

So for many Muslims, the existence of traces of Qur'anic revelation in earlier books only confirms the Qur'an's role as correcting and superseding all earlier revelations. Muhammad himself spoke forthrightly about Islam replacing Judaism and Christianity, and on one occasion used a parable to explain how.<sup>9</sup>

## Other borrowings

The Qur'an's descriptions of Paradise are many and vivid. The blessed will be adorned "with bracelets of gold and pearls" (22:23) and "dressed in fine silk and in rich brocade" (44:53). He will recline "on green cushions and rich carpets of beauty" (55:76), sit on "thrones encrusted with gold and precious stones" (56:15), and share in "dishes and goblets of gold"—on which would be "all that the souls could desire, all that their eyes could delight in," including an "abundance of fruit" (43:71, 73) along with "dates and pomegranates" (55:68). There will also enjoy "the flesh of fowls, any that they may desire" (Qur'an 56:21). Paradise itself consists of "gardens, with rivers flowing beneath" (3:198; cf. 3:136; 13:35; 15:45; 22:23). In it are "two springs pouring forth water in continuous abundance" (55:66), along with "rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and clear" (47:15). That wine is "free from headiness," so that those who drink it will not "suffer intoxication therefrom" (37:47).

"Reclining in the Garden on raised thrones," the blessed "will see there neither the sun's excessive heat nor the moon's excessive cold. And the shades of the Garden will come low over them, and the bunches of fruit, there, will hang low in humility" (76:13-14).

The food and comforts would never run out: "its food is everlasting, and its shade" (13:35).

And above all, of course, there will be "voluptuous women of equal age" (78:31): "those of modest gaze, with lovely eyes" (37:48), "fair women with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes" (44:54), "like unto rubies and coral" (55:58) to whom the blessed will be "joined" (52:20). These women would

be “maidens, chaste, restraining their glances, whom no man or Jinn [spirit being] before them has touched” (55:56). Allah “made them virgins” (56:36), and according to Islamic tradition, virgins they would remain forever. Also “round about them will serve, devoted to them, young male servants handsome as pearls well-guarded” (52:24), “youths of perpetual freshness” (56:17): “if thou seest them, thou wouldst think them scattered pearls” (76:19).

None of this, of course, can be found in the Jewish or Christian Scriptures, but it is in the writings of the Zoroastrians of Persia, who were a considerable presence in the areas around the Persian Empire before the advent of Islam. According to historian W. St. Clair Tisdall, who did pioneering work on these questions in his monograph “The Sources of Islam,” which he later expanded into a book, and in his other writings, “the books of the Zoroastrians and Hindus . . . bear the most extraordinary likeness to what we find in the Koran and Hadith. Thus in Paradise we are told of ‘houris having fine black eyes,’ and again of ‘houris with large black eyes, resembling pearls hidden in their shells.’ . . . The name *houry* too is derived from an Avesta or Pehlavi Source, as well as *jinn* for genii, and *bihisht* (Paradise), signifying in Avestic ‘the better land.’ We also have very similar tales in the old Hindu writings, of heavenly regions with their boys and girls resembling the houris and *ghilman* of the Koran.”<sup>10</sup>

## Revelations of convenience?

Aisha once asked Muhammad what the experience of receiving revelations was like, and he responded: “Sometimes it is (revealed) like the ringing of a bell, this form of Inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes off after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he says.”<sup>11</sup> On another occasion he explained: “The revelation dawns upon me in two ways— Gabriel brings it and conveys to me as a man conveys to another man and that makes me restless. And it dawns upon me like the sound of a bell till it enters my heart and this does not make me restless.”<sup>12</sup> Aisha noted: