

Islamic Sources and the Iconoclasm in the Levant Reinterpretation

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Abstract: *In the history of Christianity and Christians of Jordan during the early Islamic period, iconoclasm was an important issue, spreading over a wide geographical area and influencing more than one third of the churches of Jordan built during that period. Many questions were raised about who launched the iconoclasm, when did it first take place and why it did occur. Some Orientalists and scholars interested in this phenomenon have pointed the finger at Islam and its influences on the conquered regions as the reason for iconoclasm. This paper investigates Islam's position on figural representation and discusses whether Muslims were responsible for the iconoclast movement. It draws on Islamic sources: the Qur'an and the Prophet's legacy (hadith), as well as the positions of religious scholars (fatawa).*

First: The Qur'an

The Qur'an gives no direct indication for the prohibition of figural representation; in fact, scholars have appealed to some Qur'anic verses to prove the legitimacy of figural representation in Islam. The argument is often grounded on certain verses. For example, in Surat Al-Ma'ida (The Table, The Table Spread) it appears that only the worshiping of idols (paganism) is prohibited: «O Jesus the son of Mary! Recount My favour to thee and to thy mother. Behold! ... thou makest out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My leave, and thou breathest into it and it becometh a bird by My leave». (Qur'an 5:110; all translations are Ali's: www.harunyahya.com). I think it is possible to assert that in Islam the prohibition of representations depends on this verse. Here, God makes it clear that nobody, even Jesus, can create any life without God's permission. This idea has been expressed by Grabar and others who asserted that the only creator is God, and what Jesus did was God's Wonder (Grabar 1973: 82-83;

Ghabin 1998: 215).

Also God mentioned in Surat Al-Anbiya' (The Prophets): «Behold! he said to his father and his people, What are these images (Tamathil), to which ye are (so assiduously) devoted? They said, We found our fathers worshipping them. He said, Indeed ye have been in manifest error— ye and your fathers. They said, Have you brought us the Truth, or are you one of those who jest? He said, Nay, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He Who created them (from nothing): and I am a witness to this (Truth). And by Allah, I have a plan for your idols— after ye go away and turn your backs. So he broke them to pieces, (all) but the biggest of them, that they might turn (and address themselves) to it» (Qur'an 21:52-58).

Again, in Surat Ibrahim God declared: «Remember Abraham said: 'O my Lord! make this city one of peace and security: and preserve me and my sons from worshipping idols (Asnam)'» (Qur'an 14:35). Here the verse has nothing to do with Iconoclasm; it clearly deals

with the idols and their worshipping.

In Surat Saba' in the story of Suleiman, God said: «They worked for him as he desired, (making) arches, images (Tamathil), basons as large as reservoirs, and (cooking) cauldrons fixed (in their places)» (Qur'an 34:13). Some scholars believe that, until the time of Mohammed, (Tamathil) of Suleiman have been displayed in temples. There were (Tamathil) of Animals, Birds, Angels, Prophets and Saints in temples and were not prohibited before Islam (Ghabin 1998:213). Others believe that the (Tamathil) of men and women are prohibited in the time of Suleiman but the (Tamathil) of trees are not, citing the authority of Alfadel ibn Abbas (Paret 1981: 218).

Based on their interpretation of the story of Suleiman and Jesu, some Qur'an scholars believe that imagery (unlike worshipped Tamathil) is not prohibited in Islam (Al-Qurtubi 1944: 272).

With the brief above in mind, it seems Qur'an Verses say nothing against Images except insofar as they are used as revered idols, which are then most forcefully condemned. Therefore, the theological basis of the condemnation of the images must be sought in the (hadith).

Second : The Prophet's legacy (hadith)

As with Qur'anic references, in Islam there is no (hadith) that indicates directly the prohibition of figural representation. However, from some (hadith) we can understand that the (hadith) have sometimes prohibited figural representation as relating to pagan beliefs, and sometimes as imitating the power of the omnipotent creator (Allah).

This fear of paganism is very well documented in the Umayyad and early Abbasid art. While figural representation, whether zoomorphic or anthropomorphic, was commonly found every

where in domestic and public places, it had no presence in religious places as it could have been seen as paganism or idolatry.

