

# Islamic Studies Today

*Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*

*Edited by*

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## Muqātil on Zayd and Zaynab

“The sunna of Allah Concerning Those Who Passed Away Before” (Q 33:38)

Gordon Nickel

### 1 Introduction

The idea that Islam advances a number of large theological claims is not a matter of dispute among modern western scholars of Islamic studies. The apparent reluctance of the same scholars to interact with those religious truth claims, however, is a matter of some curiosity.

The sourcebooks of Islam – the texts that Muslims appeal to for authority – are by their very nature a series of religious truth claims. Andrew Rippin<sup>1</sup> described the character of the sources through an explanation of the scholarly insights of John Wansbrough:

[T]he entire corpus of early Islamic documentation must be viewed as “Salvation History.” What the Koran is trying to evidence, what *tafsīr*, *sīra*, and theological writings are trying to explicate, is how the sequence of worldly events centered on the time of Muḥammad was directed by God. All the components of Islamic salvation history are meant to witness the same point of faith, namely, an understanding of history that sees God’s role in directing the affairs of humankind. And the difference that makes is substantial . . .<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Andrew Rippin introduced me to the formative period of *tafsīr* and especially to the commentary of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. While doing research for my dissertation, I noticed that a number of scholars drew attention to Muqātil’s interpretation of Q 33:38. Andrew taught me the methodology of literary analysis, and I have tried to use that methodology in this essay, in his honor. The references to dispassionate research and response to truth claims also come out of our relationship. We have often discussed these things during the past 10 years.
  - 2 Andrew Rippin, Literary analysis of Qur’ān, *tafsīr* and *sīra*. The methodologies of John Wansbrough, in Richard C. Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in religious studies* (Tucson, AZ 1985), 154, repr. in Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The origins of the Koran. Classic essays on Islam’s holy book* (Amherst, NY 1998), 354–5. Cf. John Wansbrough, *Quranic studies. Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford 1977), 43.

The “difference” that Rippin saw in Wansbrough’s analysis related to the question of the historicity of Muslim tradition and the widespread willingness of modern western scholars to accept that tradition as history. Rippin counseled that Muslim tradition be approached rather through the methodology of literary analysis, but at the same time he helpfully trained a spotlight on the fundamental nature of the Muslim literary sources.

Many passages in the Qurʾān give the reader the impression of entering debates in progress between the claims of Islam and groups of listeners who do not accept those claims. Kate Zebiri writes that “polemic in the sense of argumentation or the refutation of others’ beliefs is a prominent element in the Qurʾān since in the course of his mission Muḥammad encountered various types of opposition and criticism.”<sup>3</sup> *Sūras* 2–7 of the Qurʾān – nearly 30 percent of its contents – contain a great deal of polemical material, often addressed explicitly to Jews, Christians, “associators,” or simply “disbelievers.”<sup>4</sup>

A test case for this thesis about the nature of the Muslim sources – one of countless possible examples – is the exegetical development of a passage in *sūra* 33 that Muslims have traditionally linked with the story of Zayd, Zaynab, and the Messenger of Islam (Q 33:36–40).<sup>5</sup> The passage has a number of features that draw the reader’s attention. Typical of the so-called “Medinan” verses of the Qurʾān, it associates Allah with his messenger for authority and obedience (Q 33:36). Verse 37 is the only verse in the Qurʾān in which a Muslim other than Muḥammad is named – Zayd (Q 33:37). This passage also contains one of only four verses in the Qurʾān where the name “Muḥammad” appears – one of only two verses to state explicitly that the messenger of Allah is Muḥammad.<sup>6</sup> Along with mention of Muḥammad comes a major truth claim, that he is “the seal of the prophets” (Q 33:40). This expression *khātam al-nabiyyīn* occurs only here in the Qurʾān, and the Islamic doctrine of the finality of prophethood is based on this verse.<sup>7</sup>

3 Cf. Kate Zebiri, Polemic and polemical language, *EQ*. A different approach to the same material is Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, Polemics in the Koran. The Koran’s negative argumentation over its own origin, *Arabica* 60/1–2 (2013), 131–45.

4 Andrew Rippin and Gordon Nickel, The Qurʾān, in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Islamic world* (London 2008), 148–9.

5 Several scholars of the Qurʾān and Hebrew Bible read an earlier draft of this essay and made many good suggestions for improvement: David S. Powers, Peter Riddell, Havilah Dharamraj and Elmer Martens. I thank them all.

6 John Wansbrough wrote that the occurrence of the name Muḥammad in Q 33:40 “suggests a particular polemic, in which not only the credentials but also the identity of the Arabian prophet was in dispute”; *Qurʾānic studies*, 64.

7 David S. Powers, Zayd b. Muḥammad, *EQ*; David S. Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men. The making of the last prophet* (Philadelphia 2009), 50–7; David S. Powers,

In spite of the mention of Muḥammad and the high claims made for him, the wider passage – as well as the Islamic interpretive tradition – sees the subject of the action as Allah. The passage repeats the claim that the command (*amr*) of Allah is the determining factor (Q 33:37, 38). Allah has “ordained” something for the prophet mentioned in Q 33:38. The passage also specifies that the divine action in view is “God’s wont (*sunnat Allāh*) with those who passed away before” (Q 33:38).<sup>8</sup> The qur’anic expression makes a claim about the practice or behavior of God. Because of its proximity to Q 33:37, the practice seems to be the actions of Allah toward the person addressed there. The Qur’ān then invites the reader to compare the practice of Allah toward the one addressed in Q 33:37 with the practice of God toward those who passed away previously (Q 33:38). This openness to the past is typical of the Qur’ān.

