WESTERN STUDIES OF THE QUR'ĀNIC NARRATIVE: from the Historical Orientation into the Literary Analysis

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Abstract

The beginnings of Western interest in the Qur'ān can be traced back to the appearance of the first complete translation of the Qur'ān into Latin by Robert of Ketton in the twelfth century when the Muslim and Western Christian worlds has begun a long-running confrontation. In the eighteenth century, Western scholars began to be interested in studying the history and sources of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ānic narrative, which has its parallels in the Judeo-Christian traditions, has been studied from the historical perspective. In this approach, everything in the Qur'ān that can be also found in earlier scriptures, is considered as borrowed, and every story that the Qur'ān modifies is viewed as distorted. Recent Western studies have shifted into a new arena, studying the contents and styles of the Qur'ānic narrative by analyzing its discourse and narrativity.

Keywords: Western scholarship, Qur'ānic studies, Judeo-Christian source

A. Introduction

The spread of Islam into Christian and Persian territories brought with it the introduction of the *Qur'ān* and the Arabic language as well. An important motivation behind Western interest in the *Qur'ān* lies in the extended confrontation between the Islamic and Christian worlds during

the Middle Ages. This interest began at least in the twelfth century when the first complete translation of the *Qur'ān* into Latin was produced by Robert of Ketton.[1] The translation was initially motivated by Western Christian polemics against Islam, constructing arguments to counter Muslim accusations of the deficiencies of the Bible and to facilitate missionary activities. It might be said that the earliest history of Western studies of the *Qur'ān* was the result of the interplay between the Muslim faith and Christian polemics.[2]

More scholarly Western studies of the *Qur'ān* began in the nineteenth century. These studies focused primarily on discussions of the original sources and chronological order of the *Qur'ān*. Studying the *Qur'ān* according to its chronological order has been viewed as a significant step towards understanding its contents based on its historical context. Considering the *Qur'ān* as the work of the Prophet Muhammad, Western scholars of that period viewed this kind of study as indispensable for describing the development of the Prophet's emotion and intellect during his mission, as well as identifying the sources of the *Qur'ān*. The appearance of a number of biographies of the Prophet in the nineteenth century by notable Orientalists such as Gustav Weil, William Muir and Aloys Sprenger had introduced material relevant to the study of the *Qur'ān*, which later became a separate discipline in itself. The publication of Theodore Nöldeke's work, *Geschichte des Qorans*, in 1860, seemed to be the most phenomenal event of nineteenth-century Orientalist studies of the *Qur'ān*. In this book, the author proposed a chronological scheme of his own, dividing the revelation, as Muslim scholars do, into two major periods, the Meccan and the Medinan, but further dividing the Meccan period into three sub-periods.[3] Nöldeke's chronological scheme was based on his analysis of the style and characteristic phrasing of *sūra*s. On the other hand, beginning from the premise that a *sūra* may be constructed from verses with different dates of composition, Richard Bell proposed

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[1] Hartmut Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'ān", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), vol. V, p. 344.

[2] Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Qur'ān: Style and Contents* (Aldershot [etc.]: Ashgate, Variorum, 2001), p. xi.

[3] Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953), p. 101.

analyzing every verse, the smallest unit within the *Qur'ān*, to arrange its chronological order.[4]

Early Western studies of the Qur'ānic narrative were part of their studies of the *Qur'ān* in general. With reference to the dictum of the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus that "nothing has sprung from nothing,"[5] and drawing on phenomenology, Western scholars identified possible influence of pre-existing cultures, including ancient Arabian, Jewish, and Christian cultures, on the construction of narratives in the *Qur'ān*. Through a historical analysis, the presence of some Biblical parallels of narratives in the *Qur'ān* was seen as evidence of this influence through cultural interaction. However, early Western studies of the Qur'ānic narrative are thought to bear religious and sectarian bias in the sense that every single story which corroborates that of earlier scriptures is viewed as borrowing, and every story that the *Qur'ān* modifies in content is considered as deviant, since this narrative is assumed to have been taken from non canonical scriptures or other unknown sources.

Recent Western studies of the Qur'ānic narrative tend to have shifted from a historical orientation to a more literary approach, with Western scholars conducting serious studies on the content of the *Qur'ān*. In the Muslim world, this literary approach was introduced in the first half of the twentieth century as the result of regular encounters between Muslim and Western scholarship, especially in the study of literary criticism. This literary approach has as its principal goal the study of the Qur'ānic narrative, not the events presented in it or the question of their historicity, but rather its religious messages and psychological effects. Still within the framework of phenomenology, this Western literary approach to the Qur'ānic narrative derives partly from the discussion of the Qur'ānic discourse, and partly from the analysis of the narrative structure of the *Qur'ān*. These studies thus lead to the discussion of the affinity between the facts in the narrative and the facts in reality, or of truth conveyed through narrative structures.

This paper will deal with important approaches employed by some Western scholars concerning the Qur'ānic narrative and parallels found

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 102-4.

[5] William St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ān* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge & New York: E. S. Gorham, 1905), p. 11.

in earlier scriptures. It is, first of all, aimed at elucidating the importance of a phenomenology of religion as a means for analyzing similarities or parallels found in different religions in order to identify the meaning of a particular phenomenon which has religious significance. Two different forms of analysis will be introduced here, historical and literary. The former tends to measure the historicity of the Qur'ānic narratives from the 'truth' of Judeo-Christian traditions, while the latter focuses more on examining similarities in narratives, resulting from cultural interaction, and their religious significances.

