

Understanding the Quran: Does the Bible Matter?

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Introduction: The People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) and the Israeetica (*Isrā'iliyyāt*)

The People of the Book or *Ahl al-Kitāb* – Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians – who are possessors of divine books (i.e., the Torah, the Gospel, and the Avesta), as distinguished from those whose religions are not based on divine revelations. The Prophet Muhammad gave many privileges to the *Ahl al-Kitāb* in his lifetime; they had the freedom of worship and were protected by the Islamic state. In the narration, the Prophet says that if one Muslim gives his *dhimma* (pact of safety) to a non-Muslim, it becomes, then, the obligation of all Muslims to safeguard him.¹ In return for this protection they had to pay a special tax (*jizya*).²

The people of the book always interacted with the Muslims within the Islamic state. For example, the Jews and Christians regularly asked the Prophet Muhammad questions, as the well-known exegete among the companions of the Prophet Ibn 'Abbās narrated that the Jews said to the Prophet Muhammad: "Tell us about the soul (*Rūḥ*) and how the *Rūḥ* will be punished that is in the body, for the *Rūḥ* is something about which only Allah knows, and there was no revelation concerning it." He did not answer them at all, then Angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) came to him and said:

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

"And they (i.e. the Jews) ask you concerning the *Rūḥ*, Say: The *Rūḥ* is one of the things, the knowledge of which is only with your Lord. And of knowledge, you (mankind) have been given only a little."^{3,4} Apart from dialogue the Prophet even judged some the Jews who practiced adultery according to the Torah; they were stoned to death.^{5,6}

In that time the people of the book also transmitted stories to the Muslims from their own traditions. The so called Israeetica (*Isrā'iliyyāt*) spread in the Islamic world partly because converted Muslims, such as the former Jew Ka'b

¹ Yaser ElIlethy. *Islam, Context, Pluralism and Democracy. Classical and Modern Interpretations*. Routledge. London – New York: 2017. P. 123. Full ḥadīth in Ibn Mājah 2683; Abū Dawūd 2751; Al-Nasā'ī: 4735. Al-Albānī classified it as authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*).

حَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَبْدِ الْأَعْلَى الصَّنَعَانِيُّ، حَدَّثَنَا الْمُغْتَمِرُ بْنُ سُلَيْمَانَ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ حَنْشٍ، عَنْ عِكْرَمَةَ، عَنْ ابْنِ عَبَّاسٍ، عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ " الْمُسْلِمُونَ تَنَافَا دِمَائُهُمْ وَهُمْ يَدُّ عَلَى مَنْ سِوَاهُمْ يَشْعَى بِدِمَائِهِمْ أَذْنَاهُمْ وَيُرَدُّ عَلَى أَقْصَاهُمْ " .

² John M. Cunningham. *Ahl al-Kitāb. People of the Book*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. N.d. Token from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ahl-al-Kitab> on 7 December 2020.

³ Sūrah al-Isrā' (17): 85.

⁴ Ibn Kathīr. *Tafsir Ibn Kathir (Abridged)*. Vol. 6. Abridged by a group of scholars under the supervision of Safiur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri. Darussalam. Riyadh: 2003. P. 77.; Al-Tabari. *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*. Vol. 7. Taḥqīq: Aḥmad 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Bakrī, Muḥammad 'Ādil Muḥammad, Muḥammad 'Abd al-Laṭīf Khalaf, Maḥmūd Mursī 'Abd al-Ḥamīd. Dār al-Salām. Cairo: 1428/2007. P. 5249-5250

