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# The Quran and the apostles of Jesus<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

According to Islamic tradition the companions of Jesus in the Quran, the *ḥawāriyyūn*, were faithful disciples. Critical scholars largely agree that the Quran means to present the *ḥawāriyyūn* as such, and generally translate *ḥawāriyyūn* as “apostles” or “disciples”. Some add that *ḥawāriyyūn* is related to *ḥawāryā*, the Ge’ez term used for the apostles in the Ethiopic Bible. In the present article I argue that while the Quran indeed means to signal the apostles of Christian tradition with the term *ḥawāriyyūn*, it does not consider the *ḥawāriyyūn* to have been faithful. The Quran praises the *ḥawāriyyūn* for their belief in Jesus (a belief that distinguishes them from other Israelites, i.e. the Jews) but reprimands them for abandoning his message. Hence emerges the exceptional position of Christians in the Quran: they are not condemned but rather exhorted to return to their prophet’s teaching.

**Keywords:** Quran, Jesus, Apostles, Bible, Prophets, Companions

In three different passages the Quran refers to the companions of Jesus as *al-ḥawāriyyūn*, a term generally understood to mean “disciples” or “apostles”. The *ḥawāriyyūn*, in each of these passages, declare their belief in Jesus and in his God. In *Āl ‘Imrān* (3) 52 the Quran recounts: “And when Jesus perceived their unbelief, he said, ‘Who will be my helpers unto God?’ The *ḥawāriyyūn* said, ‘We will be helpers of God; we believe in God; witness thou our submission (*wa-shhad bi-annā muslimūn*).’”<sup>2</sup> In *al-Mā’ida* (5) 111 the divine voice of the Quran declares: “And when I inspired the *ḥawāriyyūn*: ‘Believe in Me and My Messenger’; they said, ‘We believe; witness Thou our submission’ (*wa-shhad bi-annanā muslimūn*)”. In *al-Saff* (61) 14a the Quran relates: “O believers, be you God’s helpers, as Jesus, Mary’s son, said to the *ḥawāriyyūn*, ‘Who will be my helpers unto God?’ The *ḥawāriyyūn* said, ‘We will be helpers of God’. And a party of the Children of Israel believed, and a party disbelieved”.

- 1 I am grateful to Patricia Crone, Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, Christopher Melchert, Mun'im Sirry, Emmanuelle Stefanidis and Hamza Zafer for their insightful comments on, and corrections of, an earlier version of this paper.
- 2 All Quran translations are those of Arberry unless noted otherwise. The present study is principally based on the internal evidence of the Quran. For an illuminating study on the antecedents to the Quran’s teaching on the apostles of Jesus (focused on the Syriac Christian *Didascalia*), see H. Zellentin, “Islām among Jesus’ disciples: The Qur’ān’s legal culture and the Didascalia Apostolorum”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, forthcoming.

According to the *mufasssirūn*, the *ḥawāriyyūn* were something like Jesus' faithful inner circle. Farrā' (d. 207/822) and Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) name them "the intimate companions (*khāṣṣa*) of Jesus".<sup>3</sup> *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* describes them as his "pure companions (*aṣfiyā'*)".<sup>4</sup> In *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1354/1935) relates: "The *ḥawāriyyūn* were the supporters (*anṣār*) of Jesus... They supported him by acting according to his religion and in their proclamation of his religion."<sup>5</sup> Ṭabaṭābā'ī (d. 1402/1982) comes to a similar conclusion: "The Qur'ān only used this expression [*al-ḥawāriyyūn*] for the most intimate members of Jesus' companions (*khawāṣṣ 'Īsā min aṣḥābihi*)".<sup>6</sup>

Presumably Muslim scholars have been inclined to think of the *ḥawāriyyūn* as faithful companions in light of the particular wording of the declarations attributed to them in the Quran. In *Āl 'Imrān* (3) 52 (as in *al-Mā'idā* (5) 111) *al-ḥawāriyyūn* declare to Jesus, "Bear witness that we are *muslimūn*".<sup>7</sup> Twelve verses later (Q. 3:64) the Quran instructs the believers in its own prophet to declare to the People of Book: "Bear witness that we are *muslimūn*".<sup>8</sup> This correspondence evidently suggested to the *mufasssirūn* that the *ḥawāriyyūn* were faithful Muslim followers of Jesus, as the companions of the Prophet were the faithful Muslim followers of Muḥammad.

Most of the *mufasssirūn* also report that Jesus had twelve *ḥawāriyyūn*, a number never mentioned in the Quran.<sup>9</sup> This report suggests that they had recourse to the New Testament traditions on the apostles, or the disciples, of Jesus, in their attempts to provide details on the *ḥawāriyyūn*. In fact the Quranic term *ḥawāriyyūn* is cognate to Ge'ez *ḥawāryā* (literally "walker"), the term regularly used for "apostle" in the Ethiopic Bible.<sup>10</sup> However, the early *mufasssirūn*,

3 Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1423/2002), 1:155 ad Q. 3:52; Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Bayḍūn (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1408/1988), (part) 12:86, ad Q. 61:14.

4 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, ed. Marwān Siwār (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1410/1995), 46, ad Q. 5:22.

5 Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā and Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ḥakīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1427–28/2007), 1:218, ad Q. 3:52–8.

6 Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabaṭābā'ī, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Ālamī li-l-Maṭbū'āt, 1418/1997), 2:235, ad Q. 3:42–60.

7 Rashīd Riḍā, here quoting Muḥammad 'Abduh, comments regarding this verse: "Here is the proof that Islam is the religion of God, proclaimed by all of the prophets, even if there are differences among them in certain outward matters, appearances, regulations, and practices". *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ḥakīm*, 1:218, ad Q. 3:52–8.

8 My translations. In the first case (Q. 3:52) Arberry translates "witness thou our submission" and in the second case (Q. 3:64) "Bear witness that we are Muslims".

9 E.g. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Shahāta (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2002 (reprint of: Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, n.d.)), 1:517, ad Q. 5:111; Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1419/1999), 1:62; Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, ed. Ḥasan 'Abd al-Raḥmān (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1425/2004), 343; *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, 56, ad 3:52. Muḥammad 'Abduh disagrees: "I do not speculate on their number, because the Quran does not specify this". *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ḥakīm*, 1:218, ad Q. 3:52–8.

10 On this see See R. Dvořák, "Über die Fremdwörter im Korān", *Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-Hist. Classe. Sitzungsberichte* 109, 1 (1885), 481–562, at p. 542; T. Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strasbourg: Trübner, 1910), 48; A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938; reprint: Leiden: Brill, 2007), 116.

although they were not averse to explaining certain Quranic terms in light of non-Arabic vocabulary,<sup>11</sup> are unaware of this etymology. They generally consider *ḥawāriyyūn* to be a proper Arabic term from the root *ḥ-w-r*, with the meaning “to be white”. Most of the *mufasssirūn* argue to this end that the *ḥawāriyyūn* were “whiteners” of clothing.<sup>12</sup> Farrā’ explains: “It is said in the commentaries that they were called *ḥawāriyyūn* because they were bleachers of cloth”.<sup>13</sup>

