NOAH’S BOAT AND OTHER MISSED OPPORTUNITIES
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Abstract
This essay addresses the ways in which several of the most popular English translations of the Qurʾān treat cases in which the text draws on key biblical concepts and vocabulary. It suggests that when determining how such passages ought to be translated, one must take into account not only the meaning that fits the passage generally but also the extent to which the text reflects an intention to invoke, modify, alter, or ignore biblical precedent. In a number of cases, it is argued, many English translations adopt an anti-biblicizing translation, often a literal rendition, such as reference to the “ship” of Noah, that obscures the connection of the Qurʾānic passage with biblical tradition. The adoption of a biblicizing translation, such as referring to Noah’s “ark” instead, would in many cases render tangible a connection with biblical texts that was originally intended.

Introduction
It is not surprising to claim that the Qurʾān is closely related to biblical tradition and that particular aspects of Qurʾānic language are related to biblical language. A cursory reading of the Qurʾān is enough to show this, and any interested reader may find it out from a number of accessible secondary works. The majority of the characters that appear in the Qurʾān appear in the Bible. The biblical figures Moses and Abraham appear more frequently than any other figures in the text, and both are presented as models for the prophetic mission of Muḥammad. Judging on the basis of narrative prominence, one may argue that the hero of the Qurʾān is, in fact, Moses. The Qurʾānic conceptions of creation, the flood, prophecy, sin, the eternal soul, angels, Satan, judgement, paradise, and hell all have obvious connections with biblical tradition. Key Qurʾānic terms such as jannah ("heaven") and al-ṭūr ("the mountain," namely, Sinai) derive ultimately from Hebrew and Ar-

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amaic or Syriac scriptural terms. Nevertheless, even specialists in Qur’anic and Islamic Studies, both those who underestimate the indebtedness of the Qur’ān to biblical tradition and those who embrace it wholeheartedly and perhaps even exaggerate it in certain cases—let alone lay readers—often fail to see the forest for the trees. Much Qur’anic Studies scholarship appears to dance around certain basic issues without stating the obvious, and related to this set of blind spots regarding the relation of Qur’anic to biblical material is the failure of some, many, or most English translations to capture the biblical valences of particular Qur’anic terms.

All translators of the Qur’ān repeatedly face the following issue: when a Qur’anic term is related in some fashion to salvation history and to earlier texts or concepts in the Jewish and Christian traditions, to what extent should the translator make those connections obvious in the English rendition? Translators have grappled with this problem in different ways, often unsuccessfully, in my view. Such translations may have occurred through lack of insight or limited background knowledge. They are certainly facilitated by recourse to Qur’anic commentaries that ignore biblical references. They may have resulted from an active desire to maintain a distance between the Qur’ān and the Bible, whether on the part of Muslim translators seeking to uphold the superiority of the Qur’ān and Islam to other scriptures and religions or on the part of Jewish and Christian translators seeking to protect biblical tradition from outside encroachment. In the following remarks, I address several examples in which, in my view, at least a few and sometimes most or all of the English translations fail to convey a biblical allusion or invocation that was intended in the text.

“Noah’s Ship” (I)

fa-anjaynāhu wa-ašhāba ’l-safinati wa-ja’alnāhā āyatan li’l-‘ālāmin
And We rescued him and those with him in the ship, and made of it a portent for the peoples. (Q 29:15)

1. This essay draws on a limited number of translations of the Qur’ān into English. I could have cited dozens more English translations, not to mention translations of the Qur’ān into French, German, Italian, Spanish, and other European languages, but that would not have changed the overall point, since they all share, *grosso modo*, the same issues that are raised here, only varying in degree. The English translations I will cite include the following: Richard Bell (trans.), *The Qur’ān, Translated, with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs* (2 vols; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937–1939); Marmaduke Pickthall (trans.), *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); Abdullah Yusuf Ali (trans.), *The Holy Qur’ān: Text, Translation and
Thus, Marmaduke Pickthall renders the conclusion to a brief account of Noah and the flood in Sūrat al-‘Ankabūt (Q 29). Arthur John Arberry and Alan Jones render the verse in similar fashion:

Yet We delivered him, and those who were in the ship, and appointed it for a sign unto all beings. (Arberry)

We rescued him and those [with him] in the ship, which We made a sign for created beings. (Jones)

All three translators render the Arabic term safinah here as “ship.” One might wonder how they justified their choice of the term “ship” instead of “ark,” which one would expect in a retelling of Noah’s story. These translators may have been influenced by the fact that the terms used to designate Noah’s ark in the Qur’ān also refer to ordinary ships. For example, the ordinary boat in the story of Moses’s mysterious teacher in Sūrat al-Kahf is also designated as a safinah (Q 18:71.79). Similarly, while Noah’s vessel is most frequently termed al-fulk in the Qur’ān (Q 7:64, 10:73, 11:37.38, 23:27, 26:119, 36:41), the same word, fulk, is used for other types of boats in several other verses (e.g., Q 2:164, 14:32). Perhaps on this account, Pickthall chose to render Noah’s fulk, as well as safinah, throughout as “ship.” One could also argue that this situation contrasts with that found in the Bible, since the common word for “ship” or “boat” is ūniyyā (e.g., Prov 30:19, Jonah 1:3.4), while, in contrast, Noah’s ark is designated by a distinct term, tēbā. Keeping the English rendering consistent across the two categories of Noah’s vessel and of other ordinary vessels might signal to the audience a distinct difference from the biblical presentation.

While the translations of Pickthall, Arberry, and Jones are in a sense technically correct, because the word safinah does mean “ship” and the vessel portrayed in Q 29:15 certainly has the basic features of a ship, I consider them tactical blunders. There is something disturbing about this rendition of the verse, because the ship in question is clearly Noah’s ark, the same one that appears in Genesis. To call it otherwise somehow does violence to the story, as if to drive a wedge between the qur’ānic and the biblical version of the story. In this particular case, many other translators did not choose

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the path adopted by Pickthall, Arberry, and Jones, and instead translated *safīnah* as “ark.”

But We saved him and the companions of the Ark, and We made the (Ark) a Sign for all peoples! (Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

We saved him and those with him on the Ark. We made this a sign for all people. (Muhammad Abdel Haleem)

But him We saved, as also the passengers in the Ark, making it a wonder to mankind. (Tarif Khalidi)

In my view, these translations are more satisfying because they render transparent the connection of this particular passage with the biblical story of Noah’s ark and the flood.

In order to decide which translation is preferable, one must consider the intention behind the Qur’ānic passages in question. Is the scene in which Noah and his companions are saved supposed to recall the biblical story of Noah’s ark, is it intended to highlight a significant distinction between the two accounts, or is it purposefully ignoring the biblical account? In my view, the answer to this question is obvious: this scene is intended to recall its biblical counterpart, as many other passages do. This does not mean that such recall is always intended or that contrasts are not intended in other cases. Translating *safīnah* or *fulk* as “ark” is therefore preferable by far, on the grounds that it makes the intended connection all the more obvious, rather than obscuring or concealing it.

Noah’s ark is an inspiring symbol in the Qur’ān and in Islamic literature generally. For example, a recently published work on Shāfī’ī law bears the title *Safīnat al-najāh fī mā yajibu ʿalā ʿl-ʿabd li-mawlāh*, “The Ark of Salvation, on the Obligations of the Worshiper to His Lord.” This title, like hundreds of others throughout Islamic history, invokes the symbol of Noah’s ark as an indication that the book is indispensable for the reader’s religious instruction and soteriological needs. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350) authored *al-Kāfiyyah al-shāfiyyah*, “The Curative and Sufficient Treatise,” a theological treatise in which he championed orthodox Islamic theology, that of the “true monotheists” (*muwaḥḥidūn*), against the heretical theology of “anthropomorphists” (*mushabbihūn*), meaning extreme literalists, and “nullifiers” (*muʿtāţilūn*), meaning the Muʿtazilis, who in his opinion did not give God’s attributes their full due. In it he wrote, “the nullifier has fallen

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behind and has missed the ark of salvation, but the true monotheist has embarked on Noah’s ark.”

This fourteenth-century author is taking up a common trope that likens “the saved sect” (al-firqah al-nājiyyah), the one sect that has adopted the correct doctrine—of the seventy-two into which Islam was predicted to divide in a famous hadith report—with the passengers on Noah’s ark.

Another large set of examples related to the doctrinal use of Noah’s ark is provided by Shi‘i tradition. Shi‘is regularly refer to the Imams as Noah’s ark—the point being that the believer can only hope for salvation if he or she pledges allegiance to the Imam of the age. They often cite the hadith report. “The likeness of my descendants (ahl baytī) is that of Noah’s ark (safīnat nūh): whoever embarks on it will be saved, and whoever fails to do so will be drowned.”

The Shi‘i comparison of their own sect with Noah’s ark is a fundamental feature of their theology. It resembles the Christian comparison of the Church to Noah’s ark, also ubiquitous, occurring perhaps most famously in the papal bull of Boniface VIII (1294–1303), Unam sanctam (1302). And with the symbol of Noah’s ark is associated the principle, parallel to Shi‘i doctrine of the Imamate, of nulla salus extra ecclesiam, “there is no being saved outside the church.” Without engaging in a grand tour of medieval Islamic theology, one may recognize that the image of Noah’s ark, in the Qur’an and in ideas inspired by the Qur’an throughout Islamic culture, carries with it the same sorts of symbolic value that it does in Jewish and Christian tradition. And while these are obviously post-qur’anic


examples, this particular symbolic use of Noah’s ark is in keeping with and inspired by the Qur’ān’s presentation. In Noah’s story as in many other cases in the Qur’ānic punishment stories, a tiny group of believers are saved, while those who did not embark on the ark are annihilated (cf. Q al-Shu‘arā’ 26). There is thus a very compelling reason to make that connection apparent when one is translating the Qur’ān into English.

This is not to say that no significant differences exist between the Qur’ānic and the biblical versions of Noah’s story (or between the Qur’ānic and biblical versions of many other stories). In fact, a quite radical difference is associated with the denouement of the two versions, which seem to be diametrically opposed. Both accounts end with prominent reference to a sign from the Almighty, but whereas the sign of the rainbow in the biblical account signals God’s promise that He will never again destroy the world by flood, in the Qur’ānic account God leaves the ark as a sign to indicate that He will continue to annihilate future peoples who reject the teachings and warnings of their prophets. The point here, though, is that the role the ark plays in saving Noah and his companions is parallel and similar in the Bible and the Qur’ān, and thus a biblicalizing translation, calling attention to that similarity, is entirely appropriate. Noah’s ark is the sole means available of escaping all-encompassing destruction, and this is as true of the Qur’ānic version of the story as it is of the biblical version. The ark is no ordinary ship.

Questions of Etymology, Influence, and Translation

Deciding how to translate Qur’ānic terms that resonate with biblical texts is not a simple matter, and it is tied to general views of the extent of biblical influence on the Qur’ān and views of etymology and borrowing. The question of the existence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur’ān is an old one, both in Islamic letters and in Western scholarship. Medieval Muslim scholars realized that a number of terms in the Qur’ān were related to Hebrew, Aramaic/Syriac, Persian, Greek, Latin, South Arabian, and Ethiopic words. They were conscious that this was potentially problematic for two reasons. First, it opened up the possibility that the Qur’ān contained borrowings from Jewish and Christian texts, and secondly, it threatened to contradict the explicit text of the Qur’ān, which states in several passages that it is Qur’ānan ‘arabiyyan, “an Arabic Qur’ān” (Q 12:2, 20:113, 39:28, 41:3, 42:7, 43:3). The main argument put forward by medieval Muslim commentators was that, even if some Qur’ānic words were related to foreign etyma, they had been assimilated into Arabic before the Qur’ān was revealed and so,
since they were \textit{bona fide} Arabic words, the Qur'ān's characterization of itself as an Arabic Qur'ān could not be impugned.

In the European tradition of Qur'ānic Studies, the investigation of foreign words in the Qur'ān and biblical influence on Islam's sacred text have been strongly linked.\footnote{Josef Horovitz, “Jewish Proper Names and Derivatives in the Koran,” \textit{Hebrew Union College Annual} 2 (1925): 145–227, 208–209; Arthur Jeffery, \textit{The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān} (Leiden: Brill, 2007 [1938]); D. S. Margoliouth, “Some Additions to Professor Jeffery’s Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ān,” \textit{JRAS} 71 (1939): 53–61; Andrew Rippin, “Foreign Vocabulary,” \textit{EQ}. s.v. (2002). For a historical overview of this topic, see the works of Jeffery and Rippin cited here.} However, it must be recognized that the matter is a bit tricky, in part because the main biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac are Semitic languages that have many cognates in common with Arabic. It is thus possible that certain qur'ānic words are similar to corresponding words in the Bible simply because they derive from the same original etymon in proto-Western Semitic and were not borrowed into the Qur'ān from biblical texts. This is obviously the case for numbers, basic kinship terms, the words for day, night, year, the sun, and so on. Less obvious, perhaps, is the term \textit{hajj}, designating the pilgrimage to Mecca in the Qur'ān (Q 2:189–197, 22:27), which phonetically resembles the Hebrew word \textit{ḥag} (“festival” or “feast day”; e.g., Exod 10:9 and 12:14, Num 28:17). This is not a borrowing from the Hebrew Bible or from other texts in Jewish tradition but rather, in all likelihood, already designated a religious ritual of some sort in proto-West Semitic. That original etymon came eventually to designate pilgrimage in Arabic and a religious festival in Hebrew. Similarly, Arabic \textit{ṣalām} (“peace”) and Hebrew \textit{šālôm} (“peace”) occur as greetings in the Qur'ān (e.g., Q 4:94, 6:54, 7:46, 10:10, 13:24) and the Hebrew Bible (Gen 43:23, Judg 6:23, Dan 10:19), respectively.\footnote{Irene Lande, \textit{Formelhafte Wendungen der Umgangsprache im Alten Testament} (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1949), especially “Die Grüssformel,” pp. 2–12.} It seems likely that this is not a case of the borrowing of biblical texts or concepts into the Qur’ān. Rather, \textit{ṣalām} and \textit{šālôm} have a common origin in proto-Western Semitic. \textit{Ṣalām} (“peace”) was probably already a standard form of greeting in the ancestral language, and the usage lived on in the daughter languages.

