

CREATION A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE QUR'AN

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I like to work with narratives from different perspectives, exploring Biblical and Qur'anic stories with critical and creative methods, often together with Jewish and / or Christian partners. There is often an element of surprise when workshop participants discover the similarities and differences, either in the language (as Semitic languages, Hebrew and Arabic are rather similar) or in the details of a story. This is the point where I then explain something about the background:

The Qur'an emerged later than the Biblical scriptures but is understood as another revelation in the same tradition line. It refers back to the Biblical books as earlier revelations. In fact, there is a children's quiz question: What are the four most important Holy Scriptures? The correct answer is: the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, and the Qur'an. This is theologically questionable, not only from an interfaith perspective but also from the perspective of Islamic principles. But it is quite useful because it illustrates even for children that the Qur'an recognises earlier revelations and their communities (the so-called "People of the Scripture"). This is important because there are still many people, and nowadays even an increasing number of Muslim youngsters who are no longer conscious that central Biblical figures are considered divine messengers. In fact, the Qur'an assumes the older narratives to be known in one form and the other. Therefore, it generally does not repeat Biblical stories but points back to them, often emphasising various aspects of them and interpreting. Conversely, Biblical texts as well as Jewish and Christian traditions, the so-called *Isra'eliat*, had a role in Classical Qur'anic exegesis along with language and the so-called "Occasions of Revelation".

This also applies to the story of creation. Workshop participants are sometimes surprised when they learn about two different creation stories in Genesis. The more they are surprised to learn, then, that seven different creation stories can be counted in the Qur'an, most of them fragments meant to illustrate certain theological and / or ethical teachings. In order to give you an impression of the idea of creation from a Qur'anic perspective, I will juggle with these fragments trying to give you a relatively continuous story timeline along with characteristic theological points that hopefully give interesting inputs for a discussion.

1. Surah 2:30-38

The story starts in Surah 2:30-38 at a point where the Creator declares his intention to "put a trustee on earth", that is, a being with extraordinary capabilities and authority and a corresponding responsibility (this is especially pointed out in present-day social and environmental ethics). Seeing the flip side of human ambivalence, the possibility that they may "make mischief on it and shed

blood – while we glorify You with Your praise and sanctify You”, the angels question the project. Whereupon the Creator responds with the mysterious phrase, “I know what you do not know” – a categorical confirmation.

The next scene is set after the creation. And (God) taught Adam all the names. Well-versed Bible readers may immediately feel reminded of Adam naming the animals – one idea of several that turn up in the exegetic literature. And in fact, I have come across polemical statements regarding the status of Adam: in Genesis, he seems to be an autonomous agent naming the animals while the Qur’anic seems to present him as dependent and in need to be taught. Both human images appear in different strands of Muslim theology. But “all the names” may also refer, according to some traditions, to the names of the angels as divine messengers or forces, or even to the so-called Ninety-Nine Most Beautiful Divine Names.

Considered together with the next scene, I find the latter options more plausible: The angels are told to, “Bow down to Adam”, that is, to show him respect. This high status of Adam as “the one to whom the angels bowed down” is pointed out by many commentators who conclude that the ideal human is ontologically higher than the angels (with the reservation that this, of course, does not refer to actual humans who still have a long way to go). This fits with the theory of theologians who deal with religious anthropology and spiritual development like Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) that the Most Beautiful Names, actually attributes, are embedded, as seed-like potentials as it were, in each human being, waiting to be unfolded and utilised in the course of life. I would consider this a beautiful image of human dignity.

This is followed by an outline of two other scenes: the refusal of a figure called Iblis to bow down, and Adam’s experience with eating the forbidden fruit and being expelled from the garden which links up with the Bible. I will get back to both a little later. Before that, I would like to discuss another important aspect.

2. Surah 4:1

In Surah 4:1, human beings are directly addressed and reminded of a key concept connected with their diversity, here primarily with the fact that they, as other created beings, exist as male and female. The origin of all that is “one single being” (corresponding to the oneness of the Creator) and, from the same substance, its partner. Readers may feel reminded of the first human being, Adam, often understood as male, and his “helpmate” Eve. In fact, many translators, including Muslim ones, render the verse as saying, “and from him, He created his wife.” In some commentaries, you actually find a reproduction of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis complete with the famous rib which also occurs in some Muslim traditions. Forgotten is the fact that Adam, in Arabic as in Hebrew, literally means earthling, no matter whether it is male or female. I could actually, in a somewhat mischievous way, translate the statement literally, strictly following the grammatical gender of the words in the original text: It would then say that God “created you from a single soul (*nafs*, feminine), and from her, He created her husband” – which would almost indicate that “Eve” was first, followed by “Adam”. However, the intention of the text is not a counter-statement to the Biblical narrative but a more abstract presentation of the one source from which many men and women were scattered on earth, ultimately, as indicated in other passages, organising into “nations and tribes” (Surah 49:13) with “different colours and languages” which are all considered to be “among God’s signs” (Surah 30:22) and of one human family. Following the abstract presentation of the Qur’an, modern commentators take this verse as one of the key texts emphasising the ontological equality of men and women.

3. Surah 38:71-89

Two more aspects that seem important appear in Surah 38:71-89. One is the information that God “breathed into him of My spirit”, the other one is the statement that God created Adam “with both My hands”.

I will start with the last one. “With both hands” indicates, on the one hand, that the Creator gave great attention and care to create the human being. It was not a project that was casually done “blindfolded”, as it were, but something that matters to the Creator.

On the other hand, it seems like another hint at human ambivalence. Hands also stand for opposites (on the one hand – on the other hand ...). For some everyday actions like kneading dough or handwashing clothes, you need two hands to apply pressure, for some others you need one hand to hold an object and the other hand to do something with it. In the Qur’an, interdependent polarity is considered a prominent feature in creation: day and night, male and female are described as “signs of God” along with the diversity of plants, animals, and humans.

“Spirit” is the Arabic word *rûh*, a cognate of the Hebrew *ruach* which is actually breath or wind. It is not a divine mode of being as it is often understood in Christian theology but the life-breath which is, at the same time, a connection between the human and the divine: by meditating on one’s breath that comes and goes without an intentional or even conscious effort, one can actually have the experience of “not being in control” and, at the same time, of being safe and cared for in something greater – in God’s presence, as we say.

Moreover, breath carries words. It enables humans to pray. But it is also thought of as the carrier of divine words into human hearts. Therefore, the *Rûh al-Qudus*, the Spirit of Holiness, is thought of as the messenger of revelation to prophetic persons, often personified and identified with the angel Gabriel.

(A side remark: personifications occurs rather often in popular Muslim thought. Thus, for example, the Qur’an is sometimes treated as a person rather than an object, and as a supporter for its readers before God’s judgement. Even each surah is personified and mentioned with its name rather than with a number. For actual text study, I like the idea of “having a dialogue with scripture”, that is, discussing texts from different perspectives, even with all kinds of critical questions, while, at the same time, admitting and including the impulses that come from the text.)

These two aspects are marginalised or ignored by those commentators and theologians who represent an attitude of generally low expectations of humans and their capability and responsibility. I would say, though, that they are highly relevant for human self-esteem. Therefore, in my experience, they are very useful for pastoral care: Humans need to feel wanted and cared for with all their ambivalence. Besides, they may be good points for dialogue with other religious traditions on the concept of Man.

4. Surah 7:11-25

So, who is Adam? There are mainly three words that are used for humans in the Qur’an. One is *bashar* (a cognate of the Hebrew *basar*) which is used for humans in all their actuality. The second is *insân* which is linked with humans as social beings. The third is, as I said before, Adam. With this meaning, the word Adam has been adopted into a number of Muslim languages. Nevertheless, it is also used as a male proper name. As such, Muslims who understand the Qur’anic stories in their literal sense have an idea of a pre-historic prophetic figure named Adam. Surah 7:11-25 opens the possibility for another perspective: “It is We (God speaking of Himself in the ‘pluralis

majestatis') who created you (humans in the plural) and shaped you. Then We told the angels, 'Bow down to Adam,' and they bowed down. Not so Iblis. He refused to be one of those who bow down." This sudden switch from "you (humans)" to "Adam" does not fit into the traditional storyline of the pre-historic Adam. If I had to consider this as a fact account, I would wonder if it is a grammatical blooper or some patchwork editing gone wrong. But if I read it as what I call a "truth story" that is relevant for us now rather than about figures of the past, then I can identify with Adam and perhaps get to an important human experience instead of just watching a distant drama.

This takes us to the question that that arose already in a previous passage is: who is Iblis who refused to bow down to Adam? In another passage of the Qur'an, Iblis is described as one of the hidden beings (*jinn*). In popular thought, he is presented as an angel who became proud of himself. Anyway, when he is taken to account for his refusal, he argues (and even in a somewhat more dramatic way later in Surah 15:28-42 and 17:61-65: "I am better than he," claiming that he was created from fire while Adam was created from mere clay. This arrogance (and jealousy) impels him to challenge even the Creator Himself: since I don't have a chance anyway, I will do what I can to expose that base creature for what it is. According to some Muslim linguists, this accounts for the name Iblis: it is explained as being related to *ablasa*, giving up the hope (for God's mercy).

The passage continues where we left off earlier, with humans, male and female, living in the garden, free to "eat from wherever you want. But do not approach this tree, or you become unjust." It stands out here that it is no longer the personified Iblis who is the agent here but *shaytan*, Evil, who seduces them to eat of the forbidden tree. Both of them. With great persuasive power. This is often pointed out by Muslims who want to emphasise the ideal equality between men and women, including some feminist authors. In the Qur'an, there is no indication that Eve was seduced first and then, in turn, seduced Adam, nor that women are morally weaker than men. But let us not jump to conclusions here. The history of the impact on certain interpretations of Eve as the seductress did not stop at the door of Muslim commentators and interpreters – often with disastrous consequences for women's rights and women's self-understanding.

Well, anyway – humans, male and female, both eat the forbidden fruit, both their shame is exposed, and both are expelled from the garden, having learned that "Evil is an obvious enemy to you." And now the story takes a turn that is unexpected for many readers of the Bible. They say, "Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and are merciful to us, we are among the losers." Their reaction is insight, acceptance, and return: This was wrong, sorry, what next? This paragraph is best read together with the first one in Surah 2 where we are told: Then Adam received words from his Lord, and he turned towards Him (or: He turned towards him). He is the Turning, the Merciful. We said, "Get down from here, all of you. And if guidance comes to you from Me, then whoever follows My guidance, on them is neither fear nor grief."

Adam receives words – are they words of prayer or words of revelation or possibly both? In any case, words are for communication. Equally ambiguous is the rest of the sentence: he turned towards Him, or He turned towards him? Is it important? The door is open for communication and mutual regard between the human and the divine. A wrong decision is not necessarily the end of the world. "Adam" is humble enough to open up for the possibility of guidance – in contrast to "Iblis" whose stubbornness makes him inaccessible for guidance. So the drama is not between God and the devil, as often constructed, but between Adam and Iblis: an inner drama between two possible attitudes towards one's own wrong decisions. One prevents from learning, the other is an opening for new insights.

5. Surah 15:28-42

The story of Iblis and his argument with the Creator is taken up again in Surah 15:28-42 with some additional aspects. The first one is his intention to make “wrong seem right to them”. This is the more important considering the great space for ambiguity and difference of opinion that is found both in the text and in the history of Muslim theological thought. There are different ways of understanding and interpreting the Qur’an. There are different ways of coming to theological and ethical conclusions. Many are “right”, at least depending on their context. But there are also wrong ones. It should be possible to identify them by the harm that they cause – unless self-deception makes them seem “right”. Seen from my personal perspective, this would include, for example, certain extremist interpretations and their exclusivist or even violent consequences as well as a number of political decisions that lead to social injustice and warfare. But when I want to challenge them, I must take into account that they “seem right” to their authors and think more carefully about how to proceed.

The second aspect is the idea that Evil has no power over God’s sincere servants. The drama is on the level of creation, between Adam and Iblis. It is not a struggle between two opposing transcendent forces of Good and Evil – which would contradict the strict concept of Qur’anic monotheism. Humans can make mistakes and frequently do so, even “sincere servants” of God. When traditional Muslim artisans discover a slight mistake in their work, they leave it rather than correcting it, and if they finish their work without the slightest slip, they quickly make one – in order to remember that nobody is perfect. The “power of Evil” would rather imply to forget such human weaknesses, to become too proud of oneself and too arrogant to learn from mistakes, possibly even blaming them on others. Then the gate of learning and insight would be closed, the communication would be disturbed, at least for the time being.

6. Surah 17:61-65

The theme is taken up again in a similar scene in Surah 17:61-65 – except that the discussion appears less confrontational. Its gentler tone reminds me more of the discussion in the Biblical story of Job where Satan challenges God and quite some freedom of action is granted to him. In the Biblical drama, it is the human individual Job who is at the centre. Here, it is humankind, personified in “Adam”. In both stories, the central figure has, at the outset, reasons to be grateful for many divine favours. The Biblical story then triggers a discussion about God’s justice. In the Qur’anic story, I find the same but, at the same time, questions about God’s mercy. In both stories, again, there are limits. In the Biblical story, the limit is Job’s life that Satan is not permitted to take. In the Qur’an, there is, once more, the assurance that Evil ultimately has no power over God’s sincere servants.

7. Surah 20:115-123

Readers may be surprised how often a similar fragment of a story can be repeated in the Qur’an. This applies also to Surah 20:115-123 where the expulsion from the garden is taken up again. There is, however, one last element that I find worth mentioning: the “covenant with Adam”. Exegetes often link this with a scene in Surah 7:172-174 which is again set in pre-existence: The soul-sparks of all descendants of Adam are brought forth to testify that God is their “*rabb*”, that is, their Sustainer and Teacher. In mysticism, this is known as the “primordial covenant”. It is the foundation on which each and every human individual is connected with the Creator. It is understood as giving meaning to human life, no matter what happens. It is a relationship that can be badly disturbed but it can also be mended. The story, as it continues throughout history, is full of ups and downs in this relationship.

When I now look back at the story, I find that it is important for modern discussions of human rights and responsibilities to rethink questions about the concept of the human being, and not only for Muslim theologians or in interfaith dialogue. How do we deal with individuals being equal and yet special? With achievements and failures? With being part of the fabric of nature and yet in charge of it? With unity and diversity? I keep finding food for thought on these questions in all our scriptures. The point is to look at them together.

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Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium
des Innern, für Bau
und Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE
LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS 

 Bistum
Osnabrück

aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages