"You *can* get there from here!" Exegetical Excursions from Judaism to Islam

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Introduction

In studying the history of religions, an interdisciplinary approach to historically related texts is often helpful, sometimes crucial, in elucidating an obscure term or phrase which otherwise defies interpretation. In the study of Jewish and Christian scriptures, scholars in both disciplines have long recognized the value of a comparative perspective. Less readily acknowledged is the fact that a similar approach to Judaic and Islamic texts can yield equally valuable insights into the numerous parallels between Judaism and Islam in doctrine, practice and religious vocabulary.[1]

Traditional Jewish and Muslim exegetes and their disciples have been generally hesitant to acknowledge cross-cultural influences on their doctrinal texts, because the basic thesis of each side is that the sacred Scriptures (Torah and Qurʾān respectively) were directly communicated from God's mouth to Moses' ear or from the Angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) to Muhammad as the case may be. Nonetheless, it is not hard to spot evidence of cross-fertilization between the two cultures at various times during what S.D. Goitein felicitously dubbed the "Jewish/Arab symbiosis"[2] -- a cross-fertilization that has gone back and forth between the two at different times and places.

When comparing Jewish and Islamic exegetical texts, we frequently find signs of adoption and adaptation of earlier Jewish writings by Muslim authors. Sometimes a Hebrew text can shed light upon a qurʾanic term whose meaning has eluded the best efforts of classical Islamic exegesis. We shall here examine some instances from Jewish ***midrash*** and Islamic ***ḥadīth,*** as well as from the earliest comprehensive work of qurʾanic exegesis, namely the monumental ***Tafsīr*** commentary of 9th-century CE (3rd-century AH) Persian scholar Muḥammad al-Ṭabarī.[3]

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Methodological Issues

It is well established that the Qurʾān contains a great many words that are not indigenous to Arabic. It is more than sixty years since Arthur Jeffery's invaluable study, ***The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān,***[4] catalogued hundreds of foreign vocabulary words, not only from the languages of earlier scriptures upon which the Qurʾān draws extensively (Hebrew and Aramaic/Syriac) but also from other languages, ranging from Persian to Ethiopic to Latin and Greek.

Jeffery points out that during the 2nd century AH (8th century CE), classical Islam adopted a dogma categorically asserting the pure Arabic character of the Qurʾān. Thereafter, it became heresy to suggest that a single word of this sacred text -- which itself claims to be written in ***lisān ʿarabī mubīn,*** "a clear Arabic tongue" (sūra 16:103) -- could stem from any but the sacred Arabic language. Thus, while the 8th-century exegete al-Suyuṭī could still concede that a given qurʾanic word was rooted in a specified technical Hebrew term, such assertions had ceased to be acceptable by the time Muḥammad al-Ṭabarī, doyen of the classical exegetes known as ***mufassirūn*** (etymologically and semantically identical with the Hebrew term ***mefareshim*** denoting classical rabbinic exegetes) wrote the ***Tafsīr*** -- a term cognate with both ***pesher*** and ***perush***. Hence, whenever a qurʾanic term has an obvious cognate in another culture, Ṭabarī claims either that the other language borrowed it from Arabic (even when the earliest attested Arabic use of the word occurs in the Qurʾān itself!) or that the word already existed in both languages, so that the Arabic text had no need to borrow it. Frequently, this dogma forces Ṭabarī to interpret obscure qurʾanic terms without benefit of recourse to Jewish (Hebrew /Aramaic) or Christian (Syriac) texts that modern scholarship would propose as the logical places to begin. We return to Ṭabarī in a later section.

Evidence from Vocabulary

Evidence of dependence of one text on another may be based on a number of factors, including considerations of chronology, borrowed vocabulary, and comparative context.

With regard to vocabulary, there is abundant evidence that the Qurʾān adopted and adapted many Hebrew, Aramaic and Christian Syriac religious terms to denote the same religious concepts -- such as ***ṣalāt,*** "prayer" (from Aramaic ***ṣelot), zakāt,*** "alms-giving" (from Aramaic ***zekhut), jannat ʿadn,*** "Paradise" (from Hebrew ***gan ʿeden), jahannam,*** "Hell" (from Hebrew ***gehinnom), ʾaḥīra*** ("afterlife") and ***qiyāma*** ("resurrection") from the Christian Syriac term -- to name only the most obvious examples. In fact, much of the technical religious terminology in the Qurʾān stems from Judaism or Christianity, and sometimes even from pre-Islamic Arabian religions, as with the terms for the greater and lesser pilgrimages known respectively as ***ḥajj*** and ***ʿumra*** (sūra 2:196-7), practices which -- like their biblical cognates ***ḥag*** and ***ʿomer*** (Leviticus 23:6,15) -- appear to have been grafted successively onto biblical and qurʾanic religion from earlier pagan practices.[5]

