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Clare Wilde

8 “They Wish to Extinguish the Light of God with Their Mouths” (Qur’ān 9:32): A Qur’ānic Critique of Late Antique Scholasticism?

8.1 Introduction

The Qur’ān contains a number of references to knowledge and the modes of its transmission. For example, in addition to *kitāb* (book), the Qur’ān has numerous allusions to writing media, such as *asfār/sifr* (book/volume); *khātām* (seal – of the prophets); *lawḥ* (board/tablet); *midād* (ink); *nuskha* (copy/exemplar: Qur’ān 7:154 – Moses’ tablets); *qalam* (pen – made of reed; also tubes); *qirtās/qarātīs* (parchment/papyrus: Qur’ān 6:7, 91); *raqq* (parchment: Qur’ān 52:3); *sijjil* (parchment scroll – in an apocalyptic context); *ṣuḥuf* (pages of scripture).¹ Knowledge is linked with faith – as something God has given prophets.² It is also one of the attributes of God (as “knower of the seen and unseen”: *‘ālim al-ghayb wa-l-shahāda*; e.g. Qur’ān 59:22). Additionally, the Qur’ān references the learning/knowledge found in earlier communities – especially relating to the knowledge of God’s revelations. Sometimes these references are positive (or at least neutral), as in Qur’ān 10:94’s exhortation that, if in doubt about the revelation, he (e.g., Muḥammad) should “ask those who were reading the book before” (cf. also Qur’ān 26:195–197, in which the truth of the Arabic revelation is said to be in the earlier books and known to the *‘ulamā’* – scholars³ – of the Children of Israel).

1 For further discussion and bibliography, see Jane D. McAuliffe, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006), s.v. “Writing and Writing Materials” (a fine piece by Sheila Blain). Hereafter this resource is abbreviated as *EQ*. The bibliography to this article contains full bibliographical details of the *EQ* articles.

2 For further discussion and bibliography, see *EQ*, s.v. “Knowledge and Learning.”

3 *‘Ulamā’* (“scholars”) twice appear in the Qur’ān (26:197 and 35:28). Additionally, those “firmly grounded in knowledge” of Qur’ān 4:162 have occasionally been glossed as the scholars of the Children of Israel; see Louise Marlow’s *EQ* article “Scholar.”

Note: I first approached this topic at the encouragement of Fr. David Johnson, as a seminar paper at CUA. A very early version was presented at the IV International Syriac Symposium in Princeton, NJ. On the occasion of Prof Angel Urban’s Festschrift, it was later reworked. Prior to the April 2015 ‘Sharing and Hiding Religious Knowledge’ conference at Groningen, yet another iteration was delivered at the SBL as part of the first IQSA meeting in Baltimore in November 2013. My thanks to all who have encouraged, and contributed to, my thinking on this topic. All errors are my own.

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8.2 Distorting God's Word

But, this knowledge (of God's books) – and a (scholarly?) cover-up of what appears in them also appears in qur'ānic polemics, generally directed at the Children of Israel – Jews, but also Christians.⁴ This tension between qur'ānic references to the (divine) book and human manipulations (be it of the *ma'āna*, sense, or the *lafz*, text⁵), whether oral or written, as well as the rationale (and intentionality) of such distortion, has been the subject of Muslim exegesis and western scholarship on the Qur'ān.⁶

Although the root letters *ḥ-r-f* are the traditional focus of scholars examining the qur'ānic charge of the scriptural corruption by earlier communities, qur'ānic passages that do not contain words derived from these root letters have also been adduced as proof of qur'ānic awareness of Jewish alteration of the biblical text. For, from its allusions to both written and oral manipulations of God's word, a qur'ānic awareness of rabbinic traditions has been posited.⁷ For example, might Qur'ān 2:79's allusion to “those who write the book with their hands and then say: This is from God, so that they may take for it a small price ...” reflect qur'ānic awareness of collections of midrashim that already existed in the written form in the seventh century? Did it know of targumim that were traditionally transmitted in the oral form, as, at Qur'ān 3:78, it criticizes “a party of them who distort the Scripture with their tongues, that you may think that what they say is from the Scripture, when it is not from the Scripture. And they say: It is from God when it is not from God; and they speak a lie concerning God knowingly.” Alternatively,

⁴ The verb *ḥarafa* (to distort) is used in the Qur'ān referencing people who hear or listen (*s-m-* 2:75) to the *kalām allāh* (word of God) then *ḥarrafa* it – intentionally (*'-q-l*) after they learned/knew it (*'-l-m*) (cf. Qur'ān 4:46; 5:13; 5:41; 2:75). For the still useful classic discussion of this topic, see Ignazio di Matteo, “II ‘tahrif’ od alterazione della Bibbia secondo i musulmani,” *Bessarione* 38 (1922): 64–111, 223–60.

⁵ For a helpful recent discussion of this distinction see Gabriel S. Reynolds, “On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (tahrif) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130 (2010): 189–202.

⁶ See, for example, the substantive study of Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), in which the works of ten Muslim authors are examined. She demonstrates that only three of these ten, the later authors, understood the text of the Hebrew Bible to have been distorted. More recently, Arye Olman offers a thoughtful and thought-provoking reading of the qur'ānic charge in Qur'ān 6:91 as a response to the Jewish practice of *midrash*. See his “‘The Jews Distorted Torah’: An Attempt to the Moslem Claim,” in *Proceedings of 15th Conference of Jewish Studies, FSU ‘Sefer’ 2* (2008): 90–100 (also available on academia.edu). On the qur'ānic charge of Jewish oral distortion of scripture, see esp. Reuven Firestone, “The Failure of a Jewish Program of Public Satire in the Squares of Medina,” *Judaism* 46 (1997): 439–52.

⁷ The following examples are taken from Olman, “‘The Jews Distorted Torah.’”

Qur’ān 6:91’s reference to the “Book that Moses brought, a light and a guidance to men, which you make into scattered writings which you show while you conceal much? And you were taught what you did not know, (neither) you nor your fathers” resonates with the Hebrew tradition of the Mishnaic era that had some rules about not reading certain excerpts from Torah in synagogue to avoid their objectionable understanding:

The story of Reuben is read but not explained; the episode of Tamar is read and interpreted; the first story of the Calf is read and translated, and the second account is read but not interpreted; the Priestly benediction and the narrative of David and that of Amnon are neither read nor translated. (Mishnah Megillah 4:10)⁸

But, the Qur’ān has not been understood as criticizing Jews alone for such scriptural distortions – and, although Islamic tradition often interpreted allusions to scriptural distortion as references to the People of the Book’s (*ahl al-kitāb*) willful concealment of mentions of Muḥammad in the Torah, for example, it could also understand these passages as criticisms of Jewish (or Christian) violations of the laws of God, or of Christian (or Jewish) misrepresentations of God as having a Son (e.g., Jesus or Uzayr/Ezra). Exegetes would ask who, exactly, was distorting scripture with their tongues, what was the content of that which they were concealing, what is the exact meaning of *rabbānīn*, how should the studying/teaching verbs be vocalized, what is meant by *al-kitāb* (book: the Qur’ān? The scripture of Jews/Christians?), was the verse revealed in response to questions from Jews and Christians to Muḥammad: “Are you asking us to take you as a lord?,” or, are the verses alluding to Jewish and/or Christian mishandling of the scriptures (as when Christians say that Jesus is the Son of God, or when Jews say that Ezra is).⁹

These exegetical discussions point to the multiple understandings possible for these qur’ānic passages. For, often the verbal subject of the phrases indicating the corruption of God’s revelation is indeterminate (third person masculine plural verbs or pronouns are frequent) and later exegetes are not unanimous in their interpretations of the verses in question. Furthermore, many of the qur’ānic discussions of the “Children of Israel” and “People of the Book” are ambiguous, and there is no scholarly consensus as to the exact identities of who is intended by these phrases,¹⁰ nor by the explicit mentions of “Jews” (*yahūd*) and “Christians”

⁸ Cited by Olman, “The Jews Distorted Torah.”

