

# PARABOLIC RESONANCES IN THE GOSPELS AND THE QUR'ĀN

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## Abstract

There are apparent similarities between the parables contained in the Gospels and those found in the Qur'ān, which provide their audiences with illustrations of complex religious concepts and moral teachings through the imagery of everyday life. Based on the form-critical analysis of the Gospel Parable of the Sower and some Qur'ānic parables, this article aims to detect defining similarities and differences between the Gospels and Sūrat al-Baqarah and illuminate details about the historical and geographic context in which the two texts originated. Based on the findings of the comparison, this article will argue that the Qur'ānic text represents a genuine continuation of the biblical text.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the teachings of the monotheistic religions –Judaism, Christianity, and Islam– parables are used to make abstract religious ideas and concepts tangible for a lay audience<sup>2</sup> through the mediums of sensible phenomena. Major monotheistic religious texts such as the Gospels and the Qurʾān deploy parables as a means of communicating their divine messages to their respective audiences. Jesus Christ and Prophet Muḥammad conveyed theological teachings and moral judgements to their audiences through the medium of these symbolic utterances. There are around fifty parables in the Gospels,<sup>3</sup> and these constitute one-third of all the recorded sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, parables have a particular significance in the teachings of Jesus; they provide the audience with an understanding of sophisticated moral and theological teachings through the familiar imagery of first-century Palestine’s everyday life.

The parables are also a preferred illustrative device of the Qurʾān; there are around thirty-nine parables mentioned in the Qurʾān that are scattered throughout its various chapters. According to Muslim accounts, most of these parables were revealed in Mecca and some in

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<sup>2</sup> The audience does not always have to be common people; they may also be the audience of the rhetorical performance. This is what Aristotle called *paradeigmata*, which are normal rhetorical means to illustrate a point – not just for the simple or layperson. *Paradeigmata* are typically either an opening story used as an induction of a more abstract point or as a concluding visualization of a more abstract speech. (I express my gratitude to Professor John Kloppenborg for this elaboration.)

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1981), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 7.

Medina. Like the Gospel parables, Qurʾānic parables provide the audience with an illustration of complex religious concepts and moral teachings in the imagery of everyday life in seventh-century Arabia.<sup>5</sup> Despite the apparent similarities between the parables of the Bible and the Qurʾān,<sup>6</sup> relatively little attention has been paid to the comparative study of the parables of these two texts<sup>7</sup> as comparative studies to date have focused largely on their prophetic narratives.<sup>8</sup>

As Angelika Neuwirth astutely observes, there have been two main trends with regard to how scholars understand the Qurʾān's status in relation to the biblical text, namely that the Qurʾān is "either as a religiously genuine attestation of biblical faith" or "a mere imitation" of the Bible:

The Qurʾān until now has not been acknowledged as part of the Western canon of theologically relevant knowledge – although it is obviously a text that, no less than the Jewish and Christian founding documents, firmly stands in the biblical tradition. Indeed, it seems to be the very fact of this close relationship that has kindled the present controversy over the status of the Qurʾān: either as a religiously genuine attestation of biblical faith, a *Fortschreibung* or "continuation" of the Bible, adding to it new dimensions of meaning, or as a mere imitation, a theologically diffuse recycling of biblical tradition. Although new readings advocating a genuine relationship between the Bible and the Qurʾān have lately been

<sup>5</sup> Wadad Kadi (al-Qāḍī) - Mustansir Mir, "Literature and the Qurʾān", *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden - Boston - Köln: Brill, 2001), 1/209.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Buck, "Discovering", *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 32.

<sup>7</sup> Notable yet limited exceptions on Qurʾānic parables. Mustansir Mir, "Language", *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 104-105; Abdullah Saeed, *The Qurʾān: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 77-78; Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 97-100; A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Parable", *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2004); Karim Samji, *The Qurʾān: A Form-Critical History* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> In this vein, Angelika Neuwirth rightly pointed out that the Qurʾānic parable narrative remains unresearched. See Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qurʾān and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*, trans. Samuel Wilder (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 305.

proposed, scholars are still far from recognizing the status of the Qurʾān as a new manifestation of biblical scripture.<sup>9</sup>

Through a form-critical study of the parables found in both scriptures, this article will argue in line with Neuwirth's thesis that "the status of the Qurʾān as a new manifestation of biblical scripture." In other words, it will argue that the Qurʾānic text is a genuine "continuity" of the biblical one. In addition to providing further supporting evidence, Walid Saleh made a significant contribution to Neuwirth's thesis.<sup>10</sup> Neuwirth has already demonstrated the feasibility of her thesis through an analysis and comparison of the various stylistic features of the Qurʾān and the Bible. However, an examination of the parables found in these two texts will shed further light on this subject. More importantly, this article will scrutinise the "continuity thesis" from the perspective of the metaphor of the soil used to illustrate the varying degrees of the receptivity of the human heart to the Word of God. In this sense, it will compare the parables of the Gospels and Qurʾān for the first time to make a connection between the Gospels and the Qurʾān regarding the grading of their audiences' response to the divine message.

A comparative study of the parables may detect delineating similarities and differences between the biblical and Qurʾānic texts and illuminate details about the historical and geographic surroundings where the two texts originated from. Suppose Neuwirth's argument about the relationship between the two sacred texts is taken at face value. In that case, it seems reasonable to expect that there should be conceptual similarities between the parables of the two texts. Especially those that pertain to faith in an unseen and mighty God. Furthermore, given that an essential characteristic of parables as a genre is that they draw on the familiar and the local in order to maximise the impact they have on their audience, it should be possible to identify the demarcating local ingredients, such as the agricultural, commercial,<sup>11</sup> and geographical elements of seventh-century Arabia. Furthermore, specifically as regards the study of the Qurʾān, these

<sup>9</sup> Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 178.

<sup>10</sup> Walid A. Saleh, "The Psalms in the Qur'an and in the Islamic Religious Imagination", *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 286-287.

<sup>11</sup> Zahniser, "Parable", 11.

findings would potentially contribute to dispelling the pejorative thesis that it is merely a poor imitation of the “original” Judeo-Christian sources.<sup>12</sup>

An additional benefit of studying the parables of the Qurʾān in this way also pertains to its relationship with the New Testament. As will be shown below, there seems to be a consensus among biblical scholars that parables are the most authentic units of the New Testament that contain the actual teachings of Jesus. Given that the textual originality of the Qurʾān has also been established,<sup>13</sup> investigating the similarities that exist between the parables of the New Testament and those of the Qurʾān becomes more significant for establishing the nature of the connection between these texts.

