

## RE-EVALUATING THE NOTION OF *ISRA'ILİYYAT*

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### ***İSRAİLİYYAT KAVRAMININ YENİDEN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ***

*Bu makale, isra'iliyyat terimi hakkında Müslüman ve gayr-i Müslim ilim adamlarının yapmış oldukları inceleme ve görüşleri değerlendirmektedir. Araştırma kısaca teknik terim olarak isra'iliyyat'ın ifade ettiği anlamlar üzerinde durmakta, sonrada Hz. Peygamber'in hadislerinde ve takip eden nesiller arasında isra'iliyyat'a ait haberlere yaklaşımı irdelemektedir. Kur'anî anlatımın kısıklı tefsirlerde yerini bulacak olan bu tür rivayetlerin yayılmasını kolaylaştırmıştır. Kıssacıların da etkinlikleri göz önüne alındığında isra'iliyyat haberlerinin hızlı bir şekilde yayılması garip karşılanmamalıdır. Bununla beraber tefsir ilmi açısından gözden kaçan önemli bir sorun vardır ve genellikle Müslüman araştırmacıların çok fazla dikkatlerini çekmemiştir. Bu makale isra'iliyyat araştırmalarıyla ilgili bu önemli sorunu gündeme getirmeye çalışmaktadır: isra'iliyyat teknik terim olarak ne zaman tefsirlerde yerini aldı? İlk defa hangi müfessirler bu teknik ifadeyi tefsirlerinde eleştirel açıdan kullanmıştır?*

#### **Anahtar Kelimeler:**

*Isra'iliyyat.*

*Qıssa.*

*Tafsir*

*Bani İsrail.*

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This article deals primarily with the term *isra'iliyyat*. Particular attention will be given to the development of this term among the Muslims. We will discuss the related reports concerning *isra'iliyyat* and analyse in detail the Western scholarship regarding it, as well as the activities of *qussas* in the promotion of the *isra'iliyyat* reports. Finally, we concentrate on the emergence of *isra'iliyyat* as a technical term in the classical exegesis.

## 1. Introduction to the Notion of *Isra'iliyyat*

*Isra'iliyyat* is the plural of the word *isra'iliyyatun*. The Qur'an generally uses the term *banu isra'il* when it refers to the Jews; it occurs forty-three times.<sup>1</sup> In the Hebrew language, according to Na'na'a, the meaning of *isra* is servant and *'il* is God.<sup>2</sup> However, this definition seems unreliable. The root *s'rh* occurs only three times in the Old Testament, all in reference to Jacob's wrestling with the divine being, as noted in Genesis 32: 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but *Israel*, because you struggled (*s'arita*) with God and with men and have overcome.' So the meaning of *s'rh*, some would argue, is to contend, struggle, and persist.<sup>3</sup> As regards the meaning of *'el* there is a consensus; *'el* is a common generic Semitic appellative for the deity. It has also been noted that this term may refer to the name of the high god in some cultures.<sup>4</sup> In a restricted sense, *isra'iliyyat* applies to the traditions and reports that contain elements of the legendary and religious literature of the Jews, but more inclusively and more commonly it also refers to Christian, Zoroastrian and other Near Eastern elements including folklore. In other words, every foreign element in exegesis is called *isra'iliyyat*.<sup>5</sup> Besides this broad definition there are some more specific aspects discussed by Western scholars. Some consider *isra'iliyyat* a subdivision of the generic term *qisas al-anbiya* (tales of the prophets), which cover three different categories: legends about the creation,

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi, *al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras li Alfaz al-Qur'an al-Karim*, İstanbul: Çağrı Yayınları 1987, 33

<sup>2</sup> Ramzi Na'na'a, *al-Isra'iliyyat wa Atharuha fi Kutub al-Tafsir*, Beirut and Damascus: Dar al-Qalam and al-Diyah 1390/1970, 72. Na'na'a also notes that the Israelites were named *yahud* after they had repented for their sin of idolatry (worshipping the golden calf), 73.

<sup>3</sup> John M. Bracke, 'Israel', in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Cumbria: Paternoster Press 1991, III.1273; *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press 1929, 975.

<sup>4</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, 'El', in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Cumbria: Paternoster Press 1997, I.400. It has been pointed out that *El* (with compounds) is used over two hundred times in the Old Testament.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Newby, 'Tafsir Isra'iliyyat', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Thematic Issue S 47/4 (1979) 686; Abdullah Aydemir, *Tefsirde İsrailiyat*, Ankara: Beyan Yayınevi 1985, 29

legends about the prophets and stories which specifically deal with the Children of Israel and their rulers from the death of Moses to their entry into the promised land.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, other scholars take *isra'iliyyat* to be the generic term and consider *qisas al-anbiya* as one of its subdivisions. There are also those scholars, such as R. G. Khoury, who try to soften this distinction by suggesting some reports may belong to both *isra'iliyyat* and *qisas al-anbiya* proper.<sup>7</sup> It seems that this compromise is more plausible than a clear-cut division of the subject matter according to genres. The specific usage of the term *isra'iliyyat* to denote these different elements is, however, due to the Arabic rule of *thaghlīb*, which prescribes that the term is appropriate when material obtained from Jewish sources greatly predominates.<sup>8</sup>

Having given the general definition of the term it is important to note that several questions arise concerning the notion of *isra'iliyyat*. Among the main questions are: when and how did they emerge, who brought them into the corpus of exegetical literature, why is there a need to make reference to those materials and are there any objections to them; if so, when and by whom were they raised?

