

CONTEXTS AND INTERPRETATION. PERSPECTIVES ON QUR'ANIC SURAH 112¹

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Abstract

Surah 112, in its usual format, consists only of four verses. However, in Muslim interpretative tradition, it is highly valued; some even estimate the contents of the surah as equivalent to a third of the Qur'an. In essence, it can be regarded as a confession of Islamic faith, defining the kernel issue of belief. Its focus is on the Oneness of Allah, not subjected to any life cycle, and incomparable.

Various occasions have been suggested for the original revelation and proclamation of Surah 112. In general, it is agreed that the surah responds to questions put to the Prophet Muhammad regarding his religious convictions, but there is difference of opinion regarding the exact setting. Al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035), for example, refers to a debate within a polytheistic, Muslim, Jewish and Christian context.

In this article, the contents of the surah is analysed and viewed from the angle of alternative occasions of revelation ascribed to them. It is shown that these different historically-related perspectives create divergent interpretative possibilities.

Key words: Surah 112; al-Tha'labī (d. 427 / 1035); Occasions of Revelation; surat al-ikhhlās; asbāb al-nuzūl

Introduction

Ample studies relating to Surah 112 and its interpretative tradition are in existence, featuring diverse approaches e.g., grammatical (Edwin E. Calverley 1957), lexical (Uri Rubin 1984), and philosophical (Daniel De Smet and Meryem Sebti 2009).

In the present article, a linguistically orientated close reading of the chosen text within its immediate and greater literary environment will be conducted, highlighting divergent historical contexts ascribed to Surah 112 within the interpretative tradition. For this purpose, attention will be given to three aspects. They are an analysis of Surah 112; an exposition and contextualisation of typical features of occasions of revelation mentioned by the prominent Qur'anic scholar al-Tha'labī (d. 427 / 1035; cf. subsection 3 below) in his commentary; *Tafsīr al-Tha'labī* (published in 2002); and finally, an elucidation of the individual interpretations.

The main objective of this article is to examine presumed *settings in life* of Surah 112 and the function of the surah within presumed revelatory contexts.

¹ This article is an adapted version of a paper delivered on 12 September 2019 at the "International Conference on Interreligious Hermeneutics" held at the University of Stellenbosch, 11-13 September 2019. The conference was an initiative of the Faculty of Theology.

For Muslims, Surah 112 is not simply one of the 114 chapters of the Qur'an; rather, it is considered to be of immense worth. Although consisting of only four verses, Surah 112 expresses the central concepts of monotheism as perceived from an Islamic point of view.² Statements in this regard will be elucidated in the "Analysis" below.

Analysis

The Arabic text of Surah 112 consists only of fifteen words

- [1] *qul huwa 'Allahu 'aḥadun*
- [2] *'Allahu 'al-ṣamadu*
- [3] *lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*
- [4] *wa-lam yakun la-hu kufiwan 'aḥadun*

Rendered word by word, the Arabic source text can be translated into English as follows³

- [1] Say (*qul*), He (*huwa*), Allah (*'Allahu*) one (*'aḥadun*)
- [2] Allah (*'Allahu*) "the-Ṣamad" (*'al- ṣamadu*)
- [3] Not did [/ does] He give birth (*lam yalid*) and not was [/ is] He born (*wa-lam yūlad*)
- [4] And not was [/ is] (*wa-lam yakun*) for Him (*la-hu*) [an] equal (*kufiwan*) [any] one (*'aḥadun*).

The surah commences with an imperative, "say" (*qul*), implying that what follows is a divine communication or revelation.

This first statement is followed by a nominal clause proclaiming the uniqueness of Allah. The clause "He Allah one" can be rendered in several ways, e.g. "He [is] Allah One (i.e. [the] Only)"; "He [is] Allah; [He is] One" (Uri Rubin 1984:200); or "He, Allah [is] One", and even "It (*huwa*) [is that] Allah [is] One" (Edwin E. Calvery 1957:9).