There are, however, intermediate cases, in which similar terms may be signs of borrowing even though they happen to be cognate words. The words for cucumbers—Arabic \textit{qīthṭā}, Hebrew \textit{qīṣṣūā}—and onions—Arabic \textit{baṣal}, Hebrew \textit{bāṣāl}—are obvious cognates that derive from an ancient, common origin in the Semitic language tree. One should not suppose that these words owe their existence in the Arabic lexicon to the fact that they
have been imported into the Qurʾān from biblical Hebrew. It is nevertheless clear that the single verse that includes these words in the Qurʾān, “And recall when you said, ‘O Moses, we can never endure one kind of food, so call upon your Lord to bring forth for us from the earth its green herbs and its cucumbers and its garlic and its lentils and its onions’” (Q al-Baqarah 2:61), is closely related to a particular biblical passage, Num 11:4–5. That text reads, “The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, ‘Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers (haqqiṣṣuʿīm), melons, leeks, onions (ḥabbāṣālim), and garlic.’” Comparison of the two texts show that, while they differ somewhat in terms of both content and order, the Arabic text is clearly a version of the biblical statement, including these prominent cognates. Another mixed example is that of the mathal, which has most often been translated as “parable” in Qurʾānic Studies, even though it also designates “proverb, comparison, exemplum” in the text, in addition to “parable.” Mathal is cognate with Hebrew māšāl, which has a similarly wide range of meanings, and both presumably go back to the proto-West Semitic “mathal, which, in all likelihood, originally meant “proverb.” Even though parables were important in both Jewish and Christian tradition before the advent of Islam, the term mathal cannot be a borrowing from Hebrew māšāl, since it would not have contained a -th- in that case; instead, proto-Semitic -th- remained -th- in Arabic but changed to -š- in Hebrew. However, even if this is true, the Qurʾānic parables may have been influenced to some degree by rabbinic parables or the parables of Jesus.

In other cases, however, certain foreign terms in the Qurʾān clearly derive from biblical tradition and have been borrowed along with more or less their same, original meanings. So, for example, al-asbāt refers in the Qurʾān to the “tribes,” that is, the twelve tribes of Israel (Q 2:136.140, 3:84, 4:163, 7:160). This word derives from the Hebrew šabāṭîm, “tribes,” and is obviously distinct from the ordinary Arabic word for tribe, qabilah. The word al-tūr is used in the Qurʾān to refer to Mount Sinai (Q 2:63.93, 4:154, 19:52, 20:80, 23:20, 28:29.46, 52:1, 95:2). It derives from Aramaic tūrā (“the mountain”), and it is substituted instead of the ordinary word for mountain in Arabic, jabal, or Hebrew har. After al-nār, “the fire,” the most frequently used term for hell in the Qurʾān is jahannam, which derives ultimately from gēʾ [ben-] hinnōm (“the Valley of [the Son of] Hinnom”; Jer 7:31 and 19:2–6).9 In these and other cases, there is little to suggest that these words were simply cog-

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9. It has been suggested that the Arabic term derives indirectly from Hebrew
nates that had been passed down the Semitic language tree or that they had been borrowed into Arabic long before the Qur’ân was produced. It seems clear that they derive from biblical or other Jewish and Christian texts.

However, one must exercise caution in interpreting such terms, for certain borrowed words may be used in entirely different senses. As Walid Saleh has explained, the field of Qur’ânic Studies is plagued by a collection of bad interpretive habits that he labels “the etymological fallacy.” The fallacy includes, first, the assumption that whenever the Muslim exegetes do not agree on the meaning of a Qur’ânic term, then it must derive from a foreign term. The second assumption is that whenever a foreign etymon has been identified, the interpretive problem has been completely solved. Saleh points out that neither of these assumptions is warranted and that the procedure is flawed, especially because it does not take into account the meanings of the terms in the contexts in which they occur. Among a number of examples, he cites the term hanîf, which, many scholars agree, is related to the Syriac hanpâ (“heathen”), but which obviously has a positive and quite distinct meaning in the Qur’ân. On the basis of the Qur’ânic evidence, for example, the term hanîf “reflects a notion of basic religious impulse in humanity towards dedication to the one God.” The point is that understanding the term hanîf as meaning “heathen” does not at all explain its correct meaning in the Qur’ân. This entire discussion is directly relevant to the topic addressed here because most of the “foreign” terms identified in such investigations are related to biblical and post-biblical Jewish and Christian traditions. Having identified a particular Qur’ânic term as being related in some fashion to Jewish and Christian texts, one may not assume that it is being used with the same or even with a similar meaning, without examining carefully the contexts in which it occurs.10 Even if the term is clearly related to a biblical precedent, the Qur’ânic text may be recognizing, accentuating, playing down, modifying, distorting, or even completely ignoring a term’s biblical origin. Knowing the original usage, or an earlier us-

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age, of a word does not guarantee that one understands its later usage. For example, “manufactured” decidedly does not now mean “made by hand,” even though that was the original sense.\footnote{11}

The anti-biblicizing or alienating rendering of the references to Noah’s vessel is emblematic of the practice of many Qur’anic translators with regard to elements of biblical tradition that are invoked in the Qur’an. They regularly opt for a literal translation, often the most common sense of the word in question. They may not have noticed that the word could be rendered otherwise. They may have neglected or overlooked the connection of particular vocabulary with the Bible, something that could be due to lack of familiarity with certain aspects of the biblical tradition. Alternatively, they may have decided to avoid a particular translation out of an intention to create some distance between the Qur’an and the Bible. This type of translation practice occurs from both directions: Muslim translators may strive to separate the Qur’an from the Bible so that the text does not appear derivative and so that Islam as a whole maintains a more distinct profile. Jewish and Christian translators may strive to make the Qur’an appear more distinct and distant from biblical tradition and similarly may stress Islam’s distance from Judaism and Christianity. In either scenario, translators may have ideological biases or goals behind their overall approach, using the distinctive nature of Islam to argue for its superiority on the one hand and its inferiority—or at least its failure to merit inclusion with the other “Abrahamic” faiths—on the other hand.

This strategy of division is taken to an extreme when allāh, the Arabic term for the biblical God, is not translated as God, but left in transliterated Arabic form, a practice that is quite common. For example, a revised version of Yusuf Ali’s Qur’an translation was produced in 1989 by Amana Publications with official backing of the government of Saudi Arabia. One of the striking features of this version was that all of Yusuf Ali’s mentions of “God” were corrected, so to speak, to “Allah.”\footnote{12} In a typical answer to the question whether the name allāh can be translated, one pundit in a Kuwaiti newspaper argues that, since the names of God are known by direct designation in scripture (tawqif), translations must therefore take into account the original contexts in which they occur and the meanings intended in those contexts. He argues that use of the English word “God”

can conjure up worshipped beings other than Allah, whose definitions and characteristics do not correspond to those of Allah. In his view, the God that the Christians worship is not the single and singular being worshipped by Muslims, by which he apparently—and typically—refers to the Christian Trinity. Therefore, the word allāh in foreign language translations should either be retained in the Arabic script or presented as “Allah” in Roman letters. Some Christian authors make the same argument from the other side. Even if one sets aside alarmist evangelical polemics such as Allah, God of the Moon: Why We Should Fear the Islamic Cult, somewhat more careful writers such as the Catholic theologian Felix Körner argue that one must not assume that allāh can be translated as “God” on account of the different theological understandings attached to those terms in Christianity and Islam. Despite the obvious importance of Judaism for a discussion of this topic, it is interesting to note that it is framed, on both sides, primarily as a conflict between Christian and Islamic theology.

A similar difference of opinion may be seen with regard to the translation of biblical personal names that occur in the Qur’ān. Perhaps the most consistent of the popular English translations in this regard, Muhammad Habib Shakir’s translation keeps all of the names of biblical characters in their Arabic forms, using “Ibrahim” instead of “Abraham,” “Musa” instead of “Moses,” “Yusuf” instead of “Joseph,” and so on, as if to suggest to Jewish or Christian readers: Don’t think that our Ibrahim and our Musa are the same as your Abraham and your Moses. Similarly, Michel Lagarde’s decision to retain the Arabic forms of biblical names in his translation of al-Suyūṭī’s substantial manual of the Qur’ānic sciences, al-Itqān fi ʿulūm al-Qur’ān, apparently reflects a similar view, that Ibrahim and Abraham cannot, in fact, be considered the same character on account of differences in interpretation between the Bible and the Qur’ān. With regard both to allāh and to the Ar-

16. Michel Lagarde (trans.), Le parfait manuel des sciences coraniques: al-Itqān fi
abic names of biblical figures, however, there are inconsistencies in translation practices. Pickthall’s translation uses both “Allah” and “God” frequently, and the logic behind the alternation is not clear. Many translations, such as that of Pickthall, regularly give the ordinary English versions of most biblical names, such as “Noah,” “Moses,” “Abraham,” “Lot,” and so on while at the same time retaining the Arabic form “Imrān” without rendering it as “Amram,” the ordinary English version of the name of Moses’s father.

While theological considerations clearly play a part in Qur’ānic translation practices regarding the name of God and the biblical personal names, I do not believe that they are the major deciding factor in the other examples examined here. In most cases, the translators are choosing the most common literal translation for a term that has biblical associations, so it may be that they simply were unaware of the connection. Most instances in which I argue that the translations fail to emphasize the biblical valences of terms are simply cases of a type of inertia. With regard to most of the examples examined here, translators have tended to follow the interpretive choices of earlier translators or common usage in secondary scholarship in Islamic Studies. This tradition has been influenced ultimately both by Muslim commentaries on the Qurʾān and by Western scholarship in Islamic Studies generally. The examples presented suffice to indicate that there is no simple divide with regard to the treatment of biblical allusions in the Qurʾān between Muslims and Christians, conservatives or liberals, traditionalists or modernists, nor is it the case that some translators consistently capture all the biblical allusions, while others consistently miss or conceal them. The point is, rather, that even translators whom one might expect to be favorably disposed to a biblicizing rendition often miss the opportunity, for whatever reason, to employ such a translation. In the end, many of these cases are simply the consequence of following the tradition of earlier Qurʾān translations. Whatever the cause of the adoption of anti-biblical or alienating translations, in many cases they go against both the letter and the spirit of the Qur’ānic text.

Several aspects of Western Qurʾānic Studies’ historical development may have contributed to the neglect of biblical valences in Qurʾān translations into English and the European languages. Some of the blame lies with the lack of attention to the relationship between the Qurʾān and the biblical tradition that was a by-product of a general slump in Qurʾānic Studies in the mid-late twentieth century. One cause of this was the break-up of the

critical mass of Qur’anic Studies scholars in Germany following the rise of the Nazi party. In addition, Qur’anic Studies early on developed distinct silos or sub-genres of scholarship, such that discussions of the relationship of the Qur’ān and the Bible tended to be excluded from general introductions to the Qur’ān. The topic was absent from Gustav Weil’s Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in den Koran (1844), Nöldeke’s influential Geschichte des Qorans (1860 and 1909–1930), and Régis Blachère’s Introduction au Coran (1947, 1959). Richard Bell included a short discussion of the topic in his Introduction to the Qur’ān (1953), but Montgomery Watt effectively edited it out of his revised version of Bell’s work, published 1970, because he felt that discussion of the topic would offend Muslims and work against cordial Christian-Muslim dialogue. In the field of religious studies in the latter half of the twentieth century, many scholars interested in the Qur’ān were influenced by the ideas of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who argued that, in order to take non-Christian religions seriously, scholars in religious studies needed to examine non-Christian scriptures such as the Qur’ān with particular attention to the ways in which Muslims have understood the text over the centuries. One practical consequence of his ideas was to shift attention of scholars whose interests lay in Islamic scripture from the Qur’ānic text to tafsīr.17 Moreover, most translations of the Qur’ān have not been undertaken by experts in Qur’anic Studies, but by scholars in other fields, such as literature, history, and philosophy, who did not incorporate advances in Qur’anic Studies into their translations. It is difficult to assign particular translation decisions to any of these factors, but they all worked to downplay attention to the influence of biblical texts on the Qur’ān. In the end, as mentioned, the main factor for the persistence of anti-biblicizing, or non-biblicizing, translations may simply be inertia in the history of Qur’ān translation, in which the common practice of many who have undertaken new translations has

been simply to adopt one of the earlier translations as a basis and modify it in some respects.

