Chapter 3

Muqātil on Zayd and Zaynab

“The sunna of Allah Concerning Those Who Passed Away Before” (Q 33:38)

Gordon Nickel

1 Introduction

The idea that Islam advances a number of large theological claims is not a matter of dispute among modern western scholars of Islamic studies. The apparent reluctance of the same scholars to interact with those religious truth claims, however, is a matter of some curiosity.

The sourcebooks of Islam – the texts that Muslims appeal to for authority – are by their very nature a series of religious truth claims. Andrew Rippin described the character of the sources through an explanation of the scholarly insights of John Wansbrough:

[T]he entire corpus of early Islamic documentation must be viewed as “Salvation History.” What the Koran is trying to evidence, what tafsīr, sīra, and theological writings are trying to explicate, is how the sequence of worldly events centered on the time of Muḥammad was directed by God. All the components of Islamic salvation history are meant to witness the same point of faith, namely, an understanding of history that sees God’s role in directing the affairs of humankind. And the difference that makes is substantial . . . .

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1 Andrew Rippin introduced me to the formative period of tafsīr and especially to the commentary of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. While doing research for my dissertation, I noticed that a number of scholars drew attention to Muqātil’s interpretation of Q 33:38. Andrew taught me the methodology of literary analysis, and I have tried to use that methodology in this essay, in his honor. The references to dispassionate research and response to truth claims also come out of our relationship. We have often discussed these things during the past 10 years.

The “difference” that Rippin saw in Wansbrough’s analysis related to the question of the historicity of Muslim tradition and the widespread willingness of modern western scholars to accept that tradition as history. Rippin counseled that Muslim tradition be approached rather through the methodology of literary analysis, but at the same time he helpfully trained a spotlight on the fundamental nature of the Muslim literary sources.

Many passages in the Qurʾān give the reader the impression of entering debates in progress between the claims of Islam and groups of listeners who do not accept those claims. Kate Zebiri writes that “polemic in the sense of argumentation or the refutation of others’ beliefs is a prominent element in the Qurʾān since in the course of his mission Muḥammad encountered various types of opposition and criticism.”3 Sūras 2–7 of the Qurʾān – nearly 30 percent of its contents – contain a great deal of polemical material, often addressed explicitly to Jews, Christians, “associators,” or simply “disbelievers.”4

A test case for this thesis about the nature of the Muslim sources – one of countless possible examples – is the exegetical development of a passage in sūra 33 that Muslims have traditionally linked with the story of Zayd, Zaynab, and the Messenger of Islam (Q 33:36–40).5 The passage has a number of features that draw the reader’s attention. Typical of the so-called “Medinan” verses of the Qurʾān, it associates Allah with his messenger for authority and obedience (Q 33:36). Verse 37 is the only verse in the Qurʾān in which a Muslim other than Muḥammad is named – Zayd (Q 33:37). This passage also contains one of only four verses in the Qurʾān where the name “Muḥammad” appears – one of only two verses to state explicitly that the messenger of Allah is Muḥammad.6 Along with mention of Muḥammad comes a major truth claim, that he is “the seal of the prophets” (Q 33:40). This expression khātam al-nabiyyīn occurs only here in the Qurʾān, and the Islamic doctrine of the finality of prophethood is based on this verse.7

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3  Cf. Kate Zebiri, Polemic and polemical language, EQ. A different approach to the same material is Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, Polemics in the Koran. The Koran’s negative argumentation over its own origin, Arabica 60/1–2 (2013), 131–45.
5  Several scholars of the Qurʾān and Hebrew Bible read an earlier draft of this essay and made many good suggestions for improvement: David S. Powers, Peter Riddell, Havilah Dharamraj and Elmer Martens. I thank them all.
6  John Wansbrough wrote that the occurrence of the name Muḥammad in Q 33:40 “suggests a particular polemic, in which not only the credentials but also the identity of the Arabian prophet was in dispute”; Qurʾānic studies, 64.
7  David S. Powers, Zayd b. Muḥammad, EQ; David S. Powers, Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men. The making of the last prophet (Philadelphia 2009), 50–7; David S. Powers,