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The Role of the Old Testament in Understanding the Nature of David's Error in the Qur'an

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Abstract

Surah *Ṣād* in the Holy Qur'an recounts a judgment made by David, followed by a report of his error and subsequent repentance. In this judgment, an individual possessing ninety-nine ewes and desiring his brother's single ewe is identified as an oppressor. Two principal interpretations have been advanced regarding the nature of David's error. The first holds that David judged in favor of the complainant solely on his statement, without hearing the accused's defense. Support for this interpretation is found in the surrounding verses, which, after describing David's error, instruct him to judge among people with justice. The second interpretation, informed by the narrative's antecedent in the Old Testament, views the reference to "The single ewe to be added to the many ewes" as an allusion to David himself. In the Old Testament, David, despite having many wives, took the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and the prophet Nathan, through a parable similar to that in the Qur'an, made David aware of his transgression. This study argues that, regardless of the antecedent, the first interpretation is decisive; however, the antecedent narrative shapes the audience's interpretive framework and should not be disregarded.

Keywords: David, David's Error, Understanding the Qur'an, Story Antecedent, Textual Context, Old Testament.

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Introduction

Verses 21-25 of Surah *Ṣād* describe two disputants appearing before David, with one accusing the other of seeking his only ewe despite already possessing ninety-nine. David characterizes this request as unjust, recognizes it as a divine test, and subsequently seeks and receives forgiveness.

Two primary interpretations exist regarding this Qur'anic account: one draws upon the Old Testament as a historical antecedent, while the other interprets the Qur'anic narrative independently. In the Old Testament, King David, despite having many wives, desired the wife of his soldier Uriah the Hittite. After relations with her, David orchestrated Uriah's death in battle and subsequently married her. The prophet Nathan then confronted David with a parable similar to that found in the Qur'an, making him aware of his transgression. David acknowledged his wrongdoing, and God spared him from death (See the remainder of the article).

Scholars such as Abraham Geiger and Gabriel Reynolds contend that the account of David in Surah *Ṣād* alludes to the Old Testament narrative concerning Uriah the Hittite's wife (Reynolds, 690-691; Geiger, 145). While the Qur'an does not affirm all accusations made against David in the Old Testament, notable similarities exist between the two accounts. These parallels support the view that Surah *Ṣād* addresses David's wives. Conversely, the alternative interpretation maintains that the Qur'anic account is independent of the Old Testament and that David's error lies in rendering judgment without adequately hearing both parties.

This raises several questions: 'Does the Qur'an accept the account of David's error in seeking another man's wife?' 'What is the relationship between the

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Old Testament antecedent and the narrative in Surah *Şād?* 'Does familiarity with the antecedent influence the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses?' In interpreting Surah *Şād*, is it necessary to consider the antecedent, or does the Qur'an offer an independent account that should be understood on its own terms?

1. Identifying the Nature of David's Error in the Qur'an

David, the renowned king of the Jews, appears in both the Old Testament and the Qur'an. According to the Old Testament, "David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned for forty years. He had previously reigned over Judah in Hebron for seven years and six months. He then reigned in Jerusalem over all Judah and Israel for thirty-three years." (The Bible, 2 Samuel, 5:4-5)

The Old Testament's detailed account of David shares several significant and noteworthy elements with the Qur'an's concise account of him. Among these, the story of David's error is presented in the Qur'an with considerable ambiguity and obscurity. The Qur'anic account of David's error and forgiveness is as follows:

"And has the story of the disputants reached you, when they climbed over the walls of the sanctuary? When they entered upon David, he was alarmed. They said, Do not be afraid. We are two disputants, and one has wronged the other. So judge between us with truth and do not transgress, and guide us to the right path. Indeed, this is my brother; he has ninety-nine ewes, while I have only one ewe. And he said, Give it to me, and he prevailed over me in speech. He said: He has certainly wronged you by asking for your ewe in addition to his ewes. Indeed, many partners wrong one another, except those who believe and do righteous deeds, and they are few. And David realized that We had

only tested him. So he sought forgiveness from his Lord, fell bowing, and repented. Thus We forgave him that, and indeed he has nearness to Us and a good return." (Ṣād:21-25)

In understanding the above account, several questions arise: 'What did David seek forgiveness for?' 'What did God forgive him for?' 'What is the referent of "*Fitnah*" in the expression "*Fatannāhu*" (We tested him)?' 'And what does the demonstrative "*Dhālika*" (that) refer to in the expression "*Faghafarnā lahu Dhālika*" (Thus We forgave him that)?'

