



# Law, Justice, and Grace: Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) on the Gospel's Relation to the Torah

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**ABSTRACT** Early and medieval Muslim anti-Christian polemicists do not present a uniform account of the Gospel's relation to the Torah, and polemical concerns drive the positions they adopt. This article focuses on how Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) responds to a provocation originating in the Christian Paul of Antioch. Paul argues that God sent Moses the law of justice and Christ the perfect law of grace, implying that the Qur'ān is not needed, at least not for Christians. Drawing on Islamic legal categories and invoking Sufi theological ideas, Ibn Taymiyya counters that the Torah and the Gospel contain both justice as obligation and grace as recommendation, with obligation more prominent in the Torah and recommendation in the Gospel, as part of a prophetic history leading up to the Qur'ān, which contains both in perfect balance. With this, Ibn Taymiyya provides a more extensive and sophisticated account of the Torah-Gospel relation than his predecessors.

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**KEYWORDS** Gospel, Ibn Taymiyya, Law, Muslim anti-Christian polemics, Paul of Antioch, Torah

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## Introduction

Early and medieval Muslim polemical writings against Christianity are replete with arguments for Jewish and Christian corruption of the meaning (*tahrīf al-ma'nā*) of the Bible and its very text (*tahrīf al-laḥẓ*).<sup>1</sup> For example, the early polemicist and Christian convert to Islam 'Alī ibn Rabbān al-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 245/860) analyzes Christian misunderstandings of the scriptural terms 'Father' and 'Son' and identifies mistakes and contradictions in the biblical text in his *Refutation of the Christians* (*Al-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā*) (2016a). The harshest medieval Muslim assessment of the Bible is Ibn Ḥazm's (d. 456/1064) *Book of Judgment* (*Kitāb al-ḥiṣāl*). Ibn Ḥazm cites numerous instances of contradiction, errant doctrine, and behavior unworthy of

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God and prophets in the extant Jewish and Christian scriptures. He furthermore alleges that the Torah revealed to Moses and the Gospel given to Jesus completely disappeared at Jesus's ascension except for a few passages pointing to the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad (Ibn Ḥazm 1929, 1:156–60; Adang 1996, 237–48; Pulcini 1998, 98–99). Other polemicists are less severe and allow that the original Torah and the original Gospel may survive in some form within the biblical texts. The prominent Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), for example, cautions in his massive refutation of Christianity, *The Correct Response (al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ)*, against alleging corruption of the extant Bible to avoid accidentally rejecting a report of authentic revelation. Nonetheless, he still maintains that the Christian religion is the product of scriptural misinterpretation and human innovation (*bid'ā*) and that the Bible itself is not entirely reliable (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 2:368–3:52; Hoover 2012, 836, 840).<sup>2</sup>

Beyond these polemics lies the intriguing and largely unresearched question of how Muslim polemicists against Christianity related the original Torah to the original Gospel. Even if the Qur'ān replaced both books with God's final and definitive revelation, what function did the Gospel fulfill vis-à-vis the Torah? The present study examines how Ibn Taymiyya and a few of his major polemicist predecessors address this question. I first outline the contrasting approaches of 'Alī ibn Rabbān al-Ṭabarī and the Mu'tazilī theologian 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024) to show that early Muslim polemicists did not hold a consistent view of the Gospel's relation to the Torah and that this reflects tensions in the Qur'ān and diverging polemical objectives. Then, I review the origins of the provocation that spurs Ibn Taymiyya to write on this topic in a treatise by Paul of Antioch (d. ca. early thirteenth century), the Melkite bishop of Sidon. After that, I take up the brief responses to Paul's provocation in polemical works by the Damascene polymath Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī (d. 727/1327) and the Egyptian Mālikī scholar Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285) before giving most attention to the much fuller discussion of Ibn Taymiyya. This will correct errors in previous scholarship that have obscured Ibn Taymiyya's position and show how he draws on Islamic legal categories and Sufi theology to produce a more extensive and sophisticated account of the Torah-Gospel relation than his predecessors.

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## 'Alī al-Ṭabarī and 'Abd al-Jabbār

The Qur'ān posits both continuity and discontinuity in the relation between the Torah of Moses and the Gospel of Christ. While it states that God gave Jesus the Gospel confirming the Torah (continuity), it also indicates that Jesus made some things lawful that had been previously forbidden (discontinuity) (Q. 3:50, see also Q. 5:46, 5:110, 19:31, 61:6). In line with this easing of religious legal requirements, the Qur'ān additionally associates mercy and compassion with the Gospel and the ministry of Jesus: "And We sent Jesus, Son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel, and We placed in the hearts of those who follow him compassion and mercy" (Q. 57:27).<sup>3</sup>

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'Alī al-Ṭabarī and 'Abd al-Jabbār take the tension in the Qur'ān's depiction of the Torah-

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2 Bertaina (2018) and Whittingham (2018) provide overviews and bibliography on Muslim attitudes towards the Bible, and Whittingham (2021) offers a comprehensive analysis of Muslim views of the Bible in the first four Islamic centuries. For a review of western language scholarship on corruption of the Bible, see Nickel (2010, 15–26). Introductions to the key authors and works mentioned in this study along with extensive bibliography may be found in Thomas et al. (2009–).

