

# MUSLIM PERCEPTIONS AND RECEPTIONS OF THE BIBLE

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The Islamic tradition reflects an acute awareness of its connection to Judaism and Christianity, the monotheistic religions that preceded it. The Qurʾān situates itself as the final revelation within a progressive series of divine dispensations and shows an intimate familiarity with the earlier scriptures and with a much longer list of earlier prophets—with heavily recast adaptations of the pentateuchal and prophetic narratives. Accordingly, the Qurʾān depicts itself as the last, perfect link in a chain of progressive divine dispensations, which culminates with Muḥammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” (Qurʾān 33:40). This stance sets the stage for the ambivalent attitude seen in the Qurʾān and in Muslim tradition towards the two earlier monotheistic religions and their scriptures, an attitude that resembles in many respects that of the New Testament and the evolving Christian tradition towards Judaism and the Hebrew Bible.

The authenticity of the earlier scriptures as divine dispensations is accepted, as the Qurʾān acknowledges a large degree of correspondence between itself and the earlier revelations—it is said to continue and to confirm, to renew and to clarify the earlier dispensations. Closely related to this is the Qurʾānic claim that the earlier scriptures contain annunciations of Muḥammad. In Qurʾān 61:6, for example, the following statement is attributed to Jesus: “And when Jesus son of Mary said: O Children of Israel! Lo! I am the messenger of God unto you, confirming that which was [revealed] before me in the Torah, and bringing good tidings of a messenger who cometh after me, whose name is the ‘Praised One’ (Aḥmad).” The triconsonantal root—ḥ-m-d—of “Aḥmad” (literally: “the most deserving of praise”) is identical with that of the name Muḥammad.

Unsurprisingly, the Qurʾān’s self-image as the scriptural continuation of the earlier scriptures carries a reverse, negative side, namely that the Qurʾān, God’s most recent and final dispensation, supersedes all earlier writings, which have as a result largely lost their validity. Indeed, the Qurʾān repeatedly emphasizes its superiority over the previous revelations that have been abrogated by it. A further recurrent motif is the accusation that the “People of the Book”—that is, Jews and Christians—have “tampered with,” “altered,” or partly “forgotten” their own writings, so that the existing versions of the Bible no longer correspond to the original dispensation(s). This topos is alluded to in the Qurʾān and eventually emerged—alongside the already mentioned notions of abrogation and the Bible’s foretelling of the advent of Muḥammad—as one of the central themes of Muslim polemic against Jews and Christians.

We can observe a variety of ways in which Muslim authors over the centuries perceived and used the Bible—as with the Qurʾānic attitude towards the earlier scripture, these are equally ambiguous and often contradictory. At the same time,

modern scholarship dealing with the Muslim reception of the Bible is faced with challenges that vary according to period, literary genre, and milieu. I shall address some of these challenges in what follows.

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The attitude of the early Islamic community towards the scriptural heritage of the “People of the Book” is predominantly a positive one. Biblical and pseudobiblical motifs and materials exerted an enormous influence on Islamic literature during the first centuries of Islam. The positive—albeit ambivalent—attitude of the Qurʾān is also reflected in the Sunna, that is, the extensive corpus of reports believed to document the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad—a corpus that in many ways reflects the state of mind of the early Islamic community. Here, we find occasional reports attesting to the Prophet’s critical view of contacts between Muslims and Jews, unambiguously advising his followers not to consult with Jews or their writings on any biblical prophets or episodes. Even so, these are outnumbered by the traditions according to which the Prophet explicitly approved of Jewish and Christian traditional knowledge and permitted the reading of the earlier scriptures side by side with the Qurʾān. Statements such as these legitimized the incorporation of a large amount of extracanonical Jewish (and Christian) lore into the Muslim tradition, often in heavily Islamicized form. This corpus, which later on was dubbed *Isrāʾīliyyāt*, played an important role in the literary genre of “prophetic narratives,” and in the early exegetical literature and historiography, as well as in all the other literary genres that had prophetic traditions as their principal constituent. During the same period, works titled “Proofs” or “Signs of Prophecy” evolved as another popular genre aimed at establishing the authenticity of Muḥammad’s prophetic mission. Again, pseudobiblical Islamicized lore forms one of the core components of such books. The trajectories through which these materials were transmitted were for the most part Jewish converts to Islam or their immediate descendants, such as Kaʿb al-Aḥbār (d. 652–653 or 654), ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām (d. 663 or 664), and Wahb al-Munabbih (d. 728 or 732), to name just the most renowned figures, as well as storytellers. The sheer quantity of these materials proves beyond doubt that the acceptance of Jewish and Christian lore was widespread during the first two centuries of Islam and did not encounter any serious opposition. As is the case with the biblical reminiscences in the Qurʾān, the identification of the relevant sources that are reflected in this rich corpus, be they of Jewish or Syriac Christian provenance, has been a favorite topic for Western scholarship since the late nineteenth century and continues to be an important field of inquiry for contemporary scholarship.

