Critical Analysis of the Bible Stories: Comparisons between the Qur’an and the Torah

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Contained in the many intricate and poetic Surahs of the Qur’an are retellings of a number of famous stories of the Hebrew Bible, known to Jews as the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. However, the Qur’an’s account of the lives of certain biblical characters often differs in significant ways from the Jewish version. While a believer in the divine nature of the Qur’an may claim that differences in facts stem from distortions of G-d’s message as recorded in Jewish holy books, both Muslims and non-Muslims might agree that the differences in emphasis are intentional. A more cynical observer might claim that the Qur’an changed the known Bible stories to suit its purposes. By choosing to include certain parts of a famous story and leaving out others, the story itself takes on a very different significance. Occasionally, the Qur’an will also discuss parts of the story which are entirely left out of the Torah, in which case a Muslim may claim the Torah did not deem those facts important for its own reasons. A cynical observer would claim the Qur’an made these additions to make its own message clearer.

In the discussion that follows, I will often talk of what “the Qur’an intends,” or what “the Torah means to say” on a topic. It should be understood that I am not ascribing human attributes to inanimate books, but rather that I am intentionally avoiding the conflict inherent in naming the author of these books. Depending on one’s tastes, one could understand the Qur’an’s intention to be either Muhammad or Allah’s intention. Likewise, “the Torah means to say” could really be understood as what either Moses or G-d means to say. Either way, the important point is that somebody thought through the stories and decided on which words were worthy of being included in the holy texts and which were not. One of the underlying assumptions of this paper is that the stories were written down the way we find them today for a reason, and this paper intends to shed light on some of those reasons.

Although the points where the Torah and Qur’an disagree on basic facts may be controversial, these facts can often profoundly change the overall character of a story. Rather than making a value judgment as to which story is better or more likely, I will simply present these differences along with a discussion on how they impact the meaning and purpose behind the story. Changing a few key facts about a person’s circumstances can often have drastic effects on how that character is viewed by the reader. Consequently, the moral lesson which is assumed to be the purpose behind the telling of
the story is greatly altered. It is therefore necessary to study how the reader views the biblical characters in each version in order to understand the story’s significance in each respective culture.

In order to facilitate a fuller understanding of the Bible stories, I begin each discussion with an overview of the story. Since the Qur’an’s version is often much more abridged than the Torah, and the Qur’an itself refers to the Torah and is fully aware of its contents, this overview may include parts of the story only mentioned in the Torah. I don’t feel that this biases the discussion towards the Torah’s version, since the Qur’an itself accepts that version by default wherever it chooses not to retell a part of the story. However, where the Torah and the Qur’an diverge, I defer discussion of the facts to the analysis section for that story.

Following the overview, I present the details roughly as they appear in the stories. Each detail is then closely scrutinized for its impact on the story as a whole. In areas where facts disagree, possible justifications and implications of the disagreement are discussed. Finally, after going through the details of the story, the discussion shifts to explaining the emphasis in each version and extrapolating its intended lessons. I proceed in this way through each “scene” of the Bible stories. The remainder of this paper is devoted to presenting these stories in what is generally agreed to be chronological order.

The earliest story retold in the Qur’an is that of Adam and Eve’s first two sons, Cain and Abel (Surah 5:27-32 and Genesis 4). Cain and Abel each offer sacrifices to G-d. Cain was a farmer and offered fruit, while Abel was a shepherd, and so he offered sheep. However, only Abel’s sacrifice was accepted, and Cain’s was not. Cain was upset at Abel over this fact, and the two got into an argument. Cain threatened to kill Abel. Although Abel had the opportunity to kill Cain first, he refused, whereupon Cain rose up and killed him. After G-d confronts Cain, Cain realizes the gravity of his sin and confesses. His punishment is that the ground will no longer bear fruits as easily as it had before.