3 See further Adang (2001–2006) on the Torah in the Qur'ān and Griffith (2001–2006) on the Gospel in the Qur'ān.

Gospel relation in opposite directions and thereby illustrate that early Muslim polemicists' views on this question are by no means uniform. 'Ali al-Ṭabarī's *The Book of Religion and Empire* (*Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*), a defense of Muḥammad's prophethood against mainly Christian objections, posits a clear break between the Torah and the Gospel regarding religious law. In the course of arguing for the virtues of the Qur'ān as a prophetic sign, al-Ṭabarī explains briefly that the Torah recounts the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and "contains customs and laws (*sunan wa sharā'i*) which dazzle intellects" whereas the Gospel speaks of "refined moral precepts, noble counsels, immense wisdom and impressive parables, though containing no customs, laws or historical accounts, except for a little that is brief" (Al-Ṭabarī 2016b, 284–85). Al-Ṭabarī also examines the Torah-Gospel relation later in *The Book of Religion and Empire* when confronting the criticism—probably of Christian origin—that the Prophet Muḥammad contradicted himself by confirming the two previous revelations in word but rejecting what they said in deed. Al-Ṭabarī counters that the Prophet was true to the message of Moses and Christ and cannot be faulted for bringing new rules while removing others because Christ did much the same thing. Though it is true that Christ came to perfect the Torah and not destroy it, explains al-Ṭabarī, Christ overturned Sabbath and divorce regulations and "openly contravened Moses and rejected the Torah outright" including "its rules, its circumcision, its sacrifices, festivals, retaliations, laws, priests and altars" (2016b, 454–59). Al-Ṭabarī's aim is clearly apologetic. He emphasizes discontinuity between the Gospel and the Torah to provide a prophetic precedent for the new and different aspects in the Prophet Muḥammad's legislation.

'Abd al-Jabbār's *Critique of Christian Origins* is the part of his larger *Confirmation of the Proofs of Prophecy* (*Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwa*) dedicated to refuting Christianity. The *Confirmation*, like al-Ṭabarī's *Book of Religion and Empire*, is dedicated to supporting the prophethood of Muḥammad, and the *Critique* provides a rich and vivid narrative of how Christ's followers deviated from Christ's original message and invented Christianity. Christ's message itself, however, was nothing new. In brief scattered remarks, 'Abd al-Jabbār affirms that Christ brought the same message of monotheism that prophets like Abraham and Moses had brought before him (2010, 8, 27, 44). Christ also established the Torah and the Law of Moses, and, contrary to his followers who called themselves Christians, he upheld ritual purity and circumcision, followed the Israelites in their fasts and religious festivals, forbade pork, and walked in the path of the earlier prophets in prescribing laws pertaining to marriage, punishment, and the Sabbath ('Abd al-Jabbār 2010, 86–88, 91, 147, 154, 157–59; Reynolds 2004, 158–60). 'Abd al-Jabbār strongly affirms continuity from Moses and the Torah to Christ and the Gospel to accentuate the contrast between Christ and corrupt Christianity and thereby highlight the need for Muḥammad's prophetic mission.<sup>4</sup> Like al-Ṭabarī, 'Abd al-Jabbār deploys an account of the Torah-Gospel relation to make a polemical point, but differing polemical contentions lead the two writers to sharply diverging accounts of that relation: discontinuity for al-Ṭabarī and continuity for 'Abd al-Jabbār. As we will see further below, Ibn Taymiyya elaborates a more complex approach thanks to the goading of Paul of Antioch.

4 Gabriel Said Reynolds critiques the argument of Shlomo Pines (d. 1990) that 'Abd al-Jabbār's view could not have been held by a Muslim because a Muslim would not attack Christians for failing to follow an abrogated law, namely, the Law of Moses. Pines maintained that the author of this material must have been a Jewish follower of Christ, that is, a Judaeo-Christian. Reynolds counters that 'Abd al-Jabbār's view is already found in the Qur'ān (2004, 4–17). Ibn Ḥazm says that Jesus was taught both the Torah and the Gospel (Q. 3:48), but he does not reflect on the relation between the two, except to argue that both have been severely corrupted (Pulcini 1998, 98–99).

## Paul of Antioch and *The Letter from the People of Cyprus*

Sometime in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, Paul of Antioch composed the *Letter to One of His Muslim Friends* (*Risāla ilā baʿḍ aṣḍiqāʾihi alladhīna bi-Ṣaydā min al-Muslimīn*) (1964a). His *Letter* is an apologetic for Christianity, which, among other things, argues for the truth of Christianity from the Qurʾān and reduces Islam to a local religion for the Arabs. In the last section of the *Letter*, Paul of Antioch contends that Christianity is the height of perfection in law, and he implies that Islam is superfluous for Christians. Paul explains that there are two kinds of law: a law of justice (*sharīʿat ʿadl*) and a law of grace (*sharīʿat faḍl*). God out of the necessity of His justice and liberality (*jūd*) sent Moses to the Israelites with the law of justice. God commanded obedience to this law of justice “until it had become firmly ingrained in their souls” (*ilā an istaqarrat fī nufūsihim*). After that came the law of grace, which was the fullness of perfection. None but God could establish this law because God alone was the pinnacle of perfection. Therefore, it was necessary that God Himself in His liberality institute the law of grace through His Word and take on human nature through Mary. For Paul, nothing remains to be added to the law of grace because it is complete and perfect. There is no need for a further law, and that implies that there is no need for the law of Islam (Paul of Antioch 1964a, 81–82 (Arabic), 186–187 (French); Griffith 2014, 233; Sarrió Cucarella 2019, 512–13). [6]

