MUSLIM PERCEPTIONS AND RECEPITIONS OF THE BIBLE
RESOURCES IN ARABIC
AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

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Muslim Perceptions and Receptions of the Bible:
Texts and Studies
MUSLIM PERCEPTIONS AND RECEPTIONS OF THE BIBLE: TEXTS AND STUDIES

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In both medieval and modern times, many Muslim scholars and laypeople alike have considered it ill-advised if not outright unlawful to consult the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, often justifying this position through recourse to the doctrine of ṭahrīf, “corruption of the text.” Similarly, scholars such as Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) stressed the idea that one could not rely on Ḥisrāʾīlyāt, “Jewish traditions,” when attempting to understand the Biblical narratives of the Qurʾan. These and other doctrinal positions represent attempts to separate Islam more starkly from Judaism and Christianity, with which it shares an obvious affinity that is textual, scriptural as much as it is doctrinal. They represent an important post-Qurʾānic development within Islam, and arguably contradict much Qurʾānic material, even if the doctrine of ṭahrīf, for example, is attached to particular Qurʾānic prooftexts (Q Baqara 2:75; Nisāʾ 4:46; Māʾida 5:13, 41) that describe the Jews in particular as “twisting the words of God.” In context, these accusations refer to particular misrepresentations of scripture on the part of the Jews, not to the wholesale corruption of the Biblical text. To the contrary, the Qurʾān presents itself as one of God’s true scriptures, along with the Torah and the Gospel, which it regards as authentic revealed books, the contents of which are confirmed by the Qurʾān. Nevertheless, in later Islamic tradition, the accusation of ṭahrīf came to be used as one strategy to discredit the Biblical texts that were then in the hands of Jews and Christians. Such dismissals of the Bible, however, were not universally shared in the Muslim community, and they do not reflect the complex and rich history of Muslim engagement with the Biblical text, through both Jewish and Christian sources, from the first Islamic centuries until the present day.

The studies gathered in this rich collection represent a major step forward in the study of Muslim engagement with the Bible. They focus on the Sunni tradition up to the eleventh century, on Shiite and Muʿtazili traditions from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries, and on the Ottoman tradition. Some of the texts analyzed focus on polemical topics, such as Biblical predictions of the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad that Jews and Christians are supposed to have suppressed or willfully misinterpreted, or the question of whether the Hebrew Bible has been abrogated. Others, however, adopt a more ecumenical view, arguing for the sanctity of the Hebrew Bible. Together they provide evidence of a long, complex, and profound tradition of the study, interpretation, and criticism of Biblical texts, showing that many Muslim scholars, from diverse regions and periods, had access to the Bible, whether through the personal knowledge of converts or through translations from the Jewish or Christian traditions, and furthermore, that at
least some of these scholars had a profound interest in the Bible as a sacred text, and not only as a source for polemical material.

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Devin J. Stewart
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Preface

The articles brought together in this volume deal with Muslim perceptions and uses of the Bible in its wider sense, including the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament as well as the New Testament, albeit with an emphasis on the former scripture. While Muslims consider the earlier revelations to the People of the Book (ahl al-kitāb) to have been altered to some extent by the Jews and the Christians and abrogated by the Qurʾān, God’s final dispensation to humankind, the Bible is at the same time venerated in view of its divine origin, and questioning this divine origin is tantamount to unbelief (chapter 10). Muslim scholars approached and used the Bible for a variety of purposes and in different ways, often ignoring these inherent contradictions. Thus Muslim historians regularly relied on biblical materials as their primary source for the pre-Islamic period when discussing the creation as well as the history of the Israelites and the prophets preceding Muḥammad. Authors seeking to polemicize against Jews and Christians were primarily interested in the presumed biblical annunciations of Muḥammad and his religion and/or in perceived contradictions and cases of internal abrogation in the Bible. (The latter topic is addressed in chapter 8.) These various concerns resulted from and had an impact on the ways in which Muslim authors accessed the scriptures—early historians often quote or paraphrase large sections or even entire books of the Bible—in Arabic translation—while those engaged in polemics or apologetics often resorted to lists of relevant biblical passages which must have circulated widely. The different approaches to the biblical text among Muslims with their inherent contradictions are discussed in the first section of the present book which consists of three chapters surveying Muslim attitudes to the Hebrew Bible in particular, although many of the arguments used apply equally to the New Testament.

Other studies focus on two of the earliest Muslim compilations of presumed biblical predictions of the Prophet Muḥammad: Aʿlām (or Dalāʾil) al-Nubuwwa by Ibn Qutayba and Kitāb al-Dīn wa-l-Dawla by Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī, both of which were frequently consulted by later Muslim scholars. The authenticity of Ibn Rabban’s work was long disputed among Western scholars. Chapter 12, which discusses the lengthy quotations from this work by the Twelver Šīʿī author al-Ḥimmaṣī al-Rāzī, puts the controversy to rest. This study in turn was the basis for several articles that shed additional light on the use of Ibn Rabban’s al-Dīn wa-l-dawla among well-known medieval Muslim scholars, such as al-Māwardī, Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and the Zaydī al-ʿAnsī (chapters 7, 9, and 15). Ibn Qutayba’s influential Aʿlām al-Nubuwwa was considered for a long time to be lost, until its recent
rediscovery. A critical edition and study of the biblical passages of the work are given in chapter 4. The impact of both Ibn Rabban and Ibn Qutayba on various Sunni, Muʿtazili and Zaydī scholars is studied in a number of additional chapters (chapters 5, 13, 14, 15). The use of biblical passages for polemical purposes is the primary concern also of the studies brought together in the final section of this book (chapters 17–21) which focusses on the polemical works of a number of Ottoman scholars, who also adduced material from the later Jewish exegetical tradition. That Muslim polemics against the Bible elicited reactions on the part of the People of the Book is shown by the example of Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret, who wrote a refutation of Ibn Ḥazm (chapter 6).

Focusing on the long-neglected Ẓīrī tradition also proved fruitful in the case of Raḍī al-Dīn Ibn Ṭawūs whose library included a copy of the Pentateuch, which is analyzed in chapter 16. The use of biblical material in the chronography of Ḥamza al-Īṣfahānī, who was in all likelihood a Shiʿī, is studied in chapter 11.

The chapters of this book are revised and updated versions of the following articles:


Preface


Chapter 13: “Muʿtazilī Discussions of the Abrogation of the Torah: Ibn Ḥallād (4th/10th Century) and His Commentators,” Arabica 60 (2013), pp. 701–742 (C. Adang & S. Schmidtke);


Chapter 15: “Biblical Predictions of the Prophet Muḥammad among the Zaydīs of Yemen (6th/12th and 7th/13th centuries),” Orientalia Christiana Analecta 293 (2013), pp. 221–240 (S. Schmidtke);


Chapter 20: “A Polemic against Judaism by a Convert to Islam from the Ottoman Period: Riṣālat Ilzām al-Yahūd fīmā zaʿamū fī l-Tawrāt min qibal ʿīlμ al-kalām,” Journal Asiatique 297 (2009), pp. 131–151 (C. Adang);

Since several of the articles included in the present volume deal with the same themes and often even with the same authors, a certain amount of overlap was inevitable. We have chosen not to rewrite the contributions, but where necessary to update references. All references have been brought together in a unified bibliography at the end of this volume, and a single system of transliteration and annotation has been used throughout. No attempt has been made to provide a comprehensive account of Muslim perceptions and receptions of the Bible.

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