

Is There Covenant Theology in Islam?¹

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1 Introduction

The idea of a covenant (*mīthāq*) or contractual relationship between God and human beings is a historical theme that Islam shares with other cultural and religious traditions that emerged in the Ancient Near East and, later, in the Reformed tradition of Christianity. According to the entry on Covenant Theology in the *Encyclopedia of religion and ethics*, the idea of the covenant or testament within the Reformed tradition or Protestantism is used to express “God’s gracious revelation to His people, both before and after Christ.”² Within the social and political life of the Ancient Near East, the idea of a contractual relationship between God (or gods) and human beings was also prominent. The article on “covenant” in the *Anchor Bible* suggests that this theme runs through various historical stages of Near Eastern religion and culture, and that

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- 1 Preliminary versions of this article were presented at Yale University (October 2014), the University of Virginia (October 2015), the American Oriental Society (March 2015), and the University of Oregon (May 2016). I am thankful for the feedback I received from my gracious audiences and to my friend and colleague Nicholas Heer for our discussions about this topic.
 - 2 W. Adams Brown, Covenant Theology, in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics* (Edinburgh 1908–22; reprint. 1981), 4:216–24. Covenant theology has a threefold significance; it is a “theory of salvation,” a “programme for conduct,” and a “philosophy of history” (4:218). Two covenants were distinguished: the covenant of works made in Paradise with Adam as the federal head of the race, and the covenant of grace made with Christ, the second Adam, or with the elect who have Him as their representative. In the former, God reveals the substance of the moral law as the condition He prescribes for the attainment of salvation; in the latter, He acquaints men with the machinery He devised for the repair of Adam’s fault (4:217). Indeed, the idea of the covenant or testament is used to express God’s gracious revelation to His people, both before and after Christ. Two such revelations were distinguished, the Old Testament and the New Testament, agreeing in substance, but differing in administration, and the nature at once of the agreement and of the difference forms the subject of a special *locus* in early Protestant dogmatics (4:219). For a discussion of this idea within the Reformed tradition of Christianity, see the Brown, Covenant theology. On covenant theology within the Reformed tradition, see the essay by Geerhardus Vos, The doctrine of the covenant in reformed theology, in Geerhardus Vos (ed.), *Redemptive history and biblical interpretation* (Phillipsburg, N.J. 2001), 234–67.

it may be used as a lens through which one can understand religious community and identity in the Bible.³

The idea of a covenant – a contractual relationship between God and humanity – is central to the qur’anic worldview.⁴ Recent scholarship by Rosalind Gwynne has argued that the covenant is “the logical key to the entire structure of the qur’anic argument” and that “virtually every argument in the Qur’ān expresses or implies one or more of the covenantal provisions.”⁵ Gwynne conceives of the covenant as a “cosmic rule” that supplies the “structure of moral reasoning that God requires of human beings,” arguing that it “validates commandments, defines the human condition, provides premises in categorical syllogisms, and so forth.”⁶ In her view, all qur’anic arguments derive ultimately from the qur’anic idea of covenant. Thanks to Gwynne’s monograph, we know much more about the internal logic employed by the Qur’ān, including the manifold syllogistic arguments that it deploys to persuade its audience to recognize and to obey the obligations that God enjoins on human beings.⁷

3 G. Mendenhall and G. Herion, Covenant, in D.N. Freedman (eds.), *The Anchor Bible dictionary* (New York 1992), 1:1179–1202. On covenant in the Old Testament, see Jon Douglas Levenson, *Sinai & Zion. An entry into the Jewish Bible*, Minneapolis 1985; Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant. The history of a biblical idea*, Baltimore 1969; Paul Kalluveetil, *Declaration and covenant. A comprehensive review of covenant formulae from the Old Testament and the ancient Near East*, Rome 1982.

4 The OED defines a covenant as “a mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from certain acts; a compact, contract, bargain; sometimes, the undertaking, pledge, or promise of one of the parties”: Covenant, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1:1101, available at: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43328?rskey=bkeUhc&result=1#/>. In the *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*: “A covenant is a bond or agreement entered into between two persons or groups of persons, or between a man or a group of men and a god or gods”; J.A. MacCulloch, Covenant, in Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*, 3:206–9.

5 Rosalind W. Gwynne, *Logic, rhetoric, and legal reasoning in the Qur’ān. God’s arguments* (London-New York 2004), 4.

6 *Ibid.*, 24.

7 The first major study of the theme of Covenant in the Qur’ān was R.C. Darnell’s unpublished dissertation, *The idea of divine covenant in the Qur’ān*, Ph.D. diss., Michigan, The University of Michigan, 1970. Darnell examined the expressions in the Qur’ān that carry the sense of covenant, bond, contract, or agreement (3), finding that the clearest expression of the theme of covenant is in *sūra* 5 of the Qur’ān (*Sūrat al-Mā’ida*), which stipulates three different forms of covenant. He sees the fundamental notion of covenant in the Qur’ān as tied to grace (pages 43 and 48), arguing that the purpose of God’s legislation is the fulfillment of His grace (50). In his study, Darnell finds further support for this idea in qur’anic exegetical literature, citing al-Ṭabarī, who ties grace and contracts together (51), as well as grace to the notion of the giving of Islam as a religion (51).

2 Aim and Methodology

The Qurʾān formulates a contractual relationship between God and humans in a single verse commonly referred to as the Covenant Verse (Q 7:172). In Arberry's translation this verse reads as follows:

And when your Lord extracted the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam, and made them testify touching themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we testify." So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were not aware of this," or, "It was our forefathers who, before us, ascribed partners to God, and we are only the descendants who came after them: will you destroy us because of falsehoods they invented?"⁸

The meaning and implications of the Qurʾān's covenantal formula were contested by Muslim intellectuals working within the genre of qurʾanic commentary.⁹ The interpretations of the formula that commentators advanced were naturally diverse, but more importantly they were central to the way that Muslim intellectuals established their theological identities and developed their conceptions of monotheistic religion. This essay describes the features of these identities by tracing the seed of the idea of covenant within the history of Islam.

A preliminary investigation into the history of the Covenant Verse has already been carried out by Richard Gramlich in the pioneering article "Der Urvertrag in der Koranauslegung (zu Sure 7, 172–173)."¹⁰ Gramlich mapped the history of

8 A.J. Arberry, *The Koran interpreted*, London 1955. The term *mīthāq* is not mentioned in this qurʾanic verse but is in Q 57:8. On other occasions (33:7 and 3:81) the Qurʾān speaks of God enjoining a covenant with Muḥammad and other prophets such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus – all of whom have symbols of their covenantal relationship with God in the Qurʾān. See G. Böwering, *Covenant, EQ*; G. Böwering, *Qurʾan*, in G. Böwering (ed.), *The Princeton encyclopedia of Islamic political thought* (New Jersey 2013), 451–3; CE Bosworth, *Mīthāq, EI2*.

