On the Qurʾanic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic

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According to the fully articulated salvation history of Islam, Moses and Jesus (like all prophets) were Muslims. Moses received an Islamic scripture, the Torah (*tawrāt*), as did Jesus, the Gospel (*injīl*). Their communities, however, suppressed their religion and altered their scriptures. Accordingly, a canonical *ḥadīth* has the Prophet Muḥammad declare:

> O community of Muslims, how is it that you seek wisdom from the People of the Book? Your book, brought down upon His Prophet—blessings and peace of God upon him—is the latest report about God. You read a Book that has not been distorted, but the People of the Book, as God related to you, exchanged that which God wrote [for something else], changing the book with their hands.[1]

This *ḥadīth* reflects the idea found frequently among Muslim scholars, usually described with the term *taḥrīf*, that the Bible has been literally altered. The same idea lies behind Yāqūt's (d. 626/1229) attribution of a quotation on Jerusalem to a Jewish convert to Islam from Banū Qurayẓa "who possessed a copy of the uncorrupted Torah."[2]

Muslim scholars also accuse Jews and Christians of misinterpreting the Bible by hiding, ignoring, or misreading it, and on occasion they describe such misinterpretation as *taḥrīf* as well. Accordingly, in scholarly treatments of the subject a comparison is sometimes made between *taḥrīf al-naṣṣ*, alteration of the text of scripture, and *taḥrīf al-maʿānī*, misinterpretation of scripture. Yet Muslim scholars who accuse Jews and Christians of misinterpretation do not mean to imply thereby that the Bible has not been altered. Instead they employ the idea of *taḥrīf al-maʿānī* for the sake of argument.[3] In *al-Radd al-jamīl li-ilāhiyyat ʿĪsā bi-ṣarīḥ al-injīl* ("The Splendid Refutation to the Divinity of Jesus through a Clear Reading

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1. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, K. al-Shahādāt, 29 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1420/1999), 2: 182. The last line is an allusion to Q 2:79. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) reports that the Prophet once found ʿUmar reading a leaf of the (falsified) Torah. At this Muḥammad "got so angry that his anger showed in his face. He said: 'Did I not bring it to you white and clean? By God, if Moses were alive, he would have no choice but to follow me'." Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, tr. F. Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 2: 438–39. On this tradition, see also I. Goldziher, "Über muhammedanische Polemik gegen ahl al-kitāb," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 32 (1878): 345.

2. Yāqūt, *Muʿjām al-buldān*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1866–73), 4: 593. See Goldziher, "Über muhammedanische Polemik," 345.

3. On this, see especially J.-M. Gaudeul and R. Caspar, "Textes de la tradition musulmane concernant le tahrîf (falsification) des écritures," *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980): 61–104. See also D. Thomas, "The Bible in Early Muslim Anti-Christian Polemic," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996): 29–38. There are examples, of course, of medieval Muslim scholars who read the Bible without any particular concern with *taḥrīf*. This is the case with the Ismāʿīlī Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/933–4), who defends the Bible against Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925 or 323/935), and Ibrāhīm al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480), who argues that the Bible (with some limitations) can be used for religious purposes. See P. Kraus, "Extraits du *kitāb aʿlām al-nubuwwa* d'Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī," *Orientalia* 5 (1936): 35–56, 358–78; Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Aʿlām al-nubuwwa* (Tehran: Royal Iranian Philosophical Society, 1977);

of the Gospel"), a work attributed to al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), the author quotes liberally from the Christian Gospels to argue against Christian doctrine on Jesus.[4] However, if the author finds his religious thought confirmed in the Bible, he never turns to the Bible as a source for new or improved religious thought. He does not, for example, accept the New Testament accounts of the crucifixion.

In the present paper I will say something about the question of *taḥrīf*, in a way that involves speaking of the topic generally at times and, at other times, contrasting the Qurʾanic treatment of this topic with that of medieval Islamic literature. In order to make my argument as clear as possible, it will be necessary first to define the terminology I will use in articulating it. As I see it, four different layers of meaning can be associated with the Arabic word *taḥrīf*. Accordingly, I use a different English phrase or term for each layer. First, I use the phrase "scriptural falsification" (as in the title of this paper) as an overarching topical description for everything that the Arabic term *taḥrīf* might entail. Second, I use the phrase "textual alteration" to describe the common accusation of medieval (and modern) Islamic literature that the Jews and Christians really erased (or destroyed) some or all of the true scripture and rewrote it (*taḥrīf al-naṣṣ*). Third, I use the term "misinterpretation" for the accusation that the Jews and Christians do not properly understand their own scripture (*taḥrīf al-maʿānī*). Fourth, I use the phrase "they shift words out of their contexts" to translate as literally as possible the Qurʾanic phrase (related to *taḥrīf*) *yuḥarrifūna l-kalima ʿan mawāḍiʿihi*, for reasons that I will explain below.

This translation itself anticipates my argument that the Qurʾan has a quite limited sense of what the act of scriptural falsification involves. But I will also make a second argument in this paper, one about those whom the Qurʾan accuses of scriptural falsification. On this point as well there is a distinct contrast between the evidence of the Qurʾan itself and the position of later Islamic literature. Most medieval Islamic texts that address scriptural falsification are concerned with Christians. This is the case with the aforementioned *al-Radd al-jamīl*, as well as with ʿAbd al-Jabbār's (d. 415/1025) *Critique of Christian Origins* (a treatise in his *Tathbīt dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*), Abū l-Baqāʾ Ṣāliḥ b. Ḥusayn al-Jaʿfarī's (d. 618/1221) *Takhjīl man ḥarrafa al-injīl* ("The Humiliation of Those Who Falsified the Gospel"), and Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-masīḥ*. To my knowledge no such class of works exists on the Jewish falsification of scripture.

For the most part these medieval works on Christian scriptural falsification are shaped by examinations of the New Testament, a technique that would be used to famous effect much later by Rahmatallah Kairanawi (d. 1891) in his debate in Agra, India against the German missionary Karl Gottlieb Pfander (d. 1865). ʿAbd al-Jabbār, however, adds to his examination of the New Testament a history of its falsification.[5] This history begins with a dispute between the Jews and the faithful followers of the Muslim Prophet Jesus:

W. Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqāʿī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

4. Compare also the remarks of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī, in the introduction to his *al-Radd ʿalā l-naṣārā*: "With the help of God Most High, I will interpret the words—which [the Christians] have explained in a way contrary to their meanings—as I describe their *taḥrīf*." ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī, *al-Radd ʿalā l-naṣārā*, in *Mélanges de l'Université de Saint Joseph* 36 (1959): 120.

