

QS 35 Q 43:81–83

43.81 Say: “If the All-Merciful had a child, I would be the first to worship.”

43.82 Glory be to the Lord of the heavens and earth, Lord of the Throne, above what they as-
sert!

43.83 So leave them to sink further in false-
hood, and amuse themselves, till they encoun-
ter the Day they have been promised.

43.81 Dis: «Si le Tout Miséricordieux avait un
enfant, alors je serais le premier à l'adorer».

43.82 Gloire au Seigneur des cieux et de la
terre, Seigneur du Trône; Il transcende ce
qu'ils décrivent.

43.83 Laisse-les donc s'enfoncer dans leur faus-
seté et s'amuser jusqu'à ce qu'ils rencontrent le
jour qui leur est promis.

سورة الزخرف

أَمْ يَحْسُبُونَ أَنَّا لَا نَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ وَنَجْوَاهُمْ بَلَىٰ وَرُسُلُنَا لَدَيْهِمْ يَكْتُبُونَ (80) قُلْ إِنْ كَانَ لِلرَّحْمَنِ وَلَدٌ فَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْعَابِدِينَ (81) سُبْحَانَ رَبِّ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبِّ الْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ (82) فَذَرُهُمْ بَخُوضُوا وَيَلْعَنُوا حَتَّىٰ يُلَاقُوا يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي يُوْعَدُونَ (83)

Crone

“*Al-Rahmān*”: A term for God of Jewish Aramaic origin that is often assumed to be an import from South Arabia (cf. Böwering 2002: 317, 331, with Gajda 2009: 224–32).

“Offspring”: The reference could be to Christ, to the deities/angels of the *mušrikūn*, or to both. The assumption of some commentators at the Notre Dame gathering that it is directed against the Nicene Creed strikes me as gratuitous. Why that target as opposed to so much else? Besides, I must agree with Neuwirth (2011b: 505) that the Meccan *sūras* do not reflect interaction with “official Christians” of any kind but rather, as she puts it, with “syncretistic” circles perhaps related to Jewish Chris-
tians (similarly Neuwirth 2005: 232).

Unlike some of the Notre Dame commentators, I see no adoptionism here either. Translating *ittahāḍa* as “adopt” works well in connection with phrases involving adopting idols, views or attitudes, but it does not mean to adopt children (*tabannā* in classical Arabic). In Q 16:51 God says *lā tattahidū ilāhayni ṭnayni*, which you could certainly translate as “Don’t adopt two gods,” but which would not persuade anyone that there were adoptionists who believed God to have adopted anyone other than Jesus. In the Medinese 5:116 we are told that on the day of judgment God will ask Jesus, *a-anta qulta li-l-nāsi ttaḥidūni wa-ummi ilāhayni min dūni llāhi*, “Did you tell people, Adopt me and my mother as two gods apart from God?” Were there adoption-
ists who believed God to have adopted Mary? The reference is to veneration of God, Mary and Jesus as a triad, which is about as far from Nicene Christianity as you can get, for all that there was a massive increase in Mary veneration in sixth-century Chalcedonian (Melkite) and Monophysite (Jacobite) Christianity alike.

“Wading into things” [“sink further” v. 83]: I have suggested that this is a con-
temptuous metaphor for participation in disputations (Crone 2012: 468f).

El-Badawi

This passage is part of the Qur'ānic discourse against Christology.

Refuting Nicene Christology: Q 43:81 asks, “if (in) the Beneficent (*al-Raḥmān*) has a son, then I would be [his] first worshiper.” It shares the rhetoric and syntax of the question in Q 6:101, “how can He [i.e., God] have [i.e. beget!] a son?” (*annā yakūnu lahu walad*) and the question asked by Zachariah and later Mary, “how can I have/beget a son/boy?” (*annā yakūnu lī walad/gulām*; Q 3:40, 47; 19:8, 20). It seems that Q 38:81 is refuting the Nicene Christology which claims that Christ is “the eternal begotten son.”

Refuting Pre-Nicene Adoptionism: Q 43:81 is better understood in consideration with Q 39:4, which asks a slightly different question, “if (*law*) God wanted to take a son, He would have chosen whatever He wanted from what He creates.” This verse belongs to a series of Qur'ānic verses refuting Allah/al-Raḥmān “taking/adopting” (*ittiḥad*; Q 17:111; 19:92; etc) a son. So it would seem that Q 39:4 refutes the pre-Nicene Christology called “adoptionism.”

Back to Q 43: v. 83 disparages those who “twist/make firm (*yaḥūḍū*; cf. Syr. *Ḥ-W-Ṣ*) and misbehave” (*yal'abū*; cf. Syr. *L-'B*; cf. also Q 43:83; 70:42), i.e. the different Churches fashioning Christologies and disputing among themselves. In this context, one may translate the end of the verse as, “glorified is [God]... above what they are troubled (*yaṣīfūn*; cf. Syr. *Y-Ṣ-P*).”

On the shifting rhetoric employed in disputing Jesus' divinity *vis-à-vis* God, between al-Raḥmān and Allah, see my comments on Q 36:13–27 (QS 31).

Khalfallah

Le v. 81 contient une ambiguïté d'ordre logico-syntaxique dont le sens est très fin. C'est une injonction adressée à Muḥammad (*qul*) lui demandant de transmettre cette phrase aux adversaires dont on ne connaît pas l'identité. Il paraît que cet énoncé s'adresse aux Mecquois qui adoraient les anges, filles de Dieu. D'où la variante *wuld* (collectif de *walad*, enfant englobant les deux sexes) et non *walad*. L'on doit vérifier si les Chrétiens sont concernés par cet énoncé ou pas.

Il s'agit en effet d'une proposition conditionnelle que je tente de déconstruire comme suit : [1] La protase est un postulat où l'on suppose qu'Allah a des enfants ; [2] Ces enfants (filles pour les Qurayšites ; fils pour les Chrétiens) sont issus d'une essence divine et méritent par-là d'être adorés. [3] Muḥammad est un homme doué de raison et connaît, mieux que quiconque, le devoir de les adorer s'ils existaient. [4] Il doit par conséquent reconnaître ce dogme avant tous les autres. [5] Or, ce postulat est faux ; la protase l'est encore plus, par conséquent. [6] Toute l'argumentation s'autodétruit. On l'a qualifiée de *bāṭil* (erronée, insensée, illogique).

Pour justifier ce recours à cette tournure complexe, on a présenté deux pistes: [1] Le contexte historique puisqu'on sait que Muḥammad avait combattu le dogme de filiation; [2] La fonction rhétorique: cette tournure sert à attirer l'attention des destinataires et à les amener à méditer ce faux argument pour se rendre compte eux-

mêmes de son absurdité. D'ailleurs, les rhétoriciens ont baptisé ce procédé Maḍab *kalāmī*, figure de style qui se construit par une phrase conditionnelle et une fausse argumentation...

Rippin

In v. 82, *subḥāna rabbi al-samawāti ...‘ammā yaṣīfūna* merits attention. Often translated as “May God be far removed from...” or “exalted above,” in this passage it is a repudiation of the lives of the disbelievers who “romp and frolic” (in v. 83, in the translation of Fakhry 2002); also see the use of *subḥān ‘an* in, among others, Q 23:91 (in refutation of God having a son); Q 28:68 (above what is associated with Him); Q 37:159 (above what they ascribe); Q 52:43 (what they ascribe); Q 59:23 (above what they associate). Ambros/Procházka (2004: 121) suggest that this expression results from “contamination with” *ta‘ālā ‘an*, “to be exalted above s.th./s.o.,” pointing to the interesting example in Q 6:100, *subḥānahu wa-ta‘ālā ‘ammā yaṣīfūna*. The translations certainly show that “contamination.” The contrast is to be made here with the frequent use of *subḥān* in a clear sense of “Praise be [to God etc].” It would be good to know more about the Syriac usages pointed to by Jeffery (1938: 161f).

Sirry

The Qur’ān denies the possibility of God’s having sons and daughters and this applies both to pagan beliefs and Christian belief about Jesus. As this passage indicates, the problem with the belief that God has sons or daughters has nothing to do with a gender, but rather with a false concept that has been ascribed to God. The word *walad* is usually understood as an “offspring,” while *ibn* has both physical and metaphorical connotations. In a number of verses, the Qur’ān rejects the notion that God adopted a son – with an Arabic term *walad* (*ittaḥaḍa waladan*), for instance, Q 2:116; 4:171; 10:68; 17:111; 18:4; 19:35, 88, 91–92; 21:26; 23:91; 37:152; 39:4; 43:81. As noted by Kropp (2011: 247–264), the expression *ittaḥaḍa waladan* is the most basic and common in the Qur’ān. In addition to this expression, the Qur’ān also uses another phrase, namely, “*lā yakūnu lahū waladun*” (He cannot have a child) in e.g. Q 6:101. The two expressions occur in one verse, saying “*allaḍīna la-hū l-samawāti wa-l-arḍi wa-lam yattaḥiḍ waladan wa-lam yakun la-hū ṣarikun fī l-mulk*” (Q 25:2). Whether this passage is related to Jesus or not, the Qur’ān uses the term *walad* twice in reference to Jesus (Q 4:171; 19:34–35) and *ibn* only once (Q 9:30). In both verses where the word *walad* is mentioned the Qur’ān responds with an exclamation *subḥānahu*, “glorified be He,” which is typical of the Qur’ānic argument against the error of projecting offspring onto God. In most cases the Qur’ān reacts to the claim that God has a son by saying *subḥāna llāh ‘anmā yaṣīfūn* (vv. 6:100; 19:35; 23:91; 37:159; 43:82). While the Qur’ān explicitly criticizes the Chris-

tians for saying *al-masīḥ ibn allāh*, it does not seem to accuse them of calling Jesus *walad allāh*.

