

**The Living Calf of Sinai:  
Orientalism, “Influence,” and the Foundations of  
the Islamic Exegetical Tradition**

**Michael E. Pregill**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2008

UMI Number: 3290527

Copyright 2007 by  
Pregill, Michael E.

All rights reserved.

### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI**<sup>®</sup>

---

UMI Microform 3290527

Copyright 2008 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2007  
Michael E. Pregill  
All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

The Living Calf of Sinai:  
Orientalism, “Influence,” and the Foundations of the Islamic Exegetical Tradition

Michael E. Pregill

This dissertation investigates the interpretation of the Golden Calf episode in the Quran and Islamic commentary literature (*tafsīr*). Part I shows that modern scholars have misunderstood the Quranic version of the story as an example of Jewish influence on Islam. Muslim exegetes constructed an elaborate narrative around the Quranic passages depicting the Calf episode, positing that a malefactor named “Sāmīrī” used magic to animate the Golden Calf and lead the Israelites astray. Scholars have assumed that this is what the Quranic story actually means, although the key Quranic verses are ambiguous. Since the Muslim interpretation of the episode corresponds to various Jewish traditions, scholars have supposed that those traditions must have been the source of the Quranic narrative, though allegations of a direct influence of Judaism on the Quran actually seem to be unwarranted in this case.

Part II examines the development of Islamic commentary on this story and demonstrates how debate over the nature of the Calf evolved in *tafsīr* from its beginnings up through the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Quranic episode does not seem to posit either an animate Calf or an autonomous character named “Sāmīrī,” the *tafsīr* elaborates upon both of these themes for specific ideological ends. Although *sāmīrī* may have originally been an epithet of Aaron, by taking the term as the proper name of a distinct character, the exegetes distanced Aaron from the sin of the making of the Calf. Although the claim that “Sāmīrī” had actually transmuted the Golden Calf into a living animal



seems to have initially been widespread in *tafsīr*, it was suppressed by some exegetes, including Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), traditionally considered the most important of the classical commentators. Analysis of his representation of possible interpretations of the Calf shows that he distorted the views of some of his predecessors in order to marginalize the claim that Sāmirī had actually created a Calf of flesh and blood; thus, Ṭabarī's commentary cannot be treated simply as a neutral source for recovery of early *tafsīr*.

## CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| List of Diagrams   | iii |
| Acknowledgements   | iv  |
| Note on Style  | vii |
| General Introduction   | 1   |
| <br>   |     |
| PART I: THE QURANIC GOLDEN CALF NARRATIVE AND ITS RECEPTION                                |     |
| <br>   |     |
| Introduction to Part I   | 10  |
| <br>   |     |
| Chapter 1:   |     |
| Rethinking the Jewish Influence on Islam   | 14  |
| 1. What did Muhammad borrow from Judaism? Geiger and the Jewish influence on Islam         | 21  |
| 2. A path by which to be made king: Muhammad's Jewish teachers in medieval polemic         | 36  |
| 3. " <i>Isrā'īliyyān</i> " and the Islamic tradition's own accounts of Jewish influence    | 46  |
| 4. Resistance to (and reiterations of) the influence paradigm                              | 51  |
| <br>   |     |
| Chapter 2:   |     |
| The Quranic Golden Calf: <i>tafsīr</i> and its Repercussions in Medieval and Modern Europe | 72  |
| 1. The Quranic Calf narrative and its canonical and parascriptural precursors              | 80  |
| 2. Classical Islamic commentary on the Calf episode: a brief overview                      | 100 |
| 3. The first European Qurans and early Orientalist exegesis of the Calf episode            | 112 |
| 4. Scholarly (mis)perceptions of " <i>al-sāmirī</i> " and the Calf                         | 155 |
| 5. Modern (mis)translations of the Quranic Calf episode                                    | 193 |
| <br>   |     |
| Chapter 3:   |     |
| "A Calf, A Body that Lows"? The Quranic Golden Calf Reconsidered                           | 224 |
| 1. The Quranic Calf narrative reconsidered, 1: " <i>al-sāmirī</i> " as epithet for Aaron   | 230 |
| 2. The Quranic Calf narrative reconsidered, 2: a lowing Calf at Sinai?                     | 259 |
| 3. Midrash or rewritten Torah? Challenging the myth of Jewish precedence                   | 280 |
| <br>   |     |
| Conclusion to Part I   | 291 |

PART II: SĀMIRĪ AND THE LOWING CALF IN THE CLASSICAL *TAFSĪR*

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction to Part II  | 296 |
| Chapter 4:<br>The Golden Calf Episode in Early Muslim Exegesis                                 | 301 |
| 1. Paraphrastic exegesis, 1: <i>Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān</i>                                 | 309 |
| 2. Paraphrastic exegesis, 2: <i>Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās</i> (a.k.a. <i>Tafsīr al-Kalbī</i> ?) | 353 |
| 4. Accounts of the Calf episode in other early works: poetry, philology, history               | 384 |
| Chapter 5:<br>Interpretation of the Golden Calf in Traditionist Circles: Ṭabarī and His Legacy | 399 |
| 1. Critical perspectives on Ṭabarī as historian and exegete                                    | 407 |
| 2. Ṭabarī's versions of the making of the Golden Calf  | 424 |
| A. Ibn 'Abbās from 'Ikrima   | 430 |
| B. Al-Suddī  | 438 |
| C. Ibn 'Abbās from Ibn Jubayr  | 449 |
| D. Ibn Zayd; Mujāhid; Qatāda; 'Aṭīyya  | 461 |
| 3. The hidden logic of <i>ikhtilāf</i> : the exegetical strategies of Ṭabarī's commentary      | 475 |
| 4. Interpreting the interpretation: building consensus or managing diversity of opinion?       | 501 |
| Chapter 6:<br>Reevaluating Ṭabarī's Achievement: A Brilliant Failure?                          | 509 |
| 1. Traces of the living Calf in early <i>tafsīr</i> : the "real" Qatāda tradition              | 516 |
| 2. Ṭabarī's contemporaries: the <i>tafsīrs</i> of al-'Ayyāshī, Mujāhid, and Ibn Abī Ḥātim      | 547 |
| 3. Revisions of Ṭabarī and the (re)making of classical <i>tafsīr</i> : al-Tha'labī and al-Ṭūsī | 586 |
| Conclusion to Part II  | 616 |
| Bibliography   | 630 |

## LIST OF DIAGRAMS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Diagram 1: Chains of transmission for Ṭabarī's exegetical hadith on the Golden Calf        | 482 |
| Diagram 2: Material on the Golden Calf in Ṭabarī's <i>Tārīkh</i> and <i>Jāmi' al-bayān</i> | 490 |
| Diagram 3: Versions of the Qatāda tradition on the animation of the Calf                   | 524 |
| Diagram 3b: Versions of the Qatāda tradition on the slaughtering of the Calf               | 524 |
| Diagram 4: Versions of the Mujāhid tradition on the Calf                                   | 555 |
| Diagram 5: Versions of the "Prayer of Aaron" tradition                                     | 579 |

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation reflects almost twelve years of engagement with various traditions on the Golden Calf—Jewish, Christian, and Islamic, as well as ancient, medieval, and modern. My sojourns through these traditions mirror the long and sometimes tangled scholarly perambulations that eventually led me to the doctoral program at Columbia University.

I began the research that led to this project while a student at Harvard Divinity School, and I must thank my advisor there, Prof. Jon D. Levenson, for his constant support and encouragement; I am grateful to say that this support continues to this very day. I continued my research on the Calf episode, particularly the interpretation of the narrative in the classical midrash and medieval Jewish biblical commentary, while the recipient of a joint fellowship from Harvard University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem that allowed me to study at the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for six months. While there, I received ample support and encouragement from Prof. Joseph Dan, who not only patiently endured my many questions, but ultimately pushed me to examine the impact of the Arab-Islamic milieu on medieval Jewish exegesis. Arguably, Prof. Dan is ultimately responsible for the path my academic career has ended up taking. At this stage in my research, Prof. Maren Niehoff kindly read a long draft of material on the midrashim on the Calf, and offered very many helpful suggestions.

In the years after completing my program at Harvard, I was privileged to receive guidance and suggestions on one of my early drafts on this material from the late Margaret Sevcenko, former editor of *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World*. At this time, I also received critical encouragement from Professors Gülru Necipoglu, David J. Roxburgh, and especially Kimberly Patton.

While a student in the Department of Religion at Columbia University, I received inestimable help and guidance from the director of this dissertation, Prof. Peter J. Awn. I have been the beneficiary of his warm and gracious patronage for the better part of twenty years now. Prof. Awn introduced me to the study of the *tafsīr* literature and patiently taught me the fundamentals of reading classical Islamic sources. Although I have not always followed his advice—probably to my detriment—he has constantly provided me with a sterling example of engaged and humane scholarship, a model I strive to emulate today. My other dissertation advisor, Prof. Neguin Yavari, introduced me to the critical study of early Islamic history and historiography, and I can only hope that the impress of my early exposure to her ideas and methods shines through here. I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee, Professors Richard Bulliet, Elizabeth Castelli, and Alan Segal, for their many valuable comments. I have not been able to follow all of their helpful suggestions, but I must acknowledge the time, effort, and trenchant insights they offered on my behalf.

A handful of people made direct contributions to the development of this dissertation and helped me in very concrete ways. In addition to being a wonderful friend, Karen Green, Ancient and Medieval History and Religion Librarian at Columbia University, was extremely helpful during the phase of my research in which I examined medieval and early modern Latin Qurans; in particular, she and Prof. Christina Kraus of Yale University, whom I must also thank, assisted me with a particularly troublesome reading in an important passage from Marracci's *Alcorani textus universus*. Consuelo Dutschke, Curator of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts at Columbia, helped me access a microfilm of the Arsenal manuscript of the *Corpus Toletanum* and provided helpful suggestions for deciphering Robert of Ketton's translation of the Quran. Prof. Thomas Burman of the University of Tennessee was most encouraging regarding this phase of the project: he not only offered advice regarding various manuscripts of Ketton's translation, but very graciously provided me with readings from a microfilm of the Latin Quran of Mark of Toledo as well. Without his help, I simply would not have had access to this material. I must also

acknowledge the helpful reference staffs at three New York institutions: Union Theological Seminary, the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University, and the New York Public Library. All three institutions were most accommodating in assisting me with access to various early modern translations of the Quran. I must also thank the Houghton Library at Harvard University, which permitted me access to another such translation at very short notice.

Conversation with numerous friends, colleagues, and mentors over the years has no doubt made a significant, though more diffuse, contribution here, and I wish to thank them for their support and interest. In particular, I must thank Adam Becker, Courtney Bender, Patricia Crone, Mimi Hanaoka, Hossein Kamaly, Marion Katz, Phil Lieberman, Elliot Ratzman, John Reeves, and Annette Yoshiko Reed. Considering the number of years I have worked on this topic, at various institutions, it seems almost inevitable that I have neglected to mention others who have helped me, and to whom I can only apologize for the unintended slight.

Naturally, critical support and encouragement over many years has come from my parents, Carol M. Pregill and Jeremiah T. Pregill, without whom this would not have been possible. It would also not have been possible without the unending support of my wife Lily, who has given so much and asked for very little in return. She has put up with all this for a very long time now. In return, I can only offer her my love, my thanks for her devotion and patience, and my heartfelt hopes for our future together.

## NOTE ON STYLE

Because of the variety of different literatures I have employed in my work, I have struggled to maintain consistency in transliterating passages from numerous sources in various non-Western languages, primarily Hebrew and Arabic. For Arabic, I have generally conformed to the system utilized in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, which is essentially a modified version of the widely accepted standard of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. I have used a regular apostrophe to signify *hamza* (e.g. *mu'min*), and a reversed apostrophe rather than a superscript letter "c" for 'ayn (thus 'ijl rather than <sup>c</sup>ijl, and so forth). For Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew, I have followed the system used by *Harvard Theological Review* with minor modifications. For the Aramaic of the targums, I have merely given a transliteration of the consonantal text, and tried to avoid making judgments about its proper vocalization.

For most terms of Arabic and Hebrew provenance in general circulation, I have foregone transliteration entirely in favor of a common-sense approach, preferring "Quran" to "Qur'ān" (and thus "Quranic"), "Muhammad" to "Muḥammad," "hadith" to *ḥadīth*, "aggadah" rather than 'aggādāh, and so on. Somewhat arbitrarily, I have not formally transliterated the titles of Hebrew works (e.g. *Shemot Rabbah*, *Midrash Tanḥuma*), but have followed scholarly convention in strictly transliterating the titles of Arabic works (e.g. *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*), except, of course, where the Quran itself is concerned. Also arbitrarily, I usually prefer to employ "biblical" and "rabbinic" as generic adjectives, while still capitalizing "Jewish," "Islamic," and "Quranic."

Most conspicuously, I have removed the honorifics and benedictions commonly encountered in both Islamic and rabbinic literature. Thus, use of the standard formula *ṣallā allāh 'alayhi wa-sallam* in reference to Muhammad and other prophets has been omitted, as have the various invocations usually employed in rabbinic and Islamic literature when referring to God Himself. For rabbinic traditions, I have retained "Holy One" as standard divine nomenclature, but



omitted the ubiquitous “blessed be He” that always follows. The expression *qawluhu* (“His utterance”), so ubiquitous in *tafsīr*, has been rendered here simply as “the verse.”

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This dissertation, which could easily have become three or four different dissertations along the way, might best be thought of as a series of interlinked investigations into little-understood and underappreciated problems in the study of Islam, generally focusing on two separate areas of inquiry, the idea of the Jewish influence on Islam and the history of classical Islamic Quran commentary. Thematic unity will be provided throughout by a core focus on the history of interpretation of one Quranic narrative in particular, the Golden Calf episode, specifically its putative sources, its literary structure, its reconstruction in the *tafsīr* and midrash, and the subsequent reception of Quran, *tafsīr*, and midrash alike in modern scholarship.

The first half of my thesis will place particular emphasis upon the historical construction of an image of Islam, especially of the Quran and the Prophet, as being fundamentally dependent on Jews and Judaism. I will show that Western scholarship has a chronic tendency to revert to a problematic claim of the direct derivation of the Quran from rabbinic sources; the case of the Golden Calf narrative helps us to see that this approach is fundamentally misguided.

The second half of my thesis presents an in-depth analysis of the development of the interpretation of the Quranic Golden Calf narrative in the early and classical *tafsīr* tradition. This section aims at demonstrating the complex inner dynamics of that tradition as it evolved from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AH, that is, roughly 750 to 1050 CE. The main idea informing this treatment is the attempt to show that certain widely used sources on *tafsīr*, especially the *Jāmi' al-bayān* of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-century exegete Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, do not present us with neutral or unmediated information about the contours of the early exegetical tradition, but rather reflect the conscious and deliberate attempt to shape the parameters of discourse. It can be shown that Ṭabarī in particular, whose work is often used as a mere repository of older tradition, actually employed subtle and sophisticated techniques to represent the views of previous generations of commentators in certain ways, for specific ends.

Chapter 1 provides the methodological background to my investigation and is primarily historiographic. Here, I discuss the problem of the putative influence of Jewish tradition on the Quran, the ubiquity of Western scholarly claims that Muhammad had Jewish teachers or informants, the background to this perception in medieval Christian polemic, and the far-reaching impact of an investigative paradigm based on such claims in Quranic Studies up to the present day. I will argue that beginning with the groundbreaking work of Abraham Geiger, Western scholarship has been disproportionately concerned with excavating the Jewish sources of the Quran, to the extent that the presuppositions associated with such an approach have become a serious impediment to constructive research. Further, as I have already noted, although his ultimate goal was a renegotiation or reimagining of the relationship between Islam and Judaism (and implicitly Judaism and Christianity) informed by his apologetic agendas, Geiger's work drew strongly on the legacy of Western Christian polemic against Islam, and in certain ways enshrined the basic axioms of that polemic as fundamental tenets of Orientalist methodology. Although historians have of course investigated Christian and other vectors of influence on the Quran and early Islamic culture and society, it is the notion of Jewish influence—real or imagined—that seems to have held a particularly strong attraction for Western scholars of early Islam.

Chapter 2, a survey of Western scholarship on the Quranic Calf episode and translations of and commentaries on that episode in Western languages, will provide a concrete example to illustrate these claims. Here, I will begin by observing the parallels between two separate but interrelated bodies of exegetical literature, the *tafsīr* and the midrash, both of which present versions of the Calf narrative that are radically different from that of both the Hebrew Bible and the Quran. The numerous parallels between the *tafsīr* and the midrashic accounts have by no means escaped the notice of previous generations of Western scholars; quite the contrary. I will show that quite early on, in this case as in many others, Western scholars made sense of the Quranic story first and foremost through recourse to *tafsīr*, to a large degree eliding and effacing

the distinction between scripture and commentary in the construction of generically “Islamic” versions of familiar stories from Israel’s patriarchal and prophetic history. Discovering the profound dependence of Western scholarship on *tafsīr*, that is, in approaching the Quran primarily as mediated through classical Islamic commentary, was itself a surprising development in the progress of this project, and this topic could no doubt supply sufficient material for several dissertations in its own right.

Even more surprising is the use to which *tafsīr* has traditionally been put, more or less consistently since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but beginning substantially earlier as well. The distinction between *tafsīr* and Quran having been largely effaced, what were scholars to make of the many similarities between *tafsīr* narratives and parallel traditions appearing in the midrash? The answer is that, in an overwhelming number of cases, scholars invoked these parallels in their analysis of the Quran, presenting them as *precursors* to their Islamic equivalents, specifically as proof of the seminal influence that rabbinic Jewish traditions had exerted upon the formation of the Quran. Thus, three different factors coalesced here to produce what has generally been the standard methodology employed in scholarly treatments of “Jewish” material in the Quran: expansions of Quranic stories found in the *tafsīr* are taken to be equivalent to those stories as they appear in their original scriptural context; the numerous parallels between *tafsīr* and midrash are observed, catalogued, and dissected; and finally, what I would term the myth of Jewish priority is explicitly or implicitly invoked (for example, through explicit reference to Muhammad’s Jewish teachers) as justification for treating midrashic traditions as the direct source of analogous or at least putatively similar Quranic narratives.

Chapter 3 presents a radically different explanation of the evidence surrounding the Quranic Golden Calf story, primarily intended as a basis upon which to challenge and overturn this traditional analytical approach. A comprehensive review of the reception and exegesis of this particular narrative by scholars, commentators, and translators shows that Western scholarship has essentially misconstrued its meaning, largely due to the reflexive tendency to privilege the

version of the story as it appears in the *tafsīr* and the consequent neglect of historical-critical analysis of the Quranic narrative. In explaining those elements of the story that are most prominent in the *tafsīr* but are supposedly *implicit* in the Quran—specifically the animate Golden Calf and *al-sāmirī*, commonly understood as “the Samaritan,” a foreign interloper—scholars have exaggerated the evidence for believing these narrative elements to be themes taken over from the midrash, the unjustified assumption being that these elements were formulated in rabbinic tradition considerably prior to the emergence of the Quran. In virtually every case, the Jewish parallels to these elements can be shown to be not only post-Quranic but also significantly post-*Islamic*, most likely having been generated in direct response to their growing prominence in the *tafsīr* tradition.

That Western scholars have put the proverbial cart before the horse in asserting these midrashic narratives to be the prototypes for the Quranic Calf episode can be vividly demonstrated by the fact that the version of the story that is “explained” thereby is not to be found in the Quran at all, but rather developed in Muslim *commentary* on the Quran at some point in the first or early second century AH. Contrary to what scholars have always argued, the midrashic versions of the Calf story that posit an animate Golden Calf and a Samaritan interloper as architect of Israel’s idolatry are not really the “influences” that determined the contours of the Quranic narrative at all. Rather, the Quranic base text, which in fact seems to *lack* these elements, presented certain difficulties for Muslim exegetes, who then elaborated these details as the basis for an alternative understanding of the Quranic episode. This alternative reading of the story then percolated gradually into Jewish circles, eventually leading to the emergence of new adaptations of the story in the midrash and other forms of Jewish biblical commentary.

In Part II, the focus of my investigation shifts from the Quran and Western scholarly literature to the indigenous tradition of scriptural commentary in Islam, the *tafsīr*. The nature of the extant literary evidence presents numerous difficulties, especially inasmuch as in Islamic culture in general, and the *tafsīr* tradition specifically, our earliest reliable literary sources seem to

date to no earlier than the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century AH, which is to say, the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century CE. There is a distinct tendency among scholars to treat works of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century as “early” and distinct from the classical collections of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, an approach that is by no means limited to the *tafsīr* genre. However, as I hope to show, a community of opinion can already be thought to have coalesced in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century that was carried over largely intact into the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century. That is, some “early” works of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century already seem to be “late,” insofar as they appear to reflect a deliberate reaction against earlier trends. But unfortunately, we have precious little evidence to go on from which the views of the earliest period may be reconstructed. I will show, however, that on rare occasion, post-classical sources of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century or later do revive opinions that appear to have circulated as part of the genuine aboriginal tradition of Quran commentary, opinions that were all but obliterated from memory already by the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century.

In Chapter 4, through a close reading of the Golden Calf narrative as it is portrayed in several early sources, particularly the *tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767), I demonstrate that even at this early juncture, exegetes struggled with certain received ideas about the Golden Calf narrative, both concerning its general significance as well as the particular question of the nature of the Calf created by “Sāmīrī” in order to lead the credulous Israelites astray. Muqātil’s commentary is particularly valuable because he seems generally concerned to incorporate as much detail in his expansions of Quranic narratives as possible, even giving somewhat different accounts of events based on parallel versions of the same story found in the Quran. Moreover, while his theological positions are often similar to those of later commentators, it might be argued that in some respects, his *tafsīr* preserves authentically ancient perspectives on certain subjects; his commentary sometimes stands in sharp contrast with that of exegetes of subsequent centuries, for example as regards the thorny question of *fitna*, sectarian strife within the community as well as secession from it. Both here and elsewhere, we find evidence that the representation of the Calf episode that would prevail in classical Quran commentary had not yet

become completely hegemonic; brief hints at alternative understandings of the story can be found in particular in genres other than *tafsīr* per se.

In Chapter 5, I will examine the traditions on the Calf preserved in the massive Quran commentary of Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). In the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries, a nascent “orthodox” tradition emerged, and a canonical corpus of Quran commentary began to be formed. However, this was by no means a passive process, and Ṭabarī’s representation of the received tradition of Quran commentary supposedly handed down from the Companions and Successors in the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century is by no means a neutral one, although he is generally understood to be a largely passive and objective collector of the exegetical opinions of previous generations. In point of fact, Ṭabarī appears to use a number of subtle techniques to communicate his preferred interpretations of Quranic verses—selectively representing the traditions at his disposal, as well as arranging the traditions he chooses to cite in particular ways in order to prioritize some at the expense of others. Discussions of the activity of such editor-redactors in classical Islamic culture are often either unjustifiably credulous or unfairly skeptical, and thus my approach attempts to achieve some parity between these two extremes. In working with the transmitted materials he received from his teachers, Ṭabarī does not have to resort to fabrication or outright suppression to get his point across, for he has recourse to far subtler methods, techniques that can only be appreciated through a painstaking consideration of the exact information he provides, how he arranges it, and what he seems to omit.

In the end, for all his efforts, Ṭabarī’s attempt to assert his hegemony over the field of potential interpretations established by previous generations of exegetes was unsuccessful. Especially in a culture that valued consensus (*ijmā‘*) most of all, a commentator in Ṭabarī’s position could only hope that his comprehensive presentation of the material would attract an audience that he could win over to his view; he could not prevent other exegetes from promoting contrary views, or, more damaging, suppress their transmission of traditions he had intended to marginalize or discredit. This is exactly what happened, however. More concretely, in the case of

the Golden Calf narrative, it is striking that Ṭabarī, like many of his predecessors, deliberately avoided any suggestion that the Golden Calf was authentically alive, a view that seems to have been widespread, or at least well represented, in the older exegetical tradition. But comparison of his work with contemporary collections of exegetical hadith demonstrates his conspicuous omission of critical traditions that asserted just this point. Moreover, as it turned out, subsequent commentators in the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, though strongly indebted to Ṭabarī's example, simply were not as concerned to follow his lead in this specific instance (and doubtless others as well). They thus accidentally or deliberately revived precisely those interpretations that Ṭabarī had most likely hoped would pass into oblivion through neglect.

Thus, in Chapter 6, I will briefly investigate a number of alternative collections of traditionally transmitted exegetical material contemporary with Ṭabarī's commentary. Though these works are often either very limited in scope compared to Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* or else are only partially extant, nevertheless, they do preserve alternative traditions, or alternative *forms* of traditions, that bear witness to the diversity of views represented in the early *tafsīr* tradition, a diversity that was managed and ultimately partially curtailed by Ṭabarī and some of his predecessors. I will conclude this discussion with a brief look at the Calf narrative as presented by two important commentators of the century after Ṭabarī, Abū Ishāq al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) and Abū Ja'far Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī (d. 459/1066); in their commentaries, we witness the collapse of Ṭabarī's representation of the Calf episode, inasmuch as the original diversity that he and his predecessors sought to curtail appears to have been restored, and the theme of the living Golden Calf of Sinai revived.

This project was originally conceived as a more conventional exercise in the history of interpretation, in which the theme of the Golden Calf's animation would be examined in light of such issues as changing conceptions of idolatry, the permeability of scriptural exegesis to "magical" and philosophical discourses, and the conspicuous role of polemic as a critical engine



driving seismic shifts in exegesis. However, after doing a considerable amount of research into the biblical, Second Temple, and midrashic incarnations of the Golden Calf, I came to realize that this project, as originally conceived, was not only impracticable but also intellectually dishonest. Simply put, the conventional approach of mapping the trajectory of a given theme's evolution from its first emergence in canonical scripture, through later Jewish and Christian reimaginings, to its further (or "late") development in the Quran and Islamic commentary literature, with the last phase primarily approached as one characterized by passive reception, has come to seem completely untenable.

The evolution of the Golden Calf narrative, in particular the theme of the animate Golden Calf, alien to the Hebrew Bible but of significant weight in both the midrash and the *tafsīr*, may seem like a trivial subject for such a lengthy discussion. But as I have hopefully shown, this particular theme demonstrates that the basic paradigm traditionally employed in research of this sort is in serious need of renovation. This is what has dictated my particular attention to multiple lacunae in the established scholarship here. I have thus sought to interrogate the idea of the Jewish influence on Islam; to explore the mediation of the Western reception of the Quran through the *tafsīr* literature; and, most of all, to shed light on the role played by *tafsīr* in not simply uncovering some latent sense of the Quran, but rather in actually formulating and then continually renegotiating scriptural meaning in response to new developments. The broader subjects addressed by this dissertation, then, are those of the dynamic of Jewish-Muslim exchanges in the early Islamic period, classical Islamic literature as a basis for Western knowledge of Islam (or at least the Quran) from the Middle Ages until modern times, and the vital function of exegesis in creating wholly new meaning in a culture saturated by scripture. If I have not been entirely successful in providing solutions for the various problems I have raised here, I hope at least to have been able to provoke some new questions.

**PART I:  
THE QURANIC GOLDEN CALF NARRATIVE  
AND ITS RECEPTION**

## Introduction to Part I

One of the really unfortunate things in our field... is that the giants of the recent past tend to be largely forgotten as soon as they are dead if not before... There is also an optical illusion, in the sense that much of what these people have contributed is not recognized because it has entered so much into the field that people do not realize how novel a contribution it was... Middle Eastern history has become a field without its own history.

Nikki Keddie, interview with Nancy Elizabeth Gallagher<sup>1</sup>

In these remarks from an interview she gave in 1990, Keddie is specifically referring to historians from the previous generation of scholars of the Middle East such as Von Grunebaum, Minorsky, and Gibb, all of whom had (and have) been largely forgotten by younger generations of scholars, especially in the wake of the devastating critique of the discipline of Orientalism (or “Orientalism”) by Edward Said and his followers. In her comments just previous, Keddie notes how Said promoted a monolithic conception of Orientalism, as if nothing had changed or developed in Western engagements with Islam or the Middle East from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present day. In a sense, Middle Eastern Studies’ ignorance of its own history was the main problem Said’s work sought to correct, but ironically, in many ways, his critique has in fact exacerbated the problem. While his demonstration of the historical collusion between Anglo-European Orientalism as a discourse and state-centered colonial and imperial projects promoted in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has exerted an inestimable impact in reshaping the discipline of Middle Eastern Studies, the master narrative Said creates is one in which Western scholarship on the Middle East and Islam seems to be hopelessly immured in dubious political projects. At the very least, according to Said’s paradigm, even when Western scholarship is not involved in

---

<sup>1</sup> Nikki Keddie, quoted in Gallagher, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Middle East: Interviews with Leading Middle East Historians*, 145.

advancing questionable political agendas, it seems that the Orientalist discipline inevitably falls back upon presenting the Arab or Muslim “Other” as ignorant, unenlightened, and—especially today—violent and fanatical.

But as Keddie and other critics of Said have pointed out, this is only part of the picture. Not all of the founding fathers of the Orientalist enterprise can seriously be indicted for advancing colonialist or imperialist interests; further, many important scholars were clearly *not* interested in portraying the Oriental East as radically other. In particular, to place such heavy emphasis on such agendas as the driving force behind the development of the Orientalist discourse overlooks the substantial contributions to the discipline made by Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially that made by towering figures such as Geiger and Goldziher, whose achievements cannot possibly be overestimated. But attempting to correct the distorted picture painted by Said in this way introduces new tensions. It is certainly true that reconsideration of the role played by Jewish scholars in the development of Western scholarship on the Middle East and Islam may help us achieve a more accurate, balanced, and nuanced conception of the history of Orientalism, in particular since Western and Central European Jews tended to romanticize the Orient rather than seeing it as radically other; further, often being deprived of real political influence, Jewish scholars were alienated by imperialist projects rather than colluding with them.

And yet, there is another forgotten history that lies behind the work of apologists such as Kramer, who seek to exonerate Jewish scholars generally, even *categorically*, from indictment as “Orientalists,” and not just “the great Goldziher” and his peers. This seems to entail glossing over a *variety* of Jewish responses to and engagements with the Orient, now cast as diverse manifestations of a single, monolithic “*Jewish* Orientalism” that is largely innocent of the charges for which “Orientalists” in general have repeatedly been tarred over the last two decades. Further, given the widespread conviction—or at least allegation—of Zionism’s colonialist and imperialist

underpinnings, Kraemer's insistence that the "Jewish discoverers" of Islam were not *really* Orientalist, not in a negative sense, seems both naïve and contrived, if not cynical.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this, however, we will argue here that Jewish scholars made a seminal contribution to one particular subfield of the modern discipline of Islamic Studies, namely the discourse on the formative Jewish "influence" on Islam, and that while this discourse may not have been directed towards asserting Islam's radical otherness or justifying colonial projects, nevertheless, it *has* involved promoting an image of Islam as religiously and culturally derivative or subordinate, at times almost as a veritable offshoot of Judaism. At its best moments, this discourse has advanced a conception of Judaism and Islam as siblings, the affinities and commonalities between them at least hypothetically outweighing their frequent mutual hostility. However, even in these moments, a certain condescension underlies these eirenic gestures; and ultimately, the attempt to demonstrate Islam's fundamental debt to Judaism, in which Jewish and Christian scholars have in fact been equal partners, does perhaps amount to a strategy of domination and control.

And behind this forgotten history lie *other* forgotten histories as well. The image of Islam as an offshoot of Judaism, especially the perception of the Quran as the hybrid offspring of a newborn Arabian monotheism and the ancient lore of the Jewish sages, has deep roots in the tradition of medieval Christian polemic against Islam. Geiger did not invent his influential argument concerning Islam's debt to Judaism from whole cloth; rather, he was subverting and appropriating—but himself ultimately indebted to—an older narrative that had been promoted in ecclesiastical circles in Western Europe since the Middle Ages that often depicted Muhammad as a renegade Christian under the tutelage of Jews. While for Jewish scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century the subject of the Prophet's Jewish teachers had a certain ecumenical ambience, for

---

<sup>2</sup> See Kramer's Introduction to *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*. Kramer in fact quotes approvingly the very same words of Keddie's with which I began here to introduce his attempt to reevaluate the overarching contributions made by the "Jewish discoverers" he discusses (41). This seems somewhat disingenuous, for he is taking her words out of context, implying that Keddie is speaking about forgotten *Jewish* scholars in particular. As he notes with aplomb, she *does* mention the "true early giant, Ignaz Goldziher," but this is *solely* in the context of his general neglect in the contemporary field.

medieval Christian authors and their early modern successors, especially the founders of the older Orientalist tradition that Geiger and his followers inherited, the image had very different connotations. For Martin Luther and Theodor Bibliander and Ludovico Marracci, as for Petrus Alfonsi and Peter the Venerable, as, indeed, for Silvestre de Sacy and Aloys Sprenger, Judaism and Islam were indeed sibling religions, but *particularly* insofar as they could be portrayed as twin “species of misbelief,” to borrow Wasserstrom’s phrase.

And behind this forgotten history lies yet *another*, inasmuch as the material upon which the Orientalists and their medieval predecessors relied in order to demonstrate Islam’s wholesale dependence upon Judaism was directly supplied, it seems, by the Islamic tradition itself. For Western scholars to prove that Muhammad had been the pupil of Jews, they had first to demonstrate the Quran’s thoroughgoing derivation from rabbinic tradition, a process that began long before Geiger’s time. To do so, they had to know what the Quran “really said”; and from virtually the inception of Western European civilization’s engagement with Islam, Western Christians learned what the Quran “really said” through the mediation of *tafsīr*, classical Islamic scriptural commentary. Even considering the relative neglect of *tafsīr* as a topic of advanced research in Islamic Studies—the last major survey of the genre was Goldziher’s *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* in 1920—it is remarkable that this basic fact has gone largely unnoticed virtually to the present day.

## **Chapter 1: Rethinking the Jewish Influence on Islam**

The Jewish writings which I have used consist almost entirely of the Bible, the Talmud, and the Midrashim, and in accordance with my determination to reject all Jewish writings later than Muhammad's time, they had to be thus limited. The few passages which are taken from other writings, of which the age is not so exactly known, such as the sections of Rabbi Elieser, the Book *Hayyáshar*, and the two differing recensions of the Jerusalem *Targum* on the Pentateuch... are all of such a kind that one can generally point to some decided declaration in Holy Scripture itself from which such opinions and traditions may have arisen, and therefore their priority of existence in Judaism can be accepted without hesitation.

Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islám: A Prize Essay* (1833)

With media scrutiny in the Western world increasingly focused upon Islam, a forgotten genre of European literature has recently made a surprising comeback: polemical biographies of the Prophet Muhammad. Admittedly, since negative stereotypes about Muhammad and Islam have always circulated among some communities in Europe and North America, e.g. the Christian Right, perhaps this genre never really went away at all. Nevertheless, hostile, ideologically burdened representations of the life and teachings of the Prophet have enjoyed a significant resurgence in popularity in mainstream media discourse in contemporary America, and it is in this context that Robert Spencer's *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*, published in 2006, should be understood and appreciated. While Spencer's approach is perhaps not animated by quite the same degree of rancor that inspired the Reverend Jerry Vines' infamous characterization of Muhammad as a "demon-possessed pedophile," his work is nevertheless significant because of the appearance of historical objectivity he strives to create. A thin veneer of respectability separates *The Truth about Muhammad* from its copious evangelical predecessors, to the degree that the work sits quite comfortably on the front shelves of mainstream retail bookstores, in which more obviously "religious" literature tends to be relegated to less conspicuous locations.<sup>1</sup>

Spencer is the director of Jihad Watch ([www.jihadwatch.org](http://www.jihadwatch.org)), a self-appointed watchdog organization that monitors the activity of so-called radical Islamists; his other works include *Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith* (2002), *Onward Muslim Soldiers: How Jihad Still Threatens America and the West* (2003), and *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)* (2005), as well as the forthcoming *Religion of Peace? Why Christianity Is—and Islam Isn't*. Spencer's works, *The Truth About Muhammad*

---

<sup>1</sup> For a critique of contemporary evangelical works on Islam written from an insider's perspective, see Larson, "Unveiling the Truth About Islam." Although the author's ultimate concern is effective, honest apologetic on behalf of Christianity, he correctly points out the fundamentally ahistorical and essentializing claims made by most evangelical works produced after 9/11, many of which are marred by their outright bigotry and common ignorance of even the most basic tenets of Islam.



among them, are touted as New York Times bestsellers, highly ranked by online booksellers, and well represented in conservative media outlets, much more so than almost all of the works by Spencer's evangelical peers. Although he is a committed Catholic, Spencer claims that his work is not specifically animated by religious concerns per se; nevertheless, it is striking that he consistently emphasizes the "Judeo-Christian" roots of Western civilization, and often draws attention to the fundamental conflict between Western values, grounded in Judaism and Christianity, and Islamic values, which he frequently identifies with a characteristic lack of respect for democracy and human rights as well as an innate tendency towards violence.<sup>2</sup> It is his emphasis on "culture" and "values" that thus allows Spencer to maintain the appearance of objectivity, as opposed to challenging Islam on specifically doctrinal grounds; his recourse to what Mahmood Mamdani calls "Culture Talk," especially his constant assertion that the reified entities of "Islam" and "the West" are diametrically opposed and essentially incompatible, also aligns Spencer's work with those of more respectable (and far better credentialed) commentators such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington.<sup>3</sup>

In any event, despite the author's claim of objectivity, *The Truth about Muhammad* ends up looking exactly like what one would expect a biography of the Prophet written by a right-wing political activist to look like. Spencer's analysis proceeds from the (admittedly correct) assumption that Muslims all over the world seek to emulate Muhammad, and thus asks what kind

---

<sup>2</sup> Although their messages about Islam's corrosive impact on Western society frequently coincide, it is noteworthy that Spencer has objected to the anti-Christian bias expressed by the well-known Somali "apostate," Ayaan Hirsi Ali. In a recent posting to his weblog on the Jihad Watch website, Spencer protests Ali's denial of any positive side to "Nazism, communism, [or] Catholicism": "Anti-Catholicism is fashionable these days, and the sins of the Catholic Church, like those of any group of human beings, are many. However, to equate Catholicism with Nazism and Communism is a ridiculous reductionism that ignores and implicitly denies the Catholic and Christian bases of so much of Western civilization..." ("Agreeing and Disagreeing with Ayaan Hirsi Ali," posted 02/06/07, [http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/2007\\_02.php](http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/2007_02.php)). It is striking that Spencer's objection to Ali's comment rests on the premise that Catholicism's value lies in its essential contributions to "Western civilization."

<sup>3</sup> On "Culture Talk" and its ubiquity in contemporary discussions of the current political crisis of Islam (or crisis of political Islam), see Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, esp. 17-62.

of man he was. The answer is predictably skewed towards the negative, emphasizing the Prophet's intolerance of and hostility towards those of other faiths, his leadership of violent campaigns of conquest, and, of course, his sexual interest in pre-pubescent girls, based on hadith found in canonical collections that testify to the fact that 'Ā'isha bt. Abī Bakr was nine years old when she was married to Muhammad. Spencer clearly prefers the view, much debated in Muslim sources, that the betrothal occurred when she was younger, possibly six, while the *consummation* of the marriage occurred at age nine; he conveniently overlooks both the ambiguities and disagreement found in the classical accounts, as well as the fact that, at least since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Muslims have preferred the view that 'Ā'isha was much older at the time of the consummation of her marriage to the Prophet.<sup>4</sup>

Curiously, among other topics such as Muhammad's role as warlord, his commissioning the assassination of his enemies, and his pacifying his Arabian opponents through "terror," we find a striking chapter here devoted to the *sources of Muhammad's revelation*. For the most part, it focuses largely on what Spencer calls "revelations of convenience," where the transparently human source of the Quran is supposedly demonstrated by the fact that the sacred text addresses and resolves situations of difficulty that came up in the Prophet's own life; in other words, Muhammad made things up to get himself out of tight spots. A conspicuous example of this is the

---

<sup>4</sup> Notably, Spencer's emphasis on this point has been publicly criticized, precipitating unfortunate accusations of "Jewish" bias as well as strident denial of the Prophet's child marriage by one anonymous reviewer of *The Truth About Muhammad* on Amazon.com. Spencer acknowledges and counters these assertions by offering multiple citations from *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* that attest that 'Ā'isha was in fact only nine when Muḥammad married her. This then provides him with a pretext for a discussion of the ubiquity of child marriage in contemporary Afghanistan and Pakistan and the recent unsuccessful attempts to ban it in Iran ("Typical Jewish Propaganda," posted 02/12/07, [http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/2007\\_02.php](http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/2007_02.php); the title of the post refers to the allegations made by the anonymous reviewer). Strangely, it never seems to strike Spencer as significant that a modern Muslim might wish to deny the reality of such allegations, nor that the debate in the tradition on the issue might be considered meaningful; in an oddly fundamentalist gesture, Spencer takes the testimony of Bukhārī as definitive proof of what Islam "really is," rather than acknowledging the point of view of his anonymous interlocutor, who clearly prefers a different interpretation of the data at hand. Cf. *The Truth About Muhammad*, 170-2, citing testimony preserved in both Bukhārī and Ṭabarī that 'Ā'isha's marriage to the Prophet was consummated when she was nine.

case of Zaynab bt. Jahsh, the wife of Muhammad's adopted son Zayd b. Hāritha. Having coveted her for her remarkable beauty, after what Spencer characterizes as a fainting spell, the Prophet discovered that God had wed Zaynab to him; and he was thus protected from the scandal of taking her as his own wife by the shelter of revelation. To Spencer, this is a textbook example of Muhammad's cynical and self-interested exploitation of his role as prophet to obtain his heart's desires.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, Spencer's discussion of the revelations of convenience is prefaced by an examination of Muhammad's evident debt to Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Curiously, Spencer never quite explains why this specific point is relevant, or what we are to make of it; the implications of demonstrating such influences are simply left unsaid. It is perfectly obvious, however, that what is at stake here is the idea that the Quran is not truly divinely revealed or even inspired, but is rather a mere literary invention; this approach also implicitly argues that since Islam is significantly indebted to Judaism and Christianity, it is clearly inferior or at least subordinate to them. As we will discuss further on, European Christian polemicists traditionally drew a sharp distinction between the Quran and the "true" revelation, e.g. the Bible; but it is noteworthy that atheists can get grist for the polemical mill out of such a claim as well, for even if one accepts that *all* scriptures are literary creations with human rather than divine origins, one can still embarrass Muslims by asserting that Muhammad simply borrowed (or stole) the contents of the Quran from the sacred narratives of others, particularly from the Hebrew

---

<sup>5</sup> Throughout Spencer's work, one sees a particular interest in portraying Muhammad as both licentious and violent; both characterizations are familiar weapons taken from the traditional arsenal of Christian anti-Islamic polemic. Regarding the Zaynab episode specifically and so-called "revelations of convenience" in general, although these have typically attracted negative attention from Western scholars, Ze'ev Maghen has recently argued that the phenomenon of divine alleviation, God's seeming capitulation to the needs and desires of believers (including Muhammad himself) should be viewed in a more positive light and mark Islam as a "uniquely responsive" religion. See Maghen, *After Hardship Cometh Ease*, *passim*.

Bible.<sup>6</sup> The truth-claims of Muslims are effectively reduced in direct proportion to the degree to which their scripture can be shown to be a mere secondhand repetition of what was revealed to and handed down by the Jews long before Muhammad arrived on the scene in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Such an interpretive paradigm may be termed a *dependency narrative*; and, as we shall see, Spencer is by no means the first to have employed such a narrative in discussing the origins of Islam, or to have used it for implicitly or explicitly polemical ends.

Spencer cannot be accused of having invented his approach to the Quran out of whole cloth, though his work by no means rests on original research either. Though he is at least passingly familiar with classical Islamic sources, he appears to know the established literature on Islam fairly well, and his approach seems to rely for the most part on a selective representation of scholarly trends, emphasizing certain aspects of the scholarship at the expense of others.<sup>7</sup> This is in fact the main reason why Spencer's work is of general historical as well as political interest; in advancing his claim of Muhammad (and thus Islam's) fundamental dependence on Judaism and Christianity, Spencer is in fact merely reiterating claims of this sort that have *traditionally* been made by Western scholars of Islam, though they have gone out of fashion in recent years (and justifiably so). As we shall see, the idea that much of the material in the Quran is of Jewish origin in particular has enjoyed a considerable and prestigious pedigree. Inasmuch as the dependency

---

<sup>6</sup> Again, Spencer himself is a committed Catholic, but he makes much of the fact that two of his main collaborators are an atheist and a Jew respectively. The notion that his allegations about Islam are based on an objective evaluation of the historical "facts" and not motivated by religious hostility is key to Spencer's project; however, the agenda of this supposedly secular enterprise is frequently blurred by his stridently partisan remarks about Christianity and his insistence that Christianity and/or Catholicism constitutes a major component of—and is thus in some way synonymous with—Western civilization or values.

<sup>7</sup> Spencer holds an M.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but as has been pointed out by many, Spencer's area of specialization was not Islamic Studies but rather Early Christianity; his scholarly credentials in the field of Islamic Studies are thus slight, if not wholly nonexistent. Various scholars, including Carl Ernst at Chapel Hill, have observed that Spencer's depiction of Islam tends strongly towards essentialization and relies upon a distorted and selective representation of the evidence; in response, Spencer—who now identifies himself as an authority on "historical jihad"—has challenged his critics to prove that any part of his portrayal is inaccurate. I thank Juan Campo for drawing my attention to Ernst's critique of Spencer.

narrative revisited over and over again in Western scholarship may have its ultimate basis in medieval European Christian attitudes towards Islam, Spencer's work may be considered to be a revival of the latent polemical tendencies that have always lain dormant in Western accounts of Islamic origins. Put another way, it appears that a polemical undercurrent links *The Truth About Muhammad* not only to its 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist precursors, but even to Christian criticism of Islam of the high medieval and Reformation eras.

## 1. What did Muhammad borrow from Judaism? Geiger and the Jewish influence on Islam

The work widely considered to inaugurate the modern study of Islam in the West, Abraham Geiger's *Was hat Mohamed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*, first published in 1833, takes the question of Muhammad's dependence on Judaism as its primary theme. Geiger's attitude towards Islam is complex, and his achievement is noteworthy for several reasons.<sup>8</sup> Various scholars have noted that Geiger's work initiated serious philological investigation of Quranic narrative in modern scholarship on Islam. More important, however, is the work's essentially eirenic attitude: Geiger's characterization of Muhammad as a *Schwärmer*, that is, as a genuinely sincere religious "enthusiast" or "devotee," went against the grain of the dominant European Orientalist view of the Prophet of Islam as a charlatan and deceiver, a reflex of the continuing legacy of medieval Christian polemical claims about Islam.<sup>9</sup>

Geiger's attitude was not wholly motivated by a simple desire for objectivity, however; rather, his portrayal of Muhammad must be placed in the context of his larger apologetic aims, inasmuch as he seems to have been concerned to highlight the links between Judaism on the one hand and its "daughter" religions, Christianity and Islam, on the other specifically in order to posit the former as the source and authentic core of the latter. Geiger sought to invert the

---

<sup>8</sup> Geiger's work has a complicated publication history. As shall be discussed presently, Geiger first wrote this piece for an essay competition; its original title was "Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume übernommen?" It was published in Bonn in 1833 under the slightly altered title *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*, by which it is best known, and subsequently disseminated more widely through an edition published in Leipzig in 1902. It was first published in English in Madras in 1898, and both the German and the English editions have been reprinted as recently as the 1970s; while the German edition retains the title of the 1833 publication, the English edition assumes the more neutral title *Judaism and Islám*. It is noteworthy that the English translation was originally produced for use by Christian missionaries in India, to provide them with polemical material with which to combat the spread of Islam in the Subcontinent. (Why the claim of Islam's dependence on Judaism should be particularly meaningful in the South Asian context is unclear to me, unless the idea of the Madras Diocesan Committee of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge was specifically to exploit South Asian *Muslims'* antipathy to Judaism.)

<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, *Schwärmer* can also have a negative connotation, meaning "fanatic" or "zealot," but Geiger undoubtedly meant to use the term positively.

traditional hierarchy of supersessionism established in both Christianity and Islam, for both traditions in fact portrayed Judaism as both a direct lineal ancestor and an obsolete precursor. According to Geiger's paradigm, on the other hand, only Judaism could truly lay claim to spiritual authenticity on account of its unquestionable originality; the pure religion of Israel owes nothing to any precursors or prior inspiration, being motivated solely by a genuine and unique vision of the divine. Christianity and Islam, in contrast, though partially recognized and enfranchised as its "daughter" religions, are thus relegated to secondary status on account of their clear derivation from Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

In his work on the Quran, Geiger was able to marshal his formidable knowledge of classical rabbinic texts, having received a traditional Jewish education as well as training in Arabic philology at the University of Bonn under Wilhelm Freytag, a titanic figure in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German Orientalist establishment. The many conspicuous parallels between Quranic and rabbinic narratives facilitated Geiger's attempt to cast Islam in the role of a derivative offshoot of Judaism, in that such rabbinic parallels naturally seemed to him to be *prototypes* or *precursors* of their Quranic analogues, predisposed as he was to see Judaism as the ultimate source of Islam. To modern eyes, his straightforward assertions of Islam's absolute debt to Judaism may seem excessive and even polemical: in his review of Sprenger's 1961 biography of Muhammad, Geiger wrote, "Islam is the youngest great form of religion, not—a new religion. There is only one religion of revelation, Judaism. Christianity was carried in the womb of this religion, Islam more indirectly suckled and nurtured by it... Christianity and Islam possess the manifestation of

---

<sup>10</sup> The basic ideology informing Geiger's work has been most thoroughly examined by Susannah Heschel: see "How the Jews Invented Jesus and Muhammed: Christianity and Islam in the Work of Abraham Geiger," and also *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, esp. 53 ff. German Jews of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Geiger among them, took a particular interest in the Jewish contribution to the Golden Age of Muslim rule in Spain for analogous apologetic reasons; on this, see Kramer's introduction to *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*, esp. 4-8.

Judaism... without establishing a new religion.”<sup>11</sup> However, it should be pointed out that Geiger was responding to a Christian scholarly tradition that still characterized Islam with vituperation and rancor. In the very same biography of the Prophet to which Geiger was responding with the foregoing words, Sprenger wrote: “Burning enthusiasm, paired with low cunning, pure sacrifice for a higher aim with mean selfishness, indulgence, even dependence upon others, with obstinacy, devotion with treachery; those are a few of the contradictory psychic qualities of Muhammad’s character.”<sup>12</sup>

It is thus crucial to keep in mind that one of Geiger’s main contributions to the development of Islamic Studies was his deliberate cultivation of an attitude of appreciation and respect for Islam, even while he maintained its *total unoriginality*. Thus, early on in his groundbreaking work, as a kind of prolegomenon to his method, Geiger asks a series of questions that provide the overarching structure for his entire inquiry: Did Muhammad borrow from Judaism? Was it feasible for him to do so? Was it desirable for him to do so? In response to the latter two questions, Geiger concludes that the Prophet had ample access to Jewish informants in the Arabian environment and that he specifically wished to conciliate the Jews of Medina and make his message more appealing to them by asserting the affinities between his revelation and their own scripture and traditions. Such being the case, an affirmative answer to the first question—that Muhammad did in fact borrow significant amounts of material from the Jews in composing the Quran—is thus made to seem perfectly intuitive and quite sensible.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Geiger, 1863 review of Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad*, quoted in Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad* (1861), quoted in Heschel, *ibid.* Strikingly, Sprenger’s work was published in a new edition in Hildesheim and New York in 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Geiger’s approach in *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* has been thoroughly discussed by Lassner, who draws attention to the various shortcomings of his method; see “Abraham Geiger: A Nineteenth-Century Jewish Reformer on the Origins of Islam,” esp. 118 ff. Lassner notes in particular Geiger’s problematic focus on normative rabbinic tradition as the probable source of the Islamic revelation, as well as his surprising neglect of the many affinities



Taking both his competence with Jewish sources and his methodological (which is to say, ideological) presuppositions into account, it is wholly unsurprising that Geiger consistently resorted to a method of deploying rabbinic traditions as prototypes in his study of the Quranic text. The success and wide impact of his work meant that his approach would be disseminated throughout the fledgling Orientalist discipline, and Geiger's preconceptions about the ubiquitous Jewish influence on early Islam rapidly helped to establish nothing less than a myth of Jewish priority as the backbone of modern Islamic Studies. What to Geiger seemed wholly natural and intuitive, namely the recourse to Jewish parallels (that is, "influences") in the analysis of Quranic narrative, became the standard and reflexive *modus operandi* in Western studies of the Quran for more than a century. Again, Geiger's approach was wholly ideological, but ultimately eirenicly and ecumenically motivated. It is extremely noteworthy that his work was in fact criticized by none other than Silvestre de Sacy, the greatest French Orientalist of the early modern era, for being on the whole too *friendly* to Muhammad; in characterizing the Prophet as a *Schwärmer* and asserting his basic sincerity—and thus implying Islam's validity and respectability as a genuine religious tradition at least analogous to, if not exactly on a par with, Judaism and Christianity—Geiger had simply gone too far. This is somewhat ironic, since Silvestre de Sacy himself was concerned to distance the Orientalist discipline from its ancient roots in Christian polemic.<sup>14</sup>

The first modern study of the Quran, which again also happened to be a study of the *Jewish sources* of the Quran, in fact had many imitators, some of which were hardly as friendly towards

---

between Quranic and Jewish law and ritual praxis. The latter topic remains a neglected field of research to this day.

<sup>14</sup> Lassner, "Abraham Geiger," 106. Silvestre de Sacy is an ubiquitous figure in Said's *Orientalism*, where he is repeatedly taken to task for his seminal role in establishing Orientalism as an insular discourse of domination hopelessly implicated with the agendas of European colonialism. For a somewhat kinder evaluation of Silvestre de Sacy's legacy, see Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, 141-50. Silvestre de Sacy's career embodies the tensions and ambivalence of the Napoleonic age, inasmuch as he strove to foster the Orientalist discipline as an endeavor autonomous from ecclesiastical discourse, although his personal religious convictions made it difficult for him to elude that legacy entirely, especially in that he remained convinced that Muhammad had been a complete charlatan.

Muhammad or Islam as Geiger had been.<sup>15</sup> For example, nearly a hundred years after Geiger's composition of his *Preisschrift*, Charles Cutler Torrey, an American philologist who had trained with Nöldeke at Strasbourg and eventually became as distinguished for his work on Hebrew and Aramaic sources as for that on early Islam (if not more so), delivered a series of lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York on the origins of Islam. Though delivered in 1931, these lectures were not collected and published until 1933, when they appeared as *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*. Torrey's treatment is novel in that it posits that the Prophet actually worked from written sources, possibly in Aramaic, in producing the Quran, whereas Geiger had emphasized the impact of oral teachings transmitted from the Prophet's Jewish tutors. Moreover, a clear shift in tone is discernible when one compares Torrey's treatment to Geiger's, for Torrey is far more acerbic, critical, and deprecating. Here we find little consideration of the Prophet's circumstances or motivations; Torrey mostly takes the *why* and the *how* of Muhammad's borrowing for granted, and focuses largely on the slipshod manner in which the Prophet used his sources, demonstrating the Quran's overall literary and poetic inferiority, especially when compared to its biblical precursor.<sup>16</sup>

Torrey was hardly the first to build on Geiger's legacy; rather, studies like his rapidly became a discrete genre in Islamic Studies, one which increasingly focused on cataloguing the

---

<sup>15</sup> Virtually all of the subsequent works in this genre make explicit reference to the fact that they are following Geiger's example, elaborating upon his insights, correcting his mistakes, refining his technique, or otherwise developing his approach and pushing it in new directions. Even works from the later 20<sup>th</sup> century invoke him as the beginning of this scholarly tradition. Very few, if any, of the works in this genre have attempted to seriously reevaluate his methods or question his basic presuppositions.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, esp. 107-9, where Torrey seems to focus in particular on Muhammad's inferior literary abilities. Geiger too had noted the Prophet's inadequacy when compared to the rabbis who were all too capable of confuting and confounding him, but Torrey takes almost perverse pleasure in pointing out the Quran's supposed shortcomings. On Torrey and his work, see the generous encomium offered by Rosenthal in the Introduction to the 1967 reprint of *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*. It comes as no surprise that Torrey emphasizes Muhammad's putative reliance on Aramaic documents, for he also argued, somewhat controversially, that Deutero-Isaiah, the canonical Gospels, and the book of Acts all similarly had a basis in written Aramaic sources.

ostensible sources of the Quran in Jewish tradition while, like Torrey's work, eschewing Geiger's emphasis on the mechanisms and motivations behind the Prophet's borrowing. In other words, studies of this kind have basically functioned as surveys of the ubiquitous Jewish background to the contents of the Quran, without seeking to furnish any sophisticated explanation as to how or why a new Arabic scripture built upon a Jewish (or possibly Christian) foundation should have appeared in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. The most egregious example of this tendency is Katsh's *Judaism in Islām* (1954, reprinted as *Judaism and the Koran* in 1962), which proceeds virtually line-by-line through Sūras 2 and 3 of the Quran and lists the Jewish sources from which their contents are derived. The work thus resembles a strange sort of rabbinic commentary on the two longest chapters of the Quran.<sup>17</sup> The 1958 work of Masson, *Le Coran et la Révélation Judéo-Chrétienne*, is similar to Katsh's, inasmuch as it operates in much the same way, juxtaposing Quranic passages with their original biblical "sources" in order to facilitate a synoptic comparison of these scriptures. The reductionist overtones of Masson's *modus operandi* are obvious, however, inasmuch as almost every passage in the Quran for which a biblical precursor could imaginably be supplied is glossed thusly, virtually without comment by the author; the seemingly derivative nature of the vast majority of the contents of the Quran is thus demonstrated *ad nauseam*.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Katsh was a member of the Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University for many years, and repeatedly taught a popular course in which he demonstrated the systematic derivation of the Quran from rabbinic tradition, much as he does in his published work. Among his students was one Margaret Marcus, who, alienated by Katsh's deprecation of Islam, began studying the Quran on her own, eventually converting to Islam from Judaism and assuming the name Maryam Jameelah. Jameelah has written a number of apologetic books on Islam in the decades since her conversion, which include, most notably, *Islam and Orientalism*, in which she directly refutes the traditional dependency narrative as promoted by scholars such as Geiger and Goitein on theological grounds. Jameelah clearly understands the work of Geiger and his followers to represent an organized Jewish conspiracy against Islam, as can be seen most vividly in her work *Islam versus Ahl al-Kitab: Past and Present*. See the biographical account on Jameelah in Esposito and Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, 54-67, esp. 55-6 (curiously, while Jameelah's Jewish background and her conversion experiences are highlighted in this account, the authors generally overlook the stridently anti-Jewish tone of much of her work).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. also Thyen, *Bibel und Koran: Eine Synopse gemeinsamer Überlieferungen* (1989), essentially similar to Masson's work, but with somewhat better annotations.

A far more common procedure has been to emphasize the narratives of the biblical prophets contained in the Quran in particular, highlighting both their similarities to and differences from their canonical and extracanonial precursors. This method has enjoyed particular distinction within this genre: Weil's seminal contribution, *Biblische Legenden der Muselmänner*, appeared already in 1845, barely a dozen years after the publication of Geiger's work; the English translation, titled *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud*, was published in 1863. This is more of a popular work than real scholarship, inasmuch as Weil focuses primarily on colorful retellings of the stories of the prophets and patriarchs from the Muslim perspective; occasional footnotes demonstrate the basis of the legends in rabbinic lore (thus the title of the English translation). What is most significant about Weil's procedure here, however, is that his retellings are in fact based not only on the Quran, but often quite substantially upon later Muslim elaborations on Quranic passages as well. Even the most cursory examination of Weil's work demonstrates that in many places almost all of the content of the "legends" he presents is in fact *extra-Quranic*. Although these later Muslim sources are briefly acknowledged at the beginning of the work, Weil fails to distinguish his sources at all in the body of the text.<sup>19</sup> As we shall see, this blurring of the line between the Quran and its later interpretations and expansions is an extremely common phenomenon in Western scholarship on the supposed Jewish borrowings found in Islamic sources, and we shall argue that this lack of discrimination has typically led scholars to problematic conclusions regarding the nature of the relationships between the Quran, the *tafsīr*, canonical biblical narratives, and the *midrash* and other genres of Jewish exegesis and narrative elaboration.

Weil's emphasis on the "legendary," as well as his preferred organizational principle, seem to have exerted a significant impact on later scholarship; the overarching framework for such

---

<sup>19</sup> At the end of his introduction, Weil admits his dependence on Muslim Quran commentaries as well as upon a handful of works in the genre now commonly called *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* or "lives of the prophets." The best-known of the latter works he employs is that of al-Kisā'ī, which has itself been almost unknown to later Muslim tradition, though it has been widely celebrated as an epitome of this genre in Western scholarship; others are somewhat more obscure.

inquiries may have been provided by Geiger, but the most prevalent format has generally been a combination of Geiger's and Weil's.<sup>20</sup> Many subsequent works in this genre feature a chronological structure, discussing, as Weil did, the Jewish (and sometimes Christian) contributions to the "biblical legends" found in the Quran; but one also often sees a scholarly apparatus employed in these surveys, which is much closer to Geiger's *modus operandi* than Weil's. (Nevertheless, one still sees a basic tendency towards an elision of the differences between the contents of the Quran and the *tafsir* in these works, a particular characteristic of Weil's treatment.) Other 19<sup>th</sup>-century German contributions to the genre such as Hirschfeld's brief *Jüdische Elemente im Korân* (1878) already show more of a predisposition to philological analysis than Weil's; ironically, some of the later scholars who contributed to the genre in fact criticized Geiger for his lack of philological rigor or his reliance on inadequate or defective sources. Many of these subsequent works, for example Schapiro's *Die haggadischen Elemente im erzählenden Teil des Korans* (1907), Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (1931), Sidersky's *Les Origines des Légendes Musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les Vies des Prophètes* (1933), and, perhaps the latest example of the classic type in this genre (despite its title), Schwarzbaum's *Biblical and Extra-biblical Legends in Islamic Folk-Literature* (1982), are in fact considerably more sophisticated in their analysis of Quranic material than Geiger's work.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> About half of Geiger's work is devoted to a systematic survey of the actual cases of borrowed Jewish material to be found in the Quran, organized chronologically according to the biblical order (e.g. from Adam to Ezra). This is preceded by Geiger's exposition of his analytical method, explanation of the context of Muhammad's borrowing, and thematic discussion of types of borrowed material (i.e. general concepts versus actual narratives) and the kinds of subject matter featured in such borrowings (theological, ethical, eschatological, et al.) In Weil's work, on the other hand, due to the particular interest in the legends of the prophets, the chronological principle dominates, as it does in most later works of this sort.

<sup>21</sup> Note that inasmuch as only the first part of Schapiro's *Die haggadischen Elemente* seems to have ever been published (specifically that part of the work that discusses the story of Joseph in Sūra 12), his work is presented as a practically line-by-line commentary on the Quranic chapter in question, thus anticipating Katsh's later work on Sūras 2 and 3. Sidersky's work is unusual in that it lays particular emphasis on Christian apocryphal material *as well as* Jewish sources, which overall tend to receive the lion's share of attention in works in this "catalogue of influences" genre, despite occasional attempts by certain scholars to shift the balance in favor of purported

Nevertheless, one fails to find commensurate progress in the refinement of the overarching paradigm for inquiry in these works, as opposed to the general improvement of the philological methodology employed in the analysis of individual narratives and verses (which has quite naturally been considerable since Geiger's time). This is only to mention discrete monographs in this area of research; the basic approach reflected here—namely neglect of the meaning of the Quranic revelation in its specific context in favor of a meticulous inventory of the ideas, terms, and motifs Muhammad supposedly appropriated wholesale from Jewish sources—has also informed dozens, if not hundreds, of articles on specialized topics in the field.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, this is to say nothing at all of the broader dissemination of Geiger's ideas through the countless reference works and surveys on Islam published in the almost two centuries that have passed since Geiger's time. For example, the pertinent essays by Hirschberg on the Jewish influence on Islam and the biblical heritage in the Quran and Muslim literature in the first *Encyclopedia Judaica*, published in 1971-1972, have no doubt been widely influential; and while Hirschberg manages to strike a balance in his characterization of Islam's relationship to Judaism between

---

Christian influences. Schwarzbaum's work is particularly well informed; in addition to reflecting a thorough knowledge of virtually all of the previous scholarship, it reflects an astonishing command of both Jewish and Islamic literature, as well as a wide knowledge of Middle Eastern folk traditions, which often shed light upon the various textual traditions he explores in fascinating ways.

<sup>22</sup> Besides the aforementioned works, other monographs or summary treatments in the genre include Gastfreund, *Mohamed nach Talmud und Midrasch* (1875-80); Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'an* (1905); Jomier, *Bible et Coran* (1959); Schwartzman, *Korankunde für Christen: Ein Zugang zum heilige Buch der Moslems* (1982); Busse, *Die theologischen Beziehungen des Islams zu Judentum und Christentum* (1988; 2<sup>nd</sup>, rev. ed., 1991; English trans. 1998); Zaoui, *Meqorot Yehudiyim ba-Qur'an* (1989); Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (2000). Most of these works, especially the latter-day ones, are far less philologically oriented than their early predecessors, largely serving to re-present older scholarship in different configurations for new audiences. Admittedly, some place more emphasis on the biblical influence rather than the Jewish influence per se, though "Bible" almost always signifies something that is primarily the intellectual property and cultural patrimony of Jews. But occasionally one does find works in this genre that are somewhat anomalous; cf., for example, Seale's *Qur'an and Bible* (1978), a series of philologically oriented investigations that place more emphasis on the common Semitic thought patterns and forms of expression found in each document than on the purported Jewish or biblical influence on the Quran per se.

acknowledging debt and recognizing autonomy, it is extremely noteworthy that in the new second edition of the *Judaica* (2007), Hirschberg's articles have not been revised at all, nor his bibliographies significantly updated. This is symptomatic, one surmises, of a general scholarly resistance to any serious reevaluation of the basic paradigm first introduced by Geiger almost two hundred years ago.<sup>23</sup>

\*\*\*

The wide dissemination of Geiger's *modus operandi* virtually at the foundation of the modern discipline of Quranic Studies in the West helps to explain why so many scholars working in this field have consistently, systematically, and sometimes even cynically asserted that various Jewish traditions are the unequivocal prototypes of Quranic narratives, often with an almost callous disregard for chronology and dating. The quest for parallels that so often dominates scholarship in the history of religions becomes, in this specific case, an obsession with discerning the exact sources of Quranic material in Jewish antecedents of varying provenance, even when asserting such influence requires making rather questionable historical judgments due to oversight, credulity, or even deliberate dissimulation.<sup>24</sup>

The historical emphasis on the unidirectional influence of Judaism on Islam reflects a common bias regarding the nature of rabbinic tradition. While the high medieval "symbiosis"

---

<sup>23</sup> *EJ*, s.v. "Islam: Judaism in Islam" and "Bible: In Islam," and cf. the corresponding entries in *EJ*<sup>2</sup>. Hirschberg's *Jüdische und christliche Lehren im vor- und frühislamischen Arabien* (1939) is another classic contribution to the "Jewish influence" genre, one which is perhaps distinguished by its attempt to reevaluate the question of Christian influence in the Jāhili milieu.

<sup>24</sup> In 1961, the President of the Society of Biblical Literature, Samuel Sandmel, addressed specifically this tendency as manifest in the then-exploding scholarly literature on the Dead Sea Scrolls, which he saw as excessively concerned with proving the most outrageous claims about both the origins of the Qumran texts and the titanic and impossibly far-reaching influence they had supposedly exerted. Sandmel's words, now immortalized in the published text of his lecture, seem as pertinent to scholars of the Jewish influence on Islam as they were (and are) for the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls. See Sandmel, "Parallelomania."

between Jewish and Islamic civilization is widely recognized as having facilitated a significant assimilation of Judaism to Arab Islam in the medieval period, classical rabbinic Judaism—that is, Judaism *qua* Judaism, in its religious essentials as well as where its scriptural and legal traditions are concerned—is generally understood to present a canonical unity that is largely closed by the time of the rise of Islam. That is, the arenas in which the significant dialogue between Judaism and Islam are most typically considered to have occurred are those of philosophy, linguistics, belles-lettres, and popular custom—that is, epiphenomenal as opposed to essential elements of “Judaism” *per se*. In its essence, that “Judaism” is usually presumed to precede the rise of Islam, and the rabbinic tradition is commonly perceived to have been consolidated and reached its mature form well before the secondary manifestation of actual Jewish receptivity to Muslim influences.<sup>25</sup> This perspective is most vividly reflected in the common interpretation of “talmudic” tradition as something that is both inherently and unimpeachably Jewish and quintessentially pre-Islamic—the last generation of the *’āmôrā’im* usually being dated to the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE—even though contemporary research on the Babylonian Talmud demonstrates that its final redaction was accomplished only much, much later. (This is to say nothing of the drawn-out process through which talmudic authority was asserted over virtually all of world Jewry, a process that probably only began in earnest in the post-Islamic period.)

Recently, the argument has been made that historically, Jewish scholarship on Islam and the Middle East reflects a quantitatively different outlook and ideology than that which has

---

<sup>25</sup> Obviously, certain aspects of the Jewish religion such as the prayerbook are indisputably medieval developments, the liturgy of the Sephardim in particular being strongly inflected by their history and experience as participants in the wider “Islamicate” culture. A distinction should thus be made here between aspects of Jewish tradition that are recognized as *directly* reflecting Arab-Islamic influence and those that are merely acknowledged to have emerged or been consolidated during the period of Muslim sovereignty over much of world Jewry. Again, scholars have traditionally been rather hesitant to acknowledge the possibility of Arab-Islamic influence on core elements of Jewish religiosity *per se*; thus, in the case of the prayerbook or the liturgy, Arab “influence” might commonly be thought to extend to the cadence and melody of prayers or even the poetic imagery employed in hymns, but the fundamental *ideas* and *sentiments* expressed therein are interpreted as essentially, even timelessly, “Jewish” at their core.



characterized mainstream Orientalism as practiced by European Christians. Said vilified the European Orientalist tradition for its deliberate strategy of radical “othering,” supposedly in implicit collusion with the projects of colonial domination pursued by European states in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (and continuing well into the 20<sup>th</sup>). It has been suggested, however, that insofar as the approach taken by Jewish scholars to the study of Islam and the Middle East often proceeded from radically different assumptions and cultural priorities, the majority of Jewish Orientalists of this period were not “Orientalist” at all—that is, even acknowledging their shortcomings, they cannot be indicted for pursuing the elaboration of Orientalist knowledge as a deliberate strategy of distancing and domination. This argument has been most unambiguously articulated by Martin Kramer, in the introduction to a collection of essays devoted to the major Jewish figures of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Orientalism, beginning with Geiger himself.<sup>26</sup>

Kramer is by no means the first scholar to point out that the paradigm established by Said in *Orientalism* ill fits Jewish representatives of the tradition, who often felt great affinity with “Oriental” tradition and in various ways strove to promote a positive view of Islam, particularly regarding Islamic culture’s (usually) progressive treatment of religious minorities and the tremendous contributions those minorities were able to make to the flowering of Islamic civilization in the Middle Ages due to Muslim tolerance. The deeper political implications of such a characterization coming from emancipated, assimilated Jews of the German-speaking world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century hardly requires comment.<sup>27</sup> While it is true that Said fails to take the particular perspective of Jewish Orientalists into account—a glaring shortcoming considering the titanic contribution made to Islamic and Middle Eastern studies by Jews in this period—at the same time, Kramer and others who seek to redress the imbalance, promoting the image of a more benevolent tradition of Jewish scholarship on the “Orient,” appear to overstate

---

<sup>26</sup> Kramer, Introduction to *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*, 2-4 and 41-3.

<sup>27</sup> Heschel, Kramer, and Lassner all make this observation vis-à-vis Geiger. For a detailed treatment of the romanticization of the Sephardic heritage by Ashkenazi scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Schorsch, “The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy.”

their case to some degree, and in some instances clearly proceed from apologetic premises as well.

First of all, at least in the case of Kramer, the fact that his counter-history of Jewish Orientalism culminates with Bernard Lewis, to whom the volume of essays in which it appears is dedicated, demonstrates that this counter-reading has clear political implications for scholars working in the here and now. Second, Kramer is at least partially guilty of idealizing and decontextualizing Jewish Orientalists themselves, an ironic gesture given the circumstances. He discusses a wide variety of Jewish scholars, working from the early 19<sup>th</sup> through the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and explicitly notes the tremendous diversity of their backgrounds, interests, and perspectives; yet somehow, all of these individuals, whether they are Orthodox, atheists, converts to Islam, or Communists, are all taken to represent some uniquely “Jewish” vision of Islam and the Middle East that sets them apart from the Christian Orientalist mainstream. We are meant to believe that these scholars all have more in common with each other than with their Christian contemporaries, due solely to their birth and to their tacit ontological status as outsiders in European society; all of these Jewish Orientalists, despite their differences, supposedly subscribed to a kinder, more benign and sympathetic view of the Orient, one which we should presumably conclude was (and is) more objective and accurate as well.

Third, even if Kramer and others are correct in distinguishing a unique tradition of Jewish Orientalism that may be exonerated of collusion with colonial projects and the pursuit of a deliberate ideology of distinction, of radical “othering,” nevertheless, it hardly holds true that this discourse is therefore not still *Orientalist* in some substantial way.<sup>28</sup> We would argue that,

---

<sup>28</sup> See the recent work of Eyal, *The Disenchantment of the Orient*, esp. Chapter 1, “What is *Mizrahanut?*,” for a more nuanced discussion of the subject. In particular, Eyal recognizes “Orientalism” as a multiplicity of interconnected discourses with overlapping agendas but often radically different presuppositions and areas of influence. In the same way that Kramer and others wish to distinguish the work of Jewish scholars as a distinct variety of Orientalism (or even claim that the Jewish engagement with the Orient is not “Orientalism” at all), Eyal would insist that there is not a single monolithic variety of “Jewish Orientalism” either but rather a multiplicity of overlapping discourses in which Jews (or in this case, Israelis) participate.

especially in the light of Geiger's project, both Jews and Christians have articulated a discourse on the Jewish influence on Islam that, for all it might serve at times to underline the affinities between Islam and Judaism rather than posit them as radically different and opposed entities, still represents a strategy of domination, or at least of deliberate *subordination*, on some level. That is, as the approaches of both Geiger and Spencer demonstrate, asserting Muhammad's reliance upon other traditions implicitly places the Islamic tradition in a position of dependence; as different as their basic outlooks are, it is hardly coincidence that both Geiger and Spencer in the end underline the fact that Muhammad's vision was not *original per se* but rather derived from another tradition or traditions that can lay greater claim to spiritual validity or cultural vibrancy. Naturally, not all Jewish scholars of Islam have subscribed to this view of the Quran's putative sources in Judaism; further, as we have already noted, Christian scholars have certainly done their part to promote the dependency narrative introduced by Geiger as well. Nevertheless, even if it is due solely to the tendency of Jewish scholars to command greater expertise in rabbinic sources, it is undoubtedly true that many of the scholars who have made signal contributions to the tradition of scholarship on the Jewish influence on Islam we have discussed here have in fact been Jewish. If there has been a specific field or subfield of Islamic Studies that has naturally tended to be dominated by Jewish scholars, it is this area of research in particular, even if non-Jewish scholars proficient with Jewish sources have played significant roles in developing it as well.<sup>29</sup>

This is by no means to suggest that the emphasis on the Jewish influence on Islam represents a variety of Jewish conspiracy, as some Muslim ideologues have in fact alleged; as we have just acknowledged, many non-Jewish scholars have worked in this field as well, or at least accepted and promoted its major findings and even basic methodology. More importantly, even

---

Kramer's account of Jewish Orientalism may be read profitably against two other recent treatments that attempt to seriously come to terms with the image or category of "Jew" as a discursive object mediating between the West and the Oriental other in modern European thought and culture: see Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: The History of the Other*, and cf. the introduction to Kalmar and Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews*.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Cutler Torrey and the Rev. William St. Clair Tisdall come immediately to mind here.

though Geiger seems to have played a seminal role in establishing the recourse to Jewish sources as a fundamental and even reflexive *modus operandi* in the modern study of the Quran, as we shall see, his approach was hardly disconnected from the wider milieu of European Christian Orientalism in which he worked and was trained.

## 2. A path by which to be made king: Muhammad's Jewish teachers in medieval polemic

Despite the fact that Geiger sought to subvert the hostile attitude of the European Orientalist tradition towards Islam, his influential promotion of a myth of Jewish priority in fact shares certain key presuppositions with that tradition. His study of the Jewish influence on Muhammad and the Quran might have been revolutionary in its outlook, but Geiger's basic approach seems to have been suggested by the very proponents of the tradition he rejected. As he himself acknowledges, his *Preisschrift* was specifically written in response to an invitation issued by the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Bonn soliciting contributions on a subject provided by the competition's sponsors: "*Inquiratur in fontes Alcorani seu legis Mohammedicae eos, qui ex Judaismo derivandi sunt.*"<sup>30</sup> While his approach to the subject may have been novel and his credentials for pursuing the project impeccable, Geiger's work proceeds from a basic axiom widely accepted in the Orientalist tradition. However, Christian Orientalists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century presumably had no stake in asserting Judaism as the authentic spiritual core of Islam, let alone of Christianity, as Geiger did; so there must have been a deeper reason for this basic coincidence in approach. As it turns out, both the early modern Orientalist tradition and Geiger's revision of that tradition hearken back to the legacy of medieval Christian polemic against Islam and the Prophet.

Hostile biographies of the Prophet clearly played a key role in medieval Christian polemics against Islam.<sup>31</sup> It has been widely noted that in the eyes of medieval Christians, Muhammad was often viewed as a renegade Christian; some even held that the early Muslim community as a

---

<sup>30</sup> Cited in the Preface to Geiger's work.

<sup>31</sup> The classic account of the medieval Christian view of the life of the Prophet is Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 100-30. The genre of hostile biography of Muhammad has recently been reevaluated from a fresh perspective by Tolan; see *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, 135-69. Tolan's account is particularly valuable for its nuanced understanding of the subtle interplay between learned, ecclesiastical sources on Islam and popular legend in the surviving texts.

whole was a breakaway sect that had deviated from orthodox Christian belief due to various negative influences in the Arabian environment. Whether or not Muhammad or his people were actually thought to have been Christian originally, the notion that the Prophet must have had Jewish or Christian tutors who helped him to formulate (or fabricate) his religion, often conceived as a combination of Judaism and Christianity with various heretical flairs, was ubiquitous in the medieval West. As described by Daniel and others, medieval authors held what we might think of as an early version of the diffusionist model of the rise of Islam, inasmuch as Arabia seems to have been widely conceived in the Middle Ages as having been a hotbed of religious ferment following the penetration of the peninsula by Jewish and Christian missionaries, sometimes explicitly identified as sectarian heretics. In particular, in the 11<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Petrus Alfonsi, the Cluniacs, and Ricoldus de Montecrucis all “detected” a strong Jewish influence on Muhammad, sometimes even specifying the Talmud as the proximate source of his distortions of biblical narratives.<sup>32</sup>

Alfonsi (d. 1140), author of the earliest European source to assert a Jewish influence on Muhammad, was an Aragonese Jew, a convert of the era of the *Reconquista*. He was knowledgeable in the Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin scholarly traditions, and is perhaps best known for the *Disciplina clericalis*, a collection of edifying stories drawn largely from both Arab and Jewish sources.<sup>33</sup> The value of his *Dialogus contra Iudaeos*, written shortly before his death, has perhaps been somewhat less appreciated; however, as Tolan has recently argued, Alfonsi’s polemical work was key in introducing a critical linkage between Islam and Judaism to the West: “whereas earlier anti-Jewish polemicists had contented themselves largely with arguing for

---

<sup>32</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 105-6. See also 372, n.21 for an extensive list of references to sources discussing the Jewish and Christian influences on Muhammad.

<sup>33</sup> On the life of Alfonsi, see the entry in *NCE*, s.v. “Peter Alfonsi” (A. O’Malley). Most contemporary interest in Alfonsi is directed towards examination of the sources of the *Disciplina clericalis*; see, e.g., Schwartzbaum, “International Folklore Motifs in Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina Clericalis*”; Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi and his Medieval Readers*, 74-91; García González, “El Contacto de Dos Lenguas: Los Arabismos en el Español Medieval y en la Obra Alfonsi”; Abou Bakr, “Islamic Sources in Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina Clericalis*.”

Christian interpretations of the Torah and the Prophets, Alfonsi focused on the Talmud and the Koran as two illegitimate pseudorevelations that formed the bases for two erroneous religions.”<sup>34</sup> This novel approach to polemic would prove to be quite popular in various circles, including that of the Cluniacs. In the fifth *titulus* or section of the *Dialogus*, Alfonsi describes how Muhammad enlisted the aid of Christian and Jewish teachers to facilitate his self-fashioning as a prophet, “devising a path by which he could be made king” by exploiting the ignorance of the Arabs, who were at that time supposed to have been pagan idolaters mixed with sectarian Jews and Christians, specifically Samaritans, Nestorians and Jacobites. In addition to the renegade monk “Sergius,” Muhammad is said to have enlisted the aid of two Jewish acquaintances:

There were also two Jews among those heretics of Arabia whom we mentioned, named Abdias and Chabalahabar, and these, indeed, attached themselves to Mohammad and offered their assistance to complete his foolishness. And these three mixed together the law of Mohammad, each one according to his own heresy, and showed him how to say such things on God’s behalf which both the heretical Jews and the heretical Christians who were in Arabia believed to be true; whereas those who were unwilling to believe of their own free will nevertheless were forced to believe for fear of the sword.<sup>35</sup>

As Resnick points out, “Abdias” and “Chabalahabar” are almost certainly ‘Abdallāh b. Salām and Ka’b al-Aḥbār, Jewish converts to Islam of the generation of the Companions who were widely acknowledged as important conduits for the transmission of Jewish lore to the early community. Further, the specific emphasis on Ibn Salām and Ka’b al-Aḥbār here is almost certainly due to the impact of the *Risāla* attributed to al-Kindī, an important early Arab Christian polemic against

---

<sup>34</sup> Tolan, *Saracens*, 154-5. Cf. his survey of the contents and basic arguments of the *Dialogus* in *Petrus Alfonsi and his Medieval Readers*, 12-41.

<sup>35</sup> *Dialogue*, 152; for the Latin, see the text of Mieth in the recent Larumbe edition (*Diálogo contra los Judíos*, 95). Note the emphasis on the production of the *lex Mahomethi* by mixing: *hi tres legem Mahomethi quisque secundum heresim suam contemperaverunt*. The three mentioned here presumably refers to Abdias, Chabalahabar, and *Sergius* rather than the two Jews and Muhammad himself, since the law (i.e. the Quran) is clearly thought to be the result of combining the heretical strains of Judaism and Christianity circulating in Arabia at that time.

Islam, on Alfonsi.<sup>36</sup> We shall discuss both this source and these well-known early Jewish converts to Islam momentarily.

A very similar representation of Islam's origins appears in the *Contra legem Saracenorum* (also called the *Confutatio Alcorani*) of Ricoldus de Montecrucis (d. 1300), a Dominican friar who traveled extensively in the Muslim east, visiting the Christian principality of Acre shortly before its fall and himself actually enslaved for a time by Mongol soldiers in Iraq.<sup>37</sup> In the *Confutatio*, Ricoldus also points to "Abdalla son of Sela," i.e., 'Abd Allāh b. Salām, as the Prophet's Jewish tutor, just as Alfonsi had before him.<sup>38</sup> Despite the fact that Ricoldus knew Arabic and used Muslim sources, he probably got this idea from the Cluniac *Corpus Toletanum*, which contains two works that mention Ibn Salām; one of these is probably the direct source of Alfonsi's reference to both Ibn Salām and Ka'b al-Aḥbār. That Ricoldus should have made use of older ecclesiastical sources despite his firsthand knowledge of Islam, Arabic, and Muslim culture is perhaps not so surprising; as Tolan notes, in describing the different branches of heretical Christianity in his final work, the *Libellus ad nationes orientales*, Ricoldus actually used Aquinas' descriptions of the types of Oriental heresy, even though he himself had direct acquaintance with the Eastern churches whereas Aquinas had none.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> See the discussion of Alfonsi's use of the *Risālat al-Kindī* in Tolan, *Saracens*, 60-4, as well as in the introduction to the English translation of the *Dialogus (Dialogue Against the Jews)*, 22-6, and see also the bibliography cited therein). This issue is greatly complicated by the frequent confusion of Petrus Alfonsi with Peter of Toledo, to whom the Latin translation of the *Risālat al-Kindī* is attributed; there is still no consensus as to whether the two Peters were the same individual or not.

<sup>37</sup> On Ricoldus' colorful experiences in the Muslim east and his outlook on Islam, see Tolan, *Saracens*, 245-54.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. the recent edition of Ricoldus' Latin text, printed along with the polemical work of Martin Luther largely based upon it: *Ricoldus de Montecrucis, Cofutatio Alcorani (1300)*, ed. Ehmann. Curiously, Ricoldus portrays Ibn Salām's accomplice as being not Ka'b al-Aḥbār but rather Salmān al-Fārisī, also known as Salmān Pak, who according to legend was the first *Persian* convert to Islam.

<sup>39</sup> Tolan, *Saracens*, 246.



The first work in the *Corpus Toletanum* that refers to Ibn Salām as Muhammad’s teacher is the so-called *Doctrina Mahumet*, translated by Hermann of Dalmatia; this is a rendition of one of the many extant versions of an Islamic source called the *Masā’il ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām*, in which Ibn Salām is the interlocutor whose questions provide Muhammad with a pretext for expounding his doctrinal and especially cosmographic views.<sup>40</sup> Of far greater consequence here, however, is the final piece represented in the Cluniac collection, the so-called *Rescriptum Christiani et Rescriptum Saraceni*, a translation of the document widely known as the *Risālat al-Kindī*, the aforementioned apologia for Christianity purportedly written by a courtier of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 813-33 CE).<sup>41</sup> This work was especially influential in medieval and early modern Europe due to the fact that it is a Christian apologetic written from an insider’s perspective, since al-Kindī was a learned Arab Christian immersed in Islamic culture.<sup>42</sup> Among the various fascinating details it contains, the *Risāla* draws specific attention to the fact that Muhammad had received help in composing the Quran from a Nestorian monk (who here remains anonymous) as well as two Jews, identified as Ibn Salām and Ka’b al-Aḥbār. As we have already seen, both the

---

<sup>40</sup> Europeans’ particular interest in the Islamic view of heaven and hell, strongly reflected in this text, is perhaps best represented by the apparent assimilation of themes and motifs from the *Mi’rāj* or account of the heavenly ascent of the Prophet into Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, a topic on which the great Asín Palacios wrote extensively. On the *Doctrina*, see Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 89-96.

<sup>41</sup> On the place of this work in the *Corpus*, see Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 101-7. The secondary literature on this work is quite substantial; see the discussion in Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 140-1 and references therein. An Arabic edition was produced by Tien in 1880, and an English translation by Muir followed soon after in 1882: *The Apology of al Kindy, Written at the Court of al Māmūn (A.H. 215; A.D. 830) in Defense of Christianity against Islam*.

<sup>42</sup> The work was particularly influential on both Petrus Alfonsi and Peter the Venerable, and the latter was particularly receptive to a “Mozarabic” perspective on Islam that was informed by authentic cultural proximity; see Tolán, *Saracens*, 155-65. The claim that Muhammad was taught by Jews or sought to revive Judaism is found among Eastern Christians relatively soon after the Arab conquests, and is attested in a handful of key Syriac documents from the period. (The consensus seems to be that the *Risālat al-Kindī* was in fact composed in Syriac and subsequently translated into Arabic.) These documents of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century CE most likely represent the earliest attestations of the idea of the Jewish influence on Islam. See Brock, “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam,” 11-2.

monk (in the guise of “Sergius”) and these two Jewish savants appear prominently in Alfonsi’s treatment of the origins of the *lex Mahomethi*, and it is quite likely that he too was drawing on the *Risālat al-Kindī*.

In emphasizing the role of Ibn Salām in particular, Alfonsi, Ricoldus, and the author of the original *Risālat al-Kindī* before them were all indirectly drawing on Muslim tradition itself, for Ibn Salām and Ka’b al-Aḥbār are acknowledged in classical Islamic sources as having been important informants on biblical and Jewish matters in the time of the Prophet and his Companions.<sup>43</sup> Ka’b al-Aḥbār, or “Ka’b of the rabbis,” appears quite frequently in historical, exegetical, and hadith works as an authority on Israelite history and Jewish religious practice, and more generally as an all-around sage well versed in all kinds of ancient lore. Ibn Salām is perhaps even more famous than Ka’b, for he is the very model of the good Jew in the *sīra* tradition, inasmuch as he was supposedly one of the leaders of the Jewish community of Medina who acknowledged the truth of Muhammad’s claim to prophethood. Thus, in a critical episode in the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq cast as the first-person account of Ibn Salām himself, he tells of how he rejoiced when he first heard about Muhammad, for “I recognized his description and his name and the time of his appearance, which we had anticipated”; later he declares that Muḥammad is a brother of Moses, and follows the same religion as he did. Ibn Salām is courageous enough to oppose his

---

<sup>43</sup> Of course, Ricoldus was most likely drawing *directly* on the testimony of the *Corpus Toletanum*. Kritzeck points out that it is suspicious that it is Ibn Salām and Ka’b in particular who are mentioned in the *Rescriptum Christiani*, since Ibn Salām is so prominent in the *Doctrina Mahumet* and Ka’b is the putative source of the narrative of the birth of the Prophet recounted in the *Liber Generationis Mahumet*, another section of the *Corpus*—insinuating, it seems, that the document is a late forgery (*Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 105). This is an odd position to take, inasmuch as the Syriac and Arabic versions are still extant. On the *Liber Generationis Mahumet*, see Kritzeck, 84-8. The *mawlid* narrative attributed to Ka’b that provides the basis for this latter text has recently been discussed extensively by Katz, who shows that its association with Ka’b goes at least as far back as ‘Umāra b. Wathīma (d. 289/902), and that it circulated widely in various forms before its incorporation into the *Corpus Toletanum*. See *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad*, 15-24. I thank Prof. Katz for supplying me with this material before publication.

people and hurries to convert to Islam at the hand of the Prophet himself; he must then seek his protection, for the Jews of Medina, a “nation of liars,” seek retribution against him.<sup>44</sup>

Ironies abound here. Some medieval Muslim writers execrated converts like Ka'b and Ibn Salām, casting them as a kind of Jewish fifth column seeking to subvert Islam from within; and this interpretation of these figures is the one that prevails among many Muslim ideologues today. Nevertheless, medieval Islamic texts that still portrayed Ka'b and Ibn Salām in a favorable light were incorporated into the *Corpus Toletanum* or otherwise accessed by Western Christian authors, who actually used these texts' testimony to their authority to corroborate the claims made about their corrupting influence in the *Risālat al-Kindī*. These works collectively exerted a profound impact on the European perception of Islam, particularly of the origins of the Quran, and Western scholarship eventually accepted it as axiomatic that Muhammad had had Jewish teachers, initially proceeding from the assumption that this proved the vanity and emptiness of Islam. In other words, though medieval Muslims and Christians would fundamentally disagree regarding their different perceptions of the Prophet himself, they would very likely *agree* in perceiving the influence of Ka'b and Ibn Salām—genuine or alleged—as pernicious.

\*\*\*

Thus, although this was almost certainly not intentional, by intimating Muhammad's extensive borrowing of Jewish material, Geiger ironically continued the legacy of European Christian polemic against Islam, in that he implicitly cast Muhammad as an opportunist (albeit a

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīra al-nabawiya*, 1.516-7. In the much-discussed story of the adulterous couple whom the Jews brought before Muhammad for judgment, the individual who points out the Jews' deceitful concealment of scripture (the archetypal demonstration of Jewish *tahrīf*) is often identified as Ibn Salām. See Adang, *Muslim Writers*, 193-4 and references therein. Wasserstrom sees the narratives about Ibn Salām in particular as a deliberate mythologization of the type of the “respected witness,” a figure through whom older Jewish traditions can be partially validated, inasmuch as they can be made to provide legitimacy to the new faith of Islam and testify to its truth; see *Between Muslim and Jew*, 172-80.

sincere one) who had deliberately appealed to Jews and Christians through a Machiavellian appropriation of materials familiar to them from their own scriptures. Further, as we have just shown, the polemical characterization of Muhammad by Christians was in some way facilitated by their Muslim informants, inasmuch as classical Islamic tradition acknowledged its partial reliance on Jewish sages in its early history. Admittedly, traditional European polemic gave as much weight to the Christian elements (however distorted) in Muhammad's message as to the Jewish, if not more; however, with the work of Geiger, the Jewish element comes to the fore.

Arguably, this shift in emphasis was due primarily to Geiger's own disciplinary orientation and ideological predisposition. However, the specific emphasis on Judaism reflected in the invitation issued by the Faculty of Philosophy at Bonn may also represent a particular change in European perceptions, inasmuch as heightening the Jewish aspect of Muhammad's *Bildung* may reflect contemporary anti-Semitism. The popularity of the Jewish theme in particular may also be due to the underlying assumption of a basic identity between "biblical" and "Jewish," especially relating to the question of the transmission of biblical and parascriptural data in a Semitic context. Finally, from an objective standpoint, as many commentators have noted, Jews and Judaism do objectively seem to occupy a more prominent place in Quranic discourse in general than Christians and Christianity.

All this having been said, it appears almost indisputable that it was Geiger's seminal work that was primarily responsible for popularizing the concept of the Jewish influence on Islam. Even given the strong shift towards increasingly virulent anti-Semitism in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century European culture, we can see a kind of "Judeo-Christian" symbiosis in the construction of an image of a heavily Judaized Islam in this period: a medieval European Christian trope, itself informed by older Muslim sources, was taken over by a Jewish Orientalist, reoriented ideologically and bolstered philologically, and then communicated to a new audience of European Orientalists, Christians *and* Jews. For these later generations of Orientalists, despite continuing interest in Christian elements in Islam in its formative period, Geiger's dependency

narrative became axiomatic, and its reiteration over decades then made it increasingly resistant to historical revision.<sup>45</sup> Although the explicitly negative connotations of this paradigm largely dissipated over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fact that the traditional dependency narrative is still available today for deployment by Spencer in a thinly-veiled, pseudoscholarly polemic against the Prophet Muhammad demonstrates that this age-old trope endures as a significant undercurrent in the Western scholarship on Islam today.<sup>46</sup>

As noted above, Geiger's own work was animated by an interest in promoting an image of Judaism as the authentic core of both Christianity and Islam, its "daughter religions." However, the idealization of Judaism as perpetual donor in modern scholarship is arguably also due to the basically Protestant roots of the academic discourse on religion; it may be seen as a reflex of the Christian relegation of Judaism to the role of superseded ancestor, exactly the perspective that, as Heschel vividly demonstrates, Geiger so desperately wished to overthrow. Even as Western scholarship on Islam increasingly transitioned from theology to philology—an evolution strongly encouraged by Geiger himself—the basic "fact" of Judaism's historical priority to Christianity and Islam helped to endow the established notion of Jewish precedence with a quasi-historical veneer. The theological roots of Western academic discourse help to explain why a unidirectional

---

<sup>45</sup> Geiger's approach was communicated to his contemporaries extremely rapidly, many of whom were among the most prominent and influential Orientalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including Weil (already discussed above), Nöldeke, and eventually even Sprenger (some of Geiger's insights and criticisms were incorporated into his 1889 *Mohammed und der Koran: Eine psychologische Studie*). Again, to some extent, the success of Geiger's work may be partially explained by the fact that at that time, European Orientalism still had profound roots in the medieval polemical tradition, laying the essential groundwork and ensuring that a substantial and well-informed treatment of the theme of "Jewish influence" would be well received. For a recent critique of the dependency narrative as taken over by Sprenger and Nöldeke in particular, see Gilliot, "Les <<Informateurs>> Juifs et Chrétiens de Muhammad."

<sup>46</sup> Spencer is not the first author in modern times to revive the traditional dependency narrative for explicitly polemical purposes at a politically charged moment. In the mid-1950s, during the Algerian war of independence, a French cleric published a study, *L'Islam, entreprise juive de Moïse à Mohammed*, portraying Muhammad as the puppet of rabbis who exploited Arab credulity to spread a new form of crypto-Judaism around the world. Both Jeffery and Jomier produced negative reviews condemning the author's willful and virulent distortions; see Rodinson, "Modern Studies on Muhammad," 55-6.

model of cultural transmission, based on the presumed antiquity and superiority of Jewish scriptural knowledge, became so strongly entrenched as a bedrock principle of historical research: it is ultimately a consequence of the traditional Christian perception of Judaism both as an unchanging, static entity and as the very definition of a thing of the past.

### 3. “*Isrā’īliyyāt*” and the Islamic tradition’s own accounts of Jewish influence

The case of Ibn Salām and Ka’b al-Aḥbār and their putative tutelage of the Prophet makes the problem of the Jewish influence on Islam more acute, for in the portrayal of these characters in the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq and other classical sources, Islamic tradition itself appears to recognize Jewish influence during its formative period, at least in some limited way. That is, the approach taken by Geiger and his successors seems to be partially validated, inasmuch as important agents of that influence who are implicitly recognized as conduits for the passage of Jewish (or more diffusely “biblical”) knowledge into Islam are acknowledged in the historical record (at least according to Islamic tradition’s *representation* of the record). Naturally, for Muslims it is never an issue of Jewish influence on *Muhammad* per se, since the Quran is of course understood to be a revealed text—indeed, the purest and most perfect of revealed texts—and they thus reject the thesis of Muhammad’s direct authorship of the scripture entirely, to say nothing of any allegation of his “borrowing” anything from Jewish sources. Instead, Muslims account for the evident parallels between the Quran and the Bible through the doctrine of God’s serial revelation to humanity; insofar as the scriptures of Jews and Christians resemble the Quran, this is solely due to the retention of some traits and traces of the original revelation in these lesser scriptures. But insofar as the scriptures of Jews and Christians *deviate* from the Quran, this is attributed to *tahrīf*—the perverse corruption of the Jewish Torah and Christian Bible through these communities’ neglect and mendaciousness.

Nevertheless, the scholarly emphasis on Islam’s fundamental dependence on Judaism would appear to be at least partially vindicated by the Islamic tradition’s recognition that substantial amounts of lore regarding historical, exegetical, and even cultic matters were transmitted to early Muslim authorities by Jewish informants. Such lore would eventually come to be called *isrā’īliyyāt*, a term that has distinctly negative connotations for medieval and modern Muslims. The Islamic tradition’s own assertion of its early reliance on Jewish converts and

savants for scriptural information has in turn become axiomatic in contemporary historical research; further, in the face of reports concerning the conspicuous interest in Judaism found among early Muslims (and even attributed to the Prophet himself), it is but a small step to conclude the derivative nature of the Quran as well—not that Western scholars ever needed to adduce arguments in support of such a conclusion, since the Quran itself seems to supply ample proof in this regard, at least when its contents are evaluated in the light of Geiger’s dependency paradigm.<sup>47</sup>

The thesis of the Jewish influence on the Quran is thus to some extent overdetermined. On the one hand, Muslim tradition itself notes that in many circumstances the early community found itself under the tutelage of Jews, and based on this admission, one can easily extrapolate this principle to Muḥammad and the Quran as well; on the other hand, as we have seen, the idea of Muhammad’s direct reliance on Jewish tradition in fabricating the Quran was a mainstay of early modern Orientalism, not to mention a holdover from the European Christian polemical tradition. However, it must be acknowledged that many modern scholars have attempted to employ the dependency paradigm in a more sophisticated fashion; particularly as regards the dissemination of the so-called *isrā’īliyyāt* in the early decades and centuries *anno hegirae*, exploration of the theme of Jewish influence has at times stimulated constructive new insights. Even though such scholarship still invokes the language of borrowing and dependence, in some quarters, demonstrating the Jewish influence on Islam has not been an end in itself—as it generally has been for those aforementioned scholars whose works merely *catalogue* these purported

---

<sup>47</sup> A novel exception to this is the recent treatment by Firestone, “Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam,” which emphasizes the accounts about Ka’b and Ibn Salām as evidence of a genuine *encounter* between the nascent Islamic tradition and Arabian Judaism, without placing undue stress on the influence of the latter upon the former. Firestone’s presentation of these figures is somewhat overly positivistic at times: though he recognizes that the accounts of people like Ka’b are “enveloped in legend,” he nevertheless sees the historical accounts about the early “Jews of Islam” as basically reliable. For a critique of such an approach to the narratives about these Jewish Companions, see my “*Isrā’īliyyāt*, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy: Wahb b. Munabbih and the Early Islamic Versions of the Fall of Adam and Eve” [forthcoming].



influences—but rather has provided the context for exploring the social and religious dynamics of the early Muslim community.

For example, Gordon Newby's breakthrough article "Tafsir Isra'iliyyat" (1979) seeks to illuminate the specific social context in which Muslim borrowing from Jews supposedly took place. Newby conjectures that in the wake of the Arab conquests in the early decades AH, converts to Islam from among the subject populations of the monotheist communities of the Near East sought to gain prestige and influence with their Arab overlords by trafficking in *isrā'īliyyāt*, here unambiguously understood as scripturally-derived knowledge of the pre-Islamic past. Whereas the Arabs had distinct advantages in terms of both authority and putative noble birth, what they typically lacked was basic access to the credentials scriptural learning could bestow on individuals who had received some religious training. Thus, the Muslim appropriation of Jewish (and Christian) scriptural and extra-scriptural information was driven by the rise of the *mawālī*, who could compete as equals—or even claim superiority—in the emerging realm of religious discourse. According to Newby's model, then, we should construe *isrā'īliyyāt* as a kind of cultural capital that learned converts could exploit for distinct material and cultural advantage.

Newby's conception of the social dynamics informing the transmission of scriptural knowledge from Jews and Christians to the early Muslim community represents a quantum leap beyond the far more simplistic approach of Geiger and other scholars who have emphasized Muhammad's borrowing from Jewish informants as the central phenomenon in the discourse surrounding the influence of older traditions on Islam. Nevertheless, the new paradigm Newby establishes is still lacking in various respects, and perhaps points to the innate shortcomings of any model of cultural diffusion that overemphasizes the unidirectional movement of ideas. His analysis still deprives Muslims of agency in the process of borrowing; it still characterizes the material in question as unambiguously "derivative"; and, most strikingly, it overstates the coherence of the boundary between Jews and Muslims in the first decades of the Hijrī era, a

notion once taken absolutely for granted by scholars that has been increasingly called into question in recent years.<sup>48</sup>

Newby's analysis is in large part based on the tacit assumption that *isrā'īliyyāt* is a category that dates back to earliest Islamic times, when the process of the transmission and dissemination of scriptural data purportedly first began. This assumption remained virtually unchallenged until the work of Calder in the 1990s and has since been definitively disproved by Tottoli, who has shown that the term *isrā'īliyyāt* is not attested at all before the mid-4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century and did not enter wide circulation until the 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century at the very earliest. Tottoli draws particular attention to the work of the influential Ḥanbalite jurists Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), whose pejorative use of the term is well known.<sup>49</sup> He demonstrates that rather than adopting a classification that was already an operative category in Islamic tradition and merely endowing it with a new, negative connotation, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr in fact *pioneered* the use of *isrā'īliyyāt* as a substantive category in the evaluation of the received tradition handed down from earliest Islamic times, deliberately deploying the term polemically in order to condemn and dismiss objectionable material as problematically "Jewish."<sup>50</sup> It is clear from their largely arbitrary invocation of the term that it by no means reflects a neutral ascription of authentic Jewish provenance that can be uncritically adopted by scholars seeking to reconstruct

---

<sup>48</sup> See Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," for a concise and suggestive discussion of the issue of the evolution of Muslim identity in the primitive *umma*, and also Elad's critique, "Community of Believers of 'Holy Men' and 'Saints' or Community of Muslims?"

<sup>49</sup> For a concise overview of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr's milieu, see Northrup, "The Bahṛī Mamlūk Sultanate, 1250-1390."

<sup>50</sup> Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īliyyāt*." Cf. Calder, "*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr" (1993), 137, n. 37: "The word *isrā'īliyyāt* has nothing to do with the actual origins of a story, which might or might not be Jewish, might or might not be known to the Muslim exegetes; it always indicates a theological objection to some narrative detail and is mostly used carelessly and polemically..." The specific attention Muslim polemicists paid to objectionable narrative details in Jewish scripture is demonstrated vividly by the text given by al-Mas'ūdī in his *Murūj al-dhahab* of a disputation between a Copt and Jew, where purported Jewish calumnies against the prophets are enumerated at some length (see Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 78-80 for discussion of this text). Intriguingly, according to Tottoli, the earliest occurrence of the term *isrā'īliyyāt* occurs in the work of al-Mas'ūdī, albeit in a different context.

a textually-accessible historical setting for the original transmission of such material. Rather, it is a selectively employed polemical device that tells us much about debates over the authority of tradition and the reception of classical sources by religious scholars living in the *eighth* century AH, but rather little about the intellectual and religious exchanges between Jews and Muslims that might have occurred in the *first*. Further, as Tottoli shows, the term was not adopted by the scholarly mainstream immediately, but took quite some time to reach the point where it became a staple of the learned tradition, from whence it entered modernist discourse in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Overall, it seems that the widespread use of the term *isrā'īliyyāt* is more or less a modern phenomenon, its ancient roots having simply been taken for granted by scholars till now.<sup>51</sup>

Anticipating Tottoli's thorough demolition of *isrā'īliyyāt* as a substantive category for analysis of the early Islamic milieu, beginning in the 1980s, some scholars questioned the validity of the traditional emphasis on the role of Jewish influence in the study of early Muslim literature and the Quran entirely. It is perhaps undeniable that the Jews of Arabia and later of the conquered territories of the Near East subjected to Muslim dominion in the first century AH must have acted as conduits for at least part of the massive flood of biblical material attested in the Quran and later Muslim sources. Nevertheless, it has become clear that the prevailing emphasis on Muhammad's purported "debt" to Jewish or Christian informants for his scriptural knowledge is not the most fruitful hermeneutic approach for scholars of the Quran to adopt. Further, it can be shown that Jewish influence on the Quran or on later Muslim sources has in fact usually just been assumed, and, as at least a few scholars have now recognized, in many cases such allegations are simply unwarranted.

---

<sup>51</sup> Tottoli emphasizes in particular the role of Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and his disciple Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) in popularizing the use of the term.

#### 4. Resistance to (and reiterations of) the influence paradigm

Even though the myth of Jewish priority promoted by Geiger has been prevalent in Western scholarship on Islam and the Quran in particular since the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would be an overstatement to claim that it has enjoyed universal popularity, for this paradigm has been repeatedly challenged in various ways. As we have already noted, the emphasis placed on the Jewish influence on Muhammad by Geiger and his followers was gradually taken up in more general treatments of the life of the Prophet; thus, Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* (1877) and Margoliouth's *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (1905) both seem to reflect, to some degree, the percolation of Geiger's more specialized research into the field of Islamic Studies as a whole. Thus the basic dependency narrative stressed by Geiger inevitably crossed over from studies of the Quran per se to more broadly conceived biographies of the Prophet, and then to general surveys on Islam as well. However, the diffusion of the paradigm established by Geiger was not an entirely negative development, inasmuch as his more eirenic stance was also communicated to other scholars, and eventually the general reading public, as well.

In early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship, we see not only a continuation of these general trends but also some rudimentary attempts at refining the dependency narrative; this development was probably inevitable, given that the overarching emphasis on Muhammad's debt to his sources might have seemed to be at odds with the increasingly conciliatory approach adopted by many scholars. Thus, in 1932, with the publication of Andræ's influential *Mohamed: Sein Leben und seine Glaube*, we see the emergence of a more sophisticated model for investigating the origins of the Quran, albeit one that was still at times tied to the quest to uncover the cultural and religious elements that had functioned as the seminal influences upon Muhammad himself.<sup>52</sup> Here, Andræ pays a great deal of attention to the impact of Nestorian monasticism on the Prophet in particular; nevertheless, he also emphasizes that Muhammad's vision represented a unique combination of

---

<sup>52</sup> I have consulted the 1936 English edition, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, here.

preexisting elements in his religious environment—essentially, that the resulting whole was much greater than its constituent parts, whatever those might have been.<sup>53</sup> However, in contrast to Andræ’s emphasis on the necessity of appreciating the whole picture when evaluating Muhammad’s thought rather than various vectors of influence, two works that followed soon after seemed to reiterate the older dependency narrative familiar from the works of Geiger and his 19<sup>th</sup>-century followers—Torrey’s *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (1933), which we have already mentioned, as well as Ahrens’ *Muhammed als Religionsstifter* (1935), which placed a particularly heavy and even deterministic emphasis on the Christian influences on the Prophet, in a much less nuanced way than Andræ had.

These latter works were soundly criticized by several prominent scholars of the day, Fück and Von Grunebaum among them, and these critiques seem to represent some of the first overt expressions of resistance to the reliance on dependency narrative, which had by this point become quite traditional in Western scholarship on Islam. In particular, Fück’s response, “Die Originalität des arabischen Propheten” (1936), may be considered to have initiated, or at least spurred new interest in, research into the social and political implications of Muhammad’s message, complemented by an attempt to appreciate the particular use he made of preexisting terms and concepts in formulating his own ideas, without recourse to either the language of “influence” or psychological determinism.<sup>54</sup> (Notably, these were flaws which Fück detected even in Andræ’s more progressive and deliberately non-reductive treatment.) This particular emphasis on the social and political implications of the Quranic message and its relevance for Muhammad’s contemporaries, rather than on its constituent parts, seems to reflect a more general interest in social-scientific interpretations of dynamic religious movements current at the time. This trend

---

<sup>53</sup> Andræ’s discussion is also noteworthy for his consideration of the possible contributions made to nascent Islam by marginalized or sectarian groups; for example, see his incisive discussion of the possible Gnostic, Ebionite, Manichaeian or “Sabian” background to the Quranic use of the term *hanīf*, which in many respects anticipates the much better informed work of Shlomo Pines (cf. *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, 102-11).

<sup>54</sup> Fück, “On the Originality of the Arabian Prophet.”

culminates, it seems, in the work of W. Montgomery Watt; in his *magna opera*, *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (1956), Watt studiously avoids recourse to dependency narrative in his discussion of Muhammad's message, and focuses instead on a conception of original Islam as a movement primarily aimed at attaining social reform and economic justice.<sup>55</sup>

Notably, although they span almost a century and a half, what all of the aforementioned treatments from Geiger to Watt have in common is that they all take absolutely for granted that Muhammad wrote the Quran. Proceeding from this basic observation, then, all of these works may be taken to be representative of two competing models for evaluating the Prophet's religious vision: they may emphasize either the *origins* of his revelation or its ultimate *function* and *purpose*, but common to both approaches is the idea that the Quran is actually the direct product of the literary activity of the historical Prophet Muhammad. However, two major developments in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century pertaining to broader methodological issues have worked to discourage scholars from continuing in this vein. First, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars became increasingly aware of the hostility the reductionism of Western accounts of the Prophet and the Quran aroused in Muslims. Further, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, learned Muslims from a wide variety of intellectual backgrounds—some with credentials from Western institutions of learning, and a few writing from within the Anglo-American and European academies themselves—began to produce critiques of the traditional Western scholarly portrayal of Islam's origins, challenging the fundamental framework of inquiry taken for granted by generations of scholars.

---

<sup>55</sup> In his review of modern scholarship on the life of the Prophet, Rodinson notes that Watt's work actually represents a *return* to an interest in social context, an approach first adopted by Grimme in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (emphasizing the "socialist" character of Muhammad's message!) that fell into recession after Snouck Hurgronje's devastating critique of Grimme ("Modern Studies on Muhammad," 46-7). In his survey, Rodinson shows repeatedly that the tendency to view Islam through the lenses of Jewish and Christian comparanda was a particular obsession of late-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship (see esp. 25, 54-6). Rodinson himself emphasizes the urgent need for an acknowledgement of Islam's organic connections to its wider religious environment to be balanced with an appreciation for its original formulations and inherent dynamism.

Such critique has sometimes proceeded from clearly apologetic presuppositions. For example, in her *Islam and Orientalism* (1981), Jameelah deconstructs several of the main premises of Goitein's *Jews and Arabs* (first published in 1955 and published in revised form in 1964 and 1974).<sup>56</sup> Much of her discussion of Goitein's approach to the Jewish influences on Islam (relatively nuanced for his time, but admittedly still heavily characterized by the language of debt and dependence) relies frequently upon modern Muslim apologetic literature, the strident assertions of which are taken as irrefutable historical fact. On the one hand, it is difficult not to agree with Jameelah's blunt response to Goitein's point-by-point enumeration of areas of similarity between Islamic and Jewish civilization, which he clearly insinuates are largely products of Muslim borrowing from or contact with Jews: "the correct explanation for these similarities lies in a common origin rather than conscious, direct borrowing one from the other. Again and again throughout history it has been demonstrated how people sharing common beliefs can and do develop the same system of ideas independently."<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, Jameelah's arguments against Goitein's assertions are often bluntly theological in nature; for example, against the allegation that Islam is a syncretic construct cobbled together by Muhammad out of disparate borrowed elements, Jameelah notes that all such "artificial" religions have inevitably

---

<sup>56</sup> Goitein, well known as the main authority on the Cairo Geniza in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote two of the most influential studies on Muhammad's Jewish sources in the 1950s: "Who Were the Sage Teachers of Muhammad" [Heb.] (1952) and "Muhammad's Inspiration by Judaism" (1958). His monumental *Jews and Arabs*, for decades the standard work on Jewish-Muslim relations and exchanges, contains much material on this subject. The 1964 and 1974 revisions of the work took contemporary political developments into account, not always felicitously. The last line of Goitein's 1952 article (which actually recurs in his treatment of the Jewish influence on Islam in *Jews and Arabs*) sums up his approach succinctly: "All the fundamental concepts of the Quran—faith in a just and merciful God, the Lord of Creation, before Whom each and every person is individually accountable—these came forth in Judaism long before the time of the emergence of Christianity. The magnificent battle, such as it was, that Muhammad won over his Arab kinsmen was already decided many centuries before on the hills of Judea" (159); cf. the nearly identical formulation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. of *Jews and Arabs* (1974), 58.

<sup>57</sup> *Islam and Orientalism*, 82.

failed; the success of Islam, to the contrary, proves that it is truly based upon divine revelation.<sup>58</sup> As further “proof” against the Orientalist depiction of Islam as a syncretic creation of the Prophet, she then cites an apologetic tract by a former professor of *tafsīr* at al-Azhar at length; here, the divine origin of the Quran is supposedly demonstrated by the fact that scripture itself refutes the claims of Muhammad’s contemporaries that the work was only a human creation.<sup>59</sup> In short, an admittedly questionable paradigm for historical inquiry is critiqued, however ineffectually, through reference to time-honored theological principles and apologetic methods.<sup>60</sup>

However, especially after the publication of Said’s *Orientalism* in 1977, Muslim intellectuals and scholars adjusted their approach, grounding it in cultural-critical and political rather than explicitly religious terms. Thus, whereas earlier counter-narratives of Islam’s origins written by Muslims who objected to the claims of Western scholars had often been theologically driven and transparently apologetic, in the 1980s and thereafter, these counter-narratives have increasingly taken on the language of postcolonial critique. Western scholars’ traditional emphasis on the use of dependency narrative could now be challenged as fundamentally imperialist, a “colonization” of someone else’s history; further, due to the particular importance of accounts like Geiger’s that trace Muhammad’s message back to seminal Jewish influences and sources, Muslim counter-narratives of this era quickly took on anti-Zionist rhetoric as well, especially after 1967. Though clearly religiously motivated, even Jameelah’s account contains a

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>59</sup> Draz, “The Origin of Islam,” 23-9, cited in Jameelah, *Islam and Orientalism*, 77-80. A similar style of argument can be found in Khalifa, *The Sublime Qur’ān and Orientalism*, 13-7. As Jameelah’s use of Draz and other apologists indicates, critical studies of this sort in Western languages draw on a long tradition of apologetic literature in the various languages of the Muslim world. Notably, anti-*isrā’īliyyāt* works have thrived in Arabic since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following the precedent set by ‘Abduh and Riḍā.

<sup>60</sup> As mentioned previously in connection with the work of Katsh, Jameelah was actually a Western-educated convert who came from a Jewish background herself. *Islam and Orientalism* is virtually riddled with alarmist denunciations of the Western, and especially Jewish, conspiracy against Islam.



strong anti-imperialist strain. For example, in the abovementioned critique of Goitein's *Jews and Arabs*, she repeatedly takes him to task for his many patronizing and blatantly Zionist statements, for example when he proposes that the surest path to peace between the Arabs and Israel is for the Arabs to embrace Westernization and secularization just as the Jews have; this will supposedly free them from their insular and tradition-bound ways and allow them to understand and appreciate the many great contributions to civilization the Jews have made over the centuries.<sup>61</sup>

Besides the emergence of Muslim resistance to the traditional dependency narrative, another major development in scholarship since the 1970s has exerted a decisive impact on contemporary treatments of Islamic origins and forced the influence paradigm to go underground, as it were, if not to be abandoned completely. While criticism of mainstream scholarship from Muslim quarters emphasizes the believer's perspective that Muhammad did not write the Quran as a viewpoint that needs to be acknowledged, or at the very least demonstrates the problematic emphasis on subordinating the Prophet's vision to deterministic Jewish or Christian influences, criticism from another quarter entirely has called into question the validity of the traditional prioritizing of the historical Muhammad as the source of the Quran for completely different reasons.

Although many of the most radical claims of the so-called revisionist school, most famously (or notoriously) represented by John Wansbrough and his students Michael Cook, Patricia Crone, John Burton, and Norman Calder, have been criticized on various grounds, the work of Wansbrough and his students has introduced a fundamental uncertainty among scholars of Islam regarding the solidity of what we know—or think we know—about the origin and

---

<sup>61</sup> Jameelah, *Islam and Orientalism*, 87-96. "Anti-Orientalist" literature by Muslims has now proliferated in various Western languages as well as in the languages of the Muslim world, often combining traditional apologetic, anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism, and postcolonial or subaltern cultural critique. An early and noteworthy fusion of at least the first two elements can be found in the 1946 piece by Maḥmūd Abū Rayya, a follower of Rashīd Riḍā: "Ka'b al-Aḥbār, the Original Zionist"! This piece has received significant scholarly attention: see Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īliyyāt*," 209-10; Juynboll, *Authenticity of the Tradition Literature*, 130-7; Nettler, "Early Islam, Modern Islam and Judaism."

development of Islam. This uncertainty extends far beyond the issue of whether or not Muhammad can fairly be represented as the author of the Quran; rather, the advent of revisionism has made many doubt if Muhammad even existed, or what we can know for sure about him, or even whether Islam is really a product of pre-Islamic Arabia, or of a truly polytheistic society. Although most scholars working in the field today cannot or would not accept the most radical positions proposed (or at least implied) by works such as *Hagarism* (1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu* (1978), the most enduring contribution of the revisionist critique has been the demonstration of the basic unreliability of the vast majority of our sources for much of the history of the first and even second century AH.<sup>62</sup>

These two trends—an increased sympathy for the Muslim perspective and a desire to reorient scholarly paradigms to render them more ecumenical on the one hand, and a contrasting skepticism regarding virtually all aspects of the traditional picture of Islamic origins on the other—have together militated against a continuing deployment of the dependency narrative in its classic form. The problem is not simply that scholars must find a way to describe the influences on Muhammad in more sensitive and nuanced terms, although this has certainly been a concern; it is also that a basic uncertainty concerning the very existence of the historical Prophet and even the Quran's origins in the Ḥijāz in the late 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> century CE has become pervasive. Both of these trends appear to present substantial, if not insurmountable, obstacles to the pursuit of any scholarly project that seeks to evaluate the Quran in its historical context, let alone any that attempts to take into account the personality of its putative author or the function of the revelation in his milieu. Put simply, we can no longer take for granted the author, the milieu, the original state of the revelation, or the language or paradigm one should employ in relating that revelation to its presumptive precursors.

---

<sup>62</sup> For a useful summation of the *status quaestionis*, see Robinson, "Reconstructing Early Islam: Truth and Consequences," and also the extremely useful essay of Lewinstein on the pedagogical implications of the revisionist perspective, "Recent Critical Scholarship and the Teaching of Islam."

\*\*\*

Arguably, this situation presents an impasse that continues to impede the refinement of scholarly paradigms for investigation of the Quran.<sup>63</sup> One noteworthy trend in recent scholarship has been the depersonalization of the Quran, that is, an attempt to read the revelation as wholly disconnected from any external context whatsoever. Thus, for example, Madigan's study *The Qur'an's Self-Image* (2001)—the title of which speaks for itself—attempts to let the *Quran* “speak for itself,” inasmuch as Madigan's specific focus is on the internal dynamics of Quranic discourse, deliberately skirting issues of authorship and origins. In this, Madigan explicitly follows the methodology of Izutsu, who pioneered the analysis of Quranic semiotics in his *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (1964) and *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (1966).<sup>64</sup> Another noteworthy trend is an emphasis on phenomenology, discussing the Quran as it is experienced or understood by Muslims, or in terms of its influence in various realms of Muslim cultural expression, thus abstracting it from the question of origins entirely.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> The impasse is vividly reflected in two recent reference works. In the new *Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (ed. Rippin), two essays are pertinent to the issue of origins: that by Saeed (“Contextualizing”) gives an account of origins that is wholly traditional, while that by Berg (“Context: Muhammad”) strikes an agnostic tone but ultimately sides with the revisionists. The new *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* (ed. McAuliffe) similarly hedges its bets: the essay by Donner relates the traditional account, while that by Motzki explicitly addresses alternative accounts. Neither volume has an article specifically dedicated to the problem of “influences” or the Quran's obvious ‘family resemblances’ to other contemporary scriptural traditions per se. However, the Rippin volume does contain Carter's essay on “Foreign Vocabulary,” which intriguingly surveys possible loan-words in the Quran and treats the traditional Muslim debates on the issue thoroughly, though Carter never really addresses the deeper implications of the phenomenon he discusses.

<sup>64</sup> See discussion of Madigan below. This emphasis on semiotics and “letting the text speak for itself” was to some degree anticipated by the study of Waldman, also to be discussed below.

<sup>65</sup> Already in 1985, in the groundbreaking *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (ed. Martin), the respective treatments of the Quran and the Prophet by Graham and Waugh reflect a distinct emphasis on phenomenology, discussing the Quran as *experienced* by Muslims and Muhammad as *perceived* by Muslims, rather than focusing on origins or history. In the recent *Teaching Islam*

In other cases, the question of influence has necessarily assumed a more subtle and oblique position in accounts of the rise of Islam. For example, many textbooks in particular continue to open with discussions of the general role of scripture, especially postcanonical interpretation and narrative elaborations, in the late antique milieu, implicitly asserting some connection between the Quran and the Jewish and Christian scriptural, parascriptural, and exegetical expressions that preceded it. This approach is obviously not invalid in itself, and overlaps with an increasing tendency in scholarship to relate the early Islamic period, its norms, fundamental concepts, institutions, and the like to broader cultural and religious developments in the centuries just preceding. To some degree, then, discussion of Judaism, Christianity, and other major religious movements of Late Antiquity (especially in the context of social, political, and cultural trends outside of Arabia, especially late Roman and Sasanian *engagements* with Arabia) in treatments of the rise of Islam in fact represents an improvement over older treatments that prioritize the Arabian milieu above all else, or otherwise make it seem as if Islam simply emerged *sui generis*, disconnected from everything that came before.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, however, many of these treatments leave the specific question of how diverse pre-Islamic scriptural traditions may have contributed to, been reflected in, or otherwise “influenced” the Quran open, and tensions and contradictions inevitably emerge. A striking

---

(ed. Wheeler), the essay on the Quran by McAuliffe highlights the necessity of acknowledging and adopting a variety of perspectives and methods, likewise effectively skirting the problem of origins (note, however, that the aforementioned essay by Lewinstein addressing some of the pedagogical implications of revisionism is also included in this volume).

<sup>66</sup> As Wansbrough, Hawting, and others have pointed out, the emphasis on the Jāhiliyya as representing Islam’s originary matrix by Western scholars recapitulates the perspective of traditional Islamic scholarship to some degree; by highlighting the contrast between the pure monotheism of Muhammad’s vision and traditional Arabian polytheism, the uniqueness of the former is thus stressed, obviating the more conspicuous parallels with contemporary Judaism and Christianity. Some would even suggest that the Jāhili emphasis serves to relocate and recontextualize the source of Islam from an originally non-Arabian environment, or at least from a non-*Hijāzī* environment. At the very least, it seems that especially beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, an increasingly strident focus on Islam’s specifically Arabian origins becomes apparent in the sources. Besides the works of Wansbrough, cf. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*; Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence*, esp. 161-97; Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, *passim* but esp. 88-110.

example of this is the presentation of the origins of the Quran found in Berkey's *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*. Berkey's work, a recent survey that successfully incorporates numerous advances in the scholarship on early Islam in particular from the last few decades, is especially valuable for the subtle and sophisticated way in which it treats the subject of emergent Islam's relationship to the late antique milieu. In discussing the Quran and other phenomena, Berkey stresses the importance of "the complicated story of creative interaction" between communities, especially Judaism and Islam, and he is particularly cautious about invoking the old dependency narrative:

[T]he complicated story of creative interaction between Judaism and Islam... involved more than the borrowing by a new faith of the religious artifacts of an older one. Ideas and stories that we would now identify as "Jewish" probably circulated more widely in late antique Arabia than is commonly suspected, and so the boundaries there between Judaism, Christianity, early Islam, even the "pagan" traditions of pre-Islamic Arabia, are not always easy to discern.<sup>67</sup>

Here, Berkey is obviously striving to avoid unthinking resort to the model of Islam's development favored since the time of Geiger. However, his remarks about Muhammad in particular sometimes betray the fact that he, like many other modern scholars, has simply cloaked the traditional dependency narrative in language that suggests a more gradual and amorphous—and less baldly *transactive*—concept of influence, while nevertheless managing to foreground the question of influences at the same time. This takes the form, here and elsewhere, of recourse to a diffusionist model of cultural communication, one which still marks scripture as the discrete property (the "religious artifacts") of one community transferred to another:

---

<sup>67</sup> Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, 65.

...the Koran at one point seems to suggest an understanding that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity involved the deification of Mary as well as Jesus. But Muhammad, and even more importantly his audience, clearly had gleaned something, either from Jews or Christians resident in Mecca, or from others they encountered during the course of commercial expeditions outside of the Hijaz. Hence the “referential” character of the Koran, its tendency to allude to stories about the Biblical prophets in a fashion which presumes a certain level of familiarity with the underlying and unexpressed narratives.<sup>68</sup>

Berkey’s references for his point about the “referential” character of the Quran are relatively recent works by Wansbrough and Rippin, but in point of fact, scholars have for quite some time made much of the allusive quality of Quranic narrative. Specifically, characterizing Quranic narrative as “allusive” or “referential” is a way of acknowledging that something seems to be missing, and this then provides scholars with a pretext for filling in the blanks, which, as we have seen, has often been done by arguing that the Quran is misquoting or garbling a story otherwise known through (and implicitly derived from) Jewish or Christian tradition. Of course, it is obvious that the Quran’s audience must have understood subtle or partial allusions to episodes known to them. But the problem is that historically, this point has often been asserted as a justification for uncontrolled speculation about the wider context of these allusions, when in most cases we have little basis for judging how much, or which, of the preexisting scriptural or legendary traditions really *is* presupposed by these allusions. As we shall see, following in Geiger’s footsteps, scholars have tended to give themselves free rein in filling in the blanks when deemed necessary, especially when doing so then corroborates their prejudices about the nature of the Quran and its putative background and audience.

The other major problem with Berkey’s account is its clear reliance on what we have termed a diffusionist model, specifically as it relates to the pre-Islamic Arabian milieu. Here, diffusionism seems like a way to avoid talking about the putative influences on the Prophet

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 63.

*himself*. According to Berkey's presentation, Muhammad is not an *author* per se, let alone one who labored under the direct tutelage of Jews; on the other hand, one gets the sense here that something is clearly being transmitted from Jews and Christians to pagans, as Muhammad and his audience "clearly had gleaned something" from the People of the Book. Diffusionism also often has the effect of reducing the conversation to a discussion of the "legendary," which, as we have seen, was the approach already taken by Weil in 1845. The dependency narrative still seems to be latent here, inasmuch as one does not get the sense from Berkey's account that Jews, Christians, and Arabians could have possibly engaged in a conversation about biblical tradition—or rather, *Abrahamic* tradition—as equals, despite the clear signs that the pre-Islamic Arabs were very likely already active, if not full-fledged, participants in that discourse.<sup>69</sup>

\*\*\*

Another development, one that has particular relevance for our project here, is the attempt by several scholars to rethink the dominant paradigm of the Jewish influence on Islam entirely, either by reversing the traditional gradient of influence predicated on the axiom of Jewish priority—e.g., by exploring instances of the Muslim influence on Judaism—, by attempting to interrogate the very concept of "influence," or both. As we have already mentioned, scholars have

---

<sup>69</sup> To some degree, my criticism of Berkey is unfair, inasmuch as anyone who wishes to make some kind of introductory-level presentation of Islamic origins, whether in the classroom or in a textbook, is perhaps hopelessly trapped, especially as one major aspect of newer scholarship on early Islam, the increasing emphasis on the impact of the late antique Roman and Sasanian milieu instead of on that of the Jāhili Arab environment, does often tend to lead one even *more* ineluctably towards reiteration of the dependency narrative. That is, the more embedded in a sophisticated religious and cultural milieu populated by Jews and Christians Islam's origins seem to be, the *harder* it is to avoid giving the impression that Jews and Christians actively contributed to the rise of Islam, and thus that Muhammad was in some way "indebted" to members of these communities.

Cf. also the aforementioned survey by Firestone, "Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam," which is somewhat problematically positivist at times, but nevertheless manages to circumvent the traditional language of debt and influence in admirable ways; cf. his treatment of Abraham as part of the "pre-Islamic 'public domain' as it was woven into the very fabric of generic Arabian culture" (278).

generally acknowledged the many contributions to Jewish culture made by Islamic civilization in the Middle Ages, especially in the realms of philosophy, language, the arts and material culture, and so forth. On the other hand, there has been much greater resistance to the idea that some Islamic influence on the normative texts and traditions of rabbinic Judaism itself—that is, Judaism *qua* Judaism, especially where scripture is concerned—could have taken place, especially in the early Islamic period. But as several scholars have successfully demonstrated, overall, the Muslim reception and adaptation of scriptural material from older religious communities was considerably more complex than has typically been appreciated, and in many instances, such reception and adaptation was *not* one-sided, “influence” having occurred as a *dialectical, reciprocal* process between Muslims and Jews. Such an idea obviously undermines age-old assumptions about the nature of Muslim “borrowing” from or “dependence” upon Jewish tradition.

For example, Marilyn Waldman has argued that an objective analysis of the text of the Quran is in fact impaired by too strenuous an insistence on its derivative character, and that appreciating its unique narrative goals requires that we acknowledge its autonomy, rather than positing its absolute dependence on the biblical precursor. In one influential essay, through a meticulous comparison of the Quranic and biblical versions of the Joseph story, she is able to show that in many respects the former is *more* developed in literary terms than the latter, and thus that the interests of the would-be exegete may best be served by analyzing the *biblical* lacunae in the light of the *Quran*'s elaborations, and not vice versa.<sup>70</sup> That is, from a purely narratological standpoint, exegesis of the Quranic version of the story may be *hindered* by an insistence on the Bible's absolute priority, but *facilitated* by a contrasting emphasis on the Quran's particular discursive context. This is specifically pertinent to our interests here because Waldman's

---

<sup>70</sup> Waldman, “New Approaches to ‘Biblical’ Materials in the Qur’an” (1986). Similarly, Maghen has recently demonstrated that Islamic literature can even shed light on the development of talmudic discourse, in some instances preserving evidence of earlier rabbinic opinions that were effaced by the later tradition; see *After Hardship Cometh Ease*, Chapter 9, “Turning the Tables: The Muslim-Jewish Polemic over Sexual Positions,” esp. 187 ff.



approach, both in emphasizing the context of reception and in overturning the traditional priority of Bible over Quran, anticipates some of the insights of Wasserstrom, who has developed this approach in various ways and grounded it in a serious reconsideration of the historical relationships between Jewish and Muslim sources in the fertile late antique cultural and religious environment.

Thus, Wasserstrom has challenged the notion of the absolute priority of Jewish sources in the development of specific scriptural mythemes and motifs, showing how Jewish and Muslim sources actually display evidence of substantial interaction and dialogue, Jews not only serving as donors of scriptural information to Muslims but also responding to Muslim developments and subsequently reincorporating and reconstruing them in turn. Wasserstrom has explored these ideas in several publications, most notably “Jewish Pseudepigrapha and *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*,” in which, like Waldman, he emphasizes the necessity of appreciating specific narratological contexts, as opposed to mere ascriptions of “influence.” To mention one specific case, Wasserstrom discusses the incorporation of elements from the late antique *Apocalypse of Abraham*, developed over the course of centuries through Jewish transmission and elaboration, in the *qiṣaṣ* work of al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035); he is able to show that Tha’labī did not receive these elements passively but rather combined them with other “*isrā’iliyyāt*”-type materials to create a unique narrative with its own specific agendas and ideological implications.<sup>71</sup>

Wasserstrom’s most important contribution, however, is his emphasis on reevaluating the very notion of “influence” as an operative category in the study of religion. Notably, in her discussion of *Sūrat Yūsuf*, Waldman observes that a rigorous emphasis on historical priority (as in the privileging of the Bible over the Quran), which most scholars take as a fundamental hermeneutic principle, itself reflects a culturally determined and thus ultimately contingent interpretive posture. Wasserstrom takes this theoretical observation several steps further, not only

---

<sup>71</sup> “Jewish Pseudepigrapha and *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*,” *passim*.

criticizing the “prestige of the *a priori*” as a scholarly obsession, the quest for origins that often informs research and “obviates the adequacy of reception, the lived response, the critical novelty of intentional reappropriation,”<sup>72</sup> but challenging the very language in which discussions of the phenomenon of “borrowing” are typically couched. Thus, he seeks to transcend what he terms the “debtor-creditor” model of cultural relations in favor of a more sophisticated conception of the complex, dialectical process through which texts evolve in a dynamic process of intercommunal “symbiosis.”<sup>73</sup> The case Wasserstrom investigates at length is that of the Jewish influence on Islam, but obviously his insights are applicable to any number of contexts.

Whereas Wasserstrom’s particular focus on describing the dynamics of the Jewish influence on Islam in more sophisticated ways as a theoretical issue is somewhat unique, other scholars have been able to demonstrate, as he has, that in certain cases the allegations of Muslim borrowing from Jews are basically unwarranted. That is, the Jewish influence on Islam is not simply something that has to be described more sensitively or in a more sophisticated fashion; rather, in some contexts, in contrast to the assertions of previous generations of scholars, Muslims did not in fact borrow scriptural data from Jews. Rather, the opposite is the case, namely that Jews quite likely borrowed from Muslims, or else both communities engaged in *simultaneous* dialogue over scriptural matters, with certain traditions being held in common between them, each community subsequently textualizing and further elaborating upon them in unique ways. The picture that thus emerges is one of dialogue (admittedly, not always friendly) and genuine, which is to say *mutual*, communication, of commonality held in tension with difference, or rather, commonality that abides in *spite* of difference, but without *effacing* difference either. In such

---

<sup>72</sup> “Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Muslim Literature,” 99.

<sup>73</sup> See *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam*, especially Wasserstrom’s introductory remarks. Note also his discussion of *isrā’īliyyāt* (cf. 172-80), which he characterizes as representing nothing less than a “Muslim myth of Judaism.”

instances, asserting the priority of one tradition over the other becomes unnecessary, or at least a secondary concern.

Strikingly, in certain key cases, this reorientation of the traditional framework of inquiry not only pertains to the coevolution of Islamic and Jewish culture in the era after the Arab conquests, but may even apply to the putative origins of the Quran itself in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Thus, in one study, Wheeler shows how the long-established scholarly perception that the story of Moses and the anonymous servant of God in Sūra 18 of the Quran is directly derived from Jewish sources is based on an almost willfully irresponsible reading of the evidence.<sup>74</sup> Wheeler proves that the similarities between the Quranic passage in question and the pertinent Jewish parallels—which are in fact all found in late sources that have been assumed to preserve much older rabbinic traditions—are due to the dissemination of certain themes in Jewish literature that had in fact originated in Muslim *commentary* on the Quranic account; this was accomplished through the work of an 11<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish author, Ibn Shāhīn, who was directly familiar with the pertinent Arabic sources.<sup>75</sup> Thus, even without delving into theoretical questions about the basic conceptual and analytical category of “influence,” Wheeler’s study provides a striking example of how a careful investigation of the avenues of textual transmission and the means by which narratives coalesced out of disparate materials can yield surprising results, forcing us to reconsider age-old assumptions about textual and cultural priority.<sup>76</sup> Simply put, the

---

<sup>74</sup> Wheeler, “The Jewish Origins of Qur’ān 18:65-82? Reexamining Arent Jan Wensinck’s Theory” (1998).

<sup>75</sup> Ibn Shāhīn is well known as the author of the *Hibbur Yafeh*, a work clearly in the Arab literary genre of *faraj ba’d al-shidda*, in which edifying and often amusing anecdotes regarding the felicitous rescue of individuals who seem destined for a sad fate are related to illustrate the unknowable workings of providence. A critical edition of this work, seemingly the first of its kind in Jewish literature, was published by Obermann in 1933; see also Brinner’s translation and commentary, *An Elegant Composition Regarding Relief after Adversity*.

<sup>76</sup> To some extent, this reconsideration of the direction of “influence” was pioneered by Schützing, whose 1961 dissertation on the Jewish and Islamic legends of Abraham and Nimrod carefully evaluated the complex *Wechselbeziehungen* between Jewish and Muslim sources, in contrast to various later authors who contributed to the “Jewish influence” genre while

Quranic story in question *cannot* be adduced as proof of the Jewish influence on Islam—specifically, of the Prophet’s supposed relationship with Jewish informants—because the story simply does not derive from a putative rabbinic precursor, but rather, through oblique channels, actually gave *rise* to that putative precursor.

Wheeler’s emphasis on—even privileging of—*tafsīr* is fully manifest in his monograph *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (2002). Here, he continues to subject the scholarship on various well-known stories about Moses found in the Quran to careful scrutiny, and concludes, as he did with Wensinck’s analysis of the story of Moses and the servant of God from Sūra 18 in the aforementioned article, that scholars have generally, almost systematically, neglected to distinguish between the elaborations of Quranic stories found in Islamic commentary literature and the contents of the original source text. The account of Moses’ servant and the lost fish (Q.18:60-65) provides Wheeler with an opportunity to evaluate the story’s problematic relationship to the Alexander Romance tradition; as in the case of Wensinck’s claims about the story of Moses and the servant, Wheeler concludes that the historical relationships between the sources must be reevaluated and that the *tafsīr* literature is in fact the source for many of the later elaborations on the story that have percolated into the Alexander Romance tradition, for example the later Arabic, Persian, and Ethiopic versions. It was these elaborations that subsequently came to fuel Western scholars’ speculations about the Quranic story’s purported *derivation* from the Alexander tradition—often treated as a monolithic corpus utterly resistant to variation and

---

consistently operating under an assumption of absolute Muslim dependence upon Jews. Additionally, Wheeler’s method here was somewhat anticipated by Lassner’s magisterial study, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, in which the author examines narratives on Solomon’s encounter with the Queen of Sheba from both the Jewish and the Islamic traditions as particular moments in an intimate intertextual dialogue. However, one still finds a particular reliance on a transactive model of cultural communication in Lassner’s work, and notably, Wasserstrom’s review of the book is largely negative, emphasizing Lassner’s lack of critical interrogation of operative categories and the work’s limited theoretical value to students of religion in particular.

adaptation over time—as well as from much older literary sources such as the Epic of Gilgamesh.<sup>77</sup>

The same is true of the supposed biblical echoes found in the Quranic story of Moses at Midian (Q.28:21-28). Geiger himself speculated that the Quranic account presupposes some confusion of the biblical stories of Moses and Jacob, but Wheeler argues that this impression in fact derives from Muslim exegetes' *deliberate and polemical conflation* of Moses and Jacob in their commentary on the original Quranic story.<sup>78</sup> Regarding the actual Quranic stories that provided the basis for later exegetical speculation (the lost fish, Moses at Midian), Wheeler is extremely skeptical that we can really prove them to be derived from the Alexander Romance tradition or the Bible. In short, he shifts the focus of inquiry from the Quran to the *tafsīr*, and thereby seeks to reorient scholarly investigation into these narratives: rather than attempting to excavate the supposed sources of Quranic episodes (the representation of which has really rested upon an irresponsible conflation of the Quran with elements from later commentary), scholars should instead focus on clarifying the relationships between Quran, *tafsīr*, and other branches of literature, mindful of the fact that the Quran's putative resemblance to its supposed "influences" may very well reflect the transmission of elements from the *tafsīr* to non-Muslim communities, subsequently *generating* those very narratives once wrongly understood as the proximate sources of the Quran.

The main problem with Wheeler's approach is that he consistently appears to abdicate the question of the ultimate source and meaning of the Quranic narratives themselves. For example, having shown that the story of the lost fish is clearly *not* simply imported into the Quran from the Alexander Romance tradition, he never adequately explains what the obscure story might "really" mean in its original context. Further, Wheeler unconvincingly suggests that the obvious parallels between the Quranic story of Moses at Midian and the biblical story of Jacob are simply due to

---

<sup>77</sup> Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*, 11-8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 38 ff.

coincidence. Thus, in attempting to dislodge or undermine the dominant interpretive paradigm that primarily views Quranic narratives as mere deposits of outside influences, Wheeler shifts the balance all the way in the opposite direction: the Quran is now absolutely *insulated* from the complex and subtle processes of intertextual allusion that inform and give such depth and meaning to the *tafsīr* tradition.<sup>79</sup>

As Wheeler is unable or unwilling to commit to any specific assignment of context to the Quran, it is therefore unrealistically isolated from a discourse in which it plays an indisputably critical role. The Quran does not simply provide a neutral base text for the later interpretations of the exegetes; rather, Quranic narratives must have clear *implications* of their own as well. For example, the Quranic stories of the pre-Islamic prophets must reflect *some* understanding of the nature of prophecy and the status of the prophetic legacy vis-à-vis the Israelite tradition. Moreover, it is absurd to deny, even implicitly, that the Quran does not draw on established themes, stories, and discourses current in the late antique milieu, no matter what theory about the origin of the text one might happen to prefer. But in wishing to avoid the suggestion that the Quran is derivative in any way, Wheeler's interpretation privileges the Quran as a source text and deprives it completely of any meaningful participation in the religious discourse of its day. The true sense of the Quran, it seems, is unattainable; we cannot know for sure where the Quran really comes from, so we cannot determine its "real" meaning, for fixed meaning only emerges in the interpretive act.

On some level this is surely true, but it seems problematic to categorically withdraw the Quran from any analysis whatsoever in this way. Moreover, if we can only be certain about what the *tafsīr* means and not about what the Quran itself might mean, scripture becomes a *textus*

---

<sup>79</sup> This is especially apparent in his discussions of the underlying agenda that informs the exegetes' deliberate conflation of Moses and Jacob. Wheeler claims that the overall interpretive agenda operative in the characterization of Moses in the *tafsīr* is to present a negative contrast between Moses and Muhammad, which thus implies a corresponding negative contrast between their respective communities. Some aspects of this characterization appear to be latent in the Quran as well, but the Quran's "agency" in this regard—that is, in making a point, *in having an intrinsic, identifiable meaning*—is never acknowledged.

*absconditus*, unknown and unknowable, but subject to an endless succession of historically contingent and equally subjective readings. While it is clearly misleading to claim that the *tafsīr* represents an *incorrect* reading of scripture as opposed to an historicist reading which is putatively more so, we might argue that there is simply nothing wrong with positing a historical reading of the Quran that proceeds from its original context; this reading precedes the commentary tradition and may even be qualitatively different from that of the commentary tradition. But in Wheeler's approach to the text, not only is *tafsīr* deprived of any claim to decide what the Quran might "really" mean, but scholars are blocked from speculating what the Quran might have "originally" meant as well.<sup>80</sup>

In what follows here, we will strive to emulate and even refine Wheeler's approach to the *tafsīr* literature, in particular in emphasizing the immense achievements of the classical commentators in elaborating upon the Quranic base text and creating new scriptural meanings relevant for the intellectual and religious concerns of their time. In the next chapter, we will examine the Western reception of the Quranic Calf story in particular and demonstrate, as Wheeler does with the Moses narratives he examines, that scholars have vastly exaggerated the degree of dependence on Jewish sources to be found here. Moreover, similar to Wheeler's conclusions, we intend to show that Western scholars' representations of the Calf narrative are actually based upon the expansions of the episode to be found in the *tafsīr* and *not* upon the Quranic text. However, where we part ways with Wheeler is in our reconsideration of the Quranic version of the narrative itself.

---

<sup>80</sup> That is, in Wheeler's presentation, the exegetes by default *never* attain an authentic understanding of and elaboration upon the meaning that is intrinsic to the Quran, since scriptural meaning is *always* secondarily manufactured. Put another way, classical commentators and modern scholars alike labor under the burden of never knowing what scripture "really means." This strikes me as analogous to the theory of polyvalency that characterizes both certain historical exegetes (e.g. al-Tha'labī, at least according to Saleh) and modern literary critics, but it is highly questionable whether this represents a useful scholarly approach to adopt for analysis of the Quran as an *historical document*.

We will argue that modern scholars' conflation of the Quranic version of the episode with that advanced in the *tafsīr* literature is not accidental; rather, it is due to the striking degree of reliance on Muslim commentary that has characterized the Western reception of the Quran from the Middle Ages virtually up to the present day. In order to underscore both the remarkable achievement of the classical Muslim commentators in remaking the Calf story and the profound errors and misrepresentations that have thoroughly marked Western scholars' commentary upon and translation of it, we must necessarily attempt a fresh reading of that story in its original scriptural context. This in turn will allow us to highlight the crucial differences between the Quranic version on the one hand and that constructed in the *tafsīr* and subsequently communicated to European scholarship on the other.



**Chapter 2:**  
**The Quranic Golden Calf:**  
***tafsīr* and its Repercussions in Medieval and Modern Europe**

The fifteenth riddle of Solomon to the Queen of Sheba:

“What was that which was not born, yet life was given to it?”

“The Golden Calf.”

*Midrash ha-Ḥefez*

Quoted in Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (1909-1938)

According to Islamic tradition—and to some degree according to its own “self-perception” as well—the Quran consists of a series of revelations mediated through the Arabian prophet Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allāh of the tribe of Quraysh over the course of some twenty-two years, first in Muhammad’s home town of Mecca and then, when he had been driven out by his militantly polytheist kinsmen, in the city of Medina, where he eventually became undisputed ruler and the head of a new religious community. Islamic tradition is generally unambiguous about the eventual fate of these revelations subsequent to Muhammad’s death: they were committed to writing and collated relatively quickly by caliphal mandate, and the canonical text of the document we now know as the Quran was established no more than twenty-five years after the Prophet’s passing.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, again according to Islamic (or at least Sunnī) tradition, the proper interpretation of these revelations was communicated by the Prophet to his Companions, who subsequently transmitted it to their followers and students, and they on to *their* students, and so on, in a more or less unbroken chain over several generations, until, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century or so, this traditional interpretation was also committed to writing in order to preserve the teachings originally entrusted to the Companions.<sup>2</sup> In short, the exegesis of the sacred text, like the sacred

---

<sup>1</sup> Whether the collection of the text of the Quran was really accomplished once and for all during the reign of ‘Uthmān (r. 23-35/644-656), as tradition generally holds, or, as some evidence suggests, preliminary collations might have occurred under Abū Bakr or at some other time during the early caliphal period is immaterial for our present concerns. For a survey of the evidence, see the account in Bell, *Introduction to the Qur’ān*, 38-43.

<sup>2</sup> This is not at all to suggest that interpretations of the Quran were *always* advanced on the basis of the authority of the Companions in the first decades and centuries AH; far from it. At one time, exegesis was not explicitly “traditional” at all, in that so-called *tafsīr bi’l-ra’y* did *not* purport to be anchored in the authority of the Companions (though it was surely “traditional” in point of fact, having been handed down over the course of generations, and having no doubt at least partially originated during earliest Islamic times). However, *tafsīr bi’l-ra’y* was largely superseded by *tafsīr bi’l-ma’t’hūr*, exegesis according to hadith or units of transmitted tradition, by the 3<sup>rd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century (although the former made a comeback among philosophically-minded exegetes somewhat later, e.g. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī). The point to be emphasized here is that earliest *tafsīr* was not so much commentary according to unmediated personal opinion (as the term *ra’y* was meant to suggest by those who imposed these labels), but rather only according to *undocumented* tradition; in contrast, the later mode of *tafsīr bi’l-ma’t’hūr* is distinguished most of all by its *explicit claim* to be traditional, in deliberately tracing its origins back to the Companions through the mechanism of the *isnād*. In the end, *tafsīr bi’l-ra’y* was never as “whimsical and

text itself, was securely established early on, and for centuries afterward, Muslim commentators could claim that their interpretation of scripture, like the sacred text itself, was genuinely the same as that known among the *Ṣaḥāba*, handed down from the Prophet himself and reliably preserved for posterity.

It is not our purpose here to gainsay the traditional account of the origin of the Quran in the revelations to Muhammad in the early years of the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Many others have attempted to do so in various ways, and with varying degrees of success; to some scholars at least, the established outline of early Islamic history has proved remarkably durable—at least regarding its basic details—despite the various challenges it has faced in the last few decades.<sup>3</sup> Rather, without adopting any particular historiographic position at the outset, we should begin with one relatively simple question: what are the implications for the traditional claim of the continuity of Quran exegesis from the time of the Prophet and the Companions—or of the primitive *umma* in general—to later generations, particularly the classical commentators (2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries), if we can demonstrate, at least in one particular instance, that *the traditional interpretation of the text seems to be wrong*? That is, in the specific instance to be discussed here, namely the Quranic version of the Golden Calf narrative, the received understanding of a particular scriptural datum is *not* that which is native to the text itself, but rather appears to have been overlaid upon it, *imposed* upon it, by later tradition. To put the question another way, how can we possibly account for the possibility that the plain sense of various Quranic verses—or even the significance of an entire scriptural episode—seems to have vanished from the collective memory of the community, as least as expressed (and subsequently preserved and disseminated) through the medium of the

---

capricious”—nor *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* as *authentically* traditional—as later critics of the received exegetical tradition made them out to be. For a succinct deconstruction of these labels, see Saleh, *Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 16-7.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., e.g., Donner's refutation of the radical revisionists in *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 25-30. The chapter on "Early Historical Tradition and the First Islamic Polity" in Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (rev. ed., 69-103) remains a classic statement of the problem; for an excellent treatment of the current *status quaestionis*, see Robinson, "Reconstructing Early Islam."

*tafsīr* literature? Alternatively, if we do not wish to conclude that the understanding of the plain sense of the narrative simply disappeared, is it desirable or feasible to speak of the plain sense of the Quran being deliberately marginalized or even suppressed?

Many scholars would readily question the authenticity of specific chains of transmission preserved in works of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* (as with other types of hadith as well), or might even be willing to dismiss the use of the *isnād* in early Islamic society outright as a mere literary convention. Nevertheless, it seems rather implausible that there would not be *some* factual basis to the phenomenon to which the use of the *isnād* in works of *tafsīr* testifies, namely the continuity of exegesis over the span of several generations in the early centuries AH. Even if one is willing to say that *isnāds* were commonly manipulated to bolster the authority of exegetical traditions, doctored so that their reach would extend all the way back to the Companions and the Successors, surely the *mufasssīrūn* of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries did not simply invent their interpretations out of thin air. The classical interpretation of the Quran *must* bear some resemblance to what came before; to propose otherwise would simply be unreasonable. And yet, in the specific case under consideration here, we are faced with a clear dilemma, in that at some point between the time of the emergence of the Quran and the consolidation of the *tafsīr* tradition in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, the original sense of scripture appears to have been forgotten, or at least deliberately obscured.

A curious corollary to this thesis presents itself when we examine the modern scholarship on the subject, for we then discover that the conspicuous discrepancy between the classical interpretation of the Calf narrative and what appears to be the plain sense of the Quranic episode has gone generally unrecognized. As it turns out, the vast majority of non-Muslim scholars and translators have simply had recourse to the *tafsīr* tradition in explaining the Quran's obscurities, in this particular case as well as in many others. Further, even in those exceptional cases where scholars express some skepticism about the classical interpretation, alternative explanations about the episode's meaning have seldom been advanced. This phenomenon is itself quite noteworthy,

for it shows the pervasive (and yet largely unacknowledged) dependence of Western Quran scholarship upon the classical Islamic exegetical tradition. It has famously been alleged that, at least until very recently, scholars of Islamic history tended simply to reiterate classical Islamic historical writing under the guise of modern scholarship, unwilling or unable to expose the tradition's claims to critical scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, it turns out that modern Western scholars of the Quran seem to have been content to reiterate the opinions and positions of the classical Muslim exegetes, without attempting to develop a critical, autonomous exegesis of their own with some authentic basis in what appears to be the contextual meaning of various episodes in the Quran. That is, the natural tendency of Muslim interpreters to adduce considerable amounts of narrative material external to the Quran in their exegeses has been largely accepted by and even imitated in Western scholarship. Although we will address only one Quranic narrative in particular here, our observations regarding this basic trend in Western scholarship on the Quran are surely pertinent to many other scriptural contexts as well.<sup>5</sup>

Western scholars' thoroughgoing dependence on classical commentators such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1134) and al-Bayḍawī (d. 685/1286)—or later summaries such as the oft-cited *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*—is readily demonstrated by the fact that almost all

---

<sup>4</sup> In describing the “entropy” that supposedly characterizes classical Islamic historical writing, Crone states: “The inertia of the source material comes across very strongly in modern scholarship on the first two centuries of Islam. The bulk of it has an alarming tendency to degenerate into mere rearrangements of the same old canon—Muslim chronicles in modern languages and graced with modern titles” (*Slaves on Horses*, 13). Her point here is that the prospective student of the period is hampered by being at a double remove from actual events: neither the primary sources nor the established scholarship (specifically the great synthetic treatments of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) offer genuine insight, only varying representations of tropes. This is particularly germane to the subject at hand, since I will argue that the modern student of the Quran likewise stands at a double remove from scripture: both the classical commentators and Western scholarship appear ultimately to be drawing on the same body of secondary interpretations, not penetrating into the deeper, contextual meaning of the narrative under consideration.

<sup>5</sup> To my knowledge, the only other scholar to comment at length upon this phenomenon is Bruce Fudge; see his trenchant and insightful “Qur’ānic Exegesis in Medieval Islam and Modern Orientalism.” Fudge’s specific interest is in hermeneutics and methodology more broadly conceived, however, whereas I am more concerned with the actual appropriation and assimilation of *tafsīr* by the Orientalist tradition.

modern translations of the Quran into English and other European languages uniformly draw upon and agree with the classical commentaries, *regardless of whether their authors are Muslim or not*. That Muslim translators of various stripes should refer to and make use of the classical commentators (even if only to refute them in particular cases where they find the classical exegesis unpalatable) is unsurprising; but that Muslim *and* non-Muslim scholars should be practically unanimous in doing so certainly is. As we shall see, the process of the assimilation of *tafsīr* in Western scholarship on the Quran and the mediation of the sense of the Muslim scripture to Western audiences through classical commentary began quite early in the history of the European reception of the Quran, specifically in the high Middle Ages; and despite the fact that Western perceptions of Islam have changed drastically in the last millennium, the same basic hermeneutic procedure of reading the Quran through *tafsīr* remains dominant even today, with relatively few exceptions.

It should be emphasized here that we do not mean to imply that some pure, original text of scripture should become the exclusive or primary focus of scholarly attention. First of all, the project of reconstructing and scrutinizing the “original” text of the Quran, suspended in some impossibly ideal, pristine state, wholly free from the mediation—and presumed “corruption”—of later tradition, is not only hopelessly quixotic but ideologically and politically suspect. Second, as it is, *tafsīr* has traditionally been a neglected area of research in Islamic Studies; for decades, if not centuries, the Quran has enjoyed far more prominence as a subject of study in Europe and the Americas. Only recently has the Orientalist pursuit of what Muhammad “really said” in the Quran (perhaps analogous to biblical scholars’ quest for the historical Jesus) been discredited as a scholarly endeavor, in favor of cultivating an appreciation for the particular achievements of the classical commentators, who articulated what became the mainstream interpretations of scripture that eventually came to dominate in Islamic society right up to modern times. Thus, insofar as we might attempt to discern some sense of the significance of the Quranic narrative in its immediate context and separate the contextual meaning from that which was later constructed by the

commentary tradition, our main goal in doing so is to promote a better understanding of the particular achievements of the latter; much of our discussion of the Calf narrative here will therefore focus on the reading of the Quranic episode that was emphasized and promoted in the *tafsīr* tradition.

Just because *tafsīr* has been neglected as a topic of research in itself, seldom if ever recognized as the instrument with which Islamic society internalized the Quran, asserted its interpretive hegemony over it, and truly made scripture its own, this does not mean that the Islamic exegetical tradition has not exerted a tremendous influence upon the Western study of the Quran; quite the contrary. The problem is that historically, scholars have seldom been careful to distinguish between those layers of narrative meaning that are native to the Quran and those that are external to it. The result of this neglect of context has been that, on the one hand, anachronistic meanings are perceived to be intrinsic to the Quran, and on the other, the role of exegesis in creating new meaning (or at least privileging certain *possible* meanings) and contributing to the further evolution of scriptural discourse is misunderstood, if not overlooked entirely. That is, *tafsīr* has played an essential role in determining the meaning of the Quran for Western scholars and translators, continually pressed into service as a substitute for a real historical-critical analysis of scripture; but paradoxically, *tafsīr* has come into its own as a distinct object of study only recently.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in the case of the particular narrative to be examined here, the story of the Golden Calf, this neglect of context has served to obscure some pressing problems regarding the

---

<sup>6</sup> Again, I should reiterate that the main goal of this project is to foster an appreciation of the inner dynamics of the *tafsīr* tradition and to promote a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the base text, the historical Quran, and the commentary literature which first began to flourish one to two centuries after the putative revelation of that text. In failing to distinguish adequately between these two separate objects of study, Western scholarship has perennially conflated the original text and its later exegesis, which I would contend is somewhat analogous to reading the Hebrew Bible through the eyes of Patristic exegetes. While the Church Fathers' interpretation of the Bible is a wholly legitimate object of study, few scholars would agree that what they understood the narratives of Genesis to mean is the same thing as what those narratives meant in either their originating or redactive contexts.

relationships between the Quran, the later Islamic commentary tradition, and contemporaneous phenomena such as the evolution of rabbinic aggadah. When they are viewed on their own terms, however (insofar as this might be possible), reconsidering the pertinent passages in the Quran *without* the mediation of classical exegesis forces us to reevaluate some cherished, or at least well-established, concepts regarding those relationships. Hopefully, doing so does not necessarily lead to the reification of the Quran's supposed "real" or "essential" meaning at the expense of prioritizing the role of exegesis in perennially reviving and reinventing scripture for new audiences. It does, however, require that we liberate ourselves from the considerable burden of generations, even centuries, of scholarly precedent.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Berlinerblau has recently argued that the emergence of "institutionalized believing criticism" in the Muslim world could serve as an antidote to Islamic extremism, though he admits that a new higher criticism of the Quran must be a natural, indigenous development among Muslims and not simply a transplantation and translation of Western methods of biblical criticism (*The Secular Bible*, 121-8). In noting the absence of any critical scholarship on the Quran in Muslim societies analogous to Western higher criticism, Berlinerblau cites Wansbrough's observation that "As a document susceptible of analysis by the instruments and techniques of Biblical criticism it is virtually unknown" (*Quranic Studies*, xxi, quoted in *Secular Bible*, 124). Ironically, as we shall argue, this principle holds true for the Western study of the Quran as well.



## 1. The Quranic Calf narrative and its canonical and parascriptural precursors

In the Hebrew Bible, the main version of the story of the making of the Golden Calf occurs in Exodus 32, and essentially depicts a crisis of leadership.<sup>8</sup> While Moses is up on Mount Sinai receiving the law and the Tablets of the Testimony, things go terribly wrong down below in the Israelite camp:

*Then the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, and they gathered against Aaron and said: Up, make us gods to go before us, for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what's become of him. Then Aaron replied to them: Remove the golden earrings of your wives, sons, and daughters, and bring them to me. Then all the people removed their own golden earrings straightaway and brought them to Aaron. He took it [i.e. the gold] from their hands and fashioned it with a tool and made of it a molten calf ('ēgel massēkāh), and they said: These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.<sup>9</sup>*

Up on Sinai, God denounces the people's idolatry and threatens to destroy them; after interceding on their behalf to allay God's wrath, Moses returns to the camp, understandably irate, and smashes the Tablets when he sees what the people have done. After demolishing the Calf, Moses angrily confronts his brother Aaron, to whom the welfare (and presumably good order) of the people had been entrusted while he was on Mount Sinai:

*Then Moses said to Aaron: What did this people do to you, that you brought upon them such great sin? And Aaron replied: Let not your wrath blaze forth, my lord; you know that the people are ever bent on evil. They said to me: 'Make us gods to go before us, for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of*

---

<sup>8</sup> Besides Exodus 32, there is another major retelling of the Calf episode in Deuteronomy 9 (the general consensus is that this is a reworking of the earlier narrative in Exodus), as well as various allusions to the episode in other biblical texts as well, e.g. Ps.106:19-23, to be discussed below. For a convenient survey of the pertinent data on the biblical material on the Calf, see Spencer, *ABD*, s.v. "Golden Calf."

<sup>9</sup> Ex.32:1-4 according to the Masoretic text in BHS. All translations of primary and secondary sources here are the author's unless explicitly noted otherwise.

*the land of Egypt, we do not know what's become of him.' Then I said to them:  
'Whoever has gold, remove it straightaway and give it to me.' Then I threw it in  
the fire, and out came this calf!*<sup>10</sup>

Moses then rallies the tribe of the Levites to pacify the camp by force; each of them takes up his sword and slays the idolaters regardless of whether he is a son or father or brother, effecting a kind of bloody atonement for the people's sin.<sup>11</sup>

It has been demonstrated that in the earliest compilations of rabbinic exegesis, the so-called "halakhic" or "tannaitic" midrashim,<sup>12</sup> one finds a more or less consistent interpretation of the significance of the Golden Calf narrative, namely, that the episode represents a drama of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Israel's sin was real and the punishment severe, but in the end, God forgave their transgression, as is proven by the election of Aaron and his sons to the High Priesthood.<sup>13</sup> This unanimity in the tannaitic midrashim—which admittedly might not represent an actual consensus among the generations of rabbis counted among the *tannā'im* per se (c. 70-

---

<sup>10</sup> Ex.32:21-24 (BHS).

<sup>11</sup> Ex.32:26-29. Probably due to the fact that several layers of tradition were redacted in the construction of the episode, there are actually multiple occasions of intercession, atonement, and extensions of divine forgiveness in the narrative. Many scholars in fact see the Calf narrative as reaching its resolution only with the restoration of the Tablets of Testimony at the beginning of Exodus 34.

<sup>12</sup> These include the two *Mekhiltas*, *Sifra*, *Sifre*, and related documents preserving exegesis of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy of a predominantly legal nature that is ascribed to the *tannā'im*, the sages whose teachings are preserved in the Mishnah and Tosefta and were subsequently elaborated in the two Talmuds.

<sup>13</sup> See Mandelbaum, "Tannaitic Exegesis of the Golden Calf Episode." Jewish interpretation of the episode before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE most likely cannot be presumed to presuppose articulate Christian polemical arguments. Nevertheless, even though tannaitic exegesis is not as explicitly apologetic as that of later eras, it is striking that, in emphasizing that various elements of Israelite cult and ritual serve as means of atonement for the sin of the Calf, Christian claims that the making of the Calf resulted in the abrogation of the covenant between God and Israel are implicitly refuted. That is to say, a subtle argument against the idea of an insurmountable rupture occurring with the making of the Calf might be thought to inform the relative candor of the *tannā'im* regarding the affair. Christian exegetes themselves struggled with the problem of the significance of the Israelite covenant after the sin at Sinai; see Bori, *The Golden Calf and the Origins of the Anti-Jewish Controversy*, especially Chapter 2.

220 CE) but rather only among the earliest extant *texts* ascribing interpretations to these figures<sup>14</sup>—stands in striking contrast to the diversity of approaches one finds in later rabbinic sources. In particular, in the Talmuds and the later midrashim, that is, those sources that preserve sayings attributed to the generations of rabbis reckoned among the *'āmôrā'im* (c. 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c. CE), a newly apologetic attitude seems to predominate. As opposed to the relative candor that characterized earlier rabbinic commentators' view of the Calf, subsequent generations of rabbis sought to minimize the significance of Israel's sin, on occasion even denying its occurrence completely.

Thus, apparently beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE—that is, the era in which a newly strident and articulate Christian polemical tradition first emerged<sup>15</sup>—the rabbis started to come up with stories that sought to explain away what Aaron and the Israelites had done, to minimize the impression of their hard-hearted perversity and rebellion against God by underscoring the extenuating circumstances that had led them to sin, or else even to exonerate them from any blame whatsoever. This effort was implicitly intended to deflect or dispel Christian claims that the Jewish covenant had been abrogated virtually at the moment of its inception, one of the key elements in the classic formulation of Christian supersessionist theology. In the face of such criticism—and, for that matter, of the increasingly strident attitude of a newly triumphant imperial church as well—rabbinic exegetes simply could no longer afford to maintain their

---

<sup>14</sup> Mandelbaum acknowledges this fundamental historiographic problem; however, for his basic purposes, as for ours, the authenticity of the “tannaitic” material he cites vis-à-vis its attribution to specific sages is far less significant than the *general* trends in the development of exegesis that he is able to observe. That is, even if tannaitic authorship is largely pseudepigraphic, nevertheless, the differences in attitude between materials attributed to *tannā'im* and those attributed to *'āmôrā'im* is conspicuous. If this does not point to authentic differences in attitude between the two periods in which these sages lived, it may at least point to differences in attitude between the periods in which the texts were *redacted*.

<sup>15</sup> See Bori's treatment in *The Golden Calf and the Origins of the Anti-Jewish Controversy*, in which he succinctly summarizes a tremendous amount of Patristic material, both Western and Eastern; note, however, that his emphasis on thematic patterns obscures the contours of historical development that might otherwise be observed in the evolution of Patristic thought on the subject.

former candor.<sup>16</sup> One of the tactics the rabbis eventually adopted as proof of the extenuating circumstances leading to the making of the Calf was to claim that evildoers of various stripes had come along during Moses' absence and done various things to distract, mislead, and intimidate the apprehensive and credulous people.

A typical example of this approach appears in the Babylonian Talmud, in a passage that relies on a clever wordplay based on the beginning of the very first verse in the Exodus account, *When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mount...*(wayyar' hā- 'ām kī-bōšēš mōšeh lā-redet min hā-hār):

R. Joshua ben Levi said: according to the text, it says, *When the people saw that Moses delayed* etc. (Ex.32:1); read not *bōšēš* ["delayed"] but rather *bā'ū šēš* ["six hours passed"]. When Moses ascended [to receive the Torah] he told Israel, I will come back after forty days, by the beginning of the sixth hour. But after forty days, Satan came and confounded the world. He said to them: Moses, your master—where is he? They said to him: He has ascended [to receive the Torah]. He replied: But six hours have passed (*bā'ū šēš*)!—but they paid him no heed. HE'S DEAD!—but they paid him no heed. Then he showed them a likeness of Moses' funeral bier; and this is the very thing they told Aaron, *for this is the man Moses...* (Ex.32:2)!<sup>17</sup>

Thinking Moses dead on account of Satan's diabolical interference, the people thus give up all hope and succumb to the temptation to worship the Calf as the new source of their deliverance.

---

<sup>16</sup> This shift in interpretation in rabbinic exegesis from the pre-Christian to the Christian era is by no means confined to the Calf episode. Rather, due to the relentless appropriation of the prophetic critique of Israel laced throughout the Hebrew Bible by patristic authors, rabbinic readers were forced to place new emphasis on the messages of consolation and promised future deliverance in scripture while neglecting more admonitory passages, which all too readily seemed to supply Christian exegetes with grist for the polemical mill, enabling their project of demonstrating the disconfirmation of the Jews. For a classic discussion of the Christian dismantling and appropriation of biblical and Jewish traditions of self-critique, see Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Roots of Christian Anti-Semitism*. I am indebted to Adam Becker for his helpful comments on this subject.

<sup>17</sup>*b. Šab. 89a.*

Not only is their sin made more comprehensible through this portrayal, but the reader even becomes sympathetic to the wayward Israelites on account of their plight.

In other texts, different malefactors appear: quite early on, amoraic sources blame the *'ēreb rāb* or “mixed multitude” as the ringleaders behind the episode; others blame evil sorcerers who had come up out of Egypt among the Israelites, and these are sometimes specified as Jannes and Jambres, a well-known pair who occur in other contexts in Hellenistic and late antique texts.<sup>18</sup> In still other versions of the narrative, later variations on this tradition, it is claimed that Jannes and Jambres, Satan, or some other malefactors actually *brought the Calf to life*. As foreign to the original context of the biblical narrative as it may be, this idea eventually became a key element in Jewish treatments of the episode, and is ubiquitous in the medieval commentary tradition. As we shall see, the theme of the *agent provocateur* who intervenes at Sinai in Moses’ absence and dupes the Israelites by bringing the Golden Calf to life, or at least granting it some semblance of life, is central in Muslim commentary on the Quranic Calf narrative, and is generally understood to inhere in the Quran itself as well.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Many of these interpretations build on older traditions that establish that Aaron was bullied or coerced into going along with Israel’s idolatry; the dislocation of accountability allows Aaron’s role to be reduced to a commensurate degree. On the theme of coercion or intimidation, see, e.g., *Vayyiqra Rabbah* 10:3, and also the readings of Ex.32:5 found in *Targum Neophyti* and the Syriac Peshitta (where *wyr*’ of the consonantal text is read not as *wayyar*’, “he saw,” as in MT, but rather as *wayyirā*, “he feared”).

On the role of the “mixed multitude” that came up out of Egypt with Israel, cf., e.g., *Vayyiqra Rabbah* 27:8 (here referred to as *gērīm*, “proselytes”), duplicated almost verbatim in *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* (Buber), 9.77b and *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), *Ēmôr* 15. On the sorcerers, see the traditions cited below.

<sup>19</sup> We will discuss the midrashic traditions depicting the actual animation or inspiration of the Calf below; these include *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1.9.3; *Tanḥ.*, *Kī-tiśśā* 19 (building on *b. Šab.* 89a, but adding a datum about the inspiration of the Calf); *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45; and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *ad loc.* Ex.32, *passim*. The theme is attested in a considerable number of medieval texts as well, in aggadic collections and systematic biblical commentaries. The dating of the aforementioned midrashic collections is difficult and subject to considerable debate, but I will argue to the effect that, contrary to the typical claim that these traditions supply the prototype for the Quranic Calf episode, some, if not all, of them are likely to reflect Islamic influence upon Jewish exegetical tradition instead.

The major shift in Jewish readings of the episode that occurred after the tannaitic period is vividly illustrated if we compare the versions of Exodus 32 to be found in the various Aramaic translations of the Bible, especially *Targum Onqelos* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*. The former, often characterized as the “official” or canonical rabbinic targum, was apparently not redacted until sometime between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, that is, the amoraic era, but it is undoubtedly of much earlier vintage, although its supposed association with “Onqelos,” i.e. Aquila, a semi-legendary figure of the second generation of *tannā’im*, is most likely apocryphal.<sup>20</sup> The latter translation is attributed to R. Jonathan ben Uzziel, another semi-legendary figure even older than Aquila: if this R. Jonathan is supposed to be identical with the obscure member of the School of Hillel of the generation before the first *tannā’im*, then he must have lived in the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. However, the work that bears his name is undoubtedly pseudepigraphic; it is less of a straightforward translation of the Bible per se and more of a paraphrase, with copious amounts of legendary and exegetical material interwoven into the fabric of scripture. Moreover, much of that material generally corresponds to traditions well known from various classical midrashic collections, which would tend to indicate a rather late date of final redaction, in the post-talmudic or even post-Islamic era.<sup>21</sup>

Exodus 32:19 describes Moses’ return to the Israelite camp after God notifies him of what has transpired during his absence. Onqelos’ version hews very close to the Hebrew of the canonical biblical text, so much so that a translation into English cannot convey the subtle and ultimately inconsequential nuances implied by the Aramaic phrasing: “When he drew near to the

---

<sup>20</sup> See Grossfeld’s article on the targum tradition in *EJ*, s.v. “Bible, Translations, Ancient Versions: Aramaic: The Targumim” for an overview of the issues surrounding the provenance and redaction of *Targum Onqelos*. Linguistically, it seems to reflect features of both Palestinian and Babylonian Aramaic; the consensus is that it received its final redaction in Babylonia, but there is considerable debate as to how much of the work might have actually originated in Palestine.

<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 3 for discussion of the debate over the dating of *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*. The ascription to R. Jonathan b. Uzziel actually only appears in a relatively late manuscript of the targum.

camp and saw the Calf and the merriment, Moses' wrath burned hot, and he cast the Tablets from his hands and broke them there at the foot of the mount."<sup>22</sup> In contrast, the version from Pseudo-Jonathan expands upon the verse considerably:

*When Moses drew near to the camp and saw<sup>23</sup> the Calf and the merriment wrought by the wicked, making merry and bowing down before it while Satan was within it, making it leap and run around<sup>24</sup> before the people, immediately Moses' wrath burned exceedingly hot,<sup>25</sup> and he cast<sup>26</sup> the Tablets from his hands and broke them there at the foot of the mount, but the holy writing that was upon them burst forth and flew up into the air heavenwards. Then he shouted out, Woe*

<sup>22</sup> I have relied on Sperber's critical edition of Onqelos here (*The Bible in Aramaic, Vol. I*, 146):  
והיה כד קריב למשריתא וחזא ית עגלא וחגנין ותקיף רוגזא דמשה ורמא מידוהי ית לוחיא ותבר יתחון בשפולי טורא.

(But cf. Díez Merino, "Targum Manuscripts and Critical Editions," 68-75, who severely criticizes Sperber's edition.) Both the Hebrew *mēhōlōt* and the Aramaic *ḥngyn* can connote music or dancing (or possibly both), so I have rendered *ḥngyn* as "merriment" here. In his translation, Grossfeld (*Targum Onqelos to Exodus*, 90) renders the word as "dancing," but in his translation of the corresponding passage in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, which likewise uses *ḥngyn* to render *mēhōlōt*, Maher prefers "musical instruments" (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus*, 253). Like the Hebrew *ḥarah 'ap*, the Aramaic phrase *tqyp rwgz'* is an idiom for anger *burning* or *growing hot*. Finally, the Hebrew simply says that the Tablets were smashed *beneath* the mount, whereas the Aramaic specifies that they were smashed at the *foot* of the mount.

The line is virtually the same in *Targum Neophyti* (which many believe to be the most authentic representative of the ancient Palestinian targum tradition, as opposed to either *Onqelos* or *Pseudo-Jonathan*; see Tal (Rosenthal), "Ms. Neophyti 1"), except that the key phrase ...*and [he] saw the Calf and the dancing...* is not translated at all but is given in the original Hebrew. The Mishnah prohibits translation of the "second account" of the Calf in Exodus 32, which the Babylonian Talmud explains as the whole passage between verses 21 and 25 (*m. Meg.* 4:10; cf. *b. Meg.* 25b). Neophyti does not observe this quite so strictly, but rather selectively omits the Aramaic translation of key phrases throughout the entire chapter. The only other noticeable difference between Onqelos and Neophyti here is the use of *tlq* ("to throw") instead of *rm'*. See Díez Macho, ed., *Neophyti I*, 2.215.

<sup>23</sup> The verb here is *ḥm'* rather than *ḥz'* in Onqelos and Neophyti.

<sup>24</sup> I understand the *pa'el* participles here (*mtpz* and *mšwwr*) as causative. The latter, which I conjecture should be vocalized *mēšawwar*, may be a pun on *šōr* (ox). However, Maher does not seem to understand the verbs as causative, rendering simply "Satan was in the middle of it, leaping and jumping before the people" (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus*, 253).

<sup>25</sup> Whereas both Onqelos and Neophyti have *tqyp rwgz'*, Pseudo-Jonathan adds a redundant verb here, *rth* (to seethe, boil) in order to emphasize Moses' great wrath; the resulting *tqyp rth rwgz'yh* means something like "his anger flared up and bubbled over"!

<sup>26</sup> Here, *tlq* as in Neophyti.

to the people who heard from the mouth of the Holy One at Sinai, THOU SHALT NOT MAKE FOR THYSELVES A GRAVEN IDOL, NOR AN IMAGE, NOR ANY LIKENESS,<sup>27</sup> and yet after forty days made a molten calf utterly without substance!<sup>28</sup>

Admittedly, Onqelos' relative reticence, especially compared to the liberal expansion of the original verse by Pseudo-Jonathan, is as due to the differences in their respective approaches to translation as to anything else. Nevertheless, the casual way in which apologetic tropes have been incorporated here by Pseudo-Jonathan is indicative of the fact that a major shift in outlook has obviously transpired between the time of the composition of this targum and that of the *tannā'îm*; even for an early 'āmôrā' such as the influential R. Joshua b. Levi (fl. early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE), the making of the Calf had only occurred "to give the penitent a pretext for repentance," and was not something to be blithely explained away, for example by blaming the event on diabolical interference.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> This line agrees with Pseudo-Jonathan's rendition of Ex.20:4, which this line is clearly quoting; it is also cited in the "translation" of Ex.32:8 above. It agrees fundamentally with the Hebrew original, except that the verb is shifted from singular to plural, and "image" (*swrh*) is added to "graven idol" and "likeness" (*pesel* and *tēmûnāh* in the Masoretic text, *slm* and *dmw* in the targum).

<sup>28</sup> Following the text edited by Clarke (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance*, 107). Cf. also the version of Aaron's apology given in Pseudo-Jonathan: where the original Hebrew text has simply *I threw it in the fire and out came this Calf!* (vs.24), and Onqelos translates it word for word (apparently in direct violation of the mishnaic prohibition, at least according to the interpretation of that prohibition given in the Bavli), Pseudo-Jonathan has "*I threw it in the fire* [with *tlq* instead of *rm'* again] and Satan had entered into it, and out of it came the likeness of *this Calf!*" (ibid.) In explaining the mishnaic prohibition on translating the "second account," *b. Meg. 25b* draws attention to this specific phrase as the reason behind it, precisely because it could potentially cause people to conclude, on the basis of Aaron's response, that the Calf had leapt out of the fire of its own accord. (Sure enough, Neophyti does not translate the phrase.) Ironically, Pseudo-Jonathan not only ignores the prohibition but exacerbates the problem, although one might well argue that by the time of its composition, the theme of the animation of the Calf had taken on new significance—that is, it now facilitated apologetic rather than potentially eliciting criticism.

<sup>29</sup> R. Joshua b. Levi was the most important of the early Palestinian 'āmôrā'îm; for his statement that the Calf was nothing but a pretext (*pithôn peh*), see *b. 'Abod. Zar. 4a*. For discussion of the date of *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, see Chapter 3 below.



At the moment, leaving the specific issue of the date of *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* aside, it seems perfectly reasonable to presume that its representation of the Calf episode—particularly Satan’s intervention and his animation of the Calf, “making it leap and run around before the people”—is likely to be roughly contemporary with traditions asserting similar things from other specimens of late antique and early medieval rabbinic literature. Examples clearly proliferate after a given point, but the earliest versions of such traditions seem to appear in texts roughly datable from the era in which the Babylonian Talmud was redacted, the era of the so-called “štamma’im.”<sup>30</sup> As we have seen from the passage about Satan “confounding the world” from the Talmud cited above, various midrashic traditions emphasize Satan’s role in the Calf affair, as *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* does, though the animation of the Calf need not be among the diabolical tricks mentioned.<sup>31</sup> Alternatively, it may be the Egyptian sorcerers Jannes and Jambres who play the role of diabolical interlopers, or else another character such as Micah may be blamed; when these specific individuals are involved, the tradition usually attributes the animation of the Calf directly to them.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> The term “štamma’im” was coined by Weiss Halivni, who posited that the tannaitic and amoraic-era material now compiled in the Babylonian Talmud underwent a long process of redaction over an unspecified period of time at the hands of anonymous redactors (*šētām* means “unknown” in Aramaic). See *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara*, esp. 76-92.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. *b. Šabb.* 89a; *Tanḥ.* (Buber), *Ki-tiššā* 13; *Shemot Rabbah* 41.7. Schäfer treats all of these Sinai traditions as part of one narrative complex; in his opinion, the core element they all have in common is the theme of Satanic intervention at Sinai, which he then locates as part of a much wider and more diffuse complex of traditions concerning angelic opposition to the revelation of the Torah. See *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen*, 157-8. But the trope of Satanic interference in the affairs of Israel is particularly prominent in a *number* of contexts treated in the classical midrash, and is very often employed as a general theodical device, for example in explaining aspects of the *Aqedah*, the trial of Abraham.

<sup>32</sup> Jannes and Jambres were apparently a very well-known pair in Late Antiquity among numerous scriptural communities: for example, they are famously mentioned in 2 Tim. 3 as opponents of Moses, as well as in the so-called Damascus Document of the Dead Sea Scrolls as minions of Satan. They are also featured in an apocryphon that is still partially extant in Greek and Coptic (cf. Pietersma, *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians*) and in a handful of Latin texts as well. The story of Micah is told in Judges 17; he was a man of Ephraim who set up an idol in his house and made his home into a shrine. As previously mentioned, in several traditions, the “mixed multitude” (*‘ēreb rāb*) who came up out of Egypt with the Israelites

Thus, *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, a midrashic commentary on the Song of Songs conventionally dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, says that due to the interference of Egyptian sorcerers, the Calf appeared to be “shaking” (*měraṭṭēt*) before the Israelites. Granted, this tradition hardly seems to indicate that the Calf was *animate* per se, but it does at least attribute a *semblance* of life to it.<sup>33</sup> (Ironically, as we shall discuss later, what little commentary on this passage there is in the scholarship tends to read this reference as far more significant than it probably is.) Further, a tradition in *Midrash Tanḥuma* says that it was either the Egyptians or Micah, but that in any case, on account of sorcery, the Calf leapt out of the fire into which Aaron cast the golden ornaments of the people, “lowing as it leapt about.”<sup>34</sup>

The account in the text known as *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* is even more colorful; further, it is of particular interest because here Aaron seems to bear at least partial responsibility for making the Calf, whereas later rabbinic traditions usually strive to exonerate him as much as possible:

---

is blamed; they are presumed to have formed a kind of Egyptian fifth column among the people, and so the worship of the Calf is easily projected onto them, without any specific reference to the role of the magicians per se. Cf., e.g., *Vayyiqra Rabbah* 27.8; *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 9.8; *Tanḥ., Ĕmôr* 15; *Shemot Rabbah* 42.6.

<sup>33</sup> *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, I.9.3. This collection is conventionally dated to approximately the 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE. This unit is actually a composite of two distinct traditions; the line quoted here is from a tradition cited in the name of an ‘*āmôrā*’ (R. Yūdān, Babylonian, fourth generation) which has been appended as commentary to a much older tradition that is independently extant in an important tannaitic collection; see discussion below in Chapter 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Tanḥ., Kī-tiššā* 19. The text of the standard printed edition (ויצא העגל גוער כשהו מקרטע) is probably corrupt: I would emend the nonsensical גוער (“rebuking,” probably due to homeoarchon from a previous line which reads “immediately Ḥur arose and rebuked them...” to גועה (“lowing”). Jastrow recommends emending to גראה, reading the line as “*appearing* as if it (the Golden Calf) were leaping” (*Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature*, s.v. “קרטע,” italics added). Arguably, my reading is more plausible on formal grounds; it is simply more realistic, graphically speaking. Moreover, *gā’āh* is the same verb used in the *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* and in other later versions as well. Berman’s translation has simply “Then the calf came forth leaping” (*Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 599). Note that the parallel in the Buber recension of the *Tanḥuma* (*Kī-tiššā* 13, cf. *Shemot Rabbah* 41:7) is built directly upon the talmudic passage from *b. Šab.* 89a as well, but *omits* the datum about the inspiration of the Calf completely. Finally, note that the idol Micah the Danite is supposed to have constructed according to Judges 17 is briefly mentioned in the context of a long tradition on the Calf episode in *Shemot Rabbah* 41.1, but it is not specifically connected with the creation of the Calf here.

Among the earrings, Aaron found a slip of gold with the Holy Name written on it and an image of a calf engraved upon it.<sup>35</sup> This alone he threw into the fire, as it is stated, *And they gave it to me...* (Ex.32:24) “And I threw them into the fire...” is not written here, but rather, *And I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf...* (cont’d.)—lowing (*g’h*), and all Israel saw.

R. Judah said: Samā’ēl had entered it, lowing to lead Israel astray, as it is stated, *The ox knows his owner* (Is.1:3).<sup>36</sup> All Israel saw this, and they offered it libations, and bowed down before it, and sacrificed to it.<sup>37</sup>

*Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* is a distinctive work for many reasons. First of all, it is most likely the earliest major work of classical rabbinic literature that is the product of a single authorial hand, as opposed to being a compilation of earlier, originally autonomous, traditions redacted in stages. Further, its author’s use of numerous well-established aggadic motifs woven into coherent narrative units marks it as a milestone in the genre of midrash and possibly in the larger history of Jewish fiction as well.

---

<sup>35</sup> The detail of the gold slip with the Tetragrammaton inscribed upon it is a variation on a theme associated with Micah in the *Tanḥuma* passage just quoted: Micah is said to have secreted away the magic tablet used by Moses to retrieve the coffin of Joseph from the Nile at the time of the exodus from Egypt, and this he threw into the fire in which the Israelites’ gold ornaments were being melted down (*Tanḥ.*, *Ki-tiššā* 19). The tradition on this tablet is very widely disseminated; the earliest version of it appears in *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, *Bēšallah* 1.86 ff. (ed. Lauterbach, 1.176-7). Cf. also *b. Šot.* 13a (in which no tablet appears, Moses retrieving the coffin with an invocation); *Shemot Rabbah* 20.19 (ibid.); *Devarim Rabbah* 11.7 (ibid.); *Tanḥ.*, *Bēšallah* 2 (Moses retrieves the coffin with a ‘pebble’ or ‘chip,’ *šērôr*, with the Name inscribed upon it).

<sup>36</sup> That is, it does what its owner, Satan/Samā’ēl, tells it to do.

<sup>37</sup> *Pirque Rabbi Elieser*, ed. Börner-Klein, 611; cf. the translation of Friedlander, 354-5, and notes thereon. The 1852 Warsaw edition reads *šāṭān* here and not *samā’ēl*, following some manuscripts. It is difficult to say which is likely to be the original reading, since both names are genuinely ancient, and the figures are often interchangeable: Satan is the name for the *Diabolos* that tends to predominate among Christians, Samā’ēl that among Jews. See Scholem, *EJ*, s.v. “Samael,” and Dan, “Samael and the Problem of Jewish Gnosticism.” Cf. also the brief discussion of this passage in Schäfer, *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen*, 159: he observes that this passage is unique among traditions on Satanic interference at Sinai and remarks that “eine genauere Datierung ist nicht möglich.” He also observes some distant relationship between it and the talmudic tradition warning of the danger posed by a black ox in the month of Nisan, because at that time “Satan dances between his horns” (*b. Ber.* 33a and *b. Pesah.* 112b), but this seems rather implausible to me.

Later midrashic or quasi-midrashic texts such as the *Sefer ha-Yashar*, *Lekah Tov*, *Midrash ha-Gadol* and even the *Zohar* all follow the pattern established in *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*: each of these is likewise the work of a single author, and likewise tailors older rabbinic traditions into a coherent, unified literary fabric, usually suppressing the explicitly exegetical aspects of the assimilated traditions in favor of emphasizing their aggadic—which is to say, fictive and literary—aspects.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, many of these works contain traditions on the animation of the Calf as well, often citing the tradition exactly as it is known from *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*, which seems to have played a particularly important role in the dissemination of this motif (and presumably others as well). The rough timeframe in which this might have occurred is readily suggested, for a *terminus post quem* can easily be established for *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*: it is quite evidently the first rabbinic work that is unambiguously post-Islamic, for here Ishmael is said to have had two wives, a Moabite woman named 'Ayshah (that is, the wife of the Prophet, 'Ā'isha bt. Abī Bakr, d. 58/678) and an Egyptian woman named Paṭūmah (that is, the daughter of the Prophet, Fāṭima al-Zahrā', d. 11/632-633?).<sup>39</sup>

\*\*\*

Like so many other aspects of aggadic tradition, the dissemination of the image of the animate Golden Calf in rabbinic sources such as *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is of particular interest to scholars of the Quran. As it turns out, it is the

---

<sup>38</sup> In this period the blurry line between midrash and fiction extends to historical works as well, as may be seen from such texts as the *Chronicle of Eldad ha-Dani* and *Sefer Yosippon*, both of which are heavily infused with aggadic details. For more on *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*, see below.

<sup>39</sup> *Pirke Rabbi Elieser*, ed. Börner-Klein, 341, 343. Strikingly, 'Ayshah is the bad wife and Paṭūmah the good, which would most obviously seem to imply "Shī'ite influence." See the recent discussion of Newby ("Text and Territory: Jewish-Muslim Relations 632-750 CE"), which places the work in its proper context in the early Islamic period and sees it as a Jewish response to the Muslim attempt to coopt the Israelite prophets as precursors to Muhammad, as seen, for example, in the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq.

undisputed scholarly consensus that this is, in fact, the conception of the Golden Calf episode that informs the handful of passages alluding to the Calf in the Quran as well, and in particular the peculiar phrase *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār'*<sup>40</sup> that occurs at Q.7:148 and 20:88. Most translators render this as “a corporeal calf”—or possibly “an *image* of a calf”—“that lows,” a phrase that has struck many scholars as reminiscent of the rabbinic Calf “lowing as it leapt about” or “lowing to lead Israel astray.” Similarly, the Quranic Calf story appears to include yet another version of the familiar character of the diabolical interloper in the guise of *al-sāmīrī*, who seems to be the architect of the episode according to the version of the account in Sūra 20 in particular. Thus, Jewish tradition has often been cited as the immediate source of the Quranic narrative, texts such as those discussed above taken as unambiguous evidence for the story’s derivation from rabbinic prototypes.

The vague and elliptical style of the Quran is well known—it is, after all, supposed to be a record of prophetic speech—and many scholars have commented upon the particularly allusive fashion in which it typically recounts narratives. As we have already mentioned, the claim that Jewish and Christian stories were “in the air” in pre-Islamic Arabia, and that the Prophet must have had some knowledge of these stories (albeit at some remove from the actual written sources of scripture), is usually invoked to explain why it is that the Quran often tells part of a biblical story and leaves the rest to the imagination, or else alludes to a more or less familiar story without telling us who it is meant to be about, or else gets most of a story “right” while nevertheless botching some basic detail in a painfully obvious way. To take one famous example, there seems to be some confusion in the Quran between the Maryam (that is, Mary) who is the mother of Jesus and the Maryam (that is, Miriam) who is the sister of Moses and Aaron.<sup>40</sup> The only logical way to account for this seems to be to assume that biblical stories were, again, “in the air” in pre-Islamic Arabia, and that Muhammad had some partial—but *only* partial—knowledge of them; his

---

<sup>40</sup> The Qur’ānic Mary is the daughter of ‘Imrān (i.e. Amram, Q.3:35-36) and sister of Hārūn (i.e. Aaron, Q.19:28) as well as being mother of ‘Īsā (i.e. Jesus).

specific invocation of these stories, however, *also* implies that we can assume that *he* assumed that his hearers possessed an analogous degree of scriptural awareness as well.<sup>41</sup> What we have called the “diffusionist” model of the origins of the Quran thus not only presupposes a basic biblical literacy on the part of the Prophet himself, but also on the part of his intended audience.<sup>42</sup>

We might note at this juncture that the idea that the Prophet had only a partial and incomplete knowledge of biblical stories, lacking direct recourse to the text or texts of scripture, conveniently reinforces two traditional claims about him that Western scholarship has incorporated wholesale from Muslim sources: first, that Muhammad was illiterate, and second, that the Jewish and Christian traditions, while having some diffuse presence in Arabian society during the Jāhiliyya, were nevertheless something qualitatively *foreign and external to it*. That Muhammad did not or could not avail himself of written texts and did not know the “real” scriptural accounts to which the Quran plainly alludes, or knew them only imperfectly, tacitly serves to validate the traditional account of Islamic origins, at least as understood by Orientalist scholarship, which saw the Prophet Muhammad, illiterate, heathen, and Arab, as the real “author” of the Quran.<sup>43</sup> As we shall see, scholars have sometimes used the Quranic Golden Calf story

---

<sup>41</sup> There is a strong tendency for Muslims of a rationalist bent to explain away these “errors”; cf. Sherif’s discussion of the Mary problem, where he claims that the Quran’s use of the term “sister of Aaron” is figurative and points to Luke 1:5, where Elizabeth, sister of Mary and mother of John the Baptist, is referred to as being one of the “daughters of Aaron.” He thus explains the expression “family of Amram” as meaning that Mary and Jesus were actually just *descendants* of Amram (*A Guide to the Contents of the Qur’an*, 89-90).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the discussion in Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*; he argues throughout that, read on its own terms, the Quran suggests an environment thoroughly infused with monotheism, and that the text is in fact primarily a form of monotheist polemic directed against other monotheists, the image of the pagan Jāhiliyya thus reflecting a myth of Arab polytheism generated in early Islamic times. To some degree, Hawting’s characterization mirrors (albeit somewhat obliquely) the portrayal of Jāhili society found in the *sīra* literature, for here we find various Jews and Christians whose primary role is to supply a basis for the confirmation of Muhammad’s message by other monotheist communities; thus, the *Praeparatio evangelica* represented by these Jews and Christians may very well be a trope in Ibn Ishāq, but could simultaneously hint at a deeper historical reality, at least according to Hawting’s interpretation.

<sup>43</sup> The notion of Muhammad’s illiteracy is based on the obscure Quranic allusion to *al-nabī al-ummī* (Q.7:157-158). For the Islamic tradition, regardless of its possible basis in historical fact,

both to comment upon Muhammad's use of older scriptural materials and to make note of his patent incompetence in doing so.

Likewise, it is often the case that the Quran appears to reflect not only a basic degree of scriptural awareness on its author's part, but some *parascriptural* awareness as well. That is, biblical stories are told in such a way that they seem to presuppose postbiblical Jewish or Christian elaborations on what we usually understand as the canonical narrative. For example, the Quran unambiguously identifies Adam and Eve's adversary in the Garden as Satan and not the serpent; while this might seem like a wholly sensible gloss to modern readers, the idea of Satan is of course foreign to pre-exilic Israel, as well as being wholly absent from the Pentateuch.<sup>44</sup> As another example, the Quran presupposes some details about Abraham's background *before* his calling by God, while the Genesis narrative only gives us substantial information about his life *after* the call. In the Quran, some allusion is made to the story of how young Abraham, back home in Ur of the Chaldees before his westward migration, became an iconoclast after discovering God and sought to destroy his father's idols; a direct correlation with the troubled early career of Muhammad is drawn here, in that this iconoclasm eventually earns Abraham the enmity of his kinsfolk, who then proceed to persecute him.<sup>45</sup> As a third example, nowhere in the

---

the notion of Muhammad's illiteracy serves to tie him to the Jāhīlī pagan environment (in which an oral culture predominated) and to insulate him from the charge of having derived his revelation from older scriptures, simply regurgitating "stories of the ancients" copied from those texts. Paradoxically, for Western scholars, Muhammad's illiteracy appears to *vindicate* that charge, since the Prophet's purported reliance *only* on oral tradition explains the Quran's supposed inaccuracies, since the general tendency in Western scholarship is to see oral transmission as less reliable than written. For both Muslim and Western scholars, the *ummī* trope historicizes the Quran by anchoring it in objective biographical "facts" about Muhammad, even though these "facts" are interpreted in different—even diametrically opposite—ways.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Q.2:35-39, 7:19-25, and 20:120-124.

<sup>45</sup> For the story of how Abraham's people sought to kill him for assaulting their idols, see, e.g., Q.37:83-113; on his logical deduction of monotheism, see, e.g., Q.6:74-83 and 26:69-104. For the background of this latter theme, see Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist and Father of the Jews."

canonical Gospels do we find the striking image of the boy Jesus animating clay birds to the delight of his playmates, though the Quran seems to allude to an event such as this as well.<sup>46</sup>

In short, we now recognize all of these ideas and stories as being from distinctly noncanonical sources such as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the various antique works collectively termed “rewritten Bible,” rabbinic aggadah, patristic exegesis, and so forth and so on. However, it is crucial to note that in Late Antiquity, these details, ultimately drawn from diverse interpretations and expansions of scripture, were not only perfectly acceptable as exegetical flourishes on canonical narratives, but by and large had come to be virtually *indistinguishable* from canonical narratives in most contexts. The Quranic Calf story seems to be another example of this phenomenon (at least at first glance), where its author’s conception of the episode appears to be decisively informed by parascriptural accounts—specifically material drawn from rabbinic midrash—and not just the canonical version of Exodus 32 familiar to us today.

Although the Quran alludes to the story of the Golden Calf in three different chapters, the fullest—and most likely earliest—treatment of the narrative is found in Sūra 20.<sup>47</sup> Although it is hard to tell from most translations, this account is in fact riddled with ambiguous phrases and unclear terms; to avoid having to deal with these difficulties at the outset, we will generally cite the 1984 version of Ahmed Ali here, at least for the time being. Although Ali clearly engages the Quran from the perspective of a believer and not that of an objective scholar, his method of rendering the scriptural text is clear and frequently, if not consistently, literal. Ali’s version is used very widely by Western academics as a reliable version of the Quran; further, as we shall

---

<sup>46</sup> Q.3:49, “Verily, I bring you a sign from your Lord, that I will create for you out of clay the likeness of a bird...” (which many modern interpreters of a rationalist bent prefer to translate figuratively) is often explained through reference to such apocryphal sources as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.

<sup>47</sup> Sūra 20 presents the most complete version of the narrative, and is traditionally considered to be earlier than Sūra 7, which presupposes it; the two brief references to the Calf in Sūra 2 do not add anything significant to the narrative, at least in terms of what most interests us here.



see, Ali's interpretation of the Golden Calf episode tends to be representative of the exegesis generally favored by both modern Muslims and mainstream non-Muslim scholars.<sup>48</sup>

As in the biblical account in Exodus 32, in the Quranic version of the narrative in Sūra 20, the Israelites' sudden degeneration (or regression) into idolatry interrupts Moses' audience with God on Mount Sinai when he is abruptly notified by the Almighty that *We have put your people on trial in your absence; and Sameri has led them astray.*<sup>49</sup> "Sameri" renders *al-sāmirī* here; the term occurs for the first time in this verse and appears only twice more in subsequent verses of the chapter. The term is almost universally considered to refer to a heretofore unmentioned character in the narrative, and is thus nearly always construed as a name; however, many if not most commentators perceive it not as a proper name per se but as a *nisba* adjective indicating this individual's ethnic or tribal affiliation. Thus, while most translators simply render the term as "Sāmirī" or some variant on this, a few actually prefer to call him *the Samaritan*.

As mentioned previously, *al-sāmirī* appears to be the Quranic version of the type of the malevolent interloper who leads the Israelites astray in midrashic renditions of the story, and this is readily apparent in the Sūra 20 account as it continues to unfold, at least according to its conventional interpretation. After God notifies Moses of what has transpired, he then rushes back down the mountain to confront his wayward people, who explain:

... *We did not break our promise to you of our own will, but we were made to carry the loads of ornaments belonging to the people, which we threw (into the fire), and so did Sameri.*<sup>50</sup> *Then he produced the image of a calf which mooed like a cow. And they said: This is your god and the god of Moses (whom) he has*

---

<sup>48</sup> In the past, this role was played by the translations of Pickthall and Arberry, both of which now seem rather antiquated. Note that Robinson uses Pickthall as his "control" text in testing other translations for sectarian ideological bias; see discussion below.

<sup>49</sup> Q.20:85 (Ahmed Ali translation).

<sup>50</sup> Or else "so did *al-sāmirī* suggest." The first instance of "throwing" here uses the verb *qadhafa*, the second *alqā*; while both seem to mean "to throw, cast," the latter can also mean "to hint, allege, suggest." The distinction is occasionally observed by translators. It is largely immaterial to our concerns here.

*neglected. Did they not see that it did not give them any answer, nor had it power to do them harm or bring them gain?*<sup>51</sup>

The Arabic phrase that Ali translates as “the image of a calf which mooed like a cow” is *’ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>*, which we have already noted above. The term *’ijl* is comprehensible enough, especially because it is cognate with the Hebrew *’ēgel*, the word used to refer to the Golden Calf throughout Exodus 32 and in many of the other references to the episode found in the Hebrew Bible as well.<sup>52</sup> The sense of *jasad* is slightly more elusive: the vast majority of commentators take it to mean “body,” “form,” and thus perhaps “image.” The even more obscure *la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>* has inspired surprisingly little debate, despite the fact that it is the primary basis (actually, in point of fact, the *sole* basis) in the Quranic narrative for the idea that the Calf was brought to life or at least possessed an illusory semblance of life.

Moses then castigates his brother Aaron, to whom, as in the biblical account, the welfare of the people was entrusted: *O Aaron, when you saw that they had gone astray, what hindered you from coming after me? Did you not disobey my command?*<sup>53</sup> Aaron’s response would have been quite resonant for later Muslim commentators, because his reply shows that his apparent collusion was motivated by a desire to avoid *fitna* or strife within the community: *O son of my mother (Aaron cried), do not pull me by my beard or my hair! I was really afraid you may say that I had*

---

<sup>51</sup> Q.20:87-89 (Ali).

<sup>52</sup> The Calf of Sinai and the calves of Jeroboam are consistently called *’ēgel* when they are not referred to more obliquely with terms such as “cast image” or the like. But cf. also Ps.106:20, which refers to the Calf of Sinai as *tabnît šôr* (an image of a *bull*). See discussion below.

<sup>53</sup> Q.20:92 (Ali). This is one of the very few places in this narrative where Ali seems to deviate from the mainstream interpretation, however slightly, in that commentators and translators typically interpret this phrase to mean “follow my example” or something similar, that is, to “go after” (*ittaba’a*) in a more metaphorical sense. Some translators adopt a compromise position, e.g. “what kept thee back... from following me?” (Abdullah Yusuf Ali), which leaves the question of literal or figurative interpretation open. Ahmed Ali, on the other hand, clearly understands the use of *ittaba’a* here as implying that Moses expected Aaron to literally come retrieve him from the mountain when things went awry (or perhaps simply to leave the camp and abandon the people to their fate?)

*created a rift among the children of Israel, and did not pay heed to your command.*<sup>54</sup> Moses then proceeds to this aforementioned person “Sameri” (a figure entirely absent from the Exodus narrative, incidentally), and demands to know what he was thinking when he sought to mislead the Israelites with the Calf: *Moses asked: O Sameri, what was the matter? He said: I saw what they did not see. I picked up a handful of dust from the messenger’s tracks and threw it in, for the idea seemed attractive to me.*<sup>55</sup> These opaque words are left unexplained. Instead, the account in Sūra 20 concludes with the destruction of the Calf, as well as with what has appeared to most commentators, translators, and scholars to be a curse placed on *al-sāmirī* by Moses in punishment for his role in Israel’s idolatry:

*(Moses) said: Go hence! All your life you are (cursed) to say: Do not touch me; and a threat hangs over you which you will not be able to escape. Look at your god to whom you are so attached: We shall verily burn it, and disperse its ashes into the sea.*<sup>56</sup>

The Golden Calf episode is also related in Sūra 7, albeit much more briefly. Notably, the conception of the making of the Calf in Q.7:148 is basically the same, and identical phrasing is used to describe the Calf itself: *In the absence of Moses his people prepared the image of a calf from their ornaments, which gave out the mooing of a cow. Yet they did not see it could neither speak to them nor guide them to the right path. Even then they took it (for a deity) and did wrong.*<sup>57</sup> The account continues briefly in vss.149-151, in which the Israelites’ repentance for their error is mentioned, along with a description of the exchange between Moses and Aaron that is basically similar to that quoted above from Q.20:92-94. Strikingly, here Aaron’s excuse is

---

<sup>54</sup> Q.20:90-94 (Ali). Note that the narrative actually omits reference to Moses’ physical attack upon his brother, which is included in the parallel account. See below.

<sup>55</sup> Q.20:95-96 (Ali).

<sup>56</sup> Q.20:97 (Ali).

<sup>57</sup> Q.7:148 (Ali).

somewhat different, as he claims to have allowed the Israelites to proceed *not* in order to avoid giving a pretext to Moses to accuse him of creating division among them, but rather out of fear that the people would slay him if he dared to interfere.<sup>58</sup> Finally, it is also extremely noteworthy that the version of the account in Sūra 7 lacks *any* reference whatsoever to the mysterious figure *al-sāmirī*. Rather, it concludes with Moses' poignant petition for pardon before God: *O Lord, forgive me and my brother, and admit us to Your grace, for You are the most compassionate of all.*<sup>59</sup> Why Moses and Aaron would need to entreat God to show such mercy is somewhat unclear, though many commentators naturally conclude that they seek to atone for allowing these events to transpire in the first place.

---

<sup>58</sup> Q.7:150 supplies the actual description of Moses physically accosting his brother, "And he cast aside the tablets, and pulled his brother by the hair," which seems to be lacking in the Sūra 20 account, even though the latter supplies Aaron's response ("O son of my mother (Aaron cried), do not pull me by my beard or my hair...") Intriguingly, the Sūra 20 account not only overlooks this particular detail, but also omits any mention of the breaking of the Tablets as well.

<sup>59</sup> Q.7:151 (Ali).

## 2. Classical Islamic commentary on the Calf episode: a brief overview

Although his rendition of these verses appears to be extremely literal and might thus be taken to be completely objective and reliable, as we shall see, Ahmed Ali's translation in fact takes a specific interpretation of the Calf episode for granted; this is absolutely typical of modern exegetes and commentators on the story. Further, precisely *because* his translation strives to take the Quran's sometimes elliptical Arabic at face value and keeps both footnotes and emendations of the literal text to a minimum, Ali's rendition of this opaque narrative leaves the reader with numerous questions regarding various important details found therein. The episode was apparently equally obscure to the classical commentators, who strove energetically to resolve numerous questions raised by the text and thus constructed a more or less coherent scheme for making sense of the scriptural verses in question. Before attempting to reevaluate the meaning of these verses, we will briefly survey the range of interpretive possibilities established by the classical exegetes and then proceed to show how this tradition was carried over practically wholesale into Western scholarship on the story. Although the proper interpretation of many of the verses cited above is disputed, we will focus on the most salient questions surrounding the Golden Calf episode in the Quran, namely the Calf's specific nature as "the image of a calf which mooed like a cow" and the precise role played in the affair by the character called *al-sāmirī*.

The classical Islamic exegetical tradition is almost completely unanimous regarding the meaning of the phrase used to describe the Golden Calf in Q.7:148 and 20:88, *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>*, rendered by Ali as "the image of a calf which mooed like a cow," though "a calf, a body"—or "image"—"that moos" would be somewhat more literal. The commentators are in total agreement in claiming that this phrase is meant to indicate that the golden idol appeared to be alive in some way, though there is significant debate over the nature of the Calf and the cause of its lowing: it was either made animate or quasi-animate due to a magical procedure undertaken by *al-sāmirī*, or else it was contrived in such a way as to give a mere *appearance* of life. Among

those interpreters who say it was actually animate, the vast majority prefer the idea that the Calf was a statue magically brought to life that moored and moved around; as we have already noted, this is a common conception of the Golden Calf in some midrashic sources as well.

These traditions generally seem to presume that the Calf remained *inorganic*, but was magically ensouled. Presumably this idea reflects the common theme of the living statue found in myriad sources from the Hellenistic era, Late Antiquity, and medieval Arab culture alike, for example Talos, the magical guardian of Crete; the oracular Egyptian images described in the *Corpus Hermeticum*; or the Brass Boatman of *The Thousand and One Nights*. In the case of the Calf, the Quranic term *jasad* specifically seems to be understood as meaning “image” or “statue,” and thus the key proof-text might be rendered “an *idol* of a calf that moored.” (To further complicate matters, however, we should note that even though the animate Golden Calf resembles the “ensouled” statues of Late Antiquity, it is not *technically* thus, for, as we shall see, many exegetes were uncomfortable with asserting that the idol possessed magically imbued life, and thus insisted that there “was no soul within it,” *laysa rūḥ fi-hi*.)

A minority among those who saw the Calf as “genuinely” animate appear to have understood it *not* as a living, lowing statue of gold, however, but instead claimed that the molten image had become a *flesh and blood* calf by means of magic. Although the exegetes of the early and classical period certainly knew of this interpretation, by the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, it had become *de rigueur* to suppress or at least avoid such a claim; however, as we shall see, there are hints and traces of this exegesis to be found in some classical sources. Moreover, by the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, whatever concerns had originally motivated this suppression or avoidance of the notion of the flesh-and-blood Calf had largely dissipated, and well-known medieval exegetes such as al-Tha‘labī and al-Suyūṭī felt free to acknowledge this tradition, whether or not they actually agreed with it. In any event, in this case, *jasad* specifically seems to be taken as meaning “body,” and thus the key proof-text might alternatively be rendered as “a real, physical calf that moored.” As we

shall see, many modern translators appear to oppose this view as well, in rendering the key phrase as “a mere body that lowed,” “a lifeless body that seemed to moo,” etc.<sup>60</sup>

Those modern translators who favor rendering the phrase as “a lifeless body that seemed to moo” often appear to be hearkening back to the third school of thought that flourished among the classical commentators on the episode. Although it is only known through secondary attestations since many of the writings associated with this school have not survived, this view was originally championed by exegetes associated with the rationalist movement of the Mu‘tazila. The Mu‘tazilites seem to have claimed that the Calf was a fraud perpetrated against the Israelites—that is, that its creator *al-sāmirī* had constructed it in such a way that the passage of wind through it would cause it to emit a lowing or mooing sound, and that the credulous Israelites fell for this trick and thus believed that the Calf was alive and worthy of their reverence. To some extent, this third school of thought, closely associated with the early exegetical authority Mujāhid b. Jabr in some commentaries as well as the Mu‘tazilite exegete al-Jubbā‘ī, seems to reflect some authentic cultural memory of the antique science of constructing automata and other clever devices that simulated the activity of living beings. Here again the critical term *jasad* seems to be taken as meaning “image” or “statue,” or else “body,” but only in the sense of a *mere* body, an empty shell that contained no genuine life of its own.

Even here, where the animation of the Calf is reduced to mere charlatanism, it is nevertheless the case that its “lowing” is supposed to have been a phenomenon witnessed by the Israelites and that led directly to their being misled by the image. That is, for all intents and purposes, all of the classical commentators, even the Mu‘tazila, concede that the oblique phrase

---

<sup>60</sup> As we shall see, the issue that seems to drive suppression (or at least avoidance) of the interpretation of the Calf as having been transformed into an actual flesh-and-blood calf is that of evidentiary miracles. The mature Islamic tradition could provisionally accept the putative occurrence of certain non-prophetic miracles (e.g. the Dajjāl’s ability to resurrect as a sign of the end times) to a certain extent, but overall, the spokesmen of the nascent Sunnī tradition at least seem to have been quite ambivalent about the proliferation of miracles. The suggestion that *al-sāmirī* may have transmuted a golden statue into a living animal, especially in the service of idolatry, was thus simply too much for some commentators to accept.

*la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* serves to describe the nature and activity of the Calf *at the moment of its creation*—it gave off a mooing sound due to its creator’s desire to dupe the people and convince them that it was a god miraculously wrought or conjured for them. The main criterion of difference between the exegetes, then, is their attitude regarding the significance of the word *jasad*, which in turn seems to depend on what the nature of the sound *khuwār* made by the Calf is thought to be. It may be taken as proof of the Calf’s magical nature, showing either that the image of gold had become a real flesh-and-blood calf or rather that it was a magical construct that could imitate the behavior of a living animal; otherwise, it may be taken as proof of its maker’s duplicity in seeking to exploit the credulity of the idolatrous mob by employing his particular skills in engineering and legerdemain.

Besides presuming that *khuwār* describes the specific sound heard from the Calf by the Israelites after its conjuring or fabrication, what all of these exegetical possibilities share in common is that they presuppose malicious intent on the part of this *al-sāmirī*. In this too they all display a basic underlying similarity to the interpretation of the Calf episode found in various rabbinic sources, in which various parties are described as coming on the scene in Moses’ absence and pursuing a variety of tactics to lead the Israelites astray. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, all three of these schools of thought on the episode seem to presuppose a considerable expansion of the narrative beyond its scriptural bounds, requiring the would-be exegete to adduce themes and concepts that are simply not inherent in or native to the Quran itself. That is, the single term *khuwār* is made to bear the burden of a substantial elaboration of detail by the exegetes that has *no* explicit scriptural basis whatsoever.

In defense of this notion of the animate (or seemingly animate) Calf, one might argue that such an exegesis is also partially anchored in various statements in the Quran about *al-sāmirī*, particularly his first-person description of his actions in Q.20:96. But the meaning of these words is in fact even more ambiguous than those describing the Calf itself, and citing this verse as “proof” of its animation in fact only demonstrates how tenuous the interpretation constructed by



the classical commentators really is. To reiterate, *al-sāmirī* is not mentioned at all in the version of the episode in Sūra 7, so the brief handful of verses in Sūra 20 that talk about him explicitly are our sole source of information about him. In point of fact, the obscure words he utters in Q.20:96, ... *I saw what they did not see. I picked up a handful of dust from the messenger's tracks and threw it in, for the idea seemed attractive to me*, becomes the single most important determining factor behind the exegetes' explanation of who he is supposed to be and what exactly his role in the making of the Calf entailed.<sup>61</sup> From verse 85, the first to mention him, we learn (from God Himself, actually) that *al-sāmirī* was responsible for leading the people astray, although this occurred with divine warrant, since God acknowledges that this was simply a test or trial that He established for the Israelites.<sup>62</sup> From verse 87 we learn from the Israelites themselves that they *were made to carry the loads of ornaments belonging to the people*; these they “threw”—Ali adds “into the fire,” words not present in the original text—and *al-sāmirī* apparently did the same.<sup>63</sup> The following verse establishes that he “made” or “produced” (*akhrāja*) the Calf for them, presumably by means of the aforementioned throwing; his rationale for doing so is later presented in verse 96, which unfortunately only raises more questions than it answers. *What* exactly did he see that the people did not? What is this “handful of dust from the messenger's tracks”? Why did this “seem attractive” to him?

The exegetical tradition must again have recourse to imaginative elaboration to explain these words, and once again near-total unanimity appears to be the result. The activity seemingly described here in fact provides the critical explanation for the aforementioned interpretation of *'ijl*

---

<sup>61</sup> The *lā misāsa* verse regarding *al-sāmirī*'s punishment (Q.20:97) is critical as well, particularly for modern scholars seeking to verify his “Samaritan” identity. Strangely, this verse is not as key for the classical exegetes, who generally do not pay very much attention to it.

<sup>62</sup> *He said, We have put your people on trial (qad fatannā qawmaka) in your absence; and Sameri has led them astray* (Ali). The specific use of the verb *fatana* here attracted the attention of the early exegetes in particular, who made much of the seeming division of labor here (God causing the trial and *al-sāmirī* leading astray).

<sup>63</sup> See note above on the use of *alqā* here.

*jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>* as indicating an animate Calf, because it appears to depict the mechanism by which *al-sāmīrī* purportedly accomplished this feat.<sup>64</sup> Notably, however, in order to explain how or why this mechanism of the “handful” worked, the exegetes must then have recourse to *additional* imaginative elaboration. For the overwhelming majority of traditional Muslim commentators, the “handful from the track of the messenger,” *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl*, is taken to refer to a handful of dirt taken by *al-sāmīrī* from the hoofprint of the horse of the archangel Gabriel, who is understood to be the *rasūl* or messenger to whom the verse refers.<sup>65</sup> According to the exegetical tradition (but *not* the Quran itself), Gabriel appeared astride a heavenly steed at the Red Sea at the time of the Israelites’ miraculous crossing; as the parted waters stood poised to rush back into the seabed, Gabriel lured the Egyptians forward to pursue the fleeing Israelites at the last minute, thus ensuring their doom when the waters surged back after the Israelites had made it to safety.<sup>66</sup> At that time, as *al-sāmīrī* himself attests, “I perceived what others did not,” *baṣurtu bi-mā lam yabṣurū bi-hi*, i.e., he either saw Gabriel when he was invisible to others, or else he understood that the dirt had magical capabilities due to the power of the angelic steed

---

<sup>64</sup> One would think that this would only be the case if one accepted the notion that the Calf was “actually” brought to life by means of magic, for the verse does little (if anything) to explain the Calf as a product of Sāmīrī’s charlatanry. That is, it can hardly be thought to corroborate the idea that he designed the idol to create the *illusion* of lowing when the wind passed through it. Strangely, however, in the classical commentaries, one finds ample traditions of a “hybrid” nature, in which the seeming miracle presented by the Calf is partially the effect of *al-sāmīrī*’s use of magic and partially that of his resorting to trickery.

<sup>65</sup> In the Quran, the term *rasūl* is usually used to refer to prophets, not angels; the one possible exception is the vague allusion at Q.81:19-23, which is traditionally taken to refer to Muhammad’s vision of Gabriel filling the horizon. This is in fact Gabriel’s most famous “appearance” in the Quran, though he is not explicitly named here. (The literature on Muhammad’s initial prophetic call and the vision of Gabriel to which this Quranic passage supposedly refers is vast; cf., e.g., Andræ, *Mohammed*, 42-7 and Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 103-10.) Gabriel is not named at Q.53:5-10 either, another important passage often taken to allude to him. He *is* mentioned briefly by name three times in the Quran, twice at Q.2:97-98 and once at 66:4, but he never appears explicitly in any Quranic narrative per se. As we shall discuss below, in very rare instances, some exegetes also suggest that the *rasūl* of Q.20:96 is al-Khidr.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. the passages from Ṭabarī cited below, who relates vivid traditions about this scene in both his *tafsīr* and his chronicle. It was commonly suggested that Gabriel specifically appeared riding a female horse in heat (*faras balqā’ unthā*) in order to lure the male horses of the Egyptians into the seabed after her.

(sometimes called *faras al-ḥayāt*, the Horse of Life) or the holiness emanating from the angel himself.<sup>67</sup> *Al-sāmīrī* then secreted some of this dirt away, and when the time came, he threw it into the fire in which the image of the Golden Calf was being formed, and it then came to life and leaped out.<sup>68</sup>

Curiously, as we shall see, not all traditions posit that the use of the handful of dirt necessarily exerted a fully miraculous transformative power upon the gathered gold of the Israelites. Again, in contrast to the marginalized interpretation that the handful transmuted the gold into a flesh-and-blood calf, another body of traditions holds that the form of the Calf was magically generated from the gold, but that it only mooed due to the passage of wind through its body, while a third holds that the Calf was in fact fashioned by hand from the gold by *al-sāmīrī*, but that he inserted more gold into its hollow form to cause it to low or to otherwise demonstrate some semblance of life. Regardless, what all of these traditions have in common—besides the basic assumption of malevolent intent on the part of *al-sāmīrī*, that is—is an understanding of the key phrase *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* as an actual handful of dirt taken from the literal track of the “messenger,” almost universally glossed in the *tafsīr* tradition as a reference to the archangel Gabriel.

It should be noted here, at least in passing, that an important variant reading of Q.20:96 is registered in the classical *qirā'āt* literature. According to this variant tradition, often associated with the *muṣḥaf* or “codex” associated with the Companion Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32/652-3), the phrase

---

<sup>67</sup> The verb *baṣura* can connote either actual vision or cognition; “perceive” is sometimes adopted as a compromise translation that bridges the semantic fields associated with seeing on the one hand and understanding on the other.

<sup>68</sup> On some level, this seems to reflect Aaron's words from Exodus 32:24 (“I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”), upon which the most important midrashic traditions on the animation of the Calf were built, as we have seen. Notably, similar to the case of the marginalized tradition on the flesh-and-blood calf, although there is no trace of an alternative explanation of this verse registered in the early and classical *tafsīr* tradition, a minority view that was apparently suppressed shows up in a later commentary: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī states that a certain early authority promoted the view that *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* in fact means “a little of the Messenger's teaching.” See discussion below.

*qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl* was sometimes recited as *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar faras al-rasūl*; that is, in this putative early witness to the original text of the Quran, the “handful” spoken of here was explicitly that of “the *horse* of the messenger.”<sup>69</sup> Obviously, if this reading were authentically early, it would solidify the claim of the various exegetical traditions surrounding *al-sāmirī*’s use of the “handful of the track of the messenger”—or rather, the track of the horse of the messenger—to create the Golden Calf to be genuinely early as well, and perhaps even to reflect the genuine original meaning of the Quranic verse in question. But, as Nöldeke recognized well over a century ago, this tradition attesting to the addition of *faras* after *athar* in the recitation of the verse is most likely *not* evidence of an authentic “original” reading per se, but rather of a very early exegetical flourish; that is, the existence of the supposed variant cannot confirm the veracity of the interpretation, because it was that very interpretation that gave rise to the variant in the first place.<sup>70</sup> Further, Wansbrough went so far as to characterize the *entire* corpus of *qirā’āt* or variant readings as exegetical flourishes that emerged considerably posterior to—and in support of—the establishment of the so-called ‘Uthmānic recension as authoritative: “Of genuinely textual variants exhibiting material deviation from the canonical text of revelation, such as are available for Hebrew and Christian scripture, there are none. The Quranic masorah is in fact entirely exegetical, even where its contents have been transmitted in the guise of textual

---

<sup>69</sup> See Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur’ān*, 61; al-Khaṭīb, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*, 5.489. Ibn Mujāhid, who is generally credited with establishing the system of seven canonical variants, loathed the tradition associated with Ibn Mas’ūd, so naturally this reading of Q.20:96 did not become one of them.

<sup>70</sup> *Geschichte des Qorāns* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 3.70: “hinter اثر hinzu فرس, entsprechend der verbreiteteren Erzählungsvariante” (expressing a widely disseminated narrative expansion). Sure enough, the Ibn Mas’ūd reading is most often attested in *tafsīr* works, though an argument could be made on behalf of the authenticity of the variant that because Ibn Mas’ūd’s *muṣḥaf* was eventually suppressed, one should thus expect to *only* find it attested in *tafsīr*, and not in works on the seven recognized *maṣāḥif*. Conversely, one could also argue that it only survived among the *mufasssīrūn* since the scholars who specialized in the variant readings recognized that it was tendentious and subordinate to a specifically exegetical concern.

variants.”<sup>71</sup> Of course, Wansbrough’s skepticism on this issue (as on so many others) has not prevented many scholars from continuing to investigate the *maṣāḥif* or putatively early codices as potentially important for the history of the Quran. Curiously, though, the potential corroborating evidence for the Gabriel tradition provided by this variant reading of Q.20:96 has *hardly ever* been taken into account by scholars commenting on the Calf narrative, most likely because it seldom occurs to anyone that said interpretation really requires such corroboration at all.<sup>72</sup>

Aside from the passages we have described here from Sūra 20, in which *al-sāmīrī* is mentioned first in God’s warning to Moses (vs.85), and subsequently in the verses describing his explanation for what he did (vs.96) and his punishment and eventual fate (vs.97), there is no other reference to him anywhere else in the Quran. That is to say, his origin, background, and character remain wholly undeveloped in the scriptural text, and for the most part exegetes are thus forced to make judgments about him that in the best-case scenario are simply congruous with the actions described here. They therefore portray him as an idolater among the Israelites who possessed

---

<sup>71</sup> Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 203; cf. also 44-6. Notably, in the introduction to his *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur’ān*, Jeffery observes that the “Muslim savants” with whom he personally studied the variant traditions sometimes held a somewhat similar view, though for different reasons. “Invariably these savants took the position that the ‘Uthmānic text is perfect and unchallengeable... Some contested the authenticity of the variants, arguing that they were nothing more than deliberate tampering with the text by later heretics... Others... were willing to admit the variants, but explained them by the theory that in the early days many of the Companions made for themselves copies of the Qur’ān in which they inserted for their own private edification many explanatory additions, synonyms for words that they did not fully understand, and such like annotations” (Preface, IX). This is precisely the model for the emergence of the variant readings adopted by Wansbrough.

Even a positivist like Vadet seems skeptical that we could ever reconstruct an entire Companion codex such as that attributed to Ibn Mas’ūd from the scattered witnesses, and doubts whether it would be of much use anyway: “At the most... we may credit Ibn Mas’ūd with a sort of prosiness, a fairly free use of the grammatical forms of Arabic, and a certain taste for juridical definitions, which sometimes lead him to seek for supplementary statements of meaning...” (Vadet, *ET*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ibn Mas’ūd”). That is, even if the variant readings attributed to Ibn Mas’ūd are authentic products of the first century AH, there is still some doubt as to whether or not they were tendentiously or subjectively generated. Wansbrough of course sees them as *all* tendentious and typically quite late. On the process whereby consensus on the seven canonical readings emerged, see Melchert, “Ibn Mujāhid and the Establishment of Seven Quranic Readings.”

<sup>72</sup> To my knowledge, the only scholars to refer to this particular variant are Nöldeke, Jeffery, and Khoury. See additional remarks on this phenomenon below.

some knowledge of sorcery, or had at least intuited the occult properties of the dirt upon which Gabriel or his steed had tread.<sup>73</sup> There seems to be some debate over whether he was really an Israelite or was rather a foreigner, a native Egyptian who somehow became associated with the Israelites and left with them on their exodus from the land of their captivity.<sup>74</sup> But in most if not all cases, the nature of the role he is perceived to have played in the episode completely determines his portrayal as a sorcerer and idolater. It is worth noting as well that Muslim exegetes sometimes recognize him as the eponym of the Samaritans: they take *al-sāmīrī* as a *nisba* adjective and argue that *Sāmira* was originally the name of an Israelite clan, and that this man's exile by Moses in punishment for his offense marks the beginning of the historic schism between the Samaritans and the Jews.<sup>75</sup>

As we have already mentioned, in the same way that interpretations of the Calf that presuppose that it possessed some semblance of life are basically analogous to those rabbinic traditions on the Calf's animation that we have already examined, the classical Muslim exegetes' explanation of *al-sāmīrī*'s role is often taken by scholars to demonstrate his basic analogy with

---

<sup>73</sup> Note the tradition that *al-sāmīrī* was hidden in a cave by his mother during Pharaoh's slaughter of the male children of the Israelites; Gabriel rescued him and raised him, which ensured that *al-sāmīrī* would recognize Gabriel when he saw him at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea. This theme of a child rescued providentially from death only to bring disaster upon Israel later is reflected in some of the midrashic traditions about Micah the Danite, who sometimes appears as a child saved from death by Moses. See discussion below.

<sup>74</sup> This particular emphasis on *al-sāmīrī* as an outsider among the Israelites may be a reflex of the widely disseminated midrashic tradition about the pernicious influence of the *'ēreb rāb* on the people.

<sup>75</sup> The Samaritans were apparently known to the Arabs relatively early on. For example, the Samaritan community clashed with the Roman authorities several times during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, and the Ghassanids, Arab vassals of the empire, are said to have participated directly in the suppression of the Samaritan revolt of 529 CE; see Anderson and Giles, *The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans*, 62-7 on the period, as well as Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 1.82-95. For the later period, the 13<sup>th</sup> c. *'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'* of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (d. 668/1270) supposedly lists several physicians with the *nisba* of *al-sāmīrī* who had been active during Abbasid times. As we shall see, there is some reason to believe that *al-sāmīrī* does *not* signify a *nisba* adjective referring to this individual's Samaritan descent in the original Quranic narrative in Sūra 20, although this is how the term is almost universally understood in the *tafsīr*.

the type of the “foreign interloper” so frequently mentioned in later midrashic traditions, e.g. the “mixed multitude,” Satan, Jannes and Jambres, and so forth.<sup>76</sup> Overall, then, a conspicuous parallelism between rabbinic Jewish and early Islamic exegeses of the Calf episode regarding the basic morphology of the narrative can be seen: in both traditions, the Calf is magically animated, usually due to the activity of some malicious foreign interloper. In this way, the prevailing (or even *exclusive*) Muslim interpretation of the Golden Calf episode appears to recapitulate the apologetic gestures that ultimately underlie later Jewish recastings of the episode as well. As we shall see, many scholars have been strongly inclined to make such connections, the numerous similarities between the Jewish and the Islamic exegesis of the episode leading them to assert not only that they are *simply* analogous, but that the latter is an extension of or derived from the former—that is, that Muslims “borrowed” both the theme of the Calf’s animation and the portrayal of the foreign arch-idolater who is the real architect of the episode from Jews.

Further, scholars have frequently tended to conflate Muslim exegesis of the episode with its Quranic sources, the interpretations promoted in the *tafsīr* literature quite often being seen as inherent in scripture; after all, Muslim exegetes themselves presume as much. On account of this, the “borrowing” that seems to have transpired here has most often been connected with the person of Muhammad himself as putative author of the Quran. That is, the conspicuous parallels between the Jewish and Islamic exegetical traditions here are usually taken to demonstrate the dependence of the latter on the former; but since Muslim exegetes only seem to make explicit what must *already be latent* in the verses of the Quran but is not fully articulated, the actual appropriation of Jewish themes must have occurred first and foremost with the Prophet. Many scholarly treatments of the Islamic version of the Golden Calf narrative—and of biblical stories in the Quran in general—proceed from such assumptions, whether or not they are expressed in precisely these terms.

---

<sup>76</sup> The analogy with Micah is probably the strongest, although he is a relatively obscure character who only emerges in later traditions on the Calf; this is probably why only a very few scholars directly connect him with *al-sāmīrī*.

The consequence of all this has been that, in the same way as most modern Muslim translators tend to perceive the exegesis of the classical *mufassirūn* as a reliable explication of what the Quran “really” says, so too have non-Muslim translators been more than willing to read that traditional exegesis back into the text in rendering the Quran into European languages, even going so far as to adduce the pertinent Jewish parallels as *confirmation* of their interpretation. Not only is this approach to the Quran in general and to the Calf narrative in particular widespread among Western scholars of the Quran, but it is of considerable vintage as well, having been established practically at the very inception of Islamic Studies in early modern Europe. We have already noted Geiger’s seminal role in establishing the use of rabbinic tradition as the proximate source of various Quranic data as the standard *modus operandi* in the modern Western study of the Quran. In the next chapter, we will examine the interpretation of the Quranic Calf narrative found in the earliest pertinent Western sources, the translations and commentaries produced during the dawn of the Orientalist tradition in early modern Europe as well as during the golden age of European Orientalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This will allow us to establish the background to Geiger’s work, and in particular to demonstrate how a pervasive dependence on the classical *tafsīr* tradition became entrenched as one of the most fundamental aspects of the Western reception of the Quran.



### 3. The first European Qurans and early Orientalist exegesis of the Calf episode

The modern study of the Quran in Europe first became possible with the publication of the so-called “Basel Koran” of 1543 edited by Theodor Bibliander (d. 1564). This version of the Quran had even older roots, inasmuch as Bibliander’s Latin text was based on the version produced by Robert of Ketton for Peter the Venerable in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>77</sup> Robert’s was hardly the only medieval Latin translation of the Quran, of course, but his version had exerted a particularly wide influence as the centerpiece of the Cluniac *Corpus Toletanum*, perhaps the most important Western Christian source on Islam during the Middle Ages.<sup>78</sup> The production of the “Basel Koran” was begun in 1542 by Johannes Oporinus, one of the greatest printers of the age of the Reformation, who initiated publication of Bibliander’s edition in secret; this endeavor was prohibited by the city’s censors when they first caught wind of it, though mediation eventually led to the publication of the work under Bibliander himself outside of Basel. Bibliander, a famous humanist and noted Orientalist of the day, was one of several authorities consulted in the dispute, along with none other than Martin Luther himself, who in that very same year produced his own polemical refutation of the Quran.<sup>79</sup> In the end, the attempt to suppress the publication of

---

<sup>77</sup> The literature on the 12<sup>th</sup>-century translation movement is vast. On Robert, see d’Alverny, “Deux Traductions Latines du Coran au Moyen Age”; Kritzeck, “Robert of Ketton’s Translation of the Qur’ān”; Bobzin, *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation*; Burman, “Tafsīr and Translation”; *ibid.*, *Reading the Qur’ān in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560*, *passim*, esp. 29-35. (I thank Prof. Burman for providing me with the proofs for his monograph in advance of publication.) On the milieu in general, see d’Alverny, “Translations and Translators.”

<sup>78</sup> As Kritzeck puts it, “the fruits of a single scholarly enterprise of the twelfth century exerted a dominant influence upon European Christian understanding of Islam for more than half a millennium” (*Peter the Venerable and Islam*, ix). On the Cluniac project, besides the magisterial monograph of Kritzeck just cited, see also the essays in the still serviceable *Petrus Venerabilis, 1156-1956*, ed. Constable and Kritzeck; d’Alverny, “Pierre le Vénérable et la Légende de Mahomet”; Daniel, *Islam and the West*, *passim*; d’Alverny, “La Connaissance de l’Islam en Occident du IX<sup>e</sup> au Milieu du XII<sup>e</sup> Siècle”; Tolan, *Saracens*, 135-69, *passim*.

<sup>79</sup> In his defense of Bibliander’s effort, Luther noted that nothing would be so vexacious to Muslims as exposing the Quran to Christian eyes through translation. Luther’s *Verlegung des Alcoran* is actually a translation of the aforementioned *refutatio* of Ricoldus de Monte crucis

Bibliander's edition failed, and it was to become a bestseller throughout Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Bibliander's presentation of Robert of Ketton's old Toledan translation of the Quran would go on to be very widely disseminated during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first edition of 1543 provided the basis for the Italian translation of Arrivabene in 1547, from which Schweigger derived his German translation of 1616; this in turn provided the basis for numerous other versions in German and Dutch printed throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>80</sup> Despite its origins in the context of European Christian polemic against Islam—in both the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century—Bibliander's Latin Quran was undoubtedly early modern Europe's most important introduction to the Muslim scripture, providing one of the foundational texts for the fledgling tradition of serious Oriental scholarship that was initiated in Europe during the decades after the Reformation and that would eventually reach full fruition in the “golden age” of Orientalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>81</sup>

---

written in 1300. Ironically, in 2002, a small Lutheran press published a stridently polemical English translation of Luther's translation (“Confutatio Alcorani At Last In English”) entitled *Islam in the Crucible: Can it Pass the Test?* Just as Luther thought that it was critical to bring Ricoldus' forgotten work to a new audience in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, apparently Thomas C. Pfotenhauer thought it necessary to do the same with the now largely forgotten work of Luther himself in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

<sup>80</sup> On the production of the “Basel Koran,” including the censure of Oporinus, the involvement of Bibliander and Luther in the dispute, and the later European versions dependent on Bibliander's Quran, see Clark, “The Publication of the Koran in Latin: A Reformation Dilemma,” *passim*; Bobzin, “Latin Translations,” 194-8; *ibid.*, “A Treasury of Heresies,” *passim* and *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation*, 159 ff.; Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, 71-3. Bibliander was also closely associated with Zwingli at Zurich, and was a major figure of the age, though he is largely forgotten today.

<sup>81</sup> As Irwin points out, if anything, the publication of Bibliander's edition (and the invention of the press in general) had a regressive or retarding effect on European mentalities about Islam (and knowledge in general): “It is one of the striking paradoxes in the history of Western culture that the invention of printing had at first an archaizing effect, as neglected medieval texts were given a much wider circulation than they had achieved when they were first written” (*Dangerous Knowledge*, 71). On the polemical implications of the production of the Basel Koran, see esp. Bobzin, “Treasury of Heresies”; and cf. Vehlow, “The Swiss reformers Zwingli, Bullinger and Bibliander and their Attitude to Islam (1520-1560)” and Boettcher, “German Orientalism in the Age of Confessional Consolidation.”

To understand the significance of the wide dissemination of Bibliander's edition, we must first briefly turn our attention to the translation of Robert of Ketton. Bobzin charitably characterizes Robert's style of translation as "not as literal as one should expect"—a vast understatement—and adds that "sometimes he shortens the text or tries to polish the difficult style of several Koranic passages in order to create a 'readable' text."<sup>82</sup> This is at least partially true of the verses pertaining to the Calf, where some phrases do seem to have been abbreviated or rendered in paraphrastic fashion, though sometimes one also encounters expansions as well. Moreover, in attempting to appreciate the changes that were wrought in the Quranic text in the transition from Arabic to Latin, it is sometimes possible to be misled due to the state of our available materials. First of all, the extant manuscript witnesses to Robert of Ketton's text vary widely in quality, although we are fortunate in that, at least according to d'Alverny, the original copy of the *Corpus Toletanum* may be numbered among these.<sup>83</sup> Second of all, as we shall see, Bibliander's edition introduced many errors and corruptions into Robert of Ketton's work, so that it is often necessary to consult multiple witnesses even to get access to his original readings, let alone to discern his intentions in choosing one way of rendering the original text over another or to ascertain how liberal or flexible his mode of translation really may have been.

One example of this that is directly germane to our concerns here is the following. When *al-sāmirī* is first introduced in Q.20:85, where Ahmed Ali renders the verse as "We have put your people on trial in your absence, and Sameri has led them astray," the version of the verse in the 1543 edition of Bibliander gives God's words simply as "propheta ille uel artifex Ascemeli post

---

Both the original *Corpus Toletanum* and Bibliander's *Machumetis Saracenorum principis* are compound works. The diverse contents of the former are surveyed by Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*; most of the various documents translated therein, including Robert's Quran, are discussed on 73-112, while the culminating section of the work, the *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum*, receives a detailed analysis on 115-52. Bibliander's work is presented in three main sections, his edition of Robert's Quran accompanied by a section of "Confutations" and another devoted to the history of the Saracens and Turks.

<sup>82</sup> Bobzin, "Latin Translations," 194.

<sup>83</sup> This is Arsenal ms.1162; see below. Cf. the remarks of d'Alverny, "Deux Traductions," 77 ff.

discessum suum gentem suam errare fecit”—“that prophet or craftsman Ascemeli made his people go astray in his [i.e. Moses’] absence.” A marginal comment to the line explains further: “Ascemeli uitulum in deserto fudit. Exod.32.”<sup>84</sup> Besides the shift from direct discourse (as in the Arabic) to indirect and the apparent omission of any reference to the divine trial whatsoever, what is most striking here is the interpolation of a gloss explaining the identity of “Ascemeli” as “propheta uel artifex” directly into the verse. In the 1550 edition of Bibliander’s Quran, on the other hand, the line seems to have been corrected by removing “propheta ille uel artifex” from the verse and relocating it to the marginal note instead, which thus reads “propheta ille uel artifex. Ascemeli uitulum in deserto fudit. Exod.32.”<sup>85</sup> Sure enough, when we consult the Arsenal manuscript d’Alverny suggested is Robert of Ketton’s original, Q.20:85 appears as it does in the second edition of Bibliander—“Ipse tamen Deo dicente, quod Ascemeli post discessum suum gentem suam errare fecit,” with “prophete uel artifex” appearing as a gloss directly over the words “quod Ascemeli.”<sup>86</sup> In this case, then, it is clear that the expansion of the verse cannot be

---

<sup>84</sup> Bibliander, *Machumetis Saracenorum principis*, “Azoara XXX,” 102, lines 40-41. The New York Public Library copy of the 1543 edition of Bibliander is actually included in a unique anthology of 16<sup>th</sup>-century works on Islam in German, Latin, and Greek (including a refutation of Islam by the Byzantine emperor John V Cantacuzenos, *Contra Mahometicam fidem*, also published in 1543) bound together. The stamp on the spine reads *Machumetis Vita et Doctrina, 1545*. A handwritten list of contents appears on the verso of the first page; the name of the owner, one Andrea Petris, appears on the recto.

<sup>85</sup> The verse again occurs on 102, lines 40-1 of the 1550 edition, though the chapter heading is now “corrected” to “Azoara XXIX.” On the different chapter divisions to be found in the text in the *Corpus Toletanum* and Bibliander’s edition as well as their mutual deviations from the standard *sūra* divisions of the Arabic Quran, see Bobzin, *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation*, 224-30.

<sup>86</sup> Arsenal ms.1162, 86r, column A bottom to column B top. The manuscript actually used by Bibliander in the preparation of his edition seems to have been lost, so it is possible that the gloss had crept into the verse proper in his source manuscript sometime during the process of transmission. It seems more likely to me, however, that the mistake occurred during the preparation of the first edition and was caught and corrected during the production of the second. According to Kritzeck, “Robert of Ketton’s Translation of the Qur’ān,” 311, the extensive marginalia seen in Arsenal ms.1162 are the work of Peter of Poitiers. Kritzeck here proposes to produce a full study of Robert’s Quran that will include an edition of these unique notes; however, this did not materialize as part of *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, nor did his critical edition of the *Corpus Toletanum* ever materialize either.

attributed to Robert of Ketton himself, but rather is an artifact of its later dissemination as a printed text in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. (Unfortunately, such errors have probably been historically significant due to the potential impact they had upon readers consulting the first, uncorrected edition of the work.<sup>87</sup>)

Although he is indisputably given to emending, supplementing, or otherwise “polishing” the wording of the original Arabic text in his translation, Robert does in fact occasionally give a simple, literal reading of it as well, especially where obscure words or phrases are concerned. On the one hand, his version of the people’s description of what occurred while Moses was away on the mount at Q.20:87-88 definitely displays his tendency to paraphrase, not to mention his proclivity towards puzzlingly circuitous routes through the Arabic, as a comparison of his rendition with Ahmed Ali’s demonstrates:

*...but we were made to carry the loads of ornaments belonging to the people, which we threw (into the fire), and so did Sameri. Then he produced the image of a calf which mooed like a cow... (A. Ali)*

...but he had commanded us to make a certain thing from the ornaments of the people: [then] Ascemeli cast a bull, corporeal, emitting a mooing sound, for us who approved of the thing which was commanded... (Ketton-Bibliander)<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Ironically, as both Bobzin and Burman note, Bibliander was in fact concerned to produce a textually sound edition of the Latin Quran, comparing his main witness with two other Latin manuscripts as well as with the Arabic original, and even producing a list of annotations pointing out the variant readings in his witnesses (Bobzin, *Der Koran*, 231; Burman, *Reading the Qur’ān*, 110-7). Both Bobzin and Burman also point out that Bibliander inserted marginal glosses pointing out the biblical precursors to various Quranic passages in many places, so the gloss “propheta ille uel artifex. Ascemeli uitulum in deserto fudit. Exod.32.” in fact seems to reflect the fusion of the tendency to comment upon Robert’s text in this way by *both* Peter of Poitiers (the original source of “propheta uel artifex”) and Bibliander.

<sup>88</sup> “Sed nobis quoddam ex ornatibus popularibus fabricare praeceperat: Cui praecepto nobis fauentibus Ascemeli taurum fudit, corporeum, emittentem mugitum...” (Bibliander, *Machumetis Saracenorum principis*, 102, lines 44-6 in the 1543 edition; the reading is identical in the 1550 edition). The reading seems to be true to that in the Arsenal manuscript, with the sole exception of the negligible deviation from “sed nobis **quiddam**... fabricare” in the original to “sed nobis **quoddam**... fabricare” in Bibliander (cf. Arsenal ms.1162, 86r, column B top).

Robert's specific reference to the people's approval of what *al-sāmirī* had commanded is somewhat inexplicable, since there is no mention of this in the original Arabic; nor is it particularly reminiscent of anything found in classical commentary on the episode. But on the other hand, the freedom with which Robert renders the line overall stands in sharp contrast with the approach he takes with *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>*: his version of the key phrase, "Ascemeli cast a bull, corporeal, emitting a mooing sound" ("Ascemeli taurum fudit, corporeum, emittentem mugitum") is in no way less accurate than Ahmed Ali's "the image of a calf which mooed like a cow."<sup>89</sup> This basically agrees with his translation of the reference to the Calf found at Q.7:148 as well, which reads "Moses being absent, his people made for themselves, from their rings and necklaces, an image of a bull making a sound like one snoring..." ("Moyse quidem absente, sua gens ex annulis suis & torquibus tauri statuam, sonitum quasi stertentis emittentem, sibi fecit").<sup>90</sup> While we again see some minor deviation from the original here in Robert's preference for *taurus* instead of *vitulus*, and the mention of "snoring" may seem outlandish (especially as Robert's version of Q.20:88 recognizes *khuwār* specifically as mooing or lowing!), it is significant that in both cases, the phrasing of his Latin displays a significant degree of sensitivity to the syntax of the Arabic. That is, the reading of *'ijl* as "bull" and *khuwār* as "snoring" notwithstanding, there is a basic structural parallelism between "taurum fudit, corporeum, emittentem mugitum..." (Q.20:88) and "tauri statuam, sonitum quasi stertentis emittentem, sibi fecit" (Q.7:148) on the one hand and the original *akhraja* [or *ittakhadha*] *'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* on the other.

The tension between a more literal and a freer style of translation in Robert of Ketton's Quran can also be seen in his rendition of the key verse in the climax of the episode in Sūra 20, *al-sāmirī*'s apology to Moses (vs.95-96), which we cite here in full, again in juxtaposition with the translation of Ahmed Ali :

---

<sup>89</sup> Notwithstanding, of course, the reading of *'ijl* (calf) as "taurum" (bull).

<sup>90</sup> Bibliander, *Machumetis Saracenorum principis*, "Azoara XVII," 57, lines 13-15 in both editions.

*Moses asked: O Sameri, what was the matter? He said: I saw what they did not see. I picked up a handful of dust from the messenger's tracks and threw it in, for the idea seemed attractive to me. (A. Ali)*

That one [Moses], turning next to Ascemeli, asked what it was he had perceived, and he [i.e. *al-sāmīrī*] responded that he had seen something not at all seen by the others. “Whence I threw in a thing enclosed with my hand from the track of the prophet, since this seemed good to me...” (Ketton-Bibliander)<sup>91</sup>

On the one hand, Robert's version of this verse is again characterized by an overall literal approach to the original Arabic, similar to his handling of *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*. His “he had seen something not at all seen by the others” is a relatively close approximation of *baṣurtu bi-mā lam yabṣurū*, “I saw what they did not see.” Likewise, the second part of the verse seems to reflect the same literalism; his “ego de prophetae uestigiis manu mea clausum, quoniam hoc bonum uidebatur, inieci” (“I threw in a thing enclosed with my hand from the track of the prophet, since this seemed good to me...”) is hardly different from Ahmed Ali's “I picked up a handful of dust from the messenger's tracks and threw it in, for the idea seemed attractive to me...” If anything, Robert is *more* literal in certain respects here, since “ego de prophetae uestigiis manu mea clausum... inieci,” is actually a rather slavish rendition of the Arabic *qabaḍtu*

---

<sup>91</sup> Both of the printed editions I have consulted are corrupt, reading “Ille deinceps ad Ascemeli conuersus, quid praecepisset, quaesiuit. Qui respondit, se nequaquam *aceris* uisum uidisse. Unde ego de prophetae uestigiis manu mea clausum, quoniam hoc bonum uidebatur, inieci” (Bibliander, *Machumetis Saracenorum principis*, 103, lines 7-10 in both editions). It is tempting to take the anomalous “*aceris*” as reflecting a radical reinterpretation of the verse as referring to a “vision of *Khiḍr*” (i.e. reading “*aceris* uisum” as “*alcedris* uisionem” or the like, and thus taking the line as “*he* [Moses] had not seen the vision of *Khiḍr* at all”), inasmuch as some later commentators did in fact interpret the *athar al-rasūl* as a reference to this prophet and not Gabriel. However, the reading in Arsenal ms. l 162 is clearly preferable: “Qui respondit se nequaquam a *ceteris* uisum uidisse” (he saw a thing not at all seen by the rest) (86r, column B, bottom). Additionally, the marginal note in the manuscript reads “Scil., rem quam non vident ceteri,” “i.e., something that others did not see,” probably to clarify that *nequaquam* should not be taken with *uidisse* (thus implying that he, “Ascemeli,” had not at all seen something that *had* been seen by the others). Note also that the 1550 edition introduces another misprint as well, “*quod* praecepisset” instead of “*quid* praecepisset.”

*qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl* (literally, “I took a handful with my hand from the track of the *rasūl*”).

On the other hand, a couple of noticeable changes have been introduced here as well. The most obvious is the partial shift from the direct discourse of the original Arabic to indirect discourse in the Latin. Such a shift is not surprising in itself, inasmuch as various commentators have observed that this is a consistent pattern in Robert of Ketton’s Quran, in which the common first-person statements and second-person forms of address tend to be uniformly (and blandly) reduced to third-person reported speech. What *is* surprising—and somewhat jarring as well—is the fact that Robert has *retained* the first-person voice for part, but *only* part, of *al-sāmīrī*’s response to Moses’ question (“whence *I* threw in a thing enclosed with *my* hand,” etc.) The other remarkable change—which is not a categorical alteration per se, but more of a conspicuous exegetical choice—is Robert’s rendition of the phrase *athar al-rasūl* as “prophetae uestigiis,” literally “track of the *prophet*.” Despite his typical predisposition towards inserting glosses when necessary, he does not provide us with any clue as to who this prophet is supposed to be. This is of course a perfectly predictable translation of *rasūl*, given that both this term and *nabī* tend to be utilized interchangeably (in Muslim as well as Western scholarly discourse) as “prophet.” The problem here is that such a translation does not really make sense in terms of the traditional understanding of this verse, for, as we have seen, the dominant conception of the phrase in the *tafsīr* is that it refers to the track left behind by the *messenger* Gabriel. Presumably it is a bit of a stretch to apply the appellation “prophet” to an angel, and one wonders if Robert had some understanding that the *rasūl* in question could very well be Moses, as some later scholars would surmise.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> At the very least, he could simply be rendering the verse contextually, for, as we have already noted, the vast majority of occurrences of *rasūl* in the Quran *do* in fact refer to prophets, in contrast to the tendency of Muslim exegetes to construe the term here as “messenger” in specific reference to the angel Gabriel, who again is not actually named in the Quran, and may in fact not really appear there at all.



This particular exegetical choice, as well as the absence of any clarification in the text as to what *al-sāmiri*'s reply to Moses really means, is somewhat surprising, for bare literalism is not in general what one expects from Robert of Ketton. In a recent discussion of the different approaches to translating the Quran taken by Robert of Ketton and Mark of Toledo, another Latin translator working in Spain who flourished somewhat later than Robert, Burman observes Robert's rather unfortunate reputation as a translator, beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century right up to the present day. In particular, it is Robert's deviation from the literal meaning of the Muslim scripture that has most often been decried by his detractors: "...he had often left out what was explicitly in the text, but incorporated into his Latin version what was only implicit in the Arabic original."<sup>93</sup> However, contrary to Robert's critics, Burman argues against the idea that his Quran translation is an inferior version because of his willingness to paraphrase; in fact, as it turns out, this paraphrastic tendency is typically dictated by Robert's direct reliance on classical Muslim commentary. Due to this tendency, Robert's translation is in fact a fairer and more informative representation of the meaning of the Quran *as it was understood by Muslims of his day* than if it were far more literal, as Mark's is.<sup>94</sup>

Robert's unspoken reliance on Muslim interpretation is quite evident throughout his work, especially in "the numerous passages in all parts of his Latin Quran where [he] has incorporated into his paraphrase glosses, explanations, and other exegetical material drawn from one or several Arabic Quranic *tafsīrs* or commentaries"; in case after case, Burman is able to demonstrate that where Robert seems to deviate from the literal meaning, these deviations in fact concur with the

---

<sup>93</sup> Burman, "*Tafsīr* and Translation," 705. Cf. also his *Reading the Qur'ān*, 36-59 for a comparison of different translators' use of classical Muslim commentaries. Note also that George Sale, the first translator of the Quran into English, objected noisily to Robert's methods; this is rather ironic, considering that in fact his version of the Quran was largely based upon—or even plagiarized from—the Latin version of Marracci, whose methodology was in the end very similar to Robert's.

<sup>94</sup> "*Tafsīr* and Translation," 707; cf. *Reading the Qur'ān*, 36-40. Burman points out that Mark of Toledo's Latin version in fact distorts the meaning of the Quran specifically *because* he utilizes readings generated by traditional Muslim commentary far less often than Robert (although he does seem to rely upon *tafsīr* occasionally).

interpretations of classical Muslim exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Ṭabarsī, al-Zamakhsharī, and Ibn Kathīr. Due to this reliance on *tafsīr*, Robert’s translation is thus quite successful in accurately construing the meaning of opaque verses according to their traditional interpretation.<sup>95</sup> The result is a version of the Muslim scripture that may not seem “accurate” or “literal” by the standards of European Christian scholars—that is, when gauged solely against the plain sense of the canonical Arabic text—but that would nevertheless have been wholly recognizable and familiar to contemporary Muslims.

In light of all this, it is somewhat unfortunate that Robert appears to be unusually literal in his translation of the Quranic passages on the Calf. For one thing, he seems to remain agnostic regarding the identity of the *rasūl* (or *propheta*), resisting the temptation to expand upon this obscure reference; likewise, he seems quite reticent to clarify the mechanism of the Calf’s animation or seeming animation. Overall, we get very little information from his version of the episode that we cannot get from the Arabic original. Nevertheless, we might argue that Robert’s reliance on *tafsīr* is clearly manifest in his interpretation of the Calf narrative in one crucial way. That is the fact that his Calf clearly *is* animate: as we have seen, the people made “an image of a bull making a sound like one snoring” (“tauri statuam, sonitum quasi stertentis emittentem”) according to Q.7:148 in Robert’s translation; likewise, according to his rendition of the key phrase from Q.20:88, “Ascemeli” made them a “taurum... corporeum, emittentem mugitum,” that is, “a bull, corporeal, making a mooing sound.”

Despite the fact that Robert seems overall to have preferred a rather literal rendition of the Quranic verses featured in the passages on the Calf we have examined above, his implicit insistence that *la-hu khuwār<sup>um</sup>* signifies that the Calf was mooing *at the moment it was created*,

<sup>95</sup> Al-Ṭabarsī and al-Zamakhsharī were actually contemporaries of Robert; Ibn Kathīr was obviously later, but preserves a wealth of exegetical data that was no doubt established long before his time. Burman quotes the striking observation of Juan of Segovia (d. 1458), whom he notes as the first in a long line of Robert’s critics: according to Juan, despite its deviations from the literal text, Robert’s translation is useful “because at very many points, just like one commenting, he explains the Muslim meaning, though it [i.e., the Muslim meaning] scarcely emerges from the Arabic letters [of the Qur’ān themselves]” (“*Tafsīr* and Translation,” 725).

that is, that the Israelites (or *al-sāmirī*) created *a mooing image of a calf* and not *an image of a mooing calf*, suggests very strongly that he was at least to some small degree influenced by the *tafsīr* tradition surrounding the episode here. This can be illustrated by comparing his version of this key phrase with that of Mark of Toledo, a translator more renowned for his literalism. In Mark's Quran, Q.7:148 is rendered almost verbatim (indeed, painfully so): *wa-iitakhadha qawm mūsā min ba'dihi min ḥulyyhim 'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* becomes "et populus Moysi presumpsit de monilibus uitulum corpulentem mugitum habentem" ("and the people of Moses took up from among the necklaces a fleshy cow possessing a mooing"). Likewise, *fa-akhraja la-hum 'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khwār<sup>m</sup>* at Q.20:88 becomes "et egressus est uitulus corpulentus habens mugitum" ("and a fleshy cow having a mooing came out").<sup>96</sup> The choice of *moniles* (necklace, collar) for *ḥulyy* (jewelry, ornaments) has the ring of a standard dictionary entry; *praesumo*, "to take up, take to oneself," actually captures the reflexive sense inherent in *itakhadha*, and leaves the aspect of worship implicit; and the choice of *egredior*, "go out," may very well represent a misreading of *akhraja* (bring out) in Q.7:148 as *kharaja* (go out), the shift from the causative *af'ala* form to the intransitive *fa'ala* form reflected in the fact that *uitulus corpulentus* is now in the nominative and not the accusative, having switched from the object to the subject of the clause.

Most worthy of comment, however, is Mark's rendition of *'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khwār<sup>m</sup>* as "uitulum corpulentem mugitum habentem." Mark has clearly understood *jasad* as an adjective modifying *'ijl* rather than as a noun in apposition to it; Robert made the same choice. However, Robert's selection of *corporeus*, "embodied," "physical," is clearly in line with the well-established understanding of the phrase in the *tafsīr*; Mark's unfortunate *corpulentus* (fleshy, chubby), on the other hand, while evoking an amusing image, seems equally *disconnected* from

---

<sup>96</sup> Mark of Toledo, *Liber Alchorani*, *ad loc.* Q.7:148, 20:88. These quotations are from Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, ms. F. v. 35, 22r, column A and 43r, column B respectively. Burman has identified this as one of the best witnesses to Mark's Quran translation, despite the fact that the manuscript dates to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. I thank Prof. Burman profusely for procuring these readings for me on extremely short notice.

the traditional reading.<sup>97</sup> This is also true of his most interesting choice here as well: as opposed to Robert, who understands the Calf as *emittens mugitum*, “mooing” (i.e. when it was created), as the classical commentators universally do, Mark falls back on a concrete translation that could not possibly be more literal: *la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>*, “to it a mooing,” i.e. “possessing a mooing,” becomes simply *habens mugitum*.

This example of an alternative translation of the critical phrase describing the Calf, however awkward, shows that Robert could very well have rendered the phrase otherwise if he so chose, but reverted instead to an understanding of the verse in conformity with the portrayal of the Calf that dominates in the *tafsīr*. As we shall see, the further reliance on classical Muslim interpretation by later scholars and translators would similarly continue this trend. Admittedly, it seems rather odd that at least two aspects of Robert’s interpretation—the allusion to the Israelites’ approval of *al-sāmīrī*’s request (Q.20:87) and the reading of *khuwār* as a sound “like one snoring” (Q.7:148)—have no conspicuous parallels with anything found in the classical commentators, though these might nevertheless betray the clear “commentary influence” (as Burman terms it) to be found throughout his translation as well.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, his rendition of *athar al-rasūl* as “prophetae uestigiis” would *not* be reflected in later scholarship for the most part; arguably, this is because of the overwhelming insistence of the classical commentary tradition that this *rasūl* was in fact the angel Gabriel. That is, Robert’s mooing cow (stentorian or not) would recur in Western scholarship of the Quran because of its continual reinforcement by

---

<sup>97</sup> There could be a lexical basis for Mark’s interpretation of *jasad* as *corpulentus*, inasmuch as the classical lexicographers often conflate *jasad* with *jism* (“body” in the sense of a fleshy volume), and the root *j-s-m* can readily connote literal corpulence (e.g. *jasīm*, fat, stout).

<sup>98</sup> Note that many of Robert’s expansions simply might not be commensurate with traditional glosses as they are known from the extant Muslim commentary literature. It is entirely possible that we simply cannot trace their basis in the surviving classical *tafsīrs* available to us, or that Robert misunderstood and misrepresented something he found in a *tafsīr* or received from an informant orally. Burman *only* discusses cases where Robert’s readings are coherent and have clear parallels in extant commentaries, while only Mark of Toledo’s glosses are shown to be garbled. But there is obviously some garbling of the Quranic original in Robert’s translation as well.

the *tafsīr* tradition; his “track of the *prophet*” would not, presumably due to the corresponding *lack* of corroboration by the *tafsīr*.

\*\*\*

As we have already noted, Bibliander’s edition of Robert of Ketton’s version of the Quran was widely influential during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially because it provided the basis for several major translations into European vernacular languages, including Italian, German, and Dutch. As previously mentioned, the first translation of Bibliander’s text was made into Italian by Arrivabene in 1547; Schweigger’s German Quran of 1616 was then derived directly from Arrivabene’s work. Schweigger’s text was in fact particularly influential, for it supplied the basis for later German and Dutch Qurans for quite some time. The degree of deviation from the original we find in Arrivabene and Schweigger is noteworthy, but perhaps ultimately unsurprising. First, we are dealing, respectively, with a translation of a translation and a translation of a translation of a translation; second, as we have already noted, Bibliander’s text of Robert of Ketton’s translation is corrupt in many places; and third, in the end, Robert of Ketton’s work is itself both paraphrastic in nature and also heavily based on the readings of the Quran found in the *tafsīr*. A rather large degree of distortion of the literal Arabic text was therefore no doubt inevitable in these circumstances.

However, as it turns out, this distortion was even further exacerbated by the fact that, for some obscure reason, Arrivabene took significant liberties with Bibliander’s Latin text. This can best be illustrated by reference to the representation of the Sūra 20 version of the episode in these subsequent translations. Previously, we paid particular attention to the representation of the key verse explaining *al-sāmirī*’s deed in the version of Ketton-Bibliander. As we have seen, Robert of Ketton’s rendition of this line, *I saw what they did not see. I picked up a handful from the*

*messenger's tracks and threw it in, for the idea seemed attractive to me, is relatively straightforward:*

Ille deinceps ad Ascemeli conuersus, quid praecepisset, quaesiuit. Qui respondit, se nequaquam aceris [i.e.: *a ceteris*] uisum uidisse. Unde ego de prophetae uestigiis manu mea clausum, quoniam hoc bonum uidebatur, inieci.

[That one [Moses], turning next to Ascemeli, asked what it was he had perceived, and he [i.e. *al-sāmirī*] responded that he had seen something not at all seen by the others. “Whence I threw in a thing enclosed with my hand from the track of the prophet, since this seemed good to me...”]

On the other hand, when we examine Arrivabene’s text, the critical line is in fact *nowhere* to be found, for he has abbreviated the whole passage considerably and telescoped the *entire* Sūra 20 version of the narrative (Q.20:83-98) into only a few short lines.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, because Schweigger was primarily dependent upon Arrivabene, this is what we find in his work as well (and thus in those works derived from Schweigger in turn), though he elaborates upon and slightly paraphrases Arrivabene’s text at a few places:

---

<sup>99</sup> The work of Arrivabene is overall considerably more condensed than that of Bibliander, even taking into consideration that Arrivabene’s *L’Alcorano di Macometto* is, like so many of its predecessors, a compound work. It contains introductory sections on “la vita di Macometto,” “la religione de Turchi,” “la conditione de Christiani ne paesi de Turchi,” and a synopsis of “legge Mahomet” (actually a brief overview of the basic tenets of Islam and not, as one might surmise, the contents of the Quran per se). The translation of the Quran proper does not begin until page 60 or so, and the work consists of only about 200 folio pages total, with relatively large printing and wide margins.

