

# Jewish Muslim Relations

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on: Jewish – Muslim  
Relations**

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*Bismillah Al-Rahmān Al-Rahīm*

‘An eye for an eye: the Biblical war’ – this example from a magazine is only one example of an eye catcher for news and commentaries on the Middle East conflict that are often presented with images and slogans taken from sacred scriptures and religious traditions, adding an apocalyptic dimension to the political and human tragedy. Meanwhile there is in fact some fire beyond the mass media smoke in that certain strengths within the religious communities involved utilised these same images and slogans to justify their actions to reinforce their respective ideologies and to demonise the other, playing with existential fears in what often looks like a fateful rivalry especially between Jews and Muslims, and to an extent, an increasing mistrust of religion seems understandable.

On the other hand, the proclaimed general aim of religion is peace. And while extremist movements refer to religious concepts, so do movements and initiatives for dialogues for peace. It would therefore be useful to reexamine source texts, commentaries and theological concepts looking both, for a perspective of a critical re-evaluation of each history and for the potential for understanding and reconciliation.

As far as the Qur’ān is concerned we should be aware of the appropriate tools for serious text study, that might differ from those used for the Bible and other texts. First of all, there is language. Since Arabic is a living language and correspondingly undergoing changes, it’s all the more necessary to investigate the original meaning expressed in the text. From a very early stage dictionaries and grammar books were written and commentators like the masharies in the 12th Century and Badawi in the

13th Century, concentrate to some extent on Language including impulses from pre-Islamic and Contemporary poetry and literature. Since Arabic is a Semitic language there is often a quick understanding of key terms in Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

The second is history. Other than the Bible, the Qur'ān emerged during a relatively short period during a relatively short period of 23 years, while it is now arranged according to hermeneutical and didactical aspects, the chronological sequence has always been considered important enough to indicate in outlines the place of revelation – Mecca and Medina – already in the headline of each sūrah. And a knowledge of the so-called occasions of revelation, the *asbāb Al-nazūl*, is in the central condition for interpretation. Commentators like Al-Tabarī who died in 923 used this methodology and developed it further. From itself understanding the Qur'ān is a scripture following earlier revelations and therefore assumes the reader to be familiar with the Biblical and Arab traditions leading all the way back to Abraham, referring back to past experiences both to point out how God is active in history, and to enjoin his readers to learn from history.

The third is systematics. Among the fundamental disciplines there is the differentiation between general and special, between 'am and khās. Between concise, that's *mujmal* and explaining, that's *mufassir*, and so on with regard to the statements. As well as the consideration of the context within the text and the relationship with other statements of the same issue. Besides the literal, *dthāhir*, and the metaphorical, *bātin*, and other possible shades of meaning are to be considered. Moreover, the Qur'ān itself repeatedly points out that it needs to be understood in the context of other signs of God, i.e. *ayāt Allah*, in nature, history, the human self and so on. That is, insights in other realms of existence. Thus, systematic work is done with ethical and legal principles that, in connect with a life example – the Sunnah of the Prophet – in connection with rational methodologies and with the consensus of competent scholars, constitute the foundation of jurisprudence, and the roots of *ijtihād* – the development of law.

The theological and prophetic issues like the links between the human and the divine, or concepts of justice and eschatology that were, by the way, often triggered by socio-political interests, or the interreligious encounter. While these basic methodologies taught formally in religious colleges all over the Muslim World, it is often used eclectically or sparingly, and there is some reluctance to supplement it by modern methodologies out of concern that new ideas might be too great a challenge, threatening the already heterogeneous Muslim communities with further splits. I do not think it is necessary at this point to go into the issue of verbal inspiration, although it is an interesting subject and the phenomenology has been discussed by a number of Muslim philosophers and mystics. To my understanding, verbal inspiration demands a much more conscientious interpretation than mere literary criticism. For practical purposes however, it should be enough to agree that the Qur'ān is the reflection of the spiritual experience of our Prophet Muhammad (saw) as distinct from his every day statements, actions and decisions, the report of which was later collected in Hadīth literature that in turn is subject of a critical evaluation of its own. Since the Qur'ān emerged in an age when the other communities of the Abrahamic tradition were well established, it does not only remind us of the concepts

and values taught in earlier revelations but also deals with the relationship with the existing faith groups, both in general terms, and referring to specific experiences including experiences of conflict along the history of its revelation, and the development of the Muslim Community.

About two thirds of the Qur'ān were revealed in Mecca where Muhammad was born and raised by relatives after his parents death, worked in various jobs until he became a business man, raised a family, and spent his spare time with activities related to social justice and later on, reflection and religious search. Due to hostilities between the Persian and Byzantine Empires, the world trade routes across the Arab peninsulas had gained importance only a few generations before and situated at the cross roads so had Mecca and her ruling clans of the Qureysh. Trade not only brought immense wealth but an exchange of information among business partners including religious faith and practice. While polytheist cults were widespread among the Arabs and rather distinct around the holy places in Mecca people were nevertheless familiar with their oral traditions, tracing their ancestors back to Abraham and being aware of their family relationship with their Jewish colleagues and competitors.

After his call, Muhammad understood his mission to be along the lines of the Biblical Prophets. His criticism was directed against polytheism and social justice. His hope for the future was based on faith in, and responsibility before the One God. In the Meccan texts of the Qur'ān we find general principles of faith and ethics, and emphasis on individual responsibility, warnings against arrogance, oppression and carelessness, to be answered for on the Day of Judgment. Promises of the fruit of sincerity, humanness and good actions to be reaped in the future garden, and illustrating references to earlier Prophets and generations. The letter also came as a moral support for the Prophet and the early Muslims, during the time of persecution. The Meccan texts are general, the Medīnan texts are more complex and specific and related to community building. In order to get a more detailed insight into the rules of later conflict and tensions more research into the history of the local tribes is necessary. Apparently a hegemony of the local Jewish tribe had been replaced by a more independent status of the Arab tribes and even a reversal of the situation and possibly some open or hidden resentment. In any case, and probably without any connection with aforesaid, the generations immediately before the advent of Islām, have been involved in an exhausting feud between the main Arab tribal units with each of their Jewish allies on each side. The way to a peaceful solution was seen in the teaching and practice of Muhammad and the early Muslims in Mecca who were therefore invited and granted protection against the persecutors. The result was the city state of Medīna – the idea being that the federal state of autonomous tribes that decided on policy and defense matters in neutral consultation.

This concept is expressed in the so-called constitution of Medīna. While the Jewish tribes maintained their religious identity tribes accepted Islām at least, formally. One should think that the peace agreement has a happy end. In reality however, it is a new beginning with its own challenges. What hopes and expectations are involved; how will tradition tensions be dealt with? What will happen to the ambitions of those who actually gained from the war in terms of power, fame and wealth. In the case of Medina we have various, often contradictory reports of the dynamics that emerged

between various factions of society and individuals. We learn of Arab leaders disappointed that their opportunist their munāfiq motives behind joining the peace agreement and even converting to Islām, did not lead to the results desired of them. We wonder about the affects of a change from war economy to peace economy and the impact of shortages and setbacks of each of the tribes and clans. We find traces of dialogue and polemics between the faith groups and of individuals who try to exploit details of the different law system for their own purposes. Finally there are the hostile encounters with the Meccan Qureysh that forestall any practical attempt at in depth reconciliation, where some munāfiq and Jewish leaders tried to keep back doors open by siding with the enemy. It needs more than the traditional asbāb al-nazūl to reconstruct the sociological political and economical background of the ensuing conflicts and the Qur'ānic texts relating to them.

As in Mecca, we find reminders of the experiences of earlier Prophets and generations, this time as illustrations for ethical teachings with more practical aspects related to law giving. Referring to the people of the Scripture, but also as critical lessons since Medīnan Muslims as a structured a community, had no experience of their own yet, including reproaches for claims of exclusivity. So we find a number of critical texts; we find for instance, criticisms of doctrines and practices prevalent in the local Jewish, and also Christian groups, including their ways of dealing with the sacred scriptures. Obviously, these groups did not exactly follow mainstream Judaism or Christianity, for in that case, much of the criticism would not fit. For instance, the reproach for changing the words from their right place and others generally understood to refer to the misinterpretation of the scripture or interference with the text itself, or the remark the Jews say from where others say he was God's son, in Surah 9 Verse 30. Therefore the readers must beware against separating these statements from their backgrounds.

