

FURTHER NOTES ON THE WORD *ṢIBĠHA* IN QUR'ĀN 2:138

SEAN W. ANTHONY

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Abstract

Recent scholarship on the interpretation of *ṣibġhat Allāh* (lit., 'the dye of God') in Qur'ān 2:138 has trended in two directions. A moderate trend views the word *ṣibġha* as merely a calque of the Syriac word for baptism, *maṣbū'itā*. Another recent, more radical approach regards *ṣibġha* as a product of the corrupting vicissitudes of the Qur'ān's textual transmission and, therefore, has proposed alternative, text-critical renderings of the Quranic ductus itself. This article offers a third — hopefully more compelling — reading, wherein the phrase 'the dye of God' is read in light of similar baptismal metaphors scattered throughout the Christian literature of Near Eastern Late Antiquity.

I

One of the many words found in the Quranic lexicon whose interpretation has proved troublesome for modern and medieval scholars alike is the word '*ṣibġha*' found in Qur'ān 2:138 (al-Baqara). The word *ṣibġha* can be literally rendered into English as 'dye' or 'colouring' in most contexts, but its precise meaning and significance in its Quranic context has been much contested. This Quranic hapax legomenon offers, therefore, an interesting case study inasmuch as the meaning of the word *ṣibġha* outside the Qur'ān presents Arabists little trouble whatsoever, yet within the context of its Quranic usage, the word has inspired a great deal of scholarly discussion and debate. Although the philological consternation it has inspired surely pales in comparison to that of other well-studied words of the Quranic lexicon — such as, for instance, *al-ṣamad* in Q. 122¹ — scholarly consensus as to the probable meaning of *ṣibġha* still remains elusive.

¹ For an overview of these debates, see W.A. Saleh, 'The Etymological Fallacy and Qur'ānic Studies: Muhammad, Paradise and Late Antiquity', in A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx (eds), *The Qur'ān in Context* (Leiden 2010), 649–97.

What, then, is the nature of the problem as perceived by scholars? Turning to the appearance of the word *ṣibġha* within the context of the Qur'ān itself, one finds that it appears quite suddenly, apparently in the guise of a metaphor, at the end of an important pericope on the primordial religion (Ar. *milla*) of Abraham (cf. Qur'ān 2:124–41). This *milla* of Abraham serves in the Qur'ān more generally as the archetype for humankind's original, pure faith in God. In the specific pericope of concern here, the Qur'ān offers a scripted exchange, between the Jews and Christians on the one hand and the followers of Muḥammad's message on the other, in which the Jews and Christians demand Muḥammad's followers to embrace their respective religions if the Muslims truly desire to be saved/guided (*tahtadū*; see Qur'ān 2:135). The Qur'ān protests on the believers' behalf in response by citing Abraham as a gentile pure of faith (*ḥanīf*)² — i.e., as neither Jew nor Christian — free of polytheistic blemish ('*bal millata Ibrāhīm ḥanīf^{an} wa-mā kāna mina l-mushrikīn*', Qur'ān 2:135). The capstone passage for this Quranic disputation is the very passage in which *ṣibġha* appears; it reads as follows (Qur'ān 2:137–8):

If [the Christians and Jews] believe in the like of which you believe in, then they shall be guided; and if they turn away, they shall instead find themselves divided. God will protect you from them, and He is the Seeing and the Knowing, | [Follow/take on] the dye of God! And whose dye is better than God's (*ṣibġhata 'llāhi wa-man aḥsanu mina 'llāhi ṣibġha^{an}*)? We worship him alone.

Vocalized in the accusative,³ *ṣibġhata 'llāh*, 'the dye of God', stands in direct relation to and in identity with the *millata Ibrāhīm* mentioned in Qur'ān 2:135, 'Say: rather [follow] the *milla* of Abraham, a gentile of pure faith (*qul bal millata Ibrāhīma ḥanīf^{an}*)...' As such, *ṣibġhat Allāh* serves as a discrete, metaphorical reinterpretation of the pristine *milla* of Abraham whose merits the Qur'ān favours over the religion of its hypothetically Christian and Jewish interlocutors.

² In translating '*ḥanīf*' as 'gentile', I have followed F. de Blois, '*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (ἕθνηκόες): 'Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam', *BSOAS* 65 (2002), 23–5. Cf. now though M. Sirry, 'The Early Development of the Quranic *Hanīf*' *JSS* 56 (2011), 349–55.

