



The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish 'Influence' on Islam

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Abstract

The biblical tradition is manifest in the Quran in many different ways. Similarly, scholars have adopted a number of different approaches to the phenomenon of the biblical 'borrowings' found in the Quran. Since the foundation of the modern discipline of Islamic studies in the nineteenth century until very recently, scholars have often seen the appearance of biblical stories in the Quran, often in significantly altered, distorted, or amplified form, as reflecting Muhammad's dependence upon Jewish teachers and thus an overarching Jewish influence on Islam. In point of fact, this approach to the biblical tradition in the Quran has significant roots in medieval Christian polemic against Islam. In recent years, a few scholars have sought to develop more constructive approaches to this material and to Quranic narrative in general; nevertheless, a full-scale reconsideration of the basic problem is still lacking, and the legacy of medieval polemic in the early Orientalist tradition, as well as its modern implications, has yet to be widely recognized.

Introduction

To the Jewish or Christian reader who is well-versed in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament), the Quran contains many narratives that may seem both familiar and strange. The scriptural legacy of ancient Israel appears to have left its mark – to have 'influenced', or somehow otherwise informed – the Muslim revelation in many places, and in many ways. Here, we will focus on some of the ways in which the biblical tradition is manifested in the Quran, as well as some of the approaches Western scholars have taken in order to explain this phenomenon and its significance. As we shall see, the traditional scholarly approach to this material has significant roots in medieval Christian polemic against Islam, although contemporary scholars have begun to articulate more sophisticated methodologies for interpreting it as well.

Varieties of Biblical Tradition in Late Antiquity

The question of what the biblical tradition was at the time of the Quran's revelation in the late sixth and early seventh centuries CE, as well as how

the Arabic scripture revered by Muslims throughout the world as the literal word of God came to be so deeply informed by this tradition, is a complex one. It is almost certainly incorrect to imagine the Prophet Muhammad simply sitting down to write the Quran one day with a pen in one hand and a copy of the text of the Bible in another, although some scholars in the past have essentially asserted precisely this.

First, Muslim tradition categorically rejects the idea that the Prophet was the actual author of the Quran *per se*; rather, he was the passive recipient of divine revelation that he conveyed in pristine, uncorrupted form to his community. Moreover, Muslim tradition holds that Muhammad was illiterate, and thus that he could not really have written anything, let alone fabricated the stories of the Quran by merely copying things he found in the Bible.¹ Furthermore, largely on account of the offense claims of Muhammad's authorship of the Quran present to Muslim sensibilities, as well as due to a general uncertainty regarding the historical record of the Islamic tradition's origins, many scholars today would prefer not to speak of the Prophet as the author of the Quran at all. Recognizing that the extant sources on the life of Muhammad and the history of the early community were compiled long after the events they describe and are thus more likely to reflect the beliefs and values of Muslims of the second and third centuries AH rather than events as they really were in the first century, historians seem increasingly focused on deciphering the sources on Muhammad and his contemporaries in light of their significance for their immediate audience. Earlier generations of scholars were much more confident about the objective reliability of these works for reconstructing 'what really happened', although this often seems like a much less viable project today (for a useful summation of the *status quaestionis*, see Robinson 2003). The endeavor to recover the authentic facts of the Prophet's life has thus receded into the background in the field of Islamic studies to a large extent.

An even more substantial criticism that can be leveled against the claim that Muhammad simply copied stories out of the Bible is that it is rather uncertain what form the biblical traditions to which the Prophet might have had access would have taken. To put things in perspective, Muhammad (ca. 570–632 CE) lived more than 1000 years after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem (586 BCE) and the proclamation of the Torah as the constitutional charter of the restored community of Judah under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah (538 BCE), and more than 500 years after the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth (d. ca. 30 CE) and the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans (70 CE). In Late Antiquity (fourth–seventh centuries CE), the transitional era between classical antiquity and the so-called Middle Ages, what we now call the Hebrew Bible and tend to identify as a single book with specific, discrete contents was still in a considerable state of flux. It is not so much that it is implausible that the Bible could have informed the contents and fundamental outlook of the

Quran in some way; this, in fact, is practically indisputable. Rather, the problem lies in discerning the form and substance of the biblical tradition as it might have appeared in the Arabian milieu in particular, for at this time, there was not a single 'Bible', but rather multiple strands of scriptural tradition in circulation, much of which derived ultimately from the ancient Israelite milieu, but not all of which was authentically ancient or, for that matter, even primarily to be associated with Jews. Much of this scriptural material, diffusely distributed in the Near Eastern milieu, was not even written down but rather circulated orally, and can thus only be called 'scripture' figuratively or metaphorically.

