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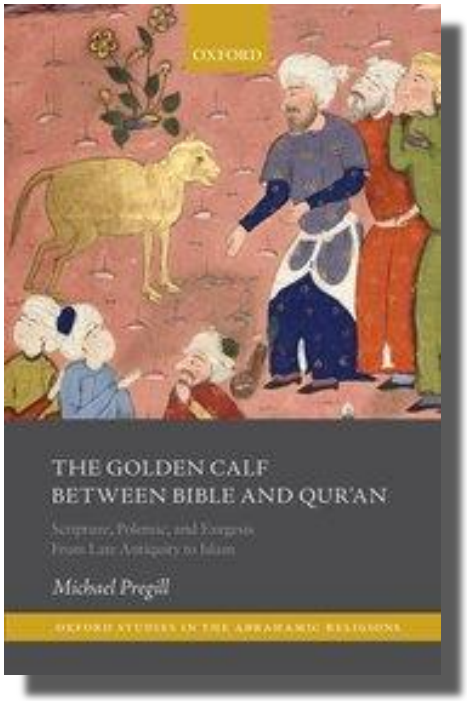

Michael PREGILL

The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an: Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam

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Michael Pregill's *The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an* sets out, via a thick reading of a single pivotal and representative narrative in the story of the Calf (or "Golden Calf" in common Jewish and Christian discourse), to situate the Qur'an within the larger religious and literary context of the Late Antique world. That it takes him nearly 450 pages to present and develop his argument attests to the complexity of the intertextual relationships he examines and the sticky methodological issues that have plagued and continue to beset those trying to make sense of traditions known from the Bible as they occur in the Qurʾān. It also attests to the extent of due diligence he undertook through his exhaustive reference to earlier research on the episode in its many literary settings. The core passage in question is found in Q Ṭā Hā 20:83–98, a qurʾānic chapter ripe with renderings of stories known also in the Jewish and Christian Bibles as well as other pre-Islamic extra-biblical works; a second and shorter telling is found also in Q al-Aʿrāf 7:148–153 and a brief reference in Q al-Baqarah 2:51–54.

As with so many qurʾānic depictions of supposed "biblical materials," the qurʾānic Calf episode is easily recognizable to readers of the Bible. It includes a number of mythemes familiar from the biblical story in Exodus and Deuteronomy; yet it lacks seemingly central motifs while including material entirely unrecognizable from the biblical narrative. It also relates the story according to a puzzling sequence and with what would appear to a biblical reader to be bewildering results. Western readers of the Qurʾān have long noted the titillating parallels in conjunction with the puzzling differences that are so typical of so-called "biblical stories" in the Qurʾān, and Pregill takes the Calf episode as an opportunity to offer a well-reasoned perspective and critique of methodologies employed in teasing out the intertextual relationship between the two scriptures. He explores the narrations of the story along with their interpretive traditions among diverse communities of exegetes over the course of more than a millennium.

Pregill moves in two directions. To contextualize the story's literary and exegetical journey, he looks rearward to trace its internal development in the centuries-long pre-canonical biblical tradition. Older scriptural materials evolved along with evolving communities under changing contexts during the first millennium BCE, as ancient Israel experienced political and religious transformations. One example he cites that impacted the narration of the Calf episode was the division of the Israelite monarchy after Solomon and the resultant competition between two centers vying for religious and political power and influence. A significant body of biblical scholarship has been written on the politics of the division of Israel into two competing and sometimes warring kingdoms. The tension included competition over control over the ritual center of Israelite religious-national life. Based on this body of biblical research, Pregill argues that the story of the Calf in the book of Exodus echoes

claims for sanctity associated with a golden calf in the Northern Kingdom. Moving forward, he examines the Calf story in relation to "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" (21).