The scholarly method well suited for investigation of the sourcebooks of Islam is a descriptive literary analysis alive to critical questions. The scholar need turn neither to the right nor the left, whether the current fashion of the academy be the “irenica” approach of an earlier generation of scholars or the unaccountable “confessionalism” since 9/11.<sup>9</sup> Rippin wrote that the “irenica” approach “has led to the unfortunate result of a reluctance on the part of many scholars to follow all the way through with their insights and results.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Ze’ev Maghen notes the extreme sensitivity toward using terms like “influence” in discussions of accounts of prophetic figures, and the “drawn-out terminological deliberations that often accompany such issues in present-day academia.” Such deliberations, writes Maghen, “hinder rather than help the pursuit of knowledge.”<sup>11</sup>

Literary analysis of the Muslim sourcebooks is thus “dispassionate” in the sense that scholars try not to allow personal feelings or beliefs to influence their research. Once the source is accurately described, however, the content frequently appeals to the reader/listener for a response. What is to prevent the scholar who has responsibly completed the necessary research, description, and analysis from responding to the subject matter?

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*Zayd* (Philadelphia 2014), 111–23; Uri Rubin, The seal of the prophets and the finality of prophecy. On the interpretation of the qur’anic *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* (33), *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 164 (2014), 67.

8 Qur’ān translations are those of Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran interpreted* (London 1964), except when a literal rendering helps to better understand Muslim exegetical comments.

9 Aaron W. Hughes, The study of Islam before and after September 11. A provocation, *Method and theory in the study of religion* 24 (2012), 314–36.

10 Rippin, Literary analysis of Qur’ān, *tafsīr* and *sīra*, 359.

11 Ze’ev Maghen, Davidic motifs in the biography of Muḥammad, *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 35 (2008), 91, nt. 1.

The exegetical treatment of Q 33:38 in focus in this essay is that of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767 CE). Muqātil was born in Balkh and lived in Marv, Baghdad, and Baṣra. He is also said to have taught in Mecca, Damascus, and Beirut. His *Tafsīr* is of special significance because of its probable (though not undisputed) early date.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 Muqātil on Q 33:38, the *Sunna* of Allah

The early Muslim commentator Muqātil offered his interpretation of Q 33:38 in the midst of his discussion of the larger pericope Q 33:36–40.<sup>13</sup> The *sūra* itself, known as *al-Aḥzāb*, contains a great deal of material about “the prophet” and “the messenger.” “The prophet” is repeatedly addressed in the second person and described in the third person. Three statements from this *sūra* that are well-known among Muslims are: “The prophet is nearer to the believers than their selves” (Q 33:6); “You have a good example (*uswa*) in Allah’s messenger” (Q 33:21); and “Allah and the angels bless the prophet. O believers, do you also bless him, and pray him peace” (Q 33:56). “The messenger” is frequently paired with Allah for submission and obedience (Q 33:12, 22, 31, 33, 36, 57, 66, 71).<sup>14</sup> The *sūra* also gives detailed instructions about the wives who are permitted to the prophet (v. 50).

At Q 33:38 the Qur’anic text switches from first-person plural address to a single listener in Q 33:37, to third person claims in Q 33:38. The verse seems to start with a justification, or perhaps defense,<sup>15</sup> of the messenger: “There is no fault (*ḥaraj*)<sup>16</sup> in the prophet, with respect to what Allah has ordained (*farāḍa*) for him” (Q 33:38). Here Muqātil glosses *farāḍa* as *aḥalla* – what Allah permits the prophet.<sup>17</sup>

12 Norman Calder, Jawid Mojaddedi, and Andrew Rippin (ed. and trans.), *Classical Islam. A sourcebook of religious literature* (London 2013<sup>2</sup>), 154; Andrew Rippin, *Tafsīr, EI2*; Claude Gilliot, Muqātil, grand exégète, traditionniste et théologien maudit, *Journal asiatique* 279/1–2 (1991), 39–92; Kees Versteegh, Grammar and exegesis. The origins of Kufan grammar and the *Tafsīr Muqātil*, *Der Islam* 67 (1990), 206–42; Gordon Nickel, *Narratives of tampering in the earliest commentaries on the Qur’ān* (Leiden 2011), 30–4, 68–72.

13 *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (Beirut 2002), 3:490–9.

14 Gordon Nickel, The clans (*sūra* 33), in Hans-Josef Klauck et al (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its reception* (Berlin 2012), 5:cols. 385–6.

15 Ze’ev Maghen, Intertwined triangles. Remarks on the relationship between two prophetic scandals, *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 33 (2007), 77.

16 *ḥaraj* also carries the sense of reproach, prohibition, or sin.

17 *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3:496.



Muqātil's interpretation of the second part of the verse is more substantial and – as it was later judged – more controversial. “The *sunna* of Allah with those who passed away previously.”<sup>18</sup> Muqātil first indicates that this means those who passed away prior to Muḥammad. He then specifies who and how this would be:

This means David the prophet (*ṣal*)<sup>19</sup> when he fell in love with (*hawīya*)<sup>20</sup> the woman with whom he was infatuated (*futina*),<sup>21</sup> namely the wife of Ūriya ibn Ḥanān. Allah joined (*jama'a*) David together with the woman he fell in love with, and likewise Allah joined Muḥammad (*ṣal*) together with Zaynab when he fell in love with her, as he did with David, upon whom be peace. That is his saying, “Allah's commandment is certain destiny.” So Allah decreed for David and Muḥammad their marriage (*tazwīj*).<sup>22</sup>

Muqātil's interpretation picks up on the tone of the verse itself, that this is an action of Allah. Allah permitted something to the prophet, as was his practice in the past. Allah joined both David and Muḥammad to the women they fell in love with. However, Muqātil also gives responsibility to the humans involved in two ways: to David and Muḥammad when he uses the verb *hawīya*, and to the wife of Ūriya with the passive *futina*.

David Powers writes that the negative reputation of Muqātil among a number of early Muslim authorities is directly related to his interpretations of these verses and his expansions on the Zayd and Zaynab story.<sup>23</sup>

18 The expression *sunnat Allāh* (“God's practice”) occurs again in *sūra* 33 in verse 62 (x2), and a total of eight times in the Qur'ān. To this may be added Q 17:77: “You will find no change in our *sunna*.” See Rosalind W. Gwynne, *The neglected Sunnah. Sunnat Allāh (the Sunnah of God)*, *American journal of Islamic social sciences* 10 (1993), 455–63.

19 *ṣal* is an abbreviation for “may the prayers (*ṣalla*) and peace of Allah be upon him” (cf. Q 33:56). For the translation of this expression, see Cristina de la Puente, *The prayer upon the Prophet Muḥammad (taṣliya)*. A manifestation of Islamic religiosity, *Medieval Encounters* 5/1 (1999), 121–9.

20 With Maghen, 77. Other scholars have rendered *hawīya* in this passage in a number of ways. David S. Powers: “The Prophet . . . experienced sexual desire for her.” *Muḥammad is not the father*, 42; Claude Gilliot: “le Prophète s'éprit d'elle,” Muqātil, grand exégète, 73; Jean-Louis Déclais: “il désira,” *Le péché et la pénitence de David dans les premières traditions musulmanes in Figures de David à travers la Bible. XVII<sup>e</sup> congrès de l'ACFEB (Lille, 1er-5 septembre 1997)* (Paris 1999), 443.

21 Again the phrase is rendered in a number of other ways. Gilliot: “la femme qui le séduisit,” Muqātil, 74; Déclais: “la femme par laquelle il fut séduit,” *Le péché et la pénitence de David*, 443; Maghen: “the woman by whom he was enraptured,” *Intertwined triangles*, 77.

22 *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3:496–7.

23 Powers, *Muhammad is not the father*, 55.

### 2.1 *Two Stories as Muqātil Understood Them*

Why was Muqātil's interpretation of "the *sunna* of Allah" at Q 33:38 so controversial? A clue may be sought in his understanding of the stories of David and Bathsheba, on the one hand, and the Messenger of Islam and Zaynab on the other. Muqātil tells the Zaynab story just prior to his comments on Q 33:38, and includes his version of the David and Bathsheba story subsequently, at Q 38:21.

For Muqātil, the Zaynab bint Jaḥsh story begins with Muḥammad giving her in marriage to Zayd.<sup>24</sup> He gives some background to both Zaynab and Zayd to explain why Zaynab and her brother 'Abdallāh b. Jaḥsh were not happy with the match. Zayd was a desert Arab in the *Jāhiliyya*. After Zayd had been captured in a raid, the Messenger of Islam had freed him from slavery and adopted him. Zaynab says she would not accept Zayd as her husband, and describes herself as one of the most perfect (*atamm*) Qurayshī women. The Messenger tells Zaynab that he has already accepted Zayd for her. At that point, according to Muqātil, Allah reveals the verse, "It is not for any believer, man or woman, when Allah and his Messenger have decreed a matter, to have the choice in the affair" (Q 33:36).

Muqātil then provides a flashback to Zayd's initial request to the Messenger to have Zaynab's hand, and his recruitment of 'Alī to help him persuade the Messenger. 'Alī is successful, and after receiving the Messenger's approval, 'Alī approaches Zaynab and her family to convey the marriage proposal. Zayd marries Zaynab, but before long he complains to the Messenger about how she is treating him. According to Muqātil, the Messenger goes to see Zaynab in order to repair the relationship.

... the Prophet entered then admonished her (*wa'azahā*). When he spoke with her, her beauty, grace and elegance filled him with admiration (*a'jabahu*). It was a matter decreed by Allah, powerful and glorious. When the Prophet (*ṣal.*) returned, he maintained in his heart [regarding Zaynab] what Allah wanted him to maintain. After that, the Prophet (*ṣal.*) was asking [Zayd], "How is she with you?" [Zayd] complained to him about her. So the Prophet (*ṣal.*) said to him, "Keep thy wife to thyself, and fear God" [Q 33:37], but a different thought was in his heart. So Allah sent down ...<sup>25</sup>

Muqātil writes that this incident was the occasion of recitation for the last clause of Q 33:36, "Whosoever disobeys Allah and his messenger has gone

<sup>24</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3:491.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:493.

astray into manifest error.” Muqātil then gives a second version of the story of the Messenger’s encounter with Zaynab that adds a number of interesting details.

The Prophet (*ṣal.*) came to [visit] Zayd. He saw Zaynab in the act of getting to her feet (*qā’ima*). She was beautiful and white, one of the most perfect Qurayshī women. The Prophet (*ṣal.*) fell in love with her (*hawīya*). Then he said, “*Subhān Allāh* who has the power to transform a man’s heart!”<sup>26</sup> Zayd noticed (*faṭana*) [this remark] and said, “O Messenger of Allah, permit me to divorce her. She is proud, she is hard on me, and she irritates (*adhiya*) me with her tongue.”<sup>27</sup>

According to Muqātil, the Messenger then tells Zayd to retain his wife, but while saying this conceals his personal wish that Zayd would divorce her.<sup>28</sup> Zayd indeed divorces Zaynab, and Muḥammad marries her.

Muqātil tells his story about David and Bathsheba in his commentary on *Sūra Ṣād* (38) to explain verse 21.<sup>29</sup> The Qur’an passage that prompts Muqātil’s story simply tells of “two disputants” who scale the “sanctuary” (*miḥrāb*), approach David, and ask him for a judgment on their dispute (Q 38:21–2). The first disputant says that his opponent had 99 ewes but prevailed upon the first disputant to give him the only ewe he possessed. David pronounces judgment that the second disputant did wrong in asking for the one ewe when he already had 99 (Q 38:23–4).