⁵ The full ḥadīth: Al-Barā' bin 'Āzib reported: There happened to pass by Allah's Apostle – peace be upon him – a Jew blackened and lashed. Allah's Apostle – peace be upon him – called them (the Jews) and said: Is this the punishment that you find in your Book (Torah) as a prescribed punishment for adultery? They said: Yes. He (the Holy Prophet) called one of the scholars amongst them and said: I ask you in the name of Allah Who sent down the Torah on Moses if that is the prescribed punishment for adultery that you find in your Book. He said: No. Had you not asked me in the name of Allah, I would not have given you this information. We find stoning to death (as punishment prescribed in the Torah). But this (crime) became quite common amongst our aristocratic class. So when we caught hold of any rich person (indulging in this offence) we spared him, but when we caught hold of a helpless person we imposed the prescribed punishment upon him. We then said: Let us agree (on a punishment) which we can inflict both upon the rich and the poor. So We decided to blacken the face with coal and flog as a substitute punishment for stoning. Thereupon Allah's Messenger – peace be upon him – said: 'O Allah, I am the first to revive Thy command when they had made it dead.' He then commanded and he (the offender) was stoned to death. Allah, the Majestic and Glorious, sent down (this verse): "O Messenger, (the behaviour of) those who vie with one another in denying the truth should not grieve you..." up to "is vouchsafed unto you, accept it" (Q. 4: 41) It was said (by the Jews): Go to Muhammad; it he commands you to blacken the face and award flogging (as punishment for adultery), then accept it, but it he gives verdict for stoning, then avoid it. It was (then) that Allah, the Majestic and Great, sent down (these verses): "And they who do not judge in accordance with what Allah has revealed are, indeed, deniers of the truth" (Q. 4: 44); "And they who do not judge in accordance with what Allah has revealed-they, they indeed are the wrongdoers" (Q. 4: 45); "And they who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed-they are the iniquitous (Q. 4: 47)." (All these verses) were revealed in connection with the non-believers. [Muslim]

عَنِ الْبَرَاءِ بْنِ عَازِبٍ، قَالَ مَرَّ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَهُودِيٌّ مُخَمَّماً مَجْلُوداً فَقَدَعَاهُمْ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَقَالَ " هَكَذَا تَجِدُونَ خَدَّ الرَّائِي فِي كِتَابِكُمْ " . قَالُوا نَعَمْ . فَقَدَعَا رَجُلًا مِنْ عِلْمَانِهِمْ فَقَالَ " أَنْشُدْكَ بِاللَّهِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ التَّوْرَةَ عَلَى مُوسَى هَكَذَا تَجِدُونَ خَدَّ الرَّائِي فِي كِتَابِكُمْ " . قَالَ لَا وَلَوْلَا أَنَّكَ نَشَدْتَنِي بِهِذَا لَمْ أَخْبِرْكَ نَجْدُهُ الرَّجْمَ وَلَكِنَّهُ كَثُرَ فِي أَشْرَافِنَا فَكُنَّا إِذَا أَخَذْنَا الشَّرِيفَ تَرَكْنَاهُ وَإِذَا أَخَذْنَا الضَّعِيفَ أَقَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ الْحَدَّ فَلَمَّا تَعَالَوْا فَلْتَجْتَمِعَ عَلَيَّ شَيْءٌ نَقِيبُهُ عَلَى الشَّرِيفِ وَالْوَضِيعِ فَجَعَلْنَا التَّخْوِيمَ وَالْجَلْدَ مَكَانَ الرَّجْمِ . فَقَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَوَّلُ مَنْ أَخْبَا أَمْرَكَ إِذْ أَمَاتُوه " . فَأَمَرَ بِهِ فَرَجِمَ فَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ (يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّسُولُ لَا يَخْزُكَ الَّذِينَ يُسَارِعُونَ فِي الْكُفْرِ) إِلَى قَوْلِهِ { إِنَّ أُوتِيتُمْ هَذَا فَخُذُوهُ } يَقُولُ التَّوَّابُ مُحَمَّدًا صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَإِنْ أَمْرَكُمْ بِالْتَّخْوِيمِ وَالْجَلْدِ فَخُذُوهُ وَإِنْ أَقَاتَكُمْ بِالرَّجْمِ فَاخْذَرُوا . فَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى { وَمَنْ لَمْ يَخُكُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ } { وَمَنْ لَمْ يَخُكُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ } فِي الْكَفَّارِ كُلِّهَا .

⁶ See: *Vayyiqra*/Leviticus 20:10; *Deravim*/Deuteronomy 22:22

As above stated, there were already Jews and Christians in the time of the Prophet Muhammad with whom the new followers of Islam interacted with. The dialogic nature towards the ‘People of the Book’ (*ahl al-kitāb*) in the Quran attests to this. For example, the Jews and Christians are regularly addressed in the Quran with ‘O People of the Book’,¹⁷ and ‘O Children of Israel’ (*Banī Isrā’īl*),¹⁸ upon which they are rebuked, admonished or invited to believe. In addition, *sūrah al-Isrā’* (17) is also called *sūrah Banī Isrā’īl*.¹⁹ Jon Hoover stated: ‘*If the Bible and those who read it as authoritative Scripture no longer existed, the Qur’an would lose much of its rhetorical force as a dialogical and polemical text speaking to a sectarian religious environment. [...] The fact that Jews and Christians take the Bible as authoritative and express their religiosity through it also challenges Muslims to read it and come to a view on its contents.*’²⁰ In exegesis (*tafsīr*) of some verses from the Quran there are references to some Biblical statements, for example:

