

## Jews in the Quran

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Today, it often seems as if the relations between Muslims and Jews are dominated by bigotry, intolerance, and even downright hostility. Some claim that Muslim hostility toward Jews is taught in the Quran itself. How does the Quran portray the Jews? Is it inherently hostile toward them? Are they described, as some have claimed, as apes and swine"? The simple answer to the latter question is no, the Quran never says the Jews are "apes and swine". We will take a closer look at this claim later in this essay. Before that, however, let us take a broader look at the overall image of Jews in the Quran. The present essay focuses entirely on the Quran and is meant as an introduction. Beyond the Quran, Muslim opinion is also shaped by the Prophetic traditions (Hadith) and centuries of commentaries and interpretations.

There are approximately 60 verses in the Quran that speak directly about or to the Jews. Two thirds of these use the phrase "Children of Israel" (*bani Isra'il*), others use the terms "Jews" (*yahud*) or "those who are Jewish" (*alladhina hadu*). In addition to verses specifically about or addressing the Jews, the Quran also speaks of the people of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) and "those who have been given the Book" (*alladhina utu al-kitab*). These verses are generally understood to refer to both the Christians and the Jews, those who received the scriptures which preceded the Quran. The Quran also mentions the Torah more than a dozen times. It also mentions the Psalms of David. In addition to the variety of verses that speak to or about the Jews, chapter 17 of the Quran is entitled "The Children of Israel."

In order to better understand the Quran's portrayal of the Jews it is important to understand the Quran's portrayal of religion itself. Right religion, according to the Quran, is submission to God (lit. *islam* in Arabic). Those who submit to God are, by literal definition, *muslim*. Thus, *islam*, in its generic, literal meaning is the religion of all the prophets and messengers from Noah to Abraham to Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, according to the Quran (10:71-72, 84; 2:128-131; 5:110-111). Thus, there is a distinction between the Quranic use of the term *muslim* as a generic term, which refers to someone who submits to God, and the proper noun *Muslim*, which refers to a follower of the religion founded by Muhammad in the seventh century. Does one need to be a *Muslim* to be a *muslim*? Must a Jew who recognizes Muhammad as a messenger and the Quran as scripture convert to Islam? The perhaps surprising answer, from a Quranic perspective, the answer is, no.

All of the prophets before Muhammad were, according to the Quran, *muslim*, as were those who believed them and followed them. The children of Israel enjoy a special status: "O children of Israel, remember my favor which I bestowed upon you, and that I favored you above all creation." (Quran 2:47, 2:122).

يَدْبِيتِ إِسْرَائِيلَ أَذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَأَنَّى فَضَّلْتُكُمْ عَلَى

الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

يَدْبِيتِ إِسْرَائِيلَ أَذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَأَنَّى فَضَّلْتُكُمْ

عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

The Quran discusses God's favors and covenant with the Children of Israel in detail:

*O children of Israel, indeed we delivered you from your enemy and made a covenant with you on the right side of the mountain, and we sent down for you manna and quails.*

(20:80)

يَدْبِيتِ إِسْرَائِيلَ قَدْ أَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ مِّنْ عَدُوِّكُمْ وَوَعَدْنَاكُمْ جَانِبَ

الطُّورِ الْأَيْمَنِ وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكُمُ الْمَنَّاءَ وَالسَّلْوَىٰ ﴿٨٠﴾

*Indeed we gave the children of Israel the Book, and wisdom, and the prophecy, and we provided them with good things and favored them above all creation. (45:16)*

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحُكْمَ وَالنُّبُوَّةَ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِّنَ

الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

*We made a covenant with the children of Israel: "Serve none except God. Be good to parents, relatives, orphans, and the poor. Speak kindly to people. Establish prayer and give alms." Afterward, you turned away, except a few of you, and you were averse. (2:83)*

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ لَا تَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ

إِحْسَانًا وَذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَقُولُوا لِلنَّاسِ

حُسْنًا وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِّنْكُمْ

وَأَنْتُمْ مُّعْرِضُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

Their special status and covenant with God gives the children of Israel a great responsibility: the responsibility to uphold the covenant and abide by the law and guidance God has given them. So, what of the Quran's criticism of Jews? An indication of the problem appears at the end of verse 2:83, above: *Afterward, you turned away, except a few of you, and you were averse.* Just as it provides details of God's favors and covenant with the children of Israel, the Quran also discusses violations of that covenant.

