The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an

Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam

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Introduction

This book is a study of the famous—or infamous—narrative of the Israelites' worship of the Golden Calf, explored through historical and literary analysis of the various interpretations and expansions of the episode across more than a thousand years. The story of the Calf is familiar even to laypeople with very little scriptural literacy; many people know it from the version recounted in the Hebrew Bible (sometimes still termed the "Old Testament"), and perhaps from later Jewish and Christian versions as well. However, while those versions will be discussed at length here, this book focuses in particular on the version found in the Qur'an—which, I will argue, represents an integral part of the biblical tradition, broadly conceived. I will trace the development of understandings of the episode from ancient Israel through the consolidation of classical Judaism and Christianity up to the emergence of Islam, using it as a case study through which to re-evaluate the relationship between Bible and Qur'an. Interrogating both historical and contemporary scholarship on the Qur'an and its connections to the Bible and ancient Jewish and Christian traditions of interpretation provides us with a framework in which to investigate the relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, particularly during the long transitional period now commonly termed Late Antiquity.

Here and in Chapter 1, I set out the methodological and historiographic presuppositions that inform this work, as Qur'anic Studies remains conspicuously undertheorized as a discipline despite its impressive expansion over the last decade; monographs on the Qur'an all too often fail to make their conceptual and theoretical assumptions explicit from the outset. Although there has been much energetic growth in the field recently, with institutions, conferences, and publications dedicated to the study of the Qur'an rapidly proliferating, Qur'anic Studies is still characterized by a certain lack of coherence and cumulative development, in part because of a failure on the part of many scholars to articulate robust theoretical frameworks for their research or adequately locate it in a particular trajectory of historical scholarship.

A recent survey of the modern field of Qur'anic Studies suggests that the main issue that divides contemporary scholars in this area is whether or not

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they understand the Qur'an to be part of the biblical tradition.[1] This book proceeds from the assumption that this characterization is both accurate and useful, and aims to present a careful, nuanced argument in support of it. In so doing, I hope to contribute to the current scholarly effort to advance our understanding of the complex relationship between Bible and Qur'an, and to demonstrate why such a perspective on the Qur'an still matters. As is well known, approaching the Qur'an as part of—or at least deeply rooted in—the biblical tradition is a well-established methodology in Western scholarship. The "biblicist" approach was foundational in the emergence of modern European studies of the Qur'an and Islam in the early nineteenth century, and although it was largely abandoned for a number of decades, it has recently enjoyed a significant revival.

Despite its distinguished pedigree, however, much work remains to be done in this area of research, both in terms of systematic exploration of the biblical subtexts and contexts of the qur'anic corpus and sophisticated articulation of the rationale behind such a project.[2] It should go without saying that this is not the only valid method of approaching the Qur'an, but unfortunately advocates of a "biblicist" approach have often denigrated and dismissed other methodologies, claiming not only that their perspective is superior because it seeks to recover the original meaning of the Qur'an in its historical context, but that all other approaches are secondary, irrelevant, or theologically driven. Sometimes, scholars engaged in historical-critical research have even implied (or asserted outright) that Muslims are mistaken in interpreting the Qur'an the way they have and do, expressing reductive and derogatory attitudes towards Islam on account of their supposed recovery of what the Qur'an "really means" through reconstruction of the historical context.

This is a problematic and troubling legacy of the historical study of the Qur'an in the Western academy that must be honestly and openly acknowledged. Here, I model one type of historical-critical approach to the Qur'an, but by no means intend to imply that other approaches are illegitimate or lack probative value, or that investigating the Qur'an's meaning in its original context is supposed to be some kind of corrective to traditional and contemporary

[1] Stewart, "Reflections on the State of the Art in Western Qur'anic Studies," 4. For other important historical surveys of the field, see Neuwirth, "'*Neither of the East nor of the West*'" and Reynolds, "Introduction: The Golden Age of Qur'ānic Studies?"

[2] Fortunately, future scholarship may now benefit from the massive work of Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible*, which serves as an indispensable guide to the current state of the field. Arranged as a commentary on the Qur'an translation of Quli Qarai, Reynolds presents a concise but comprehensive guide to the most commonly recognized biblical subtexts and intertexts for the entire Qur'an, as well as to major scholarly insights and debates.

Muslim understandings. Those understandings proceed from rather different assumptions and pursue goals categorically different from those of this book. Neither methodology should invalidate the other. Both should be valued as aspects of the academic study of the Qur'an, and ideally, in a scholarly discourse in which diversity of all sorts is valued, the study of these separate enterprises should be mutually enriching and complementary.

Here, the primary method of historical-critical analysis of the Qur'an I employ is that of history of interpretation in the *longue durée*—embedding a particular narrative shared between Bible and Qur'an in the literary, religious, and political-ideological contexts of its reinterpretation and recontextualization over a millennium, across the boundaries separating the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities of the Mediterranean and Near East. I take for granted that to fully understand how the Qur'an recasts and deploys stories shared with the Bibles of Jews and Christians in its late antique milieu, we should not focus exclusively on the transference of isolated motifs, lexica, and other raw scriptural data from one corpus to another.[3] Rather, we should strive to comprehend the wider context in which Jews and Christians—and eventually Muslims—transmitted and interpreted biblical narratives. That is, we must pay close attention to the function stories from and about ancient Israel played in various genres and discourses among later communities, and how apologetic and polemic inflected and affected how interpreters made use of them. In the end, it is continuities in discourse rather than communication of specific influences that tell us the most about the form a story takes in the Qur'an and why it appears there—how specific claims informed particular narrative choices. Those continuities can only be appreciated by taking the long view in the narrative history of scriptural stories shared between Bible and Qur'an, and thus between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

In pursuing this method, this book operates at the intersection of a number of areas of study, including Hebrew Bible, Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism, Late Antiquity, Eastern Christianity, Qur'anic Studies, and *tafsīr* or traditional Islamic commentary. Again, although this book is about biblical tradition and shared narratives, it is the Qur'an's perspective on the Calf episode rather than that of the Hebrew Bible that is central to our concerns here. Therefore, I pay substantial attention to Islam and Islamic (or "Islamicate") material, while aiming to reorient the relationship between Biblical Studies as it is currently conceived—encompassing not only the

[3] For a trenchant critique of this tendency as it applies to lexica treated as loanwords, see Saleh, "The Etymological Fallacy and Qur'anic Studies" and "A Piecemeal Qur'ān."

Hebrew Bible and New Testament but also the literatures of early and late antique Judaism and Christianity—and Qur'anic and Islamic Studies. I have adopted this approach because I am by training primarily an Islamicist, but also have significant interest and background in the study of the Bible, classical Judaism, and Late Antiquity. In engaging in such an interdisciplinary project, I have benefited in many ways from the work, ideas, and generosity of people who primarily locate themselves in these latter fields, and from whom I have learned just as much as I have from fellow students and scholars of Islam.

The narrative of the Israelites' worship of the Golden Calf at Mount Sinai during their exodus from Egypt is one of the most important stories in both the history of scriptural interpretation and the history of intercommunal relations in Western religious history. It is one of a number of narratives that Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike embraced as establishing their own community as the main protagonists of salvation history and recipients of the covenant with the God of Israel. In a very real sense, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all identify with the righteous followers of Moses, in distinction to the idolaters who transgressed and worshipped the Calf at Sinai. For members of all three communities, the story is interpreted as being about *us*—Moses is seen as *our* prophet, and *we* identify with his loyal supporters who rejected the worship of the Calf and remained believers like us. Yet the literal meaning of the story, as describing a specific moment in the history of Israel in which that community went astray, has also had particular relevance for Christians and Muslims as the main basis for asserting the disinheritance and delegitimation of the Jews as the descendants of the erring, idolatrous Israelites. Thus, for Christians and Muslims, this story is also commonly interpreted as being about *them*—describing *their* sin, signaling the rejection of *those* people, the Jews.

The Golden Calf story thus provides us with a unique basis for discerning how apologetic and polemic between communities was expressed through recasting and reinterpreting scriptural episodes inherited from ancient Israel. Through these discourses, scriptural interpretation became an instrument for identity formation and boundary maintenance, as exegetes and storytellers projected views of themselves and their interlocutors—their real or imagined "others"—onto the behavior of various characters in the episode. Again, these processes can best be understood by embracing the long view and adopting a perspective sensitive to both continuity and change in portrayals of the episode. In tracing the history of interpretation of the Calf narrative, we discern a variety of approaches to and perceptions of the story, but at the same time, we can observe how particular interpretive moments resonate with

others across a period of more than a thousand years, from ancient Israel and the Second Temple period to the emergence of the Qur'an and the advent and maturation of classical Islam.

Scholarly attempts to investigate shared scriptural narratives have seldom managed to examine both the broad contours of their development over centuries (or millennia) and the subtler ways in which social, political, and religious contexts, especially intercommunal relations, shape interpretation. Further, despite its importance as the single most representative portrayal of idolatry in both the Bible and the Qur'an, it is a strange fact that the Golden Calf story has never been the subject of a comprehensive comparative treatment that incorporates Jewish, Christian, and Islamic material.[4] This is especially surprising given that the episode demonstrates with virtually unparalleled clarity how fundamental concepts that Jews, Christians, and Muslims share in common such as chosenness, covenant, transgression, and authority can be articulated through narrative and exegesis, as well as the way in which the competing claims of rival communities converge in the interpretation of shared stories.

Bori's classic study *The Golden Calf and the Origins of the Anti-Jewish Controversy* provides a critical starting point for understanding the nexus of theology, exegesis, and polemic that coalesces in the early Christian interpretation of the Calf narrative. However, Bori's work fails to adequately capture the contours and trajectory of historical development of the narrative in Late Antiquity, given his relatively limited textual sample (mainly classical patristic literature and a small corpus of comparanda from rabbinic tradition), as well as his emphasis on thematic parallels rather than historical progression.[5] Lindqvist's more recent study *Sin at Sinai* focuses upon early Jewish material on the Calf, from the Second Temple period to the early rabbis; along with the material found in the canonical Hebrew Bible, these texts have received the greatest amount of scholarly attention in the past. Lindqvist's work is a deliberate response to the widely held assumption that Jewish exegetes were predominantly concerned with fending off polemical attacks against Jewish

[4] The recent edited volume on the Calf episode in Brill's *Themes in Biblical Narrative* series, Mason and Lupieri (eds.), *Golden Calf Traditions in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (to which I contributed the article on the Qur'an and Islam), is to some degree representative of the diversity of historical treatments of the narrative, although, as is characteristic of this series as a whole, greatest emphasis is placed on biblical and early Jewish representations of the episode. See my comments on this tendency as reflected in this series in Chapter 1.

[5] Bori mentions the qur'anic tradition on the Calf in a brief aside early in the book and subsequently devotes a mere two pages to it in an appendix; for him, the qur'anic story functions as corroboration of a supposed rabbinic impulse to blame the episode on diabolical interference (*Golden Calf*, 23, 98–100).

communities based on the biblical portrayal of the Calf episode. Though we can readily appreciate the desire to restore agency and autonomy to exegetes of the Second Temple and early rabbinic periods that lies behind Lindqvist's emphasis on internal communal considerations as driving shifts in interpretation, his depreciation of the role of external interlocutors in motivating such shifts creates the unfortunate impression that Jewish communities were largely insulated from larger cultural patterns, perceptions, and concerns. Further, the historical moment that Bori and Lindqvist focus upon really represents only the earliest phase of a much longer diachronic coevolution of traditions.[6] Until now, most of the textual evidence pertaining to understandings of the Calf narrative from Late Antiquity to the Qur'an and early Islam has either been completely ignored or else been the subject only of brief inquiries, viewed in isolation from larger frameworks of meaning.

Besides rectifying the historical neglect of a massive amount of important literary material, another major goal of this book is addressing the chronic misrepresentation of the Qur'an—and sometimes all of Islamic tradition—as the product of a passive reception of influences channeled from other, more literate communities. Historically, scholarship investigating the Qur'an's literary precursors and parallels has portrayed the Prophet and early Muslims as "borrowing" ideas from their more scripturally learned betters, especially the Jewish groups in their immediate environment. Discomfort with the reductionist implications—if not overtly political agenda—of such an approach is one of the main reasons that academic investigation of the Qur'an's Jewish and Christian background fell out of fashion for decades. The most potent antidote to the once-ubiquitous emphasis on themes of dependency and derivation is to demonstrate how the Qur'an and early Muslims were not passive recipients of "influences," but rather well-informed, active participants in complex processes of identity formation through narrative reshaping that were characteristic of their time. Their reinterpretations of biblical narratives are part of, embedded in, the continued unfolding of biblical tradition in the later first and second millennium CE.

Thankfully, much contemporary scholarship on the Qur'an now avoids this reductionist and even polemical approach of the past. Continuing this

[6] The attention paid to this era is unsurprising given the way in which Second Temple, early rabbinic, and early Christian material—especially from the Greco-Roman cultural ambit—has historically monopolized the attention of scholars in Biblical Studies and its cognate fields. Only relatively recently have scholars shifted from an historical emphasis on the Mediterranean and "Romanocentric" material to exploring relevant textual corpora from other areas and periods, for example Eastern Christian material from Late Antiquity.

vein of inquiry, this book is intended to model an approach to the shared biblical-qur'anic legacy that turns not on a concept of passively absorbed influences—what one scholar has called the "debtor-creditor" approach—but rather on that of long-term trajectories of development that unite the perennially fruitful (and perpetually fractious) Jewish, Christian, and Muslim reimaginings of the legacy of Israel.[7] My hope is not only to contribute to this ongoing project—one that has proven so productive for the field of Qur'anic Studies in recent years—but also to demonstrate why the study of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition matters for scholars in other fields such as Biblical Studies, late antique Judaism and Christianity, and the newly flourishing, increasingly ecumenical study of the intertwined religious traditions of the First Millennium.

