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Sūrat al-Ikhlā as a Case of Multi-layered Co-production

Ceramic Spandrel, Louvre, MAO 728

Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, the short and revered profession of Islamic faith, may appear straightforward at first glance. Close analysis and careful contextualization, however, reveal both the complexity of the text as well as its intricate engagement with Jewish and Christian textual traditions.

General remarks regarding sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ

Chapter 112 of the Qurʾān, usually referred to as sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Purity, Sincerity) or sūrat al-Tawḥīd (Unity), is a concise four verse profession of faith that proclaims God's absolute unity. Framed within a simple twofold structure, the first two verses express this divine oneness in a positive manner while the last two do so negatively. A very literal translation of this surah might read "Say: He is God, One; God the *ṣamad*. He has neither begotten, nor has He been begotten; And no one is equal to Him".

Although brief, al-Ikhlāṣ is a complicated text that makes use of difficult syntax as well as words whose meaning elude us up to the present day. The first verse displays a rather peculiar syntax as we would expect it to read "God is One", rather than "He is God, One". In the second verse, the Arabic word *ṣamad*, which is used to qualify God, has been translated in dozens of different ways, and its original meaning is lost to us.

This surah is an especially revered text. It has pervaded the visual and auditory landscape of the Islamicate world since the 7th century CE and continues to do so to this day. It appears prominently on official Umayyad buildings and coinage, in the calligraphies decorating mosques, in popular graffiti dating from the first centuries of Islam, on a variety of amulets and tombstones, and is frequently recited during the daily prayers. Its concise expression of the Islamic faith as well as the prophylactic qualities attributed to it in later Muslim tradition, account for this lasting popularity.

What is less apparent at first glance is this surah's intricate engagement with Jewish and Christian textual traditions. Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ intends to formulate the "correct" definition of God, which implies that it does so in reaction to competing claims that its verses aim to rectify. Thus, this engagement is of a polemical nature, and as we will be discussing, religious controversies characterize its different levels of contextualization.

In what follows, I will offer different levels of reading of this surah, each of these levels being a different possible setting of coproduction that might help us make sense of both its text and context. The first level deals with some of the vocabulary used in sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ that reveals likely intertexts from the earlier Biblical scriptural tradition. The second looks at ways in which early Muslim exegetes of the Qurʾān understood the context of revelation of this surah, reading it as a response to competing religious groups challenging Muḥammad to define his God. The third level explores the earliest material evidence of this text, which suggests that it was produced as a creed to be publicly displayed to define nascent Islam in opposition to previous religious traditions. Finally, the fourth level is that of the late antique historical context of inter and intra-religious controversies which shaped many a religious self-definition, particularly through the elaboration of creeds.

A coproduced text: sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ and its Biblical intertexts

The Arabic word *aḥad*, found in the first verse of sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, suggests a plausible Biblical intertext. Used to describe God in the positive sense of "one", the expected form of the root word would be *wāḥid*, applied to God in another verse (Q 39:4) and recorded as a "variant reading" for Q 112:1 ascribed to the early Muslim authority ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd (d. ca. 32/653). Why does the Qurʾān describe the oneness of God with a word that would otherwise mean either "someone" or "anyone" or even, as in this very surah's last verse, "no one"?

At the end of the 19th century, the Orientalist Hartwig Hirschfeld (1854-1934) offered an answer to this question. He argued that al-Ikhlāṣ was "modelled on Deut. vi. 4, which verse begins the *Sh'ma'* of the Jewish prayer book". Typical of the era in which he was writing which saw scholars looking for possible ways in which Muḥammad "borrowed" Jewish and Christian texts to compose the Qurʾān, Hirschfeld suggested that the Prophet must have heard Jews reciting the Biblical passage "Hear, Israel! The Lord our God is the Lord One", and then, modeled the surah after it. According to his hypothesis, the Arabic *aḥad* used in this specific instance would, therefore, be a calque of the last word of Deuteronomy 6:4, the Hebrew *ēḥād* used in the context of the definition of God's unity.

This is a plausible intertext for understanding the function of the word *aḥad* in the opening verse of al-Ikhlāṣ. What is missing from Hirschfeld's analysis, however, is a wider frame in which to comprehensively understand the whole surah.

