

# The Qur'ān and Syriac Christianity: Recurring Themes and Motifs

University of Tuebingen



Conference Organiser: Ana Davitashvili



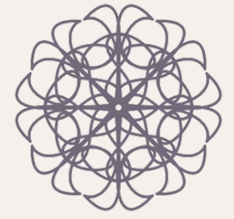
Universitätsbund  
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# The Qur'ān and Syriac Christianity: Recurring Themes and Motifs

This three-day international conference pioneers in its focus on the relationship between the Qur'ān and pre-Islamic Syriac Christianity. It brings together specialists in Syriac Christianity and comparative theology, as well as scholars of the Qur'ān. The conference explores how the Qur'ān reacts to pre-Islamic Syriac traditions and the extent to which it serves as a historical witness to Syriac Christianity in Arabia.

This conference is organised within the ERC funded project, 'The Qur'an as a Source for Late Antiquity' (QaSLA), directed by Professor Holger Zellentin. QaSLA considers the Qur'ān as witness to the history of Judaism and Christianity. It examines the Qur'ān as a primary literary source that facilitates the study of the religious landscape of the Arabian Peninsula and investigates the Qur'ān's testimony to the religious culture of Judaism and Christianity throughout Late Antiquity from a new perspective.

# The SCHEDULE

DEC 5

## Session One

11:30		Welcome & Introduction
11:40	Muriel Debié	Syriac or not Syriac: The Background to the Qur'ān
12:30	Emran El-Badawi	Revisiting Q 5:82 in light of 6th Century Syriac Literature
13:20	Julien Decharneux	Being <i>'ibād</i> of God: A Syriac Pun in the Qur'ān?

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## Session Two

15:10	Christian Lange	Concepts of Christian Life as a Constant Struggle for the Believers in Syriac Literature – A Template for the 'Great <i>Jihād</i> '?
16:00	Dmitrij Bumazhnov	Thirst for Killing and Being Killed in the Syriac 'Eusebius Narrative' and in the Qur'ān
16:50	Johanne Louise Christiansen	Unbelief, Protection, and Containers: Dark Metaphors between the Qur'ān and Syriac Christianity

# The SCHEDULE

## DEC 6

### Session Three

- 09:00 Adrian Pirtea 'Messengers of God' – Prophethood, Apostleship and Typological Thought in Late Antique Syriac Christianity
- 09:50 Jacob M. Kildoo On Qur'ānic Prophetology and Syriac Christian anti-Jewish Polemic
- 11:00 Zishan Ghaffar Covenant Theology and anti-Jewish Polemic in the Qur'ān and in the Syriac Tradition
- 11:50 Mohammad Ghandehari On the Temporal Sequence of the Jonah Story in the Qur'ān and Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns

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### Session Four

- 14:30 Daniel Bannoura Concerning the Redaction of Material by Ephrem of Edessa in the Qur'ān
- 15:00 Ana Davitashvili The Fall of Humanity in the Qur'ān and pre-Islamic Syriac Christianity
- 16:30 Nestor Kavvadas A Talking New-born (Q 19:30), Aaron's Sister (Q 19:28), Mary who is not God (Q 5:116): Qur'ānic Cruces and their Syriac Intertexts
- 17:20 Ryann Craig "You crucified him and you killed him; except that God raised him": Creedal Patterns and the Qur'ānic Crucifixion



# The SCHEDULE

DEC 7

## Session Five

- |       |                    |  |
|-------|--------------------|--|
| 10:00 | Sarah Yona Zweig   | Mapping the Edge of the World - The Cosmographies of Q 18:86   |
| 10:50 | Lasse Løvlund Toft | Damned Accusers and Fueled Fires - On the Syriac Reception of Daniel 3 and the <i>Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd</i> in Q 85:4-10                               |
| 11:40 | Mark Hoover        | Washing after Sex and Menstruation in the Syrian Tradition and the Qur'ān: Beyond the Pseudo-Clementines Homilies and the Didascalia Apostolorum |
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## Session Six

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|-------|-----------------------|---|
| 14:00 | Mohammad Haghani Fazl | A Reading of the Qur'ānic Narrative of the Birth of Moses Based on Syriac and Midrashic Sources |
| 14:50 | Gavin McDowell        | The Syriac <i>Cave of Treasures</i> and the Qur'ān: A Reappraisal                               |
| 15:40 | Aaron Butts           | Christians in the Qur'ān's Milieu: Why Syriac?  |

# Syriac or not Syriac: The Background to the Qur'ān

Muriel Debié

Recent scholarship on the Qur'ān, that studies the holy book of the Muslims in its late antique context, has rightly highlighted the importance of Syriac Christianity in the formation of the Qur'ān. In doing so though it tended to see Syriac everywhere, even when it is merely Christian parallels that can be traced, not necessarily Syriac ones. The first part of this contribution aims at showing what are the historical links between Syriac Christianity in (Ancient) Syria and the Arabian Peninsula that Syriac texts attest. Where and in which milieus did debates take place? What were the issues that have echoes in the Qur'ān? The second part will examine examples of surahs that might refer not only to Syriac texts but also to Greek ones.