Mose dunque condotte le genti fecero il vitello perche Dio riprendendoli diceua. O gente, perche hauete [i.e. *avete*] uoi ingiuriato Dio? Studiate uoi forse di hauer [i.e. *aver*] l'ira diuina?

Et eſi, non fummo noi, ma alcuni de popolari che lo comandarono, & se Mose non torna non uogliamo lasciarlo.

Tornato adunque Mose commando ad Aron che andasse in peregrinaggio fin che il vitello tutte consumato, e riprese i popoli di tanto errore.<sup>100</sup>

Das Volcke so Moses ausgeföhret hat ein Kalb gegossen welches sie anbeteten: darüber erzörmete Gott und sprach: O du böses Volcke warum thustu<sup>101</sup> Gott diese Schmach an? thustu vielleicht solches damit du dir meinen Zorn auf den Hals ladest?

Das Volke antwortet; Wir wollen dieses Kalb nicht verlassen biß Moses wieder kommet.

Als nun Moses wieder kommen hat er dem Aaroni befohlen daß er so lang solte Wallfahrten gehen biß das Kalb verzehrt würde; und straffete das Volcke wegen dieses begangen Irthums.<sup>102</sup>

[The people whom Moses led out cast a calf that they worshipped, wherefore God became angry and said: O you evil people, why did you bring this disgrace before God? Perhaps you brought it so as to burden yourselves with my anger?

The people replied: We will never give up this Calf until Moses returns.

As Moses returned then, he ordered Aaron that he should set out wandering, till the Calf should be consumed; and he punished the people on account of this sin they committed.<sup>103</sup>]

Despite his radical compression of the text as represented by Ketton-Bibliander, Arrivabene's abridged version of the narrative is still recognizable. However, we find no trace of the key line Q.20:96 here because he has chosen to represent the episode through selective

---

<sup>100</sup> Arrivabene, *L'Alcorano di Macometto*, 63r-64v. I have consulted the original 1547 edition.

<sup>101</sup> *thustu*, from the archaic *thun*, "to get, have, put, place, bring" etc. (cf. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, s.v. "thun"), rendering the Italian *hauere*, i.e. *avere*.

<sup>102</sup> Schweigger, *Al-Koranum Mahumedanum*, 568-9. I have consulted the 1664 edition.

<sup>103</sup> I have followed Schweigger's slightly more expansive text here, in which the people make and worship the Calf (*gießen, anbeten*) as opposed to simply making (*fare*) it; they are specified as an evil (*böse*) people; etc.

reference to other key phrases and verses in the text. The latter part of the first line is clearly reminiscent of Q.20:86, *Did the time of covenant seem too long to you? Or did you wish the wrath of your Lord to fall upon you...?* (or more literally, “did you wish to *hasten* the wrath of your Lord...?”), although in the original Quranic text, this is Moses speaking and not God.<sup>104</sup> The second line is quite recognizable as Q.20:91, *So long as Moses does not come back we are not going to give it up...*, although in the original, this line is spoken by the people to Aaron, and not in response to God’s question.<sup>105</sup> The third line is obviously based upon Q.20:97, Moses’ *response* to the apology of *al-sāmirī*, especially the description of the impending destruction of the Calf—except, of course, that whereas in Ketton-Bibliander these words are clearly addressed to “Ascemeli,” here *al-sāmirī* has vanished completely.

The disappearance of *al-sāmirī* is something of a mystery here. It is extremely tempting to conclude that somehow Arrivabene (who provides no apparatus and practically no notes to his translation) has recognized *al-sāmirī* as an epithet for Aaron, as certain later scholars would, and thus replaced “Ascemeli” with Aaron in the key passage here. If Arrivabene was *not* simply switching Aaron for “Ascemeli” here, then Aaron’s sudden appearance at this juncture would make no sense, since he is otherwise not mentioned in the passage as given by Arrivabene. The specific terminology Arrivabene employs in fact gives us a direct clue as to what has transpired, for Q.20:97 in Ketton-Bibliander reads, “Iniunxit itaque Moyses, ut quam diu uiueret Ascemeli peregrinaretur, nec cuiusquam communione potiret”—“wherefore Moses imposed the penalty that Ascemeli must wander as long as he should live, and never enjoy human society again.”<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup> The text of Ketton-Bibliander follows the Quranic original much more closely here; the line reads “O gens, quare placitum bonum uobis a Deo propositum mentiti estis. An studetis iram incurrere diuinam,” and these words are clearly spoken by Moses to his people (Bibliander, *Machumetis Saracenorum principis* (1550), 102, lines 42-44).

<sup>105</sup> The text of Ketton-Bibliander likewise has the previous line spoken by Aaron to the people, and gives their response as “Illi uero responderunt, se nullatenus hoc dimittere, priusquam Moyses reuertet,” once again hewing rather close to the original (ibid., 103, lines 2-3).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.



This, of course, is a gloss on the Arabic *adhab fa-inna la-ka fi'l-hayāt an taqūl lā misāsa*, or in Ahmed Ali's version, *Go hence! All your life you are (cursed) to say: 'Do not touch me...'* Robert of Ketton's word choice is intriguing, for *peregrinor* has a clear connotation of performing pilgrimage as well as wandering; the key element connecting these different senses of the word, which also illustrates why this specific term was used here, is that in Robert's time in particular, the age of the Crusades, pilgrimage was often undertaken for penitential purposes. Thus, in his understanding, *al-sāmirī* has been "cursed" to depart from the company of the other Israelites and wander the earth forever, shunning the society of others, as punishment for his sin, with the ultimate destination of his *peregrinatio* left unspecified and ultimately unknown. This is, in fact, the most common interpretation of the *lā misāsa* verse in the *tafsīr*. The connection with the legend of the Wandering Jew is obvious as well, and it seems significant that Geiger would later assert exactly this.

We can thus make at least partial sense of Arrivabene's "Mose commando ad Aron che andasse in peregrinaggio," for the basic terminology is the same, as is Schweigger's "solte Wallfahrten gehen," since both are more or less literal reflections of Robert's specific use of the term *peregrinor*. Further, it now becomes entirely apparent that for whatever reason, Arrivabene has directly exchanged Aaron for "Ascemeli" here; that is, the punishment doled out to the transgressor is (somewhat) the same, but the object of Moses' wrath has changed, and Aaron is now understood as the architect of Israel's sin, not a third party named "Ascemeli." Again, because of the lack of explanatory material in his translation, we are not well equipped to understand how or why Arrivabene came to this conclusion, but it appears that for one reason or another he has anticipated the explicit identification of *al-sāmirī* as an epithet for Aaron by at least one later scholar.

This insight has in turn necessitated another readjustment in the text, however, since now *al-sāmirī*/Ascemeli/Aaron *cannot* be sentenced to wander forever and never enjoy human society again, because this obviously does not happen to Aaron in the *biblical* Exodus account. That is,

Arrivabene's alteration of Ketton-Bibliander's text may reflect the conception that the Quranic text should somehow parallel "real" biblical history consistently, and so now Aaron is instead commanded to wander penitentially *only until the Calf is completely destroyed*—"andasse in peregrinaggio fin che il uitello tutte consumato" in Arrivabene's text, and thus "er so lang solte Wallfahrten gehen biß das Kalb verzehrt würde" in Schweigger's. Rather than use the Quran's apparent discrepancies from biblical history as an opportunity to decry its faults and the evident falsehood of Muhammad's claim to prophecy, Arrivabene chooses a different tack, and simply alters the Quranic text that he has at hand to bring it into line with the "orthodox" account known from authentic Christian scripture. There is something intrinsically ecumenical about Arrivabene's approach, inasmuch as it implicitly functions to underline the similarities between the Quran and the scriptures of Christians and Jews; it is unfortunate that his text lacks explanatory notes that would make his understanding of the Quran and his hermeneutics more transparent.<sup>107</sup> Overall, his agenda appears to have been to "biblicize" or even "christianize" his translation; for example, passages in the Quran dealing with Jesus and Mary seem to have been considerably expanded, while passages of lesser interest to Christians are compressed or even omitted.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Strangely, the only note of consequence Arrivabene includes here reads: "Ascemeli maestro del Vitello nel deserto come nel Essodo a i.xxxii" (*L'Alcorano di Macometto*, 63r, bottom). This is clearly just a translation of the gloss found in the margin of the 1550 edition of Ketton-Bibliander *ad loc.* Q.20:85, but its inclusion here is somewhat incomprehensible given that Arrivabene has removed "Ascemeli" from the narrative entirely. (Viewed another way, however, "Ascemeli maestro del Vitello" could be taken as the master key to his understanding of the episode, since Arrivabene might very well have concluded that "Ascemeli" is Aaron based *specifically* on the identification of the former as the "maestro del Vitello"!)

Arrivabene's work seems to lack explicit hermeneutic remarks at the beginning of the text as well. After the various introductory sections already noted, the section on the Quran proper begins with "Il Primo Libro dell'Alcorano," which is actually a brief synopsis of creation, pre-Islamic Arabian history, the birth and career of Muhammad, and early caliphal history; this is directly followed by the translation of the Quran itself, apparently without any overall discussion of the nature of the Quran.

<sup>108</sup> We thus find ubiquitous cross-references to the Bible in the margins of Arrivabene's work, but also, somewhat surprisingly, the occasional "narrano di talmudisti" as well.

With Schweigger, who worked more than fifty years after Arrivabene, we see an explicit and deliberate return to the issue of the discrepancies between the Quran and the Bible. In contrast to Arrivabene, Schweigger *did* supply his version of the Quran with ample notes, and thus, a few pages after the Sūra 20 account of the making of the Calf, we find an extended discussion of the episode. Schweigger first connects the Israelites' worship of the Golden Calf to Egypt, identifying the Calf itself as having been made in the image of the sacred bull Apis, and associating it as well with the calf worship instituted at Dan and Beersheba [*sic*] by Jeroboam. He then proceeds to focus on the ways in which the Quranic version deviates from the Bible—for example, he points out that in Exodus God confronts Moses about the sin of the people (i.e. in Ex.32:7 ff.), while here in the Quran, He confronts the people directly.<sup>109</sup> But overall, for Schweigger, the points of disagreement between the Bible and the Quran have *already* been significantly reduced, for Schweigger *only* knows the Quranic account through the translation of Arrivabene, who seems to have already effaced many of the apparent discrepancies to be found in the Quran. For example, as we have already seen, Arrivabene understood *al-sāmirī*, “Ascemeli,” to be Aaron, and thus “replaced” Aaron in his original role as architect of Israel’s idolatry in his version of the narrative. Thus, ironically, Schweigger was in point of fact not aware of how radically the Quranic Calf episode seems to deviate from the biblical precursor, a major sticking point for many Western exegetes both before and after him. Schweigger’s ignorance of the true contours of the Quranic narrative—and really of much of the Quranic text as a whole—would be

---

<sup>109</sup> Schweigger, *Al-Koranum Mahumedanum*, 572-3. Schweigger is of course mistaken in attributing this deviation to the Quran: in the Arabic text of Sūra 20, God first confronts Moses and Moses then confronts the people, as is the case in the canonical Exodus narrative; God only confronts the people directly in the versions of Arrivabene and Schweigger himself. (In other words, Schweigger has “inherited” this error from Arrivabene, but imputes the error to the Quran due to his ignorance of the original text.)

communicated to many subsequent scholars, since, as previously mentioned, his edition of the Quran would inform many of the German and Dutch versions to follow for quite some time.<sup>110</sup>

\*\*\*

Continuing our survey of early modern Quran translations will serve as a means for us to further gauge the reception of *tafsīr* in Western scholarship on the Quran. In contrast to the various 17<sup>th</sup>-century German and Dutch Qurans directly based on the “translation” of Schweigger, the first version of the Quran in French, that of André du Ryer (d. 1660) published in 1647, is significant because it was, like Robert’s original version, rendered directly from the Arabic, being the first such translation in Europe in almost five hundred years. In turn, this version was the basis for the first Quran to appear in English, that of Ross, which was produced a mere two years after the first edition of du Ryer’s translation was published.<sup>111</sup> In comparison to Robert’s version, du Ryer’s seems significantly more literal in most places.<sup>112</sup> For example, in contrast to Robert’s rather free rendition of Q.20:87-88, du Ryer’s reading conforms closely to the Arabic for the most part: “...nous avons pris les plus pesans ornements du peuple, & les avons jettez dedans le feu,

---

<sup>110</sup> For example, Schweigger’s Dutch translation of 1641, *De Arabische Alkoran*, is a straightforward representation of the previous German text, though the extensive scholarly apparatus is omitted. On the *Nachgeschichte* of Bibliander’s Quran, see Bobzin, *Der Koran*, 262-75.

<sup>111</sup> Du Ryer was the French consul at Alexandria and had direct diplomatic dealings with the Ottomans. Like the original *Corpus Toletanum* itself and Bibliander’s *Machumetis Saracenorum principis*, his *L’Alcoran de Mahomet* is actually a compound work, including a “Sommaire de la Religion des Turcs” in addition to the Quran translation. On his life and career, see Hamilton and Richard, *André du Ryer and Oriental Studies in Seventeenth-Century France*. Regarding Ross, despite the purported inferiority of his Quran—Jeffery calls it “an indifferent translation of an inadequate version, [with] little to recommend it” (*The Koran: Selected Suras*, 17-8)—it is nevertheless of considerable historical significance, being the first version of the Muslim scripture published in America (the 1806 reprint was produced in New England).

<sup>112</sup> D’Alverny argues that du Ryer used the Latin translation of Mark of Toledo, now only extant in a handful of manuscripts and never published; cf. “Deux Traductions Latines du Coran au Moyen Age,” 113 ff. This would in fact explain du Ryer’s overall propensity for literalism.

Samery les y a jettés luy-meme; il a fait le corps d'un veau mugissant" ("...we were carrying the heavy ornaments of the people, which we threw into the fire, and 'Samery' threw the same; he made the body of a calf which mooed...")<sup>113</sup> Du Ryer's "le corps d'un veau mugissant" is essentially repeated in his rendition of Q.7:148. While Ahmed Ali has "In the absence of Moses his people prepared the image of a calf from their ornaments, which gave out the mooing of a cow," where the verb *ittakhadha* is construed as "to make" (cf. Robert's "sua gens... tauri statuum... sibi fecit"), this verb can also mean "to take in worship, revere as a god" (as many of the classical commentators observed). This is clearly the understanding that informs du Ryer's rendition of the verse as "le peuple de Moyse après son trespas, a adoré le veau Dieu mugissant..."; Ross in turn renders this quite colorfully—but accurately—as "The People of Moses, after his Departure, adored the Calf, a bellowing God."<sup>114</sup>

It is in fact entirely possible that du Ryer derived the specific reading of *ittakhadha* as "to worship" directly from the Muslim commentators. Although it has been suggested that he was more of a Persianist or Turcologist than an Arabist (du Ryer was also famous for a Turkish grammar and a popular translation of Sa'dī's *Gulistān*), he was in fact familiar enough with traditional Islamic religious literature to avail himself of a number of important Arabic commentaries on the Quran in his work. Unlike Robert of Ketton, however, he made this dependence explicit, citing such authorities as "Gelal-din" and "le Bedaoi," among others, overtly in his introduction and marginalia; and his use of these sources would seem to be confirmed by

---

<sup>113</sup> *L'Alcoran de Mahomet*, 354; I have consulted the 1651 reprint. Note that du Ryer dubs *Sūrat Tā-hā* "Le Chapitre de la Beatitude, & de l'Enfer"! The renaming of various *sūras* echoes that in the *Corpus Toletanum*, where the redactor of the documents making up the work (presumably Peter of Poitiers, but possibly Peter the Venerable himself) assigned new titles and subtitles to certain chapters.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 187; *Sūrat al-A'rāf* becomes "Les Chapitre des Limbes." For Ross' translation, see Jones, *A Compleat History of the Turks* (1718-9), 4.164. A better translation of the verse would probably be "the people of Moses... adored the Calf (as a god), which mooed."

his rendering of *ittakhadha* as “to worship” rather than “to make.”<sup>115</sup> The subtle influence of the *tafsīr* tradition in du Ryer’s work is further suggested by his rendition of the critical line at Q.20:96 as “je voyois ce que le peuple ne void pas, j’ay pris une poignée de terre des vestiges du Messenger de Dieu, & en ay fait la figure d’un veau le plus beau que j’ay peu” (“I saw what the people did not see, I picked up a handful of earth from the track of the Messenger of God and I made the figure of a calf, the best that I could...”)<sup>116</sup> The key phrase “une poignée de terre des vestiges du Messenger de Dieu” agrees fundamentally with Ali’s “a handful of dust from the messenger’s tracks”; both seem to presuppose that the Arabic *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* means a literal handful of the dirt touched by the passage of the “Messenger”—whoever this *rasūl* might be—and, as we have seen, this is the unanimous interpretation promoted in classical *tafsīr*.

On the other hand, du Ryer’s “le plus beau que j’ay peu” (i.e. *j’ai peu*) is a bit strange, since the phrase in the original, *sawwalat lī nafsī*, quite clearly speaks to *al-sāmīrī*’s inspiration for what he did and *not* to any quality of the Calf per se. Quite possibly du Ryer has appropriated this from Robert of Ketton but misunderstood his meaning. Robert’s version of the verse concludes with the phrase “quoniam hoc bonum uidebatur,” “since this seemed good to me” (cf. Ahmed Ali’s “for the idea seemed attractive to me”), which is exactly what the Arabic *sawwalat lī nafsī* means in essence, if not literally. Lacking any other plausible explanation for “le plus beau que j’ay peu”, one wonders if du Ryer read Robert’s “quoniam hoc bonum uidebatur” but thought it

---

<sup>115</sup> On du Ryer’s Quran, see Hamilton and Richard, *André du Ryer*, 91-114, and esp. 96-101 on his use of *tafsīr*. Some of his references, like al-Suyūṭī and al-Bayḍāwī, are obvious; others are far less so, but may be discerned from the extant list of du Ryer’s personal collection of manuscripts (e.g. his “Kitab el tenoir” is not the well-known and widely disseminated *Tanwīr al-miqbās min Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās*, as one might surmise, but rather a now-obscure abridgment of the *tafsīr* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī called the *Tanwīr al-tafsīr*); some are not even Arabic (e.g. the “Tafsir ans Giavhoir,” i.e. the Turkish *Enfes-i cevahir*). Finally, some of his sources remain wholly obscure; Hamilton and Richard second this author’s bewilderment at du Ryer’s citations of “Abdel Baky” and “Makkary.” (Could the latter possibly be Shīhab al-Dīn al-Maqqarī (d. 1041/1642), a luminary of the North African Mālikī tradition who was in fact an older contemporary of du Ryer himself?)

<sup>116</sup> Du Ryer, *L’Alcoran de Mahomet*, 355.

referred not to *al-sāmīrī*'s reason for his making the Calf, but rather to the *uitulum* itself (i.e., “for it, i.e. the *calf*, seemed good to me”), and that this misreading has in turn resulted in *al-sāmīrī* producing ‘the best calf that he could’ in du Ryer’s thinking.<sup>117</sup>

Despite this conspicuous anomaly, overall, there are many points of similarity between the 17<sup>th</sup>-century French of du Ryer and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century English of Ahmed Ali, especially when both are compared to the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Latin of Robert of Ketton. This is obviously due first and foremost to a common interest in rendering the Arabic as literally as possible within the bounds of good sense (and arguably within the bounds of theological or ideological acceptability as well). However, it is also undoubtedly true that both du Ryer and Ahmed Ali have permitted their overall understanding of the meaning of scripture to be dictated to a greater or lesser extent by the *tafsīr*, a trait they clearly share with Robert. That is, the approach of du Ryer or Ali is distinct from that of Robert *not* because the latter utilized classical commentaries more often; rather, it is simply that Robert allowed the readings of scripture promoted in those commentaries to have much more of an impact on his flexible and paraphrastic interpretation. Just because their renderings of the actual words of scripture are more literal and “objective”—or rather, more resistant to exegetical paraphrase—does not mean that du Ryer and Ali have not allowed the overall conception of the Calf episode *generally* found in the classical tradition to pervasively color their own presentations of it.

This is also true of the third major Quran translation produced in early modern Europe, that of Ludovico Marracci, which was first published in 1698.<sup>118</sup> Despite the wide influence of

---

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Ross: “He answer’d, I saw what this People seeth not, I took an handful of the Earth of the Footsteps of the Messenger of God, and made the Figure of a Calf, the fairest that I could” (Jones, *A Compleat History of the Turks*, 4.255) Hamilton and Richard claim that it is unlikely that du Ryer used Robert of Ketton’s translation, and point out that the only evidence that he used Mark of Toledo, as d’Alverny alleged, is their common literalism (*André du Ryer*, 103-4). On the other hand, their only evidence that du Ryer did *not* know Robert of Ketton’s translation (apart from the absence of any direct citation in his work) is the putative dissimilarity of their styles of translation.

Bibliander's edition of the Quran, for many classical Orientalists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Latin version of the Quran they knew was not Bibliander's presentation of the Toledan text, but rather Marracci's later version.<sup>119</sup> As was the case with the texts of Robert of Ketton, Bibliander, and du Ryer, Marracci's translation appeared as part of a larger work, specifically being paired with a *Refutatio Alcorani* by the author.<sup>120</sup> Marracci appears to have been the first European author to explicitly comment upon the Quranic Golden Calf narrative, with the exception of Peter of Poitiers' exceedingly brief glosses on the relevant passages of Robert's translation; this reflects most of all the unique method Marracci followed in his translation, at least in the original edition of 1698. Here, he presents short portions of the text, usually one to two pages, in the original Arabic as well as in Latin translation; he then provides a short section of annotations, followed by another of short "refutations" (that is, notes specifically addressing the doctrinally objectionable contents of the passage). His notes and "refutations" on the versions of the Calf narrative in Sūras

---

<sup>118</sup> On Marracci, see the works cited in the following notes, and also Bobzin, "Latin Translations," 198-200; Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom*, 56-8; and Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, 104-6 on Marracci's contribution to Catholic Orientalism and its continuing polemics against Islam. Cf. also d'Alverny, "Deux Traductions," 116-9 for a short comparison of Quranic passages from the translations of Robert of Ketton, Mark of Toledo, du Ryer, and Marracci.

<sup>119</sup> The number and variety of Latin renditions of the Quran, in whole or in part, is actually quite striking. Apart from the handful of other Latin Qurans from the medieval and early modern period that were overshadowed by Bibliander's publication of the *Corpus Toletanum* with Robert of Ketton's version (for example that of Mark of Toledo, well known in its own day), quite a few polemical treatises and early scholarly works of the 14<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> centuries quote passages from the Quran directly (i.e. Ricoldus' *Confutatio Alcorani*). Bobzin's monograph *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation* (1995) represents the first systematic overview of this important literature; cf. also now Burman's *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560*. Especially considering that early European scholars of Islam were often much better informed about Muslim sources and tradition than we have usually considered them to have been (as Burman repeatedly emphasizes), the direct citation and interpretation of the Quran in this literature is clearly a subject of great interest. As most of these early works will likely never be published, a concordance of the citations of the Quran in these texts is thus a great desideratum.

<sup>120</sup> The abridgement of Marracci's work by Reinicci, first published in 1721, was far more popular and widely disseminated; this version of the *Alcoranus* excised the Arabic text and all of the annotations, and confined the "refutations" that were retained solely to the introduction.



7 and 20 thus provide us with unique insight into both his perception of the story and the sources upon which he relied for information.<sup>121</sup>

Unlike Robert of Ketton and du Ryer, who saw *al-sāmirī* as a proper name, Marracci recognizes the term as a *nisba* adjective indicating this individual's putative ethnic origin, and thus renders it as *Samarita* (the Samaritan), for example in his translation of Q.20:85, the first mention of *al-sāmirī* in the Quran: "errare fecit eos Samarita (*qui fudit vitulum, per adorationem vituli*)..."<sup>122</sup> Like Robert, he inserts glosses here to clarify the Quran's basic statement that "*al-sāmirī* has led them astray," indicating not only who *al-sāmirī* was ("who made the Calf...") but also how he led them astray ("by means of worshipping the Calf"), though he is careful to isolate these glosses from the actual text; both the parentheses and italics appear in the original. Marracci seems to utilize this technique consistently throughout his translation, which conveniently allows us to separate his exegesis of the actual text of the Quranic verses from material he adduces from the commentaries. Thus, in his rendition of Q. 20:87, "verum nos jussi sumus conferre pondera ex ornatu populi (*i.e. magnam copiam ornamentorum aureorum*), conjecimusque ea *in ignem*; nam ita conjecit Samarita," not only does he clarify the relatively straightforward *awzār min zīnat al-qawm* (rendered literally, if clumsily, as "pondera ex ornatu populi") by explaining these

---

<sup>121</sup> Borrmans draws a distinction between Marracci's approach in his Quran translation proper, which he lauds as a pioneering achievement of "un orientalisme rigoureux" marked by a particular objectivity and a scientific approach to Muslim exegesis and lexicography, and that which characterizes his refutations, still infused with the spirit of anti-Islamic controversy. The audience of his work is "les catholiques eux-mêmes, surtout les chrétiens destinés à vivre et à dialoguer avec les musulmans"; the tripartite goal of his *refutatio* is thus "combattre l'adversaire à partir de ses propres affirmations..., traduire fidèlement le texte de son Coran d'un point de vue culturel..., [et] développer une apologétique structurée sur les quatre points essentiels de la contestation musulmane" (these points being the inauthenticity of Muhammad's prophecy, his lack of evidentiary miracles, and the inferiority of Islamic dogma and law). See "Ludovico Marracci et sa Traduction Latine," 82. Marracci's objections to the "frivolities" supposedly introduced into biblical narrative by the Prophet presumably occupy a lesser place in this scheme. Unfortunately, Borrmans does not discuss Marracci's view of Muhammad's prophethood or his purported relationship to the Jews at any length.

<sup>122</sup> Marracci, *Alcorani textus universus*, Q.20:85/81. I have also consulted Reinicci's abridgment, entitled *Mohammedis filii Abdaliae pseudo-prophetae fides Islamitica, i.e. Al-Coramus*, which seems overall less reliable than the two-volume original of 1698.

“burdens” as “a great amount of golden ornaments,” but he indicates that both the people and *al-sāmirī* alike had thrown these ornaments *in ignem*, into the fire, even though the original verse does not mention such a fire or really clarify their “throwing” in any way. These parenthetical remarks have clearly been adduced from the commentaries, as has the basic presupposition that *al-sāmirī* must mean “the Samaritan.”<sup>123</sup>

Marracci’s tendency towards literalism where the basic words of the Quran are concerned is similarly manifest in the two places where the Calf is specifically described; one says it was *al-sāmirī* and the other says it was the people, but in both passages, they made “*vitulum habentem corpus: ipsi erat mugitus*,” that is, “a calf possessing a body, which was mooing,” i.e., ‘*ijl jasad la-hu khuwār*’.<sup>124</sup> As we might expect, however, Marracci’s version of Q.20:96, *al-sāmirī*’s apology, is considerably more expansive (again, the italics and parentheses are in the original):

Respondit: Sciebam id, quod nesciebant illi. Accepi igitur pugillum ex pulvere vestigii unguiae equi Legati (*id est Gabrielis*) & conjeci illud *in formam fusoriam vituli*: ita enim persuacit mihi anima mea.

[I understood that which *those people* did not understand. I therefore took a handful from the *dust* of the track of the *hoof* of the *horse* of the Messenger (*i.e. Gabriel*) and threw it in *the cast form of the calf*; for that indeed was what my soul persuaded me to do.]<sup>125</sup>

Although he makes an effort to distinguish his interpolations from the words of the original Arabic, Marracci goes several steps further than du Ryer in elaborating upon this verse by means

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, Q.20:87/84. Note that “conjecimusque” is misprinted as “conjerimusque” in the 1721 edition. Note also that “ornatu populi” is not *quite* a literal translation, since it means “popular ornaments” and not “ornaments of the people.” Marracci never acknowledges the basis of his interpretation of *al-sāmirī* as “the Samaritan” in the classical commentaries, taking for granted that this is a natural reading of the term.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., Q.20:88/85 and 7:148 respectively.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., Q.20:96/94.

of data taken from the classical commentaries. Whereas du Ryer expanded upon the phrase *qabaḍtu qabaḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl* only slightly in specifying that this means a handful of *earth* from the track of the messenger, Marracci readily brings the verse into alignment with the representation of the episode in the mainstream *tafsīr* tradition, indicating that it was “the *dust* of the track of the *hoof* of the *horse* of the Messenger,” and then goes on to cement the identification of *al-rasūl* here with the archangel by adding a parenthetical gloss, “(i.e. *Gabriel*).” He also makes it absolutely clear that the mention of *al-sāmīrī*’s “throwing” specifically refers to his throwing this dirt into the hollow form of the Calf that was cast from the gold the people had previously thrown into the fire.

In his commentary on these passages, Marracci provides verbatim citations of the Muslim exegetes upon whom he has relied, as well as giving us some direct indication of his understanding of the wider significance of their remarks, if only to criticize them. For example, his note on Q.7:148 (“vitulum habentum corpus”) quotes the gloss of “Gelaleddinus” (i.e. al-Suyūfī) in both Arabic and Latin, e.g.:

لحمًا ودمًا, *carnem, & sanguinem...*

Quod autem addit, ipsi fuisse mugitum, exponit idem Auctor صوت يسمع,  
*voce, quae audiebatur: & addit*

انقلب كذلك بوضع التراب الذي اخذه من حافر فرس حبرائيل [sic] في فمه فان اثرة  
الحياة فيما يوضع به:

*Ita autem conversus fuerat per oppositionem pulveris unguiae equi Gabrielis in ore ejus (nimirum ab eadem unguia excitati vel compressi) nam ubi is ponebatur, vitae vestigia apparebant.*<sup>126</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 2.285, note CXLIV. The line in Arabic is a verbatim citation of the comment found in the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn ad loc.* Q.7:148 (1.116; I have consulted the two-volume Būlāq edition of 1882).

["A calf possessing a body," [that is,] *flesh and blood*... [The text] also adds, "which was mooing," which the same author explains as *a voice that was audible*, and he adds: *Thus it was transformed by means of placing dust from the hoof of the horse of Gabriel in its mouth* ([the dust] apparently stirred up and packed down by that hoof), *for the trace of life appeared in that which he was placing in it.*]

Besides his direct citation of al-Suyūṭī here, perhaps what is most remarkable about Marracci's comments on Q.7:148 is his recognition of the transformation of the Golden Calf into a flesh and blood creature, as well as the total absence of any mention of *al-sāmirī* at all, although the brief mention of the Calf in Q.7:148 is specifically glossed by comparison with the longer version of the narrative in Sūra 20, fully expanded via reference to the traditional exegesis of vs.96 (the placing of the dust from the hoof of the horse of Gabriel into the Calf's mouth and so forth).<sup>127</sup>

Marracci's subsequent remarks in both the "refutations" of this passage and in his notes to the corresponding passage in Sūra 20 make his attitude to the story quite plain. In the former, he mentions that "Among the rabbinic, which is to say talmudic, fables, many of those which *Alcoranus* and its expositors fabricated regarding the calf which was worshipped by the Israelites need to be examined. Of such kind also is that one which is mentioned regarding the seventy killed by the earthquake..."<sup>128</sup> The last part of his comment refers to the account about the elders

<sup>127</sup> Besides numerous classic Orientalist studies, Marracci cited a wide variety of Muslim authorities throughout his work; he seems to refer to "Gelaleddinus," "Zamchascerius" (i.e. al-Zamakhsharī), "Ebn-Abbas" ('Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās, presumably in the *Tanwīr al-Miqbās* in al-Suyūṭī's recension) and "Jahias" (Yahyā b. Salām, i.e. Ibn Abī Zamanīn) most often, and also acknowledges the famous *Qāmūs* of al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 817/1415) in his introductory remarks. Nallino, "Le fonti manoscritte dell'opera di Ludovico Marracci sul Corano," discusses Marracci's sources exhaustively; see also Borrmans, "Ludovico Marracci et sa Traduction Latine," 76-8.

<sup>128</sup> Marracci, *Alcorani textus universus*, 2.286. This remark echoes those which are occasionally found in Bibliander's text of Robert's Quran. For example, Bibliander recognized in the Quranic story of the sacrifice of the cow (Q.2:67-69) some echo of Numbers 29, but attributed the distortion to the influence of Jewish tradition: "sed fabulosa admiscet, nimirum ex iudeorum traditionibus" (cited in Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān*, 255, n. 213; cf. discussion on 116-7).

who accompanied Moses to Sinai and demanded to see God as Moses had; the Sinai narrative in Sūra 2 is usually taken to allude to the fact that they were annihilated by a lightning bolt and then resurrected on account of this demand (cf. Q.2:55-56), while that in Sūra 7 only mentions an earthquake that consumed the elders, and does not explain why this occurred (cf. Q.7:155). Marracci's comment is accurate inasmuch as, like the Quranic version of the story of the Calf, the story of the Seventy seems to deviate from the biblical Sinai account, and appears to have rabbinic (if not "talmudic") parallels or prototypes as well.<sup>129</sup>

Marracci's subsequent remarks make it perfectly plain what he means by calling the Quranic Calf story a "rabbinic" or "talmudic fable": "Nothing of the sort can really be found in sacred writ. How very ridiculous it is to claim that the Samaritan bestowed voice and life to a calf assembled from gold by means of dust from the hoof of the horse of Gabriel."<sup>130</sup> This statement not only implies that the story as found in "Alcoranus" and its expositors is identical to and derived from that found in rabbinic tradition; it also implies that Marracci presumes that *no distinction need be made between the sacred text and the views of the commentators*, for again, he explicitly draws on the reading of Q.7:148 found in "Gelaeddinus" here to clarify the passage. He is thus building on a foundation established by previous polemicists, whose basic attitude was that the Quran was cobbled together from various materials transmitted to the Prophet, especially Jewish traditions; in scrutinizing the Quran verse by verse, it is thus natural for Marracci to conclude that anything apocryphal he encounters in the text must be of Jewish origin. Inasmuch

---

<sup>129</sup> This tradition has clear roots in Moses' request to see God's glory in Ex.33:18. Curiously, in Q.7:155, Moses emphasizes that the seeming threat of annihilation faced by the people on account of the deeds of a few is merely a test (*fitna*), echoing the words of warning uttered by Aaron to the people regarding their making of the Calf in Q.20:89 (*innamā futintum bi-hi*, "you are only being tested with it..."). In turn, the parallel account in Sūra 20 lacks the story of the Seventy entirely (and thus Moses' remark as well).

<sup>130</sup> "Inter fabulas Rabbinicas, seu Thalmudicas recensenda existimo esse pleraque ex his, que de vitulo ab Israelitas adorato, Alcoranus ejusque Expositores comminiscuntur. Quemadmodum etiam illud, quod de Septuaginta viris terraemotu sublatis refertur. Nihil hujusmodi ex sacris scripturis colligitur. Quam vero ridiculum est, ex pulvere unguulae equi Gabrielis Samaritam vitulo ex auro conflato vocem, vitamque tribuisse." Marracci, *Alcorani textus universus*, 286, note IX.

as Marracci seems to be the first Western author to explicitly comment on the Quranic Calf story, he is also the first author to explicitly assert its derivation from a Jewish source. In this case and no doubt in many others, Marracci's exegetical activity directly anticipates that of Geiger, who admittedly proceeded from a rather different set of assumptions. It is worth noting in this connection that Geiger was very familiar with Marracci's work and made extensive use of it in writing his *Preisschrift*.

In a similar vein, Marracci appears to deem the longer version of the narrative in Sūra 20 barely worth remarking upon, although his derisive comments are quite significant. Thus, in a note on Q.20:87, he states:

*We threw them in the fire, etc.* Regarding this fable, in which the Samaritan animated the golden calf with the dust of the trace of the horse of Gabriel, or else a body consisting of flesh, and blood, and mooing, leapt out [of the fire], see above; truly there is no time to relate these frivolities repeatedly.<sup>131</sup>

Further, a comment on the episode in the subsequent section of "refutations" makes it clear that Marracci sees these "frivolities" as typical of the Quran's wholly unreliable portrayal of biblical narratives:

From this it is evident how unfaithfully the Koran relates sacred stories, and how it mixes up these many fables; of such kind is this one regarding the animation of the calf made by the Samaritan by means of dust from the track of the horse of Gabriel; the punishment of the Samaritan should be considered thus as well.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> "*Conjecimus que ea in ignem, &c.* ] De hac fabula, in qua Samarita pulvere vestigiorum equi Gabrielis vitulum aureum animavit, itaut evaderet corpus constans carne, & sanguine, & mugiret: vide supra: nam non est otium toties has nugas referre." Ibid., 447, note LXXVII.

<sup>132</sup> "Ex quo patet, quam infideliter referat Alcoranus sacras historias, & quam multis fabulis illas admisceat, cujusmodi est illa de animatione vituli facta a Samarita per pulverem vestigiorum equi Gabrielis; & de poena Samaritae ipsi illata." Ibid., 448, note III.

Unfortunately, in this last passage, Marracci does not make explicit what he thinks these “fables,” the Jewish sources of the Quranic portrayal of the judgment of *al-sāmirī* (i.e. *lā misāsa*), might be; nor does he provide any evidence for his earlier contention regarding the Jewish sources for the Quranic Calf, nor for the fate of the Seventy either. This is not surprising in itself, inasmuch as Marracci simply did not possess the requisite tools to do such work. Nevertheless, he was clearly able to discern the degree to which Quranic narratives (or rather—and this is a crucial point—the *representation* of Quranic narratives in the *tafsīr* literature) deviated from the original (and to his mind, authentic and inspired) narratives of the Bible. In concluding that those deviations were due to Jewish influences on Muhammad, it is evident that Marracci was simply working under a given set of assumptions about the nature of the Quran established in previous centuries by Christian polemicists, whose works he knew well. Of course, working less than a hundred and fifty years later, Abraham Geiger *did* possess the requisite tools for such work; and in the end, it is supremely ironic that the seminal commentary of Ludovico Marracci, of the Congregation of the Regular Clerks of the Mother of God, the confessor of Pope Innocent XI, should provide us with the most important early modern forerunner to Geiger’s approach to the Quran, which would itself exert a titanic influence on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship.<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Again, the brilliant reversal we see in Geiger’s work is the fundamental reorientation of the framework that had informed the work of Marracci, as well as his predecessors, especially the Cluniacs: whereas the Christian polemicists of the Middle Ages and early modern period saw Judaism and Islam as common species of error and readily affiliated them on that basis, Geiger turned the tables and used the same basic approach to assert that Islam, *like Christianity*, was derived from Judaism and thus held only a diminished and ultimately second-hand claim to spiritual authenticity. But the fundamental assumptions regarding Islam’s status as a secondhand faith remain in Geiger’s work; and in point of fact, Marracci was one of Geiger’s main sources, especially for excerpts from the *tafsīr* literature, which Marracci conveniently cites in the apparatus to his translation.

\*\*\*

Marracci's method, poised halfway between scholarly rigor and traditional polemic, was somewhat anticipated by that of an older contemporary, Barthelmy d'Herbelot. D'Herbelot's famous *Bibliothèque Orientale* was published posthumously in 1697, one year before the first edition of Marracci's work, by his assistant Antoine Galland, probably best known as the first European translator of the *Arabian Nights*. While not a translation of the Quran per se, d'Herbelot's popular work—sometimes acknowledged as the first encyclopedia of Islam—merits some attention here, however brief, because of its contribution to the popularization of stories taken from the Quran among Western audiences, including the Calf episode. The material on the Calf appears in the encyclopedia under the heading “Moussa Ben Amran, Ben Cahath, Ben Laoui, Ben Jacoub,” where much of d'Herbelot's treatment seems to focus on what European biblical scholars might possibly want to learn from Oriental lore on Moses.<sup>134</sup> He devotes several paragraphs to an examination of the Calf episode, if only to emphasize, as Marracci did, the discrepancies between the biblical account and those found in the Quran and the *tafsīr*.

D'Herbelot begins by noting that the story of the Calf is only briefly mentioned in Sūra 7, though the commentators on the Quran greatly expand the few verses that refer to it; this remark makes it sound as if he is oblivious to the fact that the episode is *also* recounted in much greater detail in Sūra 20. In fact, although d'Herbelot goes on to adduce various details about *al-sāmirī*'s involvement in the episode, it is striking that he *never* cites verses from Sūra 20 in doing so, choosing only to summarize the classical exegetes' version of the story. (One thus wonders if he had perhaps only partially engaged the commentaries, and not thoroughly examined the Quran

---

<sup>134</sup> Note that d'Herbelot started out as a biblical scholar and was thus very interested in the Quran's divergences from the Bible. Strangely considering his impact on the Enlightenment-era conception of the Orient, d'Herbelot has received little attention in modern scholarship. On his project and relationship with Galland, see Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, 114-6; cf. also his *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, 14-8.



itself!) D’Herbelot then gives Q.7:148 in transliterated Arabic and a French “translation,” really a paraphrase with interpretive details subtly interpolated:

Voici le passage du texte Arabique: *Vattakhadh Caum Moussa men bâdehi men Holaihem âgelan giasedan laho khaouar; c’est-à-dire, les Israélites, après que Moïse les eut quittés, pour monter sur la montagne de Sinâï, firent de leurs bracelets & autres ornements de métal un veau qui n’étoit qu’un corps sans ame, & qui mugissoit néanmoins comme un bœuf.*<sup>135</sup>

By rendering *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* with the lengthy “un veau qui n’étoit qu’un corps sans ame, & qui mugissoit néanmoins comme un bœuf” (“a calf that was nothing but a body without soul, but which nevertheless was mooing like a cow”), d’Herbelot neatly telescopes a wealth of exegetical information into a single line; in particular, this seems to reflect some classical commentators’ insistence that the term *jasad* signifies a *mere* body, a hollow shell (and *not*, as others argued, a flesh-and-blood body).<sup>136</sup>

D’Herbelot then proceeds to summarize one version of the story taken from the *tafsīr*, in which the circumstances under which the people acquired the golden ornaments from the Egyptians receives particular emphasis. According to his synopsis, *al-sāmīrī*, “un des principaux Chefs du peuple Juif” (his identity is not explained further), reminded Aaron that it was not legal for the Israelites to keep the gold that they had borrowed; Aaron then demanded that *al-sāmīrī* have the people gather it together in one place and melt it down into a mass for Moses to dispose of upon his return.<sup>137</sup> While the classical commentators usually portray *al-sāmīrī* as acting duplicitously here in order to trick Aaron and the people, strangely, in d’Herbelot’s account, he

---

<sup>135</sup> D’Herbelot, *Bibliothèque Orientale*, 648. I have consulted the 1776 reprint.

<sup>136</sup> I.e., what we have termed the “Mu’tazilite” or “quasi-Mu’tazilite” interpretation, to be discussed extensively below.

<sup>137</sup> In the classical parallels to this account, it is usually *either* Aaron *or* Sāmīrī who commands the people to gather the golden ornaments so that they might be disposed of properly; this version is somewhat unusual in depicting Aaron as specifically ordering Sāmīrī to do it.

seems to be only a passive observer and not really an arch-idolater. Thus the genesis of the Calf seems to have occurred in an oddly accidental way: when the people threw their ornaments into the fiery pit, “all these metals melted together formed a figure in the shape of a kind of calf, as if they had thrown them into a mold” (“Tous ces métaux fondues ensemble formerent, comme s’ils avoient été jetté dans un moule, la figure d’une espece de Veau.”)<sup>138</sup>

At the same time, at the conclusion of the story, *al-sāmirī* seems to act out of implicitly nefarious purposes, since he is portrayed as exploiting the Israelites’ nostalgia for Egyptian idolatry in bestowing a semblance of life upon the Calf. The critical portion of the passage is clearly derived from a traditional exegetical gloss on the Sūra 20 version of the episode, though once again, d’Herbelot seems to be unaware of the specific Quranic basis of these details:

As the Israelites were still accustomed to Egyptian idolatry, they already held some reverence for this figure at first. This in turn caused Sameri to take a little bit of dust that he put into the face of the Calf, which immediately began to moo. The Israelites had held some measure of respect for this Calf already even before it had voice and movement, and so no sooner had they heard it moo than they bowed down before it, and adored it as their god. That earth or dust that made the Calf moo had been collected by Sameri from beneath the hoof of Gabriel’s steed, or from Khiḍr’s foot, when he walked at the head of the Israelite camp in the wilderness. It is on account of this that it had the power to give life and movement to a statue of metal, according to these same interpreters.<sup>139</sup>

It is well known that d’Herbelot relied on various late medieval and early modern Muslim sources for his information, especially the eminent 17<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman bibliographer Ḥajjī Khalīfa (who was actually a contemporary of d’Herbelot’s). However, in the preface, Galland notes that d’Herbelot’s main source for specific information about Quranic exegesis and related

---

<sup>138</sup> D’Herbelot, *Bibliothèque Orientale*, 648.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

matters is “Hussain Vaez,” i.e. the Persian exegete al-Kāshifī (d. 1504). Much of d’Herbelot’s account is clearly taken from Kāshifī, for example the emphasis on the bad impression made on the Israelites by the Egyptians. On the other hand, there seems to be no reference to the Khidr tradition in the pertinent passages from Kāshifī, though presumably d’Herbelot did not come up with this all by himself.<sup>140</sup> Further, Kāshifī’s repeated emphasis on the Calf as a mere body, lacking soul (echoing early commentators like Muqātil b. Sulaymān in particular) seems to have left only minimal traces in d’Herbelot’s version of the narrative, primarily reflected in the latter’s rendition of the key phrase describing the Calf in Q.7:148 as “un veau qui n’ étoit qu’ un corps sans ame.”<sup>141</sup> Both of these factors seem to point to d’Herbelot’s probable reliance on multiple *tafsīr* sources in this particular case.<sup>142</sup> (It should also be noted, however, that Kāshifī’s main account of the making of the Calf occurs in his comments *ad loc.* Q.7:148, so it is tempting to conclude that this explains d’Herbelot’s seeming ignorance of the Sūra 20 version.)

---

<sup>140</sup> The ultimate basis of this identification is obviously a well-known hadith transmitted from the Prophet by Abū Hurayra on how Khidr received his name (which some have understood as meaning “evergreen”): “Khidr was named thusly because when he sat down on a patch of white, parched earth, upon arising, it would be verdant (*khaḍrā*’).” Cf. Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Anbiyā*’ 27 (3438); Tirmidhī, *Sunan* 3444; Ṭayālīsī, *Musnad* 2548; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* 8113. The interpretation of the *rasūl* of Q.20:96 as Khidr is not to be found in the classical commentaries, but the fundamental basis of the association is not hard to deduce, as the image of verdure springing up wherever Khidr sits was no doubt readily conflated with the “Horse of Life” motif connected with the Calf story. One assumes that this association must have had some specific textual basis, inasmuch as d’Herbelot somehow had access to it somewhere among his sources.

<sup>141</sup> See Kāshifī, *Mavāheb-i ‘aliya*, 1.484-5 (*ad loc.* Q.7:148) and 3.70-2 (*ad loc.* Q.20:88-96). The *rasūl* of Q.20:96 is unambiguously Gabriel in Kāshifī’s estimation. His gloss on ‘*ijl jasad*’ in Q.7:148 is illustrative: *go-sāleh-ye ya’nī bi-hay’et-e go-sāleh badanī bīrūḥ* (“a calf, meaning, a mere form of a calf; a body without soul”). On Kāshifī, see the 2003 issue of *Iranian Studies* dedicated to his life and work edited by Subtelny, especially the contribution by Sands, “On the Popularity of Husayn Va’iz-i Kashifī’s *Mavāhib-i ‘aliyya*: A Persian Commentary on the Qur’an,” 469-83.

<sup>142</sup> Gibbon used the *Bibliothèque* extensively and noted that d’Herbelot was stronger when working with Persian materials than with Arabic. Irwin claims that d’Herbelot “made exceptionally heavy use of late Persian compilations” but also notes his extensive use of al-Zamakhsharī as well (Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, 115).

Despite the very different purpose of his work, in his manner of presenting Quranic narratives, d'Herbelot shares much in common with Marracci, for example in his interest in representing the original Arabic in some form alongside a translation, as well as in mediating the established Muslim interpretation of the episode (as opposed to a literal reading of Quranic verses) to a European audience.<sup>143</sup> In fact, d'Herbelot's work may represent the inevitable logical conclusion of this tendency, since he apparently relies on *tafsīr* to such a degree that he actually seems to be *entirely unaware* of the single most important Quranic passage dealing with the story he synthesizes here.

Like Robert of Ketton, du Ryer, Marracci, and d'Herbelot, the author of the first widely disseminated English translation of the Quran, George Sale (d. 1736), appears to have relied quite heavily upon Muslim commentators. In his introduction, Sale acknowledges many of the same works that were consulted by Marracci, including the *Jalālayn*, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Bayḍāwī, and so forth, along with certain Jewish works as well, most notably *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*. As it turns out, however, with the exception of al-Bayḍāwī, Sale probably did not consult the classical Muslim commentators directly, but rather received their views secondhand through consulting Marracci's translation. Thus, just as the first English Quran, that of Ross, is taken straight from the French of du Ryer, the second, that of Sale, is essentially taken from the Latin of Marracci.<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> On the other hand, Galland's preface to the work reflects his characteristic interest in the exotic, fabulous, and *merveilleux* creatures and spectacles abounding in Oriental history. He refers repeatedly to "Génies ou Esprits, qu'ils appellent *Peris, & Dives*," "les Héros de la race de Pischdadiens," "la montagne du Kaf," "du Simorg," et al. before proceeding to other matters to be treated in the encyclopedia, from the history of the biblical prophets to profane history after the flood, oriental peoples and dynasties and the like (*Bibliothèque Orientale*, v).

<sup>144</sup> See the brief notice by E. Denison Ross calling attention to the achievement and influence of Marracci, who had largely fallen into obscurity by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Ross, Marracci's importance is demonstrated by the fact that, although he bragged about relying mostly on his own library in producing his translation, George Sale in fact seems to have gotten most of his knowledge of traditional Muslim exegesis directly from Marracci. Ross observed that the catalogue of Sale's manuscripts and books, which were eventually acquired by the Bodleian, contains very few works on the Quran, and thus his citations of al-Zamakhsharī, al-Suyūṭī et al. can only be accounted for as having been plagiarized from Marracci. See Ross, "Ludovico Marracci." Sale had the audacity to describe Marracci's translation in the introduction to his own

The basic agreement between Sale’s readings and those of Marracci is thus wholly unsurprising: for example, Marracci’s “vitulum *habentem* corpus: ipsi erat mugitus” becomes “a corporeal calf... which lowed” in the corresponding passages in Sale.<sup>145</sup> Just as Marracci acknowledged that the traditional interpretation of this phrase signifies that the Calf was either an animate statue or else actually became flesh and blood, citing the comments of al-Suyūṭī in particular, Sale’s note to Q.7:148 does much the same, only on the authority of al-Bayḏāwī: “*A corporeal calf*, That is, as some understand it, consisting of flesh and blood; or, as others, being a mere body or mass of metal, without a soul.”<sup>146</sup>

Regarding the apology of *al-sāmirī* in Q.20:96, Sale does deviate a bit from Marracci’s translation, though the gist of the passage is largely the same:

Respondit: Sciebam id, quod nesciebant *illi*. Accepi igitur pugillum ex *pulvere* vestigii *ungulae equi* Legati (*id est Gabrielis*) & conjeci illud *in formam fusoriam vituli*: ita enim persuacit mihi anima mea. (Marracci)

He answered, I saw that which they saw not; wherefore I took a handful of *dust* from the footsteps of the messenger of *God*, and I cast it *into the molten calf*, for so did my mind direct me. (Sale)<sup>147</sup>

Sale understands the verb *baṣūra* to mean “to see, perceive” rather than “to know, understand” (cf. Marracci’s *scio*); he renders *nafsī* in the last clause as “my mind” rather than “my soul”; and, most notably, he takes somewhat less liberty in rendering *qabḏat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl*, and in

---

as “very exact; but adheres to the Arabic idiom too literally to be easily understood... by those who are not versed in the Muhammadan learning.” The irony is that Sale clearly “adheres” to Marracci for his translation at almost every turn. Even more incredibly, Sale criticizes Arrivabene’s Italian version (derived directly from Bibliander, as already noted) for “the pretences... of its being done immediately from the Arabic”!

<sup>145</sup> Sale, *Koran*, 132; 261.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 132, note f.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

particular resists glossing “messenger” as “Gabriel.” Nevertheless, Sale’s note here indicates that he holds almost exactly the same view as Marracci regarding this verse’s meaning:

*I saw that which they saw not; Or, I knew that which they knew not; viz.*  
That the messenger sent to thee from God, was a pure spirit, and that his  
footsteps gave life to whatever they touched; being no other than the angel  
*Gabriel*, mounted on the horse of life; and therefore I made use of the dust of his  
feet to animate the molten calf. It is said *al Sāmeri* knew the angel, because he  
had saved and taken care of him when a child and exposed by his mother for fear  
of Pharaoh.

All this is cited in the name of “Al Beidawi” and “Jallalo’ddin.”<sup>148</sup> Sale adds little to Marracci’s interpretation here, except perhaps for noting the story of *al-sāmirī*’s supposed prior acquaintance with Gabriel.<sup>149</sup>

The one place where Sale seems to add something substantial to our knowledge beyond the contribution of Marracci is regarding the identity of *al-sāmirī*. As previously noted, while Robert of Ketton and du Ryer seem to have taken this term as indicating a proper name (“Ascemeli,” “Samery”), Marracci—in line with the classical commentators—recognizes it as a *nisba* and thus renders it *Samarita*, “Samaritan.” This is accepted by Sale, and while Marracci does not mention it in his notes, Sale examines the question more closely:

This was not his proper name, but he had this appellation because he was of a certain tribe among the *Jews* called *Samaritans* (wherein the *Mohammedans* strangely betray their ignorance in history;) tho’ some say he was a proselyte, but a hypocritical one, and originally of *Kirmān*, or some other country. His true name was *Moses*, or *Mūsā*, *Ebn Dhafar*.

---

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 262, note b.

<sup>149</sup> A common theme in Ṭabarī’s traditions on the Calf in particular; see below.

All this is cited on the authority of al-Bayḏāwī. Strikingly, Sale then goes on to suggest another possibility, that *al-sāmīrī* is really another name for *Aaron*; for this, he cites the conjecture of the famous antiquarian John Selden, which we shall discuss below.<sup>150</sup> It is unclear from Sale’s note how exactly this association works, however, for he holds that Muhammad in fact “seems to have mistaken *al Sāmeri* for the name of a different person,” which seems to imply that the Prophet took this narrative from another source which called Aaron *al-sāmīrī*, but simply *did not recognize the reference*. Nevertheless, Sale holds this interpretation to be more plausible than the derivation of the term from the Samaritans—as the Muslim commentators held—because they “were not formed into a people, nor bore that name till many ages after”!<sup>151</sup> Despite this, somewhat later on, when discussing the fate of *al-sāmīrī* in the story, Moses’ command “that thou shalt say *unto those who shall meet thee, Touch me not*” (Q.20:97), is explained as ultimately derived from the Samaritans’ known tendency to shun outsiders, and Sale even cites *Selden’s* own notice that this tradition probably reflects the hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews. Thus, Sale (seemingly following Selden) appears in the end to *reinforce* the identification of *al-sāmīrī* as the eponymous ancestor of the Samaritans in the Quran and *not* as an alias for Aaron.<sup>152</sup>

Sale’s translation, such as it is, seems to be of interest mainly for the role it played in disseminating Marracci’s interpretations to an even wider audience in the West. This would prove to be a dominant trend in future scholarship as well, where the authority of the “established” interpretation, often ultimately derived from classical Muslim commentators, is bolstered and reinforced through simple repetition. At a certain stage, scholars began to further corroborate the received interpretation of the Quran through more or less objective historical and philological

---

<sup>150</sup> Sale, 260-1, note g; see also 261, note c. On Selden’s *De diis Syris*, a classic of oriental philology, and his hypothesis that *al-sāmīrī* is Aaron, see below.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 261, note g.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 262, note d. Sale first recounts the story in his note to Q.2:51, where he cites “Jallalo’din” as his source. He also notes here that the Muslims claim that the descendants of *al-sāmīrī* still inhabit an island in the Arabian Gulf, and cites the account in d’Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque Orientale* for the story of the Calf’s animation as well.

research; but the established sense of scriptural passages, originally determined for the Western audience as far back as the time of Robert of Ketton or at least Marracci—who themselves largely promoted the sense of scripture found in *tafsīr*—would continue to possess a certain interpretive primacy. In this connection, it is striking that the possible identification of *al-sāmīrī* as Aaron proposed by Selden quickly falls by the wayside *even in Selden's own work* next to the Samaritan reading, which is corroborated through reference to outside sources, primarily classical *tafsīr*.

Rounding off the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the final early modern Quran translation to be considered here is that of Savary, first published in 1783 and reprinted many, many times afterward.<sup>153</sup> Although his translation is heavily annotated in a few places, his treatment of the Calf episode is singularly austere; for example, his Calf is simply “un veau mugissant.” Further, his reading seems to agree fundamentally with Marracci’s as a straightforward representation of both the literal sense of the Arabic original and its prevailing interpretation among Muslim exegetes: “J’ai, dit-il, des connaissances que le peuple n’a pas. J’ai pris de la poussière sous les pas du coursier de l’envoyé céleste; je l’ai jetée dans le fournaise, c’est une idée que mon esprit m’a suggérée.” Notably, for Savary, as for Marracci, *başura* connotes knowledge rather than sight or perception; further, his “poussière sous les pas du coursier de l’envoyé céleste” is basically Marracci’s “pugillum ex pulvere vestigii unguiae equi Legati,” with the specification of “l’envoyé céleste” taking the place of Marracci’s parenthetical gloss *id est Gabrielis*. Moreover, a short note appended here explains that *al-sāmīrī* had known that the earth that Gabriel’s steed touched would become endowed with the power to give life, and he threw it in as he was casting the gold he took from the Israelites. “Telle est,” he concludes, “l’opinion des mahómétans au subject de ce veau.”<sup>154</sup> The only thing that really sets his interpretation apart from that of Marracci is his inclusion of the detail about the “fournaise,” which is truly a minor detail, and one that he shares

---

<sup>153</sup> Note also the two-volume edition of Sale’s Quran published by T. Wardle in Philadelphia in 1833 that includes some of Savary’s notes interpolated among those of Sale.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. n. 1 *ad loc.* Q.20:96, 307. I have consulted the 1937 reprint.



with d'Herbelot. Overall, then, Savary's reading essentially agrees in all major points with that promoted by Marracci, Sale, and d'Herbelot before him.

Minor disagreements and variations notwithstanding, we must reiterate that the interpretation of the Quranic Golden Calf episode we have seen in the works of Robert of Ketton, Bibliander, du Ryer, Marracci, Sale, d'Herbelot, *et al.* has been the predominant understanding of the Calf narrative among both Muslim and non-Muslim exegetes and translators right up to the present day. As we shall see, beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this interpretation was given added weight by scholarly arguments that sought to adduce additional historical or philological evidence in its favor. Nevertheless, for the most part, it remains the very same interpretation that has consistently prevailed among Muslim commentators since at least the third Islamic century (i.e. the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE). Amazingly, to date there have been virtually no deviations from the basic exegetical framework established in the classical commentaries and appropriated virtually wholesale by the early modern Orientalists; in the few instances where we *do* see substantial deviation from this hegemonic interpretation, it is only found among modern Muslim exegetes, usually those who adhere to some sectarian ideology. There are virtually no cases of substantial dissent among Western scholars, and there has hardly ever been an attempt to systematically reevaluate the Quranic narrative afresh.

As noted, though there is some small difference of opinion between them, the most important translations of the Quran in circulation in early modern Europe—those of Bibliander, du Ryer, Ross, Marracci, Sale, and Savary—all demonstrate the impact classical Muslim commentaries had on European exegesis even at this early stage; Marracci's translation seem to reflect this most of all. In fact, if anything, the view of the Calf narrative among Western commentators in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is even *more* homogeneous and monolithic than that which prevailed among their early modern predecessors, inasmuch as d'Herbelot at least momentarily entertained at least the possibility that the *athar al-rasūl* of Q.20:96 might be a

reference to the prophet al-Khiḍr and not the angel Gabriel; likewise, as we have seen, Selden (and Sale after him) briefly acknowledged the possible interpretation of *al-sāmīrī* as a reference to the prophet Aaron, as opposed to the dominant exegesis of the term as “Samaritan.”<sup>155</sup> It would not take long for even these tenuous strands of minority opinion to die out completely, enshrining a single hegemonic conception of the narrative among most Western and Muslim exegetes alike, a conception that again is largely borrowed straight from the classical *tafsīr* tradition.

As we shall see, at least in the case of the exegesis of *al-sāmīrī*, there is one obvious reason why the minority strand in interpretation disappeared entirely from Western scholarly treatments and translations in particular. Insofar as there appear to be conspicuous Jewish parallels to (or possibly prototypes for) the conception of *al-sāmīrī* as a foreign interloper among the Israelites at Sinai, this has seemed to confirm scholars’ sense of who this character is supposed to be. Conversely, since the overwhelming trend in rabbinic interpretation in particular is to explain away Aaron’s role in the Calf episode through recourse to the theme of the foreign interloper, the repeated references in the midrashim and medieval Jewish works to the role of the “mixed multitude,” Jannes and Jabres, Micah the Danite, and even Satan seem to militate *against* recognizing *al-sāmīrī* as an epithet for Aaron.<sup>156</sup> Thus, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several scholars struggled to find the missing link that would conclusively prove that the Quran’s portrayal of *al-sāmīrī* and the animate Calf is the direct result of the Jewish influence on Islam,

---

<sup>155</sup> In contrast, the major issue that divides the classical commentators, at least in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, is the question of the physical nature of the Calf—whether its lowing was due to some trick of *al-sāmīrī*’s, to its being animate metal, or rather to its having been transmuted into actual flesh and blood. The fact that the early modern European translators and commentators whose works we have already examined refer somewhat indifferently to this issue obviously reflects their straightforward dependence on *tafsīrs* generated during different stages in the history of this controversy.

<sup>156</sup> This is presumably the reason why the interpretation of *rasūl* as Khiḍr did not catch on either. In addition to being obscure in the *tafsīr* tradition (again, it seems to be a relatively late development, not represented in classical commentaries), this theme has no obvious correspondence with anything to be found in the midrash, especially as Khiḍr is typically taken to be a reflex of Elijah, who is never connected with the Golden Calf in aggadic lore, at least to my knowledge.

even though this quest required that they go quite far afield in seeking out the definitive proof required to corroborate that decisive influence.

#### 4. Scholarly (mis)perceptions of “*al-sāmirī*” and the Calf

As we have already discussed, modern research into Quranic narrative was inaugurated by Abraham Geiger’s well-known *Preisschrift*, “Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume übernommen?”, which specifically addressed the Jewish provenance of the tales of the prophets found in the Quran. It is thus quite appropriate that our discussion of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship on the Quranic Calf narrative should begin with Geiger, who unsurprisingly makes a particular effort to demonstrate the conspicuous parallels between the main elements of the Quranic story and traditions found in the midrash. The most distinctive aspect of Geiger’s interpretation is his suggestion that the name *al-sāmirī* may be derived from *Samā’ēl*, “the name of one who is supposed by the Jews to have been helpful at the making of the calf.” He does not explicitly cite any aggadic parallels for the idea of diabolical intervention in the episode, though it is clear that what he has in mind are passages like those we have already discussed from *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* or *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*.<sup>157</sup>

In addition to the basic identification of *al-sāmirī* with *Samā’ēl*, Geiger notes that the portrayal of *al-sāmirī* seems to be compounded from that of various other figures known from the Hebrew Bible and midrashic tradition. In particular, he notes that the willingness to identify another Israelite and *not* Aaron as the maker of the Calf seems to have a significant precedent in the rabbinic identification of Micah the Danite as the arch-idolater in question; further, Geiger claims that there is supposedly evidence that “Arabian” (or rather, “arabische”) tradition identifies Micah with *al-sāmirī*. Moreover, due to the seemingly composite nature of the character, Geiger can *also* assert, along with his predecessors, that *al-sāmirī* literally means “the Samaritan”; he claims that the Talmud calls a certain sect of the Pharisees “the set-apart, touch me not” (*pārûs al tēmûšēnī*), and that the “Arabians” mistakenly conflated this group with the

---

<sup>157</sup> Geiger, *Judaism and Islām*, 131. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and some manuscripts of *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* actually have “Satan” instead of “*Samā’ēl*” in the relevant passages.

Samaritans. According to Geiger, this latter tradition was apparently known to the Prophet; in the Quranic narrative, he thus cast *al-sāmirī* as the founder of that “set-apart” community, with his punishment of having to wander the earth crying “Touch me not” having been assimilated into the narrative from the legend of the Wandering Jew, which must *also* have been known to Muhammad.<sup>158</sup> Finally, the Quran’s statement that the Calf “lowed as it came forth” is said to have been derived from the rabbinic reading of Ex.32:24 (“I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”); this is demonstrated on the basis of the tradition attributed to R. Judah from *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45 (“Samā’ēl had entered it, lowing to lead Israel astray”).<sup>159</sup>

In his effort to uncover the numerous Jewish sources of Muhammad’s portrayal of *al-sāmirī*, Geiger quite evidently seems to suffer from “paralellomania.”<sup>160</sup> It is certainly true that in the scriptural cultures of Late Antiquity, multiple themes and traditions could converge in complex and unexpected ways; and the conflation of persons and motifs that were originally unrelated is a common characteristic of the reception of biblical material in the midrash, Patristic exegesis, and the Quran and later Islamic lore alike. At the same time, however, in Geiger’s account, *al-sāmirī*’s Jewish origins appear a bit overdetermined; that is, the overall impression one gets from Geiger’s approach—in this instance and many others—is that there are *so many* possible Jewish precedents for the ideas that ended up in the Quran that the Jewish influence on Muhammad seems like a foregone conclusion (which it in fact was for Geiger). But because Geiger takes the Jewish influence on the Quranic narrative largely for granted rather than carefully demonstrating it, his argument appears slipshod and his treatment of the evidence superficial.

---

<sup>158</sup> Curiously, Geiger does not cite the Samaritans’ notorious antipathy towards congress with outsiders as a possible basis for this portrayal, though this had already been observed by Sale.

<sup>159</sup> Geiger, *Judaism and Islām*, 131-2. Again, Sale ostensibly knew the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* account, but did not explicitly connect this passage to the Quranic Calf; Geiger thus appears to have been the first scholar to have done so.

<sup>160</sup> See discussion of Sandmel’s article above; Wasserstrom has called the same tendency “influence peddling.”

For example, in his handling of the pertinent rabbinic parallels, Geiger is surprisingly careless. In citing Micah the Danite as one possible precursor to *al-sāmīrī*, he overlooks the critical passage in *Midrash Tanḥuma* that directly associates Micah with the animation of the Calf, although he must certainly have been familiar with the *Tanḥuma*. Moreover, he neglects to provide a specific citation for the talmudic statement about the Pharisaic sect termed *pārûs al tēmūšēnī* or something similar, saying that “I have only a dim recollection of the passage.” In fact, this passage is nowhere to be found in either the Bavli or the Yerushalmi.<sup>161</sup> Even his citation of the statement of R. Judah from *Pirḳe de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45 about the animation of the Calf as the source of the Quranic analogue is questionable, given the fact that this collection is clearly post-Islamic—although, in Geiger’s defense, whether or not this fact was recognized in his day, he might have assumed that the *idea* expressed in the tradition was authentically ancient and really went back to amoraic times.

The situation is far worse when it comes to Geiger’s handling of the specific evidence he cites as proof of the Jewish influence on the Quranic Calf story, generally characterized by a complete disregard for chronology. First of all, his main source for the Jewish precursor for the Quran’s claim that it was some other Israelite (like Micah) and not Aaron who was responsible for the making of the Calf is the famous commentator Rashi of Troyes (R. Shlomo Yitzḥaḳi), who died in 1105.<sup>162</sup> Second, as support for his claim that the “Arabians” assert the identity of Micah

---

<sup>161</sup> *pārûs*, literally “set-apart,” is itself the rabbinic term for “Pharisee.” The phrase is reminiscent of a passage found in both talmuds about the different types of Pharisees (*b. Šot. 22b; y. Ber. 9.5*) but the “touch me not” sort is not found in either text. On Geiger’s innovative reimagining of the Pharisees, specifically designed to counter the theologically motivated invective generated by Protestant scholarship, see Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, 76 ff.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Rashi’s comments *ad loc.* Ex.32:4: “*A molten calf*. When they threw [the gold] into the fiery pit, the sorcerers of the mixed multitude came along—those who had come up out of Egypt—and made it with their sorcery. Some say Micah was there, he who had been rescued from the bricks of the building by which he had been crushed back in Egypt; and he had the plate upon which Moses had written, *Up, ox! Up, ox!*, in order to draw Joseph’s coffin out of the Nile. He threw this in the fire and out came the Calf” (Berliner ed., 196). Though the concatenation of midrashic themes is rather dense here, the individual strands can be sorted out, and, as the editor

and *al-sāmirī*, he cites one “Aḥmad ben Idrīs” as quoted in Hottinger’s classic *Historia Orientalis*. This is in fact the Mālikī jurist Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Idrīs al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285); Hottinger is drawing on al-Qarāfī’s classic treatise *al-Ajwiba al-fākhira*, an apologetic work that actually draws on the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic tradition to confound and refute the Jews.<sup>163</sup> Though an interesting source in itself, al-Qarāfī’s brief reference to the identity of Sāmirī and Micah in his work no doubt reflects centuries of assimilation of the *tafsīr* tradition into the aggadah and the production of new midrashic treatments of the Calf episode in the Middle Ages that drew on both the legend of Sāmirī and older, established rabbinic traditions.<sup>164</sup> Suffice to say, this process must have occurred considerably posterior to the emergence of the Quran itself. Third, regarding Geiger’s association of *al-sāmirī* and the Wandering Jew, in point of fact, despite its “Oriental” trappings, the legend of the Wandering Jew is not attested in any source before the 13<sup>th</sup> century,

---

points out, the proximate source for much of this is obviously the *Tanḥuma* account. Cf. also Rashi’s comments *ad loc.* vs.5 as well: “And Aaron saw...: that the animating spirit (*ruḥ hāyyim*) was within it, as it is written: *An image of an ox that eats grass* (Ps.106:20). Then he saw that the work of Satan was accomplished” (ibid.)

Oddly, Rashi’s commentary on Exodus 32 has recently inspired a detailed, book-length supercommentary by an Orthodox author from Brooklyn. The author’s purpose in producing this work is presumably apologetic, though the purpose of his exegesis, apart from clarifying Rashi’s comments, is rather unclear. See Lipton, *The Sin of the Golden Calf According to Rashi*.

<sup>163</sup> Brockelmann, *GAL*, 1.385; *ET*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī” (Jackson).

<sup>164</sup> That is, the emergence of Micah as the central figure in aggadic traditions on the Sinai episode and the consistent portrayal of him as orchestrating the creation and animation of the Calf probably represents an appropriation of Sāmirī in the midrash, a process that seems to begin with the *Tanḥuma* tradition on Micah and the golden plate, which, as we have just seen, is quoted by Rashi. (To my knowledge, the earliest author to explicitly state that Sāmirī and Micah are the same person is Tha’labī (d. 427/1035); see discussion below.)

Cf. Hottinger, *Historia Orientalis*, 84-5, where he cites “Ahmed Ibn-Edris, Sanhagio” (a reference to al-Qarāfī’s *nisba*, al-Ṣanhājī); the “Libr. de quaesit. & resp. de Relig.” is obviously the *Kitāb al-ajwiba al-fākhira ‘an al-as’ila al-fājira* (“The Book of Splendid Replies to Profligate Inquiries”!) Strikingly, Hottinger is citing al-Qarāfī as the basis of *Muslims’* claim that Sāmirī and Micah are the same person; but the *overall* gist of the passage in Hottinger is the assertion that Sāmirī (or “Samari”) is Aaron’s *alter ego* in the Quranic Calf narrative, a point that Geiger overlooks entirely. Al-Qarāfī, on the other hand, in refuting the Jews’ claim that Aaron commanded the making of the Golden Calf, states that this is a lie, and that it was really “Mikhā al-Sāmirī” who did so (*Al-Ajwiba al-fākhira*, 151; the text actually reads “منحا,” which is obviously an error for “ميخا”). Note also Halperin’s opaque examination of the parallels between Sāmirī and Micah, “Can Muslim Narrative Be Used as Commentary on Jewish Tradition?”

and is of indisputably European Christian provenance in any case.<sup>165</sup> Still further, Geiger's authority for the "Arabian" identification of the Samaritans as the *lā misāsiya* (i.e. those who say "Touch not!"), a key element in his discussion, is "Makarizi," i.e. al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442).<sup>166</sup> Geiger quotes two lines from the passage on the Samaritans from Maqrīzī's *Khīṭaṭ* that Silvestre de Sacy gives in his famous *Chrestomathie Arabe*; because other scholars after Geiger would likewise focus attention on Maqrīzī's account (not surprising in light of the publicity that both Silvestre de Sacy and Geiger gave it), it is worth turning our attention to it, at least briefly.

In his chapter on "the sects of the Jews today," it is striking that Maqrīzī in fact devotes the most space to the Samaritans out of all of the different Jewish groups he acknowledges.<sup>167</sup> Further, he knows specific details about the putative origins of the community, the derivation of the name of their community from the hill of Samaria (or *Šōmrōn*, which was itself named after a man named *Šemer*, according to 1 Kings 16:24, or *Shāmīr*, as he appears here), and so forth, and many of these details are clearly taken directly from the Bible.<sup>168</sup> At the end of a passage in which Maqrīzī describes the geographical distribution of Samaritan communities throughout Palestine, in regard to the Samaritans of Nablus in particular, he states briefly that "it is said that they are

---

<sup>165</sup> The classic treatment of the Wandering Jew is found in Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*, 1-31. Whether this figure is identified as Ahasuerus or Joseph of Arimathea, he is typically *associated* with the Orient, and the tale is often *claimed* to have Oriental (Armenian or Arab) origins; but this most likely reflects the attempt to achieve verisimilitude on the part of Western European writers who wished to endow the story with an exotic veneer. Note that Schwartzbaum revives Geiger's intimation of *al-sāmīrī* as an echo of the Wandering Jew, although admittedly his interest is in the evolution of the character in folklore per se; intriguingly, he also observes a marked tendency for *Sāmīrī* to be conflated with *Khīḍr* in folktales (*Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends in Islamic Folk-Literature*, 14 ff.) Finally, Geiger might have gotten the idea that *al-sāmīrī* is the Wandering Jew from Silvestre de Sacy, who makes an oblique reference to it; *Chrestomathie Arabe* (1826), 1.340.

<sup>166</sup> On Maqrīzī's life and work, see Rabbat, "Who Was al-Maqrīzī? A Biographical Sketch."

<sup>167</sup> See al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz wa'l-i'tibār bi-dhikr al-khīṭaṭ wa'l-athār*, 4.381-8 on the Jews in general and 383-5 on the Samaritans in particular. Maqrīzī knows of Rabbanites, *qurrā'*, 'Ananites, and Samaritans, and seems to take this at least partially from al-Bīrūnī. One would assume *qurrā'* were Karaites, but in al-Bīrūnī's account at least, it is actually rather ambiguous. See Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 89-91, for discussion of this issue.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.383.



the ones that say *lā misāsa*.” Shortly thereafter, Maqrīzī quotes the passage on the Samaritans found in the work on chronology by the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Khwārazmian polymath al-Bīrūnī (d. 442/1050-1):

The Samaritans are those who are called *lā misāsiyya*. Nebuchadnezzar established them in Syria as a replacement population when he led the Jews away into captivity and purged the land of them.<sup>169</sup> The Samaritans provided help to him in this endeavor, pointing out the vulnerabilities of the Israelites; so he did not relocate them or kill them or imprison them, but rather brought them into Palestine under his patronage.

Their customs (*madhāhib*) are a combination of those of the Jews and the Zoroastrians. The majority of them live in a place in Palestine called Nablus, and their places of worship are established there. Since the days of David, none of them has entered the Temple precinct, for they claim that he perpetrated injustice and committed outrage in relocating the Holy Temple from Nablus to Aelia, i.e. the Temple Mount.

They refuse to come in contact with anyone (*lā yamusūna al-nās*); if this occurs, they purify themselves by washing. They do not acknowledge any prophecy in Israel after that of Moses.<sup>170</sup>

It is difficult to assess the reliability of this passage, or to distinguish completely accurate information from what may represent later accretions. Of course, it is true that the Samaritan community is historically distinguished by a preference for their own holy place on Mount

---

<sup>169</sup> The text has *ajlāhā 'anhā*, but I have followed the editor's suggested reading of *ajlāhā 'anhum* instead.

<sup>170</sup> Al-Bīrūnī, *Al-Athār al-bāqiyya*, 23 (cf. Sachau, *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, 25); al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz*, 4.384. (I have followed the text in the edition of Bīrūnī here; the text in Maqrīzī deviates from the original only slightly, but note that here the Samaritan sect under discussion has become *الأمساسية*, as opposed to *اللامساسية*!) The context of the passage in Bīrūnī's work is an examination of the different versions of the Bible extant in his day; at the beginning, he notes that the two versions of the Torah belonging to the Jews and the Christians, which he has just been discussing, are not the only two in existence, but that there is a third version extant among the Samaritans as well, these people being called *lā misāsiyya*, etc. On Bīrūnī's work on chronology and his knowledge of Judaism and in particular of the Karaites, see Adang, *Muslim Writers*, esp. 88-94. Adang quotes the passage on the *lā misāsiyya* at length, but does not comment upon it or attempt to account for the basis of Bīrūnī's knowledge of the Samaritans.

Gerizim and a refusal to recognize the Israelite prophets after Moses and the books associated with them. On the other hand, the emphasis on the Samaritans as agents of Nebuchadnezzar is clearly external to the community, and is partially based on biblical “evidence.”<sup>171</sup> Further, although Jews historically characterized the Samaritan faith as corrupt and syncretic (again partially on a biblical basis), it is doubtful that any Jew would identify the Samaritans’ customs as a mixture of Judaism and Zoroastrianism!

There seems to be a significant body of evidence that confirms that the Samaritans have historically placed a strong emphasis on ritual purity, and in particular held the belief that contact with outsiders is defiling. The reports on this are relatively diverse and go back at least to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE; one of the most important late antique sources on Samaritan customs, the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis (a work sometimes also known as the *Treasury of Heresies*) emphasizes that the Samaritans rinse themselves in urine after traveling abroad, and bathe after touching a non-Samaritan.<sup>172</sup> In his discussion of the pertinent passage in Epiphanius, Pummer collects a considerable amount of evidence that might corroborate his account, but strikingly, much of it comes from a significantly later period. Pummer suggests that the passage about *al-sāmirī* in the Quran may reflect authentic Samaritan customs, and specifically draws attention to the account of Maqrīzī, but also acknowledges that, as Wasserstrom demonstrates, Maqrīzī seems in fact to have used the account of Epiphanius in producing his own!<sup>173</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup> See the discussion of the Samaritan versus the Jewish versions of Samaritan history in Anderson and Giles, *The Keepers*, 9-19. As they point out, it is actually Flavius Josephus who popularized the identification of the Cuthean “lion proselytes” described in 2 Kings 17 as the Samaritans and promoted the image of these corrupt proselytes as Assyrian agents; cf. *Ant.* 9.290-1. Maqrīzī’s material on the Samaritans likewise reflects an outsider’s perspective, for example in conflating the Samaritans and the *Samarians*, which no Samaritan would do, though a Jew or Christian very well might.

<sup>172</sup> It is tempting to see purification with urine as the key to the connection Maqrīzī asserts between the Samaritans and the Zoroastrians, since the latter famously (or notoriously) consider cow’s urine purifying.

<sup>173</sup> See the discussion in Pummer, *Early Christian Authors on Samaritans and Samaritanism*, 124-7, and cf. also Wasserstrom, “Species of Misbelief: A History of Muslim Heresiography of

In the final analysis, we are not concerned here with what may or may not be authentic historical Samaritan doctrine or practice, but rather with the potential value of the accounts of Bīrūnī and Maqrīzī for corroborating the identification of the Quranic *al-sāmīrī* as a Samaritan and for explaining the critical phrase from Q.20:96, *lā misāsa*, as an allusion to Samaritan purity law. It is difficult to refute the claim that the Samaritans have in fact historically perceived contact with outsiders to be ritually defiling. However, the *main* reason Geiger cites the quotation from Maqrīzī in Silvestre de Sacy’s *Chrestomathie* is because of its *specific* identification of the Samaritans—or of one sect of the Samaritans at any rate—as the *lā misāsiyya*. Considering the fact that the information reflected in the texts of both Bīrūnī and Maqrīzī came from sources outside the Samaritan community, and that the latter in particular clearly saw fit to simply repeat literary stereotypes, it is extremely questionable if the appellation *lā misāsiyya* is authentically pre-Islamic, or even authentically Samaritan in origin.<sup>174</sup>

It seems just as likely—if not more so—that the association of the Samaritans and the phrase *lā misāsa* is a *post-Quranic* development, reflecting Muslim exegetes’ deliberate construction of a connection between *al-sāmīrī* and the Samaritan community, as it is that any Samaritan group ever called themselves the *lā misāsiyya* (or some equivalent), and that this historical fact informs the Quranic account. Nevertheless, as we shall see, despite the extreme tenuousness of this association, the passage we have examined from Maqrīzī’s *Khīṭaṭ* would be

---

the Jews,” 245-6. Wasserstrom emphasizes both Maqrīzī’s importance for modern scholarship on Jewish sectarianism due to his work’s early publication by Silvestre de Sacy and his exceptional resourcefulness at excavating and employing older sources, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. Maqrīzī’s particular distinction in the field of Muslim heresiography lies, it seems, in bringing new data into the tradition by citing versions of sources that were superior to those to which his predecessors had had access. Unfortunately, “his brilliance was inadvertent, for he shone in finding texts, not in assessing them” (“Species of Misbelief,” 242).

<sup>174</sup> Obviously, even Bīrūnī is a late source to be citing as evidence for the origin of the Quranic *lā misāsa*, as Yahuda correctly surmises; see below.

cited as evidence by several other scholars after Geiger, most notably Goldziher, though at least one other scholar, namely Yahuda, cast serious aspersions on its reliability.<sup>175</sup>

To return to our evaluation of Geiger's discussion of the sources of the Quranic Calf narrative, it seems that his account is for the most part embarrassingly anachronistic and uncritical.<sup>176</sup> Ironically, Geiger concludes his account by stating that "[t]he Arabian commentators produce the most unedifying tales about this passage," although his own evaluation consists of little more than a miscellany of random textual citations lumped together without clear order or any appreciation for chronological development at all. If one dissects his argument carefully enough, the almost inescapable conclusion is that the proof for Jewish influence on the formation of the Quranic Golden Calf narrative is in fact rather thin. Despite all this, as we have already asserted, Geiger's approach to the narrative—and to the Jewish influence on the Quran in general—would prove to be of seminal importance for subsequent scholarship on the subject and for the discipline of Islamic Studies on the whole. The impulse to excavate the "original" Jewish and Christian influences on the Quran—and the nascent Islamic tradition in general—is found throughout late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship, and even when later scholars did not agree

---

<sup>175</sup> Again, Geiger knew Maqrīzī's passage on the Samaritans *only* as an excerpt in Silvestre de Sacy's *Chrestomathie*, and thus the Birūnī passage *only* as a quotation within that excerpt. In the 1806 edition of the *Chrestomathie*, the passage on the Samaritans appears at 1.162-71 (the excerpt from Birūnī starts on 170) in Arabic. However, as far as I can tell, in the second edition of 1826, Silvestre de Sacy only gives the passage in French (1.301-5), but he now provides commentary as well: he cites al-Bayḍāwī's gloss on Q.20:96 briefly, and then proceeds to discuss a strange attestation of the name *sāmīrī* in a line from Mutanabbī at length (on which see below). Geiger's page citations of the *Chrestomathie* appear to be wrong.

<sup>176</sup> Admittedly, we should perhaps not be too surprised at the relatively fast and loose way Geiger arranges his evidence; after all, as can be seen in the preface to his work, in discussing the Jewish influence on Islam, he explicitly limited himself to citing materials from texts of clearly pre-Islamic provenance *except* for such works as "the sections of Rabbi Elieser" (i.e. the conspicuously *post*-Islamic *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*) and the two recensions of the "Jerusalem *Targum* on the Pentateuch" (one of which is the conspicuously *post*-Islamic *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*), on the grounds that the traditions contained therein "are all of such a kind that one can generally point to some decided declaration in Holy Scripture itself from which such opinions and traditions may have arisen, and therefore their priority of existence in Judaism can be accepted without hesitation" (*Judaism and Islām*, viii).

with all of the *particular* influences on Muhammad as suggested by Geiger, his example looms large over the many generations that followed.

Again, Geiger's approach to Quranic narrative may be thought to ultimately have roots in the medieval Latin Christian view of Muhammad as a Christian schismatic inspired by or under the tutelage of Jews, as represented in the texts of Petrus Alfonsi or Ricoldus de Montecrucis, for example. Similarly, we have already seen Marracci's indiscriminate connection of the Quran with Jewish tradition, a characterization that is ultimately polemically motivated; despite proceeding from radically different presuppositions than those which informed the work of Marracci or the older Christian polemicists who preceded him, in the end, Geiger advances much the same thesis, except that his treatment ostensibly has some basis in objective scholarly "fact," bolstered as it is with specific textual and historical evidence.

\*\*\*

Geiger's identification of *al-sāmirī* with Samā'el did not prove popular among subsequent generations of scholars, who eventually reasserted the absolute primacy of the "Samaritan" reading of the name first suggested by Marracci (or rather, as almost universally proposed by the classical Muslim commentators and subsequently mediated to Western scholarship by Marracci). At the same time, however, the theme of Jewish influence upon which Geiger placed so much emphasis is echoed continually throughout late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century discussions of the Quranic Calf narrative. Further, the apparent conflation of multiple characters from biblical and Jewish lore in the person of *al-sāmirī*—regarding which Geiger noted only that "this legend is composed of different elements"—provided a pretext for some commentators to portray Muhammad as hopelessly confused or simply ignorant, an obvious revival of the polemical roots of the theme of Jewish influence.

The treatment of the Calf episode by St. Clair Tisdall in his *The Original Sources of the Quran* (1905) epitomizes this attitude, as the author seems to relish the opportunity to demonstrate the maladroit and derivative quality of the narrative; there is some irony in this, since St. Clair Tisdall in fact borrows most of his discussion directly from Geiger.<sup>177</sup> He mentions the legend of the Calf's transformation into flesh and blood via the dust from Gabriel's steed (cited from the *Jalālayn*) and notes that the commentators misunderstand the Calf as actually alive based on the words "a calf *in body*" (i.e. *'ijl jasad*). According to St. Clair Tisdall, what Muhammad really seems to have had in mind is the Jewish legend about Samā'ēl inhabiting the Calf and making it low, preserved in the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* account.<sup>178</sup> But Muhammad misunderstood the name of Samā'ēl—here claimed to be the Jewish angel of death—and mistook it for "Samaritan"; he knew that the Jews hated the Samaritans, "and fancied that they attributed the making of the calf to one of the latter." This misperception was supposedly further reinforced by the Prophet's fragmentary knowledge of Jewish traditions about *Jeroboam*, who ruled at the place that would later be called Samaria. St. Clair Tisdall concludes that

...since the city of Samaria was not built, or at least called by that name, until several hundred years after Moses' death, the anachronism is at least amusing, and would be startling in any other book than the Qur'ān, in which far more stupendous ones frequently occur. Here, as in very many other instances, Muḥammad's ignorance of the Bible and acquaintance with Jewish legends instead is very striking...<sup>179</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> St. Clair Tisdall's direct reliance on Geiger is acknowledged in his preface; more specifically, he states that he is not conscious of being "to any great extent indebted" to any other scholar's work *but* Geiger's, and here only in Chapter IV (7). This is a bizarre assertion, as that chapter deals with Christian influences, but must be rather be an erroneous reference to Chapter III, "Influence of Sābian and Jewish Ideas and Practices"; this is in fact by far the longest chapter in the book, and it is thoroughly derived from Geiger's work. Like many works on Islam of the time, the book is explicitly polemical, a missionary work published by a missionary press.

