

Images of David in Several Muslim Rewritings of the Psalms

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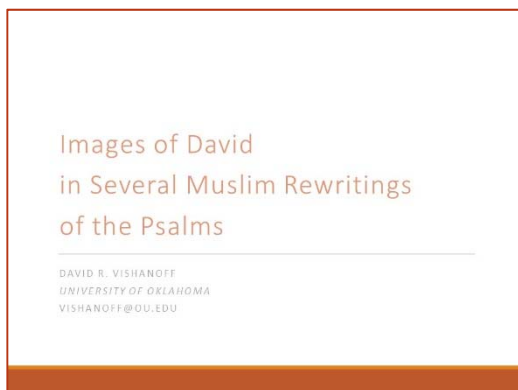
Warrior, Poet, Prophet and King: The Character of David in Judaism,
Christianity and Islam

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Abstract

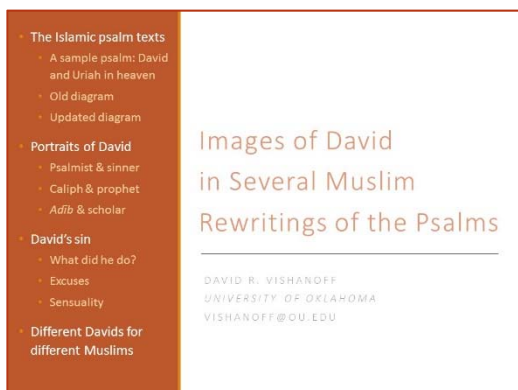
Among the many extant Arabic manuscripts of “the Psalms of David” are some that start out sounding like translations of the Biblical Psalms but that turn out, on further investigation, to contain fresh compositions by Muslim authors. This paper identifies several different versions of these psalms, each of which starts with a shared core of one hundred psalms and then edits, reorganizes, rewrites, and adds to that core material. Each version presents David in a somewhat different light: all present him as a model of repentance and otherworldly piety, but some emphasize the gravity of his sin and tearful repentance while others minimize his sin and promote a piety of strict orthodoxy and obedience. Each editor uses the shared symbol of David and his Psalms to advance his own vision of Islamic piety, not in opposition to Jewish or Christian pieties but as a critique of worldliness within the Muslim community.

Introduction



It is a delight to be included in this gathering, from which I have already learned so much that will help me in one of my next projects, which is to produce an edition and translation of one early version of the Islamic “Psalms of David.” These are not Arabic translations of

the Biblical Psalms but completely new compositions, by Muslim authors, consisting of snippets of wisdom and pious exhortations placed in the mouth of God and addressed to the Prophet David and, through him, to the Children of Israel and all the Children of Adam.



Today I want to introduce you to several different versions of these psalms, and point out their somewhat different images of David, and particularly of David’s sin. As in the Qur’an, David’s biography is never recounted in detail in these psalms, but there are

occasional references to his actions and his character.

The Islamic psalm texts

- A sample psalm: David and Uriah in heaven
- God speaks
- David repents
- Ascetic piety
- Qur'anic style

O David, next I say to you: let my Book poor forth from you; recite it to the resurrected [in paradise] if Uriah hears you, he will pursue vengeance upon you with all his might, and will start to beat you as you stand in the pulpit of the prophets. When he strikes you, the crown of prophecy will fall from your head, the pulpit will vanish from beneath you, and the wild beasts will come after you for payment [of Uriah's blood money]. I will make the two of you enemies, and so it will be until I dispose him favorably toward you; so be meek in spirit and repent.

I have commanded you to ask forgiveness, and if you ask me for forgiveness I will accept you; but you asked my forgiveness without desisting from sin. Turn to me in repentance and I will receive you! Turning to me in repentance from your sins is like land on which much blood has been poured out; the rain comes and washes away what was on the face of the earth. Such are your sins and your repentance.

O Children of Adam, when you consider your sins, laugh little and weep much! Weep for shame before me, and I will cover over your evil deeds. I am fully aware of what you do. (S 72, F159a.6-59b.3)

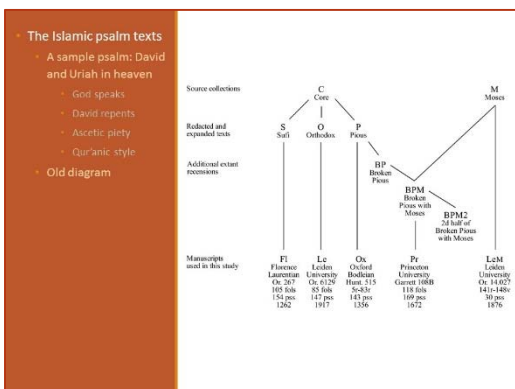
Here is an example. [Read most of ¶1.]

