Galadari, Abdulla. "The Vivid Portrayal of Physical Resurrection in Qur#an 2:259." *Metaphors of Death and Resurrection in the Qur#an: An Intertextual Approach with Biblical and Rabbinic Literature*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 75–98. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350244559.ch-006>>.

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Chapter 6

THE VIVID PORTRAYAL OF PHYSICAL RESURRECTION IN QUR'AN 2:259

Two verses in a single passage in the Qur'an portray the resurrection of dead bodies, albeit non-human, that do not go through birth again:

²⁵⁹Or [think of] the like of him who passed by a town as it lay fallen upon its roofs. He said, 'How shall God give life to this after its death?' So God caused him to die for a hundred years, then raised him up. He said, 'How long have you tarried?' He said, 'I tarried a day or part of a day.' He said, 'Nay, you have tarried a hundred years. Look, then, at your food and your drink – they have not spoiled. And look at your donkey. And [this was done] that We may make you a sign for humankind. And look at the bones, how We set them up, then clothe them with flesh.' When it became clear to him he said, 'I know that God has power over all things.' ²⁶⁰And when Abraham said, 'My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead,' He said, 'Do you not believe?' He said, 'Yea, indeed, but so that my heart may be at peace.' He said, 'Take four birds and make them be drawn to you. Then place a piece of them on every mountain. Then call them: they will come to you in haste. And know that God is Mighty, Wise.'

Qur'an 2:259–260

Although this passage is one in the Qur'an that literally describes the resurrection of dead bones without analogy to first-time creation, its depiction concerns two types of animals: a donkey and birds. It does not depict the resurrection of the human being. Actually, the human being in this passage, who dies, is not resurrected in the same way as his donkey. The Qur'an implies he was revived just as if he were asleep. The man is asked how long he stayed, to which he answers, 'A day or part thereof.' This response parallels that of the Companions of the Cave (Sleepers) – they slept for 309 years (i.e. Qur'an 18:19).¹ Here in Qur'an 2:259 the term *ba'th* is used for the raising of the dead man, just as it is in Qur'an 18:19 when the sleepers in the cave are revived. The link between Qur'an 2:259 and the Companions of the Cave has been argued by Tommaso Tesei² and Dorothee Pielow.³ Tesei argues that sleep and wakefulness in Qur'an 2:259 and the cave sleepers are metaphors of death and resurrection.⁴ If Qur'an 18:18 portrays the sleepers moving while they are asleep, then they are not depicted as clinically

dead. Qur'an 2:259 uses the root *m-w-t* for the man being caused to die. Death equated with sleep, nonetheless, is seen in various pseudepigrapha texts in the Near East: *Pseudo-Philo*, for example, makes this connection liberally (e.g. *Pseudo-Philo* 19:2, 19:6, 28:10, 29:4, 33:6, 35:3).

While Qur'an 2:259–260 is the most explicit in its depiction of nonhuman animals resurrected back to life, Sarra Tlili does not mention it in her discussion of the resurrection of nonhuman animals in the Qur'an (e.g. Qur'an 6:38, 81:5).⁵ It appears that her definition of resurrection is what would traditionally occur eschatologically on the Day of Resurrection.⁶ The methods she uses in her arguments are heavily dependent on traditional Muslim exegetes, mainly al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr.⁷ According to these traditional exegetes, the purpose of the nonhuman animal resurrection is accountability.⁸ However, in Qur'an 2:259–260, that appears not to be the case. It seems that the purpose behind the depiction of an apparent resurrection of the donkey or birds is for the reassurance of humans, who are asking questions about resurrection, to believe in its possibility.

I will divide the close reading of the two Qur'anic verses into two chapters: this and the next, devoting one chapter to each verse. In both cases, significant intertextualities between the Qur'an and biblical and extrabiblical literature are presented. The Qur'an is most likely informed by these subtexts and the traditions that use them, or their proto-traditions, and is rearticulating them. However, the Qur'an's rearticulation is not necessarily done in the spirit of arguing polemically against some of the notions propounded by such traditions to advocate its own message. The Qur'an rearticulates the same subtext using different terms and themes, in this case resurrection, but only to interpret the same message in its own way. The Qur'an does the same in other examples,⁹ such as the parable of the camel passing through the eye of the needle, in which – while the Qur'an appears to confront arrogance instead of richness as it is in the Synoptic Gospels – it retains and expounds upon the Gospels' message using different terms and themes.¹⁰

The reader will recognize the Qur'an's use of Israelite exilic imagery and redemption in the passages discussed – its engagements with and allusions to texts and traditions of the exile and their return. Undoubtedly, the question that would be raised is why the Qur'an would even be interested in engaging on the topic of the Israelite exiles. However puzzling at first, the reason might ultimately be very simple. However, I appeal to the reader's patience: with the intertextualities involved, this overarching question will be answered by the end of the next chapter, after discussing Qur'an 2:259–260 in full.

The man in the desolate town

Although most traditional commentators, such as al-Ṭabarī, understand Qur'an 2:259 to mean literally that a man is physically caused to die,¹¹ Ibn 'Arabi interprets the man's death metaphorically, as a spiritual one, namely describing ignorance.¹²

This merely small example demonstrates that Muslim intellectual history contains various opinions concerning this passage.

The man passes through a desolate town and asks how God will revive it. The question of life from death here concerns neither humans nor nonhuman animals but a town, portrayed as desolate. The man simply asks how a dead town, with death symbolizing its emptiness, would become liveable again. Since the man's question is metaphorical, it should not at all be a surprise if what comes next is metaphorical, as well.

Traditional Qur'anic commentators identify the man in this passage mostly with Ezra, but sometimes with Jeremiah.¹³ Most commentators arrive at these views based on presumptions, and therefore it is difficult to follow how these identifications have been first made, but Mahmoud Ayoub has argued that a biblical background is perhaps how these exegetes arrived at their opinions, though not always without confusing biblical and hagiographical accounts.¹⁴ In the next chapter, I will suggest the possibility of identifying the man in another way: with Abraham.

This section discusses two similar traditions: Abimelech – who according to 4 Baruch (*Paraleipomena Jeremiou*) was with Jeremiah, who had slept for sixty-six years during the exile (i.e. 4 Bar. 5:1–35)¹⁵ – and Ḥoni ha-M'agel (the Circle-Drawer),¹⁶ who had slept for seventy years, according to the Talmud, both Jerusalem and Babylonian.¹⁷ Both traditions are related to the exile. Both Jeremiah and Ezra are also related to the exile. When early Muslim commentators identified the man in this Qur'anic passage as either Jeremiah or Ezra, it might have been the case because they somehow were able to relate this story with the exilic traditions. There might have been some Jewish traditions that existed in the earlier Muslim history that combined these exilic traditions. It has already been suggested that the Abimelech narrative in 4 Baruch serves as a link between the Ḥoni tradition in the Talmud and the Christian version of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus,¹⁸ who are sometimes identified as the Companions of the Cave in the Qur'an.¹⁹ The language of Qur'an 2:259 suggests a parallel with the Companions of the Cave, and by extension with perhaps Abimelech or Ḥoni traditions. Robert Hoyland cleverly connects Qur'an 2:259 with the Companions of the Cave narrative, as well as with Abimelech's narrative in 4 Baruch, and strongly concludes that Abimelech's narrative in 4 Baruch is the underlying subtext for Qur'an 2:259.²⁰ While 4 Baruch might have been the inspiration for Ḥoni's narrative, another version of Abimelech's sleep was also circulating in the seventh century known as the *Apocryphon Jeremiae de captivitate Babylonis*²¹ (*History of the Captivity in Babylon*).²² While the earliest manuscript is dated to the seventh century, the tradition might be dated earlier. In the *History of the Captivity*, Abimelech sleeps for the entire seventy years of the exile and wakes up as Jeremiah returns with the exiles, similar to the time period in Ḥoni's narrative. Thus, Pierluigi Piovaneli hypothesizes that this is based on older traditions than that of 4 Baruch.²³ Moshe Simon-Shoshan also agrees to Piovaneli's hypothesis.²⁴

According to the Babylonian Talmud, Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer is said to have slept for seventy years, the same duration as the exile, because he doubted that one could slumber this long:

R. Yoḥanan said, 'All the days of that righteous man [Ḥoni] he was troubled by this verse: "A song of ascents: when the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream" [Ps. 126:1]. He [Ḥoni] said [to himself], "Is there anyone who sleeps and dreams for seventy years?"