Some one hundred years later, in the early fourteenth century, an anonymous Nestorian Christian composed what is known as *The Letter from the People of Cyprus* (*Risāla min ahl jazīrat Qubruṣ*). This *Letter* adds further arguments and more biblical and qurʾānic proof texts to Paul’s letter (Thomas 2001; Treiger 2014; Arabic edition and English translation of the *Letter* in Ebied and Thomas 2005, 53–147). The final section of *The Letter from the People of Cyprus* on the “two laws” retains the core of Paul’s argument and often his very words.<sup>5</sup> Following Paul, the *Letter* establishes a sharp contrast between Judaism and Christianity by confining the law of justice to Moses and law of grace to Jesus Christ. With the coming of the law of grace, Christianity exceeds Judaism in perfection, and Islam is unneeded. [7]

Earlier Arab Christian writings against Judaism and Islam linked the law of justice with retaliation and retribution and the law of grace with forgiveness, turning the other cheek, and loving enemies (Matthew 5:39, 44; Sarrió Cucarella 2015, 115–18, 2019, 516–20). Moreover, some Arab Christians had come under the influence of the Islamic view that the Law of Moses had been abrogated (*mansūkh*), and they spoke of the perfect law of grace abrogating the law of justice (Griffith 2013). The West Syrian theologian Yaḥyā ibn Jarīr al-Takrītī (d. 497/1103–4) gave this view analytically precise articulation by outlining three ways that Christian law relates to the Mosaic Law. First, the Law of Christ abrogates such things as sacrifices, Sabbath-keeping, and ritual purity. Second, the Law of Christ retains things like confessing the Creator and honoring parents. Third are things that the new law neither abrogates nor retains in their old forms, but which are perfected through addition, such as the perfection of retaliation through the addition of pardon (Sarrió Cucarella 2021, 64, 69–71, 75–76). Abrogation for [8]

5 However, one manuscript of *The Letter from the People of Cyprus* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Arabe 204, dating to 1336) adjusts the Christology of the “two laws” section to a Nestorian perspective and expands on Mary’s blessedness from the Bible and the Qurʾān at length (see the edition and translation in Ebied and Thomas 2005, 140–45). Regarding Christology, the manuscript adds the characteristically Nestorian claim that the Word “indwelt” (*yaḥill fī*) a sensible being, and it speaks of “the human being taken from Mary” (*al-basharī al-maʾkhūdh min Maryam*) (translations adapted from Ebied and Thomas); on these expressions as Nestorian, see Treiger (2014, 41). The Muslim responses examined below are unaware of these additions.

Yahyā ibn Jarīr does not mean the complete replacement of one religious law system with another but the removal of some laws and the retention, improvement, and addition of others.

The discussions of the two laws in Paul of Antioch's *Letter* and the Cypriot *Letter* are imprecise and underdetermined by comparison to Yahyā ibn Jarīr, especially as they leave justice and grace undefined. They also do not clarify whether the law of grace supersedes and abrogates the law of justice or simply completes and fulfills it (see Matthew 5:17). Paul in his *Letter* writes about the law of justice becoming "firmly ingrained" in the souls of the People of Israel, and, presumably, with the law of justice firmly ingrained, the law of grace came to complete and fulfill justice, not replace it. Yet, Paul also says that the law of grace was a far superior perfection that only God could establish, and this leaves open the possibility of abrogation. Indeed, elsewhere in his corpus, Paul speaks of the stipulations of the new law as replacements for the stipulations of the old Law of Moses by putting the following words into the mouths of Jesus's disciples:

As for the new law (*al-sunna al-jadīda*) that God gave to the nations in Zion through us, the disciples, it is baptism as a substitute for (*ʿiwāḍ*) circumcision, Sunday as a substitute for the Sabbath, bread and wine in place of (*mawḍiʿ*) animal offerings, praying toward the east in place of the Temple, and grace in place of retaliation (*qiṣāṣ*). (Paul of Antioch 1964b, 49 (Arabic), 161 (French))<sup>6</sup>

The final contrast in this quotation between grace and retaliation offers a clue to what justice might mean for Paul of Antioch. Diego Sarrió Cucarella infers from this that Paul's law of justice is the *lex talionis* of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Exodus 24:21), while his law of grace is mercy and forgiveness (Sarrió Cucarella 2019, 515–16). While that may indeed be the case, Paul's *Letter* and the Cypriot *Letter* do not actually spell this out, and that leaves the door open for a diversity of Muslim responses.

Paul's *Letter*, or what appears to be a summary of it, drew a polemical response from Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfi in his *Splendid Replies (al-Ajwiba al-fākhira)* (1985). *The Letter from the People of Cyprus* received two responses in the early fourteenth century: first Ibn Taymiyya's *The Correct Response (al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ)* in 716/1316 or soon thereafter (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a; partial English translation Michel 1984), and then Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī's *Response to the Letter of the People of Cyprus (Jawāb risālat ahl jazīrat Qubruṣ)* in 721/1321 (2005). The Christian letters provoke these Muslim scholars to defend the supremacy of Islam and refute Christian doctrines and arguments at length. However, the letters also challenge them to reflect on the theological relation between original Judaism and original Christianity, or more specifically the Torah and the Gospel. Al-Dimashqī is discussed first because he finds a way to evade this challenge entirely. Al-Qarāfi and Ibn Taymiyya are examined thereafter.

## Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī

While Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī is the latest of our three authors, he shows no awareness of the earlier reflections of al-Qarāfi and Ibn Taymiyya on the relation between the Torah and

<sup>6</sup> The translation is adapted from Sarrió Cucarella (2019, 515) and Teule (2005, 104). Teule provides an abbreviated English translation of Paul's of Antioch's treatise (pages 100–106) and a general overview of his corpus. Griffith (2013, 192) notes that the term 'abrogation' appears in the titles of two treatises attributed to Paul of Antioch that are of doubtful authenticity: "On the Abrogation of the *sharīʿa* of the Jews from the Torah and the Prophets," and "A Second Note on the Abrogation of the Laws."

the Gospel. Either he did not know about them, or he ignored them. Al-Dimashqī is instead interesting for the fact that he reinterprets the law of justice and the law of grace such that the question of the Torah's relation to the Gospel does not arise. Al-Dimashqī argues that the Christian *Letter* has misconstrued the meaning of the two laws entirely. The law of justice is not the Law of Moses, and the law of grace is not the Law of Jesus. Instead, the two laws are the two general wills of God. The law of grace (*fadl*) is “[God’s] volitional law” (*sharī‘atuhu al-irādiyya*), which is universal and all-encompassing. It is what God in His lordship (*rubūbiyya*) wills to occur throughout the whole universe, including what humans do and say and whether they enjoy success or suffer misery. It is a matter of ontology, of what is and will be. Al-Dimashqī adds that the law of grace has nothing to do with Christianity. It is rather what we find in the Zabūr (the Psalms), which speaks of God’s creation of the heavens and the earth (Al-Dimashqī 2005, 452–55).

Then, the second law, the law of justice, is God’s general command. It is “[God’s] imperative law” (*sharī‘atuhu al-amriyya*), which derives from God’s divinity (*ilāhiyya*) and which the prophets and messengers brought. The law of justice teaches humankind worship, moral virtue, and spiritual insight since human beings seek a way to attain the blessedness and everlasting life that has been given to Muslims (Al-Dimashqī 2005, 454–57). With this, Al-Dimashqī reduces all morality and law to matters of justice, and he gives the law of grace no moral and legal significance in the realm of human affairs. This obviates any need to reflect on the balance of grace and justice in the laws of the Moses, Jesus, or Muḥammad. [14]

## Al-Qarāfī

Unlike al-Dimashqī, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī links grace to the revealed law and not solely to God’s all-encompassing creative activity. Al-Qarāfī in his *Ajwiba* rejects Paul of Antioch’s limitation of justice to the Law of Moses and grace to the Law of Christ (Al-Qarāfī 1985, 1:274–91).<sup>7</sup> For al-Qarāfī, all generosity and beneficence is grace from the God who is free and subject to no obligation or necessity. This world is a mix of grace and justice, and justice entirely devoid of grace is in fact very rare. It is only in the hereafter that justice and grace separate completely, with pure justice for those in Hellfire and pure grace for those in the Garden of Paradise (Al-Qarāfī 1985, 1:274). Moreover, the Law of Moses involves both justice and grace, and the role of Jesus was to confirm and live out the Mosaic Law without adding anything to it except exhortations to gentleness and compassion. Al-Qarāfī explains: [15]

There are diverse kinds of beneficence in the Law of Moses—Peace be upon him—all of which are grace, like the forbiddance of murder, anger, adultery, slander, and intoxicating drinks that fog minds—it permitted only small amounts that do not lead to the point of drunkenness—and like permission of fruits, meats, marriage, and such like. All of these are different kinds of grace. Then, Jesus—Peace be upon him—came confirming [the Law of Moses], acting according to its requirements, and applying its rulings. He did not add anything to these rulings. He only added exhortations and commanded humility, gentleness, and compassion. Jesus—Peace be upon him—did not bring another law such that it could be called [the law of] grace. (Al-Qarāfī 1985, 1:275–76) [16]

7 Sarrió Cucarella (2015, 114–21) translates and discusses the paraphrase of Paul of Antioch’s *Letter* quoted by al-Qarāfī, which differs somewhat from Paul’s *Letter* itself, and provides an overview of al-Qarāfī’s full response.

After clarifying that the Law of Moses and its confirmation by Jesus both involve grace, al-Qarāfi turns the tables on Paul of Antioch. He explains that the upshot of Paul's argument is in fact that the law of the Muslims is the perfect law of grace because it is independent and does not follow or imitate any other law (Al-Qarāfi 1985, 1:277). It is not clear how al-Qarāfi derives this argument from Paul, as Paul does not link independence of origin explicitly to the perfection of grace, but it may have something to do with al-Qarāfi's linkage of grace with God's free and independent action. [17]

Al-Qarāfi goes on in *Ajwiba* to refute Paul's incarnational theology of the Word (1985, 1:277–79) and then advances a series of ten arguments for why perfection, liberality, and grace are found in greater abundance in the Law of Muhammad than in all other laws (1985, 1:279–91).<sup>8</sup> I will outline only al-Qarāfi's second, seventh, and tenth arguments, as they touch most directly on the relation between the laws of Moses and Jesus. As we will see in the seventh argument, al-Qarāfi speaks explicitly of Jesus bringing a law even though he says earlier that Jesus did little more than confirm and apply the Torah. [18]

The second of al-Qarāfi's ten arguments states that the Torah of Moses is the most perfect of all the laws revealed before Islam. This implies that the Torah is more perfect than the Gospel. However, the Law of Muḥammad is even greater in perfection than the Torah because the Torah was given only to the People of Israel, whereas the Law of Muḥammad is universal (Al-Qarāfi 1985, 1:280–81). [19]

