

PONTIFICIO ISTITUTO DI STUDI ARABI E D'ISLAMISTICA

ISLAMOCHRISTIANA

دراسات اسلامية مسيحية

16

(ESTRATTO)

MUHIB O. OPELOYE

CONFLUENCE AND CONFLICT IN THE QUR'ANIC  
AND BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE LIFE OF PROPHET MŪSĀ

1990  
ROMA

MUHIB O. OPELOYE \*

CONFLUENCE AND CONFLICT IN THE QUR'ĀNIC  
AND BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS  
OF THE LIFE OF PROPHET MŪSĀ<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY:** The A. compares the qur'ānic and biblical presentations of Moses. Though the Qur'ān does not set out the prophet's life chronologically, a chronological account can be constructed from the various passages. It can be seen that this is very similar to the life of Moses as told by the Bible. The A. nevertheless lists seven points of dissimilarity. These he attributes to the different circumstances in which the message was recorded. The similarities, he suggests, indicate a common source and origin.

Prophet Mūsā (the Biblical Moses), otherwise known as *Kalīmu llāh*<sup>2</sup>, is the only prophet of God, apart from prophet Yūsuf, whose life account is given in detail by the Qur'ān. Information on his life is mainly contained in *Sūrat al-Baqarah* (2:49-71); *Sūrat al-A'rāf* (7:100-162); *Sūrat Tāhā* (20:9-97); *Sūrat ash-Shu'arā'* (26:10-69) and *Sūrat al-Qiṣaṣ* (28:3-42), apart from other Qur'ānic passages where casual references are made to different aspects of his life. The special attention given to Mūsā by the Qur'ān derives perhaps from

---

\* Dr Muhib O. Opeloye (born 1949) holds a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. For his thesis he presented *A Comparative Study of Selected Socio-Theological Themes Common to the Qur'ān and the Bible*. He has published a number of articles in this field. He is at present Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Lagos State University, Ojo, Nigeria. He is also Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of the Nigerian Association of the Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies.

<sup>1</sup> Even though Moses (the Qur'ānic Mūsā) is not usually included in the list of the Biblical prophets, classified into major and minor prophets, this study recognises him as one. This is because he performed the functions of a *nabī* and a *nabī* in Hebrew terminology means one who is called to be the spokesman of God, which is the essential feature of the prophetic function. Moses was not just a prophet, he was a law-giver as well as a leader. The prophethood of Mūsā in Islam is not open to controversy.

<sup>2</sup> Mūsā is referred to as *Kalīmu llāh* because God spoke to him without the use of intermediary angels.

the important nature of his mission. The account of his life as enshrined in the scripture focuses on his birth and infancy; his conflict with the Egyptian and the consequent flight to the land of Madyan; his call to prophethood and his prophetic mission, and the Israelites' intransigence in the wilderness.

The Biblical parallels of these accounts are found in the books of Exodus (Chps. 2-40); Numbers (Chps. 1, 12, 13, 27); Deuteronomy (Chps. 1-4; 32-34); Wisdom (Chps. 15-19); Ecclesiasticus (Ch. 45). The basic difference between the Qur'ānic and Biblical accounts of the life of Prophet Mūsā lies in their methodological approaches in their presentation. While the latter is interested in giving a chronological narration of the life history of the prophet from birth to death, paying attention to every minute detail, the former discusses different aspects of the prophet's life with different motifs<sup>3</sup> without following any chronology. Hence the seeming repetition of the Qur'ānic accounts of the prophet's life. The aim of this study therefore is to use the scriptural accounts of Mūsā's life to demonstrate the extent to which the Qur'ān and the Bible are complementary in spite of some apparent contradictions in many of their narratives. An attempt will be made in the paper to utilize the information contained in the Qur'ān to construct a chronological account of Mūsā's life and compare it with the Biblical account with a view to bringing into focus aspects of similarities and dissimilarities between the two.

#### *Birth and Infancy of Mūsā*

Mūsā was born in Egypt at a time when the male children born to the Israelites were ordered to be killed by the reigning Pharaoh<sup>4</sup>. The circumstances of this royal instruction need to be examined for a proper understanding of the prophet's birth experience as contained in the two scriptures. Before the birth of Mūsā, the Israelites had been living in Egypt for quite a long period of time. Their arrival in the country was dated to the time Yūsuf (Biblical Joseph) invited his father Ya'qūb (Biblical Jacob, also known as Israēl) and his brothers to the land in order to save them from the famine in Canaan<sup>5</sup>. The family of Ya'qūb thus left their country to settle permanently in Egypt where they multiplied and grew strong.

Hitherto, the kings of Egypt, known as Pharaoh, had been well disposed

<sup>3</sup> For different motifs for narration of Mūsā's history in the Qur'ān see Yusuf Ali's commentary on *Sūrah*s 20:9, 26:10 and 28:3.

<sup>4</sup> Pharaoh is not the name of a particular King in Egypt, it is a dynastic title of any reigning king. The reigning pharaoh at this particular time, according to most commentaries, was Thothmes I who reigned about 1540 B.C.

<sup>5</sup> This invitation is contained in *Sūrat Yūsuf*, verse 93, as well as Exodus 45:16.

to the Israelites, probably as a result of Yūsuf's interpretation of the dream of one of their kings. However, during the time of Mūsā's birth, a Pharaoh who did not know Yūsuf was on the throne, and the increase and multiplicity of the Israelites coupled with their growing strength became a source of worry and anxiety for him. He feared that the Israelites who were aliens in the land of Egypt might one day become powerful and supreme in the land. Consequently he subjected them to different forms of persecution while he devised means by which they would be extirpated.