9 This is not to say that speculation about the Covenant Verse took place only within the genre of qurʾanic commentary. The writings of the Ṣūfī mystic Junayd (d. 298/910), to cite one example, are saturated with the theme of the Covenant: Abū l-Qāsim Junayd, *Kitāb al-mīthāq*, in ʿAlī Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Qādir (ed.), *Rasāʾil al-Junayd*, London 1962; cf. A.J. Arberry, Junayd, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3 (1935), 499–507; A.J. Arberry, *Al-Djunayd, EI2*.

10 Richard Gramlich, *Der Urvertrag in der Koranauslegung (zu Sure 7, 172–173)*, *Der Islam* 60 (1983), 205–30. On the ways in which the Covenant Verse reflects contractual formulas from the Ancient Near East see Gwynne, *Logic, rhetoric, and legal reasoning in the Qurʾān*. Most recently, Lumbard has made a case for "covenantal pluralism" in the Qurʾān and has shown how certain interpretations of the Covenant Verse reaffirm earlier covenantal

interpretations of this verse within the vast literature of qur'anic commentary (including Shī'ī exegesis) and studied how the multiple and diverse lines of interpretation converge and diverge at different points in the history of Islamic culture. In this essay I do not wish to take issue with Gramlich's analysis but rather to use it as a starting point for further exploration. In what follows I wish to argue that the Qur'ān's covenantal formula deserves to be analyzed against the cultural background of pre-Islamic Arabia and as an aetiological myth that offers an account of how human beings came into existence. Additionally, I wish to further elaborate on several themes surrounding the idea of a contractual relationship between God and human beings, and to further examine the debates that surrounded this idea within the genre of qur'anic commentary. Ultimately, I would like to address one fundamental question: Is there covenant theology in Islam?

This exposition begins by situating the Qur'ān's formula of the Covenant within the category of myth. It interprets Q 7:172 against the cultural backdrop of ancient Arabia, showing how the qur'anic covenant adopted ancient Arabian values and adapted them to fit its theocentric worldview. It subsequently analyzes the theological arguments that arose through exegesis of Q 7:172 and draws out their implications. Finally, it examines the strategies that Muslim commentators working within the theological tradition of Mu'tazilism deployed to demythologize Q 7:172, showing how such commentators argued for the rational impossibility of a "covenant theology" (at least in the strict and formal sense), and reinterpreted the Covenant Verse along unconventional lines that conformed to their principles of natural theology.

Since much is packed into the Covenant Verse itself, it is worth taking our time to dissect and expand on it before examining its history within the genre of qur'anic commentary.

3 The Qur'anic Data on the Covenant

The Covenant Verse is an aetiological account – a sacred story or myth that relates how human beings came into existence.¹¹ As noted by many historians

theologies within Judaism and Christianity: Joseph E.B. Lumbard, Covenant and covenants in the Qur'an, *Journal of qur'anic studies* 17/2 (2015), 1–23. For the background on the covenant in Islam, see G. Böwering, Covenant, 1:464–7; Louis Massignon, Le "jour du covenant" (*yawm al-mūthāq*), *Oriens* 15 (1962), 86–92.

11 On aetiological myths, see the discussion in Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and chaos in the primeval era and the eschaton. A religio-historical study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, Grand Rapids-Cambridge 2006.

of religion, including Mircea Eliade, in the religions of the Ancient Near East and other cultural traditions, myths or sacred stories often relate “what has already taken place in the beginnings,” since they narrate how a fragment of reality – for example, an island, plant, a kind of behavior, an institution (or even the entire cosmos) – came into being through the act of a supernatural being or beings.¹² Anthropologists, including Malinowski (d. 1942), have stressed the social function of such myths by arguing that they serve as “a charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.” In his words, a myth “expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man.”¹³ Malinowski further stresses the social function of “myths of origin” or “narrative[s] of emergence” when he argues that one attains knowledge of myths by ceremonially recounting them or by performing the rituals that they justify.¹⁴

The Covenant Verse expresses the first event in cosmic history. It relates the initial relations between God and the human race in the formula of a contract that stipulates an obligation to serve God.¹⁵ The question “Am I not your Lord?” conveys that God imposed an obligation on human beings to acknowledge His sovereignty. When God created humanity in pre-existence, He initiated a contract that enjoined all human beings to testify to His lordliness. By attesting that God is the sole divinity by using the expression (“Yes, we testify”), human beings accepted the responsibility to live in service of God.¹⁶ Thus, from the perspective of the Qur’ān the first event in cosmic history is one that

12 The Qur’anic covenant (*mīthāq*) is a classic example of what Eliade would call a hierophanic event in the history of religions. See Mircea Eliade and Lawrence Sullivan, Hierophany, in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of religion* (New York 1987), 6:3970–4; Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and the profane. The nature of religion*, New York 1959; Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and history. The myth of the eternal return*, Princeton 1959; Mircea Eliade, *Myth and reality*, New York-Evanston 1963. On myth in religion and culture, see the following foundational works: Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, science and religion and other essays* (Garden City, NY 1954), 72–124; Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive culture. Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion language, art, and custom* (New York 1920), 1: chapters 8, 9, and 10. On myth in the Qur’ān, see Angelika Neuwirth, Myths and legends in the Qur’ān? An itinerary through its narrative landscape, in Angelika Neuwirth (ed.), *Scripture, poetry and the making of a community. Reading the Qur’ān as a literary text* (Oxford 2014), 385–413.

13 Malinowski, *Magic, science and religion and other essays*, 79.

14 *Ibid.*, 89, 94.

15 Note that this verse does not use the Qur’anic terms for covenant – *mīthāq* or *‘ahd*.

16 In this regard, the Qur’anic idea of covenant resembles the Sinaitic event. On the covenant at Sinai, see Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*; Hillers, *Covenant*.

establishes and binds together the monotheistic worldview and an ethos or program of conduct on earth for humanity.

As noted by Wadad Kadi, the final qur'anic phrases of this verse relate that human beings will be judged at the end times in accordance with the promise that they made in the primordial covenant.¹⁷ The idea here is that fulfillment of the moral law (a program of conduct) is a prerequisite for the attainment of salvation. The Qur'an reasons that by willingly recognizing God as the sole deity, human beings disallowed all excuses (e.g. for idolatry or ascribing partners to God) that they might have provided at the end times – the “Day of Resurrection.” They could not say, for example, that they were unaware of the contractual relationship with God that they undertook; and they could not make excuses for idolatry or for ascribing partners to God by saying that they were simply following the ways of their forefathers.¹⁸

As mentioned above, the Covenant Verse does more than just establish an ethical program that leads human beings to salvation. It also provides an answer to a fundamental question – how did human beings come into existence? The aetiological account that the Covenant Verse offers relates that the human race was willed into existence when God brought forth all generations of human beings from the loins of Adam – the first man – or from Adam's progeny, the Children of Adam.¹⁹

The prominence of Adam, who occupies the center stage of the Qur'an's myth of origins, is significant. The Qur'an places Adam as the instrument

17 Wadad Kadi, The primordial covenant and human history in the Qur'an, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 147/4 (2003), 333.

18 The ways in which Q 7:172 exhibits features from covenantal formulas that appear within Ancient Near Eastern cultures and religions are discussed by Gwynne; see *Logic, rhetoric, and legal reasoning in the Qur'an*, 1–24.

19 As I shall show, the question of whether human beings issued forth from Adam's loins or from the loins of the Children of Adam was a significant point of contention between the Mu'tazila and the Ash'ariyya. On Adam, see Meir J. Kister, Ādam. A study of some legends in *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth* literature, *Israel Oriental Studies* 13 (1993), 113–74; Meir J. Kister, Legends in *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth* literature. The creation of Adam and related stories, in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the history of the interpretation of the Qur'an* (Oxford 1988), 82–114; Mustansir Mir, Adam in the Qur'an, *Islamic culture* 62 (1988), 1–11; Cornelia Schöck, Adam and Eve, *EQ*; Cornelia Schöck, *Adam im Islam. Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte der Sunna*, Berlin 1993; Howard N. Wallace, Adam, *The Anchor Bible dictionary* (New York 1992), 1:62–4; M. Fishbane, Adam, *Encyclopedia of religion*, 1:29–30. I was unable to read the following article by Michael Pregill before submission: *Isrā'īlyyāt*, myth, and pseudography. Wahb b. Munabbih and the early Islamic versions of the fall of Adam and Eve, *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008), 215–84.

through which the human race comes into existence. When it does so, it replaces an old Arabian cultural value with a biblical ideal.²⁰ By proposing that human beings existed primordially in Adam's loins the Qur'an replaces the old Arabian cultural value of tribal genealogy (*nasab*) with an alternative genealogy that recognizes Adam as the head of the human race.

There are additional ways in which the Qur'an's myth of origins inherits ideas and values from ancient Arabia and reconfigures them to fit its theocentric worldview. The Qur'an adopts the old Arabian idea – which seems to have been widespread in the Ancient Near East – that covenantal formulas cement bonds between contracting parties and prescribe obligations between them. In ancient Arabia, a covenantal formula (*'ahd*) was a rite that traditionally cemented kinship between parties, often through some kind of ritual involving blood.²¹ The obligations were either taken on by one of the parties in favor of the other, or imposed by one upon the other, or mutually accepted by both.²²

How does the Qur'an's myth of origins reconfigure the old Arabian sacred rite of the covenant, and perhaps broadly, covenantal ideas that emerged earlier within the Ancient Near East?

By adopting the idea that a Covenant establishes agreements between contracting parties, the Covenant Verse cements a bond between two parties – God and the human race. From the perspective of the Qur'an's chronology of cosmic history, the Covenant Verse unites (for the first time) the transcendent sphere of the divine and the profane sphere of human beings.²³ This newly

20 There are many examples where the Qur'an replaces old Arabian cultural values with biblical ideals. On this subject, see Angelika Neuwirth, *From tribal genealogy to divine covenant. Qur'anic re-figurations of pagan Arab ideals based on biblical models, in Scripture, poetry and the making of a community*, 53–75. For a discussion that traces the biblical ideas about Adam in the Qur'an see Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, Hildesheim 1961.

21 The term *'ahd* in the third form (used eleven times in the Qur'an according to the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*) is bilateral; according to Lane, *'ahd* is "an injunction, a charge, a bidding, an order, or a command" (2:2182–4); Q 19:90 and 7:100.

22 Robertson Smith, *Kinship and marriage in early Arabia* (Boston 1885), 49; Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His people. Covenant and theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford 1986), 20. See also J. Pederson (cited in Nicholson, 20), who defines covenant as a bond between parties with prescribed obligations: Pederson, *Der Eid bei den Semiten. In seinem Verhältnis zu verwandten Erscheinungen sowie die Stellung des Eides im Islam*, Strasbourg 1914.

23 To be sure, the divine act of creation described in the Covenant Verse does not mark the absolute beginning of human cosmic history. Within the Qur'an's chronology of cosmic events, the divine act that brings forth human beings from Adam takes place after Adam is evicted from Paradise for his disobedience to God. The Qur'an thus situates the event of the covenant *after* man's celestial existence in the Garden but *before* his terrestrial

established theological bond makes possible the reciprocal ethical obligations between God and humanity. Indeed, the program of conduct that God imposes on the human race through the Covenant – a program that (if fulfilled) will ultimately lead to humanity’s salvation – assumes an initial contact between the transcendent sphere of the divine and the profane sphere of human beings.

In sum, the Covenant Verse exhibits several interrelated ideas that are central to Covenant Theology: (i) God’s creation of human beings; (ii) a contractual relationship between God and humanity; (iii) a program of conduct for humanity; (iv) and the idea of salvation. Indeed, one could argue that the Qur’anic formula of the covenant is remarkable because it establishes links between these ideas.

4 Exegetical Difficulties and Interpretive Possibilities

The Qur’ān’s covenantal formula formed part of a comprehensive mythology that was contained in the vast literature of prophetic traditions. The formula featured prominently within the web of cultural myths that early traditionists spun when they explained how the cosmos and all living things came into being. An examination of the full range of forty-three traditions that al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) amassed in his Qur’anic commentary (*Jāmi’ al-bayān*) and his *History* – two works that mirror the views of the early Islamic community – shows that the early Islamic community elaborated a chronology of cosmic events using the Qur’ān and Prophetic Traditions, and that God’s imposition of the Covenant occupied a pivotal place within that chronology. Within this order of events, the divine act that brought forth human beings from Adam takes place after Adam is evicted from Paradise for his disobedience to God.²⁴ The early Muslims thus situate the Covenant event *after* man’s celestial existence in the Garden but *before* his terrestrial existence, an existence that will continue until the Day of Judgment.²⁵

Naturally, early Muslims considered God’s initiation of the covenant an event that took place within human history. Traditionists proposed that the covenant (*mīthāq*) took place at Na’mān – or possibly ‘Arafa. Moreover, they

existence that extends until which ends with the Day of Judgment. For further discussion on the Qur’ān’s chronology of cosmic events, see Kadi, Primordial covenant, 332–8.

24 Kadi, Primordial covenant, 333.

25 Ibid., 335. For a lengthy discussion about the chronology of cosmic events described by the Qur’ān and prophetic traditions, see al-Ṭabarī, *The history of al-Ṭabarī*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Albany, NY 1989), 165ff.

insisted that this occasion marked a critical moment in cosmic history. After God evicted Adam from Paradise He brought forth all future generations of human beings from Adam's loins (*ṣulb*), or from his back (*ẓahr*), according to some traditions, thus creating progeny.²⁶ He multiplied human beings, scattered them in front of Him like tiny atoms (*dharra*), and then spoke to them.²⁷ He imposed a covenant on them by enjoining them to acknowledge His lordship and unity.²⁸ After all human beings recognized God's unity and sovereignty by testifying their profession of faith "one after another,"²⁹ God returned the collective of the human race to Adam's loins.³⁰ For early Sunnī traditionists, the covenant thus served as a reminder of a time in the past when the entire human race – or even all living creatures, according to some traditions – recognized God's unity and sovereignty.³¹

Now to al-Ṭabarī's exegesis. The forty-three traditions amassed by al-Ṭabarī in his *tafsīr* reveal two major themes: (a) for traditionists (who represented a major current within the early Muslim community), the ideas of covenant and belief in predestination are inseparable;³² and (b) for traditionists within the early Muslim community, the ideas of covenant and belief in Islam as the natural and original religion of humanity are inseparable. So, the questions that arise are as follows: How did covenant and belief in predestination come to be knotted together? And how did covenant and belief in Islam as the natural and original religion of humanity come to be linked to each other? I will deal with each of these in turn.