<sup>178</sup> St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ān*, 112-3. Note that once again the proof-text from the *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* narrative is key.

Thus, in a brilliant polemical maneuver, St. Clair Tisdall manages at one and the same time to appropriate Geiger's implausible connection between Samā'el and *al-sāmirī* and to blame it *directly upon the Prophet*, whose carelessness and ignorance are demonstrated thereby. Likewise, the conflation of the hodgepodge of different elements that went into the characterization of *al-sāmirī*, or rather that the Orientalists *discerned* in the characterization of *al-sāmirī* (the theme of diabolical intervention, the Jewish hostility towards Samaritans, the connection with Jeroboam) is primarily understood as evidence of Muhammad's bewilderment, the final evidence for which is his utter lack of historical awareness, as reflected in his anachronistic association of "Samaritans" with the Mosaic era. In other words, Geiger's "explanation" of the character of *al-sāmirī* is upheld, but its shortcomings are efficiently projected onto the Prophet instead; if anyone is to be held responsible for this bricolage of ill-fitting legends and tropes, the fault must lie with Muhammad, not with modern scholars' possibly flawed approach to "explaining" the narrative by piling up one conjectured source after another, making it seem as if the Quranic episode is actually far more disjointed and incoherent than it actually is.

The fundamentally reductive approach of Geiger and St. Clair Tisdall has been recapitulated several times, in works that for the most part contribute very little that is original to the discussion. Even when the "confusions" preserved in the Quran are not viewed condescendingly, the basically derivative nature of the Calf narrative and the Quran as a whole is stressed. This attitude would eventually become very widely disseminated in the discipline of Islamic Studies as a whole, well beyond the specialized literature on the Jewish influence on Islam.<sup>180</sup> As we noted in the Introduction, this attitude has only recently begun to be dislodged

---

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 113. Although Samā'el is more typically assigned the role of chief tempter and malefactor (and eventually becomes the virtual embodiment of evil in the Kabbalah), he is indeed identified as the angel of death in some aggadic sources.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. Jeffery's comments on Q.20:88 (*The Koran: Selected Suras*, 218): although his account is not explicitly pejorative, drawing on Horovitz (*Koranische Untersuchungen*, 114-5), he observes that the association of Jeroboam, the Israelite regime at Samaria and the schism between the

from its former position of preeminence, though for the most part we have not seen a commensurate interest in developing new methodologies for the analysis of Quranic narrative.

St. Clair Tisdall was not the first to point out what Geiger had seemingly (and strangely) overlooked, that Jeroboam could provide the critical missing link between the Calf of Sinai and the Samaritans apparently presupposed by the Quran. As we have seen, already in 1616, Schweigger mentioned Jeroboam in connection with the Sūra 20 version of the episode, but did so specifically in connection with the *biblical* narratives about the Golden Calf. For Schweigger, there could have been no question of identifying *al-sāmirī* as a confused reminiscence of Jeroboam, since in a very real sense he did not know of *al-sāmirī*'s existence at all due to his dependence on Arrivabene's version of the Quranic text (Arrivabene already having brought the Quranic account into conformity with Exodus in exchanging "Aron" for "Ascemeli" in the version of Sūra 20 from the Latin Quran of Ketton-Bibliander). The first scholar to assert a direct connection between the Quranic *al-sāmirī* and Jeroboam seems to have been Rückert, whose Quran translation was initially published in 1885 and has recently been reprinted in a new edition by Bobzin. In a note to Q.20:85, Rückert simply suggests that the name *al-sāmirī* could reflect a connection with Samaria because of the *Stierdienst* that later prevailed there.<sup>181</sup> But again, Geiger had overlooked the possible connection with Jeroboam, and it would take some time for this hypothesis to become widely disseminated.

---

Samaritans and the Jews is based on a "confused reminiscence" of Ex.32:21-24 in the Quran. Cf. also his treatment in *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 158-9.

<sup>181</sup> *Der Koran in der Übersetzung von Friedrich Rückert*, 237. Oddly, at the same time, in his supplementary annotations to Rückert's translation, Fischer states uncomprehendingly: "ungeklärt ist, wieso der Samaritaner im Koran als Prototyp des Verführers der Kinder Israel verstanden wird"! (524) Again, the putative basis of the connection between Jeroboam, Samaria, and the Calf is that Jeroboam established the worship of golden calves at the northern shrines of Bethel and Dan after the kingdom of Israel broke away from Judah, according to the account in 1 Kings 12; Jeroboam's successors would subsequently relocate the capital of the Northern Kingdom from Shechem to Samaria. Most biblical scholars would recognize the Calf narrative of Exodus 32 as a veiled polemic against Jeroboam and the calves of Bethel and Dan, though the exact source and provenance of that polemic is unclear.



Nor was St. Clair Tisdall the only commentator to emphasize the problematic anachronism involved (either on the part of the Quran or of its later exegetes) in associating the Calf of Sinai with either the calves of Jeroboam, or the postexilic Samaritan community, or both. The attitude of Kasimirski, a contemporary of Geiger whose Quran translation was first published in 1841, is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Like Marracci, he observes that *essameri* is to be rendered as “Samaritaine” and is an ethnic appellation (i.e. a *nisba*) rather than a proper name per se. However, Kasimirski sees the classical commentators and *not* Muhammad himself as ultimately responsible for the confusion, since he takes the opportunity to note how ignorant *les docteurs mahométans* are of Jewish history because of their placement of the Samaritans in the same epoch as Moses.<sup>182</sup> Likewise, Palmer, whose English translation of the Quran was published in 1880, observes regarding “es Sâmarîy” that “some take it to mean a proper name, in order to avoid the anachronism.”<sup>183</sup> It will be recalled that Sale supported Selden’s identification of *al-sâmirî* with Aaron on this very basis as well. Notably, whenever Western scholars raise the problem of the seeming anachronism of the Quran’s placement of a “Samaritan” at Sinai in the Mosaic era, it is *always* blamed on Muhammad or the Muslim commentators; somehow, these scholars *never* pick up on the fact that the problem might be their *own* assumption that the term *al-sâmirî* must inevitably mean “Samaritan” (although admittedly, this is perhaps due more to their reliance on the *mufassirûn* than to anything else).

Nevertheless, as if in response to the underlying tensions such an interpretation would tend to produce, the more universally accepted the identification of *al-sâmirî* as “Samaritan” became in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the more crucial it became for some scholars to sort out the

---

<sup>182</sup> Kasimirski, *Le Koran, traduction nouvelle, ad loc.* Q.20:87/85; I have consulted the 1859 edition. Kasimirski is also clearly uncomfortable with the traditional reading of *jasad* as well, and finds the Mu’tazilite reading to be equally unsatisfying; see his note to Q.7:148. This is one of only very few examples where a Western commentator responds to the problem of the physical nature of the Calf, the central issue for the classical *mufassirûn*, with anything other than indifference.

<sup>183</sup> Palmer, *The Qur’ân* (originally published in Müller’s *Sacred Books of the East* series), *ad loc.* Q.20:85.

complex relationships that seemed to inform Muhammad's understanding of the narrative. Thus, following the basic clues supplied by Geiger, a number of scholars set out to explain more systematically the logic behind the anachronistic appearance of a Samaritan at Sinai in the Quranic narrative. In the treatments of Fraenkel, Goldziher, and Halévy, we again see a particular interest in addressing the quandaries posed by the Quranic narrative according to objective historical and philological methods. What is perhaps most curious about this new phase of the Orientalist enterprise, however, is that these later scholars focus almost *exclusively* on the issue of *al-sāmirī*'s supposed Samaritan identity, without paying much attention to the specific context in which the character appears at all. That is, it is simply assumed that Muhammad for one reason or another blamed the making of the Calf on a Samaritan interloper rather than on Aaron, and the main task at hand is thus explaining how this could be, in terms of the lore about the Samaritans that was putatively in circulation at the time of the Prophet. Virtually no effort is made in these accounts to clarify the basis of the Quran's apparent claim of the Calf's animation or its description of the means by which *al-sāmirī* supposedly performed this feat, i.e. the use of the "handful from the track of the messenger."<sup>184</sup>

This is possibly due to the fact that the idea of the Calf's animation and the apparition of Gabriel at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea simply seemed like fantastic flourishes not worthy of closer examination; or perhaps these scholars recognized the tenuousness of the Quranic basis for these ideas, since they are largely derived from the commentary tradition and at best represent legendary conceptions to which the Quran obliquely alludes. The Samaritan identification for *al-sāmirī* is itself derived from the commentary tradition as well, as we have seen, but this presumably may have seemed like a more rigorously "historical" problem worthy of

---

<sup>184</sup> Note that Fraenkel is the exception, but also that his brief notice on the "handful of dirt" explores specific parallels to the process described by the commentators, and does not really seek to clarify the actual Quranic text per se. That is, he directs the reader to attestations of belief in the miraculous power of the *Fußspur* of holy men and supernatural beings from other cultures and literatures in antiquity, and seems wholly uninterested in the question of the terminology used to describe the process, for which he, like so many other scholars, takes the classical explanation at face value. See "Miscellen zum Koran," 73.

resolution by serious scholars, especially since it may have appeared as if the “Samaritan” presence in the Quran was an indisputable fact, no other meaning for the term *al-sāmirī* seeming to be plausible at this point.

In a brief notice published in 1902, Fraenkel addressed the problematic identity of *al-sāmirī*, “eine rätselhafte, in anderem Quellen nicht mehr nachweisbare Persönlichkeit” (“a mysterious personality otherwise unknown from other sources”). He explicitly rejects Geiger’s interpretation of the name as derived from Samā’ēl, and further thinks it unlikely that Muhammad could possibly have come up with the Quranic version of the Calf narrative all by himself; rather, its densely layered associations and allusions must have been borrowed from a now-lost Jewish midrash that can only be reconstructed on the basis of the Quran. (At least in the case of this particular narrative, Fraenkel seems to have been the first scholar to have explicitly posited the likely existence of such a lost midrashic source for the Quran.) In his view, the Quranic narrative reflects the basic tendency found in the midrashim to reduce or ameliorate the Israelites’ culpability for the making of the Calf; as we have already noted, this tendency is in fact ubiquitous among amoraic sources in particular. In this specific case, that apologetic tendency is specifically manifest in the attempt to blame the *Kälberdienst* on the Samaritans.

According to Fraenkel’s view, this is quite understandably accomplished by playing on the scriptural association between Samaria and golden calves such as that found in Hosea 8:5 and projecting that association backwards—despite the anachronism—to the Mosaic era. This is the underlying logic behind the evident derivation, supposedly validated by philological analysis, of *sāmirī* from “Samaritan.” Notably, Fraenkel makes no mention at all here of the classical Muslim commentators, despite their recognition of *al-sāmirī* as the eponym of the Samaritans; nor does he acknowledge the argument to this effect on the basis of the critical phrase from Q.20:97, *lā misāsa* (“do not touch!”) first advanced by Selden in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>185</sup>

---

<sup>185</sup> “Miscellen zum Koran,” 73. Fraenkel’s ignorance of Selden’s treatment is understandable, as the latter’s *De diis Syriis* was generally not widely read or appreciated by Orientalists of the 19<sup>th</sup>

However, a few years later, both Goldziher and Halévy attempted to elaborate upon Fraenkel's argument, paying particular attention to this key verse. Notably, in doing so, each of them ended up promoting Geiger's basic position about the abiding Jewish influence that predominates in the Quran, now bolstered with Fraenkel's conjecture about a lost midrash that must have supplied Muhammad with his basic information about (and supposed bias against!) the Samaritans.<sup>186</sup> Goldziher basically agrees with Fraenkel's assessment of the Prophet's reliance on a lost midrash, possibly transmitted orally by his *informateurs Juifs*, that blamed the Israelites' apostasy before the Calf on Samaritan instigation, heedless of the implicit anachronism.<sup>187</sup> He then proceeds to evaluate the meaning of *al-sāmirī*'s condemnation to go forth crying out "do not touch!"

According to Goldziher, Muhammad knew about the supposed Samaritan "taboo" against contact with others through oral lore, the presumed antiquity of which he then demonstrates. A taboo against contact with sinners or with members of the *Ahl al-Kitāb* is said to have had some

---

and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, despite its popularity in its own day. Further, Selden's critical remarks on *al-sāmirī* are found only in the second edition, which is rarer and less commonly cited than the first edition.

<sup>186</sup> An ancient Arabian antipathy against the Samaritans seems difficult to explain, so scholars have always assumed that the basic attitude inherent in the portrayal and condemnation of *al-sāmirī* must recapitulate the hostility of rabbinic Jews towards their distant cousins. That is, the basic outlook of the narrative as well as its specific details (however garbled) must have been borrowed.

<sup>187</sup> One gets the sense that the emphasis on oral transmission here is a smokescreen meant to cover up or explain away the utter absence of any textual evidence testifying to the existence of this lost midrash whatsoever. Strangely, scholarship on Jewish tradition that invokes the mechanism of orality tends to do so in order to address discontinuity as often as to assert continuity. This is perhaps true of very many references to orality in scholarship in general, which, despite the tremendous advances made in our understanding of how oral transmission works, persists in exploiting orality as a trope, a means of obviating difficulties relating to absent documentary evidence, rather than approaching it as a legitimate and comprehensible mechanism of cultural diffusion. Only recently have scholars seriously attempted to come to terms with orality as a critical mode of transmission in Judaism: see Elman and Gershoni, eds., *Transmitting Jewish Traditions*. Cf. also Schäfer's criticism of the use of orality as a crutch for unsubstantiated claims of cultural continuity in the study of Jewish mysticism in particular in *Mirror of His Beauty*, esp. 218-224.

adherents in the early Muslim community, and, although this idea might seem to resemble certain Zoroastrian notions, Goldziher alleges that these beliefs originated in the *umma* due to Samaritan influence (a point first argued by Geiger, as it turns out!) This thesis appears to be confirmed, at least in Goldziher's opinion, by evidence for a Samaritan sect putatively observing such a taboo called the *lā misāsīyya*; oddly, as support for this point, he cites an obscure work of de Goeje on the migration of the Romani peoples from Asia into Europe, specifically his discussion of different sects and groups who shun contact with others. Examining the pertinent passage in de Goeje's work, in turn, we find a direct association of the sect of the *Athiggānoi*, "Melchisedekite" Christians who considered contact with outsiders defiling, with the Samaritan sect of the "Dositheans," and posits that the name *Athiggānoi* is possibly a translation of the Arabic *lā-masāsīya* [*sic*], which is supposedly known as the epithet of the Dositheans. But frustratingly, de Goeje does not name his source for this information on the so-called sect of *lā-masāsīya*, or as he puts it, "les ne-me-touchez-pas."<sup>188</sup>

Goldziher goes on to bolster de Goeje's information by citing a Karaite source that quotes the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish *mutakallim* Dāwūd al-Muqammiṣ on the Samaritan avoidance of outsiders, as well as noting a statement of the famous heresiologist al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) on the extreme scrupulousness of the Samaritans in matters of ritual purity in general.<sup>189</sup> The final piece of evidence Goldziher adduces for his argument (the point of which is never stated directly, though one might readily take it to be the demonstration of the basis of the Quranic portrayal of

---

<sup>188</sup> Goldziher, "Lā Misāsa," 26; de Goeje, *Mémoire sur les Migrations des Tsiganes à Travers l'Asie*, 74-5. De Goeje could very well have known the pertinent passage from Maqrīzī in Silvestre de Sacy's *Chrestomathie*; he could also have been directly familiar with the original passage cited by Maqrīzī from Bīrūnī, since the latter's *Al-Athār al-bāqīyya* had been published by Sachau in 1878 (de Goeje's work appeared in 1903). On the other hand, Goldziher does not seem to be aware of either of the possible Arabic sources for the phrase *lā misāsīyya*. He *does* bring up the connection with the *Athiggānoi* in passing, though he does not put anywhere near as much emphasis on it as de Goeje; this late antique Christian sect would eventually become quite central in Halévy's discussion.

<sup>189</sup> Goldziher, "Lā Misāsa," 26-7. The source for the statement of Ibn al-Muqammiṣ is a work of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century author Judah b. Elijah Hadassi, *Eshkol ha-kofer*.

*al-sāmirī* and his “untouchability” in particular in actual historic Samaritan practice) rests, somewhat surprisingly, on the religious law of the Falasha, the ancient Jewish community of Ethiopia, more properly known as the Beta Israel. According to the account of Epstein that Goldziher cites, this community supposedly possesses an extreme form of this taboo, according to which contact with sinners causes a serious degree of ritual impurity; “one may thus conclude, at least in this case, that the law of the Falasha Jews is that of the ancient Samaritans.”<sup>190</sup> In the end, according to Goldziher’s account, having become aware of this authentic Samaritan taboo through unknown channels, Muhammad drew the same conclusion about it that he had drawn about Jewish law in general, namely that it was a divine punishment imposed upon this nation for their past faithlessness. In this specific case, in the Prophet’s thinking, the Samaritans had received this divine interdiction because of their ancestor’s misdeed in introducing the worship of the Calf at Sinai.<sup>191</sup>

Halévy’s response to Goldziher, the rather misleadingly titled “Les Samaritains dans le Coran,” seeks to further refine the putative historical basis of the Quranic portrayal of *al-sāmirī*. The specific focus of his piece is Goldziher’s allegation regarding the evidence of *la loi des juifs Falacha*. Observing, quite correctly, that Goldziher’s argument for the genuine antiquity of the putative Samaritan taboo ultimately rests almost entirely on the identity of that taboo with the practice of the Beta Israel, Halévy then goes on to demolish this claim by pointing out, on the basis of one of this community’s most important texts, the *Te’ezaza Sanbat* or “Commandments of the Sabbath,” that they *cannot* be considered to be “Samaritan” in orientation at all, but are

---

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 27. This assertion is by no means historically unsubstantiable; see Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 1.93-5, for a brief survey of the evidence suggesting that the Beta Israel are ultimately descended from Samaritans captured during the revolt of 529 CE and sold in Ethiopia as slaves, the Christian Ghassanids, who were called upon to suppress the rebellion, having established ties to the court of the Negus. The strongly “Mosaic” orientation of the Beta Israel in particular is supposedly explained by adducing specifically Samaritan origins for the community.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 27-8.

rather squarely “Jerusalemite” like rabbinic Jews.<sup>192</sup> But then, Halévy goes on to argue (somewhat perversely), on the basis of this very text, that Muhammad *does* in fact appear to have been influenced by something resembling the version of the Calf narrative preserved in the *Te’ezaza Sanbat*. As Halévy points out, the distinguishing features of this text’s version of the Calf episode are its attempt to distance Aaron from the making of the Calf (an element it shares with many late antique Jewish sources, in particular the amoraic-era midrashim) and, more critically, its depiction of the secession of a group of Calf worshippers from the main group of Israelites.

In this account, while those Israelites who actually gave gold for the making of the Calf are killed, those who only worshipped the Calf were spared; subsequently, according to Leslau’s translation of the *Te’ezaza Sanbat*,

...some of them were proud and haughty, believed not, and were disobedient to Moses. They separated themselves from the camp of Israel, each one from his family and from his brothers; each one with his companions separated himself from the twelve children of Jacob. They numbered one hundred two thousand and ninety and arrived at the plain of *‘Iyārēwos* toward the Jordan and Jebus. They encamped there and still abide there until today and are alienated from God, the Lord.<sup>193</sup>

---

<sup>192</sup> Halévy, “Les Samaritains,” 422-4; he concludes that “entre les Falachas et les Samaritains, il y a le même abîme infranchissable qui sépare, dans les principes fondamentaux, le judaïsme actuel du samaritisme de nos jours” (424).

<sup>193</sup> *Falasha Anthology*, tr. Leslau, 29-30. For a serviceable but somewhat outdated survey of Beta Israel history and culture, see Wurmbrand, *EJ*, s.v. “Falasha.” Wurmbrand’s article is now superseded by Kaplan’s in the new, second edition of the *Judaica* (s.v. “Beta Israel”), which, however, places less emphasis on culture and religion, and is somewhat awkwardly organized chronologically rather than topically. The last fifteen years has witnessed an explosion in studies on the Beta Israel, and at least two major surveys are available in English: Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia* (1992) and Kessler, *The Falashas* (3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed., 1996).

The settlement of these sectarians at the location termed *'Iyārēwos*, where those who split off from the rest of the Israelites are said to continue to persist in their evildoing, is significant. While Leslau speculates that this term is a reflection of the Hebrew *'ir ha-yēbūšī*, i.e., the city of the Jebusites, Halévy instead prefers to interpret the term as a reflection of *Yābēš-Gil'ād*, a locality in Transjordan once frequented by the royal family of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and other notables from Samaria in pre-exilic times.<sup>194</sup>

Thus, according to Halévy, not only did this sectarian group apparently survive for some time, but in some ambiguous way, they seem to have become associated with the Israelite regime at Samaria. He then proceeds to offer several other tantalizing clues about this community's persistence well into Late Antiquity.<sup>195</sup> Most importantly, as Halévy sees it, in the end, one need not suppose that Muhammad associated the Calf with the eponymous ancestor of the Samaritans because he assumed that their purity law was a punishment for the making of the Calf; rather, he seems to have been supplied with *a ready-made Jewish legend* about the origins of a Samaritan sect that was characterized by such a taboo at the time of the original schism at Sinai, in the form

---

<sup>194</sup> *Falasha Anthology*, 152, n. 213; cf. Halévy, "Samaritains," 427-8. This tradition is strikingly reminiscent of Muslim traditions concerning "secessions" from Moses' people, which some exegetes connected with the Calf episode. Based on Q.7:159, *Among the people of Moses is a section* [lit. "community," *umma*] *that shows the way to the truth, and deals justly in accordance with it* (Ali), some understand the Calf episode to have caused a fundamental rupture among the *qawm Mūsā*; thus, this verse is supposed to refer to those Israelites who remained just, the Jews supposedly representing the section that chose to go astray. Note, however, that the episode is by no means consistently understood in this way; cf., e.g., Ṭabarī's strongly anti-sectarian reading, in which the Israelites did *not* split into two factions, but rather were punished together and atoned together. This interpretation is no doubt strongly conditioned by Ṭabarī's well-known horror of *fitna*, to be discussed below.

<sup>195</sup> Like de Goeje before him, Halévy directs our attention to the group known as "les Intangibles," *Athiggānoi*, mentioned in certain late antique sources; these "Melchizedek Christians" are posited as the putative ancestors of the sect of the *lā misāsiyya* ("Les Samaritains dans le Coran," 428-9). It goes without saying, of course, that in all of this, Halévy believes the fission in the community depicted in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* to reflect a real historical event on some level. Note, however, that no such secession is depicted in the *Aṣāṭir*, the authentic Samaritan midrash on the Pentateuch, which actually lacks any reference to the Golden Calf episode whatsoever. (For text and translation, see Gaster, ed., *The Asatir: The Samaritan Book of the Secrets of Moses*.)



of a midrash that must have resembled that which informs the *Te'ezaza Sanbat*. Notably, the main feature of Halévy's treatment is that the Prophet is now relieved of responsibility for any creative thought whatsoever in assembling the maladroit pieces of the Quranic Calf narrative. Whereas to Geiger and especially St. Clair Tisdall, this "garbled" episode epitomizes Muhammad's conflation of multiple sources and legendary elements—not to mention his profound confusion—to Halévy, it instead epitomizes his utter passivity.

Despite the fact that both Fraenkel and Goldziher seek to build upon observations first made by Geiger, neither of their arguments seem to contribute much to securing the basic reading of the Quranic verse that they take for granted. Goldziher does show that the phrase *lā misāsa* might be comprehensibly associated with a "Samaritan," but the proof he adduces is based largely on much later accounts of the Samaritans, as well as upon a conspicuous amount of mere speculation. Further, Selden had already surmised that *lā misāsa* had something to do with the supposedly xenophobic purity law of the Samaritans; and one could probably get at least this much from a careful reading of the classical commentators' views on the passage as well. Moreover, whatever the flaws of Geiger's original treatment, his reading of *al-sāmirī* as derived from "Samā'ēl" at least has the virtue of being based on some proximate textual evidence (i.e. *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45), however philologically improbable this interpretation may be. On the other hand, in choosing to emphasize the "Samaritan" reading above all, Fraenkel and Goldziher have to resort to more remote textual sources, and must simply take the existence of a lost midrash for granted as the requisite intermediary between various disjointed components of Jewish lore and the Quran.

Halévy appears to improve upon this situation a bit by "discovering" the passage from the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* that seems to supply the much-needed missing link here, and in the end, it is not surprising that he relies so strongly upon this work, for it was he himself who first published the

text and called scholars' attention to its importance.<sup>196</sup> However, Halévy's handling of the evidence in his discussion of the relationship between the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* and the Quran is as sloppy—or disingenuous—as Geiger's use of rabbinic and other sources had been. In particular, the Beta Israel text that supplies the critical piece of the puzzle in his argument is almost indisputably of extremely late provenance. Thus, Leslau acknowledges some Christian Arabic influence on it, and suggests a date “not older than the fourteenth century... [though] the work contains materials which reach much further back.”<sup>197</sup> The former assertion is hardly surprising, given the many conspicuous associations between Ethiopian Christianity and the Judaism of the Beta Israel; moreover, the Beta Israel themselves sometimes attribute authorship of the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* to a charismatic figure called Abba Šabra, a Christian, to whom is also credited the institution of monasticism traditionally practiced in their community.<sup>198</sup> Leslau's latter statement is no doubt true to some extent as well, despite the fact that Abba Šabra lived in the *fifteenth* century; for example, the “laws of the Sabbath” explicated in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* seem to resemble those of the influential Jewish apocryphon *Jubilees* to some extent, which circulated in Second Temple times and exerted some influence in various circles well into Late Antiquity.<sup>199</sup>

---

<sup>196</sup> Halévy, ed., *Tě'ězāza Sanbat (Commandements du Sabbat)* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (the Calf episode appears on 26-8 in the original Ge'ez and 153-4 in Halévy's French translation). Halévy's brief introduction to his edition and translation focus largely on outlining the contents of the work and those of the six other Beta Israel texts he publishes here, and he seems to skirt the issue of dating entirely.

<sup>197</sup> Leslau, *Falasha Anthology*, 10. See remarks regarding Kaplan's reevaluation of the date and provenance of the work below.

<sup>198</sup> See the account in Leslau, *Falasha Anthology*, xxv-vi. In his brief account in *EJ*, Wurmbrand notes that no Christian version of the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* is extant, but that much of its content overlaps with similar “Sermons on the Sabbath” in circulation among Ethiopian Christians, which are presumed to be derived from the Beta Israel text. Tellingly, in his account, it is unclear whether Abba Šabra was a Christian or Jew, but Kaplan notes that he is “generally believed” to have been a Christian, and that even if the legends surrounding this figure and his impact on the Beta Israel are mere hagiography, the role attributed to him signals the decisive impact of Christian monasticism not only on ecclesial life but even on the very consolidation of Beta Israel identity (*The Beta Israel*, 69-73).

However, it is characteristic of Halévy's approach—and Leslau's as well, at least implicitly—that while some dialogue between Judaism and Christianity can be countenanced, and the influence of Judaism upon Islam is largely taken for granted, the possibility of a reciprocal impact of Islam on either Ethiopian Christianity or the Beta Israel is for the most part downplayed.<sup>200</sup> More specifically, the tacit assumption in Halévy's treatment seems to be that the Falasha received unimpeachably or unambiguously “Jewish” traditions at the time of their community's formation and preserved them *wholly unaltered* for centuries, without making *any* substantial contributions to the text as it finally emerged in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat*, the form in which this version of the Calf narrative is now available to us, until such time as a scholar (like Halévy himself) could “recover” this material and put it to use in proving, once and for all, the Jewish origins of the Quran in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, despite the overall dearth of research into the development of biblical traditions in Ethiopia (among both Jews and Christians) as well as the general lack of scholarly interest in Muslim-Jewish and Muslim-Christian exchanges in medieval Ethiopian history, there seem to be indications that traditional Arab-Islamic learning in fact made a significant contribution to the general efflorescence in Ethiopian culture under the so-called Solomonic dynasty of Amhara that came to power in the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>201</sup> Nevertheless,

---

<sup>199</sup> Corinaldi, “The Relationship between the *Beta Israel* Tradition and the *Book of Jubilees*,” is useful as an outline of the main points of similarity; however, the discussion is clearly impaired by the ahistorical and even apologetic approach of the author, who tacitly but consistently strives to assert both the authentic Jewishness of the Beta Israel and the essential centrality of Sabbath observance in Jewish life.

<sup>200</sup> Leslau acknowledges that some biblical expansions of a “legendary” nature found in the work are of probable “Arabic” origin, and specifically points to the account of the angels sent to earth to collect the dust from which Adam was made and the tale of Nimrod flying in his palanquin pulled by eagles; these are “abridged” and “corrupt,” but dimly recognizable as Arab (*Falasha Anthology*, 9-10). These elements are characterized in such a way as to lead the reader to infer that they are minor and not of any real significance as regards the essentially Jewish nature of the work.

<sup>201</sup> On this dynasty and its role in Christian-Muslim relations in the period, see the overview by Tamrat in the *Cambridge History of Africa*, “Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Horn,” esp. 123-50 (which account, however, focuses only on political history, and says nothing at all about cultural developments).

contemporary treatments of the Beta Israel tend to emphasize both their autonomy from other communities and the antiquity and essential *Jewishness* of their culture and traditions.<sup>202</sup>

Given its extremely late date, inasmuch as the key narrative of the schism between the Israelites and the Samaritans after the making of the Golden Calf seems to be more or less uniquely attested in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat*, rather than assume that this narrative must be genuinely pre-Islamic and was somehow communicated to Muhammad, thus contributing to the formation of the Quranic Calf narrative, it seems somewhat more realistic to suppose that the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* might in fact derive from complex processes of intercommunal exchange that occurred in the medieval Ethiopian milieu. In other words, the account of the Golden Calf episode in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* represents a distant reflection of *later* Muslim traditions that identify the sin of *al-sāmīrī* as the cause of the emergence of a Samaritan community set apart from the Israelites; it is *not* an ancient, “pure” Jewish text preserved unaltered for centuries only to crystallize in literary form in the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE among Ethiopian Jews.<sup>203</sup> This is, in fact, essentially the stance adopted by Kaplan in his reevaluation of the evidence regarding the origins of the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* (although he does not address the possible ties to Islam at any length). While stressing the fact that the work does qualify as an authentic and original work of the Beta Israel community, *pace* Wurmbrand, who claimed that the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* had influenced a similar Ethiopian

---

<sup>202</sup> Kessler’s inclusion of a chapter entitled “Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” in his survey seems promising, but unfortunately, the only discussion of Islam here focuses on the “Dark Ages” precipitated in Ethiopia by the emergence of Muslim dominion over the Middle East; further, regarding the question of dialogue between the Beta Israel and their neighbors, Kessler asserts: “If the Falashas have acquired a small number of practices from their Christian and other neighbors... Ethiopian Christianity has borrowed enormously from Judaism” (*The Falashas*, 71).

<sup>203</sup> Cf. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*, 11-19, where he examines one of the Quranic Moses accounts, the elaboration of this story in the *tafsīr*, and the relationship of both narratives to the Alexander Romance. Wheeler demonstrates conclusively that many of the elements seen as “classic” components of the Alexander cycle which have typically been assumed to have influenced the Quran were in fact only fully developed in the Muslim commentary tradition and then subsequently percolated into later versions of the Alexander Romance. The point here that is most germane for our present concerns is that the Ethiopic versions of the Alexander Romance must be counted among those that are clearly dependent upon the *tafsīr* (as one would naturally surmise, given the prominence of Khidr in these versions!), and probably date from the thirteenth century at the earliest.

Christian work, Kaplan has shown that a significant amount of the text was in fact “borrowed,” inasmuch as fundamental elements were taken from the wider Ethiopian Christian milieu: “whatever the origin of the ‘Israelite’ self-identification around which the ‘Jews’ of Ethiopia organized their religious life and their society, the building blocks from which the identification was constructed were almost invariably pan-Ethiopian in character.”<sup>204</sup> Although this piece of the puzzle is as yet almost wholly unexplored, it appears indisputable that Islam made important contributions to Ethiopian culture at this time, and thus constituted a major component of the “pan-Ethiopian” environment in which the Beta Israel emerged and articulated their unique identity.

\*\*\*

The final major “advance” in the interpretation of the Quranic Calf narrative in 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship was made by Yahuda, who quite ironically published the results of his research in a *festschrift* for Goldziher. Like St. Clair Tisdall, Yahuda emphasizes the connection between *al-sāmirī* and Jeroboam, and even reconstructs the precise way in which a critical tradition about the latter was transmitted to the Prophet:

---

<sup>204</sup> Kaplan, “*Te’ezāza Sanbat: A Beta Israel Work Reconsidered*,” 123. Contrary to Wurmbrand’s approach to the text, Kaplan underscores the fact that certain passages of the work were clearly produced through the direct appropriation of Christian materials, in which the characteristically Christian references were skillfully edited out. Considering the overarching emphasis on “Israelite” images, themes, and concepts that prevailed in Ethiopia after the ascendance of the Solomonic dynasty of Amhara in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it should come as no surprise that the “pan-Ethiopian” culture in which both Christians and Beta Israel participated (and to which both contributed) was strongly philosemitic, which accounts for many aspects of the culture of both communities as they developed jointly over the course of centuries. Debate over the antiquity of various aspects of Beta Israel culture is rapidly becoming one of the major historiographic issues involved in the study of this community’s heritage: see Kaplan, “‘Falasha’ Religion: Ancient Judaism or Evolving Ethiopian Tradition?” for a concise articulation of key problems, esp. 61-2 on the *Te’ezaza Sanbat*. Kaplan actually argues for a more nuanced and gradualist model of development than the most radical revisionists suggest, insisting that “Falasha” culture cannot be accurately characterized *either* as authentically ancient *or* as a wholesale invention of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, he emphasizes repeatedly that the ahistorical idealism that informs the approach of Halévy and Leslau is clearly untenable.

The clue... is given in the words of v. 87 “the *sāmirī* has misled them” *wa-aḍallahumu ‘s-sāmiriyyu*. The Jew who related the story to Muḥammad, told him that Jeroboam, too, made two gold calves of gold and declared them, like Aaron, to be the gods that brought them out of Egypt (1 Ki. 12, 18). In telling him that the Jew called Jeroboam *Sāmirī*, because he was King of Samaria, and used the word *wa-aḍallahum* which is an exact rendering of what is said of Jeroboam, 1 Ki. 14, 16, that “he made Israel sin”...<sup>205</sup>

Yahuda goes on to interpret *lā misāsa* as indicating that, following his Jewish informant, Muhammad ascribed the same punishment to *al-sāmirī* (that is, Pseudo-Jeroboam) as the Bible commands for the leper, namely to cry out “unclean, unclean!” to all passersby.<sup>206</sup> Strikingly, he sees any attempt to connect *lā misāsa* to real Samaritan praxis as extremely implausible, and thus rejects the interpretations of Goldziher and Halévy out of hand; and he further surmises that the report of al-Bīrūnī quoted by al-Maqrīzī about the *lā misāsiyyūn* “was built upon the present passage” (i.e. Q.20:97).<sup>207</sup> In point of fact, although much earlier commentators identified *al-sāmirī* as coming from a tribe of the Israelites called *Sāmira*, no classical source discussing the character lays much emphasis on his “Samaritan” identity before al-Maqrīzī’s time; and it does seem, from the context, that the application of the term *lā misāsiyya* or *lā misāsiyyūn* to the actual Samaritans is posterior to and dependent upon not only the Quran but the exegetical development of the character of *al-sāmirī*.

---

<sup>205</sup> Yahuda, “A Contribution to Qur’ān and Ḥadīth Interpretation,” 286. The crux here is that the Arabic *aḍalla* (to lead astray, cause to sin) translates the Hebrew *heḥēṭi’* precisely.

<sup>206</sup> Lev.13:45. Yahuda specifically criticizes Halévy for making this very connection and yet not recognizing that Jeroboam lies behind the legend of *al-sāmirī*.

<sup>207</sup> Yahuda, “A Contribution to Qur’ān and Ḥadīth Interpretation,” 287. In point of fact, it is actually *Geiger* who cites the report of al-Bīrūnī quoted by al-Maqrīzī; Goldziher only alludes to it indirectly by citing de Goeje—who, as we have seen, does not actually name his source for the *lā misāsiyya*—and Halévy does not really mention it at all. However, Yahuda is still correct in identifying this slim piece of evidence as the foundation upon which the edifice built by Goldziher and Halévy ultimately stands.

Yahuda's account is of special interest for a number of reasons. First of all, the passage quoted above is exceptional for the particular emphasis it places on the specific mechanics of the transmission of information about Jeroboam to the Prophet and his subsequent misunderstanding of its import: a Jewish informant told Muhammad the story of the first Golden Calf and then added that later on, Jeroboam, the Samaritan—i.e. the *sāmirī*—had also made golden calves for Israel to worship; Muhammad subsequently conflated the two stories, projecting the *sāmirī* he had heard about into the story of the *earlier* instance of Calf worship among the Israelites. The basic idea here is the same as what previous scholars had imagined, of course, but Yahuda's depiction is surprisingly concrete, isolating and emphasizing the very moment at which the Prophet's interlocutor transmits—that is, *influences*—Muhammad's conception of the Calf narrative, which he presumably misunderstood on the spot, or else garbled soon after. Admittedly, because he strives to isolate and clarify the precise steps in which the key datum was transmitted to Muhammad from his anonymous informant, Yahuda's account is admirably cogent, far more so than the convoluted accounts of his predecessors.

The other major element of particular interest in Yahuda's discussion is his citation of a Yemenite midrash that, like Halévy's tradition from the *Te'ezaza Sanbat*, appears to provide the critical missing link for understanding the Quranic Calf narrative. In fact, his text effectively trumps Halévy's citation of the Beta Israel text—and al-Bīrūnī's report about the *lā misāsiyya* as well—because it appears to be much more closely related, formally speaking, to the Quranic Calf narrative. No doubt Yahuda also believed this Yemenite midrash to be more compelling evidence of the Jewish influence on Muhammad because of its "Oriental" origin and its sheer geographical proximity to the Arabian matrix from which Islam emerged; that is, to an Ashkenazi audience, Yemenite tradition was already practically "Islamic" anyway. (The irony of such an assumption will become clear in our later examination of this evidence.)

This fragmentary midrash on the making of the Calf (which actually appears in the context of commentary on a verse from Song of Songs) was first published by Ginzberg in 1922, and later

discussed by Lieberman in a lecture he gave on the Yemenite midrashic tradition, eventually published under the title *Midrashei Teman* in 1939; and Yahuda credits Lieberman as the first to recognize this midrash as the true source of the Quranic story of *al-sāmīrī*.<sup>208</sup> The immediate context for this tradition is the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, when the Israelites are supposed to have been privileged with a vision of God, who appeared to them riding in the Merkavah or divine chariot described in the book of Ezekiel; according to Ezekiel, the Merkavah contained (or was borne by) four angelic beings, each of which had four faces, one of a man, one of an eagle, one of a lion, and one of a bull.<sup>209</sup> Later Jewish tradition would often identify each of the four angels of the Merkavah with just one of the distinct species mentioned in the account in Ezekiel 1, and thus the key element in this divine vision is Israel's perception of *šōr ha-merkābā*, the "Bull of the Chariot." The pertinent part of this passage states:

When Israel saw a likeness of a bull walking to His left [i.e. to the left of the Holy One], they took some dust from beneath its feet; later, when they made the Golden Calf, they took the dust and cast it into it, and this made it stamp its feet.

The midrash then connects this image to the biblical version of the episode with a deft manipulation of an apposite proof-text: "As scripture says, *I threw it in the fire, and out came this calf* (Ex.32:24). It does not say, 'I brought it out' (*wě-ôšē*), but rather, 'it came out' (*wa-yēšē*)—this is to teach you that the Calf came out by itself."<sup>210</sup>

---

<sup>208</sup> See Ginzberg, "Haggadot Qeṭu'ot"; the discussion of the passage appears on 57-8, the section of the text on the making of the Calf on 64-8; cf. Lieberman, "Midrashei Teman," 17-8. I have consulted the second, revised edition of Lieberman's work, published in 1970.

<sup>209</sup> Ez.1:5-10; cf. 10:14, where the bull has been replaced by a "cherub."

<sup>210</sup> Author's translation, from the passage as given by Ginzberg, "Haggadot Qeṭu'ot," 66:  
 וכשראה ישראל דמות של שור שמהלך לשמאלו נטלו עפר מתחת רגליו וכשעשו את העגל נטלו את העפר והשליכוהו לתוכו והיה מרפס שני ואשליכהו באש ויצא העגל הזה ואוצא לא נאמר אלא ויצא מלמד שיצא מאליו



As noted by Lieberman, the tradition contained in this Geniza fragment, first published by Ginzberg, is not part of our extant *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim*, i.e. *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*; nor is it found anywhere else in the known midrashic corpus either. Nevertheless, Lieberman concludes that the tradition is genuinely ancient, *a fact that is demonstrated in particular by its clear influence on the Quranic Calf narrative*. He then goes on to quote Q.20:96 (*I saw what they did not see* etc.) in Arabic and Hebrew.<sup>211</sup> Yahuda emphasizes this point as well: though the Quranic account is clearly derived from this midrash, “[t]he Quran has not preserved all the details of the picture, and confounded the bull with the ‘Messenger,’ who obviously is Moses, and made the *Sāmīrī* take a handful of dust from beneath his footsteps to throw it in the molten calf. The commentators had some knowledge of this Midrash, but offered a distorted picture of the story.”<sup>212</sup> Yahuda does not elaborate further, but it is clear that what he means by the “distortion” introduced by later commentators is their unanimous identification of the *rasūl* in the narrative with Gabriel, instead of recognizing him as Moses, which is what the Quran originally meant, though it was itself based on a distortion of the original portrayal of the dust as coming from the track of the *šōr ha-merkābā*.

---

Cf. Lieberman, “Midrashei Teman,” 17-8; for Yahuda’s translation and discussion, see “A Contribution to Qur’ān and Ḥadīth Interpretation,” 288 (note that he leaves out the reference to the proof-text from Ex.32:24). The key word *mērappēš* is somewhat ambiguous. The *pi’el* verb *rippēš* means “to shake” in modern Hebrew, and it is tempting to render the line as “they took the dust and cast it into it and it shook,” asserting some connection to the version of the tradition in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, which states that “Egyptian sorcerers performed their witchcraft, and it [the Calf] appeared to be shaking (*mēraṭṭēṭ*) before them.” However, Jastrow registers numerous examples from rabbinic literature where the *qal* form, *rāpaš*, means “to tread, stamp,” and one might thus feasibly read the form *מַרְפָּשׁ* as *mēruppāš*, the participle from the *pu’al* form, meaning “it was made to stamp its feet.” This is how Yahuda interprets the line.

It will not have escaped the notice of the perceptive reader that in the case of several of our most important witnesses to the tradition on the animate Calf in the midrash, the key term—*mēraṭṭēṭ* (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*), *gō’ēr/gō’ēh* (*Midrash Tanḥuma*), and *mēruppāš* here—is either difficult to interpret or else must be emended in order to yield an appropriate meaning.

<sup>211</sup> “Midrashei Teman,” 18.

<sup>212</sup> Yahuda, “A Contribution to Qur’ān and Ḥadīth Interpretation,” 288.

The midrashic association of the Golden Calf and the ox of the Merkavah seems to be authentically ancient. We cannot go into details here, but rabbinic exegetes appear to have perennially been drawn to assert a connection between the Calf made at Sinai and the *šôr ha-merkābā*, and modern scholars have perennially been drawn to do likewise.<sup>213</sup> The particular interest in this fragmentary midrash exhibited by Ginzberg and Lieberman seems to reflect another, complementary strain in modern scholarship on rabbinic literature as well, one that has been quite prevalent in modern times: this is the continuing interest in unearthing an authentically ancient esoteric tradition in rabbinic Judaism centering on visions of the Divine Chariot, to the extent that, in the contemporary study of Jewish mysticism in particular, this topic has received a disproportionate amount of attention, especially given the extreme paucity of surviving literary evidence of such a tradition. While the Chariot vision of Ezekiel supposedly provided one major focal point for esoteric speculation, the biblical Song of Songs provided another, and the discovery of previously unknown midrashic traditions discussing the Chariot in the context of commentary on Song of Songs is probably what excited the imagination of Ginzberg and Lieberman in the first place, especially given that this “ancient” tradition was found in a formerly lost “Oriental” source. On the other hand, as is clear from the context of his discussion (and is in general typical of scholars working in the subfield of Jewish-Islamic exchanges, as we have seen), Yahuda’s main interest is in demonstrating the thoroughgoing dependence of the Quranic tradition on a genuinely antique rabbinic precursor.

It goes almost without saying, however, that a Geniza fragment of an otherwise unknown midrashic tradition is unlikely to be of sufficient vintage to have exerted a decisive influence on

---

<sup>213</sup> Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, features an exhaustive treatment of the subject that will likely never be superseded. Cf. also his eccentric piece on the interrelationships between the *tafsīr* and the midrash on the Golden Calf, a fascinating exploration that strenuously resists clear decipherment: “Can Muslim Narrative Be Used as Commentary on Jewish Tradition?” Halperin seems to suggest that Sāmīrī represents not Aaron but rather *Moses*, based on a reading of the biblical Micah as a kind of doppelgänger to Moses (i.e. the lawgiver is also in some way himself the transgressor and arch-idolater). It is unfortunate that an inquiry that is so willing to challenge the established paradigms for investigation of the relationships between aggadah and *tafsīr* should devolve in the end into wholly ahistorical and even nonsensical speculations.

the formation of a parallel narrative found in the Quran. Both Ginzberg and Lieberman would readily admit that the bulk of the contents of the Cairo Geniza were produced in the high Middle Ages, and that the oldest documents found therein come from the late 9<sup>th</sup> century CE; they simply presume, however, that materials of a specifically “rabbinic” character, especially midrashim, and especially midrashim of a seemingly esoteric character, must be authentically early, and certainly pre-Islamic. In his discussion of the fragmentary midrashic materials retrieved from the Geniza, Ginzberg places some emphasis on parallel passages from the Yemenite *Midrash ha-Ḥefeẓ*; similarly, in his discussion of the Yemenite midrashic tradition, Lieberman often refers to the *Midrash ha-Gadol*, a text he worked on extensively throughout his career. Both would have seen these works as illustrative of the general milieu that produced the fragmentary midrash on Song of Songs from which our tradition on the Golden Calf and the ox of the Merkavah was taken, and this provides us with the key for understanding the basic assumptions that have colored their approach, and that of Yahuda as well.

The Yemenite midrashic tradition has received renewed attention in recent years, for example in the work of Tzvi Langermann. In his compilation of extracts from major works from this tradition, Langermann emphasizes the novel contribution made by the various authors who were responsible for compiling them; these authors redacted large amounts of material from traditional rabbinic sources but reframed them in new contexts, and in particular adapted them to the philosophical discourse of their time. As it turns out, the real efflorescence of this Yemenite tradition—identified by Langermann as the “Golden Age” of Yemenite Jewry—occurred from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries CE.<sup>214</sup> While the aggadic compilations and Torah commentaries of this period certainly do preserve *some* authentically ancient rabbinic traditions—in certain cases, our best-attested versions of exemplary classical midrashim are found in these texts—Langermann criticizes scholars like Lieberman, who pillaged the *Midrash ha-Gadol* for

---

<sup>214</sup> See Langermann, *Yemenite Midrashim*, 265-81, on the authors of the works represented in his anthology; the earliest author of a Yemenite “philosophical midrash” (in the parlance Langermann prefers here) is Nathanel ben Yeshaiiah, who wrote his *Nūr al-ẓalām* in 1329 CE.

such material while totally overlooking the unique contribution to the development of the midrashic genre made by these late medieval authors. It is quite clear that there is much in the *Midrash ha-Gadol* and other works of Yemenite midrash produced during this period that reflects the concerns and interests of their actual authors and redactors; likewise, it is hardly surprising that some influences from the greater Islamic intellectual milieu should have percolated into these works.<sup>215</sup>

Again, this is the milieu in which *Midrash ha-Gadol* and *Midrash ha-Ḥefez* were produced, and, *pace* Lieberman and Yahuda, it is likely that our fragmentary midrash from the Geniza on the Calf and the ox of the Merkavah really originated in this later period as well.<sup>216</sup> While it certainly draws on older aggadic traditions associating the Divine Chariot and the Calf of Sinai, at the same time, the characteristic flourish we see here in the fragmentary Yemenite midrash—that the Israelites took the dust from beneath the foot of the ox and cast it into the Calf—is quite recognizably posterior to and dependent upon the story of *al-sāmīrī*'s animation of the Calf with the “handful from the track of the messenger” found in classical *tafsīr*. Likewise, both Lieberman and Yahuda note that in the Torah commentary of Menaḥem Ṣiyyoni (fl. mid-14<sup>th</sup> c. CE), it is said that Micah, to whom the making of the Calf is attributed, “had seen a vision of the Merkavah

---

<sup>215</sup> See Langermann's discussion of the milieu on xxv-xxix. While he is careful to stress that Jewish authors of the period exerted some influence on Muslim thinkers, and that many points of similarity in Jewish and Muslim philosophical thought were independent developments in each tradition, the impact of Ismā'īlī and Zaydī Shī'ī influences in particular on the Yemenite Jewish tradition is conspicuous. Langermann's emphatic use of the term “philosophical midrash” underscores the fact that the overarching agenda in these works is to adapt traditional aggadah to post-Maimonidean philosophical principles.

<sup>216</sup> The author of *Midrash ha-Gadol*, David 'Adanī, flourished in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century CE. The *Midrash ha-Ḥefez* was completed and published by its author, Zakaryā ha-Rōfeh, in 1430 CE. Again, Lieberman completely overlooked the individual contribution made by the former and treated the *Midrash ha-Gadol* simply as a mine from which earlier rabbinic materials could be taken. Ginzberg cites *Midrash ha-Ḥefez* extensively in his *Legends of the Jews*, usually quoting traditions contained therein alongside much older compilations of rabbinic midrash, thus further contributing to the indiscriminate use of this material.

as it crossed over the sea.”<sup>217</sup> The possible echo of Q.20:96 here (*I saw that which they did not see...*) might seem to corroborate our claim of the diffusion of the story of *al-sāmīrī* from the *tafsīr* among medieval Jewish circles, though Lieberman and Yahuda naturally assumed that the gradient of influence flowed the other way, from Jewish circles to the Quran and *tafsīr*. Strikingly, neither Lieberman nor Yahuda acknowledges that, in the *continuation* of the passage, after Micah sees the Merkavah, he takes dust from beneath the hoof of the ox of the Merkavah and secrets it away; later on, this dust is used in the making of the Calf, just as it is in Ginzberg’s Geniza fragment! This echoes accounts of Sāmīrī’s activity from the *tafsīr* even more strongly, inasmuch as the creation of the Calf through this miraculous means is now directly attributed to the interloper Micah, already recognized by some commentators as Sāmīrī’s doppelgänger.

While little is known of Zīyyoni apart from what can be gleaned from his works, a short (but very dense) Torah commentary and a seminal work on Kabbalistic demonology, it is clear from these texts that his thought represents a fusion of different strains of Kabbalah with influences from Arab philosophical, theological, and scientific works.<sup>218</sup> However, quite remarkably, Yahuda explicitly asserts that the Quranic *baṣurtu bi-mā lam yabṣurū*, the words of Sāmīrī, are in fact directly derived from the words we find in Zīyyoni’s account describing

---

<sup>217</sup> *Sefer Zīyyoni*, 42r, column A, top. The Calf episode seems to dominate Zīyyoni’s comments on this part of the book of Exodus; his treatment of the making of the Calf is redolent with Merkavah imagery.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. Dan, *EJ*, s.v. “Menachem Zīyyoni”; Scholem, *ibid.*, s.v. “Demonology [in Kabbalah],” cols. 1531-2. The latter notes Zīyyoni’s particular importance as the main conduit through which Arab demonology was transmitted to Ashkenazi circles. Zīyyoni is a generally obscure character in the history of Kabbalah, but he has recently been the subject of two substantial articles: see Laura, “Collected Traditions and Scattered Secrets: Eclecticism and Esotericism in the Works of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Ashkenazi Kabbalist Menahem Zīyyoni of Cologne”; Huss, “Demonology and Magic in the Writings of R. Menahem Zīyyoni.” Laura’s treatment in particular focuses on the eclectic character of Zīyyoni’s thought, but somewhat bizarrely, she wholly neglects his incorporation of Arab elements into his work. Huss mentions this aspect briefly, but is vague about Zīyyoni’s Arab sources.

Note that Ginzberg sporadically cites material from Zīyyoni’s Torah commentary in *Legends of the Jews* as well, adding him to a number of other medieval authors dispersed there among much older classical rabbinic sources. On Ginzberg’s promotion of an ahistorical image of aggadah as representing the timeless creativity of the Jewish people, see below.

Micah's vision of the Chariot.<sup>219</sup> Presumably Yahuda is simply taking for granted that Ziyoni is quoting an older midrashic source, now lost, since Ziyoni seems to be the oldest extant witness to this missing tradition that he assumes must have influenced the Quran. But just as the Calf episode as represented in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* is unlikely to provide us with that single seminal influence that decisively shaped the portrayal of *al-sāmīrī* in the Quran, the Yemenite fragment cited by Ginzberg, Lieberman, and Yahuda is equally unlikely to be the element that decisively explains the origin of the Quran's living Calf. In point of fact, it is much *more* likely that both of these sources reflect the conditions of a much later age, one in which Jewish exegesis was permeable to influences from the canonical *tafsīr* produced during the classical period in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Jewish exegetes responded dynamically and creatively to thematic developments that first originated in the realm of Muslim exegesis.<sup>220</sup>

Yahuda's article, published in the 1940s, seems to reflect certain contemporary trends in the treatment of Islamic origins, for at that time, several scholars were interested in excavating the "real" sources of the Quran in marginal or sectarian contexts rather than in what might be considered mainstream Judaism or Christianity. Yahuda's emphasis on a little-known midrash preserved by Yemenite circles, and ultimately taken (at least by Ginzberg and Lieberman) to reflect esoteric undercurrents in classical rabbinic thought, directly parallels Halévy's use of the *Te'ezaza Sanbat*; in each case, the author strove to assert Islam's basic dependence on Judaism through recourse to traditions that had previously been largely or completely unknown to European Jewry, with the assumption that these traditions are genuinely antique and

---

<sup>219</sup> Halévy, "A Contribution to Qur'ān and Ḥadīth Interpretation," 288, n. 29.

<sup>220</sup> Note also that in the case of both the Yemenite and the Beta Israel traditions, the putative or actual sources of these texts—'Adanī, Abba Ṣabra, et al.—are individuals who are clearly saturated with the culture of the dominant Islamic tradition, or else act as conduits for the communication of discrete influences from Islamic tradition (it will be recalled that it is unclear whether Abba Ṣabra was a Christian or a Jew, but that he was certainly well-versed in the Ethiopian Christian learned tradition of his day, which was itself heavily influenced by Islam after the 13<sup>th</sup> century).

quintessentially Jewish.<sup>221</sup> At the same time, though Yahuda in particular wants to assert the importance of Judaism over Christianity in the formation of Islam, in many ways his approach is also analogous to that of Richard Bell and Tor Andræ, both of whom focused on Eastern Christianity as providing the major impetus behind the rise of Islam while crediting such “heretical” elements as Manichaeism for their key contribution to Muhammad’s thought as well.<sup>222</sup> However, on the whole, Yahuda’s work is best understood as the natural conclusion of a single line of argument begun by Geiger, given critical impetus by Fraenkel’s insinuations about the role played by a “lost midrash,” and then continued by Goldziher and Halévy. In particular, Halévy and Yahuda both attempt to discover the previously unknown midrashic source of the Quranic Calf narrative, and their revelation of texts that seem to supply the most critical elements of the enigmatic story of *al-sāmirī* and the Golden Calf effectively relieves Muhammad of the uncomfortable burden of originality. Geiger’s vision of Judaism as the sole authentic religion of revelation and thus the ultimate source of Islam—through obscure Oriental and Asiatic channels, to be sure—is thereby realized.

---

<sup>221</sup> See Yahuda’s introductory comments, where he declares his intention to focus especially on terms coined by the Jews of Arabia, “Arabic in origin but alien in spirit” (280); he will employ both familiar Hebrew sources and newly uncovered documents such as the Yemenite midrashim to do so (283). His emphasis on Jewish origins extends not only to the biblical or quasi-biblical lore of the Quran but also to fundamental issues of ritual; for example, he claims that *majlis* in Q.58:11 refers not to an “assembly hall,” but rather to the Prophet’s prayer-space, *masjid* being a later coinage. According to Yahuda, the term *majlis* actually had this meaning in the usage of Arabian Jews, and Muhammad had initially sought to imitate these Jews by taking not only the term itself from them, but many points of ritual as well (“A Contribution to Qur’ān and Ḥadīth Interpretation,” 290-1).

<sup>222</sup> See esp. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (1926), and Andræ, *Mohammed: Sein Leben und seine Glaube* (1932). This emphasis on the sectarian and apocryphal (which has always been important in the study of Islamic origins anyway due to the Quran’s clear derivation from parascriptural materials and the apparent Docetist tendency of its Christology) is most strongly manifest in the work of Shlomo Pines, who argues repeatedly for the particular impact of Jewish Christianity on formative Islam.

Since the publication of Yahuda's essay in 1948, there have been no major revisions of the scholarly understanding of the Quranic Calf narrative; even minor adjustments have been rare.<sup>223</sup> The classical commentators' solutions to the enigma of *al-sāmirī*'s identity, his cryptic response to Moses about the "handful from the track of the messenger," and the nature of the "corporeal calf that lowed" have all been more or less accepted in modern scholarship on the Quran; in particular, the presence of a Samaritan interloper at Sinai was "conclusively" demonstrated by Geiger and his followers to constitute decisive proof of the thoroughgoing influence of Jewish lore and legend on the Quran, in this as in so many other cases. This point of view has come to dominate the literature so thoroughly that even what little scholarly rigor informed the judgments of Geiger, Goldziher, Yahuda, et al. has been abandoned, and "Jewish influence" has simply become an oft-repeated trope.

Of course, this phenomenon was already in evidence well before Goldziher's time due to the wide influence of Geiger. A particularly striking example of this is the Quran translation of Rodwell, first published in 1861: drawing largely on Sale and Geiger, Rodwell furnished his version of the Quran with extensive footnotes on the Jewish sources of the material therein. The

---

<sup>223</sup> Most of the major works on the Jewish influence on Islam mentioned in the Introduction contain at least brief treatments of the Calf episode; typically, these simply summarize the established interpretations of Geiger, Fraenkel, Goldziher, and (eventually) Yahuda. Other particularly influential presentations that I have not mentioned or else can only mention in passing include Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 114-5 (1926); Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (1931); Heller, *El*, s.v. "Al-Sāmirī" (1934); Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 158-9 (1938); and Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, 174, 334-6 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1977). These draw on the same sources as the treatments we have examined closely here, and tend to reach the same conclusions.

There have been almost no contemporary treatments of the Calf narrative of note in Western languages. The only presentations of significance are Rippin's revision of Heller's article in *El*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Al-Sāmirī" (1995) and Hawting's article in *EQ*, s.v. "Calf of Gold" (2001). Rippin notes Schwartzbaum's intimation of a connection between *al-sāmirī* and the legend of the Wandering Jew, but adds that while some traces of this motif may appear in some midrashic sources (e.g., *Tanḥuma*, *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*), these appear to be post-Islamic, and so the Quran in fact represents "the earliest record of this midrashic development." Hawting's treatment is distinctive because of its air of objectivity: he simply summarizes the positions of both the classical commentators and modern scholars (especially regarding the putative influence of biblical and postbiblical material) but remains agnostic, refusing to advocate any particular interpretation as "original" or intrinsic to the Quran itself.



wide dissemination of Rodwell's work, reprinted many times, therefore helped to popularize the impression of the Quran as wholly derivative, and in particular, derived from Judaism. It is characteristic of Rodwell's careless approach and stereotyped outlook that he asserts a *Talmudic* basis for the image of the lowing Calf, even though he explicitly cites the *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* narrative as the actual source.<sup>224</sup> Overall, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, the Calf narrative, the aggadic basis of which appears to have been conclusively proved, has been taken as a model example of the Quran's employment of readily available exegetical and legendary material from its environment, particularly Jewish material. As we have seen, this point has typically been illustrated via reference to standard rabbinic sources such as the Babylonian Talmud and the classical midrash, usually heedless of even the most rudimentary concern for chronological development, let alone more sophisticated reflection upon the ultimate significance of the phenomenon of cross-cultural communication and intercommunal "influence."

---

<sup>224</sup> Rodwell, 99, n. 2 *ad loc.* Q.20:85; 306, n. 2 *ad loc.* Q.7:148. See also 99, n. 1 *ad loc.* Q.20:85: *al-sāmirī* is the Samaritan, which "involves a grievous ignorance of history on the part of Muhammad"; various theories about his identity are noted, but the characterization here is most probably due first and foremost to Jewish hostility to the Samaritans. Geiger's interpretation and even bibliography is closely followed throughout. Rodwell's Quran passed into the public domain some time ago and has been frequently reprinted in popular editions through such imprints as Everyman's Library and by publishers such as Dover; I have been able to account for at least twenty-five impressions between 1861 and 2004.

Note also that "Talmudic" itself becomes a trope in modern commentary on the story: cf. Palmer's note to Q.7:148 (a Talmudic legend) and Bell (a Talmudic legend, citing Rodwell; cf. *Qur'ān, Translated*, 1.151, n. 1; cf. also *Commentary on the Qur'ān*, 1.250).

## 5. Modern (mis)translations of the Quranic Calf episode

Throughout the period we have just considered here, namely the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, translations of the Quran into Western languages proliferated.<sup>225</sup> Although initially this activity had been the exclusive province of European scholars, at a certain point, Muslims from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent who had received Western-style educations began to contribute to this endeavor, often for apologetic purposes. This trend began during the age of European colonial expansion and has lasted until the present day, with Muslims from both diasporic and native communities in Europe and the Americas now joining in as well.<sup>226</sup> In interpreting the Quran, Muslim translators sometimes take contemporary Western scholarship into consideration, even if only to refute it; at other times, they prefer to rely solely on classical commentaries from their own tradition. But even in the latter cases, in which engagement with Western scholarship is usually kept to a minimum, modern Muslim presentations of the Calf

---

<sup>225</sup> There is a substantial scholarly literature on the translation of the Quran into various Western languages. Except for more specialized treatments such as Bobzin's, the emphasis usually tends to be on more contemporary translations (i.e. from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century), with medieval and early modern precursors generally receiving only token mention. Several useful overviews are available for the Anglophone tradition in particular: see Zwemer, "Translations of the Koran" (an interesting survey of the state of affairs in 1914!); Pearson, "Bibliography of Translations of the Qur'an into European Languages"; Khan, "English Translations of the Holy Qur'an"; Kidwai, "Translating the Untranslatable"; and Mohammed, "Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an." Except for Zwemer, all of these surveys date from 1983 to 2005. As regards other Western languages, Hofmann, "German Translations of the Holy Qur'an," is useful, but needs to be approached with caution due to the author's clear bias (for example, the important early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Qur'an of Henning, a.k.a. Müller, is criticized because its footnotes are supposedly full of "Isrā'īliyyāt"). The first section of Bijlefeld's three-part "Some Recent Contributions to Qur'anic Studies" discusses translations; despite the limited time period covered by his discussion, several major contributions (including those of Blachère, Paret, and Watt) are not only examined here but subjected to illuminating comparisons; to my knowledge, Bijlefeld's is the only evaluation of modern translations to discuss works in *different* European languages together.

<sup>226</sup> As Robinson points out, there are over forty full translations of the Quran now available in English: six of them are by Christians (Ross, Sale, Rodwell, Palmer, Bell, and Arberry; note also the partial translations by Jeffery and Cragg), and one is by a Jew (Dawood), while the others reflect the diversity of expressions of modern Islamic identity in the Anglophone world, having been produced by interpreters from the Sunnī, Shī'ī, Sufī, and Aḥmadī communities in South Asia, the United Kingdom, and America.

narrative typically do not deviate radically from those of Jewish and Christian scholars of Europe and the Americas, for, as we have hopefully made clear by now, Western scholarship itself has historically relied, directly or indirectly, on the classical *tafsīr* tradition for its basic understanding of the Muslim scripture. As a result, we see an overwhelming degree of agreement among 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century translations by Muslims and non-Muslims alike regarding the meaning of the Quranic verses pertaining to the Calf episode; further, the basic contours of the narrative in the conception of Western scholars in particular usually agree with what Marracci and his immediate successors in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had already established in their analysis of the episode.

Thus, regarding the characteristic reference to the Calf in Q.7:148 and 20:88 as *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>*, modern renderings of this phrase tend to follow an interpretive line that leads directly back to Marracci (and ultimately Robert of Ketton as well), according to whom the people or *al-sāmīrī* made (or, in the case of the people, possibly “took as their god,” *ittakhadha*) a “vitulum *habentem* corpus: ipsi erat mugitus.”<sup>227</sup> This specific phrase appears largely verbatim in many of the later translations of the Quran into various other European languages as well, as “un veau corporel, mugissant,”<sup>228</sup> “ein Kalb von Leib, das brüllte,”<sup>229</sup> “a corporeal calf that lowed,”<sup>230</sup>

---

<sup>227</sup> Q.7:148 and 20:88/85 in Marracci’s rendering; cf. Robert’s version of Q.20:88, “taurum fudit, corporeum, emittentem mugitum.” In what follows, due to the large number of sources surveyed, I have typically omitted specific page number citations, unless a given translation presents special difficulty in locating passages (e.g. in Qurans in which *sūras* are given in the order of their putative revelation). If a translator’s rendering of each verse agrees, the specific chapter and verse citations will be given *only* if one or both deviate from the conventional enumeration established by the Cairo edition of the Quran. If no citation is given, the phrases are identical in Q.7:148 and 20:88. If only a partial translation is available, or else the renditions of the verses disagree, appropriate citations will be provided. Finally, in discussing translations here, I have deliberately omitted the renditions of the pertinent verses that appear in scholarly discussions such as those of Geiger, St. Clair Tisdall, Goldziher, et al. to which I have already referred.

<sup>228</sup> Kasimirski, Q.20:88/90; cf. “un veau en corps et mugissant” at Q.7:148/146. Compare du Ryer: “le corps d’un veau mugissant” at Q.20:88 and “le veau... mugissant” at Q.7:148. Savary has only “un veau mugissant” at Q.20:88/90, as noted above, and at Q.7:148/146 as well; Blachère, “un veau, masse qui poussait un mugissement” at Q.20:90/88 and Q.7:146/148 [*sic*; both verse numbers are given by Blachère]. Cf. also Boubakeur, who renders “un corps doué de la faculté de mugir” at Q.20:88 and “un corps capable de mugir” at Q.7:148, with a note to the latter giving the literal reading as well, “un corps qui avait un mugissement.”

or some other variation on this. Further, the image is often explained as deriving from Jewish legend, and sometimes actual midrashic passages are cited as corroboration, following the precedent set by Geiger, Fraenkel, Goldziher, Halévy, and Yahuda in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Like the basic interpretation of the phrase, the common assumption that the Quranic image must derive from a Jewish source ultimately goes back to Marracci and his predecessors as well. A particularly instructive example of this continuity may be seen in the annotations added by Wherry to the multi-volume edition of Sale's translation that appeared between 1882 and 1886. Wherry was a Christian missionary in the Indian subcontinent in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and his notes often corroborate the information Sale took from the classical Arabic commentaries (or rather plagiarized from Marracci!) through reference to later Persian and Urdu *tafsīrs* (which were themselves no doubt substantially derived from classical Arabic sources). Predictably, Wherry's approach to Quranic narrative presumes a fundamental distinction between biblical narrative (naturally taken as authoritative) and the deviations introduced by Muhammad and/or the Muslim commentators; further, he often explains these deviations through reference to supposed Jewish influences.<sup>231</sup>

---

<sup>229</sup> Rückert; cf. Grimme, "ein Kalb aus der Form, das brüllen konnte" (Q.20:88, 108-9), and Khoury, "ein Kalb... als Leib, der blökte."

<sup>230</sup> Rodwell, Q.20:88 only (99) and Palmer; cf. also Ross, "the Body of a bellowing Calf" (Q.20:88 in Jones, 4.255), following du Ryer; Sale, following Marracci; Mirzā Abū'l-Faḍl (Q.20:88 only; I have been unable to check Q.7:148); Sarwar (Q.7:148 only); Jeffery (Q.20:88 only, *The Koran: Selected Suras*, 89); and Khalifa.

<sup>231</sup> Thus, in telling the story of *al-sāmirī* and the dirt that caused the Calf to appear to come to life and moo, according to Wherry, Muslim commentators were "copying the Jewish traditions"; lamentably, "this garbling of Jewish history and tradition is represented here as coming from God by direct revelation" (note to Q.20:89, 3.127). Conversely, though his note to Q.7:148 states that the Calf's lowing "contradicts Bible history," here Wherry posits that this deviation was solely due to Muhammad's imagination. Notably, Wherry also cites details of the episode here that are not commonly observed, for example the green grass that sprang up wherever Gabriel walked (seemingly reflecting the aforementioned Khidr tradition), or, even more surprisingly, Satan's words within the Calf ("I am your preserver, wherefore worship me"); see his comments *ad loc.* Q.2:51 (1.307). These unusual details are presumably derived from Persian and Urdu *tafsīrs*, several of which are cited at the beginning of Wherry's work.

As is the case in the classical commentaries, the only substantial debate that emerges in modern commentaries in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is over the meaning of *jasad*, though this debate is hardly as significant here as it is in the classical *tafsīr* tradition. Sometimes the corporeality of the Calf is reported neutrally, as in the aforementioned Quran translations, and the sense of *jasad* as “body,” with all that it might imply, is simply taken for granted. At other times, implicitly or explicitly echoing some of the classical commentators, translators may indicate in various ways that this phrase specifically means that the Calf was *merely* corporeal, that is, that it lacked a soul, and that what life it appeared to possess was just an illusion. In such cases, translators opt for phrases like “a Calf, a mere body that lowed,” “an image with a hollow sound,” “a mere body with a hollow sound,” etc.<sup>232</sup> The use of such phrases, which emphasize that the Calf was only a physical form and that the mooing sound the Israelites heard was due solely to the effect of the sound echoing within its hollow body, seems to presume that the specific appearance of the unusual term *jasad* in the pertinent Quranic verses is intended to convey precisely this point. Translators who interpret *jasad* as meaning a *soulless* or *lifeless* body typically adopt this position for apologetic reasons: like their predecessors among the *mufasssirūn*, they seek to deny that the Quran contains any suggestion that the Calf might really have been alive.<sup>233</sup>

---

Quite naturally, Muslim exegetes are usually loathe to invoke the specter of Jewish influence; Daryabādī is quite unusual in this regard, in observing, like Rodwell, Palmer, and Bell, that the theme of the Calf’s mooing is Talmudic but not biblical (see n. 174 to Q.7:148).

<sup>232</sup> Arberry, Dawood, and Sarwar (Q.20:88 only) respectively. Cf. d’Herbelot’s “un veau qui n’ étoit qu’ un corps sans ame” (*Bibliothèque Orientale*, 648, seemingly reflecting al-Kāshifi’s glosses). See also Daryabādī (cf. n. 173 to Q.7:148, “of course lifeless,” and n. 382 to Q.20:88, “the thing was a body, something corporeal, complete with the limbs and members, though without life”); Khatib; Irving (“a (mere) body that mooed” at Q.7:148, though only “the shape of a body that mooed” at Q.20:88); Fakhry; and Abdel Haleem (a “mere shape” at Q.7:148, but just “an image of a calf which made a lowing sound” at Q.20:88).

<sup>233</sup> Note also Albayrak’s stridently rationalist—and tendentiously ideological—treatment: “Isrā’īliyyāt and Classical Exegetes’ Comments on the Calf with a Hollow Sound.”

Above all, this particular interpretive position seems to be typical of a certain rationalist or even “neo-Mu‘tazilite” approach adopted by many Sunnī Muslims of modernist leanings in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Further, these exegetes often share this attitude with contemporary sectarian interpreters from the Shī‘ī and Aḥmadī communities. At least in the case of the Imāmī Shī‘a, this hardly seems surprising given the close relationship between the Mu‘tazila and certain elements in the Imāmī religious leadership in the tradition’s formative period; although seminal thinkers of the early Imāmī tradition assumed an *anti*-rationalist posture, by the time of figures such as Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1032) and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), something resembling a rapprochement had occurred, and classical Imāmī authors ended up adapting a considerable number of established Mu‘tazilite doctrines for their own purposes.<sup>234</sup>

In a recent article, Robinson observes a certain conspicuous ideological bent in 20<sup>th</sup>-century English-language translations of the Quran by exponents of so-called “scientific rationalism,” Aḥmadīs, and Shī‘īs alike, among others; particularly common is a desire to break with the scriptural meanings associated with traditional Sunnī *tafsīr* in favor of more palatable exegetical alternatives, particularly where issues such as divine anthropomorphism are concerned.<sup>235</sup> It is

---

<sup>234</sup> It is perhaps too strong to say that the Imāmīs eventually became the intellectual heirs of the Mu‘tazila, though again, the legacy of Mu‘tazilite thought is felt very strongly in Imāmī works of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, inasmuch as certain aspects of Mu‘tazilite rationalism, adopted and adapted by figures like Mufīd, provided valuable tools to proponents of the nascent Twelver tradition to facilitate the transition to the new age that followed the occultation of the Twelfth Imām in 329/941. For a succinct account of this critical period, see Bayhom-Daou, *Shaykh Mufīd*, esp. 75-82.

<sup>235</sup> Robinson, “Sectarian and Ideological Bias in Muslim Translations of the Qur’ān.” Among the works discussed by Robinson, Shakir is acknowledged as openly Shī‘ite, Muhammad Ali and Muhammad Zafrulla Khan as Aḥmadī and crypto-Aḥmadī respectively. Further, the translations of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Asad, Ahmed Ali and Khatib, among others, are noted as being characterized by a moderate or undogmatic Mu‘tazilī-style rationalism, for example in showing a predilection for symbolic or figurative interpretations, or by an apologetic, “modernist” outlook. Robinson observes that both the 1989 American edition and the 1990 Saudi edition of Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation have been censored to remove many of the references to symbolic interpretations. I have consulted the 1997 revised edition of Abdullah Yusuf Ali here, in which all

perhaps unsurprising that many of the authors to whom Robinson calls attention also adopt a more “rationalist” approach to the Calf narrative, for a desire to minimize the occurrence of supernatural and miraculous events in nature often goes hand-in-hand with an aversion to anthropomorphism. Ironically, the label “neo-Mu‘tazilite” is doubly fitting in this context, since some of these exegetes not only display the basic rationalist attitude that characterized the original Mu‘tazila, who flourished from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century, but also specifically claim that the mooing sound that issued forth from the lifeless or soulless body of the Calf was due to its being engineered to do so by its duplicitous creator, *al-sāmirī*, in order to dupe the credulous Israelites.<sup>236</sup> As mentioned above, this is precisely the explanation of the key phrase *‘ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* that is commonly attributed to Mu‘tazilite exegetes in the classical sources. Among the modern commentators, this approach to the episode is perhaps epitomized by Jullundri, who seems to read quite a bit into the original *fa-akhrāja la-hum ‘ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu*

---

of the notes and textual readings pertaining to the Calf episode are largely or fully consistent with those in the older editions.

<sup>236</sup> For discussion of the consistently rationalist approach to the episode taken by the Aḥmadīs, see below. Predictably enough, the Shī‘ite translator Shakir has “a calf, a (mere) body” in both passages. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, whose quasi-rationalist leanings may be due to the influence of his father, an Ismā‘īlī, on his religious education (see Robinson, “Muslim Translations,” 261-2), translates the key phrase rather neutrally as “The image of a calf... it seemed to low”; however, see n. 1113 to Q.7:148 in his translation, which emphasizes that the Calf was a mere image without soul, as well as n. 1113 and 1114 that allege that the Calf was an image of the bull of Osiris and a fraud perpetrated by Egyptian magicians. Abdul Latif has “a corporeal frame of a calf” at Q.20:88, but “the image of a calf so contrived that it could seem to low” at Q.7:148; cf. his translation of Azad’s influential *Tarjumān al-Qur’ān*, e.g. 2.442-5 on the passage from Sūra 7. Azad’s notes regarding “Samari” and his knowledge of Egyptian image-making feature the same quasi-Mu‘tazilite explanation of the Calf as is found in Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation. The same is true of the versions of Muhammad Asad (“the effigy of a calf... which gave forth a lowing sound”) and the Nawawi Foundation (“a material form... which gave a lowing sound” at Q.7:148 and “a body that could low” at Q.20:88), both of which likewise explain Q.7:148 through reference to the Egyptian origins of the Calf in the cult of Apis, the bull of Osiris, and claim that it was a hollow shell fashioned to moo when the wind passed through it. Although Paret is presumably not ideologically driven to do so, he gives us the highly conditional “ein leibhaftiges Kalb... das (wie wenn es lebendig wäre) muhte” in both places; his corresponding remarks in his commentary to this passage (*Kommentar*, 334-6, and cf. 174) are vague regarding the Calf’s putative life, focusing more on the issue of the *athar al-rasūl*.

*khawār*<sup>237</sup>: “So he found out of that fine (wooden) decorations [*sic*], a worthless image of a calf for them, and an artificial sound of a cow was made to come out of it (like toys)...”<sup>237</sup>

We might consider those translators who render *jasad* specifically as “image,” “statue,” “bodily appearance” or the like to be a subset of the group we have just discussed, except that these choices are generally less obviously informed by ideological considerations. Further, such an interpretation may sometimes reflect (usually only implicitly) an understanding of the phrase *’ijl jasad* as having been inspired by the Exodus account, in which it is clearly an *image* of a calf that is fabricated. In these cases, *jasad* may be thought to communicate the idea that this is an image of a calf made as an object of idolatrous veneration. In other words, *jasad* here specifically connotes not a “mere body,” as it does for some exegetes, but rather a mere *idol*.<sup>238</sup>

But whether the term is understood as connoting simply a body that may or may not really be alive, a “mere” body that possesses only an illusion of life, or rather only a statue, the interpretation of *jasad* as basically denoting the Calf’s *physical form* is almost universal. The single exception to this trend is the interpretation of the term as meaning “yellow” or “golden,” which is certainly in keeping with the nature of the Calf as it is known from biblical tradition. This sense of the word is observed in the lexicons of both Freytag and Lane, by means of which it was communicated to a handful of European commentators. In their entries on the term, both Freytag and Lane refer first to the sense of *jasad* as “body,” but then proceed to the secondary

---

<sup>237</sup> Jullundri; cf. Q.7:148, “an image of a calf..., there came out of its body a bellow like sound.” Cf. his long note *ad loc.* Q.20:83-98 (716-8), where the Calf is again likened to a clever toy constructed to go “baa.” The fact that the ornaments were wooden is underscored here as well, specifically to explain how Moses could have burned the Calf and strewn its ashes into the sea (cf. Q.20:97). Note also Jullundri’s idea that “Samari” (also “Somari”) inspired the Hindu religion, except that his followers reversed the penalty imposed upon him by Moses (i.e. to say “do not touch!”) “by making themselves holy and they made other people untouchable” (718; see also the long note to Q.2:67-71 on 23-6). Overall, Jullundri’s notes bristle with provocative and polemical remarks aimed at Hindus.

<sup>238</sup> E.g.: Laïmèche (“une statue de veau râlante”); Bell (“a bodily appearance with a low,” *Qur’ān, Translated*); Ahmed Ali; Cragg (“a shape realistic enough to low!” at Q.7:148; “a calf’s effigy” at Q.20:88); Turner-Behbūdī (a statue); and Starkovsky.



meaning, and specifically relate it to the Quranic Calf. Thus, in Freytag, we find the following definition: “Saffron, or something dyed a similar color to this; [the color of] dried blood; wherefore one might explain *'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup>* in Q.7:147 [sic] as meaning a calf [made] of reddish-yellow gold, the Calf of the Israelites.”<sup>239</sup> Freytag’s *Lexicon Arabico-Latinum* (1833-1837) was a widely influential Arabic dictionary largely derived from classical and medieval lexicons; Lane’s *Arabic-English Lexicon* (1863-1893), still used as a standard reference today, was constructed on similar principles, and Lane gives much the same explanation for the “yellow” definition of *jasad* that Freytag does. However, in contrast to Freytag, Lane explicitly cites his sources for the “saffron” interpretation and, most importantly, even mentions that the interpretation of the Quranic *'ijl jasad* specifically as “a red golden calf” (i.e., a calf made of reddish-tinged gold) is to be found in the *Ṣiḥāḥ* of al-Jawharī (d. c. 400/1009-10).<sup>240</sup>

If we turn to the *Tāj al-‘arūs* of al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1791), an Arabic lexicon that served as a major source for both Freytag and Lane, we find analogous definitions for *jasad*. Al-Zabīdī first emphasizes the primary meaning of “body,” and then gives the secondary meanings “saffron” and “dried blood.” Specific reference is made to the occurrence of the term in the Quranic Calf narrative and to the *'ijl banī isrā’īl* here, but *only* in connection with the definition of the term as the body of a living, or at least seemingly living, being.<sup>241</sup> Moving further back, in the aforementioned *Ṣiḥāḥ* of al-Jawharī cited by Lane, sure enough, we once again find the primary definition of “body” (*badan* or *jism*) followed by “yellow” (“saffron, or a similar pigment”), and then “blood.” But further on, toward the end of Jawharī’s entry, as Lane attests, one finds the

<sup>239</sup> “Crocus et res tinctoria huic similes; Sanguis siccus; *quidam in Corano Sur. 7, 147 exponunt عجلا جسدا Vitulum ex auro fulvum, vitulum Israelitarum.*” *Lexicon Arabico-Latinum*, s.v. “جسد”.

<sup>240</sup> Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. “جسد”.

<sup>241</sup> *Tāj al-‘arūs*, s.v. “ج س د” (7.499-502). For an overview of the Arabic lexicographic tradition that helpfully clarifies many of the complex issues surrounding the historical development of the genre, see *EP*, s.v. “Ḳāmūs [1. Arabic Lexicography]” (Haywood). Because of the difficulties one frequently encounters in locating entries in the classical and medieval dictionaries, I have consistently provided specific citations for all of the works discussed here.

critical statement referring to the Quranic Calf narrative: “Some say that the Quranic phrase *he brought forth for them a calf, a body* [e.g., Q.20:88, *akhraja la-hum ‘ijf<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*] means *tawny-red, [made] from gold.*”<sup>242</sup>

However, when we check two other major lexicons produced by contemporaries of al-Jawharī in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, namely the *Maqāyis al-lughā* of Aḥmad b. Fāris Ibn Zakariyya (d. 395/1004) and the *Tahdhīb al-lughā* of Abū Manṣūr al-Azharī (d. 370/980), we find that the three main definitions for *jasad*, “body,” “blood,” and “saffron,” are again registered, but *neither* of al-Jawharī’s contemporaries specifically connects the last definition with the Quranic Calf. In the case of Ibn Zakariyya, this is perhaps unsurprising, inasmuch as his work is extremely laconic compared to most classical dictionaries; he does not mention the Calf at all, nor any other Quranic attestation of the term *jasad*, in the few lines he devotes to the term.<sup>243</sup> But this omission is striking in the case of al-Azharī, since the specific focus of his work is the correlation of various attested meanings of words with pertinent Quranic prooftexts. He in fact opens his entry on *jasad* with a quotation of Q.20:88, *He brought forth for them a calf, a body that lows...*, and immediately proceeds to assert “body” as the primary sense of the term. He develops this idea for several passages, and only acknowledges the secondary senses of “blood,” “dried blood,” and “saffron” towards the end of the entry. But again, unlike al-Jawharī, he never asserts a direct connection between the Quranic Calf and “saffron” or “yellow” or “gold” as a viable interpretation for *jasad* as attested in the key phrase used in Q.7:148 and 20:88 to describe the Calf.<sup>244</sup>

<sup>242</sup> *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, s.v. “جسد” (2.456-7).

<sup>243</sup> *Maqāyis al-lughā*, s.v. “جسد” (1.457).

<sup>244</sup> In other words, when al-Azharī comes to the meaning of *jasad* as possibly signifying *za’farān*, he observes that one can extrapolate from this to use *jasad* (or, it seems, the related *jisād*) to refer to a garment or some other thing dyed a reddish or yellow tint, but the connection with the color of the Golden Calf is not asserted in this connection, even though one would think such would be quite apposite to the context. See *Tahdhīb al-lughā*, s.v. “جسد” (10.566-9). Due to the author’s adherence to the “Khalīl system,” the *Tahdhīb* is excruciatingly difficult to use; see Haywood,

Pushing even further back into the classical lexicographic tradition, consulting two of the oldest extant works in this genre confirms that al-Jawharī’s identification of the “saffron” meaning of *jasad* with the Quranic Calf—that is, his recognition that the Quranic *’ijl jasad* is *literally* a “golden calf”—is in fact entirely anomalous in the early and medieval lexicographic tradition. In the *Jamharat al-lughā* of Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933), a late 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>–early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century work, we see another terse treatment analogous to that of Ibn Zakariyya; here, in the few short lines devoted to defining the term, it seems that the definition of “saffron” is actually given somewhat more attention than that of either “body” or “blood,” in particular to show, for instance, that a garment called *mujsad* is thus called because of its treatment with a yellow pigment. As in Ibn Zakariyya’s work, however, no mention is made of a Quranic context for *any* sense of the term.<sup>245</sup> Further, in the *Kitāb al-’ayn* of al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. c. 170/786), the work that many have seen as the foundation of the Arabic lexicographic tradition, we can see how the disparate strands of “body,” “blood,” and “saffron” first coalesced as definitions of *jasad*, for this is how Khalīl organizes his entry, and, lexicography being one of the most conservative branches of traditional Islamic learning, we can readily surmise that subsequent elaborations have essentially followed Khalīl’s lead here:

*Jasad*: i.e., the *jasad* [body] of a human being, though it is said that a *jasad* properly belongs to a created being *other* than the human; that is, any creature that does not eat or drink but possesses reason, such as the angels or the jinn—that is *jasad*. Therefore, it is correct to say that the Calf of the Israelites was a *jasad*, for it neither eats nor drinks.

---

*Arabic Lexicography*, 53-6. Haywood notes that al-Azharī explicitly intended his work to serve as an aid to Quranic study; this is relatively unusual in classical lexicography, despite the fact that the analysis of Quranic lexica, grammar, and syntax was one of the fundamental underpinnings of classical Arabic philology virtually from the beginning of the tradition.

<sup>245</sup> *Jamharat al-lughā*, s.v. “الجسد” (4.65b bottom-66a top). Cf. Haywood, *Arabic Lexicography*, 44-53.

Khalīl then goes on to refer to another Quranic verse, Q.21:8, which seems to corroborate the above point, and here we can see the underlying logic that led to the specific conception of *jasad* as a kind of physical body that does not require sustenance: *We did not make them of a kind of body so that they do not eat food*, or, more literally, “we did not make them *jasad*, that is, not eating food.” The obvious problem here was to discern what this use of *jasad* could possibly have in common with that in the Calf narrative, and the two were perceived to be related because the Calf of the Israelites obviously lowed, but did not eat or drink. Khalīl then goes on to briefly acknowledge the meaning of *jasad* as “blood,” *jisād* (and *not*, apparently, *jasad*) as “saffron,” and *mujsad* as “yellow-colored.”<sup>246</sup> Once again, the explanation of *jasad* in reference to the Calf as meaning “yellow” or “golden” simply does not emerge.

