

The root *kfr* and philology: significance and biblical, post-biblical and koranic meanings

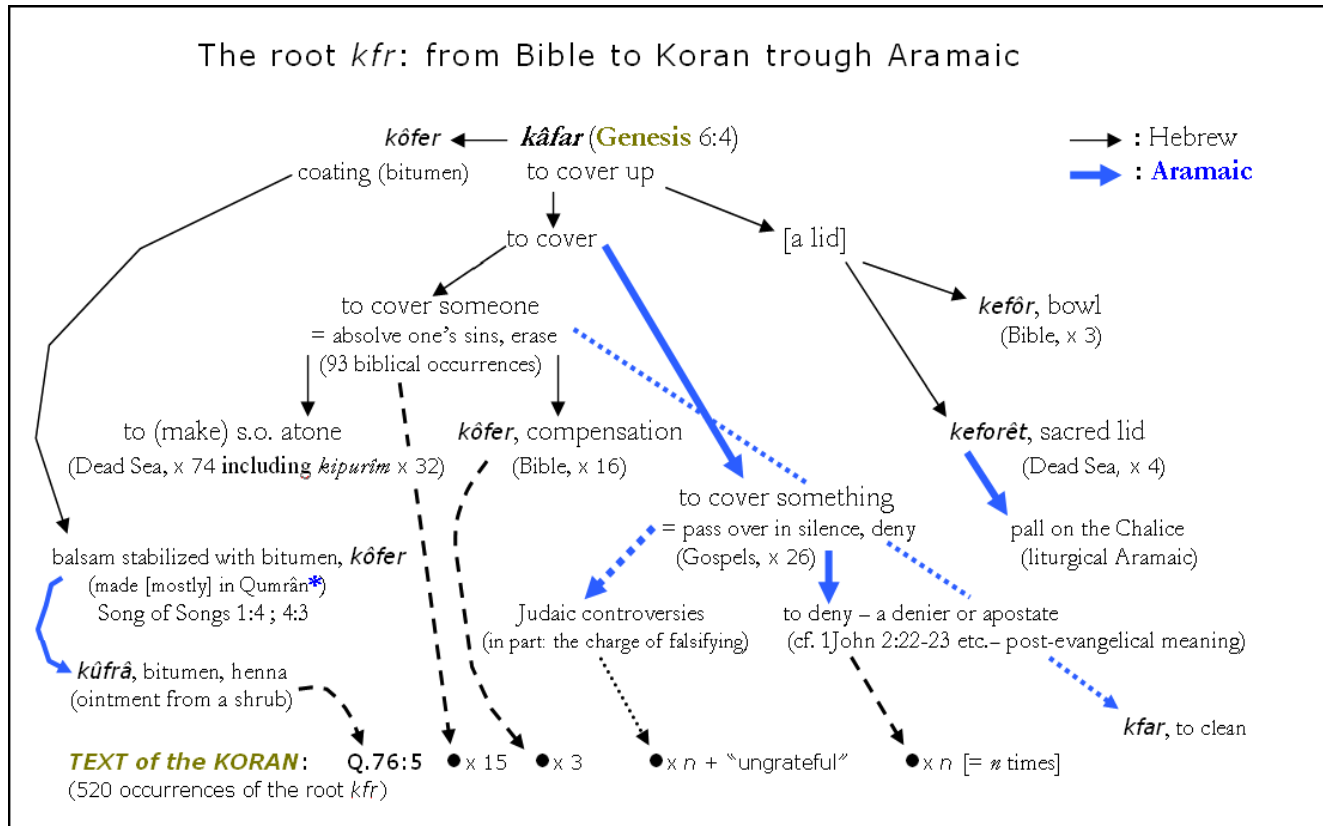
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What is the meaning of the word « *Kâfer* » that we encounter so frequently in the Koran, and whose root appears no less than **520** times in various forms, but particularly verb forms? This term has acquired an offensive connotation (it is the insult reserved for Christians and Jews), but not necessarily so, and in fact the wide semantic range of all its forms can sometimes present a real puzzle to researchers!

In reality, **all** the discrepancies in meaning of the root *kfr* can easily be explained, as long as one turns to the essential sources of the Koranic text, namely the ... Bible written in Aramaic, and to other Judeo-Christian writings (also in Aramaic). This perspective explains even the most perplexing occurrence, found only once: the passage of surah *The resurrection* (76:5) which says that the *kâfûr* is a delicious, heavenly drink. This word is rendered by camphor – the English term derived from it – yet camphor has an awful taste. Where does the error lie? We will see, at the end of this study, how this term built on the root *kfr* used to denote a scented thing, related to the original meaning of that root.

Thus, philology confirms what we already knew: the Koranic text must be read in the light of the Aramean traditions, a fact also established by the German philologist Christof Luxenberg.



Before examining the sometimes paradoxical meanings of the root *kfr* occurring in the Koran, it is important to look at the distribution of its occurrences. It is absent, in any form whatsoever, from 40 Surah-s ^[1], mostly short ones: the first three are the Fâtîhah, surah 12 *Yusuf*, and Surah 20 *T'aha*. The statistical breakdown alone doesn't account for this absence; given the overall ratio of 1:12 (one occurrence for every twelve verses) ^[2], there should be less Surah-s without the root of *kfr*. It is actually easy to predict where it appears, thanks to its most frequent and polemical meaning: *to be a miscreant* (Hamidullah) or *to be godless* (Blachère). Where the topic isn't directly polemical, it has almost no chance to appear, and vice versa. Surah 1 obviously is polemical and nevertheless doesn't contain the root *kfr* anywhere, but on closer look it is not a real exception: the controversy is expressed in just one verse, the last one, which deserves its own special treatment ^[3].

This brings us to the nub of the problem: an offensive meaning doesn't occur at the very beginning of a story, but usually in the middle or at the end. What is the story in question? We can begin to answer this question after we compare the expressed meaning of *to be a miscreant*, the most frequent meaning, with the second form of the root, in at least fourteen occurrences where its certain meaning is *to absolve*. In those passages, we read that God *absolves faults* (sometimes the text says *whose faults*) – and we must add 3 more occurrences where the root forms the substantive *kaffarah*, which definitely means *expiation*, a counterpart of *absolving*. But how can a verbal form mean that God *absolves* from faults, when it should in fact say, considering the form itself and 16 others according to the accepted diacritism, that *God is a great miscreant*? Of course, it is unthinkable to call God a *miscreant* or someone who would *cause others to disbelieve*, since the Koranic text attributes this action to demons. This is an important paradox, which increases again after we notice that in three sets of two verses, there is a deliberate play on words between the first and the second form with the aim of opposing the “good” and the “bad”, and it is always the same [to better highlight it, we will use a substituting device]. The three Surah-s in question are these: *Muhammad*, *The Mutual Deceit*, and *The Interdiction*:

47,1a Those who “*kafar*” and prevent others to follow God’s path...

47,2d He “*kaffars*” their bad actions and reforms their thoughts ^[4].

64,9 To the one who believes... He will *kaffar* his wrongdoing.

64,10 Whereas those who *kafar*... will be acquainted with the Fire [of hell].

66,7 O you *kafarers*!... You will only receive the salary of what you did.

66,8 O you believers!... Maybe your Lord will *kaffar* your sins...

What was the original meaning of the root *kfr*, since so many divergent meanings seem to be derived from it? From what primeval story do they all originate?

To find the answer, we must first open the Bible, where we find the narration of an extremely ancient story, also present in the Babylonian tradition (the story of Gilgamesh): the passage of the flood and Noah. Noah is mentioned 39 times in the Koran, including 3 times in surah 71, its eponym, which alludes to the flood without mentioning the Ark. However, it is in relation to Noah's Ark that the Hebrew verb *kâfar* is first used: Noah *kafars* the Ark with some *kôfer*, i.e. he covers it with bitumen (Gn 6:4). This is the fundamental meaning, which can be translated by *coating*: the Ark isn't hidden or concealed, but *coated* by something that prevents it from being seen as it was originally.

That same verb, used in the intensive form [2nd form in Arabic], also means *to cover someone*, i.e. *to cover someone's fault*: it is used 93 times in this way in the Hebrew Bible to convey the meaning of *absolving from sins* or the precondition that leads to it, of *performing the expiatory rite*. The two corresponding forms of *kfr* sometimes occur in the same sentence, as in for example:

"When the priest shall make atonement on the person's behalf for the wrong committed, the individual may be forgiven" (*Leviticus* 4:35).

In the Dead Sea scrolls, mention is made 74 times – a frequent rate – of the expiatory ritual and the penitential preparation that precedes it, especially in relation to the day of atonement of Yom Kippur (*kippurim*); two rams are involved in that rite, one which is sacrificed, the other which is released and sent into the desert:

"On the 10th day of the month [of Tishri], the atonement will be done (*ykwfr*)... they will be forgiven by using two rams" (1Q22, III,11 ; IV,3 – DJD I p.90.110).

Again, in the Scroll of the Temple (19 mentions), we read:

"He will perform [by the holocaust of the first ram] the atonement for the whole assembled people... then he will go to the live ram and will confess on its head all the faults of son of Israel... and will send it to the desert..." (11Q19 XXVI, 9-13).

This aspect of sacrificial expiation isn't present in the Koran, or maybe only through the allusion to the offering of a "perfect and unblemished cow" [5] in the eponymous Surah (Q. 2:71). But several researchers [6] have suggested that the odd absence of any sacrificial dimension and of any mention of Jerusalem was likely to be intentional. The mention of the Al-Aqsa Mosque furnishes another surprise, as it didn't yet exist at the time of the alleged "dictation" of the Koran (it was either built because the first verse of surah *The Night Journey*[s.17] mentions it, or the reverse happened). Next, there is the question of the first *qibla* in the direction of Jerusalem, where one can't help wondering if the sacrifices in the Temple account for the establishment of the *Great Feast* of 'Aid al-kabir, when a sheep is slaughtered and whose date coincidentally also falls on the 10th day of the month [7]. Several writings from the Dead Sea and related writings suggest that substitution practices were taking place among certain groups who were looking forward to the restoration of the Temple. Attempts to explain that Islamic ritual as an echo of the sacrifice of Abraham transposed onto Ishmael are unconvincing. So, the absence of a sacrificial notion in the Koranic text doesn't imply that it is absent from proto-Islamic history. One last point: another essential notion – which we will evoke later – is missing from the Koran, or barely alluded to [8]: the material return of the Messiah-Jesus (*al-Masîh 'Isa*), yet popular Islamic traditions have kept alive this expectation.

At any rate, if the notion of *expiation* to God is absent from the Koranic text, the parallel notion of *compensation* to a human person who has been wronged is for its part present, albeit only in three occurrences of the same surah, *The Table Spread* (5:45, 89,95), expressed with the substantive *kaffârah*. Of course, this meaning relative to a human third party was already present in the Bible, under the term of *kôfer* (16 times).

We are now able to address the vast majority of the occurrences of the root *kfr* and examine their various meaning, which, as we know, are extremely polemical and negative, since the targeted groups are doomed to hell, sometimes destined to be killed first: those are the *kâfirûn* (mentioned 159 times including 5 in the singular), who commit acts of *kufr* (33 times) or some similar actions expressed with the same verb phrase (299 times), notably *al-ladhina kafaru*. In a context of insistence, the root sometimes takes the 2nd form (20 times), as in:

"Those who *kafar* and die as *kâfir-s* (*kuffâr*, plural of *kâfir*), God's curse is upon them" (Q. 2:161; 3:91).

Among these countless occurrences, there are several whose context *unambiguously* imposes the meaning of *being ungrateful* – translators have no misgivings, although the generally accepted translation of *being a miscreant* or *being an infidel* is problematic. How are we to

understand the exact meaning of the accusation of *kafarring*? Let us turn to the Aramaic texts of the Gospel.

Around the 1st century B.C., a second meaning for the root *kfr* had emerged in Aramaic: *to cover* a fact (or a word), therefore *leaving something unsaid, ignoring, denying* or even *being ungrateful* (in the case of a benefit received). This is what is conveyed by the 26 or so occurrences of that root in the Aramaic gospels. To give the main ones:

Lk 6:35: "... For He is good for the *kafûrê'* (*ungrateful ones*) and the wicked".

Lk 8:45: "Jesus asked: 'Who touched me ?' Since all *were kafarring (denying)*, Peter said:..."

