

ON THE QUR'ĀN'S *MĀ'IDA* PASSAGE
AND THE WANDERINGS
OF THE ISRAELITES¹

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Towards the end of the Qur'ān's fifth chapter the companions of Jesus ask him whether his Lord can send down a *mā'ida*, literally "a table," from heaven. Jesus, reluctantly, asks God for this table. God agrees to send it down to him, and threatens those who would disbelieve henceforth. This passage, which consists of only four verses (Q 5:112–15), can hardly be called a narrative. The Qur'ān does not explain where, when, or why the companions of Jesus made this request of him, why Jesus was reluctant to assent, and why the request so exasperated God.

Medieval Muslim exegetes, of course, attempt to explain these things. In order to do so, however, they seem to have extrapolated from the Qur'ānic passage itself, while adding some details from Biblical traditions.² They do not know how the Qur'ān's original

¹ I am obliged to Profs. Michel Cuypers and Gerald Hawting for their insights on an earlier version of this paper.

² *Tafsir Muqātil* reports that 5000 Israelites had requested the *mā'ida*, the number of the multitude fed by Jesus' multiplication of loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:31–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:5–15). Thereafter he recounts an Islamized version of the multiplication account: "Jesus—peace be upon him—said to his companions (*aṣḥāb*) as they were sitting in a meadow, 'Does anyone of you have anything?'" Simon ap-

audience—or the Qurʾān’s Prophet—understood this passage, and accordingly they are divided over its meaning.³

The *māʿida* passage has also troubled western scholars. They have long sought to explain it with reference to Christian sources, and to the New Testament in particular, but they have hardly agreed on an explanation. Accordingly Matthias Radscheit has a hard time summarizing the “scholarly consensus” on this passage:

The broad scholarly consensus is that the Qurʾānic table episode basically refers, in one way or another, to the Lord’s Supper, although other biblical passages can be adduced as possible reference points as well, such as the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus’ discourse on “the bread of life” (John 6:22f.), Peters vision in Acts 10:10ff., or Psalms 78:19 and 23:5. But when it comes to understanding the meaning of this episode, opinions are divided.... The question of the meaning of the

proached with two small fish and five loaves. Someone else came with pottage. Jesus—peace be upon him—proceeded to cut the two [fish] into small pieces and break the thin bread by half again and again, and to serve the pottage. Then he performed *wuḍūʾ*, prayed two *rakʿas*, and called on His Lord—mighty and sublime is He. God—mighty and sublime is He—sent down a sort of sleep upon his companions. When the people opened their eyes the food had been multiplied.” Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad al-Shaḥāta, 1:518. Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002 (Reprint of: Cairo: Muʿassasat al-Ḥalabī, n.d.).

³ Ṭabarī records five opinions on the question, “What was the *māʿida*?” The first, supported by twelve traditions, is evidently informed by the narrative of the feeding of the multitude: the *māʿida* consisted of fish and some sort of food. Five of these traditions specify that the “food” was bread. The second, supported by two traditions, is that the *māʿida* consisted of dates from heaven. The third, supported by three traditions, is that the *māʿida* consisted of all foods except for meat. The fourth, supported by one tradition, is that the *māʿida* passage is only a parable, and no food at all was brought down from heaven. The fifth, supported by three traditions, is that when they heard the divine threat (v. 115), the companions rescinded their request and accordingly no food was sent down to them. Ṭabarī, *Jamīʿ al-bayān ʿan tāʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Saʿīd Alī, Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et al., (part) 7:133–35. Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābi al-Ḥalabī, 1954–68.

table motif in the Qur'ān has proved to be especially intractable.⁴

The difficulty with the *mā'ida* passage is that it is not obviously connected to any episode found in the New Testament or early Christian literature. While Qur'ānic passages involving Jewish or Christian protagonists generally lack narrative details, their connection to earlier traditions is usually clear enough. When the Qur'ān mentions the laughter of Abraham's wife (Q 11.71) it is evidently alluding to Genesis 18:12; when the Qur'ān mentions the miraculous provision of food to Mary (Q 4:155), it is evidently referring to the story of her upbringing in the Jerusalem temple (as found, for example, in the *Proto-Evangelium of James*); and when the Qur'ān refers to a group of young men who fled to a cave to escape unbelief (Q 18:9–26), it is evidently referring to the tradition of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. Yet neither the New Testament, nor early Christian literature (to my knowledge), preserves a story in which the companions of Jesus demand that he ask God for a table from heaven. Accordingly, this passage has remained a scholarly enigma.

In the present paper I will offer a new explanation of the *mā'ida* passage. The basic structure and plot of this passage, I will argue, emerges from a topos found not in the New Testament, but in the Old. The Qur'ān inserts Jesus into this framework and thereby effectively creates a new tradition. Accordingly, we cannot speak here of the Qur'ān alluding to a well known Jewish or Christian narrative, as in the cases above. Instead we might understand the *mā'ida* passage in light of John Wansbrough's vision of the Qur'ān as a text that integrates earlier religious symbols and topoi in order to develop its particular religious message.

INTRODUCTION TO THE *MĀ'IDA* PASSAGE

The passage at hand, according to the standard Cairo edition of the Qur'ān, is as follows (translation mine):

5:112 إِذْ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ يَا عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ هَلْ يَسْتَطِيعُ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يُنَزِّلَ عَلَيْنَا مَائِدَةً مِنَ السَّمَاءِ قَالَ أَتَقْوُونَ اللَّهَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ

⁴ Radscheit, M. "Table." In *EQ*, vol. 5, 189.

When the companions (*al-ḥanwāriyyūn*) said, “Jesus the Son of Mary, can your Lord send down a table from heaven to us?” he said, “Fear God, if you are believers.”

5:113 قَالُوا نُرِيدُ أَنْ نَأْكُلَ مِنْهَا وَتَطْمَئِنَّ قُلُوبُنَا وَنَعْلَمَ أَنْ قَدْ صَدَقْتَنَا
وَتَكُونَ عَلَيْهَا مِنَ الشَّاهِدِينَ

They said, “We wish to eat from it, that our hearts might be set at ease, that we may know that you have told the truth, and that we may be witnesses to it.”

5:114 قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ اللَّهُمَّ رَبَّنَا أَنْزِلْ عَلَيْنَا مَائِدَةً مِنَ السَّمَاءِ تَكُونُ
لَنَا عَيْدًا لِأَوْلَادِنَا وَأَخْرَجْنَا مِنْكَ وَأَرْزُقْنَا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ الرَّازِقِينَ

Jesus the Son of Mary said, “O God, our Lord, send down to us a table from heaven, which might be a feast for the first and last of us,⁵ and a miraculous sign from you. Provide for us, You who are the best provider.”

5:115 قَالَ اللَّهُ إِنِّي مُنَزِّلُهَا عَلَيْكُمْ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بَعْدَ مِنْكُمْ فَإِنِّي أَعَذِّبُهُ عَذَابًا لَا
أَعَذِّبُهُ أَحَدًا مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ

God replied, “I will send it down to you. But as for those who disbelieve henceforth, I will torment them as I have never tormented anyone before.”

The *mā'ida* passage is part of a larger section (verses 110–18) at the end of this Sūra (named *al-Mā'ida*; Q 5) in which the Qur'ān is concerned with Jesus and his followers. In verse 110 the Qur'ān has God remind Jesus of the graces he has received, including the presence of the Holy Spirit, the ability to perform miracles, and divine protection from the plots of the Israelites. In verse 111 the Qur'ān reminds the audience how the companions of Jesus proclaimed their belief in God and Jesus, His messenger. The verse ends with the companions' declaration, “We believe. Bear witness that we have submitted (*ashhad bi-annanā muslimīn*).”

After the *mā'ida* passage, in verse 116, the Qur'ān presents a conversation between God and Jesus. God asks Jesus whether he taught people that he and his mother are gods and Jesus, with a

⁵ Cf. Rudi Paret's translation of this phrase: “für uns von jetzt an bis in alle Zukunft (?).”

pious exclamation, emphatically denies having done such a thing. In the following verse (117) Jesus explains that he taught people only to worship God, who is his Lord as He is the Lord of all people. Finally Jesus, addressing God, declares in the following verse, “They are Your servants, and You have the right to torment them. So too You have the right to forgive them. You are the Powerful, the Wise” (v. 118). Evidently Jesus is invoking the eternal fate of the people whom he taught but who misunderstood his teaching: Christians.

Thus the *ma'ida* passage is set within a frame of anti-Christian argumentation, where the focus is on the infidelity of the followers of Jesus. The Qur'ān has the companions of Jesus acknowledged his prophethood (v. 111) but then demand a sign from him (v. 112). And the Qur'ān, immediately after the *ma'ida* passage, has Jesus forswear the beliefs which his followers had apparently adopted (vv.116–7), and acknowledge that God might now rightly condemn them to hell (v. 118).