³ Early attestations to the reading *ṣibġhatu 'llāh* — i.e., placing *ṣibġha* in the nominative rather than accusative — exist but have little effect on meaning; the nominative in these instances results from an implied '*hiya*', standing in for the *milla* of Qur'ān 2:135 and thereby only makes the identification of *ṣibġha* and *milla* the result of direct equivalence rather than by a discrete parallelism. See 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 11 vols (Damascus 2000), I, 202.

Since both *milla* in Qur'ān 2:135 and *ṣibġha* in 2:138 take the accusative, resulting from the implied verb, the text leaves some latitude with regards to the translation of the verse, depending on what one surmizes the implied verb to be. Any number of options work: 'follow', 'adopt', 'adhere to', etc.

In the above translation, I have also rendered *ṣibġha* as 'dye' because it is, as I believe one can reasonably assert, the most straightforward, *prima facie* translation of the term — even if other proposed translations run the gamut of 'savour', 'colouring', 'unction', 'hue', 'baptism', etc.⁴ As will be further discussed below, this rendering of *ṣibġha* as 'dye' has often been strongly challenged by scholars, if not rejected outright. This essay's main contention will be that 'dye' ought to become the preferred translation for *ṣibġha*. It is a translation, I argue, whose justification can be found in a late antique rhetorical context with which this Quranic passage engages through its use of the word *ṣibġha*. It is also this late antique rhetorical context that, once brought to bear on this Quranic passage, promises to make the most cogent sense out of what has often been regarded as a troublesome word.

II

Early and medieval Muslim exegetes usually either glossed *ṣibġhat Allāh* as '*dīn/millat Allāh*' (God's religion) or '*fiṭrat Allāh*' (man's god-given, inborn faith), noticing the connection of *ṣibġha* with *milla* in Qur'ān 2:135.⁵ Other interpreters reified the term *ṣibġha* and thus chose to view it as referring to some concrete ritual of Islamic orthopraxis — such as circumcision (*al-khitān*), praying towards Mecca (*al-qibla*), or the ritual ablutions for a major impurity (*ghuṣl al-janāba*).⁶ Circumcision was, of course, identified quite early on as one

⁴ E.g., see Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'ānic Usage* (HdO 1, vol. 85, Leiden 2008), 510.

⁵ Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. Muthannā, *Majāz al-Qur'ān* (2 vols), Mehmet Fuad Sezgin (ed.) (Cairo 1954–62), I, 59; al-Akhfash, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* (2 vols), 'Abd al-Amīr al-Ward (ed.) (Cairo 1985), I, 340; al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa-i'rābuhū* (2 vols), 'Abd al-Jalīl 'Abduh Shalabī (ed.) (Beirut 1973), I, 196; Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (14 vols), Maḥmūd M. Shākir and Aḥmad M. Shākir (eds) (Cairo 1954), III, 117–20; Maḥmūd b. Abī 'l-Ḥasan al-Naysābūrī, *Ījāz al-bayān 'an ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* (2 vols), Ḥanīf b. Ḥasan al-Qāsimī (ed.) (Beirut 1995), I, 124.

⁶ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, III, 118; cf. al-Farrā' *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* (3 vols), Aḥmad Yūsuf Najātī and Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār (eds) (Cairo 1980), I, 82 f. and Abū Ishāq

of the essential religious practices which defined and distinguished the *milla* of Abraham.⁷ One also finds, albeit more rarely, that exegetes surmised from *ṣibġha* a reference to the felicitous white hue with which the believers will shine resplendent in paradise.⁸ The early Muslim mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 318/930) defined *ṣibġha* as the act wherein 'God immerses the heart of the believer in the water of mercy (*mā' al-rahma*)' — a definition which so impressed Paul Nwyia that he declared the mystic to have retrieved the original connection of the word with baptism.⁹ Yet, as Geneviève Gobillot has more recently shown, similar ideas to those of al-Tirmidhī appear earlier than his writings, particularly in early Imāmī-Shī'ite literature, which speaks of God having 'created the believers from His light' and then having 'plunged/baptized them (*aṣḡabġahum*) in His mercy'.¹⁰

Of all the exegetical options presented by the *tafsīr*-corpus and its kindred literature, it seems that, of the formative and medieval interpretations of Muslim exegetes, the most tantalizing for modern scholars researching the Qur'ān has been the penchant of some early

al-Tha'labī, *al-Kaṣḡf wa-'l-bayān*, Muḡammad b. 'Āṣḡūr and Nazīr al-Sā'idī (eds) (Beirut 2002), II, 5–6.