⁹ Although the details of the rich and varied interpretation of Qur’ān 3:75–80 preserved in classical works of *tafsīr* are beyond the scope of this paper, these questions are found in numerous *tafsīr* ad Q 3:75. See, e.g., the comments of al-Tabari and al-Razi, ad loc.

¹⁰ For a solid introduction (with relevant bibliography) to this complex issue, see the *EQ* articles “People of the Book,” “Jews and Judaism,” “Christians and Christianity,” “Children of Israel.”

(*naṣārā*, as well as “People of the Gospel”).¹¹ Additionally, terms that appear to designate particular functions (e.g. scholars, rabbis, priests, monks) are not uniformly glossed by the classical exegetes. (*Aḥbār*, for example, is generally glossed as rabbis – but can also be understood as Christian scholars.)

Given the variety of later exegetical glosses of *aḥbār* and the multivalent qur’ānic estimations of monks/monasticism (*raḥbān/raḥbāniyya*),¹² might we be able to read the qur’ānic discourse on the oral destruction – whether with tongues (e.g., Qur’ān 3:78 or 4:46) or mouths (e.g., Qur’ān 24:15) of God’s word as indicative of a familiarity with Late Antique debates (especially in Syriac) over Hellenic education practices by both Jews and Christians?¹³

8.3 Qur’ān 9:30–34: An Allusion to Late Antique Scriptural Study Debates?

The qur’ānic allusions to people (especially Jews) using their tongues to distort Scripture – by adding words (Qur’ān 3:78), or by moving words around (e.g., Qur’ān 4:46) – have been studied in the context of discussions of “*taḥrīf*,” the qur’ānic charge that the earlier revelations (to Moses, Jesus, etc.) have been distorted by members of the earlier monotheistic communities. The following argues

¹¹ See, e.g. François De Blois, “Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and Hanīf (ἑθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (2002): 1–30 and Sidney H. Griffith, “Al-Nasara in the Qur’an: A Hermeneutical Reflection,” in *New Perspectives on the Qur’ān: The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds (New York: Routledge: 2012), 1–38.

¹² For a recent reading of the qur’ānic *raḥbāniyya* see Emran I. El-Badawi, “From ‘Clergy’ to ‘Celibacy’: The Development of Raḥbāniyya between the Qur’an Hadith and Church Canon,” *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur’ān and Ḥadīth Studies* 11/1 (2013): 1–14.

¹³ On the significance of Syriac for qur’ānic studies see, e.g. Sidney Griffith, “Syriacisms in the Arabic Qur’ān: Who Were “Those Who Said ‘Allāh is Third of Three’” According to al-*Mā’idah* 73?” in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’ān; Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, ed. M. Bar-Asher et al. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 2007), 83–110. Two other recent studies highlight the complexity of attempting to understand the Qur’ān in its Late Antique environment: Emran I. El-Badawi, *The Qur’an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (New York: Routledge, 2013) and Holger Michael Zellentin, *The Qur’ān’s Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013). Angelika Neuwirth, “Qur’ān and History—A Disputed Relationship: Some Reflections on Qur’ānic History and History in the Qur’ān,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 5/1 (2003): 1–18, provides a comprehensive and accessible overview of some of the challenges of studying the Qur’ān in the context of Late Antiquity.

that yet another qur’ānic allusion to the oral destruction of God’s word (Qur’ān 9:30–34) might also shed light on qur’ānic engagement with Late Antique debates over the propriety of probing with one’s intellect into the meaning of scripture. This passage reads as follows:

- 9:30 And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah; and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah. These are the words of their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before. Allah’s curse be on them! How they are turned away!
- 9:31 They take their *aḥbār* and *ruhbān* (doctors of law and their monks) for Lords besides Allah, and (also) the Messiah, son of Mary, And they were enjoined that they should serve one God only – there is no god but He. Be He glorified from what they set up (with Him)!
- 9:32 They desire to put out the light of Allah with their mouths, and Allah will allow nothing save the perfection of His light, though the disbelievers are averse.
- 9:33 He it is Who sent His Messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religions, though the polytheists are averse.
- 9:34 O you who believe, surely many of the *aḥbār* and *ruhbān* (doctors of law and the monks) eat away the property of men falsely, and hinder (them) from Allah’s way. And those who hoard up gold and silver and spend it not in Allah’s way – announce to them a painful chastisement¹⁴

A number of features bear mentioning. First, it does not contain the root *ḥ-r-f*, so is not generally included in scholarly discussions of the qur’ānic charge that Jews and Christians have “distorted” their original revelations. Secondly, it is “mouths” rather than “tongues” that are the means of destruction. Thirdly, the passage contains an explicit mention of “Jews” and “Christians”: it is with their mouths that Jews claim Uzayr is the Son of God and Christians, that the Messiah is (Qur’ān 9:30). Fourthly, in this passage, twice *aḥbār* and *ruhbān* are paired: Jews and Christians are accused of taking them (and Jesus) as lords besides God. And, a few verses later, these *aḥbār* and *ruhbān* are accused of taking the wealth of the people, and hoarding gold and silver – and not spending it in the path of God ... all the while preaching about the dreadful torment (of hell). It is in the context of this passage that the charge that “they wish to extinguish the light of God with their mouths” occurs. The antecedent for the “they” of “they wish”

¹⁴ Translation found at <http://www.aaail.org/text/hq/englishholyqurantranslation/englishholyqurantranslationmaulanamuhammadali.shtml>

(*yuridūn*, Qur’ān 9:32) is not specified, and exegetes proffer various explanations.¹⁵ Finally, it should be noted that “scripture” is not explicitly mentioned in the passage: rather, people are accused of wanting to use their mouths to “destroy the light of God.”

8.4 Christian and Jewish Authorities in the Qur’ān

Classical exegetes and contemporary scholars have explored the Qur’ān’s ambiguous estimations of Jews and Judaism and Christians and Christianity (including monasticism) with a number of hypotheses: e.g., various encounters between Muhammad and different Jewish and Christian communities; indications of lingering remnants of a Jewish-Christian sect¹⁶; polemics.¹⁷ Islamic tradition has discussed the significance of qur’ānic criticisms of Jewish religious authorities (Qur’ān 2:75; 5:44, 63; 9:31, 34),¹⁸ and the similarities of the Jewish and Christian abuses to which the Qur’ān alludes – often in terms of rabbis and priests as having served as lawmakers for their respective communities, sometimes “allowing what God forbade” or “forbidding what God allowed.” And, in their obedience to the “new” laws, the communities were effectively abandoning the worship of God and following the religious authorities as their new lords.¹⁹

15 See, e.g., the glosses provided by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Muqātil b. Sulaymān and al-Ṭabarī ad Qur’ān 9:32.

16 Recently, Zellentin, *Legal culture*.

17 E.g. Griffith, “Syriacisms.”

18 The qur’ānic critique of rabbis in the aforementioned passages certainly merits further scholarly investigation. Does it, for example, reflect actual developments in the Jewish community of Late Antique Arabia? (cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004]). Is it an example of qur’ānic employment of Christian *Adversus Judaeos* argumentation? For some scholarship on this literature, see, e.g., the references in Aryeh Kofsky, “Eusebius of Caesarea and the Christian-Jewish Polemic,” in *Contra Judaeos: Ancient Polemics between Christians and Jews*, ed. Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa, Texts and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism 10 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 59–84, at 65 n. 19. Or is it an indication of qur’ānic awareness of Jewish-Christian polemics—akin to its assertion at Qur’ān 3:67 that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a Muslim, a *ḥanīf*?). This line of investigation is, however, beyond the scope of the present discussion.

19 Cf. e.g. the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī, ad loc. An online version of *Tafsīr* Ibn Kathīr states that “fighting the Jews and Christians is legislated because they are idolaters and disbelievers.” A more nuanced rendering of classical *tafsīr* of Qur’ān 9:31 is found at <http://islamicssystem.blogspot.co.nz/2012/06/tafsir-of-surat-al-tawba31-taking.html>

Elsewhere (e.g. Qur’ān 5:63), the *aḥbār* are paired with *rābāniyūn* – commonly interpreted as Jewish learned men who should be forbidding people from uttering and eating unlawful things. In yet another passage, the *ruhbān* are paired with *qissīsīn* (priests, Qur’ān 5:82) – but in extremely favorable terms, and in marked contrast to Jews and polytheists. In Qur’ān 9:30 f., however, *aḥbār* and *ruhbān* are painted with the same brush. In classical exegesis, this coupling in Qur’ān 9:30–34 has been examined in the context of narratives about events in the life of Muhammad. And, while Islamic tradition is clear that rabbis and monks are not literally worshiped by Jews and Christians, they were heeded in place of God, inasmuch as they served as the “lawgivers” for their respective communities – and made lawful that which God forbid, and vice versa. But, might the coupling of *aḥbār* and *ruhbān*, in the context of the charge of their oral distortion of God’s word, also indicate a Qur’ānic familiarity with the debates over the “scholasticism” of late antique rabbinic and Christian schools?

8.5 Qur’ānic Critique of Late Antique Scholasticism?

If understood as referencing the practices of Jewish and Christian scholars, the Qur’ānic linkage of *aḥbār* and *ruhbān* and their association with an “oral” destruction of God’s word (Qur’ān 9:30–34) evokes the scholastic movement among both Jews and Christians in Late Antique Mesopotamia: in Nisibis at the end of the fifth century, and in Seleucia itself in the middle of the sixth.²⁰ As Adam Becker has discussed,²¹ these schools developed in the same time period and place as did the Babylonian Rabbinic academies. These schools also figure in Late Antique eastern Syriac monastic discourse. For example, in response to the Catholicos Iso’yahb’s (d. 659) restoration of the monastery at which he had studied, which included plans to “build a school (Syr. *eskole*) in the place of his cell, ...so that a monastery of instruction ... might be accessible to every ‘school student,’ trained and illuminated in the scripture, so that the school and monastery might become one ...,”²² a group of monks, including the head of the monastery replied:

²⁰ See Adam Becker, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism’ in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 34 (2010): 91–113. The discussion of the establishment of these schools is found at p. 94.

²¹ Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

²² Becker, *Fear of God*, 169.

This work is not one that belongs to ascetics ... we who sit in our cells. The songs of the hallelujahs, the psalms, the responses, the harmonies of the youths and the vigilant ... will vex us. For we did not find it in a book nor did we receive from report (the tradition) that this thing (i.e., a school) was in one of the monasteries of the fathers. Rather, we ourselves are summoned to weeping and mourning while sitting in our cells ..., according to the teaching which is from scripture and which we have also received from our father Mār Jacob. For he did not order us in his life and in his migration from us that one should teach the other chanting or how to read a manuscript. Leave off making us “school students” again, rather, (let us be) while we sit in our cells ... and (there may be) the solitary reading (of scripture) of each person by himself.²³

Although this account is found in a ninth-century work, it reflects the tensions within east Syrian monasticism since at least the mid-sixth century. Many east Syrian solitary monastics would have been trained as youths in the schools, but left the school for the monastery and, eventually, the solitude of the desert. Some, however, would have stayed within the school environment, continuing their training and becoming teachers themselves. But, as Becker argues, “group study at the school ... would have served as a devotional practice that bore as much religious significance as prayer and private reading did in institutions focused more on private inspiration, such as those East-Syrian monasteries where monks focused on the higher levels of contemplation as advocated in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus.”²⁴ From the sixth century and their translation into Syriac, the works of the fifth-century Evagrius would prove highly influential in east Syrian monastic spirituality. For Evagrius, prayer is “communion of the mind with God” – a communion that ought to have no intermediary, be they images or even the human voice:

Every proposition has a genus, which is predicated, or a difference, or a species, or a property, or an accident or what is compounded of these: but nothing which is said in regard to the Holy Trinity is acceptable. Let the ineffable be worshiped in silence.²⁵

The dangers of the scholastic methods in scriptural investigation are outlined by the seventh century Dadisho of Bayt Qatraya (a region identified as modern-day Bahrain and eastern Arabia, i.e., Qatar), who “makes a number of passing jabs and disdainful references to *eskolāyē*, that is, school men and students” providing “explicit information on the tension that could exist between the school and the monastery.”²⁶ Dadisho also identifies the “alternative means” the demons

²³ Quotation found in Becker, *Fear of God*, 170.

