Resurrection of Marginal Traditions: New Reinterpretation of Jews in Early Islamic Texts (Part 2)

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Brief Analysis

Early Islamic traditions—compiled in the centuries following Islam's formative phase through the literary corpus of *Sirah* (Biography of the Prophet) and *Hadith* (Acts and sayings of the Prophet)—openly drew on accounts from Jewish converts to Islam (*Isra'iliyyat*). While classical Islamic scholars have generally discounted the value of these accounts, they have in some cases figured prominently in both the canonical and non-canonical compilations of the both historical and apocalyptic literatures. These sources have gained new prominence in the modern period, as Jihadist theologians have reinterpreted these early sources as a call to fight Jews as a collective, now differentiated from the classic theological classification of Jews as acceptable residents of Islamic polities—discussed in a separate article here—and warping broader Arab cultural portrayals of Jews writ large.

There are three pre-modern encounters with the "Jews" recorded in Islamic texts: (1) the Banu Isra'il of Biblical times as related in the Qur'an and by the Isra'iliyyat; (2) the Yahud of Yathrib (Madinah), Khaybar and Wadi al-Qura with whom Muhammad and his followers interacted, as related in the Qur'an and the Sirah; and (3) the contemporary Jews of subsequent centuries. Conventional Islamic scholasticism clearly differentiates between the 'Yahud' of the time of the Prophet and the Jewish communities living under later Islamic rule. By adopting this sense of discontinuity, scholars incorporated negative Qur'anic encounters with 'Yahud' into theology while separating their lived encounters with Jewish communities in jurisprudence.

Thus, the Qur'anic parables (*qisas*) on the failures of Banu Isra'il to accept Divine prophesy were generally presented as a reflection of human frailty and a warning to the new, now universal *Ummah* (religious collective) not to fall into the pattern of error and arrogance of its predecessor. Similarly, the accounts of the polemics between the Prophet and the Yahud of Arabia were also generally contextualized as illustrations of human stubbornness and resistance to a humbling truth. Pre-modern exegetes did not feel the need to justify or rationalize the prominence of Banu Isra'il or al-Yahud in the Qur'an, or see these instances as instructive of their relations with contemporary Jewish communities.

However, certain elements of early historical records have taken on new prominence in the modern period. In the *Sirah*, its original redactor Ibn Ishaq relates an account of the demise of Banu Qurayzah, the last of the three Jewish tribes of the city of Yathrib—later renamed al-Madinah. According to the text, the Banu Qurayzah had been

effectively prodded, or even coerced into a mutual defense agreement with the Prophet upon his ascension to authority in Yathrib. However, the non-belligerent lifestyle of Banu Qurayzah was plainly at odds with the conflict between Muhammad and the tribes of Mecca, who had forced Muhammad and his followers to flee to Yathrib. When a coalition of Muhammad's enemies laid siege to Yathrib, the leaders of Banu Qurayzah sought to withdraw from the nominal defense agreement.

The besieging coalition dissolved after a stalemate, securing Muhammad's rule in Yathrib, but Prophet declared his intent to punish Qurayzah for their breach of contract. Their leaders ultimately agreed to arbitration, with the arbiter deciding that all adult males to be killed, and all females and male children to be enslaved. Ibn Ishaq describes a massacre in which up to 800 Jewish males were slaughtered, with their wives, daughters, and sons distributed as booty to the slaughtering Muslims.

Until recently, this account has not been part of the general Muslim consciousness of the life of Muhammad. While the text of Ibn Ishaq is normally accepted as the basis for the historical account of the life of the Prophet, it is a sole source with intra- and extra-textual issues that may cast serious doubts upon the Banu Qurayzah account, as well as much of the remainder of the work. So though the scholastic establishment, past and present, has not challenged the Banu Qurayzah account, for centuries it had been neither highlighted or emphasized, despite the fact that it constitutes, by far, the largest instance of killing in the history of the Prophet.

In the past few decades, however, Ibn Ishaq's recounting of the demise of Banu Qurayzah has gained new prominence, first interpreted as a strategic decision by the Prophet who engaged in a drastic but necessary action designed to insure the survival of the nascent state, then as a just punishment for the perfidy of the Jews who plotted and acted against the Prophetic message.