26 The interpretation that all human beings come out of the loins of Adam was endorsed by a number of traditional authorities, including Ibn 'Abbās, Sa'īd b. al-Musayyib, Sa'īd b. Jubayr, al-Ḍaḥḥāk, 'Ikrima, and al-Kalbī, as well as Shī'ī commentators.

27 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fi ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, ed. M.M. Shākir and A.M. Shākir (Cairo 1954–69), 6: Nr. 15381.

28 Ibid., 6: Nr. 15371, 15377, 15379, 15381.

29 Ibid., 6: Nr. 15349, 15359, 15360, 15361, 15362, 15376. On the Arabic term *dharra* (sing. *dharra*), which is used in the Qur'anic expression *mithqāl al-dharra* at 4:40; 10:61; 34:3; 24:2; 34:22; 99:7; 99:8), see Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English lexicon* (Cambridge 1992), 1:957.

30 Ibid., 6: Nr. 15371, 15378, 15379, 15381. See also Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 304.

31 Ibid., 6: Nr. 15350, 15351, 15353, 15354, 15357.

32 An analysis of the forty-three traditions collected by al-Ṭabarī in his exegesis of Q 7:172 reveals that the Covenant was just one of many qur'anic symbols that were vehicles for the transmission of predestinarian ideas. Others include the divine pen (*qalam*) and the appointed time of death (*ajal musammā*). See Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 6: Nr. 15355, 15358, 15359, 15360, 15368.

4.1 *Covenant is God's Foreordainment or Predestination (Qadar)*

The Covenant Verse (cited above) and the tradition of predestination (cited below) express disparate ideas (although as I shall argue, they share a common element). The former is an aetiological account that relates how humanity came into existence (*khalaqa*); the latter relates that God predestined the fate of each human being. For the early Islamic community, however, the aetiological account and the idea that God preordained the destiny of each individual were already locked together in Muḥammad's lifetime.³³

Traditions collected by al-Ṭabarī credit Ibn 'Abbās (d. c. 68/688), the uncle of the Prophet and the grandfather of Qur'anic exegesis, with aligning the Covenant Verse with predestinarian ideas.³⁴ According to several traditions, Ibn 'Abbās explained the ideas of covenant and predestination with reference to one another. Al-Ṭabarī reports:

Abū Kurayb – Yaḥya b. 'Isā – al-A'mash – Ḥabīb b. Abī Thābit – Sa'īd ibn Jubayr – Ibn 'Abbās, commenting on [the Qur'anic verse], "And when your Lord took from the backs of the children of Adam their progeny," as follows: **When God created Adam, He took his progeny from his back like tiny atoms. He took two handfuls and said to those on the right: Enter Paradise in peace! And He said to the others: Enter the Fire!**³⁵

In his *History* al-Ṭabarī records another report in which the ideas of covenant and predestination explain each other. This report quotes an alternative tradition that can ultimately be traced to a version found in the *Muwatta'* of Mālik ibn Anas.³⁶ It relies on the authority of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, and it credits the Prophet with the tradition. In his *History* al-Ṭabarī reports:

33 I am grateful to my friend and colleague David Hollenberg for helping me clarify this point.

34 Gramlich, *Der Urvertrag*, 206. On the theme of predestination, see the classic work by Josef van Ess, *Zwischen Ḥadīth und Theologie* (Berlin 1974), passim. On the *ḥadīth* of predestination, see A.J. Wensinck et al., *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden 1992), 2:23a. On Ibn 'Abbās, see Claude Gilliot, *Portrait mythique d'Ibn 'Abbās, Arabica* 32 (1985), 127–84; Andrew Rippin, *Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās and criteria for dating early tafsīr texts, Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 19 (1994), 38–83; Andrew Rippin, *Ibn 'Abbās's Gharīb al-Qur'ān, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46 (1983), 332–3; Andrew Rippin, *Ibn 'Abbās's al-Lughāt fī'l-Qur'ān, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 44 (1981), 15–25; Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's night journey. Tracing the development of the Ibn 'Abbās ascension discourse*, Albany 2008.

35 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 6: Nr. 15355; *Ta'rikh*, 1:305.

36 See Van Ess, *Zwischen Ḥadīth und Theologie*, 32ff.

Ibrāhīm b. Sa‘īd al-Jawharī – Rawḥ b. ‘Ubādah and Sa‘d b. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Ja‘far – Mālik b. Anas – Zayd b. Abī Unaysah – ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. al-Khaṭṭāb – Muslim b. Yasār al-Juhānī: **When ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb was asked about this verse: “And [when] your Lord took from the backs of the children of Adam their progeny,” he said: “I heard the Messenger of God say: ‘God created Adam, then rubbed his back with His right hand and brought forth from it [his] progeny.’ Then He said: ‘I have created these for Paradise, and they will act as the inhabitants of Paradise. Then he rubbed his back with his left hand and said: ‘I have created those for the Fire, and they will act as the inhabitants of the Fire.’ A man asked: ‘O Messenger of God, how is that?’ Muḥammad replied: ‘When God creates a human being for Paradise, He employs him to act as the inhabitants of Paradise, and he will enter Paradise. And when God creates a human being for the Fire, He will employ him to act as the inhabitants of the Fire, and will thus make him enter the Fire.’”**³⁷

Al-Ṭabarī records the same tradition in his exegesis of Q 7:172:

God created Adam, then He rubbed his back with his right hand so that progeny issued forth. Then He said, “I have created these for the Fire, and they will act as the inhabitants of the Fire.” Then He rubbed his back and progeny issued forth. And He said, “I created these for Paradise, and they will act as the inhabitants of Paradise.” Then a man said: “How is that?” Muḥammad replied: “When God creates a human being for Paradise, He employs him to act as the inhabitants of Paradise, and he will enter Paradise. And when God creates a human being for the Fire, He will employ him to act as the inhabitants of the Fire, and will thus make him enter the Fire.”³⁸

These are just two instances in which the Covenant Verse is interpreted through the lens of the “*ḥadīth* of predestination.” There are many other instances, however, that suggest that the Covenant Verse and the *ḥadīth* of predestination were used to explain one another in medieval Islam. To cite one example,

37 Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 305–6. The prophetic tradition appears in the *Muwattaʿa* of Mālik b. ‘Anas. An alternative version of the *ḥadīth* is quoted by al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Cairo 1933), 15:46. Variants of this *ḥadīth* are mentioned by al-Ṭabarī in his *History*; see also the discussions in Van Ess, *Zwischen Ḥadīth und Theologie*, 1–74.

