

ON THE QUR'ĀN AND THE THEME OF JEWS AS “KILLERS OF THE PROPHETS”¹

Gabriel Said Reynolds*

Abstract

A prominent element of the Qur'ān's material on the Jews is its report that the Israelites killed prophets sent to them. The Qur'an does not describe the killing of any particular prophet, nor does it attempt to prove in any other way that the Jews have killed the prophets. Instead the Qur'an seems to consider it common knowledge that the Jews have done so as it makes certain inter-religious arguments in this light. However, on the basis of the Hebrew Bible the prominence of this theme in the Qur'an hardly makes sense. None of the great prophets in the Hebrew Bible are killed by the Israelites. In the present paper I argue that this theme emerges from the para-biblical traditions which indeed describe how the Jews killed the prophets whom God sent to them. These traditions are found already in Jewish texts, and they lead Christian authors -- including New Testament authors -- to connect the Jewish persecution of Christian believers with their earlier persecution of the prophets who predicted the coming of Christ. This connection is prominent in the anti-Jewish literature of the Syriac Christian authors. The manner in which the Qur'an employs the theme of Jews as killers of the prophets is closely related to that literature.

Keywords: *Qur'an, Jews, Christians, Prophets, Syriac, Midrash, Ephrem, Jacob of Serug.*

* University of Notre Dame, Reynolds@nd.edu.my.

¹ I benefited from the advice of a number of colleagues and friends in the course of writing this paper. I am particularly grateful to Profs. David Marshall, Sergey Minov, and Michael Tzvi Novick and for their helpful references to Jewish and Christian literature. I would also like to thank Matthew Kuiper and the anonymous reviewer of *al-Bayān* for their valuable comments on a draft of this article. All errors are my own.

A prominent element of the Qur'ān's material on the Jews is its report that the Israelites killed prophets sent to them, a report that appears in nine different passages:

1. So they were struck with abasement and poverty, and they earned Allah's wrath. That, because they would deny the signs of Allah and kill the prophets unjustly. That, because they would disobey and commit transgressions (Q 2:61b).²
2. Certainly, We gave Moses the Book and followed him with the apostles, and We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, manifest proofs and confirmed him with the Holy Spirit. Is it not that whenever an apostle brought you that which was not to your liking, you would act arrogantly; so you would impugn a group [of them], and kill a [nother] group? (Q 2:87).³
3. And when they are told, "Believe in what Allah has sent down," they say, "We believe in what was sent down to us," and they disbelieve what is besides it, though it is the truth confirming what is with them. Say, "Then why would you kill the prophets of Allah formerly, should you be faithful?" (Q 2:91)
4. Those who deny Allah's signs and kill the prophets unjustly and kill those who call for justice from among the people, inform them of a painful punishment (Q 3:21).
5. Wherever they are found, abasement is stamped upon them, except for an asylum from Allah and an asylum from the people. They have earned the wrath of Allah, and poverty has been stamped upon them. That, because they would deny the signs of Allah and kill the prophets unjustly. That, because they would disobey and commit transgression (Q 3:112).
6. Allah has certainly heard the remark of those who said, "Allah is poor and we are rich." We will record what they have said,

² All Qur'ān translations are those of Ali Quli Qara'i unless otherwise noted.

³ In this verse (Q 2:87) and in Q 5:70 (passage I) Quli Qara'i translates *taqtalūna* with "slay," whereas in the other seven passages where this theme is found he uses "kill" to render the various forms of *q-t-l*. I have accordingly changed "slay" to "kill" in vv. 2:87 and 5:70 in order to represent the consistency of the Arabic text.

and their killing of the prophets unjustly, and We shall say, “Taste the punishment of the burning” (Q 3:181)

7. Tell those who say, “Allah has pledged us not to believe in any apostle unless he brings us an offering consumed by fire,” “Apostles before me certainly did bring you manifest signs and what you speak of. Then why did you kill them, if you are truthful?” (Q 3:183).
8. Then because of their breaking their covenant, their denial of Allah’s signs, their killing of the prophets unjustly and for their saying, ‘Our hearts are uncircumcised’ ... Indeed, Allah has set a seal on them for their unfaith, so they do not have faith except a few (Q 4:155).
9. Certainly We took a pledge from the Children of Israel and We sent apostles to them. Whenever an apostle brought them that which was not to their liking, they would impugn a part of them and a part they would kill (Q 5:70).

In all of these passages the “killers of the prophets” are the Jews.⁴ The manner, in which the Qurʾān repeatedly reports that the

⁴ In certain cases the connection with the Jews appears only in the light of a passage’s larger context. Q 2:61a (passage A) describes the ingratitude of the Jews when, having received manna, quails, and water from God in the desert, they ask God to send them different sorts of food. Q 2:91 (passage C) is followed by a condemnation of the Jews for their infidelity to Moses at Mt. Sinai (Q 2:92-93). Q 3:21 (passage D) is seen to involve the Jews in light of v. 24, in which certain infidels are made to say, “The Fire shall not touch us except for a number of days.” This same boast appears in Q 2:80, in the midst of an anti-Jewish section of *al-Baqara*. Q 3:112 (passage E) appears to involve the Jews in light of its connection with two other evidently anti-Jewish verses: Q 2:90 and Q 7:152. Q 3:181 (passage F) and 3:183 (passage G) appear to involve the Jews in light of the statement in the latter verse which the Qurʾān attributes to the same infidels who killed the prophets, viz.: “Allah has pledged us not to believe in any apostle unless he brings us an offering consumed by fire.” This statement is connected to Old Testament passages such as Leviticus 9:24, Judges 13:20 and 1 Kings 18:38 in which God demonstrates his designation of religious leaders by consuming an offering with flame. 1 Kings 18:38 is particularly interesting in this regard because it involves Elijah, who in the next chapter is found on Mt. Sinai complaining to God: “I am full of jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabaoth, because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, have torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me” (1 Kings 19:9-10). Q 4:155 (passage H) appears in an anti-Jewish section of *al-Nisaʾ* (the Qurʾān has the Israelites boast of having killed Jesus two verses later).