The second verse categorises Allah as "the-Ṣamad", a term used only here in the Qur'an and rendered by means of English equivalents such as "the eternal" (Haleem 2015) or the "Eternal Refuge" (Ṣaḥeeḥ International 1997) and "the Self-Sufficient" (Al-Hilali and Khan 1993).⁴

Verse three contains two statements, which both deny (by means of a negative and jussive) the active and passive modes of the verb "to be born" (*walada*). Grammatically preferable is the past tense, "He [Allah] did not give birth, neither was He born". However, focus is on the negation of the event (W. Fischer 1972 par. 319) rather than the specification of time. The present tense is thus also permissible: "He [Allah] does not give birth, and neither is He born".

² According to Uthmani calligraphy, the four verses of Surah 112 were written in two lines (Muhammad-Jafari et al 2019:208).

³ English renderings here and elsewhere use as guideline the English meanings provided by Ṣaḥeeḥ International 1997.

⁴ The two quoted translations are examples of a contextual (Haleem 2015) and etymological approach (Ṣaḥeeḥ International 1997 and Al-Hilali and Khan 1993) in the rendering of *'al-ṣamadu*. For more on the treatment of this hapax, see Ambros 1986:228–44, Calvery. 1957:8:5–14, Cuypers 2004:141–75, Köbert 1961:204–5, Newby 1973:129–30, Paret 1979:294–5 and Rubin 1984:200–6.

The final verse also comprises a negative statement that can be translated (keeping to the sequence of the source text), “And not was / is for Him (*la-hu*) [an] equal [any] one”.

Seen as a whole, the surah expresses its contents in a poetical way. Verse one and four both end with the same word, “one” (*'ahadun*), referring in turn to Allah (verse one) and “[any] one” (verse four). Two homonyms thus function as referential antonyms. Alternatively, parallel statements are made in the surah supporting one another, “Allah One” (verse one), and “Allah the-Šamad” (verse two); “He [Allah] did not give birth, neither was He born” (verse three). The negative particle, *lam* (plus jussive), is used twice in verse three, and once in verse four. As far as recital is concerned, the final words of the four lines, ([1] *'ahadun*, [2] *šamadu*, [3] *yūlad*, [4] *'ahadun*) end respectively on –*adun* [1 and 4], –*adu* [2], and –*ad* [3]. Taking –*lam yūlad* [3], negative [*lam*] plus jussive [*yūlad*], as a point of departure, it may be surmised that the –*u* [2] or –*un* [1 and 3] endings are secondary and that poetically, (with a view to rhyme) the ending –*ad* is to be preferred for all four lines, thus [1] *'ahad**, [2] *šamad**, [3] *yūlad*, and [4] *'ahad**. If this suggestion has any merit, it would also explain why the sequence *lam yalid* (not did He give birth) *wa-lam yūlad* (not was He born) [3] figures rather than the more expected reading, *lam yūlad wa-lam yalid* (not was He born, neither did He give birth).

From the point of view of the contents, Surah 112:1–2 and 3–4 form distinctive units. The first unit (112:1– 2) focuses on the uniqueness of Allah, while verses 3 and 4 accentuate his incomparability. Uri Rubin (1984:206) characterises the latter unit (112:3–4) as providing “purely monotheistic conclusions”. In his commentary on Surah 112, Avicenna (Abu Ali Sina, 980–1037) the Persian Muslim philosopher, regards the pronoun “He” (*huwa*) following the imperative “Say” (*qul*) in verse 1 as the central statement in Surah 112. He refers to it as introducing the “absolute He”, the “Necessary Existent” who is “in itself unknowable”. All other statements in the surah are characterized in a hierarchical order as close [positive] (112:1–2) or distant [negative] (112:3–4) “concomitants” (Daniel De Smet and Meryem Sebtı 2009:136)⁵.

Commentary of al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035)⁶

Al-Tha‘labī (d. 427 H / 1035 CE) compiled an extensive commentary on the Qur’an, titled *'Al-Kašf wa-'l-bayān 'an tafsīr 'al-Qur'ān* (The unveiling and explanation as regards the commentary of the Qur’an). A printed edition of this commentary consists of 10 volumes, more than 3,425 pages (*Tafsīr al-Tha‘labī* 2002). Although he has been criticised as far as his theology and compilation of sources are concerned (cf. Saleh 2004:38–41), *'Al-Kašf wa-'l-bayān* provides important insights into the post-'al-Ṭabarī (d. 311 H / 923 CE) Sunni exegetical tradition.⁷

In his commentary (*tafsīr*) on Surah *'ikhhlāṣ*, Q. 112, al-Tha‘labī pays attention to

⁵ The hierarchical relationship between Surah 112:1-2 and 3-4 may also be expressed in terms of “increasing degrees of concreteness”, comparable (although in a totally different way) to the ordering of consecutive statements in the prologue of the Gospel according to John (cf. Benedict T. Viviano 1998:181).

