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Mazmuur Naafi: The Arabic Psalm of Nephi by Jamal Qureshi (b. 1976). Digital Print on Paper. 16" x 16", 2003. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

Understanding *Mazmuur Naafi*

The Arabic Psalm of Nephi

Josh E. Probert

Arabic calligraphy is arguably the defining form of Islamic art. Jamal Qureshi has combined this centuries-old tradition and the geometric forms of Ottoman architecture with one of the richest passages from the Book of Mormon, the Psalm of Nephi (2 Nephi 4:16–35), to create an artwork rich in meaning. The artwork is visual praise; and it represents the way in which religious artforms are fluid, transgenerational, and adaptable to new meanings. This short essay explains the artwork by contextualizing it in both Islamic and Mormon traditions.

Qureshi has navigated the worlds of the East and the West throughout his life. His father is Pakistani and Islamic, his mother Norwegian and Mormon. Today he lives and works in New York City, where his children are growing up Mormon and learning Arabic from their Yemeni babysitter and Laotian from their mother. Taking the artist's background into account, *Mazmuur Naafi* (Arabic for "Psalm of Nephi") can be understood as autobiographical. It reflects the artist making space for his faith within his world of mixed family traditions.

On a broader scale, his work illustrates well the borrowing of forms by artists of a new faith from the forms of an older one. For Qureshi, the process is one of artistic syncretization. It represents the way that artforms flow through and across different cultures and are repackaged and adopt new and syncretized meanings. In looking at *Mazmuur Naafi*, one sees what Thomas Tweed would call the confluence of cultural flows.¹ Qureshi affirms as much when he says that he is "trying to do something that shows a blending of cultures and forms."²

One of the best examples of this idea of cultural blending—and one stylistically related to Qureshi's use of Eastern Mediterranean artforms for



Salt Lake Temple with original annex (c. 1892). Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Mormon purposes—is the original annex of the Salt Lake Temple (1892). The annex was designed by Joseph Don Carlos Young in Byzantine style with possible Moorish influences. Byzantine was a popular form of early Christian architecture that was used throughout the empire for cathedrals, baptisteries, and palaces, and was later adopted by Muslims, who overtook many of the Christian structures throughout the Middle Ages and turned them into mosques.³ The style experienced a revival in the late nineteenth-century domestic and religious architecture when exoticism was popular. The 1866 Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati even has minarets.⁴ This is all said to illustrate the way in which an artistic vocabulary can travel through three religions and across numerous nations, with several nonreligious uses in between, and then be used by Mormons for their sacred architecture.

Arabic Calligraphy

Islamic tradition strictly prohibits the production of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic images in religious contexts. To illustrate living creatures is seen as pretending to the creative power reserved by God alone.⁵ Therefore, Islamic artists use abstract art to understand, estimate, and approach the Unseen God. “The sacred history of the Muslims may only be told in words,” writes Piotrovsky. “Thus it is accurate to state that Islamic art is

in essence abstract and not figurative.”⁶ Islamic artisans have traditionally used three types of abstract ornamentation for centuries: calligraphy, geometric forms, and Arabesque (floral) forms. These are combined in repetitive patterns that to echo the eternal nature of God.⁷ *Mazmuur Naafi* uses calligraphy and geometric forms to represent God’s eternal nature.

Although Jews, Christians, and Buddhists have used calligraphy to write and decorate sacred texts for centuries, Islamic and LDS traditions elevate sacred writing even further.⁸ Qur’anic calligraphy is more than just decoration to the Muslim eye; it is sacred writing that originated in heaven. The word of God contained in the Qur’an is understood to be a text written first in heaven then delivered by God to Muhammed. In the first revelation to Muhammed, the Qur’an says that God “teaches by means of the pen [*qalam*].”⁹ And in many Islamic poems, Allah is called “the Eternal Calligrapher.”¹⁰

In *Mazmuur Naafi*, the artist used two types of Arabic script popular among Ottoman Muslims. He wrote the text of 2 Nephi 4:16–35 in *Thuluth*, one of the six traditional types of Arabic script commonly referred to as the “six feathers.”¹¹ *Thuluth* was the first perfected form of Arabic in cursive and is attributed to Khalil ibn-Ahmad al-Farahidi, an eighth-century lexicographer from Basra.¹²

The name Allah (meaning “God”) is written in the center of the artwork in a simple, cursive *Diwani* script. Ibrahim Munif, an Ottoman Turk of the late fifteenth century developed this script. It became a chancery script that was well suited for official documents and decoration.¹³ The beauty and popularity of the Turkish fonts used by Qur’an copyists led to an oft-repeated tradition that “the holy Qur’an was revealed in Mecca, recited in Egypt, and written in Istanbul.”¹⁴

The artist’s use of blue and gold to write the Psalm of Nephi also has precedents in Islamic art. In the Maghreb region of North Africa, for example, a popular type of Qur’an called a *Kairouan* was produced, in which golden letters were written on a dark blue background.¹⁵ Persian Lajvardina porcelain is characterized by “gold over-painting set against a deep, royal blue glaze.” And tin-glazed faience earthenwares were developed in the Middle East. Blue became the most popular color used to decorate the tiles, especially tiles from Iznik that were used to decorate the interiors of mosques, the Blue Mosque in Istanbul with its 21,000 Iznik tiles being the most famous.¹⁶

Nephi’s Prayer of Praise

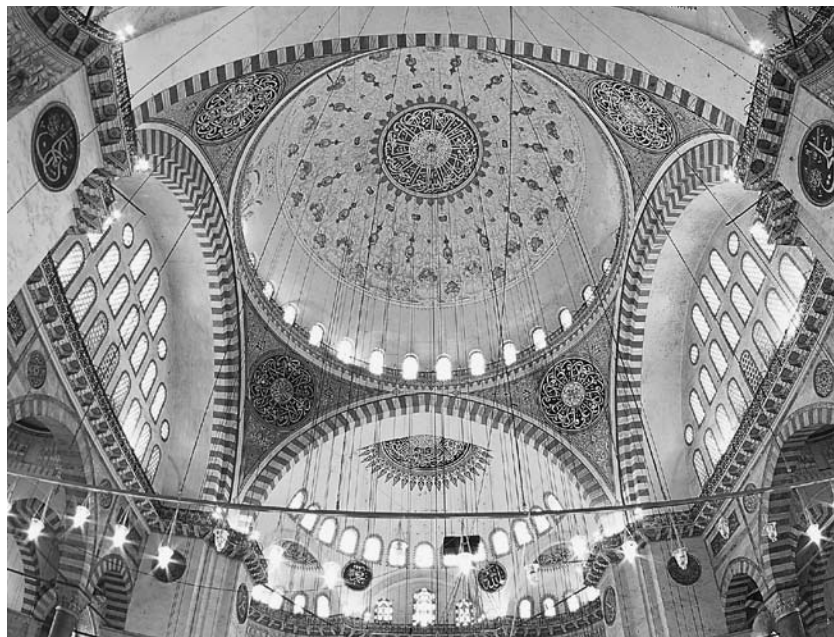
Qureshi selected the Psalm of Nephi because of its resonance to him personally, but also because he thought the translation rendered nicely in Arabic. “It is certainly a general form which sits quite comfortably in an

Arabic context,” he says.¹⁷ Hugh Nibley would have agreed. He argued that Nephi’s cultural background was influenced by Arabic desert peoples as much as or even more than the Jews.¹⁸

The similarity of the Psalm of Nephi to the psalms of the Old Testament Psalter has been studied, and the text fits well within Hermann Gunkel’s category of individual lament.¹⁹ But the text also shares characteristics with Islamic psalmody, including “the Lord’s Prayer of Islam,” the *Fateha* found in the first chapter of the Qur’an.²⁰ Both the Psalm of Nephi and the *Fateha* are prayers that are praiseful and pleading. At the outset, Nephi declares the “great goodness of the Lord” (2 Nephi 4:17), while the *Fateha* praises God as “the Beneficent, the Merciful” (Qur’an 1:1). Nephi pleads for redemption, while the *Fateha* praises God as “Master of the Day of Judgment” (Qur’an 1:4). Nephi prays, “Wilt thou make my path straight before me!” (2 Nephi 4:33), and the *Fateha* prays, “Guide us (O’ Lord) on the Right path” (Qur’an 1:6). And as Nephi prays, “I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever” (2 Nephi 4:34), a later Qur’anic passage declares, “In God do we put our trust” (Qur’an 10:85–86).

Roundels and the Rightly Guided Caliphs

Surrounding the large, central circle in *Mazmuur Naafi* are four circles with names written inside each. The names are Lehi, Nephi, Moroni, and Joseph. The artist selected these four because they were major figures in the preservation and transmission of the Book of Mormon plates. The format is a borrowing from Ottoman mosque domes. Four large roundels were traditionally hung under the dome in the pendentives. If one were to stand in the center of one of the great mosques of Turkey and Egypt and look up, one would see an arrangement of forms quite similar to those used in *Mazmuur Naafi*—a large circle surrounded by smaller circles with calligraphic inscriptions. The names written in the roundels of mosques vary but are usually the four successors to Muhammed, called the Rightly Guided Caliphs: Abu Bakr (632–34 AD), Umar (634–44 AD), Uthman (644–56 AD), and Ali (656–61 AD). These men were all colleagues of the prophet who were instrumental in the preservation and transmission of the revelation to him. Thus, the parallel that Qureshi artistically draws between the four Rightly Guided Caliphs and Lehi, Nephi, Moroni, and Joseph Smith is apt as the latter were instrumental in the preservation and transmission of the “prophesyings and revelations” of the Book of Mormon (Words of Mormon 1:6). Christianity has a similar quadrature form in the Tetramorph—a man, an ox, a lion, and an eagle representing the



Süleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey. © Gordon Galbraith.

four Evangelists, which swirl around the throne of Christ in the apses of countless churches as interpreted from the vision of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:10).

The tradition of four circles surrounding a large central circle is not restricted to mosque architecture. Illuminated manuscripts also adopt this schema, especially the *hilyes* of Ottoman Turkey, which are descriptions on paper of important figures in Islam. The most famous *hilye* is that of Muhammed. Transmitted by Ali, Muhammed's son-in-law, it has been artistically rendered in sumptuous colors and patterns incorporating calligraphy, floral decoration, and geometric patterns.²¹ Therefore, *Mazmuur Naafi* might be seen as a type of Mormon *hilye*, although its content is more prayer and praise than it is a description of a person's physiognomy and mannerisms.

Geometric Forms

Concentric circles set in a square is a popular motif of Islamic architecture altogether, reaching its apogee during the Ottoman period. As Robert Hillenbrand has written, "Ottoman architecture is unique in the Islamic world for its unwavering fidelity to a single central idea—that of the domed square unit."²² Mosque domes often rest upon a square, the

courtyard fountain is often rounded and set in a square courtyard, and the four minarets of the great mosques form a square surrounding the round sanctuary. The composition of concentric circles surrounding a central axis is repeated on the interior as bands of calligraphy demarcate the areas of the dome. Several mosques in Istanbul use this composition, including the Hagia Sophia, which has “The Light Verse” (Qur’an, 24:35) inscribed around the interior of the central cupola.²³ And the interior dome of the Mosque of Bayezid II, in Edirne, Turkey, is inscribed with the Most Beautiful Names and verses from the Qur’an in a central circle and a larger concentric circle.²⁴

The prominence of the concentric circle in *Mazmuur Naafi* and in Islamic artforms is reflective of premodern Islamic cosmology. The Islamic mind saw the world as round and bounded. As Samer Akkach writes, the cosmos “was conceived in the form of concentric circles, at the center of which humans dwelled and at the outer limit stood the all-encompassing divine Throne.”²⁵ This cosmology is not so different from that of ancient Jews and Christians, for whom the earth was also round and bounded, a flat disk floating upon an eternal expanse of water.²⁶ Later Jewish and Christian thought saw the heavens as a series of ten concentric spheres mimicking the spheres of holiness radiating from the Holy of Holies in the temple.²⁷ Linking the Book of Mormon text with the form of *Mazmuur Naafi*, it is important to note the concentric sayings and ring compositions found throughout the Book of Mormon.²⁸

Conclusion

Mazmuur Naafi is an aesthetically powerful artwork that offers viewers rich strata of meaning. The work is an autobiographical reflection of the life of the artist and of his desire to help build a bridge between East and West. “I’m trying to bring two things together that are to each side common,” Qureshi says. “2 Nephi 4 is a commonly known Book of Mormon text, and calligraphy is very common in the Middle East. Place one of them in the other’s world by itself, and it will be out of place. But together, a bridge is built.”²⁹

The ease with which Qureshi places Book of Mormon text of 2 Nephi 4:16–35 into an artform traditionally reserved for text from the Qur’an reveals a certain similarity between the two books of scripture. In the words of Boyd K. Packer, Islam and Mormonism are both “religions of the book.”³⁰ Both were revealed by prophets who claimed firsthand transmission from deity. Both contain teachings about right living, the afterlife, and the nature of God. Both are central to the faith of each.

To Muslims the Qur'an is the foundation. To Mormons the Book of Mormon is the "keystone." Both volumes are seen as "most correct" books by their adherents.

The mixing of Ottoman art forms with Mormon scripture illustrates the way in which the forms of architecture, painting, and calligraphy are not static, forever assigned to one artistic school, one religious tradition, or one ethnic locale. Instead, artforms, like religious ideas, have legs—they travel. They are adopted, modified, given new meanings, and exported for the purposes of believing individuals and believing communities. Mormon art and architecture has a long tradition of borrowing from its cultural environment, but the forms of Western Europe and the United States have dominated Mormon artistic vocabularies much more than any Eastern ones have. Because of this, *Mazmuur Naafi* is paving new roads in the Mormon art tradition. Non-Western artistic styles have become more common in Mormon art over the past century, and they will be used more and more as the Church continues to grow internationally. This multicultural artistic diversity will further complicate an already complicated question: What is Mormon art?

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