

JEW³ IN THE QUR³AN: AN EVALUATION OF THE NAMING AND THE CONTENT

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Abstract

No other people are mentioned in the Qur³an as often as the people of Israel. They appear in sixteen srahs and approximately forty verses by name (*ban İsr'il*). The Qur³an also makes reference to the Jews either by name (*al-yabd/bd*) or within the context of the people of the book (*abl al-kitb*). This paper aims to discuss the Qur³anic verses about the Jews and the people of Israel in terms of the naming and the content. Key questions to be addressed are: What is the purpose of the frequent mention of the people of Israel in the Qur³an? What is the context and the content of the verses about the Jews and the people of Israel both in Meccan and Medinan srahs? What message or messages are intended to or can be conveyed by these verses?

Key Words: Qur³an, Jews (*yabd/bd*), the people of Israel (*ban İsr'il*), the people of the book (*abl al-kitb*), the Prophet Muḥammad, Muslims, *Islm*.

Introduction

The word “religion (*din*)” is used in the Qurʾān as a term that includes all religion(s).¹ Nevertheless, the Qurʾān does not mention religions or religious systems individually or by name (in fact, there is no Qurʾānic usage of a plural form of the word *din*, i.e., *adyān*). Instead, the Qurʾān refers to religious groups, such as “Jews” (*al-yahūd*), “Christians (*al-naṣārā*),” “Sabians (*al-ṣābiʿūn*),” “Zoroastrians (*al-majūs*),” and “idolaters (*al-musbrikūn*).” The reason the Qurʾān makes reference to these religious groups only lies in the fact that the Qurʾān’s interest in other faiths/religious groups is, quite naturally, not of a scientific/descriptive or even purely theological purpose but rather pertains to their relations with Muslims as well as, and to the extent of, the common points between their traditions.² It is possible to say that this has much to do with the nature of the Qurʾān as a holy book that was revealed (or made, if you like) gradually, in parallel to the experience and needs of the first Muslim community (thus, even universal messages are delivered within a context). This is why the Qurʾān does not even give a place to the beliefs and practices of the above-mentioned groups in a holistic and systematic way. And how appropriate would it be to do so, considering that religions as living faiths are not stagnant entities but rather change and diversify over time? Thus, religions, even in the Qurʾānic usage, seem tantamount to peoples’ ways of believing and acting in the course of history. The true religion (*al-din*), on the other hand, is essentially identified, in the Qurʾān, with *islām* in its primary and broadest sense, i.e., the upright faith in and obedience to the one and only God as exemplified by the faith/obedience of the Prophet Abraham.³

¹ See Q 48:28: “It is He Who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, to proclaim it over all religion (*al-din kullibih*)”; Q 109:6: “Unto you your religion (*dinukum*), and unto me my religion.” See also Q 3:85.

² Having said that, the Qurʾān also points to beliefs such as dualism, reincarnation, and materialism in an indirect way, without necessarily associating them with any particular faith/religious group.

³ See Q 2:135: “Say [unto them, O Muḥammad]: Nay, but [we follow] the religion of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*), the upright, and he was not of the idolaters,” Q 3:95: “So follow the religion of Abraham, the upright. He was not of the idolaters.” Q 4:125: “Who is better in religion than he who surrenders to Allah while doing

The fact that the Qurʾān does not talk about religions but religious groups, that is to say, not about Judaism (*al-yahūdiyyah*) but about Jews (*al-yahūd/būd*) or the people of Israel (*banū Isrāʾīl*), and again, not about Christianity (*naṣrāniyyah*) but about Christians (*naṣārā*), should also be seen as the result of a general usage in that period. For this is the case in Jewish and Christian Scriptures as well. In fact, the Hebrew terms *yabadut* and *dat yebudit*, which correspond, respectively, to “Judaism” and “Jewish religion” in modern Hebrew, do not occur in the Hebrew Bible and occur just once in the Rabbinic literature, albeit in the meaning of “Jewish custom/way of life” rather than that of religion.⁴ Even in the medieval Jewish literature, it is quite rare to find the term Judaism (*yabadut*). Thus, this term, in the sense of the religious tradition of the Jews, seems to find a common usage only in modern Jewish literature. In the Hebrew Bible, which similarly lacks a word corresponding to religion, a mention is made of peoples (*goyim/ʿamim*) instead of religions. Again, reference is made to the term *torah* as the teaching/law of Moses that the people of Israel are obliged to obey, as well as several terms meaning “law/rule/judgment” (*ḥuka, mishpat, dat, din*)⁵ that, unlike the term *torah*, are used for other peoples as well. Thus, in Jewish tradition, the teaching of the people of Israel/Jews is indicated by the term *torah*, which is also the name of the book given to the Prophet Moses⁶ and the entire written and oral tradition in its broader sense.

good (to men) and follows the religion of Abraham?” Q 98:5: “And they are ordered naught else than to serve Allah, keeping religion pure for Him, as men by nature upright, and to establish worship and to pay the poor due. That is true religion.”

⁴ *Mishna*, Ketuboth 7:6 (*dat Moshe ve-yebudit*); *Esther Rabba* 7:11 (*yebudatan/yabadut*). The term Judaism (*Ioudaismos*) was first used in the 2nd century BCE by the Greek-speaking Jews of Antioch to separate themselves from the Greeks who belonging to the Hellenistic culture (*Hellenismos*) as well as other pagans (*Allofulismos*). See II Maccabees 2:21; 8:1; 14:38; IV Maccabees 4:26; and Galatians 1:13-14. The term *Ioudaismos* was later transferred to Latin as *Judaismus* and from there spread to other Western languages in the form of Judaism, Judaisme, Judaismus, Judaismo, etc.

⁵ Although in modern Hebrew, the word *dat* means “religion,” in the Hebrew Bible, it carries the meaning “law.” Again, the Biblical word *din* means “judgment/decision.”

⁶ Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 15:15-16; Joshua 1:7; II Kings 10:31; Jeremiah 9:13. Here, the difference between the Biblical *torah* and the Qurʾānic *din* is apparent. The term *torah* appears to be related to content (law, rule,

The fact that the word *tawrāb* is used in the Qurʾān in that the latter sense as the revelation/teaching given to the people of Israel/Jews⁷ (and not the first five books given to Moses per se, which are instead called *al-kitāb*) runs parallel to this broader usage. At this point, it is also important to emphasize that although the term *al-yabūdiyyab*, corresponding to *yabadut*, was unknown in the Arabic language at the time, the Qurʾān, instead of offering a new conceptualization based on religions, seems to retain the present usage based on religious groups, for the possible reasons mentioned above.

In light of these introductory remarks, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the Qurʾānic verses about the Jews and the people of Israel in terms of the naming and the content. Some of the key questions to be addressed are: What is the purpose of the frequent mention of the people of Israel in the Qurʾān? What is the context and the content of the verses about the Jews and the people of Israel both in Meccan and Medinan sūrahs? And what messages are intended to or can be conveyed by these verses?

The Qurʾānic Names for Jews

The Qurʾān refers to Jews by several names or terms. These are *banū Isrāʾīl* (بنو اسرائيل), *al-yabūd / yabūdī* (اليهود/يهودي), *būd* (هود), *alladhīna hādū* (الذين هادوا), *ahl al-kitāb* (أهل الكتاب), *ahl al-dhikr* (أهل الذكر), *alladhīna ūtū l-kitāb* (الذين أوتوا الكتاب), *alladhīna ūrithū / warithū l-kitāb* (الذين أورثوا/ورثوا الكتاب) and *alladhīna yaqraʾūna l-kitāb* (الذين يقرؤون الكتاب). The range and usage of these names/terms differ in Meccan and Medinan sūrahs. The name *banū Isrāʾīl* (the children/people of Israel), designating a historical group, occurs more often in Meccan than Medinan sūrahs, but in the latter, the content is sometimes more detailed. The names *al-yabūd/yabūdī*, on the other hand, which are used in the meaning of Jew/Jewish in

instruction, etc.), whereas the term *dīn*, as much as it includes the meanings of law, order, path, etc., primarily refers to sovereignty/dominance (in the name of God) and submission/obedience (in the name of human beings). Thus, it indicates a relational dimension between God/Creator and humans/creatures. For more information on the Qurʾānic *dīn*, see Sayyid Abul Aʿlā Mawdūdī, *Four Key Concepts of the Qurʾān*, trans. and ed. Tarik Jan (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2006), 145 ff.

⁷ For more information on the topic, see Baki Adam, *Yabudi Kaynaklarına Göre Tevrat* (Istanbul: Pınar Yayınları, 2002).

modern Arabic, as well as *būd*, exist only in Medinan sūrahs. In Meccan sūrahs, the Jews are referred to only in three verses and by the term *alladbīna bādū*. In a similar way, the terms *abl al-kitāb* and *alladbīna ūtū l-kitāb*, which pertain to both Jews and Christians, but mostly to Jews, occur almost entirely in Medinan sūrahs, and only once in Meccan sūrahs. The terms *alladbīna ūrithū/warithū l-kitāb*, *alladbīna yaqraʿūna l-kitāb* and *abl al-dhikr*, on the other hand, all appear merely in Meccan sūrahs.⁸

It is quite understandable why the Qurʾānic passages, where the Jews are mentioned by name, exist almost entirely in Medinan sūrahs. This is because the Qurʾān, as indicated earlier, was revealed gradually in accordance with the experience of the first Muslim community; and in the Meccan period, the Muslims had not yet come into proper contact with Jews. In turn, the passages where the people of Israel as a historical group are mentioned have a more equal share in Meccan and Medinan sūrahs. Again, in Meccan sūrahs, mention is made of Jews (and Christians) in terms of *abl al-kitāb* (the people of the book) in several places.

Moreover, in relation to the period of Moses and the following periods, reference is generally made to the people of Israel as a historical group (both Meccan and Medinan sūrahs), whereas with regard to the people of the Torah living in the period of the Qurʾān, reference is mainly to Jews either by name or in terms of the people of the book. Occasionally, reference is made to the people of Israel, but less as a historical group and more a group identified with Jews (mostly Medinan sūrahs). This entire usage also runs parallel, to a great extent, to the historical reality and the way the terms the people of Israel and Jew are used in the Hebrew Bible. In the passages from the pre-exilic period (i.e., before the Babylonian Exile, the 6th century BCE) alongside *bene yisrael* (the children of Israel) and *ʿam yisrael* (the people of Israel), the names *yisrael* and *yebuda* are used to designate, respectively, the northern and southern Israelite tribes. The name *yebudi*, on the other hand, which does not exist in the Torah, mostly appears in the exilic and post-exilic periods (especially in the late books of Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Daniel)⁹ alongside the

⁸ For all these passages, see footnotes 13, 14, 33, 34, 40, 41.

