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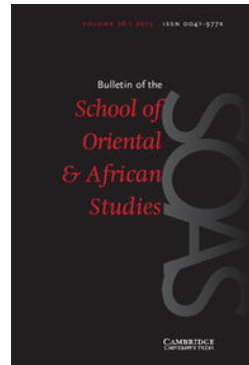
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Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies / Volume 78 / Issue 01 / February 2015, pp 25 - 40

DOI: 10.1017/S0041977X14001438, Published online: 17 March 2015

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0041977X14001438

How to cite this article:

Uri Rubin (2015). “Become you apes, repelled!” (Quran 7:166): The transformation of the Israelites into apes and its biblical and midrashic background. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 78, pp 25-40 doi:10.1017/S0041977X14001438

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“Become you apes, repelled!” (Quran 7:166): The transformation of the Israelites into apes and its biblical and midrashic background¹

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Abstract

In Quran 7:163–6, God punishes the inhabitants of “a town by the sea” who have collected fish from the sea on a Sabbath by transforming them into apes (*qirada*). Almost none of the attempts to find a precedent for this punishment in pre-Islamic texts have been plausible. This article argues that this scene reflects post-biblical traditions referring to Numbers 11:19–20. This biblical passage deals with the Israelites who consumed quails that had come from the sea; they were doomed to partake of the meat until it came out of their nostrils and became loathsome to them. This was their punishment after having expressed their discontent with the manna, while craving for meat and fish and vegetables. The midrashic sources describe various obnoxious bodily effects which the meat of the quails had on their unrestrained eaters. It will be suggested that the punitive transformation into apes, suffered by the people of the town by the sea who ate fish, represents the Quranic reshaped version of the bodily infliction which the quail eaters suffered as a result of eating the quails that came from the sea. In support of this suggestion, several points common to the biblical quail eaters and the Quranic people of the “town by the sea” will be highlighted.

Keywords: Quran, Israelites, Manna, Quail, Apes, Bible, Midrash, David, Jesus, Theodoret, Ayla, Tiberias

Modern scholarship

Modern scholars have already suggested various Jewish, Christian and other pre-Islamic possible precedents for the intriguing Quranic story about the town by the sea whose people were transformed into apes (Q. 7:163–6).² Some of them have suggested the biblical episode about the manna as a possible

- 1 My thanks are due to the participants in two seminar meetings at Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University, with whom I shared an earlier draft of this study, as well as to an anonymous reader, for their insightful comments. I alone am responsible for any remaining shortcomings.
- 2 For example Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (repr. Hildesheim, 1961), 313–14; Ilse Lichtenstaedter, “‘And Become ye accursed apes’”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14, 1991, 153–75; Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur’ān* (Miami, 2009), 290–1; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London and New York, 2010), 106–17.

origin of the Quranic story but only in a general manner, and not very convincingly.³ The following investigation will try and illuminate in more detail the possible links of the Quranic story to a specific aspect of the midrashic elaborations on the biblical affair of the manna and quails.

Manna and quails: biblical versions

Exodus 16

The clue to the origin of the Quranic story of the people of the town by the sea who became apes seems to be found in the biblical passages about the manna and quails that God gave to the Children of Israel during their wandering with Moses in the wilderness. Let us begin with these passages and then move on to the Quran. In Exodus 16 of the Hebrew Bible, the Children of Israel who have just come from Elim to the wilderness of Sin complain of the lack of bread. God, hearing the bitter murmuring, tells Moses that he shall “rain bread from heaven” for them, and thereupon two miraculous events take place.

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.

(Exodus 16:13–14)

Further on in the same chapter, only the manna is discussed. Moses declares that the Israelites should collect the manna day by day, six days in a row, but not on the seventh day, the holy Sabbath.

For six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none. On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. The Lord said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day”.

(Exodus 16:26–9)

3 Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* (London, 1902), 108. Cf. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 114 n. 339. According to Hirschfeld, the Quranic story is “a mistaken rendition” of the biblical episode about the manna that became worms after the Children of Israel had disobeyed Moses by saving it for the morrow (Exodus 16:20). Hirschfeld posits that in the Quranic version, the people who left the manna overnight became insects themselves – *qirāda* (vermin). He maintains that the compilers of the Quran eventually preferred *qirada* (apes) to *qirāda*.

The relevant point here is that the Israelites went out to collect food on a Sabbath, thus violating its holiness.

Numbers 11

Another version of the affair of the manna and quails is provided in Numbers 11. The Children of Israel, who are on their way to the Promised Land, are dissatisfied with only one kind of food, the manna, and express their longing for the variety of dishes which were available to them in Egypt. They miss especially fish and meat, saying:

... If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.