The details regarding the offerings that Cain and Abel offered are mentioned only in the Torah. Specifically, the Torah mentions that Cain chose a profession which requires that he spend most of his time working hard in the field, while Abel chose a profession that would develop his caring skills and which would give him ample time to
contemplate spiritual matters. Furthermore, Cain offered “the fruit of the ground,” while Abel offered “of the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest.” Thus the Torah heavily implies that Cain brought ordinary, or perhaps even inferior, offerings. When the Torah mentions that Cain’s offering was rejected, it means to teach the reader that only the finest of one’s possessions should be offered to G-d. In contrast, this aspect of the story is entirely left out of the Qur’an. However, this is not surprising given that, unlike Judaism, animal sacrifice is not required in Islam.

In contrast to the details of the offerings, the details of the conversation between Cain and Abel are only elaborated upon in the Qur’an. After Cain threatens Abel, Abel backs down and refuses to fight. However, in the Qur’an, an additional line explains why Abel refused to fight. Abel sites fear of G-d, “L-rd of all the worlds,” as his reason for not acting in self defense. Furthermore, the Qur’an implies that not acting in self defense due to fear of G-d can actually have positive benefits. If a person dies a violent death not caused, directly or indirectly, by his own sinful actions, his previous sins are forgiven. The burden of these sins is instantly transferred to the murderer (in addition to the burden of the additional sin of murder), who is “destined for the fire, since that is the requital of evildoers!” In contrast, the Torah states in other places that one should always at least attempt some form of self defense, and offers no reward to those who are killed violently.

While the specifics of the story mentioned above amount to merely a difference in emphasis, the stories directly contradict in their discussion of how Cain comes to repent. In the Qur’an’s version, Cain sees a raven scratching the dirt, which makes him think of how he might now bury his brother. Further ruminations on the topic lead him to be “smitten with remorse.” In the Torah, however, Cain is initially much less remorseful. In fact, G-d gives him an opportunity to repent by asking him, “Where is Abel your brother?” Cain replies famously, “I do not know, am I my brother’s keeper?” Only after G-d has meted out punishment does Cain beg for forgiveness. Therefore the Qur’an ends with a somewhat more positive view of Cain, since even he came to repent without much Divine intervention.

The overall emphasis of the Cain and Abel story as it appears in the Qur’an is clearly summarized by the last verse. “Because of this did We ordain unto the Children of Israel that if anyone slays a human being, unless it be in punishment for murder or for
spreading corruption on the earth, it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind.”

Evidently, the Qur’an’s purpose in relating this story is to demonstrate this universal moral dictum. In contrast, the Torah uses this story to teach a few smaller lessons, such as not to be selfish when offering sacrifices and to repent when G-d gives you the chance.

Ten generations following Adam and Eve, the world had descended into deep corruption and idolatry. G-d decides to flood the world and destroy everything. Only one man and his family are righteous enough to be saved through the grace of G-d, and that man is Noah (Genesis 6-9 and Surahs 11:25-49 and 71). Noah builds an ark, loads his family and a pair of every living creature

The Torah and the Qur’an have such different versions of the rest of the story that, were it not for the flood, one might think the books are referring to two different people. The two cannot even agree on what mountain Noah’s Ark settled on (Mount Ararat in the Torah, Mount Judi in the Qur’an). The Torah version does not discuss any attempt made by Noah to persuade the people of his day to repent. Rather, some commentators specifically mention that Noah did not make any such attempt. In the Qur’an, however, Noah’s troubles in his unsuccessful attempt to bring the people back to worshipping G-d are expounded at length. Furthermore, the Qur’an mentions that Noah had one rebellious son who refused to board the Ark when G-d declared that the time had come. Consequently, the rebellious son died with all the others. This is a direct contradiction with the Torah’s clear statement that all three of Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham, and Yafet, boarded the Ark along with their wives and children.