Lk 22:57: "[Peter] *kafarred (denied)*: 'Woman, he said, I do not know him' "

Mt 10:33: 'Whoever will have *kafarred* me (= *not spoken up* on my behalf), I too will *kfr* him (*will not speak up* for him) before my Father in Heaven.'

Mt 16:24: "If someone wants to become my disciple, let him *kafare* his soul (= *deny himself*)".

Mt 26:34.75: "This very night, before the cock crows, you will have *kafarred (denied)* me three times."

We find again the common meaning of *keeping quiet* or *denying* in at least two verses of the Koran:

Q. 21,94 : "[Concerning the believer,] we will not *kaffar (ignore)* his zeal."

Q. 3,115 : "Whatever good they might do, it will not be *kaffarred (denied)*".

However, the strong and very negative connotation quickly emerge in the subsequent part of the New Testament [9], because, in those texts, *leaving unsaid* is the same as *denying*:

1 Jn 2:22-23: "Who is the liar, if not the one who *kafars* that Jesus is the Christ? The Antichrist (!), the one who *kafars* the Father and the Son. Whoever *kafars* the Son does not have the Father either."

Jude 1:4: "For some people have slipped in among you unnoticed... who *kafar* our only Master and Lord Jesus Christ."

The reproach of *denying* takes on its strongest meaning here: that of being a *renegade*, a small *anti-christ* – the veritable Anti-Messiah, for his part, being bound to appear toward the fulfilment of times, just before the return of the Messiah-Jesus. However, even in that strong meaning, the material gesture of *covering* remains predominant. In the **Homilies** of Jacob of Sarugh dating from just over 500 A.D., we find traces of this meaning, in four occurrences:

"The people complains to the sun that it isn't shining. Blessed be the One whose rising dispels the darkness of *denial (d-kafûrûta)*" (*Hom.* 1:347-348).

[relating to the opposition between the light and darkness evoked further in verse 79:] "She [Jerusalem] *denied (kfr-t)* the Bridegroom" (*Hom.* 5:80).

[relating to the darkness also evoked further in verse 301:] "You persist in your *refusal (b-kafûrûta-k)*" (*Hom.* 3:302).

[relating to the contradiction with the Revelation:] "O *kafur* !" (*Hom.* 3:318).

In those four occurrences, the translator of the *Patrologia Orientalis* renders the root *kfr* in three different ways: *to deny, to reject, or to be godless* in the case of the invective *kafur*. This gives an idea of the difficulty. The idea of *denying* is too strong, since one can only *deny* what one has first *embraced*, which can't be what the rabbinic Jews did with the Christian faith – and this isn't the perspective of Jacob of Sarugh. The context indicates how to understand correctly: the occurrences of the root follow the image of the darkness opposed to the light and attempting to **cover** it. This is in fact the first meaning of the root, the one that is always implied. It suggests the action of *hiding*, although not completely, which elicits more criticism. This additional reproach is actually made by Jacob of Sarugh, just like the Koranic text, as we shall see next:

"Your people's scribe **hid** the truth from you, and your doctors did not openly proclaim the truth. Whether conscious of it or not, they **hid** the truth" (*Hom.* 5:305-307).

"Let the scribes of this people not present to us obscure commentaries" (*Hom.* 4, 248).

“O Jew, ask those questions to your doctors... the *yhûdhâyûtâ* is filled with lies” (*Hom.* 5:339,341) [10].

It isn't the Jews per se that are being challenged here, but their leaders, designated by the generic term of *yhûdhâyûtâ*. When addressing the Jews in general, without being more specific, Jacob of Sarugh abandons his polemic severity. A similar distinction seems at play in the Koran between the very negative use of the term *Yahûd* and the one, more neutral, of *Hûd* or *sons of Israel*, but not to distinguish the people from their leaders, instead to denounce a particular community among the ethnic group of the *Hûd* or *sons of Israel* (we might say “Hebrew”): the *Yahûd*, a term signifying primitively *Judeans* but later designating specifically the rabbinical community. Under the term of *Yahûd*, the Koran makes no distinction between the common people and their leaders: all are doomed to hell. We have to keep in mind that at that time, all *Hebrews* were not *rabbinical*. The “Nazarenes” were a group apart, who claimed to be the only true Jews and true Christians. So did those early communities which would one day found the great Khazar empire.