Muqātil starts his interpretation immediately after the scriptural words, “the dispute when they scaled the sanctuary” (Q 38:21). David is anticipating a trial from God because, according to Muqātil, he has asked God to raise him to the status of Abraham and Moses. While he is praying, a beautiful bird comes and lands near him. When David moves toward the window to catch the bird, it flies off into the garden. Muqātil writes:

... So David looked down and saw a woman bathing, and was amazed (*ta’ajjaba*) at her beauty. The woman saw his shadow, then shook out her hair [so that it] covered her body. His amazement (*’ajab*) with her increased, and the woman entered her apartment. David sent a slave immediately. Since she was Batsāmaḥ (sic) the wife of Udriyā (sic) ibn

26 On this expression, see Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 42.

27 *Ibid.*, 3:493–4.

28 *Ibid.*, 3:495.

29 *Ibid.*, 3:639–40.

Ḥanān, whose husband was involved in the raid on Balqā, which is in Syria, with Nawāb (sic) ibn Ṣūriyā, son of David's sister, David wrote to his nephew with instructions that he send Udriyā forward, [that] he fight the people of Balqā and not return until he was victorious or was killed. [Nawāb] sent him forward and he was killed, may the mercy of Allah be upon him.<sup>30</sup>

According to Muqātil, David waits until completion of the legally prescribed waiting period (after a woman has been widowed or divorced), then marries her. Muqātil writes that when David realized that his visitors were angels, he fell down in penitent prostration for forty days and nights. God eventually forgave his sin and informed him of the high position he would get in the next life.

### 3 Muḥammad and David in Later Commentary

Muqātil's understanding of the stories of David/Bathsheba and Muḥammad/Zaynab generally matches the interpretations of later Muslim writers, with the emphatic exception of Muqātil's claim at Q 33:38 that Allah himself joined David and Muḥammad to the women they fell in love with (*hawīya*). Later commentators knew of Muqātil's narratives, and some cite him explicitly and relay his comments on Q 33:37.<sup>31</sup> However, the commentators of later centuries show a definite trend to avoid any mention of sin on the parts of David or Muḥammad, and even to deny credibility to the Bathsheba and Zaynab narratives.

Summing up the interpretations of the formative period,<sup>32</sup> al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) tells the story of Zayd, Zaynab, and Muḥammad in both his history, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, and his commentary, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*. The version he transmitted eventually became the standard telling of the episode. In his *Ta'rikh*, al-Ṭabarī begins his story<sup>33</sup> with Muḥammad going to call on Zayd. However, Zayd is not at home. Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, Zayd's wife, rises to meet the Messenger.

30 Ibid., 3:639–40.

31 For example, Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut 2006), 17:156.

32 Andrew Rippin, Tafsīr, in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York 1987), 14:240.

33 Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (Cairo 1967), 2:562–4. Translations from Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* are those of Michael Fishbein, *The history of al-Ṭabarī. Volume 8. The victory of Islam* (Albany, NY 1997), 1–4.

Because she was dressed only in a shift, the Messenger of Allah turned away from her. She said: “He is not here, Messenger of Allah. Come in, you who are as dear to me as my father and mother!” The Messenger of Allah refused to enter. Zaynab had dressed in haste when she was told “the Messenger of Allah is at the door.” She jumped up in haste and excited the admiration (*aĵabat*)<sup>34</sup> of the Messenger of Allah, so that he turned away murmuring something that could scarcely be understood. However, he did say overtly: “Glory be to Allah the Almighty! Glory be to Allah, who causes hearts to turn!”<sup>35</sup>

When Zayd arrives home, he asks Zaynab about the visit, and Zaynab repeats to him the exclamation Muḥammad made after seeing her. Zayd then goes to meet Muḥammad and refers to Muḥammad’s visit. Zayd says, “Messenger of Allah, perhaps Zaynab has excited your admiration (*aĵabatka*), so I will separate myself from her.” Muḥammad instructs Zayd to keep his wife, but Zayd “could find no possible way to [approach] her after that day.”<sup>36</sup> The implication is that Zayd and Zaynab ceased having sexual relations, as required by the expression in Q 33:37, “Zayd had accomplished what he would of her.”

Al-Ṭabarī includes a second tradition about the Messenger’s encounter with Zaynab:

One day the Messenger of Allah went out looking for Zayd. Now there was a covering of haircloth over the doorway, but the wind lifted the covering so that the doorway was uncovered. Zaynab was in her chamber, undressed, and admiration for her (*iĵābuhā*) entered the heart of the prophet. After that happened, she was made unattractive to the other man.<sup>37</sup>

In his commentary *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, al-Ṭabarī presents the story of Zayd and Zaynab in his interpretation of Q 33:36–40.<sup>38</sup> The detail of the wind lifting the door cover appears here in virtually the same words.<sup>39</sup> Al-Ṭabarī presents

34 Maghen finds seven different Arabic phrases for this emotion in the commentaries, the same number that are used to describe David’s emotional state after he sees Bathsheba; Intertwined triangles, 48.

35 Ibid., 2:562.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 2:563.

38 Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī musamma. Jāmi‘ al-bayān fi ta’wīl al-qur’ān* (Beirut 2005), 10:301–5.

39 Ibid., 10:302; Maghen, Intertwined triangles, 33.

the David story along the same lines as Muqātil, while adding some interesting details and explanations.<sup>40</sup> He understood the “two disputants” of Q 38:22 to be angels in disguise. Al-Ṭabarī understood the Qurʾān’s reference to 99 ewes in Q 38:23 to be a parable about the 99 wives of David and the one wife of Uriah. In the dispute, one angel takes the part of Uriah, the other that of David. Al-Ṭabarī interprets the expression, “Put [the one ewe] in my charge” (Q 38:23), as “Divorce her in my favour, put her in my charge; give her to me, grant her a divorce for me, I will marry her; put her in my charge.”<sup>41</sup> David uses his rank to exploit Uriah by forcing him to surrender his wife. When David realizes the meaning of the parable, he is convicted of his sin and repents.