⁷ See M.J. Kister, "And He was Born Circumcised"... Some Notes on Circumcision in Ḥadīth', *Oriens* 34 (1994), 10–30.

⁸ See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṡī, *al-Durr al-manḡḡūr fī 'l-tafsīr bi'l-ma'tḡūr* (8 vols), 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Maḡdī (ed.) (Beirut 2001), I, 309.

⁹ P. Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique: nouvel essai sur le lexique technique des mystiques musulmans* (Beirut 1970), 58.

¹⁰ Muḡammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Farrūkh al-Ṣaffār, *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt fī fuḡā'il āl Muḡammad*, Mīrzā Muḡsin Kūcha-bāġhī (ed.) (Qom 1983), 11; cited in G. Gobillot, *La conception originelle (fiṡra): ses interprétations et fonctions chez les penseurs musulmans* (Cairo 2000), 81. In a subsequent study, Gobillot puts forward the hypothesis that the Quranic *ṣibġha* reflects 'un theme ayant d'abord connu son développement dans la mouvance hermétique', in support of which she cites Hermes' discourse with his son Tat on immersion of select humans' hearts into a cosmic 'mixing bowl (Gk. *kratēr*)' to thus receive the grace of mind (Gk. *noūs*). See her 'Les mystiques musulmans entre *Coran* et tradition prophétique. À propos de quelques themes chrétiens', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* no. 1 (2005), 73 f.; for the passage, see B.P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge 1992), 15 f. (IV.4). The connection of this discourse from the Hermetic literature to the Quranic *ṣibġha* strikes me as quite tendentious, although Gobillot's insight remains highly plausible, in my view, when postulated as an influence upon the Shī'ī and mystic interpretations of the Quranic *ṣibġhat Allāh* cited above and by herself. This latter scenario is made all the more plausible by the familiarity with Hermetic literature exhibited by Ibn Nawbakht (fl. late-eighth century) — whose family's influence on Shi'ism is well-known. See K. van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford 2009), 30ff.; cf. also the influence of this discourse upon Christian thought discussed in Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 134 f.

Qur'ān-exegetes for connecting the Quranic *ṣibġha* with Christian, and occasionally even Jewish, baptismal practices. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) serves as a paradigmatic example of this trend, commenting on the verse as follows:¹¹

The Most High means by His mention of the dye (*al-ṣibġha*) the dye of Islam. That is because the Christians, whenever they desire to Christianize their children, place them in water, claiming that it is a type of sanctification (*taqḍīs*), equivalent to ablution for major impurity (*ghuṣl al-janāba*) for the people of Islam, and that is the dye (*ṣibġha*) for them in Christianity.

Drawing from this trend in early Qur'ān-exegesis, modern scholars seeking to translate *ṣibġha* have often found justification for regarding the Quranic *ṣibġha* as akin to an Arabic calque of the Syriac *maṣbū'ūtā*, or 'baptism'.¹²

Not all scholars have found this interpretation satisfactory, for it begs the question as to just what the Qur'ān refers when it mentions God's (as opposed to the Christians' and Jews') *ṣibġha*. Islam has no obvious parallel or ersatz ritual institution for baptism, and this fact accounts at least in part for the heterogeneity of the answers proffered by those early Qur'ān-exegetes who attempted to identify *ṣibġhat Allāh* with a specific Muslim religious practice, such as circumcision or a specific genus of ablution. Indeed, the problem of the word *ṣibġha* was perceived to be so acute by James Bellamy that it inspired him to make the most radical, modern suggestion of all for interpreting Qur'ān 2:138. Bellamy speculated that the *ṣibġha* of our extant Quranic codices resulted from a problem arising in the redaction of the Quranic ductus itself, either from a corruption of *ṣanī'a* (favour) or, alternatively (but less favoured by Bellamy), *kifāya* (sufficiency).¹³ While each suggestion of Bellamy is novel and certainly a tempting *lectio facilior* in its own right, in the absence of any codicological confirmation or evidence, it seems most prudent to let the traditional *lectio difficilior* of *ṣibġha* stand.

The solution, or reading, I would like to propose to the interpretation of *ṣibġha* is a slight modification of that proposed over a

¹¹ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, III, 118.

¹² A. Jefferies, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran* (Lahore 1977), 192; R. Köhlberg, 'Zur Bedeutung von *ṣibġa* in Koran 2,138', *Orientalia* 42 (1973), 518–19; idem, 'Zur Bedeutung von Sure 2,138', *Orientalia* 44 (1975), 106–7; R. Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart 1977), 33–4.

¹³ J.A. Bellamy, 'Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran', *JAOS* 113 (1993), 570–1.

half-century ago by Edmund Beck in a seminal article on the Quranic significance of *milla* *Ibrāhīm*.¹⁴ Following closely a strand in early Muslim exegesis of the Qur'ān,¹⁵ Beck proposed that the *ṣibgha* of Qur'ān 2:138, meaning 'baptism' in his surmise, functions metaphorically in the pericope and that *ṣibgha* acts essentially as a metaphor for the *milla* of Ibrāhīm. In other words, God's *ṣibgha* in the Quranic account is Abraham's archetypal faith, which the Qur'ān posits as superior to 'baptism' — Beck's favoured meaning for *ṣibgha* — in its Christian instantiation.¹⁶ Where my present proposal differs from Beck's, however, is that I argue for keeping the apparent meaning of the word *ṣibgha* — i.e., to translate this term as 'dye' — and to understand 'dye' as a double metaphor for both the *milla* of Abraham and Christian baptism.

My justifications for doing so will come primarily in the next section of this essay, soon to follow. Before I proceed, however, it would be prudent to address directly the concerns of a number of major modern interpreters — most notably Troupeau, Gilliot and de Prémare — who have been inclined to regard the interpretation of *ṣibgha* as 'dye' as either inaccurate or insufficient. Here, I cite only one of the most articulate and compelling examples of such scholarly objections: that of Claude Gilliot. In his review of Jacques Berque's French translation of the Qur'ān, Gilliot strongly objects to Berque's rendering of *ṣibghat Allāh* as 'une teinture de Dieu' and also Berque's description of the passage as an 'allusion ironique au baptême chrétien,' leading Berque to recommend to 'laisser à la métaphore sa force'. For Gilliot, allowing the metaphor of Qur'ān 2:138 to convey its force is impossible, for the passage, though certainly ironic in its reference to baptism, is not in the least metaphorical. *Ṣibgha*, in Gilliot's view, is simply the Arabic neologism for baptism arising from Christianity's penetration and spread among Arabic-speaking tribesmen prior to the advent of Islam. *Ṣibgha*, in his view, is merely the pre-Islamic, Arabian Christians' word for baptism which the Qur'ān itself co-opts for polemical purposes.¹⁷

¹⁴ E. Beck, 'Die Gestalt des Abraham am Wendepunkt der Entwicklung Muhammads: Analyse von Sure 2, 118 (124)–135 (141)', *Le Muséon* 65 (1952), 73–94.

¹⁵ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, III, 117.

¹⁶ Beck, 92, 'Zur Klärung der Bedeutung des *ṣibghatun* bietet der Koran keine weiteren Stellen. Doch verrät die wenn auch ferne Verbindung mit *milla*, dass *ṣibgha* Taufe (grundlegender religiöser Brauch, Initiation) hier in allgemeinerer Bedeutung für Religion überhaupt steht'.

¹⁷ C. Gilliot, 'Le Coran: trois traductions récentes', *Studia Islamica* 75 (1992), 167–8.

Though not entirely novel,¹⁸ the evidence Gilliot presents for his case is compelling, and even more so given the additional data adduced in a more recent article by the late Alfred-Louis de Prémare.¹⁹ However, it also falls short of being entirely convincing in my view for a number of reasons. Gilliot argues that the Arabic root *Ṣ-B-GH* had come to be associated with the meaning of 'baptism' by the advent of Islam, an assertion he claims is borne out by early traditions regarding the Christian tribesmen of the Banū Taghlib. According to these traditions, the Muslim conquerors permitted the Banū Taghlib to remain Christian 'on the condition that they do not baptize their children into Christianity (*'alā an lā yaṣbughū awlādahum fī l-naṣrāniyya*)'.²⁰ This point finds further confirmation in the broader and more variegated lexical usage of words derived from *Ṣ-B-GH* in the *ḥadīth*, which attest to the root carrying the meaning 'to dip' and 'to immerse'²¹ — a sense which can also be seen surfacing in an early variant on the Banū Taghlib tradition wherein '*yaṣbughu*' is replaced by '*yaghmisū*' (to immerse).²² Still, Gilliot's assertions about pre-Islamic, Christian Arabic are overly cavalier. The verbal usage of *Ṣ-B-GH* in the aforementioned traditions tells us little about the noun such Arabic-speaking Christians used. His thesis also remains problematic inasmuch as the testimonies are imbedded within Muslim texts compiled at a relatively far remove from the period they purport to describe — this is not to contest the historicity of these accounts but merely to question the validity of historical accounts for reconstructing the linguistic features of pre-Islamic, Christian Arabic and its vocabulary.