5. Goldziher was not aware of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's narrative when he wrote: "Da stellt sich nun heraus, dass die Hauptvertreter der muhammedanische Theologie nicht einmal bezüglich der Grundfrage: wie man sich jene Verdrehung und Fälschung vorzustellen, und was man darunter zu verstehen habe, eines Sinnes sind." Goldziher, "Über muhammedanische Polemik," 364.

Now, after Christ, his followers conducted their prayers and holidays with the Jews and the Israelites in one place, in their synagogues, despite the conflict between them over Christ. The Romans were ruling over them and the Christians would complain about the Jews to the Roman rulers, showing them how weak they were and asking for compassion. [The Romans] would have compassion on them.

This became more frequent until the Romans said to them, "There is an agreement between us and the Jews, that we will not change their religious practices. If you were to deviate from their religious practices and separate yourselves from them . . . then we would aid you and make you mightier. Then the Jews would have no way over you. You would be mightier than them." They said, "We will do it." . . .

But [their companions] replied to them, "You have done wretchedly! It is not permitted for us to place the Injīl in the hands of the unclean Romans. . . ." A severe conflict ensued between them. [The first group] returned to the Romans and said to them, "Assist us against these companions of ours before assisting us against the Jews! Get our book from them for us." [The companions] concealed themselves from the Romans and fled throughout the land.

Those who had made a deal with the Romans gathered and consulted each other over what to adopt in place of the Injīl, since it had passed out of their hands. They came to the opinion that they would produce a Gospel (*injīl*), saying, "The Tawrāt is only genealogies of the prophets and histories of their lives. We will construct a Gospel accordingly."[6]

In ʿAbd al-Jabbār's view a faithful group of Jesus's disciples ran away with the true Gospel. Thereafter, the unfaithful disciples who had made a deal with the pagan Romans wrote a false Gospel on the model of the Tawrāt. ʿAbd al-Jabbār, it might be noted, tells no such story to explain the falsification of the Tawrāt. Presumably his silence on this count reflects the relative importance of Christians in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's historical context, both in his own city (Rayy, Iran) and in the Islamic world as a whole. Christians, of course, were more numerous than Jews in most of the Islamic world, and Christian forces from Byzantium or Europe formed a constant threat in the medieval period. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find that medieval Muslim scholars generally, and not only ʿAbd al-Jabbār, wrote more on the scriptural falsification of the Christians than on that of the Jews.[7]

The scriptural falsification of the Jews is, however, a prominent theme in traditions on the life of the Prophet.[8] One such tradition has some Jews of Medina bring to Muḥammad a man and a woman from their community accused of adultery. When Muḥammad asks them what penalty the Torah prescribes for this case, they reply that the offenders are to be flogged. At this a companion of Muḥammad, ʿAbd Allāh b. Sallām (himself a recent convert from Judaism), counters that the Torah itself contains a verse condemning adulterers to death by stoning. When they bring out the Torah scrolls to solve the matter, a rabbi places his hand over a passage in the text, reciting only what precedes and what follows it. Ibn Sallām strikes

6. ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *The Critique of Christian Origins*, ed. S. K. Samir, tr. G. S. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young Univ. Press, 2010), 92–94, part 3: vv. 60–74.

7. On this point it is worth comparing the arguments of Jane Dammen McAuliffe in her work *Qur'ānic Christians*. Therein McAuliffe traces the effect of religious competition with Christians on traditional Islamic interpretation of passages in the Qur'an which "make ostensibly positive remarks about the Christians." J. Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 4. She concludes: "The commentators understand the Qur'ān to make a clear distinction between true Christians, a tiny minority, and those who have appropriated and propagated a corrupted form of the religion of Jesus" (p. 286).

8. John Wansbrough writes: "Of those themes [of Muslim polemic] the most prominent, and the one destined to bear the major burden of Muslim external polemic, was the charge of scriptural falsification, leveled originally at the Jews, later the Christians, and finally employed for polemic internal to the community" (the last comment an allusion to Shiʿi accusations of Sunni corruption of the Qur'an) (*The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978], 41).

away the rabbi's hand, uncovering the verse with the stoning penalty, and declares, "This, O Messenger of God, is the verse of stoning that he refuses to read to you." Muḥammad is appalled, and cries out, "Woe to you Jews! What has induced you to abandon the judgment of God which you hold in your hands?"[9]

Unlike the class of texts on the Christian falsification of scripture, which typically involve either an examination of the New Testament or (in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's case) a historical description of how Christians falsified scripture, such traditions often appear to be midrashic. The Ibn Sallām story above seems to be a way of explaining *sūrat al-mā'ida* (5):41–43, a passage that builds up to the rhetorical question "Why would they ask you to be a judge when they have the judgment of God in the Torah?" The detail of a Jew physically covering a portion of the Torah, meanwhile, is evidently related to the Qur'an's command "Do not cover up the truth with falsehood and conceal the truth" (Q 2:42). A different story has a Jew literally hide a portion of the Torah behind his back, thus explaining *sūrat āl ʿImrān* (3):187: "When God made a covenant with those who had been given revelation, [He commanded them,] 'Present it to the people. Do not hide it from them.' Yet they cast it behind their backs, bartering it for a cheap thing. They have only bartered for evil."[10]

Such traditions reflect a mechanism of Islamic exegesis referred to in Arabic as *taʿyīn al-mubham* ("resolution of ambiguity"), whereby Qur'anic phrases and allusions are substantiated in historical reports involving (usually) the Prophet and his Companions. In such cases the text itself produces history. Thus it is not surprising to find that most traditions describing Jewish scriptural falsification are of this type, for the Qur'an frequently directs this charge against the Jews.[11]

1. SCRIPTURAL FALSIFICATION IN THE QUR'AN

In all the Qur'an describes scriptural falsification with eight different verbs or verb phrases:

1. and 2. *Sūrat al-baqara* (2):42: Do not **cover up** (*talbisū*; cf. Q 3:71) the truth with falsehood and **conceal** (*taktumū*; cf. Q 2:140, 146, 159, 174; 3:71, 187) the truth, for you know [it].