The leaders of the rabbinic Jewish community (or communities) and the Christian church (or churches) certainly had their particular lists of the specific books to be included in the physical text of the canonical scripture and the order in which they were to be arranged. However, by this time, Jews primarily knew the Bible in the Hebrew of the original as well as in Aramaic translation, while Christians knew it in the Greek of the Septuagint, the Latin of the Vulgate, the Syriac of the Peshitta, and other tongues as well. At the same time, many Christians and Jews at this time mainly experienced the Bible as recited and interpreted in the liturgies of church and synagogue – in short, as an oral phenomenon. Furthermore, the question of canonicity itself is by no means an unambiguous one. The official list of the books of the Hebrew Bible continued to be contested in various ways in both communities for some time after the general closure of the canons in the second century CE; moreover, on the popular level, authority, if not actual canonicity, was extended to diverse works of a 'parascriptural' nature, especially among marginal groups and remote communities. For example, texts dating back to the Second Temple period (535 BCE to 70 CE) that we have come to conventionally term 'Apocrypha' and 'Pseudepigrapha' continued to command considerable authority as authentic scripture, in some cases even becoming part of the canonical Bible of some communities (e.g. the *Book of Enoch* in Ethiopic Christianity).²

Finally, in the late antique Near Eastern milieu, scripture was almost never approached or understood in an unmediated form, but was typically filtered through diverse interpretive traditions that functioned not only to clarify the plain sense of scripture *per se*, but also to make scripture meaningful and relevant for the particular community in which such exegesis arose. These interpretative traditions took myriad forms – scholarly and popular, liturgical and literary, oral and written, homiletic, juridical, and legendary – but for all of the communities for whom the Hebrew Bible (in whatever shape it happened to take) possessed authority, not only Jews and Christians but Manichaeans, 'Jewish Christians', and various Jewish and gentile sects of a 'gnostic' nature, the process of scriptural interpretation had one key function: it made scripture uniquely *theirs* and allowed them to assert some form of sovereignty over it, to stake their

claim to it. Thus, biblical tradition not only took on myriad forms and diverse meanings in Late Antiquity, it was also actively contested by various communities that laid claim to the religious patrimony of ancient Israel and located themselves as the natural inheritors of its legacy of dedicated monotheism and its place of privilege as God's chosen nation.

In short, in the late antique milieu, the biblical tradition was not primarily manifest as a single work, the 'Hebrew Bible' or 'Old Testament' in the sense of a closed and stable canon of written texts (although it was also sometimes this). Rather, when we speak of Late Antiquity, the period in which Islam emerged, 'Bible' should evoke the image of a plurality of rich traditions, in multiple languages, oral and written, centering on documents transmitted over the course of a millennium that conveyed the authentic cultural and religious inheritance of ancient Israel, its legacy of monotheism, covenantalism, and prophecy, but that also included a dazzling variety of exegetical traditions that supplemented, supported, amended, and even perhaps at times subverted that legacy. The Torah could certainly be identified as a book *per se*, but it was much more frequently experienced as a practically fathomless sea of stories by Jews, Christians, Jewish Christians, Manichaeans, and a host of other – sometimes nameless – scriptuaries.

Varieties of Biblical Tradition in the Quran

All this is directly relevant to the question of the biblical tradition as manifest in the Quran, for it is quite possible to see the extensive appropriation and adaptation of biblical stories in the Quran as reflecting this wider phenomenon. That is, even though Islamic tradition emphasizes that Muhammad revealed the Quran in a completely 'pagan', polytheistic environment, the Arabian society of the Jāhiliyya or so-called 'Age of Ignorance', it nevertheless seems clear that both monotheism and the scriptural legacy of the ancient Israelites – whatever form it might have taken – was to some degree both familiar and meaningful to Muhammad's contemporaries (for a reinterpretation of the evidence regarding the religious environment in which the Quran was revealed, see Hawting 1999). Moreover, the active preaching of belief in one god, the emergence of a new scripture in which biblical stories were recast for a new audience, and especially the appearance of a new prophet who may have deliberately shaped those stories to reflect his own circumstances and his own self-presentation to reflect those stories (this is suggested by the evidence of the Quran itself) would all tend to indicate that the emergence of Islam in the late sixth and early seventh centuries may represent the culmination of a long process of engagement between Arabian society and the wider religious and cultural milieu of the late antique Near East.

The most common way in which the narratives of the Hebrew Bible appear in the Quran is in the form of what would eventually be termed

the ‘tales of the prophets’ (*qışaş al-anbiyā*). The major figures of the patriarchal and prophetic heritage of ancient Israel – Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses pre-eminent among them – are featured prominently in the Quran, as are other figures from later phases of Israel’s history, from David and Solomon to Job to Jesus of Nazareth. Virtually all of these figures are endorsed as representatives of the prophetic heritage, and called either *nabī* or *rasūl*. Thus, it is primarily the Pentateuch and parts of the Prophets and historical books that are appropriated and reinterpreted in the Quran; much less seems to have been taken over from literary books such as the Psalms and Proverbs. Moreover, of the Pentateuchal material, it is the narrative contents rather than the legal that seem to have had the greatest impact on the formation of the Quran.³

