Surah 5 of the Qurʾān: The Parting of the Ways?

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Abstract. Was an Islamic identity, shared by the in-group members and distinct from other religious categorizations, operative already during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 CE)? This article looks at surah 5 of the Qurʾān, titled *al-Māʾida*, as a locus where the discourse of "the parting of the ways" might be found. If a reified group of Muslims, with their religion Islam, distinct from Jews and Christians, can be supposed to have existed during the time of the Prophet, it is in *al-Māʾida* where this should be the easiest to perceive, but, I argue, this is not the case.

Keywords. Qurʾān – the the Prophet Muḥammad – early Islam – Islamic identity – interreligious encounters

INTRODUCTION

Did a distinct Islamic identity – and indeed, religion, with characteristic beliefs, practices, ethics, norms, and rituals – emerge already during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 CE)? Was the social category 'Muslims' operative as a primary, or at least secondary, designation of the group around Muḥammad? Did these believers (or Muslims, if they called themselves that) see themselves as totally, or to a large degree, different from Jews and Christians? The answer to these questions, I argue, is 'no'.

This article looks at surah 5 of the Qurʾān, titled *al-Māʾida*, 'the Table', as a locus where the discourse of 'the parting of the ways', to borrow a phrase from Biblical studies, might be found. Surah 5 includes very late material in the Qurʾān, stemming, probably, from the last years of Muḥammad's life. If a reified group of Muslims, with their religion Islam, distinct from Jews and Christians, can be supposed to have existed during the time of the Prophet,[1] it is in surah 5 where

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[1] It appears to me that this (a rather quick process of identity articulation and the 'parting' occurring during the time of the Prophet) remains the majority view in early Islamic studies; see, e.g., A. Elad, 'Community of Believers of "Holy Men" and "Saints" or Community of Muslims? The Rise and Development of Early Muslim Historiography',

this should be the most marked and easiest to perceive. However, I argue that even surah 5 does not present an articulation of a reified Islamic identity. Verse 3 of the surah, known in the later Islamic tradition as 'the verse of the perfection of religion' (*āyat ikmāl al-dīn*) and understood as having been revealed during the so-called farewell pilgrimage of the Prophet, is quite often adduced, in both classical Islamic and modern non-confessional scholarship,[2] as evidence of the existence of the concept of the religion called Islam, set aside from other religions. I argue that, to its first audience, verse 5:3 meant nothing of the sort, rather presenting a statement on law (*dīn*), more specifically dietary and purity regulations, and emphasizing obedience (*al-islām*) to it.

The subtitle of this article borrows a turn of phrase employed in early Christian studies, which I have been inspired by in conceptualizing the developments in early Islam. The phrase was made famous by J. D. G. Dunn in his classic book on the topic of early Christian identity formation and parting from Judaism.[3] Dunn's book was important because it argued with vigour and evidence that we cannot entertain the idea that Jesus, Paul, or other people in the movement could be considered to have been Christians, properly speaking. They did not call themselves that, nor did they recant Judaism. The Jesus group was, simply, one of the sects in late Second Temple Judaism, though they were somewhat distinctive in the fact that they accepted, and encouraged, large numbers of gentiles (non-Jews) to become group members. The gentiles did not have to accept the Jewish law, at least not in its entirety, but those Christ-believers that were of Jewish background continued, for the most part, to be Torah-observant.[4] Scholarship after Dunn has argued with even more emphasis that the historical Jesus did not renounce dietary regulations[5] and the negative Pauline portrayals of the law are mostly written with the gentile audience of his letters

Journal of Semitic Studies 47/1 (2002), 241–308; P. Crone, 'Among the Believers', *Tablet* (August 10, 2010, accessed? http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/42023/among-the-believers); R. Hoyland, 'Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East', *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 25 (2017), 113–40; N. Sinai, 'The Unknown Known: Some Groundwork for Interpreting the Medinan Qur'an', *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 66 (2015–6), 47–96 and *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, 2017). However, there are scholars that suggest a much slower process of identity formation; see F. M. Donner, 'From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community', *Al-Abhath* 50–1 (2002–3): 9–53 and *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); M. P. Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia, 2015); P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh, 2016); F. M. Donner, 'Talking about Islam's Origins', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 81 (2018): 1–23; S. J. Shoemaker, *A Prophet Has Appeared: The Rise of Islam Through Christian and Jewish Eyes: A Sourcebook* (Oakland, 2021), 1–36.

[2] For references, see footnote 39, below.

[3] J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London, 2006, 2nd edition).

[4] On the question of gentile and Jewish Christ-believers and the law, see in detail P. Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle* (New Haven, 2017).

[5] D. Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York, 2012).

in mind. Nowhere does Paul say that Jewish Christ-believers (such as himself) should stop following the law.[6]

Dunn dates 'the parting of the ways' between Christianity and Judaism to the era between the first (AD 66–73) and second (AD 132–135) Jewish–Roman wars. During the first war, the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, while during the second, the revolt of Bar Kokhba, who was viewed as the Messiah, was crushed. It is also around this time (the second century) that the category 'Christians' began to be operative and the New Testament canon started to emerge. Hence, Dunn suggests that this era witnessed important events in both Judaism and (emerging) Christianity that drove them apart.[7]

All in all, Dunn puts forward the idea of a somewhat slow, and piecemeal, process of the emergence of a distinct Christian identity. However, more recent scholarship has questioned this as being too early, with the fourth century starting to emerge, it appears, as a new consensus for the 'parting', as suggested by in particular Daniel Boyarin, who has problematized the looking at social categories, such as 'Christians' or 'Jews', alone.[8] Scholars have noted, moreover, that gentile Christ-believers followed the food and purity laws mentioned in the so-called Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:19–21: avoidance of meat sacrificed to idols, carrion, blood, and fornication) for centuries;[9] and those Christ-believers that were of Jewish background in most cases followed a fuller set of regulations of the law.[10] This (following the gentile dietary and purity laws) even appears to have been the mainstream position up to the fourth century, when the Christian religious

[6] Paul's and other early figures' stances toward the law are insightfully explored in Fredriksen, *Paul*, and in her *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (New Haven, 2018). It is naturally true that in some passages, such as parts of Philippians, Paul's criticism of the law is somewhat vehement; see N. Nikki, *Opponents and Identity in the Letter to the Philippians* (Leiden, 2018). But it has to be remembered that all Paul's extant letters are addressed to groups that were majority gentile. Paul's criticism of the law (which is, in any case, present in only some of his letters) can be understood in the context of rhetoric and differing social identifications that he wanted to put forward: as a Jewish Christ-believer writing to gentile Christ-believers, he wanted to make the case that he can be the pagan's apostle. One of the strategies that he adopts for this, in certain passages of his letters, is the criticism of the law. His goal was to reject the idea that the gentiles should adopt the law, at least not all of it. By this, he wanted to keep the categories of gentiles and Jews separate rather than fusing them into one, though they (or some of them) ascribed to the uniting aspect of faithfulness in Jesus.

[7] The development that Dunn emphasizes in Judaism is, in particular, the beginning of the rise of rabbinic scholarship after the destruction of the Temple.

[8] D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2004), a much-read work, being the first to suggest this. The various articles in A. Becker and A. Reed (eds), *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen, 2003), treat the issue from different viewpoints, some doubting the whole notion of the 'parting' given how intertangled Judaism and Christianity have been to this day.

[9] Hence, the idea that early Christianity, or gentile Christianity, was 'law-free' is problematic and basically Protestant. For the history of the idea of 'law-free Christianity' and a repudiation of it, see Frederiksen, *Paul*, 94–130, and the copious notes in 222–35.

[10] E. Broadhead, *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus: Redrawing the Religious Map of Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2010).

leaders started to argue for a fully symbolic interpretation of the law, though some evidence of even later Christian observance of the law, either in its full or limited sense, survives.[11] It is also this century – the fourth – that witnesses the first concrete examples of Christological formulations, in particular in the first council of Nicaea in 325. This would have put (the majority of) the Christian Church, in the plane of ideas and identities, outside of Judaism.

So, the question is, was Islam similar to Christianity and other faiths of Antiquity and Late Antiquity, with a slow, piecemeal identity formation? Or was Islam *sui generis* in the (late) ancient world? Can we say that it underwent a much quicker process than Christianity (or Judaism, or Zoroastrianism, or Manichaeism),[12] emerging as a religion distinct from other religions in the space of some twenty years, the length of the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad?

The study of early Islam has been very active in recent decades, with important works that have shone light on its history.[13] Though much remains debated, there is a rather broad consensus

[11] See the important discussions in H. Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen, 2013) and 'Judaeo-Christian Legal Culture and the Qurʾān: The Case of Ritual Slaughter and the Consumption of Animal Blood', in F. del Río Sánchez (ed.), *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam* (Turnhout, 2018), 117–59.

[12] Zoroastrianism and Judaism represent millennia old religious traditions that have undergone a multitude of developments and identity negotiations (including with and in contrast to each other) throughout the ages. The early Israelites and Judaeans' distinct identity evolved throughout centuries *vis-à-vis* other religious groups in the Near East. Late Antique rabbinic Judaism was instrumental in further articulating and outlining the Jews' social identity. The literature on early and Late Antique Judaism is immense; for orientation, see M. S. Jaffee, *Early Judaism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1997), which contains valuable insights in the ways in which Jewish identity has been understood in different contexts. According to D. Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick, 2018), the understanding, among Jews, that they formed a religion or abstraction called 'Judaism' was not present until modern times. In the pre-modern era, the Jews' self-understanding was that they formed an ethnic group. Though Zoroastrians were in contact with and often articulated their identity in contrast to Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity, the early history of Zoroastrianism should be interpreted in the context of the ancient Indo-Iranian religions; see M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism:* Volume 1, *the Early Period* (Leiden, 1996); R. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2016); J. Rose, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (London and New York, 2011). As for Mani, he called himself the 'apostle of Jesus' and his followers 'true Christians' or, simply 'Christians'. However, the Manichaeans were labelled as heretics and beyond the pale by (other) Christians, affecting how the Manichaeans saw themselves; see M. Tardieu, *Manichaeism*, tr. M. B. DeBevoise (Urbana and Chicago, 1997). G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2015) discusses the cases of, in particular, Jews, Christians, Manicheans, Muslims, and their often overlapping social identities and practices in the late ancient world.