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ وَمَا مَسَّنَا مِنْ لُغُوبٍ

“And indeed We created the heavens and the earth and all between them in six Days and nothing of fatigue touched Us.”²¹ Ibn Kathīr, and also found in al-Ṭabarī, stated that Qatāda (d. 735) said: “The Jews, may Allah’s curses descend on them, said that Allah created the heavens and earth in six days and then rested on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath. This is why they call it a holiday. Allah the Exalted then sent down denial of their statement and false opinion. By His saying: “and nothing of fatigue touched Us.” Indicating that no sleep, exhaustion or weariness affects Him.”^{22,23} Referring to *Bereshit*/Genesis 2:2: “And by the seventh day God ended His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”^{24,25} Knowing the Bible and its contents will make you understand the meaning of this Quranic verse much better than without; because you will understand the beliefs of the *ahl al-kitāb* better and how they see themselves. That why you see in ‘*The History of al-Ṭabarī*’ a lot of references to the Biblical verses; not to gain authentic knowledge which is represented as the truth, but to gain a more global overview of history and understanding of the previous revelations.²⁶

The first five books of Moses, or the Thora, in the Hebrew Bible (TaNaKh/Old Testament) for example shows the history of the Children of Israel and their covenant with God. To know who the Israelites where it’s useful to read it, and reflect on it. Even if only to know how Jews see themselves and why the Jewish identity is so important for them. Why they say: “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel)”, and why don’t follow the Prophetic Message of Muhammad, a Prophet from Arab descent. If you know this you will understand verses of the Quran like verse 84 from *sūrah Āl ‘Imrān* better:

قُلْ ءَامَنَّا بِاللّٰهِ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَىٰ إِبْرٰهِيْمَ وَإِسْمٰعِيْلَ وَإِسْحٰقَ وَيَعْقُوْبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسٰى وَعِيسٰى وَالنَّبِيُّوْنَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُوْنَ

“Say (O Muhammad): “We believe in Allah and in what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down to Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Ismā‘īl (Ishmael), Ishāq (Isaac), Ya‘cūb (Jacob) and al-Asbāṭ (the offspring of the twelve sons of Ya‘cūb (Jacob)) and what was given to Mūsā (Moses), ‘Īsā (Jesus) and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between one another among them and to Him (Allah) we have submitted (in Islam).”

Another important point is that of Anti-Semitism. In modern era the content of the Quran is portrayed as anti-Semitic. Pieter Coppens gives an example that Jews are called donkeys carrying books in the Quran:

¹⁷ Quran: 3:64-65; 3:70-71; 3:98-99; 4:171; 5:15; 5:19; 5:59; 5:68; 5:77

¹⁸ Quran 2:40; 2:47; 2:122; 5:72; 20:80

¹⁹ Al-Ṣuyūṭī. *Al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Taḥqīq: Ibrāhīm Makkī al-Ṭanṭāwī. Vol I. al-Dar al-‘āmiyyah. Cairo: 1437/2017. p. 164.

²⁰ Jon Hoover, “Why the Bible Matters: Islamic Studies”, 83.

²¹ *Sūrah Qāf* (50): 38.; Translation from: Taqī-ud-Dīn al-Hilālī & Muhammad Muḥsin Khān. *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’ān in the English Language. A Summarized Version of At-Ṭabarī, Al-Qurtubī, and Ibn Kathīr with Comments from Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Darussalam Publishers and Distributors. Riyadh: 1996.

²² Qatāda b. Di‘āma (d. 735) belonged to the early interpreters of the Quran (*mufasssīrīn*), he was a student of the famous al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. See: “Qatāda b. Di‘āma”, in: *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth Online*, G.A.H. Juynboll. Consulted online on 07 December 2020 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2590-3004_ECHO_COM_000123>

First print edition: 2007

²³ Ibn Kathīr. “*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr (Abridged)*. Vol. 9”, 243-244.; Al-Ṭabarī. “*Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*. Vol. 9”, 7590-7591

²⁴ *Bereshit* is the Hebrew term from Genesis. For the translation is referred to: *The Jerusalem Bible Edition of The Koren Tanakh*. Third Hebrew/English Edition. Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd. Jerusalem: 2015.