The criticism made to the scribes and doctors of hiding the truth to the simple isn't frequent, or at least as frequent any more, as it dates back to second-century (or earlier) polemics pitting Judeo-Christians against rabbinical Jews mostly in the East. We find echoes of this controversy in the West, for example in the writings of Justin [11], Irenaeus [12], and Origen (first half of the 3rd century) [13]. We also find some in the Koran, for example in the surah *The Family of 'Imrân*:

“There is among them [the « people of the Scripture » of verse 75 – we will go back to this expression], a party who alter the Scripture with their tongue so you may think it is from the Scripture, but it is not from the Scripture. And they say, ‘This is from Allah’, but it is not from Allah! And they speak untruth about Allah, while they know (= keep in themselves ‘Im) (Q. 3:78).

“You make it [the Scripture given by Moses] into pages, disclosing [some of it and concealing much” (Q. 6:91b).

The reproach is now especially about *hiding the truth* by *keeping it quiet* when one is aware of it. Commenting on that last verse, Regis Blachere indicated that the reproach of *dissimulating* (*hafiy*, to hide from someone's sight) must have been addressed to talmudic Judaism:

“The expression: *You were taught that ... neither you nor your fathers* [Q. 6:91c] seems to allude to talmudic teachings”.

What does it mean? The Talmuds, the one known as the Jerusalem Talmud, the other as the Babylonian Talmud, are both constituted of a double layer of commentaries of the Bible. The first one, the *mišnah*, is presented as an oral teaching which was supposedly given by God to Moses and transmitted through the pharisean movement until it was put down in writing in the course of the 2nd century. Thus, in relation to the Bible, the talmudic writings act as a *cover*, since the Bible remains accessible but is read as if through a layer that *covers* it.

In the end, to adopt the pliability of semitic languages, we should systematically translate the root *kfr* by *covering*, instead of rendering it by contradictory approximations. This choice made the most sense to us when we considered the 520 occurrences found in the Koranic text. The scope of the study focuses on this simple question: who covers what, and how? As far as God is concerned, the Koranic formulae are the same as the ones found in the Bible: God *covers* (or *covers up*) sins through his mercy – we already mentioned this type of occurrences. As far as men are concerned, we still need to examine the matter in further details, with the help of Jacob of Sarugh, in addition to the New Testament, which only stresses the aspect of *keeping silent* about the truth. We find the connotation of *hiding*, even *falsifying*, explicitly echoed by the Koranic reproach (*tahrîf*). Where Justin, Irenaeus and Origen (cited above) meant only one or the other connotation, the reproach issued in the Koran is more general:

"...a party of them [the sons of Israel] used to hear the words of God and then distort the Torah after they had understood it while they were knowing" (Q. 2:75).

"But do they not know that God knows what they conceal and what they say? And among them are some (*ummîyûn* – it means *Hebrew groups* [¹⁴] but not *unlettered*) who do not know the Scripture except in wishful thinking, but they are only assuming. So woe to those who write the Scripture with their own hand, then say, 'this is from God!' " (Q. 2:77-79a).

"Among the Jews are some who distort words from their [proper] usages " (Q. 4:46).

"God shall judge between them on the day of resurrection about what [in the Book] they *replaced*" (Q. 2:113).

"Cursed were those who concealed among the sons of Israel by the tongue of David and of Jesus, the son of Mary... in the punishment they will abide eternally" (Q. 5:78.80).

"God said, 'O Jesus,... I will rid you from those who *cover*, and make those who follow you superior to those who *cover up*, until the day of Resurrection' " (Q. 3:55).

"O people of the Scripture, why do you *cover* the signs of God while you yourself are their witness? O people of the Scripture, why do you wrap the truth with falsehood and conceal the truth, while you yourself know?" (Q. 3:70-71).

Here, we must pause to make a parenthetical remark about the expression *ahl al-Kitâb*, *tent of the Scripture*, often rendered by *People of the Book*. According to Islamic dogmatics, this Koranic expression allegedly designates both the Christians and the Jews, and *kâfir* is more of an insult toward the Christians than the Jews. But in the Koran itself, [this isn't the case](#).

