Dyed in Virtue: The Qur'ān and Plato's *Republic*

Juan Cole

THE QUR'ĀN'S CHAPTER "The Cow" contains a verse (2:138) having to do with believers being dyed with the dye of God, which has occasioned speculation both among Muslim exegetes and academic scholars. I translate it this way: "The dye of God! Who is better than God as a dye? – and we are His worshippers." The first instance of the word *ṣibgha* or "dye" is a noun, with God in the genitive. It is the dye *of* God that is being praised. But in the second phrase, God himself seems to be spoken of as the dye.

Although the construction seems unusual, our earliest lexicographic aids confirm this interpretation. One of the first Arabic dictionaries, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn* of al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (718–786 CE), defines *ṣabagha* as "to dye."[1] The noun, *al-ṣabgh*, is defined as "that with which clothes are dyed." The associated profession, he says, is *al-ṣabbāgh*, the dyer. Another meaning is "that with which something is tinged" (*mā yuṣṭabaghu*), such as food. That is, it can mean to add a condiment (*yu'tadamu*). This latter meaning is exemplified in the only other Qur'ān verse to use the *ṣ-b-gh* root. "The Believers" (23:20) says that God sends down rain to water gardens, orchards, "and a tree issuing from the Mount of Sinai that bears oil and seasoning (*ṣibghin*) for all to eat."[2] The relationship between dyes and seasoning provides

[1] Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, ed. ʿA. Hindāwī, I–IV (Beirut 2003) II 377.

[2] A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* I–II (New York 1955) II 38.

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a clue to the meaning of this root, which has to do with imbuing one thing with attributes of another or dipping one thing in another.

Because of the atomistic approach to exegesis common among Muslim commentators on the Qur'ān, perhaps, scholars have often lost sight of the context. The verse about being dyed with the dye of God comes in the course of an argument against religious exclusivism, condemning the belief that only followers of a particular monotheistic religion can hope to be saved. It comes at the end of a controversy with Jews and Christians ("The Cow" 2:135–140):

> They said, "Be Jews or Christians in order to be guided." Say: "Rather, the Logos (*milla*) of Abraham the gentile monotheist; he was no polytheist." Say, "We have believed in God and what was revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We do not make any distinction among any one of them, and we have submitted to Him. If they have believed in something similar to what you have believed in, then they have been guided, but if they turn away, they are merely in dissent. God suffices you against them, and He is hearing, knowing. The dye of God! Who is better than God as a dye? – and we are His worshippers. Do you dispute with us about God, when He is our Lord and your Lord? To us our works and to you your works. We are sincere to Him. Or do you maintain that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes were Jews or Christians? Say, "Do you know better, or God? Who is more unjust than one who conceals with himself a testimony from God? Nor is God unaware of what you do."

The passage counterposes Jewish and Christian salvific exclusivism to the Qur'ān's monotheistic pluralism, in which all righteous believers in the one God who follow the way or Logos of Abraham are eligible for salvation.[3] This pluralism is

[3] For exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in the theology of other

clearly related to the notion of being dyed with the dye of God. But how?

I will argue that one key to the meaning of the verse is provided by the use of *milla*, a loan into Arabic from the Aramaic *meltā* ("word"), which in turn is a loanshift from the Greek Logos. Becker notes, "stemming from ambiguities in the use of the Greek Logos, the relation between words for 'speech' and 'reason' in Syriac would have contributed to this confusion: *meltā* means 'word, 'speech' or 'reason'…"[4] The Hellenic philosophical underpinning becomes clear if we translate the second part of the verse this way: "Say: 'Rather, the Logos of Abraham, the gentile monotheist; he was no polytheist'."[5] A rich tradition exists in the Platonic traditions of discussing how particular beings are dyed or colored by the eternal Forms such as the Logos, and I will attempt here to show its relevance to this Qur'ān passage. It was not necessary to be a sectarian Platonist or 'Neoplatonist' to adopt these terms, and they came to suffuse Christian literature as well. It is not far-fetched that an echo of this imagery became proverbial among the peoples of the Eastern Roman Empire, including among Arabic-speakers.

ṣabagha has a cognate in Aramaic, however, that was borrowed for "to baptize" by some ninth- and tenth-century

religions see Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London 1983), and *Thinking about Religious Pluralism: Shaping Theology of Religions for Our Times* (Minneapolis 2015).

[4] Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia 2013) 135; see also Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda 1938) 268–269; F. Buhl and C. E. Bosworth, "Milla," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*[2] (online 2012, consulted 21 August 2021).

[5] For *ḥanīf* as "gentile" in the sense of someone outside the biblical tradition, and its Aramaic background, see François de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *BSOAS* 65 (2002) 1–30.

Arabophone Christians, but it is not attested earlier. It should be noted that the more common Christian Arabic word for baptism is instead *al-maʿmūdiyya*, influenced by the Syriac usage in the Peshitta. Some academics, holding a theory that Islam originated in Syriac Christianity, came to see the verse as an echo of this Christian theme.[6] A. J. Arberry thus translated it "The baptism of God; and who is there that baptizes fairer than God? Him we are serving."[7] Even the ninth-century Muslim commentator Ṭabarī contrasted the baptism of Christians with this verse, saying that that the Qur'ān says the best *ṣibgha* is Islam, the monotheism of the Abrahamic tradition.[8]

Sean W. Anthony has shown that *ṣabagha* here is better translated as "to dye," and has argued persuasively against translating the word as "to baptize."[9] He does not, however, fully relinquish the latter possibility, pointing to late-antique Christian usages that connect dyeing the soul with baptism. (The Greek terms for "to dye" and "to baptize" are etymologically related.)