3. *Sūrat al-baqara* (2):59a: Those who were in error **exchanged** (*baddalū*) the declaration (*qawl*) with one which they were not told. (Cf. Q 7:162.)

9. Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat rasūl Allāh*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1858–1860), 395; English trans.: Ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, tr. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), 267; cf. Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), *al-Muwaṭṭa'*, K. al-Ḥudūd, mā jā'a fī l-rajm, 1 (Cairo: n.p., 1303/1885), 38. This *ḥadīth* is analyzed by J. Burton, "Law and Exegesis: The Penalty for Adultery in Islam," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G. R. Hawting and A. A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 269–84, esp. 271–72.

10. *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Surtī (Qatar: n.p., 1396/1976), 180. The early Qur'an commentator Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), for his part, reports that the Jews altered their scripture to hide the predictions of Muḥammad therein. *Tafsīr Muqātil*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd al-Shiḥāta (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, 1969), 1: 118, on Q 2:76.

11. It would go too far, however, to conclude that the anti-Jewish material in Islamic tradition is exclusively a response to anti-Jewish passages in the Qur'an. The anti-Jewish tone of certain legal traditions, for example, seems to be motivated instead by tension in the relationship between Islamic and Jewish practice. Note to this end the *ḥadīth*s on whether Muslims should fast on ʿĀshūrā' (the Jewish Yom Kippur). See Ibn Abī Shayba, *K. al-Muṣannaf*, K. al-Ṣiyām, 4, mā qālū fī ṣawm ʿĀshūrā', 58, ed. Muḥammad Shāhīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1416/1995), 2: 311–13 (n.b. *ḥadīth* 9359 [from Ibn ʿAbbās], in which the Prophet declares, "You have a greater claim to Moses than [the Jews], so fast [on ʿĀshūrā']."). I am grateful to Christopher Melchert for drawing my attention to this matter.

4. *Sūrat al-baqara* (2):79: Woe to those who **write** (*yaktubūna*) revelation (*al-kitāb*) with their hands and then say, "This is from God."

5. *Sūrat āl ʿImrān* (3):78a: Among them is a group who **twist their tongues** (*yalwūna alsinatahum*) with the revelation. (Cf. Q 4:46.)

6. *Sūrat al-nisāʾ* (4):46: Among the Jews are those who **shift** (*yuḥarrifūna ʿan*; Q 2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41) words **out** of their contexts (on this idiom, v.i.) . . . while they twist their tongues (*layyān bi-alsinatihim*) and speak evil of the faith.

7. *Sūrat al-māʾida* (5):13–14: Because they have violated their covenant We cursed them and made their hearts hard. They shift words out of their contexts. They **forgot** (*nasū*) a portion of what was recounted to them. . . . * As for those who say, "We are *naṣārā*," we made a covenant with them but they forgot (*nasū*) a portion of what was recounted to them. (Cf. 7:53, 165.)

8. *Sūrat al-māʾida* (5):15: O People of the Book, our messenger has come to you to present much of what you were **hiding** (*tukhfūna*) of the truth. . . .

Evidently the Qurʾan is principally concerned with the misuse of scripture. In none of these examples does the Qurʾan insist that passages of the Bible have been rewritten or that books of the Bible have been destroyed and replaced by false scripture. Instead, the Qurʾan argues that revelation has been ignored, misread, forgotten, or hidden. The Qurʾan is certainly concerned with false scripture when it proclaims, "Woe to those who write revelation (*al-kitāb*) with their hands and then say, 'This is from God'." (Q 2:79).[12] Yet in this passage the Qurʾan does not accuse Jews or Christians of changing the Bible. Instead, it argues against those who treat the words of humans as revelation, while neglecting the words of God.

According to most Western scholarship, the Qurʾan is referring to textual alteration with the verb *yuḥarrifūna* (the noun *taḥrīf* itself does not appear in the Qurʾan). Hava Lazarus-Yafeh defines the Qurʾan's use of *taḥrīf* accordingly:

> [C]hange, alteration, forgery; used with regard to words, and more specifically with regard to what Jews and Christians are supposed to have done to their respective Scriptures (*yuḥarrifūna 'l-kalima ʿan mawāḍiʿhi* [sic], sūra IV, 46, V, 13; see also II, 75), in the sense of perverting the language through altering words from their proper meaning, changing words in form or substituting words or letters for others.[13]

Edward W. Lane, who relies on medieval Islamic dictionaries (in this case the *Ṣiḥāḥ* of Ismāʿīl b. Ḥammād al-Jawharī [d. 400/1003] and the *Tāj al-ʿarūs* of Muḥammad al-Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī [d. 1205/1791]), similarly defines the idiom *taḥrīf l-kalima ʿan mawāḍiʿihi* as "the altering of words from their proper meanings."[14] He adds that in accordance "with this explanation, the verb [*ḥarrafa*] is used in the Ḳur[ān]."[15] A closer examination, however, will show that this explanation is in accordance with exegesis of the Qurʾan, but not the Qurʾan itself.

12. False scripture may also be at issue in Q 2:59: "Those who were in error exchanged (*baddalū*) the declaration (*qawl*) with one which they were not told" (cf. Q 7:162). The word *qawl*, however, is an ambiguous term and not obviously a reference to revelation.

13. H. Lazarus-Yafeh, "Taḥrīf," in *EI*², 10: 111a.

14. E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: The Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 1: 549b.

