

Holistic-textual Approach to Qur’anic Verses on Muslim-Jewish Relationship in the Qur’an

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ABSTRACT

The Muslim-Jewish relationship is often associated with tension and antagonism. Authors from both sides who analyse the Sacred Texts on this issue demonstrate that antagonistic and unpleasant relationship between Muslims and Jews stemmed out from the Qur’an. However, this article argues that some of the previous studies on this issue are based on partial insights of Qur’anic verses. Alternatively, it proposes a holistic-textual approach to all verses that relate to this issue. This holistic-textual approach, however, is not sufficient on its own. It serves merely as a basis or a framework, which works hand-in-hand with a historical-contextual approach to understanding the Qur’an. This research demonstrates only the first layer, which is the holistic-textual approach, via the Muslim-Jewish relationship according to accumulated Qur’anic verses on this issue. It analyses 123 Qur’anic verses in which Jews are described in seven different terms. Subsequently, the verses are classified into five categories according to the mode of expressions therein. Three of the categories are considered the major ones, namely positive, neutral and negative expressions. The result of this analysis shows that contrary to commonly held perception, the largest number of verses belongs to the neutral expression category with the total number of 63 verses out of 123. This is followed by 41 verses under the negative expression, 14 verses under positive expression, 5 verses with a combination of neutral and negative expressions, and finally, there is only one verse which combines positive and negative expressions in similar verse.

Keywords: Muslims-Jews; interfaith; Qur’an; hermeneutics; holistic-textual exegesis

1. Introduction

In the book entitled “*Al-Yahud fī al-Qur’an*” (The Jews in the Qur’an), Sabiq (1994) clearly states that Islam recognizes Judaism as one of the revealed religions. He further defines who *al-Yahud* refers to, and offers historical insights about them. Nevertheless, his analysis of Qur’anic verses on Jews’ characteristics is consistently negative, due to generalization of various terms associated to Jews. It highlights errors committed by Jews in different periods of time, the punishment for them and Jews’ views of themselves and others. While quoting texts from a Jewish source, the author does not provide details of the source that he relies upon. Similar style is applied in writings on Jews by other traditional Muslim authors (Al-Shaqari, 1996; Fath

Allah Sa'id, 1982; Tabarah, 2004; Tantawi, 1997; Tu'aimah, n.d.). The main issue of the writings is the authors' application of analytical exegesis or *al-tafsir al-tahlili* on the verses of the Qur'an. This *al-tafsir al-tahlili* approach, somehow, is susceptible to partiality ('Ali al-Mahdali, 1996; Ma'rifah, 2004). A book on Jews, which attempts to approach the subject objectively, is entitled *al-Athar al-Waridah 'an al-Salaf al-Yahud fi Tafsir al-Tabari* (Al-Hawshan, 2013). Nevertheless, this book is limited to reports about Jews in *Tafsir al-Tabari*.

The book entitled "*Islamic Judaism*" contains merely an accumulation of Qur'anic verses on Jews and the Prophets from Jewish origin, without any analysis (Gohari, 2000). Other recent and important writing on similar issue, but, which is analysed in a broader perspective, is a study entitled the People of the Book and the People of the Dubious Book (Sabjan, 2009). The author carefully explores two important concepts in relation to Jews as described in the Qur'an, namely *al-Yahud* (the Jews) and *ahl al-Kitab* (people of the book), while being aware of the divisions under the concept. Nonetheless, since his study has a broader scope than Jews alone, there is no further discussion on other terms that are utilized in the Qur'an to indicate Jews. Hence, the comprehensiveness of his study cannot be ruled out.

On the other hand, Robert Spencer leads to an almost similar conclusion with Sabiq that portrayal of Jews in the Qur'an is negative (Spencer, 2009). It seems that such conclusion is derived when depiction on Jews is examined through only few verses while neglecting the rest. In fact, a holistic study of all terms related to Jews indicates that the Qur'an rather promote the spirit of dialogue, even with the Jews.

