



THE FIGURE OF MOSES IN ISLAM: AN INTERPRETATIVE HYPOTHESIS

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Abstract : The figure of Moses is very complex in the Islamic tradition, both in terms of the interpretation of the Qur'anic passages concerning him, as well as what is mentioned in the *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets), that is the vast literature which deals with the stories of the prophets prior to Muhammad.¹ The present contribution offers a study of the figure of Moses on the basis of a structural analysis of the sacred text of Islam. It is based on two assumptions: that Moses is, without fear of contradiction, the most cited prophetic figure in the Qur'an; the fact that the Qur'an is increasingly shown to be, under the lens of linguistic and historical exegesis, to be a text that is anything but disorderly and chaotic (as it was judged by Francesco Gabrieli among the many, calling it an "unbearable jag"), but rather a wisely composed and ordered text.

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The particular importance of the figure of Moses in the Qur'an is justified from two points of view: first, because it is an example of a prophetic experience that Muhammad has also lived, becoming in this way a model for the latter; secondly, because he had an exceptional relationship with God: in fact he had the unique privilege of meeting God face to face in the "burning bush." In the Islamic vision, the prophets, even in the diachrony of their

mission,² share several characteristics, also because Islam strongly supports a continuity of the history of prophecy: the message that God has entrusted to His messengers has always been one, identical from the beginning of time to Muhammad who is the seal of prophecy.³ It is therefore evident that they refer to a common theoretical and theological horizon. Another peculiarity is that the vast majority of prophets were rejected, often with physical violence, by their people. Starting from Abraham who risked being burnt alive (see Q. 21: 51-70) to Lot (see Q. 7: 80-83) who fled from Sodom, we come to the exclusively Arab prophets such as *Ṣālih*, Hūd and *Shu'ayb*, who are almost absent in sources outside the Qur'an and were equally denied and persecuted.

Now the Qur'an recites in detail the adventures of Moses, but not in the form of a consequent and continuous, biographical account as is the case in the Hebrew Bible, but in sections, in different suras, without ever offering a single contiguous narration. This implies a methodological observation and one that concentrates more on the content: the methodological observation (which in reality is valid for all the stories mentioned in the Qur'an,

including those of Noah or of non-biblical characters such as *Sāmirī* or *Luqmān*) suggests that the listeners of Muhammad already knew, broadly at least, the stories they were told, so it was enough for the Prophet to mention facts and legends to be understood by his audience; the observation that concentrates more on the content is that, inevitably, the content of the stories told may not correspond verbatim to the original matrix. Specifically, the broad lines of Moses' vicissitudes correspond between the Bible and the Qur'an and are easily recognizable, but the details differ, even very strongly. I will eventually return to reflect on this peculiarity.

In any case, in the Qur'an, Moses, saved from the waters and raised at the court of Pharaoh, then exiled and then, after returning to Egypt,

rejected by Pharaoh and the polytheistic dignitaries of his court, must resort to God's intervention (the miracle of the stick devouring the snakes, the "plagues of Egypt" etc.) to free his people from the yoke of servitude, but that same people then, in the desert after the Exodus and on countless other occasions, not only continually rebels against his orders, but falls into the most unbridled polytheism: adoring the golden calf. The experience of Muhammad in Mecca was equally dramatic: the people of Quraysh utterly refused his appeal, persecuted and even put to death some of his followers, even tried to assassinate him. Similarly, as Moses led the Jewish people out of Egypt and immigrated to the Promised Land, so Muhammad emigrated from Mecca to Medina (the Hijra) with his most faithful followers. Muhammad could find comfort in the example of Moses: as God had helped Moses, so He would help him.

An important detail does not find its place in this picture: Moses, in the Qur'an as in the Bible, deals with Pharaoh, a ruthless tyrant, who exercises injustice almost purely for the sake of injustice, while the enemies of Muhammad in Mecca are not individually blameworthy: despite some particularly determined and malicious adversaries, such as Abū Lahab, "who of the flame," or Abū Jahl, the "father of ignorance," evidently nicknames, or Abū Sufyān, the authoritative leader of the Mecca aristocracy, is in fact the whole environment of the incredulous and of the associators of the hometown that refuses him; it is the great part of the Meccan society that rejects his challenging of traditional customs.

