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What would Ibn Taymiyya make of intertextual
study of the Qur'ān? The challenge of the *isrā'īliyyāt*.¹

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The religious culture of the Late Antique Near East was a world shaped by the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and a wide range of Christian, Jewish, Manichean and other religious writings that may be conveniently lumped together under the broad rubric “Biblical literature.”² Much of the research in this volume is committed to reading the Qur'ān intertextually as a work in dialogue with this world of biblical literature, and it views the Qur'ān as a major crossroads in the ongoing development of that literary tradition. The key to the Qur'ān's historical meaning lies not in the Muslim interpretative tradition (*tafsīr*) that grew up around the text in subsequent centuries but in trying to reconstruct something of the Qur'ān's interaction with the biblical narratives, concepts and practices that came before. To those trained in modern historical-critical approaches to texts, looking to the literary and the cultural context of the Qur'ān to understand its meaning rather than its subsequent interpretation might appear to be the obvious course of action, but western academic study of the Qur'ān has in fact quite often relied on Muslim interpretation for its basic frames of reference in making sense of the text.³

The intertextual method prominently on display in this volume is also strongly committed to Qur'ānic agency. From this perspective the Qur'ān is not merely a collection of borrowings from earlier Jewish and Christian books. It is rather an interactive reworking of and polemical response to a wide range of religious ideas and tropes circulating in the seventh-century Near East. Significant currents of western scholarship on the Qur'ān from the 1800s into the early 1900s were preoccupied with tracing influences and borrowings from

¹ This essay is adapted from comments delivered at the close of the conference “The Qur'ān's Reformation of Judaism and Christianity: An International Colloquium,” held at the University of Nottingham, 20-21 January 2013.

² Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

³ Note for example the observation of Alford Welch that the sūra chronologies of both traditional Muslim scholars and many modern non-Muslim scholars are based largely on the same foundations: A. T. Welch, “Qur'ān,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Ed., 5:400-429 (417).

earlier texts. By way of contrast, the research in this volume reflects comparatively on the religious and literary traditions that the Qur'ān may have been drawing upon and speaking into in the process of forming its particular religious message. It is not a matter of discovering the books or narratives that the Prophet Muḥammad might have had to hand when compiling the Qur'ān—a scenario unnecessarily at odds with the Muslim view of the revelation process—but of thinking about the kind of conversation that was going on in the community into which the Qur'ān was speaking.

The purpose of this essay is to inquire into possibilities for Muslim interaction with the intertextual studies in this volume. More specifically, I will ask what Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), the figure that I have worked on most, might have thought of them. To get at why this matters, we need to consider the state of Muslim interpretation of the Qur'ān in the modern period. There is a fairly well established narrative in recent western academic scholarship that the Muslim tradition of Qur'ānic *tafsīr* took a radical turn in the twentieth century against the rich diversity of its past, and especially against the vast array of biblical lore used to explain and elaborate the Qur'ān. On this account, early Muslim scholars held the Jewish converts to Islam Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 32/652-3 or later) and 'Abd Allāh b. Salām (d. 43/663-4) and the Yemeni Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110/728 or 114/732) in high esteem for their vast knowledge of biblical traditions. However, twentieth-century Muslim exegetes expurgated these traditions, the so-called *isrā'īliyyāt*, from their commentary and stories-of-the-prophets (*qaṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) literatures and impugned their transmitters for undermining Islam. A 1946 article by Abū Rayya, a student of Rashīd Riḍā, even labeled Ka'b al-Aḥbār the first Zionist. Roberto Tottoli attributes this twentieth-century attack on *isrā'īliyyāt* to the rationalizing impulses of Islamic modernism and to Muslim reactions against the establishment of the state of Israel and against orientalist scholarship bent on demonstrating Jewish and Christian influence on Islam.⁴ Furthermore, the intellectual pedigree of the modern Muslim attack on *isrā'īliyyāt* is traced back to the fourteenth-century Qur'ān commentator Ibn Kathīr (774/1373) and his teacher Ibn Taymiyya, who are in turn credited with an unprecedented narrowing of the rich ecumenically-minded *tafsīr* of their own time and the stripping away of all polysemy in favor of the search for univocity. Ibn Taymiyya and

⁴ Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2002), 175-188; Roberto Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īliyyāt* in Muslim Literature," *Arabica* 46 (1999): 193-210 (208-210).