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*Session One*

# Muriel Debié

## École Pratique des Hautes Études, Université PSL

Muriel Debié is Professor and Director of the Studies of Eastern Christianity at École Pratique des Hautes Études, Sorbonne, PSL. Debié studied classical literature at the École normale supérieure (Ulm) and ancient oriental languages at the École des langues et civilisations de l'Orient ancien (ELCOA, Institut catholique de Paris). She began studying Syriac after investigating a Greek version of a 7th century Syriac text, the Apocalypse of the Pseudo-Methodius. She received her doctorate from the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne in 1999, with a thesis devoted to Western Syriac historiography.

From 2000 to 2012, Debié was a research fellow at the CNRS, at the Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes, specializing in manuscripts. She taught Syriac at the ENS and at the ELCOA. She directed the ELCOA from 2011 to 2016. After her Habilitation to direct research in 2011, Debié was elected Director of Studies at the EPHE in 2012. From 2009-2010 she was a Visiting Research Scholar at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW) in New York, and in 2016-2017, she was a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) in Princeton. Since 2020, she is a senior member of the Institut universitaire de France. Debié has published several books in the field of Syriac and Eastern Christianity, including *Le monde syriaque. Sur les routes d'un christianisme ignoré* (written together with F. Briquel Chatonnet, Les Belles Lettres, 2017) and *L'écriture de l'histoire en Syriaque* (Peeters 2015), as well as numerous articles. She is currently working on a monograph on Alexander the Great (forthcoming, next year).

# Revisiting Q5:82 in light of 6th Century Syriac Literature

Emran El-Badawi

Who precisely are the Believers, Christians, Jews and Idolaters referred to in Q 5:82? Looking beyond the speculative works of Tafsir, which offer no decisive solutions, this paper explores possible echoes of these groups, and perhaps individuals, may be detected in the 6th Century CE works, the Book of the Himyarites and Letters of Simeon of Beth Arsham.

These works made famous the “Martyrs of Najran” of 523 CE throughout Near Eastern Christendom. They made equally infamous the Himyarite Jewish king Yusuf Ash’ar Yath’ar (d. 527), called Masruq in Syriac and known to Islamic tradition as Dhu Nuwas.

At the heart of my examination is the unique phraseology of Q 5:82, notably:

- \* Using the standard ‘Medinan’ phrase, “those who believe”
- \* Juxtaposition of “the Jews and those who associate”
- \* Careful reference to “those who claim ‘we are Christians’”

I argue the characterization of Jacobite martyrs, Nestorian ‘Christians in name,’ and the epithets used against the king and his companions, and their depiction as ‘Jews and heathens’ provide the building blocks for the phraseology of Q 5:82, and betters our understanding of the text as a whole.

DECS

*Session One*



# Emran El-Badawi

University of Houston

Emran El-Badawi is Department Chair of Modern and Classical Languages at the University of Houston, where he also serves as Associate Professor and Program Director of Middle Eastern Studies. He is author of *Queens and Prophets: How Arabian Noblewomen and Holy Men Shaped Paganism, Christianity and Islam*; *The Qur'an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*; and co-editor of *Communities of the Qur'an: Dialogue, Debate and Diversity in the 21st Century*. His current project on female power in the Qur'an and early Islamic Arabia is under review. He teaches courses on Islamic civilization as well as the modern Middle East, and is a contributor to *Forbes*, *The Houston Chronicle*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*.

# Being *'ibād* of God:

## A Syriac Pun in the Qur'ān?

Julien Decharneux

In this paper, I offer to study the use of the word *'ibād* and the derivatives of the *'BD* in at least two passages of the Qur'ān (Q 7:191-194; 39 :3-4) against the background of Syriac Christian exegesis. I will suggest that the use of the root *'BD* in these passages betrays the Qur'ānic authors' acquaintance with a pun built around the twofold meaning of the root *'BD* in Syriac. Famous Syriac Christian authors, such as Ephrem of Nisibis and Narsai, resorted to the ambiguous meaning of the root in different instances in order to stress the ontological « chasm » between God and its creatures (creator vs. creatures). Such a theme echoes quite closely some of the Qur'ān's anti-associationist polemical passages.

The study of this specific example in the Qur'ān will lend itself to theoretical reflections around the Syriac lore of the Qur'ān. I will argue that whereas scholars have increasingly sought for Syriac textual influences in the Arabic text, the study of this Syriac substratum would benefit from a reflection around the socio-historical context of the encounter between the Syriac and the Qur'ānic spheres: Who were the Christian informants of the authors of the Qur'ān and what were their literary and theological backgrounds?

