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A New Hermeneutical Approach to the Qur'an with Special Reference to the Narrative of Prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) in the Qur'an and the Bible

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Abstract: Prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) is considered to be a bridge between Islam and Christianity. Both traditions emphasize that he is a 'rightly-guided' figure and among the company of 'the righteous' such as Abraham and Moses. The story of Yaḥyā is included in two chapters (Q. 3: 39 and Q. 19: 12–14) in the Qur'an. Canonical Gospels also provide various aspects of John the Baptist. Muslim commentators have used biblical and other sources in their interpretation of the Qur'an, elaborating some aspects of his life within the Qur'anic theological framework. Whereas various similarities may be seen in narratives of Islamic sources and the biblical sources regarding Prophet Yaḥyā, some differences are present. Therefore, this article seeks to provide an analysis on the story of Prophet Yaḥyā through Qur'anic narratives. It also investigates the classical exegetical approach to such a comparative reading (*isrā'iliyyāt*, biblical materials) and a modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible. Relying on the framework of comparative theology, considered as "welcoming wisdom wherever it exists" and "faith seeking understanding" in light of truth seen deeply in other religious tradition, such mutual close readings and interactions across religious traditions could be a good model for the Muslim world, instead of a fully rejectionist fundamentalist discourse against other traditions. Such a pluralist approach emphasizes a global raising of awareness and mutual understanding.

Keywords: Prophet Yaḥyā; John the Baptist; the Qur'an; Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*); *isrā'iliyyāt*; canonical gospels; comparative theology



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1. Introduction

Francis X. Clooney SJ describes contemporary comparative theology as an original response to twenty-first century religious diversity. It involves "finding God in all things" and "welcoming wisdom where it exists". It is "faith seeking understanding" in light of truth(s) embedded deeply in other traditions. In his view, the aim of the attempt is "to know God better" (Ray et al. 2013, p. 99). Clooney highlights the following:

Comparative theology marks acts of faith as seeking understanding, which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition(s) as well as the home tradition (Clooney 2010, p. 10).

Clooney adds that *Comparison* is a reflective and contemplative attempt by which we see the other in the light of our own and our own in light of the other. This comparison ordinarily starts with the intuition of an interesting similarity that assists us to place two realities—texts, images, practices, doctrines, and persons—near one another, so that they may be seen over and over again, side by side. We understand each differently in this necessarily random and intuitive practice since the other is near, and through increasing insight also begin to comprehend related matters differently too. Ultimately, in his view, we see ourselves differently, intuitively revealing dimensions of ourselves. Otherwise, we

could not grasp them through a non-comparative logic. Clooney underlines that it is a theological discipline that one is confident about being intelligently faithful to his tradition even while looking for fresh understanding outside his tradition (Clooney 2010, pp. 10–11).

Clooney indicates that there are several distinctive features of the comparative initiative. First of all, comparativists should have a commitment to the truth of their home tradition before they journey into another tradition. In Clooney's project, one moves from a commitment base through involving intellectual inquiries to a renewed and transformed reappropriation of confessional ideas. The second feature of contemporary comparative theology is its strong textual part. He states that religious texts have a way of bringing to life the truths they seek to tell. The words in religious texts are like windows allowing the comparativist to see into the text. Moreover, Clooney advocates comparative theologians not to make a priori judgements, but to internalize the materials and address theological challenges after reading, reflection, and dialogue. The reason for this is that he does not intend to force his own ideas upon the texts but prefers to wait and see what the texts might provide. Furthermore, it is recommended that the discipline must not remain theoretical, but must have a practical aspect. Clooney maintains that in ideal circumstances, one sees, hears, visits, tastes, smells, and touches the "reality" of the other tradition. In addition, the comparative enterprise ends where it began—in a return home. The comparativist travels full circle and reallocates their original commitment position (Ray 2014, pp. 54–59).

In her book, Catherine Cornille indicates various types of approaches to comparative theology such as postcolonial, confessional, trans-religious and interreligious. In inter-religious comparative theology, theologians focus on commonalities and what they can learn from each other by examining the common ground between religious traditions to achieve mutual illuminations (Cornille 2019). However, it is worth mentioning here that the purpose for such comparison of sacred texts is a deep theological learning across religious traditions and not to harmonize conflicting interpretations, emphasizes the distinct nuances of meaning understood by the other even when broad concepts are shared (Albayrak 2012).