As mentioned before, the Quranic stories featuring the biblical patriarchs and prophets will seem familiar in many ways to Jewish and Christian readers. *Ādam*, fashioned from clay, is the ancestor of all humanity, falling from grace due to his desire to attain Godlike knowledge and immortality (Q.2:35–39, 7:19–25, 20:120–123; Q.20:120 refers explicitly to the *shajarat al-khuld* or Tree of Immortality, seemingly echoing the reference to the *‘etz ha-ḥayyim* or Tree of Life in Genesis 3:22). *Nūḥ*, Noah, is the antediluvian saint who survives God’s purgation of the earth from sin through the flood, the epitome of obedient submission in the face of divine judgment (cf., e.g. Q.26:105–122). *Ibrāhīm*, Abraham, is the archetypal believer, responsive to God’s commands and ready to sacrifice his son as the ultimate sign of his faith (Q.37:100–113).⁴ The story of *Yūsuf* or Joseph embodies the lesson of trusting in providence; in the Quran, as in Genesis, his betrayal by his brothers and descent to Egypt in slavery ends up guaranteeing the future salvation of his people (cf. Sūra 12, the only example of a chapter of the Quran devoted to a single subject, and directly reflecting Genesis 37–50 at many points). And just as in Exodus, *Mūsā* or Moses is the righteous instrument of the Israelites’ deliverance from bondage, an unlikely candidate for leadership who nevertheless becomes both redeemer and lawgiver (cf., for example, Sūra 20, *Ṭa-ha*, the first hundred verses of which present the story of Moses in concise form). So many of the basic themes of these stories are clearly held in common between the Quran and the canonical Bibles of both Judaism and Christianity that many commentators have correctly discerned that these scriptures are essentially of one voice, at least as pertains to these individuals and their stories: the lessons in obedience, fidelity, and trust in God that they so succinctly and beautifully communicate constitute one of the most important grounds for dialogue and mutual understanding between all three of the Abrahamic faiths.⁵

However, as we have also mentioned before, there is much to be found in the stories of these figures in the Quran that will seem strange to readers of the Christian or Jewish Bible as well. While the same canonical text of the Hebrew Bible revered by Jews constitutes the equally canonical

Old Testament of Christianity, in Islam, it is not the literal text of the Hebrew Bible that was appropriated and transmitted in the Quran, but rather significantly recast versions of familiar Pentateuchal and prophetic narratives. While much about the portrayal of these patriarchal and prophetic figures thus seems to echo the stories found in the canonical Bible and therefore might reflect a more or less straightforward process of adaptation, many aspects of these stories appear to have been added or significantly reshaped as well. To take just three of the abovementioned figures as examples: as is the case in post-biblical Jewish and Christian tradition, Adam and Eve's exile from the garden is caused by a diabolical interloper, the equivocal serpent of Genesis now replaced by the Devil himself (*al-shayṭān*, cf. Q.2:36, 7:20, 20:120). In the long version of the story of Noah in Sūra 11 (Q.11:25–49), much is made of the son who refused to be rescued on the Ark but rather rebelled against his father's urgent pleas that he save himself; however, Noah's dignity is spared in that God tells him that this unnamed son was not really his but was rather illegitimate, the result of an 'unrighteous deed' (*ʿamal ghayr ṣāliḥ*, vs.46; cf. Q.66:10). While much of the Abraham cycle in the canonical Bible focuses on his departure from the land of his ancestors, 'Ur of the Chaldees', and his sojourns in the Holy Land and Egypt, the Quran considerably supplements this material with detailed narratives about Abraham's sojourning in Arabia as well, and Jews and Christians may be surprised to discover that Abraham and Ishmael are claimed to have built the Ka'ba in Mecca, the holiest site on earth in the eyes of Muslims (cf. Q.2:125–129).

Taking such examples into account, then, even a cursory survey of the evidence demonstrates that the Quran uses biblical tradition in surprising and provocative ways; we cannot justifiably claim that the Quran is the product of a simple, direct dependence on narratives from the canonical Bible slavishly copied in a straightforward and unsophisticated fashion.⁶

The Origins of Biblical Tradition in the Quran: The Jewish Influence on Islam?

One might reasonably wonder how exactly the biblical material found in the Quran came to be there, or why it is that the Quranic stories of the Israelite patriarchs and prophets resemble their canonical precursors in some respects while seeming to deviate from them in others. In point of fact, these questions have been central in the Western study of the Quran from the beginnings of the modern discipline of Islamic studies in the nineteenth century until very recently; and they have commonly been answered with the claim that these Quranic narratives represent Muhammad's direct 'borrowings' from Jewish informants. Only in the last few decades have scholars begun to develop approaches to these narratives that do not overly emphasize the basic theme of Muhammad's debt to Judaism,

or subordinate the Quran either to its biblical precursors or to parallels found in rabbinic literature.

The work widely considered to inaugurate the modern study of Islam in the West, Abraham Geiger's *Was hat Mohamed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (What did Muhammad derive from Judaism?), first published in 1833, takes the question of Muhammad's dependence on Jewish informants for his scriptural knowledge as its primary theme. Geiger's attitude toward Islam is complex, and his achievement is noteworthy for several reasons.⁷ Various scholars have observed that Geiger's work initiated the modern academic study of Quranic narrative from a serious philological perspective. More important, however, is his work's essentially eirenic attitude: Geiger's characterization of Muhammad as a *Schwärmer*, that is, as a genuinely sincere religious 'enthusiast' or 'devotee', went against the grain of the Orientalist view of the Prophet of Islam as a charlatan and deceiver that was dominant in his day.

Geiger was not motivated by a simple desire for scholarly objectivity, however; rather, his portrayal of Muhammad must be placed in the context of his larger apologetic aims, inasmuch as he was concerned to highlight the links between Judaism on the one hand and its 'daughter' religions, Christianity and Islam, on the other, in order to posit the former as the source and authentic core of the latter. Geiger sought to invert the age-old hierarchy of supersessionism established in both Christianity and Islam, for these traditions understood Judaism as both a direct lineal ancestor and an obsolete precursor. According to Geiger's paradigm, on the other hand, only Judaism could truly lay claim to spiritual authenticity, on account of its unquestionable originality; in his account, the pure religion of Israel owes nothing to any precursors or prior inspiration, being motivated solely by a genuine, unique vision of the divine. Christianity and Islam, in contrast, although partially recognized and enfranchised as Judaism's 'daughter' religions, are thus relegated to secondary status on account of their clear dependence upon it.⁸

In his work on the Quran, Geiger was able to marshal his formidable knowledge of classical rabbinic texts, having received a traditional Jewish education as well as training in Arabic philology at the University of Bonn under the great Orientalist G. W. Freytag. The crux of Geiger's analysis was his observation of the many conspicuous parallels between Quranic episodes and the narratives of the midrash, rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. Essentially, Geiger explained the apparent deviations of Quranic stories about the patriarchs and prophets from their parallels in the canonical Hebrew Bible as due first and foremost to their derivation from what he assumed must be Jewish prototypes of those stories found in the midrash. That is, to the degree that the Quranic portrayal of Adam or Abraham or Moses does not fit that found in the Bible *per se*, this can be attributed to Muhammad's direct borrowing of versions of those stories from his Jewish informants, who mediated biblical traditions to him in the

form they knew from the midrash and not from the canonical text of scripture *per se*.⁹

Thus, in Geiger's view, the occurrences of what one must concede are very many apparent parallels between Quranic narratives and rabbinic (as opposed to merely biblical) narratives should be taken as proof that Islam is essentially a derivative offshoot of Judaism. It must be noted, however, that Geiger took this approach as a matter of principle, which caused him both to overstate the degree of correspondence between the Quran and the midrash and to overlook the clear chronological problems that often arise when making comparisons of this sort. For example, it is frequently the case that Geiger cites midrashic traditions as unequivocal precursors to Quranic stories even though they are attested only in Jewish works that are considerably posterior to the emergence of the Quran. In these cases, he seems to have simply assumed that later Jewish texts must have preserved much older rabbinic traditions (which is sometimes, but by no means always, the case).

To modern eyes, Geiger's straightforward assertion of Islam's thoroughgoing debt to Judaism may seem excessive and even derogatory. However, it must be emphasized that he was responding to a Christian scholarly tradition that still described Islam with vituperation and rancor and characterized the Prophet as a fake. It is thus crucial to keep in mind that one of Geiger's main contributions to the development of Islamic studies was his deliberate cultivation of an attitude of appreciation and respect for Islam, even while he maintained its total unoriginality; in truth, the main point for Geiger was not Islam's unoriginality *per se*, but rather its fundamental affinity with, and similarity to, Judaism and Christianity. He was certainly not the first to claim that the contents of the Quran were primarily borrowed from Jewish sources, but he *was* the first to argue this point in a systematic fashion and to bolster such a claim with a substantial demonstration of philological technique. His emphasis on the critical role played by Jewish informants in the Arabian environment who transmitted knowledge of biblical tradition channeled through the midrash would have an unparalleled impact on the modern study of Quranic narrative.

Taking both his competence with Jewish sources and his ideological presuppositions into account, it is wholly unsurprising that Geiger consistently resorted to a method of deploying rabbinic traditions as unambiguous precursors to their apparent Quranic parallels. The success and wide influence of his work meant that his method would be spread throughout the fledgling Orientalist discipline, and his preconceptions about the ubiquitous Jewish influence on early Islam helped to establish nothing less than a myth of Jewish priority as the backbone of modern Islamic studies. What to Geiger seemed wholly natural and intuitive, namely, the recourse to Jewish parallels to Quranic stories to explain the origin and meaning of those stories, became the standard and reflexive *modus operandi* in Western studies of the Quran for more than a century.

It is also noteworthy that Geiger's eirenic and conciliatory attitude toward Islam was often not shared by his followers. There is some irony to the fact that two subsequent authors who also dedicated studies to demonstrating the purported Jewish influence on Islam, Charles Cutler Torrey (1967) and William St. Clair Tisdall (1905), both of whom stridently criticized and even ridiculed the Prophet for his inept garbling of biblical narrative, were in fact Christians.

The basic paradigm established by Geiger has been fundamental in the history of the Western study of Quranic narrative, and the phenomenon of the reception and reinterpretation of biblical tradition in the Quran cannot be separated from the larger context of the perennial scholarly obsession with the purported Jewish influence on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad himself.¹⁰ Most of the works in the 'Jewish influence' genre have basically functioned as surveys or catalogs of the Jewish traditions supposedly 'borrowed' by Muhammad and inserted in the Quran, and seldom has there been any attempt to refine Geiger's basic paradigm or to explain exactly why or how a new Arabic scripture should have been established so strongly upon a Jewish foundation in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.

