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"Turn in Repentance to your Creator, then Slay Yourselves": The Levitical Election, Atonement, and Secession in Early and Classical Islamic Exegesis[1]

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In memory of Thomas Sizgorich

Abstract

The quranic retelling of the Golden Calf story found at 2:51–54 contains a unique allusion to what is arguably one of the most important elements in the biblical precursor in Exodus, the so-called Levitical election. This paper will explore the interpretation of Moses' puzzling command to the Israelite idolaters to "slay yourselves" in early and classical *tafsīr*. I will argue that the subtle changes in Muslim exegetes' understanding of this aspect of the episode reflect important developments in early Islamic society, in particular the emergence of the accommodationist political ideology that would become one of the defining features of classical Sunnism.

Keywords
Biblical stories in Islam, Exodus in Islam, Golden Calf in Islam, Quran, sectarianism, *Tafsīr*, violence

1. I delivered an early draft of this paper at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Boston in 2008, on a panel I organized entitled "The Muslim Bible: Islamic Visions of Israel's History." I thank the attendees and my fellow panelists for their helpful comments and questions.

Western scholarship on biblical characters, symbols, and themes in the Quran and Islamic tradition has long tended to focus on questions of provenance, pedigree, and "influence." That is, whenever a narrative found in the Quran, Muslim commentary literature, or related texts appears to derive from the Hebrew Bible or New Testament—or Jewish and Christian tradition more generally—the prevailing concern has been to uncover the ultimate source of the narrative, the "original version" of the story.[2] The quest to discover origins and trace lines of influence has been perennially popular in Islamic Studies from the foundation of the discipline right up to the present. However, a revisionist scholarship has gradually emerged that takes a fresh approach to Islamic adaptations of biblical and parabiblical material, rejecting the one-dimensional, reductionist emphasis on "borrowings" and "influences" that was formerly all too prevalent.[3]

Studies of the traditional sort have been especially prone to promote what might be called a myth of Jewish priority. Since the pioneering work of Abraham Geiger in the nineteenth century, scholars have repeatedly asserted that a number of narratives, motifs, and terms in the Quran and Islamic literature are directly derived from rabbinic midrash and other Jewish literatures of antiquity, and therefore concluded that both Muhammad and later Islamic tradition simply plagiarized much of their information from Jewish sources. But it is clear that this emphasis on dependence oversimplifies the complex processes of diffusion, adaptation, and interpretation that inform the reception of biblical material in the Quran and Islamic literature, reducing them to a shallow, one-sided copying of ideas and themes from midrashic prototypes.[4] Arguably, quranic and extraquranic traditions that explore (and appropriate) the monotheistic, prophetic, and monarchal legacy of ancient Israel are better understood as products of the rich tradition of late antique scripturalism, the common heritage of the broader Abrahamic tradition linking various communities of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim persuasion together.

2. See the extensive bibliography on this literature in Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2002).

3. For a brief overview of the *status quaestionis,* see my "The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish 'Influence' on Islam," *Religion Compass* 1 (2007): 643–659.

4. For a particularly striking example of a scholarly misreading of a quranic episode due to an anachronistic and mistaken emphasis on a rabbinic prototype for the story, see Brannon Wheeler, "The Jewish Origins of Qur'ān 18: 65–82? Reexamining Arent Jan Wensinck's Theory," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998): 153–171.

While in many instances it is true that a biblical term, theme, or concept in the Quran or Islamic tradition was mediated through rabbinic precursors, in some cases, a Christian source may be more plausible. Further, at least some elaborations upon the biblical tradition were so generally diffused in the late antique milieu that they cannot credibly be claimed as the exclusive property of one particular community at all. Moreover, in the case of later Islamic tradition, one can often show that the flow of "influence" was not unidirectional; Muslim elaborations on biblical themes are by no means always secondhand, borrowed, and subordinate to midrashic, pseudepigraphic, patristic, and apocryphal precedents. While early Islamic sources frequently draw on much older trends in exegesis disseminated in the late antique scriptural milieu, one sometimes encounters *original* developments of biblical narratives, themes, and symbols in the Quran and Islamic tradition. In these cases, major shifts in interpretation are most likely to have occurred in Muslim circles and then been subsequently communicated to Jewish and Christian exegetes in the wider cultural environment.[5] Thus, there are numerous grounds for calling the once-axiomatic principle of the unidirectional influence of Judaism on Islam into question.

Here, I would like to address a different, but no less problematic, aspect of the traditional scholarly approach to biblical material found in Islamic sources. The special allure such traditions have held for scholars —with the consequent privileging of the age-old influence question—has often resulted in their being examined in isolation from their wider contexts of reception. Since the groundbreaking studies of Goldziher in the late nineteenth century, Muslim traditions have typically been scrutinized for what they might tell us about the prevailing norms, controversies, and problems of the time in which they arose. But in the case of Muslim "borrowings" of biblical and parabiblical material, the most pressing concern has often been to determine the likely source of said "borrowings," not to show how that material was understood by Muslims in the eighth (or twelfth, or twentieth) century and why it was important to them. One does often see a conspicuous interest in how the tradition was altered, misunderstood, or corrupted in the process of transmission

5. Carol Bakhos has studied the close relationships between classical rabbinic and early Islamic sources on Abraham and Ishmael, emphasizing the subtle nuances of the intercommunal conversation reflected in these texts: see *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

from the original source, especially in the older scholarly literature, but this is hardly the same thing.[6]

Only in recent years have we seen substantial scholarly attempts to focus on the role biblical traditions, episodes, and symbols play in their immediate context in Muslim discourse and what implications they seem to have had for Muslim thought, religiosity, and society. This essay attempts to follow in the footsteps of some of the best examples of this scholarship in adopting a more discursive, rather than strictly genealogical, approach to biblical tradition in Islam.[7] In particular, I wish to show not only that the Muslim interpretation of a particular biblical narrative adapted in the Quran reflects larger concerns in the intellectual and political landscape of its day, but also how the fundamental reshaping of that landscape by the ideological ascendance of Sunnism in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries clearly impacted that interpretation. Biblical traditions typically had a complex *Nachleben* in Islamic exegesis, and the later phases of their evolution in Muslim sources are undoubtedly as significant as the earlier phases in which they were transmitted and translated—by whatever means—from older communal settings to newer ones. Ultimately, we must regard the initial reception of such traditions in the Quran or Islamic literature as only the beginning, and not the end, of the story.

Contemporary scholars have learned to avoid essentialist characterizations of Islam in general, and there is no reason why this principle should not apply to Islamic adaptations of biblical or quasi-biblical traditions as well. Thus, it goes without saying that we cannot speak of a single, authoritative interpretation of the significance of the revelation at Sinai

6. Cf. William St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ân* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and New York: E.S. Gorham, 1905), in which the author often gleefully gloats over Muhammad's "mistakes" in the Quran.

7. For example, Uri Rubin has vividly demonstrated the continuing power of quranic symbols associated with the Israelites in early Islamic political and religious discourse: see "Traditions in Transformation: The Ark of the Covenant and the Golden Calf in Biblical and Islamic Historiography," *Oriens* 36 (2001): 196–214, and compare his earlier "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shīʿa Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979): 41–65. Likewise, in her *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), Shari Lowin has convincingly shown not only that Jewish and Muslim interpreters drew freely on each others' traditions in developing biographical narratives on the early life of the patriarch, but that each community's processes of adaptation were profoundly shaped by their distinctive theological concerns.

in Islam, or a monolithic Muslim understanding of Abraham, or a monovalent reading of the Ark of the Covenant in *tafsīr*. Rather, as with every other aspect of Islamic life and thought, we should be willing to speak of a *plurality* of Muslim versions of the theophany or Abraham or the Ark, the conception of each of these narratives and themes—and countless others besides—naturally being prone to change in response to new circumstances and concerns.[8] Other quranic symbols and ideas that recur throughout Islamic history have been reinterpreted countless times as their cultural and religious significance shifted in new contexts; the same is true of those symbols and ideas that have their ultimate basis in the Israelite heritage. After all, to Muslim exegetes of various stripes, these biblical stories and symbols and themes were (and are) no longer properly "biblical" at all; rather, they are thoroughly quranic, the history of the prophets and patriarchs of Israel being, in the final analysis, an aspect of Islamic history, despite its having transpired well before the career of the Prophet Muhammad commenced.

"Slay yourselves"

Muslim interpretation of the quranic Golden Calf narrative, like Christian interpretation of its biblical precursor, tends to emphasize the episode's significance as proof of the waywardness and sinfulness of the Israelites and, by extension, their contemporary descendants, the Jews. According to the understanding of the story that generally predominates among Muslim exegetes, while Moses is away on Sinai, the idolatrous Israelites seem to get the better of Aaron, their custodian or steward in Moses' absence; as in the biblical story, the Israelites go astray in worshipping a golden calf, despite Aaron's meager attempts to restrain their idolatrous fervor. When Moses returns from Sinai with the tablets of the Torah, he destroys them in a rage, and then sets about demolishing the idol and castigating the people. The *tafsīr* literature alters the story in certain key ways, in particular by claiming that a malevolent outsider, the "Samaritan" (*al-sāmirī*) engineered the creation of the Calf and made it appear to be alive, based on the obscure quranic reference to the Israelites' idol as "a calf, a body that lows" (*ʿijl jasad la-hu khuwārun*) in Q.7:148 and 20:88.

8. At most we might speak of tendencies that seem to have been typical of particular eras, genres, discourses, or sectarian formations. Cf. the classic study of Reuven Firestone on the shifting interpretation of the quranic story of Abraham's sacrifice: "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*Al-Dhabīḥ*, Qur'ān 37: 99–113): Issues in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989): 95–131.

Some exegetes even suggest that the Calf really was alive, the Samaritan having used magic to animate the golden image or transmute it into a flesh and blood animal.

Most exegetes focus on the longer versions of the narrative that appear in Q.7:148–153 and 20:83–98, but there are also a few brief allusions to the story elsewhere in the Quran, for example in Q.2:51–54:

> When We appointed a meeting of forty nights with Moses, then it was that you took the Calf as a god in his absence, and did wrong. But We pardoned you afterwards, so that you would perhaps be grateful. And we gave Moses the Book and the Criterion, so that you would perhaps be guided. When Moses said to his people, O people, you have wronged yourselves by taking the Calf as a god, so turn in repentance to your Creator, then slay yourselves; that would be better for you with your Creator. He then accepted your repentance, for truly He is the one who accepts repentance, the most merciful.[9]

In this short passage, the narrative focus is quite different from that of the other quranic passages on the episode; for example, both the Samaritan and Aaron are absent here, and there is no mention of the nature of the Calf as "a body that lows." Moreover, these verses seem to contain a unique quranic reference to a major aspect of the biblical precursor in Exodus 32, the so-called Levitical election (verses 25–29):

> Then Moses saw the people, that they were out of hand—for Aaron had let them get out of hand, so much so that they were a threat to those who opposed them.[10] And Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and cried, "Whoever is on the Lord's side, to me!" And all of the sons of Levi

9. All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted. Verse 54 is a classic example of a common quranic trope, namely humanity turning from a sinful path back to God and God's reciprocal turning from wrath to reconciliation: "so turn in repentance to your Creator (*fa-tūbū ilā bāri'ikum*)... He then accepted your repentance (*fa-tāba ᶜalaykum*), for truly He is the one who accepts repentance (*al-tawwāb*)." See Uri Rubin, *Encyclopedia of the Quran,* s.v. "Repentance and Penance." This reciprocity is portrayed very frequently in the Quran, but in this specific case it may also represent an adaptation of Exodus 32's portrayal of God repenting of His desire to annihilate the people (cf. verses 9–14). Ironically, Muslim polemicists sometimes criticized the latter passage as an unacceptable depiction of divine vacillation, and thus maintained that it constitutes proof that the Bible represents a corruption of the original revelation to Moses.

10. On the martial connotations of this frequently misinterpreted verse, see Gerlad Janzen, "The Character of the Calf and its Cult in Exodus 32," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 597–609.

> rallied. Moses said to them: "Thus commands the Lord God of Israel: Let every man strap his sword to his leg, and go back and forth between the gates of the camp; and let each man slay his brother and his neighbor and his kinsman." The sons of Levi did as Moses said; and three thousand of the people fell that day. Then Moses said: "Dedicate yourselves to the Lord today, even at the expense of your son's or brother's life, so that He might give you a blessing today."

The historical background to this biblical story is exceedingly complex. On the surface, it serves to explain the privileged role of the Levites as a hierodoule class in the classical Israelite Temple cult, at least as that cult is presented in the canonical Pentateuch. However, Cross has convincingly argued that both this specific pericope about the Levites' action and the Golden Calf story as a whole reflect rivalries between different priestly castes in early Israel. Inasmuch as this passage portrays the consecration of the Levite tribe due to their obedience to Moses' command to suppress the mass of "paganized" Israelites led by Aaron, it is natural to conclude that the story originated with a non-Aaronide priestly faction that actually identified Moses and not Aaron as the founder of the High Priesthood. This is an idea that recurs in scattered places throughout the canonical biblical corpus, as a subtle counterbalance to the prevailing emphasis on the exclusive legitimacy of the Aaronid priestly lineage.[11] In short, as one recent commentator on the book of Exodus has observed, the slaughter "is difficult to comprehend except as the enigmatic and troubling remnant of an ancient struggle for the rights to the priesthood."[12]

However, it is actually misleading to refer to the quranic episode as an allusion to the Levitical election, because in the Muslim imagination—as in the Quran itself—it is no such thing. The Muslim exegesis of these verses, especially the key line "so turn in repentance to your Creator, then slay yourselves; that would be better for you with your Creator (*fa-tūbū ilā' bāri'ikum fa'qtulū anfusakum dhālikum khayrun lakum ᶜanda bāri'ikum*)," lacks any notion that the forcible pacification of the idolatrous Israelites at Moses' command by those who remained loyal to God would result in the ascendance of these people to special offices or privileges of any kind. Rather, as this event is represented in early and classical *tafsīr*, this foundational moment of violence has been transformed and, as I hope to show,

11. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of Religion of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 197–200.