The Qur'ān contains no details of the oppression to which the Israelites were subjected. These can however be found in different passages of Exodus. In Ex. 1:11, we are informed that Pharaoh set taskmasters to afflict them with heavy burdens which included the building of store-cities; in Ex. 1:14, we read that Pharaoh made the Israelites' life bitter with hard service; in mortar and brick and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work the Egyptians made them serve with rigour. And in Ex. 5:6 we are told that the Israelites were made to make bricks without straw. The climax of their persecution set in with the instruction to get rid of the male children born by the Israelites while the females were spared. The Pharaoh's decree, which is contained in Ex. 1:22, reads: "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile but you shall let every daughter live". Reference is made to the same decree in *Sūrah* 2:49. It was at the time this decree was promulgated that Mūsā was born according to the accounts of the two scriptures.

The Qur'ānic accounts of Mūsā's birth are related in *Sūrah* 20:38–39 and *Sūrah* 28:7–13. The latter passage reads:

So we sent this inspiration to the mother of Mūsā: "Suckle (thy child), but when thou hast fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve for We shall restore him to thee and We shall make him one of our apostles". Then the people of Pharaoh picked him up (from the river): (It was intended) that Mūsā should be to them an adversary and a cause of sorrow for Pharaoh and Haman and all their hosts were men of sin. The wife of Pharaoh said: "Here is a joy of the eye for me and for thee, slay him not. It may be that he will be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son ...". And she (the mother of Mūsā) said to the sister of Mūsā, "Follow him": So she (the Sister) watched him in the character of a stranger and they knew not. And We ordained that he refused suck at first, until (his Sister came up and) said: "Shall I point out to you the people of a house that will nourish and bring him up for you and be sincerely attached to him?". Thus did We restore him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted, that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of God is true but most of them do not understand.

The account of Mūsā's birth as contained in this Qur'ānic passage is to a large extent in harmony with the Biblical narrative in Ex. 2:1–10: He was born at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that all male children born to the

Hebrews be killed; Mūsā's mother out of fear concealed him for some time and when she was unable to hide him any longer cast him into the river in a chest where he was picked up by Pharaoh's people<sup>6</sup>. According to *Sūrah* 28:8-9 he was adopted as a son by Pharaoh's wife though nursed by his mother. Pharaoh's wife is mentioned in Qur'ān 66:11 as a model of faith and comments say that her name is Āsiya. The Bible on the other hand claims that Mūsā was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. It should be noted however that in contrast with the Bible the primary concern of the Qur'ān in the quoted passage is not to narrate a detailed history of Mūsā's birth but to recapitulate the salient points in his birth account which bear on his spiritual upbringing and work. The account of Mūsā's birth as contained in the two scriptures reveals the divine plan to make Pharaoh bring him up in all the learning of the Egyptians in order that the learning itself should be used not only to expose all that was shallow and wicked in it but to cause their degradation while the glory of God is advanced.

#### *Mūsā's Flight to the Land of Madyan*

Mūsā having become a grown up man (about the age of forty) went out one day to the Israelite colony and saw the Egyptian oppression under which the Israelites laboured. On this very occasion he saw an Egyptian smiting an Israelite with impunity. Mūsā was moved with sympathy and consequently smote the Egyptian who in the process lost his life. The account of this incident is recorded in *Sūrah* 28:14-22 which reads in abridged form:

When he (Mūsā) reached full age, and was firmly established (in life), We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge ... And he entered the city at a time when its people were not watching, and he found there two men fighting, one of his own party, and the other of his foes, and the man of his own party appealed to him against his foe, and Mūsā struck him with his fist and made an end of him. He said "This is a work of evil (Satan), for he is an enemy that manifestly misleads". He prayed: "O my Lord I have indeed wronged my soul. Do thou then forgive me". So God forgave him for He is the Oft - Forgiving, most merciful ... And there came a man running from the furthest part of the city. He said: O Mūsā! the Chiefs are taking counsel together about thee, to slay thee, so get away for I do give thee sincere advice. He therefore got away therefrom ... Then, when he turned his face towards (the land of) Madyan, he said: I do hope that my Lord will show me the smooth and straight path.

The Biblical account of Mūsā's killing of the Egyptian and the consequent

<sup>6</sup> In the Qur'ān, it is vaguely stated that the people of Pharaoh discovered the baby on the river bank, while the Bible is more specific when it asserts that Pharaoh's daughter discovered the baby.

flight from Egypt to the land of Madyan is contained in Ex. 2:11–15. The two scriptures however view the incident differently. From the Qur'ānic point of view, the murder was accidental. According to Ash-Shawkānī<sup>7</sup>, Mūsā's intention was merely to defend the Israelite and not to kill the Egyptian. M. M. Ali expresses a similar view<sup>8</sup>. Aṣ-Ṣābūnī was of the view that the death was due to natural causes. This is why subsequent to the incident Mūsā was full of regrets, so much so that he repented and prayed to God for divine forgiveness as evident in the above passage. The view that the killing was accidental derives from *Sūrah* 26:20 which explicitly states that the murder was committed in error<sup>9</sup>.

The statement *fa'altu-hā idhan wa-anā min aḍ-ḍāllīn* (meaning: 'I did it then when I was in error') has been given three interpretations all of which are plausible:

- (i) I was wrong in doing it in a temper and in being hasty.
- (ii) I was wrong in taking the law into my own hands, but I repented and asked for God's pardon.
- (iii) That was at a time when I was under your (Pharaoh) influence, but since then I am a changed man as God has called me<sup>10</sup>.

Maulana Ali explains *ḍāll* as meaning 'one perplexed, being unable to know what was incumbent on him'<sup>11</sup>. These interpretations corroborate one another in the assertion that the murder was inadvertent. A strong argument in support of this view is the fact that Mūsā was not in possession of any weapon that could cause death.

The Bible on the other hand purports that the act of murder was premeditated, as can be inferred from Ex. 2:12 which asserts: "He (Moses) looked this way and that way, seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand". The idea of looking around, trying to cover up in carrying out his action, lends credence to this opinion. According to the Jewish Encyclopaedia<sup>12</sup>, the Rabbinical explanation of Ex. 2:12 is that the murder was justifiable because the Egyptian had forced a Jewish woman to commit adultery with him.

<sup>7</sup> Ash-Shawkānī, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī, *Faṭḥ al-Qādir*, Vol. 4, (Dār al-Fikr, Lebanon, 1976), p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> M. M. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary* (A. A. I.I., Lahore, 1963) p. 712.

<sup>9</sup> Aṣ-Ṣābūnī, Muḥammad Ali, *Mukhtaṣar Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Vol. 3, (Dār-al-Qur'ān, Bairut, 1981) p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> A. Yusuf Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 949.

<sup>11</sup> M. M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 712.

<sup>12</sup> See *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, Vol. IX, p. 48.

This view is not contained in the Qur'ān. Maulana Ali has however tried to suggest that Mūsā's statement: *hādhā min 'amali sh-shayṭān* (which means: this is a work of the devil, but translated by him as: 'This is on account of the devil's doing') refers not to Mūsā's action but to the punishment meted out to the Egyptian on account of his devilish deed (of committing adultery?)<sup>13</sup>. Ali's interpretation is consequent upon his belief in the impeccability of the prophets. To him it is not conceivable that Mūsā could be influenced by the devil. This has also influenced him in his interpretation of Mūsā's prayer for forgiveness. In his view Mūsā's prayer was not evidence of guilt of murder. Hence he interprets Mūsā's statement *zalamtu nafsī* as signifying 'taking risk in giving help to another'<sup>14</sup>. To my mind these interpretations are too far-fetched and they do not convey the real message intended in the passage. The Qur'ān is clear in its assertion that Mūsā's action was committed in error and this is a fact admitted by Maulana Ali himself, as is evident in his commentary on *Sūrah* 26:20. If in spite of this admission he still believes that the killing is a punishment for an offence, he must be contradicting himself. It must be pointed out that the Islamic principle of impeccability of the prophets is not violated by Mūsā's action in view of the fact that the action occurred before he became a prophet.

Mūsā's action became known to Pharaoh. While he was planning to deal with him, Mūsā was secretly informed that he should not expect justice from the authority and he was consequently advised to leave Egypt in the interest of his life. He there and then fled to the land of Madyan where he was given asylum. There he had various adventures. He came in contact with daughters of Shu'ayb<sup>15</sup> (Jethro) whom he assisted to fetch water for their flocks as they were hindered by shepherds who also needed water. The Bible states the number of Shu'ayb's daughters who are said to be seven, while the Qur'ān only speaks of two of them who are in charge of the father's flock<sup>16</sup>. Impressed by Mūsā's kind gesture they informed their father about their experience. The father, out of curiosity, sent for him and as a compensation for his noble deed he employed him to look after his cattle. He also gave one of his daughters to him in marriage<sup>17</sup>. The Qur'ān however stipulates a service of eight to ten years as a condition for the marriage. A similar service recorded in the Bible is in respect of Jacob's marriage to Rachel as found in Genesis 29:15-30. After the expiration of the service period Mūsā decided to return to Egypt.

<sup>13</sup> M. M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 746.

<sup>14</sup> Shu'ayb is given the name Ruel in Ex. 2:18 and Jethro in Ex. 3:1

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid. loc. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> *Sūrah* 28:23 and Ex. 2:16.

<sup>17</sup> *Sūrah* 28:26-27 and Ex. 2:21.

*Mūsā's Prophetic Call and Mission*

On Mūsā's way back to Egypt, together with his family and flocks, he was called to his mission by God. The place was at the right side of Mount Sinai, as we read in *Sūrah* 19:52. He perceived a fire at a distance and went there to obtain comfort and guidance. To his amazement it was a bush burning, but which was not consumed, according to the Biblical expression<sup>18</sup>. Mūsā found a higher and holier comfort and guidance in the divine call which informed him he was on sacred ground, and as such he was asked to put off his shoes<sup>19</sup> and draw near for mystic converse. It was at this point that he was given his commission, with the appointment of his brother Hārūn (Aaron), as a co-prophet, who served as his interpreter as he was more eloquent<sup>20</sup>.