¹⁸ E.g., see G. Troupeau, *Études sur la grammaire et la lexicographie arabes: recueil d'articles sélectionnés* (Damascus 2002), 218 f, repr. of 'Un exemple des difficultés de l'exégèse coranique: le sens du mot *ṣibġha* (S. II, v. 138)', *Communio* 16 (1991), 119–26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 168; A-L. de Prémare, 'Les textes musulmans dans leur environnement', *Arabica* 47 (2000), 403–5.

²⁰ E.g., see Ibn Sa'd (d. 845), *K. al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut 1957), I, 316 where the precedent is Muḥammad's; however, usually the ruling is attributed to 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. Cf., Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Salām (d. 837), *Kitāb al-amwāl*, Muḥammad 'Imāra (ed.) (Beirut 1989), 101 '*alā an lā yaṣbughū ṣabīy^{an} wa-lā yukribū 'alā dīnⁱⁿ ḡhayri dīnihim*' (Abū 'Ubayd glosses '*yaṣbughū awlādahum*' as '*yunaṣṣirū awlādahum*'); al-Balādhurī (d. 892), *Futūḥ al-buldān*, ed. M J. de Goeje (Leiden 1866), 182 '*alā an lā yaṣbughū ṣabīy^{an} wa-lā yukribū 'alā dīnihim*'.

²¹ A.J. Wensinck et al., *Concordances et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden 1933–69), III, 243b–44.

²² Yaḥyā b. Ādam (d. 818), *K. al-Kharāj*, ed. Ḥusayn Mu'nis (Beirut 1987), 102 '*alā an lā yaghmisū aḥad^{an} min awlādihim*'.

However, Gilliot also notes the usage among Arabophone Christians of the word *ṣibġha* to translate baptism as early as the ninth century CE²³ — so ostensibly we do have linguistic continuity. While this assertion is technically correct, it is also potentially misleading for at least two reasons. Firstly, the case to which Gilliot refers is exceedingly rare and certainly not sufficient to prove continuity with a hypothetical pre-Islamic usage some two to three centuries earlier and for which there exists no hard evidence. As noted above, the earliest works that survive from Arabophone Christians generally attest to this fact, as they usually chose to translate baptism as *al-ma'mūdiyya* or, less often, *al-maṣbū'iyya*, thus directly transcribing into Arabic their older, Syriac and Palestinian Aramaic equivalents, such as *ma'mūdītā* and *maṣbū'ītā*.²⁴ Secondly, even with the evidence of the usage of *ṣibġha* as baptism in one text by the ninth century CE, the importance of this text for interpreting Qur'ān 2:138 is severely attenuated by the likelihood that this Christian usage of *ṣibġha* for 'baptism' arises from the influences of Quranic diction and/or the Quranic exegetical tradition on Christian Arabic rather than from autochthonous Christian usage.²⁵ With regard to the morphology of *ṣibġha*, moreover, the Quranic *ṣibġha* is an odd equivalent for the Syriac *maṣbū'ītā*, and any alleged correspondence of *ṣibġha* with this Syriac word for baptism seems distorted and exaggerated, insofar as the Quranic word bears a much more straightforward resemblance to either the Syriac *ṣebā'a* ('dye') or *ṣeb'ūtā* ('dying').

²³ Gilliot, art. cit., 167.

²⁴ G. Graf, *Verzeichnis arabischer kirchlicher Termini* (CSCO 147, subs. 8, Louvain 1954), 70, 79 f. The root *ṣ-b-* conveys the sense of 'baptism' most frequently in the Christian Palestinian Aramaic translations of the New Testament; cf. C. Müller-Kessler and M. Sokoloff (eds), *A Corpus of Christian Palestinian Aramaic, vol. IIA: The Christian Palestinian Aramaic New Testament from the Early Period Gospels* (Groningen 1998), 248b, s.v. *m.ṣ.b.w. 'y*.