Two approaches have been proposed in response to these questions. One draws on the Old Testament to identify the nature of David's error, whereas the other explains the Qur'anic account independently of the Old Testament.

1.1. Identifying David's Error Without Reference to the Story's Antecedent

If, in seeking to identify the nature of David's error, one confines oneself solely to the Qur'anic account in Surah Ṣād, no error on David's part is apparent except that, after hearing the complainant's statement, he judged him to be the wronged party. In explaining David's sin, exegetes have reported the view that David heard the statement of one of the two disputants and ruled in his favor before hearing the other party (Māwardī, n.d.: 5, 88).

One would expect a judge, when adjudicating disputes, to request evidence from the claimant and an oath from the respondent, or at the very least to hear both sides of the dispute. In this account, however, David appears content to hear only one party's statement and, without hearing the other's defense, rule that he was the oppressor.

The most important evidence for this interpretation is the verse: "O! David! We have made you a vicegerent on earth, so judge between people with truth

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and do not follow desire, lest it lead you astray from the way of Allah..." (Ṣād:26) Following the account of David's trial and his forgiveness, the verse states: "O! David! We have made you a vicegerent on earth; so judge between people with truth and do not follow desire, lest it lead you astray from the way of Allah." This context may indicate that David's preceding judgment was a deviation from truth and an inclination toward desire, which was nevertheless forgiven after David sought forgiveness. On this interpretation, *Dhālika* (that) in the expression "Thus We forgave him that" refers back to David's hasty statement expressed in the sentence "He has certainly wronged you by asking for your ewe in addition to his ewes." That is, "We forgave him that statement."

Nevertheless, identifying David's error as a hasty judgment can be criticized on three grounds. First, the fact that David's examination and hearing of the case are not mentioned in the Qur'anic account does not constitute evidence that he did not conduct such an examination. The Qur'anic method in its narratives is not to provide every detail; rather, it selects and reports certain events, passes over others, and leaves their understanding to the audience.

For example, in Surah *al-Ṣāffāt*, the Qur'anic account of Jonah omits at least two important scenes from the story: one is the storm that overtook the sea and placed the ship in danger of sinking, and the other is the passengers' acceptance, through casting lots, of the identification of the person responsible for the calamity. (See the remainder of the article.) On this basis, in Surah *Ṣād* as well, the accused person's admission may be regarded as omitted for the sake of brevity and implicitly assumed. According to exegetes

such as *Marāghī* (23, 109) and *Zuḥaylī* (23, 186), David uttered the statement "Laqad ḡalamaka..." after the accused had confessed.

Tha'labī (8, 189) likewise regards the accused person's confession as an omitted element of the narrative.

Moreover, David's statement "*Laqad ḡalamaka...*" may not have constituted a final judgment; rather, he may have characterized the act as an injustice on the assumption that the matter had been established, as *Ibn 'Aṭṭyyah* understands the ellipsis in the sentence as follows: "In (*ḡahara ṡidquka bi bayyinah aw i'tirāf*), *Laqad ḡalamaka...*" (If the truth of your claim is established by evidence or confession, then he has certainly wronged you...) Others have likewise supplied the omitted qualification as: "In (*kāna al-amr kamā taqūl*), *Laqad ḡalamaka...*" (If the matter is as you say, then he has certainly wronged you...) (Wāḥidī, n.d.: 3, 547; Māwardī, n.d.: 5, 88)

On the other hand, if David's error is identified as a hasty judgment, another difficulty arises: "What purpose is served by mentioning "The single ewe to be added to the ninety-nine ewes?" Is it merely intended to provide an account of the dispute? What benefit is gained from mentioning the details of the dispute in this context? If the Qur'an's sole purpose were to prohibit hasty judgment, recounting the details of the dispute would constitute a form of unnecessary elaboration that should not be expected in eloquent discourse.

Furthermore, identifying David's error with hasty judgment requires the sentence "*Laqad ḡalamaka bi su'āli na'jatika ilā ni'ājihī*" to be regarded as an inappropriate statement uttered by David, whereas the continuation, "*Wa inna kathīran min al-khulafā'i la yabghī ba'ḡhum 'alā ba'ḡin illā alladhīna āmanū wa 'amilū al-ṡāliḡātī wa qalīlun mā hum,*" would no longer be

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inappropriate. For if a statement is correct, an exception or qualification may be mentioned to preserve its accuracy; but if a statement is fundamentally incorrect and deserving of remorse, what purpose would be served by adding the exception "Except those who believe and perform righteous deeds?"

For a correct statement to remain correct, any necessary qualification must be stated so that the statement is not given an unwarranted general scope. But if a statement is fundamentally inappropriate, whether it is overgeneralized makes no difference, since it remains inappropriate either way.

Thus, if David's error is understood as a hasty judgment, the single statement attributed to him must be divided into two parts, with the first being inappropriate and the second legitimate. Such a division is implausible. The structure of the Qur'anic narrative instead calls for David's statement to be understood as coherent, since both parts are reported as a single utterance by David.

1.2. Identifying David's Error with Reference to the Story's Antecedent

The story of David's error in the Old Testament has an explicit antecedent, and the Qur'an's mention of "The single ewe to be added to the ninety-nine ewes" resembles the parable that the prophet Nathan presented to King David in confronting him with his wrongdoing.

According to the Old Testament, "The Lord sent Nathan the prophet to David." Nathan came to him and told him this story: "Two men lived in the same city, one rich and the other poor." The rich man had very large flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He tended it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared

his food, drank from his cup, and slept in his arms; it was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man was unwilling to take one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler. Instead, he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for his guest. David was furious when he heard this story and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man..." (The Bible, 2 Samuel, 12:1-7)

The Old Testament, like the Qur'an, also speaks of David's acknowledgment of his error and of God's forgiveness of him: "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.'" Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin; you are not going to die." (ibid., 12:13)

Thus, the Qur'anic account of the person who possesses ninety-nine ewes and desires his brother's single ewe corresponds to the Old Testament narrative in which a wealthy man, despite possessing numerous cattle and sheep, takes possession of his poor neighbor's only lamb. This correspondence is particularly significant because, in both narratives, this image is presented in the course of addressing David, and David condemns the conduct of the person who possesses many sheep. Moreover, both narratives describe David's acknowledgment of his error and God's forgiveness.

In this respect, the Qur'an's audience may understand David's error as the same error reported in the Old Testament, even though the Qur'an does not explicitly identify David's error; rather, it merely recounts the wrongdoing of the possessor of ninety-nine ewes who sought his brother's single ewe. Thus, the person who possesses many sheep but also desires his brother's only ewe

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resembles David, who, despite having many wives, desired the wife of one of his subordinates. David's seeking forgiveness would likewise have been prompted by this desire.

Accordingly, *Dhālika* (that) in the expression "*Faghafarnā lahu Dhālika*" (Thus We forgave him that) may refer back to the "Request" in the sentence "*Laqad ḡalamaka bi su'ālī na'jatika ilā ni'ājīhi*," (He has certainly wronged you by asking for your ewe in addition to his ewes) meaning: "We forgave him that request."

It may be objected that, in this statement, the person making the request is not David but one of the disputants before him. The response is that David made a request analogous to that of the person who sought the ewe, and that the underlying referent (*baṭn*) of "Request" (*su'āl*) in the sentence "*Laqad ḡalamaka bi su'ālī na'jatika ilā ni'ājīhi*" is David's own request, even though its manifest referent (*ḡāhir*) is the request made by one of the disputants before him.

On the other hand, in the story of Mary, the Qur'anic expression "You were not with them when they cast their pens to determine which of them would take charge of Mary" (Āli 'Imrān:44) addresses the Prophet of Islam, stating that he was not present when they cast their lots to determine who would assume responsibility for Mary. In this context, the verb "*Yakfulu*" denotes assuming guardianship or responsibility. Likewise, according to the expression "And He entrusted her to the care of Zechariah," (Āli 'Imrān:37) God appointed Zechariah as Mary's guardian. In light of these expressions, the meaning of "*Akfīlnīhā*" is: "Entrust your ewe to me and add it to my ewes so that I may take care of it for you."

Accordingly, the detailed account in the Old Testament reveals what the concise Qur'anic account leaves implicit. It may be argued that following the Qur'anic statement "David realized that We had tested him," the implicit expression is "And that it was a parable for his own affair, because he had sought his brother's wife." In other words, David realized that We had subjected him to a trial, and that this was a parable for his own situation because he had sought his brother's wife.

According to *Zamakhsharī* (4, 64), in these verses, the story of Uriah and David is likened to the story of a man who had one ewe. In contrast, his partner had ninety-nine ewes. Yet, the possessor of the ninety-nine ewes coveted even the single ewe of his partner and sought to remove it from his possession, engaging him in argument to achieve his aim. In any event, the minds of the Qur'an's audience were not devoid of prior information. Rather, they remembered the story of the Old Testament and, because of this prior knowledge, understood the mention of numerous ewes in the expression "He has ninety-nine ewes" as an allusion to David's numerous wives.

Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (3, 116) understands the ninety-nine "*Na'jahs*" as ninety-nine women and consequently holds that this was the number of David's wives. Similarly, *Baghawī* (4, 60-61) states that *Na'jah* is a euphemism for "Woman" and that this story is an allegorical representation of the story of David and Uriah: "David had ninety-nine wives, whereas Uriah had one." David added that woman to his own wives. *Ṭabarī* (23, 170) likewise regards *Na'jah* as a euphemism for "Woman" and reports that such a euphemistic usage was known among the Arabs. According to *Ibn 'Aṭīyyah* (1596) and *Tha'ālibī* (5, 63), *Na'jah* in Arabic denotes a female sheep and a

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female wild cow, and Arabs also use *Na jah* as an expression for a woman. Accordingly, in this verse, the woman is referred to as a *Na jah*. (ibid.) Similarly, *Abū al-Futūḥ* (16, 268) states that "*Ni'āj* is a euphemism for women, and this is his story with Uriah... Arabs use *Ni'āj*, cattle, gazelles, and similar terms euphemistically for women." *Shaykh Ṭūsī* (8, 417) identifies the interpretation of *Na jah* as a euphemism for "Woman" in this passage as the position held by most exegetes.

Nevertheless, the more plausible interpretation is that, in this narrative, the image of a female sheep is employed as a parable to direct the mind toward a woman. Thus, *Na jah* does not itself mean "Woman"; rather, *Na jah* retains its literal meaning of "Female Sheep," just as the Old Testament narrative likewise speaks of a sheep.

On the other hand, the reading attributed to *'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd* renders the verse as "He has ninety-nine female ewes." (Naḥḥās, n.d.: 6, 97; Qaysī, n.d.: 6, 137) *Qaysī*, based on the feminine denotation already inherent in *Na jah*, regards the addition of *Unthā* in this reading as an emphatic specification (ibid.). Others have understood the addition of *Unthā* as indicating beauty and excellence (ibid.).

In the Old Testament account, David is accused of having had relations with the woman before Uriah's death. The statement "David sent messengers and had the woman brought to him, and he slept with her" (The Bible, 2 Samuel, 11:4) expresses this accusation. In addition, the Old Testament narrative accuses David of arranging Uriah's death in battle. It states: "...David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by Uriah. The letter said: 'Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so that he may be

struck down and die." So Joab, while besieging the city, assigned Uriah to a place where he knew the strongest enemy fighters were. When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David's army fell; Uriah the Hittite was among them." (ibid., 2 Samuel, 11:14-17)

In interpreting the Qur'an, it is not possible to revive all the memories associated with the Old Testament and attribute every event mentioned there to the Qur'anic account. In the Qur'anic parable of David's error, the only matter mentioned is the intention of the possessor of many sheep to take possession of his brother's sheep. Accordingly, in the Qur'anic narrative, David's error is presented at the level of inclination and request, and there is no evidence that David's intention was actually carried out.

It appears that the Qur'an, in its wisdom, does not elaborate upon this story and is even deliberately concise in its reference to David's intention. This concision is such that an exegete who relies solely on the Qur'anic text cannot fully discern the intended meaning of the narrative; rather, the exegete must know the story's antecedent to understand the Qur'anic allusion. In other words, the notion of David's error in seeking another man's wife cannot be derived from the Qur'anic verses unless one draws upon the Jewish antecedent of the story.

In this regard, many Qur'anic exegetes have likewise used the story of David's error in the Old Testament, with modifications and adjustments, even though explicit reference to the Old Testament was not customary among them.

According to *Abū al-Futūḥ* (16, 264), "*Uriah ibn Ḥayyān* desired a woman, and the woman was exceedingly beautiful; David had ninety-nine wives, and

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this was permissible according to his law. David, too, proposed marriage to her and sought her hand." Thus, our exegete reduces the story of Uriah's wife to the circumstance that David sought to marry a woman whom Uriah desired."

According to *Zamakhsharī* (4, 61), among the people of David's time, when a married woman attracted a man's admiration and interest, he would ask her husband to divorce her so that he could marry her. According to our exegete, a similar form of assistance was practiced by the *Anṣār* on behalf of the *Muhājirūn* in the early Islamic period (ibid., 4, 61-62).

In this regard, *Zamakhsharī* understands David's story as follows: "One day, David caught sight of a woman whose husband was named Uriah, and David became attracted to her. He therefore asked her husband to divorce her for his sake. The husband was too embarrassed to reject David's request. He consequently complied, and David married the woman, who later became the mother of Solomon." (ibid: 4, 62)

According to *Shawkānī* (2, 649), in the account of Surah *Ṣād*, the two angels were alluding to David's conduct. Apparently, David asked a man with only one wife to relinquish her in his favor so David could add her to his other wives. God then sent angels to David to make him aware of his error and prompt him to repent and seek forgiveness.

According to *Ibn 'Āshūr* (23, 137), Uriah was one of David's soldiers. When David saw Uriah's wife, he became attracted to her and asked Uriah to relinquish her for his sake. In *Ibn 'Āshūr*'s view, it was permissible under their law for a man to divorce his wife for the sake of another man, just as this was

also permissible in the early Islamic period (ibid.). According to *Ibn 'Āshūr*, God's reproach of David concerned a legally permissible act; that is, given David's position and status, it would have been more appropriate for him to refrain from such a marriage (ibid.).

The reference made by *Zamakhsharī* and *Ibn 'Āshūr* to the early Islamic period alludes to the proposal made by *Sa'd ibn al-Rabī'* to *'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf*.

Bukhārī reports from *'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf* that when they arrived in Medina, the Messenger of God established a bond of brotherhood between him and *Sa'd ibn al-Rabī'*. *Sa'd ibn al-Rabī'* said: "I am the wealthiest of the *Anṣār*, so that I will divide half of my wealth for you. Choose whichever of my two wives you prefer, and I will divorce her for you; then, once she becomes lawful for you, marry her." *'Abd al-Raḥmān* replied that he did not need that.¹ (*Bukhārī*, 3, 52)

On the other hand, those who have regarded the two disputants in the account of Surah *Ṣād* as two angels have considered the dispute between them to be a hypothetical one. This is likewise the case in the Old Testament, where Nathan's statement is based on a hypothetical situation. Some scholars, such as Gabriel Reynolds, maintain that the Qur'an narrates Nathan's parable as an actual event to portray David in his capacity as a judge (Reynolds, 691).

¹. "... *'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf* reported: "When we arrived in Medina, the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) established a bond of brotherhood between me and *Sa'd ibn al-Rabī'*. *Sa'd ibn al-Rabī'* said, "I am among the wealthiest of the *Anṣār*, so I shall divide half of my wealth among you. Furthermore, look at my wives; whichever one you find most suitable, I will divorce her from me, and once her waiting period has concluded, you may marry her." "*'Abd al-Raḥmān* replied, "I have no need for that..."

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2. Clarifying the Role of the Old Testament in Understanding the Story of David

The Qur'anic accounts of earlier prophets sometimes resemble those in the Old Testament. At other times, however, the Qur'an presents a different, independent version of the narrative. This dual approach has made the use of the People of the Book as sources in Qur'anic interpretation a difficult and delicate issue.

