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## The Qur'anic Image of “the Table Descended from Heaven” – an Apocryphal Reproduction of the Biblical Eucharist

### Abstract

Christianity and Islam, as religions of the Book, claim divine authority by receiving and preserving the divine revelation in a holy book, the Bible for Christians and the Qur'an for Muslims, respectively. The two holy books present facts, accounts and common images, as the result of a fragmentary reproduction of the Biblical, Apocryphal and Gnostic texts in the Qur'an. One of these images is represented by the table descended from Heaven (*ma'edhanmnalsma'*, مَائِدَةٌ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ) in the midst of the Apostles, who begged Jesus to entrust them with His truth. This Qur'anic



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image can be identified in various forms in the Holy Scripture. In this paper we will attempt to identify the layout of the bookish images of the Eucharist, and how they end up in a mixed form in the pages of the Qur'an. This paper presents the hypothesis that Biblical texts are at the basis of the Qur'an, often as presented in the Gnostic and Apocryphal versions. Besides, Muhammad's relations with Christians influenced this fusion. The paper also proposes a comparative analysis of the elements that make up this Qur'anic image, presenting both explanations from Muslim theology and the Christian position on this phenomenon.

## Keywords

Eucharist, Christianity, Islam, Bible, Qur'an (قرآن), Gospels, Apocryphal Texts

## 1 Introduction

The mystery of the Mass, centred on the Eucharistic event as a way "of living and habitation of the human being opened to the Other's epiphany"<sup>1</sup>, passes humanity through an eschatological synthesis that integrates in a single act of mystical union "the communion bread" and wine as a "revelation of the mystery"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mihail Neamțu, *Liturghia Bisericii: Sintează eschatologică*, in André Scrima, *Biserica liturgică*, (București: Humanitas, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Here we refer to the terminology and theology of Father André Scrima in his work *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei* (The Spiritual experience and its languages), (the work will be cited below). Talking about the "order of Melchizedek", about the symbolic value of bread and wine as elements of the Eucharist, André Scrima sees a symbol of communion in bread as "the act of peace. Sharing the same bread, we enter in communion, in a brotherly existence with those with whom

through the person of the divine Logos. The mystery emerges from the very acts of Christ recorded in the New Testament Scriptures and steadied by the Apostolic practice after the Resurrection and universalized in the early Church. The Eucharist, as a total event, shows the own valences of Christianity, and can be considered the very life of the world. Even though, in some aspects of tradition and symbol, we find, within the Islam, elements of the Eucharist in writing, this is only due to the historical context, having no major relevance in non-Christian theologies.

Inside the Qur'anic text, a mixed reproduction of Biblical passages that speak of the Eucharist can be identified. The text in question appears at the end of the fifth Surah, called the Table, and gather a few Biblical sequence, such as the passages in the Gospel of John, VI, 30-40, in the Acts, X, 10-13, and in various other places. The first reference mentions Jesus Christ, who says about himself that he is "the bread of life" and "the bread of God which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world". The second reference pictures the Apostle Peter seeing "the heavens opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth", and hearing a voice telling him to "kill and eat". In this paper we try to determine how the passage about the table descended from heaven, in the fifth Surah, found its place in the pages of the Qur'an, also stating the Biblical passages that are close to the Qur'anic text and putting them in the Muslims' most sacred text.

The research has led us to find that, the parallel between the Holy Scriptures and the Qur'an regarding the Eucharist, has not been treated in the Romanian literature, neither theological nor secular. In the specialized literature we have explored, from the English, French and Italian bibliography, this connection is treated, or at least mentioned, by several authors. The novelty

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we break the bread, based on the numerical value of the word yayin, whose correspondent means mystery, sacrament (pp. 149-150).

of this paper is that it brings a Christian Orthodox position on the Qur'an text and on the phenomenon itself. Western theologians and scholars, who have dealt with this theme, have established the general Biblical source as the foundation of the Qur'an, giving various assumptions regarding the exact specification of the source. We will attempt to do a brief exegesis of the Qur'anic text which describes the table descended from heaven, emphasizing elements from the Christian area. In order to support this thesis in the following chapter, we will try to bring some scientific references on the sources of the Qur'an in relation to the Holy Scripture.

## **2 Revelation, the Bible and the Qur'an**

Its holy text is one of the most important elements of a religion, having by its very nature a sacred valence generated by the revelatory dimension claimed by almost any sacred text. Undoubtedly, along with the sacred text, the religious systems are based on founders, prophets and supernatural occurrences that, in a particular historical context, can produce changes or new directions in the religious world. The religious text remains one of the fields most exploited by a believer in order to better know or to reinforce the faith. The sacred text bears this because, at a first level of understanding, it operates with concepts within human reach, being exclusively designed for and enjoying an everlasting time, in the book form, being reachable anytime, anywhere.

Probably just because of this, the sacred text produces the most interreligious or theological disputes within the same religion. The founder and the prophets are historically conditioned, and the idealism and supernatural events are subjected to a harsh rational criticism that rejects them by the criteria of a subjective examination. So, the sacred text represents the evidence, verifiable and available to the human being who is seeking the sacred.

For Christianity, the afore-mentioned aspects are partially valid and impose further clarification. The revelation is a unified action, performed in multiple ways. In this case, the founder does not exclude the sacred tradition of the text and represents the quintessence of prophethood and supernatural events. All this can be experienced by the faithful Christian in the Liturgical mystery. The eternal divine Logos, who experienced the incarnation in human form, expresses Himself conceptually through words, and gave Himself through the Eucharistic sacrifice, ontologically linking himself to the Church that became his body, creating a continuous way for man to reach forth unto God.

Without neglecting the importance and sacredness of the holy Scriptures, Orthodox Christianity cannot treat the Biblical text as the highest level of knowledge of God, because “any power of thoughts and any meaning of the words, even if it may seem to comprise something great and divine, is not able to reach the Word himself, but some traces and remains our word gives the account of his Word, from those things we understood supposing, through the similarity, the Uncontainable”<sup>3</sup>. The scripture cannot be separated from Christ and Church, knowing God through the Scriptures is more fruitful, the closer you are to Him who has the words of life.

„The scripture is indeed the Word of God, however, without being identical, by its nature, to the eternal Word and Son of God [...] being part of ontologically different plans, The Divine Word and the words of the Scripture do not merge in the pantheistic and the

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<sup>3</sup> Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Tâlcuire amănunțită la Cântarea Cântărilor* (Commentary on the Song of Songs), in „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 29”, (București: EIBMBOR, 1982), p. 129

Monophysite sense, but neither separates as in the Nestorian sense”<sup>4</sup>.

The concrete and authentic form that assumes the divine Logos identity as both divine hypostasis and as a way of anamnesis, updating and continuous work of God’s Word in the Christian life is the Holy Eucharist. In its complexity, the mystery of the Eucharist, from the Orthodox point of view, remains unique as a form of union between the human and the divinity. Also the Eucharist unites the Scripture’s secret word with the divine Logos. In this regard, the Islamic theology offers a different identity that makes the Qur’an, becoming the only way of revelation and “communication” between man and God, reproducing the exact and concrete word of Allah, revealed by the repeatedly violent visions of the prophet Muhammad that have torn his soul apart<sup>5</sup> and gave him true state of panic<sup>6</sup>. These hadith specifications regarding the way of his revelation, rout out negative criticism even during the prophet’s life, being considered “haunted by the jinn”<sup>7</sup>.