Jews killed the prophets, without ever naming any of the prophets whom they have killed, suggests that the Qur'ān is not concerned with any particular incident. The Qur'ān does not mean to offer the reader information on any particular killing of any particular prophet, nor does it try to convince its audience of the idea that the Jews have killed the prophets. The Qur'ān treats it as a matter of common knowledge that the Jews killed the prophets and makes certain religious arguments in this light. In passage A and passage E the Qur'ān argues that "the abasement and poverty of the Jews" can be explained by, among other things, their killing of the prophets. In passage C the Qur'ān argues that Jewish claims to be faithful should not be believed because they are a people who killed the prophets. In passage F, the Qur'ān argues that the Jews, or some Jews, will be punished in hell because (among other reasons) they have killed the prophets.

Thus in these passages the Qur'ān means above all to say something about the Jews, namely that one of their characteristics as a people is that they kill prophets. This characteristic might be placed alongside others referred to by the Qur'ān: they are a people who made a covenant with God, whom God favored above all other nations, who denied God's signs, whose hearts have been hardened or are uncircumcised, and who kill the prophets. The question for the present paper is why the Qur'ān makes 'the killing of the prophets' one of the principal characteristics of the Jews. On the basis of the Hebrew Bible this presentation hardly makes sense. None of the great prophets in the Hebrew Bible are killed by the Israelites: not Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Daniel. In the Hebrew Bible the Israelites often fail to listen to the prophets, but they don't have the habit of killing them.

To my knowledge there are only two narratives in the Hebrew Bible which seem to have the Jews kill a prophet: The first is in 2 Chronicles and involves Zechariah son of Jehoiada the high priest who lived in the days of King Joash of Judah (r. 835-796):

The spirit of God then invested Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest. He stood up before the people and said, 'God says this, "Why transgress Yahweh's commands to your certain ruin? For if you abandon

*Yahweh, he will abandon you.” * They then plotted against him and, at the king’s order, stoned him in the court of the Temple of Yahweh (2Chronicles 24:20-21).⁵*

The second narrative appears in the Book of Jeremiah and is set two centuries later, towards the end of the kingdom of Judah, during the reign of King Jehoiakim (r. 609-598):

There was another man, too, who used to prophesy in Yahweh’s name, Uriah son of Shemaiah, from Kiriath-Jearim. He prophesied exactly the same things against this city and this country as Jeremiah.

** When King Jehoiakim with all his officers and all the chief men heard what he said, the king was determined to put him to death. On hearing this, Uriah took fright and, fleeing, escaped to Egypt.*

** King Jehoiakim, however, sent Elnathan son of Achbor to Egypt with others, * who brought Uriah back from Egypt and took him to King Jehoiakim, who had him put to the sword and his body thrown into the common burial ground (Jeremiah 26:20-23).⁶*

⁵ All Biblical translations are from the New Jerusalem Bible.

⁶ In this context we might also consider a narrative in 2 Maccabees, a parabiblical (Deutorocanonical or apocryphal) Greek work, on the killing of a Jewish man named Eleazar who refuses to eat pork as demanded by the regime of the pagan Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 175-64 BC). While Eleazar is not named a prophet in this text, he does act like one, and he is killed by his fellow Jews:

Eleazar, one of the foremost teachers of the Law, a man already advanced in years and of most noble appearance, had his mouth forced open, to make him eat a piece of pork. * But he, resolving to die with honour rather than to live disgraced, walked of his own accord to the torture of the wheel, * having spat the stuff out, as befits those with the courage to reject what is not lawful to taste, rather than live. * The people supervising the ritual meal, forbidden by the Law, because of the length of time for which they had known him, took him aside and privately urged him to have meat brought of a kind he could properly use, prepared by himself, and only pretend to eat the portions of sacrificial meat as prescribed by the king; * this action would enable him to escape death, by availing himself of an act of kindness prompted by their long friendship... * “Pretence,” he said, “does not befit our time of life;” many young people would suppose that Eleazar at the age of ninety had conformed to the foreigners’ way of life * while those who were escorting him, recently so well disposed

In addition to these two passages, The Jezebel/Elijah narrative in the Book of Kings refers to the killing of prophets. 1 Kings 18:4 relates, “when Jezebel was butchering the prophets of Yahweh....” Later Elijah refers to the killing of prophets during his conversation with God on Mt. Horeb (i.e. Mt. Sinai) – whither he fled from the wrath of Jezebel’s husband, the Israelite king Ahab. When the Lord asks him what he is doing there Elijah responds: “I am full of jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabaoth, because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, have torn down your altars and *put your prophets to the sword*. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me” (1 Kings 19:9-10).⁷

Nevertheless, it seems to me unlikely the Qur’ān is invoking of any of these passages in particular when it describes the Jews as killers of the prophets. The first two passages are isolated pericopes with no direct connection to the narratives of the Hebrew Bible that otherwise concern the Qur’ān. The passage involving Elijah in 1 Kings is certainly not obscure (it precedes the report of the theophany on Mt. Horeb). Yet it hardly seems likely that the Qur’ān could be alluding to this passage with its repeated description of the Jews as a people who kill the prophets. On the one hand, the reference to the killing of the prophets in this passage is general and is not explained any further. On the other hand, when the Qur’ān refers to the confrontation of Elijah with his unbelieving people, it never accuses them of killing any prophets.⁸

towards him, turned against him after this declaration, which they regarded as sheer madness. * He for his part, just before he died under the blows, gave a sigh and said, “The Lord whose knowledge is holy sees clearly that, though I might have escaped death, from awe of him I gladly endure these agonies of body under the lash, and that in my soul I am glad to suffer.” * This was how he died, leaving his death as an example of nobility and a record of virtue not only for the young but for the greater part of the nation (2 Maccabees 6:18-24, 29-31).

⁷ The Biblical narrative puts the life of Elijah during the reign of Ahab king of Israel (c. 874-853 BC), and thus the killings to which Elijah refers (cf. 1 Kings 18:4) would have taken place before those described in the passages of Chronicles and Jeremiah quoted above.

⁸ “Indeed Elijah [Ar. *ihyās*] was one of the apostles. * When he said to his people, “Will you not be God wary? * Do you invoke Baal and abandon the best of creators, * Allah, your Lord and Lord of your forefathers?,” * they impugned him. So they will indeed be mustered [in hell] * [all] except Allah’s exclusive servants. * We left for him a good name in posterity. * ‘Peace be to Elijah!’” (Q 37:123-30).