The story of Noah is told so differently in each tradition, that the moral lessons one is meant to learn from the story could not possibly be related. For the Qur’an, the story demonstrates Noah’s great attribute of patience. Despite the wickedness of the people, he pressed on with the struggle to reform society. Noah’s reward did not come until many years following his death, when Abraham was chosen by G-d for a special mission. On the other hand, the Torah’s main purpose in telling this story is to reassure the reader that, no matter how evil the world seems, G-d assures us that he will not destroy it all ever again.
Yet another ten generations after Noah, one of the most important characters in all three Western religions is born. This figure, known variously as Avraham, Abraham, and Ibrahim, is recognized to be the forefather of Jews and Arabs, and is the direct male ancestor of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Reportedly, Abraham came to know and understand that there is only one true G-d entirely through logical deduction. Only after that did G-d clearly communicate with him. Because he is such an important character, both the Torah and the Qur’an tell many stories about his life. Each of these stories presents either some moral lesson or some important bit of history. Only a few stories, however, are recounted in both books.

The first of these stories takes place relatively late in Abraham’s life. At the ripe old age of ninety nine, when his son Ishmael was thirteen, Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent looking for wanderers in the desert. In the heat of the day, three men appear from a distance. Abraham rushes to prepare food for them. When the three men arrive, they announce that they are angels and they bring two pieces of news with them. The first is an announcement that Sarah will bear children, which gladdens both Sarah and Abraham very much. The second piece of news, however, is that the angels have come to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gommorah. Abraham pleads with them to spare the cities, but G-d refuses. Only the family of Abraham’s nephew, Lot, who lived in Sodom, will be saved.

The most immediate difference in emphasis between the Qur’an and the Torah is the description of Abraham’s preparation of food for guests. While the Qur’an does state that Abraham slaughtered fatted lambs, the Torah also mentions that he brought water, bread, cakes, cream, and milk, and that he brought all of these things “quickly” and “hurriedly.” The Torah therefore stresses the precept of welcoming strangers through Abraham’s example. The Torah and Qur’an also differ on the matter of what happens to the food. Normally, angels do not eat food. The Torah states that the angels ate it nonetheless; thereby teaching that one should abide by the customs of the land even if that is not one’s usual practice. The Qur’an, on the other hand, asserts that the angels refused to eat, and that Abraham was actually quite apprehensive about their behavior. In fact, Abraham was so visibly shaken by the angels’ behavior that they had to immediately reveal themselves to him.
Even the brief exchange between the angels and Sarah contains a significant contradiction. The Torah tells of how, upon hearing the angels promise her a son, she laughed to herself in disbelief. The Torah implies that Sarah misunderstood the prophecy to be a courteous, yet meaningless, blessing. G-d was upset at Sarah for her disbelief in G-d’s power to perform any miracle. The Qur’an, on the other hand, agrees that Sarah laughed, but disagrees as to why she laughed. According to the Qur’an, she laughed “with happiness” upon discovering that the guests who refused to eat were actually messengers of G-d. Her reaction to the prophecy of a son was actually one of grief over her past barrenness.

The stories diverge once again when it comes to the description of the angels’ mission to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Whereas the Qur’an simply writes that Abraham pleaded with G-d not to destroy the cities, the Torah actually cites the conversation they had. In the Torah’s version, Abraham is described as having the audacity to negotiate with G-d the terms of the cities’ destruction. Abraham and G-d struck a deal that if ten righteous men reside in the cities, G-d will desist from destroying them. As it turned out, though, there were not even ten righteous men, and the cities had to be destroyed. The impact on the reader, however, is much more powerful in the Torah version. The story vividly teaches us just how high of a spiritual level Abraham was able to attain.

Immediately following the story of the three angels’ visit, both the Qur’an and the Torah shift to a discussion of how Lot was saved. Both books agree that Lot met the angels at the gate to the city and invited them into his home. When word got around that some new guests had come to town, the predominantly homosexual residents of the town wanted to give them a “Sodom” welcome. Lot attempted to calm down his neighbors, at one point even offering them his daughters if they would only leave his guests alone. However, the townspeople pushed on and tried to get into the house. At that moment, the three angels stepped out, grabbed Lot, and struck those near the entrance with blindness. The angels then proceeded to inform Lot of the Divine judgment that was to befall the city, and urged him to grab his family and leave before morning.

