















with open and unerring judgment<sup>35</sup>,  
 If the Qur'ān is responding to this challenge found in Syriac literature to discern the true "heir" to the "House of God", it proffers its own response:  
 Q 2:135 (cf. Q 2:140) reads:

"They say, 'Become Jews or Christians if you would be guided.'  
 Say: 'No, the religion of Abraham, a *hanif*, And he was not of the associators"

#### *ANBIYĀ'* : VERNACULARIZATION OF A POLEMIC OR CONCEPT?

The Qur'ānic allusions to prophet-killing may indicate a Qur'ānization, or Arabicization, of a trope, rather than a validation of the Christian "side" in the polemic, or any particular hostility to Jewish groups in its milieu. For, while the Qur'ānic accusations of "prophet-killing" do seem directed at Jews and their forefathers, the refrain is also near a few litanies criticizing *ahl al-kitāb* rejections of Muhammad, or of Christian misappropriations of their faith (e.g. Q 3:183-187; 4:171). Thus, even if the prophet-killing passages invoke biblical events or tropes, they are directed at the *ahl al-kitāb* in Muhammad's own milieu, who, presumably, are not accepting Muhammad as a prophet. The repetition of the accusation initially uttered in Q 2:61 with slight wording changes, including a seeming transition to *anbiyā'*, may indicate the popularity of, or increasing familiarity with, the idea, among the Qur'ānic auditors or larger society.

Although the use of *anbiyā'* in the almost hymnic refrain of "they killed their prophets without right" may indicate an Arabic (re)appropriation of an increasingly familiar refrain, the Qur'ān continues to use *nabiyyūn/īn* during and after its prophet-killing mentions (e.g. in conjunction with martyrs, Q 4:69; or in litanies of previous prophets, Q 2:136 and 3:84; cf Q 4:163 for a more extensive list). Any claim, therefore, of a Qur'ānic "transition" to *anbiyā'* is restricted to its prophet-killing allusions. But there is a final use of *anbiyā'* (Q 5:20), which is not in a prophet-killing accusation, but in a reported quotation of Moses to his people.

Like Q 2:61, the first Qur'ānic accusation of prophet-killing, Q 5:20 is in a pericope of Moses, this time in a reported speech of Moses. But, unlike Q 2:61, the allusion to prophets in Q 5:20 is within the direct quotation of a speech Moses gave, rather than a liturgical or possibly hymnic refrain following his speech, commenting on the wrongs of the Israelites. As at Q 2:91, when the Qur'ānic audience is directly addressed, using *anbiyā'*, at Q 5:20 the Qur'ān has Moses address his people in its own – Arabic – vernacular.

This is akin to the first use of *anbiyā'*, which appears as a question the Qur'ānic prophet is supposed to repeat to his auditors: "Say 'Why were you killing the prophets of God before, if you are believers?'" (*taqtulūna anbiyā'ā llāhi min qabli in kuntum mu'minīn*, Q 2:91). Does the specification of the *anbiyā'* as of God in its first Qur'ānic appearance indicate a translation of a "foreign" concept into Arabic? For *nabiyy* and *nabiyyūn/īn* appear in previous passages, including the first appearance of the prophet-killing accusation (Q 2:61). Or, rather than a formulaic refrain, does it indicate the vernacular usage of its auditors - who may be familiar with a range of prophets, including those who are not from God?

As with Q 2:91, the final Qur'ānic appearance of *anbiyā'* is in a homiletic passage addressed to the *ahl al-kitāb* in its milieu: "O People of the Book! ... [Remember] Moses said to his people, 'Remember God's favor to you, when he placed prophets among you and made you kings...'" (Q 5:19-20). A quick perusal of classical exegesis of Q 5:20 reveals discussions about the number and identity of the

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in S. Brock, "Disputations in Syriac Literature," pp. 159-174 in *Disputation Literature in the Near East and Beyond*, edited by E. Jiménez & C. Mittermayer, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), 169.



prophets given to Moses' people (the consensus seems to be 70), but much of the exegetical discussion focuses on the kings.

The Qur'ānic paralleling of prophets and kings<sup>36</sup> is reminiscent of Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9, which is read as part of the Jewish liturgical cycle. But, Moses predated the kings of Israel by a few centuries, and, in Judeo-Christian tradition, was himself the first prophet sent to Israel. The chronologically fluid exhortation of Moses to his people at Q 5:20 (to remember that God had given them prophets and made them kings) is similar to Q 19:27-28 terming of Mary "sister of Aaron" (using a figure from the Hebrew Bible as a trope for the mother of Jesus). It also calls to mind other anachronistic parallels in Syriac tradition, in which biblical (and other) figures are often placed in various situations as a didactic device<sup>37</sup> (as with the above-mentioned dialogues between "the church" and "the synagogue").