[13] See, e.g., G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993); R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton, 1997); E. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley, 1999); J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010); N. Khalek, *Damascus After the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam* (Oxford, 2011); P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford, 2011); S. J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia, 2011); G. W. Bowersock, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (Waltham, MA, 2012); S. Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (Cambridge, 2013); E. I. El-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel traditions* (New York, 2014); P. Crone, *Collected Studies in Three Volumes* (Leiden, 2016); M. Shaddel, 'Qurʾānic *ummī*: Genealogy, Ethnicity, and the Foundation of a New Community', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 43 (2016), 1–60; G. W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 2017); S. Dost, 'An Arabian Qur'ān: Towards a theory of Peninsular origins', PhD thesis,

of certain key premises as regards sources: i) the Qurʾān, at least the bulk of it, stems from the time and revelations of the Prophet Muḥammad; ii) documentary evidence should be used where it exists; iii) Arabic literary sources are non-contemporary with Muḥammad and the earliest movement but can in some cases be used, critically and comparing them with other types of sources, to flesh out the details; iv) non-Arabic sources are a useful source set and some of them are contemporary with the events they describe.[14]

What marks a 'parting'? A few methodological remarks on how I approach the question on this article are in order. To begin with, I will concentrate on the social categorizations that the community (here: the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad) articulated: who did they include in their group and what appellations did they use for it? Who did they envision as forming the out-group?[15] Second, I will note how identity appears to have been signalled (through praxes but also group beliefs) among the in-group and to what extent these identity signs were shared between different communities in that social and historical context.[16] A 'parting of the ways' would entail both a social categorization and group name that situates the group apart from other groups in the societal context (here, in particular Jews and Christians), and practices and beliefs that were shared by the majority of that social group and understood as peculiar to that group. It is true that the case of partitioning between Judaism and Christianity is somewhat different from the early Islamic case under consideration in this article, since Jesus, Paul the Apostle, and many other early figures of the movement we now know as Christianity were in fact Jews. However, my reconstruction of the early Islamic situation assumes that, first, the Prophet Muḥammad lived in a profoundly Jewish and Christian environment, though he did not identify as either; and, second, that the group of the early believers (followers of Muḥammad) offered a recategorized, superordinate, identity, which

University of Chicago, 2017; J. Cole, *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the Clash of Empires* (New York, 2018); J. Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton University Press, 2018); A. Neuwirth, *The Qurʾan and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (Oxford, 2019); S. W. Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (Berkeley, 2020).

[14] See the astute (and optimistic) methodological remarks in Anthony, *Muhammad*, 1–21, which, it seems to me, represent the current ethos of early Islamic studies more widely.

[15] In this article, I discuss 'identity' in the context of social identity. Social identity is one's understanding and awareness of oneself as a member to one or more social groups, including the emotional and evaluative meaning of that affiliation. Groups are always 'imagined' and socially construed rather than concrete, bounded units. On social identity, see the classic studies H. Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge, 1981) and S. A. Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach* (London, 2004).

[16] M. Ehala, *Signs of Identity: The Anatomy of Belonging* (London and New York, 2018), has formulated a recent theory on identity performance, on which I am indebted to for this part of the analysis. For this question, see also I. Lindstedt, 'Signs of Identity in the Quran', in I. Lindstedt, N. Nikki, and R. Tuori (eds), *Religious Identities in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Walking Together & Parting Ways* (Leiden, 2021), 66–91.

encompassed Jewish, Christian, and gentile believers.[17] Later, in the eighth century, the superordinate nature of their identity was jettisoned and a new category, 'Muslims', surfaced. Hence, *mutatis mutandis*, one can refer to this process, too, as one during which a 'parting' occurred.

To probe this question, it is worthwhile to read surah 5. Though the surah includes passages from different revelatory acts, and perhaps years, the reading of it as a totality in all likelihood captures discourses and debates that belong to the very latest phase of the Prophet's life.[18] The question that guides my reading of this surah is the depictions of and value judgments on the believers, on one hand, and Jews and Christians (often lumped together as 'the People of the Book'), on the other. There are naturally many other topics treated in surah 5, but much of its content will be outside the scope of this essay.[19] In a short article such as this, I will not concentrate on all its 120 verses but merely interpret those that are pertinent for social categorizations.

SURAH 5, *AL-MĀʾIDA*

Surah 5 will provide an interesting case study. Theodor Nöldeke noted that, according to the Islamic tradition, the last surah to be revealed is either 9 or 5.[20] Naturally, the surahs of the Qurʾān, especially the longer ones, include material that belongs to different revelatory passages and different times, so these sorts of statements are highly simplistic. Moreover, it is not certain how valuable the classical tradition is in dating the surahs with precision. However, it has been supposed in modern scholarship that the longer the verse length of a given surah, the later the

[17] For studies arguing for this, see Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 68–74; I. Lindstedt, '"One Community to the Exclusion of Other People" – A Superordinate Identity in the Medinan Community', in M. B. Mortensen, G. Dye, T. Tesei, and I. Oliver (eds), *The Study of Islamic Origins: New Perspectives and Contexts* (Berlin, 2021), 325–76.

[18] For important suggestions about the redactional history of surah 5, see N. Sinai, 'Towards a Redactional History of the Medinan Qur'an: A Case Study of Sūrat al-Nisāʾ (Q 4) and Sūrat al-Māʾidah (Q 5)', in M. Klar (ed.), *Structural Dividers in the Qur'an* (London, 2021), 365–402. For a highly inspiring study that reads surahs 10–15 of the Qurʾān as 'a booklet' capturing a specific historical moment in the movement's history, see W. Saleh, 'End of Hope: Sūras 10-15, Despair and a Way out of Mecca', in A. Neuwirth and M. Sells (eds), *Qur'anic Studies Today*, (London and New York, 2016), 105–23.

[19] For another take on surah 5, see M. Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an* (Colombia, 2009), which is mostly based on classical Islamic exegesis and traditional understanding of early Islamic history. See also V. Comerro, 'La nouvelle alliance dans la sourate al-Māʾida', *Arabica* 48 (2001), 285–314, an important study. Both Cuypers and Comerro interpret surah 5 in the context of a new covenant and supersessionism. As I argue in what ensues, this is only one aspect of the surah. Moreover, the concept 'restoration theology' seems to describe better than 'supersessionism' what is articulated in surah 5. The supplanting of the Jews and Christians by the community of the believers led by Muḥammad is never categorical in surah 5 (or elsewhere in the Qurʾān). G. S. Reynolds, 'Sourate 5: *Al-Māʾida* (la Table)', in M. A. Amir-Moezzi and G. Dye (eds), *Le Coran des historiens*, 2 vols (Paris, 2019) vol. 2, 203–35, presents a good overview on the surah and the scholarship on it.

[20] T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 3 vols (Leipzig, 1909–1938), vol. 1, 226–7.

material in it is. Nicolai Sinai has produced informative charts of the mean verse length of the surahs of the Qurʾān. The verses of surah 5 are among the longest in the Qurʾān, surpassed only by surahs 60 and 65.[21] This would corroborate the late date.[22]

I would not suggest that surah 5 should be understood as a literary unit or organic whole;[23] instead, like many Medinan surahs, it consists of various pericopes, inserted one after another by the redactors of the Qurʾān.[24] However, it would in any case be agreed by most modern scholars that material found in surah 5 is among the latest in the Qurʾān. If one accepted the conventional view of distinctive religious identity having developed towards the end of Muḥammad's life, with increased hostility and a break between the Muslims and the People of the Book, one would suppose that surah 5 evinces such a clear-cut breach. And, indeed, many scholars have seen it there. Nicolai Sinai, for instance, argues that verses such as 5:12–9, 41–86, and 116–8 'betray an explicit demarcation of the Qur'anic community from Judaism and Christianity and harshly criticise Jewish and Christian beliefs'.[25] However, as will be seen, the categorizations and boundaries put forward in those and other verses of surah 5 are much more complex. I do not agree that the surah expresses such a 'demarcation' or 'parting'.[26]

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[21] Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 120.

[22] In this article, my premise is that the great majority of the material in the Qurʾān goes back to the revelations of the Prophet Muḥammad. For significant studies problematizing this, see, e.g., C. Gilliot, 'Reconsidering the Authorship of the Qurʾān: Is the Qurʾān Partly the Fruit of a Progressive and Collective Work?', in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context* (London, 2007), 88–108; G. Dye, 'Le corpus coranique', in Amir-Moezzi and Dye (eds), *Le Coran des historiens*, vol. 1, 733–918; S. J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia, 2018) and *Creating the Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Study* (Oakland, 2022). Naturally, this is a much debated question in Islamic studies. If surah 5 were shown to contain some or much post-Muḥammadan contents, this would not change my arguments drastically, since I, in any case, date the 'parting of the ways' to 700 or later; see Conclusions.

[23] See R. Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* (Ashland, OR, 2014), for an attempt to read Qurʾānic surahs as literary wholes with a ring composition, which is not, in my opinion, very convincing in the case of the long Medinan surahs.

[24] See, e.g., Neuwirth, 'Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon: Zur Entstehung und Wiederauflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus', in S. Wild (ed.), *The Qurʾān as Text* (Leiden, 1996), 69–105. For an excellent overview on the Medinan surahs, see Sinai, 'The Unknown Known', though it should be noted that I disagree with his interpretation of the social categories. My understanding of the structure of surah 5 is in disagreement with N. Robinson, 'Hands Outstretched: Towards a Rereading of Sūrat al-Māʾida', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3/1 (2001), 1–19, who argues for the coherent macrostructure of this surah.

[25] Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 125.

[26] Interestingly, although the Medinan surahs often contain discourses of warfare, these are all but absent in surah 5. However, exhortation to warfare does not, in the Qurʾān and other early evidence, suggest a categorical demarcation of believers vs. the People of the Book, since only a small number of verses mark the latter as the enemy, as discussed in I. Lindstedt, 'Religious Warfare and Martyrdom in Arabic Graffiti (70s–110s AH/690s–730s CE)', in F. M. Donner and R. Hasselbach-Andee (eds), *Scripts and Scripture: Writing and Religion in Arabia, 500–700 CE* (Chicago, 2022), 195–222. For instance, the 'Constitution' of Medina takes it as the starting point that the Jews among the community will participate in the efforts to fight for the community. The much adduced and discussed verse 9:29 is the only Qurʾānic piece of evidence suggesting the People of the Book should be fought; moreover, it does not present the People of the Book categorically as the enemy but only some among them. I would render the verse as follows: 'Fight those who do not believe in God and the Last Day, who do not deem illicit what God and His Messenger have

The rhyme and structure of surah 5

The rhyme of surah 5 is varied but follows the basic structure *-ūC/-īC*. The rhyming consonant in the context of surah 5 is always *majhūr* (voiced): *b*, *d*, *m*, *n*, *r*, or *l*. In a couple of instances (verses 2, 4, 72, and 95), the vowel before the consonant is not *ū* or *ī* but *ā*. The rhyme pattern in surah 5 is, all in all, loose and diverse. Changes in rhyme do not in most cases seem to signify obvious breaks in revelatory pericopes, except perhaps in the cases where the vowel is *ā* instead of the regular *ū* or *ī*. For instance, the first four verses have the following rhyme pattern: 1) *-īd*, 2) *-āb*, 3) *-īm*, 4) *-āb*. This raises the question of whether verses 2 and 4 belonged together in the original context. Indeed, it is possible to read the beginning of surah 5 with the order of verses restructured, for example, as follows: 1, 3, 2, 4. What is more, verses 72 and 95 could be later additions to the surah, based on their unusual rhyming vowel. Verses 72 and 73 contain some repetition, which might indicate that verse 72 was an interpolation,[27] inserted where it would thematically fit notwithstanding that this breaks the rhyme pattern (verse 71 ends in *-ūn*, 72 in *-ār*, and 73 in *-īm*):

> 72. Those are disbelievers who say, 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary'. The Messiah himself said, 'Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord'. If anyone associates others with God, God will forbid him from the Garden, and Hell will be his home. Such evildoers have no helpers. 73. Those are disbelievers who say that God is the third of three. There is only One God. If they persist in what they are saying, a painful punishment will afflict those of them who persist.[28]

The rhyme schemes of surah 5 point toward the notion that the redactors of the Qurʾān collected the material of this surah from different pericopes. As for the contents of surah 5, verses can be grouped thematically, for example, in the following way:

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proclaimed to be such, and who do not follow the law of justice (*dīn al-ḥaqq*) from those who have been given the Book, until they humbly pay the *jizya ʿan yad*'.

[27] When I call a verse or a passage 'interpolation' in this essay, I do not mean that it is necessarily post-Muḥammadan. It could simply belong to a different stage of the revelatory corpus, and Muḥammad himself could have made the interpolation. But much of the editing and collection process of the Qurʾān remains unclear, and the post-prophetic period is definitely a possibility for some of the interpolations.

[28] My citations of the Qurʾān stem from the translation of M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford, 2004). In some cases, I have changed his rendering somewhat because of the context or because I put forward another interpretation (which I explicitly note).

1–6: Food and purity laws.

7–11: God's covenant with the believers.

12–9: God's previous covenants with the Israelites and Christians.

20–32: Narratives on Moses and Adam's sons.

33–7: The fate of the disbelievers.

38–40: The cutting of thieves' hands.

41–50: Verses on Jews, Torah, and Jesus, as well as Muḥammad's role in administering the Law.

51–86: Various verses on the People of the Book.

87–109: Laws related to, e.g., food, wine, oaths, pilgrimage and hunting.

110–20: Jesus, his disciples, and the story of the table (*māʾida*).

As can be seen, surah 5 contains much material on the law, God's covenant, and the believers' position vis-à-vis the People of the Book. This is interspersed with narratives from the sacred history (20–32 and 110–20), which are not, for the most part, dealt with in this article, since they do not directly relate to the issue at hand, social identity. In my presentation below, I include some references to classical Arabic works of Qurʾānic exegesis to explicate pre-modern views on the passages.[29] However, since this is not the main topic of this article, the references are somewhat limited and selective.

Law, supersessionism, and God's covenants (verses 1–19)

Verses 1 and 2 of the surah mention some details concerning the pilgrimage and hunting. It is important to note here that appreciation of and pilgrimage to Mecca did *not* necessarily form a shibboleth demarcating Jews and Christians from the Qurʾānic community of believers at this time, since according to poetical evidence it appears that a variety of communities considered Mecca and its shrine sanctified by God.[30]

[29] Only the following three works are used: al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 26 vols (Cairo, 2001); al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 24 vols (Beirut, 2006); al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl*, 2 vols (Beirut, 2008). The reader should note that the exegetical genre is multi-voiced, diverse, and rich, but these aspects cannot be fully conveyed in the present study.

[30] In an important study, N. Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler: Allāh in Pre-Quranic Poetry* (New Haven, 2019), 52–3, notes that there is evidence in Arabic poetry of pre-Islamic Christians accepting God as the patron deity of the Meccan shrine. Sinai also argues that pre-Islamic gentile monotheists venerated the Kaʿba. Though clinching evidence is missing, it makes sense to assume, on the basis of the poetic corpus, that pilgrimage to Mecca (as well as other parts of Arabia) was practiced by various local Arabian communities.

Verses 5:3–5 are of utmost importance for Qurʾānic dietary and purity regulations. Let us first consider 5:3. It is a giant of a verse, over 50 words in the Arabic original. I cite it in its entirety:[31]

> You are forbidden to eat carrion; blood; pig's meat; any animal over which any name other than God's has been invoked; any animal strangled, or victim of a violent blow or a fall, or gored or savaged by a beast of prey, unless you still slaughter it [in the correct manner]; or anything sacrificed on idolatrous altars. You are also forbidden to allot shares [of meat] by drawing marked arrows – a heinous practice. Today, those who reject (*kafarū min*) your *dīn* have lost hope. Do not fear them: fear Me. Today I have perfected your law (*dīnakum*) for you, completed My blessing upon you, and favoured obedience (*al-islām*) as regards law (*dīnan*) for you; but if any of you is forced by hunger to eat forbidden food, with no intention of doing wrong, then God is most forgiving and merciful.

Here, one might suppose, we could have a verse, dealing with issues of food and purity, setting the community apart, if not from Jews (who would have agreed with these notions of diet and purity), then at least from Christians. However, it should be noted that, on evidence, there were in Antiquity and Late Antiquity a number of (gentile) Christian groups who followed a set of gentile dietary regulations (avoidance of meat sacrificed to idols, carrion, blood, and fornication; Acts 15:19–21). In fact, following these regulations was the majority opinion until the fourth century, as Holger Zellentin has argued, and even after this, some texts, such as the pseudo-Clementine Homilies and the Didascalia evidence such rules being followed by some Christians.[32] Intriguingly, the pseudo-Clementine Homilies and the Didascalia mention these Christians also shunning pork and wine.[33] Hence, it appears that some late antique Near Eastern Christians

[31] I have modified Abdel Haleem's translation here.

[32] Zellentin, 'Judaeo-Christian Legal Culture', 147. The text of the pseudo-Clementine Homilies was redacted in the fourth or fifth century. The Didascalia dates to the fifth century in its Latin version and the eighth century in its Syriac one. For thorough studies on these texts and their connections with the Qurʾān, see Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture* and *Law Beyond Israel: From the Bible to the Qur'an* (Oxford, 2022). Naturally, it is possible to assume that, in the centuries that followed their initial composition, these texts were only transmitted and translated with antiquarian interest. However, the similarities between the pseudo-Clementine Homilies and the Didascalia, on one hand, and the Qurʾān, on the other, as regards dietary and purity regulations is very striking, so a connection (though not necessarily a direct one) seems to me to be probable.

[33] Christians sceptical about or eschewing wine might sound unexpected, but there are some suggestions that there was similar wariness in the earliest Jesus group as well since the wine might have been sacrificed to 'false' deities as libations before its serving. See Fredriksen, *Paul*, 97–8, 148, and also Romans 14:20–21. The later, Late Antique, Christian groups that were shunning wine were presumably also worried that it was pagan wine, possibly used in idolatry. See Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture*, 120–2.

eschewed idol meat, carrion, blood, and, perhaps more rarely, wine and pig meat.[34] This might have been because of ascetic reasons, but it might also reflect the ways in which they conceived the law.

With that in mind, let us look at verse 5:3 again. What do we find? First, 'carrion' in general is declared forbidden, with some particular sub-categories mentioned explicitly ('any animal strangled, or victim of a violent blow or a fall, or gored or savaged by a beast of prey'). Second, blood. Third, pork. Fourth, meat sacrificed to idols or used in divination or gambling ('any animal over which any name other than God's has been invoked…or anything sacrificed on idolatrous altars. You are also forbidden to allot shares [of meat] by drawing marked arrows'). As I have mentioned, things forbidden in Qurʾān 5:3 would have been considered repugnant by (most) Jews;[35] hence, the verse does not delineate them from the practices of the Qurʾānic community of believers. But, in addition, extant evidence shows that there were late antique Near Eastern Christians who continued to follow the gentile food regulations mentioned in Acts 15:19–21, perhaps also shunning wine and pork, as the Late Antique text, the Didascalia, suggests some Christians were doing.[36] Naturally, we do not know if such Christians existed in Western Arabia at the time of the Prophet, given the lack of evidence from there, but the similarity between the Qurʾānic regulations and Acts 15:19–21 is striking and difficult to ignore. Though wine is not mentioned in this verse of the Qurʾān, verse 5:90 proclaims wine, alongside gambling, idols, and divining arrows to be 'repugnant' (*rijs*) and 'Satan's doing'.

Hence, I would argue, verse 5:3 (and perhaps 5:90 as well) points toward shared norms and notions between Jews and (some) Christians on one hand, and the Qurʾānic believers, on the other. And this is what Qurʾān 5:5 in fact emphasizes: 'Today all good things have been made lawful for you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them'.

Let us now look at the part in verse 5:3 where God is cited as saying: 'Today I have perfected your law (*dīnakum*) for you, completed My blessing upon you, and favoured *al-islām* as regards law (*dīnan*) for you' (all 'you' pronouns are in the plural here).[37] This verse and other similar ones (e.g., 3:19, 3:85) have been in the forefront in Islamic exegesis and theology as proof texts for the

[34] For this question, see also P. Crone, 'Jewish Christianity and the Qurʾān (parts I–II)', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74/2 (2015) 225–53 and 75/1 (2016), 1–21.
[35] See Leviticus 11 and 17.
[36] For more detail, see the seminal study of Zellentin, 'Judaeo-Christian Legal Culture'.
[37] I have modified the translation of Abdel Haleem in this part, which reads: 'Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion *islam* [total devotion to God]'.

conventional exclusivist interpretation of other religions.[38] However, it is hard to see *al-islām* signifying a reified and distinct religion, Islam, in Qurʾānic Arabic.[39] The word, after all, simply means 'submission' or 'obedience' to God and the law.[40] Moreover, we should not translate *dīn* as 'religion' here,[41] given that it most often denotes 'law' or 'judgment' in the Qurʾān.[42] Indeed, the rest of verse 5:3 has to do with dietary and other regulations. Thus, the natural understanding of the passage quoted above is, instead, that God has 'favoured obedience as regards law', the word *dīnan* being an example of a *tamyīz* accusative.[43] The remainder of the verse ('but if any of you is forced by hunger to eat forbidden food, with no intention of doing wrong, then God is most forgiving and merciful') directly continues the Qurʾānic discourse on food regulations (which are naturally an important part of the law), corroborating my suggestion that the phrase '[God has] favored *al-islām* as regards *dīn* for you' refers to the idea that law (*dīn*) should be observed in obedience (*al-islām*); the text does not identify *al-islām* as the name of the religion that the believers should follow.

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[38] See the discussion in M. Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'ān and Other Religions* (Oxford, 2014), 65–99.

[39] Nonetheless, this is how a number of modern scholars have interpreted it. See, e.g., Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, vol. 1, 145; D. Z. H. Baneth, 'What Did Muḥammad Mean When He Called His Religion 'Islam'? The Original Meaning of *aslama* and Its Derivatives', *Israel Oriental studies* 1 (1971), 183–90; Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 7, 90; G. Böwering, *Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction* (Princeton, 2015), 217; S. H. Nasr et al. (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York, 2015), 276; N. Sinai, 'Processes of Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion in Two Medinan Surahs', in C. Bakhos and M. Cook (eds), *Islam and its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford, 2017), 106–22, at 84–5; *The Qur'an*, 128–9, 135–6, n. 58; M. D. Niemi, 'Historical & Semantic Development of Dīn and Islām from the Seventh Century to the Present', PhD thesis, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2021. These are some of the examples of researchers who see the word *al-islām* accruing the signification 'Islam', at least in the late stages of the Qurʾānic corpus. However, there are other scholars who more or less agree with my understanding of *al-islām* as following its general Qurʾānic meaning (obedience, submission). See, e.g., Reynolds, 'Sourate 5', 209 who puts forward the following translation for *raḍītu lakum al-islām dīnan*: 'J'ai agréé que la soumission [à Moi] soit votre obligation'. However, Reynolds does not dwell on the syntax or grammar of the phrase, and the translation seems like a paraphrase.

