

## The Quranic Word *mawālī* in Zachariah's story: Seeking an Ethiopian Connection

واژه قرآنی موالی در داستان حضرت زکریا (ع): در جست‌وجوی یک پیوند با حبشه

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### Abstract

*The meaning of the word mawālī used on the Quranic verse 19:5 and the thing which is inherited by John was a subject of debate in exegetic literature, without any clarification about its lexical origin. In this survey, the main question is about the lexical origin of the word, as well as the cultural roots of the position which the story is speaking of. Also, the article is seeking a proper understanding of the word and the verse being relevant to the context and make the Zachariah's story in the Sura 19 consistent. Concerning methodology, the article uses etymology of keyword mawālī based on comparative Semitic studies from one side and clarification of the story as a whole by a comparison between the Quranic account with relevant passage in the New Testament and some connected material in Jewish literature.*

*According to given evidence, the word mawālī in the verse 19:5 is supposed to be a term coming from the New Testament. The basis is the Geez word mawā'āl meaning 'daily (duties)', used in Ethiopian version of Gospel of Luke to refer to 'priestly division' in Jewish tradition. The secondary layer is South-Arabian and Ethiopian root meaning 'to guard' which contaminated to the previous term and relates to the Jewish Rabbinic term mišmārōt. It is a Christian-Jewish blending appeared in pre-Islamic Ethiopia. Then, the Quranic word mawālī in the verse 19:5 was not a regular Arabic word, but a Judeo-Christian arabicized term with Ethiopian origin.*

**Keywords:** priestly division, New Testament, John the Baptist, Etymology.

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### چکیده

معنای واژه موالی به کار رفته در آیه (مریم/۵) و آنچه حضرت یحیی (ع) بنا بود از پدر خود به ارث ببرد، در آثار تفسیری محل مناقشه بوده است. در این پژوهش، پرسش اصلی در باره ریشه لغوی این واژه و نیز ریشه‌های فرهنگی جایگاه زکریاست که آیه یاد شده از آن سخن آورده است، ضمن آن که ربط معنایی به سیاق و انسجام معنایی آیات مورد بحث نیز مقصود است. از نظر روش‌شناسی، در این مقاله از یک سو مطالعه تطبیقی سامی برای روشن شدن معنای کلیدواژه موالی استفاده می‌شود و از سوی دیگر کلیت معنای آیه برپایه مطالعه تطبیقی متون ادیان، مشخصاً مقایسه میان مضامین قرآن کریم با عهد جدید و اطلاعات مرتبط در منابع دینی یهود مورد بررسی قرار می‌گیرد. بر اساس شواهد ارائه شده، واژه موالی در آیه (مریم/۵) اصطلاحی برآمده از عهد جدید است. پایه این اصطلاح، واژه عجزی (حبشی) مَوَاعِل به معنای "(وظایف) روزانه" است که در تحریر حبشی از انجیل لوقا به کار رفته است و به "فرقه‌های احبار" در سنت یهودی اشاره دارد. لایه دوم معنایی، یک ریشه یمنی-حبشی به معنای "راهنمایی کردن" است که به لایه اولیه معنایی سرایت کرده و این ترکیب، در حبشه پیش از اسلام شکل گرفته است. بنابراین، واژه قرآنی موالی در آیه مورد بحث، یک واژه متعارف عربی نیست، بلکه اصطلاحی مربوط به فرهنگ اهل کتاب پیش از اسلام است و از اصلی حبشی برخاسته است.

**کلمات کلیدی:** فرقه‌های احبار، انجیل، یحیی بن زکریا، ریشه‌شناسی.

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### Introduction

The story of Zachariah and his demand for a son to inherit him in the Qur'an (19:5) was always an issue of controversy between commentators, although they didn't felt any problem with the keyword *mawālī*. The main question for them was the subject of this inheritance and the relevancy of this heritage to spiritual duty of the prophets Zachariah and John. Usually, ambiguities about the Quranic stories rooted in the sources of Abrahamic religions are expected to be solved in comparison; but in fact, it doesn't seem to be helpful enough to come over the ambiguities in this concern. It should be noticed that the core of this ambiguity is the word *mawālī*.