DECS

Session One

# Julien Decharneux

## Université libre de Bruxelles

Julien Decharneux is an Islamologist and historian of religions. Julien completed his doctorate at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) on 'Creation and Contemplation: The Cosmology of the Qur'ān and Its Late Antique Background'. Julien's primary research interests include Late Antiquity, and the origins of Islam and the Qurān. Julien also worked on Medieval Arabian epics, and more specifically the *Sīrat* 'Antar. Currently, he is Associate member of the Centre Interdisciplinaire d'Etude des Religions et de la Laïcité (CIERL) at the Free University of Brussels (ULB). He has published multiple articles in the field of the Qur'ān and its Late Antique Context, as well as on language and religion including "The Natural Theology of the Qur'ān and Its Late Antique Christian Background: A Preliminary Outline." In *The Study of Islamic Origins: New Perspectives and Contexts*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021. Julien's monograph, entitled 'Creation and Contemplation: The Cosmology of the Qur'ān and Its Late Antique Background' is forthcoming next year (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter).

# Concepts of Christian Life as a Constant Struggle for the Believers in Syriac Literature – A Template for the ‘Great *Jihād*’?

Christian Lange

In quite a number of pre-Islamic Syriac writings life is understood as a constant struggle of the faithfuls with the Bisho, the Evil One. Christians are encouraged to resist the temptations of the Evil One, and to guard themselves with the weaponry of fasting and prayer. These Syriac texts include early writers such as Aphrahat and Ephraem as well as Narses of Edessa or Jacob of Sarug in the 5th century.

It is the aim of the paper to discuss some of the Syriac source texts which describe the idea of life as a constant struggle with the Evil One and his temptations. Given that exegetes of the Quran held different views regarding the Question what *Jihād* really was, the paper will rise the question whether the presented concepts in Syriac writings might have had an influence on the Quranic idea of the „great *Jihād*“ as an inner and mental effort for the Muslims?

DECS

Session 7



# Christian Lange

## University of Würzburg

Christian Lange currently holds the Chair of Ancient Church History, Patrology and Christian Archaeology at the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg.

His publications include "Einführung in die altorientalischen Kirchen" (together with Karl Pinggera), Darmstadt 2012.



# Thirst for Killing and Being Killed in the Syriac 'Eusebius Narrative' and in the Qur'ān

Dmitrij Bumazhnov

The fictionalized "Eusebius Narrative" is known as second part of the so-called Syriac "Julian Romance" composed probably before the middle of the VI century in the miaphysite milieu of Edessa. In the "Narrative", Pope Eusebius is confronted with Christian partisans of Rome desiring to burn alive a group of pagan priests on the altar built with their participation in front of the biggest church of the city. Despite Eusebius's eloquent attempt to plea for mercy, the zealots succeed in enforcing their will. In various situations and addressing different groups of people, Eusebius and the radicals of Rome claim thrice that they are prepared "to kill and to be killed" for the sake of their faith. The paper provides an attempt to compare this claim with some Qur'ānic parallels.

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*Session 7*



# Dmitrij Bumazhnov

## University of Göttingen

Dmitrij Bumazhnov has obtained his PhD in languages and cultures of the Christian East at the University of Tübingen in 2001. He completed his second monograph (Habilitation) in the same field at the University of Tübingen in 2008. Bumazhnov is currently working at the University of Göttingen on the research project “Development and contexts of Christian anti-Jewish polemical literature in Syriac (5th – early 6th century)” supported by the German Research Society (DFG).

# Unbelief, Protection, and Containers: Dark Metaphors between the Qur'ān and Syriac Christianity

Johanne Louise Christiansen

In figurative language, darkness (in contrast to light) constitutes a so-called “archetypical metaphor”; a common and cross-cultural expression. Another characteristic is that archetypical metaphors are grounded in human experience, such as the relation between darkness/blindness/ignorance. Within religious discourse, the light/dark metaphor is frequently used to explain belief versus unbelief. In the Qur'ān, e.g., people can move from the darkness into the light, generating a picture of salvation (Q 33:43). However, we should be aware of the tendency to read religious literature as consisting only of clearcut black-and-white opposites: The Qur'ān also uses darkness as a significant metaphor of protection (Q 39:6). This paper explores the use of dark metaphors between the Qur'ān and Syriac Christianity, represented by Ephrem (d. 373) and Narsai (d. 502). Not only will it demonstrate that the archetypical light/dark metaphor is present in both religious traditions, but also that dark metaphors are applied more positively independently of this system.

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# Johanne Louise Christiansen

## University of Southern Denmark

Johanne Louise Christiansen (PhD 2016, Aarhus University) is Associate Professor at the Department of the Study of Religions, at the University of Southern Denmark. Her research focuses on the application of theoretical perspectives from other research fields, such as the study of religions, to the Qur'ān. Christiansen is currently the PI of the research project *Education between the Qur'ān and the Bible*, which is funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark from 2022–2024. Among Christiansen's recent works is the book *The Exceptional Qur'an: Flexible and Exeptive Rhetoric in Islam's Holy Book* (Gorgias Press, 2021).