The Theme of Muhammad's Tutelage by Jews in Medieval Polemic

Another great irony lies in the fact that despite Geiger's intention to advance a more conciliatory and benign view of the Prophet, his influential promotion of what we have termed a myth of Jewish priority itself reflects the influence of an essentially medieval portrayal of Muhammad that originally emerged in Christian polemic against Islam. As Geiger himself acknowledges, his *Preisschrift* was specifically written in response to an invitation issued by the Faculty of Philosophy at Bonn soliciting contributions on a subject provided by the competition's sponsors: '*Inquiratur in fontes Alcorani seu legis Mohammedicae eos, qui ex Judaismo derivandi sunt*' (the subject to be investigated is those sources of the Quran or the Law of Muhammad which are derived from Judaism). In turn, Orientalist interest in the Jewish derivation of the Quran in the first half of the nineteenth century often hearkened back to key elements of hostile accounts of the life of the Prophet produced by ecclesiastics in the Middle Ages.

It has been widely noted that in the eyes of medieval Christians, Muhammad was often viewed as having been a renegade Christian himself; some even held that the early Muslim community as a whole was a breakaway sect that had deviated from orthodox Christian belief due to various negative influences in the Arabian environment. Whether or not Muhammad or his people were actually thought to have been Christian originally, the notion that the Prophet must have had Jewish or Christian tutors who helped him to formulate his religion, often conceived as a combination of Judaism and Christianity with various heretical flairs, was

ubiquitous in the medieval West.¹¹ In particular, in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, such authors and works as Petrus Alfonsi, the Cluniac *Corpus Toletanum*, and Ricoldus de Montecrucis all asserted that Muhammad had been strongly influenced by Jews, sometimes even specifying the Talmud as the proximate source of his corruptions of biblical narratives. For example, Alfonsi (d. 1140), an Aragonese Jew of the era of the *Reconquista* who converted to Christianity, was knowledgeable in the Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin scholarly traditions, and, as John Tolan argues, his work was key in introducing a critical linkage between Islam and Judaism to the West: 'whereas earlier anti-Jewish polemicists had contented themselves largely with arguing for Christian interpretations of the Torah and the Prophets, Alfonsi focused on the Talmud and the Koran as two illegitimate pseudorevelations that formed the bases for two erroneous religions.'¹² Alfonsi portrayed Muhammad as an opportunist who enlisted the aid of sectarian Jews and Christians, specifically Samaritans, Nestorians, and Jacobites, to compose the Quran in order to snare the credulous and build up a scriptural foundation for his claim to be a prophet. Likewise, the influential *Corpus Toletanum*, an anthology of Islamic texts translated by a group of scholars commissioned by Peter the Venerable of Cluny, contains various works that reinforce the image of Muhammad as being under the tutelage of Jews in particular.¹³

In describing Muhammad's debt to his putative Jewish teachers, these polemical works often mention famous early Arabian Jewish converts to Islam by name, Ka'b al-Aḥbār and 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām in particular. In singling these converts out, medieval Christian authors were indirectly drawing on Islamic tradition itself, for these converts are sometimes acknowledged in classical Islamic sources as having been important informants on biblical and Jewish matters in the time of the Prophet and his companions. Naturally, Muslims did not (and do not) acknowledge any possibility of Jewish influence on Muhammad or the Quran *per se*; rather, in Muslim accounts, these converts are credited with bringing a certain amount of older scriptural lore into the Muslim community, material on the Bible and related matters that supposedly helped early Muslims to interpret the Quran. At the same time, some later Muslim authors execrated these converts for seeking to subvert Islam from within by spreading corrupting 'Jewish lore'; eventually, the technical term *isrā'īliyyāt* was applied to such material as a way of marginalizing and even demonizing it.

In any event, although this was almost certainly not intentional, by intimating Muhammad's extensive borrowing of Jewish material, Geiger ironically continued the legacy of European Christian polemic against Islam, in that he implicitly cast Muhammad as an opportunist who had deliberately appealed to Jews and Christians through a Machiavellian appropriation of materials familiar to them from their own scriptures.¹⁴ Furthermore, as we have just mentioned, this polemical characterization of Muhammad by Christians ironically echoed certain themes in Islamic

sources, inasmuch as classical Islamic tradition acknowledged its own partial reliance on Jewish sages in its early history. Admittedly, traditional European polemic gave as much weight to the Christian elements (however distorted) in Muhammad's message as to the Jewish, if not more; however, with the work of Geiger, the Jewish element undoubtedly comes to the fore.

New Perspectives on Quranic Context, Canonicity, and Chronology

In response to the various factors noted above – particularly an increased sensitivity to the Muslim viewpoint as well as a contrasting skepticism regarding the traditional picture of Islamic origins – in recent years, many scholars have grown uncomfortable with the one-dimensional and reductionist picture of the Quran's origins commonly promoted in traditional European scholarship.¹⁵ The prevailing paradigm that emphasizes the Jewish influence on Islam, particularly on Muhammad and the Quran, has been challenged in numerous ways, and some of the objections raised to the traditional focus on the debt to Judaism supposedly signaled by the presence of biblical narratives in the Quran are worth examining here briefly.

