

Jeremiah in Ibn `Asākir: Early influence or later translation?

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Abstract

Stories of the Prophets in Islam, a genre rooted in the Qur'ān and developed widely in popular Islamic literature, are often related to similar Biblical stories. However, this relationship varies considerably—all the way from virtually no topical relationship to heavy citation of translated Biblical verses, and sometimes even chapters. This paper will focus on Jeremiah—a major prophet in the Bible, but comparatively minor non-Qur'ānic one in Islam. The paper will contend that it is more fruitful to search for Biblical material in non-Qur'ānic prophets, and test this with regard to Jeremiah.

Introduction

The search for exact Biblical citations within classical Muslim literature is an interesting and rewarding one. As a purported final monotheistic revelation, the Qur'ān contains a wide range of both biblical and non-biblical prophetic accounts. Some of the former, such as that of Joseph (Q12), have been fruitfully compared to their antecedents—both for literary and theological significance. However, some accounts, such as that of Solomon (Q21:78-82, 27:15-21) have little relation with the biblical figures of the same name.

In general, when the Qur'ānic accounts are compared with the Biblical ones, a reader is struck by the fact that the Qur'ānic account is ahistorical. This is to say, that the Qur'ān will tend to focus upon the moral of the story rather than the historical elements of the same that would tend to place it within a historical or at least semi-historical context.

Examples of this tendency are legion: the Pharaoh of the Qur'ān is a generic anti-divine self-extolling figure (e.g. Q10:75). This is in contradistinction to the Pharaoh of the Bible, who had specific cities constructed, and political-social reasons behind the manner in which he acted.

One should add that for the most part this Qur'ānic treatment of prophets is closely in line with its treatment of Muḥammad. Researchers seeking biographical details about the Prophet from the Qur'ān are mostly disappointed, and those which do exist—sparse as they are—usually are capable of several different interpretations. This is theologically in line with the Qur'ān's most basic theme: the message of monotheism is greater than the messenger (or any given messenger).

Another important theological Qur'ānic basis is that knowledge comes from God. This basis is communicated within the revelation usually accepted as the first:

Recite in the name of our Lord! Who crease, creates the human from a clot.
Recite, for your Lord is the Most Generous, who teaches by the pen, teaches the human who he does not know. (Q96:1-5)

This theology of God communicating knowledge to humanity through the medium of messengers and prophets is also a constant through the stories of the prophets in the Qur'ān. A good example of this is when after the act of creation, in Q2:31 “And He taught Adam the names—all of them.” The names were those of the animals. In Gen. 2:19-20 Adam is said to have named the animals himself, with God in the background watching to see what he would do.

There is also a fairly stark divide between the Biblical idea of what a prophet is compared to the Qur'ānic idea. One way of looking at this is seeing who is considered to be a messenger or a prophet in the Qur'ān. A usual list gives us: Adam, Seth, Idris (= Enoch), Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Lot, Job, Dhū al-Kifl (= son of Job?), Shu`ayb (= Jethro), Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, David, Solomon, Jonah, Zacariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Muḥammad.¹

Consideration of this list reveals several basic differences between the Biblical concept of prophethood, and the Qur'ānic one. First of all, for a concept drawing upon the same fund of personalities and basic story-lines, separated by only 6-8 centuries in terms of composition, there is surprisingly little overlap between the two groups. Moses, Elijah, Elisha and Jonah are the major figures considered to be prophets by both traditions.

However, the Islamic tradition has vastly expanded the number of prophets, including figures not named inside the Qur'ān up till 124,000.² This latter number includes a wide range of Biblical, and some extra-biblical figures.

Interest in the stories of the prophets on a popular level among Muslims has traditionally been high. This fact is exemplified by the numerous collections of the genre known as *qiṣaṣ al-anbīyā* (stories of the prophet), of which there are at least 50 from the classical

¹ E.g., `Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Ḥanafī,

² *Encyclopedia of the Qurān* (ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Leiden: E.J. Brill 2006), s.v. “Prophet.”

period. The earliest of these, that of Wathīma, dates from the later 800s.³ However, it is clear from numerous citations that there were collections or partial collections even earlier.

Many of the early collections contain materials that are either taken from the Bible, or from extra-biblical Jewish and Christian sources. Although this material is of the highest interest to scholars, Muslims have found the obviously Jewish and Christian material to be problematic over the centuries and have periodically winnowed it out. In general, the iron law in Muslim tradition literature is that whatever is specific and identifiable in the early accounts will become general and generic in the later ones.

This rule is apparent in a number of closely related genres, such as ascetic literature and apocalyptic materials. For example, the early Muslim ascetic figure `Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 797) included a great many identifiably Christian stories in his collection called *Kitāb al-zuhd wa-l-raqā'iq* (*Book of Asceticism and Compassionate Stories*). However, when we look at later compilations of the same genre, such as Ibn Qudāma's (d. 1223) *Kitāb al-tawwābīn* (*Book of Penitents*) we find that the specific details are no longer present.