⁹ See, for example, Esther 2:5; 3:4; 5:13; 6:10; 8:7, etc. (*yebudi*); Nehemiah 1:2; 2:16; 5:1, 8, etc. (*ba-yebudim*); Ezra 4:12, 23; 5:1, 5; Daniel 3:8, 12 (*yebudaye/yebudaʿin*); 5:13 (*yebudi*). In the prophetic books (*Neviim*) of II

names *bene yisrael*, *‘am yisrael*, *yisrael*, and *yebuda*.¹⁰ In the Rabbinic literature, which belongs to the post-biblical period (from the 2nd century CE), alongside the frequently used *yisrael*, which corresponds to a theological and social category, the name *yebudi* is also used to designate a religio-ethnic group (Jews).¹¹

Accordingly, the Qur’ānic *banū Isrā’īl*, which corresponds to the biblical *bene yisrael*, *‘am yisrael*, and *yisrael*, is used mostly in relation to the period between the times of the Prophets Moses and Jesus and, occasionally, the period of the Prophet Muḥammad. As for the Qur’ānic *al-yabūd* and the related terms, they are used in parallel to the biblical *yebudi* and almost entirely with reference to later periods, in this case, the period of Islam. The sons of Jacob, on the other hand, unlike the biblical usage, are designated as *asbāt* rather than *banū Isrā’īl*, except in one place.¹²

Kings and Jeremiah, it occurs in plural form as *ba-yebudim* (II Kings 16:6; 25:25; Jeremiah 32:12; 38:19; 40:11, 12; 41:3; 43:9; 44:1; 52:28, 30). For a post-exilic prophetic usage, see also Zechariah 8:23 (*ish yebudi* = Judean/Jewish man). It is argued that until the 2nd century BCE, the word *yebudi* did not mean a “Jew,” which refers to a religious identity; it rather meant a “Judean,” that is, a member of the tribe/kingdom of Judah or someone from the land of Judaea. For more information, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 82 ff. However, in the book of Esther, which is usually dated to the late Persian and early Hellenistic period (4th century BCE), the word *yebudi* seems to refer to a “Jew” in terms of religious identity. This is also the only book where the term *mityabadim* is used (8:17), which means “to become/look like *yebudi*.” “And many from the peoples of the country became/declared themselves Jews (*mityabadim*) for the fear of the Jews (*ba-yebudim*) had fallen on them.”

¹⁰ See, for example, Malachi 1:1; 2:16; Daniel 1:3; 9:7, 11, 20; Ezra 2:2, 70; 3:1; Nehemiah 1:6; 8:17, etc.

¹¹ In the *Mishna*, the word *yebudi* occurs only in three passages (Megillah 2:3; Nedarim 11:12; Ketuboth 7:6), whereas in the Talmud, it occurs more often. The word *yisrael* is used in the *Mishna* sometimes to refer to the whole Israelite stock (Terumoth 8:12) and other times to describe ordinary Israelite men, excluding the kohens/priests and the Levites (Terumoth 7:2; 9:2; Yebamoth 2:4; 7:1-5).

¹² See Q 2:136, 140; 3:84; 4:163. Again, regarding the split of the people of Israel in the desert into twelve branches, the term *asbāt* is used (Q 7:160). The only place where the name *banū Isrā’īl* is used to designate the sons of Jacob is Q 3:93. For the description of the sons of Jacob as *bene yisrael* (the children of Israel) in the Hebrew Bible, see also Genesis 45:21.

In what follows, a detailed examination will be made of the usage and content of these Qurʾānic names for Jews.

Abl al-Kitāb

The first reference to Jews chronologically in the Qurʾān appears to be in the form of *alladhīna ūtū l-kitāb*, meaning those who have been revealed to or given the book. This phrase and its correlative *abl al-kitāb*, except for two Meccan passages,¹³ occur almost entirely in the Medinan sūrah; the first form, together with its close correlatives, appears in sixteen verses and the second one in thirty-one verses.¹⁴ On the other hand, similar phrases, like *alladhīna ūrithū l-kitāb/warithū l-kitāb*, *alladhīna yaqraʾūna l-kitāb*, *alladhīna ūtū l-ʿilm*, and *abl al-dbikr*, are all used in passages from the late Meccan period.¹⁵

According to the interpretations given in the tafsīr books, the people mentioned in these passages are *abl al-Tawrāb (wa-l-Zabūr)*, (i.e., the people of the Law/Torah and the Psalms), that is, a group or certain men from among the Jews (e.g., Kaʿb ibn al-Ashraf, Phinhas ibn ʿĀzūrā, Zayd ibn Qays)¹⁶ or even *abl al-Tawrāb wa-l-Injil*, (i.e., the people of the Law/Torah and the Gospel), that is, both Jewish

¹³ Q 74:31; 29:46.

¹⁴ *Alladhīna ūtū l-kitāb*: Q 74:31 (Meccan); Q 2:101, 144-146; 3:19-20; 4:47, 51(-54), 131; 5:5, 57 (-58); 9:29; 57:16; 98:4. *Alladhīna ātaynāhum al-kitāb*: Q 2:146. *Alladhīna ūtū naṣīb^{am} min al-kitāb*: Q 3:23(-25). *Abl al-kitāb*: Q 29:46 (Meccan); Q 2:105, 109; 3:64-65, 69-72, 75, 98-99, 110(-112), 113(-114) (110-118), 199; 4:123, 153(-158), 159(-162), 171; 5:15, 19, 59(-62), 65(-66), 68, 77; 33:26; 57:29; 59:2, 11; 98:1, 2(-3), 6.

¹⁵ *Alladhīna ūrithū l-kitāb*: Q 35:32; 42:14. *Alladhīna warithū l-kitāb*: Q 7:169. *Alladhīna yaqraʾūna l-kitāb*: Q 10:94. *Alladhīna ūtū l-ʿilm*: Q 17:107. *Abl al-dbikr*: Q 16:43; 21:7.

¹⁶ See Abū l-Ḥasan Muqātil ibn Sulaymān ibn Bashīr al-Azdī al-Balkhī, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihātah (Cairo: al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah li-l-Kitāb, 1979), I, 130; Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd al-Āmulī al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hijr li-l-Ṭibāʿah wa-l-Nashr, 2001), II, 419 ff. (Q 2:109); Abū l-Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar ibn Muḥammad al-Khwārazmī al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshaf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-taʾwīl*, eds. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd and ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwiḍ (Riyadh: Maktabat al-ʿUbaykān, 1998), I, 309, 568 (Q 2:109; 3:69).

and Christian groups or individuals.¹⁷ Most of the time, when the passage has a negative context, it is considered to be referring to those from among Jews and Christians who rejected the message of the Prophet Muḥammad (i.e., *abl al-kidhb wa-l-kufr*). When the passage has a positive context, on the other hand, as in the examples of Q 10:94 or 21:7, it is taken to be about Jews such as ‘Abd Allāh ibn Salām and Ka‘b al-Aḥbār who accepted the message of the Prophet Muḥammad (i.e., *abl al-ṣidq wa-l-īmān*) or about the first Muslims, namely, the people of the Qurʾān.¹⁸ However, as will be discussed below, these interpretations do not seem so accurate.

As mentioned earlier, according to the chronological order of the Qurʾān, the first reference to Jews is made in Sūrat al-Muddaththir from the Meccan period:

And We have set none but angels as guardians of the Fire; and We have fixed their number only as a trial for *unbelievers*, in order that *those who have been given the Book (alladhīna ūtū l-kitāb)* may arrive at certainty, and the *believers* may increase in faith, and that no doubts may be left for *those who have been given the Book* and the *believers* ... (Q 74:31)

In this passage, there is mention of some three groups: 1) those who reject the Prophet and his monotheistic message (Unbelievers), 2) those who accept the Prophet and his message (Believers), and 3) those who have been given the book (People of the Book). The passage, which has obviously a positive context, makes reference to the people of the book as a group standing between believers and unbelievers, but somewhere closer to the former. And this is the case in other passages, where the phrases *alladhīna yaqraʾūna l-kitāb* and *abl al-dbikr* are used.

¹⁷ See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, V, 284, 489 (Q 3:69); al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 538, 567 (Q 3:64); Abū ‘Abd Allāh Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-mashbūr bi-l-Tafsīr al-kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), VII, 226 (Q 3:19), 234 (Q 3:20). It is quite clear that Q 4:171, which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity, is addressed to the Christians.

¹⁸ See, for example, al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, XII, 286 ff; XVI, 228-229; Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, I, 248; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, XVII, 170; see also Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, eds. Hatice Boynukalın and Bekir Topaloğlu (Istanbul: Mizan Yayınevi, 2006), VII, 110; id., *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, eds. Murat Sülün and Bekir Topaloğlu (Istanbul: Mizan Yayınevi, 2007), IX, 261.

If you were in doubt as to what We have revealed unto you, then ask *those who have been reading the Book* (*alladhīna yaqraʿūna l-kitāb*) from before you: the Truth has indeed come to you from your Lord; so be in no wise of those in doubt. (Q 10:94)

Before you, also, the messengers We sent were but men, to whom We granted inspiration. If ye realize this not, ask of *those who possess the Message* (*abl al-dhikr*). (Q 21:7)¹⁹

In these verses, too, the people of the book are mentioned in a positive context in parallel to the claim of the Qurʾān that it is the book from God and, therefore, is the continuation of the former prophetic/revelatory tradition. Thus, the people of the book, as the receivers or inheritors of the former revelation, are expected to be the first to recognize and confirm the revelation that has been given to the Prophet Muḥammad. Thus, the people of the book are seen here as a kind of reference point or authority of recognition in this matter. Considering that these passages belong to the Meccan period, it is very unlikely that what is meant by *alladhīna yaqraʿūna l-kitāb* (those who have been reading the Book) or *abl al-dhikr* (the people of the Message) are the Jewish individuals who became Muslim, as that event happened much later in the Medinan period. Again, the fact that a reference is being made to the people who are related to the former revelation makes it equally impossible that it is about the first Muslims coming from an idolatrous (*musbrīk*) background. It is more likely that what is meant by “those who have been reading the Book” and “the people of the Message” in these verses are those individuals who have been coming from a monotheistic tradition and are acquainted with the former revelation, that is to say, Jews and Christians and/or even *muwāḥḥid* Ḥanīfs, such as Warāqah ibn Nawfal and ʿUbayd Allāh ibn Jaḥsh, who were well-informed in the Bible.²⁰ Indeed, in the *Tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī, there is an interpretation

¹⁹ See also Q 16:43.