First of all, it is worth mentioning that the Qur'an contains many narrative passages concerning the prophets and sages, but these are usually in an allusive style and frequently mention an event once only or refer briefly to a person who does not appear again. These passages are not intended as biography, history or entertainment.<sup>9</sup> As Shahhata has stated, the objective of Qur'anic narrative is guidance and warning rather than story-telling in detail.<sup>10</sup> Although this style may presuppose that the hearer already has some knowledge of the story or is at least familiar with the broad topics being discussed, the transmitters of these tales aimed at widening the scope of the stories to include details that their listeners might wish to know such as the colour of the dog of the people of the cave, the length of Moses' staff, and so on. In addition, from the sociological point of view, as Ibn

<sup>6</sup> Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1996, 9

<sup>7</sup> G. Vajda, 'Isra'iliyyat,' *EF*<sup>2</sup>, IV.211; Lewis Bernard, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984, 70; C. Adang, *op. cit.*, 9

<sup>8</sup> R. Na'na'a, *op. cit.*, 73

<sup>9</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trend in Islam*, New York: Octagon Books 1972, 74

<sup>10</sup> 'Abd Allah Mahmud Shahhata, *al-Qur'an wa al-Tafsir*, Egypt 1974, 248

Khaldun has pointed out, the illiteracy of the masses and the way of life in the desert forced people to reflect on the secrets of the universe, the creation and so forth.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, this interest in details has contributed greatly to the growth of exegesis.<sup>12</sup> It should also be noted that some Western scholars have sought the origin of *tafsir* (exegesis) in the rendition of these stories.<sup>13</sup> Although it is difficult to accept this view, it can be said that the existence of these tales allows exegesis to penetrate a vast literary corpus.

## 2. Discussion of *Isra'iliyyat* Reports

There are various traditions regarding *isra'iliyyat* reports. Muslim scholars have expressed a variety of opinions about the implications of these traditions. The main discussion centres on whether or not it is permissible for a Muslim to read the People of the Book's religious texts and whether or not it is permissible for Muslims to transmit from them. Some of the traditions forbid questioning. Others, however, adopt a more moderate approach, according to which the questioning of Jews and Christians seems to be permitted. Before going further we need to note some of these traditions.

## 3. The Avoidance of Information from Jewish and Christian Sources

According to the report narrated on the authority of Abu Hurayra, the People of the Book read the Torah in Hebrew and explained it in Arabic. On this matter the prophet said 'Do not confirm the People of the Book, and do not accuse them of falsehood,' but say that 'we believe in God and what He has revealed to us.'<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Ibn Mas'ud reports a command of the prophet 'Do not ask the People of the Book because they will not guide you having already led themselves astray.' He also counselled the companions, saying 'If the People

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, Cairo nd., 439 (no publisher)

<sup>12</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1984, 32; W. M. Watt, *op. cit.*, 1994, 185; M. J. Kister, 'Legends in Tafsir and Hadith Literature: Creation of Adam and Related Stories', in Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988, 83; R. Firestone, Firestone, Reuven, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, Albany: Suny 1990, 9

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Rippin, 'Tafsir', in Mircea Eliade (ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, New York-London: Macmillan Publishing Company 1987, XIV.238

<sup>14</sup> Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Isma'il Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi nd., IV.374 (Bab 25, no: 7362)

of the Book tell you something do not either accept it as true or reject it as false for they may tell you something which is false but you may accept it is true.'<sup>15</sup> As W. M. Watt has stated, these reports suggest that Muslims are told to adopt a non-committal attitude to what they hear.<sup>16</sup>

A third report, narrated on the authority of Jabir, states that 'Umar wrote some part of the Torah in Arabic and brought it to the prophet. When he started reading what he wrote, the face of the prophet changed. Then one of the Madinians told 'Umar: 'Shame on you O 'Umar! Look at the face of the messenger of God.' The Prophet said 'Do not ask the People of the Book about anything, because they will not show you the right path, having already led themselves astray. Otherwise you accuse the truth of falsehood and confirm the wrong; I swear that even if Moses was alive among you nothing would be opened to him but to follow me.'<sup>17</sup> This report shows an extremely strict attitude towards any knowledge deriving from the People of the Book. Muslims are explicitly discouraged from questioning them. But the following report, narrated by Ibn 'Abbas, is more critical of the People of the Book than any other:

Ibn 'Abbas warned the community of Muhammad, 'O community of Muslims! Why do you ask the People of the Book about anything while you have the final and undistorted Book, which is revealed to the prophet of God?' He added 'Did God not inform you in His Book that the People of the Book have altered their book with their hands?' He recited 2:79: 'Then woe to those who write the book with their own hands and then say this is from God so that they may take for it a small price.' He continued, 'Does God not forbid you the knowledge that comes to you from questioning the People of the Book about what He has sent to you? By God we never saw any of them asking you about what God revealed to you.'<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, it is shown that the People of the Book altered their own books, deliberately corrupted the scriptures, on the other hand, as Watt has pointed out, it is implied that all the sound knowledge of religious matters necessary for Muslims can be gained from the Qur'an.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Dhahabi, *al-Isra'iliyyat fi al-Tafsir wa al-Hadith*, Cairo 1971, 70-71

<sup>16</sup> W. M. Watt, 'The Muslim Attitude to the Bible', *Glasgow University Oriental Society*, 16 (1955-56) 60

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, Istanbul: Çağrı Yayınları 1992, III.338, 387

<sup>18</sup> Bukhari, IV.375 (Bab 25, no: 7365)

<sup>19</sup> W. M. Watt, *op. cit.*, 1955-6, 61

There are two more anecdotes which indicate that strong prohibitions have been placed on Muslims regarding *isra'iliyyat*. In the first anecdote °Umar is alleged to have voiced his objections to Ka'b al-Ahbar: 'Refrain from transmitting from your ancestor, otherwise I will send you back to the land of monkeys, *'ard al-ghiradah* (Yaman).'<sup>20</sup>

The second anecdote is noted by al-Muttaqi al-Hindi: 'A man came to °Umar and informed him about a wonderful book which he had found in Mada'in after Muslims had conquered the city. °Umar asked, 'Is it from the Book of God, the Qur'an?' 'No' said the man. °Umar began to beat him with his whip, reciting the first four verses from surah Yusuf.'<sup>21</sup>

Muslim scholars have discussed this topic broadly. Not only Muslim scholars forbid transmission from the scriptures of the Peoples of the Book but they also forbid the study of these scriptures. Kattani mentions that the scholars agreed that it is unlawful to read, investigate and deal with the books of the People of the Book.<sup>22</sup> The only purpose that would justify the reading of their book would be to answer the Jews.<sup>23</sup> It is also worth noting that Muslim scholars have written individual books about the status of the transmission of *isra'iliyyat*. Haji Khalifa mentions Sakhawi's *al-asl al-asil fi tahrim al-naql min al-tawrat wa al-injil*.<sup>24</sup> Although Sakhawi's book may be considered a late contribution it might still reflect quite accurately the prevailing attitude held by earlier authorities.