Although a religious tradition keeps its originality and major sources, it is a reality that interactions and exchange between religious traditions and knowledge among cultures took place in the past. Any religious tradition can benefit from accumulated human knowledge. In the context of Islamic intellectual tradition, there had been interreligious learning in several fields of Islamic studies such as mysticism (sufism, *taṣawwuf*) and ethics. For example, Sayyid Hussain Nasr says that today, Muslims' engagement with other religions relies on rich foundations laid by Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) and Ibn Al-'Arabī (d. 1240). He also points out that "the Sufis spoke about universality of the truth and of revelation. It was figures such as Ibn Al-'Arabī and Rumi who had a vision of the Formless which allowed them to see the truth in forms other than those of their own religion" (Nasr and Jahanbegloo 2010, p. 290). Moreover, there are examples from some Muslim mystics who were intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking a fresh understanding from outside that tradition. For instance, Muslim mystic Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham (d. 778) "fell in with Christian anchorites", who instructed him in their "inner wisdom", or "gnosis" (*mārifā*), which gives its possessor power over his fellow believers (Knysh 2000). Further, Muslim mystic Shāqīq al-Balkhī (d. 810) had a curious encounter with a Buddhist monk who taught Shāqīq the meaning of trust in God (*tawakkul*) and challenged him to demonstrate his trust in God as the sole provider of men (Knysh 2000).

This article focuses on John/Yaḥyā in the Qur'an in the light of the exegetical tradition and certain Qur'an commentaries. Using *isrā'īliyyāt* reports (related to biblical materials) in the interpretation of the Qur'an along with modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible will also be examined. The main argument of this article is that, as examples of learning across religious borders in the Islamic tradition are present, such as using *isrā'īliyyāt* in Qur'anic exegesis and 'the laws preceding Islam' (*shar'u man qablanā*)¹ in Islamic law, and certain Muslim mystics' engagement with others, openness to mutual, closer readings of scriptural texts, deeper learning, and thereby mutual illuminations could be a good model for the Muslim world in today's world.

2. John the Baptist/Yaḥyā as a Common Figure

The origin of John is Yôhânân in Hebrew, meaning Jehovah bestowed (Aydin 2020). In the Qur'an and Islamic sources, his name is Yaḥyā. The word Yaḥyā is derived from the word *hayya*, meaning "to make alive" or "to quicken". Qur'an commentators interpret this word as referring to "his miraculous birth and his mission to renew faith" (Hillier 2006, p. 700).

Prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) is prominently a great figure as a bridge between Islam and Christianity². Both traditions accept him to be "rightly-guided" and among the company of "the righteous" such as Abraham and Moses. Both traditions perceive his mission as intrinsically related to the life of Jesus (Hillier 2006). However, in the Bible his mission was a preparation for the coming of Jesus and he is not independent from Jesus. In Islamic tradition, his birth, identity, and his prophetic mission is as one of the prophets for the sons of Israil (Bani Israel) (Aydin 2020).

3. Prophet Yaḥyā in the Qur'an and Exegesis

The Qur'an indicates Prophet Yaḥyā's miraculous birth, identity, and his prophetic mission as one of the prophets for the sons of Jacob. It should be noted that Prophet Yaḥyā appears five times in the Qur'an. However, the bulk of John's story takes place within two nativity chapters (3 and 19), *Āl Imrān* (House of 'Imran) and *Maryam* (Mary), which is similar to the nativity narrative in the Gospel of Luke (Hillier 2006). This section will briefly analyze Q. 3: 39–41 and Q. 19: 2–15 through selected Qur'an commentators and a few selected modern studies.

Q. 3: 39 highlights the following:

The angels called out to him (Zachariah), while he stood praying in the sanctuary, 'God gives you (Zachariah) news of John, confirming a Word from God. He will be noble and chaste, a prophet, one of the righteous'. (Q: 3:39) (Abdel Haleem 2004)

The story of Zachariah and John is given in fuller detail in 19:2–15, and *sūra Maryam*'s narrative indicates Zachariah's fear of what his existing heirs might do after his death due to his own and his wife's advanced age (Nasr et al. 2015). According to the exegete al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), "confirming a Word from God" indicates John will confirm Jesus, son of Mary, who is described as a word from God (Al-Ṭabarī 2022a; Al-Rāzī 2022). "Noble" (*sayyid*) is interpreted as learned, devout, wise, generous, reverent of God, clement, and temperate (Nasr et al. 2015; Al-Ṭabarī 2022b). "Chaste" in the verse, according to some, refers to someone who abstains from sexual relations with women or vice versa, though many commentators believe that this means abstention only from illicit sexual relations (Nasr et al. 2015; Ibn Kathīr 2022).