Overview of chapters

Chapter 1 establishes the historical and methodological framework for this book. Subsequently, the book is arranged into three discrete but interdependent parts. The first part, "Foundations," deals with the most ancient traditions on the Calf episode, beginning with the Israelite narratives that eventually became the basis of the account in the book of Exodus in the canonical Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and proceeding to the oldest extant traditions of Jewish interpretation of the story. The second part, "Jews, Christians, and the Contested Legacy of Israel," charts the significant ongoing dialogue between these communities on the status of the Israelite covenant and the identity of the true chosen people as it was refracted through the prism of the Golden Calf story. Understanding the broad contours of exegetical approaches to the narrative in the Near East in Late Antiquity is crucial as background for the third part, "The Qur'anic Calf Episode." Here we will examine trends in exegesis and narrative reimagining in two very different contexts, the late antique setting in which the Qur'an was revealed and the medieval and modern settings in which Western reception of and scholarship on the Qur'an was shaped.

Part I: Foundations. Chapter 2 examines the main narrative of the Golden Calf found in Exodus 32, as well as other allusions to this episode from Israel's history that are preserved in what became the canonical Hebrew Bible. Here, we introduce major themes that will resonate throughout the rest of the book, especially insofar as the account of the Calf in Exodus appears to have been

[7] See the provocative introduction to Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*.

profoundly shaped by polemical imperatives in the earliest stages of its development. Rather than presenting a unified picture of the Calf affair, the versions of the episode preserved in different parts of the Pentateuch reflect profoundly different perspectives on the matter. While the Exodus narrative ultimately hearkens back to a time in Israel's history in which the making of the Calf was perceived primarily as a lamentable cultic infraction, the reframing of the narrative in Deuteronomy embeds it in a larger discourse in which the making of the Calf appears as the pre-eminent example of idolatry, a distinctive ideological construction of the exilic and post-exilic period.

Just as narratives on the Calf in the canonical biblical accounts are already deeply colored by polemical concerns, the earliest "post-biblical" traditions on the narrative (found in texts outside of and responding to those canonized in the Pentateuch and other parts of what eventually became "our" Bible) are already deeply colored by apologetic concerns. Chapter 3 traces the development of early Jewish interpretation of the Calf episode from authors of the late Second Temple period to the emergence of distinctive midrashic readings of the narrative collected in classic works of rabbinic literature from Late Antiquity. Major shifts in interpretation can be charted over the course of a few short centuries here due to rapid changes in the cultural and religious landscape. The earliest Jewish interpretations of the Calf episode, dating to the late Second Temple era, are primarily concerned to minimize the impact of attacks on the Jewish community and its traditions from gentile outsiders. Early rabbinic exegetes, in contrast, are relatively candid about Israel's sin with the Calf. However, the promotion of stridently anti-Jewish readings of the narrative by the early Christian movement, especially after Christianity's establishment as an imperial religion, would compel Jewish exegetes to adopt new apologetic interpretations that were more imaginative, as well as more evasive, concerning the issue of the culpability of both Aaron and the Israelite community for their deed at Sinai.

Part II: Jews, Christians, and the Contested Legacy of Israel. In Chapter 4, we turn to the emergence of specific anti-Jewish readings of the Calf episode in patristic literature. Virtually from the outset, the early Christian movement made use of the Calf narrative as proof of the disconfirmation of the formerly chosen Israel—the remnants of whom they saw manifest in the Jewish community of their day—in favor of the Christian Church, positioned as the True Israel and new chosen people. Early Christian exegetes strove to emphasize the illegitimacy of the Jews' continuing claim to covenantal priority, but this effort was tempered by the necessity of validating Israel's historical relationship with the Deity and the authenticity of the Bible (which included post-Sinaitic

prophecy) as true revelation. Notably, these exegetes' understanding of the significance of Israel's idolatry with the Calf often appears to reflect an awareness of older Jewish approaches to the story. In turn, the major revisions of the episode seen in later rabbinic tradition can be read as direct responses to the promotion of specific anti-Jewish themes in patristic literature; the diverse claims about the Calf episode preserved in rabbinic collections reflect a host of approaches to the problem of the apparent schism between Israel and God caused by the worship of the Calf. Despite the mutual opposition and hostility expressed by spokesmen of both communities, a basic symmetry, even symbiosis, between Jewish and Christian traditions is characteristic of this phase of development of accounts of Israel's making of the Calf.

Chapter 5 examines a unique corpus of material in Syriac that reflects a synthesis of older patristic views of the Calf episode with specific themes that seem to have circulated widely in the Eastern Christian milieu, shared in common between communities of Jewish and Christian exegetes in this period. While continuing the tradition of anti-Jewish arguments predicated on the abiding impact of Israel's sin with the Calf, authors such as Ephrem, Aphrahat, and Jacob of Serugh also developed a unique view of Aaron that dictated a more apologetic position regarding his particular culpability; this precisely paralleled the development of similar views of Aaron in Jewish tradition. Given these Syriac Christian authors' social proximity to Jews and the much-discussed cultural affinity of their distinctive brand of Christianity with contemporary strands of Judaism, this material provides us with a particularly compelling case through which to examine the phenomenon of exegetical approaches that are held in common by different communities, yet deployed for opposite purposes. Beyond the general theological, social, and ideological imperatives operative in these Syriac Christian authors' works, it is also possible that there was a specific historical context to the polemic they advanced based on the Calf narrative, given recent research pointing to a contemporary revival of priestly leadership—symbolic or actual—in late antique Palestine.

Part III: The Qur'anic Calf Episode. Chapter 6 introduces the qur'anic Golden Calf episode as it is traditionally interpreted in both Muslim exegesis and in Western scholarship. Jewish and Christian debates over the meaning of the Calf story provide the essential background for understanding the Qur'an's unique approach to the Calf episode; however, this background has never been fully appreciated or explored in historical scholarship on the narrative. We will show that Western scholars have almost always relied upon the explanation of the episode in Muslim exegesis, the *tafsīr* tradition, misunderstanding the role

that early Muslim commentators played in introducing a radical revision of the story that was quite different in major details from the account found in the Qur'an itself. This can be demonstrated by examining historical translations of the Qur'an in the West, beginning with some of the earliest translations and commentaries of the medieval and early modern periods in Europe. In the specific case of the Calf narrative, Western scholars' reliance on *tafsīr* has typically been motivated not by a desire to validate the claims of Muslim authorities, but rather by the assumption that Islam is at its root thoroughly dependent upon Judaism—a presupposition informed initially by medieval ecclesiastical polemic against Islam and subsequently by the influence paradigm introduced by Geiger's groundbreaking work on the Qur'an. This assumption has colored not only the overarching approach to the qur'anic narrative per se, but also the characterization of a number of midrashic traditions found in the rabbinic corpus that have been cited as the sources of that narrative.

In Chapter 7, we will re-examine major aspects of the qur'anic story, proposing a reading of the narrative that breaks with those of both traditional Muslim and Western scholarship and seeks to restore it to its proper historical, religious, and literary context in Late Antiquity. The qur'anic references to the image worshipped by the Israelites as *ʿijl jasad lahu khuwārun*, that is, *a lowing image of a calf* (literally *a calf, a body that lowed* or that "possesses lowing," 7:148/20:88) provided Muslim exegetes with a pretext for depicting the Calf as alive or at least possessing some semblance of life. However, we will argue that the qur'anic Calf is better understood not as *a lowing image of a calf* but rather as *an image of a lowing calf*, a distinction of enormous significance for the exegesis of the story. In the absence of a conception of the Golden Calf as actually or seemingly animate, the Qur'an's allusions to *al-sāmirī*'s creation of this entity must be reinterpreted as well. We will thus propose alternative explanations of the major elements of the traditional portrayal of the narrative, especially the depiction of the "Samaritan" as an outside interloper who created and animated the Calf through supernatural means, with Moses subsequently imposing a sentence of exile on both Sāmirī and his descendants, the Samaritan community, for all time. We will propose instead that the major elements of the key passage in the Qur'an can be interpreted as allusions to various biblical subtexts, and that the qur'anic story originally posited, like its Jewish and Christian precursors, that it was Aaron who had made the Calf and led the Israelites into sin—the Qur'an's unique contribution to the development of biblical tradition here being Aaron's portrayal as *al-sāmirī,* an epithet that identifies him as the inventor of the calf worship of biblical Samaria.

Overall, judging by consistent parallels in structure, imagery, and linguistic expression, the Calf narrative of Sūrah 20 appears to reflect a profound, subtle, and intentional engagement with the Golden Calf story as it is known to us today from the book of Exodus, reshaped according to certain exegetical predispositions anticipated by older late antique Jewish and Christian interpretations of the story. In Chapter 8, we will discuss these findings in the context of both the Qur'an's relationship to its literary precursors and the Calf narrative's particular points of resonance with other themes and topoi in the qur'anic corpus. Though the term is a problematic one, we will consider the Qur'an's novel treatment of the Calf story as an example of "rewritten Bible," a reshaping of an older scriptural story that is not only a reimagining but in some ways a re-revelation of a narrative with a considerable—and considerably freighted—history in previous scriptural tradition. We will also consider a possible context for the qur'anic presentation of the Calf narrative, particularly its subordination of Aaron as priest to Moses as prophet, in the conflict that traditional Muslim sources describe between Muḥammad and the Jews of Medina after the *hijrah*. At the same time, our interpretation must take into account the possible significance of central themes of the story such as transgression, repentance, and authority for the Qur'an's original audience, the community of Believers, at a transformative moment in their history.

1

Method and Context in the Study of Bible and Qur'an

The Calf Narrative as Case Study

Israel's idolatry at Sinai

The Golden Calf episode of Exodus 32 stands as the paradigmatic example of idolatry in the Bibles of both Jews and Christians—the Jewish Tanakh, now commonly called the Hebrew Bible, as well as the Christian Old Testament. In this famous portrayal of a critical moment in Israel's history, while Moses is away on Mount Sinai receiving the Tablets of the Testimony (typically interpreted by Jews as the Written Torah and by Christians as the Ten Commandments), the people fear that their leader has abandoned them. They approach Aaron, the brother of Moses and leader of the people in his stead, demanding that he make them *gods to go before us* (v. 1). Aaron complies and makes the people an image—a calf of gold—that they then worship.

Subsequently, Moses returns from Sinai after interceding with God on Israel's behalf, persuading Him not to annihilate the people for their sin, and destroys the image. As the worshippers of the image—known to posterity as the Golden Calf—abide in their idolatrous fervor, Moses rallies the loyal tribe of Levi to slay thousands of the idolaters until the camp is pacified. This shocking act is followed by a plague sent by God that smites the surviving Israelites in retribution for the community's transgression. The denouement of the story, however, is the resumption of the revelation of the Torah, indicating that the covenantal relationship between God and His chosen people has been restored.

A similar version of this narrative appears in the Qur'an. While there are shorter allusions to the episode found in a number of other chapters, the lengthiest and most detailed account appears in Sūrah 20, *Ṭā-Hā*. (It is no coincidence that the longest portrayal of the episode is found here, since this chapter is a kind of extended biography of Moses, and so the Calf story is only one of many parallels to be found between *Ṭā-Hā* and the biblical book of

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Exodus.) The account of the Calf found in Sūrah 20 (vv. 83–97) touches on many of the same themes as Exodus 32, though there is no analogue here to the Levites' violent suppression of the idolaters, which resonates in another qur'anic passage instead (Q 2:51–4). Overall, given its prominence in both Bible and Qur'an, it is hardly an overstatement to say that the Golden Calf serves as the ultimate symbol of the sin of idolatry in all three of the great scriptural traditions of the West, readily recognizable by Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike as a tangible sign of the Israelites' faithlessness and betrayal of the covenant.

When we look closer, however, we find that these communities have historically disagreed in significant ways over the ultimate meaning of Israel's sin with the Calf. For Jews, the story is a symbol of Israel's susceptibility to temptation, only one of many occasions in the biblical narrative in which they transgress and stray from the path of fidelity to their unique covenant with God. The Calf thus provides the Jewish faithful with what a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud terms a "pretext for penitence": a reminder that no one is perfect and that God is willing to accept sincere repentance for even the most heinous transgressions.[1] While later Jewish readers would certainly identify more with Moses and his faithful Levites than with the Israelites who lapsed into idolatry, a sense of collective responsibility also pervades Jewish understandings of the event, and so interpretation of the story is often colored by empathy for the transgressors, reflecting a desire to understand the rationale and circumstances behind their sin.

On the other hand, for many Christian exegetes, the story of the Golden Calf signals nothing less than a complete disruption of the original covenant with Israel, proof of the total disconfirmation of the Jews. This reading of the narrative is strongly conditioned by the influential representation of the episode in one passage of the New Testament in particular, Stephen's speech in Acts 7. This supersessionist reading clears the way for a new covenant between God and the Church as *Verus Israel*: Christian exegetes position the Church as heirs to the legacy of Moses and other patriarchs and prophets whose teachings would be realized and fulfilled in the Church, while their literal followers, the Israelites/Jews, proved themselves unworthy through their idolatry. Unlike Jewish exegetes, Christian readers of the narrative have little motivation to view it empathetically.

However, interpreting the Calf episode as a total annulment of the covenant with Israel presented some difficulties for the Christian interpreter as well.

[1] *b. AZ* 4a.

As we shall see, representing the making of the Calf as irrevocably disrupting the covenantal process between God and Israel is problematic, because if such a disruption did occur with the making of the Calf, one must explain why God continued His relationship with Israel after these events, communicating with His people through the prophets and repeatedly calling them to repentance. If the Calf represents the complete severing of the tie between God and Israel, one wonders why God would even bother to complete the revelation of the Torah to Moses, as occurs right after this idolatrous episode in the Exodus narrative. Questions such as these seem to have nagged at Christian exegetes and imposed certain limits on how they could construe the Calf narrative's significance for Israel.

For their part, on the basis of the qur'anic narrative, Muslim exegetes promote an interpretation of the story that is rather similar to that of Christians, namely that it demonstrates the ingratitude of Israel—and, by extension, their descendants the Jews—for God's beneficence and their innate predisposition to sin and disobedience.[2] However, while both Christians and Muslims see the story as emblematic of the Jews' propensity to idolatry, Muslim exegetes generally do not cast the sin of the Calf as the single event that ruptured the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Rather, in keeping with a recurring motif in the Qur'an, Muslim commentators are usually inclined to portray this sin as an example of the Jews' perpetual tendency to rebel against God and defy His prophets, manifest on a variety of occasions and not just during their idolatry with the Calf.