Interest in the relationship between Bible and Qurʾān is not new, of course – among both Muslims and non-Muslims. As he relates in some detail in chapter 1 focusing on method, the many parallels between the Qurʾān and earlier scripture have occupied non-Muslim observers since the very emergence of the Qurʾān as text. Perspectives on the relationship have shifted over the centuries from the purely polemical to increasingly "scientific" (though often still polemical). He walks the reader through the most impactful methods and presumptions on the relationship and the ways in which the various approaches reinforced one another's stereotypes and presuppositions. Only in the past few decades, he argues, have some scholars succeeded in approaching the problem with a minimal level of bias along with the intellectual and linguistic tools and perspective to get beyond deeply embedded religious and cultural prejudices. Pregill is clearly part of this wave. Rather than privileging biblical or rabbinic sources or relating to the Qurʾān as in any way derivative, he exemplifies a recent and still-developing perspective that treats intertextual negotiation as part of a long process of

adaptation, adjustment, elaboration, and amplification of ideas and texts that is a natural part of the human project.

Pregill reconstrues "Bible" "not as a singular, discrete textual object but rather as a vast body of interrelated genres and corpora – a capacious tradition" (27), "more a genre than a closed corpus" (29). He thus integrates the Qurʾān and formative Islam as part of the continuing evolution of biblical tradition as it has grown and changed during the period of Late Antiquity and afterward. The Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, for example, was not the only one available in the Second Temple period and Late Antiquity. Other forms include the Septuagint, various Aramaic targums as well as renderings of the Bible in other languages, editions known from the Dead Sea compendia, (re)tellings such as Jubilees and other pseudepigraphic works and certainly additional sources that have been lost to us, along with various reiterations couched in the interpretive traditions among the many religious communities that we tend now to define as "Jewish" or "Christian" but which were in many cases not so clearly differentiated.

Pregill's interest in the pre-canonical biblical evolution of the Calf episode brings him into the world of biblical scholarship on the story. According to current trends of thinking, the narrative in Exod 32 is a late rendering of a story of Israelite betrayal of God through worship of an idol in the form of a calf. As it appears in Exod 32, however, this story was influenced by internal political and religious issues associated with competing sacred sites between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah after the breakup of the united Israelite kingdom under David and Solomon. One issue concerned a contestation over authority that was articulated, in part, via competing ways of representing the authority of God. The image of a bull was resurrected in the north from ancient Canaanite tradition to

serve as a symbol of the monotheist deity in Samaria. The bovine image in that context was not an idol but rather a symbol, something not significantly different from the symbolism represented by the Ark of the Covenant in the Jerusalem Temple in the south. Neither the calf nor the ark were worshipped; they were symbolically representative of the same God, but in different political environments – mascots, so to speak, that represented local tradition and devotion.

More on this in a moment, but one of the points Pregill makes is that textual representations as well as their meanings have always been fluid, and that contending parties or communities worked with familiar motifs in myriad ways in order to convey their own perspectives and agendas. The Qurʾān is a part of this very long tradition of telling and retelling, with its own agendas and its own integrity. Western perspectives regarding the qurʾānic role in the long process of tellings and retellings have, until recently, been one of near disdain, he argues, conveyed by various articulations of the trope that as author of the Qurʾān, Muḥammad relied on (often heretical) Christian or Jewish informers for his material, who either did not know the Bible properly or purposefully distorted it for their own nefarious reasons; or that Muḥammad erroneously thought that midrashic stories were accurate representations of scripture and so based his composition on them; or that Muḥammad distorted the traditions he learned himself, or simply made a lot of mistakes in his faulty authorship of what he claimed to be a new scripture. According to all of these scenarios, the Qurʾān is thus considered derivative, little more than a garbled collection of topoi from earlier sources rather than representing a unique and valuable contribution to an ages-long process of textual development. The Qurʾān therefore has little value on its own, since it represents errors or slavish reliance on early interpretations. This outmoded perspective continues to

influence some scholars who persist in assuming a sort of transactive relationship between the Qurʾān and the Bible, which subordinates the former to the latter through a passive role of receiving rather than producing. On the contrary, Pregill writes, the Qurʾān is no more derivative than any other part of what he defines as an extended biblical tradition. This makes perfect sense to me. My only problem is with the nomenclature, and this is not only Pregill's problem. It would be beneficial to come up with a more disinterested term than "biblical tradition" to label the long and continuing process of literary development that began long before the appearance of the Hebrew Bible and of which the Qurʾān – and, by extension, also post-qurʾānic sacred texts and traditions – is a part.

Pregill works chronologically, beginning with the biblical rendering of the story (chapter 2), with a particular sensitivity to what might be considered internal scriptural conversation. The core story is found in Exod 32, but is "retold" in Deut 9 and referenced several times in the historical books of 1 Kgs 12 and elsewhere. Of particular importance is the near parallel in 1 Kgs 12 of Exod 32:4 when Aaron takes gold from the Israelites and fashions from it a molten calf, after which the people exclaim, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" The 1 Kgs 12 passage (v. 28) has the rebel King Jeroboam make "two golden calves. He said to the people, 'You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.'" Pregill argues that this would have been understood to mean something like, "This is *representative* of your God, O Israel, who brought you up from the Land of Egypt." The calves fashioned in the Northern Kingdom were not idols, but rather representative of the same divinity as worshipped in the Temple of the Southern Kingdom (serving a parallel function to the Ark of the Covenant – and one might add, the mythic winged cherubim that covered it). Behind the symbolism of calf or

ark was competition for sanctity and authority, as the words "you have been going up to Jerusalem long enough" seem to convey (i.e., you *should* come to Samaria!). This episode, which appears to reflect some level of actual history in the strife and competition between the two Israelite kingdoms, seems to have been the inspiration for what became the canonical Calf narrative in Exodus. This is suggested by a number of parallels, including the nearly identical names for the sons of Aaron and Jeroboam.[1] Use of the calves in northern worship was not considered idolatrous because they were not considered deities or representations of deities in and of themselves. And, Aaron never referred to the Calf as God in the Exodus rendering. In both cases, the calves were only representative of the power of God, not divinities themselves. The Deut 9 passage, which is chronologically the latest of the three, manipulates the earlier renderings to convey the notion that the people constructed the Calf of Exodus not as representative of the divine Other but rather as a divinity in the form of a molten image. This reflects its agenda of centralizing authority in the state cult in Jerusalem and condemning all other centers as dedicated to the worship of foreign gods. Accordingly, the Exodus Calf story in its current form (it includes nearly the same line as the 1 Kings rendering, but with a different meaning: "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the Land of Egypt!") served as a polemic against cultic competition from the Northern Kingdom. The message was that the Northern Kingdom's claim for authority was a profanation of God's will, just as the people profaned God's will at the foot of Mount Sinai with worship of a calf.

Chapter 3 treats early Jewish interpretation from the Second Temple and tannaitic period (ending roughly in the early 200s CE). The chronological setting is important because this was a period during which Jewish communities struggled to make sense of their status in

[1] Jeroboam, therefore, would lay claim to priestly authority to administer the temple in the north.

relation to the overwhelming power of Rome, and it was before Christianity's success in penetrating and absorbing the power and authority of the Roman state. It is the period during which the Septuagint was produced, along with a number of other sources that engaged in innovative readings (and re-readings) of the Calf story, including Pseudo-Philo, Philo, Josephus, and early (tannaitic) midrash. Pregill sees in these retellings and comments a certain level of apologia. Pseudo-Philo, he notes for example, omits the scene of calf-worship and reduces the chance of associating Aaron with the sin of creating the Calf, while Josephus removes the Calf episode entirely from his retelling of biblical antiquities. But the literature has other possible agendas as well, which Pregill teases out in this chapter. The tannaitic material conveys significant discomfort with Israel's sin with the Calf. Among more than a dozen treatments examined here from the midrashic literature of the period, virtually all acknowledge the reality of Israel's "dalliance with idolatry at Sinai" (144). But they resolve the problem by noting that Israel repented of their sin and received atonement by faithfully fulfilling the ritual obligations of the Torah. God forgave them as a result, and continued the covenant with Israel, which preserved their special status in the eyes of God.