Moreover, Moses knew, we repeat, the direct experience of the encounter with God on Sinai near the "burning bush." The Qur'an mentions it in Q. 20: 9-15: "Did not the story of Moses come to your ears? When he saw a fire and said to his people: "Stop! I saw an intense fire. I will bring you an ember so that fire be [for you] a guide. But when he came to Us, We [abrupt change of subject: now speaks God] called him:

"O Moses, indeed I am your Lord! Take off your sandals because you are in the holy valley of *Tumal*! I have chosen you, listen to what is inspired to you. I am God, there is no other god but Me. Worship Me and pray, invoking my name. Indeed, the Hour [of the Last Day] is near; I'm almost on the verge of making it happen so that every soul will be rewarded for what it has committed [to doing]"» (the interpretation of the Arabic text is mine, as later). The "proof of Islam"

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) in his commentary on the verse of the Light offers an ethical-spiritual explanation of these verses, allegorising the fact that the divine voice orders Moses to "take off his shoes". This expression of the Qur'an has a literal sense and an allegorical sense, none of which must be exaggerated and overpower the other. So, the order to Moses to take off his sandals should be understood literally as a measure of respect for the holy place that he was going to step in (in mosques, as is known, one must take off his/her shoes), and allegorically because it indicates the need to undress of materiality and corporeity to access the spiritual world.⁴

Rather, the sublime experience of Muhammad, somewhat similar to that of Moses because it ends with the vision of God, is that of the so-called nocturnal journey (the *isrā'*, horizontal displacement from Mecca to Jerusalem, and the *mi'rāj* vertical ascension from Jerusalem to heaven), so full of esoteric and mystical values in Muslim wisdom literature. The Qur'an contains two groups of verses, not quite perspicuous, that allude to the miraculous journey. Q. 17:1 (it would be intriguing to ask why the verse immediately following 17:2 speaks about Moses in particular), and especially Q. 53:1-18. These latter verses describe, in an esoteric and imaginative language, full of symbols and subtleties, how Muhammad arrived "less than two bowshots", according to the most widespread exegesis, from the Throne of God (but the crypticity of the text can allow other interpretations).

As can be seen, there are many similarities between Moses and Muhammad, even if it would be improper to speak of a true parallelism, traceable to the smallest details. Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888- 1956), famous Egyptian modernist intellectual, in his critical biography of the Prophet, also underlines the fact that Moses and Muhammad were both shepherds:⁵ in fact, sheep farming is considered an original condition "purer" and less "contaminated" than civilization. Certainly, a mentality derived from Bedouin culture. It is no coincidence that Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer. In truth, according to traditional biographies, Muhammad was (perhaps) a shepherd as a child, but a merchant as a young man before receiving the prophetic call: apparently Haykal was looking for a symbol.

The second preliminary fundamental point concerns the complex question of the ordered structure of the Qur'an. Everyone knows that, at first glance, the Qur'an gives an impression of disorder. It is enough to take the sūra Q. 2 of the Cow (*al-Baqara*), the fulcrum of this whole article, to realize how it is interwoven with a myriad of arguments, from anti-Judaic polemics (which I will come to in detail below) to normative indications concerning menstruation or usury or testimony in contracts; from prescriptions concerning pilgrimage, fasting and prayer to verses about war; from splendid theological pericopes such as the "verse of the Throne" (Q. 2: 255) or the "verse of piety" (Q. 2: 177) to digressions on the prophetic history and about the *Ka'ba* as "the house of God" founded by Abraham and Ishmael.