The (hadith), I will argue, indicates that the prohibition of figural representation was a gradual process dependent on Islamic thought of the period. For example:

1-At the beginning, Prophet Mohammed tried to keep the newly Muslims converts away from anything that may remind them of paganism. Narrated 'Aisha: «I purchased a cushion with pictures on it. The Prophet stood at the door but did not enter. I said, 'I repent to Allah for what I have done.' He said, 'What is this cushion?' I said, 'It is for you to sit on and recline on.' He said, 'The makers of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection and it will be said to them, "Make alive what you have created."» Moreover, the angels do not enter a house where there are pictures (Bukhari 1980:82-83). This hadith dose not mention any kind of prohibition of the pictures directly, but the makers of the pictures indeed will be asked to bring to life, on the Day of Resurrection, the forms they have created, because the painters attempted to imitate the creative power of God and they would not have the ability to breathe souls into their pictures and animate what they shaped, so they will be punished. One can also indirectly understand from this hadith that the pictures on the cushions or in an inferior status are not allowed.

'Aisha further narrated: "Allah's Apostle returned from a journey when I had placed a curtain of mine having pictures over (the door of) a chamber of mine. When Allah's Apostle saw it, he tore it and said, 'The people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to make the like of Allah's creations.' So we turned it (i.e., the curtain) into one or two cushions"

(Bukhari 1980:82). This hadith indicates that the prophet prohibited the figures on objects placed high like curtains, but he allowed it to be used as cushions. Moreover, he explained that the makers of such items will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, making clear that it is prohibited to create in imitation of Allah's power.

2- At a later stage Prophet Mohammad allowed Muslims to depict figures on pillows if they are incomplete and displayed in an inferior place.

Abu Hureirah narrated that «The messenger of God said: Gabriel came to me yesterday but that he could not enter because there were images (tamathil) near the door, there was a curtain with images (tamathil) on it and there was a dog in the house. Then he orders Mohammed to cut off the heads of the images, so that they become like trees, and to cut the curtain into pieces and to make pillows of it that will be thrown on the ground and trodden upon and to bring the dog out of the house. The Prophet carries it all out» (Abu Dawud, n.d.: 81,82; At-Tirmidi 1983:201).

This (hadith) indicates that the representations (tamathil) on curtains are forbidden when they are completed and displayed on a dominant places such as walls or doors. If the images were depicted on floors, or on objects of inferior status like carpets or cushions trampled underfoot they are lawful (Paret 1981: 218).

Based on Ibn 'Abbas it is lawful to use the figures of human beings if they are not completed: «Images without a head cannot be alive and therefore allowed as the Ibn 'Abbas indicates» (Ibn Hanbal 1956: 363), and are not direct imitations of creations of the creator (Allah). For example, if a zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figure is used, it should not be represented naturally and should be

uncompleted in a way that it becomes constant and disabled, just like vegetal figures.

3- In other (hadith) the prophet has recognized that the figural shapes can be used, provided that it is displayed in heavily used items such as clothing.

Narrated Busr bin Said:»That Zaid bin Khalid Al-Juhani narrated to him something in the presence of Said bin 'Ubaidullah Al-Khawlani who was brought up in the house of Maimuna the wife of the Prophet. Zaid narrated to them that Abu Talha said that the Prophet said, 'The Angels do not enter a house wherein there is a picture.' Busr said, Later on Zaid bin Khalid fell ill and we called on him. To our surprise we saw a curtain decorated with pictures in his house. I said to 'Ubaidullah Al-Khawlani, 'Didn't he (i.e. Zaid) tell us about the (prohibition of) pictures?' He said, 'But he excepted the embroidery on garments. Didn't you hear him?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'Yes, he did'» (Bukhari1980:82; Muslim 1981: 85; Abu Dawud no date: 80; Nisa'i n.d: 212-213).

From this (hadith) we can conclude that the prophet has not prohibited the images on clothes or on curtains since he thought that Islam became stable and its impact established on the minds of Muslims, and is no danger of paganism. According to this (hadith) Al-'Ainy thinks that «The lawgiver at first forbade all representations (suwar), even a figure on a garment, since they (the Arabs) were still not far removed in time from the worship of representation. So he forbade them entirely, and when his prohibition had been established he permitted figures on a garment» (Ibn Hasim 1966: 673).

4- Later (hadith) indicate that there is no problem with using figural shapes provided that it is not used in religious places. 'Aisha had a Qiram (a thin marked woolen curtain) with



Fig. 1. Deformed face and intact body, Umm Al-Rasas (Piccirillo 1993:219)

which she had screened one side of her home. The Prophet said, «Take away this Qiram of yours, as its pictures are still displayed in front of me during my prayer (i.e., every time I enter it makes me think of this world)» (Bukhari 1980: 82). According to this (hadith), it is clear that any significance of worship or veneration of representation has disappeared from Muslim's minds; therefore, the Prophet has not prohibited the use of figures on curtains unless it distracts the mind from prayer. The Muslim now has no fear for his faith or prohibition against displaying the figures whether in a dominant place or in a complete form, provided that they are not displayed on the place of prayer. Perhaps this issue is important for the question as to whether or not images are allowed in a place of prayer. Therefore the images have been used later in palaces but prohibited in mosques.

From these (hadith) it can be concluded that Islam has nothing to do with Iconoclasm in the churches of Jordan in general: First, the Prophet, as shown in the second point, did not prevent the figures if they were depicted on floors, or on objects of inferior status like carpets trampled underfoot. If we survey the Figures of the churches of Jordan we will find that all of the figures were depicted on the floors of the churches and nothing on walls. This means that

the places where the figures were depicted were not against the attitude of Islam and therefore Islam would not have paid it much attention.

Secondly, Islam, according to the fourth point, has nothing to do with the figures in the Christian's religious places. The (hadith) clearly indicates that the prohibition of figures is limited to Islamic religious places.

From some of these (hadith) and their interpretations it can be concluded that the iconoclasm in the churches of Jordan can only be partially related to Islam. According to Ibn'Abbas, it is lawful to use the figures of human beings if they are not completed. It is clear that some of the images in the churches of Jordan were deformed by removing the head but leaving the body intact (Fig.1), and in some cases the body was disfigured and the head left intact (Fig.2, 3). Also in some instances most of the body and the head are deformed, and some parts of the human figure are left intact (Fig. 4). This indicates that the iconoclasts may have been Muslims and deformed the images according to Islamic points of view as Ibn 'Abbas explained, or they were Christians who were influenced by the Islamic points of view towards images, or Christians who wanted to maintain a good relation with Islamic authorities.



Fig. 2. New (vegetal) shape of lion's body and intact head, Main (Piccirillo 1993, 200, fig.305)



Fig. 3. Disfigured body of an animal, the head is intact, Umm Al-Rasas (Piccirillo 1993: 293, fig. 387)

Also the (hadith) in point two indicates that the vegetal representations are permitted: «Orders Mohammed to cut off the heads of the images, so that they become like trees». In some churches of Jordan it is clear that some images of human beings were disfigured and changed into trees or something relating to vegetal plants (Fig. 4). This also indicates that the Iconoclasts were either Muslim or Christian, who were influenced by the Islamic points of view towards images, or Christians who wanted to maintain a good relation with the Islamic authorities.

At the end of this discussion of the hadith one can conclude that the Prophet does not appear to have objected to all figures of living beings as long as they are not made with the intention of veneration. The great danger to be avoided was idolatry; that is, any deviation from the absolute loyalty to the One and Only God. Muslims also condemned the representations of animate beings because they involved a presumptuous attempt to imitate the creative power of God. Painters, it is argued, do not have the ability to breathe souls into their pictures and cannot animate what they shape.

Indeed, the fact that Islam objected to images in gradual procession indicates that this complaint was not directed at images in themselves. Early

Muslims were not fundamentally opposed to images. The rejection of images in official arts did not apply to private art, as is amply demonstrated in Qusair ‘Amra, Qasr al-Mushatta and Qasr Hisham and the coins of the Islamic Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan. The rejection of representations of living things is limited to those aspects of the arts, which are directly and exclusively related to faith.

Third: The Edict of Yazid II Ibn Abdelmalk in 721 AD .

The «edict of Yazid» was issued by the Umayyad caliph Yazid II Ibn ‘Abdalmalk in A.D. 721 (Vasiliev 1956: 46). The edict ordered the destruction of crosses and Christian images within the territory of the caliphate (Mansi 1767:198-200).

Some scholars and historians have concluded that Islam was against iconic representation which led to the iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire, based on the decree of Leon the third in 726 AD. It is true that Islam has prohibited the representation of the living beings in prayer and religious places but at the same time has not prevented this type of representations in civil and domestic places. It is very difficult to believe that this Islamic attitude toward representation of living being had encouraged



Fig. 4, deformed horse but parts of the legs and the tail left intact, Ma'in (Piccirillo 1993: 198, fig. 302)

the iconoclasm in Christian churches during the 8th century AD Jordan, especially if we know that the Christians far outnumbered the Muslims in the 8th century in Syria (Gil, 1983: 142; Bisheh, 1987: 13; Levtzion 1990: 302; Griffith, 2008) and the impact of the Arabs in Syria and Palestine was limited (Levtzionm 1990: 294).

The only historical reference on Islamic attitude toward iconic representation is the decree of Yazid II Ibn 'Abdelmalk in 721 AD. This reference will raise many questions, notably: Was iconoclasm concomitant with the decree of Yazid or did it have roots in early Christianity? The answer is that, rather than being an influence of Islam, iconoclasm has its roots in early Christianity. King attests to this opinion: «It is possible that the Iconoclast party within Byzantine territory was encouraged to imitate Yazid's activities, but in terms of doctrine and iconography, iconoclasm had deeper roots within Christianity itself» : «Do not make an image or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below» (65, 25), 51 (50), 21 which may reflect various interpretations for the testament between the Christians (Piccirillo 1989: 337). It did not need Islam to invent Christian opposition to images; the extensive use of icons in the Christian world was sufficient to stimulate a profound objection to them among those Christians who felt that alien, pagan-like practices had intruded into their religion» (Kitzinger 1954: 131 King 1985: 268).

This opinion can be corroborated by the report that in the year 394 or 395 AD. Epiphanius entered a church in Palestine, in which he found a curtain with holy figures. He tore the curtain with the figures (Hamarneh and Van Eldern 1984: 46-47). Some Christian groups saw that the wide spread of religious iconography in their churches as an aspect of paganism that

entered their religious believes.

Furthermore, Iconoclasm is not only a pure religious matter; it is also political. Grabar suggested that the «outbreak of Iconoclasm was in essence a re-assertion of imperial power and an affirmation of its absolute superiority vis-à-vis the church» (Kitzinger 1954: 128).

However, in reading historical sources relevant to the decree of Yazid we can observe the following:

1. Except for John of Jerusalem and his report to the church council of A. D. 787 in Nicaea (Mansi 1767: 109), all contemporary Christian and Islamic historical sources of Yazid's era do not record that Yazid had ordered the destruction of the churches' iconography (Vasilieve 1956: 25-27)
2. It is difficult to believe that the decree of Yazid was the reason for the massive damage that iconography of the churches in Jordan suffered, especially if we know that the iconoclastic policies were not continued by his successors, and some scholars like De Vaux think that the iconoclasm in the church of Ma'in (Jordan) is attributed to Caliph Omar ibn Abd Al-Aziz (717-720 A.D.) (De Vaux 1938: 257-258). The effect of Yazid's declaration was so much exaggerated by scholars and historians. Many facts can be cited in support of contrary opinions to the newly discovered mosaic pavement in the village of Wadi Al-Sajour (Nabghah), governorate of Aleppo in northern Syria, which consists of many deformed figures. Here, one can introduce first the evidence of the church of Tell el-'Adas in Syria; it was built in 722 A.D. (a year after Yazid's 721 declaration) and was decorated with iconographic figures (Donceel-Voûte 1988: 45-54). Another will be the mosaic floor of the holy martyrs church at Tayibat al-Imam-

Hamah in central Syria, which has been dated to 447 A.D. It has unique representations of many kinds of animals including: eagle, lamb, deer, mules, birds, fish; crosses and cross-shaped buildings; the two cities of Jesus' birth and death; and the paradisiacal mountain from which flow the four rivers of paradise which indicate an ideal vision of both the kingdom of God and Theophany of Christ. Like many other mosaic pavements in Jordan, none of these representations is disfigured or destroyed (Zaqzuq and Piccirillo 1999: 443-464). In light of the lack of contemporary written sources and archaeological evidence, it is very difficult to establish responsibility for Iconoclasm, (Piccirillo 1993: 42; 1994: 158-161).

Second, a completely non-figurative decoration in mosaic appears in the church of Mar Gabriel in the Tur 'Abdin area in southeastern Turkey. The church has been associated with Monophysite patronage from Antioch and dated to A. D. 512 (Hawkins and Mundell 1973: 279-296).

This evidence could indicate that the non-figurative decoration in some of the Mosaics of Jordan (Fig.5) has been part of the Monophysite patronage.

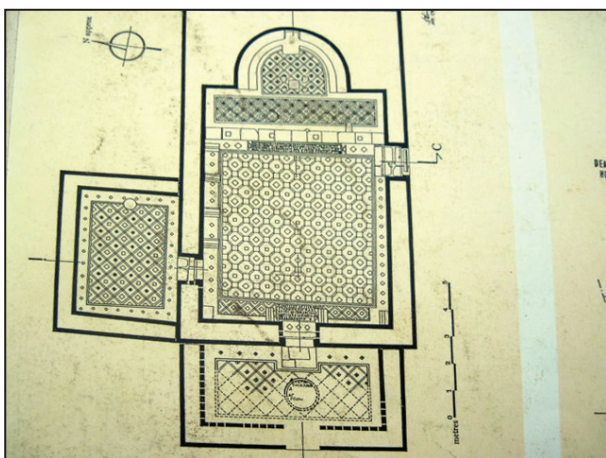


Fig. 5. Geometric mosaic design, Marianos Church, Jerash. (Gawlikowski 1986: 139, fig. 2)



Fig. 6, deformed bird replaced with a cross, Massuh (Piccirillo 1993: 253, fig.443)

3. Third, much archaeological evidence of the iconoclasm in the mosaics of Jordan reflects a Christian belief. For instance, some human figures have been transformed into Christian symbols such as a cross (Fig. 6) and a church building (Fig.7). I think, if the Iconoclasts were Muslims they will never change the figures of human beings, which they reject, into a Christian symbol, in which Muslim do not believe at all.

Also some of the figures in the mosaic pavements have been destroyed and rebuilt in a better shape in order to continue their veneration in the same church. This reflects the importance of the mosaic for the people who carry out the destruction or disfiguration, and then they themselves take the honor of rebuilding it in a newer scene and newer pavement. If Muslims disfigured the mosaic, it is unlikely that they would invest time and resources to restore it again in any shape. I think that the Christian must have done that in order to continue their use of the church.

Conclusion

Based on historical, religious and archeological evidence one can understand that iconoclasm has not stemmed from religious



Fig. 7, a new building like a church instead of a figure of human being, Massuh (Piccirillo 1993: 253, fig. 442)

edicts or doctrines. It is true that Islam does not encourage figural representation but according to religious sources, mainly the (hadith), Islam did not prohibit the use of figural representation on the building's floors; therefore, there is no justification for Muslims to prevent Christians from decorating their churches with iconic figure. To sum up, all hadith indicate that figural use in art is not prohibited unless it has religious implications. Images that lie on the ground are trodden upon and this excludes the possibility of veneration. I do not believe that the objection to pictorial art was meant to be general. In fact, it is not part of the Muslim creed. Further, the fundamental cause of the objection is the horror of idolatry and the suspicion with which a statue or a picture was regarded. It cannot be meant for all times and circumstances, especially as Muslims get far away from the pagan life of the pre-Islam and become a powerful nation, fully confident in the steadfast of their faith and power.

Here I would like to pose the idea that iconoclasm was a Christian matter rather than an Islamic influence. For example, it might have been the influence of the Christian monophysite groups or an internal Christian changes to conciliate with the new political situation:

A- During the initial stages of the Islamic conquest, the hostility between Byzantium and the Chalcedonians of Syria was rooted in Constantinople's iconoclasm. This hostility served to distance the Chalcedonians from Chaliphate enemy and the Caliphate had to tolerate the local Chalcedonians because of the new attitude (Boojamra 1991: 224). Also the Islamic toleration of Christians can be observed by the discovery of many churches which were build in the Ummayyd period in Jordan (Piccirillo 1984: 333-341) and Syria (Donceel-Voûte 1988: 45-54). Thus, Christians tried to show loyalty to the Muslims Caliph (Baumann 1999:48) in the hope of gaining better position or of improving their conditions through damaging these iconographic figures and replacing them with vegetal or architectural elements which indicates an Islamic trend in decorating religious places with vegetal elements but not figural iconography (Fig 2, 4).

B-The second evidence which indicates that iconoclasm was conducted by Christians is the fact that in many churches iconographic figures were replaced by Christian symbols like a cross and a church. The beliefs of the monophysite groups in Christ as having one nature may have led them to damage these religious iconography which characterized him. Here, and with the coming of Islam, they felt free to damage the iconographic figure of their churches and perhaps those of Orthodox churches, keeping in mind they only damaged the religious figures and replaced them with Christian symbols. This may reflect the controversy between the Christian sects of the region (King 1985: 276).

C- We can also interpret the iconoclasm in Jordan as a reaction in line with the central government in Constantinople; it was against iconographic representations in churches which the Orthodox group in this region still used in their religious practice. Therefore,

the government may have tried to keep the Orthodox group within the Islamic empire by spreading the idea of iconoclasm initiated in Byzantium amongst the Christians of this region, particularly in Jordan. This might have been encouraged by the Islamic authority which, on this issue, was in agreement with the monophysite group. This led to the fact that Islamic government had taken no action against the Byzantine interference with the Orthodox group in this region.

D- In Syria there was a local Christian group called Melkite Christians who become both

religiously and politically unstable and lost their confidence in their religion in that they wondered whether or not Christianity was the true religion to follow. This group converted into monophysite. This conversion may have led them to damage and repair the religious iconographies in their churches in which they continued to practice their religious rites (Schick 1987: 367).

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ملخص: يعد تشويه الصور الحية في فسيفساء أرضيات الكنائس البيزنطية في الفترة الإسلامية المبكرة من الموضوعات المهمة في تاريخ مسيحي الأردن وكنيستهم؛ فقد انتشرت هذه الظاهرة في منطقة جغرافية واسعة- ليس فقط في الأرض الأردنية، بل في مناطق مختلفة من بلاد الشام - وأثرت بشكل مباشر على ما يزيد عن ثلث كنائس الأردن ذات الأرضيات الفسيفسائية في تلك المرحلة؛ لذلك طرحت العديد من الأسئلة التي لا تزال موضع تحليل و نقاش من مثل: من الذي قام بعملية تشويه الصور؟ ومتى حدث ذلك؟ وما هي الأسباب التي أدت إليه؟ وقد أشار بعض العلماء الغربيين الذين ناقشوا هذه الظاهرة بأصابع الاتهام إلى الإسلام وتأثيراته على المناطق المفتوحة كسبب لهذه الظاهرة. في هذا البحث، يحاول الباحث تحري رأي الإسلام في موضوع التصوير، ومناقشة؛ وذلك في محاولة لمعرفة فيما إذا كان المسلمون هم المسؤولون عن هذه الظاهرة، وذلك من خلال استقصاء ما ورد عن هذا الموضوع في المصادر الإسلامية وبشكل خاص القرآن الكريم والأحاديث النبوية الشريفة، و رأي رجال الدين في هذا الأمر، إضافة إلى تحليل ما ورد في المصادر المبكرة عن قرار يزيد الثاني بن عبد الملك، ومقارنة ذلك بالأدلة الأثرية المكتشفة في المنطقة.

Notes

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