Stories of the prophets are to be found in many genres of Muslim literature, including (but not exclusively) in polemical anti-Christian or anti-Jewish literature, exegetical works on the Qur'ān, historical and semi-historical narratives, pilgrimage accounts, Sufi sayings, and even literary narratives designed to entertain. Very little of this material, other than that cited for polemical purposes—which usually had to maintain a level of accuracy—demonstrates knowledge of the Bible however.

The reason for this fact is the divergence that occurred between the Biblical traditions and the Islamic. This divergence has its roots in the polemic already inside the Qur'ān, and most specifically in the idea that the Jews and Christians have manipulated their sacred scriptures in order to exclude mention of the Prophet Muḥammad. This doctrine, known as *tahrīf* (changing or manipulating words or meanings) is found in Q2:75, 4:46, 5:13, 41). However, inside the Qur'ān the doctrine is not a global accusation against Jews and Christians the way it would become during later centuries as the result of polemics.

³ Wathīma, *Kitāb bad' al-khalq wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbīyā'* (ed. Khoury, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978), which contains no Jeremiah material.

Because of this doctrine the Muslim attitude towards the Bible is a rather schizophrenic one. On the one hand, Muslims, even polemicists, are forced to accept that parts of the Bible are revealed truth from God. As such they would have, according to the Muslim concept, have originally contained divine revelation. However, they have as a result of Jews and Christians changing their own scriptures, become corrupted, and can no longer be relied upon.

In spite of this doctrinal rejection of the Bible and reluctance to grant it any type of divine connection, Muslim polemicists and historians have always used the Bible. The reason for the former using the Bible was the fact that the biblical text, with a bit of imagination, could supply predictions of the Prophet Muhammad, and in many cases provide a polemical writer with material useful against both Jews or Christians. Probably the best known of the predictions of Muḥammad, and certainly one of the earliest, is Ibn Ishāq's (d. 767) use of Jesus' prophecy of the Paraclete appearing in John 14:15-21.⁴ Such a prophecy is alluded to in Q61:6, where Jesus speaks of "good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name will be Aḥmad."

Theology might tend to drive Jews and Christians away from Muslims, but the fact is the stories of the prophets actually linked the communities together. This fact can be seen in terms of names—where names of Biblical prophets were always favorites, and served to downplay the differences between the communities—and in terms of popular pilgrimage locations. Pilgrimage to Syria, while not mandated in Islam in the manner in which pilgrimage to Mecca was, was popular and is well-attested in the historical and travel literature.

One could expect at a popular pilgrimage site to find Jews, Christians and Muslims praying, seeking the holy figure's favor, and listening to the local guides/ascetics who made it their business to spin entertaining and moralistic tales concerning a given prophet or holy figure. And such was the case with Jeremiah.

⁴ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), I, p. 63; trans. Guillaume, *Life of the Prophet Muhammad* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 103-4.

Jeremiah

Of all the major prophets—a category usually including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel—Jeremiah is the most difficult to read. While Isaiah has a message of messianic hope, Ezekiel has a brutal critique of Judean spiritual practices coupled with an affirmation, and Daniel promotes apocalyptic liberation, Jeremiah is almost unrelieved gloom and sorrow. One who reads the Bible, and knows its stories already before reading Jeremiah knows that the city of Jerusalem will be judged, and the Temple destroyed by the Babylonians. So reading Jeremiah through is watching a slow-motion train-wreck. It is difficult to be cheerful after finishing reading the text.

Historically speaking, Jeremiah appears to be a prophet from the late First Temple period, during the reigns of the later Judean kings. (This is not the point to consider critical material on Jeremiah as to the actual date of the book.)⁵ These kings were effectively puppet rulers of their state on behalf of the Babylonian Empire (626-539 BCE); however, as the Biblical account makes clear, they longed to be free of this dependency.

This longing frequently induced the kings to ally themselves with Egypt, which was the Babylonian Empire's principal competitor in the region. Such an alliance usually left the Judean kings in the lurch, and in any case, as the prophets so frequently pointed out, Egypt was only better than the Babylonians because it was weaker. Were Egypt to gain the victory it would not treat the Judean kingdom any different than did the Babylonians. However, the balance of the book of Jeremiah is taken up by the story of Jeremiah himself—a prophet commissioned by God to speak unpalatable truths in public, and who very often paid a terrible price for what he had to say. Much of the book is given over to long oracles concerning the awaited fate of Judea's neighbors—some of whom were taking advantage of its weakness. Interspersed with these oracles are snippets concerning Jeremiah's life and personal feelings, his feelings of inadequacy, and social rejection. The book finishes on a frustrating note: Jeremiah is taken to Egypt against his will, and presumably died there.

When one considers the contents of Jeremiah, it is fairly easy to see where there is likely to be an overlap—the places where from a Muslim point of view the content and the style

⁵ See for example, John Bright, *The Anchor Bible: Jeremiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope* (Crossway, 2001).

would suggest that this was divinely-based material. If a Muslim were to read Jeremiah, the overlap would be those dialogues where God is speaking to Jeremiah. Those sections of the book are the ones that to a Muslim eye most look like the Qur'ān. And indeed, that is what we find in Ibn `Asākir.

Importance of Ibn `Asākir

Ibn `Asākir (d.1176) was a traditionalist and a historian who collected a massive amount of material on the region of Syria. This material is presented and published in the *Tā`rīkh madīnat Dimashq* (*History of the City of Damascus* = IA, henceforward) in 78 volumes.⁶ There are approximately 11,000 biographical entries in the work, all of them covering a figure which Ibn `Asākir considered to have had some type of connection with Syria or Damascus.

The massiveness of IA is the result of an inferiority complex that Syrians felt, especially towards Iraq. After the fall of the Umayyad caliphate, whose capital had been in Damascus, in 747, the center of the Islamic world shifted to the east, and most specifically to Baghdad. When after the foundation of the latter city in 762, the developing art of Muslim Arabic-language history tended to view Baghdad or Iraq as being the center and everything else as periphery.

This attitude had some ramifications upon the genre of the stories of the prophets. In fact, Qur'ānic and Biblical stories that centered upon Iraq or Persia were given a higher profile than might be strictly warranted given their relative importance in the holy texts.

By contrast, Syria, and especially Jerusalem, was a backwater. Starting in the 9th and 10th centuries there were efforts to raise the profile of Jerusalem within the Muslim world by composing literature in praise of the city—and its many prophetic (former) inhabitants. This was followed by Damascus doing the same.

Ibn `Asākir was the inheritor of this legacy. As a young man, just after the Crusaders conquered most of the Syrian coastlands, and the area around Jerusalem, Ibn `Asākir went to Baghdad to study. At that time Damascus was a backwater, marooned in the midst of Crusader states, forced by its geography and weakness to conclude alliance after alliance with the former. This sat ill with Ibn `Asākir, who as a Sunni Muslim was well

⁶ Ibn `Asākir, *Tā`rīkh madīnat Dimashq* (ed. `Umar al-`Umarwī, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995-2000).

aware that one was not to be so subservient to unbelievers. But there was nothing that he could do about it.

In Baghdad Ibn `Asākir was introduced to what was at that time the gold standard for city histories in the Arabic-speaking Muslim world: al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's (d. 1071) *Tā'rikh madīnat al-salām* (*History of Baghdad*). This work is also massive—today issued in 17 vols—and contains a listing of everyone who could conceivably have some connection to Baghdad until the time of the author. (The genre of city-histories in Farsi was just beginning at this time; none, however, were as large as the ones in Arabic.)

Among other entries, al-Khaṭīb included any prophets who could have had any connection with the territory that would eventually become Baghdad, or with Iraq as a whole.⁷ It is clear from reading Ibn `Asākir that the latter greatly respected al-Khaṭīb, and was determined to outdo his work—when he returned to Damascus.

And that he did. Because during the time while Ibn `Asākir was gone, Damascus had changed considerably. The Second Crusade (1146-8) had broken the Crusaders' alliance with Damascus, and had attacked the city, albeit falling apart at its walls. Not immediately, but eventually this led to a strong reaction—and enabled the growing Zangid dynasty under its dynamic ruler Nūr al-Dīn (d. 1174) to capture Damascus.

In spite of the indifferent religiosity of his father Zangī, who was murdered in a drunken stupor by his servants, Nūr al-Dīn chose to strongly emphasize Sunni Islam, and make fighting against the Crusaders the hallmark of his rule. Ibn `Asākir approved of this policy, and wrote a glowing obituary of Nūr al-Dīn in IA.⁸

Ibn `Asākir received the extensive patronage necessary to take on a mammoth project like the history of Damascus from Nūr al-Dīn, although he does not mention this fact in his obituary of the latter. Using IA as a source, then we are able to see the expansive conception of Syria and its place in Islamic history. The reality is that conception would not be fulfilled until some 120 years after Ibn `Asākir's death.

In IA, the prophets have a prominent role. We should remember at this point that there are two very distinct Muslim prophetic narratives in Syria. There is the one that IA itself channels, which is mainstream Sunni Muslim, and based upon traditions. Although not

⁷ Also issued as a separate volume, see below.

⁸ Trans. Nikita Elisséeff, "Un document contemporain de Nūr al-Dīn: sa notice biographique par Ibn `Asākir," *Bulletin des études orientales* 25 (1972), pp. 125-40.

all of these traditions, especially in marginal genres such as history, and stories of the prophets, actually go back to Muḥammad, they must have some type of basis in the tradition literature. And they must be theologically in accord with Islamic teachings.