[40] On the word *al-islām*, see also J. Cole, 'Paradosis and Monotheism: A Late Antique Approach to the Meaning of *islām* in the Quran', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82/3 (2019), 405–25. Cole suggests a different meaning to what I am pursuing here, interpreting *al-islām* to mean the prophetic tradition of monotheism, which, I think, does not quite fit verse 5:3, for instance.

[41] Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 98, notes insightfully that 'the word "*al-dīn*" is never used in the Qur'ān in its plural form, *adyān*, which indicates that religious life at the time was not yet fully reified'. This is to the point. Classical exegesis often supplies the plural to the reading of the text; see, e.g., al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 1, 255, who suggests that Qurʾān 5:3 means that God has chosen Islam as *the* religion 'over all other faiths' (*ʿalā al-adyān kullihā*). The goal of these pre-modern exegetes was to solidify the hegemonic understanding of Islam as the best (indeed, the only authentic) religion.

[42] For a detailed treatment of these words, see F. M. Donner, '*Dīn*, *Islām*, und *Muslim* im Koran', in G. Tamer (ed.), *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling* (Berlin, 2019), 129–40. However, Donner understands verses 3:19, 3:85, and 5:3 as referring to 'Islam' in the reified sense (which I do not agree) and sees these passages as probable post-prophetic interpolations.

[43] Verse 5:3 should be compared to Qurʾān 3:19 and 3:85. Similarly to 5:3, I would translate 3:85 as: 'Whoever pursues non-obedience as regards law – it will not be accepted from her/him, and she/he will be among the losers in the hereafter', understanding the word *dīnan* being a *tamyīz* accusative. I would understand the phrase *inna al-dīn ʿinda allāh al-islām* in 3:19 as 'the law in the sight of God signifies obedience' (not: 'the religion of God is Islam').

The next verse, 5:6, extends the question of purity to praying:

> You who believe, when you are about to pray, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, wipe your heads, wash your feet up to the ankles and, if required, wash your whole body. If any of you is sick or on a journey, or has just relieved himself, or had intimate contact with a woman, and can find no water, then take some clean sand and wipe your face and hands with it. God does not wish to place any burden on you: He only wishes to cleanse you and perfect His blessing on you, so that you may be thankful.

Once again, though we might with hindsight detect a distinctly 'Islamic' set of requirements for ritual purity (washing oneself before prayer) here, things were not so simple in the seventh century. The late antique Christian texts mentioned above, the pseudo-Clementine Homilies and the Didascalia, contain references to Christian groups that practiced washing themselves before praying and after having sex. Similar injunctions are also attested in rabbinic texts.[44] Hence, in the case of verse 5:6, it is unclear if the Qurʾānic message actually puts forward norms and rules that would have set its community apart from Jews and Christians. Rather, the opposite could be the case: the Qurʾān accepts and acknowledges dietary and purity regulations that were commonplace in its context (though it is naturally true that we know very little indeed about *Western Arabian* Jews and Christians of the time).[45]

I will continue the discussion of surah 5 by taking up the notion of supersessionism in it, which is a facet that could be seen in verses 5:7–19. By supersessionism, I mean the idea that the current community (the believers) have supplanted earlier groups (Jews and Christians) as holders of God's covenant (*mīthāq*) and as God's people (*ḥizb Allāh*, Q. 5:56).[46] In this connection, it should be noted that although later Islamic theology also abounds in scriptural supersessionism[47] – the claim that that the Qurʾān has displaced earlier scriptures because the latter are distorted or

[44] See the detailed discussion in Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture*, 86–105, with some references to rabbinic literature as well.

[45] In any case, Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture*, 81, notes: 'the entirety of the enhanced Judaeo-Christian lawcode that we find in the Qurʾān – including the prohibition of pork, and the injunction to wash after intercourse and before prayer, as well as abstinence during the menses – was equally endorsed by Judaeo-Christians within the Didascalia's community, as well as by the gentile followers of Jesus in the Clementine Homilies'.

[46] For an analogue, see S. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians, 70-170 C.E.* (Minneapolis, 1995), 110–42, on early Christian supersessionism. On Qurʾānic supersessionism in the context of religious communities, see also R. Firestone, 'Is There a Notion of "Divine Election" in the Qurʾān?' in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* 2 (London, 2011), 393–410.

[47] Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 57–63, 100–32. On the theme of supersessionism, see also J. T. Lamptey, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Oxford, 2014).

falsified – there is little or nothing in my opinion to suggest that this idea is present in the Qurʾān or was prevalent during Muḥammad's lifetime. Indeed, the Qurʾān corroborates earlier revelations as true and authentic (e.g., 5:48, 11:7, 13:37–9, 46:12).

Although 'groupist' supersessionism and the notion that Jews and Christians have lost God's covenant are present in other Qurʾānic verses as well (e.g., 3:187), Qurʾān 5:7–19 contain the clearest and most detailed formulation of these ideas. However, I should note that Qurʾānic supersessionism is not completely exclusionary since, as is argued in this study, Jews and Christians could lay some claim to being inside the believer group,[48] the heirs of the covenant according to the Qurʾān. Understood in this way, a concept better than 'supersessionism' could actually be 'restoration theology',[49] that is, the pursuit of an earlier, purer (and, in this case, more inclusive) form of belief and the law. Jews and Christians (as groups) have gone astray, and the community of believers around Muḥammad restores the earlier and original covenant of God.

Now to the proofs of the notion of restoration in this surah. Verses 5:7–11 deal with the receiving of God's covenant by the believers, while 5:12–3 and 14 refer to earlier covenants held (and lost) by the Israelites and Christians:

> 5:7: Remember God's blessing on you and His covenant with which you were bound when you said, 'We hear and we obey'. Be mindful of God: God has full knowledge of the secrets of the heart…
>
> 5:12–3: God made a covenant with the Children of Israel. We made twelve leaders arise among them, and God said, 'I am with you: if you keep up the prayer, pay the prescribed alms, believe in My messengers and support them, and lend God a good loan, I will wipe out your sins and admit you into Gardens graced with flowing streams. Any of you who now ignore this will be far from the right path'. But they broke their covenant, so We distanced them and hardened their hearts.[50] They distort the meaning of words and have forgotten some

[48] While the equation of Jews and Christians (or 'those given the Book') as believers is more common in the Meccan strata of the Qurʾān, the Medinan verses also sometimes unequivocally state this (see, e.g., 3:110, 113–5, 199). The difference between Meccan and Medinan layers is that while the former accepts Jews and Christians categorically as believers, the latter verses often note that only some of the Jews and Christians can be described as such. See in more detail Lindstedt, '"One Community"'.

[49] The term 'restoration theology' is used in this sense by Dunn, *Partings*, 77 (and many other scholars of early Christianity beside).

[50] For this motif, see H. Räisänen, *The Idea of Divine Hardening: A Comparative Study of the Notion of Divine Hardening, Leading Astray and Inciting to Evil in the Bible and the Qur'ān* (Helsinki, 1972).

of what they were told to remember: you will always find treachery in all but a few of them. Overlook this and pardon them: God loves those who do good.

5:14: We also made a covenant with those who say, 'We are Christians', but they too forgot some of what they were told to remember, so We stirred up enmity and hatred among them until the Day of Resurrection, when God will tell them what they have done.

These verses make up a logical sequence: first the current people of God are mentioned, then the narratives about the previous holders of the covenant are recounted. The Israelites and the Christians function as historical examples of communities who have lost the covenants because of forgetfulness. The Qurʾān does not claim that a new religious community supplanted them as such, but that the Israelites and the Christians themselves broke the covenant: the believers should not repeat their mistakes.

In my reading, these passages do not mean that the Qurʾān rejects the Jews and Christians categorically and *as individuals* as having any claim to righteousness and faith but rather that, *as groups*, they have by and large forfeited the special bond that they once had. Before, just being an Israelite or Christian was enough evidence for righteousness; now, according to the Qurʾān, they had to prove themselves individually.

Verses 5:18–9 continue this Qurʾānic theme of denying that special bond that Jews and Christians claim to have with God. According to 5:18, 'the Jews and the Christians say, "We are the children of God[51] and His beloved ones"'. The Qurʾān, naturally, refutes this idea that Jews and Christians are thus favored by God. Verse 5:19 tells them: 'People of the Book, Our Messenger comes to you now, after a break in the sequence of Messengers, to make things clear for you'. After a hiatus, God's covenant is again established on earth through the Qurʾānic revelation and the formation of the community of believers.

[51] Although centuries of Christian theology have given the phrase a certain tint, 'the son/daughter/children of God' often simply denoted a special bond with God. See Dunn, *Partings*, 224–6. In Galatians 3:26, Paul calls the Christ-believers 'children of God'. H. Zellentin, '*Aḥbār* and *Ruhbān*: Religious Leaders in the Qurʾān in Dialogue with Christian and Jewish Literature', in A. Neuwirth and M. Sells (eds), *Qurʾānic Studies Today* (London & New York, 2016), 258–89, notes (p. 266) parallels from the rabbinic and Syriac Christian literature for the expression in the Qurʾān.

Jews and Christians in 5:41–86

Let us now take a closer look at a group of verses where commentators[52] have seen a clear separation between the believers, on one hand, and Jews and Christians, on the other: that is, Qurʾān 5:41–86. I will argue that the categorizations of the groups are far from straightforward.

Verse 5:41 begins with a strong polemical tone, linking the Jews (here referred to as *alladhīna hādū*) with *al-kufr*, disbelief:

> Messenger, do not be grieved by those who race to surpass one another in disbelief (*al-kufr*) – those who say with their mouths, 'We believe', but have no faith in their hearts, and the Jews who listen eagerly to lies and listen to another group (*qawm ākharīn*) who has not even met you, who distort (*yuḥarrifūna*) the meanings of words (*al-kalām*).

This and similar verses were later interpreted in Islamic exegesis as evidence that the Jews and Christians have distorted or forged their scriptures. This is unlikely to have been the original import of the text: the Qurʾān says nothing of the falsification of Jewish and Christian scriptures, only that the Jews and Christians distorted their interpretation.[53] Besides, 5:41 does not necessarily say that the Jews were the ones who 'distort (*yuḥarrifūna*) the meanings of words' but that the Jews *listen* to another group (*qawm ākharīn*) who does that, as the text could also be interpreted. Who comprised this *qawm ākharīn* is unclear, but the most probable interpretation is that they were not Jewish (if they were, why would they be mentioned as 'another group' beside the Jews?). Moreover, it should be asked whether the phrase *yuḥarrifūna al-kalām* in this verse actually refers to divine discourse (and, hence, scripture) or whether a more mundane form of speech is meant.[54]

Be that as it may, verses 5:41–5 contain anti-Jewish polemics. But once again, the situation is not black and white. Verse 5:42 states that the Prophet has in fact arbitrated between Jews in some role. The following verse notes that 'they have the Torah with God's judgment, and even then still turn away? These are not believers'. Here, the criticism seems to entail that the Jews are not following the Torah, even though they should. That is, the verses do not offer all-out reproach

[52] E.g., Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 125; Cuypers, *Banquet*, 223–355.
[53] See Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 100–32, for an in-depth review of the verses and their Islamic interpretative tradition.
[54] For an interpretation of verse 5:41, see also Sinai, 'The Unknown Known', 78, who notes: '*Q.* 5:41 clearly expresses a deep dissatisfaction with such a stance: what the Qur'an demands from the Jews is an unconditional acceptance of the Qur'anic revelations, whether or not these are matched by anything presently contained in the Jewish or Christian scriptures'. Though I do not necessarily agree that the verse is about accepting or distorting the scripture to begin with, Sinai's general note is not necessarily incongruous with my interpretation of the Qurʾānic text, since I suggest that those Jews who accepted the Prophet's revelations were considered in-group members.

against the Jews *qua* Jews; rather, what the Qurʾān seems to be claiming is that some Jews are not Torah-observant. Indeed, soon after, verse 5:44 contains a very positive description of the Torah and the Jewish religious scholars:

> We revealed the Torah with guidance and light, and the Prophets, who had submitted to God, judged according to it for the Jews. So did the rabbis and scholars (*al-rabbāniyyūn wa-l-aḥbār*)[55] in accordance with that part of God's Book which they were entrusted to preserve, and to which they were[56] witnesses.

These verses are followed by a section (5:46–50) which discusses the role of Jesus and the current Prophet and which do not mention the People of the Book. The verses state that Jesus confirmed the Torah and, similarly, the Prophet confirms the earlier part(s) of the scripture. Verse 5:48 is very important as regards this surah's discourse on the law:

> We sent to you [Muhammad] the Book with the truth, confirming and guarding the Books that came before it: so judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do not follow their whims, should they deviate from the truth that has come to you [sing.]. We have assigned a law (*shirʿatan*) and a path (*minhājan*) to each of you [pl.]. If God had so willed, He would have made you [pl.] one community (*umma wāḥida*), but He wanted to test you [pl.] through that which He has given you [pl.], so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about.

This verse appears to put forward the suggestion that different communities (*vis-à-vis* the believers, but perhaps also subcategories inside the believers) can have and keep their different views on the law, ethics, and practices. Above, it was suggested that the Qurʾānic understanding of dietary and purity laws aligned with (some) Jewish and Christian groups. Nonetheless, in verse 5:48, the Qurʾān propounds that differences, where they exist, are not necessarily a bad thing. Before this verse, the Torah (5:45 and 46) and the Evangelion (5:47) are mentioned, so it makes sense to understand 'a law (*shirʿa*) and a path (*minhāj*)' to refer to the contents (and interpretations)

[55] See Zellentin, '*Aḥbār* and *Ruhbān*' for the terms. On p. 271, Zellentin notes that he would translate the word *al-aḥbār*, 'as "rabbinic overseer", to whom the regular rabbis are subordinate in the Jewish community'.
[56] One could also translate 'are', since in Qurʾānic Arabic the perfect aspect (the suffix conjugation) of the verb does not often signify the past tense, in particular as regards the verb *kāna* ('to be').

of these scriptures. Indeed, 5:47 notes explicitly: 'So let the followers of the Evangelion judge according to what God has sent down in it'.

Qurʾān 5:51 has received considerable attention, both medieval and modern.[57] Before quoting the verse, let me remark that it seems to be qualified by verses 5:55–8, which are dealt with below. Verse 5:51 does indeed categorize the believers into a clearly distinct group, apart from other groups: 'You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies (*awliyāʾ*): they are allies (*awliyāʾ*) only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally (*man yatawallahum*) becomes one of them – God does not guide such wrongdoers'. The word *awliyāʾ* has multiple meanings: friends, masters, patrons, clients, and the one adopted by Abdel Haleem and reproduced here, allies. Whatever the original intended meaning and context of the word, a rather clear-cut division into different groups is articulated here. Verse 5:51 does not permit a grey area: the categories are purportedly distinct and in no way overlapping. However, 5:55–8 seem to be directly in dialogue with and comment on 5:51:

> 55. Your true allies are God, His Messenger, and the believers: those who keep up the prayer, pay the prescribed alms, and bow down in worship, 56. and those who turn for protection to God, His Messenger, and who believe. God's party is sure to triumph. 57. You who believe, do not take as allies (*awliyāʾ*) those who ridicule your law[58] (*dīnakum*) and make fun of it – whether people who were given the Book before you, or disbelievers – and be mindful of God if you are believers. 58. When you make the call to prayer, they ridicule it and make fun of it: this is because they are people who do not reason.

In particular, verse 5:57 is very similar to 5:51 and could be a qualifying remark on it: you should not ally with those Jews, Christians, and others who ridicule the believers' concept of law. The believer identity signalled in 5:55–6 is, in any case, rather broadly defined. A further note relating to the same theme as 5:51 and 5:55–8 is included in verses 5:78–81, which explain that some of the Israelites have disbelieved and, moreover, are presently engaged in allying themselves with (other?) disbelievers. Hence, while verse 5:51 definitely presents the clearest example in this surah of the supposed 'parting of the ways', it has to be read in conjunction with verses that ensue soon after.

[57] See Cuypers, *Banquet*, 267–9, and Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 182–93.
[58] Abdel Haleem translates *dīnakum* as 'your religion'.

Verse 5:59 continues by stating that the People of the Book should not resent the (gentile?) believers: all the latter do is to believe in God and the scriptures, both past and present. It ends with a rather typical remark on the People of the Book: 'most of you are sinners (*fāsiqūn*)'. The Qurʾānic usage of the word *fāsiqūn* seems to echo and follow a long tradition of Jewish and Christian discourse and polemics in which the in-group were given the label 'righteous' and the outgroup 'sinners'.[59] Note, however, that what 5:59 implicitly says is that *some* of the People of the Book are *not* sinners; and indeed verses elsewhere in the Qurʾān, such as 3:110 and 114, state that some of them are righteous and believers, which I take to mean that they should be categorized as part of the Qurʾānic in-group.

Verse 5:63 merits a close reading. It follows verse 5:62, the translation of which is straightforward: 'You [Prophet] see many of them [scil. Jews or the People of the Book more generally] rushing into sin and hostility and consuming what is unlawful. How evil their practices are!' The interpretation of Qurʾān 5:63 is trickier. I will present below 1) the transliteration of the verse, 2) Abdel Haleem's translation (which concurs with most translations that I have checked),[60] and 3) my own suggestion for how to understand the verse.

1. *law-lā yanhāhum al-rabbāniyyūna wa-l-aḥbāru ʿan qawlihim al-ithma wa-aklihim al-suḥta*[61] *la-biʾsa mā kānū yaṣnaʿūna*.
2. Why do their rabbis and scholars not forbid them to speak sinfully and consume what is unlawful? How evil their deeds are! (tr. Abdel Haleem)
3. If the rabbis and scholars did not forbid them to speak sinfully and eat unclean foods, their deeds would be evil! (my suggestion)

The exegesis of this verse requires some discussion about the grammatical rules of Classical Arabic and Qurʾānic Arabic (if we can say anything certain about the latter). The crux of the matter is the expression *law-lā* + imperfect (prefix) verb at the beginning of the verse. This construction appears elsewhere in the Qurʾān as well (e.g., 2:118, 18:15, 20:133) and is usually understood, by

[59] Dunn, *Partings*, 141.
[60] Different translations can be compared online at https://quran.com/5/63.
[61] The word *al-suḥt* appears only a couple of times in the Qurʾān. It seems to be a loan from Syriac, where the cognate means 'filth'. See A. Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 130.

both the classical and modern scholars, as meaning, like *hal-lā*, 'why not?'[62] This is how Abdel Haleem translates 5:63 as well. But are other translations possible? In fact, the classical exegete al-Qurṭubī suggests that *law-lā* in Qurʾān 5:63 means *a-fa-lā*[63] (and not *hal-lā*) in which case the translation of the beginning of the verse would be: 'Do the rabbis and scholars not forbid them to speak sinfully and eat unclean foods?' The import would not be a categorical renunciation of Jewish religious authorities but, rather, the verse would pose a question left somewhat unanswered.

My own interpretation is offered above (no. 3). This requires some defending. According to the Arabic grammar of Wolfdietrich Fischer, the word *law* '"if" introduces an unreal or potential conditional sentence which contains a hypothetical presumption of a specific unrealized event. The apodosis is as a rule introduced by *la-*. Earlier stages of Arabic used the perfect and imperfect with their aspect function after *law*'.[64] Furthermore, '*lā* is affixed to particles that introduce clauses:…*law-lā* "if not"'.[65] However, in Classical Arabic, *law-lā* ('if not') 'is always followed by a noun in the nominative', or a clause 'introduced by *ʾan* or *ʾanna* may also follow'.[66] This we do not have in Qurʾān 5:63, but, rather, *law-lā* + imperfect verb. This is against the rules of Classical Arabic, but it does not necessarily mean that it functioned the same in Qurʾānic (pre-Classical) Arabic. As quoted above, Fischer notes that in early Arabic, *law* can be followed by either the perfect or imperfect verb, depending on the intended aspect function, and perhaps we can suppose that *law-lā* sometimes functioned similarly to *law* in this respect (though in the negative). What is more, the ending of 5:63, *la-biʾsa mā kānū yaṣnaʿūna* can be understood as an apodosis with the introductory participle *la-*, rather than a separate clause, 'How evil their deeds are!', as interpreted by Abdel Haleem and other translators as well as the exegetical literature. However, I admit that Qurʾān 5:62 ends with an almost identical phrase, *la-biʾsa mā kānū yaʿmalūna*, and in that verse it is in my opinion impossible to interpret this as an apodosis; instead, it forms a separate clause.[67]

My rendering of the *law-lā* construction in verse 5:63 nonetheless finds support from a (supposedly) early Arabic poem attributed to Abū Dhuʾayb al-Hudhalī (d. 649), which reads:[68]

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[62] See Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary*, 330, for this meaning of the expression. The suggestion in much (but not all) of classical exegesis (and Ambros) is that *law-lā* is synonymous with *hal-lā*, 'why not?', 'if only', or 'wouldn't you?', see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, vol. 8, 550.
[63] al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, vol. 8, 80.
[64] W. Fischer, *A Grammar of Classical Arabic* (New Haven, 2001, 3rd edition), 231.
[65] Fischer, *A Grammar*, 172.
[66] Fischer, *A Grammar*, 231.
[67] It is possible that when surah 5 was compiled from distinct revelatory units, verses 5:62 and 5:63 were attached next to each other because their ending was similar.
[68] *Dīwān al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 3 vols (Cairo, 1965), vol. 1, 34; see also the notes of the editor to this line on the same page. On the Hudhalī poetical corpus, see N. Miller, 'Tribal Poetics in Early Arabic Culture: The Case of Ashʿār al-Hudhaliyyīn', PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2016. He suggests that much of the material is authentic.

*a-lā zaʿamat asmāʾu an lā uḥibbuhā * fa-qultu balā law-lā yunāziʿunī shughlī*

Verily, Asmāʾ has claimed that I do not love her. I answered: 'But I do! If my work did not occupy me [I would visit her]!'

In this line, we have a similar construction as in Qurʾān 5:63, that is, *law-lā* + prefix (imperfect) verb. Here, it clearly does not mean 'why not?', but 'if…not'. This, I suggest, makes my rendering ('If the rabbis and scholars did not forbid them to speak sinfully and eat unclean foods, their deeds would be evil!'), while perhaps not probable, at least possible.[69] According to this interpretation, verses 5:62 and 63 would first denigrate many Jews (or 'them': also Christians might be referred to) as eating illicit foods and sinning, while 5:63 would signify that the rabbis and scholars should (and perhaps do) intervene. As mentioned above, also some classical commentators, such as al-Qurṭubī, understood verse 5:63 in this vein.

If my reading of Qurʾān 5:63 is correct – and this is up for debate – the meaning of the verse changes. Instead of castigating the Jewish religious authorities categorically for not forbidding illicit deeds, [70] the verse would only contain a potential conditional sentence, even suggesting that, currently, they indeed *are* preventing the Jewish community from speaking and consuming unclean things. This is naturally what one might expect, since verse 5:5 declares the food of the People of the Book pure, though 5:62 notes that many of them (*kathīran minhum*, that is, the lay Jews) do not stick to licit foods only, but rush to consume illicit ones as well. In any case, I would suggest that the portrayal of the Jews and their authorities is not categorically pejorative in the surah (as mentioned above, verse 5:44 presents a positive depiction). But I do not want to push my suggestion of the reading of 5:63 too far, since my overall interpretation of the surah does not hinge on this. It is indeed possible that the traditional interpretation of the verse (conveyed in the modern translations such as the one by Abdel Haleem cited above) is how the Prophet's community first understood it. Even this reading of the verse does not necessarily suggest a demarcation from the Jews all and sundry, but censures many (not all) of them as being lax in their obedience of the law.

[69] One could perhaps criticize this reading on the grounds that the verses around 5:63 contain anti-Jewish polemics and hence a positive statement in their midst would be surprising. But quick turns and changes are common in the Qurʾānic style. See, e.g., verse 5:69 (treated presently), which is also located amidst (mostly) anti-People of the Book rhetoric.

[70] 'The Qurʾān may not question the legitimacy of Jewish and Christian leaders as such. Yet it does accuse them, in continuity with a rich Jewish and Christian tradition, of self-aggrandizing as well as embezzlement, and their position is thus ultimately undermined', Zellentin, '*Aḥbār* and *Ruhbān*', 264.

Let us now continue with Qurʾān 5:64–9, which are an extremely significant group of verses. They have a bearing on the present and future status of the People of the Book. Verse 5:64 represents anti-Jewish polemics which is rather common in this surah: allegedly, Jews lie about the bountifulness of God, spread corruption, and 'kindle the fire of war'. Indeed, God has 'sown enmity and hatred amongst them till the Day of Resurrection'. These are all very pejorative, othering, and stereotyping descriptions. Verses 5:65–67 address the People of the Book, basically saying that some of them are bad, others good: among them there is a 'moderate community' (*umma muqtaṣida*), but many of them do evil deeds (verse 5:66). The phrase *umma muqtaṣida* should be compared (and connected) with the concept *umma wasaṭ*, 'middle community' in verse 2:143, which is one of the Qurʾānic descriptions for the in-group.[71] Once again, the description of the People of the Book contains, at the very least, shades of grey.

The depiction changes from a grey area toward a rather positive command in verse 5:68, which reads:

> Say, 'People of the Book, you have no true basis unless you uphold the Torah, the Gospel, and that which has been sent down to you [plural] from your Lord'. But what has been sent down to you [Prophet] from your Lord is sure to increase many of them in their insolence and defiance: do not worry about the disbelieving community.

The beginning of the verse contains an aspect of Qurʾānic polemical rhetoric which I have noted above: the Qurʾān often does not censure Jews and Christians because they are Jews and Christians but because they are *lax* Jews and Christians, not following their respective scriptures.[72] Admittedly, the rest of the verse articulates a possible tension between the People of the Book and the Prophet's revelation (but note that verse 5:83 says that the Christians accept the latter, with 'eyes overflowing with tears because they recognize the Truth').

In any case, the tone of the Qurʾān develops even more toward a positive description in 5:69: 'For those who believe, the Jews, the Sabians, and the Christians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds—there is no fear: they will not grieve'. The verse is almost identical

[71] For an important study treating these two verses in conjunction, see A. Afsaruddin, 'The Hermeneutics of Inter-Faith Relations: Retrieving Moderation and Pluralism as Universal Principles in Qur'anic Exegeses', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 37/2 (2009) 331–54.

[72] Granted, 5:68 could actually be read as saying that both Jews and Christians should accept and uphold both the Torah and the Gospel (and Muḥammad's revelation too). However, there are other instances that seem to suggest that the religious communities have different scriptures and laws; see, e.g., 5:44 and 48.

to 2:62, which adds: 'they will have their rewards with their Lord'. Salvific inclusiveness for the People of the Book is unmistakably what is articulated here. Although there have been a multitude of interpretations of the Qurʾānic text, it has been common in classical exegesis to suggest that verses such as 5:69, promising the salvific reward to the People of the Book (alongside other believers), are early ones superseded by later, more exclusive verses, or that the promise given in the verse only applies to non-Muslims living before the Prophet's time.[73] However, as can be seen in the case of 3:110–5, in some cases more inclusive verses actually modify earlier more exclusive ones.[74] As far as I can see, there is no evidence, from a historical-critical perspective, to suggest that 5:69 is an early verse in the context of later verses supplanting it. The opposite could be the case: 5:64–8 are earlier, and 5:69 is an interpolation that qualifies them.

Verses 5:72–86 concern Christology and Christians. Although denying Jesus' divinity, they contain in general very positive statements about Christians. Let us begin with Qurʾān 5:72–3, which comments on the nature of God (and Jesus):

> 72. Those who say, 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary', have disbelieved. The Messiah himself said, 'Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord'. If anyone associates others with God, God will forbid him from the Garden, and Hell will be his home. No one will help such evildoers. 73. Those who say that God is the third of three have disbelieved. There is only One God. If they persist in what they are saying, a painful punishment will afflict those of them who persist.

Trinitarianism and the idea that Jesus might be God in flesh[75] are here linked with *shirk*, associationism. Jesus himself is quoted, as it were, for disapproving this. Verse 5:75 goes on to elaborate that Jesus was only a Messenger who ate like other human beings. However, most

[73] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, vol. 8, 575, notes that belief in the Prophet would be required for the paradisal reward. In his exegesis of Qurʾān 2:62, which is almost identical to 5:69, al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, vol. 2, 32–46, deals with the issue at more length. Though many views are cited, one can summarize the contents by saying that al-Ṭabarī puts forward that Islam has superseded and replaced all other religions and, hence, the promise of 2:62 (and 5:69) does not hold any more. In his exegesis of verse 2:62, al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, vol. 1, 66, says that the promise extended to non-Muslims only before Islam. After that, their religions were abrogated (*yunsakh*) by Islam.

[74] Verses 3:110–2 are more critical of the People of the Book (though verse 110 states *minhum al-muʾminūn*, 'some of them are believers'), while verses 113–5 are a later softening of the message. Hence, not all later additions are more critical of the Jews and Christians: the process of the Qurʾānic discourse on this topic does not develop from inclusion to a 'parting'. Some passages, such as 3:110–5, move from exclusion to inclusion.

[75] I note in passing that the formulation 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary' is peculiar. Why not the other way around, 'the Messiah, son of Mary, is God'?

Christians would not have had problems with the idea that Jesus ate food, so the import of this statement in the Qurʾān is unclear.[76]

After critical Christological remarks, the tone changes. Qurʾān 5:82–5[77] include a very positive description of the Christian, while the beginning of the passage is anti-Jewish:

> 82. You [Prophet] are sure to find that the most hostile to the believers are the Jews and those who associate [other beings with God]; you are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians', for there are among them priests and monks. These people are not given to arrogance, 83. and when they listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears because they recognize the truth. They say, 'Our Lord, we believe, so count us amongst the witnesses. 84. Why should we not believe in God and in the truth that has come down to us, when we long for our Lord to include us in the company of the righteous?' 85. For saying this, God has rewarded them with Gardens graced with flowing streams, and there they will stay: that is the reward of those who do good.

These verses are followed by 5:86: 'But those who disbelieve and deny Our signs will be the inhabitants of Hellfire'. This indicates that the Qurʾān does not automatically categorize all Christians as believers; if they are non-observant and show signs of disbelief, they are relegated outside the group.

Qurʾān 5:82–5 is, indeed, replete with notions extending positive characteristics and, I would argue, the in-group believer affiliation to some Christians: they are not arrogant, accept the current revelation, and strive to be righteous. And, as 5:85 notes, they will receive the salvific reward. According to the Qurʾān (5:83), Christians actively indicate in-group belonging by exclaiming, 'Our Lord, we believe, so count us amongst the witnesses'. The whole passage is very similar to other Qurʾānic verses describing the in-group more generally, for example, 3:15–7.[78] Verses 5:82–5 accept (at least some) Christians as part of the believers whereas Jews are relegated outside the

[76] I explore the Qurʾānic discourse *vis-à-vis* Late Antique Christologies in more detail below. However, note the evidence mustered by Crone, 'Jewish Christianity (part I)', 245–6 of Christian texts that note that Jesus *did not* eat.
[77] For this passage, see also Zellentin, '*Aḥbār* and *Ruhbān*', 273–4.
[78] 'Their Lord will give those who are mindful of God Gardens graced with flowing streams, where they will stay with pure spouses and God's good pleasure. God is aware of His servants – those who say, "Our Lord, we believe, so forgive us our sins and protect us from suffering in the Fire", the patient, truthful, devout, spending [in God's cause], and asking for forgiveness before dawn'.

group. On the other hand, verses such as 5:44 include more positive comments on the Jews, and 2:62 and 5:69 expand the salvation to them as well. Moreover, as part of the umbrella group, the People of the Book, they could have some claim on in-group belonging (e.g., Qurʾān 3:113–5).

Qurʾān 5:87–109 deals with various injunctions related to, for instance, food, wine, bequest, oaths, pilgrimage and hunting. To limit the size of the current essay, I will skip this section, though I have dealt with verse 5:90, declaring wine repugnant, above, in the context of 5:3. Verses 5:87–109 do not mention Jews or Christians and are somewhat irrelevant for the purposes of my arguments in this study.

Let me end my selective survey of the material of this surah by looking at verses 5:110–20, which mention a narrative about Jesus, his disciples, and the table (*māʾida*).[79] It is this narrative that gives the surah its name. As mentioned at the beginning, in verses 5:116–8, Nicolai Sinai sees one of the examples in the Qurʾānic communication of drawing a clear boundary with Christianity and of harsh criticism of Christian dogmata.[80] Is this necessarily so? Given the variety of ways in which Late Antique and medieval Christians articulated their faith in Christ,[81] I disagree.

