

# “People of the Book” and Nazarenes in the Koran: Who are the first, and on what grounds are the second included?

Taken and translated from *Oriens Christianus*, Band 92 Jahr 2008, z. 219-231 (updated article)

The habitual Islamic or Islamological rhetoric states that:

- the Koranic expression « people of the Book » (*ahl al-kitâb*, literally « tent of the Scripture ») is an overall designation of Jews, Christians and Muslims;
- the term “*nasârâ*” is the Arabic name for Christians.

The following study, published in early 2009 in the German journal *Oriens Christianus*, refutes these two points. The fact is that careful research and translation can isolate many passages in the Koran that do not support these assertions.

What does this study find? That the original leaflets that eventually became the “Koran” of the Caliphs betray a different reality:

- originally, “*ahl al-kitâb*” **exclusively** designated the possessors of the Holy Scripture, those who formed its “family”, in other words all the sons of Israel, regardless of their branch (“the Scripture” in question being the Torah)
- the “*nasârâ*” constituted the **other** Jewish branch to which the Koran alludes (other than the *yahûd*-Jews of Judaic tradition). This term must be rendered by “Nazarenes” – as even the Saudi do at times in their own translations.

It is only in a few verses that “*ahl al-kitâb*” and “*nasârâ*” corroborate the meaning widely given to them today; yet this study shows that those same verses were manipulated by the introduction of additional words or by an improper interpretation. As for the original meaning, it is easy to guess the historical reasons for which it had to be expunged (those are exposed elsewhere).

Without this comprehension lens, the Koranic text cannot break loose from its confines of ambiguities and contradictions.

At the center of myriad questions, one is largely fundamental: what is the Koran exactly referring to when it evokes the *people of the Book*?

The expression *ahl al-kitâb* appears 32 times in the Koran (a significant percentage of the total 127 occurrences of *ahl*). However the repartition of these occurrences is uneven across the text: after surah 5, *ahl al-kitâb* becomes scarce, appearing only in surahs 29, 33, 57, 59 (twice) and 98 (twice).

## • The name Nazarene occurs fifteen times

From the outset, the problem around the term *nasârâ*-Nazarene is weighty. Christians never called themselves *Nazarenes* (except roughly during the ten years that followed Pentecost): what they have been called and have called themselves is *Messians* (*Messianic*), i.e. *khristianoï*-Christians in the Greco-Latin Empire, and its equivalent *mešîhâyê* in Aramean (and the Persian Empire).

So why would they have been called by a different name in the Koran? Did Christians mistakenly use a different name for six hundred years until Islam was born? Even the most conservative translations by Islam’s standards, the Saudi publishing house *dar al-Ifta* for instance, do not always translate *nasârâ* by *Christians*. Here are two counter-examples:

“Those who believed, those who follow the Jewish [scriptures], **Nazarenes** or **Sabeans**, whoever believed in God... will have their reward” (surah 2:62 parall. 5:69). And also:

"Those who have believed, and those who follow the Jewish [traditions] and the **Sabeans and the Nazarenes**, the Magians and those who associated with God, God will judge between them on the day of Judgment" (Surah 22:17).

This is understandable: throughout the Koran, Christians are accused of giving God associates and are therefore doomed to hell. But the first verse, and the second implicitly, sends the *nasârâ* to Paradise. Should we think that God, who dictated the Koran, used the same term of *nasârâ* in these two verses to designate instead the "Nazarene community"? Does God ignore that proper nouns designate unique realities? Is it perhaps a persistent error in interpretation? Or a mistake inherent to the text? But how could it be so?

A close analysis of the 12 other occurrences of the term *Nazarene* and part of the 31 occurrences of the expression "people of the Book" will provide an answer.

### • The formal contradiction in Surah al-Mâ'idah (The table spread, 5)

The key to this question was actually given ten years ago by Antoine Moussali. In a cutting-edge article <sup>1</sup> Moussali pointed to the mechanism responsible for introducing contradictions in the meaning of the word *nasârâ* in the Koran, particularly in Surah 5. In this surah, we read on one hand:

"O you who have believed! Do not take the Jews and the *nasârâ* as allies: they are allies of one another" (5:51)

But on the other hand: "You will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say: *We are nasârâ*" (5:82).

The contradiction is so plain that many versions translate *nasârâ* by *Nazarenes* in the second verse. Another problem is that verse 51 is illogical: how can one pretend that Jews and Christians are friends or allies "of one another"? Muslim commentators get over the difficulty by saying that those who do evil are allied to each other. Is that possible if they are enemies, as is often the case? The problem therefore seems to lie in verse 5:51 where the term *nasârâ*, used just after the term *Yahûd* (meaning *Judaics*) can thus only mean *Christians*. In fact, this passage contains a startling formal inconsistency, as the cantillation reveals a break in the rhythm, which disappears only if we omit "and the *nasârâ*" (*wa n-nasârâ*). The balanced text is this:

"O you who have believed! Do not take the Jews as allies: they are allies of one another" (5:51).