12. Carol Meyers, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 260.

adapted to a particular set of characteristically Muslim concerns. Naturally, the exegetical tradition excludes the possibility that actual suicide is being prescribed here. The key phrase in verse 54, "so slay yourselves" (*fa'qtulū anfusakum*) is commonly glossed as "slay each other" (*aqtulū baʿḍukum baʿḍan*) or "they slew one another" (*qatalū baʿḍuhum baʿḍan*) in virtually every commentary I have examined.[13] The central questions for the exegetes regarding this killing or atonement are rather: Who it is that does the killing? Who it is that is killed? What does this killing achieve, and how does it relate to the crime that has apparently been perpetrated by the Israelites in their "taking the Calf as their god"?[14]

The sound of *fitna*: Q.2:51–54 in *Tafsīr Muqātil*

The *tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767 CE) preserves what is probably the earliest extant extended commentary on this passage from the Quran.[15] Muqātil's significant elaboration upon the relatively brief reference to the Golden Calf episode in Q.2:51–54, incorporating an impressive amount of supplementary detail, testifies to this scene's importance in Muslim recollections of Israelite history. Muqātil describes various events surrounding the making of the Calf, including the dramatic conversation between the prophet and God when He notifies Moses of what has transpired in his absence from the Israelites' camp; Moses' subsequent return and his interrogation of various parties involved in the affair; and finally the story's bloody culmination. Not all parts of the story receive equal attention here, however. For example, Muqātil describes narrative elements such as Moses' breaking of the tablets of the Torah

13. The classic discussion of the topic of suicide is Franz Rosenthal, "On Suicide in Islam," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66 (1946): 239–259. Occasionally exegetes suggest that a *figurative* "killing" of oneself (e.g. "slaying" one's ego, pride, or base impulses) is being prescribed for the idolaters here. However, overall, the understanding of the verse as a command to the Israelites to slay one another predominates in classical *tafsīr*.

14. I will often refer to the part of the quranic narrative that deals with the killing as the "atonement scene," although, as we shall see, to some exegetes Moses' command to the people to "slay yourselves" was not a means of securing atonement for their sin at all, but rather a pretext for purging the community of idolatrous sinners.

15. The scholarly consensus is that this commentary is for the most part genuinely the work of Muqātil himself, though the recension of the text upon which the sole printed edition is based may have originated as late as the second half of the third/ninth or even the early fourth/tenth century. See the overview of Claude Gilliot, "Muqātil, Grand Exégète, Traditionniste et Théologien Maudit," *Journal Asiatique* 279 (1991): 39–92.

and the expulsion of the Samaritan from the camp in extremely laconic fashion while treating the atonement scene at considerable length. This makes perfect sense, given the unique emphasis on this latter aspect of the episode in the passage at hand.[16]

Several elements in the narrative Muqātil presents here are noteworthy. First of all, in a scene strongly reminiscent of a passage in the biblical precursor but lacking any basis in the Quran whatsoever, Moses and his companions hear the tumult surrounding the Israelites' worship of the Calf as they approach the camp on their way back from the mountain:

> Then they departed with Moses to make their way back. When they drew near to the camp's location by the seashore, they heard the uproar of the people around the Calf, and they said, "This is the sound of a battle (*qitāl*) in the camp!" But Moses replied, "It is not a battle, but rather the sound of trial (*fitna*)."[17]

The circumstances of this exchange and the sharp juxtaposition of battle, *qitāl,* and trial, *fitna,* are evocative of a well-known scene from the Golden Calf narrative in the biblical book of Exodus: "And when Joshua heard the sound of the people shouting, he said to Moses, 'There is a sound of war (*qôl milḥāmāh*) in the camp!' He replied: 'It is not the sound of those who have triumphed (*qôl ʿănôt gĕbûrāh*), nor the sound of those who are overcome (*qôl ʿănôt ḥălûšāh*); rather, it is the sound of revelry (*qôl ʿannôt*) that I hear'" (Ex. 32:17–18).

16. Specifically, the command to the Israelites to "turn in repentance to your Creator and slay yourselves" is missing from the major versions of the Calf narrative in Sura 7 and 20. However, it is worth noting that the Sura 20 version of the episode follows directly upon God's statement that "I am surely forgiving towards the one who turns in repentance (*man tāba*), and has faith, and undertakes righteousness and is thus rightly guided" (20:82), which again seems to signal the close association of the episode with the theme of repentance. This is reminiscent of the dictum found in the Babylonian Talmud that the making of the Calf occurred simply to give people a pretext for repentance (tractate *ʿAvodah Zarah,* 5a).

17. Muqātil b. Sulāyman, *Tafsīr*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Shiḥāta, 5 vols. (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, 1967; repr. Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li'l-Kitāb, 1979–1989), 1.105. Moses' companions here are usually termed the Seventy in the *tafsīr* tradition; they are identified as a group among the Israelites who challenged Moses' authority in Q.2:55–56, the verses immediately following those that describe the atonement scene: "When you said, 'O Moses, we will not have faith in you until you show God to us up close,' then the lightning seized you while you watched; but then We brought you back to life after you were dead, so that you would perhaps be grateful" (cf. 4:153). Muqātil devotes several lines to the story of their impudent demand, their annihilation by lightning, and God's resurrection of them before Moses' eyes.

More important than this tradition's clear echoing of the biblical account, however, is the prominent use of the term *fitna* here, the connotations and associations of which are extremely complex. In classical Islamic culture, the word signifies a situation of conflict or anarchy within the community, encompassing not only civil or sectarian strife but, as a Sunni author of the seventh/thirteenth century put it, "sin, disbelief, war, conflagration and deviation."[18] For many later exegetes, the word would have primarily had this meaning. For them, the element of trial would have been intrinsic to, but only *latent* within, the larger connotation of political and religious strife associated with the term.[19]

In contrast, it seems clear that for Muqātil, the sense of divine trial is paramount: Moses is saying that it is *not* the sound of a battle they hear —which conflict within the community would presumably produce—but rather the results of God's testing the people and their subsequent failure of the test, namely the revelry and chaos surrounding the worship of the Calf. The sharp juxtaposition between these two conditions corresponds precisely with that made in the biblical text; that is, the *qitāl-fitna* dichotomy replicates the contrast between battle and rejoicing in the verse from Exodus. Muqātil's perception of the episode as a trial is partially based on a cue supplied by the Quran itself, in a verse that appears in one of the parallel passages depicting the Calf episode: in Sura 20, when God notifies Moses of what the people have done while he was away, He says, "We have imposed a trial on your people in your absence (*fatannā qawmaka min baʿdika*), and al-Sāmirī has led them astray..." (Q.20:85). Muqātil obviously has this verse in mind in relating how Moses heard the sound of *fitna* in the camp, for earlier in his comments on Sura 2, he portrays the confrontation between God and Moses on Sinai thusly:

> Then they worshipped the Calf; and when God informed Moses of this on the mountain, Moses then said to his Lord: "But who was it that

18. Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, cited in Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, quoted in Abdulkader Tayob, "An Analytical Survey of al-Ṭabarī's Exegesis of the Cultural Symbolic Construct of *fitna*," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān,* ed. G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 157–172, 159.

19. Tayob ("Cultural Symbolic Construct of *fitna,*" *passim*) decries the ossification of the term's polyvalent potential in Sunni tradition; in particular, he notes that due to the strong aversion to anarchy, political resistance, and revolution that is a cornerstone of the classic Sunni outlook, mainstream exegetes do not appreciate the nuances of the term's use in the Quran. This in turn has supposedly served to foster a greater sense of quietism, bordering on apathy, in Sunni political culture.

> inspired it with soul?"[20] The Lord replied: "I did." Moses replied: "O Lord, the Samaritan might have made the Calf for them and thus led them astray, but You were the one who made the lowing sound within it [by animating it], and so it was You who imposed the trial (*fatanta*) on my people." God replied: "*We have imposed a trial on your people in your absence, and al-Sāmirī has led them astray...*"[21]

Admittedly, Muqātil is hardly the only exegete to use this verse to underscore the Calf episode's status as a divine trial. Many commentators cite it in connection with this episode; moreover, it eventually becomes somewhat conventional to use a stock phrase, *balā' wa-fitna*, in reference to the making of the Calf. Though both terms can mean "trial," it is more likely that the juxtaposition of the two is meant to communicate something like "trial and *strife*"—implying that the making of the Calf was *both* a divine trial and the cause of a severe rupture in the community.[22] Such usage thus deliberately conflates the political and theological senses of the term.[23] Notably, this phrase does not seem

20. And thus animating it, enabling it to low like a real calf, at least temporarily.

21. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 1.104. In quoting from the commentaries of Muqātil and other exegetes, I place direct citations of scripture in italics to distinguish those phrases and verses from the author's own glosses and additions.

22. Cf., e.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī ad* 2:51, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, 16 vols. [incomplete] (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1954–1969), 1.66 (no. 921 from Ibn ᶜAbbās), repeated *ad* 20:95–96, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān ᶜan tafsīr al-Qur'ān,* ed. Muḥammad al-Zuhrī al-Ghamrāwī, 30 vols. in 11 (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaᶜat al-Maymaniyya, 1903), 16.205; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaᶜ al-bayān ad* 2:51, 30 vols. in 7 (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, 1961), 1.243; al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiᶜ li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān ad* 20: 83–89, 20 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1935; repr. Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-ᶜArabī, 1967), 11.235. In the same way that Q.20:85 provides a scriptural cue for connecting the term *fitna* with the Calf episode, 2:49 may do the same for *balā'*; although here the "trial" in question is Pharaoh's slaughter of the Israelite children, this verse immediately precedes the first reference to the making of the Calf in the Quran. The phrase *balā' wa-fitna* is also occasionally invoked in reference to other scriptural episodes in which a trial precipitates various kinds of strife.

23. To some degree, the distinction between these senses of the term may be intrinsically blurry anyway. In his commentary on the Sura 20 version of the Calf episode, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's overall concern is with the story's status as a divine trial; nevertheless, he concludes his discussion with a brief citation of a hadith about ᶜAli that asserts that the division of the Muslim community after Muhammad's death was nothing compared to the Israelites' rapid descent into idolatry immediately after crossing the Red Sea. See *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr,* 32 vols. in 16 (Egypt: Al-Maṭbaᶜa al-Bāhiya al-Miṣriya, 1934–1962; repr. Tehran: Sharikat Saḥāfī Nawīn, [1980]), 22.105. This tradition implicitly posits a connection between the "test" to which the Israelites were

to appear anywhere in Muqātil's commentary in reference to the making of the Golden Calf.

I do not at all mean to suggest that Muqātil was unaware of the "political" connotations of the term; rather, it seems probable that the contrast between *qitāl,* battle, and *fitna*, trial, that he places in the mouth of Moses here is entirely deliberate. In particular, it is striking that while Moses says that it is *not* the sound of battle that he and his companions have heard on their way back from the mountain, battle is *exactly* what results from his return to the camp. After the exchange between Moses and the elders, Muqātil relates in brief how Moses demolishes the Calf, burns its remains, and then strews the powdery ash upon the sea. He then dedicates the rest of the account to the interpretation of 2:54, the key verse in the passage ("so turn in repentance to your Creator, then slay yourselves" etc.); here, Muqātil describes in detail how the Israelites take up arms and slaughter one another in an attempt to secure divine forgiveness for their transgression. The consequence of Moses' return to the camp thus looks a lot like *fitna* in its "political" sense; this is exactly what gives his previous statement about hearing "the sound of *fitna*" its ironic resonance.

Though it is unclear when exactly the term *fitna* acquired its political connotation and came to signify "civil strife," it appears that this sense of the word is implicit here, and that Muqātil is deliberately exploiting it for rhetorical force. After all, for Muqātil to have quoted Moses saying that there was no battle in the camp, but only *fitna* (trial), and then naively portray Moses initiating a battle that anyone familiar with the term's complex associations would recognize as *fitna* (strife), without being aware of what he was doing, seems implausible. It is not that Muqātil was unaware of the implications of the term; rather, what sets him apart from later exegetes is that *fitna* does not seem to have quite the same negative associations for him. Overall, he appears to be much less troubled by the prospect of civil unrest and bloodshed in the community than later authors would be.

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subjected and the strife and division—*fitna*—with which Muslims have been plagued throughout their history. Though this hadith is widely attested in Sunni collections, it is generally omitted from those of the Twelver Shiᶜa. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the Shiᶜa perceive the events of the First and Second Fitnas in a very different way from Sunnis, and are thus rarely if ever concerned with *fitna* as a deviation from some idealized original communal unity the way Sunnis are. I thank Tariq al-Jamil for his expert opinion on this matter.

This can be demonstrated with a closer examination of Muqātil's portrayal of the Israelites' atonement for their idolatry. As he describes it, when the people are gripped with remorse for going astray and worshipping the Calf, Moses urges them to repent.

> Then they said: "How should we make repentance, O Moses?"
>
> He replied: "*Slay yourselves*"—that is, slay one another—"that killing and repentance (*al-qatl wa'l-tawba*) *would be better for you with your Creator...*" They replied, "Done!" Then those among the twelve thousand Israelites who had not worshipped the Calf took up sword and dagger to carry out Moses' command to slay the others. All the sons of a certain father set out zealously from their places, but hesitated when they came to the thresholds (*afniya*) of their own homes.[24] Then they said to one another: "These are your brethren. Go forth with swords drawn; fear God and be steadfast. Remember that God's curse is on any one who loses his courage, stands apart from his own place, recoils in the slightest, or returns to his folk even for the blink of an eye!"[25] They said: "Amen!"
>
> They set about slaying them from daybreak to sunset on Friday. Then God sent down darkness upon them so that they could not recognize one another; and the number of the slain reached seven thousand. Then God sent His mercy down upon them, when their weapons had been dulled. God then informed them that His mercy was descending upon them; and Moses commanded a herald to give the order: "Withhold your swords from your brethren!"
>
> God made those who were slain into martyrs, and accepted the repentance of the survivors, pardoning those who had steadfastly undertaken the killing but not been killed themselves. Anyone who had died before Moses' return to the camp to find the idolaters there, however, was condemned to the eternal Fire. Those who had fled the fighting were cursed; God smote them with disgrace and degradation, as scripture states: *We*

24. The term *finā'/afniya* usually signifies a courtyard, a bit maladroit in this context considering that the Israelites presumably lived like bedouin in their camp beside the sea. We might surmise that the term is being used here to refer to the space in front of a family's tent. The usage might also reflect the reference in Exodus 32:27 to Moses' command to the Levites to "go back and forth between the gates of the camp (*ʿibrû wāšûbû mi-šaʿar lā-šaʿar bĕ-maḥăneh*)." It seems to me that the mention here of "all the sons of a certain father" can only refer to the Levites, though it is odd that they are not explicitly recognized as a specific clan within the tribe of the Banū Isrā'īl.