⁶ Al-Tha‘labī is the usual appellation used in Muslim literature when reference is made to Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī al-Thal‘abī.

⁷ al-Tha‘labī was a renowned but controversial exegete of the Qur’an. In his discussion of al-Tha‘labī within the classical *tafsīr* tradition, Walid A. Saleh (2004:83-84, 205-221) mentions al-Tha‘labī’s concern with detailed textual exegesis, on the one hand, but his compilation of divergent traditions on the other hand. Extensive use of al-Tha‘labī’s commentary was made by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 H / 1144 CE) as well as al-Qurtubī (d. 671 H / 1272 CE), but he was severely criticised by Ibn Taymīyyah (d. 728 H / 1328 CE).

- [1] the virtues of reciting Surah 112;
- [2] a variety of surmised occasions pertaining to the revelation of Surah 112; and
- [3] detailed aspects of the surah.

The three foci represent three approaches to Surah 112. Holistic-impressionistic, contextual (setting in life) and philological.

The virtues [1] of reciting Surah 112 are firstly mentioned by al-Tha‘labī, stating that a specific number of recitals ensure blessings. Repeating the surah twelve times, for example, will have the favourable result that “twelve palaces will be built for him [the reciter] in Jannah”. As a whole, the enumeration of benefits underlines the high esteem of the surah in the 5th century of the Islamic calendar.

As regards detailed aspects of the surah [3], attention is given to interpretative traditions regarding the vocalisation and pronunciation of specific words (*‘ahadun* and *kufuwan*), and the meaning and use of *‘ahad* and particularly *‘al-ṣamad*.

However, for the purpose of this article, it is the second [2] focus point of al-Tha‘labī’s commentary on Surah 112 that needs consideration, the so-called *‘asbāb ‘al-nuzūl*, i.e. “occasions of revelation”.⁸ A series of traditions are quoted by al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035) in this regard, suggesting a variety of contexts for the interpretation of Surah 112.

Five traditions regarding occasions of revelation (*‘asbāb ‘al-nuzūl*) are reported.

Typical of narrations regarding the occasions of revelation of a specific surah, the text (*matn*) of all five traditions is introduced by a chain of consecutive transmitters (*‘isnād*), cited in reverse sequence (latest to earliest).⁹

Three of the traditions have as initial transmitters Companions (*ṣahāba*) of the Prophet. They are

- Ubayy ibn Ka‘b (died 30 H/ 649 CE) one of the first to accept Islam, and later scribe of the Prophet (tradition one), and
- Ibn Abbas (died 68 H / 687 CE), the son of Al-‘Abbas ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib, an uncle of the Islamic prophet Muhammad (traditions two and five).

Two of the traditions (referring to Jews) are associated with transmitters of a slightly later period, namely

- Qatadah (died 118 H / 726 CE) and Muqatil (died 150 H / 767 CE)¹⁰ (tradition three), and
- Muhammad Ibn Sa‘id (date of death not certain; tradition four)

Typical of traditions, two of them (divergent in nature) have as first transmitter the same person, Ibn ‘Abbas. Furthermore, one of the interpretative traditions mentions as the

⁸ For the use of *‘asbāb ‘al-nuzūl* in Qur’anic exegesis, see Rippen, A. 1988: 1–20.

⁹ For the purpose of the present article, only the ultimate source to which a revelatory tradition is ascribed is mentioned. An evaluation of the reliability of the individual transmitters of revelatory traditions associated with surah 112 is provided by Muhammad-Jafari et al 2019:202–7.

¹⁰ For the way in which al-Tha‘labī quotes Muqatil, see Koç, Mehmet Akif. 2008: 69–101..

original transmitter two persons, Qatadah and Muqatil, whose dates of death differ by thirty-two years.

Although they are of diverse origin, the traditions have a comparable format.

In each case it is alleged that conversations of the Prophet with specific persons prompted the revelation of the surah. They are identified as

mušrikūn (“polytheists”; tradition one),
two acquaintances of the Prophet (‘Amir ibn Tufayl and Arbid ibn Rabi’ah; tradition two),
some (or: men, *nās*) from the rabbis (‘*ahbāri*) of the Jews (‘*al-yahūdi*; tradition three),
a group (*rahṭ*) of Jews (tradition four) and
seven bishops (*sab’a ’asāqifatin*) from the Banu al-Harith ibn Ka‘b in Najran, including two leaders (as-Sayyid and al-‘Aqib; tradition five).

Only scant information about the people concerned is provided (cf. subsection 4.1-4 below). It is simply stated that they questioned the Prophet (traditions 1–5), usually on their own initiative (traditions 3–5) but in some cases after an invitation (tradition 2). Questions usually start with the imperative singular and are similarly phrased

Describe (*šif*) him (Allah) to us. Second tradition
Describe (*šif*) your Lord (*rabba-ka*) to us. Third tradition
Describe (*šif*) your Lord (*rabba-ka*) to us. Fourth tradition
Describe (*šif*) your Lord (*rabba-ka*) to us. Fifth tradition

People putting questions that ask for a description of Muhammad’s God suggests some answers (formulated in a stereotyped way) as well, e.g.

Is he gold (*dahab*) or is he silver (*fīdḍa*), or [is he perhaps] steel (*ḥadīd*) or wood (*kašab*)? Tradition two
Is he [created] from gold or copper (*nuḥās*), or [perhaps] from brass (*ṣufr*), steel or silver? Third tradition
What thing (*šai’in*) is he [made of]? Tradition five

The presupposition is that God, whom Muhammad worships, is or is represented as an idol. Alternatively, a heavenly pantheon is assumed

This Allah has created (*kalaqa*) the creation (‘*al- kalq*), so who created him (*kalaqa-hu*)? Fourth tradition.¹¹

A third conceptualisation of the divine figure associated with Muhammad is a convergence of the notion of a manufactured idol and a “living” member of a pantheon

¹¹ “This Allah” (*ḥaḍā ’Allāhu*) consists of a demonstrative pronoun added to Allah, indicating that the latter was regarded as a class noun by the speakers. In their view, the deity that the Prophet Muhammad proclaimed was simply one among gods with a similar appellation.

So inform us (*fa- 'akbir-nā*) from what thing (*min 'ayyi šai'in*) is he [created]. What is his characteristic (/kind / gender)? Is he [created] from gold or copper (*nuḥās*), or [perhaps] from brass (*ṣufr*), steel or silver? Does he eat (*ya'kulu*) and drink (*wa-yašrabu*)? From who did he inherit (*warīṭa*) the world ('*al-dunyā*) and who will [it be that will] inherit (*yarīṭu*) from him? Third tradition.

How (*kaifa*) was he created (*kuliqa*) and how is his upper arm ('*aḍudu-hu*) and forearm (*ḍirā 'a-hu*)? Fourth tradition.

The two views, more advanced than the ones postulated above, are respectively ascribed to some rabbis and a “group of Jews”. In response to their questions, the different groups of people receive as divine reply Surah 112, either directly or after the Prophet himself had responded in person. Revelation of the surah is stated in a more or less stereotyped way

Allah then revealed *Qul huwa Allahu ahad* until the end of the Surah (*Surat al-Ikhlās*). Tradition one.

This Surah was then revealed. Tradition two.

Allah (...) then revealed this Surah and it (or: this) is Allah's exclusive (*kāṣṣa*) ascription (*nisba*). Tradition three.

Allah then revealed *qul huwa 'Allahu 'aḥadun*, with '*aḥadun* in the meaning of *wāḥidun*. Tradition five.

However, in one of the traditions (four), the angel Jibrā'īl (cf. Q. 2:97) is mentioned as a mediator between the Divine and Muhammad, stating

And he [Jibrā'īl] came to him [the Prophet] from Allah with an answer (*bi-jawābi*) to (lit.: of) what they [the Jews] had asked him (*sa'alū-hu*) [which is the Surah] *qul huwa 'Allahu 'aḥadun* (*Surat al-Ikhlās*).

Only in one instance (tradition 5) is a verbalised response of the Prophet himself mentioned. In answer to the Christian delegation's question, “Of (*min*) what thing (*šai'in*) is he [your God, made of]?” it is reported that Muhammad replied, “My Lord (*rabbī*) is not [made out] of something (*šai'in*), and he is apart (or: separate; *bā'in*) from things ('*al-'ašyā'a*).”

However, in the case of the group of Jews, the Prophet twice became extremely angry when, concerning Allah, they asked, “Who created him (*kalaqa-hu*)?” and “How (*kaifa*) was he created (*kuliqa*) and how is his upper arm ('*aḍudu-hu*) and forearm (*ḍirā 'a-hu*)?”. In response to each question, it is stated, “and he [the Prophet] looked at them furiously (*sāwara-hum*)”, adding (at the first occasion) that it was ‘for his Lord’ (*li-rabbi-hi*). In both instances, tradition four reports, Jibrā'īl came (*jā'a*) to him, and calmed him and said, “Oh Muhammad, lower ('*ikfīd*) on yourself [as regards] your wing (*janāḥa-ka*) [for your Lord].”

Interpretation

Four contexts are suggested by the five traditions regarding the occasions of revelation of Surah 112, namely

Polytheistic
Muslim
Jewish (two traditions)
Christian

Tradition one

Tradition one mentions as the context within which Q. 112 was revealed a meeting with unidentified *Mušrikūn*, i.e. **polytheists**. The tradition states that they “said to Rasul Allah (p.b.u.h.), ‘Give us the lineage of your Lord (*’ansib la-nā rabba-ka*).’” Their request differs from the stereotyped demand (“describe ...”) ascribed to the groups mentioned in the other traditions. Background to their request is possibly provided by Surah 37. According to 37:149f., Muhammad was told,

So enquire of them [polytheists], “Is there for your Lord (*’a-li-rabbi-ka*) daughters, and for them sons. Or did we create the angels as females (*’ināṭan*) while they were witnesses.” Is it not that they out of their falsehood (*min ’ifkihīm*) say, “Allah has begotten (*walada*)”. And indeed they are liars. Has He chosen daughters over sons? And they have made between Him and the jinn a lineage (*nasaban*), but the jinn have already known that they will be brought (fetched; *la-muḥḍarūna*) [to punishment].

Asking for the lineage of Allah, as the *Mušrikūn* (polytheists) have done, according to tradition one, is to enquire about the family relationship of Allah. This would imply that He is part of a sociological structure determined by lineage and marriage (*nasaban wa-ṣihran*, cf. Q. 25:54).

No further information regarding the *Mušrikūn* (polytheists) is provided by tradition one. However, all the questions mentioned in the other traditions reflect a mind-set of categorising the religion that Muhammad proclaimed as polytheistic. Idols and gods other than Allah are associated with him. In the Qur’an, an awareness of such conceptions is demonstrated, and warnings are issued against them. In 22:30 and 31, the new adherents to Islam are told

So avoid the filthiness of idols (*’al-rijsa min ’al-’awṭāni*),
inclining [only] to Allah (*ḥunafā’a li-llāhi*) [i.e. as true believers in Allah]
unlike those-who-associate with him (*ghaira mušrikīna bi-hi*) [other gods]

Surah 112:1–4 can also be regarded as an anti-*Mušrikūn* (polytheists) positioning; affirming the Oneness of Allah (112:1), as ‘the-Ṣamad’ (2), not part of the life-cycle (3) and incomparable (4).

Tradition two

Tradition two reflects a typical **Muslim** *da’wa* context: the Prophet invites two fellowmen “to Allah” (*’ilā ’Allāhi*). However, they do not submit to Islam but ask for a description of Muhammad’s God, suggesting some possibilities (gold, silver, steel, wood) which give the impression that they regarded Allah as an idol.

Divine response is reported. Surah 112 is revealed followed by the Heavenly-determined death of the two fellowmen of the Prophet

Allah ... also sent (*'arsala*) a bolt of lightning (*ṣā'iqā*) on Arbid and it burnt him (*'ahraqat-hu*), while 'Amir was penetrated (or afflicted; *tu'ina*) [with plague] in (*fī*) his little finger (*kinṣir*) and he died.