At this point the stories diverge. According to the Qur’an, the angels warned Lot that his wife is evil and that she cannot leave, but the remainder of his family was
permitted to leave. The Torah, however, makes no such distinction between the wife and
the other family members. Rather, it is Lot’s sons-in-law which scoff at Lot and refuse to
leave the city. Lot, his wife, and his two daughters leave the city just before dawn. The
angels ordered Lot and his family not to look back and view the destruction, but Lot’s
wife could not resist the temptation. Upon looking back, she was instantly transformed
into a pillar of salt.

Essentially, the lessons learned from the story of Lot are the same in both the
Qur’an and the Torah. In the last leg of the story, though, the Torah adds an additional
lesson. The Torah teaches through the example of Lot’s wife that one should always trust
G-d completely and take Him at His word. Those who disobey G-d in the slightest way
will be punished swiftly and without remorse. The Qur’an chooses instead to use Lot’s
wife as an example of what happens when you are personally wicked, even if you are part
of a righteous family.

The next Biblical story retold in the Qur’an tells of the famous life of the ever-
popular Joseph. The Qur’an itself refers to this story as “the finest of stories - one of
which you, with others, were quite unaware previously.” Since Joseph’s story is retold in
great detail in both the Torah and the Qur’an, the story is here divided into several sub-
sections, each with its own meaning and lessons.

As a young lad, Joseph had a number of prophetic dreams. In one of these
dreams, he envisioned eleven stars, the sun, and the moon prostrating before him. These
objects represent Joseph’s eleven brothers, his father, and his mother, who he prophesied
would all prostrate before him at some point in the future. This (and possibly other
things) made Joseph’s brothers jealous, and they conspired against him. After some
debate, they decided to cast him into a pit in the desert. When a caravan of Arabs came
by, the brothers decided to sell him to the Arabs. When they got back to their father, the
brothers told Jacob that a wild beast had killed him, and showed him Joseph’s bloodied
tunic. Jacob mourned and prayed to G-d. Eventually, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, the
Egyptian Minister of Butchers, and the story ends right there for now.

The Qur’anic account of the story of Joseph differs from the Torah from the very
beginning. In the Torah, Joseph has many dreams in which his brothers bow down to
him, and he relates all of these dreams to his brothers and to his father. Jacob ridicules
Joseph publicly, for he does not see how Joseph’s mother Rachel, who has already died, could possibly prostrate before him. By ridiculing the dream, Jacob tries to assuage the anger that the brothers surely feel when they hear the dream. Furthermore, the Torah describes Joseph as bringing evil reports about the brothers to their father Joseph. It is also clear from the Torah that Jacob favors Joseph because he is the son of his most beloved wife, Rachel. In contrast, it is the sons of Rachel’s older sister, Leah, that do most of the plotting against Joseph. In the Qur’an, all of this is left out, and the reader is left wondering why the brothers hated Joseph so much. The Qur’an even mentions that Jacob warned Joseph not to tell his brothers about his dreams “lest out of envy they devise an evil scheme against you.” But if Joseph did not tell the brothers about the dream, why were they so jealous? It is understandable that they hated Joseph because Jacob favored him, but, as the Torah mentions, they did not come to envy him until they heard of his dreams prophesying his becoming the leader of the family.

How exactly the brothers come to commit such a horrible act, the selling of their brother Joseph into slavery, is described very differently in the Qur’an and the Torah. The Qur’an mentions that first the brothers devised an evil scheme, and then they put it into action. They convinced Jacob to allow Joseph into the fields to “play.” Then, as soon as they are out of sight of Jacob, they throw Joseph into the pit and return home with the horrible news that a wolf has devoured him. Jacob suspects that this is too much of a coincidence, and he does not believe his sons. Nevertheless, rather mysteriously, he doesn’t take any sort of strong action against them.