As for the *ma'ida* passage itself, it contains two terms that have been the subject of frequent scholarly discussion. The first of these is *al-ḥanwariyyūn* (v. 112), which I translate above as, “companions.” This term might seem to be a *crux interpretum*, for our understanding of the passage might be shaped according to whether it refers to the faithful disciples of Jesus, or simply to the people—faithful or unfaithful—around him. Moreover, the word is difficult to understand on the basis of Arabic, both on account of its orthography and its root (ḥ-w-r, “to return,” or “to be white”). It has no obvious precedent in Syriac,⁶ and seems to be related instead to Ethiopic *ḥanwariyā*, meaning “walker, or messenger.”⁷

It seems to me, however, that the etymology of this term is less important than the Qur'ān's own use thereof. Even if the term

⁶ The common term for μαθητής (“disciple”) in Syriac is *talmidā* (cf. Arabic *tilmidh*); the common term for ἀπόστολος is *shlīḥā*. See Payne Smith, R. *Thesaurus Syriacus*, t. I, Oxford: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1879; t. 2, 1901, p. 1955 and 4175, respectively.

⁷ On this see Nöldeke, T. *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, 48. Strassburg: Trübner, 1910; Jeffery, A. *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, 116. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938 (reprint: Leiden: Brill, 2007).

al-ḥawwāriyyūn is meant as a reference to Jesus' disciples, or apostles,⁸ (and not only "followers"), the Qur'ān could hardly be invoking this term in the way a Christian text would. Indeed the very point of the Qur'ānic material on the *al-ḥawwāriyyūn* seems to be their faltering faith. In *āl 'Imrān* (3) the Qur'ān first has *al-ḥawwāriyyūn* declare their belief in God (vv. 52–53), but then remarks "But they schemed and God schemed. And God is the best schemer" (v. 54). In *al-ṣaff* (61) the Qur'ān has *al-ḥawwāriyyūn* respond to Jesus' request for "helpers" (*anṣār*), but then immediately notes that only one sect of the Israelites believed, while another disbelieved (v. 14). And in *al-mā'ida*, after *al-ḥawwāriyyūn* (v. 111) acknowledge their faith in God and his messenger, they immediately demand a sign from both of them (v. 112).

The second term is *mā'ida* itself, which is likewise difficult to explain on the basis of Arabic (the root m-y-d in Arabic has the meaning "to be moved, to waver"). Like *ḥawwāriyyūn*, *al-mā'ida* also has no obvious precedent in Syriac and seems instead to be related to an Ethiopic term, in this case *mā'edd*, "table." Nöldeke notes that this term is used in the Ethiopic Bible to translate Greek τράπεζα; he draws attention in particular to its use in 1 Corinthians 10:21 for the Eucharistic table.⁹

SCHOLARLY THEORIES ON THE *MĀ'IDA* PASSAGE

Nöldeke's observation in this regard evidently helped determine the principal scholarly explanation of the *mā'ida* passage, namely

⁸ R. Dvořák proposes that Muḥammad learned of this term from the emigrants who had returned from Christian Ethiopia. See Dvořák, R. "Über die Fremdwörter im Korân." *Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-Hist. Classe. Sitzungsberichte* 109.1 (1885): 481–562, see 542.

⁹ See Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge*, 54–55; Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, 255–56. Nöldeke (p. 55) states that the etymology of Ethiopic *mā'edd* is unclear, although he suggests that it may not be an originally Semitic term. Manfred Kropp argues that it is derived from the vulgar Greek term *mágida*. Kropp, M. "Beyond Single Words: *Ma'ida*—*Shaytan*—*jibt* and *tagbut*. Mechanisms of transmission into the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) Bible and the Qur'anic text." In Reynolds, G. S., ed. *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, (204–16) 206–7. London: Routledge, 2008.

that it is a reflection of the Christian Last Supper tradition. Some scholars, however, understand this passage instead in the light of the Gospel accounts of the multiplication of the fish and loaves, or the passage in Acts 10 in which God sends down “something like a great sheet bound at the four corners“ (Acts 10:11) filled with animals for Peter to eat. A *status quaestionis* of research on the *mā'ida* passage can be found in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* article of Matthias Radscheit cited above,¹⁰ and in recent the work of Michael Cuypers on *sīrat al-Mā'ida*.¹¹ I will therefore excuse myself from that task and introduce here only two recent contributions to the question not mentioned by Radscheit or Cuypers.