Sometimes an Arabic word found also in a cognate language (Hebrew, Aramaic or Syriac) acquires a new technical religious connotation corresponding to its meaning in Jewish or Christian Scripture or doctrine. A striking example is the word ***dīn,*** which in Arabic normally means not “law” but “religion,” but which Islam interprets as “judgment” in the expression ***mālik yawm ad-dīn*** occurring in the first sūra of the Qurʾān known as the ***fātiḥa*** (“Opening, introduction”).[6] Another example is seen in the technical use of the terms ***ṣadaqa*** and ***zakāt*** to mean alms or charity, respectively derived from the Mishnah's use of ***ṣedaqah*** (literally, “righteousness”) and the Palestinian Talmud's occasional use of ***zekhut*** (literally, “merit”) to connote the good deed of giving alms.

There is one particularly interesting category of religious language, namely titles or names of God, that points to dependence on earlier Hebrew or Aramaic terms when the term did not previously exist in Arabic -- or if it did, was not earlier used in this specialized meaning. Among the ninety-nine Islamic names of God we find several that are identical with the divine names in Jewish tradition, including some that are not native Arabic terms at all. A prominent example appears in the adjectives in the ***basmala,*** the opening line of the first sūra: ***bismi-[A]llāhi-r-raḥmāni-r-raḥīm,*** “In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” ***Raḥmān*** and ***raḥīm*** are recognizably cognate with the talmudic term ***raḥaman*** and the biblical adjective ***raḥum*** to connote God's qualities of mercy and compassion.

In the same way, the Qurʾān twice (sūra 2:54, 59:24) uses the term ***al-Bārī*** -- an apparent transliteration of the Hebrew ***ha-Boreʾ,*** “the Creator” -- to describe God in that capacity, though the verb ***baraʾa*** itself (reserved in the Hebrew Bible for God's creative acts) appears but once in the Qurʾān (sūra 57:22) which normally employs the unrelated verb ***khalaqa*** to describe divine creativity, as in sūra 4:1, where it used for God’s creation of humankind. The Qurʾān (sūra 2:200) uses the noun ***khalaq*** -- modeled on the mishnaic Hebrew term ***ḥeleq*** (M. Sanh. 10:1) -- to denote man's appointed portion in the life to come, even though the native Arabic verb ***khalaqa*** means not “to apportion” but “to create.”

Sometimes, a Hebrew epithet for a biblical character is used of the same character in the Qurʾān, even though the word has a slightly different meaning in Arabic; thus, the rabbinic **Yosef ha-Ṣaddiq** (Joseph the Righteous) appears in the Qurʾān as **Yūsuf al-Ṣiddīq** (Joseph the Truthful) even though the plot in both the biblical and the qurʾanic version (resistance to the blandishments of the master's wife) actually emphasizes Joseph's righteousness rather than his truthfulness.[7] Another striking example of borrowed terminology is seen in the name ***al- Masīḥ,*** a qurʾanic title for Jesus derived either from Hebrew ***mashiaḥ*** or, more likely, from the ***meshiḥa*** of the Syriac ***Peshitta.*** In Arabic, however, the title ***Masīḥ*** carries none of the doctrinal assumptions (such as “anointed king,” “saviour,” or “son of God”) inherent in the concept of Messiah in either Judaism or Christianity.

Evidence from Context

Dependence of one document on another may also be postulated where the text of the later document does not “fit” its context (either because context is totally lacking or because the text fits better in the context of an earlier work incorporating the same material. Examples of this problem abound in Jewish and Islamic tradition, as demonstrated in 1833 by Abraham Geiger in his dissertation: ***Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?***[8]***,*** translated sixty-five years later with the less provocative title, ***Judaism and Islam***.).[9]

Geiger's most interesting example analyzes the provenance of the following statement in the qurʾanic story of Cain and Abel, immediately following the description of Cain killing and burying his brother:

> That is why We laid it down for the Israelites that whoever killed a human being... shall be looked upon as though he had killed all mankind; and that whoever saved a human life shall be regarded as though he saved all mankind (sūra 5:32).

As Geiger points out, this statement is an egregious ***non sequitur*** in the qurʾanic version of the story, and is entirely absent in the original biblical account. So where does the Qurʾān get it from? The solution to the puzzle is found in an aggadic midrash tacked onto a rule in the mishnaic law of evidence insisting that a prosecution witness in a capital case must take extra care, because should he wrongly condemn the accused he will be answerable both for the blood of the condemned man and for the blood of his posterity, who remain unborn because of the accused’s untimely death:

> For thus we have found it with Cain who slew his brother, for it is written: ***The bloods (pl.) of thy brother cry out (demei aḥikha ṣoʿaqim,*** Gen. 4:10**)**. It says not “the **blood** of thy brother” **(sing.)** but ***“the* bloods (pl.) *of thy brother*”** -- his blood and the blood of his posterity. ....Therefore man was created a single individual, to teach you that he who destroys a single life is reckoned by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world, while he who saves the life of a single individual is reckoned by Scripture to have saved an entire world. (M. San. 4:5).