“God’s House” (II)

_Bayt _is the ordinary word for house in Arabic, though it can take on senses such as “room,” “tent,” “spiderweb,” “beehive,” and a host of others. In one set of passages in the Qur’ān, this term is used to refer to the Ka‘bah, the rectangular building that was Mecca’s main shrine before the advent of Islam and later the focus of daily Islamic prayer. In these verses, English translations most often render the term as “house.” However, I suggest that it means “temple” in this context and that it ought to be translated as such. The most common word for temple in the Semitic languages is in fact _bayt_, and this usage presumably goes back to proto-Semitic. The Akkadian cognate _bitu_, for example, means “house, dwelling, temple, sanctuary, palace, region, household, family, property,” and the genitive construct _bit ilī_, literally, “house of god,” is a standard Akkadian term for “temple.” In Hebrew, the temple in Jerusalem is _bēt hammāqiḏāš_, literally, “the house of holiness” (2 Chr 36:17), which becomes _bayt al-maqdis _in Arabic, though that term does not occur in the Qur’ān. Significantly, the biblical text also refers to the temple in Jerusalem as _bēt YHWH_, “the house of Yahweh” (e.g., 1 Kgs 3:1, 2 Kgs 24:13). The term “the house of God” (_bēt hāʾēlōhīm_), a label that corresponds closely to _bayt allāh _in the Qur’ān, is used to refer to the tabernacle at Shiloh (Judg 18:31).

Use of the term _bit/bēt/bayt_ to mean “temple” obviously originates in an analogy between a human master’s house and the house of a god. The divinity lives in this house, which is recognized as his or her special property. Like the owner of a mundane estate, he or she has servants who run the household, clean the rooms, tend the grounds, prepare and serve meals, and entertain, pamper, and flatter their master or mistress. The emphasis on God’s transcendence in later Jewish and Christian tradition and in the Qur’ān made such analogies between house and temple less obvious, apt, and doctrinally acceptable. In modern English, the close connection between an ordinary house and a temple is mainly lost. One can still refer to a center of worship as a house of God, with the difference that one is not signaling that He actually resides at that address. Despite the existence of that turn of phrase, when the Ka‘bah is referred to as a “house” in English, this fails to carry the weight of veneration that the designation “temple” does.

Muslims do not pray towards Mecca because it is the native town of the Prophet, but rather because it is the location of a biblical temple. The early
Muslims originally prayed toward Jerusalem on the grounds that it was the site of Solomon’s temple. When it was revealed in the Qur’ān that the Kaʿbah had been built by Abraham and Ishmael but subsequently corrupted by Arab pagans, this was connected with the idea that it had originally been consecrated as a temple to the biblical God.18 The Prophet Muḥammad’s mission was framed in part as a project to restore Abraham’s temple to its original purpose. Moreover, the Kaʿbah was the first temple, since Abraham lived centuries before Solomon, whose grand monument was actually the second temple. As Angelika Neuwirth puts it succinctly: “Mecca is thus ‘the first temple of God.’”19 This understanding is clear from Q Āl ʾĪmārān 3:96: inna awwala baytin wudi’a liʿl-nāsi laʾlladhi bi-bakkata (“The first temple erected for mankind is certainly that at Bakkah”), Bakkah being understood as an alternative designation of Mecca. Since the Kaʿbah is portrayed as a precursor of other biblical temples, the many references to the Kaʿbah as a “house” (Q 2:125.127.158, 3:96, 5:2.97, 8:35, 14:37, 22:26, 106:3) should preferably be rendered as “temple.” Accordingly, the epithet al-bayt al-harām (Q al-Māʾidah 5:97) should be “the sacred temple” or “the inviolable temple,” and the epithet al-bayt al-ʿatīq (Q al-Ḥajj 22:29.33) should be “the ancient temple.”

The view that bayt in Qur’ānic usage means “temple” has been rejected by at least one investigator in the field of Qur’ānic Studies, on the basis of what is, in my view, an ultimately unconvincing argument. In Le Seigneur des tribus: L’Islam de Mahomet, Jacqueline Chabbi undertakes an analysis of the rise of Islam that concentrates on its setting in the geography of the Ḥijāz and in tribal society of the time. This attempt to emphasize the Arabian background of Islam and the Qur’ān is an important corrective to the works of Wansbrough and other scholars who treat both as related entirely to biblical traditions and downplay or completely ignore the influence of pre-Islamic Arabian pagan religion. At the same time, an exclusive emphasis on the Arabian background risks downplaying the strategies of adopting biblical history as the central framework of Qur’ānic salvation history and of rejecting certain pre-Islamic Arabian concepts such as the poetic virtues of extravagant generosity, violence, and pride and loyalties based primarily on solidarities of clan and tribe that clearly play an important role in the Qur’ān and in the early Islamic movement. In one chapter of her work, Chabbi describes the physical space of Mecca, addressing, among

other things, the nature of the Ka‘bah. She argues that the Ka‘bah was not a temple, suggesting that the term *bayt* in Arabic differs considerably from its Hebrew counterpart in that *bayt* is much less concrete in conception, because it means “tent” or any place where one spends the night. She argues that in it were combined two conceptions, neither of which corresponds to that of a temple: a sacred enclosure and a betyl or sacred stone in which the power of the divinity was concentrated. Neither is an actual building. This argument is based on certain important observations, such as the fact that the Ka‘bah is associated with a betyl, the black stone that is embedded in its wall, and that the term *bayt* was applied to sacred stones—betyl derives from *bet el* (“a house of god”)—which were conceived of as receptacles for the powers of particular gods. It is also an argument from silence: Chabbi is reluctant to term the Ka‘bah a temple not only because she is engaged throughout her work in downplaying the connections of Islam and the Qur‘ān with biblical tradition and correspondingly emphasizing the distinct Arabian tradition but also because little information has been preserved about what used to occur inside the Ka‘bah, suggesting that all the important ritual activity, and primarily circumambulation, took place around the Ka‘bah. This ignores a number of reports about the idols that were housed inside the Ka‘bah, such as a statue of the god Hubal, along with other decorations, such as paintings of Mary and Jesus, Abraham and Ishmael. Even if those accounts are apocryphal, it is not unreasonable to suppose the use of the interior of the Ka‘bah for ritual activity on the basis of analogy with other shrines and scattered hints in Islamic literature such as Hishām b. al-Kalbi’s (d. c. 206/821) *Kitāb al-Aṣnām.* Crucial, also, is the recognition that, whatever the pre-Islamic notions of the Ka‘bah were, it was transformed in the Qur‘ān and early Islamic tradition and reinterpreted as a biblical temple dedicated to the worship of the one God.

“The Disasters” (III)

The term *al-mu‘tāfikāt* occurs three times in the Qur‘ān, in all cases in a list of earlier rebellious peoples who were punished through God’s wrath. The singular form *al-mu‘tāfikah* appears once (Q al-Najm 53:53), and the

plural form *al-mu’tafikāt* twice (Q 9:70, 69:9). In Q 53:53, *al-mu’tafikah* occurs immediately after reports of God’s destruction of ‘Ād, Thamūd, and Noah’s people (Q 53:50–52). In Sūrat al-Hāqqah, *al-mu’tafikāt* occurs after a description of the destruction of Thamūd and ‘Ād (Q 69:4–8). It is mentioned along with “Pharaoh and those before him” (Q 69:9–10), suggesting that they represent one of the communities that were destroyed before the time of Moses and Pharaoh. In Q al-Tawbah 9:70, *al-mu’tafikāt* occurs in a list of annihilated communities, after mention of the folk of Noah, ‘Ād, Thamūd, the folk of Abraham, and the dwellers of Midian. In all cases, then, the term occurs together with names of earlier peoples who were destroyed by God, and so likely refers to a parallel, historical people who were subjected to God’s wrath.

With regard to form, the word *mu’tafikah* is an active participle of form VIII, from the root combination ‘-f-k. It thus appears, at first glance, to be related to the term *ifk* (“lying, deception”; Q 24:11.12, 25:4, 29:17, 31:43, 37:86.151, 46:11.28) and *affāk* (“inveterate liar”; Q 26:222, 45:7), but these cognates do not appear to give an appropriate meaning for the contexts in which *al-mu’tafikah* and *al-mu’tafikāt* occur. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall renders the term variously in his translation. In Q 53:53, he interprets *al-mu’tafikah* as a proper noun, refraining from translating it: “And Al-Mu’atifikah He destroyed.” In Q 69:9 he translates it as “the communities that were destroyed”: “And Pharaoh and those before him, and the communities that were destroyed, brought error.” In Q 9:70, he translates the term as “the disasters”: “Hath not the fame of those before them reached them—the folk of Noah, A’ad, Thamud, the folk of Abraham, the dwellers of Midian and the disasters (which befell them)?” First, these are three distinct translations for as many verses, and while that might be required in other circumstances, it appears that the three contexts here do not differ considerably, and a single rendition would have been appropriate. Secondly, “disasters” is certainly wrong, for the context does not suggest that *al-mu’tafikāt* are the means by which the nations of the past that appear earlier in the verse were destroyed. Rather, the fact that they occur in a list along with various destroyed nations of the past, parallel with them, suggests that the term must refer to another destroyed nation.

Scholars of Qur’ānic Studies have long recognized that *al-mu’tafikah/al-mu’tafikāt* derives ultimately from biblical Hebrew and that it refers to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham Geiger did not address the term in his 1833 work, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*, but Aloys Sprenger suggested that *al-mu’tafikah/al-mu’tafikāt* derives from rabbinic uses of the verb *h-p-k* (“to overthrow”) to describe the act by which
God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Hartwig Hirschfeld suggested that al-mu’tafikah derives from the Hebrew noun mahpekā (“the overthrow”), a term used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Josef Horovitz suggested that the al-mu’tafikah/al-mu’tafikāt derives from Aramaic mahpektā in the Targums or hafēkā or other nominal forms, arguing that it was assimilated by being couched in the form of a participle of the form-VIII Arabic verb. Heinrich Speyer and Arthur Jeffery mentioned these interpretations without, however, endorsing them explicitly, and Jeffery pointed out that the term is “certainly Arabic in its form.” Richard Bell viewed the derivation from Hebrew mahpekā proposed by Hirschfeld probable, and Paret accepted it as established. Overall, a compelling case can be made that al-mu’tafikah/al-mu’tafikāt derive ultimately from Hebrew mahpekā, perhaps through Aramaic.

In the Bible, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not simply an etiological account explaining the desolation of the southern plain of the Dead Sea; it also serves as an exemplum of divine punishment for sin and disobedience. It is used in later biblical accounts in a typological fashion, serving as the model or analogue for Babylon, Edom, Jerusalem, or other cities, suggesting that the present corruption of society would, if it continued,

27. Bell, Introduction to the Qurʾān, 124.
29. The exact process by which mahpekā or mahpektā ended up as al-mu’tafikah/ al-mu’tafikāt in Arabic by being modified and adapted to the particular Arabic participial pattern maf′alāh and the reason for this occurrence remain unclear. Despite the phonetic similarity, there is a certain semantic discrepancy of shift between the two forms, since mahpekā refers to God’s act of destruction, whereas al-mu’tafikah/al-mu’tafikāt evidently refer to the cities that were destroyed. The common Arabic nominal pattern maf′alāh would match Hebrew mahpekā more closely in form. Perhaps that form was not favored because it usually serves as a noun of place and the intention was to create a cognate form that would ostensibly describe the cities that were destroyed.
cause the city in question to meet the same fate that Sodom and Gomorrah had met centuries earlier. It is joined suggestively in various passages of the New Testament with Noah’s flood and the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians as examples of the dire consequences of disobedience to God (e.g., Luke 17:26–32, Rev 11:8). This typological usage continues to appear in later Jewish and Christian literature.

Sodom and Gomorrah are regularly invoked in the Hebrew Bible, especially by the later prophets, most often to make analogical arguments about contemporary society in Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah addresses his audience as follows (Isa 1:9–10):

Unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

Here Isaiah refers metaphorically to the rulers and the people of the kingdom of Israel as the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah, making the point that their general sinfulness would have caused their doom had it not been for a small group of the righteous who continued to exist within the community, upholding correct behavior and thus averting disaster. Ezekiel also uses an analogical argument to denounce his contemporaries, inhabitants of the southern kingdom of Judah (Ezek 16:46–48):

Your older sister was Samaria, who lived to the north of you with her daughters; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you with her daughters, was Sodom. You not only followed their ways and copied their detestable practices, but in all your ways you soon became more depraved than they. As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done.