To these criticisms of the Prophet, the Qur’an quickly replied: “And your companion is not [at all] mad. And he has already seen Gabriel in the clear horizon. And Muhammad is not a withholder of [knowledge of] the unseen. And the Qur’an is not the word of a devil, expelled [from the heavens]” (Qur’an, surah 81; 22-25)<sup>8</sup>. In this situation, the prophet who receives the

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<sup>4</sup> Agapie Corbu, *Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, tâlcuitor al Scripturii. O introducere în exegeza biblică patristică*, (Arad: Sfântul Nectarie, 2011), p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Emil Jurcan, *Lumea religioasă contemporană. Evoluție și problematizare*, (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2004), p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Filoramo (coord.), *Istoria religiilor. III. Religiile dualiste. Islamul*, (Iași: Polirom, 2009), pp. 126-127.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> For most of the citations from the Qur’an the following edition will be used: *Coranul (The Qur’an)*, (București: Kriterion, 2002). The Qur’anic passages cited from other editions will be signalled in the footnote.

revelation becomes a mere instrument, being harmless to the word of Allah, which remains the ultimate form of revelation in Islam. In this spirit, the Qur'an, in the Muslim theology "cannot be compared with other holy books (Torah, the Gospels), but he is placed on the same level with Jesus Christ because both represents material manifestations of the Spirit, Word of God"<sup>9</sup>. As we mentioned above, the revelation inside the Christianity is a complex factor that cannot be reduced only to a book because it is beyond the human finitude and lures into transcendent, giving it an apophatic type of knowledge that cannot be expressed or poetized but manifests itself through a mystical union with Christ - the Word and Person. For both traditions, Christian and Islamic, „The book offers indeed an exemplary version of reality, its standard and the transcendent reference to which the individuality complies and especially follows”<sup>10</sup>. But in Christianity, “following the book, in every sense of the term, following it beyond itself, into its author, means, for humans to extend vertically, to exit from the limits of the their current condition, a universal experience”<sup>11</sup>.

„Or, strictly speaking, the Christian tradition does not have a sacred book, a book of the kind of Hebrew and Islamic traditions. In the Christian tradition is not the book that ensures God's revelation. Primary is God's plan for the incarnation in a human being, of the person called Jesus Christ, for the incarnation of His word's essence”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> E. Cerulli, *La questione del Corano Increateo e la dotrine analoghe nel creştianesimo d'Oriente*, Roma, 1971, 30, apud. George Grigore, *Coranul între traducere şi netraducere*, in *Coranul*, (Bucureşti: Kriterion), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Anca Manolescu, *O metodă de studiere a experienţei spirituale*, in *André Scrima, Experienţa spirituală....*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *André Scrima, Experienţa spirituală....*, p. 129.

Leaving aside the sacred books within the religious tradition, and passing to the hermeneutic and isagogic plane of sacred texts, especially the Qur'anic text, we will attempt to establish a lineage of the Qur'an or to identify its sources of inspiration, if it can be proved, otherwise, what is the content of the new revelations in relation to the Holy Scriptures. Pursuing this, we have established three major sources which fed the Qur'an writing. We are talking about the Gnostic writings, apocryphal Christian literature, and the Syrian and Coptic Christian literature. We cannot speak about a direct influence of the Biblical canon on the Qur'anic text, since many mismatches occur, even if the fundamental topics can be the same<sup>13</sup>. The Qur'an recognizes the Bible as a sacred book, revealed by God to Jesus Christ, who is considered only a prophet, yet the Islam refuses the Bible's authority, being considered "falsified".

The Muslims' masterpiece consists of 114 chapters of varying lengths, each known as a surah, the shortest chapter consists of three verses and the longest of 286, each surah corresponds to a major theme<sup>14</sup>. The Qur'an has quite a varied style<sup>15</sup>, but is concentrated as a revelation in a very short period of time, extending its claims as the only masterpiece ever, being the coronation of both the Torah and the Gospels, that would have been allegedly incomplete and insufficient. Regarding this, we should mention that it is very close to the style of the

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Jomier, *Bible et Coran*, (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1959), p. 27 sqq.

<sup>14</sup> Malek Chebel, *Dicționar enciclopedic al Coranului*, (București: Artemis, 2010), pp. 309-310.

<sup>15</sup> Giulio Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the light of Christ. A Christian Interpretation of the Sacred Book of Islam*, (Chicago-Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), pp. 71-91. The variety of Qur'anic style consists of the presence of some literary forms such as oracles, apocalyptic visions, psalms, hymns, prayers, historical and legendary narratives often depicting biblical characters and events in the history of the monotheistic beliefs presented differently from their true source. The Qur'anic text takes into account requirements related to worship as well as the civil life.