The request for a description, as well as the possibilities mentioned, categorises the two fellowmen among the polytheists (*Muṣrikūn*) or disbelievers. In the Qur'an (2:171), the latter category is typified as deaf (*ṣummun*), dumb (*bukm*) and blind (*'umyun*). Unbelievers are like people putting their fingers in their ears against [dangerous] bolts of thunder (*min 'al-ṣawā'iqi*; 2:19).

Thunder, however, cannot be escaped. In tradition two, it is related how Arbid, one of the two fellowmen, was struck by lightning which "Allah sent". No overt explanation is given, but the reason is implied. Q. 13:13 states that Allah sends thunderbolts and strikes therewith whom He wills while they dispute (*yujādilūna*) with Allah.

The request of the two fellowmen, "Describe (*ṣif*) him (Allah) to us", is a direct response to the preceding dialogue. After seemingly being summoned by Muhammad, the tradition reports that they ask, "To what (*'ilā mā*) are you calling us" (*tad'ū-nā*). He replies, "to Allah" (*'ilā 'Allāh*). Being called 'to Allah' is a metaphoric expression for being invited to submit to Allah as expounded in the Qur'an. However, the two fellowmen interpret the request literally, i.e. that they should come towards a physical object which they do not observe. They therefore ask for a description. Their exact words are, "Describe (*ṣif*) him (Allah) to us". Their demand, as far as Allah is concerned, is, in turn, not achievable. A statement often repeated in the Qur'an is that Allah "is exalted (*subhāna*) [above] regarding what (*'ammā*) they describe" (cf. Q. 21:22, 23:91, 37:159, 37:180 and 43:82). Allah is perceivable only through self-disclosure. And in the context of tradition two, it happens through the revelation of Surah 112.

Although some of the details in Q. 112 do not have direct bearing upon the situation sketched in tradition two, the surah as a whole has the function to emphasise the exaltedness of Muhammad's God. Even legendary conceptions of the presumed idol are pathetic in comparison to Allah.

For the two fellowmen, however, the importance of the idol was manifested through the material from which he was manufactured. Gold and silver were associated with wealth (cf. Q. 3:14). Gold, as a matter of fact, also features in Qur'anic visions of the world to come, e.g. Q18:31 (bracelets of gold) and 43:71 (vessels of gold). However, Allah Himself is beyond description and comparison.

Traditions three and four

Traditions three and four give an account of visits to the Prophet by representatives of the Jews. They are identified respectively as "Some (or: 'men', *nās*) from the rabbis (*'ahbāri*) of the Jews (*'al-yahūdi*)", and "A group (*raḥṭ*) of Jews". It is stated that they "came" (*jā'a*, tradition three; *'atā*, tradition four) to the Prophet.

The description (tradition four) of the approach and questioning of the second delegation (group of Jews) conveys the impression of having been experienced by the

Prophet as confrontational. Twice they ask for information regarding Muhammad's God, and both times he becomes angry with them. Each time, however, the angel Jibra'il intervenes to temper his anger. Simultaneously, a divine message is brought to the Prophet, namely Surah 112 and, at the second occasion, Surah 39:67 (warning about the Day of Judgement).

Between the said two occasions, the Prophet recites to them (*talā 'alai-him*) the newly revealed Surah 112. Within the Qur'anic context, it has the technical meaning of communicating portions of revelation to his hearers at divine instruction. Surah 10:16 states, "If Allah had willed, I would not have recited it (*talawtu-hu*) [i.e. the Qur'anic message] to you (*'alai-kum*)."

Seen from a practical point of view, every mentioning of the revelation of Surah 112 in the different traditions would have been followed by its announcement or recital by the Prophet.

However, of particular concern for the present article is the account (tradition three) of what had been said by "some (or: 'men', *nās*) from the rabbis (or, 'scholars'; *'ahbāri*) of the Jews (*'al-yahūdi*)". They asked the Prophet, "Describe (*ṣif*) your Lord (*rabba-ka*) to us so that we may perhaps (*la'alla-nā*) believe in you (*nu'minu bi-ka*) because, certainly, Allah has revealed his description (*na'ta-hu*) in the Taurah."

