

A Comparative Conceptual Analysis of “bānê hā’ēlōhîm” (“Sons of God”) in the Qur’ān and Jewish Texts: Examining the Attribution of Polytheism to Jews in the Story of ‘Uzayr in Qur’ān

Hamed Reza Karimi Malayer <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4277-7892>

Ph.D in Religions and Mysticism Studies, Kashan University, Iran

karimihamedreza@yahoo.com

ARTICLE HISTORY: Received: 31 August 2026 | Accepted: 08 October 2026 | Published: 14 October 2026

HOW TO CITE: Hamed Reza Karimi Malayer. (2026). A Comparative Conceptual Analysis of “bānê hā’ēlōhîm” (“Sons of God”) in the Qur’ān and Jewish Texts: Examining the Attribution of Polytheism to Jews in the Story of ‘Uzayr in Qur’ān. *Journal of World Religions and Interfaith Harmony*, 5(2), 51–64. <https://journals.iub.edu.pk/index.php/jwrih/article/view/4894>

Open Access: This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, adaptation, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are properly credited.

INDEXED / HARVESTED IN: [HEC Pakistan](#) • [Google Scholar](#) • [Internet Archive](#) • [Academia.edu](#) • [DefinePK](#) • [BASE](#) • [Wiki Data](#) • [OpenAlex](#) • [Research Bib](#)

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative conceptual analysis of the expression bānê hā’ēlōhîm (בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, “Sons of God”) within Jewish theology and the Qur’ānic reference to ‘Uzayr in verse Q 9:30. Employing an intertextual framework informed by Julia Kristeva’s theory of textual transposition and late antique Qur’anic hermeneutics, this study reassesses the dialogue between the Qur’anic corpus and its Biblical/post-Biblical subtexts. Contrary to conventional exegetical readings that attribute literal polytheism (Shirk) to Jews for this expression, I argue that both traditions fundamentally employ such idioms metaphorically and honorifically, designating spiritual proximity rather than ontological divinity. By analyzing the semantic trajectory along both historical and intertextual axes—particularly through key Qur’anic terms such as arbāb (“lords”) and dūn Allāh (“apart from God”)—this study challenges traditional polemical readings and repositions the Qur’ān’s theological critique within its broader Late Antique context. Ultimately, this approach facilitates a more nuanced intertextual understanding of monotheism across Abrahamic traditions and contributes to current debates on scriptural semantics and interfaith hermeneutics.

Keywords: bānê hā’ēlōhîm; Ibn Allāh; ‘Uzayr; Islam, Judaism, Intertextuality.

1. Introduction

The common narratives found in both the Qur’ān and the Hebrew Bible share fundamental structural similarities, yet there are critical differences that have at times fueled profound tensions between the Islamic and Jewish worlds. Undeniably, the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible chronologically precede the Qur’ān—a historical reality that must be recognized without recourse either to confessional partisanship or the polemical charge of textual alteration by Muslims or Jews.

To clarify these distinctions, a semantic approach is necessary, so that the narrative differences between the Qur’ān and the Bible can be explained in their proper historical, religious, linguistic, and cultural contexts. One crucial difference also lies in the literary purposes of the two scriptures: while the Qur’ān often emphasizes the

ethical and spiritual lessons behind narratives about Jewish and Christian history rather than preserving their exhaustive historical detail¹, such a unified interpretive approach cannot easily be applied to the multifaceted stories of the Bible, which were composed in diverse periods and from various sources.

Among the shared figures between the Qur’an and the Bible, the reference to the prophet ‘Uzayr gains particular importance. Although only briefly mentioned in the Qur’an, Qur’anic commentators have attached special significance to ‘Uzayr, using his story to demarcate a sharp division between early Islam and Arabian Judaism on the question of divine sonship, aligning Jews with Christians in the accusation of “Shirk.” However, every form of non-monotheistic belief has been vigorously rejected throughout mainstream Jewish history. Suggesting even the slightest possibility of such beliefs requires postulating that Arabian Judaism was a particular sect, isolated from wider Jewish tradition, which demands thorough scholarly scrutiny. Key questions remain: Who exactly were these Jews? When and how did such beliefs develop among them? What were the sources and trajectories of their alleged doctrines concerning sonship?

The absence of any attestation in classical Rabbinic literature—comprising the Mishnah, the two Talmuds, and the foundational Midrashic collections—regarding the divine sonship of Ezra (*‘Uzayr*) poses a significant hermeneutical problem for historical-critical scholarship.²

The story of Zimri found in the Bible—set during the Israelites’ wandering in Kan’a’n, and their episode of apostasy in the worship of the Moabite Baals³ provides examples of idolatry, but these fall far from the idea of “sonship” or incarnational theology.

It is also critical to recognize the role of translation and interpretive mistakes in Qur’anic exegesis. In several respects, the dialogue between the Qur’an and Jews can be seen as an intra-monotheistic exchange; in this sense, *ḥanīf* (primordial monotheism) is not unlike an orthodox branch of Judaism. As a result, many ritual and theological concepts in the Qur’an and the Bible are remarkably similar and deserve comparative semantic inquiry.

Despite the prominent role of the concept of *bəne hā’elohim* (“son of God”) in differentiating Qur’anic and Jewish theology—especially regarding the accusation of Shirk—there is still no clear consensus on the original meaning, historical context, and interpretive pathways of this term across Abrahamic traditions. This research addresses a critical gap by examining whether the Qur’an’s ascription of “sonship” to Jews is a reflection of actual Jewish belief, a polemical misreading, or an interpretive artifact rooted in metaphor and context. Shedding light on this issue holds significant implications for Jewish-Muslim understanding, scriptural hermeneutics, and the correction of recurring misconceptions in the field.

To address these critical questions and unravel the semantic layers of this polemical convergence, this study adopts an **intertextual theoretical framework rooted in Julia Kristeva’s theory of textual transposition**. Rather than treating the Qur’an as a self-contained isolated text or merely a polemical derivative, this framework—drawing upon recent advances in Late Antique Qur’anic studies by Angelika Neuwirth and Gabriel Said Reynolds—positions the Qur’anic proclamation as an active participant in an ongoing, dynamic dialogue with Biblical and para-Biblical subtexts. By mapping the discourse across both horizontal (the immediate late-antique addressees) and vertical axes (intertextual echoes with Second Temple and apocalyptic Jewish literature, such as 4 *Ezra* and Enochic traditions), this research investigates how the idiom *bəne hā’elohim* underwent semantic transformation. Through this hermeneutical lens, the paper explores whether the Qur’anic critique targets an ontological claim of divine sonship or engages in an ideological transposition of honorific idioms into the strict monotheistic boundaries of Late Antiquity.

Theoretical Framework: Intertextuality and Semantic Transposition

To decipher the complex theological rhetoric surrounding the accusation “‘Uzayr is the son of God” (*‘ibnu llāhi*) in the Qur’an (9:30) and its potential correlation with the Hebrew biblical idiom *bəne hā’elohim* (בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים), this

¹ Stephen Gritten, “John Wansbrough Remembered: Interview with Gerald Hawting,” *The Religion Report*, ABC Radio National, June 26, 2002, audio, 2:15, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/religionreport/john-wansbrough-remembered/3512288>.

² For an overview of Rabbinic literature and the limits of its theological claims, see Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1–15; see also the discussion on Qur’anic polemics and the Jewish milieu in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 350–53.

³ Bible, Numbers 25:1–15

study employs an intertextual framework grounded in the literary theory of Julia Kristeva. Kristeva posits that every text functions as a “mosaic of quotations,” wherein meaning is generated not in isolation, but through the absorption and transformation—or “transposition”—of prior textual systems.⁴ She conceptualizes textual signification along two axes: a horizontal axis connecting the text to its immediate contemporary addressees, and a vertical axis linking the text to a broader constellation of precursor texts.⁵

Applying this model to Qur’anic hermeneutics—as developed in the context of late antique scriptural studies by scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth and Gabriel Said Reynolds—enables us to view the Qur’an not merely as an isolated theological proclamation, but as an active interlocutor engaged in a dynamic, intertextual dialogue with the broader Biblical and Late Antique milieu.⁶ By examining the vertical axis connecting Qur’anic polemics with Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphical traditions (e.g., 4 Ezra and Enochic literature), this paper demonstrates how the honorific semantics of divine sonship underwent an ideological and semantic transposition.⁷ In this process, the Qur’anic discourse critiques the perceived ontologization of metaphorically “divine” titles, reframing them within a strict monotheistic framework that rejects any dilution of divine transcendence.⁸

2. The Concept of Ben Elohim

The Hebrew term *bənê hā’ēlōhîm*, literally translated as “sons of God,” appears both in the Hebrew Bible and in apocryphal literature. The phrase is also found in Kabbalistic writings, where “Ben Elohim” designates a rank within the celestial hierarchy of angels and spiritual beings⁹ ¹⁰. The first reference to the “sons of God” appears in Genesis 6:1–4. Based on literary-historical analysis, this phrase is usually associated with Yahwist tradition¹¹, and two major interpretations have been proposed. Since this expression occurs at the very opening chapters of the Bible, its interpretation is of critical importance to resolving the related theological questions. The first and more traditional interpretation considers the “sons of God” to be the descendants of Seth, the third son of Adam, while another interpretation views them as angels who descended to earth to interact with the daughters

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

⁵ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 69.

⁶ Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*, trans. Samuel Wilder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 235–40; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 350–52.

⁷ For the transmission of the *bənê hā’ēlōhîm* concept in post-biblical literature, see Michael E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 125–30. Regarding the Qur’anic critique, see Gordon D. Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 58–60.

⁸ Reynolds, *The Qur’an and the Bible*, 352.

⁹ J. D. Douglas, Merrill C. Tenney, and Moisés Silva, eds., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1384.

¹⁰ The term “son(s) of God” appears in several instances throughout the Hebrew Bible, each reflecting unique theological and symbolic meanings. Notably, the final occurrence in the Book of Daniel, given its chronological proximity to the era of Ezra, is often interpreted as a reference to the historical figure of Ezra.

In Genesis 6:2, it is mentioned that the “sons of God saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they took wives for themselves from all whom they chose.”

Similarly, Genesis 6:4 states that, “In those days there were giants on the earth; and also afterward, when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them, they were the heroes of old, men of renown.”

In the book of Job (1:6), it is narrated that “there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.”

This scene is repeated in Job 2:1, where once again “the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD.”

Furthermore, Job 38:7 describes, “when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.”

In Hosea 1:10, the prophecy declares that “the number of the Israelites will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted. And in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

In Daniel 3:25, the text records, “He said, ‘Look! I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of God.’” Considering the timeframe, this verse has frequently been understood to allude to the historical Ezra.

Finally, in Psalms 29:1, it is stated: “Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of God, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.”

¹¹ Jon Davies, ed., *Words Remembered, Text Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F.A. Sawyer* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995), 22.

of men. Judaism, with some exceptions, has traditionally adhered to the former interpretation. Recent translations have preferred to render “bənê hā’ēlōhîm” as “children of the Lord” rather than “sons of God.” In line with this, the second interpretation—that they are the sons of angels or other heavenly beings—has found little support in modern Judaism¹². It must also be noted that biblical translations are neither uniform nor based on a single textual tradition, a factor which has contributed to the semantic and theological ambiguity of this expression¹³.

Amid Jewish denials and emphatic rejection of any such belief existing in Jewish history, two scholars, drawing on textual evidence from the Babylonian Talmud, have suggested that exaggerations about Ezra and the presence of such notions among Arabian Jews may have occurred. Firestone, in his book *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims*, asserts that the Second Book of Ezra, composed during the exile, ascribes an almost divine status to Ezra. Similarly, Lidzbarski and Lodahl have theorized about the presence of such beliefs among Arabian Jews¹⁴. The primary dialogue is that of the son with the father. Symbolic and metaphorical references to God as Father appear explicitly and prominently in the books of Proverbs and Isaiah. However, even prior to these instances, God is referred to as Father once in Deuteronomy and once in the historical books¹⁵. In the Psalms, God is also referred to as Father on three occasions¹⁶, the Book of Proverbs explicitly emphasizes that the relationship between father and son is intended as a metaphor for love and care. As Psalm 103:13 states, just as a father loves his children, so too does the Lord show affection to those who honor Him. Proverbs endeavors to clarify and interpret the nature of sonship and filial relationship, and in Proverbs 3:12 affirms, “For whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights.” In this way, Proverbs seeks to explicate the dynamic and the rights of the father over the son within this metaphorical framework¹⁷. Israel, in the role of the son, is exhorted to obey the father and is warned against disobedience and folly. It is especially during times of decline and exile that both the prophets and the wider community are reminded of the very warning issued in Prov., perceiving the prevailing darkness and defeat as the consequence of the son’s unfaithfulness toward the father. As stated:

“The Lord says to His people: ‘Do you think I cast you out of your land as a man divorces his wife and sends her away? If that were so, where is the certificate of divorce? Do you think it was I who sold you into captivity as a father sells his children into slavery? No, never! It is because of your sins that you have been taken into exile.’”¹⁸. At this point, some of the most profound prayers, reflecting the dialectic of son and father, are found in the Bible¹⁹. The identification of Ezra with the Achaemenid-era Ezdra necessitates an understanding of his status as a ‘son of God’ and protector of the Temple and Scripture through a purely allegorical lens. Rather than implying biological or literal sonship, this concept functions as a metaphor for Israel’s covenantal relationship with God. The legacy of this communicative paradigm, where God and Israel engage in a reciprocal dialogue using paternal and filial language, remains evident in the subsequent theological frameworks of Jeremiah and Malachi²⁰.