This ***aggadah*** rests entirely on an exegesis of the unusual plural form of the word “blood” in Gen. 4:19. Hence direct or indirect acquaintance with this Jewish tradition must underlie the qurʾanic reference, which cannot be explained in any other way.

Geiger further noted that the qurʾanic version of a biblical story often incorporates details entirely lacking in the biblical version but present in Jewish oral tradition embellishing Scripture's account. Thus, the tale of Abraham destroying his father's idols and claiming that the largest one had smashed the rest (Midrash Gen. Rabbah para.38) is not in the biblical narrative, yet appears almost verbatim in the Qurʾān (sūra 21:52-67).[10] Similarly, the qurʾanic story of Yūsuf (sūra 12) tells how his master's wife invited her girlfriends to a party to admire Joseph; they were peeling fruit when he walked in, and were so transfixed by his beauty that they all cut their fingers on the fruit-knives while staring at him! Not a trace of this episode appears in the Torah (even though the story of Joseph is by far the most detailed narrative in the book of Genesis); but the incident of the fruit-knives does appear in an ancient midrashic text, ***Sefer Hayashar,*** cited in later midrashic collections, ***Yalqut Shimʿoni*** and ***Tanḥuma Vayeshev).***[11] That the Jewish ***midrash*** (using the talmudic term ***sakkin*** for knife) is the likeliest source of the qurˀanic version is further indicated by the fact that a medieval Muslim commentator expressed puzzlement at the use of the term ***sikkīn*** for "knife" in the Joseph story (sūra 12:31), pointing out that the Arabic root ***s-k-n*** means "to dwell" and has nothing to do with knives. This incidentally illustrates a useful methodological test: if the standard connotation of a key word in the putative source differs from its Arabic meaning, its occurrence in a qurʾanic or ***ḥadīth*** account is fairly conclusive evidence of borrowing from the earlier source.

Geiger points to yet another example of qurʾanic incorporation of a midrashic embellishment to a biblical text: the story of the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon. The Qurʾān says:

> She was bidden to enter the palace; and when she saw [the floor of the throne-room] she thought it was a pool of water, and bared her legs. But Solomon said, "it is a hall paved with glass." (sūra 27:44).

This extraordinary incident, not found in the biblical version (I Kings 10), apparently reflects the ***Targum Sheni*** commentary on ***Esther***, which relates that when the king heard of the queen's arrival, he seated himself in a glass-paved room. Thinking the king was sitting in water, she bared her legs to wade through it.

Jacob Lassner's penetrating analysis of the qurʾanic version of this story[12] discusses what he calls "Muslim uses of the Jewish past," going far beyond Geiger's simplistic emphasis on similarities that merely point to Muslim borrowings from Jewish sources. Lassner focuses on the interesting and often subtle differences that indicate how the borrowing culture adapts the borrowed material to make it, in Lassner's words, "consistent with the perceived needs of those who borrow."[13] This important insight will be illustrated in the next section.

Exegetical Excursions from Judaism to Islam

Let us make some comparisons showing how Islamic cultural imperatives shaped Muslim uses of the Jewish past, not only in qurʾanic adaptation of midrashic material, but also in parallel versions of a tradition found in both Jewish ***midrash*** and Islamic ***ḥadīth.*** Among the more intriguing instances is the following Islamic parable found in the ***Ṣaḥīḥ*** of al-Bukhārī:

> The faithful Muslim who can recite the Qurʾān is like a citron ***(ʾitrāj)*** whose fragrance ***(rayḥ)*** is good ***(ṭayyib)*** and whose taste ***(ṭaʿm)*** is good ***(ṭayyib).*** The faithful Muslim who cannot recite the Qurʾān is like the date [palm] ***(tamr)*** which has no fragrance but whose taste is good. The unbeliever ***(munāfiq)*** who can recite the Qurʾān is like an aromatic plant

> ***(rayḥān)*** whose fragrance is good but whose taste is bitter ***(mar).*** And the unbeliever who cannot recite the Qurʾān is like the colocynth plant ***(hanżal)***, which has no fragrance and tastes bitter. (Bukhārī , ***Ṣaḥīḥ*** 65:31)[14]

This parable repeats almost verbatim the familiar midrashic parable of the four kinds of Jews represented by the four species of plant used in the Sukkot ritual:

> Just as the citron ***(ʾetrog)*** has good taste ***(ṭaʿam ṭob)*** and good fragrance ***(reaḥ ṭob),*** so Israel have among them men of learning who also perform good works. Just as the palm tree ***(tamar)*** has taste ***(ṭaʿam)*** but no fragrance ***(reaḥ),*** so Israel have among them men of learning who do not perform good works. Just as the myrtle has good fragrance but no taste, so Israel have among them men who perform good works but lack learning. And just as the willow has neither taste nor fragrance, so Israel have among them people who neither have learning nor perform good works. (*Leviticus Rabbah* 30:12)

Even if we discount the scholarly dating of Leviticus Rabbah to the 5th century CE, the fact that the ***midrash*** (but not the ***ḥadīth***) has an obvious context makes clear that this ***ḥadīth*** is far more likely derived from this ***midrash*** than the other way around. The ***midrash*** depends directly on Scripture's commandment to the Israelites to perform on ***Sukkot*** a ritual with four species of plant (Lev. 23:40). But no such text appears in the Qur$^{?}$ān, hence the ***ḥadīth*** cannot be explicating an Islamic scripture. To a Muslim, this ***ḥadīth*** would have no obvious basis; but to someone familiar with ***Leviticus Rabbah,*** its likely source is clear enough.

What makes this even clearer is the subtle change the ***midrash*** undergoes in the course of its transformation to a ***ḥadīth,*** showing us once again how adoption of an alien cultural tradition may require adaptation. In this case, the correspondence between persons and plants has been subtly modified to fit the Islamic social context. The ***midrash*** equated good taste with learning and fragrance with good works; the Muslim version reverses this, identifying the pious Muslim (a doer of good works) with good taste and the man of learning (understood as one who can recite the Qurʾān) with fragrance. But why does Islamic tradition reverse the characteristics in this way?

I propose the following solution. Since fruit is intended for eating, its taste is more important than its fragrance. Judaism traditionally rated Torah study higher than good works ***(vetalmud torah keneged kullam,*** M.Peah 1:1), idealistically assuming that most Jewish males are literate and thus can study Torah, and further, that those who study Torah will thereby acquire the capacity to perform the good works the Torah demands. Thus Torah learning, perceived as the highest level, was equated with good taste. Islam, by contrast, took into account the sociological fact that the overwhelming majority of its converts and adherents were illiterate -- which made it unrealistic to present learning as more important than good works; hence the Islamic version equates good works with taste and learning with fragrance.

Another noteworthy example is the tradition concerning the call of Muḥammad: ***Iqrā bismi rabbika,*** "Proclaim in the name of your Lord!" (sūra 96:1). This generated the famous incident recorded in ibn Iṣḥāq's biography of the Prophet ***sīrat rasūl Allāh*** which has Muḥammad three times responding ***mā aqraʾu*** ("I ***cannot*** proclaim") -- while the angel chokes him with a cloth until he agrees to do God's bidding. Both the qurʾanic text and the ibn Iṣḥaq tradition have clearly discernible Jewish roots. The parallelism of qurʾanic ***iqrā!*** with ***qera!*** in Isaiah 40:6 and of Muḥammad's response ***mā aqraʾu*** with Isaiah's response: ***ma eqra*** is self-evident. But in Isaiah, ***ma eqra*** means not "I ***cannot*** proclaim," but rather, "***What*** shall I proclaim?". The problem is, how to resolve this discrepancy?

I propose that ibn Iṣḥāq's version results from a combination of two factors: first, a misconstruction of the word ***ma*** in Isaiah 40:6 (***ma*** in Hebrew can only mean "what?" but in Arabic it can mean either "what?" or "not" depending on context); and, second, the Muslim tradent's acquaintance with Moses' assertion that he was "slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exodus 4:10) and suffered from a speech impediment (Exodus 6:30). Hence, whereas Isaiah was asking ***ma eqra?,*** "***What*** shall I proclaim?", the ***ḥadīth*** by using the same words as Isaiah, ***mā aqraʾu,*** takes advantage of the ambiguity (does the Prophet mean "What shall I proclaim?" or does he mean "I ***cannot*** proclaim!"?) so as to identify Muḥammad at one stroke with both Moses and Isaiah (two Israelite prophets ranked by Islam among the Prophet's most illustrious precursors).