Now the verse is clear, meaningful and coherent. Now the contradiction with verse 82 is gone. The convergence of these three factors leaves little room for doubt: the passage was interpolated.

So why was *wa n-nasârâ* inserted in the first place? Some could even object: was there a serious enough reason for taking the chance of causing a major formal contradiction a few verses further? There is a reason.

Before looking at it, we must make this remark, formulated by Antoine Moussali: Koranic expressions like and/or [the] *nasârâ* are **all** interpolations (perceptible to the ear): you find them in surahs 2:111 ("or *nasârâ*"); 2:113 (followed by "and the *nasârâ* say: the Jews have nothing to stand on"); 2:120 (and the *nasârâ*"); 2:135 (or *nasârâ*"); 2:140 (or *nasârâ*"); and 5:18 ("and *nasârâ*"). In verse 2:135, the addition of "or *nasârâ*" after "be Jews" is especially devoid of logic: it implies that the "sons of Abraham" recommend that people be either "Jews **or Christians**". Without the addition, the verse is again comprehensible:

"They (the sons of Abraham, cf. 2:133) say: *Be Jews, you will be guided. Say: Rather [we follow] the religion (millah) of Abraham, as hanîf-s (hanîfan)*" (2:135).

This verse acquires rich meaning, and should be compared to 3:67, when also rid of "*and not a nasrânî*":

<sup>1</sup> *Interrogations d'un ami des musulmans*, in COLL., *Vivre avec l'Islam?* Versailles, Saint-Paul, 1997, p.235-240.

"Abraham was not a Jew but he was a *hanîf* who submitted [to God] (*hanîfan musliman*)" (3:67).

The two verses say that Abraham was not a Jew since he was himself the father of the Jews, and that those, relying on their election, did not remain faithful to the religion of their forefather who *submitted to God (muslim)*. The same idea is present in the gospels (for example in Mt 3:9 and Lk 3:8), but here the affirmation is quite ironic as Abraham is presented as model of the *hanîf*. To grasp the scope of the anti-Jewish polemic pervasive in the Koran but antedating its written form, we need to know that in the Talmud-s, the term *hanef* means heretic, an equivalent of *mîn*<sup>2</sup>. By presenting Abraham as a kind of "*heretic who submitted to God*", Jacqueline Genot (+ 2004) explained, those two verses turn back against Judaism the Judaic condemnation of those they themselves deem heretic – in particular those whom patristic tradition calls the Nazarenes: *if we are heretics, they say, then Abraham was heretic before us: you are the unfaithful heretics!*

Here we touch upon a major problem of contemporary Islamology: what can we understand of the Koran's Jewish polemic if we do not know the historic contemporary background of Judaism and its branches? The ties between the two are not mere hypotheses. A publicly verifiable, recurrent evidence that is never contradicted or explained away by a logical argument belongs to the domain of the factual and nonarbitrary.

### • Why modify the meaning of the word *nasârâ*?

As far as we are concerned, Koranic expressions of the type "*wa n-nasârâ*" (unlike other occurrences of the word *nasârâ*) are additions to the text forcing the reader to think that *nasârâ* stands for *Christians*: this isn't a mere happenstance. But what goal was being pursued by intentionally stretching the word and by doing so truncating its meaning? The historical context furnishes the explanation. If, from the time of 'Uthmân, the decision was made to showcase the current "Islam" as an autonomous reality willed by God, its *Nazarene* roots had to be masked, particularly in the writings produced to oppose the Jews and Christians' Bible – even if, historically speaking, nothing proves that the collected works were officially presented as divine before the 7th century; similarly, nothing indicates that the terms *Islam* and *Muslim* had already been employed in the modern sense (before the 8th century, *Muslim* simply meant *one who submits* (is subjected) [to God] as we see in the mouth of the Apostles in 5:111 – true to the Aramean root<sup>3</sup> – while *islâm* meant *submission*).

In the absence of skilled men who could rewrite the totality of the manuscripts, it was more expedient to alter the meaning of *nasârâ* by adding words, a much more clever tactic than suppressing its occurrences: collective memory can veer off much more easily than it can be erased by an authoritarian edict. But the first meaning did not completely disappear. Two centuries after Muḥammad, Ibn Hišâm still called Waraqa, the man who blessed his marriage with Khadija, a "*Nazarene priest*". This couldn't be in any way a *Christian* priest. The fact that this Waraqa is said to have translated books from Hebrew to Arabic points to a Jewish context – even though Muḥammad, for his part, was Arab. We also read that:

"Waraqa ibn Nawfal was priest and chief of the Nazarenes...He was excellently acquainted with Nazareism. He frequently read the books of the Nazarenes, until he knew them like the *people of the Book*". And: "Concerning Waraqa, he was seeking wisdom through Nazareism; it was the Nazarenes who introduced their books to him, so that he had acquired a sure knowledge of the *people of the Book*".