# 'Messengers of God' – Prophethood, Apostleship and Typological Thought in Late Antique Syriac Christianity

Adrian Pirtea

In the Qur'ān, Muḥammad is repeatedly called either a "prophet" (*nabiyy*), a "messenger of God" (or "apostle", *rasūl allāh*), or both (e.g. Q 33:40). While the terms were well known as standard designations for divinely inspired individuals in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible (Hebr. *nabīʿ*?) and in the New Testament respectively (Gr. ἀπόστολος, Syr. *šlīḥā*), I argue that the way in which the Qur'ān articulates its notions of prophethood and apostleship can best be understood only when compared with the late antique elaborations on these Biblical concepts in the various branches of Judaism, Christianity, but also Manichaeism. In this paper, I will thus analyse the two key notions of prophet/prophesy and apostle/apostleship in a number of late antique apocryphal, Patristic, hagiographic and historical sources (in Syriac, Greek, Middle Persian and other languages), in order to reconstruct the religious and intellectual background against which the Qur'ān formulated its own claims and distanced itself from competing views. As I will try to show, typology and salvation history were not only essential elements in eastern Christian discourses on prophethood and apostleship, but also important points of intersection between late antique Syriac and Byzantine Christianity and the Qur'ān.

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Session Three



# Adrian Pirtea

## Max Planck Institute Berlin/BBAW

Adrian C. Pirtea (PhD., 2017) is a Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, with a project on the transfer of astral knowledge between the Islamic world and Byzantium. He has previously held research and teaching positions at the Freie Universität Berlin (Byzantine Studies), the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences (long-term project “Corpus Coranicum”) and the University of Vienna (Marie-Skłodowska-Curie Fellow in Byzantine Studies). His main area of expertise is the history of Syriac Christianity and Syriac literature, but he has widely published on various other aspects of the religious and intellectual history of late antique and early medieval Eurasia.

# On Qur'ānic Prophetology and Syriac Christian anti- Jewish Polemic

Jacob M. Kildoo

For the Qur'ān, prophetic history unfolds in a repeated, cyclical pattern: God sends a messenger to a people; that messenger preaches a paraenetic monotheistic message; the people reject the messenger; God punishes the wicked people and vindicates His messenger (Marshall 1999). This prophetological framework structures the way in which the Qur'ān retells stories of previous prophets. But where exactly did this framework come from? Many scholars have argued, reasonably, that Muhammad was simply retrojecting his prophetic experiences onto his forebears—but this explanation is incomplete insofar as it ignores the numerous late antique precursors to Qur'ānic prophetology. While some authors have proposed precursors to the Qur'ān's "sequence of messengers" paradigm (Jeffery 1952; Griffith 2016), less attention has been paid to the idea that prophets were faced with perennial enemies (e.g., Q 6:112). Why, after all, does the Qur'ān present the messengers' audiences as overwhelmingly wicked, and the prophets as the prime locus of divine favor? I argue that a plausible precursor can be found in Syriac anti-Jewish texts, notably the work of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373). For Ephrem, biblical history is chiefly a story of God's dealings with the recalcitrant Israelites, who nullified their covenant by worshipping the Golden Calf (Shepardson 2008; Pregill 2020). It is therefore the prophets who take up the mantle of God's chosen people—meanwhile, the Israelites remain a perennial enemy to God's elect. I propose that this prophetological paradigm was available to the Qur'ānic author(s), who adopted and refigured this framework in constructing the Qur'ān's self-identity.

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*Session Three*



# Jacob M. Kildoo

## University of Notre Dame

Jacob M. Kildoo is a PhD candidate at the University of Notre Dame. His research focuses on Qur'anic studies, Muslim-Christian relations, comparative theology, and philosophy of religion. He holds bachelor's degrees in Arabic and philosophy from Notre Dame (2015) and a master's in Islamic studies from Washington University in St. Louis (2018).

# Covenant Theology and anti-Jewish Polemic in the Qur'ān and in the Syriac Tradition

Zishan Ghaffar

This paper examines the covenant theology and anti-Jewish polemic of Syriac authors such as Aphrahat, Ephrem, Isaac of Antioch, and Jacob of Sarug and summarizes the common tendencies of their respective reflections. These findings will be systematically compared to the covenant theology and anti-Jewish polemic in the Qur'ān. It will be argued that the Qur'ānic discourses deal with certain tendencies in the tradition of Syriac Christianity. The Qur'ān adapts its understanding of salvation history and God's covenant(s) with humankind and different groups in response to the conceptions of the Syriac authors.

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*Session Three*



# Zishan Ghaffar

## University of Paderborn

Zishan Ghaffar is professor for Qur'ānic exegesis at the Paderborn Institute of Islamic Theology. He is the Chairman of the Centre for Comparative Theology and Cultural Studies at the University of Paderborn. In his most recent monograph “Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext“ he argues that the theology of the Qur'ān is deeply related to the political developments and events in the first half of the seventh century and relates to the eschatological discourses of that time.



# On the Temporal Sequence of the Jonah Story in the Qur'ān and Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns

Mohammad Ghandehari

In Syriac Christianity, among numerous examples of prophets being a sign of Jesus, Jonah is perhaps the most prominent. Thus, many hymns and homilies are dedicated to him, including Ephrem the Syrian's (d. 373) *mēmṛā* on Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh. Recently, Robert Gregg has noted in his *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings* that Ephrem alters the sequence of events in Jonah in order to underscore the prophet's resistance to the purposes of God. I seek to show that the same phenomenon is visible in the Qur'ān as well.