38 Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 6: Nr. 15368.

the Sunnī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) mentions an alternative version of this *ḥadīth* when he elaborates on the Covenant Verse:

I heard that [when] the Prophet of God was asked about this verse, he said: “God – glory be to Him and may He be exalted – created Adam and then rubbed his back; then He extracted progeny from him. Then He said: ‘I have created these for Paradise, and they will act as the inhabitants of Paradise.’ Then He rubbed Adam’s back and extracted progeny from him. Then He said: ‘I created these for the Fire and they will act as the inhabitants of the Fire.’”

It is plain to see that there was a tendency among Muslim traditionists (and even later Sunnī theologians) to explicate the Covenant Verse by referring to the *ḥadīth* of predestination. Naturally there are discrepancies between the traditions of predestination that I have cited. What is important here, however, is that for Muslim traditionists (and even later Sunnī theologians) the idea of predestination and the Covenant Verse dovetailed rather well, and these were brought into line with each other without much controversy.

It is plain to see why these two ideas adapted to one another so easily. Both traditions work on the assumption that Adam is the prototype of humanity and its progenitor and acknowledge him as the head of the human race.³⁹ The two traditions provide the same account of how human beings came into existence. Both traditions suggest that human beings, which the Qurʾān refers to as the Children of Adam, were brought into existence as a collective when God rubbed Adam’s back – the Arabic term “back” (*ẓahr*) here is a euphemism for the region of the genitals or loins, the source of procreative power.⁴⁰ Moreover, both traditions insist that God predestined the providence of each human being when He extracted humanity from Adam.

Let me conclude this section with an observation about the position I have just described and a note about its implication. First, for one major current within medieval Islam, the idea of a contractual relationship between God and human beings derived its authority from an aetiological myth circulating within the vast literature of prophetic traditions – a myth that also recognized Adam as the head of the human race. Conversely, one could say that belief in God’s predestination of human beings derived its authority from the idea of covenant.

39 For a discussion of this theme and analysis of qurʾanic verses that relate to the creation of Adam, see Kister, *Ādam*.

40 On the Arabic verb *massaḥa*, see Lane, *Arabic-English lexicon*, 2:2713.

Secondly, and more significantly, the early Islamic community regarded the covenant as a universal contract and conceived of it in universal terms. Although it considered the event of the covenant to be tied to certain historical and social institutions (and to a locale – Na‘mān or ‘Arafa), the early Islamic community deemed the covenant a contractual relationship that God imposed upon the collective of the human race. It considered the whole of humanity (all future generations) as having been created at the covenant through Adam; it considered all human beings to have testified to God’s unity at that moment, and it naturally considered all human beings to be bound by the covenant.

4.2 *Universal Covenant and Natural Monotheism*

This brings us to a second theme within Sunnī theology and exegesis: universal covenant and natural monotheism. When Muslim traditionists and later Sunnī theologians interpreted the qur’anic concept of covenant, they postulated that all human beings are endowed with a natural tendency for monotheistic belief. They proposed that this tendency was given to human beings in virtue of the covenant: When human beings were taken out of Adam’s loins in pre-existence and made to testify to God’s unity they were instilled with monotheistic belief.

How did the qur’anic concept of the covenant get fused with the idea that human beings are endowed with a natural tendency toward monotheistic belief?⁴¹ The answer lies in a key qur’anic term – *fiṭra* – which means, roughly speaking, “a unique way that human beings are created” or “a created disposition, inclination, or tendency.” (The term has been translated many ways, and its history deserves a separate study.) *Fiṭra* appears in Q 30:30: “So set thy face to the religion, a man of pure faith – God’s original upon which He originated mankind. There is no changing God’s creation. This is the right religion; but most men know it not.” According to some commentators, the idea behind this verse is that there is an original and proper religion. God created human beings with a natural inclination toward that proper religion, which is simply and essentially monotheistic belief (*islām, dīn*).⁴²

41 For example, al-Ṭabarī cites several interpretations in which these ideas are tied together: Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 6:15363, 15364, 15373.

42 See the discussion in Gramlich, *Der Urvertrag*, 218ff.; D.B. Macdonald, *fiṭra*, *EI2*; J. Royce, *Monotheism*, *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*, 8:817–21; A.J. Wensinck, *Concordances* 5:179–80 (on the prophetic tradition and its many variants); A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim creed. Its genesis and historical development* (Cambridge 1932, reprint. London 1965), 42–4, 190–1; Van Ess, *Zwischen Ḥadīth und Theologie*, 101ff.; Camilla Adang, *Islam as the inborn religion of mankind. The concept of fiṭra in the works of Ibn Ḥazm, al-Qantara*

It was by appealing to the qur'anic notion of *fiṭra* that Sunnī commentators developed this interpretation of the covenant. Since the Qur'ān defined *fiṭra* as a unique way in which human beings were created, commentators only needed to take a small step to reinterpret the concept of covenant to align with this notion. When they took this step, Sunnī commentators formulated a novel claim: when human beings were extracted from Adam's loins they were endowed with a tendency toward monotheistic belief. To cite just one example: al-Rāzī links the ideas of *tawḥīd* and *fiṭra* in his *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb* and interprets the qur'anic term *fiṭra* – the natural constitution that God created for human beings – to mean “the profession of God's unity” (*tawḥīd*).⁴³ To put the matter bluntly, in the eyes of Sunnī theologians and commentators, human beings are born monotheists.

What is significant about the Islamic accounts of the origins of human beings that I have described? Their significance may lie in what is conspicuously absent, and that is a crucial idea from the biblical narrative of Adam – namely that human beings inherit Adam's sin. None of the prophetic traditions collected by al-Ṭabarī allude to this idea. The other Sunnī commentaries that I consulted do not allude to it either. Instead of speaking about man's inheritance of Adam's sin, as one might expect, and affirming a biblical idea, the medieval Muslim sources formulate a novel idea of covenant. According to this account, integral to the history of man or to the Qur'ān's chronology of cosmic events, what all human beings inherit from Adam (and by virtue of the covenant in pre-existence) is not a propensity to sin but a tendency toward monotheistic belief. To put the matter baldly, in the eyes of Sunnī theologians and commentators, human beings are born monotheists, not sinners.

21 (2000), 391–410. I was not able to obtain the following works before submission: A. Straface, *La fiṭrah come espressione di iman*, *Oriente Moderno* 11/72, 7–12 (1992), 69–86; Yasien Mohammed, The interpretations of *fiṭrah*, *Islamic Studies* 34 (1995), 129–51; Yasien Mohammed, *Fiṭrah. The Islamic concept of human nature*, London 1996; G. Gobillot, *Lépitre du discours sur la fiṭra (Risāla fi-l-kalām 'alā-l-fiṭra)* de Taqī-l-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya (661/1262–728/1328), presentation et traduction annotée, *Annales Islamologiques* 20 (1984), 29–53; Livnat Holtzman, Human choice, divine guidance and the *fiṭra* tradition. The use of hadith in theological treatises by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, in Y. Rappoport and S. Ahmed (eds.), *Ibn Taymiyya and his times* (Karachi 2010), 163–88.

43 See Rāzī's commentary on Q 30:30 in *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb*, 25:119. The point is first alluded to by Gramlich.

