READING THE QUR’AN AS HOMILY:
THE CASE OF SARAH’S LAUGHTER*

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Introduction

In surah 11 (Hūd), the Qur’an refers to messengers (rusul) who come to Abraham and give him the good news of the promised birth of a son and a grandson (vv. 69ff.). Immediately thereafter (vv. 77ff.), the text refers to messengers, apparently the same messengers, who come to warn Lot of the destruction of his people. This narrative sequence, of course, accords with Genesis 18–19. Yet the quality of the narrative is quite different in the Qur’an. The Bible provides a detailed story, beginning with Gen. 18:1–2: “Yahweh appeared to him at the Oak of Mamre while he was sitting by the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up, and there he saw three men standing near him.”¹ The Qur’an, on the other hand, provides only allusions. It mentions neither the Oak of Mamre nor a tent, nor the heat of the day, nor does it specify the number of messengers at three.

Evidently, the Qur’an is not borrowing or retelling the biblical story, but rather commenting on it. Accordingly, there is a distinctly homiletic feel to this passage. It is all carefully rhymed, according to the fāṣila of a penultimate -ī or -ū. It is interrupted on several occasions with pious reminders, such as verse 73, when the messengers ask, “Do you wonder at God’s command? May the mercy and blessings of God be upon you, O people of the house. Surely he is praiseworthy and glorious.” Even the very substance of the story seems to be remolded by the homiletic goals of the author. In Gen. 19:26 there is a terse reference to Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt, a


¹ The translation is according to the New Jerusalem Bible.
punishment, it seems, for her decision to look back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Thus when Jesus seeks to warn his audience that on the Day of Judgment “anyone who tries to preserve his life will lose it” (Luke 17:33), he exclaims “Remember Lot’s wife!” (Luke 17:32). In Q 11:81, however, the demise of Lot’s wife is already predicted by the messengers; it is preordained (cf. Q 7:83; 15:60; 29:32). The message is clear: God’s will is ineluctable. Thus the Qur’an—much like Jesus in Luke’s Gospel—alludes to the biblical story of Abraham and Lot as a medium by which to express a religious message. That only an allusion was necessary suggests that the Qur’an’s audience, like that of Luke, was already familiar with the details of the story.

Yet the allusive style of the Qur’an was a source of great consternation to Muslim scholars. For when Qur’anic exegesis (tafsir) arose, the exegetes (mufassirūn) were either not aware of the details of the biblical story to which the Qur’an alludes, or, perhaps more likely, were mistrustful of biblical literature and commentary. Either way, they kept the Qur’an separate from the Bible. Instead of turning to biblical literature for the details of the visitation story, the mufassirūn attempted to find those details by extrapolating the references in the Qur’an. This proved particularly vexing in regard to one peculiar detail of this passage: the mention of Abraham’s wife laughing in Qur’an 11:71. It is to this detail that the present paper is dedicated.

Incidentally, if the homiletic quality of the Qur’an was problematic to the medieval exegetes, it could be quite helpful to critical scholars today. For if the Qur’an is a homily, in this case a homily on a biblical narrative, it ceases to be in a competitive relationship with the Bible (or any other text on which it might be commenting). On the contrary, the two texts become the best of friends, one helping the other along. One text provides the material, the other text provides the interpretation. The Qur’an can no longer be accused of borrowing from the Bible or vulgarizing the Bible. The Bible, meanwhile, can no longer be off limits to studies of the Qur’an, which no longer appears ex nihilo. On the contrary, this model would demand that students of the Qur’an become no less students of the Bible. Hopefully the virtue of this model will become evident through the simple example that follows.