This brings us to the second strand of Muslim prophetic narratives in Syria, which are the popular ones. These narratives have their roots among storytellers, among ascetics, and pass easily back and forth over religious boundaries. Some of them are completely in opposition to mainstream Islamic teachings.

A good example of the latter tendency is the version of the Cain and Abel story (based in Gen. 4 and Q5:27-31). This story which involves the two sons of Adam—one of whom (Cain) was an agriculturalist, while the other (Abel) was a herdsman—enmeshed in bitter envy because the sacrifice of one was not accepted by God. In both the Qurʾān and the Bible the rejected figure is Cain (although neither is named in the text), who responds to this rejection by murdering his brother.

This story was a popular one in Syria, and Abel's murder was traditionally associated with Mt. Qāsiyūn, just outside of Damascus. However, in popular Syrian histories, such as that of Ibn Naẓīf (d. 1234?) the murdered son is Cain, whose name is parsed as *qabūl qurbānihi* "his sacrificed was received," while Abel is associated with the pre-Islamic god Hubal.⁹ Other similar stories that are of a popular nature can be found in Muslim pilgrims' guides to Syria.¹⁰

Ibn ʿAsākir gives listings to the following messengers and prophets: Adam, Abel, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, the Twelve Tribes (12 tribes of Israel), Job, Moses, Caleb, Balaam, Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Jonah, Dhū al-Qarnayn (Alexander the Great), Hūd, Zacariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Disciples. This is a rather eclectic list, given the fact that there are a number of figures unnoted by IA that we would expect. For example, neither Isaac nor Ishmael are listed, even though they are listed in the Qurʾān. Saul, also, is listed in the Qurʾān but goes unmentioned while Samuel appears, who is not. Abel, Caleb and Balaam are all surprises as well.

⁹ Ibn Naẓīf, *al-Tāʾrīkh al-Manṣūrī* (mss. reproduction, Moscow: Izdatistivo Vostochnoi Literaturi, 1963), fol. 4a.

¹⁰ E.g., al-Harawī's guide from 1126, see Josef Meri, *A Lonely Wayfarer's Guide to Pilgrimage* (Princeton: Darwin, 2004), p. 14.

The biography given to the Disciples (separate from that of Jesus) is of the highest interest as it contains a partial translation of the Sermon on the Mount.¹¹ But more than citations, one can see that Ibn `Asākir, in spite of his being a mainstream Sunni, was more influenced by non-Muslim ideas of what constitutes a prophet. All of the major prophets are present—none of whom appear in the Qur`ān,

Of all of these, Jeremiah and Balaam might be the most unexpected, as neither of them is remotely alluded to in the Qur`ān. Additionally, neither of them figure very much in the mythological biblical history that Muslims constructed from the Bible narratives. So let us see what Ibn `Asākir has to say about Jeremiah.

Jeremiah in Ibn `Asākir

Ibn `Asākir is not the only Muslim writer to list Jeremiah. The latter is mentioned in a range of the “stories of the prophets” literature.¹² With 14 pages of text, however, Ibn `Asākir’s account is by far the longest.¹³

Jeremiah is called *irmiyā* son of *ḥalqiyā*, a pretty fair representation of Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, and is immediately identified with the semi-Qur`ānic figure al-Khiḍr. The latter is usually said to be the unnamed figure in Q18:65, and because the *sūra* portrays him as being a guide to Moses—who is a messenger and a prophet in Islam—is usually considered to be of a prophetic level. The cult of al-Khiḍr is quite well-developed in Muslim Syria, where the figure has a strong connection with agriculture and verdancy. However, Ibn `Asākir does not develop this line of connection, between Jeremiah and al-Khiḍr, through the biography.¹⁴

Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 728) said:

Jeremiah, when the Temple (*bayt al-maqdis*) was destroyed, and the books were burned, stood to one side of the mountain, and said: ‘Will God revive these after their death?’ So God caused him to die for 100 years, then God returned his spirit

¹¹ Which I published: “New Testament Citations in Muslim Ascetic literature,” in David Thomas (ed.), *The Encounter of Oriental Christianity with Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 185-223.

¹² See below.

¹³ IA, viii, pp. 27-41 (no. 589).

¹⁴ The connection to Jeremiah is unmentioned in literature devoted to al-Khiḍr, such as the treatise by Ibn Ḥajar al-`Asqalānī.

at the point of 70 years from the time when God had caused him to die, but then they (=it?) were/was granted the lifespan of 30 years to complete the 100.

When the 100 was completed, God Most High returned his spirit to its first condition, he began to see the bones—how they were mended/connected, one to another. Then he saw how the bones were being clothed with nerves and flesh. When this was clear to him, he said: ‘I know that God is capable of doing everything.’¹⁵

Although this vision is placed together with Jeremiah, it most strongly reminds a reader of Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones (Ez. 37:1-10). Lacking context, it is difficult to know what to make of this vision. But if the author is recreating the Ezekiel vision, one should note that the point of the original vision was to give hope of a revived nation, while in this version the point appears to be that God is capable of anything.

The narration continues into an even more confusing sequence, which is a retelling of the wanderings of the Ark of the Covenant taken from I Sam. 6:7-20, complete with details of its transportation, and the deadly sickness inflicted upon any who defiled it. This section is completed with King David’s bringing the Ark to Jerusalem (II Sam. 6:14-16), complete with the story of David dancing before the Ark, and the remonstrance of his wife (Michal), and his ultimate rejection of her (II Sam. 6:20-21).

It is not easy to know why Ibn `Asākir identified these scripture selections with Jeremiah, other than the first has a topical connection with the divine remonstrations that characterize the rest of the biography, while the second sets the stage for the holiness of the Temple.

We are then introduced to Jeremiah, who is identified as living during the time of Bukhtanaṣṣar (Nebuchadnezzar). This latter figure to Muslims would be identified as an anti-divine blasphemous figure strikingly similar to that of Pharaoh. Bukhtanaṣṣar, however, is not a Qur’ānic figure,

More startling is that Jeremiah is said to have saved Ma`dd b. Adnān, distant ancestor of the Prophet Muḥammad from danger—presumably from Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁶ It is interesting that one of Nebuchadnezzar’s successors Nebonidus (d. 539 BCE) is said to have

¹⁵ IA, viii, p. 28.

¹⁶ IA, viii, p. 29. I could find no place in the genealogical and legendary material on Ma`dd which mentions this connection to Jeremiah.

moved his capital to Taymā' in northern Arabia. It is doubtful that this ancient connection between the Babylonians and the early Arabs would have been known during the time of Ibn `Asākir.

From this point in the biography of Jeremiah, the material becomes more recognizable as biblical Jeremiah accounts. Wahb said:

God inspired one of the Israelite prophets named Jeremiah, when misdeeds appeared among them. Rise, among your people, and tell them that they have hearts that do not understand, eyes that do not see, and ears that do not hear. I have been reminded of their fathers' righteousness, and this softens Me towards their sons.

Ask them how they have found disobedience, whether any of them are felicitous with the misdeeds by which they have disobeyed Me? Are any who obeyed Me infelicitous as a result of obedience? The animals remember their homelands, and long for them, but this group has abandoned the command (*amr*) through which I honored their fathers, and has sought after other ways of honor.

As for their good ones, they have denied My rights, for their readers/scribes they have worshipped those other than Me, as for their pious (*nussāk*) they have not benefited from that which they learned, and as for their rulers, they have denied Me and my messengers. They have stored up deceit in their hearts, and made lying common on their tongues.¹⁷

This selection is a standard call to repentance by God, and although it is not written in the Qur'ānic style, its contents are not dissimilar to that of the Qur'ān. The question is: to whom is it directed?

All through reading the Jeremiah selection one recurring possibility is that this is directed towards Muslims, especially the Muslims of Syria. The verse selection most commonly cited with Jeremiah is that of Q17:4-8:

And We decreed for the Sons of Israel in the Book: 'You will indeed foment corruption on the earth twice, and you will indeed rise to a great height.' When the first promise came (to pass), We raised against you servants of Ours, men of harsh violence, and they invaded (your) homes, and it was a promise fulfilled.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Then We returned to you (another) chance against them, and increased you with wealth and sons, and made you more numerous. ‘If you do good, you do good for yourselves, but if you do evil, (it is likewise) for yourselves.’ When the second promise came (to pass) (We raised against you servants of Ours) to cause you distress, and to enter the Temple as they entered it the first time, and to destroy completely what they had conquered.

This verse selection is a comparatively rare example of a Qur’ānic sequence that can be used as an apocalyptic prophesy. It appears to be referring, from a historical point of view, to the destructions of the First and Second Temples (586 BCE, and 70 CE respectively). However, at significant points in Muslim history when Jerusalem has either been in danger or been under non-Muslim control, speculation has centered around the second of these judgements.

Who exactly are these “servants of Ours” who will “cause you distress”? Presumably these second servants are similar also to the characterization of the first group of servants, the ones who were “men of harsh violence” who “invaded (your) homes.” It is not surprising, as we will see, that this verse selection is indeed cited towards the end of Ibn `Asākir’s biography of Jeremiah. One could also wonder whether the arrangement of this biography is designed to highlight the role of Nūr al-Dīn and the Turks in their defense of Islam against the Crusaders during Ibn `Asākir’s own lifetime.

Ibn `Asākir continues with the above divine monologue:

Therefore, I have sworn by my majesty and my glory to raise up generations against them who will not understand their tongues, will not know their faces, nor will they have compassion upon their weeping. I will send a king, a hard tyrant who will have armies like the racing clouds, [30] and a retinue like smoke. The flapping of his banners will be like the wings of eagles. If is as if (I hear) the attack of his horsemen like the eagles’ swooping down! They raze the built-up areas, and leave the villages abandoned.

Woe to you, Jerusalem (*ilīyā*), and its inhabitants—how they are humbled for the slaughter! I will impose captivity upon them; after the clamor of the wedding, there will be screaming. After the neighing of horse, there will be howling of wolves! After the overhanging palaces, there will be dwellings for wild beasts.

After the light of the lantern, there will be billowing dust, after glory, humiliation, after blessing, captivity.

I will make your women exchange perfume for dirt, instead of walking on rich carpets (*zarābī*), on dirty rags. I will make your bodies into garbage for the earth, your bones will be exposed to the sun! I will subject you to different types of torment, then I will command the heavens to be as an iron tray, while the earth is a copper ingot! If (the heavens) rain, the earth will not sprout forth, but if something should sprout forth through all of that, then it is only because of My mercy for the animals. Then I will cause it to hold back during the time of planting, and send it (rain) forth at the time of harvest.

If you manage to plant something during all of that then I will subject it to other disasters; if something survives, blessing will be removed from it. If they pray to Me, I will not answer them, if they ask, I will not give. If they weep, I will not have mercy, if they plead I will turn My face from them.¹⁸

This is a rather strong admonition from God directed at the sinning city of Jerusalem. It has parallels with many Biblical and post-biblical oracles, especially those directed against cities (e.g., Ez. Rev. 19). Such anti-large city oracles are also fairly common in Muslim apocalyptic literature, where one can find them directed against Constantinople, Baghdad, and even against Damascus itself.

All of these oracles have the basic theme of the city's pride and arrogance, its indifference to God, and its reliance upon extensive trade and cultural connections. All of these advantages can, however, be upended by God's changing circumstances and withholding blessing. But is the selection an actual citation from the Bible? As one reads through the early sections of Jeremiah there are many which have parallels to the above selection. For example, Jer. 2:32 speaks of the wedding theme, and Jer. 4:13-28 have a number of parallels in terms of judgement. But even as a paraphrase or as a summary, this selection is not very exact.

On the other hand, it is not possible to see any obvious changes that were made because of Muslim considerations in the oracle. The language is quite elevated, and intricate,

¹⁸ IA, pp. 29-30.

suggesting a fairly well-educated translator. It sounds much as the Bible sounds, but it does not appear to be a translation.

Almost immediately following this oracle we finally see a first fairly obvious paraphrase of the biblical Jeremiah: the prophet's call:

Jeremiah said: 'O Lord, I am weak, can you not strengthen me? Incapable, can you not give me eloquence? Sinning, can you not protect me, abandoned, can you not aid me, humiliated, can you not enhance me?'¹⁹

This request on Jeremiah's part is a good deal more verbose than one finds in Jer. 1:6. Here it is possible to say that there is a paraphrase, but the basic idea is merely enhanced a bit.

God's response is:

God, mighty and majestic said: O Jeremiah, did I not teach you that the matter is Mine, that all affairs proceed from My will (*mashī'atī*). The command is mine, the entirety of creation is Mine. Hearts and tongues, all of them, belong to Me, and in My hand, they can be changes in the manner I wish. By My greatness, none but I know what will happen tomorrow, nor will it come to be without Me. How can you fear weakness when I am with you?

I am God by whom the heavens and the earth, and that which is in them, were raised—by my word. I am God to whom they are submissive out of fear, and cognizance of My command. Nothing (bad) will come to you—I am sending you to a people of My creation to tell them of My message, and for you to realize thereby the recompense of those who obey you among them.

It is curious how much more in-depth this answer is than the Biblical version in Jer. 1:7-8. Again, one could say that it brings together a number of themes that are developed throughout Jeremiah during periods when the prophet was in doubt, and conversed with God concerning his doubt. But it is interesting that the entire sequence of God touching Jeremiah's mouth (Jer. 1:9) is absent from the IA version. Perhaps God's extra-long answer is to make up for the lack of a personal touch, which would be unacceptable theologically in Islam.

¹⁹ IA, p. 31.

Although Jeremiah's call is cited by IA for the first time on the fifth page of his biography, one cannot say that this theme is unimportant, as there are another two places in the text where it is cited again. As it happens, the second one reads:

It was said to him: 'Raise your head,' so he (Jeremiah) raised his head and wept. Then he said: 'O Lord, who will you have dominate them?' He said: 'Fire-worshippers—they are not afraid of My vengeance, or do they hope for My reward. Rise, Jeremiah, listen, and live! I will tell of your tale and that of the Israelites. Prior to when I created you, I chose you, and before I formed you in your mother's womb, I sanctified you. Prior to when I took you out of your mother's belly, I purified you. Prior to when you grew up, I chose you as a prophet. Prior to your preaching, I informed you, and I selected you for a great matter. Rise, now, with the king, protect and guide him rightly.'²⁰

Parts of this version of Jeremiah's call seem to be direct translations of Jer. 1:5, although there are sentences in the call that do not appear in the Bible. Perhaps such a selection was chosen for a more literal translation because of its strong overtones of *ʾisma* (prophetic infallibility).