15. Ibid.

In order to understand what the Qurʾan means by *yuḥarrifūna l-kalima ʿan mawāḍiʿihi*, one might begin with the literal sense of *mawāḍiʿ* (sing. *mawḍiʿ*) 'places' (and not 'meanings', which might represent *mawāḍīʿ* [sing. *mawḍūʿ*]) and the primary meaning of the root *ḥ-r-f* 'to move; to turn'.[16] In classical Arabic the noun *ḥarf* means 'letter', a meaning that undoubtedly suggested to medieval Muslim scholars that with *yuḥarrifūna* the Qurʾan is concerned with an alteration of the very words of revelation. But 'letter' seems to be a secondary meaning of *ḥarf*, the primary meaning being 'extremity, verge, border, margin, brink, brow, side, or edge'.[17] The only occurrence of *ḥarf* in the Qurʾan (22:11: *man yaʿbudu llāha ʿalā ḥarfin*)[18] evidently matches this primary meaning. In other words, there is no compelling reason to associate Qurʾanic *taḥrīf* with an alteration of letters. Instead, the phrase *yuḥarrifūna l-kalima ʿan mawāḍiʿihi* seems to involve turning or shifting words out of their places or contexts. In other words, the Qurʾan intends scriptural falsification that involves reading or explaining scripture out of context, not erasing words and rewriting them. Thus we might agree with the point Ignazio di Matteo made in response to Ignaz Goldziher some time ago, that there is no compelling reason to think the Qurʾanic idea of *taḥrīf* involves textual alteration.[19]

To this point a second point should be added, namely, that in the Qurʾan the verbal form of *taḥrīf* (Q 2:75; 4:46; 5:13; 5:41) is always used against the Jews and never against the Christians. Indeed, Qurʾanic material on scriptural falsification is largely directed against the Jews (although at times the Qurʾan specifies that only certain wrongdoers among them are at fault). The Qurʾan's concern with the Jews is explicit in some verses dealing with scriptural falsification (e.g., Q 4:46); in other verses it is evident from context. For example, *sūrat al-baqara* (2):59 "Those who were in error exchanged (*baddalū*) the declaration (*qawl*) with one which they were not told" is preceded by a passage (see 2:57) in which the Qurʾan refers to God's provision of manna and quails to the Israelites. Q 2:79 "Woe to those who write revelation (*al-kitāb*) with their hands and then say, 'This is from God'" is preceded by a passage in which the Qurʾan comments on the red heifer of Numbers 19:1–10 (Q 2:66–71) and the heifer of Deuteronomy 21:1–9 (Q 2:72–73). *Sūrat āl ʿImrān* (3):187 is preceded by a reference (3:181) to those who killed the prophets, a common Qurʾanic allusion to the Israelites.

16. Thus, according to Lane, form 1 of *ḥ-r-f* means most simply 'to turn'; form 2 'to turn away' (here Lane makes *taḥrīf* synonymous with *taḥrīk* 'to disturb, to move'), or 'to turn on an edge' or 'obliquely' (used for altering the angle of the blade of a knife or the nib of a pen); and the passive form 7 'to be turned away'. Lane, *Lexicon*, 549c–550a. Dozy reports the use of this root with the direct object *mizāj* ('mood, humor'; forms 1, 2, and 5 [reflexive]) evidently with the meaning of disturbing—i.e., physically agitating—the humors (R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1881], 1: 271b–272a). That the base meaning of Arabic *ḥ-r-f* is 'to move, to turn' is likewise suggested by Syriac *ḥ-r-p* which, in the *peal*, has the meaning 'to spur, to incite' (*acuit, incitavit*). See R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1879–1901), 1379a, with reference to Jacob of Serūgh (d. A.D. 521).

17. Lane, *Lexicon*, 550a.

18. A. A. Ambros comments "unc., prob. ref. to those who worship God, as it were, marginally, i.e. without full attention of devotion." A. A. Ambros and S. Prochazka, *Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), 69.

19. Goldziher concludes ("Über muhammedanische Polemik," 344) that the Qurʾan accuses the People of the Book of altering the text of scriptures brought down from heaven to Moses and Jesus: "Die Schriftbesitzer hätten die in ihren Händen befindlichen Offenbarungsbücher verändert und gefälscht (*taḥrīf, taġyīr, tabdīl*) abgeleitet." Di Matteo responds that the only accusation that the Qurʾan raises against Jews and Christians is misinterpretation, not textual alteration, of the scriptures. See I. di Matteo, "Il 'taḥrīf' od alterazione della Bibbia secondo i musulmani," *Bessarione* 38 (1922): 64–111, 223–60.

On other occasions the Qur'an accuses also the Naṣārā of falsifying revelation. In *sūrat āl ʿImrān* the Qur'an argues against the Jews and the Naṣārā in regard to Abraham (Q 3:65–67) and then accuses the "People of the Book"—presumably a label for the two groups together—of concealing (Q 3:71) and twisting (*layyu l-alsina*, Q 3:78) divine revelation. In *sūrat al-mā'ida* (5):14 the Qur'an accuses the Naṣārā of forgetting a portion of revelation. Notably, however, this accusation follows a verse in which the Qur'an accuses the Jews of both forgetting and "shifting words out of their contexts" (*yuḥarrifūna*) (Q 5:13). In other words, the Qur'an seems to excuse the Naṣārā from this latter charge.

One might add that the Qur'an's use of the term Naṣārā is peculiar. This term is understood by Muslim exegetes—and most western scholars—to mean simply Christians. Today Arabic-speaking Muslims often refer to Christians with this term. Yet in most languages, including Eastern languages, the term for Christians is some calque of Greek Χριστιανοί. In Syriac, Christians are *mshīḥāyê* (from *mshīḥā* 'Christ'), and indeed Arabic-speaking Christians generally call themselves *masīḥiyya*. Naṣārā, a term apparently based on the name Nazareth (Ar. *nāṣira*), seems in contrast to be a pejorative term. It reflects Acts 24:5, where the enemies of the Christians are said to refer to them as Nazoraeans. Later Ναζωραῖοι is used as a name by Epiphanius (d. 403) and Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. ca. 458) for a heretical Judaeo-Christian sect. In pre-Islamic Syriac texts Nazoraean is again a pejorative label; generally it appears in quotations of hostile Persian sources.[20]

The similarity between Arabic *naṣārā* and Greek Ναζωραῖοι has led a series of Western scholars to explain the Qur'an's material on Christianity as a product of Muḥammad's exposure to some heretical Christian group.[21] Sidney Griffith, however, argues convincingly against this view, maintaining instead that the Qur'an uses *naṣārā* as a term for all Christians (similar to the cognate term in Syriac quotations of Persian opponents of Christianity).[22] It seems possible to me that the Qur'an's term for Christians is intended for rhetorical effect—in other words, that with *naṣārā* the Qur'an means to separate the Christians of its context from the name of Christ, and, indeed, from Christianity.

A different description of Christians is found in Q 5:47: "Let the People of the Gospel judge by what is in it." Here the Qur'an refers not to *naṣārā*, but to *ahl al-injīl*, the "People of the Gospel," and instructs them to rely on their own revelation, the Gospel. Thus if the Qur'an speaks against certain Christians, it speaks in support of the Gospel, and moreover assumes that the valid Christian revelation is still at hand in its day. This reference to the "People of the Gospel" is nowhere matched by a reference to the "People of the Torah."

20. On this question, see F. de Blois, "*Naṣrānī* and *Ḥanīf*: Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and Islam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002): 1–30, esp. 8–9. Therein de Blois quotes a passage (p. 8) from the story of St. Pethion in which the protagonist declares tellingly, "I am not the head of the Nazoraeans, no. I am the servant of God and the minister of the Christians (*kristyānê*)."

21. For this argument, see de Blois, op. cit., and also J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidestums* (Berlin: Reimer, 1897), esp. p. 232; H. J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1949), 334–42; Yūsuf Durra al-Ḥaddād, *al-Qur'ān daʿwā naṣrāniyya* (Jounieh: Librairie pauliste, 1969); Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, *Qass wa-nabī* (Beirut: n.p., 1979); French trans.: J. Azzi, *Le prêtre et le prophète: Aux sources du Coran*, tr. M. S. Garnier (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001); É. Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète: Aux origines de l'islam* (Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2005); J. Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran: Eine Spurensuche* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007).

22. S. Griffith, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qur'an: A Hermeneutical Reflection," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. G. S. Reynolds, Routledge, forthcoming.

2. CHRISTIAN ANTI-JEWISH POLEMIC

The Qurʾan seems to echo traditional themes of Christian anti-Jewish polemic. The Qurʾan defends Mary against Jewish calumny (Q 4:156), maligns the Jews who accused Jesus of being a magician (Q 5:110; 61:6), and contradicts the Jews who boast of having killed Jesus (Q 4:157). Elsewhere, the Qurʾan seems to celebrate the historical dominance of the Church over the Jews. In *sūrat al-ṣaff* (61):14, the Qurʾan divides the Israelites into two sects: those who followed Jesus and those who did not. The Qurʾan insists that God aided the sect that followed Jesus against their enemies and made them victorious (*ẓāhirīn*). The Qurʾan could hardly be thinking of (proto-)Muslim disciples of Jesus here. These disciples, according to Islamic tradition, were oppressed and vanquished. The Christians were victorious.

Moreover, in Q 3:55a, the Qurʾan insists that God's support of those who followed Jesus has not, and will not, be eclipsed. Here God speaks to Jesus, assuring him, "I will make you die, raise you to myself, purify you from the unbelievers, and make those who follow you superior to the unbelievers until the day of resurrection." These verses stand in perfect contrast to the traditional Islamic view of Christianity as a falsified religion. Instead, they reflect quite closely the traditional Christian notion of the Church's triumph over the Jews.

The Qurʾan's approach to scriptural falsification is also close to the traditional Christian notion. The Church Fathers could hardly accuse the Jews of textual alteration of the Bible. After all, this was their Bible, too, the Bible from which the evangelists quote repeatedly to prove their claim that Jesus is the Christ. Certain Church Fathers, notably Justin Martyr, argued that later Jewish Greek translations of the Bible were efforts to mutilate messianic passages of the Septuagint, but it is hard to imagine that such arguments could have a place in the Arabic Qurʾan.[23]

It is similarly hard to imagine that the Qurʾan's idea of scriptural falsification is connected to some other religious group, even if scriptural falsification was a common enough idea in late antiquity. The Samaritans, of course, rejected the Jewish Bible for its inclusion of books other than the Torah; they also insisted that only their version of the Torah was faithful to the revelation given to Moses.[24] The Ebionites, according to Irenaeus, read only the Gospel of Matthew.[25] Epiphanius explains that this was not Greek Matthew but a Hebrew text otherwise known by Judaeo-Christian groups as the Gospel of the Hebrews.[26] Otherwise, the Judaeo-Christians presumably continued to read the Hebrew Bible. In contrast, Marcion

23. A. Lukyn Williams notes Justin's arguments to this effect in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Chapter 71 of that work is entitled "The Jews reject the interpretation of the LXX, from which, moreover, they have taken away some passages." In the following chapters Justin offers some specific examples: ch. 72, "Passages have been removed by the Jews from Esdras and Jeremiah" (p. 234); ch. 73, "[The words] 'from the wood' have been cut out of Ps. 96." See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, tr. T. B. Falls (Washington: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1948), 234–35. On this, see also A. L. Williams, *Adversus Judaeos: A Bird's-Eye View of Christian Apologiae Until the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1935), 33; M. Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135–425)*, tr. H. McKeating (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 153–54.

24. "The same theme recurs throughout Samaritan literature. They continually assert that they alone have carried out the command in *Deut.* iv, 2 . . . 'not to add to and not to diminish' the words of Scripture. They themselves were able to do this because they possessed the true tradition which had been transmitted from Moses to the elders, who in turn handed it on to the successive generations of elders. Naturally enough, the Samaritans held that they were the only true Israelites to uphold this tradition faithfully" (S. Lowy, *The Principles of Samaritan Bible Exegesis* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977], 124).

25. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3:11:7.

26. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 30:13:203.

insisted that the Hebrew Bible was inspired not by God, the Father of Jesus Christ, but by Yahweh, who, in his view, was a lesser god responsible for the material realm.

All three of these groups—Samaritans, Judaeo-Christians, and Marcionites—have at different times been the subject of scholarly speculation on the origins of Islam.[27] Yet in no case is there any compelling evidence behind this speculation. The Samaritans were a small and geographically isolated community at the time of Islam's origins. The Judaeo-Christians and Marcionites, it seems, were long gone by that time.[28]

In any case, the simple point here is that the Qur'an's concern with the failure of the Jews to read divine revelation properly is closely related to conventional Christian anti-Jewish literature. Indeed, this accusation is found at the heart of the New Testament. In his comments on the Jews in 2 Corinthians (3:14) Paul writes, "But their minds were closed. Until this very day, the same veil remains over the reading of the Old Testament: it is not lifted, for only in Christ is it done away with."

The Jewish failure to read scripture correctly is an especially prominent theme in pre-Islamic Syriac Christian literature.[29] John Bowman comments to this end: "The early Christians in general and Syrians in particular regarded the Jews as heretics and as completely wrongly interpreting the Old Testament."[30] This concern with Jewish misinterpretation of the Old Testament is a product of the role of typology in the exegetical thinking of the Syriac Fathers. They had an extraordinary interest in uncovering the mystery of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament, and were accordingly interested in the failure of Jews to find him there.[31]

Aphrahat's (d. ca. 345) extant corpus of twenty-three homilies reflects his fascination and frustration with the Jews' failure to recognize and interpret correctly messianic signs in the

27. On the Samaritans and Islamic origins, see especially P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 21–28. On Judaeo-Christians and Islamic origins, see W. Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1922), 27–51; H. J. Schoeps, op. cit., 334–43; S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs* (New York: Schocken, 1955); Yūsuf Durra al-Ḥaddād, op. cit.; and idem, *al-Injīl fī l-Qur'ān* (Jounieh: Librairie pauliste, 1982). On Marcionites and Islamic origins, see H. Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma* (London: SCM Press, 1997); J. M. F. Van Reeth, "L'Évangile du Prophète," in *Al-Kitāb: La sacralité du texte dans le monde de l'Islam*, ed. D. De Smet et al., *Acta Orientalia Belgica*, Subsidia III (Leuven, 2004), 155–74.

28. Perhaps the most remarkable argument for the survival of Judaeo-Christians into the Islamic period is that of Shlomo Pines, who held persistently to the view that ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwa* was in large part the work of a Judaeo-Christian community that maintained a clandestine existence in the "Nestorian" (East Syrian) Church. See his *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity according to a New Source* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1966). Cf. the critique of his argument in G. S. Reynolds, *A Medieval Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu: ʿAbd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), ch. 1.

29. On anti-Jewish Syriac literature, see S. Kazan, "Isaac of Antioch's Homily against the Jews [part 2]," *Oriens Christianus* 46 (1962): 87–98; 47 (1963): 89–97; 49 (1965): 57–78; C. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2008).

30. J. Bowman, "The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syrian Christianity," in *Essays in Honor of Griffithes Wheeler Thatcher*, ed. E. C. B. MacLaurin (Sydney: Sydney Univ. Press, 1967), 200. "The common basis of the anti-Jewish writings lies in their method of argument, i.e., in their recourse to scripture, which is accepted by both parties to the discussion as a revelation of infallible authority" (Simon, *Versus Israel*, 145). On Christian anti-Jewish polemic generally, see (in addition to Williams and Simon) I. Resnick, "The Falsification of Scripture and Medieval Christian and Jewish Polemics," *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1996): 344–80; H. Schrekenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1990).

31. "The type of spiritual interpretation which is employed most frequently by the Syriac Fathers can best be described as typological or symbolic interpretation" (S. Brock, *The Bible in Syriac Tradition* [Piscataway, NY: Gorgias Press, 2006], 67).

Old Testament.[32] The ten homilies that Jacob Neusner translates—about one hundred pages of English text—include 912 Old Testament citations, including 171 from Isaiah and 116 from Jeremiah. In one of those homilies he gives an account of his experience debating a Jew over the scriptures:

> It happened that one day a man who is called "the sage of the Jews" met me. . . . When I saw that he was blaspheming and talking much against the [Christian] Way, my mind was disturbed, for I knew that he would not accept the explanation of the words he was quoting to me. Then I also questioned him concerning words from the law and the prophets.[33]

In other places Aphrahat addresses the Jews directly in his homilies, insisting that they have stubbornly misunderstood the Scriptures. In this way he explains to an anonymous Jew that the Roman destruction of Jerusalem is a fulfillment of messianic Old Testament prophecy:

> But, O fool, the prophets have not permitted you to say that the Messiah has not yet come, for Daniel confutes you, saying, "After sixty-two weeks the Messiah will come and be killed. And when he comes the Holy City will be destroyed, and her end will be in a flood. Until the completion of the things which are decided, she shall remain desolate" (Daniel 9:26–27).[34]

Elsewhere Aphrahat turns to his Christian audience, explaining that the Jews will not, indeed cannot, be persuaded by the truth:

> Now this brief exposition which I have written for you is so that you may respond when it is necessary to give an answer, and so that you may strengthen the mind of whoever listens [to you], so that he will not be deceived by their seditious arguments. They will not accept persuasion, for the Scripture has imprisoned them, so they will not hearken and be persuaded that God will have mercy for all men. He said concerning them, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Isaiah 29:13).[35]

Aphrahat's lament might be compared to that of the Qurʾan in *sūrat al-nisāʾ* (4):155: "God has sealed (*ṭabaʿa*) [their hearts] with their unbelief, so that only a few of them believe."[36]

The writings of Aphrahat's younger contemporary Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) are similarly marked by a typological, messianic reading of the Old Testament.[37] In his *Hymns on Virginity*, Ephrem writes, "In Scripture [Christ] is written. . . . The prophets have his likeness."[38] In his *Hymns on the Nativity* Ephrem declares that the Jews are condemned by their failure to recognize Christ in the scriptures:

32. Aphrahat, referred to in later Syriac sources as *hakīmā parsāyā* ("the Persian Sage"), was from the Persian-controlled region of northern Mesopotamia. On his anti-Jewish writings, see Williams, *Adversus Judaeos*, 95–102; J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (2nd ed.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

33. Aphrahat, *Homily* 21; tr. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, 97–98.

34. Ibid., *Homily* 17; tr. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, 73.

35. Ibid., *Homily* 19; tr. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, 95.

36. Here the Qurʾan is referring to the Jews (cf. Q 4:153), but elsewhere it uses this, or related, expressions for unbelievers (*kuffār*) generally. See, e.g., Q 2:7 (with *khatama*); 6:25 (with *akinna*; cf. 17:46; 18:57); 7:100; 9:87, 93; 16:108; 17:46; 18:14; 47:16; 63:3.

37. "Perhaps no other writer has ever made such a creative use of typology" (Edward Mathews, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, tr. J. P. Amar and E. G. Mathews, Jr. [Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1994], 48).

38. "Addressing Christ directly he continues, 'By you the apostles became priests so that the Levites were brought to an end by you'" (Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity*, 8:3:4:21; tr. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 104).

> [The Jews] rejected the trumpet of Isaiah that sounded the pure conception; they stilled the lyre of the psalms that sang about his priesthood; they silenced the kithara that sung of his kingship. . . . Behold the fool reads in his Scriptures the promises that were distributed to us! As he boasts in his Scriptures, he reads to us his [own] accusation, and he witnesses our inheritance to us.[39]

A century later Isaac of Antioch (d. late fifth century) would pursue a similar line of argument against the Jews. In a treatise shaped around an exegesis of Jacob's blessings to his offspring in Genesis 49,[40] Isaac begins (ll. 1–100) by discussing the Law, but then turns to the manner in which Jacob singles out Judah in his blessings. By his reading Jacob had a spiritual knowledge of the messiah who would come from Judah's line:

> In Judah, as in the heart,
> there are mysteries of the messiah.
> In him the sick man, Jacob, found comfort,
> and upon him did he shower blessings.[41]
>
> . . .
>
> Upon Judah, Jacob poured forth
> the entire treasury of his blessings,
> that they would be preserved in the mystery, so to speak,
> for the Messiah (coming forth) from Judah.[42]

Towards the end of his treatise Isaac turns to Psalm 110, vv. 1–4, a passage that Christian authors often understood to be Christological. In introducing his interpretation thereof Isaac challenges the Jews to refute this interpretation:

> Let us take for ourselves a scripture,
> that we inquire of it concerning us and you.
> And from the treasury of your books bring forth,
> the invalidation of your observances.[43]

Still closer to the period of the Qur'an is Jacob of Serūgh (d. 521). Jacob's prose homilies, or *mēmrê*, against the Jews make up about eighty-five pages of Syriac text in the modern edition, and include 445 Old Testament citations (one hundred from Genesis alone). In the introduction to his first homily Jacob proclaims:

> From the revelations of the family of God, let us learn the Truth.
> If God has a Son, then the Jews have been confounded.
> Let the scribes come, bringing with them the books of prophecy;
> let those who have been warned, read, proclaim, and explain to us.
> The people are deaf, so raise your voice, O lector!
> Cry in their ears, that they may know God has a Son!
> Come, O Moses, you who saw the Son in the bosom of the Father;

39. *Hymns on the Nativity*, 24:14:22; tr. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 94.

40. Edited and translated in S. Kazan, "Isaac of Antioch's Homily against the Jews [part 1]," *Oriens Christianus* 45 (1961): 30–78. For an introduction to Isaac and his anti-Jewish writing, see Kazan, "Isaac of Antioch's Homily against the Jews [part 2]," *Oriens Christianus* 47 (1963): 93–97.

41. Trans. Kazan, "*Isaac of Antioch's Homily* . . . [part 1]," 37, ll. 131–34.

42. Ibid., 38, ll. 165–68.

43. Ibid., 50, ll. 439–42.

persuade with us your people, regarding your Lord.[44]

In another passage Jacob, like Isaac, invites the Jew to examine the scriptures with him:

Come now, o Hebrew, let us sit down and read the books;
Let us see if that which concerns the Son is found in these readings.
It is Him who Jacob saw at the height of the ladder;
If your intelligence were directed at the reading, you would understand.[45]

Thus Jacob insists here that the Jews refuse to see the true meaning of their scriptures. Elsewhere he accuses the leaders of the Jews of hiding the truth of their scriptures from the people:

The scribe of your people has hidden the truth;
Your teachers have not openly declared the reality.
Whether or not they know it, they have hidden reality;
They will not show you the image of the Son in their texts.[46]

The concern of Jacob, and the Syriac Fathers generally, with Jewish misinterpretation of the Bible is part of their larger concern with the refusal of the Jews to recognize Jesus as the Christ. The Qurʾan also does not show any explicit interest in the Christological sense of the Hebrew Bible (but then the Qurʾan never speaks properly of the Hebrew Bible at all). It does share, however, the concern of the Fathers with the Jewish opposition to Jesus. When the Qurʾan addresses the Crucifixion in Q 4:157–59 it means, above all, to condemn the enmity of the Jews versus Christ. In this passage (vv. 158–59), as in Q 3:55, the Qurʾan has God raise Jesus above the unbelievers, who in this context can be none other than the Jews.

Otherwise the Qurʾan's concern with Jewish infidelity is significant. The Qurʾan insists that God has cursed the Israelites (Q 5:13), a people who have not only falsified scripture but who have also broken their covenant (Q 4:155) and killed the prophets (Q 3:181; 4:155); they are a people whose hearts are uncircumcised (Q 2:88; 4:155), who have slandered Mary (Q 4:156), and who boast of having killed Jesus (Q 4:157). God has made their hearts hard (Q 5:13) and sealed their hearts with their unbelief (Q 4:155), and the unbelievers among them were cursed by the tongue of David and Jesus (Q 5:78).

This concern with the Jews is striking. The Qurʾan addresses the Christians in a handful of passages scattered among its chapters, but it addresses the Jews regularly and repeatedly. Why would this be when in the late antique Middle East Jews were few and far between, but Christians were everywhere, from North Africa to Syria to Iraq, and when the great powers of the day, Sasanian Persia excepted, were Christian states?

44. Jacob of Serūgh, *Homélies contre les juifs*, ed. and tr. M. Albert, *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. 174 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976), 44–46 (Homily 1, ll. 25–32). Elsewhere Jacob pursues his argument on the divinity of Christ by turning, like Isaac of Antioch, to Jacob's blessing of his sons:

O Jew, you who have the books, examine the books;
you will find the son there in the midst of your readings.
Moses and Jacob, servants of the divinity;
in their books is really found the Son.
Read the benedictions of him who fought with an angel;
in them come to know the Son of your Lord.

Ibid., 59 (Homily 1, ll. 209–14).

45. Ibid., 122–24 (Homily 4, ll. 177–79).

46. Ibid., 156 (Homily 5, ll. 305–8).

CONCLUSION

Islamic tradition, of course, has an answer to this question: the Prophet Muḥammad lived among Jewish tribes in the city of Medina during the second half of his prophetic career. But how much confidence can we place in this answer? The traditional biography of the Prophet seems to be—at least in part—exegetical,[47] and so it would seem circular to rely on it in establishing the Qur'an's historical context. Outside of this biography there is no compelling evidence of Jewish settlement in Medina.[48] Some early Arabic poetry is attributed to Jews such as al-Samaw'al b. ʿAdiya, but this poetry is never reported in early sources—Jewish or otherwise—but only in later Islamic sources. Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities*, 15:9:3) refers to Herod dispatching a group of men to join a Roman campaign to Yemen in 26–24 B.C., but he says nothing more of their fate. Later pre-Islamic Jewish literature has essentially nothing to say of Jews in the Ḥijāz. The Talmud refers occasionally to Arabia, but then there is no reason to conclude that by Arabia it means the Arabian Peninsula, let alone the Ḥijāz.[49]

Meanwhile, the physical evidence for Jewish settlement in the Ḥijāz is remarkably meager. A burial inscription in the Nabataean city of Madā'in Ṣāliḥ (ancient Hegra, modern-day al-Ḥijr) refers to a Judaean, who may or may not have been a Jew (the name of the deceased, Shubaytu son of ʿAliu, is not obviously Jewish). Otherwise, a handful of inscriptions, mainly around Madā'in Ṣāliḥ and Dedan (modern-day al-ʿUlā), contain names that may or may not be Jewish.[50] Even if all of these inscriptions indeed reflect the name of Jews, they certainly do not constitute evidence of a Jewish city, as Medina was supposed to have been. More likely they reflect the presence of foreign Jewish merchants. In any case, we are still quite some distance from Medina—Madā'in Ṣāliḥ and Dedan are 350 and 320 kilometers north of Medina respectively. South of Medina Jews are not found again before the extreme southern

47. This is a contentious and complicated topic in scholarship on Islamic origins. As I am unable to give it due treatment here, I mention it with indeterminate language. The idea that the *sīra* is fundamentally exegetical was perhaps first raised by Henri Lammens. See H. Lammens, "Qoran et tradition: Comment fut composé la vie de Mahomet," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 1 (1910): 25–51; English tr., "The Koran and Tradition: How the Life of Muhammad was Composed," in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. Ibn Warraq (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000), 169–87. Wansbrough argued that the Qur'an developed at a later date, but like Lammens he maintained that the *sīra* is fundamentally reliant on it: "Indeed, from the point of view of a literary analysis, it can be argued that the principal difference between the text of scripture and the Muhammadan *evangelium* lies merely in the canonical status of the former. Thematic and exemplary treatment of prophethood in the Qur'an was reformulated in the *evangelium* (*sunna/sīra*) as the personal history of Muhammad" (J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977], 65). Stephen Humphreys offers a sober assessment of the historical value of the Islamic literature: "Questions of this kind have been discussed over and over by modern scholars, but so far their conclusions remain more in the realm of speculation than of demonstration. The evidence is such, in fact, that reasonable certainty may be beyond our grasp" (S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* [London: I. B. Tauris, 1991], 70); I found the quotation of Humphreys in the detailed article of Jeremy Johns, "Archaeology and the Early History of Islam: The First Seventy Years," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 46 (2003): 412.

48. For the following references I am indebted to Robert Hoyland's forthcoming paper, "The Jews of the Hijaz in the Qur'ān and in Their Inscriptions," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, vol. 2, ed. G. S. Reynolds. The classic studies on this topic are D. S. Margoliouth, *The Relations between Arabs and Israelites Prior to the Rise of Islam* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1924) and A. J. Wensinck, *Muhammad and the Jews of Arabia*, tr. W. Behn (Freiburg: Schwarz, 1975). In *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York: KTAV, 1967), C. C. Torrey makes far-reaching assumptions about the importance of Jewish communities in Medina and elsewhere, arguing that there was "an ancient and extensive movement of colonization, a Hebrew migration southward into the Hijaz" (p. 26). For an extensive bibliography, see the notes in Hoyland's article.

49. On this, see J. Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 526–32.

50. On this, see Hoyland, "The Jews of the Hijaz." There Hoyland describes twenty-nine inscriptions with "possibly" Jewish names.

regions of the Peninsula, modern-day Yemen. In Medina itself no material evidence of a Jewish presence has been discovered.[51]

These are just brief observations on a matter—material evidence for the origins of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula—that can be handled in depth only by specialists.[52] I am not one of them, but then my point in making these observations is simply to highlight the absence of any compelling evidence for the Jews of Medina. The absence of evidence for traditional ideas does not prove anything, of course. Yet among the things that remain unproven are the traditional ideas themselves.[53] Accordingly, we should not assume that the Qurʾan's concern with the Jews reflects Muḥammad's difficult experiences with them in Medina.

While we lack historical evidence on this point, we do have literary evidence that suggests that the Qurʾan's fascination with Jewish perfidy is rooted in the tradition of Syriac typological exegesis. The devotion of the Syriac Fathers to finding Jesus Christ in the Old Testament led them to write against Jews, who do not find him there. For our purposes it is noteworthy that the Syriac Fathers did so even though Jews hardly constituted a serious social or political threat in their context, be that Mesopotamia in the fourth (in the case of Aphrahat and Ephrem) or sixth (in the case of Jacob) century or Antioch (in the case of Isaac) in the fifth century. This conclusion does not mean, of course, that the Qurʾan was the product of a Syriac-speaking Christian community. Instead, it suggests that the Qurʾan creatively applied an established literary technique for the advancement of its particular religious doctrine.

51. "And yet not a single clearly Jewish inscription has yet been found at Mecca, Yathrib or Khaybar despite quite a number of epigraphic surveys conducted at all three sites" (Hoyland, op. cit.).

52. On this matter, see above all R. Hoyland, "The Content and Context of Early Arabic Inscriptions," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21 (1997): 77–102, and the aforementioned article of Johns, "Archaeology and the Early History of Islam."

53. Responding persuasively to the revisionist scenario of Islamic origins developed by Yehuda Nevo, Johns attributes the absence of material evidence for the early Islamic community to the absence of a state apparatus: "The shortage of archaeological evidence for the religion of Islam during the first seventy years of the hijra is not surprising. It is only with the formation of the state that produced the media that preserve the evidence for the religion that archaeology begins to be able to contribute to what is essentially a historical, and above all historiographical, debate" (J. Johns, "Archaeology and the Early History of Islam," 433). Evidence for Jewish Medina, however, would presumably not be dependent on the formulation of a mature Islamic state.

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