²⁴ Becker, *Fear of God*, 172.

²⁵ Quoted in Becker, *Fear of God*, 177.

²⁶ Becker, *Fear of God*, 188.

have devised to trick men: “constant and disordered meditation on scripture, a disparate wandering after seeking its meanings, and suspension of labors, of prayer, of reflection on God, and of meditation and self-correction,” – all of which “leads Christians to engage in intellectual disputes.”²⁷ Such criticism, however, did not appear only with Dadisho, or even Evagrius; in fact, this echoes earlier Syriac reflections on the traps into which men fell when they attempted to probe, with their intellect, into the meanings of the names of God, rather than engaging in meditative contemplation on the wonders of God. For example, in a panegyric against Arius (b. 260 CE) concerning theological inquiry, speculation and investigation into the nature of God, the fourth century Ephraem²⁸ writes²⁹:

Take life from the greatness (of God)
 And leave aside investigation into the greatness.
 Love the grace of the father
 And do not probe into his being.
 Take delight in and love the goodness of the son
 And do not probe into his birth.
 Love the descent of the holy spirit
 And do not apply yourself to investigating it.
 Father and Son and Holy Spirit
 By their names they are understood.
 Do not ponder their hypostases.
 Meditate on their names.
 If you inquire into the being you are brought to naught
 But if you believe in the name you live...

Similarly, Dadisho defends “spiritual” (monastic allegorical) exegesis in the hope that he might

muzzle the mouths of certain stupid exegetes who, thanks to their knowledge of the jargon that they have learnt – jargon that is totally divorced from any idea of good conduct – hold saints in contempt when these latter introduce examples from the Scriptures and from the natural world, and take them to refer to godliness and righteousness.³⁰

²⁷ Becker, *Fear of God*, 189.

²⁸ See Sidney H. Griffith, “Images of Ephraem. The Syrian Holy Man and his Church,” *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought and Religion* 45 (1989–90): 7–33, for an overview of the man, his church and his portrayal in later literature.

²⁹ *On Faith* (no. 4), lines 121–34, in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones de Fide*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 212 (Leuven: Peeters, 1961), 32–36.

³⁰ Quoted by Becker, *Fear of God*, 189 n. 133.

Although the third person (masculine) plural antecedent of those who wish (*ḡurīdūn*) to extinguish God's light with their mouths in Qur'ān 9:32 is not explicitly identified, the accusation occurs directly after accusations against Jews and Christians for saying, respectively, that Uzayr and the Messiah are sons of God – and the assertion that *ruhbān* and *ahbār* had been taken as lords besides God. Might the Qur'ān's first auditors, then, have heard Qur'ān 9:32 – and other qur'ānic allusions to the use of tongues and mouths (as well as writing) in the distortion of scripture (e.g., Qur'ān 3:75f.) – as reflecting Late Antique criticism of the scholasticism in which certain contemporary Christians, as well as Jews, engaged?