This entire process is very different in the Torah. The Torah says that it was Jacob who encouraged Joseph to go out into the field with his brothers. In fact, the brothers were already out pasturing the flock, and Jacob sent Joseph to check up on the brothers, to see if they and the flock were all right, and to bring back word to him. As it turned out, finding the brothers was no easy task for Joseph. Joseph searched the neighboring pastures of many cities, such as Shechem (Nablus), Hebron, and Dothan. When he finally arrived at the pasture where his brothers were tending the flock, his brothers saw him from afar and began conspiring. Therefore the brothers’ deed seems like a much more spur-of-the-moment act than the premeditated act detailed in the Qur’an. However, the Torah does mention that the brothers sat to eat after throwing their
brother in the pit, teaching us that they had a clear conscience and believed what they were doing was right. Commentators explain this by mentioning that they thought Joseph’s prophecies meant that he would abandon the brothers, thus they saw him as a traitor and did what they thought should be done to a traitor.

Even after Joseph was thrown into the pit, the Torah explicitly mentions that Reuben, the oldest brother, intended to save Joseph while the brothers weren’t paying attention. Unfortunately, he did not have the opportunity. When the caravan or Arabs arrived and Judah suggested selling Joseph to the Arabs, Reuben was not present. When Reuben returned to the pit, the Torah reports that Reuben rent his garments in mourning. As for the sale of Joseph, the Torah says Joseph was sold for twenty silver dinars, which the Torah implies was a fair price. The Qur’an writes that “they sold him for a paltry price – a mere few silver coins: thus low did they value him.”

When the brothers return from their trip, they show Jacob, their father, Joseph’s bloodied tunic. According to the Qur’an, the brothers directly lied to their father and swore to him that Joseph was killed by a wolf. The Torah writes that Jacob assumed upon seeing the tunic that Joseph was devoured by a wild beast. After receiving the garment, the Qur’an says Jacob did not believe his sons. Quite the opposite happened in the Torah’s version, as it says Jacob mourned his son for many days, and the brothers all tried to comfort their father unsuccessfully.

All in all, from the first half of the story of Joseph, one has a much more negative impression of the brothers from the Qur’an’s version. Perhaps this is because Muhammad does not claim the brothers as his ancestors, whereas the Jews are directly descended from Judah. The brothers are depicted as evil men capable of lying to their father, deceiving their father (prior to the sale of Joseph), and irrational jealousy. In contrast, the Torah depicts the brothers as extremely righteous men who committed a grave error with only the best of intentions. The Qur’an’s Joseph, on the other hand, is an innocent young lad who suffers at the hands of his evil brothers. The Torah’s Joseph is a courageous young man willing to put his life at risk to honor his father, but sometimes takes the honor of his father too far by telling him bad things about his brothers. While still a man of excellent character overall, Joseph is shown as having definitive flaws in the Torah, such as being pompous, arrogant, and insensitive to his brothers. One should
note that the story of Joseph is not unique in that the flaws of prophets are generally overlooked in the Qur’an, elevating them to near-G-d status. The Torah emphasizes that prophets are still ordinary men, and that any man has the potential to be a prophet. In fact, not only are Joseph and Jacob, but so are all of the other brothers. Therefore it is highly unlikely that they were as evil as the Qur’an makes them out to be, and it is possible that the Qur’an itself overlooked this fact when describing Joseph and Jacob as perfect models of character.

The next section of Joseph’s story describes how Joseph wound up in the Pharaoh’s prison. After being purchased by Potiphar, G-d gave him much success in all that he did. Potiphar was very satisfied with his slave, and so he appointed him over his household. Potiphar placed all that he owned in Joseph’s custody. G-d blessed Potiphar’s house on Joseph’s account. Joseph grew up into a very handsome young man, and Potiphar’s wife “cast her eyes upon Joseph” and sought to seduce him. One day, when there was no one around, she caught hold of him by his garment and attempted to force him to lie with her. Joseph proceeded to run out of the house naked, whereupon he was caught, and placed in jail.

The Qur’an’s version of the event surrounding Potiphar’s wife are very different from the Torah. The Qur’an writes that Potiphar’s wife grabbed Joseph’s tunic “from behind” as Joseph was trying to escape from her. The master of the house just so happened to be right outside the door, and caught the both of them red-handed. The master’s wife immediately claimed it was Joseph who attacked her, while Joseph claimed it was he who was attacked. Someone from the household proposed that they examine whether Joseph’s tunic was torn from the front or from the back, and this would somehow prove who was right. Since the tunic was torn from the back, Potiphar believed his slave over his wife, accusing her of having “womanly guile.”

In contrast, the Torah version is much more believable considering the way things worked back in those days. In the Torah, it is irrelevant whether the garment was torn from behind or from the front, because Potiphar immediately believed his wife, and not the slave. Potiphar promptly threw Joseph into prison.

So if Potiphar believed Joseph, how did Joseph end up in prison by the Qur’an’s account? The Qur’an presents an entire story demonstrating the evil cunningness of
women, especially when they are allowed to congregate. The women of the town gathered, took a close look at Joseph, and decided he is “too handsome” to be walking around on the streets! Therefore the women demanded that Joseph be placed in prison, and Potiphar, in a moment of weakness, concurred. The Qur’an therefore takes the opportunity to deride women and call them by a variety of unflattering terms. Through the example of Joseph, the Qur’an warns all men to be very wary of their wives, and not to give them too much power. The Torah, on the other hand, is always extremely positive on women, insisting many times that women are in fact far more righteous than men. For example, Sarah is described as being a greater and wiser prophet than Abraham her husband. Contrary to the depiction in a popular film, women also did not take part in the sin of the golden calf. These details elevating the status of women are only found in the Torah. The Qur’an’s verses take every available opportunity to put women down and ensure that they are kept in their place.

Although Joseph has gone from being a slave to a prisoner, he maintains his charisma and his great fortune, since G-d is still with him. While in prison, he befriends the warden and is eventually placed in charge of the entire prison. Although technically Joseph was forced to stay in prison, he took the opportunity to gain some management expertise, a skill that would come in very handy in the future. While in prison, Joseph encountered the Minister of Wine and the Minister of Bread. Each of them had a dream, and Joseph offered to interpret it. Joseph interpreted that in three days, the Minister of Wine would be restored to his post and the Minister of Bread would be hung. Joseph also pleaded to the Minister of Wine that, when he is restored, he should remember Joseph and try to get him out of prison. Three days later, Joseph’s interpretation came true, but the Minister of Wine forgot about Joseph.

Aside from the exclusion of a few peripheral details, the Qur’an’s description of the Minister’s dreams incident agrees completely with the Torah. The only other major difference is in the emphasis. In the Torah, many more details are related regarding the dreams and how the Ministers got into prison. The Qur’an, however, chooses to leave those out and instead include more details about how Joseph attempted to convert the Ministers prior to giving them his interpretation. There are, however, no contradictions between the two stories.
Joseph remains in prison for two more years before he is summoned to Pharaoh’s court. After Pharaoh has a few particularly troubling dreams, the Minister of Wine suggested that Pharaoh call upon Joseph to interpret them, since Joseph has already proven himself to be a good dream interpreter. Joseph prophesies that Egypt will have seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh appoints Joseph viceroy over the entire Kingdom to ensure that Egypt survives the seven years of famine. Joseph handles the task very well, collecting much grain during the years of prosperity and amassing a great deal of wealth during the years of famine as landlords from all over the Earth came to buy grain from Joseph.

There are two primary differences between the Torah and the Qur’an version of these events. First, when Pharaoh has the curious dreams and asks his Ministers for an interpretation, the Qur’an writes that the Minister of Wine claimed he had the answer, whereas the Torah depicts a slightly more honest Minister telling Pharaoh about Joseph’s dream interpretation skills. Nevertheless, Pharaoh is not fooled, and immediately asks for Joseph to be brought before him. However, Joseph refuses to appear before Pharaoh until the women of the city confess to committing evil acts, which the women promptly agree to do. Since the evil of the women is not mentioned in the Torah, obviously neither is their confession. A final minor difference between the two versions is that the Qur’an has Joseph demanding to be appointed viceroy, whereas the Torah writes that Pharaoh recognized Joseph’s great wisdom and therefore appointed him viceroy.