A passage of Bukhârî gives this further explanation:

"It happened that Waraqa deceased and the *revelation* dried up" (Azzi, p.205<sup>4</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> Plural: *hanefim* or *hanupa*, cf. *Talmud Babli*, treatises *Sanh.* 103a or *Sota* 41b. The midraš gives this precision: "R. Jonathan said: When a derivative of the root *hnf* appears in Scriptures (*miqr'ah*), the text is aimed at the *mîn'im*" (*Beréšit Rabba* ch.48, 18,1).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. [the meaning of "Muslim".htm](#) or in [PDF format](#).

<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive study concerning Waraqa was done by Joseph AZZI in chapters I and III of his book *Le prêtre et le prophète. Une étude sur les origines de l'islam*, translated by Salina Morsy, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2004 (translation from Arabic is available on [Amazon.com](#): *The Priest and the Prophet*). The quotations from his book were found in IBN HIŠÂM, *as-Sîrat an-nabawîya*, and d'Al-Bukhârî

Doesn't Bukhârî mean the texts collected together in one book, which later came to be known as *Koranic revelation*? It should also be pointed out that Khadija was supposedly a cousin of Waraqa, therefore she too was *Nazarene*. This marriage certainly provides a key to the origin of "Islam".

To close our chapter around the occurrences of the word *nasârâ*, one should cite verses 5:14 and 9:30, where the perceived interpolations go beyond a few words that a trained ear can detect: those are vaster and more complex. For want of space, let us leave aside verse 9:30 (where we find *wa n-nasârâ*)<sup>5</sup> to better examine the most telling verse 5:14.

This verse, in its entirety, reflects a late Muslim dogmatic push to accuse the *nasârâ* of having "*forgotten part of what they had been reminded*". But in the rest of the Koran, we never read that Christians have "*forgotten*" a certain part of the Revelation (which we would then interpret as: what concerned the future coming of Muhammad). If that is the case, we must admit that verse 5:14 is related to verse 61:6, making Jesus claim to be "*the prophet of a messenger who comes after me, whose name is Ahmad* [the equivalent of *Muhammad*]". But remember that here too we are confronted to a late Islamic apologetic based on a very creative comparison with the Greek word *paraklêtos* present in Saint John's gospel<sup>6</sup>. Can the original Koranic text contain a polemic that only surfaced over a century later, by all historians' accord? Similarly to the core part of verse 61:6, verse 5:14 is a longer, complete interpolation, arranged with borrowed and slightly adapted elements from the foregoing verses 12 and 13.

The stakes are high, for if we continue on to verses 12-20 and skip verse 14, *Christians* are no longer mentioned, whereas the whole passage takes on a new, rigorously coherent meaning, handing out a diatribe against an important part of the "sons of Israel" who didn't remain faithful to their promises (v.12), who forgot "part of what they had been reminded" (v.13) and for whom a "Messenger came *in the past (qad)*," bringing a light and a text revealing what had been kept hidden (v.15). We know that this "Messenger from God [sent] to the sons of Israel" is Jesus, as verse 61:6 rightly states (just before the interpolated part)! The diatribe expressed in 5:12-20 is therefore a long reproach made to the Jews who don't recognize Jesus as the Messiah (i.e. the Judaics), who think that he died (v.17 includes a dialectical allusion, probably from the time of the emergence of the Christian faith<sup>7</sup>), who believe to be "God's favorite children" (v.18 without the interpolation *wa n-nasârâ*), and who

---

for the third one. We limited ourselves to the essential facts.

<sup>5</sup> In 9:30, the interpolation begins with the expression "*wa n-nasârâ*" and continues with what those *nasârâ* were supposed to say: "that the Messiah is son of God", as if the text-revisers were afraid that the other, more subtle interpolations with the word *nasârâ* were not enough to convince the readers that the word meant *Christians*.

Verse 9:30 says in substance that the *nasârâ* believed that Jesus was the son of God – the exact opposite in fact of what the historical Nazarenes believed.

<sup>6</sup> In chapter 14 of John's gospel, Jesus promises a Paraclete who must come. The central part of verse 61:6 echoes this announcement. But verse 61:6 can function only if *ahmad* is the same word as *Paraclete*, as Islamic exegesis has been repeating ever since the 10th century...whereas no connection exists between the two terms. The inconsistent interpretation can only rest on an erroneous transposition of *paraklêtos* in Arabic and an erroneous reading in Greek (cf. KHALIL Samir and his collaborators, *Acts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Christian Arabic Studies*, collection *Paroles de l'Orient* vol. XVI, Kaslik, Lebanon, 1990-1991, p.311-326; GALLEZ Edouard-M., *Le messie et son prophète*, Paris-Versailles, Editions de Paris, 2005, vol. 2, p.141-153).

Moreover, in the Ubbay Koran version, Jesus does not announce *ahmad* but a community to come. In other words, it seems that the original version of verse 61:6 simply said: "And when 'Îsâ son of Mary said: *O son of Israel, I am God's messenger to you*, they said: *This is blatant sorcery*".