This father–child discourse is also repeated throughout other books of the Hebrew Bible, where God is portrayed as the father not only of Israel but also of other beings and sacred realities. For example, God is described as compassionate toward those who fear Him, just as a father shows compassion to his children²¹. Similarly, the text asks, “Does the rain have a father?” underscoring the metaphorical use of divine fatherhood²².

¹² David R. Jackson, *Enochic Judaism* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 75.

¹³ Fatemeh Tofghi, “Mafhūm-e ‘Farzandān-e Khodā’ dar Ketāb-e Moqaddas va Qur’ān-e Majīd” [The Concept of ‘Children of God’ in the Bible and The Holy Qur’an], *Haft Asmān* 13, no. 50 (2011): 95.

¹⁴ Quoted in Mun’im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur’an and Other Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 48.

¹⁵ Deut. 32:6

¹⁶ Ps. 68:5; Ps. 89:26

¹⁷ Prov. 1:8, 4:1, 4:3, 4:4, 6:20, 10:1, 13:1, 15:5, 15:20, 17:6, 17:25, 19:13, 19:26, 20:20, 23:22, 23:25, 27:10, 28:7, 29:3, 30:11, 30:17

¹⁸ Isa. 50:1

¹⁹ In Isa. 63:16, Isa. 64:8

²⁰ In Jer. 2:27, Jer. 3:4, Jer. 3:19, Jer. 31:9, in Mal. 3:17

²¹ Ps. 103:13

²² Job 38:28

Elsewhere it is proclaimed, “But now, O Lord, You are our Father”²³, and even Adam is described as the son of God²⁴. God is also called the father of Mount Zion²⁵.

The designation “sons of God” applies not only to Israel but at times to the righteous and holy ones: “The sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves from all whom they chose”²⁶. “Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of God, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength”²⁷.

This compassionate relationship extends to all people, especially the people of Israel, and even sinners are sometimes called “sons of God.” As it is written: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me”²⁸. Hosea also states: “Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ it shall be said to them, ‘You are sons of the living God’”²⁹.

In certain passages, even supernatural or angelic beings are described as “sons of God.” For example: “There were giants in the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them. They were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown”³⁰.

This dialogical, devotional, and metaphorical language—rooted in the linguistic traditions and ancient cultural contexts of its era—does not possess a theological or doctrinal meaning in itself and does not penetrate the core of Jewish monotheism. Rather, the monotheistic theology of the Hebrew Bible consistently and unambiguously asserts its stance. For instance, even in describing the preexistence of Wisdom, the text does not regard it as coequal with God:

“[Does not Wisdom call out?] ‘The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His work, before His deeds of old. I was established from everlasting, from the beginning, before the world began... When He set the heavens in place, I was there... Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord’”³¹.

The unity of God and the necessity of total devotion to Him is likewise forcefully affirmed: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”³². Similarly, in Isaiah: “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last; besides Me there is no God’”³³.

3. Confusion of Names

In attributing the Quranic ‘Uzayr to either the historical figure Ezra of the Achaemenid era or Azariah the prophet of the Exile, a range of theories have been put forward by Quranic exegetes, Jewish scholars, and academic researchers. Nevertheless, none of these views has been established with certainty based on historical evidence; all remain in the realm of speculation. Each of these theories relies essentially on transformations or shifts in name and terminology. For instance, some scholars have proposed that ‘Uzayr is a derivative of ‘Uzael—a variant form of Asael³⁴, or Azazel³⁵ who is presented in the Haggadah as the leader of the angels referred to as “sons of God”^{36 37}. Other scholars see ‘Uzayr as a transformation of ‘Aziz and connect it to the phrase “You are My son” in the Song of Songs³⁸. Viviane Comerro also identifies ‘Uzayr with Azariah³⁹.

²³ Isa. 64:8

²⁴ Luke 3:38

²⁵ Ps. 2:7-8

²⁶ Gen. 6:2

²⁷ Ps. 29:1

²⁸ Isa. 1:2

²⁹ Hos. 1:10

³⁰ Gen. 6:4

³¹ Prov. 8:22–23, 27, 35

³² Deut. 6:4–5

³³ Isa. 44:6

³⁴ Enoch 6:8

³⁵ Lev. 16:8

³⁶ Gen. 6:2

³⁷ Viviane Comerro, “Esdras est-il le fils de Dieu?,” *Arabica* 52, no. 2 (2005): 170, 172.

³⁸ Song 2:7

³⁹ Comerro, “Esdras est-il le fils de Dieu?,” 20, 173.

According to her, among the Jews of the Peninsula—and based on their remaining legends and a version of the Book of Daniel common among them—a conceptual confusion emerged between the angel known as the “son of God” and the historical-prophetic figure of Ezra⁴⁰.

However, the main issue is that efforts to associate the historical Ezra or other figures with the ‘Uẓayr mentioned in the Qur’ān—whether regarding the precise historical period of his life or the existence of so-called polytheistic beliefs among the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula—have led to no definitive conclusions. Any resolution of this issue, therefore, depends on an accurate translation and renewed reading of Qur’ān 9:30, specifically through the lens of the concept of *Ben Elohīm*. It must be emphasized that such theological extremism is entirely absent from Judaism, and the Qur’ān’s reference is not to any such notion, but rather to a deeply metaphorical concept rooted in the Hebrew Bible. This demonstrates a broad and subtle mastery of Biblical terminology and ideas in the Qur’ānic revelation.

In this vein, the Qur’ān itself repeatedly states that it does not affirm the textual corruption (Taḥrīf) of the Torah or Gospel, and it even brings a particular verse concerning the Jews, affirming the status of the sacred books circulating among the various Abrahamic communities of Arabia⁴¹. Meanwhile, the claim of the Hebrew Bible itself is likewise its divine and inspired origin, maintaining that its contents have been delivered to its authors—prophets, seers, or scribes—by divine command and inspiration⁴².

By cataloguing the metaphorical and symbolic usages throughout the Old Testament, it becomes evident that the greatest concentration of such motifs and figurative elements is found in the following books: Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Job, Daniel, and Genesis. Notably, references to the concept of the “sons of God” likewise appear most frequently in Job, Psalms, Genesis, and Daniel—that is, precisely in the most metaphorical books of the Old Testament. In light of these documented cases and relying on theories of language and allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, the metaphorical meaning of *Ben Elohīm* emerges even more distinctly.