After introducing the etymology of *al-mā'ida*, and mentioning the theories of earlier scholars on this passage, Manfred Kropp asks: “Could it be that they were too focused on Biblical texts alone, or the extrabiblical Jewish and Christian traditions and texts to the exclusion of the Ethiopic heritage?”¹² Kropp argues that the *mā'ida* passage in the Qur'ān is related to a hagiographic Ethiopic tradition in which light shines upon a group of saints whenever they gather to eat. This tradition is preserved in the homily of the 5th century bishop John of Aksum. In telling the story of nine saints from Syria he comments: “Every time they came together at the table (*mā'ad(d)ā*), lights descend on them shining like the sun.”¹³ Kropp does not contend that this citation is the direct source of the Qur'ān's *mā'ida* passage; he does maintain, however, that the close relationship between the two texts suggests that this passages owes more to Ethiopic Christian tradition than the single word *al-mā'ida*.

¹⁰ Radscheit, “Table.”

¹¹ Cuypers, M. *Le festin: Une lecture de la sourate al-Mā'ida*, 337–39. Paris: Lethellieux, 2007. English trans.: *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an*. Miami: Convivium Press, 2009.

¹² Kropp, “Beyond Single Words,” 210–11.

¹³ The translation is Kropp (p. 211), from the edition in: Conti Rossini, C. “L'omelia di Yohannes, vescovo d'Aksum in onore di Garimā.” In *Actes de Congrès international des Orientalistes, section sémitique*, 139–77 (excerpt p. 153). Paris, 1898.

Samir Khalil Samir, in his analysis of the *mā'ida* passage in the Qur'ān, focuses on the dialogue between Jesus and God. According to Samir, the Qur'ān here uses peculiarly Christian turns of phrase. He argues that the term *'id* (v. 114), which appears nowhere else in the Qur'ān, is related to Syriac *'idā*, meaning “feast” or “liturgical festival.”¹⁴ As for the phrase *li-anwalinā wa-ākhirinā* (v. 114), also found nowhere else in the Qur'ān, Samir argues that it reflects the New Testament narrative on the institution of the Eucharist. Both Matthew (26:28; *περὶ πολλῶν*) and Mark (14:24; *ὑπερ πολλῶν*) have Jesus describe the cup as his blood which is “shed for many” (Luke 22:20 has simply “for you.”). Samir explains that the Greek phrase here in fact means, idiomatically, “for all,” and argues that the Qur'ānic phrase *li-anwalinā wa-ākhirinā* has the same meaning (and therefore might be thought of as a sort of calque). Finally Samir suggests that God's threat in v. 115 (“But as for those who disbelieve henceforth, I will torment them as I have never tormented anyone before.”) reflects the threat in 1 Corinthians 11:29 that the one who receives the Eucharist unworthily is “eating and drinking his own condemnation.” Samir thus concludes that the *mā'ida* passage must be understood in the light of the Christian Eucharist tradition. In support of Samir's conclusion it might be noted that Ethiopic *mā'edd* appears for the Eucharistic table in 1 Corinthians 11:21, eight verses before the verse that Samir connects to v. 115 of the *mā'ida* passage.

Now neither Kropp nor Samir insists that the Qur'ān is simply borrowing from a Christian source. Instead both scholars draw our attention to the religious milieu in which the Qur'ān emerged and examine how the *mā'ida* passage might be in conversation with Christian traditions. Indeed when discussing such matters it should not be missed that the Qur'ān as a rule does not quote from Jewish or Christian texts. Instead it alludes to them as it develops its own religious message. Accordingly passages such as that on the *mā'ida* should not be thought of as citations of heterodox or apocryphal

¹⁴ Samir, S. K. “The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur'ān: A Reflection.” In Reynolds, *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, (141–62) 149.

texts,¹⁵ or garbled renderings of canonical Jewish or Christian texts.¹⁶ Instead they should be thought of as the Qur'ān's intentional employment of earlier religious symbols and topoi.

THE *MĀ'IDA* PASSAGE AND THE ISRAELITES

In this light we might think again of one of the “reference points” which Radscheit mentions in the citation at the opening of this article, namely Psalm 78:19.¹⁷ As a whole this Psalm recounts the history of Israel from Moses to David, emphasizing Israel's repeated acts of infidelity, and God's repeated acts of mercy. The verse in question occurs in a section of the Psalm on the fickleness and insolence of the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert after the exodus:

¹⁵ He split rocks in the desert, let them drink as though from the limitless depths;

¹⁶ he brought forth streams from a rock, made waters flow down in torrents.