<sup>7</sup> Verse 5:17 points to "those who say: God is the Messiah". In languages and cultures, dialectics are always a means to justify oneself by pitting against each other two positions contrary to the one we wish to promote.

Here (and elsewhere), the Koranic scriptures try to oppose the Jews who refuse the Messiah and said that he died, to the Christians who recognize him as God who came through Mary (i.e. as the presence of God come to visit his people, cf. John 1 etc.). The goal of dialectics is always to reach a synthesis: if on one hand the Judaics are wrong and on the other hand the Christians are wrong too but for opposite reasons, those in the middle – rather above all oppositions – are right. They proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, but not God's presence, and that he has been kept alive in Heaven since God took him up from the cross (with the purpose of sending him back to earth later). They have the true doctrine (*millah, religion*) inherited from Abraham.

haven't accepted the message of Jesus (v.19) and listened to Moses to whom they owe everything (v.20).

### • Occurrences of the expression "ahl al-Kitâb"

To begin, it is worth noting that the expression "people of the Book" occurs twice in the passage that we are examining (in verses 5:15 and 5:19). It is used in the form of an address ("O people of the Book!") to the Jews with undertones of reproach: they are the *unworthy* possessors of the Book of which they concealed many passages (v.15), at least as far as the coming of "the-Messiah-Jesus" is concerned (this expression *al-Masîh-'Isâ* [= *Jesus*] is found four times in the Koran!). This is where we realize that "people of the Book" is to be taken in the sense used by Ibn Hišâm (cf. supra) concerning Waraqa. Those "people" are all the "sons of Abraham", who have received the Book. Among them, some have purposely covered up parts of the Book – the text calls them *al-Yahûd* (the Judaics) –, and some others are called faithful Jews or *Nazarenes*, who accept the Luminous Book brought to complement the revelation (v.15).<sup>8</sup> Christians are not included in this large group, Muslims even less, evidently. Waraqa is called a "priest", but this shouldn't mislead us: the Nazarene sect had its own priests, even some individuals leading a consecrated single life, as we find in this exhortation aimed at Arab audiences:

"You will surely find that the people who are the most hostile to the believers are *al-Yahûd* and those who associate others to God; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, "We are *Nasârâ*." That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant" (5:82).

Many translators are not deceived (ex: HAMIDULLAH) and simply render *nasârâ* by *Nazarenes*. Besides, why would a preacher remind 7th-century Arabs that among the Christians they will find priests and monks? The Arabs knew them well as they encountered them everywhere around the desert, or during pilgrimages to Saint Sergius' shrine, a very popular destination for the Arabs (several shrines were dedicated to him). There were even monasteries for Arab women. The Koran isn't referring to these monks but to those found in the Nazarene Jewish community denoted by the word *ummaḥ*:

"Among the people of Moses an *Ummaḥ* guides in the truth and so renders righteous" (7:159 – this *Ummaḥ* textually and clearly is a part of the Jewish people, not the "Muslims"!).

For some rise in the middle of the night for the nightly prayer (following the monastic tradition):

"Not all of them are alike: among the people of the Book a *standing (qâ'imatun) Ummaḥ* rehearses the Signs of Allah all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration" (3:113).

### • Why do Muslims take it for granted that they belong to the people of the Book?

So far we have unveiled two facets of the *people of the Book*. What about the Muslims? Although the inclusion of Muslims in this group is never explicitly stated in the Koran, the belief stems implicitly from certain passages alluding to ... the Koran itself: the people of the Book who read it *must* also be *people of the Book*. By extension, according to this pure logic, the Christians must also belong to it. These ideas coalesce around verse 5:66 where the Koran makes a reference to itself. This verse is framed by two mentions of the "people of the Book" (v.65 and 68). Since we read that:

"Among them is a *moderate (muqtasidah – or upright) Ummaḥ*" (5:66b),

---

<sup>8</sup> This message bringing Light with a book (5:15) through a messenger coming after other messengers is of course the *injîl*, a term in the singular form which the Koran often associate to the *Tôrah*. It doesn't refer to the four Christian gospels, but to one only. The Fathers of the Church explained that this gospel was precisely a questionable version of the gospel of Matthew used by the ... *Nazarenes* (sometimes improperly called *Ebionites*, « *the poor ones* », for their focus on poverty).

we are forced to imagine, against the obvious meaning of the passages quoted above, that the *umma* in question is the Islamic community. A close analysis is needed to identify where the issue lies.

The wide context of this verse is an anti-Judaic polemic extending from the beginning of this surah *al-Mâ'idah* to verse 82 (including a tangent against those who "associate", serving as a dialectical counterpart – verses 72-76 – to which verse 82 alludes). In such an anti-Judaic context, it is hardly surprising that the expression *ahl al-Kitâb* occurs many times (six in fact):

We have already seen its occurrences in verses 15 and 19. There is another verse 59:

"O **People of the Book**, do you resent us except [for the fact] that we have believed in God and what was revealed to us and what was revealed before and because most of you are defiantly disobedient?" (5:59).