But it was not only the Jewish ***Scripture*** that Muslim exegetes adapted to Islamic requirements; they did this also with ***perush*** (Jewish scriptural ***exegesis***). One ingenious example of Muslim adaptation of a Jewish exegesis to Islamic requirements appears in the ***midrash*** on the opening words of Moses' final blessing of the Israelite people before his death:

> ***Y-H-W-H mi-Sinai ba, ve-zaraḥ mi-Śeʿir lamo; hofiaʿ me-har Paran.*** Y-H-W-H came from Sinai; he shone upon them from Seir; he appeared from Mount Paran. (Deut. 33:2)

The Qurʾān explicitly acknowledges that God gave previous scriptural revelations to earlier Prophets -- first, the ***Tawrāh*** (Torah) to the prophet Moses, and then the ***Injīl*** (***Evangelion,*** Gospel) to the prophet Jesus.[15] As Hava Lazarus-Yafeh noted, several Muslim authors interpret the three place-names in Deut 33:2 -- Sinai, Śeʿir and Paran -- to symbolize respectively the three communities of faith: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.[16] The metaphor of Sinai for Judaism is obvious, and Paran as designating Islam is easily reached via the connection with Ishmael (biblical ancestor of the Arabs), who is said to have dwelt in the wilderness of Paran (Genesis 21:21); but the connection between Śeʿir and Christianity is slightly more remote and needs to be spelled out. Originally, Śeʿir was connected with Esau, said to have settled there (Genesis 36:8), and this verse also identifies Esau as Edom, ancestor of the Edomites (Genesis 36:1). Centuries later, rabbinic tradition made Edom a metaphor for Rome; in mishnaic and early talmudic times, this meant ***pagan*** Rome (TJ Taʿanit 1:1, 64); but by late talmudic times, following the triumph of the Church, Edom/Rome finally became a metaphor for ***Christianity.*** Thus the vicissitudes of Jewish history led to the identification of Śeʿir in Deuteronomy 33:2 as a metaphor for Christianity.

The foregoing designations ultimately became known to Muslim exegetes, who took them further, pointing to Deuteronomy 33:2 as predicting the abrogation of both Judaism (“Sinai”) and Christianity. (“Śeʿir”) by the final and perfect revelation of Islam (“Paran”) to the Prophet descended from Ishmael.[17]

According to Lazarus-Yafeh, Islamic exegesis of individual verses of the Hebrew Bible as pointing to Muḥammad had by the Middle Ages become quite sophisticated, even employing the talmudic technique known as ***gematria,*** which plays games with the numerical value of alphabet letters. One fascinating Islamic ***gematria*** is the interpretation of Gen. 17:20 (“As for Ishmael, ...I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous” ***(ve-hirbeti oto bi-meʾod meʾod).*** The numerical value of ***bi-meʾod meʾod*** happens to be 92 — identical to the value of the letters of the name ***Muḥammad*** -- from which Muslim exegetes deduced that Gen.17:20 must be a veiled reference to the Prophet; thus the Hebrew words, ***meʾod meʾod***, (transliterated as ***Madh-Madh***) became one of the names of the Prophet in Islamic tradition.[18]

An important contribution to the field of Islamic scriptural exegesis is that of Reuven Firestone. In his ***Journeys in Holy Lands,***[19] Firestone analyzes ***ḥadīth*** traditions on the topic of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, demonstrating how Islamic ***midrash*** capitalized on the fact that unlike the Torah ***(Genesis 22)***, which specifically names Isaac as the sacrificial victim, the Qurʾān ***(sūra 37)*** omits to specify which son of Abraham was involved in that episode. More than 250 Islamic traditions on this topic split almost evenly between Isaac and Ishmael as the potential victim, the final score being “Isaac 131, Ishmael 133” – so Ishmael wins by a head (in this case, the head of a ram!) Firestone cites one tradition (reported by Muḥammad b. Kaʾb al-Qurayẓī) in particular, in which a Jewish scholar who had converted to Islam is asked by the Caliph ʿUmar II, “Which of Abraham's two sons was he commanded to sacrifice?” and replies that it was:

> Ishmael; and …the Jews know that. However, they envy the Arab community because their father was the one commanded [to be sacrificed] and he is the one who is ascribed for merit for his steadfastness. But they deny that and claim it was Isaac because Isaac was their father.[20]

Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*

We conclude our excursion into comparative Jewish and Islamic exegesis with a brief comment on the monumental work of qurʾanic exegesis known as Ṭabarī's ***Tafsīr***.[21]

In the***Tafsīr,*** Ṭabarī often seems puzzled by a term he wishes to explicate, sometimes because it does not strike him as native Arabic, sometimes because he is confronted by a “new” usage of an existing Arabic word. It seems to me that his exegetical task would have been far simpler, had he been unconstrained by dogmatic considerations and free (like his predecessor al-Suyūṭī) to acknowledge influences from other cultures – and above all, to recognize the presence of foreign words in the Qurʾān itself. Ṭabarī could have clarified many obscure qurʾanic terms, had he been permitted to discuss related Hebrew terms for biblical or rabbinic concepts. Many of the ***Tafsīr***'s exegetical discussions involve terms cognate with Hebrew or Aramaic biblical or talmudic expressions that predate the Qurʾān by many centuries.

