
Jerusalem vs. Mecca in Ibn Qutayba's

Kitāb A'lām al Nubuwwa



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Abstract

This article investigates one polemical issue, the substitution of Mecca for Jerusalem, in the writings of Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba (828–889 CE). In his *Book of the Signs of Prophethood* (*Kitāb A'lām al-Nubuwwa*), Ibn Qutayba interprets five Biblical verses that speak of Jerusalem as actually alluding to Mecca. The investigation queries the quality of several Biblical allusions in Ibn Qutayba's work, probes Ibn Qutayba's reasoning in using them, and asks how they fit into the larger and longer-lasting polemic between Islam and Judaism concerning the identity of the son whom Abraham bound on the altar. It is found that the two issues—the place most sacred to God and the identity of the bound son—are strongly connected in the polemic between Islam and Judaism and between different schools of Islamic exegesis.

Introduction

The polemic between Islam and Judaism is as old as the Qur'ān, in which one encounters verses and concepts that criticise Jewish ideas and the reliability of the Torah.¹ The controversy escalated in the ninth century and thereafter, finding expression in the production of anti-Jewish (and anti-Christian) pamphlets by Muslim authors. In one manifestation of this genre, many Muslim scholars interpreted various Biblical verses as prophecies of the advent of Muḥammad and the rise of Islam.² These verses are known in the Islamic literature as “Signs of the Prophethood” (*a'lām al-nubuwwa*) and as “Evidence of the Prophethood” (*dalā'il al-nubuwwa*), and many Islamic tracts include these expressions in their titles.

One of the first Muslims to write a polemical pamphlet is Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba (828–889 CE). Ibn Qutayba stands out among Muslim polemicists

¹See further, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, “Tahrīf,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd Edition), 12 vols. (Leiden, 2000), vol. 10, pp. 111–112; Haggai Mazuz, *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 17–21.

²This Qur'ānic idea appears in Q. 7:157: “Those who follow the messenger, the prophet of the common folk (*ummī*), whom they find written down with them in the Torah and the Gospel [...]”. Translation taken from the Qur'ān *The Koran interpreted*. Edited by Arthur J. Arberry (London, 1964). This article is dedicated to Mrs Shoshanah Mandelboim.

in the number of his works and the frequency of his Biblical quotations.³ One of his compositions, *Book of the Signs of Prophethood* (*Kitāb A'lām al-Nubuwwa*), alludes to references to the advent of Islam in an especially large number of Biblical verses. In this work, Ibn Qutayba interprets several Biblical verses as alluding to Mecca. Study of five of these verses in Ibn Qutayba's Arabic treatise in comparison with the original Hebrew Biblical text, however, reveals that they actually refer to Jerusalem. Below I examine the way Ibn Qutayba cited these five verses to demonstrate his method and interpretation. The dates and comments in brackets are mine.

From Jerusalem to Mecca: Examination of Ibn Qutayba's Citations

The general view among modern scholars is that Ibn Qutayba and many other Muslim scholars did not translate Biblical verses themselves but used various existing translations. One of the most prominent scholars of the Judaeo-Islamic culture, Georges Vajda, excludes Ibn Qutayba from this generalisation, doubting that he knew or had access to any Arabic translation of the Bible.⁴ However, another prominent scholar in this field, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, argues that Ibn Qutayba "had some knowledge of the Bible, and he quotes what seems to be an early Bible translation into Arabic".⁵ To remain neutral in this dispute, I speak of Ibn Qutayba's having paraphrased or cited verses instead of having translated them. Ibn Qutayba's substitution of Mecca for Jerusalem in the verses at issue, presented below, however, may support the argument that he actually did translate these Biblical verses, at least in part.

Many verses in Isaiah refer to Jerusalem; Ibn Qutayba paraphrases several of them. His paraphrases, however, are only partly accurate and some omit entire verses. Examples follow: (1) Is. 54:1 reads: "Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord".⁶ Ibn Qutayba explains that the inhabitants of the city—it is not yet clear to which city he refers—will outnumber the inhabitants of Jerusalem (*bayt al-maqdis*), who are among the Children of Israel (Banū Isrā'īl). He then explains the rest of the verse as follows:

He (Allāh) means that the people of Mecca, with all those who will come there on pilgrimage, will be more [numerous] than the people of Jerusalem. [Allāh] compared Mecca to a barren woman with no children, because before the prophet there was only Ishmael and no [divine] book was revealed there. He (Allāh) certainly could not have meant Jerusalem to be barren, because it is the home of the prophets and the place of divine revelation (*bayt al-anbiyā' wa-mahbiṭ al-wahy*); therefore, it cannot be compared to a barren woman.⁷

³On Ibn Qutayba's life and work, see Gérard Lecomte, 'Ibn Qutayba,' *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edition), 12 vols. (Leiden, 1971), vol. 3, pp. 844–847; Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazon* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 30–36.