2. Terminological consideration

It is observed that Jews are depicted in the Qur'an in seven different terms, specifically *al-Yahud* (the Jews), *Bani Israil* (the Children of Israel), *ahl al-Kitab* (people of the Scriptures), *alladhina utu al-Kitab* (those who are given the Book), *alladhina utu nasiban min al-Kitab* (those who are given a portion of the Book), *alladhinahadu* (literally, those who are guided –the Jews) and *hudan*. The term which is mostly repeated is *Bani Israil* (41 times), followed by *Ahl al-Kitab* (29 times), *alladhina utu al-Kitab* (17 times), *al-Yahud* (8 times), *alladhina utu nasiban min al-Kitab* and *hudan* (3 times respectively) and *alladhinahadu* only twice. Altogether, the seven terms appear in 105 times in the Qur'an. The terms are elaborated and described in 123 Qur'anic verses.

This article discusses the analysis involving all verses that contain different terminologies as mentioned above, including further elaboration and description of the terms. This article investigates the commonly held perception by extremist Muslims and Islamophobes alike, that the Qur'an suggests hatred to the Jews or in other words it serves as a ground for anti-Jewish attitude. It argues that the spirit of dialogue is consistently evident throughout the Qur'an, despite dealing with the highly controversial issue for centuries – regarding Muslim-Jewish relationship.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this research is similar to the thematic exegesis or better known as *al-tafsir al-mawdu'i* (Al-Khalidi, 2008; Hammad, 2010; Muslim, 2009; Sharif, 2008). In this analysis, the

123 Qur'anic verses on Jews are read individually. Based on the reading, different modes of expression concerning Jews are detected. They can be classified into three major categories. The first category belongs to a positive expression where Jews' virtues are acknowledged and privileges highlighted. Secondly, neutral expression category, which refers to verses that describe Jews in non-judgmental and non-bias tones. This category also includes verses that contain orders and prohibitions for Jews; objective description of their state of affairs; and a series of question and answer between them and the Prophet Muhammad. The third category is a negative expression. A negative expression consists of verses that condemn Jews' actions, remind them of the punishment that inflicted on them in the past and warn them against the harsh punishments that await them in the hereafter. Following these three major categories are two minor categories. In these latter categories, some verses are traced to have mixed expressions between neutral and negative, and the combination of all three expressions in one verse. Altogether, there are five categories of Qur'anic expression on Jews that will be dealt in this study.

4. Result and Discussions

4.1 Categorization of the verses

There are three major categories of verses on Jews –positive, neutral and negative expressions. Two minor categories follow the three major ones. These categories will be discussed below.

4.1.1 Positive: Jews' Virtues and Privileges

To presume that Islam over-generalizes and condemns Jews simply because they were born as Jews is misleading. The Qur'an recognizes the heterogeneous nature of Jews; they are individually different to one another, "Not all of them are alike; a group of them stand for the right, they recite the verses of Allah during the hours of the night, prostrating themselves in prayer."(Qur'an, 3: 113). It also states that those who believe in Allah and the Book among them humble themselves before Allah thus rewards were promised for them (Qur'an, 3: 199).

There are 13 places in which Jews are acknowledged in the Qur'an. For instance, the food slaughtered by them who are named 'people that have been given the Scripture' and Muslims are made *halal* (permissible) for each other. Besides, Muslim men are allowed to marry dignified Jewish or Christian ladies (Qur'an, 5: 5).

Most of the positive expression regarding the Jews is stated in reference to the past experience that they underwent, and the bounties bestowed by Allah upon them. The bounties for Jews that are being recalled in the Qur'an are salvation from the tyrant Pharaoh (Qur'an, 20: 80; 44: 30) food known as *al-manna* –that is a kind of sweet gum, and *al-salwa* or quail (Qur'an, 45: 16), and being chosen and preferred among all mankind and *jin* (Qur'an, 2: 47 & 122; 45: 16). In addition to the bounties, Allah has also raised the Prophets among them to a high station (Qur'an, 19: 57-8), and inherited them the Scripture from Moses (Qur'an, 40: 53), treasures and all kinds of honourable place (Qur'an, 26: 58-9).

The most interesting point that is mentioned in the Qur'an pertaining Jews is that they have been made to inherit a land, which is situated to the east of Egypt and also to its west, as a result of their endurance (Qur'an, 7: 137 & 28: 5-6). According to verse 137 of chapter 7:

“And We made the people who were considered weak to inherit the eastern part of the land and the western part thereof which we have blessed. And the fair Word of your Lord was fulfilled for the Children of Israel, because of their endurance. And We destroyed completely all the great works and buildings which Pharaoh and his people erected.”