One day he was going along the road. He saw a man who was planting a carob tree. He said to him, "This tree, how long does it take to bear fruit?" He said to him, "It takes seventy years." He said to him, "Is it obvious to you that you are going to live another seventy years?" He said to him, "That man [I] found a world full of carobs. Just as my fathers planted for me, so I plant these for my children."

He sat down to wrap a piece of bread. Sleep overtook him. As he slept, a cliff formed around him and hid him from sight, and he slept for seventy years. When he woke up, he saw a certain man gathering carobs from the tree. He said to him, "Are you the one who planted the tree?" He said to him, "I am his grandson." He said to him, "It is to be inferred that I have slept for seventy years." He saw his donkey, who had produced generations of offspring, and he went home.

He said to them, "Is the son of Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer still alive?" They said to him, "His son is no longer, but his grandson is." He said to them, "I am Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer." They did not believe him. He went to the house of study. He heard the rabbis saying, "His traditions are as clear to us as in the days of Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer. For when he would come to the house of study, any question that the rabbis had, he would resolve it for them." He said to them, "I am Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer." They did not believe him or pay him any proper respect. He was very upset, prayed for mercy, and died. Raba said, "This explains what people say: either fellowship or death."²⁵

The similarity between the Qur'anic passage and Ḥoni's narrative is that Ḥoni sees a man planting a tree that takes seventy years to grow. It takes a very long time for it to be fruitful. The Qur'an sometimes uses the motif of a dead earth for one that has no plants. Additionally, Ḥoni has a donkey, similar to the Qur'anic narrative. Not only did Ḥoni see the tree become fruitful after seventy years, but also he saw his donkey bring forth generations of offspring. It is as if the plant-seed and the donkey-seed, though coming from what are now dead, do bring forth life. In his story, Ḥoni understands the motif in 'When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream' (Ps. 126:1) as the Israelites being in a dream state, sure to prosper again.²⁶ Simon-Shoshan suggests that the dream-state also reflects Ḥoni's state during the exile: 'The "like dreamers" simile refers to his experience during the exile, rather than after it. Unlike those who went into exile, he did not suffer during this period. He quite conveniently slept through it, awaking as if nothing had happened.'²⁷

The narrative according to the Jerusalem Talmud differs slightly and concerns the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile, and the rebuilding of the Temple.²⁸

Said R. Yudan Gira, 'This is Hōni the Circle-Drawer, the grandson of Hōni the Circle-Drawer. Near the time of the destruction of the Temple, he went out to a mountain to his workers. Before he got there, it rained. He went into a cave. Once he sat down there, he became tired and fell asleep. He remained sound asleep for seventy years, until the Temple was destroyed and it was rebuilt a second time. At the end of the seventy years he awoke from his sleep. He went out of the cave, and he saw a world completely changed. An area that had been planted with vineyards now produced olives, and an area planted in olives now produced grain. He asked the people of the district, "What do you hear in the world?" They said to him, "And don't you know what the news is?" He said to them, "No." They said to him, "Who are you?" He said to them, "Hōni, the Circle-Drawer." They said to him, "We heard that when he would go into the Temple courtyard, it would be illuminated." He went in and illuminated the place and recited concerning himself the following verse of Scripture: "When the Lord restored the fortune of Zion, we were like those who dream."

Ps. 126:1²⁹

Simon-Shoshan compares the Jerusalem Talmud's account to three earlier traditions that are all connected to the exile and return: *Ben Sira's* Simon the high priest (i.e. Sirach 50), 2 Maccabees's Nehemiah hiding and restoring the fire of the temple altar, and 4 Baruch's Abimelech.³⁰

Commanded by Jeremiah, the priests in 2 Macc. 1:18–2:18 took some of the fire from the temple's altar during the exile and secretly hid it in a waterless cistern next to Moses's tomb, along with the tabernacle, the ark and the golden altar. After a certain number of years decreed by God, Nehemiah, by the authority of the king of Persia, sent the descendants of the priests to retrieve the fire.³¹ They found not the fire but a viscous liquid in its place, which was brought in and sprinkled by sacrificial materials. When the sun shone upon it, a great fire lit and burnt the offerings, as part of the celebrations of the temple's purification. Simon-Shoshan considers hiding the fire during the exile and retrieving it is one of the traditions that might have inspired Hōni's narrative in the Jerusalem Talmud indirectly.³² Since he finds it unlikely that the later rabbis were familiar with the text, he suspects an overarching tradition that circulated which proved a continuity of various traditions.

According to 4 Baruch,³³ Jeremiah is told by God of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Israelites to Babylon. The prophet pleads with God to show mercy and shield Abimelech the Ethiopian, who has been kind to Jeremiah, from seeing Jerusalem destroyed and its inhabitants taken captive (i.e. 4 Bar. 3:12–13). Accepting Jeremiah's plea, God tells him to send Abimelech to the vineyard of Agrippa, where he will be divinely hidden in the shadow of the mountain until the people return to the city (i.e. 4 Bar. 3:14). So Jeremiah asks Abimelech to take a basket and go to Agrippa along the mountain road to bring some figs to the sick people. Meanwhile, God informs Jeremiah that he will speak to Baruch, who weeps for the destruction of Jerusalem and sits in a tomb, while the angels explained to him God's revelations (i.e. 4 Bar. 4:12). The text does not

identify the tomb nor does it give any hint as to why Baruch was sitting in one.³⁴ It is possible that the tomb, which is described as being outside Jerusalem, is a metaphor for the Israelite nation, who were in exile outside Jerusalem; such a metaphor is used in Ezekiel 37.³⁵ Biblical scholar and historian Dale Allison Jr. states,

Baruch is obviously not sitting there in order to consult the dead. His action is rather a prophetic symbol. He, like the nation, is lifeless. He will no longer participate in everyday life. He is fit only for the company of the dead.³⁶

The metaphor of death and resurrection of the nation of Israel through its biblical intertextualities – some of which are portrayed in this chapter – is best developed by closely analysing the symbolism used in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, as demonstrated by biblical scholar and theologian Donald E. Gowan in his biblical study on death and resurrection.³⁷ This chapter uses only some of the symbolism that appears to be directly related to Qur'an 2:259, but it is an overarching theme that exists within the Hebrew Bible, which has several inner-biblical allusions associated with this symbolism.³⁸ Gabriel Reynolds speculates that the clothing of bones with flesh in Qur'an 2:259 mirrors Ezekiel 37,³⁹ further associating this passage with the Babylonian exile.

In 4 Bar. 5:1–35, Abimelech takes a basket and collects figs under the burning sun. Since it is too hot, he decides to rest under the shade of a tree. Between 4 Baruch and the Qur'anic passage we see similarities, but two main differences: (1) the Qur'an narrates that the man died for 100 years, while Abimelech sleeps for sixty-six, and (2) the Qur'an states that the man had a donkey, while no mention of a donkey exists in 4 Baruch (though Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer has one in the Babylonian Talmud). However, in both cases, a man has ripe fruit that continues to be fresh after so many years.

