El-Azhari, Taef. 'Imad Al-Din Zanki and His Hostile Policy toward the Saljuqid Sultanate and the Abbasid Caliphate in Iran and Iraq. Expanding His Frontiers 1127–1146'. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 2, no. 12 (December 2012): 13–23. http://www.aijcrnet.com/journals/Vol_2_No_12_December_2012/2.pdf. (Accessed 19 March 2021).

Hibon, Élodie. 'Review of *Zengi and the Muslim Response to the Crusades: The Politics of Jihad*, written by Taef El-Azhari'. *Arabica* 64, no. 5-6 (2017): 797–808. doi:10.1163/15700585-12341467.

Christopher J. van der Krogt
Massey University, New Zealand
C.J.vanderKrogt@massey.ac.nz

https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2021.1914418

The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an: Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam, by Michael Pregill, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, 528 pp., $125.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-1988-5242-1

This monograph is one of the most comprehensive works to investigate the interpretation of the Golden Calf narrative, as it includes the full spectrum of Jewish, Christian and Muslim reception history. Michael Pregill thoughtfully traces the exegetical evolution of the Golden Calf narrative chronologically, from the early Jewish reception to the Christian reception, the reactive Jewish interpretations to some of the Christian polemics, the qur'anic reception of the narrative, and the later Muslim interpretations.

In its first chapter, Pregill demonstrates the various approaches used by scholars studying the Golden Calf narrative between the Bible and the Qur'an. There are some discrepancies in the details of the two accounts, especially regarding who was complicit in making the Calf. The biblical traditions suggest that it was Aaron, while the Qur'an designates the culpable person as *al-Sāmirī*. While non-Muslims have viewed the qur'anic account as erroneous, Pregill suggests that it can be read as part of a long tradition of biblical reception and is, therefore, not something utterly foreign to these traditions existing in its milieu. He makes a case that, while modern qur'anic studies have unfortunately been infested with polemical agendas, this has shifted in the past few decades to a more sophisticated approach. He also weighs in on the debate about the 'Abrahamic' religions, preferring to consider Judaism, Christianity and Islam as three dialects of the same Abrahamic language (46): while the symbolism and motifs may be intelligible between them, there are distinct features in each.

In Chapter 2, Pregill looks closely into the biblical narrative of the Golden Calf. He explains that the narrative portrays how the Israelites in the story broke some of the very fundamental commandments of the Decalogue: taking other gods, creating graven images and serving them, and taking God's name in vain (71–72). Aaron, on the other hand, creates the image of the Calf, invokes God's name before it, and builds an altar; his faults seem a little less serious than those of the other Israelites. Pregill illustrates how the traditions of the Golden Calf continued to evolve and were used by various Israelite political factions to demonize their counterparts. He negotiates from within biblical literature the cross-pollination between the different narratives of the Golden Calf and their inner-biblical allusions. For example, the Israelites did not always view God as formless and invisible, without a cult image to act as a placeholder for God's manifestation (89), as is seen in the function of the Ark of the Covenant.

In Chapter 3, Pregill demonstrates the variety of early Jewish interpretations of the Golden Calf narrative, many of which attempt to sideline Aaron's role. He surmises that the reasons might be to deflect criticism coming from the gentiles, to avoid contemporary Jewish readers feeling too embarrassed by this episode, and even to fend off what may be considered illegitimate interpretations from within the Jewish community. In Chapter 4, Pregill shifts to early Christian interpretations of the Golden Calf narrative. Some of the Christian authors also appear to have some familiarity with contemporary Jewish interpretations, but argue for a different conclusion. During that period, the change in Jewish attitudes to interpreting the narrative is suggested to have been a reaction to some Christian polemic against the Jews. Pregill also illustrates that some rabbinic works, such as Leviticus Rabbah, completely deny that the Israelites had anything to do with the Golden Calf episode, blaming it on some proselytes who joined the Israelite community during the Exodus.

Pregill shows that not all Christian traditions shared the same polemical stance against the Jews. He explains in Chapter 5 how some Syriac traditions also attempt to soften Aaron's role. He introduces various Late Antiquity traditions, as well as the tensions between Jewish and Christian interpretations.

After surveying the Jewish and Christian reception of the Golden Calf narrative, Pregill starts examining the qur'anic version in Chapter 6. He introduces Muslim exegesis and Western scholarship from the medieval to the modern period that discussed the qur'anic narrative, mostly accepting the Muslim exegetical tradition as if it accurately reflected the meaning intended by the Qur'an. He argues that, while some late Jewish *midrashim* appear to have some parallels with unique elements found in the qur'anic narrative, it is most likely that these features were themselves adopted from the Qur'an. Therefore, he argues that it would be a mistake to use them as possible subtexts or traditions that have lent themselves to the qur'anic narrative.

While the first six chapters of the book are an exhaustive review of the evolution of the Golden Calf narrative, its reception, and interpretation throughout history, it is in the last two chapters that Pregill eloquently conveys his argument that the Qur'an is not just passively adopting the narrative from existing Jewish or Christian traditions, but is bringing its own unique voice into the narrative and its interpretation.

A very interesting argument that Pregill makes is that, when the Qur'an describes the Golden Calf as lowing, it does not mean that there was some kind of supernatural animation of the Golden Calf, but that it was made in the form of a lowing calf, a portrayal not very different from Psalm 106.20, which describes it as an image of an ox eating grass. I think that this interpretation by Pregill would suggest the possibility that the Qur'an is denigrating the Golden Calf as a god, for elsewhere in the Qur'an when it narrates the story of Abraham, Abraham mocks his people's gods by rhetorically asking them to speak to their gods if they can, in fact, respond (Q 21.62–67). His people realize that their gods do not speak, so Abraham asks how they can worship gods who do not speak in phraseology that parallels Q 20.89, which immediately follows the description of the lowing calf.

Pregill also argues convincingly that the qur'anic narrative becomes much more cohesive if one interprets *al-Sāmirī* and Aaron as the same person. Additionally, Pregill makes the case that the consequence of *al-Sāmirī*'s action, which is to avoid touching, signifies the priestly requirement for purity. I find this convincing because I have argued elsewhere that, in the Qur'an's narrative of the red (yellow/brown) cow ritual, the depiction of how life comes forth from the dead is analogous to purity coming out of impurity, which is the purpose of the red cow ritual in biblical and rabbinic literature. Hence, when the Qur'an suggests to *al-Sāmirī* that in life (*al-ḥayāt*) he is to say 'Do not touch', it is possibly analogous to

purity, especially since the narrative of the red cow comes after the short allusion to the Golden Calf narrative in the Chapter of the Cow (*Sūrat al-Baqara*; Q 2) in the Qur'an.

There is, however, one theological observation I would like to make, as Pregill sets out the debate on whether Aaron is directly blamed for the episode in the Qur'an or whether the Qur'an attempts to soften it, as in some rabbinic and Syriac traditions. The passage on *al-Sāmirī* begins with God telling Moses that it is none other than God who tempted the people (Q 20.85), and consequently, *al-Sāmirī* was only a tool in God's plan. The Qur'an, here and elsewhere, has God taking ownership of events and outcomes, giving less credit to human agency. This might imply that the Qur'an cares less about ascribing responsibility, and cares more about the moral of the story. Ultimately, according to the Qur'an, God is a sovereign who causes everything and no one can escape God's plan—perhaps, in this specific narrative, not even Aaron.

The humility of Pregill's scholarship is much appreciated. He provides various possibilities for how a certain word or passage is to be understood, without making forceful assertions. This is truly valuable because, in some recent scholarship, such humility is unfortunately neglected in favour of precarious affirmations that only serve an agenda beyond the sincere scholarly search for truth. Pregill is self-critical, as he balances the evidence that supports certain hypotheses without shying away from pointing out the lack of evidence for some speculations.

The book is dense, as it gathers much valuable information until it reaches its climax in the final two chapters. While some might find it somewhat repetitive, I think it reflects an excellent pedagogical approach, as the ideas are reinforced in the reader's mind. Therefore, if some students feel deterred by its size, it would still be comprehensible if one attempted to skim through it, and thus would still be suitable for use in classrooms. Briefly, this book is valuable not only to scholars of the Qur'an but also to biblical scholars and students interested in the Golden Calf narrative generally, and those interested in the Qur'an's reception of and interlaced engagement with biblical literature. Biblical scholars have long neglected the qur'anic or Muslim reception history of biblical tradition. This book goes hand in hand with Adam J. Silverstein's *Veiling Esther, Unveiling Her Story*, which also sheds light on a huge gap in biblical scholarship, which largely neglects the reception history of biblical literature in the Muslim context. It is no coincidence that these two books are published in the same appropriate series, Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions.

Abdulla Galadari
Khalifa University of Science & Technology, United Arab Emirates
abdulla.galadari@ku.ac.ae

https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2021.1928964

Knowledge, Authority and Change in Islamic Societies: Studies in Honor of Dale F. Eickelman, edited by Allen James Fromherz and Nadav Samim, Leiden, Brill, 2021, 308 pp., €149/$179 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-43952-8

Dale Eickelman's work is required reading for all who work in the field of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. His seminal textbook *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach*, published in 1981, was the first successful attempt to study the Middle East from an anthropological perspective. Until then, this was the almost exclusive domain of historians and