

Replica from an Islamic-theological perspective

von

Vahid Mahdavi Mehr

**Bonn
2024**

Replik aus islamisch-theologischer Sicht
Vahid Mahdavi Mehr
Qom

Zusammenfassung

Mehrs Beitrag stellt eine Weiterentwicklung der Ideen Christoph Chalamets aus muslimischer Perspektive dar. Mehr unterstreicht die Bedeutung nicht-supersessionistischer Koranauslegung als Voraussetzung, das Bundesmotiv in dieser Weise komparativ-theologisch fruchtbar werden zu lassen. Er zeichnet dabei die von Chalamet angestoßene Reflexion über asymmetrische Bünde in den koranischen Bezugstexten nach. In Mehrs Überlegungen kommt das Motiv der einseitigen (Selbst-)Verpflichtung in der koranischen Tradition genauso zu tragen, wie die Idee des noahidischen Bundes und dessen Thematisierung in den Texten des Koran. Damit findet er zahlreiche komparativ-theologische Ansatzpunkte, die das Bundesmotiv für den interreligiösen, akademischen Diskurs ertragreich weiterdenken lassen.

Schlüsselbegriffe

Bund, Koran, Supersessionismus, Asymmetrie göttlicher Bünde

Replica from an Islamic-theological perspective

Abstract

Mehr's contribution offers an elaboration of Christoph Chalamet's ideas from a Muslim perspective. Mehr emphasizes the importance of a non-supersessionist interpretation of the Quran as a precondition for enabling the covenant motif to become fruitful in comparative theology. He briefly discusses the motif of asymmetrical covenants in the Quran. Mehr considers the idea of unilateral (self-)commitment as well as the idea of the Noahide covenant and its implications in the Quranic tradition. He thereby finds some theological aspects that allow the covenant motif to be fruitfully elaborated for comparative theological discourse.

Keywords

Covenant, Quran, supersessionism, asymmetrical covenantal structures

Sumario

La contribución de Mehr representa un nuevo desarrollo de las ideas de Christoph Chalamet desde una perspectiva musulmana. Mehr subraya la importancia de una interpretación no supersesionista del Corán como requisito previo para que el motivo de la alianza resulte fructífero en la teología comparada de este modo. Al hacerlo, sigue la pista de la reflexión sobre las alianzas asimétricas en los textos coránicos de referencia iniciada por Chalamet. En las reflexiones de Mehr entra en juego el motivo del (auto)compromiso unilateral en la tradición coránica, así como la idea de la alianza de Noé y su tematización en los textos del Corán. De este modo, encuentra numerosos puntos de partida teológicos comparativos que permiten desarrollar fructíferamente el motivo de la alianza para el discurso académico interreligioso.

Palabras clave:

Alianza, Corán, supersesionismo, asimetría de las alianzas divinas

Introduction

In his thought-provoking paper, Christophe Chalamet dives into the theological concept most fundamental to an Abrahamic comparative theology, the concept of divine covenants. In this response, I will comment and expand on some of what I find intriguing in Chalamet's paper. I hope this helps the discussion grow inductively. First, I will briefly mention my stance on supersessionism because I believe it is foundational to my arguments. Then, I will expand on a couple of Chalamet's points, thinking loudly about them, so to speak.

Supersessionism

While the Second Vatican Council was being held, resulting in the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*, another declaration was made by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in response to the ongoing council. *Nostra Aetate* opened up ways for meaningful engagements of Catholic Christianity with other religious traditions, trying also to roll back her longstanding theological animosity towards Judaism. Soloveitchik's »Confrontation,« on the other hand, seemed to reject whatever was going to result from the council because he believed this engagement was still supersessionist. If supersessionism persisted in any shape or form, an encounter between two religious traditions required one party to leave their frames of reference in favor of the other. In that case, Soloveitchik proposed, »The confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level.«¹ Supersessionism is the decisive factor in differentiating between inter-religious or interfaith dialogue and comparative theology. For dialogue to be fruitful, it needs only to promote tolerance, mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence. This can be done even if the two parties believe each other to be in the wrong and could be done at »a mundane human level.« In theology, on the other hand, supersessionism negates the possibility of genuine understanding and listening to the other, at least when the concept of supersession explicitly applies to the relationship between the two traditions. In an Abrahamic setting, hence, our stance on supersessionism decides the nature of our engagement with the other, and a great starting point to investigate supersessionism is discussing our theological conception of divine covenants in general and the Mosaic covenant in particular.

Chalamet writes, »We tell the stories of the covenant(s) in distinct ways, on the basis of distinct narratives. Within these narratives, we can decide either to stress elements that pit our own tradition against other traditions, or we can emphasize elements that sustain dimensions of inclusivity and universality, that invite dialogue and interest in the other.«² This is exactly the reason why I would investigate my tradition, containing the stories I tell myself, to find whether it is supersessionist. If my story of the covenant(s) has elements that negate certain elements of the other traditions' story, can I do comparative theology with that tradition? Where do these conflicting elements come from? How are they related to my theological system? Does my system of theology produce these elements, or are they residues of earlier systems I no longer use? If elements of supersession and negation of another tradition are intrinsic to my theology, if they are a part of the system of theology my work operates within, there can be no theological encounter between me and the other tradition,

¹ Joseph B. SOLOVEITCHIK, *Confrontation and Other Essays*. New Milford 2015.

² CHALAMET, »Bund« als Grundlage und Thema Komparativer Theologie, 279.

only dialogue. Theological elements of a religious tradition could be irrelevant, unimportant, or even incomprehensible to another without implying supersessionism, but if the foundation of one theological system is essentially opposed to the other, a change of focus does not change this opposition. It is not a problem for comparative theology if supersessionism is there accidentally, but it will be a problem if it is there essentially.

Soloveitchik believed that there was such an essential opposition between Judaism and Christianity, and his stance against theological confrontation between the two was »absolute and not contingent on either history or sociology.«³ Whether he would hold the same opinion today, particularly after the development of non-supersessionist Christian theologies, is not my concern here. What matters to my discussion is whether the Quran's theological framework has such a characteristic. My presupposition in this response is that the Quran operates in a non-supersessionist framework, which I have argued for elsewhere.⁴ I will also focus only on the Quran, not how different Muslim communities or Sunni and Shia scholars received it, or its rich, diverse, and multifaceted expansion in Muslim traditions. I find conflating Islam and the Quran in comparative theological endeavors problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it implies that, on the one hand, what Muslims do or believe must have come from the Quran, and on the other hand, any understanding of the Quran is not valid unless a considerable Muslim community subscribes to it. Secondly, it sterilizes Scriptural exegesis, preventing it from substantial developments against established opinions. Avoiding the conflation of Islam and the Quran means that my criticism of a certain point that Chalamet makes does not mean he misunderstands Islam but that I am proposing another understanding of the Quran that might not be mainstream.

The Jewish Covenant

Chalamet points out that »Christianity and Islam both derive from the Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of Israel, also when it comes to the theme of ›covenant‹.«⁵ It could be that Chalamet did not mention Judaism in this sentence because it is obvious, but if it implies a particular privilege of Judaism over Christianity concerning the Scriptures, we need to discuss it. From a Quranic perspective, Judaism is also a tradition that derives from the Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of Israel, not just Christianity and Islam.⁶ While the Quran recognizes the self-identification of its Jewish audience with the ancient Israelites, calling them Children of Israel, it seems to see Judaism and Christianity as two different approaches to the same »Book,« not that Jews are identical to the Israelites. This is implicated in Q 6:156, where the Quran states one of the reasons for its revelation to its audience. »Lest you say, ›the Book was sent down to two communities before us, and we

³ Marshall J. BREGER, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's ›Confrontation‹. A Reassessment, in: *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 1(1) (2005) 157.

⁴ See Vahid MAHDAVI MEHR, *Is the Quran Supersessionist? Toward Identifying the Quran's Theological Framework of Engagement with Earlier Abrahamic Traditions*, Paderborn 2023. In this response, I will repeat some of the points I made in the book.

⁵ CHALAMET, ›Bund‹ als Grundlage und Thema Komparativer Theologie, 268.

⁶ For a similar view in Judaism and Christianity, see Adam H. BECKER / Annette Yoshiko REED, *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Minneapolis 2007.

were indeed unaware of their study.«⁷ The Arabic word translated to study is *dirāsāt*, strikingly similar to the Hebrew *derasha*. Words from the root *d-r-s* are used several times in the Quran, meaning studying the Book, with Q 3:79 particularly naming the rabbis as those whose task is to teach the Book and to study it. Another example is Q 2:113, in which both Jews and Christians are reprimanded for negating each other while both are reading the Book.

Chalamet continues, »[T]hese two religious traditions look at this theme through their own lenses, and so they do not merely see different things, they see things differently.«⁸ Here, we must consider the fundamental difference between the social and historical settings from which Christianity and Islam emerged. The Quran's discussion of the Mosaic covenant, contrary to the Christianities of its time, is not one of fulfillment or replacement. Jews are not »the others« of the Quran, nor they are pedagogical tools for the »new« people of God. On the contrary, the Jewish audience of the Quran is reminded of their covenant so that they might recognize the legitimacy of the Muslim community as a part of the Abrahamic family. In Q 6:154, the Quran affirms that the Book given to Moses was already complete, containing the explanation of everything, and the Quran even blames some of its Jewish audience for not acting according to it. There were several reasons for this Ishmaelite prophet to be sent to his people, but it was not to replace the Israelite community. If any fulfillment could be ascribed to the prophet of the Quran, it is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham regarding Ishmael in the Bible. This is, obviously, not the fulfillment meant by supersessionist Christian theologies.

Moreover, Chalamet's claim that Ishmael is considered a »negative, violent foil and rival to the »son of the promise«⁹ in Jewish and Christian traditions might not be accurate regarding Judaism. The Jewish reception of the Biblical Ishmael is more nuanced than that and sometimes even positive, particularly before the rise of Islam.¹⁰ A non-supersessionist Christian theology might want to reconsider the theological significance of Ishmael, trying to see if they can more profoundly explore his potential not as a pedagogical or polemical tool but as a Biblical character in the light of the Ishmaelite prophet of the Quran. I cannot comment on the theological possibility of it for Christianity, but it seems possible for a non-supersessionist Jewish scholar since positive interpretations of Ishmael already exist in the Oral Torah.

Reciprocity and Asymmetry

Chalamet emphasizes the importance of considering both the reciprocity and the asymmetry of divine covenants with human beings. This provides an intriguing line of thought. If we look at the Quranic depiction of the event at Mount Sinai, the asymmetry of the divine covenants is even more striking than that of the Bible. In the Quran, just as in some Jewish midrashim, the Jewish covenant was taken *under* the mount, with the Israelites being threatened to be buried under it if they refused God's offer.¹¹ As if »by threatening to bury the Israelites, alive with the suspended mountain, God

⁷ I use Ali Qarai's translation of the Quran, sometimes with minor changes.

⁸ Chalamet, »Bund« als Grundlage und Thema Komparativer Theologie, 268.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Carol BAKHOS, *Ishmael on the Border. Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab*, New York 2006.

¹¹ See Q 7:171.

coerced the Israelites to sign the contract.«¹² To expound the Biblical narrative like this is obviously not self-serving for Jewish scholars, and it was a detail that Jews had to struggle with in their understanding of the history of their ancestors.¹³ Chalamet points out that »[t]he theme of ›covenant‹ in the Qur'an, appears to have mainly ›transactional‹ connotations.«¹⁴ This is also true of Biblical covenants where »covenantal formulations [...] are to be seen as statements of contractual relationship.«¹⁵ However, the striking asymmetry of the two parties and its seemingly forced nature in the case of the Jewish covenant makes these covenants more complicated than a mutual contract.

John Wansbrough argues that covenants in the Quran have a unilateral nature.¹⁶ We can see how this can be the case for the Jewish covenant, but it also seems true for the covenant more interesting and relevant to Muslim theologians appearing in Q 7:172-3:

When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants and made them bear witness over themselves, »Am I not your Lord?« They said, »Yes indeed! We bear witness.« Lest you should say on the day of resurrection, »Indeed we were unaware of this,« or say, »Our fathers ascribed partners [to God] before [us], and we were descendants after them. Will you destroy us because of what the wrongdoers have done?«

The Quran recounts the event at Mount Sinai in the verse before, emphasizing, in my opinion, the unilateral nature of both these divine covenants. The Jewish covenant seems to have been forced on the Israelites just as this universal covenant is forced upon us by being born. After all, are we not born without being consulted about it?¹⁷ This is why it is not easy for me to ignore the asymmetry or unilaterality of these covenants and why Chalamet is correct in pointing out its importance. Chalamet also believes that "[o]ne does not wish to embark on a pact with someone who may turn out to be untrustworthy, and so certain guaranties or signs of the trustworthiness of the covenant partner may be important, even as faith remains characterized by audacity."¹⁸ However, I wonder if we have any real choice regarding divine covenants. We can reject abiding by the content of a divine covenant, but we will have to face the consequences as if we have already accepted it. We cannot choose not to embark on this pact; we can only decide to violate its terms and face the consequences. The stark asymmetry of these covenants, hence, impacts the meaning of the term reciprocity. This reciprocity is only in the terms of the covenants, not in their ratification.

¹² Isaac W. OLIVER, *Standing under the Mountain. Jewish and Christian Threads to a Qur'anic Construction*, in: DERS., u.a. (Hg.), *The Study of Islamic Origins. New Perspectives and Contexts*, Berlin 2021, 103.

¹³ See *ibid.*

¹⁴ CHALAMET, ›Bund‹ als Grundlage und Thema Komparativer Theologie, 268.

¹⁵ Lawrence H. SCHIFFMAN, *The Concept Of Covenant In The Qumran Scrolls And Rabbinic Literature*, in: Hindy NAJMAN / Judith NEWMAN (Hg.), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation. Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, Leiden 2004, 257.

¹⁶ See John WANSBROUGH, *Quranic Studies; Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, übersetzt von Andrew Rippin, New York 2004, 8-12.

