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Moses, Son of Pharaoh

A Study of Qur'ān 26 and Its Exegesis

1 Introduction

In the 26th of the Qur'ān's 114 sūras, entitled *al-Shu'arā'* ("The Poets"), God calls on Moses and his brother Aaron to preach to the people of Pharaoh (Q 26:15–17). A conversation then transpires between Moses and Pharaoh:

¹⁸He [Pharaoh] said, 'Did we not rear you as a child among us, and did you not stay with us for years of your life?' ¹⁹Then you committed that deed of yours, and you are an ingrate.' ²⁰He said, 'I did that when I was astray. ²¹So I fled from you, as I was afraid of you. Then my Lord gave me sound judgement and made me one of the apostles. ²²That you have enslaved the Children of Israel—is that the favour with which you reproach me?'¹

The questions which Pharaoh asks of Moses ("Did we not rear you as a child among us, and did you not stay with us for years of your life?") suggest that he is Moses's adoptive father. Pharaoh seems to be upbraiding Moses as a father would a disobedient child. The notion that Pharaoh and Moses are father and son in the Qur'ān is confirmed in Q 28:7–9, a passage which tells the story of Moses' adoption:

We revealed to Moses' mother, [saying], 'Nurse him; then, when you fear for him, cast him into the river, and do not fear or grieve, for We will restore him to you and make him one of the apostles.' Then Pharaoh's kinsmen picked him up that he might be to them an enemy and a cause of grief. Indeed Pharaoh and Hāmān and their hosts were iniquitous. Pharaoh's wife said [to Pharaoh], '[This infant will be] a [source of] comfort to me and to you. Do not kill him. Maybe he will benefit us, or we will adopt him as a son.' And they were not aware (Q 28:7–9; cf. Q 20:40).²

1 All Qur'ān translations are from Quli Qara'i unless otherwise noted: *The Qur'an with Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation*, ed. and trans. by Ali Quli Qara'i. New York: Tahrike Taarsile Qur'ān, 2007.

2 The character of Haman appears as the vizier of the Persian king Ahasuerus in the Biblical *Book of Esther*. In the Qur'ān he appears instead as the vizier of Pharaoh. The reasons for this shift, which are connected with an originally Ancient Near Eastern legend centered on the wisdom figure of Aḥīqar, have been meticulously examined by: Silverstein, A., "Haman's Transition from the Jahiliyya to Islam," *JSAI* 34 (2008): pp. 285–308.

To those who are familiar with the account of Moses from the Biblical Book of Exodus this passage might seem surprising. In *Exodus* it is not Pharaoh, or Pharaoh's wife (as in Q 28), who adopts Moses. According to Exodus it is Pharaoh's daughter who finds Moses and adopts him. She discovers Moses in a basket (Exod 2:5) and confides the boy with his own mother to be nursed.³ Moses' mother later takes him back to Pharaoh's daughter who adopts him as a son: "And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son; and she named him Moses, for she said, 'Because I drew him out of the water.'" (Exod 2:10; cf. Acts 7:21).⁴

Moreover, in Exodus the Pharaoh whom Moses confronts, the Pharaoh who refuses to let the Israelites go (until Egypt is struck by ten plagues) is *not* the Pharaoh of Moses' childhood. In Exodus Moses flees to Midian after killing an Egyptian and burying him in the sand because he is afraid of the vengeance of Pharaoh (Exod 2:12–15). He returns to Egypt only when he learns that this Pharaoh has died and a new one has taken his place: "And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt; for all the men who were seeking your life are dead'" (Exod 4:19).⁵

I am hardly the first to notice the contrast between the Bible and the Qur'ān as concerns the relationship between Pharaoh (or the Pharaohs) and Moses. Already Abraham Geiger, in his 1833 work *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*,⁶ notes the discrepancy. According to Geiger, however, the way in which the Qur'ān has the same Pharaoh on the throne is best understood as Muhammad's confused reception of a Midrashic tradition.⁷ In the present brief study I would like to suggest that the Qur'ān's author has not unwittingly, but rather intentionally, diverged from the Exodus account. In my opinion the

3 A tradition in the Babylonian Talmud (b. *Sotah* 12b) explains the detail in the Exodus account which has Pharaoh's daughter seek out a wet-nurse among the Hebrew women by insisting that Moses refused the milk of Egyptian women. This has an echo in Q 28:12.

