

The Ascetic Piety of the Prophet David in Muslim Rewritings of the Psalms

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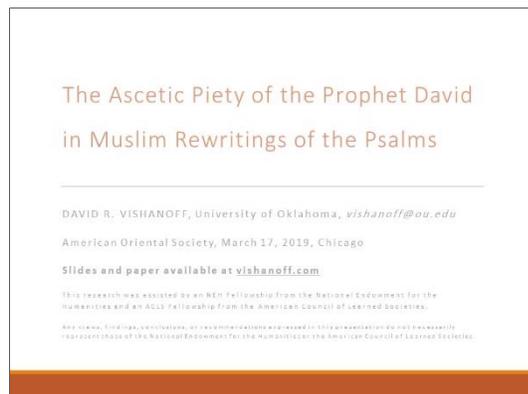
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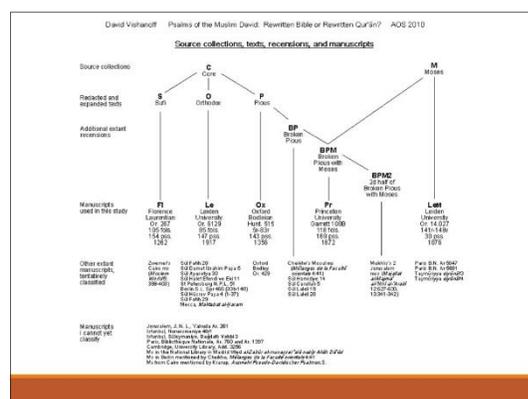
Abstract

Numerous Arabic manuscripts of “the Psalms of David” contain not translations of the Biblical Psalms but original Islamic compositions in which God exhorts David to repent of his sin and pursue a life of otherworldly devotional piety. When several of these manuscripts were studied piecemeal in the early twentieth century they appeared to be unrelated, and were dismissed as so many forgeries. A comparative study of a dozen manuscripts shows that they are all revisions and expansions of a lost source text consisting of one hundred psalms, which newly discovered evidence (described by Ursula Bsees in another paper at this conference) allows us to date to the late eighth or early ninth century. This confirms that the source text was an early literary expression of an ascetical renunciant piety (described by Christopher Melchert and others) that flourished in the seventh, eighth, and early ninth centuries, when similar forms of Christian monastic piety were still regarded positively by some Muslims, and before Islamic asceticism lost ground to more inward and mystical forms of piety. The original text reflected what Nimrod Hurvitz calls mild asceticism, urging disdain for this world and total dependence on God without entirely rejecting private property or marriage. Later recensions of the text, however, softened and modified its ascetical tone in various ways, the Pious recension emphasizing adherence to the letter of the law, and the Sufi recension transforming David’s piety from tearful fear of hell into loving devotion. These recensions reflect divergent strands in the development of Islamic piety, while testifying to David’s continuing appeal as an exemplar of repentance and otherworldliness.

Introduction



Nine years ago at our meeting in St. Louis I presented the Islamic “Psalms of David,” a family of texts that all purport to preserve the *Zabūr Dāwūd* but that have almost nothing in common with the Biblical Psalms. Instead they contain Qur’anic-sounding exhortations addressed by God to David, urging him to repent of his sin and pursue a life of otherworldly devotional piety.



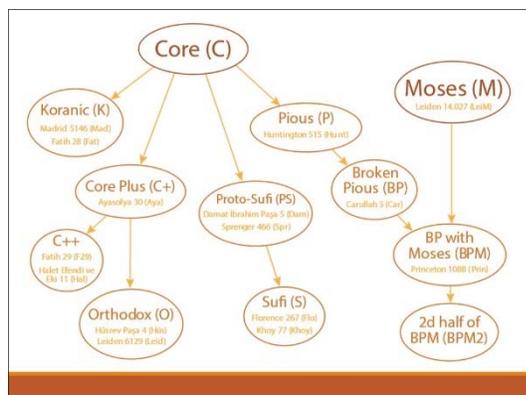
At that time I summarized the several different psalm texts that I was aware of using this diagram, showing that although they appeared to be quite different texts when they were last studied over a hundred years ago, in fact they stemmed from a single compilation of one hundred psalms that I called the Core text.

At the time I characterized this small body of literature not as “rewritten Bible” but as “rewritten Qur’an”—a medium for Muslim authors to try their hand at writing in the “genre” of divine revelation.

I recently went back to take another look at these psalms, and today I want to update and revise both my history of this evolving family of texts and my hypothesis about what gave rise to them in the first place.

History of the texts

The twelve recensions



First, I have now had the chance to examine dozens more manuscripts, and have discovered several new versions or recensions that I have had to fit into my old stemma. Here I list only the most important manuscripts that I am actively using right now as I edit and translate the Koranic recension.

I call it that because it is makes a special effort to align the text with the style and vocabulary of the

Qur'an.

The Core Plus recension adds fifty new psalms, which were then recopied and edited by the Orthodox editor, who changed or omitted things that smacked of unorthodoxy, such as explicit references to David's sin of adultery.

I recently discovered that several manuscripts of Core Plus represent yet another expansion and revision that for now I am calling Core Plus Plus.

The Sufi recension reorders and radically rewrites the Core text, expanding on vaguely Sufi themes like love for God and dependence on God, and it adds a hundred new psalms of its own, some of which, I recently discovered, were already in this proto-Sufi version.

The Pious recension tends to replace vocabulary about love of God with obedience to God's law.

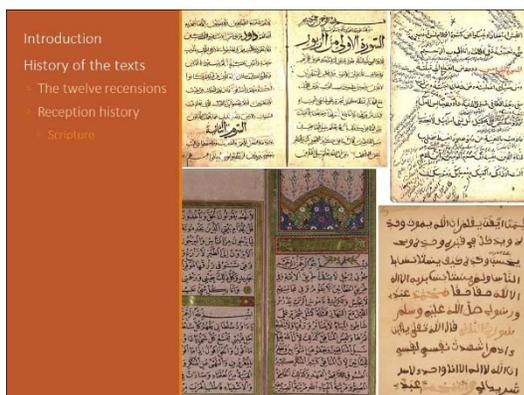
A completely separate text, forty short chapters purportedly from the "Torah of Moses," was truncated to thirty at some point and retitled "Psalms of David." It was then appended to the end of one partial copy of the Pious text to form the "Broken Pious with Moses" recension, which was copied over and over, mainly in Jerusalem. Some copies contain only the second half, BPM2.

I won't dwell on the differences between these versions today, but as you can imagine, keeping track of which snippets of text reappear where, in what form, in each version, has been

challenging, and when I finish going through all these manuscripts I will put online my whole database of notes so that others can track units of text across all the different versions.

Reception history

Scripture



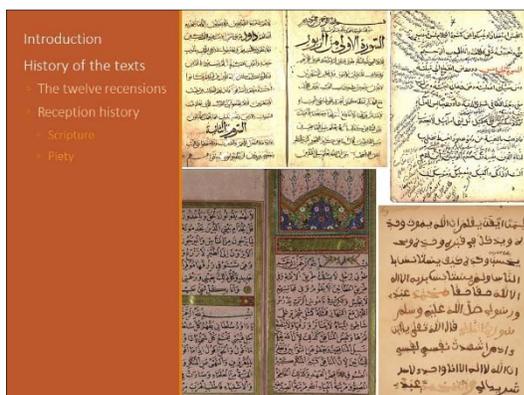
Why did people continue to revise, rewrite, and recopy these psalms by hand into the twentieth century?

Some copyists seem to have regarded them as sacred scripture, because they presented them like copies of the Qur'an: chapters are often called suras, and sometimes a keyword or the number of verses is mentioned at the beginning of a sura. The earliest

complete copy that I know of, on the upper left, from the early thirteenth century, has little red circles to mark verse endings and recitation marks such as pauses. Some are beautifully illuminated.

It seems a bit ironic to present them as sacred scripture, given how freely the editors improved and rewrote them.

Piety



Clearly most editors saw themselves as engaged in a creative literary endeavor whose main purpose was pious exhortation. In the fourteenth-century manuscript on the upper right two different readers added notes elaborating and clarifying the moral of the text.

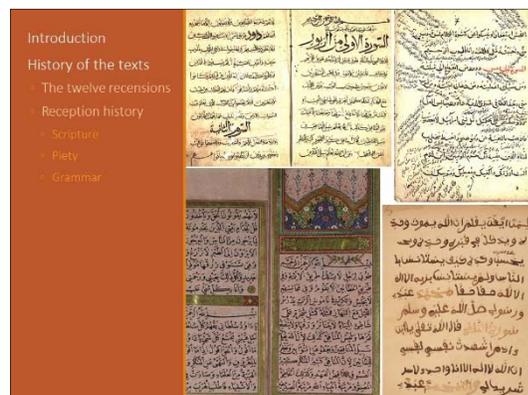
In one fifteenth-century Maghribī manuscript in Madrid the psalms appear alongside a book on *waraʿ*, scrupulous piety. In another they are part of a collection of sermons.

One psalm was quoted in a 15th-century book on prayer that is still available in several languages—though when my English copy arrived from amazon the other day I was

disappointed to find that the translator had silently omitted most of this suspicious *isrāʿīliyyāt*-like psalm. But it is all there on the Persian web site of the Shiite Sibtayn International Foundation, on a page of spiritual advice about the problem of unanswered prayer.

Clearly these psalms were cherished for their spiritual and psychological wisdom, and were found useful for sermons or private reflection.

Grammar



Copies circulated from the Caucasus and Iran to al-Andalus and West Africa. On the lower right is one of many copies of the thirty “Moses” psalms from Timbuktu. I learned the other day that in West Africa the Zabura is still used in advanced Arabic instruction, following the memorization stage at Qur’anic schools, where the teaching of grammar has not yet been divorced from instruction in moral

character.

The Moses psalms were also printed in the mid-twentieth century in Egypt and Tunis as “Eloquent Sermons from the Zabūr.” But the main text—the Core text and all its offspring—seems to have been almost entirely forgotten since the early 20th century, by Muslim as well as Western scholars.

Ascetic origins

But what gave rise to these psalms in the first place? What was the impetus for composing or compiling the Core text?

It was Christopher Melchert who pointed me in the direction of early renunciant piety, *zuhd*. I now believe the Core text to be an early literary expression of that ascetic piety, which flourished in the seventh, eighth, and early ninth centuries. Some later recensions softened and modified its asceticism as *zuhd* was displaced by other strands of Islamic piety.

Mild vs. extreme

Nimrod Hurvitz distinguishes between extreme asceticism—refusing to earn a living, severing social and family ties, intensive fasting—and mild asceticism, in which families, property,

earning a living, decent clothing, sufficient food, and even “perfumes and women” were deemed acceptable. Mild asceticism, he says, emerged as a reaction to the growth of the bourgeoisie, and first found literary expression in the early ninth century in the form of biographies of pious early figures including the Prophet Muhammad. Composing a Zabūr for the prophet of repentance, Dāwūd, would have been a creative twist on such pious biographies.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction History of the texts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The twelve recensions Reception history <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scripture • Piety • Grammar Ascetic origins <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mild vs. extreme 	<p>(Fatih 88) O David, if someone does not give back the wealth he has amassed, but stores up for himself wicked deeds, I will summon the owner and command that his wealth be heaped upon him and set ablaze for a thousand years in the Fire. Then I will divide it in two halves; one half will be used to brand his forehead, and the other half will be forced, with fury and curses, into his belly to scald him. This is for you a deterrent and a prohibition against acquiring wealth. I am the Just Judge.</p>
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The Islamic psalms generally reflect mild asceticism, though more extreme views sometimes appear.

In our earliest full copy, representing the Koranic recension, we find a hair-raising warning against acquiring wealth, which seems to be equated with wickedness.

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Comparison with other copies, however, reveals that this is a surprisingly late corruption, or perhaps a deliberate change, unique to this manuscript. In the Core text (in brown) and in the Koranic recension as preserved in the Madrid manuscript, the threat is directed only at forbidden sources of wealth.

This reflects a milder asceticism. It even notes the psychological and spiritual benefits of rightly earned wealth. But then the ending still discourages and even prohibits *kasb al-amwāl*, apparently taking a clear stance in the early dispute about whether earning a living is legitimate.

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But the Pious editor (in red) changed the ending to a “deterrent and warning against acquiring what is forbidden.” Despite some early debate, earning a living by honest means was judged permissible in mainstream jurisprudence, and the Pious editor liked to emphasize legal piety.

And the Sufi editor, who moved the text from asceticism toward mainstream devotional piety,

reduced this whole psalm to its last sentence, omitting the fiery torment and dropping the word “prohibition,” so that all that remains is a vague deterrent and a rebuke about greed.

I cannot explain the Fatih manuscript’s apparently late change threatening torment in hell for all who acquire wealth. Perhaps it was inadvertent. But the Pious and Sufi modifications reflect the emergence of legal and mystical forms of piety that eventually displaced asceticism.

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In another psalm wealth seems to be acceptable in moderation, so long as it does not distract one from thoughts of God and the Hereafter.

Wealth is not prohibited, but if you must pursue it, do so in moderation, and realize that it is a snare that will inevitably contaminate your single-minded devotion to God and diminish your reward in heaven. What is legal is not necessarily good for

you.

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Once again the Pious text puts the emphasis on the legality of one’s wealth and one’s sexual relationships.

The Sufi text omits this entire psalm.

Ascetical vs. mystical

Introduction	(Core 88) [...] I have not forbidden profit, nor have I prohibited you from pursuing gain. I have not forbidden you good food, or the beds of women and intercourse with goodly [women...]
History of the texts	(Pious 69) [...] I have not forbidden profit from permitted goods, nor have I prevented you from pursuing gain through beneficial dealings. I have not forbidden you food or victuals, or marrying women, or sweet-smelling perfume [...]
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These psalms advocate only a mild asceticism, but they are definitely ascetical rather than mystical, to use Christopher Melchert's terminology. In an important study, Melchert found that sayings reported by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) from proto-Sufi figures of the late 8th and early 9th centuries were predominantly ascetical in tone, whereas more mystical sayings start to appear in

the later 9th century. Melchert suggests that asceticism was unsustainable, and that the later mystical piety, developing into Sufism, displaced it because it was less world-renouncing.

The Sufi recension advocates what Melchert calls mysticism—an ethos of intimate communion with a gracious God—but the Core text fits best the earlier ascetic ethos, expressing great fear of hellfire and of the delusions of worldly pleasures. As we will see, some of the sayings reported from early ascetics by al-Sulamī are strikingly similar to parts of the Core text.

Both Hurvitz's and Melchert's chronologies suggest that the Core text originated in the eighth or early ninth century.

Inner vs. outer

In Leah Kinberg's article on *zuhd* she points out a disagreement between those who regarded *zuhd* as a purely inward matter of contentment with God—not caring about the world even though one deals with it—and those who regarded *zuhd* as also an outward physical matter—not storing up wealth for tomorrow. A famous example of inner *zuhd* is Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), an eighth-century ascetic—recently studied by Feryal Salem—who was simultaneously a wealthy merchant who “shun[ed] worldliness without shunning the world itself.”

Introduction	(Koranic 12 = Core 10) O ye people, do not forget the next world, nor let the splendor and radiance of this world delude you. O Children of Israel, if you reflected on your end and destination, and if you called to mind the Resurrection and what I have prepared on that Day for the disobedient, you would laugh little and weep much! [...] If only you would think how hard the ground and how cold and dark the grave; then you would speak little, but would frequently invoke my name and attend single-mindedly to me. For beauty is found only in the next life; the beauty of this world is fickle and fleeting.
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These psalms talk incessantly about shunning the world itself. They do not consistently *require* avoiding wealth, but they do advise it; their asceticism is moderate but physical and outward as well as psychological and inward. They represent the fearful, weeping, otherworldly kind of *zuhd* that Salem clearly dislikes.

Exaggerated fear

Christopher Melchert has also written about the *khāʿifūn*, pious early Muslims known for weeping profusely for fear of the coming judgment and fainting when they heard descriptions of hell. Reports place these figures mainly in the seventh and eighth centuries rather than the ninth.

Introduction	(Core 4.5) Blessed are the anxious, those stricken with fear, who comfort orphans with food and nourishment. Blessed are those who withdraw in silence from society and its vices, whose souls are afforded the most sublime insight. Blessed are those who rise to spend the night in vigil. But woe to those who go looking for adultery! The least that I will do to adulterers is to blot out the glow of health from their faces and wipe away both their lifespan and their livelihood. Blessed are those who think too highly of me to gaze on the private parts of those forbidden to them, fearing my punishment.
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Fear, weeping, and hell are pervasive themes in these psalms. Here we have some beatitudes extolling the *khāʿifūn*, coupled with monastic-sounding practices like withdrawing from the world, silence, and night vigils.

Al-Sulamī reports in his *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* (p. 12) a similar saying from the eighth-century figure al-Fuḍayl ibn ʿIyād (d. 187/803): “Blessed is he who

recoils from society, is drawn to his Lord, and weeps over his offenses.”

Several later scribes, including the Koranic and Orthodox editors, modified this psalm to avoid the term *khāʿifūn*, perhaps to distance themselves from that early form of radical piety.

Monastic influence

A synonym for *khāʿifūn*, of course, would be *ruhbān*, the term for Christian monks, who likewise withdrew from society and engaged in nighttime vigils while reciting the Psalms.

There has been some dispute about the influence of Christian monks on Muslim ascetics.

Feryal Salem vigorously denies it, but she seems to me a bit too intent on discovering in *zuhd*

an orthodox Muslim piety and a precursor to orthodox Sufism uncontaminated by unislamic influences. The only aspects of *zuhd* and Sufism that she is willing to attribute to outside influences are those she does not like, such as Ibn al-Mubārak’s devotion to *jihād*—which also features in these psalms.

Introduction	Abba Antony said, “With fear of God before our eyes, let us ever be mindful of death . [...] While staying in the cell, collect your mind; remember the day of death; behold the subsequent decomposition of the body ; consider the misfortune; accept the pain; condemn the vanity of the world ; be attentive to due proportion and zeal that you might be able ever to remain in the same intended <i>hesychia</i> [stillness, the life of a hermit] without weakening. Keep in mind, too, the state of things in Hades and think what it is like for the souls who are therein: in what most bitter silence, amidst what most horrid groaning , in what great fear and agony , in what apprehension as they anticipate the unrelenting torment or the eternal and internal weeping . But remember too the day of resurrection and of [our] appearing before God.” (<i>The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers, the Systematic Collection</i> , ch. 3 nos 1 and 2, trans. John Wortley)
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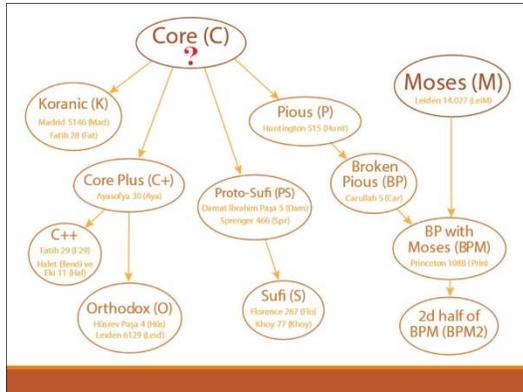
There is certainly a great deal of overlap between the Islamic psalms and the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

Christopher Melchert has noted that the term *rāhib* was sometimes used to describe especially pious members of the Muslim community, which for much of the eighth century was still not sharply distinguished as a self-consciously new religious

community separate from Judaism and Christianity. Many references to Christian monks from the seventh and eighth centuries depict them in positive terms, as adherents of the same ascetical piety embraced by pious Muslims of that time, who sometimes engaged in prayer alongside them. That respect gave way to hostility, Melchert says, over the course of the later eighth and ninth centuries, as Islam came to be seen as a new religion superseding Christianity, and as Islamic piety moved away from physical austerity toward an emphasis on inward and, eventually, mystical piety.

Conclusion

All the circumstantial evidence seems to point to an eighth- or early-ninth-century origin for the Core text, with later recensions modifying its mild but physical and markedly fearful piety in keeping with later developments in Muslim legal and Sufi piety.



It would be nice, though, to have some documentary evidence for this hypothesis. I have been reluctant to put it in print because my earliest manuscripts came from the thirteenth century.

In a stroke of incredible good luck for me, thanks to someone else's skill and hard work, the kind of evidence I lacked has now come to light. But the honor of presenting that stunning discovery belongs

entirely to our next speaker, Ursula Bsees of Cambridge University.