Q 5:20 is in a pericope reminiscent of biblical accounts (Numbers 13 and 15; Genesis). For the speech is followed by an account of the Israelites' refusal to enter the land, and their subsequent 40 years of wandering (Q 5:21-26). There is then an account of Cain and Abel (Adam's two sons) and the sacrifice that was accepted from one, but not the other (Q 5:27-31). Found in Genesis and later Jewish tradition<sup>38</sup>, like that of the Calf of Gold, this is a story prominent also in Christian tradition. In fact, a dispute between Abel and Cain was known to Jacob of Serugh (d 521)<sup>39</sup> and, until today, is part of Syriac Christian Holy Week celebrations.

While the rich literature on the *qurbān* of Cain and Abel<sup>40</sup> is beyond the scope of this discussion, as the Qur'ān is engaging auditors familiar with Jewish/Christian tradition, might the switch from *nabiyyīn* to *anbiyā'* indicate a bilingual audience - or a switch from a liturgical to a homiletic context? In other words, might the more frequent *nabiyyīn* be an indication that the Qur'ān is invoking biblical passages – or phrases

<sup>36</sup> G. Hepner, "The Mockery of Kings and Prophets: The Balaam Narrative Contains an Implied Critique of Moses," *Revue Biblique* (2011): 180-185; G. van Kooten and J. van Ruiten (eds.), *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). J. Witztum, "Variant Traditions"; U. Simonsohn, "The Christians Whose Force is Hard: Non-Ecclesiastical Judicial Authorities in the Early Islamic Period," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53/4 (2010): 579-620.

<sup>37</sup> For Joseph and other examples, see K. Heal, "Joseph as a Type of Christ in Syriac Literature," *Brigham Young University Studies* 41/1 (2002): 29-49. On the genre of disputes, dialogues and disputations, see e.g. S. Brock, "The Dispute Poem: From Sumer to Syriac," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 1/1 (2009): 3-10; G.J. Reinink and H. Vanstiphout (eds.), *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1991); S.P. Brock, "Biblical Dialogues in Syriac: Texts and Contexts," pp. 33-56 in *Dialogues and Disputes in Biblical Disguise from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, Edited by P. Tóth. (Routledge, 2021); K. Upson-Saia, "Caught in a Compromising Position. The Biblical Exegesis and Characterization of Biblical Protagonists in the Syria Dialogue Hymns," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 9/2 (2006): 189-211; O. Münz-Manor, "Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1/3 (2010): 336-361; Brock, "Disputations in Syriac Literature"; J. Benzion Witztum, *The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives* (Dissertation, Princeton University UMI Dissertation Services, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. the discussion of J. L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998)

<sup>39</sup> S. P. Brock, "Two Syriac dialogue poems on Abel and Cain." *Le Muséon* 113, no. 3 (2000): 333-375.

<sup>40</sup> In the exegetical literature, the *qurbān* of Adam's sons is linked to that in Q 3:183, in which those who refuse the messengers God sends them demand that the messenger bring a sacrifice devoured by fire. See the extensive discussion of this theme in S. P. Brock, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2006).

used in liturgy, or religious services rooted in Syriac (or Hebrew, or Aramaic) – phrases or formulae that, given the context in which they were initially heard, might be more impervious to vernacularization? The more common (in Arabic, but less frequent in the Qur’ān) *anbiyā’* then, may indicate a refrain more familiar to a ‘pure’ Arabic speaking audience, or a homiletic-type context. In this case, the Qur’ān reports Moses’ speech in the vernacular of its own audience. This context could either be the Qur’ān’s own “believing” auditors, or another Arabic -speaking audience (probably Christian, given the contexts in which *anbiyā’* appears).

## CONCLUSIONS

These reflections lead to the question of why the “prophet-killing” – but not, for example, prophetic litanies (e.g. Q 33:7, etc.) – eventually employed *anbiyā’*. One hypothesis is that the prophetic litanies are non-polemical and, therefore, less likely to lend themselves to translation into the vernacular of “popular” discourse. The charge of prophet-killing and the (implied) Israelite ingratitude for the prophets and kings God had bestowed (Q 5:20), however, lend themselves very well to polemics against a (theological and/or socio-political) group that is refusing to accept the qur’ānic message or messenger. Alternatively, the litanies of the prophets may have been well-embedded in the Jewish and Christian liturgical formula of the qur’ānic milieu, thereby making the formulas impervious to vernacularization. A third hypothesis is that the charge of “prophet-killing, much like the Jewish-Christian discourse around Abraham, was a theological trope<sup>41</sup> present in Christian (and Jewish) circles, but, prior to the qur’ānic appropriation, not one considered to have implications outside church (or synagogue) walls. When, however, it was appropriated by the Arabic Qur’ān, it entered the awareness of broader society, expanding beyond Jewish-Christian polemical discourse, and was vernacularized, without altering its historical focus. That Q 2:91 and Q 5:20 employ *anbiyā’* in direct address to an audience, rather than as a refrain or scriptural formula further argues for the vernacularization of the term.