The account of Mūsā's call to prophethood is similar to the Biblical account given in Ex. 3:1-18 and Ex. 4:1-17. The mission of Mūsā and Hārūn was to preach God's existence to Pharaoh<sup>21</sup> and the Egyptians, as well as to lead the Israelites out of Egypt in order to liberate them from the Egyptian oppression. Mūsā is said to have been given nine signs as a mark of his prophetic call, according to *Sūrahs* 17:101 and 27:12, most of which correspond to the two signs and ten plagues recorded in chapters 7-11 of Exodus. They are follows:

- (i) The rod (*Sūrah* 7:107, cf. Ex. 4:2-3)
- (ii) The radiant hand (*Sūrah* 7:108, cf. Ex. 4:6-7).
- (iii) Years of drought (*Sūrah* 7:130).
- (iv) Short crops (*Sūrah* 7:130).
- (v) Wholesale death (*Sūrah* 7:133 cf. Ex. 9:1-7 and Ex. 11:1-10).
- (vi) Locusts (*Sūrah* 7:133, cf. Ex. 10:12-20).
- (vii) Lice/gnats (*Sūrah* 7:133, cf. Ex. 8:16-19).
- (viii) Frogs (*Sūrah* 7:133, cf. Ex. 8:1-15).
- (ix) Nile water turning into blood (*Sūrah* 7:133, cf. Ex. 7:14-24).

The following observations can be made on the foregoing references:

<sup>18</sup> The fire is not an ordinary fire. It is a reflection of the Glory of God.

<sup>19</sup> The command to remove the shoes is meant to make the heart vacant from the care for material things.

<sup>20</sup> *Sūrah* 20:25 and Ex. 4:14-17.

<sup>21</sup> Pharaoh needed a prophet because he had transgressed all bounds. He calls himself God as is evident in *Sūrahs* 26:29 and 28:3. He was also wicked as Exodus 5:6-19 and 6:5 show.



- (i) The Qur'ān talks of nine signs against the mention of ten plagues in the Bible.
- (ii) The Qur'ān does not make a distinction between the plagues and the two miracles (signs) of the rod and the radiant hand which were to prepare Mūsā for his mission to Pharaoh. The two are considered along with the plagues to make the nine signs.
- (iii) The years of drought and short crops (in iii and iv above) have no parallels in Mūsā's life in the Biblical accounts. Their parallels are contained in Gen. chapters 40 and 41 where they are given as signs of Joseph (Qur'ānic Yūsuf).
- (iv) The widespread death (*at-Tūfān* in v) parallels the 10th plague in the Bible, i.e. plague of death of the first born of the Egyptians.
- (v) The plagues of locust, lice/gnats, frogs, and Nile water becoming blood (in vi-ix) have direct parallels in the Bible.
- (vi) The plagues of flies, death of cattle and other animals, boils and sores and darkness are not directly mentioned in the Qur'ān.

It may however be reasonable to argue, in line with M.M. Ali's <sup>22</sup> reasoning, that the plague of flies is not mentioned in the Qur'ān because it is akin to the plague of the gnats (lice), while the plague of the death of cattle is considered with the widespread death. However, his explanation for the omission of the plagues of hail and darkness in the Qur'ān is not plausible. He argues that instead of mentioning hail the destruction of fruit which was brought about by it is mentioned, while instead of darkness the drought which is the actual affliction is mentioned. This view is not plausible because, as already noted, the destruction of fruit and the drought did not feature during the time of Mūsā, hence they cannot be associated with hail and darkness. We may reasonably assume that they are omitted, along with the plague of boils, because they are not considered to be of equal importance with those mentioned. The significance of the plagues lies in their revealing the glory and power of God. The climax of them all is the 10<sup>th</sup> plague which served as the point of deliverance, because with it Pharaoh's resistance was broken and he had no choice but to release the Israelites<sup>23</sup>.

With the granting of the initial prophetic signs of the rod and the radiant hand, and with the appointment of Hārūn as an assistant, Mūsā appeared set for his mission in Egypt in spite of the offence that necessitated his exile to the land of Madyan<sup>24</sup>. Details of Mūsā's encounter with Pharaoh and his people

<sup>22</sup> T. N. O. Quarcoopone, *History and Religion of Israel, from the Creation through the Monarchy to the Exile* (African University Press, 1986) p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> M. M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

<sup>24</sup> The mission of Mūsā is spelt out in *Sūrah* 20:43-47 and Ex. 3:7-12.

are contained in *Sūrah* 7:103–144 and *Sūrah* 20:42–76, the parallel of which is found in Ex. 7:8–13 with further details contained in Exodus chapters 4 and 5.

According to the Qur'ānic account, when Mūsā met Pharaoh he announced his mission to him. Pharaoh found it difficult to believe in Mūsā's prophethood, hence his demand for convincing signs. In response he showed the signs of the rod and radiant hand<sup>25</sup>. To challenge these signs Pharaoh invited his magicians who promptly responded, but with the anticipation of remuneration in the event of their victory<sup>26</sup>. However, their efforts were frustrated by Mūsā who demonstrated superior skill<sup>27</sup>. The magicians there and then submitted to Mūsā and declared belief in One God, as evidenced by *Sūrah* 7:120–122 and *Sūrah* 20:70–76. The action angered Pharaoh who consequently threatened to punish the repentant sorcerers for treason and apostasy by amputating their hands and feet on the opposite sides and by crucifying them<sup>28</sup>. However, they remained firm and prayed to God for patience and constancy.