25. The importance of steadfastness and endurance (*sabr*) is a recurring theme in interpretations of this episode.

> *have ordained wrath for them from their Lord and disgrace in the world* (7:152); likewise *Your Lord declared that He would send people against them people who would inflict painful chastisement upon them until Judgment Day* (7:167).[26]

The central premise of Muqātil's interpretation of Moses' command to the Israelites to "slay yourselves" appears to be that this meant that the innocent should immediately undertake to slay the guilty, with utter disregard for bonds of kinship, loyalty, and familiarity, and that the distinction between slayer and slain was moot anyway, since obeying the command to participate in this mass slaughter redeemed both the fallen and the survivors. Only those who refused to participate and stood entirely apart from the conflict (or those who died in a sinful condition before the atonement occurred) were damned. Admittedly, one might say that Muqātil's emphasis on the zeal of the killers merely reflects his debt to the biblical source of this scene, with its depiction of Moses' command to the Levites to "let each man slay his brother and his neighbor and his kinsman... Dedicate yourselves to the Lord today, even at the expense of your son's or brother's life..." (Ex. 32:27, 29) However, to attribute this to Muqātil's mere dependence on the biblical source would miss the whole point of his skilled use of this narrative to send a message about the proper way a situation of sin, a deviation from prophetic norms and guidance, should be handled in the community. As we shall see, while some authors used Muqātil's narrative freely—overlooking or indifferent to its underlying message—others were clearly uncomfortable with it, and thus sought to minimize those implications while nevertheless appropriating and reinterpreting some elements from it.

That the killing achieved what God wanted—and forestalled a far worse fate for the Israelites—is signaled by Muqātil's concluding remarks:

> When a man would come upon his people and summon them to judgment while they sat waiting, out of ten, he would slay three, and the rest would pray; then he would slay another five, as martyrdom was decreed for them; and he would spare the rest for whom killing had not been ordained. As scripture states: *Then we pardoned you*—that is, We did not annihilate all of you together—*afterwards*—after the Calf—*perhaps*

26. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr,* 1.106–107. Cf. Muqātil's comment on 7:152 in that section of his commentary: "*Disgrace in the world*—i.e., humiliation (*madhalla*). They will become the conquered (*maqhūrīn*) until Judgment Day" (2.65). Read together, these glosses suggest that Muqātil reads the Calf episode as a political fable regarding the inevitable subjugation of the Banū Isrā'īl and their descendents, the Jews, in direct retribution for their past sins.

> *you will be grateful* (2:52)—towards your Lord for this favor, that is, for the pardon. *He then accepted your repentance, for truly He is the one who accepts repentance, the most merciful...* (2:54)[27]

Considering that battle, *qitāl* (or rather slaughter, *qatl*) is exactly what results from Moses' return to the camp, his earlier statement that he did *not* hear a battle can be seen as an ironic foreshadowing of his own instigation of the bloody confrontation with the wayward Calf worshippers. Even though he underscores the fact that this mass killing earned God's acceptance of the people's repentance, Muqātil does not fail to perceive that, as the Quran alludes to this event, the command to the Israelites to "slay yourselves" comes not from God but from Moses himself. Moses is thus placed squarely at the center of the action here and may be considered the main architect of this savage act.

We may even read Muqātil's statement that Moses heard a trial and not a battle as implying that battle is exactly what he would have expected to hear, or *wanted* to hear, when discovering what had happened while he was away; after the people's degeneration into idolatry, the situation could only be rectified by taking up arms and eliminating the sinners through bloodshed. Inasmuch as they had not yet undertaken this themselves, however, Moses had to set things right himself upon returning from Sinai. When we take into account the staggering scope of the slaughter, with the dead outnumbering the living when it was all over (the author specifies that the Israelites were reduced in number from twelve to five thousand), the crystalline purity of Muqātil's moral vision is terrifying.[28]

Moses and Aaron in *Tafsīr Muqātil*

My reading of Muqātil's interpretation of the atonement scene can be confirmed through comparison with other passages in his commentary that deal with the Golden Calf episode. That Muqātil understands Moses as having expected to find a situation of conflict in his community upon his return from Sinai, and that the expiatory violence he reads as implicit in the quranic phrase "turn in repentance to your Creator and slay yourselves" was necessary not only to make atonement but also restore justice

27. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 1.107.

28. Muqātil does not specify how many Israelites fled, or what became of them. We might infer that the Israelites who remained after the slaughter were the core of the surviving virtuous people of Moses (cf. Q.7:159), while those who fled and were cursed were the ancestors of the Jews, upon whom the curse of ignominy (cf. Q.7:152) fell.

and good order in the community, is corroborated by his comments on the parallel version of the Calf episode found in Sura 20. Here, a number of terse, yet telling, glosses on the scriptural verses depicting the key confrontation between Moses and Aaron upon the former's return from Sinai similarly imply that the violence that resulted from Moses' command to the people represented what Moses (and, by implication, Muqātil himself) saw as the only way to restore communal justice and purity.

In this passage, it appears that to Moses (and Muqātil as well) the whole problem with Aaron's handling of the situation in Moses' absence was that he was too conciliatory and tolerated the presence of idolaters in the community. He did not attempt to drive them out by force or secede with those Israelites who had remained faithful, which seems to be what Moses expected. In other words, Aaron did not instigate *fitna,* in the political sense of the word, although in Moses' view, he absolutely *should* have; as we have already seen, Moses may have heard "the sound of *fitna,*" but it was apparently not the right *kind* of *fitna*!

In the version of the Calf narrative found in the original quranic text in Sura 20:83–98, when Moses returns to the camp, he accosts Aaron, who was supposed to keep the people under control while he was gone, and asks: "O Aaron, when you saw that they had gone astray, what prevented you from following me, so that you disobeyed my command?" (vss. 92–93). Aaron's response indicates that his apparent toleration of the people's sin was motivated by a desire to avoid strife within the community: "I feared that you would say, 'You have caused a division among the Israelites! You did not heed my command'" (vs. 94). Many later commentators were completely satisfied with Aaron's apology, it seems, for this verse often receives only brief attention. Given that many later exegetes would have seen a situation of strife within the community as the greatest of evils, Aaron's fear of causing division would seem like a self-evident justification for his inaction.

In contrast, this is how Muqātil presents the scene:

> When Moses returned, *he said*—to Aaron—"*O Aaron, when you saw that they had gone astray* – that is, that they became idolaters—*what prevented you from following me*—that is, so that you did not follow my command, and therefore disavow them (*fa-ankarta ʿalayhim*)—*so that you disobeyed my command?*" (Q.20:92-93)—that is, so that you disregarded what I said. As scripture says, *Do not obey the command of those who exceed their bounds* (*musrifīn*) (Q.26:151).[29]

29. What this countertext seems to imply is that Aaron's disobedience of Moses' command—thus "exceeding his bounds"—means that he should not have his own

> Aaron said to Moses: "...If I had disavowed them, the people would have become two parties bent on slaying each other (*fa-innī law ankartu ʿalayhim la-ṣārū ḥizbayn yaqtulū baʿḍūhum baʿḍan*). *I feared that you would say, 'You have caused a division among the Israelites! You did not heed my command* (Q.20:94)—that is, you did not uphold my trust (*waṣiyya*)."'[30]
>
> In Sura 7 Moses' statement regarding Aaron is, *Be my deputy among my people, and judge rightly...* (Q.7:142) Aaron was more beloved by the Israelites than Moses, and seven thousand Israelites were named after him on account of that love.[31]

Though Muqātil understands the Samaritan, the actual maker of the Calf, to have been the ultimate architect of the Israelites' downfall, like other exegetes, he is forced to acknowledge that Aaron must have played some role in what transpired. This is because Q.7:142, which he quotes in this passage, establishes Aaron's ultimate responsibility for the Israelites' welfare as Moses' viceroy or surrogate. Muqātil seems to read Moses' probing question in verse 93 ("What prevented you from following me, so that you disobeyed my command?") as meaning that Aaron had refused to denounce the devotees of the Calf and "disavow" them, even to the point of abandoning them to their sin and forming a separate faction with those who had not succumbed to the temptation

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commands followed. Ironically, what made Aaron a *musrif*—literally, one who is excessive or overindulgent—was doing nothing at all, which seems like the exact *opposite* of excess (*isrāf*). In its original context, Q.26:151 appears in the story of Ṣāliḥ and the camel. Notably, this is another prophetic narrative where an animal is the direct cause of people going astray.

30. The term *waṣiyya* may be rendered as "legacy," "will," or "testament"; in early Islamic culture, it has a certain political-theological resonance in addition to its obvious juridical meaning. As used here, the term not only designates the authority that Moses entrusted to Aaron when he left to commune with God on Sinai, but it also seems to have a certain moral connotation; poor leadership violates the trust implicit in the bestowal of the *waṣiyya* (or perhaps even the explicit instructions given as part of the legacy) and thus a *waṣiyy* can apparently let his predecessor down in not living up to his *waṣiyya*. According to Q.7:142, Moses made Aaron his surrogate (*khalīfa*): "Take my place (*akhlufnī*) among my people, and deal justly; and do not follow the path of those who spread corruption." Not only could *waṣiyya* be readily associated with *khilāfa* on the basis of this verse, but the "testamentary" aspect of the *waṣiyya* is made explicit.

31. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr,* 3.39–40. Two of the Jewish tribes of Yathrib/Medina, the Naḍīr and the Qurayẓa, were supposedly known as *Banū Hārūn* on account of their claim to priestly descent; possibly this tradition reflects a misunderstanding of the basis for this appellation.

to worship the Calf. He thus failed to "follow" Moses, either literally or figuratively. According to verse 94, Aaron claims that he did not do so because then Moses could accuse him of causing a rift (*firāq*) in the community. As Muqātil understands this statement, Aaron seems to have believed that to have done so would have been tantamount to abandoning Moses' "trust" (*waṣiyya*) with the consequence of dividing the people into "two parties bent on slaying one another" (*ḥizbayn yaqtulū baᶜḍūhum baᶜḍan*).

Again, both Muqātil's tradition on the "sound of *fitna*" and his emphasis on the loyal Israelites' willingness to kill the idolaters despite their kinship ties with them seem to reflect aspects of the biblical account in Exodus. In contrast, Muqātil's portrayal of Aaron here seems strongly reminiscent of certain readings of the Golden Calf episode found in classical rabbinic sources. The remark with which Muqātil concludes this part of the narrative seems somewhat odd in the immediate context: "Aaron was more beloved by the Israelites than Moses, and seven thousand Israelites were named after him on account of that love." However, it is possible that this is a distant echo of a characteristic rabbinic tendency to depict Aaron as a conciliator, literally "the one who pursues peace" (*rôdēp šālôm*).

Without necessarily asserting direct influence per se, we might observe an intriguing parallel from the Babylonian Talmud. In one of the several traditions on the Calf episode to be found there, the attitudes of Aaron and Moses are juxtaposed in the context of the idolatrous mob's murder of another leader of the Israelites named Ḥur.[32] In midrashic tradition, Ḥur is portrayed as Aaron's partner in the leadership of the Israelites in Moses' absence. He is depicted as extremely zealous, so much so that he stridently resisted the Israelites when they sought to make the Calf, and on account of this, the Israelites killed him. Seeing this, Aaron sought to compromise with them for various reasons, especially out of fear that a foreboding prophecy would be fulfilled if he too were to be killed; rather than allow the penalty for the murders of two of their leaders, a priest and a prophet, to fall on the Israelites' heads, Aaron thought it better to

32. Ḥur is a rather mysterious figure, despite his prominence in the Exodus account. When the Israelites are attacked by the Amalekites, it is Aaron and Ḥur who help Moses keep his hands aloft in a gesture of blessing so that Joshua and his soldiers can prevail against them (17:12–13); later, he is explicitly placed in charge of the Israelites along with Aaron when Moses departs for his journey to Sinai (24:14). He is the grandfather of Beẓalel, to whom is entrusted the construction of the Tabernacle and its holy vessels (35:30).

go along with their demands, at least until Moses returned from Sinai.[33]

This story is first attested in *Vayyiqra Rabbah,* a relatively early homiletic midrash that may be dated to the fourth or fifth century CE; subsequently, many other midrashic traditions allude to the story, which seems to have become very well known. The version of the Calf narrative that we have mentioned as a possible parallel to the portrayal of Aaron in *Tafsīr Muqātil* appears in the Talmud in tractate *Sanhedrin*, and this version is unusual in that it casts Aaron's role in a largely *negative* light. It is cited in the context of a discussion of arbitration, which is condemned because arbitration implies compromise, and statutes, ordinances and laws that have their ultimate basis in the divine will should *never* be subjected to compromise. The Calf episode is then cited as an example of this principle: while Moses always insisted on an unyielding adherence to the law, Aaron, who "loved peace and pursued peace," was always inclined to make compromises. Thus, after Ḥur was killed by the idolatrous mob, Aaron wanted to spare them from committing an even worse crime, so he permitted their lapse into idolatry; because he compromised in this instance, however, he earned God's wrath and subsequently had to atone for his sin.[34]

Muqātil's statement about the great love the Israelites had for Aaron (in contrast to the zealous and unyielding Moses), following immediately upon his assertion that Aaron feared turning the community into "two parties bent on slaying each other," can hardly be arbitrary. Rather, it most likely reflects some awareness of this characterization of Aaron as "loving peace and pursuing peace." We can surmise that for Muqātil, it was precisely Aaron's typically conciliatory attitude that led him to think that going along with the people's idolatry, and thus avoiding causing a rift in the community, was the lesser of two evils and a better way to live up to Moses' trust. This reluctance to introduce division into the com-

33. *Vayyiqra Rabbah* 10:3. The various apologetic traditions that portray Aaron's subterfuges in hoping to stall the Israelites or ameliorate their sin by going along with the making of the Calf are perhaps ultimately based on a variant reading of the text of Exodus 32:5, "And Aaron saw; and he built an altar before it [i.e. the Calf]." The consonantal text וירא can be read either as *wayyar',* "he saw," as in the Masoretic text, or as *wayyirâ*, "he *feared*," as in the Syriac Peshitta and other witnesses. Midrashic traditions like this one seem to exploit the ambiguity of the text to support the idea that Aaron *saw* Ḥur slain before him, and then *feared* the terrible price Israel would have to pay if he were slain too. Sometimes it is said that he simply feared for his life.

34. Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sanhedrin,* 6b–7a.

munity by actively resisting the idolaters, especially by force, may have been due to the people's affection for him, which was presumably reciprocated. In the end, however, Moses took Aaron to task for his willingness to compromise, or rather his unwillingness to resist wrongdoing by force. This passage therefore seems to present an implicit condemnation of the moral laxity that underlay Aaron's conciliatory attitude.

Again, what is so striking about Muqātil's interpretation of this passage is that for him, Aaron really does seem to have been derelict in his duty in not removing himself and his loyal followers from the evildoers' midst. That is, fearing the consequences, he did *not* abandon the idolaters to their sinful ways, refusing to publicly disavow them, lest division and civil war occur and they become "two factions bent on slaying one another." Although Aaron expected that Moses would support his decision ("I feared that you would say, 'You have caused a division among the Israelites! You did not heed my command'"), according to Muqātil, creating a rift and allowing the Israelites to be divided into two factions, even to the point of bloodshed, was exactly what Moses expected Aaron to do. That is, the right course of action was precisely that thing for which Aaron was afraid Moses would take him to task! Aaron *should* have disavowed them, *should* have allowed them to become "two factions bent on slaying one another." This, if anything, would have been the proper way to uphold Moses' *waṣiyya*.[35]

That Moses believed that the expiatory killing of the idolaters was necessary and desirable certainly seems to be confirmed by his command to the people to kill one another. In turn, that Aaron was in the wrong for failing to make this happen is surely implied by the fact that his protest to Moses, "If I had disavowed them, the people would have become two parties bent on slaying each other" (*fa-innī law ankartu ʿalayhim la-ṣārū ḥizbayn yaqtulū baʿḍūhum baʿḍan*), directly echoes the earlier passage that actually describes the corrective violence that Aaron's inaction made necessary – "He said, *slay yourselves,* that is, you should slay one another" (*qāla aqtulū anfusakum yaʿnī yaqtulu baʿḍukum baʿḍan*). The final irony here lies in the fact that the number of Israelites that Muqātil tells us were supposedly

35. Note that the most overtly political definitions of *fitna* in *Lisān al-ʿArab – mā yaqaʿu bayna al-nās min al-qitāl* (an outbreak of fighting among the people), *al-qatl wa'l-ḥurūb wa'l-ikhtilāf alladhī yakūnu bayna al-firāq al-muslimīn idhā taḥazzabū* (killing, warfare, and dissension between factions of the Muslim community, divided into parties) are strongly reminiscent of the phrasing of Muqātil's glosses on the episode. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab,* 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1955–1956), 13.317–321.

named after Aaron on account of his people's appreciation for his clemency—seven thousand—*precisely matches* the number of Israelites who were killed in the slaughter. With this grim coincidence, Muqātil appears to be signaling that these people were really the victims of Aaron's lapse in judgment and moral turpitude, specifically because of those conciliatory impulses that caused him to be so beloved. If he had acted sooner, perhaps the price the Israelites had to pay for their transgression would have been less severe.

Al-Ṭabarī on the Israelites' collective atonement

It is difficult not to read Muqātil's extended description of how the righteous Israelites take up arms and massacre the evildoers at Moses' command as an energetic endorsement of punitive violence against perceived transgressors in the community. As we have seen, this seems to be corroborated by his interpretation of the conversation between Moses and Aaron in Sura 20, which he understands as condemning Aaron's readiness to compromise and conciliate the idolaters among the people. In contrast, some later exegetes' hostility to civil strife and factional violence would lead them to view this episode rather differently. In the classical Sunni tradition, *fitna*—a state of affairs in which part of the community secedes for some reason, causing strife and disrupting the harmony that should ideally characterize a rightly-guided people—was to be avoided at all costs. The root meaning of the verb *fatana* is "to burn"; it seems to have originally signified the testing of precious metals by melting, a literal trial by fire. Extrapolation to more figurative kinds of "testing" then led to the word acquiring a secondary sense of "temptation," and it is this sense that seems to predominate in the Quran. In the mature Sunni tradition, however, *fitna* came to carry the meaning of "civil strife," "disorder," as it was strongly associated with the tribulations the *umma* endured throughout its early history in recurring conflicts over legitimate leadership of the community. The semantic leap made here appears to have been based in the perception that the community of the faithful had been tempted to follow sectarian or secessionist impulses repeatedly in its early history, and repeatedly failed that test.[36]

Conditioned by centuries of factional conflict and civil strife, the classical Sunni tradition rejected perfectionist interpretations of Islam in favor

36. See L. Gardet, *Encyclopedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., s.v. "Fitna" and G.H.A. Juynboll, "The Date of the Great *Fitna,*" *Arabica* 20 (1973): 142–159 for analysis of the semantic development of the term.

of a broad-based, consensus-minded communitarian ideal. Later exegetes could hardly overlook Moses' command in Q.2:54 to the people to "slay yourselves," but their extreme aversion to the kind of situation Muqātil portrays among the Israelites at Sinai led them to impose some strictures on how this scene could be interpreted. In particular, some Sunni authors seem to have deliberately marginalized interpretations like Muqātil's to exclude (or at least ameliorate) his vision of Moses' purging of the idolaters from his community. Although his conception of *fitna* is arguably more nuanced than that of many later Sunni authors, the treatment of the atonement scene and the rest of the Calf episode in the massive commentary of al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923) shows how some exegetes made use of many of the same narrative components that Muqātil himself utilized, but did so in order to communicate rather different ideas.[37]

In his comments on Q.2:54, al-Ṭabarī relates no fewer than twelve separate exegetical hadith transmitted from older authorities that specifically address Moses' command to the Israelites to kill one another. There are quite clearly numerous points of agreement with Muqātil's exegesis to be found here; however, I would argue that al-Ṭabarī discreetly manipulates some of his material through careful arrangement and selective omission, so as to change the reader's understanding of the scene's significance.[38] Thus, even when some of al-Ṭabarī's traditions seem particularly similar to Muqātil's exegesis in some of their details, the overall message, impli-

37. Tayob argues that *fitna* does not have a uniformly negative connotation for al-Ṭabarī, inasmuch as it sometimes indicates a test that can have positive results for the community; in contrast, *fitna* is "exclusively a negative, debilitating and catastrophic notion" in al-Bukhārī and throughout the Sunni hadith corpus more generally ("Cultural Symbolic Construct of *fitna*," 159). However, that is not to say that al-Ṭabarī did not have strong opinions about the *historical conflicts* in the early community that came to be associated with the term. Due to al-Ṭabarī's importance as a source for early Islamic history, there is a copious literature analyzing his views on this subject. Cf., e.g., Boaz Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī's History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004) and bibliography therein.

38. It has long been recognized that al-Ṭabarī used such techniques in his world chronicle, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk,* to subtly influence his audience's perceptions of received material. Marshall G.S. Hodgson, "Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians: Pitfalls and Opportunities in Presenting them to Moderns," in *Towards World Community,* ed. John Nef (New York: Humanities Press and The Hague: W. Junk, 1968), 53–68, presents a pioneering analysis of al-Ṭabarī's portrayal of the circumstances leading up to the murder of the caliph ʿUthman. The same techniques are clearly evident in al-Ṭabarī's selection and arrangement of material in his Quran commentary, though this method has seldom been used in a systematic way to study the *tafsīr*.

cation, and tone of these traditions is sometimes rather different. As an example, we might take the following hadith, which al-Ṭabarī cites in the name of the famous early exegete and historian Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767):

> ... Moses asked his Lord to accept the Israelites' repentance for their worship of the Calf. He said, "No, not unless they kill themselves." [Ibn Isḥāq] said: I have heard that they told Moses, "Whatever God commands, we will endure steadfastly." So Moses commanded those who had not worshipped the Calf to kill those who had. They sat at the thresholds of their homes, and the people drew their swords and moved against them; then they commenced killing them.
>
> Moses wept, and the women and children gathered around and implored him to seek pardon for them. Then God accepted their repentance and pardoned them, and Moses gave the order for them to sheathe their swords.[39]

In Muqātil's interpretation of this scene, the battle has the character of a purge or execution; the innocent simply begin slaying the guilty in vast numbers until God's mercy finally descends on the people. This tradition is similar in that the killing likewise resembles an execution, and notably, here we also find the same detail of the guilty sitting at the thresholds of their homes waiting for their killers to arrive.[40] But the overall ambience of this short tradition is rather different. For example, it lacks Muqātil's stark emphasis on the killers' zeal in carrying out Moses' judgment. Further, we are not told how many Israelites are killed here, but we have no reason to believe it is thousands and thousands of people as in Muqātil's version.[41] Finally, the details of Moses' tears and

39. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 1.77, no. 944.

40. There are various ways of accounting for the frequent similarities between traditions preserved in al-Ṭabarī's work and Muqātil's *tafsīr*. In the particular case at hand, since Ibn Isḥāq and Muqātil were contemporaries, one might argue that both drew on and transmitted material drawn from a common stock of exegetical traditions in circulation in the second/eighth century. However, some have alleged that despite the rejection of Muqātil's commentary by some authors after the third/ninth century due to its questionable reliability (i.e. its lack of proper documentation through *isnād*; al-Ṭabarī is commonly numbered among these), at some point the work seems to have been quietly dismembered and the traditions therein recirculated as autonomous hadith with false *isnād*s imposed upon them. Thus, Muqātil's commentary was able to exert a wide influence on the development of the *tafsīr* tradition even after it was supposedly rejected by "orthodox" commentators.

41. Only a couple of the traditions that al-Ṭabarī cites specify the number of dead as seven thousand; cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 1.75, no. 938

the begging of the women and children adds an element of pathos that is wholly missing from Muqātil's account.

Even judging by this short tradition alone, one immediately gets a sense of how differently al-Ṭabarī presents this scene, and this impression is compounded when we survey the other traditions he quotes here.[42] First of all, out of the dozen traditions of varying lengths he relates here, only *two* of them, including Ibn Isḥāq's, actually describe a situation in which it is explicitly stated that the innocent executed the guilty.[43] None of the others specify who killed whom, and some portray the fighting as quite random: the very first tradition al-Ṭabarī cites here says merely, "*Slay yourselves*—they set forth with their daggers and commenced stabbing one another."[44] Thus, the impression one gets is that this was a general slaughter, not a methodical elimination of the sinful from the community.[45] That being the case, it seems that al-Ṭabarī was trying to convey the idea that this event was not so much a purge of the idolaters, but rather a truly collective rite of atonement.[46]

(→ al-Suddī) and 939 (→ Mujāhid).

42. Some would object that we have no proof that al-Ṭabarī actually shaped the traditions he received from his various informants, but I would argue that in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we should assume that the author was fully responsible for the content as well as the arrangement of his material. This is not to say that all of al-Ṭabarī's hadith are invented, of course; rather, I am suggesting that we have no compelling reason not to believe that he shaped that material freely, especially through selective omission of key details, but also through changes in wording and so forth.

43. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), no. 936 (→ Ibn ᶜAbbās).

44. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), no. 934 (→ Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥman).

45. Admittedly, no. 938 related from al-Suddī strongly implies that it was the innocent who set about executing the idolaters, inasmuch as the slaying is preceded by a trial by ordeal that distinguishes the Calf worshippers from the others; once this happens, the Israelites form two lines so that the killing can begin. The emphasis on the ordeal separating the innocent from the guilty is an ancient midrashic trope based on Exodus 32:20 found in a number of sources from throughout the centuries, including Pseudo-Philo, the Palestinian Talmud, and Ephraem the Syrian. The al-Suddī tradition specifically states that when Moses made the people drink the water into which he had strewn the Calf's pulverized remains, the lips of the idolaters among them turned gold; the same claim is made in chapter 45 of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer,* a midrashic composition dating perhaps to the eighth or ninth century CE (*Pirke de-Rabbi Elieser,* ed. Dagmar Börner-Klein [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004], 614).

46. It is in al-Ṭabarī's exegesis that *tawba* most clearly seems to signify "atonement" rather than mere repentance, inasmuch as the killing required by God seems to acquire an expiatory function here, analogous to a sacrificial act. In both his presentation of the scene and that of Muqātil, the *tawba* enacted by the Israelites can-

This approach to the episode seems to color other aspects of al-Ṭabarī's presentation as well. As another example, we might consider Muqātil's strong emphasis on the zeal of the executioners in slaying the idolaters, even though their kinsmen were among them; this is a prominent element in the original narrative of Exodus, and Muqātil seems to deliberately underline it ("These are your brethren. Go forth with swords drawn; fear God and be steadfast"). In contrast, it seems that al-Ṭabarī actually strives to *minimize* this aspect of the story. Only three of the traditions he cites state unambiguously that the Israelites slew each other regardless of whether or not they were kinsmen.[47] But one of these traditions is followed immediately by a variant version, attributed to the same authority, that makes exactly the opposite point by changing the key phrase from "they even undertook killing their own fathers and sons..." to "they *neither* killed their own fathers *nor* their brothers..."[48]

This has the clear effect of casting doubt on the veracity of the claim that the Israelites were so zealous to follow Moses' command that they disregarded family ties in carrying out his order to execute the guilty; this is not the only aspect of al-Ṭabarī's presentation that does so. Two other traditions al-Ṭabarī relates here seem to literally screen the Israelites from any accusation that they willingly slew their own kinsmen, in that they describe how a great darkness or fog descended upon the Israelites so that they could not see who it was they were killing. One of them, related from Ibn Zayd, describes how some of the Israelites who had not succumbed to the worship of the Calf ask him how the people might atone for their sin:

> They said, "Moses, what about repentance for this deed?" He replied: "Oh yes! *Slay yourselves; that would be better for you with your Creator. He may then accept your repentance*" etc.[49] So they grasped their swords and

not simply be "repentance" as a wholly internal emotional state, but rather must correlate with external actions, particularly a deliberate act of violence (whether conceived as a sacrificial rite or as a purge of transgressors from the community).

47. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 1.73, no 935 (→ Saʿīd b. Jubayr and Mujāhid): "They confronted each other wielding daggers and slew one another, and they took no pity on each other whether they were kinsmen or not..."; cf. 1.75, no. 938 (→ Mujāhid) and 1.76, no. 943 (→ ʿUbayd b. ʿAmīr through Ibn Jurayj).

48. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 1.75, no. 939 (→ Mujāhid). Admittedly, one might argue that the double *muʿanan* chain associated with this tradition (i.e. it is transmitted *ʿan* Ibn Abī Najayḥ—*ʿan* Mujāhid) implies that the author may have believed it was less reliable than the former.

49. Although *fa-tāba ʿalaykum* is usually understood as the past tense, the reading of the

> rods and daggers and knives, and God sent a mist down upon them; they groped for each other in the dark, and commenced slaying one another. They came upon their fathers and brothers and slew them unknowingly; they called out in the darkness, "May God have mercy on his servant who endured this so that He would be pleased with him!"[50]

It is also worth emphasizing here that we find no trace in al-Ṭabarī's commentary of the fervent speech that Muqātil puts in the mouth of the people as they steel themselves for the task of slaying their idolatrous kinsmen.

The final element of note in al-Ṭabarī's presentation relates to something that we find at the very end of Muqātil's version of the episode, his statement regarding the ultimate consequence of the violence: "God made those who were slain into martyrs, and accepted the repentance of the survivors, pardoning those who had steadfastly undertaken the killing but not been killed themselves." It is surely significant that among the dozen traditions al-Ṭabarī relates here, no fewer than *seven* say something to this effect. Most echo Muqātil's phrasing precisely: those slain were counted as martyrs, while God accepted the repentance of those who slew others but remained alive. One tradition, related in the name of the famous Medinan traditionist al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741), makes this exact point in a particularly vivid way: "Moses and the Israelites were saddened on account of the killing, but God revealed to Moses: 'Why are you sad? Those among you who were slain are now sustained alive with me [in Paradise], while I have accepted the repentance of those among you who survived.' Moses then passed this good news along to the Israelites."[51]

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phrase that seems to be presupposed here, "He *may then* accept your repentance," is actually grammatically tolerable, since *tāba* can also be read as optative in mood.

50. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 1.77-78, no. 945. Cf. no. 936 from Ibn ᶜAbbās, in which a great darkness descends upon the Israelites when they take up their daggers to slay one another; when it abates, seven thousand Israelites lie dead. One assumes that the darkness kept them from knowing that they were killing their own kinsmen. The appearance of this narrative detail is particularly interesting because it resembles something similar in Muqātil's presentation that has the opposite implication. There, it is said that "God sent down darkness upon them such that they could not recognize one another; and the number of slain reached seven thousand." This is *after* the Israelites have been killing each other all day long; I infer that Muqātil means that they were so fervent to fight that they continued even after it became dark.

51. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 1.76, no. 941.

Al-Ṭabarī thus seems to accept Muqātil's claim that those Israelites who were killed in the fighting were martyrs, while God accepted the repentance of those who slew them but survived. However, he vigorously *rejects* the idea that those idolaters who may have died before Moses' return, as well as those who refused to participate in the fighting, did not receive God's pardon or grace. While Muqātil asserts that these people were either damned in the next world or received God's curse of disgrace and chastisement in this world—according to what God seems to prescribe for the Jews in Q.7:152 and 167—al-Ṭabarī is at some pains to refute this exegesis. In his comments on 7:152 ("We have ordained wrath for them from their Lord and shame in the world"), he begins by citing a tradition from Ibn Jurayj that makes the same point Muqātil does in his *tafsīr*; however, al-Ṭabarī then proceeds to systematically deconstruct it.[52]

First, al-Ṭabarī argues that this reading of the Quran goes against not only the general consensus of the community of exegetes, but also against the plain sense of scripture, since Sura 2's description of Moses' command to the people to fight and God's subsequent turning to them in repentance certainly appears to refer to *all* the members of the community in general. Further, God's order for them to slay one another essentially *replaced* the penalty He would have imposed in His wrath; that is, "their slaying each other was a disgrace to them, and shame that God imposed on them in this world." Thus, the judgment mentioned in verse 152 cannot be in *addition* to the order to "slay yourselves," or possibly refer to other parties; rather, the killing *was* the wrath and disgrace mentioned in the verse. Al-Ṭabarī insists that one cannot take part of what scripture says in this episode as referring to some of the Israelites and part as referring to others, or some smaller segment of the whole; this is not the plain sense of scripture, nor is there any basis in the received tradition for claiming that the inner or hidden meaning of verse 152 is that it refers to a subgroup of the Israelites, in contrast to the obvious or outer meaning. The literal meaning of these verses is simply that *all* were punished together.[53]

52. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 13.134, no. 15147. This is not the only place in his commentary where al-Ṭabarī attributes a view that is also found in Muqātil's *tafsīr* to Ibn Jurayj. It is perhaps noteworthy that the latter is one of only two tradents with whom he associates the specific claim that the Israelites killed one another regardless of kin ties. See *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (Shākir and Shākir ed.), 1.76, no. 943.

53. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 13.134, no. 15147. What al-Ṭabarī seems to be doing here is bolstering the overall communitarian message that he sees writ large

In light of al-Ṭabarī's overall approach to this episode, one may easily surmise that these remarks once again underscore the point that the killing served to achieve collective atonement for the sin of the worship of the Calf for the *entire* community. If the judgment mentioned in verse 152 referred to only some of the people, this would imply that not all of the Israelites participated in the killing. If the wrath and disgrace mentioned therein were some *subsequent* punishment for the making of the Calf, that would prompt the question of what purpose the killing had in the first place. Al-Ṭabarī cannot abide the first possibility because it goes directly against his conception of the rite as making atonement for the sin of the whole community. He cannot abide the second either, because it would seem to make the rite meaningless, or worse, imply that this killing was not actually the means through which the Israelites bought God's acceptance of their repentance, but rather served some other purpose—for example, purging the community of idolatrous sinners, as Muqātil would have it, and thus making it a political act.

Read against Muqātil's portrayal of the episode, all of these elements in al-Ṭabarī's presentation seem to underline themes of mutuality and collective accountability. He acknowledges the possibility that the innocent executed the guilty, but implicitly argues against this by making the killing seem more arbitrary, and the fighting more equally diffused among the people; he vacillates on the issue of whether or not kin killed kin; and he reiterates again and again that both the killers and the killed had their roles to play, explicitly denying the possibility that some of the Israelites were excluded from the divine pardon that the Israelites seem to have bought with their lives. Al-Ṭabarī's overall judgment on the episode, simply put, is that the Israelites all sinned together, and were all punished together.

Similarly, in contrast to Muqātil's condemnation of Aaron for shirking his duty to disavow the idolatrous Israelites, even to the point of causing bloodshed, al-Ṭabarī's comments on the passages in Sura 7 and 20 that deal with Aaron indicate his rejection of Muqātil's exegesis. To some extent, he attempts to avoid dealing with the issue of Aaron's role as

in this episode—and that thus colors almost every aspect of his commentary on it-through reference to hermeneutic categories that recur throughout his *tafsīr* (*ʿumūm/khāṣṣ, ẓāhir/bāṭin*) and may be applied in numerous different ways. Simply put, he makes it seem as if the plain sense of scripture and the widely observed rules for ascertaining its meaning naturally corroborate his view.

much as possible.[54] When he does deal with it, however, he asserts Aaron's innocence in a straightforward way. Thus, in his exegesis of 7:150, al-Ṭabarī states, rather plainly, that Moses' anger with his brother was motivated by the latter's disobedience, but that he forgave him when he heard his explanation of what had happened in his absence. His terse exegesis of the following verse ("Moses said: 'O Lord, forgive me and my brother and admit us into Your mercy; You are the most merciful'") likewise indicates the matter-of-fact way in which al-Ṭabarī approaches the question of Aaron's innocence: "When his brother's excuse became clear to him, and he learned that he had not been negligent regarding the duty incumbent upon him from God's command regarding what the ignorant had perpetrated with their worship of the Calf, Moses asked forgiveness for himself for what he did to his brother earlier, and for his brother, for what transpired before that, which was between him and God."[55]

This attitude is further reflected in his comments on Sura 20, especially those on verse 93 ("O Aaron, when you saw that they had gone astray, what prevented you from following me, so that you disobeyed my command?") Here, al-Ṭabarī acknowledges a debate among the older exegetes concerning the nature of Aaron's failure: did Moses' statement "what prevented you from following me?" mean that Aaron should have left the camp, abandoning the idolaters and taking those Israelites who did not worship the Calf with him (that is, *literally* following Moses up the mountain), or did it mean that Aaron should have taken steps to fix the problem (that is, *figuratively* following Moses in pursuing a solution of which Moses himself would have approved)?

It is obvious from what we have seen of Muqātil's presentation of the episode that he would have chosen the latter option: Moses upbraided Aaron for not having purged the community of idolaters by force, which was precisely the result of his own command to the Israelites to "slay yourselves" upon his return from Sinai. It should come as no surprise that al-Ṭabarī rejects this interpretation. In discussing the possibility "that Moses reproached him for failing to take steps to rectify the

54. For example, although he does comment extensively on Q.7:150 and 20:92–94 (the verses that relate directly to the confrontation between Moses and Aaron), only a very small proportion of these comments are actually relevant to the subject of Aaron's role in the affair.

55. *li-akhīhi min sālifin salafa la-hu baynahu wa-bayn allāh*. The mention of what Moses did to his brother must be an allusion to his attacking Aaron upon his return from Sinai (cf. Q.7:150). Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 13.133.

people's corruption," he notes that this means that Aaron had feared engaging the idolaters in battle because they would slay each other; in support of this interpretation, he cites a brief tradition from Ibn Jurayj stating specifically that he feared that they would fight till they annihilated each other. But in discussing the other possibility, al-Ṭabarī marshals the support of Ibn ᶜAbbās, who claimed that he was really afraid of splitting the community in two if he tried to secede from them, and Ibn Zayd, who likewise explained his fear as motivated by the thought that Moses would reproach him for dividing the people into two *ṭā'ifa*s or factions. Al-Ṭabarī then says that the latter view is correct: Moses would have expected that Aaron would simply leave the camp with his followers, but Aaron had been afraid to do so because Moses would castigate him for splitting the Israelites into two groups. This, al-Ṭabarī notes, is plainly the correct interpretation of the import of their conversation.[56]

This passage perhaps epitomizes al-Ṭabarī's method of dealing with contentious issues in his commentary. On the surface, he appears to simply be endorsing one school of thought on the issue of the meaning of Moses and Aaron's words, and rejecting another. Reading between the lines, however, and taking al-Ṭabarī's comments elsewhere into consideration, we can conclude that what he is really saying here is that Moses initially might have wanted Aaron to abandon the idolaters with whomever would follow him, but that Aaron did not do so out of fear of causing division, and (a point that must be emphasized) Moses clearly *forgave him for that*.[57] In rejecting the idea that Moses really meant that Aaron should have actually undertaken to fight the idolaters, al-Ṭabarī implicitly marginalizes Muqātil's view: the idea that Aaron should have taken up arms against the sinners never really crossed Moses' mind. In fact, in *none* of the traditions cited on this episode by al-Ṭabarī does Aaron ever seem to consider engaging the idolaters directly in order to force them to submit; nor does al-Ṭabarī ever suggest that this is what Moses wanted; nor is this ever presented as having been the right course of action according to the author's own opinion.[58]

56. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān* (ed. al-Ghamrāwī), 16.203–204.

57. Cf. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr ad* Q.7:150, 2.65 where the author gives no explanation at all for Moses' seeking forgiveness for Aaron.

58. Cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir and Shākir) *ad* Q.2:51, 1.66-67, no. 921, a long description of the circumstances surrounding the making of the Calf attributed to Ibn ᶜAbbās; the end of the tradition depicts the very moment when Aaron decides that he and those loyal to him cannot abandon the idolaters out of fear of causing divi-

Even more strikingly, al-Ṭabarī never says anything here that links the view of those exegetes who thought Moses had wanted Aaron to fight with the actual killing that transpired afterwards, even though the connection would be obvious to any reader of the *tafsīr*. For example, the view he rejects states that Aaron said "I was afraid of engaging them in battle, for then we'd be slaying each other" (*khashaytu an naqtatila fa-yaqtulu baᶜḍunā baᶜḍan*), phrasing that clearly echoes that of his various comments on the Sura 2 passage.[59] It is hardly unreasonable to think that in light of the killing that *did* later take place, this would have been a sound interpretation of Aaron's statement. But while Muqātil does assert a direct connection between the killing that Moses seems to have expected Aaron to initiate and the killing that followed upon Moses' return, for al-Ṭabarī, they are categorically different.

Again, for al-Ṭabarī, the killing that occurs at Moses' command has the character of a collective atonement; at prophetic prompting, the people earn God's forgiveness through what can only be called expiatory bloodshed. If Aaron had taken it upon itself to take up arms against the idolaters at his own initiative, this would not have been the same thing. To al-Ṭabarī, this would simply have been *fitna*, in the most negative sense of the word. The fundamental difference between the views of Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī may be conveyed by distinguishing between two ways of paraphrasing Q.2:54: while for Muqātil the key phrase about "killing yourselves" really means "make things right in the community for your Creator by killing the idolaters," for al-Ṭabarī it means "make atonement with your Creator by killing each other."

