

## **Qur'ānic *Anbiyā'*: Homiletic Appropriation of a Christian Polemic?<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Bio:**

Clare Wilde is a scholar of Qur'anic studies, Arabic Christianity, and late antique Christian-Muslim intellectual history. Her work examines Christian Arabic texts, Syriac and Arabic religious traditions, and the ways early and medieval Christian writings engaged the Qur'an and Islamic discourse. She has published on the utility of Christian Arabic texts for Qur'anic studies and on the Qur'an in early Melkite texts. Her scholarship is especially concerned with how Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions interacted across languages, polemical settings, and shared scriptural inheritances.

### **Abstract:**

This article investigates the Qur'anic use of terms for prophets, especially the plural *anbiya*, in relation to late antique Jewish and Christian polemical traditions. Focusing on Qur'anic passages that accuse earlier communities of wrongfully killing prophets, the study asks why some prophetic references employ *anbiya* rather than other plural forms and how these usages may have entered Arabic religious discourse. Through close attention to Qur'anic language, Syriac and Christian parallels, and the polemical contexts of late antiquity, the article argues that the charge of prophet-killing may reflect the appropriation and vernacularization of a theological trope already present in Jewish and Christian settings. The analysis suggests that Qur'anic rhetoric both participates in and transforms inherited biblical and para-biblical traditions, extending them to new audiences and new claims about revelation, authority, and prophethood. Rather than relying only on later exegesis, the article reads the Qur'an in relation to the linguistic and religious environment of its first auditors. It concludes that

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was initially delivered at the International SBL in Berlin (9 August 2017) as part of the panel on *Biblical Prophets, Muslim Prophets* organized by the project on [Biblia Arabica: The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians, and Muslims](#). My thanks to Camilla Adang for her invitation and subsequent support, the participants in the session for their helpful comments, and to Devin Stewart and Steve Mason who gave substantial feedback at a later stage. Any errors are my own. An expanded version appeared as “‘Prophets’ and their Wrongful Killing: Homily or Hymn? Hearing a Qur’ānic Term and Refrain in the Light of Syriac Tradition” in *SARA* 3 (2023): 33-68. The present piece is an abridged version of the *SARA* publication, with some additional reflections.

Syriac and other late antique materials can illuminate the Qur'an's rhetoric and its engagement with earlier scriptural communities.

The Qur'ān mentions a number of individuals, including some familiar from biblical tradition - both the Jewish "Old" Testament, and the Christian "New" Testament.<sup>2</sup> These qur'ānic mentions range from detailed narratives to brief allusions. Sometimes, the individuals are identified as a "messenger" (*rasūl*, which occurs 332 times in the qur'ānic text) and/or "prophet" (*nabiyy*, 75 times).<sup>3</sup>

For the concept of "prophet(s)", the Qur'ān employs the singular form (*nabiyy*), as well as two plural forms: the broken Arabic plural (*anbiyā'*) and the common Semitic plural (*nabiyyūn/nabiyyīn*). The plurals occur in three earlier (i.e. Meccan) passages (Q 19:58; 17:55; 39:69) and 18 later (i.e. Medinan) passages (Q 2:61; 2:91; 2:136; 2:177; 2:213; 3:21; 3:80; 3:81; 3:84; 3:112; 3:181; 4:69; 4:155; 4:163; 5:20; 5:44; 33:7; 33:40). While later Arabic literature on the prophets commonly uses *anbiyā'* (as in the literary genre "Stories of the Prophets" - *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, and even a qur'ānic sūra, Q 21, is entitled *Sūrat al-Anbiyā'*), the Qur'ān prefers the sound – and common Semitic – plural form of the word, employing *nabiyyūn/nabiyyīn* 3x more frequently than *anbiyā'*.