The main question in the article is to find a bridge between the referred Quranic verse and relevant passages of the Bible to make the meaning clear. The approach taken is comparative study of Abrahamic sacred books from one side and Semitic etymological studies from other side. This article tries to show that the primary gap between Quranic and Biblical accounts, may be bridged through Ethiopian version of the New Testament. In other words, the survey comes to the point that the core term *mawālī* in the Quranic verse 19:5 is a result of Judeo-Christian blending occurred in Ethiopian culture and the word in question is a pre-Islamic religious term crystalized under the influence of Ethiopian culture and Geez Language of Ethiopia.

### Mawālī in Exegetic tradition

The focus of the article is on the word *mawālī* in the Quranic verse 19:5. In the tradition of Quranic exegesis, there is no doubt that this word is a

normal Arabic word, as broken plural for *مولى* *mawlā*. The plural form *mawālī* is appearing in the Qur'an twice more, while the singular form has a usage of 18 times. The familiarity of this word, besides its relatively high frequency made the traditional scholars, as well as modern authors convinced that there is no problematic with the usage of *mawālī* in the verse 19:5. The verse which says:

“Lo! I fear my kinsfolk after me, since my wife is barren. Oh, give me from Thy presence a successor<sup>1</sup>” (19:5-6).

The opinions narrated from the earliest commentators are very close to each other and appears like a compromise.

Some narrations make the word *mawālī* in this usage equivalent to the word *عصبة* 'aṣaba, meaning 'relatives on the father's side'. This commentary is recorded from: Abū Ṣāliḥ [† c. 90/709], in one of the two opinions quoted of him (al-Ṭabarī, 1985: 16/46), Muḡāhid ibn Ḡabr [† 104/722] (idem: 16/47; al-Naḡḡās, 1989: 4/309), Qatāda ibn Di'āma [† 118/736] (al-Ṣan'ānī, 1989: 3/3; al-Ṭabarī, 1985: 16/47), Al-Suddī [† 127/745] (idem: 16/47; Yaḡyā ibn Sallām, 2004: 1/214) and Yūnus ibn Ḥabīb, d 182/798 (al-Azharī, 2001: 15/324). This opinion is approved by some famous scholars of 3rd/7th and 4th/10th centuries too (Ibn Qutaiba, 1978: 231; Ibn Abī Ḥātim, 1985: 2/202). Abū 'Ubaid [† 224/839] who approved the equivalence of *mawālī* to 'aṣaba, explained that it includes father, brother's son, cousin and relatives like that (Abū 'Ubaid, 1964: 3/141).

١. وَإِنِّي خِفْتُ الْمَوَالِيَ مِنْ وَرَائِي وَكَانَتِ امْرَأَتِي عَاقِرًا فَهَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ وَلِيًّا (مريم/٦)

Some narrations from the earliest commentators make it equivalent to the word *كلالة* *kalāla*'. The latter is one to controversial words of the Quranic vocabulary, but usually explained as 'remote relationship, cousins' (Hava, 1899: 653). This opinion is received from: Ibn 'Abbās [† 68/687] according to narration through Muḥammad ibn Sa'd from his ancestors (al-Ṭabarī, 1985: 16/46) and Abu Salih [† c. 90/709] in one other of the two opinions quoted of him (idem: 16/47; al-Naḥḥās, 1989: 4/309).

Some narrations made it equivalent to the usual word *ورثة* *warāṭa*, meaning 'heirs, inheritors'. Such an opinion is quoted from Muḥammad ibn Sā'ib al-Kalbī [† 146/763] (al-Ṭa'labī, 2002: 6/206); followed by scholars like Pseudo-'Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī [c. 3rd/9th century] (al-Qummī, 1966: 2/48) and Ibn Wahb al-Dinawarī [† 308/920] (Ibn Wahb, 2003: 1/484). Some other ones make the word *mawālī* equivalent to *بنی العم* *banī al-'amm*, meaning 'the cousins'. The earliest figure from whom this opinion is recorded is Abū 'Ubaida [† 209/940] (Abū 'Ubaida, 1964: 2/2).

Also, there were some commentators which tried to give two equivalences for the word *mawālī* in parallel. Muqātil ibn Sulaimān [† 150/767] proposed a double equivalence of *kalāla* = 'aṣaba (Muqātil, 2003: 2/620) and Yaḥyā ibn Sallām [† 200/815] explained it by *warāṭa* = 'aṣaba (Yaḥyā ibn Sallām, 2004: 1/214). Also al-Farrā' [† 207/822] gives a double equivalence of 'heirs' and 'cousins' (al-Farrā', 1980: 2/161; al-Azharī, 2001: 15/323). Finally, this is al-Ṭabarī who gave both 'cousins' and 'aṣaba as equivalents (al-Ṭabarī, 1985: 16/46).

In addition, it is worthy to review the relevant information in Wuḡūh sources, an old branch of exegetic literature which discusses the polysemy of the Quranic vocabulary. As the first author of this kind, Muqātil ibn Sulaimān [† 150/76] pointed out that the word *mawālī* and its singular form *mawlā* in the Qur'an have several meanings, including: 'relative (in general), relative on the father's side, helper, freedman'. From which, he believed that 'relatives on the father's side' or 'aṣaba is meant in the verses 4:33 and 19:5 (Muqātil, 2006: 201-202). This information is almost repeated by later authors in the field (Hārūn ibn Mūsā, 1988: 196-198; al-Dāmaḡānī, 1998: 791-795).

Going to Classical Lexicographers, as the first lexicon of classical Arabic, it is *kitab al-'Ain*, attributed to al-Ḥalīl ibn Aḥmad [† 175/791] which speaks of a polysemy for the word *mawlā* (pl. *mawālī*). It gives for it these meanings: 'cousin, freedman, co-swearing person (halif), as well as its being an alternative for the word *waliy* (al-Ḥalīl, 1981: 8/365). A contemporary figure to al-Ḥalīl, Yūnus ibn Ḥabīb [† 182/798] pointed out to a similar polysemy and counts these meanings for *mawlā*: 'a person with the same belief, relative on the father's side, co-swearing person, freedman' (al-Azharī, 2001: 15/323-324).

Half a century later, there are more details in explanations of Abu-l-Haiṭam al-Rāzī who spoke of six different meanings: 1. all relatives on the father's side, including cousins, uncles, brothers and sons; 2. helper, 3. one who does duties on behalf of you; 4. one initiated in Islam in your hands; 5. one benefitted of your grace; 6. Freedman (al-Azharī, 2001: 15/324). In all of these explanations about the polysemy, the place for the meaning 'aṣaba

(relatives on the father's side) is reserved for its application on the verse 19:5. Among early lexicographers, Ibn Duraid [† 321/933] specifically mentioned that the meaning of the word in the verse in question is 'cousins' (Ibn Duraid, 1987: 2/ 809).

Anyway, these explanations about the word is more or less repeated in further dictionaries along centuries until the present. Even in modern bilingual Arabic- English dictionaries, the same set of meanings is reflected, like the followings:

'master, lord, freed slave, helper, auxiliary, friend, companion, son-in-law, uncle, nephew, cousin, near, relation, ally, follower, mollah, moslem judge' (Hava, 1899: 887).

'lord, chief, son of a paternal uncle, freedman, being one patronage of his emancipator whom the emancipator is bound to aid and whose property he inherits if he dies having no heir (Lane, 1968: 8/3061).

Although regarding the usage of *mawālī* in the verse 19:5 the opinions of both exegetes and lexicographers are very close and integrated, but there is an important consideration. In general, we know that it is not easy to speak of meanings of a Quranic word, on the basis of classical Arabic dictionaries, because they are strongly influenced by exegetical tradition. It is very common for classical lexicographers to receive influence of exegetic literature and to record speculative meanings offered by Quranic commentators, besides their hearings of native informants. A more reliable way to find out the meanings in Quranic Arabic without being engaged in exegetic speculations is to use etymological evidences from comparative Semitic studies.

Concerning the Arabic word *mawālī* and its triconsonantal root /wly/, we

can find out a wide range of cognates in different branches of Semitic languages. The core meaning of these cognates is 'to join, to accompany, to guard' (Gesenius, 1955: 530; Cohen, 1970: 1/20; Leslau, 1991:62). Thus, one can claim that the meanings referred to by Quranic commentators, as well as lexicographers, i.e. 'aṣaba, kalāla and cousins are not approved by etymology and must be counted as speculative opinions created by commentators and leaked to lexicographers. As seen in Semitic cognates, there is no evidence for existence of such a meaning in other Semitic languages, while it is not a familiar meaning for *mawālī* in applications later than the Qur'an, in classical Arabic.

### What inherited John

The verses 19:5-6 speaks of Zachariah's motivation to request for a son; he asked for a son to inherit him, saying:

“Lo! I fear my kinsfolk after me, since my wife is barren. Oh, give me from Thy presence a successor \* Who shall inherit of me and inherit of the house of Jacob, and make him, my Lord, acceptable<sup>1</sup>” (19:5-6).

Pondering the two verses together clarifies that there is a thing which was the cause of worry for Zachariah leading him to ask for a son who was necessary to inherit something from his father Zachariah and from the house of Jacob, i.e. Israelites. It is clear that the nature of this heritage is related to the reference of *mawālī*. That is why

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investigation on the nature of this heritage maybe helpful to conduct our research.

Taking in consideration that from the early Islamic era, there was a controversy between Shi'a and Sunni scholars about financial inheritance of the prophets, the part of this verse speaking of inheriting of John from his father was an issue of debate between two sides. Before quoting the various opinions in this regard, it should be noticed a word of al-Suhailī who said: 'the exegesis scholars rendered this verse to inheritance of prophethood and sublime things, except a minority who rendered it to the properties' (al-Suhailī, 1985: 138).

There is a sermon attributed to Fatima (PBUH), the prophet's daughter in defense of her inheritance right using the verse 19:5 as an argument (Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, 1908: 23). Also, there is a debate narrated between Ali ibn Abi Talib and Abu Bakr with a similar reference in arguments about Fatima's inheritance right (Ibn Sa'd, al-Ṭabaqāt, 2/315).

Anyway, among the earliest commentators, the majority of them render the subject of inheritance to spiritual sides, such as:

'Knowledge', narrated from Muḡāhid [† 104/722] (al-Ṭabarī, 1985: 16/48; al-Nahhās, 1989: 4/311).

'Tradition (sunna) and knowledge', narrated from Ḍahḡāk ibn Muzāḡhim (Ibn Abī Ḥātim, 1999: 7/ 2398).

'Prophethood and knowledge', narrated from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī [† 110/728] (al-Ṣan'ānī, 1989: 3/3; al-Ṭabarī, 1985: 16/48; Ibn Abī Ḥātim, 1999: 7/ 2397).

'Prophethood and morals', narrated from 'Atā' ibn Abī Rabāḡ [† 114/732] (Ibn al-Ġawzī, 1984: 5/ 208; also al-Sulamī, 2001: 1/421).

'Prophethood', narrated from al-Suddī [† 127/745] (al-Ṭabarī, 1985: 16/48; Ibn Abī Ḥātim, 1999: 7/ 2398).

Chronologically thinking, it is interesting that the subject of inheritance begins with knowledge, then prophethood is added to it and then focused on prophethood dropping the component of 'knowledge'.

Some of the earliest figures separated the nature of John's inheritance from his father and from the house of Jacob; a separation which may support Shia's position about the prophets' financial inheritance. These commentators say that John supposed to inherit from the father his properties, while his inheritance from the house of Jacob is prophethood. Such a combined commentary is narrated from Abū Ṣāliḡ [† c. 90/709] (al-Ṭabarī, 1985: 16/47-48), 'Ikrima mawlā ibn 'Abbās [† 105/723] (Abū Laiṡ al-Samarqandī, Tafsīr: 2/368) and Sufyān al-Ṭawrī [† 161/778] (al-Ṭawrī, 1983: 181).

In later centuries, while some scholars emphasized that the subject of inheritance in Zachariah's demand cannot be properties and tried to prove it (Ibn Qutaiba, 1973: 300; Ibn Ḥazm, 1928: 4/76; Ibn Sīda, 2000: 10/210), others believed in the other side. For example, a famous scholar of Shi'a argued that the literal meaning of inheritance refers to properties; while issues like knowledge and faith is not transmittable by inheritance, but by inquisition and initiation (al-Mufīd, 1992: 25).

It is worthy to mention that from middles of the 2nd/8th century, there was a minority of commentators rendered the subject of inheritance in the verse 19:5 to 'priesthood'. This is Muqātil ibn Sulaiman who said that John inherited from his father 'headship of priests' (Muqātil, 2003: 2/307).

Further, Ibn Qutaiba al-Dinawari [† 276/889] mentioned that Zachariah was a priest and John expected to inherit from the father, his priesthood (Ibn Qutaiba, 1978: 231). This group of opinions, are very close to Judeo-Christian sources which speak about Zachariah as head of a division of priests; a subject which shall be studied in continuation. This consideration of this two commentators testifies that they were somehow aware of relevant accounts in previous scriptures by Jews and Christians. In later exegetic literature, both of Sunna and Shi'a the mentioned options were repeated and the new-appeared viewpoints are rarely traceable.

Generally it is understood from the Qur'an and Zachariah's seriously worry for lacking a heir, that something important would be lost with his death. It was not meaningful for Zachariah to be such worried about his properties as proved by scholars like Ibn Qutaiba; while it is not understandable for knowledge, wisdom or prophecy to be inherited too, as expressed by Shaikh al-Mufīd. Thus, the only remaining probability is a thing with spiritual values, but inheritable. This situation is the one with no reflexion in opinions of traditional Quran' commentators, except the mentioned minority who rendered it to priesthood, although in an ambiguous way without any clarification.

The traditional exegetic opinions not only cannot answer What inherited John from his father, but also reduced the meaning of other keywords in the context. Namely the attributes given to John, just reduced to some moral praises with no evident relevancy to the context, such as *رضي* *raḍiy* (19:6) which usually understood as 'satisfying, satisfied, pious'. Also negation of the

attribute *عصى* *aṣiy* is usually rendered to the fact that John was not 'disobediant, turbulent, rebellious' (Tarğomeh ..., 4/957-958; Yāḥaqqī et al., 2010: 2/801, 3/1026).

### Abrahamic Roots and Ethiopian Connection

In the sources on Prophet's life, it is recorded that a delegation of refugees led by Prophet's cousin Ġa'far ibn Abī Tālib has attended the court of Ethiopian king, called by general title Najāšī. According to narratives, the king asked Ja'far about their position concerning Jesus Christ and in response, Ġa'far recited the first verses of the Sura 19. Hearing these verses, Najāšī appreciated the image given to the Christ in the Qur'an and in reaction agreed to protect the refugees (Ibn Hišām, 1990: 2/180).

Without any emphasis on the historical value, authenticity and accuracy of this account, it is just a remembrance of a tradition about a connection between early Islam and Ethiopian Christianity. In special view, these narratives legitimate seeking a connection between the Quranic account on Zachariah's story and the Ethiopian Christian account in the same concern.

Now it is the time to turn to biblical content and seek the root of Zachariah's story in the New Testament. First of all, it should be considered that the account on Zachariah's prayer and promise about the birth of John is reflected in the Gospel of Luke as follows:

Ἐγένετο ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἡρώδου βασιλέως τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἱερεὺς τις ὀνόματι Ζαχαρίας ἐξ ἐφημερίας Ἀβιά, καὶ γυνὴ αὐτῷ ἐκ τῶν θυγατέρων Ἀαρών, καὶ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτῆς Ἐλισάβητ (Luke, 1:5).