One problem for seeing the term as connected to baptism is that the Qur'ān nowhere shows an interest in baptism in a Christian context and is similarly uninterested in most aspects of the Christian ritual calendar. Moreover, in its context the passage is not arguing for the relevance of Christian ritual, but instead is saying that both the Jewish and Christian traditions are particular rather than universal. What is universal is the Logos of Abraham. Jews and Christians are reprimanded for attempting to appropriate for narrow sectarian purposes this

[6] See literature cited in Sean W. Anthony, "Further Notes on the Word *Ṣibgha* in Qur'ān 2:138," *JSS* 59 (2014) 117–129, at 123–124.

[7] Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* I 45.

[8] Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan tawīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turk, I (Cairo 2001) 603.

[9] Anthony, *JSS* 59 (2014) 121–124

universal, exemplified by the patriarchs, which the Qur'ān, like Paul (Gal 3:17), sees as preceding Judaism per se, thus "Or do you maintain that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes were Jews or Christians?"

James A. Bellamy also rejected the meaning "baptism": "It is to me inconceivable that one should find in the Koran the name of a Christian sacrament used—even metaphorically—for Islam." His proposed solution, of emending the text so that we read *ṣanīʿa* (favor) for *ṣibgha*, however, seems to me unsupported and unnecessary.[10] Here I will argue that the Qur'ān's *ṣabagha* means "to dye" and has nothing at all to do with baptism but rather has a context in Near Eastern discourses at least vaguely inflected by metaphors and usages that were commonplaces in antiquity.[11]

Late-antique Hellenism

While finding echoes of Plato in the Qur'ān may at first blush seem unlikely, I would argue that nothing could be more natural if we see the Muslim scripture not as the product of an isolated inner Arabia but rather as a text of late antiquity. I have found echoes of a *Novel* of Justinian in the Qur'ān and

[10] James A. Bellamy, "Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran," *JAOS* 113 (1993) 562–573, at 570–571. The studies of the Nabataean and Safaitic inscriptions since Bellamy's time, the discovery of seventh-century Qur'ān MSS. and palaeographical studies, and the newly discovered wealth of early Islamic rock inscriptions around Mecca and Medina have changed the way scholars look at the text. An example is the fate of Bellamy's proposal to emend *al-raqīm* in Q. 18:9 ("Al-Raqīm or al-Ruqūd? A Note on Sūrah 18:9," *JAOS* 111 [1991] 115–117), which foundered when May Shaddel demonstrated that it is simply the Nabataean Aramaic term for the city of Petra: Mehdy Shaddel, "Studia Onomastica Coranica: Al-Raqīm, Caput Nabataeae," *JSS* 62 (2017) 303–318; see also Marijn van Putten, " 'The Grace of God' as Evidence for a Written Uthmanic Archetype: The Importance of Shared Orthographic Idiosyncrasies," *BSOAF* 82 (2019) 271–288.

[11] I first made this suggestion in my *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the Clash of Empires* (New York 2018) 113 and 287 n.53.

have suggested tracing the word "Islam" itself through the Aramaic *mashlmānūtā* to the Greek παράδοσις.[12] For another instance, ch. 31 of the Qur'ān, "Luqmān," breathes such an ambience. It has been suggested that Luqmān is the Arabic for Alcmaeon of Croton (fl. ca. 475 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher who influenced Plato and is mentioned by Galen.[13] He asserted that while the gods have certain knowledge of the world, human beings are limited to conjecture. He also held that the soul is immortal because it is in motion. He distinguished between perception and understanding and identified the brain as the seat of the latter. For this reason, he thought, the head is the first part of the embryo to form.[14] Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria cited Alcmaeon. It is possible that a tradition grew up in late antiquity of attributing to him wisdom sayings, extrapolating from his interest in the brain, mind, and embryos to an assumption that he interested himself in child development, and depicting him as having monotheistic tendencies. Such a text on the upbringing of children, attributed to the Crotoniate, seems to be paraphrased in the Qur'ān. Qur'ān 31:12 might best be translated, "We be-

[12] Juan Cole, "Muhammad and Justinian: Roman Legal Traditions and the Qur'ān," *JNES* 79 (2020) 183–196, and "Paradosis and Monotheism: A Late Antique Approach to the Meaning of *islām* in the Quran," *BSOAS* 82 (2019) 405–425. In general for this approach see Cole, *Muhammad*, and Zishan Ghaffar, *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext* (Paderborn 2020); the essays in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context* (London 2008), *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: the Qurʾān in its Historical Context* II (Abingdon 2011), and in Angelika Neuwirth et al. (eds.), *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (Leiden 2010).

[13] Jan M. F. van Reeth, "Sourate 31: Luqmān," in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi et al. (eds.), *Le coran des historiens* III (Paris 2019) 1097–1108; Mahmud Muftic, "Which Oath? Luqman's as given in the Qur'ān or Hippocrates's?" *The Islamic Review and Arab Affairs* (1968) 6–8.

[14] W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* I (Cambridge 1962) 341–355.

stowed philosophy [*al-ḥikma* = φιλοσοφία] on Alcmaeon: 'Give thanks to God'." If this identification of Luqmān as Alcmaeon is correct, it further suggests a late antique philosophical context for some quranic vocabulary and ideas.