Al-Ṭabarī gives five different versions of the Bathsheba story, each of which contributes to an interesting cumulative list of narrative elements.<sup>42</sup> Here the disputants make it clear to David that in giving his judgment contained in Q 38:24, David condemns himself. David’s sin (*khaṭīʾa*)<sup>43</sup> in these narratives is that he sent Uriah to his death in battle so that he could marry Bathsheba. There is no mention of adultery. Al-Ṭabarī’s understanding of the disputation scene was generally accepted in the Muslim community and became popular.<sup>44</sup>

However, a trend in the interpretation of Q 38:21–5 in later classical commentaries was to distance the passage from the biblical account of David, and especially to remove any question of sin on David’s part. The shift was underway two centuries later when al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144) wrote his commentary *al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl*. al-Zamakhsharī’s interpretation of Q 38:21–5<sup>45</sup> includes explanations that attempt to mitigate David’s wrongdoing, and remarks that show the influence of the Islamic doctrine of prophetic sinlessness (*iṣma*).<sup>46</sup> For al-Zamakhsharī, David’s fault was only that he asked to marry Bathsheba, and the seriousness of the fault is reduced here from *khaṭīʾa* to *zalla* (“slip,” “lapse”).<sup>47</sup>

Less than a century later, al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) strongly disagreed with al-Zamakhsharī about the possibility of even a minor lapse on David’s part, and

40 Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 10:567–74; A.H. Johns, David and Bathsheba. A case study in the exegesis of qur’anic story-telling, *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain d’Etudes Orientales du Caire* 19 (1989), 229–34; Déclais, *Le péché et la pénitence de David*, 432–6.

41 Johns, David and Bathsheba, 232.

42 Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 10:570–4; Johns, David and Bathsheba, 233–4.

43 Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 10: 574.

44 Johns, David and Bathsheba, 234.

45 Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa ‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta’wīl* (Beirut 2006), 4:77–85.

46 Maghen, *Intertwined triangles*, 52–4; Johns, David and Bathsheba, 237–45.

47 Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 4:74.

advanced an extensive argument for David's virtue in his commentary *Mafātīh al-ghayb*. Al-Rāzī's treatment of the Bathsheba story was circumscribed by his commitment to the Islamic doctrine of prophetic sinlessness.<sup>48</sup> He used the descriptions of David's praiseworthy qualities in Q 38:17–20 and 27 to negate the possibility of the traditional story of sin and repentance at Q 38:21–5. He explained Q 38:21–4 as no more than a story of two human disputants, and wrote that David asked forgiveness for a mere feeling of anger toward the disputants when they burst in, or perhaps for too quickly jumping to the conclusion that the disputants wanted to kill him.

In the commentary of Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), the biblical story of David disappears altogether. Ibn Kathīr simply chose not to tell the story of Bathsheba in his commentary *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*. Rather, at Q 38:21–5 he counsels readers to read the verses of the Qur'ān and nothing more; do not attempt to explain the story of the disputants with reference to any other source, he writes, but “consign its proper interpretation to Allah.”<sup>49</sup> Ibn Kathīr similarly declined to recount the Muslim story of Zayd and Zaynab at Q 33:37, characterizing the tradition as unsound and the *isnād* weak. Maghen observes that late medieval and modern Muslim writers have largely followed Ibn Kathīr's approach to the Bathsheba and Zaynab stories – an approach he calls “erasure.”<sup>50</sup>

### 3.1 *Those Who Passed Away Previously*

The claim of Q 33:38 that there is no reproach (*ḥaraj*) for the prophet – that what Allah did in his case is the “*sunna* of Allah concerning those who passed away previously,” raises a reasonable question: To what extent was this understood to be God's way prior to Islam?

The question is reasonable because the Qur'ān frequently refers to pre-Islamic knowledge and history, including accounts of famous prophetic figures (biblical and non-biblical) from the past. The Qur'ān gives no impression that such investigation is negative or ill-intentioned. On the contrary, the Qur'ān calmly claims in a variety of contexts that its recitations confirm (*muṣaddiq, taṣdiq*) what the listeners already have in their possession (Q 2:41).<sup>51</sup> For example, the Qur'ān confidently presents its retelling of the story of Joseph as proof

48 Johns, David and Bathsheba, 245–63.

49 Maghen, Intertwined triangles, 59, quoting from Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm* on Q 38:21. Also Déclais, Le péché et la pénitence de David, 440.

50 Maghen, Intertwined triangles, 60.

51 In many cases these verses appear to refer to the earlier scriptures: Q 2:41, 89, 91, 97, 101; 3:3, 81; 4:47; 5:48; 6:92; 35:31; 46:12, 30; 61:6 (*muṣaddiq*); 10:37; 12:111 (*taṣdiq*); cf. Nickel, *Narratives of tampering*, 47–8, 63–4, 188–91.

of its inspiration (Q 12:1–3, 102–11), and claims that the story is “a confirmation (*taṣdīq*) of what is before it” (Q 12:111).

When the Qurʾān refers to God’s practice with those in the past, it invites the question of to whom this refers, and whether its description of God’s practice in the past is indeed true. The Qurʾān refers to the past in a paraenetic, allusive, and elliptical manner, as if the reader/listener is familiar with the story to which it refers.<sup>52</sup> To what story does it refer? Is this an Arabic translation of a biblical text? Are these local oral tales about biblical characters? Are there possible parallels in rabbinic Jewish or apocryphal Christian discussions?