That al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of this whole affair is categorically different from Muqātil's is signaled by his version of the "sound of *fitna*" tradition. Unlike Muqātil's *tafsīr,* where this tradition is used to underscore the ironic *lack* of *fitna* in the camp—a condition Moses would have expected, according to Muqātil's view—in al-Ṭabarī's version there is no longer any mention of *fitna* at all. Rather, it says that upon returning to the camp, Moses heard the voices of the people (*aṣwātahum*) and said simply, "Verily, I hear the voices of people rejoicing (*aṣwāṭ qawm lāhīn*)...."[60]

sion. Another tradition cited here in the name of al-Suddī says simply that after Aaron exhorted the people to repent of their error, he and those loyal to him rose up, but they did not engage the idolaters in battle (al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* [ed. Shākir and Shākir] 1.64–65, no. 919).

59. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān* (ed. al-Ghamrāwī), 16.204.

60. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir and Shākir), 13.122–123, no. 15129 (→ Ibn ᶜAbbās). Notably,

Fitna, secession, and the "sectarian" reading of the Calf episode

Comparison of Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī's interpretations of Q.2:54, *Turn in repentance to your Creator and slay yourselves*, reveals the vast differences in these commentators' understanding of the significance of the Golden Calf episode, particularly regarding what we might call its communitarian implications. Overall, al-Ṭabarī's portrayal of the episode reflects the classic Sunni attitude towards such issues; in contrast, it is clear that Muqātil's approach is more anomalous, and that he is simply not thinking about this issue the same way as al-Ṭabarī and other Sunni exegetes would nearly a hundred and fifty years later.[61]

For Muqātil, *fitna* in the sense of "communal strife" is what is *not* going on in the Israelites' camp when Moses returns, but it is exactly what he believes *should* have occurred, given his emphasis on how those who were innocent of the crime set about executing the idolaters at Moses' command, as well as his remarks regarding Moses' criticism of Aaron's inaction. While both the word *fitna* itself and its politically loaded meaning as "communal strife" came to have extremely negative connotations in Sunni discourse generally, for Muqātil, *fitna* does not necessarily have such connotations.[62] This makes sense, inasmuch as Muqātil lived at a time in which many aspects of normative Islam, including ritual, law, theology,

this version is closer to the biblical precursor in Exodus 32:18, especially considering that Arabic *ṣawt*, like Hebrew *qôl*, can mean either "voice" or "sound." What relationship does this have to the "sound of *fitna*" tradition as Muqātil cites it? Has al-Ṭabarī or his source recognized the allusion to Exodus in that version of the tradition and "re-biblicized" it so that it agrees more literally with its obvious precursor?

61. Obviously, a more comprehensive survey of Muqātil's commentary would be necessary before we could reach a final verdict on this issue, especially considering the numerous occurrences of the term *fitna* and related terms in the Quran. A close examination of his understanding of the oft-cited Q.2:191 ("*fitna* is worse than killing"; cf. also 2:217) and comparison with later *tafsīr* on the verse would be illuminating.

62. Juynboll emphasizes that the term *fitna* did not begin to acquire its political connotations until the second/eighth century, and that the earliest historical event associated with the term is the so-called Second Fitna, the extreme factional division that followed the death of Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya in 64/683, especially the disruptions associated with the revolt of the counter-caliph Ibn al-Zubayr. Further, this seems to be the historical period with which the term is *most frequently* associated in classical sources, including al-Ṭabarī (see "Date of the Great *Fitna*," esp. 152 ff.) But even if the word first came to signify a condition of disorder and strife in the community after the Second Fitna, it did not acquire the universally negative connotation it has for Sunnis until high Abbasid times.

and sectarian identity, were still in flux and had just begun to coalesce.[63]

Further, it is not only the case that Muqātil simply does not suffer from the horror of *fitna* that characterizes the mature Sunni tradition. Judging by the aspects of his interpretation of the Calf narrative we have examined at length here, it seems that he may actually have *approved* of such a state of affairs, at least under certain circumstances. It hardly seems like a coincidence that Muqātil hailed from Khurasan, a region in which opposition to the Umayyad regime during the later Marwanid era in the mid-second/eighth century was widespread. According to some reports, Muqātil was a supporter of the Abbasids who deliberately attempted to curry favor with the dynasty after the revolution that brought them to power, though there are *also* reports that suggest that he was opposed to the regime.[64] It is very tempting to correlate Muqātil's apparent endorsement of communal strife and purgative bloodshed in his *tafsīr* on this episode either with his personal political views or else with the prevailing mood of his time, especially in the eastern Islamic world, in which armed rebellion against the Umayyad dominion was instrumental in toppling the regime and establishing a new political order in 132/750.[65]

63. Among Muqātil's generation, we find many of the seminal figures who were responsible for the earliest codifications of what would become classical Islam; he died in the same year as Abū Ḥanīfa and Ibn Isḥāq, and shortly after Jaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq. Much of the evidence Gardet cites in the aforementioned *Encyclopedia of Islam* article on the development of ideas about *fitna*—in particular regarding the Sunni rejection of secession and sectarianism as illegitimate—comes from the early creedal literature studied by Wensinck and others. Though some of the early Sunni creeds are associated with early authorities such as Abū Ḥanīfa, they are most likely pseudepigraphic and come from a later period.

64. Muqātil's work was rejected by later authors on the basis of three allegations made against him: a tendency towards anthropomorphism, lack of documentation of his sources through *isnād*, and seeking to curry favor with the Abbasids by offering to fabricate hadith supporting their legitimacy. Nwyia demonstrated that the first charge appears to be groundless, based on Muqātil's surviving oeuvre, while the second charge is quite evidently an anachronistic one to level against an author active in the first part of the second/eighth century. It is unclear how reliable the reports regarding the third charge might be.

65. Some have suggested that Muqātil was a Murjiᶜite on the basis of biographical reports to this effect, but as several scholars have noted, there is little to no trace of such views in his extant works. Even if these reports are accurate, this does not necessarily negate my characterization of his basic outlook based on what I infer from his *tafsīr*. Early Murjiᶜites, including Abū Ḥanīfa himself, actually supported the ideal of political activism against unjust rulers, totally contrary to the classical Sunni view of *irjāᶜ*; see Patricia Crone and Fritz Zimmermann, *The Epistle of Salim Ibn*

In contrast, al-Ṭabarī's attitude is thoroughly conditioned by his own political circumstances, and his exegesis thus reflects a rather different context. Muqātil lived in an era and environment in which an activist or perfectionist approach to communitarian politics was common, at least in certain circles, and hardly confined to sectarians or "radicals." Sunni spokesmen of al-Ṭabarī's time, on the other hand, embraced a more accommodationist approach and explicitly promoted that approach as the foundation of what they presented as "mainstream" Islam. Part of the reason for the strident Sunni condemnation of the situation represented by the term *fitna* is that the communitarian ideal espoused by its spokesmen among the ulama was deliberately established in *opposition* to the perfectionist ideal advocated by more activist circles among the Shiᶜa as well as militant sectarian formations such as the Kharijites.

Classical Sunnism stressed the legitimacy of standing authority, valorized both ᶜUthman and ᶜAli equally as rightly guided caliphs (as opposed to the Shiᶜi execration of the first three caliphs, and the Kharijite execration of all of them), and most of all emphasized political quietism.[66] It is extremely telling that the nascent Sunni movement came to embrace the Abbasids specifically at that time when the dynasty's political fortunes had waned and the caliphs had for the most part given up claims both to the exercise of real power and the prerogative to judgment in religious matters. For Sunnis of the fourth/tenth century and afterwards, the caliphs were first and foremost symbols of an unbroken chain of leadership that stretched back to the Prophet, and thus of the historical continuity of the community itself; the movement's spokesmen, like the caliph, had abandoned any claim to exercise real political authority at all. Nor could they espouse the kind of active resistance to standing regimes that had

Dhakwan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 245 ff.

66. Note the tradition al-Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn Jurayj in his comments on the Sura 2 passage (no. 943 cited above): "God knew that there were those among the people who recognized that the Calf was nothing, and the only thing that had kept them from disavowing the idolaters was a fear of battle; *this is why He commanded them to slay one another*" (*Tafsīr,* 1.77). This epitomizes the classical definition of *irjāᶜ*—those who knew that what the idolaters were doing was wrong *wanted* to disavow them, but didn't, out of fear of fostering conflict within the community. They postponed judgment (*irjāᶜ*) and let Moses – a prophet, and thus the unmistakable representative of the will of God—decide what to do about the situation. Although this tradition is one of only two cited by al-Ṭabarī that states that the innocent slew the idolaters, these remarks make it clear once more that this is a divinely sanctioned rite of atonement, not a purge.

brought the Abbasid dynasty to power in the first place, needless to say.[67]

Groups that adopted a more oppositional outlook, on the other hand, tended to view what they perceived as unjust authority as illegitimate, saw the political struggles of the early community as both justified and definitive for their collective identity, and generally cultivated an ethos of resistance, whether or not it was expressed in actual armed struggle against standing authority.[68] Most of all, these sectarian groups—perhaps better termed "secessionist," especially in the immediate context—were inclined to idealize a position of nonconformity with situations of perceived injustice, such as the refusal of the Kharijites to accept ᶜAli's resort to arbitration after the Battle of Ṣiffīn in 37/657, or the rejection of non-Alid or non-Ḥusaynid leadership of the community by the various factions and communities gathered under the banner of the Shiᶜa. For these groups, protest against prevailing injustice should ideally be taken to its logical extreme, namely fissure of the community itself, whereas other groups that rejected or suppressed the urge to secede from the mainstream—if not factionalism per se—managed to remain part of the Sunni fold.[69] It is the success of the accommodationist, communitarian vision that developed among those who rejected this ethos of dissent and resistance that has led Western scholars to mistakenly accept Sunni claims to represent "mainstream," "orthodox," and "true" Islam while other communities with competing claims have been indelibly marked as "sectarian," and thus, at least implicitly, as heterodox. As scholars have increasingly come to acknowledge, however, the rejection of sectarianism (or at least the appearance of sectarianism) is itself a sectarian choice.

While the historical reports about Muqātil b. Sulaymān do not generally allege that he had Shiᶜi leanings—not that such reports need be taken as

67. See Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 134–139 for a succinct analysis of the détente between the ulama and caliph after the "Orthodox Restoration" under al-Mutawakkil (r. 233/847–247/861) that marked the emergence of the Sunni consensus and the formulation of the doctrine of political accommodation almost a hundred years before al-Ṭabarī's time.

68. On the various sects' roots in the events of the First Fitna, see Crone, *God's Rule,* 17–32.

69. Robinson has suggested that the emergence of militant sectarianism in the first/seventh and second/eighth century may be partially explained as a failure on the part of the caliphal state to fully exploit, redirect, or suppress the time-honored jihadist impulse that drove the armed expansion of the *umma* in the first place. See Chase Robinson, "Prophecy and Holy Men in Early Islam," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages,* ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Anthony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 241–262.

objectively reliable anyway—we might nevertheless characterize the outlook expressed in his interpretation of the Calf narrative as perfectionist and secessionist, since he seems to be opposed to the ideal of conciliation that would become a cardinal virtue in classical Sunnism. I am not at all suggesting that Muqātil was a Shiᶜite or a Kharijite—although admittedly the speech that he puts into the mouth of the executioners in his depiction of the killing of the idolaters in the Israelite camp does have a certain rigorist Kharijite feel to it, in its savage disregard for bonds of kinship and its total confidence in violence as a necessary instrument for maintaining justice and communal purity.[70] The key issue here is not Muqātil's particular sectarian leaning, if he even had one. Rather, it is that his attitude towards *fitna* and the legitimacy of violent secession from (or purification of) the community may be an authentically archaic strand in early *tafsīr*, reflecting conspicuously "pre-classical" ideas and attitudes.

It was only later that the "mainstream" or "orthodox" Sunni attitude was established, and thus later *tafsīr*s reflect the radically different view of *fitna* that would come to typify the Sunni perspective after the third/ninth century. Muqātil's explicit position regarding the crisis of leadership portrayed in the Calf episode would seem to indicate that the instinctive hostility to secessionist tendencies that would become widespread among later Sunni authors is clearly a development posterior to his time. That is, to characterize Muqātil as a crypto-Shiᶜi would simply be anachronistic, reflecting an attitude that was only *later* asserted to be "mainstream" or "orthodox."[71] In short, although the quranic term *fitna* had already come

70. This is perhaps exemplified by the notorious "questioning" of the Azraqite sect, who according to the sources were willing to murder fellow Muslims whom they considered to be insufficiently pious; see Keith Lewinstein, *Encyclopedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., s.v. "Azāriqa," and also Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 196–230. Note that the guilty in Muqātil's narrative are "sitting at their thresholds," *qaᶜadū bi-afniyat buyūtihim*; *quᶜūd* seems to be a Kharijite codeword for unacceptable laxity, i.e. "sitting things out," not taking action to rectify a situation of injustice.

71. Note also that the term *waṣiyya*, in its specific sense of the "trust" or "testament" handed down in prophetic succession, would eventually take on very strong Shiᶜi associations; in particular, especially among the early Shiᶜa, the term signified the legacy of spiritual authority, virtue, and knowledge that the prophets bequeathed to one another in succession. It also represents one aspect of the authority that Muhammad was thought to have transmitted to ᶜAli as his legitimate heir, subsequently passed on from ᶜAli to the other imams (see Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shiᶜa Tradition," *passim*). The term appears twice in Muqātil's commentary on the Calf episode in reference to Aaron's relationship to Moses, but

to mean not only a "test" or "trial" of the community, but specifically a test or trial through division and communal strife, in Muqātil's time, it had not yet acquired its typical Sunni sense of "*unacceptable* civil strife."

Notably, one of the earliest commentaries to preserve an account of the Golden Calf episode similar to Muqātil's is explicitly sectarian in orientation, while another apparently derives from a source with putatively sectarian leanings. The first is the *tafsīr* of Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Huwwārī, one of the great exegetes of the early Ibadi tradition, who was active in the third/ninth century.[72] In an extended passage commenting on Q.2:54, Hūd has the "sound of *fitna*" tradition, and its phrasing is exactly like that of Muqātil's version.[73] Somewhat further on, he gives us his version of the atonement scene; this is also very similar to Muqātil's, but notably, in certain respects in which Hūd's version differs, it is more similar to the biblical precursor in Exodus than Muqātil's version. For example, here Moses is depicted as specifically adjuring the loyal Israelites to take up arms against their kinsmen to do God's bidding:

> He took a solemn oath from them: "Verily, be steadfast in the killing and give your wholehearted consent to it." They replied: "We will!" He said: "Pursue it even to the thresholds of your own homes." All the sons of a certain father set out zealously and did it thus. And Moses commanded the Seventy, who did not worship the Israelites' calf, to take up their swords and slay anyone they met. Then they did so, walking about in the camp, slaying whomever they met.[74]

never in al-Ṭabarī's.

72. See Crone, *God's Rule,* 54–64 for a concise overview of Kharijite political doctrine, including frequent reference to the gradual moderation of that doctrine among the Ibadis; on Ibadi accommodationism see also now Adam Geiser, *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers: The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). On Hūd, see Claude Gilliot, "Le commentaire coranique de Hūd b. Muḥakkam/Muḥkim," *Arabica* 44 (1997): 179–233, who emphasizes the derivation of this work from the *tafsīr* of Yaḥyā b. Sallām (d. 200/815) and thus ultimately from that of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728). The Ibadi trend towards accommodation and eventual "Sunnification" does not seem to have precluded more strident attitudes on the theoretical and theological level; for example, Hūd is supposed to have worked to impose his own views on the material of Ibn Sallām, who was a committed Murjiᶜite. As Crone notes, early Ibadis openly ridiculed the quietism of the Sunnis (*God's Rule,* 137).

73. Hūd b. Muḥakkam, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-ᶜazīz,* 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islamī, 1990), 1.105.

74. Hūd b. Muḥakkam, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-ᶜazīz,* 1.106–107. Both Moses' specific command to slay kinsmen and the description of the Seventy walking about the camp killing whomever they meet seem like details derived from the precursor in Exodus

The scene that follows resembles Muqātil's version of this narrative closely, including the speech that the killers gave to each other before executing their kinsmen and the description of the descent of God's mercy when the number of dead reached seven thousand.[75]

What is particularly noteworthy about Hūd's citation of this tradition is that he attributes this material to the famous early exegete Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), a contemporary of Muqātil. Like Muqātil, al-Kalbī occupies a significant but sometimes tenuous role in the *tafsīr* tradition, specifically due to allegations concerning his Shi^{c}i tendencies.[76] Given that much of the material in question agrees almost verbatim with that in Muqātil, one might argue that Muqātil simply appropriated this material directly from al-Kalbī.[77] However, it is difficult to

(cf. 32: 27–28). It is unusual for the Seventy to be singled out as those responsible for the killing, though it is natural for an exegete inclined to focus on the innocent as the executioners of the guilty to do so, since they obviously were the only ones around who absolutely could *not* have been guilty of worshipping the Calf, as they were away with Moses on the mountain at the time it was made.

75. Hūd b. Muḥakkam, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-^{c}azīz,* 1.106–107. Notably, the passage concludes with a seemingly unique interpretation of "slay yourselves" as actually referring to suicide: "Some of the commentators said that they [i.e. the innocent?] commanded them [i.e. the guilty] to commit suicide [*yantaḥirū*] with cleavers [*shifār*, i.e. large, broad knives]. When God's retribution come down upon them, the knives dropped from their hands; the dead received martyrdom, those still alive, repentance." Though these large knives are mentioned elsewhere as the weapon of choice in the fighting, this is the only direct reference to actual suicide I have found in the sources in relation to this episode.

76. On al-Kalbī's complex place in later Islamic scholarship, see Marco Schöller, "*Sīra* and *Tafsīr*: Muḥammad al-Kalbī on the Jews of Medina," in *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources,* ed. Harald Motzki (Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill, 2000), 18–48, esp. 18–23. Schöller takes al-Kalbī's Shi^{c}i loyalties as a basic fact, citing in particular his association with Abū Ṣāliḥ, the *mawlā* of ^{c}Ali's sister Umm Hāni', from whom al-Kalbī purportedly received traditions from Ibn ^{c}Abbās. On the question of al-Kalbī's Shi^{c}ism and the popularity of his *tafsīr* among the Karrāmiyya, see Josef Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam,* 6 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991–1997), 1.298–301.

77. Determining the sources of Muqātil's *tafsīr* is notoriously difficult; the introduction to the work emphasizes its fundamental basis in traditions handed down from the Successors and other major authorities from before Muqātil's time, but this was added to the commentary by Muqātil's student and editor al-Hudhayl b. Ḥabīb. It was precisely Muqātil's neglect of *isnād,* typical of his time, that led to his *matrūk* status among later authors. A global search of Muqātil's *tafsīr* on altafsir.com reveals that al-Kalbī is cited only a handful of times in the work, and always in *isnād*s attached to hadith interpolated into the body of the text by al-Hudhayl. Strangely, according to

ascertain if material attributed to al-Kalbī is genuine since his *tafsīr* has not survived to the present day except in later quotations; therefore, we should perhaps not assume that this is necessarily the case. Further, even if Muqātil did derive some of his presentation of the atonement scene from an earlier source, just as with his use of earlier biblical or Jewish material, we should prioritize an understanding of the overall coherence of that presentation – that is, what he *does* with the material – over the drive to identify its source. As we have seen, Muqātil's exegesis of the Golden Calf episode, of which the atonement scene is but one part, is rich and subtle, clearly reflecting his complex attitude towards political and communitarian issues. Any element of that whole that might happen to be derivative or secondhand he has clearly made his own.[78]

The other early source in which similar material is found seems to confirm its possible association with al-Kalbī, but the difficulty of using this source dictates that we approach the issue of authorship with caution. This is the so-called *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās*, widely circulated in a printed edition that mistakenly identifies it as the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* of al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 817/1414). Somewhat confusingly, since the nineteenth century this work has *also* been claimed to be the lost *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī. In a now-classic analysis of the work, Rippin convincingly demonstrates that attributions of this work to the Companion Ibn ᶜAbbās, al-Kalbī, and al-Fīrūzābādī are all equally spurious.[79] However, my own examination of the work suggests that its association with al-Kalbī may have a partial basis in fact, inasmuch as some of the particularly distinctive material therein also appears in later traditions that are attributed to al-Kalbī. Moreover, one some-

an oft-cited tradition, al-Kalbī actually alleged that Muqātil transmitted traditions in his name that he had not actually heard from him; based on what we have seen here, we might rather have expected al-Kalbī to accuse him of the opposite, namely appropriating his material without giving him proper credit!

78. Note also that, unlike Muqātil, Hūd seems to avoid the issue of Aaron's culpability; he omits any comments that might be construed as critical of Aaron in his treatment of Sura 7 and 20, and he is totally silent on the matter of Moses' entreating God for forgiveness for himself and Aaron in Q.7:151 (Hūd b. Muḥakkam, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-ᶜazīz,* 2.47). If Muqātil's material on Aaron is derived from al-Kalbī as well, we cannot prove it by comparing his *tafsīr* with that of Hūd. Notably, Hūd seems to be in agreement with Muqātil regarding the curse mentioned in 7:152: the "disgrace in the world" mentioned in the verse is interpreted as the *jizya*; "*thus do we compensate those who promote falsehoods* —i.e., their worship of the Calf" (ibid.)

79. Andrew Rippin, "*Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* and Criteria for Dating Early *Tafsīr* Texts," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 38–83.

times finds a very high degree of verbatim agreement between this *tafsīr*'s glosses on quranic phrases and those in *Tafsīr Muqātil.*[80] Finally, Motzki has recently suggested that a number of second/eighth-century sources, including the *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq, *Tafsīr Muqātil,* and the lost *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī may have all drawn on a common source.[81] This hypothesis, though it cannot be proven, is appealing because it would explain why Muqātil's version of the atonement scene and that which Hūd attributes to al-Kalbī are so similar without our having to resort to accusing Muqātil of plagiarism.

Motzki also suggests that *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* may be a digest of interpretations found in the original *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī. I would add that it seems likely that the author of the work, whoever he was, also drew on other sources in producing this digest, and that *Tafsīr Muqātil* might have been among them. Whenever it was that this text originated—both Rippin and Motzki point to the fourth/tenth century—it is clear that the author used his sources judiciously, because those sources' original viewpoint still seems to be perceptible. Specifically, when we turn to the treatment of the Calf episode in *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās*, the approach it takes to the atonement scene is very much like Muqātil's, seemingly reflecting an underlying "secessionist" perspective, whether or not the author was actually actively sectarian in his political and religious predilections.[82]

80. See my "Methodologies for the Dating of Exegetical Works and Traditions: Can the Lost *Tafsīr* of al-Kalbī be Recovered from *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* (a.k.a. *Al-Wāḍiḥ*)?," in *Aims and Methods of Qur'ānic Exegesis (8th–15th Centuries),* ed. Karen Bauer (Oxford: Oxford University Press in Association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012) [forthcoming].

81. See Harald Motzki, "Dating the So-Called *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās,*" *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 31 (2006): 147–163, esp. 152–153. Motzki's common source hypothesis might explain why the tradition from Ibn Isḥāq al-Ṭabarī cites *ad* Q.2:54 (1.77, no. 944; see above) seems to share certain distinctive elements in common with Muqātil's version of the narrative.

82. Motzki suggests that he was. Rippin identifies the probable author of the final recension of *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* as Abū Muḥammad ᶜAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Wahb al-Dīnawarī (d. 920), to whom a *tafsīr* entitled *Al-Wāḍiḥ fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm* that is identical to other witnesses to *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* is attributed. However, Motzki argues that the evidence of the *isnāds* actually points to a *different* al-Dīnawarī, Abū Muḥammad ᶜAbd Allāh b. *al-Mubārak*, as the author. This suggestion is particularly tantalizing because this Ibn al-Mubārak al-Dīnawarī appears to have associated with scholars who are sometimes identified as Karrāmīs (Motzki, "Dating the So-Called *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās*," 147–152, 161). While the Karrāmiyya were moderates on the question of communal leadership, they were nevertheless self-consciously sectarian by al-Dīnawarī's time, and perhaps less constrained by Sunni ideals of accommodation, at least on the theoretical level.

Thus, *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* alludes to the "sound of *fitna*" tradition in its gloss on Q.20:86: "*So Moses returned*—[i.e.] when Moses returned—*to his people* with the Seventy, he heard the sound of *fitna*; then he became *full of anger and regret*, [i.e.] saddened."[83] In its exegesis of the atonement scene in Sura 2, it inserts the following terse gloss into the text of verse 54: "*So turn in repentance to your Creator...* They said, 'How should we make repentance?' He replied to them, '*Slay yourselves*.' So those who had not worshipped the Calf immediately began slaying those who had. '*That*—that is, repentance and killing—*would be better for you with your Creator...*'."[84] Further, we find essentially the same attitude to Aaron's role here in this text as in Muqātil's work: Aaron's failure to take up arms against the idolaters was motivated by a fear that "the people would have become two parties bent on slaying one another," and that this is what Moses in fact had expected him to do; Aaron's failure to do so was nothing short of a betrayal of his trust (*waṣiyya*). This becomes clear in the gloss on Q.20:92–93: "'*What hindered you from following me?*—why did you not follow my *waṣiyya,* so that you failed to engage them in battle? – *Did you not disobey* – did you not disregard—*my command* – [i.e.] my *waṣiyya*?... *You did not pay heed to my command*—you did not anticipate my return, and for that reason you gave up on fighting them.'"[85]

Though the wording of the corresponding glosses in *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* differs somewhat from that in *Tafsīr Muqātil* and the al-Kalbī tradition cited by Hūd, the same basic approach to the episode is nevertheless recognizable in all three texts.[86] It is possible that this agreement can be attributed to al-Kalbī as the putative common source here, since he is explicitly credited with Hūd's portrayal of the Calf episode, he was possibly plagiarized by Muqātil, and his work is conjectured to be the basis

83. Ibn ᶜAbbās (Pseudo-), *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ᶜIlmiyya, 2000), 333; cf. 180 *ad* Q.7:150.

84. Ibn ᶜAbbās (Pseudo-), *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās*, 11.

85. Ibn ᶜAbbās (Pseudo-), *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās*, 334. The term *waṣiyya* appears no fewer than three times in this passage.

86. If anything, it seems that the author of *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* is actually *more* strident in his attitude regarding the affair than even Muqātil, inasmuch as the former inserts a greater number of glosses that call attention to Aaron's partial responsibility for the episode than Muqātil does. It is possible that Muqātil's relative reticence on the issue reflects some concern for Aaron's prophetic status, a concern that is correspondingly greater in al-Ṭabarī's treatment of the issue, as we have seen, and that is generally lacking in *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās*. The absence of critical remarks about Aaron in Hūd's version of the episode perhaps confirms that this was not solely a Sunni concern.

of *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās*.[87] However, whether or not al-Kalbī can be credited with the "original" interpretation preserved in these three texts, he is the actual author of *none* of them. Therefore, regardless of whether he is ultimately responsible for the "sectarian" exegesis of the episode we have examined here, what we should emphasize is that Muqātil, Hūd, and the author or editor of *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās* all saw fit to integrate that interpretation into their commentaries and found its approach to the story congruous with their own worldviews. This tells us something important about the context of reception of this version of the story, just as much as al-Ṭabarī's strenuous attempts to suppress it.