Why does the Qur'ān employ these different plural forms for "prophet"? And why does it prefer the sound over the broken plural? While rhyme and metrical balance are not likely explanations given the rules of Arabic meter<sup>4</sup>, grammarians have ascribed different degrees of plurality to the sound and broken plurals (the "plural of paucity," *jam' al-qilla* and "plural of plenty," *jam' al-kathra*, respectively)<sup>5</sup> – although in practice the distinction is often irrelevant.<sup>6</sup> As the sound plural (*nabiyyūn/-īn*) represents the plural of plenty, and the broken plural (*anbiyā'*) is the plural of paucity, this implies that the Qur'ān primarily speaks of a prophet (*nabiyy*) or a few prophets

<sup>2</sup> R. Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*. Routledge, 2013; B. Wheeler, "Arab Prophets of the Qur'an and Bible." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8/2 (2006): 24-57; G. Reynolds, *The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext*. (Routledge, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> For an introductory overview of the overlap and distinctions of these two concepts, see the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* articles "Prophets and Prophethood" (by Uri Rubin, in vol. iv: 289-307) and "Messenger" (by A.H. Mathias Zahniser, in vol. iii: 380-383). More recently, see the discussion of qur'ānic prophetology in S. Griffith, "Late Antique Christology in Qur'ānic Perspective," pp. 33-68 in *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, ed. G. Tamer (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019)

<sup>4</sup> On the "rhymed prose" of the Qur'ān, see e.g. Devin Stewart, "Saj' in the Qur'ān": Prosody and Structure," *Journal of Arabic Literature* (1990): 101-139. On qur'ānic meter, see e.g. D. Stewart, "Divine Epithets and the Dībāḥiyyah: Clausulae and Qur'anic Rhythm" *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 15/2 (2013): 22-64. For discussion of the origins of *nabiyy* see T. Izutsu, "Revelation as a Linguistic Concept in Islam," *Studies in Medieval Thought* 5 (1962): 122-167, 154.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language. Translated from the German of Caspari and Edited with Numerous Additions and Corrections*. Third Edition. Revised by W. R. Smith and M.J. de Goeje. 2 vols. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1898), I, 169–70, 234–35, II, 234–35. The possibility of the Qur'ān reflecting different numbers of prophetic killings was first proposed to me at the Mu'minūn bi-lā hudūd conference in Marrakesh (April 2019). My thanks to the participants and organizers of that conference, and to Prof van Gelder, for his ever-helpful and patient guidance in Arabic grammar and literature.

<sup>6</sup> See Wolf Dietrich Fischer's *Grammatik*, in the English translation by Jonathan Rodgers, *A Grammar of Classical Arabic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) Revised 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 54: "As a result of numerous analogical formations that have occurred in the system of plurals, in usage classical Arabic has given up the distinction among plurals largely in favor of a general plural category: collective plurals can replace individual plurals; the plural of a small number can function as a general plural." My thanks to Prof. van Gelder for this reference.

(*nabiyyūn/nabiyyīn*), and only speaks of many prophets (e.g. *anbiyā'*) in five places: Q 2:91, 3:112, 181; 4:155; 5:20.

Western scholars have tended to look to other explanations, such as the “foreign” (e.g. non-Arabic) origins of the word. Nearly a century ago, Joseph Horowitz<sup>7</sup> commented on the qur’ānic employment of these two plural forms for prophet:

*As the plural form “nabiyyūn” has the preponderance, only in a few passages belonging to the Medina period the broken plural “anbiyā” occurs and this fact likewise is an indication that it took Mohammed quite a long time to forget the foreign derivation of the word.*

But in addition to lexical and grammatical investigations, scholars, past and present, have attempted to understand the context in which a given passage was revealed (*asbāb al-nuzūl*)<sup>8</sup> to better understand the qur’ānic text - for legal and other exegetical purposes.<sup>9</sup> Mindful of the importance of understanding a text as its first auditors might have, Angelika Neuwirth has recently cautioned that

*[q]ur’anic studies will not become ‘modern’ through simply introducing new historical, archaeological, and codicological evidence into the discussion. What is needed today is to re-embed the Qur’an into the discourse current in its epoch and most importantly, to consider the hermeneutics that was prevalent at the time.*<sup>10</sup>

For the Qur’ān expects its auditors to know the story or event of which it is speaking. There is therefore no need to repeat all the details that a more fleshed-out narrative might contain.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, be they exhortations or polemics, the qur’ānic message is one intended to move its audience – not to give precise details of the group(s) present in its milieu.<sup>12</sup> But, in this dialectic, the qur’ānic text is very aware of Late Antique ‘religious’ (and other) motifs.<sup>13</sup> As the Qur’ān is a text in conversation with its

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Horowitz, "Jewish Proper Names and Derivatives in the Koran." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 2 (1925): 145-227, p. 223.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of exegetical use of *asbāb al-nuzūl* see A. Rippin, "The Function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur’ānic Exegesis." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51/ 1 (1988): 1-20.

