The Coming of the Comforter:
When, Where, and to Whom?

Studies on the Rise of Islam and Various Other
Topics in Memory of John Wansbrough

Edited by

Carlos A. Segovia

Basil Lourié

Orientalia Judaica Christiana

3

Orientalia Judaica Christiana, the Christian Orient and its Jewish Heritage, is dedicated, first of all, to the afterlife of the Jewish Second Temple traditions within the traditions of the Christian East. A second area of exploration is some priestly (non-Talmudic) Jewish traditions that survived in the Christian environment.

The Search for Ṭuwā: Exegetical Method, Past and Present[1]

Andrew Rippin

Victoria, Canada
arippin@uvic.ca

An Exegetical Problem

The word *ṭuwā* (or *ṭuwan* if understood to have *tanwīn* as it sometimes is, although it is never pronounced that way in recitation) is found only twice in the Qurʾān, in *sūrat Ṭāhā* (20), verse 12, and *sūrat al-nāziʿāt* (79), verse 16. Both instances occur in the context of Moses and the removal of his sandals in the holy valley. The first citation of the word *ṭuwā* (following the canonical ordering of the text) is in *sūra* 20.

> 20:9 Has the story of Moses come to you?
>
> 20:10 When he saw the fire, he said to his family, "Wait; indeed, I perceive a fire! Perhaps I will bring you a firebrand from it, or I may find guidance by the fire."
>
> 20:11 And when he came to it, he was called to. "O Moses!
>
> 20:12 Indeed, I am your Lord! So take off thy sandals; indeed you are in the holy *wādī*, Ṭuwā.

---

[1] Versions of this paper have been discussed at several gatherings (in Berlin, Copenhagen and Toronto) and I have benefitted greatly from that input.

20:13 I have chosen you. So listen to what is inspired (in you);

20:14 Verily, I am God, there is no god but Me! So serve Me, and be steadfast in prayer in my remembrance."[2]

The second instance of the citation of the word is in *sūra* 79.

79:15 Has the story of Moses come to you?
　　79:16 when his Lord addressed him in the holy *wādī*, Ṭuwā,
　　79:17 "Go unto Pharaoh; indeed, he is outrageous."

Some clarification of the context of this incident with Moses is provided in *sūra* 28 without actually using the word *ṭuwā*.

28:29 And when Moses had fulfilled the appointed time, and was journeying with his people, he perceived a fire on the side of the mountain; he said to his people, "Wait here; I perceive a fire. Perhaps I will bring you good news from it, or a brand of fire. Perhaps you will be warmed."

28:30 And when he came to it he was called to, from the right side of the *wādī*, in the blessed valley, out of the tree, "O Moses! I am God the Lord of the worlds."

The word *ṭuwā* has posed a problem of minor proportions for both traditional and scholarly treatments of the Qur'ān. Precisely because this is *not* a passage of crucial importance, the treatment of this word by exegetes and scholars allows a direct view into the mechanisms of interpretation and an understanding of the presuppositions and ideologies with which interpretational enterprises are undertaken. It is possible to make observations in a case such as this without there being an excessive amount of interference from dogmatic issues and the like which serve to complicate the interpretational processes. That said, it is worth remarking at the outset that appearances can be deceiving and that the issue of why Moses

---

2 The translation of the Qur'ān used in this essay are from Arberry, A. J. *The Koran Interpreted*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964; this translation is used here for convenience even though, in its presentation, it does already suggest a specific resolution of the exegetical issue that will be raised.

had to remove his sandals when treading on holy ground was quite significant to Muslims since it could be seen to have practical implications for everyone and not just for Moses. However, for the most part, the word *ṭuwā* itself is not one which appears to demand an exegetical solution for any reason other than curiosity and, on the surface, it does not appear to raise significant issues of particular practical and/or religious significance.

Traditional Muslim exegesis has approached the word *ṭuwā* in a number of different ways. The following summary of those approaches does not pretend to be complete. The citations are intended simply to demonstrate tendencies and to document the variety and scope of the material available to us; much more could be added but such would only serve an aim of being comprehensive which is hardly necessary for the aims of this essay.

PROPER NAMES

First, the word *ṭuwā* has been asserted to be simply a proper name. Al-Qurṭubī[3] and al-Ṭabarī,[4] for example, cite Ibn ʿAbbās and Mujāhid as holding that *ṭuwā* is the name of the valley. Some refinement of that position is also attributed to al-Jawharī by al-Qurṭubī when he states *ṭuwā* is specifically a place in al-Shām; al-Ṭabarī cites Ibn Zayd as suggesting it is near Mount Sinai. While it does not get connected to the specific exegesis of these passages but, rather, is related in passages dealing with the building of the Kaʿba in *sūra* 2, verse 125, the association of *ṭuwā* with the place in which Abraham and Ishmael found the black stone for the Kaʿba is cited in al-Qummī,[5] for example. This type of geographical variation is, of course, a motif of Muslim historiography, and we should not be surprised at it, nor should we look for any isolatable meaning in this divergence in the setting between the Hijaz of the Kaʿba and

---

[3] Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ad Q. 20:12. Except where indicated otherwise, all citations of Arabic exegetical works are taken from the online texts available at altafsir.com as of November 20, 2010; all are cited simply by their *sūra* and *āya* referent.

[4] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ad Q. 20:12.