¹⁵ Pace the conclusion of Nöldeke, “Es kann ferner keinem Zweifel unterliegen daß die hauptsächlichste Quelle, aus der Muhammed seine Kenntnisse zuflossen, weniger die Bibel als das ausserkanonische, liturgische und dogmatische Schrifttum war. Daher gleichen die alttestamentlichen Erzählungen im Qoran weit mehr den haggadischen Ausschmückungen als ihren Urbildern¹; die neutestamentlichen sind ganz legendenhaft und haben einige Ähnlichkeit mit den Berichten der apokryphen Evangelien.” Nöldeke, T., et al. *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 1:8. Hildesheim: Olms, 1970.

¹⁶ Pace the conclusion of Wilhelm Rudolph who, after refuting the idea of Nöldeke that Muḥammad was influenced by heterodox Jewish and Christian writings, comments: “Dazu mag er sich wohl auch Notizen über das Gehörte gemacht haben (s. S. 25 6); andererseits werden sich manche Verworrenheiten in seinen Erzählungen—abgesehen von der mangelhaften Übermittlung—eben daraus erklären, dass er sie aus dem Gedächtnis vortrug.” Rudolph, W. *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorāns von Judentum und Christentum*, 21. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1922.

¹⁷ On the relationship between the *mā'ida* passage and Psalm 78 see also Cuypers, *Le festin*, 344–45.

- ¹⁷ But they only sinned against him more than ever, defying the Most High in barren country;
- ¹⁸ **they deliberately challenged God by demanding food to their hearts' content.**
- ¹⁹ **They insulted God by saying, 'Can God make a banquet in the desert?**
- ²⁰ **True, when he struck the rock, waters gushed out and flowed in torrents; but what of bread? Can he give that, can he provide meat for his people?'**
- ²¹ When he heard them Yahweh vented his anger, fire blazed against Jacob, his anger mounted against Israel,
- ²² because they had no faith in God, no trust in his power to save.¹⁸

The moaning and groaning of the Israelites over the lack of food—or the lack of good food—is a prominent trope in the Pentateuch. The Israelites are first found complaining this way in Exodus 16, soon after their miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds:

Setting out from Elim, the whole community of Israelites entered the desert of Sin, lying between Elim and Sinai—on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left Egypt. * And the whole community of Israelites began complaining about Moses and Aaron in the desert * and said to them, 'Why did we not die at Yahweh's hand in Egypt, where we used to sit round the flesh pots and could eat to our heart's content! As it is, you have led us into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!' * Yahweh then said to Moses, 'Look, I shall rain down bread for you from the heavens. Each day the people must go out and collect their ration for the day; I propose to test them in this way to see whether they will follow my law or not (Exodus 16: 1–4).

In the *ma'ida* passage the companions confront Jesus with the demand that God send down to them a table; here the Israelites confront Moses and Aaron with their complaints for food. In the

¹⁸ Unless indicated otherwise Biblical translations are from the New Jerusalem Bible.

mā'ida passage God agrees to send a table down to them, but also threatens them with a punishment for infidelity. Here God affirms that he will send down bread from heaven—manna—but adds that this will be a test of their fidelity.

In Exodus 17 the Israelites arrive at Rephidim—to be known later as Meribah—where they begin again to complain, now because they found no water to drink. Again the Israelites turn on Moses; again they regret that he has led them out of Egypt, heedless of the miracle wrought by their God at the Sea of Reeds:

The people took issue with Moses for this and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses replied, “Why take issue with me? Why do you put Yahweh to the test?” * But tormented by thirst, the people complained to Moses. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt,” they said, “only to make us, our children and our livestock, die of thirst?” (Exodus 17:2–3).

In Exodus 16 Yahweh proposes to test (Heb. *nāsā*) the Israelites; now Moses accuse the Israelites of testing (again *nāsā*) Yahweh. They are guilty of a sin of presumption, making demands of God when they should instead be concerned with God's demands of them. The sin of the companions in the *mā'ida* passage of the Qur'ān is similar. They demand a table from heaven in order to test Jesus and his God: “We wish to eat from it, that our hearts might be set at ease, that we may know that you have told the truth, and that we may be witnesses to it.” (Q 5:113).