How then might one explain the Qur'ānic presentation of the Jews as killers of the prophets? If we look to Islamic tradition for the answer to this question we might come to the conclusion that Muḥammad's rivalry with the Jews of Medina led him to develop increasingly hostile anti-Jewish polemic. This is the sort of conclusion suggested by the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article on Jews by Norman Stillman. Speaking of the Medinan period of Muḥammad's career Stillman comments: "During this fateful time, fraught with tension after the Hidjra, when Muhammad encountered contradiction, ridicule and rejection from the Jewish scholars in Medina, he came to adopt a radically more negative view of the people of the Book who had received earlier scriptures."⁹ From this perspective one might conclude that the Qur'ān describes the Jews as "killers of the prophets" because the Jews of Medina were trying to kill Muḥammad. This is the position of Rashīd Riḍā, who explains *Āl 'Imrān* (3) 21 (passage D above) with the remark: "The Jews desired to kill the prophet in the time when this verse and this Medinese *Sūra* were revealed."¹⁰

⁹ N. Stillman, "Yahūd," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition, 11:240.

¹⁰ Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1354/1935) and Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1323/1905), *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ḥakīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1427-28/2007), 3:183, ad Q 3:21. Among the classical *mufasssīrūn* Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) explains the report in Q 2:87 (passage B) that the Jews kill the prophets with reference to their desire to kill Muḥammad. Paraphrasing the divine voice of the Qur'ān, he relates: "You search for ways to kill Muhammad – peace and blessings of God be upon him – but I have protected him from you. Thus you cursed him and poisoned the mutton he was to eat." Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥusayn Aḥmad (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1987), 1:162-63, ad Q 2:87-89. The same report is found in Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), *Tafsīr*, ed. Muḥammad Bayḍūn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1424/2004), 1:122, ad Q 2:87. The mention of poisoned mutton refers to the account in the Prophet's biography by which, after the conquest of the Jewish settlement of Khaybar, Muḥammad received poisoned mutton from a Jew who plotted thereby to kill him. On this see Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 79, "Al-Maghāzī," 43 (*Bāb al-shāt allattī summit li-l-nabiy bi-khaybar*) (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1420/1999), 3:82.

Riḍā also reports (ad. loc.) a view found commonly in classical *tafsīrs*, that the earlier prophets whom the Jews killed include Zechariah (presumably Zechariah the father of John in the New Testament and the Qur'ān) and John (*yāḥyā* or John the Baptist of Christian tradition). For this view see *Tafsīr Muqātil*, ed. 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Shaḥāta (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2002; reprint of: Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, n.d.), 1:121, ad Q 2:87; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and Jalāl al-

There are two problems with this idea. First, there is no self-evident manner by which the nine Qur'ānic passages related to the killing of the prophets could be mapped out onto the traditional biography of the Prophet. The report to this effect in *al-Baqara* (2) 87 (passage B), a *sūra* considered by Nöldeke to be the earliest Medinan *sūra*, is just like that in *al-Mā'ida* (5) 70 (passage I), a *sūra* considered by Nöldeke to be the latest Medinan *sūra* (i.e. to date from a period when the Jews had already been eliminated from Medina). In other words, there is nothing in these verses which would seem to reflect a developing situation in the relationship between Muhammad and Jews (for example, that their murderous threats had become more or less threatening). Second, and perhaps more importantly, the Qur'ān never actually reports that the Jews sought to kill Muḥammad. In fact, the Qur'ān always reports that the Jews kill the prophets, and never speaks of any particular plot against this particular prophet.¹¹

Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, ed. Marwān Siwār, (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1410/1995), 9, ad Q 2:61. Another tradition found in classical *tafsīrs* (e.g. Ibn Kathīr, 1:102, ad Q 2:61) relates that the Israelites killed 300 prophets in a day. Ibn Kathīr reports that the Jews, after killing all of those prophets, opened their vegetable markets the same day. This report may be connected to Esther 9:15, in which the Jews are said to kill 300 of their Persian neighbors in Susa.

- ¹¹ The notion that such passages should be explained in light of certain moments from the biography of the Prophet necessarily involves a recourse to narratives which offer a context in that biography for a particular passage. A well-known source for this narratives is Wāḥidī's (d. 468/1076) work *Asbāb al-nuzūl*. On Āl 'Imrān (3) 181 (passage F above) he recounts:

Abū Bakr al-Siddiq entered a Jewish place of study and found a group of Jewish people gathered around one of them called Finhas ibn 'Azura, who was one of their doctors. Abu Bakr said to Finhas: "Fear Allah and embrace Islam, for by Allah you know well that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah who has brought the truth to you from Allah. He is mentioned in your Torah; so believe and accept the truth and grant Allah a goodly offering and He will make you enter the Garden and multiply your reward". Finhas responded: "O Abu Bakr, you claim that our Lord is asking us to lend Him our wealth. Yet, it is only the poor who borrow from the rich. ... it follows that Allah is poor and we are rich, for if He were rich He would not ask us to lend Him our wealth". Abu Bakr ... became very angry and struck the face of Finhas. ... Finhas went to [Muḥammad] and said: "O Muḥammad! Look at what your companion has done to me". [Muḥammad] asked Abu Bakr: "What has driven you to do what you have done?" He said: "O Messenger of Allah, this enemy of Allah ... claimed that Allah is

A different approach to the Qurʾān’s report that the Jews killed the prophets is offered by Muḥammad Ḥossein al-Ṭabaṭabāʾī (d. 1402/1982) and Betram Schmitz. Regarding *al-Baqara* (2) 61 (passage A above) Ṭabaṭabāʾī comments: “By God they did not strike [the prophets] with their hands, or kill them with their swords. Rather they heard the declarations (*aḥādīth*) [of the prophets] and proclaimed them, but removed things from them.”¹² On this same passage Schmitz concludes that the Qurʾān means to accuse the Jews only of infidelity to the prophets; it speaks of “killing” the prophets in a metaphorical sense only.¹³

Yet to arrive at this conclusion is to miss the manner in which Jews and Christians came to emphasize the killing of prophets as a central feature of Israel’s history. This development – the fruit in part of reflection on the story of Zechariah’s murder in 2 Chronicles and the references to the killing of the prophets in the Jezebel/Elijah narrative – is found already in Nehemiah 9.