Moreover, verses of polemic dialectic oppose the *kâfirûn* and the *mušrikûn* (*those who associate*), and this root *šrk* – also charged with a long history – was a pejorative way of designating the Christians alone [¹⁵]. Systematic and symmetric oppositions between *those who cover* and *those who associate* generally stretch over several verses, but in surah *The Table Spread*, one opposition is actually contained in just one verse, telling the Arabs to stay away from the Jews and the Christians and to follow the true believers, i.e. those who, from the 1st century onward, have called themselves the *Nazarenes*:

"**You will surely find** that those who are the most hostile to *those who believe* [i.e the true believers] are the *yahûd* **and** *those who associate* (*al-lađîna ašrakû*); and **you will find** that the closest friends to the believers [who took refuge in Medina] are those who say: '*We are Nazarene*' [as Hamidullah translates it]" (Q. 5:82).

It is therefore unthinkable that the expression *ahl al-kitâb* would imply both Jews and Christians [¹⁶], but, by designating the Hebrews as a whole, it does include different, even antagonistic groups. This is reinforced by verse s.3:113, which Regis Blachere thinks that it refers to a Judeo-Christian sect, hard to define exactly:

They are not all the same; among the people of the Scripture is an upright (*ummatun qâ'imatun*) community, reciting the verses of God during the night and prostrating [in prayer] " (Q. 3:113).

The text continues: "The latter are among righteous. And whatever good they do, it will never be *covered up*" (Q. 3:114b-115): here again is the verb *kafara*, with a polemic hint toward the others who, for their part, do *cover up* and therefore will go to hell (v.116). The "people of the Scripture" then are those to whom God "gave the Scripture", the Hebrews as a whole, as we read in surah 29:46-47, with this precision:

"Among those are some who believe. Only the coverers reject our verses" (Q. 29:47).

This is very clearly put. Christians, for their part, are not considered legitimate holders of the Scripture, but instead as robbers of an inheritance, who *do not know*, to the point of associating a child to God:

"Glory to the Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of the Throne, [who is] above what they describe.
Let them therefore converse vainly and amuse themselves, until they meet the Day that awaits them"
(Q. 43:82-83).

It isn't the Christians that verses 10:95 and 17:103 recommend that they be consulted:
"Ask those who have *recited* (*qara'a*) the Scripture before you" ! However, one shouldn't go to just anybody:

"O sons of Israel [v.40]... do not be the first to be its *coverers*...
Do not dress up the truth with falsehood. Do not keep the truth secret while you know!" (Q. 2:41-42).

In a certain way, the Koranic text echoes the polemic that took place especially during the 2nd century among the Jewish communities who didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah – the *Yahûd* – and those who did, particularly the *Nazarenes*. This polemic is sometimes subtle, as evidenced for instance by verses 256b-257 of surah *The Cow*, involving the *tâghût* or *rebellious angels*:

"The right course has become clear from the wrong. Whoever *covered* the *tâghût* (the verb *kafara* is very ironic here, see Q. 4:51.60) and believes in God, has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. God is the one who hears and knows. God is the ally of those who believe: He brings them out from darkness into light. But *those who cover*, their allies are the *tâghût*: they take them out of the light into darkness" (Q. 2:256b-257)

This indicates that the *coverers* were at first in the light, until they *covered* what they were supposed to believe in the Scripture concerning the Messiah Jesus.

Many other verses containing the root *kfr* would deserve to also be mentioned, but we have to limit ourselves to the essential. The above diagram presents the historical derivations of that root down to its 520 Koranic occurrences. Regardless of their nuances or uses, even when they are meant to be ironic, all the terms find their meaning and coherence in the framework of this history rooted in the biblical and Syro-Aramaean world.

In conclusion, we wish to go back, as promised, to the anecdotal occurrence of *kâfûr* mentioned at the beginning: what connection does it have to the delicious heavenly drink? To answer this question, one must remember that Noah coated his ark with bitumen, and that, in Ancient Times, the best-known source of bitumen was just east of the Dead Sea. But the region west of the Dead Sea was almost the only one where balsam trees grew, whose sap gave off an exquisite perfume. Bitumen was actually used to stabilise that perfume, before it was poured into expensive glass flasks. Archeologists are very familiar with that region where this coveted activity mainly took place: Qumrân. This is how the word *bitumen* eventually came to designate the wonderful perfume itself, used, among other things, in the service of the Temple and embalming. This substance is lost today. It is first evoked in the *Song of Songs*, and Late Aramaic conserves its trace: when the balsam tree seemingly disappeared in the aftermath of the two Jewish wars, the word *kûfrâ* or *kûpru'* remained, but to designate *hennah* (a red dye preparation derived from a plant, used for hair or skin). At the same time, the Jews did not lose the memory of what used to be the most sublime perfume to ever have existed on earth, a celestial perfume so to speak. The Koranic text corroborates this.