B. The Phenomenological Approach and the Qur'ānic Narrative

There have been many approaches used in the study of religion. The comparative approach may be the most popular one, dealing with a comparison of religions as large units for the purpose of determining their typical value. It has to do with analyzing sources of each religion to comparatively identify any relative value among these religions. The most important task of this comparison is to give a general view of the different degrees of religious development and to indicate the place of each religion in this line of development,[6] whether it is higher or lower than the others.

There is another approach introduced in this field, namely phenomenology of religion, which originated in the discipline of comparative religion.[7] Considering religion as composed of different components, the phenomenology of religion focuses on understanding these components across their different forms in different religions. It is the search for parallels among religions. It is the systematic treatment of history of religion in the sense that it does not attempt to compare religions as large units, but takes out of their historical setting similar facts and phenomena, and studies them in groups. The purpose of this approach is to know the essence of religious thought in general, not from the perspective of the believers themselves.[8] Thus similar

[6] W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, translated into English by John B. Carman (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960), p. 2.

[7] Jacques Waardenburg, *Reflections on the Study of Religion* (The Hague [etc.]: Mouton, 1978).

[8] Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion*, p. 1-2.

features or phenomena in different religions become the main object of phenomenological research to determine their significance.

Qur'ānic narratives, which constitute a considerable portion of the *Qur'ān*, have been an important subject of research by Western scholars since the eighteenth century. A phenomenological approach has become the most preferable approach to identifying narrative parallels in previous scriptures. The studies, as well as the *Qur'ān* itself, ascertain the existence of these parallels. However, there are different opinions concerning the relation between narratives in the *Qur'ān* and those in the previous scriptures, particularly on the question of whether or not there has been cultural borrowing.

According to the doctrine of Islam, all of these narratives were revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad, and there was absolutely no human interference in their construction. Nevertheless, the use of the phenomenological approach provides us with various speculations and results. This approach aims to explain these narratives by examining the historical background of Arabia before the advent of Islam, where similar features of narrative could be found. In other words, by examining the historical background of Arabia, scholars expect to be able to trace the cultural connection between the Arabs, as the main listeners of the *Qur'ān*, and other people of different cultures. Therefore, a person who intends to employ the phenomenological approach must at the same become acquainted with the history of Arabia and its surroundings.

Based on historical investigations, Arabia was surrounded by Christian Kingdoms, with the Ghassanids Empire in Syria under Byzantine auspices in the north-west, the Ḥira Empire under the Persian Kingdom in Mesopotamia in the north-east, and the Abyssinia Empire in the west which spread its influence in Yemen. The possible influence of Christianity in Arabia can be seen from the journey of some Arab poets in Christian territories and commercial travel by camel riders and caravans.[9] On the other hand, the Prophet's migration to Medina was considered the beginning of Muslims' encounter with the Jewish community, who had established their settlement there many centuries earlier. The constant encounter of Muslims with the Jews in Medina has

[9] See: Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), p. 42.

been seen as the means for the introduction of Jewish tradition to the Muslim community, which is assumed, especially by Western scholars, to be reflected in the *Qur'ān*. Hence the phenomenological approach recognizes cultural connections or the possibility of cultural borrowing. Based on this identification, in general, Western studies of the Qur'ānic narrative generate two different orientations. The first considers these narratives as deliberately borrowed from the Old and New Testaments or other previous cultures. The second tends to view the existence of these parallels as part of a natural process in the sense that humanity is engaged in a common search for truth, with each religion constituting one effort in this search for truth.[10] Thus it shows the tendency to elucidate the Qur'ānic narrative from the perspective of narratology, focalizing the focalization of others through one's filter,[11] and the analysis of the Qur'ānic discourse.

C. Cultural Borrowing: the Polemical and Historical Orientation

The first study of the Qur'ānic narrative with a phenomenological approach might be credited to Abraham Geiger (d. 1874), a German rabbi and scholar who led the German Jewish reform movement, and his book *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentume aufgenommen*.[12] Compared to earlier Western study of the *Qur'ān*, his study is considered distinct in that he perceived the Prophet Muhammad as a sincere man in his religious mission -though he was viewed as very indebted to Judaism- rather than as an impostor or cheater. However, he contended that the Prophet had deliberately borrowed some Jewish concepts and material for his mission. To support the premise of borrowing, he tried to contextualize the life of the Prophet as well as the development of the *Qur'ān* -as the Prophet's work- with the facts and events of his time.[13] To define the idea of borrowing, Geiger took into account two aspects of analysis. First, it must be shown to exist in the Jewish tradition. Second, in order

[10] See: Jacques Waardenburg, *Reflections*, p. 94-5.

[11] Mieke Bal, "The Point of Narratology", in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 11, No. 4, Narratology Revisited II (Winter, 1990), p. 733.

[12] Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, translated from the German by F.M. Young (Madras: the M.D.C.S.P.C.K Press, 1898).

[13] *Ibid*., p. 1-2.

to be certain, it must be proved that it was really borrowed in the sense that it is only found in the Jewish tradition and not in Christian or other traditions.[14] His definition of borrowing is so simple that he might have difficulty making the connection between the parallels of narrative as shown later.