²⁰ The word *ḥanīf* is used in the Qurʾān in terms of “surrendering to one God” or “believing in one God,” with similar meanings to the words *muslim* and *muwāḥḥid*. It usually occurs in relation to the prophet Abraham (Ibrāhīm), the pioneer of monotheism. The origin of the word is believed to be the Syriac *ḥanpā*, which means “pagan” or “gentile.” This begs a question: How did a term such as *ḥanpā*, which carries a negative connotation (“pagan”), come to have a positive meaning in the Qurʾān (*ḥanīf* = “monotheist believer”)? One paper offers a reasonable explanation of the transformation the word *ḥanpā* went through

quite in line with this: that what is intended by *ahl al-dhikr* (the people of the Message) are those who could read *Tawrāh* (the Torah) and *Injīl* (the Gospels) and the books outside these.²¹

Thus, in these early Qurʾānic passages, the Prophet and the Muslims are considered to have something in common with the people of the book as against the idolatrous Arabs.²² To emphasize again, at this stage, the people of the book are seen in an ideal sense as a group who are expected to recognize the revelation of the Prophet Muḥammad. There is also anticipation that there will be those among them who respond positively to the call of the Prophet:

Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own [Scriptures], in the Law/Torah and the Gospel; for he commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good [and pure] and prohibits them from what is bad [and impure]; He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. So it is those

and how it came to indicate, in the Christian literature, someone “who is a believer outside of Jewish – and even Christian – faith,” i.e., “a gentile believer,” which is considered to be the precursor of the Qurʾānic *ḥanif*. For this explanation, see François de Blois, “*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanif* (ἕθνικός): studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65, no. 1 (2002), 17-25. For the contrast made between *ḥanif* and Christian priest/Jewish rabbi in the Islamic literature (Yāqūt), see W. Montgomery Watt, “Ḥanīf,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III, 165. As indicated by de Blois, for the usage of the word *ḥanpā* in the New Testament in relation to the prophet Abraham, which bears a clear similarity to the Qurʾānic usage, see also Romans 4:9-12: “Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well ...” Cf. “Abraham was not a Jew, nor a Christian; but he was an upright man who had surrendered (to Allah), and he was not of the idolaters” (Q 3:67).

²¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, XIV, 227.

²² See also Q 11:17: “Is he [to be counted equal with them] who relies on a clear proof from his Lord, and a witness from Him recites it, and before it was the Book of Moses, an example and a mercy?”

who believe in him, honor him, help him, and follow the light, which is sent down with him, it is they who will prosper. (Q 7:157)

At this point, Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh indicates that in the Meccan period there had been some Jews who were informed with the message of the Prophet Muḥammad through Arab idolaters whom they had commercial relations with and might have also exercised some negative influence on.²³ However, at this stage, except for some isolated contacts,²⁴ direct and proper relations had not been experienced yet between Muslims and Jews, a situation that would end up in negative outcomes. Therefore, the Meccan passages generally reflect the attitude of Muslims to the people of the book in a neutral environment and testify to a Muslim anticipation of their support in the face of harsh opposition from the Arab idolaters. Moreover, even in the Medinan period, which witnessed an environment of conflict, it is declared in Sūrat al-Māʾidah (Q 5:5) that the food of *ahl al-kitāb* (i.e., animals slaughtered by them) and their women (i.e., marriage with them) are both permitted (*ḥalāl*) for Muslims. This decree indicates that the Qurʾān, in principle, confirms the establishment of social and even marital relations with Jews (and Christians), regardless of the current state of relations, mostly contentious.²⁵

²³ See Muhammad Hamidullah [Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh], *The Life and Work of the Prophet of Islam*, ed. and trans. Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1998), I, 419, 420, 422; id., *Le Prophète de l'islam* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1959), I, 369, 371, 373.

²⁴ The *Tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī states that in the Meccan period, a group of Medinan Jews talked to the Prophet Muḥammad and asked him about the attributes of God, and upon this question, the Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ was revealed. See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, XXIV, 728 ff. See also Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, XXXII, 175; Mehmet Paçacı, "Kur'an'da Ehl-i Kitap Anlayışı," in *Müslümanlar ve Diğer Din Mensupları: Müslümanların Diğer Din Mensuplarıyla İlişkilerinde Temel Yaklaşımlar*, ed. Abdurrahman Küçük (Ankara: Türkiye Dinler Tarihi Derneği Yayınları, 2004), 46.

²⁵ From the Qurʾānic passage stating that the food of the people of the book is permitted (*ḥalāl*) to Muslims, de Blois comes to the conclusion that the people of the book thus mentioned in the Qurʾān were the Jewish Christians who accepted Jesus Christ and continued to observe the Jewish law, including eating only kasher food. See de Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (ἕθνικός)," 16.

Again, as indicated in another passage in Sūrat al-ʿAnkabūt, from the late Meccan or early Medinan period,²⁶ despite the existence of some hostile groups or individuals among the people of the book, the positive tone is preserved by emphasizing common points between them and Muslims, especially the monotheistic faith (*tawḥīd*).

And dispute you not with the *People of the Book*, except with means better [than mere disputation], unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong, but say, “We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we surrender (*muslimīn*).” (Q 29:46)

As part of this emphasis on *tawḥīd*, in the early period of Medina, the Jews (and Christians) “as a community,” and in terms of a minimum requirement of faith and common terms between them and Muslims, are invited to *islām* in its broader sense, that is, in the meaning of the “monotheistic faith or tradition of Abraham,” the faith/tradition that Jews and Christians claim to represent:

Say: “O *People of the Book!* Come to common terms as between us and you; that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah.” If then they turn back, say you: “Bear witness that we [at least] are Muslims”. (Q 3:64)

Say: “... follow the religion of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*), upright in faith (*ḥanīf^{an}*); he was not of the idolaters (*mushrikīn*).” (Q 3:95)

These Qurʾān verses have been interpreted by Montgomery Watt such that the Prophet Muḥammad, in the early years of the Medinan period, invited Jews, unlike the idolatrous Arabs, to become *muwaḥḥid/muʾmin* (i.e., monotheist) and not *Muslim* (i.e., follower of the Prophet Muḥammad); this is why, according to Watt, Jews are

²⁶ There are different opinions as to the date of Sūrat al-ʿAnkabūt. According to one, it was revealed in the Meccan period, except for the first ten verses, or vice versa. For this, see Mustafa Öztürk, *Kurʾan-ı Kerim Meali: Anlam ve Yorum Merkezli Çeviri* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2014), 447. It is also considered to be revealed toward the end of the Meccan period (85th or 83rd sūrah in chronological order).

designated as *mu'min* in the Constitution of Medina.²⁷

Although this argument seems to be correct to a certain extent, what Watt further suggests, that the Prophet at the beginning presented himself as a messenger sent solely to the Arab tribes, is apparently inaccurate. For it is clear from the Qur'ānic passages that the message of the Prophet (or the revelation given to him) was intended to unfold through a gradual process, and the universal emphasis was part of this message right from the beginning. As quoted above, the call of the Prophet to the people of the book to come to a monotheistic Abrahamic faith indicates an effort to find common ground and a place of conciliation with Jews (and Christians) "as a community." And, as also pointed out earlier, it is clearly seen in some other Meccan passages that, in addition to this general call to the people of the book to follow the monotheistic faith, Jews (and Christians) "as individuals" are invited to become *Muslim*. To quote again, in the Meccan Sūrat al-A'raf it is stated:

Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own [Scriptures], in the Law/Torah and the Gospel ... So it is those who believe in him, honor him, help him, and follow the light, which is sent down with him, it is they who will prosper. Say: "O mankind! I am sent unto you all, as the Messenger of Allah, to whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth; there is no god but He; it is He that gives both life and death. So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet ... Follow him that you may be guided." (Q 7:157-158)

Accordingly, it is understood that in the beginning of the Medinan period, as in the period of Mecca, the language of peace was retained to a great extent. However, as a result of what the Qur'ān calls "the hostile attitude" on the part of the Jews, an increase in the language of criticism became apparent. And this time, the people of the book,

²⁷ See W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 200 ff. In the document called the Constitution of Medina, Muslims are described as *ummah wāḥidah* and the Jews as *ummah min al-mu'minīn*. That the Jews are referred to as *mu'min* is taken to mean that the Jewish groups living in Medina were to be under protection (*amānah*) and would have the right to live their religion freely. See Uri Rubin, "The 'Constitution of Medina': Some Notes," *Studia Islamica* 62 (1985), 15-16, doi:10.2307/1595521. See also Q 6:84; 24:55; 42:15; 2:139; 28:55.

in the example of the Jews, were placed closer to Arab idolaters because of their common ideology and attitude toward Muslims:

It is never the wish of those who disbelieve among the *People of the Book*, nor of the *idolaters*, that anything good should come down to you from your Lord. But Allah will choose for His special mercy whom He will, for Allah is Lord of grace abounding. (Q 2:105)

Many of the *People of the Book* wish they could turn you (people) back to infidelity after you have believed, from selfish envy, after the truth has become manifest unto them. But forgive and overlook, till Allah accomplish His purpose; for Allah has power over all things. (Q 2:109)

It is the wish of a party of the *People of the Book* to lead you astray. But they shall lead astray [not you], but themselves, and they do not perceive! (Q 3:69)

O you who believe! Take not for friends those who take your religion for a mockery or sport whether among those who received the Book before you, or among the disbelievers. But keep your duty to Allah if you are true believers. (Q 5:57)

However, it is important to note that there is no generalization in the criticism leveled on the people of the book in the above-quoted verses. Despite that the plural language is sometimes used and that it is apparently Jews who are more criticized than Christians, the Qurʾān clearly distinguishes between the well-behaved and the ill-behaved among each group, by saying:

Among the *People of the Book* are some who, if entrusted with a hoard of gold, will [readily] pay it back; others, who, if entrusted with a single silver coin, will not repay it unless you constantly stood demanding, because, they say, “there is no call on us [to keep faith] with these ignorant (*ummiyyīn*)” ... (Q 3:75)

Not all of them are alike: of the *People of the Book* are a group that stand; they recite the revelations (*āyāt*) of Allah all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration. They believe in Allah and the Last Day; they enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten in good works. They are in the ranks of the righteous. Of the good that they do, nothing will be rejected of them; for Allah knows well those that do right. (Q 3:113-115)

And there are, certainly, among the *People of the Book*, those who believe in Allah, in the revelation to you, and in the revelation to them, bowing in humility to Allah. They will not sell the revelations of Allah for a miserable gain! For them is a reward with their Lord ... (Q 3:199)

In these verses, especially in Q 3:113-115 and Q 3:199, the people of the book who are praised because of their faith, practice, and morality, are explained in the tafsīr books as those Jewish and/or Christian groups or individuals who had faith – in the Prophet – and became Muslim (e.g., ‘Abd Allāh ibn Salām and his companions or the Negus [al-Najāshī] of Abyssinia and thirty men/women from his people or forty men/women from the people of Najrān or eight men/women from the Greek people, or all of these).²⁸ Although there are different opinions on the verse “those who believe in the revelation to you, and in the revelation to them” (Q 3:199), it is reasonable to think that what is meant here are the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad from among the people of the book. On the other hand, it is not clear what is meant by “the revelations (*āyāt*) of Allah” in the verse “they who recite the revelations of Allah all night long” (Q 3:113); is it the Torah and the Gospels or the Qurʾān? According to the majority view, these revelations (*āyāt*) are those of the Qurʾān, and what is meant by “belief in Allah” in the verse “They believe in Allah and the Last Day” (Q 3:114) is the belief not only in God but also in all the prophets.²⁹ Again, the passage “They enjoin

²⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, V, 692; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 571, 611; al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, eds. Ahmed Vanlıoğlu and Bekir Topaloğlu (Istanbul: Mizan Yayınevi, 2005), II, 342; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, VIII, 111, 205-207; IX, 159; Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān wa-l-mubayyin li-mā taḍammanabū min al-Sunnab wa-āy al-Furqān*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī et al. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 2006), V, 175. For a critique of the views in the tafsīr books that confine the abovementioned people of the book to those of them who believe in the Prophet Muḥammad, see also Mehmet Okuyan and Mustafa Öztürk, “Kurʾan Verilerine Göre ‘Öteki’nin Konumu,” in *İslam ve Öteki: Dinlerin, Doğruluk/Kurtarıcılık ve Birarada Yaşama Sorunu*, ed. Cafer Sadık Yaran (Istanbul: Kaknüs, 2001), 184 ff.