What was "revealed to us" and what was "revealed before"? It is easy to guess. In fact it is openly stated in verses 66 and 68: respectively, the *injîl* (light brought by Jesus, cf. supra 5:15), and of course, the *Tôrah*, forming the main part of the Hebrew Bible.

What about the Koran then? Shouldn't this sacred text say of itself that it also was divinely revealed? If there was ever a place to affirm it, it is here. And so it is, four consecutive times: in verses 66, 67 and 68 but in a more subtle way than just an explicit "*Tôrah-Injîl-Koran*" trio. And yet this rough trilogy appears once in the Koran:

"Indeed, God has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have Paradise. They *fight unto death* (i.e. *go as far as to kill, yuqâtîlûna*, root *qt*) in the cause of God, so they kill (*qt*) and are killed. [It is] a true promise [binding] upon Him in the *Torah* and the *Gospel* and the **Koran**" (9:111).

What some may find shocking is that ternary formulas are systematically absent in the Koran, except in this exact verse, where "*Koran*" is intentionally used as a self reference criterion<sup>9</sup>. And that is exactly the issue: how can a book in the making refer to itself as an already-existing one? Some tend to think that verse 9:111 is prophetic, pointing to the eternal existence in heaven of an eternal Koran in God's possession, next to the *Tôrah* and the *Injîl*. Others think that it is simply a crass addition to the text.

This trilogy is almost unthinkable in verses 5:66-68 which speak not from God's perspective (who gives his promise, 9:111) but instead from man's perspective (who must observe "*the Tôrah and the Injîl*"). From a human standpoint, the Muslim discourse admits that the Koran was then a text in the process of being dictated and not an achieved work. Rather than speak about a "Koran", it thus seemed more appropriate and more subtle to speak about "*What Was Revealed To ...By The Lord*", where "to" would mean "*to you /them*". In brief: *WWRT\_BTL*. This formula is already partially present in verse 59: curiously, we encounter it again in verses 66 to 68, twice in fact in verse 68. Regarding verse 67, Régis BLACHÈRE wrote that "in its current state, the text is embarrassing to commentators". Let us leave it aside and examine verses 65 and following:

"Only the people of the scripture believed and lead a righteous life, we would then **cover** their sins<sup>10</sup> and admit them into gardens of bliss" (5:65).

<sup>9</sup> About sixty times over, the Koran talks about a Koran-*qur'ân*. In most cases, it isn't a reference to itself, but to a *lectionary* (the actual meaning of the word *qur'ân*), adapted from the Hebrew and in use at the time in that land and by the Arab disciples of those who were indoctrinating them. But **it is** sometimes a kind of self-reference, every time the text has been interpolated (mainly with a third term coming after "the *Torah* and the *injîl*").

<sup>10</sup> "**Cover**", i.e. *erase: covering a sin (kaffara, intensive of kafara)* is an expression used in the Bible (and elsewhere) to say that God forgives, thence the name of the great Jewish feast of *Yom Kippur*. Translators translate it correctly (it is true that its meaning can be close to "**unbelievers**"), but never wonder what the word means, particularly in the first form, *kafara*, where it evokes an action that the Koran disapproves, prompting the insult of *kâfir* at the end of verse 5:68 and in many other places. What evil does someone who *kafars* do if God is said to *kafar* even more intensely? In fact the answer is already there; it flows from the various senses of *covering*, as well as to what is *covered*. We can find all its justifications in the long article: [La racine KFR, importance et significations bibliques post-bibliques et coraniques \(The root KFR: Biblical, post-biblical and Koranic importance and meanings\)](#), in *Le texte arabe: seulement islamique?*, under the guidance of M.-T. Urvoy (*Actes du Colloque de Toulouse – October 22-24, 2007*),

"If only they **would uphold** <sup>11</sup> the **Tôrah and the Injil** and and *WWRT\_BTL*, they would be showered with blessings from above them and from beneath their feet. Among them is an upright *Ummah*, but many of them are evildoers" (5:66). / (5:67)/

"Say: O People of the Book! You have no ground to stand upon unless you **stand fast** by the **Torah and the Injil**, and *WWRT\_BTL*. And *WWRT\_BTL* surely increases in most of them their obstinate rebellion and *unbelief (kufr)* <sup>12</sup>. But sorrow not over these *unbelievers*" (5:68).

We can now leave aside *WWRT\_BTL*. Let us keep refining our reading.

### • **People of the Book, that is People of the Tôrah and the Injil**

In verse 66, the question of lawful and forbidden foods is raised. Muslim commentators have vainly tried to explain these discussions on what was formerly but no longer forbidden. The Tôrah<sup>h</sup> actually prohibited to eat "*what is above*" (most birds) and "*what is under their feet*" (all crawling beasts: snakes, lizards, weasels, mice, etc., but also insects with the exception of certain grasshoppers), cf. *Leviticus 11*. Verses 5:87-88 clarify the reproaches to the *people of the Book* in verse 66:

"O you who believe, do not prohibit good things that are made lawful by GOD ... And eat from the good and lawful things that GOD has provided for you" (5:87-88).

