CHAPTER 9

Some Reflections on Borrowing, Influence, and the Entwining of Jewish and Islamic Traditions; or, What an Image of a Calf Might Do

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I am extremely gratified to be able to contribute to this volume in honor of Andrew Rippin, as there are few scholars who have exerted as much of an impact on my own work and ideas as he has. When I entered graduate school some fifteen years ago Andrew's impressive body of publications on *tafsīr* constituted my introduction to the discipline at a time when it was not nearly as robust as it is today. His surveys of the field, his edited volumes, and his discussions of the work of Wansbrough remain invaluable for the clarity with which they show us what has already been accomplished, what is problematic about older approaches to the genre, and what work still remains to be done.[1] His magisterial treatment of the ubiquitous commentary misleadingly entitled *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* vividly demonstrates the need to approach texts and traditions of the *tafsīr* genre with a keen appreciation for the symbolic function of attribution, both as an authorizing device and as a means of shaping collective memory.[2] My own articles on the lost *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī and the corpus of

1 Andrew Rippin has produced an invaluable body of work of a propaedeutic sort on the genre of *tafsīr*, which, when viewed in retrospect, allows us to see clearly the massive advances in the field over the last decades. See, e.g., The present status of *tafsīr* studies, *Muslim World* 72 (1982), 224–38; Literary analysis of *Qur'ān, tafsīr*, and *sīra*. The methodologies of John Wansbrough, in Richard C. Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in religious studies* (Tuscon, AZ 1985), 151–63, 227–32; (ed.) *Approaches to the history of the interpretation of the Qur'ān*, Oxford 1988; Studying early *tafsīr* texts, *Der Islam* 72 (1995), 310–23; Quranic studies, Part IV. Some methodological notes, *Method and theory in the study of religion* 9 (1997), 39–46; Tafsīr, *EI2*; (ed.) *The Qur'ān. Formative interpretation*, Aldershot 1999; foreword, translations, and annotations to John Wansbrough, *Quranic studies. Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation*, Amherst, NY 2004[2]; (ed.), *The Blackwell companion to the Qur'ān*, Oxford 2006; Tafsir, *Oxford bibliographies online research guide* (2011).

2 Andrew Rippin, *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* and criteria for dating early *tafsīr* texts, *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994), 38–83. This article should be read in the context of a number of other studies Andrew published in the 1980s and 1990s that address the problem of extant texts implausibly attributed to major figures of the early tradition on the one hand, and the

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traditions attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih would have been impossible to conceive without Andrew's pioneering work.[3]

Today, *tafsīr* studies has clearly emerged as a field of inquiry distinct from the study of the Qur'ān, and it is hard to believe that this could have happened without Andrew's contributions. His various discussions of specific qur'anic topoi and, especially, his work on the subgenre of *asbāb al-nuzūl* offer compelling evidence of why it is so crucial for scholars to recognize that there is far more going on in *tafsīr* than first meets the eye.[4] Along with his contemporaries Patricia Crone and Gerald Hawting, Andrew has for decades been a consistent (and insistent) voice for the necessity of distinguishing the Qur'ān's meaning in the originating contexts of Late Antiquity and the prophetic period – what we are increasingly comfortable calling an historical-critical approach to the text – from the massive edifice of almost 1,400 years of Muslim exegesis.

The idea of studying the Qur'ān on its own terms has now gained considerable traction in Anglo-American and European academic circles, to a degree unknown – and perhaps unforeseen – when Andrew and a handful of his peers began publishing in this vein some forty years ago.[5] However, in Andrew's work in particular, this perspective is constantly tempered by a complementary insistence on understanding *tafsīr* on its own terms as well – that is, with an appreciation for the way exegesis functions as an arena in which Muslim beliefs, behavioral norms, and values are expressed and

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subgenre of *tafsīr* works of a specifically lexical and periphrastic nature on the other; cf. Ibn 'Abbās's *al-Lughāt fi'l-Qur'ān, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 44 (1981), 15–25; the short appendix Ibn 'Abbās's *Gharīb al-Qur'ān, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46 (1983), 332–3; al-Zuhrī, *Naskh al-Qur'ān* and the problem of early *tafsīr* texts, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47 (1984), 22–43; and Lexicographical texts and the Qur'ān, in *Approaches to the history of the interpretation of the Qur'ān*, 158–74.

3 Michael E. Pregill, Methodologies for the dating of exegetical works and traditions. Can the lost *tafsīr* of Kalbī be recovered from *Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās* (also known as *al-Wāḍiḥ*)?, in Karen Bauer (ed.), *Aims, methods and contexts of qur'anic exegesis* (*2nd/8th–9th/15th c.*) (Oxford 2013), 393–453; idem, *Isrā'īliyyāt*, myth, and pseudepigraphy. Wahb b. Munabbih and the early Islamic versions of the fall of Adam and Eve, *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008), 215–84.

4 See, e.g., Andrew Rippin: The function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in qur'anic exegesis, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51 (1988), 1–20, which serves most directly to address a question raised by Wansbrough, viz., whether this material primarily has a legal ("halakhic") or narrative ("haggadic") function. The historiographical implications of Andrew's demonstration of the exegetical function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* are difficult to overlook, however.

5 On the current renaissance in critical studies of the Qur'ān, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, Introduction. The golden age of qur'ānic studies?, in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in its historical context 2* (Abingdon, UK 2011), 1–21.

shaped, in stark contrast to an historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān that discards traditional exegesis as an impediment to getting at the "original" meaning of the text.

Andrew's work in qurʾanic studies has not been as controversial as that of some others who have been dubbed "revisionists," though it has frequently been just as subversive. This is due, I think, to the careful, subtle, and non-polemical way in which he poses his arguments. He has not shied from asserting that traditional Muslim accounts of the Qurʾān's genesis are primarily hagiographical, reflecting the value system and conceptions of the mature Islamic tradition. But in his work, the point that *tafsīr* reflects not the historical, intrinsic, or "original" meaning of the Qurʾān is always tempered by the complementary point that it represents not an obfuscation, or a doctrinal imposition, or a mendacious fabrication, but rather a dynamic, creative attempt on the part of Muslim interpreters to make the Qurʾān comprehensible and vital in their particular time and place – that is, to render it into *scripture*, a living touchstone of meaning, and not just a collection of texts of antiquarian interest. Given his persistent emphasis on distinguishing Qurʾān from *tafsīr*, his importance in encouraging the emergence of both qurʾanic studies and *tafsīr* studies as separate but complementary fields, and his direct impact on my own work, it seems wholly appropriate to dedicate the following reflections on the phenomenon of influence to him.

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Direct, face-to-face communication of ideas, especially through the transmission of oral or written texts, is the most obvious way knowledge passes from one individual, culture, or community to another. At least, it is the easiest for us to imagine, especially in a world of instant connectivity, when communication via the spoken or written word can occur almost instantaneously, defying all limitations of time and space, and practically any form of expression can be readily archived, broadcast, and given a limitless shelf-life. But this is also perhaps the least sophisticated way of conceiving of "influence," one party simply passively deriving information from another, or receiving and duplicating what the other has written or said, with the borrower then indebted to the original source, and both playing a clearly delineated role in what is ultimately a transactive rather than interactive relationship.

This conception of how cross-cultural communication works, privileging a rather flat and mechanistic idea of influence driven by a direct and one-dimensional process of imitation and borrowing, has long haunted our

imaginings of the origins and development of Islam.[6] This is first and foremost due to the titanic impact of the work of Abraham Geiger, who is justifiably credited with both initiating the modern discipline of qur'anic studies in the West in the first half of the nineteenth century and helping to foster a more objective and less overtly polemical approach to the life of Muḥammad.[7] Although Geiger sought to avoid the obvious biases operative in previous European scholarship on the Qur'ān and the Prophet, his approach to both centered on a conception of the former primarily as a pastiche of biblical and rabbinic traditions, and the latter as profoundly indebted to Jewish informants with whom he had direct and prolonged contact.[8]

In Geiger's view, Muḥammad's borrowing was initially motivated by his desire to appeal to the Jews of the Ḥijāz, who were in his estimation a 'learned people', in distinction to the Prophet's pagan Arab contemporaries, who were submerged in the state of ignorance that the Qur'ān calls *jāhiliyya*.[9] Geiger could not imagine any other possible source for the Qur'ān's extensive references to eschatology, cosmology, and the prophetic and patriarchal history of Israel than the biblical and midrashic traditions; nor could he imagine any other audience for Muḥammad's appropriations and adaptations of those traditions than the Jews he sought to woo to his cause, their recognition of his authenticity serving to validate his claims to prophecy.[10] Even after his schism with the Jewish tribes of Medina with whom he was initially allied, Muḥammad continued to tap into the rich vein of material his informants made available

6 For a provocative attempt to excavate some of the theoretical underpinnings of ideas of "influence" in the study of Islam, see Steven Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew. The problem of symbiosis under early Islam*, Princeton, NJ 1995.

7 Geiger's 1832 Bonn thesis, *Was hat Mohamed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*, has long been available in English as *Judaism and Islám*, trans F.M. Young, Vepery 1898.

8 See the summary of Geiger and his context in my The Hebrew Bible and the Quran. The problem of the Jewish "Influence" on Islam, *Religion Compass* 1 (2007), 643–59.

9 Cf. Q 5:50; 33:33; 48:26.

10 In reality, this is not entirely true, for Geiger does briefly acknowledge the fact that a tradition in the Qur'ān perceived as a borrowing from Judaism can only be securely identified as such if it is disqualified as a borrowing from Christianity – which implies, of course, that such might actually be the case. However, he dismisses such a broader comparative exercise as beyond the scope of his work (*Judaism and Islám*, 29–30). This points to a larger problem, which is that because his expertise was limited to ancient Judaism, there may be allusions to and borrowings of Christian tradition in the Qur'ān he was simply not equipped to recognize. Had he been trained in and conversant with the literature of Eastern Christianity, Geiger's work would likely have been quite different, as would the contours of the discipline of qur'anic studies in the West subsequently inspired by the resulting thesis.

to him one way or another – through direct consultation, by observing their practices and listening to their discourse, or even by assimilating and reversing their witty rejoinders to his preaching. That is, even their learned attacks on his claims became the basis of new revelations – influence exerted through polemic, reshaped through appropriation of and response to negative assertions about Muḥammad's ministry and message, rearticulated as what is now commonly called the counter-discourse of the Qurʾān.[11]

It has been almost two hundred years since Geiger's pioneering work in the field. Many scholars who came after him refined his analysis, seeking to introduce new philological or historical rigor into the quest for the sources of the Qurʾān, but they commonly maintained his basic thesis, namely that Muḥammad produced the Qurʾān by extensively borrowing from Jews, and thus that Islam was profoundly indebted to Judaism from its very foundation. The development of this genre of scholarship over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often reflects changing political circumstances, as well as authors' particular concern to demonstrate the inferiority of Islam and the superiority of the Bible, Judaism, or Christianity – often abandoning the eirenic tone that made Geiger's work so progressive for its time.[12] A small minority of scholars, especially Tor Andræ, reacted against Geiger's approach by seeking to shift the emphasis from rabbinic Jewish to Eastern Christian sources – realigning the vectors of influence, but hardly altering the basic presuppositions.[13]

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11 A phenomenon now explored at length in Mehdi Azaiez, *Le contre-discourse coranique*, Berlin 2015.