²⁹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, VIII, 111, 206-207; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, V, 689-691. According to another account given in the *Tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī, those who are mentioned in the above-mentioned Qurʾānic verses are in fact the people of the book or the people from other religions (V, 697-698).

what is right, and forbid what is wrong” in the same verse is explained in terms of enjoining the belief in Allah and the Prophet and forbidding polytheism (*shirk*) and denial of the Prophet.³⁰ In fact, without narrowing down the meaning of these verses that much, it is possible to think that the people of the book mentioned here, too, are those who accepted the revelation given to the Prophet Muḥammad. However, unlike Q 3:113-115 and Q 3:199, there is no mention of belief in Q 3:75; it is rather about moral/immoral behavior. In fact, in the early tafsīr books, this verse is explained with reference to different groups within the people of the book. According to al-Ṭabarī, those who pay it back when entrusted with money and those who do not are two different groups among the Jews; for al-Zamakhsharī, on the other hand, the first group are the majority of the Christians and the second group are the majority of the Jews.³¹

From these interpretations, it is reasonable to assume that these three sets of Qurʾānic verses refer to different groups within the people of the book. Thus, Q 3:75, which points to moral behavior, speaks of two different parties among them, one well-behaved and the other ill-behaved. The Q 3:113-115 and Q 3:199, on the other hand, which are restricted to the principle of belief, might be seen to refer to those who came to believe, either secretly or openly, in the revelation that has been given to the Prophet Muḥammad. In other words, these three passages can be classified into three groups: (1) one referring to the well-behaved among the people of the book (“If entrusted with a hoard of gold, they will pay it back”); (2) the second referring to those among them who believe in the Prophet in secret (“They recite the revelations of Allah all night long”); (3) and the third referring to those who again believe in the Prophet but this time in an open way, apparently (“They will not sell the revelations of Allah for a miserable gain”). Otherwise, when all these passages are seen to equally pertain to those from among the people of the book who became Muslim, one would come to the conclusion that in the Qurʾān, morality is identified with being Muslim, which is against the truth. Besides, in this case, it would remain unexplained why the Qurʾān speaks of those from the people of the book who became

³⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, V, 699; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, VIII, 111, 208.

³¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, V, 507-508; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 571. See also Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, VIII, 110.

Muslim not simply as “Muslims” but as “the people of the book (*abl al-kitāb*)” all the time.

On the other hand, when other *abl al-kitāb* passages, those with critical or disapproving content, are concerned, the criticism here seems to be mainly directed toward the better educated among the people of the book, especially among the Jews. The Qurʾān accuses them of taking the side of the idolatrous Arabs, whom they once used to call *ummī* (= unscriptured/unlettered), and of supporting them as against the Prophet and his followers, namely Muslims, who pursue the monotheistic tradition of the former prophets. These adversaries among the people of the book/Jews do so, according to the Qurʾān, despite the fact that they were awaiting a Messenger as announced in their Scripture.³²

O *People of the Book!* Now has come unto you, making [things] clear unto you, Our Messenger, after the break in [the series of] our messengers, lest you should say: “There came unto us no bringer of glad tidings and no warner [from evil]”: But now has come unto you a bringer of glad tidings and a warner [from evil]. And Allah has power over all things. (Q 5:19)

Say: “O *People of the Book!* Do you disapprove of us for no other reason than that we believe in Allah, and the revelation that has come

³² Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh notes that from the Arab chronicles of the time and from some of the modern occidental works (Casanova’s *Mohammed et la fin du monde*) it is understood that “in the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era the Jews as well as the Christians were awaiting the advent of a great personality, the last divine messenger, who would give to humanity what it needed.” See Hamidullah, *The Life and Work of the Prophet of Islam*, I, 417; id., *Le Prophète de l’Islam*, I, 367. Indeed, in the books of ḥadīth and sīrah, there are accounts of the Jews of al-Ḥijāz having an anticipation of a prophet and this anticipation having a role in the decision of the Jews such as ‘Abd Allāh ibn Salām to become Muslim. See, for example, al-Bukhārī, “Manāqib al-anṣār,” 51; Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq ibn Yasār, *Sīrat Ibn Ishāq*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh, 2nd ed. (Konya: Hayra Hizmet Vakfı, 1981), 62-66; id., *The Life of Mubammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. with introduction and notes by A. Guillaume (Lahore: Oxford University Press, 1967), 93-98; see also Reuven Firestone, “Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 544-546. Moreover, we understand from the New Testament that a similar anticipation existed among the Jews of Palestine during the time of Jesus Christ. See Mathew 16:13-14; 21:10-11; Mark 8:27-28; Luke 7:11-17; 9:18-20.

to us and that which came before [us], and [perhaps] that most of you are rebellious and disobedient?" ... Many of them do you see, racing each other in sin and rancor, and their eating of things forbidden. Evil indeed are the things that they do. Why do not the rabbis and the priests forbid them from their [habit of] uttering sinful words and eating things forbidden? Evil indeed are their works. (Q 5:59, 62-63)

Have you not turned your vision to those *who were given a portion of the Book*? They believe in sorcery and evil, and say to the Unbelievers that they are better guided in the [right] way than the Believers! (Q 4:51)

And when there comes to them a Book from Allah, confirming what is with them, although from of old they had prayed for victory against those who disbelieve, when there comes to them that which they [should] have recognized, they refuse to believe in it but the curse of Allah is on those without Faith. (Q 2:89)³³

In these passages, then, the emphasis is placed on the hostility and the denial of many from the people of the book (mostly Jews, apparently) toward the Prophet of *tawhīd*; and this attitude is seen, in the Qurʾān, as contradicting the prophetic/monotheistic background they have a claim to. Consequently, it is possible to say that in the *abl al-kitāb* passages, there are both approving and disapproving statements, and the latter are mostly directed toward their hostile attitude and the concomitant immoral behavior.

Banū Isrāʾīl

Another term used in relation to the Jews in the Qurʾān is *banū Isrāʾīl*, meaning the children or people of Israel. This name appears in sixteen sūrahs and forty verses: twenty-four of them are Meccan,³⁴ and sixteen of them (especially in the long sūrahs such as al-Baqarah,

³³ In the *Tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī it is stated that those who are referred to as "*Inna lladbīna kafarū* ..." (Those who reject faith)... in Q 2:6 are the Jews and the hypocrites from among the Muslim Arabs of Medina (i.e., from the tribes of [Banū l-] Aws and [Banū l-] Khazraj). See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, I, 258.

³⁴ Q 7:105, (128-129) 134, 137, 138(-139, 145, 148, 150-154, 171); 20:47, 80(-81), 83(-94); 26:17, 22, 59, 197; 27:76; 10:90, 93; 40:53, 59; 44:30; 45:16(-17); 46:10; 32:23; 17:2, 4, 101, 104.

Āl ʿImrān, al-Nisāʾ, al-Māʾidah and al-Şaff) are Medinan.³⁵ In addition, the word *Isrāʾīl* as the name of the prophet-patriarch Jacob occurs in two verses, one Meccan and one Medinan.³⁶

As noted by Arthur Jeffery, the name *banū Isrāʾīl* was well known by the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, while before that time, the name *Isrāʾīl* only appeared in the inscriptions found in South Arabia.³⁷ According to Goitein, the fact that this name did not occur in any authentic poetry from the pre-Islamic period indicates that the Prophet had an original knowledge of and interest in the former monotheistic religions.³⁸ According to the testimony of the Qurʾān, which depicts the Prophet as *al-nabī al-ummī* (an unlearned/unscriptured messenger), the origin of this knowledge and interest is first and foremost the very revelation he received from God.³⁹

The term *banū Isrāʾīl*, as explained in the tafsīr books, designates the descendants of Jacob. As stated earlier, it is used mostly in relation to the period between the times of the Prophets Moses and Jesus and occasionally with reference to Jews living in the period of the Prophet Muḥammad. In the Meccan verses, the people of Israel are mentioned as a historical people and generally in the third-person, whereas in the Medinan verses, they are identified with the Jews of the Qurʾānic period, and therefore, the second-person form is usually employed. Again, in the Meccan sūrahs, especially in Sūrat al-Aʿrāf, where a detailed account of the story of the people of Israel is given, the main themes are the encounter of the Prophet Moses with Pharaoh and, after a long struggle and many miracles displayed for Pharaoh, the redemption of the people of Israel under the leadership of Moses from their slavery in Egypt, the miraculous crossing of the

³⁵ Q 2:40, 47 (-57, 63-74), 83(-84, 87, 93, 100), 122, 211, 246(-247); 3:49, 93; 5:12(-13), 32, 70, 72, 78, 110; 61:6, 14.

³⁶ Q 19:58; 3:93.

³⁷ See Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 61.

³⁸ S. D. Goitein, "Banū Isrāʾīl," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II, 1020.

³⁹ See Q 7:157-158. For the possible implications of the term *ummī* and the expression *al-nabī al-ummī*, the preferred meaning of the latter being unlearned/unscriptured prophet, i.e., "a vessel that was unpolluted by intellectual knowledge of word and script," see Sebastian Günther, "Muḥammad, the Illiterate Prophet: An Islamic Creed in the Qurʾān and Qurʾānic Exegesis," *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2002), 7-16, doi:10.3366/jqs.2002.4.1.1.

sea and coming to Mount Sinai, their worship of the golden calf when Moses left to meet with God to receive the tablets of law, and their inheriting the land of blessings (the land of Canaan) with the permission of God.⁴⁰ As for God's covenant with and favor to the people of Israel and giving them the book, the former is mentioned in five places and the latter in four.⁴¹ In Medinan passages, on the other hand, the struggle of Moses with Pharaoh and the crossing of the sea is mentioned only once.⁴² The emphasis is instead on the covenant made between God and the people of Israel, mostly in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*; God's taking their word and showing His favor to them over other peoples by giving them the book and sending them prophets; and their breaking the promise that they had given to God.⁴³ There is also mention of their relations, mostly antagonistic, with the Prophet Jesus.⁴⁴ Some of the commandments and prohibitions given to the people of Israel (e.g., the forbidden foods, the prohibition against shedding the blood of the innocent, the commandment to slaughter a cow, the prohibitions of Sabbath) are also given place mostly in the Medinan *sūrahs*.⁴⁵ Thus, in the Meccan passages, the main subject matter is the people of Israel as a historical entity, with emphasis placed on the "redemption" of Israel from Egypt. In the Medinan passages, on the other hand, the main subject matter is the Jews of the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and, in relation to them (namely, as their ancestors), the people of Israel, which indicates a clear identification between the people of Israel and the Jews; and the emphasis is undoubtedly on the "covenant" of Sinai.