Afterwards, Abimelech is taken to the tomb (i.e. 4 Bar. 6:2) where Baruch had been sitting – apparently staying there all the time that Abimelech was asleep.⁴⁰ Allison analogizes Baruch's time in the tomb to exiled Israel itself, which 'has been in mourning for decades', in a kind of 'liminal' state.⁴¹ Baruch looks at the ripe figs and tells his heart that it (along with his flesh) will be filled with joy and that it will come back to life:

⁶You are the God who gives a reward to those who love you. Prepare yourself, my heart, and rejoice and be glad while you are in your tabernacle, saying to your fleshly house, 'your grief has been changed to joy'; for the Sufficient One is coming and will deliver you in your tabernacle – for there is no sin in you.

⁷Revive in your tabernacle, in your virginal faith, and believe that you will live!

⁸Look at this basket of figs – for behold, they are 66 years old and have not become shrivelled or rotten, but they are dripping milk. ⁹So it will be with you, my flesh, if you do what is commanded you by the angel of righteousness. ¹⁰He who preserved the basket of figs, the same will again preserve you by his power.

4 Bar. 6:6–10⁴²

This passage shows that Baruch interprets the ripe figs he saw to mean that his flesh and heart would be given life and resurrected,⁴³ if he does what the angel commanded him. One assumes that the angels who came to him in the beginning, when he sat in the tomb (i.e. 4 Bar. 4:12), ordered him to do something, to which he is now referring. Baruch apparently knows that whatever he is seeing is a sign from God that the Israelites will return to Jerusalem. Baruch and Abimelech then pray to God to show them the way to give the news to Jeremiah (i.e. 4 Bar. 6:14). The answer came to Baruch through an angel, informing him that he should write a letter to Jeremiah, which an eagle will deliver (i.e. 4 Bar. 6:15–18).

Then, Baruch ties the letter and fifteen figs from Abimelech's basket to the eagle's neck (i.e. 4 Bar. 7:7). The eagle travels to Babylon and rests on a post outside the city in the desert (i.e. 4 Bar. 7:12). The place is described as a graveyard, another death motif. Jeremiah and the people come to this place to bury the corpse of a dead Israelite (i.e. 4 Bar. 7:13–14); the eagle comes down on the corpse, and the corpse revives (i.e. 4 Bar. 7:15–19).

After the Israelites return to Jerusalem, the text later narrates that Jeremiah appears to have died (i.e. 4 Bar. 9:7). When Baruch and Abimelech wanted to bury his body, a voice commands them not to bury someone who is still alive, because his soul will return to his body (i.e. 4 Bar. 9:11–12). In three days, Jeremiah's soul returns and he is resurrected, prophesying the coming of Jesus (i.e. 4 Bar. 9:14) – which suggests a later Christianized redaction.⁴⁴

While Simon-Shoshan suggests that Ḥoni's narrative shows the continuity of the pre-exilic and postexilic community, Abimelech of 4 Baruch wakes up before the return of the exile, seeing the city's desolation and redemption.⁴⁵ Its theme is thus closer to that of the Qur'an's narrative than Ḥoni, who never really saw the city desolate.

Simon-Shoshan suggests that 4 Baruch and Ḥoni's narratives are distinct and have evolved separately from traditions linking them to *Ben Sira* and 2 Maccabees. He asserts that Ḥoni's narratives did not develop from 4 Baruch.⁴⁶ His main argument is based on the difference between the number of years slept, whether the time of the exile (seventy years) or sixty-six years. The latter would mean that the man saw the desolation of the city before it was rebuilt. The Qur'anic narrative clearly shows the amalgamation of both narratives, including the donkey in Ḥoni's version. The number of years cannot be used as a litmus test in the Qur'anic narrative, because it is one hundred years, and yet depicts a person who saw the city desolate. In the next chapter, it is proposed that the man in the Qur'anic narrative is Abraham, who had Isaac at one hundred years old. This might suggest that there was an interim tradition that takes inspiration from *Ben Sira* and 2 Maccabees or similar proto-traditions, from which both 4 Baruch and Ḥoni's narratives derive independently, while the Qur'anic narrative also stemmed from a third, separate branch. That would confirm Simon-Shoshan's conclusion that 'entire complexes of narrative traditions circulated and developed among differing communities.'⁴⁷

The similarities between Ḥoni's narrative in the Talmud and that of Abimelech in 4 Baruch with the Qur'anic version, which seemingly has bits and pieces from

both versions but more closely resembles 4 Baruch, suggests several theories: (1) both narratives served as a subtext for the Qur'anic narrative; (2) an oral tradition of 4 Baruch that adds a donkey (based on Ḥoni's narrative in the Talmud) served as a subtext for the Qur'anic narrative; (3) the Qur'an is referring to a different tradition that itself evolved from proto-traditions for the Talmud and 4 Baruch or; (4) a post-tradition that combined both. Various similar traditions existed in the Near East during Late Antiquity in Greek, Jewish, and Christian sources.⁴⁸ Pieter van der Horst suggests that while 4 Baruch was later Christianized, its origins might have been Jewish and that the Christian author of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus might have used similar motifs from it.⁴⁹ Therefore, it is likely that there were traditions in the Qur'anic milieu that mixed earlier traditions of long-sleepers, which might even suggest the possible reasons with the similarity in some of the language between Qur'an 2:259 and the Qur'anic narrative of the Companions of the Cave.

The man's ṭa'ām (food or commandment)

According to Qur'an 2:259, the man had food that did not spoil, similar to the figs of Abimelech in 4 Baruch. What is the significance of mentioning the food not being spoiled in the Qur'an? What does it have to do with resurrection, if anything?

To put this passage in context, perhaps one needs to understand the significance of the figs of Abimelech in 4 Baruch. Some scholars argue that the Hebrew Bible has a pattern of using figs as a metaphor for the nation of Israel,⁵⁰ as in Hos. 9:10 (also echoed in Mic. 7:1): 'Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your ancestors.' The absence or the withering of figs is sometimes also understood as a curse on the nation of Israel or its land:⁵¹ 'When I wanted to gather them, says the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them' (Jer. 8:13). Haggai also has this contrast between barren fig trees and blessing: 'Is there any seed left in the barn? Do the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree still yield nothing. From this day on I will bless you' (Hag. 2:19).

Just before recounting the seventy years of captivity, Jeremiah's vision in chapter 24 calls figs to mind:⁵²

¹The LORD showed me two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the LORD. This was after King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem King Jeconiah son of Jehoiaquim of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the artisans, and the smiths, and had brought them to Babylon. ²One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. ³And the LORD said to me, 'What do you see, Jeremiah?' I said, 'Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.'

⁴Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁵Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. ⁶I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. ⁷I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

⁸But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who live in the land of Egypt. ⁹I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth – a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. ¹⁰And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they are utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their ancestors.

Jer. 24:1–10

This passage might contextualize Abimelech's story in 4 Baruch with whom Jeremiah interacted. The figs not spoiled in 4 Baruch might be an allusion to this motif in Jer. 8:13 and Jeremiah 24.⁵³ In 4 Baruch, the figs were given to sick people and might mirror the figs used to heal and cleanse Hezekiah from the terminal illness he had, and used as a sign to go up (*'e 'ēle*) to the temple (i.e. Isaiah 38). In 4 Baruch, the sick people might symbolize the people of Israel and the figs are a sign of them being healed, as a symbol of their return from exile and for going up to the Temple (perhaps as pilgrims).

Analysing the Gospel of Mark's narrative on Jesus cursing a fig tree (e.g. Mk. 11:12–25), Brent Kinman states,

Others think that an eschatological emphasis is to be seen. According to this view, the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem is the real focus of the narrative in which Jesus, by a prophetic act or acted parable (the cursing of the tree), announces impending judgment. The fig tree represents Israel in Jesus' day, and its cursing symbolizes the destruction of the city and Temple by the Romans some years later.⁵⁴

In parallel, New Testament scholar John P. Heil also writes, "The Marcan audience realizes that the temple, like the fruitless fig tree, is condemned to destruction for failing to attain its purpose to be a house of prayer for all peoples."⁵⁵ Hence, there is a possibility that the non-spoiling figs of Abimelech in 4 Baruch are symbolic of the nation of Israel, which though destroyed and exiled are restored and, indeed, not spoiled.

In the Qur'anic narrative, two terms need to be investigated closely: *ṭa'ām* (food) and *yatasannah* (spoiled). The latter is rooted in *s-n-h*, which can mean sleep, as used in Qur'an 2:255. However, because the same root also means years or growing old (as understood in Qur'an 2:259 as old and decayed),⁵⁶ it is difficult

to suggest whether or not those two root meanings are related to one another.⁵⁷ If the root meaning is sleeping or staying still, then the meaning of passing time and growing old may be a natural evolution of that,⁵⁸ in which it decays as something ages. If Qur'an 2:259 is demonstrating that a man falls into a deep sleep (metaphorically dies), then the term *yatasannah* could show that his food did not sleep. If it means that his food did not grow old, meaning that it did not decay, then the question one must ask is whether the man himself grew old. In the Sleepers of the Cave narrative, the Qur'an implies that the men grew old because anyone who would see them would be smitten with fear (i.e. Qur'an 18:18). However, if the men did grow old, they would have realized the changes and would not have thought that they slept only a day or a part thereof. Thus, it is difficult to answer whether in this passage the man grows old or not, but since he did not realize the passage of time, then it is likely that he did not. Similarly, Abimelech in 4 Baruch and Honi the Circle-Drawer of the Talmud show no explicit evidence that they too grew old.

As the Qur'an might be using *yatasannah* in two definitions, *ṭa'ām* might also be used in two definitions. This term is obviously understood as food and is attested throughout the Semitic languages to have the basic meaning of taste.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Akkadian,⁶⁰ Aramaic and Hebrew include another meaning for *ṭē'ēm*, which is command, discernment or intelligence.⁶¹ The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT) suggests that since the root meaning is perceiving taste, it evolved to mean discernment or intelligence, which is an act of perception and, by extension, came to mean a decree or command that occurs through discernment and rationale.⁶² John Makujina argued for two possible origins of the meaning of decree, either Old Persian or Semitic; in his estimation the evidence leans more towards the former.⁶³ Could this meaning have also found its way into Arabic, and perhaps become incorporated within the Qur'an? Or at least could the Qur'an's audience have understood the wide semantic field of this term? I hypothesize that the answer to both is yes, but not that the Arabic language simply borrowed such a definition. However, the Qur'an sometimes uses specific terms that would resonate with the audience. For example, the Qur'an uses the term *qiblah* to resonate with the Talmudic *qabbalah* as an allusion to the *Shema*.⁶⁴ The Qur'an sometimes uses the term *al-ḥaqq*, with the meaning of 'decree' in the *Qiblah* passages to resonate with the *Shema* passages,⁶⁵ as well as in the cow passage to resonate with the rabbinic commentary of the red cow ritual, which is discussed in Chapter 9. Since the context of Qur'an 2:259 is argued to be that of the Israelite exile, which would correspond to an audience that would be familiar to some of the books of the Hebrew Bible on the exile, such as Ezra-Nehemiah, Jeremiah and others, the use of *ṭē'ēm* in these texts is sometimes specific to the meaning of 'decree'. Moreover, the Arab poet, al-Farazdaq (d. 730), uses *al-ṭi'mah*, from the same root, to mean a trait or a conduct,⁶⁶ while *ṭa'm*, in Arabic, also means understanding,⁶⁷ similar to its Aramaic definition, which by extension came to mean decree.⁶⁸

The usage of *ṭa'ām* might resonate with Israelite literature pertaining to the exile, which uses *ṭē'ēm* as 'decree', as the following Qur'anic passage may contextualize:

All *al-ṭa'ām* was lawful unto the Children of Israel, except what Israel had forbidden for himself, before the Torah was sent down. Say, 'Bring the Torah and recite it, if you are truthful.'

Qur'an 3:93

The context of this verse has nothing to do with food. Nothing preceding nor following this passage has anything to do with food at all. The overarching theme of this passage's context is faith. If this passage were understood to be about food, then it would seem out of its Qur'anic contextual flow and completely random. However, if we tweak the meaning of *ṭa'ām* in this passage to commandment or decree, as it can also be defined in Hebrew and Aramaic, we get the following:

All decree/commandment [*al-ṭa'ām*] was lawful unto the Children of Israel, except what Israel had forbidden for himself, before the Torah was sent down. Say, 'Bring the Torah and recite it, if you are truthful.'

Qur'an 3:93

This definition of the term would make more sense. The Qur'an is arguing that God's commandments did not exist in the time of Israel (Jacob). God's commandments came later, through the Torah. Consequently, these commandments are not the essence of faith. The Qur'anic argument is that the essence is the faith of Abraham (i.e. Qur'an 3:95), who came before the Torah and, therefore, before its commandments; and the preceding context, Qur'an 3:65 states exactly that:

⁶⁵O People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham, as neither the Torah nor the Gospel was sent down until after him? Do you not understand?

⁶⁶Behold! You are the very same who dispute concerning that of which you have knowledge; so why do you dispute concerning that of which you have no knowledge? God knows, and you know not. ⁶⁷Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian, but rather was a *ḥanīf*, a submitter, and he was not one of the idolaters.

Qur'an 3:65–67

Therefore, understanding *ṭa'ām* in Qur'an 3:93 as a decree or commandment makes a lot more sense and flows rather well with the context. Otherwise, understanding *ṭa'ām* as food would isolate this passage from its immediate context. Coming after Qur'an 3:93, the text discusses the *first house*, an allusion to the House of God and its dedication to the people.

⁹⁶Truly the first house established for humankind was that at Bakkah, full of blessing and a guidance for the worlds. ⁹⁷Therein are clear signs: the station [*maqām*] of Abraham, and whosoever enters it shall be secure. Pilgrimage [*ḥajj*] to the House is a duty upon [*āla*] humankind before God for those who can find a way. For whosoever disbelieves, truly God is beyond need of the worlds.

Qur'an 3:96–97

Several intertextualities are seen between Qur'an 3:93–97 and the Book of Ezra. First, the Book of Ezra frequently uses the Aramaic term *ṭē'ēm* for decree, with much of it discussing the decree of rebuilding the Temple of God in Jerusalem (e.g. Ezra 6:1, 6:3, 6:8, 6:11–12). Second, the Book of Ezra continuously discusses the rebuilding of the House of God, the Temple. Third, Ezra-Nehemiah⁶⁹ does present the Israelites returning to Jerusalem as pilgrims.⁷⁰

The Qur'an appears to be using wordplay. As in the passage just preceding Qur'an 2:259, it uses the root *ḥ-j-j*, but in a different polysemous meaning of arguing or debating,⁷¹ when also portraying a matter of life and death (or resurrection):

Have you not considered him who disputed [*ḥājj*] with Abraham about his Lord because God had given him sovereignty? When Abraham said, 'My Lord gives life and causes death,' he said, 'I give life and cause death.' Abraham said, 'Truly God brings the sun from the east. Bring it, then, from the west.' Thus was he who disbelieved confounded. And God guides not wrongdoing people.