Using the Biblical motifs, the Qur'ān refers to the Jonah story without retelling the entire biblical story but only parts of it. The most extended Qur'ānic mention of Jonah is Q 37:139–148 in which the sequence of events has long been read as: Sea – Fish – Plant – Nineveh. This sequence differs from the one appearing in the Bible: Sea – Fish – Nineveh – Plant. Some scholars have sought to reconcile it with its biblical parallel (e.g., Reynolds, 2012).

However, reading all intra-Qur'ānic parallels (Q 21:87–88, Q 37:139–148, and Q 68:48), I will demonstrate that the Qur'ān employs a similar narrative sequence known from Ephrem's homily (Nineveh – Sea – Fish – Plant), but it does not engage with its prophetology. Instead, the Qur'ān develops a new framework of its own discourse.

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Session Three

# Mohammad Ghandehari

## Independent scholar

Mohammad Ghandehari is a scholar of Islamic studies. He holds a Ph.D. (on *Kitāb Sulaym*) from the University of Tehran, Department of Qur'anic and Hadith Studies. His primary research interests are the conversation of the Qur'ān with the Bible and methodological approaches to the study of Hadith.

His publications include "Facing Mirrors: The intertwined golden calf story" (2018). Among the courses he has taught are "The Qur'ān and the Bible" and "Early Shi'i Hadith."

# Concerning the Redaction of Material by Ephrem of Edessa in the Qur'ān

Daniel Bannoura

It has been established that the Qur'ān contains a "Christian lore" and many vestiges of "Syriacisms". Scholars as diverse as Griffith, Reynolds, El-Badawi, and Zellentin have helped shape our understanding of the Qur'ān's reception and engagement of Syriac Christian material found therein. Using the methods of redaction criticism used in biblical studies, this paper builds on previous research on the Syriac subtext of the Qur'ān and analyses several Qur'ānic passages that echo Syriac material that can be traced back to Ephrem of Edessa. These include the pericopes on the creation of Adam and the rebellion of Satan, the birth of Mary and the Annunciation in Q 3:35-48, passages about the afterlife such as Q 50:31-35, and the various verses throughout the Qur'ān, particularly those detected by the *Corpus Coranicum* project, that seem to echo themes and turns of phrase found in the *madrāšê* and *mêmrê* of Ephrem of Edessa.

Here the paper relies on various criteria used in Redaction Criticism, such as the syntax of Qur'ānic passages, *iltifāt*, style shifts, breaks of the literary genre, etc. to discern markers of editorial work that rewrote and adapted (or Qur'ānicized) Syriac themes for its own audience(s). The examination of such an editorial process is an unavoidable methodological step in any historical or scholarly use of the Hebrew Bible, the Synoptic Gospels, as well as the Qur'ān. Redaction criticism can thus help shine a light into our understanding of the history of the Qur'ān and its engagement with Syriac literature at large.

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Session Four

# Daniel Bannoura

## University of Notre Dame

Daniel Bannoura is a PhD student in Qur'anic Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He received a bachelor's degree in Physics from the University of Florida, a Master's degree in Theology from London School of Theology, and a Master's degree in Islamic Studies from the University of Chicago. His research interests include the historical analysis of the Qur'ān, redaction criticism, Palestinian Theology, and Christian-Muslim relations. His writings include an article on Islam and astronomy published by Oxford University Press, and a critical edition of the seventeenth century *Al-ʿiḏah fī našīd al-ʿadrāʾ* with a transliteration from Garšūnī to Arabic. Alongside his academic career, Daniel is the founder of "Ultimate Palestine", the Palestinian national association of Ultimate Frisbee.

# The Fall of Humanity in the Qur'ān and pre-Islamic Syriac Christianity

Ana Davitashvili

The paper considers the banishment of the first human beings from the Garden and compares the depictions of the Fall in the Qur'ān with pre-Qur'ānic Syriac texts. While three Qur'ānic passages – Q 2:35–38, 7:19–27, 20:115–123 – briefly describe the expulsion of Adam and his unnamed spouse, various Syriac texts depict the fall of humanity with significant detail. The paper pays special attention to shared wording as well as similar concepts and ideas occurring in these texts. The analysis explores whether the relevant Qur'ānic passages are conversant with the West or East Syrian tradition rather than with pre-Islamic Syriac Christianity more broadly. It does so by analyzing the relevant narratives in the Syriac translation of the Bible, the works of Aphrahat (d. c. 345), Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), and of numerous East and West Syrian fathers. In order to prove a connection between the Qur'ān and one Syriac tradition, analogous wording or the same concept must appear only in the Qur'ān and West or East Syrian texts. Whereas the Qur'ānic passages are short and partly dissimilar from Syriac narratives, I argue that one can still trace the Qur'ān's dialogue with one particular Syriac tradition.