The same tradition recounted in Exodus 16–17 is told differently in Numbers. In the account of Exodus 16 Yahweh responds to the complaints of the Israelites by sending to them manna in the morning and quails in the evening (v. 13). Numbers 11, however, recounts how the Israelites—already in the desert of Sinai—complained to God that they have nothing *but* manna to eat (vv. 4–6),¹⁹

¹⁹ “The rabble who had joined the people were feeling the pangs of hunger, and the Israelites began to weep again. ‘Who will give us meat to eat?’ they said. * ‘Think of the fish we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic! * But now we are withering away; there is nothing wherever we look except this manna!’” (Numbers 11:4–6).

and God responds by sending quails (vv. 31–32). The tradition of a miracle at a site named Meribah also appears in Numbers, but only after the Israelites have arrived at Kadesh (to the Northeast of the desert of Sinai). There the Israelites complain that they have no water for their crops, their livestock, or themselves.²⁰ Moses, following Yahweh's instructions (although, unfortunately for him, not exactly) strikes a rock and water pours forth (Numbers 20:8–11). In the next chapter, however, after the death of Aaron, and after they have defeated the Canaanite king Arad, the Israelites again complain to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in the desert? For there is neither food nor water here; we are sick of this meagre diet" (Numbers 21:5). Yahweh, understandably exasperated, curses them for their insolence and sends serpents against them, serpents "whose bite brought to death many in Israel" (v. 6).

Psalm 78 seems to follow this latter sequence of complaints. The Psalmist laments how the Israelites demand food *after* they have witnessed God provide water from a rock: "True, when he struck the rock, waters gushed out and flowed in torrents; but what of bread? Can he give that, can he provide meat for his people?" (vv. 20).²¹

The Qur'ānic *mā'ida* passage is tellingly close to Psalm 78. As cited above, in the New Jerusalem translation, verse 19 reads: "They insulted God by saying, 'Can God make a *banquet* in the desert?' Yet the Hebrew word here translated "banquet", *shulḥān*, is

²⁰ "The people laid the blame on Moses. 'We would rather have died', they said, 'as our brothers died before Yahweh! * Why have you brought Yahweh's community into this desert, for us and our livestock to die here? * Why did you lead us out of Egypt, only to bring us to this wretched place? It is a place unfit for sowing, it has no figs, no vines, no pomegranates, and there is not even water to drink!'" (Numbers 20:3–5).

²¹ The second Old Testament reference raised by Radscheit is Psalm 23:5: "You prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup brims over." This latter verse, however, occurs in a Psalm of praise, and has little in common with the *mā'ida* passage, or Psalm 78, both of which are marked by the theme of humans insolently testing God.

literally: “table.” Accordingly the LXX translates τράπεζα, and the Ethiopic Bible translates *mā'edd*.²² Thus we might compare:

Qur'ān 5:112b: “Can your Lord send down a *mā'ida* from heaven?”

(Ethiopic) Psalm 78:19b: “Can God make a *mā'edd* in the desert?”

JESUS AND *AL-MA'IDA*

The problem we are left with, of course, is that Jesus, the protagonist of the *mā'ida* passage, was not yet born when the Israelites were wandering in the desert. Why, then, would the Qur'ān insert Jesus into a passage based on an Old Testament narrative?

In answering this question it might first be noted that it would not be out of character for the Qur'ān to place a Biblical protagonist in a different context. In the Biblical book of Esther Haman is the vizier of the Persian king Xerxes. In the Qur'ān, however, Haman becomes the vizier of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Q 28:6–8, 38–42; 40:24, 36–47).²³ In the Qur'ān, Mary the Mother of Jesus becomes also the daughter of 'Imrān (Biblical 'Amrām, father of Moses, Aaron, and Mariam; see Q 3:35ff.), the sister of Aaron (Q 19:29).²⁴ In the Bible (Judges 7:4–8), God instructs Gideon to take only those men who drink from their hands (and not those who drink straight from the river) on campaign with him against the Midianites. In the Qur'ān (2:249) this same story is told, but here Saul (Tālūt) appears in the place of Gideon.

In an earlier publication I have argued that it would be wrong to describe these contradictions as errors of the Qur'ān, or to think

²² Devens, V. M. *A Concordance to Psalms in the Ethiopic Version*, 105. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001.

²³ On the relationship between the Biblical and Qur'ānic characters of Haman see Silverstein, A. “Haman’s transition from the Jahiliyya to Islam.” *JSAI* 34 (2008): 285–308; Reynolds, G. S. *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 97–106. London: Routledge, 2010.

²⁴ On this oft-debated topic see Mourad, S. M. “Mary in the Qur'ān: A Reexamination of Her Presentation.” In Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, 163–74.

of them (as Orientalists were once wont to do) as Muḥammad's confused recounting of Biblical narratives.²⁵ In analyzing these matters it is important above all to remember that the Qur'ān is invested in paranesis. The Qur'ān is a profoundly homiletic book, a book fundamentally unconcerned with a precise recounting of historical narratives. In referring to Biblical accounts, its only concern is the impact that these references will have on its audience, whom the Qur'ān seeks passionately to convert to the fear of God. In other words, the Qur'ān does not quote Biblical traditions, it employs Biblical *topoi*. To this effect Wansbrough writes on the opening page of *Qur'anic Studies*:

Both formally and conceptually, Muslim scripture drew upon a traditional stock of monotheistic imagery, which may be described as schemata of revelation. Analysis of the Qur'anic application of these shows that they have been adapted to the essentially paraenetic character of that document, and that, for example, originally narrative material was reduced almost invariably to a series of discrete and parabolic utterances.²⁶

Cases such as the *mā'ida* passage show that the Qur'ān's relationship with Biblical material is creative. In this case, or in the case of Haman in Egypt, the Qur'ān creates a new tradition by integrating Biblical themes, protagonists, and settings in a way that introduces its religious message.

Nevertheless, we might expect to find a certain logic in the way that the Qur'ān does so. In order to understand the logic behind the *mā'ida* passage, it should first be noted that the Qur'ān presents Jesus—like Moses—as a prophet for the Israelites, not a prophet for the entire world.²⁷ In one passage the Qur'ān explicitly

²⁵ Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Context*, 239.

²⁶ Wansbrough, J. *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977 (reprint: Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004). Note also Wansbrough's later (p. 19) reflection, "The so-called narrative sections of the Qur'an are of essentially symbolic character adduced to illustrate the eschatological value of the theodicy."

²⁷ I am obliged to Prof. Gerald Hawting for drawing my attention to this point.

describes Jesus (Q 3:49) as a messenger to the Israelites; elsewhere the Qur'ān has Jesus himself declare, "O Israelites, I am the messenger of God to you!" (Q 61:6). Earlier in *al-Mā'ida*, moreover, Jesus addresses the Israelites to demand that they worship God alone (Q 5:72). The *mā'ida* passage—seen as a development on the topos of the wanderings of the Israelites—would thus reflect the special connection in the Qur'ān between Jesus and the Israelites.

Yet the particular idea of creating a tradition based on the wanderings of the Israelites, but with Jesus in the place of Moses, was presumably inspired by the tradition found in John 6:29–32.²⁸ In this passage the crowd that had been fed by Jesus when he multiplied the fish and loaves has followed him to the other side of the lake. After recounting that they asked Jesus how one might do God's work, John relates:

Jesus gave them this answer, 'This is carrying out God's work: you must believe in the one he has sent.' * So they said, 'What sign will you yourself do, the sight of which will make us believe in you? What work will you do?' * Our fathers ate manna in the desert; as scripture says: He gave them bread from heaven to eat. * Jesus answered them: In all truth I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread.

²⁸ In his description of the *mā'ida* passage Michael Cuypers similarly focuses on this passage. He notes that the passage on Peter's vision in Acts 10 is similar to the Qur'ān only as regards "l'image très matérielle de la descente du ciel d'un nourriture" (Cuypers, *Le festin*, 340); however, whereas the companions of Jesus in the Qur'ān demand that a table be brought down to him, in Acts 10 the "great sheet" is brought down to Peter against his will, and is filled with impure animals which he does not want to eat. Similarly the Gospel account of the multiplication of fish and loaves, Cuypers notes, is not prompted by a request of the companions. On the other hand the "Bread of Life" discourse is, like the *mā'ida* passage, introduced by a request of the crowd (John 6:30). Moreover, in the "Bread of Life" discourse, as in the *mā'ida* passage, food is promised—the Eucharistic feast—but not yet given (see John 6:48–57). Cuypers comments: "Les deux discours restent donc également inachevés, ouverts à un accomplissement qui est à réaliser par l'auditeur-lecteur croyant" (p. 340).

Here John has the companions of Jesus ask for a sign by recalling the bread that had been sent down from heaven to the companions of Moses. Jesus responds by describing himself as the bread of life, sent down from heaven, a reference to the Eucharistic feast:

I am the bread of life. * Your fathers ate manna in the desert and they are dead; * but this is the bread which comes down from heaven, so that a person may eat it and not die. * I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world (John 6:48–51).