One can almost hear the book of Acts or the gospel of Matthew:

"The voice spoke to him [Peter] again, a second time: What God has made clean, you are not to call profane" (Acts 10:15 and 11:9).

"It is not what enters one's mouth that defiles that person; but what comes out of the mouth is what defiles one" (Mt 15:11, developed in 15:17-20).

"But tell them [non-Jews] by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood" (Acts 15:20).

The passage is now crystal clear. A Nazarene-Jewish preacher – Waraqa or someone else after him – wished to convince Arabs to "*judaize*" (*hâda*, "*to become Jew*", verse 69 cf. 2:62 cited supra), but not in the manner of the Judaic Jews who refused the contribution of "the-Messiah-Jesus" (as the Nazarenes see it): they are accursed <sup>13</sup>. The preacher is addressing everyone, but at times more particularly his representative to the allied Arabs (possibly *Muhammad*): it is for that person that he developed what he said (or planned to say) to all, while explaining to him how to debate the Judaic Jews, and exhorting him not become discouraged: this is the exact content of verse 68 in relation to verse 66.

So it is apparent that the turn of phrases *WWRT\_BTL* in verses 66 and 68, as well as verse 67, are much like foreign bodies: if one eliminates them, the text becomes coherent and historic (at any rate, from verse 5:51 as we reconstitute it supra to verse 5:71 which closes the diatribe). According to early Koranic preaching, the people of the Book are those who are

---

*éditions de Paris, 2008*. In fact, Ignaz Goldziher had already indicated the solution to the problem of the meaning of *kfr*, but it had fallen into oblivion (*Der Mythos bei den Hebräern und seine Entwicklung. Untersuchungen zur Mythologie und Religionswissenschaft*, Leipzig, 1876, 214-225).

<sup>11</sup> We read further: "Every time, there came to them a messenger with what they themselves desired not - some (of these) they called impostors, and some they (go so far as to) slay." (5:70). The similarity with Stephen's speech is striking:

"Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? ...You received the Torah as transmitted by angels, but you did not observe it." (Acts 7: 52-53).

<sup>12</sup> *Kufr* : action of *covering up* or *hiding* (a truth, a text, etc.) – cf. note 10. One doesn't really "hide" (since the text is there – some other Koranic verses are directed at acts of concealing, but they then use a different verb), but one can *read through* a false interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> "Curses were pronounced on those among the Children of Israel who *cover* the Faith, by the tongue of David and of Jesus the son of Mary" (5:78).

expected to observe "the *Tôrah* and the *Injîl*", precisely because it was to them that God gave the Book:

"O Children of Israel [2:40]... be not the first to *cover*... And do not wrap Truth with falsehood, nor conceal the Truth when ye know (what it is)" (2: 41-42).

"**Those to whom We have given the Book** recite it with its true recital. They [are the ones who] believe in it. And *whoever covers it* [see notes 10-12] – it is they who are the losers" (2:121).

"When they [the *coverers* of v.103] are told: *Come to what GOD has revealed, and to the messenger [Jesus]*, they say: *What we found our parents doing is sufficient for us*" (5:104).

"Some [the *people of the Book* of v.109] have said: *No one will enter Paradise* except Jews (*hûd*)! Such is their wishful thinking. Say: *Show us your proof, if you are right*" (2:111). / (2:112) / "The *Yahûd* (*Judaics*) said: *The Nazarenes have no basis /.../*<sup>14</sup>. Yet, both of them read the Book! Such are the utterances of those who possess no knowledge<sup>15</sup>. God will judge them on the Day of Resurrection, regarding what they have changed" (2:113).

"Those, among the **People of the Book**, who cover (Truth) and the associators will be in Hell-Fire, to dwell therein (for aye)" (98:6).

As with all polemics, those dealing with the Koran are somewhat complex, but originally quite simple.

### • A fresh look on the "Book" and its "tent"

By now we have already encountered seven occurrences of the expression "*ahl al-Kitâb*", including five from surah *al-Mâ'idah* (plus one which we will mention later). The twenty-four others are easier to identify, and we will content ourselves with addressing just a few in this article.

We must stop at a verse which makes a strong allusion to the Christian faith (by which Christians become *people of the Book*) – and not a self-reference to the Koran (by which Muslims become *people of the Book*); this verse, as such presenting a unique case, must be divided into two parts, not only for its unusual length, but because of its two literary styles (the first is the usual faulty translation):

"O **People of the Book!** Commit no excess in your religion. Say of God nothing but the truth. The-Messiah-Jesus son of Mary was *no more than (inna-mâ)* a messenger of God, and His Word (*kalima*), which He bestowed on Mary, is a *spirit (ruh, ancient Arabic: blow*<sup>16</sup>) coming from Him. Believe in God and His messengers" (4:171a).