Following this call, there are additional divine oracles condemning the sinful practices of Judea.

As for their readers/scribes and their learned, they study what they choose, being led by the kings, and following them in innovations which they make up with regard to My religion. They obey the latter in disobeying Me, fulfilling covenants to them, but breaking My covenant. They are ignorant in what they do, and avail nothing of what they have learned from My book.²¹

This oracle sounds as if it is much more influenced by Islamic norms than do the others, as it speaks about "innovations" and obeying the rulers by disobeying God.

Punishment is coming soon, according to the following oracles"

I swear by my might that I will decree a dissension (*fitna*) during which even the self-controlled will be confused, and those perceptive will go astray, while the wisdom of the wise will not avail. Then I will give you into the hands of a hard,

²⁰ IA, viii, pp. 34-5.

²¹ IA, viii, p. 36.

merciless tyrant! I will clothe him with an awe-inspiring aura, and remove any compassion from his heart. Numbers will follow him, black like the darkening night. In his armies there will be like the racing clouds and a retinue like smoke.²² Even after this harsh judgement there is still some hope as God says towards the end of Jereemiah's biography:

I will be like a compassionate shepherd, pushing aside every drought, and neglect. I will lead them to the verdant land until they become gentle lambs, nudging one another. Woe to them, and woe again, I will only honor those who honor Me, and will lay low those who disdain my command. Those generations previous to this one made light of disobeying Me. But this people have exceeded those in disobeying Me—making this open in the mosques/ places of prayer, markets and mountains. Wild animals flee from this to the ends of the earth, but in spite of all they do not benefit what they have learned from the book.²³

The concluding two pages of IA's biography of Jeremiah give most of the historical details of the Jewish people's Babylonian exile, giving extensive details of the numbers taken into captivity, and finally a face-to-face encounter between Jeremiah and Nebuchadnezzar. During this Jeremiah tells the latter that he was only able to conquer the Judeans because of their disobedience towards God. The biography finishes off by stating: "When Bukhtanaṣṣar (Nbuchadnezzar) heard these words, he left him, and Jeremiah stayed in his place in the land of Jerusalem."²⁴

Ibn 'Asākir's account of Jeremiah remains a confusing one to read. Perhaps this is because there is so little Qur'ānic material to give the story a frame—whether chronological or thematic. Or perhaps it is as I feel is likely: he sought to place Jeremiah into the position of a prophet of contemporary significance but lacked the material to complete this scenario.

Compared with other accounts

100 years after Ibn 'Asākir an apocalyptic collection by one al-Sulami (d. 1261) contains the following tradition:

²² IA, viii, p. 37.

²³ IA, viii, p. 39.

²⁴ IA, viii, p. 41.

“God most high says: ‘When My servants have disgraced My sanctity, declared lawful the things prohibited by Me, [and] broken My commandments, then I gave them into the hands of an army from the east called the Turks. They are My horsemen, and take vengeance on those who rebel against Me. I have removed mercy from their hearts: they take no pity on those who weep, and do not answer those who complain, killing the fathers and the mothers, the sons and the daughters’...”²⁵

It is interesting that this tradition, portraying the Turks as instruments of God’s (necessary) vengeance would sound so similar to the oracles presented in Ibn `Asākir’s biography of Jeremiah. This tradition, unattested prior to the 1200s, appears to be a further development upon the theme of Q17:4-8: God will send servants who will be cruel and harsh, but will purify regions/cities and practices that the Muslims had allowed to fester.

This was not always the message of Jeremiah. When we look at earlier accounts of Jeremiah it does not seem that much use is made of the historical circumstances under which Jeremiah acted, nor of the various oracles attached to his message cited above.

It should be noted that Jeremiah is mostly cited by exegetical and historical sources rather than stories of the prophets collections. Maybe this is not so remarkable, since the genre of stories of the prophets was basically religious entertainment. (This is already alluded to in the Qur’ān, e.g. Q12:3). Jeremiah, however, is not good entertainment. There is too much doom and gloom, and one can hardly say that the story ends on a very positive note.

The historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), for example, cites many of the same oracles that Ibn `Asākir cites.²⁶ However, he does so in strict chronological order. Jeremiah’s call precedes everything, and the whole story is placed within the context of Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion of Judea. It is interesting that Ṭabarī includes a number of oracles that convey hope, rather than entirely doom and gloom ones. Additionally, his version of these oracles contain a number of recognizably Islamic elements.