(Numbers 11:4–6)⁴

This discontent with the manna kindles God’s anger, and he tells Moses that he is about to give the Children of Israel plenty of meat, which they will consume till they can stand it no longer.

You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days; but for a whole month – until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome [*le-zārā*] to you – because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”

(Numbers 11:19–20)

Upon hearing God’s intention, Moses doubts whether it would be possible to find enough meat and fish to feed the entire people for a whole month, but God assures Moses that this can be done, as the Lord’s power is unlimited (Numbers 11:21–3). Eventually the following takes place:

Then a wind went out from the Lord, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground. So the people worked all that day and night and all the next day, gathering the quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers; and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.

(Numbers 11:31–2)

In this passage, God enacts all the deeds which Moses has doubted. As opposed to the meat and the fish that Moses has mentioned, God provides the unsatisfied

4 Unless otherwise stated, the English translation of the biblical passages is according to *The New Revised Standard Version*.

people with “quails from the sea”. Their arrival from the sea turns these birds into a combination of fish and poultry, providing the Israelites with the fish and meat they have asked for. In the ensuing verses, the drama culminates.

But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague. So that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah [graves of lust], because there they buried the people who had the craving.

(Numbers 11:33–4)

This terrible punishment is meted out to the Israelites merely because the manna has not been good enough for them. Had they given up their demand for additional food beyond the manna, the “quails from the sea” would not have come, and they would have been spared.

Moses’ entreaty

Early Jewish Midrash elaborates on these events. The *Tosefta*, a Palestinian collection of midrashic materials (c. 200 CE), describes Moses’ attempts to prevent the catastrophe that awaited the complaining Israelites. He said to God:

Is it proper for them that you should give them what they need and then put them to death?

God answered:

But is it proper for them to say: “The Omnipotent cannot provide sufficient food for us and our cattle?” But let them and thousands like them perish!⁵

This discourse is an elaboration on Numbers 11:23, where God says to Moses: “Is the Lord’s power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not”. In this manner the *Tosefta* intensifies the role of the quails as a means of a terrible punishment. In another Midrash (*Sifré*), Moses tells God that he intends to go to the discontented people and appease them, but God tells him not to bother because they will not listen. Moses goes anyway but fails to persuade them.⁶

Manna and quails: the Quran

Various elements in the biblical accounts of the manna and the quails resurface in the Quran. To begin with, according to Q. 7:160, Moses used his rod to produce water out of the rock (see Exodus 17:6), and then the following took place:

5 *The Tosefta, Nashim* (Sotah 6:7) trans. Jaccob Neusner (New York, 1979), 174.

6 *Sifré, Bamidmar*, n. 95; Jacob Neusner, *Sifré to Numbers* (Atlanta, 1986), II, 105–6. See also *Midrash agada*, ed. Salomon Buber (Vienna, 1894), I, 101 (on Numbers 11:22).

... and we outspread the clouds to give shade over them, and we sent to them manna and quails (saying): eat of the good things we have given you. They wronged not us, but it was themselves that they wronged.

In this Meccan passage, the biblical scene of the manna and quails is recounted quite briefly, with only a vague allusion to the sin of the displeased Israelites. The succeeding passage (Q. 7:161–2) tells us how the Israelites were instructed to dwell in “this town” (*hādhihi l-qarya*) and eat plenty of good things therein; they disobeyed by not saying the right word (*hiṭṭa*) and not prostrating themselves while entering the gate of that town. The next passage (Q. 7:163–6) contains the story of the town by the sea and the apes. All in all, Q. 7:160–6 contains a sequence of four episodes revolving around food and drink: (1) the rock and the water; (2) the manna and the quails; (3) the town and *hiṭṭa*; (4) the town by the sea.

In the Medinan parts of the Quran, the manna and the quails are mentioned again within a sequence of four episodes. The first episode appears in Q. 2:57, where the reference to the manna and the quails is identical to the brief one given in episode 2 of Q. 7:160. This is followed by the affair of the town and *hiṭṭa* (Q. 2:58–9). Thereafter comes the event of the rock and the water (Q. 2:60), and then comes the fourth episode, which runs as follows (Q. 2:61):

You said: O Moses, we cannot put up with one sort of food, so pray to your lord on our behalf to bring forth for us out of what the earth produces, of its herbs and its cucumbers and its garlic and its lentils and its onions. He said: Will you exchange that which is better for that which is worse? Go down to Egypt, so you will have what you ask for. And abasement and humiliation were brought down upon them, and they became deserving of God’s wrath; this was so because they disbelieved in the communications of God and killed the prophets unjustly; this was so because they disobeyed and exceeded the limits.

This passage describes the fatal ungratefulness of the Israelites who were displeased with only one kind of food, which, according to Numbers 11, preceded the coming of the quails. It is therefore an elaboration on episode 1 in which the actual arrival of the quails, as well as the manna, is recounted.

The town by the sea

A comparison of the two lists of the four episodes reveals a noteworthy detail. Three episodes are common to both lists: the rock that produced water, the manna and the quails, and the affair of *hiṭṭa*. As for the fourth episode, in Quran 7 it is the one of the town by the sea (Q. 7:163–6), whereas in Quran 2 it is the story of the Israelites who were displeased with only one sort of food (Q. 2:61). This is no coincidence. It seems that on both lists, episode 4 represents the same event but from different viewpoints. In Quran 2, episode 4 is focused on the sin of the displeased Israelites that preceded the coming of the quails, while in Quran 7, episode 4 – the town by the sea – seems to contain the Quranic reshaped version of the horrible punishment that the quails

brought along with them to the unrestrained sinners. In order to corroborate this observation, we must now look more closely at the story of the town by the sea. It runs as follows (Q. 7:163–6):

[163:] Ask them about the town situated along the sea; they profaned the Sabbath because their fish came to them on the day of their Sabbath, coming up to the surface of the water (*shurra'an*), and on the day on which they were not on a Sabbath they did not come to them; thus did we try them because they transgressed. [164:] A party of them said: Why do you admonish people whom God is about to destroy or punish severely? They said: [we do it] to be free from blame before your lord, and that haply they may be God-fearing. [165:] So when they forgot what they had been warned of, we delivered those who forbade evil and we afflicted the wrong-doers with a grievous chastisement because they transgressed. [166:] When they persisted in what they had been forbidden, we said to them: Become you apes (*qirada*), repelled (*khāsi'in*).

The present case is one of a predestined divine retribution. The food at a certain town is available only on the Sabbath, which means that it can only be collected while desecrating that holy day. This situation, which God himself seems to have brought about, gives him an immediate excuse to punish the people who have violated the Sabbath and transmute them into abominable apes. Not all the people are punished. One group of righteous people, who try to avert the lurking catastrophe and warn the potential sinners, escapes the fate of the others. There is yet a third party which asserts to the anxious righteous that warning the sinners will not help.

Biblical and midrashic links

This Meccan passage opens with the imperative “ask them”. It stands for a query which the Quranic prophet is often requested – especially in other Meccan sūras – to pose to people who possess the relevant information, which is needed to produce a lesson or confirm a theological point. The addressees are always the Jews, or the People of the Book, who are supposed to know the answer from their own scriptures.⁷ Indeed, several basic elements of the biblical versions of the affair of the manna and the quails are discernible here. To begin with, we have seen that in the biblical version the quails come to the Children of Israel “from the sea” (Numbers 11:31). The “sea” is most likely the Red Sea. The relationship between the quails and the sea is repeated in a Jewish Midrash saying that the sea has actually “brought up the quails for them”.⁸ Most significantly, in an early apocryphal source (first century CE) known as *Pseudo-Philo* (10:7) we read that “for forty years [God] rained down for them bread from heaven and brought quail to them from the sea”.⁹

7 Q. 10:94; 17:101; 25:59; 16:43; 21:7. Cf. Q. 43:45. See also Q. 2:211.

8 *Midrash Tanhuma, Shemoth, Ki Tissa*, no. 35 (Jerusalem, 1997), 703.

9 See D.J. Harrington, “Pseudo-Philo: a new translation and introduction”, in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York, 1985), II, 317.

Therefore it is not unexpected that in the Quran the quails that God produced for the Israelites “from the sea” should become actual fish. But even the fish have retained the basic features of the biblical quails. This is reflected in the fact that the Quran mentions no act of fishing. The fish merely “came up on the surface of the water” (*shurra*’),¹⁰ meaning that all that remained to be done was to collect them. The fish, like the quails, are disastrous. The people who consumed them ended up suffering God’s wrath. However, the sin for which they were punished has changed. In the Bible, the punishment is meted out to the quail eaters because they have disliked the manna and insisted on more kinds of food, whereas in the Quran, the fish eaters are guilty of having collected the food on a Sabbath. This latter offence seems to have been imported from the biblical version about those who tried to gather the manna on a Sabbath (Exodus 16:26–9). It may have been inspired also by a talmudic passage (Qiddushīn, 72a) noted already by Speyer.¹¹ It relates that there was a place in Babylon called BIRTHA DI SATYA whose people turned away from the Almighty; a fishpond overflowed on the Sabbath, and they went and caught the fish on the Sabbath, whereupon R. Ahi, son of R. Josiah, declared the ban against them and they renounced Judaism (or, they were destroyed). But this talmudic episode lacks the element of the two additional groups that are involved in the affair of the town by the sea. These groups have no parallel in the standard Quranic descriptions of friction between believers and unbelievers, and can only be discerned in the midrashic elaborations on the affair of the manna and the quails. Accordingly, the group of the righteous, who in the Quran intended to warn the fish eaters, is analogous to Moses, who, according to the above-mentioned Midrash, intended to warn the lustful Israelites of the danger that awaited them if they insisted on their demands for extra food. The group of people, who in the Quranic version wondered why the doomed fish eaters should be admonished at all, is a parallel with God, who, according to the Midrash, told Moses that there was no point in warning the insubordinate people.