Compared with the abundant extrabiblical material in Islamicized form, the number of authentic biblical quotations included in the early Islamic literature is limited. Curiously enough, despite the ubiquity of allusions to biblical narratives and motifs throughout the Qurʾān, the text contains only a single nearly verbatim biblical quotation, namely, Qurʾān 21:105, which includes a passage taken from Ps. 37:29. By the eighth century, quotations of authentic biblical passages appear in the works of a number of Muslim authors. Muḥammad b. Ishāq (d. 767), the author of the famous biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, is reported to have cited passages from the Pentateuch and the Gospel. Authentic biblical quotations are also included

in some of the historiographies of the ninth and tenth centuries. ‘Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba (d. 889) adduces large portions of the Pentateuch in some of his works, particularly his “Book of Knowledge,” in which he deals with the history of the pre-Islamic prophets. Other historical works, such as Aḥmad al-Ya‘qūbī’s (d. 905) “History,” also contain comprehensive sections that are culled from the four Gospels. Similar observations can be made for Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī’s (d. between 961 and 971) “History of the Years of the Kings of the Earth and of the Prophets.”

We also encounter during the early centuries instances in which Muslim scholars drew on the Bible to support their own theological argumentation, as a rule in addition to the Qur’ān and the Sunna. The Zaydī imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm (d. 860), for example, who was closely familiar with Christian theological notions, proudly confesses his intimate knowledge of the Bible, and he occasionally adduces relevant biblical passages (quoting by heart, as it seems), alongside relevant passages from the Qur’ān. When discussing God’s oneness and His attributes, for example, he quotes Exod. 3:6. In his treatment of the concept that some Qur’ānic verses were abrogated by other verses of the Qur’ān, al-Qāsim quotes verses from the Gospel of Matthew that testify to the New Testament’s claim of abrogating Mosaic law (Matt. 5:17, 18, 21, 22).

The mid-eleventh-century Twelver Shi‘i theologian and jurist Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Karājīkī also uses the Bible as proof to further underpin his theological views. To prove the veracity of the specific Twelver Shi‘i notion of the imamate, he quotes Gen. 17:20 (“And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation”). The passage served him (and, as a matter of fact, other Twelver Shi‘i scholars) as evidence that the number of imāms was indeed twelve—a concept central to the beliefs of this branch of Shi‘ism, whose followers accordingly also call themselves “Twelvers”—and that this had already been foretold in the Bible.

Ismā‘īlī Shi‘i authors are likewise well known for their practice of quoting from the Bible as evidence for their particular notions of prophecy and imamate, as is the case with Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 934) in his “Signs of Prophecy” and Ḥamid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. 1021). Al-Kirmānī, in at least three of his works, cites passages from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, adducing the original Hebrew or Aramaic (for the quotations from the Hebrew Bible) and the Syriac (for the passages gleaned from the New Testament) in Arabic transcription, along with their translations into Arabic.

Another literary genre in which authentic biblical materials play a prominent role is interreligious apologetics and polemics. The earliest extant Muslim refutations of Christianity date to the eighth century. These include an epistle addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Leo III attributed to the caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, and a treatise addressed to Constantine VI, written on behalf of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd by Abū l-Rabī‘ b. al-Layth. Apart from theological arguments, these epistles contain quotations from Deuteronomy, the Psalms, Habakkuk, and Isaiah that are interpreted as predictions of the Prophet Muḥammad. The earliest extant work containing numerous prooftexts from almost all the books of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is “The Book of Religion and Empire,” composed by the formerly

Christian convert to Islam ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. 865), followed by the “Book of the Signs of Prophecy” by his near-contemporary, the aforementioned Ibn Qutayba. Ibn Rabban’s work circulated, it seems, mostly within Christian circles up until the eleventh century, when it first came to the attention of Muslim readers. By contrast, Ibn Qutayba’s work—although extant in only a single manuscript, which resurfaced just a few years ago— was widely read among early Muslims and served many later authors, up until the eighteenth century, directly or in most cases indirectly, as a source for relevant biblical passages.

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In what form did early Muslim scholars such as Ibn al-Layth, Ibn Rabban, Ibn Qutayba, and al-Ya‘qūbī have access to the Bible? Where did the numerous biblical quotations they adduced come from? Were they verbally communicated to them by Christian or Jewish informants or were these early scholars able to access them in written form of some sort? Did it make a difference for their approach to the Bible that Ibn al-Layth and Ibn Qutayba were born Muslims, whereas Ibn Rabban had converted to Islam and, thus, as a former Christian (who was well versed in Greek and Syriac) would have had immediate access to the Bible? The question as to how Muslim scholars of the early centuries of Islam had access to the Bible has barely been explored in any satisfactory manner in modern scholarship. Our understanding of the relevant trajectories and modes of transmission of the biblical texts among Muslim scholars and the ways they worked with the material(s) that were available to them remains cursory and deficient.

The following three scenarios are—theoretically—plausible.