Apocryphal writings. Moreover, the Gospel of Thomas consists of 114 logia, as the Qur'an consists of 114 surahs<sup>16</sup>. Even the style and the length of the chapters resembles very much those of the Qur'an<sup>17</sup>. The anteriority of the Gospel of Thomas in respect to the Qur'an is demonstrated by Philippe de Suarez<sup>18</sup>. The Coptic papyrus was discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, along with other Gnostic writings dating from the III-IV centuries A.D.<sup>19</sup>. Another text, from which many topics and biblical narratives about the childhood of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Baptist, and so on, were adopted, is the Protoevangelium of James<sup>20</sup>. The fact that Muhammad had met and known the Essene communities during the journeys undertaken when he was in Khadija's service is a naturalized question, as well as his refuge with a Christian in Ethiopia. But besides this, Muhammad closely knew authentic Christians too. For example, when he was just 35, a Coptic Christian built the roof of the Ka'aba<sup>21</sup>. He also met a Christian slave named Gabr<sup>22</sup>. Even if he had not personally met such a community, the influence cannot be denied, because on the Saudi Arabia's territory the Judeo-Christian and Gnostic ideas were commonly shared<sup>23</sup>. Besides these Gnostic communities, Muhammad met heretical Christian communities such as the Sabaeans.

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<sup>16</sup> W. Atallah, *L'évangile selon Thomas et le Coran*, in „Arabica”, T. 23, fasc. 3, sept., 1976, p. 309.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 310.

<sup>18</sup> Philippe de Suarez, *L'évangile selon Thomas*, (Montélimar, 1974), p. 355, apud W. Atallah, *cit. art.*, p. 310.

<sup>19</sup> See Jean-Marc Prieur, *Les écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, (dossier), in „Cahiers Evangile”, no. 148, June, 2009; \*\*\* *Evanghelii apocrife (Apocryphal Gospels)*, (București: Humanitas, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Joachim Gnllka, *Qui sont les chrétiens du Coran?*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2008), pp. 104-106.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 101. For a more complex list of Christian contacts which Muhammad established see Busse, *Die theologische Beziehungen*, pp.12-13, 27-28.

<sup>23</sup> Giulio Basetti-Sani, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-59.

As for the influence of Syrian Christian literature on the Qur'an, many theologians, philologists and historians have been able to find thematic patristic images in the text of the Qur'an and implicitly in the Muslim theology. For example, Christoph Luxenberg in *Die Syro-aramaische Lesart des Koran*, found many theological and philological explanations that reinforce this argument<sup>24</sup>. One of the most striking similarities between the two traditions refers to the eschatological image of the eternal paradise topic<sup>25</sup>, in the works of the Syrian Church Fathers, especially St. Isaac the Syrian and St. Ephrem the Syrian<sup>26</sup>.

There are also some speculations that would consider the Greek culture as being a source in the affirmation and development of Islamic tradition, but this fact happened rather late, not until IX<sup>th</sup> and X<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Greek culture was passed through a rigorous Muslim filter that suppressed any orientation or religious ideas that contradicted the teachings of the Qur'an<sup>27</sup>. We have briefly presented above only the influences exercised over the Qur'an that can help us to better understand the context in which the Biblical passages concerning the Eucharist came, in a mixed form, into the pages of the Qur'an. Besides, there are many other influences that the Qur'an could bear<sup>28</sup> until its final form drafting<sup>29</sup>, at a distance

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<sup>24</sup> Jan M. F. van Reeth, *Le vignoble du Paradis et le chemin qui y mène: La thèse de C. Luxenberg et les sources du Coran*, in „Arabica”, T. 53, fasc. 4, oct., 2006, p. 511.