¹⁷ There is a great body of literature in different schools of thought, both in Sunni and Shia traditions, that will answer this question in the negative. I suspect that is also the case with Judaism. I, however, currently answer this question in the positive.

¹⁸ CHALAMET, ›Bund‹ als Grundlage und Thema Komparativer Theologie, 279.

The Noahide Covenant

The Noahide covenant seems to be *the* covenant when Jewish or Christian scholars try to discuss a Biblical covenant that concerns non-Israelites. Chalamet, however, discusses this covenant for a different reason. »This is a singular covenant narrative, for here the commitment as well as the remembering entirely falls on God's own shoulders.«¹⁹ This might be why Chalamet singles out the Quran for containing covenants with mainly transactional connotations. One can argue, however, that the Noahide covenant is also transactional. »If one reads the whole text of Gen 9, this covenant is actually connected with certain stipulations, the so-called Noachide laws (Gen 9:1-6).«²⁰ Regardless, Chalamet's reading prompts me to look in the Quran for similar self-imposed or one-sided commitments.

Three instances of self-imposed commitments in the Quran immediately come to my mind.²¹ One, in Q 57:27, was put by followers of Jesus upon themselves »to seek God's pleasure« by committing to monasticism. »Yet,« the verse continues, »they did not observe it with due observance. So, We gave the faithful among them their reward, but many of them are transgressors.« The other two instances appear in Q 6:12 and 6:54, where a divine commitment is described as follows: »Your Lord has made mercy incumbent upon Himself.« In all three instances, the Arabic word used to refer to the act of commitment is *kataba*, meaning to write or to prescribe (on oneself). In Q 6:54, the rest of the verse explains what seems to be the meaning of this mercy that God is committed to: »Whoever of you commits an evil [deed] out of ignorance and then repents after that and reforms, then He is indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful.« It is as if because of this extra-covenantal commitment on God's part, a breach of the terms of divine covenants by human beings does not immediately result in divine punishment. Is this commitment there to mitigate the forced nature of the divine covenants we discussed earlier?

Curiously, there is not much explanation of, or emphasis on, the Noahide covenant in the Quran. Noah features relatively prominently in the Quran both independently as an important prophetic figure and in the list of non-Jewish prophets that the audience of the Quran seems to be familiar with and can relate to.²² God's covenant with Noah, however, is not so prominent and is not elaborated on in the Quran. There is one instance in which he is named in a list of prophets with whom God made a covenant, but nothing more.²³ Also, while the Quran implies that its prophet is an Ishmaelite, the non-Jewish audience of the Quran is never called children of Ishmael, nor that of Noah, but of Adam.

It might be insightful to compare the Quran's attitude toward Noah with the rabbinic one. Lawrence H. Schiffman claims that »[n]o significant Noahide covenant was recognized by the Rabbis. Even the extensive Noahide laws, the rabbinic equivalent of natural law—the basic ethical and moral laws, the observance of which was expected of all humanity—were actually understood

¹⁹ Ibid. 270.

²⁰ Siegfried KREUZER, Background and Origin of Covenant Theology in the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, in: Christian A. EBERHART u.a. (Hg.), *Covenant – Concepts of Berit, Diatheke, and Testamentum*, Tübingen 2023, 16.

²¹ Most probably there are more.

²² See Q 11:89; 14:9.

²³ See Q 33:7. I hope I have not missed a verse on this claim.

to apply even from the time of Adam and Eve.«²⁴ This aligns much better with how the Quran treats God's universal covenant with the people of the world. As we saw earlier, the Adamic covenant could be said to resemble natural law. A more explicit attestation to the natural characteristic of the Adamic covenant appears in Q 30:30: »So set your heart with pure faith on the religion, the nature endowed by God according to which He created people. There is no altering God's creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know.«

However, Noah has another significance in the Quran. There are verses that differentiate between the progenies of Noah and Abraham. Q 57:26, for example, reads: »Certainly, We sent Noah and Abraham, and We ordained among their descendants the prophethood and the Book. Some of them are guided, and many of them are transgressors.« This implies a Quranic recognition of two types of religious traditions, Noahide and Abrahamic. We also have Q 42:13, which reads: »He has prescribed for you the religion which He had enjoined upon Noah and which We have revealed to you, and which we had enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, declaring, ›Maintain the religion and do not be divided in it [...].« If we can take the separation of the three branches in this verse to be intentional, we end up with a possible Quranic division of religious traditions into Israelite, including Judaism and Christianity, Ishmaelite, and Noahide, without them being divided in faith. This seems to be an exciting line of Quranic investigation that remains to be done in a comparative theological setting.

²⁴ SCHIFFMAN, *The concept of Covenant* (Anm. 15), 259.