[5] Al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, ad Q. 20:12.

the biblical world of Sinai and Syria in this particular case; the meaning of it, rather, is to be found within the generalized impulse of "biblicization" versus "hijazification" that characterizes the emergence of Muslim identity in the first few centuries of Islam.

DESCRIPTIVE MEANINGS

Other exegetical sources take the word *ṭuwā* simply to be a descriptive word of the valley in which Moses found himself. Frequently this is seen to relate to a root sense of the word for which it is given the meaning "doubled" or "to do something twice." That then is taken to be an explanation of something about the nature of the valley. This, says al-Ṭabarī, was the meaning transmitted by Qatāda and al-Ḥasan. The word could mean "doubled" because, according to Abū Ḥayyān,[6] al-Ḥasan said that it was full of *baraka* and sanctity. In this meaning, the word should be understood as a complement of *muqaddas*, "sacred," according to the clarification of al-Shawkānī.[7] This latter meaning, it should be remarked, may well be dictated or emphasized due to legal concerns related to establishing the nature of the holiness connected with the valley such that it would require the removal of sandals. In his explanation of this, al-Jaṣṣāṣ[8] first asserts that there is a causal relationship between removing sandals and being in the holy valley: that is, he glosses "indeed," *inna*, in the phrase "indeed, you are in the holy *wādī ṭuwā*," as *li-anna*, "because," as the first necessary exegetical step. Then, the interpretation is given that Moses's sandals were made from the skin of a donkey and were deemed unclean and thus subject to removal due to the holiness of the place. The extension of this as a generalized requirement for removing one's sandals during prayer and pilgrimage is rejected by al-Jaṣṣāṣ, however.

A second tendency is also to be seen in the understanding of *ṭuwā* as a word rather than a name. It could also be, according to al-Māwardī[9] on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, that *ṭuwā* means "dou-

---

[6] Abū Ḥayyān, *Tafsīr baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, ad Q. 20:12.

[7] Al-Shawkānī, *Fatḥ al-Qadīr*, ad Q. 20:12.

[8] Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ad Q. 20:12.

[9] Al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa'l-ʿuyūn fī l-tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ad Q. 20:12.

bled"; however, that is not to be taken as a description of the valley as such, but as something which happened to Moses while he was in the valley. It was in the valley that Moses was called twice by God, saying, "Moses, Moses." The word is then understood as an adverb of the verb "He was called to" (in Qur'ān 20:11) and "He called" (in Qur'ān 79:16).

ETYMOLOGY

The distinction between the two fundamental approaches to *ṭuwā*, one as a simple proper name and the other as a descriptive meaning either of the valley or of Moses, becomes blurred, however, with the key element of etymology providing the bridge. There is a definite tendency to want proper names to have a meaning; this might be thought to be a continuation of the drive to "identify the unknown," *ta'yīn al-mubham*, which pervades exegetical works and which is based on a conviction that every element of scripture is meaningful. The drive does lead to several etymological suggestions which seem to allow for *ṭuwā* to be a proper name and to have a meaning at the same time. For example, al-Qurṭubī reports that al-Ḍaḥḥāk said that *ṭuwā* was a deep, round valley that was called this because *al-ṭawī* is a lean, lanky man, or because it is a bundle of cloth. So, the shape of the valley or its description has given it its name.

NARRATIVE ELABORATION

Etymology is not the only element which plays into the explication of meaning. Narrative elaboration is clearly crucial as well. The vehicle for an explanation of the word is frequently a story, and the story itself often provides the key to some of the meanings put forth. What transpires in such cases, it would appear, is that a narrative, which exists independently of the specifics of the word in question, provides a vehicle for a meaning which is demanded by the narrative logic. This is certainly true of the meaning just mentioned which relates *ṭuwā* to the sense of "twice," because, it is reported, Moses was called upon twice by God in the valley. More elaborate, however, are all the meanings which spin off from the journey of Moses itself. To complicate things further, several proposed meanings may be observed to mix the narrative motif of travel with the exegetical process of etymology. This may be seen

in a group of meanings which relates once again to the physical nature of the valley itself. The meanings of *ṭuwā* related to "folded" stem from an etymological sense of "doubled" and perhaps the sense of "rolled up" (and from there meaning "secretly," "hidden"); this is also usually understood as the meaning of the word in Qur'ān 39:67 with its apocalyptic use of "the heavens folded up" which employs the same root as *ṭuwā*. These meanings relate to a physical description of the valley: the valley is deep and very high on both sides, providing an appropriate link to a narrative sense of going up towards God, as in an ascension. Going even further, this leads to some metaphoric and/or mystically-inspired interpretations found in both classical and modern sources giving a meaning to *ṭuwā* of "proximity to God," that being in mystical terms, "self-annihilation," *fanā'*. Thus we are told that the valley achieved its name *ṭuwā* because Moses was in proximity to God within the valley; *ṭuwā* was not its name otherwise. All this seems to derive from a metaphorical sense of "doubled" being extended to physical elevation, then seen in a spiritual sense. One popular contemporary web site provides the following gloss to *ṭuwā*: "Moses should cover a long distance to be prepared to receive the inspiration, but *Allah* rolled up the way and made it near for Moses to reach the goal."[10] The Ṣūfī exegete al-Kāshānī[11] says *ṭuwā* is "the world of the spirit, free of actions of linking (through the soul and the body) characteristic of transient things and the material bonds. This world is called *ṭuwā* because the stages of the kingdom of God are concealed [or "rolled up" or "doubled"] (*ṭawā*) in it, while the heavenly and earthy bodies stand under it." All of these meanings relate to a sense of "doubled" or "folded up" which become elaborated in narratives about Moses and his journey in this valley which is described as *ṭuwā*, "folded up."

Closely related in narrative elaboration as the basis for this exegetical approach, it would seem, is a range of meanings which become associated with the sense of "traverse" in the word *ṭuwā*,

---

[10] See www.al-islam.org/enlightening/25.htm (November 20, 2010)

[11] Al-Kāshānī, *Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān [Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī]*, ad Q. 20:12, as cited in Gätje, H. *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis*, 235. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

thus relating the word once again not to the valley itself but to Moses's activity in it. Etymologically this is said to stem from the root meaning of *ṭawā* in the sense of "to traverse from one side to the other," clearly a semantic extension of the sense of "doubled up" but with a different narrative focus. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī[12] among others, explains this, as he so often does, in a straightforward manner. Ibn ʿAbbās, he reports, said that Moses passed through the valley at night and he traversed it. So, the meaning is the sacred valley which you traverse, that is, you pass through it until you reach its heights.

In a curious twist, a meaning arises which seems unrelated to etymology: *ṭuwā* is also said to mean "at night." In the story of Moses traversing the valley, Ibn ʿAbbās is given to assert that this happened "at night." It is possible to see how this might have occurred by examining the narrative provided by al-Thaʿlabī, which is very much in the style of an aetiological narrative. Each element of al-Thaʿlabī's story seems to bring in every element proposed for producing meaning for the word *ṭuwā*. Narrative logic calls for the story to happen at night: how else would Moses have seen the fire? Why was he looking around for a fire to begin with? Why did he want to go to get an ember? The following extensive quotation provides a flavour of the technique of narrative glossing of meanings.

> Moses was traveling in the desert, not knowing its paths, when the journey brought him to the western, right-hand side of Mount (Sinai) on a very cold, rainy evening. The night became dark, and the sky began to thunder and flash with lightning and it rained, and birth-pangs took hold of his wife. Moses took up his flintstone and striking-iron, but no fire came. He was at a loss and alarmed, for he had never witnessed the like of this with a flint. He began to look out near and far, confused and troubled. Then he listened for a long time in order to hear a sound or movement. Suddenly he saw a light from the direction of the mountain and thought it was a fire—*'He said to his folk, 'Wait here, I have seen a fire afar off. Perhaps I may bring you news*

---

12 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr [Mafātīḥ al-ghayb]*, ad Q. 20:12.

of it, or an ember from the fire'." (28:29)—meaning someone who would lead me to the path, for he had lost his way. When he reached it he saw a mighty light extending from the horizon to a large tree there. There is disagreement about the kind of tree it was; some say it was a box-thorn, and some say a jujube. Moses was baffled, and his whole body shook with fear when he saw a very big fire which had no smoke, but was flaring up and blazing from the inside of a green tree: as the fire grew more intense, the tree became greener. When Moses drew near the fire, it drew away; seeing this, he retreated, for he was afraid. Then he remembered that he needed fire and returned to it, and it too drew near him. Then a voice called out from the right side of the valley, in the sacred hollow, coming from the tree, "O Moses." He looked, but saw no one, and again a voice called out, *"I am God, the Lord of all Being."* (28:30) When he heard these words, he knew that this was his Lord. [He was overcome gazing at the Lord and when] he recovered his senses, he was called, *"Take off your shoes for you are in the holy valley of ṭuwā."*(20:12)[13]

The particular accomplishment of this narrative is seen in the way in which that it incorporates a number of proposed meanings which are inherent in the stories isolated by various exegetes: at night, traversing, and the physical description of the valley. It may also be remarked that such narratives may well have evolved in a context of Jewish and/or Christian polemic with Muslims relating to the status of Moses in relationship to Muḥammad; while it is not possible to point to specific historical evidence of this, as a social situation for the production of exegetical meaning this should certainly be taken into account.

Etymology is not a simple tool for the medieval exegetes or for modern scholars, especially when dealing with a word such as *ṭuwā* which is doubly-weak in its root. Most of the etymologies

---

13 Al-Thaʿlabī, *'Arāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, translation by Brinner, William M. *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ or Lives of the Prophets as recounted by Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī*, 296–97. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

mentioned thus far depend upon a root of *Ṭāʾ—Wāw* or *Yāʾ—Yāʾ*. However, some authorities suggest a root of *Wāw—Ṭāʾ—Yāʾ* or *Wāw—Ṭāʾ—Hamza* and equate that to a meaning of "set foot on" or "walk in." Al-Ṭabarī cites this approach as coming on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, ʿIkrima and Saʿīd ibn Jubayr. The exegetical process remain the same as sketched previously: narrative associations with characters demand certain meanings as a consequence of the logic of the narrative; once again, in this case, the word is not a name but simply a description of the valley or of Moses's activities in the valley. Clearly etymology is not a simple, objective tool.

As can already be seen, there are a number of tools that are used to establish meaning in the Qurʾān. Grammar, broadly understood, is the main tool with which the exegetes adjudicate between meanings. However, whether grammar truly adjudicates or gives support after the fact is difficult to say. For example, the notion that *ṭuwā* is a description of the valley is justified in a number of sources by arguing for a grammatical relationship between elements of the sentence (the status of the word as a *ḥāl*, for example). But such an observation, precisely because it can be employed in exactly the same manner to justify two different meanings related to the valley itself or to Moses's activities (admittedly not radically different meanings, but ones which have different analyses underlying them), indicates that grammar in this instance plays a role to justify and not to analyze.