<sup>9</sup> For a compelling argument that the achronological arrangement of the qur’ānic text may have allowed for interpretive fluidity, see J. Burton, *Sources of Islamic Law: Islamic Theories of Abrogation*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). For a critical approach to qur’ānic exegesis as indicative of the world and concerns of the interpreters see W. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Quran Commentary of al-Thalabi (d. 427/1035), Texts and Studies on the Quran* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> A. Neuwirth, "Locating the Qur’an and Early Islam in the 'Epistemic Space' of Late Antiquity" in C. Bakhos and M. Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 165-185, 166. For some attempts at precisising geographic and other allusions found in the Qur’ān see T. Tabataba’i, “The Place of Archaeological Studies and Historical Geography in Contemporary Interpretations,” *Alustath Journal for Human and Social Sciences*, 6112 (2022): 442-457. [On the importance of \(initial\) audience for understanding a text, see e.g. S. Mason, "Of Audience and Meaning: reading Josephus’ Bellum Judaicum in the context of a Flavian audience," in J. Edmondson, S. Mason and J. Rives \(eds.\), \*Josephus and Jewish history in Flavian Rome and Beyond\* \(Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005\), 71-100.](#)

<sup>11</sup> For examples of rabbinic-qur’ānic linkages, see, e.g. the numerous works of R. Firestone, such as “The Problem of Sarah’s Identity in Islamic Exegetical Tradition” in *The Muslim World* 80/2 (1990): 65-71.

<sup>12</sup> A. Neuwirth, “Qur’an and History—a Disputed Relationship. Some Reflections on Qur’anic History and History in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 5/1 (2003): 1-18.

<sup>13</sup> For some examples of qur’ānic engagement with its milieu, see R. Firestone, "The Failure of a Jewish Program of Public Satire in the Squares of Medina." *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 46/4 (1997): 439-453; S. Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur’ān: ‘The “Companions of the Cave’ in Surat al-Kahf and in Syriac Christian Tradition”, pp. 109-137 in G. Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur’an in Its Historical Context* (Routledge, 2007); K. Van Bladel, "Heavenly Cords and Prophetic Authority in the Quran

auditors,<sup>14</sup> careful attention to its language might shed light on its hermeneutical categories and the group(s) in its milieu. Assuming that the Qur'ān is a text with a context, and that it was comprehensible to its auditors, the following attempts a reading of the the qur'ānic occurrences of *anbiyā'* as reflective of a context in which the Qur'ān was in direct dialogue with its audience, reaching out to them in their own idiom.

#### QUR'ĀNIC PROPHETOLOGY

The Semitic concept of *nabiyy* would have been well have been known to Jewish and Christian communities in the qur'ānic milieu; the preponderance of qur'ānic references to *nabiyyūn/nabiyyīn* are, in fact, in litanies reminiscent of biblical or biblically-based formulae, possibly designed to remind its auditors of the messages and messengers that had come before. Indeed, Q 4:69 and other passages in which prophets are paired with various righteous or notable individuals may have resonated with liturgical and/or hymnic formulae already known to them.<sup>15</sup>

But, although the litanies of the prophets resonate with Christian and Jewish tradition, as in Q 3:84 “Say, ‘We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the Tribes, and in was given to Moses, Jesus and the Prophets, from their Lord,” such litanies are not simply incorporated uncritically into the qur'ānic message. Rather, they are commented upon: “we make no distinction between one and another among them, and to Him we are submitters” (Q 3:84; cf. also Q 2:136). Sometimes, as at Q 33:7, the qur'ānic messenger is included: “And remember We took from the Prophets their covenant, and from you; from Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary: We took from them a solemn covenant.” Prophets and the qur'ānic recipient also appear in conjunction with inspiration (*wahī*, e.g. Q 2:213): “We have inspired you, as We inspired Noah and the Prophets after him; We inspired Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms.”