5 Covenant is the Original Nature and Formation of the Human Being

I turn now to a third theme surrounding the covenant: Covenant is the natural origin and formation of the human being. How did the covenant come to be interpreted to refer to the natural or original nature of human beings?

The answer lies with the Sunnī theologian and Qurʾan commentator Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Writing in the late sixth/twelfth and early seventh/thirteenth century, al-Rāzī reformulated the covenant to make it conform to natural philosophy or natural reason. The key passage is as follows:

God extracted his progeny, who are the children of Adam, from the loins of their fathers. [By extraction, what is meant is that] they were a sperm drop, [and that] then God extracted it in the wombs of their mothers, and he made it a blood-clot, then an embryo, then he made them to be fully-formed and [gave them] a full nature. Then God made them testify touching themselves to the proofs of his unity that he composed for them and the wonders of his creation. So, in testifying they became as though they said, “Yes, we testify,” even though they did not testify with their tongues.⁴⁴

In the excerpt above, al-Rāzī interprets the qurʾanic idea of covenant by appealing to the generative process of an embryo that is described in several passages of the Qurʾān. He proposes that the covenant is a natural act that occurs every time a human being comes into existence – not a one-time metaphysical that took place in pre-existence.⁴⁵

Crucial to al-Rāzī’s novel reformulation of the covenant is his interpretation of the qurʾanic verse, “And when your Lord extracted the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam.” Rejecting the notion that this phrase refers to God’s extraction of human beings from Adam’s loins in pre-existence, al-Rāzī takes the phrase, “from the loins of their fathers,” to refer to the natural propagation of human beings one from another and from one generation to the next. Furthermore, he understands the act by which God extracts progeny from “the loins of their fathers” to refer to the origin and natural development of the human being in the womb – from its origin as a sperm-drop through its developmental stages of blood-clot, embryo, and, finally, an upright human being.

Al-Rāzī does not consider the implications of his position, so let me try. We have seen that he asserts that human beings undertake the covenant in

44 Ibid., 15:50.

45 Gramlich, *Der Urvertrag*, 229.

a prenatal state, and that they do so by affirming God's existence and by testifying to his unity in the womb. What he means to imply here is that human beings enter a contractual relationship with God while still in the womb. That contractual relationship demands moral duties and principles on the part of human beings. First and foremost among these acts of obedience is the duty to live in service to God. This responsibility, al-Rāzī implies, is grounded in the genesis and natural formation of human beings, not in a metaphysical event that took place in pre-existence.

6 Demythologizing the Covenant: The Mu'tazila

Not all intellectual currents in medieval Islam saw things this way. Countering the authority of Prophetic *ḥadīth*, the Mu'tazila interpreted the Covenant Verse from the subjective perspective of human intellect or reason (*ʿaql*). They devoted their efforts to demythologizing the Qur'ān's formula of the covenant, to undermining the traditional interpretations of it, and to demonstrating its rational impossibility.

The following, and final, section focuses on the methods and strategies that the Mu'tazila developed to accomplish these aims. An examination of the wealth of Mu'tazilī arguments recorded by the Sunnī intellectual Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī suggests that the Mu'tazila adopted a two-pronged strategy when they interpreted the Covenant Verse. The first was to point out discrepancies between the wording of Q 7:172 and the traditions that *ḥadīth* specialists invoked in order to explicate that verse. The second was to show that the traditional conception of the covenant amounted to a rational impossibility.

6.1 *The Mu'tazilī Use of Philology*

The Mu'tazila did not give much weight to the authority of prophetic traditions, and so it was easy for them to dismiss the *ḥadīth* of predestination as inconsequential and irrelevant.⁴⁶ Besides, the traditional interpretation that took the Covenant Verse to refer to predestination could not have been an option for them. This is because the idea that God predestined the fates of

46 This is not to say that the Mu'tazila did not (when it suited their purposes) invoke the authority of prophetic traditions. On the Mu'tazilī attitude towards prophetic traditions, see Josef Van Ess, *La notion d'autorité de la tradition prophétique dans la théologie mu'tazilite*, in George Makdisi et al. (eds.), *La notion d'autorité au Moyen Age. Islam, Byzance, Occident* (Paris 1980), 211–26; Racha El-Omari, *Accommodation and resistance. Classical Mu'tazilites on ḥadīth*, *Journal of Near Eastern studies* 7 1/2 (2012), 231–56.

individuals and that He had an overall design for humanity was in contrast to the Mu‘tazili belief in free will.⁴⁷

For the Mu‘tazila, the traditional understanding of the Qur‘ān’s covenantal formula implied certain rational impossibilities; moreover, the formula itself, “And when your Lord extracted the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam,” bore the stamp of anthropomorphism. For these reasons, the Mu‘tazila developed strategies to show the falsity of the traditional interpretation, and they developed exegetical methods to reinterpret the qur’anic formula along lines that conformed to their rational theology.

What were these strategies and methods? Philology will be the first place to begin.⁴⁸ The Mu‘tazila deployed their philological skills to undermine the traditional interpretation of the covenant. Interpreting Q 7:172 through the lens of Arabic grammar, they rejected the idea that human beings are the actual physical offspring of Adam (anthropomorphism again!). This strategic method is evinced in three arguments that are preserved within the tradition of Sunnī qur’anic commentary. Al-Rāzī states:

The first argument is that the Mu‘tazila held that in God’s words, “from the children of Adam, from their loins,” there is no doubt that His words, “from their loins,” refers back to His words, “the children of Adam,” so that the meaning here is: “When your Lord took from the loins of the children of Adam.” On this supposition, God the exalted did not mention that He extracted anything from Adam’s back.

The second argument is that if the intended meaning were that God Most High extracted something of his seed from Adam’s back when He said, “from their loins,” then it would be necessary that he say, “from his back,” because Adam has only one back. The same goes for His words, “their seed.” If this referred to Adam then He would have said, “his seed.”⁴⁹

The arguments above demonstrate that the Mu‘tazila were quick to point out a discrepancy between the qur’anic formula of the covenant and the prophetic tradition that implied that God brought forth all of humanity from Adam’s

47 The literature on free will and predestination in Islamic theology is vast. The two classic works are William Montgomery Watt, *Free will and predestination*, London 1948; Harry A. Wolfson, *The philosophy of the kalām*, Cambridge 1976.

48 On the history of philology in the Western tradition (and its role within the Humanities in academia, see James Turner, *Philology. The forgotten origins of the modern humanities*, Princeton 2014. See also the review by Eric L. Ormsby A kingdom in splinters, *The new criterion* 34/8 (April 2016).

49 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 15:47.

back. The Mu'tazila discerned that the Qur'an employs the plural pronoun when it speaks of "loins" and "progeny" at Q 7:172, and they consequently argued that if the Qur'an intended to convey that progeny were taken from the loins of Adam, then it would have used the singular of loins (i.e. *his* loins) and the singular of progeny (i.e. *his* progeny).⁵⁰ Reading the qur'anic phrase *min zuhūrihim* in apposition to *min banī Ādam*, the Mu'tazila interpreted this verse to mean "that God took human beings out of the loins of the children of Adam," as opposed to out of Adam's back or loins. They proposed that this verse implied that human beings issued from the offspring of Adam's *children* – and not from Adam's back.⁵¹ They concluded that all the Qur'an is referring to in this verse is the idea that human beings are generated from one another – the natural propagation of the species (father-son, father-son, and so on.)