4 Cf. Jub 47:9, which has God recount to Moses: "And after this when you had grown they brought you to the daughter of Pharaoh and you became her son." Trans. by O.S. Wintermute in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. by J.H. Charlesworth, vol. 2. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985.

5 All Bible translations are taken from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

6 Geiger, A., *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*, 2nd edition. Leipzig: Kaufmann, 1902, pp. 155–56. See the English translation of Geiger's work by Young, F.M., *Judaism and Islam*, Madras: M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1898, pp. 123–25.

7 Geiger explains (*Judaism and Islam*, p. 124) this as a point of confusion resulting from the influence on Muhammad of a tradition in *Exodus Rabbah* which makes the "death" of the first Pharaoh only an allusion to appearance of leprosy in his body. However, *Exodus Rabbah* is best dated to the 11th or 12th century and should not be taken as the source of Qur'ānic passages.

Qur'ānic author's very purpose for this scene is to have a confrontation between father and son, that is, to have Moses choose his obligation to God above his obligation to his father. This follows from the Qur'ān's larger concern to emphasize the primacy of faith over family.

Before turning to an examination of the Qur'ān itself I will begin by examining several Qur'ānic commentaries for their perspective on Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh in Q 26.

2 Islamic Exegesis on the Confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh

On Q 26:18, which has Pharaoh allude to his raising of Moses, the early *tafsīrs* attributed to Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687) and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) mention only that Moses stayed with Pharaoh for 30 years.⁸ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) makes the same remark (which is meant to explain why Pharaoh specifically mentions to Moses in this verse “Did you not stay with us for *years* of your life”). To this Rāzī adds an anecdote which describes the scene of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh:

The doorman said, ‘Here is a man who says that he is a messenger of the Lord of the worlds.’ [Pharaoh] said, ‘Let him come in that we might have fun with him.’ So they [Moses and Aaron] delivered the message. He recognized Moses and first recounted his favors done to him and then secondly recounted the wrong which Moses had done to him.⁹

The mention of a “wrong” at the end of this passage here is connected to Q 26:19 (cf. 20:40; 28:15, 33), in which Pharaoh alludes to Moses' killing of an Egyptian: “Then you committed that deed of yours, and you are an ingrate” [or “unbeliever”].”

⁸ Ibn Sulaymān, Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, ed. by 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Shihāta. Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2002; reprint of: Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, n.d., 3:260, ad Q 26:18. *Tanwīr al-Miqbās min Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās*, trans. by M. Guezzou. Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute, 2007, p. 407, ad Q 26:18. On the authorship and dating of this work, which is perhaps best attributed to 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak al-Dināwārī (d. 308/920), see Pregill, M., “Methodologies for the Dating of Exegetical Works and Traditions: Can the Lost Tafsir of al-Kalbi be Recovered from Tafsir Ibn Abbas (also known as *al-Wādiḥ*)?” in *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis (2nd/8th-9th/15th century.*), ed. by Karen Bauer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 393–453.

⁹ Rāzī, *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, ed. by Muḥammad Bayḍūn. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1421/2000, 24:108–9 ad Q 26:18.

To Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), the tradition-minded Shāfi‘ī commentator, the main tension between Pharaoh and Moses in this scene is not the demand which Moses makes of Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt but rather Pharaoh’s memory of this killing. Ibn Kathīr paraphrases Q 26:18–19 by having Pharaoh declare to him: “Are you not the one we raised among us and in our midst and on our bed, the one whom we showed favor to for a long time, and then after you repaid this goodness from us with that deed by killing one of our men? You renounced our favor to you.”¹⁰

The account of Moses’ killing of an Egyptian, something only alluded to by Pharaoh in Q 26,¹¹ is found in Q 28:

¹⁵ [Moses] entered the city at a time when its people were not likely to take notice. He found there two men fighting, this one from among his followers and that one from his enemies. The one who was from his followers sought his help against him who was from his enemies. So Moses hit him with his fist, whereupon he expired. He said, ‘This is of Satan’s doing. He is indeed clearly a misleading enemy.’¹⁶ He said, ‘My Lord! I have wronged myself. Forgive me!’ So He forgave him. Indeed, He is the All-forgiving, the All-merciful.¹⁷ He said, ‘My Lord! As You have blessed me, I will never be a supporter of the guilty.’ (Q 28:15–17).¹²

Unlike Exodus, the Qur’ān has Moses blame the deed on Satan and seek forgiveness for it. In addition, Q 28:15–17 seems to make it clear that Moses’ killing of the Egyptian was wrong. This is a departure from the Bible. *Exodus* has Moses hide the Egyptian’s body in the sand (2:12), and it relates that Moses was afraid when he discovered that the deed had become known (Exod 2:14) but it does not reprove Moses for the killing. According to an opinion in the late Midrashic text *Exodus Rabbah*, Moses act was fully justified. He had studied the conduct of the Egyptian and “found that he deserved death.”¹³

10 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, ed. by Muḥammad Bayḍūn. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1424/2004, 3:312 ad Q 26:18.

11 This case might be seen as an example of Qur’ānic intra-textuality. One could imagine that the logic of Q 26 demands Q 28 to have preceded it, so that the audience would understand the allusion to Moses’ “deed” (although Nöldeke makes Q 28 a “late” Meccan sūra and Q 26 a “middle” Meccan sūra). On the other hand it is certainly possible that the Qur’ān’s audience would have known the story of the killing independently of Q 28.

12 Later in Q 28 the Qur’ān has Moses express fear that this killing will lead the Egyptians to seek vengeance against him. He declares to God: “My Lord! I have killed one of their men, so I fear they will kill me” (Q 28:33). This might be seen as a reflection of the “fright” which Moses feels in Exodus 2:14 when he learns that his killing of an Egyptian has come to light.

13 *Exodus Rabbah* (para. 5). See Geiger, A., *Judaism and Islam*, p. 123.

The Qur'ānic notion that Moses' killing of an Egyptian was a murder adds tension to his confrontation Pharaoh in Q 26.¹⁴ Moses' position does not depend on his moral superiority. Nor does it depend on any obligation of Pharaoh towards him. Moses' position depends entirely on the legitimacy of his claim to be a prophet sent by God.

Like Ibn Kathīr, the Andalusian Mālikī al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) is interested in the way that Pharaoh seeks to take the moral high ground in his debate with Moses. He concludes that Pharaoh mentions his adoption of Moses in Q 26:18 in order to remind Moses that he saved his life when other Israelite children were being massacred.¹⁵ The same point is made by al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480). He paraphrases Pharaoh: "We have over you in this a certain right which should prohibit you from addressing us in this way' ... because the threat of massacre of children which threatened him passed by him."¹⁶

Connected to all of this is the way in which Pharaoh, at the end of Q 26:19, accuses of Moses of being *min al-kāfirīn*. The Ḥanbali Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), in his work *Zād al-masīr*, records a debate which took place among earlier interpreters regarding this phrase. At issue was what exactly Pharaoh meant by accusing Moses of *kufṛ*. Inasmuch as *kufṛ* in the Qur'ān can function (for example in Q 14:34; 16:83; 22:66, passim) as a the opposite of *shukr* ("gratitude"), certain interpreters (Ibn al-Jawzī names Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn Jubayr, 'Aṭā', al-Ḍaḥḥāk, and Ibn Zayd) believed that Pharaoh was accusing Moses of being ungrateful "of his favor" (*ni'ma*).

