

# Intellectual Discourse

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Volume 26

Number 2

2018



**International Islamic University Malaysia**  
<http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam>



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International Conference on Religion, Culture and Governance in the  
Contemporary World (ICRCG2018) 3-4 October 2018  
(Wednesday-Thursday) 23-24 Muharram 1440.

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# “O People of the Book”: An Exegetical Analysis of the *Ahl al-Kitāb* in Qur’ānic Discourse

**Jonathan Alexander Hoffman\***

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to develop a methodological framework through which to analyse the Qur’ān’s dialogical engagement with the *Ahl al-Kitāb* (the People of the Book – Jews and Christians). A substantial portion of the Qur’ānic revelations are directed towards, or about, the Jews and Christians, warranting a critical analysis of *why* such a dialogue was necessary and what the nature of that dialog entailed. Indeed, the Qur’ān’s engagement with the *Ahl al-Kitāb* is one of the most critical elements of the Qur’ānic revelation, evidenced by the sheer number of verses addressing them. This research seeks to address *why* the Qur’ān engages so heavily in polemics with the *Ahl al-Kitāb* and the evolutionary nature of the engagement and polemical tone throughout Muhammad (SAW)’s prophethood.

The overall argument of this analysis is that the Qur’ān engages heavily in dialogue with the Jewish and Christian communities in order to establish and legitimize itself within, as a continuation of, and as the final solidification of Abrahamic-monotheism. Explored within this analysis will be the polemical tone/interaction of the Qur’ān towards other religious communities, specifically Jews and Christians, and *why* this dialogue is so prevalent within the text. Since the Qur’ān was revealed within the context of other religions (particularly Judaism and

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Christianity), the text sought to legitimize itself by claiming to be a continuation of the monotheistic tradition beginning with Abraham, but at the same time it sought to separate itself and make an authoritative new claim in order to distinguish itself from these already established communities.

This dialogical exchange between these communities is particularly interesting considering the large body of knowledge about monotheism that existed before the Qur'ānic revelations in Makkah: the people of Arabia were familiar with the *Suhūf* (scrolls) of Moses and Abraham, the *Tawrāt* (Torah), *Zabūr* (Psalms), and the *Injīl* (Gospel) of Jesus at the time of the Qur'ānic revelations. Indeed, the *Tawrāt* is mentioned in the Qur'ān 18 times, the *Zabūr* three times, and the *Injīl* 12 times (Albayrak, 2008). This research will therefore focus on the development of the polemical nature of the revelations dealing/interacting with the People of the Book and how they fit into the overall historical background. This study does not seek to advance the theological position of one of these traditions over the other, but rather strives to contextualize the Qur'ānic revelations within the historical communities that the text was revealed.

However, it must be noted that this specific term is not always needed/used within the Qur'ān when dealing with either the Jews or Christians, each of which are often addressed either specifically by name or by using a different collective expression, ultimately reflecting the particular context – i.e. audience – at hand. Besides the expression *Ahl al-Kitāb*, there are also other expressions by which the Qur'ān refers to the Jews and Christians collectively: *alladhina utū al-Kitāb* (those who have received the book), *ataynāhum al-Kitāb* (those unto whom We have given the book), *utū nasīban min al-Kitāb* (those who were given a portion of the book), *wa awrathnā al-Kitāb* (those we gave the book as an inheritance unto), *alladhina yaqra'ūn al-Kitāb* (those who read the book), and *fa'salū ahl al-dhikr* (the followers of remembrance). The Jews and Christians are also often addressed individually through terms such as *yahūd* (Jews), *Banū Israīl* (children of Israel), *nasārā* (Nazarene), *Ahl al-Injīl* (people of the Gospel), and *hawāriyyūn* (disciples of Jesus). For the sake of this analysis, the term *Ahl al-Kitāb* – the most frequent expression used when addressing these two communities collectively – will be the primary focus of this study in order to gain a holistic understanding of the Qur'ān's dialogical engagement with these two communities as a whole.