Thus, while for many Christian exegetes Israel's worship of the Calf is a decisive moment in sacred history, for Muslim exegetes, it is a sign of a perennially manifest inner perversity. Notably, this is quite similar to the conception of the sin maintained in both the Bible and Jewish tradition; the prophets of ancient Israel would likely not disagree with the Muslim assessment that the episode of the Calf reflects a chronic propensity towards bad behavior on the part of a thankless people. It is this persistent tendency towards sin and ingratitude that paves the way for another community to replace Israel as the chosen people—though Muslim readers naturally see the

[2] The qur'anic term Banū Isrā'īl is ambiguous. It is often used in connection with the ancient history of Israel and so might be rendered "Israelites," in clear reference to people who lived in the past; however, sometimes the term refers to Israel as a generic identifier for the followers of the Torah, without a distinction being implied between past and present (e.g. 2:83), but often with a specific claim of lineage or inheritance being overt (e.g. 40:53). I have thus generally opted to translate or allude to qur'anic and Islamic statements about Banū Isrā'īl with the term "Israel," preserving the ambiguity. See Rubin, "Children of Israel."

ummah or community founded by Muḥammad as the true successor to the covenantal legacy of Israel and not the Christian Church.

It is also worth noting that many Muslim commentators, especially among the Shi'ah, emphasize that the struggles of Moses and his loyal followers foreshadowed those of the Muslim faithful and their prophet who came long after them; this exegetical move conveniently allows them to portray perceived enemies, regardless of their actual religious disposition, as idolaters equivalent to the original Calf-worshippers (even if they are fellow Muslims, at least nominally). One of the main points of resemblance between Christian and Muslim approaches to the narrative is thus the positioning of the righteous community (the Church, the *ummah*) as successors to Moses and the upright Israelites while casting Jews collectively as guilty of the sin of the idolaters at Sinai—even going so far as to characterize heretics or opponents within their own community as tantamount to Jews on account of their deviance.

Disagreement between the three traditions is not limited to the larger theological message of the Calf story. Rather, despite many similarities between the two versions, the qur'anic account of the Calf in Sūrah 20 differs radically from that of Exodus 32 in particular details. Overall the qur'anic version of the story is quite ambiguous, and its most distinctive elements are so unfamiliar to readers who know only the version of the Jewish and Christian Bibles that they have often provoked expressions of bewilderment and disdain from Western commentators. The most striking of these distinguishing features is that the qur'anic account of Sūrah 20 directly indicts a person referred to as *al-sāmirī* for the making of the Calf. Thus, this version of the story opens not with the people approaching Aaron to make *"gods to go before us,"* as in Exodus 32:1, but rather with Moses's audience with God on Sinai, where he is told that *"We have put your people on trial in your absence, and* al-sāmirī *has led them astray"* (Q 20:85). This is the first occurrence of the term *al-sāmirī* in the Qur'an; it appears only two more times, both in subsequent verses of this episode (vv. 87, 95), and it is absent from other qur'anic retellings of or allusions to the story.[3]

The qur'anic account of Sūrah 20 unfolds in a sequence of highly allusive and ambiguous verses that have elicited significant elaboration and explication from Muslim exegetes. Collectively, practically unanimously, they understand the term *al-sāmirī* to be a proper noun, and so "Sāmirī" is construed as the

[3] In the aforementioned version of Sūrah 2, we hear only of the bloodshed that followed the making of the Calf, and nothing about how the Calf was actually made; in the Sūrah 7 version, in contrast, the focus is on the confrontation that occurs between Moses and Aaron when the former returns from the mountain, and *al-sāmirī* is not mentioned at all.

name of the person who was responsible for making the Golden Calf and leading the Israelites astray by usurping Aaron's leadership of the people and exploiting their desperation, guiding them to commit idolatry. Equally unfamiliar to those who only know the biblical account of this story is the claim that Sāmirī did this by bringing the Golden Calf to life, or at least tricking the people into believing it to be alive—his miracle or illusion being indicated by the Qur'an's laconic reference to the entity he created as *a calf, a body that lowed* (20:88; cf. 7:148).

Aside from these basic details, the commentators' attempts to provide additional background to clarify the identity of *al-sāmirī* may seem even more perplexing to readers of the Bible. They explain the word as a *nisbah* or attributive adjective (used here as a substantive noun) indicating this individual's ethnic or tribal origin; thus, while translations of the Qur'an into English or other Western languages sometimes give the name simply as Sāmirī, *al-sāmirī* is also commonly rendered as "the Samaritan."[4] The Samaritans, a community similar to but distinct from the Jews that has inhabited parts of Palestine for millennia, are perhaps best known from the New Testament's account of the proverbial "Good Samaritan" who (despite the hostility between their communities) saved a fellow traveler, a Jew, who had been assaulted by bandits. To many Western commentators, the Qur'an's association of a Samaritan with the Israelites' wilderness sojourns after the Exodus, and especially its replacement of Aaron with a Samaritan as the maker of the Golden Calf, appears to be a bizarre error, given that the Samaritans had not yet come into being as a community in the Mosaic age.[5]

Unsurprisingly, Muslim and Western commentators address these discrepancies between the biblical and qur'anic accounts in dramatically different ways. The traditional Muslim perspective is that the Qur'an, though later than the revelations that eventually made up the Jewish and Christian Bibles, actually preserves a truer account of the events at Sinai, as the Qur'an is

[4] For the sake of analytical clarity, I will consistently distinguish between *al-sāmirī* as the term designating the character in the qur'anic narrative of Sūrah 20 (where the term is undefined, ambiguous, and seems to be an epithet), and "Sāmirī" as the proper name of the character of the Samaritan as he is portrayed in Muslim exegesis.

[5] Conventionally, the Samaritans are identified as descendants of the inhabitants of Palestine who remained there after the Babylonian conquest of the Southern Kingdom of Judah while the leaders of Judah were taken away into captivity during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, leaving the true Israelite communities of Judah, the forerunners of the Jews, temporarily dispersed and leaderless. Even in this mythic account the distinction between the communities is hardly obvious, and so—building on the narrative of 2 Kings 17—Jewish tradition holds that the Samaritans were not originally Israelites or natives of the land at all, but rather represent the descendants of foreign colonists introduced into Judah by the Assyrians after the conquest of the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century BCE.

understood to be a more accurate record of God's historical relationship with humanity than the Bible. In Muslim eyes, this is indisputable because God protects his prophets from sin (a principle termed *ʿiṣmah*, impeccability) and He would certainly not have established Aaron as a leader of the Israelites alongside Moses if he were the kind of man who would turn to idol worship in a crisis. Thus, it must have been Sāmirī who was really responsible for the affair, as the Qur'an seems to indicate. Moreover, Muslim commentators often hold that the Bible's indictment of Aaron for this sin is evidence of a phenomenon called *taḥrīf*, the negligent or deliberate corruption of the original revelations entrusted to the Jews and Christians. Carelessness or mendacity are the only logical explanations for how the Bibles of these communities came to be as full of unseemly, slanderous, and inevitably false allegations about the prophets as they are, in distinction to the pure, unadulterated integrity of the Qur'an.[6]

Notably, Muslim arguments for both the impeccability of prophets and the corrupt state of other communities' scriptures have significant precedent in both Jewish and Christian tradition in Late Antiquity, a term that usually refers to the period between the Christianization of the Roman Empire and the revelation of the Qur'an and the spread of Islam (that is, from roughly the third or fourth through the seventh or eighth centuries CE). In this period, with the proliferation of scriptural forms as well as increasing disputes over which community possessed true revelation, various communities came to contest the authenticity of textual corpora attributed to Moses or other major Israelite progenitors.[7] Further, during this period, both Jewish and Christian interpreters came to be increasingly concerned with the reputation of prophets and other sacred figures from the Bible. While the ancient Israelites had unflinchingly recounted tales of the sins and flaws of figures such as Noah, David, and Aaron, and thus circulated unflattering traditions that came to be preserved in what later became the canonical accounts of the Bible, later exegetes applied different moral standards to their reading of scripture; both Jews and Christians were therefore often at pains to explain away (or were forced to ignore) the incest, adultery, and even idolatry of the founding figures of Israel whom they saw as the forerunners of their own tradition.

[6] See Reynolds, "On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic"; Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries on the Qur'ān*, ch. 1.

[7] The most commonly cited late antique precursor for the polemical claim of mendacious tampering with revelation is the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*; on this theme, see Shuve, "The Doctrine of the False Pericopes and Other Late Antique Approaches to the Problem of Scripture's Unity," and cf. Reed, "'Jewish Christianity' as Counterhistory?"

It is thus not surprising that a new scripturalist community building on the foundations laid by older communities' engagement with and development of biblical tradition would inherit their aversion to implicating prophets and patriarchs in sin. Moreover, this community had recourse to older polemical discourses concerning scriptural corruption or misinterpretation, and thus argued that their predecessors' scriptures had been subject to tampering while their own scripture, the Qur'an, was free of such corruption. Whether the Qur'an actually avoids indicting the prophets of sin is actually a complex question: it is more accurate to say that the Qur'an reflects an aversion to acknowledging prophetic sins directly, and so on a number of occasions it alludes to prophetic lapses in a vague or ambiguous way, rather than avoiding the issue completely. In any case, the overall impact of arguments over prophetic sin is that the discrepancies between the biblical and qur'anic accounts actually became a point of pride for Muslims, while the exposure of prophetic figures like Aaron to direct criticism in the Bible was often a source of embarrassment for Jews and Christians.

Western scholars of the Qur'an have generally approached the problem presented by the appearance of *al-sāmirī* in the Sūrah 20 episode with a different perspective, one typically informed by historical Jewish or Christian biases. In the logic of many Western commentators, the Calf episode took place long before the Israelites entered the promised land, and thus centuries before the schisms that led to the emergence of the Samaritans as a people distinct from the Jews. The Qur'an thus seems to present significant evidence of its own falsehood, since a true scripture (like the Bible) would not contain such gross errors. This attitude is epitomized by William St. Clair Tisdall's openly polemical work on the Qur'an, who avers that

> since the city of Samaria [from which the Samaritans took their name] was not built, or at least called by that name, until several hundred years after Moses' death, the anachronism is at least amusing, and would be startling in any other book than the Qur'ân, in which far more stupendous ones frequently occur.[8]

St. Clair Tisdall's work is exceptional only in the degree of open hostility and condescension he displays towards the Qur'an, Muḥammad, and Islam; his

[8] St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ân*, 112–13. The subtitle given to the work in some editions, *Its Origins in Pagan Legends and Mythology*, is misleading, concealing the fact that its references to pre-Islamic Arab paganism are few, but those to Jews and Judaism pervasive.

sentiments would be echoed in more muted terms by many other commentators who followed.

There are two ironies underlying the approach of such Western critics. First, the basic framework in which they view the Qur'an is ultimately taken from the work of Abraham Geiger, whose intentions in his 1833 study *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (*What Did Muḥammad Derive from Judaism?*) were actually eirenic rather than polemical. In discussing what he acknowledged as the apparent errors and inconsistencies to be found in the Qur'an, Geiger's tone is far more accommodating and empathetic than that of scholars writing decades after him about the same or similar cruxes in the Qur'an. On the whole, his conciliatory approach had a massive impact on Islamic Studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, despite their antipathy, Western commentators have historically been almost completely dependent on Muslim tradition for their understanding of what the ambiguous verses of the qur'anic Calf episode mean, including the notion that *al-sāmirī* should be interpreted as the name of a Samaritan interloper in the narrative; this point is actually rather ambiguous in the qur'anic account itself. Critics who decry the flaws of the Qur'an and the credulity of Muslim commentators would in fact have no access whatsoever to the sacred text or its possible interpretation without relying on Muslim intermediaries as their basic starting point.

It is no exaggeration to say that Geiger exerted a titanic impact on the foundation of the modern discipline of Qur'anic Studies in the West, though this legacy is in many ways a problematic one. Geiger was unconcerned with the question of religious truth as such, a novel position for his time. His characterization of Muḥammad as a *Schwärmer*, a sincere religious enthusiast, rather than a conniving fraud was intended to move the study of Islam's origins out of the realm of theology and disputation into a more objective and scientifically-minded framework. His breaking with the tradition of open polemic against Muḥammad, the Qur'an, and Islam that was typical of scholars of the early modern age was revolutionary (and controversial) in his time. However, his work preserved enough of the vestiges of older derogatory claims about Islam that it enabled new polemic in the generations following him. Geiger's thoroughgoing emphasis on the Qur'an's derivative nature, particularly his portrayal of it as a repository of half-garbled and passively received traditions drawn from the Judaism of Muḥammad's time, could be construed as a judgment on the Prophet's lack of originality, and so gave rise to new variations on older attacks on Islam—some of which have been revived in the present day.

Christian missionaries seem to have taken a particular interest in Geiger's ideas. Decades after Geiger published his work in German, an English translation was commissioned to assist missionary efforts in South Asia, presumably to facilitate the argument that Muslims should turn to Christianity because their own faith was actually derived from (or even a form of?) Judaism.[9] Missionaries' allegations of the anachronism and incoherence of the Qur'an had a conspicuous impact on South Asian Muslim interpretation and translation of the Qur'an in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and so we find a number of exegetes in this period engaging in intricate arguments to vindicate the inerrancy of their scripture. Thus, the famous reformer Abū'l-Aʿlā Mawdūdī (d. 1979) claimed that the qur'anic Sāmirī was so named not because he was the progenitor of the *Samaritans*, but rather because he was descended from a far more ancient people, the *Sumerians*. Mawdūdī's claim would be reiterated by a number of later exegetes and translators, reflecting both an ongoing need to refute Christian allegations and the continuing ambiguity of *al-sāmirī*'s identity, still fluid after more than twelve hundred years of Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an.[10]

What is at stake here? The Bibles revered by millions of Jews and more than a billion Christians worldwide preserve one version of the Golden Calf narrative, while the Qur'an revered by nearly as many Muslims preserves another. Muslim and non-Muslim views of the situation are thus oddly symmetrical: each side sees the discrepancies from the way things "really were" (whether in the true account of sacred history or in the objective historical record) found in the other side's scripture as a major proof of its falsehood or corruption. But the disjunction between the biblical and qur'anic accounts is hardly an accident of history, or (as some polemicists would hold even today) proof of the Qur'an's distorted and errant nature. Rather, the Qur'an and Islamic tradition are integral chapters of the reception and reinterpretation of core concepts and

[9] The translation was produced by F. M. Young, a member of the "Ladies' League" in Bangalore, Karnataka, in 1896, to support the activities of the English Gospel Propagation Society in Delhi. It was published by the M.D.C.S.P.C.K. (Madras District Committee of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge) Press in 1898 and distributed through the Society's depository in Vepery, a suburb of Chennai/Madras.