Qur'an 2:258

Furthering the relationship between Qur'an 3:93–97 and the Book of Ezra, Ezra 6:18 describes the reinstatement of the priestly functions in the Temple, according to the Book of Moses. The Qur'an appears to argue that all *ṭa'ām* were allowed to the Children of Israel, except what Israel had forbidden to himself before the revelation of the Torah (i.e. before the Book of Moses). When discussing that all *ṭa'ām* were lawful to the Israelites before the Torah, Qur'an 3:93 specifically asks to bring the Torah and to read it as proof. This reading request might be intertextualized with Neh. 8:1–8, which narrates how the Israelites asked Ezra to bring the Book of Law of Moses (i.e. Neh. 8:1) and to read it (i.e. Neh. 8:1–8). After Ezra read before the Israelites the Book of Moses, the narrative states, 'So they read from the book, from the Law [*tōrat*] of God, with interpretation [*mēpōrāš*].'⁷² They gave the sense [*sōm šekel*], so that the people understood the reading' (Neh. 8:8). Makujina argues that the term *sōm šekel* in this passage is the same as *sōm ṭē'ēm* used in the rest of Ezra-Nehemiah and needs to be understood as to 'give a [divine] order'.⁷³ Therefore, as it is being argued that the context of Qur'an 3:93 is seemingly engaging with the Second Temple, especially within Ezra-Nehemiah, then it seems highly likely that the *ṭa'ām* of Qur'an 3:93 is divine commandment. In addition, Qur'an 3:93 requests that Jews bring the Torah and read it; the centrality of public recitation of the Torah within the Jewish community is described in the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative.⁷⁴

Brannon Wheeler⁷⁵ and Noah Feldman⁷⁶ have argued that Qur'an 3:93 is specifically in reference to the prohibition of the sinew of the thigh (*gīd ha-nāše*): 'Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle [*gīd ha-nāše*] that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle [*gīd ha-nāše*]' (Gen. 32:32). Feldman concludes Qur'an 3:93 is anti-Jewish, to prove that Israel (Jacob) forbade something to himself without divine sanction.⁷⁷ I humbly disagree with Feldman's conclusion, in light of my own argument on the *Qiblah* passages in the Qur'an, which are viewed by many scholars as anti-Jewish.

However, the *Qiblah* passages only engage with Jews, reminding them of what is truly important, the *Shema*.⁷⁸ Given the overall context of Qur'an 3:93, dietary prohibition would seem out of place. It is more likely that the passage is engaging with Ezra-Nehemiah and the Second Temple. Therefore, dietary laws do not seem like the actual issue in Qur'an 3:93, but – as is typical with the Qur'an – its creative use of polysemy and therefore double meaning is a possibility.⁷⁹ Moreover, after Ezra read the Torah to the Israelites, they were asked to stop weeping and rejoice and have a feast and eat and drink (i.e. Neh. 8:9–18).

If the man in the desolate town described in Qur'an 2:259 is understood to be engaging with either Abimelech's narrative in 4 Baruch or Honi the Circle-Drawer in the Talmud – which is about the Israelites return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, as described in Ezra-Nehemiah – then the *ṭa'ām* that did not spoil might be a clever reference to the Torah of Moses, which Ezra was also able to restore. It did not spoil, that is, even after it appeared to have been lost during the time of the exile.⁸⁰

The broader Qur'anic context of this passage is faith and asking the People of the Book to return to the faith of Abraham, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian, because the Torah and the Gospel were revealed after him. Ezra-Nehemiah and the traditions based thereon speak of the House of God rebuilt according to the prophecy of Haggai and priestly functions reinstituted as per the Book of Moses. If this passage is engaging with those traditions, then the Qur'an argues that Abraham, his station (*maqām*), and his call for pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) predate the Torah.

When another chapter of the Qur'an describes the *ḥajj* rituals, it refers to the House as *al-bayt al-ʿatīq* (the ancient house) echoing Ezra 5:11, which shows that the Jews who were rebuilding the house in Jerusalem stated, 'we are rebuilding the house [*baytā*]' that was built many years ago [*mi-qadmat*]. As the Qur'anic passage describes pilgrimage, that also echoes Ezra-Nehemiah's portrayal of the Israelites returning to Jerusalem as pilgrims.⁸¹

Where the pilgrimage portrayal is found in Qur'an 3:96–97, it is within the direct context of the *ṭa'ām* in Qur'an 3:93: the *ṭa'ām* in this passage may very well be meant as decree referring to the Torah. The *ṭa'ām* of the man in the desolate town may refer to the Torah being unspoiled, and function as a metaphor for its restoration, as the figs of Abimelech in biblical literature are understood to represent the Israelite nation, which did not decay but was restored. The rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud explicitly correlate figs with the Torah:

What is the meaning of this verse of Scripture: 'Whoso keeps the fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof'? [Prov. 27:18] How come words of the Torah were compared to a fig? Just as the fig – the more someone examines it, the more one finds in it, so words of the Torah – the more one meditates on them, the more flavor he finds in them.⁸²

He who in a dream sees a fig will find that his knowledge of Torah will be fully protected within him. For it is said, 'He who keeps the fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof'.

The term used for pilgrimage in the Hebrew Bible is sometimes rooted in *ʿl-y* or *ʿl-h* (e.g. Exod. 34:24),⁸⁴ which is understood from its root meaning as 'going up',⁸⁵ much as Hezekiah looks for a sign to go up to the Temple after being healed with figs.

In Ezra this going-up may denote the journey of the Israelites to Jerusalem and further emphasize it as a portrayal of pilgrimage.⁸⁶ The Book of Ezra starts its description of the journey with Cyrus's edict to go up (*ya ʿal*) to Jerusalem (i.e. Ezra 1:3); the people were stirred to go up (*la- ʿālôt*) and rebuild the house of the Lord (i.e. Ezra 1:5); the gold and silver are brought up (*he ʿēlâ*) when the exiles were brought up (*hē ʿālôt*) from Babylonia to Jerusalem (i.e. Ezra 1:11).⁸⁷ Knowles further points out that Ezra and the Israelites offering a sacrifice in Jerusalem (i.e. Ezra 8:32–35) further accentuates the journey's portrayal precisely as a pilgrimage.⁸⁸

Indeed, Ezra-Nehemiah recounts the Israelites celebrating, upon their return to Jerusalem, the Festival of Booths (*ḥag ha-sukkot*) (i.e. Ezra 3:1–4, Neh. 8:13–18).⁸⁹ After the first group celebrates the Festival of Booths (*ḥag ha-sukkot*) (i.e. Ezra 3:1–4), the text discusses the rebuilding of the Temple and its dedication (i.e. Ezra 3–6).⁹⁰ Immediately after the dedication of the Temple, Passover, another pilgrimage, is celebrated (i.e. Ezra 6:19–22).⁹¹

Additionally, the use of the term *maqām* for the station of Abraham in Qur'an 3:97 would resonate with its Jewish audience because of the Hebrew term *māqôm*. Qur'an 3:97 states that anyone who enters it shall be secured. This description parallels that of Hag. 2:9, 'The latter [*hā- ʿaḥārôn*] glory of this house [*ha-bayit*] shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place [*māqôm*] I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.'⁹² In another account,

But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, who left us a remnant [*pēlētā*] and given us a stake in his holy place [*mēqôm*], in order that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance [revival] in our slavery.

Ezra 9:8

In these accounts, the house is described as a place (*maqām*) and anyone in it is granted security or peace, which is also reflected in the Book of Zechariah, who is mentioned in Ezra 6:14 as one who prophesized the rebuilding of the House of God.

It is he who shall build the temple of the LORD; he shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. There shall be a priest by [on] his throne with peaceful understanding between the two of them.

Zech. 6:13

Moreover, the Temple is identified as the place where Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son, on Mount Moriah (i.e. Gen. 22:2, 2 Chron. 3:1),⁹³ thus becoming a good candidate for the Qur'an's station of Abraham. Haggai encouraged the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the House of God.⁹⁴ One recent study has

explored the agricultural theme in Haggai in the rebuilding of the Temple, but mainly looked at it as an economic portrayal of Jerusalem.⁹⁵ I am more inclined to deduce that such a portrayal of agriculture in Haggai sheds light on some intertextuality with other biblical texts as a metaphor for the nation of Israel being restored after the exile. Similarly, Zechariah encouraged the exiles to return to God and to repent such that God may bring back their glory.⁹⁶ Just prior to its discussion on the *ṭa'ām* and *ḥajj* (pilgrimage), Qur'an 3:89–90 praises those who repent and return to God and those who work for reform (*aṣlahū*), while warning those who increase in their *kufṛ* (disbelief) that their repentance will not be accepted:

⁸⁹except those who repent after that, and make amends (*aṣlahū*), for truly God is Forgiving, Merciful. ⁹⁰Truly those who disbelieve after having believed, then increase in disbelief, their repentance shall not be accepted, and they are the ones who are astray.