In the verse (5:111) that introduces the *ma'ida* passage the divine voice of the Qur'an declares: "When I revealed to the companions, 'Believe in me and my messenger,' they said, 'We believe. Bear witness that we have submitted.'" This verse appears now to reflect the introduction (John 6:29) to the "Bread of Life" discourse cited above, where Jesus tells to crowd to "believe in the one He has sent (Greek: ὃν ἀπέστειλεν ἐκεῖνος; Syriac: *d-hū sbaddar*). Now the Qur'an shows no interest in the reference to the Eucharist in John 6. Instead, it is focused on the comparison between the companions of Jesus and Moses therein. Indeed it develops this comparison by having the companions of Jesus themselves ask for food from heaven.²⁹

Their demand for food is also a demand for a sign that would verify the claims of Jesus: "We wish to eat from it, *that our hearts might be set at ease, that we may know that you have told the truth*, and that we may be witnesses to it" (Q 5:113). Now in the Gospels the demand for a sign is a trope for the hardened heart of unbelievers. When the scribes and Pharisees demand a sign of Jesus, he responds ominously: "It is an evil and unfaithful generation that asks for a sign! The only sign it will be given is the sign of the prophet

²⁹ Cuypers also emphasizes the Qur'an's creative use of Biblical traditions: "La péricope puise en outre dans les sources scripturaires de Jean, que ce soit le livre de l'Exode ou le psaume 78, mais elle le fait de manière originale." Cuypers, *Le festin*, 345.

Jonah” (Matthew 12:39; cf. Luke 11:29).³⁰ The Prophet of the Qur’ān is also challenged to give a sign, and similarly he refuses: “They say, ‘If only signs were sent down to him from his Lord.’ Say, ‘The signs are only with God, and I am but a clear warner’” (Q 29:50). In this light the threat that God adds at the end of the *mā’ida* passage—which might seem curious at first—is understandable. The companions of Jesus—unlike the people who challenged the Prophet of the Qur’ān—have had a sign sent down to them. If they dare, despite this sign, to disbelieve, then God will accordingly torment them as He has “never tormented anyone before” (v. 115).³¹

Now it seems to me that in the *mā’ida* passage the Qur’ān is not concerned with the crowds who followed Jesus but refused to confess that he was the Messiah. Instead it is concerned with Christians, the followers of Jesus who betrayed his teaching and insulted God by deifying him (and his mother). The Qur’ān introduces its threat by declaring, *man yakfur bā’du*, “as for those who disbelieve henceforth...” (v. 115), that is, after confessing that Jesus is a messenger (v. 111) and seeing a sign from him (the *mā’ida* sent down from heaven). And according to the Qur’ān the Christians have indeed disbelieved: *la qad kafarū alladhina qālū inna allāba al-masīhu*,

³⁰ Matthew has Jesus first explain this sign by comparing Jonah’s time in the fish to his time under the earth. Jesus then continues, “On Judgment Day the men of Nineveh will appear against this generation and they will be its condemnation, because when Jonah preached they repented; and look, there is something greater than Jonah here” (Matthew 12:41). This latter explanation—that the sign of Jonah refers to the infidelity of the Israelites and the faith of the gentiles—may be the more ancient tradition, as it is the only explanation that Jesus gives in Luke (11:30). On the opponents of Jesus demanding a sign cf. Matthew 16:1–4; Mark 8:11–12; Luke 11:16; John 2:18.

³¹ Cuypers suggests that the threat in v. 115 could reflect the conclusion of the “Bread of Life” discourse in John 6, where Jesus alludes to the betrayal of Judas: “Jesus replied to them, ‘Did I not choose the Twelve of you? Yet one of you is a devil.’ * He meant Judas son of Simon Iscariot, since this was the man, one of the Twelve, who was to betray him” (John 6:70–71). See Cuypers, *Le festin*, 341.

“those who say, ‘God is Christ’ have disbelieved” (Q 5:17, 72); *la qad kafarū alladhīna qālū inna allāhā thālithu thalāthatin*, “those who say, ‘God is the third of three’ have disbelieved” (Q 5:73).

For this reason the Qur’ān has Jesus, in the dialogue that follows the *mā’ida* passage, declare himself innocent from the errors of Christians (Q 5:116–7) and proclaim to God: “They are Your servants, and You have the right to torment them. So too You have the right to forgive them. You are the Powerful, the Wise” (v. 118).