[10] Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding the Qurʾān*, 5.212–214, n. 63. For a concise discussion of Mawdūdī's approach to biblical and Jewish material, see Adams, "Abū'l-Aʿlā Mawdūdī's *Tafhīm al-Qurʾān*," 317–20. Adams notes Mawdūdī's reflections on the term *al-sāmirī* as a rare example of the author's indulgence in philological speculation, though he does not acknowledge the "Sumerian" interpretation or indicate the larger political and polemical context behind this question. The most recent advocate for this position is the Gülenist Ali Ünal, who considers the "Sumerian" reading alongside the (quite anachronistic) conjecture that Samaria (and thus the appellation Samaritan or Samarian) actually antedated Moses (see *The Qurʾān with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English*, 612, n. 16 *ad* Q 20:85).

narratives of the ancient Israelites, and thus of the long-term development of biblical tradition, broadly defined. That Muslims do not revere or recognize the authority of the Hebrew Bible itself is irrelevant. If anything, this should compel us to rethink the meaning of biblical tradition as an historical phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of the canonical Bible (what many people would insist is the only authentic or true Bible). It should also encourage us to rethink the relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as three traditions that share a common identity rooted in differing interpretations of the legacy of Israel, having equally legitimate claims to fulfill that legacy in their own particular—albeit mutually incompatible—ways.

The Qur'an's blaming the making of the Calf on the individual it calls *al-sāmirī* is the culmination of a number of major developments in the long trajectory of interpretation of the Calf episode during the centuries between the wide diffusion of Torah traditions on Exodus on the one hand and the emergence of Islam on the other. The main purpose of this book is to illuminate the underlying dynamics that informed and shaped that long trajectory, impelling the transition from Jewish and Christian recognition of Aaron's part in the affair, to the Qur'an's ambiguous assertion of the culpability of *al-sāmirī*, to Muslim tradition's extensive elaborations on the identity of Sāmirī/the Samaritan as the maker of the Calf.

In exploring major shifts in interpretation among different communities of exegetes over the course of more than a thousand years, we will touch upon much broader issues of great contemporary significance and interest: the development of biblical tradition in the first millennium CE, with older scriptural materials being perennially transmitted, adapted, and reinterpreted for new communities and contexts; the parallel development of Judaism and Christianity in the early centuries of the Common Era and the role of scriptural exegesis as a critical aspect of the process through which the boundaries between them were erected; the origins of the Qur'an in Late Antiquity, specifically as a product of those ongoing interreligious interactions and their implication in imperial projects; the shaping of early Islamic identity through processes of assimilation and adaptation of older monotheist traditions, symbols, and claims; and the ways in which the tripartite encounter between Jews, Christians, and Muslims has impacted the study of the Qur'an in the modern West. Thus, the example of the Golden Calf story—the continuities and disruptions of its interpretation across millennia, the persistence of imaginative and contentious debates over its significance—provides a compelling case study for illuminating the historical relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as articulated through the scriptural discourses in and surrounding Bible and Qur'an.

From Bible to Qur'an: scripture and scripturalization in Late Antiquity

There is a rich scholarly literature tracing the reception of the Bible and the history of interpretation of biblical stories among Jews and Christians from antiquity to the Middle Ages; the scope of some particularly ambitious studies extends even to the Renaissance and the early modern period. At their best, these studies are nuanced and theoretically sophisticated; further, as we will discuss below, investigation into scriptural interpretation as a central arena of Jewish–Christian exchange, boundary construction, and identity formation has had a tremendous impact on the contemporary study of these communities' complex relationships in Late Antiquity in particular. However, even when they are methodologically sophisticated and marshal diverse evidence for their arguments, it is quite rare to see such works integrate the Qur'an and Islamic tradition into the discussion in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

This is rather surprising, especially considering the popularization of the notion of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as sibling "Abrahamic" religions in recent years and the frequent calls for scholars to approach all three traditions on an equal footing. One might have expected scholars to have applied themselves more assiduously to the comparative study of the three traditions over the last fifteen years, especially given the scope and vigor of Biblical Studies and ancillary fields, in Europe and North America in particular, as well as the wealth of Islamic comparanda waiting to be drawn into significant conversation with biblical, Jewish, and Christian material. Yet truly integrative scriptural studies have been rather slow to appear.

On those occasions when material from the Qur'an and Islamic tradition does happen to be included in monographs or edited volumes on the development of biblical tradition in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, that material is often treated superficially, incorporated into discussions of older literary material in a maladroit and haphazard way, and without much consideration of contemporary methodological developments in the study of the Qur'an and Islamic origins. As an example of this, one might consider Brill's series *Themes in Biblical Narrative*: out of more than twenty edited collections of articles published in this series to date, many contain substantial discussions of qur'anic or Islamic treatments of the subject at hand, but these are typically given far less emphasis than material drawn

from the canonical Hebrew Bible or paracanonical Jewish and Christian literary sources.[11]

Contemporary studies of this sort are undoubtedly valuable in drawing attention to paracanonical and exegetical traditions as being equally deserving of scholarly investigation as the canonical Bible. Generally speaking, sources that were once consigned to the category of "intertestamental literature," or formerly deemed to be "mere" commentary and thus of secondary importance, are now increasingly valued as just as important as the formerly hegemonic Masoretic text. Moreover, many scholars are now sensitive to the multiplicity and diversity of forms of biblical tradition, challenging the canonical Bible's historical predominance as the supposed original wellspring of ancient Israelite tradition, and thus as the exclusive focus of their attention and interest.

However, while these studies are certainly useful in countering the centrality of the canonical Hebrew Bible, they are quite obviously biased in another way: they almost always privilege Jewish and Christian literary expressions as being of greater value and legitimacy as articulations of biblical tradition than relevant comparanda from the Qur'an and various genres of Islamic literature.[12] When qur'anic and Islamic traditions on the creation, the prophetic and covenantal history of Israel, and other themes and topoi of a conspicuously biblical ambience are reflexively relegated to a peripheral role in Biblical Studies, the mistaken impression one gets is that the continuing evolution of biblical tradition throughout the centuries primarily took place in the form of a dialogue between Judaism and Christianity in their earliest phases of development. In urging scholars to correct this by paying greater attention to Islamic material, the authors of one important critique note:

> The various linguistic versions, the so-called apocrypha and pseudepigrapha (both Jewish and Christian), rabbinic midrash, compilations of narratological folklore by Christian and Muslim antiquarians, and the classic medieval commentaries form legitimate facets of 'biblical studies' as it has been

[11] While some volumes in the series contain Islamic treatments of biblical topoi that are rather peripheral in the Qur'an and Islam, several treat subjects of major importance in both—the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, the Flood, the Sinai revelation, Israel's wanderings in the wilderness—yet fail to incorporate any qur'anic or Islamic material within the compass of the sources examined, while others present only marginal Islamic perspectives.

[12] See e.g. Wilken's "The Novelty and Inescapability of the Bible in Late Antiquity," an eloquent vindication of the study of biblical tradition as a central aspect of late antique culture that unfortunately limits itself entirely to Jewish and Christian evidence. Wilken's essay serves as the introduction to a whole volume of essays on the Bible in Late Antiquity, most of which do little to challenge the regnant conception of a singular Bible as the exclusive heritage of Jews and Christians.

> and is currently practiced. If anything, a responsible pursuit of the discipline of 'biblical studies' should produce the removal of the artificial boundaries drawn among some of these facets of professional activity by many modern researchers.[13]

The conventional emphasis on early Jewish and Christian textual corpora as definitive of Bible as a genre and discourse is self-evidently problematic. Islam has just as legitimate a claim to represent an integral part of the Israelite and biblical heritage as Judaism or Christianity; the only difference is that Jews and Christians maintain a corpus of texts directly associated with ancient Israel as part of their canonical scriptures, whereas for Muslims, their version of the Israelite heritage is directly incorporated into the qur'anic revelation itself. Only a few forward-thinking scholars have emphasized without bias the degree to which other significant interlocutors besides the canonical Bibles and Jewish and Christian parascriptural traditions might profitably be included in this conversation. For example, one of the most impressive contributions to this effort in recent years has been Robert Gregg's *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings*, particularly valuable for its elegant analysis of the different uses and valences biblical stories had for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readers throughout the centuries, as well as for the vibrant diversity of sources he draws upon, including a wide range of examples from visual culture.[14]

Our understanding of how the Qur'an fits into the larger picture of late antique scripturalism has been impaired by a number of longstanding misconceptions, not only the perception of Jewish and Christian textualizations and elaborations of biblical material as more authentic and those of other communities as less so, but also by a fundamentally anachronistic conception of what "Bible" actually represented in Late Antiquity. Overall, contemporary approaches to the canonical Bible and the broader biblical tradition still frequently operate within the constraints of established paradigms, especially

[13] Bowley and Reeves, "Rethinking the Concept of 'Bible'," 14. Their point is not just that our understanding of canonical biblical stories may be enriched through comparison with their qur'anic counterparts, but rather that such comparison demonstrates how misleading it is to assume that the Masoretic text or other canonical Bibles necessarily preserve the most authentically ancient versions of biblical stories. Cf. Reeves's discussion of the biblical and qur'anic narrative complexes on the fate of the protoplasts and their children in "Some Explorations of the Intertwining of Bible and Qurʾān," 52–8.

[14] While Gregg has a sharp appreciation for the particularities of interpretation in specific times and places, especially as a means of expressing difference, he is generally reluctant to see communities' narrative exegeses and elaborations as actually inflected by rival interpretations (despite the book's title)—that is, as produced through dynamics of polemical thrust and apologetic riposte. This marks his approach as fundamentally different from that which I pursue here.

that of a self-evident and universal distinction between canonical or "original" biblical narratives, the enormous corpora of exegetical traditions in a variety of languages, and the vast sea of paracanonical scriptural elaborations, even though the boundaries between these textual categories are often rather fluid.

As scholars such as Annette Yoshiko Reed have shown, our long-standing assumptions about what was truly authoritative and ancient—and thus primary—and what apocryphal or "merely" interpretive—and thus secondary—are actually misleading. Reed trenchantly emphasizes the enduring legacy of the fourth-century church father Athanasius of Alexandria, responsible for the prescriptive construction of "the Bible"

> as a single and clearly delineated entity, distinct from other writings in religious and epistemological status—a concept consolidated in Late Antiquity and now widely taken for granted. The late antique conceptualization of the "canonical scriptures" as a privileged site for interpretation and intertextuality has informed modern scholarly approaches to "biblical" books no less than to their "extrabiblical" counterparts, shaping the questions we ask and the terms in which we ask them.[15]

Critical investigation of discourses on canonicity in Late Antiquity can demonstrate the ways in which this concept served to naturalize an idea of the canonical Bible that is often taken for granted by moderns, calling into question the legitimacy of viewing the Masoretic text as the pre-eminent literary register preserving ancient Israelite tradition.

James Kugel is perhaps the best-known advocate of an approach to Bible as a broader epistemological and cultural category in ancient Judaism and Christianity, emphasizing that biblical stories were commonly viewed not as they are found in the authoritative textual witnesses of the canonical Bibles today, but rather as mediated through the rich corpus of exegetical traditions that aggregated around the canonical biblical text in the Second Temple and late antique periods.[16] Kugel has perhaps done more than any other contemporary scholar to encourage the study of biblical reception in the midrash and other genres as an authentic and vibrant aspect not only of Jewish culture but of biblical tradition in general. That said, his promotion of the study of biblical exegesis primarily *as* a discourse of "reception" has also had particular

[15] Reed, "Pseudepigraphy, Authorship, and the Reception of 'the Bible' in Late Antiquity," 472–3. See also Kraft's incisive discussion of "the tyranny of canonical assumptions" in "Para-Mania," 10–18.

[16] Kugel has advanced this idea in numerous studies, but his encyclopedic *The Bible as It Was* and *Traditions of the Bible* have likely had the greatest impact on scholars and laypeople alike.

drawbacks for the understanding of what Bible represented in antiquity among scholars and laity alike.

Despite his proposal to present "the Bible as it was" in antiquity, Kugel operates with a distinct presupposition that a singular canonical text—that is, an original Hebrew *textus receptus* transmitted within Jewish communities that stands behind the Masoretic tradition—was stable, fixed, and authoritative already in the Second Temple period. As John Reeves points out, this implies an operative distinction between a singular "original text" and traditions of interpretation in virtually all contexts of "reception" of the Bible in antiquity, even though the massive library of separately transmitted compositions and macroforms that informed the Masoretic tradition and provided the building blocks used to produce what we now know as "the Bible" was characterized by significant instability and fluidity well into Late Antiquity.[17]

Thus, in approaching Bible and biblical tradition, it is anachronistic to see the situation as that of a unitary, canonical Bible on the one hand and a host of interpreters who always and everywhere addressed a uniform text identical to "our" Bible on the other. The model of biblical tradition that we should prioritize, in contrast, is that of a vast body of permeable textual corpora with varying and shifting degrees of authority that circulated among diverse communities in a number of settings. The transmission of older traditions, some undoubtedly ancient, certainly did give rise to a variety of interpretations, adaptations, elaborations, and re-articulations, as Kugel emphasizes, but these were associated with a variable corpus of overlapping Israelite textual traditions on cosmology, covenant, prophecy and so forth, and not anchored in a single canonical Bible fundamentally identical to the Masoretic text, as Kugel often implies.[18] In this period, we should speak not of "*the* Bible" in the singular or even "the Bible*s*" of multiple denominations of Jews and Christians, but rather "Bible" in general as a literary

[17] Reeves supplies us with a compelling example of a clearly post-Islamic Masoretic intrusion into the text of Isaiah; see his *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 7–12. While many of Reeves's caveats about the instability of the biblical text pertain to the fluidity of the corpus in Second Temple times (drawing primarily on materials from the so-called Pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls), examples such as this one underscore the importance of carefully considering not only parascriptural material from the late antique and medieval periods, but the actual textual tradition that stands behind the Masoretic corpus as well.

[18] See Reeves, "Problematizing the Bible . . . Then and Now," in which he revisits numerous points previously explored in his collaborative piece with James E. Bowley, "Rethinking the Concept of 'Bible.'" As has long been recognized, the Masoretic corpus of manuscripts is marked by such internal diversity that we cannot even speak of uniform schools within the Masoretic movement with any certainty, let alone a single authoritative Masoretic text ("Rethinking the Concept of 'Bible'," 11–12).

macrogenre unconstrained by considerations of writing, Judaic or Christian communal orientation, or canonicity.[19]

Bowley and Reeves's assertion that "[n]othing of a concrete nature warrants the common use of the singular number and the definite article as if there was an inalterable form and content to 'the Bible'" becomes even more relevant when we move beyond the scriptural expressions of various forms of ancient Judaism to consider both canonical and paracanonical textual corpora produced by other communities in Late Antiquity.[20] As Reeves has shown in a number of pioneering articles, any serious investigation of the growth of biblical tradition in antiquity must acknowledge not only Jewish and Christian but also qur'anic and Islamic scriptural elaborations. A sophisticated analysis of both the qur'anic corpus and Islamic tradition demonstrates their persistent familiarity not only with Jewish and Christian exegetical and narrative expansions on what we can recognize as the canonical biblical text, but seemingly with paracanonical material of significant antiquity as well. This begs the question of the form or forms biblical tradition took in the time and place in which the Qur'an was composed, as well as what aspects of that tradition were actually recognized as authoritative by the Arabian audience, particularly the editor-redactor(s) who remodulated it into the material that became the Qur'an.[21] Thus, reconstruing "Bible" not as a singular, discrete textual object but rather as a vast body of interrelated genres and corpora—a capacious tradition and not a discrete corpus—must be central to any attempt to integrate the Qur'an and formative Islam as an important aspect of the continuing growth of this tradition in Late Antiquity and after.

Although study of the intersections of Bible and Qur'an remains a peripheral concern among most scholars in Biblical Studies, there has been a significant revival of interest in exploring this subject among contemporary specialists on the Qur'an, as well as among the general public.[22] These studies (like many of their historical predecessors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) often take the status of earlier Jewish and Christian exegesis for

[19] In thinking about the place of both individual texts and collections comprising what we now recognize as "Bible" as literary compositions in ancient Judaism, beyond the problems of writing and canon, even our most basic assumptions about genre and attribution must be interrogated. See Mroczek's sustained and provocative investigation of this question in *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*.

[20] "Rethinking the Concept of 'Bible'," 4.

[21] Reeves first engaged with this subject in "Some Explorations of the Intertwining of Bible and Qur'ān" over ten years ago and has revisited it in a number of subsequent publications; my approach to this subject has been deeply informed by his perspective. See also his "Problematizing the Bible," 147–8 and "Some Parascriptural Dimensions of the 'Tale of Hārūt and Mārūt'," *passim*.

[22] For an overview of recent contributions to the genre that includes both apologetic and polemical works as well as scholarly monographs and edited volumes, see Kaltner, "Comparative Study of the Bible and the Qur'ān since 9/11."

granted, while generally overlooking theoretical attempts to rethink Bible as a genre. Thus, even some of the most sophisticated and balanced investigations of biblical tradition in the Qur'an tend to see pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian traditions of exegesis mainly as tools to assist in scholarly investigation of particular themes, figures, and passages in the Qur'an, without exploring fully the implications of these developments for our understanding of the larger textual or cultural landscape.

At other times, scholars seem to revert to an older tendency to simply attribute the significant amount of biblical material in the Qur'an to the diffusion of oral lore, much of which was naturally inflected with biblical-Israelite themes and narratives, throughout Arabia in the pre-Islamic period. They thereby adopt a position of deliberate agnosticism regarding the compositional history of the Qur'an and the larger political, cultural, and religious frameworks in which it emerged. The incongruity of these approaches demonstrates the ongoing state of incoherence that is currently characteristic of Qur'anic Studies as a developing field.

To take one prominent example, Gabriel Said Reynolds's influential *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* hearkens back to the best older scholarship on the subject such as Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, and does a great service to the field by collating a vast number of parallels to qur'anic discourse from a variety of sources, especially Syriac Christian comparanda. The broad remit of Reynolds's work is admirable, and his arguments about possible literary subtexts in the qur'anic corpus are often nimble and compelling. However, he by and large takes the distinction between canonical scripture and parascriptural and exegetical elaborations for granted, operating with the assumption that "the Bible" represented a tangible (and indisputably canonical) category of text clearly distinct from rabbinic midrash, Syriac *mêmrê*, and so forth in the period when the Qur'an was revealed. Thus, while Reynolds convincingly demonstrates the importance of viewing the Qur'an in tandem with late antique precursors instead of privileging traditional Islamic interpretation, his work gives the impression that the Qur'an responds to larger debates, claims, and narrative presentations known from fixed scriptural and exegetical corpora, rather than making a dynamic contribution both to an evolving discourse and a still-fluid textual environment.

To consider another influential contemporary perspective, in Sidney Griffith's *The Bible in Arabic*, the pendulum swings in the opposite direction. Here, absent tangible evidence of written biblical witnesses in Arabic from the pre-Islamic period, Griffith lays particular emphasis on biblical tradition as known to the Arabs in this period as wholly diffuse and largely

decontextualized, a virtual sea of stories that circulated widely in the form of oral lore. Essentially, he sees the Qur'an as the result of engagement with Bible as legend, experienced by the audience to which Muḥammad first revealed his scripture as *asāṭīr al-awwalīn*, the "fables of the ancients."[23] Griffith's position has much to recommend it, especially as he is able to transcend the conceptual limitations that an overemphasis on canonicity may impose; for him, Bible is—as we have emphasized here—more a genre than a closed corpus. The problem here, it seems, is that diffusionism forecloses on other options.

As Griffith puts it, "the Bible is at the same time everywhere and nowhere in the Qur'ān; there are but one or two instances of actual quotation."[24] In Griffith's account, the lack of obvious quotations of the Bible in the Qur'an, at least as conventionally understood, and the absence of tangible evidence of written Bible translations into Arabic before the advent of Islam collude to support his claim that the Bible was *only* manifest in a diffuse way in the Jāhiliyyah, the so-called "Age of Ignorance" that preceded Islam. This in turn serves to corroborate the traditional conception of pre-Islamic Arab communities as largely unlettered and only superficially aware of the sophisticated religious cultures of the late antique period. It cannot be doubted that the Bible circulated as oral lore in pre-Islamic Arabia; but newer scholarship seems to provide evidence of artifacts of biblical textuality in the Qur'an that were likely communicated in the guise of literary macroforms that corresponded, more or less, with one or another of the canonical versions of Jewish and Christian Late Antiquity—with the "actual" Bible, to put it bluntly.

The work of Reynolds, Griffith, and others in recent years has no doubt been invaluable and paved the way for the field to progress beyond the more reductionist approaches of the past. The contemporary flourishing of Qur'anic Studies, especially the emergence of communities of scholars working to advance historical-critical approaches to the Qur'an in its original context, has enabled us to see with greater clarity the profound interconnections between the qur'anic corpus and the larger cultural, political, and religious world beyond Arabia. We would similarly locate our efforts here in the ongoing enterprise to promote the study of the Qur'an as a primary artifact of late antique scripturalism, an approach that, as Devin Stewart puts it,

[23] See Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, ch. 1 and cf. Vollandt, *Arabic Versions of the Pentateuch*, 22–6, where the author acknowledges the significance of processes of cultural and religious assimilation among the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period, but then focuses exclusively on the post-conquest production of Arabic translations of the Bible among Arabized Jews and Christians from the ninth century onward.

[24] Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 2.

> sets the Qur'an on an equal footing with the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, avoiding the implication that the Qur'an is a derivative document . . . [treating it] as a highly original work that engages the figures, stories, and concepts of the biblical tradition—and other Near Eastern traditions—and responds to them in a dynamic, complex fashion.[25]

As we shall see, this approach reacts to and rejects the historical tendency to see the Qur'an in reductionist, derivative terms. But it also stems from the attempt to reconsider the place of the Qur'an and Islam in the late antique milieu more broadly.

It is notable that so much of the cutting-edge scholarship on the Qur'an that seeks to investigate its connections to late antique Jewish or Christian textual corpora—the work of a school Stewart dubs the "New Biblicists"—actually overlooks (or deliberately avoids) questions of a specifically historical or historiographical character.[26] Beginning in the 1970s, critiques of the reliability of the traditional sources for the life of Muḥammad and the emergence of the Muslim *ummah* induced a sense of agnosticism, if not outright skepticism, regarding the historicity of the consensus account of the revelation of the Qur'an. Thus, many scholars working in the field today tend to approach the Qur'an as a sui generis literary specimen without context, treating the question of the exact circumstances under which the qur'anic corpus originated as a black box.[27] Insofar as scholars today frequently imply that the literary origins of the corpus are unknown and unknowable, we might say that whereas it was once commonly understood that Muḥammad was the historical author of the Qur'an, today it often seems that the Qur'an essentially has no author at all.[28]

At the same time, recent scholarship on Roman and Persian history in Late Antiquity, specifically work focusing on the impact of the centuries-long conflict between Christian Rome and Sasanian Iran and the entanglement of various Arabian communities throughout the peninsula in it, tends to corroborate at least the larger contours of the traditional account of the political circumstances in which Islam emerged.[29] Many scholars are still reluctant to

[25] Stewart, "Reflections on the State of the Art in Western Qur'anic Studies," 31–2.

[26] Ibid. 20–8. On this issue, see Pregill, "Positivism, Skepticism, and Agnosticism in the Study of Late Antiquity and the Qur'an."

[27] For a still-serviceable survey of revisionist approaches, see Motzki, "Alternative Accounts of the Qur'ān's Formation."

[28] On the *status quaestionis* of research into Islamic origins, especially in the context of the mission and statecraft of the Prophet, see Görke, "Prospects and Limits in the Study of the Historical Muḥammad," and compare Hagen, "The Imagined and the Historical Muḥammad."

[29] For a recent concise survey of the period that emphasizes the imperial conflicts of Late Antiquity as the salient context for understanding the rise of Islam, see Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam*.

draw direct links between the conditions created by the Roman–Persian struggle during the centuries leading up to the Arab conquests and the processes that led to the revelation, canonization, and promulgation of the Qur'an as the foundation of the proto-Islamic movement. However, it is not unreasonable to postulate that the gradual integration of formerly more marginal societies into the Roman and Persian cultural and political spheres of influence that dominated the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds provided the concrete circumstances under which the adaptation and assimilation of concepts, convictions, and identity markers associated with the dominant religious cultures of Late Antiquity occurred in Arabia. As various settled and nomadic communities were integrated into the larger world system that spanned the eastern Mediterranean–Near Eastern *oikoumene*, Arab communities increasingly acquired the character of Roman or Persian subcultures in the centuries preceding the rise of Islam.

Less isolated parts of Arabia such as Petra, Palmyra, and the Yemenite kingdoms seem to have experienced such integration first. The penetration of monotheism into Ḥimyar provides perhaps the most productive avenue for research in this regard, especially because of the rich epigraphic evidence that survives; it is clear that the polity underwent a transformative monotheizing trend sometime in the fourth century that culminated in the adoption of Judaism as the state religion, though scholars are divided on the question of how specifically Jewish this movement was and how widespread and rapid the shift to a new monotheizing faith could have been.[30] Regardless, the process of monotheization seems to have accelerated in the Arabian interior in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, eventually affecting the mixed pastoral-urban-agricultural culture of the Ḥijāz during the Jāhiliyyah. Through such acculturation, the Arabs living at the dawn of the Islamic era would have become increasingly familiar with the scripturalist religious communities of surrounding areas; these communities likely made tangible inroads into the Arabian interior at this time through conversion as well. Despite classical Islamic sources' consistent portrayal of pre-Islamic Arabia as a primitive wasteland largely insulated from external developments, especially from more organized forms of religious life, the revelation of the Qur'an in this

[30] See Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," 262–73 for a convenient overview, and compare Lecker, "The Conversion of Ḥimyar to Judaism and the Jewish Banū Hadl of Medina" and Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam*, esp. ch. 1. See also the discussion of the divine name al-Raḥmān in Chapter 8 below. On the conjunction of political consolidation and the spread of monotheism among the northern tribal confederations, see Fisher, *Between Empires*, ch. 2; Fowden, *From Empire to Commonwealth*, 119–21; and Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra*.

milieu must have been preceded by a substantial degree of indigenization of monotheist scriptural and parascriptural traditions communicated into the region by a variety of means, in a variety of forms.

The Qur'an itself implies as much about this milieu. Its many allusions to monotheistic scripturalist tradition presuppose a great deal of familiarity with biblical tropes and themes, which its audience would presumably have found meaningful. In addressing the significant residuum of biblical lore in the Qur'an, scholars have generally acknowledged that the revelation's intended audience must have understood such references, especially given their frequent opacity, but this comprehension has too often been reduced to a superficial familiarity with Israelite legends and tales, rather than being indicative of a more profound penetration or diffusion of monotheism into Arabian culture.

Older scholarship readily acknowledges some limited percolation of monotheism into Arabian society, for example through the Jewish tribes of Yathrib/Medina or the perambulation of Christian monks and missionaries through the region. However, the premise that the revelation of the Qur'an was preceded, and presumably catalyzed, by broader processes of monotheization at work in *jāhilī* society has now come to be more widely accepted. *Pace* the depiction of the revelation to Muḥammad as a wholly novel irruption of divine truth into a pagan landscape barely touched by the *praeparatio evangelica* of Jews, monks, and *ḥanīf*s acknowledged in the traditional biography of the Prophet, the rise of Islam may readily be seen as the result of the convergence of multiple cultural vectors.[31] If anything, what is surprising is not that the Arabs were thoroughly exposed to the imperial religions of the age, but rather that such exposure culminated not in permanent Christianization or Judaization, but in a significant reformulation of both into a new religious dispensation instead. As Walid Saleh puts it:

> The Arabs were not the ignorant lot that later Islamic tradition would like us to believe. They knew Rome, and they knew Ctesiphon . . . it was only a matter of time, one might have predicted, until they would convert to either Christianity or, less likely, to Judaism. Muḥammad, in a way, almost single-handedly reversed the historical trend . . .[32]

[31] The contemporary interest in a diffusionist model for the rise of Islam was anticipated by Fück, who already in 1936 posited in his "The Originality of the Arabian Prophet" that the career of Muḥammad is best understood as a response to the gradual penetration of scripturalist traditions into Arabia over a long period of time, in contrast to the reductionism of Geiger, Andræ, and others who emphasized particular vectors of influence that explained the genesis of the Qur'an.