### **1. Parables of the Gospels**

Given that there is abundant literature discussing the parables of the Gospels, it may be better to understand the meaning of parables within a religious context by looking at parable’s meaning in biblical studies. According to a simple biblical studies definition, “parables are earthly stories that illustrate heavenly truths.”<sup>14</sup> Jesus used parables to teach his message about God and God’s relationship to humanity.<sup>15</sup> C. H. Dodd offers what is perhaps the most comprehensive definition of parables: “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Joachim Jeremias, who was one of the most significant historical critics of the Bible in the modern period,

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<sup>12</sup> For a study of the relevant literature see John Wansbrough, *Qurʾānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977); John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006); Neuwirth, *The Qurʾān and Late Antiquity*, 33-57; Harald Motzki, “Alternative Accounts of the Qurʾān’s Formation”, *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 59-75; Fred M. Donner, “The Historical Context”, *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (New York: Cambridge University Press 2006), 23-39.

<sup>13</sup> See fn. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1988), 16.

Not only do the parables of Jesus regarded as a whole represent a specially reliable tradition, but they also present the appearance of being entirely free from problematic elements. The hearers find themselves in a familiar scene where everything is so simple and clear that a child can understand, so plain that those who hear can say, 'Yes, that's how it is.' Nevertheless, the parables confront us with a difficult problem, namely, the recovery of their original meaning.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the above definitions, I may identify two main characteristics of the parables. First, they take place in an environment that is familiar to their audience and invoke ordinary objects from everyday life. Therefore, people understand them effortlessly. As Donahue notes: "The parables manifest such a range of images that the everyday world of rural, first-century Palestine comes alive in a way true of ancient cultures."<sup>18</sup>

The second salient characteristic of the parables is that they aim to simplify complex and abstract divine teachings. Thus, parables serve as a didactic tool for actively teaching religious and moral values and convincing the audience to adopt them. The parable's style and message are intended to capture the listener's attention unexpectedly; it often comes in the form of a challenge to religious conviction and the corresponding action of the audience. It provides the listener with a glimpse of the divine character and the spiritual realities of human life. The main stylistic feature of the parable is arguably the element of surprise; it sets out to be familiar, but then there is a sudden shift that develops in the plot of its story, "A consciousness of God and his way of viewing the world enters the commonplace scene to communicate the divine message. The familiar setting of the parable allows each person to understand God's will. The local colour of the story is changed for a special purpose."<sup>19</sup>

In other words, parables are the literary devices used to connect the spiritual realm with the physical one by way of making it understandable to ordinary people. In the context of biblical studies,

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<sup>17</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 12.

<sup>18</sup> John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Young, *The Parables*, 5.

traditional interpretations of parables up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century focused on deciphering their allegorical meanings. According to these interpretations, every word and expression had an independent meaning that could be interpreted according to the church's teachings. This approach to the interpretation placed a strong emphasis on the particular details of the parables instead of focusing on their overall messages.

The modern period in parable scholarship in biblical studies began in 1888 with the publication of Adolf Jülicher's *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*. In this two-volume work, Jülicher argued against the allegorical interpretation of the parables and made a strong case for a distinction between parable and allegory. He argued that a parable was a single simile or metaphor and that it aimed to focus on a single reality, not a chain of metaphors. In short, Jülicher's contribution to the field freed the biblical exegesis from the esoteric understanding of the parables that emphasised the details of the story, rather than extracting the main ethical and theological message of the parable.<sup>20</sup> C. H. Dodd's *The Parables of the Kingdom*<sup>21</sup> was the next significant contribution to the field. Dodd concurred with Jülicher's thesis but further asserted that the parables could be best interpreted in the context of the core teaching of Jesus, the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. In his ground-breaking research, Jeremias agreed with Dodd's thesis in general but disputed Dodd's definition of eschatology.<sup>22</sup>

Jeremias argued for the direct relevance of the parables to the life of Jesus. That is to say, he asserted that parables were not merely a literary production but were, in fact, uttered in response to the actual situation of the life of Jesus. Therefore, through a careful study of the parable, Jeremias made a case that parables refer to actual events of history. Thus, they represent the history and not only a literary culture of the early Christians: "What we have to deal with is a conception which is essentially simple but involves far-reaching consequences. It is that the parables of Jesus are not –at any rate primary– literary productions, nor is it their object to lay down general maxims (no one

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<sup>20</sup> Madeleine Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1977), 5-8.

<sup>21</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 24-25.

would crucify a teacher who told pleasant stories to enforce prudential morality).”<sup>23</sup> Instead, each of the parables was expressed in a tangible situation of the life of Jesus, at a particular and often unforeseen point. Moreover, they were concerned with a situation of conflict. They correct, criticise, and attack.<sup>24</sup> Jeremias further states that C. H. Dodd’s *Parables of the Kingdom* makes the first successful effort “to place the parables in the setting of the life Jesus, thereby introducing a new era in the interpretation of the parables.”<sup>25</sup>

However, over time Jeremias’s approach, which was to “attempt to reach back the most primitive text possible for each parable”<sup>26</sup> or “Ur-parables,” was criticised on the grounds that it would be impossible to extract historical information from the parables because “the parables he constructs simply do not exist. Jeremias’s Ur-parables are hypothetical formulations; therefore, the parable interpreter relying upon them is not only faced with interpreting ancient and culturally alien texts but with interpreting hypothetical texts as well.”<sup>27</sup> This view has found widespread acceptance, and modern research on the parables of Jesus has largely shifted from historical research to literary analysis as they now appear in the gospels.

Therefore, the modern studies in parables have mostly fallen into one of two categories: either parables of Jesus or parables of the Gospels, that is to say, scholars have studied the parables either as a conduit for seeking reliable historical information about Jesus or looking at “the theological and polemical interests and intents of the redactors of Gospels.”<sup>28</sup> Biblical scholars have used form and redaction criticism methodologies believing that the parables might include valuable information about the teachings of Jesus or about the theological concerns of the early Christian community.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Charles W. F. Smith, *The Jesus of the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables*, 18.



## 2. The Parables of the Qurʾān

It seems that trends in the biblical studies regarding the study of the parables do not differ significantly from the contemporary study of the Qurʾān in the West. The members of the “revisionist school” were influenced by the dominant views in the field of biblical studies and, consequently, adopted and implemented the same ideas in the field of Qurʾānic studies. These ideas have been outlined by Andrew Rippin in his accessible introduction to the methodological approaches adopted by John Wansbrough in his studies of the Qurʾān.<sup>30</sup>

There have been a number of critiques of the views of the revisionists that have largely succeeded in dispelling their hypotheses about the textual history of the Qurʾān.<sup>31</sup> What is more relevant to the scope of this article, however, is that there is a strong view amongst scholars of biblical studies that parables are probably among the more authentic parts of the Gospels and that it may be possible to reconstruct some aspects of the history of Jesus based on their contents. Furthermore, it has been established by recent scholarship that the Qurʾānic text most probably is the work of the Prophet Muḥammad and that its historical origins lie in seventh-century Arabia.<sup>32</sup>

As I have noted above, the Qurʾān also utilises parables to convey complex religious concepts to its audience in the form of simple narrations. As both Islam and Christianity are Abrahamic religions, it may be possible to locate similarities<sup>33</sup> between the parables contained in their respective sacred texts, especially regarding the faith in an omnipotent God. The following Qurʾānic verse may be taken as a confirmation of this fact: “*We have certainly diversified (ṣarrafnā) this Qurʾān for the people with every [kind of] parable, but most people are*

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Rippin, “Literary Analysis of Koran, Tafsir, and Sira: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough”, *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam’s Holy Book*, ed. Ibn Warraq (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 355-361.