Interaction between the Jews and the Prophet and early Muslims took place after they migrated to Medina where they encountered three important Jewish tribes: Banu Qaynuqā', Banu Qurayẓa, and Banu Naẓīr. These Jewish tribes possessed considerable power at the time when the Prophet came to Medina. Although the Jews of the region were considered ignorant compared to Jews in other regions - they knew the Jewish teachings only from oral tradition -, compared with the Arab people their system of belief was considered superior and so they gained respect from the others. From this point of view, Geiger argued that the Prophet was eager to ally with the Jews by accommodating their views. Thus it happened naturally that the Prophet wanted to know more about their views in order to include the Jews in his community. Furthermore this interaction created the opportunity for the Prophet to adopt material from Judaism into his own religious system.[15] Geiger considered Abdullah ibn Salām (d. 43/663), a learned Rabbi who converted to Islam during the Prophet's lifetime, as a person from whom the Prophet learned more about the Jewish tradition.

Geiger assumed that the Prophet borrowed both religious thought and narratives from Judaism. In terms of the quantity of borrowing, stories were deemed as the largest form of writing borrowed. This was due to these narratives providing listeners with, what he called, "the marvelous garb of fiction", which was regarded as an important aspect for captivating the attention of the audience. Considering the narratives of some figures mentioned in the *Qur'ān* as merely records of historical facts which did not support any doctrine in Islam except that of the unity of God and the resurrection of the dead, Geiger employed a historical approach by arranging the history of these figures in a chronological order based on Jewish sources such as the Bible, Mishna, Gemara, Midrash etc. The reason was that he intended to show, what he called, 'anachronisms'

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 3-17.

among these narratives.[16]

Geiger surveyed the Qur'ānic passages mentioning a number of Biblical figures. He divided the periods of these figures into four periods: the period of Patriarchs, Moses, the three kings who ruled over undivided Israel, and holy men after the time of Solomon. His study of the Qur'ānic narrative is predominantly conducted, as suggested in phenomenology of religion, by comparing its parallels in the Jewish sources. The general conclusion of his study was that there are many mistakes in the Qur'ānic accounts of these figures due to the Prophet's ignorance of the approved Jewish sources, or his drawing on traditions unknown to Jews.

As noted before, Geiger based his argument for borrowing on the presence of Qur'ānic narrative parallels in Judaism. His idea of borrowing implies the superiority of the Jewish tradition over the 'truth' of narratives in the *Qur'ān*. This borrowing might happen due to cultural interaction, but to attribute the act of deliberate borrowing to the Prophet is something different. Narratives in the *Qur'ān* were actually delivered and adjusted within the minds and religious concepts of the audiences. Yet at the same time the Prophet intended to convey certain messages through these narratives. The case here concerns the relationship between the Prophet's mission and the existing culture of the audience. It seems to be impossible to communicate ideas beyond the audience's knowledge. Hence, narratives should be understood by examining the discourse between these two parties.

To make the study more distinct we will discuss some examples of Geiger's reading of Qur'ānic narrative. In the story of Cain and Abel, according to the *Qur'ān*, God sent a raven which scratched the earth to show Cain how to bury Abel after he killed Abel from jealousy that God accepted Abel's sacrifice (Q. 5:31).[17] Geiger contended that the story in the *Qur'ān* was wrong and did not fit the source from which the story came. By referring to a version mentioned in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, he argued that the raven did not teach Cain to bury Abel, but in fact it

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 74-5

[17] In Muslim commentaries and historiographies, the story is well-known as the story of Qābil and Hābil, two sons of Adam, who were asked to devote their offerings to God to seek His answer about the marriage arrangement proposed by their father.

inspired his parents on how to bury him.[18] Studies have suggested that *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* had actually been redacted after the advent of Islam. Indeed what was thought to be Jewish haggadic influence might well be quite the reverse.[19] Hence, it would not be reliable to base the argument of borrowing on a work composed after the *Qur'ān* has been revealed.

Another example is the story of Joseph. The *Qur'ān*'s statement that Joseph's brothers joyfully asked their father to send him together with them (Q. 12:12) contradicts the Biblical account that the father himself sent Joseph to his brothers who were out herding their goats. Another mistake, according to Geiger, is the statement that one of the travellers who went to draw water found Joseph in the pit (Q. 12:19) conflicint with the clear word of the Bible that the pit was dry.[20] Before going any further, Geiger should explain first how he could make the connection between the two stories of Joseph because sūra Yūsuf actually belongs to the Meccan period[21], before the Prophet visited Medina and encountered the Jews living there. Geiger seems too ambitious in his view of the Jewish contributions in the *Qur'ān*. It should be emphasized that one should be extremely cautious about assigning specific origins to any narrative in the *Qur'ān*[22] without ample knowledge of the Qur'ānic discourse.

William St. Clair Tisdall, a British historian and philologist who served as the Secretary of the Church of England's Missionary Society in Isfahan, provides us with a wider survey of the parallels between elements of the Qur'ānic narrative and narratives found in earlier

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[18] Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, p. 80.

[19] N. A. Stillman, "The Story of Cain and Abel in the Qur'an and the Muslim Commentators: Some Observations", in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 19 (1974), p. 231, 236. David Sidersky points out that the parallel of the story of the raven's scratching the earth from which Cain learned how to bury his brother's body, which is not mentioned in Genesis, is found in *Midrash Tanhuma*. Cf. David Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes* (Paris: Geuthner, 1933), p. 18.

[20] Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, p. 116-7.

[21] It has been reported that educated Jews approached Arab leaders to ask the Prophet why the family of Jacob moved from Shām into Egypt and to ask him about the story of Joseph. For further information about the occasion of the revelation of sūra Yūsuf see: *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* of al-Rāzī, the *tafsīr* of Abī al-Su'ūd and the *tafsīr* of al-Bayḍāwī.