Qur'an 3:89–90

The passage avers that God will forgive those who repent or return (*tābū*) and work for reform (*aṣlahū*). The root of the term for repentance has its cognates in Hebrew and Aramaic, as they are used and associated with the rebuilding of the Temple in the Books of Ezra-Nehemiah,⁹⁷ Haggai⁹⁸ and Zechariah. Yet another important term the Qur'an uses is *aṣlahū*. Its Aramaic cognate is also used in the Book of Ezra, when the exiled Jews returned and worked for reform; for example:

May it be known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built of hewn stone, and timber is laid in the walls; this work is being done diligently and prospers [*maṣlah*] in their hands.

Ezra 5:8

Accordingly, the account in Ezra shows that the exiled Jews rebuilding the Temple have returned to God and are working for reform. Therefore, if the Qur'anic context were established with its intertextuality among the Books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah on the House of God,⁹⁹ then this passage would allude to those exiled Jews who are rebuilding the Temple, as recounted in Ezra 6:14 with the term *maṣlēḥin*. That being the case, Haggai and Zechariah warn the Jews that they should repent for God to return His favour to them. As the exiles were allowed to return and were allowed to rebuild the Temple, it means that God did, accordingly, grant them favour. After the many warnings the Qur'an gives to the People of the Book in the context of this passage, it asserts that not all of the People of the Book are equal, and that some are good and reformers or righteous (*ṣāliḥin*). Therefore, the context of this Qur'anic passage continues to show parallelism with the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah.

¹¹³They are not all alike. Among the People of the Book is an upright community who recite God's signs in the watches of the night, while they prostrate. ¹¹⁴They believe in God and the Last Day, enjoin right and forbid wrong, and hasten unto

good deeds. And they are among the righteous [*al-ṣāliḥīn*].¹¹⁵ Whatsoever good they do, they will not be denied it. And God knows the reverent.

Qur'an 3:113–115

Another intertextuality between the Qur'anic passage and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem is the Qur'anic association of the *first house* with 'Bakkah'. Although traditional Muslim commentators interpret the *first house* as the Ka'bah and the enigmatic 'Bakkah' as a name for Makkah,¹⁰⁰ the following passage from the Book of Ezra might shed some additional light on this.

¹²But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the *first house* on its foundation, wept [*bōkīm*] with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy,¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping [*bēkī*], for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

Ezra 3:12–13, *emphasis added*

This passage in Ezra narrates how the people who had seen the *first house* wept, with weeping rooted in *b-k-y* or *b-k-h*. According to Ezra 6:3, it is assumed that the original foundation was repaired and rebuilt.¹⁰¹ This description of people unable to distinguish between joyful shouts and the sound of weeping is essential here, as this is obviously a great event, which the Qur'an might have taken into consideration when narrating it, since it calls it the *first house* and the place of weeping.

When, during the exile, some Israelites intermarried with foreigners against the Law of Moses (i.e. Exod. 34:16, Deut. 7:3), Ezra pleaded before God confessing the sins of the Israelites and wept.¹⁰² People confessing their sin also wept with him:

While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping [*bōkeh*] and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept [*bākū*] bitterly.

Ezra 10:1

The image of the Israelites weeping, as they listened to Ezra reading the Torah, is also narrated in Nehemiah 8. Ezra and the people weeping while confessing their sins and prostrating before the house of God also supports Qur'an 3:113–115 in accepting that not all of the People of the Book are alike. Some are truly devout: they prostrate, do good and are considered among those who make reforms (*al-ṣāliḥīn*). This is what was found among those rebuilding the Second Temple in the Books of Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah. An image repeated in Nehemiah also makes the distinction:

⁶Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin,

Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodia, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law [*tôrat*] of God, with interpretation [*měpōrāš*].¹⁰³ They gave the sense [*šôm šekel*], so that the people understood the reading. ⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep [*tibkû*].' For all the people wept [*bôkîm*] when they heard the words of the law [*tôrâ*].

Neh. 8:6–9

Ezra-Nehemiah's portrayal of the Israelites returning to Jerusalem as pilgrims¹⁰⁴ might be an inner-biblical allusion between these passages and Psalm 84:

⁴Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise! *Selah* ⁵Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways [*měsillôt*] to Zion. ⁶As they go through the valley of Baca [*ha-bākā* 'weeping] they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools [blessings / *bērākôt*]. ⁷They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

Ps. 84:4–7

The *first house* in Ezra 3:12 is a reference to the original Temple, where the people wept. In Nehemiah 8, when Ezra brings the Book of Moses to recite, he does so in front of the Water Gate and all the people also wept. Ps. 84:6 describes blessings (*bērākôt*), sometimes translated as pools (*bērekôt*). The Septuagint translates *bērākôt* in this verse into Greek *eulogias* (blessing) instead of pools.¹⁰⁵ Much as Ps. 84:6 does, Qur'an 3:96 uses the terms for weeping (*bakkah*) and also blessed (*mubārakan*). Ezek. 34:25–28 also discusses the security and the blessing of the area,¹⁰⁶ a theme argued to be prominent in Psalm 84¹⁰⁷ and emphasized in Qur'an 3:96–97,

²⁵I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. ²⁶I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing [*bērākā*]; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing [*bērākā*]. ²⁷The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. ²⁸They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid.

Ezek. 34:25–28

Psalm 84 is understood as a portrayal of pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Qur'an 3:97 states that people need to go to on pilgrimage to this *first house* in Bakkah whoever is able to find 'a way' (*sabīlā*) to it. This 'way' shows

similarity to the highways (*mēsillôt*) to Zion in Ps. 84:5. The Peshitta translates the Hebrew 'There are highways (*mēsillôt*) in their heart'¹⁰⁹ to the Aramaic 'Your highways [*šbylyg*] are in his heart.'¹¹⁰ The intertextuality is that the Qur'an is using the Arabic, *sabīl*, which is the cognate of the term used by the Aramaic text, *šbyl*.¹¹¹ There is much intertextuality in the usage of terms and descriptions between this Qur'anic passage and biblical literature; it becomes likely that the Qur'an is engaging with the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah or some other text or oral tradition that combines these. Further examples to show the relationship of this Qur'anic passage with the Israelite exile are also proposed in the next section. Therefore, the *ṭa'ām* in Qur'an 3:93 is likely to be understood within such a context as a divine decree or commandment, which would resonate with the audience. The *ṭa'ām* of the man in the desolate town in Qur'an 2:259 holds the dual meaning of food and, metaphorically, the restoration of the Torah, and subsequently, the restoration of the nation of Israel.

The measuring line (ḥebel) and the fiery furnace

While biblical scholars divide the Book of Zechariah between chapters 1–8 and 9–14,¹¹² the partition may not have been apparent to the traditions of the Qur'anic milieu. Therefore, this section does not assume that the Qur'an or existing traditions during Late Antiquity made such a distinction.

Zechariah 2 narrates a vision of a man with a measuring line (*ḥebel*), identified as the line that would measure Jerusalem, and a prophecy that Jerusalem will revive again with a multitude of people, even though it was desolate:¹¹³

I looked up and saw a man with a measuring line in his hand [*ḥebel*].² Then I asked, 'Where are you going?' He answered me, 'To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length.'³ Then the angel who talked with me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him,⁴ and said to him, 'Run, say to that young man: Jerusalem shall be inhabited like villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and animals in it.⁵ For I will be a wall of fire all around it, says the LORD, and I will be the glory within it.'

Zech. 2:1–5

This passage in Zechariah of a vision of a man with a measuring line (*ḥebel*) might be a clue to the Qur'anic context of the *first house*. A few verses after the Qur'an states that all *ṭa'ām* was allowed to the Children of Israel, it twice repeats the rope (*ḥabl*) of God, using the same cognate term used in Zechariah for the measuring line.

And hold fast to the rope [*ḥabl*] of God, all together, and be not divided. Remember the Blessing [*ni'mat*] of God upon you, when you were enemies and He joined your hearts, such that you became brothers [*ikhwānā*] by His Blessing [*bi-ni'matih*]. You were on the brink of a pit of fire and He delivered you from it.

Thus does God make clear unto you His signs, that haply you may be rightly guided.

Qur'an 3:103

They shall be struck with abasement wherever they are come upon, except by means of a rope [*ḥabl*] from God and a rope [*ḥabl*] from people.¹¹⁴ And they shall earn a burden of wrath from God, and they shall be struck with indigence. That is because they used to disbelieve in God's signs and kill the prophets without right. That is for their having disobeyed and transgressed.

Qur'an 3:112

Immediately following this passage, the Qur'an makes a distinction between the People of the Book, who are not all alike. The use of the term *ḥabl* in these Qur'anic passages is the only time the rope of God is mentioned. Being within the same context with the aforementioned intertextuality on the rebuilding of the Second Temple gives possible credence to further such intertextuality between the rope (*ḥabl*) of God mentioned in these passages and the measuring line (*ḥebel*) of Zechariah to measure Jerusalem and bring it back to life for God to dwell in its midst.

Traditional Qur'anic commentators¹¹⁵ and also some contemporary scholars interpret the rope (*ḥabl*) of God in the Qur'an as a covenant,¹¹⁶ which would keep the context of this passage parallel to that of Zechariah. Analysing the term *ḥabl*, Reuven Firestone suggests the possibility – though admittedly not the certainty – that it reflects the notion of a covenant in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹⁷ Intertextualities between this Qur'anic passage and the idea of a covenant from the Hebrew Bible might actually make such an inference more likely.

Additionally, Qur'an 3:103 speaks of not only a rope (*ḥabl*) but also a brotherhood (*ikhwānā*). This may be compared with the following passage in Zech. 11:14: 'Then I broke my second staff Union [*ḥa-ḥōbēlīm*], annulling the brotherhood [*ʾaḥāwā*] between Judah and Israel.' The term 'brotherhood' used in this passage in the form *ʾaḥāwā* is a *hapax legomenon*. Zech. 11:14 is alluding to the Israelite national unity between the kingdoms of Judah (the southern kingdom) and Israel (the northern kingdom).¹¹⁸ Solomon, who according to the Israelite tradition built the First Temple, was the last king of the United Monarchy. Traditionally, the division occurred after his death, when the tribes of Judah and Benjamin accepted Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, as their king, while the rest of the Israelite tribes rejected him, leading to what was known as Jeroboam's revolt.¹¹⁹ After that, the kingdoms of Judah and Israel remained distinct until the destruction of each. According to the biblical account, the kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians,¹²⁰ and the kingdom of Judah was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian, who besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.¹²¹ Thus, the *ḥōbēlīm* (union) of *ʾaḥāwā* (brotherhood) was broken.¹²²

The passage of Zech. 11:14 appears to refer to the Israelites quarrelling amongst themselves after the building of the First Temple, and appears to be an inner-biblical allusion to Ezek. 37:15–28.¹²³ The significance of this allusion is the broader

context of Ezekiel 37, which discusses the valley of dry bones that are resurrected as a reference to the return of the Israelites from exile.

Zech. 11:7 speaks of two different staffs, each one given a name: 'I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slaughtered by the sheep traders. And I took two staffs, one I named Favor [*nō 'am*], the other I named Union [*hōbēlīm*]. And I tended the sheep.' God breaks each staff, annulling with it a covenant: 'I took my staff Favor [*nō 'am*], and I broke it, annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples' (Zech. 11:10). The first staff, Favor (*nō 'am*), is broken, annulling the covenant made with all the people, and the second staff, Union (*hōbēlīm*), is broken, annulling the covenant made between the brotherhood (*'ahāwā*) of Judah and Israel. There are three distinct intertextualities between these passages and Qur'an 3:103: (1) the *ḥabl*, understood as a covenant; (2) the brotherhood (*ikhwānā*); and (3) God's favour (*ni'matih*). All three terms are found in Zechariah within a single thematic context, the doom of Israel.

While continuing to portray God's wrath against Jerusalem and the Israelites (i.e. Zech. 12:1–3), Zechariah nonetheless continues to provide hope that God's salvation will be at hand.¹²⁴ According to Zechariah, God's salvation would come through the tribe of Judah like a blazing fire: 'On that day I will make the clans of Judah like a blazing pot on a pile of wood, like a flaming torch among sheaves; and they shall devour to the right and to the left all the surrounding peoples, while Jerusalem shall again be inhabited in its place, in Jerusalem' (Zech. 12:6).

In showing how the tribe of Judah will be like a blazing fire against its enemies,¹²⁵ Zech. 12:6 contrasts with Jer. 5:14, 'Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts: "Because you have spoken this word, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall devour them."¹²⁶ Jeremiah then continues to show how the Israelites will be destroyed by other nations and dispersed (i.e. Jer. 5:15–18, cf. Jer. 8:13).¹²⁷ Jer. 5:17 even states that other nations will eat their fig trees, a common theme with Abimelech who saw that his figs were not spoiled, in relation to the similar account in the Qur'anic narrative. As God's judgement is portrayed as fire against Israel through foreign nations in Jer. 5:14, so is Israel becoming a fire against other nations per Zech. 12:6.

The fire in Zechariah tests the Israelites, which resonates with Ps. 66:10–12,¹²⁸ Isa. 48:10¹²⁹ and Mal. 3:2–3,¹³⁰ as well as many other biblical passages that have been closely analysed by biblical scholar Daniel Frayer-Griggs.¹³¹ In addition, Zechariah continues,

⁸In the whole land, says the LORD, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. ⁹And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'¹³²

Zech. 13:8–9

The portrayal of Israel going through a fiery furnace can also be seen as an allusion to Deut. 4:20:¹³³ 'But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron

furnace, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own inheritance, as you are this day.¹³⁴ The description of Egypt as having been an iron furnace for the Israelites has parallels in 1 Kgs. 8:51 and Jer. 11:4.¹³⁵ Jeremiah 11 depicts the Israelites breaking the covenant, and recounts that though God brought them out of the iron furnace and Egypt, but they still did not hearken to Him or do as commanded. The covenant had established that if they walked in the way of God and did as commanded, they would be given the land flowing with milk and honey that was promised to their fathers.¹³⁶

A representation of God's wrath as a fiery furnace is also seen in Ezekiel:¹³⁷

¹⁷The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁸Mortal, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them, silver,¹³⁸ bronze, tin, iron, and lead. In the smelter they have become dross. ¹⁹Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. ²⁰As one gathers silver, bronze, iron, lead, and tin into a smelter, to blow the fire upon them in order to melt them; so I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. ²¹I will gather you and blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted within it. ²²As silver is melted in a smelter, so you shall be melted in it; and you shall know that I the LORD have poured out my wrath upon you.