For the Qur'ān is positioning its recipient as a *nabiyy*, a concept that it otherwise reserves for certain notable individuals clearly identifiable from biblical tradition. Although later Islamic tradition would maintain that “*rasūl*” (messenger)<sup>16</sup> is a select subset of *nabiyy* (prophet), the Qur'ān makes no such claim. It speaks of messengers and prophets, sometimes identifying one individual as both a messenger and a prophet. Others, such as the three Arabian messengers named in the Qur'ān (Hud, Salih, Shuayb), are only termed *rasūl* by the Qur'ān. Muhammad is also termed a *rasūl*. But he is also the only individual not found in the Bible whom the Qur'ān terms a *nabiyy*. As a counter to some of the challenges he is facing, the Qur'ān asserts that the recipient of the qur'ānic message is “not the father of any of your men, but the *rasūl Allāh*,

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and its Late Antique Context,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70/2 (2007): 223-246; T. Tesei, “Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity in Q 18: 60–65: The Quran in Light of Its Cultural Context,” *Journal of American Oriental Society* 135/1 (2015): 19-32. For an argument of qur'ānic engagement with pre-Islamic Christian Arabic, see Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān. Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Ur-Qur'ān* (Erlangen: Verlagsbuchhandlung Hannelore Lüling, 1974) and the recent essays on his seminal work, *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, ed. G. Tamer (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> William Graham, “The Earliest Meaning of Qur'ān’,” *Die Welt des Islams* 23/1-4 (1984): 361-377.

<sup>15</sup> This is discussed in greater detail in Wilde, “‘Prophets’ and their Wrongful Killing”.

<sup>16</sup> For a parallel discussion of Muhammad as *rasūl*, see W. Saleh, “The Preacher of the Meccan Qur'an: Deuteronomistic History and Confessionalism in Muḥammad's Early Preaching,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20/2 (2018): 74-111.

*khātīm al-nabiyyīn*” (Q 33:40).<sup>17</sup> Muhammad is also termed the “ummī prophet” (*al-nabiyy al-ummī*, Q 7:157-158), a phrase that has been understood as referring to his gentile (non-Jewish) origins, his illiteracy, and/or his inability to read the Scriptures of the Jews and Christians.<sup>18</sup> (The concept appears elsewhere, as at Q 3:20, which contrasts “those who were given the Book” with the “*ummiyyīn*.”) With such claims, the Qur’ān asserts its recipient’s position as not only a messenger, but also a prophet, akin to those who had been sent to the People of the Book, the Children of Israel. The positioning of Muhammad as a prophet who is bringing the same revelation that God had given biblical figures parallels qur’ānic criticisms of Jews and Christians in its milieu as upstart traditions that have prioritized particular creeds and traditions over God’s message, which had been given to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes (cf. e.g. Q 2:135, 140; 3:67). And, among the other criticisms, is the accusation that “they killed their prophets without right”.

### WRONGFUL KILLING OF PROPHETS

Although prophets both kill and are killed in the Bible (a theme taken up by Late Antique authors<sup>19</sup> and others), qur’ānic prophets are generally vindicated, eventually triumphing over their adversaries. But, as Griffith has commented, “the several passages in the Qur’ān that charge the Jews with being killers of the prophets [...] do not contradict [...] ‘the *sunnah* of Our messengers’, whereby the messenger or prophet is vindicated over his adversaries in the end. Rather, the polemical charge against the Jews of having killed the prophets echoes a theme in earlier Jewish and Christian polemical lore, finding a place already in the New Testament in the Christian instance (e.g., Mt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34).”<sup>20</sup>

Building on scholarly and exegetical discussions about the qur’ānic charge of wrongful prophet killing<sup>21</sup>, here the focus is the qur’ānic employment of *anbiyā’*. For four of the five qur’ānic mentions of *anbiyā’* appear in accusations of wrongful prophet-killing. Excluding the accusation of killing *rusul* (Q 2:87; 3:183; 5:70), the six places in which the charge of prophet-killing appears are as follows:

- Q 2:61 - *wa-yaqtulūna l-nabiyyīna bi-ghayri l-ḥaqqi*,
- Q 2:91 - *qul fa-lima taqtulūna anbiyā’ allāhi min qabli*,
- Q 3:21 - *wa-yaqtulūna l-nabiyyīna bi-ghayri ḥaqqin*,
- Q 3:112 - *wa-yaqtulūna l-anbiyā’a bi-ghayri ḥaqqin*,

<sup>17</sup> On which, see D. Powers, *Muhammad is not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> S. Günther, "Muḥammad, the Illiterate Prophet: An Islamic Creed in the Qur'an and Qur'anic Exegesis." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4/1 (2002): 1-26.