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*Session Four*

# Ana Davitashvili

## University of Tübingen

Ana Davitashvili is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Tübingen and a member of the ERC-Project “The Qur’an as a Source for Late Antiquity.” She is currently working on a book project that unearths the affinities of the Qur’an with pre-Islamic West and East Syrian Christian traditions. Ana’s research focuses on literary aspects of the Qur’an, methodological approaches to the study of Muslim traditions, as well as on a comparative study of pre-Islamic Syriac Christianity, the Qur’an, and early ḥadīths (in particular, *Isrā’īlyāt*).

Ana holds a PhD from the University of Bamberg (Germany). Her dissertation (2021) explores the depictions of the *ḥūr īn* in the Qur’an, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and early Islamic exegesis (forthcoming with Brill/Schöningh next year).

# A Talking New-born (Q19:30), Aaron's Sister (Q19:28), Mary who is not God (Q5:116): Qur'ānic Cruces and their Syriac Intertexts

Nestor Kavvadas

Some of the most “difficult” Qur'ānic passages – difficult either in terms of tracing down possible intertexts, or of making sense of them at all – are found in the narratives around Mary, Jesus, and his birth. Calling Mary “Aaron's sister”, having the new-born Jesus miraculously talk, and then (in a very different context) having God ask Jesus if he had ever claimed that himself and his mother were Gods, are some such cruces interpretum. However, a closer look at certain pre-Qur'ānic West and East Syriac writings on Mary, on Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, and on Miaphysite Christology, can identify hitherto unnoticed intertexts that give us a much better, clearer idea of these Syriac exegetical, quasi-apocryphal, or Christological traditions that the Qur'ān had in mind in the three aforementioned verses, and might even contribute to a better understanding of what the Qur'ān wanted to say when remoulding, or refuting, these elements of Syriac tradition.

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*Session Four*

# Nestor Kavvadas

## University of Bonn

After completing his studies in Thessaloniki and Tübingen, Nestor Kavvadas received his PhD in 2011, with a dissertation on Isaac of Niniveh, from the Catholic Theological Faculty of the latter University. Since then, he has been working mainly on Syriac and Greek literary sources on the Late Antique and Early Medieval Near East at the Universities of Tübingen, Siegen and Paderborn, and for the *Corpus Coranicum*. His works include the editio princeps of Joseph Hazzaya's *On Providence* (2016), and a book on *Jerusalem zwischen Aachen und Bagdad* (2017). He is now working at the Center for Comparative Theology and Social Issues at the University of Bonn, doing research on political theologies in the Near East of the early 7th century.



**“You crucified him and you killed him; except that God raised him”:**

## **Creedal Patterns and the Qur’ānic Crucifixion**

Ryann Craig

When the Qur’ān’s crucifixion account (Q 4:157–158) speaks of Jesus as killed, crucified, with an appearance, and a raising, this reverberated with Eastern Christian articulations of ‘crucified, died, buried, raised, and appeared’ found in biblical creedal patterns. This paper provides an examination of biblical and conciliar creedal patterns in Syriac and (later) Arabic, in order to better understand how Christians heard the Qur’ānic crucifixion account in light of their internal disputes over how to express the person of Christ. The evidence suggests that these creedal patterns, from the Bible and later the church councils, sounded more similar to Q 4:157–158 than previously thought, and that the Eastern Christian communities shifted how they articulated their creedal formulas, embracing elements of the Qur’ānic crucifixion account in their responses to Muslims.

DECOG

*Session Four*



# Ryann Craig

## Georgetown University

Ryann Craig is the director of student programs and an assistant research professor at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

She teaches as a faculty fellow at the Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service and adjunct professor at the Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. She is co-editor with Vasile-Octavian Mihoc of *A Contested Coexistence: Insights in Arabic Christianity from Theology to Migration* (Harrassowitz, 2020).

# Mapping the Edge of the World - The Cosmographies of Q18:86

Sarah Yona Zweig

Dhū l-Qarnayn's journey in the Quran has an intriguing cosmological detail: there is a spring into which the sun sets (Q 18:86). This is striking for two reasons. First the spring is qualified by an opaque adjective (حَمِيمٌ) that is read and understood in various ways. Secondly, the idea of the sun setting in a spring is puzzling and needs to be unpacked. In this paper I examine phonological and semantic variants of حَمِيمٌ suggested by the classic commentators, in light of their cultural backdrop. Next I offer an interpretation of the spring in the context of the Syriac Alexander narratives. The various cosmological models prevalent in Late Antiquity seem to have influenced the commentators' readings of the Qur'ān. Reading the Islamic commentaries as polytexts interweaving through historical archives may shed light on other such textual obscurities.

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# Sarah Yona Zweig

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Sarah Zweig is conducting doctoral research on the Moses episode in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and its literary background in Late Antiquity at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Sarah's research interests include religion, society and culture in Late Antiquity, Qur'ān and Tafsīr Studies, Euro-Asian Literary Motifs and Sanskrit Theatre Traditions. She is currently a research fellow at the India International Centre, New Delhi. She was a fellow at the Doha Institute for Advanced Studies in 2021. Previously she studied Philosophy and Comparative Religion in Jerusalem, Paris and Rome. Growing up Sarah was a circus performer on horse and the trapeze. She worked for over ten years as a cinematographer in documentary and feature films.