The information imparted to Muhammad is that, following a convincing description of his Lord (*rabb*), the possibility existed that they would "believe" in him, i.e. accept him as a true prophet. However, the sincerity of the realisation of the probability is minimised by the subsequent statement, namely that 'Allah has revealed his description (*na'ta-hu*) in the Taurah'. In Surah 2:91, the Jews are quoted as having said, "We believe [only] in what was revealed to us."

Furthermore, in Surah 4:150, the Jews are reproached for wishing to discriminate (or "distinguish"; *'an yufarriqū*) 'between Allah and His messengers', saying, "We believe (*nu'minu*) in some and disbelieve (*nakfuru*) in others". The accusation of the Qur'an is that the credibility of Muhammad as the true prophet of Allah is questioned by the Jews.

However, the impression created by the above Qur'anic verses about the extent of knowledge of the Jews of Islam is not reflected by tradition three and four. The details of their question and suggestions towards its answer imply that Muhammad's God was visualised as an idol. However, compared with the other traditions, more extensive information is exacted. Quite informative is the general questions ascribed to them

Does he eat (*ya'kulu*) and drink (*wa-yaṣrabu*)?

From who did he inherit (*wariṭa*) the world (*'al-dunyā*) and who will [it be that will] inherit (*yariṭu*) from him?

Reference to "eat and drink" implies human characteristics ascribed to the presumed idol. It is unimaginable within Muslim thought as a feature of Allah. As a matter of fact, typifying Allah as 'the-Ṣamad' (*'al-ṣamadu*) in Surah 112 completely distances the Divine from the necessity of consuming any food. In his explanation of the said term (cited by al-Tha'labī), ash-Sha'bi says, "It [i.e. *'al-ṣamadu*] refers to one who does not eat or drink".

Furthermore, the question (tradition three) of the rabbis regarding "inherit" (receive or bequest) associated with the presumed god of Muhammad is also negated by the

expression *'al- šamadu* in Surah 112:2, as well as 112:3 (give birth, born). According to al-Tha'labī, Ubayy ibn Ka'b had said, "*as-Samad* is the one who neither begets nor is born. This is because whatever is born will die and whoever inherits will be inherited from, and Allah will never die and will never be inherited from."

Except for unique expressions like *'al- šamadu*, Surah 112 defines the Muslim view of exclusive monotheism in a way parallel to statements to this effect in the Torah and Hebrew bible as a whole¹². Deuteronomy 6:4 (cf. Surah 112:1), a kernel verse in Jewish tradition, proclaims

šēma ' yisrā'ēl YHWH 'elōhē-nū YHWH 'ehād

Hear, O Israel (*šēma ' yisrā'ēl*). The Lord [*YHWH*] our God (*'elōhē-nū*), the Lord [*YHWH*] is One (*'ehād*).

A similar formulation is found in Psalm 86:10b (cf. Ne. 9:6), "You (*'attā*), you alone (*lē-badd-ekā*) are God (*'elōhīm*)."

Identity in central theological conceptualisations between Judaism and Islam is in line with views (revelations) expressed by Muhammad, e.g. Surah 3:3-4

He [Allah] has sent down upon you, [Muhammad], the Book [Qur'an] in truth, confirming (*mušaddiqan*) what was before it. And He revealed the Torah and the Gospel before as guidance for the people.

Tradition five

Tradition five commences by introducing a Christian delegation to the Prophet,¹³ stating

[As regards] Najran, seven bishops (*sab 'a 'asāqifatin*) from the Banu al-Harith ibn Ka'b came (*qadamū*) to (*'ilā*) the Messenger (*rasūli*) Allah (s.a.w). Amongst them were as-Sayyid and al-'Aqib (two of their leaders).

They ask the Prophet, "Describe (*šif*) your Lord (*rabba-ka*) to us, of (*min*) what thing (*šai'in*) is he [made of]?"

Muhammad responds to their question, stating, "My Lord (*rabbī*) is not (*laisa*) [made out] of something (*šai'in*), and He is apart (or: separate; *bā'in*) from things (*'al-'ašyā'a*)."

This short dialogue is followed (as in the other traditions) by a divine revelation: "Allah then revealed '*qul huwa 'Allahu 'aḥadun*' with '*aḥadun*' in the meaning of '*wāḥidun*'."