For his part Ṭabarī records three different opinions on why the Quran names the companions of Jesus *ḥawāriyyūn*: first, because of the whiteness of their clothing; second, because they worked as bleachers; and third because *ḥawāriyyūn* is a name given to the intimate companions of all prophets; that is, the term has no connection to the clothing or the job of Jesus’ companions – it is a title (the meaning of which the tradition does not explain) which was bestowed upon them when they decided to follow Jesus. Ṭabarī favours the second opinion.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere in his commentary, however, Ṭabarī quotes a tradition in which Ibn ‘Abbās is made to refute this view. By this latter tradition the companions of Jesus were called *ḥawāriyyūn* due to the whiteness of their clothing (the first opinion above), since they all worked as fishermen.<sup>15</sup>

Our knowledge of the relationship between *ḥawāriyyūn* and Ge’ez *ḥawāryā* might seem to confirm the way in which the *mufasssirūn* associate the *ḥawāriyyūn* (by numbering them at twelve or reporting that they worked as fishermen) with the apostles, or disciples, of Jesus. Yet we might consider carefully what this relationship implies. The problem of interpreting Quranic vocabulary by searching out related foreign terms has recently been highlighted by Walid Saleh.<sup>16</sup> A good example of this problem, for our purposes, is the term

11 A tradition, attributed to Dahhāk, explains that *ḥawāriyyūn* means *ghassālūn* in Nabataean. Ṭabarī, 12:86, ad Q. 61:14.

12 *Tafsīr Muqātil* explains that the *ḥawāriyyūn* “were bleachers (*qaṣṣārūn*), whiteners of clothing”. *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1:517, ad Q. 5:111; *Tafsīr Mujāhid* glosses the term *ḥawāriyyūn* with “washers” (*ghassālūn*), and explains that their profession was to “whiten (*yuhawwirūna*) clothing”. *Tafsīr Mujāhid* (ed.), Abū Muḥammad al-Asyūṭī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1426/2005), 39.

13 Farrā’, 1:155 ad Q. 3:52. In light of such traditions it is surprising that more modern translators of the Quran (many of whom claim to present the literal meaning of the Quran with reference to the classical *mufasssirūn*) do not translate *ḥawāriyyūn* in light of the connection that the *mufasssirūn* make between this term and “whiteness”. The only translator to do so, to my knowledge, is Muhammad Asad, who translates *ḥawāriyyūn* as “the white-garbed ones”. Asad explains: “It is, however, most probable – and the evidence provided by the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls strongly supports this view – that the term *ḥawārī* was popularly used to denote a member of the Essene Brotherhood, a Jewish religious group which existed in Palestine at the time of Jesus, and to which, possibly, he himself belonged. The Essenes were distinguished by their strong insistence on moral purity and unselfish conduct, and always wore white garments as the outward mark of their convictions”. M. Asad, *The Message of the Qur’ān* (Bitton, England: The Book Foundation, 2003), 89. I am indebted to Emmanuelle Stefanidis for calling my attention to this translation.

14 Ṭabarī, 3:287, ad Q. 3:52.

15 Ibid., 12:86, ad Q. 61:14.

16 W. Saleh, “The etymological fallacy and Qur’ānic studies: Muhammad, paradise, and late antiquity”, in A. Neuwirth et al. (eds), *The Qur’ān in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 649–98. Saleh’s concern with this scholarly habit, however, seems to lead him to an extreme position (indeed, one which the early *mufasssirūn* did not entertain) of

*naṣārā*. It has long been noted that the appearance of this term in the Quran is peculiar, in as much as the word for “Christians” in the languages (Semitic or otherwise) of late antiquity is generally (as in English) some sort of calque of the Greek term *Χριστιανοί*. Thus in Syriac Christians are generally named *mshihāyē* (or *kristyānē*);<sup>17</sup> indeed in Christian Arabic Christians are *masīhiyyūn*.

The Arabic Quran, however, refers to Christians as *naṣārā*, a term which seems to be connected to Greek *Ναζωπαῖοι* (presumably through Syriac *nāsrāyē*), or “Nazarenes”.<sup>18</sup> As Sidney Griffith has recently pointed out, in the early Christian centuries the term “Nazarenes” was generally used in a pejorative manner, often to label a heretical sect accused of Judaizing.<sup>19</sup> The connection between the Quran’s use of *naṣārā*, and the heresiographical use of “Nazarenes” became an important part of a scholarly theory, found already in the nineteenth century and still found today,<sup>20</sup> that the Quran employs the term *naṣārā* because Muḥammad knew Christianity only through a Jewish–Christian sect. For his part Griffith argues that the material in the Quran (once it is appreciated that the Quran is a text marked by rhetorical strategies like any other) offers no compelling reason to search for a Jewish–Christian sect behind the term *naṣārā*.<sup>21</sup>

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rejecting even a judicious use of non-Arabic languages in the study of the Quran; he does not, to be clear, deny the presence of foreign vocabulary in the Quran, but he suggests that all such vocabulary had already been Arabized. Such a position seems to be unjustified in light of the peculiar nature of the vocabulary of the Quran (in comparison with, for example, the vocabulary of the *ḥadīth*) and in light of the dynamic relationship of Arabic, Aramaic and Ancient South Arabian dialects and languages (evident, for example, in epigraphy) in the late antique period.

- 17 Zellentin (“Islām among Jesus’ disciples”) notes that an exception to this case is found with some manuscripts of the Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*. In the oldest manuscripts Christians are referred to as *kristyānē* but in later manuscripts they are *nāsrāyē mshihāyē*. As Zellentin notes, however, it is possible that the nomenclature of the later manuscripts is influenced by the Islamic Arabic use of *naṣārā*.
- 18 On this etymology see Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 280–21.
- 19 S. Griffith, “*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur’ān: a hermeneutical reflection”, in G.S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur’ān: The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context 2* (London: Routledge, 2011), 301–22 at pp. 303–5. The term *nāsrāyē* is used by Christians writing in Syriac when they quote the derisive manner in which non-Christians (usually Persian Zoroastrians) refer to them. This use of the term is reminiscent of Acts 24:5 in which the Jewish attorney Tertullus, speaking against Paul, comments: “We have found this man a perfect pest; he stirs up trouble among Jews the world over and is a ringleader of the *Nazarene* sect”. Later *Ναζωπαῖοι* is used by Christians such as Epiphanius (d. 403), Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. c. 458) and John of Damascus (d. 749) as a term for heretical “Judaizing” Christians.
- 20 See, among other works, J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentumes* (Berlin: Reimer, 1897), esp. pp. 230–34; Yūsuf Durra al-Haddād, *Al-Qur’ān da’ wā naṣrāniyya* (Jounieh: Librairie pauliste, 1969); Abū Mūsā al-Ḥārīrī, *Qass wa-nabī* (Beirut: n.p. 1979); French trans.: J. Azzī, *Le prêtre et le prophète*, trans. M.S. Garnier (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001); F. De Blois, “*Naṣrānī* (*Ναζωπαῖος*) and *Ḥanīf* (*εὐνικοῦ*): studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam”, *BSOAS* 65/1, 2002, 1–30; J. Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran: Eine Spurensuche* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007).
- 21 “From the hermeneutical point of view, the biggest problem in discerning the identity of the Christianity reflected in the Qur’ān has been the construction scholars have put upon those passages that either give a name to the Christians, i.e. calling them *al-naṣārā*, or

My point about the term *ḥawāriyyūn* is similar. Critical scholars are generally content to translate this term as “apostles” or “disciples” without any further comment.<sup>22</sup> The entry “Apostle” in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān* is in fact an entry on the *ḥawāriyyūn*.<sup>23</sup> But what would it mean for the Quran, a text with no little polemic against Christianity, to invoke the apostles of Christian tradition?

