

# Islam and Qur'anic figures in Africa: Prophets, Sages and Disciples

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# Islam and Qur'anic figures in Africa: Prophets, Sages and Disciples

## Abstract

This is but a humble attempt to frame a discussion on Islam, prophetic voices and geographical spaces in Africa as territorial canvasses for sketching out Islam's sacred history. This way of thinking or conceptualizing about Africa is not as fashionable among Muslim Qur'anic scholars as it is among black Biblical theologians. Yet, this is not to suggest that the approach of this study is grounded in the Afro-centered methodology. Such an approach has its own place and serves certain ideological and cultural functions especially within a given African American diasporic scholarship. Rather, the aim of this research is two-fold: first, to critique Afro-centric thought and, second, to probe and re-center or re-state Africa's position within Islam's civilizational and spiritual narrative.

## Keywords

African Landscape, Afro-centric, Qur'anic Figures, Patriarchs/Matriarchs, Hijra/Exoduses, Sacred Drama/ Islamic Sacred History

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## Cover Page Footnote

1. If one seeks to frame or construct a discourse that hopes to challenge some of the prevalent negative images that are directed at people of African descent the place to turn to for this in Muslim societies is in the popular literature that was produced and legitimated within the context of slave owning societies and the Trans-Saharan or Mediterranean and Indian Ocean slave trade. This is a separate study that needs to be undertaken and to which some scholars have begun to devote scholarly attention. See for starters, Chouki El Hamel 2002; Hunwick 1992: 5-38 and others. 2. An international collaborative effort by scholars (that has been ongoing) proposed that our most recent common/Adamic ancestor lived in Africa 59,000 ago (Underhill 2000, Spencer 2002). 3 African American Muslims have found a kindred spirit in Bilal who endured the same kind of suffering as they did earlier in their history as black slaves of white masters in the New World. 4 See Saudi Aramco World (March/April 1974), 2-3. Information on Luqman can be obtained from the works of Muslim commentators such as Ibn Kathir in his Tafsir Ibn Kathir (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Qalam, n.d.) 3: 379-381.

## Introduction

The teachings of Islam as embodied in the Qur'an, Prophetic traditions and Muslim folklore reveal a wide range of figures, historical or mythical events as well as geographical spaces or landscapes that clearly say something about Africa. Can we identify such figures and such landscapes by framing a discussion that affirms the role of Africa and of Africans?

During the second half of the last millennium, it became fashionable in Europe to think of Africans simply as non-players or, at least, at best, as less significant players in history and to label their continent as the Dark Continent. Fortunately, such views and others like them came increasingly under attack in the latter part of the twentieth century as scholars challenged both Eurocentric views of history and (for Afro-centrists) of the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of the above, the focus of this study is to present a reading (even re-reading) of the Islamic sources that highlight the centrality of Africa and of Africans in shaping Muslim spirituality. Africa-based figures made their contributions as major patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, sages and devoted followers (who constitute part of the Muslim worldview) as models of Islamic sacred history.

In what sense, then, are the stories of such figures paradigmatic of foundational traditions of not just Islam but also of Christianity and Judaism? It is clear that in all these monotheistic traditions born in a geographical environment extending from the Arabian peninsula through the Fertile Crescent (including the Levant) to the Nile region of Africa these are powerful figures (especially in Islam) for advancing the Islamic model of piety, justice, temperance, wisdom and uprightness. Given this understanding, it is appropriate that we explore ideas that these religious personalities represent and the general framework they provide both for understanding the role of such individuals and the significance this has for shaping Muslim social reality.

This paper does not offer an Afro-centered reading of the Qur'an akin to Afro-centric Biblical hermeneutics that challenge Euro-centered interpretation of the Bible. Rather, it explores/probes the spiritual landscape of the Qur'an to see what it reveals regarding some of its major actors or spiritual players within the geographical space of Africa as an arena of sacred activity/drama.