Q. 3:40 and 41 continues to state Zachariah's story as follows:

He said, 'My Lord, how can I have a son when I am so old and my wife is barren?' [An angel] said, 'It will be so: God does whatever He will'. He said, 'My Lord, give me a sign'. 'Your sign', [the angel] said, 'is that you will not communicate with anyone for three days, except by gestures. Remember your Lord often; celebrate His glory in the evening and at dawn'.

Gabriel Said Reynolds (2018) holds the view that the passage of Q. 3:38–40 alludes to Luke's account of the annunciation of John to Zechariah, who was serving as a priest in the tabernacle of the Temple (Luke 1:5–13). The statement "you will not communicate with anyone" for Zechariah in the verse is understood to mean that he was temporarily unable to speak even if his wits were still intact (Nasr et al. 2015; Al-Ṭabarī 2022b). His momentary speechlessness reminds us of Mary's directive to maintain a fast of silence following the birth of Jesus. (Q. 19:26). After these supernatural occurrences, Zachariah and Mary were instructed to keep silent, indicating the spiritual significance of quietness (Nasr et al. 2015).

In line with the passage above, Q. 19: 2–15 (*sūra Maryam*) elaborates the story. The stories of Mary, Zachariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus are linked in the passages of verses 2–35 of *sūra Maryam* (Mary). The two stories also have relations with Q. 21: 89–91 as

well as in the biblical account found in Luke 1: 5–80. The parallel between the miraculous birth of Jesus to the young virgin Mary and the miraculous birth of John to the elderly and previously infertile wife of Zachariah serves to illustrate how age and human limitations have no bearing on the way in which God's will has been carried out in sacred history (Nasr et al. 2015).

Regarding the story of Zachariah and John the Baptist in *sūra Maryam*, Reynolds maintains that passage of Q. 19: 2–6 might be read in light of Luke 1. Both texts notably have Zechariah refer to the “House of Jacob” (Q. 19: 6 and Luk 1: 33). Only the Qur'an, however, has Zechariah pray to God for an heir (cf. 3: 38–40; 21: 89; Zechariah is also referred to in 6: 85) (Reynolds 2018, p. 473). About verses 7–11 of the same *sūra*, Reynolds believes that the Qur'an is developing Luke 1 while indicating few differences such as it has God speak directly to Zechariah (unlike Luke, where it is the angel Gabriel, and unlike 3: 39, where it is instead “angels”). He also highlights that “Verses 8–9 should be compared to Luke 1: 18–19” (Reynolds 2018, p. 474). In this context, Reynolds highlights one difference between the narratives of the Qur'an and the Bible: Zechariah loses his speech in Luke as a result of rejecting the angel's message, whereas in the Qur'an (verses 9–10), this is the response to Zechariah's plea for a sign (Reynolds 2018).

However, in another study, Wonjoo Hwang (2022) argues that the Qur'an uses biblical figures within its own theological framework. Hwang also maintains that a comparison of the Islamic narratives on Zakariyyā and Yaḥyā with the biblical accounts indicate not only similarities but also significant differences that cause significant theological breaches between the Qur'an and the Bible. Awareness of such differences will result in a better understanding of their roles in their respectful narratives. For example, Zachariah's being not able to communicate is a sign in the Qur'an, but it is a punishment in according to Luke's Gospel. This took 3 days according to the Qur'an, but, In Luke's Gospel, Zachariah did not communicate until the eighth day after the birth of John (Yaḥyā) (Hwang 2022). Hwang, in general, takes the polemical nature of the two chapters (Āl Imrān and Maryam) into account, arguing that the Islamic narratives of Zakariyyā and Yaḥyā should be taken “as a counter-biblical or anti-Christological assertion” (Hwang 2022, p. 176). In another work, Kaltner and Mirza (2017) briefly summarize the Qur'anic narrative of John the Baptist/Yaḥyā, making few comparisons between the Qur'an and the Bible.