Reading the account of the town by the sea along with the texts about the manna and the quails elucidates the most intriguing theological problem of the Quranic account: why did God supply the fish only on a Sabbath, thus forcing the people to break the holiness of the day? In view of the biblical precedent, it becomes clear that this was a punitive measure against ungrateful people who were not satisfied with what God had given them already. This observation is corroborated by the fact that in the above-mentioned sequence of four events, the fourth episode in Quran 2 is the affair of the Israelites who were not satisfied with one kind of food (Q. 2:61). This is a parallel with the fourth episode in Quran 7, which is none other than the affair of the town by the sea.

10 See Arne A. Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 147 (traditionally explained as “swimming on or near the surface”).

11 Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 314. Cf. Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 115.

Apes?

Although the relationship of the affair of the town by the sea to the affair of the manna and the quails is fairly clear, the Quranic version stands out as an independent one. The food is no longer quails from the sea but actual fish. Above all, the punishment is unique. The sinners are transmuted into apes (*qirada*), an infliction not anticipated in any of the biblical versions of the affair of the manna and the quails. Nor does it occur in the talmudic texts about the Sabbath violators. So whence the apes? A possible solution might be suggested with the help of some more midrashic materials that describe a sort of physical change that takes place in the body of the unconstrained sinners while they are consuming the quails. These texts revolve around the biblical passage in which God says about the disastrous quails that he is about to supply:

You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but for a whole month – until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome [*le-zārā*] to you.

(Numbers 11:19–20)

The key word in our analysis is *le-zārā* (לְזָרָא). The available targumim of Numbers 11:20 render this word as “[into] obstacle” (*le-taqlā*),¹² or “[into] abomination” (*le-riḥūq*)¹³ or “[into] nausea” (*le-aptarā*).¹⁴ Similar variations are provided in the early Jewish midrashim. In the Palestinian Midrash *Leviticus [Wayiqra] Rabbah* (fifth or sixth century CE), 18:4, we read:¹⁵

What does *le-zārā* mean? R. Huna said: [into] vomiting (*le-zurnā*) and [into] diarrhea (*le-butnā*). R. Shimon b. Laqīsh said: [into] croup (*le-askara*). R. Abbahu said: [into] warning (*le-azhara*). R. Ebyatar said: *le- idrdyā* (לְאִידְרֵיָא).

The various available texts – manuscripts and printed editions – of the *Leviticus Rabbah* offer different variants of the inflictions that the Jewish exegetes have explained in various ways.¹⁶ For the present context, however, the important point is that apart from the interpretation of *le-zārā* as *le-azhara* – “[into] warning” – which is a play on words, the rest of the suggested possibilities reflect the notion that *le-zārā* stands for a bodily abominable effect which the quails were

12 Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Numbers* (Hoboken NJ, 1998), 139. This is a delicate rendering, as if *le-zārā* were *le-šārah* (לְצַרְהָ). Cf. *ibid.*, 140 n. 44.

13 E.G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken NJ, 1984), 170; Alejandro Díez Macho, *Neophyti 1* (Madrid, 1968–79), IV (Números), 107.

14 *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version*, Part I, fascicle 2 (Leiden, 1991), 39.

15 Mordecai Margulies, *Midrash Wayiqra Rabbah: A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments with Variants and Notes* (Jerusalem, 1954–57), II, 409–10.

16 See the variants, *ibid.*, 410.

liable to have on the eaters. Most noteworthy is the explanation of R. Ebyatar, a second-generation Palestinian Amora. His interpretation of *le-zārā* is *le-'idrāyā* (לאִדְרַיָּא). This stands for a Greek loan word (*diárroia*) denoting “diarrhoea”. The various manuscripts have several other orthographic variations of the same word, such as לִדְרַיָּא or לִדְרַיָּה.¹⁷

As for the Quran, here, too, the punishment of the unrestrained sinners stands for a detestable bodily infliction, no less obnoxious than diarrhoea and the like. They become apes. That apes should be chosen as the species of transmutation is only to be expected in light of the ancient idea that sinners are liable to become apes.¹⁸ More specifically, apes represent the loss of human dignity due to over-indulgence in food and drink. For example, the *Midrash Tanhuma*¹⁹ states that when a human being drinks a lot, he becomes a hero like a lion and says that no one is like him. When he drinks too much, he becomes like pig, soiling himself in his own filth. When he gets drunk, he becomes like an ape, standing and dancing and playing and resorting to foul speech, and no longer knows what he is doing. Accordingly, the apes into which the sinners of the town by the sea are condemned to be transformed seem to represent a magnified form of the fate of the midrashic quail eaters who were punished with terrible bodily inflictions for their unrestrained craving for food.

