

Ibn Taymiyya as Exegete: Moses' Father-in-Law and the Messengers in *Sūrat Yā Sīn*

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It was the year 683/1284 in Damascus. There was talk of a prodigy, known as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who had been recently appointed to head the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Sukriyya.¹ His inaugural address at the institute drew a noteworthy audience, including the Chief Judge and some of the most influential scholars of the time.² The great Shāfi'ī jurist Tāj al-Dīn al-Fazārī (d. 690/1291) was present at the address and noted that the lecture was extremely beneficial and well received by the audience. As his notoriety began to rise, the young Ibn Taymiyya began to conduct a class on Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) at the Umayyad mosque after Friday prayers, something he would regularly do for the rest of his life.³ A special section of the mosque (a *minbar*) was prepared for him and he started to comment from the beginning of the Qur'an.⁴ The class became extremely popular, attracting a large crowd, and was talked about throughout the country. Ibn Taymiyya was only 22 at the time.

While modern scholarship views Ibn Taymiyya primarily as a theologian and jurist,⁵ the Arabic historical sources frequently mention that he was a *mufasssīr*, or Qur'anic exegete.⁶ His student and colleague al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) exclaimed that Ibn Taymiyya was a 'sign of God in *tafsīr*'⁷ and noted that his class always attracted a large audience (*al-jamm al-ghafīr*).⁸ His good friend al-Birzālī (d. 739/1339) called Ibn Taymiyya a master (*imām*) in Qur'anic exegesis⁹ and records that people were astonished at how much *tafsīr* Ibn Taymiyya had memorised.¹⁰ His loyal disciple Ibn Rushayyiq (d. 749/1349) notably lists Ibn Taymiyya's *tafsīr* treatises first in his compilation of his master's works.¹¹ Furthermore, one of the most important classical biographical dictionaries on Qur'anic exegetes, al-Dāwūdī's (d. 945/1538) *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, includes an entry on Ibn Taymiyya.¹²

Part of the reason why Ibn Taymiyya is not seen as a *mufasssīr* is because of the narrow definition that we have given to *tafsīr*. As Jane McAuliffe argues in her insightful article 'Genre Boundaries of Qur'ānic Commentary', scholars should not

limit *tafsīr* to complete line-by-line commentaries (*musalsal*) but rather explore other genres in which the Qur'an is engaged. As she explains:¹³

Tafsīr as a genre and *tafsīr* as an intellectual exercise of the Muslim religious imagination are not necessarily coterminous categories. Despite the countless shelves of published commentaries and the many collections of *tafsīr* manuscripts that await editing, medieval exegesis of the Qur'ān cannot be caught or contained within these boundaries.

By focusing only on complete *tafsīrs*, we are blinded to the exegetical insights of those who did not complete full commentaries. Ibn Taymiyya never finished a complete line-by-line commentary, so many of his unique exegetical insights are left unexplored.¹⁴

Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical engagements are significant because they are part of an important hermeneutical shift within the history of *tafsīr* in which the traditionalist *ḥadīth*-based movement distances itself from the Ash'arī scholastic tradition. Previous scholarship asserts that this hermeneutical shift occurred primarily with Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) and was limited to lists of prophetic reports (*ḥadīths*). In his influential article 'From al-Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr', Norman Calder makes the argument that it was Ibn Kathīr who was a 'significant deviation' from the norm of the established tradition of *tafsīr*.¹⁵ Although Calder implies throughout the article that Ibn Kathīr was influenced by his 'mentor' Ibn Taymiyya, his focus is on how Ibn Kathīr is a sharp contrast to previous exegetes such as al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī.¹⁶ Calder criticises Ibn Kathīr for not engaging with the full range of hermeneutic tools, such as scholastic theology and philology, and for his 'concept of truth' which 'is locked into the notion of what "we have from the sinless prophet Muḥammad" that is prophetic *ḥadīth*'.¹⁷ Walid Saleh more accurately places Ibn Taymiyya at the centre of a hermeneutical shift. Realising that it was Ibn Taymiyya that laid the hermeneutical foundation for the traditionalist movement, Saleh devotes a detailed study to analysing his 'Introduction to the Principles of Qur'anic Exegesis' (*Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*). At the end of this article, in a section regarding the influence of Ibn Taymiyya's treatise, Saleh mentions that the *Muqaddima* was first implemented by Ibn Kathīr and then al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).¹⁸ Thus, according to his reading of the situation, while Ibn Taymiyya lays the foundation for the hermeneutical shift, it is Ibn Kathīr and al-Suyūṭī who actually started to apply it. Additionally, through his reading of the *Muqaddima*, Saleh concludes that implicit in Ibn Taymiyya's method 'was a full capitulation to the prophetic *Ḥadīth* and the interpretations of the first generations as the decipherers of divine speech'.¹⁹ The *Muqaddima* appears to envision commentaries as lists of *ḥadīths* as we see later with the exegete al-Suyūṭī.²⁰

However, after examining Ibn Taymiyya's various writings, I contend that it was Ibn Taymiyya *himself* who began the implementation of his own hermeneutic, and that he incorporates philology and the Biblical tradition into it. On the basis of the exegetical composition that survives from Ibn Taymiyya, we see that he is attempting to reprioritise the exegetical tradition in favour of tradition-based exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923).²¹ As Saleh explains, 'Ibn Taymiyya sought to rearrange the hierarchy of texts in the scholarly tradition of Qur'anic commentary'.²² In the process of re-ordering the hierarchy of exegetical texts, Ibn Taymiyya not only sticks to narrating *ḥadīths* but uses philological, historical, and even Biblical arguments to make his case. Ibn Kathīr would directly build upon Ibn Taymiyya's hermeneutic *and* exegetical interpretations, but with his own rigour, use of *ḥadīths*, and understanding of traditionalism.²³

In making my argument, I will examine Ibn Taymiyya's 'Treatise of Shu'ayb', an exegetical work that I contend was written after his *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*. In the 'Treatise', Ibn Taymiyya builds on many of the themes in the *Muqaddima*, such as the interpretation of the Qur'an through the Qur'an itself, through the Prophetic legacy (Sunna), and through *ḥadīths* transmitted from the Companions of Muḥammad and the following generation of the Successors. Ibn Taymiyya employs what he deems to be the most reliable and authentic *tafsīrs* to argue that Moses' father-in-law was not Shu'ayb, as many other exegetes have posited, but rather the Biblical Jethro, and that the messengers in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* were not the Disciples, but rather prophets sent before the time of Jesus. While the 'Treatise of Shu'ayb' is a very small sample from Ibn Taymiyya's vast exegetical engagement, the work does show him making exegetical moves that go beyond the *Muqaddima*.

What is consistent throughout the 'Treatise' is Ibn Taymiyya's desire to correct the exegetical tradition in regards to its conception of prophecy. As in his works on law and theology, he critiques the Ash'arī tradition for gradually incorporating errant opinions based on misreadings of the Qur'an and improper implementation of *ḥadīths*. These misunderstandings allowed the exegetical tradition to misattribute names to figures whom the Qur'an does not explicitly identify, and to blur the lines between prophets and non-prophets. For Ibn Taymiyya, prophets were a unique category: they were divinely protected from error as they were responsible for relaying God's message. Saints and righteous individuals, in contrast, were virtuous and models of emulation but were not divinely protected since they did not bring a new message. Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical works can thus be described as critical engagements with the exegetical tradition based on his theology of the early community (*salaf*).

Tracing the Development of Ibn Taymiyya's Exegetical Thoughts: Dating the *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr* and the 'Treatise of Shu'ayb'

While many contemporary scholars often cite Ibn Taymiyya simply by saying that 'the Shaykh al-Islam' believed this or stated that, more critical scholarship is now placing Ibn Taymiyya's work within a timeline in order to examine how his thought developed. Yahya Michot, for instance, demonstrates in his 'Ibn Taymiyya's Commentary on the Creed of al-Ḥallāj' that Ibn Taymiyya's opinion on the Ṣūfī master evolved from one that justified his execution because of his claim that God dwelled within him, to one contending that such statements were wrongly attributed to him. Michot successfully puts Ibn Taymiyya's writings within a chronology and makes the compelling case that the scholar's views on al-Ḥallāj are remarkably more complex than previously thought.

Likewise, I contend that Ibn Taymiyya's views on the Qur'an developed in that he worked to marginalise the Ash'arī *tafsīr* tradition and began to look at the Bible to better understand Qur'anic passages that had Biblical allusions. To make this argument, it is essential to date his *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr* since the work only briefly critiques Ash'arī exegetes and makes no reference to the use of Biblical material to interpret the Qur'an. In his 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of "An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'anic Exegesis"', Walid Saleh provides the most comprehensive analysis of the 'Introduction' and convincingly argues that Ibn Taymiyya attempted to shift the exegetical tradition away from the Ash'arī philological approach to one that was more *ḥadīth*-based. Towards the end of the 'Introduction', for instance, Ibn Taymiyya famously states that the best way to interpret the Qur'an is through the Qur'an, the Sunna, and then the sayings of the Companions and Successors. He makes only a fleeting reference to philology and there is no mention of the Bible.²⁴

In his analysis, Saleh briefly attempts to date the *Muqaddima* based on a close reading of the text itself: 'The treatise, as Ibn Taymiyya makes clear in its preface, was dictated from memory, probably during his last stint in jail, without access to his notes or books, and as such it shows a slight degree of disorganization and some fluidity in its composition.'²⁵ Saleh makes the astute observation that the 'Treatise' was written from memory (*min imlā' al-fu'ād*), suggesting that Ibn Taymiyya most likely composed the work during one of his many sojourns in jail, possibly his last. Saleh's statement here reflects a wider trend in the scholarship that views the *Muqaddima* as Ibn Taymiyya's final and most complete view of *tafsīr*. For instance, in his famous biography of Ibn Taymiyya, Muḥammad Abū Zahra draws exclusively from the *Muqaddima* for his chapter on Ibn Taymiyya's view of *tafsīr*. Abū Zahra does not examine any of Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical treatises or other works that engage the Qur'an.²⁶ However, from a close reading of the *Muqaddima*, I contend that the work could not have been composed during his last trip to jail because the

last two chapters appear to be written at a different time from the first four, since there is a sharp break in style and organisation, an observation that Saleh himself also makes.²⁷ Furthermore, it seems that Ibn Taymiyya wrote the last two chapters when he had access to a library, since he quotes all of his traditions with complete chains of transmission, a task very difficult to complete from memory. It is recorded that Ibn Taymiyya died during his last period of incarceration and did not have access to his library or notes.²⁸