#### 4. The Granting of Permission to Muslims to Ask the People of the Book

Although Muslims are apparently forbidden to study and copy Jewish or Christian scripture or to learn their religious practices, there are reports which suggest the contrary. One of the most significant in paving the way for *isra'iliyyat* is narrated by °Abd Allah Ibn °Amr b. al-°As: 'There is no

<sup>20</sup> Dhahabi, *Siyar A'lam al-Nubala*, Egypt: Dar al-Ma'arif nd, II.433; R. Ra'na'a, *op. cit.*, 87

<sup>21</sup> M. J. Kister, 'Haddithu °an bani isra'ila wa-la haraja: A Study of an Early Tradition', *Israel Oriental Studies*, 2 (1972) 235

<sup>22</sup> °Abd al-Hayy Kattani, *Nizam al-Hukumat al-Nabawiyya al-Musamma al-Taratib al-Idariyya*, Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-°Arabi nd, II.429

<sup>23</sup> M. J. Kister, *op. cit.*, 1972, 231

<sup>24</sup> Haji Khalifa, *Kashf al-Zunun*, Ma'arif Matbaasi 1941, I.107

objection to transmitting from the Children of Israel, but when you transmit from me, do not lie about me.'<sup>25</sup>

There are numerous debates about the validity of this tradition. Alqami, according to Kister's information, considers this report to be an utterance abrogating an earlier prohibition. Furthermore, Kister records two views of Mu'afa about the meaning of this report. According to the first opinion, *la haraja* is a predicate and it means there is nothing objectionable in telling these stories. The other view considers this phrase as denoting a prohibition. In other words, it is equivalent to *la tahruju* (do not commit sin by telling stories when you know they are lies).<sup>26</sup> There are other interpretations of this report. For example, in the beginning Muslims considered the prophetic expression *haddithu* to be a commandment. Consequently they began narrating stories from the Children of Israel. The prophet then has made it clear that 'there is no objection to not transmitting from the Children of Israel', *la haraja fi tark al-tahdith 'anhum*.<sup>27</sup> However, according to the second interpretation there is no opposition to the transmission from the People of the Book, as long as they do not contradict the Qur'an and tradition. A third comment, made by 'Ayni, suggests that the prohibition of questioning the People of the Book is applicable to those people who had not embraced Islam.<sup>28</sup> The last opinion, which is not very plausible, is that the term *bani isra'il* refers only to the story of Jacob and his sons.<sup>29</sup> Despite the variety of interpretations of this report the apparent meaning is that transmission is lawful. However, the existence of different reports and interpretations have encouraged Western scholars to conclude that there was a controversy among the early Muslims about the transmission of Jewish lore,<sup>30</sup> but that these contradictory reports indicate the attitude of the transmitter(s) rather than the prophet's own view.<sup>31</sup> Muslim scholars, on the other hand, explain that after Islam had been established the transmission

<sup>25</sup> Bukhari, II.493 (Bab 50, no: 3461); Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, II.202

<sup>26</sup> M. J. Kister, *op. cit.*, 1972, 217

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari, bi-Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, Beirut: Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi 1988, VI.338

<sup>28</sup> Badr al-Din Abu Muhammad Mahmud Ibn Ahmad al-'Ayni, *'Umdat al-Qari Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, Beirut nd, XI.507

<sup>29</sup> Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, VI.338

<sup>30</sup> M. J. Kister, *op. cit.*, 1972, 215

<sup>31</sup> C. Adang, *op. cit.*, 8

of *isra'iliyyat* could no longer do any harm.<sup>32</sup> As a result of this interpretation many *isra'iliyyat* found a place in classical exegesis.

Besides this report there are five individual anecdotes (reports) which show that some of the earlier personalities dealt with the Torah and the Gospels in the same manner.

i. It is narrated that the convert °Abd Allah Ibn Salam said that the prophet had suggested to him that he should read the Qur'an one night and the Torah the following night. Dhahabi considers this report, if it is true, as indicating permission to reflect on the Torah, whereas Suyuti is doubtful: 'One of the transmitters of this report is very weak.'<sup>33</sup>

ii. Ka'b al-Ahbar stated, 'I have not seen anybody who is more familiar with the Torah than Abu Hurayra among the people who could not read the Torah.'<sup>34</sup>

iii. Qasimi, in his long comment on *isra'iliyyat*, mentions Ibn Kathir's explanation of the position of Ibn °Abbas regarding *isra'iliyyat*: 'Ibn °Abbas learnt the knowledge of *isra'iliyyat*.'<sup>35</sup>

iv. It is narrated that Ibn °Umar found two pieces of the Torah and used them.<sup>36</sup>

v. This last anecdote is mentioned by Ibn Hisham: al-Aws and al-Khazraj were more knowledgeable about the prophet than the Meccans because they used to listen to Jewish rabbis.<sup>37</sup> This anecdote also supports the view that *isra'iliyyat* began with the migration, *hijra*.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, when the Meccan pagans were challenged by the new religion they sent

<sup>32</sup> G. H. A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussion in Modern Egypt*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1969, 121; Ibn Hajar al-°Asqalani, VI.338

<sup>33</sup> Abu °Abd Allah Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi, *Kitab Tadhkirat al-Huffaz*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-°Ilmiyya 1955, I.27; Kattani, II.427; *fa hadha fa in sahha fihi rukhsa fi takrir al-tawrat wa tadabburiha*.

<sup>34</sup> Dhahabi, *Siyar A°lam al-Nubala*, II.432

<sup>35</sup> Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi, *Mahasin al-Ta°wil*, Cairo: Dar al-Ihya 1957, I.43

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, I.44

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Hisham, *al-Sir°at al-Nabawiyya*, Cairo: Dar al-Hadith 1996, I.232

<sup>38</sup> M. Akif Koç, *Bir Kadın Müfessir: Aişe Abdurrahman ve Kur'an Tefsirindeki Yeri*, İstanbul: Şule Yayınları 1998, 91.



Nadr Ibn al-Harith and 'Uqba Ibn al-Mu'ayt to consult the Jewish rabbis in Madina.<sup>39</sup>

These reports suggest that there was a close relation between the Arabs and the People of the Book at an early stage of Islam. However, there is no consensus among Muslim scholars about the engagement in *isra'iliyyat* during the time of the companions. Some hold the view that *isra'iliyyat* began during the companions' time,<sup>40</sup> while others maintain that there were no *isra'iliyyat* during the time of the companions of the prophet.<sup>41</sup> The second view is due, to some extent, to theological commitment rather than factual analysis of the narrated reports. Non-Muslim scholars, however, hold generally the view that, throughout the first and the beginning of the second Islamic centuries, Muslims were encouraged to learn about the Biblical and extra-Biblical pre-Islamic prophets. One important reason for this, according to Western scholars, came about from Muslims' having difficulty in making sense of significant portions of the Qur'an.<sup>42</sup> The second reason lies in the activities of the new converts to Islam. When they accepted Islam they brought with them their old religious tradition and legends.

According to Goldfeld and Newby, their contribution was not limited to the expanding of the Qur'anic stories but also included the development of the techniques of interpretation of the Qur'an.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, it is mentioned that they were consulted by Muslims about disagreements on the reading of the Qur'an.<sup>44</sup> Be that as it may, many materials which are found in exegesis, the history of the prophets, and tradition, function as narrative

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Hisham, *op. cit.*, I.247

<sup>40</sup> Shahhata, *op. cit.*, 243

<sup>41</sup> Ramzi Na'na'a, *Bid' al-Tafsir fi'l-Madi wa'l-Hadir*, Amman 1970, 29-30 (no publisher)

<sup>42</sup> R. Firestone, *op. cit.*, 8-9; Rudi Paret, 'The Qur'an as Literature', in A. F. L. Beeston, T.M. Johnstone, R. B. Serjeant and G. R. Smith (eds.), *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 209; M. J. Kister, *op. cit.* 1972, 215-39

<sup>43</sup> Yeshayahu Goldfeld, 'The Development of Theory on Qur'anic Exegesis in Islamic Scholarship', *Studia Islamica*, 67 (1988) 8, 14; G. Newby, *op. cit.*, 1979, 685

<sup>44</sup> Tabari, XVI.11: A subject matter report related to the exact recitation of the words *fi 'ayn<sup>in</sup> hami'at<sup>in</sup>* in surah Kahf. According to this report, despite Ibn 'Abbas' opposition Mu'awiya read it *fi 'ayn<sup>in</sup> hamiyat<sup>in</sup>*. Consequently Ibn 'Abbas sent someone to call Ka'b al-Ahbar to solve this problem. When he came he explained the meaning of *hami'at<sup>in</sup>* and supported the reading of Ibn 'Abbas.

exegesis of the Qur'an.<sup>45</sup> The key personalities who were frequently asked to comment on the verses which deal with Biblical personalities are 'Abd Allah b. Salam, Ka'b al-Ahbar and Wahb b. Munabbih. They were highly regarded by early scholars; for instance, Ka'b was considered the most learned of the People of the Book.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, it is said that Wahb had read ninety-two Books revealed by God.<sup>47</sup> They found confirmation of the Qur'anic stories in the Jewish and Christian sources. The majority of their explanations are primarily based on Midrash, Rabbinic exegesis on the Pentateuch or the Apocrypha, and the hagiographic writings of eastern Christianity, rather than on the Bible.<sup>48</sup> Later, some scholars questioned their authority. Before dealing with the serious criticism of *isra'iliyyat* it is appropriate to discuss another class of people who had disseminated these reports, namely *qussas* (story-tellers).

### 5. *Qussas*, Story-tellers

One of the important groups of religious people who played a significant part in the compilation of *isra'iliyyat* are the preachers and story-tellers. In his *Kitab al-Qussas wa al-Mudhakkirin*, Ibn Jawzi points out that there are three designations concerning this branch of learning; *qasas*, *tadhkir* and *wa'iz*. Those who engage in these activities are called *qass*, *mudhakkir* and *wa'iz* respectively.<sup>49</sup> The *qass*, according to Abbot, is one who fashions tales with a good moral around Biblical and Qur'anic stories and legends, in which the stories of the prophets loom large, and are supplemented by other legends from ancient stories and folklore.<sup>50</sup> He is not to be condemned in and of himself, for in relating narratives of the pious people of old he points out the lessons to be learned from these stories, which give warning, and admonish and rebuke, and contain examples of righteousness which should be followed. Ibn Jawzi cites Qur'anic support for the function of the *qass*: 'We shall narrate to you the best of the stories', 12:3.<sup>51</sup> Having given a similar definition, Abbot states that such story-tellers,

<sup>45</sup> R. Firestone, *op. cit.*, 14

<sup>46</sup> Bukhari, IV.374, (Bab 25, no: 7361)

<sup>47</sup> Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1905, V.395

<sup>48</sup> Ilse Lichtenstadter, 'Qur'an and Qur'an Exegesis', *Humaniora*, 2 (1972) 12

<sup>49</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *Kitab al-Qussas wa al-Mudhakkirin*, (ed.) by Merlin S. Swartz, Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq 1986, 96

<sup>50</sup> Nabia Abbot, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri: Qur'anic Commentary and Tradition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1967, 14-15

<sup>51</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *op. cit.*, 1986, 96

both Arab and non-Arabs, appeared on the scene spontaneously and informally and were readily accepted by the community.<sup>52</sup> As regards the other two activities, *tadhkir* is a teaching about God's benefactions towards His creatures, an appeal for thankfulness and a warning against opposing Him, and *wa'z* denotes the inspiration of listener through fear, by which the heart becomes sensitive.<sup>53</sup>