Alongside this variation in content, a difference of style is also apparent. One example is the account of the story of the golden calf, as told in *Sūrat al-A'rāf* from the Meccan period and in *Sūrat al-Baqarah* from the Medinan period.

⁴⁰ For all these, see Q 7:102-154; 20:47, 83-98; 26:17; 17:101; 10:90;

⁴¹ See Q 7:140, 171; 44:30-32; 45:16-17; 20:80-81; 7:140; 40:53; 32:23; 17:2. See also 20:77-79; 26:197; 27:76; 46:10.

⁴² See Q 2:49-50.

⁴³ See Q 2:40, 47-48, 51-57, 63-64, 80, 83-84, 87, 93, 100, 122, 211, 246-247; 5:12-13, 20-26, 70.

⁴⁴ See Q 3:49; 5:72, 78, 110; 61:6, 14.

⁴⁵ See Q 2:65-66; 3:93; 5:32.

The *people of Moses* made, in his absence, out of *their* ornaments, the image of calf, [for worship] ... When *they* repented, and saw that *they* had erred, *they* said: “If our Lord have not mercy upon us and forgive us, we shall indeed be of those who perish.” (Q 7:148-149)

Again, in the accounts of the Sinai covenant and the preference (or election) of the people of Israel by God over other peoples, as told in the same sūrah, one can find a similar difference of style.

When We shook the Mount over *them*, as if it had been a canopy, and they thought it was going to fall on *them* ... (Q 7:171)

We did aforetime grant to *the Children of Israel* the Book, the power of command, and prophethood; We gave *them*, for sustenance, things good and pure; and We favored *them* above the nations. (Q 45:16)

In fact, this difference in both content and style indicates that the mention of the people of Israel in the Meccan and Medinan sūrahs aims at different purposes. In the Meccan sūrahs, the people of Israel are mentioned, for the most part, with reference to their struggle with Pharaoh in the name of God (*taḥbīd*) and as a people living a persecuted life due to their monotheistic faith. Thus, they are presented as precursors of early Muslims, i.e., the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad, who also happen to be struggling with idolatrous Arabs. Muslims are reminded in this way that the people of Israel were eventually rescued and exalted by God, and so would be Muslims.

Said Moses to his people: “Pray for help from Allah, and [wait] in patience and constancy; for the earth is Allah’s, to give as a heritage to

And when We appointed forty nights for Moses, and in his absence *you* took the calf [for worship], and *you* did grievous wrong. Even then We did forgive *you*; there was a chance for *you* to be grateful. (Q 2:51-52)

And remember We took *your* covenant and We raised above *you* [the towering height] of Mount [Sinai] ... (Q 2:63)

O Children of Israel! call to mind the [special] favor which I bestowed upon *you*, and that I preferred *you* to all other [for My Message]. (Q 2:47)

such of His servants as He pleases; and the end is [best] for the righteous" ... "It may be that your Lord will destroy your enemy and make you inheritors in the earth; that so He may try you by your deeds." (Q 7:128-129)

And We made a people, considered weak [and of no account], inheritors of lands in both east and west, lands whereon We sent down Our blessings. The fair promise of your Lord was fulfilled for the Children of Israel, because they had patience and constancy ... (Q 7:137)

We did indeed aforetime give the Book to Moses; be not then in doubt of its reaching [you]; and We made it a guide to the Children of Israel. (Q 32:23)⁴⁶

Moreover, by bringing up the examples of Pharaoh and his companions, alongside other peoples (such as the peoples of Noah, ʿĀd, Thamūd and Lot), who persecuted their prophets and, therefore, were punished with destruction, the idolatrous Arabs are being warned of possible demise unless they put an end to their enmity with the Prophet and his followers. In this way, a parallel is drawn between the people of Israel and Muslims, on the one hand, and Pharaoh and the Arab adversaries, on the other.

Such were the towns whose story We relate unto you: There came indeed to them their messengers with clear [signs] but they would not believe what they had rejected before ... Most of them We found not men [true] to their covenant but most of them We found rebellious and disobedient. Then after them We sent Moses with Our signs (*āyāt*) to Pharaoh and his chiefs, but they wrongfully rejected them. So see what was the end of those who made mischief. (Q 7:101-103)

... And We leveled to the ground the great works and fine buildings which Pharaoh and his people erected [with such pride]. (Q 7:137)

We have sent to you, [O Meccans!] a messenger, to be a witness concerning you, even as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. (Q 73:15)

Accordingly, the early Qurʾānic passages from the Meccan period address Muslims and their Arab adversaries by using the example of the people of Israel and their enemies. Here, the reference is to the early period of the history of the people of Israel, when they were a

⁴⁶ See also Q 46:12.

persecuted people. As for the passages from the Medinan period, a period in which Muslims entered into a direct relationship with Jews, this time the Qurʾān's address is primarily to Jews either directly or indirectly, in terms of the people of Israel or the people of the book, and only secondarily to Muslims. In these latter passages, the failing and insincerity of the Jews with the prophetic tradition and their concomitant hostility toward Muslims are criticized, a resemblance being indicated between them and the people of Israel, who after their redemption from Egypt rose against their prophets and broke their covenant with God over and over again.

And when We appointed forty nights for Moses, and in his absence *you* took the calf [for worship], and *you* did grievous wrong. Even then We did forgive *you*; there was a chance for *you* to be grateful. (Q 2:51-52)

And remember We took a covenant from the Children of Israel... Then did ye turn back, except a few among you, and you backslide [even now]. (Q 2:83)

We took the covenant of the Children of Israel and sent them messengers. Every time there came to them a messenger with what they themselves desired not, some [of these] they called impostors, and some they [go so far as to] slay. (Q 5:70)

Say: "O People of the Book! Why reject you the signs (*āyāt*) of Allah, when Allah is Himself witness to all you do?" Say: "O you People of the Book! Why obstruct you those who believe, from the path of Allah, seeking to make it crooked, while you were yourselves witnesses [to Allah's Covenant]? But Allah is not unmindful of all that you do." (Q 3:98-99)

Thus, there is both positive and negative mention of the people of Israel and the Jews in the Qurʾān: they are praised as the most important monotheistic group (the emphasis of the Meccan passages), on the one hand, and are chastised for their disposition toward transgression (the emphasis of the Medinan passages), on the other, as can be found in the Hebrew Bible as well.⁴⁷ As indicated earlier, these two dimensions or periods of the history of the people of Israel/Jews are employed in the Qurʾān in accordance with the

⁴⁷ See, for example, Deuteronomy 4:5-7; 32:15-18; Psalms 147:19-20; Jeremiah 3:11; 11:10.

experience of the Muslims and their relations with surrounding peoples, both Arabs and Jews. However, unlike the common Orientalist interpretation, this twofold presentation of the people of Israel in the Qurʾān seems to be for contextual reasons rather than tactical.

Al-Yabūd/Hūd/Hādū

As for the names *al-yabūd*, *būd*, and *alladbīna bādū*, which are the direct designations for the Jews in the Qurʾān, they appear in twenty-two verses altogether, three of them Meccan and nineteen of them Medinan. The terms *al-yabūd* and *yabūdī*, the proper names for Jew/Jewish in Arabic, the latter being also found in pre-Islamic Arab poetry,⁴⁸ as well as the term *būd*, all occur in Medinan sūrahs.⁴⁹ In Meccan sūrahs, on the other hand, Jews are mentioned only in three verses and in the form *alladbīna bādū*.⁵⁰ As indicated earlier, the apparent reason for this is that Muslims did not come into proper contact with Jews in the Meccan period.

Again, the biblical name *yebudī*, which is the counterpart of the Arabic *yabūdī*, is used in the books of the Hebrew Bible outside the Torah and mostly from the post-exilic period. In these earlier Jewish books – at least until the 2nd century BCE – it is mostly used in the meaning of “Judean,” that is, a member of the tribe/kingdom of Judah or, in a broader sense, someone from the land of Judaea; it designates in this way those who survived of all the Israelite tribes.⁵¹ As for the Jewish writings from the Antique period (i.e., the first two centuries of the Christian Era), Philo of Alexandria uses the term *ioudaiois*, the Greek counterpart of the term *yebudī*, as a name that includes all

⁴⁸ See Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān*, 294.

⁴⁹ *Al-yabūd/yabūdī*: Q 2:113, 120; 5:18, 51, 64, 82; 9:30; 3:67; *būd*: Q 2:111, 135, 140 (the other six passages where the term *būd* appears are all related to the prophet called Hūd and his people: Q 7:65; 11:51, 53, 58, 60, 89); *alladbīna bādū*: Q 2:62; 4:46, 160; 5:41, 44, 69; 6:146; 62:6.

⁵⁰ *Alladbīna bādū*: Q 6:146; 16:118; 22:17.

⁵¹ II Kings 16:6; 25:25; Jeremiah 40:11; 44:1; 52:28-30; Zechariah 8:23; Esther 3:4, 6; Nehemiah 1:2; 3:33-34; 13:23; I Chronicles 4:18. In the Aramaic passages of the Hebrew Bible (Ezra 4:12, 23; 5:1, 5; 6:7, 8, 14; Daniel 3:8, 12), it occurs as *yebudaye*. See also Yehoshua M. Grintz, “Jew: Semantics,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., XI, 253. Cf. Zeitlin, “The Names Hebrew, Jew and Israel: A Historical Study,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 43, no. 4 (1953), 371, doi:10.2307/1453236. See also footnote no 9.

Israelites from the time of the patriarch Abraham to his own time; and this name, as distinguished from the name *ebraios* (Hebrew), seems to carry more of a religious than an ethnic meaning.⁵² Josephus Flavius, on the other hand, states that the Jews were originally named *ebraious* (Hebrews), after their ancestor Eber, but after the return from the Babylonian Exile (6th century BCE), they were called *ioudaious*, with reference to the tribe of Judah.⁵³ For the tribe of Judah (Greek: *iouda*), as further explained by Josephus, was the first tribe that settled in the land of Canaan, and this is why both the land (Judea) and the people (Judah) living there were called by this name.⁵⁴ In the New Testament, on the other hand, the name *ioudaios* designates a religio-ethnic group who derive from the descendants of Jacob. And the Jewish origin of Jesus Christ, as well as the twelve disciples, is emphasized.⁵⁵

As for the Rabbinic literature, as indicated earlier, here Jews are usually designated as *yisrael/bene yisrael*, but the name *yebudi* is also frequently used. What is most interesting is that in the Babylonian Talmud, an explanation is offered as to why the character of Mordechai in the book of Esther is called *yebudi*, despite that he comes from the tribe of Benjamin.⁵⁶ Here, the Talmud confers upon the term *yebudi* a completely religious meaning by defining it not as someone coming from the tribe of Judah or from the land of Judea⁵⁷ but, in a similar meaning to the Qurʾānic *ḥanif/muwahḥid*, as “someone who rejects idolatry.”⁵⁸ This meaning goes against the ethnic/racial connotation that the term *yebudi* has acquired in the medieval and modern periods.