Rather than relying exclusively on the interpretations of later exegetes, qur’ānic pericopes with allusions to prophets, as *nabiyyūn/īn* and as *anbiyā’*, were read with the assumption that at least some of the Qur’ān’s initial auditors would have been familiar with Jewish and/or Christian liturgical traditions. In this examination, a number of parallels were found with Syriac Christian, tradition. But, as with the Qur’ān’s critique of contemporaneous Jewish and Christian communities, it is not uncritically adopting biblical phraseology or concepts. Rather, it is employing concepts known to its auditors to support its own (sometimes polemical) message.

The qur’ānic employment of the broken Arabic plural *anbiyā’*, particularly in the recurrent accusation of the “wrongful killing of their prophets”, was examined as a sort of hymnic refrain, responding to references to historic (e.g. found in biblical accounts) and/or contemporary wrongs of groups in its milieu. As the qur’ānic audience became more familiar with the charge, it was increasingly rendered in phraseology particular to Arabic, e.g. using *anbiyā’* rather than *nabiyyīn*. The final use of *anbiyā’*, in which Moses anachronistically reminds his people to remember that God had given them prophets and kings, can be read along the lines of Syriac *sogithe* and *madroshe*, in which biblical figures are chronologically fluid.

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<sup>41</sup> G. Stroumsa "From Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism in Early Christianity?" pp 1-26 in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, edited by O. Limor and G. Stroumsa (JCB Mohr, 1996).

This understanding of qur'ānic references to prophets presuming an audience familiar with Syriac Christian and Jewish traditions fits with other elements in the qur'ānic discourse. Although the Qur'ān alludes to its own clear (or clarifying) Arabic (in 11 places), and an apparently obvious contrast between Arabs and non-Arabs (Q 26:198; cf. also 49:13) or non-Arabic speakers (Q 41:44), its milieu is neither monolingual nor monoethnic. For example, the Qur'ān describes the tongue of a person said by Muhammad's detractors to be teaching him the Qur'ān as 'a'jamī' (Q 16:103), a concept glossed as "foreign" or "accented" (e.g. speaking Arabic, but with a Persian accent). The inability of Muhammad's contemporaries and subsequent generations to imitate the Qur'ān contributed to the claim that part of the "proof" of Muḥammad's prophethood was the inimitability of the (Arabic) Qur'ān.<sup>42</sup> This claim was further enhanced by the interpretation of Muhammad, the *ummī* prophet, as "illiterate" (or, as a gentile, at least unable to read Hebrew or other biblical languages; cf. Q 7:158).

The qur'ānic milieu was also not mono-cultic, as evidenced by its allusions to Arabian and other beliefs, including frequent mentions of Jews, Christians, Israelites, People of the Book, etc. Against his detractors, the Qur'ān positions its recipient as not only the *rasūl Allāh* but an *ummī* prophet, in fact the seal of the prophets (*khātim al-nabiyyīn*) – even though he is not of the Banī Isrā'īl. In fact, the Qur'ān claims Abraham (over whose legacy Jews and Christians quarrel) as a *hanīf, muslim* – and insists he was neither a Jew nor Christian (Q 3:67). These are just a few examples of how the Qur'ān positions itself, and its recipient, as not only within the biblical tradition, but as a more authoritative or legitimate transmitter of biblical truths than many of the Jews and Christians already claiming to be the preferred heirs of the prophets.

While a number of parallels with Syriac Christian tradition have been presented, these initial speculations about a phrase ("they killed their prophets without right"), if not a lexeme (*anbiyā'*), that is making itself more 'at home' in the Arabic of the Qur'ān, perhaps as an appropriation of a (Syriac) hymnic refrain, are shaped by my own areas of study – and ignorance. As the Qur'ān is increasingly read in the light of Syriac and other Late Antique literature (not excluding the pre-Islamic traditions of Arabia), we may gain more insights to the Qur'ān's first auditors and its rhetoric.

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<sup>42</sup> For a recent overview of the various understandings of this concept in Islamic tradition, see D. Urvoy and M. Urvoy. *Enquête sur le miracle coranique* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2018); on the signs of prophethood in general, see also S. Stroumsa, "The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature," *Harvard Theological Review* 78/1-2 (1985): 101-114.