The Biblical account contrasts with that of the Qur'ān with regard to the sorcerers' repentance. The Bible does not give the impression that they believed in the mission of Mūsā after their defeat, rather they were presented as being persistent in their opposition to him when other signs were shown<sup>29</sup>. This is not to say however that the enchanters failed to recognise the authenticity of Mūsā's mission, for they acknowledged in Ex. 8:9 that there was the finger of God in what Mūsā was doing. They were led to this conclusion because of the effect of the plagues on them<sup>30</sup>.

In spite of Mūsā's triumph over Pharaoh's magicians, Pharaoh still neither believed in God nor would he release the Israelites. Rather, he intensified his infanticide policy, that is his design to kill the male children born to the Israelites, a device to gradually extirpate the Israelites in Egypt. Pharaoh's obstinacy earned him and his people punishment with the plagues recorded in *Sūrah* 7 of the Qur'ān and the book of Exodus discussed above. Each time a calamity befell him and his people they appealed to Mūsā to call on his God for its removal, promising to believe in Him, but as soon as it was removed they broke their promise<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> In Exodus, chapter 7 only, the miracle of the rod was displayed as against the two miracles demonstrated at the time Mūsā was commissioned, as recorded in chapter 4 of Exodus.

<sup>26</sup> *Sūrah* 7:113.

<sup>27</sup> This is evidenced by *Sūrah* 7:117 and Ex. 7:12.

<sup>28</sup> *Sūrah* 7:123–124 and *Sūrah* 20:71–72.

<sup>29</sup> See Ex. 7:8–9:11.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald E. Clement, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the English Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 1972) p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> *Sūrah* 7:134–135 and Ex. 9:27 and Ex. 10:16.

The Israelites' oppression by Pharaoh was brought to an end when Mūsā received divine instruction to leave Egypt with his people by night in order to cross the Red Sea into the Sinai peninsula. According to *Sūrah* 20:78 and Ex. 14:21–31, Mūsā and his people safely crossed the sea—while Pharaoh with his troops, who came out in their pursuit, were overwhelmed by the sea and consequently perished in it.

The two scriptures agree on the view that a path was created in the sea through which Mūsā and his people passed when on divine instruction he struck the sea with his rod<sup>32</sup>. Further details on how the Israelites were made to pass through the sea are contained in Ex. 14:21. This passage says the Lord drove the sea back by a strong East wind which blew all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters divided forming walls for them at their sides. With the miracle of the sea-crossing, the Israelites were finally rescued from the bondage of tyrannous Pharaoh.

#### *Aftermath of the Israelites' Freedom after Bondage in Egypt*

After crossing the sea, Mūsā was invited to Mount Sinai<sup>33</sup> to receive the law; he was appointed to stay for forty days<sup>34</sup>. According to *Sūrah* 7:155 and Ex. 24:1, he took along with him seventy elders of Israel who stayed at a distance to serve as witnesses to the incident. The purpose of the long stay, as explained in the Bible, is to enable him to receive sufficient instructions for the construction of the tabernacle<sup>35</sup>.

The law given to Mūsā is understood by the Muslims to be contained in the revealed scripture known as *Tawrāt*. The same is understood by the Jews and the Christians as *Torah* containing the ten commandments as enshrined in Ex. 20:2–17<sup>36</sup> as follows:

- (i) "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 2:2–3).
- (ii) "You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above or that is in the earth beneath..." (Ex. 2:4).

<sup>32</sup> The Bible says he was asked to stretch his hand on the sea. The hand implies rod since the rod was in his hand (see Ex. 14:21 and 14:26 cf. *Sūrah* 26:64–69).

<sup>33</sup> The Mountain of Sinai (Tūr Sīnīn) is a prominent mountain in the Arabian desert in the peninsula between the two arms of the Red Sea. This is where Mūsā received his call and the law.

<sup>34</sup> *Sūrahs* 2:51; 7:142–145; 20:83, cf. Ex. 24:18.

<sup>35</sup> Ex. 25:9.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Deut. 5:6–10.

- (iii) "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain ..." (Ex 2:7).
- (iv) "Remember the Sabbath day, keep it holy..." (Ex. 2:8).
- (v) "Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long ..." (Ex. 2:13).
- (vi) "You shall not kill" (Ex. 2:13).
- (vii) "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 2:14).
- (viii) "You shall not steal" (Ex. 2:15).
- (ix) "You shall not bear false witness ..." (Ex. 2:16).
- (x) "You shall not covet your neighbour's house ..." (Ex. 2:17).

According to the muslims' claim the Qur'ān encompasses the teachings of the earlier scriptures, including the *Tawrāt*, as the only extant parts of all the Muslims' revealed books. Hence the parallels of most of the ten commandments are found in the scripture. *Sūrah* 17:22–29 in particular contains a number of injunctions synonymous with the ten commandments, as is evident from these excerpts.

- (i) "Take not with God another object of worship or thou wilt sit in disgrace and destitution" (cf. Ex. 20:2–4 = the first two commandments).
- (ii) "Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him and that ye be kind to your parents ... Say not to them a word of contempt" (cf. Ex. 20:12).
- (iii) "Nor come nigh to adultery for it is a shameful deed ..." (cf. Ex. 20:14).
- (iv) "Nor take life which God has made sacred except for a just cause ..." (cf. Ex. 20:13).
- (v) "Come not nigh to the orphan's property except to improve it (*Sūrah* 4:32 is more stern on the prohibition of covetousness, cf. Ex. 20:17).