It should be noted that Qur'anic actors such as Noah, Lot and others are not presented in the sacred text within the context of racially constructed myths (such as the one that has justified the so-called 'curse of Ham'). In fact, its elliptical style displays little concern for chronological sequence or for precise identification of characters/peoples, places and epochs. The Qur'an is more

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<sup>1</sup> Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1989).

content with presenting its information as a mosaic of moral teachings all woven together in a tapestry that resembles the intricate and repetitive designs (arabesques) of a carpet or calligraphic inscription (where details are sacrificed for the particulars of normative ethical patterns/designs of spiritual behavior or conduct in life). In its scheme of things all human beings (deriving from a common ancestor and later going on to form nations and ethnic groups for purposes of knowing and respecting one another, with the most noble being the most pious,<sup>2</sup> are equally honored by God who has sent a messenger to every community on earth.<sup>3</sup> In the light of this Qur'anic understanding, this exploratory paper hopes to re-center or re-focus our gaze on Africa's central place within Islam's civilizational and spiritual narrative.

This article is divided into two sections. The first addresses the limitations of an Afro-centric approach to studying Islam and Qur'anic voices in Africa. The second engages the Qur'an on its own terms by presenting its worldview as the point of departure for studying Africa-based characters within its sacred history.

### **Arguments against a race-centered approach**

The emergence of Islam (at least in its outward manifestation) is associated with the creation of an overarching universal umma/community. The worldview of this faith-bounded umma, in effect, a commonwealth of believers over time and space, makes it difficult to reconcile the Qur'anically-derived vision of society with the system of thought that views the world in purely racial terms. It follows, therefore, that the Afro-centric approach, even if justifiably meant to be a corrective against Eurocentric claims, taken to its extreme, nonetheless, tends to foster race-centered assertions exactly as the latter has done. This ends up simply confusing the issue by shifting focus away from human agency (irrespective of skin color or geographical location) to essentialist positions that privilege race over other considerations.

Yoseph ben-Jochannan [hereafter referred to simply as Ben], is a major thinker and writer within the Afro-centrist tradition who has advanced clearly race-based arguments against the three "Western" religions in the context of a conspiracy theory. His views merit a closer scrutiny as he has devoted an entire book to examining what he considers to be the African basis of the three monotheistic faiths. Much of what he presents (it is quite ironic that it reflects much of the tenor of the earlier Western orientalist writing on Islam) is in the form of accusation of "borrowing" of this or that universal concept from, for instance, Egypt or Ethiopia or some place in Africa.

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<sup>2</sup> Qur'an 49: 13. All references to the Qur'an in this article will be to Muhammad Asad's English translation entitled *The Message of the Qur'an*. (Gibraltar, Dar al-Andalus Limited, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Qur'an 10: 47.

Ben makes claims for which he offers no textual tradition to support his contentions. As a result, the book (especially the section on Islam, which is what will be analyzed here) provides no evidence of either serious source study of Arabic or Islamic material (as characterized orientalist or even Eurocentric scholarship) or detailed fieldwork such as that conducted by, say, John Mbiti who made at least the effort to collect oral material from different parts of Africa for his study of African religions.<sup>4</sup> There is, in fact, no evidence to indicate that Ben has taken the trouble to read the Qur'an, let alone engage it.

In chapter four of his book entitled "Bilal: African Influence on Islam," Ben argues for Islam's African origins by focusing on what he claims to be Bilal's pivotal role in the creation of Islam as a religion.<sup>5</sup> The extent and the nature of Bilal's alleged influence on Islam is, however, never satisfactorily elaborated upon with textual evidence. The reason for this difficulty is not far to find: there is, in fact, very little source material on Bilal even in the Arabic language to allow one to make the sort of outrageous claims that Ben makes.

Apart from mis-spelling Bilal's name as Bilal ibn "Rahab" (instead of "Rabah"), Ben refers to this former slave of Ethiopian origins and a disciple of the prophet Muhammad with an array of confusing titles, including: "the first Muezzin (high priest!)," "head of the nation of Islam!" and the person "responsible for the creation of Islam!"<sup>6</sup> Even a casual observer of Islam would know that the function of a Muezzin in Islam is not to officiate at religious functions the way a high priest does but simply to summon people to prayer. It is also misleading and mainly wishful thinking for Ben to claim that Bilal was "head of the nation of Islam" when, apart from being the Prophet's treasurer, Muezzin, and among his closest and most revered companions, he did not assume the mantle of political leadership of the Muslim community as a caliph/ruler the way Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali had done in succession after the death of Muhammad.

What is even more perplexing is for Ben to assert that this African is referred to in the Muslim holy book simply as "Bilal."<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an is notable for not mentioning the names of any of Muhammad's disciples with the possible exception of Zayd, Muhammad's adopted son who was freed from slavery by him.<sup>8</sup>

The above examples indicate that in the absence of source material Ben is left with no choice but to present as factual far-fetched claims that he makes up

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<sup>4</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford, Heinemann Educational publishers, 1969; 1989)

<sup>5</sup> Yosef Ben-Jochannan, *African Origins of the Major 'Western Religions.'* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1991; originally published in 1970 by Alkebu-lan Books Associates), 206.

<sup>6</sup> Ben, 197, 199, 206.

<sup>7</sup> Ben, 199.

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an 33: 37.

about Bilal. Consider, for instance, his choice of confused and confusing descriptive titles for Bilal that include: an "African diviner, philosopher, and assistant-prophet;" "select prophet of Allah;" and others.<sup>9</sup> Needless to point out, no where in the Qur'anic/Islamic tradition is Bilal (not even in Muslim Africa) presented or considered to be a person of the status of a prophet. There is, in fact, no documented evidence that he produces to substantiate this claim. Interestingly enough, Ben would have been on far more solid ground had he chosen to study another figure by the name of Luqman. He has the advantage of being a Qur'anic figure (thought to have been Ethiopian) who would have been a better candidate for his wild claims. His moral teachings (which will be presented at the end of the paper) are fleshed out in the Qur'an.

He also makes the claim that Bilal is responsible for creation of much of what Muslims believe in about paradise, including (mis-spelled) "Hur-al-Oyum" (huurun Iin are considered as "pure companions"<sup>10</sup> or what he calls "black-eyed African virgins!"<sup>11</sup> Yet, there is neither textual evidence to substantiate such claims nor even attempts to analyze Arabic words as they appear in the Qur'an to show how they are related to cognate words in the ancient "Ethiopian" language. He does not follow any historical or linguistic methods to analyze such words.

Ben goes a step further in his speculations by inverting the Shi'ite claim that the Prophet Muhammad had appointed Ali as his successor by asserting that (again no textual evidence of any kind is cited): "For Mohamet, while lying on his bed, he beseeched Bilal to become his successor, Bilal having yielded to Abu Bekr!" By inserting such a claim in his made up narrative Ben introduces the element of a conspiracy theory but one that does not lead to a Bilalian group/sect forming to advance in his name the claim to leadership that he supposedly had forfeited!<sup>12</sup>

Bilal's greatness does not end there; to top it all, Ben presents him as part of an Islamic threesome spiritual fellowship that is close to duplicating the Christian holy trinity. How else is one to understand his description of Bilal except as some part of a trinity? This is how he describes Bilal in relation to Allah and Muhammad: "Bilal is the third part of Islam. Al'lah [sic] is the first, and Mohamet the second!"<sup>13</sup> The problem with this formulaic characterization of Bilal is that it leaves out many other disciples of Muhammad who were as close, if not closer to him, including such important companions as Abu Bakr, Ali, Umar and others.

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<sup>9</sup> Ben, 201, 205.

<sup>10</sup> Qur'an 56: 22.

<sup>11</sup> Ben, 200.

<sup>12</sup> Ben, 205

<sup>13</sup> Ben, 217.

At this point it may be asked as to why Ben (in making a case for African origins of Islam via Bilal) has not taken the trouble to read the Qur'an or the corpus of hadith or any other early Muslim writings as a first step to conducting linguistic, exegetical, or historical analyses of the sources of Islam? In fact, much of the criticism directed against Islam by Ben and other Afro-centric thinkers or writers is, according to Sherman Jackson, not based on "direct experience or knowledge of verifiable facts, but on imagination, ideology and projection."<sup>14</sup> As he puts it: "Asante's Black Orientalism, like that of all Black Orientalists, attempts to caste Islam and the Muslim world in a mold that accommodates Black American imaginings, resentments, prejudice and difficulties in confronting the intractable problem of American race relations."<sup>15</sup> Muslims/Arabs by being presented through the prism of race as "white" allowed the Afro-centrists to ignore the intermarriages and the widespread racial mixing that takes place in the Muslim world and specifically created white, brown and black Arabs across southwestern Asia and north and northeastern Africa. This is in contrast to the way whiteness and blackness have been historically constructed in the American experience in which cross-overs were not permitted.

To conclude this discussion, it should be noted that Ben's study of Islam (without any attempt to engage the Qur'an) fails to open up any interpretive possibilities inherent in such narrative material. As a result, his Afro-centric approach, as applied by him, does not move the discussion on Islam and the Qur'an in Africa any further beyond fixation with one person, Bilal, whose importance, for him, derives from the fact that he was a person of Ethiopian/African origins. The failure to sufficiently account for Islam's multi-ethnic/multi-racial character leaves Ben unable or unwilling to accept Islam's articulation of its universal message in a trans-national context. The community that Muhammad built in Madina (even before the territorial expansion of Islam into an empire after his time) embraced followers of diverse ethnic and social backgrounds welded into a single brotherhood of believers. Thus to argue for a Bilal-centric Islam simply runs the danger of duplicating and creating something akin to an Elijah Muhammad's "Nation of Islam" reading of Islamic history (were this to be contemplated) in which characters can only be viewed in a binary form in terms of black and white dimensions.

Nevertheless, within the context of the foregoing discussion one can detect some areas in which Ben's Afro-centric study could have been meaningfully directed or deployed. First, by engaging the Qur'an (as this study will do) he could have made the African dimension of Islam more explicit than it is in the writings of Muslims. His chapter on Islam, while covering too many subjects and,

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<sup>14</sup> Sherman Jackson, "Black Orientalism: Its Genesis, Aims and Significance for American Islam," *Muslims in America* April 19 (2009), 6-7.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, 7

therefore, being all over the place, should have focussed on a few issues of interest to him. For instance, Muslim geographical names of different regions of Africa reveal how Africa (with names such as "Sudan," "Zanj" etc which mean "black") was constructed or imagined by the early Muslims in Africa. This is a subject that he could have pursued as soon as he realized that Bilal was going to be too illusive a figure to allow him to project his Afro-centric views.

Furthermore, his presentation of the contributions of Muslims of African descent to Islamic civilization does not strengthen his argument of Muslim discrimination against dark skinned Muslims. In fact, even when he cites the eighth-century Afro-Arab prose writer, al-Jahiz, who wrote a book enumerating the superior qualities of the black/dark-skinned people over the light-skinned ones, he fails to contextualize this polemic that was meant to counter the sense of any entitlement on the part of the Arabs during the period of Arab political ascendancy. He failed to note that the Umayyad dynastic attempts (661-750 CE) to subvert Islamic teachings by reducing non-Arabs to subordinate status within the Muslim society having been successfully challenged by a broad-based Muslim opposition, one outcome was that Arabization of indigenous populations became the norm in a wide area extending from Syria/Iraq and Palestine to North and Northeast Africa (including Egyptians, large sections of Berbers and later even Nubians becoming Arabic speakers and therefore Arabs). These "new" Arabs, in fact, contributed far more to Islamic thought/civilization than did the "old" Arabs of Arabia.<sup>16</sup>

Finally Ben's discussion of African enslavement does not elicit an acknowledgement that historically the majority of early slaves in Muslim society were, in fact, initially Turkish rather than African whose numbers increased only in later centuries. He could have conducted a separate comparative study of, for instance, trans-Atlantic versus trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades to see how Africans were affected in both cases and with what lasting consequences.

### **Adam and Eve**

Turning to the second major concern/focus of this essay, it should be pointed out first that with respect to the Qur'anic patriarchal and matriarchal figures, Adam and Eve, their most likely habitat where they lived during their sojourn in life was not Hijaz in Arabia or any other place in Asia but most likely the Rift Valley region of Eastern Africa. Both anthro-paleontological evidence and modern study of DNA point to this as the most likely place of the earliest human habitation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jackson, 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Stringer and Robin Mckie, *African Exodus: The Origins of Modern Humanity* (New York, Henry Holt, 1996); Peter Underhill et al, 'Adam and Eve Probably never met,' *Nature Genetics* (November 2000): 358-61 and 253-54; and Spencer Wells, *The Journey of Man; A*



If the first humans lived in Africa it follows that we are all descended from an "African" woman, Eve, who, along with Adam, represent the primordial humans, also known as vicegerents/khalifas on earth.<sup>18</sup> This makes us all in some sense to be Banu Adam (children of Adam) or Banu 'Africanus.' Muslims seem rather reluctant to think of Adam and to connect their ancestry to Africa in this way. The reason for some perhaps may partly lie with the story of Adam (if he is to be associated with Africa) being connected to the theory of human evolution. This, however, does not fully explain why Muslim scholars (even those writing in the modern period) who paid great attention to geography and who have written and speculated about Qur'anic figures, have not given full rein to their imagination about Africa in their interpretation of the Muslim grand narrative on the origin of human life. Africa has been at the margins of their speculation when, in fact, it should be at the very center.

### **Abraham**

Let us consider another patriarchal figure, Abraham, and the role he plays in the Muslim spiritual universe. The first thing to point out is that the events surrounding his life take place in the region extending from the Fertile Crescent (including the Levant and Egypt) and the Arabian peninsula. This is, coincidentally, thought to be the successful early exodus route of modern humans out of Africa that figures prominently in the sacred drama of foundational historical as well as mythical events connected to the establishment of the monotheistic tradition.

Abraham is presented in the Qur'an and hadith (sayings of Muhammad) as well as exegetical literature as a patriarchal prophetic figure whose journeys carry him from Biblical Canaan to Egypt and also to the valley of Makka. In the Muslim tradition he is depicted as the progenitor of the monotheistic tradition both in its Ishmaelite (Islam springs out of this Abraham-Ishmael-Muhammad spiritual matrix) and Isaac lines (Judaism comes out of this Abraham-Isaac-Moses spiritual connection). He is considered as the prototype of unflinching faith and complete trust in God as evidenced by his willingness to sacrifice his son.

More importantly and for our purposes, Abraham's story links up with Hajar (his Egyptian bond woman/wife) and the mother of Ishmael. While there is no direct mention of Hajar in the Qur'an her story is threshed out by tradition. According to one tradition she was not taken to the waterless valley of Makka by Abraham to be abandoned there with her son but in fulfillment of the unfolding of a divine plan. This is confirmed by the Qur'an which mentions that Abraham made the following prayer on this occasion:

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*Genetic Odyssey* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Qur'an 2: 30.

O Lord! I have led some of my offspring to live in an uncultivated wadi (valley) by your sacred House (Ka'ba), in order, O Lord, that they establish regular prayer. So fill the hearts of some with love toward them, and feed them with fruits so that they may give thanks.<sup>19</sup>

According to Muslim tradition, Hajar desperately searched for water which she eventually found (the well of Zam Zam) after running back and forth seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa. As a result of this ordeal Hajar has come to represent complete trust in divine providence at the same time that she displays motherly love, care, nurturing and unflinching support for her son in the face of trial. This is a mythic retelling of her story as a founding matriarch who, along with her son (Ishmael), are associated with the creation of the Abrahamic lineage of Islam. Thus Hajar's story and that of her son are intertwined with the story of the holy shrine (Ka'ba) after Abraham and Ishmael had raised up its foundation.<sup>20</sup> Hajar herself endured suffering and became a vehicle for a sacred goal. Ultimately, therefore her religious significance has to do with her participation in the drama of reestablishing true monotheism in Arabia. To the extent that this is the case, she becomes an important figure in Islamic consciousness as her story is linked to hajj rituals.<sup>21</sup>

Hajar, by the mere fact that she was an Egyptian [read: African--by tradition she is identified as a slave girl who had been given to Abraham] and her son Ishmael (who was therefore half-Egyptian/African) represented the African contribution to Arab monotheism on the one hand and the Arab Ishmaelite identity on the other. Seen from this perspective, Africa once more continued its tradition of producing strong women such as Eve and later Hajar who figure prominently in the foundational story of human society at different stages of its spiritual development. These two matriarchs represent females nurturing strength through motherly love.

### **Joseph and Moses**

The story of Abraham and his progeny through Isaac and Jacob to Joseph time and again links up with the all important and ancient land of Egypt in Africa (that exercised immense influence on Hebrews) where the stories of Joseph and, later, Moses unfold. As a child, Moses (though of Hebrew origins) had an Egyptian/African name (Moses) and an African upbringing in the house of the Pharaoh. He (like other Hebrews who had spent centuries in Egypt and some must have intermarried with Egyptians to make them Afro-Asiatics) was nurtured in

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<sup>19</sup> Qur'an, 14: 37

<sup>20</sup> Qur'an 2: 124-129; 5: 100; 22: 27, 29, 33; 3: 96-97

<sup>21</sup> Qur'an 2: 158

Egyptian court circles and later married a Midianite.<sup>22</sup> He faced trials later in his life when his Hebrew identity caught up with him and he found himself involved in the struggles of his oppressed people. He emerged as their leader and orchestrated an exodus (not the first one in African history) out of Egypt to what would be the promised land. The whole drama of the exodus has its origins on African soil where the promulgation of the Commandments (Torah) leads to the crystallization of the religious ethnic identity of the Israelites. It is this foundational story (grounded in myth and history and unfolding on African soil and African holy ground in Mount Sinai where the Torah was revealed) that the establishment of Judaism as an Abrahamic monotheistic tradition emerges.

The Qur'an makes it clear that the wife of Pharaoh (identified by tradition as Asia) was a God fearing and righteous person. She belongs to the spiritual fellowship of the great African ladies who are depicted as having been models of patient perseverance. In fact, the Qur'an<sup>23</sup> places the Pharaoh's wife in lofty company when it mentions her name alongside that of Mary who is considered to be the epitome of piety and saintliness.

This Qur'anic narrative of the ancient prophets which touches on Muhammad's ancestry through the half Egyptian Ishmael brings out the Afro-Asiatic dimension of the Abrahamic family into clear view. It does not matter what their skin color was as that is of no importance to the Qur'anic perspective.<sup>24</sup> It is here that the Afro-centrists' attempts to reclaim, for instance, the ancient Egyptian heritage for Africa runs into problems. Thus they confuse the issue by making race-based claims about ancient Egyptians (falling into the same trap as the Euro-centrists) whereas the point was to highlight the contributions of Africans irrespective of "race" or skin color.

### **Jesus in Egypt**

The tradition of Israelite prophets either venturing into or escaping to Egypt in this case to avoid danger continued with the infant Jesus during the time of Herod. This is according to Biblical sources that indicate that not just Joseph, but Mary and her son Jesus (though this is not mentioned in the Muslim tradition) also found solace or safety in Egypt.<sup>25</sup> In any case, what is important is that Jesus grew up and took on a religious mission that was an extension of and built on the Mosaic tradition of the Torah whose revelation was in Mount Sinai in Egypt, Africa.

Moreover, we may add here briefly that not only is Egypt central to the sacred history of Judaism (Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses), Christianity

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<sup>22</sup> Qur'an 28: 20-30

<sup>23</sup> Qur'an 66: 11-12

<sup>24</sup> Qur'an 49: 13

<sup>25</sup> Mathew 2: 13-15.

(Abraham, Moses, Maryam/Mary and Jesus), and Islam (Abraham, Hajar, Ishmael, and Muhammad--who married Maria the Coptic Egyptian) but Ethiopia too shares in this narrative world of Islam. Known to the Arabs as Abyssinia or al-Habasha, Ethiopia was the country that Muhammad chose for his followers to seek protection and freedom from oppression when the persecution in Makka against Muslims reached a high point. This ancient kingdom was therefore the destination of the first *hijra* (a reverse migration/exodus) in Islam and the land of freedom of expression and worship. The second migration/exodus would be to Madina where Muhammad sought to forge an identity based on universal faith/brotherhood, not tribal affiliations. In any case, Ethiopia played the same crucial role in Islam as Egypt had done earlier for the Biblically-based monotheistic religions and Islam too for that matter (since the stories of Abraham, Ishmael and Hajar have an Egyptian component to them as well).

Furthermore, Ethiopia produced one of the most revered figures in the earliest Muslim community, Bilal ibn Rabah, a slave living in Makka (he suffered torture for refusing to denounce Islam and emerged as the prototype of the staunch believer), later became a leading and well respected companion of the prophet. He was, however, not a prophet or part of a threesome spiritual fellowship that includes Allah and Muhammad as Ben claimed. In all probability he is related (in terms of ethnic origins) to the last figure that we will be examining in this paper and with whom we will end our exploratory study.

### **Luqman in Ethiopia**

Luqman's life is wrapped up in mystery, mythology and folkloric depiction in the writings of various Arab writers of different ages. He was known to Arab tradition even prior to the coming of Islam. By most accounts he is identified as having been an Abyssinian/Ethiopian or even a Nubian.

Much of Luqman's wisdom (some of which is described in the Qur'an) is about holding a firm belief in the unique single God, exercising gentle care and compassion toward parents, maintaining one's integrity, not repeating all that one hears, not revealing secrets or breaking promises, taking precautions, being courteous and generous, being careful what you say lest you offend others with an uncontrollable or wagging tongue, not being deceived by surface appearances, cultivating a good reputation which outlasts outward beauty, being humble and willing to learn even from a child, talking in a low voice as a loud voice does not mean getting things done or that your views are convincing, telling the truth and keeping quiet about what did not concern a person and so on.<sup>26</sup> His advice is

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<sup>26</sup> Dimitri Gutas, 'Classical Arabic Wisdom Literature: Nature and Scope,' *Journal of the Oriental American Society* 101,1, (Jan-Mar 1981): 49-86; Dimitri Gutas, 'Luqman: a Legendary Hero'. *Encyclopedia of the Holy Qur'an*, 5 (2000); B. Heller and N.A. Stillman, 'Lukman,' in C. E. Bosworth et al (eds.), *Encyclopedia Islamica* 5 (Leiden: Brill, : 1986): 811-13; and Riad Aziz Kassis, *The Book of Proverbs & Arabic Proverbial Works* (Leiden: Brill, 1999): 47-54.

practical and rings true for all times and for all occasions. It enables one to survive in a hostile world in which humans have to live and navigate their way through it.

While Luqman is not explicitly identified in the Qur'an as having been given a message to convey to a particular people as had many of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, nonetheless, like them, he led a saintly life judged by his exemplary teachings that clearly reflect aspects of the features identified in the ideal type attributes for prophets.<sup>27</sup> The *hikma* or wisdom mixed with prophetic admonition that he conveys and the advice that he dispenses (almost reminiscent of the deathbed scene in which Jacob asks his children who they will worship after his death)<sup>28</sup> projects an idealization of an archetypal or exemplary believer concerned about passing on his legacy. This fits well with the ideal type attribute of a prophet who bears witness to the message of submission and seeks to convey it to his posterity. Luqman repeats the message of the prophets as can be seen clearly in verses 12-19 of the chapter titled Luqman. In fact, his authority as a sage and arguably a prophet is established in these Qur'anic words which are couched in the language of prophets (verses 16-18):

O my son! keep up prayer and enjoin the good and forbid the evil, and bear patiently that which befalls you; surely these acts require courage; And do not turn your face away from people in contempt, nor go about in the land exulting overmuch; surely Allah does not love any self-conceited boaster.

Furthermore, there are similarities between Luqman and the prophet Solomon in four different respects:<sup>29</sup> the merger of legend and historical facts; the source of their wisdom and knowledge being directly from God<sup>30</sup>; the wide-spread reputation of their sayings; and the entry of their wisdom sayings into the sacred domain of the scripture of Judaism/Christianity and Islam. The wisdom tradition of both characters mixes legend with history until they become inseparable. This is true of Solomon as well as his father, David, both of whom are described in the Quran<sup>31</sup> as having been given special knowledge and powers. In any case, Solomon's utterances represented the wisdom traditions associated with the Biblical land of Israel just as Luqman's exhortations/advise manifested another

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<sup>27</sup> Marilyn Waldman, 'New Approaches to 'Biblical' Materials in the Qur'an,' in William Brenner and Stephen Ricks (eds.), *Studies on Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 54-55..

<sup>28</sup> Qur'an 2: 133

<sup>29</sup> Riad Aziz Kassir, *The Book of Proverbs & Arabic Proverbial Works* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 48-54.

<sup>30</sup> Qur'an 21: 79; 31: 12.

<sup>31</sup> Qur'an 21: 79; 27: 15.

wisdom tradition connected to the lands contiguous to the Red Sea area (Arabian peninsula and the Horn of Africa) and perhaps beyond.

With respect to whether Luqman received a divine mandate, Muslim scholars have been reluctant to declare Luqman and, for that matter Mary, a woman, as being a prophet (given a patriarchal reading of prophecy) when in her case she fulfills even more the attributes of the prophet paradigm than he does--being the ideal of the righteous believer, a mother of a prophet (Jesus), was visited by an angel (Qur'an 3: 42-43), and above all exemplified many prophetic virtues, including: obedience to God, reception of a divine mandate, humility, and possession of divine blessing.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Luqman encapsulates the prophetic aspects of knowledge, wisdom, humility, dutifulness toward parents, in addition to summing up in his own eloquent way the essence of the prophetic message. Therefore despite the Qur'an not explicitly declaring Luqman or Mary to be a prophet/prophetess who was given a divine mandate or scripture, nonetheless, the roles it attributes to them (both male and female being receptive objects of divine action) makes their lives, what they say and do the defining matrix of prophetic action. Their messages are not constructed around apocalyptic imagery or warnings of final judgment and destruction, as is the case with Noah and Lot, but as a projection (especially of Mary) of the transcending power of God that reverberates through prophetic assertions that they make.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has not been to formulate a new reading or even re-reading of the Qur'anic text on the lines of, for instance, what the Afro-centric scholars of the Bible have done. Such an attempt, as this paper has shown, is fraught with problems. As a case in point we have seen that Ben's study of Islam without engaging the Qur'an or Prophetic traditions fails to move the discussion on Islam and the Qur'an in Africa any further beyond fixation with one man, Bilal. Accordingly, our task has been to suggest ways of thinking/conceptualizing about Africa that are, unfortunately, not fashionable among Muslim Qur'anic scholars. More specifically, we have illuminated the role and place of Africa and Africa-based characters in advancing the Islamic model of piety, justice, temperance, wisdom and uprightness. It remains, however, for others to fill in the gaps and to carry this research in new directions beyond the limited objectives of this paper.

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<sup>32</sup> Loren Lybarger, 'Gender and Prophetic Authority in the Qur'anic Story of Maryam: A Literary Approach'. *The Journal of Religion* 80. 2, (April 2000), 249.

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