<sup>19</sup> For a general overview, see B. Halpern Amaru, "The Killing of the Prophets: Unraveling a Midrash." *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1983): 153-180; G. Hawting, "Killing the Prophets and Stoning the Messengers", in Holger M. Zellentin (ed.), *The Qur'an's Reformation of Judaism and Christianity: Return to the Origins* (Routledge, 2019), 303-317; Reuven Firestone, "The Problematic of Prophecy: 2015 IQSA Presidential Address." *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 1 (2016): 11-22.

<sup>20</sup> Griffith, "Late Antique Christology," 48; see also Acts 7:52; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15.

<sup>21</sup> G. Hawting, "Were There Prophets in the Jahiliyya?" in Bakhos and Cook, *Islam and Its Past*, 186-212; see also Hawting, "Killing the Prophets"; G. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); G. Reynolds, "On the Quran and the Theme of Jews as 'Killers of the Prophets'" *al-Bayān* 10/2 (Dec 2012): 9-32 (for a fuller discussion of the nuances of the prophet-killing charge, including discussion of the traditions surrounding Muhammad's relations with the Jewish groups of Yathrib).

Q 3:181 - *wa-qatlahumu l-anbiyā'a bi-ghayri haqqin*,

Q 4:155 - *wa-qatlihimu l-anbiyā'a bi-ghayri haqqin*,

As four of these passages employ *anbiyā'*, this means that two-thirds of the qur'ānic mentions of prophet-killing employ *anbiyā'*, and 80% (4/5) of the qur'ānic allusions to *anbiyā'* are in this context. (The fifth qur'ānic employment of *anbiyā'* - Q 5:20 - is in a speech of Moses, discussed below.)

Exegetes have commented on the differences between *bi-ghayr l-haqqi* of Q 2:61 and *bi-ghayri haqqin* of Q 3:21, 112, 181; 4:155<sup>22</sup>, as well as the use of the different plural forms.<sup>23</sup> Although the passages that mention “they killed their prophets without right” have been the subject of various studies, there is no consensus as to the identity of the slain prophets or their killers. While the Qur'ān provides specific details of those who threaten, fear or are threatened with stoning (even naming four of the six)<sup>24</sup>, it specifies neither the slain prophets, nor their killers. Q 3:110-114, for example, does mention *ahl al-kitāb* as the perpetrators – but it was later exegetes who specified the prophets, e.g. Zechariah and his son (John), and discussed which groups were intended by the qur'ānic accusations.<sup>25</sup>

Particularly given the Qur'ān's own assertions about its clear Arabic nature (Q 16:103; 26:192-195; cf. Q 12:2; 41:44) and the uniquely Arabic nature of the broken plural form (*anbiyā'* – as opposed to the “common” Semitic plural *nabiyyīn*), the qur'ānic occurrences of *anbiyā'* merit closer attention. A systematic examination of the occurrences of *anbiyā'* reveals:

1. All occurrences of *anbiyā'* are late Medinan passages, but not all the late Medinan instances of prophets utilize *anbiyā'* (e.g. Q 5:44)
2. Twice, *anbiyā'* is in a speech (a commanded speech of the qur'ānic recipient, Q 2:91; and a reported speech of Moses, Q 5:20)
3. Four of the five occurrences of *anbiyā'* are in the accusation that (Jews) killed their prophets (Q 5:20, the other use of *anbiyā'*, is in Moses' reported speech about God having given his people prophets and kings, discussed below)
4. In its earliest qur'ānic appearance, the qur'ānic prophet is told to challenge those who do not heed him by asking why they had killed the “prophets (*anbiyā'*) of

<sup>22</sup> E.g. al-Rāzī ad Q 2:61; Tabari ad Q 2:61.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Rāzī ad Q 3:21 (in which the charge of prophet killing employs the sound plural in the phrase *wa-yaqtulūna l-nabiyyīna*).