Relying on the doctrine of the scriptural inspiration of the Bible—on the basis of both internal textual affirmations and confirmations in the Qur’ān—and considering that in certain father-son dialogues, God refers to Himself as “Father” even within His own monologues, one can also interpret these instances through the lens of allegorical interpretation of sacred texts. Thomas Aquinas was the first to introduce the theory of analogy in Christian theology to address the semantic problem of divine attributes⁴³. According to this linguistic theory, the transfer of meaning between different domains—in describing divine names and attributes, or in divine-human dialogue—can occur without strict attention to truth conditions, provided that the meaningfulness and truth of the propositions are preserved. This is why anthropomorphic and symbolic descriptions in the sacred texts function to facilitate human-divine dialogue, without implying anthropomorphism or associating partners (Shirk) to God⁴⁴.

4. ‘Uzayr in Islamic and Jewish Tradition

‘Uzayr is a Qur’ānic figure referenced in Q 9:30, where it is stated that the Jews said: “‘Uzayr is the son of God.” Based on this verse, and especially in subsequent Qur’ānic interpretations, Jews have been accused of harboring polytheistic beliefs similar to those found in Christianity. This claim, however, has been categorically rejected by the Jewish community and viewed by Jewish scholars primarily as a polemical charge directed against Judaism⁴⁵⁴⁶⁴⁷, Maimonides (Ibn Maymun) also decisively considered the accusation a slander by Muslims⁴⁸. Even

⁴⁰ Ibid., 170, 172

⁴¹ For a broader thematic comparison regarding the recognition of previous scriptures, cf. Quran 2:136; 3:3; 5:68; 2:101; 5:47–48.

⁴² Muhammad Haqqani Fazl and Abd al-Rahim Soleimani Ardestani, “Barrasi-ye estedlālā-ye modāfe‘ān-e khaṭāpaziri-ye Ketāb-e Moqaddas” [Analysis of the Arguments of Inerrancy Advocates for the Bible], *Falsafeh-ye Din* 7, no. 6 (Summer 2019): 27, 137.

⁴³ James F. Ross, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 43, 199.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁵ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, “‘Uzayr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), s.v. “‘Uzayr.”

⁴⁶ “Ezra,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 6:1106–7.

⁴⁷ Kaufmann Kohler and Ignatz Goldziher, “Islam,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1906), <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8212-islam> (accessed May 13, 2018).

within Jewish reformist thought, such as the works of Abraham Geiger, this claim is perceived as a strategic move by the Prophet of Islam to undermine Jewish monotheism⁴⁹.

The Qur'anic 'Uzayr has often been identified with Ezra of the Hebrew Bible, and some early exegetes stated that he lived sometime between the reign of Solomon and Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, or during the Babylonian exile. Ibn Kathīr recounts the various opinions regarding 'Uzayr in his *Stories of the Prophets*, including genealogical traditions: "He was 'Uzayr son of Jarwah; it is said, son of Suriq son of 'Adiya son of Ayyub son of Darzna son of 'Ari son of Taqi son of Usubu' son of Phinehas son of Elazar son of Aaron son of Imran. It is also said 'Uzayr son of Sarukha. There are reports that his grave is in Damascus."⁵⁰ Some Qur'anic interpretations describe 'Uzayr as a learned figure who restored forgotten divine law among the people⁵¹. There are also claims in Qur'anic commentaries that 'Uzayr is the personality referred to in Q 2:259 as the one who slept for a hundred years and to whom God revealed the resurrection of the dead. Some Muslim scholars considered him a prophet, while others said that, due to lack of sufficient faith, God excluded him from the ranks of the prophets⁵². Among Islamic thinkers, Ibn Hazm and Samuel ibn Yahya al-Maghribi argued that 'Uzayr or one of his followers had a hand in altering the Torah⁵⁴. Although this theory is historically unsubstantiated from a critical perspective, it emerged as a central trope in medieval Muslim anti-Jewish polemics, particularly between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries CE across al-Andalus and the Near East. A prominent instance is found in eleventh-century Cordoba, where the Andalusian scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), in his magnum opus *Al-Fiṣal fī al-Mīlāl wa-al-Ahwā' wa-al-Nihāl*, systematically argued that Ezra ('Uzayr) fabricated and interpolated the post-Exilic Torah, capitalizing on the Jewish tradition of Ezra restoring the forgotten scriptures to claim total textual corruption (*taḥrīf al-naṣṣ*).⁵⁵ This polemical argument was subsequently intensified in the twelfth century by Samau'al al-Maghribī (d. 570/1175)—a Jewish mathematician and rabbinical scholar who converted to Islam—in his influential treatise *Ifḥām al-Yahūd* (Silencing the Jews). Samau'al utilized his insider knowledge of Jewish rabbinic traditions to contend that Ezra rewrote the Hebrew canon according to personal and sectarian interests following the Babylonian exile.⁵⁶ Later Mamluk-era polemicists, such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) in *Hidāyat al-Ḥayārā fī Ajwibat al-Yahūd wa-al-Naṣārā*, routinely recycled this claim during interreligious debates in Damascus,⁵⁷ demonstrating how the figure of Ezra was systematically weaponized in Late Medieval polemical encounters. This controversy extended into the modern era, so much so that the *Jewish Encyclopedia* unequivocally dismisses the charge as nothing more than an accusation. Some historians have attempted to demonstrate the existence of a Jewish sect that admitted 'Uzayr's divinity, but they have not succeeded in providing conclusive evidence⁵⁸.

Meanwhile, Gordon Darnell has suggested that the Qur'anic term "son of God" (*ibn al-Allah*) may reflect the phrase and metaphor *ben Elobim*. However, even he ultimately concurs with the direction of Muslim exegetes, finding it plausible that hyperbolic views about 'Uzayr arose among the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula:

⁴⁸ Marc B. Shapiro, "Islam and the Halakhah," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life & Thought* 42, no. 167 (Summer 1993): 193.

⁴⁹ Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, trans. F. M. Young (New York: Ktav, 1970), chap. 2, sec. 4.

⁵⁰ Ibn Kathīr, "'Uzair (Ezra)," in *Stories of the Quran*, trans. Ali As-Sayed Al-Halawani (Islambasics.com, 2007), 11–21, 30.

⁵¹ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', "Ezra," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2006), s.v. "Ezra," 18.

⁵² Encyclopedia of the Holy Prophet and Companions, s.v. "'Uzayr."

⁵³ Ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Quran*, 11–21, 30.

⁵⁴ See Lazarus-Yafeh, "'Uzayr."

⁵⁵ Ibn Ḥazm, *Al-Fiṣal fī al-Mīlāl wa-al-Ahwā' wa-al-Nihāl*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣr and 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Umayrah (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1996), 1:215–228. See also Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 249–254.

⁵⁶ Samau'al al-Maghribī, *Ifḥām al-Yahūd: Silencing the Jews*, ed. and trans. Moshe Perlmann, Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research 32 (1964): 45–53, 91–97.