6.2 *Covenant is Metaphysical Impossibility*

Such are the philological arguments. I turn now to the ways that the Mu'tazila subjected this verse to the critical judgment of human reason.

The Mu'tazila reject – without reservation – the interpretation of the covenant that was advocated by Muslim traditionists. They claimed that the idea that God imposed a covenant on human beings in pre-existence was false, and they argued vehemently against the strongly anthropomorphic idea that God brought the human race into existence by extracting human beings from Adam. In their commentaries on Q 7:172, the Mu'tazila focus mainly on the metaphysical implications of this traditional interpretation, and they argue that such metaphysical implications are problematic because they lead to rational impossibilities.

Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915) and Abū-l Qāsim al-Ka'bi (d. 319/931) were among the first Mu'tazilī theologians to challenge the way that traditionists interpreted the qur'anic formula of the covenant. They tried to show that the traditional interpretation of the covenant implied rational impossibilities. Their commentaries focus on the reasoning that traditionists had applied to this verse. Al-Jubbā'ī seems to have been the first to do this. His position is preserved by his student Jishumī (d. 494/1101). Al-Jubbā'ī's argument against the possibility of the covenant can be best phrased in terms of a question: *How is it possible for the entire offspring of human beings to have been present in Adam when Adam's back cannot encompass that great whole?*

50 Ibid. See also Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl* (Cairo 1307/1890), 2:129; Gramlich, *Der Urvertrag*, 209.

51 The Mu'tazila then interpreted qur'anic phrase, "Our fathers were idolaters aforetime," to mean that the forefathers of the children of Adam were polytheists.

Among such arguments is the one that our master (*shaykh*) Abū ‘Alī [al-Jubbā’ī] mentioned, which is that the back of Adam cannot encompass that great whole. This is a preposterous doctrinal position.⁵²

This argument is also preserved by al-Rāzī in his Qur’ān commentary. He writes:

The fifth argument is that all of mankind, who God created from the children of Adam, are a great number, so the sum total realized of those specks reaches a great number in *volume* and *measure*, but the loins of Adam because of their smallness make it impossible to encompass that whole.⁵³

The Mu‘tazilī argument above aims to undermine the traditional understanding of the covenant. As mentioned previously, Muslim traditionists had proposed that all human beings (including all future generations of souls) were brought into existence when they were extracted from Adam at time of the Covenant in pre-existence; consequently, human beings are the actual physical offspring of Adam.

To counter this thesis, the Mu‘tazila appealed to a principle from their atomistic cosmology: an infinite number of parts cannot be contained in a finite entity. The essence of the Mu‘tazilī argument is: (a) Adam’s loins are finite; (b) but the collective of human souls (at the time of the covenant) is of a great size in terms of its volume, even being infinite; and so (c) the collective of human souls cannot possibly be contained within the finitude of Adam’s loins.

From the perspective of the Mu‘tazila, this argument succeeded in discrediting an idea that was pivotal to the worldview of Muslim traditionists, namely that human beings are the actual physical offspring of Adam. It therefore succeeded in demythologizing the qur’anic covenantal account of how human beings came into existence.

The second way that the Mu‘tazila went about demythologizing the traditional understanding of the covenant can also be phrased in terms of a question: *How is it possible for human beings to be charged with a religious obligation (to obey God) before they were endowed with intellects or the capacity for understanding?*

52 Jishumī, *al-Tahdhīb fi l-tafsīr*, Rome, Vatican Library MS Arab 01026, fol. 90a–91b. I am grateful to my friend and colleague Suleiman Mourad for sharing Jishumī’s manuscript with me and for our discussions about this verse.

53 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 15:48.

This argument proceeds by pointing out a metaphysical difficulty with the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an's covenantal formula. The Covenant Verse describes human beings as essences or seeds (*dhawāt*); but such seeds or essences are not endowed with intellects. Consequently, it is not possible for God to have charged those seeds or essences with religious obligation at that time. This difficulty was the subject of a debate that took place between two early Mu'tazilis, namely al-Ka'bī (d. 319/931) and al-Zajjāj (d. ca. 337/949). Again, it is the Sunnī theologian al-Rāzī who preserves this debate:

The eighth argument: [Abū-l Qāsim] al-Ka'bī held that at the moment of the covenant those offspring (*al-dhurriya*) were not superior in understanding or knowledge to children. Now, since it is not possible to charge children with an obligation, how is it possible to charge those essences with an obligation? Al-Zajjāj responded to this by saying that it is not impossible that God gave the ants intellect (*al-'aql*) as: He said, "an ant said, 'Ants, enter your dwelling-places!'" (Q 27:8) [...] and that He gave mountains understanding (*al-fahm*), so that they praised God, as He said, "And with David we subjected the mountains to give glory..." (Q 21:79), and just as God gave intellect (*al-'aql*) to the camel so that it prostrated itself before the prophet, and to the date-palm so that it listened...⁵⁴

In the passage above al-Ka'bī asserts that the intellectual understanding of the seeds (*al-dhurriya*) mentioned in the Qur'an cannot be superior to the intellectual capacity of children. And since it is not possible to charge children with obligation to the law it is not possible for God to charge those specks [essences] (*dhawāt*) with religious obligation.⁵⁵

A third way that the Mu'tazila challenge the traditional understanding of the Qur'an's covenantal formula is by citing scriptural evidence. They note that several qur'anic passages convey that human beings are initially created as embryos ("gushing water issuing between the loins and the breast-bones"). They take these verses to mean that the human intellect does not pre-exist the body; and therefore the idea that God charged human beings with religious

54 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 15:48.

55 Ka'bī's pointed question initiated internal debates within Mu'tazilism. In his response to al-Ka'bī, al-Zajjāj adduces several qur'anic verses that seem to imply that intellect is not the prerogative of human beings; furthermore, just as God bestowed intellect (*al-'aql*) on ants, granted a mountain "understanding" (*al-fahm*), and gave intellect (*al-'aql*) to a camel, it is equally possible that He bestowed Adam's offspring with religious obligation.

obligation in pre-existence – before they were embodied – is a metaphysical impossibility.

This argument is preserved by al-Rāzī as well. He states:

The tenth argument: God's words, "So let man consider of what he was created; he was created of gushing water issuing between the loins and the breast-bones" (Q 86:5–7). Now if those specks were intellects with the capacity for full understanding, then they would have existed before they were gushing water, but the only meaning that properly belongs to the human being is that which we just mentioned, so at that time man is not created from gushing water, and that disproves the plain sense of the Qurʾān (*radd lil-naṣṣ al-Qurʾān*).⁵⁶

In the excerpt above the Muʿtazila argue that the specks mentioned in Q 7:172 could not have been intellects endowed with the capacity for understanding, and they conclude that the specks could not count as human beings at the time of the primordial covenant. The argument proceeds on the scriptural supposition that human beings are created from "gushing water issuing between the loins and the breast-bones" (Q 86:5–7). It proposes that if the specks referred to in Q 7:172 were intellects, then such intellects would pre-exist the original state in which they were created as gushing water. But since human beings are essentially and originally gushing water, as is evidenced by Q 86:5–7, then the plain sense of the Qurʾān – the idea of pre-existent intellects charged with religious obligation – must be false.⁵⁷

Thus far, we have seen that the Muʿtazila developed strategies and methods to undermine the way that Muslim traditionists interpreted the Qurʾān's covenantal formula, and that certain leading Muʿtazilis went so far as to dismiss the traditional understanding of the covenant as a rational impossibility. This does not lead to the conclusion, however, that the Muʿtazila rejected the qurʾanic formula of the covenant as totally false or that they turned their backs on this notion that was so central to the qurʾanic worldview.