[32] Saleh, "The Arabian Context of Muḥammad's Life," 22.

The Qur'an stands as direct evidence of the importance of scripturalization as a major aspect of the processes of assimilation, acculturation, and appropriation through which the communities of Arabia, in Yemen, the Ḥijāz, and elsewhere, were integrated into the late antique world system. As popularized by the work of Vincent Wimbush in particular, scripturalization refers to the process by which the cultures of the "New World" and other sites of contact between Europeans and various others drawn into the emergent colonial world order after the so-called "Age of Discovery" were domesticated and subordinated to a regime of truth in which Christianity as official religion—with both its primary sacred text and various parascriptural textual corpora—became both the touchstone and instrument of European hegemony.[33] At the same time, we must not underestimate the power of the subaltern—or in the case of the Arabs of the Ḥijāz, the culturally and geographically marginal—to contest and appropriate the authority of the dominant sacred culture. In colonial social formations the native or subaltern is transformed through the encounter with the dominating power and engages its sacred culture through translation and vernacularization.

Thus, while Wimbush tends to depict scripturalization primarily as an instrument of domination, he does acknowledge how the subaltern—or in his main example, the enslaved—can contest and even reverse the power dynamic in moments of colonial engagement through articulating new hermeneutic strategies (e.g. an Africanized approach to the Bible). In a similar vein, Jacqueline Hidalgo has recently adapted the scripturalization paradigm to theorize a hermeneutic of indigenization and resistance, demonstrating how scripturalization may thereby become a means of asserting agency.[34] As applied to the late antique context, one can certainly see how a model of scripturalization as instrument of resistance can enrich our understanding of the scriptural formations produced at sites of contact between the Eastern Roman dominion in particular and various subcultures—not least of all the Arabian frontier—in which Christianity (and to a lesser extent, Judaism) was spreading as a cultural force integrating these subcultures into the imperial world order. While the Muslim *ummah* may very well have emerged as a local pietistic movement in dialogue with both Judaism and Christianity, its

[33] See Wimbush, *White Men's Magic*, esp. ch. 4.

[34] See Hidalgo, *Revelation in Aztlán*, esp. chs. 4 and 5, where she describes Chicanx biblical hermeneutics as transmuting the biblical book of Revelation and its apocalyptic symbology from an instrument of imperial power to a means of utopian reimagining of colonized geographic and social space.

ultimate fate was not to assimilate into either, but rather to articulate and realize a vision of becoming a wholly new religious dispensation.

In this process, traditions of the Bible in circulation in the milieu were incorporated into local culture, for example by being Arabized and applied figuratively to local conditions, a more proximate terrain (both literal and imaginative). Subsequently, those traditions were transformed in both their import—signifying not the truths of Judaism or Christianity, but rather those of a new, autonomous tradition that would ultimately be called Islam—and their textual setting—becoming the foundation of a new revelation accompanying and facilitating communogenesis. A theoretical frame that acknowledges both the power dynamics of empire and the cultural dynamics of assimilation, acculturation, and appropriation provides a robust basis for understanding the historical context in which we should situate our account of the Qur'an's relationship to the biblical tradition.

The Qur'an in context: beyond the "influence paradigm"

How did scripturalization function in the late antique milieu? How should we conceptualize the aforementioned processes of assimilation, acculturation, and appropriation of biblical discourse as they operated in northwest Arabia during the decades and centuries preceding the rise of Islam, eventuating in the revelation of the Qur'an?

Some might object to our emphasis on the Qur'an as a part of biblical tradition, perceiving this as an "Orientalist" gesture, a misguided attempt to subordinate the Qur'an to Judeo-Christian culture and strip it from its proper place as the unique and original foundation document of Islam and cornerstone of global Muslim civilization. Resistance to attempts to link the Qur'an too strongly to the Bible or Jewish and Christian tradition is understandable, for, as we have already noted, many past attempts of this sort were motivated directly or indirectly by problematically negative views of Islam and derogatory attitudes towards Muslims. For generations, indeed centuries, the idea that the Qur'an was derivative and inferior, based on half-understood and garbled borrowings from Jewish or Christian tradition, was an axiom of the study of the Qur'an in Europe and America.

This approach to the Qur'an was in large part the consequence of the aforementioned work of Abraham Geiger, who presented Judaism as the matrix from which Islam emerged. Taken together with his subsequent work on the origins of Christianity, Geiger's project was a watershed moment in

both European historiography and Western civilization because it introduced a model in which religious development could be understood through a biological metaphor: traditions or communities conceived as organisms that give rise to offspring with recognizably similar traits while remaining vital themselves.[35] After Geiger, a palpable shift in European apprehensions of Islam occurred: it became possible to view Islam's differences from Judaism or Christianity not as heretical deviations from an original orthodoxy, but rather as specific developmental variations that naturally arose due to the circumstances under which Muḥammad produced the Qur'an.[36]

However, another consequence of Geiger's pioneering approach was that Islam was reduced to a status not unlike that of a child vis-à-vis its Jewish "parent," the prevailing assumption being that the parent must have been fully formed at the time of the birth of its child, and thus that all observable similarities between them were family resemblances passively derived from the progenitor by the progeny. Geiger himself had been motivated by an attitude towards Islam that was relatively positive for his time, but many who came after him latched onto aspects of his work that seemed to support a portrayal of Islam as inferior and inauthentic.

Thus, a subtler and more enduring aspect of Geiger's legacy was the naturalization of a two-dimensional and reductionist conception of the Qur'an's origins. Geiger's approach—what we would term the "influence paradigm"—holds that what appear to be qur'anic elaborations on (or "borrowings" of) biblical themes, symbols, characters, and narratives are the result of Muḥammad's reliance on Jewish informants, and thus of a pervasive influence of Judaism on formative Islam. Work after work in the decades and generations after Geiger deployed the language of derivation, deviation, and debt in treatments of the Qur'an, often openly deriding the Prophet—its putative author—by portraying the scripture as an inferior corruption of biblical truth. Even when explicitly derogatory language and value judgments are avoided in this scholarship, until quite recently it was typical for work in this vein to approach the Qur'an with a particular fixation on excavating sources, as if demonstrating the links between qur'anic material and various

[35] Geiger's work on Christian origins came after his initial study of Islam, and it is here that his larger project of reconceptualizing the relationship of the Abrahamic traditions came to fullest fruition. See Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*.

[36] On Geiger's project, see the sequence of provocative essays by Heschel: "How the Jews Invented Jesus and Muhammed"; "Abraham Geiger and the Emergence of Jewish Philoislamism"; and "Abraham Geigers Historische Philologie und die Anfänge der Islamwissenschaft in Deutschland," and compare Hughes, "Contextualizing Contexts" and Lassner, "Abraham Geiger."

literary precursors is a sufficient end in itself, a self-evidently worthwhile scholarly enterprise.[37]

Absent a sophisticated understanding of the Qur'an's place in the long-term development of biblical tradition or as an alternative textualization of ancient Israelite lore, or of the continuity of exegetical preoccupations and predispositions over centuries and across communal boundaries, or of the role of scripturalism and the ongoing contestation of the legacy of Israel in the history of religions in Late Antiquity, such studies of "influences" are retrograde and improve little on Geiger's work of nearly two centuries ago. This is partially due to the intrinsic poverty of the concept of "influence" itself; this is a term of great imprecision that seldom captures the nuances of the phenomenon to which it points. Rather than evoking complex and reciprocal processes of exchange, communication, assimilation, and reshaping that constitute both the means and the ends of cultural and religious coevolution, "influence" often simply connotes a transactive experience in which one party as donor transmits some datum or tradition to a passive recipient. One of the greatest flaws with such an approach is that it casts the donor community as uniform and immutable; this is especially the case with Geiger's conception of Judaism, which he tends to view as monolithic and largely immune to historical development, at least as regards its spiritual essentials.[38]

The considerable impress of biblical tradition upon the contents and outlook of the Qur'an can hardly be disputed; further, it is difficult to deny that ancient Jewish commentary on and expansions of Torah traditions appear to resonate in many passages of the Qur'an. At the same time, the approach promoted by Geiger and his followers projects an image of both Bible and rabbinic tradition as closed and stable textual corpora at the time of the Qur'an's formulation and revelation, but this was hardly true in either case. The fluid and shifting nature of biblical discourse characteristic of the early centuries CE, during which time both the maturation of the Christian

[37] See my remarks about this genre of scholarship in my "The Hebrew Bible and the Quran." Several examples of this approach will be discussed in Chapter 6 in reference to their authors' claims about the qur'anic Golden Calf story. Although the recent revitalization of interest in the connections between the qur'anic corpus and Syriac literature is often treated as an alternative to the approach of Geiger and his followers, as Stewart recognizes ("Reflections on the State of the Art," 23–4) the approaches are fundamentally the same in basic methodological terms, with an emphasis on Christian comparanda now simply supplanting the older emphasis on Jewish comparanda.

[38] In the last two decades some scholars have sought to think more critically about Jewish cultural transmission, continuity, and relationships with various other traditions, especially as they impact scriptural exegesis: see Dohrmann and Stern (eds.), *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange*; Elman and Gershoni (eds.), *Transmitting Jewish Traditions*; and Houtman et al. (eds.), *Religious Stories in Transformation*.

movement and the coalescence of rabbinic Judaism occurred, likely continued, at least in some parts of the Mediterranean–Near Eastern *oikoumene*, up through the centuries leading to the emergence of Islam. In thinking about late antique Arabia, we must bear in mind that there were multiple strands of Israelite scriptural tradition in circulation, some authentically ancient, some less so; some were associated with Jews, some with Christians, and still others with both, or with neither in particular.

Much of this scriptural material, diffusely distributed in the Near Eastern milieu, was not written down but rather circulated orally (as Griffith emphasizes), and can thus only be called "scripture" figuratively or metaphorically. As is well known, the prestige of scripture in Late Antiquity was so commonly symbolized through the figure of the book and writing that the Qur'an refers to the older monotheist communities that preceded its revelation as Ahl al-Kitāb, People of Scripture—but the "book" intended here was not so much the biblical codex per se (and indeed, Jews preserved their written Torah in the form of a scroll) but rather the entirety of revelation that was commonly but not exclusively manifest in actual written form. In this connection, it is surely significant that the Qur'an invokes the general term Ahl al-Kitāb far more frequently than its more specific terms for Jews or Christians. This at least partially reflects the indeterminate origins of traditions in circulation in the Arabian environment; these traditions could exhibit a diffusely scripturalist character but perhaps lacked a more specific communal inflection. However, it is also partially an attempt to modulate a representation of social configurations as primarily associated with the concept of scripture itself; that is, scripturalism could be understood as actually determinative of group identity.[39]

The best corrective to the influence paradigm in approaching Bible and Qur'an is to abandon a model of transactive transmission that subordinates the latter to the former—one stable corpus of material passively received into a new setting—in favor of one that emphasizes the qur'anic corpus as the result of a process of robust adaptation of a fluid discourse of late antique scripturalism. At specific junctures the movement and development of specific textual

[39] The phrase *ahl al-kitāb* occurs some thirty times in the Qur'an, much more often than the scattered references to Jews or Christians specifically. This, like the profusion of references to Israel/Banū Isrā'īl (which occurs some forty times), seems to indicate the power of the scripturalist-biblical imaginary operative in the Qur'an. As Madigan's classic study on the subject demonstrates, *kitāb* and its cognates cannot be restricted to the realm of literal books or writing, and thus the translation of Ahl al-Kitāb as "People of Revelation" is perhaps more accurate than the conventional "People of the Book" or "People of Scripture" as we have rendered it here; see Madigan, *The Qur'ân's Self-Image*, 193–213 and Pregill, "People of Scripture."

elements and artifacts can be traced, but the overarching conception of a monolithic biblical text's authority and stability must be abandoned.[40]

In the period of Islam's emergence, "Bible" evokes (or should evoke) a wealth of narratives and traditions, in multiple languages, oral and written, centering on texts transmitted over the course of a millennium that purported to convey the authentic cultural and religious inheritance of ancient Israel, its hallmark institutions of monotheism, covenantalism, and prophecy. Some, but not all, of these narratives and traditions were canonical for many communities; some, but not all, are represented in what we know as "the Bible" today. This fluid corpus also included a dazzling variety of later expansions and interpretations that supplemented, supported, amended, and even perhaps at times subverted older traditions. The authority of different strands of revelation of putative or actual antiquity was actively contested by various communities that laid claim to the religious patrimony of ancient Israel and located themselves as the natural inheritors of its legacy of dedicated monotheism and its place of privilege as God's chosen people.

Geiger and many of his followers assumed that the Qur'an was at most a poor approximation of the older canonical Bible assembled from a mismatched conglomeration of influences, its derivation from (predominantly Jewish) oral lore, legend, and exegetical tradition proof of its inferior and inauthentic nature. A better way to approach the Qur'an, however, is through the lens of a more sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon of late antique scripturalism, the myriad discourses of Jews, Christians, and others who drew on the masses of tradition handed down over the centuries—written and oral, canonical and paracanonical—to reinterpret and refigure the legacy of Israel for their time, rearticulating that legacy in a different context and a new key. In phrasing the title of his work as he did, Geiger explicitly framed the relationship between Muḥammad and his "sources" as one of derivation, a literal *taking over* (*aufnehmen*) or copying, from Judaism. In moving forward, we should prefer to think of the relationship as one of the Qur'an's participation, *taking part* (*teilnehmen*), in older discourses and processes instead.