²⁵ As Mark Swanson has recently observed, 'the early Arabic Christian literature is not merely a literature of translation, in close relationship to Greek and Syriac exemplars; it is also a literature in some inter-textual relationship with the Qur'ān' ('Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'ān in Some Early Arabic Apologies', *Muslim World* 88 [1998], 298). Cf. Graf, op. cit., 70 and n. 2 thereto. The text Graf erroneously cites here as belonging to Theodore Abū Qurra (and Gilliot following him; see art. cit., 167) is the famous ninth-century '*Summa theologiae arabica*' (in Arabic: *al-Kitāb al-jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*); on this text, see now R.G. Hoyland, 'St. Andrews Ms. 14 and the Earliest Arabic *Summa Theologiae*: Its Date, Authorship and Apologetic Context', in W.J. van Bekkum, J.W. Drijvers and A.C. Klugkist (eds), *Syriac Polemics: Studies in Honour of Gerrit Jan Reinink* (OLA 170, Louvain 2007), 159–72. See also the discussion of *ṣibġha* in B. Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā* (Leiden 2009), 461 n. 40.

III

To challenge the recent trend in Qur'ān scholarship to read the Quranic *ṣibġha* as a straightforward translation of the Syriac *mašbū'ūtā*, particularly in francophone Qur'ān scholarship (aside from Berque whose view I clearly favour to that of Gilliot), I would like to introduce a seemingly hitherto unnoticed similarity between Qur'ān 2:138 and a passage from an early Christian document discovered among the Coptic Nag Hammadi codices known as the *Gospel of Phillip*. The relevant passage from this parasciptural document reads as follows (Gos. Phil. 61.12–20):²⁶

God is a dyer. Like the good dyes—they are called the 'true'(dyes) — die with those (things) that have been dyed in them, thus it is with those whom God has dyed. Since His dyes are immortal, they become immortal by means of His remedies. But God dips/baptizes those whom He dips/baptizes in water.

The simile of the passage is a striking one: as good and true dyes become one with (or, 'die with') the items dyed, so God's immortal dyes suffuse those whom He dyes with immortality during baptism. For anyone familiar with the Quranic '*ṣibġat Allāh*', the designation of God as a dyer in Gos. Phil., is immediately striking as both are framed soteriologically. Furthermore, there is the striking connection made via the simile in Gos. Phil., between divine dyeing and Christian baptism; indeed, later in the text, Christ explicitly declares 'the son of man has come as a dyer' (Gos. Phil. 62.29–30). The Quranic text, if my hypothesis is correct in reading *ṣibġha* as 'dye', uncannily seems to posit a similar, metaphorical linkage between God's dye and that of baptism. But is this only a surface similarity?

The gospel itself is exceedingly rich with baptismal metaphors that, in all likelihood, circulated among Valentinian gnostic communities.²⁷ This passage from Gos. Phil. 61 has been viewed in a number of

²⁶ I have here adopted the translation of H. Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Phillip and the Exegesis on the Soul* (NHMS 73, Leiden 2010), 255. Cf. the discussion of the passage in H.-M. Schenke, *Das Philippus-Evangelium (Nag-Hammadi-Codex 11,3): Neu Herausgeben, Übersetzt, und Erklärt* (TU 143, Berlin 1997), 302 f.; H. Schmid, *Die Eucharistie ist Jesus: Anfänge einer Theorie des Sakraments im koptischen Phillipusevangelium (NHCI13)* (VCS 88, Leiden 2007), 426–33; R. Charron and L. Painchaud, "God is a Dyer". The Background and Significance of a Puzzling Motif in the Coptic *Gospel According to Phillip* (CG 11, 3)', *Le Muséon* 114 (2001), 41–50.

²⁷ See É. Thomassen, 'Baptism among the Valentinians', in D. Hellhom, Tor Vegge, Ø. Norderval and C. Hellholm (eds), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late*

lights by biblical scholars. A study by Charron and Painchaud, for example, regards the baptismal simile of Gos. Phil. 61 as heavily influenced by the Graeco-Egyptian alchemical literature, 'where', as they state, 'the art of dyeing is presented as divine and as the art of transformation par excellence'.²⁸ While an intriguing and plausible suggestion, I am inclined to side with Hugo Lundhaug, who recently commented that the parallels with the alchemical literature posited by these two scholars 'are not necessary to understand Gos. Phil.'s argument, which seems to have a clear internal logic of its own'.²⁹ Indeed, this 'clear internal logic' inherent to metaphor likely comes from the fact that Gos. Phil. mobilizes a relatively common trope associated with baptism, even if its usage in this particular Nag Hammadi gospel remains idiosyncratic.

One can surmise as much from the appearance of the baptism-as-dyeing/colouring metaphors in the homilies composed in Syriac by Narsai of Edessa (d. c. 502 CE). This is particularly apparent in a homily titled 'On the Mysteries of the Church and on Baptism (*'al zārē d-'ētā w-'al ma'mōdītā*)'.³⁰ In the opening sections of his homily, Narsai declares,

The pus (*ṣūḥtā*)³¹ of passions had defaced the beauty of our excellence; and He (viz., God) turned and painted us with the colour of the Spirit (*ṣāran b-sammā d-rūḥā*), which may not be effaced. Cunningly, He mixed the colours for the renewal of our race (*madkēh l-sammā d-ḥūdāt gēsan*), with oil and water and the invincible power of the Spirit.