VARIANT READINGS

Grammar comes into play even more prominently when variant readings to the text are adduced as well. The basic method here is clear: grammar provides rules and those rules dictate usage and agreement within the parts of a sentence. Some readings can be eliminated, and some can be restricted to certain meanings as a result. The use of variant readings to resolve the differences between interpretation and to respect the niceties of grammar is the most notable outcome of all the exegetes' work; however, once again, determining which came first—the perception of the problem or the existence of the variants—is, I think it must be admitted, difficult to ascertain. That differences in meaning, generated through narrative exegesis and the like, stimulated the production of variant readings in the first place in order to justify, clarify and separate out different meanings is certainly a tempting explanation. But this is

difficult to prove fully. In some cases it is certainly possible to come close to a demonstration that it is likely that exegesis has generated variants, if only because it seems that each possible alternative meaning is covered by a different variant. Additionally, some meanings that are demanded by narrative logic, for example, seem so "odd" that variants become the only way to provide them with support; the other method of resolving such divergent meanings by actually changing the text of scripture was not, after all, a solution that was possible.

There are five or six (depending on whether one includes subtleties of pronunciation) variant ways of reading the word *ṭuwā* cited in the *qirāʾāt* literature and found scattered throughout the major works of *tafsīr*. The first two readings relate to the pronunciation of *ṭuwā* with nunation (*ṭuwan*) and the differentiation between them does not enter into the grammarians discussions: *ṭuwan* can be read with *imāla* and or *taqlīl*. Both of these are the common, standard readings of the word *ṭuwan* and both provide the necessary and rhyming pronunciation ending in a long "a" with the dropping of the *nūn* of the *tanwīn*; for the grammarians, of course, it was the *tanwīn* that mattered and not the pronunciation as such, for the *tanwīn* indicated something about grammar. The third reading is with *tanwīn* but is *ṭiwan* rather than *ṭuwan*. Two further readings suggest that the word can be read without *tanwīn*, *ṭuwā* and *ṭiwā*. The final reading, an isolated or non-canonical one, puts a long "a" in the middle of the word, *ṭāwā*.

Al-Rāzī summarizes the matter as follows:

> [*ṭuwā*] can be read either with a *ḍamma* or a *kasra* and can be treated as a (virtual) triptote with *tanwīn* or not. Those who provide it with a *tanwīn* say it is a the name of the valley, while those who do not give it *tanwīn* do not inflect it because it is derived from the root *ṭawā* (meaning "traverse") although it is admitted that it is still possible that it could be the name of a place even if it is without the *tanwīn*.

Here, of course, the role of grammar is clear, as may be seen in the invocation of rules regarding the treatment of proper names of which it is said that they must have *tanwīn*. Likewise, when the

word does not have a *tanwīn*, explicit rules of grammar are invoked to restrict the meanings. Al-Ṭabarī,[14] for example, following al-Farrā',[15] says that without a *tanwīn*, the word must be the name of the country that the valley was in and he cites a line of poetry to prove the case; without *tanwīn*, it is declared, this cannot be the name of the valley itself. Such rules are extended by the citation of other Qur'ānic passages to make the same point. A parallel is seen to exist in Q. 9:35 where *tanwīn* is used at the end of Ḥunayn indicating that Ḥunayn is the name of the actual valley in which the battle took place. This also gets compared to a poetical citation where a reading Ḥunayna—that is, as a diptote without *tanwīn*—is explained as occurring because the reference is to the land in which the place is located and not the specific name of *wādī*.

THE RULES OF GRAMMAR

It is not necessary to resolve here whether these rules are *ad hoc* or not. Rather, the important point is that this invocation of rules is, of course, the mark of the grammarian and the means by which the authority of the grammarian is asserted. It is not only a matter of authority, surely, but a legitimate assertion of knowledge as well; yet the nature of grammatical rules is certainly different than the methods of adducing other types of evidence based on scholarly knowledge, since the aura of rules tends to be absolute. Of course, rules of Arabic grammar exist: yet, on occasions such as this, their invocation seems rhetorical, not absolute, precisely because other rules can be adduced to prove a different point and thus a different meaning. And other kinds of knowledge abound in the grammarians' treatments as well. Grammatical rules are not the only way of justifying meanings and readings for a grammarian, clearly. Note must be taken, for example, of the use of poetry which here provides grammatical parallels, *shawāhid*. But poetry retains its status as a comparative tool for the grammarians, underpinning claims about the relationship of the Qur'ān to Bedouin language. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, cites a line of poetry from the pre-Islamic poet 'Adī ibn

---

[14] Al-Ṭabarī, ad Q. 20:12.

[15] Al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī 'l-Qur'ān*, ad Q. 20:12.

Zayd to support the meaning of *ṭuwa* as "doubled." Poetry is also adduced to demonstrate grammatical points related to *ṭuwa* as a proper name. Here, it is the procedure which counts, not the singularity of the evidence. Poetry is no more definitive or absolute in its application than is the application of grammatical rules. But, for the exegete, it is a tool, a mark of knowledge, and an assertion of the mastery of the subject.

The other clear attribute of the exegetical treatments and the mark of the grammarian is the invocation of the authority of people of the past. It is notable, of course, that while meanings are attributed to trusted members of the early community and that these names serve to distinguish the meanings and give them authority, the use of those names tends to duplicate and proliferate in ways which provide no consistent pattern in thought for any given individual who is considered an authority. Herbert Berg has already demonstrated this phenomenon extensively in his book *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam,* and it hardly needs further demonstration here. The basic point is worthy of note, however: the invocation of a name of an authority does not lend support to a particular tendency in interpretation or its tools. No historical personality emerges of whom we can speak: the invocation of the name is symbolic of authority, not procedure.

There is a mass of greater detail and precision which could be given to this presentation and what has been provided thus far is a simple overview; however, a summary of what has been noted thus far may now be profitable. We have the situation of a word, the meaning of which seems to have been perceived as difficult. Exegetes then either declare the word to be a proper name and avoid some of the problem, or declare it to be a word with a meaning, either a meaning which explains its proper name or a meaning only, not a proper name. The devices used to determine the meaning involve grammar and its rules, the retelling of narrative, metaphor, the citation of traditional authorities, adducing poetry and inter-Quranic parallels, and the invocation of variant readings; all of these tools are adduced to a variety of intertwined ends.[16]

---

[16] These are points that have raised by Wansbrough, John. *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation.* Oxford: Oxford Uni-

SYSTEMATIZATION

Now, in this attempt to isolate procedures, we should not lose sight of one very important and overall, high-level procedural issue within the exegetical works: that is their tendency to systematize. One can very easily see attempts, especially in people such as al-Rāzī, to systematize the cumulative tradition of exegesis with which they are confronted. Indeed, this systematization is such that it poses a real danger for those of us studying the *tafsīr* tradition to-day; the medieval exegetes potentially hide the processes by which the multitude of meanings, approaches and variants were produced in earlier times.

The work of al-Ṭabarī provides an illustrative case of systematization. In it, the author structures the treatment of the word *ṭuwā* in Q. 20:12 as follows. First he announces there is a difference of opinion regarding the word. Some say, on the grounds of grammar, that it means "to traverse"; others say it means "two times," also on the grounds of grammar. Yet others says that it is the name of the *wādī*, with that name having a meaning according to some other people. Further people say it means "set foot in." In total, five meaning groups are isolated. Then, differences in readings are adduced, once again under a general heading of "there are differences among the readers." Each reading is set out, some with poetical justifications and some with attempts to connect grammar and readings with meaning. Thus al-Ṭabarī separates out meaning as related to grammar and variants as related to grammar in his attempt to systematize.

This attempt to systematize the information cited does not always work rigorously and efficiently, as is evidenced by the occasional duplication of reports under different categories. In a case

versity Press, 1977, second edition with notes by Andrew Rippin, Amherst NY: Prometheus Press, 2004. They are elaborated in the context of the exegetes who are mainly under consideration here in Calder, Norman. "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr. Problems in the Description of a Genre Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham." In Hawting, G. R., and A.-K. A. Shareef, *Approaches to the Qurʾān*, 101–40. London: Routledge, 1993, reprinted in his *Interpretation and Jurisprudence in Medieval Islam*, Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2006, chapter IV.

such as this, the divisions that al-Ṭabarī puts forth are difficult to keep straight especially because of the shifting role that variant readings play. The instance of al-Rāzī is similar, even though the organization of his systemization is different; he, too, is clearly using his own particular sense of the way things "must be" to guide him. Underlying all this is, of course, the fundamental attitude of the multivalency of the text of scripture and the accumulative nature of the exegetical tradition. However, the active, intellectual editorial role of the exegete is evident throughout, as is the privileging of approaches. For both al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī, the approach taken is one which privileges grammar and ties that in with meaning.

This is notable. Systematization does not take place on the level of the authorities cited, the background material (foreknowledge of the biblical text, for example), narrative development, or anything else. Further, this systematization must be contrasted with the earliest written records of exegesis which do not appear to contain this systematization; those texts tend to be what we might even see as snippets of the conversations within the early Muslim community talking about their scripture. It is also worthy of remark in this regard that there do exist medieval *tafsīr*s which might be said to *not* be of a systematizing nature when it comes to sorting through the history of the exegesis of a passage. Works such as al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wajīz fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, and al-Suyūṭī and al-Maḥallī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, provide illustrations. As I have observed elsewhere, we cannot treat the genre of *tafsīr* as an undifferentiated mass; in my summary of the genre of works devoted to *al-nāsikh wa'l-mansūkh*,[17] I pointed out that we must take into account the audience of a work in considering the place and role of a book which claims a status within the genre of *tafsīr* or any of its sub-disciplines. Systematization was the mark of the scholastics. Epitomes of the works of the scholastics existed for more popular, yet learned, use; there, the tendency to systematization might be said to reach its

---

17 Rippin, Andrew. "The Exegetical Literature of Abrogation: Form and Content." In Hawting, G., J. Modaddedi, and A. Samely, eds. *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts and Tradition in Memory of Norman Calder*, 213–31. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

logical conclusion in reducing the choices which confront the reader.

This tendency of the medieval exegetes towards systematization can, of course, be profitably compared to what modern studies of *tafsīr* such as this one attempt to do. In this essay thus far, there has been a certain privileging of meaning and the organization of the material reflects that final goal, such that history is reconstructed through the interplay of tendencies in meaning-extraction. Clearly, our own place as scholars of the discipline in the history of *tafsīr* itself should not be underestimated.

WHY IS THERE A PROBLEM WITH *ṬUWĀ*?