12 Works of this sort have been produced for the better part of a century and a half; some major milestones of the genre across the 20th century include Gustav Weil, *Biblische Legenden der Muselmänner*, Frankfurt 1845, English trans. *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud*, London 1846; William St. Clair Tisdall, *The original sources of the Qur'ân*, London 1905; Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish foundation of Islam*, New York 1933; Denise Masson, *Le Coran et la révélation judéo-chrétienne*, 2 vols., Paris 1958; Jacques Jomier, *Bible et Coran*, Paris 1959; and Katsh, *Judaism in Islām. Biblical and Talmudic backgrounds of the Koran and its commentaries, suras II and III* (New York 1954), reprinted as *Judaism and the Koran*, New York 1962. The most current adumbrations of this approach are Israeli: thus André C. Zaoui, *The Jewish sources of the Qur'ān* [Heb.], Jerusalem 1989; Bat-Sheva Garsiel, *Scripture, Midrash, and Qur'ān. An intertextual investigation into shared literary materials* [Heb.], Tel Aviv 2006. Recently, Haggai Mazuz has revived the attempt to determine the social and religious character of the Jews of Medina by identifying supposedly borrowed traditions in the Qurʾān and correlating them with rabbinic materials, essentially reverse-engineering an image of Muḥammad's Jewish contemporaries: *The religious and spiritual life of the Jews of Medina*, Leiden 2014, and see my comments in *Review of qur'anic research* 2/2 (2016).

13 See Tor Andræ, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum*, Uppsala 1926, and *Mohamed. Sein Leben und seine Glaube*, Göttingen 1932; the latter was published in

While the exploration of Syriac Christian precursors to the Qur'ān and early Islam has recently exploded in popularity and become quite productive for advancing our sense of their literary, cultural, and religious contexts, few of these studies explicitly address the basic mechanism of influence that long informed scholarship on Islamic origins.[14] We have come to a point when it is instead simply more politic to dodge the question. That is, while Geiger and many of his followers took for granted a direct, face-to-face transmission of knowledge to Muḥammad from his informants, today scholars avoid making such assertions directly, for which we may be grateful. But few are willing to speculate as to how exactly precursor traditions – the oral or written corpora that illuminate the literary horizons of the Qur'ān and its audience – relate to the Qur'ān, or how knowledge of contemporary Jewish and Christian lore came to be communicated to the author or authors who produced the Muslim scripture. Whether they emphasize Jewish or Christian parallels to the Qur'ān, or rather remain completely agnostic about the communal orientation and probable origins of the proto-Islamic movement in the prophetic period, scholars today have simply abandoned the question of *how* – how the currents of Late Antique thought and religiosity that appear to have left a significant deposit in the Qur'ān flowed into Arabia, and under what circumstances.

Two factors are likely to be at play here; curiously, they seem to stem from completely different imperatives. Both are no doubt familiar to most readers of this volume (especially those conversant with the work of the scholar whom it honors). First, at least to some, the revisionist critique of the traditional sources available for the study of Islamic origins that emerged in the 1970s introduced an insurmountable degree of skepticism regarding our knowledge of the prophetic period; barring the discovery of new evidence, almost any attempt to write a positivist history of the beginnings of Muḥammad's movement, the life of the Prophet, or the origins of the Qur'ān now seems hopelessly suspect.[15] Second, the significant demographic changes in scholarship

English as *Mohammed, the man and his faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel, New York 1936. Despite the careful and sympathetic tone of these studies, Andræ's contemporary Johann Fück criticized his reliance on the language of influence and psychological determinism, anticipating much later critiques of such an approach; see his Die Originalität des arabischen Propheten, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 90 (1936), 509–25, published in English as The originality of the Arabian prophet, in Merlin Swartz (ed. and trans.), *Studies on Islam* (Oxford 1981), 86–98.

14 For an overview of recent studies exploring Syriac subtexts in the Qur'ān and their implications, see Emran El-Badawi, The impact of Aramaic (especially Syriac) on the Qur'ān, *Religion Compass* 8 (2014), 220–8.

15 Harald Motzki, Alternative accounts of the Qur'ān's formation, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to the Qur'ān* (Cambridge 2006), 59–75 offers a concise

in both Anglophone and European university cultures, particularly the influx of Muslim students and scholars as full participants in a scholarly world from which they were formerly largely excluded, has encouraged a countervailing sympathy for the conventional account of Islam's origins, at least in its broad contours. This sometimes entails aversion to discussions of the possible literary influences on the Qurʾān – to say nothing of the question of authorship.[16]

In short, although such an approach to the Qurʾān was once widespread in Western scholarship, explicit discussions of Muḥammad's role as the author of the Qurʾān, responding directly to the lore and learning of his Jewish (and/or Christian) contemporaries, are now completely unfashionable in the Western academy, among both revisionists and those opposed to revisionism alike. However, a new consensus regarding alternative ways of imagining and talking about the human agencies behind the creation and assemblage of the qurʾanic corpus as we have it today has simply not emerged. Accounts such as Andræ's description of Muḥammad imitating the prayer, vigils, and fasting practiced by Christian monks he saw on caravan journeys, or St. Clair Tisdall's ridiculing the Prophet for garbling the biblical stories he heard from the rabbis of Medina, now strike us as hopelessly retrograde and politically objectionable. Thankfully, few authors today would describe the formation of the Qurʾān in such a crude way; to do so seems irresponsible, if not blatantly reductionist.

The fact remains, however, that *someone* must have written the Qurʾān; we simply do not know who, or where they got their information, or how old the contents of the Qurʾān are, or where they came from. But as our understanding of the likely literary parallels to qurʾanic material continues to grow, scholars seem by and large helpless to articulate a sophisticated model for the actual development of the qurʾanic corpus, in stark contrast to the relative coherence of theories of the emergence of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (although these remain perennially contested). The *textus receptus* of the Qurʾān must have had a pre-history, but we simply do not know anything

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overview of revisionist approaches as they have impacted the study of the Qurʾān, though his treatment is now out of date given the surge in activity in this field of research over the last decade.

16 I am not implying that a "closing of the Muslim mind" has stifled scholarly inquiry, as is sometimes alleged, but rather that the inclusion of Muslim voices in academic discourse has led to increasing recognition of the questionable motivations and political investments that have often impelled Euro-American perspectives on the origins of the Qurʾān. The new *Study Quran* edited by a team of scholars headed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, New York 2015, represents an intriguing attempt to cultivate an academic approach to the Qurʾān anchored in the formidable edifice of traditional Muslim scholarship, a tradition that has often been blithely discarded wholesale by revisionists.

about it – though we may be quite certain that the picture is far more complicated than that which prevailed for a century and a half, when scholars commonly imagined Muḥammad simply repeating (and often distorting) what the Arabian Jewish rabbis or itinerant Christian monks who were his teachers and interlocutors taught him.

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Another area in which the question of models and mechanisms of influence comes to the fore is that of the so-called *Isrāʾīliyyāt*. Muslim tradition steadfastly denies the possibility of Jewish influence on the Qurʾān – precisely the phenomenon that Geiger placed at the heart of research into Islam's origins. However, the tradition does contain what has seemed to many observers to be direct evidence of a wholesale transfer of knowledge into Islam from Judaism via Jewish informants, converts, or, somewhat later, Muslim antiquarians who collected the lore of *Ahl al-kitāb* in the post-prophetic period. A significant body of *ḥadīth* and *akhbār* seems to testify to the role played by figures such as Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, ʿAbdallāh b. Salām, and Wahb b. Munabbih in channeling *kitābī* materials into Islam, first through their disciples and followers, and then through later generations of traditionists, exegetes, and historians who deployed them to comment on the Qurʾān, relate events from pre-Islamic history, illuminate juristic problems, or for a host of other purposes.

Here, too, a basic idea of direct, face-to-face transmission of knowledge prevails in most accounts of the dissemination of this material. The evolution of Muslim attitudes to the traditions of *Ahl al-kitāb* has been much discussed. Some early Muslims were clearly ambivalent about it, but while some statements of suspicion and distrust survive from the early period, there was evidently an equal amount of interest in encouraging the collection of this lore, expressed most famously in a prophetic *ḥadīth* authorizing the practice: "relate traditions from Banū Isrāʾīl, for there is no harm in it" (*ḥaddithū ʿan banī isrāʾīla wa-la ḥaraja*) – as long as said traditions are consonant with the Qurʾān and the Prophet's own teachings, at any rate.[17]

This early acceptance of "borrowing" from *kitābī*s stands in stark contrast to the open hostility with which later scholars confronted the phenomenon. The advent of an abiding concern to model a pure Islam based exclusively on the Qurʾān and the precedents set during the golden age of the Prophet and his successors, eventually known as Salafism, encouraged the denunciation of

17 M.J. Kister, *Ḥaddithū ʿan banī isrāʾīla wa-lā ḥaraja*. A study of an early tradition, *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972), 215–39.

any kind of "foreign" influences in Islam. Unsurprisingly, this critique of the received tradition as tainted by incursions from the lore of *Ahl al-kitāb* often accompanies an excessive concern with social and religious boundaries. That is, many of the critics of what came to be called *Isrā'īliyyāt*, the lore of Israel (broadly defined) that had infiltrated the received tradition, have also tended to be acutely concerned with keeping various forms of social and cultural contamination at bay, whether coming from Jews, Christians, sectarians, or heretics. This is as true of medieval opponents of the *Isrā'īliyyāt* like Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr as it is of the modern ideologues who took up this polemic, sharpened in the modern era by tensions surrounding colonialism, confrontations with Western powers, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.[18]