The verse is implicit that the land was meant for Jews by using the phrase ‘the people who were considered weak’. Most of the interpreters perceive that this phrase refers to the Children of Israel (Al-Razi, 1990; Al-Shawkani, 1991; Al-Tabari, 1992; Al-Zamakhshari, 1986). In fact, although it seems implicit at the beginning, the meaning is directly made understood from the later part of the same verse which mentions ‘Children of Israel’ in relation to ‘Pharaoh’. The question which remains is which specific land was inherited to them? Interpreters of the Qur’an, including Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari (838-923 C.E.), Mahmud ibn ‘Amr Al-Zamakhshari (1070-1143 C.E.) and Muhammad ibn ‘Umar Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi (1149-1209 C.E.), hold the view that the land mentioned in the verse is Al-Sham (or the present day Palestine, Syria and Jordan). Al-Razi further mentions alternative opinions; firstly those who see that the land refers to al-Sham, Egypt, and all surrounding places, based on its geographical location from Egypt; whereas the second opinion simply assumes that the verse does not indicate any specific land but what it means is merely some area of the earth (Al-Razi, 1990). A Jewish source cites Dr. Muhammad al-Husseini’s claim that according to the Qur’an, the land of Israel belongs perpetually to the Jewish people because it is a gift from God as in the covenant (Rocker, 2009).

The opinion of majority Qur’anic interpreters regarding the ‘Children of Israel’ as referring to the phrase ‘the people who were considered weak’ is important here. This is parallel to the story recalled in the previous and the continuing sections of the Qur’an. Consequently, the land which is possibly referred to is al-Sham, Egypt, and its surrounding area. The quality of ‘weak’ takes precedence over the name ‘Children of Israel’, which means that the promise of the fertile land is dependable upon the situation of the Children of Israel. As long as they are in the position of patience and endurance, they are entitled to the land. Nevertheless, when they choose to be in the position of oppressing others, the entitlement shall cease.

4.2.2 Neutral: Verses of Commandments, Descriptive and Dialogue

Verses on Jews that carry neutral expression are the largest category of the subject as stated in the Qur’an. A closer observation on each verse under this category reveals that its verses are delivered in different tones. They are sometimes expressed in the tone of invitation, for example:

“Say (O Muhammad): ‘O people of the Scriptures! Come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall take others as lords besides Allah.’ Then if they turn away, say: ‘Bear witness that we are Muslims.’(Qur’an, 3: 64)”

In this invitation tone, there is a call for unity between Muslims, Jews, and Christians based on common ground, specifically, according to the verse, the monotheistic concept. Closing this invitation is a code of conduct advised by the Qur'an in dealing with an adversary. If the Christians and Jews turn away from the message conveyed by Muslims, the latter should just be firm on the principle of monotheism while declaring that they surrender themselves to Allah – or become Muslims. Obviously from this verse, there is no order to force or display aggression towards Christians and Jews, even if they turn away from the message.

In other places, the neutral expression appears in a descriptive tone, for instance, “Those who disbelieve from among the people of the Scripture and the polytheists, were not going to leave (their disbelief) until there came to them clear evidence (Qur'an, 98: 1).” In fact the whole Chapter 98, which is named '*Al-Bayyinah*' (The Clear Evidence), describes the circumstance in which Jews, Christians, and polytheists were, upon receiving the new prophet. Their early circumstance was the state of disbelief in which they insisted on being unless clear evidence appeared in front of them to satisfy their conviction. The 'clear evidence' is described in the following verse as the Prophet Muhammad himself, who was appointed by Allah and recites the revelation that contains guidance from Allah. However, when the clear evidence that they demanded was presented to them, they became divided among themselves (Qur'an, 98: 4), whereas they have been commanded to worship Allah alone, pray and give charity (Qur'an, 98: 5). These three commands are similar to the Jews' and Christians' previous teachings, but some of them still disbelieved.