The account of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 has some similarities to the versions that Muslims came to accept, but in other ways it is strikingly different. The biblical account sharply contradicts Muqātil’s claim in Q 33:38 that God arranges the marriages of prophets when they fall in love. The focus of the biblical account is on David’s actions, and, especially, their consequences.

In the biblical account, David is very much a king (2 Samuel 11:1–2; 12:7). The narrative is striking for the series of verbs of which David is the sole subject: he saw, he sent messengers to get her, he slept with her, he wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah, he had Bathsheba brought to his house (2 Samuel 11:2, 4, 14, 27). In 2 Samuel, Bathsheba bears no blame for astonishing, infatuating, or testing David. In the Hebrew text, “the woman was a very good sight (*mar’eh*)” (2 Samuel 11:2).

The extensive and elaborate account (2 Samuel 11:5–25) of David’s attempts to disguise his adultery by coaxing Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba after she became pregnant, and then to remove the husband altogether, indicates a guilty and frenetic monarch. God is not involved in any of this. In fact, there is no mention of God at all until the last verse of 2 Samuel 11. When God is mentioned, he is not the divine actor joining David to the woman he fell in love with. Rather, solemnly, “The thing that *David did* (*ʿāsāh*) was evil in the eyes of Yahweh” (2 Samuel 11:27).

God sends Nathan the prophet (2 Samuel 7:2) to confront the king. The punchline of Nathan’s parable about the sheep was the straightforward – and potentially dangerous – declaration, “You are the man!” When Nathan delivers Yahweh’s message close on the heels of his parable about the “one little ewe lamb,” it is certainly not one of approbation. God has indeed done much for David, Nathan says; but through Nathan God directly questions David’s actions:

Why did you despise the word of Yahweh by doing what is evil in his eyes?  
You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be

<sup>52</sup> Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*, 1, 40–3, 47–8, 51–2, 57–8; Rippin, *Literary analysis*, 359–60.



your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own (2 Samuel 12:9–10).<sup>53</sup>

Again, the relentless series of strong verbs firmly making David responsible for his actions provides a stark contrast to the ambiguous Islamic versions of the Bathsheba story. According to the biblical account, David is stripped of any illusions: “I have sinned (*ḥāṭāʾtī*) against Yahweh,” he acknowledges to Nathan (2 Samuel 12:13).

Jewish tradition has identified Psalm 51 with David’s confession and repentance, “when Nathan the prophet came to him after David had been with Bathsheba.”<sup>54</sup> The writer of the psalm acknowledges:

For I know my transgressions,  
And my sin (*ḥaṭṭāʾt*) is always before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned (*ḥāṭāʾtī*)  
And done what is evil in your eyes,  
So that you are proved right when you speak  
And justified when you judge (Psalm 51:3–4).<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps even more significant than these details in the biblical account – though strangely possible to miss – is the shape and tone of the narrative itself and its importance in the larger context of 2 Samuel. “The sword will never depart from your house,” prophesied Nathan, “because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own” (2 Samuel 12:10). Subsequent events recounted in 2 Samuel certainly support the prophecy. There follow echoes not only of the sword but also of sexual sin.

Robert Alter observes that 2 Samuel 11 – “the story of David as adulterer and murderer” – is “dense with moral and psychological meanings and possibility

53 Compare the first-person address of 2 Samuel 12:7–10 with the first-person address of Q 33:37.

54 For example, Barbara Ellison Rosenblit, David, Bat Sheva, and the fifty-first Psalm, *Cross Currents* (Fall 1995), 326–9.

55 This translation is that of the New International Version. Verse numbering of the Hebrew original is Psalm 51:5–6. It is true that the ascription to David at the start of Psalm 51 is not part of the original text of scripture. In this sense it resembles the “occasions of revelation” material, which, according to Muslims, links Q 33:37 with the story of Zayd and Zaynab; Maghen, Davidic motifs, 135, n. 101.

of meaning.”<sup>56</sup> Alter compares the David account with other biblical narratives, and finds that it “is in fact one of the richest and most intricate examples in the Bible of how ambiguities are set up by what is said and left unsaid in dialogue, and how characters reveal themselves through what they repeat, report, or distort in the speech of others.” He also notes that in the biblical account, David’s adultery and murder are the source of “all the subsequent disasters that befall David’s court.”<sup>57</sup>

The striking differences between the biblical account and Islamic versions of the Bathsheba story can be accounted for, at least in part, by differences in the understanding of prophethood. William Brinner has written that the text of the Hebrew Bible and Islamic traditions “diverge greatly in their respective attitudes toward the role of prophets.”<sup>58</sup>

In Judaism the words of the prophets offer chastisement, inspiration, healing, hope, and comfort, but as men and women the prophets do not serve as models or exemplars. Virtually the opposite is true in Islam. The words of the prophets are virtually divested of significance by the concept of the centrality of God’s word in the Qur’ān. *How* to lead a Muslim life is, however, based on the model of the prophet *par excellence*, Muḥammad.

These distinctions, in addition to the wider literary context of 2 Samuel, strongly suggest that the depiction of David’s actions in 2 Samuel 11 and their straightforward prophetic condemnation in 2 Samuel 12 are not some strange glitch in the biblical account. They also suggest that the earliest Muslim commentators were not familiar with the biblical account. Muqātil, for example – or even al-Ṭabarī – shows no sign in any of his stories about biblical characters that he knows the biblical text, or is “correcting” allegedly falsified biblical narratives.<sup>59</sup> In that case, what is the source of Islam’s version of the story?

Scholars of Islamic studies who are familiar with Jewish rabbinic writings have identified similarities between the Islamic version of the David story and the Mishna, Talmud, and Jewish haggada.<sup>60</sup> The rabbinic writings tend to

56 Robert Alter, *The art of biblical narrative* (New York 1981), 76.

57 Alter, *Art of biblical narrative*, 76.

58 William M. Brinner, Prophets and prophecy in the Islamic and Jewish traditions, in William M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks (eds.), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic traditions II* (Atlanta 1989), 77.