Notice that the speaker here is God, as one would expect in a scripture modeled on the Qur'an. When David appears in these psalms, his role is often to model repentance, as is the case here. [Read from ¶2.]

The tone is one of ascetic Sufi piety: “laugh little and weep much!” is a frequent refrain.

And notice the very Qur'anic-sounding closing phrase, “I am fully aware of what you do” (*wa-anā bi-mā ta'malūna muḥīṭ*).

This particular psalm appears only in what I call the Sufi version of these psalms, but



that is just one of several versions that I identified several years ago in an article that mapped out the manuscripts that were available to me at that time. I found what I called a Sufi version, S, an Orthodox version O, and a Pious version P, each of which

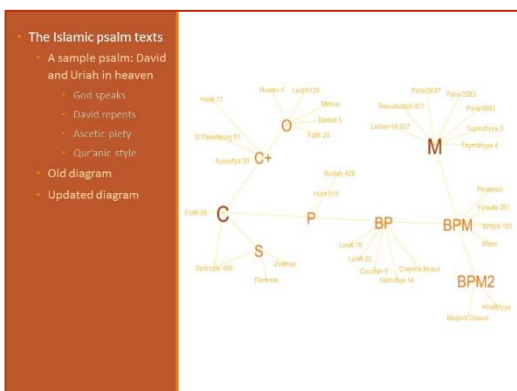
reproduced and sometimes radically modified a common Core, C, of one hundred psalms, to which each version then added another fifty or a hundred of its own. The Pious text was then reproduced in a number of different recensions, sometimes with an additional thirty psalms tacked on at the end that had originally been attributed to Moses.



Those manuscripts were all in European and American libraries,



but this spring in Istanbul I was able to obtain copies of several other important manuscripts. The one in the upper left corner, Fatih 28 from Istanbul, is the oldest known copy, from the early thirteenth century.



I have now catalogued the contents of all these manuscripts in a database, which has allowed me to map them out like this. This has confirmed my prior hypothesis that these several versions derived from a common Core, C, and one manuscript, Fatih 28, represents a

slightly edited and highly polished version of C plus a few extra psalms unique to it tacked on at the end. I plan to use that manuscript as the basis for an edition and English translation. But I also discovered that the Orthodox version, O, was not produced directly from C, but from an augmented version, C+, which contains the common Core plus most of the additional forty-eight psalms found in O, but without

the editing that the Orthodox editor did to ensure the his text, O, adhered strictly to mainstream Sunni theology. I found two manuscripts of C+, one of which has its own extensive editing and elaborations.

Many of the manuscripts listed here I have not yet seen, but published descriptions of them are sufficient for me to locate them on this map. I will just point out the manuscript belonging to David Moss, an artist living in Jerusalem, which he graciously shared with me; I was able to confirm for him that it is a copy of the Broken Pious with Moses recension, BPM, a very popular recension based on P but missing a few pages near the beginning and with the thirty psalms of Moses added at the end. There seem to be a lot of copies of that particular recension, or of just the second half of it, BPM2, floating around Jerusalem. There is also one in Princeton.

One of the strangest manuscripts is Sprenger 466 from Berlin, which contains a very bad copy of C plus the second half of the extra psalms added by S.

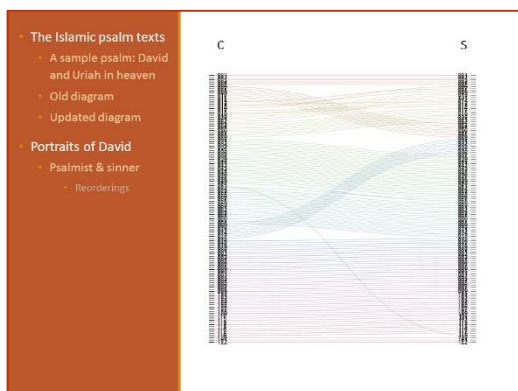
Each major recension reproduces almost all the psalms from C, but each rearranges them somewhat, and modifies them to suit its own ideology.

<p>The Islamic psalm texts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A sample psalm: David and Uriah in heaven · Old diagram · Updated diagram <p>Portraits of David</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Psalmist & sinner 	<p><u>Original in Core 14:</u> O David, once you were endowed with a deeply moving voice, before you rebelled against me; but when you rebelled I snatched the light of wisdom from your chest – though if you repent I will restore some of it to you. (C 14:6-7 = Fatih 15:6-7, 16a.8-16b.3)</p> <p><u>Parallel in Sufi 2:</u> O David, once you were endowed with a deeply moving voice, before you rebelled against me; but when you rebelled I snatched the light of wisdom from your chest – though if I relent toward you I will restore it to you. (S 2:8, Fl 3b.7-9)</p>
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Psalm 14 from the Core text alludes to several standard elements of the story of David as it is known in Islamic literature: his beautiful voice with which he recited the Psalms, his wisdom, his sin, and his repentance. Early and classical writings on the Tales of the Prophets present

David as so overcome by remorse for his sin, and by fear of the day of judgment, that he weeps in continual prostration until his tears cause grass to grow beneath him.

Notice that C 14 comes much earlier in the Sufi text, in psalm 2. The Sufi editor changes it slightly to emphasize God's grace in relenting toward humans rather than human repentance per se.

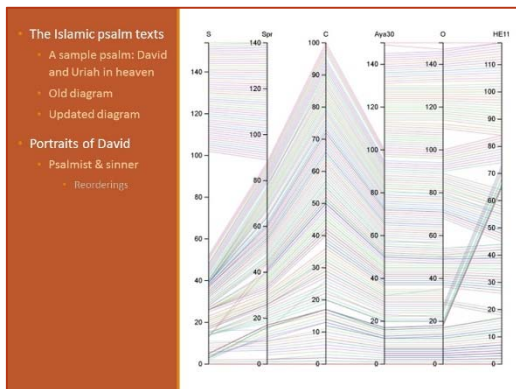


This rearrangement of material can be illustrated using data visualization software. You can see that S moves around several blocks of text from C. This really complicates the task of comparing manuscripts.

Text	Ps	v	s	v	Pericope ID
C	14	1	2		make me your refuge
C	14	3	3		be devoted to me
C	14	4	5		those who do as they please
C	14	6	7		deeply moving voice
Pericope re. - Target pericop. - Relationship I - Base pericop. - Dir					
Aya30	13	6	7	7 b	7 b
(New) Aya30	13	6	7		
BPM	11	6	7		
C	14	6	7		
F28	15	6	7	16 a	8 16 b 3
Pericope re. - Target pericop. - Relationship I - Base pericop. - Dir					
F28	15	6	7		
(New) F28	15	6	7		
F1	2	8	9	3 b	3 b
Hunt	15	6	7		
Le	14	6	7		
O	14	6	7		
P	15	6	7		
Pr	11	6	7	13 b	9 14 a 3
S	2	8	9		
Pericope re. - Target pericop. - Relationship I - Base pericop. - Dir					
S	2	8	9		
(New) S	2	8	9		
(New) S	2	8	9		
Ideologically mo C 14:6-7					
C	15	1			Prayer of my servant in distress

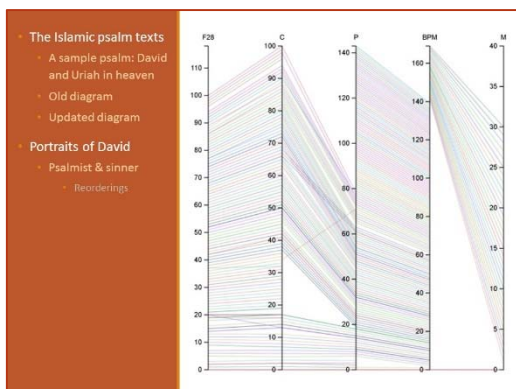
In order to compare them I have broken each text down into short units of text, each one a single psalm or even just a few verses that belong together, and have catalogued them all in a database. The database lists every unit or snippet of text in every copy of every version,

and also notes which versions of each snippet are based on which other versions, which version modifies which, and which one corrupts or adds to or subtracts from which other version.



The database is not entirely complete, but it is proving very useful for tracking down parallel passages. Once you have data like this in a database, you can use visualization software to get the big picture. Here you can see that S, the Sufi text, contains most of the same

material that is in Sprenger and in C, with some reordering, but also contains, from psalm 53 to 101, material that does not appear in any other text (the blank space that is not connected to any other text). But then its psalms 102 to 154 correspond more or less to psalms 89 to 137 in Sprenger 466, but do not appear in any other manuscript I have seen. To the right of C you can see that Ayasofya 30, a good copy of C+, contains the one hundred psalms of C plus an additional fifty psalms that were added, presumably, to bring the total to one hundred and fifty. O preserves the contents of C+ virtually intact, but edits (and sometimes corrupts) the text to fit Orthodox theology. Halet Effendi 11, from Istanbul, on the right, contains basically the same material but expands it and reorders some sections.



Here you can see that Fatih 28 contains the same one hundred psalms as C plus an additional seventeen psalms of its own. P, the Pious text, contains much of C, though it drops a big chunk from the middle, and then adds another sixty some psalms of its own. BPM,

the Broken Pious with Moses version, contains all of P except a few missing pages at the beginning, plus the first thirty psalms of the Moses text, M, on the right.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Islamic psalm texts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A sample psalm: David and Uriah in heaven · Old diagram · Updated diagram Portraits of David <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Psalmist & sinner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Reorderings · The database · Caliph & prophet · Adīb & scholar 	<p><u>Orthodox 113 (editorial addition to Core+)</u>: O David, ask my forgiveness with your whole heart. I singled you out for kingship, made you my caliph on the earth, and sent down to you the Book [of Psalms] (<i>al-zabūr</i>) as a warning and a reminder. Recite it correctly; therein have I sent down to you guidance and light. (O 113:1-4a, Le 60a.7-9)</p> <p><u>Fatih 112 (unique)</u>: O David, I brought together for you [in the Psalms] culture (<i>al-adāb</i>), exhortations (<i>al-mawāʿiẓ</i>) and reports (<i>al-akhbār</i>) to serve as signs to the worlds. (Fatih 112:1, 82b.6-7)</p>
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The material that each text adds has a distinct tone, and presents a distinct portrait of David.

The Orthodox text, for example, inserts into the Core Plus material a description that makes David sound very Islamic: he is not just a king but a caliph, *khalīfa*, and also a proper

Muslim prophet, since he receives from God a revealed Book that contains not human songs or prayers to God, but God’s guidance and warnings and admonitions to humanity.

On the other hand, the Fatih manuscript adds near the end a description that makes David sound like a well–rounded gentleman and a scholar, a kind of literary figure. This echoes a certain strand of Islamic literature in which David is made into a model of temperance and good taste who pursues a balanced life of spiritual disciplines, practical concerns, and worldly pleasures. This is somewhat unusual; for the most part these psalms present the more ascetic, renunciant, otherworldly image of David that may be found in the Islamic literature on *zuhd*, asceticism.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Islamic psalm texts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A sample psalm: David and Uriah in heaven · Old diagram · Updated diagram Portraits of David <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Psalmist & sinner · Caliph & prophet · Adīb & scholar David’s sin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What did he do? 	<p><u>Core 78</u>: O David, you are the one who judges yourself, the one who causes men to be stricken that he might enjoy what they used to enjoy. I knew beforehand that I would build palaces for you, but when you did what you did I knew beforehand that I would diminish for you those palaces—and what calamity is greater than a calamity that diminishes your station before God? (Fatih 79:1-2.63a.1-4, similar to S 39).</p> <p><u>Pious 56</u>: O David I made you my Caliph on the earth that you might judge rightly between people, but you followed your fancy rather than obey your Lord and preferred your desire over the truth. O David, I had prepared for you a palace in paradise, but when you did what you did I brought you down from the station that you previously had with me. (P 56:1-2, Hunt 37b.2-6)</p>
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The texts also disagree about David’s sin, which is quite a central theme in some versions of these psalms. They reflect the changing retellings of David’s sin that others have traced through the history of Qur’anic exegesis and Tales of the Prophets literature:

what started out as a case of adultery and murder is quickly turned into a case of Uriah’s murder followed by a quite proper marriage between David and Bathsheba.

Later, even the murder disappears, and David's sin becomes a case of hasty judgment between two litigants, one of whom had stolen his neighbor's sheep—a case that was entirely allegorical in its Biblical form but came to be understood as a real court case in the Islamic context. Here you see that the Core text reflects the notion that David had Uriah killed so that he might enjoy his wife, but the Pious text, which is generally reluctant to delve into David's sin, alludes to the alternative story that David was too quick to judge between two litigants.