Al-Qarāfi's seventh argument compares the laws of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad regarding marriage, and it illustrates a point that al-Qarāfi makes in several other arguments as well, namely, that the law of Islam is the best at promoting human benefits and interests (*maṣāliḥ*). According to al-Qarāfi, the Law of Moses permitted men to marry as many wives as they wished. This favored the interests of men over those of women, as the many wives married to one man would suffer from jealousy and neglect. The Law of Jesus (*sharī'at 'Īsā*) swung to the opposite extreme and favored the interests of women over men by limiting the number of wives to one. Restricted to one wife, the man would suffer harm if he happened to marry a wife unsuitable to him, as that would be tantamount to having no wife at all. The Law of Muhammad successfully combined the interests of both wives and husbands by permitting a man four wives. Al-Qarāfi adds that the Jews of his day saw the wisdom in this and followed the Muslims in limiting the number of wives a man may marry to four (1985, 1:287). [20]

In his tenth and final argument for the perfection of the Law of Muhammad, al-Qarāfi compares the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim methods for calling to prayer. The Jews use a trumpet and the Christians a bell made of wood or some other material. Al-Qarāfi adds that other groups even use fire, perhaps a reference to Zoroastrianism. He says that these methods offer no benefit beyond calling to prayer, whereas the Muslim call to prayer adds oral praise of God, exhortation to pray, and such like, which the human voice broadcasts widely from the highest buildings (Al-Qarāfi 1985, 1:289–91). The Jewish and Christian methods for calling to prayer are equally inferior when compared to the more beneficial method of the Muslims. [21]

Al-Qarāfi's various arguments elevate the Law of Moses over that of Jesus. The Mosaic Law contains many expressions of God's beneficence and grace. Jesus did little more than confirm the Law of Moses and add compassion and some exhortations. Al-Qarāfi is however most interested in making the case for the superiority of the Law of Muhammad over all prior laws, which is what leads him to undermine Paul of Antioch's claim that God established the law greatest in perfection through the Incarnation of the Word. [22]

8 Sarrió Cucarella (2015, 119–21) outlines all ten arguments.

## Ibn Taymiyya: Laws of Justice and Grace

In responding to the two-laws argument of the Christian letters, al-Dimashqī and al-Qarāfī [23] both interpret grace theologically, albeit in different ways. Al-Dimashqī confines grace to God’s creation of everything that exists, while al-Qarāfī includes within grace God’s free provision of law for the benefit of humankind. Ibn Taymiyya in his *Jawāb* does something different. He aligns the term grace (*faḍl*) with the Islamic ethical-legal category of recommended human acts and leaves aside the theological approach found in al-Qarāfī and al-Dimashqī.

Before attending to Ibn Taymiyya’s *Jawāb* directly, I need to clear up some confusion in [24] Thomas Michel’s 1984 study and partial translation of this work. Michel provides a useful analysis of the Christian-Muslim controversy around perfect religion following on from Paul of Antioch’s *Letter* (1984, 131–35). However, Michel does not grasp Paul’s “two laws” argument adequately and thereby misses important features of Ibn Taymiyya’s response. Michel starts off on the wrong foot by translating the term *sharī‘a* in Paul’s *Letter* as “religion” instead of “law,” and the term *‘adl* as “law” instead of “justice.” These translation choices lead Michel to conclude that Paul sees Judaism as the religion of law and Christianity as the religion of grace (1984, 131). As we have already seen, Paul of Antioch speaks of two laws, one of justice and one grace. He does not contrast law and grace, but justice and grace. It appears that Michel has interpolated a certain kind of Christian contrast between Old Testament law and New Testament grace into the discussion (see Howard 2013, 173–74; John 1:17). Michel’s terminology then bleeds over into his analysis of Ibn Taymiyya as well. According to Michel, Ibn Taymiyya argues, “There is a religion of law which is Judaism, a religion of grace which is Christianity, and a religion which combines perfectly both law and grace—that is, Islam” (1984, 132). The same confusion appears in Michel’s translation of *Jawāb*, where he also renders the expression *sharī‘at al-‘adl* as “religion of law” (1984, 351). In fact, Ibn Taymiyya speaks of three laws—the laws of the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur’ān—and the law of the Qur’ān perfectly combines justice and grace, not law and grace. Michel does eventually translate the Arabic term *‘adl* as “justice” instead of “law” in both his analysis and his translation, but without explaining the shift in terminology (1984, 134).<sup>9</sup>

What escapes Michel’s attention is Ibn Taymiyya’s transposition of Paul of Antioch’s two-law [25] discussion into the five-fold categorization of acts central to Islamic legal analysis. The first category is the obligatory (*farḍ*, *wājib*). The second is the recommended and supererogatory (*mandūb*, *nafl*, *mustahabb*, *sunna*). The third category is the permitted (*mubāḥ*, *jā‘iz*, *ḥalāl*), and the fourth is the disliked (*makrūh*). The fifth and final category is the forbidden and unlawful (*ḥarām*). For a Muslim, it is obligatory to pray five times a day, fast the month of Ramadan, and go on pilgrimage to Mecca if one is able. It is recommended to do additional prayers and fast on days outside the month of Ramadan. It is permitted to eat lawful foods or commit a sinful act under duress. It is disliked to divorce, and it is unlawful to eat pork and commit murder and adultery. The performance of obligatory deeds is rewarded in this life or the hereafter, and their omission is punished. Recommended or supererogatory deeds are rewarded, but their omission is not punished. Permitted deeds are not rewarded or punished. Disliked deeds are not subject to punishment, but forbidden deeds are punished (Kamali 2003, 413–31).