The foregoing analysis is separated into three interconnected sections. The first, “Major themes, patterns, and observations” presents the overarching concepts and frameworks that form the foundation of this study. It analyses and seeks to answer the original question that spawned this inquiry into Qur’ānic polemics vis-à-vis the *Ahl al-Kitāb*: why does the Qur’ān engage so heavily in dialogue with the People of the Book and what is the nature and purpose of that dialogue? The next section – “Confirmation of that which has already been revealed” – analyses specific Qur’ānic verses that serve as an attempt to legitimize the Qur’ānic revelation amongst the *Ahl al-Kitāb* and that attempt to portray the Qur’ān as a continuum of the previously-established Abrahamic traditions. The final section – “The Qur’ān as the epoch and solidification of the Abrahamic-monotheistic tradition” – analyses the specific verses which contain polemical claims against the *Ahl al-Kitāb* and that ultimately serve to separate Islam as its own religious community distinct from the People of the Book. These polemical engagements serve to establish the new Islamic identity of the community of the believers and is the most important dialogical exchange with the *Ahl al-Kitāb*.

### **Major themes, patterns, and observations**

The polemical engagements between the Qur’ān and the People of the Book are critical to understanding both the religion of Islam and the inner-working of the Qur’ān itself. In order to understand the polemical engagement between the Qur’ān and the *Ahl al-Kitāb*, the nature of the Qur’ān itself must be holistically understood as well as its stark differences from the previous Abrahamic scriptures. The Qur’ān is not meant to be a narrative, but rather a communicative process between God and man through the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). As opposed to being revealed/delivered in totality, the Qur’ānic revelations were revealed in piecemeal according to the specific context at the time. Therefore, it is natural that different revelations employ different polemical tones according to their respective contexts and specific audience(s). This becomes evident when examining the gradual change in the tone in the engagements with Jews and Christians within the revelations.

At the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), monotheism was well known throughout Arabia. There were large communities of Jews and Christians, and Arabia itself was surrounded by strong powers – such

as the Byzantine Empire – which were monotheistic in doctrine. The Qur’ān is, therefore, presented with the challenge of legitimizing itself amongst these communities and then tasked with convincing the *Ahl al-Kitāb* of the superior nature of this final revelation. In other words, the Qur’ān must demonstrate to the Jews and Christians that it is the legitimate successor to and continuation of the tradition established by and continued by prophets such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc. At the same time, the Qur’ān also had to attempt to establish its supremacy and separate itself as a distinct “entity” from the already established communities of Jews and Christians.

The term *Ahl al-Kitāb* – the most common expression used when the Christians and Jews are being addressed collectively – occurs 31 times verbatim within the Qur’ān (Wahyudi, 1997). The distribution of the term *Ahl al-Kitāb* within the Qur’ān is broken down accordingly: twice in *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (Q 2: 105, 109); twelve times in *Sūrah al-‘Imrān* (Q 3: 64, 65, 69, 70, 71, 72, 75, 98, 99, 110, 113, 199); four times in *Sūrah al-Nisā* (Q 4: 123, 153, 159, 171); six times in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah* (Q 5: 16, 21, 62, 68, 71, 80); twice in *Sūrah al-Bayyinah* (Q 98: 1, 6); and once each in *Sūrah al-‘Ankabūt* (Q 29: 46), *Sūrah al-Aḥzāb* (Q 33:26), *Sūrah al-Ḥadīd* (Q 57: 29); and *Sūrah al-Ḥashr* (Q 59: 2, 11) (Wahyudi, 1997). It is important to note that out of these 31 verses, only three of them were revealed in Makkah: (*Sūrah al-‘Ankabūt* (Q 29: 46); and *Sūrah al-Bayyinah* (Q 98: 1, 6), while the rest were revealed in Madinah. The different verses were, as will be shown, addressed to different representatives of the People of the Book with whom Prophet Muhammad (SAW) came into contact at different times within different contexts.