[40] The fluidity of the canon in Second Temple times is often demonstrated in relationship to the Qumran library, where—in contrast to the picture that would emerge from exclusive dependence on the canonical portrayal of Genesis 1–6—major (and rather incommensurable) traditions on the antediluvian period are represented by Genesis, Jubilees, 1 Enoch, and the Genesis Apocryphon. In this context, we have little if any legitimate reason to favor the Genesis account as primary and more authoritative than the other sources. The richness and diversity of scriptural, parascriptural, and exegetical materials circulating in the late antique milieu compels us to read the literary horizons of the qur'anic corpus in a similar way.

As Qur'anic Studies has undergone a significant revival in recent years, numerous scholars have sought to break from the limitations of older scholarship and model new approaches to the Qur'an with a more nuanced conception of its place in the culture of late antique scripturalism, seeking to renovate our conception of both the Qur'an's situatedness in its milieu and its relationship to biblical tradition. Foremost in this field is Angelika Neuwirth, who in numerous publications spanning more than two decades has argued for the importance of locating the Qur'an in the context of the competing religious discourses of Late Antiquity, and of applying observations drawn from the study of late antique Judaism and Christianity to a proper understanding of the evolution of qur'anic discourse as a unique, but characteristic, response to the larger cultural, religious, and political trends of the age.

Notably, Neuwirth has repeatedly emphasized the Qur'an's location in a milieu in which a synthesis of native Arabian and monotheistic, especially biblical, traditions was underway (or had already taken place), as well as the active and creative reinterpretation of received tradition in the Qur'an, in contrast to older scholarship's emphasis on the passive transfer of "influences."[41] Her insistence on viewing the Qur'an not as a collection of late antique Jewish and Christian lore but rather as a hermeneutically self-aware and evolving scriptural discourse in its own right is particularly relevant for our purposes here. In Neuwirth's view, the Qur'an appropriates and adapts not only specific scriptural "data" in circulation in its milieu, but actively engages both the Bible and the interpretive traditions of neighboring communities to rehearse and ultimately supplant the existing hermeneutic structures dominant in the discourse of late antique scripturalism.

That is, to Neuwirth, what marks the Qur'an as a full participant in late antique scripturalism is not merely its Arabization of biblical themes, characters, and narratives, but rather its assimilation and adaptation of the larger ideological and political arguments that informed biblical, Jewish, and Christian modes of engagement with and through Israelite tradition. The originators of qur'anic discourse were well aware of the strategies of self-legitimation Jews and Christians pursued through recourse to their Bibles, and so modulated their own unique hermeneutic strategies of engagement with biblical tradition by building on the precedent set in the textual traditions

[41] Neuwirth's scholarly output in Qur'anic Studies is vast; for a concise overview of her general approach, see the introduction to her *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community*, esp. xxi–xxiv on the Qur'an's location in Late Antiquity, and compare her comments in the methodological essay "'*Neither of the East nor of the West*'" contained therein, esp. 24–6.

of these older communities.[42] Thus, to take only one example, Neuwirth has demonstrated quite vividly how the Qur'an's perception and positioning of Abraham developed over time, culminating in the full appropriation of the patriarch as both symbolic ancestor and founder of the sacred center of Mecca, reimagined as a new—and yet ancient—analogue to or replacement for the Temple of Jerusalem.

Through this process, the Qur'an revisited, reshaped, and finally reoriented Jewish and Christian theological arguments centering on the patriarch as well as reviving the ethnic logics informing Genesis, a fundamentally political argument that had been marginalized and suppressed over time by both Jews and Christians.[43] Neuwirth is hardly alone in focusing on the larger context of late antique textual strategies and scriptural debates that impacted the Qur'an; recent studies by Emran El-Badawi and Holger Zellentin take a similar approach in correlating qur'anic arguments to those that informed older debates among Jews and Christians, which were themselves likewise deeply imbricated in scriptural topoi, themes, and logics. While Zellentin posits that the qur'anic approach to law, especially pertaining to issues such as ritual purity, reflects older Christian arguments, particularly as preserved in (and sometimes closely echoing) such sources as the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, El-Badawi's work charts what he views as persistent correspondences between the qur'anic corpus and the canonical Gospels in Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic, understanding the Qur'an's citations of or allusions to the latter as the result of "dogmatic re-articulation," and the milieu in which the Qur'an originated as one in which its audience was deeply familiar with Christian debates over Christology, ecclesiology, and the like.[44]

Building on these observations, here we will specifically argue for the importance of recognizing both continuity and change in the long-term development of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, specifically as each community grounds its conception of itself in the legacy of ancient Israel—covenantal, monarchal-messianic, legal, revelatory-prophetic—communicated and preserved

[42] See Neuwirth's recent discussion in "Locating the Qur'an and Early Islam in the 'Epistemic Space' of Late Antiquity" for a particularly compelling crystallization of her ideas on this theme.

[43] Ibid. 175–83; cf. her "From Tribal Genealogy to Divine Covenant."

[44] See Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture*, and El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*. Though these works are rather different in argument and method, what links them together (and to the work of Neuwirth) is their common emphasis not on passive influence, a direct transfer or cloning of individual and disjointed scriptural and parascriptural artifacts, but rather on the continuity of discursive approaches, hermeneutic predispositions, and ideological concerns between the Qur'an and key precursors. For more on Zellentin's work on the *Didascalia*, as well as on the "Syriac turn" in recent studies of the Qur'an, see Chapter 8.

through numerous scriptural and parascriptural registers. While the perennially revitalized biblical tradition provides the common thread that links these co-evolving communities together over the centuries, at the same time, each community had to reinterpret that tradition anew in engaging the others and contesting their mutually exclusive, but mutually legible, claims. The authors who stand behind the qur'anic corpus were deeply aware not only of biblical tradition, but of the strategies that older communities pursued through reference to that tradition. The Qur'an exemplifies the way processes of textual adaptation were integral to communal definition and legitimation during the late antique period, processes that reached a critical juncture and precipitated massive transformations at the threshold of the transition from the pre-Islamic to the Islamic world.

Between midrash and *tafsīr*: exegesis and contestation

Building on the insights of Reeves, Reed, and others, we would argue that the most potent way to counter the influence paradigm, which has always given both chronological and cultural priority to the canonical Bible, is to challenge the regnant notion of what Bible represented in the era in which the Qur'an was revealed, thus acknowledging the role of both the Qur'an and later Islamic tradition as authentic and important stages in the development and reinterpretation of the legacy of Israel. The Golden Calf episode provides a particularly valuable example with which to explore these issues and rethink the intersections of Bible, Qur'an, midrash, and *tafsīr*.

The relationship of the qur'anic and Islamic versions of the story to older Jewish and Christian scriptural and parascriptural precursors is exceptionally complex. On the one hand, the qur'anic approach to the story shows points of similarity to and continuity with larger exegetical trends current in Late Antiquity, interpretive approaches manifest not only in rabbinic midrash (as Geiger alleged), but also Christian literary materials as well. This is in itself not surprising: diverse literary precursors resonate in the Qur'an, so it is quite feasible that its portrayal of the Calf episode draws on strands of both Jewish and Christian literary tradition, on currents of thought expressed in different literary corpora preserved among multiple communities in the pre-Islamic period. However, the qur'anic Calf episode's precise connections to its various precursors, especially its purported Jewish precedents, has long been misunderstood, and the misprisions of previous generations of scholars can only be rectified through careful reconsideration of the episode's paths of development

through the midrashic corpus, Syriac literature, the Qur'an, and Muslim commentary literature as registers of biblical tradition in the First Millennium.

The influence paradigm has historically had an enormous impact on scholarly interpretation of this qur'anic narrative. Geiger and his successors saw the most distinctive elements in the story from Sūrah 20—the Samaritan's interference in the Israelites' affairs at Sinai and his animation of the Calf to lead the Israelites astray—as reflecting the direct impact of midrashic precursors. However, the absence of a single Jewish source that contains plausible analogues to the elements that distinguish the Qur'an's portrayal of the episode from that of the Bible has repeatedly led scholars to argue that the story must have been inspired by or derived from a source that is no longer extant. This recourse to lost sources is an all too familiar claim in older studies of purported Jewish influences on the Qur'an and Islam.

One of the main theses of this book is that the dependence of the qur'anic story on midrashic precursors was largely overstated by Geiger and his successors, and that many if not all of the traditions that have been labeled as "influences" on the Qur'an's portrayal of the story are more productively compared with later Islamic exegetical expansions of the qur'anic narrative instead. Geiger claimed that the qur'anic narrative drew on numerous strands of midrashic tradition, including the depiction of Satan inhabiting the Calf in the major aggadic work *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and a supposed talmudic precursor to the Qur'an's sentence of exile for *al-sāmirī* (Q 20:97). A number of scholars subsequently noted the maladroit or implausible nature of the specific precursors Geiger identified, and so sought to adduce others for the Qur'an's portrayal of the animate Calf and the Samaritan interloper. However, the assumption that the midrashic corpus is the primary source of the Qur'an discouraged Geiger and his followers from recognizing that some of the similarities they detected between aggadic stories and qur'anic or later Islamic parallels may actually be due to the assimilation of elements of qur'anic and Islamic narratives into the midrashic corpus, some aggadic sources being quite late, having reached their final form well after the rise of Islam.[45]

In contrast to the claim that the Sūrah 20 version of the story presents a Samaritan as the main culprit behind Israel's idolatry and alludes to his

[45] In this vein, see the important study of Wheeler, "The Jewish Origins of Qur'ān 18:65–82?" Here, Wheeler demonstrates that the longstanding claim that the story of Moses and the anonymous servant of God in this passage is derived from Jewish sources is based on an almost willfully irresponsible reading of the evidence; the similarities between the qur'anic passage and the supposed Jewish precursor are in fact due to the dissemination of themes in Jewish literature that originated in Muslim commentary on the qur'anic account.

creation of a living Golden Calf—narrative themes modeled on similar accounts in midrashic sources—we will argue here that *al-sāmirī* is not the name of a new character inserted into the qur'anic episode in opposition to Moses and Aaron, but rather is an appellation for Aaron himself. Further, the claim that the Calf was wondrously brought to life can be shown to be a development central to the *tafsīr* tradition on the episode but not actually found in the qur'anic account itself, in which the reference to *a calf, a body that lowed* appears to have a rather different significance, representing a poetic expression for the Golden Calf that is ultimately rooted in biblical tradition. Those elements that Geiger and his successors pointed to as proof of the Qur'an's dependence on Jewish precursors here—the Samaritan interloper, the animate Calf—seem to have been developments original to Islamic commentary on the Qur'an that then subsequently percolated into contemporary Jewish portrayals of the narrative. Thus, at least in this specific case, what Geiger and others have identified as Jewish "influences" on the Qur'an are more likely to be the result of post-qur'anic Islamic "influences" on Judaism.

While both the use of this distinctive terminology for the Calf and the application of the epithet *al-sāmirī* to Aaron in the Qur'an remain to be explained, what becomes clear when we extricate the animate Calf and the Samaritan interloper from our interpretation of the Sūrah 20 narrative is that the closest precursor to the qur'anic version of the story is not one or another of the Jewish or Christian traditions of Late Antiquity that elaborate on the events at Sinai, but rather the version of the narrative as it is known from the extant witnesses to the book of Exodus. We will thus argue that close examination of the literary structure of the Sūrah 20 narrative demonstrates the likelihood that this portrayal of the Calf story is mainly the result of a direct and largely original engagement with a version of the Exodus narrative, and is not substantially derived from Jewish exegetical tradition or any other expansion on the story in circulation in the pre-Islamic period.

At the same time, while Q 20:83–97 thus appears to be an Arabic textualization of the ancient Calf story and may profitably be compared with other versions of the Exodus narrative in the Septuagint, the Peshitta, and the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, the specific approach the Qur'an takes to that story aligns in a general way with that of both Jewish and Christian exegetes in the larger late antique cultural and religious landscape. That is, the qur'anic portrayal of the Calf affair is largely congruous with the approach prevalent among older interpreters, though it cannot be held to be directly derived from any literary precursor in rabbinic midrash or Syriac Christian compositions on the episode in particular.

In short, the Qur'anic Calf story represents, it seems, a unique register of the ancient version of the Calf narrative in Arabic, paralleling those of the Jewish and Christian Bibles extant in various languages, though also inflected by concerns and concepts typical of its time, a background that can be illuminated in a general way by considering older exegetical precursors to the qur'anic account. The similarity of the Sūrah 20 narrative to the canonical biblical witnesses is somewhat anomalous, at least judging from the scholarly literature, which (again due to Geiger's impact on the field) generally focuses on discerning the exegetical intermediaries that lie between Bible and Qur'an, the assumption being that the author or authors of the Qur'an could only have been aware of biblical traditions as they were transmitted through such intermediaries. This is not an unreasonable view given that many qur'anic versions of biblical stories do reflect narrative flourishes for which there are clear and direct precursors in exegetical and apocryphal corpora, for example the portrayal of the circumstances leading to the sin of Adam and Eve, Abraham's destruction of his father's idols, or the animation of clay birds by the child Jesus.[46] In these cases, the qur'anic corpus's engagement with a topos known from the Hebrew Bible or New Testament clearly occurs at some remove from what we know as the canonical versions of those stories, modulated through an adaptation found in what we would now consider parascriptural sources.

Unfortunately, the prominence of such passages—and the way they attracted the attention of Geiger and other influential early scholars of the Qur'an as paracanonical and exegetical traditions that the Qur'an renders canonical—has generally distracted scholars from serious consideration of other passages in the Qur'an that most closely resemble narratives known from the canonical Bibles themselves. Generally, when scholars have compared qur'anic and ancient biblical material, they have opted for broad-based discussion of thematic, symbolic, or narrative parallels—family resemblances—without considering the significance of such parallels for our overall understanding of the evolution of biblical tradition or the emergence of qur'anic discourse. Thus, the possibility that qur'anic retellings of Israelite stories may hearken back to ancient Torah traditions as their primary touchstone—to authentically ancient strands of Israelite tradition, presumably mediated through a translation in circulation in the milieu—has hardly been explored.

