

## ‘The Stranger Who Visited Me’. The Concept of Hospitality in Islam

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This paper takes its title from the description which the renowned scholar Louis Massignon gave of his return to the Catholic faith, a reconversion which is still shrouded in mystery and which took place on the night between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1908, while he was on an archaeological expedition in the region around Baghdad. This experience also led him to begin considering Islam from within rather than from without; to place himself at the very centre of the Muslim religious tradition. Among the many characteristic elements of Muslim practice (as well as of Jewish and Christian) is that of welcoming the stranger. The question of hospitality within the three main monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) is addressed not only from the perspective of welcoming the stranger in one’s midst, but also from the recognition that the host was also once himself a stranger in a foreign land.

The attitude of the Muslim community towards the stranger in its midst has its roots in the common norms of Middle and Near Eastern rules of moral conduct (which includes the Biblical tradition), the experience of Muḥammad, and the teachings of the Qur’ān. Muslims believe that the Qur’ān was given to Muḥammad and that the latter was throughout his entire life the recipient of Divine goodness and favour. Such Divine bounty also had to be mirrored in the Prophet’s conduct among those who are most vulnerable and needy and who lie at the periphery of Arab society:

*Your Lord is sure to give you so much that you will be well satisfied. Did He not find you an orphan and shelter you? Did He not find you lost and guide you? Did He not find you in need and make you self-sufficient?*

*So do not be harsh with the orphan and do not chide the one who asks for help; talk about the blessings of your Lord.*  
(Q.93:6-11)<sup>1</sup>

In the above-quoted text one detects much biographical information. According to the earliest Muslim biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad, he was orphaned first by the death of his father before his birth, and by his mother’s death when he was six. He was then taken into the custody of his grandfather ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, who died two years later, and finally cared for by his uncle Abū Ṭālib. The Qur’ān instructs him to demonstrate the same goodness that he received from God in his time of need toward those who seek his help and protection. Here one finds many elements in common with the Biblical tradition of mercy and hospitality. The people are called upon to remember that they themselves once lived a life of misery and oppression, languishing in a foreign and hostile land.<sup>2</sup>

The Biblical characters in the Qur’ān also offer examples of strangers in a foreign land who become both recipients and bestowers of divine bounty. Among the most renowned are Abraham and Moses. Both end up as wayfarers at some point in their lives, and the way that their plight was addressed is a demonstration of God’s mercy.

### **The story of Abraham**

In the Qur’ān Abraham is portrayed as the precursor of monotheism. He is a *ḥanīf* (an upright believer) and a true Muslim,<sup>3</sup> which makes him also the father of a line of prophets/messengers that leads to Muḥammad.<sup>4</sup>

he is the father of all Muslims.<sup>5</sup> Initially he refuses to worship the stars and later breaks the idols worshipped by his father and brothers, who remain unbelievers.<sup>6</sup> He then separates himself from them and from his people. This attitude is set forth as a model of conduct for the Muslim community that was being tried and tested to the limits by the inhabitants of Makka, who remained stubbornly polytheistic and rejected Muḥammad's preaching and the warnings of the Qur'ān:

*You have a good example in Abraham and his companions, when they said to their people, 'We disown you and what you worship beside God! We renounce you! Until you believe in God alone, the enmity and hatred that has arisen between us will endure! – except when Abraham said to his father, 'I will pray for forgiveness though I cannot protect you from God – ''*  
(Q. 60:4)

Abraham finds himself in Makka and builds the Ka'ba and establishes it as a place of worship to the one God.<sup>7</sup> The cult of monotheism is established by a stranger in a foreign land. It is precisely in this place that he also establishes the religion chosen for him and for his progeny (the *millat Ibrāhīm*),<sup>8</sup> and whose inheritors are the Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

Abraham is also the one who himself welcomes strangers and accords them hospitality:

To Abraham Our messengers brought good news. They said, 'Peace.' He answered, 'Peace,' and without delay he brought in a roasted calf. When he saw that their hands did not reach towards the meal, he found this strange and became afraid of them. But they said, 'Do not be afraid. We have been sent against the people of Lot.' His wife was standing [nearby] and laughed. We gave her good news of Isaac and, after him, of Jacob. She said, 'Alas for me! How am I to bear a child when I am an old woman, and my husband here is an old man?

