Remembering Zakariya: A Conversation with Emran El-Badawi

The Qur’an has 114 chapters (Suras), which were revealed in Mecca and Medina in seventh century Arabia. A majority of these Suras are Meccan, and even within those both traditional as well as Western scholars have detected stages of development. Much of this is somewhat tentative, but I believed since I first read the Qur’an that Suras 17 through 20 form a kind of unit, for literary as well as thematic reasons. So for example, these Suras share the same rhyme syllable and demonstrate a sense of progression within didactic prophetic narrative. I would like to speak a bit about Suras 19 (Maryam) and 20 (Taha).

Sura Maryam begins with unconnected letters call them *muqatta’at*. However, my focus here is on what follows. As I see it, the first verse or second verse of a typical *sura* sets the mood for the remainder of that text. You see this in the Medinan suras as well as the Meccan. So in Sura Maryam the Qur’an essentially defines the name Zakariya, stating, “a commemoration of the mercy of your Lord is his servant Zakariya” (*dhikru rahmati rabbika ‘abdahu Zakariyya*). This is may be considered a definition of the term, or an linguistic explanation. Zachariah in Hebrew means “God has remembered.” *Zachar* in Hebrew means “to remember.” In Aramaic, the cognate verb is *dekar*. The Arabic cognate *dhikr* means “a remembering, a commemoration.” In these languages, the sound represented by the letters *z*, *d*, and *dh* are related to one another. In other words, *dhikr* in Arabic and *zachar* in Hebrew are cognates. The Qur’an connects Zakariya and “commemoration” without recourse to any other text.

The *sura* carries on from there, speaking about Jesus, John, Abraham, Moses and the other prophets. The Qur’an mentions in the beginning that there is a path that leads to mercy and that there is another path that leads to hellfire, and that through looking at the sequence of prophets, the well-defined prophetology of the Qur’an manifests itself. Prophetology in the Qur’an acts like a sieve for humankind. This idea is important to Muslims in general. To say this differently, prophets are used as examples to remind the Muslim community today, as well as fourteen hundred years ago, who the good guys and bad guys are.

In Sura 19, the Qur’an begins by mentioning the prophet Zakariya and does so in a context where the Christians are being addressed. If you look at the sequence of the *sura* as a whole, you see that it goes through all the prophets who were relevant for debate at the time. Towards the end it expounds upon the apocalypse as well as good and evil. It concludes by speaking about Jesus once again. So we begin by addressing the Christians, and then come full circle by addressing them at the end. This tells me and other Qur’an specialists that this *sura* is an inseparable unit. Michel Cuypers and Carl Ernst among others have studied the phenomenon of “ring structure” in some depth.

Whereas Sura 19 addresses the Christians, Sura 20, while it does not directly address the Jews, uses the example of Moses and his people to remind believers today as well as fourteen centuries ago, about what good and evil. One striking feature of Sura 20 is that there is a good deal of narrative detail. Although there is little extended narrative in the Qur’an, except for Sura 12 (Yusuf), we find some detail it in Sura 20 as well. The *sura* teaches us showing good from evil, lets the community know that people have rejected the divine message before, illustrates what has become of them, and it even demonstrates that good people can go astray but find their way again—like Aaron. So the *sura* goes
through various permutations how someone can be saved or unsaved, culminating in characteristic apocalypticism. Ultimately these two suras share the goal of warning and teaching a community of Christians and Jews using their stories to argue that this is a divine message and that this is a legitimate prophet in the tradition of their prophets. In this respect I agree with the traditional exeges as well as secular academics—like Theodor Nöldeke.

We can detect in suras seventeen through twenty, that the Prophet’s message has partly been articulated already; the Qur’an, in a sense, already exists in some tentative form. It is oral, it is there, but somehow now being rearticulated in a way that speaks to Jews and Christians more immediately, using stories and language with which they are familiar. I differentiate these suras from earlier ones focus more on fire and brimstone, where the message is ‘repent quickly.’ These earliest revelations have a strong sense of urgency tapered in didactic narratives of suras seventeen through twenty, or so-called ‘late Meccan suras.’ An alternative argument holds that the encounter with Jews and Christians occurred mainly in Medina rather than in Mecca. Arguments like this are complex and still hotly debated.

That being said there is an increased awareness of the Qur’an’s Jewish and Christian audience nowadays. I believe there is a loose consensus among Qur’anic studies scholars today that when the Qur’an speaks of mushrikun—i.e. those who associate the worship of God with another deity—and when it speaks of kuffar—i.e. unbelievers, folks who are disobedient—these terms are polemical or heresiographical, rather than informative about the historical identity of such interlocutors. By this I mean that the text is a kind of catalog of those who have committed heresy by its standards. This understanding, especially of of the situation in Mecca, differs from the traditional view that there was a dominant pagan background with a handful of Jews and Christians here and there. I think that the Qur’an operates in a monotheistic background through and through. That is I think we are dealing with Jews and Christians primarily. Other monotheistic groups have a place as well. The Qur’an talks about Sabians and Magi, for example. Principally, though, there is such a critical mass Qur’anic verses talking to Jews and Christians. The text addresses syncretistic pagan cults only a handful of times—Al-Lat, Uzza, Manat, and al-Shu’ra. If, however, we were to record all the instances in which the Qur’an addresses Jews and Christians, we would come up with dozens of references. Both in Mecca as well as Medina, we’re dealing with monotheists, primarily Jews and Christians.

That is as much as I can commit to now on this issue, but others have argued that when the Qur’an talks about nabi, “prophet,” as opposed to rasul, “apostle” or “messenger,” that this points to a difference in the confessional identity of the audience. Although I am tempted to agree with such a hypothesis, although I am cautious about the black and white designations that have been made in this regard—namely that nabi resonates with Jewish audience and rasul with a Christian one. There are surely areas of grey and I suspect it may be a bit more complicated. At any rate, I think that the Qur’an knows its audience, and adapts its fundamental message—strict monotheism, the approaching apocalypse—to speak to its audience in a meaningful way, telling stories that are meaningful to them. This is why I think that Jews or Christians are the primary audience of the Qur’an throughout.

This conclusion both does and it does not have implications for how Muslims understand their relationship with Jews and Christians today. It does not in the sense that the Qur’an’s conversation with
these groups took a long time ago, in a context foreign to our own, and so in a sense we have to let go of the past. We need to let go of the disputes that may manifested themselves in the Qur’an’s polemic, which I think should be taken in context of late antique polemic in general. It was an era within which holy men wrote long treatises against each the seemingly misguided faith of their interlocutors.
Consider, for example, the plethora of Christian Aramaic literature from this time, like the dialogue between Bardaisan and his student Phillipus, Apodath’s Demonstrations, or Isaac of Nineveh writing against the Jews, and countless treatises written against the Nestorians and, conversely, against the Jacobites. We find that the Qur’an functions in this context. It works to persuade its audience in this context because they are a sophisticated one, well versed in the intellectual debate and literature of their day. They know full well the kinds of locutions, ring structure, didactic stories, apocalyptic imagery and legal responso that manifest themselves within the text. The Qur’an’s non-linear literary form, which can look disjointed to an unassuming modern reader, was completely normal for its time. In this regard, the Qur’an was revealed in a world totally different from the one which we know today.

However, the Qur’an’s conversation with Jews and Christians does, of course, affect how Muslims, Christians and Jews can see themselves today. Not long ago I was speaking to Angelika Neuwirth, an eminent scholars in the field. Among other things she illustrated—and I paraphrase—that there are no quintessentially Islamic, Christian or Jewish theologies—just theology. If we appreciate that the Qur’an is part of a larger fabric of religious literature, then we realize the theological borders that we have placed between us are no longer divisive, and that they are not, furthermore, constructed by scripture itself or by the message within it. The borders are constructed mainly as a result of political and historical reasons. This realization can imbue a new albeit ironic meaning onto interfaith dialogue: ‘we disagree because we have so much in common.’ We speak in the same terms.

The Qur’an is aware that the word Zakariya is not Arabic. The text is “Qur’an-izing” the word by associating it with dhikr. The Qur’an knows that this is a technical term, worthy of further clarification. The text hints, perhaps, that its universal message will reach non-Arabic speakers who will find such terminology meaningful. Within the Arabian sphere in which the Qur’an operates, Jews, Christians and hanifs—‘proto-Muslims’—were competing with one another at times Arabic oral tradition, at other times through forms of Aramaic writing. When the Qur’an identifies itself as “clear Arabic language” (lisan ‘arabi mubin), it acknowledges its existence in a multi-lingual context, hence the significance of the “Arabic Qur’an” (qur’an ‘arabi). Why would such descriptions have been significant if all members of its audience spoke simply Arabic? It would have been a non-issue. Such descriptions are a statement that this scripture is in Arabic—a new revelation to be added Hebrew and Christian scripture.

Fred Donner has argued that the Qur’anic term “believers” (mu‘minun) may have included Jews and Christians. I think that the idea has more potential which needs to be developed. The Medianan Suras often say, “O you who believe,” and then follow with a discussion on Jewish and Christian practices in the same verse. So if you’re talking to those who believe, and then you’re addressing their Jewish law, or their Christian doctrine, then who are the believers? I think that Donner has a point.
It says in verse 34 of Sura 20, “This is ‘Isa, the son of Mary about whom they are dispute,” or “about which they speak in excess.” Who is “they”? There must have been more than one Christian group. So the text recognizes that there is more than one way of ‘being’ Christian.

This is why the Qur’an describes Abraham’s faith as, “the word of Abraham the puritan/proto-Muslim (hanif), nor was he not one of the associators, i.e. pagans.” It is a supplement and corrective to Paul’s teachings in Galatians, which argue the Gospel he preaches was present with Abraham, and that is was the pure religion of God prior to the scriptures being revealed. The Qur’an mentions in Sura 3, and then later on in Sura 98, that even before the scriptures were revealed there existed the pure faith of Abraham, i.e. Hanifism. The Qur’an promotes and articulates an updated form of this ancient faith. And so it says that those who argue about the “nature” or “weil” of Jesus—i.e. the various groups within Christianity—are wrong. Similarly, it polemicizes the Jews in other suras with respect to excesses in their laws, and it proposes Islam as a simpler alternative. Such a proposal would have engaged an audience that included Christians and Jews. Otherwise it would not have been affective; nor would anyone have converted. So the Qur’an proposes Islam as Hanifism recast, partly in order to attract Christians and Jews.

One thing that I argue in the first chapter of my book, The Qur’an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions, is that there exists some serious sectarian and missionary activity in the Qur’an we have today. Some Muslims feel uncomfortable when I say that, and fear that I am subjecting the text to a secularizing or even orientalist reading. In such cases I say, “no,” I’m reading the Qur’an and you’re reading Tafsir, that the commentary that came about later on. The Qur’an discusses the sectarianism of its day explicitly, a small sample of which can be gleaned from such words as shiqaq, “division,” ahzab, “parties,” and when it talks about groups or sides (nadiyyan). The Qur’an is adding its voice to a multiplicity of competing theological and legal schools and saying purporting its own to be the correct one.

To push this argument further, some Muslims are hesitant to look at such texts as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, or the Protovangelium of James. Muslim tradition is not based, as it were, on such texts but rather on exegetical, prophetic and biographical literature—Tafsir, Hadith, Sirah, and so on—which flourished about two centuries after the Qur’an. However, in the classical Muslim scholarship of the ninth to sixteenth century, widely accepting authors like ibn Qutaybah, Tabari, al-Suyuti and others were looking at and debating the textual with which the Qur’an is in dialogue. I say “in dialogue” because it is talking to the audience of those texts. In the fourteenth to fifteenth century, in his multi-volume Tafsir al-Biqa’i considers the canonical Gospels—that is, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—to be the Gospels referred to by the Qur’an. Most Muslims today would not agree with that. And yet this line of thought was afforded some space within Islam in the past. Plus al-Biqa’i was a scholar high regard. Unfortunately, the difference of opinion that was considered rahma, “mercy,” among classical Muslim scholars, has long disappeared today. In some cases this problem has been exacerbated by “post-colonial baggage.” And so today we have tremendously bright scholars before the vast sea of knowledge and wisdom that is the Qur’an, but we have discouraged them from plunging their buckets deep into the waters, as our predecessors used to. My instinct is always that much of this problem is informed by political rather than academic challenges.
I hope and feel that I am reviving my own tradition, which has a rich scholarly history. I am not alone; there are others. Within the Islamic world you have someone like Yusuf Zaydan, a historian and historical novelist who has written a number of best sellers in Egypt. He says that as Muslims we need to truly study the pre-Islamic world. Otherwise our knowledge of that world is reduced to cheap miracles.

For example, if the meaning of a word in the Qur’an is not entirely clear—like the mysterious unconnected letters $ALM, HM$, and so on—there is a temptation to identify as a miraculous utterance. At the same time, when the first Muslims scholar had recourse to such an idea, it followed a lengthy process of research and inquiry.

I am co-directing a new Qur’anic Studies initiative with Gabriel Reynolds. The International Qur’anic Studies Association will be a new learned society to be established in 2015. Gabriel comes from a Catholic background and I come from a Muslim one. Yet the Qur’an is speaking to us both. We want IQSA to be a place where people of different academic disciplines and confessional backgrounds can talk to one another, agree as well as have differences of opinion and revive a tradition which fosters digging deep and asking bold questions. I plan to involve Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars in this initiative.

I wonder if my ideas are atypical compared to those of your other interviewees, but I also hope this is a good thing. I hope that the transcripts of our discussions will demonstrate that Muslims—in America no less—are comfortable with diversity. My work is informed by a thirst to learn more. At the same time it is nourished by my aspiration to be the best Muslim I can be, to my family, to my students and society as a whole. Part of this aspiration—believe I or not—is to maintain my family’s tradition of naming our children using prophet names. My grandfather’s name was Musa, my uncle ‘Isa and mine ‘Imran. And it is for good reason that I named my firstborn son Zakariya.