The supposed cultural and linguistic isolation of the Hejaz or Western Arabia is an artifact of the Abbasid-era Muslim authors about early Islam, some of whom had moved east to Baghdad and who had little in-depth understanding of the early seventh century. Some large Arabophone tribes spanned the Near East and the Hejaz. Bosworth wrote:[15]

> At the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the land of Madyan fell within the territories in modern southern Syria, Jordan and the northern Hijaz as far south as Tabuk and the Wādī 'l-Qurā, which were held by the extensive tribal group of Judhām … Some elements at least of the tribe had become sedentarised in the regions of Moab (ʿAmman-Maʿan) and Madyan. The Judhām and their sister-tribes were amongst the Arab confederates (*mustaʿriba*) of the Byzantines, employed by the Emperors as frontier guards against the pressure of nomadic groups from the deep desert of northern Arabia, and, to a superficial extent, were in part Christianised … They fought for Heraclius under a Ghassānid commander at the Battle of the Yarmuk in 15/636.

That forms of knowledge and turns of phrase circulated from the Christian Banū Judhām, with their familiarity with Hellenic culture, to their cousins in the middle Hejaz is at least plausible. Evidence for the continued use of Greek in Western Arabia and the Transjordan also exists. A team of archaeologists has discovered Greek inscriptions in the northern Hejaz.[16]

[15] C. E. Bosworth, "Madyan Shuʿayb in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Lore and History," *JSS* 29 (1984) 53–64, at 56.

[16] François Villeneuve, "The Greek Inscriptions at al-ʿArniyyāt and Umm Jadhāyidh," in Laïla Nehmé (ed.), *The Darb al-Bakrah, A Caravan Route in North-West Arabia discovered by Ali I. al-Ghabban: Catalogue of the Inscriptions* (Riyadh 2019) 285–292.

Another made a revolutionary archaeological find in the 1990s of documents in the basement of a sixth-century church in the Transjordan. A fire carbonized them, but the scholars proved able to reconstitute some of the texts as the Petra Papyri.[17] They reveal an Arabophone notable family, proprietors of the church and surrounding lands and orchards, who corresponded with one another in Greek. The Hejaz was a cultural appendage of the Transjordan, sharing a Greco-Roman-Nabataean heritage.

In studies of the Late Roman Near East, as well, some earlier assumptions have been challenged. Classicist Glen Bowersock and Islamicist Aziz al-Azmeh have brought Western Arabia into the same frame as the Eastern Roman Empire in the sixth and seventh centuries.[18] The languages of Greek, western Aramaic, Arabic, and Syriac (eastern Aramaic) jostled with one another and multilingualism was common. Gzella writes of the Roman Levant:[19]

> The westward advance of Syriac in the early Christian period then resulted in an increase of demonstrable contact with Greek, the language that dominated administration, culture, and religion west of the Ḥauran … instances of linguistic convergence … suggest that exposure to koiné Greek and, consequently, Syriac-Greek bilingualism must have increased quickly in parts of Syria after or perhaps during the first three centuries C.E.

[17] Jaakko Frösén et al., *The Petra Papyri* I–V (Amman 2002–2018), especially Ahmad al-Jallad, "The Arabic of the Petra Papyri," V 35–55; Omar al-Ghul,"Preliminary Notes on the Arabic Material in the Petra Papyri," *Topoi* 14 (2006) 139–169.

[18] See the trilogy: G. W. Bowersock: *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (Waltham 2012), *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford 2013), and *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2017); and Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People* (Cambridge 2014).

[19] Holger Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam* (Leiden 2015) 260.

Arabophone populations in Palestine, the Transjordan, and eastern Syria used both Aramaic and Greek for particular purposes, multilingual practices that may have been accelerated by their Christianization.[20] Christian Arabic itself was more significant and long-lived a cultural phenomenon than had earlier been thought.[21] Polyglot populations engaged in code switching, mixing words, phrases, and sentences in one language with another.[22]

The position of Greek in the late-antique Levant has often been underestimated by historians, but it served as an urban standard in the Near Eastern cities of the Roman Empire.[23] Fergus Millar argued that in parts of Roman Syria some groups appear to have spoken Greek as their mother tongue. He pointed out that all the surviving rock inscriptions from Roman Damascus are in Greek, and rural Greek inscriptions become common, showing use of that language beyond the urban centers.[24] The Roman Near East produced prominent figures in the resurgent empire of Justinian in the sixth century who wrote memorably in Greek. Choricius of Gaza and his

[20] Gzella, *A Cultural History* 242–246.

[21] Robert Hoyland, "Mount Nebo, Jabal Ramm, and the Status of Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Old Arabic in Late Roman Palestine and Arabia," in M. C. A. Macdonald (ed.), *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language* (Oxford 2010) 29–46.

[22] Peter Auer (ed.), *Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction and Identity* (London 2013); John J. Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies* (Cambridge 1982).

[23] Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II* (Berkeley 2006), and "The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?" *JECS* 21 (2013) 43–92 and sources cited; see also Ahmad al-Jallad and Ali al-Manaser, "New Epigraphica from Jordan II: Three Safaitic-Greek Partial Bilingual Inscriptions," *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 2 (2016) 55–66.

[24] Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 B.C.–A.D. 337* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1993) 311–314.

school in the early part of the century were praised for the purity of their Greek rhetoric.[25] The historian Procopius, a Palestinian from Caesarea Maritima, may have been a covert pagan.[26] The philosopher Damascius (ca. 480–550 CE), the last head of the Athens Academy before it closed, in part because Justinian withdrew his financial support, hailed from Damascus and had loyal followers in Bostra.[27] Although the poet and historian Agathias was born in Asia Minor, he studied law in Alexandria. The provincial Christian Arabophone family that produced the Petra papyri in the Transjordan, who corresponded extensively in Greek throughout the sixth century, probably learned epistolary Greek from the *paideia*. Even where Near Easterners did not cultivate Greek directly, some brought Greek learning into Syriac and Aramaic, as at Nisibis.[28] The Hejaz had extensive economic and cultural relationships with the Roman Near East.