9 Ralston (2020, 109 n 35) highlights Michel’s problematic translation of *sharī‘a* as “religion” and *‘adl* as “law” but does not notice Ibn Taymiyya’s equation of justice and grace with the Islamic legal categories of obligation and recommendation, respectively, which is discussed in what follows here. My own brief account of Ibn Taymiyya’s argument in Hoover (2019, 137) follows Michel and therefore requires correction; the same applies to Howard (2013, 174 and 186 n 5).



At the beginning of Ibn Taymiyya's response to the discussion of the two laws in *The Letter from the People of Cyprus*, he links justice with the legal categories of the obligated and the forbidden, and he ties grace to the recommended and the disliked. He explains furthermore that the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an all contain both justice and grace, with the Qur'an containing justice and grace in the most perfect combination. [26]

The [kinds of] laws are three: a law of justice only, a law of grace only, and a law that combines justice and grace so that it obligates justice (*tūjīb al-ʿadl*) and recommends grace (*tandub ilā al-faḍl*). This is the greatest of the three laws in perfection. It is the law of the Qur'an, which combines justice and grace. However, we do not deny that Moses—Peace be upon him—obligated justice and recommended grace. Likewise, Christ also obligated justice and recommended grace. Saying that Christ obligated grace and forbade every victim to retaliate against the perpetrator, or that Moses did not recommend beneficence, devalues the law of the messengers. However, it may be said that mention of justice is greater in the Torah, that mention of grace is greater in the Gospel, and that the Qur'an combines the two most perfectly. The Qur'an makes plain that those who are happy are the People of the Garden. They are the friends of God, and they are of two types: the righteous who are ordinary, and the foremost in nearness [to God]. The first degree is obtained by means of justice, which is the performance of obligatory deeds and the omission of forbidden deeds. The second is obtained only by means of grace, which is the performance of obligations and recommendations (*mustahabbāt*) and the omission of forbidden and disliked deeds. The perfect law combines justice and grace, as in [God's] statement, "If the debtor is in difficulty, then give him time until things are easier" (Q. 2:280a). This is obligatory justice. Whoever deviates from it deserves punishment in this life and the hereafter. Then, He said, "It is better for you to write off [the debt] as charity, if you only knew" (Q. 2:280b). This grace is recommended (*mustahabb mandūb ilayhi*). God will reward whoever does it and raise his station, and He will not punish whoever omits it. (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:58–60) [27]

At the beginning of this passage, Ibn Taymiyya rejects Paul of Antioch and the Christian *Letter's* limitation of justice to the Law of Moses and grace to the Law of Christ. The two laws are not the opposites that the Christian *Letter* makes them out to be. Both laws contain both justice and grace, even if the Qur'an combines justice and grace in perfect proportion. Ibn Taymiyya also offers a brief comparison of the Torah and the Gospel in the above passage. The Torah contains more in the way of justice while the Gospel contains more in the way of grace. Or, to frame the comparison in terms of the Islamic five-fold categorization of acts, the Torah focuses more on obligatory and forbidden deeds, and the Gospel more on the recommended and the disliked. Much of Ibn Taymiyya's response to the Christian *Letter's* two-laws argument is devoted to showing the superiority of the Qur'an and outlining how Jews and Christians corrupted their respective religions, but he does expand on the distinction between the Torah and the Gospel in a few places. [28]

At one place, he compares the contents of the Torah and the Gospel unfavorably with the contents of the Qur'an, but in different ways (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:71–73).<sup>10</sup> The Torah fails [29]

10 Morabia (1979a, 113–16) outlines Ibn Taymiyya's unfavorable comparisons between the Qur'an on the one hand and the Torah and Gospel on the other more thoroughly than I do here, and from other parts of

to measure up to the Qurʾān because it does not speak of the final judgment and of Paradise and Hellfire. It also does not relate the stories of some prophets mentioned in the Qurʾān, nor does it mention proofs for many theological doctrines. As for the Gospel, it fails to match the Qurʾān because it lacks an “independent law” (*sharīʿa mustaqilla*) and does not discuss the unity of God, the creation of the world, and the stories of the prophets. For such matters, the Gospel just refers readers to the Torah. However, Ibn Taymiyya adds, Christ did permit some things that earlier prophets had forbidden (cf. Q. 3:50), and he commanded “beneficence, pardon of the perpetrator, forbearing injury, and asceticism in this world” (1999a, 5:72–73). The Gospel distinguishes itself from the Torah primarily through “commendable and noble character traits, supererogatory asceticism, and the permission of some forbidden deeds” (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:73). By undoing some outright prohibitions, the Gospel does speak to some matters of justice, as Ibn Taymiyya understands the term, but its main contribution is to the realm of the recommended and the supererogatory.