[22] N. A. Stillman, "The Story of Cain and Abel", p. 239.

scriptures and cultures in his work, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ān*. The book bears a Christian bias. It might have a polemical tendency in that the author intended to show the superiority of the Christian tradition over Islam and blame the Prophet Muhammad for his ignorance of the truth of Christian doctrines.[23] Like Geiger, he considered the *Qur'ān* as the work of the Prophet, since the idea of revelation as understood by Muslims, as one of the sources in the hierarchy of truth in Islam, could not be accepted in Western scholarship. He based his argument on the premise that if the Qur'ānic *sūra*s are arranged in chronological order of composition, and then compared with the events in the Prophet's life, the result would be that every passage describes an occasion during which the Prophet interacted with his surroundings.[24] Thus St. C. Tisdall saw a close relationship between the development of the *Qur'ān* and the personality of the Prophet.

St. Claire Tisdall's study of the Qur'ānic narrative raised the idea that the Prophet deliberately borrowed a large number of materials from Zoroastrian and Judeo-Christian sources to establish his religion. Coming from a Christian background, and as one of its prominent missionaries in his time, it will be interesting to discuss his views on the Qur'ānic narrative in relation to the Christian tradition. To what extent did he maintain objectivity in his research? Did he tend to show the superiority of the Christian tradition over the construction of the Qur'ānic narrative? How did he define 'borrowing' which became his point of departure in describing the Prophet's ignorance about the doctrines of Christianity?

In fact the Prophet's encounter with Christians was less compared to his interactions with Jews. However, St. C. Tisdall still insisted that

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[23] This book has been included as an essay in Ibn Warraq's *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book*. Herbert Berg views the essay by St. Clair-Tisdall as being included for its 'Christian' perspective. It is not a particularly scholarly essay or even a polemical one. It uses the salvation history of Christianity to refute that of Muslims. The author is altogether too fond of using words such as 'foolish', 'fanciful', 'childish' and 'ignorant' when describing Qur'ānic (and for that matter Talmudic and Midrashic) stories that disagree with his Christian reading of the Old Testament. Cf. Herbert Berg, "Review: The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book by Ibn Warraq", in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol. 62, No. 3 (1999), p. 558.

[24] W. St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ān*, p. 27.

there were Christian influences on the *Qur'ān*. He argued that there were Christian converts living around Arabia such as Banū Ḥārith of Najrān, Banū Ḥanīfa of Yamāma and Banū Ṭā'ī at Taymah. He also assumed that the Prophet encountered Christian monks when he visited Syria as a trader before his prophethood. From this point of view, he insisted that the Prophet must have heard about Christianity and then made his own assessment about the true Christian doctrines. However, he did not examine further as to what extent those Christian converts and monks attracted the Prophet's attention for the purposes of learning their religion. This is an important question to be kept in mind in order to establish the 'borrowing' attributed personally to the Prophet. Narratives of the Christian tradition could become folklore known by Arabs and other people at the time, since Arab caravans had reached Christian territories for commerce. Thus it can be assumed that some information about Christianity was known by Arabs through oral communication. The case here is closely related to cultural interaction. The Prophet himself never followed the track of those Arabs who sought the truth of religion such as Waraqa ibn Nawfal (d. 610). The *Qur'ān* is principally revealed to respond to the issues arising at the time and the needs of the community. Its contents, therefore, are related to the discourses going on during the Prophet's mission. Thus the discussion of Qur'ānic narratives which have parallels in earlier traditions must be done within the discussion of the Qur'ānic discourse.

As a matter of fact, there are only a few references to the Christian tradition in the *Qur'ān*, and their significance is usually to defend the doctrine of the unity of God, confirm that Jesus was the son of Mary,[25] and to dismiss the doctrine of the crucifixion of Jesus. St. Claire Tisdall stated that the *Qur'ān* relied on stories found in the apocryphal Gospels, not the Canonical ones, to define the real doctrines of Christianity. Consequently, he argued, that there were many mistakes and distortions in the *Qur'ān* concerning its description of Christianity. He mentioned

[25] There are three different opinions about Jesus. Jews view Jesus as a person who was born from adultery; the majority of Christian believe he was born as the only begotten son of God; while Muslims consider him as one of the series of prophets sent by God who was born neither from adultery nor begotten by God, but from the spirit exhaled by God through an Angel to Mary.

some narratives assumed to have been borrowed from Christianity, such as the story of the companions of the cave (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*, sūra al-Kahf, 18:9-26), and the childhood of Jesus (sūra Maryam, 19:27-36) which will discussed below.

According to St Claire Tisdall, the parallel of the story of *aṣḥāb al-kahf* is first related by Gregory of Tours (d. 594). The story is not mentioned either in the Old Testament nor the New Testament. It is about the legend of seven noble Christians of Ephesus who fled from persecution in the time of Decius (r. 249-51) and took refuge in a cave not far from the city. Eventually, their enemies found where they were and blocked up the entrance of the cave, leaving them to die of hunger. They slept in the cave for a long time and awoke in the time of Theodosius II, when Christianity became triumphant. They sent one of them to buy some food. People were surprised that this man bought food with a coin produced by Decius, which was considered a treasure at the time. He then told the story of himself and his companions. St. Claire Tisdall considered the story to be an allegory or religious romance showing the rapid spread of the Christian faith.[26] He assumed that the story was widely known in many regions of the East long before the Prophet's lifetime.