⁴Georges Vajda, "Judaeo-Arabica: Observations sur quelques citations bibliques chez Ibn Qutayba," *Revue des études juives* 99 (1935), pp. 68–80.

⁵Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton, 1992), p. 80.

⁶Translation taken from *The King James Version of the English Bible: An Account of the Development and Sources of the English Bible of 1611 with Special References to Hebrew Tradition* (Chicago, 1941).

⁷Throughout this article, I used the critical edition of the text as appears in Sabine Schmidtke, "The Muslim Reception of Biblical Materials: Ibn Qutayba and his *A'lām al-nubuwwa*," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22/3 (2011), pp. 249–274, at pp. 245–260 (hereinafter: Ibn Qutayba, *A'lām al-Nubuwwa*). Ibn Qutayba, *A'lām al-Nubuwwa*, p. 257.

Thus, according to Ibn Qutayba, this verse is a metaphor for the advent of Islam. Since many prophets were active in Jerusalem before the arrival of Muḥammad, one should not say that Jerusalem is barren. He concludes that the verse refers to Mecca, which until Muḥammad's arrival was "barren, thou that didst not bear," and may now sing and rejoice because Muḥammad has appeared there.

(2) Is. 62:2 reads: "And the gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name Trans". Ibn Qutayba paraphrases this verse as follows: "And Allāh will give you a new name 'Trans'. This "new name," he then explains, is "the Sacred Mosque" (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*).⁸ This can be none other than the mosque in Mecca that surrounds the Ka'ba; therefore, to his way of thinking, the verse speaks of Mecca.

(3) Is. 60:1–7 reads:

[1] Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. [2] For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. [3] And the gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. [4] Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. [5] Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the gentiles shall come unto thee. [6] The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the Lord. [7] All the flocks of Qedar shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory.

Paraphrasing most but not all of the foregoing verses (1, 4, 5 and 7) and using those omitted to interpret them, Ibn Qutayba claims that the passage refers to and describes the *ḥajj*, which gives the city under discussion reason to be happy and rejoice. Twice he mentions the dignitaries of Nebaioth (instead of the rams of Nebaioth, of which the Biblical text speaks) as those who will minister to the city. On the second of these occasions, he writes that the dignitaries of Nebaioth, son of Ishmael, are the gatekeepers of the house (*sadanat al-bayt*). The term *bayt* in this context refers to the Ka'ba; therefore, Ibn Qutayba's use of it in this manner leaves no doubt that the city he has in mind is Mecca.⁹

(4) Is. 60:11 reads: "Therefore thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night; that men may bring unto thee the forces of the gentiles, and that their kings may be brought trans". Ibn Qutayba paraphrases this verse as follows: "Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, and they shall adopt you as their *qibla* (direction of prayer), and you shall be called after that the city of the Lord, that is, the house of Allāh".¹⁰ This city, by implication, is Mecca.

(5) Apart from Isaiah, Ibn Qutayba applies the Mecca-as-Jerusalem substitution to a verse in Psalms. Ps. 50:2 reads: "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined". Ibn

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 257–258.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Qutayba replaces the word “perfection” (*mikhlah*), which he identifies as a metaphor for the Islamic leadership and Imamate, with the word “crown” (*iklīl*), and the word “beauty” (*yofī*) with the word Maḥmūd, this being a reference to Muḥammad.¹¹ Therefore, according to Ibn Qutayba, one should read the first part of the verse as follows: “Out of Zion, the crown of Muḥammad”. Since Muḥammad’s provenance traces to Mecca and not to Zion as the verse reads, it is clear that this is Ibn Qutayba’s meaning.

Conclusion

Ibn Qutayba lived in the ninth century, a time of escalating polemics about the identity of the bound son. In *sūrat al-ṣāffāt* (Those arrayed in ranks), Qur’ān 37:99–113 describes Abraham’s preparations for the sacrifice. The text is vague as to the identity of the intended sacrifice and does not provide his name. Yet verses 112 and 113 at the end of the passage do refer to Isaac; what is more, Ishmael is not mentioned in the passage at all.

Early Qur’ān commentators such as Mujāhid b. Jabr (642–722 CE) and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767 CE), among others, specifically identify the bound son as Isaac, son of Sarah.¹² From the ninth century on, however, one finds commentators who have doubts about the identity of the bound son and thus raise both possibilities: Isaac and Ishmael.¹³ Later commentators argue that the bound son was Ishmael.¹⁴ The pro-Ishmael commentators appear to be motivated solely by polemical motives that they express by venerating Ishmael.¹⁵

This polemic in the Islamic world was preceded by a controversy over the sanctity of Jerusalem—one that would last for centuries, until the late medieval period. Jerusalem was the first *qibla*; eventually, it was succeeded by Mecca.¹⁶ Some Islamic sources state that the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 685–705 CE/d. 705 CE) and his son Walīd

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹²Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Makkī al-Makhzūmī, *Tafsīr Mujāhid* (Cairo, 1989), p. 569; Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 3 vols. (Beirut, 2003), iii, p. 104.