Khāsi' ūn

Yet another link connecting the affair of the town by the sea to the case of the quail eaters is found in the description of the sinners who became apes. They are called *khāsi' ūn* [*khāsi' īn*]. The word *khāsi'* is usually applied to a dog or to a swine, or the devil, and means driven away, repelled and not allowed to come near people.²⁰ In Q. 67:4, as well, *khāsi'* means “rejected”, this time as a metaphor for a dazzled vision that is being shamefully driven back to the beholder.²¹ This sense of *khāsi'* takes us back to the *Leviticus Rabbah*. Here yet another interpretation for *le-zārā* is suggested: R. Judah b. R. Simon said: [*le-zārā* means that] from that time they became strangers [*zārīm*] as regards the Tent of the Covenant.²²

This interpretation is based on a play on words with *zārā* and *zārīm* (strangers),²³ so that the meaning is that the quail eaters have become outcasts, not being permitted to enter the Holy of Holies. Therefore, the Quranic description

17 See the Bar-Ilan University synoptic online edition of *Leviticus Rabbah*: <http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/midrash/VR/editionData.htm>. The first printed edition of *Leviticus Rabbah* (Constantinople, 1512) has the orthographic variation לִקְרָדָא/*le-qardā*: “into mites”. This would mean that the quail eaters were liable to be infested with mites. Had this variant been found in an early manuscript of *Leviticus Rabbah*, it might have provided a striking clue to the Quranic *qirada*. But alas, this is not the case. We only find it in printed editions, including those of *Numbers Rabbah* (7:4), where R. Ebyatar’s text is repeated.

18 Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 313–14.

19 *Midrash Tanhuma, Bereshit, Noah*, no. 13 (Jerusalem, 1994), 126.

20 Lane, *Lexicon*, 736 col. 3.

21 Cf. Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary*, 85.

22 *Leviticus Rabbah*, 18:4.

23 The form *zārīm* is common to all manuscripts and printed editions.

of the transmuted sinners as “repelled” seems to have preserved the midrashic interpretation of the biblical *zārā* in the sense of *zārīm*, “outcasts”, conflating it, as it does, with the interpretation of *zārā* as a sort of bodily infliction.

Concise versions

The punishment brought down upon the town by the sea is referred to more briefly in further Quranic passages belonging to Medinan sūras, i.e. later than the Meccan passage about the town by the sea. They contain some new elements not encountered in the version about the town by the sea that intensify the polemical tone of the affair. To begin with, Q. 2:65–6 reads:

You have known those among you who broke the Sabbath, how we said to them: Become you apes (*qirada*), repelled. Thus we made them an example to those who witnessed it and those who came after it, and an admonition to the God-fearing.

Here the scene appears shortly after the sequence of the four episodes (Q. 2:57–61), the last of which being the scene of the ungrateful Israelites who demanded more than one kind of food. This again supports the observation that the scene of the people who became apes is related to the same context, illustrating the fate of lustful people guilty of the same ungratefulness. The present version elaborates on the historical lesson that the following generations of Jews must draw from the affair.

Another Medinan passage refers to the punishment of those who violated the Sabbath, yet with only a vague allusion to the punitive transformation. This is Q. 4:47 in which we read:

O you who have been given the Book, believe in what we have revealed, which verifies what you already possess, before we alter countenances, turning them backwards, or lay a curse upon them [*aw nal' anahum*], as we cursed the violators of the Sabbath; and God's command shall be done.

This passage puts the violation of the Sabbath at the centre of the crime that has caused the severe curse of the sinners.²⁴ The addressees are the People of the Book, who, in this case, stand for Muḥammad's contemporary Jews of Medina. They are warned of the fate of their Israelite forefathers.