The Book of Nehemiah tells the story of Nehemiah’s role in the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the return of the Babylonian exiles. After the rebuilding of the city walls Nehemiah gathers the Israelites

poor and they are rich. I therefore got angry for the sake of Allah and hit his face”. But Finhas denied that he ever uttered those words, and so Allah, exalted is He, revealed this verse (God has heard the saying of those who said, ‘Surely God is poor, and we are rich.’ We shall write down what they have said, and their killing the Prophets without right, and We shall say, ‘Taste the chastisement of the burning’). [This He did] to give the lie to Finhas and to confirm that Abu Bakr al-Siddiq [=the truthful] said the truth.

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qurʾān*, ed. Kamāl Zaghlūl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1424/2004), 127; English trans.: *Al-Wāḥidī’s Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, trans. M. Guezzou (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2008), 45, ad Q 3:181. In such cases – where the story seems to explain the Qurʾānic material in a conspicuous manner -- it is worth asking if the story was remembered from the time of the Qurʾān’s proclamation, or rather if it was written in order to explain the Qurʾānic passage.

¹² Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabaṭabāʾī, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-ʿĀlamī li-l- Maṭbūʿāt, 1418/1997), 1:192, ad Q 2:49-61.

¹³ “Bezieht sich diese Aussage auf den direkt vorgegebenen Kontext, meint auch hier ‘töten’ die gesamte Spannweite von ‘missachten’ über ‘davonweisen’ bis zum physischen ‘töten’; an dieser Stelle kann nur ‘missachten’, ‘zurückweisen’ oder auch ‘sich gegen ihn auflehnen’ gemeint sein, denn ‘getötet’ im physischen Sinn wurde Moses nicht!” B. Schmitz, *Der Koran: Sure 2 “Die Kuh,”* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009), 90.

together and commands them to obey the Law. A group of Levites then leads the people in a public confession. In describing the past sins of Israel the Levites declare, among other things: “But they grew disobedient, rebelled against you and thrust your law behind their backs; they slaughtered your prophets who had reproved them to bring them back to you, and committed monstrous impieties” (v. 26).¹⁴ This passage – which speaks of the slaughter of prophets (and not an individual prophet such as Zechariah son of Jehoiada) – seems to be an allusion to the story of Elijah in Kings. Now Elijah of course escapes death when he ascends to heaven in a chariot of fire, but the passage in Nehemiah suggests that the reference to the killing of prophets in the Biblical narrative of his life had a significant effect on the religious thought of later Jewish authors.

The narrative in Chronicles on the killing of Zechariah had a similar effect. The Aramaic Targum to Lamentations (a text generally dated to the first Christian centuries), recounts a tradition (found, as we will see, also in the New Testament) that the prophet Zechariah (to whom a prophetic book is attributed; i.e. *not* Zechariah son of Jehoiada mentioned in the citation of 2 Chronicles 24 above) was killed by the Jews.¹⁵ The Masoretic text of Lamentations 2:20 reads: “Look, Yahweh, and consider: whom have you ever treated like this? Should women eat their little ones, the children they have nursed? Should priest and prophet be slaughtered in the Lord’s sanctuary?” To this the Targum adds the following explanatory reflection: “As you killed Zechariah the son of Iddo, the High Priest and faithful prophet in the sanctuary of the Lord on the Day of Atonement because he admonished them not to do what was displeasing to the

¹⁴ I am grateful to Matthew Kuiper for referring me to this passage in Nehemiah and emphasizing its important place in the development of the theme discussed in this article.

¹⁵ On this cf. *Leviticus Rabbah* 10:3 (a text usually dated to the mid-7th century AD), which explains Lamentations 2:20 with a narrative by which the Israelites kill the “prophet” Hur (although Hur is not named a prophet, or killed, in the Bible; the killing seems to be a way to explain his disappearance from the Exodus narrative after 24:14): “*And Aaron was affrighted when he considered the slaughtering* (Exodus 32:5), [meaning], ‘he was frightened when he saw the slaughtered man before him.’ Aaron said [to himself]: What shall I do? They have already killed Hur who was a prophet.” *Leviticus Rabbah*, trans. H. Freedman, et al. (London: Soncino, 1983), 123. I am grateful to Prof. Michael Tzvi Novick for this reference.

Lord.”¹⁶

The rabbinic interpretation of this verse – which in its plain sense does not report that any prophets have been killed (it rather asks rhetorical questions) -- seems to be taken up in the New Testament, which has Jesus condemn the Jews for killing the prophets, and cite the case of Zechariah in particular:

*This is why -- look -- I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some you will slaughter and crucify, some you will scourge in your synagogues and hunt from town to town *and so you will draw down on yourselves the blood of every upright person that has been shed on earth, from the blood of Abel the holy to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. * In truth I tell you, it will all recoil on this generation. * Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused! (Mat 23:34-38).*¹⁷

¹⁶ The translation is from S.H. Blank, “The Death of Zechariah in Rabbinic Literature,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 12-13 (1937-38), 327-46. The Jerusalem Talmud (y. Ta’an. 4:9) includes an anecdote by which the Babylonian ruler Nebuzaradan discovers Zechariah’s blood boiling (for want of satisfaction) on the altar of the Jerusalem temple. Regarding this and other Jewish midrash on the death of Zechariah see Blank, 340-46 and more recently M. Swartz, *The Signifying Creator: Nontextual Sources of Meaning in Ancient Judaism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), ch. 5. I am grateful to Prof. Michael Tzvi Novick for his references to, and guidance with, the midrashic traditions on the death of Zechariah.