²⁵ In a Christian translation, namely: *The NET Bible, Full Notes Edition*. Published by Thomas Nelson. China: 2019, there is another translation for “and He rested”, namely “and he ceased”. The footnote stated: “Hebrew term *shabbat* can be translated “to rest” (“and he rested”) but it basically means “to cease.” This is not a rest from exhaustion; it is the cessation of the work of creation.”

²⁶ See for example: Al-Ṭabarī. *The History of Al-Ṭabarī. Volume III*. Translated and annotated by William M. Brinner. State University of New York (SUNY) Press. New York: 1991.

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ حُمِّلُوا التَّوْرَةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ الْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ أَسْفَارًا

“The likeness of those who were entrusted with the (obligation of the) *Tawrāt* (Thora), but who subsequently failed in those (obligations), is as the likeness of a donkey which carries huge burdens of books (but understands nothing from them).”²⁷ This criticism of the Jewish people is also stated regularly in the Hebrew Bible itself, for example in the book of Judges.²⁸ Other passages of the Quran criticize the people of Israel, that they urge others to piety, but themselves fail in their actions.²⁹ If the Muslim community (*umma*) is aware of the content of the Hebrew Bible, it will be better to deal with such criticism. As Rabbi Tovia Singer said: “Now; the Quran is critical of the Jews, that means of some Jews who did not keep the Thora, but frankly if you want criticism of the Jews, you will find it plenty of it all in the Jewish scriptures.”³⁰

Approaching the Bible: different ways

In the Ottoman Empire in 1558, during the reign of Sultan Suleiman Han (1520-1566), besides memorizing the Quran also memorising the Bible and Torah were part of the curriculum that the imam of the Süleymaniye Mosque had to comply with.^{31,32} It is interesting enough to see that Imams learned the Bible and Torah. Just like the fact that Christians and Jews were allowed to live by their Biblical rules in the Islamic State throughout history, as long as they did not disturb public order.³³ Imams thus learned the previous scriptures, but how did they interpret and explained it?

There are different ways for explaining the Bible adopted by Muslim scholars. For example there is the way of the Islamic scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) by looking for the errors in the Biblical scriptures.^{34,35} This approach was also practised by the famous preacher Ahmed Deebat (d. 2005) in interfaith- dialogues and debates, he was influenced by the works of the Indian scholar Rahmatullah Kairanvi (d. 1891) who debated Western Christian missionaries in the British Indian Empire.³⁶ Another approach is that of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) and that is searching for and explaining of Biblical verses that prophesised the coming of Muhammad.³⁷ To confirm both of these ideas, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d.1350) states that Allah protected the confirmation of the coming of Muhammad (as interpreted in *Devarim*/Deuteronomy 18:15) from the falsification of the scriptures by the Jews. In this way he

²⁷ Sūrah al-Jummu‘ah (62): 5.

²⁸ Pieter Coppens. “Joden als ezels die boeken dragen”. Parabel Project. 21 July 2020. Token from <https://parabelproject.nl/gastblog-joden-als-ezels-die-boeken-dragen/> on 8 December 2020.

²⁹ See: Sūrah al-Baqarah (2): 44.

³⁰ Tovia Singer, “Do Jews Believe Mohammad Was a Prophet and is the Quran Anti-Semitic? Rabbi Tovia Singer Responds”. Tovia Singer’s YouTube Channel. 6 Juni 2016. Token from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5pwwh5io9I> on 8 December 2020. Min. 33:30-33:46.

³¹ Ahmad Bahjat “*‘Istithmār Insānī’*”, p. 2. in: Al-Ahrām newspaper. Cairo: 22 September 1986.

³² The imam had to meet the following requirements: 1) Knowing Arabic, Latin, Turkish, and Persian; 2) Memorised the Quran, the Bible, and the Torah; 3) To be a qualified scholar in divine law and jurisprudence; 4) To have qualified in physics and mathematics up to a teaching standard; 5) To have outstanding capabilities in chivalry, archery, duelling, and the arts of warfare and its laws; 6) To be of handsome countenance; 7) To have a strong melodious voice.