Ṭabarī's Introduction already contains echoes of Jewish midrash. For instance, he says that the Muslim Scripture was sent down in seven tongues -- evoking the Jewish tradition that God gave the Torah in all of "the seventy languages of man" so that all would have an equal opportunity to accept it.[22] (Seventy, like seven, is a conventional number in ancient literature.)

Occasionally, Ṭabarī refers indirectly to the fact that a term with an established Arabic meaning may have had quite a different connotation, which happens to coincide with the actual meaning of the term in Hebrew or Aramaic texts. Thus, in discussing the qurʾanic term ***furqān*** (which in Aramaic means "salvation" but in Arabic means "separation") Ṭabarī records the assertion of a predecessor, Jabir b. Ziyad, that a still earlier exegete, ʿIkrima, used to say: "It is the same as salvation." Ṭabarī actually endorses ʿIkrima by noting that "this was the opinion of several early authorities." But he expresses no personal awareness that the Muslim commentators must have known that ***purqan*** (so pronounced in Aramaic) was the standard Jewish talmudic term for salvation; he prefers, instead, to explain "the day of the ***furqān***" (sūra 8:41) according to the Arabic meaning of the root ***f-r-q:*** "Our opinion about the origin of ***furqān*** is that it is a separation between two things.... the Qurʾān is called the ***Furqān*** because it separates the one who is right from the one who is wrong."[23] Obviously, this somewhat strained interpretation does not fit the qurʾanic context nearly as well as the Aramaic connotation -- that "the day of the ***Furqān***" is the day when salvation will arise for those who merit it, and that the Qurʾān is called the ***Furqān*** because adherence to its precepts brings salvation to Muslims just as adherence to the precepts of the Torah brings salvation to Jews.

This example shows the kind of awkwardness Ṭabarī's ***Tafsīr*** frequently exhibits in trying to explain technical religious terms without conceding their possible source in an extraneous culture. Thus, when he presents the arguments of predecessors trying to spell out different nuances for the terms ***raḥmān*** and ***raḥīm,*** and, reading between the lines, it is obvious to the informed reader that those commentators are having problems because these are "new" terms in Arabic -- or at any rate old vocabulary words being used in new ways. For instance, after recording the views of three named commentators. Ṭabarī appends a fourth view (unattributed):

> Some ignorant people have claimed that the Arabs did not formerly know of the name ar-Raḥman, that it was not in their language, and that that is why the polytheists said to the Messenger" What is ***ar-Raḥmān***?" (Sūra 25:60)....This is an erroneous view. The question is asked rhetorically and does not mean that they did not know of the name.[24]

Earlier exegetes had suggested that ***ar-Raḥīm*** may mean God is merciful to people in this life, while ***ar-Raḥmān*** refers to his mercy both in this world and the next. Ṭabarī says that

ar-Raḥīm specifically refers to God's mercy towards Muslim believers (citing sūra 33:43, ***Raḥīm limuʾminīn***) while ***ar-Raḥmān*** shows mercy towards all his creatures in both this world and the next. This uncertainty about the precise connotation of ***ar-Raḥmān,*** coupled with the apparent sense that the term is associated with non-Muslims as well as Muslims, and with the afterlife as well as this life, strongly suggests that Muslims may have learned the name of ***ar-Raḥmān*** from the Jews, especially since a widely-known Jewish liturgy (the Grace after Meals, ***Birkat ha-Mazon***) specifically associates ***ha-Raḥaman*** with the coming of Messiah and the afterlife ***(ha-Raḥaman hu yezakkenu liymot ha-Mashiaḥ uleḥayyei ha-ʿolam ha-ba)***

However, a caveat is in order here. Even in such cases, we cannot automatically deduce an influence of Judaism on Islam with 100% certainty. When considering the direction of cross-cultural influence between Judaism and Islam, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh cautioned against simply assuming that it is always the earlier religion that has influenced the later one. Cross-cultural influence is a two-way street; and sometimes, when a feature of Islamic exegesis strikes Jewish scholars as familiar, this may be because cross-influence actually went in the other direction. Thus, at one point in his introduction, Ṭabarī cites Ibn ʿAbbās' dictum concerning four modes of exegesis:

> (1) an aspect which the Arabs know through their language; (2) an exegesis which no one may be excused for not knowing; (3) an exegesis which the learned know; and (4) an exegesis known only to God.[25]

This seems to me at first sight to parallel the four modes of rabbinic exegesis: ***peshaṭ, remez, derash*** and ***sod.*** Those terms denote (a) the literal meaning of a text (could this correspond to "an aspect which the Arabs know through their language"?); (b) the allusive meaning (possibly that "which no one may be excused for not knowing?); (c) the homiletical meaning (perhaps this is "an exegesis which the learned know"?); and (d) the secret meaning (this could well correspond to "an exegesis known only to God").

But can we assume or deduce that Islam "borrowed" these four kinds of interpretation of sacred texts from Judaism? Not necessarily; Jewish texts that refer specifically to this fourfold mode of exegesis tend to be of comparatively late date (e.g., the 13th-century ***Zohar***), and moreover it is entirely possible that the scholars of both religions were drawing on pre-existing modes of interpretation, as was suggested in the case of rabbinic Judaism by the late David Daube, in his comparison of the rules of rabbinic exegesis with the canons of classical Greek rhetoric.[26] Therefore, circumspection is in order unless and until further research can establish irrefutable evidence of borrowing by either Judaism or Islam from the other. Whether one can assert that a specific Islamic exegesis is echoing Jewish exegesis or the other way round depends largely on the relative dates of the Jewish and Muslim exegetical works containing parallel material. But as noted in the case of the Joseph story, this is not necessarily conclusive, since it can happen that an Islamic text that had initially drawn on an earlier Jewish midrashic source is later reproduced in a Jewish source that was unaware of the earlier Jewish source and is actually borrowing directly from the intermediate Islamic conduit.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, the relationship between Jewish and Islamic exegesis is multi-faceted and can be quite complex. For numerous reasons (some less scholarly than political) comparative research into these matters has not proceeded at fast as it might have done. This worthwhile endeavor is still in its infancy and far more research is needed before a definitive history of Lazarus-Yafeh's "intertwined worlds" of Jewish and Islamic exegesis can be written.

Notes

[1] Prior to the last 25 years, the most noteworthy comparative works on Judaism and Islam were the 19th and early 20th century ***oeuvre*** of Abraham Geiger, Ignaz Goldziher and Shelomo Dov Goitein. The proliferation of contributions in the area during the last quarter of the 20th century include: R. Brunschwig, "Herméneutique Normative dans le Judaisme et dans l'Islam," ***Accademia dei Lincei: Scienze Morale, etc., Rendiconti*** 30 (1975); Norman A. Stillman, ***The Jews of Arab Lands*** (Jewish Publication Society 1979); Judith Romney Wegner, "Islamic and Talmudic Jurisprudence: The Four Roots of Islamic Law and their Talmudic Counterparts," ***American Journal of Legal History*** vol.26, pp. 25-71 (1982) and (2) "The Status of Women in Jewish and Islamic Marriage and Divorce Law," ***Harvard Women's Law Journal*** vol. 5, pp.1-33 (1982); Bernard Lewis, ***The Jews of Islam*** (Princeton Univ. Press 1984; William M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks (eds), ***Studies in Islamic and Judaic traditions*** (Scholars Press 1986); Gordon D. Newby, ***The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*** (Univ. of S. Carolina Press 1989); F.E.Peters, ***Judaism, Christianity and Islam: the Classical Texts and their Interpretation*** (Princeton Univ. Press 1990); Reuven Firestone. ***Journeys in Holy Lands*** (SUNY Press 1990); Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, ***Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*** (Princeton Univ. Press 1992); Steven M. Wasserstrom, ***Between Muslim and Jew: the problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*** (Princeton Univ. Press 1995). Most (though not all) comparative work to date on Judaism and Islam has been done by Jewish Islamicists, whose knowledge of biblical Hebrew and talmudic Aramaic texts made it easy for them to spot the numerous parallels in the two systems, which are generally less apparent to gentile scholars (who until recently comprised the overwhelming majority of academicians studying Islam). In addition, the proliferation of comparative scholarship on Judaism and Islam has been hampered by the fact that assertions regarding the historical influence of Judaism on Islam tend to be doctrinally unacceptable and thus offensive to traditional Muslims.

[2] S. D. Goitein, ***Jews and Arabs. Their Contacts Through the Ages*** (Shocken 1955, 1974) p.6 and ***passim.***

[3] ***Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*** ("The Full Exposition of Qurʾanic Commentary") Cairo, 1903.

[4] Arthur Jeffery, ***The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān*** (1938), Oriental Institute, Baroda. It is no accident that Jeffery's work was published in a non-Arabic-speaking country (India) by the Oriental Institute under the auspices of the Maharajah of Baroda, rather than in an ethnic Arab country, where its publication might well have been offensive to traditional Muslim Arabs.