<sup>31</sup> See fn. 11 and 32.

<sup>32</sup> Behnam Sadeghi - Mohsen Goudarzi, “Ṣan‘ā’ 1 and the Origins of the Qurʾān”, *Der Islam* 87/1-2 (March 2012): 1-129; Walid A. Saleh, “The Preacher of the Meccan Qurʾān: Deuteronomistic History and Confessionalism in Muḥammad’s Early Preaching”, *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 20/2 (June 2018), 74-111; Marijn van Putten, “‘The Grace of God’ as Evidence for a Written Uthmanic Archetype: The Importance of Shared Orthographic Idiosyncrasies”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82/2 (June 2019), 271-288.

<sup>33</sup> Angelika Neuwirth provides an excellent analysis of the comparison of the Bible and the Qurʾān, see Neuwirth, *The Qurʾān and Late Antiquity*, 347-378.

only intent on ingratitude.” (Q 17:89).<sup>34</sup> It seems reasonable to hypothesise that while the details of the Qur’ānic and Gospel parables might differ because of differences in the localities of their respective audiences, they contain the same message. There are approximately thirty-nine parables contained within the Qur’ān, and these are found in 55 verses spread between the following chapters:

al-Baqarah: 17, 19-20, 26, 171, 261, 264, 265.

Āl ‘Imrān: 117.

al-A‘rāf: 176, 177.

al-Tawbah: 109-110.

Yūnus: 24.

Hūd: 24.

Ibrāhīm: 18, 24, 25, 26.

al-Naḥl: 75, 76, 112.

al-Isrā’: 89.

al-Kahf: 32-44, 45, 54.

al-Ḥajj: 31, 73.

al-Nūr: 35-36, 39, 40.

al-‘Ankabūt: 41, 43.

al-Rūm: 28, 58.

al-Zumar: 27-28, 29.

al-Faṭḥ: 29.

al-Ḥadīd: 20.

al-Ḥaṣhr: 21.

al-Jum‘ah: 5.

For the most part, these verses use the Arabic word *mathal*<sup>35</sup> to denote a parable (Hebrew is *mašal*, comparison). However, sometimes there is no explicit mention of the word *mathal* but a reference to the previous mention of the word *mathal*, as can be seen in Q 2:19-20. In Arabic, by and large, *mathal* can be translated as simile, similitude, or parable.<sup>36</sup> These two verses do not contain the word *mathal* but instead refer to the previous use of the word in Q 2:17. In some other instances, there is neither explicit use of the word *mathal* nor there is a reference to the previous use of it, and instead

<sup>34</sup> In the translation of the Qur’ānic verses, I mostly rely on ‘Alī Qulī Qarā’ī’s translation of the Qur’ān with minor alterations.

<sup>35</sup> On *mathal* see Samji, *The Qur’ān: A Form-Critical History*, 179-182.

<sup>36</sup> Zahniser, “Parable”, 9.

the parable is introduced by the phrase *ka* (“like”), such as in the verses of Q 24:39 and 40. In some verses, such as Q 2:26 and Q 7:176, the word *mathal* was used twice.

The word *mathal* is sometimes used in the sense of “an example.” For instance, in verse Q 13:35, the word *mathal* is used to describe the rewards of Paradise. To some extent, however, even this use of the word *mathal* could be counted as a parable, as it tries to explain the abstract concept of Paradise using examples drawn from the objects of everyday life. However, there is no attempt to provide moral and ethical teachings in these types of examples. Also, there are elaborate theological debates among Muslim scholars concerning the nature of Paradise and Hell. Therefore, there is no need to stray into such a problematic area by including them in the category of parables. Most of the parables are included in the chapter *al-Baqarab* (The Cow) –the Qurʾān’s longest chapter, revealed in the city of Medina– which contains seven independent parables. In this next section, I will study some of the parables mentioned in the Qurʾān and compare them with the parable of the sower in the Bible.

### 3. The Parable of the Sower and the Use of “Soil” in the Qurʾān

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells his disciples: “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?”<sup>37</sup> In this way, Jesus points to the significance of the parable as a means of understanding his innermost teachings.<sup>38</sup> The parable of the sower is included in all synoptic Gospels (as well as the Gospel of Thomas) and is widely believed to be something that Jesus authentically taught. However, it is also believed that the interpretation of the parable (found in Mark 4:14-20, Matthew 13:18-23, and Luke 18:11-15) was added to the original story at a later stage.<sup>39</sup> The original parable is 3-9, the rest is Markan redactional framing:

(Mark 4) <sup>1</sup>Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in

<sup>37</sup> New International Version.

<sup>38</sup> Birger Gerhardsson, “The Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation”, *New Testament Studies* 14/2 (January 1968), 165.

<sup>39</sup> Anna Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean?: Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257.

it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. <sup>2</sup>He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: <sup>3</sup>"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup>As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup>Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. <sup>8</sup>Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." <sup>9</sup>Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." <sup>10</sup>When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup>He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables <sup>12</sup>so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? <sup>14</sup>The farmer sows the word. <sup>15</sup>Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. <sup>16</sup>Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup>But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. <sup>18</sup>Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; <sup>19</sup>but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. <sup>20</sup>Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

In his interpretation of the parable, Jeremias notes that the parable of the sower fits in the traditional sowing methods used in Palestine. Therefore, it is relevant to the conditions of Palestine where the parable was told. Unlike the generally implemented method, in

Palestine, sowing took place before ploughing.<sup>40</sup> Hence, he concludes that the parable is historically accurate.

Wierzbicka notes the various views regarding the significance of the parable of the sower and mentions the comments of scholars such as Madeleine Boucher, Herbert Lockyer, and Robert Farrar Capon, whom all agree that it is one of the essential parables of the Gospels.<sup>41</sup> Despite the concurrence of the scholars regarding the significance of the parable, however, there is a difference of opinion about its proper interpretation.

Despite the diversity of the opinions, as it was stated by Wierzbicka, the interpretation of the parable may be divided into two main categories: first, Mark's original interpretation included in the Gospel of Mark, which frames the story as a warning against the dangers of worldliness and tribulation.<sup>42</sup> Second, the eschatological interpretation mostly championed by Joachim Jeremias: "In essence, Jeremias (1972) argued that the harvest in verse 8 symbolises an impending world crisis—the coming of the kingdom of God—and that the parable promises the final victory of this kingdom."<sup>43</sup> Mark, on the other hand, saw the parable as speaking about hearing, understanding, and responding to the Word of God.<sup>44</sup>

Many biblical commentators consider Mark's interpretation of the parable of the sower most appropriate interpretation of the parable:

The view of the present study is that the Markan interpretation gives a very natural rendering of the parable, one which fits it perfectly. The hearer would have to be told that the parable as a whole has to do with hearing the word; but once so informed, he would have little difficulty in apprehending many of its constituent meanings. That the scattering of seed stands for the dissemination of the word;

<sup>40</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 11-12.

<sup>41</sup> Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean?*, 257-258.

<sup>42</sup> M. F. Wiles, "Early Exegesis of the Parables", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 11/3 (September 1958), 293.

<sup>43</sup> Jeremias insists that the parable refers not only to "doing the word" but also to the kingdom of God. Jeremias calls this the eschatological point of the parable, which he interprets in terms of an impending crisis: "God's hour is coming ... in spite of every failure and opposition, God brings from hopeless beginnings the glorious end that he has promised." Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 119-120. See the criticism of this interpretation in Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean?*, 261.

<sup>44</sup> Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean?*, 259.

the ground for those among whom the word is broadcast; the poor and rich soil for those respectively who fail and who succeed in receiving and keeping the word; and the final yield of grain for righteousness—these are meanings that are derived quite naturally from the story. There is nothing in the broad lines of the interpretation that strains the sense of the reference in the parable itself. Even a simple, uneducated hearer of the kind that must have largely made up the audiences of Jesus would have been able to supply these constituent meanings, once he had perceived the whole meaning to be about the word... What the author of the interpretation (whoever he may have been) has done with the parable... is by no means a falsification of its meaning.<sup>45</sup>

There is a universal relevance to the parable in Mark's original interpretation; it is a meaning that can be understood effortlessly by common people, which renders such an interpretation more plausible. The main idea that Mark focuses on is that the sower sows God's Word and that people respond to it differently. Wierzbicka contends that Mark's interpretation has not been superseded by later interpretations, including the latest scholarly hermeneutics.<sup>46</sup>

According to Mark's interpretation, the parable focuses on the soil and its three kinds.<sup>47</sup> In the parable of the sower, the soil signifies the human heart and its receptiveness and reaction to the Word of God. In other words, the parable categorises the different levels of faith or lack of faith in God and His prophet. The aim is to understand what kind of faith these three types of soil represent.

The interpretation says that the parable is about the duty of the people of God to (effectively) listen to the Word of God, and this takes us to the centre of the covenant ideology. The obligations of the covenant, which in themselves could be summarized in many different ways, could be condensed into the duty to hear—in its most profound sense of hearing and doing—the Word of God. Every pious Jew reminded himself of this obligation daily as he read the Shema'—the covenant text par excellence.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 49-50.

<sup>46</sup> Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean?*, 260.

<sup>47</sup> Donald H. Juell, "Encountering the Sower Mark 4:1-20", *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 56/3 (July 2002), 274.

<sup>48</sup> Gerhardsson, "The Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation", 166.

Gerhardsson refers to the Shema' as the oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism, which has been recited morning and night since ancient times. This prayer contains the covenant between God and His people and is mentioned in various parts of the Bible: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41. In short, it calls the human being to total submission to God's will, in heart and in deed. In other words, it calls him to have full faith in the words of the Creator.

One of the occurrences of the parable of the soil in the Qur'ān's chapter *al-Baqarah* includes the explicit reference to the parable of the "rocky soil" as it was used in the parable of the sower to describe the faith.

O you who have faith! Do not render your charities void by reproaches and affronts, like those who spend their wealth to be seen by people and have no faith in God and the Last Day. Their parable is that of a rock covered with soil: a downpour strikes it, leaving it bare. They have no power over anything of what they have earned, and Allah does not guide the faithless lot. (Q 2:264)

A number of basic similarities between Qur'ānic parables and Gospel ones are apparent: They are presented in clear and simple language, and they are related to objects found in the everyday life of seventh-century Arabia, such that even the most uneducated people could grasp their basic meaning with minimal effort. This gives an important clue about the audiences of Jesus and Muḥammad; their audiences were the same; the common people. Early Christianity and Islam address mainly the lowest levels of their societies, who often have less influence in the society but higher in numbers. So, both Jesus and Muḥammad wanted to reach out to as many people as possible to preach their teachings.

There is something of a consensus among Muslim exegetes that the aforementioned verse addresses the hypocrites<sup>49</sup> who did not believe in the message of the Prophet but pretended to be Muslims because of the prevailing authority of the Prophet in Medina. To delve further into the significance of this parable, I have selected Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) influential<sup>50</sup> *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* as a representative exegesis. In his discussion of the verse, al-Rāzī notes that two images

<sup>49</sup> Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> See Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

are used in this verse; one is that of the disbelievers and the other is that of “a rock covered with soil”. The inclusion of the example of disbelievers and the element of pompousness illustrated by the phrase “to be seen by people” in the verse makes it clear that the parable of soil is used to refer to hypocrites who are disbelievers in their hearts but pretend to be believers outwardly. The example gave rise to the idea that good deeds could be rendered void by one of two ways: disbelief in God and committing the misdeed of “reproaches (*al-manni*) and affronts (*al-adhbā*).” According to al-Rāzī, committing such a flagrant misdeed is a clear sign of hypocrisy and the parable of a rock covered with soil is given to explain it.

In the verse, the word “rock” (*ṣafwān*) denotes faithless human hearts that do not believe in God but, due to the pressure of the society, perform good deeds such as giving charity but then invalidate these by engaging in “reproaches and affronts.” This term for rock refers not to small pieces of stone but to sizeable solid blocks that stand on desert or bare land. It often happens that such a rock might be covered with a layer of soil or dust, such as would allow small plants to take root and grow if they receive light rain. By contrast, a heavy downpour might instead wash away the thin layer of soil and these small plants from the face of the rock because the soil is not deep enough for them to take root.