For example, in the story of Moses, the verse "And when he was about to strike the one who was an enemy to both of them, he said, "O! Moses, do you intend to kill me as you killed a person yesterday?" (al-Qaṣaṣ:19) states that when Moses intended to attack his adversary, the latter said: "O! Moses, do you intend to kill me, just as you killed someone yesterday?" The Old Testament likewise states: "The man said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?' 'Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?' (The Bible, Exodus, 2:14) In cases of this kind, where a complete similarity can be observed between the Qur'anic and Old Testament narratives, if two possible interpretations arise in understanding the Qur'an, the narrative antecedent in the Old Testament should be taken into consideration as an interpretive clue.

At other times, however, the Qur'an presents a narrative that differs from the Old Testament. For example, in the story of the Israelites' worship of the calf, the Old Testament says Aaron made the calf. The Old Testament states: "Moses said to Aaron, 'What these people did to you, that you have brought such a great sin upon them?' Aaron replied, "Do not be angry with me." You know how eager these people are to do evil. They said to me, "We do not know what has happened to this Moses, who brought us up out of Egypt. So

make us gods to lead us." I told them to bring me their gold jewelry, and they brought it to me. I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." (ibid: 32:21-24)

The Qur'an, however, identifies the Samaritan as the maker of the calf in the verses: "...We were carrying burdens of the ornaments of the people, so we cast them away, and likewise the Samaritan cast them. Then he brought forth for them a calf, a mere body that had a lowing sound..." (Tāhā:87)

In this scene, the Israelites state that they were carrying heavy burdens of the ornaments of Pharaoh's people, which they cast away, and that the Samaritan likewise cast something away, producing a calf-shaped image that emitted a lowing sound. Moreover, according to the verse "And Aaron had already said to them before this, "O! My people! You have only been tested by it, and surely your Lord is the Most Compassionate...", (Tāhā:90) Aaron had told the calf worshippers: "O! My people! You have been put to trial by this calf, and your Lord is only the Most Compassionate." Thus, the Qur'an absolves the Prophet Aaron of making the calf.

In the Qur'anic account of David's error, therefore, before invoking, or refraining from invoking, the Jewish antecedent of the story, it is first necessary to determine whether the Qur'an intends to recount a purified and implicit version of the Old Testament narrative or whether it presents a particular and independent account of its own. 'Does the Qur'an, as in the case of Moses' acknowledgment of the killing, intend to accept the accusation against David found in the Old Testament, or, as in the case of Aaron's exoneration, does it intend to absolve David?' 'Can it be argued that the Qur'an has altered the function of the parable of "The many sheep and the

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single sheep" from its earlier context in the Old Testament and employed this image to explain David's hasty judgment?'

On this assumption, the mere fact that the Qur'an and the Old Testament both mention a parable involving sheep in connection with David does not warrant the conclusion that the meaning of the parable is identical in both texts. Rather, in the Old Testament, the parable is an allusion to David, who, despite having many wives, desired the wife of one of his soldiers. In the Qur'an, however, the image represents an actual dispute in which David was hasty in issuing his judgment, whereupon God instructed him to judge correctly. Support for the hypothesis that the parable's position and function have changed appears in other Qur'anic narratives, in which the Qur'an reports a scene from the Old Testament without necessarily adopting all the surrounding details.

An example of this claim appears in the story of the gourd provided for Jonah. According to the verses, "So We cast him onto the open shore while he was ill, and We caused a gourd plant to grow over him. Then We sent him to a hundred thousand or more. They believed, so We granted them enjoyment for a while," (al-Şaffāt:145-148) God cast Jonah, out of the belly of the fish, onto a barren shore while he was ill, caused a gourd plant to grow over him, and sent him to a hundred thousand people or more, who believed and were granted enjoyment for a time. According to *Abū al-Futūḥ* (16, 240), "The meaning is that We caused a tree to grow that provided him with shade; that is, a tree that cast its shade over him, because his body was like roasted and decaying flesh, and if the sun had shone upon it, it would have burned him."

On the other hand, exegetes, quoting *Ibn Mas'ūd*, have reported in connection with these verses that Jonah benefited from the shade of that plant. He then used it, but when it dried up, Jonah wept. God subsequently revealed to him: 'Do you weep over a plant that has dried up, but do not weep over a hundred thousand people or more whom you wished to see destroyed?' (Ibn Jawzī, n.d.: 3, 553) The report attributed to *Ibn Mas'ūd* is one example of how stories from the Old Testament were transmitted as reports attributed to the Companions, with exegetes referring to them without explicitly mentioning the Old Testament.