The disparity between Qur’ān’s varying tones relating to the *Ahl al-Kitāb* in Makkah and Madinah has to do with the intended audience(s) of those particular revelations. When the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) initially embarked on his mission within Makkah, his primary audience (therefore, also the primary audience of the Qur’ān) were polytheistic pagans, not Jews or Christians. Therefore, the Qur’ān is staunch in its denunciation of polytheism, which was the prevalent religion of those peoples, and the verses directly addressing the *Ahl al-Kitāb* are limited in number. The revelations relating to the People of the Book within the Makkah period (examined in more detail in the next section) are inherently positive because the Qur’ān is attempting to confirm the

previous revelations and establish the parallels between these new revelations and previous ones.

The verses revealed after the *Hijrah* (migration) of the Prophet (SAW) and his community of believers from Makkah to Madinah are far larger in number and have a strikingly different tone. Within Makkah, the audience of the revelation changed dramatically: the Prophet (SAW) was in direct – constant – interaction with the Jews and Christians of the city (particularly the former). During the earlier days in Madinah, the Qur’ān speaks highly of the *Ahl al-Kitāb* and the relationship/discourse between the Jews of the city and Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his followers was one of mutual friendship (Yaman, 2011). In time, however, political and religious disagreements arose between the People of the Book and the Muslim community, causing revelation to take a more forceful tone due to the fact that criticisms were levied against the Prophet. In other words, the progressive hardening of the opposition to the message of Muhammad went hand in hand with a progressive intensification of the Qur’ānic polemic (Robinson, 2004).

This change in polemical tone raises a critical question: are these polemical statements meant to be essentialist – the ultimate overarching reality and nature of how the Muslim community should conduct themselves vis-à-vis the People of the Book – or contextual in nature and therefore subject to the events taking place at those specific moments? As the specific cases will show in the following two sections, the revelations should be considered as contextual, not essentialist, and cannot be separated from their specific contexts and intended audiences. In other words, the condemnation (when present) of Jews and Christians and their practices within the Qur’ān cannot be separated from the historical conditions which lead to the development of those specific revelations within those respective contexts. The intensification of the Qur’ānic rhetoric towards Jews and Christians represents the increasing tensions on the ground in Arabia between the Prophet Muhammad and members of these two other communities.

### **Confirmation of that which has already been revealed:**

The Qur’ān goes to great lengths in order to engage with the People of the Book and demonstrate that it is the confirmation and continuation of that which has previously been revealed to the other prophets within the ongoing tradition of Abrahamic-monotheism. The Qur’ān must first

position itself as the natural continuum of the Abrahamic-monotheistic tradition before it can make an attempt to separate itself from the Jewish and Christian communities as the alleged final divine truth. Therefore, the verses discussed in this section reflect Qur'ānic polemics attempting to legitimize itself, and Muhammad, to the People of the Book by utilizing similar themes and concepts found within previous revelations in order to portray itself as a continuation of those revelations.

An important concept to understand when analysing Qur'ānic polemics with the attempt to legitimize itself amongst the pre-established traditions is that of Qur'ānic self-referentiality. The Qur'ān is aware of the presence of other scriptures, specifically the *Suhūfs* of Moses, Abraham, etc., the *Injīll* of Jesus, etc. It is within this context that the Qur'ān demonstrates that it is aware of these previous revelations, and seeks to place itself at the top – i.e. the culmination of – that same tradition. The Qur'ān does this in two specific ways. The first is that the Qur'ān is the only scripture to actually call itself scripture in order to grant it the ultimate, self-reflexive authority it needs within the emerging polemical context:

This is the Book in which there is no doubt, a guidance to the God-fearing (Q 2: 2)

Another way in which the Qur'ān is self-authoritative is the self-designation it grants itself in relation to its position on earlier scriptures: “Confirmer – *Muṣaddiq*” (Q 2: 89 & Q 3: 3-4). According to the Qur'ān, God has always provided a “guide” (Q 13: 7) and a “warner” (Q 35: 24) for mankind and has sent a number of different prophets to different communities at different times to show them the right path (Yaman, 2011). Furthermore, the Qur'ān claims that each prophet brought a message or a “book” from a common and single source termed the “Mother of the Book – *Umm al-Kitāb*” (often referred to as the Celestial Kitāb) (Q 43: 4) (Yaman, 2011). In this sense, the Qur'ān is presenting itself as a part of a succession of divine messages and messengers, all of which emphasize the same universal and essential principles which the Qur'ān is now professing. This self-authorization through self-reflection is critical because it demonstrates a direct polemical engagement with the People of the Book who would seek to challenge Muhammad.