There are references to acts of treason by people of the scriptures, for instance Sūrah 2 Verse 76 with warnings against taking them as allies and a permission for punitive measures. It's not obvious from the Qur'ānic text itself while Islamic law was applied in the case of the munāfiqūn at least in the case of the banu Qureyza, the Jews involved were given the choice between this and Jewish Law as understood by their scholars that apparently went far beyond actually punishing the actual perpetrators by executing the adult members of the tribe. The more care must be taken not to come to generalizing conclusions. And amazingly they are statements of appreciation of the people of the scripture and exhortations to come to common terms between us and you, Sūrah 3 Verse 64, that run parallel with the criticism clarifying that all those who have faith in God and the Last Day and act righteously will know, neither fear nor grieve – Sūrah 2 Verse 62.

The deterioration of the relationship between the Jewish and the Muslim Community in Mecca leaves us with a serious question especially important when you consider problems relating to a multicultural system where the federation of different autonomous religious, cultural, tribal units can work, or if unity can only work as uniformity or if a solution will be to have one ruling group that determines the norms and gives space to its minorities. Since the Muslim Empires were multi ethnic and multi religious, rulers were repeatedly confronted by challenges like deciding, for instance, whether the burning of a Hindu widow on her husband's funeral pyre was

to be respected as part of Hindu or cultural understanding, or if the Islāmic command of saving a human individual's life had priority over tolerance.

It is tempting to conclude from the Medīnan experience that the conflict permanently altered their relationship between Jews and Muslims. However, the thought provoking last word chronologically between at least the three Abrahamic faith groups is a general statement on the perspective of co-existence. This is in Surah 5, the second half of Verse 49, where it says,

‘To each of you we have prescribed a legal system and a way. If God had wanted to, he would have made you all one single community, but He wants to test you by what He has given you. Therefore compete in good actions. The final goal of all of you is God. He will then enlighten you about what you used to differ in.’

In later rulings considerations of the context have often been neglected and particular or specific statements were applied to new situations by simple analogy, disregarding the perspective of interreligious coexistence in the general verses, as well as methods like *istislah* – considering public welfare, *istidlal* the arriving rules and regulations from general principles. Legal decisions were often based on the actual state of peace or tension between the communities, as well as doubtful interests of power. And on the general atmosphere of material, political and cultural prosperity rather than on ideals of justice and harmony. While general principles of tolerance and co-operation could never be completely ignored, and in fact, even found their way into the constitutions of modern Muslim states, people of the Scripture, although they enjoyed certain privileges, for example using wine, being exempt from military duty against paying tax – the *jiz'iyah*- on maintaining their own private law and religious customs and so on, and protection that is, for instance, the Jews in Spain who were welcome to come and live in the Ottoman Empire. People in the Scripture were generally not treated as equal citizens and there are embarrassing examples of this discrimination, as well as individual cases of persecution by fanatic rulers, and this must be criticized by both an Islamic, and a modern, human rights perspective.

Meanwhile, experiences like enlightenment, the industrial revolution, colonialism, modern technology, and others had a significant impact on tradition and concept within all faith communities. The world has become a much more complex and interdependent place. Following the Qur'ānic injunction to learn from history, Muslims can look back upon a wide variety of experiences of success and failure, of progress and dead ends, including the handling of their texts and come to conclusions for the future. Likewise, if you consider interfaith encounter, there is a long history of dialogue and polemics, co-operation and conflict, as well as intellectual and spiritual cross-fertilisation. There's no way back behind these experiences into an idealized past or behind modern technology that enables us to communicate and be challenged. There is no more front line with us here, and them over there, and in the long run there is no way of continuing conflicts that have nearly become part of our traditions causing people to live in fear of each other and to demonize each other.

Rather, it is overdue for us to reconsider our relationship as communities living in one world with no choices except co-existing or destroying each other.

We must learn to look at the multi-religious and multi-cultural reality in a positive way, keeping in mind, as far as Muslims are concerned that in the variety of languages and colours, there are signs, as it says in Sūrah 30 Verse 22, 'And that God made people into nations and tribes, so that you may recognize each other.; In Sūrah 39 Verse 13, and exploring and reviving those religious messages that promote integrity and confidence and that enable us to bridge the gaps that separate us. This would take our dialogue beyond the exchange of our information or negotiation of tolerance, to constructive competition for the good.

There is a lot of research and educational work to be done but this will bring us closer to our joint responsibility of cultivating and preserving the Garden, as it says in Genesis 2:15, or being God's representative on Earth, as expressed in Sūrah 2, Verse 30. Then in an age of global communication and interaction can no longer be conceived of as being fulfilled by one faith community or nation alone.