"Say not *Three* (Trinity): desist. It will be better for you. God is one. Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is God as a Protector" (4,171b).

Evidently the first part (4:171a) blames the Judaic Jews (4:171a) for not recognizing "the-Messiah-Jesus", while the second (4,171b) addresses the Christians as if they were the sole object of the whole verse. Now, let us rectify the translation above.

<sup>14</sup> Here comes a parallelism between the *Yahûd* and the *nasârâ*: "while the Nazarenes said: ' *The Jews have no basis* ' " (2:113) These parallelisms always are interpolations, as we saw above.

<sup>15</sup> The targeted group of those "**who do not know anything**" is the same as that of "*those who associate to God*" (or "*associators*"): the Christians (who of course do not approve the Nazarenes either – verse 2:113 is dialectic; see note 7). The ideological grievance against the Christians in the Koran (and up to now) indeed is that they are accused of putting near God "what is not God" because they don't understand – but that is no excuse, they all are doomed to Hell:

"Glory to the Lord of the heavens and the earth, the Lord of the Throne (of Authority), He is above the things they describe! So leave them to babble and play until One makes them meet the Day [of Judgment] which they have been promised" (43:82-83).

<sup>16</sup> In ancient Arabic like in Hebrew and Aramaic, the same word *ruh* means both *blow* and *spirit* (and is feminine), but the classical Arabic language has artificially differentiated *ruh* (*spirit* – now masculine), from *rîh* (*blow* – same root but feminine).

Translating *lâ taqlû fi dynikum* by "commit no excess in your religion" does not make sense. It should be translated according to the Syriac: "do not err in your judgment"<sup>17</sup>.

More directly important for our purpose is the adverb *'inna-mâ* that follows. The official reading of this adverb *'inna-mâ* gives it a restrictive sense (*'Îsâ is **only** a messenger*), just as is the adverbial phrase in the same verse: *lâ taqûlû 'alâ Llah 'illâ l-haqq*, "Say of God **only** (literally: *nothing but*) *the truth*". Why? Are there two ways of implying the same restriction? According to the Islamic dogma, *'inna-mâ* must necessarily be restrictive, so Jesus' messianity may become negligible and the *rasûl* (*messenger*) *Muhammad* acquire a greater status than the *rasûl 'Îsâ* (*Jesus*)! But if we apply the meaning that *'Îsâ is **only** ('inna-mâ) a messenger*, we have to apply the same meaning elsewhere, to the risk of absurdity, as in:

"The believers are **only** (*'inna-mâ*) brothers" (49:10) <sup>18</sup>.

Of course, the translation should be: "the believers are such close brothers!"; *inna-mâ* can only accentuate and amplify the meaning of the sentences, not the other way around, as it is the compound of two intensifiers <sup>19</sup>. In order to use it in a restrictive way, it has to include *'illâ* (*but, otherwise*) combined with *'inna* or *mâ*, as we see in those two verses:

"**Inna** hu **illâ** 'abdun : Indeed, he [the son of Mary, v.57] is *only* (*otherwise*) a servant" (43:59)

"**Mâ** al-Masyh ibn Maryam **illâ** rasulun : What is the Messiah son of Mary *if not* (*otherwise*) a messenger!" (5:75)

In the absence of *'illâ*, 4:171a must be read: "Indeed, the-Messiah-Jesus son of Mary is God's messenger!".

A last remark: a Syriac translation undoubtedly anterior to the 10th century doesn't say "God and his messengers" at the end of 4:171a, but: "God and his Messiah". This is very surprising in a text where the translation is consistently meticulous and has no interest whatsoever in misleading its Christian readers <sup>20</sup>. In the end, we have reasons to think that the original verse was:

"O people of the Book, do not err in your judgment. Say of God nothing but the truth. Indeed the-Messiah-Jesus son of Mary is God's messenger, His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, is a blow (of life) coming from Him: so believe in God and His Messiah!" (4:171).

Thus in the original Koran, neither the Christians nor the Muslims are said to be *people of the Book*, even if verse 5:77, beginning in the same manner as 4:171 (*O people of the Book, do not err in your judgment*), talks about people who *mislead* and *err*: because it appears in the final verses of the *Fâtihah*, this verb *mislead* (*dhalla*) seems to designate the Christians without naming them, but these verses 1:6-7 are a long apposition on the word *sirât* (*way or path*); this composition throws off balance the prosody or cadence of a prayer originally structured around six verses (if we count the *basmallah*), by adding ten rhythmic units (i.e. half as much as the six first verses count of): this is obviously an interpolation. If the current koranic text suggests that Muslims and Christians belong to the "People of the Book" (alongside the Jews) – and also that Muslims are **the** Ummah mentioned in the Koran, it is on account of

<sup>17</sup> Cf. LUXENBERG Christoph, *Neudeutung der arabischen Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem*, in *Die dunklen Anfänge, neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, Berlin, Hans Schiler, 2005, p.136.

<sup>18</sup> Beginning with the (nine) occurrences of surah *al-baqara*, we can see that *'inna-mâ* cannot be restrictive, esp. in 2:107 ([the angels of magic say:] "**Indeed**, we are a temptation"); in 2:137 ("If they turn away, they are **very much** in disagreement"); in 2:181 ("Then, sin weighs **so heavily** upon those who changed it [the testament]!"); and in 2:275 ("They say: *commerce is **in itself** interest*").

<sup>19</sup> In a book soon to be published, Christoph Luxenberg indicates that the Arab formula *'inna + mâ* corresponds to the Aramean *ên + mâ* meaning: "Yes indeed"! This confirms the logical analysis we are conducting here. The opportunity to shed light on the Koranic text with the help of Aramean contributes more examples to the already important list accumulated since the opening of the research *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin, Das Arabische Buch, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. MINGANA Alphonse, *An ancient Syriac Translation of the Kur'ân exhibiting new Verses and Variants*, Manchester / London, University Press / Longmans, Green & Co., 1925, p.4.6.27.41.

many manipulations. This process could be compared to a game of ping-pong: an incorrect reading in one place is fixed by an addition somewhere else, itself reinforced by another altered interpretation or addition, etc.

No need to go further. The most representative (and difficult) verses have been discussed, and the remaining occurrences of the expression *ahl al-kitâb* would not add anything to what we said.

### • Long-term perspectives

It would be naive to think that the Koranic text was only superficially manipulated with a few additions here and there, as we have seen with the term *nasârâ*. Generations of "redesigners" have made changes to the text: at the beginning of the 8th century, governor **Hajjaj** was forced to recall the existing versions in circulation to burn them and substitute new ones – this is told by Islamic traditions. It is impossible to examine such a complex history in a few pages: a long, exacting exegetical task lies ahead of us to fully disclose them, which will require a multi-disciplined collaborative effort, in the fields of linguistics, history, geography, archeology, Judaic and Syriac studies, and even theology because of the necessity of determining the objectives pursued by a specific human group, along with its representation of God and of the future <sup>21</sup>.

Surahs were designed to convince: they were composed in a perfectly clear and coherent oral style. It was the successive manipulations that made them often obscure and incoherent, to the point that they are no longer truly read: one looks at the text not in term of what is written but in terms of the Islamic dogma and the more recent commentaries.

In the meantime, we have to at least discern keys of comprehension. One of them was the object of this article: the distinction between *Yahûd* and *Nazarenes* made by the Koran in the "tent of the Book", i.e. among the "sons of Israel" (also called "sons of Abraham" in the Koran) who all were the legitimate heirs of the Book. Another key consists in discovering how the Koran used to designate Christianity (accused of *associating*, *shirk*) and how the term "associators" was employed in a dialectical parallelism also denouncing the *Yahûd* – this form of dialectic would deserve more consideration than we can give it here. Still another fundamental key comes from the discovery of the community designated by the term *nasârâ*: the *Nazarenes*. These keys and others bring the text into contact with factual parts of history, of which the text seems so devoid <sup>22</sup>. Such contact points exist in the Koranic text, but it will take years of research to fully highlight them.

---

[Home Page](#)

---

<sup>21</sup> The latest research in islamology is discovering these « theological » or « eschatological » perspectives, that Mahomet's goal was to haste the coming of « Judgment Day » by his military campaigns (pushing toward Jerusalem); likewise, that his hope was subsequently occulted by the Caliphs (beginning in the second half of the reign of 'Umar). In *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (University of Pennsylvania Press, nov. 2011), Stephen J. Shoemaker thus explains:

"Early Islamic tradition was later revised to meet the needs of a changing Islamic self-identity. Muhammad and his followers appear to have expected the world to end in the immediate future, perhaps even in their own lifetimes, Shoemaker contends. When the eschatological Hour failed to arrive on schedule and continued to be deferred to an ever more distant point, the meaning of Muhammad's message and the faith that he established needed to be fundamentally rethought by his early followers" (page IV cover).

It would be a mistake to believe that Muhammad founded the Islamic faith: such an "eschatological" expectation existed *before* his time, notably in the Nazarene sect to which Muhammad belonged. Since 2005, we have written two web-articles, which have added substance and reinforced these perspectives: [Muhammad was waiting for the Messiah](#) and [Muhammad and the Holy Land](#) – (soon to be available in English).

<sup>22</sup> The Koranic text offer almost no chronological background, famous landmarks or people; from that last point of view, we only have the names of Zayd (33:37), Qurayš (106:1), Abou Lahab (111:1), four times *Muhammad* + once *Ahmad* – added to the middle of verse 61:6 (cf. text). The truth is that the four mentions of the name *Muhammad* are themselves suspect, as Antoine Moussali had began to prove (the result of that research is exposed in *Le messie et son prophète vol. II*, pp 135-153 and 345-357).