First of all, it has been quite obvious to many scholars that the established approach, which first and foremost asserts that the biblical traditions in the Quran are 'borrowings', belies the subtle and complex ways in which older stories are renovated and redeployed in the Quran; accounts that place the question of debt and influence in the foreground simply promote a view of the Muslim scripture that is diminished and inadequate. For example, in a now-classic study, Marilyn Waldman argues that an objective analysis of Quranic narrative is in fact impaired by too strenuous an insistence on its derivative character, and that appreciating the Quran's unique literary goals and techniques requires that we acknowledge its autonomy, rather than positing its absolute dependence on the prior biblical text, let alone supposed Jewish prototypes. Thus, through a meticulous comparison of the Quranic and biblical versions of the story of Joseph, she is able to show that, in many respects, the former is more developed in literary terms than the latter, and thus that the interests of the would-be exegete may best be served by analyzing the biblical lacunae in the light of the Quran's elaborations, and not vice versa (Waldman 1985). That is, from a narratological standpoint, exegesis of the Quranic version of the story is hindered by an overarching insistence on the Bible's absolute priority, but facilitated by a contrasting emphasis on the Quran's unique discursive style. In short, what really matters is not that the Quran supposedly borrows narrative material from the Hebrew Bible (if this is even really the way to put it), but rather what it does with that borrowed material within the context of its literary structure and agendas.

A second objection that can be raised against the established paradigm is that works in the traditional 'Jewish influence' genre tend strongly to ignore both the Quran's immediate and long-term contexts of reception.

That is, scholars' desire to uncover, evaluate, and catalog the long list of borrowings from the Hebrew Bible or rabbinic midrash to be found in the Quran predominates at the expense of cultivating any sort of appreciation for why biblical narratives are adopted, recast, and deployed in the Quran in the first place. What are they doing there? What meaning did they have for the Prophet, for his followers, and for the community that they built?

In a sequence of recent articles, Angelika Neuwirth has proposed a new method of reading Quranic narrative in the light of its chronological development within the emerging Quranic canon, that is, at the 'pre-redactive' stage of its history. While Neuwirth very much wants to avoid regression to the older hermeneutic approach common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which the Quran was read against the reconstructed sequence of events in the life of the Prophet – a technique that took much for granted and fundamentally relied upon the traditional account of Muhammad's biography – at the same time, she emphasizes that chronological development within the Quran has been unjustifiably neglected by scholars. Applying sophisticated rhetorical and literary analysis to various narrative complexes in the Quran, Neuwirth is able to convincingly demonstrate clear strata of development within the Quranic corpus, where later Medinan passages seem almost indisputably to refer to, amplify, amend, and even rectify older Meccan passages.

This is pertinent to our concerns here because two of Neuwirth's articles discuss Quranic narratives built on or derived from older biblical traditions. In one, she focuses on the Quranic portrayal of the creation of Adam. While she acknowledges that the Quranic version of this episode 'strongly binds the Qur'ān to Biblical tradition,' and likewise that the theodical theme that is central to the story of the Fall has been rehearsed in numerous contexts of reception in Judaism and Christianity, Neuwirth pays the greatest amount of attention here to the inner-Quranic development of the versions of the story, which is found in several sūras, and concludes that the story's significance seems to have evolved considerably at the 'pre-redactive' level (Neuwirth 2001). In another, similar piece, Neuwirth analyzes the Quranic Golden Calf story, not only demonstrating its importance as a recurring meditation on themes of transgression and repentance, but actually connecting it with an ongoing dialogue between the fledgling Muslim community and the Jews of Medina regarding the observance of formal rituals of atonement (Neuwirth 2006). Strikingly, in both of these discussions, the fact that the narrative in question is ultimately based on a story of biblical provenance, one possibly even transmitted by Jews, is completely irrelevant for the formidable contextual analysis Neuwirth offers. In her view, it is the reception of the older narrative in a new setting and its evolution in that setting that matters most – not the fact that it is a biblical 'borrowing' that may indicate Jewish 'influence' on the Prophet.

A third objection to the traditional paradigm is simply that in some cases, allegations of the Quran's (or the Prophet's) borrowing from Jews are simply unwarranted. Careful analysis of particular narratives may show that, in contrast to the assertions of previous generations of scholars, the Quran simply does not consistently reflect the direct derivation of biblical data from Jews or a straightforward assimilation of rabbinic midrash. Rather, the opposite may be the case, namely, that Jews quite likely 'borrowed' from the Quran, or even from later Islamic literature. That is, not all apparent innovations in the interpretation of biblical narrative were pioneered by Jews and subsequently transmitted to Muslims (or to the Prophet); rather, in some cases, the Quranic data has been misunderstood and must be systematically re-evaluated. While some biblical traditions in the Quran are indeed quite likely to be derived from Jewish precursors, this is by no means true of *all* of them.