Ibn Kathīr are seen to stand at the origins of the modern Muslim drive to eradicate ambiguity from the text of the Qurʾān and endow it with one obvious and unequivocal sense.⁵

Given this narrative of the modern Muslim attack on *isrāʾīliyyāt*, it is not difficult to imagine that many Muslims today might find the research in this volume singularly wrong-headed because it seeks to relate the Qurʾānic text to preceding biblical literature. We might also conclude that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr excluded *isrāʾīliyyāt* completely and that the likes of Ibn Taymiyya would have had no time for research such as that found in this volume. However, things are not so simple, and I want to show that Ibn Taymiyya has more reason to be open to intertextual study of the Qurʾān than we might think.

It must first be said that Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Taymiyya do provide precedents for their modern heirs seeking to dismiss biblical lore or *isrāʾīliyyāt*. For example, on the question of whether Abraham's intended sacrifice was Isaac or Ishmael, classical exegetes weighed up arguments and traditions for and against, some coming judiciously to one view and some to the other, whereas Ibn Kathīr berates Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, the convert from Judaism, for being the source of all reports that it was Isaac. Ibn Taymiyya also rejects Isaac as the intended sacrifice. While making no mention of Kaʿb, he accuses the People of the Book of adding Isaac's name into the biblical text.⁶

That aside, we turn to Ibn Taymiyya's *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr* (Introduction to the Principles of Qurʾānic Interpretation),⁷ which is quoted in part in the introduction to Ibn

⁵ For brief summaries of the narrative, see Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 163-165; and Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The tasks and traditions of interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 181-209 (196-198). For more detail, see Norman Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qurʾān*, ed. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 101-140; Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qurʾān Commentary of al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); and Walid A. Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of *An Introduction to the Foundations of Qurʾānic Exegesis*," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123-162. Calder provides a particularly harsh assessment of Ibn Kathīr: "Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr* has many merits; but he has little respect for the intellectual tradition....He does not generally like polyvalent readings, but argues vehemently for a single 'correct' reading....It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in Ibn Kathīr's view, God has considerably less literary skill than the average human being, and very little imagination" (p. 124).

⁶ Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 138-140; Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā* (hereafter MF), ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim and Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad, 37 vols (Medina: Mujammāʿ al-Malik Fahd, 2004), 4:331-336. Yunus Y. Mirza, "Ishmael as Abraham's Sacrifice: Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr on the Intended Victim," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 24.3 (2013), 277-298, appeared after this essay was written; Mirza makes the important point that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr both engage biblical lore and the biblical text directly to argue that Ishmael was Abraham's intended sacrifice.

⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, "Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr," MF 13:329-375.

Kathīr’s Qur’ān commentary. Ibn Taymiyya writes, “It is obligatory to know that the Prophet—May God bless him and give him peace—made the meanings of the Qur’ān evident to his Companions just as he made its wording evident to them.”⁸ Here Ibn Taymiyya asserts that the Prophet gave the Muslim community not only the text of the Qur’ān but also its interpretation. The Sunna of the Prophet includes not only his deeds and statements found in the authentic hadith but also the exegetical traditions of the Prophet’s Companions. The Prophet’s Companions, as well as their Successors, hold the keys to the meaning of the Qur’ān, not the tools of historical and philological analysis.⁹

Now the problem is that non-Qur’ānic and non-sunnaic biblical lore entered Islam with the Companions and the Successors, in other words, at the very root of the exegetical tradition. Ka’b al-Aḥbār and ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām were both Companions by most accounts and Wahb b. al-Munabbih was a Successor.¹⁰ Moreover, the most authoritative name in early Qur’ān exegesis Ibn ‘Abbās (d. ca. 68/687–8) transmitted biblical lore from these figures as well as from another respected Companion Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652-3). If Ibn Taymiyya locates the meaning of the Qur’ān in the exegetical traditions of the Prophet’s Companions and Successors, then he must either accept everything that they transmit without critical distinction or find some way of distinguishing between reliable and unreliable transmitters and traditions. Taking the latter course, as Ibn Kathīr does in impugning the reliability of Ka’b al-Aḥbar, threatens to undermine the reliability of the Companions and Successors as a collective bearing religious authority and to beg the question of criterion for discerning the reliable from the unreliable.

Additionally, Ibn Taymiyya has to contend in his *Muqaddima* with the fact that the Prophet himself authorized transmitting biblical lore in a hadith reported by Bukhārī. Ibn Taymiyya is here speaking about the fact that the famed eighth-century exegete al-Suddī (d. ca. 127/745) transmitted reports from Ibn ‘Abbās and Ibn Mas‘ūd that came from the People of the Book:

At times, [al-Suddī] transmits from [Ibn Mas‘ūd and Ibn ‘Abbas] what they narrate of the sayings of the People of the Book, which the Messenger of God—God bless him and give him peace—permitted when he said, “Transmit from me, even if only one

⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, “*Muqaddima*,” MF 13:331.