Despite appearances, a current exegetical tendency, which is becoming more and more accredited, instead identifies (or at least tries to do so) in the Qur'anic narrations a precise compositional warp that reorganises and logically gives structure to what may seem disorganised. Among Muslims it is enough to remember the theory of *naẓm* of al-Islāhī; or the thematic interpretation theory (*mawdu'ī*), albeit

declined in extremely different ways, by Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Hasan Hanafi (d. 2021) and Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996).⁶ Among the orientalist, a pioneer was Neil Robinson;⁷ more theoretically systematic Michel Cuyper and Raymond Farrin,⁸ who also dealt with sūra 2, which will be also the subject of our subsequent discussion. These two initial premises offer us the tools to deal from a specific angle (only one: otherwise this intervention would extend to a whole book) the story of Moses in the Qur'an and how it has been analysed by a couple of important contemporary Islamic intellectuals.

It is worth mentioning immediately that some contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as the Egyptians Mahmūd Shaltūt (1893-1963), Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and the aforementioned Muhammad al-Ghazālī, considered Q.2, the Cow a chapter whose *'amūd* (pillar, thread) would be the anti-Jewish polemic. The historical motivation of this judgment has a basis in the fact that, with great probability, Q.2, or at least a substantial part of it, would be revealed soon after the Hijra when Muhammad and the Muslims who had emigrated from Mecca to Medina would soon be having to face the hostility of the numerous and rich Jewish clans who lived in the oasis. These Jews refused to recognize Muhammad as the new prophet announced for Arabia and became more and more his enemies until, in 626 on the occasion of the so-called "battle of the trench", the point of betraying him and trying to "deliver him" to the Qurayshites facilitating the (eventually unsuccessful) conquest of Medina. Here, as well as in the reconstruction of the prophetic stories previously outlined, we are concerned with the traditional narration offered by historical Muslim sources,⁹ which, in general, can be considered quite reliable even by doing the tare to the numerous problems that traditional sources¹⁰ may bring about.

Mahmūd Shaltūt, rector of Azhar at the time of President Nasser in Egypt in the fifties of the last century, claimed that the Qur'an in Q. 2 accuses the Jews of having disavowed the

benefits of God, of having forgotten that God saved them from Pharaoh, of having unjustly rejected and mocked the Prophet Muhammad, despite having signed a covenant with God, and, in relation to verse 102, to have followed the wicked and perverted intentions of the demons where neither Solomon was a "disbeliever" neither the two angels (mentioned in the Qur'an alone in that place) Hārūt and Mārūt deviated from the right path by teaching magic and sorcery to men.¹¹ In short, Shaltūt points out the occasions when the Jews have exceeded the limits imposed on them by God.

With a closer regard to our discourse, Sura Q. 2 contains a long passage dedicated to Moses that I would like to study in depth as it constitutes one of the most significant loci in relation to the alleged and so often over-emphasized anti-Judaism of the Qur'an (it would obviously not only be anti-historical, but definitely foolish to call it "anti-Semitism"). I repeat that the anti-Judaism of the Qur'an is, in the light of at least Muslim historical sources, the inevitable outcome of the first ambiguous and then decidedly hostile attitude that the Jews showed towards Muhammad and his mission.

My analysis will take place using the aforementioned structural method, which Orientalists in particular like Cuyper or Farrin emphasize in the compositional rules of Semitic rhetoric. These rules provide a concentric form of the argument that starts from a more external layer, arrives at a central focus and then reproduces the arguments in a mirror-like way up to the second outer layer.

The passage in question is Q. 2: 53-74 which can be divided into nine "phases":

- a) v53. As a preamble, the Qur'an recalls that the Scripture and the furqān were given to Moses. The term furqān is complex, of controversial etymological origin: my opinion is that it means "discernment" or "division", that is, indicating the revelation given to Moses as a moment of distinction

- and fracture between the time of error and that of truth. To Muhammad (Q. 25: 1) it happens similarly: he was also given the *furqān* as a "cut" between the before and after the light of revelation.
- b) vv. 54-57. Reference is made in a rather allusive way to episodes of the Exodus: first of all, Ex. 32: 27-28, when Moses orders the sons of Levi to kill without mercy one by one those who had bowed to the idolatry of the golden calf; then to the miracles of manna and quails. Despite these prodigies, the Jews refuse to believe and obey.
- c) vv. 58-59. These are two rather obscure verses that refer to a city (Jerusalem? Jericho? Damascus?) in which the Jews once again maintain improper behaviour, refusing to obey an order of God that would have commanded them to pass under a door prostrating, asking for forgiveness.
- d) vv. 60-61: more episodes of the Exodus: that of Moses which miraculously makes water pour out of a rock (Exodus 17: 1-6); that of the Israelites who complain in a petulant way, and offensive to God, of the scarcity and monotony of the food they have available in the desert.
- e) v.62: it is the central axis, the pivot, the moment of equilibrium of the concentric concatenation. The verse states that: "Indeed, those who believe, be they Jews, Christians or Sabeans, believe in God, in the last day and do good works - they will be rewarded by their Lord, they will not be in fear and they will not be saddened". Ecumenical verse, therefore, which goes beyond the dogmatic distinctions of monotheism.
- f) v. 63. It mentions the Sinai and the Tablets of the Law with which the Covenant between God and the Israelites is sealed.
- g) vv. 64-66. The Jews are stigmatized for not respecting the Sabbath and for making other irregularities; some are turned into monkeys so that their punishment be set as an example.
- h) vv. 67-71. They contain the episode of the cow that gives the title to the entire sura. The possible biblical reference is Nm 19: 1-10. The Qur'an narrates how Moses endeavours to be obeyed by the Jews when he orders them to sacrifice a heifer to God: they invent a series of quibbles and excuses to escape the obligation; finally, they reluctantly obey. This shows, once again, the reluctance to bow to divine orders.
74. vv. 72-74. By way of conclusion. Despite the *furqān* brought by Moses, the hearts of the Jews are hardened like stones, deaf and rebellious (and obscurely the verses mention a murder of which God takes advantage to exhort the Jews to realize His will and implicitly submit to it).

By applying the concentric structure, we would have this scheme:

a: preamble: the *furqān* of Moses.

b ↔ (corresponds to) f.

c ↔ (corresponds to) g.

d ↔ (corresponds to) h.

e: serves as a scale needle.

i: conclusion: the refusal to sincerely accept the role of Moses. I leave to the reader the burden of deciding whether the reasoning works or not.

It is rather interesting to verify at this point how the passage is commented by Sayyid Qutb, the famous Muslim Brother, considered the *maitre-à-penser* of radical Islamism. Discussing v. 54 referring to the punitive massacre ordered by Moses against the idolater Jews, Qutb states that the rebel Jews of the time of Moses, who abandon themselves to polytheism out of impatience (Moses has ascended Sinai and does not return), resemble those of the time of Muhammad who refuse to recognize his

mission and impatiently demand "proof" of his truthfulness. The rebels ask Moses to show them God in person, highlighting a cynical and obstinate nature.

In general, according to Qutb, the Qur'an admonishes the Jews of Medina, through the narration of the ancient stories of their forefathers, who helped them to fight and led them to conquer Jerusalem, that they have always proven to be ungrateful and disobedient, perhaps in order to earn their good will and to convince them to adhere to Islam. Moses is irritated by his companions' indocility and in an onset of anger he advises them to return to Egypt, as slaves. According to Qutb, the role of Moses is eminently that of convincing the Jews with patience and kindness to conform to the commandments of God. Of the episode of the cow, Qutb advances its own interpretation. V.72 scolds the Israelites for killing (seemingly unjustly) a man. Qutb deduces that the sacrifice of the cow is intended as an expiation of the unjust crime committed, but, while Moses intentionally tries to explain to his companions the wisdom that underlies the sacrifice and therefore the atonement, they refuse to understand, "with a hard heart." In spite of everything, God does not withdraw His benevolence towards them and in general towards those who sincerely believe: v. 62 shows this, underlining how the criterion of God's forgiveness is not ethnic but rather dependent on the sincerity of worship.¹²

So far Qutb in a rather soft commentary, does not emphasize any particularly striking aspect. In the description of Qutb (at least of this passage), Moses appears as a shapeless figure, not very incisive, almost at the mercy of events and unable to govern them. The aspect that emerges most clearly is that of being exemplary: the story of Moses anticipates in many places that of Muhammad. It is rather Muhammad Husayn Haykal in his biography of the Prophet, often referring to Moses, that suggests an unconventional image of the latter. There are

four points to highlight that refer to precise historical-ideological references.

