BRILL

ARABICA 65 (2018) 31-63

Arabica

brill.com/arab

Between History and Exegesis: the Origins and Transformation of the Story of Muḥammad and Zaynab bt Ǧaḥš

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Abstract

This article examines the origins of the story of the Prophet Muḥammad's controversial marriage with Zaynab bt Ǧaḥš as well as its transformation and reinterpretation through the centuries. The fact that the story features in different genres of Islamic literature as well as in non-Muslim sources allows for a reconstruction of how and where the story emerged, how it spread and to what extent it was transformed over time. In the course of this reconstruction, the article critically assesses different approaches to the historicity of reports on the life of Muḥammad. With its analysis of later Muslim sources, it also illustrates different strategies of reinterpreting and recasting traditions and shows how societal change and different ideologies influenced the interpretation of the story.

Keywords

Zaynab bt Ǧaḥš, Zayd b. Ḥāriṯa, prophet Muḥammad, Qur'ān, exegesis, *sīra*, *tafsīr*, representations of Muḥammad, historical Muḥammad, sources for the life of Muḥammad, criterion of embarrassment

* This article is based on my paper presented at the symposium "Representations of Muḥammad," which was held in Edinburgh on 24th October 2015. I wish to thank my colleagues in Edinburgh as well as the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

 | DOI 10.1163/15700585-12341479

Résumé

Cet article examine les origines de l'histoire du mariage controversé du prophète Muḥammad avec Zaynab bt Ǧaḥš, ainsi que sa transformation et sa réinterprétation à travers les siècles. Le fait que cette histoire se retrouve dans différents genres de la littérature islamique, ainsi que dans des sources non-musulmanes, permet de reconstruire comment et où l'histoire a émergé, comment elle s'est répandue et dans quelle mesure elle s'est transformée au fil du temps. Au cours de cette reconstruction, l'article évalue de manière critique différentes approches de l'historicité des récits sur la vie de Muḥammad. Avec l'analyse des sources musulmanes postérieures, il illustre également différentes stratégies de réinterprétation et de refonte des traditions et montre comment le changement sociétal et les différentes idéologies ont influencé l'interprétation de cette histoire.

Mots clefs

Zaynab bt Ǧaḥš, Zayd b. Ḥāriṯa, le prophète Muḥammad, Coran, exégèse, *sīra*, *tafsīr*, représentations de Muḥammad, personnage historique de Muḥammad, sources pour la biographie de Muḥammad, embarras ecclésiastique

Introduction

Over the centuries both Muslims and non-Muslims have been interested in the Prophet Muḥammad's relationship with women. Among the relationships that have received a lot of attention from both sides, Muḥammad's marriage with Zaynab bt Ǧaḥš stands out as particularly controversial. On the one hand, this marriage seemed objectionable due to its almost incestuous character, Zaynab being the divorced wife of Muḥammad's own adopted son, Zayd. On the other hand, the fact that this—problematic—marriage appeared to be legitimised by a Qur'ānic revelation raised more than an eyebrow both among his contemporaries and later generations. But this marriage is not only interesting in terms of the implications it has had for the image of Muḥammad, it also offers the opportunity to study the origins of traditions about Muḥammad's life. This question has been controversial for a long time and, as will be shown, the story of Zaynab and Muḥammad is particularly suitable for an enquiry into its origins. Moreover, due to its prominence and controversial character, the story can also serve as an example of the transformation and reinterpretation of a tradition over the course of time.

This article takes a closer look at this marriage and how it has been reflected in the Muslim and non-Muslim literature. It focuses on two main aspects. First, it will examine the origins and background of the earliest reports about this marriage and will assess to what extent these reports are rooted in history. By doing this, it also aims to contribute to the debate over whether it is possible to establish facts about the historical Muḥammad and how this could be done. It will in particular examine two methods that have commonly been used to argue in favour or against the historicity of reports: the criterion of embarrassment and the influence of Jewish and Christian stories on the biography of Muḥammad. Secondly, the article aims to examine how Muslims and non-Muslims over the course of time have dealt with this controversial topic, which seems to put Muḥammad in a bad light. The analysis of the later tradition provides an insight into different approaches to the topic. It also allows us to assess modern treatments of the topic by highlighting their conscious selection of arguments that had been advanced and developed over the centuries.

The Islamic sources on the life of Muḥammad can best be described as collections or compilations made up of individual, usually rather short, reports. While the sources mostly date from the third/ninth century and later, they claim to contain older material. Traditions relating to the life of Muḥammad can be found in various types of sources, such as the *sīra* or *maġāzī* literature (dealing with the biography of Muḥammad), the *ḥadīṯ* literature (dealing with the normative behaviour and sayings of Muḥammad), or the *tafsīr* literature (concerned with the explanation of the Qur'ān, which is thought to occasionally refer to the life of Muḥammad). Although these fields seem to have been more or less independent disciplines from a very early time,[1] they often contain similar or related material, and several traditions on the life of Muḥammad can be found in all of these genres.

For the study of both the life of Muḥammad and the development of the biographical tradition about him, the crucial question is where and when these traditions originated and how they were shaped and transformed in the course of the transmission. Previous studies have established different sources of origin, of which four seem to account for the majority of the reports.

1 See *e.g.* Roberto Tottoli, "Interrelations and Boundaries between *Tafsīr* and Hadith Literature: The Exegesis of Mālik b. Anas's *Muwaṭṭa'* and Classical Qur'anic commentaries," in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, eds Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink, Oxford, Oxford University Press ("Qur'anic studies series"), 2014, p. 147-171; Andreas Görke, "The relationship between *maghāzī* and *ḥadīth* in early Islamic scholarship," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 74/2 (2011), p. 171-185.

The first of these sources consists of recollections and memories of actual events. While there have been some scholars who argued that Muḥammad is not a historical figure,[2] the evidence leaves little room for doubt that he existed and was active as a prophet in Arabia at the beginning of the 7th century CE.[3] And if Muḥammad indeed existed and played a prominent role, there must have been people who remembered and related events from his life. The most ardent upholder of this view was probably William Montgomery Watt, who argued for the reliability of a significant part of the sources in several of his works, the tendentious shaping of some of the material notwithstanding.[4] After the fundamental criticism of this position by John Wansbrough,[5] Patricia Crone, and Michael Cook,[6] amongst others, scholars have been much more careful in their assessment of the sources. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the sources contain some authentic and historical material,[7] and that some key elements of an event, for example, would have been preserved.[8] In some cases it might even be possible to unearth details from the very early layers of a tradition, apparently unaffected by later tendentious shaping.[9]

A second possible source can be seen in the Qur'ān and the exegetical speculation about Qur'ānic verses that were assumed to relate to the life of

2 Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The origins of the Arab religion and the Arab state*, Amherst, Prometheus books ("Islamic studies"), 2003, p. 11.

3 See *e.g.* Patricia Crone, "What do we actually know about Mohammed," www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp, accessed 25 January 2017; Fred McGraw Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton, Darwin Press ("Studies in late antiquity and early Islam", 14), 1998, p. 25-30, 286-289.

4 See *e.g.* William Montgomery Watt, "The reliability of Ibn-Isḥāq's sources," in *La vie du Prophète Mahomet: Colloque de Strasbourg* (*octobre 1980*), ed. Toufic Fahd, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France ("Bibliothèque des centres d'études supérieures spécialisés"), 1983, p. 31-43.

5 John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1978.

6 Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; Patricia Crone, *Meccan trade and the rise of Islam*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987.

7 See *e.g.* Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins*.

8 See *e.g.* Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds*, Berlin-New York, de Gruyter ("Studien zur Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients", 14), 1996, p. 167; Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muḥammads: Das Korpus ʿUrwa ibn az-Zubair*, Princeton, Darwin Press ("Studies in late antiquity and early Islam", 24), 2008, p. 279-280.

9 See *e.g.* Meir Jacob Kister, "'A Bag of Meat: A Study of an Early *Ḥadīth*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 33/2 (1970), p. 267-275.

Muḥammad. The Qur'ān appears to refer to events in the life of Muḥammad in a number of cases, and Muslim scholars have made use of these verses to gain information about the events in question. However, the Qur'ān as a rule is not very explicit about these or other events and rather alludes to them than narrate them. Often the allusions can be interpreted in different ways, and, in several cases, it is not entirely clear whether a verse actually refers to Muḥammad or not.[10] It is therefore possible that some stories that eventually were incorporated in the biography of Muḥammad are in fact not based on actual events from his life, but rather on exegetical speculation and a misinterpretation of verses. Patricia Crone made this very explicit in her book *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*:

> From what has been said, it should be plain that much of the apparently historical tradition is in fact of exegetical origin. Thus the story of Hāshim and his journeys owes its existence to *Sūrat Quraysh*, for all that it is in historical rather than exegetical works that it survives. Similarly, the numerous historical events said to have triggered a revelation (the raid at Nakhla, the battle of Badr, the oath of allegiance at Ḥudaybiyya, Muḥammad's encounters with *munāfiqūn*, and so forth) are likely to owe at least some of their features, occasionally their very existence to the Qur'ān.[11]

A third important source are debates in which legal scholars or theologians were engaging during the first two or three centuries, and in which they developed different legal or dogmatic positions. To bolster their arguments and lend them more authority, they would among other things point to the alleged precedents set by the Prophet and provide reports to this effect, reports which—occasionally or frequently—may just have been invented. This view was first advanced by Ignaz Goldziher[12] and further developed by, among others, Joseph Schacht.[13] Some scholars of Islam argued that the whole biography

10 See Andrew Rippin, "Muḥammad in the Qur'ān: Reading Scripture in the 21st Century," in *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources*, ed. Harald Motzki, Leiden-Boston-Köln, Brill ("Islamic history and civilization. Studies and texts", 32), 2000, p. 298-309.

11 Crone, *Meccan trade*, p. 214-215; see also Marco Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie: Eine quellenkritische Analyse der Sīra-Überlieferung zu Muḥammads Konflikt mit den Juden*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz ("Diskurse der Arabistik", 3), 1998, p. 128-133, 463-464.

12 Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, Halle, Max Niemeyer, 1890, II, p. 1-273.

13 See *e.g.* Joseph Schacht, "A Revaluation of Islamic Traditions," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2 (1949), p. 143-154, in particular p. 150-151.

of Muḥammad is made up of exegetical and legal traditions, chronologically rearranged.[14] Even those who argued for the existence of genuine historical material in the early Islamic tradition admitted that some of the material originated in legal debates, while maintaining that not every legally relevant tradition has to be invented. Albrecht Noth, for example, distinguished three types of historical traditions with legal content: those that contained genuine historical facts of legal relevance, those in which historical facts or developments were transformed in a way that allows to draw legal conclusions, and those that were pure fiction, invented to bolster a legal claim with historical evidence.[15]

Finally, a fourth possible origin would be stories of other provenance that were adapted and retold as relating to Muḥammad. These would, for example, be related by public preachers (*quṣṣāṣ*), several of whom were also reciters of the Qurʾān and were involved in the teaching and interpretation of the Qurʾān.[16] There are a number of studies that show how biblical stories about Abraham, Moses, or David were used as models for episodes in the life of Muḥammad, but stories of other origin could likewise have served as literary models.[17]

It is likely that material from each of these sources was incorporated into the biography of Muḥammad, and the evidence for each of these processes is compelling. However, it is difficult and highly controversial to establish to what extent each of these sources contributed to the formation of the biography of Muḥammad. The question, then, is whether it is possible to find out where a report about Muḥammad originated, and if it is based on historical recollection, exegetical speculation, legal and dogmatic debate or literary adaptation. If the biography of Muḥammad indeed includes material from all

14 Henri Lammens, "Qoran et tradition, comment fut composée la vie de Mahomed," *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 1 (1910), p. 27-51; Carl Heinrich Becker, "Prinzipielles zu Lammens' Sīrastudien," *Der Islam*, 4 (1913), p. 262-269; see also Crone, *Meccan Trade*, p. 215, where she states that some of the material that is not of exegetical origin "is legal and doctrinal ḥadīth in historical guise."

15 Albrecht Noth, "Zum Verhältnis von Recht und Geschichte im Islam," *Saeculum*, 26 (1975), p. 343.

16 Lyall R. Armstrong, *The Quṣṣāṣ of Early Islam*, Leiden-Boston, Brill ("Islamic history and civilization", 139), 2017, p. 76-77.

17 P. Jensen, "Das Leben Muhammeds und die David-Sage," *Der Islam*, 12/1-2 (1922), p. 84-97; David Emmanuel Singh, "Muḥammad 'The Prophet like Moses'," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 43/4 (2008), p. 558; Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as viewed by the early Muslims*, Princeton, Darwin Press, 1995; Hartmut Bobzin, "The 'Seal of the Prophets': towards an Understanding of Muhammad's Prophethood," in *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2010, p. 565-583.

of these sources, the only means of answering this question is a detailed study of each report about the life of Muḥammad individually.

Muḥammad's marriage with Zaynab seems to be particularly suitable for such an analysis, as the story not only features in a number of reports in different genres, but is also alluded to in the Qurʾān, in sura 33, 37. The Qurʾānic verse furthermore presents the case as a legal precedent, which allows us to also investigate the field of legal literature. And, finally, a number of recent studies have drawn attention to the parallels between this story and stories of a Jewish or Christian background, in particular to the story of David and Bathsheba,[18] but also to the story of Abraham, Ishmael and the latter's wives,[19] the story of the marriages of Hosea,[20] and the story of Joseph and Mary.[21]

Let us first have a look at how the topic has been dealt with in previous scholarship and then proceed to an examination of the sources themselves. The topic has extensively been treated in the field of the biography of the Prophet. A typical presentation of the story can, for example, be found in W. Montgomery Watt's book *Muḥammad: Prophet and Statesmen*. He writes:

> Zaynab was Muḥammad's cousin, being the daughter of one of his father's sisters. At the time of the Hijrah she was probably a widow and emigrated to Medina, presumably along with her brothers who were also Muslim. There she was forced by Muḥammad, against her will, to marry his adopted son, Zayd ibn-Ḥārithah. In the course of the year 626 Muḥammad

18 Ze'ev Maghen, "Intertwined Triangles: Remarks on the Relationship between two Prophetic Scandals," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 33 (2007), p. 17-92; *id.*, "Davidic Motifs in the Biography of Muḥammad," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 35 (2008), p. 91-139; David Stephan Powers, *Muḥammad is not the Father of any of your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, p. 123-124, 144-145; *id.*, *Zayd*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press ("Divinations: rereading late ancient religion"), 2014, p. 42-43, 46-47; Gordon Nickel, "Muqātil on Zayd and Zaynab," in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, ed. Majid Daneshagar and Walid Saleh, Leiden-Boston, Brill ("Texts and studies on the Qurʾan", 11), 2017, p. 43-61.

19 Powers, *Muḥammad*, p. 138-143; *id.*, *Zayd*, p. 43-44, 47-48.

20 Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*, London, Royal Asiatic Society ("Asiatic monographs", 3), 1902, p. 121-122.

21 Powers, *Muḥammad*, p. 124-127, 132-133. Powers suggests that the figure of Zayd, including his marriage with Zaynab, the subsequent divorce and Muḥammad's marriage with Zaynab, is entirely built on different biblical models. For a critical review of this work, see Walid Saleh, "Review Article: Muḥammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet, by David S. Powers," *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 6/1-2 (2010), p. 251-264.

> called at Zayd's house to talk to him. Zayd was out, but he saw Zaynab scantily clad, and is supposed to have been smitten by love for her. He went away saying to himself 'Praise be to God, praise to the Manager of Hearts!' Zaynab told Zayd about Muḥammad's visit, his refusal to enter and his cryptic utterance. At once Zayd went to Muḥammad and offered to divorce Zaynab, but Muḥammad told him to keep her. After this, however, life with Zaynab became unbearable for Zayd, and he divorced her. When her 'waiting period' was complete, a marriage with Muḥammad was arranged. This was justified by a verse of the Qur'ān [...].[22]

Watt is not alone in presenting the outline of the story along these lines. Almost all Western biographies of Muḥammad retell the story in the same manner,[23] and this is also how it is presented in all three editions of the *Encylopaedia of Islam*: Muḥammad sees Zaynab in the house of his adopted son, falls in love, and Zayd divorces her so that Muḥammad can marry her.[24] In most biographies of Muḥammad, these events are depicted as historical facts. Sometimes this is explicitly based on the argument that a tradition such as this would never have been preserved if it did not have some basis in historical fact.[25] This line of argument, termed the "criterion of embarrassment" and adopted from the historical Jesus research, has in fact often been applied to argue for this historicity of some events in the life of Muḥammad.

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22 W. Montgomery Watt, *Muḥammad: Prophet and Statesman*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 156-157; see *id.*, *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956, p. 329-330.

23 See, for example, Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: Sein Leben und Glaube*, Göttingen, Vanderhoek & Ruprecht, 1932, p. 124-125; Rudi Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1985, p. 158-159; Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet*, Paris, Éditions Albin Michel, 1957, p. 245; Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed*, transl. Anne Carter, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 205; Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1991, p. 212-213; Martin Forward, *Muhammad: A Short Biography*, Oxford, Oneworld, 1997, p. 84-85; Karen Armstong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, London, Phoenix Press, 2001, p. 196; *ead.*, *Muhammad: A Prophet for our Time*, New York, Harper Collins, 2006, p. 167; Hans Jansen, *Mohammed: Eine Biographie*, transl. Marlene Müller-Haas, München, C.H. Beck, 2008, p. 108; Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende*, München, Oldenbourg 2008, p. 793, n. 156; *id.*, *Allahs Liebling: Ursprung und Erscheinungsformen des Mohammedglaubens*, München, Oldenbourg, 2008, p. 44.

24 Virginia Vacca, "Zainab bint Djaḥsh," *EI*; Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "Zaynab bt. Djaḥsh," *EI*^{2}; David Stephan Powers, "Adoption," *EI*^{3}.

25 See *e.g.* Andrae, *Mohammed*, p. 125; Forward, *Muhammad*, p. 85.

On the other hand, a number of recent publications, focusing mostly on the exegetical tradition, have highlighted the parallels between this story and the biblical story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11). Peter Jensen was the first to draw the attention to a number of significant parallels between the biographies of David and Muḥammad and concluded that the biography of the latter was modelled on that of the former.[26] He did, however, not include the story of David and Bathsheba. This comparison was then done in detail by Ze'ev Maghen, who identified a large number of parallels.[27] The most relevant for our purpose are neatly summarised by Maghen:

> The temporal and spiritual leader of his community inadvertently catches sight of his loyal servant's wife in a state of undress, while the servant himself is absent from home. He is enraptured by her, and in the *denouement*, the woman becomes the leader's wife and her first husband is martyred on the battlefield.[28]

Maghen himself admits that there are also significant differences between the two stories,[29] and other scholars likewise pointed to these.[30] Parallels between the story of Zayd, Zaynab, and Muḥammad and other biblical stories have also been noted,[31] and they have led Powers do argue that the entire story is a literary fiction, a *fabula*, invented to support the doctrine of Muḥammad being the last prophet.[32]

We see two conflicting arguments in place here. Based on the criterion of embarrassment one has to assume that the story about the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab is historical, as it presents Muḥammad in such a negative light that it cannot have been invented by Muslims. On the other hand, the parallels between the stories of Muḥammad and Zaynab on the one side, and David and Bathsheba on the other could best be explained by a literary adaptation. Is it a matter of personal taste which of these arguments is more

26 Jensen, "Das Leben Muhammeds."

27 Maghen, "Intertwined triangels"; *id.* "Davidic motifs."

28 *Id.*, "Intertwined triangels," p. 20; *id.* "Davidic motifs," p. 129. See also Powers, *Muḥammad*, p. 144-145.

29 Maghen, "Intertwined triangels," p. 20; *id.* "Davidic motifs," p. 129.

30 Bobzin, "The 'Seal of the Prophets'," p. 576. Fred Donner, "Review of David S. Powers, *Zayd*," *Critical Research in Religion*, 3/1 (2015), p. 121-122.