³³ An interesting question that could be further explored is “why are the *ahl al-kitāb* allowed to live by their Biblical rules in an Islamic state and why are atheists not allowed to live by their subjective rules?” It could be argued that the Biblical rules come from God, who knows what is right and wrong, and that man cannot be the measure. So the *ahl al-kitāb* cannot pose a danger to the public order as long as they adhere to the scriptures; while one who is his own measure can be a danger to society because he is not framed by any form of revelation. The question of whether ‘man is the measure’ is an age-old discussion that has already been found in Plato’s (428-347 BC) writings in his dialogues with Protagoras. See: Plato. *Protagoras*. Verzameld werk. Tweede deel. Vertaald door Xaveer de Win. Uitgeverij de Nederlandsche boekhandel ambo. Antwerpen: 1978.

³⁴ Jon Hoover, “*Why the Bible Matters: Islamic Studies*”, 84.

³⁵ Based on verse 79 from sūrah al-Baqarah (2):

فَوَيْلٌ لِلَّذِينَ يَكْتُمُونَ الْكِتَابَ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ ثُمَّ يَقُولُونَ هَذَا مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ لِيَشْتَرُوا بِهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا فَوَيْلٌ لَهُمْ مِمَّا كَتَبَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَوَيْلٌ لَهُمْ مِمَّا يَكْسِبُونَ

“Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands and then say, “This is from Allah”, to purchase with it a little price! Woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for that they earn thereby.

³⁶ Ahmed Deedat. *Is de Bijbel God’s Woord?* Vertaald door Abdul-Jabbar van de Ven. Momtazah. Helmond: 2001.; Rahmatullah Kairanvi. *Izhar ul Haq. The Truth Revealed*. Translated by Muhammad Wali Razi. Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd. London: 2020.

³⁷ Based on verse 29 from sūrah al-Fath (48):

مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ أَشِدَّاءُ عَلَى الْكُفَّارِ رُحَمَاءُ بَيْنَهُمْ تَرْتَنِّمُ تَرْنَهُمْ رَكْعًا سَاجِدًا يَتَّبِعُونَ قَوْلًا مِنْ اللَّهِ وَرُضُونًا سِيمَاهُمْ فِي وُجُوهِهِمْ مِنْ أَثَرِ السُّجُودِ ذَلِكَ مَثَلُهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَمَثَلُهُمْ فِي الْإِنْجِيلِ كَزَرْعٍ أَخْرَجَ شَطْأَهُ فَآزَرَهُ فَاسْتَغْلَظَ فَاسْتَوَى عَلَى سُوقِهِ يُعْجِبُ الزُّرَّاعَ لِيُغَيِّظَ بِهِمُ الْكُفَّارَ وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

“Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. And those who are with him are severe against disbelievers, and merciful among themselves. You see them bowing and falling down prostrate (in prayer), seeking Bounty from Allah and (His) Good Pleasure. The mark of them (i.e. of their Faith) is on their faces (foreheads) from the traces of prostration (during prayers). This is their description in the Tawrāt (Thora). But their description in the Injil (Gospel) is like a (sown) seed which sends forth is shoot, then makes it strong, and becomes thick and it stand straight on its stem, delighting the sowers, that He may enrage the disbelievers with them. Allah has promised those among them who believe (i.e. all those who follow Islamic Monotheism, the religion of the Prophet Mohammed till the Day of Resurrection) and do righteous good deeds, forgiveness and a mighty reward (i.e. Paradise).”

avoids an objection that ‘the arrival of Muhammad in the Bible could also be falsified’.^{38,39,40} Another, not common, approach is that of Najm al-Dīn Al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316), a student of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).⁴¹ He interpreted the Biblical text in an Islamic way. He explained parts of the Bible, like *Bereshit*/Genesis and the Gospels, to correct the, in his eyes, misinterpretations of the Jews and Christians. This approach allows that the Biblical text may not be corrupted.⁴²