¹⁷ Cf. Luke 11:47-51:

*Alas for you because you build tombs for the prophets, the people your ancestors killed! * In this way you both witness to what your ancestors did and approve it; they did the killing, you do the building. * And that is why the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles; some they will slaughter and persecute, * so that this generation will have to answer for every prophet’s blood that has been shed since the foundation of the world, * from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the Temple.’ Yes, I tell you, this generation will have to answer for it all.*

Here Jesus accuses the Israelites of killing Zechariah *son of Barachiah*. This is not the Zechariah whose death is reported in 2 Chronicles 24 (who is the son of Jehoiada), but instead Zechariah, the prophet to whom the Biblical book Zechariah is attributed, and thus the same figure as “Zechariah the son of Iddo” (referred to in the Targum cited above).¹⁸

The killing of the prophet Isaiah, like that of Zechariah, is also reported in non-canonical Jewish sources. In the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* (a composite work dating from the 2nd century BC to the 4th century AD) the unfaithful Judaeen king Manasseh, son of the faithful (or, at least, repentant) Judaeen king Hezekiah (see 1 Kings 18-21), kills Isaiah (Isaiah himself predicts the killing during the reign of the father). Manasseh does so under the influence of the demon Beliar:

Cf. also the Lucan parallel to Matthew 23:38: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you refused! * Look! Your house will be left to you. Yes, I promise you, you shall not see me till the time comes when you are saying: Blessed is he who is coming in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 13:34-35). A connection between Matthew 23/Luke 13 and Qur’anic material on the killing of the prophets is proposed by Horovitz: *KU*, 40; cf. Paret, 20, ad Q 2:61. Regarding the relationship between the passages in Matthew and Luke see O.H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten* (Neukirchener-Verlag: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967), 20-58. Steck (p. 33ff.) argues that the passage in Luke is earlier and that “Son of Barachiah” in Matthew is a later interpolation.

¹⁸ The book of Zechariah begins: “In the second year of Darius, in the eighth month, the word of Yahweh was addressed to the prophet Zechariah (son of Berechiah) son of Iddo, as follows” (Zechariah 1:1). Ezra (5:1; 6:14) and Nehemiah (12:16) refer simply to Zechariah son of Iddo (hence the name as found in the Targum of Lamentations). Blank argues that the description of Zechariah in the Book of Zechariah as “*son of Berechiah* son of Iddo” is a later insertion meant to associate the author of Zechariah with Zechariah, son of Jeberechiah, who appears (with Uriah the priest) as a “reliable witness” to a tablet which the prophet Isaiah inscribes (Isaiah 8:2).

By having Jesus refer to the murders of Abel and Zechariah son of Berechiah, Matthew may mean to have him accuse the Israelites of the first murder of the Hebrew Bible (Abel) and the murder of the last of the prophets (as Jewish tradition generally holds Zechariah, along with Haggai and Malachi, to have been). Alternatively, the tradition in Luke, which seems to involve the murders of Abel and Zechariah son of Jehoiada, would have Jesus accuse the Israelites of the first and last murder of the Bible, if indeed by the time of Luke’s composition the Hebrew Bible had been arranged in its later canonical order, by which Chronicles is the last book.

*Because of these visions, therefore, Beliar was angry with Isaiah, and he dwelt in the heart of Manasseh, and he sawed Isaiah in half with a wood saw. * And while Isaiah was being sawed in half, his accuser, Belkira, stood by, and all the false prophets stood by, laughing and (maliciously) joyful because of Isaiah.¹⁹*

The tradition that Isaiah was sawed in half is known to Christian authors as well.²⁰ It may be that this tradition is alluded to in Hebrews 11 with the report that some (or one?) of the prophets were sawn in half:

*What more shall I say? There is not time for me to give an account of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, or of David, Samuel and the prophets. * These were men who through faith conquered kingdoms, did what was upright and earned the promises. They could keep a lion's mouth shut, * put out blazing fires and emerge unscathed from battle. They were weak people who were given strength to be brave in war and drive back foreign invaders. * Some returned to their wives from the dead by resurrection; and others submitted to torture, refusing release so that they would rise again to a better life. * Some had to bear being pilloried and flogged, or even chained up in prison. * They were stoned, or sawn in half, or killed by the sword; they were homeless, and wore only the skins of sheep and goats; they were in want and hardship, and maltreated. * They were too good for the world and they wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and ravines. * These all won acknowledgement through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, * since God had*

¹⁹ *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 5:1-2. Trans. M.A. Knibb in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1985), 2:163. The murder of Isaiah at the hands of Manasseh is also mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, b. Sanh 103b (and the Jerusalem Talmud: y. Sanh 10:2).

²⁰ Both Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 120:5) and Tertullian, (*De patientia* 14) refer to this tradition.

made provision for us to have something better, and they were not to reach perfection except with us (Heb 11:32-40).

Whether or not this passage indeed includes an allusion to the martyrdom of Isaiah, it is nevertheless important for what it shows of the prominence that the traditions of the killing of the prophets had gained by the time of the writing of the New Testament. These traditions were, for the most part, not found in the canonical Bible, but they were evidently known to both Jews and Christians.

Later Christians further developed traditions on the murder of the prophets, notably in a collection of narratives known under the title the *Lives of the Prophets*. The oldest version of the *Lives* is extant in Greek, although versions of this work appear in Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic, Arabic and Latin.²¹ It is traditionally attributed to Epiphanius (d. 403), the bishop of Salamis, but scholars today generally describe the author as Pseudo-Epiphanius. Although some hold that the *Lives of the Prophets* was first written by Jews and then adapted by Christians,²² David Satran argues convincingly that the

²¹ On this see D. Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1ff. The classical study of the text (updated by Satran) is T. Schermann, *Prophetarum vitae fabulosae* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907). Schermann also edited Greek and Latin versions of the *Lives* as *Propheten- und Apostellegenden nebst Jüngerkatalogen des Dorotheus und verwandter Texte. Texte und Untersuchungen 31.3* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907). The Syriac versions of the text were published by E. Nestle, first in a chrestomathy attached to his Syriac grammar: *Syrische Grammatik* (Berlin: Reuther, 1888), 86-107 (the 1881 edition of this chrestomathy includes only the “major prophets” of the Old Testament) and later with an apparatus and along with Greek versions: “Die dem Epiphanius zugeschrieben Vitae Prophetarum in doppelter griechischer Rezension,” *Marginalien und Materialien* (Tübingen: Heckenhauer, 1893), 1-64. On the origins and historical transmission of the *Lives* see (in addition to Satran), A.M. Schwemer, *Studien zu den frühjüdischen Prophetenlegenden* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995-96).

²² Notably C. Torrey, *The Lives of the Prophets* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 1946). N.b. esp. p. 10: “The little book is Palestinian through and through, and its atmosphere is distinctly that of pre-Christian times.” In fact, no Jewish versions of the work exist, and so arguments for a Jewish origin (based largely on supposed Semiticisms in the Greek, and on the idea that the work’s geographical references reflect the folk culture of pre-Christian Jewish Palestine) are necessarily speculative. More recently G. Xeravits supports the position of Torrey. See “Some Remarks on the Figure of Elijah in Lives of the Prophets,” *Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino García Martínez*, ed. T. Hilhorst and E.J.C.