31 Powers, *Muḥammad*, p. 124-127, 132-133, 138-143; *id.*, *Zayd*, p. 43-44, 47-48.

32 *Id.*, *Muḥammad*, p. 38, 120, 148, 231.

convincing? Or is it possible to decide the matter? To answer this question, we have to examine the sources on the topic in more detail.

The Sources for the Story of Muḥammad and Zaynab

Most of the studies cited above—those dealing with the Zaynab story in the context of the biography of Muḥammad as well as those discussing it in the context of the exegetical tradition and biblical parallels—take a holistic view of the sources.[33] They take information from different sources, namely the Qur'ān and traditions from exegetical or historical works, and either harmonise the traditions or combine individual elements from them. By doing this, they disregard the fact that the treatment of the same material in different genres (and indeed in different works of the same genre) may differ and may provide insight into the origins and the development of the tradition. It therefore seems useful to discuss the different sources individually.

As indicated before, a passage of the Qur'ān is traditionally assumed to refer to this marriage, namely Kor 33, 37. There has been some debate in scholarship whether the passage including this verse, namely Kor 33, 36-40, might be a later addition to the text.[34] However, there is hardly any evidence to substantiate this claim, and the assumption that the passage was inserted at a later time

33 The only study I am aware of that discusses the earliest sources individually, albeit with a different focus than this article, is Ayşe Başol, "Koran 33/37 – eine quellenkritische Untersuchung," in *Aufsätze zu Sure 33 al-Aḥzāb*, eds Ayşe Başol and Ömer Özsoy, Berlin, EB Verlag ("Frankfurter Schriften zum Islam. Islam im Diskurs"), 2018 (forthcoming).

34 Powers argues that the whole passage Kor 33, 36-40 was inserted at a later stage to support the case that Muḥammad was the last prophet: Powers, *Muḥammad*, p. 35-71. For him, Kor 33, 37 should be seen as "a sacred legend modeled on earlier biblical narratives" (*ibid.*, p. 120), the original function of which was "to support the theological doctrine of the finality of prophecy" (*ibid.*, p. 148), and "its true purpose was to create a narrative space in which Muḥammad could say to Zayd, 'I am not your father'" (*ibid.*, p. 231). The whole passage would have been "added to the Qur'ān during the generation following the Prophet's death in 11/632" (*ibid.*, p. 71). Powers is not the first to suggest that Kor 33, 37, or indeed the whole passage, might be a later insertion. See *e.g.* Hartwig Hirschfeld, *Beiträge zur Erklärung des Ḳorân*, Leipzig, Otto Schulze ("Morgenländische Forschungen", 9), 1886, p. 71. Claude Gilliot regards the passage and the traditions relating to it as an example for a strategy of secrecy (*stratégie du secret ou de l'ambiguïté*), aimed at obfuscating the problematic nature of the sura and its individual elements: Claude Gilliot, "Miscellanea coranica I," *Arabica*, 59 (2012), p. 122.

poses more problems than it solves.[35] Unless there emerges any evidence for the claim that these verses were inserted at a later stage, it thus seems reasonable to regard them as an original part of the Qur'ānic text.

The verse referring to the marriage of Muḥammad and Zaynab, Kor 33, 37, reads:

> And when you said to him whom God had blessed and you had favoured, 'Keep your wife to yourself, and fear God,' and you were concealing within yourself what God should reveal, fearing other men; and God has better right for you to fear Him. So when Zayd had accomplished what he would of her, then We gave her in marriage to you so that there should not be any fault in the believers touching the wives of their adopted sons, when they have accomplished what they would of them; and God's commandment must be performed.[36]

There are a number of observations to be made on this verse. Firstly, the addressee indeed seems to be Muḥammad. The incident referred to is too specific to be understood as addressing the reader or listener in general, and at the end of the Qur'ānic passage of which this verse forms a part, Kor 33, 36-40, Muḥammad is explicitly referred to by his name ("Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men […]"). The verse can therefore justifiably be viewed in relation to his life. Secondly, we can notice that while Zayd is mentioned by name in the verse, his wife is not (although it is generally agreed in the Muslim tradition that the woman referred to is Zaynab). We do not learn why Muḥammad

35 The insertion, according to Powers, would have to be accompanied by changes to other verses as well, namely Kor 4, 12; Kor 4, 126; and Kor 33, 6 (Powers, *Muḥammad*, p. 228-231). While later insertions in the text of the Qur'ān cannot be excluded *per se* (although no evidence for this has so far been found), Powers' scenario, which cannot be discussed here in detail, poses several problems. The idea that the whole story of Zayd, Zaynab and Muḥammad was only invented to support the abolition of adoption and the repudiation of Zayd, which were necessary prerequisites for the doctrine that Muḥammad was the last prophet, seems far-fetched. Both the abolition of adoption and the repudiation of Zayd could have easily been done without any recourse to marital relationships between Zayd, Zaynab, and Muḥammad. In fact, the repudiation of Zayd together with the abolition of adoption in general can much easier be explained in the context of the birth of Muḥammad's grandchildren al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn around that time. On this see Mohammad-Ali Amir Moezzi's review of Powers' *Zayd* in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 43 (2016), p. 371-379.

36 Translations from the Qur'ān follow Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London, Oxford University Press, 1964, with some modifications.

advised Zayd to keep his wife or what he concealed within himself. We also do not learn why Zayd eventually did divorce Zaynab. But we are provided with a reason for the marriage between Muḥammad and Zaynab: to allow men to marry divorced women of their adopted sons.

We had already observed that it is not uncommon for the Qur'ān to refer to events rather than narrate them; this is indeed characteristic of the text. It is rather the reference to Zayd which is exceptional, making him one of only two of Muḥammad's contemporaries to be mentioned by name in the Qur'ān (if one considers Abū Lahab in Kor 111, 1 to be the name of an actual person).

We see, however, that the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab, which according to the prevalent view was the reason for Zayd's divorce from Zaynab, is not mentioned in the Qur'ān. But it does feature in several accounts of the marriage that can be found in historical works, biographical dictionaries and Qur'ānic commentaries.

The famous historian, jurist and Qur'ān commentator, Muḥammad b. Ǧarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), for example, records the following tradition in his world history:

> According to Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Aʿlā – Ibn Wahb—Ibn Zayd, who said: The messenger of God had married Zayd b. Ḥārithah to Zaynab bt. Jaḥsh, his paternal aunt's daughter. One day the Messenger of God went out looking for Zayd. Now there was a covering of haircloth over the doorway, but the wind had lifted the covering so that the doorway was uncovered. Zaynab was in her chamber, undressed, and admiration for her entered the heart of the Prophet. After that happened, she was made unattractive to the other man. So he came and said, 'Messenger of God, I want to separate myself from my companion.' Muḥammad asked: 'What is wrong? Has anything on her part disquieted you?' 'No, by God,' replied Zayd, 'nothing she has done has disquieted me, Messenger of God, nor have I seen anything but good.' The messenger of God said to him, 'Keep your wife to yourself, and fear God.' That is [the meaning] of the Word of God: 'And when you said unto him on whom God has conferred favor "keep your wife to yourself, and fear God." And you did hide in your mind that which God was to bring to light.' *You did hide in your mind* [the thought] that 'if he separates himself from her, I will marry her.'[37]

37 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīḫ al-Ṭabarī: Ta'rīḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo, Dār al-maʿārif, 1961, II, p. 563-564; I follow the translation *The Victory of Islam*, transl. Michael Fishbein, Albany, State University of New York Press ("The History of al-Ṭabarī", 8), 1997, p. 4.

Is it possible to establish when and where this tradition was brought into circulation? And what can this tell us about the historicity of the events narrated? To answer these questions, we need to closely examine the evidence that we have for the circulation of this tradition.

Let us first turn our attention to the biography of the Prophet, the *sīra* or *maġāzī* literature. If the early Muslims found this to be a memorable event in the life of their prophet, there should be evidence for it in the biographical literature on Muḥammad. But there is little mention of it. There is a tradition similar in its outline to the one quoted above in Yūnus b. Bukayr's (d. 199/815) recension of Ibn Isḥāq's (d. 150/767) biography of the prophet, in the chapter on the wives of the prophet.[38] Ibn Bukayr in his recension added material from other authorities to the traditions he relates from Ibn Isḥāq, and he could thus justifiably be regarded as an author of his own right.[39] The tradition in question is among those that Ibn Bukayr does not relate from Ibn Isḥāq, but rather on the authority of Abū Salama, the *mawlā* of al-Ša'bī from al-Ša'bī (d. between 103/721 and 110/728). The slightly younger Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/844) adduces another similar tradition on the authority of his teacher al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822), who was himself the author of a famous biography of the Prophet, from ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿĀmir al-Aslamī (d. 115/733) from Ibn Ḥabbān.[40] However, this information cannot be found in al-Wāqidī's biography of the Prophet itself, and Ibn Sa'd likewise does not adduce it in his description of the life of Muḥammad, but only in the biographical entry on Zaynab bt Ǧahš in the volume on women. It seems very likely that Ibn Sa'd took the tradition from al-Wāqidī's now lost biographical dictionary, which is said to have served as a model and basis for Ibn Sa'd's work. Al-Ṭabarī in his history and al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 405/1014) relate the same tradition with minor variants on the authority of Muḥammad b. ʿUmar (al-Wāqidī) with the same *isnād*.[41]

If we take a closer look, we can see that the tradition does not seem to have featured in the biography of the Prophet before the end of the 2nd/8th or the beginning of the 3rd/9th century. Thus, the most important author of a biography of a Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq, who died in 150/767, does not mention the marriage at all—it does not occur in any recension of his work –, although he relates the stories of some other marriages of Muḥammad, such as those with

38 Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Ibn Isḥāq al-musammāt bi-kitāb al-mubtadaʾ wa-l-mabʿaṯ wa-l-maġāzī*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh, Fez, Maʿhad al-dirāsāt wa-l-abḥaṯ li-l-taʿrīb, 1967, p. 244.

39 Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, p. 50-51.

40 Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, n.d., VIII, p. 101-102.

41 Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīḫ*, II, p. 562-563; al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *al-Mustadrak ʿalā l-ṣaḥīḥayn*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, IV, p. 25.