<sup>25</sup> Giovanni Filoramo (coord.), op. cit., pp. 130-131. The image of Paradise described in the Qur'an may seem almost identical to that of the Syriac Church Fathers. See Jan M. F. van Reeth, art. cit.; Serafim Seppala, *In speechless ecstasy. Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*, (Publications of the Institute for Asian and African Studies 2, University of Helsinki, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Saint Ephrem the Syrian, Imnele Raiului, (Sibiu: Deisis, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Sylvain Gouguenheim, *Aristotel la Muntele Saint-Michel. Rădăcinile grecești ale Europei creștine*, (București: Nemira, 2011), pp. 129-146.

<sup>28</sup> Clair Tisdal, *The original sources of The Qur'an*, at <http://www.answering-islam.org/Books/Tisdal/Sources/> (retrieved

of almost three centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

### **3 "The table descended from heaven" – an Apocryphal Reproduction of the Eucharist. A Christian Orthodox Assessment**

The text of the Qur'an that reproduces in a mixed form the biblical Eucharist can be found in the fifth surah, called the Table - Al Ma'ida (المائدة), consisting of 120 verses. The Medinan Surah treats eighteen divine precepts referring to "vows, sacrifices, venison, sacralisation, marriage with women from the nations of the Book, apostasy, purification norms, theft punishing, punishment for robbery and corruption on earth, precepts concerning gambling (*maysir*), vows atonement, sacralisation during killing the hunted animal, the will to death, Bahira and sa'iba, conviction of the person abandoning the guidance given by Allah's laws and other legislative precepts"<sup>30</sup>. Besides these aspects, the fifth surah presents two Biblical narratives, told in a personalized manner. It presents the story of Moses and the sons of Israel wandering in the wilderness, and the story of Cain and Abel.

The verses 110-115 present the text which we consider for the intention of our study, referring to the table descended from heaven, considered a miracle performed by Jesus for the Apostles. Given the surah's name, it seems that this scene is an

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on 24.03.2014); Material for the Evaluation of the Sources of the Qur'an, at <http://www.answering-islam.org/Quran/Sources/> (retrieved on 24.03.2014.)

<sup>29</sup> Mahommad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Autour de l'histoire de la rédaction du Coran*, in „Islamochristiana”, no. 36, 2010, Pontificio Instituto di Studi arabi e d'islamistica, pp. 139-157.

<sup>30</sup> \*\*\*Coranul cel sfânt. Traducerea sensurilor și comentarii, (s.l.: s.n., 1997), the fifth surah's introduction, p. 396.

important dimension, “being the most wonderful story of these written in this surah, because it consists of many verses and shows the great grace of Allah Almighty and Most High and Great”<sup>31</sup>.

(110) “[The Day] when Allah will say, ‘O Jesus, Son of Mary, remember My favour upon you and upon your mother when I supported you with the Pure Spirit and you spoke to the people in the cradle and in maturity; and [remember] when I taught you writing and wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel; and when you designed from clay [what was] like the form of a bird with My permission, then you breathed into it, and it became a bird with My permission; and you healed the blind and the leper with My permission; and when you brought forth the dead with My permission; and when I restrained the Children of Israel from [killing] you when you came to them with clear proofs and those who disbelieved among them said, ‘This is not but obvious magic.’ (111) And [remember] when I inspired the disciples, ‘Believe in Me and in My messenger Jesus.’ They said, ‘We have believed, so bear witness that indeed we are Muslims [in submission to Allah].’ (112) [And remember] when the disciples said, ‘O Jesus, Son of Mary, can your Lord send down to us a table [spread with food] from heaven?’ [Jesus] said, ‘Fear Allah, if you should be believers.’ (113) They said, ‘We wish to eat from it, and let our hearts be reassured and know that you have been truthful to us and be among its witnesses.’ (114) Said Jesus, the son of Mary, ‘O Allah, our Lord, send down to us a table [spread with food] from heaven to be for us a festival for the first of us and the last of us and a sign from You. And provide for us, and You are the best of providers.’ (115) Allah said, ‘Indeed, I will sent it down to you, but whoever disbelieves afterwards from among you - then indeed will I punish him with a punishment by which I have not punished anyone among the worlds’” (Qur’an, surah V; 110-115).