Therefore, given its general absence in lexicographic works of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, it seems quite reasonable to see the direct connection between the definition of *jasad* as yellow and the Quranic Golden Calf as an innovation of al-Jawharī’s time, if not of the man himself, although again it is odd that neither Ibn Zakariyya nor al-Azharī—contemporaries of al-Jawharī—acknowledge this connection. The lack of a substantial basis in the older lexicographic tradition for this golden Golden Calf—although the sense of “saffron” for *jasad* is certainly well-attested enough—might lead us to speculate that this connection specifically arose as a gloss on the Quranic Calf narrative at about this time.

In any event, despite the fact that Freytag and Lane made this sense of the word available to Western scholars and translators, strangely enough, relatively few seem to have availed themselves of this datum. (It is worth repeating here that the appearance of this datum in the lexicons of both Freytag and Lane is specifically due to their mutual reliance on the *Ṣiḥāh* of

---

<sup>246</sup> *Kitāb al-ʿayn*, s.v. “جسد” (6.47-8). Khalīl is commonly perceived as the father of Arabic philology, not only producing the first Arabic dictionary per se but also largely pioneering the study of grammar (his pupils included both Sībawayh and al-Aṣmaʿī) and poetic meter as well. As Sellheim notes (*EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad”), the *Kitāb al-ʿayn* was in fact most likely redacted by Khalīl’s student al-Layth b. al-Muzaffar (d. 131/748) and seems to have been continuously edited up through the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. Haywood, *Arabic Lexicography*, 20-40.

Jawharī.) Rodwell renders Q.7:148 as “a calf... ruddy like gold, and lowing,” and, though he acknowledges the preference of Sale and others in rendering *jasad* as “corporeal” (and actually does so himself in the case of the *other* occurrence of the phrase at Q.20:88!), he claims that this is unsatisfactory, and adopts the “yellow” reading instead, on the authority of Freytag.<sup>247</sup> Likewise, Pickthall translates both Q.7:148 and 20:88 as “a calf... of saffron hue, which gave a lowing sound,” and in his note to the first passage, observes that in Arabic *jasad* means body, but *only* a body of flesh and blood, so “saffron-coloured” better fits the context here; he does not specify his source for this interpretation, but he could have gotten it either from the Arabic lexicons or from Freytag or Lane.<sup>248</sup> Additionally, a footnote in the 1920 edition of the Quran translation of the Aḥmadī Muhammad Ali observes that *jasad* could mean “red or intensely yellow” as well as “body,” which he most likely has taken from al-Jawharī (or perhaps Rodwell, though probably not Freytag).<sup>249</sup> Finally, Nikayin translates *‘ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* as “A ruddy body with a lowing rough” at Q.7:148, though he has “the body of a calf that moored” at 20:88. Nikayin has quite evidently plagiarized this directly from Rodwell, since only the latter gives *alternate* interpretations for each of the pertinent verses in his translation.<sup>250</sup>

---

<sup>247</sup> Rodwell, 306, n. 2.

<sup>248</sup> Stratton describes Pickthall as something of a linguistic prodigy, and thus he could easily have availed himself of any of these sources (“Tory Muslim,” 81). His observations on the issue of the specific nature of the Calf’s body appear to invert a datum commonly found in the lexicons, namely that *jasad* may connote a rational body that does *not* eat or drink, like that of a jinn or an angel; this is specifically mentioned by Lane, seemingly following the information found in the *Tāj*. Pickthall’s reference here could represent a misunderstanding of the issue at hand; in the introduction to his edition of Horovitz’ *The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and their Authors*, Conrad suggests that the many faults of the previous publication of Horovitz’ work in the Hyderabad journal *Islamic Culture*, edited by Pickthall, in 1927-8 were due to Pickthall’s shortcomings as an editor and not as a translator, inasmuch as he was almost completely ignorant of early Islamic history and scholarly tradition (*Earliest Biographies*, ed. Conrad, xxxiii-iv).

<sup>249</sup> Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur-ān* (1920), n. 944 to Q.7:148.

<sup>250</sup> Nikayin explicitly claims to have relied mostly upon Muhammad Ali, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, and Mawdūdī in his translation, and does not mention Rodwell; hypothetically, he *could* have gotten the idea to render the key phrase as “ruddy like gold” from Maulana Muhammad Ali, but his choice of the “saffron” interpretation for Q.7:148 and then the “body” interpretation for Q.20:88,

Overall, then, very few translators seem to have acknowledged the possibility that *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* could possibly mean “a calf of *gold* that lowed.” This is highly peculiar, especially given the inviting (and obvious) parallel to the biblical account of Exodus this would present. If one had to conjecture as to why this interpretation received such a limited hearing among Western scholars and translators—it is not mentioned in *any* of the earlier commentaries or extended treatments of the Calf episode we have discussed so far—one solution immediately presents itself. For one reason or another, the interpretation of *jasad* as “saffron,” “yellow,” “ruddy gold,” and so forth simply does not appear *anywhere* in the discussions of the relevant verses in the classical *tafsīr*. Admittedly, many of the commentaries that have historically been available to and widely used by European scholars of the Quran such as those of Bayḍāwī, Ibn Kathīr, and Suyūṭī are technically *post*-classical. But despite the fact that the interpretation of *'ijl jasad* as indicating “a calf ruddy like gold” appears in the lexicographical tradition well before the time of these latter authors—Jawharī lived almost three hundred years before Bayḍāwī, the earliest of the aforementioned exegetes—none of *them* seems to mention it either. This is most likely because, as we have seen, the definition of *jasad* as “yellow” or “red-gold” *only* seems to have emerged, or at least become prominent, in Jawharī’s time, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and arguably, by this time, a stable range of exegetical possibilities for the Quranic *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* had already been established in the *tafsīr*, in which the interpretation of the Golden Calf as being truly golden never became popular or widespread. (In contrast, as we shall see, the debates that emerged in subsequent centuries concerning the physical nature of the Calf were typically based upon interpretations that had emerged early on, been *suppressed* in classical sources, and then subsequently reappeared in the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> centuries.) The general lack of attestation of this sense of *jasad* in *tafsīr* works specifically meant that most Western commentators and

---

matching Rodwell precisely, is highly suspicious. Note also that in his commentary on Sale’s translation, *ad loc.* Q.7:148, Wherry mentions the “yellow” interpretation put forward by Rodwell, but also observes that the Persian and Urdu commentaries in fact validate Sale’s interpretation of *'ijl jasad* (i.e. “a corporeal calf”).

translators were likely to ignore it, even though Freytag and Lane had made it perfectly accessible to them.<sup>251</sup>

\*\*\*

Regarding *al-sāmirī*, in modern translations and commentaries, the term is almost always either directly *rendered* as “Samaritan,” or else is given as a proper name in the text—“Samerī” or the like—while being glossed in the footnote as *meaning* “Samaritan,” with any number of the various theories supporting this reading provided as explanation.<sup>252</sup> It is *extremely* rare for any modern translator to deviate from this position. Occasionally a note of agnosticism may be struck,<sup>253</sup> or, in a few isolated cases, the Samaritan identification is denied or modified by a Muslim translator or commentator specifically because of the issue of chronology—the premise being that the Quran could not contain such an anachronism. (This may be considered to be a direct response to certain Western scholars’ emphasis on Muhammad’s “confusion” in projecting

---

<sup>251</sup> One is struck by the fact that all of the aforementioned Quran translators who *do* recognize the sense of *jasad* as “saffron,” “yellow” etc., even if only to reject it—namely Rodwell, Wherry, Pickthall, Maulana Muhammad Ali, and Nikayin—are Anglophone. It would thus seem reasonable to conclude that their adoption of this reading is above all due to the influence of Lane.

<sup>252</sup> More or less unambiguous identifications of *al-sāmirī* as “the Samaritan” appear in Marracci, Blachère, Arberry, Jeffery (*The Koran: Selected Suras*, 88-9), Watt, Khatib, Irving, Paret, Khalifa (“Samaritan”), Fakhry, and Starkovsky. Some translate the term this way or acknowledge it in notes but have explicit reservations about it, usually based on the seeming anachronism; at the very least, the apparent mistake of Muhammad and/or the Muslim commentators may be pointed out. Cf. Sale (with brief allusion to Selden’s view), Kasimirski, and Palmer. (Cf. also Fischer’s note to Q.20:85 in Rückert (524), noted above; he states that it is unclear why a Samaritan is construed as the arch-idolater here, and seems ignorant of the relevant literature.) Starkovsky takes the opposite view from Christian commentators in accepting the Quran’s apparent deviation from the biblical account and viewing it favorably: he observes that *al-sāmirī* is not biblical, but approves of his inclusion in the Quranic account since this gesture exonerates Aaron from allegations of his participation in the making of the Calf (“a Prophet could not be such a miscreant,” note to Q.20:85); in other words, the theological relief thus provided makes the issue of anachronism irrelevant.

<sup>253</sup> Cf. Dawood (“it is not clear who the Sāmirī is,” note to Q.20:85) and Abdel Haleem (citing al-Rāzī’s various “unsubstantiated identities” for *al-sāmirī*, note c to Q.20:85).

a Samaritan back into the Mosaic era.) Like the interpretation of the Calf as a “mere” body that possessed only the illusion of life, there is a certain rationalist disposition that seems to inform this rejection of the traditional exegesis; quite unsurprisingly, we generally find it in many of the same translations as the neo- or quasi-Muʿtazilite interpretation of the Calf as a mechanical device rather than as actually animate. Such interpretations commonly allude to historical (or quasi-historical) and philological arguments that support the explanation of *al-sāmirī* as an Egyptian; although this is occasionally found in the classical commentaries as well, various modern interpreters who adopt this reading attempt to argue for this hypothesis in a more or less scholarly fashion.<sup>254</sup>

Even more strikingly, there is not very much variation in the exegesis of the crucial verse Q.20:96 in which *al-sāmirī* gives his apology for his actions either. The most common variation concerns the interpretation of the verb *baṣura*, which is sometimes taken as indicating *seeing*, at other times *understanding*; as already noted, these two alternatives are fully endorsed by the classical commentators. The real crux of the verse, however, is the phrase *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl*, for it is the common interpretation of this phrase as an allusion to the passage of

---

<sup>254</sup> Cf., e.g., Abdullah Yusuf Ali: the name is possibly based in “shemer,” the Egyptian term for “foreigner”; this person was the real maker of the Calf, and then *subsequently* gave his name to Samaria, as demonstrated in 1 Kgs. 16:24 (n. 2605 to Q.20:85). (Cf. also n. 2608 to Q.20:87, where he gives alternate etymologies, Hebrew *shōmēr* or Arabic *samīr*, and n. 2624 to Q.20:97.) Mawdūdī says much the same thing, adding only the unique flourish that *sāmirī* and “Samaritan” alike could ultimately be derived from *Sumerian*; this would explain the presence of such a person in Egypt among the Israelites, and contradicts the allegations of Orientalists and missionaries that the story is evidence of the historical ignorance of Muhammad, the Quran’s putative “author” (*Towards Understanding the Qurʾān*, 5.212-214, n. 63 to Q.20:85). Daryabādī reiterates Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s position regarding *al-sāmirī*’s Egyptian origin and adduces other historicizing remarks as well (viz., the Calf’s origins in Canaanite cultus, its possible identity with an ancient moon god, etc.; see n. 381 to Q.20:85 and n. 400 to Q.20:96). Similar comments are made by Asad, who notes the traditional interpretation of “Sāmira” as the name of an Israelite clan, *al-sāmirī*’s possible identity as an Egyptian, and the name’s possible derivation from *shemer* (n. 70 to Q.20:85); *ibid.* for Khoury (note to Q.20:85), the Nawawi Foundation translation (note to Q.20:84), and Nikayin (who gives virtually the same explanation as Abdullah Yusuf Ali but adds that the translation as “Samaritan” is just plain wrong, note to Q.20:85). Again, the salient point in all of these cases is that an ostensibly scholarly interpretation resting on what appears to be objective historical evidence is invoked to vindicate the plausibility and accuracy of the Quranic account, and sometimes the claims of the classical commentators as well.



the archangel Gabriel that indicates how profoundly modern exegesis of the Quran by Muslims and non-Muslims alike has been shaped by the classical *tafsīr* tradition.

Sometimes, translators simply render the line more or less literally—e.g. Arberry’s “a handful of dust from the messenger’s track”—and seem to ignore the classic Muslim reading of the narrative.<sup>255</sup> Other times, a literal translation is supplemented with reference to the Gabriel episode in a note.<sup>256</sup> But much more often, translators unabashedly interpolate clarifying glosses into the verse, sometimes indicating those interpolations by placing them in italics and/or parentheses—e.g. Marracci’s “pugillum ex *pulvere* vestigii *ungulae equi* Legati (*id est Gabrielis*)” and Sale’s “handful of *dust* from the footsteps of the messenger of *God*”<sup>257</sup>—but usually not. As becomes obvious when we compare Marracci and Sale, the degree of indulgence in such interpolation on the part of the translator can vary widely. Most often the “handful from the track” (*qabḍa min athar al-rasūl*) is presumed, seemingly quite reasonably, to be a handful of dirt, and the phrase might thus be rendered “une poignée de terre des vestiges,” or the like, as with Arberry’s spare translation cited above;<sup>258</sup> or else the *rasūl* is quite logically inferred to be the messenger of *God*; and sometimes both of these inferences may be quite casually asserted.<sup>259</sup>

---

<sup>255</sup> Note that even here in Arberry’s austere rendition, a gloss has been inserted, since the Arabic of Q.20:88 says nothing about dirt or dust. Literal translation of the phrase without any explanatory note is found in Rückert (“eine Handvoll... von der Spur des Boten,” but cf. Fischer’s comment regarding Moses appended here); Grimme (109); Dawood; Jeffery (Q.20:88 only, *The Koran: Selected Suras*, 89); Ahmed Ali; Irving; and Cragg (148).

<sup>256</sup> Literal translation with note about Gabriel, usually without any perception of a distinction between the Quranic context and later interpretation: Palmer; Pickthall; Khalifa (translates Q.20:96 literally but note about Gabriel provided at Q.20:88).

<sup>257</sup> Cf. Rodwell (almost identical to Sale’s reading, with explanatory note: “From the track of Gabriel’s horse, or of Gabriel himself,” 100, n. 1) and Boubakeur (“une poignée [de la terre foulée par la monture] de l’envoyé”) with explanatory note regarding the Gabriel story, but cited specifically on the authority of Ṭabarī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, without any comment regarding the story’s veracity (this is commensurate with the translation’s declared status as a “commentaire encyclopédique” that represents various schools of Muslim interpretation but generally forgoes any normative claims or judgments).

<sup>258</sup> Du Ryer (355); cf. Ross; Abdullah Yusuf Ali (with explanatory note re: Gabriel, but notice also the acknowledgement of dissenting opinion in favor of *Moses* as the *rasūl*, see n. 2621 to

Occasionally, as with the identification of *al-sāmirī*, a position of agnosticism may be assumed regarding the identity of the *rasūl* in question, but this is rare.<sup>260</sup> Much more often, the line is rendered more expansively, and a translator may feel free to multiply terms in the phrase in order to make it very clear that the *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* means the track left by Gabriel or even by his angelic steed: thus Savary’s “J’ai pris de la poussière sous les pas du coursier de l’envoyé céleste,” or, as an extreme case, the translation of Q.20:97 in the translation of Turner and Behbūdī:

The *Samiri* replied: “I could see something they could not: I could see a celestial messenger, bringing life wherever he trod; I took up a handful of earth from his footprints and hid it, for therein lay the elixir of life. I was wondering how I could use it when, encouraged by the tribal chiefs, I hit upon the idea of the calf. And so I fashioned a statue and placed the elixir of life inside, according to the dictates of my own soul.”<sup>261</sup>

This is quite clearly a remarkable amount of detail to get out of the verse, considering that others have rendered it simply as “I beheld what they beheld not... and I seized a handful of dust from the messenger’s track, and cast it into the thing. So my soul prompted me” (Arberry) or the like! Then again, it must be admitted that in its paraphrastic style, the version of Turner and Behbudi is strangely reminiscent of the translation of Robert of Ketton due to the liberal way in which the

---

Q.20:96); Laïmèche (“une poignée de sable”); Abdul Latif; Paret (*Übersetzung*, “eine Handvoll (Erde) von der Spur des Gesandten,” but cf. *Kommentar*, 334-6); Khatib (with long note about Gabriel emphasizing that *al-sāmirī* must have lied about seeing him, n. 22 to Q.20:96); Khoury (with long note about the Gabriel story, Yahuda’s midrash, and reference to the dissenting opinion favoring Moses); Fakhry (with short note on Gabriel); Nawawi Foundation (with short, obscure note about Gabriel and *al-sāmirī*’s lies); Nikayin (ibid. on Gabriel and *al-sāmirī*’s lies).

<sup>259</sup> Cf. Kasimirski (with explanatory note about Gabriel); Daryabādī (“a handful of *dust* from the footstep of the angel,” and see note about Gabriel and *al-sāmirī* as the original Untouchable, n. 406 to Q.20:97); Shakir (with “Jibree!” inserted parenthetically in the verse).

<sup>260</sup> E.g. Bell (*Qur’ān, Translated*, 1.299, n. 3, and also *Commentary*, 1.531, where the traditional interpretation is acknowledged as “possible if the passage be Medinan”—and thus influenced by Jewish lore?—“but not very probable”).

<sup>261</sup> *The Quran: A New Interpretation*, ad loc. Q.20:87; note the possible allusion to the Khidr legend in “Samiri’s” comment about the “elixir of life.”

literal words of the Quranic verse are treated; it is hardly surprising that this version has attracted substantial criticism on account of this. There is a certain irony here, for, as we have seen, Robert of Ketton was particularly influenced by classical *tafsīr* in his translation, and the version of Turner and Behbudi is in fact a deliberate combination of translation and traditional glosses.

Overall, the vast majority of modern exegetes interpret the *athar al-rasūl* as the handful of dirt endowed with magical potency by being tread upon by Gabriel or his steed. In this connection, as we mentioned before, it is quite surprising that the majority of scholars and translators have completely overlooked what might be considered to be a substantial piece of corroborating evidence for this view, namely the aforementioned attestation of a variant reading for Q.20:88 as *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar faras al-rasūl* in the *qirā'āt* literature. To our knowledge, the only citations of this variant in connection with the episode appear in Nöldeke and Khoury; as part of the Ibn Mas'ūd tradition, Jeffery has this alternative reading listed in his *Materials for the History of the Text of the Quran*, but he does not acknowledge it in his various discussions of the passage in question or in his Quran translation proper. It is also worth noting that even on those rare occasions when scholars are skeptical about the “midrashic” conception of the verse that dominates in the *tafsīr* tradition and Western scholarship alike, they are at a loss to provide a plausible alternative reading, and thus simply render Q.20:88 as literally as possible.<sup>262</sup>

However, it must be noted that one group of Quran translators proposes a radically different exegesis of the episode and deviates strongly from the traditional interpretation of these verses; these are the various translators associated with the Aḥmadī movement.<sup>263</sup> As is the case with many other modern interpreters, the Aḥmadīs subscribe to the “Mu'tazilite” view that the Calf was not really brought to life or even animated magically, but rather was a mere mechanical

---

<sup>262</sup> E.g. Kasimirski and Bell.

<sup>263</sup> There is a titanic amount of English-language literature available on the Aḥmadī movement and its different sects; because of the numerous controversies surrounding the Aḥmadī communities, most of this literature is tendentious and polemical (or apologetic). An unbiased presentation of the history of the movement up through the 1980s can be found in the first section of Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous*.

device employed by *al-sāmirī* to dupe the Israelites. However, these exegetes also propose an interpretation of the “handful of the track of the messenger” that is sharply at odds with that of most mainstream Sunnī and Shīʿī commentators and translators; further, this nonconformity extends to the interpretation of the identity of the “messenger” in question, though *not* to that of *al-sāmirī* himself. Although some of these elements may be found among a few exceptional non-Aḥmadī interpreters, this alternative exegesis is most consistently advanced by the Aḥmadīs, and so we will briefly focus on their perspective in particular here.<sup>264</sup>

After the death of its founder, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmed, the Aḥmadī movement broke into two factions, one based in Lahore, the other in Qadian in the Punjab (renamed Rabwah by the faction there, and recently renamed again to Chenab Nagar, against the wishes of the Aḥmadī community). The leader of the Lāhōrī group, Maulana (or Mawlānā) Muhammad Ali (d. 1951), produced a translation of the Quran in 1916 that has been considered authoritative by this branch of the Aḥmadīs ever since. The translation has been reprinted many times; Khan claims that at least twelve editions of the work were published between 1917 and 1973, the last version (the 7<sup>th</sup> revised edition) being published in 1991. Because both the translation itself and its extensive notes have been subject to repeated revision, it is somewhat difficult to track the various changes made in the authoritative Lāhōrī Aḥmadī Quran over time, but despite this, it is quite evident that an overall nonconformist reading of the Calf episode (and many others as well) has been maintained by the exegetes of this branch of the movement.<sup>265</sup>

---

<sup>264</sup> On the South Asian milieu that produced both the Aḥmadī movement and their militantly Sunnī opponents associated with such movements as the Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jamaat and the Ahl-e Hadis, see Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India*. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, likewise has much to offer of relevance to the general context. As we shall see, many of the basic hermeneutic concerns and predilections of the Aḥmadī exegetes and translators, particularly their conspicuously apologetic rationalism, are in fact held in common with more mainstream South Asian Muslim authors.

<sup>265</sup> Khan, “English Translations of the Holy Qur’an,” presents a very concise and helpful treatment of the exceedingly complex publication history of the Qurans produced by both major Aḥmadī sects, though the author proceeds from the biased assumption that Aḥmadīs are not true Muslims. Robinson, “Sectarian and Ideological Bias,” reflects the same outlook. From a more

As already noted, Muhammad Ali shares the view of the Calf itself that is commonly found among 20<sup>th</sup>-century interpreters of a rationalist bent; his is “a calf... a (mere) body, which had a hollow sound.” Further, like many of his contemporaries, he explains the Calf as a mechanical construct built to low with the wind and its cult as a reminiscence of the worship of Apis, the bull of Osiris, with which the Israelites were acquainted from their sojourn in Egypt.<sup>266</sup> Finally, he adopts a somewhat agnostic position regarding the identity of *al-sāmīrī*: he points out that it does not matter whether this person was really the ancestor of the Samaritans or not; rather, the salient point is that the testimony of the Quran exonerates Aaron from the crime of making the Calf, and tradition holds that *al-sāmīrī* was most likely an Egyptian.<sup>267</sup> The most radical aspect of Muhammad Ali’s interpretation is his understanding of Q.20:96, where he deviates quite strongly in his understanding of the key phrase *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl*: “I saw what they did not see, so I followed only partly the way of the apostle, then I cast it away: thus did my soul embellish (it) to me” (italics added).

Clearly, the idea is that *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup>* is not understood as an actual physical action, but rather is interpreted figuratively, as “taking a little bit” in the sense of preferring one thing over

---

balanced perspective, Ichwan, “Differing Responses to an Ahmadi Translation and Exegesis,” specifically compares the contexts of reception of Muhammad Ali’s translation in Egypt and Indonesia.

<sup>266</sup> *The Holy Qur-ān* (1920); see n. 84 to Q.2:51, n. 944 to Q.7:148 (where the interpretation of “red or intensely yellow” as well as “body” is given), and n. 1597 to Q.20:88 (citing the Ibn ‘Abbās tradition on the wind passing through the Calf’s body). These notes all appear in practically identical form in the later editions of 1951 and 1991 which I examined. The key phrase describing the Calf is the same in the 1951 edition, but slightly changed in the 1991 edition, which has “a (lifeless) body... having a lowing sound” at Q.7:148 but still “a body, which had a hollow sound” at Q.20:88.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 1595 to Q.20:85, n. 947 to Q.7:151 and n. 1599 to Q.20:90 (all virtually the same in the later editions). See also the brief treatment of Aaron in Muhammad Ali’s *History of the Prophets* (42-3), first published in 1946; I have consulted the 1996 edition. Here, the Quran’s departure from the biblical account is noted; while the latter casts blame for the Calf on Aaron, the Quran clears him of these charges, as can be seen from his warning to the Israelites not to make the Calf (Q.20:90). Cf. also the preface to the work, in which a general principle regarding the comparison of Quranic narratives on the prophets with their Jewish and Christian analogues is given: “It will be found that wherever previous record has cast a slur on the character of a prophet, the Holy Qur’ān has invariably vindicated it” (iv).

another, or pursuing a given endeavor for only a short period of time. Further, the *athar al-rasūl* is interpreted not as the apocryphal “handful of dirt from the track of the messenger,” with *rasūl* glossed as Gabriel, but rather as the example, path, or way of the prophet Moses (presumably analogous to the *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad). This is explained in a note which Muhammad Ali prefaces with an explicit condemnation of the traditional, and in his view utterly tendentious, exegesis: “The stories built upon the simple words *قبضت قبضة من اثر الرسول* do not deserve to be noticed... That the apostle is Gabriel, that he rode on a horse, that by *اثر الرسول* (lit. *the footprints of the apostle*) is meant *footprints of the horse*, are conjectures pure and simple, to which the Qur-án does not lend the least support.”<sup>268</sup> The corresponding footnote in the 1951 edition is even more strident, for it labels the interpretation of the key phrase as “the footprints of the horse of Gabriel” an innovation, an extremely serious charge, and one that is no doubt meant to counter the strident condemnation of the Aḥmadī community by Sunnīs and Shī’īs alike as innovators themselves. The corresponding note in the 1991 edition is relatively eirenic by comparison, in that the traditional interpretation is now simply called “baseless”; the rest of the text of the explanatory note is the same as in the 1917 and 1951 editions. Strikingly, however, in the 1991 edition the translation of the verse has been made somewhat less “deviant” in its actual wording: “I perceived what they perceived not, so *I took a handful from the footprints of the messenger* then I cast it away...” (italics added).

The Qadiyanī branch of the Aḥmadīs has its own “authorized” version of the Quran. Work began on the Qadianī Quran early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with only a short part of the translation being published in 1915; the entire work was not published until mid-century, appearing in three parts between 1947 and 1963 “under the auspices” of Mirzā Bashiruddin, the second leader of the Qadian Aḥmadīs. The original 1915 work was apparently the product of a committee of translators, while two of their number went on to collaborate on the bulk of the major translation,

---

<sup>268</sup> *Holy Qur-án* (1920), n. 1600 to Q.20:96.

the text being translated by Sher Ali and the notes written by Malik Ghulam Farid.<sup>269</sup> (A later abridgement of the work was edited by the latter.) Overall, the approach taken to the Calf narrative here is extremely similar to that of the Lāhōrī Muhammad Ali: extensive reference is made to the Egyptian origins of the worship of the Calf and in particular to the Quran’s critical exoneration of Aaron.<sup>270</sup> A novel etymology for *al-sāmīrī* is offered (i.e. “blacksmith” or “craftsman”!), but the name’s possible derivation from an Israelite tribe called *sāmira* is also acknowledged, along with the connection to the later Samaritan community.<sup>271</sup>

Overall, the question of the name’s significance is given far less weight than the fact that it was this person and *not* Aaron who was guilty of the sin of the Calf, which is repeated in the commentary again and again. The translation points out the nature of the Calf as “a *lifeless* body producing a lowing sound,”<sup>272</sup> although curiously, the means by which it was able to do so is never specifically addressed in the notes, only its inability to actually *speak*. Finally, as in the Lāhōrī translation of Muhammad Ali, here we find an analogous translation of *al-sāmīrī*’s apology: “I perceived what they perceived not. I *only* partly received the impress of the Messenger (Moses), but that *too* I cast away. Thus it is that my mind commended to me.” Although the translator has favored a somewhat more physical interpretation of *athar* as “impress,” the explanatory note makes the figurative sense of the expression clear:

---

<sup>269</sup> See Khan, “English Translations,” 89. I have consulted the 1988 reprint here, published under the auspices of Mirzā Tahir Ahmad, the fourth head of the Qadianī community.

<sup>270</sup> *The Holy Quran with English Translation*, n. 58 *ad loc.* Q.2:51/52; notes 1040-1042 to Q.7:150/151-152/153; and n. 2304 to Q.20:90/91. Cf. also n. 1038 to Q.7:148/149, where the phrase “Did they not see that it spoke not to them, nor guided them to any way?” occasions a clever defense of the Aḥmadī doctrine of continuing prophecy: the Calf’s silence provided a clear proof of its inadequacy as a divinity, and this is precisely what those who deny that God continues to communicate to humanity through prophets dare to ascribe to the true God. “The gift of divine revelation is attainable even now as it was attainable in the past, and those who look upon it as a thing of the past are grievously mistaken... Take away the power of speech from God and you leave Him no better than a calf.”

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 2299 to Q.20:85/86.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, Q.7:148/149; cf. Q.20:88/89, where the reading is “*mere* body.”

The words *I perceived that which they did not perceive* mean, “My mental perception was clearer than that of the Israelites.” The *Sāmīrī* means to say that he had followed Moses and had accepted his teachings intelligently and not blindly like them and that his object in doing so was that he should become the leader of his people. So when the proper occasion arrived and Moses went to the Mount, he threw away the cloak of expediency and discarded what little of his teachings he had accepted and that was what his mind suggested to him.<sup>273</sup>

The third *Aḥmadī* (or, more properly, crypto-*Aḥmadī*) translation of note, that of Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, first published in 1970, fundamentally agrees with the readings of the *Lāhōrī* and *Qadianī* Qurans quoted above. His Calf is likewise “a mere lifeless body from which issued a meaningless sound,”<sup>274</sup> and his version of *al-sāmīrī*’s apology is similar—“I had adopted only part of the teaching of the Messenger and then even that I cast away...”<sup>275</sup>

Overall, in all of these cases, the deviation from the norms established in the classical commentaries for the interpretation of this story is readily explained. As with the interpretation of the Calf as being a “mere” or “lifeless” body, the shift to recognizing the *athar al-rasūl* of Q.20:96 not as the track in the earth upon which Gabriel (or his celestial mount) tread but rather as the *sunna* of the prophet Moses is largely dictated by the particular ideological tendencies of these *Aḥmadī* exegetes. Perhaps more than any other particular group or school of thought within the Islamic world, the *Aḥmadīs* adopt practically as dogma the principle of denying miraculous

---

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, Q.20:96/97 and n. 2309 thereon. Cf. also the abridged edition by Malik Ghulam Farid, published under the auspices of Hazrat Mirza Nasir Ahmad, the third head of the *Qadianī* community, in 1962; I have consulted the 1981 edition. The translations here are identical and the annotations fundamentally the same.

<sup>274</sup> *The Quran, the Eternal Revelation Vouchsafed to Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets*, 156. His rendition of Q.20:88 is basically similar (304).

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 305. Muhammad Zafrulla Khan is a controversial character; one of the original committee that initiated the production of the *Qadianī Qur’ān*, he seems to have repudiated or at least concealed his affiliation with the *Aḥmadīs*, even successfully holding public office in Pakistan at one point. Robinson critiques him harshly for the subversive “crypto-*Aḥmadī*” interpretations he slips into his translation, complaining bitterly that “there is nothing to warn the unsuspecting reader that this is a highly tendentious [*sic*] work of sectarian propaganda” (“Sectarian and Ideological Bias,” 265).



interruptions of the natural order, being willing to acknowledge only very few exceptions to this in history.<sup>276</sup> This is not a perspective found exclusively among the Aḥmadiyya, of course, and thus we find a handful of instances in which other interpreters of a clearly rationalist-modernist bent make the exact same exegetical choices; as we shall discuss below, this interpretation has some precedent in that it is cited by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who is sometimes quoted by those modern exegetes who favor it.

In his translation of the Quran, Mirzā Abū'l-Faḍl Gulpāygānī (d. 1332/1914), one of the main spokesmen of the early Bahā'ī movement, renders the key phrase as “a handful from the footprint of the apostle”; there is no footnote here to clarify his interpretation, but one might assume that he would not have rendered *rasūl* thus if he understood it to refer to the angel Gabriel.<sup>277</sup> Sarwar and Jullundri, presumably both Sunnīs, likewise have similar interpretations. Sarwar has “I understood (*lit. saw*) what they did not understand (*lit. see*), then I took hold a certain holding of the footstep (the teaching) of the messenger, /But I threw it away and this is what my heart has devised for me”; despite the clumsiness of his translation, it is clear that he has a figurative conception of the *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* in mind and has rejected the traditional story about Gabriel. Jullundri gives the even more awkward “I saw what they did not see with it, and whatever guidance I obtained by following in the footsteps of Apostle. I forsook that; thus did my soul make my suggestion fair-seeming to me.” The common occurrence of this distinctive approach to the episode among South Asian exegetes, whether Sunnī, Bahā'ī, or Aḥmadī, points to a shared community of opinion in the region despite sectarian divides. In particular, one could easily conclude that 20<sup>th</sup>-century South Asian translators might be predisposed to a certain

---

<sup>276</sup> Note, however, that Malik Ghulam Farid's annotations to the Qadianī translation never really address the issue of the putative animation of the calf; strikingly, he does not refer to the Mu'tazilite interpretation of the Calf as a mechanical construct as a way of resolving the difficulty.

<sup>277</sup> The denial of miracles and the necessity of interpreting Quranic statements on supernatural events metaphorically seem to have been cornerstones of Mirzā Abū'l-Faḍl's reformist, modernist platform. His treatise on these subjects has been translated by Juan Cole as *Miracles and Metaphors*.

rationalist hermeneutic due to the overarching apologetic concerns that originally motivated the translation of the Quran into English in the first place.<sup>278</sup>

All that said, the “revisionist” understanding of Q.20:96 is not restricted to South Asian translators any more than it is to Aḥmadī; nor is it even confined to Muslims. Muhammad Asad takes the crucial phrase as a reference to the teachings of Moses and provides a long note on it.<sup>279</sup> Abdel Haleem simply has “teachings of the Messenger” for *athar al-rasūl*. Likewise, Khoury, a Lebanese Catholic priest, translates the phrase literally as “eine Handvoll Erde von der Spur des Gesandten,” but acknowledges the alternative reading in a note.<sup>280</sup> A few other modern translators and commentators, Muslims and non-Muslims, have also recognized this interpretation as well; many, but by no means all of them, explicitly cite the tradition quoted by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in doing so.<sup>281</sup>

Some slight variation on this interpretation is also attested, particularly in the form of only partial revisions of the traditional exegesis. We might note that Abdullah Yusuf Ali—whose rationalist tendencies did not escape Robinson’s notice—renders Q.20:96 as “A handful (of dust)

---

<sup>278</sup> The overall proximity of various South Asian Sunnī translations to Aḥmadī positions is a subject that invites further research. Note the odd case of Jullundri: his ideology is not advertised, but he is definitely not an Aḥmadī. At the same time, his interpretation of Q.2:71 (the slain man in the *baqara* episode) reflects clear “contamination” by Aḥmadī ideas (the verse is a common Aḥmadī shibboleth; see Robinson, “Sectarian and Ideological Bias,” 266).

<sup>279</sup> Asad, a Ukrainian Jew who converted to Islam in 1926, seems to have spent more than twenty years in South Asia during the Independence and Partition periods, which clearly exerted a formative influence on his rationalist-modernist brand of Islam. This no doubt accounts for his general conformity with the drift in interpretation exhibited by the previously mentioned exegetes. On Asad, see Kramer’s introduction to *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*, 25-6.

<sup>280</sup> Khoury’s note *ad loc.* Q.20:96 acknowledges Rāzī but mistakenly states that the source is one Abū Mūsā al-Iṣfahānī instead of Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī.

<sup>281</sup> E.g. Starkovsky, who does not advertise himself as a Muslim, though his translation is riddled with pietisms and his viewpoint generally reflects a conservative representation of Islamic tradition; and cf. also the note in the lexicon of al-Miṣrī, in which he states that the plain sense of the *athar* is that it refers to the ‘*ahd*’ or covenant of Moses, though he acknowledges the consensus reading as well (*Mu’jam al-Qur’ān*, 2.88). Note also that this reading of *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl* is emphasized in the commentary on the Calf story in al-Najjār’s stridently anti-*isrā’īliyyāt* work on the stories of the prophets in the Quran; he presents the alternative meaning as self-evident, and does not cite Rāzī (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, 224).

from the footprint of the Messenger,” and acknowledges the classical interpretation of *athar al-rasūl*; however, he *also* suggests that the *rasūl* here could be Moses, and that *al-sāmirī* intended to flatter Moses by suggesting that it was *his* footprint that was so sacred as to have animated the Calf.<sup>282</sup> He does not really address whether or not the Calf was actually animate, and one can surmise that the real issue at hand for him is not anti-supernaturalism per se but rather a desire to avoid too much reliance on apocryphal detail in exegesis. On the one hand, in context, reading the *rasūl* as Moses makes better sense; but on the other, Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s conception of the basic mechanics of *qabḍatu qabḍat<sup>an</sup> min athar al-rasūl* is the same—that is, this phrase refers to an actual handful of dirt from the track of the “messenger.”<sup>283</sup>

Notably, this reading anticipates the interpretation of the episode found in the Quran commentary of Mawdūdī (d. 1399/1979) *Tafhīm al-Quran*, which is worth considering here in brief, especially inasmuch as this work exerted an extremely wide influence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both in the original Urdu and in contemporary translations into Arabic, English, and other languages as well.<sup>284</sup> Further, Mawdūdī’s commentary on the issue is unusually explicit, and

---

<sup>282</sup> See n.2621 *ad loc.* Q.20:96. Note also Paret, who basically holds the same view; curiously, he does not just acknowledge that this is one possibility countenanced by some commentators, but rather seems to think that this is actually the objective meaning of the verse. Even more strangely, he cites Yahuda’s discussion of the Yemenite midrash and accepts the datum about the Israelites’ taking the dust from the foot of the ox of the Merkavah as a plausible explanation for the Quranic image.

<sup>283</sup> Two non-Muslim commentators take the same approach. Blachère renders the verse literally (“J’ai pris une poignée de la poussière laissée par l’Envoyé et je l’ai lancée”), but observes in a footnote that the commentators all claim that *l’Envoyé* is the Archangel, “mais il est bien plus normal de supposer qu’il s’applique à Moïse.” Further, in the old German version of Rückert recently edited by Bobzin and published with a commentary by Fischer, Q.20:96 is rendered literally in the body of the text itself (“Und eine Handvoll nahm ich von der Spur des Boten”), but in the commentary, Fischer adds matter-of-factly: “By ‘messenger,’ Moses might be meant; in Oriental custom, the dust from a man’s footprint was used for magical purposes” (“mit dem Boten dürfte Mose gemeint sein. Der Staub von der Fußspur eines Menschen wurde im orientalischen Brauchtum zu magischen Zwecken benutzt”)(524). (This is exactly the same point emphasized by the discussion of the *Fußspur* in Fraenkel, “Miscellen zum Koran.”)

<sup>284</sup> *The Holy Quran*, the English translation of the text and annotations of Mawdūdī’s Quran by Murādpurī and Kamāl, was first published in 1982; *Towards Understanding the Qur’ān*, Ansari’s English translation of the *Tafhīm*, Mawdūdī’s Qur’ān commentary, was published in 1988.

helps to clarify the main exegetical issues as they appear to a contemporary Muslim reader. For Mawdūdī, both the traditional interpretation of *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* as a literal handful from Gabriel’s track and the rationalist-modernist interpretation as a figurative “handful” from the *sunna* of Moses, drawing on the tradition from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, should be rejected; the former strays too far from the context intended by the Quran, while the latter defies the principle that scripture was revealed in clear language. The only possible solution is to read the phrase literally, but to take it as *al-sāmīrī*’s own claim about what transpired. Moses’ response in the next verse declaring the punishment to be doled out to Sāmīrī thus reflects his disbelief.<sup>285</sup> Further, Mawdūdī clearly understands the Calf’s lowing as a result of *al-sāmīrī*’s mechanical skill with “strange devices,” although after contriving this artificial Calf that seemed to be alive, he pretended that he had had nothing to do with its creation other than melting down the gold from which he claimed it sprang forth spontaneously.<sup>286</sup>

In a completely different context, this seems to be the exact same interpretation found in a modern Hebrew translation of the Quran as well. The translation of Ben-Shemesh, *Ha-Qur’an*, epitomizes the tendency to interpret Quranic narrative through the lens of rabbinic tradition; in fact, here this approach is taken very literally, inasmuch as the translator seems to proceed by

---

<sup>285</sup> Thus, Q.20:96 is simply rendered “I took a handful of dust from the footprints of the Messenger, and sprinkled it (on the calf), for so did my soul prompt me,” but a kind of paraphrase is supplied in the corresponding note: “As it appears the Sāmīrī was a cunning person, who wanted to beguile the Prophet Moses by his flattering tricks; therefore, he said, ‘Sir, the dust trodden by your feet has miraculous powers. When I sprinkled it on the molten gold, this wonderful calf appeared’” (*Holy Qur’ān*, 510, n. 27; cf. *Towards Understanding the Qur’ān*, 5.220-2, n. 73 *ad loc.* Q.20:96).

<sup>286</sup> See Mawdūdī’s comments in *Towards Understanding the Qur’ān*, 5.216, n. 68 *ad loc.* Q.20:87. In addition to arguing in favor of the “Sumerian” argument for Sāmīrī’s origins, Mawdūdī also promotes an interesting hypothesis regarding the origins of the biblical Calf story, the basis for the mistaken claim of Jews and Christians that it was Aaron who had actually made the Calf: “It is possible that this false report gained currency among the Israelites because the Sāmīrī’s proper name may have been Aaron; if that was the case then at some later date it could have led to confusion... Christian missionaries and Orientalists of today, however, insist that this provides positive evidence of an erroneous statement in the Qur’ān. This though is all rather odd, for Christians painted a bad image of the Prophet Aaron... Ironically enough, the Qur’ānic narrative absolves him of this and it is faulted for that very reason! This is the state of their obduracy” (*ibid.*, 5.217, n. 69 *ad loc.* Q.20:90).

harmonizing the Quranic text with its presumed midrashic prototypes. It is not entirely clear why, but Ben-Shemesh renders the apology of the *Šômronî* (Samaritan) as “I took a handful from the dust upon which *you* [i.e. Moses] tread, and I threw it into the Calf; and this is what my soul asked me to do.”<sup>287</sup> (This may well have been dictated by the absence of any corresponding angelic figure in the aggadic versions of the story, or Ben-Shemesh could simply have recognized that it is more likely that the *rasūl* of Q.20:96 is meant to be Moses.) On the other hand, Ben-Shemesh’s reasoning behind his choice of words in rendering the key phrases describing the Calf from Q.7:148 and 20:88 is completely transparent, for he does so in such a way as to deliberately echo the parallel accounts of the Calf’s animation from the *Tanḥuma* and the *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer*. The Calf is thus *‘ēgel zāhāb še-hāyāh gō‘ēh* (a golden calf that mooed) at Q.7:148 and *‘ēgel gō‘ēh wě-ba‘al-gūp* (a calf, lowing, possessing a body) at 20:88; *gō‘ēh* is the specific term used to describe the Calf’s lowing in the midrashic traditions we examined previously.<sup>288</sup>

In any event, the case of the Aḥmadīs is most significant because of the consistency with which the principle of avoiding excessive supernaturalism is upheld, which predisposes them not only to reject the conventional interpretation of the *rasūl* of Q.20:88 as Gabriel but also to adopt a more figurative reading of *qabḍa min athar*, as well as favoring the quasi-Mu‘tazilite explanation of the Calf’s lowing. Their insistence on the *rasūl* of Q.20:96 being Moses and not Gabriel, and the *athar* being the prophet’s teachings and not the angel’s literal “track”—shared by some other interpreters of a modernist bent—is the most consistent example of dissent in the modern interpretation of the Quranic Golden Calf episode.<sup>289</sup> But again, as we have already noted, this

---

<sup>287</sup> *Ha-Qur’an*, 190.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 99 and 190 respectively.

<sup>289</sup> However, interpreters wishing to substantially alter or challenge the traditional reading may have recourse to other strategies as well. Cf. the representation of the episode in Sherif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur’ān*, a conspicuously apologetic work: he specifies that the people were led astray by a magician named Samiri, but mentions neither the Calf’s lowing nor the reference to the “track of the messenger”; he also omits any mention of Moses’ confrontation of Aaron (84-5). If anything, his presentation of the episode is tailored to foreground the unflattering

approach seems to be dictated first and foremost by apologetic and ideological concerns. Thus, many of the same exegetes who subscribe to this view of the narrative tend to underscore the key element of Aaron’s innocence as well, this being dictated by the tendency of many modernists and Aḥmadīs to uphold the doctrine of prophetic *’iṣma* or impeccability.<sup>290</sup> However, as we shall see, this principle would most likely prevent such exegetes from following the implications of their revisionist interpretation to its logical conclusion.<sup>291</sup>

\*\*\*

If the *athar al-rasūl* which *al-sāmirī* rejected or “threw away” (*nabadha*) was the teaching or “way”—*sunna*—of Moses, then his response to God’s question at the beginning of the episode, “What made you hurry away from your people?”, acquires an ironic twist: *hum ūlā’i ’alā atharī*, not “they are right behind me,” as Ahmed Ali renders the phrase, but rather, “they are obeying my teaching” (20:84)! This is ironic specifically because—as the whole passage depicting the Calf

---

representation of the Israelites as unworthy, which may represent a subtle attack on Jews. Overall, Sherif simply avoids dealing with the uncomfortable aspects of the story and ignores those elements in the classical exegesis that he finds distasteful.

<sup>290</sup> Speaking *very* generally, one might say that the Aḥmadīs support this exegesis primarily because of their unique prophetology, while modernists do so out of a desire to combat the allegations of Western scholars (and polemicists) that the Quran has the story “wrong.”

<sup>291</sup> It should be noted at this juncture, at least in passing, that there is another Muslim constituency that seems to consistently repudiate either the idea of the Calf’s animation or the interpretation of the *rasūl* in Q.20:96 as Gabriel (or both): these are the modernist authors of anti-*isrā’īliyyāt* works such as al-Najjār, Bint Shāṭi’, and Abū Shuhbah. These authors could be classified accurately as “fundamentalists,” inasmuch as they strive to purge Quranic interpretation of what they see as unacceptable accretions and tendentious Jewish “influences”; in this, they draw on the anti-*isrā’īliyyāt* ideology first promoted in modern times by ‘Abduh and Riḍā, itself strongly influenced by the legacy of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr.

This phenomenon is of particular interest insofar as these interpreters all seem to agree on some basic level with Western scholars’ allegations regarding the Jewish influence on Islam, except that these would-be reformers see the problem as one of Jewish influence on *tafsīr* and other traditionally-transmitted materials rather than on the Prophet or the Quran per se. Because most if not all of the pertinent literature is in Arabic and our main concern here is with Muslim representations of the Quran generally accessible to Western audiences, I will not discuss this material here, though I hope to devote a separate study to this subject.

episode demonstrates—they in fact did not do so. Moreover, if anyone can be thought to be at fault for this, then surely it is Aaron, in whose care Moses left the people when he ascended to Sinai. Further, as their subsequent dialogue makes clear, Moses understands perfectly well that Aaron himself did not obey his teaching—*mā mana 'aka idh ra 'aytuhum ḡallū allā tattabi'anī*, “what hindered you, when you saw them go astray, so that you *did not follow me*” (vss.92-93)—that is, so that you did not follow my *sunna*, my *athar*?

The direct response to this question is delayed for a few lines while Aaron explains the conditions under which he caved to the people's demands rather than introduce a schism into the community. By doing so, he obviously did not follow Moses' *athar*; and arguably, he himself may be thought to acknowledge this in verse 97: *qabaḡtu qabaḡat<sup>an</sup> min athar al-rasūl*, “I followed the teaching of the prophet for a time” (i.e. I did what you would have done), *fa-nabadhtuhā*, “then I cast it away” (i.e. I took matters into my own hands and did what *I* thought best). That is, the question of the prophet's *athar*, his teachings, way, or *sunna*, is in fact the crucial element that provides the fundamental thematic structure that unifies this entire narrative, a fact that has gone generally unnoticed by modern translators and scholars because of their failure to consider the possibility that *al-sāmirī* might be another name for Aaron.

In the next chapter, we will reevaluate the standard or consensus interpretation of the Quranic Golden Calf narrative and propose a new reading of the episode that draws strongly on the scattered elements of dissenting tradition found in both classical and modern commentary. Arguably, this reading makes better sense of the original Quranic narrative in context, isolated from the layers of apocryphal material projected upon it by centuries of exegetical tradition and scholarly speculation alike. By doing so, we do not intend to polemicize against the traditional Muslim exegesis of the Calf story, thus asserting that Muslim interpreters “got it wrong.” Rather, the goal of this exercise is to distinguish the Quranic narrative from the highly developed elaborations upon it to be found in the classical commentary tradition, for the particular purpose of highlighting the specific contributions made by the latter. In the final analysis, we are not

seeking a “pure” reading of the Quran or a dubious “liberation” of the text from the corruptions wrought by the Muslim faithful over centuries. Rather, we wish to encourage a new appreciation for the role played by the *mufassirūn*, whose exegesis reflects not so much the uncovering of the “legendary” background to the allusive and opaque Quranic story—that is, meaning already *latent within* the Quran as they passively received it—but rather the construction of *entirely new* dimensions of scriptural meaning that were more compatible with their perspective and priorities.



**Chapter 3:**  
**“A Calf, A Body that Lows”?**  
**The Quranic Golden Calf Reconsidered**

Ibn Jurayj said regarding the verse *I perceived that which they perceived not*, that it means “I saw that which they did not see”; he who explicates the statement thusly according to received knowledge is correct. The meaning is thus “I knew that the dust tread upon by the horse of Gabriel had the particular quality of bestowing life.” However, Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī said that there is no basis in the Quran for this interpretation which the exegetes have transmitted; rather, the verse has another meaning.

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, various exegetes in the modern period, particularly Aḥmadīs or other Muslims of what we might call a “modernist” predisposition, reject the traditional interpretation of the “track of the messenger” in Q.20:96 as the handful taken by Sāmīrī from the dust tread upon by Gabriel’s angelic steed (or by Gabriel himself). Further, some of these exegetes point to a conspicuous precedent in the classical *tafsīr* for rejecting this interpretation, and this is worth dwelling on momentarily here. As we have already mentioned, this precedent is very often cited in the name of one Abū Muslim al-İşfahānī (d. 322/933-4) in the Quran commentary of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209). In point of fact, very little is known of this Abū Muslim; he deserves to be remembered, it seems, for three major reasons.

First, he was an authority of some significance among the Mu’tazilites. He is mentioned briefly in the *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mu’tazila* attributed to the Zaydī imām Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Ibn al-Murtaḍā (d. 840/1430), which is putatively derived from sources going back to the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century. Here, Abū Muslim is located among the eighth generation of the Mu’tazila, and his peers included such luminaries as Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 303/915-6), whom we shall have occasion to discuss below, Abū Ḥusayn al-Khayyāt (d. c. 300/913), and Abū’l-Qāsim al-Balkhī (d. 319/931).<sup>1</sup> Great eminence is ascribed to him here, which is somewhat surprising given his relative obscurity. Thus, the account in the *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mu’tazila* notes that the Zaydī imām Muḥammad b. Zayd (d. 287/900) had first brought together Abū Muslim, Abū’l-Qāsim, and Muḥammad’s brother al-Ḥasan b. Zayd (d. 270/884), the first ruler of the Caspian Zaydī principality, and that “each one of them was peerless in his age and exceptional in his time.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mu’tazila* is an artificial work, derived from a longer text by the same author; according to Gimaret, Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā took his information on the Mu’tazila from the earlier work of al-Ḥakīm al-Jushamī (d. 484/1101), the *Faḍl al-i’tizāl*, which was itself derived from the earlier work of his teacher, the great Mu’tazilī theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), who supposedly got *his* information directly from Abū’l-Qāsim al-Balkhī; see *EF*, s.v. “Mu’tazila.”

<sup>2</sup> *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mu’tazila*, 91; *Faḍl al-i’tizāl*, 299. The editor of the latter provides a number of references for *tarājim* of Abū Muslim in several sources later than al-Ḥakīm al-Jushamī, including Yāqūt, Ibn Ḥajar, and Şafadī. Al-Nāşir li’l-Ḥaqq al-Ḥasan b. Zayd, called *al-dā’ī al-*

The second major datum worth noting about him is mentioned here in this source immediately after the brief notice about Abū Muslim himself; namely, that he and his peers were the main representatives of the Mu'tazila at the time when the notorious Ibn al-Rāwandī, once an adherent of the movement, parted ways with the school and its teachings.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the third major datum of interest concerning him is his importance to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī; in truth, it might be said that Abū Muslim's main significance for posterity is the fact that Rāzī cites him frequently as a representative of Mu'tazilite *tafsīr*, though often only for the purpose of refuting him. As is the case with the particular distinction ascribed to Abū Muslim in the *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila*, his prominence in Rāzī's *Mafātiḥ al-ghayb* is out of all proportion to his importance in modern scholarship, even given the obscurity of many of the major figures associated with the Mu'tazila. A cursory glance at Lagarde's index to Rāzī's *tafsīr* demonstrates that Abū Muslim is cited therein just as often as the much better-known al-Jubbā'ī; in turn, both of them are cited quite a bit more often than Abū'l-Qāsim al-Balkhī, who has also received his fair share of attention in modern scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

The interpretation of Q.20:96 Rāzī attributes to Abū Muslim is crucial. Rāzī quotes it at length towards the end of his extensive comments on this verse:

---

*kabīr* in Zaydī tradition, founded an independent 'Alīd principality in Ṭabaristan during the era of Ṭāhirid rule over eastern Iran in the mid-3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> c. AH, passing sovereignty over to his brother, the aforementioned Muḥammad b. Zayd, *al-dā'ī al-ṣaghīr*, upon his death. The Zaydī dominion over the region was to be short-lived; it was subsumed into the Samanid domains in the wake of that dynasty's initial expansion, though it was subsequently restored, however temporarily, by the Būyids. See Buhl, *ET*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Al-Ḥasan b. Zayd b. Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl b. al-Ḥasan b. Zayd." The particular interest in the Zaydī *imāms* is common to both Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā and al-Ḥākim al-Jushamī, for the latter "converted" from Mu'tazilism to the Zaydī cause late in life; cf. *ET*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Al-Ḥākim al-Djushamī" (Madelung).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 92. Admittedly, this particular datum, though interesting, is not terribly useful in the long run, since so little is known about Ibn al-Rāwandī himself, despite his infamy. On the few tenuous facts available to us about him, in particular his relations with the Mu'tazila, see Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam*, 37-46.

<sup>4</sup> See Lagarde, *Index du Grand commentaire de Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, s.v. "Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī," "Abū'l-Qāsim al-Ka'bī al-Balkhī," and "Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī," under the index of personal names.

Ibn Jurayj said regarding the verse *I perceived that which they perceived not*, that it means “I saw that which they did not see”; he who explicates the statement thusly according to received knowledge is correct. The meaning is thus “I knew that the dust tread upon by the horse of Gabriel had the particular quality of bestowing life.”

However, Abū Muslim al-Isfahānī said that there is no basis for this interpretation which the exegetes have transmitted in the Quran; rather, the verse has another meaning. By “messenger,” Moses is meant; by “track” (*athar*) is meant his *sunna* and the pattern for behavior he established.

He explains: A person follows the *athar* of another and “takes a handful” of his *athar* when he imitates his behavior. What the verse intends to communicate is that when Moses confronted Sāmīrī to censure him and ask him about the command by which he misled the people to undertake the affair of the Calf, Sāmīrī replied, I perceived that which they did not perceive, i.e., I knew that this thing they undertook was wrong. I had “taken a handful,” O messenger, of your *athar*, i.e., something of your *sunna* and your religion, but I “tossed it away” (*qadhaftuhu*), i.e., I decided to forsake it. Regarding this act, Moses knew better than he what his recompense would be in this world and the next...

Contrary to the received tradition, Abū Muslim proposes a metaphorical interpretation for both *athar*, the “track” of the messenger, as well as the act of “taking a handful” from it: *qabḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl* means to imitate the *sunna* or precedent established by a person of authority; moreover, that person, the *rasūl* mentioned in the verse, is not in fact Gabriel, but rather Moses. Rāzī then goes on to agree with Abū Muslim’s position, stating that it is closer in truth to the real meaning of the verse, and enumerates several reasons as to why this so. Among other things, he points out that Gabriel is not called *rasūl*; that it is unlikely that Sāmīrī would have known about the miraculous power of Gabriel’s track while Moses did not; and, most

crucially, that it is quite unlikely that an evidentiary miracle (*mu'jiza*) would be bestowed on someone of Sāmīrī's ilk.<sup>5</sup>

Again, this tradition from Abū Muslim stands as the main (actually, the sole) precedent in the classical commentary literature for the view of some modern commentators that the *qabḍa* or “handful” that Sāmīrī mentions in his apology before Moses in Q.20:96 refers to the *sunna* or precedent set by Moses himself and not the physical track of the angelic messenger Gabriel or his steed.<sup>6</sup> The only other major commentaries in which the Abū Muslim tradition appears are the *Tafsīr al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ* of Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī (d. 754/1353), a work specifically designed as a digest of earlier *tafsīrs*, and the *Durr al-ma'thūr* of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), similarly a kind of *summa* of the previous tradition. Both of these works cite the Abū Muslim passage as it appears in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's work largely verbatim.<sup>7</sup> Overall, despite its obscurity in the exegetical tradition, as an interpretation of major elements in the Calf episode in their original context, Abū Muslim's exegesis of the “handful from the track of the messenger” has much to recommend it. The counter-reading introduced by this early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-century Mu'tazilī

---

<sup>5</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 22.111.

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the few other occurrences of the root *q-b-ḍ* in the Quran tend to refer to grasping or holding rather than relying on the more figurative sense of the word, but curiously, in a couple of these examples, the grasping or holding is not really *physical* per se, inasmuch as the grasping or holding is that of God! Q.25:46 refers to God drawing the sun to Himself a bit (or a “handful”) at a time, presumably at sunset: *qabaḍnā ilaynā qabḍan*. Similarly, Q.39:67 refers to the earth as God's “handful” on the Day of Resurrection, and Q.2:245 refers to His “withholding” in a more diffuse and general sense. In Q.9:67 it says that when the time comes to exert themselves for God, the hypocrites “close their hands,” *yaqbaḍūna aydayhim*, which is obviously symbolic. In Q.67:19 the verb is used to refer to the folded wings of birds, which is probably the only *purely* physical occurrence of the root in the Quran. The reference to the action of the hypocrites at Q.9:67 is probably the closest analogy to the figurative sense of “taking” we wish to ascribe to *qabaḍtu qabḍat*<sup>an</sup> at Q.20:96. On the other hand, the uses of the root to refer to God's “holding” or “taking” suggest that the word connotes dominion over something, which is probably the basis of one of the senses of *qabḍa* found in Lane, namely “that which belongs to one.” This certainly seems germane for our interpretation of the “handful from the track of the messenger” as an image for the *sunna* of Moses (Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. قبض).

<sup>7</sup> Abū Ḥayyān, *Al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 6.274 of the Būlāq ed.; the corresponding citation from Suyūṭī appears in the margin.

commentator will in fact make a significant contribution to the reevaluation of the Quranic narrative that we will propose here.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> I do not wish to give the impression that I think this interpretation, which, as we have seen, is adopted by some modern Muslim exegetes for apologetic reasons, is valid simply because it can be traced back to a commentator of the classical era. That is, it is not that classical interpreters are inherently more likely to be “correct” than modern interpreters whose exegetical priorities are clearly driven by sectarian bias, for example. There is certainly nothing “neutral” about Mu’tazilite exegesis; at least, it can hardly be thought to be intrinsically more objective than, say, Aḥmadī exegesis. Rather, Abū Muslim’s comments are worth considering specifically because of the linguistic insights he brings, which help us to enlarge the semantic range associated with the key terms in this verse, with or without “classical” warrant. As we have already seen in the case of the interpretation of the physical nature of the Calf associated with the Mu’tazila (*viz.*, that it was a clever mechanical device surreptitiously designed to moo in order to trick the Israelites), these commentators likewise bring their own presuppositions and priorities to bear in exegesis, and often yield solutions to problems of interpretation in the Quran that are quite obviously not compatible with the ostensible original context.

## 1. The Quranic Calf narrative reconsidered, 1: “*al-sāmirī*” as epithet for Aaron

Even among the handful of modern exegetes who recognize the *athar al-rasūl* of Q.20:96 as a possible reference to the teachings, way, or *sunna* of Moses—Aḥmadīs, Sunnīs, and non-Muslims alike—very few, if any, seem to discern that the *athar* mentioned here should be linked to the *athar* mentioned at the beginning of the episode in verse 84, or vice versa. Strangely, with only *two* exceptions, every translator whom we cited above who takes the reference to the *athar al-rasūl* figuratively *also* takes the reference to the *athar* in Moses’ reply to God’s question, *hum ūlā’i ‘alā atharī*, entirely *literally*.<sup>9</sup> This is not only surprising because of the self-conscious way in which these exegetes deviate from tradition in interpreting the *athar al-rasūl* in verse 96 figuratively; it is also surprising because of the line that comes after Moses’ reply in verse 84—“they are following my *athar*,” i.e. “they are obeying my teaching”—in which God tells him that *al-sāmirī* has led the people astray, *wa-aḍallahum al-sāmirī*.

Surely this critical phrase *wa-aḍallahum al-sāmirī* is not supposed to mean that *al-sāmirī* had *literally* led the people astray, getting them lost in the desert, leading them off the physical path on which Moses had set them—unless one supposes that *hum ūlā’i ‘alā atharī* means that they were actually supposed to follow him up the mountain. In this case, *hum ūlā’i ‘alā atharī* would have to mean “they are coming along right behind me,” and God’s rejoinder would mean something like, No, *al-sāmirī* has led them off the path and taken them someplace else! But it is improbable that the narrative really presupposes that the people were meant to come along and

---

<sup>9</sup> E.g.: “track” (Muhammad Ali, Mirzā Abū’l-Faḍl); “footsteps” (Sher Ali, Jullundri, Abdel Haleem); the people are “close behind me” (Muhammad Zafrulla Khan). Sher Ali renders *athar* as “footsteps” but also provides a note showing the diverse meanings of the word, as if to contrast its sense here in verse 84 with that it has in verse 96. Khoury translates “Spur” and acknowledges that this indicates either physical proximity or else, more figuratively, that the people were anxiously awaiting Moses’ return (364, note *ad loc* Q.20:84). Granted, a translation such as “upon my track” or “following in my footsteps” *could* have a figurative meaning, but this is not made explicit by any of these translators.

join Moses in his communion with God on Sinai.<sup>10</sup> Further, such a reading ignores the clear *moral* sense that the root *d-l-l* typically has in the Quran.<sup>11</sup> God’s initial question, “What made you hurry away from your people?”, seems to imply that Moses’ departure has placed the people in moral jeopardy, and the prophet’s reply indicates that he believes (quite wrongly, as it turns out) that he has provided for their well-being either through his instruction or else, more likely, through leaving them in the hands of a trusted surrogate. Either way, he believes that *hum ūlā’i ‘alā atharī*, they are following my *athar*; that is, they are obeying my teaching, or rather *will* obey my teaching. Not so, replies God.

The reference to *athar al-rasūl* at verse 96 is the only other occurrence of this freighted term *athar* in the Sūra 20 Calf narrative besides that at verse 84, and so it seems quite natural to assume that they are connected somehow.<sup>12</sup> Granted, one might argue (as the various exegetes discussed above probably would) that *al-sāmīrī*’s response is completely appropriate, in that, since he was the one who led the people astray, it is natural that he acknowledge that he himself

---

<sup>10</sup> Notably, in his gloss on this verse, Tha’labī does in fact seem to interpret *athar* here wholly literally. In response to God’s question as to why he has hurried away from his people, explicitly interpreted as the seventy elders Moses took with him to Sinai, Moses replies, “*hum ūlā’i ‘alā atharī*—meaning, ‘they are coming along [after me]’” (*Kashf al-bayān*, 6.257). In other words, Moses had “hurried away” from the seventy, but they were close behind him, following his *athar*, his trail. There is no authority given for this comment, though Tha’labī could have derived it from any one of his many sources. The specific point of interest here is that this gloss on Q.20:83 takes *athar* completely literally, resolving the seeming contradiction between its occurrence here and that at Q.20:96 (assuming one is inclined to understand the *athar al-rasūl* in the latter verse literally as well).

<sup>11</sup> This is the basis of Asad’s objection; he renders the phrase as “they are treading in my footsteps,” but emphasizes that this must have a “tropical” sense, since the people were undoubtedly not meant to literally follow Moses up the mountain (n. 64 *ad loc.* Q.20:84). The other exception to the general trend is Sarwar, who hedges his bets by rendering *athar* as “footsteps (teaching)” in both places.

<sup>12</sup> The term *athar* is well attested in the Quran, often in the plural, which expresses the same meaning. On the one hand, it may very well be taken wholly literally as “track, trace”—e.g. Q.48:29, *athar al-sujūd*, the physical mark left by repeated prostration. On the other hand, there is certainly no shortage of occurrences of the term with the clearly figurative meaning of the example left by leaders, prophets, and forebears, being used in an analogous way to our English expression “following in their footsteps,” e.g. Q.5:46 (Jesus was established in the *āthār* of the prophets before him), 43:22 (we are rightly guided following their *āthār*), etc.



rejected the prophet's *athar*. But if we assume that *al-sāmirī* is a third party, some of the episode's underlying literary symmetry is lost. First, in vs.83, God asks Moses why he has been so quick to abandon his people. (He already knows the answer.) Moses replies that they are secure following his *athar*. Surely not, says God, for *al-sāmirī* has led them astray. Later on, sure enough, *al-sāmirī* admits that he himself rejected the prophet's *athar*. What is obviously missing here, however, is Aaron's role in these proceedings. Moses' reply about the people being secure in his teachings, in his *athar*, surely has *something* to do with Aaron's role as the people's guardian and the presumed guardian of Moses' *athar*. Granted, Sūra 20 never explicitly states that Aaron was left in charge of the people; but besides intuiting this on the basis of the biblical precursor in the book of Exodus, Aaron's role as deputy or *khalīfa* is in fact specifically mentioned in the Sūra 7 version of the episode, immediately before Moses' departure for Sinai.<sup>13</sup> Such a role for Aaron is clearly implicit in the Sūra 20 version of the episode as well, if for no other reason that upon his return to the camp, Moses confronts Aaron and demands to be informed about what happened while he was away (vs.92), right after confronting the people themselves (vs.86) and right before addressing *al-sāmirī* (vs.95). Surely he would not have done so if Aaron was not expected to play some significant role here as Moses' *khalīfa*.

Aaron's initial reply to Moses' query, "I was afraid you would say that I had caused division among the Israelites" (vs.94), does not really have any significance for the status of Moses' *athar* one way or another; it merely establishes the conditions under which Aaron made the choices he did, namely because of his fear of being accused of causing a rift among the people (that is, creating *fitna*). But Moses *does* seem to be asking about the *athar*, the path or way, here, because he asks what hindered Aaron from following (*ittaba'a*) after him, not literally of course,

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Q.7:142: *Moses said to Aaron, his brother: Deputise for me among my people. Dispose rightly, and do not follow the way of the authors of evil.* The phrasing of Moses' command makes it quite clear that Aaron is his viceroy or surrogate: *akhluḥnī fī qawmī*. Despite the archaic-sounding translation by Ahmed Ali—a better rendition might be "Be my surrogate among the people, and deal justly"—his version has the distinct virtue of implicitly asserting the connection between *akhlaḥa* and *khalīfa*.

but rather figuratively, presumably from following the *athar*. (Most exegetes and translators agree that what is meant here is that Aaron should have “followed” him by doing what Moses had commanded or would have wanted him to do, not literally “followed” him up the mountain to fetch him back to the camp!<sup>14</sup>) But again, Aaron’s initial reply has nothing to do with the *athar*. But then, eventually we *do* hear something about the *athar*, namely that *al-sāmirī* abandoned it (or “cast it away”) and led the people astray. But such a sequence of events seems rather disjointed from a literary perspective, because if we assume that *al-sāmirī* is a third party, then it is unclear what he had to do with Moses’ *athar* to begin with. Further, again assuming he is a third party, Moses did not ask *al-sāmirī* about the *athar* or about following him (or it) at all; his only direct question to *al-sāmirī* is the vague *mā khaṭbuka* (vs.95)—what do you have to say for yourself?, or, more colloquially, what’s up with you? And yet it is this *al-sāmirī* who inexplicably brings the subject *back* to the *athar al-rasūl*, in explicitly acknowledging that this is what he has rejected, or at least not followed, in vs.96.

Assuming that there are three distinct parties involved here makes the flow of the narrative unnecessarily complicated. Granted, the Quran has a particular reputation for disjointed narratives and sudden shifts of perspective among Western critics; but if we assume, even momentarily, just for the sake of evaluating the literary structure here, that Aaron and *al-sāmirī* are one and the same individual, suddenly the flow of the narrative becomes far more streamlined. God asks Moses why he has hurried away from his people (vs. 83); Moses replies that they are following or will follow his *athar* (because they have been left in the hands of Aaron, his lieutenant, who is explicitly mentioned in this capacity in the parallel account in Sūra 7) (vs.84); no, says God, *al-sāmirī*/Aaron (the custodian of the people and of Moses’ *athar*) has led them astray (vs.85). After confronting the people, Moses asks Aaron what kept him from following him, which means, one might think, from cleaving to his *athar* (vss.92-93). Aaron first provides an explanation of his

---

<sup>14</sup> But note again Ahmed Ali’s translation, which does seem to presuppose a literal “following”:  
*O Aaron, when you saw that they had gone astray, what hindered you from coming after me?*

motivations, i.e., “I was afraid of what you would say” and so forth, thus *avoiding* any talk about the *athar* (vs.94). But Moses presses on: So, *al-sāmirī*, what do you have to say for yourself, i.e., what about my *athar*? (vs.95) And finally, the climactic moment: *al-sāmirī*/Aaron replies, finally addressing the key issue directly, “I perceived something they did not”—perhaps this means, I knew that this would all turn out badly!—but *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl fa-nabadhtuhā*, meaning something like “I rejected the *athar* of the prophet (that is, your *athar*) for a little while,” or possibly “I deviated *just a little bit* from your *athar*” (rather than “I *momentarily* followed it... and then rejected it completely”), *wa kadhālika sawwalat lī nafsī*, “for that seemed best to me at the moment”—perhaps implying, “now I know better.”

Framed as a single continuous narrative from verse 83 (God’s initial question to Moses) to verse 97 (the fate of *al-sāmirī* and the destruction of the Calf), the entire Calf episode of Sūra 20 can be seen to revolve around the issue of the *athar*; more specifically, it is about the fate of the *athar* when left in someone else’s hands. It opens with God’s loaded question about the people’s safety while Moses is away—presumably safe and sound under the guidance of his *athar*—and proceeds forensically, with Moses’ investigation of the scene back down in the camp and his interrogation of both the people and his surrogate, Aaron, as he tries to find out what happened in his absence, how the guidance that should have been provided by his *athar* was waylaid or circumvented. The people confess that they did what they did because their custodian, *al-sāmirī*, suggested it (*alqā*); this can be none other than Aaron, and the episode reaches its climax in verse 96, when Aaron, *al-sāmirī*, admits that he in fact abandoned the *athar* of Moses (just a little bit of it, or for just a little while), went his own way, and led the people astray. The narrative is thus not about the Israelites being led astray through the intrusion of a diabolical miscreant, the “Samaritan”; it is, rather, about a crisis of leadership, and specifically paints a sharp contrast between the leadership that mere men can provide when relying on their own intuitions (“for that seemed best to me...”) and the leadership that only God can provide by guiding His chosen

representatives. That is, the story is essentially about prophetic authority, which is, in the end, arguably what the Quran itself is really all about.

\*\*\*

The identification of *al-sāmirī* as Aaron has been suggested in the past, though only rarely. Perhaps the widest hearing this view ever received was through the popular Quran translations of Sale and Rodwell: as noted above, both cite the conjecture of the British antiquarian John Selden (d. 1654) that *al-sāmirī* was originally an appellation of Aaron himself, being derived from the Hebrew *shômēr*, “guardian,” since he was the appointed custodian of the people during Moses’ absence. At the same time, Selden *also* claimed that Muhammad had not recognized that *al-sāmirī* was supposed to be Aaron, and thus cast him as a completely separate character in the Quranic narrative in Sūra 20. Moreover, seeing this *al-sāmirī* as a discrete character, Muhammad construed him as the eponymous ancestor of the Samaritans, having somehow been influenced in this reading by the hostility of the Jews towards this nation—thus the “curse” upon *al-sāmirī* in verse 97. It is somewhat difficult to follow Selden’s logic here, but the underlying idea seems to be that in some pre-Islamic source—possibly a midrash?—the Calf narrative was translated or retold in some way, and the title *shômēr* applied to Aaron. Muhammad got hold of this now lost source and adapted it in the Quranic Calf narrative, but erred in doing so, splitting Aaron and *shômēr/sāmirī* into two separate *dramatis personae*.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Selden’s *De dis Syris* was widely disseminated in the first edition of 1617, of which there is a relatively rare English translation. However, the discussion of the Quranic Calf episode and *al-sāmirī*, which seems to be interspersed among the older material on the Calf, is only found in the second edition, which seems to have been produced in 1668 (I have examined a later printing of this second edition dated to 1672; another appeared in 1680). I have not been able to obtain any information about the second edition, which was edited by one Andrea Bayer. See *De dis Syris* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 125-36. The discussion of the Calf episode here clearly merits more investigation; in particular, it is noteworthy that the Quran is cited here in the Latin version of Ketton-Bibliander, in which *al-sāmirī* appears at least superficially to be a distinct character; the reason for the

Selden may very well have concluded that *al-sāmirī* is Aaron because he realized that Q.20:95-96, in which Moses interrogates him (*mā khaṭbuka* et al.), seems to reflect the dialogue between Moses and Aaron from Exodus 32:21-24; other scholars have discerned this as well.<sup>16</sup> It is also possible that Selden's approach might have been inspired by Schweigger's treatment, in which *al-sāmirī* is completely absent from his version of the Sūra 20 account, and heavy emphasis is placed upon the biblical precursors to the Quranic Calf episode. (As we have already noted, Schweigger seems to have simply been following Arrivabene's lead, for the former's German Quran is a rather literal translation of the latter's extremely loose Italian adaptation of Ketton-Bibliander; and again, Arrivabene does not make his reasons for omitting Sāmirī entirely from his version of the Sūra 20 narrative explicit.) Schweigger's translation of Arrivabene's translation of Ketton-Bibliander was published in 1616, only one year before the first edition of *De dis Syris*, but Selden's discussion of the Quranic account did not actually appear until the *second* edition of his work in 1668. It is also worth noting that Selden's approach anticipates

---

author's deduction that Aaron and Sāmirī are the same person is thus uncertain. Note also that this treatment seems to draw on sources that are not generally cited in subsequent scholarship, in particular marginal glosses in manuscripts that are no longer extant; of special interest is the author's citation of supposed variant readings for *al-sāmirī* as *al-musārī* and the like. It is curious that Selden (or perhaps Bayer) and Hottinger, who were contemporaries, both recognized *al-sāmirī* as Aaron, but that the only other sources in which such an identification is found—at least implicitly—are the Italian Quran of Arrivabene (produced almost a century earlier) and the derivative German version of Schweigger.

On Selden, see the concise sketch of his life and milieu in Rowse, *Four Caroline Portraits*, 125-55, and the somewhat more substantial account of Berkowitz, *John Selden's Formative Years*. Both pass over the composition of *De dis Syris* in perfunctory fashion. None of the biographical materials on Selden I have consulted address the second edition of the work or offer any information that could account for the fact that the second edition suddenly seems to reflect a substantial knowledge of Islamic tradition while the first edition does not (Selden was first and foremost known as an Hebraist and a scholar of antique law). A report in the *Annals of the Bodleian Library* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 110-23) by Macray for the years 1654 to 1659 describes various bureaucratic matters associated with the bequest of Selden's library to the Bodleian after his death, but unfortunately goes into almost no detail about its contents. Considering all this, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the new material in the posthumous second edition of Selden's *De dis Syris* may be the work of Bayer and not Selden himself.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Jeffery, who not only claims that Sāmirī represents a confusion of the Exodus narrative with the account of Jeroboam in 2 Chron. 13, but specifically notes that Q.20:96 is a "confused reminiscence" of Ex.32:21-24 (*The Koran: Selected Suras*, 218).

some of the treatments of the Quranic episode found among Geiger and his followers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only those who specifically note the apparent confusion between biblical accounts in Sūra 20 (i.e. Tisdall's claim that Sāmīrī is a conflation of Aaron and Jeroboam), but also those who place particular emphasis on the impact of a lost midrash as the specific source for the term *al-sāmīrī* (e.g. Halévy's claim that this is a reflex of the ancient Jewish antipathy towards the Samaritans, as opposed to Selden's derivation of the word from the Hebrew *shômēr*).

As noted above, many modern Muslim exegetes, particularly those of a rationalist bent, strive to historicize the traditional portrayal of *al-sāmīrī* as a foreign interloper among the Israelites by claiming the name's basis in *shemer*, supposedly the Egyptian word for "foreigner" or "outsider." (Additionally, Mawdūdī comes up with the novel interpretation "Sumerian," but the underlying concept is the same.) This person is then explained to have been the eponymous ancestor of the people *later* known as Samaritans, or else to have subsequently given his name to the hill upon which the city of Samaria would eventually be founded. All of this is no doubt designed to combat the allegation by Western scholars and translators that the projection of a Samaritan into the Mosaic era in the Sūra 20 episode is erroneous and anachronistic, indicative of Muhammad's ignorance or confusion.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali, one of the earliest Muslim exegetes to explain *al-sāmīrī* in this way, makes this very suggestion about *shemer* in a note to Q.20:85; however, in a subsequent note, he observes: "If the Egyptian origin of the root is not accepted, we have a Hebrew origin in "Shomer" a guard, watchman, sentinel; allied to the Arabic *Samara*, *yasmuru*, to keep awake by night, to converse by night; *samīr*, one who keeps awake by night."<sup>17</sup> This is a remarkable

---

<sup>17</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, n.2608 *ad loc.* Q.20:87. According to Zammit, the Arabic *samara* (meaning to keep watch at night, especially by telling stories and so forth) represents an adaptation of the old Northwest Semitic root meaning "to guard," which is also the basis for the Hebrew *shômēr*. *Against* my reading, however, note the sense of *samīr* he observes attested in Q.23:67, which seems more similar to the classical sense of the word: "talking nonsense about the Qur'ān like one telling fables at night (*samīr*)" (Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'ānic Arabic*, 547, citing Lane). In the sense of "companion," *samīr* (and *sāmīr* as well) is very widely attested in pre-Islamic poetry.

admission for Abdullah Yusuf Ali to make, because the notion that *al-sāmirī* was the watchman or custodian of the Israelites could be taken to imply that this person is in fact identical with Aaron; and perhaps this is why other exegetes generally shy away from such an interpretation, even though they enthusiastically derive information about Samaria, the term *shemer*, and so forth from sources such as the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Like the figurative reading of *athar al-rasūl* in verse 96 as the “teaching of the prophet,” an exegetical choice contrary to the classical interpretation, perhaps dictated by ideological considerations, ends up endangering the whole apologetic enterprise in which the interpreter is involved: if one selects *shômēr* as the basis of *al-sāmirī* in order to avoid the anachronism of placing a Samaritan at Sinai, the consequence may be that Aaron is implicated in the making of the Calf, violating the principle of prophetic *'isma*. In any event, it is doubtful that Abdullah Yusuf Ali was familiar either with Hebrew philology or with Selden’s 17<sup>th</sup>-century work, so one might conjecture that he appropriated the *shômēr* reading directly from Sale or Rodwell.

Whatever the original basis of the epithet *al-sāmirī* for Aaron might have been, the deliberate alternation between the names makes perfect sense in the context of the Quranic narrative. The term *al-sāmirī* occurs first in verse 85, in God’s response to Moses’ statement about the people being secure in his *athar*, meaning that they will follow his guidance while he is away, presumably because they have been entrusted to his lieutenant Aaron. No, says God, we have tested them, and *al-sāmirī*, their custodian, has led them astray. The specific use of the epithet here reinforces the point behind Moses’ statement about the people following his *athar*, clarifying why he would think that would be the case— *hum ūlā’i ‘alā atharī*, because they are in the care of the *sāmirī*. But no, it is *not* the case, for *al-sāmirī*, their custodian, has led them astray.

The second time the term occurs is in verse 87: when the people are asked by Moses why they did what they did, they indicate that they did not mean to violate what is commonly construed as their “promise” to Moses. The phrase *mā akhlafnā maw’idaka bi-malkinā* seems to mean “we did not do so willingly” or “of our own accord”—i.e., we couldn’t help it, which is

most likely meant to seem like a rather lame excuse. The people had been made to carry all these gold ornaments (*ḥummilnā*, we were *burdened* with these riches—another lame excuse!), and so threw them (i.e., into the fire to be smelted into a molten form; this much the traditional exegesis acknowledges), *fa-kadhālika alqā al-sāmirī*, “for thus did *al-sāmirī* suggest.”<sup>18</sup> Everything the people say here indicates their intention to shirk as much of the responsibility for their actions as possible: we could not help it; the gold was so heavy; we threw it in the fire, because Aaron, our guardian, told us to! The specific reference to *al-sāmirī* reflects their desire to shift blame to the one who was ultimately responsible for supervising them, their custodian or watchman, and so Moses then turns to interrogate Aaron directly.

The last occurrence of *al-sāmirī* is in verse 95: *mā khaṭbuka yā sāmirī?* As already noted above, verses 92-97 should not be read as two different dialogues, one with Aaron and one with *al-sāmirī*; rather, this is a *single* exchange, and the shift in address from Aaron to *al-sāmirī* in verse 95 is both emphatic and ironic. By asking what prevented Aaron from following after him (*yā hārūn... mā mana’aka... allā tattabi’anī*), Moses is implicitly asking about adherence to his *athar*, his teachings or prophetic precedent; the use of the verb *ittaba’a* implies that he wants to know about the *athar*. Aaron demurs and gives him an excuse: I was afraid of what you would say... Moses’ reply is terse and dramatic: all right, *O sāmirī*, but what do you have to say for yourself, did you follow my *athar* or not?

In the same way that God already knew the answer to His question to Moses in verse 83, which began the whole affair, Moses already knows the answer to his question here, but he wants

---

<sup>18</sup> It may seem like there are three redundant verbs meaning “to throw” in this narrative, *alqā*, *qadhafa*, and *nabadha*, but actually, while they all *literally* mean “to throw,” each has a distinct nuance: *qadhafa* simply means “to throw”; *alqā* also means “to suggest”; and *nabadha* also means “to reject.” (Note that *alqā* is the verb used of the “throwing” depicted in the rods to serpents episode in Sūra 20.) The Quranic narrative seems to play on the ambiguity of these words in this chapter, for example in verse 87: *fa-qadhafnāhā fa-kadhālika alqā al-sāmirī*, so we threw, for so did *al-sāmirī* “throw,” i.e., suggest. Note also that this portrayal is in keeping with that in Exodus 32 as regards the division of labor between Aaron and the people: he issues commands, while they gather the golden ornaments and cast them into the fire in order to make the Calf.



Aaron to admit it outright. This is the climax to the story, when *al-sāmirī*, Aaron, has to admit that he did not fulfill his obligation: “I followed the *athar* of the prophet”—that is, your *athar*—“for a little while, *but then rejected it*, for that seemed best to me.” The fate of the *athar* is what has been at stake since the beginning of the narrative, and now it has been disclosed at long last. Moses’ shift to the epithet in verse 95 both underscores what it is he wants to know, the fate of the *athar*, and is meant to be ironic as well, since, as the *sāmirī* in Moses’ absence, it was Aaron’s primary task to uphold it. Moses of course realizes by now that this simply did not happen.<sup>19</sup>

It is also possible that the ambiguity of the identity of *al-sāmirī* in the narrative is meant to build dramatic tension. God says that *al-sāmirī* has led the people astray, but we are never explicitly told that this is Aaron, nor is Aaron’s role as custodian (which would be a decisive clue) explicitly mentioned here either. The tension builds as Moses returns and confronts the people. Then, turning to Aaron, the listener or reader may suspect the truth as Moses questions him: Why didn’t you follow me? Did you disobey my command? Then, at last, our suspicions are confirmed: *continuing* his dialogue with Aaron (and *not* turning to a wholly different character, as exegetes have always held), Moses lets the other shoe drop—tell me what happened already, *sāmirī!* If it is indeed the case, as it seems, that this ambiguity is deliberate, then it is supremely ironic that this episode’s display of superlative literary technique has kept practically every interpreter, Muslim and non-Muslim, medieval and modern, from recognizing the actual identity of Aaron and *al-sāmirī*. At the very least, it has discouraged modern Western scholars, who presumably aspire to an objective and historical-critical reading of the Quran, from viewing the narrative objectively; as for the classical Muslim exegetes, we would prefer to suppose that they

---

<sup>19</sup> Note also the dramatic shift in terms in Moses’ dialogue with his brother: in verse 92, Moses addresses him by his proper name, Aaron; Aaron replies with the far more intimate “son of my mother” in verse 94; then, as if rejecting this familiarity and keeping the exchange businesslike, in verse 96 Moses shifts to the appellation that defines the role Aaron was supposed to play, though he failed miserably: *O sāmirī*.

knew perfectly well who *al-sāmirī* was, and what the episode meant, but deliberately chose to emphasize another interpretation entirely.<sup>20</sup>

It also stands to reason that this is why *al-sāmirī* is mysteriously absent from the shorter version of the narrative in Sūra 7, where the making of the Calf is initially blamed on “the people.” In fact, he is not absent here at all. After noting that the people made a calf from their ornaments in Moses’ absence—or perhaps took it for worship as their god, *ittakhadha*—the passage goes on to describe first the people’s remorse for their actions and then Moses’ angry confrontation of Aaron. As the “people of Moses” are blamed in verse 148, this is likely meant to *include* Aaron, especially since he not only shares in their responsibility for the deed but is particularly culpable as the one charged with the task of keeping things under control while Moses was gone. If *al-sāmirī* were really an outsider, then this characterization makes no sense—why would the Israelites, the “people of Moses,” all of a sudden have to shoulder the burden of guilt here if the Sūra 20 account is explicitly designed to blame some other party, especially an outsider?