Lives of the Prophets is a thoroughly Christian work.²³ In any case, for our purposes the key question is not the origin of the work, but rather its relationship to the Qurʾān. To this end it is particularly important to note that a version of the *Lives* in Syriac (a language intimately related with the Arabic of the Qurʾān) was composed already in the sixth century.²⁴

The *Lives of the Prophets*, unlike the canonical Old Testament, describes the murder of many of the prophets of Israel – Major or Minor – at the hands of their own people. According to the *Lives*, three of the four Major Prophets of the Old Testament were killed by the Jews:

1. Isaiah: “[He] died after he was sawn in two by Manasseh and was buried beneath the oak of Rogel.”²⁵
2. Jeremiah: “He died in Tahpanhes (Daphne) in Egypt when he was stoned by the people. He is buried in the area of the residence of Pharaoh, since the Egyptians honored him.”²⁶
3. Ezekial: “He is from the land of Arira, of the priests, and he died in the land of the Chaldeans during the captivity, when he had prophesied many things to those in Judea. The

Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill 2007), 499-508.

²³ Satran demonstrates that the work reflects the style and theological perspectives of Byzantine Christians such as Eusebius, Jerome, Athanasius, and Theodoret (see Satran, chs. 2 and 4). Both Torrey and Satran (pp. 121-28) translate the Greek text on the basis of the oldest manuscript (the so-called Codex Marchalianus).

²⁴ On this question S. Brock concludes that the Syriac version of the *Lives of the Prophets* “must go back at least to the sixth century.” S. Brock, “The *Lives of the Prophets* in Syriac,” *Essays in Honour of Michael A. Knibb* (Leiden; Brill, 2006), 37. Although the author of the Syriac *Lives of the Prophets* is generally named Pseudo-Epiphanius, Brock indicates that the text is closer to those Greek versions which are *not* attributed to Epiphanius (but rather to Vatican gr. 2125 [“anonymous”] and the “Dorotheus” recension). An early translation of a late Syriac manuscript of the lives was done by I.H. Hall: “The Lives of the Prophets,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 7 (1887), 28-40. Brock (pp. 27-31) translates a Syriac manuscript which includes the lives of the first nine (of the twelve) minor prophets. I am grateful to Prof. David Marshall for references to the Syriac versions of the *Lives*.

²⁵ *Lives of the Prophets*, trans. D. Satran, 121. Cf. the traditions from *The Martyrdom of Isaiah* and the Talmud mentioned above, n. 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121. The reference to “the people” is an allusion to Israel. On this reference see Steck, 249, n. 7 (“Hier sind freilich die Juden in Ägypten die Täter.”).

leader of the people of Israel there killed him, when he was rebuked by him for worshipping idols.”²⁷

4. Daniel died in peace in light of the *Lives of the Prophets*, it is understandable that the Qur’ān would say of the Jews: “Whenever an apostle brought them that which was not to their liking, they would impugn a part of them and a part they would kill” (Q 5:70; passage I).²⁸ Indeed it is telling that the Qur’ān never seeks to explain such oblique references further. In the context in which the Qur’ān was proclaimed – the Late Antique Near East – such passages would have needed no explanation.

At the heart of the *Lives of the Prophets*, it seems, is the veneration of Christians in the Late Antique Near East for martyrs who witnessed to the Christian gospel at the cost of their lives. In the *Lives* the prophets of the Old Testament become types of the Christian martyrs. The Jews are accused of killing the prophets of Israel who predicted Christ’s coming, as they are accused of killing Christ himself and those who would proclaim him.²⁹ The connection between the murder of the prophets, of Christ, and of the martyrs is seen in the account of the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts. Before his death Stephen declares to the Sanhedrin:

*You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears. You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. * Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted? They*

²⁷ *Lives*, trans. Satran, 123.

²⁸ The *Lives* also includes entries on 19 other prophets (the twelve known as authors of the “minor” prophetic books in the Bible and seven others). Of these three are said to have been murdered by the Israelites: Micah: “[He] was killed by Joran his son at a precipice, because he rebuked him for the impieties of his fathers” (trans. Satran, 125); Amos: “His son at last killed him by pummeling his temple with a club” (p. 125); and Zechariah son of Jehoida: “Joash the king of Judah killed him by the altar” (p. 126; cf. 2Ch 24:20-21).

²⁹ D. Satran notes how the *Lives* generally reflects the interest of early Christians in associating their saints with the prophets of the Old Testament: “This desire to forge a spiritual link between the contemporary holy man and biblical prophet found its perfect complement in the understanding, as expressed in the *Lives*, of the prophets themselves as precursors of the Byzantine saint” (p. 105).

*killed those who foretold the coming of the Upright One, and now you have become his betrayers, his murderers. * In spite of being given the Law through angels, you have not kept it (Acts 7:51-3).³⁰*

Christians would later connect the martyrdom of Stephen and the death of the prophets. In his *Ecclesiastica historia* (book 9, ch. 17) Sozomenus (d. ca. 450) recounts how the body of Zechariah the prophet was discovered along with the body of Stephen the martyr.

Thus while Jews and Christians shared an interest in the stories of the deaths of prophets, the use to which Christians put these stories was quite different. Christian use these stories as part of the Christian theodicy whereby the Jews long opposed – even to the point of murder -- the prophets whom God sent to them, prophets who predicted the coming of Jesus Christ. Now they have murdered Christ himself. This theodicy is suggested by the parable of the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33-43; Mark 12:1-9), and by Stephen’s speech in Acts.