⁵⁷ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Hidāyat al-Ḥayārā fī Ajwibat al-Yahūd wa-al-Naṣārā*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Ḥājj (Jeddah: Dār al-Qalam, 1996), 2:485–492.

⁵⁸ Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 45, 48.

“Ezra, because of the traditions of his translation, because of his piety, and particularly because he was equated with Enoch as the Scribe of God, could be termed one of the *Bene Elohim*. And, of course, he would fit the description of religious leader⁵⁹ whom the Jews had exalted.”⁶⁰

Some scholars have also proposed that the name ‘Uzayr could be a variant of ‘Uzayl, ‘Azazel, ‘Aziz, ‘Azariah, or Abednego—one of the three prophets of the exile who, according to tradition, were present in Persia alongside Daniel after Nebuchadnezzar⁶¹. In this case, ‘Uzayr’s lifetime would be situated at the beginning of the Achaemenid era, which allows for his identification with the historical Ezra, the figure commissioned by the Persian king to rebuild the Temple.

In *Zubdat al-Tawarikh*, an interesting allegorical interpretation of the story in Qur’an 2:259 is presented in the form of a miniature⁶². Although this interpretation lacks strong historical evidence, it can nonetheless serve as an intriguing model for a renewed reading of Qur’anic narratives and their divergence from the accounts of the Bible. In this work, after relating the Qur’anic narrative, the historical Ezra is equated with ‘Uzayr: Ezra is depicted as passing by the ruins of Jerusalem and weeping (after Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest), then falling into a sleep (alluding to the Babylonian exile), and awakening after one hundred years to resume life (the restoration of the Temple). While this is, in essence and undoubtedly, an interpretive reconstruction, it reflects a semantic approach striving to harmonize the Qur’an with the Biblical account⁶³.

Ibn Kathīr, however, presents a contrasting account rooted in historical narrative, stating that after the miracle of rejuvenation, Ezra was proclaimed “son of God” by the Jews, introducing an element of polytheism into Jewish religion⁶⁴. Despite the later polemical interpretation that associates this with polytheism, the allegorical reading that equates the Babylonian exile with sleep, and the restoration of the Temple with renewal, offers a noteworthy example of metaphorical reconciliation between two scriptural traditions, remarkable for its time.

Within Judaism, as in Islam, it is firmly believed that God is not bound by time, matter, place, or space; He is neither begotten nor begets, and bears no human likeness. Any creed to the contrary is regarded as blasphemy⁶⁵. Even in the Book of Ezra—which Jews accept as the chronicle of Ezra’s life, and which includes prophecies about another redeemer—Ezra is presented as the son of Seraiah and of Aaronic descent. This is notable given that the term “children of God” appears repeatedly in Genesis⁶⁶. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* clarifies that this term describes those whose asceticism elevates them to a status near to God, but does not, in any way, denote physical birth or a literal parent-child relationship; rather, it implies mystical union⁶⁷. In the Book of Wisdom, too, the term is used to mean “saint”—denoting a stage of nearness in which a person becomes conscious of the fatherhood of God⁶⁸.

5. Identity Crisis and Fragmentation

One of the main points of the analysis by Ahmed is that postmodern era disintegrates identity and creates the crisis in Muslims. The process of modernity already started to undermine the traditional collective identities

⁵⁹ Referring to one of the Jewish scholars (aḥbār) mentioned in Q 9:31

⁶⁰ Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam*, 2nd ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 40, 59.

⁶¹ Comerro, “Esdras est-il le fils de Dieu?,” 20, 172-173.

⁶² Seyit Lokman (text) and Abdullah Lütü (illustrations), *Zübde-i’t Tevarih* [Cream of Histories], 1583 CE, Türk ve İslâm Eserleri Müzesi (TİEM, Istanbul), Manuscript 1973, fol. 38r (“Uzayr awaking after the destruction of al-Quds”).

⁶³ Günsel Renda, “The Miniatures of the Zubdat al-Tawarikh,” *Turkish Treasures: Culture / Art / Tourism Magazine*, no. 1 (1978): 26–35.

On the iconography of biblical and post-biblical prophets in Ottoman manuscripts and the visual conflation of Ezra/‘Uzayr with the restoration of Jerusalem, see Rachel Milstein, Karin Rührdanz, and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999), 98–104; Seracettin Şahin, *The Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts: Masterpieces of Islamic Art* (Istanbul: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2009), 242–245.

⁶⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Wāḥid (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Ta’līf, 1388 AH/1968 CE), 26, 322.

⁶⁵ Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Yesodei ha-Torah 1:1.

⁶⁶ Gen. 6:2

⁶⁷ Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch, “Son of God,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1905), 11:460–461.

⁶⁸ Kohler and Hirsch, “Son of God,” 11:461.

(tribal, ethnic, religious, familial), postmodernity does it on an entirely new level. Ahmed notices that in a postmodern world, the disintegration of social and political concepts and thought transformation, causes the feeling of dislocation; established structures are torn into pieces, and people are on the search of new sources of belonging. Among the results, one of them, which appears to be paradoxical, is the emergence of revivalist or fundamentalist movements. He argues that: “postmodernists fail to link this process with the revival of ethnicity and religious fundamentalism... Where nothing is sacred, every belief becomes revisable. Thus fundamentalism is the attempt to resolve how to live in a world of radical doubt. It is a dialogue with the times, a response to it.”⁶⁹

That is, even the circumstances of skepticism and relativism that characterize postmodernism can also give rise to a reactionary response: a search of certainty, typically in the form of a renewed or re-discovery of the so-called fundamentalist religious or ethnic identity that offers a feeling of security and clarity. The definition of fundamentalism provided by Ahmed is especially remarkable. He does not demonize it as sheer fanaticism but rather puts into perspective as an unadaptive resolution to the fear of fragmentation.

In case individuals no longer can count on a coherent worldview (since the post modernity is subverting the grand narrative and absolutes), some will be drawn to the seeming firmness of literalist religion or ethnonationalism. Even he opines that this revivalism is a cause and effect of postmodernism - in that the more divided and skeptical the environment, the greater the revival of atavistic loyalties, which only in turn oppose the modern state and pluralist society. Ahmed gives a vivid example of how identity crisis may be violent in *Islam Under Siege*, which he wrote ten years later. He looks at the example of Osama bin Laden as representative of hyper-asabiyya (an exaggerated group solidarity) due to interest in identity as a result of perceived threats. Ahmed writes: “Bin Laden identifies excessively with his group as the traditional markers of identity—family, nation, religion—appear under threat. He blames others for their plight... To correct the situation and reclaim honor he plans to inflict violence on Americans. He does not care if innocent people, including women and children, are killed.”⁷⁰

This gruesome account reveals the psychological process: when the family, the nation, and the religion all appear besieged (as a result of the geopolitical events, globalization, and the cultural invasion of modernity) one person such as bin Laden narrows his identity to one dimension (a fighter of the faith) and transfers the responsibility to an externalized other (Jews, Christians, America). Ahmed views such extremism as a distorted act to reestablish some sense of honor and integrity that the postmodern world has destroyed.