Thus, in one study, Brannon Wheeler shows how the long-established scholarly view that the story of Moses and the anonymous servant of God in Sūra 18 of the Quran is derived from postbiblical Jewish sources is based on an almost willfully irresponsible reading of the evidence (Wheeler 1998). This story is not literally biblical *per se*, but rather may be thought to represent a biblical expansion, the presence of which in the Quran has often been explained in reference to a purported midrashic precursor. But Wheeler in fact demonstrates that the similarities between the Quranic passage in question and its supposed Jewish parallels – which are in fact all found in late sources – are due to the dissemination of certain themes in Jewish literature that originated in Muslim commentary on the Quranic account; the transmission of the story to Jewish circles was accomplished through the work of an eleventh-century Jewish author, Ibn Shāhīn, who was directly familiar with the pertinent Arabic sources. The Jewish story of Elijah and Rabbi Joshua, which since the late nineteenth century has commonly been understood as the proximate source of the narrative in Sūra 18, is in fact itself derived from the *tafsīr* or Muslim exegesis of that Quranic narrative. Thus, at least in some cases, the seeming affinities between Jewish midrash and the Quran may be due to an ongoing dialogue over scriptural matters that took place in both communities in the medieval period, and not to Muhammad's unequivocal 'debt' to Jewish informants.

Furthermore, in his monograph *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (2002), Wheeler continues to subject the scholarship on various well-known stories about Moses found in the Quran to careful scrutiny, and concludes, as he did with Wensinck's analysis of the story of Moses and the servant of God from Sūra 18, that scholars have generally failed to distinguish between the elaborations of Quranic stories found in Islamic commentary literature and the content of the original source text. Once again, echoes of biblical and midrashic lore supposedly found in the Quran, claimed to reflect Muhammad's reliance on Judaism, may really in fact only be found in the *tafsīr*; furthermore, the parallels between Quran

or *tafsīr* on the one hand and Bible and midrash on the other could in the end actually stem from later Jewish authors' use of Muslim sources and not the other way around. That is, the Quran's putative resemblance to its supposed 'influences' might very well reflect the transmission of elements from the *tafsīr* to the Jewish community, which then subsequently generated those very narratives wrongly understood as having 'influenced' the Quran in the first place. Therefore, the Quranic stories in question may be vaguely 'biblical', inasmuch as they are ultimately inspired by narratives from the Hebrew scripture, but the key phenomenon to which they point is the Quran's status as an original Arabic elaboration of an Abrahamic tradition that was part of the general cultural landscape of the Middle East in Late Antiquity. To view these stories primarily as 'borrowings' from Jews is to misunderstand their significance, and the Quran's creative development of the common biblical legacy, entirely.

Conclusion

As the foregoing discussion of the works of Waldman, Neuwirth, and Wheeler has hopefully demonstrated, contemporary scholarship on the biblical tradition in the Quran has by no means been entirely stagnant, nor unanimously promoted what we have termed the myth of Jewish priority that is so prevalent in scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has certainly not been our intention to give the impression that the study of this material has not progressed at all in the last few decades. Nevertheless, as John Reeves points out in the Preface to an important recent collection of articles, *Bible and Qur'ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, the study of the biblical tradition's relationship to the Quran and Muslim literature has generally suffered from neglect in recent years, due largely to what Reeves views as a new insularity in biblical studies and a corresponding lack of appreciation for the kind of insights comparative research into the Bible and the Quran may yield. Despite the important contributions of the abovementioned scholars, it is evident that there is still much work to be done, and that the time has come for a major renovation of this field of research, particularly a wholesale re-evaluation of the questions and presuppositions that inspired the abiding interest in Muhammad's Jewish teachers and the Jewish 'borrowings' in the Quran among the founding fathers of the discipline of Islamic studies.

Historically, the Quran has been central to Muslim thought, culture, and devotion, and the tales of the biblical prophets found therein have been commented upon and reinterpreted for centuries. Muslims have not only sought to explain and elaborate upon the Quranic stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, and so forth in works of systematic scriptural commentary (*tafsīr*), but also developed those stories considerably in art and literature, often in surprising ways. At the same time, however, we must keep in mind that to Muslims, there is really nothing 'biblical' about the

tales of the Israelite patriarchs and prophets at all. Rather, their stories are understood not as biblical, but Quranic; their protagonists are perceived as Muslims; and their religion is defined as Islam. The first step in reinvestigating research in this crucial area is thus for scholars to recognize that the original biblical legacy of ancient Israel continues to thrive and evolve in Islam, as an integral part of Islam, and that Muslims, Jews, and Christians must be seen as equal partners in the development of the biblical heritage. The biblical tradition is a crucial element of Islamic civilization, just as much as of Western civilization, and it would thus perhaps be useful for Jewish and Christian scholars to begin by asking not what we might learn about Islam by studying the biblical prophets in the Quran, but rather what studying the Muslim prophets in the Bible might teach us about ourselves.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ The traditional Muslim claim of Muhammad's illiteracy is predicated upon the Quran's reference to him as *al-nabī al-ummī* (cf. Q.7:157), which some scholars have argued might be better interpreted as meaning 'a *gentile* prophet', that is, from a people without previous revelation, that is to say, the Arabs of the Jāhiliyya. From early Islamic times to the present day, the image of Muhammad as an illiterate (or better, 'unlettered') prophet has been repeatedly invoked precisely to refute the claim that he copied the material in the Quran from other scriptures.