With time, the Muʿtazila developed their own interpretation of the Qurʾān's covenantal formula, offering a positive doctrine, and formulated their own kind of Covenantal Theology. This was not until the twelfth century, when al-Zamakhsharī, a Muslim commentator from Central Asia, composed his Qurʾān commentary (*al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq al-tanzīl*), a work that was widely

⁵⁶ Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 15:49.

⁵⁷ See Gramlich, *Der Urvertrag*, 210–2.

read among Shī'ī and Sunnī scholars and extensively commented upon in Muslim institutions of learning.⁵⁸

Al-Zamakhsharī departs from the traditional interpretations of the Covenant Verse by rejecting the idea that the verse explains how human beings were brought into existence. Moreover, he departs from the ways that his Mu'tazilī predecessors interpreted this verse by dismissing the idea that the covenant is a metaphysical impossibility.

How did al-Zamakhsharī resolve the exegetical difficulty of the covenant? And what is the significance of the Covenant Verse for him?

In his brief exegesis of the Covenant Verse, al-Zamakhsharī raises a theme we have not seen before: Covenant is God's act of endowing human beings with intellect and religious obligation.⁵⁹ The idea here is that at the Primordial Covenant, God granted human beings intellects. By testifying to God and confirming His unity at the Covenant (using the expression, "Yes, we witness"), human beings entered into a contractual relationship with God. They consequently became obligated to come to knowledge of God using natural reason (rather than revelation).⁶⁰

Al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation of the Qur'ān's covenantal formula is inflected by two ideas that are foundational to the Mu'tazilī system of theology. The first is that the human intellect is autonomous. What the Mu'tazilī meant by this is that the human intellect is capable of acquiring a natural knowledge of God and of distinguishing between praiseworthy and blameworthy acts without having recourse to God's revelation.⁶¹ The second is that because

58 On this subject see Walid A. Saleh, The hashiya of Ibn al-Munayyir (d. 683/1284) on *al-Kashshāf* of al-Zamakhsharī, in Andrew Rippin and Robert Tottoli (eds.), *Books and written culture of the Islamic World. Studies presented to Claude Gilliot on the occasion of his 75th birthday* (Leiden 2015), 86–90; Walid Saleh, The gloss as intellectual history. The ḥāshiyahs on al-Kashshāf, *Oriens* 41 (2013), 217–59. On al-Zamakhsharī, see Andrew J. Lane, *A traditional Mu'tazilite Qur'ān commentary. The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)*, Leiden 2006; Wilferd Madelung, The Theology of al-Zamakhsharī, in Wilferd Madelung, *Studies in medieval Muslim thought and history* (Aldershot UK, 2013), 485–95.

59 This was first pointed out by Ignaz Goldziher in *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden 1920), 134. Goldziher relies on al-Zamakhsharī, for whom this verse belongs in the category of *tamthīl wa-l-takhyīl* ("similitude and imaginative representation"); Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2:129.

60 Thus al-Zamakhsharī writes that, "when God established the covenant with human beings . . . He showed them a proof of His Lordliness and unity." He further writes that when human beings responded to God, their intellects testified to God's Lordliness and confirmed his unity. See al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2:129; Goldziher, *Die Richtungen*, 134.

61 According to Frank, it is by using this faculty that one is "capable of discovering and recognizing in individual acts those characteristics having which an act is obligatory or is bad or is good: what is praise worthy and what is blameworthy to do or to omit." See Richard M.

human beings are endowed with intellect, they are obliged to know God using natural reason. Thus, for al-Zamakhsharī, the Covenant Verse essentially serves as evidence for natural law – the idea that human reason is an autonomous source of knowledge. It enables one to distinguish praiseworthy acts from blameworthy acts and enables one to determine what one’s obligations to God are.⁶²

7 Conclusion

Admittedly, the place we have arrived at could have been predicted. After all, it is not surprising that the different ways that Muslim commentators interpret the Qur’ān’s covenantal formula are naturally inflected by their specific theological ideas and principles. One might argue that it is to be expected that Muslim traditionists would interpret the Covenant Verse through the lens of predestination, that Sunnī theologians (like al-Rāzī) would interpret the verse in accordance with natural reason or philosophy, and that the Mu‘tazila would reject traditional interpretations of the Covenant Verse and discover the idea of “natural law” in it. So, one might argue that all this study reveals is an old, recurring theme in religious traditions: interpretations of scripture on the one hand and theological ideas on the other are used to explicate and lend authority to one another.

But perhaps something can be gained from the commentators that have been studied in this essay by asking a different and more basic question: Is there Covenant Theology in medieval Islam? If so, what form did it take?

Let me return to scripture for a moment. There is no doubt that the Qur’ān contains the seeds of Covenant Theology. In Q 7:172 it succinctly formulates the idea of a contractual relationship between God and mankind. It specifies the constitutive elements of a kind of Covenant Theology, including: (i) God’s creation of human beings; (ii) a contractual relationship between God and humanity; (iii) a program of conduct for humanity; and (iv) the idea of salvation.

Frank, Reason and revealed law. A sample of parallels and divergence in *kalām* and *falsafa*, in *Recherches d’Islamologie: recueil d’articles offert à Georges C. Anawati et Louis Gardet*, ed. S. Van Riet (Leuven 1978), 125–6.

62 I am grateful to my friend and colleague Frank Griffel for alerting me to this point. On the concept of natural law in Islam, see Anver M. Emon, Law, natural, in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim world* (New York 2016²), 2:649–51; Anver M. Emon, *Islamic natural law theories*, Oxford 2010.

But let me turn from scripture to commentary and use qur'anic commentaries to measure the extent to which medieval Muslims articulated their own form of Covenant Theology. Judging by the commentaries that I have examined it appears as though the seed of the qur'anic idea of covenant did not ever develop into a fully-fledged theory. Although Muslim traditionists and Sunnī theologians acknowledged the covenant as a fundamental premise of the Qur'ān and an idea that is foundational to the qur'anic worldview, and although they speculated about its meaning and implications, they did not deem the idea worthy of extensive elaboration. Indeed, the Covenant Verse did not engender isolated treatises or commentaries in the way that other qur'anic verses did in medieval Islam. Perhaps most importantly, as far as one can judge from the present state of the field, the idea of covenant was never used as a framework to interpret the Qur'ān in the way that Christianity used it to interpret the Bible.