(1) The tenth-century bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm, in his *Fihrist*—an index of all books written in Arabic, whether by Arabs or others, up until the year 988—reports on various translations of “the Bible,” or parts thereof, produced by Muslim scholars during the early days of Islam. Other Muslim sources attribute to some of the prominent early Muslims philological knowledge of Hebrew or Syriac and mention their intensive study of the Bible. Whereas references such as these testify to the early Muslims’ appreciation for the Bible, we should be extremely cautious in taking these reports at face value. There is no independent evidence that would corroborate Ibn al-Nadīm’s report on any of these translation projects, for example in the form of quotations. This absence of corroboration raises serious doubts as to the historicity of early Bible translations by Muslim scholars and their immediate familiarity with the Hebrew or Syriac versions of the Bible or parts of it.

(2) Arabic Bible translations that were produced by non-Muslims constitute a more plausible source for authors such as Ibn al-Layth, Ibn Rabban, Ibn Qutayba, and al-Ya‘qūbī. In contrast to the phantomlike translation enterprises purportedly undertaken by early Muslims, translations by members of other religious communities in their manifold denominations are attested to by ample material. In fact, we are faced here with the reverse situation: in view of the sheer mass of available material (most of which is still in manuscript form), scholarly exploration of the various translation traditions is in many ways still in its infancy.

With the spread of Islam, Arabic became the new common language and the hallmark of the cultured elites that came under Islamic rule. This was true not only among the growing body of converts to Islam, but also among the Jews and the Christians, whose scriptural heritage guaranteed their religious autonomy throughout the Islamic domain. From the eighth century onwards, socially mobile Christians and Jews began to use Arabic not only for oral communication but also as their written language for religious, literary, and scientific purposes. The oldest Arabic Bible versions have come down to us from this early stage in the process of arabicization of these groups, for whom scriptural translation was the initial vehicle in adapting their communal identity to a new world at a time of profound political and cultural change. *Nota bene*—the question as to whether there had been Jewish and Christian Arabic versions of the Bible in pre-Islamic Arabia, and whether these circulated in strictly oral form, were jotted down as *aides-mémoires*, or constituted fuller textualized versions, is debated among scholars.

As has been shown by Sidney Griffith,<sup>1</sup> who has done several important studies on this topic, the Melkite Christian communities of South Palestine, the Sinai Peninsula, and Syria appear to have led the way in translating their scriptures from Greek (and Syriac) into Arabic. The fact that they adopted Arabic as their ecclesiastical language at a relatively early stage is intrinsically connected, it seems, with their virtual isolation from Byzantium as a result of the Muslim conquests. Hence, the seemingly earliest extant translation known so far is a bilingual Greek-Arabic fragment of Ps. 78:20–31 and 51–61, which is commonly dated by scholars to the eighth century.

The earliest dated translation, from 859, containing a partial translation of the Greek Gospels, is found in yet another manuscript of Melkite Christian provenance and was probably copied in one of the monastic communities in South Palestine.

While the earliest Arabic translations (based on Greek or Syriac texts) were thus most likely produced within the Melkite communities, followed by the East Syriac Church, the process of arabicization was considerably slower in the West Syriac communities and especially the Coptic communities in Egypt. For a longer period these groups insisted on keeping their canonical scriptures in the sanctified languages, whether Greek, Syriac, or Coptic. Eventually they tended to integrate various earlier Arabic translation traditions into their Arabic Bibles, produced in the ninth and tenth centuries. The Spanish Mozarabs—mostly Roman Catholics—are also known to have rendered their scriptures into Arabic at that time, often consulting Latin versions of the Bible—as is the case, for example, with the Arabic translation of the Gospels by Isaac b. Velasquez (Ishāq b. Balashk), dated 946, which was based on the Old Latin version. At the same time, the Mozarabs also employed partial translations into Arabic of Eastern provenance.

Although Christian translations can be found for virtually all books of the Bible, the different communities produced translations primarily of those parts of the Bible that were central to their liturgies. Despite the high number and variety of Christian Arabic versions of the Bible (or parts of it) no translation was ever canonized, and Arabic never reached the status of a Church language.

The scholarly exploration of the Christian Arabic translations of the Bible, which began in the late nineteenth century, is still far from being completed—in

fact, scholars are agreed that, considering the vast amount of mostly still unexploited Christian manuscript materials scattered in countless public, private, and monastery libraries around the world, what has been done so far is still very much only the beginning of a comprehensive study of the Christian materials.

The Jews began producing written Arabic translations of their Bible about a century later than the Christians, sometime in the mid-ninth century. In doing so, the Jews were responding, like the Christians, to a sociolinguistic development that created a growing need for translating scripture.

The Jews, too, appear to have moved from oral translation settings of their scripture to sporadic word lists and then to full-fledged translations, of which Sa'adya Gaon's (882–942) version of the Pentateuch appears to have reached semi-canonical status in the second half of the tenth century. His translation was also available to the European community of scholars, as is indicated by the fact that it was included in the Paris Polyglot Bible (1628–1645) and in the London Polyglot (1653–1658).

All the books of the Hebrew Bible are represented in the Jewish translation corpus, although, as may be expected, the Pentateuch and other books that served in synagogue worship, such as the Psalms, command the highest proportion of translations. The manuscripts that were discovered at the end of the nineteenth century in the Ben Ezra Genizah in Old Cairo, which are nowadays stored primarily in the University Library at Cambridge, comprise several thousand fragments of Arabic translations of the Bible, the majority of which are written in Hebrew characters. Numerous other Judeo-Arabic versions of the Bible, Rabbanite as well as Karaite, can also be found in other libraries around the world. Again, only a fraction of these textual witnesses has been investigated up until now.

On the basis of the extant material, it can be assumed likely that already during the eighth and ninth centuries there existed a variety of oral translation traditions of the Bible into Arabic among the various non-Muslim communities that formed part of the rich ethnic and religious tapestry of the medieval Arabic-speaking world. These traditions differed from one another in many ways. Apart from fully preserved books of the Bible (a rather late phenomenon in fact), thousands of manuscript fragments and codices containing portions of these translations and commentaries have come down to us. They reveal a large variety of stylistic approaches, vocabulary, scripts, and ideologies—ranging from literal versions bound to the Hebrew/Aramaic, Greek, or Syriac source text to doctrinally inspired nonliteral versions oriented towards the cultural values of a fully arabicized audience. Extracts of the various versions are also attested in the many other literary and, more specifically, liturgical genres such as lectionaries and apologetics that circulated within the different communities.

Moreover, the different versions were fairly mobile, coalescing within and beyond denominational, ecclesiastical, and geographical borders. Sa'adya's translations, for example, which were originally produced for a Jewish audience, are attested in manuscripts of Samaritan and Christian provenance, in addition to Syriac and Coptic adaptations of his translation of the Torah. Some of the East Syriac versions of the Pentateuch were later in common use among the arabophone Christians of Spain (the Mozarabs), and the Karaite version of the Pentateuch by Yeshu'ah ben

Yehudah, a scholar who was active in eleventh-century Jerusalem, is attested in Samaritan manuscripts, in which it is transcribed into Samaritan script. Moreover, secondary revision and adaptation of the respective versions is another common phenomenon that needs to be taken into consideration.

Recent studies of clearly defined corpora of Bible translations, such as those by Hikmat Kashouh on the Christian translations of the Gospels<sup>2</sup> and Ronny Vollandt on the Christian translations of the Pentateuch,<sup>3</sup> have shown that “any manuscript of a collection of biblical books in Arabic is likely to be an amalgam, of which each section has a long separate textual history.” (Vollandt) The sheer quantity of the material that is dispersed over countless libraries around the globe, the different translation traditions and versions, many of which underwent dramatic modifications as they traveled through time and space, and the numerous translation amalgams render this field of research terra incognita, where new ground is to be broken not only in terms of the data to be processed, but also in terms of interreligious and intercultural implications.

What is known about the history of Bible translations among the various non-Muslim communities has immediate implications for the study of the Muslim reception of the Bible, a field of inquiry that is in many respects likewise still in its infancy. This again demonstrates how important it is to study the materials originating with the various denominational groups in conjunction. First of all, it is evident that only the early Christian translations could have served as a possible source for the Muslim scholars of the third and fourth centuries of the Islamic era (that is, the ninth and tenth centuries CE). Indeed, the parallels between some of the early Christian Bible translations and the biblical passages adduced by Ibn al-Layth, Ibn Rabban, and Ibn Qutayba are striking. Although their respective sources still need to be identified in detail, all three authors were clearly drawing on translations of Syriac Christian provenance. In some cases, the Muslim quotations even provide *ante quem*s for non-Muslim translation traditions that otherwise cannot be dated accurately. This specifically applies to some of the historiographical works in which authors such as Ibn Qutayba and al-Ya‘qūbī quote extensively from a clearly defined group of biblical books, such as the Pentateuch or the Gospels.

The situation is more complicated with respect to various lists of alleged biblical predictions of Muḥammad’s prophethood, which consist of quotations from a wide range of biblical books. As mentioned before, none of the early attested translations comprised the entire Bible. Accordingly, comparison of biblical quotations in works by Muslim authors with the relevant translation traditions of non-Muslim provenance must be carried out separately for each book or group of books. Ibn Qutayba, for example, cites in his “Signs of Prophecy” the Pentateuch (Gen. and Deut.), the Prophets (Hab., Isa., and Ezek.), the Psalms, and the New Testament (John and Matt.)—groups of books that were originally translated and transmitted separately. His pentateuchal passages, for example, can be identified as originating in one of the well-known Christian translation traditions, while the situation is less clear for the biblical passages culled from other books of the Bible. It is also noteworthy that, with respect to the Pentateuch, Ibn Qutayba draws in his “Signs of Prophecy” on a different translation tradition than he does in his abovementioned

historiographical work, the “Book of Knowledge”—another indication that Muslim scholars of this period were largely dependent on secondary sources.

It can be taken for granted that Muslim authors gleaned their material—directly or perhaps more often indirectly—from a variety of sources when compiling their lists of biblical annunciations of Muḥammad’s prophethood. This is also confirmed by instances in which an author adduces the same scriptural passage more than once, each time in a different rendering. In most cases, the author was clearly unaware that he was drawing on different translations of the very same biblical passage. The Shiʿi Zaydī imām al-Muwaffaq bi-llāh (d. 1029), for example, quotes on two occasions in the course of his extensive list of biblical prooftexts a largely identical passage from Ps. 149, each reflecting a different translation tradition. This presumably unintentional repetition—as well as the unsystematic placement of the first quotation of Ps. 149—indicates that the author had culled his materials from different sources. Moreover, the common phenomenon of mixing biblical and pseudobiblical passages in this type of list also suggests that Muslim authors consulted secondary sources rather than the original text of the Bible. Another indication that most if not all Muslim authors took their material from secondary sources, that is basically similar lists in earlier Muslim literature, would be that the majority of authors adduced by and large the same characteristic biblical prooftexts.

(3) The most plausible scenario for explaining how those early Muslim authors accessed the relevant materials when compiling their lists of biblical “annunciations” is therefore a secondary or indirect reception. It was apparently at a very early stage that lists of biblical passages circulated that were understood to foretell Muḥammad’s designation as the messenger of God. Such lists were consulted both by converts and by scholars of Muslim origin, as is suggested by the striking uniformity of the lists. Compiling lists of relevant scriptural passages has a long tradition—it was a common practice among early Jewish exegetes, who collected biblical passages emphasizing the election of Israel, while omitting those underlining the universality of God’s salvific will, and it was (and still is) a popular device among Christian authors identifying messianic passages from the Hebrew Bible that would predict the advent of Christ Jesus. The considerable overlap of passages of probative value adduced by Christians and Muslims suggests that the Christian practice was copied by Muslim authors, who may even have used earlier Christian lists as their initial raw material.

Similar observations can be made with respect to Muslim attempts to prove that abrogation in the Hebrew Bible is a fact—a *topos* regularly invoked in their debates, real or literary, with Jewish interlocutors. Muslim authors may well have gleaned arguments and relevant biblical passages from parallel discussions among Christians, as is again suggested by the similarity of pertinent lists in the Christian and the Muslim literature. In addition, the theoretical possibility of abrogation on rational and/or scriptural grounds was discussed among Jewish scholars (e.g., by Saʿadya Gaon in his “Book of Beliefs and Opinions”). The arguments of the proponents of the various views are echoed in the Muslim literature of the Middle Ages, which is an indication that Muslim scholars were very much aware of this intra-



Jewish discussion and of the rational and scriptural arguments employed by the respective proponents.

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Over the centuries, we can observe a variety of ways in which Muslim literature dealt with “the Bible” at large—canonical and noncanonical books as well as pseudobiblical lore in Islamicized form. As has been observed with respect to the ambivalent attitude towards the earlier revealed scriptures seen in both the Qur’ān and the Sunna, these trends—most of which can be observed until today—are often contradictory.

There is a remarkable continuity as to the motifs and lines of argumentation employed in these polemics over the centuries, up until the contemporary period. This continuity is reflected, first of all, in the repertoire of biblical passages allegedly foretelling Muḥammad’s prophethood. As we saw earlier, most Muslim authors gleaned the relevant passages from the writings of their predecessors, and in many cases the lines of transmission of the respective lists can be exactly determined. The canon of biblical quotations that were adduced by Muslim authors therefore displays a remarkable degree of consistency over the centuries, and this is true until today. The number of Muslim polemical writings that have been published over the past decades, either in printed form or on the World Wide Web, testifies to the continuing popularity of this genre, and quoting the standard set of biblical passages remains a regular ingredient in these publications.

Occasionally we come across cases in which the established canon of biblical passages has been expanded. An interesting example concerns Gen. 49:10 and 12, containing the famous Shiloh oracle (Gen. 49:10). The passage belongs to “Jacob’s testament” to his sons, with the verses in question being specifically addressed to Judah. According to Jewish understanding, they support the view that there will always be a ruler from among the descendants of Judah until the coming of the Messiah. This is also the context in which the Muslim polymath Abū l-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. ca. 1050–1051) quotes Gen. 49:10 in his “The Chronology of Ancient Nations.” His contemporary, the Andalusī scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), deals with the verse at length in his “Book of Decision(s) on Religions, Sects, and Heresies,” when reporting on a discussion he had with the Jew Ibn al-Naghṛīla. Ibn Ḥazm is primarily concerned with refuting the Jewish claim based on this verse, that authority is now exercised by the head of the Jewish diaspora, the exilarch. The verse was also a common scriptural passage adduced by Christian authors, both in the Arabic-speaking world and in medieval Europe, against the Jews. It is further included in the debate between the caliph al-Mahdī and the patriarch Timothy I (which is assumed to have occurred in the final decades of the eighth century), in which the latter uses this verse, Gen. 49:10, as an argument supporting the claim that, after the coming of Jesus, prophethood would cease. The renowned twelfth-century Jewish convert to Islam, Samaw’al al-Maghribī, also quotes Gen. 49:10 as a Christian argument compelling the Jews to accept the prophethood of Jesus in his polemical tract “Silencing the Jews,” while the fourteenth-century Hanbalite author Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Qawī al-Ṭūfī al-Ḥanbalī, in his “Muslim Defenses to Uncover Christian Doubts,” rejects the argumentation offered by his Christian interlocutors based on this passage. By