However, *kufṛ* also regularly functions as the opposite of *imān* ("belief") in the Qur'ān. On this basis a second interpretation (supported by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and al-Suddī) was offered, by which Pharaoh meant to accuse Moses of being an unbeliever (*kāfir*) in God. As Ibn al-Jawzī puts it, according to this interpretation what Pharaoh was really saying to Moses was, "You were a disbeliever in

14 Pharaoh reasonably refers both to his care for Moses and to Moses' offense. Pharaoh has a case to press. Moses, notably, does not seek to defend his action. He simply explains in response, "I did that when I was astray" (Q 26:20). Ibn al-Jawzī includes three different opinions of what Moses might mean when he said "I was astray" (*wa-anā min al-dāllīn*): first, that he was "ignorant" (*min al-jāhilīn*), not yet having received prophetic revelation; second, that he was "sinful" or "a wrongdoer" (*min al-khāṭi'in*), having wrongly killed a person; and third, that he was forgetful (*min al-nāsīn*). Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr*. Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islamī, 1404/1984, 6:119.

15 Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. by 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī. Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī 1433/2012, 13:91.

16 Ibrāhīm al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsuh al-āyāt wa-l-suwar*, ed. by 'Abd al-Razzāq Ghālib al-Mahdī. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1432/2011, 5:353.

your god because you were among us in our religion which you now consider erroneous.”¹⁷

It seems to me that the first interpretation is right, although it is interesting to note that by accusing Moses of being an ingrate Pharaoh is acting like God. In several passages the Qur’ān first recounts the bounty which God has given to man in nature (e. g., Q 14:32–33; 22:65) and then accuses man of being an ingrate (Q 14:34; 22:66).¹⁸ In Q 26 Pharaoh imitates the divine character by reminding Moses of the favor he has given him and then accusing him of ingratitude. This imitation of Allah is found again later in that same passage where Pharaoh demands to be recognized as the only true god. Turning to his assistants Pharaoh declares, “If you take up any god other than me, I will surely make you a prisoner!” (Q 26:29).

As for modern Qur’ān commentators, a number of them show a distinct interest in understanding the psychology of Pharaoh in this passage. The 20th century Pakistani scholar Muḥammad Shafī‘ (d. 1976) argues that Pharaoh raises the issue of Moses’ ingratitude (by calling him *min al-kāfirīn*) because he is not prepared to debate the merits of Moses’ claims to prophethood. He comments:

When a sharp opponent is not properly equipped with the correct arguments, he normally tries to switch the conversation towards the person of the addressee in order to find faults with him. This tactic is employed to embarrass the opponent and to make him look small before the audience. Hence, the Pharaoh also came out with two such points. First, ‘We have brought you up in our household and have done so many favours to you. So, how can you have the face to speak before us.’ Second, ‘You have killed an Egyptian for no fault of his. This is not only cruelty but also ingratitude toward those among whom you are raised to your manhood.’¹⁹

Like Muḥammad Shafī‘, the Egyptian rigorist Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) is interested in the rhetorical strategies employed by both Pharaoh and Moses. On Pharaoh’s address he comments:

Pharaoh is sarcastic, asking in an affected air of surprise: ‘Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many years of your life? Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever. Is this how you repay our kindness as we looked after you when you were a young child? Is it fair that you come today profess-

17 Ibn al-Jawzī, 6:119.

18 In Q 14:34 the Qur’ān accuses man of being *kaffār* and in 22:66 of being *kafūr*. These variations of *kāfir* can be attributed to the rhyme patterns of those passages and need not be imagined to have some particular nuance of meaning.

19 Shafī, Muhammad, *Maarifūl Qur’an*, trans. by M. Shameen and M.W. Razi. Karachi: Maktaba-e-Darul-Uloom, 1996–2003, 6:528–29.

ing a religion other than ours, rebelling against the authority of the king who brought you up in his palace, and calling on people to abandon his worship?”²⁰

Notably Quṭb finds sarcasm also in the way Moses responds to Pharaoh (“That you have enslaved the Children of Israel—is that the favour with which you reproach me?” Q 26:22). Quṭb comments:

Moses then uses a touch of sarcasm (*tahakkum*) in reply to Pharaoh’s own sarcastic remarks, but he only states the truth: What sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel? The fact that I was reared in your palace came about only as a result of your enslavement of the Children of Israel, and your killing of their children. This was the reason why my mother put me in a basket to float along the Nile. When your people found me, I was brought up in your palace, not in my parents’ home. What favour is this that you press against me?²¹

That Quṭb concedes attributes sarcasm (*tahakkum*, which might also mean “scorn” or “derision”) in his reply to Pharaoh is noteworthy. As a rule classical commentators do not attribute *tahakkum* to Moses (or – to my knowledge – to the prophets generally), although this is a rhetorical mode of address which God seems to employ in the Qur’ān.²²

The Iranian Shi’ite commentator Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1982) focuses on a different point. To Ṭabāṭabā’ī Pharaoh’s intention is not to remind Moses of the favor done for him, or to remind Moses of his killing of an Egyptian. Pharaoh’s point is simply that he knew Moses before the latter claimed to be a prophet and therefore he finds these claims of prophethood unbelievable:

The point and goal of this is, first in regard to his claim of prophethood, he says: “You are the one whom we raised when you were the little boy (*walīd*) and you remained with us from many years of your life. We know you by your name your character. We did not forget

20 Quṭb, Sayyid, *Fī ḡilāl al-Qur’ān*, 17th edition. Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1412/1992, 5:2591. The English translation is taken from *In the Shade of the Qur’ān*, ed. and trans. by A. Salahi. Leicester, UK Foundation, 2003, 13:22–24.

21 *Ibid.*

22 This much is granted by the Qur’ān scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) in his *al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Zarkashī includes *tahakkum* among the various types of qur’ānic discourse. The examples of divine sarcasm he cites have God address the residents of hell (Q 56:42–43, 52–56, 93–94), or those to be condemned to hell (Q 9:34; 44:49). For example, Q 9:34 has God declare, “Give them the ‘good news’ (*fa-bashshirhum*) of a painful punishment.” On this see Gwynn, R.W., “Patterns of Address.” in *Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. by A. Rippin, pp. 73–87. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006, p. 78. I am grateful to Liran Yadgar for this reference.

anything of your affairs. So how could you have this message when you are the one whom we know and we are not ignorant of your origins?”²³

Ṭabaṭabā’i’s perspective reflects the influence of other passages in the Qur’ān, where unbelieving peoples find it impossible that someone whom they know from among them could be a prophet sent by God (see e.g., Q 7:63; 69; 38:4; 50:2).

Thus we can detect among our 20th-century commentators a certain interest in the psychological strategies of the Qur’ān’s protagonists. Whereas classical commentators are principally interested in the meaning of Qur’ānic vocabulary, or an explanation of the Qur’ānic allusions, modern commentators have something like a psychological interest in decoding the rhetoric of the protagonists in this scene. None of them, however, think about the rhetorical strategies, or the psychology, of the Qur’ān’s author. That is, they imagine this conversation to be precise transcript of a historical conversation. They see no possibility that the Qur’ān’s author has shaped this scene for his own purposes. In a sense, the author of the Qur’ān disappears altogether in their analysis.

It is also worth noting that none of the commentators, modern or medieval, show any awareness or interest in the differences between the Bible and the Qur’ān in regard to the adoption of Moses. And indeed it is an appreciation of those differences which is the key to understanding the Qur’ānic passage before us.

3 Pharaoh in the Qur’ān

Before offering an interpretation of this passage it will be important to clarify some basic points about Pharaoh in the Qur’ān, most of which have been elucidated by Adam Silverstein in an excellent article on the subject.²⁴ The first point that Silverstein makes is that the very reference to the Egyptian ruler as “Pharaoh” is Biblical. In ancient Egyptian the term *par’o* (later rendered into Greek as φαραώ and Hebrew as *par’ōh*) means “Great House” and originally referred only to the residence of Pharaoh. Only around the year 1200 BCE (which according to a Biblical chronology would be several centuries after the lifetime of Moses) was the term applied to the Egyptian ruler.

²³ Al-Ṭabaṭabā’i, Muḥammad Ḥ., *Al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-‘Ālami li-l-Maṭbū’āt, 1418/1997, 15:259.