In addition to the examples stated, there are verses that tell the diverse nature of the people of the Scriptures, “...among them are some who have faith, but most of them are disobedient or rebellious against Allah's commands (Qur'an, 3: 110).” Such description educates Muslims to be careful of hasty generalization over all Jews and Christians because they are individually different.

There is also a tone, signaling prohibition in this category. This includes the prohibition for the Jews against exceeding the limit and following their desires. The prohibitive tone appears in the issue of Jesus' mortality:

“O people of the Scripture! Do not exceed the limits in your religion, nor say of Allah aught but the truth. The Messiah Jesus son of Mary was a Messenger of Allah and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary and a spirit, created by Him; so believe in Allah and His messengers...(Qur'an, 4: 17)”

Besides, the reflective tone is another component of this category. This component consists of verses that remind of the covenant between God and the Children of Israel. The contents of the covenant include the order to worship none but Allah, be dutiful to parents, be good to kindred, orphans and the needy, speak well to people, perform prayer and give away charity (Qur'an, 2: 83).

Every now and then, the people of the Scriptures are reminded to observe their conduct. The standard of 'right' and 'wrong' in the conduct that the Qur'an highlights is not a new standard imposed upon them, but as repeatedly mentioned, the code of conduct are

based on “..the teachings of Torah and *Injil*..”(Qur’an, 5: 68; 3: 70; 5: 15 & 19), or as the Qur’an puts it, “your religion”(Qur’an, 5: 77), which means their own religion.

4.2.3 Negative Expression: Errors and punishments

Undoubtedly, there is the negative expression on Jews in the Qur’an, but they are described throughout 35 out of 105 places on the subject. Undeniably, there are portrayals of Jews’ mischief in the Qur’an. Nonetheless, the portrayals are made carefully by the use of term ‘the disbelievers among them’, which distinguish and separate only one group of them apart from the whole Jewish community. This specific group was associated with hypocrites (Qur’an, 59: 11) during the life of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly in the Banu Nadir.

Verses in the Qur’an on Jews that carry negative expression are those which remind them of the errors that they committed in the past. Among the errors that are recalled in the Qur’an include worshipping the calf, breaking the covenant, rejecting proofs (Qur’an 4: 153-4), calling the Prophets liars and killing them unjustly (Qur’an, 5: 70), accusing false charge against Maryam – the mother of the Prophet ‘Isa (Qur’an, 4: 153-80), being unjust (Qur’an, 4:160-1), taking usury and practising bribery (Qur’an, 5: 62).

Punishments on Jews are also categorized under negative expression. In most verses, punishments are stated along with the previous errors committed. For instance, since they have acted wrongfully, certain good food is made unlawful for them (Qur’an, 4: 160); for those among them who claimed that Uzayr was the son of Allah, they were cursed by Him (Qur’an, 9: 30); as for those who broke the covenant, rejected the proofs and killed the Prophets, Allah sets seal upon their hearts (Qur’an, 4: 155). There is also a verse which states precisely that since they incurred the wrath of Allah, they were changed into apes and swine; and since they worshiped false deities, they shall be in worst rank in the hell and be most far astray (Qur’an, 5: 60).

It is true that there is an order to fight some people of the Scripture in the Qur’an. Nonetheless, the order is made specifically towards those who have learnt about the One God and the Last Day, aware of the actions that are prohibited, and told to acknowledge the religion of truth in their own Scripture, but choose ignore the contents. In such encounter, Muslims are ordered:

“Fight against those who believe not in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and His messenger, and those who acknowledge not the religion of truth among the people of the Scripture, until they pay the *jizyah* (tax for protection under the Muslim government) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued (Qur’an, 9: 29).”

Apparently, the order is understood as to humiliate any people of the Scripture arrogantly under Muslim governance. Conversely, this verse was an instruction for a specific situation, that is, the Battle of Tabuk between Muslims and Byzantines during the prophet Muhammad’s lifetime. The battle was preceded by a murder of a Muslim emissary by the Byzantines, after the effort to dialogue was unfruitful.