[5] The ***ḥajj*** (cognate with biblical Hebrew ***ḥag***, whose basic meaning is to "circle round") involves circumambulating the ***kaʿba*** shrine at Mecca. The ***ḥajj*** was practiced in pre-Islamic Arabian religion (as indicated in Qur'ān, sūra 8:34-35). Practices associated with the ***ʿumra*** include letting the hair and beard grow untrimmed until after the person has either performing the ***ʿumra*** or made a ***nusuk*** offering in lieu (sūra 2:196); cf. the biblical ***nesekh*** libation required by Leviticus 23:13 in connection with the ***ʿomer*** ritual, and also the (much later) talmudic characterization of the ***ʿomer*** period as a time of mourning during which a man should not trim his hair or beard. The fact that this requirement deos not appear in Scripture and that the Talmud's explication of it has no obvious relevance to the biblical ***ʿomer*** ritual as such reinforces the sense that ***ʿomer*** and ***ʿumra*** alike are ancient rituals adapted from earlier religions, whose original motivations were unknown to either the Jews or the Muslims who adopted them. Moreover, the qur'anic passage exhorts Muslims to "observe the ***ḥajj*** and the ***ʿumra*** in the well known months (sūra 2:197), clearly implying that these practices were of pre-Islamic origin.

[6] The Qurʾān proper, as a book of revelation, begins in sūra 2 with the obviously introductory phrase ***dhālika (a)l-kitāb,*** "This is the book…" -- seemingly emulating the opening words of the New Testament: "This is the book ***(ketaba)*** of the genealogy of Jesus Christ" (Mt.1:1 – which had in turn been modeled on the opening phrase of Genesis ch. 5: ***zeh sefer toledot haʾadam,***. "This is the book of the genealogy of Adam."

[7] Additional evidence of the dependence of the qur'anic version on the biblical version is seen in the fact that whereas the Qurʾān itself identifies Joseph's master only by an epithet, ***al-ʿAziz*** ("the mighty one") later Islamic tradition calls him Qitfir -- an obvious mistransliteration of his biblical name, Potiphar, which should more accurately have been rendered Fitfir. This error was almost certainly due to the fact that the Arabic letter ***fa*** differs from the Arabic letter ***qof*** only in the number of dots placed above it -- ***fa*** having one dot and ***qof*** two.

[8] Published by the author at his own expense in 1833.

[9] Tr. F. M. Young, published by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, Madras, 1899

[10] See also sūras 6:74-82, 19:42-51, 22: 43, 26:69-105, 29:15-23, 37:81-95, 43:26-2 7, 60:4-6

[11] Geiger, ***Judaism and Islam,*** Ktav Publishing House 1970, p.112. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh (in ***Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism,*** Princeton Univ. Press 1992) notes that the midrashic version of the Joseph story is post-qurʾanic and could conceivably have borrowed details from the Qurʾān, but points out that Muslim commentaries on the qur'anic story identify the fruit as an ***itrāj,*** whereas the Qurʾān, written down in the northern Arabian peninsula where citrons were unknown, does not name the fruit at all. Lazarus-Yafeh therefore deduces that the Muslim commentaries must be dependent on a Jewish ***midrash*** that identifies the fruit as an ***etrog*** (citron).

[12] Jacob Lassner, ***Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*** (Chicago Univ. Press, 1990).

[13] Ibid, p. 13

[14] Muhammad al-Bukhārī, ***Ṣaḥīḥ*** (tr. & ed. M.M. Khan), Kazi Publications , Chicago 1979, vol. 7, p. 249

[15] Sūra 3:3-4; 3:48; 3:65; 5:44-48. The statement that God "gave the Injīl to Jesus" resulted from a false analogy with the rabbinic claim that God dictated the Torah directly to Moses.

[16] "Muslim Bible Exegesis: the Prediction of Muhammad and Islam." ***Intertwined Worlds***, p. 109

[17] Ibid., note 110

[18] ***Intertwined Worlds,*** p. 107

[19] SUNY Press, 1990.

[20] ***Journeys in Holy Lands***, p. 143.

[21] See note 3 above. An English translation of small portion of the ***Tafsīr*** now exists: Ṭabarī, ***The Commentary on the Qurʾān*** , vol. 1. tr. J. Cooper Oxford Univ. Press 1987.

[22] But (says the Midrash) only the Israelites accepted it, saying (Exodus 24:7), ***naʿaśeh venishmaʿ*** meaning literally, "We shall do and obey!" In Deuteronomy 5:24, this declaration appears as ***veshamaʿnu veʿaśinu***, -- which the Qurʾān renders as ***wasamiʿna waʿaṣayna*** -- meaning precisely the opposite: "We hear but disobey" (sūra 4:46).

[23] Ṭabarī, ***Commentary***, vol. 1, pp. 42-43.

[24] Ibid., p. 38

[25] Ibid., p. 34

[26] David Daube, "Rabbinic Methods of Interpretation and Hellenistic Rhetoric," ***Hebrew Union College Annual*** Vol. 22 (1949).