Underneath all of this discussion of the word *ṭuwā* and its meaning is one nagging question, especially for those of us who reflect upon all this activity which focuses on this one very minor point in the Qur'ān: how did this perception of a "problem" with this word emerge to begin with? Why did the exegetes not declare the word a proper noun and leave it at that? This really is the obvious reading of the text, it seems to me, given the grammar, vocabulary and style of the Qur'ān. One answer might be that the variant readings stimulated the divergences in meaning through the process of applying grammatical rules. That solution presumes the existence of the variants being prior to the perception of a difficulty with the text. That is possible, of course, but, as was suggested above, tangible evidence for this, or in fact for the inverse postulation, is not readily to be found. Another answer may be more productive.

Although I have not run across any statement that acknowledges this, it does seem that the exegetes knew that *ṭuwā* was not a name associated with this valley in the biblical tradition of Moses and the burning bush. The association of the area of Sinai—sometimes simply cited as Ṭūr, "mountain"—with the burning bush incident and thus this valley is apparent.[18] It is this piece of fore-knowledge on the part of the exegetes—that the Bible does

---

[18] It should be remembered here that even though the biblical text speaks of this place as Horeb (Exodus 3:1), the biblical canon itself already provides the gloss of Horeb as Mt. Sinai (explicitly in Sirach 48:7).

not call this place *ṭuwā*—which seems to be crucial in pushing the exegetical tradition towards either not seeing the word as a proper name, or seeing it as a proper name with a specific meaning that could be related to an exegetical narrative. One notable fact which supports this observation is the relative absence of considering *ṭuwā* to be a foreign word. Abū Ḥayyān does suggest that some people hold that *ṭuwā* is a foreign word if it is not read with *tanwīn*, but that resolution indicates the strength of the grammatical tradition and the generalization that indeclinable words are frequently foreign rather than any necessary consciousness of the biblical context of the passage. That said, the flurry of activity which surrounds this word does indicate to me the strength of the biblical tradition as an exegetical tool, something which has, of course, been extensively documented, notably in the case of Moses in the recent book by Brannon Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*, whose conclusion is worth citing:

> The Muslim exegetical use of the Torah, Gospel, and other non-Quranic sources does not appear to be a confused or haphazard 'borrowing' of Jewish and Christian ideas. On the contrary, Muslim exegesis of Q 18:60–62 [with which Wheeler is dealing] and related passages evinces an informed and intentional attempt to appropriate certain ideas to a well-defined and coherent interpretational agenda. Muslim exegesis is familiar not only with the Torah and Gospel but also with what Jewish and Christian exegetes singled out and highlighted in support of their own positions and on polemics.[19]

To this I would add that such knowledge also produced situations, as such we find in the case of *ṭuwā*, in which the differences between the Qur'ān and the Torah needed to be recognized, confronted and explained away.

Still, even in light of this unstated but nagging problem of pre-knowledge and its role, I would argue, with Wheeler, that the methods of the medieval exegetes are not arbitrary in their approach to the Qur'ān. There always seems to be a rationale underly-

---

[19] Wheeler, Brannon M. *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*, 123. London: Routledge, 2002.

ing why a particular interpretation is put forth. It must be admitted, at the same time, that it can sometimes be difficult to ascertain those rationales but such is the task of the modern student of *tafsīr* to do his or her best to try to find those links. The academic study of *tafsīr* needs to delve further into the social and political factors which determined meaning. Do some of these meanings stem from an anti-biblical bias? Or do they come from the social role of the grammarians—as has been explored by Michael Carter?[20] Or might they be stimulated by notions related to the supremacy of Arabic as has been explored by Paul Heck?[21] The one puzzle which remains within all of this is the variant readings. Their function is obscure and their place within the logic of the exegetes is uncertain. This is a puzzle which has fascinated scholars for several generations now but a generalized answer has yet to emerge.

Overall, I would emphasize the ingenuity of the medieval exegetes, and the awe and the respect that the exegetes have for the text of scripture, which comes through in their every attempt to tangle with the text. This is not wilful "pettifogging" or an abuse of the text to be dismissed as "mere exegesis": it is an intellectual challenge within the context of a devoted faith.

MODERN APPROACHES

All of these exegetical outcomes may be compared with the tradition of scholarship which we refer to, by convenience, as "western" or "orientalist" scholarship. It seems clear that virtually all modern scholars have presumed that *ṭuwā* is, in fact, a proper name. I have only come across one incidental reference to the meaning of "multiple" in a translation of the Qur'ānic passage.[22] Modern scholars, like their classical Muslim counterparts, are certain that the place is unknown in the biblical tradition related to Moses. From this initial

---

[20] Carter, M. G. "Language Control as People Control in Medieval Islam: The Aims of the Grammarians in their Cultural Context." *Al-Abḥāth* 31 (1983): 65–84.

[21] Heck, Paul. "The Hierarchy of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization." *Arabica*, 49 (2002): 27–54.

[22] Rubin, Uri. "Sacred Precincts." In *EQ*, vol. 4, 513; this rendering is also reflected in Rubin's Hebrew translation of the Qur'ān.

observation one can see an entirely different range of interpretational strategies emerge.

There are those who simply say that *ṭuwā* is the name of the valley and provide no particular additional comment, as if it were "obvious." Youakim Moubarac,[23] for example, simply notes that the use of this name allows for an ambivalence within the Qur'ān as to whether the valley or the mountain (that is, Ṭūr) is the central location in the Moses narrative. Some writers have argued that the word displays the Islamicization of the Moses traditions; thus the word is termed a "coinage." This coinage may have emerged for reasons of ideology in order to make Moses more a part of the Muslim tradition and to assert the scripture which the Jews had in their possession was not a true rendition of the true Torah; or this coinage may have emerged because of the constraints of the rhyme scheme of the text. Josef Horowitz,[24] for example, sees *ṭuwā* as being formed as a coinage to be a rhyme word, while he admits that the meaning of the word is unknown.[25]

Other scholars, however, postulate that the word *ṭuwā* results from a misreading of the biblical (likely Syriac) text. Richard Bell[26] thinks that the Syriac *ṭūrā* meaning "mountain" has been misread.

---

[23] Moubarac, Youakim. "Moïse dans le Coran." In his *Pentalogie Islamo-Chrétienne Tome II: Le Coran et la critique occidentale*, 147. Beirut: Editions du Cénacle Libanais, 1972–73.

[24] Horowitz, Josef. *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 125. Berlin/Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1926.

[25] In a variant on this approach to the matter, Angelika Neuwirth has suggested to me that inner-Qur'ānic exegesis may have played its role in the development of the series of Moses narratives in the text. She suggested that Qur'ān 79:16 would have been the earliest of the Moses sequence and the word *ṭuwā* may dropped out of later passages as a result of a general tendency in the Qur'ān which displays an increasing interest in the Bible as time goes on, manifesting itself in this case in an awareness of the absence of the name from the Bible.

[26] Bell, Richard. *The Qur'ān, Translated, with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs*, Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1937–39, footnote ad Q. 20:12; idem. *A Commentary on the Qur'ān*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991, ad Q. 20:12.

Involved here are all the questions of literacy, Muḥammad's informants and so forth that characterise Bell's approach. I would imagine that, if pushed, Bell would have had to say the word *wādī* was a later addition in order to make sense of the passage once it had this meaningless and/or corrupted *ṭuwā* in place.[27] A. Ben-Shemesh suggests that the name must "refer to the place mentioned in Ex. 3:5 and may be an Arabic form of 'Valley of Shaveh' mentioned in Gen. 14:17–20 as a holy place."[28] How such a transformation would have occurred and the linguistic basis upon which it is grounded is not explicated; that this section of Genesis 14 speaks of Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek and that the Valley of Shaveh is glossed in the Bible itself as "The King's Valley" makes this a highly speculative suggestion.

Yet other scholars suggest that some confusion arose in the understanding of the Bible at the time of the Qur'ān's composition. James Bellamy,[29] in the most imaginative instance of recent scholarship, suggests that the reference of *ṭuwā* is, in fact, to Joshua 5:15 where Joshua is ordered to remove his shoes by the commander of the Lord's army because, "where you stand is holy." The place this happened was Gilgal which, according to Bellamy, is a word-play related to the root Gimel—Lamed—Lamed, meaning "to roll." Thus, he suggests, the word *ṭuwā* is a calque or a literal translation of "the exegetical definition of Gilgāl." Says Bellamy, "The prophet may well have asked his informant what the name of the sacred valley was and was told 'ṭawā.' The discrepancy between Mt. Horeb and Gilgāl and between Moses and Joshua should not give us pause," says Bellamy, "[t]he Koran, in retelling the biblical stories,

---

[27] In a variant on this, reflecting more contemporary approaches to the problem of the textual history of the Qur'ān, G.-R. Puin has suggested to me that the misreading might have occurred in the movement of the text into the *ḥijāzī* script (resulting from the inadequacies of that script) or from the movement of the text from *ḥijāzī* into Kufic.

[28] Ben-Shemesh, A. *The Noble Quran*, 256, note 1. Tel Aviv: Massada Press, 1979.

[29] Bellamy, James A. "Textual Criticism of the Koran." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001): 2–3; also in his entry "Textual Criticism." In *EQ*, vol. 5, 248.

often modifies them...." Thus the suggestion includes a proposed situation within the life of Muḥammad, admitted to be speculative by the historian's key phrase "may well have," and it promotes a psycho-history of Muḥammad that sees him as cavalier with the "facts" ("this discrepancy compared to some of the others is quite trivial," says Bellamy) or as a simpleton who did not know the difference between Horeb and Gilgal and thus, "the prophet may have chosen to conflate slightly the two accounts." Bellamy also speculates that "this may have taken place earlier in the Old Testament lore in the Arabic language," ultimately putting the entire scenario into the unknown past, but strictly within Arabic, since, it goes unstated, there is no proof of this having happened within any Jewish midrashic sources available to us.

Overall, then, the core assumptions here are obviously different from those of the Muslim exegetes although, notably, they do start from the same observations. This is especially so regarding the fact that the use of a name *ṭuwā* is not a part of the biblical tradition. The critical difference is clearly in the attitude towards the text and its creation. The strategies involved in solving the problem are psychological or historical; all involve differing conceptions regarding the nature of Islam and its relationship to its intellectual and religious environment during its development, a direction of inquiry which is absent in the classical Muslim exegetes. This is hardly a surprising conclusion, but one which is always worthy of reiteration.

THE UNENDING PROCESS OF INTERPRETATION

An investigation such as the foregoing does not help "solve" the "problem" of *ṭuwā*; rather, it demonstrates the collection of cultural forces by which meaning is produced and constrained. This, it seems to me, is the more interesting task of scholarly research by which we will learn of the triumph of grammar and history in differing eras of human history. What is more, this is an investigation which is never-ending. The forces that affect meaning production are, even now, developing in some previously unknown and unanticipated ways.

This essay has pointed to how exegesis and its procedures raise issues of scholarly authority and knowledge. Among the presuppositions of the entire method of classical Muslim exegesis were the emphasis on the cumulative nature of the enterprise and the

need for the person involved within the process to be immersed not just in the Qur'ān itself but in the world of *tafsīr* literature, in grammar, in lexicography, and so forth. The authority of one's pronouncements on meaning was intimately tied to one's ability to be able to cite cross-references, authorities, information, rules and opinion. Such abilities demanded training, dedication, intelligence, and acumen.

We face a changed situation today. The availability of searchable electronic texts allows a much fuller and faster determination of relevant citations in dealing with any given exegetical problem.[30] As a result of this ability to search texts digitally, we are witnessing a wholesale change in access to knowledge which alters fundamental aspects of traditional exegetical procedures. Still, this must not be exaggerated. Just because the material is available electronically and because one does not need to have all the material memorized do not make exegetical works easier to understand, or immediately accessible in an intellectual manner, or even appealing to many people. It does, however, have the potential to result in a radical transformation of the notion of exegesis, one comparable to, and perhaps, one might even suggest, parallel to, the tendency which commenced with Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr in the 14th century to construct the authority of exegetical processes on an entirely different basis. For Ibn Kathīr, this was basing *tafsīr* not on grammar but on the authority of the prophet.[31] Today, exegesis is being transformed by taking the materials out of the hands of an élite and providing immediate access to the information. Exegesis still requires learning, of course, but a social transformation is possible within the group of people in charge of the task, just as in the case of Ibn Kathīr and his time.

---

[30] See my somewhat-dated reflections on this in Rippin, A. "The Study of *tafsīr* in the 21st Century: Etexts and their Scholarly Use." *MELA Notes* 69–70 (1999–2000): 1–13.

[31] See Saleh, Walid A. "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of *An Introduction to the Foundations of Qurānic Exegesis.*" In Rapoport, Yossef, and Shahab Ahmed, eds. *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 123–62. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abu Ḥayyān. *Tafsīr baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, as found at www.altafsir.com

Arberry, A. J. *The Koran Interpreted.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Bell, Richard. *A Commentary on the Qur'ān.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991.

———. *The Qur'ān, Translated, with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs.* Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1937–39.

Bellamy, James A. "Textual Criticism of the Koran." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001): 1–6.

———. "Textual Criticism." In McAuliffe, Jane Dammen, ed. *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 5, 237–52. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Ben-Shemesh, A. *The Noble Quran.* Tel Aviv: Massada Press, 1979.

Berg, Herbert. *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam.* Richmond: Curzon, 2000.

Calder, Norman. "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr. Problems in the Description of a Genre Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham." In Hawting, G. R., and A.-K. A. Shareef, eds. *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, 101–40. London: Routledge, 1993, reprinted in his *Interpretation and Jurisprudence in Medieval Islam.* Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2006, chapter IV.

Carter, M. G. "Language Control as People Control in Medieval Islam: The Aims of the Grammarians in their Cultural Context." *Al-Abḥāth*, 31 (1983): 65–84.

al-Farrā'. *Maʿānī 'l-Qur'ān*, as found at www.altafsir.com

Gätje, H. *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

Heck, Paul. "The Hierarchy of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization." *Arabica*, 49 (2002): 27–54.

Horowitz, Josef. *Koranische Untersuchungen.* Berlin/Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1926.

al-Jaṣṣāṣ. *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, as found at www.altafsir.com

al-Māwardī. *al-Nukat wa'l-ʿuyūn fī l-tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, as found at www.altafsir.com

Moubarac, Youakim. "Moïse dans le Coran." In his *Pentalogie Islamo-Chrétienne Tome II: Le Coran et la critique occidentale.* Beirut: Editions du Cénacle Libanais, 1972–73.

al-Qummī. *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, as found at www.altafsir.com

al-Qurṭubī. *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān* as found at www.altafsir.com

al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn. *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr [Mafātiḥ al-ghayb]*, as found at www.altafsir.com

Rippin, Andrew. "The Exegetical Literature of Abrogation: Form and Content." In Hawting, G., J. Modaddedi, and A. Samely, eds. *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts and Tradition in Memory of Norman Calder*, 213–31. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

———. "The Study of *tafsīr* in the 21st Century: Etexts and their Scholarly Use." *MELA Notes*, 69–70 (1999–2000): 1–13.

Rubin, Uri. "Sacred Precincts." In McAuliffe, Jane Dammen, ed. *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 4, 513–16. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

Saleh, Walid A. "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of *An Introduction to the Foundations of Qurānic Exegesis*." In Rapoport, Yossef, and Shahab Ahmed, eds. *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 123–62. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

al-Shawkānī. *Fatḥ al-qadīr*, as found at www.altafsir.com

al-Ṭabarī. *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, as found at www.altafsir.com

al-Thaʿlabī. *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, translation by William M. Brinner, ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ or *Lives of the Prophets as recounted by Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī*. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

Wansbrough, John. *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; second edition with notes by Andrew Rippin, Amherst NY: Prometheus Press, 2004.

Wheeler, Brannon M. *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*. London: Routledge, 2002.