Conversely, if the Quranic account is really intended to “correct” the Bible, and Aaron is meant to be exonerated here, as many exegetes claim, then why is the deed blamed directly on the people that had been placed in his care in Q.7:148, when this would clearly reflect poorly on him as well? For that matter, if the exoneration of Aaron is truly the point of the Quranic account of the episode, why do both of the Quranic versions of the story *preserve* Moses’ angry accusations against him? Strangely, modern commentators often point to the apparent discrepancy between the two *sūras*, but usually do not attempt to provide any explanation of what this discrepancy means; the typical way they address the problem is by simply noting in commentary on Sūra 7

---

<sup>20</sup> Note also the occasional tendency for the Quran to slip into the use of epithets for rhetorical effect, either to render someone’s identity deliberately ambiguous or else to accentuate a particular role; the use of such epithets in scripture then provided commentators with some latitude to promote alternative readings of episodes. Besides *al-sāmirī*, the other obvious example is *dhū’l-qarnayn*, typically explained as Alexander of Macedon, but more probably indicating the prophet Moses, especially since this “character” appears in Sūra 18 right after Moses’ journey to the “ends of the earth,” the *qarnayn*, has been depicted.

that the episode is related in full in Sūra 20, and that one finds a more detailed description of the role of *al-sāmirī*, the real architect of Israel's idolatrous downfall, there. The Quran contains so many instances of narratives told in an elliptical fashion that the seeming discrepancy here hardly presents a real problem to most scholars.<sup>21</sup>

\*\*\*

Along with emphasizing *al-sāmirī*'s supposed Egyptian roots—with the *shemer* etymology not only dislodging the seemingly anachronistic “Samaritan” reading, but also asserting the Egyptian origins of the Calf itself and its cult—many modern Muslim exegetes are also fond of highlighting the fact that the Quranic account rectifies the clear error of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, which wrongly associate the making of the Calf with Aaron. However, if one accepts that *al-sāmirī* is in fact an epithet for Aaron, then it turns out that he is far more involved in these events than either traditional or modern Muslim exegetes would be willing to admit. For example, if Aaron and *al-sāmirī* are one and the same person, then clearly he is being indicted for his involvement in Q.20:87: “we were burdened with the ornaments of the people, and we threw them in, for thus did *al-sāmirī* suggest.” This is true of the next line as well, in which he is said to have “brought forth an image of a calf” (or a *corporeal* calf) for the people. But if Aaron is directly responsible for fashioning the Calf, what are we to make of verses 90-91, in which he appears to *intervene* in this affair, seemingly wishing to *prevent* this monumental act of idolatry, and then seems to fail miserably? In Ahmed Ali's translation, these lines read:

---

<sup>21</sup> Some exegetes, especially non-Muslims, see the Sūra 7 account as “right” and the Sūra 20 account as “wrong” because the former places emphasis on Aaron, the latter (seemingly incorrectly) on *al-sāmirī*, e.g. Bell. The traditional chronology seems to tacitly encourage such an evaluation by placing the revelation of the former after that of the latter; Orientalists thus claim that Muhammad was confused when he revealed the account in Sūra 20, but later corrected his mistake (thus bringing his version of the episode into line with the “correct” biblical version) in Sūra 7. Note again the assumption that the Bible was something fundamentally foreign to the Arabian milieu that was not all that well understood by the Prophet or other Arabs of the Jāhiliyya.

*Aaron had indeed told them earlier: O my people, you are being only misled with this. Surely your Lord is Ar-Rahman. So follow me and obey my command. They said, So long as Moses does not come back we are not going to give it up, and we will remain devoted to it.*

While his translation is *literally* accurate, Ahmed Ali's version overlooks some of the nuances of the passage. The verb rendered as "you are being misled" here is *futintum*, the 2<sup>nd</sup>-person plural passive form of *fatana*—the same verb used by God at the beginning of the episode when He says "We have put the people on trial (*fatannā*)... and *al-sāmirī* has led them astray." The two actions are surely not unrelated. Aaron's words can thus also be rendered as "you are only being *tried*," or even "you are only being *tempted*," another connotation of *fatana* (in the Quran, trials frequently involve temptation). But if Aaron himself is responsible for making the Calf, why warn the people against being misled by it?<sup>22</sup> Why does he assert that their Lord is *al-Rahmān* (here, clearly understood as the proper name, or at least the unmistakable epithet, of the one true God)? Moreover, if he is warning them about the Calf that he is making, why does he *then* say, "so follow me and obey my command" (*fā'ttabi'ūnī wa-aṭī'ū amrī*)? What sense can this possibly have?

The note about Aaron's intervention comes directly after the line about how *al-sāmirī* made the Calf for the people and they then said: "This is your god and the god of Moses (whom) he has neglected" (vs.88 according to Ahmed Ali), to which is appended a notice about the Calf's impotence and the people's devotion to it nevertheless. It also immediately *precedes* Moses' confrontation of Aaron. Seemingly, then, if one accepts the traditional interpretation of these verses, the function of the exchange between Aaron and the people is to underscore both the guilt of the latter (since they were warned against following the Calf, and yet did it anyway) and the innocence of the former (since he *did* try to intervene, after all). The theme of the people's guilt

---

<sup>22</sup> Note the apparent connection to Hārūt and Mārūt, who according to Q.2:102 taught sorcery to humanity but warned that "we are only a temptation/trial" (*fitna*).

connects these verses with what precedes (“they said, ‘This is your god...’”), and that of Aaron’s innocence with what follows (“I was afraid you would say I had caused division...”). But this all falls apart if we suppose that Aaron is *al-sāmirī* and was therefore directly responsible for making the Calf. In other words, a good argument against our attempt to read *al-sāmirī* as an epithet for Aaron is that the narrative integrity of the episode would appear to be compromised thereby. Or is it?

Properly sorting out what is going on in the moral economy of this narrative and what each of these verses means in relation to the others requires reading them in the light of the biblical precursor in Exodus 32. Of course, many Muslim exegetes would object to such a procedure, because they assume that the Quran is correcting the Bible or, more specifically, that the extant Jewish and Christian biblical texts have been corrupted. But from an objective viewpoint, this procedure seems perfectly reasonable; after all, to make the narrative yield even a modicum of sense, we must accept *some* preconceptions about what it is supposed to be about. For example, exegetes universally recognize that the “throwing” of the people in verse 87 refers to the metal jewelry being smelted in a furnace, but it is simply assumed that this is what the phrase means based on the very rudimentary idea that the Israelites took their gold and melted it down to make a metal idol. The Calf is never called a “Golden Calf” in the Quranic account, nor is the process of its being fashioned from the metal ornaments of the people described, nor are the ornaments identified as having been melted down, nor is a fire ever mentioned.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, we cannot simply accept the judgment of some Western scholars that the attribution of the making of

---

<sup>23</sup> And thus Jullundri can, in good conscience, claim that the *zīna* with which the people were burdened (Q.20:87) were finely crafted ornaments of *wood*; there is nothing in the narrative that explicitly states that they were gold or some other kind of metal, that they were thrown into a fire to melt them down, or that the Calf was created through casting metal in a mold. But he *can* point to Moses’ threat “surely we will burn it (*la-nuḥarriqamahu*) and toss its ashes into the sea,” and feasibly conclude that the Calf *must* have been wooden if Moses intended to burn it up. A couple of other commentators seem to make a deliberate point of saying that the ornaments were made of gold *and other metals as well*—presumably based on the realization that the Calf could not have been pure gold but rather must have been an alloy; otherwise, the image would not have been able to bear its own weight.

the Calf to *al-sāmirī* is “wrong” per se, assuming that the biblical text must necessarily possess absolute primacy as a matter of principle. Nevertheless, we will argue that in attempting a close reading of the Quranic text autonomous from the various legendary accretions projected onto it by later interpreters, it makes sense to have recourse to other extant versions of the episode, particularly (but not exclusively) the oldest textualization of the story available to us, the Exodus narrative of the canonical version of the Hebrew Bible.

It is an almost universal misconception that the biblical Golden Calf story is primarily about the Israelites’ degeneration into the worship of a false god in the form of the Golden Calf, and their rejection of the true God whose covenant with Israel stipulates that they have no other gods besides Him. Read this way, however, many elements in the Exodus narrative make no sense, most of all the fact that Aaron seems to escape punishment for his apparent leadership of the idolatrous mob. Seen in its original context, however, what the Calf story really seems to be about is a temporary and ultimately illegitimate regression into a *form* of worship of the true God of which God Himself disapproves; in the absence of Moses, the people enjoin Aaron to make them “gods to go before” them—not an idol to *replace* God per se, but rather a symbol of His unseen presence. Even this limited iconophilia is eventually rejected in favor of the “pure” monotheism promoted by the biblical authors as well as the original prophets, and so the Exodus narrative is really about what can go wrong if one indulges in this sort of cultic practice, even with the best of intentions. Thus, in Exodus 32:1-6, even though Aaron tries to keep the situation under control, the people misunderstand the real purpose of the Calf; he fashions it for them out of their golden ornaments, and they immediately declare, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (vs.4).<sup>24</sup> Wanting to remind the people of what the Calf really is, Aaron counters by preparing for the performance of sacrifice before the Calf, but emphasizes that “tomorrow is a festival for the LORD,” *ḥag la-YHWH māḥār* (vs.5). Use of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Actually *plural* in the original Hebrew—“*these* are your *gods* who brought you out...” etc.—for complex historical and literary reasons.

Tetragrammaton here is an unambiguous indication that the Calf is only a tangible symbol of His presence, and that worship should be directed towards Him alone.

In the end, when Moses returns to the camp, demolishes the Calf, and imposes a terrible punishment upon the idolaters for their misdeeds, the major point the narrative is meant to communicate is that of iconoclasm: God does not approve of being associated with this improper form of worship. But in the hands of later redactors and interpreters, beginning even as early as the initial redaction of this story into the literary collection that would become the Hebrew Bible, the subtler point to be made here was lost: the Calf rapidly became a false god (or “gods”), albeit a mute one made of a crude sculptured form. For specific historical reasons that must go unaddressed here, the biblical narrative is also about rival forms of leadership: Aaron represents priestly authority and Moses prophetic, and by portraying the priestly representative as indulging in forbidden forms of worship, the episode stresses the necessity of prophetic authority as a corrective or check upon priestly authority. Put another way, priestly leadership must be *subordinated* to the prophetic.

Verses 88 to 91 in the Sūra 20 account most likely reflect a combination of paraphrase and exegesis of Exodus 32:1-6; deciphering their subtle nuances allows us to understand not only the function of these lines in the larger narrative fabric of the passage, but the implicit significance of the making of the Calf itself in the Quranic episode. Ultimately, that meaning is not very different from that of the Calf story as seen in the canonical biblical precursor. Q.20:88a, “he brought forth an image of a Calf” et al., seems to reflect Exodus 32:4, “And he took [the gold] from their hands and cast it in a mold, and he made it into a molten calf...” Q.20:88b, “And they said, ‘This is your god and the god of Moses...’” likewise seems to reflect Exodus 32:4, “And they said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt...’” The final word at the end of the Quranic verse, *fa-nasiya*, is commonly understood as a pejorative reference to Moses on the part of the idolaters making the proclamation about the Calf’s identity: “This is your god and the god of Moses (whom) he has neglected,” in Ahmed Ali’s rendering.

In traditional exegesis, *fa-nasiya* is also sometimes taken as referring to *al-sāmirī*—he and his followers made this blasphemous proclamation, and by doing so *al-sāmirī* forgot his former allegiance to Moses and obligations to the community and to God. We could take it this way as well, but possibly recognize it as a kind of editorial comment regarding *Aaron*’s lapse in his role as *sāmirī*: the people said of the Calf, “This is your god...,” and Aaron/*al-sāmirī* thus forgot to uphold the *athar* of Moses by letting this happen. But it is more likely that the singular masculine subject of *nasiya* is the aforementioned *qawm mūsā*, the people themselves (more on this in a moment). Q.20:89a, *Did they not see that it did not give them any answer, nor had it power to do them harm or bring them gain...*, thus becomes comprehensible as an extension of the editorial gloss begun with *fa-nasiya*, a remark of incredulity regarding the Calf’s being proclaimed to be God despite its obvious shortcomings.

Ahmed Ali’s rendition of Q.20:89b—“Aaron had indeed told them earlier: ‘O my people, you are being only misled with this. Surely your Lord is Ar-Rahman...’”—is partially right, especially in that it notes that *laqad qāla* specifically indicates that the statement is perfective—Aaron *had* told them this earlier, probably *prior* to the people’s declaration in the previous verse (i.e. “This is your god...”) This line seems to discern the real spirit in which Aaron cooperated with the people’s demand in the Exodus narrative: he went along with it, but wanted to insure that they would properly understand that the Calf itself was not God, only a token of His presence. So he *had said* to them: *innamā futintum bi-hi wa-innā rabbakum al-raḥmān*, “*inasmuch as you may be tempted by it*”—recalling that the perfect can indicate the optative mood as well as the past tense, and that *fatana* can mean “to tempt”—“...indeed, your Lord is al-Raḥmān.” We might even take the *wa-innā* as disjunctive, which makes even better sense of the relationship between the two phrases: “*inasmuch as you may be tempted by it... however, your Lord is (really) al-Raḥmān.*” The ellipsis here marks a lacuna in the verse, the unspoken conclusion of the first part of his statement—“*inasmuch as you may be tempted by the Calf, you really should not be, for indeed your Lord is al-Raḥmān,*” or possibly “*even though you may be tempted by the Calf, so*



*that you think it is your Lord, your Lord is really al-Raḥmān.*” He *had* said this (vs.90), but after they saw the Calf, they went ahead and said “This is your god and the god of Moses...” (vs.89) anyway.

In any event, these words seem to correspond rather closely to Exodus 32:4-5, precisely following the temporal order of actions in the biblical version, though the sequence in which those actions are *narrated* has been altered. In the Quran, “They said, ‘This is your god and the god of Moses...’” (vs.89), even though Aaron had *previously* said, Don’t be tempted, “your Lord is al-Raḥmān” (vs.90). In Exodus, the people make their idolatrous intent clear first: “They said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt...’” (32:4); afterwards, Aaron made his position plain, reminding the people of their obligation to God: “tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD” (32:5). This being the case, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Aaron/*al-sāmīrī*’s reference to God specifically as al-Raḥmān in Q.20:90 parallels his invocation of the Tetragrammaton in Exodus 32:5—not that al-Raḥmān should be taken as a *translation* of the Tetragrammaton per se (although this is vaguely tempting, given that it has been suggested that the Tetragrammaton may signify “he who bestows life”), but rather that the particular use of what may readily be taken to be God’s *proper name* (or at least one of them) occurs in both passages.<sup>25</sup>

Q.20:90b elaborates on Aaron’s warning to the people not to be tempted to worship the Calf instead of their Lord: “follow me and obey my command (*amrī*)”; do not be tempted.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the people’s response here points to their initial intent *not* to be tempted: not “So long as Moses does not come back we are not going to give it up, and we will remain devoted to it” (as Ahmed Ali has it, with far too many words), but rather “We will not stop our devotion to it until

---

<sup>25</sup> On the name al-Raḥmān, see the very different discussions of Jomier, “The Divine Name ‘Al-Raḥmān’ in the Qur’ān” and Rippin, “RḤMNN and the Ḥanīfs.”

<sup>26</sup> Note the parallel in Moses’ words to Aaron later, in verse 93: *did you not disobey my command (amrī)?* That is, Aaron disobeyed Moses’ *amr* by not succeeding in getting the people to follow his own *amr*.

Moses returns to us,” i.e. “we will *only* remain devoted to it until Moses returns to us.” This points, one might argue, back to Exodus 32:1: “When the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, they gathered before Aaron and said, ‘Up, make us a god to go before us, for this man Moses who led us up out of Egypt, we do not know what’s happened to him.’” That is, the Calf is not only a token of the divine presence, but on some level, it is a surrogate for Moses, who is the leader of the people and in some sense a token of the divine presence himself.<sup>27</sup> So too in Sūra 20: Aaron agrees to make the Calf, asserts that their Lord is really al-Raḥmān, and enjoins them to follow him; the people then promise only to cleave to the Calf until Moses, their real leader, comes back. But again, all this is related in *retrospect* in the Quranic version, in verse 90, which comes *after* the fateful notice: the people went astray anyway, calling the Calf their god and the god of Moses, and *they forgot* (*fa-nasiya*) about their previous assurances to Aaron (vs.88). (Or, alternatively, *Aaron* then forgot about the *athar* of Moses, meaning that he gave up and let the people get out of hand and allowed them to misconstrue the real purpose of the Calf.) And all this happened even though Aaron had said, “Inasmuch as you may be tempted by the Calf...” (vs.90)—that is, you should *not* be tempted by the Calf.

Again, if one reads the dialogue between Aaron and the people according to the conventional interpretation of the Quranic episode, then verses 90 and 91 seem to depict Aaron’s failed attempt to intervene and hinder the people from their idolatry, as well as their obstinate insistence on defying him. It thus follows on and connects with the notice about their idolatrous statement in verse 88, and anticipates Aaron’s apology before Moses during their dialogue in

---

<sup>27</sup> This is perfectly embodied in the often misunderstood image of Moses returning from Sinai with the restored Tablets of the Testimony in Ex.34:29-35 with the horns of his head showing. While most interpreters would agree that this should be understood as referring to the divine radiance Moses’ face emitted after his audience with the Lord, some have seen this as a pun (*qeren* meaning both “ray” and “horn”) that implies that now that Moses had returned, the Israelites had no need for the Calf as a surrogate leader—he was now the visible “gods” or *ēlôhîm* that would go before them and guide them through the wilderness. Janzen, “The Character of the Calf and its Cult,” argues elegantly that the Golden Calf was in fact a war standard that the Israelites intended to follow in their campaign to conquer Canaan; when Moses returned from Sinai after the destruction of the Calf with horns on his head, this signified that he alone, and not the Calf, was qualified to lead them into battle.

verses 92-94. But this scene works equally well, if not better, if we acknowledge Aaron's identity as the maker of the Calf. In verse 87 the people partially admit their guilt for making the Calf to Moses, but claim that *al-sāmirī* orchestrated it; verse 88 describes the making of the Calf itself, as well as the inevitable outcome, their idolatrous proclamation. Then the scene returns to the tragic background to this moment, when Aaron attempted to indulge the people's request and yet keep things under control, urging the people not to be tempted; they in turn seemed to agree to this quite amicably ("we will only remain devoted to it until Moses returns to us," vs.91).

But the reader or listener already knows that this did not work out, for we have previously been told that "they said, 'This is your god and the god of Moses,' and they forgot..." (vs.88) Only later does Aaron admit the critical lapse in judgment that led to his allowing the people the license to pursue their idolatrous impulses: "I perceived what they did not perceive"—i.e. that this would all go awry?—"and then I cast away a little of the *athar* of the prophet"—i.e. "what little of it I had followed," or possibly "I cast the *athar* of the prophet away *for a little while*"—that is, I deviated and allowed this to happen through a momentary lapse, "for this seemed like a good idea to me" at the time (vs.96)<sup>28</sup>

\*\*\*

As we have seen, the punishment meted out to *al-sāmirī* in Q.20:97 is assigned tremendous importance in modern scholarship as providing a solid historical basis for verifying that this story is really about a Samaritan interloper projected back to the Mosaic era. Scholars such as Fraenkel, Goldziher, and Halévy enthusiastically pursue every bit of textual evidence that either corroborates the existence of stringent ritual purity laws forbidding contact with outsiders among the Samaritans or else demonstrates some association between the Samaritans and the Calf of

---

<sup>28</sup> Or possibly "I took a little from the prophet's example, for this seemed to be a good idea"—that is, I sought to be like Moses and *become like a prophet myself* in taking command of the Israelites?

Sinai in the midrashim; and each of these scholars proceeds from the assumption that, somewhere out there, there *must* exist some lost text that will provide indisputable proof of the Jewish origin of the Quranic account. Yahuda's analysis proceeds from similar assumptions, except that in the end, the lost midrash he adduces as the decisive influence on the Quranic account deals not with the issue of the "Samaritan" per se, but rather with the animation of the Calf. However, in their zeal to validate the basic interpretation of the episode first suggested by Geiger—which, as we have seen, largely corresponds to the interpretation promoted in classical Muslim exegesis—these scholars succumb to the same tendency towards carelessness and anachronism we first saw in Geiger's treatment, a trait that is unfortunately characteristic of discussions of the Jewish influence on Islam on the whole.

The readiness with which the "Samaritan" reading of the name *al-sāmirī* has always been accepted is partially due to a chronic tendency of both the classical exegetes and modern scholars to misrepresent Q.20:97, the verse describing the "curse" Moses places upon *al-sāmirī*. Muslim interpretation traditionally places strong emphasis on this line as basically definitive of *al-sāmirī*'s character and identity, as we have seen, and modern scholars have done the same. That is, the main proof-text demonstrating *al-sāmirī*'s Samaritan identity is found in this verse; conversely, the assumption that *al-sāmirī* was an evil outsider who infiltrated the Israelite community but was subsequently cast out and ostracized creates a predisposition to see this line as a curse, which, evaluated objectively, is actually a bit of a stretch. The degree to which this reading has largely been taken for granted in exegesis becomes quite clear if we carefully reconsider its proper translation.

Almost every available translation of the Quran presents Moses' statement in this verse as strident and utterly hostile. Thus, Ahmed Ali gives the following for verses 97 and 98:

*(Moses) said: Go hence! All your life you are (cursed) to say: 'Do not touch me'; and a threat hangs over you which you will not be able to escape.*

*Look at your god to whom you are so attached: We shall verily burn it, and  
disperse its ashes into the sea. Your god is only God. There is no other god but  
He. His knowledge extends over every thing.*

Verse 97b (“Look at your god...”) is fairly unambiguous, as is verse 98, so we will concentrate on the first part of verse 97, as this is really the key to understanding what is going on here. The notion that *al-sāmirī* is being cursed with exile in this line is predicated *entirely* upon the first word of Moses’ command—“Go hence!”—but *adhab* simply means, “go!” There is no explicit mention of a “curse” here, as Ahmed Ali seems to recognize through his use of parenthesis. Further, the first part of the key phrase might be rendered more neutrally: *fa-innā la-ka fī’l-ḥayāt an taqūla lā misāsa*, “...for it is for you to say in life [i.e. all your life?] ‘no touching’...” The second part of the key phrase is even more ripe for reinterpretation, for the plain sense of *wa-innā la-ka maw’id<sup>m</sup> lan tukhlafahu* is hardly “a threat hangs over you which you will not be able to escape”! The verb *akhlafa* is not “to escape” in the sense of running away, but rather “to break, violate, render null and void,” especially in a contractual or covenantal context such as a treaty violation. The root *kh-l-f* itself is notoriously polysemic. It is the basis of the freighted term *khalīfa*, which is ambiguously applied to both Adam and David in the Quran, and, as is well known, can be taken to mean either “successor” or “viceroys.”<sup>29</sup> The basic meaning refers to succession, and one might surmise that the causative *af’ala* form used here means to cause a succession, not in terms of making someone ascend to a throne or the like, but rather to make *one set of obligations or stipulations replace another*. In other words, *akhlafa* might mean something like “to break a deal.”

Likewise, and even more to the point, *maw’id* hardly seems to signify “threat” here. The root *w-’-d* means to appoint a time and/or place for a meeting or some other predetermined event or activity; and so *maw’id* commonly signifies an appointment or a date (as in setting aside a date

---

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Q.2:30, 38:26. See also the comprehensive discussion of the commentary tradition on these passages by al-Qādī, “The Term ‘*Khalīfa*’ in Early Exegetical Literature.”

for something to occur, especially a meeting). By extrapolation, it seems to also mean a duty or obligation, not only in terms of appearing at a given place at a given time, but also of performing a certain agreed-upon action under particular circumstances. Thus it is often translated as “pledge,” “promise,” or “commitment.” Throughout the Quran, *maw'id* is the typical word used to refer to Moses' meeting with God on Sinai. Furthermore, it is extremely striking that both the key words *akhlafa* and *maw'id* appear throughout Sūra 20, and often together, and not only in the Calf narrative. For example, mirroring the conjunction of the terms here in Q.20:97, somewhat earlier, in Q.20:58, there is another mention of a *maw'id* “which neither we nor you can/should break,” *nukhlifuhu*, and *this* refers to the appointed time for Moses' duel with the Egyptian magicians! Consulting a concordance yields several other occurrences of the two terms being used together as well, and one might speculate that here in Sūra 20 and elsewhere the *maw'id* that cannot or should not be broken—*akhlafa*—carries a strong connotation of predestination or providence, perhaps both.

Conjunctions of the verb *akhlafa* and the noun *maw'id* in fact occur *three times* here in the Calf narrative, and these seem to be among their most significant appearances in all of Sūra 20.<sup>30</sup> When Moses confronts the people, he asks them if they deliberately intended to incur the wrath of God, *fa-akhlafum maw'idī*, “[so] that you broke the promise you had made to me?” (vs.86b, Ahmed Ali). The people respond by saying *mā akhlafnā maw'idaka bi-malkinā*, “We did not break our promise to you of our own accord” (vs.87a, Ahmed Ali again). Undoubtedly these occurrences of the phrase and that at verse 97 must be read together, but it admittedly seems strange to render the latter as “you will say ‘no touching,’ and you have a promise you will not break,” for this would be an odd curse indeed! Given the context, it is almost inconceivable that *akhlafa maw'id* could really mean anything here but *to abandon one's duty* or *to shirk one's obligations*, particularly covenantal obligations. It is particularly important in this connection to

---

<sup>30</sup> Considering the amount of material in Sūra 20 dedicated to the story of Moses, the fact that these terms recur throughout the chapter is unsurprising given their covenantal connotations.

take note of the first part of Moses' address to the people when he returns from Sinai in Q.20:86; here is the verse in full according to Ahmed Ali.

*So Moses returned to his people full of anger and regret. O my people, he said, did not your Lord make you a better promise [wa'd]? Did the time of covenant ['ahd] seem too long to you? Or did you wish the wrath of your Lord to fall upon you that you broke the promise you had made to me [maw'idī]?*

The covenantal context is obvious from the setting of the episode itself, as well as from the explicit evocation of the term *'ahd* here. Ahmed Ali renders *both* the terms *wa'd* and *maw'id* with the single word “promise,” but this could stand to be refined a bit. God made the people a better (or just “good,” or “fair”) *wa'd*—*ya'idukum rabbikum wa'd<sup>m</sup> hasan<sup>m</sup>*. We might understand this to mean that God initiated the covenantal process with Israel and (at least initially) offered them a fair deal, in terms of setting forth equitable terms without undue obligations on their part. The reciprocal process, accepting such obligations, is *maw'id*—the process itself, or the obligations incurred thereby. When speaking of the Israelites' *maw'id*, Moses calls it *my maw'id*, and they, in response, acknowledge it as *your maw'id*; perhaps this reflects Moses' stake in the process as the intermediary between God and Israel.<sup>31</sup> Thus, his question in vs.86 is essentially: Did the Lord not do right by you in offering you a fair covenant?... did you wish to provoke Him by abandoning the obligations you accepted through me?

Therefore, Moses' words to Aaron in vs.96, *wa-innā la-ka maw'id<sup>m</sup> lan tukhlafahu*, do not really seem to mean “there is a curse on you that you won't ever escape”; rather, this seems to mean, “you have an obligation you will not abandon” or “a duty you cannot shirk,” and specifically connotes performance of covenantal responsibilities. This makes perfect sense in terms of the lapse for which Aaron is responsible in this narrative, namely, abandoning the *athar*

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Q.2:40: “O children of Israel... keep your covenant with Me (*'ahdī*) and I will keep Mine with you (*'ahdikum*)...”

of Moses and allowing the people to be tempted into worshipping the Calf—clearly a violation of covenant if ever there was one! The “punishment” meted out to Aaron is wholly suited to the circumstances, and closely tailored to mimic the structure of what has transpired beforehand. Since he was the surrogate leader of the people, it makes sense that Aaron bears responsibility for what they did. As the people did not live up to their obligations, their *maw'id*, but rather abandoned their duty (vs.87), Aaron will now have a *maw'id* that he will not be able to abandon for his whole life (vs.97). Just as they were devoted to the Calf ('-k-f, vs.91) and were then punished, so too is Aaron punished, as if he himself had been attached or devoted to it (“look at your god to whom you are so attached” in the translation of Ahmed Ali; again using '-k-f, vs.97). Just as the people had said, “This is your god...” (vs.88), Moses reminds *Aaron* that “your god is only God, and there is no other god but He” (vs.98).

All that said, however, it should be reiterated once again that verses 97 and 98 *do not constitute a curse*. Ahmed Ali’s translation of the critical phrase, “Go hence! All your life you are (cursed) to say: ‘Do not touch me’; and a threat hangs over you which you will not be able to escape,” can be rendered more neutrally: “Now go; for it is for you [i.e. it is your lot] to say for the rest of your life, ‘no touching’; and you [now] have an obligation you cannot shirk.” Reconstructing the other elements in the verse allows us to reconsider the cryptic *lā misāsa*, upon which European scholars since the time of Selden have placed so much emphasis. This line hardly sounds like it is supposed to explain the origins of the Samaritan nation, allegedly doomed to shun contact with outsiders, which their Jewish rivals interpreted as a punishment imposed upon them in order to make them scapegoats for the sin of the Golden Calf.<sup>32</sup> Rather, especially now that we might recognize *al-sāmirī* as Aaron, it seems much more plausible that this verse represents a *Quranic etiology of the Israelite priesthood*.

---

<sup>32</sup> Note that there are really two issues here which are commonly conflated by scholars. The first question is whether *al-sāmirī* is really “the Samaritan” and *lā misāsa* means that he is permanently rendered unclean; the second is whether the Samaritans can really be considered to have had a stringent taboo on contact with outsiders since the time of their community’s foundation.



Admittedly, the Quran generally seems to reflect very little knowledge of or concern with the Temple cult or Jewish liturgy on the whole. Nevertheless, it makes sense that if the Quran were to single out *any* characteristics of the Israelite priestly class, they might be those of Aaronide descent and an exaggerated degree of ritual purity.<sup>33</sup> It is hardly necessary for us to posit much in the way of direct familiarity with the priestly class or the special ordinances surrounding them in either biblical or rabbinic law as necessary background for this verse. Rather, even a passing familiarity with the narrative portions of the Pentateuch or associated traditions would readily communicate some idea of the special ritual obligations surrounding the priests in ancient Israel, as well as their descent from Aaron; that is, both of these elements could easily be reduced to literary tropes stereotyping the priestly class.

It is one thing to say that *lā misāsa* is not really a way for the Quran to explain the “uncleanness” of the Samaritans, or their perception of *others*’ uncleanness, or the schism between the Jews and the Samaritans. As we have already shown, the evidence for such an interpretation is tenuous at best. However, it is another thing entirely to claim that this phrase signifies that Aaron (and presumably his descendants) is to take on holy status and become a group set apart within the larger Israelite community. The most obvious problem with this exegesis is that it may not seem like this is much of a punishment at all for Aaron’s complicity in making the Calf. Discerning how this could be so provides the master key for unlocking the greater significance of the episode as a whole in the Quran. It is possible that this idea somehow reflects the broader theme of the law being imposed upon the Israelites (and subsequently the Jews) as punishment for their past sins; as the stringent laws of the Torah in general represent a divine interdiction against Israel, so too might the elevation of Aaron and his descendants to the priesthood represent a punishment for Aaron’s role in the making of the Calf.<sup>34</sup> That is, Aaron’s

---

<sup>33</sup> This is of course assuming that *lā misāsa* has *something* to do with ritual purity; it is difficult to see what else it could be about, especially if one is trying to discern some connection between *al-sāmirī* and the biblical Aaron.

role is specifically to be a hierophant, *not* a prophet or leader of the people. He had originally been entrusted with judging rightly in his role as “watchman” (cf. Q.7:142), which we surmise should have entailed upholding Moses’ *athar* and essentially being a surrogate prophet; however, he failed in this task, seemingly overstepping his bounds by deciding to follow his own intuitions rather than upholding the *athar* of Moses.

One might suppose that Aaron’s attempt to fill Moses’ shoes, especially at a crisis point, was doomed to fail since real authority is invested in the prophets by God. The role of priest is thus imposed upon him as a way of relegating him to a secondary function. This might be considered an ironic inversion of the Exodus narrative, which is commonly understood as positing that Aaron received the office of High Priest as a token of God’s *forgiveness* for his role in the making of the Calf. Intriguingly, the tension between priestly and prophetic models of leadership *also* undergirds the biblical narrative as well, largely due to the wider political context in which the original Calf story took shape. In Exodus, priestly leadership is not enough; the corrective of prophetic leadership is always necessary.<sup>35</sup> In the Quran, the situation is reversed: the prophet is the original (and true) leader; another tries to follow and uphold his *athar* and fails, arrogating authority to himself; the solution to this tension is to give Aaron another job and explicitly relegate him to a different task, so that he leaves the role of leader to the prophet. The sin of the Calf leads to the institution of the office of the priesthood—such as it is in the imagining of the Quran—primarily as a way to clearly delineate Moses and Aaron’s respective

---

<sup>34</sup> The concept of the Torah as punishment upon the Jews is found throughout the Quran, which thus gave rise to a common trope in Islamic literature of the Jews’ refusal of Islam, the “religion of relaxation” (*dīn al-rukḥṣa*), and deliberate preference for hardship in obstinately clinging to their own religion. See Maghen, *After Hardship Cometh Ease*, esp. 83-101. As Maghen waggishly notes, “Judaism is hard; Islam’s Judaism is harder” (99).

<sup>35</sup> The most probable historical context for this idea is the initial formulation of E or the “Elohist” source, which provided the original basis for the Sinai Calf narrative, among the religious opposition in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. More specifically, E seems to have emerged under circumstances in which prophetic leadership was thought to have an essential function as a check on both monarchal and priestly authority, the collusion of the latter having led, in the eyes of the northern “Elohist” and his circle, to the abuses associated with the Aaronide establishment at Jerusalem under Judah’s patronage in the time of the United Monarchy.

vocations; this much is implicit in the biblical story as well, except that there, priesthood is not specifically construed as negative in itself, only necessarily subject to prophetic oversight.

In the end, even if our conjecture that the curse of *al-sāmirī* really represents a Quranic etiology for the Israelite priesthood is wrong, it now seems entirely clear that the “Samaritan” reading of the episode is simply untenable. The image of *al-sāmirī* that emerges from reconsidering these verses is not one of a sinister interloper, but rather a sympathetic portrait of failed leadership in a time of crisis. The key verse demonstrating this is Q.20:96, which has consistently provided the basis for exegetical speculation on the meaning of the narrative, but, as we have seen, the monolithic emphasis in the *tafsīr* tradition—and in Western scholarship as well—on reading this verse as a reference to the supernatural agency employed by the dastardly “Sāmirī” to animate the Golden Calf has generally prevented us from perceiving its true significance, and thus from appreciating the nuanced and ultimately tragic portrayal of Aaron to be found in the Quran.

## 2. The Quranic Calf narrative reconsidered, 2: a lowing Calf at Sinai?

If *al-sāmirī* is in fact identical with Aaron, and, more crucially, we should not imagine the *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* to be a handful of earth tread by the angel Gabriel (or his horse) and thereby endowed with magical potency, what on earth are we to do with *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>*? As discussed previously, to understand this verse as meaning that *al-sāmirī* cast the aforementioned handful of dirt into the metal form of the Calf, animating it so that it made a mooing sound (or perhaps even transforming it into a real flesh and blood animal), one must be familiar with the exegesis promoted by the classical Muslim commentators—as very many modern translators, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, quite demonstrably are. Further, to many modern scholars—at least the non-Muslims among them—this reading seems to be confirmed by the close similarity this interpretation bears to various rabbinic traditions, for example to what some have misleadingly termed the “Talmudic” tradition about Satan’s interference at Sinai, when he entered into the body of the Calf, “lowing to lead Israel astray.”

As we have also discussed previously, the use of Jewish parallels to illuminate the meaning of the Quranic passages on the Calf appears to proceed from a tacit assumption that they are in one way or another *prototypes* of the Quranic passage, more or less representative of the tradition or traditions from which the Quranic account is supposed to have been more or less directly derived. But if it is better to interpret the *athar al-rasūl* mentioned in Q.20:96 as the “teaching” or “way” of the prophet Moses, we are then deprived of the means by which the animation of the Calf was supposed to have occurred. Further, if *al-sāmirī* is now Aaron, we are most likely deprived of the agent who was supposed to be responsible as well, for we can no longer blame it upon the agadic “Samaritan,” versed in Egyptian sorcery or raised from infancy by the angel Gabriel. What, then, is to be done with this “corporeal calf that lowed”? Besides the occurrence of the critical phrase *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* in two places, Q.7:148 and 20:88, the only “evidence” for the animation of the Calf internal to the Quran itself is the activity attributed to *al-*

*sāmīrī* in the Sūra 20 version of the episode. However, as we have now shown, those verses do not necessarily mean what they have always been taken to mean. Is the Quranic Calf animate or not? All things being equal, it would seem not. Here we return to the problem with which we began this investigation: since the Calf of the *tafsīr* tradition *is* unambiguously animate, it thus appears that the entire classical tradition of interpretation is based upon what seems to be a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the key phrase describing the Golden Calf in the Quran.

Without implying anything like the direct influence of this text on the Quranic account, we might adduce a passage from a very early rabbinic midrash, the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, as an illustration of the basic problem we seem to be facing here.<sup>36</sup> A line from the Psalms refers to the Israelites' sin at Sinai in the following terms: "They made a calf at Horeb [i.e. Sinai], bowed down to an image of molten metal; and they exchanged their glory for *the image of a bull that eats grass* (*tabnūt šôr 'ōkēl 'ēšeb*)" (Ps.106:20). The phrase *tabnūt šôr*, "image of a bull," is unambiguous. In itself, however, the phrase *'ōkēl 'ēšeb*, functioning adjectivally here in describing the *šôr* or bull, *is* somewhat ambiguous. The word *'ōkēl* is an active participle that agrees with the noun *šôr* in gender and number, and thus, again, functions adjectivally. Without the context to clarify things, the terms *šôr 'ōkēl 'ēšeb* would mean "an ox *eating* grass," and, somewhat bizarrely, this is precisely the reading that seems to inform the *Mekilta* passage in question:

R. Pappias interpreted Scripture thus: *They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull that eats grass*—I understand this as a reference to the "bull on high" (*šôr šel ma 'ālāh*), but Scripture teaches us that it was "a bull that eats grass" (*'ōkēl 'ēšeb*) [i.e. a bull of the sort that eats grass]! R. 'Aqiba said: That's enough out of you, Pappias! He responded: So what meaning do *you* get out of *They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull that eats grass*? [ 'Aqiba replied:] I understand this as a reference to an ordinary bull [lit. "the bull as he is the whole year round"]. Scripture teaches us that it was "a bull eating grass"

<sup>36</sup> As we shall see, this passage is also quoted in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, a later midrashic compilation.

(*'ōkēl 'ēšeb*) because nothing could be more gross and loathsome than the bull while he is eating grass!<sup>37</sup>

In its original context in the Psalms, *tabnūt šōr 'ōkēl 'ēšeb* clearly refers to the Golden Calf as an “image of a bull,” *tabnūt šōr*, the bull being, more specifically, a kind of animal that “eats grass,” *'ōkēl 'ēšeb*. (That is to say, the Israelites made an image of a “grass-eating ox.”) In Hebrew of all periods, as in other Semitic languages, the active participle commonly functions as an adjective, and so the poetic figure employed here should not be too difficult to understand. Pappias’ exegesis seems to signal an inclination to associate the Golden Calf with the “bull on high,” which most likely indicates an esoteric exegesis connecting the Calf of Sinai with the bull of the Merkavah or Divine Chariot described in the book of Ezekiel.<sup>38</sup> I want to interpret this way, insinuates Pappias, but the angelic *šōr* of the Merkavah surely does not eat grass, is *not* a grass-eating sort of ox—so this *cannot* be an image of *him*.

Stupendously, ‘Aqiba’s counter-interpretation, which one might presume is specifically tailored to suppress this exegesis (or at least its explicit publication), posits that *'ōkēl 'ēšeb* is not a *generic* adjective referring to a quality of bulls in general (and thus applicable to the bull whose image this is supposed to be). Rather, it is supposed to specifically describe a particular aspect of the *image*, that is, that the Israelites’ golden idol is literally an image of a bull *in the act* of eating grass, a literal “ox eating grass” and *not* a “grass-eating ox.” According to ‘Aqiba, Scripture tells us that the Israelites were so debased that they not only worshipped an idol of a bull, but it was an idol fashioned in the image of a bull while he enjoys a meal of grass—and how gross is that?—and yet they *still* went ahead and worshipped it anyway. Strikingly, the homiletic interpretation of

---

<sup>37</sup> *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Běš. 7, 1.248-9 of the Lauterbach edition.

<sup>38</sup> See my discussion of this concept in connection with Yahuda’s treatment of the Quranic Calf narrative in Ch.2. As Lauterbach suggests, the *šōr šel ma ‘ālāh* could be also be the constellation Taurus, though this is unlikely in this context; however, later commentators who saw the Golden Calf as a quasi-hermetic construct enabled to channel astral influences certainly would have understood the tradition in this way.

'Aqiba which distorts the literal meaning of Scripture seems to trump the esoteric interpretation of Pappias which seems to rely upon and bolster it (since Pappias is specifically objecting that he would like to think that the bull is *not* the kind of bull that eats grass, the latter being the explicit and plain meaning of the original verse).

There is a third interpretive possibility for this curious image from the Psalms as well. If 'ōkēl 'ēšeb could be taken as describing not bulls in general but rather the image itself—in a certain sense, this is already the basis of 'Aqiba's exegesis—then it is not such a radical leap to shift the meaning of the participle 'ōkēl from the adjectival to the *gerundive*. One could therefore see the phrase *tabnūt šôr'ōkēl 'ēšeb* as indicating *not* that the image was made in the shape of a bull *while* he eats grass, but rather that the *image* of the bull *was* eating grass—that is, that it was animate or actually alive. None of the aggadic traditions that we have previously mentioned here make the connection between this verse and the animation of the Calf explicitly; it is found in neither the *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* nor the passage from the *Tanḥuma*, nor *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* either. The closest we come to an indication of such an interpretation in the classical midrash is in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*: as it turns out, the 'Aqiba-Pappias dialogue on the “image of an ox” from the *Mekhilta* is quoted here, and directly after it appears the aforementioned tradition attributed to the 'āmōrā' R. Yūdān about how the Egyptian magicians made the Calf shake (*mēraṭṭēt*), as a sort of appendix to or gloss upon it.<sup>39</sup> The association of these two texts here could by some remote chance indicate that the text from the Psalms is in fact being read as implying that the Calf is animate—the magical “shaking” of the image mentioned in R. Yūdān's tradition being a prelude to the Calf's eating grass in imitation of a real bull, as one might think is being insinuated in the 'Aqiba-Pappias exchange.

Whether or not this is the case, it is undoubtedly true that later interpreters *did* understand Psalm 106:20 as implying that the Calf was alive—or seemingly so—since the phrase *tabnūt šôr'ōkēl 'ēšeb* very commonly features in medieval exegesis of the Golden Calf episode as a

<sup>39</sup> *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, 1.9.3. See discussion above.

critical proof-text for the claim that the Calf was animate.<sup>40</sup> In any event, the crucial point to be made here is the fundamental ambiguity of the key phrase from Psalm 106 describing the Calf and its general susceptibility to imaginative reinterpretations such as that of ‘Aqiba (an image of a bull that depicts him while he is eating grass) or the medieval commentators (an image of a bull that actually went around eating grass). It is the flexibility of scriptural verses and their ready application to different imaginative contexts, which sometimes requires radical misreading or rereading through the exploitation of ambiguity, that should capture our attention here, rather than the issue of the supposed rabbinic precedent for the image of the animate Calf in the Quran.

We would contend that the key Quranic phrase describing the Calf as *‘ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>* has been similarly misread, accidentally or deliberately. Regarding the term *jasad*, about which some exegetes have been quite ambivalent, and others insisted must indicate that the Calf was soulless and lifeless, it seems probable that this simply corresponds to the biblical terminology that describes the image, *‘ēgel massēkāh*. While *massēkāh* specifically means a *cast* image (the Hebrew root *n-s-k* indicating “to pour,” especially pouring molten metal into a mold), it is also readily construed as simply indicating that the *statue* of a calf is meant; *jasad* is likely to mean something similar, as some commentators and translators have recognized.<sup>41</sup>

It is the phrase *la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>* that has been most consistently (and perhaps deliberately) misconstrued. Like the later interpretation of *tabnīt šōr’ōkēl ‘ēšeb* that was built upon the assumption of the Calf’s animation—namely that this was an “image eating grass”—*‘ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>* has almost always been read with a similar assumption being made, as if this Calf’s “possessing a lowing sound” (*la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>*) meant that it was lowing *right then*, at the moment right after it was made, as if the phrase in Q.20:88 was *akhraja la-hum ‘ijl<sup>mn</sup> jasad<sup>mn</sup> khā’ir<sup>an</sup>*, “he

<sup>40</sup> Although it should be noted that the commentators who *do* adduce this verse in connection with the animate Calf, such as Ibn Ezra, do not tend to place very much emphasis on the Calf’s eating of grass per se. See the quote from Rashi’s comments *ad loc.* Ex.32:5 above.

<sup>41</sup> Grammatically, *jasad* may be taken either as an adjective or as a noun in apposition with *‘ijl* (cf. al-Qurṭubī, *Aḥkām*, 7.284); I tend to favor the latter interpretation, especially since this provides a structural parallel to the biblical *‘ēgel massēkāh*.



brought forth for them a **lowing** image of a calf.” In the case of *tabnūt šōr’ōkēl ‘ēšeb*, the misreadings of this phrase hinge upon whether it is the bull that eats grass or rather the *image* that eats grass, as well as whether *’ōkēl* is a generic adjective describing *all* bulls or rather a gerund describing the *particular* activity of that *particular* bull. A similar ambiguity characterizes *’ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>*: is it the *jasad*, the *image*, that “possesses a lowing sound,” or is it the *’ijl*, the calf? And if it *is* the *’ijl*, does this mean that this *particular* Calf “possessed a lowing sound,” or else that *calves in general* possess a lowing sound?

We would argue that it is more probable that the latter is the case in each of these choices. The key phrase *’ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* should be understood as meaning that the people took as their God (or *al-sāmīrī*, i.e. Aaron, brought forth for them) “an image of a mooing calf,” or, to wax Joycean, “a statue of a moocow,” and *not*, as is universally suggested, “an image of a calf that mooed.” The thematic and structural similarity to *tabnūt šōr’ōkēl ‘ēšeb* makes one wonder if the Quranic phrase is in some way a remote reflection of the phrase from Psalm 106, but it is hardly necessary for us to maintain that this is the case. It is enough for the phrase from the Psalms to simply remind us of the ultimate biblical basis of the image. That *la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* should be taken as referring to the generic quality of the *’ijl* and *not* to the specific action of the *jasad* made at Sinai makes far more sense in the immediate context of the Quranic account; arguably, it makes more sense grammatically as well. That the use of this possessive structure with a verbal noun should indicate a general trait and not an action being performed at the present time can be demonstrated by a citation from the famous 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup>-century commentator al-Zamakhsharī (by way of Lane’s lexicon), who provides us with an example that is perfectly apposite. In his entry on the root *kh-w-r*, Lane quotes Zamakhsharī’s example of a poetic use of the word, namely *la-hu ṣawt ka-khuwār al-thawr*.<sup>42</sup> This vivid phrase means “he has the voice of a bull”; it does *not* mean “he is bellowing like a bull right now” or “he is making a lowing sound like a bull this very minute!”

<sup>42</sup> Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon, s.v. خور .

\*\*\*

As we have shown, in modern scholarship, the assumption that the Quranic Calf is animate seems to rely, tacitly or explicitly, upon a particular historiographic approach to the Quran and to the emergence of Islam in general that was first pioneered by Geiger. According to this approach, many, if not all, aspects of Islam, and especially the versions of biblical stories presented in the Quran, are patterned upon Jewish precursors, for knowledge of which one should turn to the well-established canon of rabbinic texts. The common reference to the Quranic Calf story as ultimately midrashic or “Talmudic” reflects the prevailing *modus operandi* in the study of Quranic narrative initiated in Geiger’s time that has been dominant virtually up to the present day. The perennial popularity of this approach explains the general uniformity of modern scholarship on this story; conversely, examining this specific case demonstrates the overarching scholarly trend.

As we discussed in the Introduction, according to the dominant scholarly paradigm, Islam plays the role of perpetual recipient or borrower and Judaism that of perpetual donor or creditor; the political domination of Jews by Muslims may be considered ironic in light of the *cultural* supremacy of Jews over Muslims, at least in the period in which Islam first emerged. Put another way, while Muslims may have possessed mere political authority and triumphed over other monotheist communities by force of arms, Jews possessed moral and spiritual authority due to their claim to represent the original and only authentic religion of revelation. The Islamic tradition is presumed to have been totally porous and absolutely passive in the process of its formation, a kind of civilizational *Bildung* in which the younger sibling matured under the tutelage of the older; and the *Bildungsroman* that chronicles this process is the Quran.

Reliance on what we have termed dependency narrative as a framework for discussing the origins of the Quran has provided scholars with the main hermeneutic principle traditionally employed when evaluating the obscure and allusive narratives of the Muslim scripture: a rabbinic

Jewish source is cited whenever a Quranic episode seems to deviate from its biblical precursor. Strikingly, the method of analysis—near-universal reference to rabbinic prototypes—is justified by an overarching ideology—recourse to the “influence” paradigm—which is itself only vindicated through reference to the textual evidence generated on the basis of that ideology. In other words, the argument for proceeding in this way is totally circular: because Muhammad was tutored by Jews (an axiom first promoted in the Christian polemical tradition), we can isolate and identify Jewish lore in the Quran by comparing Quranic narratives to extant or reconstructed Jewish prototypes; having thus demonstrated that the Quran is full of Jewish lore, we may conclude that Muhammad must have been tutored by Jews. Put bluntly, the Quran has appeared to be full of midrash because that is precisely what scholars have always expected to find there; excavating Jewish influences is thus both the premise and the purpose of research.

Further, Judaism’s tutelary relationship to Islam in the period of the latter’s formation is assumed to have been of unidirectional benefit. There was no reciprocity in the relationship, nor could there have been, except regarding superficial matters, for rabbinic Judaism is presumed to have attained its classical equilibrium shortly after the amoraic era with the codification of the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>43</sup> According to this paradigm, to the degree to which some limited Muslim influence on Judaism might be acknowledged, it is represented as late and indirect; that is, the political and economic dominance of Islam paved the way for its eventual attainment of cultural wealth and scientific distinction, often through appropriating and synthesizing cultural forms “borrowed” from older civilizations; this in turn provided a necessary impetus for the further evolution of Jewish religious and cultural forms in the Middle Ages. (We have already alluded to the problematic bifurcation between “rabbinic” and “medieval” phenomena in Jewish

---

<sup>43</sup> It is only in recent decades that the traditional perception of the integrity of rabbinic tradition after the amoraic period has begun to be challenged, following on the insights of Halivni and his students regarding the gradual process of the Babylonian Talmud’s redaction. To a large extent the consequences of this readjustment have still not reverberated in the study of midrash, a field in which the focus has been literary rather than historical-critical analysis of the available corpus of midrashic material for some years now. See my further comments below.

historiography.) Moreover, the cultural resources for the later evolution of Judaism in the Middle Ages are often (though not always) presented as deriving from indigenous sources, articulating truths and values that were always inherent to Judaism; the outer dress of Judaism at this time might have been Arab and its primary language of expression Arabic, but the thought and spirituality of such medieval luminaries as Ibn Ezra, Shmuel ha-Nagid and Maimonides reflected an ancient core that could only have been authentically Jewish.

Thus, the emergence of the Quran is understood as an inevitable development in the evolution of the midrash. At a given point, rabbinic *aggadah* began to be transmitted to other communities, and so the many family resemblances between the lore of the classical midrashim and that of the Quran are taken as another demonstration of Judaism's role as perpetual donor. Beginning with the work of Geiger, aggadic parallels for Quranic narratives were carefully charted and catalogued; when they could not be found, as we have seen, lost sources were posited as proof of the Jewish mediation of midrash to gentile communities. The Quran thus stands as a kind of testament to the state of the development of rabbinic parascriptural themes and tropes in Late Antiquity—a reliably dateable reference to assist scholars of midrash in ascertaining the state of things in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In the specific case under consideration here, according to this logic, the appearance of the Quranic “corporeal calf that lows,” animated by *al-sāmīrī* or “the Samaritan,” demonstrates that the theme of the animate Calf must have already been in circulation in rabbinic culture in this period, even though the most famous and oft-cited instance of this idea in a Jewish source is found in the conspicuously post-Islamic *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*.

As we have already observed, this paradigm has begun to be dismantled in various ways by contemporary scholarship. As the date of final redaction of various works from the classical rabbinic canon—not least of all the Babylonian Talmud itself—is reconsidered and the fluidity of the canon in the early medieval period acknowledged, the possibility of authentic exchange and genuine mutual development in Jewish-Muslim relations in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages is increasingly being contemplated. As the conception of Judaism as universal donor may

now be recognized as a myth promoted by Geiger, serving the ideological needs of an assimilated but still-beleaguered Ashkenazi Jewry in the post-Emancipation age, the Quran is no longer comfortably characterized as a mere anthology of rabbinic *aggadah*. It is indisputable that the Quran does in fact contain a significant amount of material of a parascriptural nature, but the exact stage of postcanonical development that its narratives generally represent is not at all clear. Moreover, as many of the classical midrashim are reevaluated as well, they no longer serve as accurate or wholly objective bases of comparison.

\*\*\*

As we have seen, attestations of the theme of the animate Calf are actually few and far between in rabbinic sources. *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* account for three of the traditions we have mentioned above, and each of these works may be argued to have reached its final shape sometime after the rise of Islam. Regarding the *Tanhuma*, the textual history of this important midrashic compilation is complex. The work is extant in two major recensions which differ considerably in content; other manuscript witnesses are available which deviate from both of those versions; and the precise relationship of our extant *Tanhuma* midrashim to the corpus of material known as the *Yelammedenu* midrashim, with which *Tanhuma* material is often but not always interchangeable—especially as quoted by medieval sources—has never been conclusively established.<sup>44</sup> The most satisfactory approach would seem to be to emphasize that the *Tanhuma* corpus represents a body of related but by no means identical homiletic commentaries on the Pentateuch which may ultimately derive from a single source, but now represent diverse strands of tradition that are currently extant not only in our two

---

<sup>44</sup> We are fortunate to possess no fewer than three extremely lucid overviews of the maddeningly complex world that is the *Tanhuma* tradition: Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 302-6; Townsend, “Rabbinic Sources,” 69-70; *ODJR*, s.v. “*Tanhuma*’-*Yelammedenu*” (Bregman).

major versions of the actual *Midrash Tanhuma* but in very many other forms as well, including large sections of the great and rather heterogeneous medieval compilation commonly known as *Midrash Rabbah*. (In particular, it has long been recognized that there is considerable overlap between the different versions of *Midrash Tanhuma* and *Shemot Rabbah*, *Bamidbar Rabbah*, and *Devarim Rabbah*, to the extent that virtually the entire second half of *Shemot Rabbah*, for instance, is for all intents and purposes identical to the corresponding sections of our two main *Tanhuma* midrashim.<sup>45</sup>)

Given the extremely amorphous nature of this tradition, it is perhaps unsurprising that the boundaries defining and containing *Tanhuma* material should prove rather permeable. Traditionally, the *Tanhuma* was regarded as a late work, dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE by the great Leopold Zunz on the basis of the affinity of some of the contents of the standard *Tanhuma* with writings of the geonic era. In more recent years there has been a general reaction against Zunz's argument, and certain scholars have opted instead for a much earlier date for a core of *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* material at the root of the tradition, possibly emerging as early as 400 CE.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Bregman—who generally views the *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* corpus as a genre rather than a diffuse textual corpus per se—has demonstrated that although the extant *Tanhuma* midrashim may have been redacted quite late, one can still cogently argue that they reliably preserve traditions that quite clearly reflect a late antique milieu, specifically Byzantine Palestine in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> For a concise treatment of the gradual emergence of *Midrash Rabbah* as an all-encompassing anthology of midrashic tradition that briefly touches on its relationship to the *Tanhuma* tradition, see Bregman, “Midrash Rabbah and the Medieval Collector Mentality.”

<sup>46</sup> See Strack and Stemberger, *op.cit.* for an overview of scholarly debate over the origins of the *Tanhuma*. The current consensus seems to be that the so-called “Buber” *Tanhuma* is the oldest recension of the work (as well as the oldest extant midrashic commentary on the entire Pentateuch), while the “standard” *Tanhuma*, first printed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, was derived from both the Buber *Tanhuma* and another version (the so-called “fragmentary” recension) which is now extant only in quotations and manuscript fragments.

On the other hand, Rubenstein has recently discussed the *Tanḥuma* as reflecting a specifically medieval outlook, one that is fundamentally *distinct* from that exhibited by classical rabbinic sources. Noting the sharp contrast in the appearance of mythic motifs in rabbinic sources, in which such themes tend to be manifest in only rudimentary fashion, and later medieval mystical literature, in which mythical themes are often present in vivid and dramatic forms, Rubenstein draws attention to what he designates the medieval midrashim—including *Midrash Tanḥuma*, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, and the later portions of *Midrash Rabbah*—as representing an intermediate stage in the development of myth in Judaism in the Middle Ages. While he would not deny that these works contain a great deal of material that can in fact be traced back to rabbinic times—notably, he actually emphasizes that one seldom if ever finds images or concepts in these early medieval texts that *cannot* be found in some form in earlier rabbinic sources—nevertheless, these works are innovative specifically in their construction and employment of narrative forms to reframe and recontextualize these older images and concepts.<sup>48</sup>

Overall, it is the permeability of the extant *Tanḥuma* corpus that we should like to emphasize here as one of the most distinctive features of this material. One need not abandon the idea that a core of *Tanḥuma* material might be dateable to amoraic times to allow for the fact that the extant compilations now referred to collectively as *Midrash Tanḥuma* underwent a long period of development before their final redaction. This would appear to be the most prudent approach when dealing with traditions contained therein that lack conspicuous amoraic-era precedents; this seems to be the case, for instance, with our brief *Tanḥuma* tradition on the

---

<sup>47</sup> Bregman has now produced several incisive analyses of material from the *Tanḥuma* tradition; cf. “Mishnah and LXX as Mystery: An Example of Jewish-Christian Polemic in the Byzantine Period,” and also his doctoral dissertation (recently published by Gorgias Press), *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*.

<sup>48</sup> Rubenstein, “From Mythic Motifs to Sustained Myth: The Revision of Rabbinic Traditions in Medieval Midrashim.” Ultimately, the conclusions of Bregman and Rubenstein are by no means mutually exclusive; rather, they are entirely complementary, inasmuch as Bregman focuses on retrieving older material preserved in the *Tanḥuma* corpus, while Rubenstein emphasizes that the methods through which later collections like the *Tanḥuma* midrashim effectively reframe older traditions must be appreciated.

animate Calf, which asserts that, due to the involvement of the Egyptian sorcerers and/or Micah, the Calf leapt out of the fire into which Aaron had cast the golden ornaments of the people, “lowing as it leapt about.” Again, in this specific form, this tradition is *only* attested in the standard *Tanḥuma* (*Kī-tiśśā* 19) and *nowhere* else in the classical midrashim.<sup>49</sup> The only texts containing similar traditions that are even remotely contemporary to the *Tanḥuma* are *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*.

As mentioned previously, although it contains many traditions also attested in much older works, *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*—in which it is said that Samā’el entered the Calf, “lowing to lead Israel astray”—*is* an unambiguously post-Islamic work. Formally, it is much more similar to later medieval aggadic works than it is to the midrashic compilations of Late Antiquity because of its integration of various themes, motifs, and exegetical traditions into a more or less seamless literary whole. Moreover, though its provenance is unknown, its dating to some time after the rise of Islam—usually broadly identified as the 8<sup>th</sup> century—seems almost indisputable, given its borrowing of the names of one of the wives and one of the daughters of the Prophet (namely ‘Ā’isha and Fāṭima) as the names of the wives of Ishmael (whence they become ‘Āyshā and Pāṭūmah).<sup>50</sup> Nor is this our only clue regarding its general provenance, for, inasmuch as its literary structure points to a particular interest in asserting the Abrahamic patrimony, the prophetic heritage, and the messianic promise as the true legacy of the Jews, as Newby has

---

<sup>49</sup> Further, note again that the text of the standard printed edition is most likely corrupt, for it literally reads “the Calf came forth, *scolding* as it leapt about” (ויצא העגל גוער כשהו מקרטע); the nonsensical גוער (“rebuking”) must be emended to גועה (“lowing”) for the passage to make sense.

<sup>50</sup> Abraham’s visit to Ishmael’s wives, perhaps one of the most famous episodes in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, in fact has a conspicuous parallel in a tradition attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās found in Ṭabarī and other classical Islamic sources. The scholarship on the dating and provenance of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* always takes note of the bare fact of the “Ishmaelite” basis for the names of the wives in these texts, but rarely if ever acknowledges that the actual narrative in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* has close affinities to an Islamic parallel. Carol Bakhos has recently argued that there are a number of traditions in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* that reflect a distinctively post-Islamic hostility to Ishmael; similar traditions are preserved in the *Tanḥuma* midrashim, the redaction of which she dates to approximately the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. See Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, esp. Chapter 4, “Ishmael in Later Midrashim.”



compellingly argued, *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* appears to reflect direct dialogue with spokesmen of the fledgling Islamic tradition on some level, insofar as that tradition was, at least by the later 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, actively engaged in a project of appropriating and adapting the Israelite and biblical heritage in order to bolster its own claims of primacy.<sup>51</sup> Even if we must accept a very broad date for the emergence of such documents as the *Mubtada'* of Ibn Ishāq (assuming it ever existed), it seems reasonable to assume that a Jewish response to Muslim supersessionism in the form of revisionist accounts of prophetic history could only be dated to the later 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century.

The question of the date and provenance of *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, on the other hand—in which the Israelites are described as “bowing down before [the Calf] while Satan was within it, making it leap and run around before the people”—has sustained considerable debate for a number of years.<sup>52</sup> While, like *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, it mentions “Pāṭūmah” (or rather “Pāṭīmā”) as a wife of Ishmael, it omits “Aysha,” but substitutes one “Adīša” (sometimes “Ḥadīša”) instead; this, presumably, is *Khadija*, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>53</sup> As with *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the interjection of latter-day “Ishmaelite” references thus points to an origin, or at least final redaction, in the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century at the absolute earliest. At the same time, however, there has been some energetic resistance to the tendency to characterize the work as *overall* late. This has been partially motivated, it seems, by a desire to assert that the translation represents the authentic legacy of the ancient Palestinian targum tradition in some way, despite the considerable interpenetration of later midrashic themes and motifs into the text; at the very least, proponents of

---

<sup>51</sup> See the aforementioned article by Newby, “Text and Territory.”

<sup>52</sup> For an overview of the established scholarship, see the aforementioned article of Grossfeld (*EJ*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Bible, Translations, Ancient Versions: Aramaic: The Targumim”).

<sup>53</sup> Following the text of Clarke *ad loc.* Gen.21:21 (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance*, 23). Clarke’s text reads עֲשָׂה here, but other witnesses apparently have עֲשָׂה or עֲשָׂה (“Ayshah” again), and עֲשָׂה is presumably a conflation of these.

an earlier date of composition seek to dissociate it substantially from the early Islamic context that the aforementioned “Ishmaelite” references would suggest for the work’s composition.

Thus, Hayward has argued in a number of articles that the contemporary tendency to treat *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* as emerging only in the Islamic period, and perhaps even encompassing a significant amount of anti-Islamic polemical material, is simply wrong. *Pace* Ohana and others who have argued that the work reflects a significant engagement with Islam, Hayward’s close examination of pertinent passages leads him to conclude that practically every one of these examples can be explained as deriving from developments and debates *internal* to Judaism. On the whole, according to Hayward, the work is in fact almost completely *isolated* from the wider Islamic milieu in which it admittedly may have received its final redaction; further, it in fact supposedly betrays its thoroughgoing *ignorance* of that milieu at numerous junctures.<sup>54</sup> Part of the established argument for a late date for *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is the contention that it is thoroughly dependent on late midrashim such as *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer*; thus, in response to critics who have challenged his conclusions on precisely this score, Hayward subsequently devoted an entire article to a point-by-point refutation of the list of affinities between the texts that purportedly demonstrate the targum’s reliance on the latter work. Though the specific reference to Satan’s entering the Calf and making it leap and run around is not mentioned in his discussion, Hayward’s refutation of literally dozens of supposed points of contact between *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* is astoundingly thorough.<sup>55</sup> Hayward is not, it must be admitted, completely hostile to the notion of *some*

---

<sup>54</sup> Hayward, “Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Anti-Islamic Polemic.” Hayward argues that most of the characterization of Ishmael in the work is in fact derived from within the confines of biblical and early midrashic tradition, and that the notion that the targum presupposes the division of the world between the Roman Empire and the world of Islam (i.e. Esau and Ishmael) is based on a misinterpretation of the evidence.

<sup>55</sup> Hayward, “Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.” Hayward is specifically responding in this piece to criticism of his work by Avigdor Shinan, the famous Israeli scholar of midrash, who marshals evidence provided by Pérez Fernández to refute Hayward (“Dating Targum Pseudo-Jonathan”). Intriguingly, this controversy is one of very few cases in which the

relationship between these works (or, more crucially, of *some* relationship between *some* of the extant witnesses to and versions of each of these works). Rather, he calls for a more nuanced treatment of the complex processes of composition and redaction that produced *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, and in particular, he urges scholars to abandon both the idea that it is unequivocally post-Islamic in most respects and that it is simply and directly dependent on *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*.

It is certainly easy to sympathize with Hayward's repeated efforts to prevent this important work from being dismissed too casually as late and derivative. At the same time, we should stress that there is nothing in his argument that directly counters our assertion that the critical datum about the leaping, running Calf found in the text is likely to have originated at some point after the rise of Islam. First, Hayward himself readily acknowledges that many traditions in both *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* stand in a complex relationship with similar traditions attested in other works, and that these various aggadic traditions should be evaluated individually to determine their precise provenance and course of development. This is precisely our goal here with the midrashic traditions on the animate Calf, which, we freely admit, are hardly identical in these two texts. In particular, the traditions from these texts, as well as those found in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* and *Midrash Tanhuma*, variously attribute the animation of the Calf to Satan, the mixed multitude, the Egyptian sorcerers, and Micah the Danite; they describe the Calf as shaking, jumping, running, and/or lowing. These traditions are obviously *not* all identical, though they are obviously likely to be related somehow, and it is the complexity of that relationship that we would wish to emphasize here.<sup>56</sup>

---

established interpretation stridently maintained by the scholarly mainstream actually militates in favor of a *late* date for a classical Jewish text. Cf. also Hayward's "Red Heifer and Golden Calf: Dating Targum Pseudo-Jonathan," which does not actually address the Calf episode in the targum *per se* but rather focuses on the idea of the ritual of the red heifer as atonement for the making of the Calf.

<sup>56</sup> One might also argue that the diversity of the manifestations of this theme in the pertinent sources, as well as its association with texts that were either composed or redacted relatively late,

However, we would also emphasize that some relationship between these traditions and Islamic lore is likely as well, and the idea of a significant post-Islamic component in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (let alone Islamic *influence!*) seems to be what Hayward most wants to avoid. That said, however, he does not deny outright that *some* traditions in the work are probably post-Islamic; he simply wants to forego characterizing the work as *thoroughly* or *essentially* post-Islamic, as others have. Though he does not address this element at any length in either of the two pieces we have mentioned here, Hayward would not deny that the identification of Ishmael's wives as "Pāḏīmā" and "Adīša" has *something* to do with Islam, after all. These he wishes to enfranchise as what older scholarship on *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* terms "modernizations," superficial and cosmetic supplements added to the text right up to the supposed time of its final redaction in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, although most of the text should be seen as substantially older, perhaps even pre-Christian.

Whether it is likely that the references to "Pāḏīmā" and "Adīša" can even realistically be as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, or, for that matter, that the targum really contains authentic traditions dating back to before the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, as some older scholars alleged as well, is questionable. But the gist of Hayward's argument is that such data as the inclusion of these names for Ishmael's wives cannot be taken as absolute proof that *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* is a *fundamentally* post-Islamic work. We agree, and would add only that the idea that various extraneous traditions found in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* might indeed be late accretions in fact serves our argument quite well. Again, Hayward does not want to deny the presence of any such accretions; he in fact cannot. Rather he only wishes to emphasize that these should not be taken as determining the character of the work as a whole.<sup>57</sup> Presumably such traditions may be recognized by the fact that

---

suggests that it was perhaps only recently incorporated into rabbinic tradition, and still in the process of adaptation and elaboration at this late stage of the development of the aggadah.

<sup>57</sup> In her recent study, Mortensen claims that the verse about Ishmael's wives is in fact the *only* "evidence" that the work is post-Islamic, and she even speculates, somewhat implausibly in my view, that these names "could refer to other women, now lost to us, who lived in earlier times"

they lack general precedent in rabbinic tradition, which would allow us to conclude that they are peripheral to the established mainstream of midrashic speculation and exegesis. This is *precisely* the point we wish to make about the appearance of the Satanically-animated Golden Calf here in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*.<sup>58</sup>

\*\*\*

The reader will recall that our earliest version of the animate (or quasi-animate) Calf seems to appear in the tradition attributed to R. Yūdān in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, the addendum to the older dialogue between 'Aqiba and Pappias on the "image of an ox that eats grass"; in this

---

(*The Priesthood in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, 1.12). In other words, the supposed "modernizations" do not really exist, at least those which might point to a 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>-century date of redaction. Mortensen's basic thesis is that the work is specifically a charter for the revival of the Israelite priesthood, produced in direct response to the apostate Roman emperor Julian's pledge to restore the Temple; she thus argues throughout for an unambiguous origin for the work in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. In her discussion of date and provenance, she is concerned to refute Splansky's thesis of an 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>-century date, but oddly omits any reference to Hayward's arguments whatsoever, which one would think would only serve to help her case. Cf. also Syrén, "Ishmael and Esau in the Book of *Jubilees* and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan," which emphasizes the continuity of the latter with the former (a widely disseminated apocryphon dating perhaps to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE), and Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature*, which perhaps epitomizes the classicizing approach taken by the aforementioned works. (The core of Bowker's presentation is a long selection of passages from *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Genesis, the annotations to which demonstrate its seemingly innumerable points of continuity not only with rabbinic works but with various sources from the Second Temple era as well.) For a trenchant criticism of the widespread scholarly tendency to exaggerate the connection between late antique or early medieval Jewish writings and the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (usually in order to assert the antiquity of the former), see Urowitz-Freudenstein, "Pseudepigraphic Support of Pseudepigraphical Sources: The Case of *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*."

<sup>58</sup> The intrinsically fluid nature of targum as a genre (to a large degree due to its basis in the exigencies of practical translation) is well illustrated by the case of the so-called "Fragmentary Targum" (sometimes termed *Yerushalmi II*), the other witness to the Palestinian tradition besides *Pseudo-Jonathan* (sometimes termed *Yerushalmi I*). Many of the glosses found here are probably older than those in *Pseudo-Jonathan*, but not all of them are; some of the aggadic expansions may in fact be posterior to those in *Pseudo-Jonathan*; and finally, some extant versions of the text were quite evidently subjected to expansion and supplementation for a very long time (a North African witness to the text dated to 1487 alludes directly to the fall of Constantinople in 1453). Cf. Grossfeld, *EJ*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Bible, Translations, Ancient Versions: Aramaic: The Targumim."

tradition, as noted previously, it is said that the Egyptian sorcerers came along at the time of the making of the Calf and made it appear as if it was “shaking” (*mēraṭṭēt*). If, as we have asserted continually here, the motif of the animate Calf is in fact *not* a midrashic theme communicated to (that is, “influencing”) the Quran, but rather might be an invention of the Muslim commentators that subsequently percolated into Jewish circles and thus gave rise to these midrashic traditions, then what are we to do with this tradition? While some would argue that *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* is one of the latest components of *Midrash Rabbah* on the whole, perhaps datable to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century, there is little to recommend a specifically post-Islamic date of redaction for this work. On the other hand, as is the case with so many classical rabbinic texts, the process of redaction might have occurred so gradually, and the text remained fluid for so long, that it is difficult to say with certainty what the true provenance of the statement attributed to R. Yūdān is.<sup>59</sup>

However, this hardly disproves our thesis of an ultimate Islamic origin for the story of the Calf’s animation. First of all, the Calf’s “shaking” might be thought to be at the absolute most a subtle precursor to the more dramatically animate Calf of the *tafsīr* tradition and medieval Jewish sources; stating that the magicians distracted the Israelites by making the Calf shudder or quake is hardly the same thing as saying that Satan himself inspired or possessed it and made it leap or canter about! Second, and perhaps more important, it is in the end not particularly critical for our

---

<sup>59</sup> Strack and Stemberger (*Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 315-6) assert the standard dating of the collection to the sixth century CE, without having much of a compelling argument for this; notably, Zunz originally asserted a date of final redaction in the mid-*eighth* century, and a few scholars have followed him in this. Neusner’s most detailed analysis (*The Midrash Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries, Volume Four: Song of Songs Rabbah*) is wholly insular, dedicated to a thorough investigation of the work’s discursive method. He seems to take a sixth-century date for granted here, and unfortunately makes no attempt to relate the work to its milieu as he does in his very compelling recent arguments on the apologetic context that informs earlier works of the classical midrashim; see his “Rabbinic Midrash in Historical Context” in the *Encyclopedia of Midrash*. Neusner’s essay on *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* in the same work mostly recapitulates the analysis found in his monograph; on the other hand, that of Girón Blanc, “Song of Songs in Song of Songs Rabbah,” *does* address the issue of date and provenance in a perfunctory fashion, settling on a date of redaction around 600 CE, probably in Palestine. *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* seems to represent a pastiche of earlier and later materials, to a degree that is unusual even for rabbinic works, so a more precise determination of provenance based solely or predominantly on its content may never really be feasible.

argument for us to show that Jews absolutely, positively did not or could not have come up with the idea of the Calf’s animation first; rather, the critical point is that, contrary to the assumptions of many scholars, the image of the Calf as being *fully* animate was clearly not widespread or even significantly attested in any midrash that can be securely dated to before the rise of Islam. A single aggadic tradition on a shuddering Calf—and not even a “Talmudic” tradition at that—can hardly be thought to constitute proof of the ubiquity of this image in rabbinic circles in Late Antiquity to a sufficient degree that the oblique references to the Calf in Sūras 7 and 20 of the Quran *must* be read in the light of this *single* putative precursor and proclaimed to be unambiguously dependent upon it.

Ironically, even this slender bit of relatively early evidence for the midrashic conception of a *quasi*-animate Golden Calf has been somewhat exaggerated by the few scholars who have commented upon it. As it appears in the standard edition of *Midrash Rabbah*, this tradition reads:

R. Yūdān said in the name of R. ‘Aḥa: Egyptian sorcerers performed their witchcraft, and it [the Calf] appeared to be shaking (*mēraṭṭēt*) before them. Just so may you read in Scripture: *Damascus is waxed feeble, she turneth herself to flee, and trembling [reṭeṭ] hath seized on her* (Jer.49:24).<sup>60</sup>

Simon, the translator of *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* in the Soncino *Midrash Rabbah*, renders the critical phrase as “it [the Golden Calf] seemed to be *dancing* before them”; this is simply incorrect.<sup>61</sup> The mistranslation here is probably based on an error promulgated by none other than Marcus Jastrow himself. As it was preserved here, the midrash includes a gloss on R. Yūdān’s statement about the shaking or trembling Calf, explicating the difficult word *mēraṭṭēt* (from the verbal root *r-ṭ-ṭ*) by reference to Jeremiah 49:24, which contains a cognate noun, *reṭeṭ*, meaning

---

<sup>60</sup> *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, 1.9.3. I have translated the line from Jeremiah by adapting the rendering from the KJV.

<sup>61</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: The Song of Songs*, 68.

“trembling” and thus, by extension, “fear.” The word is originally of Aramaic origin, and is only attested once in Biblical Hebrew, in this very verse. Regarding its later usage, Jastrow notes that the occurrence of the verbal form here in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* as a participle of the *pi'el* form is a *hapax legomenon* in Rabbinic Hebrew. The noun is unknown in this stage of the language’s development, and the few parallel verbal uses in Aramaic, in various targums, all have the sense of “shaking” or “trembling.”

It would thus be completely rational to conclude, based on the miniscule linguistic evidence available to us, that *měratṭēt* means “trembling.” But in citing this very passage in his entry under *rāṭaṭ*,<sup>62</sup> Jastrow translates, “the Egyptian magicians made sorcery before them, and it (the golden calf) appeared as if it were *leaping* before them” (italics added). Although the verbal root surely does connote movement, there is no reason to interpret the verb here as signifying “to leap,” let alone “to dance” as Simon does. It is quite probable that Simon, like Jastrow, understood this passage in the light of the *later*, fuller, and probably better known version of this tradition, the statement in *Midrash Tanḥuma* that describes the Calf being animated by these sorcerers (or perhaps Micah) and “*bleating as it danced about.*” Regarding the leap (so to speak) in logic that Jastrow has made here, it is entirely clear that he has assimilated the *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* passage to the later midrash it appears to resemble; as it turns out, in his entry on the root *q-r-t-*, which supplies the key term *měqirtā'* in the aforementioned *Tanḥuma* passage, Jastrow quotes the key line from the latter and then refers the reader to his entry on the root *r-t-ṭ!* While the word *měqirtā'* clearly denotes “dancing” or “jumping,” *měratṭēt* simply does not. There is something rather ironic about the fact that these modern translations of the earlier midrashic passage, colored as they were by the *later* passage, thereby obscured the real meaning of the original tradition from *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*.

---

<sup>62</sup> A hypothetical, unattested *qal* form of the verb from the same root. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature*, s.v. “רָטַט”.



### 3. Midrash or rewritten Torah? Challenging the myth of Jewish precedence

As we have shown, ever since the time of Geiger, Quranic narratives have commonly been approached from the perspective of establishing their dependence on rabbinic *aggadah*, but at least in the case at hand, when we consider the available evidence, it seems far more reasonable to conclude that the aggadic tradition on the lowing (or leaping) Golden Calf reflects roughly contemporary developments in Islamic tradition. However, it is not really accurate to posit that these midrashic traditions are influenced by the *Quran* per se, since, as we have argued, it is more likely that the fully animate Calf seen in later aggadic accounts is not really native to the Quran at all, but rather first appears, for complex reasons, in the *tafsīr* tradition. This theme must have emerged relatively early in the evolution of Muslim commentary on the Quran, given that the earliest extant literary remains of this tradition, dating to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, not only take the idea of the animate Calf for granted, but actually presuppose a considerable amount of critical reflection upon that idea.

To reiterate, the claim of a unidirectional influence of the midrash on the Quran rests to a large extent on an anachronistic view of rabbinic tradition as being uniformly early, coalescing for the most part by the conclusion of the amoraic era in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. But it is clear that the midrashic corpus in fact crystallized over a long period of time, and that the extant collections of so-called “classical midrash” actually contain traditions that emerged over the course of centuries; some of these no doubt originated before the rise of Christianity, while others, it seems, may very well date to some point after the rise of Islam. These compilations, preserved for the most part as collections of individual rabbinic *dicta* on the exegesis of scripture, can no longer be artificially distinguished from later aggadic works that employ a more conspicuously literary format. While there is certainly some distinction to be made between *Bereshit Rabbah* on the one hand and *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* on the other, representing, respectively, early rabbinic midrash proper and the product of the medieval aggadic-literary imagination, texts such as *Midrash Tanhuma* and the

various constituent elements of *Midrash Rabbah* are located somewhere in between these two extremes. Partially exegetical per se and partially aggadic or literary, they clearly reflect centuries of midrashic creativity; and the relatively porous contours of these works, edited, transmitted, and re-edited for generations, if not centuries, preclude us from making hard and fast determinations of their date, provenance, or even genre.

The tendency for modern authors and scholars to present the rabbinic legacy as a uniform and timeless corpus, ahistorically telescoping different texts and traditions into one seamless body of 'āggādôt ḥāzāl, “stories of the Sages,” has most likely had a retarding effect on the careful historical analysis of the evolution of rabbinic tradition. To some degree, this ahistorical approach has certain important precursors in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with Geiger and his contemporaries, but a particularly important contribution in this regard was made by those authors and scholars who, beginning in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, sought to reclaim aggadic tradition as an essential and vital aspect of Jewish literary creativity, especially as a means of promoting various agendas associated with the revival of the Hebrew language. In seeking to make the midrash accessible to as wide an audience as possible, works such as the *Sefer ha-Aggadah* of H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitsky (first published in 1908-11) presented edifying and entertaining stories from classical rabbinic literature, including a great deal of material that was originally exegetical but was now edited to appear primarily narrative and literary in nature. The result was often a kind of uniform compendium of rabbinic lore shorn not only of its important connection to exegesis but, we would argue, of any but the vaguest historical context as well.<sup>63</sup> Sure enough, when we examine the account of “The Sin of the Golden Calf” in *Sefer ha-Aggadah*, we find that the authors have

---

<sup>63</sup> See Stern’s introduction to the English translation of *Sefer ha-Aggadah* by Braude, *The Book of Legends*, xvii-xxii, where he specifically notes that the “collapsing of time and history” which is so characteristic of midrash was enhanced by the romanticized view of the aggadic tradition promoted by Bialik and Ravnitsky and their contemporaries.

knitted together passages from the Babylonian Talmud, both versions of the *Tanḥuma*, *Shemot Rabbah*, and even *Yalqut Shim'oni*, a 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup>-century anthology, at one point.<sup>64</sup>

A similar predisposition towards an ahistorical perspective informs Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* (1909-38), a somewhat more sophisticated presentation of aggadic lore that has had a wide influence on the popular conception of midrash, especially in emphasizing the literary and narrative character of midrash over other factors. Here too originally discrete traditions from disparate works are redacted into a seamless, contiguous whole that utterly effaces any sense of the original context that generated this content. Works cast in the mold of *Legends of the Jews*, or, for that matter, its much less unwieldy abridgment, *Legends of the Bible* (1956), are now very widely disseminated in various languages. Ginzberg at least provides the reader with an extensive apparatus of obsessively detailed annotations; in contrast, more contemporary works such as Klapholtz' *Ozar Aggadot ha-Torah (Treasury of Torah Stories)* (1970) takes traditions derived from the classical midrash, the Babylonian Talmud, medieval aggadic works, and biblical commentators alike and knits them together with only the barest indication of their source or original context. Thus, Klapholtz' synopsis of the making and inspiration of the Calf draws indiscriminately on talmudic accounts, the *Tanḥuma*, *Pirge de-Rabbi Eliezer*, and various later works as well.<sup>65</sup>

Admittedly, these modern authors are for the most part only following in the footsteps of the medieval anthologists themselves. *Midrash Rabbah* serves first and foremost to obscure the different exegetical styles of the various constituent works it encompasses, and redacts ten originally discrete texts composed over the course of several centuries into a single, extensive,

---

<sup>64</sup> *The Book of Legends*, 83-6. A casual browsing of the annotations and glossary of sources provided at the back of the work demonstrates that although the Talmud and the classical midrash are the main sources the authors have relied upon, they have also drawn a great deal from later medieval commentaries and anthologies.

<sup>65</sup> Klapholtz, *Ozar Aggadot ha-Torah*, 3.94-8.

and more or less cohesive commentary on the Pentateuch and Five Scrolls.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, as we have already seen, works such as *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* clearly represent an attempt to incorporate atomistic midrashic traditions into a coherent literary whole, a trend that continued throughout the Middle Ages and produced such works as *Midrash ha-Ḥefez*, *Midrash ha-Gadol*, the *Zohar* and even the Torah commentary of Rashi, which has often been understood as a kind of *summa* of the entire previous midrashic tradition. All of these works of course have different audiences and are informed by different agendas and presuppositions, but they are all basically anthological in character. And again, they all endeavor in various ways to eradicate any trace of the originally independent traditions and texts from which they are constructed, integrating those traditions and texts into a seamless, coherent, timeless unity.<sup>67</sup>

This conception of “rabbinic lore” or “Jewish legend” as being something essentially timeless translates directly into a widely held conviction that the *aggadah* is uniformly pre-Islamic. Thus, when the question of the Jewish “influence” on Islam arises, as it so often has, that influence is automatically considered to have been absolutely unidirectional—Judaism is the universal donor, and Islam the perpetual recipient. As we have shown, this is a perception that has as much to do with ideology as with historical reality, if not more so. It has by no means been our intention here to suggest that the Quranic Golden Calf episode or the *tafsīr* tradition has *no* significant relationship to older traditions of Jewish exegesis on the Exodus narrative at all; quite

---

<sup>66</sup> Bregman, “Midrash Rabbah and the Medieval Collector Mentality.” See also Elbaum’s groundbreaking works on the medieval anthologies, e.g. “*Yalqut Shim’oni* and the Medieval Midrashic Anthology.”

<sup>67</sup> The ahistorical perspective that informs the typical presentation of hazily defined “rabbinic lore,” “Jewish legend,” *aggadah*, etc. often seems to infuse the general scholarly literature on midrash as well. A recent collection that surveys the *status quaestiones* in the field, *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (ed. Bakhos), ably demonstrates the contemporary vitality and sophistication of this area of research; nevertheless, of the dozen contributions, only a few even begin to broach the subject of renewing efforts towards evaluating midrash in its historical contexts of production, as opposed to prioritizing literary analysis. See especially Kalmin, “The Use of Midrash for Social History,” and also Bakhos, “Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash.” On the other hand, see the useful contributions in the recent volume by Teugels and Ulmer, *Midrash and Context*.

the contrary. The scriptural culture of Islam, especially its significant engagement with biblical or Abrahamic tradition, simply could not have developed in a vacuum. In the case of the Calf narrative, the *tafsīr* in fact quite clearly draws on certain key narrative elements found in the classical midrash, in particular the important theme of the role played by outside agents who intervened at Sinai in order to mislead the Israelites. This is a major aspect of the general trend towards apologetic reconstruction of the Calf narrative found in the midrash, and the *tafsīr* literature shows unambiguous points of contact and affiliation with Jewish interpretation in this regard. The central motivating factor here is, of course, the desire to exonerate Aaron by shifting blame to malevolent interlopers, and the same impulse that generated the aggadic motif of the interference of the Egyptian sorcerers, the mixed multitude, and even Satan himself at Sinai was, as we have argued, ultimately responsible for the elaboration of “Sāmīrī” as an independent character in the versions of the Calf story produced in the *tafsīr* literature as well.

Nevertheless, there is an important distinction to be made between the clear precursors to elements in the *tafsīr* to be found in the midrash and those narrative-exegetical elements in Jewish sources that must be acknowledged as likely to be posterior to and dependent upon developments in Muslim exegesis. As we have argued here, Western scholarship has consistently misrepresented both the meaning of the Quranic Calf episode and its dependence upon rabbinic prototypes by presenting the themes of Samaritan involvement at Sinai and especially the animate Golden Calf as indisputably Jewish in origin, and thus as specific criteria on the basis of which rabbinic tradition may be credited as the proximate source of the Quranic narrative. However, recognized as independent developments of the Islamic exegetical tradition, and *not* as themes indigenous to the Quran itself, “Sāmīrī” and the living, lowing Calf demonstrate the pressing need for scholars to rethink the relationship of the *tafsīr* to the Quran, of the midrash to the *tafsīr*, and especially of the Quran to the midrash.

As we have hopefully been able to show here, the Quranic Calf episode actually resembles the biblical account of Exodus far more than it does the more elaborate and fantastic narratives found in the *tafsīr* and *aggadah*; sheared of the “aggadic” elements that the *mufasssirūn* projected onto it, not only does the Quranic account appear more austere and coherent, but themes that are not so readily detected when one reads the verses of the Quran through (or with) the classical commentators come much more sharply into focus, for example the motifs of covenantalism, secession, and rivalry between priestly and prophetic authority. Throughout, the Quranic account seems to reflect an astute discernment of significant underlying issues that inform the precursor narrative of Exodus. Moreover, as we emphasized above, the particular terminology used to refer to the Calf in the Quran may ultimately be biblical as well: *jasad* may derive from *massēkāh* on some level, and the key phrase *ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* of Q.7:148 and 20:88 may perhaps reflect the “image of a calf that eats grass” of Psalm 106:20. Whether or not this is true, it is almost certainly the case that this “image of a calf that lows” should *not* be unambiguously identified with the “lowing image of a calf” that became ubiquitous in both later Muslim *tafsīr* and medieval Jewish Torah commentaries and midrash.