It is within this overarching context that the Qur'ān engages with the People of the Book in order to portray itself as the natural

continuum of the monotheistic tradition originally established between God and the Israelites. In pursuit of this goal, the Qur’ān begins by inviting the People of the Book to common ground on the basis that neither party worships any other than God:

Say: “O People of the Book! Let us come to common terms between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not from amongst ourselves, lords and patrons other than God.” If then they turn back say ye: “Bear witness that we are Muslims (in submissions to God’s will).” (Q 3: 64)

Similarly, in the early days within Medina, the Qur’ān capitalizes upon the good-standing relationship between the Muslims and the People of the Book:

Today the good things are permitted to you, and the food of those who were given the Book is permitted to you, and permitted to them is your food. And [permitted in marriage] are chaste women from among the believers and chaste women from among those who were given the Book before you, when you have given them due compensation, desiring chastity, not unlawful sexual intercourse or taking [secret] lovers. And whoever disbelieves in the faith, his work has become worthless, and in the hereafter he will be among the losers. (Q 5: 5)

Both of these verses hold paramount importance to the overall goal of the Qur’ān. They both serve to establish Muhammad and his followers, and the People of the Book, as equals. Furthermore, they also serve to establish Muhammad on the same prophetic level as earlier prophets within the same Abrahamic-monotheistic tradition. The first verse aligns the two groups theologically (i.e. the belief in the one true God), while the second verse establishes them as equals on a societal level. It allows them to eat together, intermarry, and – essentially – strive towards establishing themselves as one community under the rule of God. These equalizing verses serve as the foundation for later revelations that would appear once those among the People of the Book began to challenge Muhammad. But, even when they began to challenge him, the Qur’ān emphasizes that even this must be done in the most respectful manner, because both the People of the Book and the Muslims were receivers of divine revelation from the same (One) God:

And dispute not with the People of the Book save in the fairest manner, except for those of them that do wrong; and say “We believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is One, and to Him we have surrendered. (Q 29: 46)

The Qur’ān also goes to great lengths mentioning the stories/prophets already believed in by the People of the Book. By speaking about prophets such as Moses, Abraham, Joseph, Jesus etc., and by applying their experiences to the specific contexts within which Muhammad and the People of the Book are faced at that particular time of revelation, the Qur’ān is attempting to demonstrate to the People of the Book that these revelations are confirming and continuing what has already been sent down to them. For example, there are numerous narratives found throughout the Qur’ān of how, in the time of Moses, God repeatedly forgave the Children of Israel after chastising them (Q 2: 40-121) (Robinson, 2004). Within these chronicles, Muhammad is clearly portrayed to the People of the Book as having a similar function to Moses (Q 2: 108; 4: 153) and the same status as Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets (Q 2: 136; 3: 84; 4: 163; 33:7) (Robinson, 2004). Moreover, Muhammad is portrayed as the messenger for whom Abraham prayed (Q 2: 129; 2: 151; 3: 164; 62: 2) and who’s future coming was foretold by Jesus (Q 61:6) (Robinson, 2004).

A similar theme the Qur’ān evokes during this period (for the specific goal of portraying itself as a continuum) is that of the “Children of Israel.” As mentioned above, these verses are very present throughout (Q 2: 40-121). However, it is worth analyzing a few verses in particular to show the direct polemics being engaged in by the Qur’ān in relation to the People of the Book:

O Children of Israel! Remember my favor which I have bestowed upon you. Fulfill my covenant that I may fulfill your covenant, and be in awe of me alone. Have faith in that which I have sent down confirming that which is already with you. Do not be the first to reject faith in it. Do not exchange its verses for a meager price, and fear me alone. (Q 2: 41-42)