Other passages of the New Testament extend the opposition of the Jews to Gods’ messengers to Christ’s followers. Thus Paul declares in 1 Thessalonians:

*For you, my brothers, have modeled yourselves on the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judaea, in that you have suffered the same treatment from your own countrymen as they have had from the Jews, * who put the Lord Jesus to death, and the prophets too, and persecuted us also. Their conduct does not please God, and makes them the enemies of the whole human race. (1Thessalonians 2:14-15)*

This same sentiment is found in Matthew 23:34-35 (cited above), which has Jesus declare: “This is why -- look -- I am sending

³⁰ An illuminating correspondence is found between this passage and the 155th verse of *al-Nisāʾ*. Stephen accuses the Jews of being a people “with uncircumcised hearts” who “killed those who foretold the coming of the Upright One,” and who became “his betrayers, his murderers.” In *al-Nisāʾ* the Qurʾān accuses the Jews both of having uncircumcised hearts and of killing the prophets. Two verses later (Q 4:159) it will describe how the Jews boast of having killed Jesus.

you prophets and wise men and scribes; some you will slaughter and crucify, some you will scourge in your synagogues and hunt from town to town. * and so you will draw down on yourselves the blood of every upright person that has been shed on earth.” Luke 11:49-50 is similar: “And that is why the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles; some they will slaughter and persecute, so that this generation will have to answer for every prophet’s blood that has been shed since the foundation of the world.’”

These Gospel passages anticipate the death of Christ and allude to the killing of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:3-12; Mark 3:19-20; Luke 3:19-20). Yet they are also condemnations of the Jews. The Jews, except for a few whom God has elected, are a people who oppose the prophets. To this effect Paul, in Romans, refers to the episode of Elijah on Mt. Horeb:

*What I am saying is this: is it possible that God abandoned his people? Out of the question! I too am an Israelite, descended from Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. * God never abandoned his own people to whom, ages ago, he had given recognition. Do you not remember what scripture says about Elijah and how he made a complaint to God against Israel: * Lord, they have put your prophets to the sword, torn down your altars. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me? * And what was the prophetic answer given? I have spared for myself seven thousand men that have not bent the knee to Baal. * In the same way, then, in our own time, there is a remnant, set aside by grace. (Romans 11:1-5).³¹*

Elsewhere in Matthew Jesus encourages his followers by comparing their suffering with the persecution of the prophets: “Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account. * Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you” (Matthew 5:11-12). The idea that the Jews are a people who killed the prophets becomes

³¹ This notion, that a few of the Jews have remained faithful, seems to be reflected in Qur’an passages such as 2:83, 88, 246; 4:46, 66, 155; 5:13, passim.

a central theme among the Syriac fathers. In the *Carmina Nisibena* Ephrem (d. 373) describes the Jews as a people who “[killed] the sons of the prophets and the prophets and threw [them] away.”³² In his *Hymns on Faith* (12:9) he declares: “From the killers (*qatūlē*) came the doctor who healed all.”³³

In his commentary on the *Diatesseron*, Ephrem reports a tradition that the Jews killed not only John the Baptist but also his father Zechariah:

*They killed Zechariah because he accepted Mary as a virgin, for the virgins used to gather into one place. Or, when the infants were being killed and his son, [who] was at his hand, was being demanded from him. Because he made [John] flee to the desert, they killed him on the altar, as our Lord had said.*³⁴

³² *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrer Carmina Nisibena, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (henceforth CSCO) 218-19, 240-41, ed. and trans. E. Beck (Louvain, Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1961-63), 67:2-10. English translation from C. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 59.

³³ *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrer Hymnen de Fide, CSCO* 154-55, ed. and trans. E. Beck (Louvain, Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1955 [vol. 154] and 1967 [vol. 155]), 58 (German trans., 42). In *Contra Julianum* (4:24) Ephrem refers to the Jews as killers of the prophets in his address to Jerusalem and Zion: “Behold you are at rest; you are at peace, then, and freed from demonic things and contact with evil spirits. They became confused and raved and crucified the Reviver of all, and they have always torn to pieces the two of you. In you they killed the prophets; in you they multiplied idols. With the image of four faces they put your faces to shame.” *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrer Hymnen de paradiso und contra Julianum, CSCO* 174-75, ed. and trans. E. Beck (Louvain, Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1957), 90. English translation from K. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), (227-57) 256. The reference to a four-faced image of the gold calf in the Temple reflects the translation of 2 Chronicles 33:7 in the Peshitta.

³⁴ *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, trans. C. McCarthy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 62-63. Ephrem's commentary reflects the joining of traditions on Zechariah the father of John the Baptist with the various figures named Zechariah in the Old Testament (on this see n. 18 above). He might have been influenced by Luke (11:51) who reports only that Zechariah perished “between the altar and the Temple” (Matthew [23:35] has “between the sanctuary and the altar”). Tellingly, Zechariah the father of John enters into the sanctuary (Luke 1:9) to burn incense at the opening of Luke's Gospel.

Thus according to Ephrem Jesus, John the Baptist, and John's father Zechariah were all killed at the hands of the Jews. In this Ephrem seems to apply to the New Testament the logic of traditions on the killing of the great prophets of the Old Testament.

Elsewhere Ephrem (like the authors of the New Testament) draws a connection between the legacy of the Jews as "prophet killers" and their ongoing threat against the believers. In the *Sermones de fide*, Ephrem warns the reader that the Israelites – the people who once killed the prophets – now seek to kill the soul of Christians.

*Then they murdered outwardly/now they murder
inwardly.*

*They wander through sea and land/in order to lead
those who followed to Gehenna.*

*They have no more prophets whom they can
murder outwardly/ as it was once their desire*

(3:325-36)

...

They use now the prophets/ whom they once killed.

*They use them and use them not/ in order to kill
with them in disputes.*

*They have killed the bodies of the prophets/ and use
the declarations of the prophets,*

*in order to kill, instead of the prophets/ those who
read the prophets*

(3:341-47; Syriac: d-ḥlāfnabīyē naqtol/l-aylīn
d-qārīn b-nabīyē)

...

*They slaughter the prophets/ like innocent lambs
Doctors came to them/ and they [the Jews] became
for them a butcher.*

Flee! Save yourselves from the violent [nation]/

Rush and take shelter with Christ!

(3:379-84).³⁵

With Ephrem the point is not simply that the Jews once killed the prophets – either of the Old Testament or of the New. His point is that the Jews once killed the prophets and they remain killers (*qatūlē*). In a similar manner the Qurʾān does not simply report that the Jews killed prophets in the past; it makes the killing of the prophets a Jewish trait and connects this trait with their later sufferings and their refusal to accept Muhammad.

*So they were struck with abasement and poverty,
and they earned Allah’s wrath. That, because they
would deny the signs of Allah and kill the prophets
unjustly.*

(Q 2:61b; passage A).