# Damned Accusers and Fueled Fires – On the Syriac Reception of Daniel 3 and the *Aṣḥāb al- Ukhdūd* in Q 85:4–10

Lasse Løvlund Toft

Recently, Adam Silverstein has contributed to our understanding of the pericope of *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd* in Q 85:4–10. He persuasively reads the passage as an admonition of the eschatological punishment of the disbelievers in which the death of the people fueling the fiery furnace for the three youths in the Book of Daniel 3:22–23 is recollected. Thereby, Silverstein combines two interpretations – the historical and the eschatological – which have hitherto been recurrent in scholarship, but have so far been viewed as mutually exclusive. However, while Silverstein acknowledges the probable Syriac route of transmission for the Danielic tradition to the Qurʾān, the scholar does not analyse the rich Syriac hymnic, homiletic and exegetical traditions as parts of his comparative material. Instead, the author compares the Qurʾānic section with Jewish traditions and he relies on the Masoretic Biblical Aramaic text of Daniel instead of the Syriac Peshitta version. Yet I will argue that reading the Peshitta version of Daniel and taking into account the reception of the three youths in the furnace in the Syriac literary tradition have great explanatory potential for 85:4–10. Thus, I will bring different Syriac sources to the analysis of the enigmatic surah 85, which itself is an interesting case of an early Meccan surah with multilayered commentary added during later stages of the Qurʾānic formation.

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# Lasse Løvlund Toft

## University of Oslo

Lasse Løvlund Toft is MA in the Study of Religion and Classics and PhD in Theology (Church History) from Aarhus University. In his dissertation *The Ḥimyarite Martyrs in flux – Developing forms of Syriac memories*, he has investigated the cults and veneration of the Ḥimyarite Martyrs of Najrān in the three main Syriac churches as they are attested in hagiography, historiography, hymnography, lectionaries and calendars found in Late Antique and Medieval Syriac manuscripts. In addition, he has written on the Islamic traditions on these martyrs and the shared literary and historiographical Islamo-Christian traditions. Currently, he is a Postdoc at the University of Oslo as part of the APOCRYPHA project, working on Coptic, Copto-Arabic and Islamo-Arabic apocryphal traditions on the creation of the human being.

# Washing after Sex and Menstruation in the Syrian Tradition and the Qur'ān: Beyond the Pseudo-Clementines Homilies and the Didascalia Apostolorum

Mark Hoover

Washing after sex and menstruation is one of the various commonalities found between the Qur'ān and two third- or fourth-century texts of Syrian provenance: the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies and the Didascalia Apostolorum. While it is clear that there is some kind of continuity between the milieus of these three texts, there is a gap of about three centuries between the Quran and the other two. Can this gap be bridged? More precisely, can we determine the nature of this continuity more closely? This paper will survey West and East Syrian texts on washing after sex and menstruation from the fifth century onwards, analyze the social location of these practices in these texts, and use this data to think about the nature of the continuity between the milieus of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, the Didascalia Apostolorum, and the Qur'ān.

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# Mark Hoover

## University of Tübingen

Mark Hoover is a doctoral student in Jewish and Religious Studies at the University of Tübingen. He is working on ritual impurity due to menstruation, sex, and emissions of semen in Egyptian and Syrian Christianity in Late Antiquity. He is in the third year of his doctoral studies. He also teaches courses in Jewish and Religious Studies for the University of Tübingen's programs in Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology.

Mr. Hoover has a Master of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary (2019) and a BA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations with a concentration in Arabic and Hebrew Studies from the University of Pennsylvania (2015).



# A Reading of the Qur'ānic Narrative of the Birth of Moses Based on Syriac and Midrashic Sources

Mohammad Haghani Fazl

The Qur'ān refers to the birth of Moses in two sūrahs (Q 20:38–40 and 38:7–13). Despite the similarities between the Qur'ānic narrative and the Exodus (2:1–10), there are also differences such as the revelation received by Moses's mother, the story of the foster mothers, and the replacement of Pharaoh's wife with Pharaoh's daughter. In this paper, I will show that one could explain these differences when comparing the Qur'ānic version of the story with the Midrashic and pre-Islamic Syriac literature. The first two differences are additions to the Torah narrative. The story of foster mothers appears in Midrash, but the revelation to Moses's mother is not mentioned, while dreams and revelations are attributed to Moses's father and sister. Traces of the revelation to Moses's mother can be seen in Syriac works and especially, in Jacob of Serugh's homily on the Nativity of Moses. Yet none of these Jewish and Christian sources replace Pharaoh's wife with Pharaoh's daughter. Nonetheless, the key to understanding this change in the Qur'ānic narrative lies in Syriac literature as well. More precisely, in the homilies of Jacob of Serugh, the virginity of Pharaoh's daughter is a symbol and type of the story of the virginity of Mary and the birth of Jesus. With this change, the Qur'ān presumably reacts to the Syriac typology and its Christ-centered reading of the life of Moses. In this presentation, first, I analyze similarities and differences between the Qur'ānic version of the story and the Jewish and Syriac ones and then discuss how the Qur'ān alters the narrative to remove Christ-centeredness from the typology of the story of the prophets.

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# Mohammad Haghani Fazl

## University of Paderborn

Mohammad Haghani Fazl has studied Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology, and Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) in the seminary of Qom (Iran). Fazl received a PhD in Comparative Study of Religions (2019) from the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom. His dissertation addresses the impact of interreligious dialogue on interpretations of scriptures. From 2014 to 2019, he was a research fellow at the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom. Since 2020, Fazl has been a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Islamic Theology at the University of Paderborn (Germany). He is currently working on a prophetology project in the department of Qur'anic Studies at the University of Paderborn. His publications include "The Scope of *iṣma* and Qur'anic Evidence" (2021) as well as "The Story of Mary as a Feminine Counterpart to the Story of Joseph" (2020).

# The Syriac *Cave of Treasures* and the Qur'ān: A Reappraisal

Gavin McDowell

The *Cave of Treasures*, an explicitly Christian retelling of biblical history from Adam to Jesus, is often cited as one of the primary Syriac influences on the Qur'ān. This work, which was adapted as a historical source in both Syriac (e.g., *The Zuqnin Chronicle*) and Arabic (e.g., *Tārīkh al-Ya'qūbī*) chronicles, has also greatly influenced Islamic Stories of the Prophets. As a work that has left an indelible mark on the way Muslims retell biblical narratives, it seems like a prime candidate as a source for the Qur'ān, yet this influence is not in evidence. The Qur'ān, though it gives a broad panorama of sacred history, only overlaps with the *Cave of Treasures* on a few points, restricted to the stories about Adam and Eve and (debatably) Jesus. Conversely, the *Cave of Treasures* has little interest in major themes from the Qur'ān, such as the lives of Abraham and Moses (truncated or nonexistent) or the “punishment stories” (Straflegenden).

In other words, the *Cave of Treasures* has shaped the way Muslims retell the biblical narrative, but it does not seem to have exerted the same influence on the Qur'ān. How did this happen? The Qur'ānic parallels in the *Cave of Treasures* are not exclusive to the Syriac work, although the other Christian works where they are found are not written in Syriac. I propose that the overall influence of the *Cave of Treasures* on the Qur'ān is minimal or even nonexistent, and some of the Qur'ān's parabiblical material might be better explained via material extant only in other Christian liturgical languages such as Greek or Coptic.

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# Gavin McDowell

## CNRS, Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes

Gavin McDowell (Ph.D., École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris Sciences & Lettres) is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes (Paris, CNRS), participating in the project “TEXTEVOLVE: A New Approach to the Evolution of Texts Based on the Manuscripts of the Targums” (ERC Project 818702). Prior to this, he was a membre régulier spécial at the Institut d'études anciennes et médiévales of Université Laval (Québec City, Canada), where he studied the use of the “Old Testament Pseudepigrapha” as Christian hagiography. His doctoral thesis, “The Sacred History in Late Antiquity,” examined the relationship between the rabbinic work *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* and two similar writings, the *Second Temple Book of Jubilees* and the *Syriac Cave of Treasures*. His primary research interest is the reception of biblical, deuterocanonical, and apocryphal literature within Christianity and Judaism.

# Christians in the Qur'ān's Milieu: Why Syriac?

Aaron Butts

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly looked to Christian texts—and less often material culture—in order to help shed light on the Qur'ān. Syriac Christianity in particular has played an especially prominent role in these scholarly conversations. In this paper, I ask why this is the case: Why have scholars invoked Syriac Christianity in particular and in contrast to the manifold other Christianities of Late Antiquity? Or, to frame the question in a slightly different way, what is the evidence that the Christians in the Qur'ān's milieu were particularly Syriac Christians? And, more broadly, what is exactly meant by Syriac Christians in this case? These lines of inquiry are necessary in my view to ground historically the ongoing scholarly conversations about the Late Antique context of the Qur'ān: If it can be shown that (some of) the Christians in the Qur'ān's milieu were particularly Syriac Christians, then this has important historical implications for the Qur'ān, for Syriac Christianity, and for the Arabian Peninsula in Late Antiquity. But, in contrast, it should not – and in fact cannot – be assumed that, just because there were Christians in the Qur'ān's milieu, they were Syriac Christians.

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# Aaron Butts

## University of Hamburg

Aaron Michael Butts (Ph.D. University of Chicago, 2013) is Professor of Semitistik at Universität Hamburg. He specializes in Christianity in the Near East, including especially Arabic, Ethiopic, and Syriac. He is currently directing the project “Belnf – Beyond Influence: The Connected Histories of Ethiopic and Syriac Christianity,” which has been funded for five years by an ERC Consolidator grant.

To register, please contact Dr. Bilal Badat:  
[Bilal.Badat@zith.uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:Bilal.Badat@zith.uni-tuebingen.de)

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