Muslim tradition

The great Qur'ān interpreter Ṭabarī (d. 923) says that some commentators translated *ṣibgha* as *dīn*, "religion."[29] Others, he said, interpreted it as the *fiṭra*, "innate character" according to which God fashioned the souls of human beings. He concludes (approvingly I think):

> Those who made this assertion made *al-ṣibgha* refer to *al-fiṭra* (innate character). Its meaning is thus, "Rather we follow the

[25] Jan R. Stenger, "The Public Intellectual according to Choricius of Gaza, or How to Circumvent the Totalizing Christian Discourse," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 10 (2017) 454–472.

[26] Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia 2004) 170–173.

[27] Damascius, *The Philosophical History*, ed. and transl. Polymnia Athanassiadi (Athens 1999); Polymnia Athanassiadi, "Persecution and Response in Late Paganism: The Evidence of Damascius," *JHS* 113 (1993) 1–29.

[28] Becker, *Fear of God* 126–139.

[29] Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* I 604–605.

> innate character of God and his *milla*, according to which he created his creation, and that is the upstanding religion (*al-dīn al-qayyim*), as God said, 'the fashioner (*al-fāṭir*) of the heavens and the earth', with the meaning, 'creator of the heavens and the earth'."

In this possible interpretation of the verse, which Ṭabarī seems to endorse, there is an implicit reference to the hadith, "No child is born except in accordance with innate character (*al-fiṭra*), but its parents make it Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian."[30] This innate character, Ṭabarī says, is exemplified in the *milla* of Abraham and in God's *ṣibgha*, so that both have connotations of "godly character." *ṣabagha* is also related by Ṭabarī to *faṭara*, to create or to endow something with a certain character.[31]

The later Sufi commentary tradition saw the verse as about the relationship of God to the soul. Rashīd al-Dīn Qushayrī (d. 1072) of Nishapur accepted that the reference to the "dye of God" equated to the character (*al-fiṭra*) that God instilled in the individual, which in turn, he says, refers to moral example (*al-ʿibra*). The dye of the outward reality of the person, he said, becomes visible through God's support, and the dye of souls is made manifest through the lights of the realization within the believer of the ultimate truth (*anwār al-taḥqīq*).[32] I hold that this Muslim Neoplatonist approach to the meaning of the verse is generally correct, precisely because the verse itself had already been embedded in late-antique Hellenic discourses.

Plato's Republic

I contend that *ṣabagha* is an Arabic loanshift from the Greek

[30] This is my own translation; for the Arabic see https://sunnah.com/muslim:2658b.

[31] Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* I 605–606.

[32] ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-Ishārāt*[2], ed. ʿA. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (Beirut 2007) I 72–73.

βάπτω.[33] LSJ gives as the first definition "to dip"; the second is "to dye." As noted, in Qur'ān 23:20, the condiment is something you dip food into whereas 2:138 speaks of dyeing with the dye of God. That the Arabic has both the meaning of "to dip" and of "to dye," just as in Greek, strongly suggests that we are dealing with a loanshift from Greek into Arabic. There is no intrinsic relationship between dipping and dyeing. The English word "dye," for instance, comes from Old English *deag* ("color, hue") via proto-Germanic **daugo*, which has to do with darkness and secrets.

The Greek philosophical tradition contains usages of the term "to dye" that have implications for how we might read the Qur'ān passage. In the *Republic* Plato explains the importance of training the city's Guardians so that their virtues, such as bravery, become second nature, using the metaphor of dyeing. The *Republic* was a valued and widely read work in the eastern Roman Empire, including by Christians, many in whose literate class continued to cultivate the Greek *paideia*.[34] Plato makes an analogy to dyeing wool in discussing the process whereby the soul acquires virtues:[35]

> "Bravery too, then, belongs to a city by virtue of a part of itself owing to its possession in that part of a quality that under all conditions will preserve the conviction that things to be feared are precisely those which and such as the lawgiver inculcated in their education. Is not that what you call bravery?" "I don't altogether understand what you said," he replied; "but say it again." "A kind of conservation," I said, "is what I mean by

[33] For the notion of Greek loanshifts in the Qur'ān see Juan Cole, "Infidel or Paganus? The Polysemy of *kafara* in the Quran," *JAOS* 140 (2020) 615–635.

[34] Guy Stroumsa, "Scripture and *Paideia* in Late Antiquity," in M. Niehoff (ed.), *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters* (Leiden 2016) 29–41; Lillian I. Larsen et al. (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia* (Cambridge 2018).

[35] *Resp*. 429B–430A, transl. Paul Shorey.

> bravery … You are aware that dyers when they wish to dye wool so as to hold the purple hue begin by selecting from the many colors there be the one nature of the white and then give it a careful preparatory treatment so that it will take the hue in the best way, and after the treatment, then and then only, dip it in the dye. And things that are dyed by this process become fast-colored and washing either with or without lyes cannot take away the sheen of their hues. But otherwise you know what happens to them, whether anyone dips other colors or even these without the preparatory treatment." "I know," he said, "that they present a ridiculous and washed-out appearance." "By this analogy, then," said I, "you must conceive what we too to the best of our ability were doing when we selected our soldiers and educated them in music and exercises of the body."