It is evident from the foregoing references that six of the ten commandments have parallels in *Sūrah* 17:22–29. The parallels of three out of four of the commandments not mentioned in the passage can be inferred from other passages of the scripture as indicated below:

- (i) The prohibition of mentioning God's name in vain (in Ex. 20:7) can be inferred from *Sūrah* 5:92 which stipulates means of expiation for one guilty of intentional swearing of a false oath with God's name.
- (ii) The prohibition of stealing contained in Ex. 20:15 can be inferred from *Sūrah* 5:41 which enjoins amputation of the thief's hand.
- (iii) The prohibition of bearing false witness (in Ex. 20:16) can be inferred from *Sūrah* 24:4 which prohibits acceptance of evidence (witness) of one guilty of false allegation against chaste women.

The only commandment which has no parallel in the *Sharī'ah* is the

command to make the Sabbath holy, as contained in Ex. 20:8. There is no Sabbath in Islam because no particular day is consecrated for worship.

While Mūsā was on the mount receiving the law the Israelites, who were encamped at the foot of the mountain, became impatient with the delay in his return and made a calf of melted gold to which worship and service were offered<sup>37</sup>. It should be noted that while the visit to Mount Sinai before the calf worship was the second and the last made by Mūsā (the first being on the occasion of his call), according to the Qur'ānic account, the Bible has record of a third visit, in Ex. 34:28, which took place immediately after the incident of calf worship.

The worship of the molten calf, whose details are contained in *Sūrah* 20:86–97 and 7:148–151, was at the instigation of one Sāmīrī. This account conflicts with the Biblical record in the 32nd chapter of Exodus which attributes the action to Hārūn. From *Sūrah* 20:90 it is clear that Hārūn not only refrained from participation in the making of the calf, he even enjoined his people to give up its worship.

Who is this Qura'nīc Sāmīrī? Is the name connected with the Samaritans in the Bible? Certainly there can be no relationship because the Samaritans appeared in history only after the fall of the Northern Kingdom and its capital Samaria in 721 B.C., as a result of the defeat the Israelites suffered at the hands of the Assyrians<sup>38</sup>. The Samaritans were the descendants of the mixed population of new settlers from the Assyrian empire and the Israelites left behind in the land<sup>39</sup>.

Yusuf Ali<sup>40</sup> postulates two possible roots of Sāmīrī: The first is *Shemer*, which in old Egyptian means a 'stranger or a foreigner', as defined in Wallis Budge's Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary. He argues that as the Israelites had just left Egypt they might have had among them an Egyptianised Hebrew bearing that nick-name. He sees justification in his argument as the name Shemer was subsequently not unknown among the Hebrews. In I Kings 16:24, we read that Omri, the king of the Northern portion of the Israelite Kingdom, who reigned about 903–896 B.C., built a new city, Samaria, on a hill which he bought from Shamer the owner of the hill. McKenzie<sup>41</sup> opines that the name of the city is derived from the owner's name. The second probable root is the Hebrew word *Shomer* which means 'a guard or a watchman'. The word, according to M.M. Ali, is allied to the Arabic trilateral verb *Samara* which

<sup>37</sup> *Sūrah*s 2:51; 7:148; Ex. 32:1–8.

<sup>38</sup> II Kings 17–24–41.

<sup>39</sup> Kwesu A. Dickson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (Longman, London, 1979) p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> Yusuf Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 806.

<sup>41</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1978) p. 800.

means to keep awake by night. *Sāmīr*, its active participle, therefore means one who keeps awake by night. The *Sāmīrī* may have been a watchman in fact or by nickname, *Allāhu a'lam*. Hārūn's exoneration from the calf worship conforms with the general tendency in Islam to dissociate prophets of God from sinful acts.

The Israelites' relapse into idolatrous practices before Mūsā's return angered him. In annoyance he dropped the tablet containing the divine message which he had brought from the Mount<sup>42</sup>, rebuked *Sāmīrī* for his action and burnt the calf<sup>43</sup>. We are not informed in the Qur'ān that the tablet was broken and renewed, as we read in Ex. 32:19 and Ex. 34:1-10. The impression given in *Sūrah* 7:154 is that when Mūsā's anger subsided he picked up the tablet wholly. Another point of conflict in this account is what happened to the ashes of the burnt calf. According to the Qur'ān in *Sūrah* 20:97 the ashes were thrown into the sea, while in Ex. 32:20 and Ex. 9:21 the Israelites were made to drink of water mixed with the ashes of the calf as a punishment for their action. Mūsā's annoyance did not last long. He gracefully prayed to his Lord for their forgiveness, and they were forgiven as is evident in *Sūrah* 7:155 and Ex. 32:11-14.

The forty years' march of the Israelites in the wilderness after their release from Egypt was punctuated by incidents which portrayed them as a specially chosen race upon whom were bestowed divine favours but who failed to show gratitude in return.

Some of the favours bestowed on the Israelites are recounted in *Sūrah* 5:22 which reads:

Remember Mūsā said to his people: O My people remember the favour of God upon you when He produced prophets among you, made you Kings and gave you what He had not given any other among the peoples.

In this Qur'ānic passage two specific favours bestowed on the Israelites are mentioned. The first is the raising up of the prophets among them, from Ibrāhīm (Abraham) through Mūsā down to 'Īsā (Jesus). With the Mosaic law was laid down the basis of a dispensation which gave them promise of numerous prophets appearing among them<sup>44</sup>. Secondly, they are said to be made kings which implies their status as a free and independent state after several years of slavery in Egypt<sup>45</sup>. These two favours bestowed on the Israelites are the two things in the verse which are said not to have been given to any other race, which make them a race specially chosen by God above

<sup>42</sup> *Sūrah* 7:150 cf. Ex. 32:19.

<sup>43</sup> *Sūrah* 20:95-97 cf. Ex. 32:20.

<sup>44</sup> M.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>45</sup> A. Yusuf Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

others, as is evident in Ex. 19:5. Israel was thus chosen to be the vehicle of God's message, the highest honour that could be granted to any nation.

In spite of these divine favours incidents in the history of the Israelites depict them as ungrateful, faithless people. The first in the series of these favours was apparently their release by Mūsā from the bondage of Pharaoh which was reciprocated by their relapse into idolatrous practices, as already noted. Perhaps the Israelites should not be blamed for their faith, or can we say they were yet to develop any faith? This was why they would demand to see God face to face before they would be prepared to believe in Him, as indicated in *Sūrah* 2:55. This is a sacrilegious demand as far as the Qur'ān and the Bible are concerned, because the punishment for seeing God is death<sup>46</sup>. This was the reason why the Israelites who summoned the courage to make the demand were dazed with thunder and lightning, as we read in *Sūrah* 2:55 and Ex. 19:12–16. They were however forgiven and were to regain their consciousness.

It is appropriate at this juncture to briefly examine the motif for Mūsā's desire to see God. While Mūsā's desire to see God, as expressed in *Sūrah* 7:143 and Ex. 33:18, may have been prompted by the demand of the elders spoken of in *Sūrah* 2:55, the more important reason for this desire was born out of his love for God. This is the kind of love which the Muslim mystics of all ages have for God which impels them to long for being in communion with Him. Consequently *ru'yatu llāh* becomes an important sufi doctrine which every sufi strives to attain. Ibn Arabi<sup>47</sup> in his *Wisdom of the Prophets*, describes supreme union, which is a concomitance of this doctrine, as a mutual interpenetration of divinity and humanity. He asserts that God as it were takes on human nature while the divine nature (*al-Lāhūt*) becomes the content of human nature (*an-Nāsūt*), the latter being considered as the recipient of the former; man is thus absorbed and enveloped by Divine Reality; God is mysteriously present in man, while man is obliterated in God. According to him all this must be understood only from the spiritual realm. It is within this context that one should understand the sufi doctrine of *fanā'* as expressed by that great sufi al-Hallāj when he says he was 'lost in God'.

Further favours bestowed on the Israelites in the course of their journey in the wilderness, according to the two scriptures, were evident in the provision of clouds which gave them shade against the excessive heat of the desert<sup>48</sup>; the provision of manna and quail<sup>49</sup> (later supplemented according to *Sūrah* 2:61

<sup>46</sup> *Sūrahs* 2:55; 7:143; 7:155; cf. Ex. 33:20 and Jn. 1:18.

<sup>47</sup> See D.M. Matheson (transl.), *An Introduction to Sufi doctrine*; (Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1973) p. 92f.

<sup>48</sup> *Sūrah* 2:57 and Ex. 13:21.

<sup>49</sup> *Sūrah* 2:57 (cf. *Sūrah* 2:61) and Ex. 16:13.

with herbs, cucumbers), which provided them with nourishment without much exertion, and the provision of water to satisfy their thirst<sup>50</sup>. Despite these blessings the Israelites continued to act contrary to the divine will. Hence when in *Sūrah* 2:58–59 they were instructed to enter a city (the city is Shittim referred to in Num. 25:1 according to one opinion, while it is the 'promised land' referred to in *Sūrah* 5 according to another opinion)<sup>51</sup>, and they were enjoined to engage in lawful things, demonstrate humility, eat of the plenteous food therein and seek divine forgiveness, they behaved contrary to the divine commands. As we read in Num. 25:1–2 and 8–9, Israelites in the city of Shittim were guilty of debauchery and the worship of false gods which earned them punishment by plagues from which 24,000 died<sup>52</sup>. The climax of the Israelites' intransigence was their refusal to enter the promised land. This is brought to light by the Qur'ān in *Sūrah* 5:23–29 thus:

"O my people, enter the holy land which God has assigned unto you and turn not back ignominiously, then will you be overthrown to your ruin". They said: "O Mūsā, in the land are a people of exceeding strength, never shall we enter it until they leave it. If (once) they leave then shall we enter". (But) among (their) God fearing men were two on whom God had bestowed His Grace, they said: "Assault them at the (proper) gate, when once you are in, victory will be yours, but on God put your trust if you have faith". They said: "O Mūsā while they remain there never shall we be able to enter to the end of time. Go thou and thy Lord and fight you two while we sit here (and watch)". He said: "O my Lord, I have power only over my self and my brother, so separate us from this rebellious people". God said: "Therefore will the land be out of their reach for forty years, in distraction will they wander through the land, but sorrow thou not over these rebellious people."

The details of this account are contained in chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Numbers. From the above Qur'ānic passage it is evident that the Israelites were not prepared to enter the promised land, despite the threat of punishment and despite the pleadings of the God-fearing men, Joshua and Caleb<sup>53</sup>. The excuse for their unwillingness was the presence of people of exceeding strength<sup>54</sup>. This shows that the Israelites were scared to fight for their inheritance in spite of assurances of victory, which further proves their faithlessness and lack of trust in God. They were prepared to appoint another captain to lead them back to Egypt, while Mūsā, Hārūn, Joshua and Caleb

<sup>50</sup> *Sūrah* 2:60 and Ex. 17:1–6.

<sup>51</sup> Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Ali are examples of Qur'ānic commentators who express the opinion that the city is Shittim referred to in Num. 25:1 (see pages 31 & 28 of their commentaries respectively). Muhammad Ali aṣ-Ṣābūnī and Muḥammad Ash-Shawkānī are examples of those who believe that the city is the promised land (see vol. 1, page 68 and vol. 1, page 89 of their commentaries respectively).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Sūrah* 2:58–59.

<sup>53</sup> Details of Joshua and Caleb's pleading are contained in Num. 14:6–9.

<sup>54</sup> Num. 13:32. Details of the Israelites' excuses are contained in Num. 14:1–4.



were asked to fight alone. In consequence of their disobedience God denied them entry into the promised land and meted His punishment on them<sup>55</sup>.

### Conclusion

The foregoing appraisal no doubt brings to light striking similarities in the Qur'ānic and Biblical accounts of the life of prophet Mūsā. This is evident in the two scriptures' synonymous views in their accounts of his birth, flight to the land of Madyan, mission, encounter with Pharaoh and experience with the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai. In point of fact the accounts in the two scriptures follow the same sequence from the beginning to the end, with broad basic agreement.

This is not to say however that the points of divergence can be marginalised. For instance the two scriptures express conflicting views on:

- (i) who among the members of Pharaoh's family adopted Mūsā as son?
- (ii) the motive behind the killing of the Egyptian,
- (iii) the number of Shu'ayb's daughters assisted by Mūsā,
- (iv) the number and nature of the plagues inflicted on Pharaoh and his people.
- (v) the person who instigated the worship of the golden calf,
- (vi) whether or not the tablet containing the divine message sent to Mūsā was broken when he was angry,
- (vii) whether the ashes of the burnt calf were thrown into the sea or the Israelites were made to drink the water mixed with the ashes.

Apart from the foregoing a point of divergence which is sometimes thought to be of a fundamental nature is the two scriptures' perception of Mūsā. While the Qur'ān unequivocally conceives Mūsā as a prophet, he is not precisely conceived as such by the Christian theologians<sup>56</sup>. Even though Dt. 34:10<sup>57</sup> describes Mūsā as a prophet whose like is rare, it appears that his role as a prophet is overshadowed by his other roles in the Christian understanding. Mūsā in the Bible is understood more essentially as the founder of Yahwism, the mediator of the covenant, the law-giver, and the creator of Israel<sup>58</sup>. However, it must be pointed out that some of these roles attributed to Mūsā

<sup>55</sup> See Num. 14:12, 14:22, 14:33 for the punishment of the Israelites. All those that were twenty years old and upwards were to die in the wilderness, while those who were children would reach the promised land.

<sup>56</sup> McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 589.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Dt. 18:15-19; Nu. 12:6-8.

<sup>58</sup> McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 588<sup>f</sup>.

are equally recognised by the Qur'ān, but they are understood to be aspects of his prophetic function. Therefore, the conflict here (if there is any) arises from the different emphasis in the two scriptures.

With regard to the other points of conflict in the narratives, it appears human involvement in the recording of the two scriptures largely accounts for these, especially as the recorders wrote under different conditions and circumstances. One point which, however, needs to be emphasised in this study is the fact that the points of confluence in the two scriptures' accounts of Mūsā's life are by no means more fundamental than the points of conflict. These should be seen as an indicator of their common source and origin.

Some scholars have the tendency to propagate the view that the Qur'ān (perhaps because it was revealed after the Bible) is a slavish imitation of the Bible in view of the similarities in their accounts. Sweetman<sup>59</sup> is a protagonist of this view. The view is to us not plausible because it amounts to denial of divine sanction for the Qur'ānic revelation. If similarities to him suggest imitation how does he explain dissimilarities? The similarities from the point of view of the Muslims are a result of the fact that God is the originator of the two scriptures. This is the premise for the belief in the doctrine of progressive revelation so much emphasised in the Qur'ān<sup>60</sup>. This is the belief that different prophets of God at different times were sent in progression to preach His message. This being the case, their teachings must of necessity be corroboratory, having emanated from one and the same God.

#### RÉSUMÉ

L'A. compare les présentations diversifiées de Moïse dans le Coran et dans la Bible. Bien que le Coran ne prétende pas fournir une biographie complète du prophète en question, on en peut cependant reconstruire les étapes chronologiques à partir des nombreux passages qu'on y trouve. Certains penseront que le récit en est alors assez proche de celui que la Bible nous rapporte dans l'Exode. L'A. énumère cependant sept points importants où les deux récits divergent. Selon lui, ces différences sont à attribuer aux circonstances mêmes dans lesquelles les messages ont dû être délivrés. Par contre, les ressemblances indiqueraient plutôt, d'après lui, que les deux récits ont une même source et une commune origine.

<sup>59</sup> J.S. Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology*, Part I, Volume I (Lutterworth Press, London, 1945) p. 6<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>60</sup> See *Sūrah*s 2:135-136; 2:28; 3:84; 6:83-90.