[46] The qur'anic portrayal of the sin of Adam and Eve is commonly correlated with that in the apocryphal Life of Adam and Eve; that of Abraham's destruction of his father's idols with that found in *Genesis Rabbah* and other midrashic sources; and that of the child Jesus animating clay birds with that in the apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

Given the close relationship between the qur'anic version of Sūrah 20 and the Exodus narrative, the Calf story vividly demonstrates the value of approaching the development of biblical tradition in the broadest possible perspective for renovating our approach to the intertwined connections between Bible, Qur'an, and Islamic tradition. Understanding the qur'anic revision of the older Exodus account on its own terms reveals significant thematic currents in that account that are overshadowed in subsequent Jewish and Christian understandings of the episode—understandings that strongly inflect our contemporary perception of the story today—but resurfaced in the Qur'an's retelling of the story.[47] At the same time, the qur'anic retelling also brings major aspects of late antique Jewish and Christian exegesis of the Calf story into relief, as these were deliberately evoked to provide subtext and meaning in the Qur'an's revision of the Exodus narrative. Finally, recalibrating our reading of the qur'anic story to highlight its exact relationship to precursors in both Exodus and Jewish and Christian retellings allows us to apprehend the significant changes later Muslim exegetes wrought in the received narrative, as well as how those revisions subsequently came to impact Jewish conceptions of the episode in particular. When we appreciate the creativity of Muslim exegetes in revising the qur'anic story according to their own predilections and presuppositions, we can better understand the place of Muslim exegetical literature on the Qur'an as another stage in the ongoing development of biblical tradition—not apart from, but rather a part of, the ongoing engagement with the legacy of Israel previously pioneered by Jewish and Christian exegetes over the course of centuries.

In shifting away from a framework emphasizing passive influence towards one emphasizing participation and dialogue, we should not underestimate the agonistic nature of the processes informing the ongoing development of biblical tradition in exchanges between Jews, Christians, and Muslims through narrative recasting and exegesis. That the reshaping and reinterpretation of traditions on the Golden Calf episode should be intrinsically contentious, being driven by apologetic and polemical concerns, goes almost without saying. However, arguably *every* moment in the ongoing development of biblical tradition was (and continues to be) contentious, as all three communities articulate their particular religious visions by challenging the claims of the others through reference to a shared but contested past.

[47] A number of scholars have emphasized that close consideration of qur'anic narratives may have heuristic value in provoking new understandings of canonical biblical texts; this project is pursued most systematically in Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac*.

This insight helps us to discern the crux of the problem with contemporary efforts to assert "Abrahamic" commonalities as a foundation for contemporary attempts at ecumenism and dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. As well-intentioned as the discourse on such commonalities may be, as scholars such as Jon D. Levenson and Carol Bakhos have shown, expressions of this tendency often involve presenting the three traditions as fundamentally similar, if not essentially identical, and so basically asserting the same—or at least mutually compatible—truths. Such generalization often entails a gravely misleading effacement of the substantial differences in what being Jewish, Christian, or Muslim means and has meant for many believers.[48] Although contemporary advocates for this position might choose to see their so-called "Abrahamic" faith as akin to that of everyone else who ratifies the vision of pure monotheism associated with the patriarch, defining that faith as something essentially open, tolerant, and accepting, this does not negate either the substantive differences that have historically distinguished the traditions or the persistent sense of difference from members of other communities some believers legitimately harbor today.[49]

Moreover, we might argue that, historically, the representatives of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities have deliberately attempted to articulate and emphasize distinctions between their beliefs and practices and those of other communities, in spite of their similarities, as a crucial strategy of self-definition. It is not just that perceived differences between communities may actually be more substantial than advocates for supposedly "Abrahamic" commonalities might be willing to admit. Rather, the impulse to actually *highlight* distinctions, the deliberate construction and enhancement of difference, has played a crucial role for all three communities, and the assertion of a particular vision of Abrahamic identity by each group has itself served as a means for promoting separation and enforcing boundaries. Historically speaking, as each community has perennially sought to claim Abraham as its special ancestor, forerunner, or spiritual exemplar in contrast to the analogous claims of other communities, the assertion of "Abrahamic" identity has frequently been intentionally divisive and deliberately polemical.[50]

[48] See Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham* and Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*.

[49] A point made most forcefully by Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, ch. 6.

[50] As Elias's commentary on the Abrahamic mythology evoked by the Taliban in their iconoclastic campaign against artifacts of Buddhist cultural heritage in Afghanistan—particularly the monumental figures at Bamiyan—makes clear, the recollection of Abraham can attend forceful, even violent, assertions of radical difference. The destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001 clearly played upon not only a politically exploitable revulsion of images in Islamic discourse but also what was

Thus, it is perhaps more useful to think of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as constituting three dialects of a common Abrahamic language. Each community may define itself as different from the others, but does so in reference to a body of symbols, ideas, and claims that are comprehensible to the others, though they may be defined and deployed in different ways. Some of their usages may overlap, some may be radically different; speakers from each community (to continue the metaphor) recognize the differences and may assign varying significance to them. Some may feel genuine affinity with speakers of another dialect and not care overmuch about perceptible differences; others may think they have nothing in common with speakers of another dialect, insist they are speaking a completely different language, and even exploit the differences between them as a pretext for alienation and violence—even though the differences between the dialects may seem negligible to an outside observer.[51]

As the primary basis for interpreting and expressing a claim to inheritance of the legacy of Israel, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scripturalism has frequently served as one of the main ways difference has been established, specifically through reference to, and promoting particular readings of, biblical themes, symbols, and narratives. As has long been recognized, Judaism and Christianity attained their mature forms through a dialectical process typically characterized by contestation and hostility in the early centuries of the Common Era. Both the Qur'an as foundation document and what became the formative Islamic tradition emerged as later participants in this very same process only a few centuries later.

Under changing religious and ideological circumstances, each community's readings of important scriptural narrative and thematic complexes have regularly shifted in order to maintain that community's exegetical sovereignty—its natural drive to promote and protect its particular conceptions of monotheism, prophecy, sin and justification, and especially the accounts of sacred history preserved in its scriptural traditions.[52] A community's exegetical sovereignty must be actively maintained and defended, especially in cases

readily cast as an execrable Western (that is, Judeo-Christian) affinity for and urge to preserve the statues despite their religiously dubious status in a Muslim country. See Elias, "(Un)making Idolatry."

[51] My use of a linguistic metaphor to describe religious difference here is inspired by that of Boyarin, *Border Lines*, ch. 1, where he applies it to emergent Judaism and Christianity in their formative centuries.

[52] Here "exegesis" should be taken in the broadest possible sense—not limited to written commentary on an exemplary canonical text, but rather denoting any act of interpretation or engagement with biblical narrative, regardless of medium or register, and including both the oral and the visual.

when claims are directly contested or usurped entirely. When specific narrative "scripts" are shared between two or more communities, authorities from each must constantly maneuver to promote and safeguard a version of the narrative that exemplifies the message those authorities seek to broadcast both to insiders and outsiders. Interpretation, whether executed through direct exegesis of a canonical text or creative reimagining and (re)canonization of a narrative, not only serves as the medium through which the legacy of Israel is transformed and reenergized among Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. It also becomes the primary arena in which challenges to preferred readings can be defused and dispelled.[53]

Put another way, interpretation is an important instrument with which differences between communities are forged and boundaries erected and maintained.[54] The centrality of exegesis in all three communities is directly linked to the centrality of biblical tradition in each; but again, the question of asserting difference is key here, for Israel and its legacy is not so much a property that is shared in common by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as it is one that is actively and anxiously contested by each group, all of whom have historically sought to be sole proprietors of this imaginative territory, actively defending its prerogatives against other claimants. It is precisely when rival claims are being most aggressively asserted that the most dynamic and creative responses to such challenges emerge. This is the process through which scriptural traditions preserving, transmitting, and reconstruing Israel's legacy multiplied over the course of centuries, even millennia.

Because the Calf episode is an emblematic moment of transgression in Israel's history, it has served those who wish to forge distinctions between communities through reinterpretation remarkably well. This is why the major shifts in the understanding of the episode from the formative periods of both the Christian and Islamic traditions are particularly important in the history we seek to chart here. As noted previously, revisiting the Calf episode—and giving it a stridently sectarian reading—is a highlight of one of the foundational moments of the early Christian movement, namely the speech of Stephen Protomartyr to his persecutors in which he likens their stubborn rejection of Christ to their ancestors' devotion to the Calf. Likewise, in the

[53] On exegesis and the contested legacy of Israel among Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible in Late Antiquity, see the classic study of Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius*.

[54] On the erection and maintenance of communal boundaries by social groups through a variety of practices and discourses, see Barth, "Boundaries and Connections"; Barth's ideas are productively deployed for analysis of the late antique and early Islamic milieu in Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*.

Qur'an, the Calf episode recurs a number of times as a key moment in the history of Israel; its recollection is meant to supply believers with a paradigmatic example of human obstinacy in the face of divine favor, a cautionary tale for a new community to take to heart as it traverses its own path out of the wilderness to its promised land.

That the Golden Calf has been a major source of contention between scriptural communities is hardly an innovative proposition. As we shall see, over the centuries, conflict over the interpretation of the story has been a constant, despite the many shifts in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim understandings of its exact meaning. It is perhaps more of a challenge to show how the interpretation of the narrative may actually be understood as an example of discursive continuity between communities as they articulate new visions of older traditions to establish the priority of their particular claims. Disputation is commonly seen as an arena in which claims and counter-claims traveled back and forth across communal boundaries; this is the very essence of the disputational dynamic. We would argue that interpretation, particularly the interpretation of symbolically freighted narratives shared between different communities' canonical scriptures, evolves in a way very similar to that of disputational discourse; throughout the late antique period, exegesis and disputation were frequently linked. Thus, scriptural interpretation may serve as a critical means of exchange just as much as disputation. After all, the contemporary study of political and strategic communications offers countless examples of how engagement in argument exerts a decisive impact on the discourse of both sides in a debate, regardless of the medium through which that debate occurs.

It is relatively rare to find spokesmen of one or another community explicitly refuting the claims of others in the context of a commentary on or narrative expansion of scripture. Rather, the very shape, texture, image, or form of a polemical trope or apologetic strategy may be drawn from the opponent's own tradition—sometimes in such subtle ways that the act of appropriation or mimicry goes unnoticed until it is subjected to careful scrutiny and meticulous comparative analysis. This is specifically the insight that has revolutionized the study of Jewish and Christian exchanges in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages over the last two decades. A sea-change has occurred in the way scholars approach late antique and medieval Jewish interpretation of biblical tradition; in contrast to an older approach that viewed Jewish cultural expressions in isolation from those of "host communities," contemporary scholars have demonstrated how the close reading of texts can reveal the deep imbrication of Jewish and Christian cultures in a variety of settings from Palestine to Spain and the Rhineland.

Today it hardly seems shocking to suggest the significant interpenetration of ideas between Jewish and Christian communities not only in scriptural interpretation, but in such areas as ritual, theology, and mysticism as well—manifestations of a profound and ongoing symbiosis between these communities in the imaginal realm. There have been a number of watershed publications in this area over the last fifteen years, each with its distinctive perspectives and emphases. Numerous studies by Daniel Boyarin have emphasized a model in which early Judaism and Christianity emerged out of a common pool of ideas, themes, and presuppositions through a very gradual process by means of which the two communities were disentangled from one another, separating out of an original unity.[55] Other authors, especially those working on medieval phenomena, approach significant developments in Jewish culture as imaginative, but largely unconscious, appropriations of Christian symbols and ideas; most notably, Peter Schäfer has argued that the emergence of the kabbalistic concept of the Shekhinah as a feminine divine hypostasis reflects the popularization of the cult of the Virgin Mary in Western Europe.[56] Still other scholars have emphasized different processes of strategic appropriation, recontextualization, and subversion of claims and ideas in medieval Jewry's engagement with the dominant Christian culture.[57]

However, scholars have far less frequently examined the significant impact that Jewish and Christian arguments over the correct shape or interpretation of scriptural narratives may have had on the Qur'an, or the reconfiguration of those arguments in a new context in Jewish–Muslim confrontations. That is, the potential benefits of a "Yuvalian" or "Boyarinesque" renovation of our approach to both the Qur'an itself and the formidable edifice of Muslim exegesis would be considerable, but such a project is as yet still largely unrealized. This is unfortunate, because these scholars have successfully shown how exegesis has frequently constituted one of the major arenas in which Jewish and Christian communal spokesmen challenge the legitimacy of the other communities' teachings, or seek to establish the truth of their own. This is self-evidently the case when it is the interpretation of scripture itself that is at issue—though in these instances, there is often much more than interpretation at stake, because contesting a particular understanding of scripture implicitly calls into question the authority of a community's interpretive

[55] See especially *Border Lines*, and compare the various essays in Becker and Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted*.

[56] See Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*.

[57] Most notably Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood* and Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*.

tradition, and beyond that, the entire structure of claims and justifications built upon scriptural foundations.

A classic example of how this exegetical contest between Jews and Christians enters a new era with the emergence of Muslim interlocutors into the fray is the controversy over which of Abraham's sons was honored by being chosen as the one to be sacrificed at God's command. While scholars are still divided about whether it is Isaac or Ishmael who is presupposed as the victim in the highly ambiguous narrative found in Q 37:100–11, as Reuven Firestone has demonstrated, early Muslim commentators actually read the qur'anic story through the lens of Jewish and Christian interpretation of the biblical narrative in Genesis, where it is Isaac who is unambiguously indicated as the intended sacrifice. Over time, Muslim opinion on the chosen sacrificial victim shifted from Isaac to Ishmael, as the view that it was the latter who was the favored son came to be naturalized through processes of Arabization in early Islamic culture. Not only did later Muslim spokesmen repudiate their predecessors' dependence on the Bible for understanding the Qur'an, but the critical difference between the scriptures was taken as a mark of distinction proving Islam's superior truth-claims; this in turn prompted new Jewish and Christian reimaginings of the Israelite patriarch, his primordial sacrifice, and his relationship to his sons.[58] Thus, even—or especially—in those cases of hotly contested (or contentious) exegeses, the claims of rivals persistently haunt interpretation, possibly even without being named explicitly.

[58] On the shifting Muslim conception of the narrative of the sacrifice, see the classic account of Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*; on Arabization, see the discussion of Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence*, chs. 7 and 8. A parallel case of shifting exegesis of a shared biblical–qur'anic story is David's sin with Bathsheba, discussed in Chapter 8.