3.1. Intertextual Reading from the Classical Notion of *isrā'īliyyāt* to the Modern Trend of Direct Biblical Citations in the Qur'anic Exegesis

This section aims to discuss the classical exegetical approach to *isrā'īliyyāt* (using biblical materials in Qur'anic exegesis) and a modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible, thereby providing a framework for the next section, where selected annotated translations of the Qur'an from the modern period are analyzed in relation to the Qur'anic narrative of Yaḥyā/John the Baptist.

It is worth mentioning that *isrā'īliyyāt* reports (biblical materials) were used by the earliest Muslims in order to interpret the Qur'an (Saeed 2005, p. 96). *Isrā'īliyyāt* narrations are used as available historical sources mostly for interpreting the stories of earlier prophets (Paçacı 2007, p. 7). Interpreting the Qur'an in the light of *isrā'īliyyāt* reports is considered under tradition-based exegesis (*tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*) (Çoruh 2017). Exegetes used biblical materials to fill some gaps in prophetic narratives. The use of *isrā'īliyyāt* to provide narrative detail to stories shared by the Qur'an and the Bible. There is the very widespread reliance on *isrā'īliyyāt* traditions in classical Qur'an an exegesis such as al-Ṭabarī's commentary. For example, Prophet Abraham saw in his dream to sacrifice his son (Q. 37: 102). The Qur'an does not give a name. Some commentators say Ishmael, other commentators, such as Al-Ṭabarī (2022b), state that he was Isaac (Ishāq) based on the Bible. It should be noted here that in Al-Ṭabarī's Qur'an commentary, the first 2.5 centuries of Muslim interpretation were collected and organised methodically (McAuliffe 2007). Therefore, Al-Ṭabarī's Qur'an commentary also contained many *isrā'īliyyāt* reports, particularly related to Qur'anic stories, from the early period of Islam. Many Muslim historians and interpreters had no trouble

adopting biblical sources in the early phases of Islamic history, but from the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries onward, resistance started to take hold (Saeed 2005, p. 96). Saeed (2005, pp. 96–97) argues for several factors for this resistance such as the maturing of Islam and the establishment of Islamic disciplines (such as *kalām*), Muslims' confidence of their theological positions and of their own distinctive scripture. Ibn al-Kathīr (d. 774/1373) put some limitations on these reports, explaining that *isrā'īliyyāt* are reported *li al-istishhād* (for supplementary attestation) not *li al-i'tidād* (for full support and reliance or *i'tiqād*, belief) (Çoruh 2019).

Moreover, in the *tafsīr* literature, the most narrations of *isrā'īliyyāt* are cited as reports from certain converts such as Wahb ibn Munabbih (654–737 CE) and Ka'b al-Ahbar (d. 653 CE) in the earliest period of Islam, and most classical exegetes do not seem to cite directly from the Bible's text. As Albayrak (2000) highlights, the classical commentators do not provide any textual proof that they were familiar with the Jewish and Christian sources though al-Biqā'ī's Qur'an commentary (809–885/1407–1480) is considered an exception (Saleh 2007). Mesut Kaya (2013) lists the followings as reasons why the classical exegetes relied on *isrā'īliyyāt* reports rather than direct citations from the Bible: the peculiar structure of classical *tafsīr* and narration of knowledge by *isnad* (chain of transmission), the legitimacy of quoting the Bible, and Muslim self-confidence and dominant attitudes. In general, it could be said that classical Muslim scholars' relationship with the Bible did not go beyond passages that they believed foretold the Prophet's prophecy, nor transmitting some of the texts they used for polemical purposes (Kaya 2013).

However, with the emergence of modernity, a new method of direct citations from the Bible in the interpretation of the Qur'an or using the Bible as a source of *tafsīr* has developed by certain influential exegetes in parallel with a critical approach to *isrā'īliyyāt* reports. Engagement with modernity and Western thought provided great opportunities for Muslim exegetes to compare and to crosscheck classical *isrā'īliyyāt* reports with the Bible and Talmud. They thought that there was a need for learning their religions and books from their own sources as classical scholars had no sufficient knowledge of the religion and books of the People of the Book (Kaya 2013).

In the beginning of Islamic modernism, Muḥammad 'Abduh's highly critical approach to *isrā'īliyyāt* has become a turning point and a starting for a new tendency in Qur'anic exegesis and influencing other exegetes. As Tottoli (1999, 2002) notes, 'Abduh and his student M. Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) are usually considered the departure point for a new approach, and the complete denial of the traditions passed down by the first generations of Muslim converts, also known as *isrā'īliyyāt*. In his *muqaddima* to his commentary, 'Abduh underlines the following:

“(Of the methods followed in the *tafsīr*) the third is that the stories (*qisās*) to be investigated. Many people have adopted this method, and they have added what they want from historical and *isrā'īliyyāt* sources (*kutub al-tārīkh wa'l-isrā'īliyyāt*) to the stories of the Qur'an. Meanwhile, they did not rely on books that were valid according to the People of the Book such as the Torah and the Gospel and other valid religious books according to other religious followers; on the contrary, they took *isrā'īliyyāt* stories without distinguishing whatever they heard from them, and without checking if they are compatible with Shari'ah and reason (*walā tanqīḥ limā yukhālif al-shar' walā yuṭābiq al-aql*).” ('Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā 1947, p. 18).

As can be seen in the above, 'Abduh is highly critical of *isrā'īliyyāt* reports, the style of their transmissions (oral) and their contents. However, although he thinks superstitious stories of Jewish and Christian origin are unreliable in *tafsīr*, he does not include the Bible itself in this category (Pink 2015). 'Abduh says above that it needs to be relied on their own resources during the interpretation of the relevant parts of the Qur'an.

'Abduh's this new method has an impact on certain exegetes, and various other scholars have also adopted this method in the modern period. After him, Rashīd Riḍā has developed it further, providing the entire passages of the Torah in *tafsīr al-Manār*. Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and then intellectuals who studied in *tafsīr* in India such as Hamiduddin Farāhī (d. 1930), Thanāullāh Amritsārī (d. 1948), Abu'l-Kalām Āzād

(d. 1958), Mawdūdī (d. 1979), Ghulam Aḥmad Parviz (d. 1985), and Amin Aḥsan Islāhī (d. 1997) seriously engaged with the Bible in their works though their views and schools were different. Moreover, certain annotated Qur'an translations also included Qur'an–Bible comparisons in relevant parts such as Muhammed Ali's (d. 1951) *The Holy Kur'ān*, Ömer Rıza Doğrul's (d. 1952) *Tanrı Buyruğu*, Muhammed Asad's (d. 1992) *The Message of The Qur'an*, Muhammad Hamidullah's (d. 2002) *Le Saint Coran*, and Suat Yıldırım's (b. 1941) *Kur'ân-ı Hakîm ve Açıklamalı Meali* (The Wise Qur'an and Annotated Translation). Tâhir b. Âshûr (d. 1973), M. Izzat Darwaza (d. 1984), and Süleyman Ateş (b. 1933) are also among the commentators who use this method in their commentaries in a prominent way (Kaya 2013). Kaya discusses criticisms against this new method of intertextual conversations while he analyses in detail on which contexts and purposes the Bible citations are used in modern Qur'an commentaries such as history of religions and polemics, cross-text comparisons between the Qur'an, the Bible and Talmud, and the Bible as the modern source of *tafsîr* (Kaya 2013).

3.2. Case Study of Selected Modern Approaches to the Narrative of Yaḥyâ/John the Baptist in the Qur'an

This section will analyze 'Abduh and Rashîd Riḍā's Qur'an commentary, and three annotated translations of the Qur'an, namely Muhammed Asad, Muhammad Hamidullah, and Suat Yıldırım, about Q. 3: 39–41 and Q. 19: 2–15 and evaluate their approaches to the story of Yaḥyâ/John the Baptist in the Qur'an. The reason for why these names are selected is that they applied for the modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible in their respective works though their distinctive methods may have some differences. As highlighted above, 'Abduh is a key figure for this new tendency in Qur'anic exegesis. How he applied it in his Qur'an commentary on the story of Yaḥyâ will provide us some insights into this tendency. The other three annotated Qur'an translators have also showed an interest in this tendency, and analyzing their perspectives/applications of direct citations from the Bible will be helpful to see a modern method in Qur'an translation genre though they have different backgrounds.

When we analyze 'Abduh and Rashîd Riḍā's Qur'an commentary on Q. 3: 39–41, we see that they aim to provide some lessons via the verses in question. Further, it seems that they avoid narrating some miraculous extraordinary events reported as additional information to the story of the Qur'an (for 'Abduh and demythologisation see, Shareea 2019). For example, regarding Mary's provisions from Allah on Q. 3: 37, "Whenever Zachariah went in to see her in her sanctuary, he found her supplied with provisions. He said, 'Mary, how is it you have these provisions?' and she said, 'They are from God: God provides limitlessly for whoever He will'". Rashîd Riḍā commented that "there is no evidence in the verse that sustenance came down as an extraordinary supernatural event (*min khawāriq al-ādāt*), and the attribution of the believers' command to God in this regard is customary in ancient and modern times" (Abduh and Rashîd Riḍā 2022, p. 54). Riḍā cites from his teacher the following:

The Qur'an was revealed plain and easy for everyone to understand without the need for trouble or going to defend something other than the apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*). We must not deviate from its way and do not add to it (Qur'anic stories) *isrā'iliyyāt* or non-*isrā'iliyyāt* tales to make this story an extraordinary supernatural event (*min khawāriq al-ādāt*). To search for that sustenance as what it is and where it did come from is superfluous, and such things do not need to understand the meaning (of the Qur'an) or need further lessons. If God knew that his statement is good for us, he would have made it clear (Abduh and Rashîd Riḍā 2022, p. 54).

As another example, on Q.3: 41, "He said, 'My Lord, give me a sign'. 'Your sign', [the angel] said, 'is that you will not communicate with anyone for three days, except by gestures'". Rashîd Riḍā emphasizes one narration about Zakariyyā's speechlessness which is indicated by the classical exegetes. Then he directly cites from Luke Gospel: "In the Gospel of Luke, it is said: Gabriel said to Zechariah: He said: 'Right now your tongue

will be held and you will not be able to speak at all until these things happen. Because you have not confirmed my promise that will come when the time comes" (Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā 2022, p. 55). He uses this biblical citation as part of *tafsīr* on this verse while not commenting on it. However, it is interesting to note that Rashīd Riḍā does not mention or comment on one difference between the Qur'an and the biblical narrative: Zakariyyā's speechlessness took 3 days according to the Qur'an, but, in Luke's Gospel, Zachariah did not communicate until the birth of John (Yaḥyā/John the Baptist) (Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā 2022, p. 55). Riḍā may not see that these two narratives in the Qur'an and the Bible are a great difference that disputes each other and so disregards to provide any comments on it. As noticed, 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā's Qur'an commentary applies for the modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible.

In *The Message of the Qur'an*, it is interesting to note that Muhammed Asad (1984) makes similar comments with 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā regarding Mary's provisions from God on Q. 3: 37, highlighting that there is absolutely no indication in the Qur'an or in any authentic tradition that these provisions had a supernatural origin, notwithstanding all the legends that most commentators have cited in this context. It seems that Asad's source in his comments is *Tafsīr al-Manār*, and Asad also considers some *isrā'īliyyāt* reports as legendary and not reliable. However, on Q.3: 41, "... 'Your sign', [the angel] said, 'is that you will not communicate with anyone for three days, except by gestures'". Asad cites Mu'tazilī exegete Abu Muslim's (d. 934) opinion that Zachariah was not rendered speechless as in the New Testament story (Luke i, 20–22); rather, he was simply instructed not to speak to anyone for the next three days, underlying that Zachariah had to completely give himself over to prayer and reflection as the "sign" which was only to be a spiritual manifestation (Asad 1984). It could be derived from here that Asad interprets Zakariyyā's speechlessness spiritually in line with the Mu'tazilī exegete, meaning that Zakariyyā refrained from talking to people by his own will and devoted himself to prayer and contemplation even though other interpretation is more preferred and common, which is that although Zakariyyā has the power to remember God and pray to Him, he will not be able to talk to people, but that he can only communicate through signs. In this context, Asad makes a comment against Luke's narrative, which looks similar with the majority of the Qur'anic exegetes' interpretation.

Regarding Asad's critical approach to *isrā'īliyyāt* reports above, it is worth mentioning here that the modernist and rationalist orientation of Asad's commentary on the Qur'an should be understood within the early Muslim modernist trend. Therefore, it is significant to highlight 'Abduh's intellectual influence on Asad's work (Dango 2018). Asad attempts to rationalize miraculous extraordinary events in the Qur'an as can be seen regarding the case of Mary's provisions above.

