

A Review of Contemporary Arabic Scholarship on the Use of Isrāʿīliyyāt for Interpreting the Qurʿan

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Abstract

The Qurʿan, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament have in common some twenty prophetic figures. The Qurʿan engages these earlier scriptural communities both in its direct addresses and in the way it recounts the stories of these prophets. The earlier scriptures tend to present accounts of these prophets in more detail than the Qurʿan. As such, early Muslims would sometimes consult Jewish and Christian converts to Islam to elaborate on the Qurʿan's allusive and terse references. From this process emerged a body of narratives called Isrāʿīliyyāt. Although well established in Muslim tradition, the practice of using such narratives to exegetical purpose has also long been a source of serious contention between scholars. This essay reviews nearly a dozen recent Arabic works in order to consider contemporary perspectives on the use of Isrāʿīliyyāt for interpreting the Qurʿan.

Introduction

As a sacred text, the Qurʿan can be read in conversation with both Judaism and Christianity. Addressing the 'People of the Book' twelve times and the 'Children of Israel' six times, the text directly engages listeners from these scriptural communities. And from its renditions of the stories of some twenty prophetic figures shared with the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the Qurʿan positions its account as the final arbiter between the three com-

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munities. Indeed, the text asserts as much in the verse, “*Indeed, this Qur’an relates to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree*” (Q. 16:76).¹ Verses such as these had a formative role in the interactions between the nascent Muslim community and the non-Muslims they would encounter in Medina and beyond over the following decades.

Muslims found themselves in close contact with Christian and Jewish scholars whose texts mentioned the same prophetic figures commemorated in the Qur’an but also included names, places, and other details not found in Islamic texts. Consequently, the exchange was not unidirectional: beyond the Qur’an’s text, some early Muslims would also use Jewish and Christian sources (*isrā’īliyyāt*) to elucidate their understandings of the Qur’an’s prophets. This essay reviews contemporary Arabic scholarship on the use of *Isrā’īliyyāt* for interpreting the Qur’an. In doing so, it responds to the dearth of English-language scholarship engaging with Arabic-language scholarship. As Yousef Casewit has mentioned, compared to the academic exchange in biblical studies between English and Hebrew-language scholarship, there is very little exchange on the Qur’an between contemporary scholars producing in Arabic and English.² This paper thus aims to familiarize English-language scholars with some of the major works on *Isrā’īliyyāt* produced by their Arabic-language counterparts, classifying them under three broad camps to help them navigate the field.

Definition

In a broad sense, Muḥammad al-Dhahabī defines *Isrā’īliyyāt* as “The Jewish and Christian effects (lit. coloring) on Qur’an exegesis [*tafsīr*], as well as how exegesis has moreover been affected (lit. colored) by these communities’ cultures.”³ Operatively, it can be defined as events or stories narrated by an Israelite, that is, a person claiming descent from Prophet Ya‘qūb.⁴ These narrations are generally attributed to scholars of Judaism and Christianity who converted to Islam. They began to inform exegesis at the time of the first generation of Muslims (*saḥāba*, or Companions).⁵ According to al-Dhahabī, some of the Companions were naturally curious about biblical sources because of how much they resembled the Qur’an’s content, especially the prophets’ stories. When a Companion sought clarification for a story in the Qur’an that could not be found in another part of the Qur’an, he would consult with other Companions. Often none would be willing or able to provide answers except for those converts to Islam—mostly from Judaism—who had knowledge of the stories from biblical sources. Al-Dha-

habī points out that the fundamental difference in how the sources present the prophets is that the Qurʾanic style tends toward brevity (*iʿjāz*) while the biblical toward exposition and verbosity (*baṣṭ wa iṭnāb*).⁶ Aided by the general perception that they had a divine and therefore authoritative origin, the expository quality of biblical sources served as the broad motivation for collecting Isrāʾīliyyāt. The most prominent Companion narrating Isrāʾīliyyāt was ʿAbdullāh bin Salām (d. 43/663), an early Jewish convert to Islam. Abu Ḥurayra (d. 57/677), ʿAbdullāh bin ʿAmr bin al-ʿĀṣ (d. 63/663), and ʿAbdullāh bin ʿAbbās (d. 68/687) narrated from him extensively. Of the second generation (*tābiʿūn* or Followers), the most prominent were Kaʿb bin al-Ahbār (d. 32-5/652-60), Wahb bin Munabbih (d. 110-14/725-29)—both of whom converted from Judaism—and ʿAbd al-Mālik bin Jurayj (d. 150-1/767-8), who converted from Christianity. In total, there were far more narrations attributed to Jewish than to Christian sources.

Through the proliferation of narrations attributed to these formerly Jewish and Christian scholars there emerged a vast genre of exegesis that furnished the Qurʾan's core presentation of its prophets with biographical information, lineages, geographic locations, and various other details. Many of these were collected in what is considered one of the most comprehensive narration-based exegetical works, the *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān fī Tafṣīr al-Qurʾān* of Muḥammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), which has been highly influential since resurfacing as a complete manuscript at the turn of the twentieth century. Building on al-Ṭabarī's work, the *Tafṣīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm* of Ismaʿīl bin Kathīr (d. 774/1373) also makes use of Isrāʾīliyyāt. His work is remarkable for attempting to explain Qurʾanic verses almost exclusively through hadith and other narrations (*āthār*). At times using an abbreviated terminology specific to hadith sciences, it seems that Ibn Kathīr was writing for circles that could distinguish between weak and strong grades of narration. Nonetheless, like al-Ṭabarī's exegesis, Ibn Kathīr's has since become a reference book for lay Muslims. Since the Arab oil-boom of the seventies and the religious revival (*al-saḥwa al-islāmiyya*)—which pivoted on narration-based texts—*Tafṣīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm* has become the most accessible exegetical work to lay Muslims. This is in large part due to its wide dissemination in print and online platforms and later translations by major publishing houses. Because of the great impression these two works have had on common Muslim understandings of the Qurʾan's prophets, contemporary Arabic scholars on Isrāʾīliyyāt typically single them out for case studies.