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Concordance syriaque du Nouveau Testament

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1 The following Surah-s: 1, 12, 20, 26, 44, 53, 55, 56, 62, 65, 69, 75, 77, 79, 81, 82, 86, 87, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114.

2 520 multiplied by 12 equals approximately the total number of verses in the Koran.

3 This last verse of the *Fâtiḥah* (Q. 1:7), a symmetrical condemnation of both Jews and Christians, presents an interesting structure. It is longer than the preceding ones, it begins with an unusual apposition, and forms an extraneous conclusion to an already coherent whole, perfectly balanced in itself. Antoine Moussali (1920-2003) considered it a later addition to an ancient prayer (not necessarily in Arabic).

4 In their entirety, the first two verses of Surah *Muḥammad* (Q. 47) look like this:

- v.1a Those who « *kafar* » and keep others from God's path,
v.1b He [God] confuses their actions.
v.2a Those who believe and perform good works
v.2b and believe in what descended upon Muḥammad
v.2c and this is the truth coming from their Lord,
v.2d He "kaffars" their wrongdoing and reforms their thoughts.

The structure formed by 1b.2a.d continues in 3a (it is evident that those who "kafar" follow falsehood, while those who believe follow the truth from their Lord); it is striking:

Those who *kafar* / God confuses them
Those who believe / God kaffars them
Those who *kafar* / are in falsehood
Those who believe / are in the truth.

The same play on words also underlies the structure of surah *The Mutual Fraud*:

"To the one who believes ... God will kaffar his misdeeds... whereas those who *kafar* will have the fire [of hell] for their companion" (Q. 64:9-10).

This affects the sub-verses 2b and 2c (cf. lemessieetsonprophete.com/annexes/six.htm).

5 In conformity with the prescriptions of Lv 22:19-22.

6 For example, Patricia Crone.

7 On the 10th day of the last month according to the Muslim calendar; on the 10th day of the first month according to the Jewish calendar.

8 "Peace is on me the day I was born and the day I will die, and the day I am raised alive (*ab'ath hayyan*). That is 'Issa son of Mary, the word of truth about which they are still in dispute" (Q. 19:33-34).

The expression of to be raised alive underscores all the more the surprise conveyed by the verb *qâma*, to rise up (from the dead), normally used to evoke the *resurrection*; as for the manner, it remains vague. Could this vagueness be unintended? If the text suggests that 'Issa-Jesus must not rise, then at least he will appear alive, coming from another place than from the dead – coming back from Heaven in a physical manifestation?

9 The root *kfr* appears 21 other times in the New Testament, 47 times in all (the Gospels included).

10 Jacob of Sarugh, *Homilies against the Jews*, P.O. 174 /6, esp. the introduction, p.13.

11 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. by A. Hamman, coll° S.C. issue n. 134, p.340 (concerning the alteration of Jeremiah's verse 11:19).

12 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 21, trans. by Adelin Rousseau, coll° S.C. issue n. 211, p.399 (concerning Theodotion's translation of Isaiah 7:14 who translated the Hebrew word 'almah by *neanis* instead of *parthenos*).

13 Origen, respectively in *Against Celsus*, 1:49; 6:27 – PG 11:754; 1334 and in *Letter to Julius Africanus* – PG 11:45,86 (concerning the censorship exerted against Daniel 13).

14 The terms *ummîyûn* and *ummah* originate from the Bible and have a biblical meaning; the translation of the word *ummah* by *community* comes from the appropriation of the term by Islamic theology and does not adequately convey the fundamental tribal aspect (where the notion of *umm*, the *mother*, is predominant). In the plural, in Gn 25:16, the word designates the twelve tribes of the Hebrews (*ummot*), and in Nb 25:15 it simply means a *clan*. This fundamental meaning of "Jewish group" appears clearly in the Koranic text, for example:

"Among the people of Moses, an ummah walks on the path in truth and therefore in justice. And we divided them into twelve tribes-ummat, and We have revealed to Moses etc." (Q. 7,159-160).