¹³See further, Aḥmad b. Abī Ya’qūb b. Ja’far, *Ta’rīkh al-Ya’qūbī*, 2 vols. (Beirut, 1960), vol. 1, p. 25; Abū al-Fidā’ Ismā’il b. ‘Alī, *Al-Mukhtaṣar fī Akhbār al-Bashar*, 2 vols. (Beirut, 1997), vol. 1, p. 30; Zayn al-Dīn ‘Umar b. Muzaḥfar b. al-Wardī, *Ta’rīkh Ibn al-Wardī*, 2 vols. (Najaf, 1969), vol. 1, p. 16. E.g., Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī, *Tafsīr al-Māwardī: al-Nukat wa’l-Uyūn*, 4 vols. (Kuwait, 1982), iii, p. 421; 3:421; Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abū Bakr al-Suyūfī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (Cairo, 2004), p. 483.

¹⁴E.g., Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Andalusī, *Tafsīr al-Nahr al-Nahr al-Mādd min al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, 6 vols. (Beirut, 1995), vol. iv, p. 637.

¹⁵See further, Reuven Firestone, “Abraham’s Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*Al-Dhabīh*, Qur’ān 37:99–113): Issues in Qur’ānic Exegesis,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34/1 (1989), pp. 95–131, especially at pp. 98–99, 113, 127 and 129; Jacques Doukhan, “The Akedah at the Crossroad: Its Significance in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” *Andreas University Seminary Studies* 32/1–2 (1994), pp. 29–40, at p. 34; Haggai Mazuz, “Polemical Treatment of the Story of the Annunciation of Isaac’s Birth in Islamic Sources,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 17/2 (2014), pp. 252–262. In this context, it is interesting to mention that in order to prove that the bound son was Ishmael, some Muslim sages referred to part of Gen. 22:2 as evidence. The verse reads: “And he said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (Gen. 22:2). These Muslim sages argued that the words “your son, your only son” could only refer to Ishmael because he was the oldest, ignoring the rest of the verse, which clearly speaks about Isaac. For an example of such a Muslim sage, see Sidney Adams Weston, “The *Kitāb Masālik al-Nazar* of Sa’īd Ibn Ḥasan of Alexandria: Edited for the First Time and Translated with Introduction and Notes,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 24 (1903), pp. 312–383, at p. 337.

¹⁶See Q. 142–146 and the commentaries on these verses; see also Mazuz, *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina*, pp. 37–39.

(d. 715 CE) tried to make Jerusalem an alternative pilgrimage site to Mecca as part of their struggle with 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (d. 692 CE), who ruled Mecca. During their lifetime and afterward, the sanctity of Jerusalem rose in importance in the Islamic world. Many Muslim sages, however, resisted such thinking lest it come at Mecca's expense. Indeed, as Meir Jacob Kister demonstrates, there were early trends that stressed the sanctity of Mecca, or of Mecca and Medina, while minimising that of Jerusalem. These trends are reflected in some early traditions that are only partly preserved in the canonical *ḥadīth* collections.¹⁷

These issues—the identity of the bound son and the place most sacred to God—are strongly connected. Both Judaism and Islam place the binding at the most sacred location on earth for each: the Temple Mount and the Ka'ba, respectively. Each faith disseminates its own narrative in this regard: (1) Isaac (the father of Jacob, also called Israel), heir to Abraham, was bound on the Temple Mount. (2) Ishmael, heir to Abraham and progenitor of Muḥammad, was bound in Mecca.¹⁸

As for the reasoning behind Ibn Qutayba's exegetical pattern, two possible explanations suggest themselves: First, Mecca replaces Jerusalem; by implication, Ishmael is the bound son. This would suggest that underneath the polemic regarding the *a'lām* in Ibn Qutayba's pamphlet hides another polemic, that regarding the most sacred site on earth. Second, Ibn Qutayba's exegetical pattern may be considered part of an internal Islamic debate between those who affirm the sanctity of Jerusalem for Muslims and those who reject it. These two polemical issues became part of the Islamic discourse during the lifetime of Ibn Qutayba, who apparently belonged to the latter camp. <hagaimazuz@gmail.com>

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¹⁷Meir Jacob Kister, "You Shall Only Set Out for Three Mosques: A Study of an Early Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24 (2000), pp. 173–196, at p. 178.

¹⁸On the link between Ishmael and Mecca in Islamic sources, see also Uri Rubin, "Islamic Retellings of Biblical History trans," in Y. Tzvi Langermann and Josef Stern (eds.), *Adaptations and Innovations: Studies on the Interaction between Jewish and Islamic Thought and Literature from the Early Middle Ages to the Late Twentieth Century*, Dedicated to Professor Joel L. Kraemer (Paris-Louvain, 2007), pp. 299–313, at pp. 304–306.