Stefanidis

Considering vv. 57–64 which mention Jesus, it could seem that this passage refers to the Christian belief in the divine sonship of Christ. However, this *sūra* seems to be concerned with the issue of divine plurality and progeny in general and not only in relation to Christian beliefs (vv. 15–16). Elsewhere in the Qurʾān (i.e., Q 21:26; 23:91), the parallel expression *ittaḥada waladan* is used to denounce *multiple* divine progeny, not necessarily a divine son.

Vv. 57–60, which claim to report the reaction of the prophet’s people (*qawmuka*) to the mention of Jesus, seem crucial to our understanding of the audience’s religious beliefs. Whether we read يصدون as *yaṣiddūna* (make noise?) or *yaṣuddūna* (turn away?), the messenger’s opponents are not here portrayed as believers in Jesus’ mission. On the contrary, v. 58 shows them mocking him: “Are our gods better or is he?” If we hold the *sūra* to be a unity, we should strive to understand vv. 81–83 in relation to the surrounding verses and in particular vv. 57–59. From that perspective, it becomes unlikely that vv. 81–83 are a refutation of trinitarian beliefs addressed to Christians. They seem rather to exemplify the Qurʾānic attempt to walk a thin line: defend Jesus’ honor from pagan derision while at the same time firmly denouncing Christian belief that he is the son of God.

Interestingly, the *sabab al-nuzūl* for v. 57 also points towards a complex religious landscape marked by multiple references (Christian, pagan...) and disputative awareness. It narrates that the messenger’s opponents made fun of the Qurʾānic proclamation which, on the one hand, confirms Jesus’ election and, on the other, condemns to hell worshipped entities together with their worshippers (e.g. Q 21:98). Since Jesus is taken by Christians as their lord – they are said to have remarked maliciously – will he also go to hell?

Zellentin

When discussing the Qurʾān’s negation of God’s fatherhood, and in turn of Jesus’ sonship, we should note how broad the range of Christological positions continued to be even after Nicea and Chalcedon. For the Qurʾān, it may be especially important to note that adoptionist theology (see also El-Badawi) is by no means pre-Nicene alone, but continues to be developed in response to the Trinitarian debates after Nicea. For example, the *Clementine Homilies*, in their present Greek form, should be dated to the latter part of the fourth century C.E. or the early fifth at the latest, yet the text continued to be translated and retold past the seventh century C.E., and constitutes an important witness to the Qurʾān’s oral discursive sphere (see my statement).

The Homilies emphasize strict monotheism, and portray Jesus as the son of God in the following words: “it is the peculiarity of the Father not to have been begotten, but of the son to have been begotten; but what is begotten cannot be compared with that which is unbegotten or self-begotten” (Hom. 15:16). The echoes, and the negation, of the Nicene Creed are clear. Jesus is omniscient, however, he is *not* himself divine in the *Clementine Homilies*. At one point Peter explicates that Jesus did “not proclaim himself to be God,” denouncing any attempt to establish Jesus’ divinity. Being asked whether “he who comes from God is God,” Peter answers, “We cannot affirm this, because we did not hear it from [Jesus]” (ibid. 16:15). The *Homilies*’ emphasis on Jesus’ omniscience, combined with Jesus’ sonship and the fact that the Jesus himself did *not* affirm his divinity in the quoted passage may allow us better to understand continuity and change in the way in which the Qur’ān deconstructs Jesus’ sonship.

Corroborating the present verse, we may well consider Q 5:116–17, where Jesus denies the divinity of himself and Mary with a clear reference to God’s omniscience, in contrast to his own ignorance. All the while, Jesus denies precisely what the *Homilies* claim about him. The Qur’ān, just like the Homilies, invokes words spoken by Jesus himself: “Had I said it, You would certainly have known it. You know what is in my self, And I do not know what is in Your Self. Indeed You are the knower of the Unseen.” I suggest reading this Qur’ānic verse, as well as QS 50 (see my commentary) and the present passage, as part of a well-informed dialogue on the essence of God. If we allow for this, then the Qur’ān may quite precisely answer to various Christological positions, yet perhaps chiefly one such as also preserved in the *Clementine Homilies*, whose post-Nicean non-divine adoptionist Christology leads us to perceive that the Qur’ān’s Christology may in turn be not far removed from that of some of its opponents.