In the New Testament the apostles (Greek ἀπόστολοι, lit. “those sent forth”),<sup>24</sup> or disciples (Greek μαθηται),<sup>25</sup> are the twelve men whom Jesus

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reflect their beliefs and practices. For the most part these passages, even when they report the Qur’ān’s own Christology, have been interpreted as reflecting or reporting the actual idiom of local Christians and even their creedal formulae, as if the Qur’ān were incapable of composing its own views of Christian doctrine. On that assumption, the hunt was then on to discover somewhere in Christian sources some report of a Christian community that had voiced such convictions as those found in the Qur’ān.” Griffith, “*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur’ān”, 320.

- 22 Thus, for example, Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 319–20. Renderings of *al-ḥawāriyyūn* in English, French and German translations of the Quran include:

Sale: apostles  
 Savary: apôtres  
 Kasimirski: apôtres (or, Q. 61:14, “ses disciples”)  
 Palmer: apostles  
 Pickthall: disciples  
 Yusuf Ali: disciples  
 Blachère: Apôtres (or, Q. 5:110, “[*Douze*] Apôtres”)  
 Hamidullah: apôtres  
 Paret: Jünger  
 Asad: white-garbed ones (regarding which see n. 13)  
 Berque: apôtres  
 Fakhry: disciples  
 Abdel Haleem: disciples  
 Khalidi: Apostles (or, Q. 5:110, 111, “disciples”)  
 Monotheist Group: disciples  
 Abu-Sahlieh: apôtres  
 Bobzin: Jünger

- 23 A.H.M. Zahniser, “Apostles”, *EQ* 1:123; the article opens with the remark, “The disciples of Jesus. The word for the apostles *ḥawāriyyūn* (sing. *ḥawārī*), occurs four times in the Qur’ān”. Both McAuliffe and Robinson translate *ḥawāriyyūn* as “disciples” without discussing at length the reason for doing so. See J. McAuliffe, *Qur’ānic Christians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 261; N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 30–31.
- 24 Accordingly the Arabic term *rasūl*, applied frequently to the Prophet Muḥammad in the Quran, is rendered into English as “apostle” by some translators. Sale, and Palmer (who frequently follows Sale) translate both *rasūl* and *ḥawāriyyūn* with “apostle”. The Quran also uses the term *rasūl* to refer to the angels. On the Quran’s use of this term, and on what that use suggests of the Quran’s understanding of revelation (and the role of prophets therein), see J.E. Fossum, “The Apostle concept in the Qur’ān and pre-Islamic Near Eastern literature”, in M. Mir (ed.), *Literary Heritage in Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of James A. Bellamy* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 149–67.
- 25 In chapter 1 of Acts the remaining eleven apostles choose Matthias to take the place of Judas among their number. In other New Testament passages the term “disciples” is synonymous with “apostles” (thus Matthew 10:1, which speaks of the “twelve disciples”



chooses to be his co-labourers (see Matthew 10:2; Luke 6:13). They are also witnesses of the risen Christ. It is one of the “disciples” (John 20:25), Thomas, who touches the risen Christ and proclaims: “My Lord and my God!” After Jesus’ ascension to heaven (Acts 1:2) – to which the apostles are witnesses as well – the apostles receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4) and work many “signs and wonders” (Acts 2:43). On the day of Pentecost Peter stands up in front of the other apostles and declares to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem, “God raised this man Jesus to life, and of that we are all witnesses. \* Now raised to the heights by God’s right hand, he has received from the Father the Holy Spirit, who was promised, and what you see and hear is the outpouring of that Spirit” (Acts 2:32–3).

The Christians (Ethiopian or otherwise) of the Quran’s late antique milieu understood the apostles in this manner. The apostles were not simply the companions of Christ, teacher and prophet; they were witnesses of Christ risen from the dead, and among these apostles was Paul (who indeed is known simply as “the apostle” [*shlīḥā*] in Syriac Christian literature).<sup>26</sup> None of this, presumably, could apply to the *ḥawāriyyūn* of the Quran, a text which (according to the standard understanding at least) denies the death of Jesus, thinks of the Holy Spirit as the angel Gabriel, and never mentions the Church.

### The *ḥawāriyyūn* and Muḥammad

For their part, traditional Muslim scholars seem to have associated the *ḥawāriyyūn* with the apostles (as I will henceforth refer to them, notwithstanding the use of “disciples” for the same characters elsewhere in the New Testament) because they were eager to show that Biblical protagonists pre-figured Muḥammad. In this case the link between Jesus and Muḥammad is suggested by the Quran itself, which seems to have (Q. 61:14) Muḥammad ask his followers to be God’s “helpers” (*anṣār*) in the way that Jesus’ *ḥawāriyyūn* were once God’s helpers. In order to illustrate this link, Muslim scholars included elements in Muḥammad’s biography that are evidently meant to be parallel to elements in the Christian biography of Jesus (the Quran itself being largely free of detailed narratives on the life of Jesus).

In his *sīra* of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) the Prophet, while still in Mecca, meets with twelve Arabs from Yathrib/Medina during the trading fair at a site named ‘Aqaba. These twelve Medinans proclaim their belief in Islam, and

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of Jesus, who are named the twelve “apostles” in the following verse). Cf. Matthew 28:16, which refers to the “eleven disciples” (after the treason and suicide of Judas). The author of the Gospel of John regularly refers to himself as the “disciple whom Jesus loved”. Elsewhere, however, the “disciples” are a larger group of Jesus’ followers, as in Luke: “When day came he summoned his disciples and picked out twelve of them; he called them ‘apostles’” (Luke 6:13). In Matthew 28:19 the risen Jesus commands his followers to “make disciples (*μαθητεύσατε*) of all nations”.

26 In his letters Paul regularly refers to himself as an apostle, as in 1 Corinthians 9:1: “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?” The term “apostles” is also used generally in the New Testament, as in the expression “apostles and elders” that appears six times in Acts 15 and 16.

pledge to him their support.<sup>27</sup> The following year, at the same fair, the Prophet meets with seventy-three Medinans (other traditions make this seventy),<sup>28</sup> all of whom pledge not only to support Muḥammad, but also to defend him in battle.<sup>29</sup>

Ibn Hishām has Muḥammad – on the occasion of the second pledge at ‘Aqaba – refer to the twelve leaders of the Medinans as *nuqabā’*, “chiefs” or “leaders”.<sup>30</sup> In doing so he is drawing on *al-Mā’ida* (5) 12, where the Quran has God reflect on how He appointed twelve *naqībs* among the Israelites in the days of Moses.<sup>31</sup> However, the story in which this term is used is related to the Quranic material on Jesus: Ibn Hishām has the Prophet exclaim to his twelve *naqībs*, “You are the sureties for your people just as the *ḥawāriyyūn* of Jesus, Son of Mary were responsible to him, while I am responsible for my people”.<sup>32</sup>

The *mufasssīrūn* generally relate the story of ‘Aqaba when commenting on *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14, a verse which seems to have the Prophet ask his followers if they will support him as the *ḥawāriyyūn* once supported Jesus. ‘Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827) and Abū Ja’far al-Ṭabarī quote a tradition by which *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14 was revealed at ‘Aqaba.<sup>33</sup> ‘Abd al-Razzāq also explains, in line with a second widespread tradition, that the seventy Medinans who pledged their support at ‘Aqaba were not Muḥammad’s *ḥawāriyyūn*, but only his *anṣār*; the Prophet *did* have twelve “*ḥawāriyyūn*” of his own, but they all came from the Quraysh.<sup>34</sup>

The story of ‘Aqaba does not seem to be a case of religious apology (although it might be argued that the story has Muḥammad act in a distinctly prophetic sort

27 See Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1858–60), 286 English trans.: Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 199.