Literature Review

Considerable advancements have been made in the academic field of Isrāʾīliyyāt studies since the second half of the twentieth century. M.J. Kister examines commentaries of the major hadiths that provide the legal basis for narrating Isrāʾīliyyāt. Citing classical Muslim scholars, he presents conflicting grammatical constructions of the *lā ḥaraja* clause found in a critical Isrāʾīliyyāt text supporting hadith and their implications for the Muslim sciences.⁷ Through his catalogue of commentaries on the hadiths, Kister provides insights into possible rationales for the prophetic utterances and their social contexts. He also sheds light on some classical Muslim prefiguration of biblical sources regarding the coming of Prophet Muhammad. These insights reveal the spectrum of attitudes towards Isrāʾīliyyāt found in classical Muslim tradition, much of which was rather cautious and non-dogmatic in nature.⁸ Roberto Tottoli addresses the difficulty of determining when Isrāʾīliyyāt was first coined as a technical term. While confirming Ignaz Goldziher's findings that al-Masʿūdī (d. 345 H/956 CE) was the first person to use the term in his *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Maʿādin al-Jawhar*, he mentions that Abū Bakr bin al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148) was the first to use it in a technical sense, thus inaugurating an explicit awareness of the narrations as a problematic exegetical genre.⁹

Ismail Albayrak builds on Tottoli's work on the evolution of the genre by identifying the early role of some *quṣṣāṣ* (storytellers) in disseminating Isrāʾīliyyāt.¹⁰ He contributes to the field by discussing how not only Christian and Jewish but also other Near Eastern sources factored into Isrāʾīliyyāt. He also proposes the important question of whether it is possible to use the Qurʾān to interpret the Bible, one that has since been taken up by John Kaltner and others.¹¹ Yunus Mirza locates attitudes towards Isrāʾīliyyāt within the major developments of narration-based *tafsīrs* from the fourth/tenth century to the eighth/fourteenth century. He contrasts al-Ṭabarī's liberal use of biblical sources with the more guarded approaches of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr, citing advancements in hadith sciences over the intervening four hundred years as a major factor of Isrāʾīliyyāt skepticism. While Ibn Taymiyya's role is often overlooked in the field, Mirza demonstrates the significance of his Qurʾānic hermeneutic on Ibn Kathīr's commentary as well as its long-term impression of Isrāʾīliyyāt skepticism upon narration-based exegesis.¹² Advances have also been made on secondary themes of Isrāʾīliyyāt studies, among them the accusation of *tahrīf* or what Reynolds calls 'scriptural falsification'. He breaks down this general

accusation into three types that are useful for concretizing the term's significance: 'textual alteration,' 'misinterpretation,' and 'shifting words out of context'.¹³

These secondary works are invaluable for their analysis of classical sources. Generally missing from them, however, are substantive references to contemporary Arabic-language scholarship (though Mirza's work stands out as an exception, and Albayrak makes a reference to such literature). Otherwise, the most recent Arabic-language scholar cited in these works is Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍa (1354/1935), whose writing is now treated as a primary rather than academic source in both Arabic and English-language scholarship. Such a division of the field of study into anglophone and arabophone spheres clearly limits its development. Stimulating academic exchange between contemporary Arabic and English-language scholars would thus be an important means of developing the field of Isrā'īlyyāt studies.

General Patterns

Of the Arabic-language scholars reviewed here, none categorically oppose Isrā'īlyyāt on the grounds of religious law. That is because their permissibility in Muslim tradition has been established largely owing to two authentic hadith narrations found in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Būkhārī*. The first one reads, "Report from me—even if only a single verse—and about the Children of Israel without reservation, and whoever intentionally attributes a lie to me, then let him take his seat in the hellfire."¹⁴ In the absence of an explicit prohibition that its context might have otherwise warranted, a second hadith seems even more approving: When Prophet Muhammad was informed that some People of the Book would read the Torah (*Tawrāt*) in Hebrew and translate it into Arabic for some Muslims, he advised: "Neither affirm nor cry lie to the People of the Book, but say we believe in Allah and what He has revealed to us..."¹⁵ This sensitivity towards Isrā'īlyyāt narrations should be considered in light of the Qur'anic affirmation of the original divinity of the Torah and Gospel (*Injīl*). Accordingly, whoever outright dismisses or prohibits their use runs the risk of negating what came from divine revelation.

Although establishing the general permissibility of narrating Isrā'īlyyāt, the two hadiths nonetheless advise caution on the matter. As such, contemporary scholars will instead usually argue the case for or against narrating Isrā'īlyyāt on the basis of their benefit or harm to understanding the Qur'an. From the works reviewed, it appears that scholars are divided

into three broad camps: those that problematize Isrāʿīliyyāt and discourage their invalid use (here termed ‘moderates’); those that problematize Isrāʿīliyyāt, discourage their invalid use, and also minimize their valid use (‘minimalists’); and those that problematize Isrāʿīliyyāt and discourage their use altogether (‘rejectionists’). This survey will analyze their main arguments.