<p>The Islamic psalm texts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A sample psalm: David and Uriah in heaven · Old diagram · Updated diagram <p>Portraits of David</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Psalmist & sinner · Caliph & prophet · <i>Adīb</i> & scholar <p>David's sin</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What did he do? · Excuses 	<p>Core 76: [David,] I made what you did to be an occasion for the man to deserve the station of the righteous: that is, Uriah was a man who feared me, but his son did not have that same fear, and I wished to gladden him with a child of his own offspring. (Aya 76, 24a.8-11)</p> <p>Fatih 77: [David,] you did what you did so that the man might deserve the station of the righteous: that is, he used to fear me greatly, but his father did not have that same fear, and I wished not to gladden him with a child of his own offspring. (Fatih 77, 61b.8-62a.2)</p> <p>Orthodox 75: [David,] you brought about an occasion for the man to deserve the station of the righteous: that is, Uriah's grandfather was a man who feared me, but his son did not have that same fear, and I wished to gladden him in paradise with a child of his own offspring. (Le 75, Le 40b.10-41a.1)</p>
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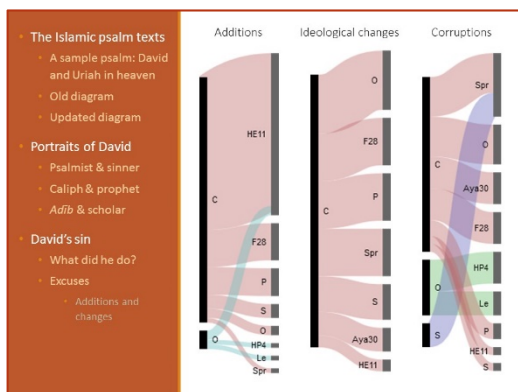
Here we see God giving excuses or explanations of why he ordained David's sin. The story becomes quite tangled, because the Core text seems to assume that David not only had Uriah murdered but even committed adultery with Bathsheba beforehand: Uriah's

son was not a God-fearing man, so God rewarded him with another, through David! The only way that son could be considered Uriah's son would be if he were conceived while Bathsheba was still married to Uriah, which, under Islamic law, would make Uriah the legal father even if the child was born of adultery.

The Fatih manuscript tries to avoid the implication that David committed adultery by turning the story on its head: Uriah's father was a Godless man, so God punished him by having Uriah killed.

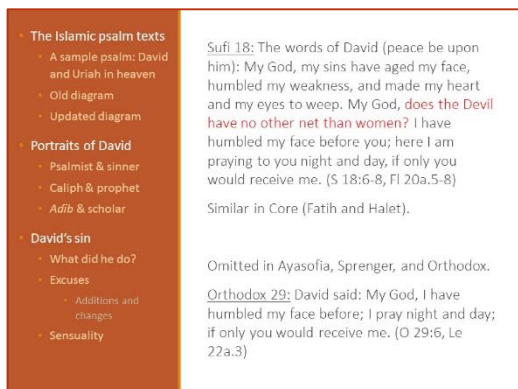
The Orthodox editor, who did not know the Fatih version of the story, made his own attempt to fix the problem but ended up making things even more convoluted: Uriah's *grandfather* is God-fearing, but his son (Uriah's father) is not, so God compensates the

grandfather by having his grandson Uriah killed and brought to paradise *as a reward*. All this to avoid the implication of adultery.



I have noted many of these changes in my database as “ideological changes.” Using software, again, to visualize the notes I have made so far in my database, we can see that all the texts modify the original content of C in one way or another. As we saw earlier, some

texts also add to or expand on C; the manuscript Halet Effendi 11 is particularly fond of such additions and elaborations. And some manuscripts simply corrupt the text, without any apparent ideological agenda. The Berlin manuscript Sprenger 466 is especially guilty of this.



The Sufi text, like the Core text, is not particularly bashful about David’s sin, or about sexual sin in general. S 18 has David weeping once again over his sin, and asking in frustration “can’t the Devil use some other temptation than women?” The text is similar

in C, but the Orthodox recension shortens the passage to omit any reference to sin, weeping, or women.

The Islamic psalm texts

- A sample psalm: David and Uriah in heaven
- Old diagram
- Updated diagram

Portraits of David

- Psalmist & sinner
- Caliph & prophet
- *Adīb* & scholar

David's sin

- What did he do?
- Excuses
 - Additions and changes
- Sensuality again

Orthodox 7: David, lower your gaze away from the believers' wives, that the world might present itself to you bashfully. David, if a beautiful woman passes by, remember that you will stand before me. Ask me for wisdom; ask me and I will marry her to you in this world and the next. (O 7:2-3, Le 6b.4-7)

Pious 9: O David, lower your gaze away from the believers' wives; the world presents itself to you bashfully. O David, lower your gaze if a beautiful woman passes by, and remember that you will stand before me on the day of resurrection. Ask me for paradise, and ask me to marry her to you on the day of resurrection in paradise. (P 9:2-3, Hunt 11b.6-9)

On the other hand, the orthodox text does preserve this advice for David: if you see a beautiful woman pass by, just ask, and I will marry her to you in this world and the next!