More importantly, Saleh makes the essential point that ‘it is important to emphasize, however, that there has not been an exhaustive study of the manuscript tradition of this treatise.’²⁹ A close look at the manuscript tradition demonstrates that the editor of the first edition of the *Muqaddima*, Muḥammad Jamīl al-Shaṭṭī, found a manuscript with the date 712/1312–1313, in other words while Ibn Taymiyya was still living.³⁰ A Mamlūk scribe copied the *Muqaddima* in 712/1312–1313, indicating that Ibn Taymiyya must have written the treatise before that time. Thus, the manuscript evidence establishes that the *Muqaddima* was written not at the end of Ibn Taymiyya’s life but rather sometime early to mid career. If Ibn Taymiyya did write the treatise in jail, as Saleh speculates, then it could have been during one of the instances in which he was imprisoned in Egypt (705–712/1306–1313), a time when he was free to write and meet with students.³¹ Such a time period would also match with the structure of this treatise, since it begins by stating that a group of colleagues asked him to write the *Muqaddima*, a format that resembles one of his many fatwas that he wrote throughout his life and even when he was in prison. We can therefore conclude that Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretations of the Qur’an after 712/1312 must be seen as a continuation and possible development of his thought rather than a build up to the composition of the ‘Introduction’ at the end of his life. In my view, the *Muqaddima* was not Ibn Taymiyya’s final say on *tafsīr* but was rather part of a series of engagements with the exegetical tradition.

Regarding the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’, we can determine that Ibn Taymiyya wrote it after his *Muqaddima* based on evidence internal to the treatise. It appears that Ibn Taymiyya wrote the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’ and *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ* (‘The Correct Reply to Those Who Altered Christ’s Religion’)³² around the same time, since he refers to the other in each of the works; in the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’ he refers his readers to *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*,³³ while in *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* he seems to refer to the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’.³⁴ David Thomas dates *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* to soon after 716/1316 since that was the date that the ‘Letter to a Muslim Friend’, which forms the basis of *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, was sent to Ibn Taymiyya.³⁵ Additionally, the content of the treatise exhibits a continuation of Ibn Taymiyya’s thoughts in the *Muqaddima* since he continues to critique the Ash‘arī exegete al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035) and prioritises tradition-based exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī.

Thus, by examining the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’, we see Ibn Taymiyya making exegetical moves that go beyond the *Muqaddima*.

The ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’ and Ibn Taymiyya’s Engagement with Christianity

Scholarship has largely overlooked the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’, not realising its significance to the study of Ibn Taymiyya, Qur’anic hermeneutics, and Muslim-Jewish-Christian relations. Since its publication in 1969 by Rashād Sālim,³⁶ the treatise has been the subject of only one major study, C.E. Bosworth’s ‘The Qur’anic Prophet Shu‘aib and Ibn Taymiyya’s Epistle Concerning Him’. It is significant that Bosworth, one of the most important and prolific scholars of Islam in the twentieth century, was drawn to Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise, most likely because of his interest in Islam and the Biblical tradition. As the title of the article suggests, Bosworth was concerned primarily with the Prophet Shu‘ayb and then Ibn Taymiyya’s contribution to understanding the Qur’anic figure. For early orientalists, the story of Shu‘ayb was significant because it spoke to the origins of the Qur’an and its relationship with the Bible. Bosworth spends much of the first half of the article shedding light on the western debates on whether Shu‘ayb was an indigenous Arab prophet or derived from the Biblical tradition.

After reviewing western scholarship on Shu‘ayb, Bosworth transitions to examine the prophet Shu‘ayb within Muslim lore, primarily through the genre of the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (‘stories of the prophets’), in which Muslim writers added fascinating details to the concise Qur’anic story. For instance, Bosworth, speaks about how al-Tha‘labī believed that Moses’ father-in-law was in fact Shu‘ayb and cites traditions detailing how both the prophets quarreled over the staff that Moses would eventually use to defeat Pharaoh.³⁷ Likewise, in his own stories of the prophets, al-Kisā’ī adds numerous details to Shu‘ayb’s mission, from the misdeeds of the people’s financial transactions to the way in which the people of Midian were destroyed. Among the interesting details is the myth that Moses’ staff was originally given to Adam when he left Paradise and then passed down through a successive line of prophets until it reached Moses.³⁸

In the second half of his article, Bosworth turns to translating Ibn Taymiyya’s entire epistle on Shu‘ayb, demonstrating that the medieval scholar made an important contribution to the debates surrounding this Arab prophet. In his introduction to his translation, Bosworth makes a number of significant points regarding Ibn Taymiyya’s methodology and hermeneutic. He correctly notes that Ibn Taymiyya wrote the treatise as a response to the ‘entertainment genre’ of the *qiṣaṣ*, which sought more to entertain its readers than to provide an historical understanding of the Qur’an.³⁹ Bosworth additionally praises the treatise stating, ‘for the most part, [Ibn Taymiyya’s] arguments are reasoned and logical’.⁴⁰ He seems to agree with Ibn Taymiyya’s general conclusion that Moses’ father-in-law was the Biblical Jethro, not

the Arab prophet Shu‘ayb as some Muslim commentators had claimed, a view supported by modern scholarship.⁴¹ As Bosworth explains, many Muslim commentators came to confuse Shu‘ayb with Moses’ father-in-law since they are both associated with the city of Midian. The Qur’an narrates how Moses fled from Egypt to Midian and married the daughter of an unspecified old man (*shaykh*) of the city. In separate Qur’anic passages, Midian is also named as the city that Shu‘ayb was sent to as a prophet.⁴² However, for Ibn Taymiyya, even though the city could have been the same, Moses’ father-in-law and Shu‘ayb were two different people who lived in two different time periods. Nevertheless, even though Bosworth highlights Ibn Taymiyya’s engagement with the Bible, he repeats the common assertion that Ibn Taymiyya was against recourse to Jewish and Christian sources: ‘Despite his strenuous opposition to the Dhimmis and all of their works, Ibn Taymiyya does not hesitate to quote the People of the Book here and elsewhere in the epistle in support of his views.’⁴³ However, I contend that, in fact, the ‘Treatise’ is evidence that Ibn Taymiyya was *not* against all Jewish and Christian sources since he uses the Bible as a hermeneutical tool, something that is also evident in his other exegetical engagements.⁴⁴ By claiming that Ibn Taymiyya had a ‘strenuous opposition’ to Christian and Jewish sources, I believe Bosworth is endorsing a modern reading of Ibn Taymiyya, one which argues that Judeo-Christian literature should be removed from Qur’anic exegesis. What is striking here is that the narrative that Ibn Taymiyya was against *all* Jewish and Christian sources is so dominant that Bosworth seeks to affirm it even though the evidence within the treatise he is translating challenges such an assumption!

Moreover, Bosworth’s use of the word ‘Dhimmis’ seems odd and out of place in this context, especially since Ibn Taymiyya does not use the word in the treatise.⁴⁵ The word *dhimmī* refers to Jewish and Christian minorities who lived in Muslim lands and means ‘protected persons’.⁴⁶ The term implies a power differential between Muslim rulers and their non-Muslim subjects, and has often been used in contemporary times in polemical contexts.⁴⁷ Even though Ibn Taymiyya prioritises the Muslim sources in this treatise, I would argue that he does not conceptually see the Bible as a source of a Jewish or Christian minority, but rather part of the scriptural tradition of Islam. This is why Ibn Taymiyya does not use the word *dhimmī* in the treatise, but rather the Qur’anic term *ahl al-kitāb* (‘the People of the Book’). Even though Ibn Taymiyya believed that the Bible was distorted, he understood it to be scripture and reliable enough to use as a hermeneutical tool.

Regarding the translation of the treatise, Bosworth presents a strong rendering of the text, successfully being able to decipher difficult passages and present the work in lucid English. However, Bosworth seems unaware of how the treatise fits within Ibn Taymiyya’s larger intellectual project, specifically his works on the Qur’an and Christianity. For instance, Bosworth does not realise that Ibn Taymiyya spends much

of the treatise evaluating the traditions of al-Ṭabarī, resulting in some minor mistranslations. Nonetheless, despite these small criticisms, Bosworth was ahead of his time in recognising the significance of the treatise in that Ibn Taymiyya was writing against the entertainment genre of the stories of the Prophets and using the various historical-critical methods of his time to identify Moses' father-in-law.

Concerning Ibn Taymiyya's engagement with Christianity, scholarship has mostly focused on his *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, since it is his most significant writing on Christianity and is one of the most important refutations of Christianity in Islam.⁴⁸ Yet, there has been no work that discusses how Ibn Taymiyya's engagement with the 'Letter to the Muslim Friend' affected his own understanding of Islam and its most authoritative scriptures. More specifically, scholarship has not addressed how Ibn Taymiyya's engagement with Christianity led him to look more closely at Qur'anic verses that had Biblical allusions. Through his composition of *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, Ibn Taymiyya begins to examine Qur'anic verses in the light of the Biblical tradition. Furthermore, scholarship has not integrated how many of his fatwas and epistles are related to his larger works and fit within his overall thinking in terms of Christianity. The study of *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* is only one part of his greater understanding of Christianity and must be appreciated in conjunction with his other works, such as the 'Treatise of Shu'ayb'.