⁵² Philo, “On the Life of Moses (De Vita Moysis) I,” I, VII; “On the Nobility (De Nobilitate),” IV, in *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993). For the original Greek text, see id. (as Philonis Judaei), *Opera Omnia: Textus Editus Ad Fidem Optimarum Editionum* (Lipsiae: Sumtibus E. B. Schwickerti, 1828-1830), IV, 115, 122; V, 263.

⁵³ “Antiquities of the Jews,” 1:146 (in *Josephus: The Complete Works*, trans. W. Whiston [Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998]). For the original Greek text, see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0145>, accessed May 15, 2015.

⁵⁴ “Antiquities of the Jews,” 11:173.

⁵⁵ Mathew 2:2; Mark 15:18; John 4:9; 8:31.

⁵⁶ Esther 2:5.

⁵⁷ See footnote no 8.

⁵⁸ Megillah 13a.

In parallel to this usage of the term *yebudi*, the Qurʾānic *al-yabūd*, *būd*, and *alladbīna bādū* also designate Jews as a religious rather than an ethnic group. This is especially true for the phrase *alladbīna bādū*, which means “those who are/become Jews.” Again, in the verses in which it is indicated that Abraham and *asbāt* (sons of Jacob) were neither Christian nor Jewish,⁵⁹ the terms *al-yabūd* and *būd* are used to indicate religious identity, in a similar way to the term Christian (*naṣrāniyy^m*). The same connotation is apparent in the mention of the Jews together with other religious groups as well (i.e., believers, Christians, Sabians, Zoroastrians) regarding the question of being on the right path.⁶⁰ Moreover, *al-yabūd* and its correlatives are used in connection to the Jews living in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad. To distinguish them from the people of Israel, a religio-ethnic group that lived in the past, the Qurʾān also addresses Jews in this way: “*Those are a people who have passed away. Theirs is that which they earned, and yours is that which you earn. And you will not be asked of what they used to do.*”⁶¹ However, the Qurʾān also, not infrequently, transitions between verses in which the people of Israel of the past are mentioned and verses that address the Jews living in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad.⁶² In this way, it recognizes that the Jews are the successors of the people of Israel in terms of faith and religious tradition. At the same time, they are criticized for making the same mistakes the people of Israel did, as in the verse: “*Unto those who are Jews We forbade every animal with claws/undivided hoof ... That We awarded them for their rebellion.*”⁶³ Although this verse seems to refer to a Biblical prohibition from the time of the people of Israel, the reason the name “Jews/*alladbīna bādū*” is used here instead of “children of Israel/*banū Isrāʾīl*” might be explained by the fact that this prohibition was retained in the later Jewish law.⁶⁴

On the other hand, the verses in Sūrat al-Baqarah, “*They say: ‘Become Jews or Christians if you would be guided [to salvation]’*”

⁵⁹ Q 3:67; 2:140.

⁶⁰ Q 2:62; 5:69; 22:17.

⁶¹ Q 2:134, 141.

⁶² See, for example, Q 2:83-85, 87; 5:12-13.

⁶³ Q 6:146. See also 16:118. According to the tafsīr books, these are animals such as camels, horses, and donkeys. See, for example, al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, IX, 638 ff.

⁶⁴ See *Mishna*, Hullin 3-8 (7:6).

and “the Jews will not be pleased with you, nor will the Christians, till you follow their religion,”⁶⁵ indicate that the Jews of al-Ḥijāz were undertaking an effort to win converts, just as the Christians were doing. In fact, the Muslim historians al-Yaʿqūbī (3rd/9th century) and al-Maḥḍisī (4th/10th century) note that in the pre-Islamic period, there were Arabs within the tribes of Ḥimyar, Banū Kinānah, Banū l-Ḥārith, [Banū] Kindah, Ghassān, [Banū l-]Aws and [Banū l-]Khazraj who accepted the religion of the Jews.⁶⁶

Again, criticism is prevalent in the Qurʾānic passages regarding the Jews mostly due to their hostility toward Muslims as well as their immoral behavior, which is seen as the reason for that hostility. However, neutral and even approving statements are also given place in some verses.

Lo! We did reveal the Torah, wherein is guidance and a light, by which the Prophets who surrendered (unto Allah) judged the Jews, and the rabbis and the priests (judged) by such of Allah’s Scripture as they were bidden to observe, and thereunto were they witnesses. So fear not humankind, but fear Me. And barter not My revelations for a little gain. Whoso judges not by that which Allah has revealed: such are disbelievers. (Q 5:44-45)⁶⁷

Criticism in the Qurʾān toward Jews pertains to issues of faith, religious laws and practices, Jewish religious leaders/rabbis and their relations with the Prophet Muḥammad and Muslims. In the passages on the question of faith, Jews are charged of claiming to be “sons of God and His beloved,” having a “monopoly on paradise,” being “greedy of life” (this might also be a reference to Jewish belief in a messianic age), displaying enmity toward God, his messengers (especially the Prophet Jesus and the Prophet Muḥammad), and his angels (the archangels Michael and Gabriel), and telling that “God’s hand is tied up/fettered” and “Uzayr is son of God.”⁶⁸ In the passages

⁶⁵ Q 2:135, 120.

⁶⁶ Abū Naṣr al-Muṭahhar ibn Ṭāhir al-Maḥḍisī, *Kitāb al-badʿ wa-l-tārīkh*, ed. Clément Huart (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthanná, n.d.), IV, 35; Ibn Wāḍiḥ Aḥmad ibn Ishāq ibn Jaʿfar al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh al-Yaʿqūbī* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.) I, 257. See also Jawād ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-ʿArab qabla l-Islām* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li-l-Malāyīn, 1970), VI, 514-515; Hamidullah, *The Life and Work of the Prophet of Islam*, I, 428; id., *Le Prophète de l’Islam*, I, 380.

⁶⁷ See also Q 2:62; 5:69.

⁶⁸ For all these, see Q 2:96, 98, 111 (113); 5:18, 64; 9:30; 62:6.

on the question of religious practice, on the other hand, they are criticized of “taking usury though they were forbidden” and “devouring people’s wealth wrongfully;” it is also stated that they were forbidden certain foods (e.g., animals with claws, the fat of oxen and sheep) because of their disobedience and wrongdoings.⁶⁹ As regards the rabbis and religious leaders of the Jews (*rabbāniyyūn* and *aḥbār*), it is recognized on the one hand that there are those who “judged the Jews by God’s Scripture” and “became witnesses” (in issues such as an eye for an eye); on the other hand, there are those who failed to forbid Jews from “uttering sinful words and eating things forbidden” and those who “distort the Scripture with their tongues” by saying “it is from God when it is not.”⁷⁰ Ordinary Jews (alongside Christians) are also criticized for “taking their rabbis to be their lords” and “not knowing their Scripture.”⁷¹ In fact all this information on the Jewish belief and practices requires a detailed examination, which is beyond the scope of this paper.⁷²

As for the verses on the relations of the Jews with the Prophet and the Muslims, here lies the main criticism of the Qur’ān: Jews, at least quite a few of them, resist the message of the Qur’ān by saying “We believe in what was sent down/revealed to us” and “Our hearts are

⁶⁹ For all these, see Q 4:160-161; 6:146; 16:118.

⁷⁰ For all of these, see Q 3:78; 5:44-45, 62-63.

⁷¹ Q 9:31; 2:78-79. One finds in the Jewish writings from the late Antique and Rabbinic periods that the majority of the ordinary Jewish people were generally ignorant and loose in religious issues. See Graham Harvey, *True Israel: Uses of the Names Jew, Hebrew and Israel in Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden & New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 151-152; Sacha Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden & New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), 114 ff. Although it is well known that the Jews of al-Ḥijāz had their own institutions for religious education (*bayt al-midrash*) and were better off from their Arab neighbors in terms of literacy (see Michael Lecker, “Zayd b. Thābit, ‘A Jew with Two Sidelocks’: Judaism and Literacy in Pre-Islamic Medina (Yathrib),” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 56, no. 4 (1997), 259, doi:10.1086/468576; Hamidullah, *The Life and Work of the Prophet of Islam*, I, 426; id., *Le Prophète de l’Islam*, I, 378), a similar case of a discrepancy between the educated and the ordinary in terms of religious knowledge and practice might be true for the Jews of al-Ḥijāz as well.

⁷² For a work on this topic, see Baki Adam, “Müslümanların Yahudilere Yöneltiltiği Teolojik Eleştiriler,” in *Müslümanlar ve Diğer Din Mensupları: Müslümanların Diğer Din Mensuplarıyla İlişkilerinde Temel Yaklaşımlar*, ed. Abdurrahman Küçük (Ankara: Türkiye Dinler Tarihi Derneği Yayınları, 2004), 103-118.

the wrappings/hardened;” they change the words from their context and say to the Prophet: “We heard and we disobeyed,” “Hear you as one who hears not,” and “*rāʾinā*,” they try to prevent others from accepting God’s religion;⁷³ and they “save a few (*illā qalīl*)” among them but act in a deceitful/treacherous way toward Muslims.⁷⁴ In fact, both the Bible and the Qurʾān testify that in the past, the people of Israel/Jews committed similar wrongdoings against their prophets and their Scripture.⁷⁵ When compared with criticism expressed in the Hebrew Bible⁷⁶ and in the New Testament,⁷⁷ the critical tone of the Qurʾān toward Jews does not look so harsh.⁷⁸

Another important point to note is that when speaking of the behaviors and beliefs of the Jews, the Qurʾān usually employs expressions and metaphors that have been used in the Hebrew Bible. The statement “Our hearts are the wrappings/hardened,”⁷⁹ for example, is particularly interesting; here, the Arabic word “*ghulf*/*غلف*” is used, which means “flesh of the foreskin.” In fact, a similar expression occurs in the book of Deuteronomy, where it is said that if the people of Israel return to God, He will “circumcise their heart,” which is to say, He will take off the foreskin of their

⁷³ Q 2:75, 88-91, 120, 135; 4:46 (cf. Exodus 19:8; Romans 10:16); Q 5:13, 41-42, 64, 82; 6:91, 147.

⁷⁴ Q 2:83-85; 4:162; 5:(12)13.

⁷⁵ In the Torah, it is said that the people of Israel, despite the covenant they made with God, frequently acted in a disobedient way from the time of Moses (see Numbers 14:21-23). Again, a common theme appearing in the books of later prophets is the disobedience of the people of Israel and their following of other peoples’ gods and serving them (see, for example, Judges 2:10-15; Jeremiah 2-4; Hosea 8:1-3).

⁷⁶ See, for example, Amos 5; Micah 9-12; Mathew 23; cf. *The Babylonian Talmud*, Sotah 22b.

⁷⁷ Jewish religious leaders, in particular, are usually mentioned in terms of acting against Jesus and his followers and being responsible for his killing. See, for example, Mathew 26:47-27:26; Mark 14:43-15:15; Luke 22:47-23:25; John 5:15-18; 8:44-48; 9:22; 11:45-53; 18:12, 31-40; Acts 12:1-3; 14:2; 18:12-13; 25:24; I Thessalonians 1:14-15.