Ḥadīğa, Ṣafiyya bt Huyayy, and Maymūna. The story is also never traced back to any of the early authorities in the field, such as Abān b. ʿUṯmān, Šuraḥbīl b. Saʿīd, ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr, Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab, Wahb b. Munabbih, Āṣim b. ʿUmar, Ibn Šihāb al-Zuhrī, ʿAbd Allāh b. Abī Bakr, or Mūsā b. ʿUqba. It is only around the beginning of the 3rd/9th century that this tradition finds entry into the biography of Muḥammad. Apparently, it was first only discussed in biographical reports about the wives of the prophet. This is also where we can find it in the *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar* of Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 245/860), who tells the story with a similar outline,[42] and in al-Balāḏurī's (d. 279/892) *Ansāb al-Ašrāf*, who gives a short account of the incident.[43] It seems that only from al-Ṭabarī's time onward was the story included in the accounts of Muḥammad's life himself.

Let us next turn to the legal literature and the major *ḥadīṯ* collections. We have seen that the Qurʾānic verse seems to indicate that the marriage of Muḥammad to Zaynab is linked to the permission to marry divorced wives of adopted sons. But adoption was abolished altogether in the emerging Islamic community—supposedly around the time this verse had been revealed—and as a consequence this topic is not dealt with at all in the legal literature.[44] The marriage between Muḥammad and Zaynab does feature in the *ḥadīṯ* collections, but mainly because of two aspects: on the one hand, it is reported that the marriage was accompanied by a splendid and grand celebration.[45] On the other hand, this marriage is said to have been the occasion for the revelation of the verse ordering the wives of the Prophet to wear the veil (Kor 33, 53). Some versions of this *ḥadīṯ* also implicitly link it to the revelation of Kor 33, 37 without, however, citing it: they state that Zaynab, after Zayd divorced her and her waiting period had passed, did not want to marry Muḥammad before receiving a hint from God, but then Muḥammad received a revelation. The *ḥadīṯ*

42 Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar*, ed. Ilse Lichtenstädter, Hyderabad, Dāʾirat al-maʿārif al-ʿuṯmāniyya, 1942, p. 85-86.

43 Al-Balāḏurī, *Ansāb al-Ašrāf*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh, Cairo, Dār al-maʿārif, 1959, I, p. 434.

44 See Ella Landau-Tasseron, "Adoption, acknowledgement of paternity and false genealogical claims in Arabian and Islamic societies," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 66/2 (2003), p. 169. The fact that the questions of adoption in general and the status of divorced wives of adopted sons in particular are not dealt with in the legal literature and the *ḥadīṯ* also bears witness to the early date of the codification of the Qurʾān. As adoption apparently was abolished during the lifetime of Muḥammad, it would make no sense to later insert verses referring to this practice.

45 See *e.g.* Muslim b. al-Ḥağğāğ, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-šarḥ al-Nawawī*, Cairo, al-Maṭbaʿa l-miṣriyya bi-l-Azhar, 1929, IX, p. 229; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿğam al-kabīr*, ed. Ḥamdī ʿAbd al-Maǧīd al-Salafī, Cairo, Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, n.d., XXIV, p. 43.

then continues with describing the wedding celebration and the revelation of Kor 33, 53. This tradition is always traced back through Sulaymān b. al-Muġīra from Ṯābit from Anas (d. *ca* 91/709-93/711).[46] Another widespread tradition reports that Zayd complained about Zaynab, but Muḥammad told him to keep his wife, on which occasion Kor 33, 37 was revealed. This tradition is traced back through Ḥammād b. Zayd from Ṯābit from Anas.[47] There is one version of this *ḥadīṯ* that also includes the story of the encounter between Zaynab and Muḥammad. It can only be found in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's (d. 241/855) *Musnad*,[48] and this also seems to be the earliest occasion where the story of the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab is related in the *ḥadīṯ* corpus. In this version, Muḥammad comes to Zayd's house and sees Zaynab, before the *ḥadīṯ* continues—in line with the other variants—with Zayd complaining about her and the revelation of Kor 33, 37. As all the other versions relate the *ḥadīṯ* without the encounter, it seems likely that this addition was introduced by Muʾammal b. Ismāʿīl (d. 206/822), the transmitter between Ḥammād b. Zayd and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, in particular as Muʾammal states that he does not remember whether this part belonged to the *ḥadīṯ* or whether it was a statement of Ḥammād. There seems to be only one other tradition in the *ḥadīṯ* corpus that relates the encounter story; it can be found in al-Ṭabarānī's (d. 360/971) *al-Muʿǧam al-kabīr*.[49] It includes only the encounter itself and ends with Muḥammad leaving Zaynab, continuously murmuring "praised be the one who changes the hearts." On the other hand, there seem to be no *ḥadīṯ*s that elaborate on the legal issue (the abolition of the prohibition to marry divorced wives of adopted sons).

In summary, the story of the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab is completely absent from the legal literature, it is only mentioned very rarely in the *ḥadīṯ*, and not before the beginning of the 3rd/9th century, and it does not include any discussion of the legal issues involved. It likewise only emerges in the biography of the Prophet at the beginning of the 3rd/9th century, and none of the early authorities in the field transmit it. We can thus exclude the possibility that the tradition in question emerged in either the field of the biography of the Prophet or in the legal literature.

46 See *e.g.* Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, Liechtenstein, Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 2008, v, p. 2756 [III, p. 195f.]; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, IX, p. 227-229.

47 See *e.g.* al-Tirmiḏī, *Sunan al-Tirmiḏī wa-huwa l-ǧāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ʿUṯmān, Beirut, Dār al-fikr, 1974², v, p. 34.

48 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, v, p. 2644 [III, p. 149f.].

49 Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿǧam al-kabīr*, XXIV, p. 44.

What about the exegetical literature of the Qur'ān? The oldest extant work, the partial commentary of Muǧāhid b. Ǧabr (d. 104/722), does not deal with the verse in question, but Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) discusses the verse along the lines we have seen.[50] This is in fact the earliest evidence of the tradition we can find in any Muslim work. The verse in question is not covered in what has survived from Sufyān al-Ṯawrī's (d. 161/778) or ʿAbd Allāh b. Wahb's (d. 197/813) works,[51] and it is discussed only with short annotations and explanations in ʿAbd al-Razzāq's (d. 211/827) *Tafsīr*.[52] Other early *tafsīr*s discuss it in broadly similar terms to Muqātil and the biographical traditions found in the *Ṭabaqāt* and historical works. Thus, for example, al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822) tells the story accordingly,[53] and so does Yaḥyā b. Sallām (d. 200/815), who relates it on the authority of al-Kalbī (d. 146/763).[54] Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Hawwārī (d. 3rd/9th century) quotes the same tradition from al-Kalbī,[55] with very minor variants.[56] Apparently Hūd took the tradition from Ibn Sallām without acknowledging it.[57] In his *Tafsīr*, al-Ṭabarī gives two accounts of the story, the one on the authority of Ibn Wahb and Ibn Zayd that he also included in his *Taʾrīḫ* (quoted above),[58] and a short anonymous account on the basis of 'what

50 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, III, p. 46-48.

51 Sufyān al-Ṯawrī, *Tafsīr Sufyān al-Ṯawrī*, ed. Imtiyāz ʿAlī ʿAršī, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1983. Some verses of the sura are discussed on p. 241-242; ʿAbd Allāh b. Wahb, *al-Ǧāmiʿ fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. Miklos Muranyi, Beirut, Dār al-ġarb al-islāmī, 2003. Interestingly, this work does not include the tradition quoted above that al-Ṭabarī traces back to Ibn Zayd through Ibn Wahb.

52 ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr ʿAbd al-Razzāq*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad ʿAbduh, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1999, III, p. 41.

53 Al-Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī l-Qurʾān*, Beirut, ʿĀlam al-kutub, 1983[3], II, p. 343.

54 Yaḥyā b. Sallām, *Tafsīr Yaḥyā b. Sallām*, ed. Hind Šalabī, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2004, II, p. 721-722.

55 Hūd b. Muḥakkam, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-ʿazīz*, ed. Belḥāǧǧ Saʿīd Šarīfī, Beirut, Dār al-ġarb al-islāmī, 1990, III, p. 370-371.

56 While Ibn Sallām says that Muḥammad came to visit Zaynab (*atā Zaynaban* [*sic*] *zāʾiran*), Hūd relates that he visited Zayd (*atā Zaydan*). Both versions then continue with the statement that Muḥammad saw Zaynab standing up and liked her (*fa-abṣarahā qāʾimatan fa-aʿǧabathu*). It is likely that the difference is just due to a copying mistake. See Yaḥyā b. Sallām, *Tafsīr*, II, p. 721; Hūd b. Muḥakkam, *Tafsīr*, III, p. 370.

57 See Claude Gilliot, "Der koranische Kommentar des Ibāḍiten Hūd b. Muḥkim/Muḥakkam," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Supplement 11 (1998) [*XXVI. Deutscher Orientalistentag vom 25. Bis 29. 9. 1995 in Leipzig*], p. 244-245.

58 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, Cairo, Maktaba wa-maṭbaʿat Muṣṭafā l-Bābī l-Ḥalabī, 1968[3], XXII, p. 13.

is said' (*fī-mā ḏukira*).[59] Al-Qummī (d. after 307/919) tells the story in slightly different terms: in his version, Zaynab wishes the divorce from Zayd after her encounter with Muḥammad, but she is afraid that Muḥammad may not marry her after the divorce. The story of the encounter itself, however, is broadly similar to the ones above.[60]

It is often possible to reconstruct earlier versions of a tradition and to identify who is responsible for its dissemination on the basis of an *isnād-cum-matn* analysis. However, in this case almost all traditions in question are very poorly documented in the sources. Apart from a few traditions in the *ḥadīṯ* corpus that, however, do not include the story of the encounter between Zaynab and Muḥammad, there usually is only one line of transmission: later sources quote the earlier works in which the traditions can first be found, rather than recording different paths of transmission. This indicates that these traditions were not circulating widely, as otherwise we would expect more variants of the same tradition. There also is no overlap in the lines of transmission; each of the individual traditions is traced back via different transmitters to a different authority. This makes an *isnād-cum-matn* analysis impossible, but it also appears to be rather uncommon. None of the lines of transmission goes back to an eyewitness; in fact, all of the alleged original narrators died after the year 100/718. While an *isnād-cum-matn* analysis is thus futile, a close comparison of the different traditions may nevertheless yield some further insights.