The story of *aṣḥāb al-kahf* is mentioned in sūra *al-Kahf* (18:9-26). In general the story serves to reinforce the faith in the unity of God by relating the story of young men who faced persecution due to their persistence in maintaining the ideology of the unity of God. According to its occasion of revelation, it has been reported that al-Naḍar ibn al-Ḥārith, one of the people who fought against the Prophet's mission, came from Ḥira, an ancient city located south of Kufah, and learned reports of Rustam and Isfandiar. The Prophet used to deliver narratives of ancient figures in front of the Arab people. When he had finished his session (*majlis*), preaching the unity of God and relating the stories of those ancient people, al-Naḍar came and sat on the Prophet's place, and told the Quraysh people that he could relate stories better than the Prophet. He then related the stories of Persian kings and heroes. The Quraysh leaders then sent Al-Naḍar and 'Utba ibn Abī Mu'īṭ to Medina to meet the Jewish rabbis, who were considered the most reputable persons to have knowledge about the stories of prophets and ancient people. This

[26] W. St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ān*, p. 147-8.

mission was aimed at seeking information about the personality of the Prophet Muhammad and his mission. The Jewish rabbis recommended they ask him three things: young men who had fled long ago, a person who traveled to the east and west of the earth, and soul (*rūḥ*). If he could answer these things, he was a prophet; but if he could not he was just a story teller (*mutaqaqqil*).[27]

Based upon the occasion of its revelation, we have to take into account that first, the story surely belongs to the Meccan period when Arab culture was dominant and the power was still in the hands of tribal leaders. Second, the Jewish rabbis' recommendation to the Quraysh's envoys to ask the Prophet three things to measure whether or not he was a real prophet indicates that the story was also known by the Jews. This seems to contradict St. Claire Tisdall's assumption that the story, described as an allegory or religious romance, belongs to the Christian tradition describing the rapid spread of the Christian faith. And finally, the story might have been widely known by people generations before the time of the Prophet, especially by those who were interest in spirituality and religiosity.

Another example is the story of the childhood of Jesus. It has been reported that Jesus spoke when he was still in the cradle to defend his mother, Mary, against the accusations of her people (Q. 19:27-36). The parallel of the story is found in the apocryphal Arabic Gospel of infancy (*Injīl al-Ṭufūliyya*). St. Claire Tisdall contended that the Gospel has been translated into Arabic from the Coptic. He argued that the Prophet knew the story from his concubine, Mary the Copt, who was sent by the Christian Egyptian governor as a present.[28] However, he seems to be

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[27] Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (Ribat: Ma'had al-Dirāsāt wa'l-Abḥāth li'l-Ta'rīb, 1976), p. 182-3.

[28] W. St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ān*, p. 169-70. David Siderskey cited a number of parallels of this narrative found in Judeo-Christian traditions. It is known in the Jewish tradition as the miraculous sleeper. It was Honi Hama'agal, a wise master, who met an old man planting carob trees. He wondered why this old man planted carob trees since they would only bear fruit after approximately seventy years. He eventually knew that following his ancestors, he planted them for his descendents. Because of fatigue, this wise master took a rest and then slept around this place. He wondered when he woke up because a young man ate that carob fruit. He realized that he had slept for seventy years until those carob trees planted by that old man bore fruit.

mistaken in claiming that the Prophet became acquainted with the story through Mary the Copt. In fact the story is mentioned in sūra Maryam which belongs to the Meccan period. It is no doubt that the Prophet met Mary the Copt after *hijra* (migration) when he lived in Medina. From this fact, it shows the invalidity of his argument.

D. Cultural Connection: the Literary Orientation

Western studies of the *Qur'ān*, especially in the classical phase, are primarily concerned with the original sources and development of the *Qur'ān*. These studies, to some extent, are beneficial for tracing the cultural connections between Arabic and other cultures, or from a theological perspective, discovering how God communicated with human beings. However, among the vast corpus of the works of early Orientalists, only a few dealt with the contents of the *Qur'ān*. This may be due to linguistic barriers, or the fact that the organization of topics in the *Qur'ān* is different from that of scriptures widely known in the Western tradition, or the fact that the contents of the *Qur'ān* were peripheral to the efforts and worldview of Orientalists.[29]

Recently, there have been efforts to revise the classical orientalist legacy by allowing the *Qur'ān* to speak for itself.[30] Contemporary studies of the *Qur'ān* are aimed at shedding light on problems that arise from a sectarian reading and understanding of the *Qur'ān* constituted by the spirit of crusades and colonization in Western scholarship.[31] It is

David Sidersky said that the story of *aṣḥāb al-kahf* probably was more similar to the Christian tradition such as a homily of Jacques de Saroug about the legend the seven sleepers and that of Gregory of Tours as mentioned by St. William Tisdall. Cf. David Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes* (Paris: Geuthner, 1933), p. 153-4.

[29] S. Parvez Manzoor, "Method against Truth: Orientalisma and Qur'ānic Studies", in Andrew Rippin (ed.) *the Qur'ān: Style and Contents* (Aldershot [etc.]: Ashgate, Variorum, 2001).

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 389.

[31] Considering Orientalism as a mode of Western discourse with the Orient, Edward Said identified three levels of definition of Orientalism: as an academic field to study Oriental cultures and history, a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the "Occident", and a Western style of dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient. The

unfortunate that the *Qur'ān* has been increasingly exposed to examination and representation that lacks deep insight into the theological, ethical and spiritual messages of the Book. It is a fact that the historical approach is the dominant feature of the studies employed to expound the *Qur'ān*. To understand what this Book is, the profound study of the contents of the *Qur'ān* becomes an indispensable task.

Toshihiko Izutsu, the Japanese scholar who had a good reputation among both Muslim and Western scholars, proposed 'semantics of the *Qur'ān*' as a method of semantical or conceptual analysis of Qur'ānic vocabulary. He defined this method as an analytic study of key terms of a language with a view to arriving at a conceptual grasp of the worldview of the people who use that language.[32] Izutsu's semantics suggests that the *Qur'ān* should only be understood in the sense of a Qur'ānic world view, the *Qur'ān*'s vision of the existence. Since the *Qur'ān* was revealed in parts in Arabia over a period of approximately twenty three years, it is inevitable to examine and understand the Qur'ānic discourse. Izutsu identified three different systems of words which were used in Arabia before the revelation: a purely Bedouin vocabulary representing the typically Arabian world view of nomadism, a mercantile vocabulary produced from the mercantile economy in Mecca, and the Judeo-Christian vocabulary used among the Jews and Christians living in Arabia. The vocabulary of the *Qur'ān* is a mixture of these different systems.[33] Izutsu's

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relation between these levels of definition is interdependent. As an academic field, the beginnings of Orientalism can be traced back to the European constant contact with the East during the colonization period, especially in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In this period, the definition of the Orient, as well as the Muslim World, was created and much influenced by the Western European perspective. See: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York and Canada: Random House, 1979), p. 1-4.

[32] Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'ān: Semantics of the Qur'ānic Weltanschauung* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2002), p. 2-3.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 36. Muhammed Arkoun considers the event of the Qur'ānic revelation as the Qur'ānic fact, *le fait coranique*, which is defined as a linguistic, cultural and religious event which divided the Arab domain into two sides of thought: the savage thought, which was characterized linguistically by the diversity of dialects and religiously by paganism, and civilized thought, which flourished with the establishment of the Muslim community, the unification of language and a 'civilized' culture. It does not mean that the former culture ceased to exist. Both coexisted and engaged the other. See: Muhammed Arkoun, *La pensée arabe* (Paris: PUF, 2003), p. 11.

semantics is not just meant to examine these vocabularies or concepts in isolation as mentioned in the *Qur'ān*, but it examines their contextual import by analyzing their meanings before the advent of Islam and their possible new meanings in the *Qur'ān*. The concept of *Allah*, for instance, was viewed by the Arabs as the highest and the most supreme deity in their hierarchy of deities.[34] The *Qur'ān*, however, gives this concept a new meaning, that is, the Only God.

Related to the discussion of the Qur'ānic narrative, the semantical approach of Izutsu implies the need for further investigation of the narrative meanings and concepts presented in the stories of the *Qur'ān* by comparing them with parallels found in earlier scriptures. What is the meaning or function of these narratives in earlier scriptures, and what is there meaning and function in the *Qur'ān*?

As a matter of fact, the Qur'ānic narratives were constructed within the Arab world view of that time. Therefore, to understand these stories it is necessary to consider the Arab vision of the universe and the new mission brought by the Prophet Muhammad. As stated by the *Qur'ān* itself, the Qur'ānic narratives are predominantly meant to serve religious teachings about the unity of God, the affirmation of the Prophet's mission and eschatological issues, the resurrection of the dead and reckoning. Hence, reading the Qur'ānic narrative has to be performed in relation to examining the Qur'ānic discourse in order to grasp its particular meaning.

Another literary reading of the Qur'ānic narrative comes from Neal Robinson (2002) who proposes the idea of 'affinity' between the event in narrative and that in reality. The *Qur'ān* depicts Jesus as one of a series of prophets sent by God, beginning with Adam and culminating with the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, the *Qur'ān* depicts Jesus and Muhammad as having a number of things in common. They both are called a prophet (*nabī*), a messenger (*rasūl*) and a servant ('*abd*) of God. Jesus received a revelation called *al-injīl*, and Muhammad received the *Qur'ān*. Both the *injīl* and the *Qur'ān* represent the confirmations of

[34] It has been mentioned in the *Qur'ān* 39:3 that the Meccan heathens stated that they worshiped the idols only that they might bring them near to Allah. This shows two different meanings of the concept of deity of the word *Allah* between that used by the pre-Islamic Arabs and that used by Islam.

previous scriptures. Jesus is depicted as a prophet who called people to the unity of God, as did Muhammad. From this, Robinson suggests an affinity between the Qur'ānic narratives of Jesus and the actual mission of the Prophet Muhammad. He concludes that it should be clear that the Qur'ānic representation of Jesus serves to legitimize the prophethood of Muhammad by giving the impression that he was doing what Jesus had done before.[35]

Another instance of the affinity mentioned by Robinson is the affinity between Mary and 'Ā'isha since they both were accused of sexual immorality. The case of Mary began when she was visited by God's spirit in the shape of a handsome man when she was alone in the temple (Q. 19:17). She came back to her people, and was then accused of adultery. Finally this accusation was defended by revelation (Q. 19:27-33). Although the case of 'Ā'isha is different, it has an affinity with Mary's story. According to the tradition, the story began when she was chosen by the Prophet among his other wives to accompany him in a campaign.[36] When the Muslim soldiers were returning after the campaign, 'Ā'isha was accidentally left behind at the camp site. Her howdah had been put on the back of the camel while she was in her privy and then she looked for her necklace which went missing while doing her privy. Tongues began to wag, spreading a rumor when she returned to Medina accompanied by a handsome young man who had come behind the army and had not spent the night with them.[37] This incident brought about a serious crisis which was solved later after the Prophet received a revelation (Q. 24:11-20). According to Robinson, despite different cases, there are still a number of similarities. First, each of them encountered a handsome man when they were alone; second, in both cases the accusation was defended by revelation; and third, the *Qur'ān* criticizes the people who

[35] Neal Robinson, "Jesus and Mary in the Qur'ān: Some Neglected Afinities", in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Qur'ān: Style and Contents* (Aldershot [etc.]: Ashgate, Variorum, 2001), p. 25-6.