The excerpt related by al-Tha'labī cites Ibn 'Abbas (died 68 H / 687 CE) as the first transmitter. The visit of the bishops should be related to the visit of a large Christian delegation in the 9th year of the Islamic calendar. As in the case of the Jews (traditions three and four), the absence of any knowledge of Islam ascribed to them is strange.

¹² Alongside parallelism between Qur'anic and Biblical theology as regards Surah 112, there are also cardinal differences. Surah 112 emphasises the incomparability between Allah and man, while a measure of identity is suggested by Biblical passages such Gen. 1:26 which expresses the view that man was created in the "image" (*šelem*) of God (cf. Sarah Stroomsa 1992:290).

¹³ For the use of Surah 112 in anti-Trinitarian polemic, see Block, C John. 2013.

Quite striking is the repeated use of the noun *šai'* (pl. *'ašyā'u*) in both the question of the delegation and the response of the Prophet. The latter's answer consists of a denial ("My Lord is not [made out] of something") and an assertion ("He is apart from things"). A link to the contents of Surah 112 is provided by the second statement.

Surah 112, as in the other traditions, pictures Allah as totally removed from any descriptions related to an idol or human being. The surah does not per se combat Christian convictions regarding Jesus.¹⁴ However, it provides the potential, used by later Muslim commentaries, of contradicting confessions of Jesus as being "truly man [and] truly God (*vere deus vere homo*)". In the Muslim view (Surah 4:71, cf. 5:75), "The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah".

Concluding discussion

In the above exposition, an endeavour was made to identify common and unique elements in the five interpretative traditions concerning surmised contexts which led to the revelation of Surah 112.

In his presentation of data, al-Tha'labī, in typical Sunni fashion, does not attempt to reconcile the divergent milieus that are suggested as depicting the situation within which Surah 112 was originally revealed. What had been received was compiled and communicated.

His (or related) material was, in turn, used by later interpreters. One such example is Fakhr al-din al-Rāzī (d. 606 H /1210 CE), whose exegetic activity post-dated that of al-Tha'labī (d. 427 H / 1035 CE) by two centuries and who also produced an encyclopaedic commentary (*'al-Tafsīr 'al-kabīr*, The Large Commentary), which includes an analysis, contextualisation and discussion of Surah 112.

Al-Rāzī (1150-1210 CE) quotes in his Qur'anic commentary (*'al-Tafsīr 'al-kabīr*) three occasions related to the revelation of Surah 112. The occasions mentioned are discussions of the Prophet with representatives of the Quraish tribe, a group of Jews and a Christian delegation.

In the case of the Quraish, an elaborate discussion is reported. However, prior to the revelation of the surah, a request similar to that expressed by 'Amir ibn Tufayl and Arbid ibn Rabi'ah is mentioned, namely, "Explain to us of what kind is your deity. Is he made of gold or silver?"

The same applies to two consecutive requests by the group of Jews (tradition four). In al-Rāzī's version (cf. al-Tha'labī), they asked:

Oh Muhammad, this Allah has created the creation, so who created Allah? And Describe your Rabb to us. How are His upper arms, how are His forearms?

Likewise, in al-Rāzī's report, the Christians request the Prophet, "Describe your Rabb to us. Is He made of chrysolite or sapphire? Or perhaps from gold or silver?"

The same tenor is found in al-Tha'labī's version but in an abbreviated way: "Describe your Rabb to us: what is he made of?"

¹⁴ A different view is expressed by Rudi Paret (1979:294–5), namely that Surah 112 was solely directed against the Christian dogma of the Trinity. Uri Rubin (1984: 209-10), in turn, surmises that the surah may also have had Jews in mind, who according to Surah 9:30 regarded 'Uzair (i.e. Ezra) as the son of Allah.

Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an insists that the interpretative tradition should play a guiding role, both as regards detail analysis and the contextualising of verses and a surah.

Multiple settings ascribed to a single surah remind the reader of various interpretative situations to which a chosen surah may have been or perhaps had been linked. Subsequent reports of the occasions of revelation echo such situations in broader terms and repeat the contents of the dialogue relatively verbatim. Their value lies in their individual portrayals and the presumed contexts reflected by each.

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