The general outline of the story in the various traditions on the topic and the discussions of the early exegetes is quite similar, but there are some notable differences between these versions. Thus in some versions, Zayd is present when Muḥammad visits his house,[61] while in other versions he is out for various reasons and Muḥammad encounters Zaynab alone.[62] In some variants, Muḥammad enters the house,[63] in others, he catches a glimpse of her while waiting outside,[64] in yet others it is just said that he saw her, without any indication when or where this happened.[65] In some versions, Zaynab is fully clothed,[66] while in others she is more or less uncovered.[67] Many more

59 *Ibid.*, XXII, p. 12.

60 Al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, ed. Ṭayyib al-Mūsawī l-Ǧazā'irī, Najaf, Maktabat al-Naǧaf, 1967, II, p. 172-173.

61 See *e.g.* Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Ibn Isḥāq*, p. 244; Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar*, p. 85.

62 See *e.g.* Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, VIII, p. 101; al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, II, p. 172-173.

63 See *e.g.* Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Ibn Isḥāq*, p. 244; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'ǧam al-kabīr*, XXIV, p. 44.

64 See *e.g.* Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, VIII, p. 101.

65 See *e.g.* al-Balāḏurī, *Ansāb al-Ašrāf*, I, p. 434.

66 See *e.g.* Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Ibn Isḥāq*, p. 244.

67 See *e.g.* Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, VIII, p. 101; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'ǧam al-kabīr*, XXIV, p. 44.

differences could be adduced here, for example, whether Muḥammad and Zaynab engage in a conversation or not, how, if this is the case, Zayd learns about it, and how he then reacts. Similarly, there are different accounts about what Muḥammad hid in his mind—sometimes this is said to be the fact that he had fallen in love,[68] or that he wishes that Zayd might divorce her,[69] or that he would marry Zaynab should Zayd divorce her.[70]

The most important difference between the various versions, however, is the reason for the separation of Zayd and Zaynab. In some versions, the marriage is already disrupted before Muḥammad sees Zaynab[71]—the reasons provided in these cases include Zaynab's arrogance due to her higher social background or her sharp tongue. In other versions, it is the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab which causes the disruption and is the reason why Zayd wants to divorce Zaynab.[72] What all versions—with one exception[73]—have in common, though, is Muḥammad's response to Zayd's request for divorce with the words "Keep your wife to yourself, and fear God," which we can also find in the Qurʾān.

The exact correspondence of the words with the Qurʾānic verse is a clear sign that these traditions are not independent of the Qurʾān, but are at least influenced by the exegetical engagement with the verse in question, if not elicited by it. This can also account for the other differences: the versions agree on those points which are evident from the Qurʾānic verse, while they differ on those aspects where the verse is not explicit, such as why Zayd at some point wanted to divorce Zaynab or what Muḥammad hid in his mind.

The correspondence in wording together with the observations that these traditions only appear late—and seldom—outside the field of Qurʾānic exegesis and that at least some of the persons (such as Ibn Wahb or al-Kalbī), who figure in the lines of transmission are known for their interest in exegesis, allows us to conclude that this story in fact is not based on a recollection of actual events, but rather on exegetical speculation.

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68 See *e.g.* al-Māturīdī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm al-musammā Taʾwilāt ahl al-sunna*, ed. Fāṭima Yūsuf al-Ḫaymī, Beirut, Muʾassasat al-risāla, 2004, IV, p. 121. Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Ǧāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, Beirut, Muʾassasat al-risāla, 2006, XVII, p. 156, traces this position back to Ibn ʿAbbās, but this cannot be verified.

69 See *e.g.* Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, III, p. 48; al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XXII, p. 12.

70 See *e.g. ibid.*, XXII, p. 13.

71 See *e.g.* al-Balāḏurī, *Ansāb al-Ašrāf*, I, p. 434; al-Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī l-Qurʾān*, II, p. 343.

72 See *e.g.* Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Ibn Isḥāq*, p. 244; Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, VIII, p. 101; al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XXII, p. 13; al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, II, p. 173.

73 Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿǧam al-kabīr*, XXIV, p. 44, only records the encounter and not Zayd's reaction to it.

If that is the case, we may wonder where the additional information comes from. We can find an answer to this question in the early exegesis as well, namely in the discussion of the verse immediately following our verse. Kor 33, 38 reads: "There is no fault in the prophet, touching what God has ordained for him—God's wont with those who passed away before; and God's commandment is doom decreed."

We have seen that the earliest Muslim source to record the tradition of the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab is Muqātil b. Sulaymān's commentary on Kor 33, 37. In his commentary to the following verse, Muqātil then draws a parallel to David, with whom God had dealt similarly: just as God had brought David together with Uriah's wife (Muqātil does not mention the wife's name, Bathsheba), he also brought together Muḥammad with Zayd's wife. Al-Kalbī in his *Tafsīr* seems to have made the same connection, if we trust later commentators who relate this on the authority of al-Kalbī and Muqātil.[74] The explicit connection of the story of Muḥammad and Zaynab with that of David and Bathsheba thus stands at the very beginning of the Muslim preoccupation with the Qurʾānic verse in question. And the encounter between David and Bathsheba contains the element that we find in the traditions about Muḥammad's marriage with Zaynab, but not in the Qurʾān, namely the sight of the scarcely clad or naked wife of another man. According to the Bible (2 Sam 11), King David saw Bathsheba bathing when he walked on the roof of his palace one day, and he found her to be very beautiful. There are in fact quite a number of episodes in the life of Muḥammad that seem to have been inspired by biblical or non-biblical stories about David.[75] While a direct modelling of Muḥammad's biography on that of David cannot be proven in this instance, it seems very likely that the story of David's encounter with Bathsheba at least was influential in shaping the story of Muḥammad's encounter with Zaynab.[76]

74 Al-Ṭaʿlabī, *al-Kašf wa-l-bayān al-maʿrūf tafsīr al-Ṭaʿlabī*, ed. Abū Muḥammad b. ʿĀšūr, Beirut, Dār iḥyāʾ al-turāṯ al-ʿarabī, 2002, VIII, p. 49. Possibly, Ibn Ǧurayǧ (d. 150/767), a jurist and commentator of the Qurʾān, likewise made this connection, as the comparison between David and the wife he married and Muḥammad and Zaynab is also traced back to him. See al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿǧam al-kabīr*, XXIV, p. 43-44. However, this seems to be the only instance where this comparison is traced back to him, and it is therefore impossible to verify the *isnād*.

75 Jensen, "Das Leben Muhammeds"; Maghen, "Davidic motifs."

76 The influence from other cultural and religious traditions in this time appears to be a mutual phenomenon. Thus, the story of Caedmon as told by the English monk Bede the Venerable, who lived at roughly the same time as al-Kalbī and Muqātil, is clearly influenced by the story of Muḥammad's first revelation. See Klaus von See, "Caedmon und Muhammad," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 112/4 (1983), p. 225-233.

We thus not only can show that the tradition is dependent on the Qur'ānic text on the one hand and influenced by the biblical tradition on the other hand, but we can also understand how and when it became part of the Muslim tradition. Other early *tafsīr* works are less explicit than Muqātil and al-Kalbī, but also draw a connection between the marriages of Muḥammad and those of David or Solomon.[77]

It may be instructive at this point to have a look at the non-Muslim sources that discuss the matter. The earliest of these is the *Fount of Knowledge* of John of Damascus (d. *ca* 132/750), in the second part of which (*De haeresibus*) he discusses all sorts of "erroneous" beliefs, including Islam.[78] One passage discusses the story of Zayd, which according to John was the reason for Muḥammad to legislate with regard to women that "one can divorce whomsoever he pleases, if he so wishes, and have another one."[79] He then relates the story as follows:

> Muhammad had a comrade named Zaid. This man had a beautiful wife with whom Muhammad fell in love. While they were once sitting together Muhammad said to him: "Oh you, God commanded me to take your wife." And he replied, "You are an apostle; do as God has told you; take my wife." Or rather, in order to tell the story from the beginning, he said to him: "God commanded me (to tell you) that you should divorce your wife"; and he divorced her. Several days later he said, "But now God commanded me that I should take her." Then after he took her and committed adultery with her, he made such a law: "Whosoever wills may dismiss his wife. But if, after the divorce, he wants to return back to her let someone else marry her (first). For it is not permitted for him to take her (back) unless she is married by somebody else. And even if a brother divorces (his wife), let his brother marry her if he so wishes".[80]

This story differs in a number of details from the Muslim accounts: the name of Zayd's wife is not mentioned, and the outline of the story is quite different from the one we know. There is no mention of an encounter between Muḥammad and Zayd's wife, and Muḥammad does not encourage Zayd to keep his wife; on the contrary, it is Muḥammad who tells him to divorce her.

77 Yaḥyā b. Sallām, *Tafsīr*, II, p. 723; Hūd b. Muḥakkam, *Tafsīr*, III, p. 371; al-Farrā', *Maʿānī l-Qurʾān*, II, p. 344.

78 The section dealing with Islam has been translated into English: Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites,"* Leiden, Brill, 1972.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

The story also does not seem to be connected to Kor 33, 37, but the references are rather to Kor 2, 229-230 (and in the following passage to Kor 2, 223).[81] Thus the whole episode is put in the context of the practice of *muḥallil* (the remarriage of a woman after a divorce, which is only allowed if she has been married to a different man in between) and the general notion of regarding women as a tilth for their husbands. The differences to the Muslim accounts and the lack of a reference to Kor 33, 37 strongly suggest that this account is not derived from speculation about the meaning of that verse, nor indeed directly dependent on the Muslim traditions about the encounter that we have seen, but must have a different origin.[82]

Another early Christian version of the story is preserved in Eulogius' (d. 859 CE) *Liber Apologeticus Martyrum*. It appears to be an expansion of an earlier history of Muḥammad, of which there is also a very brief summary in a letter from John of Seville to Paulus Alvarus of Cordoba (*ca* 800-861 CE).[83] Eulogius seems to have expanded the original work considerably, possibly by incorporating information taken from John of Damascus.[84] His version of the story nevertheless shows some differences to the one related by John of Damascus. Thus, he says:

> As he [*i.e.* Muḥammad] sweated in the great error of his prophecy, he coveted the wife of a certain neighbour of his, Zeit by name, and subjected her to his lust. Upon learning of this, her husband was appalled but stood aside for his prophet, whom he did not have the power to contradict. And he [Muhammad] ordered it to be set down in his law, as if it came from the voice of the Lord: "Since that woman was displeasing in Zeit's eyes and he repudiated her, he united her to his prophet in marriage, so that it might be an example to others and so that in the future it might not be a sin for the faithful to do it if they so desire."[85]

81 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 91.

82 Cf. Tarek M. Muhammad, "The Byzantine Theologians on Muḥammad and Zaynab b. Jaḥsh: Marriage or Adultery?," *Byzantoslavica*, 67 (2009), p. 143.

83 Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Princeton, Darwin Press ("Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam", 13), 1997, p. 512-513; Janna Wasilewski, "The 'Life of Muhammad' in Eulogius of Córdoba: some evidence for the transmission of Greek polemic to the Latin west," *Early Medieval Europe*, 16/3 (2008), p. 334-336.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 341-353.

85 Eulogius, *Liber Apologeticus Martyrum*, in *Patrologia Latina*, éd. Jacques Paul Migne, Paris, 1852, CXV, p. 16, col. 860; cf. Stephan Hotz, *Mohammed und seine Lehre in der Darstellung abendländischer Autoren vom späten 11. bis zur Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am

This version connects the story to Kor 33, 37 (although in a somewhat distorted rendition), rather than Kor 2, 229-230, as did John of Damascus. Despite the clear reference to Kor 33, 37 the story is put in the context of adultery or coveting another's wife rather than adoption. The name of Zayd's wife again is not mentioned, nor is there any notion of an encounter between her and Muḥammad.

The story is also briefly discussed in the correspondence between the caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 99/717-101/720) and the Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 99/717-123/741).[86] Although the letters did not survive in the original, later Arabic and Armenian sources record some of the arguments of both sides, many of which apparently date from the 8th century.[87] With regard to the story of Zaynab and Muḥammad, the recorded passages seem in fact to condense and conflate arguments from different letters. In Leo's letter Muḥammad is depicted as having seduced the woman Zeda. This very likely is a confusion of names; possibly what is meant is either the wife of Zayd, or Zayd is misunderstood to be the name of the woman in question. ʿUmar's letter responds to the accusation that Muḥammad married a woman whom her husband has repudiated by reference to David and the wife of Uriah. Leo's letter contains a response to this by making clear that David's actions were a sin before God.[88] This account directly follows a discussion of Kor 2, 223 and thus seems to be put in the context of the alleged lecherousness and lewdness of Islam in general. The correspondence shows that the story at this time was already linked to the story of David and Bathsheba, although no details of the similarities are given, and the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab is not mentioned.

A somewhat different version of the story is presented in the "letter to the emir of Damascus" from the late 3rd/9th or early 4th/10th century, allegedly written by Arethas, the bishop of Caesarea. In this version, Muḥammad, to satisfy his lust, tells his friend named Rusulullé (obviously a misreading of *rasūl Allāh*) that God had revealed to him that Rusulullé's wife had committed

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Main-New York-Oxford, Peter Lang ("Studien zur klassischen Philologie", 137), 2002, p. 19. The translation is taken from Wasilewski, "The 'Life of Muhammad' in Eulogius of Córdoba," p. 343-344.

86 Arthur Jeffery, "Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence between ʿUmar II and Leo III," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 37/4 (1944), p. 324; Jean Marie Gaudeul, "The Correspondence between Leo and ʿUmar: 'Umar's Letter Rediscovered?," *Islamochristiana*, 10 (1984), p. 109-157; Dominique Sourdel, "Un pamphlet musulman anonyme d'époque abbasside contre les chrétiens," *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 34 (1966), p. 1-33.

87 Robert Hoyland, "The correspondence of Leo III (717-41) and ʿUmar II (717-20)," *Aram Periodical*, 6/1 (1994), p. 165-177; *id.*, *Seeing Islam as others saw it*, p. 490-501.

88 Hoyland, "The correspondence," p. 170-171.

adultery. Rusulullé replies that he would kill her. Muḥammad advises him not to kill her but rather to divorce her and have someone else take her, by which act she would purify herself from her adultery. After that he could take her back, cleansed from adultery. He divorces her, and Muḥammad takes her in his presence. After defiling her and satisfying his desires, he then tells Rusulullé to take her back, which he does. Subsequently, Muḥammad makes this practice law.[89] As in the previous Christian versions, the woman in question is not named and, similar to the version of John of Damascus, the story seems to be linked to the practice of *muḥallil* and Kor 2, 229-230, although this link is not made explicit.

How can these different accounts preserved in the Qurʾān, and the early Muslim and non-Muslim sources best be reconciled? The most likely explanation seems to be that there is indeed an historical kernel of this story. If the story was based only on exegetical speculations about Kor 33, 37, it is difficult to explain why most of the early Christian sources do not make this connection and differ in a way from the Muslim sources that makes it unlikely that they are dependent on the traditions preserved in these sources. They also link the story to other verses of the Qurʾān, namely Kor 2, 223 and 229-230, which never seems to be the case in the Muslim traditions on Zaynab. Some version of the story therefore must have been circulating independently of the versions based on the Qurʾānic exegesis of Kor 33, 37. On the other hand, Kor 33, 37 likewise seems to refer to a historical event, as it is difficult to imagine a different *Sitz im Leben* for that verse.

If we take together the statements from the Qurʾān and the information on Zayd and his wife about which there is a consensus between the different Muslim and non-Muslim sources, the following points appear to have some historical basis: Zayd indeed seems to have been the adopted son of Muḥammad. The name of Zayd's wife is less certain, as neither the Qurʾān nor the earliest non-Muslim sources say anything about it. However, there seems to be a consensus in all Muslim sources that her name was Zaynab, and there is little reason to doubt this information. At some point, Zayd wanted to divorce his wife, but Muḥammad was against this separation as he was afraid of the public reaction to this. Nevertheless, Zayd divorced her and Muḥammad subsequently married her. This was justified by reference to a change in the status of adopted sons, or rather their divorced wives. The motivation behind these actions, however, remains in the dark for us—just as it had been for the early commentators.

89 Armand Abel, "La lettre polémique 'd'Aréthas' a l'émir de Damas," *Byzantion*, 24 (1954), p. 364; cf. Muhammad, "Byzantine Theologians," p. 146.

Interpretation and Re-interpretation: The Story of Muḥammad and Zaynab in the Later Muslim and non-Muslim Traditions

Although the story of the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab apparently emerged from exegetical engagement with the Qur'ān as shown above, it soon spread to other fields such as the biographical and historical literature, but it never really became part of the biography of the Prophet. While the Christian literature in the following centuries made use of the story along the lines seen above, focusing on the alleged lewdness of Muḥammad and his brazen audacity to justify his deeds by divine revelations, Muslims came up with rather different interpretations and strategies to deal with this apparently problematic story.[90] In the biography of the Prophet the entire episode of Zayd, Zaynab and Muḥammad does not constitute an essential part and could thus easily be omitted, which would in fact follow the model of the most important early works, such as Ibn Isḥāq and al-Wāqidī. Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (d. 734/1334), for example, does not mention the incident at all, neither in the biography of Muḥammad himself, nor in the section on the wives of the Prophet. All he says on the matter is that Zaynab had been married to Zayd, and when he divorced her and her waiting period was over, God married her to Muḥammad.[91]

In the field of *tafsīr* this was slightly more difficult, as the story of the encounter between Zaynab and Muḥammad had been discussed in the context of Kor 33, 37 from the time of Muqātil b. Sulaymān and possibly al-Kalbī, and was included in several of the early exegetical works, such as those of al-Farrā', Ibn Sallām, al-Ṭabarī, and Hūd b. Muḥakkam. Nevertheless, as in the field of the biography of the prophet, one strategy would be not to mention the story of the encounter and discuss the verse without going into much detail as to its context and background. And indeed, from about the 4th/10th century we find commentaries that do not relate this story. Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938), for example, in his *Tafsīr* quotes a number of traditions with regard to the verse, which deal with the identity of the person on whom God and his prophet have bestowed their favour, Zayd's wish to divorce his wife and Muḥammad's response, as well as the question of what Muḥammad had hidden in his heart, but he does not mention an encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab,

90 Ze'ev Maghen and Gordon Nickel have also studied the later Muslim tradition on the Zaynab affair, but with a different focus and scope. See Ze'ev Maghen, *Virtues of the Flesh: Passion and Purity in early Islamic Jurisprudence*, Leiden-Boston, Brill ("Studies in Islamic law and society", 23), 2005, p. 75-110; Nickel, "Muqātil on Zayd and Zaynab," p. 50-53.

91 Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *'Uyūn al-aṯar fī funūn al-maġāzī wa-l-šamā'il wa-l-siyar*, ed. Muḥammad al-'Īd al-Ḫaṭrāwī and Muḥyī l-Dīn Mastū, Medina, Maktabat dār al-turāṯ, n.d., II, p. 398.

nor does he indicate that Muḥammad had fallen in love.[92] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ṯaʿālibī (d. 875/1471) likewise discusses a number of aspects of the verse, but omits any reference to the story of the encounter or to Muḥammad's feelings.[93] Nevertheless, many scholars apparently felt that they needed to discuss the story, as it obviously was circulating and known.