⁹ See Saleh, “Ibn Taymiyya,” for a close analysis of Ibn Taymiyya’s *Muqaddima* that makes this point strongly.

¹⁰ On Wahb, see Michael Pregill, “Isrā’īliyyāt, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy: Wahb b. Munabbih and the Early Islamic Versions of the Fall of Adam and Eve,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008): 215–283.

verse. And narrate [traditions] from the Children of Israel; there is nothing objectionable in that. Whoever tells lies about me intentionally, let him take his seat in the Fire.”¹¹ Bukhārī relates this from ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr [al-‘Āṣ]. On account of this, when on the Day of [the battle] of Yarmuk ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr happened upon two camel-loads of books from the People of the Book, he used to narrate [traditions] from them because he understood that this hadith permitted him to do so. However, these *isrā’īlī* traditions are mentioned by way of attestation (*istishhād*), not as a basis for doctrine (*i’tiqād*). They are of three types. The first is that which we know to be authentic because of what we already have in hand attesting to its truth. This is authentic. The second is that which we know to be false because of what we have that opposes it. The third is that about which we are silent; it is neither like the first nor the second. We do not believe in it, and we do not say that it is false. It is permitted to relate this material on account of the above, but most of it is of no advantage in religious matters.¹²

Ibn Taymiyya goes on in the *Muqaddima* to explain that the *isrā’īliyyāt* are the source of disagreements among scholars of the People of the Book and Qur’ān commentators and that most of this concerns details irrelevant to religion. What is important here is that the hadith, “Narrate [traditions] from the Children of Israel,” constrains Ibn Taymiyya to permit discussion of biblical lore in exegesis. The prospect does not excite him a great deal, and he completely neutralizes the possibility that it might disturb Islamic doctrine. Ibn Taymiyya is more negative in other texts about the *isrā’īliyyāt* and those like Ka’b al-Aḥbār and Wahb b. al-Munabbih who transmit them, and he insists on turning to the Sunna of the Prophet in all religious matters.¹³ Yet, we do not have here the *isrā’īliyyāt*-bashing and the complete

¹¹ On this *ḥadīth*, see M. J. Kister, “Ḥaddithu ‘an banī isrā’īla wa-lā ḥaraja: A Study of an Early Tradition.” *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 215–239. Kister translates the second sentence of the hadith, “Narrate (traditions) concerning [‘an] the Children of Israel...” reading the preposition ‘an as “concerning” (p. 215) and elsewhere “about.” Haggai Ben-Shammai, “Observations on the Beginnings of Judeo-Arabic Civilization,” in *Beyond Religious Borders: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 13–29, 162–172, rejects Kister’s translation of ‘an in favor of “from/in the name of/on behalf of” (p. 24); I am grateful to Joseph Witztum for the latter reference. Whether ‘an is read “from” or “about” does not make a significant impact my own argument in this essay.

¹² Ibn Taymiyya, “Muqadimma,” MF 13:366-67. In translating this text, I benefitted from comparison with the partial translation by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Ibn Taymiya: Treatise on the Principles of Tafsir,” in *Windows on the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life*, ed. John Renard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 35-43 (38).

¹³ See for example what Ibn Taymiyya writes in MF 1:257-258; 15:151-152.

discrediting of Ka‘b al-Aḥbār that we find in twentieth-century commentary or even in Ibn Kathīr.

To conclude, there is nothing in Ibn Taymiyya’s approach to Qur’ānic interpretation to warrant rejecting the intertextual research in this volume completely out of hand. The biblical literature brought to bear on the interpretation of the Qur’ān cannot be judged *a priori* to be *isrā’īliyyāt* totally devoid of interest or truth. Were Ibn Taymiyya to read the studies in this volume, he may regard them with no more than detached interest, and he would certainly evaluate them on the basis of already established doctrine. If the results confirmed Islamic doctrine, it would be because they agreed with what was already known to be true—something that might be useful for Muslim apologetics. If the results disagreed, they would simply be wrong. Either way, Ibn Taymiyya would have no religious reason not to read this volume and consider its findings carefully. This is to suggest that the kind of study undertaken in this volume need not be alienating to Muslims, even those of Taymiyyan persuasion. Intertextual study of the Qur’ān in fact provides space for conversation between confessional Muslim scholars and non-Muslim academics about at least the historical meaning of the Qur’ān. While Muslims and non-Muslims will disagree on the ultimate significance of the Qur’ān, they share the search for the meaning of the Qur’ān within human history. We humans are a people with a history, in some sense a shared history in which the Qur’ān plays a role, and I suggest that we will do better working together to discover what that sense is rather than apart.