Thus, the word “soil” (*turāb*) refers to the thin layer of soil that built up on the rock by chance over time, such as by the wind depositing it there. In the parable, this soil represents the good deed of giving charity, but which lacks a firm base and occurred by chance rather than out of a conscious belief in God and a desire to spend one’s wealth in the way of God. The “downpour” (*wābil*) of heavy rain represents “reproaches and affronts,” that the giver of charity committed after his good deed. Like the thin layer of soil that covered the rock, charity not given for the sake of God is washed away by “reproaches and affronts,” leaving the heart barren. Hence, the soil in this parable represents fertility, receptiveness, and the potential to bear the fruit of faith on the Day of Judgement. Good deeds may only be cultivated in fertile soil or in a heart which would convey the good deeds to the Day of Judgement in the forms of the rewards that inhabitants of Paradise would recognise:



And give good news to those who have faith and do righteous deeds, that for them shall be gardens with streams running in them: whenever they are provided (*ruziqū*) with their fruit for nourishment, they will say, “This is what we were provided before,” and they were given something resembling it. In it there will be chaste mates for them, and they will remain in it [forever]. (Q 2:25)

In general, Qurʾānic commentators have understood the word *ruziqū* as food, and thus interpreted the verse in the literal sense, namely that the fruits that people eat in this world will also be available in Heaven. However, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī (d. 1981), one of the most important commentators of the Qurʾān in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, disagrees with the standard interpretation of the verse. Instead, he reads the verse figuratively and contends that the word “fruit” refers to the fruit of those deeds that people of Heaven performed while they were alive in the previous world. In this vein, the word *ruziqū* does not only mean food, but rather every kind of blessing bestowed upon people, such as knowledge, good character, happiness etc. In the Hereafter, these blessings are obtained through the deeds of the believers in this world: deeds such as prayer, fasting, and giving charity will be returned to them in the Hereafter in the form of spiritual provisions.<sup>51</sup>

Because there is no faith at the foundation of the good deeds performed by hypocrites, this leads them to commit “reproaches and affronts” when the deed is done and thereby turn the soil into dust (*ghubār*).<sup>52</sup> The hearts of disbelievers are like rocks, which do not provide the soil with a natural foundation. Hence, their good deeds inevitably turn to dust and are carried away.<sup>53</sup> Al-Rāzī seems to refer to the idea that charity giving is a good deed for the society and the needy. Similarly, the rain in itself is good for the environment and crops; if the conditions are right, it gives life to everything in the world

<sup>51</sup> Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (Qom: Ismāʿīlīyān, 1985), 1/89-90.

<sup>52</sup> In addition to the point made by al-Rāzī in the explanation of the parable, another verse of the Qurʾān may further support the connection between the state of lack of faith and invalidation of the good deeds: “*And [at the point of death] we will turn to the deeds that they [disbelievers] have done and disperse them like dust.*” (Q 25:23)

<sup>53</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-musammā al-Tafsīr al-kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 2/43-47.

and makes living things flourish. But, if the conditions are not right, it may cause havoc. If the hearts of the people who give charity are not faithful, then their giving of charity is associated with reproaches and affronts, which invalidate the good deed on the Day of Judgement by way of increasing the hypocrisy and arrogance of the heart.

However, Ṭabāṭabāʿī again puts forward a slightly different reading of this verse. For him, the addressees of the verse are not the hypocrites but believers whose hearts are afflicted by spiritual illnesses. According to this understanding, because the verse opens with “O you who have faith!” he argues that it indicates those of weak faith who commit reproaches and affronts towards the people to whom they give charity would be disbelievers or hypocrites in this particular instance, as the existence of duplicity is a major sign of disbelief. In other words, any good deed that is *ultimately* committed for the sake of people’s approval rather than for the sake of God may take people outside the bounds of faith on the performance of this particular act and render such a person a hypocrite. This means that while the person may be faithful overall, a particular action of ill intent removes the faith from his heart, putting the person into a state of hypocrisy as a result. As for the remainder of the verse, he broadly concurs with al-Rāzī’s interpretation.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to this mention in the Chapter of *al-Baqarah*, there is an explicit acknowledgement of the parable of the sower in the Qurʾān, in which soil is referred in relation to the various ways in which human beings receive and respond to the divine message:

Muḥammad is the messenger of God; and those who are with him are strong against unbelievers, [but] compassionate amongst each other. You will see them bow and prostrate themselves [in prayer], seeking grace from God and [His] good pleasure. On their faces are their marks, [being] the traces of their prostration. This is their similitude in the Torah; and their similitude in the Gospel is: like a seed which sends forth its blade, then makes it strong; it then becomes thick, and it stands on its own stem, (filling) the sowers with wonder and delight. As a result, it fills the unbelievers with rage at them. God has promised those among them who believe and do righteous deeds forgiveness, and a great reward. (Q 48:29)

<sup>54</sup> Ṭabāṭabāʿī, *al-Mizān*, 2/393-395.

The theme of representing the heart with soil is the common feature of both the New Testament and Qurʾān, which reaffirms the fact that both Palestinian Jews to whom Jesus preached and Muslims of Medina to whom Prophet Muḥammad preached were mainly farmers.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the parable of soil was chosen to describe a receptive and unreceptive soul, as this image of sowing was relevant to the daily lives of the inhabitants of Palestine and Medina in their respective times. One might argue that parables and farming are fairly generic features of both the New Testament and Qurʾān context, but this was not always the case. Because a significant portion of the Qurʾān was revealed in Mecca, which was basically a desert environment, hence no farming could have occurred. In Mecca, the main occupation was trade (of commodity and slave) and religious service in Kaʿbah. Hence, it was not a suitable context for farming; consequently, there was no reference to farming in Meccan verses.

Furthermore, the first twenty verses of the chapter *al-Baqarab*, similar to the parable of the sower, categorise people into distinct groups based on their reaction to the divine revelation. The first group is the believers, who are mentioned in verses 3, 4, and 5. The second group is the disbelievers, who are mentioned in verses 6 and 7. Verses 8 and 20 describe two different types of hypocrites:

First, hypocrites who momentarily believed in the revelation, but then their hearts returned once again to disbelief while they pretended outwardly to be Muslims. This group of hypocrites are mentioned in the Chapter of *al-Munāfiqūn* (the Hypocrites): “Because, they believed first and then disbelieved...” (Q 63:4). Second, hypocrites who never accepted the revelation but still pretended to be Muslims. It appears the reason more verses are allocated to the discussion of the hypocrites is that the beginning section of the chapter *al-Baqarab* was revealed when the Prophet entered Medina, which is where he first had to deal with the problem of the hypocrites.

### 3.1. The First Category: Disbelievers

The parable of the sower describes the first category of receptivity of the human heart to the Word of God with the following image: “Some fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up.” As the New

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<sup>55</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 35.

Testament scholars noted above, the parable's focus is the soil rather than the seed; in the first category, the seeds fall on the ground but are eaten by the birds, meaning that the Word of God is heard but does not penetrate the heart of the listener. Because it was not a fertile ground but hardened soil or path which lost its fertility due to people constantly walking on it. Therefore, it is probable that this group are the disbelievers upon whom the Word of God had no influence.

Looking at the Qur'ānic equivalent of the first group mentioned in the parable of the sower, it can be found in the beginning verses of *al-Baqarah*, immediately before the parables that describe the hypocrites:

Indeed, those who disbelieve - it is all the same for them whether you warn them or do not warn them - they will not believe. God has set a seal upon their hearts and upon their hearing, and over their vision is a veil. And for them is a great punishment. (Q 2:6-7)

The style of the verse is certainly different from the parable of the sower, but it uses words that indicate a similar reaction to God's Word – namely, that it has no influence on the heart of these listeners. Whether or not God's Messenger tries to sow the seeds of faith in the hearts of these disbelievers, the disbelievers will not be affected by hearing God's Word. This is because "God has set a seal upon their hearts and upon their hearing, and over their vision is a veil" or "the birds came and ate it up." Interestingly, in the Qur'ān, a sealed heart – one which is utterly turned against the message of God – is also associated with the image of being eaten by birds:

... as persons having pure faith in God, not ascribing partners to Him. Whoever ascribes partners to God is as though he had fallen from a height to be devoured by birds, or to be blown away by the wind far and wide. (Q 22:31)

The similarity between the Gospel and Qur'ānic parables in their description of disbelievers is striking. Those people whose hearts refuse the divine message are considered like seeds fallen into barren soil, and birds –used here to symbolise Satan– come and take away such hearts:

<sup>14</sup>The farmer sows the word. <sup>15</sup>Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

The use of birds to symbolise Satan is salient in both examples. In the example of the Qurʾān, the individual choice of disbelief is equated with the self-destructive behaviour of throwing oneself from a height only to be devoured by birds. Birds in this context implicitly refer<sup>56</sup> to Satan, whose influence would push disbelievers further away from God and intensify the process of their self-destruction in the Hereafter. In both examples, however, the source of disbelief is not Satan. Rather, the disbelief is the result of an internal process or a lack of receptiveness of a person's heart (or fertile soil) to the divine message.

Elsewhere, the Qurʾān makes it clear that it is individuals who initiate their state of disbelief by the choices and actions they take, and Satan intensifies this process: “*Because of their disbelief, God set a seal [on their hearts]*” (Q 4:155). In another example: “*Have you seen someone who has taken his own desire as god. God misguided him despite the knowledge he had and sealed his ears and his heart and veiled his vision...*” (Q 45:23). Once the heart and mind are set on disbelief, the consequences of the individuals' choice amplify their experience of disbelief, which is then depicted as giving Satan dominion over them – as illustrated by the phrase “God set a seal [on their hearts].”<sup>57</sup> The natural consequence of God setting a seal on disbelievers' hearts is to place them under the guidance of Satan: “... *And those who disbelieve, their guardians are the evil ones/Satan will take them from light to darkness...*” (Q 2:257).

In both parables, the external role of the birds or Satan is clear. They are there to devour what has been consciously left unprotected. However, despite the thematic and symbolic similarity of the two parables, one cannot ignore the differences in the use of metaphors. The biblical parable is used in the context of the sowing practice of Palestinians, while the Qurʾānic parable, in the general terms of falling from a height and being devoured by scavenger birds, is more relevant to geographical features of the city of Medina, which is surrounded by

<sup>56</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, 2/222-223.

<sup>57</sup> Some verses of the Qurʾān may offer a more comprehensive perspective on this issue. In this case, for example, the verse 4:155 provides an explanation for why God set a seal on the hearts of disbelievers: “*Because of their disbelief, God set a seal [on their hearts].*” According to the Qurʾān, the cause of their hearts being sealed is their individual choice to disbelieve, rather than the cause of their disbelief being that God sealed their hearts and that, therefore, they are doomed to be disbelievers.

mountainous terrain.<sup>58</sup> This perfectly fits into the demarcating differences that give parables their key ingredients of locality and familiarity. Of course, farming was also practised in Medina,<sup>59</sup> thus “birds”, the common enemy of the farmers in agricultural societies, that devour what is left in the open and unprotected, could have eaten those seeds that fell on infertile soil, but perhaps heights or the mountains surrounding the city of Medina were more salient images for the audience, especially for those who came to Medina as visitors from the other parts of Arabia.

### **3.2. The Second Category: Hypocrites Who Briefly Had Faith**

<sup>5</sup>Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.<sup>6</sup>But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.

This section of the parable refers to people who hear God’s Word and instinctively accept it in their hearts, which momentarily fills them with joy and happiness. Unlike the previous category, whose hearts were utterly unreceptive, the seed or the Word penetrates into the heart of listeners of the second category. However, it does not take root in the individual’s heart because the spiritual depth of their heart is shallow. Thus, such an individual’s commitment to the Word of God is superficial. As soon as an external difficulty emerges (when the sun comes up or thorns grow), the superficial faith is scorched, withered, or choked as it did not have strong roots in the soil (in the heart).

The same concept is invoked in the parables of the torch and the rainstorms in the chapter *al-Baqarah* of the Qur’ān, which concerns the hypocrites. Some of these hypocrites briefly believed in the message of the Prophet Muḥammad but then turned away from the message, while others never believed the message in the first place but made an outward show of faith. The section of verses discussing the hypocrites begins with Q 2:8. However, it is in Q 2:16 that the parable of the torch is introduced, and so it is from here that we will begin our

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<sup>58</sup> The city of Medina is naturally surrounded by two hills. See, Harry Munt, *The Holy City of Medina: Sacred Space in Early Islamic Arabia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 68-71.

discussion: “*They are the ones who bought error for guidance, so their trade did not profit them, nor were they guided.*”

This verse says that this group of people figuratively “bought error (*al-ḍalālah*) for guidance.” It indicates that this group of hypocrites first received guidance from the Prophet but then exchanged this guidance for misguidance in return for personal gain when they received an offer from the other disbelievers in exchange for giving up their belief in the Prophet’s message. This offer may not necessarily have been one of the material rewards; it may also be the offer of an improved social position or of prestige. Verse 17 further elaborates on the process by which these hypocrites lost their faith: “*Their parable is that of one who lighted a torch, and when it had lit up all around him, God took away their light and left them sightless in a manifold darkness.*” (Q 2:16-17)

The parable likens this group’s initial belief in the Prophet and his revelations to their lighting up a torch that illuminated their surroundings. In the parable of the sower, this same phenomenon is expressed by the phrase “*Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.*” Because the light of the torch was not perpetual –as compared to natural sources of light, such as the sun or stars– it was vulnerable to being extinguished by the wind and rain or running out of fuel. And as soon as God caused these external elements to act –in a manner similar to the Sun coming up and scorching the plant that sprang from the seed or the thorns choking it in the Parable of the Sower– the light vanished and the people were left lost in darkness.