A different approach, which can already be observed in the earliest exegetical preoccupation with the verse, focuses on God's will behind the events. Muqātil b. Sulaymān in one of the two versions of the story he relates clearly indicates that the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab as well as Muḥammad's resulting feelings for her were God's will and decision.[94] Other scholars offer different variants of this motif, for example by insinuating that it was God who sent the wind lifting up the curtain to reveal the scantily clad Zaynab to Muḥammad.[95]

Another strategy was to come up with other traditions that would make sense of the Qurʾānic verse while at the same being less embarrassing. One such tradition is traced back to ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (d. 95/712), the fourth Imam of the Shiites. Initially, however, we can only find it in Sunni sources transmitted through Sunni transmitters, and the first source to record it seems to be al-Ṭabarī.[96] In this tradition, Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn states that God had revealed to Muḥammad that Zayd was going to divorce Zaynab and that Muḥammad would then marry her. But when Zayd told him that he wanted to divorce Zaynab, Muḥammad ordered him to keep her, while he knew in his heart that this was in vain. This tradition over the course of time becomes the most important, in the Sunni tradition first, but eventually also spreading to Shiite commentaries. In Sunni commentaries, when the tradition is equipped with an *isnād* at all, it is always traced back through Sufyān b. ʿUyayna from ʿAlī b. Zayd b. Ǧadʿān from ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn.[97] This tradition cannot be found in the *ḥadīṯ* corpus except for later works but it is frequently cited in *tafsīr* works. It thus seems likely that the tradition emerged in the exegetical domain

92 Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. Asʿad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, Mecca, Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā l-Bāz, 1997, IX, p. 3134-3137.

93 Al-Ṯaʿālibī, *Tafsīr al-Ṯaʿālibī l-musammā bi-l-Ǧawāhir al-ḥisān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ, Beirut, Dār iḥyāʾ al-turāṯ al-ʿarabī, 1997, IV, p. 348-350.

94 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, III, p. 48.

95 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Ǧāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, XVII, p. 156.

96 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XXII, p. 13.

97 See *e.g.* al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmiʿ al-bayān*, XXII, p. 13; al-Ḥusayn b. Masʿud al-Baġawī, *Tafsīr al-Baġawī: Maʿālim al-tanzīl*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh al-Nimr *et al.*, Riyadh, Dār ṭayyiba, 1991, VI, p. 355; Ibn Kaṯīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. Sāmī b. Muḥammad al-Salāma, Riyadh, Dār ṭayyiba, 1999[2], VI, p. 425.

in response to traditions such as Muqātil's and al-Kalbī's, and that probably Sufyān b. ʿUyayna (d. 198/814), himself author of a *tafsīr*, is responsible for its spread. On the Shiite side, neither al-Qummī (d. after 307/919) nor al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) record the tradition.[98] The first Shiite *tafsīr* in which the tradition occurs seems to be the one by al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1154),[99] who relates the tradition on the authority of ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn, but without giving an *isnād*.

A different approach to deal with the story seems first to have been taken by al-Qušayrī (d. 465/1072) in his *Tafsīr*[100] and was then made popular by Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ (d. 544/1149) in his *Kitāb al-Šifāʾ*,[101] and by his contemporary Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148).[102] All three argue with reference to the impeccability of the Prophet. The origin of the concept of impeccability or infallibility (*ʿiṣma*) in Islam is not entirely clear, it possibly emerged with regard to the caliphs in late Umayyad times.[103] The concept then seems to have been developed in particular in Shiite circles with regard to their Imams. The Imams—in contrast to prophets—did not receive revelations which could correct what they were doing, but as they were nevertheless regarded as role models, they were thought to be protected by God from committing any wrong.[104] By the time of al-Qušayrī this concept had spread and encompassed the prophets, including Muḥammad. With the Prophet being sinless, Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ argues, all the stories that imply that Muḥammad had been committing any wrong in what he did, are incorrect.

Al-Qušayrī and then Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ also seem to be the first to discuss the close relationship between the two protagonists. They argue that Muḥammad knew his cousin Zaynab from a very young age and that it would be strange that he should suddenly have fallen in love with her, as her sight must have been very familiar for him, in particular since women at this time were not yet wearing

98 The respective verses are treated in al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, II, p. 172-175 and al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥabīb Quṣayr al-ʿĀmilī, Beirut, Dār iḥyāʾ al-turāṯ al-ʿarabī, n.d., VIII, p. 344-345.

99 Al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Maǧmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. Hāšim al-Rasūlī l-Maḥallātī and Faḍl Allāh al-Yazdī l-Ṭabāṭabāʾī, Beirut, Dār al-maʿrifa, 1986, VIII, p. 564.

100 ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qušayrī, *Tafsīr al-Qušayrī al-musammā Laṭāʾif al-išārāt*, ed. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2007, III, p. 40.

101 Al-Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ, *al-Šifāʾ bi-taʿrīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Baǧāwī, Beirut, Dār al-kitāb al-ʿarabī, 1984, II, p. 876-879.

102 Abū Bakr b. ʿArabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭāʾ, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, III, p. 576.

103 Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2001-2007, IV, p. 599-600.

104 Wilferd Madelung, "ʿIṣma", *EI*[2]; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, I, p. 377.

a veil.[105] Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ goes on to say that God, by making Zayd divorce Zaynab and Muḥammad marrying her, only wanted to abolish adoption.[106] Al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), takes this argument slightly further when he argues that the abolition of adoption would not have been possible without Muḥammad himself setting a precedent.[107]

Ibn al-ʿArabī in his discussion of the Zaynab story also points to the weaknesses in the *isnād*s of the traditions, although he still provides an outline of the story.[108] Not so Ibn Kaṯīr (d. 774/1373), who challenges the problematic traditions explicitly and refrains from giving an account of the story. He states that he will disregard the traditions related by al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim and others on the topic as they are not sound. He also mentions the respective tradition recorded by Ibn Ḥanbal, but likewise rejects it due to its anomaly, and does not cite it.[109]

In addition to dismissing the traditions related about the event, he explains that the marriage was concluded to clarify and to emphasise the abolition of adoption that God had declared through the revelation of Kor 33, 4 ("And he has not made your adopted sons [*adʿiyāʾakum*] your sons [*abnāʾakum*]"), and thus directly links Kor 33, 37 to Kor 33, 4.[110]

After Ibn Kaṯīr and his open challenge to the reliability of the traditions, Muḥammad's encounter with Zaynab is less frequently discussed in commentaries of the Qurʾān, but several scholars, among them Abū l-Suʿūd (d. 982/1574),[111] al-Burūsawī (d. 1127/1715),[112] and Ibn ʿAǧība (d. 1224/1809)[113] still include it in their commentaries.

These examples show the variety of interpretation and the arguments Muslims adduced when they engaged with Kor 33, 37. They also show how

105 Al-Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ, *al-Šifā*, p. 880-881. Al-Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ quotes al-Qušayrī here, but the discussion does not appear in al-Qušayrī's *Tafsīr* on the passage. See also Ibn ʿArabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, III, p. 577.

106 Al-Qāḍī ʿĪyāḍ, *al-Šifā*, p. 881.

107 Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Faḫr al-Rāzī l-mustašhar bi-l-tafsīr al-kabīr wa-mafātīḥ al-ġayb*, Beirut, Dār al-fikr, 2005, IX, p. 187.

108 Ibn ʿArabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, III, p. 577 (with the outline of the story on p. 575).

109 Ibn Kaṯīr, *Tafsīr*, VI, p. 424-425.

110 *Ibid.*, VI, p. 426.

111 Abū l-Suʿūd, *Tafsīr Abī l-Suʿūd al-musammā Iršād al-ʿaql al-salīm ilā mazāyā l-Qurʾān al-karīm*, Beirut, Dār iḥyāʾ al-turāṯ al-ʿarabī, n.d., VII, p. 105.

112 Ismāʿīl Ḥaqqī al-Burūsawī, *Rūḥ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2009, VI, p. 180.

113 Ibn ʿAǧība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-maǧīd*, ed. ʿUmar Aḥmad al-Rāwī, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2005, VI, p. 29-30.

discussions emerging in other fields of Islamic learning affect the exegesis of the Qurʾān—in this case for example the question of the impeccability of the Prophet or the reliability of traditions. The different approaches outlined above seem to have remained the main strategies employed in the premodern discussion of the tradition—omission, holding God responsible for the events, adducing additional traditions, challenging the problematic traditions directly, arguing with the impeccability of Muḥammad, the accepted historical background (the close relation of Zaynab and Muḥammad), or the legal aspect mentioned in the Qurʾānic text. We can find a selection of these in most premodern works dealing with the topic.

But reinterpretation did not end at this point, and in modern times new arguments have been brought forward. Muḥammad ʿAbduh discusses the Zaynab affair at length in an appendix to his commentary on the first sura, al-Fātiḥa.[114] He elaborates on a number of arguments that had been raised in the pre-modern exegesis, such as the close relationship between Zaynab and Muḥammad at a time when there was no veil, the impeccability of the prophet, or the weakness of the traditions that relate the incident, for which he quotes Ibn al-ʿArabī at length. But he also advances new arguments. He says, for example, that God had publicly rebuked Muḥammad through a revelation regarding a much lesser case, where no personal desires were involved[115]—how then can one assume that the story of Zaynab is true?

The Aḥmadī scholar Muḥammad ʿAlī claims that Muḥammad arranged the marriage of Zayd and Zaynab to abolish differences of class, Zayd being a former slave, Zaynab a noble woman from Qurayš. After this marriage failed, Muḥammad had the moral responsibility to marry Zaynab, as he had arranged the marriage between the two in the first place.[116] By marrying her, Muḥammad also wanted to remove the stigma to which divorced women were exposed. Muḥammad ʿAlī furthermore argues against the idea that Muḥammad could have coveted Zaynab and pressured Zayd to divorce her, as Zayd continued to be devoted to Muḥammad, which is not conceivable had Muḥammad been

114 Muḥammad ʿAbduh, *Tafsīr sūrat al-fātiḥa*, Cairo, Maṭbaʿat al-mawsūʿāt, 1901, p. 100-123.

115 He discusses the case of the blind Ibn Umm Maktūm, who allegedly approached the Prophet and asked him for guidance; Muḥammad, however, turned away from him and continued to preach the leaders of the Qurayš. This is regarded as the background for the revelation of Kor 80, 1-10, which rebukes Muḥammad for preaching to those who were not interested in listening, while turning away from someone seeking guidance. ʿAbduh, *Tafsīr sūrat al-fātiḥa*, p. 111.