⁷⁸ For a similar comparison between Christian and Muslim depictions of the Jews in the literature from the medieval period, see N. A. Stillman, “Yahūd,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, XI, 240.

⁷⁹ Q 2:88; 4:155.

hearts⁸⁰ and in this way their heart will be purified so that they will come to love God and follow in His ways.⁸¹ Accordingly, it is possible to assume that when the Jews of Medina said “Our hearts are the wrappings/hardened,” they had been rejecting the call of the Prophet Muḥammad by using the biblical expression of the circumcision of the heart.

As for the statements “We heard and we disobeyed” and “*rāʿinā*,”⁸² these seem to be allusions to certain biblical expressions as well. Indeed, the first statement might be referring to the response of the people of Israel to God’s order to obey during the ratification of Sinai covenant: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.”⁸³ It might also be referring to the well-known biblical commandment: “*Shemaʿ Yisrael*/Hear, O Israel!”⁸⁴ What is interesting here is that although the literal meaning of the word *shemaʿ* is “hear/listen,” it also includes the meaning “be obedient.” Thus, in response to the call of the Qurʾān, the Jews of Medina might have been saying, “We heard and we disobeyed (*samiʿnā wa-ʿaṣaynā*)”

⁸⁰ “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6; see also Jeremiah 4:4). There is a similar passage in Ezekiel 36:25-26: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

⁸¹ See A. Cohen, ed., *The Soncino Chumash: the Five books of Moses, with Haphtaroth. Hebrew text and English translation, with an exposition based on classical Jewish commentaries* (London: The Soncino Press, 1983), 1142.

⁸² Q 4:46.

⁸³ Exodus 24:7; 19:5, 8. In another Qurʾānic passage, it is said: “And remember We took your covenant and We raised above you (the towering height) of Mount (Sinai): (saying): ‘Hold firmly to what We have given you, and hearken.’ They said: ‘We heard, and we disobeyed.’ And they had to drink into their hearts (of the taint) of the calf because of their faithlessness. Say: ‘Vile indeed are the behests of your faith if you have any faith!’” (Q 2:93; cf. 5:6). Here, what is meant by the expression “We heard and we disobeyed” is not the literal response the people of Israel gave to God at Sinai but rather their actual deeds that they did afterwards, such as the worship of the calf, rejecting the divine order of entering the land of Canaan and bowing down to other gods (see Exodus 32).

⁸⁴ “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

by alluding to the words of the people of Israel in the Sinai covenant: “We will listen and we will do (*wa-shamaʿnu wa-ʿasinu*).”⁸⁵ There is also an obvious phonetic similarity between the Hebrew word *ʿasa*/עשה, which means “he did,” and the Arabic word *ʿaṣā*/عصى, which means “he disobeyed,” making the allusion even more apparent.

In the same way, the expression “*rāʿinā* (observe/look at us)” might be an allusion to the biblical metaphor of “shepherd” (*roʿe*/רועה),⁸⁶ which is used with reference to God as well as Moses and David in their relation to the people of Israel. But in the Qurʾānic verse, what is implied with this expression, too, is a negative meaning through a play of words. In fact, the Hebrew word *raʿ*/רע, which means “bad,” bears an obvious phonetic similarity to the Arabic word *rāʿ*/راع. Thus, in the Jews saying *rāʿinā*, an insult might have been intended to the Prophet Muḥammad (meaning “our bad one”). Indeed in the ḥadīth books, there are various accounts according to which the Jews of Medina used to play with words with the intent to insult the Prophet as well as the Muslims.⁸⁷ In fact, a similar kind of ridicule and contempt toward the Prophet are found in medieval Jewish literature as well.⁸⁸

Again, it is possible to see the statement “*Allah’s hand is tied up/fettered* (مغلولة)”, which is also attributed to Jews in the Qurʾān, as an allusion to certain expressions that are used in the Hebrew Bible with reference to the people of Israel, such as, “Is the Lord’s hand not shortened;”⁸⁹ and the Jews of Medina were obviously familiar with

⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 5:27. See also Exodus 24:7 (*naʿase ve nishmaʿ* = we will do and we will listen/be obedient).

⁸⁶ See Genesis 49:24; Isaiah 40:10-11; Jeremiah 43:12; Ezekiel 34:12, 23; Psalms 23:1; 80:1.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Muslim, “al-Salām,” 10-12. For an evaluation of this Jewish play or war with words, see also Firestone, “Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam,” 550-552 and Hikmet Zeyveli, “Kur’an ve İndiği Dönem: Kur’an’da Yahudilere Yapılan Tarihî Atıfları Doğru Anlamak,” in *Kur’an ve İslami İlimlerin Anlaşılmasında Tarihin Önemi*, ed. M. Mahfuz Söylemez (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2003), 123-124.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Maimonides, “Epistle to Yemen,” in *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 457.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Numbers 11:21-23: “But Moses said: ‘The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and You have said, I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month!’ Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for

such expressions.

Another important topic that is brought up in the Qurʾān in relation to the Jews is the question of salvation. In two verses from the Medinan period that recall a pluralist understanding of religion, those among Jews as well as Christians and Sabians who believe in God and the Last Day as well as doing good deeds are promised reward in the hereafter.

Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Q 2:62; 5:69)⁹⁰

In the classical tafsīr books, particularly in al-Ṭabarī, the Jews (and Christians, etc.) mentioned in this verse are explained to be those among them who lived in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and believed in him or else those who lived before him.⁹¹ Al-Ṭabarī also notes that there are those such as Ibn ʿAbbās who claimed that this verse is referring to the Jews (and Christians, etc.) who believed and acted in accordance with their own *sharīʿab(s)*, but it is abrogated by the following verse: “And who seeks as religion other than *Islām* it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the

them, and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them? And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Is the *Lord’s hand shortened*? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.’” See also Isaiah 59:1-3: “Behold, the *Lord’s hand is not shortened*, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness;” and see Lamentations 2:3: “... He [God] has *withdrawn from them His right hand* in the face of the enemy.”

⁹⁰ For another passage from the Meccan period that mentions these groups together, albeit not in the context of salvation, see Q 22:17.

⁹¹ See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, II, 39-45; VIII, 561-562, 572-573; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 277; Abū l-Faṭḥ Tāj al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Aḥmad al-Shahrastānī, *Tafsīr al-Shahrastānī al-musammā Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-maṣābiḥ al-abrār*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAlī Ādharshab (Tehran: Markaz al-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt li-l-Turāth al-Makḥḥūt, 2008/1386SH), I, 386-387; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, III, 112.

Hereafter.”⁹² According to al-Shahrastānī, on the other hand, who does not accept abrogation (*naskb*) in the Qurʾān, the related verse in Sūrat al-Baqarah is qualified by this verse in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān.⁹³ At this point, the inclusive interpretation put forward by al-Qushayrī, according to which all *muwahhids* from among other religions are considered to be saved, constitutes an exception.⁹⁴ However, those who hold to the interpretations based on the idea of abrogation or of qualification overlook the fact that the verse in Sūrat al-Baqarah is repeated in Sūrat al-Māʿidah with the exact same words, and the latter is considered to be revealed later than the verse in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān. What is important at this point are the verses that precede the related verse in Sūra al-Māʿidah, as quoted below:

If only the People of the Book had believed and been righteous, We should indeed have blotted out their iniquities and admitted them to gardens of bliss (*jannāt al-naʿīm*). If only they had stood fast by the Law (*Tawrāh*), the Gospel (*Injīl*), and all the revelation that was sent to them from their Lord, they would surely have been nourished from above them and from beneath their feet.⁹⁵ There is from among them

⁹² Q 3:85. See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, II, 45-46. This view of abrogation (*naskb*) is in fact al-Ṭabarī’s own conclusion and not that of Ibn ʿAbbās. What is accounted from Ibn ʿAbbās is no more than this: Q 3:85 is revealed later than Q 2:62. See Okuyan and Öztürk, “Kur’an Verilerine Göre ‘Öteki’nin Konumu,” 200.

⁹³ See al-Shahrastānī, *Tafsīr al-Shahrastānī*, I, 388. See also Recep Arpa, “Şehristānīnin Nesh Anlayışı,” *İslām Araştırmaları Dergisi - Turkish Journal of Islamic Studies* 32 (2014), 57.

⁹⁴ “It is quite approvable that there are different ways, as long as they derive from the same origin. When one accepts God as depicted in his revelation and believes what is revealed as regards the existence and attributes of Him, the divergence in laws (*sharīʿahs*) and different names given to them is not an obstacle in earning the consent of God” (Abū l-Qāsim Zayn al-Islām ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin ibn ʿAbd al-Malik al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt: Tafsīr şūfī kāmīl li-l-Qurʾān al-karīm*, ed. Ibrāhīm Basyūnī, 2nd ed. [Cairo: al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah li-l-Kitāb, 1981], I, 96). For a detailed evaluation of the interpretations made on this passage and a critique of the exclusive interpretations, see Okuyan and Öztürk, “Kur’an Verilerine Göre ‘Öteki’nin Konumu,” 196-204.

⁹⁵ Cf. Deuteronomy 28:9-13: “The Lord will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your

a party on the right course but many of them follow a course that is evil. O Messenger! Proclaim the (message) which has been sent to you from your Lord ... Say: "O *People of the Book!* you have no ground to stand upon unless you stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord." It is the revelation that comes to you from your Lord, that increases in most of them their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy. But sorrow you not over (these) people without faith. (Q 5:65-68)

Here, it is stated that for the people of the book to be nourished (blessed) both in this world and the world to come, they have to believe in and act in accordance with "all the revelation that was sent to them" alongside the Torah (*Tawrāb*) and the Gospel (*Injil*). However, in these verses, reference is being made to an "abundance of nourishment" in this world and the "gardens of bliss" in the hereafter. Thus, it might be taken that if they believe in and act in accordance with their own Scriptures only, there will still be a reward, but in that case, it will be a lesser one than the total blessing. However, this implication seems to be undermined by the statement "you have no ground to stand upon unless you stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord."

Indeed in the tafsīr books, "the revelation that was sent to them" mentioned in the verse is explained as the revelation that has been sent to the Prophet Muḥammad, namely, the Qurʾān, or else all the books that have been sent to the prophets. And the statement "[to] stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation" is interpreted in terms of accepting all the rules and commandments (such as daily prayer) mentioned in these books and recognizing the Prophet announced in them.⁹⁶ A similar emphasis is made in another verse in Sūrat al-Baqarah:

livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them."

⁹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, VIII, 564; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, II, 268; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, XII, 49-50.