Moses came to you with clear proofs, yet you took the calf [for worship] in his absence, and you turned wicked. (Quran 2:92)

﴿۹۲﴾ وَلَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مُوسَىٰ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ ثُمَّ اتَّخَذْتُمُ الْعِجْلَ مِن بَعْدِهِمْ

﴿۹۳﴾ وَأَنْتُمْ ظَالِمُونَ ﴿۹۳﴾

We made a covenant with you, that you not shed each others' blood, nor evict each other from your homes. You agreed and bore witness. Yet it is you who are killing each other and evicting a group among you from their homes, supporting each other against them unlawfully and aggressively; and if they should come to you as captives you would ransom them-- while evicting them was unlawful for you. Do you then believe in a part of the Book and disbelieve in the other? (Quran 2:84-85)

﴿۸۴﴾ وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَكُمْ لَا تَسْفِكُونَ دِمَاءَكُمْ وَلَا تُخْرِجُونَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ مِن

﴿۸۵﴾ دِيَارِكُمْ ثُمَّ أَقْرَرْتُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ تَشْهَدُونَ ﴿۸۵﴾

﴿۸۶﴾ ثُمَّ أَنْتُمْ هَتُّوْا لَهُمْ أَنْفُسَهُمْ فَرِيْقًا مِّنكُمْ مِّن دِيَارِهِمْ  
تَظَاهَرُونَ عَلَيْهِم بِالْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَإِن يَأْتُوكُمْ أُسْرَىٰ تَقْدُدُوهُمْ  
وَهُوَ مُحْرَمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ إِخْرَاجُهُمْ أَفْئُوتٌ مِّنُونَ بَعْضِ الْكُتُبِ وَتَكْفُرُونَ  
بِبَعْضِ مَا جَزَأَهُ مِن يَفْعَلُ ذَلِكَ مِّنكُمْ إِلَّا جِزْيَٰ فِي الْحَيَاةِ  
الدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ أَشَدِّ الْعَذَابِ وَمَا اللَّهُ بِغَفِيْلٍ

﴿۸۷﴾ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿۸۷﴾

You have known those among you who violated the Sabbath, so we said to them: "Be despicable ape." (Quran 2:65)

﴿۶۵﴾ وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمُ الَّذِينَ اعْتَدَوْا مِنكُمْ فِي السَّبْتِ فَقُلْنَا لَهُمْ كُونُوا

﴿۶۶﴾ قِرْدَةً خَاسِيْنَ ﴿۶۶﴾

It is in a similar context that the Quran uses the term "apes and swine," in Quran 5:60, though in that verse, it is not said in reference to Jews. Here is 5:60 in its entirety: Say: "Shall I inform you of something worse in the sight of God: those whom God has cursed and with whom he is angry, and he has made some of them apes and swine and

*servants of evil. These are in a worse position and more astray from the even path."*

قُلْ هَلْ أُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِشَرِّ مِّنْ ذَلِكَ مَثُوبَةً عِنْدَ اللَّهِ مَن لَّعَنَهُ  
اللَّهُ وَغَضِبَ عَلَيْهِ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهُمْ الْقِرَدَةَ وَالْخَنَازِيرَ وَعَبَدَ  
الطَّاغُوتِ أُولَئِكَ شَرٌّ مَّكَانًا وَأَضَلُّ عَن سَوَاءِ السَّبِيلِ ﴿٦٠﴾

While some people may claim that the above refers specifically to the Jews, reading the verse in its context shows this is not necessarily accurate. This is clear from verses 5:57-58.

*O you who believe, do not befriend those who make a mockery of your religion from among those who were given the Book before you or the disbelievers. Reverence God, if you are truly believers. When you call to prayer they make a mockery and a game of it. This is because they are a people who do not understand.*

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَتَّخِذُوا الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا دِينَكُمْ هُزُؤًا وَلَعِبًا  
مِّنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ وَالْكَفَّارَ أَوْلِيَاءَ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ  
إِن كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

وَإِذَا نَادَيْتُمْ إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ اتَّخَذُوا هُزُؤًا وَلَعِبًا ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

﴿٥٨﴾

As these verses show, the discussion is about those who make a mockery of religion, whether they are those who received previous scripture or those who are disbelievers. Of course, Jews are among those who received previous scripture, which is the basis of the claim that verse 5:60 refers to Jews. However, there is no Quranic basis for claiming that it refers exclusively or even primarily to Jews. The emphasis in the discussion is not the religion of, or lack thereof, of those with whom God was so angry that he cursed them and some of them apes, swine, and servants of evil. The emphasis is on the actions that may lead to such retribution from God--making a mockery of the religion of those who believe in God and in a scripture the mockers do not accept. Some of those mockers are among those who received previous scriptures:

*Say, "O people of the scripture, do you resent us because we believe in God, and in what was sent down to us, and in what was sent down before us, and because most of you are*

not righteous?" (Quran 5:59)

قُلْ يَتَأَهَّلَ الْكِتَابِ هَلْ تَنْقِمُونَ مِنَّا إِلَّا أَنْ ءَامَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ  
إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ مِن قَبْلُ وَأَنَّ أَكْثَرَ كُفْرِكُمْ فَسِيقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

But does this mean all of those who received the previous scripture? Other verses of the Quran make it clear that it is not.