116 Muhammad Ali, *Muhammad the Prophet*, Lahore, Ahmadiyya Anjuman-i-isha'at-i-Islam, 1924, p. 238-239.

actively involved in the separation. Finally, he argues that Muḥammad could have married Zaynab when she was still young, as this is what her family wanted. That he rather married her to Zayd shows that there was no passion involved from Muḥammad's side.[117]

Similar arguments were brought up by Muḥammad Haykal in his biography of Muḥammad, published in the 1930s. Possibly influenced by Muḥammad ʿAlī, he argues that Muḥammad had arranged the marriage between Zayd and Zaynab only to "wipe out racial and class distinctions between men."[118] And to refute the point that Muḥammad fell in love, Haykal argues that the fact that most marriages of Muḥammad remained childless indicates that these marriages were not the result of love or attraction but rather undertaken for other reasons, as Muḥammad obviously was able to father children, even in old age.[119] He also asserts that great figures stand above the law,[120] and that Muḥammad honoured women more than any other man and raised them to the status they truly deserve.[121] In addition to these new interpretations, he also adduces a number of arguments which had already been advanced in premodern commentaries, such as Muḥammad's blood relation and familiarity with Zaynab from her childhood, or the necessity for Muḥammad to set an example for the abolishment of adoption.[122] Sayyid Quṭb in his commentary of the Qurʾān also emphasises the removal of class distinctions and adoption as the primary motifs for the marriage of Zayd to Zaynab and their divorce and the subsequent marriage of Muḥammad and Zaynab.[123]

Muhammad Hamidullah comes up with a very different interpretation of Muḥammad's exclamation "Praise to God, praise to Him who changes the hearts," which forms an important part in most of the early traditions and was usually seen as an indication that Muḥammad had been overwhelmed by

117 *Ibid.*, p. 249-250.

118 Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *The Life of Muḥammad*, transl. Ismaʿīl Rāgī A. al Fārūqī, [Indianapolis], North American Trust Publications, 1976, p. 295. Haykal discusses the whole episode at length with polemical attacks on "chroniclers, orientalists, and missionaries" (p. 294). The background of these accusations and the question to what extent they are justified have been dealt with extensively by Antonie Wessels and need not be reiterated here, as they do not advance new interpretations. See Antonie Wessels, *A modern Biography of Muḥammad: a critical Study of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's Ḥayāt Muḥammad*, Leiden, Brill, 1972, p. 132-141.

119 Haykal, *Life of Muḥammad*, p. 289-290.

120 *Ibid.*, p. 287-288.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 298.

122 *Ibid.*, p. 297-298.

123 Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qurʾān*, Beirut, Dār al-šurūq, 2003[32], v/22, p. 2868-2869.

Zaynab's beauty. Similar to Muḥammad ʿAlī, Hamidullah argues that the marriage between Zayd and Zaynab had been an unhappy one for some time and had been arranged to abolish the class differences. The reason for Muḥammad to come to Zayd's house, however, was to improve the family relations of the two, and with his famous utterance he simply gave expression to his astonishment that Zayd did not fancy this beautiful and charming wife of his, in particular as Zayd's first wife, Umm Ayman, was much older than him and also black. Despite Muḥammad's explicit wish that Zayd keeps Zaynab, he divorced her. Only some months later [and therefore completely independent from his visit] was Muḥammad given the order by God to marry her, and this marriage served to abolish the previous custom of regarding adopted sons as biological sons.[124]

In contrast to these attempts to counter the notion that Muḥammad had been struck by Zaynab's beauty and had fallen in love, ʿĀ'iša ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, better known under her pen name Bint al-Šāṭi', argues to the contrary. In her book *Nisā' al-nabī* she asserts that the story is a proof for Muḥammad's human nature. She regards his behaviour as exemplary and commendable, having fallen in love but nevertheless still trying to save the marriage of Zayd and Zaynab.[125]

The traditional strategies as well as some of the more recent approaches of later Muslim scholars also served as the basis for some apologetic notions in Western biographies of Muḥammad in the 20th century. Most 19th-century works, among them the studies of Aloys Sprenger, William Muir, and Hubert Grimme, still commented on Muḥammad's marriage with Zaynab with a strong polemical undertone, not very different from the earliest Christian polemics, but incorporating material from the Muslim sources.[126] They gloated over what they regarded as Muḥammad's concupiscence and his impudence to justify his immoral actions with alleged revelations from God. An exception to this attitude can be seen in Gustav Weil's work, in which he describes the episode rather matter-to-factly, stating that Zayd divorced Zaynab "probably

124 Muhammad Hamidullah, *Le Prophète de l'Islam*, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin ("Études musulmanes", 7), 1959, II, p. 454-455.

125 ʿĀ'iša ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Šāṭi', *Nisā' al-Nabī*, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1979, p. 161; see also Wessels, *A modern Arabic biography*, p. 147.

126 See for example Aloys Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammad*, Berlin, Nicolai'sche Verlagsbuchandlung, 1861-1863, I, p. 400-406; III, p. 76-77; William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, London, Smith, Elder and Co., 1858-1871, vol. iii, p. 228-232; Hubert Grimme, *Mohammed: Das Leben nach den Quellen*, Münster, Aschendorff ("Darstellungen aus dem Gebiete der nichtchristlichen Religionsgeschichte", 7), 1892, p. 139-140.

to please Muḥammad",[127] and that Muḥammad's marriage with her "elicited" Qur'ānic verses, or that these verses "appeared" or "emerged".[128]

In the 20th century, we can then see attempts to explain and downplay the apparent scandal, using some of the arguments that had emerged within the exegetical tradition. Montgomery Watt, for example, takes up several of the arguments: that Zaynab was forced against her will to marry Zayd, that Muḥammad was her cousin, that at her age she cannot have been overly attractive, that the marriage also served to enforce a complete break with pre-Islamic notions of adoption, and that in fact Muḥammad regarded the marriage "as a duty imposed on him by God."[129] Martin Lings also refers to the already unhappy marriage of Zayd and Zaynab,[130] and so does Karen Armstrong,[131] who also mentions other arguments brought forward by Muslims: that Muḥammad and Zaynab had been cousins and knew each other from a very young age, that Zaynab at her age probably was not very attractive anymore, and that the incident also served to emphasise that adoption is different from a blood relationship.[132] Even Rudi Paret, although not short of critical comments regarding Muḥammad's relationship with Zaynab and refuting Watt's defence, remarks that in Muḥammad's favour one has to take into account that Zaynab had been forced against her will to marry Zayd.[133] Not all works, however, followed suit, and some 20th-century biographies of Muḥammad retained a more polemical stance in the matter.[134]

Conclusion

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the above examination. First, by comparing a large number of variants of a tradition and exploring their use in different literary genres it is often possible to establish where and when a tradition originated, how it spread, and how it was adapted and transformed during its transmission. As shown, this can occasionally also be

127 Gustav Weil, *Mohammed der Prophet: Sein Leben und seine Lehre*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1843, p. 145.

128 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

129 Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, p. 229-231; cf. *id.*, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, p. 156-159.

130 Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 213.

131 Armstrong, *Muhammad: a prophet for our time*, p. 167; *id.*, *Muhammad: a biography*, p. 196.

132 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

133 Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*, p. 158-159.

134 *E.g.* Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet*, p. 244-245.

done if there are too few lines of transmission for an *isnād-cum-matn* analysis to yield any relevant results. To do this, however, it is important to take into account as many traditions as possible rather than relying on a few. In the case studied here, the incorporation of early non-Muslim sources helped to establish to what extent the story of the marriage of Muḥammad and Zaynab is likely to be rooted in history.

The careful analysis of the Muslim sources in the context of their literary genres showed that despite the likely historicity of the marriage as such, the story of Muḥammad's encounter with Zaynab had its origins in the exegesis of the Qur'ān and the adaptation of biblical stories rather than in historical recollections or legal debates. The incorporation of biblical and non-biblical material about David into the exegetical speculation on Kor 33, 37 was most likely introduced by *quṣṣāṣ* who were also engaged in the interpretation of the Qur'ān, such as Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī and Muqātil b. Sulaymān. The absence of the encounter story in the earliest Christian sources supports this finding. Once this story had become part of the exegetical tradition, however, it was taken up in other fields and was soon accepted as fact, as it could easily explain the allusions of the Qur'ānic verse.

The increasing transfiguration and veneration of the Prophet led to different approaches to reinterpret the story of the encounter between Muḥammad and Zaynab, and over the course of time, Muslim scholars were quite creative in finding arguments of why this incident was not as embarrassing as it appeared at first sight, or why it did not happen at all. It can also be seen how societal, theological or intellectual developments impacted on the reinterpretation of the story. We had already observed this in the pre-modern tradition when arguments such as the impeccability of the prophet were applied to the story, and this continued in more recent times, when Marxist, feminist, or egalitarian approaches shaped the interpretation of the story and depicted Muḥammad as protagonist for the abolishment of racial and social differences or for the improvement of the status of women in society.

In contrast, the non-Muslim preoccupation with this story over centuries remained rather one-dimensional and served as basis for polemical charges against Islam. A mutual exchange of stories and ideas is only clearly manifest in the first centuries. At this time, debates between Muslims and non-Muslims apparently allowed for the circulation of these ideas, at first between Muslims, Christians and Jews in the region, but eventually also spreading to Europe. In the following centuries, there seems to have been very little exchange and mutual influence, and Muslim and Western discourses remain largely independent and self-enclosed. It is only in the 20th century that we can again see an interrelation between Muslim and non-Muslim approaches to the topic.

Finally, this study showed that the criterion of embarrassment has to be used with care. A negative or embarrassing presentation of Muḥammad in the sources does not necessarily imply that the underlying account must be historical. In the case studied here, the embarrassing story seems to have been introduced to the Muslim tradition only in the first part of the 2nd/8th century, probably aided by the *quṣṣāṣ* and commentators of the Qurʾān Muqātil b. Sulayman and al-Kalbī, drawing from biblical lore. This does not mean, however, that every story in the life of Muḥammad that shows parallels to biblical stories must have its origin in these. Whether this is the case or not can only be decided in each individual instance with a thorough analysis of the sources.