59 Pace Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 49.

60 For example, Heinrich Speyer, who cited the rabbinic material in Hebrew, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim 1971), 379–80 (Sanhedrin 107a, ‘Ābōdā-zārā 4b, Shabbāt 30a).

exonerate David of the charges of adultery and murder.<sup>61</sup> One rabbi wrote that at that time, soldiers like Uriah who went to war first divorced their wives. The same rabbi claimed that David had merely contemplated the act but had not gone through with it. The rabbis also claimed that God was testing David, and that God's forgiveness of David proved that he had passed the test.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in Islamic tradition we read that Bathsheba was engaged to Uriah, but not married to him; that both Uriah and David asked for Bathsheba's hand, and her parents preferred the king; or that Bathsheba was already divorced or widowed when David first saw her.<sup>63</sup>

Isaac Hasson observes, "The need to explain some cryptic allusions in the Qur'ān opened the door to the abundant and readily available Jewish and Christian legends about David."<sup>64</sup> He explains that Muslim storytellers and exegetes accepted these extra-biblical revisions "and rejected the older image of David from the Book of Samuel and Kings, where he is charged with adultery and murder."<sup>65</sup>

#### 4 Scholarly Observation and Analysis

The journey of exploration outward from Muqātil's interpretation of Q 33:38 reveals a terrain fertile for polemic and apologetic, truth claim and counterclaim. Along the way more than a few fascinating ironies can be spotted. A number of academic scholars have examined the Muḥammad and Zaynab story, and especially the Islamic David and Bathsheba stories, in order better to understand questions about prophetic succession and the finality of prophethood,<sup>66</sup> the influence of the David story on the portrait of Muḥammad,<sup>67</sup> and the history of the development of the Islamic David.<sup>68</sup> Their observations on, and analyses of, these stories have raised a range of questions that beg for response.

61 Maghen, *Intertwined triangles*, 40–6; Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 48–9.

62 Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 49. The element of trial or testing is also part of the qur'anic material on David: "Then David guessed that we had tried (*fatana*) him" (Q 38:24). The forgiveness then follows: "So we forgave him that" (Q 38:25).

63 Isaac Hasson, *David*, *EQ*. See also Maghen, *Intertwined triangles*, 46–53.

64 Hasson, *David*, 496.

65 Hasson, *David*, 497.

66 Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*.

67 Maghen, *Intertwined triangles*, 17–92; Maghen, *Davidic motifs*, 91–139.

68 Déclais, *Le péché et la pénitence de David*, 429–45; Déclais, *David raconté par les musulmans*, Paris 1999; Johns, *David and Bathsheba*, 225–66; Khaleel Mohammed, *David in Muslim tradition. The Bathsheba affair*, London 2015.

1. Muslim exegetes evidently chose to transmit rabbinic extra-canonical versions of the David and Bathsheba story – what Maghen calls “the vast industry of revisionism” that grew up around the story.<sup>69</sup> Then, when the biblical account became more widely known, some Muslim scholars cited the biblical story of David’s adultery as a “proof” that Jews and Christians had falsified the Bible.<sup>70</sup>

2. On the one hand, Muqātil attributed to ‘Umar al-Khaṭṭāb the tradition, “If the Messenger of Allah (ṣal) could have concealed (*katama*) anything from the Qur’ān, he would certainly have concealed” the rebuke in Q 33:37, “thou wast concealing within thyself what God should reveal, fearing other men; and God has better right for thee to fear him.”<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, the Qur’ān frequently accuses its audience of concealing (*katama*), and Muqātil interprets this series of *katama* verses to mean that the Jews of Medina conceal references to Muḥammad in the Torah.<sup>72</sup>

3. This concealing tradition attributed to ‘Umar makes the claim that Muḥammad did not conceal anything that was revealed to him. Powers finds in this tradition a suggestion of “[t]he growing discomfiture of the Muslim community with the story of Muḥammad’s infatuation with Zaynab.”<sup>73</sup> In his interpretation of Q 33:38, Muqātil has in mind a group of critics who were “troubled by the manner in which God’s decree appears to have been designed to satisfy the sexual desires of the Prophet.”<sup>74</sup> If so, the questions posed by this group were applied toward a test of true prophethood, and their doubts demanded a defense of Muḥammad.

4. Certainly in the encounter between the conquering Arabs and the conquered Christian communities of the Middle East, there are signs that the Zaynab story attracted attention. It must be noted that the Zaynab story is a Muslim story, and that the disagreements surrounding the story were

69 Maghen, *Intertwined triangles*, 40.

70 Camilla Adang, *Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden 1996), 240 (Ibn Ḥazm in his *Kitāb al-ḥaṣal fi l-milal wa-l-ahwā’ wa-l-niḥal*). More recently Raḥmat Allāh Kayrānwī, *Izhār al-ḥaqq* (Beirut 1998), 2:478–81. Cf. Hasson, David, 497; Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 48; Gordon Nickel, *The gentle answer to the Muslim accusation of biblical falsification* (Calgary 2015), 136–44.

71 *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3:495–6; see also ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr*, 2:97. This tradition was also attributed to ‘Ā’isha and Anas ibn Mālik: Maghen, *Intertwined triangles*, 39–40; Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 49–50.

72 Nickel, *Narratives of tampering*, 88–96, 112–3. This was also al-Ṭabarī’s understanding of the *katama* verses; *ibid.*, 145–9.

73 Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 49.

