

The Table from Heaven: A Note on Qur'ān, Sūrah 5,111 ff.

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Resumen: Este artículo plantea la hipótesis de la posible influencia de un pasaje, procedente de un texto siriano poco conocido titulado “El Evangelio de los Doce Apóstoles”, sobre un episodio relativo a Jesús y los Apóstoles que se encuentra en la sūrah 5 del Corán.

Abstract: This article examines the hypothesis of a possible influence of a passage from a little known Syriac text, entitled *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, on an episode concerning Jesus and the Apostles in the Fifth Sūrah of the Qur'ān.

Palabras Clave: Corán. Siriano. Cristianismo. Islam.

Keywords: Qur'ān. Syriac. Christianity. Islam.



The fifth Sūrah of the Qur'ān, known as *al-Mā'idah*, “The Table”, belongs to the Medina period of the compilation of the Qur'ān, both according to the Islamic tradition, as well as according to Western scholarship.¹ The Sūrah introduces a discussion of Islamic dietary laws and expresses certain basic statements about the figure of Jesus as well, but still it derives its name from a brief episode to be found almost at the end, concerning the disciples of Jesus.

The text (5,111-115) reads as follows:

“And when I inspired the Apostles: ‘Believe in Me and My Messenger’; they said, ‘We believe; witness Thou our submission’. And when the Apostles said, ‘O Jesus,

¹ See Theodor NÖLDEKE – Friedrich SCHWALLY, *Geschichte des Qorāns. I. Teil: Über den Ursprung des Qorāns* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1961, reprint of the 2nd ed. Leipzig 1909-1938), pp. 227ff.

son of Mary, is Thy Lord able to send down on us a Table out of heaven?'. He said, 'Fear you God, if you are believers.' They said, 'We desire that we should eat of it and our hearts be at rest; and that we may know that thou hast spoken true to us, and that we may be among its witnesses.' Said Jesus son of Mary, 'O God, our Lord, send upon us a Table out of Heaven, that shall be for us a festival, the first and last of us, and a sign from Thee. And provide for us; Thou art the best of providers.' God said, 'Verily, I do send it down to you; whoso of you hereafter disbelievers, verily I shall chastise him with a chastisement wherewith I chastise no other being.'²

The scenery describes a moment of confirmation of the faith of the disciples to Jesus' God, who is identified in this context with the God of the Messenger. There have been several hypotheses canvassed about the origin of this story in a possible biblical context, but despite the apparent Christian setting of this episode no satisfactory explanation has been provided so far, compared with other similar stories that we find in the Qur'ān and which have clearly identifiable parallels in the Christian tradition.³

The most often quoted parallel text from the Christian tradition, refers to the Last Supper or the Lord's supper, as representing a meal shared by Jesus and his disciples (Mth. 26, 20-29; Mk. 14, 17-25; Lk. 22, 14-23), the wording: "a festival for us" would support such a possibility.⁴ Some details in the Qur'ānic text such as the confirmation of faith or the table descending from heaven fail to reinforce this theory. Alternatively the vision of the Apostle Peter in Joppa (Acts 10,

² Translation by Arthur J. ARBERRY, *The Koran Interpreted*, vol. 1 (London et al.: Allen & Unwin et al., 1955), pp. 146-147.

³ See for example Richard BELL, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian environment* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1926); Wilhelm RUDOLPH, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans vom Judentum und Christentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1922); Windrow SWEETMAN, *Islam and Christian Theology* (2 vols, London: Lutterworth Press, 1945-1947); Heinrich SPEYER, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1961, reprint Gräfenheinen 1931).

⁴ See Adel Theodor KHOURY, *Der Koran. Arabisch-Deutsch. Übersetzung und wissenschaftlicher Kommentar*, vol. 6 (Gütersloh, 1995), p. 192; Rudi PARET, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart et al., 1997, 5th ed.), p. 133; Wilhelm RUDOLPH, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans vom Judentum und Christentum*, pp. 81f. notices: „Kann man sich das geringe Wissen vom Leben und Wirken Jesu im übrigen weithin aus der Ignoranz der arabischen Christen erklären, so ist es völlig ausgeschlossen, daß über das Abendmahl bei ihnen eine derart entstellte Tradition umlief; hier muß ein Mißverständnis Muhammeds vorliegen.“