In summary, the scholarly work as a whole often divides Ibn Taymiyya's engagement with the Qur'an and Biblical literature between that of 'Qur'anic Studies' and that of 'Muslim-Christian polemics'. His *Muqaddima* is subsumed under 'Qur'anic studies' and incorporated within the study of *tafsīr*. On the other hand, his *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* falls under the study of 'Muslim-Christian polemics' and is consequently compared to other Muslim-Christian engagements such as that of Aḥmad b. Idrīs al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285)⁴⁹ or Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Damashqī (d. 727/1327).⁵⁰ However, such divisions can obscure the nature of Ibn Taymiyya's work, which does not divide neatly between such categories. As I will demonstrate, his engagement with *tafsīr* informed his understanding of Judaism and Christianity while his view of Judaism and Christianity led him to rethink *tafsīr*.

The Story of Shu'ayb

It is significant that the 'Treatise of Shu'ayb' is not one of Ibn Taymiyya's many fatwas in which scholars, students, and non-specialists approached him regarding an issue that they sought clarification about. In a fatwa, the thrust of the composition is external to the mufti, since he is answering a question rather than researching a topic that he himself is interested in.⁵¹ The fact that the 'Treatise of Shu'ayb' is not a fatwa but rather a treatise suggests that the issue of Moses' father-in-law was of particular interest to Ibn Taymiyya and something that he personally sought to clarify. Specifically, the treatise represents Ibn Taymiyya's increased interest in the

relationship between the Qur'an and Bible which was prompted by the 'Letter to a Muslim Friend'.⁵²

The first half of the treatise can be divided into three parts: first, the authentic Companion and Successor traditions all state that the man was not Shu'ayb; second, it historically does not make sense that the Arab prophet Shu'ayb could have communicated with Moses and live in a city which the Qur'an says was destroyed; last, the various 'staff traditions' in which Moses quarrels with his father-in-law over the possession of the staff are all inauthentic.⁵³

Ibn Taymiyya begins by arguing that the most famous and authoritative Companions and Successors believed that the *shaykh* referred to in the Qur'anic account was not Shu'ayb but rather Jethro.⁵⁴ As he states in his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Taymiyya believed that the Qur'an should be interpreted first on the basis of the Qur'an and the Sunna. However, since both texts are not explicit on who the father-in-law was, he moves to statements of the Companions and Successors. The relevant Qur'anic verses, Q. 28:22–28, read:

As he made his way towards Midian, he was saying, 'May my Lord guide me to the right way.' When he arrived at Midian's waters, he found a group of men watering [their flocks], and beside them two women keeping their flocks back, so he said, 'What is the matter with you two?' They said, 'We cannot water [our flocks] until the shepherds take their sheep away: our father is a very old man.' He watered their flocks for them, withdrew into the shade, and prayed, 'My Lord, I am in dire need of whatever good thing You may send me,' and then one of the two women approached him, walking shyly, and said, 'My father is asking for you: he wants to reward you for watering our flocks for us.' When Moses came to him and told him his story, the old man (shaykh) said, 'Do not be afraid, you are safe now from people who do wrong.' One of the women said, 'Father, hire him: a strong, trustworthy man is the best to hire.' The father said, 'I would like to marry you to one of these daughters of mine, on condition that you serve me for eight years: if you complete ten, it will be of your own free will. I do not intend to make things difficult for you: God willing, you will find I am a fair man.' Moses said, 'Let that be the agreement between us—whichever of the two terms I fulfil, let there be no injustice to me—God is witness to what we say.'

Ibn Taymiyya explains that the Qur'an does not mention if this *shaykh* was Shu'ayb or a prophet nor do the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) consider the man to be a prophet.⁵⁵ The opinion that it is Shu'ayb is not transmitted by any Companion, such as the famous Qur'an scholar Ibn 'Abbās, but rather it is narrated from the

Companions that it was not Shu‘ayb. As Ibn Taymiyya explains later in the treatise, a large contingent of Qur’anic exegetes believed that this old man was the Arab prophet Shu‘ayb since he is also associated with the city of Midian in the Qur’an. The Qur’an, for instance, states in Q. 29:36, *To the people of Midian, We sent their brother Shu‘ayb. He said, ‘My people, serve God and think ahead to the Last Day. Do not commit evil and spread corruption in the land’*. This verse, as well as others, states that Shu‘ayb was sent to the people of Midian.⁵⁶ However, in the verses in question, Q. 28:22–28, there is no explicit recognition of who this *shaykh* of Midian was.

To bolster his argument that the *shaykh* was not Shu‘ayb, Ibn Taymiyya cites Companion and Successor reports from the tradition-based *tafsīrs* of Sunayd b. Dawūd, the teacher of the *ḥadīth* scholar al-Bukhārī, and also al-Ṭabarī. Ibn Taymiyya mentions the works of both of these scholars in his *Muqaddima* as examples of sound *tafsīrs* in his list of fifteen tradition-based exegetes whom he endorses.⁵⁷ Ibn Taymiyya cites two Ibn ‘Abbās traditions from Sunayd’s *tafsīr* which assert that the man was Yathrā (Jethro) with the second tradition also noting that the man could have been Yathrūn. Ibn Taymiyya also cites other traditions that support the name as Yathrūn as Moses’ father-in-law⁵⁸ and adds traditions regarding the names of the two daughters with some noting that the daughter Moses married was Ṣafūra (Zipporah).⁵⁹

Ibn Taymiyya then cites from the famous exegete al-Ṭabarī, highlighting a tradition from Ibn ‘Abbās that states that the man was Yathrā. He also notes that there are other traditions from the Companions ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd and Abū ‘Ubayda who narrate that they believed the man was the nephew of Shu‘ayb and his name was Yathrūn. After citing the relevant Companion traditions, Ibn Taymiyya moves to quote the tradition from the Successor Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who asserts ‘They say it was Shu‘ayb the Prophet, but rather it was the master of the well of that time.’⁶⁰

Ibn Taymiyya concludes his citations by noting that both al-Sunayd and al-Ṭabarī narrate well-known and accepted chains of transmission from the Prophet and the Successors, and that none of them mention that Prophet Shu‘ayb was the old man. Rather they transmit through affirmed chains of transmission the statement of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: ‘They say that it was Shu‘ayb but it was not Shu‘ayb, but rather it was the master of the well at that time.’ Ibn Taymiyya notes that some unknown authorities attribute the opinion of Shu‘ayb to Ḥasan but that the authentic tradition has him explicitly say that ‘it was not Shu‘ayb’ (*laysa huwa Shu‘ayb*). Thus, the most important Companion and Successor exegetes, such as Ibn ‘Abbās and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, contend that the man was not Shu‘ayb. Ibn Taymiyya’s specific focus on Ibn ‘Abbās is particularly important because of his influential role in Qur’anic exegesis. In his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Taymiyya states that the most knowledgeable people on *tafsīr* are the people of Mecca since they were the students of Ibn ‘Abbās.⁶¹ He later

praises Ibn ‘Abbās, noting that he was the nephew of the Prophet, and uses his common appellation ‘Translator of the Qur’an’ (*tarjumān al-Qur’ān*).⁶² Ibn Taymiyya links Ibn ‘Abbās’ exegetical abilities to the blessing of the Prophet’s prayer, as passed down in a famous *ḥadīth*, ‘Oh God, give him [Ibn ‘Abbās] a good understanding of the religion and teach him [Qur’anic] interpretation (*ta’wīl*)’.⁶³ The implication of the prophetic prayer is that Ibn ‘Abbās’ exegetical abilities were part of a divine blessing.⁶⁴

Ibn Taymiyya then moves to contrast the works of Sunayd and al-Ṭabarī with the great exegete al-Tha‘labī, and goes out of his way to criticise al-Tha‘labī, noting that he mentioned the opinion of Shu‘ayb in his Qur’anic exegesis.⁶⁵ He declares ‘one should not look at [al-Tha‘labī’s] opinions’ since ‘he transmits the “lean and fat” (*ghath wa-samīn*)’, or, in the translation of Bosworth, the ‘wheat and chaff’. Ibn Taymiyya’s use of the phrase *ghath wa-samīn* is also echoed in his forward of his *Muqaddima* in which he explains that one of the reasons that he is writing the *Muqaddima* is because the books of Qur’anic exegesis are full of ‘wheat and chaff’ and he wanted to give students a guide in order to sort through the material. Later in the *Muqaddima* Ibn Taymiyya makes similar remarks regarding al-Tha‘labī, branding him a nocturnal wood gatherer (*ḥātib al-layl*). Just as a nocturnal woodcutter is incapable of determining the quality of the wood being cut because of the darkness, al-Tha‘labī simply included whatever tradition he could find because he was not knowledgeable regarding the sciences of *ḥadīth*.⁶⁶ As Walid Saleh summarises, Ibn Taymiyya believed that al-Tha‘labī:⁶⁷

... was a man of righteous conduct; unfortunately he collected anything and everything that came his way in previous tafsīr works, just like a nocturnal wood gatherer is unable to distinguish between the good and the bad. Ibn Taymiyya implies that al-Tha‘labī inadvertently gathered these fabricated Ḥadīths because he did not know better.

As we see in the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’, Ibn Taymiyya is frustrated that al-Tha‘labī transmits the name of Shu‘ayb as Moses’ father-in-law without any critical evaluation.