²⁴ Silverstein, A., “The Qur’ānic Pharaoh.” in *New Perspectives on the Qur’ān: The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. by G.S. Reynolds, pp. 467–77. London: Routledge, 2011.

In the Bible Pharaoh is used as a title for the Egyptian ruler (whose name never appears) in the stories of both Joseph (in Genesis) and Moses (in Exodus). In the Qur'ān, however, Pharaoh (*Fir'awn*) appears only in the Moses material. In the Qur'ānic sūra on Joseph the Egyptian ruler is referred to simply as the king (*malik*).²⁵ The reason for this is simple, although it is generally overlooked. The Qur'ānic author does not understand Pharaoh to be a title at all. In the Qur'ān *Fir'awn* is simply the *name* of the ruler of Egypt in the time of Moses (accordingly the ruler in the time of Joseph must be referred to otherwise).²⁶ As Silverstein puts it: “The Bible understands ‘Pharaoh’ to be a regnal title while the Qur'ān takes *Fir'awn* to be a more sharply defined historical character.”²⁷ In order to keep this point clear, I will refer in what follows to the Qur'ānic character not as “Pharaoh” but rather as *Fir'awn*.²⁸

4 The Qur'ānic Context

It is important for the Qur'ān's author that *Fir'awn* be the ruler of Egypt both in the time of Moses' childhood and his adulthood. The Qur'ān thereby makes the encounter between *Fir'awn* and Moses a family affair and advances one of its central arguments, namely that faithfulness to God should come before faithfulness to one's family. It is also the Qur'ān's concern with this argument which explains why it has *Fir'awn*'s wife, and not his daughter, adopt Moses. This detail (Q 28:9) contradicts both the account of Exod 2:10, as already mentioned, and the retelling of the Exodus story in Stephen's speech in Acts 7:20 – 23. Yet in order to portray the later encounter between *Fir'awn* and Moses as an encounter between father and son it is necessary for the Qur'ān's author to have *Fir'awn* and his wife adopt Moses. Pharaoh's daughter must give way to *Fir'awn*'s wife.

The Qur'ān's concern with the principle that faith comes before family is seen in the way it often portrays the unbelievers as a people who do things

25 The Bible refers to the Egyptian ruler also as “the king” (*ha-melek*) both in the Joseph story (Gen 40:1, 5) and in the Moses story (Exod 1:15, 18). That the Qur'ān refrains from calling the Egyptian ruler in the time of Joseph is occasionally the subject of Islamic apologetics (the point being that the Qur'ān is more historically accurate than the Bible) but in fact both the Bible and the Qur'ān are anachronistic in their usage of Pharaoh for the Egyptian ruler in the time of Moses.

26 This shift may be paralleled by the way in which the Biblical Potiphar, who is described in Gen 39:1 as the “captain of the guard,” becomes in the Qur'ān *al-'aziz* (“the mighty one” 12:30, 51), a term which (despite the definite article) seems to be used as a nickname, and not a title.

27 Silverstein, p. 468.

28 In so doing I am following the precedent of Silverstein.

the other way around, who stubbornly cling to the false religion of their forefathers:

When they are told, “Follow what Allah has sent down,” they say, “We will rather follow what we have found our fathers following.” What, even if their fathers neither applied any reason nor were guided?! (Q 2:170).²⁹

And when they are told, “Come to what Allah has sent down and [come] to the Apostle,” they say, “Sufficient for us is what we have found our fathers following.” What, even if their fathers did not know anything and were not guided?! (Q 5:104)

Similarly, in Q 23:24 Noah’s opponents reject him with the declaration: “We have never heard of such a thing among our forefathers.”³⁰ Not only does the Qur’ān warn its audience not to follow the false religion of family members, it commands its audience to separate themselves entirely from unbelieving members of their family: “O you who have faith! Do not befriend your fathers and brothers if they prefer faithlessness to faith. Those of you who befriend them—it is they who are the wrongdoers” (Q 9:23).