*That would be a strange thing!' They said, 'Are you astonished at what God ordains? The grace*

*of God and His blessings be upon you, people of this house! For He is worthy of all praise and glory.'*  
(Q. 11:69-73)<sup>10</sup>

It is clearly noticeable that the above text is strikingly similar to the narrative found in Genesis 18:1-15, even though it is presented in an altogether Qur'ānic dress. One of the early commentators of the Qur'ān, Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 1373) identifies the three strangers with Gabriel, Michael, and Israfi'l.<sup>11</sup> Taking them to be guests he treated them as such and prepared for them the best of his cattle, whereas Sarah "was serving the guests as was the custom among the Arabs."<sup>12</sup> Here one must surely notice that the character of the Biblical patriarch has become completely Arabized and Islamized.

Abraham's overall conduct is reflected also in his progeny (Isaac and Jacob) of whom the Qur'ān states:

*We made all of them leaders, guiding others by Our command, and We inspired them to do good works, to keep up the prayer, and to give alms: they were Our true worshippers.*  
(Q. 21:73)

The hospitality accorded by Abraham to the three strangers is set within the context of his being a monotheist and a Muslim who had to flee from danger and experience solitude and uncertainty away from home.

### **The story of Moses**

As with the accounts concerning Abraham, the story of Moses in the Qur'ān has its roots in the Biblical tradition but the character has been transformed into one that is set within the framework of a Muslim narrative. The story is woven into the fabric of Muslim belief and practice. Contrary to the account in Exodus Pharaoh did not order the slaughter of the Hebrews because of their growing numbers, which he sensed as a threat to his power, but because he "made himself high and mighty in the land and divided the people into different

groups” (Q. 28:4). Moses fled from the Egyptian authorities after he was warned by a man that he was being sought for the murder of an enemy of “one from his own people” (Q, 28:15). Here the goodness of God manifests itself to Moses, a stranger who is also a fugitive: *As he made his way towards Midian, he was saying, ‘May my Lord guide me to the right way.’ When he arrived at Midian’s waters, he found a group of men watering [their flocks], and beside them two women keeping their flocks back, so he said, ‘What is the matter with you two?’ They said, ‘We cannot water [our flocks] until the shepherds take their sheep away: our father is a very old man.’ He watered their flocks for them, withdrew into the shade, and prayed, ‘My Lord, I am in dire need of whatever good thing You may send me,’ and then one of the two women approached him, walking shyly, and said, ‘My father is asking for you: he wants to reward you for watering our flocks for us.’ When Moses came to him and told him his story, the old man said, do not be afraid, you are safe now from people who do wrong.’ One of the women said, ‘Father, hire him: a strong, trustworthy man is the best to hire.’ The father said, ‘I would like to marry you to one of these daughters of mine, on condition that you serve me for eight years: if you complete ten, it will be of your own free will.<sup>13</sup> I do not intend to make things difficult for you: God willing, you will find I am a fair man.’ Moses said, ‘Let that be the agreement between us – whichever of the two terms I fulfil, let there be no injustice to me – may God be witness to what we say.’*

(Q. 28:22-28)

At this point, hospitality towards the stranger goes beyond mere assistance to a needy person. Moses becomes an integral part of the old man’s family by making a pact with him to enter his employ and marrying one of his daughters. All this takes place in an atmosphere of trust in the all-encompassing goodness and bounty of God, who protects and delivers his prophets from evil and accords them prosperity. All the above references and texts are meant to revive in the heart of the reader an already

present faith in the boundless mercy of God.