<sup>24</sup> In addition to the prophet-killing mentions, the Qur'ān also alludes to various instances in which individuals, including prophets, have been threatened with stoning: Noah, Q 26:116; Abraham, Q 19:46; Moses, Q 44:20; Shu'ayb, Q 11:91; one of the “companions of the cave” expresses fear of this punishment, Q 18:20; and it is also a punishment threatened (Q 36:18) to the messengers (*al-mursalīn*) in the parable of the “companions of the settlement” (*ashab al-qarya*, Q 36:13f.).

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Tabari ad Q 3:21; *Tafsīr* Jalālayn, ad Q 2:61; Rāzī ad Q 3:183; Reynolds, “Killers of the Prophets”, 24-25; for the identity of Zechariah in Jewish and Christian tradition, see also S. Blank, “The Death of Zechariah in Rabbinic Literature.” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 12 (1937): 327-346. The Gospel of Matthew appears to have conflated two Zechariahs – the father of John and the one in 2 Chron 24. On this conflation, see e.g. I. Kalimi, “The Story about the Murder of the Prophet Zechariah in the Gospels and its Relation to Chronicles,” *Revue Biblique* 116/2 (April 2009): 246-261. My thanks to Steve Mason for bringing this discussion to my attention. Examples of the variety of glosses are: *Ahl al-Kitāb*, *Bānī Isrā'īl*, according to al-Tabari, ad Q 3:21; for Q 3:21 in relationship to Christian divisions (e.g. Jacobites and Nestorians), see the *Tafsīr* of al-Hawārī ad loc; according to Muqātil, ad Q 3:21, those who disbelieved in the signs of God were the kings of the *Bānī Isrā'īl* from the Jews who did not read the book. In his reading, Muhammad is instructed to warn the Jews of the punishment that awaits them because they were of the religion that first killed their prophets and those who ordered justice.

God”; here, the *anbiyā’* are specified as of God (Q 2:91). None of the subsequent appearances specifies which prophets are intended.

5. *Anbiyā’* twice occurs in conjunction with, or in the proximity of, *qurbān* (oblation), one of which times in association with fire (from heaven) that will consume it (Q 3:181/3:183; 5:20/5:27)<sup>26</sup>

Late Antique authors struggled with the complex relationship between God, prophets and bloodshed, as seen in an anonymous Syriac work from the 4th/5th century, the *Book of Steps*.<sup>27</sup> Although many details of the text’s provenance and author are unknown, as with many Late Antique Syriac texts, the imagery and rhetorical devices of this text resonate with the Qur’ān. Its numerous allusions to the “straight and perfect path” (*urhō gamīrtō wa trīstō*), as well as its references to the “upright” and “perfect” (*kīnō wa gamīrō*), are but two examples of concepts that resonate with Qur’ānic idioms (in which the “straight path” and the “righteous” figure prominently).<sup>28</sup> Understood as an adaptation of Hebrews 11,<sup>29</sup> the 9th memre (metrical homily) of the *Book of Steps* discusses prophets from the Hebrew Bible who killed by God’s orders. He “killed the sinful peoples by means of the prophets so that they might fear and acknowledge them by their own will, but due to their accursed will they were not persuaded.”<sup>30</sup> But, by the 22nd memre, it is clear that humans are not to do everything God has done: “But if a person says, ‘I will imitate God, doing good *and doing bad* (emphasis mine) like him’, he will go greatly astray, and the Law will convict him on the day of judgment, for the Law does not allow him to imitate the misfortunes that God does, only the good.”<sup>31</sup> And, in Memre 23, it is made clear that God permits free will in evil people – Pharaoh or the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day: “I will die by your hands while making my soul lowly. I will be three days in the heart of the earth,<sup>39</sup> so that those who believe in me might lower themselves until [their] death.”<sup>32</sup> If such arguments were known to the Qur’ānic auditors (God killed people through the prophets; misguided people justified their actions through copying God’s harsh deeds, including the taking of life – even the killing of Jesus – a detail that the Qur’ān rejects at Q 4:157) – might the Qur’ānic charge of wrongful prophet-killing be heard as an almost hymnic refrain reflecting a polemic familiar to its milieu? But, in the

<sup>26</sup> Discussed in Wilde, “‘Prophets’ and their Wrongful Killing”.