These approaches are missionary and this has undoubtedly caused many Christians and Jews to enter Islam. However, these approaches could be criticized academically; the reality of religions is often more complicated than is often thought. Within Islam, many principles are also bound before one speaks about the exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Quran. This will be the same for Jews and Christians. These ways of explaining will also not be well received by both Christians and Jews; just as Muslims will not appreciate the missionary efforts of Quran interpretations by mainly Christians. For example, the first Quran translation, and a translation is an interpretation, was written for missionary reasons.⁴³ Robert Ketton translated it in 1143 by order of Petrus Venerabilis, a Catholic bishop from the South of France. However, Petrus Venerabilis forbade publication and it remained hidden for four centuries until it was published by Theodor Bibliandrus in 1543. It was required by Peter de Cluni to write a *Refutatio* (refutation) for every Quran translation. Thus wrote Theodor Bibliandrus: “I have discovered with my hands the law of the so-called Mohamet and made it easier to understand it, and have added it to the treasures of the Latin Roman language, so that knowledge of this law is gained. [...] So that the lights of the Lord Jesus appear on mankind and that people come to know the truth Jesus.”⁴⁴ The question is now: Do we want to convey the message by denigrating others, or do we proclaim our messages by explaining the true revelation? The Quran speaks about debating the *ahl al-kitāb*:

وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ وَقُولُوا ءَامَنَّا بِالَّذِي أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَأَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكُمُ وَالْهَذَا وَالْهُكْمُ وَحْدٌ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ

“And argue not with the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), unless it be in (a way) that is better (with good words and in good manner, inviting them to Islamic Monotheism with His Verses), except with such of them as do wrong; and say (to them): “We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and to Him (Allah) we have submitted (as Muslims).”⁴⁵ Ibn Kathīr commented on “and say (to them): “We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you””, saying: “means, ‘if they tell you something which you do not know to be true or false, say to them: We do not hasten to say it is a lie, because it may be true, and we do not hasten to say it is true because it may be false. We believe in it in general, under the condition that it has been revealed and has not been altered or deliberately misinterpreted.”⁴⁶

The discussions about the theology, content and interpretation of the previous scriptures was already done between Jews and Christians, such as the Quran confirms:

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ لَيْسَتْ النَّصْرَى عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَقَالَتِ النَّصْرَى لَيْسَتْ الْيَهُودُ عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَهُمْ يَتْلُونَ الْكِتَابَ كَذَلِكَ قَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ مِثْلَ قَوْلِهِمْ فَاللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ

“The Jews said that the Christians follow nothing (i.e. are not on the right religion); and the Christians said that the Jews follow nothing (i.e. are not on the right religion); though they both recite the Scripture. Like unto their word, said (the pagans) who know not. Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection about that wherein they have been differing.”⁴⁷

³⁸ Jon Hoover, “Why the Bible Matters: Islamic Studies”, 84.

³⁹ Deuteronomy (Devarim) 18:15: The Lord thy God will raise up to thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like me.

⁴⁰ Sabine Schmidtke. “The Muslim reception of biblical materials: Ibn Qutayba and his *A’lām al-nubuwwa*.” In: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. Vol. 22, No. 3, July 2011, 249-274. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

⁴¹ Lejla Demiri, “Al-Ṭūfī”, in: *Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500*, General Editor David Thomas. Consulted online on 07 December 2020 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-8054_cmri_COM_24035 First published online: 2010

⁴² Jon Hoover, “Why the Bible Matters: Islamic Studies”, 84.

⁴³ Yaser Ellethy often quotes the “the Italian adage “*traduttore traditore*” (translator (is) a traitor)” to show that translation is not always reliable but mere interpretation. See: Ellethy, “*Islam, Context, Pluralism and Democracy*”, 23.

⁴⁴ Gregory J. Miller. “Theodor Bibliander’s *Machumetis saracenorum principis eiusque successorum vitae, doctrina ac ipse alcoran* (1543) as the Sixteenth-century “Encyclopedia” of Islam”. In: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 2013. Vol. 24, No. 2, 241-254, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2013.772329>; Notes from Yaser Ellethy’s course on *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* thought at the VU Amsterdam, 2019.

⁴⁵ Sūrah al-‘Ankabūt (29): 46.

⁴⁶ Ibn Kathīr. “*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr (Abridged)*. Vol. 7”, 496.

⁴⁷ Sūrah al-Baqarah (2): 113.

Why, then, should Muslims get involved in these mutual theological debates by unleashing a new interpretation on the verses? Is it the task of the Muslims to explain the writings of the Jews and Christians, or is it their task to preach the message of Islam?