The message is that the cities of Judah are even more sinful than Sodom and its counterparts, the implication being that they risk an analogous destruction. Jeremiah makes a similar comparison of the city of Jerusalem (Jer 23:14):

I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem a horrible thing: They commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness. They are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah.
Here he complains specifically about sinful and evildoing prophets, as well as ordinary inhabitants of Jerusalem, comparing them to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The catastrophic end of Sodom and Gomorrah came to be known in later strata of the Bible as hammahpēkā, “the overthrowing.” The term mahpēkā derives from the accounts in Gen 19 of God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. At several points in the narrative, the text employs forms of the verb “to overthrow” in order to describe God’s act of destruction: “that I will not overthrow (ḥāpkā) the city of which you have spoken” (Gen 19:21), ... “and He overthrew (wayyahāpōk) those cities, and all the plain ...” (Gen 19:25); “And God sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow (ḥahāpēkā), when He overthrew (behāpōk) the cities in which Lot dwelt” (Gen 19:29). On account of such uses of derivatives of the tri-consonantal root h-p-k, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—and of the other cities of the plain at the southern end of the Dead Sea—became known as hammahpēkā, “the overthrowing,” as a pithy characterization of the historical event.

Analogical references to Sodom and Gomorrah in later books of the Bible regularly use the term mahpēkā to describe the particular act of their destruction:

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans’ pride, shall be like God’s overthrow (kōmahpēkat ēlōhim) of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Isa 13:19)

I have overthrown some of you as when God overthrew (kōmahpēkat ēlōhim) Sodom and Gomorrah. (Amos 4:11)

As God overthrew (kōmahpēkat ēlōhim) Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighbor cities thereof, the Lord says that no man shall abide there, nor shall any son of man dwell therein. (Jer 50:40)

In all of these cases, the phrase kōmahpēkat ... (“like the overthrow of ...”) is used regularly to designate the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah while threatening later societies with a comparable fate. It is this usage from which the qur’ānic term for Sodom and Gomorrah apparently derives.

Typological usage ties the qur’ānic mu’tafikāt with the biblical mahpēkā. The passages in which the term al-mu’tafikāt occurs make similar analogical arguments, holding up the destructions of bygone nations as examples of what will happen to the contemporary audience if they fail to heed the

30. I would like to thank my colleague Shalom Goldman for first pointing this out to me.
warning of the Prophet Muhammad. It is therefore clear that *al-mu’tafikāt* is related to the biblical *mahpēḵā* (“the overthrowing”) and refers to Sodom and Gomorrah, which are never referred to explicitly by those names in the Qurʾān. *Al-mu’tafikāt* must mean, literally, “the overturned cities,” referring to God’s method of destruction, and the fact that the term is related to *mahpēḵā* has to do with the fact that the Qurʾān is drawing on biblical tradition in framing the entire genre of the punishment stories that play such a prominent role in the text.

The Qurʾān provides some corroboration that *al-mu’tafikāt* is not just etymologically related to the Hebrew terms for biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Several qurʾānic passages make it clear that the qurʾānic understanding of the act of destruction corresponds to the “overthrow” that appears in the Bible. Q 53:53 uses the verb *ahwā* (“cast down, cause to fall”) to describe the destruction: *wa‘l-mu’tafikāta ahwā* (“and He cast down the *mu’tafikah*”; Q 53:53). Two other verses describe the act of destruction using the explicit phrase *ja‘almā ‘āliyahā sāfilahā* (“We made its uppermost part its lowermost part” or “We made its high part its low part”; Q 11:82, 15:74). Especially the last two verses go along with the sense of “overthrowing,” and this may indicate an understanding that the term *al-mu’tafikāt* was connected with that idea.

In contrast to Pickthall’s rendition, some other translations capture the meaning of “overturned” cities found in the Hebrew Bible, and Yusuf Ali refers to Sodom and Gomorrah explicitly once. Thus Yusuf Ali:

> Hath not the story reached them of those before them?—The people of Noah, and ‘Ād, and Thamûd; the people of Abraham, the men of Midian, and the Cities overturned. (Q 9:70)

> And He destroyed the Overthrown Cities (of Sodom and Gomorrah). (Q 53:53)

> And Pharaoh, and those before him, and the Cities Overthrown, committed habitual Sin. (Q 69:9)

And thus Bell:

> And the overturned (cities) He cast down. (Q 53:53)

> Pharaoh, and those before him, and the overwhelmed (cities) committed fault. (Q 69:9)

Shakir’s translation has the following renderings:
Has not the news of those before them come to them; of the people of Nuh and Ad and Samood, and the people of Ibrahim and the dwellers of Madyan and the overthrown cities. (Q 9:70)

And the overthrown cities did He overthrow. (Q 53:53)

And Pharaoh, and those before him, and the Cities Overthrown, committed habitual Sin. (Q 69:9)

Finally, here is Alan Jones:

And he also overthrew the overturned settlements. (Q 53:53)

And Pharaoh and those before him and the overturned settlements brought error. (Q 69:9)

The translations “overturned” or “overthrown,” modifying “cities” or “settlements,” captures quite directly the connection with the biblical image of the destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the plain.

Several other translations render al-mu’tafikah/al-mu’tafikat in somewhat different fashions. Arberry uses “subverted,” which in one sense is synonymous with “overturned”:

Has there not come to you the tidings of those who were before you—the people of Noah, Ad, Thamood, the people of Abraham, the men of Midian and the subverted cities? Their Messengers came to them with the clear signs God would not wrong them, but themselves they wronged. (Q 9:70)

... and the Subverted City He also overthrew. (Q 53:53)

Pharaoh likewise, and those before him, and the Subverted Cities — they committed error. (Q 69:9)

I would prefer “overturned” to “subverted” on the grounds that “subvert” is often understood to mean “undermine,” which would be incorrect here, since the understanding is that the city is being raised up, inverted, and smashed to the ground.

In yet other cases, translators have chosen “overwhelmed” rather than “overturned”:

Has there not come to them the report of those before them, the people of Noah, and ‘Ad and Thamûd, and the people of Abraham, and those of Midian, and the overwhelmed (cities)? (Q 9:70; Richard Bell)
Have they not heard the tidings of those before them: the people of Noah, ‘Ād, Thamūd, the people of Abraham, the men of Madyan, and the overwhelmed settlements? (Q 9:70; Jones)

In my view, this particular diction does not fit the context. The use of “overwhelmed” suggests that the cities were flooded or covered over, whereas the biblical mahpeša appears to describe God’s act of raising them up, inverting them, and smashing them to the ground. Muhammad Abdel Haleem uses the more generic term “ruined cities” to render al-mu’tafikah/al-mu’tafikāt:

Have they never heard the stories about their predecessors, the peoples of Noah, ‘Ād, Thamud, Abraham, Midian, and the ruined cities? (Q 9:70)

... that it was He who brought down the ruined cities. (Q 53:53)

Pharaoh, too, and those before him, and the ruined cities: these people committed grave sins. (Q 69:9)

While this translation certainly fits in with the general logic of the punishment stories, in which nations of the past are in fact ruined, this translation is less than ideal. First, it breaks or conceals the connection with biblical diction, and secondly, it obscures one of the crucial features of the punishment stories. The annihilations of past nations occur in specific ways. One realizes from the beginning of these accounts that those who disobey God and reject the Prophet will inevitably meet their fate and be destroyed, but the particular mode of destruction visited upon them is a point of acute interest: Noah’s people are destroyed by a flood, ‘Ād by a wind, and Sodom and Gomorrah by being overturned. Abdel Haleem’s generic reference to ruination thus removes a key element of the story.

“The Burning Tree” (IV)

The scene in which God selects Moses to be his prophet is well known from the Book of Exodus, and it is generally known by reference to its most striking element, “the burning bush” (Exod 3:1 – 4:17). It is a crucial scene in the Hebrew Bible, for it recounts God’s commission of Moses as a prophet, whereby he is assigned the task of confronting Pharaoh and rescuing the Hebrews from oppression. It stands as a model for prophecy in general, and it presents God speaking directly to a human prophet, stressing the intimate contact between Moses and God and at the same time the overpowering presence of the Lord on hallowed ground. It provides the archetype of pro-
prophetic miracles—the snake turning into a staff and Moses’s hand turning white—through which the legitimacy of prophecy is established.

Versions of this scene in which God commissions Moses as his messenger to Pharaoh occur in five Qur’anic passages of varying length (Q 19:51–53, 20:9–48, 26:10–16, 27:7–12, 28:29–35). The scene is crucial in the same ways, and for the same reasons, as it is in the Bible. Three of the five passages refer explicitly to the fire that attracts Moses’s attention (Q 20:9–11, 27:7–8, 28:29–30). A notable difference is that whereas in Exodus Moses goes to investigate the fire in the wilderness out of curiosity, because the bush is not being consumed by the fire, in the Qur’an he goes in order to fetch a firebrand or live ember for his family (ahl)—probably meaning here his wife—evidently to help start their own fire to cook a meal (Q 20:9, 27:7, 28:29). All three passages imply that some sort of wood is burning, but only one, Q al-Qaṣṣaṣ 28:30, refers explicitly to the burning bush. Given the close connection of these passages with the events portrayed in Exod 3–4, it is surprising that most translations of the Qur’an into English refer to a “tree” that burns, and not a bush. To refer to “the burning tree” is to make the scene somehow strange and unfamiliar, as if it referred to a forest fire and not to one of the most striking and dramatic scenes of God’s presence in the Hebrew Bible.

At the outset, it is worth pointing out that “bush” is a perfectly fine translation of the word that occurs in the Qur’anic text, Arabic shajarah. Shajarah is indeed rendered commonly as “tree,” and this is certainly the first sense that appears in the dictionary. However, the Arabic term may refer to leafy plants that vary greatly in size. For example, Q al-Ṣaffāt 37:147 depicts Jonah being cast up on the seashore, where he is protected by a gourd vine (shajarah min yaqṭin) that grows over him to conceal his body from the view. The context indicates that the “tree” in question is a plant that grows low to the ground. Shajarah can thus be translated as “bush” while adhering closely to the original text and without doing any violence to it, but this option is rarely taken in English translations of the Qur’an.

Some of the widely used English Qur’an translations render Q 28:30 as follows:

And when he reached it, he was called from the right side of the valley in the blessed field, from the tree: “O Moses! Lo! I, even I, am Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.” (Pickthall)

But when he came to the (Fire), a voice was heard from the right bank of the valley, from a tree in hallowed ground: “O Moses! Verily I am Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.” (Yusuf Ali)
But when he reached it, a voice called out to him from the right-hand side of the valley, from a tree on the blessed ground: “Moses, I am God, the Lord of the Worlds.” (Abdel Haleem)

When he came to it, a voice cried from the right of the watercourse, in the sacred hollow, coming from the tree: “Moses, I am God, the Lord of all Being.” (Arberry)

Arriving at the fire, a voice called out to him from the right side of the valley, at a blessed spot, and coming from the tree: “O Moses, it is I, God, Lord of the Worlds.” (Khalidi)

All of these examples use the term tree to refer to what is evidently the burning bush. Only a few translators whose translations I have examined use “bush.” Richard Bell has the following:

When he came to it, a voice called to him from the right-hand bank of the wādī, in the blessed vale, out of the bush: “O Moses, lo, I am Allah, Lord of the worlds.”

Muhammad Habib Shakir, though he in many other cases shows a tendency to avoid biblical vocabulary, renders this passage as follows:

And when he came to it, a voice was uttered from the right side of the valley in the blessed spot of the bush, saying: O Musa! Surely I am Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

In my view, the translations of Bell and Shakir are in this respect superior to the others, since they preserve the critical term “bush” as the exact site of Moses’s direct encounter with God.

In this case, the qurʾānic text certainly does not evince a strategy of separating this scene from its biblical forerunner, despite some obvious differences between the two accounts, including the fact that the Hebrew text uses the term hassōneh, “the bush” (Exod 3:2.3), and not hāʾēṣ, the common Hebrew word for “tree,” and the fact that the scene opens with a statement that the angel of the Lord, that is, the angel of Yahweh, appeared to Moses in the flames coming out of the midst of a bush (Exod 3:2), whereas in the Qurʾān there is no mention of an angel. The general equivalence of the scenes and the role they play in establishing Moses’s prophecy and setting up his later confrontation with Pharaoh are clear, and this equivalence is corroborated by many other more specific correspondences. For example, God’s statement to Moses in Exod 3:14, ‘ehyeh ‘āsher ‘ehyeh (“I am that I am”), is certainly reflected in the Qurʾān’s emphatic statement inni anā ʾllāhu rabbu ʾl-ʾālamin (“I, indeed I, am God, Lord of the Worlds”; Q 28:30). The
emblematic nature of this scene is made poignant by the Islamic tradition’s assignment to Moses of the epithet kalim allāh (“the one to whom God spoke”) on the basis of their interaction in this scene and by several other verses that refer to it, such as Q 28:44: “You [Muḥammad] were not present on the western side of the mountain when We gave Our command to Moses: you were not there.” Insisting on translating the term shajarah here as “tree” rather than “bush” obscures the invocation of the scene in Exodus that is obviously intended.