There is yet another Medinan passage that mentions the curse of the transmuted sinners. It is contained in Sūrat al-Mā'ida (5) which abounds with verses revolving around food and drink (Q. 5:1, 3–5, 66, 87–8, 90–1, 93, 96, 112–15). The sinners are transformed into apes as well as swine (Q. 5:60):

Say: Shall I tell you about those whose retribution with God will be worse than this? [They are the ones] whom God has cursed [*la' anahu*] and

24 The obligation imposed on the Jews to keep the Sabbath is related in the same *sūra*, in Q. 4:154, as well as in a Meccan *sūra* (Q. 16:124).

brought his wrath upon, and of whom he made apes [*qirada*] and swine [*khanāzīr*], and he who served the Ṭāghūt; these are worse in place and more erring from the straight path.

The addressees in the entire passage are again the People of the Book (Q. 5:59), and the addition of swine to the punitive transformation reflects the Quran’s unsympathetic attitude towards this species which the believers are forbidden to consume (Q. 2:173, etc.).

The curse by the tongue of David and Jesus

Another passage in the same *sūra* mentions again the curse of the Children of Israel (Q. 5:78–9):

Those who disbelieved from among the Children of Israel were cursed [*lu’ina*] by the tongue of David and Jesus, son of Mary; this was because they disobeyed and exceeded the bounds of right. They did not restrain themselves [*lā yatanāhawna*]²⁵ from a forbidden act they committed; evil indeed was that which they did.

The clause *lā yatanāhawna* runs parallel to the passage about the town by the sea (Q. 7:165–6), in which the root *n.h.y.* is also used. In that passage, the doomed sinners persist in doing what they have been forbidden (*mā nuhū ‘anhu*), in defiance of the warning of the party that has tried to forbid them from doing the wrong thing (*yanhawna ‘ani l-sū’i*). The root *n.h.y.* thus indicates the relationship of the curse by the tongue of David and Jesus to the fate of the people of the town by the sea.

David

More links of the curse by the tongue of David and Jesus to the doomed people of the town by the sea can be easily pointed out. Let us begin with David. The Quran states in two verses (Q. 4:163; Q. 17:55) that God revealed the Book of Psalms (*Zabūr*) to David. Therefore it stands to reason that the curse “by the tongue of David” refers to a chapter in that book in which David tells about a curse incurred by the Children of Israel.²⁶ Modern scholars have already suggested Psalms 109 as the chapter to which the Quran might be referring.²⁷ However, here only the poet’s personal enemies are cursed, not the Israelites as a collective group that God himself cursed. Also, the expression “by the tongue of” (*‘alā lisān*) does not seem to mean that David himself cursed the Israelites but that

25 The clause *lā yatanāhawna* could be interpreted as “they did not restrain one another” (Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary*, 276), but this is a less plausible option. See Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 2000), 15–16.

26 Elsewhere (Q. 21: 105), the Quran indeed alludes to a verse in Psalms – 37:29.

27 See Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen*, 383; Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart, 1971, 127) (with reference to Speyer). See also Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 350–51.

he was recounting an event in which the Israelites had once been cursed. The main clue to the relevant psalm is provided yet again in the clause *kānū lā yatanāhawna* ‘an *munkarin fa’alūhu*, “they did not restrain themselves from a forbidden act they committed”. This pronouncement harks back to Psalms 78. The entire chapter is dedicated to the condemnation of the Israelites for their persistent transgressions, from the Exodus through to David’s time. But the sweeping rebuke of the Israelites is not what makes this chapter particularly relevant to the Quranic allusion to David’s curse.²⁸ The specific link is to be found in the following verses of this psalm, in which the poet refers to the quail eaters (Psalms 78:30–1). Here is a literal rendering of the Hebrew:

They were not estranged (*lō zārū*) from their craving, while the food was still in their mouths. The anger of God rose against them and he killed the strongest of them. . .

The Hebrew words, *lō zārū* (לֹא זָרְוּ) – literally, “they were not estranged (from their craving)” – elaborate on the clause *le-zārā* that appears in the story of the quail eaters (Numbers 11:20). In the internal context of Psalms, *lō zārū* could mean that the quail eaters were not deprived of their desire, i.e. God gave them what they wanted. But *lō zārū* could also mean that they did not abstain from their craving. Accordingly, the idea would be that even before the object of their craving – the quails – became loathsome to them, i.e. when they still wanted more, God’s wrath befell them.