The text reproduced above, based on the Romanian translation by the Romanian Arabist George Grigore, has a few differences compared to the two other known versions in Romanian, one conducted by the Association of Muslim Students in Romania

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem., p. 397.

edition which we have already quoted, and the edition translated by the turkologist Mehmet Ali Mustafa<sup>32</sup>.

In the Western translations, then term Ma'ida is translated as "meal served, prepared or adorned"<sup>33</sup>. The translations into Indian and Pakistani of Ali's Mumammad and M.H. Shakir respectively, render the term into English as "food" or "aliments". The famous dictionary of Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, gives two meanings of the word: the first refers to a meal prepared with different dishes or courses, and the second refers to the food itself, without mentioning a table<sup>34</sup>. Most reviewers' opinion is that both directions must be respected and considered, because the full significance of the term Ma'ida cannot separate the two meanings of the term. The etymology of the term Ma'ida aroused some controversy among Orientalists. The Arab etymology of the term has been thoroughly refuted by A. Jeffery<sup>35</sup>.

The proponents of the Persian origin of the term derived its meaning from the Pahlavi term *myazd*<sup>36</sup>, referring to a sacred food, consisting of bread, fruit and wine, which Parsi people used to devote through hymns and prayers, then ate after some festivals<sup>37</sup>. Also the presumptive Avestic origin, from the etymon *myazda*, designates a sacred offering of meat and wine<sup>38</sup>. The most plausible origin of the term Ma'ida, which supports the direction of our research, is the Ethiopian one.

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<sup>32</sup> \*\*\*Coran. Ultima carte sfântă, (București: Paideia, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Michel Cuypers, *Le Festin. Une lecture de la sourate al Mâ'ida*, (Lethielleux: 2007), p. 333.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 333.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, (Oriental Institute Baroda), p. 255.

<sup>36</sup> *Language of the Iranian Zoroastrian literature between the III-X centuries.*

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Jeffery, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>38</sup> Michel Cuypers, *op. cit.*, p. 334, *apud.*, J. Duchesne Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien*, (Paris: PUF, 1962), p. 102.

Ethiopian Christians used this word in the sense of table, but customized as the table used for the Eucharistic celebration.<sup>39</sup>

The idea is plausible, because another word of certain Ethiopian origin, *hawâriyyûn*, which means apostle<sup>40</sup>, is used in the verses referring to the table descended from heaven in the context of the Qur'an. One can safely assume the Ethiopian Christians' influence on Muhammad, given the links that he had with some Christians. Moreover, a very important thing is Muhammad's contact with the Christian liturgy<sup>41</sup>, which probably favoured such an influence, the liturgy being the moment in which Christians read the New Testament text.

The verses 110-111 are an introduction to Jesus Christ and his relationship with God, as presented in the Qur'an. It reminds of the supernatural birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary and the grace and spirit that was poured onto him. Islamic theology considers the Holy Spirit as a power of the Divine, which ensures the revelation, sometimes even identified with the archangel Gabriel (Djabrail). However, in verse 110 is used *Ruh al-qudus*, which derives from the Syriac *Ruha d-qudshâ* which, a term calling the third person of the Trinity in the Christian Syrian texts. The Qur'an recognizes the divine wisdom of Jesus through the prism of the dialogues he had with the Children of Israel. Marcel Cuypers, in his exegesis on the fifth surah, considers that this specification concerning the wisdom of Jesus in verse 110, "in the cradle, you spoke to people like an old man" stems from the Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew<sup>42</sup>, in

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<sup>39</sup> Michel Cuypers, op. cit., p. 334.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 334.

<sup>41</sup> E. Graf, Zu den christlichen einflüssen im Koran, in „ZDMG”, 111, NF, 17, 1962, pp. 396-398, apud Heribert Busse, Die Theologischen Beziehungen des Islams zu Judentum und Christentum, (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), p. 28, apud. Joachim Gnilka, op. cit., p. 101

<sup>42</sup> \*\*\* Évangile du Pseudo-Matthieu, in Charles Michel, Évangiles apocryphes, Vol. I, (Paris: Auguste Picard Editeur, 1924), pp. 107-108. The Gospel was written in Latin in the late sixth century.

which it is reported that during the journey of the holy family to Egypt, they met on the road with beasts which began to worship Jesus. After that moment, Jesus spoke to Joseph and the Virgin Mary about the new order re-established by the Messiah, foretold by the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 18, knowing the Torah and the Revelation contents in the Gospel is a gift of God. Regarding the healing power of Jesus, besides the healing of the man born blind and of the leper, besides His power to resurrect people, facts that are mentioned in several places in the New Testament, in verse 110 occurs a miracle that is not recorded in the Gospels: Jesus made a bird of mud, blew on it and it came to life. This miracle is found in a text from the third century, the history of Jesus' childhood, a text that appears in the so-called the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, having no connection to Thomas' Gnostic Gospel found at Nag Hammadi.

In verses 112-115, the Apostles ask God to send down a table from heaven, and to let their hearts be reassured and know that God has been truthful to them. By this fact they would be assured of Jesus truth, and they would become faithful witnesses. Jesus asks God to let down, from heaven, a table that would be a universal feast and a divine sign. As in the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asks God to give us the daily bread. God fulfils Jesus request and sends a table from heaven, and for those who will not believe even after the event, they will be punished with a punishment that the world has never known.

Some exegetes and interpreters of the Qur'an comment on this passage as one that refers to the multiplication of loaves<sup>43</sup>, and some to the multiplication of the fishes<sup>44</sup>. There are also scholars who prefer to see in this sequence the episode in the book of Exodus in which God sent the heavenly *manna* to the

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<sup>43</sup> Michel Cuypers, op. cit., p. 338.

<sup>44</sup> Marcel Haddad, *Unite de l'inspiration biblico-coranique*, 1989, p. 59.

Hebrew people<sup>45</sup>. Another Biblical reference to which the interpreters of the Qur'an, as well as A. Yusuf Ali<sup>46</sup>, have referred is the reference in the Acts of the Apostles that mentions the time when a table descended from heaven to Peter the Apostle, and the Lord commanded him to eat from it.

All these being put together, most experts consider this Qur'anic passage as one related to the Christian Eucharist. There are plenty of arguments in order to eliminate other hypotheses<sup>47</sup>. On the one hand, Jesus is in the midst of the Apostles, with whom He has a dialogue on an essential topic. On the other hand, it is not a sheet, as the one seen by the Apostle Peter, but a meal that serves food through which the Apostles appease their hearts and become believers. And, last but not least, the table descended from heaven is a feast and a divine sign. The celebration, the feast to which the Apostles take part, becomes a sign, a universal and living symbol, that opens up to all people who want to know God. And in the Holy Bible, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter XI speaks of the Holy Eucharist, where we find a warning that "For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, eat and drink judgment on themselves" (I Corinthians, XI; 29 NIV).

The first Muslim commentator of the Qur'an who recognizes the influence of the Eucharist and Easter celebrations on this surah is Rashîd Ridâ<sup>48</sup>. This commenter identifies this passage also with the passage in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, where Jesus Christ is called the bread of life, bread of God that came down from heaven, and "whoever eats this bread will live forever" (John, VI; 51). Chapter six in the Gospel of John, even if is much more extensive than the three verses in the fifth Surah

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc Monneret, *Les grands thèmes du Coran; Préface du Docteur Dalil Boubakeur*, (Paris: Editions Dervy, 2003), p. 588.

<sup>46</sup> A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holly Qur'an*, p. 279, n. 826, apud. Michel Cuypers, op. cit., p. 339.

<sup>47</sup> Henri Michaud, *Jésus selon le Coran*, (Neuchatel: Éditions Delachaux et Niestlé, 1960), p. 59.

<sup>48</sup> Michel Cuypers, op. cit., p. 338.



in the Qur'an, follows the same structure. In verse 29 of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, the Apostles are told that "the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." So they asked him: "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you?" (John VI; 30). And then He began the discourse on the bread (manna) of their ancestors, who ate it and yet they died, and the Bread of Life which He is, and anyone may eat and not die. Broadly speaking, the structure of the dialogue between the Apostles and Christ is not very different, following the same questions and answers. There are many other places in the Scripture that can be linked to the Qur'an text<sup>49</sup>, but for each one there are differences that cannot be totally cancelled.

Another text that should be taken into account, regarding the similarities that may be established compared to the Koran version of "the Eucharist", is the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles, published in 1900 by H. Rendel Harris. The Apocrypha is a Syriac text which presents narratives of the four Gospels and Acts, and three apocalyptic sermons uttered by three of the Apostles<sup>50</sup>. The Syriac manuscript is originally Jacobite, and has been dated to the late sixth century and the beginning of the seventh<sup>51</sup>. However, dating the manuscript will not raise any issue on the authenticity and the influence it could exercise on the Qur'an, as this apocryphal text is mentioned in the II<sup>nd</sup> century by Origen<sup>52</sup>. The text presents Simon Kepha, along with the other disciples, gathered in a place where they were fasting and were praying to Jesus Christ to strengthen their faith, and

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<sup>49</sup> See Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian environment*, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1926).

<sup>50</sup> Emmanouela Grypeou, *The Table from Heaven: A note on Qur'ān, Sūrah 5, 111 ff.*, in „*Collectanea Christiana Orientalia*”, volume 2, 2005, pp.312-313.

<sup>51</sup> Han J. W. Druvers, *The Gospel of The Twelve Apostles...*, in Averil Cameron & L. J. Conrad (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islam Near East I*, p. 211, apud. Emmanouela Grypeou, op. cit., p. 314.

<sup>52</sup> See note 13 in Emmanouela Grypeou, op. cit., pp. 314-315.

to hear their prayer. Then suddenly there appeared a table set before them, with many good things that the Lord himself had fed<sup>53</sup>.

The influence of Christianity upon the last part of the fifth Surah is undeniable. The Qur'an text is influenced by the texts of the Gospels and the Apocrypha, as well as by the liturgical ritual itself. The Syro-Oriental Liturgy, unlike the rest of the Liturgies, did not include, in the great prayer, words of institution<sup>54</sup>, but emphasized the symbolic and spiritual Mystery.

## Conclusion

The liturgy of the Church in the first centuries had a crucial role in the lives of the Christians, and was a pillar around which the ecclesial and social life was organized. The Eucharistic mark on the Qur'an text was due to the liturgical notoriety in all spaces where Christianity was embraced.

As we have seen above, we can affirm without any doubt the influence of Christianity upon the Qur'an, starting with the Biblical texts regarding the Eucharist, which, as time passed by, began to be reproduced in other non-canonical texts, claiming their authority from some Apostles who were no longer alive, but who enjoyed an authority in the Church. Besides these apocryphal Gospels, it should be noted the role of Syriac Christian literature that manifested, at least in some theological topics, its influence on the territory of the Arabian Peninsula.

As to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, we notice the contact he had established with the Ethiopian Christians and with the heretical communities across Arabia and beyond. Moreover,

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<sup>53</sup> J. Rendel Harris (ed.), *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles together with the Apocalypses of each one of them*, (Cambridge University Press, 1900), pp. 30-31.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Christian Felmy, *De la Cina de Taină la Dumnezeiasca Liturghie a Bisericii Ortodoxe. Un comentariu istoric*, (Sibiu: Deisis, 2008), p. 70.

according to some information, Muhammad knew the meaning of the Christian liturgy. Spiritual experiences are expressed in various languages according to several factors of interaction. The Eucharist represents the knowledge of Christ and the remaining in Him through the mystery of the Church; and the study of the Scriptures is not only an intellectual work, but an Eucharistic investigation aided by divine grace<sup>55</sup>, by which we can discover the mystery of the Word through the fully communion with Him.

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<sup>55</sup> Stelian Tofană, Cuvântul lui Dumnezeu ca euharistic: înțelegerea și interpretarea Bibliei în lumina experienței euharistice liturgice din perspectiva ortodoxă, in : „Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Theologia Orthodoxa”, no. 1-2, year XLIII, 1998, p. 123.