

The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an: Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam. By Michael E. Pregill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. xiv + 499 pages. \$125.00.

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This book provides the first comprehensive comparative treatment of the role of the golden calf story in the monotheistic religious traditions. Michael E. Pregill studies how the narrative has been interpreted and expanded within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam throughout history, and he devotes much attention to challenging longstanding assumptions about the Qur'an, particularly the idea that it is a derivative text that simply borrowed from the Bible and other Jewish and Christian sources. His study of the "single most representative portrayal of idolatry in both the Bible and the Qur'an" (5) is a tour de force that, through its careful analysis and persuasive argument, opens up new ways of thinking about the relationship between the two texts.

The first part of the book, "Foundations," treats early Jewish interpretation of Exodus 32 and other references to the golden calf tradition in the Hebrew Bible. During this period, there was a tendency to downplay or deny the seriousness of the offense committed by the Israelites in the story. Authors such as Pseudo-Philo, Philo, and Josephus sought to explain away the episode for apologetic purposes and soften its most problematic aspects, and Josephus went so far as to exclude the entire episode from his *Jewish Antiquities*. Such selective readings of the story set the stage for similar narrative manipulations that would recur in the future, and not just within Jewish sources.

In the second part, "Jews, Christians, and the Contested Legacy of Israel," Pregill studies how the Jewish and Christian communities viewed the covenant and chosen people through the prism of the golden calf story. Christian exegetes used it to support the idea of the illegitimacy of the Jewish people, as Exodus 32 came to play a key role in Christian notions of supersessionism. A clear example of this can be seen in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a widely circulated text of the third century, which presents the golden calf story as the reason for the punitive restrictions that resulted from the Jewish law. Rabbinic sources attempted to respond to these Christian claims by viewing the law as an expression of divine forgiveness and atonement rather than punishment. This shows how the symbiotic and dialectical relationship between Jewish and Christian exegesis of Exodus 32 sustained the ideologies of both groups and sharpened the divisions between them. A particularly fascinating part of this section that will be less familiar to many readers is Pregill's explanation of how Syriac Christian figures like Aphrahat (d. 345), Ephram of Nisibis (d. 373), and Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), in an effort to reduce Aaron's responsibility for what takes

place in the golden calf story, adopted an approach similar to that used by some of the early rabbis in order to evoke and subvert Jewish claims about the meaning of the biblical story.

In the third section of his book, "The Qur'anic Calf Episode," Pregill provides an excellent critique of how Western scholarship has tended to read the Islamic account of the golden calf story in Qur'an 20:83–97, and he presents his own interpretation of it that proposes alternative ways of understanding all of its major elements. His analysis is too detailed and technical to discuss in any detail here, but, suffice it to say, he makes a coherent and convincing case for his reading that is based upon the Qur'anic text itself. This differs from the way Western scholars have typically approached the Qur'an's account because they have usually relied upon medieval Muslim commentaries (*tafsīr* in Arabic) of the passage to determine its meaning. Those Islamic sources introduced many elements and ideas that are not supported by the text, and so Western scholarship related to the Qur'an's account perpetuated and recapitulated an understanding of it that is inaccurate. This book offers a corrective to that approach through its careful rereading and reinterpretation of the Qur'an passage.

Pregill is to be commended for producing a first-rate work of scholarship on a tradition shared by the Bible and the Qur'an that has not received the attention it deserves. Along the way, he draws some important conclusions that will undoubtedly challenge certain views many have about the Bible and its relationship to the Qur'an. Among the most insightful are the following: (1) the Qur'an is best described as a "rewritten Bible"; (2) we should not think of the Bible as one fixed text, but as a set of interrelated corpora that includes the Qur'an; and (3) the Qur'an is a later stage in the ongoing development of the biblical tradition. These are provocative ideas that give a good sense of the direction that the field of Qur'anic studies is headed, and Pregill will prove to be an able guide for anyone interested in embarking on that journey.

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Godless Fictions in the Eighteenth Century: A Literary History of Atheism. By James Bryant Reeves. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. viii + 288 pages. \$70.00.

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Social media outlets frequently carry forward the most important religious and philosophical lessons in ways that professors try to compete with in