“The Chest of Tranquility” (V)

The ark of the covenant appears prominently in Q 2:248, in the course of an account of the exploits of Saul (Arabic ẖāliṯū). The verse features a prophet who arose after the time of Moses and who corresponds to Samuel but is unnamed in the text. The Qurʾānic passage presents in a few verses, Q 2:246–251, a highly condensed version of the events recounted in 1 Sam 4–17. The verse of interest for the present discussion occurs after the prophet, again, presumably Samuel, has appointed Saul king of the Israelites (Q 2:247; cf. 1 Sam 10:24–25, 11:14 – 12:4). In Q 2:248, the unnamed prophet promises the Israelites future victory over their enemies. This is followed by a description of one of Saul’s military campaigns, before the momentous battle in which David defeats Goliath, sealing Israel’s victory over the Philistines (Q 2:250–251; cf. 1 Sam 17). Shakir translates the key verse as follows:

And the prophet said to them: “Surely the sign of His kingdom is, that there shall come to you the chest in which there is tranquility from your Lord and residue of the relics of what the children of Musa and the children of Haroun have left, the angels bearing it; most surely there is a sign in this for those who believe.”

32. In Q 2:249, Saul is described as forbidding the Israelites from drinking from a river when they cross it. Some scholars have argued that this scene is based on an erroneous conflation of the story of Gideon with the story of Saul’s campaign, which differs at this point. Saul ill-advisedly makes the members of the army swear that they will not eat, and as a result they become weak. The temptation is honey in a forest, and not the river water. Neal Robinson and Walid Saleh, however, have argued that such quibbles miss the point of the Qurʾānic story. See Neal Robinson, Discovering the Qurʾān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text (London: SCM Press, 1996), 217–218; Walid Saleh, “In Search of a Comprehensible Qurʾān: A Survey of Some Recent Scholarly Works,” Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies 5 (2003): 143–162, 155–157.
First, the “chest” here is clearly meant to be the ark of the covenant. The qur’ānic term for the ark of the covenant is *al-tābūt*, which occurs in this sense only in this verse. In Q 20:39, the word’s only other occurrence in the Qur’ān, tābūt refers to the vessel in which Moses’s mother placed him when she set him afloat on the river (cf. Exod 2:3). Geiger identifies tābūt as a borrowing from Aramaic tābūtā (“ark”), though Nödeke argues that it derives from Ethiopic tābōt. Though the Hebrew in the Bible for “ark of the covenant,” ʿārôn habbarit, is quite different, the noun tēbā, the same word used for Noah’s ark and the vessel of reeds in which Moses was placed by his mother, a cognate of tābūt, is used for the ark of the covenant in the Mishnah. Most other English translations of the Qur’ān capture the connection of the term tābūt in this verse with the ark of the covenant, but they regularly fail to capture the biblical allusion to God’s “presence” in the ark, conveyed by the term *shekinah* in rabbinic Hebrew, which corresponds to Arabic *sakīnah* in the qur’ānic text. Most English translations of the text render *sakīnah* with a term related to “calm” or “tranquility” instead:

Their prophet said to them, “The sign of his authority will be that the Ark [of the Covenant] will come to you. In it there will be [the gift of] tranquility from your Lord and relics of the followers of Moses and Aaron, carried by the angels. There is a sign in this for you if you believe.” (Abdel Haleem)

And their Prophet said unto them: Lo! The token of his kingdom is that there shall come unto you the ark wherein is peace of reassurance from your Lord, and a remnant of that which the house of Moses and the house of Aaron left behind, the angels bearing it. Lo! Herein shall be a token for you if (in truth) ye are believers. (Pickthall)

Their prophet said to them, “The sign of his sovereignty is that the ark, in which there is an assurance from your Lord, will come to you, and a remnant of that which the family of Moses and Aaron left behind, borne by the angels. In that there is a sign for you if you are believers.” (Jones)

And (further) their Prophet said to them: “A sign of his authority is that there shall come to you the Ark [of the Covenant], with (an assurance) therein of security from your Lord, and the relics left by the family of Moses and the family of Aaron, carried by angels. In this is a Symbol for you if ye indeed have faith.” (Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

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All of these translations render *al-tâbût* as “the ark” or “the ark of the covenant.” However, they render the term *sakînâh* “[the gift of] tranquility” (Abdel Haleem); “peace of reassurance” (Pickthall); “an assurance” (Jones); and “(an assurance) therein of security” (Abdullah Yusuf Ali). In doing so, they are in agreement with many commentaries on the Qur’ân, which gloss *sakînâh* as *tumaʾinâh* (“reassurance”).\footnote{34} The meaning “tranquility” derives from one of the main meanings of the triconsonantal root *s-k-n* in Arabic, “to be quiet, calm,” and the translations of “assurance” or “reassurance” derive from a combination of the understanding of this Arabic root and a consideration of the context, probably influenced by commentaries on the verse. In my view, these translations of the term *sakînâh* do not adequately capture the image invoked, which is related to the representation of the ark of the covenant in the Hebrew Bible.

The Qur’ânic term *sakînâh* has long been recognized as a borrowing from Jewish tradition, and the general interpretation of its use in the Qur’ân has followed for the most part the same lines from the beginning. Silvestre de Sacy identified *sakînâh* as a borrowing from Hebrew already in 1829, explaining, “Or qui ne voit que ce n’est autre chose que la *schékînâ*, c’est-à-dire la *présence de la majesté divine* ou, comme s’exprime Moïse, *la gloire de Dieu* qui, reposant sur le tabernacle, annonçait la présence de la divinité.” He added, “On peut conjecturer, par les deux passages de la surate 48, que Mahomet lui-même attachait à ce mot une idée de calme et de sécurité.”\footnote{35} Subsequently, Abraham Geiger and many other scholars recognized Hebrew *shekhînah* as the etymon of *sakînâh*.\footnote{36}

The Hebrew term shekhinah is a verbal noun meaning “dwelling, occupying” that derives from the verb shakhan, yishkhon (“to dwell”), just as the triconsonantal root s-k-n also means “to dwell, inhabit,” as well as “to be calm” or “to be at rest.” It is used to mean God’s “indwelling,” that is, His “presence” or “aura.” The functional, idiomatic equivalent to the term in Arabic would probably be ḥadārah or ḥudūr (“presence”) and not, for example, sukūn (“being quiet” or “being at rest”), even though both Hebrew and Arabic attach both general meanings, residence on the one hand and calm, rest, or quiet on the other, to the triconsonantal root combination sh-k-n/s-k-n. The history of the term shekhinah is complex. A number of modern studies focus on shekhinah as representing the feminine aspect of the divine, something that became important in mysticism of the medieval kabbalah tradition and that has been emphasized in modern scholarship on account of its potential connections with feminist thought. The consen-

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sus in biblical scholarship is that the term *shekhinah* first developed as a euphemism in the Targums, the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. It is generally understood that the term was used to replace the mention of God in passages that sound too anthropomorphic in the original Hebrew. When confronted with such anthropomorphic passages, the scholars who produced the Targums often referred to the *shekhinah*’s being located somewhere rather than referring to God directly. So, for example, Exod 34:6, “The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,’” is rendered by Onqelos as “The Lord made his presence pass in front of him, and he proclaimed, ‘O Lord! O Lord! Compassionate and gracious God, who keeps anger at a distance and abounds in doing true goodness.’”39 Likewise, Exod 34:9, “And he said, ‘If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Presence of the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance,’” is rendered as follows: “And he said, ‘If now I have found compassion before You, O Lord, let the Presence of the Lord now walk among us; although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our iniquities and our sins, and make us Your possession …”40 In both of these examples, “the Lord”—i.e., Yahweh in the original Hebrew—has been replaced by “the presence (*shekhinah*) of the Lord” in order to avoid stating that God is simply walking among humans. According to Bernard Grossfeld, the translator of the Targum of Onqelos into English, the term *shekhinah* is used here instead of God because these verses appear to contradict a statement in Exod 33:20 that dictates that no man can survive seeing God directly.41

The interpretation of *shekhinah* as a euphemism designed to tone down the anthropomorphic implications of some verses in the earliest historical strata of the biblical text is certainly valid, but scholars in Biblical Studies, in my view, have exaggerated the attendant leap between biblical Hebrew and later use of the term *shekhinah*. It is true that the exact term *shekhinah* does not occur in the Hebrew Bible; the first historical attestations are in the Targums and rabbinc Hebrew. The form *pe’ilah* became much more frequent in later Hebrew than it was in the Hebrew Bible; it came to be a standard form of the verbal noun of verbs of the *qal* pattern in rabbinc

41. Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Exodus*, 96–97, n. 3. Grossfeld points out that Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan uses the same periphrasis, while the Targum of Neophyti and the Fragmentary Targums (P, V) use “the Glory of His Divine Presence.”
Nevertheless, verbal nouns of this form already occurred in the Bible. An example is hâlikôt (“goings, ways, processions”; Ps 68:24, Prov 31:27, Hab 3:6), a plural of hâlikā, which matches shekhinah in form. In addition, scholars seem to overlook the key role that cognates of shekhinah play in the Book of Exodus. Chief among these is mîskân (“dwelling place”), the Hebrew term for the tabernacle, the mobile precursor of the temple, whose construction is described in great detail in Exod 25–31 and 35–40. The term is obviously based on the conception that God is present in a specific locale; the tabernacle is called “the dwelling place” because God dwells there. This understanding of God’s physical residence is stated explicitly in several passages using perfect verbs: “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell (wâšâkantî) among them” (Exod 25:8); “Then I will dwell (wâšâkantî) among the Israelites and be their God” (Exod 29:45); “And I will dwell (wâšâkantî) among the sons of Israel” (1 Kgs 6:13). Other similar verses use the active participle: “You shall send away both male and female; you shall send them outside the camp so that they will not defile their camp where I dwell (sôkên) in their midst” (Num 5:3); “You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord am dwelling (sôkên) in the midst of the sons of Israel” (Num 35:34). The “dweller” was originally the idol of the divinity, who inhabited the tabernacle and the temple generally, and the ark of the covenant specifically. A number of biblical passages, such as the report that the God of the Israelites repeatedly knocked over Dagon, the idol of the Philistines in their temple after they had captured the ark of the covenant, strongly suggest


that He assumed the form of a similar idol (1 Sam 5). One could thus argue that the term shekhinah was implied already in the text of Exodus, and it is plausible that the instances of the term in later texts were merely recording an earlier, oral usage.44

Later strata of the Bible reveal that attempts were made to remove vestiges of idolatry from the religion of the Israelites but that facets of earlier beliefs continued to be relevant nevertheless. Direct references to an idol were for the most part removed—except that the incident of the Golden Calf in Exod 32 appears to be a back-handed admission that the Hebrews used to worship Yahweh as an idol in the form of a calf or cow—but the idea remained that God’s power or presence could be located in a particular place. The divinity at certain times made His presence known, and then He could be sensed by those in the vicinity. Other terms used to describe God’s nebulous presence in the Hebrew Bible are “cloud” (‘ânân) and “glory” (kābôd; 1 Kgs 8:10–13, 2 Chr 5:13–14 and 7:1–3). When the doctrine of God’s transcendence was adopted in the Israelite religion and mentions of the physical idol were suppressed, the understanding came to be that the ark was associated with God’s aura or presence, envisaged as invisible but nevertheless located or concentrated in a particular area. While it is clear that the Qur’ānic term sakīnah cannot have derived directly from the Bible and must have come from later Jewish or Christian texts, the concept of God’s presence is not only a post-biblical development.

The term sakīnah occurs six times in the Qur’ānic text (Q 2:248, 9:26.40, 48:4.18.26). As seen above, the translators render this term regularly in English translations as “tranquility,” “assurance,” or “reassurance,” and this is true not only in Q 2:248, but also in the other verses in which it occurs. However, the other instances do not occur in the midst of biblical narratives, so the connection with the Bible is attenuated. For example, Q 4:84 is translated as follows:

He it is who hath sent down the Assurance in the hearts of the believers, that they may add faith to their faith; To Allah belong the hosts of the heavens and the earth, and Allah hath become knowing, wise. (Bell)

[It is] He who sent down the reassurance into the hearts of the believers that they might add faith to their faith—to God belong the hosts of the heavens and the earth; God is Knowing and Wise. (Jones)

44. Indeed, one might even suggest that the term was used as a euphemism for the idol of Yahweh that was written out of descriptions of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle.
Again, we see the use of “assurance” or “reassurance.” It is not immediately clear what the connection between sakînah in Q 2:248 and other similar verses would be with the biblical shekhînah, and this requires some careful consideration.

In Q 2:248, the sakînah is used in a clearly biblical context, a scene that portrays a battle between the Israelites and the Philistines. It is associated with the ark of the covenant, as it is in the Bible. Furthermore, it is associated closely with battle, as it is in the Bible. In the books of the Hebrew Bible, one of the main functions of the ark of the covenant is to be marched out with the army of the tribes of Israel when they battle their enemies. The ark brings the very presence of God into their host and, on account of the deity’s awesome power, both terrifies the enemy and infuses the army of Israel with the courage and determination to fight and to emerge victorious. 1 Samuel does not include a verse in which Saul utters the statement that appears in Q 2:248, but the ark of the covenant appears prominently in that book. The ark is first retrieved from Shiloh to help the army of Israel in a battle against the Philistines, who are terrified by its presence (1 Sam 4:3–8). Then, it is captured by the Philistines, who hold it for seven months but return it after being plagued by mice and hemorrhoids as a form of divine punishment (1 Sam 4:11–6:18). The return of the ark allows Israel to defeat the Philistines (1 Sam 7:10) and later facilitates another rout of the enemy (1 Sam 14:18–31).45

The situation described in Q 2:248 is typical of the contexts in which the ark of the covenant appears in the Bible in general and in the story of Saul in particular. In Q 2:248, the setting also involves the military conflict be-

between Israel and the Philistines. The verse describes the ark of the covenant as a sign of Saul’s sovereignty (mulk) and does not mention a specific battle. Nevertheless, given that the figure of the king (malik) is associated with fighting in v. 247 and that the passage refers to Saul’s campaign in v. 249 and ends with David’s climactic victory over Goliath in vv. 250–251, it makes sense to interpret the prophet’s statement as a promise of future victory. This being the case, one may assume that the sakînah fulfills a much more warlike function than “tranquility” or “reassurance.” Like the angels who, according to the Qur’ân, fought alongside the Muslims at the Battle of Badr (Q 3:123–125, 8:9), the sakînah is a physical presence that will enable Saul’s forces to overpower their enemies and grant them victory.

In general, scholars in Qur’ânic Studies have reached a consensus that while the term sakînah is connected with the biblical shekhînah in Q 2:248, in the other verses in which it appears, its meaning has been conflated with or at least colored by one of the ordinary meanings of the root combination s-k-n, namely, sukûn (“quiet” or “calm”). Two translators, Bell and Arberry, have chosen to render the biblical allusion palpable in their renditions of Q 2:248. Although in the other instances Bell translates sakînah as “assurance” (Q 9:26.40) or “the Assurance” (Q 48:4.18.26), he does not translate the term in Q 2:248, retaining the term in transliteration as “Sakîna.” This is presumably due to the fact that this verse deals directly with the ark of the covenant in the time of Saul, and so sakînah would have to take on a sense more appropriate to that context.

Their prophet said to them: “The sign of his kingship will be that the Ark will come to you containing a Sakîna from your Lord, and a relic of what was left by the family of Moses and the family of Aaron, and the angels will bear it; surely in that is a sign for you if ye are believers.”

In a note attached to this verse explaining the word sakînah, Bell writes, “The Hebrew shekhînah; in the Qur’ân the word generally has the sense of ‘assurance,’ but as this is probably the first occasion of its use, it is doubtful if any such sense is attached to it here.” He thus recognizes that sakînah is related to the Hebrew shekhînah, but he means to distinguish this verse from the other qur’ânic verses in which it appears. He does not indicate that the other uses of sakînah in the Qur’ân are unrelated to this one, but he apparently believes that this “foreign” term was used here initially, with something closer to its original meaning, and was then adopted for other uses,

46. Bell, The Qur’ân Translated, 1.36, n. 2.
subsequently being assigned the meaning “assurance” on account of the term’s association with cognates such as sukūn (“being at rest, quiescent”).

Arberry goes further, but does not really translate, producing a version similar to Bell’s rendition of Q 2:248:

And their Prophet said to them, “The sign of his kingship is that the Ark will come to you, in it a Shechina from your Lord, and a remnant of what the folk of Moses and Aaron’s folk left behind, the angels bearing it. Surely in that shall be a sign for you, if you are believers.”

In all of the verses in which sakīnah occurs, Arberry renders the term as “Shechina,” which certainly attempts to capture the connection with the Hebrew. However, one might ask what the sense of “Shechina” is, or whether that word in English conveys any clear sense, whether appropriate to the context or not. In one verse, Arberry presents the term Shechina, as usual, but also provides a gloss:

It is He who sent down the Shechina (tranquility) into the hearts of the believers, that they might add faith to their faith – to God belong the hosts of the heavens and the earth; God is All-knowing, All-wise. (Q 48:4)

Here, his use of “tranquility” may be considered a debt to earlier translations, or to the generally understood connection of the root s-k-n with calm or silence.

The first question that arises is what translation of sakīnah would appropriately capture the invocation of biblical shekhinah in Q 2:248. A possible candidate is “God’s overwhelming aura.” The second question is whether those translations can be legitimately applied in the qur’ānic verses that do not involve the ark of the covenant or biblical history. The other five instances of sakīnah occur in two sūrah, Sūrat al-Tawbah (Q 9) and Sūrat al-Fāṭih (Q 48), both of which have to do with military confrontation. In my view, the consensus is more or less correct: these latter instances of sakīnah are in fact distinct from Q 2:248, and they do appear to have been colored by association with the term sukūn (“calm”). In all cases, however, I would argue that the translations “tranquility,” “calm,” “assurance,” or “re-assurance,” are insufficient because they do not capture the sense of overwhelming might that allows the forces to defeat their enemy attached to the term sakīnah.

Sūrat al-Tawbah is a particularly warlike sūrah which begins with an ultimatum to the pagan Meccans. The term sakīnah occurs in it twice, in the following verses:
Then God sent His calm (sakinatahu) down to His Messenger and the believers, and He sent down invisible forces (junūdan lam tarawḥā). He punished the disbelievers—this is what the disbelievers deserve, but God turns in His mercy to whoever He will. God is most forgiving and merciful. (Q 9:26; Abdel Haleem)

Even if you do not help the Prophet, God helped him when the disbelievers drove him out: when the two of them were in the cave, he [Muḥammad] said to his companion, “Do not worry, God is with us,” and God sent His calm (sakinatahu) down to him, aided him with forces invisible to you (bi-junūdin lam tarawḥā), and spoiled the disbelievers’ plan. God is almighty and wise. (Q 9:40; Abdel Haleem, with adjustments)

In both these verses the imagery is of a battle in which God grants victory to the Prophet and the believers over the disbelievers. The military implications of the term sakinah are demonstrated by the fact that it is parallel to “forces” or “troops” (junūd) in both verses: anzala junūdan lam tarawḥā (“He sent down troops that you did not see”; v. 26) and ayyadahu bi-junūdin lam tarawḥā (“He supported him with troops that you did not see”; v. 40). Like the invisible troops, God’s sakinah is what made the believers’ victory over their enemies possible. The translation “calm” is thus based mainly on the etymological meaning of the root s-k-n and does not entirely fit in the context.

Sūrat al-Fath (Q 48) reports a victory over the pagan Meccans. It is generally understood to comment on the confrontation that occurred when the Prophet marched to Mecca with his followers with the intention of performing the pilgrimage but was barred by the Meccans. After a standoff, the two sides signed the treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyyah. The term sakinah occurs three times in the sūrah, in the following verses:

It was He who made His tranquility (sakinatahu) descend into the hearts of the believers, to add faith to their faith—the forces of the heavens and earth (junūdu 'l-samāwātī wa 'l-ardī) belong to Him; He is all knowing and all wise. (Q 48:4; Abdel Haleem)

God was pleased with the believers when they swore allegiance to you under the tree: He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent tranquility (alsakinah) down to them and rewarded them with a speedy triumph (fathan qarība) and with many future gains—God is mighty and wise. (Q 48:18–19; Abdel Haleem)

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While the disbelievers had fury in their hearts—the fury of ignorance (hamiyyata 'l-jahiliyyah)—God sent His tranquility (sakinatahu) down on to His Messenger and the believers and made binding on them [their] promise to obey God, for that was more appropriate and fitting for them. God has full knowledge of all things. (Q 48:26; Abdel Haleem)

Again, military confrontation is prominent in these passages. As in the verses from Sūrat al-Tawbah, Q 48:4 pairs God’s sakinah with forces or troops (junūd), this time “the troops of the heavens and the earth.” The forces of nature are apparently acting in concert with God’s sakinah to bring about the victory of the believers. Q 48:18 refers explicitly to a “swift victory” (fathān qarībā) as a consequence of God’s sending down the sakinah. There is a slight difference here regarding the location of the sakinah. Verse 4 refers to its descending into the hearts of the believers, something that none of the other verses state. Clearly, in the Bible, the shekhinah is located outside the Hebrews, though it has a tremendous effect on their courage and inner resolve or determination, and this appears to be the case in most of the other verses that invoke God’s sakinah in the Qur’ān. The fact that it is in the Muslim believers’ hearts here suggests that it is somehow conflated with the resolve to do battle with the enemy, and this is corroborated by the fact that the sakinah counters, in effect, the fury of ignorance (hamiyyata 'l-jahiliyyah) that appears in Q 48:26, which lies in the hearts of the disbelievers, propelling them to fight for their unjust cause.

One may compare sakinah in such contexts with other passages in which God aids the prophet or believers in a confrontation or conflict. One of the most common terms that appears in such passages is the verb thabbata, yuthabbitu (“to make firm”): thabbatāna (“We made you firm”; Q 17:74); nuthabbitu bihi fu‘ādaka (“with which We make your heart firm”; Q 11:120, 25:32); li-yarbiṭa ‘alā qulūbikum wa-yuthabbita bihi ‘l-aqḍāma (“in order to bind your hearts and with which to fix your feet firmly”; Q 8:11; cf. Q 2:250, 3:147, 47:7). This act of making firm appears to be portraying in physical terms a figurative, emotional sense—it means to strengthen the resolve of the fighters. A noun that appears in such contexts and that may be interpreted as being closer to sakinah in meaning is ṣabr, “patience, endurance.” Just after Q 2:248, the text reads as follows:

249 ... But those who know that they were going to meet their Lord said, “How often a small force has defeated a large army with God’s permission! God is with those who are steadfast (wa’llāhu ma‘a ‘l-ṣābirin).”

250 And when they met Goliath and his warriors, they said, “Our Lord! Pour patience on us, make us stand firm, and help us against the disbelievers.”
Here, the troops that have been fortified by the sakīnah are described as “steadfast” (sābirīn), having patience (ṣabr) poured upon them by God, and having their feet (ʾaqdām) planted firmly by God. Sakīnah must be parallel and in harmony with these meanings.

Overall, sakīnah appears in two main contexts involving military confrontations between the forces of the believers and those of the pagan Mecccans. In all cases, God’s sakīnah aids them to gain victory over their opponents, and in this it is closely parallel to the biblical shekhinah. The contexts require a translation that captures the term’s invocation of might, terror, and military prowess; “tranquility,” “calm,” “assurance,” and “reassurance,” are all too mild to convey the appropriate meaning. The translations examined here all appear inadequate in this case. “God’s overwhelming, or awe-inspiring, aura” or a similar translation would better convey the appropriate meaning. If one considers sakīnah as parallel in meaning to ṣabr in these contexts, then one might suggest not translating them as “tranquility” and “patience,” which are both too passive for the context of a military confrontation. Ṣabr might be rendered as “endurance, steadfastness, or the ability to withstand and resist,” and sakīnah might be “resolve” or “determination.”

“Jesus, the Messiah” (VI)

A survey of the presentation of Jesus in the Qurʾān reveals an overall strategy to agree with the Christian portrayal of Jesus to a large extent. Jesus’s birth was miraculous. His mother, Mary, was a virgin (Q 3:35–37.42–50, 19:16–33). Jesus performed many miracles, including curing the sick, healing lepers, and bring the dead back to life (Q 3:49, 5:110). Jesus is termed “a word” (kalimah) from God (3:39.45, 4:171), something that recalls the opening of the Gospel of John. Jesus is associated with “the Holy Spirit” (rūḥ al-qudus; Q 2:87.253, 5:110), recalling the close association of the Holy Spirit with Jesus and the Trinity in Christian doctrine. God “raises him up” (Q 3:55), which recalls the Christian notion of Christ’s resurrection. Of course, there are some differences of portrayal as well, reflecting real theological differences between Islam and Christianity: Jesus is not divine but rather a prophet; he cannot perform miracles of his own accord, for his actions depend on God’s power and permission; and he did not die on the cross but was miraculously rescued by God at the last minute. However, the number and importance of the common features are striking, and they must be recognized as part of an intentional strategy of creating common
ground with Christians. This has broad consequences for the translation of the Qur’anic material related to Jesus.

One Qur’anic term worth considering is that of *al-masih,* “the Messiah,” which is cognate with the Hebrew *hammāšîaḥ,* but which several authors in Qur’anic Studies have argued derives more directly from the Syriac form, *mšīḥa.* The Qur’ān applies the epithet *al-masih* (“the Messiah”) to Jesus eleven times (Q 3:45, 4:157.171.172, 5.17.72(twice).75, 9:30.31); three times as *al-masih* “the Messiah” (Q 4:172, 5:72, 9:30), five times as *al-masih ibn Maryam,* “the Messiah son of Mary” (Q 5:17.72(twice).75, 9:31), and three times as *al-masih ʾiṣâ b. maryam,* “the Messiah Jesus son of Mary” (Q 3:45, 4:157.171). The term occurs in the Qur’ān only in connection with Jesus. A major impulse behind the use of this term in the Qur’ān is the intention to agree with Christian usage, and this view is corroborated by other examples such as those mentioned above.

In English translations of the Qur’ān, *al-masih* is usually rendered as “the Messiah,” mainly on the grounds that this is viewed as a literal equivalent. However, in my view, it would be preferable to render it as “Christ” instead. Of course, Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that is in fact the literal meaning of the term *al-masih*—an obvious cognate and equivalent of the Hebrew *hammāšîaḥ* (“the Messiah”). However, the phrase would take on a different valence in English if the translations consistently rendered *al-masih* as “Christ” and *al-masih ʾiṣâ b. maryam* as “Jesus Christ, son of Mary.” Christ is based on the literal Greek translation of the Hebrew *māšīaḥ* (“anointed”), referring to the practice of anointing the new king of Israel with holy oil in a ritual equivalent to coronation. Because of the fundamental status of Greek in Christian literature and technical terminology, “Jesus Christ” is used as an epithet by Christians speaking in English and the European language far more commonly than is “Jesus, the Messiah.” (This difference falls away in Arabic, because, for Arab-speaking Christians, the two terms are identical, *al-masih.*) As Parrinder points out, in Christian traditions the term “Christ” comes to have the character of a frozen epithet or proper noun, losing some of its connection with the promised Messiah of Jewish tradition, and the use of the term in the Qur’ān appears to re-

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flect this development. Christians refer to themselves in English and the other European languages as Christians, and not as Messianists. Christian theological discourse generally refers to the body of Christ and not to the body of the Messiah, and the well-known port city in the state of Texas is Corpus Christi, not Corpus Messiae. Translating al-masih as “Christ” would signal much more directly the intended strategy of agreement with formal Christian usage that lies behind it. Just as the term Christ in English usage loses a large part of its connection with the Jewish concept of the Messiah, so too does al-masih in the Qurʾān appear to serve as an honorific title of Jesus, indicating his exalted and revered status in general and not evoking a restoration of the historical monarchy of Israel.

“The Table” (VII)

The fifth sūrah of the Qurʾān, al-Māʿidah, is often given the title “the Table” in English on the grounds that this is an accurate rendering of the literal meaning of the word. However, like the Arabic word al-sufrāh, the term al-māʿidah, the context suggests, refers not to a piece of furniture but to the table along with the meal typically served upon it. Pickthall endeavors to capture this meaning without straying too far from the underlying Arabic by labeling the sūrah “The Table Spread,” Abdel Haleem calls it “the Feast,” and Michel Cuypers’s work devoted to analysis of this sūrah terms it “the Banquet.” An additional issue, though, is that the sūrah derives its name from a scene in which God provides a banquet for Jesus’s disciples, after they request, through Jesus, that they might be reassured in their belief (Q 5:111–115). This scene of Jesus and his disciples sharing an extraordinary banquet is a clear invocation of the scene of the Last Supper, which is described in the Gospels and becomes a central event in Christian tradition, serving as the basis for the Eucharist. The question then becomes whether

51. Several scholars have argued instead that this passage invokes John 6 or the agape meal. I am not entirely convinced, for the passage, in my view, suggests an invocation of the image of the Last Supper, which may have been known to the Prophet’s contemporaries. It is also possible that the notions of the Last Supper and the agape meal have been conflated. Speyer, Die biblischen Erzählungen, 452; Wilhelm Rudolph, Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1922), 81–82; Paret, Der Koran, 133; Cuypers, The Banquet,
the translation of *al-mā‘īdah*, either in the passage in which it occurs or in the *sūrah*’s title, ought to signal the connection more forcefully.

This example is not as clear as some of the others presented above. One type of event has been given three quite different interpretations, depending on which religion one assumes as background. From the Jewish point of view, Jesus and his disciples are sharing a meal at the Passover *seder*, the annual commemoration of the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. From the Christian point of view, it is the Last Supper, which serves as the model for celebration of the mass, a reinterpretation of the Passover *seder* in which the meal represents Jesus’ flesh and blood, which are sacrificed for the sins of believers. From the Islamic point of view, the banquet is a sign of God’s unwavering support of his prophets and their faithful followers, yet another indication of Jesus’ favored status, even among prophets. Perhaps the Qur’ānic presentation is sufficiently and dramatically different to warrant not closely associating it with Christian views of the Last Supper.

I argue that the connection should be made obvious despite the theological differences between Christian and Qur’ānic interpretations. It is clear that whatever theological work the scene at the end of Sûrat al-Mā‘īdah performs, it is intended to invoke the visual image of the Last Supper, which may have been well known to the audience. The disciples’ request for the banquet to be *li-awnalinā wa-ākhirinā* ("for the first of us and the last of us"; Q 5:114) suggests the visual image of the disciples lined up in a row, as one sees in paintings of the Last Supper. Again, while this example involves the evocation of a well-known biblical scene, it differs from the others considered above in the extent to which reinterpretation is involved. In this case, to translate the term explicitly as the Last Supper would appear to invoke too strongly the Christian interpretation of the event that has been altered considerably in the Qur’ān. A translation that would capture the intended connection might include reference to Jesus’ followers such as “the banquet of Jesus and his disciples.” It is certainly not just any table, nor is it just any banquet. The Qur’ānic presentation emphasizes the reassurance for the disciples represented by the miracle of the banquet, and not its finality and proximity to Christ’s crucifixion.

“The Book” and “The People of the Book” (VIII)

Much ink has been spilled over the Qur’ānic term *kitāb*, which takes on a number of distinct meanings in the sacred text. Geo Widengren, Daniel Madigan, and Anne-Sylvie Boisiliveau have discussed it thoroughly, along with other terms that the Qur’ān uses to describe itself. Nicolai Sinai also treats aspects of the term *kitāb* in a study of Qur’ānic self-referentiality. Despite this attention, something seems to have escaped the translators of the Qur’ān: one of the prominent denotations of *al-kitāb* in the Qur’ān is simply “the Bible.” Anne-Sylvie Boisiliveau comes close to this translation in her study of the Qur’ān’s references to itself when she concludes that the term *kitāb* designates the Qur’ān as an object linked clearly to Judaism and Christianity. It is a scripture that has been revealed “in the Judeo-Christian manner.” Translators seem to be unaware that, according to William Muir’s 1856 study, *al-kitāb* refers to the Old Testament or to both the Old and New Testaments.

The inherited tradition of Islamic Studies scholarship dictates that *ahl al-kitāb* be rendered “people of the book” or “people of scripture.” Similarly, the phrase *alladhina ūtū ’l-kitāb* is regularly rendered as “those who have been given the book” or “those who have been given the scripture.” Most translators have simply followed earlier translations in this regard. This usage is based on the idea that *al-kitāb* in the Qur’ān is throughout a general term referring to any member in the category of sacred text or scripture. This view may be justified by recourse to Arabic grammar, according to which the definite article *al-* serves not only to identify something that is known because it has been mentioned earlier in the conversation (in which case it is termed *lām al-*’ādh, “the *al-* of familiarity”), but also to refer to an entire category (*lām li’stighrāq al-jins, “the *al-* for encompassing the category”). Thus, in Arabic, one says *al-hubb*, “the love,” just as the French say *l’amour*, to refer to “love” in general, while in English the definite article is

not generally used in this fashion, but it is only deployed when a general term is specified in some fashion, as in “the love of Qays for Laylā” or “the love of a mother for her children.” This usage is also upheld by the Islamic legal tradition, which has included several other religious communities under the protected category of ahl al-kitāb, such as Sabians and Zoroastrians. In short, translators have understood the usage of the term al-kitāb to refer to the general category of scripture, while I would argue that, in the Qurʾān, al-kitāb in many cases refers to a specific book. In grammatical terms, the definite article al- in this case is lām al-‘ahd and not lām li’stighrāq al-jins; it refers to a known and familiar scripture, and not to the general group of all scriptures.⁵⁶

One hint that something might be amiss with these translations is the Qurʾānic use of ahl al-kitāb and the alternative expression alladhīna ʿūtū l-kitāb. Muslims themselves are never described in the Qurʾān as ahl al-kitāb (“people of the book” or “people of the scripture”). Neither Muslim exegetes, nor later authors of texts in Islamic law, nor scholars writing in the European tradition of Qurʾānic Studies have argued that the term ever applies to them. However, if al-kitāb simply referred to the category of scripture, then this would be a startling fact. Clearly, Muslims have a scripture, and just as clearly, the Qurʾānic text refers to the revelations delivered through the Prophet Muhammad as belonging to a scripture. This is so even if one limits attention to explicit Qurʾānic evidence and ignores the ubiquitous use of al-kitāb in later Islamic legal literature to refer either to the Qurʾān as a substantial scripture or to a specific prooftext from the Qurʾān. As seen above, Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau stresses that kitāb in the Qurʾān is meant to designate the Qurʾān as a scripture of the Judeo-Christian type. If kitāb is simply the generic label of “scripture,” then why wouldn’t Muslims be included in the category of ahl al-kitāb, along with Jews and Christians?

It is important to recognize that the term ahl al-kitāb excludes Muslims even when the term al-kitāb itself is used in a number of passages to refer unambiguously to the Qurʾān itself (e.g., Q 2:1, 13:1, 14:1). This suggests that the meaning of al-kitāb in the term ahl al-kitāb is distinct from its meaning when it refers to the Qurʾān. A solution suggests itself in the argument that al-kitāb (“the Book”) refers, in many passages, to a specific book. That this is so is corroborated by a passage that uses a parallel turn of phrase which unequivocally refers to a specific scripture, Q 5:47:

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⁵⁶ Mohsen Goudarzi also makes this point in his dissertation, “The Second Coming of the Book: Rethinking Qurʾānic Scriptuology and Prophetology” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2018), 20–22.
Let the people of the Gospel judge according to what God has sent down therein.

Ahl al-injil, “the people of the Gospel,” here designates Christians through reference to their scripture, a specific sacred book. This suggests the possibility that al-kitāb as well refers to a specific book, namely, the Bible, and not just a member of the class of scripture in general.

If the term ahl al-kitāb refers to both Jews and Christians, and al-kitāb refers to a specific, known scripture, and not just to any scripture, it must refer to a sacred book that is shared by Jews and Christians. In some cases, ahl al-kitāb may be interpreted as referring to Jews alone, but in others it refers manifestly to both Jews and Christians. Moreover, there is little indication that ahl al-kitāb includes any other group besides Jews and Christians.

A number of passages that include the term ahl al-kitāb refer explicitly either to Jews and Christians or to the Torah and the Gospel. The term ahl al-kitāb in Q 5:15 clearly refers both to the Israelites (banū isrā’īl) mentioned in Q 5:12–13 and to the Christians (al-naṣārā) mentioned in Q 5:14. Similarly the term ahl al-kitāb in Q 5:19 clearly includes both the Jews and the Christians mentioned in the previous verse, Q 5:18. Q 3:65 reads, “O people of the book! Why do you argue about Abraham, while the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until long after him? Do you not understand?” This verse refers to the people of the book and to the Torah and the Gospel in the same verse. It suggests that Jews and Christians dispute over Abraham, each group arguing that they have a closer relationship to him or a better claim to his legacy. When the verse objects that neither the Torah nor the Gospel were revealed until long after Abraham’s time, the point is that Abraham could have been neither a Jew nor a Christian, on the grounds that Judaism began only with the revelation of the Torah, and Christianity began only with the revelation of the Gospel. It is thus clear that ahl al-kitāb means Jews and Christians in this passage, and the book referred to by the term ahl al-kitāb corresponds both to the Torah and the Gospel. Arguably, then, al-kitāb means “the Bible,” a sacred text that encompasses both Jewish and Christian scripture.

Sūrat al-Mā’idah (Q 5) provides yet more evidence that al-kitāb refers to a sacred text including both the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Q 5:65–66 report that God will admit ahl al-kitāb to paradise if they believe and fear God. If they observe the teachings of the Torah and the Gospel, they will enjoy providence from above and below. A similar conjunction occurs shortly after this statement in the same passage, in Q 5:68:
Say, “O ahl al-kitāb! You have nothing to stand on unless you observe the Torah, the Gospel, and what has been revealed to you from your Lord.”

Thus, in this passage, ahl al-kitāb are closely associated with both the Torah and the Gospel, which are both mentioned explicitly twice. In all of these cases, the use of the term ahl al-kitāb refers to Jews and Christians directly or to those whose sacred texts are the Torah and the Gospel, which evidently amounts to the same thing. These passages tend to justify the post-qur‘ānic, historical definition of ahl al-kitāb as referring primarily to Jews and Christians, and not to a broader category consisting of any group endowed with a scripture. As argued above, the book mentioned in the designation ahl al-kitāb apparently includes both the Torah and the Gospel.

If the term ahl al-kitāb certainly refers to Jews and Christians, then this suggests that al-kitāb is not a generic reference to scripture but a reference to a specific scripture that Jews and Christians are understood to share. It is for this reason above all that I would suggest that ahl al-kitāb means “those who possess the Bible” and that al-kitāb in certain passages of the Qur‘ān means simply “the Bible.” This view was anticipated long ago by William Muir, who wrote a work in 1856 titled The Testimony Borne by the Coran to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.57 As a colonial official in India, he was struck by local Muslims’ habit of disparaging the Bible and characterizing it as corrupt, so he wrote this work in order to present the Qur‘ānic view of the Jewish and Christian sacred texts and thereby correct his Muslim interlocutors with evidence from their own sacred text. He points out that the Qur‘ān throughout exhibits veneration for these texts. The view commonly held by his interlocutors was that the “true” Torah and the “true” Gospel were essentially different from the texts in the possession of the Jews and Christians, but Muir argues that this view is mistaken because the Torah and the Gospel are described in the Qur‘ān as what is ma‘ahum (“with them”) or ‘indahum (“in their possession”). Qur‘ānic usage does not restrict the terms Torah and Gospel to those texts as they were originally revealed by God.58

In his view, the terms al-kitāb (“the book”), kitāb allāh (“the book of God”), kalām allāh (“God’s speech”), al-dhikr (“the remembrance”), and so on, all refer to the Bible. In his analysis of the verse, “If thou are in doubt regarding that which We have sent down unto thee, then ask those who read the Book (revealed) before thee. Verily the truth hath come unto thee from thy Lord; be not therefore amongst those that doubt” (Q 10:94), he writes about the term al-kitāb: “Here, as in many other passages, the word is obviously

57. Muir, Testimony.
58. Muir, Testimony, 23, 100.
used in its widest sense, and intends the Scripture in use both amongst the Christians and Jews.” Muir stresses that, according to the Qurʾān, believers are required to believe in the whole of scripture and not simply part of it. The audience is asked, “Do you believe in part of the Book and reject part thereof?” (Q 2:85). He means to argue that the Book refers to the Bible in the sense of the one body of scripture that is used both by Jews and by Christians.

Examination of the examples presented above suggests that it is not unreasonable to translate al-kitāb as “the Bible” in a number of Qurʾānic passages. A clear example occurs in Sūrat al-Baqarah, Q 2:113:

The Jews say, “The Christians have nothing to stand on” and the Christians say, “The Jews have nothing to stand on,” although both recite the Book. ... Surely God will judge between them on the Day of Judgment regarding their dispute.

This verse refers explicitly to both Jews and Christians and states that they both read al-kitāb (“the Book”). It is possible to argue that the text means that the members of each group, the Jews on the one hand and the Christians on the other hand, read their own respective scripture. However, the probable meaning intended by the verse is that the book in question is the same book. The logic of the verse requires this: it is surprising that they disagree, because they recite the same scripture. Muir agrees with this interpretation of al-kitāb here, remarking, “These are the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, in current use among the Jews and Christians.” Another example occurs in Q 6:156: an taqūlū innamā unzila ‘l-kitābu ‘alā tā‘ifataynī min qaḥlinā wa-in kunnā ‘an dirāṣatihim la-ghāfilīn (“Lest you say, ‘The Book was only revealed to two communities before us, though we could not grasp what they recited’”). This verse reports that al-kitāb, again, apparently a single scripture, was revealed to two communities (tā‘ifatayn), evidently Jews and Christians, and that they both read or studied that same scripture. The verse does not use the indefinite kitāb (“a book” or “a scripture”), one of which was revealed to each community. The point is that the pagan Arabs were arguing that they could not be held accountable to the one God and obligated to accept monotheism because they could not understand the biblical text, which was not in their own language. The revelation of the Qurʾān in Arabic served to invalidate that line of argument.

59. Muir, Testimony, 22.
61. Muir, Testimony, 54.
Both these verses suggest that *al-kitāb* refers to a scripture that is shared by the Jews and the Christians, and the most idiomatic way to convey this idea in English is to translate it as “the Bible.” And, if this is the case, then *ahl al-kitāb* should be “the people of the Bible” or “those who possess the Bible,” rather than “the people of the book” or “the people of scripture,” and *alladhīna ātū 'l-kitāb* should be “those who have been given the Bible.”

Mohsen Goudarzi’s 2018 dissertation focuses on qurʾānic scripturology and in particular on the term *al-kitāb*. He argues that *al-kitāb* is not a general referent to the category of scripture but rather a specific term identifying a particular scripture. He then argues that *al-kitāb* has exactly two major referents, the Torah and the Qurʾān. I agree with Goudarzi that *al-kitāb* refers to a specific book, but while he limits the term exclusively to two referents, the Torah and the Qurʾān, I would argue that it also refers to the Bible. In some cases, this is conceived of as identical with the Torah, but in others, it must include Christian scripture as well. Goudarzi resolves this potential objection by arguing that, according to the Qurʾān, the Torah is presented as the scripture of the Christians as well, and by relegating the Gospel to a lower status than that of *al-kitāb*. My suggestion, agreeing with the interpretation of Muir, is that the term takes on the sense of the Bible that is familiar from Christian usage, referring to the combination of the Old and New Testaments, while also conceding that the term may be used by Jews to refer to their sacred text.

Like the choice to render *allāh* as God, the qurʾānic personal names *ibrāhīm* and *mūsā* as Abraham and Moses, and *al-maṣīḥ* as “Christ,” the choice to render *al-kitāb* as “the Bible” would give the reader of an English translation a stronger impression of the direct invocation of Jewish and Christian sacred texts that is in fact intended in the text of the Qurʾān. The use of “scripture” as the translation of the term *al-kitāb* weakens and diffuses that invocation by allowing it to refer to a broader and more nebulous category of sacred texts not necessarily connected with Jewish and Christian tradition.

## Conclusion

Some connection between the Qurʾān and the Bible has always been obvious. However, the intimate relation between these sacred texts has often been played down in Islamic tradition in order to stress the uniqueness

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and superiority of Islam, stressing its status as a distinct religion from Judaism and Christianity. It has also often been attenuated by non-Muslim writers seeking to exclude Islam from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In yet other cases, translations that fail to capture adequately the Qur’ān’s invocations of biblical tradition are simply the product of inertia in the history of Qur’ānic translations, in which translators have simply fallen back on literal renditions or have relied heavily on earlier translations and have not undertaken independent investigations of key Qur’ānic terms. In many cases, the translations have not kept up with developments in Qur’ānic Studies scholarship.

Several examples have been presented here of alienating renditions of Qur’ānic phrases that I believe could be better rendered in a biblicizing manner in translations of the Qur’ān. In my view, current English translations of the Qur’ān obscure the fact that the Qur’ān refers to Jesus explicitly as “Jesus Christ” and refers explicitly to “the Bible” shared by Jews and Christians. In some cases, as with safinat nūḥ, many of the existing translations already adopt the biblicizing form, referring to Noah’s ark, and only a few translators have chosen to do otherwise. In other cases, however, such as those of al-masīḥ, al-kitāb, and ahl al-kitāb, the alienating translations are entirely dominant. Even specialists who focus on the Jewish and Christian connections of the Qur’ān rarely entertain the idea that al-kitāb in the Qur’ān could simply mean “the Bible”—that book in particular.

The extent to which “biblicizing” translations are correct is an issue that confronts every translator of the Qur’ān. When faced with a term that is related in some fashion with biblical language or with Jewish or Christian concepts, the translator must take into account how it is used in the Qur’ānic text and what function it serves. Is it intended to call attention to the similarity between the Qur’ān and the earlier settings in which the term was used, or is the sense modified or reinterpreted? Is the former sense simply ignored altogether? The choice of a biblicizing vs. an alienating translation is not an automatic one. Both Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Walid Saleh have pointed out that simply knowing the origin of a word does not solve the puzzle of its later usage. However, in a number of cases biblicizing translations of particular Qur’ānic terms have been regularly missed or passed over in favor of alienating translations, and these occur in contexts which suggest that the connections with Jewish and Christian material were meant to be understood.

Biblicizing translations may not always be appropriate. As explained above, the term hanif is used in the Qur’ān in a way which suggests that it was not intended to invoke the meaning of the Syriac ḥanpā (“heretic”),
which may nevertheless have been its etymological source. In his discussion of Qur’ānic language, Nöldeke devotes a section to foreign terms that have been used in the Qur’ān in ways that are not true to their original meanings, including furqān, sakīnah, zakāh, rajīm, burhān, millah, and so on, which he gives the heading "Willkürlich und mißverständlich gebrauchte Fremdwörter im Koran" ("foreign words used in an arbitrary and misleading way in the Qur’ān"). He was concerned mainly with historical linguistics rather than theology, but some of these examples may not, in fact, be comparable to that of ḥanīf, for it is often the case that borrowed terms are modified or altered in some respects without losing the connection with the original term. Similarly, Mark Durie has argued that Islam cannot be construed as forming part of the Abrahamic tradition on account of fundamental differences between Qur’ānic and Christian theology, despite their apparently shared vocabulary. For a number of terms from biblical tradition that appear in the Qur’ān, including sakīnah and al-masīḥ, he argues that while the cognate term figures in the Qur’ānic corpus, the profound theological connection with Christian tradition does not. Regarding the overall implications of the use of al-masīḥ in the Qur’ān, he writes, “There is no Christological ‘subtext’ in the Qur’ān’s allusive use of the name al-masīḥ to refer to Iṣā, for the Qur’ān has a ‘Christ’ without a Christology. ... Al-Masīḥ of the Qur’ān is to mashīḥ of the Hebrew Bible and christōs of the New Testament what ‘juggernaut’ is to Hindi Jagannātha.” While it is true that there are fundamental differences between the portrayal of Christ in the Qur’ān and Christian Christology, Durie appears to overlook or downplay the fact that the Qur’ānic use of the al-masīḥ is meant to recall Christians’ use of the term “Christ,” concentrating on implied theological differences instead. In my view, his argument, that such examples as this do not represent an organic inheritance of religious ideas but rather perfunctory borrowings that are not signs of a more profound affinity between the religious traditions, is overly rigid. Using the same types of evidence, one could make a similar argument that Christianity does not have a profound affinity with Judaism, or even that the religion of the Hebrews/Israelites/Jesus as evident from different strata from the Hebrew Bible are not indicative of any productive continuity.

It is important to point out here that differences in usage or theology often do not prove a lack of connection, with the consequence that if a biblical term occurs in the Qur’ān, the question is not whether it has the same exact

64. Nöldeke, Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft, 23–30.
meaning or implications but whether its use is intended to invoke biblical precedent or not. For example, it has been observed that the Torah ark in a Jewish synagogue is meant to invoke the ark of the covenant and to conjure up God’s presence, as if the Torah were an idol. The two arks are clearly different in their physical forms and literal definitions, but the analogy is nevertheless intended and important in the tradition. Similarly, the term that devotees of the Islamic mystical traditions adopted for their chants or litanies, dhikr (“remembrance”), invokes Qur’anic uses of the term dhikr that clearly had very different meanings and referred instead to revelation, message, information, explanation, historical accounts, revealed books, or the Qur’ān. Nevertheless, the use of the term dhikr allows Sufis to invoke and anchor their practice in the Qur’ān, and when reading the Qur’ānic command fa’s’alū ahlā l-dhikri in kuntum lā ta’lāmūn (“So ask the people of remembrance, if you do not know”; Q al-Nahī 16:43) they can argue that this refers to Sufi masters, or as al-Qushayrī (d. 465) puts it, al-ārifīn bi’llāh (“those who know God”). Even if this reading is demonstrably anachronistic and arguably wrong, it cannot be dismissed as an ordinary misunderstanding, and one cannot say either that dhikr is simply an incorrect term for “Sufi chant” or argue that it does not invoke the Qur’ān. For present purposes, the main point is that, just as these terms are meant to conjure up connections with important terms and concepts in earlier religious history, many biblical terms in the Qur’ān are meant to do the same. Pointing out that the Qur’ānic terms do not have the same exact referents or connotations does not explain away the intended invocation, just as pointing out that dhikr does not mean “Sufi chant” in the Qur’ān does not disprove that Sufis meant to invoke Qur’ānic usage by adopting that term.

In How to Read the Qur’ān, Carl W. Ernst stressed the unfamiliarity of Islam’s sacred text to an anglophone audience in whose societies the Qur’ān, in contrast to the King James Bible, has not permeated the language for

centuries. What I have attempted to show here is that this strangeness is in part the fault of alienating translations which fail to convey the biblical resonances that permeate the text of the Qurʾān. To translate the Qurʾān in ways that capture these resonances, or even to bring them into relief, is not to do violence to Islam’s scripture but rather to render tangible to the reader of a translation something that, in many cases, was clearly an intended feature of the original text. This is not a foreign imposition, since the Qurʾān presents itself as a scripture in the biblical tradition and claims explicitly that it has been revealed to confirm earlier scriptures in that tradition, including the Torah and the Gospel. As a consequence, Jewish and Christian salvation history provided the necessary background for and models to be emulated by the nascent Islamic community.

While this investigation has not treated the many translations of the Qurʾān into other European languages, experience indicates that the situation is more or less the same in the existing French, German, and other translations: they, too, regularly engage in what I have described as alienating translations of biblical elements in the text. The only exception, in my view, are the Hebrew translations. Because Hebrew is both cognate with Arabic and also heavily imbued with biblical phraseology, even in its modern form, it is much more difficult to disguise or neglect the biblical valences of the terms and phrases like those that I have cited here. So, for example, translating bayt in reference to the Kaʿbah into bet in modern Hebrew is not like translating it as “house” in English, because Hebrew bet already shares with Arabic bayt the fundamental meaning of “temple,” and appears prominently in the common terms for the temple in Jerusalem, bêt hammiqdāš and bêt elôhîm.