It is a sad display of the dilemma -is a path that would not bring salvation but rather senseless violence, it means that there would be little honor or even no honor left of the world. Even on top of these extreme examples, fragmentation is a problem that has more insidious yet widespread impacts on ordinary Muslims. The disintegration of traditional social units is frequently mentioned by Ahmed. Migration and urbanization undermine the extended family and close-knit community, which previously was an individual identity.

Globalization in many Muslim societies has seen the mass labor migration (e.g. the migration of the village to the megacity or to the Western nations), which in turn has caused the splitting up of families (e.g. the woman leaving the home etc.), in other cases the tribe (e.g. parts of the tribe migrating), in other cases the state (e.g. political and economic change), and in other cases the religion (e.g. the materialism and...[moral disruptions]) which is putting the traditional values and practices under stress. The net result is that people are getting lost: they are everywhere and nowhere and their self-identity is somewhere in between fractured loyalties. It is what Ahmed (stealing a phrase of other people) refers to as culture schizophrenia - a disordered sense of self brought about by the attempt to balance out several, and often conflicting, cultural influences.

However, Ahmed does not consider fragmentation only in such a negative way; fragmentation has a creative potential too. He admits that the blending of cultures and ideas can result in the syntheses that are rich. By being as enthusiastic about high- and low-brow, the serious and the frivolous, postmodernity forms a collage of images and ideas that is to be bewildering, but also liberating in its lack of the ability to be bound by old boundaries. To

⁶⁹ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Routledge, 1992), 13.

⁷⁰ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 15–16.

Muslims, it may imply the liberty to redefine identity that goes beyond the traditional nationalistic or sectarian boundaries- perhaps more cosmopolitan Islamic identity that survives on diversity. But Ahmed is careful that a weak ethical base can more frequently result in disorientation and insecurity, and propel individuals into defense.

In conclusion, the postmodern identity fragmentation is a significant challenge to Muslim people, which in certain situations may result in crisis and radicalism. The analysis presented by Ahmed points to the fact that the revival of fundamentalism, in turn, is not a medieval resurgence in a strict sense of the term, but a contemporary (or postmodern) one; that is, a response to the uncertainties of the present. The interpretation of this, according to him, is key when one seeks to solve the main causes of extremism or the illness of identity among the Muslim people who are young. It is not the inability of Islam to cope but the unstable situation that should be controlled and preferably with the searching of identity venturing into constructive and inclusionary, but not the violent paths.

6. Re-Reading the Verse

Qur’anic commentators have generally regarded the purpose of this verse as polemical, aimed at theological disputes with the Jewish community of Medina, and have taken the continued warning against Shirk as evidence that Jewish beliefs were indeed polytheistic.

However, considering the metaphorical nuance of *ben Elohim*—and that the Qur’anic source was aware of this metaphorical sense—a renewed reading of the verse is possible:

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ عُزَيْرٌ ابْنُ اللَّهِ وَقَالَتِ النَّصَارَى الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ اللَّهِ

The Jews said, “‘Uzayr is the son of God,” and the Christians said, “The Messiah is the son of God.”

Interpreted as:

The Jews ascribed to ‘Uzayr the status of *ben Elohim*—a mystic and ascetic who attained spiritual union—and the Christians attributed such a rank to the Messiah.

ذَلِكَ قَوْلُهُمْ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ

That is their statement by their mouths:

This signifies a metaphorical or symbolic statement (a meaning that is articulated in words); here, the Qur’an (or its narrator) acknowledges the semantic tradition of the Scriptures—affirming the metaphorical meaning of *ben Elohim* to describe a realized saint, rather than a charge of theological polytheism.

يُضَاهُونَ قَوْلَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ

which (the meaning, *ibn Allah*) apparently resembles the beliefs of the disbelieving peoples before them.

فَاتْلَاهُمْ اللَّهُ أَنَّى يُؤْفَكُونَ

May God destroy them! How are they deluded [from the truth]?

(In almost all Persian Qur’an translations, the pronoun “هم” is referred back to Jews and Christians throughout; however, it could arguably refer instead to “those who disbelieved before them”—*al-ladhīna kafarū min qablu*.)

Thus, in this verse, there is actually no negative or “polytheistic” connotation assigned to *ibn Allah* at all. On the contrary, the Qur’an seeks to clarify and define a metaphor shared with the Biblical tradition—one that, in Qur’an translations and many exegetical works, has been quite unknowingly and even inversely translated and interpreted. Notably, of all classical and modern commentaries, ‘Allāmeḥ Ṭabāṭabā’ī does allude to this point, though without full elaboration—and ultimately returns to the path of levelling the charge:

“And perhaps their calling him the ‘son of God’ is merely an honorary title and not one of genealogical descent.”⁷¹

Taking into account this metaphorical meaning of *ibn Allah* (ben Elohim, “son of God,” meaning a realized mystic or saint), the proper translation of the verse—which also accords with the conceptual usage in the Bible—would be as follows:

⁷¹ Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-A’lamī, 1997), 9:244.

“The Jews and the Christians likewise used a metaphorical and linguistic construct known as *ibn Allah* (“son of God”), which bore a superficial resemblance to the polytheistic beliefs of the disbelieving communities before them—those peoples who turned away from the truth and whom God opposed in battle.”⁷²

The context of the following verse, as well as the *circumstances of revelation* (*shān-i nuzūl*), have played a significant role in shaping the polemical and “polytheist” translations and interpretations of this passage. However, even in these contextual frameworks, no genuine polytheistic meaning can be identified; rather, the phrase can still be interpreted in the same metaphorical sense as *ben Elohim*.

According to traditional accounts of the *shān-i nuzūl*, Ibn Abi Hatim reports from Ibn Abbas (with an additional chain from Muhammad ibn Dihyah):

“They said to the Prophet, ‘How can we follow you when you have abandoned our qibla and do not acknowledge that ‘Uzayr is the son of God?’ Then this verse was revealed.”⁷³

As is evident, the focus of the Jewish community in this exchange with the Prophet was on the centrality of Jerusalem and their objection to the change of qibla. It seems that the Jewish community existed in a liminal state, negotiating between accepting or rejecting the Prophet, attempting to align his teachings with the principles of their own Scriptures. The Prophet’s decision to change the qibla from Jerusalem led them to ultimately reject him, reasserting the importance of Jerusalem and its restoration by ‘Uzayr (*ben Elohim*).