According to the Muslim account, the development of this profession (story-telling) reaches back to the earliest period of Islam. Ibn Jawzi says that the messenger of God joined with the people while a *qass* was narrating stories to them, and also that he listened to 'Abd Allah Ibn Rawaha narrating stories. However, he adds that these were not common occurrences.<sup>54</sup> 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab is said by some to have given permission to tell stories to the people, either to the pious Tamim al-Dari or (according to others) to 'Ubayd Ibn 'Umayr.<sup>55</sup> A dissenting opinion is given by Ibn 'Umar: 'Stories were neither narrated in the time of the prophet nor during the reign of Abu Bakr or 'Umar; the practice was not introduced after the reign of 'Uthman (but only at the time of civil war, *fitna*).<sup>56</sup> A similar comment is made by Ibn 'Adiyy on the authority of A'mash: 'The first person to introduce *qasas* was Mu'awiya, at the time of *fitna*.'<sup>57</sup> It should be noted, however, that a severe criticism was made by Ibn Sirin, who discredited the very origins of their profession by assigning them to the Kharijites.<sup>58</sup> Khalil Athamina believes that the linking of *qasas* to the *fitna* or *khawarij* periods was intended to repudiate such story-telling by implying that it is negative in nature and not rooted in Islamic tradition. So these allegations have nothing to do with the precise date of their emergence. Furthermore, Athamina suggests that *qasas* developed as an essential necessity of Islamic society at least one generation before the outbreak of the

<sup>52</sup> N. Abbot, *op. cit.*, 1967, 14-15

<sup>53</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *op. cit.*, 1986, 97; J. Pedersen, 'The Islamic Preacher: Wa'iz, Mudhakkir, Qass', in Samuel Löwinger and Joseph Somogyi (eds.), *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume I*, Budapest: 1948, 243

<sup>54</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *op. cit.*, 1986, 107

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 108

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 108

<sup>57</sup> Suyuti, *Tahdhir al-Khawass min 'Akadhib al-Qussas*, Cairo: Matba'a al-Mu'ahad 1351H, .63

<sup>58</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *op. cit.*, 1986, 211

first civil war in 657 AD.<sup>59</sup> According to Abbot, however, Mu<sup>c</sup>awiya is credited with formalising the position of the *qussas* and the caliph <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan is credited with confirming their official position and further regulating the activities of the officially appointed *qussas* in the mosque services.<sup>60</sup>

Besides these various opinions, some Western scholars have sought their origin in ancient Arabian daily life, while others have tried to find a connection between the Islamic penitential sermon and the corresponding Christian sermon. The first view is held by Pedersen, who places great stress on the art of the spoken word. There are two practitioners of this art in *jahiliyya*: the poet, *shā<sup>c</sup>ir*, and the rhetorician, *khatib*. The latter, according to Pedersen, obtained a position as the one who continued the prophet's function during the Friday service. Besides this official preacher, the congregation was addressed by another pulpit orator, who was not an official of the mosque and who exerted considerable influence on the people during the early period.<sup>61</sup> Pedersen associates his position with that of the preacher, *wā<sup>c</sup>iz*. The second opinion, proposed by C. H. Becker, is not completely rejected by Pedersen; however, Becker warns the reader that it must not be overlooked that the fundamental idea of *qasas* can be traced back to the Qur'an and thence to ancient Arabic poetry.<sup>62</sup>

As regards the activities of these *qussas*, three functions are mentioned: reciting the Qur'an, leading the prayer, and giving a speech after prayer.<sup>63</sup> The last point is quite important. As Abbot has stated, they accelerated the popularisation of the emotion-laden theme of reward and punishment in this life and the hereafter, *targhib wa tarhib*. Much of the material on this theme was soon incorporated into the body of tradition and Qur'anic exegesis.<sup>64</sup> To support this point it is worth mentioning the suggestion of Birkeland: 'A great deal of *tafsir* actually found are

<sup>59</sup> Khalil Athamina, 'al-Qasas: Its Emergence, Religious Origin and its Socio-Political Impact on Early Muslim Society', *Studia Islamica*, 76 (1992) 58-59

<sup>60</sup> N. Abbot, *op. cit.*, 1967, 15; K. Athamina does not accept this opinion. For him, Mu<sup>c</sup>awiya simply utilised the *qussas* in order to promote his own political aims. (Khalil Athamina, *op. cit.*, 65)

<sup>61</sup> J. Pedersen, *op. cit.*, 226

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 231

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 235

<sup>64</sup> N. Abbot, *op. cit.*, 1967, 15; M. J. Kister, *op. cit.*, 1988, 83

performed by *qussas* and Mutazilite philologists.<sup>65</sup> Newby considers *qussas* intermediaries between Jewish and Islamic materials, particularly in the transmission of *isra'iliyyat*.<sup>66</sup> It should be remembered that in early times the title of *qass* did not apparently carry the unfavourable connotation which it gained in the course of further development. As Ibn Jawzi's list indicates, the *qussas* of early times were generally reputable judges and traditionalists who functioned as preachers through the medium of the story.<sup>67</sup> Hasan al-Basri considers story-telling as an innovation but adds, 'how wonderful is that innovation!'<sup>68</sup> They were left undisturbed to do their pious work, and official theology gladly tolerated their activities in the mosques.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Goldziher's comment indicates the degree to which they were influential in the community: 'Their lectures were attended much better than those of trained theologians.'<sup>70</sup> Qasimi records Ahmad Ibn Hanbal's saying: 'When we narrate the law we are very cautious, but when we talk about *fada'il* (virtues) we take it easy (show compliance to it, *tasahalna*); we are especially flexible in telling of stories.'<sup>71</sup> So it is clear that at first the *qussas* had a good reputation and were very influential among the laymen of early Muslim cities. As Massignon has noted, the second century was, specifically in Basra, the century of preachers.<sup>72</sup>

However, this did not last long. Ibn Jawzi notes a tendency among jurists to look down on the *qussas* and to avoid their meetings.<sup>73</sup> In order to satisfy the curiosity of the people story-tellers invented tales about Biblical persons. As Goldziher remarks, they left no question unanswered because any admission of ignorance would have damaged their reputation among the populace. A *qass*, for example, was able to give the name of the golden

<sup>65</sup> Harris Birkeland, *Old Muslim Opposition Against Interpretation of the Koran*, Oslo: Norske Videnskaps-Akademi Oslo, Kommissjon hos J. Dybwad 1955, 17, fn.2

<sup>66</sup> Gordon Newby, 'The Sirah as a Source for Arabian Jewish History', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 7 (1986) 129

<sup>67</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *op. cit.*, 1986, 126-170; I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies II*, in M. Stern (ed. and tr.), London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd 197, II.152; N. Abbot, *op. cit.*, 1967, 9

<sup>68</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *op. cit.*, 1986, 103