While Plato wants the citizens of the city to exercise their critical faculties, there are some virtues, such as bravery in defense of it, that he believes need to be made indelible in the soul. Dyeing the psyche in a virtue through drill and education is thus a key metaphor in the Platonic tradition. Plato was speaking of an abstract virtue, bravery, which in his thought would be a form or idea. The ideas subsisted in an unchanging and eternal world, and things of earth reflected or participated in them. A brave man was thus a man imbued with the form or idea of bravery.

Forms of βάπτω were used for abstract ideals by other authors. Plutarch (d. after 119 CE), in his *Life of Phocion*, observed, "Zeno used to say that a philosopher should utter his words while dipping them in meaning" (ὁ Ζήνων ἔλεγεν, ὅτι δεῖ τὸν φιλόσοφον εἰς νοῦν ἀποβάπτοντα προφέρεσθαι τὴν λέξιν).[36] Words themselves, then, need to be dipped in or dyed by abstract ideals such as meaning.

Caesar Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180), as well, underlined the connection between dyeing, thinking, and virtue in his *Medi-*

[36] *Phoc.* 5.1; transl. Bernadotte Perrin.

tations:[37]

> Your mind will come to resemble your frequently repeated thoughts, because it takes on the hue of its thoughts. Dye your mind (βάπτεται γὰρ ὑπὸ τῶν φαντασιῶν ἡ ψυχή), then, with a succession of ideas such as the following: Wherever it's possible to live, it's possible to live well; it's possible to live in a palace; therefore, it's possible to live well in a palace.

This Stoic use of the notion of dyeing the psyche by repeatedly imagining a virtue differs somewhat from the Platonic metaphor. Here it is the internal thoughts of a calming nature that are repeated to compose the mind and to dye it. Still, it speaks to the improvement of character through taking on a higher coloration and so resembles the Platonic (and quranic) concerns.

Even closer to the diction of the Qur'ān is a passage from the Syrian Pythagorean Numenius of Apamea (fl. mid-second century CE). Speaking of the divine First Principle, Numenius says: "If those who participate, participate [in the Good], it is by nothing other than thought." He adds that this divine First Principle emanates the Second, which is good, not intrinsically, but from the First. This is also true of all other things as well: "If then that from which the other things take their color (ἀποχραίνεται), and by which the other things are rendered good, – if that, and that alone appertains to the First, and to him alone, it would be foolish to doubt about this any longer."[38] This Pythagorean idea that all things are given their "color" and goodness by the one God resonates closely with Qur'ān 2:138.

Numenius believed that the major wisdom traditions of the world had an underlying unity despite their outward variety. Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) quoted him as having said,

[37] *Med.* 5.16, transl. Robin Waterfield.

[38] Fr.19 des Places; transl. Walter Scott, *Hermetica* II (Oxford 1925) 85 n.2–3.

"What is Plato other than Moses speaking Attic Greek?"[39] He also thought that the Hindus, Zoroastrians, and Egyptians were basically in agreement with Plato.[40] This belief that the wisdom traditions were ultimately in some way monotheistic, and that they taught the Good just as did Plato, foreshadows the Qur'ān's soteriological pluralism, which holds that righteous Jews, Christians, and Muḥammad's believers, as well as the ancient patriarchs, and perhaps Zoroastrians as well ("Pilgrimage" 22:17), could attain paradise if they recognized the one God and his Word or Logos, as taught primally by Abraham himself.

Late Antiquity

Plotinus, as well, uses the diction of color when speaking of the participation of particulars in the eternal, pristine Forms, such as beauty. He asks, "Where did the beauty of the Helen who was fought over actually radiate from, or those women who are said to be beautiful as Aphrodite?" (*Enn.* 5.8.2). The Form of Beauty is participated in by things in the intelligible world "so as to make them beautiful, too, in the way that human beings often when ascending to high country are infused with the golden colour of the terrain there, and, filled with that colour, they begin to resemble the ground on which they have walked" (5.8.10).[41] While he does not use the verb "to dye" here, Plotinus is clearly speaking of particulars absorbing the form of eternal Beauty by analogy with the way hikers take on the hue of the dusty hilltops they tread.

Subsequent thinkers repeated Plato's image of preparing

[39] Clem. *Strom.* 1.22.150.4 = Numenius fr.8: Νουμήνιος δὲ ὁ Πυθαγόρειος φιλόσοφος ἄντικρυς γράφει "τί γάρ ἐστι Πλάτων ἢ Μωυσῆς ἀττικίζων;" Cf. Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca 2013) 208.

[40] Numenius fr.1a: Πλάτωνι ὁμολογουμένως, ὁπόσας Βραχμᾶνες καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ Μάγοι καὶ Αἰγύπτιοι διέθεντο. See also Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* 210.

[41] Transl. Lloyd P. Gerson et al., *Plotinus, The Enneads* (Cambridge 2017) 611, 621.

cloth to be fast-dyed so that the colors would not later fade as a metaphor for preparing students to receive indelible virtues. The Syrian philosopher Iamblichus (ca. 245–ca. 325 CE), born near Antioch but said to hail from an "Arab" royal family of Emesa (Homs), wrote a biography of Pythagoras. Therein he told the story of how Lysis of Taras (fl. fifth century BCE), a disciple of the master, scolded a certain Hipparchus for divulging the group's teachings to mere adherents, rather than only those who had undertaken a five-year course of silence and study. Iamblichus attributes to Lysis the following discourse:[42]

> Think how long a time we spent discussing the stains which were ingrained in our breasts, until, with the passage of the years, we were able to receive his words. As dyers (βαφείς) cleanse and treat with a mordant the parts of this garment which need to be dyed, so that the dye will be fast and will never fade or be lost in the wash, so that wonderful man prepared the souls of those who had fallen in love with wisdom, so that he should not be disappointed in one of those he hoped would become good men.