*They have earned the wrath of Allah, and poverty
has been stamped upon them. That, because they
would deny the signs of Allah and kill the prophets
unjustly.*

(Q 3:112, passage E).

*Then because of their breaking their covenant,
their denial of Allah’s signs, their killing of the
prophets unjustly and for their saying, ‘Our hearts
are uncircumcised’... Indeed, Allah has set a seal
on them for their unfaith, so they do not have faith
except a few.*

(Q 4:155, passage H).

The polemical description of the Jews as killers of the prophets among the Syriac fathers is not limited to Ephrem. Jacob of Serugh (d. AD 521), in his *Homily on the Nativity*, blames the “synagogue”

³⁵ *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones de fide*, CSCO 212-13, ed. and trans. E. Beck (Louvain, Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1961), 30-31 (German trans. 43-44). For a similar reference see Ephrem’s 19th hymn (v. 6) on unleavened bread: *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschahymnen*, CSCO 248-49, ed. and trans. Ed. Beck (Louvain: Peeters, 1964). I am grateful to Prof. David Freidenreich for this reference.

for the death of Hur (who, according to a rabbinical tradition, was killed by the Israelites):³⁶

*She stoned Hur/ and through Aaron she cast the
calf.*

*She reviled Moses/ and threw Jeremiah into the
well.*

*She is more skilled than us in idolatry/ which stems
from her mind;*

*She cast the image of four faces/ never having learnt
how to.³⁷*

In his *Homilies on Elijah* Jacob (reflecting on the words of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:10: “The Israelites have abandoned your covenant, have torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me”) turns Jezebel into a personification of sin, describing how “she” murdered Israel’s prophets:

*She threatened this saint/ the house of this
impudent woman,
and he trembled before her/ such that he removed
himself from her.
He knew that by her/ the blood of prophets had
been shed,
and which she had done/ she said she would do
again and he was sure.*

³⁶ On this see above, v. 15.

³⁷ On “reviling Moses” see Exodus 17:3 (passim); on casting Jeremiah into a well see Jeremiah 38:6; on the four faced image see 2 Chronicles 33:7 (the Peshitta makes the image here “four-faced”). The translation above is taken from T. Kollampampil, *Jacob of Serugh: Select Festal Homilies* (Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies, 1997), 106-7 (vv. 285-88). For the Syriac text P. Bedjan, *Cantus seu Homiliae Mar-Jacobi in Jesum et Mariam* (Paris and Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1902), (775-90) 788; reprinted in *Homilies of Jacob of Sarug*, ed. P. Bedjan (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006) 6:(163-78) 176. I am grateful to Prof. Sergey Minov for the reference to this passage.

*He experienced in his companions/ the anger of the
shameless woman,
for whom the blood of the prophets/ counted for
nothing.³⁸*

Thereafter Jacob describes the encounter of Elijah with the angel of the Lord on Mt. Horeb, explaining:

*That is, [Elijah] told [the angel]/ The children of
Israel have left your covenant,
they have burned your altars/ and they have even
killed your prophets by the sword.
And I alone Lord/ I have escaped from their hands,
and now they pursue me/ to take away my life
because of you.³⁹*

Similar language on the Jews as a nation of killers is found in Jacob of Serug’s “Letter of Consolation to the Himyarite Christians,” a treatise which Jacob wrote towards the end of his life in response to the persecutions of Christians in Himyar (a region of southern Arabia) by the Jewish king Yūsuf (Dhū Nuwās of Islamic tradition). Therein he addresses the Christians and explains:

*If you were being persecuted by the pagans, there
would be a pause to your pains and a cease to your
suffering. Now that the Jews, the enemies of the cross,
are arraying (themselves) against you, your pains
are greater than (ordinary) pains, and your crown
more triumphant than (the ordinary) crown. This
murderous nation stirred up a quarrel against you.
This (nation) is trained in killing and instructed in
bloodshed; and is rich in envy, and its heart is filled
with deceit; and is wise in persecuting, and knows
how to crucify; and is prepared to kill, and ready to*

³⁸ “The Second Homily on Elijah, when he ran away from Jezebel,” *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1905-1910), 4:(133-54) 134 (reprint: Gorgias, 2006). A French translation is available: *Le saint prophète Élie* (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1992), (483-507) 484-85.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:145-46 (French trans., 495).

*stone; and sets ambushes for the innocent, and its dagger is sharpened for the necks of the good; and its sword is drunk with the blood of the pure, and its blade is drawn against the back of the believers.*⁴⁰

The description of the Jews as both a “murderous nation” and a nation whose “heart is filled in with deceit” is reminiscent of Acts, where Stephen declares that the Jews are a nation of “uncircumcised hearts” who “killed those who foretold the coming of the Upright One” (Acts 7:51-52). The Qur’ān similarly connects the condition of the Jews’ hearts with their killing of the prophets: “Then because of their breaking their covenant, their denial of Allah’s signs, their killing of the prophets unjustly and for their saying, ‘Our hearts are uncircumcised’...” (Q 4:155a).⁴¹

Jacob wrote his “Letter of Consolation” in the sixth century, to a people in southern Arabia. Evidently, the idea of Jews as “killers of the prophets” was well known to Christians throughout the Late Antique Near East. It is telling, therefore, that the Qur’ān refers to this idea in a manner which suggests that its own audience would have found it familiar.

⁴⁰ Jacob continues: “The pagans hate you because they do not know your lord. The Jews, out of hatred of your lord, arrange suffering for you. An ancient enmity turns within them to persecute the disciples of the cross. They want to show that they are the rightful heirs of Annas and Caiaphas [see John 18] and the trained disciples of Judas, the traitor.” R. Schroter, “Trostschreiben Jacobs von Sarug an die himjaritischen Christen”, *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 31 (1877), 360-405. The Syriac text of this letter is also found in G. Olinder, *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae quotquot supersunt*, CSCO 110, ed. G. Olinder (Louvain, Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1952), 87-102.

⁴¹ Cf. Q 2:88. On the trope of the uncircumcised hearts of the Jews see also Jeremiah 9:24-25; Romans 2:28-29; Philippians 3:3; Colossians 2:11. Q 5:13 has God declare that He has cursed the Jews and “hardened their hearts.”