Later in *Jawāb*, Ibn Taymiyya aligns recommendation and supererogation with Christ and obligation with Moses even more firmly. The context is a discussion of pardoning wrongdoers. Ibn Taymiyya first reads the Christian *Letter* to say that grace alone derives from God’s perfection while justice comes naturally to human beings. Ibn Taymiyya counters that it is in fact the other way around. Everyone knows that beneficence and pardon are good things, and a great many people are in fact happy and able to pardon others and act beneficently. It appears that Ibn Taymiyya sees pardon and beneficence as the easy ways out of knotty circumstances, especially as he goes on to say that not everyone appreciates the need for justice. Few in fact have the capability to execute it. So, it is not fitting to think that God commanded the law of grace but not the law of justice. God revealed both (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:108). Following on from this, Ibn Taymiyya is keen to clarify that Christ did not obligate pardoning wrongdoers, but only recommended it. Pardoning wrongdoers is certainly praised and rewarded, but it is not blamed or punished when omitted. [30]

As for the command of Christ—Peace be upon him—to the victim to pardon the perpetrator, there is nothing in it to indicate that it is an obligation whose omission deserves blame and punishment. On the contrary, it is something desirable whose commission deserves praise and reward. Moses—Peace be upon him—obligated the justice whose omission deserves blame and punishment. In this case there is no incompatibility between the obligation of justice and the recommendation of grace. (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:109) [31]

Furthermore, argues Ibn Taymiyya, if Christ had obligated pardoning perpetrators, it would be blameworthy and punishable to seek justice against those who perpetrate wrong. That would involve two injustices: first, the injustice suffered by the victims at the hands of perpetrators and, second, the injustice in not permitting victims to gain justice against perpetrators (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 110–11). To put a point on this, Ibn Taymiyya emphasizes that the law of the Gospel does not contradict the law of the Torah. Christ is not opposing the justice for victims prescribed in the Torah. The Gospel is rather a branch (*farʿ*) of the Torah that perfects it. The Gospel cannot stand alone without the Torah (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:113).<sup>11</sup> [32]

Ibn Taymiyya’s *Jawāb*. Morabia (1979a, 1979b) provides an encyclopedic survey of Ibn Taymiyya’s views in *Jawāb* on Jews and the Torah, as well as Christians, Jesus, and the Gospel.

11 The idea of the Gospel as but a branch of the Torah fits with Ibn Taymiyya’s brief assertions elsewhere that the Torah ranks higher than the Gospel. Earlier in *Jawāb*, he addresses the Cypriot *Letter*’s claim

## Ibn Taymiyya: A Prophetic History of Severity and Gentleness

Ibn Taymiyya uses historical explanation to make sense of the differences that he identifies between the Torah and the Gospel. A number of scholars have noted the role that historiography plays in Ibn Taymiyya's thought (e.g. Michot 2012; Ben Ahmed 2019), and Daniella Talmon-Heller's recent study on grave visitation illustrates this well (2019). Talmon-Heller shows that Ibn Taymiyya does not simply specify what is right and wrong in religion and then support that from the Qur'ān and the Sunna of the Prophet. He also deploys historical narratives to highlight the contingency and contextuality of doctrines and practices, especially those that he deems erroneous and misguided. In *Jawāb* Ibn Taymiyya does something similar to address the differences between the Torah and the Gospel. [33]

Ibn Taymiyya sets out a narrative of prophetic history to explain why severity (*shidda*) predominates in the Torah and gentleness (*līn*) in the Gospel while the Qur'ān combines the two in moderation (1999a, 5:79). The Torah spoke to the specific situation that the Israelites found themselves in after many years in Egypt. The Pharaoh had humiliated and enslaved them, and so God legislated severity to toughen them up and remove their humiliation (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:81). With the passing of time, however, the Israelites' hearts grew hard to the point that they now resembled the People of Pharaoh. To deal with this, "God raised up Christ with gentleness, forgiveness, pardon of one who does evil, and forbearance of injury to make them gentle of character and remove their pride and severity" (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:83). However, the followers of Christ then exaggerated in their gentleness. They abdicated their responsibility to maintain a just society and became solitary monks. At the same time, Christian kings went to the opposite extreme. They grew proud and hard of heart. They did not rule according to God's law, and they shed innocent blood.<sup>12</sup> In response to all of this, God sent Muḥammad with a law that avoided the two extremes of the followers of the Torah and the Gospel and combined the best of both (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:83). The gentleness of the Law of Muḥammad is in fact greater than that found in the Gospel and its severity is greater than that of the Torah. [34]

Ibn Taymiyya concludes this account of prophetic history by quoting three short sentences that rhyme in Arabic and resonate with a Sufi theology of God's attributes: "Moses was sent [35]

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that the qur'ānic expression "the illuminating book" (*al-kitāb al-munīr*, Q. 3:184) refers to the Gospel. Ibn Taymiyya interprets "the illuminating book" to indicate not just the Gospel but previous revelations more generally including the Torah, and he explains that the Torah is superior to the Gospel because it is greater in guidance (1999a, 2:346, 351, 353). Ibn Taymiyya also elevates the Torah over the Gospel in his book *Shaming of the Followers of the Gospel (Takhjīl ahl al-Injīl)*: "The most eminent of the three books is the Qur'ān, then the Torah, and then the Gospel" (Ibn Taymiyya 1999b, 5:207–8). He derives this ranking from the order of the qur'ānic oaths, "By the fig and the olive; by Mount Sinai; by the secure city" (Q. 95:1–3). The fig and the olive symbolize the Gospel's place of revelation, presumably Jerusalem. Mount Sinai is where the Torah was revealed, and the "secure city" is Mecca where the Qur'ān was revealed. To Ibn Taymiyya's mind, the ascending order of places—Jerusalem, Mount Sinai, and Mecca—indicates the relative eminence of the book revealed in each place. The context of this quotation does not, however, explain how the Torah is better than the Gospel (Ibn Taymiyya 1999b, 5:207–208).

12 Later in *Jawāb*, Ibn Taymiyya elaborates his criticism of Christians for requiring people to give up their rights and claiming that this is the "law of the Injīl." He continues, "They claim that the law of the Gospel requires people to abandon their rights and that the victim not seek justice against the perpetrator. Therefore, they have no judgment (*ḥukm*) of justice by which to judge between people. On the contrary, they have two judgments: the judgment of the church, in which there is no justice for the victim against the perpetrator, and second, the judgment of kings, which is not a revealed law (*shar' munazzal*), but instead is what accords with the opinions of the kings. Therefore, you find them referring people to the judgment of the law of Islam in matters of bloodshed, property, and such like" (*Jawāb* 5:104–5).

with majesty (*jalāl*). Jesus was sent with beauty (*jamāl*). And Muḥammad was sent with perfection (*kamāl*)” (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, 5:86). Ibn Taymiyya does not indicate the origin of this saying, but the Sufi ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291), who lived in Cairo and died in Damascus, is a possible source for the key idea. In a commentary on *The Stations (al-Mawāqif)* of the Egyptian Sufi al-Niffārī (d. 354/965 or ca. 366/976), al-Tilimsānī expounds upon God’s names of mercy (*asmā’ al-raḥma*), such as Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*) and Kind (*al-Ra’ūf*), and God names of vengeance (*asmā’ al-naqma*), such as Compeller (*al-Jabbār*) and Vanquisher (*al-Qaḥḥār*). He then links these names to stations of the Prophet Muḥammad. The station (*maqām*) linked to Merciful is beauty; the station linked to Compeller is majesty; and the station combining the two is linked to the name God (*Allāh*) and called perfection. Al-Tilimsānī explains furthermore that the station of Moses is the station of majesty, the station of Jesus is the station of beauty, and the station of Muḥammad is the station of perfection. The station of Muḥammad perfectly combines the presences of Moses and Jesus and is seen in Muḥammad’s mercy toward believers and harshness toward unbelievers (Al-Tilimsānī 1997, 109–10). Al-Tilimsānī’s theology of God’s names of majesty and beauty goes back to Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) (Chittick 1989, 23–24; Ibn ‘Arabī 2001; which is translated in Harris 1989), but I was not able to find Ibn al-‘Arabī himself linking majesty, beauty, and perfection to Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad, respectively. Whatever be the exact source of Ibn Taymiyya’s quotation, he is clearly drawing on a Sufi theology of God’s names of majesty and beauty to illuminate the relation between Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad.

Ibn Taymiyya’s account of the three major prophets rationalizes the functions of the Torah and the Gospel as integral to a history of revelation that finds its perfection in the Qur’ān and turns the Torah and the Gospel into meaningful parts of this Islamic story. Here, a comparison with al-Qarāfī is instructive. Al-Qarāfī tells us that the Torah permitted men an unlimited number of wives and the Gospel only one. However, he does not explain why the Torah and the Gospel did this, and we might wonder why God did not get the permitted number of wives right the first time. Ibn Taymiyya shows none of al-Qarāfī’s interest in scoring polemical points through arguing that Islam permitted the ideal number of wives for a man. He is much more interested in explaining why the Torah differed from the Gospel and why both differed from the Qur’ān. The prior revelations were not simply arbitrary and partial revelations waiting for correction and completion by the definitive revelation. Instead, the Torah and the Gospel each had a distinctive and specific role to play in the moral and legal development of humankind, even if the two books are not as different as Paul of Antioch and the *Letter from the People of Cyprus* make them out to be. Ibn Taymiyya is certainly not ready to welcome the Torah and the Gospel into a Muslim canon of scripture, but he does more than al-Qarāfī to value their significance in the Islamic story of God’s work with humankind.

[36]

## Conclusion

To conclude, there is no clear and consistent view of the Torah-Gospel relation in the early and medieval Muslim tradition of anti-Christian polemics, and polemical and apologetic concerns drive the positions adopted. ‘Abd al-Jabbār emphasizes that Christ established the Torah and adhered to the Law of Moses in order to sharpen the contrast with Christians who corrupted Christ’s religion. ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī takes the opposing view that Christ rejected the Law of Moses outright, which he understands to be a precedent for Muḥammad, who also changed the rules of earlier revelations. Al-Qarāfī and Ibn Taymiyya both moderate Paul of Antioch’s sharp con-

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trast between the law of justice sent to Moses and the law of grace sent to Jesus. For al-Qarāfi, the Law of Moses contains grace as well as justice, and Christ did not change the Law of Moses except to add a measure of gentleness. Ibn Taymiyya says something similar but in fuller and more sophisticated fashion by drawing the Torah-Gospel relation more imaginatively into Islamic frames of reference. He aligns justice with the Islamic legal category of obligatory deeds and grace with the category of recommended and supererogatory acts and then explains that the Torah and the Gospel contain both, but with justice and obligation stronger in the Torah and grace and supererogation more prominent in the Gospel. Both al-Qarāfi and Ibn Taymiyya construct the relation between the laws of Moses and Jesus, the Torah and the Gospel, such that the balance of justice and grace attains perfection in the Law of Muḥammad and the Qurʾān. Ibn Taymiyya then goes well beyond al-Qarāfi and his other polemicist predecessors to explain why this historical progression was necessary. The Children of Israel needed the relative severity of the Torah to overcome slavery in Egypt. However, their hearts hardened with time and so required the relative gentleness of the Gospel. The followers of Christ took gentleness to the extreme, which led to the Qurʾān's perfect balance of severity and gentleness, and justice and grace. Ibn Taymiyya then crowns this prophetic history by calling to mind a Sufi-inspired theology of God's names of majesty and beauty that links Moses to majesty, Jesus to beauty, and Muḥammad to the perfection of the two.

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