The perception of *lō zārū* in the sense of not having abstained or desisted (from their craving) is adopted in the Syriac Targum (the *Peshiṭta*) of Psalms. It renders *lō zārū* as: ܘܠܐ ܙܪܘ, ²⁹ i.e. “they did not cease (to crave)”, or “they did not forsake (their craving)”. This is also the interpretation which the Quran seems to have been following. The verse about the curse “by the tongue” of David states that this curse came upon the Children of Israel when they were not restraining themselves, or not desisting (*lā yatanāhawna*) from the forbidden act they were committing. The Psalm verse with *lō zārū* that speaks about the death that came upon the quail eaters seems to be echoed here very clearly. As seen above, the eventual death of the quail eaters has been mentioned in Numbers 11:33–4, where they are said to have been buried in Kibroth-hattaavah [Graves of Lust]. Their death also seems to be alluded to in the story of the town by the sea, where the wrongdoers are said to have been afflicted with a grievous chastisement (Q. 7:165). But here this chastisement is mentioned before the event of the apes, suggesting that there were

28 The possible relationship of Psalms 78 to David’s curse has already been suggested by modern scholars, without, however, pinpointing the specific link. See Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 351. As noted by Cuypers, al-Biqā’ī (d. 885/1480) does quote a verbatim translation of Psalms 78:1–42, but again without focusing on a specific connection to the Quranic curse by the tongue of David. See Ibrāhīm b. ‘Umar al-Biqā’ī, *Nazm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa-l-suwar* (Hyderabad, 1972–84), VI, 260–2.

29 See *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshiṭta Version* (Leiden, 1980), Part II, fascicle 3, 91.

two groups among the doomed Israelites: one was killed and the other transmuted.

Jesus

As for those cursed “by the tongue” of Jesus, the Quran imputes to them the same blame attributed to those cursed “by the tongue” of David – that they did not restrain themselves. Therefore, if David’s words refer to the death of the unrestraining quail eaters, the curse “by the tongue” of Jesus must also refer to those lustful Israelites who were killed by God on account of their part in the affair of the manna and the quails.³⁰ This takes us to the New Testament, to John 6. In this chapter, Jesus is near Tiberias, at the Sea of Galilee, where he feeds a crowd of five thousand with five multiplied loaves (John 6:1–14). The next day his hearers recall that Moses has previously given their ancestors bread from heaven, the manna, but Jesus insists that it was God who gave them the bread, asserting that “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”. He goes on to declare that he is the bread of life (John 6:25–35).

Many points in John 6 make it relevant to the Quranic scene of the Table (Q. 5:112–15),³¹ yet there is also a passage in John 6 that makes this chapter particularly relevant to the curse of the Jews “by the tongue of Jesus”. When the Jews hear that Jesus claims to be the bread of life that has come down from heaven, they deny it (John 6:41–2), but Jesus tells them among other things: “I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died” (John 6:48–9). Further on, Jesus tells the Jews about his own flesh: “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died” (John 6:58).

All in all, Jesus draws a clear line separating the food of death from the food of life. His own flesh is the origin of life, in contrast to the manna that brought death upon the ancestors of the Jews. Of course, in the Hebrew Bible, the quail eaters are those who die, not the manna eaters, but this slight deviation leaves the curse within the same context of unrestrained craving for the wrong kind of food that ends up with divine punishment and perdition. Jesus’s words about the death of the Israelite manna eaters seem therefore to be the curse “by the tongue” of Jesus that the Quran mentions along with that of David.

The conclusion that the curse by the tongue of David and that of Jesus refers to the quail eaters may be assessed against the background of the comments of the post-Quranic exegetes who maintain that these curses refer to the transformation of the Jews into apes and of the Christians into swine.³² This in turn reconfirms the observed link between the biblical quail eaters and the Quranic sinners who became apes.

30 The suggestion that Jesus’s curse stands for Matthew 15–16 (quoted already by al-Biqā’ī), or 23, is therefore not entirely plausible. For these suggestions see Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 351–2. These passages may, however, be relevant to the Quranic affair of the Table (Q. 5:112–15).

31 Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 416, 419–23.

32 For example, Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, I, 496 (on Q. 5:78).

Theodoret

In the Christian sphere, the terrible fate of the manna and quail eaters left its impression not only on the New Testament but also on Christian church leaders. Referring to Numbers 11, Theodoret of Cyrus (fifth century CE) asks:³³

Why did the prophet [= Moses; U.R.] express doubt when God promised to provide meat? Because he was not only a prophet but also a human being. But he was taught by the Lord God not to waver when God made a promise. In fact, God said to him, “Surely the Lord’s hand will not fail to provide enough? Now you will know whether my word will or will not overtake you”. Yet after promising to give the meat, God joined punishment to generosity. Having said, “You will eat meat for a month until it comes out of your nostrils”, he added, “It will nauseate you”, or, as Symmachus puts it, “It will make you sick to your stomach”. Overindulgence, in fact, brought on illness, and the heaven-sent-disease killed many. Hence, in his account, the divinely inspired David added, “While the food was still in their mouths, God’s wrath arose against them and killed great numbers of them” [Psalms 78:30–1]. So Paul in his great wisdom, rightly advised, “Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desire” [Galatians 5:16–17].