74 Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 48.

internal to the Muslim community. Ibn Kathīr, for example, disagreed even with the founder of his own *madhhab*, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, about the soundness of the tradition; he declined to tell the Zaynab story in his commentary, “lest those lacking in understanding make improper use of it.”<sup>75</sup> John of Damascus (d. 749) comments on the story in his *De haeresibus*, and the topic also comes up in an exchange of letters attributed to the Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717–41) and the caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 717–20).<sup>76</sup> According to this latter document, the interest of the Byzantine emperor was theological – he had heard that the Qur’ān claims that the actions of the story were commanded by God (“We gave her in marriage to thee,” Q 33:37). Leo III responds, “Of all these abominations the worst is that of accusing God of being the originator of all these filthy acts . . . Is there indeed a worse blasphemy than that of alleging that God is the cause of all this evil?”<sup>77</sup> Here the emperor also emphasizes that when David took Uriah’s wife, “he committed a sin before the Eternal, for which he was grievously punished.”

5. Q 33:38 makes a claim for the behavior of God, and Muqātil and other Muslim exegetes explained the *sunnat Allāh* in various ways. After Muqātil, however, Muslim scholars began to make the categorical claim that the conduct of David in the Bible is unthinkable for a prophet. This view is presented forcefully in the recently-published *Study Quran*: “But the idea that David had adulterous relations with Bathsheba before Uriah’s death, found in 2 Samuel 11:4–5, is considered by Muslims to be an abomination that *could not have been committed by a prophet*.”<sup>78</sup> This claim shows the influence of the Islamic doctrine of *iṣma*, the belief in prophetic immunity or impeccability, which was developed by Muslim scholars during the second to fifth centuries of Islamic history.<sup>79</sup>

6. These theological issues and questions about God and prophets are significant, especially when Islam declares that all subsequent human behavior would be based on the model of Muḥammad. The interpretations of these

75 Maghen, Intertwined triangles, 59–60, quoting Ibn Kathīr’s *al-Bidāya*.

76 Powers, *Muḥammad is not the father*, 29–30.

77 Arthur Jeffery, trans., Ghevond’s text of the correspondence between ‘Umar II and Leo III, *Harvard theological review* 37 (1944), 324.

78 Seyyed Hussein Nasr et al., *The study Quran. A new translation and commentary* (New York 2015), 1106 (my italics).

79 Michael E. Pregill, Bathsheba. Islam, in Matthew A. Collins et al (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its reception* (Berlin 2011), 3: cols. 604–5; W. Madelung, ‘Iṣma, *El2*; Paul E. Walker, Impeccability, *EQ*; A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim creed. Its genesis and historical development* (London 1965), 94, 192–3, 217–8, 246–7; Tor Andrae, *Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glaube seiner Gemeinde* (Stockholm 1917), 139–45.

stories in the commentaries provide evidence that, over time, theological concerns became more important, not less so, and that commentators showed a greater concern to defend the honor of both Allah and His Messenger as time went on. In other words, sensitivity to the polemical edges of these issues increased in the minds of Muslim exegetes.

7. The trend in the later commentaries was to measure information reputed to be from Jewish or biblical sources against developing Islamic doctrines, or traditions attributed to Muḥammad.<sup>80</sup> Khaleel Mohammed highlights three doctrinal factors that strongly affected the Muslim portrayal of biblical stories: *Isrāʾīlyyāt*, a negative attitude toward material from Jewish sources; *ʾisma*, the belief that all prophets are sinless; and *tahrīf*, accusations of corruption or falsification against the Bible.<sup>81</sup> This interpretive strategy can be seen to subject history to the exigencies of ideology, writes Anthony H. Johns. “[T]he manipulation of the qurʾanic text to make it support views reached on the basis of a priori reasoning – in this case the reasons that [al-Rāzī] gives as to why a prophet must be immune from sin and error, may well render the facts of history and of historical context irrelevant.”<sup>82</sup>

8. If this is to be the Muslim approach to pre-Islamic sources of information, the expression in the qurʾanic text “those who passed away previously” (Q 33:38) also becomes problematic. For these later exegetes, there is no reliable knowledge before Islam, and the picture of history prior to Islam can only be drawn from the Qurʾān’s own materials and the traditions attributed to Muḥammad. As Jean-Louis Déclais characterizes the approach of Ibn Kathīr, he “wants to cut the cord that links Muslim culture to the biblical tradition.”<sup>83</sup>

9. One is left with two different accounts about David that do not agree about his sin, and two histories of interpretation which tend to accentuate – not ameliorate – the theological divide. Khaleel Mohammad, in a recent monograph about the figure of David in Islam, sets out the situation in its plain reality: “. . .[U]nless David sinned, it would have made no sense for God

80 Norman Calder illustrates how traditions attributed to Muḥammad became the determining factor in the interpretation of qurʾanic material about biblical figures: *Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr. Problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham, in G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qurʾān* (London 1993), 120–1, 124–34.

81 Khaleel Mohammed, *David in Muslim tradition*, 13–20.

82 Johns, *David and Bathsheba*, 263.

83 Le péché et la pénitence de David, 440.

to forgive him; and if he did indeed sin, then such action would negate the idea of prophetic *iṣma*.”<sup>84</sup>

## 5 Response to Truth Claims

Academic scholars attempt to report what they find, turning neither to the right nor the left. In this sense they are “dispassionate” – they try not to let personal feelings or beliefs skew their reading and description of the sources. Wherever scholars from past and present may have allowed their animus against – or advocacy for – Islam to prejudice their research, this behavior must be avoided.

However, scholarly dispassion does not mean lack of interest. And it does not mean that scholars must be cold or indifferent. The sources themselves use exclusive language and often directly address the reader/listener, pronouncing judgment on the faith of others and making supremacist and triumphalist claims for Islam, its Messenger, its scripture, its law and its politics. To allow these claims to distort scholarly research would be unwise. But to experience no response at all would be unnatural.

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84 Khaleel Mohammed, *David in the Muslim tradition*, 18.