Ezek. 22:17–22

Thus, the Israelites being tested through a fiery furnace, which often alludes to God's covenant, is a recurring theme in the Hebrew Bible.¹³⁹ The Hebrew prophets warn the Israelites, asking them to hearken to the words of God, so that they may be saved and will not ignite the wrath of God against them. Similarly, when in Qur'an 3 a warning is made against the People of the Book, notably the Jews, it should not be seen as anti-Jewish, but as the warnings of the Hebrew prophets to the Jews to obey the words of God. This is in contrast to Reynolds's link of Christian anti-Jewish polemic and its relationship with the Qur'an.¹⁴⁰ Reynolds especially discusses the concept that the Qur'an accuses some of the Jews of having falsified their scripture (*tahrif*).¹⁴¹ Yet I have argued that the concept of *tahrif* in the Qur'an is an accusation not that some Jews have falsified their scriptures but that they have turned away from them, while the Qur'an calls on Jews to uphold their scriptures instead.¹⁴²

Looking objectively at some of its themes and language, the Hebrew Bible may have elements that, if they appeared in other contexts, would be read as anti-Jewish. However, the denunciations and condemnations are understandably regarded instead as a series of calls for reforms from within the tradition and culture, and when texts such as the New Testament or the Qur'an appear to admonish Jews, it is viewed differently – often as anti-Jewish. The admonitions of Jews within the Qur'an, may in large part (and in detail) be no different from the admonishments of the Israelites by their own prophets as narrated in the Hebrew Bible, but the context colours the reception and opens the door to characterizations of anti-Jewishness. Remember, though, that the Qur'an views

itself not as ushering in a new religion but as a call for reform, going back to its Judaeo-Christian roots.¹⁴³

Besides pulling from the Hebrew Bible to reference the covenant and measuring line (*ḥabl*), the staff of unity (*ḥabl*) and favour (*ni'mah*), Qur'an 3:103 also states that 'You were on the brink of a pit of fire and He delivered you from it.' Given the context established between this passage and the Books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah, the pit of fire seems to be God's judgement against the Israelites, from which God delivered them. The wrath of God and its association with the breaking of the covenant (*ḥabl*) is clearly seen in Qur'an 3:112: 'And they shall earn a burden of wrath from God.' This pit of fire in the Qur'an could be either an allusion to God's judgement against the Israelites while in Egypt and their later salvation through the Exodus, or to the nations fighting against them and the later reestablishment of their nation and the Second Temple once they had repented. 4 Bar. 6:19–25 also references the fiery furnace in the letter Baruch sent to Jeremiah, showing that God delivered the Israelites from the fiery furnaces of Egypt and Babylon, further intertextualizing this imagery with Qur'an 2:259 and subsequently Qur'an 3:93.

The divine covenant

The flipside of the fiery furnace is the concept of a divine covenant that also occurs within the context of Qur'an 2:259 – not just in Qur'an 3:93–103, which might further suggest a relationship between both Qur'anic passages. A few verses before Qur'an 2:259, it discusses some sort of divine covenant calling it *al-'urwah al-wuthqā*: 'There is no coercion in religion. Sound judgment has become clear from error. So whosoever disavows false deities and believes in God has grasped the most unfailing handhold [*al-'urwah al-wuthqā*], which never breaks. And God is Hearing, Knowing' (Qur'an 2:256). This unfailing handhold (*al-'urwah al-wuthqā*) of Qur'an 2:256 may be associated with the *ḥabl* (rope) of Qur'an 3:103 and 3:112.

There are some Muslim traditions, especially expounded by Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1176) suggesting the *ḥabl* (rope) and *al-'urwah al-wuthqā* (unfailing handhold) are synonymous,¹⁴⁴ which al-Suyūṭī had referenced in his *al-Durr al-manthūr*.¹⁴⁵ Muḥammad al-Sha'rāwī (d. 1419/1998) also specifically associates *al-'urwah al-wuthqā* (unfailing handhold) of Qur'an 2:256 with the *ḥabl* (rope) of Qur'an 3:103.¹⁴⁶ In more recent scholarship, Joseph Lumbard also confirms, 'Discussions of the covenant are also found in the exegetical treatment of Qur'anic terms such as *ḥabl Allāh* [the rope of God, Q. 3:103, cf. Q. 3:112] and *al-'urwah al-wuthqā* [the most unfailing (or the firmest) handhold, Q. 2:256; Q. 31:22], among others.'¹⁴⁷ Some Muslim commentators and modern scholars suggest that this covenant or pact in these Qur'anic passages specifically denote a pact between God and the Muslims.¹⁴⁸ However, it is apparent that it might be mirroring the concept of the covenant from the Hebrew Bible,¹⁴⁹ suggesting that the Qur'an is either trying to transpose this concept and repurpose it or suggesting that this pact

is perhaps not exclusive between God and the Israelites – and that anyone who chooses to be part of the pact is someone God would choose to forge alliances with.

The Abrahamic covenant or promise made in Genesis 15 includes the promise of both children and land,¹⁵⁰ so the topic of the divine covenant associates the contexts of both Qur'an 2:256–260 and Qur'an 3:93–103. The intertextualities with the covenant in the Hebrew Bible have been shown earlier in this chapter, and will be seen in the next as well. This intertextuality further supports the concept that the Qur'anic text is alluding to these biblical and extrabiblical materials. The man in the desolate town seems an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile of the Israelites, and their eventual return and rebuilding.

Conclusion

From the close reading of Qur'an 2:259 and its intertextualities with the Books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai and Jeremiah, along with identifying the narrative to the rich traditions circulating in line with Abimelech of 4 Baruch or Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer of both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud, we may draw certain conclusions from this passage and its allusions. First, we can say that the biblical text, along with the deuterocanonical texts in question, do not identify death with actual death, but with sleep. The intertextualities and intrabiblical allusions portray the death and resurrection as the Israelite return from exile, which further emphasizes its metaphorical sense.¹⁵¹

In the Talmud, Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer sees his own grandchild, sees that his donkey had generations of offspring, sees the seeds flowering, and sees his own teachings surviving. It has been suggested that the Talmudic redactor perhaps intended to reflect Ketubot 50 of the Babylonian Talmud, which interprets, 'May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel' (Ps. 128:6) in that regeneration through birth guarantees the survivability of Israel.¹⁵² After all, according to Gen. 30:1, a person without children is likened to a dead person, which is also elaborated in the Talmud.¹⁵³ Thus, the context of Ḥoni's narrative is that he did not see the dead as truly dead, since they had children and children's children.

In 4 Baruch, death is understood as a metaphor for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Israelites scattered and subdued by other nations due to God's wrath about their iniquity. The resurrection is understood as the Israelites returning to Jerusalem, rebuilding the Temple, and bringing it back to its former glory and beyond, because of a group of Israelites who were diligent in repentance and worked hard for reform.

Since Qur'an 2:259 and its direct context is fully engaging or rearticulating biblical, extrabiblical and rabbinic texts and traditions in regards to the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile and the rebuilding, then the resurrection reference in that passage is also to be understood metaphorically no differently from how it is understood from its subtexts. Additionally, with Qur'an 3:93–103 also making

reference to biblical and extrabiblical texts in regards to the Israelite exile, then its association with Qur'an 2:259 is likely – thus building an inner-Qur'anic allusion. Given all this context, the *ṭa'ām* in Qur'an 3:93 becomes more naturally a reference to the Aramaic/Hebrew *ṭe'em*, meaning decrees and commandments. Accordingly, Qur'an 2:259 perhaps uses it in dual meaning, as food and as a metaphor for the restoration of the Torah and, subsequently, the nation of Israel after the exile. Recall that the figs used as such in Abimelech's story in 4 Baruch and the general metaphorical use of figs in the biblical, extrabiblical, and rabbinic literature.

All this suggests that Qur'an 2:259 does not depict a literal resurrection of bodies leaving their graves, but possibly a physical resurrection of a nation that was destroyed and then rebuilt. The next chapter discusses the subsequent Qur'anic passage (i.e. Qur'an 2:260), which appears to allude to God's covenant with Abraham, promising children and land, and also proposing the identification of the man in Qur'an 2:259 as Abraham, who having no children was as if dead, but at one hundred years of age sired Isaac.