The use by past exegetes (*mufasssirūn*), such as al-Ṭabarī, of the Israeetica and Biblical texts was not made to seek the truth or to proclaim the truth to the *ahl al-kitāb*, but rather to get a better picture of things in history that have not been mentioned in the Quran and Sunnah without confirming or denying it, as long as there is no clear evidence against it in the Quran and Sunnah. Through the use of Biblical texts, we learn more about the Jews and Christians with whom the Quran was in dialogue. They also learn how they see themselves and the history of the Children of Israel (*Banū Isrā'īl*), who, according to Abu Ishāq al-Heweny, are the largest community in history after the Islamic one.⁴⁸ For this we can use the saying of Pieter Coppens who stated: “When we approach this historically critically, it cannot be ruled out that a certain intertextuality is at work here, and that the theme of the expected arrival of Muhammad may have to be understood in the light of the tradition of the Old Testament, as one who brings back to order the stray people of Israel.”⁴⁹

Conclusion

This paper investigated to what extent the *ahl al-kitāb* (focused only on the Jews and Christians; not the Zoroastrians) and the Biblical scriptures have been part of the *tafsīr*-tradition, the Islamic state and history and how they have influenced the Islamic community can be of use in understanding one's own tradition. The Jews and Christians have been part of Islamic history since the message of the Prophet Muhammad; they lived under the Islamic State with their own rules, asked the Prophet questions, interacted with the Companions and reported their own traditions; some of them converted to Islam and also passed on the so-called Israeetica. These stories ended up in the Islamic books of *tafsīr* and history, of which the works of al-Ṭabarī are the best known today. The Quran entered into dialogue with the Jews and Christians in many ways. They are addressed several times and have been given the special status of *ahl al-kitāb*. By studying the Bible one learns more about the history of the Jewish people, their way of thinking and ideology. In addition, one can understand anti-Semitist accusations against the Quran from a broader perspective, namely that the Jews are also often criticized in their own writings.

I have also covered the different approaches to the Bible by Islamic scholars, these are generally three: 1) Explaining the Bible by way of looking for the errors in it; 2) Explaining the Bible in the way that prophesised the coming of Muhammad; 3) Explaining the Bible in an Islamic way. Here I argue that all these ways are done for missionary reasons, just as some Christians try to interpret the Quran in such a similar way. It can lead that one enters into the Islamic faith (which pleases me as a faithful Muslim), but one should nevertheless be critical on this; namely, that these approaches to the Bible, and conversely the Quran by Christians, do not do justice to the complexity and tradition of interpretation of the scriptures. As a result, people will soon not taken seriously in the academic world, unless they substantiate it with very strong evidences. The goal should not be to convert people no matter what, because that leads to errors, but rather to convey the own message: “We are not here to convert, but we are here to convey, and only Allah lead people to the Right Way.” The way used by al-Ṭabarī seems to me to be an accepted academic way of approaching the Biblical texts; to get a better picture of things in history that have not been mentioned in the Quran and Sunnah without confirming or denying it as a Muslim. Through the use of Biblical texts, we learn more about the Jews and Christians with whom the Quran was in dialogue. They also learn how they see themselves and the history of the Children of Israel (*Banū Isrā'īl*).

All above is part of the answer on the main-question for this paper, namely: ‘**Does the Bible matter for understanding the Quran?**’ To sum up: the Bible doesn’t matter to know the basic beliefs of Islam, but it does matter for understanding the dialogical nature of some verses that address the *ahl al-kitāb*. From this one may better understand some verses of the Quran, this I have tried to show with examples of different Quran verses.

In order to justify the minority opinion that does not allow average persons to read and study the Biblical text, it is important to mention that this opinion is also supported by respected Islamic scholars. This paper is based solely on the view that it is permissible and it seeks to provide insights into this topic. As a believing Muslim, I say: all that is good comes from Allah; and all that is bad comes from myself and the devil (*shayṭān*) and Allah and His Messenger - peace and blessings be upon him - are free from this.

⁴⁸ Abū Ishāq al-Heweny. “The Isrā’īliyyāt are of three types.” See: الشيخ أبو إسحاق الحويني: الإسراييليات ثلاثة أنواع ..:: uploaded by Islam Will Prevail. 19 January 2017. Token from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZWr2yuSD00&t=1s> on 8 December 2020.

⁴⁹ Pieter Coppens. “Joden als ezels die boeken dragen”.

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