[36] It was the Prophet's tradition to draw lots amongst his wives when he intended to go on a journey, one of whom got the lot would accompany him in the journey.

[37] This story is mentioned in various books of ḥadīth such as Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī no. 2467 (*Kitāb al-Shahādāt*), no. 3826 (*Kitāb al-Maghāzī*), and no. 4381 (*Kitāb Tafsīr Qur'ān*), and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim no. 4974 (*Kitāb al-Tawba*).

spread the accusation (Q. 3:156 for Mary's case).[38]

In his reading, Robinson employs a diachronic analysis of revelation to reveal the idea of affinity in the Qur'ānic narrative, mentioning *sūra* Maryam, which belongs to the Meccan period, to establish an affinity between the story of Mary and that of 'Ā'isha. It is well-known that the case of 'Ā'isha took place after the Prophet's settlement in Medina, and *sūra* al-Nūr itself, in which the case of 'Ā'isha is mentioned, belongs to the Medinan period. His analysis might be different from that of Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallah who employed a synchronic analysis of a particular revealed narrative. Khalafallah considered every story as an independent narrative which contains a certain message and a psychological effect. Thus the idea implies that every narrative has its own affinity with a particular incident of the Qur'ānic discourse.[39]

Another Western literary reading of the Qur'ānic narrative has been credited to Mieke Bal, a Dutch literary critic and a proponent of narratology, in *Loving Yusuf*: *Conceptual Travels from Present to Past*. Her reading of the Qur'ānic version of the story of Joseph is part of her reading of the Biblical version of the same story. It might be said that her reading of the Qur'ānic narrative is a kind of literary reading from otherness and ignorance, as she admits. By juxtaposing the Biblical and Qur'ānic versions, she examines the parallels of the story to indicate some similarities and additions found in each version. Her reading of the biblical narrative is based on the concept of 'cultural memory', which is defined as the gap between the words on the page and the meanings[40] which are generated from culturally and historically different readings. This concept is primarily meant to describe the gap between the long-term continuity of texts and the fast changing communities of readers. How can relatively stable texts have varying meanings? Mieke Bal delineates a distinction between two understandings of textuality and reading that she calls *literalism* and *fundamentalism*. The first reading, whose interest is

[38] Neal Robinson, "Jesus and Mary", p. 29.

[39] For more detail study of Khalafallah's reading on the Qur'ānic narratives we can refer to his work, *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fi al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (The Art of Qur'ānic narrative).

[40] Mieke, Bal, *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past* (London & Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 5.

in the precise wording, traces the cultural inheritance and opens it up for the contemporary world, whereas the latter, which is based on the idea that the texts contain the questions we ask of them, makes an appeal to an immutably referential, prescriptive meaning, an appeal that is based on a radical denial or negligence of how signs work.[41] As a literary critic, Bal proposes *literalism* reading which involves the role of culture in reading itself. Culture is a significant influence on one's reading as well as the construction of his questions. The questions we ask are culturally framed, embedded in ways of thinking and common conceptions of social life. Reading is establishing a meaningful connection between these relatively stable texts and the varying, historically shifting meanings they generate.[42]

Concerning reading the Qur'ānic narrative, especially the story of Joseph in which Mieke Bal finds a parallel in the Bible, she develops the idea of reading from 'ignorance' as an indispensable element for her analysis.[43] Her reading from ignorance seems to imply the fact that she avoids discussing materials and discourses involved in the construction of the Qur'ānic narrative. She juxtaposes the Bible and the *Qur'ān* as they are, as literary texts which contain a particular narrativity. She began to seek knowledge of the *Qur'ān* by reading some articles by Heck, Jomier, Kalner, and Peters which are addressed to Christian and Jew readers. Being a literary critic, these studies made her feel ambivalent since she considers herself as no longer belonging to the communities they addressed. Therefore, her analysis of the Qur'ānic version of the story of Joseph is primarily based upon the story as presented in the Qur'ānic text.

Kalner's argument - that the fewer details found in the *Qur'ān*'s narratives is because it conveys only the information essential to make the point rather than telling a story and avoiding discussion of seemingly unrelated points - makes Bal question what theory of representation underlies the search for 'points',[44] what kind of measure is used to decide these points? Dealing with the story of Joseph in the *Qur'ān*, Bal analyzes the possible angle of the *Qur'ān*'s improving on the Biblical

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 124-8.

version, moving from a mythical narrative about 'the danger of women' to another point, 'women's solidarity'.[45] In this respect, she proposes what she calls 'Qur'ānic semiotics'[46] to read the *Qur'ān*, as a semiotic reading to understand *signs* in different versions. The *Qur'ān* gives new 'versioning' of the same story found in the Bible; it changes the version and improves the story to a certain degree to reveal some points different from those in the Bible.

