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Book Review

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

By Michael E. Pregill
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This book examines the Golden Calf episode and its interpretation from ancient Israel to the emergence of Islam as a case study for re-evaluating the relationship between Bible and Qur'an. It includes an introduction, a methodological chapter, three sections including seven more chapters, and a conclusion.

The introduction defines the Qur'an as part of the biblical tradition of the late first millennium CE, having emerged through active and conscious processes of early Islamic identity-building, and presenting its audience with new interpretations of biblical narratives. The proposed methodology is, therefore, a critical historical analysis of the qur'anic calf episode through the history of its interpretation and reinterpretation by Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the *longue durée*.

Chapter 1 depicts the historical and methodological framework. While illustrating the story's polemical importance for Christians and Muslims as a means of justifying their self-presentation as true Israel, it also highlights the differences between the calf narrations in the Qur'an (Q 2:51–54, 7:148–153, 20:82–97) and in the Bible (Exod. 32, Deut. 9, Ps. 106). Pregill considers the qur'anic calf narrative as corresponding directly with the biblical text; he rejects the scholarly view that the Qur'an mainly reflects midrashic re-narrations of the Bible. Moreover, he considers the Qur'an and Islamic literature as legitimate participants in the biblical tradition. However, the emphasis on the textual fluidity of the Bible and rabbinic tradition during the emergence of the Qur'an (28–29) is questioned by the book's apparent perception of the millennium-long exegetical tradition being examined as relating to a rather stable version of Exodus 32, similar to the Masoretic text (324–25).

The first section of the book discusses the most ancient calf traditions. Chapter 2 examines the Exodus 32 narrative in relation to other episodes in the Israelite history, demonstrating its polemic nature. Pregill notes that this narrative refers to a cultic violation, not idolatry. Having emerged as criticism of the Northern Kingdom's calf cult, it projects this cult back to Sinai. In both contexts, however, the calves represent God's invisible presence rather than another

deity. Yet, Exodus condemns this form of worship. Aaron's participation in it expresses criticism of Judaean priests for their political involvement and calls for prophetic leadership instead. Post-exilic Deuteronomy 9 takes this criticism further, depicting the calf as an idol and Israel as perennially inclined towards unfaithfulness to God. Chapter 3 examines Late Second Temple Jewish interpretations of the story. Following the Septuagint translation, the Bible became accessible to hostile non-Jews, who used the calf narrative to denounce Jews. Pseudo-Philo and Philo diminish the significance of the calf incident, whereas Josephus omits it altogether.

In the Tanaitic era, this early apologetic approach is replaced by candor, although it is not clarified why. Tanaitic sources treat the calf episode as a drama of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Forgiveness is evident through the confirmation of Aaron as priest and the revelation of divine law after the incident. The incident is depicted as atypical of Israel's normal obedience to God. Pregill dismisses equating the calf and paradise transgressions and highlights Rabbinic and Christian diverse perceptions of the paradise episode. Yet, in chapter 8, he notes qur'anic parallels between the calf and paradise episodes, implying that at least the Qur'an saw a connection there. Still, some apologetics took place. Non-mainstream interpretations of the episode were declared "sectarian," and some verses were not to be translated during Torah reading in synagogue. Pregill explains these through attempts to establish mainstream rabbinic authority, protect Aaron's image, and respond to early Christian writings, such as the Acts of the Apostles, which equates the Israelites who rejected Jesus with those who sinned in Sinai. This became an influential anti-Jewish argument.

Section 2 of the book examines developments of this story in polemic patristic literature, Amoraic apologetics, and late-antiquity Syro-Palestinian Jewish and Christian milieu. Chapter 4 notes that patristic anti-Jewish interpretations, despite using the calf episode to transfer the "chosen people" status from Israel to the Church, could not deny altogether the continued relationship of Israel with God, since Christianity relies on the Israelite post-Sinai scripture and prophetic heritage. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian thus argued that the law revealed in Sinai after the calf had a punitive, or disciplinary, purpose. As of the second century, the revelation of Jesus was presented as replacing it. In response, Jewish sources in the third to fifth centuries produced apologetic interpretations, which transferred responsibility for the transgression from Israel to foreign agents (e.g., Satan) and exonerated Aaron.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how Syriac sources in this period combined older patristic perceptions of the calf with later themes used by Jews and Christians alike. Despite their evident anti-Jewish approach, Ephrem of Nisibis, Aphrahat, and Jacob of Serugh promoted the apologetic approach that removed blame from Aaron. Jewish sources protected Aaron to protect the Israelite covenant with God, whereas these Christian authors considered Jesus as inheriting Aaron's spiritual and physical priesthood. Pregill identifies such interreligious exchanges as background for the emerging Islam.

The third section examines the calf episode in the Qur'an. Chapter 6 presents the qur'anic calf episode and its traditional interpretation. An examination of early and later Western translations of the Qur'an demonstrates Western reliance on Islamic commentaries of the calf episode despite these commentaries' radical revision of the story. Pregill depicts this approach as "mythologizing" the Qur'an through introducing oral legends into it. For example, some translations read into the qur'anic text a non-qur'anic legend about the calf as having been created from magical dust upon which angel Gabriel stepped. Similarly, Western scholars adopt the traditional interpretation that "*al-sāmirī*" who has made the calf (Q 20:95) was a "Samaritan." Acknowledging that Samaritans appeared much later, they seek a midrashic origin for this while maintaining that the Qur'an "confuses" the biblical story. Pregill refutes the midrashic origin of *al-sāmirī* by showing suggested sources as probably later than the Qur'an. Instead, he establishes the qur'anic calf narrative as directly engaging with the Bible.

Chapter 7 demonstrates the qur'anic allusions to, reinterpretations of, and lexical sharing with Exodus 32 and Psalm 106. It offers elegant solutions for qur'anic elements that otherwise would be "difficult." The lowing calf in Q 7:148 and 20:88 is convincingly explained as "an *image* of a lowing calf" (rather than an animated statue), alluding to the grass-eating bull in Psalm 106:20 and taking a "handful from the track of the messenger" (Q 20:96) relates metaphorically to (initially) following Moses's leadership, similar to the metaphorical use of this phrase in Q 20:83–84. *Al-sāmirī* Pregill identifies as Aaron. He supports this identification through the wordplay that "*al-sāmirī*" creates between Aaron's failure to guard the Israelites in Moses's absence (echoing the Hebrew *šômēr* = watchman, and Arabic *samīr* = remaining awake at night) and the Samaria calf cult. The Qur'an thus agrees with the Bible that Aaron created the calf and holds Aaron responsible for initiating the Samaria cult. This argument can be further supported through Exodus 32:8, where God questions Moses concerning the people's quick deviation (*sārû mahēr*) from God's path, and the Psalm 121:3–4 warning for the *šômēr* not to fall asleep, stating that the watchman (*šômēr*) of Israel [= God] shall not doze or sleep.

The reference to "no touching" (Q 20:97) Pregill explains as a qur'anic aetiology of the priesthood institution, with an emphasis on cultic purity, echoing the Christian concept of the law as punitive: following Aaron's failed attempt to lead, he is forced into priesthood to delineate his role. The Qur'an thus echoes the biblical tension between priest (faulty human leader) and divinely inspired prophet. This message, which echoes with the qur'anic theme of prophetic authority, differs from midrashic interpretations of the calf episode.

Chapter 8 links these findings with the Qur'an's literary precursors and intra-qur'anic themes. It explains qur'anic omissions of some biblical elements as adapting the narrative to the Qur'an's worldview. For example, the Qur'an, which considers "God's will as unwavering" (391), omits Moses's intercession with God (Exod. 32:9–14). Such textual alterations fit the Qur'an's self-understanding as correcting former scriptures, and Pregill suggests treating the Qur'an as a "rewritten Bible" since it reframes the stories and re-reveals them in a new scripture. Qur'anic intertextuality is indicated too, for example, through textual links between the calf and paradise narratives (435). This linkage could be extended through paralleling the tragedy of Aaron (411) and Iblīs.

Other themes in the calf story, such as transgression, repentance, and authority, are presented as significant for the Qur'an's initial audience. Pregill links this episode with seventh-century Arabia as depicted in *Sīrah* literature, particularly the conflict between Muhammad and the Jewish tribes in Medina, known as "the priestly" (*al-kāhinayn* [426]), and the exodus imagery of the *hijrah*. He admits, however, that such a contextualization involves accepting parts of the Islamic historiographical tradition while rejecting others. Either way, despite being depicted as an important theme (437), this last dimension is not expanded.

This well-argued, well-researched book is a welcome contribution to establishing an understanding of the Qur'an as a well-informed, deliberate textual engagement with the Bible. Its coherent, clear language makes it accessible to scholars and students of diverse disciplines. Each chapter is clearly related to the chapters before and after it, creating a chronological and thematic continuity, which facilitates following the author's arguments despite the extensive scope of this work. It also allows for individual chapters to be read independently, thus making the book useful for teaching too.

Zohar Hadromi-Allouche
Trinity College Dublin