<sup>27</sup> See the recent edition and translation, in 3 volumes: R. Kitchen and M. Parmentier (eds.), *The Syriac Book of Steps: Syriac Text and English Translation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press 2004; 2011; 2014). For discussion of its various aspects, see the essays in K. Heal and R. Kitchen (eds.), *Breaking the Mind: New Studies in the Syriac Book of Steps* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2014). See also J. Corbett, “They Do Not Take Wives, or Build, or Work the Ground: Ascetic Life in the Early Syriac Church.” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 3/1 (2009): 3-20; R. Kitchen, “Becoming Perfect: The Maturing of Asceticism in the Liber Graduum,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 2/1 (2009): 30-45.

<sup>28</sup> For examples of other possible resonances with the Qur’ān, see e.g. J. Witztum, “Variant Traditions, Relative Chronology, and the Study of Intra-Quranic Parallels,” pp 1-50 in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts. Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, edited by A. Ahmed, B. Sadeghi, R. G. Hoyland, and A. Silverstein (Leiden: Brill, 2014). A tentative connection to traditions known to the *Liber Graduum* is mentioned on page 26, note 89. C. Segovia, “Reimagining the Early Quranic Milieu” also discusses the *Book of Steps*.

<sup>29</sup> R. Kitchen, “Making the Imperfect Perfect: The Adaptation of Hebrews 11 in the 9th Mēmrā of the Syriac Book of Steps,” pp. 227-251 in *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity*, edited by L. DiTommaso and L. Turcescu (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Kitchen and Parmentier, *Book of Steps* 1, 186-188

<sup>31</sup> Kitchen and Parmentier, *Book of Steps* 3, 66

<sup>32</sup> Kitchen and Parmentier, *Book of Steps* 3, 100

Qur'ānic purview, not just Jews – but also Christians - transgressed God's laws and will. And this refrain is, however, uttered in its own idiom, Arabic.

While the charge of Jews as prophet-killers circulated in Late Antiquity (among Jews as well as Christians), it should be noted that not all the Qur'ānic accusations of prophet-killing clearly, or exclusively, implicate Jews. While four of these do seem to implicate the people of Moses,<sup>33</sup> Q 3:21 seems more generally directed (at both those who have the Book, and the unlettered, cf. Q 3: 20), and Q 3:112 is in an address about the “People of the Book” (cf. Q 3:110, 113), generally understood to include Christians as well as Jews. This is reflective of the Qur'ān's reworking, rather than uncritical adoption, of polemics familiar to its auditors - as with Q 3:67's assertion that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a muslim, a *hanif*.

Given the Qur'ān's seemingly specific employment of *anbiyā'* in only five passages (rather than *nabiyyūn/nabiyyīn*, the plural form common to other Semitic languages), it is plausible they indicate a homiletic context, in which the Qur'ān employs a theme already familiar to its audience (prophets), translating it to its own preferred linguistic medium (Arabic). For, especially given the near identical wording of the accusation, it seems to have taken on an almost refrain-like quality. As the refrain was repeated, it may have increasingly employed *anbiyā'* as a more natural, more particularly Arabic, form of the word – possibly reflecting the techniques of contemporaneous Christian (and Jewish) preachers who may have operated in a bilingual liturgical atmosphere, in which scripture and even liturgical formula were in one language, while homiletic addresses were delivered in the vernacular of the congregation.

Distinguishing a “Jewish” or “Christian” context for a given Qur'ānic polemic is difficult, not least because Christianity drew upon Jewish tradition in its own polemics<sup>34</sup>.

The Daughter of the Hebrews is boasting  
that she is heir to the House of God,  
but the Church says, in opposition,  
that ‘I am the daughter and true heir’.

Judge between them, all you who listen  
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

<sup>33</sup>Q 2:61, 91 and 4:155 are in passages relating to Moses and his people; the pericope containing Q 3:181 indicates that the prophet-killers said, among other things, that God had made them promise not to believe in a messenger unless he brought a *qurbān* consumed by heavenly fire (Q 3:183), a claim that resonates with 1 Kings 18:24.

<sup>34</sup> On Late Antique Christian interest in the biblical prophets, see, e.g. D. Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 1995)

<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.

“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’a 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 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

<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.

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 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

<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).

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.

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

<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).

<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

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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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.