Every story contains its own message or truth. Bal proposes the concept of *truth speak* to describe the relationship between narrative and truth as it manifests in the discursive versioning of the story of Joseph.[47] This truth is what the believer submits to. To understand what the truth is, we have to examine the narrator's form of speaking the truth. The Bible, especially Genesis, is ordered genealogically and chronologically to present the ideas of patriarchy and monotheism all together. The Bible which has been known to Western people for a long time ago affects their way of thinking, especially in terms of relating narratives chronologically. That is why Western scholars consider the *Qur'ān*'s organization of story as strange.

Through a narratological analysis, Mieke Bal admits that the *Qur'ān* introduces another style of organizing narrative, a style which comes from a different culture. For readers familiar with a tradition of chronological reading, the organization of the *Qur'ān* is at first very disorienting and disruptive. To make the study more tangible, she considers the random

[45] Both the *Qur'ān* and the Bible agree that the wife of Potiphar (or al-'Azīz according to the Qur'ānic version) persuaded Joseph to lie with her. Once in the absence of people in the house she carried out her desire to seduce Joseph, but he refused to do so and then ran away. Afterwards, the *Qur'ān* mentioned an additional scene about the rumour arising from this incident among the ladies in the city. They blamed the ruler's wife who fell in violent love and went astray because she tried to seduce her slave-boy. When she heard of the rumour, she sent for them and prepared a repast, and gave each of them a knife. When Joseph appeared in front on them and they saw him, they were amazed and infatuated with him. Because of their amazement in him, they unconsciously cut their hands. This story, the amazement of the ladies of the city, is not mentioned in the Bible. Therefore, Mieke Bal contended that the Bible's version of the story emphasizes on "the danger of women", while the *Qur'ān* improves the story into another point such as "women solidarity".

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 164.

structure of the *Qur'ān* as 'point' and the chronological structure of the Bible as 'line'. Point and line are the visual-conceptual metaphors of how to read these texts. The Bible proceeds with linearity, and the *Qur'ān* with points which need a certain degree of narrative chronology to be made. While the Bible's chronology bears the ideological connotation of development and historical truth, in which a construction of meaning is very useful and possible, the *Qur'ān*'s stories begin to make sense according to a very different logic.[48]

Bal intends to realize a kind of intercultural understanding. She seems to place the Qur'ānic narrative which focuses on points as a source for reading that of the Bible which contends with chronology and lineage. She proposes a mode of reading which does not need to claim qualitative primacy or truth status as the result of temporal priority, a mode of reading which does not always associate the former with value. Take the story of Joseph, for instance. The Bible emphasizes Joseph's adventures in a chronological order beginning with the scene telling the reader that his father loved him very much to the extent that this love made his brothers jealous. Against his father's warning, Joseph then told his brothers about his dream which made them jealous and angry with him. As a consequence, he was led astray and sent into exile in Egypt. He was privileged by God and reunited with his father in a different land, and never came back to Canaan. According to Bal, the point here is disguised. The *Qur'ān*'s version of the story does not emphasize chronology -although its different episodes are chronologically related- but rather points. That is why, in this sense, Bal proposes reading 'the chronology' of the Bible from 'the points' of the *Qur'ān*, or in other words reading the Qur'ānic narratives as giving direction on how to read the Biblical version.[49]

The narratological analysis conducted by Mieke Bal underlines the relevance of deep analysis on narrative structure to reveal what truth the narrator wants to convey. This analysis seems able to eliminate and

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 170-1

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 175

counter interpretations based on prejudice, convention or ideology[50] which makes the text suffer from the absence of comprehensive reading.

E. Conclusion

It is a fact that parallels of the Qur'ānic narrative can be found in earlier scriptures. Based upon historical investigation, Arabia was surrounded by Christian empires, and Arab caravans had reached Christian territories for their commerce before the period of the Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, Jewish communities had lived in Medina for many centuries and with whom the Prophet regularly encounters after the migration. Thus it is highly possible that Arab people were familiar with the Judeo-Christian tradition due to cultural interaction.

Similarities in features of narratives have been phenomenologically approached to identify their significances in religious life. However, Western readings of the Qur'ānic narrative from a historical perspective were very dominant in the early period and conducted in favour of the 'truth' of Judeo-Christian traditions. It means that everything Qur'ānic that corroborates earlier scriptures was considered borrowed and every story that the *Qur'ān* modifies is viewed as deviant. Moreover, these Christian readings blame the Prophet for having manipulated the real doctrines of Christianity because the *Qur'ān* cites the Christian narratives from apocryphal gospels, not from canonical ones. Western historical reading of narratives is apt to ascertain the contribution of earlier traditions to the *Qur'ān* or to show its historical distortion and the Prophet's ignorance of the real Judeo-Christian traditions.

In the later period, there is a distinct indication that Western scholars begin examining the content and particular wording of the *Qur'ān*. This study leads to the discussion of the Qur'ānic discourse, recognizing that the *Qur'ān* communicated to its first listeners within the culture they were acquainted with. Thus the Qur'ānic narratives are read as a means of promoting the Prophet's mission by relating his affinity to previous prophets. Furthermore, reading these narratives from within the Qur'ānic discourse implicitly suggests that there is an affinity between the facts in the narratives and the facts experienced by

[50] Mieke Bal, "The Point of Narratology", in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 11, No. 4, Narratology Revisited II (Winter, 1990), p. 750.

the Prophet and his followers during the period of revelation. From the narratological analysis, the *Qur'ān* presents a new version of relating narratives as a semiotic reading to understand narratives in the Bible: reading 'the chronology' of the Bible from 'the points' of the *Qur'ān*, or in other words reading the Qur'ānic narratives as giving direction on how to read the Biblical version.

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