This faith is characteristic of the Muslim who is constantly reminded that “God is the best guardian and the Most Merciful of the merciful” (Q. 12:64).

### Hospitality in daily life

It is precisely this faith in God Most Merciful that guides the Muslim in his or her dealings with others in everyday life. It is a quality that is deeply admired and widely praised by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. By way of a Christian example one might take the account of the mediæval Dominican missionary Ricoldo da Montecroce (d. 1320), who had obtained permission from the then Master of the Order Muñio da Zamora to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and preach to the Mongols and to the Muslims. Having arrived in the Holy City the pilgrimage soon transformed itself into a missionary venture as he proceeded eastward right into the heart of the Mongol Ilkhān Khanate, where he preached in Tabriz initially through an interpreter. However he was known to have learned Arabic while in that city and later to have pursued Qur’ānic studies in various schools in Baghdad. He recorded his travels in a work entitled *Liber peregrinationis* (commonly known as the *Itinerarium*). He then proceeded to Mosul, Tikrit, and finally arrived in Baghdad. Ricoldo offers the following description of the generous nature of the people of Baghdad and the hospitable way in which he was greeted into their homes:

*Whenever we wished to enter the homes of the nobility or of scholars, they received us with such delight, that it frequently seemed to us as if we were guests of the Order. Furthermore, those who willingly receive the brethren of the Order in their homes frequently question us with a certain courtesy and familiarity, because of something we might say about God or in praise of Christ.<sup>14</sup>*

As we witness this crucial moment in history when Islam is being held hostage to movements who are bent on transforming it into an ideology, the subject of hospitality in Islam as a witness of faith (as it is also in Judaism and in Christianity) is a demonstration that there is

another side to this religion, one that is implanted in the very heart of its believers and that reflects God's goodness and bounty towards those seek it and of which they are the recipients.

## NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all texts from the Qur'ān are quoted from *The Qur'an: A new translation* by M. A. S. Haleem, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004).

<sup>2</sup> See Lev 19:33-34; Dt. 10:18; 14:29; 24:17.19-21; 26:12-13; cf. Eph. 2:19.

<sup>3</sup> See Q. 3:67.

<sup>4</sup> See Q. 51:24-55.

<sup>5</sup> See Q. 22:78.

<sup>6</sup> Q. 21:51-70. See also the Old Testament apocryphal work *The Book of Jubilees* 12:1-6.

<sup>7</sup> See Q. 2:125-127; 3:96-97; 22:26.

<sup>8</sup> See Q. 2:132-133. This marks the establishment of the religion professed by Abraham as a social body.

<sup>9</sup> See Q. 3:68.

<sup>10</sup> See also Q. 15:51-56; 51:24-30.

<sup>11</sup> Isrāfīl is the name of an archangel, probably traced to the Biblical *serāfīm*. He is considered to be the angel who reads the divine decrees from the Well-Preserved tablet (the Heavenly Scripture from which all texts revealed to the prophets, including the Qur'ān, derive, see Q. 85:21-22) and transmits them to the archangel under whose purview they fall.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran*, London and New York: Continuum (2002), p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> This part of the narrative parallels that of the dialogue between Jacob and Laban his uncle and father-in-law in Gn. 29:18-20.

<sup>14</sup> The original text in Latin reads:

Quando autem volebamus intrare domos nobilium vel sapientium, cum tanta leticia nos recipiebant, quod videbatur nobis frequenter, quod invenimus hospites ordinis. Illi autem, qui libenter recipiunt fratres ordinis in domibus suis, frequenter eciam quadam urbanitate et familiaritate petebant, quod aliquid diceremus de deo vel ad commendacionem Christi.

Ricoldo of Montecroce, *Liber peregrinationis*, ed. C. M. Laurent, Lipsiae: Peregrinatores medii aevi quatuor, 1864, p. 134; quoted in Hugo Monneret de Villard, *Il Libro della Peregrinazione nelle parti d'Oriente di Frate Ricoldo da Montecroce*, p. 84.