

# Psalms of the Muslim Prophet David

## Rewritten Bible in a Qur'anic Idiom

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### Abstract

Some Arabic manuscripts of the “Psalms of David” contain not the Biblical Psalms but Muslim compositions that sound more like the Qur’an: not human praises and prayers to God, but God’s admonitions to the prophet David, urging him to flee the pleasures of this world, spend his nights in repentant prayer, and prepare for the Day of Judgment. There are echoes of the Biblical Psalms and Gospels, but the ethos is markedly different: rather than the Psalmist’s plaintive laments or grandiose descriptions of creation, one hears God thundering his own majesty and warning of the fires of hell. This new scripture exists in several recensions stemming from a single eighth- or ninth-century collection of one hundred psalms. Only a small fragment of that text has been preserved in its original form, but it was edited, rewritten, rearranged, and expanded by later editors, each of whom sought to align it to his or her own religious vision, resulting in what I call the Koranic, Orthodox, Pious, and Sufi versions.

By purporting to present the authentic Psalms of David, these texts appear to embody the common Muslim claim that the Bible is textually corrupt, but in fact they show little concern for textual authenticity. Each editor freely rewrote and improved the text, using the concept of “the Psalms of David” as an opportunity for creative writing in a Qur’anic style. When these psalms were last studied by orientalist over a century ago, they were dismissed as polemical forgeries, but that misses the point. Their interreligious polemic is incidental; their main target is worldly Muslims. In fact, they illustrate vividly how many symbols and values their Muslim authors shared with Jews and Christians: the figure of David, his Psalms and his sins,

virtue and repentance, asceticism and spirituality, heaven and hell, and a rich common stock of maxims and metaphors. At a time when both scholars of religion and the American public are probing the boundaries of western and Islamic civilizations, and making crucial decisions about whether to imagine them as distinct or bound together, this curious instance of “rewritten Bible” provides a concrete manifestation of the contested but interwoven moral landscape that they share.

## Introduction

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There are many Arabic manuscripts of the Psalms listed in library catalogs, but some of them turn out not to be Arabic translations of the Biblical Psalms, but rather a completely new Zabūr Dāwūd, written by a Muslim and then rewritten several times by subsequent editors.

An Islamic psalm

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. (Koranic 5 = Core 4)

Here is a sample.

An Islamic psalm

Why Islamic psalms?

Ascetic origins

- Fear
- Repentance
- Otherworldliness
- The Vienna papyrus

Later recensions

Sources

- *Zuhd* and *hikma*
- Biblical parallels
- The Qur’an

Reception

Implications

- Interreligious polemic
- Internal exhortation
- Shared piety and symbols

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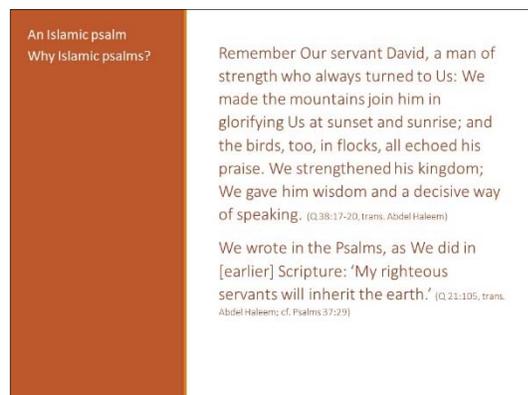
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Today I want to give you an overview of this literature: where it came from, how it developed, and what it means.

## Why Islamic Psalms?

I suppose it's not that surprising that a Muslim might rewrite the "Psalms of David."



David was known for his Psalms in Islamic tradition, and already in the Qur'an. He recited the Psalms so beautifully that the birds and the hills joined in his praises. (He did not play the harp, as in the Biblical tradition; musical instruments were invented by the demons in an attempt to imitate David's beautiful voice.)

The Qur'an refers to David's Psalms as the Zabūr, and even gives one brief and fairly accurate quotation from the Psalms, echoing Psalm 37:29, "The righteous shall inherit the land, and live in it forever."