In 1971, Heikki Räisänen explored the Jesus of the Qurʾān with the eye of a New Testament scholar. He noted that, if we disregard the Jesus of later church councils, the Qurʾānic Jesus depiction comes very close indeed to that of the New Testament (in particular the synoptic Gospels and some other pre-Nicene understandings of Jesus). In both the synoptic Gospels and the Qurʾān, Jesus is a prophet, a healer, and the Messiah, but not God incarnate.[82] Scholars have since noted that such 'low' Christologies survived for centuries, in particular among groups such as the Ebionites that are often called 'Jewish Christian' in scholarship (though this appellation is not necessarily apt).[83] The ideas of Jesus as God incarnate and the second person of the Trinity were

[79] For these verses, see the important comments in M. Azaiez, G. S. Reynolds, T. Tesei, and H. M. Zafer (eds), *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages*, 111–7.
[80] Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 125.
[81] In the memorable formulation of Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 235, 'just as one can believe in gravity without understanding the finer points of Einstein's Theory of General Relativity, or indeed, without ever having heard of Einstein; so, too, one could believe in Jesus without having a coherent view of the Incarnation or a strong opinion on Chalcedon (or any view at all on these matters)'.
[82] H. Räisänen, *Das koranische Jesusbild: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Korans* (Helsinki, 1971). For the development of Christology in early Christianity, see also P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Christ* (New Haven and London, 1988, 2nd edition 2000).
[83] Broadhead, *Jewish Ways*, who proffers that such views continued until the Middle Ages; see also Crone, 'Jewish Christianity' both parts? and Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions*, 139–58, for connections between the so-called Jewish Christian groups and the Qurʾānic Jesus. More on this, including contributions disagreeing with this connection, see the articles in F. del Río Sánchez (ed.), *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam* (Turnhout, 2018).

articulated over the course of centuries (and never universally accepted by *all* Christians).[84] It should naturally be noted that we know next to nothing of the views and dogmata that Arabian Christians held dear on the eve of Islam.[85] In any case, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of Late Antique Christologies (and other dogmata).[86]

Recently, Jack Tannous has noted that the scholars do not need to (and, perhaps, should not) resort to the Jewish Christian thesis to explain the Qurʾānic discourse on Jesus.[87] This is a plausible solution, though I do not see the two as mutually excluding each other. According to the evidence that Tannous has put forward, there was, in fact, a multitude of opinions on doctrine and practice among Late Antique and early medieval Near Eastern Christians within the churches that deemed themselves and are often even in scholarship called 'orthodox'.[88] Many Christians appear to have been more or less indifferent to the dogmata.[89] I would argue that the fact that the Qurʾān very rarely (and never in surah 5) ascribes the Christological stances that it criticizes to the Christians but, instead, to an anonymous bunch ('those who say', verses 5:17, 72, and 73), speaks to the notion that not all late antique Christians should automatically be understood as subscribing to, endorsing, or caring for the high Christological doctrine, even in the post-Nicaea and post-Chalcedon era.

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[84] For this, see the classic book J. Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London, 1977). Though many of the writers in this collection also put forward modern theological interpretation, the book has also been important as regards the historical development of Christological views.

[85] Epigraphic evidence of Christians in Arabia has increased in recent years. The most exciting new finds of Christian inscriptions include a sixth-century Arabic inscription from near Dūma and (earlier) Greek inscriptions from al-ʿArniyyāt and Umm Jadhāyidh, in Northwestern Saudi Arabia. See L. Nehmé, 'New Dated Inscriptions (Nabataean and Pre-Islamic Arabic) from a Site near al-Jawf, Ancient Dūmah, Saudi Arabia', *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 3 (2017), 121–4; F. Villeneuve, 'The Greek Inscriptions at al-ʿArniyyāt and Umm Jadhāyidh', in L. Nehmé (ed.), *The Darb al-Bakrah: A Caravan Route in North West Arabia Discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban: Catalogue of the Inscriptions* (Riyadh, 2018), 285–2. The Greek inscriptions published by Villeneuve are from ca. 500 km northwest of Medina (by road), which is, incidentally, approximately the same distance that is between Mecca and Medina.

[86] Abraha's Sabaic inscriptions have been interpreted as articulating low Christology: see C. Segovia, 'Abraha's Christological Formula *RḤMNN W-MS¹Ḥ-HW* and Its Relevance for the Study of Islam's Origins', *Oriens christianus* 98 (2015), 52–63.

[87] Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 252: 'when the Qur'ān seems to suggest that Christians understood Mary to be part of the Trinity (5:116), we can, as scholars have done, invoke the possible existence of an exotic heretical group like the Collyridians in western Arabia to explain such a curious claim. But in this instance, and in other places where the Qur'ān speaks of Christianity in unfamiliar ways, rather than looking for fourth – or fifth – century groups which held low Christologies, exalted views of Mary, or some other view not typical of the Christian communities most familiar to us now, or seeking to find individual passages in Syriac texts written by theological elites in northern Mesopotamia or Greek writers somewhere in the Mediterranean world which seem to bear resemblance to this or that idea put forth in the Qur'ān, a more fruitful way of understanding the image of Christianity presented therein is to see it as a reflection of and reaction to Christianity as it existed on the ground in the seventh-century Ḥijāz – or wherever it is that one wants to argue is the Qur'ān's original context'.

[88] Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 12–3, 23–4, 61, 260.

[89] Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 92, 108, 235, 245. Indifference to dogmata is, naturally, not peculiar to Christians but describes many, if not most, believers of any religious identity, in any era.

Three aspects in the Qurʾānic communication should be acknowledged: 1) the Qurʾānic characterization of the group Christians is markedly positive; 2) the Qurʾān vehemently denies trinitarianism, Jesus' incarnation, and sonship; 3) the Qurʾān seldom attributes these position to the Christians (only 9:30 explicitly does this). In my opinion, the conclusion based on these three factors is that there were at least *some* Christians around Muḥammad who, either before or after the beginning of his mission, subscribed to low Christology or did not care for the theological niceties involved in the issue to begin with. Otherwise, it is difficult to see how such affirmative depictions of the Christians could exist alongside heavy censure of certain Christian dogmata in the Qurʾān (5:72–3, 82–5).[90]

With this in mind, let us see what verses 5:110–20 have to say. Since food and dietary regulations are an important topic of surah 5, it is perhaps no coincidence that the surah ends with a narrative where Jesus' disciples ask God to send[91] them a table (*māʾida*)[92] from heaven. Verse 110 ascribes to Jesus many superhuman characteristics: he was helped by the Holy Spirit, he resurrected the dead, and gave life to a clay bird; he healed the blind and the lepers; and God taught him multiple scriptures: the Torah and Evangelion, but also 'the Book' and 'the Wisdom'. What is more, Qurʾān 5:111 adds that the disciples of Jesus were also given inspiration by God, and that they were obedient (*muslimūn*, perhaps to be understood as law-observant). The verb used for the giving of inspiration in this verse is *awḥā*. This is rather remarkable: the disciples/apostles were God-inspired. It shows how far the Qurʾān sometimes goes to embrace the Christians.

The table narrative is recounted in verses 5:112–4, where the disciples first ask Jesus to ask God to send them 'a table', and Jesus does this, specifying that the table would provide for a 'feast' (*ʿīdan*) for 'the first and last of us'. At this point, God makes the miraculous table descend from heaven. This Qurʾānic passage appears to echo the Christian last supper narratives[93] and, as verse

[90] Shoemaker, *A Prophet Has Appeared*, 20–23, notes this phenomenon and offers the idea that the Qurʾānic text might have not been well known or viewed authoritatively among the Christians (and others) joining the movement, which is a plausible solution. He also notes that the anti-trinitarian passages might be later interpolations.

[91] The verb used is *anzala*, which is often used in the Qurʾān in the context of God giving the Prophets revelation or scripture.

[92] This word appears to be a loanword from Geʿez, where its cognate is related to the Eucharist; see A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda, 1938), 255–6.

[93] Azaiez et al. (eds.), *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary*, 113–7, discuss different possible subtexts for this Qurʾānic narrative that appears to echo the narratives of the last supper: Matthew 14:13–21 and 15:32–9; Acts 10; John 6:22–71 and 10. However, G. S. Reynolds, 'On the Qur'ān's Mā'ida Passage and the Wanderings of the Israelites', in C. Segovia and B. Lourié (eds.), *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom?* (Piscataway, 2012), 91–108, rejects this association and rather connects the passage with the story of Moses and the Israelites in the desert and the Ethiopic translation of Psalm 78:19.

5:109[94] connects the passage to eschatology, the expectation of the eschatological second coming of Jesus might be implied at the end of surah 5. The phrase 'the first and last of us' might also be understood in an eschatological context.

After the table narrative, the Qurʾān once again comments on Jesus' nature. In verses 116–7, God interrogates Jesus, asking if he is to be blamed for the idea that Jesus and Mary[95] are considered gods in addition to God. Jesus denies this idea. Incidentally, since such a trinitarian (or perhaps better, tritheist) dogma of God, Mary, and Jesus as the three persons of the Godhead was not a common one among Late Antique Christians, it is difficult to see these verses as generally denouncing Christianity or Christians.

To recapitulate, surah 5 ends with a Jesus story that, in all likelihood, would have been eagerly accepted and appreciated by at least some Christians in the Qurʾānic audience.[96] However, verses 116–7 renounce the idea that Jesus (and Mary!) would have been God in flesh. Does this indicate that the Qurʾānic portrayal of Jesus would have been unacceptable to Christians? To some (perhaps the majority), undoubtedly: those Christians who held the Nicene creed dear would have found it appalling that the Qurʾān does not accept the miracle of the incarnation or Jesus' sonship. To other Christians, who held lower Christologies or did not really care about the exact details and wordings of Jesus' position *vis-à-vis* God, the Qurʾānic Jesus would probably not have been unpalatable: he was, after all, the Messiah born of the virgin Mary, a Prophet among the Prophets, and the most important miracle worker of the Qurʾān, with disciples who were themselves divinely inspired. As noted above, the surah contains many positive descriptions of Christians (in particular verses 5:82–5); nothing points toward a complete repudiation of them or their views. If there really was a demarcation between believers and Christians, I would suppose that there would be clearer traces of this in the Qurʾān, in surah 5 or elsewhere. Though there are definitely more anti-Jewish remarks in surah 5, there are some positive statements as well (5:44 and 5:69). And as part of the People of the Book, they could also be characterized as a righteous, 'moderate community' (5:66).

[94] 'On the Day when God assembles all the messengers and asks, "What response did you receive?" they will say, "We do not have that knowledge: You alone know things that cannot be seen"'.
[95] This is not, naturally, the 'orthodox' understanding of the Trinity or of Mary, as has been pointed out by modern scholars. For these Qurʾānic statements and their context, see the lucid study by M. Sirry, 'Reinterpreting the Qurʾānic Criticism of Other Religions', in Neuwirth and Sells (eds), *Qur'anic Studies Today*, 294–309.
[96] Naturally, it is difficult to say how the Jews in the Qurʾānic audience would have reacted.

CONCLUSIONS

In my reading of surah 5's verses related to social categories, I have suggested that even the very latest stratum of the Qurʾān does not necessarily warrant the conclusion that a distinct Islamic identity was articulated during this time. In my opinion, the clear demarcation of the Prophet's community from Judaism and Christianity that has been suggested to exist in the late strata of the Qurʾān[97] turns out to be primarily a mirage. The catch-all endonym 'believers' (*al-muʾminūn*), which included Jews and Christians, was still the dominant one, the word *al-islām* does not refer to Islam with a capital letter but to obedience to God and the law, and *dīn* does not denote 'religion' as much as 'law'. The dietary and purity regulations of surah 5 echo the notions present in Jewish and Christian literature of Antiquity and Late Antiquity. Verse 5:5 emphasizes the shared norms: intermarriage is allowed as is eating the food of the People of the Book. Qurʾān 5:69 promises the salvific reward to Jews, Christians, and Sabians – indeed anyone who believes in God and the Last Day. The surah ends with a narrative of the 'table' descending to Jesus and his followers. Certainly, there are polemical passages and censure against, in particular, the Jews, but I cannot see a demarcation, a clear break, from either the Jews or Christians. The Qurʾānic polemics are directed against lax Jews and Christians rather than the totality of them.

This is not to say that the Arabian believers, in Muḥammad's time or later, somehow *lacked* a social identity. Such a phenomenon is not possible and I do not suggest it. Rather, I put forward the idea that the social categorizations and borderlines were (perhaps drastically) different from what they later became. That is to say, the seventh-century group of *al-muʾminūn* contained gentiles, Jews, Christians, and others (e.g., Sabians, whoever they were). The believer identity was a superordinate category bringing these people together. They did not have to forsake, at least totally, their former ethno-religious identities, which now functioned as sub-identities.

The Qurʾānic evidence (or the lack of it) suggests that the Jews and Christians joining the believer movement did not have to undergo a particular conversion rite.[98] They did not have to recant their existing understanding of the law (5:48);[99] in any case, their dietary and purity norms were already more or less the same, according to the Qurʾān (5:3, 5:5).[100] Naturally, they would have to accept Muḥammad as a prophet (which Qurʾān 3:199, 5:83, 6:114, and 13:36 explicitly

[97] E.g., Sinai, 'The Unknown Known', 76.
[98] As suggested by Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 110, 114.
[99] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 70.
[100] However, verses 4:160–1 suggests that certain specifically Jewish food taboos were imposed upon them because of their perfidy and wrongdoing. But this does not read to me like a rejection of the totality of the Jewish law nor a claim that it and the Qurʾānic gentile legislation would be in utter disagreement.

say they did), and, in the case of some Christians at least, lower their Christological beliefs. This would have been a barrier for many (but not all) Jews and Christians to identify with Muḥammad's movement, and, tellingly, the Qurʾān indicates (e.g., 3:110) that most of them are not to be considered believers.[101]

I have, in this article, proceeded with the supposition that the Qurʾān stems from the time and revelations of the Prophet Muḥammad. Surah 5 would belong to the (very) latest stratum of this corpus and present evidence of some of the discussion and debates in community around him during the last days of his life. Naturally, it is possible that the Qurʾān, including surah 5, could contain material accrued after his death: were this to be the case, then some portions of the Qurʾān, in addition to other types of evidence, would evince post-Muḥammadan developments.[102]

In any case, the 'parting' that this article probes is somewhat dissimilar to the early dynamics of the Jesus movement, the leading figures and many followers of which were Jews, while the followers of the gentile (*ummī*) Arabian Prophet were, it would seem, majority gentile.[103] Despite this, Muḥammad put forward a big-tent category of *al-muʾminūn* that accommodated sub-identities (such as Jewish or Christian).[104] The 'parting' occurred, in my view, when these sub-identities were no more accepted. In fact, the early Christian case is not necessarily so different from the early Islamic one, since the Jesus group became majority gentile perhaps as early as during Paul's time.[105] Indeed, what Paul endeavored to do was to craft a superordinate identity in Christ in which both Jews and gentiles might participate in.[106]

If the 'parting of the ways' did not take place during the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad, when should we date it? In this article, I have concentrated on Qurʾānic evidence. According to later epigraphic and other dated evidence,[107] the endonym 'Muslims' (*al-muslimūn*) began to gain

[101] In I. Lindstedt, 'Religious Groups in the Quran', in R. Hakola, O. Lehtipuu, and N. Nikki (eds), *Common Ground and Diversity in Early Christian Thought and Study: Essays in Memory of Heikki Räisänen* (Tübingen, 2022), 289–311, it is argued that Jews and Christians form a grey area, a boundary category, some (the minority) being 'in', and others (the majority) 'out', in the Qurʾān.
[102] A debated issue taken up recently by, e.g., Dye, 'Le corpus coranique' and Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire*.
[103] For the significance of gentile ethnicity and law in the early Arabian movement, see Zellentin, *Law Beyond Israel*; I. Lindstedt, 'The Seed of Abraham: Gentile Ethnicity in Early Christian Texts and the Quran', in R. Hakola, N. Nikki, and J. Vikman (eds), *Local and Global Cultures in the Roman East: Multicultural Innovations and Reinvented Identities*, a special issue of *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* (forthcoming).
[104] The main evidence for this is the 'Constitution' of Medina, which states, in one of the versions of the text, that the Medinan Jews are 'a group from among the believers' (*umma min al-muʾminīn*). Moreover, the Qurʾān contains passages (e.g., 3:199, 5:83, 13:36, 28:52–5, 29:46–7) that buttress this interpretation. See I. Lindstedt, '"One Community"', 357–67.
[105] Fredriksen, *Paul*, 69–77.
[106] P. F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Settings of Paul's Letters* (Minneapolis 2003).
[107] I. Lindstedt, 'Who Is in, Who Is out? Early Muslim Identity through Epigraphy and Theory', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 46 (2019), 147–246. In particular, pp. 186–94 are important for this question.

sway in the first half of the eighth century, which is also when distinctly Islamic rites started to be emphasized. As regards non-Arabic evidence, the Syriac Christian literature points toward the idea that borderlines were fuzzy, often not clearly articulated, and even in those cases where they were, easily permeable. Michael Penn summarizes the contents of the Syriac texts written in the early Islamic period, saying that they contain 'numerous Syriac references to Muslims requesting Christian exorcists, attending church, seeking healing from Christian holy men, visiting Christian shrines, and endowing Christian monasteries. There are also references to Christians attending Muslim festivals, becoming circumcised, referring to Muḥammad as God's messenger, and draping their altars with a Muslim confession of faith'.[108] The non-Arabic literary evidence also suggests that there were, in particular during the (pre-'parting') seventh century, Christians and Jews who joined the group of Arabian believers *qua* Christians and Jews.[109]

There are important eighth-century developments that we can follow through Arabic literary evidence and that point toward the consolidating of Islamic identity (and beliefs, practices, norms, and so on). First of all, recent scholarship suggests that it is around that time that the first biographical narratives and dicta of the Prophet begin to be written down and circulated in a lecture setting.[110] This happens at the same time as a broader interest in narrating the history of the Muslim community, an important part of the Islamic identity formatting.[111] The caliphs of the early eighth century tried to enforce decrees according to which Muslims and non-Muslims should dress differently, an important part of the endeavour to create *visible* social categories.[112] What is more, before this, sacred spaces and places of prayer were sometimes shared, with a clearer demarcation between the mosque and the church occurring, by and large, in the eighth century.[113]

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[108] Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 4. Though Penn writes 'Muslims', this is not a word used in most of these Syriac texts, which refer to this group with other words such as *mhaggrāyē* (from the Arabic *muhājirūn*, 'emigrants') or *ṭayyāyē* (derived from the tribal group Ṭayyiʾ).

[109] Examples of evidence for this can be found in the *Armenian Chronicle of 661*, the *Book of Main Points* of John bar Penkaye, the letters of Maximus the Confessor, and the *Secrets of Rabbi Shimʿōn ben Yōḥay*. For discussions and translations of these and other texts, see Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 110–15; Shoemaker, *A Prophet Has Appeared*; I. Bcheiry, *An Early Christian Reaction to Islam: Išūʾyahb III and the Muslim Arabs* (Piscataway, NJ, 2020).

[110] See the seminal works G. Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, tr. U. Vagelpohl, ed. J. E. Montgomery (London & New York, 2006); A. Görke and G. Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muḥammads: Das Korpus ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubair* (Princeton, 2008); G. Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read*, tr. S. Toorawa (Edinburgh, 2009) and *The Biography of Muḥammad: Nature and Authenticity*, tr. U. Vagelpohl, ed. J. E. Montgomery (London & New York, 2011); Anthony, *Muhammad*.

[111] F. M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, 1998) add page numbers?.

[112] On these ordinances, see the important study by M. Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge, 2011). Needless to say, such efforts were never really successful.

[113] Shared spaces are explored in S. Bashear, '*Qibla Musharriqa* and Early Muslim Prayer in Churches', *The Muslim World* 81 (1991), 267–82, who notes that Arabic literature avows that early Muslims prayed routinely in churches and

The eighth century is when the beginnings of theological discourse and debate are attested, pointing toward the slow creation and emergence of Islamic dogmata and a multitude of theological topics. In particular the question of predetermination versus free will was much debated.[114] Though the idea that the concept of *sunna*, 'the established practice', denotes exclusively the *sunna* of the Prophet does not become the prevalent view until after (the reception of) the works of the scholar al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820), the idea starts to emerge in the eighth century. Before this, the *sunna*, the practice to be followed, was the one established by the caliphs, the scholars, and the community at large.[115] And, finally, the eighth century witnesses the first phases in the development of intra-Islamic groups, with the Shīʿa beginning to acquire their own distinct affiliation.[116]

All in all, a 'Dunnian' understanding of the evidence would put distinct Islamic identity emergence in the first half of the eighth century. This appears to have been the time when Muslims started to categorize themselves as Muslims, set aside from other religious groups. Non-Arabic evidence appears to corroborate this date, with Syriac texts for instance showing a budding understanding of Islam as a distinct religion. But, in a sense, this could be too early, despite the fact that the social category of Muslims is attested in Arabic and non-Arabic evidence from the early eighth century onward. After all, the collections of the *ḥadīth*s did not exist as such; schools (*madhāhib*) of law and ritual did not exist; historiographical works and grand vision of the community's past did not exist; the dogmata were not formulated (either in their Sunnī or Shīʿī formulation); much was still in the process of fermentation. Hence, a 'Boyarian' interpretation of Islamic identity emergence would push this later, perhaps to the year 800 or thereabouts, when we have more solid evidence of Islamic literature (historiography, traditions, theology, and so on), practices, dogmata, and, with them, a reified Muslim identity.[117] Be that as it may, dating the creation of a distinct Muslim identity to the lifetime of the Prophet seems ill-advised and far-fetched.

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some religious scholars were fine with it; on this issue, see also the important studies Khalek, *Damascus*, which looks at continuities and changes in Syria, and Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, studying what the Syriac literature tells us about, inter alia, Muslims praying in and visiting churches and Christians, mosques.

[114] The developments in early Islamic theology are explored in great detail in J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, 6 vols (Berlin & New York, 1991–1995).

[115] P. Crone and M. Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge, 1986).

[116] N. Haider, *The Origins of the Shia: Identity, Ritual, and Sacred Space in Eighth-Century Kufa*, (Cambridge, 2011).

[117] This was actually the suggestion of J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford, 1978), which still contains valuable insights though many of its claims are by now obsolete.

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