- 1) P.4: Moses, according to Haykal, was educated in monotheism at the court of Pharaoh. The Muslim tradition often claims that the wife of Pharaoh was "Muslim", that is, monotheist, believer (here obviously "Muslim" has nothing to do with Islam historically achieved after the conquests, but generally indicates the "natural religion" in which God has natured men (Q. 30:30), precisely the adoration of the One God). An obscure reference in Q. 12, the Qur'anic history of Joseph in Egypt, would perhaps allow us to hypothesize that Pharaoh himself, called *malik*, i.e. "king" and not "Pharaoh" (because "Pharaoh", used as a proper name indicating specific person, symbolically translates tyranny, wickedness, deafness to the call of God), was a believer.¹³ Haykal does not cite specific sources, but, notoriously, from Freud to Jan Assmann, many scholars have hypothesized the maturation of mosaic monotheism at the court of Pharaoh Akhenaten (XVIII dynasty).
- 2) P.92. Moses, according to Haykal, is revolutionary: he rebels against the oppressive power of Pharaoh who persecutes the Jews. It is not useless to remember that the Shiite intellectual Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977) has maintained that the monotheistic religions, all, have been revolutionary. As Moses rebelled against Pharaoh, Jesus rebelled against the Romans and Muhammad against the Qurayshites.¹⁴
- 3) P.179. According to Haykal, Moses and Jesus were only religious preachers, while Muhammad was a Prophet and a statesman and a leader in battle. In short, Haykal does not fail to underline the political aspect of Muhammad's activity, whereas Moses appears more like being sent by God to fulfil a soteriological task, the salvation of his people.

- 4) Pp. 578-580. Haykal writes at the wake of the Salafi modernism of Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) by sponsoring an "Islamization of modernity": Islam calls man to embrace religion and to abandon himself to God through reason and not thanks to a blind faith. Moses and Jesus legitimized themselves with miracles, but miracles are credible in the infancy of humanity. With Islam, humanity reaches maturity, it no longer needs miracles, but rationality and science. For this reason, real miracles are not attributed to Muhammad (except the reception of the Qur'an).

The conclusion that can be drawn from this brief analysis is that in the Qur'an the story of Moses has an exemplary and, so to speak, didactic purpose. The admonition is directed to the followers of Muhammad so that they do not behave like the Jews. And it is a comfort for Muhammad who is advised to be patient because sooner or later he will be victorious, despite the ruthlessness of the Qurayshites. The character of Moses as leader, on the other hand, is compromised by some of his uncertainties: for example, he is aware of his stuttering and seeks the comfort of Aaron. If the experience of Moses is really similar to that of Muhammad, the moral stature of the latter is much more prominent. Although, in fact, the Qur'an does not hide the doubts and some shortcomings of Muhammad, there is a certain self-confidence on his part. For example, sūras Q. 47 and 48 give the impression of being the narration, almost stenographic, of an oration held by Muhammad to his soldiers before a battle and the consequent victory (not by chance, perhaps, sura Q 47 is named "Muhammad", while Q. 48 is named "victory" (*al-Fath*)).

These are the details of the biblical and Qur'anic tales concerning Moses (or Joseph / Yūsuf of the sūra Q. 12 to give just a second example) to provide us with nuanced features of the same characters in one or another sacred text.

Muhammad al-Ghazālī, a very prestigious member of the *'ulama'* linked originally to the Muslim Brotherhood, in his thematic analysis of Q. 2 states that, although Muhammad had brought the message of the unity of all religions guaranteed by the basic teachings of all the prophets, the Jews received it with cynicism and disdain, due to the fact that they believed that God had given them the monopoly in religion excluding by that other revelations and other peoples. Yet, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad have walked the same path and the project of Islam contains that of all the other revealed religions, regardless of time and place.¹⁵ It is therefore important to note that the Qur'an never condemns Judaism as such, neither here nor elsewhere, but rather condemns the individuals who manipulated the sacred texts and rebelled against the will of God and their prophets (like Moses in our case), whose relations with the people were never easy (at least on a Qur'anic basis). The bitterest accusation of the Qur'an against the Jews is that of having considered themselves as the chosen people: Q. 62: 6 warns the *hādū*, those who profess Judaism, to put an end to their self-pride in order not to incur the wrath of God.