Here, the period of apprenticeship where the initiate takes a vow of silence for half a decade and engages in other forms of discipline of the self is likened to the treatment dyers give cloth before they dye it to ensure that it remains colorfast. Lysis rebuked Hipparchus for skipping this step and so opening these would-be Pythagoreans to having their colors run.

Christians steeped in Hellenic learning also used the metaphor. Basil of Caesarea-Mazaca, ironically enough, used it to argue for the need of Christians to study the pagan Greek heritage:[43]

[42] *V.Pythag.* 17.76, ed. Ludwig Deubner with Ulrich Klein (Leipzig 1937) 43–44; transl. Gillian Clark, *Iamblichus: On the Pythagorean Life* (Liverpool 1989) 33.

[43] Basil, *Aux jeunes gens sur la manière de tirer profit des lettres helléniques*, ed.

> We give, as it were in shadows and reflections, a preliminary training to the eye of the soul, imitating those who perform their drills in military tactics, who, after they have gained experience by means of gymnastic exercises for the arms and dance-steps for the feet, enjoy when it comes to the combat the profit derived from what was done in sport. So we also must consider that a contest, the greatest of all contests, lies before us, for which we must do all things, and, in preparation for it, must strive to the best of our power, and must associate with poets and writers of prose and orators and with all men from whom there is any prospect of benefit with reference to the care of the soul. Therefore, just as dyers first prepare by certain treatments whatever material is to receive the dye, and then apply the colour, whether it be purple or some other hue, so we also in the same manner must first, if the glory of the good is to abide with us indelible for all time, be instructed by these outside means, and then shall understand the sacred and mystical teachings; and like those who have become accustomed to seeing the reflection of the sun in water, so we shall then direct our eyes to the light itself.

This passage is deeply influenced by the discussion in the *Republic*, as is clear from the vocabulary used. Now, however, the Guardians of the city are the Christian believers and exposure to the Hellenic heritage is the fixative that will, upon the application of the dye of faith in Christ, ensure that the latter is colorfast. Basil had studied philosophy in the pagan academy in Athens but then lived through the brief reign of Julian the Apostate, during which Christians were forbidden to study or teach the Greek classics, and his determination to justify this activity is apparent in this text.

Likewise, Ps.-Chrysostom in the fifth century appealed to the analogy of dying wool repeatedly to make the colors fast—to the extent, he said, that afterwards we no long speak of the

Fernand Boulenger (Paris 1935) 43; transl. Roy J. Defarrari and Martin R. P. McGuire, in Saint Basil, *The Letters* (Cambridge 1939) IV 383–385.

material as mere wool but call it after its new, colorful reality. In the same way, he said, the human soul needs to be immersed repeatedly in divine words (θείοις λόγοις) as a way of washing away old imperfections and endowing it with a new, polychrome beauty.[44] In this text, being exposed to divine words, that is, scripture quotations and sermons, is associated with the dyeing of the soul, a metaphor that resembles the themes of "The Cow" 2:135–140.

Logos

Being dyed with the dye of God in 2:138 is clearly related, as Anthony argued, to the *milla* of Abraham. *milla* here is an Aramaic loan that bears the connotations of the Greek Logos, including the cosmic principle of reason generating the universe, and a religious path to that truth. It implies reasoned speech, and speech that prescribes a rule and behavior, that is, it is a statement of principle. The principle, in turn, is a ground of being. In this case, the Logos of Abraham is the acknowledgment of God's indivisible oneness along with willingness to submit to his will. In the Qur'ān, it is characteristic of Judaism, Christianity, and the religion of Muḥammad rather than being a proprietary attribute of any one religion. All members of the monotheistic communities can thereby be saved: "Those who believed, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, and whoever has believed in God and the Last Day and performed good works, they shall have their reward with their Lord" ("The Cow" 2:62).

Mario Baghos has argued that the Middle Platonic conception of the Logos was a powerful element of Hellenic globalization throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East from the time of Alexander to the rise of Christianity.[45]

[44] Ps.-Chrysos. *De fide et lege naturae* 2, *PG* 48.1083–1084.

[45] Mario Baghos, "Hellenistic Globalisation and the Metanarrative of the Logos," *Modern Greek Studies* (2012) 23–37.

For thinkers of this era writing in Greek, the Logos had many aspects. Among the more important was the idea that divine Reason was part of the structure of the universe. Hence, when humans engage in speech (Logos) in accordance with cosmic Reason (Logos), they are participating in its eternal Form. Many also saw the Logos as a demiurge, as the instrument whereby God fashioned the physical world, which hence left its impact on its work.

Here, it is worth pointing to three contexts for the idea of the Logos of Abraham that may be pertinent to the Qur'ān as contributors to the discourses and figures of speech circulating in the Roman Near East and its frontiers in the early seventh century. The first comes from Philo, the Jewish writer who was widely read and cited by Christians. They carefully preserved his oeuvre because they saw in it a foreshadowing of Christianity or because they valued an earlier attempt to reconcile the biblical and Hellenic heritages. In his *On the Migration of Abraham*, Philo says that the "blessing" (εὐλογία, or literally, "good Word") bestowed by God on Abraham (Gen 12:2) means "I will endow you with excellent reason and speech (λόγον)." He points out that in the Greek Septuagint, "blessing" is a compound noun consisting of the words for "good" and "speech." Logos, he says, has two aspects, an internal one, in which it means "reason," and an external one, in which it means "utterance." Each of these, he says, reinforces the other, since it is possible to arrive at a superb piece of reasoning without being able properly to express it. Likewise, some people are great orators but express deficient, even evil thoughts, as with the Sophists. Philo insists that God's blessing on Abraham bestowed on him excellence in both types of Logos (*Migr.Abr.* 70–71). Later in the essay Philo quotes Gen 12:4, "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him," interpreting it as saying that Abraham went in accordance with the nature of reality, which is the path praised by the elite of philosophers. He continues that this way "is attained whenever the mind (νοῦς), having entered on

the path of virtue, walks the trail of right Reason (λόγου) and follows God" (128).

Philo thus strongly associates Abraham with the divinely ordained universal Reason or Word. Phoebe Makiello writes, "Philo views the righteous man as one able to benefit the rest of humankind by healing soul-wounds, left by the sword edge of vices … Curing soul-wounds is moreover understood by Philo as equivalent to restoring someone's reason, which is a prerequisite for any apprehension that there is a God, the first step towards a virtuous life." She believes that in Philo, the supplication of the wise man benefits all humankind, and that, indeed, the wise exemplar of the Logos need not be Jewish. She points to Philo's allegorical and universalist understanding of Genesis 12:3b, "and in you all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed" (*Migr.Abr.* 118–121).[46] In the Qur'ān, as well, the Word of Abraham has soteriological implications for all monotheists, whatever their particular religion, even for gentiles born outside of the biblical traditions. Whether or not this phrase of Philo's, taken into Aramaic in Judaism and Christianity as the *meltā* of Abraham, lies in the background of the quranic usage, these passages demonstrate that such conceptions existed and were widely known in late antiquity.

Another passage that is suggestive for the phrase "the Logos of Abraham" in the Qur'ān comes from the Christian Middle Platonist Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165). He accepted the Stoic doctrine that divine Reason had been seeded throughout the creation (λόγος σπερματικός). He argued that before the incarnation, humans were under the judgment of the abstract Logos, that is, reasoned words and action in accordance with the truth of God. He held that the early philosophers Heraclitus and Socrates lived in accordance with the Logos as did

[46] Phoebe Makiello, "Abraham and the Nations in the Works of Philo of Alexandria," in Martin Goodman et al. (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites* (Leiden 2010) 139–161, quotations at 150, 155–156.

figures of the Old Testament such as Abraham and Elijah, and that they were therefore saved Christians *avant la lettre*.[47] In Justin Martyr, as in Philo, we thus find an explicit mention of a Logos of Abraham, which rendered the patriarch a "Christian" before the fact (*Apol.* 1.46):[48]

> In case some should … accuse us of holding that all men who preceded him [Christ] were not responsible for their deeds, we will anticipate and resolve this question. We have been taught that Christ was First-begotten of God and we have indicated above that he is the Word (Logos), in which the entire human race participates. Those who lived according to the Word were Christians, even if they had been considered atheists: such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, Ananias, Azarias, Misael, and Elijah and many others … So, also, those who preceded Christ and did not live by reason were worthless persons, enemies of Christ, and murderers of those who did live by the Word. But those who lived according to the Word, and still do, are Christians, and are unafraid and unperturbed.

The early sixth-century mystic Ps.-Dionysius also appealed to a Logos theology: "God is praised as 'Logos' by the sacred scriptures not only as the leader of the word [λόγου], mind and wisdom, but because he also initially carries within his own unity the causes of all things and because he penetrates all things, reaching, as scripture says, to the very end of all things … This Word is simple total truth. Divine faith revolves around it because it is pure and unwavering knowledge of all. It is the one sure foundation for those who believe, binding them to the truth . . ."[49]

These passages are only highlighted to demonstrate that the

[47] Eric Francis Osborn, *Justin Martyr* (Tübingen 1973) 37–40.

[48] Transl. Thomas B. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr* (Washington 1965) 83–84.

[49] *Div.Nom.* 7.4; transl. Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works* (New York 1987) 109–110.

notion of a Logos of Abraham was not unprecedented. None of these usages is exactly mirrored in the Qur'ān, though Philo's conception perhaps comes closest. As for Justin Martyr, in the Qur'ān the Logos of Abraham precedes and encompasses the Christian tradition, so in a way the Muslim scripture is reversing Justin's schema.

Color theology

As in Numenius, the Qur'ān has a theology of color, associating it with God's creativity, presumably because primal being was colorless. The *sūra* "Rome" (30:22) says: "Among his signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and complexions. In that are signs for those who know." It is those with gnosis who can discern the sign (*āya*) or σημεῖον of God in the range of colors visible in human beings. Polychromy is itself theophanic. In addition, "The Creator" (35:27–28) says: "Have you not seen how God sends down rains from the heavens? 'Then We produced thereby multi-colored fruit. And in the mountains are veins of white and red of various hues, along with black basalt'. And among the people and animals and livestock are also a range of colors. Only the knowers among His servants stand in awe of God. God is Almighty, Forgiving." Here again, it is those with gnosis who can discern in the colors in nature (as well as in human complexions) the signs of the divine. God is a colorist as well as a dyer.