If its first auditors did indeed hear this passage as directed at monks, as well as at scholastic (?) authorities, both for wishing to extinguish the "light" of God – with their mouths – and for hoarding wealth, such a reading coincides with Becker's reading of criticisms of the pedagogy of the school of Nisibis – that, rather than being distinct from the monastic movement, the scholastic movement was an integral, if contested, part of east Syrian monasticism, indicative of increasing Hellenization, a process that had not just linguistic but also academic and, arguably, administrative, effects.³¹ This possibility is particularly convincing in the light of the early exegetical gloss provided by Muqātil b. Sulaymān of the *ahbār* of Qur'ān 9:32 as both Christian and Jewish '*ulamā*' (scholars). In this reading, the qur'ānic criticism of those who destroy the light of God with their mouths is directed at Christian and Jewish scholars, reflecting, perhaps their shared "pedagogical paradigm."³² If the Arabic Qur'ān is in fact criticizing some contemporary Jewish and Christian scholars, and monks, as being similarly trained, in a classical Hellenic pedagogy, does this indicate an awareness familiarity with, and criticism of, Hellenizing trends? Particularly if the qur'ānic message is understood as located in, and directed at, people familiar with the solitude of the desert, it is not impossible that it would expect its auditors to be familiar with an Evagrian spirituality that would prioritize silent meditation on, rather than scholastic debates about, scripture.

8.6 Conclusion

The Qur'ān presumes its auditors' familiarity with both Judaism and Christianity. But – as indicated by the difference of scholarly opinions about the meaning of qur'ānic verses, who, exactly, were the Jews and Christians the Qur'ān presumes

³¹ See esp. Becker, *Fear of God*, 169–203.

³² See Becker, "Comparative Study," 108–09 for a thoughtful discussion of this concept.

its auditors to know?³³ How can we know the Jews and Christians it references? This is a particularly tricky question when we also consider the Qur’ān’s rhetoric and style.³⁴ In other words, to the extent that the Qur’ān is polemical, or carrying a particular message – does it intend, or expect, a literal reading of its allusions to Jews/Christians? Further, as much exegesis was both chronologically and geographically removed from the Qur’ānic milieu, the later exegetical glosses better reflect the milieus of the exegetes than the first auditors’ reception of the Qur’ānic revelations. If, however, we attempt to read the Qur’ān from a Late Antique (rather than later Islamic) perspective, we might be able to gain insight into the Judaism and Christianity the Qur’ān presumes its auditors to know, thereby illuminating our understanding of the Qur’ānic message – while also expanding our perceptions of the involvement of “Arabs” in Late Antiquity.

The complexities of Late Antiquity are of particular interest for understanding the Qur’ānic ambivalence towards monks and monasticism.³⁵ Although Islamic tradition has generally understood the Qur’ān as criticizing monasticism as an “innovation” (cf. Qur’ān 57:27), it also contains words of praise for Christians on account of monks and priests who are humble (Qur’ān 5:82). But, in Qur’ān 9:30–34, Christians are said to take their monks and *aḥbār* as “gods besides God,” and these two groups are accused of taking the wealth of people. As these passages that allude to the misconduct of religious authorities and, arguably, their abuse

33 Contemporary scholarship on the Qur’ān, as well as classical exegetes, posit a range of possibilities. For an overview of the literature, see the aforementioned *EQ* articles on “Jews and Judaism” and “Christians and Christianity.” Possible connections to “rabbinic” Judaism, Jewish-Christianity, Gnosticism, as well as the three well-known Christian divisions resulting from Chalcedon: Melkites, Jacobites and Nestorians (particularly in their Syriac manifestations), have all been posited. Other possibilities, such as a lingering late remnant of Jewish-Christianity, have also been posited.

34 See, e.g. the *EQ* articles “Rhetoric of the Qur’ān” and “Language and Style of the Qur’ān.”

35 The multivalent Qur’ānic estimations of monks and monasticism also resonates with Late Antique trends in Christian ecclesiastical circles. For, prior to the rise of Islam, the ecclesiastical hierarchy attempted to regulate monastic communities and individual ascetics—as at the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) and that of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (481 CE). Not surprisingly, such regulations do not appear to have been met with universal approval by all Christian communities. As such, might the Qur’ān’s first auditors (in contrast to later Islamic tradition) have heard echoes of Late Antique Christian debates over monasticism (rather than a blanket condemnation of the institution) in its allusions to the “innovation” of *rahbāniyya* and the mixed praise and criticism of *ruhbān* (Qur’ān 5:82–9:31/34). As Christian theological disputes, such as those that both led up to, and followed from, the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) are found, for example, in Qur’ānic references to Jesus and Mary, the Qur’ān might also reflect a knowledge in its milieu of the multiple faces of monasticism that both western and eastern Church councils of Late Antiquity also addressed.