In a short treatise on the incident, Abu Yahya al-Libi, an al-Qa'idah leader and ideologue killed in 2012, described the significance and implications of the Banu Qurayzah incident as a model of behavior with non-Muslims. Al-Libi recognized the limited nature of the Banu Qurayzah's transgression and the vastly disproportionate consequences they suffered. Al-Libi then used this example to define Islamic justice—in his eyes Divinely mandated through this Prophetic example—as applying an equally disproportionate cost to any infringement on Muslim rights. While al-Libi is generally viewed as "extreme" in mainstream Arab culture, reactions to al-Libi in jihadist forums also sought to qualify his deductive analogy (*qiyas*) by narrowing this view to specific case of "the Jews."

Similarly, early texts on Jews have taken on an increased prominence in eschatological (end times) literature. Though the former centralizes eschatological elements to a greater extent, both Shi'i and Sunni texts have a multitude of traditions about the end of times. Attempts to compile and in some cases harmonize differing strains have occurred during the centuries, but in most cases limited weight has been assigned to conflicting traditions. The past century, however, has seen some elements of the Islamic apocalypse elevated to canon-like status: in the last days, with either the Mahdi or Christ in his Second Coming as their leader, the Muslims will fight and kill the Jews. Every living and inanimate object will guide the Muslims in their pursuit of the treacherous Jews except, for whatever reason, the Nitraria tree (*al Gharqad*) behind which the Jews will be able to hide.

It may not be possible to quantify the actual acceptance of this tradition as part of Muslim belief systems. It is undeniable, however, that this narrative is now an established component of the rhetorical arsenal in popular and religious discussion of the Jews. Both this eschatological vignette and the Banu Qurayzah account have graduated from the margins of the received corpus to occupy a central role in the new theology of the Jews.

The conflation of parable and history

The unchecked demonization of the Jews in Islamic theology in the course of the past century has promoted the historicization of the Qur'anic parables—towards the enrichment of the negative record of the Jews as a continuous

collective. While Western scholars of the Bible have trended towards reinterpreting the Biblical text as metaphorical in spite of its literal claim, many if not most Islamic thinkers have moved in the opposite direction, ascribing historicity and literal truth to Qur'anic parables. The "Jews" as the "killers of prophets," and as the "progeny of mutated monkeys and pigs," both derived—with liberties, through the literalization of parables—from the Qur'anic text, thus metastasize into self-propelled memetic ideas in recurrent use.

But the conflation of parables and history presents a serious dilemma to Islamic thinkers. If the large amount of space allocated to Banu Isra'il and the Yahud of Yathrib in the Qur'an is primarily history, rather than moral wisdom parables, the Qur'an is reduced largely to a book focused on the Jews. The disproportionate output of Islamic thinkers on Jews and the Qur'an is reflective of this oddity in need of explanation and justification.

Repeatedly, popular and scholastic theologians have recently resorted to a demonization of the Jews to rationalize the vast space their accounts occupy in the Qur'an. It is mandatory that the text of the ultimate and final revelation be reflective of Divine Wisdom. The abundance of reference to the Jews in the holy text is therefore a solemn indication of their importance in human history. Their continuous denunciation and condemnation underlines the evil that they represent. Viewed in the light of this guiding principle, the Qur'an, with parables reduced to history, is not a book about the Jews, it is a Divine guidance against the Jews. Through presumed textual analysis, promoters of this Judeo-centric reading of the Qur'an claim to decipher the Divine message commanding the faithful to engage in an eternal battle with the Jews.

These new theological interpretations of Jews as both uniquely evil and deserving of disproportionate punishment play out on the modern political stage. Prior to his entanglement in Syria on Iranian orders, Hezbollah's leader Hasan Nasrallah enjoyed the status of a pan-regional hero, embodying unshakable steadfastness and unblemished morality. In line with this reputation, Nasrallah issued a solemn and somber apology in July 2006 for the deaths of civilians in Israel as a result of rockets launched by his party at random targets in Israeli cities. His apology, however, was explicitly phrased to refer to the death of Arab civilians in Israel.

In contrast, Nasrallah did not see the death of innocent Jewish Israelis as a challenge to his morality or his reputation. In fact, both public rhetoric and actions of Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or even in the ubiquitous slogan of the remote Ansarullah (Huthis) in Yemen—proclaiming "Death to America, Death to Israel, Cursed be the Jews"—demonstrate the widespread belief of Jihadist groups that the Jews as a collective are intrinsically evil, and thus potentially subject to elimination, and the confirmation that this attitude does not alienate their supporters. These attitudes, while extreme, are facing a lack of challenge in broader Arab discourse. If left unchecked, they will continue to poison broader Arab understandings of Jews, and can trap broader Arab society in a narrative that sees "the Jews" as an omnipresent evil and challenge to Islam.

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