The final episode in the story of Joseph describes how all of the house of Jacob eventually joined Joseph in Egypt, and settled in the fertile land of Goshen. It is also here that Joseph’s prophecy concerning his parents and brothers bowing down to him finally comes true, except for the fact that his mother’s handmaid substitutes for his mother. The episode begins as Jacob sends ten of his sons (Benjamin, the son of his beloved wife Rachel, remained home) down to Egypt to purchase grain.

At this point, the Torah writes that Joseph accused his brothers of being spies. He demanded that one of them stay in Egypt until they come back with Benjamin, who they mentioned as being their brother. Reuben would have volunteered, but Joseph demanded that Shimon, the second eldest, remain. The Qur’an also has Joseph demanding that the brothers bring down Benjamin, but the bargaining chip he uses is not Shimon’s captivity,
but rather the threat of not giving them any more grain. In practice, Jacob was equally unwilling to allow Benjamin out of his sight in either scenario, so the next time the brothers made a trip down to Egypt was when they really needed the grain.

In order to convince their father to allow Benjamin to go down with them, the brothers had to swear that they would protect him. In the Torah, this oath takes on very special significance. Jacob refused to allow Benjamin to go when Reuben swore that, if Benjamin does not return, Jacob may kill his own two sons. Jacob allowed Benjamin to go when Judah proposed, instead, that if Benjamin does not return he will “have sinned for all time.” In the Qur’an, Jacob simply asks for a solemn pledge. The brothers present as proof of G-d’s hand in the affair the fact that all their money had been mysteriously returned to them. In the Torah, this fact is actually taken as a bad omen, for when they return they will be looked upon as both spies and thieves by the Egyptians.

Nonetheless, Benjamin is allowed to go down with his ten older brothers to Egypt. When they arrive, the Qur’an says that Joseph secretly approached Benjamin and informed him of his identity. In contrast, in the Torah, Benjamin is kept in the closet along with the other brothers. Joseph orders that his silver goblet be placed in Benjamin’s sack, in addition to all the grain and money that is to be placed in all the other sacks. The Qur’an portrays this as a gift, while in the Torah it is part of a test to see if the brothers have reformed themselves.

The Qur’an writes that Joseph was not allowed to detain Benjamin according to the law of the land (a silly explanation, since Joseph himself made the laws). Luckily for Joseph, the Egyptians noticed that the goblet was missing and thought one of the brothers had stolen it. After checking the bags, they found it in Benjamin’s bag, and Benjamin was now legally allowed to be detained. The ten older brothers briefly pleaded with Joseph on their younger brother’s behalf, but they quickly decided to just forget about the solemn pledge they made to their father, and proceeded to go home without Joseph. After all, the brothers are truly evil according to the Qur’an, so this doesn’t present any particular problem. The Qur’an depicts this as showing G-d’s hand in all affairs, since Joseph really wanted to detain Benjamin, but it was only by G-d’s good fortune that he was allowed to do so. After a third trip the brothers made to Egypt, Joseph finally reveals
his true identity. The brothers confess to being huge sinners and promptly bring their father Jacob down to Egypt.

The Torah’s version of the events is completely different. First of all, Joseph intentionally hides his goblet in Benjamin’s sack to test the brothers and see for himself whether or not they are still sinners. Joseph declares that his goblet is missing and orders that his brothers’ bags be searched. When the goblet is found in Benjamin’s bag, Joseph declares that he will detain Benjamin. He overhears the debate, presumably in Hebrew which the brothers thought Joseph does not understand, over what to do. Joseph learns that the brothers are truly repentant, and realize the great evil they had committed years earlier. Judah pleads with Joseph not to detain Benjamin for Jacob will surely die from grief if he discovers that both of his two most beloved sons have been lost. At this point Joseph cannot restrain himself and reveals his identity to all the brothers at once. The brothers promptly return home with many gifts and proof of Joseph’s spiritual and physical wealth. Jacob eagerly makes the trek down to Egypt in order to see Joseph one last time before he dies.