Almost every modern reference book on the sciences of the Qurʾan dedicates a section to Isrāʿīliyyāt. These sections center on the origins and applications of the thousands of narrations originating from Jewish—and, to a lesser extent, Christian—sources. All of the reviewed works make sure to affirm the original divinity of the *Tawrāt* and *Injīl*. However, most emphasize that despite their original divinity, the physical copies of these scriptures were augmented with other sources such as the Oral Law, the ‘Mosaic pages’ (*al-asfār al-mūsāwiyya*), as well as advices (*naṣāʾih*), practices (*sunan*), and explanations of the text taken from other sources, all of which together produced what are today known as the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.¹⁶ Almost all of the scholars cite the Qurʾan (usually Q. 5:13) for reference to the distortion of Jewish texts. Factoring the human element into the Isrāʿīliyya sources circulating during early Islam, the scholars thus put a comfortable distance between the divine authorship of the *Tawrāt* and the main source-text of Isrāʿīliyyāt narrations, namely the Hebrew Bible. The more extensive works examined in this study cite verses and hadiths to justify the various positions. Scholars are quick to point out that while many of the Companions consulted Jewish and Christian converts on the stories of the prophets, they were more selective regarding whom they asked on matters of law and theology.¹⁷

Moderate Camp

Most of the moderate camp’s works reviewed here are large reference works that outline the various fields of Qurʾan exegesis. Because of the length of their sections dedicated to Isrāʿīliyyāt, these tend to expound on several opinions concerning their use and the scholars usually indicate their own views only suggestively. They tend to focus most on the difference between acceptable and unacceptable types of Isrāʿīliyyāt. In their sections supporting the permissibility of Isrāʿīliyyāt, the ‘moderate’ scholars’ works tend to cite combinations of the following Qurʾanic proofs in addition to the two hadiths cited earlier:

“So if you are in doubt of what we have revealed to you then ask those who have read the book from before you. Truth has verily come to you from your Lord so do not be of the doubters” (Q. 10:94);

“Say, then bring the Torah and recite it if you were to be truthful...” (Q. 3:93);

“Say, have you considered that this was from Allah while you disbelieved in it; and a witness from the Children of Israel testified to its likeness (in previous scripture), so he believed while you were too proud?” (Q. 46:10).

With these highly authoritative textual proofs at hand, moderate scholars proceed to explore the relationship between exegesis and narrations from Jewish and Christian sources. However, their discourse sidesteps the delicate question of what the Qur’an means by *Tawrāt* and *Injīl*. While the cited verses suggest that the scripture read by the Children of Israel contains the divine truth, yet other verses suggest that it may have already been altered from its divine form.¹⁸ Though this is a predicament that explicitly surfaces among scholars in the rejectionist camp, it is not meaningfully addressed in the moderate camp’s works reviewed here.

The moderate scholars tend to discern between *Isrā’īliyyāt* in two ways: the forms they take and their general degrees of legal permissibility. In terms of their forms, Mas’ad al-Tayyar (2011) analytically divides *Isrā’īliyyāt* into four types, namely those which situate the abstract (i.e. name unknown locations and people); detail the general (i.e. elucidate the precise nature of something like a misfortune or harm); direct the verse to its presumed meaning (i.e. give an abstract term its obvious explanation, based on an *Isrā’īliyya* source); and give a *sui generis* reason for the story (i.e. one which is based on an *Isrā’īliyya* source, with little or no textual basis in the Qur’an).¹⁹ He places those four types of *Isrā’īliyyāt* on a sliding scale in this order, in a range from complementing the Qur’anic text to subjugating it to a foreign interpretation. On its own, al-Tayyar’s typology might indicate which *Isrā’īliyyāt* are more constructive than others but does not further say which types are permissible (although he implies that the final type is least promising for ensuring an accurate interpretation).

In terms of their legal permissibility, al-Dhahabī (1970) provides a clear maxim on *Isrā’īliyyāt*. He states, “it is impermissible for the Muslim to accept what is told to him [from such sources] in any absolute sense, nor reject it in any absolute sense, but rather take from it what conforms with the

Qur'an or the prophetic practice (*sunna*) because this conformity is proof that such an *Isrā'īliyya* [text] is free from distortion and alteration." He adds the condition that such a text must also conform with reason (*'aql*), as this is a further proof that it has not been distorted or altered.²⁰ However, a field of study such as stories of the prophets—which characteristically involve miraculous or supernatural elements—might make reason a difficult criterion. Instead, what al-Dhahabī seems to mean by reason is that the narrations do not contradict tenets of Muslim belief (*'aqīda*), namely necessary articles of creed about God and His prophets. One serious issue al-Dhahabī mentions in this light is the *Isrā'īliyya* text stating that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and then 'rested' with the lexical sense of fatigue; al-Dhahabī cites in contrast the Qur'anic verse, "And indeed We created the heavens and the earth in six days and We were not touched by tiredness."²¹ For him, a text so contradictory to explicit Qur'anic text would be a clear example of an unacceptable use of *Isrā'īliyyāt*, one that could not be relied upon in an exegetical project. Another major issue occurs with regard to prophets, who (by the orthodox Muslim creed) are protected from committing major sins; a sinning prophet is logically impossible. Yet *Isrā'īliyyāt* frequently attribute immoral or indecent actions to the prophets, against the latter's correct depictions in the Qur'an. The account of David and Uriah's wife as told in the Second Book of Samuel is clearly to be rejected on this basis. One of the more unresolved examples of potential creedal violation is the prophetic status of Prophet Yūsuf's older brothers, namely the critical (if often overlooked) question of to whom the Qur'anic term *aṣḥābāt* (descendants) refers. If they were prophets despite having abandoned their younger brother, their example would demonstrate that exegetes in fact accepted the possibility of prophets committing major sins (at least before having entering prophethood).