Muhammed Asad makes some comments on Q. 19: 7–16. He provides the meaning of the name Yaḥyā (John the Baptist). He also makes a connection between the story of Yaḥyā and the story of Maryam, pointing out that John's birth story is followed by that of Jesus in these both *sūras*, Maryam and Āl 'Imran, for two reasons: first, because John (also known as "the Baptist" in the Bible) was to be a forerunner of Jesus, and second, because there is a clear connection between the birth announcements of these two children (Asad 1984). In his short notes, Asad indicates Yaḥyā's biblical description and his role as the forerunner of Jesus.

In *Le Saint Coran*, Muhammad Hamidullah (2000) provides some explanatory notes on Q. 3: 37–40. On Q. 3: 37, he states that "Zechariah" is the father of John the Baptist. He had nothing to do with the prophet, who had a chapter with his name in the Old Testament. Regarding Q. 3: 38, Hamidullah (2000) recommends comparing this story through the Gospel of Luke (1, 5–25), highlighting that the Qur'an only reminds us of the previously known story and is content with making certain points. Regarding "ews of John, confirming a Word from God" on Q.3:39, he remarks that the "word" here means both God's command and Jesus himself (Hamidullah 2000). As the above shows, Hamidullah has not any hesitation to make a reference to Gospel of Luke in his notes, interestingly noting that the Qur'an only reminds us of the previously known story. As Hamidullah lived in the

West for a long time, it seems that he aimed to address the Western people as an audience and adopted a comparative approach by comparing certain topics of the Qur'an with other religions and cultures. However, his detailed approach to other religions or Bible references are beyond the scope of this article. In addition, he does not look to rationalize miraculous extraordinary events in the story like Asad did.

In the introduction to his annotated translation of the Qur'an, Suat Yıldırım (2006) provides some major characteristics of his Qur'an translation. In this context, he emphasizes that at times he touched on parallels with existing Torah and biblical texts merely for the purpose of comparison and for demonstration of the places other scriptures have on the same topics rather than interpretation. He also refers to other exegetes who adopted a similar method of citing other scriptures for the purpose of comparison such as Rashīd Riḍā, Ibn Āshūr, and Muhammad Hamidullah. On Q. 3: 41, Yıldırım makes a reference to Luke, 1, 20. Regarding Q. 19: 2–15, he provides some biblical references to certain verses. He refers to Luke, 1, 5–25 for Q. 19: 2; 1 Chronicles, 23 for Q. 19: 5–6; Luke, 1, 5–22 for Q. 19: 7; Luke, 1, 5–22 for Q. 19: 15. Finally, at the end of the story of Prophet Yaḥyā, Yıldırım (2006) makes a brief comparison between the Qur'anic and biblical narratives, stressing that there are just two differences between the stories of the Qur'an and Gospel: 1. Zachariah's being not able to communicate is a sign in the Qur'an, but it is a type of punishment in according to Luke's Gospel. 2. This took 3 days according to the Qur'an, however, in Luke's Gospel, Zachariah did not communicate until the birth of John (Yaḥyā). Yıldırım (2006) makes it clear in his introduction that references to the Bible and other scriptures are made for the purpose of comparison and to be aware of the information and contents of other scriptures as the Qur'an makes references to Torah, Gospel, and Palms in many places. Yıldırım's Qur'an translation adopts a unique style. In many cases, the translation just provides references to the Bible in the relevant parts without citing them, and examination and comparison are left to readers. In his translation, Yıldırım applies for the modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible. However, he follows the mainstream traditional line without attempting to rationalize and demythologize miraculous extraordinary events.