Say you: “We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord; we make no difference between one and another of them; and unto Him we have surrendered (*muslimūn*). So *if they believe as ye believe, they are indeed on the right path*; but if they turn back, it is they who are in schism; but Allah will suffice you as against them, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing. (Q 2:136-137)

In fact, the idea of absolute pluralism, which acknowledges the equality of all religions in terms of truth, did not find much acceptance in the Islamic tradition. However, Islam obviously takes a pluralistic approach in providing other religious groups, especially the monotheistic ones, with the right to live and in permitting social and legal relations with them. And when it comes to the question of the salvation of other religious groups, the majority view in Islamic tradition is that those who had a monotheistic faith but died without coming into contact with the true message of Islam will indeed have a share in the world to come.⁹⁷ In the opposite case, when belief in the Prophet Muḥammad is always considered to be a necessary condition for salvation, even in the case of those who did not have direct or correct contact with the message of the Prophet, such a condition would undermine the Qurʾān’s own accusation against Jews and Christians that they claim to have a monopoly on salvation (Q 2:111, 113). If we put aside the question of religious truth – as the position of the Qurʾān is clear on that – it is reasonable to think that in every religion there might be those who believe in God and in the hereafter and who do good deeds, and therefore, there should be hope of salvation for them. It is possible to understand the statement “There is from among them a party on the right course” in Sūrat al-Māʾidah within this vein and not as necessarily referring to the Muslims from among them.

However, as far as the Qurʾān’s people of the book are concerned, namely, those who lived in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and came into direct contact with him, they are required in the Qurʾān to *eventually* accept the message of the Prophet. Thus, the people of the book, in order to be true to their own prophetic/Abrahamic tradition,

⁹⁷ Ḥujjat al-Islām Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafrīqah bayna l-Islām wa-l-zandaqah*, ed. Riyāḍ Muṣṭafā ʿAbd Allāh (Damascus & Beirut: Dār al-Ḥikmah, 1986), 105 ff.

are required by the Qurʾān to accept the revelation given to the Prophet who happens to be the last link of the chain in that tradition. This is considered a necessary concomitant of following their own books: “O *People of the Book!* You have no ground to stand upon unless you stand fast by the Law (Torah), the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord.”⁹⁸ In fact, for the Jews (and the Christians) to accept the message of the Prophet is seen by the Qurʾān as more a question of moral and religious integrity than pure theology. Thus, as a further step in the face of a continuing hostile attitude of the Jews, threatening language is also adopted in some later passages:

O you *People of the Book!* Believe in what We have (now) revealed, confirming what was (already) with you, before We change the face and fame of some (of you) beyond all recognition, and turn them hindwards, or curse them as We cursed the Sabbathbreakers. (Q 4:47)

It is important, even necessary, to understand these and the above-quoted harsh verses on the people of the book within the context of the relations between the Prophet and the Jews and the eventual state of affairs. It is important, first, to recognize the gradual change in style of the verses on the people of the book in general and the Jews in particular, and second, to consider the information given by early Muslim historians – though questioned by some Orientalists – regarding the relations between the Prophet and the Jewish tribes of Medina. These considerations lead to the following conclusion: the Jews of Medina failed to accept, mainly for pragmatic reasons,⁹⁹ the call for peace and reconciliation by the Prophet, as exemplified in the statements “Come to common terms as between us and you” and

⁹⁸ Q 5:68. See also 17:107-108: “Say: ‘Whether you believe in it or not, it is true that those who were given knowledge beforehand, when it is recited to them, fall down on their faces in humble prostration;’ and they say: ‘Glory to our Lord! Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled!’” For a justification of the view that the belief in the Prophet Muḥammad is necessary condition for salvation, see Mustafa Altundağ, “Kur’an Hitâbının Ehl-i Kitabı Bağlayıcılığı Üzerine,” *Bakü Devlet Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesinin İlmî Mecmuası* 2, no. 1 (2005), 79-121; see also Mesut Erdal, “Kur’ân’a Göre Ehl-i Kitab’ın Uhrevî Felah ve Kurtuluşu Meselesi,” *Dicle Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 4, no. 1 (2002), 1-33.

⁹⁹ For the possible socio-political and religious reasons for the hostile attitude of the Medinan Jews toward the Prophet Muḥammad, see Firestone, “Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam,” 548 ff.

“Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion,”¹⁰⁰ which was also set forth in the Constitution of Medina.¹⁰¹ Moreover, as indicated in

¹⁰⁰ Q 109:6, 3:64.

¹⁰¹ The Constitution of Medina is a document of historical value. This document, from article no. 15 onward, which is in conformity with the rule that “*there is no compulsion in religion*” (Q 2:56), assures the protection of the Jews as long as they remain on peaceful terms with Muslims. Moreover, in article no. 25, it is stated that “Unto the Jews their religion, and unto the Muslims theirs” (cf. Q 109:6). For more information on the content of the Constitution and the view that it includes the three major Jewish tribes (i.e., Banū Qaynuqāʿ, Banū Naḍīr and Banū Qurayzah), see Hamidullah, *The Life and Work of the Prophet of Islam*, I, 147-160; id., *Le Prophète de l’Islam*, I, 126-137. For different views, see also R. B. Serjeant, “The *Sunnab Jāmiʿah*, Pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the *Ṭaḥrīm* of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-Called ‘Constitution of Medina’,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41, no. 1 (1978), 4-43; Rubin, “The ‘Constitution of Medina’,” 5-20; Saïd Amir Arjomand, “The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad’s Acts of Foundation of the *Umma*,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009), 558-560, 562-564, doi:10.1017/S0020743809990067; Michael Lecker, “Did Muḥammad Conclude Treaties with the Jewish Tribes Naḍīr, Qurayza and Qaynuqāʿ?,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 17 (1997), 29-36; Michael Lecker, *The “Constitution of Medina”: Muḥammad’s First Legal Document* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 2004), 3. Lecker, counter to his earlier view he put forward in his article, later argued in his book that the Constitution did not include the three major Jewish tribes (see Lecker, *The “Constitution of Medina,”* 49 ff.). In opposition, Arjomand argues that Banū Qaynuqāʿ were included right from the beginning in the Constitution under the name of “the Jews of ‘Awf” (article no. 15). On the other hand, the group depicted as “the Jews of Aws” (article no. 27, considered to be an addition to the document following the Battle of Uḥud) were Banū Qurayzah (see Arjomand, “The Constitution of Medina,” 573 [n. 25], 560). In Sūrat al-Anfāl (verses 56-58), which is considered to have been revealed immediately after the Battle of the Trench, it is said: “They are those with whom you did make a covenant but they break their covenant every time, and they have not the fear (of Allah). If you gain the mastery over them in war, disperse, with them, those who follow them, that they may remember. If you fear treachery from any group, throw back (their covenant) to them, (so as to be) on equal terms; for Allah loves not the treacherous.” These verses indicate that the Qurayzah Jews, who were accused of treachery after the Battle of the Trench, as well as the Qaynuqāʿ and the Naḍīr Jews, who had also been accused earlier of treachery after the Battles of Badr and Uḥud, were under treaty with Muslims. For this, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, XI, 235; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 592-593; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, XV, 188-190. Besides all these, it seems unreasonable to think that the Prophet Muḥammad, while he was

the Qurʾān, they acted against the Muslim community in the most critical times, despite their having been in covenant relationship with them.¹⁰² It is understood that, in response to this, those among them who continued on the treacherous way were punished. This action of the Prophet, which has been adopted toward a hostile group as a last resort, should be distinguished from the question of salvation of individuals as well as that of normal relations in times of peace.

Concluding Remarks

When looking at the Qurʾānic verses on the Jews/people of Israel and the people of the book overall, there are two points that need to be emphasized: (1) Firstly, the content and style of these verses change, somewhat gradually, from the ideal and neutral, even positive, to the actual and negative; this is due to the experience Muslims had with Arab idolaters as well as Jews in the Meccan and Medinan periods, respectively. (2) Secondly, and in parallel to the first point, the main criticism of the Qurʾān against the Jews seems to be less about the matters of pure belief and religious practice than the hostile attitude of the Jews of Medina toward a monotheistic Prophet and his followers, as well as their concomitant arguments, particularly the claim of religious superiority, which is used by them as a justification for hostile and immoral behavior. In other words, the language of criticism employed in the Qurʾān seems to be dependent on the actual context and thus aims at the language of debate/ridicule and rivalry on the part of the Jews. Accordingly, the Jews who are mentioned negatively in the Qurʾān are not a peaceful group who, though they do not recognize the prophethood of Muḥammad, nevertheless accept the call of conciliation with Muslims and remain faithful to it; rather, they are a group who wage a theological and political campaign against Muslims and ally with Arab idolaters with whom the former has been at war. Thus, the emphasis of the Medinan verses on the betrayal of the people of Israel of their covenant with God in the past should be understood in this vein. Again, there is the verse “*O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends/protectors (awliyāʾ)*”,¹⁰³ which is usually dated

seeking to create conciliation between Muslims and Jews, would by-pass the major Jewish tribes of Medina.

¹⁰² Q 8:56-58.

¹⁰³ Q 5:51.

to the time of the Battle of Uḥud. This verse is about how Muslims should not look to Jews and Christians to be their allies in times of war; it is not about being on neighborly and friendly terms with them, namely, having civil relations in ordinary times of peace.¹⁰⁴

In fact, understanding these verses on Jews (and Christians) in their own context is crucial, as it prevents one from making generalizations. It helps one to instead develop a framework of behavior and conduct based on the principle of experience and the rule of reciprocity – just like the case in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad. Accordingly, as it is indicated in the Qurʾān, the ancient people of Israel and the Jews succeeding them are not the same and homogenous peoples. By the same token, the Jews who lived in later periods and even today, despite their common religious-cultural and historical-political heritage with the Jews of the past, are not identical with them, nor are they a homogenous community in themselves. This does not mean to say that some of the points of criticism leveled on the Jews in the Qurʾān might be/are true for the Jewish groups living in later periods and even today. It is rather to say that the perspective displayed in the Qurʾān and the statements made within a certain context are not to be taken as a fixed “doctrine” but as a flexible “set of principles” that need to be readapted to and reevaluated in light of new experiences. At this point, the course of the relations between Muslim ruling societies and Jewish communities in the past, in both a positive and negative sense, testifies to the possibility of realization of the above-mentioned principles and change of attitudes in accordance with new situations, again in terms of both conciliation and confrontation.

Moreover, because the history of the people of Israel is used in the Qurʾān – particularly in the Meccan sūrahs – as a means of example and reference for the early Muslims, it is possible to see for the Muslims of today a similar exemplification in the history of the Jews. The experience of the European Jews, in particular, might be seen as

¹⁰⁴ See Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, VIII, 506-508; al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, eds. Mehmet Boynukalın and Bekir Topaloğlu (Istanbul: Mizan Yayınevi, 2005), IV, 248. From the accounts that have come down to us in the ḥadīth literature, one understands that the Prophet Muḥammad had commercial relations with the Jews and had Jewish neighbors with whom he had been most of the time on good terms. See, for example, al-Bukhārī, “al-Buyūʿ,” 14; al-Tirmidhī, “al-Birr,” 28; Abū Dāwūd, “al-Adab,” 122, 123, etc.

an important example of the relations of Muslim communities with European societies. Again, in a broader context, it is fair to say that the constant criticism in the Qurʾān of the failings of the ancient societies, including the people of Israel/Jews, do not only aim at those societies (Jews, in this case) and early Muslims but also pertain to Muslim societies in every period. If one fails to see this, then s/he will also fail to understand the wider meaning and message of many of the Qurʾānic passages, including those related to Jews.

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