In common situations when Muslims encounter adversary from the people of the Scripture, however, they are advised to deal with the latter by being patient and holding fast to the principle of piety:

“You shall certainly be tried and tested in your wealth and properties and in your personal selves, and you shall certainly hear much that will grieve you from those who received the Scripture before you and from those who ascribe partners to Allah; but if you persevere patiently, and become *al-muttaqin* (the pious) then verily, that will be a determining factor in all affairs (Qur’an, 3: 186).”

Figure 1, which follows, depicts categories of verses on Jews in the Qur’an based on expression with the application of the holistic-textual approach to the Qur’an.

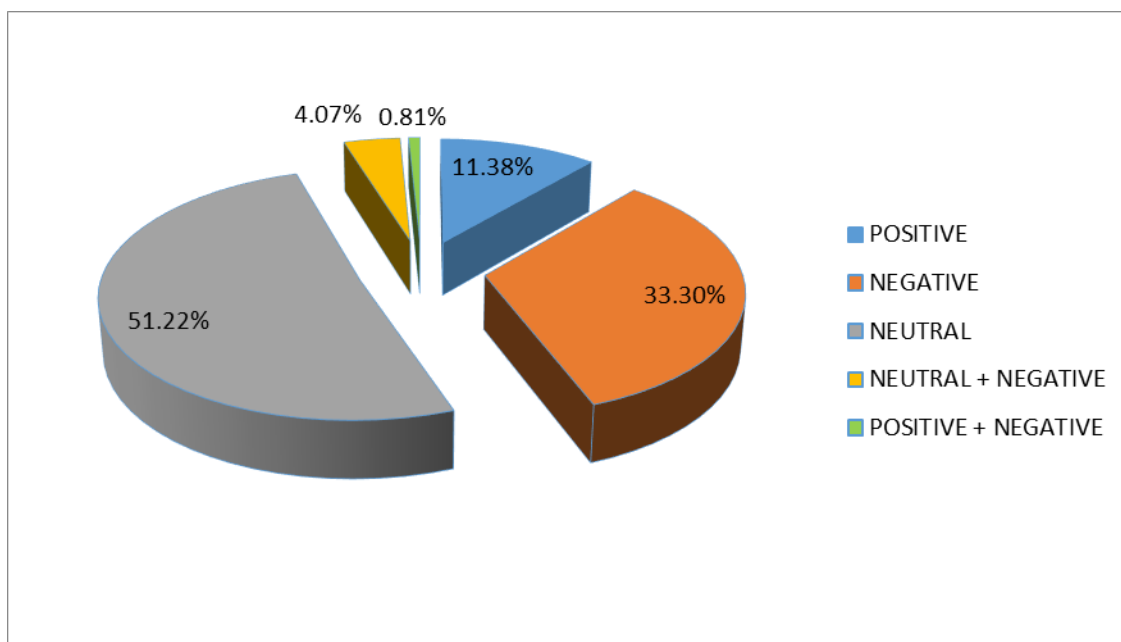


Fig 1: Verses on Jews in The Qur’an based on Expression

The result of this analysis shows that contrary to commonly held perception, the largest number of verses belongs to the neutral expression category with the total number of 63 verses out of 123. This is followed by 41 verses under the negative expression category, 14 verses under positive expression, 5 verses with a combination of neutral and negative expressions, and finally, there is only one verse which combines positive and negative expressions in similar verse.

5. Conclusion

By employing the holistic-textual approach to understanding the contents of the Qur’an, it is discovered that Qur’anic expression on Jews ranges from various intonations; namely positive, neutral, negative and a mixture of those. The selection of verses which indicate seven terms

that are employed for depiction on Jews contribute to a more comprehensive view of the subject. The result of this analysis shows that most of the expressions regarding Jews sound in a rather neutral tone. The Qur'an is objective in discussing the subject by specifically attributing the crimes that occurred in history only to those who were guilty of committing them while releasing the innocents from any false accusation. In fact, some Jews are not only acknowledged as an existence, but they are also credited and honoured. Holding this heterogeneous nature clearly throughout the Qur'an, and contrary to the commonly held perception, Jews are celebrated in the spirit of dialogue. This study utilizes holistic-textual methodology only on the topic that relates to Jews-Muslims relationship. This proposed methodology has to be applied to other topics as well, in order to test its reliability as one of the tools to assure that Qur'anic verses are understandable and applicable in contemporary discourse.

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