28 Thus *Tafsīr ‘Abd al-Razzāq*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad ‘Abduh (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1419/1999), 3:307–8, ad Q. 61:14, and Ṭabarī, 12:86, ad Q. 61:14.

29 Ibn Hishām, 293–302; trans. Guillaume, 201–07.

30 Ibid., 297; trans. Guillaume, 201–04.

31 Q 5:12 alludes to Numbers 13, which has God command Moses to send out twelve men, one from each Israelite tribe (13:12), to reconnoitre the land of Canaan. On this see M. Cuypers, *Le Festin* (Paris: Lethielleux, 2007), 105.

32 Ibn Ishāq, 299; trans. Guillaume, 204.

33 *Tafsīr ‘Abd al-Razzāq*, 3:307–8, ad Q. 61:14, and Ṭabarī, 12:86, ad Q. 61:14.

34 “All of the *ḥawāriyyūn* were from the Quraysh: Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, ‘Alī, Ḥamza, Ja’far, Abū ‘Ubayda b. al-Jarrāh, ‘Uthmān b. Maḥ’ūn, Sa’d b. Abī Waqqās, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Awf, Ṭalḥa b. ‘Ubayd Allāh, and Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām.” The report that the *ḥawāriyyūn* were from the Quraysh – a tradition evidently meant to underline Meccan privilege on questions of leadership – is related to a second report that one Qurashī in particular, Zubayr, was known as Muḥammad’s *ḥawārī*: “The *ḥawāriyyūn* were the privileged companions (*khāṣṣa*) of Jesus. Similarly the privileged companions of the messenger were called *ḥawāriyyūn*. Zubayr was known as ‘the *ḥawārī*’ of the messenger of God.” Farrā’ 1:155 ad Q. 3:52. A *ḥadīth* in the Prophet’s own words, to the same effect, is found in Bukhārī: “Every prophet has a *ḥawārī*, and my *ḥawārī* is al-Zubayr”. Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 56, “Al-Jihād wa-l-Siyar”, 40–41 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1420/1999), 2:235; also Ṭabarī, 3:287, ad Q. 3:52. A second *ḥadīth* – based on the traditional etymology of the term *ḥawārī* – explains instead that al-Zubayr was named the *ḥawārī* of the Prophet due to the whiteness of his clothing (Bukhārī, 62, “Faḍl al-Ṣaḥābā”, 13; 2:480).



of way, and with appropriately symbolic numbers) but rather haggadic exegesis. The story provides an Islamic story to explain *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14. This verse opens with a command – “O believers, be you God’s helpers (*anṣār*)” – but it does not identify who was commanded, or on what occasion the command was given. The story of ‘Aqaba fills in these details by having the Medinans respond to Muḥammad’s call by declaring that they will be his “*anṣār*”. This story, or better, this Muḥammadan reading of *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14, seems to explain how the idea of naming the Muslims of Yathrib/Medina “*anṣār*”, developed.<sup>35</sup>

The exegetical nature of the story of ‘Aqaba seems to have a parallel in a (Shiite) variant reading of *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14 attributed to al-Rabī‘ b. Khuthaym, by which the last line of this verse – “So We confirmed those who believed against their enemy, and they became masters” – is replaced by: “So we aided the believers in their fight alongside the paternal cousin of their Prophet [i.e. ‘Alī] against their enemy”.<sup>36</sup>

The story of ‘Aqaba and the report of Muḥammad’s twelve *ḥawāriyyūn* are elaborations of the parallel between Muḥammad and Jesus suggested by *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14. The twelve *ḥawāriyyūn* are Muḥammad’s apostles. The 70 (or 73) *anṣār* of Medina are his disciples (whom he sent out to Medina to prepare for the arrival of Islam). Thus his biography matches the Gospel reports which have Jesus choose both twelve apostles and (in the Gospel of Luke) seventy others whom he sent out in twos to preach the Gospel, “as lambs among wolves” (Luke 10:3).<sup>37</sup>

## Rethinking the apostles of Jesus in the Quran

Thus both *tafsīr* on Jesus’ *ḥawāriyyūn* and traditions on Muḥammad’s *ḥawāriyyūn* reflect an association that traditional Muslim scholars make between the *ḥawāriyyūn* of the Quran and the apostles of the New Testament. Critical scholars make this same association. Watt describes *al-ḥawāriyyūn* as “the twelve apostles of Jesus”.<sup>38</sup> Dénise Masson names them: “Les disciples immédiats de Jésus, ceux que la tradition chrétienne désigne sous le nom

35 This idea is suggested by A. Wensinck, “*Ḥawārī*”, *EI*<sup>2</sup>, 3:285b. More typical is the position of D. Masson, by which things took place the other way around. The Quran gave the name *anṣār* to the “apostles” in light of the historical use of this name for Muḥammad’s Medinan companions. D. Masson, *Le Coran et la révélation judéo-chrétienne* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1958), 334.

36 On this see F. van der Velden, “Kotexte im Konvergenzstrang – die Bedeutung textkritischer Varianten und christlicher Bezugstexte für die Redaktion von Sure 61 und Sure 5,110–119”, *Oriens Christianus* 92, 2008, 130–73. Van der Velden relies on A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur’ān. The Old Codices* (Leiden: Brill, 1937), 287.

37 Cf. Exodus 24:1 and 9, whereby God designates seventy Israelites to join Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu on the top of Mount Sinai.

38 *Companion to the Qur’ān* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994), 50. Penrice defines the term as “Disciples or apostles of Jesus” in *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Kor’ān with Copious Grammatical References and Explanation of the Text* (London: King and Co., 1873), 58; Ambros defines them as “Apostles of Jesus”, in A.A. Ambros and S. Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004), 308.

d'*Apôtres*". She adds that they are believers: "Ils sont croyants; Jésus a accompli à leur demande le miracle de *la table servie*, et ils y ont cru. Le dernier verset de la Sourate LXI semblerait même les proposer en exemple aux compagnons de Mohammad".<sup>39</sup> It is worth asking, however, what it might mean to think of the Quran's *ḥawāriyyūn* as both apostles *and* believers in the Muslim Jesus of the Quran. In other words, if the *ḥawāriyyūn* are the apostles of the New Testament, how could they also be faithful companions of the Muslim Jesus?

It seems to me that one of these two must go. Either the Quran's *ḥawāriyyūn* are not the "apostles" but rather fundamentally different characters with no particular connection to the stories of the New Testament, or they are the "apostles", but not faithful companions of the Quran's Jesus. The right solution will emerge through a careful reading of the three passages in which *al-ḥawāriyyūn* appear (see Table 1).<sup>40</sup>

In the first verse quoted in Table 1 (Q. 3:52), which follows an account of Jesus' message to the Israelites (Q 3:49–51), the *ḥawāriyyūn* declare their belief in God. Their declarations continue in the next verse: "Lord we believe in that Thou hast sent down, and we follow the Messenger. Inscribe us therefore with those who bear witness" (Q 3:53). Thereafter, however, the Quran reports, "And they devised [*makarū*], and God devised, and God is the best of devisers" (Q. 3:54). This report suggests that the *ḥawāriyyūn* did not remain true to their declaration of faith. They were like the second son who, when asked, promised that he would go to work in his father's vineyard, but then did not go (Matthew 21:30). Their "devising" (or better, "deception", Ar. *makr*) consisted of making promises that they did not keep ("We will be helpers . . . we believe . . . witness thou our submission . . . we believe . . . we follow . . . inscribe us therefore with those who bear witness!").

The standard Islamic interpretation of this passage is quite different. Most of the *mufasssīrūn* connect verse 54 to the beginning of verse 52, that is, to those whose unbelief Jesus "perceived".<sup>41</sup> These unbelievers are the Jews who rejected Jesus.

39 Masson, 334. At the risk of sounding pedantic, I may add that the Quran does not report that the miracle of *al-mā'ida* (*la table servie*) took place; it only has God announce His intent to accomplish it (Q. 5:115).

40 I do not follow, here or elsewhere, the method of dating Quranic passages according to the traditional biography of Muḥammad. Regarding this see G.S. Reynolds, "Le problème de la chronologie du Coran", *Arabica* 58, 2011, 477–502.

41 This conviction that *Āl 'Imrān* (3) 54 could not be a criticism of the *ḥawāriyyūn* is reflected in a number of translations. Pickthall adds a parenthetical note in his translation here in order to keep his readers from thinking that the *ḥawāriyyūn* were false friends of Jesus: "And they [the disbelievers] schemed". Yusuf 'Alī and Abdel Haleem do the same. Hamidullah writes: "Et ils [les autres] se mirent à comploter". To their credit, the authors of the anonymous Quran translation, *The Message*, who aim (in light of their Quranist convictions) to translate the Quran without the interference of medieval *tafsīr*, refrain from adding a parenthetical note here. For his part Abu-Sahlieh seems to build on the traditional Islamic view when he writes in a footnote to his translation that this verse refers to Judas' act of delivering Jesus to the Jewish authorities (he includes also references here to the relevant passages in the four Gospels of the New Testament). S.A.A. Abu-Sahlieh, *Le Coran* (Paris: L'Aire, 2008), 425, n. 2.

Table 1. Quranic passages in which *al-hawāriyyūn* appear

Q. 3:52	Q. 5:111–12	Q. 61:14
فَلَمَّا أَهَمَّ عِيسَىٰ مَنَّهُمُ الْكُفْرَ قَالَ مَنْ أَنْصَارِي إِلَى اللَّهِ قَالَ الْخَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنْصَارُ اللَّهِ بَالِغًا مُّسْلِمُونَ وَأَشْهَدُ بِآيَاتِهِ بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ	فَوَادَّ أَوْحِيثُ إِلَى الْخَوَارِيِّينَ أَنْ آمَنُوا بِهِ وَيَرْسُولِي قَالُوا آمَنَّا وَأَشْهَدُ بِآيَاتِكَ مُسْلِمُونَ * إِذْ قَالَ الْخَوَارِيُّونَ يُعِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ هَلْ يَسْتَطِيعُ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يُنْزِلَ عَلَيْنَا مَائِدَةً مِنَ السَّمَاءِ قَالَ اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُّؤْمِنِينَ	يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا أَنْصَارَ اللَّهِ كَمَا قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ لِّلْخَوَارِيِّينَ مَنْ أَنْصَارِي إِلَى اللَّهِ قَالَ الْخَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنْصَارُ اللَّهِ فَأَمْنَعْتَ طَائِفَةً مِنْ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ وَكَفَرْتَ طَائِفَةٌ فَأَيَّدْنَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَىٰ عَدُوِّهِمْ فَأَصْبَحُوا ظَاهِرِينَ
And when Jesus perceived their unbelief, he said, “Who will be my helpers unto God?” The <i>hawāriyyūn</i> said, “We will be helpers of God; we believe in God; witness thou our submission”.	And when I inspired the <i>hawāriyyūn</i> : “Believe in Me and My Messenger”; they said, “We believe; witness Thou our submission.” * And when the <i>hawāriyyūn</i> said, “O Jesus son of Mary, is thy Lord able to send down on us a Table out of heaven?” He said, “Fear you God, if you are believers”.	O believers, be you God’s helpers, as Jesus, Mary’s son, said to the Apostles, “Who will be my helpers unto God?” The <i>hawāriyyūn</i> said, “We will be helpers of God”. And a party of the Children of Israel believed, and a party disbelieved. So We confirmed those who believed against their enemy, and they became masters.

The “devising” in verse 54 consists of their plot to crucify him (even if the crucifixion is not mentioned anywhere in this passage, or indeed in this Sura).<sup>42</sup>

Yet the idea that the *ḥawāriyyūn* were those who devised corresponds with the role they play in *al-Mā'ida* (5).<sup>43</sup> In *al-Mā'ida* (5) 111 the Quran cites a pious proclamation of the *ḥawāriyyūn*; in the very next verse, they demand a sign of Jesus (“O Jesus son of Mary, is thy Lord able to send down on us a Table out of heaven?”). Thereby the Quran has the *ḥawāriyyūn* challenge at once Jesus and God. When Jesus seeks to dissuade them from this challenge (“Fear you God, if you are believers”) they insist still more fervently, “We desire that we should eat of it and our hearts be at rest; and *that we may know that thou hast spoken true to us*” (Q 5:113).<sup>44</sup>

The demand of sceptics, or hypocrites, for a sign from heaven is a prominent topos in the Quran. The unbelievers ask regarding the Quran’s own prophet, “Why have signs not been sent down upon him from his Lord?” (Q. 29:50). Elsewhere the divine voice of the Quran explains to the Prophet: “The People of the Book will ask thee to bring down upon them a Book from heaven; and they asked Moses for greater than that, for they said, ‘Show us God openly’. And the thunderbolt took them for their evildoing” (Q. 4:153a). To this effect the Quran also relates how Pharaoh once sought to look upon the God of Moses, for which reason he commanded his assistant Haman to build him a tower: “Pharaoh said, ‘Haman, build for me a tower, that haply so I may reach [the passageways],<sup>45</sup> \* [the passageways] of the heavens, and look upon Moses’ God; for I think that he is a liar.’” (Q 40:36–7).<sup>46</sup>

The *mā'ida* episode is similar. In *al-Mā'ida* (5) 111 the *ḥawāriyyūn* are told by God to believe in Him and in Jesus, and they profess their faith in response.

42 Thus *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1:278, ad. Q. 3:54; Farrā', 1:155 ad Q. 3:52. Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) explains the phrase “they devised (*makarū*)” as a reference to the unbelievers (cf. Q. 3:52) among the Israelites who sought to kill Jesus. Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥusayn Aḥmad (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1987), 1:366, ad Q. 3:52–4; The same opinion is found with *Tafsīr Jalālayn*, 57 ad Q. 3:54 and, in the modern period, with *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 3:219, ad Q. 3:52–8.

43 Noting the exact correspondence of their final lines, F. van der Velden argues that Q. 5:111 is a verse developed on the model of Q. 3:52 (which he considers to be chronologically earlier). By his reading, Q. 5:110–19 was composed through the incorporation of formulaic refrains, and according to the structural model, of Q. 3:45–59 and Q 61:4–13 (Van der Velden, “Kotexte im Konvergenzstrang”, 148–54). Van der Velden draws a contrast between his approach and that of Cuypers, who (even while contending that *al-Mā'ida* is the definitive proclamation in the Quran) focuses on rhetorical relationships within particular Quranic units here as elsewhere (and not on theories of the Quran’s diachronic development). See Cuypers, *Le Festin*, 321–58.

44 The demand of the *ḥawāriyyūn* might be compared to that of Abraham in Q 2:260: “And when Abraham said, ‘My Lord, show me how Thou wilt give life to the dead’, He said, ‘Why, dost thou not believe?’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but that my heart may be at rest’.” If both the *ḥawāriyyūn* and Abraham seek to have their hearts set at rest (*tuma'nīnat al-qalb*), the *ḥawāriyyūn* openly doubt that Jesus is truthful, while Abraham does not doubt that God is truthful. I am grateful to Emmanuelle Stefanidis for drawing my attention to this important parallel.

45 *Asbāb*; Arberry translates “cords”.

46 On Haman in the Quran see A. Silverstein, “Haman’s transition from the Jahiliyya to Islam”, *JSAI* 34, 2008, 285–308.

In the next verse, however, they demand that Jesus bring them a sign from heaven. They insist that he do so even when Jesus attempts to dissuade them. If the Quran does not declare that they think him a liar (as Pharaoh thinks the God of Moses to be a liar), it implies something to this effect when it has them explain to Jesus, “We desire that we should eat of it . . . that we may know that thou hast spoken true to us”.

Thus in neither *Āl ‘Imrān* nor *al-Mā’ida* do the *ḥawāriyyūn* play the role of the faithful apostles. Instead their role reflects that of the crowds in John 6.<sup>47</sup> In *al-Mā’ida* (5) 111 the Quran has God inspire the *ḥawāriyyūn* with belief in God and His messenger, Jesus. In John 6:29 (the introduction to the “Bread of Life” discourse) Jesus tells the crowd to “believe in the one He has sent” (i.e. “His messenger”; *ὁν ἀπέστειλεν ἐκεῖνος*).<sup>48</sup> The crowds respond to him with a demand for a sign, “What sign will you yourself do, the sight of which will make us believe in you? What work will you do? \* Our fathers ate manna in the desert; as scripture says: He gave them bread from heaven to eat” (John 6:30–31). Here John has the crowds make a reference to the Old Testament material on the manna which God gave to the Israelites during their forty years of wandering in the desert.<sup>49</sup> The Quran does something similar when it has the *ḥawāriyyūn* ask: “Is thy Lord able to send down on us a Table out of heaven?” Their question reflects the manner in which the Psalmist chastises the Israelites for their constant demands of Moses in the wilderness: “They insulted God by saying, ‘Can God make a *table* in the desert?’” (Psalm 78:19).<sup>50</sup>

The presentation of the *ḥawāriyyūn* in the *mā’ida* passage as imperfect followers of a prophet seems to reflect the Quranic presentation of the Christians generally. Earlier in the same Sura the Quran makes imperfect belief a distinctive quality of the Christians. In *Al-Mā’ida* (5) 13 the Quran insists that the Jews have been cursed by God for their infidelity to Him:

So for their breaking their compact We cursed them and made their hearts hard, they pervert words from their meanings; and they have forgotten a portion of that they were reminded of; and thou wilt never cease to light upon some act of treachery on their part, except a few of them. Yet pardon them, and forgive; surely God loves the good-doers (Q. 5:13).

47 On this see G.S. Reynolds, “On the Qur’ān’s *Mā’ida* passage and the wanderings of the Israelites”, in B. Lourié, C.A. Segovia and A. Bausi (eds), *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom? Studies on the Rise of Islam in Memory of John Wansbrough* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2011), 91–108; Cuypers, *Le Festin*, 340; E. Grypeou, “The table from heaven: a note on Qur’an, Surah 5,111 ff.”, *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 2, 2005, 311–16.

48 Cf. Abu-Sahlieh, who includes here a cross-reference to John 14:1: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God, trust also in me”.

49 See especially Exodus 16–17; Numbers 11: 20–21.

50 The Hebrew word *shulḥān* is translated in the New Jerusalem Bible (from which I have otherwise quoted) as “banquet”, but literally means “table”. The Ethiopic Bible translates *mā’edd*, cognate with Arabic *al-mā’ida*. On this see Reynolds, “On the Qur’ān’s *Mā’ida* passage”, 102–3.

In the following verse the Quran turns to the Christians:

And with those who say “We are Christians” We took compact; and they have forgotten a portion of that they were reminded of. So We have stirred up among them enmity and hatred, till the Day of Resurrection; and God will assuredly tell them of the things they wrought (Q. 5:14).

The Quran insists that God has made a “compact” (*mīthāq*) with both the Jews and the Christians. The Jews have broken their compact, and therefore have been cursed; they have also “forgotten a portion of that they were reminded of” (or “of that which was explained to them [*dhukkirū bihī*]”). The Christians, evidently, have *not* broken their contract, but have only “forgotten a portion of that they were reminded of”.

The particular condemnation which the Quran reserves for the Jews – vis-à-vis the Christians – is presumably explainable by their disbelief in Jesus. Their refusal to believe in him is emphasized in *al-Ṣaff* (61) 6:

And when Jesus son of Mary said, “Children of Israel, I am indeed the Messenger of God to you, confirming the Torah that is before me, and giving good tidings of a Messenger who shall come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad”. Then, when he brought them the clear signs, they said, “This is a manifest sorcery”.

Here the Quran makes Jesus a prophet to the Israelites in the way that Hūd was a prophet to ‘Ād, Ṣāliḥ a prophet to Thamūd, and Shu‘ayb a prophet to Midian. When Hūd preached to his people, most of ‘Ād rejected him and were annihilated, but God “delivered him, *and those with him*” (Q. 7:72; or, according to Q. 11:58, “those who believed with him”). So too God saved those of Thamūd who believed in Ṣāliḥ (Q. 11:66) and those of Midian who believed in Shu‘ayb (11:94). The *ḥawāriyyūn* are those who believed in Jesus.

According to this topos, in other words, when God sends a prophet to a people some of the people reject the prophet (and are punished), while others accept him (and are saved). This topos is evidently developed for the sake of the Quran’s religious exhortation to its own people. The Quran has its prophet allude to a party (*tā’ifa*) of believers and a party of unbelievers within his community:

And if there is a party of you who believe in the Message I have been sent with, and a party who believe not, be patient till God shall judge between us; He is the best of judges (Q. 7:87).

This topos is again found in respect to Jesus, several verses later in *al-Ṣaff* (61), the third passage which involves the *ḥawāriyyūn*:

O believers, be you God’s helpers, as Jesus, Mary’s son, said to the Apostles. “Who will be my helpers unto God?” The *ḥawāriyyūn* said, “We will be helpers of God”. And a party (*tā’ifa*) of the Children of Israel believed, and a party disbelieved. So We confirmed those who believed against their enemy, and they became masters (*zāhirīn*; Q. 61:14).



Now according to the traditional interpretation of this verse, those who “became masters” are those addressed at its beginning (“O believers”), that is, the followers of Muḥammad.<sup>51</sup> However, this reading seems to ignore the syntax of the verse (which suggests that the party of the Israelites who believed “became masters”). Moreover the relationship of *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14 to the corresponding passage of *Āl ‘Imrān* (3) belies this interpretation.

**Q. 61:14a:** O believers, be you God’s helpers, as Jesus, Mary’s son, said to the Apostles. “*Who will be my helpers unto God?*” *The Apostles said, “We will be helpers of God”*.”

**Q. 61:14b:** And a party of the Children of Israel believed, and a party disbelieved. So We confirmed those who believed against their enemy, and they became masters.

**Q. 3:52–3:** And when Jesus perceived their unbelief, he said, “*Who will be my helpers unto God?*” *The Apostles said, “We will be helpers of God; we believe in God; witness thou our submission. \* Lord, we believe in that Thou hast sent down, and we follow the Messenger. Inscribe us therefore with those who bear witness”*.”

**Q. 3:55:** When God said, “Jesus, I will take thee to Me and will raise thee to Me and I will purify thee of those who believe not. *I will set thy followers above the unbelievers till the Resurrection Day. Then unto Me shall you return, and I will decide between you, as to what you were at variance on*”.

As in *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14, in *Āl ‘Imrān* Jesus asks: “Who will be my helpers unto God” and the Apostles volunteer for the job (Q. 3:52–3). In *al-Ṣaff* the Quran continues by explaining that a party of the Israelites believed, while another party did not, and that God “supported” (*ayyadnā*; Arberry translates “confirmed”) the believers. This explanation finds a parallel in *Āl ‘Imrān* (v. 55), where the Quran has God declare that He will put the followers of Jesus above the unbelievers. *Tafsīr Muqātil* identifies the unbelievers in this verse as the Jews, and the believers as, “The people of Jesus’ religion: the Muslims”.<sup>52</sup>

This identification seems to be far removed from the concern of the Quran, namely the manner in which the Israelites were split into those who believed in Jesus and those who did not. As there was a division among ‘Ād, Thamūd, and Midian between a party of believers and a party of unbelievers, so too there was a division among the Israelites. In the case of Jesus, however, the belief at stake is not belief in one God (the two parties agree on this point) but rather belief in Jesus’ prophethood. The *ḥawāriyyūn* – that is, the Christians – believed in him, and the Jews did not.

The Quran’s explanation that the party who believed in Jesus “became masters” (or better, “victorious” (*zāhirīn*)), implies that the *ḥawāriyyūn* are not (pace *Tafsīr Muqātil*) the Muslim disciples of Jesus known to Islamic tradition (who

51 A tradition reported by Ṭabarī (on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās) explains that the phrase: “We confirmed those who believed against their enemy, and they became masters”, refers to: “the victory of Muḥammad above ... the religion of the infidels. And [the Muslims] became masters”. Ṭabari 12:87, ad Q. 61:14.

52 *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1:279: ad Q. 3:55.

were persecuted soon after the day of the Crucifixion and disappeared from the face of the earth).<sup>53</sup> Instead the *ḥawāriyyūn* are the Christian apostles. The apostles believed in Jesus. Their community, the Christians, became masters and ruled over the Jews (we can detect here something of the Christian idea of the triumph of the Cross). In *Āl 'Imrān* (3) 55 – set in the time of Jesus – God announces that He will support those who believe in Jesus against those who do not (the Jews). In *al-Ṣaff* (61) 14 – set in the time of Muḥammad – God reminds the Prophet of how He once supported those who believed in Jesus against those who did not.

The *ḥawāriyyūn*, then, are the party of believing Israelites.<sup>54</sup> Their belief, however, is imperfect: they demand a sign from Jesus (Q. 5:112), doubting that he is truthful (Q. 5:113) immediately after they declare their belief in him (Q. 5:111). They also proceeded to say things which Jesus did not say:

Q. 5:116–8: And when God said, “O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, ‘Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God?’” He said, “To Thee be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it, knowing what is within my soul, and I know not what is within Thy soul; Thou knowest the things unseen. \* I only said to them what Thou didst command me: ‘Serve God, my Lord and your Lord’. And I was a witness over them, while I remained among

53 ‘Abd al-Jabbar, for example, relates that Jesus’ followers split into those who made a pernicious alliance with the pagan Romans against the Jews, and those who remained faithful to his Islamic teaching (and held on to his Islamic scripture, *al-Injīl*). The first party sought the help of the Romans against the faithful party. He continues: “The [faithful companions] concealed themselves from the Romans and fled throughout the land. The Romans wrote to their agents in the regions of Mosul and the Arabian Peninsula. They were hunted down. A group of them fell [into the hands of the Romans] and were burned. Another group was killed”. ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *The Critique of Christian Origins* (from *Tathbūt dalā’il al-nubuwwa*), ed. and trans. G.S. Reynolds and S.K. Samir (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young Press, 2009), part 3, vv. 70–72. Thereafter the unfaithful party abandoned the (Islamic) religion of Jesus and embraced pagan Roman religion (for which reason ‘Abd al-Jabbār comments elsewhere: “The Romans did not become Christians, the Christians became Romans [*al-rūm mā tanaṣṣarū ... bal al-naṣārā tarawwamat*]” Ibid., part 3, verse 309).

For his part Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) reports a tradition on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās which describes the tragic fate of the faithful Muslim followers of Jesus in a different manner. After the Crucifixion (of a companion who took the place of Jesus on the cross), the Christians split into three groups: Jacobites (who thought Jesus to be God), Nestorians (who thought him to be the Son of God), and the true believers who thought him to be a servant of God (cf. Q 19:30). The tradition continues: “The two disbeliever groups joined together against the believer group and killed them, and so the real teachings of Islam taught by Jesus became obscure till God sent the Prophet Muḥammad.” Ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets*, trans. R.A. Azami (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2003), 572.

54 In a similar manner the Syriac *Didascalia*, a text written from the perspective of the twelve apostles, has the apostles describe themselves as “His disciples from among the Jews”. On this see Zellentin, “Islām among Jesus’ disciples”. The citation of the *Didascalia* is from: *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*, ed. and trans. A. Vööbus, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 401–2, at 407–8 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CSCO 1979), ch. 26, 248.

them; but when Thou didst take me to Thyself, Thou wast Thyself the watcher over them; Thou Thyself art witness of everything. \* If Thou chastisest them, they are Thy servants; if Thou forgivest them, Thou art the All-mighty, the All-wise.”

For this reason the *ḥawāriyyūn* are guilty of “deception” (Q. 3:54). The Quran’s concern with the imperfect faith of the *ḥawāriyyūn* appears again in *al-Mu’minūn* (23):

Q. 23:49–53: And We gave Moses the Book, that haply they would be guided; \* and We made Mary’s son, and his mother, to be a sign, and gave them refuge upon a height, where was a hollow and a spring: \* “O Messengers (*rusul*), eat of the good things and do righteousness; surely I know the things you do. \* Surely this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord; so fear Me.” \* But they split in their affair between them into sects, each party rejoicing in what is with them.

Here the Quran, immediately after referring to Jesus and Mary, has God speak to “*al-rusul*”. Now these *rusul* might be thought to be the *rusul* mentioned five verses earlier (Q. 23:44): “Then sent We Our Messengers successively; whenever its Messenger came to a nation they cried him lies ...”. By this reading verse 51 (“O Messengers [*rusul*], eat of the good things and do righteousness; surely I know the things you do”) would be a general address by God to all of the prophets whom He has sent in earlier generations.<sup>55</sup> It does seem strange, however, that God would gather all of these prophets (including those who were dead?), treat them as one community, and command them to eat only licit foods.

Instead these *rusul* should be thought of as the Christian *rusul*: the apostles or the [*ḥawāriyyūn*]. Indeed *rusul* is a good Arabic translation of Greek *ἀπόστολοι*, “apostles”. The connection with Christians is suggested by the mention of Mary and Jesus in verse 52, and by the reference in verse 53 to the divisions in their “community”. As we have seen (Q. 5:14) the Quran presents discord and division as a (divinely ordained) mark of the Christian community. The connection with Christians is also suggested by the relationship of this passage with *al-Anbiyā’* (21) 91–3.<sup>56</sup>

Q 21:91–3: And she who guarded her virginity, so We breathed into her of Our spirit and appointed her and her son to be a sign unto all beings. \* “Surely this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord; so serve Me.” \* But they split up their affair between them; all shall return to Us.

55 I am particularly obliged to Patricia Crone for her insights on this (and other relevant passages). However, all of the opinions expressed here are my own, and I am responsible for any mistakes or errors of judgement.

56 On this see R. Paret, *Der Koran, Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), 345.

Here the Quran similarly refers to Mary and her son (v. 91), has God command a community to remain united, and then (speaking retrospectively) reflects on how this community divided into sects.<sup>57</sup>

If the Quran indeed uses the term *rusul* (otherwise reserved for prophets or angels) in *al-Mu'minūn* (23) 51 to refer to the apostles, then the phrase that appears in the following verse (“O Messengers (*rusul*), eat of the good things and do righteousness; surely I know the things you do”; a version of this appears in Q. 21:92) speaks of a revelation to them. In this light we might better understand *al-Mā'ida* (5) 111. In Arberry's translation this verse begins: “And when I inspired the *ḥawāriyyūn*: ‘Believe in Me and My Messenger’...”. Arberry here translates *awḥaytu ilā* as “I inspired”, yet the Quran generally uses the verb *awḥā* to refer to divine revelation (to Moses 7:117, 160; to Muḥammad Q. 3:44; 4:163; to the angels 8:12, etc.).<sup>58</sup> Arberry has seemingly shaped his translation here so that it conforms to Islamic doctrine.

Now the Quran also has God *awḥā* to the bees (Q. 16:68 – here Arberry does translate “revealed”) and to the earth (Q. 99:5). Elsewhere the demons are said to *awḥā* (Q. 6:112, 121). Yet *al-Mā'ida* (5) 111 is a case of God speaking to humans (not to animals or minerals); moreover, the Quran is not merely inspiring people in any spiritual sense but rather delivering a literal message, which the Quran relates in direct speech (I revealed to the apostles, “Believe in Me and My Messenger”). There is nothing to differentiate this report from those Quranic reports of God's literal messages to Moses (e.g. Q. 7:117: “We revealed to Moses: ‘Cast thy staff’) or the Quran's own prophet (“Then We revealed to thee: ‘Follow thou the creed of Abraham’”). In other words, the apostles of the Quran – like the apostles of the New Testament – receive divine revelation.<sup>59</sup>

57 Q. 21:92 and Q. 23:52 are almost identical:

Q 21:92 *inna ḥādhihi ummatukum ummatan wāḥidatan wa-anā rabbukum fa-'budūni*  
 Q 23:52 *wa-inna ḥādhihi ummatukum ummatan wāḥidatan wa-anā rabbukum fa-ttaqūni*

58 The *mufasssīrūn* – who generally presume that the *ḥawāriyyūn* were not prophets – are accordingly eager to clarify the Quran's use of this term here. To this end Zamakhsharī paraphrases the Quranic phrase “I revealed to the *ḥawāriyyūn*”, with, “I commanded them through the tongues of the prophets”. Zamakhshari, 1:692, ad Q. 5:111–15. Ibn Kathīr, for his part, explains that *wahy* here is used in a limited manner: “What is meant by this use of *wahy* is illumination [*ilhām*]”. In order to illustrate this explanation he quotes a tradition from al-Suddī: “He cast this into their hearts”. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 2:113, ad Q. 5:110–11. Rashīd Riḍā agrees with Ibn Kathīr and explains: “In its original meaning *wahy* is ‘a quick, hidden, indication’”. He continues, “If the telegraph had existed in the days of the pure Arabs, they would have called its communication *wahy*”. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ḥakīm*, 7:179, ad Q. 5:109–15.

59 Elsewhere the Quran has God *awḥā* to Moses' mother (Q. 20:38). This example might be taken to show that the Quran uses *awḥā*: first, for divine revelation to “prophets” (when it uses this verb in regard to Moses or Muḥammad); and second, for something other than divine revelation to “non-prophets” (when it uses this verb in regard to Moses' mother or the apostles). Alternatively, it might be taken to show that the Quran does not teach – as later Muslim scholars do – that divine revelation is given only to those who are generally held by Islamic tradition to be prophets.

Thus the Quran's presentation of the apostles is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Quran reports how the apostles proclaimed their belief in Jesus, how God revealed messages to them (on at least two occasions), and how God supported them against the Jews for the sake of their belief in Jesus. On the other hand, they forgot the words of Jesus and split apart into different sects.

The ambiguity in the Quran's material on the apostles reflects its teaching on the Christians generally.<sup>60</sup> The Quran's Christians are fundamentally unlike the Quran's Jews. The Quran refers to the Jews in the same way that it refers to other peoples who refused to believe in other prophets. The Quran, it might even be said, refers to the Jews in the way that it refers to the ruins of the people who rejected the prophet Lot:

Q 37:133–8: Lot too was one of the Envoys; \* when We delivered him and his people all together \* save an old woman among those that tarried; \* then We destroyed the others, \* and you pass by them in the morning \* and in the night; will you not understand?

The unbelievers of Lot's people (whose ruins were thought by the Quran to be visible to its own people) were destroyed by God and serve as an example of a divine punishment. Similarly the unbelievers of Jesus' people – the Jews – serve as an example of a divine curse. To this end the Quran, in *al-Mā'ida* (5) 13, first describes how God has cursed the Jews ("So for their breaking their compact We cursed them and made their hearts hard...") and then continues, "and thou wilt never cease to light upon some act of treachery on their part". The treachery of the Jews is a sign of God's curse (which made their hearts hard), as the ruins of Lot's people are a sign of God's punishment.

As for the Christians, they are the imperfect believers whom the Quran seeks to reprimand (in part by citing examples such as the destruction of Lot's people and the cursing of the Jews) and to convert to proper faith. This fundamental difference between the Quran's treatment of the Jews and of the Christians is evident in the comparison that the Quran draws between the Jews and the Christians later in *al-Mā'ida*:

Q 5:82–3: Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men to the believers are the Jews and the idolaters; and thou wilt surely find the nearest of them in love to the believers are those who say "We are Christians"; that, because some of them are priests and monks, and they wax not proud; \* and when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize. They say, "Our Lord, we believe; so do Thou write us down among the witnesses".

60 In his detailed article "Islām among Jesus' Disciples", Zellentin arrives at a different conclusion. In light of the Syriac *Didascalia* he argues that the Quran's positive references to the apostles (as *anṣār* and *muṣlimūn*) may reflect the continued historical presence of a group who professed belief in Jesus but maintained certain Jewish practices (what Zellentin refers to as an "observant" faction), or at least the continuation of those practices within certain Christian communities.

In the larger context of the Quran's narratives of the prophets and their peoples, the Christians are a unique case. They have not been destroyed or cursed (indeed, they have been made "victorious" by God). But they have forgotten the message of their prophet. The Quran is meant to be their reminder.