Ibn Taymiyya’s criticism of al-Tha‘labī seems to also revolve around the fact that al-Tha‘labī cites traditions that do not always have chains of transmission (*isnāds*) since he contrasts the exegete to Sunayd and al-Ṭabarī who ‘narrate well-known and accepted chains of transmission’.⁶⁸ Al-Tha‘labī, for instance, cites Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as an authority who believed that the *shaykh* was Shu‘ayb but provides no chains of transmission to corroborate the authenticity of this claim.⁶⁹ If authentic, such a tradition would contradict Ibn Taymiyya’s argument that the *shaykh* was not Shu‘ayb. Saleh contends that al-Tha‘labī’s lack of *isnāds* helped with the *tafsīr*’s

user-friendliness: ‘The dropping of *isnād* in the body of the commentary explains the popularity of al-Tha‘labī’s work, since it was easier to use than the cumbersome work of al-Ṭabarī.’⁷⁰ However, for the *ḥadīth* scholar, not citing the *isnāds* was careless because without a chain of transmission it was impossible to verify a tradition. *Ḥadīth* scholars would corroborate the various *isnāds* of a tradition in order to see if the report potentially came from the source it claimed to originate from.⁷¹

Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of al-Tha‘labī is significant because it provides us with a window into the Mamlūk intellectual milieu that Ibn Taymiyya was working within. Even though Ibn Taymiyya emphasises the works of al-Sunayd and al-Ṭabarī, he had to contend with the influential al-Tha‘labī, which confirms Saleh’s thesis that the exegete was much more important to the history of Qur’anic exegesis than previously thought.⁷² Before Ibn Taymiyya can transition totally to al-Ṭabarī, which he will do later, he must challenge al-Tha‘labī’s important stature and explain why he did not deserve the position that he held. Indeed, the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’ could be understood as a response to what Ibn Taymiyya viewed as the ‘inept *ḥadīth* scholar’⁷³ al-Tha‘labī and the Ash‘arī exegetical tradition which hopelessly incorporated traditions into their commentary without any critical methodology. In his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Taymiyya strongly critiques the scholastic theologians (*ahl al-kalām*), many of whom were Ash‘arī, who he believes are ‘far from the knowledge of *ḥadīth* and its specialists; they don’t distinguish between a sound and a weak *ḥadīth*. They doubt the authenticity of *ḥadīth* or certainty in [a particular *ḥadīth*] despite it being known to be certain to the *ḥadīth* specialist.’⁷⁴ The scholastic theologians were incompetent in the sciences of *ḥadīth* to the point where they could not ascertain an authentic *ḥadīth* from a weak one and even doubted *ḥadīths* that were widely known to *ḥadīth* scholars as reliable.

After his critique of al-Tha‘labī, Ibn Taymiyya re-emphasises that the opinion of Shu‘ayb cannot be substantiated from the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Companions, and the sayings of the reliable Muslim scholars. Those who hold on to the opinion that the *shaykh* is Shu‘ayb conflict with what is affirmed by Ibn ‘Abbās and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, as well as Jews and Christians (or, more literally, the people of two scriptures (*ahl al-kitābayn*)). Jews and Christians are in agreement that the *shaykh* was not Shu‘ayb, the Prophet, for the Torah in the possession of the Jews in Ibn Taymiyya’s day, and the Gospel (*Injīl*) in the possession of the Christians, both state that his name is Yathrūn.⁷⁵ The Prophet Shu‘ayb, Ibn Taymiyya adds, is not even mentioned in the Torah, giving further credence to the idea that the *shaykh* could not have been the Arab prophet. In another instance, when citing the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’ in a later work, Ibn Taymiyya references Jewish and Christian scholars by stating, ‘the scholars of the pious ancestors (*ahl al-salaf*) and the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) know that [the *shaykh*] was not Shu‘ayb’.⁷⁶ Thus, the scholars of

the early Muslim community (*salaf*) and Jewish and Christian scholars all agree that the *shaykh* was not Shu‘ayb but rather another man.

Here Ibn Taymiyya makes the important hermeneutical turn, for he uses the Bible and Jewish and Christian scholarship as a corroborating element in his argument that Moses’ father-in-law was not Shu‘ayb. He states that Jews and Christians do not have the Arab Prophet Shu‘ayb mentioned in the Torah but rather have Moses’ father-in-law as Yathrā. Although Ibn Taymiyya does not cite the relevant Biblical verses, he is referencing Exodus 2:16–21:

But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well. The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock. When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, ‘How is it that you have come back so soon today?’ They said, ‘An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock’. He said to his daughters, ‘Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread’. Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage.

While Moses’ father-in-law is named Reuel in this passage, he is referred to more frequently as Jethro in the Bible.⁷⁷ For instance, a little later in Exodus 3:1, the Bible narrates that ‘Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian’ before he comes across the Burning Bush. Yet, despite the differences of names, none of the Biblical narratives have Shu‘ayb as Moses’ father-in-law, a point that Ibn Taymiyya employs in his argumentation. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even though Ibn Taymiyya references the Bible he is suspicious regarding the contents of the Torah and the Gospels, as can be seen by the fact that he qualifies reference to them with the statement that he is referring to the books ‘in the possession (*inda*) of the Jews’ and then ‘in the possession of the Christians’ suggesting that they were potentially distorted (*tahrīf*).⁷⁸ He further does not give the Bible as much intellectual weight as the scholarship of the Companions, Successors, and later Muslim exegetes, since he quotes the Bible after emphasising their authority. Nonetheless, Ibn Taymiyya is completely aware that the Qur’anic story has a Biblical parallel and draws on the Bible to solve the Qur’anic exegetical debate.⁷⁹

Ibn Taymiyya’s use of the Bible here flies against the dominant trends in scholarship that view medieval Muslim scholars, particularly Ibn Taymiyya, as only employing the Bible for polemical ends. The medieval period is generally thought to be an era of intellectual decline, and it is often said that it is only with modernity that Muslims

begin to draw on the Bible to better understand the Qur'an.⁸⁰ As noted above, Bosworth himself adopts the position that Ibn Taymiyya had a 'strenuous opposition to the Dhimmis and all of their works' and seems surprised to find that Ibn Taymiyya references the Bible. Ibn Taymiyya's use of the Bible, however, was not an aberration but part of the encyclopedic Mamlūk milieu in which an array of Muslim scholars engaged with the scripture. Scholars from al-Tūfī (d. 716/1316) to al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480) employed the Bible for a variety of purposes and even used it to better understand parts of the Qur'an.⁸¹

Ibn Taymiyya then begins a new section in which he argues based on historical grounds that the *shaykh* could not have been Shu'ayb. The first argument rests on the ethnic and linguistic identity of Shu'ayb. Ibn Taymiyya states that 'more than one of the scholars noted' that Shu'ayb was an Arab, which is supported by a *ḥadīth* narrated by Ibn Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938). Shu'ayb is therefore similar to the Arab prophets of Hūd and Šāliḥ.⁸² Moses, on the other hand, was a Hebrew and he did not know the language of Shu'ayb (*lisānahu*). However, it is apparent from the Qur'anic text that Moses spoke directly to the two women and their father (the *shaykh*) without a translator. Knowing this fact, the *shaykh* could not have been Shu'ayb because he was an Arab prophet and would not have been able to speak the language of Moses.⁸³

Ibn Taymiyya further adds that the Qur'an indicates that God destroyed the people of Shu'ayb and consequently nobody was left in the city; Shu'ayb would not reside in a city where there were no inhabitants. A Prophetic tradition mentions that when the prophets' people are destroyed, they travel to Mecca and reside there until they die; some scholars even note that Shu'ayb's grave is in Mecca similar to that of other prophets, such as the Qur'anic prophet Hūd. The implication is that Shu'ayb would not have stayed in Midian after it was destroyed but would have travelled elsewhere, such as Mecca. However, when Moses came to Midian it was inhabited by the *shaykh* and his daughters, making it impossible that they were the people of Shu'ayb mentioned in the Qur'an. Moreover, those who say that it was the nephew or cousin of Shu'ayb do not transmit from authoritative sources (*ṥabt*). Rather the authoritative transmission from Ibn 'Abbās (that the man is Yathrā) is not overturned by the opinions of those who believe it was Shu'ayb or one of his relatives.

What is important in this section is that Ibn Taymiyya goes beyond the narrations to see whether the *shaykh* being Shu'ayb could be historically plausible. Shu'ayb was an Arab prophet and Moses was a Hebrew; it would not be possible for them to communicate without an interpreter. Furthermore, the Qur'an speaks of the people of Midian being completely destroyed making it unlikely that Shu'ayb or one of his relatives could have been the man in the story. Ibn Taymiyya is most convinced by the narration from Ibn 'Abbās that the man was Jethro (Yathrā).

Ibn Taymiyya concludes his commentary on Shu‘ayb by criticising the various ‘staff traditions’ found in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* which state that Shu‘ayb, the *shaykh*, or the Angel Gabriel gave Moses the staff that he would later use to confront Pharaoh.⁸⁴ Ibn Taymiyya finds all of these narrations problematic, and states that they cannot be affirmed. For instance, one narration states that ‘Adam took with him the staff from Heaven, then Gabriel snatched it, and after that Gabriel met Moses one night and passed it on to him’.⁸⁵ The tradition asserts that Moses’ staff was heavenly, something that cannot be corroborated by the Qur’an or Prophetic *ḥadīths*. Ibn Taymiyya paraphrases another story from al-Suddī (d. 128/745)⁸⁶ in which the father of the two women orders his daughter to bring Moses a staff, and the staff was given to him by an angel in the form of a man.⁸⁷ Then the father-in-law quarrels with Moses over its possession and they both agree to have a man arbitrate between them with Moses eventually winning the staff. Some even narrate that Moses was more trustworthy and deserving of the staff than his father-in-law. In his summary of al-Ṭabarī’s traditions, Ibn Taymiyya removes fascinating details and does not cite the more extraordinary traditions such as one in which the staff repeatedly flies into Moses’ hands, suggesting that it would eventually serve an important purpose.⁸⁸

Ibn Taymiyya finds fault in all of these traditions, arguing that if Moses’ father-in-law was the prophet Shu‘ayb, he would not have quarreled with Moses, he would not regret giving the staff to him, and he would not have forced an arbitration. At the time of this story, Moses had not been called to prophecy and thus would not be more deserving of the staff than Shu‘ayb, who was already a prophet at the time; it would not make sense for Moses before his prophecy to be more perfect than a prophet. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya ends the section with a narration stating that it is possible that the old man in the story knew that Moses was a prophet.⁸⁹ If this were the case, then his behaviour would be understandable as it is commonly known that the scholars and rabbis were aware of the signs of prophecy and would inform the prophets of their impending prophecy before they were sent on their mission. Ibn Taymiyya thus accepts the idea that the old man in the story was not Shu‘ayb but a righteous man who could have discerned the fact that Moses had a future prophetic career. Yet, as Ibn Taymiyya admits, God is the most knowledgeable of such affairs (*Allāh subḥānahu a‘lam*).