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth".

This verse is recited in Geez classical translation as follows:

ውኩነ በመዋዕለ ሄሮድስ ንጉስ ይሁዳ ሀሎ አሐዲ ካህን ዘስሙ ዘካርያስ በመዋዕለ አብያ ውበእሲቱኒ እምአዋልደ አሮን ወስማ አልሳቤጥ።

**Transliteration:**

wakōna bamawā‘əl herōdās negūs yəhūdā hallō ‘aḥadī kāhən zasmā zakāryās bamawā‘əl ‘abyā wab’əsitūni ‘am’awālōda ‘arōn wasmā ‘elsābeṭ.

Literal translation: And was in days of Herod, king of Judaea, existed a priest with who named Zachariah in division of Abia and his wife from children of Aaron and her name (was) Elisabeth.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting in the Geez text that the combination *έξ έφημερίας Αβιά* (division of Abijah) is translated in Geez to *በመዋዕለ አብያ bamawā‘əl ‘abyā*. Then the Geez *mawā‘əl* is used as equivalent to *έφημερία*; from *έφήμερος*, meaning 'daily', plus the suffix *-iā*, derived from the root *ήμαρ/ήμέρᾱ*, meaning 'day' (Liddell & Scott, 1996: 770; Frisk, 1960: 1/634; Beekes, 2010: 518).

Of course, it should be considered that in the same verse, *በመዋዕለ bamawā‘əl* is used another time in the meaning of 'days, period, era, time'

1. It is useful to add that in the Gospel of Luke, in further verses, there are repeated mentions of priestly division with the same word in Greek and Geez versions, in what we read : ‘So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division \* According to the custom of the priesthood, it fell to his lot to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord (Luke, 1: 8-9).

(Dillmann, 1865: 462; Leslau, 1991: 603).

It is recorded in dictionaries that in Geez, *መዋዕለ mawā‘əl* is broken plural of *መዐልት ma‘alt* or *መዓልት mo‘alt*, meaning 'day, daytime, noontime', derived from the root *ወዐለ wa‘ala/ ውዕለ wə‘la*, meaning 'pass the day, remain/stay/do something during the day (Dillmann, 1865: 462; Leslau, 1991:602). On the basis of existing an alternative for singular form of the word *መዐልት ma‘alt* as *መአልት ma‘alt*<sup>2</sup> (idem: 326)<sup>3</sup>, a hypothetical form with hamza, as *መዋአለ* maybe a more convenient source for Arabic borrowing.

Anyway, this derivation can well justify the usage of *መዋዕለ mawā‘əl* for translation of Greek *ήμέραις*<sup>4</sup> (days, period) in the quoted verse, and such a derivation is relevant for translation of *έφημερίας*, because of the fact that the core meaning for formation of the division of priests was their 'daily duties'.

In seek of the roots in the Old Testament, it should be notices that according to biblical scholars, the content of Luke 1:5 is understood under the light of some passages of the Old Testament. We read in the Second Book of Chronicles as follows:

וּלְכַנְּי אֶת־רֹן מִמִּלְקוֹתֵם כִּנְי אֶת־רֹן נָדָב וְאַבְיָהוּ וְאֶת־רֹן אֶלְעָזָר וְאֶת־רֹן מִמִּלְקוֹתֵם

2. It is noticeable that alteration between /' / and /' / is very common in Geez language.  
 3. Bravmann had said that there is a connection between Geez *መዋዕለ (mawā‘əl)* and Akkadian *a‘ālu*, meaning 'to bind, to conclude a contract' (Bravmann, ZS, 1933: 153-154), but Leslau believed that this connection is not convincing (Leslau, 603).  
 4. Hēmerais.

καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς ααρων διαίρεσεις υἱοὶ  
ααρων ναδαβ καὶ αβιουδ ελεαζαρ καὶ  
ιθαμαρ

Now these are the divisions of the sons of Aaron. The sons of Aaron were Nadab, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar (2 Chronicles, 24:1).

Also in a passage of the Book of Nehemia we read:

וּבְיָמַי יוֹזְקִים הָיוּ כְהֹנָנִים רָאשֵׁי הָאָבוֹת לְשָׂרְיָה  
מִרְיָה לְיִרְמְיָה הַנְּבִיאָה

Now in the days of Joiakim, the priests, the heads of the fathers' houses, were: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah (Nehemiah, 12: 12).

What these verses speak of is an organization made among Jewish priests regarding duties at the temple of Jerusalem. According to this order, the duties were altered between each of family lines which had descended from the orders appointed by king David and Solomon. Because the priests were numerous and scattered throughout Palestine and being impossible for them to officiate at the same time, this order worked as a remedy for a fair distribution of this honour. There are some accounts in rabbinic literature which give more information about this divisions of priests and renders the origins back even to Moses (Safrai et al., 1976: 2/580 ff.; Liver & Sperber, 2007: 317-319).

It is important for our survey that in all of these divisions, the position of head of priest is gained by inherited succession restricted to male descendants. This was the case for Abijah the grandfather of the family and Zachariah the case of our study as well (Carlton, 2008:16). The number of priests in each division might be very great, as announced by Josephus that in his times, for any division, there were no less than five thousand priests

(Jennings, 1837:164). But in some historical sections, the place of this honour in some divisions was in danger. That is why it is realized for in the course of rabbinic tradition how sometimes divisions disappearing and how there was need sometimes for reforming the divisions by organizing the remaining ones (Gurtner & Stuckenbruck, 2020: 510). This information besides what is noticed about the inheritance of the position by male descendants, helps us better understand the cause of Zachariah's worry for his division after his death.

The word used for these divisions in the Old Testament is generally מַחְלָקֶת *maḥalqet*, meaning 'division, course' (Gesenius, 1955: 324); a word derived from the root חָלַק, meaning 'to divide, to share' (idem: 323). The Greek equivalent chosen for the word in Septuagint is διαίρεσις 1, also derived from διαίρω 2, meaning 'to divide, to split, to disunite' (Liddell & Scott, 1996: 395). This term is replaced in postbiblical sources by מִשְׁמָרוֹת *mišmārōt* (Liver & Sperber, op.cit.), meaning 'guards, observers' (Gesenius, 1955: 1038), derived from the root שָׁמַר, meaning 'to keep, to watch, to preserve' (idem: 1036). This is considerable that the root √wly/yly, meaning 'to guard, to protect' existing in some Semitic languages including Aramaic, Epigraphic South Arabic (ESA) and some Ethiopian languages like Geez, Tigre and Tigrīña has a close meaning to this usage. The details is following:

Aramaic לוי לְוִי *lwy* , לָוָה *lāwā<sup>h</sup>*: 'to join, to be connected'; Pi. 'to order an

1. Diairéseis.

2. Diarō.



escort for protection, to escort, to walk a distance with a departing guest, to follow'; Hif. 'to escort, to lend' (Jastrow, 1903: 2/697).

Epigraphical South Arabic *wlyt*: 'protected persons, clients of a clan' (Beeston et al., 1982: 160).

Tigre *'ala* : 'to guard, preserve'; Tigrinya *'aläyā* : 'to guard'; Geez አለወ *'alwa*, ዐለወ *'alwa* : 'to be on guard' (Leslau, 1991:62; Cohen, 1970: 1/20).

Even there are records of usage of adjectival noun /*mwly*/ in Palmyrian like in Arabic with two ranges of meanings: 'to be protected by' and 'to be freedman by' (Hoftijzer & Jongelling, 1995: 458).

Coming back to the Gospel of Luke, it is noticeable that both the Greek word *ἐφημερίας* and Geez word መዋዕለ *mawā'äl* are free interpretations for Jewish terms. Even some scholars have evaluated this translation as 'somewhat improperly', because the division shifted in service not daily, but weekly as concluded from the Chronicles (Jennings, 1837:163). But it is better to be interpreted as divisions of priests which their special service is defined by a specific order and number of days.

As a result, one can conclude that the word *mawālī* in the verse 19:5 can be a term constructed on basis of two origins: The basis is the Geez word መዋዕለ *mawā'äl* related with the meaning 'daily', as a convenient translation for Greek word *ἐφημερίας* in Gospel of Luke. The secondary origin is South-Arabian and Ethiopian root meaning 'to guard' influenced by the Jewish Rabbinic term מִשְׁמָרֹת *mišmārōt*. Such a blending between Christian and Jewish term seems to be occurred before Islamic era in a milieu like Ethiopia which is well-known for such Judeo-Christian connections. On this basis, the Quranic usage of *mawālī*

in the verse 19:5 was not a regular Arabic word, but a Judeo-Christian term arabicized. It is embedded in this term, the South-Arabian and Ethiopian meaning of 'guarding' as secondary component, while the Geez meaning of 'daily (duties)' is the semantic ground.

Thus, the Quranic word *mawālī* can be considered as a Geez borrowing which received a secondary morphonemic influence of Yemeni-Ethiopian root  $\sqrt{wly}/lw$ , meaning 'to guard'.

Coming back to the first verses of Sura 19, now it is very clear that why Zachariah immediately after demanding a heir, prayed to God that this heir be 'satisfied'. It means that Zachariah has a secondary worry about well acceptance of John in this position and prayed saying:

"Who shall inherit of me and inherit of the house of Jacob, and make him, my Lord, acceptable"<sup>1</sup> (19:6).

Further, God announces that John as inherent was not 'opresser' and not 'ašiy' where says:

"And dutiful toward his parents. And he was not arrogant, rebellious"<sup>2</sup>.

While normally commentators and translators considered the word *ašiy* as a form for present participle and interpreted it to 'disobeying, rebellious', such an interpretation goes far from the main story and turns the speech to a general moral praising of John. This understanding that John was not to disobey God or his parents, as private sides of his morals in a kind of reductionism.

It is more relevant to understand *ašiy* as a form for passive participle, i.e. 'disobeyed, disobeyable', meaning

۱. يَرْثِي وَيَرِثُ مِنْ آلِ يَعْقُوبَ وَاجْعَلْهُ رَبِّ رَضِيًّا (مريم/۶).

۲. وَتَرَأُ بِوَالِدَيْهِ وَاكْرَهُمَا وَنَحْمُ يَكْفُرًا عَصِيًّا (مريم/۱۴).

which can be a complementary pair to *ġabbār*. Thus, the verse 19:14 speaks of the fact that John as a leader of his division which inherited headship of priests from his father, was not a tyrant and oppressor, while he enjoyed a charisma which forced the people to obey him.

### CONCLUSION

The word *mawālī* in the Quranic verse 19:5 is an arabicized Ethiopian loanword, from borrowed from the Geez origin *mawā'əl*. This Geez word in a term referring to priestly divisions in Jewish Rabbinic tradition which is used in Zachariah's story in the Gospel of Luke. Although the main meaning of the word is connected with 'days' and 'daily affairs', there is a secondary meaning under the affection of a Yemeni-Ethiopian similar root meaning 'to guard'. While the first meaning was originated from Greek text of New Testament, the secondary meaning shows an influence from Jewish Rabbinic terminology; a blending which seems to be occurred in Judeo-Christian milieu of Ethiopia.

Either the meaning of 'daily (duties)' or the meaning of 'guarding' are referring to one thing; the priestly division among Israelites. The first meaning is on the basis of *ἐφημερία* in New Testament, while the latter is based on the Rabbinic concept of *מִשְׁמָרוֹת* *mišmārōt*. According to this etymology from one side and comparing the Quranic and New Testament accounts, Zachariah was the head of priests in division of Abijah (Abia) and what John inherited from his father was headship

of priests in that division. It is worthy to consider that the position was in danger of being lost in case Zachariah died without a masculine heir. It should be added that this explanation helps to better understand the co-text of the verse 19:5 too, especially regarding the attributes given to John.

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