A second intertext might help us make sense of both the text and context of our surah. The two first verses of sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ describe the oneness of God in a positive manner,

insisting that God is “One” and is “*al-ṣamad*”. In contrast, the two last verses describe God’s absolute unity in a negative way, stating that God has neither begotten, nor has been begotten, and that no one is equal to Him.

In the Gospel according to Mark, we find a quite similar brief description of the oneness of God. Therein, a Jewish scribe tests Jesus, asking him: “What is the first [or “most important”] commandment?” (Mk 12:28). When Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4, the scribe cries out: “Well said, teacher; you have truthfully said that He is one, and there is no other besides Him” (Mk 12:32).

Several elements here are interesting in relation to our discussion of our surah’s intertextual links. First, the aforementioned verse of Mark blends two verses of Deuteronomy (6:4 and 4:35, respectively) to formulate an original creedal statement that closely resembles the two extremities of al-Ikhlāṣ (i.e., v. 1 and v. 4: “… He is God, One” and “No one is equal to Him”).

Second, as a growing number of studies have shown, many aspects of the text and context of the Qurʾān are best understood when situated in a late antique Syriac milieu. Emran El-Badawi recently argued that Islam’s sacred scripture is “in dialogue” with the Syriac translation of the New Testament, otherwise known as the Peshitta. In our particular case, the Peshitta version of Mk 12:32 might help us understand the peculiar use of the Arabic pronoun “He [is]” (*huwa*) in the specific context of Q 112. To render the original Greek *eis estin* of the Markan “He is one”, the Peshitta has *ḥad hū*, the latter lexical element being the Syriac third person masculine singular pronoun – just like the Arabic *huwa* – which in this case substitutes as a verb (“to be”, “to exist”). Instances in which the Qurʾān introduces descriptions of God with this pronoun (i.e., *huwa Allāh*; in eight places, such as Q 59:22-24) could be seen as a calque of the theological Syriac expression of divine definition *hū Alōhō*.

Third, the underlying polemical aspect of al-Ikhlāṣ which clearly targets a specific belief when it says that “He has neither begotten… And no one is equal to Him” might find an interesting echo in Mk 12:32. Indeed, the “addition” of “and there is no other besides Him” to Dt 6:4 is revealing since, in the words of New Testament scholar Joel Marcus, this added passage is “an important Jewish principle that was frequently used *against* Christians, who were accused of making Jesus equal to God and thus violating the oneness of God proclaimed in the Shema”.

Reading this surah in continuity with the Biblical textual tradition allows us to suggest plausible solutions to come to terms with some of its difficult words or syntax. It can also help us to better understand its rhetoric: the fourth verse can be read as a polemical response to beliefs infringing upon the absolute monotheism (*tawḥīd*) so insistently proclaimed throughout the entire Qurʾān.

A coproduced context: Muslim interpretations of the “circumstances of Revelation” of Q 112

Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ receives special attention in the subgenre of Qurʾānic exegesis known as the “circumstances of the Revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), which aims to give a precise context to a number of allusive passages in the Qurʾān. In the case of Q 112, exegetes from the 2nd/8th century onwards have sought to determine which religious community’s beliefs are targeted by this surah. According to the exegetes, God revealed these verses when three different groups of religious adversaries challenged Muḥammad to define his Lord, a scene reminiscent of the passage in Mk 12 in which Jesus is questioned by a Jewish scribe.

An early interpretation found *inter alia* in Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's (d. 150/767) *Tafsīr* features a group of polytheists from Mecca, who we are told believed that angels were the daughters of God, going to meet Muḥammad to ask him: "Describe your Lord to us. Is He made of gold, or silver, or iron, or copper?" In reply, Muḥammad recites sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, which has just then been divinely revealed to him.

Another exegesis, which appears in al-Wāḥidī's (d. 468/1075) *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, describes unidentified Jews who similarly present themselves to Muḥammad and challenge him: "Describe your Lord to us. Tell us from what He is made of, and of what species He is – is He of gold, of copper, or silver – and does He eat and drink, and from whom has He inherited the world and to whom will He bequeath it?" Again, Muḥammad's answer comes in the form of the full text of Q 112. In addition, Muqātil's *Tafsīr* on this passage paraphrases another Qurʾānic verse (Q 9:30) to tell us that the Jews claimed that ʿUzayr [i.e., Ezra] was the son of God.

Somewhat paradoxically, the third and most plausible "contextualization" of the revelation of this surah is extremely brief and absent from al-Wāḥidī's collection as well as other major exegetical works such as al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) monumental *tafsīr*. Again paraphrasing Q 9:30, Muqātil informs his reader that "the Christians said that Christ is the son of God", and that the two last verses were revealed to counter their claim.

Polytheism was close to extinct in Arabia at the time of Muḥammad, the latest attestations of belief in "daughters of God" date from the first decades of the common era, and no Jewish belief that Ezra is the son of God is recorded. This strongly suggests that the specific target of this surah is the well-documented belief amongst Christians that Jesus is the son of God. Furthermore, this same Trinitarian belief is condemned and corrected time and again throughout the Qurʾān, notably in Q 4:171: ""... and do not say 'Three'! Stop, it is better for you. God is One god! Glory to Him that He should have a son! ..."

This four-verse text is simultaneously an affirmation of God's absolute oneness in continuity with Biblical antecedents such as Dt 6:4 and Mk 12:32, and a firm denial of divine hypostases countering the truth-claims held by contemporary Trinitarian Christians. In short, it is a self-definition of a new faith in the context of competing religious claims.

A coproduced historical setting: the earliest material attestations of sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ

Could these "circumstances of the Revelation" narratives be better understood not as reflecting factual encounters of Muḥammad with different religious adversaries, but as echoing the political context during the rule of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 65-86/685-705)? By the time he came to power, vast regions of the former Byzantine and Sassanian Empires had been conquered, and he was faced with the challenge of ruling over lands where a variety of religious traditions had been coexisting for centuries. He therefore needed to assert Islam's place among them.

ʿAbd al-Malik deployed significant efforts to define Islam in contradistinction to previous "Abrahamic religions" and to publicize its essential tenets throughout his Empire. The two most important of these endeavors happen to carry the oldest attestations of the text we know today as sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ.

The Marwānid caliph is responsible for the first example of consciously Muslim architecture: the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The inscriptions that adorn both sides of the octagonal arcade inside the building display polemical texts, including the four

verses under discussion, which refute and correct certain points of Christian theology. As Chase Robinson puts it, “there can be no doubt that ‘Abd al-Malik wished the anti-Christian campaign to be public”. Indeed, at the time of the Dome of the Rock’s completion in 72/692-693, Jerusalem was mainly populated with Christians and stood as a strong symbol of “global” Christianity. In recent years, studies by the likes of Riva Avner and Stephen J. Shoemaker have shown that the Dome of the Rock is itself the result of coproduction, as it is based on the architectural model of the Church of the Kathisma, a 5th century CE Byzantine octagonal edifice with a rock in its center located halfway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Therefore, inscribing “God has neither begotten, nor has He been begotten” on a building which reappropriates Christian symbolism can be seen as a clear statement of the supersessionist nature of this newly founded monotheism, defining itself in opposition to previous religions.

ʿAbd al-Malik is also responsible for innovations in Islamic coinage. The strictly epigraphic “post-reform” gold and silver coins struck during ʿAbd al-Malik’s rule starting in the year 77/696-697 feature the brief definition of God’s absolute unity, even as they appropriate older formats and symbolism. The gold coinage or *dīnār* is based on the former Byzantine *solidus* which is flanked by images of Jesus on the obverse, and of the Emperor holding a cross on the reverse. After first replacing these overtly Christian images with his own portrait on the obverse, and with a “pole on steps” in lieu of a cross on the reverse in 74/693-694, ʿAbd al-Malik took the radical step of introducing “the first imageless precious metal coinage produced in the world of Late Antiquity”, as Luke Treadwell remarks. Still according to him, the original image of the Christian cross, which was then replaced by a pole, was finally “translated” into text with the introduction of what we know today as sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (with its two first words missing): “These Quranic verses attack the Christian claim to the divinity of Christ in same manner as the image of the deformed cross”.

However, these verses predate all known manuscripts of the Qurʾān. Should we call them “Quranic verses”, or would it be more prudent to consider this a pre-Qurʾānic text, as the late Alfred-Louis de Prémare suggested? In the latter case it could be viewed as a co-produced creed, an authoritative and concise confession of faith summarizing the essential beliefs of a community, devised to be displayed on official buildings and coinage for all to see.

Reverse of a dirham minted in 91 AH/709-710 CE with Q 112 in its center

Reading al-Ikhlāṣ as a creed in a coproduced context of religious controversies

How might the broader historical context of inter- and intra-religious controversies that seems to characterize the world of Late Antiquity help us make sense of sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ? Islam appeared on the scene during a time of abundant polemics, as evidenced by the numerous anti-Jewish works authored by Christians at the time, and the inter-Christian Christological controversies sparked by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. Looking at explicitly and predominantly polemical writings in Syriac from the 4th to the 7th century CE, one finds no less than 45 works belonging to the literary genre of religious controversy. Furthermore, many other polemical references are scattered throughout the vast corpora of Syriac homilies, letters, and other texts.

One such example is Narsai's (d. ca. 503 CE) *Homily on our Lord's birth from the Holy Virgin* which is, in the words of its editor F. McLeod, one of his "major Christological and controversial homilies". Narsai exposes his own doctrine on the Trinity in a polemical manner throughout this particular homily as he frequently responds to the implicit or explicit doctrines of his Christian adversaries by refuting and/or correcting them.

In the last section of this work, which starts on verse 389 and which McLeod entitles "Narsai's rejection of his Adversaries' Position", Narsai states his own doctrinal position in distinction to those of his unnamed adversaries, and concludes with a short creed: "One confession of one God… because He is Eternal… He has an Offspring who is born from Him… and He is equal with Him in everything" (vv. 495-500).

Ever since Karl Ahrens' 1930 article "Christliches im Qoran", sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ has been understood by some scholars as closely related to the Nicene Creed (325 CE) which formulates belief in one God, with Jesus begotten by and consubstantial to God. There is no need, however, to try to find direct links between both texts. Indeed, the Nicene Creed looms large in many subsequent texts during Late Antiquity, for instance in the 4th century CE Syriac translation of the *Clementine Homilies*.

Narsai's creed might provide another clue towards understanding the relation between

al-Ikhlāṣ and this particular genre of text. The Nicene Creed is itself based on several intertexts such as the aforementioned verses of Deuteronomy, and many creeds were produced subsequently to the Nicene one. It is therefore more relevant for our understanding of the history of the Qurʾān not to try and determine what its precise source is, such as Deuteronomy 6:4, or Mark 12:28-32, or the Nicene Creed, but to consider the general genre of creeds as well as its functions, and to replace them in the historical setting of late antique religious controversies.

It then appears that Narsai's creed can work as an interesting parallel to al-Ikhlāṣ: both late antique texts are the result of controversial engagement with unidentified (but undoubtedly Christian) adversaries' doctrines concerning God which they set out to refute and correct – as staged in later Muslim *asbāb al-nuzūl* literature. To do so, both texts affirm what they deem to be the true definition of God by alluding to Scripture (such as Dt 6:4 and 4:35): God is "one" (*ḥad* in Syriac and *aḥad* in Arabic), God is "Eternal" (*mēn mtūm* in Syriac, *al-ṣamad* in Arabic – "Eternal" being one of the ways in which the Arabic word is interpreted); and while Narsai continues by affirming that God "has begotten" (*īlīd* in Syriac) a Son and that He is "equal" (*shwē* in Syriac) to God in everything, al-Ikhlāṣ refutes these very same Christological claims, stating that God "has not begotten" (*lam yalid* in Arabic) and that no one is "equal" (*kufuwan* in Arabic) to Him.

Finally, looking at three of the eight main functions R. Marston Speight assigns to the creed might also help us make sense of the *raison d'être* of this surah. These are: the expression of self-definition of a religious community, the confirmation of the community's unity, and the publicizing of this core belief to the world. At a time when Muḥammad's community was in its infancy and its belief system was not yet clearly delimitated and self-defined, especially in the face of long-standing competing religious traditions, and in the context of major territorial expansionism, it is not difficult to see how a creed of the sort needed to be produced, whether it was during Muḥammad's lifetime, or sometime thereafter, under ʿAbd al-Malik's caliphate for instance, when Islam emerged as an organized and distinct religion.

Further reading:

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