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AbdulGafar Olawale Fahm

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DISGUISED COMMENTARY ON THE QUR'ĀN: THE QUESTION OF FORM AND CONTENT IN RŪMĪ'S *MATHNAWĪ*

AbdulGafar Olawale Fahm*

Abstract: *Mathnawī*, Jalāluddīn Rūmī's magnum opus, is among the most quoted mystico-didactic epic poems in the world. This research provides an assessment of the 13th century scholar's work as exegetical commentary on the Qur'ān. A theological approach has been adopted to identify the major teachings in the work. In this study, after a brief introduction of Rūmī and his vision of the Qur'ān, the research evaluates the *Mathnawī* from historical, mystical, exegetical and literary perspectives. It identifies the stories of prophets and their people in his poetic lines and provides a holistic categorisation of issues about them found also in various Qur'ānic verses as a possibility of commentary on the Qur'ān. To establish a meaningful relationship in terms of the form and content in the work, stories of prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān are analysed to facilitate comprehensive assessment. This also serves as a guide to Rūmī's interpretation of the Qur'ān. It was discovered that Rūmī, in his work, pays particular attention to the spiritual attributes of each prophet. An overall evaluation of the *Mathnawī* shows Rūmī not only uses Qur'ānic verses or words but also rational arguments, stories and anecdotes to drive home his commentary on the Qur'ān.

Keywords: *commentary, Qur'ān, Mathnawī, Rūmī, theology*

INTRODUCTION

Jalāluddīn Rūmī was born on 30 September 1207 in Central Asia when it was still part of the Persian cultural sphere. He lived most of his life in Konya, Central Anatolia, which was then the Byzantine cultural sphere, hence al-Rūmī (the one from Rome). Rūmī pursued a formal education in Islamic sciences and obtained *ijāzat* (authorization) from one of the famous *madāris* (schools) in Syria. While in Syria, Rūmī studied courses such as the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, theology, and Hanafi law under acknowledged legal and religious authorities of the day, which earned him a respectable position as a Muslim preacher and jurist. He later metamorphosed

* Dr. AbdulGafar Olawale Fahm is a lecturer at the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

“into an ecumenical teacher of poetic bent.”¹ This gave Rūmī mastery over his self and marked his progress into deeper Sufistic path.

Rūmī authored the following poetic works: *Dīvān-é Kabīr* (Great Collected Poetic Works) or *Dīvān-é Shams-é Tabrīzī* (The Collected Shams-e Tabrizi) and *Mathnawī-yé Ma‘nawī* (Couplets of Deep Spiritual Meaning), considered his greatest work and on which the present study is based. *Mathnawī* is one of his major works of poetry with 25,700 verses over six volumes. The work shows quite clearly the breadth and depth of Rūmī’s genius as well as his passion for Islamic spirituality.

This article begins by reconstructing Rūmī’s vision of the Qur’ān. It notes the importance of the Qur’ān to Rūmī as well as his use of Qur’ānic words and verses. The use of several Rūmī and *Mathnawī* scholars’ views in this section of the study puts Rūmī in a proper historical context and sees him as a lifelong scholar of the Qur’ān and Islam who lived in a period when Islam was a major force. In addition, it helps highlight the “Qur’ānised” *Mathnawī* because of the attempts seen in contemporary times to detach Rūmī’s thoughts from its Islamic roots. In the third section, I describe the *Mathnawī* from a multi-faceted perspective and locate Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* at a particular juncture – between the poetic and discursive nature, on the one hand, and exegetical and mystical work, on the other. In the last section, I focus on Rūmī’s commentary on three major Prophets (Musa - Moses, ‘Isa - Jesus and Muhammad) of Islam in the *Mathnawī* where issues he raises about them can be found in the Qur’ān.

RŪMĪ’S VISION OF THE QUR’ĀN

Rūmī is one of the foremost inspired Muslim mystics from the 13th century. His most noted contribution to Muslim intellectual output is the *Mathnawī*. Its 25,000+ verses are mostly in Persian but riddled with Arabic excerpts from the Qur’ān. In fact, the prefaces of four volumes were written in Arabic. Rūmī, in his own words that preface the first volume, describes the *Mathnawī*:

It is the cure for (sick) breasts, and the purge of sorrows, and the expounder of the Qur’ān, and the source of (Divine) gifts, and the (means of) cleansing (sordid) dispositions.²

Furthermore, Rūmī frequently alludes to Qur’ānic anecdotes that offer rhetorical, heuristic and moral lessons. Although this was not uncommon among Muslim mystics of his time, the frequency with which Rūmī often drew from the Qur’ān shows he has a comprehensive understanding of its outlook.

Rūmī describes the *Mathnawī* as “...the roots of the roots of the Religion” – that is Islam – “and the expounder of the Qur’an.”³ This is why some Rūmī scholars regard the *Mathnawī* as a work in which “every interpreter has found whatever he sought, from pantheism to personal

1 Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi-Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalāl Al-Dīn Rumi* (Bloomsbury, London: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 54.

2 Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalāl ud-dīn Rūmī*, trans. and ed. R. A. Nicholson (Tehran: Booteh Publication Company, 2002), vol. 1, 5.