What is noteworthy in this section is that Ibn Taymiyya is now evaluating traditions found within al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*. It is as if Ibn Taymiyya has taken his own advice by no longer looking at al-Tha‘labī, since it is full of ‘wheat and chaff’, and instead transitions completely to al-Ṭabarī. However, Ibn Taymiyya is much more charitable to al-Ṭabarī, only criticising his traditions and not the entire exegesis itself. Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya is not doing a proper *ḥadīth* evaluation of these traditions, something that is prominent throughout Ibn Kathīr’s *tafsīr*. He is not cross-referencing the reports within authoritative *ḥadīth* collections, nor is he

spending a great amount of time analysing the chains of transmissions. Rather, his objections to these ‘staff traditions’ are primarily theological, since it would not be sensible for a prophet to quarrel with Moses. Ibn Taymiyya seems not to have the patience for such a drawn out *ḥadīth* evaluation and seems to be hurriedly running through these traditions in order to get to the important theological content.⁹⁰

In summary, Ibn Taymiyya makes a number of important exegetical moves in his argument that Moses’ father-in-law could not have been Shu‘ayb. We see that Ibn Taymiyya is trying to implement many of the principles laid out in his *Muqaddima*, such as the fact that the Qur’an should be interpreted by the Qur’an, the Sunna, and the Companions and Successors. However, since the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition are silent on who the *shaykh* was, he moves to Companion and Successor reports. In doing so he relies heavily on what he deems to be the reliable *tafsīrs* of Sunayd, al-Ṭabarī, and Ibn Ḥātim al-Rāzī. Thus, Ibn Taymiyya distances himself from Ash‘arī exegesis, particularly that of al-Tha‘labī, since he believed that the *tafsīrs* simply narrate ‘wheat and chaff’ and do not correctly sort through the various traditions and chains of transmission. For Ibn Taymiyya, the Ḥasan al-Baṣrī tradition that the man was not Shu‘ayb is authentic and the Ibn ‘Abbās narration that the *shaykh* was Jethro (Yathrā) is the most plausible.

Moreover, we see a new hermeneutical tool that is not explicitly mentioned in the *Muqaddima* in that Ibn Taymiyya employs the Bible and Jewish and Christian scholarship on it in making his argument, something that previous exegetes like al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha‘labī do not directly do. However, Ibn Taymiyya situates the Bible within the framework of Muslim sources and uses it as a corroborating tool after the Companion and Successor reports. While scholars frequently highlight how Ibn Taymiyya is against the Bible and Biblical literature, here he uses the Bible to confirm one side of a debate that is already going on in the Islamic exegetical tradition. For Ibn Taymiyya, early exegetical authorities, such as Ibn ‘Abbās and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, are ascribed narrations that are confirmed by the Bible and Jewish and Christian scholarship. Ibn Taymiyya’s use of the Biblical tradition also coincides with the historical arguments that Moses was a Hebrew and Shu‘ayb was an Arab, making it impossible that they could have communicated without a translator. The Qur’an additionally mentions that the town was completely destroyed, making it unlikely that Shu‘ayb would be residing there.

Lastly, we see a theological interest in defining prophecy that carries through the treatise, a theme that continues in his other works.⁹¹ The thrust of the treatise is not trying to determine who the *shaykh* is, but rather to argue that he is not Shu‘ayb and thus not a prophet. Ibn Taymiyya’s argument that the *shaykh* was not a prophet is particularly significant in his evaluation of the various traditions in which the *shaykh* and Moses quarrel over the staff. For Ibn Taymiyya, it does not make sense that a prophet would fight with Moses or that the pre-prophetic Moses was more

trustworthy than a prophet. Hence Ibn Taymiyya dismisses these ‘staff traditions’ primarily on theological grounds, not because they are not found in authoritative *ḥadīth* collections or cannot be corroborated by other traditions. This theological interest of defining who is a prophet continues in the next section of ‘The Treatise’ regarding the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn*.

The Messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn*

Ibn Taymiyya begins a new section of the treatise, in which he connects his argument that Moses’ father-in-law was not Shu‘ayb to his claim that the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* could not have been the Disciples of Christ. Ibn Taymiyya prefaces his argument with a polemical paragraph stating that those who hold the opinion of Shu‘ayb as Moses’ father-in-law do not have any knowledge of the realities of scholarship and its evidences, whether it be through the transmitted or rational sources.⁹² No intelligent person could be taken in by such an argument and those who hold the opinion are only ascribed with having knowledge, but are not necessarily knowledgeable in themselves. An opinion of a scholar who disagrees with his contemporary is not an argument in itself but must be backed up with evidences. Even though Ibn Taymiyya does not explicitly say so, he is most likely critiquing al-Tha‘labī once again since he believed that he did not appropriately navigate the rational and transmitted sources.

Ibn Taymiyya then continues to refute an argument found within the ‘Letter to a Muslim Friend’ which claims that the Qur’an endorses the Christian theological position that the Disciples were divinely protected from error (*ma‘ṣūm*). As David Thomas and Rifaat Ebied explain, ‘the main body of the letter goes on to lay out a long series of arguments which are supposedly found in the Qur’an itself in favor of Christian doctrines and against any requirement to abandon them’.⁹³ One of these arguments is that the Qur’an supports the idea that the Disciples of Christ were messengers (*rusul*) of God.⁹⁴

To justify his argument, the author of the ‘Letter to a Muslim Friend’ references the ‘messengers’ of *Sūrat Yā Sīn*. The relevant verses, 13–21, read:

Give them the example of the people to whose town messengers (mursalīn) came. We sent two messengers but they rejected both. Then We reinforced them with a third. They said, ‘Truly, we are messengers to you,’ but they answered, ‘You are only men like ourselves. The Lord of Mercy has sent nothing; you are just lying.’ They said, ‘Our Lord knows that we have been sent to you. Our duty is only to deliver the message to you’, but they answered, ‘We think you are an evil omen. If you do not stop, we shall stone you, and inflict a painful torment on you.’ The messengers said, ‘The evil omen is within yourselves. Why do you take it as an evil omen when you are

reminded of the Truth? You are going too far!’ Then, from the furthest part of the city, a man came running. He said, ‘My people, follow the messengers (mursalīn). Follow them: they are not asking you to reward them and they are rightly guided.’

In particular, the author cites verse 20, *Then, from the furthest part of the city, a man came running. He said, ‘My people, follow the messengers (mursalīn)’* and stresses the last part of the verse, *follow the messengers (mursalīn)*. For the Christian author, the ‘messengers’ here are the Disciples who came to the city to spread the message of Christ.⁹⁵ Compounding this problem for Ibn Taymiyya was the fact that many Qur’anic exegetes, such as al-Tha‘labī, maintained that the ‘messengers’ here referred to the Disciples.⁹⁶

Ibn Taymiyya refutes this argument that the ‘messengers’ were the Disciples of Christ based on a reading of the entire Qur’anic story and his own reading of early Christian history. He explains the fact that the village referenced in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* was destroyed, making it impossible for it to be the city of Antioch to which the Disciples were sent.⁹⁷ He then goes on to say that the section on the messengers in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* ends with verse 29: *there was just one blast, and they fell down lifeless (khāmidūn)*. If we complete the story, and do not just reference Q. 36:20, then we learn that the people of the city were destroyed because they rejected the messengers’ call to faith. As verses 20–29 read:

*Then, from the furthest part of the city, a man came running. He said, ‘My people, follow the messengers (mursalīn). Follow them: they are not asking you to reward them and they are rightly guided. Why should I not worship the One who created me? It is to Him that you will be returned. How could I take besides Him any other gods, whose intercession will not help me and who would not be able to save me if the Lord of Mercy wished to harm me? Then I would clearly be in the wrong. I believe in your Lord, so listen to me.’ He was told, ‘Enter the Garden,’ so he said, ‘If only my people knew how my Lord has forgiven me and set me among the highly honoured.’ After him We did not send any army from heaven against his people, nor were We about to: there was just one blast, and **they fell down lifeless (khāmidūn)**.*

Ibn Taymiyya stresses the last part of the verse, *they fell down lifeless (khāmidūn)*, as an indication that the people of the city rebuffed the messenger’s call to faith and were destroyed. In contrast, the people of Antioch believed in the two Disciples sent to their city and both the Muslims and the People of the Book agree that the city of Antioch was not destroyed. Thus, how could one say that the messengers of *Sūrat Yā*

Sīn are the Disciples? Here, once again, we see that Ibn Taymiyya references Biblical history to make his argument.

Furthermore, the man (*rajul*) who runs into the town to warn his people is frequently identified as Ḥabīb al-Najjār,⁹⁸ and he was not alive during the time of Christ and the Disciples. Rather, the messengers in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* were prophets sent before Jesus' time and Ḥabīb al-Najjār believed in those prophets, not the Disciples. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya does entertain the possibility that the messengers could have been sent to Antioch before the time of the Disciples. Antioch could have been destroyed after the people disbelieved and then rebuilt and inhabited during the time of Jesus.

Ibn Taymiyya concludes his argument clarifying that the Disciples are not the messengers of God but rather the messengers of Christ; they are similar to the Companions of Muḥammad who the Prophet sent to various kings. Thus whoever considers the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* as being the Disciples is unknowingly falling into a Christian apologetical argument. Here Ibn Taymiyya is referring to the 'Letter to a Muslim Friend', which explicitly states that the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* were the Disciples. The anonymous author quotes various Qur'anic verses and contends that when the Qur'an speaks of 'messengers' it is actually referring to the Disciples, not prophets as Muslims claim.⁹⁹ Ibn Taymiyya then mentions that he expands on the idea that the Disciples were not messengers of God in his *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* (*Radd 'alā al-Naṣāra*). He explains that in his *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* he details how Christians falsely claim that the Disciples were messengers of God similar to the messengers of Abraham and Moses. Some even prefer the Disciples over Abraham and Moses, which is disbelief according to Muslims.

When we look at *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, we see that Ibn Taymiyya adds several more arguments in favour of the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* not being the Disciples.¹⁰⁰ Much of his arguments rest on a close reading of the entire section of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* and paying attention to the linguistic structure of the Qur'an and its worldview.¹⁰¹ For instance, the Qur'an speaks about God sending the messengers, not Jesus himself. The Qur'an states, *We sent (arsalnā) to them two and they rejected them so We reinforced them (fa-'azzaznā) with a third ...* The verse speaks in the royal past tense in that 'We sent' to them and that 'We reinforced'.¹⁰² For Ibn Taymiyya, this Qur'anic structure represents God Himself sending and helping His messengers, not any of the prophets.¹⁰³ Moreover, the Qur'an speaks of a total of three messengers while 'the Christians say' that only two Disciples came to Antioch after Christ's ascension. It is said that their names were Paul and Simon and that they called the people to God and even raised the King's son back to life. It is therefore not possible that the three messengers here could be referring to the two Disciples.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, the exchange between the town's peoples and the messengers suggests that they were the messengers of God, not of Christ. When the town's people reject the messengers' call, they say, *You are only men like ourselves. The Lord of Mercy has sent nothing; you are just lying.* The town's people are responding to the messengers' claim that God, the *Lord of Mercy*, had sent them, not Jesus.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, when the people reject the messengers, they say, *you are only men like us.* Such a response would only make sense if they were prophets since nobody would doubt that the messengers of prophets (*rusul rusul Allāh*) were not men. Rather the people are troubled with the idea that messengers of God could be people like themselves.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, when the messengers hear the town's people's response, they do not refer the people to the prophet who sent them or to his companions in order to verify their claim.¹⁰⁷ Rather they respond by saying, *Our Lord knows that we have been sent to you. Our duty is only to deliver the message to you.* Their response indicates that they are messengers of God and their duty is to proclaim His message.

Ibn Taymiyya also contextualises the story of the messengers within the sura itself and within the larger Qur'anic language and theology. At the end of the story, the Qur'an turns its attention to the Arab polytheists who rejected Muḥammad's call and states, *Alas for human beings! Whenever a messenger comes to them they ridicule him. Do they not see how many generations We have destroyed before them, none of whom will ever come back to them?* The Qur'an is using the story of the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* as a warning to the Arab polytheists in that God may punish them (*intaqama*) as He has punished people before them. The story also provides comfort to Muḥammad in learning about the plight of previous messengers and how their people continued to reject them as well. It would only make sense to comfort Muḥammad with prophets like himself, not messengers or companions of prophets.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the Qur'an never speaks of the messengers that Muḥammad sent to the various kings as 'messengers of God' (*rusul Allāh*).¹⁰⁹ Thus if Muḥammad's messengers are not mentioned as 'messengers of God', how could the Qur'an speak of 'messengers of God' of another prophet?¹¹⁰ For Ibn Taymiyya, what is intended (*maqṣūd*) is the explanation of the meaning of the Qur'an (*bayān ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*) and what God intended through it.¹¹¹

Regarding the comparison between the Disciples and Companions, Ibn Taymiyya has a whole section devoted in his *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* arguing that the Disciples were not divinely protected from error (*ma'ṣūmūn*). Ibn Taymiyya critiques the Christian view that the Disciples were divinely protected (*ma'ṣūm*) messengers of God (*rusul*) but not prophets. For Ibn Taymiyya, being a messenger (*rasūl*) but not a prophet (*nabī*) is problematic, since only prophets are divinely protected from mistakes. Even if the Disciples were the greatest saints (*awliyā' Allāh*) and possessed miracles, they were still human beings prone to error.¹¹² Ibn Taymiyya then compares the Disciples

to the Rightly Guided Caliphs, who are seen within Sunnī Islam as the closest Companions to Muḥammad and model Muslims. Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Alī were the best of people and even better than the Disciples but were not prophets and not protected from error (*ma ‘šūm*). In a later section, Ibn Taymiyya explains that the Companions also had miracles but were not considered divinely protected.¹¹³ ‘Umar, in particular, was thought to be inspired (*mulham*) by God, who made truth appear in his heart and on his tongue. Nevertheless, he made mistakes and Muslims are not required to accept what he said if it did not correspond to the Qur’an and Sunna.¹¹⁴

In summary, the ‘Letter to the Muslim Friend’ prompted Ibn Taymiyya to reexamine the Muslim exegetical tradition, much of which had argued that the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* were the Disciples of Christ. Using textual and historical reasoning, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the Disciples of Christ could not have been the messengers in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* because the people of the city were eventually destroyed due to their disbelief. In contrast, the Disciples were sent to the people of Antioch who believed in their call and were hence saved. The man who encourages his people to follow the messengers, Ḥabīb al-Najjār, was not a contemporary of the Disciples, making it even more unfeasible that the Disciples were the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn*. In Ibn Taymiyya’s view, the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* were prophets sent before the time of Christ to Antioch or another city. In his *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, Ibn Taymiyya stresses philological arguments such as the phrase ‘We sent (*arsalnā*)’ as solely referring to God sending messengers and that the people’s response suggests that they believed them to be messengers of God. The Qur’an never speaks of Muḥammad’s messengers as ‘messengers of God’, making it unlikely that it would use that language to describe Jesus’ messengers.

Ibn Taymiyya additionally contextualises the Qur’anic verses by understanding them within their Qur’anic section or pericope. One of his consistent criticisms throughout *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* is that the Christian author of the ‘Letter’ selectively picks Qur’anic verses to justify his argument, removing them from their original contexts. Instead of seeing the verses in isolation, Ibn Taymiyya tries to put the Qur’anic verse within their contexts and within the larger Qur’anic worldview. As he states in his *Muqaddima*, one should first try to interpret the Qur’an through the Qur’an itself (i.e. not first through Christian sources). When these verses are put within their proper section in the chapter, we see that they are a warning to the Arab polytheists to follow their messenger, and intended to comfort Muḥammad by narrating to him the story of messengers before him.

Lastly, what is fascinating about Ibn Taymiyya’s analysis is that while he refutes the Christian ‘Letter to a Muslim Friend’, he uses Christian sources to make his argument. Whereas the Christian author of the ‘Letter’ contends that the verses in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* are the Disciples, Ibn Taymiyya asserts that Christian history in fact

supports the idea that the ‘messengers’ were not the Disciples. Muslims and Christians are in agreement that the people of Antioch believed in Christ and were not subject to God’s punishment, making it impossible that the messengers here refer to the Disciples. Christian history also states that there were two Disciples sent to Antioch, not the three that *Sūrat Yā Sīn* refers to. We thus see in Ibn Taymiyya’s refutation of the Christian ‘Letter’ that he accepts Christian history and the Biblical tradition as a Muslim hermeneutical tool.

Conclusion

The ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’ is an important part of the history of Qur’anic exegesis as it represents the traditionalist movement distancing itself from the Ash‘arī scholastic tradition. Ibn Taymiyya reprioritises the texts within the exegetical tradition, quoting from al-Ṭabarī, Sunayd, and Ibn Ḥātim al-Rāzī, and marginalises the work of al-Tha‘labī. For Ibn Taymiyya, al-Tha‘labī and other Ash‘arī exegetes carelessly incorporated traditions within their commentaries and were unable to distinguish between strong and weak *ḥadīths*. This ultimately led many of them to wrongly identify Moses’ father-in-law with Shu‘ayb and the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* with the Disciples. In Ibn Taymiyya’s view, a correct reading of the Qur’anic text that prioritises understanding the Qur’an through the Qur’an, the Sunna, and the early Muslim community would lead one to conclude that Moses’ father-in-law was Jethro and that the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* were prophets sent before the time of Jesus.

Throughout his argumentation, Ibn Taymiyya places a strong emphasis on reading the Qur’an through the Qur’an itself. In doing so he compares and contrasts the story of Moses’ father-in-law with the various verses of the story of Shu‘ayb and argues that they could not have been the same person. The Qur’an speaks of God completely destroying the people of Midian, making it impossible that Shu‘ayb would stay in an uninhabited city and then marry one of his daughters to Moses. Similarly, the Qur’anic structure in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* alludes to God sending the messengers, and the people’s response suggests that they understood that they claimed to be messengers of God, not Christ. As a whole, the entire story of the messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* aims to warn the Arab polytheists that God could punish them if they do not heed Muḥammad’s call, and to comfort the Prophet by giving him examples of previous prophets like himself.

We also see that Ibn Taymiyya consistently references the Bible, Jewish and Christian scholarship, and Biblical history to make his argument, a hermeneutical move which stands against current dominant narratives of the scholar and medieval Muslim engagement of the Bible. Based on readings of his *Muqaddima*, modern scholarship frequently sees Ibn Taymiyya as against philology and Biblical literature, and endorsing a Qur’anic hermeneutic of using only Prophetic traditions. However, I have argued that Ibn Taymiyya’s *Muqaddima* was an early to mid-career

work and that his Qur'anic hermeneutic continued to evolve till the end of his life. In particular, his engagement with the 'Letter to a Muslim Friend' prompted him to examine Qur'anic verses that had Biblical allusions or were attributed to early Christian history. In the 'Treatise of Shu'ayb', he references the Bible and Jewish and Christian scholarship to argue that the *shaykh* was not Shu'ayb but rather Jethro, an opinion that is in accordance with authentic traditions from the Companion Ibn 'Abbās and Successor Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. Likewise, Ibn Taymiyya contends that Christian history does not support the idea that the Messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* were the Disciples since the people of Antioch believed in them making it impossible that the city was the same one that the Qur'an states was destroyed because of their disbelief. Moreover, Christian history speaks of two Disciples going to Antioch, not the three mentioned in *Sūrat Yā Sīn*. Ibn Taymiyya therefore incorporates Biblical scholarship within his hierarchy of Islamic sources and uses it as a corroborating element to support views already expressed in the Muslim exegetical tradition.

What is consistent throughout the treatise is Ibn Taymiyya's interest in defining prophecy. Ibn Taymiyya is adamant that Moses' father-in-law and the Disciples are not messengers and thus not divinely protected. Ibn Taymiyya's view that the *shaykh* was not a prophet is particularly significant in regards to the various traditions in which the old man supposedly fights with Moses over possession of the staff. In Ibn Taymiyya's opinion, a prophet would not have quarreled with Moses, nor regretted giving the staff to him. Similarly, Ibn Taymiyya found it problematic that the Qur'an would endorse a Christian theological position that the Disciples were divinely protected messengers (*rusul*). For Ibn Taymiyya, the Disciples were akin to the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad who spread the message but who erred. Thus, Jethro, Ḥabīb al-Najjār, and the Disciples could have been righteous men who could have discerned prophets that they encountered but were not divinely protected prophets themselves. We therefore see that Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical writings are not *ḥadīth* evaluations (*takhrīj*) in the manner of Ibn Kathīr or lists of *ḥadīths* similar to that of al-Suyūfī. While Ibn Taymiyya was concerned with *ḥadīth* authentication and critiques traditions, we see a strong focus on theology in defining prophecy.

NOTES

I would like to thank a number of people who helped bring this article into fruition. John Kaltner, Paul Heck, Diego Sarrio, and Walid Saleh all read earlier drafts and provided helpful comments and suggestions. Walid deserves special thanks for providing much of the intellectual foundations of this article. Jon Hoover has been an essential reference for me on Ibn Taymiyya and his intellectual rigour has set a high standard for the field. Mohamed Hag Magid was the first person I studied the *Muqaddima* with and he has been a constant source of knowledge and inspiration. Allegheny's Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies (Eric Boynton, Glenn Holland, Carl Olson, Ron Bernstein-Goff, Rehenuma Asmi, Eric Palmer, Tal Correm and Steve Farrelly-Jackson) provided the collegial and hospitable environment where much of this article was written. Our building coordinator, Ashley Wright,

was kind enough to edit this article and provide helpful stylistic suggestions. Linda Ernst from the library was very efficiently able to track down all of the resources I needed from libraries throughout the world. Any mistakes are my own.

1 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya*, vol. 13, p. 303. Al-Dhahabī also alludes to Ibn Taymiyya's *tafsīr* classes ('Abd al-Hādī, *al-'Uqūd al-durriyya*, p. 8, p. 21).

2 This lecture was on the *basmala* or the verse *In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful* (al-Dāwūdī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, vol. 1, p. 47).

3 As al-Birzālī chronicles, it was his habit to teach a *tafsīr* class every Friday morning ('Abd al-Hādī, *al-'Uqūd al-durriyya*, p. 13). Ibn Kathīr also records that it was Ibn Taymiyya's habit (*ādatihi*) to teach every Friday at the Umayyad mosque (Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya*, vol. 14, p. 4).

4 al-Dāwūdī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, vol. 1, p. 47.

5 Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines*. More work needs to be done on the extent to which Laoust has set the parameters of the study of Ibn Taymiyya. The more recent edited volume by Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, does have a chapter devoted to Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical views which will be discussed below.

6 For exceptions to this rule, see Baraka, *Ibn Taymiyya wa-juhūduhu* (Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics'). Elliot Bazzano is also publishing parts of his dissertation on Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical insights. As he states in his review of the secondary literature on Ibn Taymiyya, 'Although Ibn Taymiyya produced hundreds of books, he is not generally known for his work in qur'anic exegesis, even though he made important contributions to the field' (Bazzano, 'Ibn Taymiyya', p. 121). Moreover, the editor of Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical writings, Muḥammad al-Sayyid Julaynad, notes that the contemporary biographies of Ibn Taymiyya do not highlight his contributions to the genre (Ibn Taymiyya, *Daqā'iq al-tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 13).

7 al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 53, p. 261.

8 'Abd al-Hādī, *al-'Uqūd al-durriyya*, p. 11.

9 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya*, vol. 14, p. 135. Note here that Ibn Kathīr is quoting al-Birzālī.

10 'Abd al-Hādī, *al-'Uqūd al-durriyya*, p. 13.

11 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jāmi'*, p. 222.

12 al-Dāwūdī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, vol. 1, pp. 45–49.

13 McAuliffe, 'The Genre Boundaries', p. 454.

14 For a discussion on whether Ibn Taymiyya wrote a complete *tafsīr*, see Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics', p. 155.

15 Calder, 'Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr'.

16 Calder does briefly cite some of Ibn Taymiyya's views on the Qur'an and mentions in an endnote that he was informed by Andrew Rippin that the quote originated from Ibn Taymiyya's *Muqaddima* (Calder, 'Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr', p. 138).

17 Calder, 'Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr', p. 120.

18 Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics', p. 153.

19 Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics', p. 148.

20 Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics', pp. 153–154.

21 For more on al-Ṭabarī see Shah, 'al-Ṭabarī and the Dynamics of *tafsīr*'.

22 Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, p. 207.

- 23 Mirza, ‘Was Ibn Kathīr the Spokesperson?’.
- 24 Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. ‘Adnān Zarzūr, p. 105. The *Muqaddima* is also found within Ibn Taymiyya’s *Majmū‘ fatāwā* (vol. 13, pp. 329–375).
- 25 Saleh, ‘Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics’, p. 124.
- 26 Abū Zahra, *Ibn Taymiyya*, pp. 178–190.
- 27 Saleh, ‘Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics’, p. 127.
- 28 Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines*, pp. 147–148.
- 29 Saleh, ‘Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics’, p. 126.
- 30 Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. Muḥammad Jamīl al-Shaṭṭī, p. 1.
- 31 Laoust, ‘La Biographie d’Ibn Taimīya’, pp. 138–149.
- 32 In the treatise, Ibn Taymiyya refers to his *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* as *Radd ‘alā al-Naṣāra* which ‘Abd al-Hādī notes was an alternative name for *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* (‘Abd al-Hādī, *al-Uqūd al-durriyya*, p. 27); al-Bazzār lists the work as *Kitāb al-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣāra* (al-Bazzār, *al-A‘lām al-‘aliyya*, p. 27). The most authoritative study of *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* is Ibn Taymiyya, *A Muslim Theologian’s Response*.
- 33 Ibn Taymiyya, *Jāmi‘ al-rasā’il*, p. 66.
- 34 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 249.
- 35 Thomas, ‘Apologetic and Polemic’, p. 253. I will speak more about the ‘Letter to a Muslim Friend’ later in the paper.
- 36 The ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’ was published in the *Jāmi‘ al-rasā’il* by Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, the famous editor of many of Ibn Taymiyya’s seminal works, such as *Minhāj al-sunna* and *Dar‘ al-Ta‘āruḍ* (Ibn Taymiyya, *Jāmi‘ al-rasā’il*, pp. 61–66). In his introduction, Sālim does not specifically speak about how many manuscripts he found of the ‘Treatise of Shu‘ayb’ and whether he found it cited in later works. In my research, I have found that Ibn Rushayyiq does mention the work in his treatise of Ibn Taymiyya’s works as ‘A Treatise on the Father-in-Law of Moses, Was it Shu‘ayb or Someone Else?’ (Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jāmi‘*, p. 228). Ibn Taymiyya also indirectly refers to the treatise in his later works (Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ fatāwā*, vol. 20, p. 429). Lastly, while Ibn Kathīr does not cite Ibn Taymiyya directly, he more or less adopts Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion that the man was not Shu‘ayb (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān al-‘aẓīm*, vol. 6, pp. 12–13; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa’l-nihāya*, vol. 1, p. 287). Ibn Kathīr most likely heard this opinion directly from Ibn Taymiyya.
- 37 For more on Moses’ rod in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, see Fodor, ‘The Rod of Moses’.
- 38 Bosworth, ‘The Qur’anic Prophet Shu‘aib’, p. 433.
- 39 Newby, ‘Tafsīr Isrā’īliyyāt’.
- 40 Bosworth, ‘The Qur’anic Prophet Shu‘aib’, p. 434.
- 41 Other modern scholars have also noted that the father-in-law must be the Biblical Jethro. For instance, Roberto Tottoli states that, once in Midian, ‘by a well Moses helps two women, the daughters of an old man of whom the Qur’an does not give the name but who evidently is Jethro of the Biblical traditions’ (Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, p. 32). In another instance, Tottoli states, ‘The identification, however, of Shu‘ayb in later traditions with Jethro finds no confirmation in the sacred text’ (Tottoli, art. ‘Shu‘ayb’).
- 42 This will be discussed further below.
- 43 Bosworth, ‘The Qur’anic Prophet Shu‘ayb’, p. 434.

- 44 Mirza, 'Ishmael as Abraham's Sacrifice'. As I mention in the article, scholars like Tottoli note that Ibn Taymiyya believed that Biblical material could be transmitted but only after 'critical evaluation' (Tottoli, 'Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īlīyāt*', p. 172).
- 45 Bosworth seemed to have an intellectual interest in the 'Dhimmi's'. See his 'The "Protected Peoples" (Christians and Jews) in Medieval Egypt and Syria' and 'The Concept of Dhimma in Early Islam'.
- 46 Cahen, art. 'Dhimma'.
- 47 Ye'or, *The Dhimmi*.
- 48 For an excellent overview of Ibn Taymiyya's works on Christianity see Hoover, 'Ibn Taymiyya'.
- 49 For more on al-Qarāfi's reply, see Sarrío, *Muslim-Christian Polemics*.
- 50 For more on Ibn Abī Ṭālib's letter, see al-Dimashqī, *Muslim-Christian Polemic*.
- 51 For more on the function of the *fatwa* in Muslim societies, see Masud et al., *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and their Fatwas*.
- 52 Ibn Taymiyya may have also written the 'Treatise of Shu'ayb' as part of his larger critique of the Druze and grave worship since the religious group venerates the grave of Shu'ayb. However, I have not found anything explicit in the treatise that would support such a conclusion. For more on Ibn Taymiyya and the Druze, see Hazran, 'Heterodox Doctrines in Contemporary Islamic Thought'; Friedman, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Fatawa'. For more on the importance of the shrine of Shu'ayb to modern Israel and its Druze minority, see Firro, 'Druze maqāmāt (Shrines) in Israel'.
- 53 Since Bosworth has provided an excellent translation of the treatise, I will not summarise all of the treatise's content but highlight the parts which are significant to the study of *tafsīr* and Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations.
- 54 For more on the Biblical Jethro, see Sarna, art. 'Jethro'.
- 55 Throughout the treatise, Ibn Taymiyya vacillates between using *ahl-kitāb* and *ahl-kitābayn*. I believe that he some times uses the later to emphasise the fact that Shu'ayb is not mentioned in either the Torah or Gospels. See footnote 74 for further discussion.
- 56 For more on the city of Midian, see Firestone, art. 'Midian'.
- 57 Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. 'Adnān Zarzūr, p. 80.
- 58 Bosworth, 'The Qur'anic Prophet Shu'aib', p. 436.
- 59 For more on Moses within the Qur'an and Biblical literature, see Wheeler, *Moses*.
- 60 Ibn Taymiyya inserts a statement from al-Ṭabarī that 'one cannot ascertain the truth about this except by means of some piece of information handed down from an immaculate (*ma'sūm*) authority, but that no such information on this topic exists' (Bosworth, 'The Qur'anic Prophet Shu'ayb', p. 437). However, Muḥammad Rashād Sālim correctly notes that al-Ṭabarī does not use the word 'divinely protected' (*ma'sūm*) in his statement but rather simply the word 'report' (*khābar*); al-Ṭabarī states that 'there is no knowledge realised except through a report (*khābar*) but that no such information on this topic exists'. By adding the phrase 'from *al-ma'sūm*' after the word report (*khābar*), Ibn Taymiyya adapts al-Ṭabarī's statement here to other points he has made regarding true knowledge. In his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Taymiyya defines true knowledge as 'that which is truthfully transmitted from an infallible [individual] (*ma'sūm*) or a statement that can be defended by an accepted [logical] proof' (Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics', p. 126). The concept of divine protection played an essential role in the theological thinking of Ibn Taymiyya in that true knowledge had to originate from a divinely protected prophetic source, not from saints or righteous figures. For more on Ibn Taymiyya's views of *iṣma* see Ahmed, 'Ibn Taymiyya'.

- 61 Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. Adnān Zarzūr, p. 61.
- 62 Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics', p. 146.
- 63 Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. Adnān Zarzūr, p. 96.
- 64 Ibn Taymiyya, as well as other traditionalists like Ibn Kathīr, continue to emphasise the opinion of Ibn 'Abbās in their exegesis demonstrating the seminal role that he played in their thinking (Mirza, 'Ishmael as Abraham's Sacrifice').
- 65 al-Tha'labī also supports the opinion of Shu'ayb in his *Stories of the Prophets* (al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is al-majālis, pp. 290–292).
- 66 Not all modern scholars of Ibn Taymiyya follow this evaluation of al-Tha'labī. The editor of the most authoritative edition of the *Muqaddima*, 'Adnān Zarzūr, contends that Ibn Taymiyya's view of al-Tha'labī being a nocturnal woodcutter is problematic (*naẓr*) (Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. 'Adnān Zarzūr, p. 77).
- 67 Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics', p. 139.
- 68 Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of al-Tha'labī was similar to that of other *ḥadīth* scholars but more harsh (Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, pp. 38–41). More work needs to explore Saleh's claim that Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of al-Tha'labī's traditions revolve around the fact that he cites pro-Shī'ī traditions in his *tafsīr* (pp. 215–221). Here, it seems that Ibn Taymiyya's criticism centers on the fact that al-Tha'labī cites traditions that are weak and without chains of transmission.
- 69 al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, vol. 4, p. 532.
- 70 Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, p. 224. For more on al-Tha'labī and *isnāds*, see pp. 82–83.
- 71 For more on the *ḥadīth* scholar's system of corroboration, see Brown, *Ḥadīth*.
- 72 Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*.
- 73 Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, p. 218.
- 74 Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. Adnān Zarzūr, p. 74.
- 75 Bosworth notes that the New Testament does not speak about Jethro (Bosworth, 'The Qur'anic Prophet Shu'aib', p. 437).
- 76 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā*, vol. 20, p. 429.
- 77 Sarna, art. 'Jethro'.
- 78 Mirza, 'Ishmael as Abraham's Sacrifice'.
- 79 For more on how Muslim scholars related Q. 28:21–28 with Biblical narratives, see Wheeler, *Moses*, pp. 37–63.
- 80 Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, p. 203.
- 81 Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible* (Demiri, *Muslim Exegesis*).
- 82 For more on the Arab prophets, see Wheeler, 'Arab Prophets'.
- 83 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jāmi'*, p. 64.
- 84 al-Tha'labī also cites these 'staff traditions' ('Arā'is al-majālis, pp. 292–294). It is probable that these traditions were in circulation orally during Ibn Taymiyya's times and could have been one of the impetuses for him writing the treatise.
- 85 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jāmi'*, p. 64.
- 86 In his section on the Companions in his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Taymiyya devotes a paragraph to discussing al-Suddī. He notes that the majority of what al-Suddī narrates in his *tafsīr* is from the Companions 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd and 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās but at times he narrates from the sayings of the People of the Book. Ibn Taymiyya thus approves of al-Suddī's *tafsīr*

because it was narrated by two Companions who were specialists in *tafsīr* but cautions the reader by saying that the opinions of the People of the Book are also mixed into his writings; Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. Adnān Zarzūr, p. 98.

87 It is evident here that Bosworth is unaware that Ibn Taymiyya is paraphrasing from al-Ṭabarī. For instance, Bosworth understands Ibn Taymiyya's statement 'to the end of the story' as a break of the first tradition and then 'entrusted to him an angel in the image of a man' as beginning another narration. Reading al-Ṭabarī, we see that this is, in fact, one tradition. Ibn Taymiyya uses the phrase 'to the end of the story' to skip over the middle part of the tradition and goes directly to the end of the story which he finds to be the most problematic in that Moses and Shu'ayb supposedly quarreled (Bosworth, 'The Qur'anic Prophet Shu'aib', p. 439).

88 For more on the 'staff traditions', see Ibn Taymiyya, *'Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 292–294, and Wheeler, *Moses*, pp. 60–63.

89 My understanding of this narration differs from Bosworth. Bosworth translates the beginning of this tradition as 'In regard to what Zaid has mentioned, sc. that Moses was generally known to be a prophet ...'. However, I understand the pronoun here to refer to the old man in the story and thus the narration states that the old man knew that Moses was a prophet before his call to prophecy. Thus I would translate this sentence as 'In regard to what Zayd has mentioned, that he [the old man] knew that Moses was a prophet ...' (Bosworth, 'The Qur'anic Prophet', p. 439).

90 Moreover, while Ibn Taymiyya prefers al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, it is evident here that he finds some of its traditions problematic. This observation suggests that even though the traditionalist movement approved of al-Ṭabarī's exegesis, they found it wanting and dated since it often cites narrations which did not accord to the movement's theology or to its critical standards of *ḥadīth*. This sentiment most likely resulted in the composition of Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr*, which is an extensive evaluation of al-Ṭabarī. While Ibn Kathīr was also a great fan of al-Ṭabarī, much of his exegesis seeks to corroborate al-Ṭabarī's traditions with authoritative *ḥadīth* collections and critique traditions which he does not find theologically plausible (Mirza, 'Was Ibn Kathīr the Spokesperson?').

91 Ahmed, 'Ibn Taymiyya'.

92 Ibn Taymiyya's inclusion here of true knowledge being in accordance with the 'transmitted and rational and sources' is significant because a large part of his intellectual project was to argue that the authentic transmitted sources were in agreement with sound rationality. For more on the 'rational' aspects of Ibn Taymiyya's thought, see Michot, 'A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary, Part I'; Michot, 'A Mamlūk Theologian's Commentary, Part II'; Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy*; Rapoport, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Radical Legal Thought'; Ozervarli, 'The Qur'anic Rational Theology of Ibn Taymiyya'; and Abrahamov, 'Ibn Taymiyya'.

93 al-Damashqī, *Muslim-Christian Polemic*, p. 3.

94 al-Damashqī, *Muslim-Christian Polemic*, pp. 66–67.

95 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 225.

96 Busse, 'Antioch', p. 162.

97 For more on the city of Antioch see Kondoleon, *Antioch*.

98 Ibn Taymiyya adds a biographical note on Ḥabīb al-Najjār in his *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* which speaks to the man's righteousness. Ibn Ishāq reports that Ḥabīb was a man from the people of Antioch. He used to work with silk and used to be sick with leprosy. His house was at the gates of the city where he used to trade. He was a strong believer in charity (*ṣadaqa*) and at the end of the day, he would gather his earnings and divide them into two: one for feeding his

children and the other for charity (Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 247). For more on Ḥabīb al-Najjār and his relation with the Jewish and Christian tradition see Busse, 'Antioch'.

99 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 224.

100 Michel very briefly summarises this section in his study of *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* (Ibn Taymiyya, *A Muslim Theologian's Response*, p. 89). Unfortunately, he does not translate this part of the treatise.

101 In his description of *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 'Abd al-Hādī mentions that there is 'tafsīr of many verses of the Qur'an' within the work ('Abd al-Hādī, *al-'Uqūd al-durriyya*, p. 27).

102 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 254.

103 Other Qur'anic exegetes tried to reconcile this problem by explaining that Jesus sent the messengers on God's orders (Busse, 'Antioch', p. 163).

104 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 245.

105 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 252.

106 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 253.

107 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 254.

108 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 253.

109 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 254. Ibn Taymiyya provides a list of the messengers that Muḥammad sent to the various kings.

110 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 254.

111 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 254. In this section, Ibn Taymiyya also adds arguments that are not directly related to this pericope in *Sūrat Yā Sīn*. For instance, he states that it is 'known among the people of knowledge' that God did not destroy a people from a punishment from the sky after the revelation of the Torah. It is apparent in *Sūrat Yā Sīn* that the people were destroyed by a blast from the sky meaning that this story must have occurred before the time of Moses (Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 251). Additionally, Ibn Taymiyya explains that Q. 5:19 states that there was a long period of time (*fatra*) between Jesus and Muḥammad in which no messengers came. The messengers of *Sūrat Yā Sīn* thus could not have been messengers after Jesus but rather came before him (Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 253).

112 Ibn Taymiyya makes this point regarding the Disciples and miracles in multiple places in *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*. See vol. 2, p. 316 and p. 349, and vol. 3, p. 419.

113 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 400.

114 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 402.

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