contrast, al-Hasan b. Muḥammad al-Raṣṣās, the leading Zaydī theologian of Yemen during the second half of the twelfth century, adduced this scriptural quotation as testimony to Muḥammad’s prophethood. As far as we know he is the earliest Muslim scholar to refer to Gen. 49:10 and 12 as foretelling the Prophet Muḥammad; although it remains unclear which sources were available to him, they were clearly secondary ones rather than the Bible itself. In later centuries and until today, Gen. 49:10 and 12 belong to the standard repertoire of biblical passages testifying to the authenticity of Muḥammad’s prophethood.

Another important trend that can be observed over the centuries is the way in which factors external to the Muslim tradition had a decisive impact on the ways in which the Bible was perceived by Muslim scholars. Pertinent intellectual discussions that took place in Jewish and Christian circles immediately influenced the Muslims’ approach to the Bible. The impact of the intra-Jewish debate concerning the abrogation of biblical injunctions on the Muslim discussion of supersession in the Bible has already been mentioned. Another example concerns a series of polemical texts written by Ottoman scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unlike earlier Muslim polemicists, the Ottoman authors drew on a variety of Jewish exegetical and theological works (alongside standard quotations from the Bible), including the Pentateuch commentaries by Sephardic authors such as Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167), one of the most esteemed authors among Jewish readers of the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, and Moshe Ben Nahman (“Nahmanides,” d. 1270)—works that belonged to the literary canon of Sephardic Jews who fled to the Ottoman Empire following the Reconquista of Spain, concluded in 1492, and the Alhambra Decree of the same year. With the introduction of Hebrew printing in Istanbul in 1504, these works became easily available in the Ottoman capital in printed form, although it remains unclear in what manner Muslim authors were able to access them, since they were written in Hebrew.

A further remarkable example concerns the “Gospel of Barnabas,” a pseudepigraphic gospel of uncertain origin that is usually dated to around the year 1600. The text, which is extant in two manuscripts—an Italian manuscript dated to the turn of the seventeenth century, with marginal glosses in Arabic, and a Spanish one from the eighteenth century—, contains both a detailed account of Jesus’s life and ascension that agrees with the Muslim rather than the canonical Christian perspective and explicit references to the coming of Muḥammad. Muslims became aware of the Gospel of Barnabas only towards the end of the nineteenth century. At the instigation of the Muslim reformer Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), who considered the Gospel of Barnabas to be closer to the original Gospel than were the four canonical ones, an Arabic translation was published in Cairo in 1908. This publication propelled the Gospel of Barnabas to center stage in Muslim polemics against Christianity, which in turn prompted Christians to advance proofs for its spuriousness. The heated debate continues today, as a cursory glance at the World Wide Web shows.

Yet another trend in Muslim polemics is the increasing reservation against the use of any materials of Jewish or Christian provenance. This concerned first and foremost the extracanonical Jewish lore and traditions that had originated with early Jewish converts to Islam and held prominence in Muslim literature during the first century of Islam. The increasingly ambiguous attitude of the Muslim tradition to-

wards the extrascriptural (and heavily Islamicized) materials is evident in the classification of these traditions as *Isrāʿīliyyāt*, a distinctly negative term, which is attested beginning in the tenth century and by the fourteenth century was in widespread usage, employed to marginalize and eventually to dismiss objectionable materials as Jewish and therefore problematic. Prominent representatives of this tendency during the Islamic Middle Ages were Ibn al-Jawzī in the twelfth century and Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in the thirteenth century—they vehemently argued for a systematic segregation between the *Isrāʿīliyyāt* and “truly” Muslim material. Over the following centuries, the *Isrāʿīliyyāt* were increasingly subject to expurgation, a trend that was further accelerated in view of the sociopolitical developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues up until the present day—one can safely speak of a systematic purging of the modern exegetical literature of any traces of *Isrāʿīliyyāt*. Moreover, throughout the twentieth century an increase in titles alluding to the “conspiracy of *Isrāʿīliyyāt*” and “scientific” ways to get rid of it can be observed in the Arab world, combined with an attempt to create a link between the early Jewish converts during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, the principal transmitters of Jewish lore and traditions, and modern Zionism. A landmark in this development was an article published in 1946 by Maḥmūd Abū Rayya (d. 1970),<sup>44</sup> a favored disciple of Rashīd Riḍā, one of the most prominent and influential scholars and jurists of the twentieth century, who had also been instrumental, as we saw earlier, in the publication of an Arabic translation of the Gospel of Barnabas. The title of Abū Rayya’s article reads “Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, the first Zionist” (referring to Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, the seventh-century Jewish convert and authority on Jewish traditions). Parallel to this trend, the Bible itself was increasingly excluded from the canon of authoritative sources, with a growing number of Muslim authors arguing for an outright prohibition on reading or citing from the biblical text.