3 Ibid.

mysticism, from enraptured love to law-bound orthodoxy.”⁴ This is just as it is stated in the Qur’ān: “And We have explained to man, in this Qur’ān, every kind of similitude...”⁵ This, it can be said, prompted Rūmī to include various words and sentences from the Qur’ān in his works. A further reference to his outlook on the Qur’ān can also be found in the following lines from the *Mathnawī*:

Ask the meaning of the Qur’an from the Qur’an alone, and from that one who has set fire to
(and extinguished) his idle fancy,
And has become a sacrifice to the Qur’an and is (laid) low (in self-abasement), so that the
Qur’an has become the essence of his spirit.⁶

The above quotation explains the importance of the Qur’ān to Rūmī. In other words, how he regards the Qur’ān as a book that extinguishes all kinds of falsehood and is worthy of an individual’s devotion and sacrifice to reach the core of oneself. Moreover, in his poetry and theological thought, several references are made to the Qur’ān as a way of reminding listeners or readers of the book. For instance, Rūmī notes the *Mathnawī* is without end, “(even) if (all) the forest should become pens and (all) the ocean ink, (yet) there is no hope of bringing the *Mathnawī* to an end.”⁷ This is one of the ways in which Rūmī alludes to the Qur’ān, as it states God’s words are without end: “Say, if the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it, for its aid.”⁸

Also, among his often mentioned verses in the Qur’ān are the verse of light in Suratul Nur (Chapter of Light) verse 35, “Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth...,” and the verse of pre-eternal covenant, “...Am I not your Lord, they said “Yea! We do testify!,” in Suratul Araaf (Chapter of Heights) verse 172. Rūmī also shows lots of interest in verses dealing with the attributes of Allah or His power. For instance, he notes about *Ayatul Qursiyy* (verse of throne) that: “We have flown with the Throne-verse towards the Divine Throne, so that we saw the Living, and reached the Self-Subsistent.”⁹ Furthermore, love for verses in the Qur’ān spurs him to use Qur’ānic terminologies in unique ways to attain unexpected results. In his pursuit of a model for his *Mathnawī*, he chose certain styles as well as terms in the Qur’ān to express his messages. This is because Rūmī sees the Qur’ān as a book beyond mere legends and myths, dos and don’ts, stories of prophets and so on; rather, the Qur’ān contains a message of salvation for mankind.

In many lines of his poetry one can deduce that Rūmī sees the Qur’ān as a book not just to explain but to guide and not just to give a scientific or scholarly exposition of Islamic teachings;

⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 316.

⁵ Qur’ān, 18:54. The Qur’ān translations are based on Abdullah Yusuf Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur-an: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* (Saudi Arabia: King Fahd Holy Qur’an Printing Complex, 1984).

⁶ Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu’ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 5, lines 3128-3129, 116.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 6, line 2247, 233.

⁸ Qur’ān 18:109.

⁹ Qur’ān 2:255.

rather, it is to make human beings realise that they are bound by natural instinct to turn towards God and devote themselves totally towards Him. Moreover, Rūmī believes the world has not properly read the message of the Qur’ān. This is why he encourages all religiously inclined individuals to look into the Qur’ān and reflect upon it. He declares: “I have taken out marrow from the Qur’an and cast bones to dogs.”¹⁰

Rūmī was a lifelong scholar of the Qur’ān and Islam. He lived in a period when Islam was the domineering force; therefore, the whole structure of his verses can be described as built on an understanding of the Qur’ān, Islamic teachings and Sufism. As a result, a lot of verses of this great Sufi poet are interspersed with Qur’ānic verses. This raises his poetry to astronomical heights and makes him remarkable.¹¹

MATHNAWĪ: A MULTI-FACETED WORK

Jalāluddīn Rūmī’s *Mathnawī-yé Ma’ nawī* (Couplets of Deep Spiritual Meaning) is named after its verse style, *mathnawī*, a literary style in Persian poetry often used for instructional purposes and an effective style to illustrate an event, story or picture.¹² It is an allegorical and expressive work, which combines mysticism with literary forms. It is order-less and this can be seen in its unusual narrative method, but it is also methodical because an idea from a story in *mathnawī* is a “product of an extended stream of consciousness.”¹³ It examines an idea or thought in a multi-levelled, multi-pronged manner and approaches its subject matter from many different angles.¹⁴ Different topics are not dealt with in a predetermined, but in a spontaneous manner.

An exceptional circumstance led Rūmī to compose *Mathnawī*. This was why the *Mathnawī* was not dictated to Huṣāmud-Dīn¹⁵ in a specific setting, but on different occasions or settings such as during mystical sessions filled with novices and those on the Sūfī path, sometimes in a public bath, in the bazaar, when hearing the sound of the goldsmith’s tools or other similar contexts. This approach gave Rūmī an opportunity to gauge the influence of his poetry on his audience as well as know their moods and needs. That is why his style is regarded as similar to the Qur’ān, which was revealed at precise times for specific public interests.¹⁶

There are several writings on the *Mathnawī*’s profound influence in different parts of the Muslim world. For instance, Sūfī scholars – especially those that understand Persian – cannot

¹⁰ Ghulam Abbas Dalal, *Ethics in Persian Poetry: With Special Reference to Timurid Period* (Maharashtra, India: Abhinav Publications, 1995), 119.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Johannes Thomas Pieter De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2014), 126.

¹³ James Roy King, “Narrative Disjunction and Conjunction in Rumi’s Mathnawī,” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 19, no. 3 (1989): 277.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Husāmu’d-Dīn Ḥasan Chalabi played an important role in Rūmī’s life. It is said that the selfless devotion of Husāmu’d-Dīn led to the composition of *Mathnawī*. In different places in *Mathnawī*, Husāmu’d-Dīn was addressed with many titular.

¹⁶ Ali Ashgar Mirbagheri Fard, “Islamic Mysticism and Persian Literature: The Case of Rumi’s Mathnawī,” *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8, no. 2 (2012): 15.

but acknowledge his tremendous contributions in deepening Islamic spirituality and understanding. In addition, Annemarie Schimmel notes it is impossible to find any literary and mystical work composed in Muslim regions such as Istanbul and Bengal that does not refer to Rūmī's thought or works.¹⁷

From an historical perspective, the *Mathnawī* is among the best known and most influential works of Sufism. In terms of literary style, the work is a six-volume series of poetry of around 50,000 lines. It contains anecdotes and stories from the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth* and folktales. However, these stories are told to illustrate a point or teach a moral lesson. In addition, the exegetical nature of the work can be seen in pervading ways in which Qur'ānic meanings and references are found in the verses. Moreover, Rūmī describes his work as the roots of the religion in order to find the truth and understand certainty (*yaqīn*), which is the purest and most manifest evidence of God.¹⁸ The *Mathnawī*, when examined from a mystical angle, is said to be a spiritual text that teaches how to reach the goal of being truly in love. It focuses on inward personal transformation and explains the dimensions of spiritual life and practice in Islam as a way of understanding the true meaning of life. Indeed, Rūmī's *Mathnawī* has been examined in the Eastern and Western worlds. This is why a Persian scholar opines that “without doubt the most eminent Sūfī poet whom Persia has produced, while his mystical *Mathnawī* deserves to rank amongst the great poems of all time.”¹⁹ Thus, with a book that is highly praised, and the spiritual master who wrote it being well-respected, one needs to know how the spiritual master commented on the Qur'ān in his famous work.

COMMENTARY ON THE QUR'ĀN: PROPHETS IN THE *MATHNAWĪ*

In discussing the issue of form and content in Rūmī's *Mathnawī* as a commentary of the Qur'ān, it is important to state the frequency and variety of Qur'ānic verses cited are quite extensive and it would be superfluous to mention them all in this paper. Furthermore, the *Mathnawī*'s manner of commentary on the Qur'ān is not a traditional form. An indication of this is the fact Rūmī did not deem it necessary when citing Qur'ānic verses to provide chapter and verse references in the other commentaries he might have consulted.²⁰ However, if commentary (*tafsīr*) is seen “as the medium through which revealed message of Allah contained in the Qur'ān could be understood,”²¹ then the form and manner in which Rūmī used Qur'ānic words and verses as well as stories found in the Qur'ān to drive home Islamic teachings in the *Mathnawī* can be said to be Rūmī's commentary. Among his works is a verse rendition of the stories of the prophets, which provides or serves as his commentary of the

17 Annemarie Schimmel, “Mawlānā Rumi: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, vol. 11, ed. Amin Banani, Richard Houannisian and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 22.

18 Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalāl ud-dīn Rūmī*, vol. 1, 5.

19 Edward Granville Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013), 515.

20 Maryam Musharraf and Leonard Lewisohn, “Sahl Tustari's (d. 283/896) Esoteric Qur'ānic Commentary and Rumi's Mathnawi: Part 1,” *Mawlana Rumi Review* 5, no. 1 (2014).

21 Badmas Olanrewaju Yusuf, *Sayyid Qutb: A Study of his Tafsir* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009), 1.

Qur'ān where particular attention is paid to the spiritual attributes of each prophet.²² What follows shows the form and message of Rūmī's commentary on the Qur'ān and his references to stories and incidents in lives of prophets Musa, 'Isa and Muhammad to justify Rūmī's unique manner and approach to Qur'ānic commentary.

Musa (Moses) and his People

The first prophet mentioned in the text of Rūmī's *Mathnawī* is Moses. The reference to Moses is in the treatment of the subject of indiscipline. In volume one of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī refers to Suratul Baqarah verse 61, where it is mentioned food came down from Heaven without stress for the people of Moses. However, they complained disrespectfully that they could not endure anymore eating one kind of food. Rūmī regards the situation as a case of indiscipline. This is why he states "[T]he undisciplined man does not maltreat himself alone, but he sets the whole world on fire."²³ The indiscipline of the people of Moses led them to toil thereafter for their daily bread. Also, he describes staving off the boat in Suratul Kahf by Khidr as a stove that contains "hundred rightnesses" unlike the imagination of Moses, despite his spiritual illumination and excellence being unable to comprehend Khidr's act.²⁴ Khidr's action is seen as coming directly from God.

The Qur'ān also mentions Moses' encounter with Fir'aun (Pharaoh). To Rūmī, Pharaoh's character or quality is that of "rebellious insolence" and a person who has this nature will continue to move away from faith.²⁵ Moses' miracle in parting the sea also receives attention. Rūmī describes that sea as discriminating the people of Moses from the Egyptians solely because the waves became charged with the command of God through Moses. "A Moses kills Pharaoh, with his army and mighty host, by means of the river Nile."²⁶ Mount Sinai (in another place, Rūmī said it was love that inspired Mount Sinai so the mountain was made drunk and Moses fell in a swoon) also experienced the miraculous nature of Moses and "began to dance." For those that might wonder how a mountain can be moved to dance, Rūmī asked "(w)hat wonder if the mountain became a venerable Sufi? The body of Moses also was (formed) from a piece of clay" yet he was able to do things that are beyond human.²⁷ This is because "in the eye of Moses the name of his rod was 'staff'; in the eyes of the Creator its name was 'dragon.'"²⁸ The reference to staff and dragon can be linked to Moses' encounter with Pharaoh's magicians in Suratul Taha verse 17-21. Rūmī refers to this incident in order to emphasise that God may seal one's sight so one fails to observe the plain meaning of a

22 Scott B. Noegel and Brannon M. Wheeler, *The A to Z of Prophets in Islam and Judaism*, vol. 176 (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2010).

23 Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 1, lines 81-82, 8.

24 Ibid., vol. 1, lines 236-237, 14. Khidr is said to be a righteous servant of God mentioned in the Qur'ān without his name or other details. According to the commentators of the Qur'ān (*mufasssīrun*), it is commonly accepted the man God instructed Prophet Musa to meet in Surat Al-Kahf (Chapter 18 of the Qur'ān) is Khidr. He is believed to have been granted divine mercy and knowledge by God.

25 Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 1, line 781.

26 Ibid., vol. 1, line 1188.

27 Ibid., vol. 1, lines 867-868.

28 Ibid., vol. 1, line 1188.

prohibition and refrain from interpreting it. In another place, Rūmī sheds more light on the event between Moses and the magicians:

The magicians in the time of the accursed Pharaoh, when they contended with Moses in enmity,

Yet gave Moses the precedence—the magicians held him in honour—

Because they said to him, “’Tis for thee to command: (if) thou wishest to be the first, do thou cast down thy rod first (of all).”

“Nay,” said he, “first do ye, O magicians, cast down those tricks (objects of enchantment) into the middle (where all can see them).”

This amount of respect purchased their (belief in) (the true) religion, so that it (the true belief) cut off the hands and feet of

their contention (prevented them from disputing further with Moses).

When the magicians acknowledged his (Moses’) right, they sacrificed their hands and feet (as a penance) for the sin of that (contention).²⁹

The punishment meted out to the magicians by Pharaoh, due to their accepting Moses’ God without his express command, was seen here by Rūmī as more like the magicians sacrificing their hands and feet due to their initial opposition of Moses. In another place, Rūmī also shows Pharaoh as praying to the God of Moses. This is, according to Rūmī, because both are subject to God’s will; therefore, they cannot make any move out of their own volitions. However, other verses refer to Pharaoh in a positive light for his “whole night in (crying) ‘O our Lord’?” And his humble and harmonious growth in secret showing his devotion to God;³⁰ to Rūmī, Pharaoh’s abhorrence of Moses was what led to his downfall.

In reference to the section in the Qur’ān where Moses informed his family that he will go to fetch fire,³¹ Rūmī says: “Moses went to fetch fire: he beheld such a Fire (the Burning Bush) that he escaped from (searching after) fire.” The search for fire became a life-changing moment for Moses, for he moved from the ordinary and became extra-ordinary. From the direction in which he went for the fire he heard the voice of God saying, according to Rūmī, “O thou of blessed fortune!” From the bush, Moses heard, “Lo, I am Allah”, and together with the words there appeared Divine lights.³² The extra-ordinary nature of Moses can be seen in the following lines:

In generosity you are (like) Moses’ cloud in the desert, whence came the dishes of food and bread incomparable.

The clouds give wheat which man with toil makes cooked (easy to digest) and sweet as honey.

(But) Moses’ cloud spread the wings of mercy and gave cooked and sweet food that was (ready to be eaten) without trouble.

For the sake of those (beggars) who partook of its bounty, its (the cloud’s) mercy raised a banner (displayed itself) in the world.

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 1, lines 1615-1620, 66.

³⁰ Ibid., vol. 1, lines 2460-2461, 97.

³¹ Qur’ān 28:29-30; 20:9-14.

³² Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu’ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 2, lines 2870-2871.

During forty years that ration and largesse did not fail the hopeful people (of Israel) for a single day,
Until they too, because of their vileness, arose and demanded leeks and green herbs and lettuce.³³

Also, Moses' extra-ordinary nature was described when Rūmī mentioned that

Moses came to battle with his one rod and made an onset against Pharaoh and (all) his swords. Every Prophet who by himself has knocked at that door (and besought God to help him) has alone (single-handed) fought (victoriously) against the whole world.³⁴

Even in the story of Moses' birth and Pharaoh's killing of innocent children to prevent the coming of Moses is to Rūmī an incident of significant lesson because Moses lay safe within the house of Pharaoh, while outside Pharaoh was killing infants in vain. Rūmī commented on that incident:

Even as the sensual man who pampers his body and suspects someone else of a bitter hatred (against him),

Saying, "This one is a foe, and that one is envious and an enemy," (though) in truth his envier and enemy is that body (of his).

He is like Pharaoh, and his body is his Moses: he keeps running (to and fro) outside, asking, "Where is my enemy?"

His fleshly soul (is) luxuriating in the house, which is his body, (while) he gnaws his hand in rancour against someone else.³⁵

It is not only Moses who is extraordinary, but everything associated or linked with him. That is why, according to Rūmī, when Moses' rod drank water from his hand, it was able to make a mouthful of Pharaoh and his army.³⁶ Just like the Qur'ān speaks about Moses' limitations, Rūmī narrates the incident between Moses and a shepherd to explain these.

Where art Thou, that I may become Thy servant and sew Thy shoes and comb Thy head?
That I may wash Thy clothes and kill Thy lice and bring milk to Thee, O worshipful One;
That I may kiss Thy little hand and rub Thy little foot, (and when) bedtime comes I may sweep Thy little room,

O Thou to whom all my goats be a sacrifice, O Thou in remembrance of whom are my cries of ay and ah!³⁷

Moses took offence at the prayer and chastised the shepherd for calling on God with human attributes. However, Moses was rebuked by God on account of the shepherd. This is because God is independent of all purity and impurity, of all slothfulness and alacrity in worshipping Him, since God did not ordain worship to make gains but to serve as a mercy to his worshippers.³⁸ Rūmī also comments on the incident of Moses and the worshippers of the golden

³³ Ibid., vol. 2, lines 3733-3738, 143.

³⁴ Ibid., vol. 2, lines 348-349.

³⁵ Ibid., vol. 2, lines 772-775, 179.

³⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, line 915.

³⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, lines 1724, 210.

³⁸ Ibid., vol. 2, lines 1745-1746

calf. He describes these worshippers as people drunken with deluding fancy. He believes they took to worshipping the calf because of their suspicions concerning Moses' prophethood despite the proofs and his noble nature. They had also seen the miracles, raising of the sea, food coming from heaven and many other miracles. Rūmī saw in the act of the calf worshippers' silly shrewdness, corruption, dullness, lack of foresight, worthlessness, futility and general lack of understanding. That is why he advises "[t]he mirror of the heart must be clear, in order that you may know therein the ugly form from the beautiful."³⁹

'Isa (Jesus) and his People

Rumi can also be said to be enamoured by the story of Prophet 'Isa in the Qur'ān. Different aspects of his life mentioned in the Qur'ān are dissected in the *Mathnawī*. The first glimpse of Jesus in the *Mathnawī* is in reference to Suratul Maa'ida verse 114-115:

Said Jesus, the son of Mary, "O Allah, our Lord, send down to us a table (spread with food) from the 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."

Allah said, "Indeed, I will send 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."

Rūmī stated, due to Jesus' intercession, God sent food and bounty from heaven on trays but, due to the insolence of his followers and lack of respect, this mercy from Heaven stopped. This is despite Jesus entreating that this will be lasting and will not fail from off the earth. Rūmī also believes Jesus' followers' show of suspicion and greed made the gate of mercy close upon them. Among the accusations levied against them are withholding the poor-tax, fornication and ingratitude "at the table of Majesty."⁴⁰ Rūmī cautions thus:

Whatever befalls thee of gloom and sorrow is the result of irreverence and insolence withal. Any one behaving with irreverence in the path of the Friend is a brigand who robs men, and he is no man.

Through discipline this Heaven has been filled with light, and through discipline the angels became immaculate and holy.

By reason of irreverence the sun was eclipsed, and insolence caused an 'Azázil to be turned back from the door.⁴¹

Also, in the story of the Jewish king who for bigotry's sake used to slay the Christians, Rūmī highlights the reason for contradictions in Christianity. The Qur'ān alludes to this in several verses.⁴² The king's vizier plotted with the king in order to bring doubt and perplexity to the Christians. The Christians were duped and started following the vizier, thinking that he was one of them and their greatest supporter against the Jewish king. Rūmī notes the vizier plotted against the Christians because of his envy for them; however, some Christians perceived the

³⁹ Ibid., vol. 2, lines 2025-2052, 222.

⁴⁰ Ibid., vol. 1, lines 83-88.

⁴¹ Ibid., vol. 1, lines 89-92, 9.

⁴² See Qur'ān 4:157.

vizier's guile. The vizier was able to confuse and perplex the Christians through writing contradictory ordinances in the Gospel. Rūmī wrote:

The doctrines, every one, are contrary to each other: how should they be one? Are poison and sugar one?

Until you pass beyond (the difference of) poison and sugar, how will you catch a scent of unity and oneness?

Twelve books of this style and fashion were drawn up in writing by that enemy to the religion of Jesus.⁴³

However, Rūmī believes the differences lie in the doctrines and not in the real nature of the True Way. The vizier did not stop there but made another plan to mislead the Christian folks by secluding himself after gaining their respect and acceptance, and refusing to break or interrupt his seclusion. The vizier later appointed each of the leaders of the twelve tribes as his successor and later killed himself. This led to quarrels among the leaders regarding the successor. It can be deduced from this story that Rūmī gave his commentary on several references to the contradictions found in Christian doctrine and practices.

Rūmī also refers to one of the miracles mentioned by the Qur'ān to have been performed by Jesus.⁴⁴ He describes it thus:

The water and clay, when it fed on the breath of Jesus, spread wings and pinions, became a bird, and flew.

Your glorification (of God) is an exhalation from the water and clay (of your body): it became a bird of Paradise through the breathing (into it) of your heart's sincerity.⁴⁵

It can be said that Rūmī links the body and spirit together and makes the water and clay to represent the body and breathing the spirit. Also, glorification is seen as earthly while sincerity makes someone heavenly or closer to God. In addition, Jesus' heavenly sojourn receives Rūmī's attention. The Qur'ān says: "Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. And ever is Allah Exalted in Might and Wise."⁴⁶ However, there are Muslim scholars who believe the raising of Jesus is not in body.⁴⁷ It appears Rūmī supports the idea of Jesus being taken up bodily and as an elevation of Jesus to the realm of God's special grace. He says: "Jesus sprang up, to escape from his enemies: that spring carried him to the Fourth Heaven."⁴⁸ In another line, he described it as: "When Jesus, the son of Mary, found its ladder, he sped to the topmost height of the Fourth Dome (of Heaven)."⁴⁹

⁴³ Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 1, lines 497-499, 23.

⁴⁴ Qur'ān 3:49; 5:110.

⁴⁵ Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 1, lines 865-866, 37.

⁴⁶ Qur'ān 4:158.

⁴⁷ See Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72, no. 2 (2009). Also, Tarif Khalidi, ed., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 1, line 2787.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, vol 2, line 916.

On the miracle of Jesus giving life to the dead, Rūmī gives extended context to the act through referring to the companion of Jesus who entreated him on how he gives life to the bones. Rūmī says:

A certain foolish person accompanied Jesus (on his way). He espied some bones in a deep-dug hole.

He said, "O companion, (teach me) that exalted Name by which thou makest the dead to live;

Teach (it) me, that I may do good and by means of it endow the bones with life."

Jesus said, "Be silent, for that is not thy work: 'tis not meet for thy breath and speech,

For it wants breath purer than rain and more piercing in action than the angels.

(Many) lifetimes were needed that the breath might be purified, so that he (its owner) was entrusted with the treasury of the Heavens.

(Suppose that) thou hast grasped this rod firmly in thy hand: whence will accrue to thy hand the cunning of Moses?"

He said, "If I am not one to pronounce (such sacred) mysteries, do thou pronounce the Name over the bones."

Jesus cried, "O Lord, what are these hidden purposes (of Thine)? What is (the meaning of) this fool's inclination (to engage) in this fruitless work?

How has this sick man no care for himself? How has this corpse no care for (spiritual) life?

He has left (uncared for) his own dead (soul) and seeks to mend (revive) the dead (bones) of a stranger."

God (answered and) said, "The backslider seeks backsliding: the thistle that has grown (in him) is the retribution for (consequence of) his sowing."

He that sows the seed of thistles in the world, be warned not to look for him in the rose-garden.

If he take a rose in his hand, it becomes a thistle; and if he go to a friend, he (the friend) becomes a snake.

The damned wretch is an elixir which transmutes into poison and snakes; (his elixir is) contrary to the elixir of the God-fearing man.⁵⁰

From Rūmī's extended context to the raising of Jesus, one can deduce the main lesson is basically one should know one's priorities. He also mentions in another place "[t]he Messiah (Jesus) brings the dead to life, and the Jew tears his moustache in wrath." Rūmī later concludes the story of the young man who entreats Jesus to teach him how he gives life to bones through his (Jesus) prayers by stating:

Jesus pronounced the Name of God over the bones on account of the young man's entreaty. For the sake of that foolish man the decree of God gave life to the form which those bones had possessed.

A black lion sprang forth, smote once with its paw, and destroyed his (bodily) image.

It tore up his skull: his brain was scattered on the spot-the brain (kernel) of a nut, for in him was no brain.

⁵⁰ Ibid., vol 2, lines 141-155, 158.

If he had had a brain, his being broken to pieces would have been no injury at all except to his body.

Jesus said (to the lion), “How did you maul him so quickly?” The lion said, “Because thou wert troubled by him.”

Jesus asked, “How did not you drink the man’s blood?” “In the (Divine) dispensation ‘twas not granted to me to drink (it),” replied the lion.

Oh, many a one that like that raging lion has departed from the world without having eaten his prey!

His (ordained portion is not (even) a straw, while his greed is as (great as) a mountain; he has no means (of satisfying his desires), though he has gotten the (material) means.

O Thou who hast made it easy for us to do unrewarded and fruitless labour in the world, deliver us!

To us it seems a (tempting) bait and ‘tis (really) a hook: show it to us even as it is.

The lion said, “O Messiah, (my killing) this prey was merely for the purpose that warning might be taken (by others).

Had there (still) been for me in the world an allotted portion (of food), what business indeed should I have had with the dead?”

This is the punishment deserved by him that finds pure water, and like an ass stales impertinently in the stream.⁵¹

The above lines help to emphasise the lesson of prioritising. Instead of the young man being concerned with his soul and how to enjoy eternal bliss, he is more interested in “bones” i.e. things that are worthless. There is also a deeper spiritual message that Rūmī wants us to ponder on this event and that there is a need to be more conscious of one’s spiritual life and level of spirituality. Rūmī asks: “(If) you are not a cur, how are you in love with bones? Why are you in love with blood, like a leech?”⁵² In addition, to attain the level of spirituality demanded by Rūmī, one needs to be willing to sacrifice one’s fleshly soul, which again is part of prioritising.

Muhammad and his People

The Qur’ān refers to the idea that Prophet Muhammad is mentioned in the Gospel and is why the description they knew the Prophet just like they knew their sons were used in the Qur’ān.⁵³ Rūmī also notes the honour paid to the description of Prophet Muhammad as mentioned in the Gospel. In his commentary on the references made to this issue in the Qur’ān, he declares:

The name of Mustafá was in the Gospel—(Mustafá) the chief of the prophets, the sea of purity.

There was mention of his (external) characteristics and appearance; there was mention of his warring and fasting and eating.

A party among the Christians, for the sake of the Divine reward, whenever (in reading the Gospel) they came to that name and discourse,

⁵¹ Ibid., vol 2, lines 455-468, 169.

⁵² Ibid., vol 2, line 474.

⁵³ Qur’ān 2:146.

Would bestow kisses on that noble name and stoop their faces towards that beautiful description.

In this tribulation of which we have told, that party were secure from tribulation and dread, Secure from the mischief of the amírs and the vizier, seeking refuge in the protection of the Name of Ahmad (Mohammed).

Their offspring also multiplied: the Light of Ahmad aided and befriended them.

And the other party among the Christians (who) were holding the Name of Ahmad in contempt,

They became contemptible and despised through dissensions caused by the evil counselling and evil-plotting vizier;

Moreover, their religion and their law became corrupted in consequence of the scrolls which set forth all perversely.

The Name of Ahmad gives such help as this, so that (one may judge) how his Light keeps guard (over his followers).

Since the Name of Ahmad became (to the Christians) an impregnable fortress, what then must be the Essence of that trusted Spirit?⁵⁴

The mention of the name of Prophet Muhammad in the Gospel, according to Rūmī, is clear. A party of the Christians knew this and honoured the name, while some others held it in high contempt. Rūmī believes those who honoured the name of the Prophet or Mustafa, as he called him, gained security from the name, while those against it found themselves in dissension, evil-plotting and corruption of their religion.

It is stated about 84 verses in the Qur'ān were revealed in connection with Abu Jahl (Amr ibn Hishām).⁵⁵ He was one of the Meccan polytheist pagan Qurayshi leaders known for his harsh opposition towards Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims in Makkah. He refused prophetic guidance until his death. This enemy of the Prophet as well as early Muslims is mentioned severally in the *Mathnawī*. Among the verses revealed regarding Abu Jahl are Suratul 'Alaq 9-19, Suratul An'am 108, Suratul Dukhan 43, Suratul Anfal 33-34 and Suratul Ma'un 2-3. Rūmī uses the term *bu jahl* to represent all that is evil and pervasive, all that is earthly and lacks spirit and not divine. For instance, he states: "Lay your hand on (cleave to) the One (God) and Ahmad (Mohammed)! O brother, escape from the Bú Jahl of the body!"⁵⁶ There is also a narration of how the Prophet manifested a miracle by speaking of the pebbles in Abu Jahl's hand and by the pebbles bearing witness to the truth of Prophet Muhammad.⁵⁷ One can understand from the story that even a pebble is made more honourable than Abu Jahl (maybe that he is even lower than earthly).

⁵⁴ Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalálu'ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 1, lines 727-738, 32.

⁵⁵ It is said 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbās says that 84 verses of the Qur'ān were revealed regarding Abu Jahl.

⁵⁶ Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalálu'ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 2, line 782.

⁵⁷ Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967). See Hakimi Abdul Jabar, *The Divine Miracles of the Prophet Muhammad: The Holy Quran, Sunnah Hadiths and Science* (Scotts Valley, California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015). Also Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *Miracles of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): Adapted from Introduction to Sahih Al-Bukhari (Arabic-English)* (Chicago, IL: Kazi Publication, 1979).

Rūmī, through his *Mathnawī*, also comments on the verse, “Make not the calling of the Messenger among you as your calling of each other.”⁵⁸ He notes how the mouth of a man who pronounces the name of Muhammad derisively remains awry. According to Rūmī, the man later came to seek the Prophet’s forgiveness because he realized, in ridiculing the Prophet, he was only bringing himself low and to ridicule. Rūmī, therefore, advised that:

When God wishes to rend the veil of any one (expose him to shame), He turns his inclination towards reviling holy men.

When God wishes to hide the blame of any one, he (that person) does not breathe a word of blame against the blameworthy.

When God wishes to help us, He turns our inclination towards humble lament.⁵⁹

From the above quotation, readers understand the importance of repentance and sincere weeping for what might be one’s fate if one continues with misdeeds (especially against prophets of God). He says:

Wherever is flowing water, there is greenery: wherever are running tears, (the Divine) mercy is shown.

Be moaning and moist-eyed like the water-wheel, that green herbs may spring up from the courtyard of your soul.

If you desire tears, have mercy on one who sheds tears; if you desire mercy, show mercy to the weak.⁶⁰

Qur’ānic support for mutual consultation (*shūrā*) – Surah Ash-Shūrā is the title of chapter 42 of the Qur’ān – is also noted in the *Mathnawī*. Rūmī believes good counsel leads to right perception and understanding because the mind is helped by other minds. He further supports this idea with an *ḥadīth* of the Prophet to “take counsel (with the trustworthy), for he whose counsel is sought is trusted.”⁶¹ The *Mathnawī* also mentions the wars fought by the Prophet to conquer Makkah and other places. To Rūmī, the motive of the Prophet in seeking to conquer these territories was not love of worldly dominion; rather, it was by the command of Allah. Rūmī gives his response to this type of accusation:

Inasmuch as to the eye of the Prophet the treasuries of the celestial spheres and intelligences seemed (worthless) as a straw,

What, then, would Mecca and Syria and ‘Irāq be (worth to him), that he should show fight and longing (to gain possession of them)?

That thought and opinion (of his motive) is the hypocrite’s, who judges (the Prophet) from the analogy of his own wicked soul.

When you make yellow glass a veil (between your eyes and the sun), you see all the sunlight yellow.

⁵⁸ Qur’ān 24:63.

⁵⁹ Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu’ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 1, lines 815-817, 35.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, lines 820-822, 35.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, lines 1043-1044.

Break those blue and yellow glasses, in order that you may know (distinguish) the dust and the man (who is concealed by it).⁶²

This is in relation to several Qur'ānic verses that ordered the Muslims to fight against their enemies. The aim of the fighting was not for worldly gains but for more spiritual benefit and attachments. Rūmī believes the Prophet already witnessed what is even more beautiful and enduring than this world yet he did not go overboard on them; then, of what benefit is gaining the whole of Persia and Rome for selfish reasons? In addition, there are several references in the *Mathnawī* to the cleaving of the moon (which sometimes Rūmī uses to say the Prophet did not only conquer the armies of the earth but also the celestial bodies), which has been alluded to in several commentaries on Suratul Qamar verse 1.⁶³ The verse states: "The Hour has drawn near, and the moon has been cleft asunder." It was said the people of Makkah asked the Prophet to show them a miracle, so he showed them the splitting of the moon.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the destruction of idols by Prophet Muhammad, which led to present Muslim communities today was also acknowledged in the *Mathnawī*. This can be linked to Qur'ānic verses urging Muslims to do away with idol-worshipping. Rūmī notes, had it not been for the efforts of Prophet Muhammad, many today like their ancestors would be worshipping idols. One is, therefore, further encouraged to give thanks for this deliverance and go a step further to also deliver oneself from the idol within.⁶⁵

In reference to the Qur'ān chapter 9 verses 107 and 110 about Masjid al-Dirar, Rūmī gives commentary on how the hypocrites attempted to cajole the Prophet in order to lead them in prayer at the Mosque of Opposition. He mentions that the hypocrites spoke deceitful words to the Prophet due to their cunning. At the onset, the Prophet promised to come to the mosque; however, he received instruction from God about the mischief of those involved in the building of the mosque. According to Rūmī's commentary on the above-mentioned verses:

They (the Hypocrites) have built a mosque upon Hell's bridge: they have played the game of trickery with God.

Their aim is to cause disunion amongst the Companions of the Prophet: how should any vain fool understand the grace of God?

(They have built the Mosque) in order that they may fetch hither a Jew from Syria, with whose preaching the Jews are intoxicated.⁶⁶

In most narrations of the event or incident, it appears the Prophet knew about the builders' intention on his way back from the battle. However, based on Rūmī's thoughts, the Prophet knew their plans before going to the battle, he only put them off and hurried to the battle in order to deal with them later.⁶⁷ Rūmī continues that the Prophet informed them of their secret

⁶² Ibid., vol. 1, lines 3955-3959, 151.

⁶³ Ibid., vol. 2, line 351.

⁶⁴ Imām al-Bukhārī, *Al-Jāmi` al-Musnad as-Ṣaḥīḥ al-Mukhtasar min Umuri Rasūlullāhi sallallāhu 'alaihi wa sallam wa Sunanihi wa Ayyāmihi* (Houston, Texas: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1997), vol.6, ḥadīth no. 390.

⁶⁵ Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, vol. 2, lines 365-367.

⁶⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, lines 2847-2849, 240.

⁶⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, line 2852.

thoughts, yet they refused to back down; instead, they began to make oaths or, as Rūmī describes it, “take oaths as shield.”⁶⁸ Rūmī also uses the incident to pass the message that unnecessary oath-making is the way of the wicked for the wicked man does not keep faith in matters of religion and will break his oaths as soon as the opportunity presents itself. To Rūmī: “Breach of compacts and covenants is (the result) of stupidity; keeping of oaths and faithfulness (to one’s word) is the practice of him that fears God.”⁶⁹ The Prophet did not believe because “shall I take your oaths as true, or the oath of God.”⁷⁰ From this incident, attention is drawn to the characteristics of hypocrites and their cunning nature, which they hold adamantly to. This is why Rūmī declares:

If you scrutinise the labour of them that follow falsehood, (you will see that) it is stinking, coat upon coat, like an onion—

Every one (of their efforts) more pithless than another, (while), in the case of the sincere, (every effort) is more excellent than the other.

Those folk (the Hypocrites) tied a hundred belts on their mantles in order to destroy the Mosque of the people of Qubá—

Even as the Lords of the Elephant (who abode) in Abyssinia made a Ka‘ba, (but) God set it afire;

(And then) they (the Abyssinians) made an attempt on the Ka‘ba in revenge: read from the Word (of God) how they fared!

The reprobates of the Religion have indeed no equipment but cunning and deceit and contentiousness.

Every Companion saw plainly (in sleep) some vision of that Mosque, so that the secret (purpose) of it became to them certain knowledge.⁷¹

Rūmī explains that those who are true to faith later knew for sure the intention of those hypocrites despite their oaths and swearing. Thus, in the end, the hypocrites will never be successful. Since the hypocrites were a challenge for the Muslim community in Madinah and it is not out of place to also mention how the Prophet handled dissension and enmity among the Ansar in Madinah. Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* also comments on the spirit of brotherhood among the Muslim community, which the Qur’ān also alludes to in several verses. The Aws and Khazraj had a blood-feud running for several years between each other. The coming of the Prophet put an end to it. Rūmī in his *Mathnawī* speaks in glowing terms about the kind of relationship that later existed within the two tribes:

First, those enemies became brethren like the units of (a bunch of) grapes in the garden;

And (then) at the admonition given in the words, *the true believers are brethren*, they dissolved (and mingled) and became one body.

The appearance of the (clustered) grapes is (that of) brethren: when you squeeze them they become one juice.⁷²

68 Ibid., vol. 2, line 2859.

69 Ibid., vol. 2, line 2862.

70 Ibid., vol. 2, line 2863.

71 Ibid., vol. 2, lines 2900-2906, 242.

72 Ibid., vol. 2, lines 3702-3704, 269.

The unity that was achieved by Prophet Muhammad among the people of Madinah was used by Rūmī to explain the universal love and oneness preached by Islam. He gave similitude such as “friend becomes a foe because he is still two,” “no one (ever) engaged in a battle with himself,” “oneness of hundreds of thousands of motes” and “dust scattered on the thoroughfare: the hand of the Potter made them one jug.” All these can be seen as Rūmī’s commentary on the verses on brotherhood and Muslim unity, which is one of the focus of Rūmī’s message in the *Mathnawī*. As he comments on the two tribes in Madinah and extension can be made to the larger Muslim community to live in unity and comradeship and try as much as possible to move away from enmity and hatred in their communities.

CONCLUSION

From the quotations above, it can be seen clearly that Rūmī comments on the Qur’ān in his *Mathnawī* through stories of prophets and their *umma* (community). Sometimes his Qur’ānic commentary is in the context it was used in the Qur’ān and other times in a completely different context. This is a major difference found in the form in which he made his commentary. His commentary on the Qur’ān focuses on the deeper spiritual messages embedded in the stories and incidents cited. This is not surprising because the *Mathnawī* is regarded as a mystical work with deep spiritual meaning.

In addition, the study helps highlight the link between Rūmī’s thoughts and its Islamic roots. This will guide against some authors’ attempts to overlook the Islamic context of the *Mathnawī*’s teachings due to lack of knowledge of the spiritual and intellectual background that made Rūmī’s poems possible, or maybe the authors are not interested in the specifics of the work’s spirituality, but in its pluralistic outlook as noted by Lewis.⁷³ Moreover, Rūmī says “I am the servant of the Qur’ān as long as I have life. I am the dust on the path of Muhammad, the Chosen One. If anyone interpreters in any other way, I deplore that person and I deplore his words.”⁷⁴

Finally, what can we learn from this Qur’ānised Sufi for the purposes of our modern thinking about *tafsir* (exegesis, usually of Qur’ān)? I find, while the poet’s purpose is, without doubt, to make a statement about the spiritual message of the Qur’ān, he does, nevertheless, suggest – as Lewis puts it – an elaborate though somewhat disguised commentary on the Qur’ān that has a lot to teach the readers of his work. This study is, therefore, a contribution to the debate about the form and content in Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*. In form, Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* may not appear as a traditional *tafsir* work due to lack of a systemic use and mention of verses being referred; however, in content, it has all the messages, themes and styles of commentary books on the Qur’ān with even more rhetorical and heuristic effect. The *Mathnawī*, I think, in form and content has the unique qualities of a *tafsir* work.

⁷³ Lewis, *Rumi-Past and Present, East and West*.

⁷⁴ See Quatrain No. 1173 in Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Ibrahim Gamard, and A. G. Ravan Farhadi. *The Quatrains of Rumi: Complete Translation with Persian Text, Islamic Mystical Commentary, Manual of Terms, and Concordance* (San Rafael, CA: Sufi Dari Books, 2008).

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