Al-Dhahabī classifies *Isrā'īliyyāt* under three legal categories: permissible (because they conform to the Qur'an and *sunna*), impermissible (because they contradict those two sources or reason), and neutral (*maskūt*) (in that they do neither). Al-Dhahabī concludes that what neither conforms nor disagrees with these criteria should be treated squarely within the hadith text: 'Neither affirm nor cry lie to the People of the Book'. The moderate camp, as represented by al-Tayyar and al-Dhahabī, is thus mostly concerned with organizing *Isrā'īliyyāt* into a formal framework and discerning between its texts on a scholastic/legal basis.

Minimalist Camp

Rather than focus on whether certain *Isrāʿīliyyāt* are permissible, minimalist scholars tend to expound on al-Dhahabī's 'neutral' category, focusing on the utility and overall benefit of using *Isrāʿīliyyāt*. Their position can be supported by the following Qurʾanic verse concerning the People of the Cave, which seems to speak to the futility of pursuing unascertainable details:

They will say there were three, the fourth of them being their dog; and they will say there were five, the sixth of them being their dog—guessing at the unseen; and they will say there were seven, and the eighth of them was their dog. Say, [O Muhammad,] “My Lord is most knowing of their number. None knows them except a few. So do not argue about them except with an obvious argument and do not inquire about them among [the speculators] from anyone.”²²

There are several reasons scholars advocate for minimal use of permissible *Isrāʿīliyyāt*, but the overarching one seems to be the question of whether the texts actually offer benefit to understanding the Qurʾan. This position finds precedent in an opinion of Ibn Taymiyya that argues against using *Isrāʿīliyyāt* for their lack of benefit—as the above verse from *al-Kahf* would suggest—in addition to the risk of them actually being false.²³ Ibn Taymiyya's second point is worth underscoring considering that—even if such narrations do not contradict the Qurʾan and *sunna*—they might still be fictitious and thus unworthy of interpreting prophetic stories that traditional Muslim understanding holds to be historically accurate (although traditionally, narrations of dubious origin were employed for pedagogical and spiritual purposes). Examples of such unverifiable details are the number of the Companions of the Cave, the color of their dog, the body part of the cow used to resurrect the dead in the story of Prophet Mūsa, the name of the boy Prophet Khidr killed, the type of birds resurrected in the story of Prophet Ibrāhīm, the number of coins with which Prophet Yūsuf was purchased, the dimensions and type of wood used to build Prophet Nūḥ's ship, and so on. Nevertheless, many classical exegetical works, including those of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, cite narrations that furnish such details. These details now tend to surface in popular TV lecture series on the stories of the prophets (*qaṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*). Without their presenters discerning between sources, these details often get mixed in with the core story provided by the Qurʾan. This admixture of details then informs the lay Muslims' total un-

derstanding, which—without source-based knowledge of the Qurʾan and hadith—is unable to discern their Isrāʾīliyya elements.

Minimalist scholars also consider the role of Isrāʾīliyyāt in the development of Muslim sciences. Concerned with how Isrāʾīliyyāt proliferated to the extent they did, Muhammad Badr al-Dīn (2015) examines the issue specifically in terms of their negative impact on narration sciences. Badr al-Dīn puts forth that the rigorous standards that early generations of Muslim compilers observed when verifying narrations were not applied to Isrāʾīliyyāt. He asserts that the main reason for this laxity was early Muslims' blind trust in Christian and Jewish converts to Islam, including such eminent figures as Kaʿb al-Ahbār, Tamīm al-Dārī, Nūn al-Kalbānī, Wahb bin Munabbih, and Ibn Jurayj. He claims that Arab cognizance of the People of the Book's older scholarly tradition gave the latter a gratuitous benefit of the doubt. ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Hussein (2013) also supports this assertion.²⁴ This claim has roots in Ibn Khaldūn's theory that explains the Isrāʾīliyyāt phenomenon through sociological factors. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) explains the reception of Isrāʾīliyyāt in terms of an illiterate desert culture desiring to learn from more learned peoples, like those of Himyar (from where Kaʿb al-Ahbar and other authoritative narrators hailed), who were seen as inheritors of civilization and a vast tradition of knowledge.²⁵ In this light, Badr al-Dīn further suggests that the Arabs sought narrations from formerly Jewish scholars in the genuine belief that the texts from which they read had been preserved since the time of Prophet Mūsā.²⁶ As we later explore, this early attitude evolved into something more critical.

Jimal al-Hubi and ʿIsam Zuhd (2011) attend to the problem of Isrāʾīliyyāt chain transmissions (*isnād*) as they carried into subsequent generations. They mention that even before Islam, storytelling in Arabia commonly involved the practice of mentioning chains of narrators. Sought out even for the most mundane matters, this measure of accountability fostered a sense of authenticity in storytelling. Narrating sometimes also involved swearing an oath and producing a witness to corroborate its validity.²⁷ The importance of these practices intensified in the early generations of Islam, as they would now authenticate narrations informing correct belief and practice. Accordingly, scholars thoroughly cited chains of transmission throughout the second generation of Muslims (*al-tābiʿūn*). But beginning in the third generation, according to al-Hubi and Zuhd, exegetes began to summarize these chains, and as a result there was some misattribution of narrations to later narrators (although the *tafsīr* works of Wakīʿ bin al-Jar-

rāḥ (d. 197/813) and Sufyān bin ʿUyayna (d. 198/811)—who belong to this generation—still demonstrate thorough citation). Other scholars also mention that the laxity which developed after the second generation coincided with a great influx of Christian and Jewish converts to Islam after the Muslim conquests of Byzantine lands.²⁸

Beyond the problem of intermediary narrators, other minimalist scholars are interested in ascertaining the original sources from which Jewish and Christian converts supposedly drew their Isrāʾīliyyāt, namely, Hebrew and Aramaic texts. At this level of investigation, scholars sometimes delve into intra-Jewish issues, adding rich nuance to the field. Amal al-Rabiʿa (2001) is thus able to discern two categories of Isrāʾīliyyāt: those that come from Jewish texts and therefore are at least potentially acceptable, and those that do not come from Jewish texts at all (nor, moreover, conform with reason) and thus come under the category of legends and myths (*aṣaṭīr wa khurafāt*).²⁹ She then proceeds to trace Isrāʾīliyya narrations found in al-Ṭabarī to their original biblical sources or reveals their lack of any basis therein. Other scholars not looking at the Hebrew and Aramaic sources tend to classify anything that comes from Jewish and Christian converts as Isrāʾīliyyāt. By mentioning that within this category, there are narrations that have no basis in any tradition whatsoever (and rather seem to be the narrator's invention), al-Rabiʿa is able to direct pointed criticisms at certain individuals associated with Isrāʾīliyyāt rather than broad arguments against the genre at large.

Quite originally, al-Rabiʿa proposes that many of the Jewish texts in Medina were already written in Arabic. She cites three hadiths—in one of which ʿUmar bin al-Khaṭṭāb reads from Jewish books—to show that these texts could not have been in a language other than Arabic.³⁰ All of her examples involve an Arabic-speaking Companion either reading a Jewish text or having it read to them. The consequence of such a finding would be that Isrāʾīliyyāt were quite accessible to the Companions and would not—owing to their availability in Arabic—have necessarily required a Jewish or Christian convert to relate them.³¹

With their primary focus on the transmission process, the minimalist scholars cited here are well equipped to delve into the role of Isrāʾīliyyāt as a historical function of *tafsīr* sciences *in addition* to their utility for understanding the Qurʾān. Mostly focusing on the narrations' negative effects, al-Hubi and Zuhd mention that Isrāʾīliyyāt and the attention they attract have caused readers to distrust Jewish and Christian scholars who convert-

ed to Islam, to look at *tafsīr* books with skepticism, and to reduce their propensity to contemplate (*tadabbur*) the morals of the Qur'an's stories.³² By distinguishing between those *Isrā'īliyyāt* rooted in Jewish and Christian texts and those not, al-Rabī'a emphasizes the individual agency involved in their narration, providing a highly personalized counterbalance to the Khaldūnian-scale meeting of two religious traditions. Though not rejecting them categorically, the minimalist camp tends to see *Isrā'īliyyāt* as having a negative effect on both *tafsīr* sciences and general Muslim understanding.

Rejectionist Camp

The 'rejectionist' camp of scholars also has narrations to furnish their positions with proof. At least where Muhammad Abu Shahba (1988) mentions them, these hadiths against the use of *Isrā'īliyyāt* are not qualified by context or the order in which they were pronounced (i.e. whether they came before or after some of the more permitting hadiths).³³ This indicates that he takes them in their generality rather than with any particular attention to the needs of the Muslims at a specific place and time:

On the occasion of 'Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb reading to the Prophet from ahl al-kitāb books that he had taken as spoils of war, the Prophet asked him, "Are you confused about your religion, oh Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb? Did I not come with the pure message of Islam? By the One in whose hands is my soul, if Mūsā (upon whom be peace) were alive he would have no option but to follow me."³⁴

"Do not ask the People of the Book—for they will not guide you while they themselves have already misled themselves—so that you cry lie to truth or affirm falsehood."³⁵

Having broadly justified their position, such scholars categorically reject *Isrā'īliyyāt* for various reasons. Abu Shahba argues for their rejection based on what Muslims now know to be false. He mentions that in contemporary times, there have been considerable discoveries in human knowledge of the universe (especially in the natural sciences) while the Qur'an remains the greatest book. As such, using *Isrā'īliyyāt* that blatantly contradict these scientific discoveries to understand the Qur'an ends up depreciating the credibility of the Qur'an. As examples of what *Isrā'īliyyāt* have credulously narrated, he mentions ideas such as the age of the earth being seven thousand years old as well as explanations for phenomena such as the beginning of creation, natural manifestations such as thunder, lightning, eclipses, how

well-water stays cool in the summer and warm in winter, and more.³⁶ Thus, according to Abu Shahba, Isrāʾīliyyāt reflect poorly on the image of the religion, the scholars who propound them, and their incompatibility with scientific discoveries. This argument corresponds to al-Dhahabī's negation of the validity of Isrāʾīliyyāt based on their contradiction of reason (*ʿaql*). Though not applied consistently, this argument bolsters the claim that the Qurʾan came as a source of reason to banish the superstition and assumption (*ẓann*) emanating from pre-Islamic religious beliefs.