The Old Testament states: "Then the Lord provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give him shade for his head and to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead." But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (The Bible, Jonah, 4:6-11)

According to the Old Testament, Jonah objected that the people of Nineveh were not destroyed after he announced the impending punishment. The Old Testament states: "Jonah entered the city and, after traveling for one day,

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announced that Nineveh would be destroyed after forty days." (ibid: 3:4) "When God saw what they did and observed that they had turned from their evil ways and repented, He relented and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened." (ibid: 3:10) "Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry because of this." (ibid: 4:1) Can it therefore be argued, in interpreting "And We caused a gourd plant to grow over him," (al-Şāffāt:146) based on the story's antecedent in the Old Testament, that the purpose of causing the gourd to grow for Jonah was for God to argue with him? That is, "O! Jonah, you are concerned about a single gourd; how, then, could I, God, not be concerned about the thousands of people in Nineveh and destroy them?"

It appears that, in this passage, the Qur'an has adopted only one part of the story, the growing of the gourd, without recounting the central episode itself. Since the Qur'an does not reflect the main part of the story, the reader of the Qur'an is not justified in attributing it to the Qur'anic account. In other words, the Qur'an does not mention Jonah's objection to the people not being punished. Had Jonah's objection been mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'an, then, when the growing of the gourd was mentioned here, a Qur'anic exegete could have stated, based on the story's antecedent in the Old Testament, that the gourd was caused to grow as part of God's argument with Jonah and as a response to his objection to the people not being destroyed. In its present form, however, this point cannot legitimately be attributed to the Qur'an, and connecting Jonah's gourd with the non-occurrence of the punishment would appear unwarranted. Accordingly, if one asks why, according to the Qur'an, God caused a gourd to grow for Jonah, the answer is that this was an act of divine grace and care toward Jonah when He brought him, in a state of illness,

out of the belly of the fish and cast him onto a barren shore, as the context of the verses indicates. Thus, the Qur'an has shifted the episode of the gourd from its earlier Old Testament context and transformed the image into a simple reference to God's care for Jonah. The question, then, is whether this pattern can also be applied to the account of David's error.

The answer to the foregoing question appears to be negative, because in the account of David's error, the Qur'an relates important components of the Old Testament narrative, unlike the story of Jonah's gourd, in which the central element of the episode, namely, Jonah's objection to the failure of the punishment to occur, is not narrated.

Another example is found in this parable in the Bible: "Jesus said to his disciples, "Know that it is very difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven." Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (The Bible, Matthew 19:23-24)

A similar parable occurs in the Qur'anic statement: "Indeed, those who deny Our signs and turn away from them in arrogance, the gates of heaven will not be opened for them, nor will they enter Paradise until the camel passes through the eye of a needle..." (al-A'raf:40) According to this verse, those who deny God's signs and turn away from them in arrogance will not have the gates of heaven opened for them, nor will they enter Paradise until a camel passes through the eye of a needle. Thus, the Gospel employs this parable to convey that the wealthy and affluent encounter difficulty in entering the realm of God's kingdom. The Qur'an, however, while employing the same parable, changes the group to whom it is directed and uses it in condemning those who arrogantly reject the Qur'an.

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Accordingly, the similarity between the parable of the prophet Nathan and the Qur'anic account requires the reader to understand the Qur'anic story within its earlier Old Testament context. On the other hand, the Qur'an may present its own independent account of David. To reconcile these two considerations, the principle should be that the Qur'an confirms the earlier scriptures unless evidence to the contrary is established. In this regard, the context of the verses may constitute evidence that the Qur'an does not endorse the antecedent of the David story, but rather regards David's error as an incorrect judgment, because following the story; David is instructed to judge with truth and not follow his desire.

If the mention of "The single ewe to be added to the ninety-nine ewes" were intended to make David aware of his desire for another man's wife, it would have been appropriate, at the conclusion of the story, to speak instead of the need for moderation in seeking wives, rather than advising David to judge correctly. Thus, the instruction to David to judge correctly at the conclusion of the story supports the view that his error concerned his judgment, rather than his desire for another woman.