For our purposes it is interesting to note that the Qur’ān seems to shape its telling of Biblical narratives according to this topos. In its passages on Abraham, for example, the Qur’ān has an extraordinary interest in the conflict between Abraham and his unbelieving father, a story from Abraham’s childhood which does not appear in the Bible but is well known from Jewish and Christian literature.³¹ In a number of different passages the Qur’ān has Abraham preach to his father, and his father’s people, demanding that they abandon idol worship. Thus Q 21:51–54:

Certainly We had given Abraham his rectitude before, and We knew him when he said to his father and his people, ‘What are these images to which you keep on clinging?’ They said, ‘We found our fathers worshipping them.’ He said, “Certainly you and your fathers have been in manifest error.”

²⁹ Cf. Q 6:148; 7:28, 70–71, 173; 10:78 passim.

³⁰ On the other hand when the Qur’ān has the prophet Elijah demand that his people – the Israelites – worship Allah he exclaims, “Do you invoke Baal and abandon the best of creators, Allah, your Lord and Lord of your forefathers?” (Q 37:125–26).

³¹ It is found, for example, in the 2nd century BCE Jewish text *Jubilees* 12 (2–3) and in the 2nd century CE *Apocalypse of Abraham* 7:11–12. For the English translations see *Jubilees*, trans. by Wintermute, O.S., in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. by J.H. Charlesworth. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985, 2:35–142; and, for the *Apocalypse of Abraham*: Kulik, A., *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha: Toward the Original of the Apocalypse of Abraham*, ed. by J.R. Adair. Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 9–35.

Elsewhere the Qur'ān has Abraham promise to pray for his father: “He said, ‘Peace be to you! I shall plead with my Lord to forgive you. Indeed He is gracious to me. I dissociate myself from you and whatever you invoke besides Allah. I will supplicate my Lord. Hopefully, I will not be disappointed in supplicating my Lord’” (Q 19:47–48; cf. Q 14:41; 60:4). The Qur'ān, however, tells its audience that believers should *not* pray for their unbelieving family members:

The Prophet and the faithful may not plead for the forgiveness of the polytheists, even if they should be [their] relatives, after it has become clear to them that they will be the inmates of hell. Abraham’s pleading forgiveness for his father was only to fulfill a promise he had made him. So when it became manifest to him that he was an enemy of God, he repudiated him. Indeed Abraham was most plaintive and forbearing (Q 9:113–14).

Similar to the Qur'ān’s portrayal of Abraham’s division with his father is its portrayal of Noah’s discussion with a son who is ultimately lost in the flood. This son (the only son of Noah who appears in the Qur'ān) is unknown to the Genesis account of Noah, which speaks of three sons of Noah, all of whom enter into the ark.³² In Q 11 the Qur'ān has this son refuse to board the ark. When he is drowned with the other unbelievers the Qur'ān has Noah intercede for his son. For this he is reprimanded:

⁴⁵ Noah called out to his Lord, and said, “My Lord! My son is indeed from my family. Your promise is indeed true, and You are the fairest of all judges.”

⁴⁶ Said He, “O Noah! Indeed He is not of your family. Indeed this is a wrongful deed. So do not ask Me [something] of which you have no knowledge. I advise you lest you should be among the ignorant.”

⁴⁷ He said, “My Lord! I seek Your protection lest I should ask You something of which I have no knowledge. If You do not forgive me and have mercy upon me I shall be among the losers” (Q 11:42–47).³³

Finally it should be noted, as Joseph Witztum of Hebrew University has pointed out, that the portrayal of Moses in the Qur'ān (and in particular in Q 28) is parallel to the portrayal of Joseph in Q 12.³⁴ Of particular interest for our purposes is

³² On the Qur'ānic account of Noah’s lost son and its Biblical origins see now Reynolds, G.S., “Noah’s Lost Son in the Qur'ān,” *Arabica* 64 (2017): pp. 1–20.

³³ By rendering “this is a wrongful deed” in v. 46 (for *innahu ‘amalun ḡhayru ṣālihin*) I have departed from Quli Qara’i’s translation of this phrase. He renders this phrase, “He is indeed [a personification of] unrighteous conduct” in order to suggest that it is a reprimand not of Noah but of Noah’s son.

This passage might be compared to Q 46:15–18.

³⁴ See Witztum, J., *The Syriac Milieu of the Qur'an*, Ph.D. Dissertation. Princeton University, 2011, pp. 281–92.

the parallel between the way Potiphar speaks to his wife in Q 12:21 of adopting Joseph and the way Fir‘awn’s wife speaks to her husband in Q 28:9 of adopting Moses.

The man from Egypt who had bought him said to his wife, “Give him an honourable place [in the household]. Maybe he will be useful to us (*‘asā an yanfa‘anā*), or we may adopt him as a son” (Q 12:21).

Pharaoh’s wife said [to Fir‘awn], “[This infant will be] a [source of] comfort to me and to you. Do not kill him. Maybe he will benefit us (*‘asā an yanfa‘anā*), or we will adopt him as a son.” And they were not aware (Q 28:9).

In both cases the prophet ultimately separates himself from his adopted parents. After his conflict with Potiphar’s wife (who hardly acts in a maternal manner) Joseph is sent to prison (Q 12:35) according to his own wish (v. 33), even though Potiphar recognizes his innocence (vv. 28–29). After his conflict with an Egyptian (Q 28:15), Moses flees to Midian (v. 22).³⁵

Thus the Qur‘ān means to present the story of Moses and Fir‘awn according to a certain topos – seen also with Noah, Abraham, and Joseph – according to which prophets choose God over family. The point of this – and this is always the point for the Qur‘ān – is to deliver a message to its own audience: follow the example of the prophets who preached to, confronted, and even abandoned their family members in order to dedicate their lives to God.³⁶

35 And just as Potiphar is a righteous figure so too is Fir‘awn’s wife, who elsewhere in the Qur‘ān declares her faith in God and asks for deliverance from Fir‘awn (Q 66:11). On this cf. Speyer, H., *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, Gräfenhainichen: Schulze, 1931; reprint: Hildesheim: Olms, 1961, pp. 272–73.

36 The Qur‘ānic theme of choosing God over family is not unfamiliar to the New Testament. Matthew has Jesus predict that his message will divide family members against each other and he insists that only those who love him more than father or mother are worthy of him: “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:37). In another Gospel tradition Jesus declares: “Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.” (Luke 18:29–30). Or one might reflect on how Jesus responds to the man who requests that he bury his own father before he follows Jesus: “Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57–60; cf. Matt 8:22).

5 Conclusion

This brief study suggests that there is no direct textual relationship between the Qur'ān and the Bible. It is true that the case of Moses' confrontation of Fir'awn shows that the Qur'ān depends on its audience's knowledge of the Bible. One might note, for example, the abrupt transition in Q 26 between verses 16–17 and 18 and what follows. Verses 16–17 are the end of a conversation between God and Moses (and Aaron) in Midian. Suddenly in verse 18 Moses is no longer in Midian but – apparently (the Qur'ān does not say so explicitly) – in Fir'awn's court. The Qur'ān presumably feels free to skip the action in between because the audience knows the general plot. One might note as well how the Qur'ān in verse 22 has Moses refer to Fir'awn's enslaving the Israelites, although nowhere in the Qur'ān is there any description of when, how, or why Pharaoh has done so. This sort of allusion implies that the Biblical subtext, the story of a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, was familiar to the Qur'ān's audience.

However, we have also seen that the Qur'ān departs from the details of the Biblical account in its portrayal of the relationship of Pharaoh and Moses. According to the Qur'ān there is only one ruler in Egypt and his name is Fir'awn. This Fir'awn is the ruler in Moses' childhood, and he is still the ruler in Moses' adulthood. It has to be this way, for the drama of Q 26 account consists in making the confrontation between Fir'awn and Moses a family reunion, in illustrating how Moses chose God over his own father.

These observations suggest that in the Qur'ān's original milieu Biblical narratives were transmitted orally and that – as is typical with oral accounts – those narratives were shaped by each new storyteller. The author of the Qur'ān was not restricted by the written text of the Bible as he composed his own story of Moses and Pharaoh. He was accordingly free to turn Pharaoh into Fir'awn, the father of Moses.