² For a provocative examination of the Enochic literature that interrogates the concept of canonicity in tracing the changing status of the work we now call *1 Enoch* (or at least one of its significant components) over time, see Reed (2005). On the oft-cited category of 'rewritten Torah' that is frequently invoked in discussions of late antique scripturalism, see Alexander (1988).

³ The Quranic stories of the Israelite patriarchs and prophets have been the subject of countless scholarly and popular treatments. Useful contemporary surveys of this material may be found in Busse (1998, pp. 63–111); Kaltner (1999); and Tottoli (2002).

⁴ Note that the Quranic text is famously ambiguous about which son, Isaac or Ishmael, was intended to be sacrificed; the name of the son is never provided in the actual verses that describe Abraham's preparations for the sacrifice, although verses 112 and 113 at the end of the passage do refer to Isaac, and Ishmael is not mentioned in the passage at all. However, after the

third or fourth century AH, it became virtually a matter of dogma for Muslims that it was in fact Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arabs and thus the metaphorical forefather of the Muslims, who had been the chosen sacrifice; on this, cf. Firestone (1989).

⁵ Cf., for example, the explicitly ecumenical treatment of Brown (2007). Note also, however, that viewed another way, inasmuch as Jews, Christians, and Muslims have frequently confronted one another over the question of which community can lay claim to be the true heir to Abraham's legacy, this mythic forefather may be taken to represent not what Jews, Christians, and Muslims really have in common, but rather that which specifically divides them (cf. Levenson 2004).

⁶ Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, a parallel phenomenon must be acknowledged here, for the same process of assimilation and adaptation – with similarly conspicuous ‘deviations’ from the narratives of the canonical precursor as well – also occurs with the New Testament in the Quran, though on a smaller scale. This constitutes another important facet of the reception and recasting of biblical tradition in the Muslim scripture. One might also point to the example of the Arabian prophets (Hūd, Šālīh, and Shu‘ayb), characters from Arabian folklore who are clearly not ‘biblical’ *per se*, but have been assimilated to the prophetic type primarily associated with the Israelite milieu.

⁷ Geiger's work has a complicated publication history. As shall be discussed presently, Geiger first wrote this piece for an essay competition; its original title was ‘Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume übernommen?’ It was published in Bonn in 1833 under the slightly altered title mentioned above, by which it is best known, and subsequently disseminated more widely through an edition published in Leipzig in 1902. It was first published in English in Madras in 1898, and both the German and the English editions have been reprinted as recently as the 1970s. While the modern German edition retains the title of the 1833 publication, the English edition has assumed the more innocuous title *Judaism and Islam*.

⁸ The basic ideology informing Geiger's work has been most thoroughly examined by Heschel (2001) and Lassner (1999).

⁹ For another classic statement of this approach or method of inquiry, see Goitein 1958.

¹⁰ Important works in this genre include Schapiro's *Die haggadischen Elemente im erzählenden Teil des Korans* (1907), Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (1931), Sidersky's *Les Origines des Légendes Musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les Vies des Prophètes* (1933), Katsh's *Judaism in Islām: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and its commentaries, sura II and III*, and, perhaps the latest example of the classic type in this genre (despite its title), Schwarzbaum's *Biblical and Extra-biblical Legends in Islamic Folk-Literature* (1982). This is only to mention discrete monographs in this area of research; the basic approach reflected here has also informed dozens, if not hundreds, of articles on specialized topics in the field.

¹¹ The classic account of medieval Christian views of the Prophet may be found in Daniel (1993, pp. 100–30), and cf. Tolan (2002, pp. 135–69).

¹² Tolan (2002, pp. 154–5); cf. also his survey of the contents and basic arguments of Alfonsi's *Dialogue Against the Jews* in (1993, pp. 12–41).

¹³ Particularly important in this regard was the work *Rescriptum Christiani et rescriptum Saraceni*, a translation of the document widely known as the *Risālat al-Kindī*, an apology for Christianity purportedly written by a courtier of the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Ma'mūn in the ninth century. See Kritzeck (1964, pp. 101–7).

¹⁴ The critical link between the medieval tradition and the work of Geiger in the nineteenth century was most likely provided by Latin sources on Islam, especially Quran translations of the Reformation era and the early modern period. For example, in the printed edition of Robert of Ketton's Quran translation produced by Theodor Bibliander (d. 1564), marginal notes often explain Quranic narratives as rabbinic or Talmudic in origin; likewise, in the extensive annotations to his Latin Quran, Ludovico Marracci (d. 1700) makes much of the pernicious ‘Talmudic fables’ that provide the basis for many of Muhammad's supposed distortions of biblical narratives. Ironically, stories denounced as ‘Talmudic’ by these early Orientalists are often not literally found in the Talmud; sometimes they are not even really rabbinic or Jewish in origin. Marracci's Latin translation of the Quran was still well known in Geiger's day, and he employed it extensively in his work.

¹⁵ Notably, a partial reaction against the traditional view that emphasized the derivative nature of the Quran had emerged already in the early twentieth century, particularly in the criticisms of Tor Andrae and Johann Fueck.

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