While earlier Western scholarship on *Isrā'īliyyāt* took the description of this material and its origins drawn from mediaeval Muslim sources largely at face value, in the last two decades scholars have come to recognize that *Isrā'īliyyāt* is fundamentally an ideological construct rather than an historical phenomenon *per se*. The polemic against *Isrā'īliyyāt* seeks to establish a clear and unassailable boundary between what is original and authentic in Islam from what is foreign and unreliable, exploiting an image of Jews in particular as agents of subversion and corruption. That we are here talking about ideology and not a properly historical phenomenon is readily established: not everything in the tradition decried as *Isrā'īliyyāt* is of demonstrable Jewish origin, and not everything in the tradition of demonstrable Jewish origin is decried as *Isrā'īliyyāt.* That is, the term is deployed inconsistently, evaluated on the basis of highly questionable criteria, for conspicuously political ends. In short, the emperor has no clothes: there is no such thing as *Isrā'īliyyāt*, at least as conventionally understood, and contemporary scholars who seek to employ it for objective textual analysis have mistaken an ideological tool, a discourse about authority cloaked in claims about authenticity, for a neutral historical category.[19]

Thus, the attribution of transmission of originally (or supposedly originally) Jewish, Christian, and biblical traditions – the sort of material inconsistently

18 On this, see Ronald L. Nettler, Early Islam, modern Islam and Judaism. The *Isrā'īliyyāt* in modern Islamic thought, in Ronald L. Nettler and Suha Taji-Farouki (eds.), *Muslim-Jewish encounters. Intellectual traditions and modern politics* (New York 1998), 1–14.

19 That is, the claim of a corrosive Jewish influence on Islam functions primarily as a form of anti-Jewish rhetoric; there may be some historical reality behind accounts of "borrowing," but the question of veracity is irrelevant to the larger ideological function that *Isrā'īliyyāt* as a concept has played in Salafī discourse. My understanding of this phenomenon is deeply conditioned by David Nirenberg's methodology in his monumental *Anti-Judaism. The Western tradition*, New York 2013.

deemed to be *Isrā'īlīyyāt* at a much later date – to a handful of specific informants and scholars in the early tradition is likely to be pseudepigraphic, a largely symbolic gesture. In the early evolution of the Islamic tradition, materials were explicitly or implicitly marked as having *kitābī* origins through attribution to individuals who functioned as bridge figures due to their marginality or hybridity, especially converts or the disciples of converts. This served as a means of accounting for the presence of a range of material conserved in *ḥadīth, tafsīr*, and other genres that was deemed of lesser importance due to its perceptible proximity to *Ahl al-kitāb* on account of its subject matter (eschatology, cosmology, *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, etc.), but likely *independent of its actual historical origin*. Conversely, as has long been recognized, materials deemed to have greater importance were marked as such by being raised to the status of prophetic *ḥadīth* or associated with Companions of some stature, especially Ibn ʿAbbās. This observation allows us to reconceptualize the milieu in which this material was originally disseminated, as it was likely to have been diffused and assimilated through a variety of complex cultural processes, at a time when religious and social boundaries – the demarcation between insiders and outsiders, the purely "Islamic" and the foreign – were likely to have been quite fluid.[20]

Here we are more dependent on conjecture, but it is not impossible to imagine analogous processes behind the genesis of the Qur'ān as well. That is to say that while Geiger and his followers understood the narratives adumbrated in the *ḥadīth, tafsīr*, and *sīra* to provide literal accounts of the concrete contexts in which the palpably biblical, Jewish, and Christian material found in the Qur'ān made its way there – as documentation of the processes of influence that allowed Muḥammad to author his revelations – we might instead seek to read these narratives as symbolic, as literary encapsulations of much broader processes of cultural diffusion and assimilation. As with the narratives describing transmission of the *Isrā'īlīyyāt*, narratives describing Muḥammad's encounters with monks and rabbis similarly condense a complex historical situation into a simple representation of face-to-face, person-to-person transmission of ideas. As we break with the influence paradigm, other interpretive possibilities may open up for us.

20 On the function of pseudepigraphy in the *ḥadīth* and associated report-based literatures as a means employed by later collectors to sort things out, reducing what were originally much more complex processes of diffusion of traditions, see Pregill, *Isrā'īlīyyāt*, myth, and pseudepigraphy, 237–41. I would now perhaps emphasize even more strongly the diversity of ways in which cultural "influences" are disseminated, on analogy with the complex models now utilized by historians of science to analyze the diffusion of new technologies.

Direct, one-to-one transmission of cultural goods – "influences" – from informant to recipient thus appears as an especially facile way to think about the composition of the Qur'ān or the influx of lore from older communities – that is, the very essence of Islam's relationship to its religious and cultural environment. Narratives about Muḥammad's interactions with his Jewish contemporaries or early Muslims consulting learned *kitābī*s on questions of ritual law, history, or scriptural interpretation must, in the final analysis, be understood as exegetical, pseudepigraphical, and even ideological in nature, expressions of the ways later generations of Muslims understood qur'anic discourse to have evolved or their predecessors to have navigated the tricky terrain of negotiating their relationship to various religious others. This is ultimately not about historical veracity, but rather collective memory.[21]

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In later contexts, about which the tradition perhaps preserves more reliable historical information (that is, less likely to be swathed in hagiography), the importance of a direct communication of ideas cannot be denied. Throughout Islamic history, there are numerous examples of nameable, dateable authors who in their time contributed to significant improvements in Muslim understanding of other cultures though a premodern version of ethnography – direct observation of those cultures and interaction with "native informants" (to invoke a discredited anthropological term) – as well as by consulting their texts. One thinks, for example, of the Barmakid expedition to Central Asia, and the well-known reports of Ja'far al-Barmakī testifying to the varieties of Buddhism still in evidence in his day on the borders of Iran; early travelers to India like Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī, whose accounts furnished Muslims with some of their earliest ideas about the subcontinent before Muslim political and military advances there; the sojourns of Ibn Faḍlān and Ibn Rustah in Northern and Eastern Europe; and, in the very heartlands of Islam, Ibn Waḥshiyya's accounts of Chaldaean and Egyptian culture and religion.

21 For a different, but complementary, perspective see Thomas Sizgorich's discussion of Ibn Ḥanbal in his *Violence and belief in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia 2009), Chapter 8. Sizgorich shows that the extant sources attributed to the traditionists of Ibn Ḥanbal's era – that is, the major works of *ḥadīth*, jurisprudence, exegesis, and history of the early and classical periods – do not offer us an unmediated window onto the prophetic period, but rather (as Goldziher argued over a century ago) reflect the concerns of a later age – in this specific case, how later Ḥanbalīs imagined Ibn Ḥanbal imagining the conduct of the Prophet, a process that was necessarily less about securing historical facts than it was about fashioning the self and forging communal boundaries.

Direct (or putatively direct) observation of foreign cultures or more proximate "others" is certainly no guarantee of authenticity. For much of the information contained in these famous accounts we lack corroboration either from native sources or from other outside observers that would help us to gauge these authors' accuracy in describing what they saw or relating what they were told. As examples of the opposite situation, we might consider outsider accounts of Islam, for example that of John of Damascus, who famously claimed that Muslims are idolaters who worship Venus. This is a gross distortion that is clearly polemically motivated, as John – or Yuḥannā Manṣūr b. Sarjūn al-Dimashqī – had ample direct knowledge of Islam, given that he was a civil servant in the administration of the Umayyad Caliphate, and can thus hardly be considered an "outsider" at all.[22]

In other cases, when analyzing early Jewish, Christian, and other witnesses to the Arab conquests and the rise of Islam, the difficulty of distinguishing between what is accurate but anomalous, what is deliberate hyperbole, and what derives from pure ignorance poses a serious historiographic problem. When these accounts contain incongruous statements that are difficult to square with the conventional narratives preserved within Islamic tradition itself – for example, the identification of Muḥammad as king of the Arabs rather than the Prophet of the community of Muslims – we can often only conjecture about their possible significance.[23]

In cases like that of John of Damascus, the misrepresentations are disconcerting, as observers may be well positioned to produce accurate accounts, yet decline to do so, or approach their subject with a mix of candor and exaggeration, objectivity and bias. Another example is the thirteenth-century traveler Riccoldo de Montecroce: considering first his missionary agenda and second his brutal treatment at the hands of the Mongols, he admittedly had little motivation to attempt to be fair in his portrayal of Islam, having been captured and enslaved in the Ilkhanate during a sojourn in Iraq in the 1280s. But his account of his travels is frequently balanced and his depictions of Muslim society sympathetic, which makes his outright fabrications – viz., that Muslims believe that reciting the *shahāda* gets them into heaven automatically – rather jarring. Even more perplexing is Riccoldo's fidelity to the descriptions of Oriental "heresies" to be found in Thomas Aquinas, who never once set foot in the East,

22 See John Tolan, *Saracens. Islam in the medieval European imagination* (New York 2002), 50–5.

23 These reports have been much discussed; see, e.g., Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam. The origins of the Arab religion and the Arab state* (Amherst, NY 2003), 129–31.

despite having had ample opportunity to observe Christian communities of Islamic lands firsthand.[24] Accuracy can hardly be expected of an observer with an unfriendly disposition; if anything, it can prove harmful in the hands of someone with hostile inclinations. This is clearly the case with the Andalusian Ibn Ḥazm's polemic against the Bible, which is, if anything, *too* well-informed; his polemic against the defamatory accounts of the misdeeds of prophets like David to be found therein reflects considerable familiarity with the text – the actual text of the Bible as known in his day – and not mendacious fabrication.[25]

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Over the centuries, Muslims and non-Muslims confronted each other, drew on each other's traditions, learned about each other, and, in seeking a *modus vivendi* in societies from Spain to China, founded a common civilization in which each community formed a distinct subculture. The Arab conquests and the establishment of a caliphal dominion stretching throughout the heartlands of ancient and classical civilization, integrating the eastern territories of the Roman Empire and the western territories of the Sasanian Empire, created the conditions for centuries of productive, though at times contentious, cultural exchange. We have already mentioned the questionable historical veracity of the varied literary responses to the rise of Islam produced as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians confronted the new political and social order that emerged. These early responses often entailed distorted representations of what the first generations of Arab Muslims thought, believed, and claimed about themselves and their Prophet, and even heralded their arrival as the harbinger of the End Times. In turn, early Muslim responses to the new subaltern populations that provided the literal human resources for expansion of their community – whether through conversion or procreation – generally reflect similarly negative attitudes. The cultures of the *Ahl al-kitāb* were tacitly understood as inferior, their cultural and material resources ripe for exploitation and appropriation – when they did not elicit anxieties about Islam's position as the pure, original form of monotheism and the fulfilment of God's prophetic and covenantal relationship with humanity, or inspire fears of social, ritual, or doctrinal contamination.

Despite the inevitable anxieties and mistrust, over time a remarkable multifaceted synthesis emerged that many scholars have characterized as a shared

24 Tolan, *Saracens*, 245–54.

25 On Ibn Ḥazm's biblical literacy, see Camilla Adang, *Muslim authors on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden 1996), 133–8.

"Islamicate" civilization. Practically every aspect of the emergent Arab-Islamic tradition was in some way shaped by a multitude of contacts between the early Muslims and members of the various communities drawn into the rapidly expanding *Dār al-Islam.* It is thus natural that these contacts had a palpable impact on numerous learned discourses. Various facets of the processes of synthesis and symbiosis that produced this common civilizational legacy have been explored in depth and given rise to whole subfields of inquiry in Islamic studies. For example, the world of belles-lettres in Islam is one that was open to participants from every religious community, drawn together in the pursuit of and love for forms of fine literary expression. Despite its intrinsically disputatious nature, the world of *kalām* was also one that was open to any participant learned enough to take part; here a common culture emerged specifically to enable spokesmen for each community to advocate for the truths of their religion against the claims of the others as equals. Philosophy and science provide other examples that are particularly relevant to questions of communication across communal boundaries due to their close connection to the phenomenon of translation and transmission of the Greek philosophical and scientific legacy. Here it is not unusual to speak of "Greco-Arabic" science and philosophy, which, however, is a misleading term since it obviates the role of Syriac-language scholars and intermediary translations.

One aspect of the shared Islamicate civilization that emerged in the early centuries after the Arab conquests has been relatively underexplored by scholars, however. This is the common discourse of scriptural interpretation, particularly manifest as part of the phenomenon of "Judeo-Arabic" or "Judeo-Islamic" learning that flourished so spectacularly in the geonic and early medieval periods, yet no doubt had roots in the period immediately after the Arab conquests, if not actually before.[26] It is true that we have little concrete evidence of either Jewish engagement with the Qur'ān or Muslim engagement with the Bible in the early centuries AH, though some scattered traces do survive. But in the bigger picture, Muslim exegesis of the Qur'ān and Jewish interpretation

26 It has been suggested by some that the Jews of the Ḥijāz, whose traditions Muḥammad accessed in composing the Qur'ān, had both a specific dialect of Judaized Arabic they spoke, called *Yahūdiyya*, and a tradition of at least oral translation of scripture; see the classic account of Gordon D. Newby, Observations about an early Judaeo-Arabic, *Jewish quarterly review* 61 (1971), 212–21. In contrast, Haggai Ben-Shammai has conjectured that it was among the Jews of Ḥīra, a pre-Islamic urban center of southern Mesopotamia, that the earliest forerunner to what eventually became known as Judeo-Arabic may have emerged: Observations on the beginnings of Judeo-Arabic civilization, in David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein (eds.), *Beyond religious borders. Interaction and intellectual exchange in the medieval Islamic world* (Philadelphia 2012), 13–29, 162–72.

of the Bible in this period probably followed parallel tracks, constituting rival exegetical enterprises, each community striving to adapt its understanding of its canonical scripture to contemporary realities, and reshaping their narratives of the covenantal, prophetic, and messianic legacies of ancient Israel in order to assert their claim to those legacies and position their community as their inheritor and culmination.

One of the most important artifacts of this period, yet one that is still poorly understood, is the midrashic work *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the "Chapters" of Rabbi Eliezer the Great. This text, likely to have been the product of a single author who attributed his work to the great *tanna* Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (fl. second half of the first century CE), has long been observed to reflect some exposure to Islam before it reached its final form sometime after the Arab conquests; famously, it gives the wives of Ishmael the names "Ayesha" and "Patumah," clear allusions to Muḥammad's wife ʿĀʾisha and daughter Fāṭima.[27] Nevertheless, the degree to which it actually reflects a substantial understanding of Islamic tradition or seeks to engage Islam has long been a subject of debate. What is relevant for our interests here is that scholars have long assumed that the bulk of the material therein dates to *before* the rise of Islam. Thus, since the time of Geiger, *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* has been repeatedly cited as a witness to Jewish traditions of the sort that likely informed the Qurʾān, and many scholars have followed Geiger in cataloguing the supposed Jewish "borrowings" in the Qurʾān on the basis of parallels between it and this text.[28]

Aside from the problematically reductive conception of influence that informs this approach, a distinct anachronism often prevails here as well. Viewed objectively, it is sometimes clear that many of the purported "influences" on Muḥammad and the Qurʾān presented by Geiger and his followers are actually traditions drawn from Jewish texts from the period *after* the Arab conquests, for which there are no known antecedents in older (and indisputably pre-Islamic) texts. (Geiger himself seems to acknowledge this, in stating that he will draw his material for comparison with the Qurʾān only from those works securely dated to before the rise of Islam – except that he

27 For a detailed discussion of the Ishmael tradition in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* and the complex question of its relationship to Islamic parallels, see Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the border. Rabbinic portrayals of the first Arab* (Albany, NY 2006), 96ff.

28 A basic survey of Geiger's text indicates that *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* serves as the main source for several of his major treatments of the midrashic basis of qurʾanic narratives. The indices of both the German and English versions do not include a general listing of sources cited in the work. This makes it difficult to evaluate his specific degree of dependence on this text or other late sources systematically, but speaking unscientifically it seems accurate to say that Geiger relies as often on works that reached their final form after the rise of Islam as on those that are indisputably pre-Islamic.

provides himself a very large loophole, by way of the caveat that reliance on later works is admissible if "it is certain that such sayings, though only recently recorded, existed earlier in the synagogue."[29]) We then might reasonably question whether the parallels we observe between the Qurʾān and *tafsīr* on the one hand and late midrashim on the other might be due not to a borrowing of Jewish traditions in the Qurʾān (though there are indisputably qurʾanic passages that do engage with and reshape Jewish precursors), but rather to the coevolution of Jewish traditions of interpretation of the Bible and Muslim interpretation of the Quran in the post-conquest period – and even, perhaps, to the direct impact of Muslim exegesis on its Jewish counterpart. The question of how *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* fits into its milieu comes to the fore here.

The narrative of the Golden Calf provides us with what is perhaps the example *par excellence* of the phenomenon we have just described. As the qurʾanic account of the Calf is usually understood, especially the long version of the story found in Q 20:83–98, responsibility for the making of the idol appears to have shifted from Aaron, the maker of the Calf in the biblical precursor in Exodus, to a mysterious personage called *al-sāmirī*, generally understood to mean the "Samaritan" (mentioned three times in this passage, and nowhere else in the Qurʾān). When confronted by Moses upon his return from his communion with God on Sinai, the Samaritan confesses, *I perceived that which they did not. I picked up a handful from the track of the messenger and threw it in; I imagined this to be best* (v. 96).[30] The meaning of this statement is obscure, but the Samaritan's action appears to have resulted in the creation of an entity described in peculiar terms: *ʿijl jasad lahu khuwārun,* "a lowing image of a calf" (literally "a calf, a body that lows," Q 7:148; 20:88).

The commentators almost universally agree that this "Sāmirī," a member of the Israelite clan of the Samaritans (*Sāmirah*), was either a malevolent interloper among the Israelites or else a treacherous follower of Moses; for some sinister reason he made the calf and, usurping leadership of the people from Aaron, commanded the credulous, desperate people to worship it. There is likewise little disagreement that the qurʾanic reference to "a calf, a body that lows" is meant to indicate that, having built a calf of gold, the Samaritan induced the calf to imitate life by lowing like a real cow through magical means. Equally ubiquitous in the *tafsīr* is the explanation of the "handful from the track of the messenger," which is usually taken as a reference to the appearance of the angel Gabriel among the Israelites when they crossed the Red Sea after their escape from Egypt. At that time, the narratives state, he rode upon a horse that was so imbued with divine potency that everything it touched came to life.

29 Geiger, *Judaism and Islám*, v.

30 All translations from Arabic and Hebrew primary sources here are my own.

Even taking just a bit of the earth it had trodden, the "track of the messenger," the Samaritan was able to induce the calf to low like a real cow or even to animate it, at least temporarily.

The narratives on this episode supplied in Qurʾān commentaries and other works latch a considerable amount of ancillary detail onto the brief, cryptic verses of Sūra 20 in order to make this story comprehensible. It is, however, quite unclear that this is what the story in the Qurʾān itself really means.[31] What is most germane to our concerns here is that this story of the magically animate Calf and the intervention of the sinister Samaritan is widespread in *tafsīr* and related genres, to the exclusion of virtually any other approach to the qurʾanic episode. The questions of greatest concern to the traditional exegetes are where the Samaritan had come from and what exactly happened when he brought the calf to life, or made it seem to be alive; there was significant debate over these questions, as is evident from many of the accounts in classical *tafsīrs* and related sources, as in this passage from al-Thaʿlabī's *Tales of the prophets:*

> In some accounts, it is said that when al-Sāmirī made the Calf and threw the handful into it, he bestowed consciousness upon it, and it ran around and lowed, for it had become flesh and blood. It is also related that it was Iblīs who lowed within it. It is also said that al-Sāmirī placed the rear end of the Calf facing towards a wall, and dug a pit on the far side of the wall, and made someone sit in the pit with his mouth on the Calf's posterior, and that this man lowed and spoke the words the Calf was supposed to say . . . Thus did he deceive the miserable ones among the Israelites, and those who were ignorant, until he led them astray.[32]

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31 In general, Western scholarly discussions of the qurʾanic story have tended to rely almost entirely on the explanations provided in *tafsīr*. The sole notes of caution regarding the evident divergence in meaning between the qurʾanic understanding of the story and the accounts in the *tafsīr* are found in two brief treatments. In his 1995 revision of Bernard Heller's article in the first *Encyclopedia of Islam* on the character of the Samaritan, Rippin expresses skepticism as to whether this narrative development genuinely predates the Qurʾān (al-Sāmirī, *EI2*). Likewise, in his 2001 article "Calf of Gold" in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, Hawting summarizes the positions of both the classical commentators and modern scholars on the story, but remains unsure as to the question of whether the portrayal of the episode in the *tafsīr* is intrinsic to the Qurʾān itself. I take up the question of the relationship of both Qurʾān and *tafsīr* to biblical and midrashic materials in my forthcoming *The living calf of Sinai. Bible and Qurʾān between Late Antiquity and Islam* (2017).