Theodoret’s comments indicate that David’s allusion to the doomed quail eaters was a well-known source of moral lessons, so that the Quran too could have picked it up when formulating its own lesson regarding the fatal end of the Israelites who failed to overcome their earthly desires.

Post-Quranic *tafsīr*

Some details contained in the post-Quranic *tafsīr* seem to retain the relationship – although not directly – of the transmuted sinners to the biblical quail eaters.

Ayla

To begin with, the majority of the Muslim exegetes maintain that the town by the sea is Ayla.³⁴ This is a well-known town situated at the northern tip of the Red Sea (= modern Eilat).³⁵ According to a tradition of Ibn Iṣḥāq

33 Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus, *The Questions on the Octateuch*, Greek text revised by John F. Petruccione, English translation with introduction and commentary by Robert C. Hill (Washington DC, 2007), II, 121 (Question 19, on Numbers 11).

34 For example, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (Cairo, 1979), II, 70; Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Cairo, 1323/1905), repr. (Beirut, 1972), IX, 62.

35 A more refined location is suggested in traditions to the effect that the town by the sea is Maqnā, a town near Ayla, populated by Jews. The traditions say that it is between Madyan and ‘Aynūnā. See Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, IX, 62; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘azīm*, ed. As’ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib (Mecca-Riyad, 1997), V, 1598 (no. 8443). According to another version, Maqnā lies at the seashore (*sāḥil*) of Madyan. See Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq b. ‘Atīyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-‘azīm* (Rabat, 1975–91), VII, 186.

(d. 150/768) on the authority of ‘Ikrima (Medinan d. 105/723), from Ibn ‘Abbās, the town by the sea was called Ayla and was situated between Madyan and al-Ṭūr (= Mount Sinai).³⁶ A slightly different version of Ibn Ishāq has it that the town was called Madyan, and was situated “between Ayla and al-Ṭūr”.³⁷

The phrase “between Ayla and al-Ṭūr” is reminiscent of the biblical clause, “between Elim and Sinai” (Exodus 16:1), which marks the area where the Children of Israel were camping when the affair of the manna and the quails occurred. Thus a striking parallel emerges between the name of Ayla and the biblical Elim. This seems to indicate that the Muslim exegetes might have been aware of the possible relationship between the Quranic event at the town by the sea and the biblical event of the manna and the quails.

Tiberias

Another identification of the town by the sea – attributed to Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri (Medinan d. 124/742) – is Tiberias (*al-Ṭabariyya*).³⁸ This seems to reflect the impact of John 6, in which Jesus is near that city while pronouncing the words about those who ate the manna and died (see above). Hence this identification also implies a relationship between the “town by the sea” and the affair of the manna and the quails.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the biblical affair of the manna and the quails, with its midrashic ramifications, reappears in the Quran in various forms. In some versions, the manna and the quails are mentioned explicitly but not necessarily with the specific sin that the Israelites committed in relation to them (Q. 7:160; 2:57). Other versions do not mention the manna and the quails by name, yet they contain other specific details from the biblical account about the unrestrained lust of the Israelites for extra food beyond what God has given them, as well as references to God’s rage against them (Q. 2:61). In other variants, the manna and the quails are not mentioned, and the focus is on the punitive transformation of the unrestrained sinners into apes (Q. 7:16–6; 2:65; 5:60). Their punishment is explicitly defined as a divine curse (Q. 4:47). Another Quranic verse (Q. 5:78–9) alludes to the same curse of the unrestraining Israelites as recounted by David (apparently in Psalms 78) and by Jesus (apparently in John 6).

The people who became apes (*qirada*) seem to represent the lustful quail eaters who, in Jewish Midrash (*Leviticus Rabbah*), are said to have been punished with various kinds of nasty bodily inflictions. In the Quran they are transformed into apes, a species that represents the loss of human dignity due to over indulgence in food and drink. The post-Quranic *tafsīr* regarding the whereabouts of the “town by the sea” seems to corroborate the relationship of the Quranic

36 Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, IX, 62 (on Q. 7:163).

37 Ṭabarī, *ibid*.

38 For example, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr*, V, 1597 (no. 8442); ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-uyūn fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Abd al-Maqṣūd b. ‘Abd al-Rahīm (Beirut, 1992), II, 272; Ibn ‘Aṭīyya, *Tafsīr*, VII, 186; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān* (Cairo, 1967), VII, 305.

story of the apes with the biblical affair of the quail eaters. The relationship is indicated mainly through the affinity between Elim – the place near which the biblical affair of the quails occurred – and Ayla, the place that the exegetes identify with the “town by the sea”.

On a more general level, the above study has demonstrated a further aspect of the manner in which a distinctive biblical theme found its way into the Quran in more than one static version, thus reflecting a typical element of the uniquely intricate texture of the Quranic message.