Thus, the contextual evidence is significant in this case, just as the evidence provided by the story's antecedent is strong. Ultimately, it is the reader of the Qur'an who must determine which of these two considerations should take precedence. If the antecedent is given priority, the apparently conflicting contextual evidence may be explained by holding that, after portraying David's judgment in a hypothetical and symbolic case, the Qur'anic narrative shifts to his actual judgments among the people and instructs him to judge in accordance with truth.

In any event, in understanding the Qur'anic narratives, there is no avoiding reference to earlier sources, because the Qur'an sometimes leaves certain events unstated in its narratives by relying on information already known to its audience. For example, the verses "And indeed Jonah was among the messengers, when he fled to the laden ship. Then he took part in the casting of lots and was among those who lost. Then the fish swallowed him while he was blameworthy" (al-Şāffāt:139-142) state that Jonah was one of God's messengers, that he fled to a ship laden with people, that he then participated in the casting of lots and lost, and that the fish swallowed him. The Qur'anic narrative moves immediately from Jonah are boarding the ship to the scene of the casting of lots. If the audience does not know the story's Old Testament antecedent, it cannot understand why the passengers cast lots. Consulting the Old Testament makes it clear that the ship was threatened with sinking because of a storm, and that the passengers cast lots to determine who was responsible for the calamity and to throw that person into the sea to save the ship. The Old Testament states: "The Lord sent a powerful wind over the sea. The storm was so severe that the ship was about to break apart." (The Bible, Jonah, 1:4) "The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity that has come upon us." They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah." (ibid: 1:7)

Based on this antecedent, the Qur'anic narrative leaves unmentioned both the occurrence of the storm and the danger of the ship sinking, and it likewise says nothing about the passengers' belief that casting lots could identify the person responsible for the calamity. These omitted events are not mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'an either. Thus, in this example, the Qur'an does not refer to another passage within its own text but rather relies upon the Old

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Testament. Such forms of concision in the Qur'an become intelligible only on the assumption that the stories already had an antecedent in the sources of the People of the Book. If reference to such antecedents is rejected as a legitimate means of understanding the Qur'anic narratives, these kinds of omissions would have to be regarded as instances of defective brevity.

Under such a conception of defective brevity, one could object that the speaker's statement is incomplete and that the audience cannot understand the meaning of the story. The Qur'anic narrative, for example, moves from Jonah boarding the ship to the casting of lots and then to his being swallowed by a fish, without explaining the relationship between boarding the ship and casting lots or why a fish should swallow the loser of the lot.

Such forms of brevity in the Qur'anic narratives are justified only if the Qur'an's audience already knew the story and the speaker employed their established background knowledge to present the account concisely and elliptically. Nevertheless, the reader of the Qur'an is not entitled, merely for the sake of elaborating and expanding the Qur'anic narratives, to transfer all the details contained in the Old Testament into the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Conclusion

The Qur'anic account of David's error and forgiveness is presented with reference to Jewish beliefs. Audiences who had the Old Testament story in mind would, upon hearing the Qur'anic account of "The single ewe to be added to many ewes," be led back to their prior knowledge and recall the Old Testament account of the Prophet Nathan's confrontation with King David, in which Nathan rebuked him through a similar parable for taking Uriah's wife.

Thus, in the Qur'anic account, the episode involving Uriah and David is paralleled by the story of the possessor of a single ewe and the possessor of ninety-nine ewes. It does not appear that the Qur'an has detached the parable of the sheep from its Old Testament context and employed it within an entirely new context.

Of course, the Qur'an, in the account of David, does not affirm all the details contained in the Old Testament, and those details cannot all be imported into the interpretation of the Qur'anic narrative merely by way of elaborating upon it. At the same time, however, it would also be unwarranted to regard the Qur'anic account as entirely unrelated to the story of David's wives, because mental associations are formed based on established background knowledge. The Qur'an's audience, because of this shared background, would have understood the story of "The ewe to be added" as an allusion to David. Had the Qur'an not intended to affirm this established frame of reference, it would have dispelled the ambiguity through an explicit expression, rather than intensifying it by presenting this very parable in David's presence.

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