But the idea that Jews and Christians might have corrupted and modified their copies of their own scriptures, though not spelled out clearly in the Qur'an, was articulated early on and eventually became a pretty dominant view.

So David's Zabūr was a scripture without a text, a concept and an empty symbol waiting to be filled with content.

## Ascetic origins

So, at some point in the eighth or perhaps the early ninth century, an anonymous and very pious Muslim decided to fill this gap by writing a new Zabūr Dāwūd from scratch. He composed a set of 100 psalms, modelled on the Qur'an, with God addressing to David a torrent of warnings and exhortations.

What do we know about this Muslim psalmist?

He was probably a man, given the distinctly male and sometimes misogynistic perspective of these psalms.

He seems to have been one of those pious early Muslims known as the *khā'ifūn*, who were so keenly aware of their own sin and so frightened about what might happen to them on the Day

of Judgment that some were known to faint if a Qur’anic description of judgment was recited during prayer at the mosque, for example.

An Islamic psalm Why Islamic psalms? Ascetic origins Fear	<p>Blessed are the anxious, those stricken with fear, who comfort orphans with food and nourishment.</p> <p>Blessed are those who withdraw in silence from society and its vices, whose souls are afforded the most sublime insight.</p> <p>Blessed are those who rise to spend the night in vigil.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Blessed are those who think too highly of me to gaze on the private parts of those forbidden to them, fearing my punishment. (Koranic 5 = Core 4)</p>
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We already say this exhortation to a fearful form of piety.

A synonym for *khāʿifūn* would be *ruhbān*, which means fearful and happens to be the term for Christian monks—who likewise withdrew from society and engaged in nighttime vigils, reciting, among other things, the Psalms.

One often hears that “there is no monasticism in Islam,” but many early Muslims, probably including the author of this text, regarded Christian monks as models for their own ascetic piety.

Notice also the concern with sexual immorality, which is pervasive in these psalms.

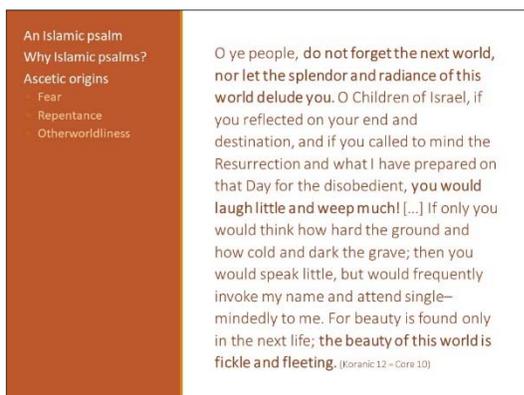
An Islamic psalm Why Islamic psalms? Ascetic origins Fear Repentance	<p>David said: My God, my sins have worn out my face, weakened my frame, and wounded my heart. My God, does the Devil have no other net than women? My God I have humbled my face before you; I pray to you night and day, if only you would receive me. (Core 29)</p>
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Another major theme is repentance. Here God quotes David, who calls out to God in a way reminiscent of the Biblical Psalms.

Here the concern with sexual immorality is pointedly directed at the well-known story of David’s adultery with Bathsheba. That incident was mentioned only rather vaguely in the Qur’an, and Muslims soon cleaned it up so that David has

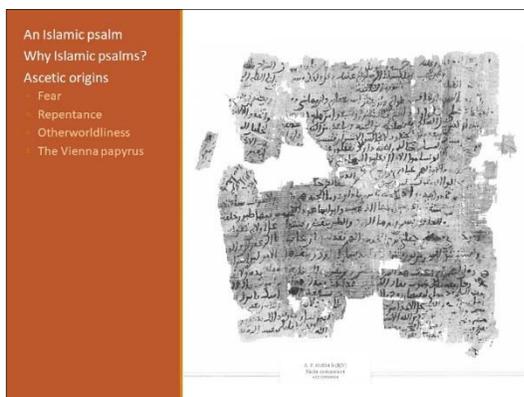
relations with Bathsheba only after her husband dies and David marries her. The fact that these psalms refer so often and so explicitly, in some places, to David’s sin of adultery is a strong indication that they were composed within the first few Islamic centuries, before the

sanitized version of the Biblical story came to dominate Muslim discourse. For those Muslims who remembered the Biblical story of David's adultery, he made an ideal model of repentance.



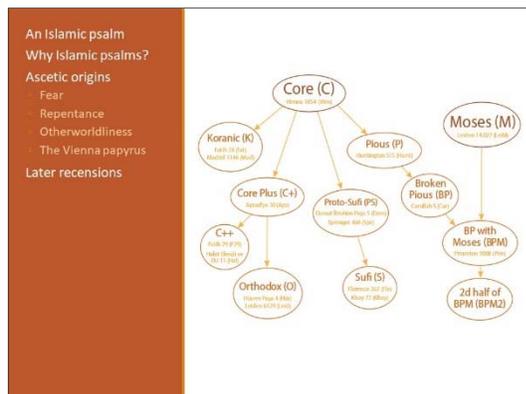
Finally, these psalms are distinctly ascetic in tone. Sometimes they prohibit outright the amassing of wealth, and sometimes they allow it as long as one's heart remains focused on God and the afterlife, but always they aim to pry the believer's heart away from the delusions of this world. They urge tearful and fearful meditation on death, and storing up treasure for the world to come.

The character of the ascetic movement among early Muslims, and even its existence, has been the subject of some dispute. According to Christopher Melchert's chronology, the kind of asceticism encouraged in these psalms flourished in the late 8th and early 9th centuries, before the emergence of the more mystical Sufi piety that eventually replaced it beginning in the later 9th century.



That our text actually does date back that far has been confirmed by the happy discovery in Vienna, by Ursula Bsees of Cambridge University, of a papyrus dating to the late eighth or ninth century. The two surviving leaves of this papyrus codex contain psalms 7–13, sandwiched between other stories and poetry about death and the afterlife.

## Later recensions



That is the only known fragment of the original 8th-century composition, consisting of 100 psalms, which I call the Core text. The fifty-some other manuscripts I have identified represent later revisions and expansions of that Core text, each with its own character.

The Koranic recension is especially notable for its efforts to align the text with the style and

vocabulary of the Koran, even more than in the other versions.

The Core Plus recension added 50 new psalms, which were then recopied and edited by the Orthodox editor, who changed or omitted anything that smacked of unorthodoxy, including obvious references to David’s sin.

I also discovered recently that several manuscripts of Core Plus represent yet another expansion and revision for which I have not yet found a suitable name, so for now I’m calling it Core Plus Plus.

The Sufi recension adds a hundred different psalms of its own, some of which were already in this other puzzling version that I am calling the proto-Sufi text. But the Sufi version doesn’t just add new material; it reorders and radically rewrites a great deal of the Core text, elaborating and expanding on vaguely Sufi themes like love for God and dependence on God.

Finally, what I call the Pious recension tends to replace vocabulary about love, for example, with obedience to God’s law.

A completely separate text, forty short chapters purportedly from the “Torah of Moses,” was converted at some point into “Psalms of David” and then appended to the end of one partial copy of the Pious text to form the “Broken Pious with Moses” recension, which became very popular. There seem to be lots of copies of it floating around Jerusalem, some of them containing only the second half of that text, 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 very

challenging, and when I publish a translation of the Koranic recension that I am working on, I plan to put online my whole database of notes which will allow others to track each snippet of text across all the different versions and manuscript copies. People very generously keep pointing me to more and more manuscripts of these psalms, and every time I have to figure out which version it is, or whether it represents a new version entirely.

## Sources

Neither the eighth-century ascetic preacher who composed the Core text, nor the later redactors, worked completely from scratch, out of their own heads. A lot of their material resembles sayings that can be found elsewhere in Islamic literature, and I keep finding parallels in surprising places.

<p>An Islamic psalm</p> <p>Why Islamic psalms?</p> <p>Ascetic origins</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Fear</li> <li>· Repentance</li> <li>· Otherworldliness</li> <li>· The Vienna papyrus</li> </ul> <p>Later recensions</p> <p>Sources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>Zuhd and hikma</i></li> </ul>	<p>Reason without <i>adab</i> is like a barren tree; reason with <i>adab</i> is like a fruitful tree. (Saying attributed to Hermes and Luqmān in al-Mubashshir ibn Fātik, <i>Mukhtār al-ḥikam</i>, pp. 19, 277)</p> <p>Knowledge without works is like a tree without fruit.</p> <p>Knowledge without works is like a bow without a string. [...]</p> <p>Knowledge without the alms tax is like planting wheat on the rocks.</p> <p>Knowledge is to a fool as pearls and sapphires are to animals.</p> <p>A hard heart exposed to knowledge is like a stone soaked in water.</p> <p>Preaching to one who doesn't care is like a playing the flute in a graveyard. (BPM 168 = Moses 29)</p>
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The most obvious parallels are with the Islamic literatures on *zuhd*, asceticism or renunciation, and *ḥikma*, or wisdom literature.

In *ḥikma* collections we find plenty of wise maxims like this one in al-Mubashshir ibn Fātik's *Mukhtār al-ḥikam*, attributed to either Hermes or Luqmān.

The maxims below, from the Moses text, are quite similar in form, though they are more concerned with good deeds than with good manners.

Some of these sound an awful lot like sayings in the Gospels: sowing seed on rocky soil, casting pearls before swine.

In fact the Muslim psalmists were quite aware of some parts of the Bible. The Sufi redactor seems to have used an Arabic translation, made I think from Hebrew, of the Biblical Psalms.

An Islamic psalm Why Islamic psalms? Ascetic origins Fear Repentance Otherworldliness The Vienna papyrus Later recensions Sources <i>Zuhd and hikma</i> Biblical parallels	David said: O Lord, do not lead me to ruin; do not let my enemies gloat over me; do not cast me from your door; do not make me despair of your mercy. My God, give me a truthful tongue that calls on you, and a heart that listens and obeys. Do not busy me with the affairs of the people, but busy me with remembering you, and occupy my heart with obeying you. [...] My God, grant me the coolness of your forgiveness, and the sweetness of dialogue with you. If one of my many enemies wills me evil, stand him on his head! O Lord, how could my heart not be stronger than iron, when you are my support and my glory? O God, O ruler of land and sea, grant me to be held in awe by kings, for you are the mighty king. (Core 96; cf. Psalms 51:10-11, 25:2)
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But the others, like most Muslims of their time, knew only a limited repertoire of quotations and paraphrases of certain famous Biblical passages that circulated widely among Muslims; and they quoted or paraphrased them freely, without regard for their source.

Here we see that the original author of the Core text was at least aware that the Biblical Psalms contained

passages such as Psalm 25:2, “do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me,” and Psalm 51:10–11, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.”

An Islamic psalm Why Islamic psalms? Ascetic origins Fear Repentance Otherworldliness The Vienna papyrus Later recensions Sources <i>Zuhd and hikma</i> Biblical parallels The Qur’an	O ye who believe, fear God with the fear that is due him, and do not die without having surrendered (or except as Muslims). (BPM 168 = Moses 29, quoting Q 3:102)  I am One, Singular, Eternal; I neither begot nor was begotten; I have taken neither companion nor child; no one is comparable to me. (Orthodox 115, paraphrasing Q 112)
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But the single greatest source of inspiration was the Qur’an itself.

Here the Moses text simply reproduces a verse from sura 3.

And here the Orthodox editor rewrites *sūrat al-ikhhlās* in the first person:

إني واحد أحد صمد لم ألد ولم أولد ولم أتخذ صاحبة ولا  
ولداً ولم يكن لي كفواً أحد.

I could cite a hundred examples of echoes of Qur’anic language.

## Reception

So these psalms originated in early ascetic circles; they drew on Islamic and Qur’anic and, indirectly, Biblical sources; and they were redacted to reflect a range of evolving forms of Muslim piety.



Why did people continue to copy them, long after asceticism lost its appeal? What were they used for? We can get some idea from the manuscripts themselves.

The early papyrus copy of the Core text was part of a personal collection of material about death and the afterlife, perhaps intended for use in preaching or perhaps just personal reflection. One later

manuscript appears in a collection of sermons, and another alongside a book on *waraʿ*, scrupulous piety. So people clearly copied them for the moral and exhortative value of their content.

Copies circulated from the Caucasus and Iran to al-Andalus and West Africa. In the lower right corner is a copy of the short Moses text from Timbuktu.

The Moses text was printed in the mid-twentieth century under the title of “Eloquent Sermons from the Zabūr,” but the main text—the Core text and all its offspring—seems to have been forgotten since the early 20th century, when it was still being copied by hand, and when a few Western scholars published excerpts from a few scattered manuscripts.

Yet somehow they persist. The other day I stumbled upon a long quote from the Sufi version in Arabic and Persian on a Shiite web site, in a piece of spiritual advice about the problem of unanswered prayer. The psalm was quoted indirectly, via a 15th-century book on prayer that is still available in Persian and English translations on amazon. Clearly these psalms were cherished in part for their spiritual and psychological wisdom.

But some copyists also regarded them as sacred scripture. Some manuscripts are elegant, with features similar to 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 13th-century copy on the upper right even includes recitation marks, though I don’t think you can see any here.

That seems a bit ironic, given how freely some of those same copyists and editors changed or improved or rewrote the text, showing very little concern for faithfully transmitting this

divine revelation which, finally, had been reclaimed from the corruptions of the Jews and Christians.

## Implications

Were they really attempting to replace the supposedly corrupted Psalms of the Jewish and Christian Bibles?

When orientalist Ignaz Goldziher encountered these “pseudo-psalms” over a century ago, they dismissed them as polemical forgeries. By the very fact that they purport to present the authentic Psalms of David, these texts do embody the claim that the Bible is textually corrupt. And they do contain some polemical accusations about corruption.

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The Qur'an suggested that prior scriptures had contained prophecies about the Prophet Muhammad which were somehow excised, concealed, or at least ignored. The Sufi editor supplied a striking example of such a prediction. It goes on to accuse Christian monks of erasing Muhammad's name from their scriptures—in sharply polemical language.

But on the whole I must say that such polemic is rare in these psalms, and seems to be included almost as an afterthought. There are occasional jabs at the Christian doctrine of Jesus' divine sonship, and at Christian liturgical practices; and naturally every version includes a prediction of Muhammad, which it accuses the Jews or Christians of removing. But the freedom with which the later redactors rearranged and improved the Core text, and appended their own compositions to it, shows that they saw their work as a constructive and creative literary endeavor, not as an attempt to recover the genuine Psalms of David. They were engaged in what Biblical scholars call “rewritten Bible,” but they did not set out to rewrite it.

The Muslim psalmists' main beef was not with non-Muslims but with sinful, hypocritical, worldly Muslims, who needed to repent and pursue a life of renunciant and otherworldly devotional piety. This was primarily an intramural critique and exhortation, and only secondarily an interreligious one.

In fact, if anything this text shows how much the original 8th-century Muslim author still had in common with his Jewish and Christian neighbors, and especially with the monks who served as an inspiration to Muslim ascetics. The Core text was not just part of an internal Muslim debate, but of a broader Near Eastern pietistic movement that spanned several religious communities—part of a broader “believers’ movement” with many common stories, symbols, and forms of piety, which in the eighth century was mostly but still not entirely differentiated into what we call Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.