The polychrome nature of this-worldly reality, and of the human body, is a sign of God in the Qur'ān, and so it is theophanic. As in Numenius, the divine first principle endues all things with color and goodness. This role of God as divine colorist makes sense, in part, of the Qur'ān's assertion that by adopting the Logos of Abraham, believers can be dyed with the dye of God.

Likewise, some divine attributes are participated in, in the Qur'ān, by human beings. "The Heights" (7:180) says: "God has the most beautiful names, so call upon him thereby." God

is Knowing (*al-ʿĀlim*, *al-ʿAlīm*). He is often described as the Knower of the unseen (*ʿĀlim al-ghayb*; e.g. 72:26, 64:18, etc.). So too can be mortals. "The Spider" (29:43) says: "These are parables that we coin for the people, but no one understands (*yaʿqiluhā*) them save for the knowers (*al-ʿālimūn*)." Only through intellection (*ʿaql*) can gnostics perceive the hidden meaning of the Qur'ān's parables. God is called "wise" (*al-Ḥakīm*) ninety-seven times in the Qur'ān. Yet the attribute wisdom (Arabic *al-ḥikmah*; cf. Gr. σοφία) can be bestowed by him on others: "He imparts Wisdom to whomsoever he will, and whoso is given Wisdom, has been given much good; yet none remembers but those endued with understanding" ("The Cow," 2:269). God "inspires" Muḥammad with wisdom ("The Night Journey," 17:39). Just as God is a colorist, endowing formless and opaque things with bright hues, so he "imparts" to human beings or "inspires" them with the divine attributes of knowledge and wisdom. This, too, is a kind of dyeing of the soul.

Conclusion

The phrase in "The Cow" 2:138, "The dye of God! Who is better than God as a dye? – and we are His worshippers" has been difficult for commentators to understand. Anthony showed that the Qur'ān's *ṣabagha* in this passage certainly means "to dye" rather than "to baptize," and this was also the understanding of early Muslim Arab lexicographers. The context of the verse is a demotion of Christianity to one of several monotheistic traditions that exemplify the Logos of Abraham, and Anthony also showed that being dyed by the divine in this verse was connected to the conception of the *milla* of Abraham.

Here I have attempted to show that the metaphor of the soul being dyed in virtue or divine attributes was a commonplace in Hellenic antiquity and late antiquity throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. We saw that Plato's image of dyers using a fixative on white cloth before dyeing them in order to make them colorfast was deployed by Iamblichus and,

for Christian purposes, by Basil the Great in the fourth century, and seems to be evoked by Ps.-Chrysostom in the fifth.

The Logos of Abraham as a concept was explored at length by Philo of Alexandria, whose notion of the patriarch as a monotheistic sage has some resemblance to the image of him in the Qur'ān. In the Qur'ān, this idea is central to the idea of soteriological pluralism for the monotheistic traditions, as is the λόγος σπερματικός of Justin Martyr. Whereas the latter uses this concept to make Abraham and Socrates Christians before the fact, in the Qur'ān Christ and other monotheists are Abrahamians after the fact. The key words in the quotation from Ps.-Dionysius on the divine names—faith, truth, and the "penetration of all things" by the Logos of God—also appear in "The Cow" 2:134–139, where it is implied that it is through being dyed by the divine dye that believers are penetrated by the Logos of Abraham.

I am arguing not for an explicit, tight intertextuality but for a circulation of ideas and figures of speech, both textually and orally, and across languages in the empire and on its frontiers. We see in the Syriac milieu of Nisibis how a wide-ranging engagement with the classical Greek conception of the Logos inflected authors' use of *meltā*, and a similar West Aramaic appropriation of the Logos via *meltā* clearly came into quranic Arabic as *milla*. One plausible path for the adoption of classical Greek figures of speech into vernacular Aramaic and Arabic was popular sermons and homilies. Priests, monks, and bishops formed under the influence of Greek texts clearly did deploy such similes and metaphors in their sermons, and such homilies circulated and were cribbed from by provincial preachers. Koine Greek continued to be widely understood in the Late Roman Near East, but it is also the case that preachers would have interpreted Greek notions into Aramaic and Arabic for their lay audiences. Although the hearers of such sermons and homilies might not have understood the finer philosophical and theological points made by such preachers, it is plausible that

they understood a relatively concrete simile such as dyeing the soul with virtues, and that this notion could have become proverbial among them in their vernaculars. After all, the philosophers took it from observing craftsmen in the first place. Philologists often have spoken as though all the technical terms, images, and metaphors in the Qur'an were Muḥammad's invention, but it is far more likely that the scripture contains long-standing Arabic terminology, sometimes going back to Old Arabic, that had many origins.[50]

The connection between dyeing and words in Plato, Zeno, Basil, and Ps.-Chrysostom reminds us that that the dye of God and the Word of God in the Qur'ān are related, even synonymous. Being imbued with the Logos of Abraham, that is, his monotheistic teaching and devotion to God, is likened to being dyed with God. The Logos and the dye are both pointers to the eternal, perfect realm of the divine in which sublunar Jews, Christians, and Muslims are invited to participate.[51]

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Department of History
University of Michigan
1029 Tisch Hall
435 S. State St.
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1003
jrcole@umich.edu

[50] Cf. Johnny Cheung, "On the Middle Iranian Borrowings in Qur'ānic (and Pre-Islamic) Arabic," in Ahmad al-Jallad (ed.), *Arabic in Context: Celebrating 400 Years of Arabic at Leiden University* (Leiden 2017) 317–333; for Old Arabic see Ahmad al-Jallad and Karolina Jaworska, *A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden 2019).

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