I believe that we can identify a certain continuity in the Islamic interpretation of the figure of Moses over the centuries, even if we have not analysed the most ancient works of the *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, preferring to concentrate on the Sacred Text. A "dogma", so to speak, very widespread among Muslim theologians is that the prophets were, all, infallible (*ma'sūmūn*) and therefore immune from sin. An objective reading of the Qur'an is not in favour of this assumption however, given that from Joseph to Jesus, passing through Moses and ending with Muhammad, the Qur'an does not cease to demonstrate their human nature and therefore their fallibility. The linearity of the prophetic story that culminates with the seal of the message revealed by Muhammad (Q. 33:40) considers the *rusul* (plural of *rasūl*), the major "messengers", bearers of revealed Scriptures such as the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'an,

so to speak as “brothers”, or components of - please forgive me the metaphor - “courier” whose witness (the revealed message) is transmitted to humanity from its beginning to the day of the Last Judgment.

NOTES

- 1) One of the most famous being that of Ibn Kathīr (m 1373); regarding criticism, see at least the books by R. Tottoli, *La vita di Mosè secondo la tradizione islamica*, Palermo, 1992 and Id., *I profeti biblici nella tradizione islamica*, Brescia, 1999, and B. Wheeler, *Moses in the Qur'an and Islamic Exegesis*, London, 2002.
- 2) The Islamic tradition knows two kinds of prophets: the nabī announcer of the good news (there were around 124,000 throughout history sent to all peoples in all ages) and the rasūl bringing the Law revealed in Books or Scriptures (there would have been about 300). It goes without saying that a rasūl is also a nabī, but few nabīs are also rasūls. Moses, Jesus and Muhammad were both nabīs and rasūls and their Books were the Torah, the Gospel (singular for Muslims) and the Qur'an.
- 3) The Scriptures however, borne by the messenger Prophets, like the Torah and the Gospel, were sometimes, subject to a process of "falsification" or tahrīf, for which Jews and Christians would have "changed the words" of the original revelations of Moses and Jesus, deforming their sentences and therefore making the definitive revelation of the Qur'an necessary.
- 4) M. al-Ghazālī, *La Nicchia delle Luci*, in *Le Luci della sapienza*, a cura di M. Campanini, Mondadori, Milano, 2012, pp. 111-116.
- 5) M. H. Hykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, Indianapolis, 1993, p. 58.
- 6) cf. M. Campanini, *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations*, London-New York, 2011.
- 7) N. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an. A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, London, 2003.
- 8) M. Cuypers, *Le Festin: Une Lecture de la sourate al-Mā'ida*, Paris, 2007; Id., 'Semitic Rhetoric as a Key to the Question of the *Naẓm* of the Qur'anic Text', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 13 (2011), 1, pp. 1-24; R. Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text*, White Cloud Press, 2014.
- 9) The most authoritative are the sīra or biographies of the Prophet, among which that of Ibn Ishāq / Ibn Hishām stand out. See Martin Lings, *Il Profeta Muhammad, la sua vita secondo le fonti più antiche*, Torino 2004; M. Lecker and R. Tottoli, *Vite antiche di Maometto*, Milan, 2007.
- 10) F. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, Princeton, 1998.
- 11) M. Shaltūt, *Min hudā al-Qur'ān (Under the Guidance of the Qur'an)*, Cairo, 1968.
- 12) S. Qutb, *In the Shadow of the Qur'an fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, ed. by M. Salahi and A. Shamis, Leicester, 1999, vol. I, pp. 66-79.
- 13) M. Campanini, *The Prophet Joseph. Monotheism and history in the Koran*, Brescia, 2008.
- 14) A. Shari'atī, *On the Sociology of Islam*, Berkeley, 1979.
- 15) M. al-Ghazālī, *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an*, Herndon Va, 2000, pp. 11-31.