9-16) has been adduced too.⁵ Again here we have the vision of a laid table according to the question of (Israelite) dietary laws, combined with the obedience of the Apostle to God's will, but still the absence of the other disciples as well as some other elements in the story, like the initial refusal of Peter to eat the food, indicate that neither this story can be considered as directly relevant to the scene in the *al-Mā'ida*. Other interpretations suggest as a possible inspiration source for our Qur'ānic story the Old Testament episode about the manna from heaven (Ex. 16, 4; Dt. 8, 3; Ps. 78, 23-25; Wis. 16, 20) or the miraculous feeding of the Five Thousand with five loaves and two fish (Mth. 14, 13-21; Mk. 6, 31-44; Lk. 9, 10-17; Jn. 6, 1-13)⁶. Jesus' Dominical prayer concerning the everyday bread (Mth. 6, 11; Lk. 11, 3) has been also alternatively proposed and is also accepted by some Muslim commentators.⁷ Finally another possible and perhaps the closest reference can be found in the request of the disciples for the bread from heaven in Jn. 6, 31-35⁸.

To my mind these various suggestions fail to explain convincingly the association of the Qur'ānic story with the Christian tradition. I suggest that the closest parallel story is to be found in a Syriac text known as the "Gospel of the Twelve Apostles", published already in 1900 by H. Rendel Harris,⁹ but widely ignored by scholarship.

The "Gospel of the Twelve Apostles" consists of a summary of the Gospel story according to the Four Evangelists and to the Acts, along

⁵ See Adel Theodor KHOURY, *Der Koran*, p. 192; Rudi PARET, *Der Koran*, p. 11, concludes: "Jedenfalls ist der Sachverhalt mangelhaft erfaßt und weithin mißverstanden."

⁶ See Adel Theodor KHOURY, *Der Koran*, p. 192.

⁷ Adel Theodor KHOURY, *Der Koran*, p. 192. See also Maulana Muhammad ALI, *The Holy Qur'an. Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore, Inc. USA: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1996, reprint of 1917), pp. 271f., n. 750.

⁸ Adel Theodor KHOURY, *Der Koran*, p. 192.

⁹ J. Rendel HARRIS, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles Together with the Apocalypses of Each One of Them* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1900). The Syriac MS is part of the Rendel Harris Collection (MS 85, folios 47r to 58r) and is preserved in the Harvard College Library, see Han J. W. DRIVERS, "The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period", in Averil CAMERON & L.J. CONRAD (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), pp. 190-191. The manuscript which is only fragmentary contains also a few writings of Jacob of Edessa, Apostolic Canons, rich synodical material as well as a passage for the Doctrina Addai. Considering these other texts, the inclusion of the Gospel in this collection might suggest that the writer(s) or the original collector(s) considered it as a text of a certain – almost canonical – authority.

with three apocalyptic sermons by three of the Apostles. The text generally deals with issues of right faith and with the end of the world while the last part treats in particular the Islamic rule and its consequences for its Christian subjects. According to H.J.W. Drijvers the Gospel, which is “anti-Chalcedonian” and “anti-Jewish” presents a “literary unit”.¹⁰

The Syriac manuscript is of Jacobite origin and is originated with great probability in Edessa.¹¹ It is to be dated with some likelihood between the end of the seventh and the beginnings of the eighth century.¹² The actual date of the manuscript is here of minor interest, since it is almost certain that the author used several older sources for the compilation of the present document. In any case a Gospel of the Twelve Apostles, not identical with our text, was already known in the second century, according to the evidence of Origen.¹³

¹⁰ Hans J. W. DRIJVERS, “The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles...”, in Averil CAMERON & L.J. CONRAD (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I*, p. 209.

¹¹ See J. Rendel HARRIS, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, p. 7 and Hans J. W. DRIJVERS, “The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles...”, in Averil CAMERON & L.J. CONRAD (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I*, p. 211.

¹² J. Rendel HARRIS, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, p. 7, dates the manuscript to the eighth century “at the latest”. Hans J. W. DRIJVERS, (“The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles...”, in Averil CAMERON & L.J. CONRAD (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I*, p. 211), believes that that the text was written between 692 and 705 because of certain references to historical events concerning the Islamic rule.

¹³ See ORIGEN, In Luc.Hom. I and Jerome, Introd. to the Mt. Comm. and Adv. Pelag. III.2. Jerome thinks the text mentioned by Origen to be identical with the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which is also mentioned by Epiphanius (Pan. 30.13.2f.), see Edgar HENNECKE – Wilhelm SCHNEEMELCHER, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, vol. I (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990, 6th ed.), p. 138. Marūtā of Maipherkat mentions in his Catalogue of Heretics (Ketzerkatalog) that the Quqites around Edessa invent in the name of the Twelve Apostles twelve Evangelists, a possible reference to a Gospel of the Twelve Apostles. Turribius of Astorga knows around 440 of a text called “Memoria Apostolorum” as common to the Manichees and the Priscillianists (PL LIV 694D c.5). A “true Gospel according to the Twelve Apostles” is mentioned also by Theodor ABŪ QURRAH in his work “Tractate on the Creator and on the True Religion” (§ 24) in use of the Manichees. All the above texts must have been either of Gnostic (or at least “gnosticizing”) or of Jewish-Christian character, see HENNECKE – SCHNEEMELCHER, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, vol. I, pp. 300-301. Henri Charles PUECH – Beate BLATZ conclude thus: “Das Evangelium das J. Rendel Harris nach einer syrischen Handschrift des achten (?) Jahrhunderts veröffentlicht hat (...) und das aus dem Hebräischen ins Griechische und aus dem Griechischen ins Syrische übersetzt sein soll (...) hat nichts mit dem Evangelium des Zwölf zu tun und erweist sich durch die ihnen enthaltenen Lehren als eine Fälschung sehr später Zeit” (in HENNECKE – SCHNEEMELCHER, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, vol 1, p.

The passage of interest for our question describes a scene which takes place shortly after the Pentecost event. It is preceded by a prayer of the Apostles to the Lord, in which they reconfirm their faith and ask the Lord “to reveal in mercies and grace” and to give to them their requests. The Lord appears as a light and they hear a voice saying: “Blessed and blessing is he that came and that comes in the name of the Lord” and sends them to a place, where “it shall be spoken to you in Spirit.”

“... and Simeon Kepha and his eleven companions rose up, being bound and called by the Holy Spirit and they went whither Jesus had directed them, and they were fasting and praying seven days [? and did eat nothing], and suddenly there were set before them [? tables] full of good things, things excellent, whence they came our Lord only knows, things from which he himself was nourished; and on the morrow, like as on the first day, he flashed light over them, and made them fervent in spirit and in truth, and a voice came to them and said, ‘Speak out, speak out!’. And they began to glorify God and laud and praise and exalt our Lord, asking from him that the gift might be completed [which he had promised].”

Some of the parallels between this text and the Qur'ānic narrative are obvious: in both passages the disciples are gathered together, they confirm their faith and they receive in a miraculous fashion a richly laid table from heaven, a clear sign from God, whose origin is only known to the Lord (here is of course Jesus meant) and as a result they begin to praise God and asseverate their loyalty to Him. The Qur'ānic story stresses the faith to the Messenger of God (although here is Mohammed meant) too, but it implies at the same time the real presence of Jesus at the table, while in the Syriac text the presence of Jesus among the Apostles can be only assumed in a metaphysical way. The Qur'ānic version emphasizes thus the role of Jesus as another Messenger, Apostle, of God.

135). According to its content, concerning later ecclesiastical issues and historical events it must be accepted that our text presents a later composition, very probably not identical with any of the above mentioned texts of the same or very similar title. I am not sure though, how PUECH – BLATZ come to the hypothesis of an original Hebrew text, which was translated eventually to Greek and from Greek into Syriac. The late dating of the text and its very special Jacobite concerns suggest an original Syriac composition.

The presence of a Syriac tradition in the Qur'ān in a brief but important episode in the life of the Twelve Apostles as a group of faithful ones should not surprise us. The multiple relations between Syriac Christian lore and Islam have been pointed out repeatedly and investigated by various scholars.¹⁴

Additionally although the relation between passages from Christian pseudepigraphic texts (like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas or the Protoevangelium Jacobi) in the Qur'ān has been the object of investigation for long, a comprehensive analysis of the entire material is still missing.

Accordingly, if our arguments have cogency, we have here another very characteristic example of another piece of tradition deriving from Syriac Christianity, which found its way into the Qur'ānic text and into Islamic lore.

¹⁴ See Karl AHRENS, "Christliches im Qoran. Eine Nachlese", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 9 (1930), pp. 15-68 and 148-190; Tor ANDRAE, *Der Ursprung des Islam und das Christentum* (Uppsala – Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1926); Alphonse MINGANA, *Syriac Influence on the Style of the Qur'ān* (Manchester: The University Press, 1927); and most recently Christoph LUXENBERG, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Schiler, 2004, 2nd ed.).