Chapter 4 moves to the next stage in the exegetical unfolding of the story, which Pregill calls "the dialectic of Jewish and Christian exegesis" (161) that emerged as the orthodoxies of post-biblical Judaism and Christianity formed in Late Antiquity. This chapter treats recent scholarship on the subject of identity formation among the various communities that would eventually self-define as Jews and Christians, with particular concern for treatment of the Calf episode in the later amoraic midrashim (c. 200–500 CE) among Jewish movements and patristic literature among the Christians. The trend during this period was for Christian writers to characterize "the Law" (the commandments enumerated at Sinai) as divine punishment meted

out to Israel for the sin of the Calf. This trope, writes Pregill, functionally exploited the Jewish trending position set forth in the tannaitic midrash: "God continued to communicate with the Jews after their sin, and the revelation of the ordinances of the Law after their idolatry at Sinai is proof of Israel's ongoing relationship with the Deity. But these [Christian] authors disagreed with rabbinic interpreters about the ultimate nature of that relationship, contending that it indicates not His forgiveness or granting of atonement – and certainly not the validity of the Jews' claim to be His chosen people – but rather the necessity of God's restraining the Jews' idolatrous impulses through the Law or imposing it upon them as punishment for their crime" (181). Not surprisingly, Jewish discourse on the Calf episode responded to this polemic. The general thrust of that response was apologetic, intended to make Israel appear to be less culpable or even to portray the Israelites as unwitting victims, egged on by a faction of disgruntled Egyptians that escaped along with Israel during the Exodus. This claim was made classically via reference to a "mixed multitude" (*ʿēreb rab*) that accompanied the Israelites as they fled Egypt (Exod 12:38), or even Satan, who took advantage of Moses' long stay on the mountain (Exod 24:15–18) to incite the people to sin. Another strategy was to explain Aaron's apparent willingness to cooperate with an evil minority as arising from his own life being threatened; his collusion was thus a form of damage control.

Chapter 5 moves the conversation into the realm of Syriac traditions including Ephrem (d. 383), Aphrahat (d. 345) , and Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), with a certain level of response in the contemporary Jewish liturgical writings of Palestine known as *piyyutim*. Pregill notes a subtext of the priesthood in the discussion. Recall that the thrust of the church fathers' position was to associate God's imposition of the Law on Israel with punishment or restraint for the sin of the Calf; according to the church fathers, the sacrificial system was established as a burden for the

same purpose. At roughly the same time as the rise of Christianity and the formation of Christian orthodoxy, Rabbinic Judaism was developing its own orthodoxy, which included lifting up the position of teacher-rabbi as community leader. After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the end of the sacrificial system, those Jews with priestly heritage held little of the ancient prestige that came with belonging to the Levite tribe. Meanwhile, in response to Byzantine oppression of Jewish life in Palestine during the early amoraic period, the center of Rabbinic Jewish life shifted to Babylonia, which left a certain power vacuum among the Jews of Byzantine Palestine. Some scholars see in these changes a revival of interest in the priesthood among Jews, which had an impact also on Christians in the region. This may have influenced some Christian writers in their identification of Jesus' role as High Priest via the line of Melchizedek or Aaron, or sometimes both. Among those who associate Jesus' priestly status with Aaron, one can detect an interest in avoiding imputing blame on Aaron for the sin associated with the Calf.

All these complex vectors of thinking about the Calf episode among Jews and Christians, and between them, were a part of the general religious-cultural milieu of Late Antiquity, Pregill explains. They were enculturated and embedded in oral tradition and written literature, in the folklore and art among Jews, Christians, and others. And, they would continue to inform and evolve as another great scriptural civilization emerged into history in the seventh century.

It is only in chapter 6, more than halfway through the book, that the discussion moves to the story of the Calf as it appears in the Qurʾān. The longest and most complex version of the narrative occurs in Q Ṭā-Hā 20:83–97, but significant information is found also in Q al-Aʿrāf 7:148–153 and Q al-Baqarah 2:51–54. Pregill begins here by considering the qurʾānic Calf story