<sup>69</sup> I. Goldziher, *op. cit.*, II.153

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, II.157

<sup>71</sup> Qasimi, *op. cit.*, I.41

<sup>72</sup> C. Pellat, 'Kass', *Et*, IV.734

<sup>73</sup> Abu al-Faraj 'Abd Rahman al-Jawzi, *Talbis-u Iblis*, Cairo: Dar al-Hadith 1995, 123; In fact they not only avoided *qussas*' meetings but also those of *muhaddithun*.

calf.<sup>74</sup> Their store of detail also penetrated into more serious exegetical works. Though his comment is a late one, the mystic Abu Talib al-Makki attacks story-telling as a heretical innovation.<sup>75</sup> Despite the fact that there were a number of *salaf* and *khalaf* who criticised the story-tellers and preachers, as Merlin L. Swartz says, it is misleading to assume that these criticisms were directed against *qussas* and *wu<sup>c</sup>az* as such or against the *qussas* and *wu<sup>c</sup>az* as a class. This was not the intention of this criticism. Men of this class were attacked only because they became so completely engrossed in *qasas* that they were distracted from the study of the Qur'an, *hadith* and *fiqh*. So it is safe to conclude that some of them contributed to the distribution of *isra'iliyyat*, especially those *qussas al-kudya* (indigent preachers) who used these materials in a shortened form;<sup>76</sup> whether their intentions were good or bad is not the issue. However there were always some knowledgeable people among them who confined themselves to the religious sciences and would have nothing to do with the *isra'iliyyat*.

#### 6. The Emergence of the Technical Term *Isra'iliyyat*

Early Muslim scholars give the names of some of those who made free use of non-Islamic materials in Qur'anic interpretation. 'Abd Allah b. 'Abbas, Mujahid and Muqatil b. Sulayman are three of them.<sup>77</sup> Dawudi relates, 'A man asked A<sup>c</sup>mash, 'why do men avoid the *tafsir* of Mujahid?' He answered, 'Because they think that he used to ask the People of the Book.'<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, it is said that because of his personal curiosity Mujahid went to *Hadra-mawt* to see the well of *Hud*.<sup>79</sup> As for Muqatil, Abu Hatim Muhammad Ibn Hayyan mentions that he was taught by both Jews and Christians.<sup>80</sup> Apart from these reports, Haji Khalifa mentions Wahb's *Kitab al-Isra'iliyyat* and states that 'he applied himself to transcribing the old works known as *al-isra'iliyyat*.'<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, nowhere in the ancient sources do we find evidence of the usage of the term *isra'iliyyat* and serious criticism of this type of exegesis. Khoury confirms that the word

<sup>74</sup> I. Goldziher, *op. cit.*, II.157

<sup>75</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *op. cit.*, 1986, 57

<sup>76</sup> Khalil Athamina, *op. cit.*, 55

<sup>77</sup> M. Plessner and A. Rippin, 'Mukatil B. Sulayman', *EF*<sup>2</sup>, VII.509

<sup>78</sup> Shams al-Din Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Ahmad Dawudi, *Tabaqat al-Mufassirin*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmi 1983, II.308

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, II.308

<sup>80</sup> Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-A<sup>c</sup>yan*, Egypt: Matba<sup>c</sup>a al-Sa<sup>c</sup>adah 1948, IV.343

<sup>81</sup> Haji Khalifa, *op. cit.*, II.1390

*isra'iliyyat* is never mentioned in connection with Wahb in historical writings.<sup>82</sup> However, it is not difficult to find some reference to Wahb's *Kitab al-Isra'iliyyat* in later works. According to Kister, the first book entirely devoted to *isra'iliyyat*, was compiled by Hammad b. Salama (d.167/783), *Akhbar-u Bani Isra'il*, a contemporary of Ibn Ishaq; but Kister has little to say about it.<sup>83</sup> In a recent article, however, R. Tottoli has contributed enormously to the study of the emergence of this term in Muslim writings. He mentions that Mas'udi (d.345/956) was the first person to use the term *isra'iliyyat* in his *Muruj al-Dhahab*, but not in the sense of a technical term or as the title of a particular book. He adds that Mas'udi's use of this term has already been noted by Goldziher.<sup>84</sup> Regarding Ibn Murajja's collection, Tottoli says that it is certain that Ibn Murajja cites directly from the book titled *Kitab al-Isra'iliyyat*, which is related to traditions circulating under the name of Wahb Ibn Munabbih.<sup>85</sup> The present writer came across the attribution of *Kitab al-Isra'iliyyat* to Wahb ibn Munabbih in Abu Talib al-Makki's (d.387/996) *Qut al-Qulub*.<sup>86</sup> Two other important figures who used the term *isra'iliyyat* are Ghazali (d.505/1111) and Turtushi (d.520/1126). According to Tottoli, Turtushi seems to use a book of *isra'iliyyat* as his direct source.<sup>87</sup> However, none of these authors use *isra'iliyyat* as a technical term and their references to it are far from critical. As Tottoli explains, their use of the term is not systematic; whether they use it to allude to the title of a book or to designate the corpus of tradition is not clear.<sup>88</sup> Finally, Tottoli mentions the Andalusian commentator Abu Bakr Ibn al-'Arabi (d.543/1148), the pupil of Turtushi, who used the term in his *tafsir* to define a kind of tradition which was regarded as unreliable for the exegete. It should be noted that apart from Ibn al-'Arabi none of the above-mentioned Muslim scholars are commentators. Therefore Ibn al-'Arabi's *Ahkam al-Qur'an* is extremely important for our

<sup>82</sup> R. G. Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, Teil 1: Der Heidelberger Papyrus PSR Heid Arab 23 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 247-57

<sup>83</sup> M. J. Kister, 'The Sirah Literature,' in A. F. L. Beeston, T. M. Johnstone, R. B. Serjeant and G. R. Smith (eds.), *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, 354

<sup>84</sup> Roberto Tottoli, 'Origin and Use of the Term *Isra'iliyyat* in Muslim Literature,' *Arabica*, 46 (1999) 194

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 196

<sup>86</sup> Abu Talib al-Makki, *Qut al-Qulub*, Beirut 1995, I.197-8

<sup>87</sup> R. Tottoli, *op. cit.*, 196

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 200

discussion. Tottoli gives four examples from Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabi's exegesis; the first two probably imply the title of a book while the other two explicitly criticise *isra'iliyyat* reports. The following quotation shows the title:

It is reported in the *isra'iliyyat* that Yahya (John) was asked when he was a child, 'Why do you not go and play?' In reply he said, 'I am not created for play', *ma khuliqtu li al-lu<sup>c</sup>b*.<sup>89</sup>

As regards Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabi's criticism of *isra'iliyyat*, Tottoli notes his statement concerning *qasas al-qur'an*: 'These Qur'anic narratives are the most beautiful and reliable stories, while *isra'iliyyat* include groundless additions or misleading omissions.'<sup>90</sup> Although Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabi's commentary only deals with legal verses this approach to the interpretation of the Qur'anic narrative is very original. He explicitly criticises this report. However, it must be noted that because of his interpretation of a limited category of verses and restricted use of *isra'iliyyat* in his few comments on the Qur'anic narrative it is safe to conclude that his *tafsir* does not represent a clear-cut approach to *isra'iliyyat*. So the following questions remain valid: when did the *isra'iliyyat* become a technical term in Muslim commentaries and when did Muslim commentators start seriously criticising these reports?

These are two different questions and neither Muslim nor non-Muslim scholars have come to any agreement. First of all it should be stated that there is a criticism of *isra'iliyyat ab initio*. In order to show the negative attitudes towards the use of *isra'iliyyat*, the anecdote mentioned by Birkeland in his work *Old Muslim Opposition Against the Interpretation of the Qur'an* is worth noting: *kana al-qasimu la yufassiru, ya<sup>c</sup>ni al-qur'an* means, according to Birkeland, that neither Biblical material nor pagan Arab poems could be recognised as a means of understanding the Qur'an.<sup>91</sup> Despite some classical exegetes' critical approaches to these reports there are also a number of *isra'iliyyat* which were used by Muslim commentators *ab initio*. Unfortunately, modern Muslim scholars do not pay enough attention to the technical origin and use of the term *isra'iliyyat* and the amount of *isra'iliyyat* reports in classical exegesis, instead they prefer to give a number of *isra'iliyyat* examples in their evaluation of the classical commentaries. A few Western scholars, on the other hand, have placed great

<sup>89</sup> Abu Bakr Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, np and nd, III.197; R. Tottoli, *op. cit.*, 197

<sup>90</sup> R. Tottoli, *op. cit.*, 197

<sup>91</sup> H. Birkeland, *op. cit.*, 10



emphasis on the usage of the technical term *isra'iliyyat*. Newby, for instance, in his many writings about *isra'iliyyat*, states that this term was in general use after the first Islamic century, the period of the greatest activity in the collection of *isra'iliyyat*. These materials, however, lost their popularity in the following centuries due to the definition of *sunna* by jurists.<sup>92</sup> In other words, *isra'iliyyat* failed to meet the scholarly standard of this new approach to Qur'anic interpretation. Only the *qisas* genre has been a favourable soil for the continuation of these materials. As regards the Qur'an they no longer have solid ground on which to stand. *Isra'iliyyat* preserved in Tabari's exegesis are the only remains of this kind.<sup>93</sup>

A similar point of view may be found in Abbot and Firestone. They reach the conclusion that the criticism of *isra'iliyyat* began when Muslims established the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad.<sup>94</sup> In addition, W. R. Taylor openly states that increased attention to *hadith* and fanatical hostility to the Jews and the Christians coincided with the establishment of Abbasid or orthodox Islam.<sup>95</sup> So, according to Taylor, the Muslims rejected not only these materials but also the non-Muslims themselves. A similar opinion is held by Guillaume.<sup>96</sup> While the Western scholarship takes the Abbasid period as one of reaction against *isra'iliyyat*, Muslims accuse the People of the Book of damaging Islam with *isra'iliyyat* reports because of their enmity. Technically speaking, however, neither of them help in determining when the term *isra'iliyyat* was used and which exegetes paid considerable attention to these materials.

Khoury, Johns and Calder have discussed whether Ibn Kathir was the first to introduce the term *isra'iliyyat* to summarise material of this kind, although in practice he only uses the term when faced with narrative details

<sup>92</sup> G. Newby, *op. cit.*, 1979, 694-5; Newby explicitly states that the circulation of non-Islamic materials for use as the basis for Qur'anic commentary was present during the prophet Muhammad's lifetime and saw a considerable increase in the two generations after his death. (Gordon Newby, 'The Drowned Son: Midrash and Midrash Making in the Qur'an and Tafsir', in William M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks (eds.), *Studies in Islamic And Judaic Traditions*, Georgia: Scholars Press 1986, 20)

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 695

<sup>94</sup> R. Firestone, *op. cit.*, 9

<sup>95</sup> W. R. Taylor, 'Al-Bukhari and the Aggada', *The Moslem World*, 33 (1943) 195

<sup>96</sup> A. Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1924, 64

to which he objects.<sup>97</sup> Johns' and Calder's constructive contribution to the understanding of *isra'iliyyat* cannot be denied: they fail, however, inasmuch as they restrict this notion to the realm of theology and disregard pre-Ibn Kathir *tafsir* works in general. What Ibn Kathir does is to place some limitations on these reports. He himself clarifies the matter by stating that *isra'iliyyat* are quoted *li al-istishhad* (for supplementary attestation) not *li al-i'tidad* (for full support.)<sup>98</sup> The categories of *isra'iliyyat* which Ibn Kathir proposed are still in use. They are three in number:

- i. those which are known to be true because they are attested to in the Qur'anic revelation
- ii. those whose falsehood is certified from the Qur'an
- iii. those which fall into neither of the other classes.

It should also be stated that Ibn Taymiyya, the mentor of Ibn Kathir, had used this technical term in his brief introduction to the science of exegesis,<sup>99</sup> but this does not mean that they were the first scholars to draw attention to *isra'iliyyat* reports and criticise them explicitly. Shahhata, quoting from Kawthari, states that Tufi<sup>100</sup> (d.716/1316) discusses the use of *isra'iliyyat* in exegesis in his small book *al-'Iksir fi Qawa'id al-Tafsir*. Unfortunately, we have not had the opportunity to see this book; however, on the basis of Shahhata's information it seems likely that Tufi's approach was apologetic. It is also important to note that he had an enormous influence on Ibn Kathir. According to Tufi, classical exegetes cannot be blamed as long as they use *isra'iliyyat* for explanation and not as absolute truth.<sup>101</sup> It is also a pity that our inability to procure this book has prevented us from making any comparison between it and Ibn Taymiyya's *al-Muqaddima fi Usul al-Tafsir*. Tufi died before Ibn Taymiyya but we have

<sup>97</sup> R. G. Khoury, op. cit., 247-57; A. H. Johns, 'David and Bathsheba: A Case Study in the Exegesis of Qur'anic Story-telling', *Mélanges Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire*, 19 (1989) 263; N. Calder, 'Tafsir from Tabari to Ibn Kathir: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham', in G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'an*, London: Routledge 1993, 137 fn.37

<sup>98</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-<sup>c</sup>Azim*, Cairo: Turath Publication nd, I.7-8

<sup>99</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *An introduction to the Principles of Exegesis*, (tr.) by M. <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Haqq al-Ansari, al-Hidayah Press 1993, 50-51

<sup>100</sup> Najm al-Din Abu al-Rab<sup>c</sup>i Sulaiman b. <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Qawi b. <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Karim b. Sajid al-Tufi al-Sarsari.

<sup>101</sup> Shahhata, op. cit., 273

no evidence to decide whose work takes precedence. However, we know that Ibn Taymiyya and Tufi met in Damascus.<sup>102</sup> This secondary evidence leads us to the conclusion that *isra'iliyyat* were discussed in classical exegesis, even before Ibn Kathir, but we cannot claim to know the exegetes' attitude towards them. As we will see later, *isra'iliyyat* reports have a long history. Their utilisation is testified to with regret by Muslim scholars; however, these materials are still being used in many Muslim religious circles. The effect of these reports is more beneficial than that of some others, and therefore it is believed that the stories may be viewed as *junud* (warriors) of God. Dihlawi (d.1762 CE) accepts their importance: 'Qur'anic narratives can be understood easily only with the knowledge of these expansions.'<sup>103</sup>

Obviously, the rejection of *isra'iliyyat* did not become a major concern of Qur'anic exegesis until the reformist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This, of course, was carried out under the influence of historical criticism as a result of intellectual links with Europe.<sup>104</sup> For instance, Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, Abu Rayya and 'Aisha 'Abdurrahman<sup>105</sup> are generally considered foremost scholars among those who engaged in the debate about *isra'iliyyat* in modern times. They considered *isra'iliyyat* alien material and very dangerous for Islam, taking the view that the majority of these reports consist of irrational ideas and traditions. The information given by Nettler shows that Rida and, following him, Abu Rayya, questioned the reliability of the main figures in the transmission of *isra'iliyyat*. For instance, Abu Rayya accused Ka'b of being a hypocrite and wrote an article under the title 'Ka'b, the first Zionist' to show the link between Ka'b and many conspiracies committed against early Muslims. Juynboll and Nettler provide detailed information about these main figures and their critics' arguments,<sup>106</sup> however, most of these (Rida's

<sup>102</sup> Ibn 'Imad, *Shajarat al-Dhahab fi Akhbar man Dhahab*, Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir 1996, VIII.72

<sup>103</sup> Qasimi, *op. cit.*, 40

<sup>104</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, *op. cit.*, 73; A. H. Johns, *op. cit.*, 1989, 263

<sup>105</sup> She expresses her dissatisfaction with every kind of *isra'iliyyat* reports. Detailed information about her approach to *isra'iliyyat* is found in her book entitled *al-Qur'an wa Qadaya al-Insan*, Beirut: Dar al-Malayin 1982, 296-310;

<sup>106</sup> G. H. A., Juynboll, *op. cit.*, 120-138; R. L. Nettler, 'Early Islam, Modern Islam and Judaism: The *Isra'iliyyat* in Modern Islamic Thought', in Nettler, R. L. and Taji-Faruki Suha (eds.), *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations: Muslim-Jewish Encounters; Intellectual Traditions and Modern Politics*, Oxford: Harwood Academic Publications 1998, 1-14

and Abu Rayya's) arguments seem to be devoted to political discussion rather than scientific investigation of the development of the notion of *isra'iliyyat* in *tafsir*. It is also important to note that Muslim tradition has regarded these converts as reliable.<sup>107</sup> For these reasons the recent discussion does not help us very much in our analysis of the notion of *isra'iliyyat* in the classical period. It should also be remembered that criticism of *isra'iliyyat* is not limited to the reformist movement. During the last two centuries there have been many Muslim scholars who in various places have pronounced their dissatisfaction with these reports in *tafsir*. For instance, writing of developments in the Malay world, Johns points out that there is a serious move to simplify the exposition of the Qur'an, including reducing the number of *isra'iliyyat* and *qira'at*.<sup>108</sup>

If we scrutinise the classical commentaries in their chronological order it will be seen that the notion of *isra'iliyyat* is by no means static, but has undergone a substantial evolution. If Newby is right we should not be able to see any appreciable change after Tabari, but it is well-known that many elaborated reports occur after Tabari in classical commentaries. Furthermore, if classical exegesis is compared with the *qisas* genre it will be seen that in many details they agree with each other, and sometimes one has what the other lacks in the narration of many stories. If the statement that the term was not used before Ibn Kathir is right, what is the significance of Abu Bakr Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabi's comment on the interpretation of the Qur'an *with isra'iliyyat*? In short, classical exegesis does not close the door to these kinds of reports; on the contrary, we observe countless similar materials in the post-Ibn Kathir period. Apart from a few exceptions, the attitudes of classical and post-classical exegetes to these reports are essentially similar. So both approaches to *isra'iliyyat* need to be rectified. Moreover, when we consider the amount of these reports and the effort of some individuals to eliminate them from their commentaries we find that some of the above-mentioned proposals are not very convincing. Thus the correct understanding of the technical use of this term requires the careful study of relevant issues together with comprehensive comparisons among the classical commentaries.

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<sup>107</sup> Said Nursi, *Muhakemat*, Istanbul: Sözler Yayınevi 1991, 16

<sup>108</sup> A. H. Johns, 'Qur'anic Exegesis in the Malay World', in A. Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988, 274