32 *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā ʿArāʾis al-majālis* (Cairo 2001), 286; ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ, *or "Lives of the prophets" as recounted by Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī*, trans. William M. Brinner (Leiden 2002), 346–7.

For Geiger and subsequent advocates of what I call the "influence paradigm," the most relevant midrashic parallel – implicitly understood as the source of the qur'anic story, which again lacks much of the detail that is central in the accounts of the *tafsīr* – is the following tradition from chapter 45 of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*. After recounting a number of details familiar from older midrashic tradition, especially those concerning Aaron's unwillingness to go along with the idolaters and his sneaky attempts to delay the affair, the narrative moves in a direction unseen in earlier rabbinic traditions on the Calf:

> Among the earrings, Aaron found a slip of gold [*tsîts shel zahav*] with the Holy Name written on it and an image of a calf engraved upon it. This alone he threw into the fire, as it is stated, *And they gave it to me* [*and I cast it into the fire, and out came this calf*] . . . (Ex. 32:24) "And I threw **them** into the fire . . ." is not written here, but rather, "And I threw **it** into the fire, and out came this calf . . ." – lowing (*gôʿeh*), and all Israel saw.
>
> R. Judah said: Samael had entered it, lowing to lead Israel astray, as it is stated, *The ox knows his master* (Is. 1:3).[33] All Israel saw this, and they offered it libations, and bowed down before it, and sacrificed to it.[34]

There is no indication in the immediate narrative context where this "slip of gold" came from, or why Aaron threw it into the fire. The most superficial explanation for this development is a minor grammatical issue in the biblical text. In Aaron's statement "I threw it into the fire," referring to the gathered golden ornaments of the people, the objective suffix of the verb form *ashlikhehû* ("I threw it") is singular. While we can infer that the singular suffix refers to the gold as a collective – especially as this is how Aaron refers to it at the beginning of the verse, *I said to them,* "*Whoever has gold . . .*" – the author of the midrash offers a different solution, namely that the "it" Aaron threw into the fire was not the amassed golden ornaments, but rather the *tsîts* or golden slip he had in his possession with an image of a calf engraved upon it.

As is so often the case in midrash, a minor grammatical abnormality in a biblical verse provides a peg upon which an imaginative expansion can be hung, though it is hardly necessary for us to make sense of the narrative. Thus, we can recognize this supposed irregularity as a mere pretext. The main stimulus for the insertion of this detail about the golden slip here in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, I would argue, is the ubiquity of the story of the Samaritan's casting the handful of dirt from the track of the angel Gabriel's supernatural steed (the

33 That is, Satan.

34 *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ed. and trans. Dagmar Börner-Klein (Berlin 2004), 610–1.

reading of Q 20:96 in the *tafsīr*) in Islamic traditions in circulation in the milieu in which the author of this midrash lived and worked. That is, the appearance of this specific element here is a mimetic gesture, a reflex of a central feature of Muslim traditions of the qurʾanic version of the biblical episode (al-Sāmirī's casting of the magical *handful from the track of the messenger* into the fire to create *a calf, a body that lows*), adapted in the form of the "throwing" of a golden slip to induce Satan to make it come to life (specifically, as in the *tafsīr*, making it low like a real calf) and integrated into the matrix of older midrashic details on the episode. Needless to say, this tradition's probative value as evidence of a determinative Jewish "influence" on the qurʾanic story dissipates; it now stands as evidence of something else entirely.

While traditions on the Golden Calf episode in older (i.e., indisputably pre-Islamic) midrashic collections do exhibit a particular tendency towards apologetic in their representation of the role of Aaron in the affair, they do not go so far as to seek to exonerate him completely by attributing the making of the calf entirely to another party. Nor is the calf ever really understood as animate in older midrashim as it is in the *tafsīr*. In some pre-Islamic rabbinic traditions, outside interlopers do get involved from time to time: one asserts that the Egyptian sorcerers who dueled with Moses at Pharaoh's court had followed the Israelites out of Egypt, and that they used enchantments to make the Calf shudder before the credulous people; another, in the Babylonian Talmud, depicts Satan using an illusion to try to convince the Israelites that Moses had died while he was away on the mountain so that they would turn to the Calf as their savior.[35] Besides *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, only two other standard rabbinic sources posit that the Calf was animated by Satan or some other malefactor. As we will discuss shortly, these other accounts are not likely to be genuinely pre-Islamic either.

Midrashic accounts such as this one from *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* are clearly "post-Islamic"; that is, they reflect Jewish exegetes' appropriation of new developments in the story by Muslim exegetes. These Jewish exegetes apparently saw the trope of the animation of the calf by an outsider in *tafsīr* as totally congruous with their own understanding of the episode – especially since their tradition's approach to that episode was already heading in this direction, for midrashic accounts of the making of the Calf were already becoming more and more apologetic in tone over the centuries leading up to the rise of Islam. In some pre-Islamic traditions, Jewish exegetes emphasize that Aaron had not meant to indulge the people's idolatry by making the Calf, but rather had some other goal in mind, especially to delay the affair until Moses's return from Sinai (so that he could either allay the people's fears of his demise, or else

35 *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1.9.3 and *b. Shabbat* 89a respectively.

discipline and restrain them from their idolatrous impulses). Subsequently, other exegetes compounded the theme of Aaron's having ulterior motives by adding sinister interlopers to the mix: these nefarious characters are depicted as interfering in the affair, so that even though Aaron did not actually wish to make the Calf, these interlopers caused it to happen anyway. Nevertheless, in all of these accounts, it is unambiguous that Aaron is actually the maker of the Calf, though his true intentions were to actually prevent Israel from committing idolatry. Only in midrashic sources dating to after the rise of Islam do we find Jewish traditions that blame the actual making of the Calf on someone or something other than Aaron, or depict the Calf as having come to life or imitating life in a significant way, as is the case almost universally in the *tafsīr* literature.

This is but a small example of how Muslim approaches to the stories of the prophets and patriarchs in the Qur'ān gradually came to inform Jewish understandings of material on those figures and events in the Bible; these new or altered understandings were eventually textualized and preserved in compendious collections of rabbinic lore alongside much older themes. The omnivorous nature of authors and compilers who drew on a variety of oral and written texts, juxtaposing significantly older traditions with others of much more recent provenance, lent an impression of antiquity to the latter, although they had emerged quite late in the development of the midrash, specifically at a time when Jewish communities were quite permeable to claims and ideas circulating in a Near Eastern world dominated by Islam after the seventh and eighth centuries. As has often been noted, this encyclopedic or comprehensive quality is a hallmark of midrashic tradition.[36] It is this specific trait of rabbinic literature, weaving together materials that originated over the course of nearly a millennium, that encouraged scholars to draw stunningly anachronistic conclusions about midrash as a genre – thus the famous studies by Geiger, Ginzburg, Goitein, and many others who present "the midrash" as a uniform, timeless, quintessential expression of Jewish values and ideas apparently insulated from outside influences. As Geiger and his followers emphasize, midrash seems to furnish an endless supply of influences on Islam, seemingly without any reciprocal influence being channeled back. This implausible claim is clearly not borne out by scrutiny of the evidence, however.

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36 See Marc Bregman, Midrash Rabbah and the medieval collector mentality, *Prooftexts* 17 (1997), 63–76.

For the remainder of this essay, I will attempt to shed some light upon the unusual reference in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* to the golden slip (*tsîts shel zahav*) with the Holy Name and an image of a calf engraved upon it; this object not only caused the Calf to be created from the amassed golden ornaments belonging to the Israelites, but also, it seems, led to it being inspired by Satan and made to low like a living calf. It is striking that while the author of this midrashic tradition mimicked *tafsīr* traditions on the Samaritan's throwing of the magical dirt here, he selected a different medium for the supernatural power that brought the Calf to life. The identification of the object as a golden slip is no doubt deliberate, meant to evoke a specific subtext to the episode. As we shall see, investigating this subtext demonstrates the importance of the spread and sharing of traditions common to both Jewish and Muslim authors and transmitters in the early Islamic period.

The term *tsîts* has a biblical resonance: it refers to a golden plate inscribed with the phrase *Holy to the Lord* that is prescribed for the High Priest to wear as part of his vestments, specifically as part of the miter or headpiece.[37] One ironic resonance here is immediately obvious: in contrast to the *tsîts* of the priestly vestments, which symbolizes the High Priest's dedication to the divine service, this *tsîts* instead represents something completely opposite, for the worship of the calf is, if anything, an idolatrous defilement of the Name. However, there are other layers of meaning here.

This passage from *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* presupposes the assimilation of a biblical image to the ritual language of ancient Mediterranean magic. The use to which Aaron is said to put the object here in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* is reminiscent of the employment of a lamella, a thin plate or plaque of gold or other metal, in various ritual traditions in the ancient Mediterranean. For example, in the Greco-Roman context, lamellae seem to have typically been used for apotropaic purposes, and this is the function that is reflected in other Jewish texts that quite possibly could have been known to the author of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*. In a procedure represented in *Sefer ha-Razim*, an ancient Jewish ascent text containing instructions for numerous ritual procedures, the initiate into the text's mysteries is told that to rid a city of predatory beasts, a lamella with angelic names should be joined with a bronze effigy of an animal and buried.[38]

37 Cf., e.g., Exodus 28:36, which is presumably why Börner-Klein chooses – rather oddly – to render *tsîts shel zahav* as *ein Diadem aus Gold* in her translation.

38 The specific term for the object here is *ṭaṣ*, meaning a shiny slip of metal (cf. *tessera*, a shiny bit of stone or foiled glass used for mosaics). On this specific passage and Greco-Roman parallels, see Christopher A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses. Guardian statues in Ancient Greek myth and ritual* (Oxford 1992), 39–40, and Gideon Bohak, *Ancient*

Although *Sefer ha-Razim* is dated to the third or fourth century CE, the magical traditions therein are thought to be much older, at least as early as the Hellenistic era; however, the work continued to circulate widely in Jewish communities throughout the early Middle Ages, as evidenced by various witnesses from the Cairo Geniza.[39] Therefore, such traditions were likely in circulation in the author's milieu, and represent a basic concept with which he may have been familiar. The representation of the use of such an object to create and animate the Calf here in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* is somewhat surprising, given the apotropaic function attributed to it in these precursors. However, it should be said that the idea that an apotropaic image, especially of an animal, could be ritually animated is not wholly unprecedented in Greco-Roman culture.[40]

The appearance of the motif here is also linked to an older midrashic tradition, one that the audience of this work would surely recognize as a subtext. Aaron's action with the Calf and the *tsîts* appears to be an allusion to a corpus of traditions about the retrieval of Joseph's coffin from the Nile at the time of the Exodus. At the very end of the book of Genesis, Joseph makes the Israelites swear to take his remains out of Egypt when God fulfills His promise of redemption to them (Gen. 50:24–6); when the Israelites finally leave Egypt, Moses remembers this pledge and takes the bones of Joseph along (Ex. 13:19). Beginning relatively early in the evolution of rabbinic exegesis of the Exodus story, a corpus of colorful traditions emerged to explain what had happened to Joseph's remains in the intervening years between his death and the Israelites' redemption, as well as Moses' adventures and tribulations in trying to discover where Joseph's resting place in Egypt was located and how he could retrieve his remains to fulfill Israel's promise to the patriarch.

In a widely attested story, Moses stands on the shore of the Nile – where the Egyptians had sunk Joseph's coffin many years previous, presumably to conceal it – and calls out to Joseph, telling him that the time of Israel's redemption has come. The coffin then floats to the surface, lest Joseph be left behind in the land of Israel's bondage. In some variations on the story, Moses performs a ritual of some sort or utilizes a magical object in order to compel the coffin to

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Jewish magic. A history (Cambridge 2008), 149–55, for a discussion of the copious evidence of the use of *lamellae* as amulets among Jews of antiquity.

39 Notably, the modern reconstruction of the text is based on Geniza witnesses. Alexander Fodor has suggested that *Sefer ha-Razim* may have provided one of the main channels through which traditions of magic in circulation in Late Antiquity were transmitted to and adapted in Arab culture; see: An Arabic version of *Sefer Ha-Razim, Jewish studies quarterly* 13 (2006), 412–27.

40 See Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 18–21, on legends concerning the animate talismans created by the god Hephaestus.

rise. Overall, the story, which seems to have been in circulation as early as the third century CE, resonates quite sharply with another concerning the retrieval of remains out of the Nile, namely the myth of Isis and Osiris, given its most well-known expression in the work of the first-century writer Plutarch.[41] Here, however, we are more concerned with the permutations this tradition underwent over the centuries of its development in midrash.

The story of the retrieval of the coffin is repeated in numerous rabbinic sources in various forms, and the object in use seems to change from account to account. In what seems to be the oldest version of the story, preserved in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Moses casts a small stone (*tserôr*) into the waters of the Nile as he utters an invocation.[42] However, the textual tradition representing this work is complex, and it is significant that in one of the witnesses to the *Mekhilta*, the object Moses uses is referred to as a golden tablet (*luaḥ shel zahav*) inscribed with the Tetragrammaton. This seems to represent the impact of later versions of the coffin story found in other rabbinic sources on the *Mekhilta* manuscript tradition.[43] For example, *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* (dated to the fifth to seventh century CE) identifies the object as a potsherd upon which Moses had written the Divine Name.[44]

It is not difficult to detect the intertextual symmetry between traditions that posit the means of Moses raising the coffin as a golden plate with the Tetragrammaton inscribed upon it and the portrayal of Aaron creating and animating the Calf by means of a golden slip with both the Tetragrammaton and an image of a calf on it.[45] The implication of the tradition in *Pirqe de-Rabbi*

41 Holger Zellentin, How Plutarch gained his place in the Tosefta, *Zutot* 4 (2004), 17–26; Rivka Ulmer, Egyptian magic and the Osiris myth in Midrash, in Lieve M. Teugels and Rivka Ulmer (eds.), *Midrash in context. Proceedings of the 2004 and 2005 SBL consultation on Midrash* (Piscataway, NJ 2007), 139–71.

42 *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Běšallaḥ* 1:86–108ff., ed. and trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia 1933–35), 1:76–7; see discussion in Ulmer, Egyptian magic, 165ff.

43 See Ulmer, Egyptian magic, 165. The sole witness to the *Mekhilta* that describes the object as *tsîts* is the same Munich manuscript that is the basis of the widely used Lauterbach edition; one cannot recognize how anomalous this reading is without a broader view of the *Mekhilta* manuscript tradition as a whole.

44 *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 11.12. This account is distinguished by an odd detail about two talismanic dogs, presumably magical guardians established by the Egyptians, who appear and begin barking at Moses (cf. *Exodus Rabbah* 20:19). The talismanic dogs are seemingly drawn from Homer (who refers to a pair of animate dog statues that guard the palace of Alkinous, *Odyssey* 7.91–4) or other Greek sources; Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 18–21.

45 Given that the golden plate with the Name is only mentioned in the Munich manuscript of the *Mekhilta*, it is probable that this manuscript of this early midrash was harmonized with some later version of the story. The use of a golden object to raise Joseph's coffin

Eliezer describing the latter is that the creation of the Calf was a sequel of sorts to the raising of Joseph from the Nile with that same object. A textual problem emerges here, however, for the episode of the raising of Joseph's coffin, where we would expect to find the author of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* describing the object Moses used there as *tsîts shel zahav*, is actually *missing* from this work. How do we explain this? Would this not suggest that the story of the raising of the coffin is *not* actually the subtext for or prequel to the appearance of the slip of gold in the Calf story in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*? However, a bit of textual detective work in fact vindicates our hypothesis about this intertextual allusion.

The depiction of this object in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* as the means through which the Calf was created appears to be quite novel, as is the detail about the calf engraved on the gold slip or plate along with the Divine Name. But there are two other sources in classical midrashic literature that depict the animation of the Calf in a similar way; both are roughly contemporary with the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* account and thus similarly "post-Islamic." In glossing Aaron's statement in Exodus 32:24 (*I said to them, "Whoever has gold, remove it and give it to me"; then I threw it in the fire, and out came this calf*), *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* describes the animation of the Calf in similar terms, but omits any reference to the *tsîts*: "I threw it [e.g., the gold] in the fire, and Satan entered into it, and out of it came the likeness of this calf . . ."[46] Here we have a diabolical intervention to bring the Calf to life, though it seems that what Aaron is supposed to have thrown into the fire is actually just the amassed gold taken from the Israelites, as in the original biblical narrative.

Of greater interest to us is the recounting of the making of the Calf in the later recension of *Midrash Tanḥuma*, which combines elements of the story as known from *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* with a number of other tropes and themes from both earlier and later midrashic elaborations on the Exodus story.[47] Here it is said that when Aaron cast the gold the Israelites had brought him into the fire, "he looked heavenwards, and he said, *'Unto you, who dwells in heaven, I set my eyes* (Ps. 123:1) – You know all thoughts, and thus know that I do this only

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implies a link to the Calf episode, but *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* seems to be the earliest extant source suggesting this association. Bohak discusses the coffin story in the context of ancient traditions on the magical use of the *tsîts* (*Ancient Jewish magic*, 117–9), where he asserts that the association of a lamella with the story is tannaitic, presumably on the basis of the Munich witness to the *Mekhilta*.

46 *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch. Text and concordance*, ed. E.G. Clarke et al. (Hoboken, NJ 1984), 1:107. Like *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* preserves older exegetical material, but it must have reached its final form after the rise of Islam.

47 On the two major recensions of the *Tanḥuma*, see Marc Bregman, *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu literature. Studies in the evolution of the versions* (Piscataway, NJ 2003).

because I am forced to . . .' He threw them [i.e. the people's golden ornaments] into the fire, and the sorcerers came and made [the Calf] with their sorceries."[48]

As is typical in midrash, the passage continues with an alternative account of the event, one in which the critical action creating the Calf is attributed to an Israelite named Micah, who is associated with the Calf episode in a number of later narratives. This passage seems to confirm that the account of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* presupposes that the golden slip Aaron used to make the Calf was the same object that had retrieved Joseph's coffin from the Nile, for it links the two events explicitly:

> [Micah] pulled out the tablet upon which Moses had written "Up, ox!" when he raised the coffin of Joseph. They cast it into the fire amidst the earrings, and out came the Calf, lowing as it leapt about. Then they began to say, "*These are your gods, O Israel . . .*" (Ex. 32:4)[49]

As in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the object coopted to create the magically animate Calf is the gold lamella that Moses is supposed to have used to draw Joseph's remains out the Nile. However, here in the *Tanḥuma* the connection between the two events is cemented through a clever midrashic link: the inscription on the plate is not the Tetragrammaton with an image of a calf, as in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, but rather the words *ʿaleh shôr*, "Up, ox!" This phrase plays on an epithet given to Joseph in Deuteronomy 33:17, in which he is poetically described as an ox.[50]

In the *Tanḥuma* account, these words inscribed on the tablet are presumably what enabled Moses to use it to raise Joseph's coffin, and now the same object is directed to a more nefarious purpose because of that inscription, which enables it to create a lowing, leaping Golden Calf from the gathered ornaments of the people, thus commanding a very different ox to come forth! Notably, in the portrayal of the retrieval of Joseph's coffin that appears earlier in the *Tanḥuma* in its commentary on the Genesis narrative cycle, the object Moses uses is not a lamella (neither a slip nor a plate, *tsîts* or *luaḥ*) but rather a pebble, *tserôr*, as in the retrieval story found in most of the *Mekhilta* witnesses. However, here the phrase "up ox!" is said to have been inscribed upon it,

48 *Midrash Tanḥuma, Kî-tissa* 19.

49 Ibid.

50 Ulmer discusses these words as the invocation uttered by Moses at the time of the retrieval of the coffin in: Egyptian magic, 162–4. It is attested in the depiction of this episode in a handful of minor, fragmentary midrashim as well as in the *Tanḥuma* account.

distinguishing it from the *Mekhilta* parallels.[51] Similar to the depiction of Aaron creating the Calf with the golden plate in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the version of the Calf narrative found in the later *Tanḥuma* likewise seems to incorporate new details reflecting the centrality of the Samaritan in *tafsīr* – especially since here it is not Aaron himself, but rather another party, Micah, who is responsible for the transformative act of "throwing" that creates a living, or seemingly living, Calf.[52]

The version of the creation of the Calf in the later recension of the *Tanḥuma* directly acknowledges the link between this event and the retrieval of Joseph's coffin, both being achieved through the use of the same object. Similarly, it would have been quite obvious for the author of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* to refer to the use of the *tsîts* at the time of the Israelites' departure from Egypt, for this would then set the stage for its critical reappearance at the time of the making of the Calf; the account of the latter event in this text seems to presuppose the episode with Joseph's coffin, but is entirely missing from all of the witnesses to the text. One might thus wonder if the versions of this text that have come down to us are thus somehow deficient.[53]

There is another possibility, however. It is plausible that the link between the two episodes was made in an older source that both *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* and the later *Tanḥuma* drew upon, each elaborating upon it in somewhat different ways. While *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* incorporates only the second part of the story, the use of the slip to create the Calf – only using half of the original tradition, as it were, leaving the reader in the dark about the source of the

51 *Midrash Tanḥuma, Beshallaḥ* 2.

52 While the fluidity of the corpus of material disseminated in various collections of material given the name *Tanḥuma* has long been recognized, scholars have generally emphasized the early core of material preserved in the Buber recension of *Midrash Tanḥuma* proper. There has been surprisingly little investigation into the later strata of the standard recension; while the Buber recension appears to be linked to a line of transmission associated with medieval Europe, the standard recension is distinctly Islamicate. It is thus unsurprising to find traditions that parallel *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, and arguably traditions from Islamic texts as well, here.

53 Scholars have long debated the question of the apparent incompleteness of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, even suggesting that the available editions represent only part of what supposedly became a fluid corpus not long after the original author's work; see Lewis M. Barth, Is every medieval Hebrew manuscript a new composition? The case of *Pirqé Rabbi Eliezer*, in Marc Lee Raphael (ed.), *Agendas for the study of Midrash in the twenty-first century* (Williamsburg, VA 1999), 43–62. However, the idea that portions of the text may have been lost in transmission has now been largely debunked. See Eliezer Treitel, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer. Text, redaction, and a sample synopsis* [Heb.] (Jerusalem 2012), 27–39.

tsîts – the *Tanḥuma* includes both parts of the story, the emergence of this potent object at the time of the Exodus *and* the unfortunate denouement at the time of Israel's idolatry. We may conclude that both of these texts are likely to be dependent on an older source that made the innovative narrative step of transferring the detail about the use of the gold plate or slip inscribed with the Tetragrammaton from the story of the raising of the coffin of Joseph (again, a *topos* of considerable vintage in the midrash) to the new context of the making of the Calf because there is another source containing this narrative complex, but that, like *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, only relates half of it. Notably, while *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* has only the second half of the story (the making of the Calf), this source contains only the first (the raising of Joseph's coffin). However, in the same way that the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* tradition seems to presuppose the earlier part of the story while relating the later, this other source presents the earlier part of the story in such a way as to foreshadow the later part, but then actually omits it.

Even more notably, this version of the coffin narrative is not found in a midrashic source at all, but rather in an Arabic work by a Muslim author, namely the chronicle of the Shīʿī author al-Yaʿqūbī (d. c. 905). A number of Islamic sources that relate episodes from Israelite history contain portrayals of the retrieval of Joseph's coffin that mirror some of the older midrashic versions of the episode. For example, the versions of this story in the chronicle of al-Ṭabarī and the major collection of tales of the prophets of al-Thaʿlabī resemble one version of the event as found in the *Mekhilta*, in which Moses finds Joseph's coffin with the assistance of an old woman who had been around since the time of Joseph's death. The *Mekhilta* identifies her as Ṣeraḥ bat Asher, the granddaughter of Jacob and thus the grand-niece of Joseph, though she is anonymous in the accounts of Ṭabarī and Thaʿlabī that refer to her. But these Arabic accounts omit any reference to a supernatural event connected with Moses' retrieval of the coffin, and thus lack any portrayal of a magical object connected with it.[54]

Therefore, Yaʿqūbī's account stands out among the Islamic treatments of this theme of his time. It begins, like the narratives in Ṭabarī and Thaʿlabī, with the story of Ṣeraḥ bat Asher:

> God commanded Moses to take the Israelites out of Egypt. When they were ready to go, he searched for the body of [Joseph ben Jacob], to carry him out with them, as Joseph had charged them to do. Then [Ṣeraḥ bat Asher ben Jacob] came to him, and said: "Do you promise to give me

54 Al-Ṭabarī, *The history of al-Ṭabarī. Volume III. The children of Israel*, trans. William M. Brinner (Albany, NY 1991), 69; Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, trans. Brinner, 234–5, 326–7.

> something left over so that I may live off of it?" He did so, and she journeyed with him to a spot by the Nile, and she said, "This is the place!"

But the account then continues:

> So Moses took four plates of gold, and made an image of an eagle on one, and a lion, a man, and an ox on each of the others. Then he wrote the mightiest name of God on each plate as well. He threw them into the water, and the stone coffin that held the body of Joseph rose to the surface.
>
> But Moses had one gold plate left over, the one with the image of the ox. He gave it to Ṣeraḥ bat Asher ben Jacob, and then he bore the coffin away.[55]

The author does not tell us what happened to the plate after it was given to Ṣeraḥ bat Asher, and so this detail about her request for a reward – in fact, the whole description of Moses's creation of four plates with inscribed images of each of the beings that bear the throne of God, with three employed in the retrieval of the coffin and the fourth left over – seems rather pointless. However, if one knows the story from *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* or the later *Tanḥuma*, this is a foreboding moment indeed: it clearly foreshadows the moment not so far in the future when, at the hands of Aaron or some sinister interloper, this object endowed with holy power at the hands of a prophet would be used for a far more nefarious purpose.

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In her discussion of the various traditions associated with the retrieval of Joseph's coffin, including the *topos* of the stone or lamella, Ulmer emphasizes the numerous thematic connections between the midrashim on this episode and ancient Egyptian mythology and ritual practice. Though her examination of the numerous parallels between the depiction of Moses's ritual procedures and ancient Egyptian magic is convincing, Ulmer does not address the subtler aspects of the diachronic development of these narratives, nor the most significant feature of that development in the period after the Arab conquests – namely, the transfer of the theme of the magical object used to draw Joseph's coffin out of the Nile to an entirely new narrative context, the making of the Golden Calf. Thus, she overlooks the critical parallels between specific thematic elements linked to this episode found in later sources such as *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Midrash Tanḥuma* and Muslim exegesis of the Qurʾān,

55 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Ibn-Wādhih qui dicitur al-Jaʿqubī, Historiae*, ed. M.Th. Houtsma (Leiden 1883; repr. 1969), 1:34.

although, as we have shown, the various narrative strands in the midrash and *tafsīr* appear to be inextricably intertwined here.

At some point after the Arab conquests and the establishment of caliphal dominion over Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, and other centers of Jewish learning, the interpretation of biblical stories among Jews evolved to conform to or absorb certain narrative developments that had emerged in the *tafsīr* and come to permeate the environment. In the specific case we have examined here, an anonymous Jewish exegete projected the theme of the lamella (as depicted in *Sefer ha-Razim* and other sources) onto the biblical *tsîts* of the priestly miter, broadening its function from apotropaic ward to magical retrieval and even statuary animation; at the same time, he transferred the *topos* from one narrative setting, the raising of Joseph's coffin on the eve of the Exodus, to another, the making of the Golden Calf. It seems clear that this latter development is dependent upon, and a response to, the ubiquitous claim in the *tafsīr* that the Calf had been magically brought to life – a claim not found in *any* Jewish source that can be securely dated to the pre-Islamic period.

It also seems clear that the two-part narrative complex about the golden plate or slip must precede its partial appearance in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, for its author saw fit to make use of only the second half of the story, discarding the first, though it appears to be presupposed. In turn, the complementary account of Yaʿqūbī employs the first half of the story while discarding the second, though the second part as the denouement to the first likewise seems to be presupposed. These two sources, one Jewish and one Muslim, show us that authors could make use of part of that received narrative complex according to their particular requirements. In the case of the author of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, he seems to have had little need for the first part of the story, since he is very selective about the events leading up to the Israelites' exodus from Egypt he describes.[56] In the case of Yaʿqūbī, his decision for omitting the second part of the story is even more striking. Just a couple of pages after he recounts the story of the retrieval of the coffin, in the portion of his text in which he describes the events surrounding the revelation at Sinai, the version of the Calf story he relates is not that of the *tafsīr*, but rather an account that is essentially an Arabic translation or paraphrase of Exodus 32 as it is known from the Hebrew Bible.[57] Lacking any reference to the Samaritan, and keeping only the briefest reference to the Calf's lowing, Yaʿqūbī has no need whatsoever for the story of

56 Notably, Ṣeraḥ bat Asher does appear in one passage in the text, in an episode connected to Moses's miracles leading up to the Exodus; see *Pirke de-Rabbi Elieser*, ed. and trans. Börner-Klein, 664–7.

57 Yaʿqūbī seems to have been among the exegetes – the Muʿtazila most prominent among them – who rejected the idea that the Calf had been brought to life; consequently, he would have had little use for a narrative explaining the supernatural cause of its animation.

the golden tablet, and despite the ominous foreshadowing of his account of Ṣeraḥ bat Asher and the plate with the inscribed Name and engraved image of a calf, this potent object does not reappear in his account of the Israelites' wilderness wanderings. It is only in the later, encyclopedic account of *Midrash Tanḥuma* that we see the two parts of the narrative reunited, as the author cites each part in its appropriate place in his text.

The appearance of this midrashic account in the chronicle of Yaʿqūbī also serves to demonstrate that these newly reconfigured Jewish exegetical accounts – what we might call Judeo-Islamic or Islamicate midrash, which combine older midrashic themes with new exegetical developments in *tafsīr* – were accessible to both Jewish and Muslim authors in the Islamic imperial milieu. To return us to the theme with which we began in this essay, the problem of "influence" in early Islam, it is hardly irrelevant that Yaʿqūbī, best known for his geographical work *Kitāb al-buldān*, is known to have traveled extensively throughout the Islamic world gathering various sorts of lore, including biblical lore, from Jews and Christians, which he relates copiously in his chronicle. While at least some of his material comes from known literary works – for example, he relied on the *Cave of Treasures* for his accounts of the history of the protoplasts and patriarchs – Lazarus-Yafeh suggests that some of his knowledge of scriptural matters must have come from Jewish informants who transmitted midrashic traditions to him orally.[58] While claims of oral transmission invoked in scholarship often seem only to obscure matters or provide a crutch for arguments of dependence in the absence of evidence, here it seems quite reasonable to suppose that a direct, face-to-face communication of lore from an informant actually does inform Yaʿqūbī's quotation of this tradition on Joseph's coffin.

As an epilogue to this discussion, it is relevant to cite a later witness to this tradition, for another version appears in the *Kitāb āthār al-bāqiyya ʿan al-qurūn al-khāliyya* (or *Book of remaining traces of bygone eras*, also known as the *Chronology of ancient nations*) of Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), an Iranian polymath who traveled extensively throughout the Islamic world gathering scientific and historical information. We can only speculate regarding the processes of diffusion that led to an anonymous Jewish exegete adapting the *tafsīr* accounts of al-Sāmirī and the animate Calf and assimilating them to the existing midrashic account of what he knew as a biblical rather than qur'anic story; further, we are on only slightly firmer ground in supposing that

58 Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined worlds. Medieval Islam and Bible criticism* (Princeton, NJ 1992), 114; cf. Adang, *Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 36–9, 117–20. Yaʿqūbī was employed in the *barīd* (a combination courier and espionage service) under the Ṭāhirid dynasty of Khorasan, which gave him the opportunity to travel, and thus to collect information through direct observation and personal encounters.

Yaʿqūbī came to know this midrashic tradition through Jewish informants somewhere on his travels. But a century and a half after Yaʿqūbī, we move to yet firmer ground with Bīrūnī's account, as he is actually rather specific about his source, giving us a name and a location; he thus provides us with explicit confirmation that he received his knowledge of the Islamicate midrash on the golden tablet by way of direct, face-to-face transmission.

Perhaps it is inevitable given the vicissitudes of oral communication that details are lost or transformed as narratives flow from one context to another and wend their way through the centuries. Although it still resembles the tradition as we know it from older witnesses, Bīrūnī's version of the lamella narrative bears clear signs of having been transmuted from an exegetical account into a folktale, and thus, ironically enough, no longer mentions a lamella at all:

> The Jews say that it was Aaron who made the Calf, and so it is related in the Torah. The Jew Yaʿqūb b. Mūsā al-Niqrisī related the following to me in Jurjan:
>
> Moses wanted to leave Egypt together with the Israelites, but Joseph had ordered that they should take his coffin along with them. As he, however, was sunk in the bottom of the Nile and submerged beneath the flowing water, Moses could not take him away. Now, Moses took a piece of a paper and cut it into something like the shape (*hay'a*) of a fish; over this he recited some words, breathed upon it, wrote upon it, and threw it into the Nile. He remained there, awaiting the result, but no trace of it appeared.
>
> So Moses took another piece of paper and cut it into the image (*ṣūra*) of a calf, and he wrote upon it, recited some words over it, and breathed upon it. Then, when he was just about to throw it into the water as he had done the first time, the coffin appeared. So he threw away the figure of the calf which he had just had in his hand, and it was taken up by one of the bystanders . . .

The story then shifts to the event of the Israelites' making of the Calf, describing, as is familiar from many older midrashic accounts, the people's anxiety at Moses's absence and Aaron's various subterfuges to delay the affair. But finally:

> The people fetched Aaron and he melted the ornaments and poured them into a mold; but the result was nothing but broken chunks of metal. The same work he repeated in a hurry (*taʿjīlan*), hoping for the return of Moses or some news of him.

> Now Aaron happened to have with him right then that very same image of a calf. He said to himself: "From the image of a fish a wonderful miracle once appeared; behold now what the image of a calf might do!" He took the image and threw it among the molten gold; when the molten mass was then poured into a mold, it formed a calf that lowed. Thereby the people were tempted away from belief, without Aaron having intended it.[59]

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When the earliest Muslim rewritings of the qur'anic Golden Calf episode began to be disseminated in the eighth century – perhaps even earlier – they stimulated the reshaping of Jewish understandings of the biblical Calf episode as well, catalyzing new approaches to the narrative that both drew on older midrashic themes and assimilated aspects of *tafsīr* drawn from the larger Islamic milieu. As a shared Judeo-Islamic or Islamicate tradition continued to evolve in the period after the Arab conquests, Jewish sources came more and more to reflect new perspectives on this and other biblical stories, renovating and revitalizing approaches to scriptural interpretation and paving the way for the emergence of systematic commentary on the Bible among Jews of Islamic lands. But Western scholarship on the Qur'ān has frequently misappraised this material. The assumption that Islam was generally grounded in the textual traditions of Judaism has often colored the perception of discernible parallels within Jewish and Islamic literature, with priority consistently awarded to Jewish traditions; the possibility that such traditions that mirror or resemble Islamic counterparts had actually been shaped through a reciprocal process of dynamic interaction between Muslims and Jews has seldom been countenanced. Like the more famous example of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*'s portrayal of the episode of Abraham's encounter with Ishmael's wives, the scene of the making of the Calf in this text and its parallels are conspicuously "post-Islamic," developing in tandem with or even in response to early traditions on the Qur'ān.[60]

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59 Yaʿqūb b. Mūsā appears as an informant twice in this section of Bīrūnī's work (the discussion of Jewish feast and fast days) and nowhere else in the text; nothing else is known of him. Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, *Chronologie Orientalischer Völker von Albêrûnî*, ed. C. Eduard Sachau (Leipzig 1878), 276. The similarities between the accounts of Yaʿqūbī, Bīrūnī, and *Midrash Tanḥuma* were first observed by M. Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde* (Leiden 1893), 151–2, though he omits reference to the version of this narrative in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*.

60 There has been significant interest in the diversity of sources drawn upon by the author of this work, including material from the Pseudepigrapha that is not attested in older

There are numerous other examples of such parallels to be explored in Jewish and Islamic materials of this period. Another avenue for exploration opens up when we examine the broader context of another reference to the use of a lamella within *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*. This *topos* was apparently a kind of narrative lodestone, attracting textual elements from the Islamic milieu that could be interwoven into older exegetical traditions, for in another passage of the midrash a lamella appears as part of the author's explanation of the teraphim or family gods of Laban stolen by Jacob in Genesis 31. Here, the author describes the teraphim as made from a preserved human head with a golden slip inscribed with a name of an impure spirit (*tsîts zahav shem ruaḥ ṭûm'ah*) placed under its tongue. Its devotees are said to light candles and recite incantations before it, and it then divines the future for them.[61]

This portrayal of the use of the lamella to animate the teraphim derives from a trope about necromantic divination using preserved human heads that is widely attested in early Islamicate culture (and eventually medieval European culture as well), distributed in many different sources of the period, in Syriac and Arabic in addition to *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* and other midrashim in Hebrew. The wide diffusion of this tradition compels us to conclude that it must simply have been common knowledge of the day, rather than having a specific traceable textual genealogy.[62] Tellingly, this necromantic depiction of the teraphim is also found in both *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (*ad* Gen. 31:19) and the later recension of the *Tanḥuma* (*Vayyetze'* 12), which, like *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, seem to have been compiled well after the period of the Arab conquests, reflecting the absorption of considerable amounts of material in circulation in the Islamic milieu. In the case of both the teraphim and the Calf,

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midrashim, as well as certain Eastern Christian sources. It thus goes without saying that not all of the material in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* lacking a classical rabbinic precedent must necessarily be linked to Islam. However, given that traditions on the living Golden Calf are completely unattested in *any* unambiguously pre-Islamic work, Jewish or Christian, the source of this narrative development in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* is likely to be the ubiquitous appearance of this claim in early *tafsīr* on the qur'anic story.

61 *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ed. and trans. Börner-Klein, 452–3. Here she renders *tsîts* as *Platte*.

62 Various scholars have commented on different aspects of this tradition, but there is as yet no single comprehensive treatment of it. See Joseph Dan, Teraphim. From popular belief to a folktale, *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 27 (1978), 99–106; Daniel Sperber, *Teraphim*. Mummified red men, in *Magic and Folklore in Rabbinic Literature* (Ramat-Gan 1994), 115–8; John Reeves, A Manichaean "blood-libel"?, *Aram* 16 (2004), 217–32. Strikingly, the theme of the necromantic teraphim described in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* and other midrashic sources of this period is later conjoined with the tradition of the animate Golden Calf as it is found in some medieval Jewish commentaries on the Hebrew Bible.

the author of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* has incorporated a reminiscence of ancient magic, mediated through undetermined literary sources from the larger environment, to vividly enrich his exegesis.

More research will undoubtedly further demonstrate the extensive interpenetration of traditions registered in both Jewish and Islamic texts of the early centuries *anno hegirae*. The mutual permeability of midrash and *tafsīr*, each absorbing stimuli from the other and fostering the growth of a common exegetical discourse, is an area of research ripe for reevaluation. Further, while scriptural exegesis is perhaps the most obvious sphere in which we might expect to discern the results of a Judeo-Islamic synthesis in the reconfiguration and reimagining of themes pertaining to biblical history in particular, as the parallels we have examined here demonstrate, one must often search further afield to discover the textual artifacts of the coevolution of scriptural themes in the early Islamic period – in relatively marginal witnesses to late midrashic creativity on the one hand, and a variety of genres of Islamic literature on the other.

To revisit the theme with which this essay opened, it is quite evident that the profound interpenetration of Jewish and Islamic tradition in the early centuries AH defies the conventional model of a clearly demarcated process of one-directional influence from the former to the latter. Rather, a general diffusion of themes and motifs that permeated the culture at large is more likely to inform the parallel trajectory of midrash and *tafsīr* in this era. The elaboration of a shared narrative complex linking Joseph's coffin and the Golden Calf is not an isolated incident. Rather, viewed through the proper lens, the fruits of Muslim and Jewish exegetical activity in the caliphal period testify not only to parallelism between them, but an actual community of opinion resulting from the emergence of a rich Islamicate culture among communities in Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Central Asia, and Europe, the far-flung domains in which the conjoined discourses of this Judeo-Islamic tradition evolved. We must recognize that a variety of complex processes underlie the formation of this shared tradition; at the same time, in at least some cases, the role of direct, personal encounters, a face-to-face communication of ideas, should not be wholly discounted, though its impact in the circulation of traditions and exchange of "influences" has at times surely been overstated.

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