Conclusion

I have argued that Muqātil's approach to the atonement scene in Sura 2 cannot strictly be thought of as "sectarian," inasmuch as this would be an anachronistic way to characterize an author of the second/eighth century who lived before the formulation of classical Sunnism. (However, in the case of the *tafsīr* of Hūd and *Tafsīr Ibn ᶜAbbās,* sectarian affiliation may have had something to do with the later reception of Muqātil's interpretation in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries.[88]) In contrast, in the fourth/tenth century, al-Ṭabarī's account may

87. There are some dim indications that the atonement scene was interpreted in a militant way very early in Islamic history by some who sought to actually implement its perceived advocacy for expiatory violence in the community. Al-Ṭabarī and other historians preserve accounts of a group of supporters of al-Ḥusayn who sought to atone for their inaction at the time of his death; early on during the Second Fitna, a small group of these partisans rebelled against the Umayyads, deliberately seeking martyrdom through facing overwhelming odds in battle. As Hawting has shown, these "Penitents"—*al-tawwābūn*—seem to have drawn the inspiration for their act of self-sacrifice from Q.2:54. See G.R. Hawting, "The Tawwābūn, Atonement and ᶜĀshūrā'," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 27 (1994): 166–181 and references therein. If the allegations of al-Kalbī's Shiᶜi leanings are accurate, it would be tempting to consider his exegesis a reflex of the Penitents' original reading of the episode.

88. However, the one other source in which Muqātil's interpretation appears before the fifth/eleventh century is the *tafsīr* of the Sunni Abū'l-Layth al-Samarqandī, who died towards the end of the fourth/tenth. He quotes a short version of the atonement scene in his comments *ad* Q.2:54 that includes an abbreviated version of the speech; my impression is that it is slightly more similar to Muqātil's version than other parallels, but the author cites this material as part of a longer string of traditions on the Calf narrative in 2:51–54 that he provides with the *isnād* al-Kalbī—Abū Ṣāliḥ—Ibn ᶜAbbās. See *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī,* ed. ᶜAlī Muḥammad Muᶜawwaḍ, ᶜĀdil Aḥmad ᶜAbd al-Mawjūd, and Zakariyyā ᶜAbd al-Majīd al-Nawwatī, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ᶜIlmiyya, 1993), 1.119–120. He explicitly notes that the command

be considered emblematic of the Sunni approach to the story, by which I mean that his hesitation to fully embrace the interpretation of earlier exegetes seems to be motivated by conspicuously Sunni attitudes and concerns. Other Sunnis disagreed with the early exegetes' point of view as well, and found different ways to express their discomfort with the received tradition of interpretation of the scene. For example, the great Ḥanafī theologian and exegete al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), a near-contemporary of al-Ṭabarī, not only avoided the strident interpretation given to the episode by Muqātil and others, but even saw fit to reject the common understanding of the explicit meaning of the quranic verses that inspired that interpretation. Al-Māturīdī seems unable to believe that the Quran proposes that Muslims—or any rightly guided followers of a prophet—should take up arms and murder one another for their perceived lapses of faith, even one as severe as idolatry. He therefore claims that the phrase "kill yourselves" in Q.2:54 cannot refer to actual killing, but rather that the people were instructed to "kill themselves" in striving to fully realize their wrongdoing and return to a state of true submission to God.[89]

On the other hand, despite al-Ṭabarī's wide influence and his strenuous efforts to marginalize more strident readings of the Calf episode, he was not wholly successful in supplanting the earlier approach to this difficult story with his own, and the reception history of the Muqātil/al-Kalbī tradition thus becomes much more complicated after this time. Beginning in the fifth/eleventh century, aspects of the exegesis of Muqātil and the other early exegetes we have examined here echo throughout the later *tafsīr* tradition. This is at least partially due to the role of al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035) in preserving and disseminating it.[90] For example, the "sound of *fitna*" tradition as we know it from Muqātil came to be very widely dif-

to the Israelites to slay themselves meant that they had to kill their kinsmen. The extant creed attributed to al-Samarqandī appears to be Ḥanafī.

89. Al-Māturīdī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿaẓīm,* ed. Fāṭima Yusūf al-Khayyamī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2004), 1.52. This figurative reading of the "slaying" mandated by Q.2:54 occasionally recurs in modern commentaries and translations, particularly among self-consciously rationalist exegetes.

90. On al-Thaʿlabī's signature ecumenism and "enlargement of the encyclopedic spirit" that led him to encompass a far greater variety of material in his *tafsīr* than al-Ṭabarī had a century earlier, see Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 17–20; cf. 178–191 on al-Thaʿlabī's efforts to defuse Shiʿi material by embracing it and relocating it in a non-sectarian framework.

fused; however, once it was removed from its original context as part of a secessionist or sectarian framework for understanding the Calf narrative, the tradition that Moses heard not battle but rather *fitna* (trial) on his way back from Sinai and then went on to cause *fitna* (strife, division) among his people tended to lose some of its ironic resonance.

In writing his own commentary, al-Thaʿlabī used the *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī in three recensions and that of Muqātil in two recensions. As he deploys these earlier exegetes' material on this episode, he preserves the reference to Moses' *waṣiyya* and even parts of the confrontation between Moses and Aaron as Muqātil has it (e.g., "If I had disavowed them, the people would have become two parties bent on slaying each other...") However, most aspects of al-Thaʿlabī's presentation are less strident in tone, and those specific implications of the earlier reading of the story that Sunnis might find most problematic have become much harder to detect in his *tafsīr*; this is because those narrative components that have a distinctly sectarian "feel" are now swamped by the vast amount of other material he presents here, much of which is taken from al-Ṭabarī.[91] Notably, al-Ṭabarī's version of the "sound of *fitna*" tradition ("I hear the voices of people rejoicing," avoiding the term *fitna* entirely) is not found in al-Thaʿlabī's *tafsīr*, and on the whole, it seems to have found its way into far fewer commentaries than the older version found in *Tafsīr Muqātil*.[92]

Al-Thaʿlabī's short presentation of the climax of the atonement scene may be thought to lie somewhere between those of Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī in its ideological posture. In his version, which is anomalously attributed to the early authority Qatāda b. Diʿāma (d. 117/735), some of the Israel-

91. Al-Thaʿlabī's version of the "sound of *fitna*" tradition, cited *ad* Q.20:89–90, is somewhat different from those versions extant in earlier sources: "When Moses returned and heard the *outcry* and *uproar* while the people were *dancing* around the Calf, the Seventy who were with him said, 'This is the sound of *fitna*.'" *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān,* ed. Abū Muḥammad Ibn ʿĀshūr, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2002), 6.258. This could have been al-Thaʿlabī's own formulation, or it could have been the reading in one of the recensions of *Tafsīr Muqātil* or *Tafsīr al-Kalbī* that is no longer extant. Whatever the case, the recurrence of the tradition in this specific form in several major *tafsīr*s of the sixth/twelfth through eighth/fourteenth centuries and beyond indicates the wide-ranging influence of al-Thaʿlabī on the genre, especially given that a number of these authors (e.g. al-Baghāwī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Khāzin al-Baghdādī, etc.) drew directly upon his work. Some of these preserve other aspects of the episode as al-Thaʿlabī has it as well, for example the references to Moses' *waṣiyya*.

92. E.g.: Ibn ʿAṭiyya *ad* Q.7:150; Abū Ḥayyān *ad* 7:143; Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib *ad* 20:88 ff. (note that Makkī has *both* versions, citing Muqātil's version *ad* 7:150).

ites—he does not specify who—undertake to carry out Moses' command to kill the idolaters. When they see that these are their own people, sons and fathers and friends and neighbors, they lose heart. God then sends down a thick fog and dark clouds to obscure everything, and a nameless voice gives a version of the speech that we have seen several times before, exhorting the righteous Israelites to take heart and not hesitate, for hesitation will invalidate their gesture of repentance. Here too it is said that the slain are martyrs and the slayers achieve atonement.[93]

It is hard to discern exactly what al-Thaʿlabī's attitude to this event is. He seems to emphasize that the killers hesitated to kill their kinsmen, requiring that the act be cloaked in darkness; further, that they had to be spurred on (by God? by Moses?) would seem to signal that they found this act distasteful, though it had to be done to obey God's will and to achieve atonement for the people's sin. That said, we find a surprising short gloss, also attributed to Qatāda, preceding al-Thaʿlabī's version of the narrative: "The worship of the Calf necessitated killing, because they became apostates, and their disbelief made the shedding of their blood permissible (*al-kufr yabīḥu al-damm*)." Contrary to the impression one gets from the narrative he relates that the killing was an act of collective atonement that the Israelites undertook unwillingly (as in al-Ṭabarī), this short statement recalls the stridency of Muqātil. Like the "sound of *fitna*" tradition, the recurrence of this version of the core part of the atonement scene in later *tafsīrs* may likewise be due to al-Thaʿlabī's wide influence. A number of later Sunni exegetes seem to draw on it, though to my knowledge the statement about the idolaters' blood becoming liable on account of their disbelief is not repeated again in this context.[94]

93. Al-Thaʿlabī, *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān,* 1.198. This tradition and the attribution to Qatāda seem to be unprecedented before this time, but, as Saleh has shown, al-Thaʿlabī made use of a bewildering number of sources that are now lost to us, including many *tafsīr*s composed during the century intervening between him and al-Ṭabarī. In some respects, it resembles the tradition the latter attributes to al-Suddī quoted *ad* Q.2:54 (1.75, no. 938, cited numerous times above).

94. Once again it is no surprise to find al-Thaʿlabī's version of this part of the narrative in al-Baghāwī, al-Khāzin, and Abū Ḥayyān. The version of al-Zamakhsharī seems to draw on him as well (*Al-Kashshāf,* 4 vols. [Cairo: Al-Bābī al-Ḥalābī, 1966], 1.281), as does that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, though the latter seems to attribute the account to al-Kalbī (*Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 3.82; this certainly suggests that al-Thaʿlabī's citation of Qatāda might have come from one of the recensions of *Tafsīr al-Kalbī* he knew). It is difficult to trace the later reception of these traditions with certainty given the frequent overlap in phrasing between the various versions, especially given that no recension of *Tafsīr al-Kalbī* has survived to the present day. Notably, Ibn Kathīr surveys several versions

Thus, at least by the beginning of the medieval period, as it filtered into the later tradition, Muqātil and al-Kalbī's approach to the episode had largely lost its sectarian associations. Al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the narrative reflects his active attempt to defuse those associations, indicating that they were potent in his time; however, his approach to the episode did not become particularly definitive for later Sunni exegetes, many of whom freely accepted both the basic narrative components and even, in some cases, the militant spirit of the earlier exegetes' interpretation.[95] But the complexity of the later reception history of this material does not detract from the overall point I seek to make here, namely that a close reading of the exegesis of the Calf episode, especially regarding its communitarian implications, can serve as a barometer of changing political (or politico-religious) attitudes in early Islam. The palpable shift in approach that becomes evident when we compare Muqātil's reading of the quranic narrative in Sura 2 with that of al-Ṭabarī highlights the central, but often only implicit, issues that informed Muslim readings of that narrative during the first four centuries of the Hijri era.

The whole point of this exercise has been to show that if we concentrate too much on investigating the putative Jewish or Christian sources of biblical or quasi-biblical material in Muslim tradition, we fail to appreciate the complex way in which exegetes actually made use of that material. Acknowledging that a given aspect of Muqātil or al-Ṭabarī's interpretation may have biblical roots or midrashic parallels is surely important; for example, as I have shown, Muqātil's remark about Aaron being more beloved by the Israelites than Moses is almost incomprehensible without understanding the midrashic tradition on Aaron as "one who pursues

of the scene from various sources; not only are the versions of Muqātil, al-Kalbī, and al-Thaʿlabī not represented here (unsurprising given these exegetes' poor reputation among later Sunnis after Ibn Taymiyya's critique of so-called *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*), but *none* of the accounts he cites features the speech that was given to encourage the killers (*Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿaẓīm,* 8 vols. [Riyadh: Al-Mamlakah al-ʿArabiyya al-Saʿūdiyya, 1997], 1.261–263). It would perhaps not be wrong to consider the speech the most distinctive mark of "secessionist" exegesis of the atonement scene.

95. Al-Thaʿlabī begins his comments on Q.2:54 by citing al-Ṭabarī: "Abū Jaʿfar said that God refused to accept the repentance of the Israelites only on account of their aversion to taking up arms when they worshipped the Calf" (*Al-Kashf wa'l-Bayān,* 1.198). In other words, al-Thaʿlabī reads al-Ṭabarī as saying that the command to the people to "slay yourselves" was only necessary because they had not already done the job of punishing the idolaters themselves; but this seems like a description of the exegesis of Muqātil, not al-Ṭabarī. Either al-Thaʿlabī has grotesquely misread al-Ṭabarī, or I have.

peace" (*rôdēp šālôm*) as its subtext. But if uncovering these sources, roots, and parallels becomes our exclusive concern, we miss the larger context that truly makes Muslim authors' engagement with the history of Israel meaningful and comprehensible.

Further, in the same way that appreciating Muslim exegetes' use of received material and the deeper underlying concerns that guided that use requires us to distance ourselves from the perennial obsession with sources and influences that has so overwhelmed the study of the biblical tradition in Islam in the past, we must also gain some critical distance from the search for the "original" or "essential" quranic meaning as well. I have deliberately avoided the question of the significance of the quranic atonement scene in its original context, because this is a separate concern from that of how the scene was understood by exegetes who lived in a very different time and milieu.[96] Naturally, understanding what the Quran does with biblical material, however it was transmitted, is important, but understanding what the living tradition of *tafsīr* did with what the Quran did with that material is equally important, if not more so. This, it seems to me, is the whole purpose of studying the commentary literature in the first place, especially considering that *tafsīr*'s primary function is to make the Quran relevant from age to age, to reshape quranic meaning in terms of the changing values and ideals of the Muslim community, and to address issues of perennial significance such as sin, communal integrity, violence, and atonement.

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96. Angelika Neuwirth connects the Calf narrative of Sura 2 with an ongoing dialogue between the fledgling Muslim community and the Jews of Medina regarding the observance of formal rituals of atonement; see "'Oral Scriptures' in Contact. The Qur'ānic Story of the Golden Calf and its Biblical Subtext between Narrative, Cult, and Inter-communal Debate," in *Self-Referentiality in the Qur'ān,* ed. Stefan Wild (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 71–91. Muqātil's reading of Aaron's duty emphasizes that he was supposed to fight the sinners; other exegetes emphasize instead that he should have simply abandoned his sinful community. It is obvious that the exegetes could have connected this in some way with the Hijra (i.e. Muhammad did what Aaron did not or could not do), but to my knowledge the Calf episode is never connected with remembrances of the Prophet's career in the *tafsīr* literature.

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