We find this same idea again and this same term of *ummah* in verse Q. 3:110:

"You are the best *ummah* raised [by God] for men".

This verse was subsequently used by the Islamic community to designate itself as the only *ummah*, and has become the motto of the Arab League based in Cairo. Verse Q. 2:78 constitutes another example. The term *ummîyûn*, *tribes*, is the emphatic plural Aramaic form of *ummah* used in the book of Daniel (Daniel 3:4,7,31; 5:19; 6:26; 7:14).

15 The root *šrk* (to associate) refers to the Christians, accused of being associators (*mušrikûn*). One could object verses Q. 6:136-137 where the same reproach is aimed at the Hebrews, but the habitual meaning isn't disproved – rather, it is confirmed. The targeted group is not the contemporary *Yahûd* but the Hebrews from the times of Judges and Kings who had behaved like idolaters (a biblical and midrashic theme).

16 As regards the Jewishness of the "Tent of the Scripture", is verse 171 of surah *The Women* (Q. 4) a counter-example? Its length is untypical. The second part seems quite crude and coarse in the light of the fact that many other verses polemicise in a much more subtle manner, trying to convince Christian Arabs. First of all, that verse doesn't concern the Christian Arabs:

"O people of the Scripture! **Do not err in your judgment** (this is a syriacism, highlighted by Christoph Luxenberg [in *Neudeutung der arabischen Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem*, in *Die dunklen Anfänge, neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2005, p.136] – the common translation "do not exaggerate in your religion (*dîn*)" does not make sense).

Do not say of God any thing other than the truth.

The Messiah 'Issa son of Mary is assuredly God's messenger, His word (*kalima*) which he sent over Mary and a breath [of life come] from Him.

Believe in God and his messengers" (Q. 4:171a).

This verse is addressed to the covering *Yahûd*, exhorting them to believe in the Messiah Jesus; the context confirms this. At the opposite, the rest of the verse suddenly reveals an anti-Christian controversy:

"And do not say: Three. Desist! It is better for you. God is one. Glory to Him! How would he have a son? To him belong what is in heaven and on earth. And sufficient is God as Protector" (Q. 4:171b).

In saying this, Christians are implicitly identified as belonging to the "people of the Scripture" who manipulate their texts. We can suspect here one of the many interpolations of the text exposed by Régis Blachère. It should also be noted that Surah 5, *The Table Spread*, contains two sets of two verses implying that the Christians (called *nasârâ*) belong to the "people of the Scripture" – at least in the form in which those verses appear today: 14-15 and 18-19. In both cases, the second verse begins with: "O people of the Scripture", whereas the first verse begins with a short sentence presenting the *Nasârâ* in opposition with *Yahûd* (consequently, the only reasonable translation of *nasârâ* here is "Christians"):

"And from those who say, 'We are Nazarenes', We took their covenant; but they forgot a portion of that which they were reminded" (verse 14);

"Jews and Nazarenes say, 'We are God's children and his beloved" (verse 18).

In that last verse, we find the same addition as the one that upsets and alters verse 51: "Do not take as friends the *Yahûd wa n-nasârâ*", as it was demonstrated as early as 1996. Verse 14, for its part, constitutes with verses 12-16 a long tirade of infidelity made to the *Yahûd*: the mention of the *Nasârâ* is allogenic.

The original verses probably read simply like this:

"Among those from whom we took our covenant, [some] forgot a portion of that which they were reminded" (Q. 5:14).

And: "The Jews say: 'We are God's children and his beloved' " (Q. 5:18).

The classification of Christians as part of the "people of the Scripture" is attested for the first time in Islamic apologetics on the Dome of the Rock and never before. It will probably take years of research to grasp in all its details the textual history of the Koran.

The remarks contained in this note have been presented respectively in *Vivre avec l'Islam?*, Paris, Saint-Paul, 1996, p.236-238, and in the notes 999 and 1013 of volume II of *Le messie et son prophète*, 2005.