as represented by the Muslim exegetical tradition and Western scholarship and translations, mostly in relation to the rendering in Sūrat Ṭā-Hā. The discussion now moves back in the direction of methodology; he argues that modern, non-Muslim scholars of the Qurʾān have been unduly influenced by the *tafsīr* tradition in their assumption that it preserves an objectively accurate and reliable understanding of what the words of the Qurʾān actually mean. But, he writes, this is not the case in relation to the Calf story. The *tafsīr* literature reflects theological and ideological priorities decades or even centuries removed from the period of the Qurʾān's composition, effectively creating a new story by adducing legendary material in its elaboration upon the enigmatic verses. Western reliance on these works, therefore, cannot make sense of the story in its historical context. The two motifs that seem to have garnered the most attention among both Muslim commentators and Western scholars are the identity and significance of al-Sāmirī (appearing three times and only in Sūrat Ṭā-Hā) and the meaning and significance of the phrase *ʿijlan jasadan lahu khuwārun* (Q 20:88). A third issue of significance is what is *not* there: the initial making and worship of the Calf in Moses' absence, which appears in the biblical renderings but is only assumed in the qurʾānic. The chapter traces the history of Christian and later, Western (both Christian and Jewish) perspectives on the qurʾānic presentation through translations and various other writing genres. This section becomes quite detailed, as Pregill is interested in the impact of earlier comments and translations on the work of later readers. He manages to develop a chronology of perspective – trends of thinking among both Jews and Christians who are usually engaged at some level in polemical/apologetic conversation. The chronology is important because it not only reflects developing ideas, it also impacts the accuracy of Western scholars' assessments of the qurʾānic portrayal (which comes to a head in subsequent chapters). Of particular importance is the

notion of midrashic "influence" on the qurʾānic rendering, which Pregill dismisses quite vigorously – and particularly the all too frequent tactic of assuming that if something new appears in the qurʾānic story that has no antecedent in the midrash, it must have been derivative of some "lost midrash." As will become clear in the final two chapters, Pregill considers the qurʾānic rendering to be a unique, purposeful, and very carefully executed articulation of the story that serves its own consistent objectives in the historical context of the late antique milieu.

Pregill lays this out in chapter 7 through detailed linguistic and exegetical analysis. In addition to the three issues of interest mentioned in the previous paragraph, he also treats other puzzling sections, such as when al-Sāmirī says, *qabaḍtu qabḍatan min athari 'l-rasūli fa-nabadhtuhā* (Q 20:96). The Muslim commentators tended to understand this as a reference to Aaron grasping some "dust of the messenger," often supposing that the statement was an excuse offered by a Samaritan interloper: he grabbed a handful of dust from the track of hoof prints left by the pegasus that carried Gabriel, which somehow contributed to the (seeming) enlivening of the Calf. This verse is followed by Moses' curt reply, *fa'dhhab fa-inna laka fī 'l-ḥayāti an taqūla lā misāsa*" (97), repeatedly parsed as something like: "Go! It will be your burden in life [as with all Samaritans henceforth] that you must say 'Do not touch me!'" This was said to explain the origin of the supposed Samaritan custom of forbidding open relations with non-Samaritans. Pregill points out the many problems with these interpretations. He works through the various exegetical layers of treatment of both individual details and the thrust of the story as a whole among the Muslim commentators, and he revisits earlier and contemporary trends among Jews and Christians as well. This leads, finally, to the concluding chapter in which the long exegetical journey reaches its conclusion.

Chapter 8 argues for a quite different understanding of the Calf episode as it appears in the Qurʾān. Pregill concludes that the qurʾānic story represents a direct engagement with the episode as it is known from the book of Exodus, reflecting that version much more closely than the imaginative expansions found in *tafsīr,* midrash, and the accounts of Christian interpreters. Aspects of this position have been suggested before, but they have never been developed as fully as in this book. Pregill argues that the qurʾānic rendering engages various texts and subtexts that can be found also in the Hebrew Bible, adapting and appropriating them while in some ways also reflecting late antique concerns. This result challenges the general assumption that the Qurʾān responds to or elaborates on biblical themes primarily through the mediation of Jewish or Christian exegetical tradition. This conclusion, however, is reached only after extensive discussion over key parts of the narrative, some of which have been mentioned above: the identity of al-Sāmirī, the meaning of *athar* and *ʿijlan jasadan lahu khuwārun*, the "missing pieces" absent from the Qurʾān but appearing in the Hebrew Bible renderings, the significance of *lā misāsa*, and many other details that cannot adequately be summarized here. It would do no justice to the depth and perspicacity of the arguments to try to reconstruct them without the supporting evidence. The only way to make sense of them fairly is to read the book, something I recommend highly, though it is not for the timid or uninformed reader. Finally, while the case seems convincing for a direct exegetical relationship between Qurʾān and Bible, it is not yet clear what was the end goal of that qurʾānic extension of the "biblical tradition." That leaves plenty of room for additional engagement with the Calf episode between the Bible and Qurʾān.

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