From a comparative theology perspective, it could be concluded that our selected authors above attempt to perform interreligious learning by direct citations from the Bible in their respective works. They believe the importance of intertextual readings and interreligious learning in the contemporary context and globalized, pluralist world. However, their level of engagement with the others' scriptures seems different. At this point, as Kaya (2013) highlights, the crucial question is that on which contexts and purposes the Bible is cited/referenced in modern Qur'an commentaries? If the biblical texts are cited merely for the purpose of comparison and what do other scriptures have on the same topics, this could be considered as more intertextual dialogue or a history of religions because comparative theology is considered as broader advancing of theological understanding and advancing religious truth, not only just understanding (Cornille 2019). The level of understanding could be more related to Scriptural Reasoning. Moreover, in 'Abduh's case, if the purpose is citing the Bible as the modern source of *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), this could be a closer engagement and deeper reading as 'Abduh believes that it needs to be relied on others' own books/scriptures during the interpretation of the relevant parts of the Qur'an (Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā 1947, p. 18). In addition, it could be highlighted that the context of our selected authors affected their level of engagement with the others' scriptures in their works.

Finally, as indicated in the introduction, samples of interreligious learning took place in several fields of Islamic studies. Besides certain examples of mysticism (sufism) and ethics in the classical period, it should be noted that knowledge in some *isrā'iliyyāt* reports is considered reliable and acceptable in the history of Qur'anic exegesis and the genre of stories of prophets (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā*). Though Ibn al-Kathīr was critical of using *isrā'iliyyāt* in his Qur'an commentary, he included some biblical narratives about Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) in his stories of prophets collection. The field of Islamic jurisprudence could be

another example as the laws preceding Islam (*shar'u man qablanā*) are considered one of the secondary sources of Islamic Jurisprudence. The previous laws can be used as evidence if the laws are mentioned in the Qur'ān and Sunnah without being identifiably rejected or abrogated (Kamali 2003).

4. Conclusions

This article has analyzed Prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) in the Qur'an in the light of the exegetical tradition and certain Qur'an commentaries. A brief historical overview of using *isrā'iliyyāt* reports (related to biblical materials) in the interpretation of the Qur'an, along with a modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible were also examined. As a case study, this article also focused on 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā's Qur'an commentary, and three annotated translations of the Qur'an, namely Muhammed Asad, Muhammad Hamidullah, and Suat Yıldırım, regarding two chapters (Q. 3: 39–41 and Q. 19: 2–15) and evaluated their approaches to the story of Yaḥyā/John the Baptist in the Qur'an.

This article has emphasized that the narrative of Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) indicated a similar story between Islamic and Christian Scriptures, and commonalities should be seen as a bridge between Islam and Christianity while being aware of the fact that some distinct differences are also present. This article has also highlighted that there have been examples of learning across religious borders in the Islamic tradition. Closer intertextual readings, deeper learning from each other, and mutual illuminations could be a good model for the Muslim world in today's globalized world as home tradition could be better understood through looking at other traditions. Narratives on common figures or teachings on common themes of humanity in different traditions may provide different perspectives and insights.

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Notes

- ¹ The Laws preceding Islam (*shar'u man qablanā*) is considered one of the secondary sources of Islamic Jurisprudence. There are some previous rulings which are valid and binding onto Muslims as well. One example is Q. 2: 183: "O you who believe! Prescribed for you is the Fast, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may deserve God's protection". The previous laws can be used as evidence if the laws are mentioned in the Qur'ān and Sunnah without being identifiably rejected or abrogated. This is the majority of Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali, and some Shafi'i jurists. Also, as another example, Hanafis validated the execution of a Muslim for murdering a non-Muslim due to 'life for life' (Q. 5: 45: "In the Torah We prescribed for them a life for a life . . . ") (Kamali 2003).
- ² The figure of John in the Bible is enigmatic, and there have been numerous studies on him. As some examples, see; Josephine Wilkinson's *John the Baptist: His Life and Afterlife* (2022), Frederick Brotherton Meyer's *John the Baptist* (2022), Wonjoo Hwang's "A Comparative Study of Zakariya/Zachariah and Yahya/John the Baptist in the Islamic and the Biblical Narratives" (2022), Małgorzata Grzegorzewska's "The forerunners St. John the Baptist and Lazarus in the poetry of T. S. Eliot" (2020), Joel Marcus's *John the Baptist in History and Theology* (2018), Dorothy A. Lee's "Witness in the Fourth Gospel: John the Baptist and the Beloved Disciple as the Counterparts" (2013), Jaroslav Rindoš's *He of Whom it is Written: John the Baptist and Elijah in Luke* (2010), Rivka Nir's "Josephus' Account of John the Baptist: A Christian Interpolation?" (2012), Francois P. Viljoen's "The righteousness of Jesus and John the Baptist as depicted by Matthew" (2013).

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