The Pious text, however, always reluctant to approve of sensuality, suggests that David ask

God to marry the woman to him only in paradise, and God never promises to comply.

The Islamic psalm texts

- A sample psalm: David and Uriah in heaven
- Old diagram
- Updated diagram

Portraits of David

- Psalmist & sinner
- Caliph & prophet
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David's sin

- What did he do?
- Excuses
 - Additions and changes
- Sensuality
 - Subtractions

Subtractions	Differences	Similarities

Ideological changes, then can take the form of rewording, additions, or subtractions. The manuscript Ayasofya 30 is particularly fond of omission as an editorial device.

We can also utilize the notes I have entered in the database to calculate overall difference

and similarity quotients, showing us which texts, overall, are most and least alike.

The Islamic psalm texts

- A sample psalm: David and Uriah in heaven
- Old diagram
- Updated diagram

Portraits of David

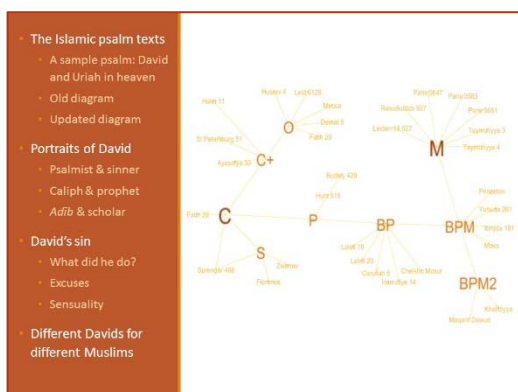
- Psalmist & sinner
- Caliph & prophet
- *Adīb* & scholar

David's sin

- What did he do?
- Excuses
 - Additions and changes
- Sensuality
 - Subtractions
 - Similarity map

If we then use a clustering algorithm to map the texts by their degree of similarity, we find that the results look similar to the text map I showed you earlier: C is surrounded by texts that did not modify it too dramatically— including, interestingly, the Orthodox text O,

which by this calculation is not as different from C as the S and P versions.



In conclusion, let me return to this family tree of the Islamic psalms. Different Muslim editors found the Core collection of psalms, and the image of David which it projects, useful for different purposes, and they reshaped it accordingly.

I do not want to overstate the differences: all these texts present David as a model of repentant, otherworldly piety. All of them employ David to critique the worldly sins and preoccupations of the Muslim community, and to call Muslims—who are the real audience of these psalms—to turn from their sins and lead a life of pious devotion to God.

It is important to say that these psalms are not aimed at Jews or Christians, for the most part. They have little to say about how Jews and Christians supposedly corrupted their scriptures, though of course they do mention that in passing. They scarcely mention the predictions of Muhammad that were supposed to have appeared in earlier scriptures, but that Jews and Christians were supposed to have erased—though one or two such predictions do of course appear. Although these Psalms are addressed to the Children of Israel, and often even to all the Children of Adam, their intended audience is Muslims. These are psalms to quote in sermons as exhortations, or to meditate upon in nighttime vigils. Though they employ a Jewish and Christian symbol, David, they use that symbol for their own internal purposes, and thus reveal how profoundly David and his Psalms, as an idea rather than an actual text, had become the common property of all three traditions.

So these Islamic psalms use a Jewish and Christian symbol for the internal purposes of their Muslim authors, which were not quite the same in each case. The Sufi editor wanted to emphasize long night vigils spent in repentant prayer, so he had no need to expunge David's sin; indeed, he dwelt upon it. The Orthodox editor also encouraged repentance, as long as David's sin and sensuality could be kept within the bounds of the Islamic doctrines of prophethood and God's divine decree. But the Pious editor, the most gifted writer of the three, wanted David to be a model not just of repentance but of scrupulous piety.

It is striking how free these editors felt to modify, reword, add to or delete from the Core material to achieve their different objectives. They did not think themselves to be preserving a sacred text. This was for them a literary endeavor akin to the writing of sermons or the collecting of wise sayings. David and his Psalms were for them just an idea, a shared cultural resource, a convenient symbol that they could refashion to fit their own notions of piety. It has been interesting to see, these last few days, just how malleable a symbol David and his Psalms have been in the Jewish and Christian traditions as well.