Key to note in this passage is the metaphorical usage of 'colours' — one could feasibly translate the word *sammā* here as dye or paint, too — to indicate the transformative instrument in God's soteriological relationship with humankind consecrated in the baptismal rite. This is not an isolated metaphor either, for Narsai often refers to God

Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity (3 vols, BZBW 176, Berlin 2011), III, 895–915.

²⁸ Charron and Painchaud, 47.

²⁹ Lundhaug, 235 n. 288.

³⁰ Narsai, *Homiliae et carmina*, A. Mignana (ed.) (Mosul 1905), I, 341 (*mēmra* xxi); the translation above is adopted with slight modification from R.H. Connolly (trans.), *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Cambridge 1909), 46. On his baptismal homilies in general, see M. Kappes, 'The Voice of Many Waters: The Baptismal Homilies of Narsai', *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997), 534–47.

³¹ Connolly feasibly translates *ṣūḥtā* as 'rust', but here, I have followed Brock. See S. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Piscataway 2008), 129.

as 'painter' (Syr. *ṣayārā*) in a baptismal context.³² Lastly, special attention should be given to the nature of the word used for colour in this Syriac homily — i.e. *sammā*. Narsai here plays with the double meaning of *sammā*, which can mean both medicine and colour-paint; the double entendre here is purposeful, emphasizing the transformative and healing aspects of baptism in the removal of the stain of human sin. Curiously, as Lundhaug notes, this same double entendre occurs in the above passage from Gos. Phil., playing instead on the double-meaning of the Coptic word *pahre*, which, like the Syriac *sammā*, can mean medicine/remedy as well as colour dye.³³

Precisely how early the metaphorical association of baptism and dyeing appeared in Christian literature and how far it spread is difficult to gauge without a more focused study on this topic in particular. However, that the metaphor appeared somewhat early and was geographically widespread seems to be confirmed by that fact that, writing against the Donatists from Numidia in c. 336 CE, the bishop Optatus marshals the baptism-as-dye trope to argue for the validity of baptism even at the hands of an unworthy baptizer.³⁴ At quite a geographical remove from his North African contemporary, one also finds Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) describing in his homilies the baptismal rite in terms of the colouring with which God imbues believers, writing:³⁵

A royal portrait is painted with visible colours (*b-samānē methazyānē metṣīr ṣalmā d-malkūtā*)

and with oil that all can see is the hidden portrait of our hidden King (*malkan kesyā*)

portrayed on those who have been signed;

on them baptism, that is in travail with them in its womb,

depicts the new portrait (*ṣayrā b-hōn ṣalmā ḥadtā*)

to replace the image of the former Adam which was corrupted.

³² E.g. Narsai, *Homiliae*, I, 356 *et passim*; Connolly, trans., *Hymns*, 33.

³³ W.E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford 1962), 282b; cited in Lundhaug, 255.

³⁴ M. Edwards (trans. and ed.), *Optatus: Against the Donatists* (Liverpool 1997), 108; cited in E. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids 2009), 676.

³⁵ E. Beck (ed.), *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Virginitate* (CSCO 223, set. syri 94, Louvain 1962), 25–6 (hymn vii, stanza 5); the translation above is taken from Brock, *Baptismal Tradition*, 130.

Indeed, this type of metaphorical depiction of baptism seems to have been one of which Ephrem was rather fond.³⁶ These data by no means represent a comprehensive survey, and it is likely in my view that further searching for the metaphorical associations of dyeing and colouring with the baptismal rite in late antique Christian literature, and perhaps Syriac homiletic literature in particular, could produce more material. However, I do think these testimonies are sufficient to call for a re-reading of the occurrence of the term *ṣibġha* in Qur'ān 2:138.

IV

In light of the above data, I believe there are ample grounds for translating the *ṣibġha* of Qur'ān 2:138 as 'dye' rather than viewing it as a straightforward Arabic calque of the Syriac *maṣbū'itā*, or baptism. However, in accord with Berque's observations in his French translation of the Qur'ān, the word *ṣibġha* alludes directly to baptism; this is an allusion whose cogency can best be viewed with the metaphorical descriptions of the baptismal rite as 'dying', 'painting', or 'colouring' the believer one finds in late antique Christian homiletic literature. *Ṣibġha*, therefore, acts as a sophisticated metaphor in the context of Qur'ān 2:138 that simultaneously represents the *milla* of Abraham previously mentioned in Qur'ān 2:135 and conveys and conjures up reminiscences of the Christian discourses on baptism as a salvific rite. It is a sophisticated metaphor — too sophisticated, some might object — but the Qur'ān is quite a sophisticated text.³⁷

The association of the baptismal rite with dyes and colours is quite an established trope by the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries CE;

³⁶ Cf. E. Beck, *Dōrea und Charis: Die Taufe: Zwei Beiträge zur Theologie Ephrāms des Syrers* (CSCO 457, subs. 72, Louvain 1984), 89 f and Edward G. Mathews (trans.), *The Armenian Commentary on Genesis Attributed to Ephrem the Syrian* (CSCO 573, scr. arm. 24, Louvain 1998), 6 and n. 34 thereto. These ideas are perhaps all intimately connected with the idea that baptism is integral in the divine process of fully restoring humankind into God's image; see I.L.E. Ramelli, 'Baptism in Gregory of Nyssa's Theology and Its Orientation to Eschatology', in Hellholm, Vegge and Norderval (eds), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism*, II, 1206–8.

³⁷ Indeed, Qur'ān 2:138 is not the only text in which scholars have found mention of baptism; Erwin Gräf argued for a number of discrete references in Qur'ān 2:249 and 74:4 in his, 'Zu den christlichen Einflüssen im Koran III', *Al-Bahit: Festschrift Joseph Henninger* (Bonn 1976), 130f. His arguments there are not entirely convincing, but perhaps they should be revisited with a wider survey of the evidence.

the Greek verbs βαπτω and βαπτίζω furnished dipping and dyeing as natural metaphors for the baptismal rite given the literal and metaphorical spectrum of their usage.³⁸ Finding echoes of this trope in Qur'ān 2:138 is, therefore, not too surprising given the proper historicization of the text, but it does invite further lines of inquiry as to how the Qur'ān may have not so much 'borrowed from' — lest we invite the ghosts of a now notorious term! — as much as engaged with the Christian homiletic discourse on baptism of the late antique Near East. The Qur'ān, as a general rule, has been seen as less aware of Christian rites than those of its better documented Jewish and pagan audience. For example, perhaps as early as John of Damascus, the episode of Qur'ān 5:112–15 in which Jesus miraculously causes a feast to descend from heaven on a table for his disciples was maligned as Muḥammad's botched attempt to discuss the Eucharist and to relate the story of the Last Supper;³⁹ however, as Emmanouela Grypeou has recently demonstrated, this is highly unlikely given that a very similar episode to that in the Qur'ān appears in a Syriac text entitled *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*.⁴⁰ With the baptismal rite, though, we are clearly on a much firmer footing. Qur'ān 2:138 presents us with a sophisticated argument in which Abraham's pure gentile faith — viz., his *milla* as a *ḥanīf* — is sufficiently efficacious for his salvation. This *milla*, God's *ṣibġha*, thus renders the soteriological necessity of baptism superfluous. It is an argument which has profound resonances with Paul's use of Abraham's faith as a counter-argument against the soteriological necessity of circumcision (Rom. 4:9–12; cf. Phil. 3:2–3) — a resonance made perhaps all the more ironic by those select few Muslim exegetes who reified God's *ṣibġha* as referring to circumcision.

Address for correspondence: swanthon@uoregon.edu, 309, McKenzie Hall, Department of History, 1288 University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403, USA.

³⁸ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 38ff.

³⁹ D.J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The 'Heresy of the Ishmaelites'* (Leiden 1972), 141.

⁴⁰ E. Grypeou, 'The Table from Heaven: A Note on Qur'ān, Sūrah 5, 111ff.', *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 2 (2005), 311–16. See also the recent study of M. Cuypers, *Le Festin: Une lecture de la sourate al-Mā'ida* (Paris 2007), 340–5 where other, and in my view less convincing, possibilities are explored. After writing this essay, the fascinating study of G.S. Reynolds, 'On the Qur'ān's *Mā'ida* Passage and the Wanderings of the Israelites', in B. Lourié, C.A. Segovia, and A. Bausi (eds), *The Coming of the Comforter* (Piscataway 2011), 91–108 came to my attention. Reynolds offers a compelling case that the Jesus's 'table (*mā'ida*)' should be read as a Quranic re-reading of Psalm 78.