*They are not all alike; among the people of the Book there is an upstanding community. They recite God's revelations through the night, and they fall prostrate. They believe in God and the last day. They advocate good and forbid evil, and they hasten to do good works. These are among the righteous. Whatever good they do will not be denied. God knows those who are reverent. (Quran 3:113-115).*

لَيْسُوا سَوَاءً مِّنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ أُمَّةٌ قَائِمَةٌ يَتْلُونَ ءَايَاتِ اللَّهِ ءَانَاءَ  
الَّيْلِ وَهُمْ يَسْجُدُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ  
وَيُسْرِعُونَ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَأُولَئِكَ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾  
وَمَا يَفْعَلُوا مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَلَنْ يُكْفَرُوهُ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِالْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١١٥﴾

*Surely those who believe, those who are Jews, the Sabians, and the Christians, whoever believes in God and the last day and does good, has nothing to fear nor will they grieve. (Quran 5:69)*

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِئُونَ وَالنَّصَارَىٰ مَنْ ءَامَنَ  
بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ  
﴿٦٩﴾

The above verses clearly extend the promise of God to all who believe and do good, whether they are believers in the Quran or not. Those who are criticized in the Quran are those who fail to uphold their covenant with God. Nothing in the Quran calls on the Jews to abandon the Torah in favor of the Quran. Quite the opposite. The Quran repeated declares that it comes to confirm the previous scripture, not to supplant it. Indeed, the Quran criticizes the Jews of Medina for coming to Muhammad for judgment when they had the Torah:

*How do they make you a judge while they have the Torah in which is God's law? Then they turn back after that--these are not believers. (Quran 5:43)*

وَكَيْفَ يُحْكِمُونَكَ وَعِنْدَهُمُ التَّورَةُ فِيهَا حُكْمُ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ  
يَتَوَلَّوْنَ مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَمَا أُولَئِكَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

The following verse further emphasizes the importance of the Torah, and the fact that those who follow it are submitting to God.

*We sent down the Torah, in which there is guidance and light, by which the prophets who submitted judged the Jews, as did the rabbis and the priests, according to what they were required to observe of God's Book, and thereunto were they witnesses. So do not fear people, but fear me, and do not sell my signs for minor gain. Whoever does not judge by what God has sent down are disbelievers. (Quran 5:44)*

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا التَّورَةَ فِيهَا هُدًى وَنُورٌ يُحْكَمُ بِهَا النَّبِيُّونَ الَّذِينَ أَسْلَمُوا  
لِلَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالرَّبَّانِيُّونَ وَالْأَحْبَارُ بِمَا اسْتُحْفِظُوا مِنْ كِتَابِ اللَّهِ  
وَكَانُوا عَلَيْهِ شُهَدَاءَ فَلَا تَخْشَوُا النَّاسَ وَاخْشَوْنِي وَلَا تَشْتَرُوا بِآيَاتِي  
ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا وَمَنْ لَمْ يُحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ



Considering all of these verses, whether they are speaking to or about the children of Israel, or the Jews, or people of the Book, it is clear that Quranic criticism and condemnation is aimed not at the Jews as a people, but only at those among them who fail to reverence God and uphold their covenant with Him. Moreover, the Quran calls on Jews to adhere to what God has sent down in the Torah. So, if a Jew recognizes Muhammad as a messenger and the Quran as God's Book, should follow the Torah. To do otherwise would be to disobey the Quran. The Quran also offers a clear remedy for religious bigotry and intolerance:

*We have sent down the Book to you in truth, verifying what is before it of the Book and a standard of comparison for it; therefore judge between them by what God has sent down, and do not follow their low desires, turning away the truth that has come to you; for each of you we have ordained a law and a way of doing things. If God wished, He would have made you a single community, but he tests you according to what he has given you, so compete with each other in doing good. Your return is to God, and then He will let you know about that in which you differed. (Quran 5:48)*

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيِّمًا  
عَلَيْهِ ۖ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ ۗ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ  
مِنَ الْحَقِّ لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا ۗ وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ  
أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً ۗ وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ ۗ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ  
إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا ۖ فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

The foregoing analysis offers a Quranic alternative to the problematic relations between Muslims and Jews that has resulted from the on-going Israeli/Palestinian struggle. If taken seriously, this alternative can allow people of faith on all sides to imagine a future in which religion becomes part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. What can be imagined, can with effort, be realized.