of power sandwich the indeterminate reference to people who “wish to destroy the light of God with their mouths,” might this passage also refer to a practice of religious authorities? For this charge parallels criticisms of (Hellenic) scholasticism practiced by Jewish and Christians scholars found in some Syriac Christian monastic literature that is similar to the tension between the Torah and *midrash* in Jewish tradition. For, as Becker has demonstrated, rather than extolling the Hellenic scholasticism popular in certain Jewish and Christian academic circles (such as that associated with the academies at Nisibis), this literature promotes “Egyptian”-type monasticism, which emphasizes silence and solitude. But, not all monastics were critical of the Hellenized schools; the Qur’ānic accusation, then, against *aḥbār* and *ruhḥān* found in Qur’ān 9:30–34 may reflect familiarity with the criticisms that solitaries in the desert had of their brethren who associated with the schools. Further, the term *aḥbār* has been glossed both as Christian and as Jewish scholars. Such a reading is in keeping with an account found in the *History of Mar Aba*, in which the holy man, prior to his conversion, met an east Syrian “school man” – but could not tell whether he was a Jew or a Christian!³⁶

Especially if the Qur’ān is understood as addressing people familiar with the solitude of the desert, might its charge of people wishing to “destroy the word of God with their mouths” reflect a sympathetic familiarity with an Evagriean criticism of the approaches to scripture found in both Jewish and Christian “schools” in the more settled urban areas – of Mesopotamia or, possibly, even in Arabia itself (e.g., in Najrān)? Although long studied as being far removed from the Hellenized world of Late Antiquity, the Qur’ān and the sixth-century Arabian peninsula are increasingly understood as knowledgeable of, and connected to, neighboring civilizations. Living far to the north of the peninsula, the sixth century Jacob of Serugh³⁷ was aware of the martyrdom of Christians in Najrān (southern Arabia)³⁸ in his own lifetime. And, a little over a century later, Seleucia was conquered by Arab/Muslim armies (637). Furthermore, the Qur’ān contains numerous allusions to events and figures familiar from Late Antique history and literature – not just from the Bible.³⁹ But, while the nature and extent of Christianity and Judaism in

36 Discussed in Becker, “Comparative Study,” 108–9.

37 For more on Jacob of Serugh and the Qur’ān, see Sidney H. Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur’ān: The ‘Companions of the Cave’ in *Surat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition,” in *The Qur’an in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 109–37.

38 For a recent and thorough overview of eastern Christianity at the rise of Islam, see Lucas Van Rompay, “Society and Community in the Christian East,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 239–66.

39 See the excellent discussion in Griffith, “Christian Lore.” Other contributions in Reynolds’s volume also touch on this topic.

Late Antique Arabia has been the object of scholarly interest,⁴⁰ both from within and outside of Islamic tradition, there is as yet no scholarly consensus as to which Jews or Christians the Qur’ān expected its auditors to know. Reading the Qur’ān in the light of the events and literature of Late Antiquity might, however, help us to hear it as its first auditors may have. Such a reading may shed light not only on the involvement of the Qur’ān and its community in Late Antiquity, but on the Judaism and Christianity known to, if not in, Arabia.

The preceding has explored ways in which Qur’ānic allusions to scriptural corruption, as well as its ambivalence towards monks and monasticism, resonate with Late Antique Jewish and Christian controversies. In particular, Qur’ān 9:32’s allusion to the desire to “extinguish the light of God with their mouths” was examined in the light of Late Antique Jewish and Christian ambivalence towards (Hellenized) scholastic approaches to scripture, with particular attention to monastic preference for silent meditation on, and criticisms of scholastic investigation into, and disputes over, revealed texts.

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⁴⁰ See, for example, Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001). His more recent contribution to the *Oxford Handbook on Late Antiquity*, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion,” provides a solid overview of this topic.

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