Other scholars reject Isrāʾīliyyāt on the grounds that they encumber the coherence of the Qurʾan. In a well-circulated Arabic translation of his Turkish-language work, Harun Ogmus (2007) asks the central question, 'Is there a need for Isrāʾīliyyāt in interpreting the Qurʾan?' His answer is in the negative. He frames their use as a complication of one aspect of the inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Qurʾan, namely that it addresses its listeners in clear terms they can understand. If the Qurʾan first addressed the people of Mecca (where most of the stories of the prophets seem to have been revealed) while they were not in close contact with Jews (unlike in Medina, where they would have access to Isrāʾīliyyāt), then Meccans would have been able to understand the stories in a complete way without need for the Isrāʾīliyyāt introduced beginning in the Medinan phase. For Ogmus, the idea that Isrāʾīliyyāt were somehow needed to complete exegetical understandings of these stories compromises the integrity of *iʿjāz* by suggesting that the stories were deficient in their original presentations. This kind of argument is novel in that it makes a rejectionist case not by negating the benefits of Isrāʾīliyyāt for understanding the Qurʾan, but instead by arguing their superfluity in light of the doctrine of *iʿjāz*.³⁷

Other scholars reject Isrāʾīliyyāt because of their propensity to cloud the Qurʾan's purpose. Fahd al-Rumi (1983) pivots on Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā's general view:

It was of the Muslim's bad fortune that most of what was written in *tafsīr* occupies the reader from the Qurʾan's sublime objectives and heavenly guidance. And from the matters of the Qurʾan that he is kept from is research of Arabic grammar... and much of what turns him away from this research is the excessive narrations and what has been mixed within them of Isrāʾīliyya myths...

Riḍā then adds, "and most of the narration-based *tafsīr* (*al-maʿthūr*) merely circulates narrations from the heretics (*zanādiqa*) amongst the Jews, Persians, and Muslim converts from the People of the Book."³⁸ Al-Rumi

approves of Riḍa's position and describes it in accordance with the 'methodology of the *salaf*. As the *salaf*—commonly taken to mean the first three generations of Muslims—were also some of the most prolific collectors of these narrations, al-Rumi seems to use this term as its common synecdoche referring to those early Muslims whose actions and beliefs were bound only by the Qur'an and *sunna*. However—as the story of Isrā'īliyyāt has revealed—this ideal is invariably complicated by the undeniable level of influence, even if unconscious, that non-Muslim traditions have exerted on Qur'an exegesis since as early as the Medinan phase.

While in theory agreeing with Riḍa on his categorical rejection, al-Rumi indicates that such a position is practically untenable. He argues that Riḍa was unable to properly sustain the rejectionist position because it led him to disparage several high-grade hadiths on the grounds that they were in fact based on Isrā'īliyya material. He cites the example of when he cast doubt on all hadiths related to the *Dajjāl*—the antichrist who appears at the end of times—although some feature in the highly authoritative collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim. More explicitly, Riḍa disparages early Muslims whom al-Rumi vindicates as 'trustworthy narrators' such as Ka'b al-Ahbar and Wahb bin Munnabbih (a Yemeni who, Riḍa underlines, was of Persian origin). Even more problematically, Riḍa cast doubt on their sincerity as Muslims. According to Riḍa, they were not merely mixing Jewish myths into their narrations, but simply inventing their own towards nefarious ends. In one case, al-Rumi cites Riḍa's view of al-Ahbar that through the myths he narrated, he "would deceive Muslims to spoil their religion and practice, all the while trying to come off as righteous..."³⁹ This resonates with al-Rabi'a's claim that many of these Isrā'īliyyāt were inventions with basis in neither Jewish nor Christian texts, but Riḍa goes farther by directly attributing them to nefarious motives.

The rejectionist camp seems driven by two main impulses. The first is to interpret the Qur'an on its own terms. Ogmus' appeal to the internal coherence of the Qur'an's as an aspect of *i'jāz* presents a purist case for rejecting Isrā'īliyyāt. The second impulse seems more polemically driven. While Abu Shahba acknowledges a neutral category of Isrā'īliyyāt that does not contradict the Qur'an and *sunna*, he still sees this category as harmful enough to merit being excluded from the *tafsīr* tradition altogether. He did, after all, write his book on the combined subjects of Isrā'īliyyāt and *mawḍū'āt* (fabricated narrations) in the belief that the former contained so many of the latter that they had equally come to pose a danger to Islam

and the legacy of the Prophet.⁴⁰ Al-Rumi's account of Riḍa's view is useful for understanding the reductionist dangers of rejecting Isrā'īliyyāt. Is it possible to fully purge tafsīr of Isrā'īliyyāt? Recalling al-Dhahabī's broad definition of Isrā'īliyyāt as "the Jewish and Christian coloring of Qur'an exegesis [*tafsīr*]," could such coloring be fully expunged from narrations attributed to Jewish and Christian converts to Islam? In his emphasis on the Persian and Jewish pre-conversion backgrounds of these narrators, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Riḍa's own perceptions of Isrā'īliyyāt may have been colored by Arab nationalism.

Conclusion: Advancing Studies in the Field

As the research surveyed above has established, one cannot ignore the impact of Isrā'īliyyāt on interpreting the Qur'an. With the Qur'an's engagement of Christian and Jewish scriptural communities and the later absorption of many of their adherents into the nascent Muslim community, there was bound to be a two-way exchange: both in terms of how Muslims would understand the Christian and Jewish religions, and in terms of how Christian and Jewish sources would assist Muslim interpretations of the Qur'an.

While scholars have delved deep into this exchange, some tensions—even if essentially unresolvable—deserve more attention. These include the major question of to what degree scholars consider the *Tawrāt* and *Injil* of the Prophet's time to have retained their divine forms. This is a particularly salient question in light of Qur'anic passages indicating that the Prophet was foretold in these scriptures—and at least two hadiths quote from them in Arabic.⁴¹ Some scholars have taken the view that these scriptures at the time and locality of the Prophet were yet in their divine forms, while others have taken the view that this preservation was limited to at least the parts of them that foretold the Prophet. These scholars argue that regardless of the scriptures' state at the time of the Prophet, the Hebrew Bible and New Testament available today are decidedly different.

Another tension that merits more attention is language, specifically where what might be considered Hebraic words are used. While this study usually comes under the field of rare Qur'anic vocabulary (*mufradāt gharīb al-qur'ān*), it deserves more prominence in the interpretation of prophetic stories proper, especially in how it might shed light on surrounding Isrā'īliyyāt details. For example, scholars such as Fadl al-Samarrai and Muhamadeen Hilali have noted that the word *yamm* (a formidable body of water)—also found in Hebrew and the Beja language spoken in Sudan and

Eritrea—is used eight times in the Qur'an, all in connection to the story of Prophet Mūsa.⁴² What might the Qur'an be indicating by using this word exclusively with this story, especially with an eye towards geography? Such linguistic investigations might advance understandings of the Qur'an independent of narrations, while in turn serving as tools to reject or verify Isrā'iliyyāt details found in those narrations. With scant other sources near to the time of the Qur'an other than these hadiths—what Fazlur Rahman calls *para-history*⁴³—these narrations are too valuable to go uninvestigated, even if misattributed or found to be of dubious origin. By the same token—and in keeping with established priorities of *tafsīr* methodology—interpretation of the Qur'an through the Qur'an must be fully exhausted before turning to hadiths.

However, it would be hard to imagine such a scholarly trend developing in isolation from regional politics. As Hassan Barari observed in *Israelism*, Jewish and Hebrew studies in Arab academia necessarily convey a political association, whether for or against Arab normalization with Israel.⁴⁴ That a disproportionate number of papers written on Isrā'iliyyāt have been written in Palestinian universities attests to the relevance of this topic as a reflection—if not extension—of the longstanding conflict. On the other hand, the example of Lu'ayy al-Sharif, an amateur but popular Saudi Semiticist, might be illustrative of a normalizing effect. While better known for transmitting Arthur Jeffery's linguistic theories of the Qur'an to Arab audiences, al-Sharif has also provided fresh impetus to learn Hebrew and Aramaic with his appeal for Arabs to appreciate revelation as spoken in the mother tongues of main Qur'anic prophets and to explore the region's broader Semitic heritage. Aside from using Aramaic to interpret the Qur'an, he has also used Hebrew to address Israelis on strictly political issues aimed at Saudi-Israeli rapprochement.⁴⁵ In an academic field concurrent with ongoing conflicts between linguistic and religious communities, pure or non-political knowledge (to borrow Said's terms) can prove an elusive pursuit. While contemporary politics invariably stimulates Isrā'iliyyāt studies, scholars must be vigilant not to allow it to sway serious research on a field originating over a millennium ago.

To advance Isrā'iliyyāt studies beyond its current state, that is, Arabic-language scholars will need to engage more intimately with the Hebrew Bible and New Testament and the histories of the Jewish and Christian scriptural communities. In line with the precedent set forth by at least one work cited in the study, this calls for scholars to increase their language ca-

capacity to directly engage with Hebrew and Aramaic sources. If scholars still reach the same conclusions, they will be all the more convincing for having been more thoroughly demonstrated. By enriching their analysis with the non-Arabic material that such engagement would bring, scholars could then take Isrāʿīliyyāt studies into unprecedented constructive territory.

Endnotes

1. Sahih International translation.
2. Introduction to his class 'Contemporary Arabic Scholarship on the Qur'an,' taught at the University of Chicago in Spring, 2018.
3. Muhammad Hussein al-Dhahabi, *al-Tafsīr wa-l-Mufasssīrūn* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 2000), 111. See also Amal Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rabi'a, *al-Isrāʿīliyyāt fī Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Dirāsah fī-l-Lughah wa-l-Maṣādir al-ʿIbriyya* (Cairo: The Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments, 2001), 25.
4. al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa-l-Mufasssīrūn*, 13.
5. *Ibid.*, 114.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Aḥmad bin Ḥajr al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī fī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Muḥammad Fuʿād al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1960), 6:329.
8. M.J. Kister, "Haddithu ʿan Bani Isrāʿīla wa-la Haraja: A Study of an Early Tradition," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 215-39. http://www.kister.huji.ac.il/sites/default/files/bani_israil.pdf.
9. Roberto Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term Isrāʿīliyyāt in Muslim Literature," *Arabica* 46, no. 2 (1999): 193-210.
10. Ismail Albayrak, "Qurʿanic Narrative and Israiliyyat in Western Scholarship and in Classical Exegesis" (PhD diss., The University of Leeds, 2000), 121-25. http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/507/1/uk_bl_ethos_365456.pdf.
11. Ismail Albayrak, "Reading the Bible in the Light of Muslim Sources: From Isrāʿīliyyāt to Islāmiyyāt," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 2 (April 2012): 113-27.
12. Younus Y. Mirza, "Ishmael as Abraham's Sacrifice: Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathir on the Intended Victim," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24, no. 3 (2013): 277-98.
13. Gabriel Said Reynolds, "On the Qurʿanic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (tahrif) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic," *Journal of the American*

- Oriental Society* 130, no. 2 (2010): 189-202, https://www3.nd.edu/~reynolds/index_files/scriptural_falsification.pdf.
14. al-‘Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, 6:329.
 15. *Ibid.*, 13:335.
 16. See Jimāl Mahmoud al-Hubi and ‘Isam al-‘Abd Zuhd, *al-Tafsīr wa Manhaj al-Mufasssīrūn* (Gaza: Ṭab‘at al-Miqdad, 1999), 86.
 17. al-Dhahabi, *al-Tafsīr wa-l-Mufasssīrūn*, 56.
 18. See Q. 2:75; 4:46. Although the Qur’an uses the word *tahrīf* (distortion) in association with Israelite texts, the other frequent accusations made by scholars—namely their *tabdīl* (replacement) and *taghyīr* (alteration)—are used in hadiths. See *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Būkhārī, Kitāb al-Itisām bi-l-Kitāb wa-l-sunna, Bāb qawl al-nabī ‘la tas’alu ahl al-kitāb ‘an shayy’*.
 19. Mas‘ād bin Sulaymān bin Nāsir al-Tayyār, *Tafsīr al-Qur’an bi-l-Isrā’īliyyāt: Nazrāt Taqwīmiyya* (Jeddah: Mujallat Ma‘had al-Imām al-Shāṭibī li-l-Dirāsāt al-Qur’aniyya, 2011), 51-53.
 20. Muhammad Hussein al-Dhahabi, *al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī al-Qur’ān wa-l-Hadīth* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1970), 49. His position is frequently cited in later works: see al-Hubi and Zuhd, *al-Tafsīr*, 87.
 21. See Q. 50:38 cited in al-Dhahabi, *al-Isrā’īliyyāt*, 49. See too al-Hubi and Zuhd, *al-Tafsīr*, 89.
 22. Q. 18:22, *Sahih International translation*.
 23. Full opinion cited in Muhammad bin Muhammad Abu Shahba, *al-Isrā’īliyyāt wa-l-Mawḍū‘āt fī-l-Tafsīr* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sunna, 1988), 111.
 24. ‘Abd al-Qadir Muhammad al-Hussein, *Tamyīz al-Dakhīl fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (Damascus: Jāmi‘at Dāmasq, 2013), 341.
 25. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima: Tārīkh ‘Allāmat Ibn Khaldūn* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1984), 5:439-440.
 26. Muhammad Hassan Badr al-Dīn, *Ishkālīyāt Maḥmūd al-Taurāt fī al-Darāsāt al-Islāmiyya wa Dawruhā fī Nash’at al-Isrā’īliyyāt al-Mubakkira* (Tunis: Mu‘minūn Without Borders, 2015), 2.
 27. al-Hubi and Zuhd, *al-Tafsīr*, 90.
 28. al-Rabī‘a, *al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 68.
 29. *Ibid.*, 28.
 30. Mentioned at length in footnote 34.
 31. al-Rabī‘a, *al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 52.
 32. al-Hubi and Zuhd, *al-Tafsīr*, 87.
 33. Cf. footnotes 14 and 15.
 34. Aḥmad bin Muḥammad al-Shaybānī, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt et al. (Tunis: Mu‘assasa al-Risāla, 2001), 1:349.
 35. al-‘Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, 13:525.
 36. Abu Shahba, *al-Isrā’īliyyāt*, 5.

37. Harun Ogmus, *Dirāsāt al-Manhajiyya ḥawl al-Ḥāja ilā al-Isrāʿīliyyāt fī Tafsīr al-Qasas al-Qurʿaniyya* (Sirnak: Sirnak University, 2007).
38. Fahd ʿAbd al-Rahman bin Sulayman al-Rumi, *Manhaj al-Madrassa al-ʿAqliyya al-Ḥadītha fī-l-Tafsīr* (Riyad: Muʿassasa al-Risāla, 1983), 319.
39. *Ibid.*, 322.
40. Abu Shahba, *al-Isrāʿīliyyāt*, 7.
41. See *Musnad Imām Aḥmād*, 1:417, and the hadiths examined in al-Rabiʿa, *al-Isrāʿīliyyāt fī Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 52.
42. Bakri Abubakr, “The Arabic and Bejawi Word ‘Yamm’: Did Prophet Musa Upon Whom Be Peace Speak It?” *Sudanese Online*, July 11, 2011, https://sudaneseonline.com/ar/article_11815.shtml.
43. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).
44. Hassan A. Barari, *Israelism: Arab Scholarship on Israel, a Critical Assessment* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2012).
45. Leya Kanaan, “K.” *YouTube*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAiaW9kA8LI>.