Thus, the context and *shān-i nuzūl* are not, in any way, concerned with theological debate about monotheism or Shirk, but rather revolve around the significance of Jerusalem and its restoration. Taking this *sitz im leben* into account, it is plausible to view the Qur’an’s reference to “ibn Allah” here as an attempt to clarify a semantic metaphor for Muslims, rather than to accuse the Jews of polytheism.

The second key to clarifying this hypothesis is found in verse 31 and its continuation, where the mistranslation of the term “**arbāb**” has led translators and exegetes astray:

اتَّخَذُوا أَخْبَارَهُمْ وَرَبَّائِهِمْ أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَالْمَسِيحِ ابْنِ مَرْيَمَ وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ سُبْحَانَهُ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ⁷⁴

The word **arbāb** is the plural of **rabb**, which primarily means “nurture” and “upbringing.” In common usage, it metaphorically refers to someone who takes responsibility for the cultivation, transformation, or perfection of something or someone. Etymologically, **rabb** is a verbal noun, but in ordinary language it has assumed the function of an active participle. As Raghīb al-Isfahānī explains, its various meanings include:

- “master” or “chief” (*siyyid*)⁷⁵,
- “reformer” (*muslih*)⁷⁶,
- “owner”⁷⁷ (*malik*),
- “possessor”⁷⁸ (*ṣāhib*).⁷⁹

When used in the absolute sense, **rabb** refers exclusively to God and, as such, is grammatically not subject to the plural form. This distinction, emphasized by Raghīb, is critical and should shape the translation accordingly. When the word is employed as a *mudāf* (possessive), it denotes ownership or superiority—such as in “**rabb al-dār**” (master of the house) or “**rabb al-faras**” (owner of the horse). As recorded in tradition, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib declared to Abraha: “I am the master of the camels, and the House [Ka‘ba] has its own Master who will protect it.”

When **rabb** refers to beings other than God, it is, in fact, pluralizable (**arbāb**) and no longer carries the meaning of “the one God and Lord,” but rather connotes “superior,” “chief,” or “one in a position of authority.”

⁷² Ibid., 9:324.

⁷³ Muḥammad Bāqir, *Namūna-yi bayānāt dar shā‘n-i nuzūl-i āyāt*, 4th ed. (Tīhrān: Intishārāt-i Islāmī, 1361 SH/1982)

⁷⁴ Qur’an 9:31

⁷⁵ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Azharī, *Tabdhīb al-lughā*, vol. 15 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2001), 128.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 2:381

⁷⁷ Ibid., 15:128

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2:381.

⁷⁹ Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt al-fāṣṣ al-Qur’ān*, ed. Ṣafwān ‘Adnān Dāwūdī (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1992), 336.

Therefore, in the context of the verse, it should not be read with the theological significance of exclusive divinity or lordship. The term **arbāb** appears in four Qur’anic verses, and the interpretation of theological or “polytheistic lordship” within its meaning should be abandoned and revised.

Given this semantic distinction, the verse may be rendered as follows:

“And they (the Jews and the Christians), in a metaphorical sense—that is, in the context of the Scriptures—also deemed their scholars and ascetics as authorities (arbāb), not in the sense of worshipping them alongside or in place of God, but rather by according them interpretive and legal authority in religious matters, alongside revealed scripture. In this way, their religious leaders became sources of decision and law in addition to divine revelation, and they likewise ascribed such status to the Messiah, son of Mary. Yet all the while, they had only been commanded to worship the One God (with emphasis on their fundamentally monotheistic stance and not being led astray), for there is no deity but Him, and He is far above what they associate with Him.”

The discourse surrounding the attribution of “sonship” to God becomes intertwined across three domains:

- (1) the polytheists, or more specifically, the ancient Mesopotamian goddess and idol-worship traditions prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula;
- (2) the metaphorical usage in the Torah; and
- (3) the theological and fundamentally distinct application in Christianity.

These three contexts have often been conflated, and it is crucial to distinguish the Qur’an’s position toward each separately.

With respect to the Mesopotamian tradition of deities and idol worship, the Meccan Qur’anic verses are explicit in their rejection of any form of “sonship” attributed to God. The Qur’an unequivocally denies—whether in physical or metaphysical terms—the claim that God has offspring.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, another group of verses addresses the uniquely theological formulation of “sonship” in Christian doctrine—an area which, while significant, falls outside the scope of this article.

However, **two specific verses** directly engage with the metaphorical concept of “sons of God” (*ben Elohim*) as it appears in the Torah and the Hebrew Bible. Chief among these are Qur’an 9:30 and the following verse:

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ وَالنَّصَارَىٰ نَحْنُ أَبْنَاءُ اللَّهِ وَأَحِبَّاؤُهُ ۚ قُلْ فَلِمَ يُعَذِّبُكُم بِذُنُوبِكُمْ بَلْ أَنْتُمْ بَشَرٌ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقَ ۚ يَغْفِرُ لِمَن يَشَاءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَاءُ وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا وَإِلَيْهِ الْمَصِيرُ⁸¹

It is notable that within the structure of this verse, the Jewish and Christian theological uses of “children of God” are separated, and two distinct responses are provided. The verse first affirms that true “children of God” would be free from sin (addressing the Jewish claim—i.e., calling upon them not to extend this concept to their entire community); second, it asserts that Jesus is not a created being (addressing Christian theology). The primary emphasis here is on the metaphorical and honorary sense of the title in the Old Testament context, with the Qur’an confirming this usage.

It should be noted that in the structure of this verse as well, the theological frameworks of Judaism and Christianity regarding the use of “children of God” are kept distinct, and two separate responses are articulated.

First, the verse implies that a true “child of God” is one who is free from sin (addressing the Jews—i.e., cautioning them against extending this concept to their entire community).

Second, it establishes that Jesus is not a created being (addressing Christianity).

The first case implicitly validates the metaphorical use of “children of God” in the Old Testament context.

7. Conclusion

Approached through the lens of intertextual transposition and Late Antique scriptural dialogue, the evidence demonstrates that the doctrine of bənê hā’elōhīm in the Hebrew Bible functions purely as an honorific and metaphorical idiom rather than an ontological category—a perspective corroborated by classical exegesis, including Allameh Tabataba’i’s *Al-Mizān*. In this light, and within the context of the Qur’ān’s rhetorical precision and historical engagement, attributing a literal deification (Shirk) to the Jewish community becomes exegetically and historically ungrounded. Neither the normative Jewish tradition nor historical-critical

⁸⁰ See for example: Najm 53:19–22; Tur 52:39; Saffat 37:149–160; Anbiya 21:26–29; Zukhruf 43:16, 17, 19, 81; An’am 6:100–101

⁸¹ Qur’an 5:18

scholarship on Arabian Judaism substantiates the existence of a community professing the physical or divine sonship of ‘Uzayr in Late Antiquity. Reassessing the vertical intertextual axis reveals that the *sha’n al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) for verses Q 9:30–31 resonates with the sanctity of Jerusalem and ‘Uzayr’s historical role in its restoration, rather than a departure from radical monotheism. Furthermore, close philological analysis along the horizontal axis of Qur’anic discourse demonstrates that the plural *arbāb* (“lords”) in verse 9:31 cannot denote ontological “deities,” just as the phrase *dūn Allāh* signifies relational displacement rather than theological parity or polytheism. Likewise, the rhetorical expression *dhālika qawluhum bi-afwāhihim* (“that is their saying with their mouths”) signals a polemical engagement with figurative locutions rather than a confirmation of actual dogma. By demonstrating how pre-existing biblical and apocryphal semantics were absorbed and reframed within the Qur’anic corpus, this intertextual reading provides a compelling alternative to traditional polemical paradigms. Commentators and translators who overlooked these semantic transformations often hardened rhetorical critique into absolute theological conflict. Recontextualizing the ‘Uzayr pericope within this broader intertextual continuum not only harmonizes the Qur’anic critique with the Hebrew Bible’s metaphorical theology, but also dismantles a historically entrenched polemic, transforming a traditional locus of controversy into a profound site of Abrahamic theological continuity.

Bibliography

- ‘Āshūrī, Seyyid Lokmān. *Zubdat al-Tawārīkh* [Cream of Histories]. 993 AH / 1583 CE. Manuscript Ms. 1973. Türk ve İslâm Eserleri Müzesi [Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts], Istanbul.
- “Ezra.” In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 2nd ed. Vol. 6. Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2007.
- Abu-Rabi‘, Ibrahim M. “Ezra.” In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Adang, Camilla. *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*. Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science, Texts and Studies 30. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996.
- al-Azhārī, Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. *Tahdhīb al-lughah*. Edited by Muḥammad ‘Awaḍ Mur‘ib. 8 vols. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2001.
- Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad. *Mufradāt al-fāḥ al-Qur’ān*. Edited by Ṣafwān ‘Adnān Dāwūdī. Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1992, 336.
- Bāqir, Muḥammad. *Namūna-yi bayānāt dar sha’n-i nuzūl-i āyāt*. 4th ed. Tihrān: Intishārāt-i Islāmī, 1361 SH/1982.
- Comerro, Viviane. “Esdras est-il le fils de Dieu?” *Arabica* 52, no. 2 (2005): 170–173. Brill.
- Davies, Jon, ed. *Words Remembered, Text Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F.A. Sawyer*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995.
- Douglas, J. D., Merrill C. Tenney, and Moisés Silva, eds. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
- Encyclopedia of the Holy Prophet and Companions*. 27 vols. Edited by International Group of Islamic Scholars. New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2004. s.v. “‘Uzayr.”
- Firestone, Reuven. *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims*. New York: American Jewish Committee, 2001, pp. 35–36.
- Geiger, Abraham. *Judaism and Islam*. Translated by F. M. Young. New York: Ktav, 1970.
- Gritten, Stephen. “John Wansbrough Remembered: Interview with Gerald Hawting.” *ABC Radio National – The Religion Report*, 26 June 2002. <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/religionreport/john-wansbrough-remembered/3512288> (accessed 13 September 2007).
- Haqqani Fazl, Muhammad, and Abd al-Rahim Soleimani Ardestani. “Barrasi-ye estedlālāh-ye modāfe‘ān-e khaṭāpaziri-ye Ketāb-e Moqaddas” [Analysis of the Arguments of Inerrancy Advocates for the Bible]. *Falsafeh-ye Din* 7, no. 6 (Summer 2019): 135–59.
- Ibn Ḥazm, ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad. *Al-Fiṣal fi al-milal wa-al-ahwā’ wa-al-niḥal* [The separator concerning religions, heresies, and sects]. Edited by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣr and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Umayrah. 5 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1996.

- Ibn Kathīr, Ismā’īl ibn ‘Umar. “‘Uzair (Ezra).” In *Stories of the Quran*. Translated by Ali As-Sayed Al-Halawani. Islambasics.com, 2007.
- Ibn Kathīr, Ismā’īl ibn ‘Umar. *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*. Edited by Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Wāḥid. Cairo: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Ta’līf, 1388 AH/1968 CE.
- Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr. *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā fī ajwibat al-yahūd wa-al-naṣārā* [Guidance for the confused in answering the Jews and Christians]. Edited by Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Ḥājj. 2 vols. Jeddah: Dār al-Qalam, 1996.
- Jackson, David R. *Enochic Judaism: Three Defining Paradigm Exemplars*. Library of Second Temple Studies 49. London: T&T Clark International, 2004.
- Kohler, Kaufmann, and Ignatz Goldziher. “Islam.” In *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1906. <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8212-islam>.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Edited by Leon S. Roudiez. Translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Lazarus-Yafeh, Hava. “‘Uzayr.” In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd ed. Edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Maimonides, Moses. “Mishneh Torah.” In *Jewish Studies*. Oxford Bibliographies. Oxford University Press. Accessed May 13, 2018. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0152.xml>.
- Milstein, Rachel, Karin Rührdanz, and Barbara Schmitz. *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999.
- Neusner, Jacob. *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*. The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1994.
- Neuwirth, Angelika. *The Qur’an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*. Translated by Samuel Wilder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Newby, Gordon D. *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.
- Newby, Gordon Darnell. *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam*. 2nd ed. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009.
- Renda, Günsel. “The Miniatures of the Zubdat al-Tawarikh.” *Turkish Treasures: Culture / Art / Tourism Magazine*, no. 1 (1978): 26–35.
- Reynolds, Gabriel Said. *The Qur’an and the Bible: Text and Commentary*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Ross, James F. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. London: Macmillan, 1969.
- Şahin, Seracettin. *The Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts: Masterpieces of Islamic Art*. Istanbul: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2009.
- Samau’al al-Maghribī (Ibn Yahyā al-Maghribī). *Ifḥām al-Yahūd: Silencing the Jews*. Edited and translated by Moshe Perlmann. *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 32 (1964): 1–136.
- Shapiro, Marc B. “Islam and the Halakhah.” *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life & Thought* 42, no. 167 (Summer 1993): 95–291.
- Sirry, Mun’im. *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur’an and Other Religions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Stone, Michael E. *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.
- Ṭabāṭabā’ī, Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-. *Al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. 20 vols. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-A‘lamī, 1997.
- Tofighi, Fatemeh. “Mafhūm-e ‘Farzandān-e Khodā’ dar Ketāb-e Moqaddas va Qur’ān-e Majīd” [The Concept of ‘Children of God’ in the Bible and The Holy Qur’an]. *Haft Āsmān* 13, no. 50 (2011): 73–98.