A similar tendency can be observed in the Muslim discussion of “alteration” of the early scriptures at the hands of Jews and Christians. It is obvious that the charge of alteration of the earlier scriptures conflicts with the claim that the Bible contains predictions of the Prophet Muḥammad—a claim that presupposes the integrity of the biblical text. Nevertheless, both notions were regularly employed by Muslim authors polemicizing against Judaism and Christianity. To alleviate the evident contradiction, different views were formulated as to the form and extent of the alleged distortion. While some Muslim scholars maintained that Jews and Christians had deliberately distorted the biblical text beyond recovery, others held that it was rather their interpretation that needed rectification, while the text itself had remained untainted. Characteristically, the protagonists of the first view—that the historical text of the Bible is not authentic—point (1) to the large number of translations of the Bible in a variety of languages; (2) to the sometimes substantial differences between these translations, taking up the thorny problem of the “multiplicity of scripture” that indeed caused anxieties among the “People of the Book” about the accuracy and stability of the biblical text; (3) to the significant differences between stories that appear both in the Bible and the Qurʾān, with the Qurʾānic version invariably serving as the benchmark against which to judge the distortion of the biblical text (the underlying assumption being that the Qurʾān includes the contents of the original scriptures revealed to the earlier prophets); and (4) to the substantial contradictions

encountered throughout the Bible, such as variations in accounts of the same incident in Jesus's life in the various Gospels—a topos that again echoes the well-established Christian tradition of Gospel Harmonies (e.g. Tatian's lost but nonetheless renowned Diatessaron of the late second century). In addition, doctrinal statements of the New Testament incompatible with Islamic theological notions were also invariably classified as later interpolations, as is the case, for example, with the notion of Christ's being the Son of God, a claim that contradicts Muslim notions of God's unicity and of Jesus as a messenger, one in a long line of messengers ending with Muḥammad. Over the centuries, we encounter numerous literary attempts by Muslim authors to "restore" the "authentic" version of some of the books of the Bible, e.g. the Psalms of David or the Gospels—based on the idea of the identity of the contents of the Qurʾān and the earlier revelations.

Up until the nineteenth century, the two notions of forgery—forgery of the biblical text itself or of its interpretation—were upheld side by side. By the mid-nineteenth century, the more radical opinion—that the biblical text itself was distorted—eventually gained the upper hand. This was mainly the result of the enormous success of a book entitled "The Demonstration of the Truth" by the Indian scholar Mawlānā Raḥmat Allāh Kayrānawī "al-Hindī" (d. 1891), a bestseller since it first appeared in Arabic in 1867 that has since been translated into many languages. The work was written in reply to "The Balance of Truth," a polemical work by the German Protestant Christian missionary Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803–1865), and it echoes the critical approach of nineteenth-century European scholarship towards the text of the Bible; al-Hindī was clearly aware of some of the pertinent discussion when writing his "Demonstration." The significance of al-Hindī's work in the Muslim polemic discourse against Christianity up to the present time can hardly be overestimated. Suffice it to mention here the impact it had on the popular South African polemicist of Indian descent, Ahmad Hoosen Deedat (1918–2005), who wrote extensively against the integrity of the Bible.

Seemingly in contrast to the trends just described, some kind of "Muslim biblical scholarship" emerged from the twelfth century onwards. Again, only a fraction of the relevant material has until now been studied, with many texts still remaining unedited and undiscovered in countless manuscript collections around the world. This development partly resulted from an increased accessibility for Muslims of the Bible, or books of the Bible, through a proliferation of manuscript copies and, from the early sixteenth century onwards, printed versions. Muḥammad b. Zafar al-Makkī as-Ṣiqillī ("Ibn Zafar"), who died in 1170, for example, discusses in detail in his "The Best of Tidings concerning the Best of Mankind" pre-Islamic predictions of the Prophet Muḥammad, and he specifically devotes the first chapter of his work to the Bible. In contrast to earlier Muslim scholars, Ibn Zafar limits the discussion to a relatively small selection of passages. However, for each one of them he cites between four and five different translations—he identifies those quite accurately—and discusses them in detail. His systematic approach and his accurate identification of the respective translations he cites suggest that he was able to consult the different Bible translations directly. An additional concern for the Bible among Muslim authors resulted from the unprecedented flourishing of Copto-Arabic literature during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the "Golden Age of Coptic Literature in

Arabic,” as it is known. Its corpus comprised numerous apologetic works by Coptic authors, which in turn spurred Muslims to compose counterrefutations against Christianity. The Egyptian scholar Ṣāliḥ b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ja‘farī (d. 1270) wrote a detailed analysis of all those biblical passages that testify to his view of the “People of the Book” as tampering with their scriptures, “The Shaming of Those Who Have Corrupted the Torah and the Gospel.” The most impressive testimony of Muslim biblical scholarship of that period is certainly Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī’s (d. 1316) critical “Commentary on the Four Gospels, the Pentateuch and Other Books of the Prophets,” while his contemporary, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Bāḥī (d. 1315), wrote a polemical commentary on the Pentateuch. In this work, the author discusses each book of the Pentateuch, often verse by verse, identifying the contradictions and other indications of alterations in the biblical text at the hands of the Jews. Both al-Bāḥī and al-Ṭūfī again identify precisely the Arabic Bible translation they were using.

Another prominent case of a Muslim scholar who systematically draws on the Bible to interpret the biblical motifs contained in the Qur’ān is the fifteenth-century scholar active in Damascus and Cairo Ibrāhīm b. ‘Umar al-Biqā‘ī in his exegetical work “Stringing of Pearls in the Correlation of [Qur’ānic] Verses and Chapters.” Like Muslims of the early centuries of Islam, al-Biqā‘ī acknowledges the integrity of the biblical text, which, in his view, can and should be used as a valid source of knowledge; accordingly, he quotes extensively from nearly all parts of the Bible to elucidate the relevant Qur’ānic allusions. Al-Biqā‘ī’s extensive usage of the Bible triggered a fierce controversy among the scholarly elite of Cairo—while some supported the practice, others heavily criticized al-Biqā‘ī for having engaged in it. One of his adversaries, the renowned Cairene scholar Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497), for example, composed his “The Genuine Reason for the Prohibition against Quoting from the Torah and the Gospel” as an attack on al-Biqā‘ī. While al-Sakhāwī’s work has unfortunately not come down to us, al-Biqā‘ī’s defense, “Just Words on the Permissibility of Quoting from the Ancient Books,” is extant. Eventually, al-Biqā‘ī was defeated and publicly disgraced and, as a result, forced to withdraw from public life in Cairo. Nevertheless, his Qur’ān exegesis continues to be widely read, as is attested by the fact that two printed editions of the multi-volume work are currently available.

An example of Muslim biblical scholarship dating to the nineteenth century is *The Mahomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible*, a commentary on the Bible in English by the Indian scholar and founder of the “Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental Colleges” in Aligarh, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (b. 1817, d. 1898), who assumed the textual integrity of the historical Bible.

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Let me conclude by adding to the highly ambivalent and partly contradictory picture some further remarks on the challenges contemporary scholars of the Bible in Arabic are facing.

The majority of the extant materials still await scholarly exploration and are preserved until this day in manuscript only—manuscripts that are scattered in libraries around the world. Some are imminently threatened, such as those preserved in

the numerous monastery libraries in Iraq and Syria, and others are accessible only with great difficulty, as is the case with some of the important collections in Russia containing material of Jewish provenance.

While the inaccessibility of relevant manuscript materials is one problem, the boundaries between established academic disciplines such as Eastern Christian studies, Judaic studies, Samaritan studies, and Islamic studies as well as Biblical studies also constitute at times severe impediments to scholarship. An obvious challenge thus results from the inherent interdisciplinarity of the field. It is only when the literary sources of all the relevant religious traditions are taken into consideration that meaningful results can be reached. The countless translations, commentaries, and adaptations of the Bible that were produced by and circulated among Christians, Jews, and Muslims are intimately intertwined, and if we were to limit ourselves to the literary production of one religious community only, our results would be unsatisfactory.

There is another far more challenging, obstacle to scholarship on the Bible in Arabic. As a result of the ambivalent attitude of the Islamic tradition towards the two earlier monotheistic religions and their scriptures and the stern aversion among many contemporary Muslims to seeing their own tradition as historically rooted in the wider religiocultural environment of late antiquity, research relating to the Muslim reception of the Bible always runs the risk of provoking hostile reactions. As unacceptable as this may be from a scholarly point of view, the boundaries between Christian (and at times Jewish) polemical writings aiming at discrediting Islam, on the one hand, and, on the other, scholarly investigations aimed at discovering Jewish and/or Christian elements in the Qurʾān and the early Muslim tradition are fluid indeed, and this not only in the eyes of Muslim believers. None of this can or should prevent scholarly progress, but it needs to be taken into consideration, particularly in view of the fact that interreligious polemics is thriving and has evidently lost none of its relevance or attractiveness.

The only valid reply to any of these challenges is solid, robust, and collaborative scholarship and visibility well beyond the confines of academia.

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine*, Aldershot: Variorum, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Hikmat Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels: The Manuscripts and Their Families*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ronny Vollandt, *Arabic Versions of the Pentateuch: A Comparative Study of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Sources*, Leiden: Brill, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Maḥmūd Abū Rayya, “Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, huwa al-ṣahyūnī al-awwal,” *al-Risāla: Revue hebdomadaire littéraire, scientifique et artistique* 14 (1946), pp. 360–363.