O Children of Israel, remember my favour toward you and that I have favoured you over all peoples. (Q 2: 47)

These verses are only some of the myriad of examples of attempts by the Qur’ān to portray itself (and Muhammad’s prophetic nature) as the natural continuum of the tradition originally established between God and the Children of Israel. In these verses, God is explaining to the People of the Book that these revelations through Muhammad are the continuation of the covenant he began with them and a confirmation of “that which is already with” them. Without this foundation of legitimacy, the Qur’ān would not have been able to later criticize the alleged improper practices by the People of the Book (see next section). The Qur’ān, through polemical verses like the ones listed above, is attempting to establish its legitimacy among the already existing scriptures possessed by the People of the Book and is serving to grab their attention to later revelation that will correct some of their improper practices. Without first establishing itself within the trajectory of the Abrahamic-monotheistic tradition, the Qur’ān would not have been able to have legitimately and critically engage with the *Ahl al-Kitāb* in later revealed verses.

### **The Qur’ān as the epoch and solidification of the Abrahamic-monotheistic tradition**

This section of the Qur’ān’s polemical engagement is the most important element when analyzing the Qur’ān’s dialogical engagement with the People of the Book. In analyzing this polemical dynamic, a question arises that needs to be answered: how does the Qur’ān separate itself from the older traditions (while still claiming to be a continuation of them) and how does it go about asserting its claim of supremacy? Ultimately, the polemical dynamic/tone of the verses analyzed in this section serve to establish a specific, separate identity for the Muslim community in relation to the Jews and the Christians. This societal differentiation (what differentiates Islam and the Muslim community writ large) is critical in the formation of a distinct Islamic community because it serves to establish a unique and separate identity for the Muslims.

The Qur’ān criticizes the *Ahl al-Kitāb* for accepting previous scriptures but failing to acknowledge the divinity surrounding the current revelations:

If they are told, “Have faith in that which God sent down, they [Ahl al-Kitāb] say, “We should rather have faith in that

which was sent down to us.” Yet they reject that which came after it, even though it is the truth, confirming that which is already with them. Say, “Why did you slay the prophets of God in times past, if you were true men of faith?” (Q 2: 91)

The Qur’ān continues in its criticisms of the People of the Book: it criticizes them for their belief that they alone will enter paradise without being able to prove it (Q 2: 111), their claim that Hellfire shall not touch them save for a number of days (Q 2: 80), and their claim that they are favored by God apart from all the rest of mankind (Q 62: 6) (Yaman, 2011). The Jews are particularly criticized for their misunderstanding of the gifts (revelations) from God and their subsequent belief that they possessed a higher status than all other people.

There are also distinct polemical condemnations of the Christians, specifically revolving around their concept of Jesus as the Son of God (Q 4: 171), the crucifixion (Q 4: 156-157) and the idea of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) (Q 5: 73-75). While the Qur’ān accepts the special humanity of Jesus (the fact that he was a prophet), it strictly denies his divinity with such verses as (Q 4: 171) and (Q 5: 73-75):

O People of the Book! Commit no excess in your religion, nor say nothing but the truth about God. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that he conveyed to Mary, and a Spirit from him. So believe in God and His Messengers, and say not “three”. Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God. Glory be to Him that He should have a son! To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth; God suffices for a guardian. (Q 4: 171)

They have certainly disbelieved who say: “God is the Third of Three.” No God is there but One God...The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away; his mother was just a woman; they both ate food. Behold, how We make clear signs to them; then behold, how perverted they are! (Q 5: 73-75)

And because of their unbelief and their uttering against Mary a might calumny. And because of their saying, “We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God.” Yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, but it appeared so to them; and those who disagree concerning it are in doubt about it; they have no knowledge of it except the following



of surmise; and they slew him not for certain. But God raised him up to Himself, God is All-Mighty, All-Wise. (Q 4: 156-157)