The implications of all of the above differences are quite clear. The Qur’an is not at all concerned with making the brothers look even halfway decent. Joseph is seen as a ruler who paradoxically makes the rules and is bound by them. Oaths to one’s father are considered to be hardly of any relevance. Even so, if someone is accused of being a sinner (i.e. a thief), he deserves no defense and should simply be abandoned. On the other hand, G-d’s role in all of the events is quite clear. The Torah, on the other hand, emphasizes that G-d controls all events, but that man must make an effort to bring about certain events. In particular, Joseph had to test his brothers before he could reveal that he is their brother, whereas the Qur’an does not give any reason for why Joseph only revealed himself to the other brothers at the late stage that he did.

Many generations after the death of Joseph and his brothers, the Egyptians become jealous of the wealthy Israelites and decide to enslave them. G-d brings forth a man from the people to redeem the nation. This man is Moses. Both the Torah and Qur’an present a very similar account of the life of Moses. The only major difference concerns the tale of how Moses struck an Egyptian.
The Torah tells of two separate incidents. In the first incident, Moses witnesses an Egyptian unfairly striking a Hebrew. After careful deliberation of the merits of this individual and all his future descendants, Moses decided that he should not live. Moses struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. The following day Moses witnesses two Hebrews fighting. In attempting to resolve the argument, one of them reminds Moses of how he unashamedly killed an Egyptian. From this Moses reasoned that the matter is well known, and that it is best that he leave the land.

The Qur’an mysteriously combines and confuses these two stories. First, Moses witnesses an Egyptian and a Hebrew arguing. The Qur’an specifically mentions that Moses unfairly struck the Egyptian due to a feeling of tribal association. Moses immediately realizes that this is a grave sin and asks G-d’s forgiveness. Thus the Qur’an chooses to mold this story into one denouncing tribal associations, a major problem amongst the Arabs in the time of Muhammad and one that continues to this day. The next day, the same Hebrew is seen fighting with another Egyptian, and asks for Moses to kill his enemy once again. From this Moses reasoned that he had attained a reputation as a violent man, and that it is best that he leave the land.

Both the Torah and the Qur’an go on to describe many important events in Moses’ life, such as his first contact with G-d at the burning bush, his experience leading the Israelites out of Egypt, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, and forty years of wandering through the Sinai Desert. Although minor variations exist in these stories, they are often nothing more than mere details, such as how many sisters-in-law Moses had. Thus the above story is the last major Bible story from which the comparative analysis method used throughout this paper can yield meaningful information.

There are so many lessons to be learned from Bible stories that it would be very difficult to list the lessons just from those stories discussed above. Certain lessons, however, stand out as being amongst the more important general themes that run throughout the Torah and the Qur’an. For the Torah, the important lessons include trust amongst members of the family, performing G-d’s will through concrete actions, and proving one’s worthiness for G-d’s mercy through action. Amongst the important lessons contained in the Qur’an are the near perfect morals of the prophets which are to
be emulated, not giving in to tribal allegiances, the pre-ordained nature of one’s lot in life, and ultimate trust in Allah.

The two books also take very different moral and ethical attitudes towards various topics. For example, from the story of Cain and Abel the Qur’an teaches the value of life. As the Qur’an says in this context, to kill one life is equivalent to having slain all of mankind. In contrast, the Torah emphasizes repentance, as Cain himself was offered the chance to repent. However, killing in self-defense or in defense of an innocent is fully justified and emphasized through examples in the Torah, as in the story of when Moses kills an Egyptian taskmaster.

All in all, this paper has shown that comparative textual studies of religious holy books can shed much light on the biases of their respective religions. It is hoped that the analyses of the stories presented above will enrich our understanding of the similarities and differences between Judaism and Islam.
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