It seems likely that Ibn `Asākir’s material, even though it is chronologically dating from several hundred years after Ṭabarī, is the earlier of the two versions. The reason for coming to this conclusion is the fact that IA’s Jeremiah material is disjointed, and much less polished than that of Ṭabarī. One can see after reading IA that disparate sections have been worked into a very smooth final oracle which Ṭabarī presents.

²⁵ al-Sulami, *ʿIqd al-durar fī akhbār al-mahdī al-muntazar* (ed. Muḥīb al-Buraynī, al-Zarqā’: Maktabat al-Manār, 1993), pp. 117-18 (no. 86).

²⁶ al-Ṭabarī, *Tāʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (Beirut: Dār al-Rawāʿi li-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.), i, pp. 547-55; compare Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-ʿUyūn wa-l-ḥikayāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2003), pp. 346-7.s

Other writers who detail Jeremiah do not cite any of the oracles. For example, al-Tha`labī (d. 1035-6), whose stories of the prophets has a very popular character.²⁷ al-Tha`labī more or less follows the historical scheme laid down by Ṭabarī, but does not include very many of the divine monologues to be found in the latter or in IA. The one exception to this is al-Tha`labī's detailing of Jeremiah's call, which is almost exactly as it was presented above.

Finally, Ibn `Asākir's major literary influence al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 1070-1) also wrote a stories of the prophets which included Jeremiah.²⁸ Al-Khaṭīb included only a shortened form of the divine oracles directed at Jeremiah, and did not even include the tradition concerning Jeremiah's call. However, he concluded the section on Jeremiah by stating that the latter went to Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem, unwillingly, which is in accord with the Biblical account.

Summing up the various other accounts of Jeremiah in early Islam, it is surprising how few there are. Of the some 20 stories of the prophets books checked, only two had accounts of him. From a Muslim point of view, Jeremiah was simply not that important. His principal importance came as a result of his being tied to the first destruction of the Temple, and the judgement upon the Judeans.

Conclusions

The Jeremiah material in Ibn `Asākir is quite confused and confusing. Its order and content does not make for consistent reading. Even though it is related to the accounts that can be found in al-Ṭabarī, and that appear later in some other historians, the IA accounts give many more personal names than do the historical accounts (other than Ṭabarī). It seems likely that what is preserved in IA, confused though it is, is in fact a separate narrative tradition from that in the standard historical works.

Jeremiah as a Biblical prophet seems to be one that could have parallels with the experience of Muḥammad. The former was in a difficult position—having to warn the Judeans about judgement that was coming via the Babylonian conquest, and the future destruction of the Temple, as a result of their own disobedience. However, IA does not develop this similarity between Jeremiah and Muḥammad, but confines himself to giving us a fairly raw and unvarnished account.

²⁷ al-Tha`labī, *Arā'is al-majālis* (n.p., n.d.), pp. xx; trans. William Brinner, *Lives of the Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 558-61.

²⁸ al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tā'rīkh al-anbīyā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyya, 2006), pp. 298-300.

As previously noted, there are very few biographical details about Jeremiah in the IA account. The vast majority of the text is several different versions of God's judgement against the Israelites taken (apparently) from Jer. 4-6, but summarized in a manner that precludes direct translation.

There is no suggestion that this is part of a full translation of Jeremiah into Arabic. But it is interesting that here we have a summary which was probably in Ibn `Asākir's mind, meant for preachers to use. Preachers could use the Jeremiah material in order to encourage the reconquest of Jerusalem. It is possible that apocalyptic predictions, such as the one cited from the 13th century writer al-Sulamī above, have their roots in the type of oracles cited in the Jeremiah biography, or at least in popular interpretations of Q17:4-8. In the end, even if the Crusader affinities of Jeremiah could be accepted, it is important to note that Ibn `Asākir nowhere makes them explicit. Probably any explicit interpretation or exegesis would be antithetical to Ibn `Asākir, who was a very mainstream Sunni Muslim scholar.

Such an interpretation would also require a fairly negative attitude towards Nūr al-Dīn, who presumably would be part of the "men of harsh violence" mentioned in the Qur'ān verse above. Such an attitude is not present in Ibn `Asākir, as the latter's biography of Nūr al-Dīn is highly laudatory. However, it is possible that Ibn `Asākir, while appreciating Nūr al-Dīn's spiritual qualities, might have felt that the Turks were in fact the "men of harsh violence"—servants of God, but nonetheless capable of great violence while carrying out God's judgements.

There is little evidence of biblical translation in the Jeremiah sequences as presented by Ibn `Asākir and others. While the general themes presented are largely in accord with the message of Jeremiah, the sequences themselves appear to be summaries or approximations of that message. However, the sequences must have been done at an early enough stage in Islamic history that quite a few names are preserved in them, and even some identifiable elements (such as Jeremiah's call).