The darkness referenced in this verse symbolises the fact that when an individual believes, they do not only perceive the physical realm but something beyond as well –the spiritual realm– by broadening their vision. As soon as the hypocrites believed in the Prophet, the torch was lit. Then, when they disbelieved, the torch was extinguished, and they were plunged into darkness and could no longer perceive the realities of the spiritual realm. In the example of the seed, the seed is God’s Word, and in the case of successful sowing, it grows into a plant –symbolising faith– and flourishes towards the spiritual realm, connecting the individual to the spiritual realm.

The parable of the rainstorm mentioned in Q 2:19–20 further elaborates on the hypocrites:

Or that of a rainstorm from the sky, wherein is darkness, thunder, and lightning: they put their fingers in their ears due to the thunderclaps, apprehensive of death; and God besieges the faithless.

The lightning almost snatches away their sight: whenever it shines for them, they walk in it, and when the darkness falls upon them, they stand. Had God willed, He would have taken away their hearing and their sight. Indeed, God has power over all things.

The “rainstorm” (*şayyib*) here represents the perception of the revelation by the hypocrites who never believed in the Prophet. The revelation would come frequently at the time and such was its abundance that these hypocrites felt like it was like a “rainstorm”. As a matter of fact, rain is essential for human existence; it brings benefits to the land and all that lives on it. However, due to their blindness to the truth, the hypocrites only saw the negative and frightening features of a rainstorm, such as darkness, rather than its beneficial side.

Verse 20 illustrates another trait of those hypocrites who never believed in the Prophet. As Muslims’ accounts of early Islam claim, there were occasions during the Prophet’s mission in which the hypocrites received guidance momentarily. For example, when the time came to share war booty between the Muslims, the hypocrites would receive their share as established in the Qur’ān and it would make them pleased with the Prophet. However, if there were a difficult situation, they would quickly become discontented; consequently, they would lose the guidance again. In this vein, the expression “rocky soil” mentioned in Q 2:264, studied above, may also refer to hypocrites who momentarily accepted the faith. But because their faith was shallow; because the base of their heart was a rock which was covered with a thin layer of soil, in the face of some external difficulties, they lost their faith.

It needs to be kept in mind that, unlike Muḥammad, Jesus did not establish any political entity or wield any political authority. Hence, there was no need for people to pretend they were the followers of Jesus. He neither held power nor was able to offer incentives to his people, thus those who refused his message never felt the need to hide their disbelief in the same manner as the hypocrites of Medina.



However, according to Muslim sources, Muḥammad did wield political power, and this meant that some people deliberately hid their disbelief, either out of fear or to obtain some benefit for themselves. Therefore, correspondence between the message of the Qur'ān's parables and the historical context of Muḥammad's life is remarkable.

The existence of the political power is the key difference between Muḥammad and Jesus, which left its mark in their teachings. Although Jesus was seen as a political threat to the local Rome appointed leader of Galilee and this perception played an important role in his perceived punishment of crucifixion. It was a punishment only implemented on slaves and enemies of the state. Jesus was certainly not a slave; thus, he must have been considered an enemy of the state.<sup>60</sup> Although Jesus might have had a political agenda on the side of his religious teachings, it is almost certain that he never wielded political power. Nevertheless, post 325 CE-Christians obtained political power and transformed how they understood the Gospel message in accordance with their changing circumstances.<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, Muḥammad, after the first ten years of his stay in Mecca, migrated to Medina, where he gained the unwavering support of two powerful tribes of the city. With the existing support of his followers, who migrated with him from Mecca, Muslims became the most organised and powerful religio-political force in the city of Medina. The Charter of Medina<sup>62</sup> (or the Constitution of Medina) became an important tool for Muḥammad's projection of political power over the Medinan society, where the above-mentioned verses were believed to be revealed. The Charter granted Muḥammad the role of the final arbitrator of the disputed matters, thus paving the way for his political power in the society. The later expeditions of Muḥammad, especially with the Meccan polytheists, strengthened the political claim of Muḥammad and his followers. In the presence of such

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<sup>60</sup> I express my gratitude to John S. Kloppenborg for teaching this and many important information about the study of the life of Jesus and the Gospels in his course on Early Gospels.

<sup>61</sup> I thank Axel Marc Oaks Takács for proving this insight.

<sup>62</sup> See Muhammad Nazeer Kaka Khel, "Foundation of the Islamic State at Medina and Its Constitution", *Islamic Studies* 21/3 (Autumn 1982), 61-88; Uri Rubin, "The 'Constitution of Medina' Some Notes", *Studia Islamica* 62 (1985), 5-23.

overwhelming political and military force,<sup>63</sup> it was only normal for those who did not accept the religious teachings of Muḥammad to fake their faith to either avoid repercussions or take full benefit of the newly emerging socio-political situation in the city. It was inevitable that the verses of the Qurʾān would have to take a stock of the new situation in Medina and address such a pretence response to the Prophet's preaching.

### 3.3. The Third Category: Believers

Verse 8 of the parable of the sower mentions the believers, the third category:

<sup>8</sup>Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew, and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.

Here, God's Word meets the fertile soil, and faith flourishes in the form of an abundance of crops. New Testament scholars emphasise that this parable refers to deeds rather than mere belief, as faith is not merely a spiritual commitment but also needs to be supported with active loyalty: "To bear fruit' was a traditional image for an active loyalty to the covenant, a righteousness that was shown in the life and in deed."<sup>64</sup>

The description of the faithful at the beginning of the chapter *al-Baqarah* places the same emphasis on the deeds:

Who believe in the unseen, establish prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them. And who believe in what has been revealed to you, [O Muḥammad], and what was revealed before you, and of the Hereafter, they are certain [in faith]. (Q 2:3-4)

This verse draws an explicit connection between believing in God's Word and demonstrating an active loyalty to the commands of God, which is the description of faith. Because, according to Qurʾān, God is beyond human comprehension and people have physical existence and limitations, the connection between God and humankind can only be achieved through faith. However, faith can only be attained and preserved through worship or active loyalty. In other words, faith is an action of the heart<sup>65</sup> and needs to be set into motion through outward deeds. According to the Qurʾān, the same applies to angels as well;

<sup>63</sup> Saleh, "The Psalms in the Qur'an and in the Islamic Religious Imagination", 282-283.

<sup>64</sup> Gerhardsson, "The Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation", 177-178.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, 2/269-270.

even though they are unseen (by people), like God, they also need to connect to God through faith and worship: “*Those [angels], at the closest point to God and those around it, exalt their Lord with praise and they have faith in Him...*” (Q 40:7). This is because God is also beyond the comprehension of angels, who live in the unseen world but are on a different level.

Further, *al-Baqarah* uses the parable of the crop to illustrate the benefits of deeds which are done as a result of intense devotion to God:

The parable of those who spend their wealth in the way of God is that of a grain which grows seven ears, in every ear a hundred grains. God enhances severalfold whomever He wishes, and God is all-bounteous, all-knowing. (Q 2:261)

This verse ostensibly describes the reward of spending on the way of God, but, ultimately, given the close connection between faith and worship, charity giving is presented as an act of faith or as evidence of the presence of faith in the heart.<sup>66</sup> According to this parable, the combination of a receptive heart (or fertile soil) and the performance of good deeds results in an exponential reward. It is also striking that the highest number in a multitude of crop and grains was given in both the parables of sower and 2:261 is a hundred. Most likely, the numbers are used figuratively<sup>67</sup> to represent the exponentiality of good deeds that are rooted in faith.

### Conclusion

This article is built upon Neuwirth’s thesis wherein she views “the status of the Qurʾān as a new manifestation of biblical scripture.” It set out to further explore this thesis by examining parables in the Gospel and the Qurʾān. I set two main parameters for a successful assessment of such a thesis through studying the parables: I expected to see conceptual similarities between the Gospel and Qurʾān parables, particularly those that pertain to faith in an unseen God. Also, in accordance with the essential characteristics of parables as a form of

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<sup>66</sup> David Waines considers the verse an example of demonstration of the all-powerful nature of God. David Waines, “Agriculture and Vegetation”, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden - Boston - Köln: Brill, 2001), 1/42.

<sup>67</sup> For an example of the figurative use of the numbers see Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾān*, 70.

genre, it was reasonable to expect to also find region and religion-specific elements that set these parables apart from one another.

The study discovered profound conceptual similarities between the parables found in the two monotheistic texts of the New Testament and the Qurʾān, as well as clear signs of local differences. The similarity in the metaphor of the soil used to illustrate the varying degrees of the receptivity of the human heart to the Word of God is indeed an important element that connects the Bible to the Qurʾān.

The most important connection was the use of soil as a metaphor to refer to the heart both in the Gospels and the Qurʾān. In accordance with the use of soil, the reception to the Word of God was graded by the level of the hardness of the soil. In both texts, a receptive or faithful heart was described as fertile soil that embraces the word of God, or a seed that connects the spiritual realm to the physical realm through the manifestation of faith, or the sprouting of the crop. In contrast, the state of disbelief or an unreceptive heart was likened to a rock that lacks the necessary foundation and thus is not open to embrace the Word of God.

Moreover, between the two spectrums, there were the hypocrites whose faith was built upon “rocky soil” or “rocky places, where it did not have much “soil”. In other words, they did not build their faith on fertile ground. Consequently, their faith was shallow and in the face of some external difficulties such as the sun, thorns or downpour of rain, their faith was lost. I noted that the theme of representing the heart as soil is a common feature of both religious texts, which reaffirms the fact that both the Palestinian Jews to whom Jesus preached and Muslims of Medina to whom Muḥammad preached were mainly farmers. The use of the metaphor of soil, therefore, made great sense to the people of Nazareth and Medina.

However, there was an important distinction between Jesus and Muḥammad; while the former did not wield political power, the latter did. The use of the parables appears to fit well with the scarce information preserved about the life and preaching of Jesus in first-century Palestine, particularly about his lack of political power. This is why the parable of the sower contains no reference to hypocrites who make an outward show of belief due to a combination of fear and the desire to win favour. However, the Prophet Muḥammad did obtain political power and the Qurʾānic parables reflect the available

historical information about the early history of Islam. In this sense, the study has shown that a close comparison of the Gospels and the Qurʾān may yield positive results in establishing a connection between the two monotheistic texts and help locate their historical relevance to their original audiences.

Aside from the soil, the use of birds in the parables of the Gospels and Qurʾān was also significant. The birds were used in both texts to refer to Satan, whose job was to eat or further mislead people who chose to disbelieve in the Word of God. In the Qurʾān, the individual choice of disbelief is equated with the self-destructive behaviour of throwing oneself from a height only to be devoured by birds. In the Gospels, it was again the individual choice of disbelieving; people heard the message, but they decided to disbelieve because their heart was hardened and turned into a path. In such a case, it becomes possible for Satan to further carry away from the message. In both parables, the source of disbelief is not Satan. Rather, the disbelief results from an internal process of an unreceptive heart. Birds are there to devour what has been consciously left unprotected.

However, despite the thematic and symbolic similarity of the two parables, I also noted differences in the use of metaphors. While the Gospel parable is used in the context of the sowing practice of Palestinians, the Qurʾānic parable in the general terms of falling from a height and being devoured by scavenger birds is more relevant to the geographical features of the city of Medina, which is surrounded by mountainous terrain. Such style fits well into the demarcating differences that give parables their key ingredients of locality and familiarity. Farming was also practised in Medina, thus “birds”, the common enemy of the farmers in agricultural societies, that devour what is left in the open and unprotected, could have eaten those seeds that fell on infertile soil, but heights surrounding the city of Medina were more salient images for the audience.

Because of the unique importance of the parable of the Gospels that they are the more authentic parts of the Gospels, the form-critical comparison carried out in this article is more significant. This is much different from comparing the prophetic stories of the Bible and Qurʾān. It may be possible to argue for the influence of prophetic stories mentioned in the Bible on the Qurʾān. Because these stories exist in the Bible and the Qurʾān; one only needs to copy and edit them before

reinserting them into the Qurʾān. Of course, the existence of additional detail and different focus in the prophetic stories of the Qurʾān hinders such argument, but still, it remains a possibility. However, parables are used to make abstract religious ideas and concepts tangible for the audience through the mediums of sensible phenomena. Therefore, they are indirect linguistic tools, and it is almost impossible to copy metaphors of the Gospels to the Qurʾān while ignoring the demarcating local ingredients.<sup>68</sup> With the comparison of the parables, this article, together with Walid Saleh’s work, makes a stronger case for the continuity thesis; it aspires to pave the way for further comparative and more detailed studies of the parables of the Gospels and Qurʾān.

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<sup>68</sup> It must be noted that the argument for the continuity thesis does not necessarily negate the inimitability thesis. Rather, it suggests that the Qurʾān can be seen as a continuation of previous monotheistic scriptures while also maintaining its unique qualities. Moreover, the Qurʾān has its own literary style, structure, and language that distinguish it from previous scriptures. In this vein, I agree with the justifications for the continuity thesis that Neuwirth and Saleh have expressed in Neuwirth, “Qurʾānic Studies and Philology”; Saleh, “The Psalms in the Qurʾān and in the Islamic Religious Imagination”.

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