These verses are meant to correct the People of the Book who have, according to the Qur’ān, distorted their previous scriptures/revelations. The Qur’ān therefore engages critically with the People of the Book, portraying itself as the continuation and solidification of the covenant that began with Abraham (Q 2: 135). It summons the Children of Israel to remember and respond to God’s favour (Q 2: 47-48) and proclaims Muhammad and his followers as the true adherents to the religion of Abraham, and that the Jews and the Christians are the ones who are “feeble-minded” despite their counter-claim (Robinson, 2004). To the Jews and Christians who attempt to convert the Muslims, Muhammad is instructed to reply that they follow the religion of Abraham, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian, and that they believe in the revelation sent down to them and in the revelations sent down to the previous prophets including Moses and Jesus (Q 2: 135-140) (Robinson, 2004). These verses serve to legitimize the Qur’ānic revelation within the Abrahamic-monotheistic tradition, but at the same time serve to separate the new Islamic tradition from those of Jews and Christians with these new theological differentiations.

There are two specific instances of polemical engagement between the Qur’ān and the *Ahl al-Kitāb* that serve as prime examples of the text attempting to establish a unique/separate religious identity for the Muslims: the fast on the tenth of *Muḥarram* and the fast of Ramadan, and the *qiblah* (direction of prayer). Beginning with the former, during the early days of the community’s presence within Medina, Muslims (at first) like the Jews observed the fast on the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) (Robinson, 2004). However, as tensions within Medina increased between the Muslim community and the Jews of the city – and the need for the Qur’ān to establish Muhammad and his followers as their own distinct religious community – the Qur’ān instituted the Muslim Fast of Ramadan (Q 2: 185-178). Similarly, Muhammad initially instructed his followers to fast on the tenth of *Muḥarram* as the Christians and Jews did. Later, however, he instructed them to fast on the ninth and tenth, or tenth and eleventh, in order to make themselves distinct from the People of the Book (Albayrak, 2008). In terms of the *qiblah*, the Qur’ān instituted the change in prayer direction by asserting

that it was Abraham who had built the Ka‘bah (Q 2: 124-127), that Islam was the true religion of Abraham and that he was not a Christian or a Jew (Q 2: 128-141), and then finally ordered the Muslims to pray facing the direction of the Ka‘bah as opposed to Jerusalem (Q 2: 142-150) (Albayrak, 2008). These actions served to separate the Muslim community from the People of the Book so that they would form their own religious identity and practices in order to differentiate themselves.

This new identity for the Muslim community is classified by the Qur’ān as being a “middle nation”. The Jews and Christians began criticizing the Muslims for longer facing in the direction they used to face (Jerusalem) (Q 2: 142) and in response God explains that He has established the Muslims as a “middle nation” and has implemented the change in order to distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels (Q 2: 143) (Albayrak, 2008). In other words, these changes were implemented in order to distinguish the new Muslim identity from those of the *Ahl al-Kitāb*. Now that the Muslims have been constituted as a “middle nation” distinct from the Jews and the Christians, the Islamic community, according to the Qur’ān, replaces the Children of Israel as the chosen (God’s) people for the continuation of the original covenant and are now “favored” (Q 2: 40, 47, 122; Q 2: 150). In other words, according to the Qur’ānic text, this revelation represents the “final seal” and signals the completion of the original covenant that began with Abraham and has now ended with Muhammad.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of the Qur’ān’s polemical engagement with the People of the Book is to first establish itself as a continuum within the Abrahamic-monotheistic tradition, and then separate the newly formed Islamic community from the two previous traditions (with a greater emphasis on the latter aspect). Ultimately, by engaging in polemics with the *Ahl al-Kitāb*, the Qur’ān establishes the Muslim community not only as a continuation of the original covenant that began with Abraham, but as its own separate entity apart from the Jews and Christians. The revelations involved in this polemical engagement were revealed within specific contexts to address specific circumstances as they arose and as different challenges presented themselves to Muhammad and the Muslim community. The Qur’ān’s polemical engagement with the *Ahl*

*al-Kitāb* severed the newly formed Muslim community from the alleged distorted previous traditions and was designed to usher in a new chapter for God’s covenant with man.

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ISSN 0128-4878 (Print)

ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