In attempting to liberate the Quran from the overarching interpretive framework constructed by scholars who perceived it primarily as the product of rabbinic “influence,” it has not been our intention to simply substitute *Bible* for *midrash* in this role by asserting the proximity of the Quranic Calf narrative to the precursor in Exodus. The Quranic Calf narrative is no more the direct product of “biblical” influence any more than it is that of unidirectional “Jewish” influence, at least insofar as “influence” is commonly conceived as connoting something being communicated from one party that possesses something to another that lacks it completely. First, it is clear that the Quranic narrative is a subtle *recasting* of the biblical precursor, including unique details in its treatment of the episode and no doubt pursuing unique literary agendas. Second, whereas the midrashim are generally assumed to be the particular cultural expression of rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity, by the time of the emergence of

Islam—that is, at a relatively late stage in the evolution of monotheist scriptural tradition in the Near East—biblical lore had become the common property of many communities. The Arabic Quran is thus in some real sense an appropriation and recasting of Abrahamic tradition meant for an audience for whom biblical tradition is both familiar and pertinent—that is, in a meaningful sense, already *theirs*.

The traditional approach to the Jewish influence on the Quran essentially casts the Quran as a mere repository for rabbinic tradition, even when there is little or no textual evidence for the preexistence of certain Quranic themes and images in the midrash, or at least that part of the midrashic corpus which is unambiguously pre-Islamic. This reductionist approach not only overstates the Muslim scripture's dependence on rabbinic Judaism in particular; it also belies its fundamentally creative and intertextual engagement with biblical tradition—"biblical" intended in the more diffuse sense we have suggested above. Taking both the Quranic Calf narrative's apparent proximity to the precursor in Exodus and its extremely perceptive reading and subtle recasting of elements from that precursor into consideration, it may be more accurate to characterize the Quranic account as "rewritten Torah" rather than "midrash" per se. Admittedly, some scholars have recently begun to question the applicability of the term "rewritten Torah" to the diverse and variegated forms of late antique scripturalism, in particular challenging the obvious privileging of written texts this phrase implies. Nevertheless, as a corrective to the prevailing emphasis on seeing the narratives of the Quran as dependent upon midrashic precursors at virtually every turn—that is, essentially as products of rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible—the characterization of the Quran as rewritten Torah at least has the virtue of suggesting an authentic, dynamic, and most of all *original* connection with older Abrahamic tradition.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Note that my use of the term "rewritten Torah" is not intended to imply any kind of statement about the Quran's date of composition or provenance. Rather, the primary intention of this shift in focus is the dislocation of the Quran from a discourse that is primarily or characteristically *Jewish* per se, which tends to imply that its relationship to biblical or Abrahamic tradition is secondary

Similarly, the purpose of our revisionist approach to the Quranic Calf narrative is not simply to insinuate that Muslim tradition and modern scholarship alike have always gotten the story “wrong.” Rather, the distinction of separate strands in the history of interpretation of this one story—the original Quranic text, the elaboration upon that text represented by the classical *tafsīr*, and the midrashic expansions on Exodus that are to some degree dependent upon and subsidiary to, or at least developed in conversation with, the *tafsīr*—is meant to serve as a prolegomenon to a more sophisticated appreciation of the inner dynamics and tensions in the *tafsīr* tradition during the first centuries of its evolution. In the following chapters, we will examine how early and classical Quran commentators constructed a fully mythologized version of the events at Sinai that emphasized the role of *al-sāmīrī* as a foreign interloper and the Golden Calf as an animate or quasi-animate being created or inspired by magic to lead the Israelites astray. In order to appreciate the inner development of *tafsīr*, it has been necessary to assert the autonomy of that discourse from both a predetermined sense of scripture that is assumed to be inherent in the Quran and from conspicuous Jewish precursors tendentiously asserted to be “influences,” largely for ideological, if not outright polemical, reasons.

If we perceive the *tafsīr* as functioning simply to unpack, highlight, or otherwise merely augment what is thought to be inherent in the Quran, this is in one sense a sure sign of the ultimate success of the *mufasssīrūn* in their primary endeavor. However, such a perception blinds

---

and mediated, as opposed to primary and direct. There is also an issue of basic literary morphology at hand here, inasmuch as “rewritten Torah” tends to connote not only a mimetic rather than explicitly exegetical engagement with older scriptural traditions, but also involves somewhat less reliance on elaborate legendary motifs and extraneous narrative elements, one of the typical characteristics of the classic midrashic form. On the basic distinctions these labels may be thought to imply, see Fraade, “Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary.” Admittedly, the term “rewritten Torah,” coined by Vermes in reference to the Qumran *Genesis Apocryphon*, has recently come under critical scrutiny, in particular in relation to the problem of oral versus written dissemination and adaptation of “scriptural” narratives. Thus, John Reeves has recently proposed the substitution of the term “Abrahamic discourse” for the late antique milieu that may be thought to have generated diverse forms of “scripturalism” that were by no means necessarily *scriptural* per se. The pertinence of this paradigm shift for Islamic Studies, in particular for the comparative study of the Quran, is obvious. I thank Prof. Reeves for sharing his unpublished research and ideas on this subject with me.



us to the commentators' creativity in remaking scripture according to their own needs, prerogatives, and agendas. Likewise, if *tafsīr* is simply taken to be a secondary reflex of the overarching Jewish influences that determined the shape and content of scripture, not only is the Quran reduced to a mere echo or distortion of the rabbinic imagination, but the dynamic activity of generations of Muslim exegetes in constructing and reconstructing scriptural narrative for their audience is rendered wholly invisible, or at least superfluous.

Our analysis of the excesses of some modern scholars who strove to prove, often beyond the bounds of all reason, the direct derivation of the Quranic Calf from far-flung Jewish sources has hopefully served to demonstrate the flawed character of much of this research. The quest for the Jewish influence on Muhammad was established by Geiger, but may be thought to have reached its logical conclusion in the treatments of the sources of the Calf narrative by Halévy and Yahuda in particular, inasmuch as both of these scholars claimed to have found the main source for the Quranic figure of *al-sāmirī* in texts—the *Te 'ezaza Sanbat* of the Beta Israel of Ethiopia and a fragmentary Yemenite midrash retrieved from the Cairo Geniza, respectively—that almost certainly reflect direct or indirect Muslim influence. And in both of these cases, these scholars did a disservice not only to the Quran and Islam by irresponsibly reiterating the dependency narrative taken from Geiger (but with ultimate roots in medieval Christian polemic), but to the Jewish communities that produced these “influential” texts as well.

In citing the *Te 'ezaza Sanbat* as the source for the Quranic *al-sāmirī*, Halévy implies that the Beta Israel served as a passive conduit for authentically ancient Jewish materials to influence Islam, without any original contribution being made by the community that supposedly preserved those materials untouched for centuries. Likewise, in attributing a similar role to a text most likely produced during the “golden age” of midrashic creativity in the Yemen in the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Yahuda effectively effaces the contribution made by the Yemenite Jewish community in general in this period and by authors such as David 'Adanī and Zakaryā ha-Rōfeh in particular, insofar as he insinuates that the primary value of the “philosophical midrash”

produced in this specific time and place is in its meticulously conservation of classical rabbinic texts. It goes practically without saying that for these authors, as for Geiger, there is virtually no possibility of reversing the gradient, of considering even for a moment the potential impact dialogue with Islam in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages might have had on Jewish thought, exegesis, and spirituality.<sup>69</sup>

As regards our priorities here, we should close here by noting that the purpose of our project is not simply to reverse the gradient of influence ourselves, by asserting the derivative or dependent nature of the aggadic tradition on the animate Golden Calf as an end in itself. Rather, in addition to encouraging appreciation of *tafsīr* as an independent, autonomous expression of the creative engagement of early Muslim commentators with scripture, our endeavors here have sought to serve as a corrective to the approach assumed by generations of scholars who, following after Geiger, have stridently asserted Islam's dependence on Judaism. As mentioned previously, the image of the animate Calf becomes more and more ubiquitous in medieval Jewish texts over time; this is not, in the final analysis, evidence of possible Muslim "influence" on Judaism in itself. At the very least, it is not *only* this. Rather, it is evidence of the continuing vitality of Jews' own engagement with scripture in the Islamic Middle Ages, in which the interpretation of the Bible was colored and nuanced by many different elements in the environment, just as it had been during the Hellenistic Age, or would be in medieval Germany, or is today in contemporary America. Yahuda's Yemenite midrash is a superlative example of this: both the Quranic template (*I saw that which they did not see...*) and the formal contours of the restructured episode found in the *tafsīr* (involvement with a supernatural or celestial power facilitates idolatrous transgression)

---

<sup>69</sup> That is, while Jewish scholars of the Ashkenazi tradition have historically held a cultivated appreciation for the "Judeo-Islamic synthesis" as it decisively shaped medieval Jewish philosophy, language, art, and material culture, there has always been a general reluctance to acknowledge similar influence in the realm of religion. This is precisely the type of prejudice Schäfer seeks to address in *Mirror of His Beauty*, in arguing that the emergence of the "Divine Feminine" in Jewish esoteric circles in the Middle Ages primarily reflects not some subterranean survival of antique Gnostic ideas within Judaism for millennia, but rather an organic Jewish response to the efflorescence of Marian devotion in Christian culture in Western Europe in this period; see esp. 229-43.

are appropriated and applied to another, more familiar or “native” context (in this case, fused with Merkavah traditions that had been closely associated with the Sinai narrative since early rabbinic times). Examination of yet more medieval incarnations of the animate Calf in Jewish sources—in other Yemenite sources such as *Midrash ha-Gadol* and *Midrash ha-Ḥefez*, in the *Zohar*, and in the Torah commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, and Ṣiyyōnī, just to name a few—would undoubtedly produce more evidence of this continuing creative, dynamic engagement with scripture. Resisting and ultimately overturning the myth of Jewish priority is not simply a prerequisite for reevaluating the relationship between Quran and *tafsīr*; it also allows for the continuing evolution of *aggadah*, long perceived as the exclusive or at least primary preserve of the rabbis of old, to be better understood and appreciated as well.

## Conclusion to Part I

In Part I of this thesis, we have argued that Western scholars and translators have historically depended upon the *tafsīr* literature as their primary resource for understanding the literal meaning of the verses of the Quran. This is in stark contrast to the established tradition of study of the Hebrew scriptures in the West, which in modern times has generally not relied upon rabbinic, patristic, or medieval Jewish or Christian traditions of commentary, but rather, at least since the era of the Reformation, has sought to achieve an independent, historical-critical understanding of the Bible. Admittedly, the emergence of what is termed Higher Criticism in Protestant Europe was not wholly motivated by purely objective interests, and as many scholars have noted, at its core, the initial drive to secure an historical-critical reading of the Hebrew Bible had as much to do with the delegitimization and repudiation of both Jewish and Catholic traditions of interpretation as with anything else.<sup>1</sup> Further, Higher Criticism is itself not without its critics today; for example, one of the mainstays of 19<sup>th</sup>-century biblical scholarship, the Documentary Hypothesis, has now been widely challenged, especially in the light of the emergence of more holistic, literary-critical exegetical methods. Nevertheless, the historical-critical foundation of the modern study of the Bible remains. This is, for the most part, simply not true for the study of the Quran in Western scholarship.

However, as we have already pointed out, the irony of this situation is that the discipline of *tafsīr* has itself gone largely neglected as an object of study. While works in this genre have long been mined for historical information, the inner dynamics and historical *development* of Muslim exegesis itself has long been of only secondary interest. This is perhaps due to a prevailing

---

<sup>1</sup> The ideological foundations of Higher Criticism—or as Schechter termed it, “Higher Anti-Semitism”—have been thoroughly discussed by Levenson; see *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies*. Admittedly, Higher Criticism had significant roots in the humanistic tradition of biblical study fostered during the Renaissance, which was in some ways a far less ideologically burdened enterprise than its later counterpart in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant Germany.

conception of scriptural commentary as an ancillary field in the Islamic religious sciences, despite the obvious centrality of the Quran in Muslim thought, expression, scholarship, and devotion. This neglect might also be explained by the very fact of Western dependence on *tafsīr* for reading the Quran; as we have already noted, Western scholars have often operated under the assumption that the commentary literature tells us what the Quran “really says,” the distinction between the Quran and the *tafsīr* being functionally effaced. This being the case, the study of *tafsīr* as an autonomous form of cultural production naturally suffers, as its primary function is thus perceived to be merely the unfolding of meaning that is already inherent to and implicit in scripture.

In the previous chapter, we argued that at least in the case of the Quranic version of the Golden Calf narrative, the meaning of the episode that is native to the Quran and the meaning of the episode in the *tafsīr* appear to be quite different, not to mention fundamentally incongruous. It is almost certainly the case that the Calf episode is not the only example of a Quranic narrative for which this holds true, and in a few instances, scholars have in fact acknowledged that what the Quran says and what the *tafsīr* says may seem to be quite different.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the Golden Calf episode, however, and probably in many other cases as well, Western scholars’ thoroughgoing reliance on *tafsīr* has led to this difference or distinction being wholly overlooked.

We have also argued that, at least regarding conspicuously “biblical” or so-called “Abrahamic” materials in the Quran—that is, the copious stories of the pre-Islamic prophets and the history of the *Banū Isrā’īl*—scholars have systematically misread this material due not only to their reliance on the *tafsīr* but also because the *tafsīr* in very many cases appears to recapitulate readings of these stories that essentially coincide with rabbinic midrash, the Jewish tradition of

---

<sup>2</sup> Textbook examples of this phenomenon include Q.53:1-18, generally considered in the *tafsīr* to refer to the apparition of Gabriel to Muhammad, although a contextual reading strongly suggests that this passage is actually about a vision of God, and Q.9:5, the so-called “Sword Verse” calling for unconditional *jihād* against unbelievers, which was commonly moderated or explained away in the *tafsīr*. In both of these cases, scholars have in fact recognized the apparent disjunctions between contextual meaning and that elaborated in the commentary tradition.

narrative expansion and exegesis. Since the time of Geiger, the prevailing methodology in the study of Quranic narratives of this sort has been to reflexively impose the *tafsīr* upon the Quranic template, specifically because such a gesture forces the Quran to conform to the example provided by its supposed Jewish precursors. It is taken for granted in this procedure not only that the *tafsīr* tells us what the Quran really says, but that ultimately, due to the fundamental influence Judaism exerted on Islam, particularly on the composition of the Quran, the *midrash* tells us what the Quran really says as well.<sup>3</sup>

We have presented a radically different interpretation of the evidence here, although certain aspects of our reconstruction must remain conjectural. First of all, as we have shown, most if not all of the purported midrashic prototypes for the theme of the Calf's animation are conspicuously late. Despite the fact that they have repeatedly been cited as the proximate sources for the image of the animate Calf supposedly found in the Quran—the assumption often being that an older Jewish oral tradition informs the midrash and thus, presumably, the Quran as well—we have discounted the claim that they represent the seminal influences that gave rise *either* to the Quranic episode *or* the versions of the narrative found in the *tafsīr*. Second, an analysis of the Quranic passages pertaining to the Calf and its maker, *al-sāmīrī*, based on the meaning of the pertinent verses in context seems to show that the Calf is not in fact understood as animate in the original Quranic account; nor should *al-sāmīrī* really be understood as the name of a distinct character, a foreign interloper who corrupted the Israelites, but rather as an epithet for Aaron.

The conception of the Calf as apparently or actually animate and the portrayal of “Sāmīrī” as an autonomous character are developments posterior to the Quran that emerge in the *tafsīr*; it thus stands to reason that the apparent midrashic prototypes for the Quranic story are either in fact

---

<sup>3</sup> As Hawting succinctly puts it: “Most non-Muslim scholars have assumed that the Qur’ānic allusions to the story depend ultimately on the biblical account and are to be understood as drawing on and developing the interpretations and embellishments which had arisen about the biblical narrative in subsequent Jewish and Christian reworkings of it. In other words, the Qur’ānic material has been itself understood as part of the midrashic tradition” (*EQ*, s.v. “Calf of Gold”).

themselves dependent on the *tafsīr*, or else, at the very least, developed in conversation with or in response to Muslim commentary on the Quran. Ultimately, due to the basic ambiguity of the Quranic narrative, it is perhaps impossible to assert with absolute certainty that Sāmirī and the animate Calf are *not* to be found anywhere in the Quranic episode. But we *may* assert unequivocally that it is wholly improbable that the Quranic episode derives wholesale from midrashic prototypes and can thus be judged to be the unambiguous product of the Jewish influence on Islam, as has been alleged time and again by previous generations of scholars.

**PART II:  
SĀMIRĪ AND THE LOWING CALF  
IN THE CLASSICAL *TAFSĪR***



## Introduction to Part II

In the earliest stages of the development of the *tafsīr* tradition, it seems to have taken very little time for the cryptic phrase *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*, conventionally rendered as “an image of a calf that mooed like a cow,” to assume a central position in exegesis of the Quranic Golden Calf episode.<sup>1</sup> The prevailing opinion among the early commentators was that the Calf had been brought to life, made to low like a real cow, or even spontaneously generated by the renegade “Sāmīrī,”<sup>2</sup> and that he had accomplished this by means of the magical use of the “handful of dust from the track of the messenger” (*qabḍa min athar al-rasūl*) mentioned in Q.20:96. This “handful” was interpreted as the soil from the footprint of the angel Gabriel or the hoofprint of the horse he rode upon when he appeared at the time of the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea. Further elaborations on the story seem to have proliferated rapidly in early Islamic culture, in various branches of literature, so that by the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, the themes of Sāmīrī’s magical mischief at Sinai and the animation of the Calf became inextricably tied to the Quranic verses with which they were associated, and came to dominate commentary on the episode almost universally.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I have continued to quote Quranic verses according to the translation of Ahmed Ali here, not only for the sake of consistency, but also to acknowledge the traditional interpretation of the Quranic Calf narrative, in contrast to the “reconstructed” reading I have proposed. Deviations from Ali’s translation have occasionally proved necessary, however, where his interpretation of the meaning of particular verses is significantly different from that reflected in classical *tafsīr*. These alterations of the translation will be acknowledged as they occur.

<sup>2</sup> Since the Muslim commentators always understand *al-sāmīrī* to be the proper name (or perhaps *nisba*) of a distinct character in the Calf narrative, in recognition of this fact, I will refer to him consistently as “Sāmīrī” throughout this and the following chapter.

<sup>3</sup> “Commentary” is to be understood broadly here; I mean not only works of *tafsīr* proper, but also other works pertinent to, and presupposing, scriptural interpretation such as lexicographical and grammatical texts, narrative and historical works with accounts that are at least peripherally related to the Quranic episode under consideration, and even hadith reports. The various branches of early Islamic literature—exegetical, linguistic, historical, and juridical—can be readily demonstrated to have originally drawn on the same corpus of orally transmitted material, or at

In previous chapters, we explored the possibility that in its original context, these cryptic verses signified something radically different. We suggested that rather than describing the intervention by a malevolent interloper “Sāmīrī” into the affairs of the Israelites while Moses was away on Sinai, the Quranic episode might rather be understood as describing a crisis of leadership, in which Aaron, an exemplar of priestly authority, failed to measure up to the standard set by the prophet Moses by succumbing to the idolatrous wishes of the people. Likewise, instead of portraying an animate Golden Calf brought to life by means of magic, the key phrase *‘ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* might rather be interpreted as an evocative description of the Calf as an image of a lowing cow, and *not* as a *lowing image* of a cow. At the very least, it might be suggested that the Quranic episode presents two *different* interpretive possibilities to the would-be exegete, who might emphasize one or another reading of the story based on his specific preferences and agendas. If the identification of *al-sāmīrī* as an epithet or pseudonym of Aaron and the *‘ijl jasad* as a mere statue of a calf is implausible, it is hardly more so than the baroque narratives that the interpreters wove around the Quranic verses portraying this episode.

The near-unanimity of early Islamic sources (and indeed, of the *tafsīr* tradition as a whole, with a few noteworthy exceptions) regarding the interpretation of the Quranic Calf narrative is striking. In the early, classical, and post-classical strata of the commentary tradition, truly seismic shifts in interpretation—at least regarding the specific issues of Aaron’s role and the nature of the Calf—seem to be largely untraceable in the extant sources.<sup>4</sup> That is, it is extremely rare to find

---

least to have developed simultaneously and reciprocally. Cross-fertilization between genres in early Islamic culture is an indisputable fact, despite the objections of those who might wish to segregate juristic hadith proper as a particular genre of report from exegetical traditions or historical *akhbār*. Some scholars have emphasized the greater reliability of the canonical corpus of juristic hadith (e.g. Azami), while others, accepting Goldziher and Schacht’s devastating criticisms of juristic hadith, have sought to insulate historical reports from that criticism (e.g. Watt, Juynboll).

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, the degree of Aaron’s culpability and the specific nature of the Calf as an entity are two of the main focal points of debate over the episode in the *tafsīr*, but while this debate is certainly significant, it never approaches truly radical positions such as asserting (as I have) that Sāmīrī is Aaron or that the Calf is not even remotely animate. However, as we shall see, this is

any acknowledgement of the possibility that the Golden Calf was a mere statue that did *not* low before the Israelites at Sinai, or that the “handful from the track of the messenger” was not a *literal* handful of dirt; further, traditions that explicitly conjecture that “Sāmīrī” does not designate an independent character in the narrative, but rather Aaron himself, are simply not to be found anywhere in Islamic literature, in the genre of *tafsīr* or elsewhere.

If we were to suppose that some chink in the armor (so to speak) of the classical, “orthodox” interpretation of the Quranic Calf narrative might appear *somewhere* in the *tafsīr* tradition, we would most logically expect to find it in the very earliest stratum of the tradition’s development. But as it turns out, our earliest available sources in fact seem to reflect a fairly coherent conception of the narrative that agrees in most points of detail with that which we find in classical sources of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards. This is perhaps due to the fact that our earliest *tafsīrs* are in fact relatively late, emerging no earlier than the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century; while it may be argued that some *traditions* preserved in these works might be much earlier, the inescapable fact is that the views and interpretations of the first generations of commentators only survive as mediated to us through editor-redactors of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AH at the very earliest. (This is of course true of the views and interpretations of the first generations of jurists, traditionists, and historians as well; that is, this problem is hardly confined to the discipline of *tafsīr*.) Arguably, any memory of dissent in the interpretive tradition could very well have been suppressed or effaced by the time discrete works of exegesis were assembled. Nevertheless, the relative unanimity of commentaries originating from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century is particularly remarkable.

It is by no means our intention to suggest, however, that Muslim exegetes somehow forgot the “real” meaning of the Quranic episode, or simply erred and misinterpreted it. Some scholars have in fact posited that a substantial gap in interpretation seems to open up between the Quran

---

not at all to suggest that we have nothing to learn from what controversy *does* occur within the bounds of “orthodox” interpretation.

and our earliest extant sources, suggesting that unknown historical circumstances led to some discontinuity between the originating source of the Quran (Muhammad himself, for example, or circles of authors or “sectarians” who generated the oldest version of the scripture) and the earliest literary records produced by the Muslim community. This historical discontinuity is invoked to account for the gulf that purportedly yawns between the “true” meaning of the scripture and that which is promoted in early *tafsīr* and then comes to dominate in the classical tradition of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Others have promoted a similar conception that often seems redolent of conspiracy theory: for one reason or another, the “true” meaning of the Quran conflicted with later, orthodox sensibilities, and so unknown parties effaced that “true” meaning and substituted demonstrably false or implausible inventions in its place. Thus, such an approach often seems to posit a sharp distinction between the tendentious readings promoted in *tafsīr* and the “original” readings generated by historical-critical analysis of the Quran, which is inevitably presumed to yield more accurate and less biased accounts of scriptural meaning.

However, we would prefer an explanation of the apparent disjunction between the “original” reading of the Quranic Calf episode—that is, the interpretation that centers on the role of Aaron—and that favored by the exegetical tradition—that is, the interpretation that centers on Sāmīrī and the animate Calf—that does not posit either wholesale amnesia or widespread dissimulation on the part of the early commentators. It is simply unnecessary to suppose either that Muslims deliberately suppressed the “real” meaning of the Quran or else simply forgot that

---

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most extreme, and notorious, exposition of such a view in recent years is to be found in the work of “Christoph Luxenberg,” *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran*, first published in 2000. Luxenberg’s now-notorious thesis is that the language of the original, unvocalized text of the Quran, the *Ur-Quran* as it were, was in fact not the “pure” Arabic tongue held up by the later Islamic lexicographic and linguistic authorities as the pinnacle of Arabic expression, but was rather essentially a form of vernacular Arabic heavily influenced by Syriac, or even an Arabic-Syriac hybrid. When the consonantal text was vocalized a century after its revelation, its original meaning was fundamentally distorted, the masoretic process essentially entailing a destructive Arabization of the work. The obvious implication of this thesis is that there was no continuity of interpretation whatsoever from the time of the Quran’s revelation to the classical period; essentially, by the second and third century AH, Muslims had no idea what the Quran “really means,” because they could not really understand it.

“real” meaning over the course of generations in order to argue that the exegetes might have collectively preferred one possible reading of a narrative over another. This preference might be understood as primarily motivated by the fact that the neglected reading was generally felt to be incongruous with the abiding concepts and values of the mature Muslim discourse as it emerged in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries. A thesis of collective amnesia deprives the early community of agency in choosing to interpret scripture one way rather than another, while a thesis that relies on overt conspiracy *exaggerates* the degree of agency the community could exercise in eliminating views it found disagreeable. Rather, it seems more equitable to conclude that a variety of exegetical choices were naturally embraced because they were compatible with the belief system that prevailed in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries, while other possibilities fell into desuetude because they seemed nonsensical or unpalatable.

All that said, it is hardly the case that the Muslim commentators are *completely* unanimous regarding the interpretation of the Calf episode. While there is virtually no recognition of the possibility that Sāmirī might be Aaron in the early and classical *tafsīr*, and only sporadic acknowledgment of an explanation for the “handful from the track of the messenger” that does not hinge on the story of Gabriel and his angelic steed, nevertheless, there *are* significant points of debate to be found in the commentary tradition. In what follows, we will examine the interpretation of the Calf narrative in several major exegetical works of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century. By carefully exploring the different ways in which commentators approached the basic issues of Sāmirī’s involvement in the affair and the creation and nature of the Golden Calf, we may uncover strands of various debates that shaped the contours of the classical interpretation of the story, thus illuminating the inner dynamics of the evolution of the *tafsīr* tradition in its formative period.

**Chapter 4:**  
**The Golden Calf Episode in Early Muslim Exegesis**

Moses said to his Lord: Who made the Calf for them? He replied: Sāmirī made it for them. Then Moses said to his Lord: But who breathed life into it? God responded: I did.

Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), *Tafsīr*

Even though one particular reading of the Golden Calf episode seems to have been universally promoted in early and classical *tafsīr*, rapidly becoming dominant at the expense of another, the specific interpretation of the reading that came to prevail was by no means monolithic. Rather, as we have already noted, our sources seem to presuppose important debates over the implications of the narrative, with the exegesis of particular elements, specifically the degree of Aaron's culpability, the origins of Sāmirī, and the means by which the Calf was animated (or at least made to appear animate), exhibiting a surprising degree of variation over a relatively short period of time.<sup>1</sup>

Further, contrary to a point we made above, one might argue that it is in fact fundamentally misguided to expect that any dissent in the exegesis of the episode would necessarily be registered in our earliest available texts. As we shall see, the extant *tafsīrs* from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century in fact already seem to presuppose a fair degree of secondary reflection upon received interpretations. For example, the *tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) hardly offers us an unmediated or unsophisticated window onto an "original" Muslim interpretation of the Quran, but rather represents the oldest available expression of the sensibility and outlook of a *mature* tradition that has already undergone significant refinement. Muqātil's *tafsīr* takes a number of older and contemporary debates for granted, including many controversies that are now basically unknown to us and can only be extrapolated from the vestigial traces that remain in this and other sources. While there are elements in this *tafsīr* that appear to be authentically "primitive," at the same time, as we shall see, some of Muqātil's positions and preferences are held in common with Ṭabarī; it is not necessarily the case that the former is "early" and the other "late," but rather, in juxtaposition with the stratum of the tradition's development that preceded Muqātil, *both* of them may be considered "late," relatively speaking.

---

<sup>1</sup> Also, certain anomalous interpretations are in evidence in the early period, especially outside of the discipline of *tafsīr* per se; one does not find a full-blown dissenting tradition here, of course, but rather a marked tendency towards idiosyncratic approaches to the narrative and its major constituent elements. See below.

This is not to suggest that what came before Muqātil is totally lost to us, however. As has recently been observed, the *tafsīr* tradition is at once remarkably flexible and stunningly conservative. While influential exegetes have attempted to effect virtual sea-changes in interpretation through the subtlest means, for example by including or excluding a word or phrase, or rearranging received material in such a way as to reorient exegesis completely, at the same time, because exegetes were typically well-versed in the work of many, if not all, of their major predecessors, suppressed, unpopular, or “forgotten” interpretations could reappear at any time after lying neglected and dormant for centuries. What this means is that interpretations that must have been current at one time but seem to have been deliberately marginalized (or otherwise simply abandoned) already by the later second or third century AH—that is, the era of Muqātil and his contemporaries—sometimes recur in sources of the *fourth and fifth* century, as if they had never really been completely purged from the tradition, but rather had merely been lying dormant.<sup>2</sup>

More specifically, those elements of narratives that it was absolutely imperative for Muqātil or Ṭabarī to avoid or reconstrue simply did not have the same uncomfortable implications for later commentators like Tha’labī or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who felt free to promote them, or at least to acknowledge them. Boyarin has observed an analogous phenomenon in the history of rabbinic interpretation of the Bible: those problematic aspects of ancient narratives that the biblical redactors and representatives of early Jewish exegesis strove to avoid or gloss over were often revived, renovated, and embraced in rabbinic tradition, in a process he describes—borrowing a page from psychoanalysis—as the return of the repressed.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I have been profoundly influenced here by Saleh’s excellent discussion of the “genealogical” character of the *tafsīr* discipline: see *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 14-6. As Saleh puts it, “the interpretive tradition had the eerie ability to manifest itself in its totality even at the moment an exegete thought that he succeeded in changing it” (ibid., 15).

<sup>3</sup> The classic statement of Boyarin’s ideas on this subject appears in his early article “Inner Biblical Ambiguity, Intertextuality and the Dialectic of Midrash: The Waters of Marah,” subsequently reformulated in his *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*; cf. Chapter 6, “The



The bulk of our evidence for the development of Muslim exegesis of the Quranic Calf episode—as for the history of exegesis on the whole—comes from the great classical commentaries of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries, primarily the works of Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923) and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035), to be discussed at length below. Together, these two works represent the culmination of the process that established classical Quran interpretation, and both—the work of Tha‘labī in particular—exerted a titanic influence on subsequent generations of exegetes for centuries. Each of these works contains an impressive number of traditions on the Calf transmitted in the names of ancient authorities on *tafsīr*.<sup>4</sup>

So-called “traditional” exegesis, *tafsīr bi’l-ma’tḥūr*, came to dominate the field of Quran interpretation sometime during the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century; for the most part, the earliest works of this type are no longer extant, though they supplied Ṭabarī, Tha‘labī, and their contemporaries with a significant amount of the exegetical information they had at their disposal. Though the term is by no means a neutral one and has been severely criticized of late, we shall nevertheless continue to employ *tafsīr bi’l-ma’tḥūr* descriptively here. Entirely apart from the ideological connotations the term carried for later commentators, *tafsīr bi’l-ma’tḥūr* may still serve as a blanket designation for works of Quran commentary structured around individual, atomistic traditions purportedly handed down from earlier authorities, directly or indirectly supplied with authenticating *isnāds* or

---

Sea Resists: Midrash and the (Psycho)Dynamics of Intertextuality.” Boyarin’s discussion specifically pertains to resurgent mythic elements in the midrash that seem to distinctly echo ideas and imagery originally suppressed in the drive towards an anti-mythic, aniconic conception of God in the “monotheistic revolution” of ancient Israel. Regarding key suppressions in the *tafsīr* traditions on the Calf, see our discussion of Ṭabarī’s handling of the Qatāda tradition on the Calf’s transmutation into flesh and blood as well as (even more to the point made by Boyarin, I think) Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s citation of the tradition transmitted from Abū Mūsā al-Isfāhanī regarding the interpretation of *qabaḍtu qabaḍat<sup>an</sup> min athar al-rasūl*, which we have already discussed at length.

<sup>4</sup> Historically, Ṭabarī has been seen as the preeminent representative of classical exegesis, but the recent treatment of the *tafsīr* of Tha‘labī by Saleh has shown that it was in fact he who had a greater impact on Quran exegesis in subsequent centuries.

chains of transmitters that explicitly mark them as grounded in the knowledge of the Companions of the Prophet.<sup>5</sup>

Since these works generally claim to preserve traditions on *tafsīr* transmitted from the Companions, who lived from the time of Muhammad himself to as late as 60/680 or thereabouts, some would argue that we need look no further than the compendia of Ṭabarī, Thaʿlabī, and other examples of *tafsīr biʾl-maʿthūr* to access what by definition can be considered to be the oldest available interpretations of the Quran. But working with traditionally transmitted materials necessarily entails dealing with difficult issues of authenticity and provenance, and historical inquiry is clearly not well served by adopting a credulous attitude regarding the origins of such material. This is not to allege that *all* such material is necessarily fabricated; in fact, there is significant evidence to suggest that at least some texts in manuscript that preserve traditionally transmitted exegetical material may contain authentic information at least from the time of the Successors, if not from that of the Companions themselves. But before examining the complex corpus of traditions preserved in the great works of *tafsīr biʾl-raʾy* of the classical period, it may be more convenient to begin our investigation of the early interpretation of the Quranic Calf episode with material culled from early examples of other types of commentary, as well as from works from entirely non-exegetical literary genres.

First of all, though one might claim (however idealistically) that it is the extant works of *tafsīr biʾl-maʿthūr* that contain the oldest exegetical *traditions* still available to us, it is an

---

<sup>5</sup> Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʾ al-bayān* epitomizes *tafsīr biʾl-maʿthūr*, particularly because every exegetical hadith he cites is documented and "authorized" with an individual *isnād*. (This does not mean that he did not have at least some of these traditions from written sources, however.) Thaʿlabī's method is distinctly different: largely in order to make his work easier to use and less bulky, he cites full *isnāds* only for those traditions that had been transmitted to him orally; for those taken directly from discrete, written works, he usually quotes only the ultimate and proximate sources, though he gives the full *isnād* for all of these works at the beginning of the *tafsīr*. Unfortunately, though his commentary preserves a considerable amount of material from works now lost to us or the contents of which are disputed, the omission of the intermediate links in the *isnāds* in the body of his work means that the exact recension of the work from which he is quoting often cannot be determined, since he knew very many of the works of his predecessors through multiple *riwāyas* (a fact which is sometimes illuminating in itself). On Thaʿlabī's use of written sources, see Saleh, *Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 69-75.

indisputable fact that such commentaries were simply not the only discrete *works* of Quranic exegesis available before the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century. They may not have even been the earliest; at the very least, it seems that the most primitive collections of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* emerged at approximately the same time as other commentaries that did *not* base their authority on that of the Companions (at least not consistently), and did not utilize the device of the *isnād* to authenticate their contents (or at least did so in a rather rudimentary fashion).<sup>6</sup> Later exegetes would derogatorily call such works *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*: in such works, rather than relying on autonomous units of transmitted tradition to interpret the scriptural text, the author instead provides a running commentary on scripture in the form of a continuous gloss or paraphrase, often supplemented with narrative expansions and other material.<sup>7</sup> The question of the origins and provenance of the few early works of this sort that are still extant is likewise fraught with difficulty, but arguably the two most important such works, the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) and the *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, which some might identify as the *tafsīr* of Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī (d.

---

<sup>6</sup> But note that our extant examples of *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* were likewise anchored in “traditional” authority, at least to some degree. The beginning of *Tafsīr Muqātil* acknowledges numerous authorities (among them a considerable number of Successors) from whom Muqātil supposedly derived his *tafsīr*; likewise, the identification of the extant commentary attributed to al-Kalbī rests upon the basis of the work’s *isnād*, traced back from the redactor through al-Kalbī and eventually to Ibn ‘Abbās. See discussion below.

<sup>7</sup> Later commentators reverted to this type of procedure. For example, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s *tafsīr* generally lacks *isnāds*, and much of the exegesis is presented as if it were the author’s own opinion, regardless of its ultimate basis. Note also that adhering to the protocol of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* was not necessarily insulation from criticism; for example, in the medieval polemic against *isrā'īliyyāt*, even Ṭabarī was indicted for transmitting from unreliable sources. (Despite his consistent promotion of the ethos of traditionism in his various works, not only in his *tafsīr* and his hadith collection but even in his chronicle, Ṭabarī was generally considered a weak transmitter by later standards and was thus typically ignored by later *muhaddithūn*.) The solution proposed in the hermeneutics of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr was to obviate weak traditions entirely by prioritizing *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān*, a method that is commonly in evidence in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, as we shall see. This is supremely ironic, given that Muqātil was later condemned as unreliable, probably because the sources of his *tafsīr* were not properly documented through *isnād*.

146/763), are readily datable to the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, rather earlier than the most important extant examples of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*.<sup>8</sup>

Further, important evidence for the early development of commentary on the Calf narrative may be gleaned from other works on the Quran that are not properly “exegetical” per se, for example grammatical and lexicographic texts. While the material contained therein often has an ambiguous relationship to the exegetical tradition proper, these texts are, like the early examples of *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, somewhat easier to locate in the pre-classical period than the transmitted traditions preserved in classical compendia. Moreover, we also find references to the Calf episode in miscellaneous 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>-century texts from *wholly* non-exegetical genres, for example in early historical works. These works likewise cannot be completely dissociated from exegesis per se, not least of all since literary genres were hardly isolated or insulated from one another in early Islamic tradition; nevertheless, they are of great value to us since, like the grammatical and lexicographic texts to be considered here, many of these works have firmer footing in the pre-classical period.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Note that determining these texts' provenance is still a complicated matter; it would be a mistake to conceive of them as necessarily having been “published” by the exegetes to whom they are attributed. Both appear to contain significant later interpolations, the degree of intrusiveness of which is debated. It is perhaps more convenient to treat the texts of Muqātil, al-Kalbī et al. first simply because they at least *purport* to reflect the opinions of individual authors whom we can date more or less reliably; that is, unlike later works such as Ṭabarī's, they are at least not *explicitly* composite works supposedly relating the opinions of whole generations of older exegetes. The relatively recent “recovery” of new examples of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* such as those attributed to 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827) and Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938) has been viewed with suspicion by some.

<sup>9</sup> It is tempting to argue that works in the religious sciences per se were more susceptible to redaction and interpolation because of their frequent preservation and transmission as school texts; even Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* appears to be extant in a redacted edition, given that Abū Ja'far himself appears in some of the *isnāds* in the work (see Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 124). This phenomenon appears to have been most prominent among the jurists: see Calder's classic discussion of the redaction of the *Muwatta'* in *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence*, 20-38. However, it is doubtful that “secular” works in fields such as *adab*, history, or genealogy were ever straightforwardly “published” either, even in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries. See the illuminating comments on literary culture and book production in the imperial capital of Baghdad during the high Abbasid period in Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfur and Arabic Writerly Culture*; cf. also Cooperson and Toorawa, ed., *Arabic Literary Culture, 500-925, passim*.

Moreover, while the material from works of *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* on the one hand and grammar and lexicography on the other generally shows considerable overlap with the data found in the classical compendia of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, we do at times find some intriguing deviations from the mainstream interpretation of the Calf episode as it was known from classical exegesis in these works. It is in these texts, from the genres of belles-lettres, history, and even poetry, that we find hints of anomalous readings of the Calf narrative that simply do not occur (or recur) either in contemporary or later works in the Quranic sciences per se. It is thus here that we can detect the most noteworthy interpretive dissent to be found in early Islamic exegesis and other forms of commentary (direct or indirect) on this episode.

## 1. Paraphrastic exegesis, 1: *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*

Among the most important documents of the early development of *tafsīr* as a literary genre—and possibly as a cultural practice—is the commentary attributed to Abū'l-Ḥasan Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 150/767), a traditionist and exegete from Khurāsān who relocated to Iraq after the Abbasid revolution, supposedly to seek the patronage of the new regime.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, *Tafsīr Muqātil* may be considered either early or late, depending on one's perspective. While a few examples of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* attributed to early authorities such as Mujāhid and Sufyān al-Thawrī are extant in manuscript, because of the stature of these authorities in the later tradition and their frequent quotation in works of the classical period, there is always the possibility that these texts are not authentic products of the second century AH, but rather were extracted from later works citing them and “reconstituted” as autonomous *tafsīrs* at some point well after the *floruit* of the eponymous exegetes.<sup>11</sup> But this is impossible—or at least extremely improbable—in the case of *Tafsīr Muqātil*. First of all, because of its author's

---

<sup>10</sup> Most of the important primary and secondary sources on Muqātil are given in Goldfeld, “Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān”; see also Sezgin, *GAS*, 1.36-7. More recent treatments of note will be mentioned in the course of the following discussion. The most important and oft-cited notices in the *rijāl* literature are those of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (*Tārikh Baghdād*, 13.160-9, no.7143) and Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (*Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, 10.279-85, no.501); major entries on Muqātil are also found in Ibn Khallikān and al-Dhahabī. There has never been a major monograph on Muqātil, nor a critical edition of his commentary. (The original 5-volume edition by Shihāta was originally suppressed upon publication in Cairo in 1969, though it has been reprinted a number of times since then.)

<sup>11</sup> There is in fact solid evidence for thinking that *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, as well as the *tafsīr* of Sufyān, is genuinely early—or at least contains genuinely early material—but the specter of secondary derivation is difficult to dispel. Versteegh rejects the authenticity of both of these texts out of hand (“Grammar and Exegesis,” 207). To this day, reconstructed editions of “lost” *tafsīrs* continue to be produced, for example that of the Successor al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim published in Cairo in 1999. Occasionally Western scholars have sought to reconstruct lost works as well, usually by gathering and comparing quotations from later works; a notorious example is Newby's *The Making of the Last Prophet*, an “edition” of the *Kitāb al-mubtada'* that reportedly comprised a large part of the original version of Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*, which was considerably abridged in the extant recension of Ibn Hishām. (On this, see the criticism of Conrad, “Recovering Lost Texts: Some Methodological Issues”; cf. also Landau-Tasserion, “On the Reconstruction of Lost Sources.”)

disavowal by the later tradition, he was seldom cited by classical commentators, at least directly.<sup>12</sup> Second, since Muqātil's predilection was for "paraphrastic" or line-by-line glossing of the Quran, his exegeses were rather unsuited for transmission in the form of atomistic units of tradition in the *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* format.<sup>13</sup> Although the *tafsīr* attributed to Muqātil that survives today was actually compiled by his student al-Hudhayl b. Ḥabīb and may represent a recension that originated as late as the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> or even the early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, the scholarly consensus seems to be that this commentary is for the most part genuinely the work of Muqātil himself. It is thus almost certainly one of the oldest genuine surviving works in the field of Quranic exegesis.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> The exception to this general rule is Tha'labī: note that in his introduction to his *tafsīr*, *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, Tha'labī names Muqātil among the *mashāyikh al-salaf* along with more widely accepted authorities such as Mujāhid and al-Suddī (see Saleh, *Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 83). This would seem to imply that Tha'labī did not perceive any basic distinction between these early authorities in terms of their putative orthodoxy.

<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, I am judging by the form of the commentary as it is currently extant, which appears to be a highly integrated, unified work that would resist dismemberment into autonomous units of tradition. However, as Versteegh points out, upon closer examination of the text, one does occasionally come across discrete exegetical hadith that were originally independently transmitted from Muqātil that al-Hudhayl *reincorporated* into the *tafsīr*. Unlike the *tafsīr* itself, these traditions were (supposedly) properly documented by Muqātil, who most frequently claimed to have them from Ibn 'Abbās through 'Aṭā' (Versteegh, "Grammar and Exegesis"). These autonomous traditions are relatively scarce in the body of the work; further, Muqātil's hadith do not seem to have ever been very widely disseminated, probably due to his being generally discredited in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century. But his *tafsīr* was certainly still read in this era; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī quotes 'Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 290/903) to the effect that he felt it was a pity that such an erudite work lacked *isnād* (cited in Goldfeld, "Muqātil," 17).

<sup>14</sup> On the transmission and authenticity of *Tafsīr Muqātil*, see esp. Versteegh, "Grammar and Exegesis," 207-9. Gilliot has serious reservations about the provenance of the text and discusses its complex transmission history in his "Muqātil, Grand Exegete, Traditionniste et Théologien Maudit"; cf. also his "L'Exégèse du Coran en Asie Centrale et au Khorasan." In the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century the work was apparently circulating in at least two distinct recensions, for Tha'labī knew both "our" version, the Baghdādī, and a Khurāsānī recension as well. Goldfeld (who generally held an extremely sanguine view of the early emergence of *tafsīr* sources) claims that Muqātil "published" a draft of his commentary during his own lifetime, citing a statement in the *tarjama* supplied by Ibn Ḥajar that Muqātil did so while his teacher al-Ḍaḥḥāk was still alive ("Muqātil," 11-2).

Wansbrough observes evidence of late redaction in the work as currently extant: for example, he discerns the totally anachronistic occurrence of sophisticated grammatical interpretations, and even instances of direct citation of the famed grammarian al-Farrā' (d. 208/822), in the body of

At the same time, inasmuch as this commentary is commonly perceived as a repository of many of the established exegetical traditions current in its day, it thus represents the *culmination* of the most ancient tradition of Quran commentary in Islamic culture, reflecting a long process of narrative and homiletic elaboration on the text of scripture in a milieu dominated by popular preachers, the *quṣṣās*. Later Sunnī authorities criticized these preachers for their supposed doctrinal deviations, and it is thus perhaps unsurprising that Muqātil himself was accused of heterodoxy by scholars of the classical period.<sup>15</sup> This is ironic considering the conspicuous dogmatic concerns that recur throughout the whole commentary; time and again, Muqātil’s paraphrases clearly reflect a pervasive interest in doctrinal issues such as prophetic dignity—if not actual impeccability—and divine transcendence, to the point where he is willing to “correct” the scriptural text to make it conform with pious preferences.<sup>16</sup> Many later commentators,

---

the text. That said, it must be acknowledged that Wansbrough held that *none* of the early examples of *tafsīr* can possibly be thought to have been redacted before the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, simply as a matter of principle. (Wansbrough’s main discussion of *Tafsīr Muqātil* can be found in *Quranic Studies*, 122-37, where its exegetical style is frequently compared with that of the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq and the commentary attributed to Muḥammad al-Kalbī, on which see below.) *Pace* Wansbrough, however, Versteegh notes that the conspicuous interpolations observed by Wansbrough are actually present in only *one* of the manuscript witnesses to *Tafsīr Muqātil*. *Pace* Versteegh, however, for Gilliot these interpolations remain problematic, and significantly compromise the integrity of the work. Note also the *isnād* that recurs throughout the work, indicating the provenance of the extant redaction: ‘Ubayd Allāh—*abihi*—al-Hudhayl—Muqātil.

<sup>15</sup> Goldziher held that at one point opposition to the activity of these preachers motivated a general ban on *tafsīr* entirely; Birkeland disagreed and claimed that it was specifically the hostility of the *muhaddithūn* to *tafsīr bi’l-ra’y* in particular that motivated the ban. Ironically, both of these strands, supposedly anathema to later exegetes who strove to assert traditional authority for *tafsīr*, seem to converge in Muqātil. The early *rijāl* expert ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Ḥakam b. Bishr specifically noted that people did not rely upon Muqātil because he was a *qāṣṣ* (*kāna qāṣṣ<sup>am</sup> taraka al-nās hadīthihi*, cited in multiple sources; cf. Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb*, 283-4). The main primary source on the *quṣṣās* is the *Kitāb al-quṣṣās wa’l-mudhakkārīn* of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), while the classic discussion remains Pedersen, “The Islamic Preacher: *wā’iz, mudhakkār, qāṣṣ*”; see also Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East*.

<sup>16</sup> An example of such a dogmatically motivated gloss is the common substitution of *anzala* with *awḥā*; the former signifies direct revelation, the latter revelation through inspiration. The term is also imposed in any situation where God speaks to a prophet, to avoid the perception that He communicated with him face-to-face. Versteegh gives numerous examples of Muqātil’s most



including Ṭabarī, refused to employ—or at least overtly cite—his work; he was often accused of anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*), and was declared unfit (*matrūk*) as a hadith transmitter, which typically represented the death knell for a scholar after the general acceptance of rigorous standards governing the transmission of religious knowledge sometime during the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century.

Muqātil's rejection by later scholars was for the most part motivated by his neglect of the *isnād*. Although his *tafsīr* contains a list of some thirty authorities he claimed as his sources (notably, this seems to have actually been supplied by al-Hudhayl when the work was redacted), Muqātil only occasionally and casually names figures such as Ibn 'Abbās or al-Ḍaḥḥāk as the ultimate sources of his *tafsīr* in the actual body of the work. Further—and more damning in the eyes of later scholars—he never provides the chains of transmitters through which he received his information anywhere in his *tafsīr*, not even in his list of authorities. Given that the convention of the *isnād* was, by most accounts, only beginning to emerge in his time, it may seem strange that such an anachronistic charge was levied against Muqātil.<sup>17</sup> But it was precisely this procedural irregularity that later tradition found intolerable: after the ascendance of *tafsīr bi'l-mathūr*, no exegete could countenance promoting scriptural interpretations that were not anchored in the authority of Islam's sainted founders and properly documented with sound *isnāds*; “free” commentary on the Quran was therefore discredited and its practitioners' reputations vigorously impugned.<sup>18</sup>

---

common substitutions, both those of a grammatical nature and those that are more likely to be theologically burdened or “ideological”; see “Grammar and Exegesis,” 211-3.

<sup>17</sup> Actually, the charge of *tashbīh* was as anachronistic as that of neglecting *isnād*, as Gilliot points out: “...this work was composed before the Mu'tazilite attacks on a “primitive” theology for which the accusations of anthropomorphism did not have much meaning... What is more, Muqātil wrote or lectured on the Qur'ān at a time when the rules regarding the pathways of transmission were not yet fixed” (“The Beginnings of Qur'ānic Exegesis,” 17).

<sup>18</sup> Most contemporary treatments of Muqātil downplay his supposed heterodoxy and emphasize his irregularity with regard to use of the *isnād* as the real reason for his repudiation by later tradition. This point was first made by Birkeland; further, upon investigating the matter thoroughly, Nwyia concluded that there is in fact *no trace* of anthropomorphism to be found in any of the three extant works attributed to Muqātil, though he conceded that this tendency might

That said, if we are willing to accept that his condemnation was by and large “politically” motivated, in the sense of being driven more by considerations of religious authority and the methods by which knowledge was to be legitimated than by concerns with his work’s actual content, in a certain sense, Muqātil was clearly guilty as charged. Although the ultimate sources of his *tafsīr* are given at the beginning of the work, and many of the interpretations therein are undoubtedly drawn from the common store of glosses and stories that were the stock-in-trade of the *quṣṣās*, overall, the *Tafsīr Muqātil* is a conspicuously individual creation. Despite its early date and its purported “popular” origins, it is neither primitive nor theologically unsophisticated; despite its frequent reliance on traditional glosses and stock formulae, it is often nuanced, subtle, even sardonic. In short, it represents the pinnacle of the earliest phase of the evolution of the *tafsīr* genre, its refinement and artistry a vivid display of its author’s formidable literary (or oratorical) skill. If Muqātil’s poor repudiation was indeed due to his lack of conformity to what eventually became the established, accepted form of exegesis, adherence to which forced authors to become “mere” editors and collectors (at least on the surface), then this is supremely ironic, for it is precisely the individuality of his vision that makes Muqātil’s work so remarkable and distinctive.<sup>19</sup>

---

have been expressed in his lost theological writings (see Goldfeld, “Muqātil,” 3-4). The accounts that declare Muqātil *matrūk* as a hadith scholar are particularly damning; he was accused of currying favor with the Abbasids by offering to fabricate hadith on their behalf that glorified their ancestor al-‘Abbās.

<sup>19</sup> Goldfeld specifically notes that this unusual singularity is a virtue and not a defect of Muqātil’s work: “...owing to the fact that the eclectic Muqātil amalgamated the information of his sources, we are fortunate to be able to refer to a Tafsīr expressing the knowledge and theology of one interpreter” (“Muqātil,” 2). Of course, it is by no means the case that individual creativity in the exegetical enterprise ended with the advent of “traditional” exegesis; as we shall see in the next chapter, commentators could still exercise a significant amount of control over their material through selection, omission, and arrangement, as well as outright fabrication. Nor did the general repudiation of authors like Muqātil necessarily spell the end for the “folkloristic” or “popular” content of works like his. Gilliot particularly emphasizes that traditions with content extremely similar to Muqātil’s would eventually find their way into the classical commentaries of Ṭabarī and others, but *only* after being domesticated through assimilation to the hadith-report format, authenticated through proper *isnāds* and attributed to impeccable authorities such as Ibn ‘Abbās (“Beginnings,” 17-8).

Though Muqātil's importance for our understanding of the early development of Muslim exegesis was recognized by many scholars before him (including Massignon, Birkeland, Abbott, Nwyia, and Goldfeld), it was Wansbrough who first attempted to evaluate the work's significance as a whole, placing critical emphasis not only on its content but on its overarching interpretive style and methodology.<sup>20</sup> Wansbrough sees *Tafsīr Muqātil* as an exemplar of what he terms "haggadic" exegesis, in which both concise glosses and long narrative passages are interspersed among Quranic verses or portions of verses in an attempt to produce a fluid exposition that clarifies and amplifies scriptural meaning. Wansbrough notes that in *Tafsīr Muqātil* the interpretive tendency he terms *narratio* is given pride of place: more than in any of the other examples of this early genre of commentary, in many passages in Muqātil's work, elaboration of the narrative framework actually takes precedence over explication of the scriptural verses that ostensibly provide the pretext or basis for the narrative.<sup>21</sup> Other distinctive characteristics of the work include a strong tendency towards the specification of ambiguous or anonymous references (termed *ta'yīn al-mubham* or "clarifying the obscure" in classical hermeneutics), intratextual glossing (where the treatment of a given scriptural passage provokes the citation of corroborating verses from parallel passages), and the regular use of formulaic terms to separate scripture from gloss (e.g. *ay*, *ya'nī*, *yaqūlu*, etc.).<sup>22</sup> As we shall see, all of these elements are quite prominent in

---

<sup>20</sup> See Goldfeld for comprehensive references to the older scholarship on Muqātil. (He strangely overlooks Abbott's treatment, however; see *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II*, 92-113, a concise—if extremely positivistic—discussion of Muqātil's career in the context of the rise of Quran commentary that accompanies her edition of a short fragment from his *Kitāb al-wujūh wa'l-nazā'ir*.)

<sup>21</sup> In such cases, it is questionable if the procedure can truly be termed "exegetical" at all. See *Quranic Studies*, 127 ff. ("the scriptural text was subordinate, conceptually and syntactically, to the *narratio*"). Thus, one characteristically finds a very high ratio of narrative exposition or gloss to scriptural verses in Muqātil's commentary. A balanced ratio of 1:1, or very nearly that, is far more typical of paraphrastic *tafsīrs*, for example that of al-Kalbī/Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās or the *Tafsīr Jalālayn*; on these, see below. Incidentally, on the basis of stylistic criteria such as those employed by Wansbrough, both Gilliot and Leemhuis insinuate that *Tafsīr Muqātil* may not be authentically early, at least not as early as the *tafsīrs* of Mujāhid or Sufyān al-Thawrī; this is the exact opposite of Versteegh's appraisal.

the passages from Muqātil's *tafsīr* dealing with the Calf narrative. More importantly, in Wansbrough's opinion, all of these elements seem to demonstrate the work's association with popular preaching: many of Muqātil's glosses seem like asides delivered to a hypothetical audience, and many aspects of his technique would seem to be quite superfluous in a literary context, *but indispensable in an oral one*. Wansbrough concludes that the most obvious *Sitz im Leben* for Muqātil's commentary, as for "haggadic" exegesis on the whole, is thus the popular sermon, corroborating what other scholars have surmised about its ultimate origins in the milieu of the *quṣṣās*.<sup>23</sup>

\*\*\*

The first verses in the Quran to mention the Golden Calf episode, Q.2:51-52, provide the basis for an extended narrative in *Tafsīr Muqātil* focusing on the circumstances and repercussions of Israel's transgression at Sinai. While this story actually begins a few pages earlier in the commentary with the initial reference to the revelation of the Torah to Moses, Muqātil's presentation of the Calf narrative here appears to be largely independent from the rest of the passage, and establishes some of the major themes connected with the episode that recur in his subsequent treatments of it.<sup>24</sup> His approach here epitomizes the technique of *narratio* that is so

---

<sup>22</sup> As one might expect, *ay* and *ya'nī* introduce synonymous glosses, *yaqūlu* an explanatory paraphrase. Muqātil's insistent resort to "anaphora" (the often redundant provision of synonyms and paraphrase) and obsessive (and occasionally ludicrous) specification of every ambiguous detail has been pointed out by many scholars.

<sup>23</sup> *Quranic Studies*, 145-8. Cf. Rippin's comments on the nature of the genre in his article on *tafsīr* in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, which emphasize its origins in the milieu of popular preaching: "Adding detail to otherwise sketchy scripture and answering the rather mundane questions which the curious mind will raise when confronted with a contextless scriptural passage are the central concerns of this genre. In fact, the actual narrative seems to be of prime importance; the text of scripture remains underneath the story itself, often subordinated in order to construct a smoothly flowing narrative" (*ER*, s.v. "Tafsīr").

<sup>24</sup> See *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1.104-7.

characteristic of “haggadic” exegesis according to Wansbrough, for in this passage, the skillful elaboration of narrative is clearly prioritized over the actual explication of scripture, which is largely relegated to a subsidiary role. Using a mere handful of verses from the immediate scriptural context, in particular Q.2:51-52 and 54-56, Muqātil creates an extended version of the Calf episode by citing short segments from these verses and then interspersing a considerable amount of paraphrase and original exposition; he also adduces numerous verses from other passages in scripture to develop the story.<sup>25</sup> Throughout this version in particular, we see copious evidence of other characteristic traits of Muqātil’s technique as an exegete as well, particularly his concern with clarifying ambiguous details by supplying personal names, toponyms, and the like; establishing a clear chronology of events; and, most of all, integrating the Quran’s laconic, elliptical verses into a clear, coherent, readable narrative framework.

Let us begin by examining the Quranic foundation for Muqātil’s narrative. In the context of a long divine address to the *Banū Isrā’īl*—traditionally understood as Muhammad’s Jewish contemporaries, though the term is most often applied in the Quran to the Israelites of biblical times—Q.2:51-56 refers to the making of the Calf at the time of the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, interpreting it as a sign of their chronic ingratitude in the face of divine favors:

*...as We communed with Moses for forty nights you took the calf in his absence (and worshipped it), and you did wrong. Even so, We pardoned you that you may be grateful. Remember, We gave Moses the Book and Discernment of falsehood and truth, that you may be guided. Remember, Moses said, ‘My people, by taking this calf you have done yourselves harm, so now turn to your Creator*

---

<sup>25</sup> Overall, intratextual glossing appears to be a real priority for Muqātil in this passage, which constitutes a virtual *tour de force* of the method. First, the initial citation of Q.2:51 is followed by a long section of narrative elaboration without any scriptural corroboration at all. Then, in proceeding to the story of the seventy elders, Q.20:85, 2:55, 7:143, and 39:67 are cited in rapid succession; Q.7:155 is then cited just before moving on to Q.2:52; shortly after that, Q.2:54, 20:97, 2:54 (again), 7:149, 7:149 (again), 2:54 (again), and 4:29 are all cited in rapid succession in the description of the destruction of the Calf and its aftermath. Another long section of narrative depicting the Israelites’ bloody atonement follows, concluding with the citation of Q.7:152 and 7:167 at the end of the account.

*in repentance, and kill yourselves; that is better with your Lord.’ And (the Lord) softened towards you, for He is all-forgiving and merciful. Remember, when you said to Moses, ‘We shall not believe in you until we see God face to face,’ lightning struck you as you looked. Even then We resurrected you after your death, that you may give thanks.<sup>26</sup>*

Appropriately, Muqātil’s commentary on this passage begins with Moses’ departure for his appointment with God, taking seventy notables from among the Israelites with him. Due to an error in calculating the time he would be gone, the people despair of his returning, and they turn to the Calf in worship as a result. God notifies Moses of their wrongdoing, and he rushes to return to the camp; along the way, the main incident involving the seventy elders takes place, in which they demand to see God as Moses supposedly had and are struck dead, only to then be resurrected as a demonstration of divine mercy.<sup>27</sup>

Subsequently, in a scene strongly reminiscent of the original narrative in Exodus (and lacking any Quranic basis whatsoever, one might add), as they approach the Israelites’ camp, the seventy elders remark that they hear the sound of battle (*qitāl*) in the camp, but Moses retorts that it is not the sound of battle, but rather a divine trial—*fitna*—that they hear. The implications of this evocative term are extremely complex; in classical Islamic culture, the word signified a situation of conflict within the community, civil strife or religious dissension (or, as was

---

<sup>26</sup> Q.2:51-56. I have had to deviate from Ahmed Ali’s translation here to a considerable degree. Verse 54 literally says “kill yourselves” (*aqtulū anfusakum*), the meaning presupposed by most classical commentators, but Ahmed Ali has “kill your *pride*.” Similarly, verse 56 speaks literally of resurrection after death (*thumma ba’athnākum min ba’d mawtikum*), but Ali renders the line: “Even then We revived you after you had become *senseless* that you might give thanks.” As noted above, Ahmed Ali’s version often reflects common revisions implemented in Quran translations and commentaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by exegetes of a rationalist and apologetic bent.

<sup>27</sup> Note that Muqātil’s version of the narrative seeks to rectify the chronology of the Quranic passage. In Sūra 2, the reference to the affair of the seventy (vss.55-56) comes *after* the resolution of the Calf incident (vs.54), when in fact it was supposed to have transpired after Moses had received the Tablets, but *before* he and the seventy had set off to return to the Israelite camp. Again, this reflects a prevailing concern with smoothing out and clarifying Quranic accounts and establishing an orderly progression of events.

commonly the case in early Islamic history, both at once). For virtually all later Muslim exegetes, grasping their understanding of the nature of the division that emerged within the Israelite community after Moses' return and the destruction of the Calf provides the key for deciphering their conception of the significance of the episode as a whole.<sup>28</sup> For many of these commentators, their use of the term *fitna* is a fundamental part of that conception. However, Muqātil's use of the term is somewhat different from that found in later authors. For most, the element of trial is intrinsic to, but often only latent within, the larger connotation of political and religious strife associated with the term *fitna*; at the very least, the two conceptions might be balanced. On the other hand, for reasons that will become clear presently, it is quite evident that for Muqātil the sense of divine trial is absolutely paramount here.

Muqātil's narrative proceeds to describe Moses' return to the camp, the breaking of the tablets upon which the Torah had been inscribed, and the expulsion of Sāmirī from the camp in extremely laconic fashion.<sup>29</sup> The subsequent demolition of the Calf and the Israelites' violent atonement receive significantly more attention, and occasion what is perhaps the densest concatenation of Quranic verses to be found in the whole narrative as Muqātil presents it. In this part of the passage, Moses pulverizes the Calf with a file, sets fire to its remains, and then strews them upon the sea; the account then culminates with the description of how the Israelites take up arms and slaughter one another in an attempt to secure divine forgiveness for their transgression.<sup>30</sup> Among the many verses from Sūra 7 and 20 that Muqātil adduces here in

---

<sup>28</sup> On this loaded term *fitna* and the possibly ironic significance of *qitāl* here, see below.

<sup>29</sup> The concise reference to Sāmirī here is peculiar, since this seems to be the first mention of him in Muqātil's *tafsīr*. I have not been able to find any earlier reference to him in Muqātil's work, so it is possible that he is simply assuming that his audience is familiar with the figure.

<sup>30</sup> The specific description of Moses both pulverizing the Calf with a file (*baradahū bi'l-mibrad*) and burning it (*aḥraqahu bi'l-nār*) reflects an attempt to resolve an interpretative quandary regarding the meaning of the Quranic *la-nuḥarriqannahū* (Q.20:97), *we shall verily burn it*. Exegetes were puzzled by the reference to burning a metal figure (which probably simply indicates melting it down in the original context), and some thus proposed "to file, abrade," as an alternative meaning for the verb *ḥarraqa*, which more commonly means simply "to burn." If the

intratextual glossing, those cited at the end of his account are especially striking; it concludes with Q.7:152, *They will suffer the anger of their Lord, and disgrace (dhilla) in the world; that is how We requite those who fabricate lies*, and Q.7:167, *Your Lord declared He would send men against them who would inflict dreadful suffering on them till the Day of Doom*.

In its original context, the former verse refers specifically to the idolatrous Israelites who worshipped the Calf, but strikingly, the latter actually refers to the so-called Sabbath-breakers who were turned into apes for their infraction of the ban on labor during the sacred day (cf. Q.7:163 ff.) The evocation of the latter passage—like the Calf narrative, part of the extended diatribe against Jewish infidelity and ingratitude that makes up much of Sūra 7—is especially apt, for it specifically alludes to the Jews’ eventual fate: they will be dispersed, oppressed by foreign nations, and subjected to continual trials as punishment for the deeds of their ancestors.<sup>31</sup> Muqātil is clearly emphasizing the connection between the past crimes of the *Banū Isrāʿīl* and what he perceives as the Jews’ present state of subjection quite deliberately here. Further, his connection of these verses from Sūra 7 with his description of the Israelites’ punishment for worshipping the Calf in his presentation of the Sūra 2 version of the episode is not left merely implicit. Rather, Muqātil makes the connection explicit by prefacing his quotation of Q.7:152 and 167 with a simple, yet ominous, gloss: “Whoever escaped from the killing [after the destruction of the Calf], God cursed them and then imposed upon them disgrace and miserable degradation (*dhilla wa-maskana*).”<sup>32</sup> The particular use of the term *dhilla* here then provides him with a pretext for

---

description of completely pulverizing a metal statue with a file seems implausibly unrealistic, one could very well conclude that the phrase refers to *defacing* the image with a file, although the narrative does require that we understand that it was completely rendered into dust or powder through this process. The particular emphasis on the violent atonement scene here, largely lacking in Muqātil’s other versions of the Calf narrative, makes perfect sense in context considering the corresponding emphasis on this aspect of the episode in Q.2:51-56.

<sup>31</sup> The oracle continues in Q.7:168 after the prediction of conquest in the previous verse: *We dispersed them in groups over the earth... and We tried (fatannā) them with good things and bad...* Note the occurrence of the root *fatana* again.

<sup>32</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1.107 top.



quoting Q.7:152. Turning to Muqātil’s interpretation of this specific verse in his comments on the Sūra 7 passage on the Calf, we find that his gloss there is equally unambiguous: “*disgrace in the world*—[i.e.], humiliation (*madhalla*). They will become the conquered (*maqhūrīn*) until Judgment Day.”<sup>33</sup> The verb *qahara* connotes military defeat leading to domination by a foreign power; Muqātil thus emphasizes the Calf episode as a political fable regarding the inevitable subjugation of the *Banū Isrā’īl* and their descendents, the Jews, in direct retribution for their sins.<sup>34</sup>

\*\*\*

Although it is formally anchored to only two scriptural verses, Q.2:51-52, Muqātil’s first version of the Calf episode takes up almost *four pages* in the printed edition of the *tafsīr*, nearly as long as Muqātil’s narration of the episode based on the Sūra 20 version, which is recounted in over a dozen verses. Strikingly, very little of the narrative here reflects directly on the role of either Aaron or Sāmirī, both of whom appear only briefly; nor is the question of the Calf’s animation really addressed. The reason for this is obvious: neither Aaron nor Sāmirī, nor the Calf’s being an *ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>*, is mentioned in the passage from Sūra 2 being interpreted here at all. The larger narrative unit to which these verses belong, Q. 2:51-56, refers only to the forty nights that Moses spent on Sinai, the people’s wronging themselves by taking the Calf in worship, Moses’ urging them to seek atonement by “killing themselves”, and the offense of the seventy and their subsequent annihilation and resurrection. Despite the fact that Aaron, Sāmirī, and the lowing Calf are omitted entirely from these verses, however, this brief Quranic passage in fact seems to provide an autonomous—if extremely concise—synopsis of the

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 2.65 middle.

<sup>34</sup> Note that this is a particularly common interpretation of the episode; see the discussion of the corresponding section in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* (and the commentaries of Bayḍāwī and the Jalālayn as well) below.

episode as a fully realized drama of sin and repentance in miniature; it is largely complete in and of itself, and does not readily provoke questions about the larger circumstances of the making of the Calf. (If anything, the most provocative element here is the command to the Israelites to “kill themselves,” and, as our summary hopefully makes clear, Muqātil does in fact elaborate upon this element considerably in his commentary.) Given the specific thrust of the concise version of the Calf episode provided in Sūra 2, it thus makes sense that Muqātil’s narrative based on that version would pay only minimal attention to the roles of Aaron, Sāmirī, and the lowing Calf; these details may have seemed largely superfluous given the scriptural context, which is essentially just a brief, elegantly argued admonition.<sup>35</sup>

There is one major exception to Muqātil’s general neglect of these particular elements in the Sūra 2 account, however, for in a brief passage at the beginning of his version of this narrative, Sāmirī and the Calf appear as somewhat more than just incidental features in the development of the plot. Just after the delivery of the Tablets to Moses, the people are said to have miscalculated the time that Moses would be gone; they counted each day and night separately—a day and a night therefore equaling *two* days in their reckoning—and they thus expected him back after only *twenty* days.<sup>36</sup> When forty of these abbreviated days had thus

---

<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Muqātil *did* feel compelled to drive home the larger political point about the future punishment and subjection of the Jews by adducing particular verses from Sūra 7 toward the end of his commentary on the passage; but arguably, this gesture seems to reflect his perception of the underlying *leitmotif* of the passage at hand, which is simply made more explicit in those verses from Sūra 7.

<sup>36</sup> This seems to represent a further development of the theme of the timing of the making of the Calf, which was generally a major concern for all commentators on the episode. Rabbinic exegetes gave great weight to this issue, making it into one of the major tenets of their apologetic reinterpretation of the biblical narrative: the Israelites were claimed to have misunderstood when Moses was supposed to return from Sinai, and thus turned to the worship of the Calf out of despair. It most likely informs Quranic statements to the effect that God appointed a time of thirty days for the meeting with Moses and then added ten more for a total of forty, insinuating that Moses might not have informed his people of the correct time of his return (cf. Q.7:142). Muslim exegetes then further developed this theme through a polemical reorientation: the insinuation is that the Israelites were either too stupid to reckon time correctly or else maliciously miscalculated the days of Moses’ absence to provide a thin pretext for turning away from their covenant with

already come and gone, the people gave up on Moses' return and engaged in the worship of the Calf:

They said: Moses has abandoned the covenant [with us]—for they added twenty days and twenty nights, then said, ‘This is the forty days.’ Then they took the Calf in worship.<sup>37</sup> God informed Moses of this while he was up on the mount. Moses said to his Lord: Who made (*šana 'a*) the Calf for them? He replied: Sāmīrī made it for them. Then Moses said to his Lord: But who breathed life into it? God responded: I did. Moses replied: O Lord, Sāmīrī made the Calf for them and led them astray, but *You* made the lowing sound within it, and so it was *You* who made the trial for my people. God then responded: *Verily, We have put your people on trial in your absence, and Sāmīrī has led them astray...* (Q.20:85)—that is, those whom Moses left with Aaron, not including the seventy—when he [Sāmīrī] commanded them to worship the Calf.<sup>38</sup>

---

God and their prophet. The motif occurs quite early in Islamic commentary; cf., e.g. al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 1.36 *ad loc* Q.2:51.

<sup>37</sup> *fa-ittakhadhū al-'ijl*. In the Quranic context, *ittakhadha* is ambiguous, meaning either “to take in worship” or “to make.” In Muqātil's versions of the Calf narrative, on the other hand, the term is *always* interpreted as referring to the Israelites' idolatrous worship of the Calf, and is often glossed with phrases such as *'ibadat al-'ijl* (worship of the Calf), *ittikhādh al-'ijl ilah<sup>m</sup>* (taking the Calf as a god), and the like. This is commensurate with Muqātil's consistent portrayal of the Calf as having been made by Sāmīrī alone, described with terms such as *šan'* or *ṣiyāgha*; somewhat confusingly, however, he refers in at least one place to the Israelites' contrition *'alā ṣanī'hum*, which clearly must mean “for their *deed*” and not “for their *making*, i.e. of the Calf (1.106 top). Note also the use of the word in Q.7:30, *ittakhadhū al-shayāṭīn awliyā'*, “they took the satans as friends”; the term clearly connotes worship or devotion here.

One would think that the specific wording of Q.7:148 would dictate an interpretation of the verb as primarily meaning “to make,” since here it clearly states *ittakhadha qawm mūsā min ba'dihi min ḥulyyihim 'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*, “the people of Moses made, in his absence, *from their ornaments*, a calf, a body that lows.” However, many exegetes and translators still take *ittakhadha* as signifying worship here, understanding the verse as meaning “the people of Moses *took in worship*, in his absence, a calf, a body that lows, [made] from their ornaments.”

<sup>38</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1.104 bottom-105 top. Despite the explicit reference to the Calf's lowing, oddly, the specific Quranic phrase that is understood to describe this, *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* (Q.7:148/20:88) is never actually quoted here. This is a particularly strange omission given the copious number of verses from other sūras Muqātil adduces throughout the passage.

This is the *only* specific reference to how the Calf was made and animated in Muqātil's long version of the Calf narrative in Sūra 2; it is otherwise described here only as the object of the Israelites' idolatrous worship.

The wording Muqātil uses here is unambiguous regarding the respective roles of Sāmīrī and God in the process of the Calf's creation: Sāmīrī merely made it (*ṣana'ahu*), while God inspired it (*nafakha fī-hi al-rūh*) and thus made the lowing sound within it (*ṣana'a fī-hi al-khuwār*) and tested or tried Moses' people (*fatana al-qawm*) thereby. The main thrust of this dialogue is theodical: it allows God's statement from Q.20:85, *We have put your people on trial in your absence... (innā qad fatannā qawmaka min ba'dika)*, to be placed in the foreground of the narrative, despite the fact that it is adduced from one of the parallel Quranic passages; in turn, this verse becomes key for establishing the episode as a divinely ordained test, relegating Sāmīrī to the role of divine instrument.<sup>39</sup> It also happens to provide important background, however subtly, for understanding Moses' subsequent statement that it is not the sound of fighting, *qitāl*, but rather that of *fitna* issuing from the camp; as we have already mentioned, while this latter term generally came to connote "strife" or "discord," this meaning seems to have been extrapolated from the word's original sense of "test" or "trial." As will become clear, Moses' exclamation can *only* mean "trial" here, since Muqātil's interpretation of the Sūra 20 version of the Calf narrative shows that, in his conception, the whole problem with Aaron's handling of the situation was that he was too conciliatory and tolerated the presence of idolaters in the community. That is, he did not attempt to drive them out or secede with the Israelites who remained faithful; in other words, at least according to the *later* sense of the word, he did *not* instigate *fitna*! *Fitna* in the sense of civil discord is what is *lacking* here in the episode, at least according to Muqātil, so *fitna* in the sense of divine trial *must* be what is meant.

The fact that Muqātil's version of the Sūra 2 narrative is based so closely on those specific elements that are explicitly mentioned in Q.2:51-56, and that other elements such as the role

---

<sup>39</sup> This theme would be emphasized by many later commentators, for example Ibn Kathīr.

played by Sāmīrī and the Calf's lowing are generally allowed to recede into the background despite their prominence in *other* Quranic accounts of the Golden Calf, reflects a basic tension that is characteristic of *Tafsīr Muqātil*. As a running commentary on scripture that operates primarily through paraphrase, a basic respect for the integrity of the divine Word *in situ* is a fundamental, though implicit, hermeneutic principle observed by the exegete. That is, since the sequence and contents of the verses of the canonical scripture dictate the direction in which the exegetical narrative flows, obviously the interpreter is under some pressure to at least acknowledge those elements which are foregrounded by scripture itself in any given passage.<sup>40</sup> Even if they are not given prominence, at the very least, these particular elements may be difficult to ignore, since neglecting them would be too conspicuous for the exegete's audience to overlook. At the same time, the exegete is by no means limited to the verses at hand in constructing his narrative, but rather has recourse to a veritable wealth of scriptural resources—as can be seen from the impressive amount of intratextual glossing Muqātil employs here.

Nevertheless, elements that are “indigenous” to the Sūra 2 version of the Calf story are preeminent in Muqātil's commentary here, which seems to indicate the importance of the first principle mentioned here. Further, this quite likely reflects the origin of this specific narrative (and much of Muqātil's commentary in general) in the milieu of preaching or popular explication of the Quran. At the same time, however, the passage is tacitly integrated and reconciled with parallel passages through the adducing of verses from the Calf accounts in Sūra 7 and 20, as well as through at least oblique reference to major elements from those versions: thus the inclusion here of a concise description of the breaking of the Tablets and the expulsion of Sāmīrī, as well as of a more detailed exposition regarding the destruction of the Calf, all elements that are conspicuously lacking in the Quranic version in Sūra 2. For the most part, though, these

---

<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the exegete is not completely obliged to maintain the absolute integrity of scriptural chronology, as we have seen from Muqātil's rectification of the sequence of events in Q.2:51-56.

secondary elements tend not to disrupt the basic flow of the narrative; otherwise, their inclusion would be intrusive and counterproductive.<sup>41</sup>

In light of all this, it is significant that the extended dialogue between God and Moses we have just cited at length seems anomalous in this context, when Sāmirī and the lowing Calf have otherwise been allowed to recede into the background in this version of the story. It is also significant that this specific dialogue appears in other *tafsīrs* as well, at least in variant versions; it thus seems to have enjoyed some popularity among later exegetes and traditionists.<sup>42</sup> Although the specific wording and tone of the scene often vary dramatically (Moses' reply to God's admission of responsibility is sometimes more strident or even hostile, while at other times he is more passive and acquiescent), the one thing *all* the versions of this dialogue have in common is a consistent reliance on the terminology used to describe God's inspiration of the Calf. Moses almost always asks, *man nafakha fī-hi al-rūh*, "who inspired it with the breath of life?" In some later versions, the wording is even more explicit—"who placed soul and life into it?" (The answer, of course, is always God.) Considering its later appearance in other *tafsīrs*, we might speculate that this dialogue was originally an independent tradition on the animation of the Calf that was in general circulation, and that Muqātil saw fit to incorporate it into his commentary here, at least in order to acknowledge its popularity.

---

<sup>41</sup> It should be emphasized that intratextual glossing is not primarily about synthesizing a master version of a scriptural episode that tidily reconciles all the disparate elements found in the various parallel scriptural narratives; that is, the primary function of intratextual glossing is *not* simple harmonization. Rather, as our examination here will hopefully make clear, a significant degree of literary artistry can be seen in the attention an exegete pays to context, inasmuch as the selection of corroborating and complimentary verses from scriptural passages other than the one under consideration is directed first and foremost to enhancing the dominant themes of immediate import.

<sup>42</sup> As we shall see, a tradition that Ṭabarī attributes to the Successor Suddī has a very similar version of this dialogue (no.919, *ad loc.* Q.2:51), variants on which are found in later collections as well. But note also that there is no trace of this dialogue in the version of the Calf episode found in Muqātil's comments on Sūra 20, where the key verse cited as prooftext here (Q.20:85) is actually to be found.

The idea that this dialogue was originally an independent tradition would seem to be confirmed by its relatively maladroit adaptation in Muqātil's commentary. It is not obtrusive per se, but its specific focus on Sāmirī and the Calf's lowing is certainly anomalous in this setting. Our conjecture would also seem to be corroborated by the fact that what this dialogue says about the Calf's animation *directly contradicts* the interpretation of the nature of the Calf provided by Muqātil in his *other* treatments of the episode, as we shall soon see. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the tradition has not been recklessly or arbitrarily incorporated here; rather, despite the apparent inconsistency and contradiction it might seem to introduce when the commentary is considered as a whole, it is noteworthy that the dialogue is overall *thematically* congruous with Muqātil's narrative based on the Sūra 2 Calf episode. Due in particular to its emphasis on the providential government of human affairs, even (or especially) the trials to which the faithful might be subjected, the dialogue enriches the episode's meaning as a drama of sin and atonement. (It is thus somewhat ironic that the central proof-text in the dialogue that establishes the episode as a divine trial, Q.20:85, is in fact imported from another scriptural passage!) Thus, placement of the dialogue here is *not* maladroit; rather, in the same way as various explanatory details could be added in Muqātil's expansions of Qurānic episodes in order to improve the *narrative* integrity of scriptural passages, this dialogue functions to enhance the passage's *theological* integrity, and demonstrates that moral and theodical coherence were as important to the exegete as literary coherence.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> That is, the drive to address inconsistencies and ambiguities in scriptural passages, while sometimes pursued to an apparently ludicrous degree, often serves a larger agenda which could be both literary and theological. Muqātil's typical exegetical procedure—filling in apparent ellipses in the text, teasing out subtle distinctions and variations in phrasing, and clarifying characters' specific roles and motivations—indicates more than just his interest in a good story. While *ta'yīn al-mubham* may be pursued to excess in some instances here, Muqātil is often working to dispel ambiguities in the moral economy operative in the narrative, in order to drive home the theological points latent in narratives to his audience. That is, he is striving to make the narrative *meaningful* in an ultimate, even transcendent, sense.

\*\*\*

It is rather typical of Muqātil's approach to parallel scriptural narratives in his *tafsīr* that he provides somewhat different portrayals of events in commenting upon those parallels; each version tends to include certain details that are unique to it, while the most important elements in the episode will be reiterated in all of them. The most obvious example of this in the case at hand is that in all three of Muqātil's versions of the Calf episode, Sāmīrī is acknowledged as the one who commanded the Israelites to worship the Calf, even though not much is said about him other than this in the Sūra 2 version in particular. When we compare the Calf narrative Muqātil builds around Q.2:51-52 with those corresponding to Q.7:148-152 and 20:85-98, we find that the latter two are considerably different from it in tone and content, though they are in most respects basically similar to one another. (This difference is largely due to the fact that the basic elements that come to the fore in these two Quranic passages in particular seem to be rather distinctive, in contrast to the particular attention given in the Sūra 2 version to elements such as the annihilation and resurrection of the seventy elders and the Israelites' violent atonement for their worship of the Calf.) However, in the end, the Sūra 7 and 20 versions are overall largely compatible with that in Sūra 2, actually contradicting it in only a couple of important respects, as we shall see.

In his version of the narrative based on Q.7:148-152, Muqātil states simply that while Moses and the seventy were gone, the Israelites worshipped an *'ijl jasad*, that is, a physical image of a calf that did not possess a spirit (*laysa fī-hi rūḥ*), that is, that was not genuinely alive. The phrase *la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* is then glossed as indicating that the Calf made a sound such as cattle make (*ṣawt al-bahā'im*), but only once. As verse 148 attests, the Calf *could neither speak to them nor guide them*, and yet *they took it (for a deity) and did wrong*, that is—according to Muqātil's gloss—they became idolaters, *mushrikūn*. Notably, the subsequent verses referring to Moses' confrontation of Aaron (vss.150 and 151) are related with almost no glosses or narrative exposition inserted at all. Instead, following the subsequent citation of vs.152 (*they will suffer the*



*anger of their Lord, and disgrace in the world* etc.), with the aforementioned “political” gloss attached to it serving to clarify what exactly that disgrace will entail, Muqātil gives a brief recap of major events in the Calf episode. He explains that the Israelites lied by claiming the Calf was their god; it was Sāmīrī who made them the Calf on the thirty-eighth day, and he knew that they would worship it because of their previous request to Moses for an idolatrous god (Q.7:138 is cited as the basis for this). They indulged in their sin—glossed repeatedly in this passage as *shirk*—from the thirty-ninth day until Moses’ return on the fortieth.<sup>44</sup>

The function of this brief concluding synopsis is quite understandable: here, the account of Sūra 7 is being deliberately reconciled with that in Sūra 20. This is necessary because of Sāmīrī’s complete *absence* from the Sūra 7 account; reconciling the two must thus be accomplished by means of free exposition rather than direct commentary upon or expansion of any specific Quranic verses that might appear in Sūra 7 (though Muqātil could quite imaginably have quoted some of the apposite verses from Sūra 20 here in support of his interpretation as well). This explains why Muqātil passes over verses 150 and 151 virtually without comment: for reasons he does not make explicit but that are relatively easy to discern, Aaron’s part in the affair is being deliberately *deemphasized*, and this encourages a corresponding emphasis on Sāmīrī as the main architect of the episode. By avoiding any significant comment on the verses that center on Aaron and then explicitly directing the reader’s (or listener’s) attention to Sāmīrī, Muqātil manages to implicitly deflect any criticism that might have attached to the former and project it towards the latter.

The role played by Aaron in these events is a difficult issue in the accounts of both Sūra 7 and Sūra 20 as they appear in the Quran. It is particularly problematic in the former because the blame that seems to accrue to Aaron in Q.7:150-151 is not correspondingly balanced by that placed on Sāmīrī as it is in the Sūra 20 account, since again, Sāmīrī is wholly absent from the

---

<sup>44</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 2.64-5. Note that the timeline for the making of the Calf here does not match that given in the Sūra 2 version.

Sūra 7 account.<sup>45</sup> Thus, in commenting upon the Sūra 7 version, if the exegete wishes to exonerate Aaron or at least ameliorate the blame that might accrue to him for his part in the episode, then he must expend some extra effort in displacing that blame onto Sāmīrī—for example, by virtually ignoring the verses referring to Aaron and then digressing to a description of Sāmīrī’s actions, which is exactly what Muqātil does here. This is virtually the same strategy Muqātil adopts in his reading of the Sūra 20 episode; while there *is* some basic interpretation of Aaron’s words here, it is relatively minimal, and in this context, it is safer to elaborate on these verses pertaining to Aaron anyway, because Sāmīrī’s role in the affair is entirely explicit in this particular context. The balancing of the portrayals of Aaron and Sāmīrī—and the specific attempt to allow the former to recede into the background while turning the spotlight on the latter—is an exegetical strategy one encounters time and time again in the *tafsīr* tradition on the Calf story, as later commentators relentlessly targeted Sāmīrī as a scapegoat for the making of the Calf.

All that said, it is very curious here how little detail Muqātil’s commentary on the Sūra 7 episode actually provides about Sāmīrī and his making of the Calf. This laconism parallels that of the Quran itself, of course; compared to the Sūra 20 version, which supplies much more information about the episode, its treatment in Sūra 7 is overall relatively sparse. We are given a basic timetable for the making of the Calf, as well as some basic details about the Calf itself (it lacked genuine life, it lowed only once), and then the making and worship of the Calf is emphasized as earning the Israelites and their descendants, the Jews, a permanent state of degradation in the world. Aside from this, we are told that Sāmīrī made the Calf, though we will have to wait until Muqātil’s comments on Sūra 20 before receiving the full story about *how* exactly Sāmīrī produced it.

Notably, while the Sūra 20 version relies on and even underscores those elements that would be key in the later *tafsīr* tradition—the “handful from the track of the messenger”

---

<sup>45</sup> Presuming, of course, that one takes these names to refer to distinct characters, as all of our extant commentaries do.

understood as the dirt taken from the track of Gabriel’s steed—here, somewhat surprisingly, we are told that Sāmirī seemingly made the Calf *by hand*. In a detail unique to the Sūra 7 version of the story, Muqātil tells us that Sāmirī was a goldsmith (*ṣā’igh*), so he made (*ṣāgha*) the Israelites their Calf. (The verb *ṣāgha* primarily means “to make,” but particularly connotes metalworking.) As we have already seen, in the Sūra 2 version (specifically in the dialogue between Moses and God), Sāmirī is also said to have “made” (*sana’a*) the Calf. In this respect, the Sūra 2 and Sūra 7 versions agree. As we shall discuss momentarily, they differ in one rather conspicuous way: while here in Sūra 7, Muqātil informs us that Sāmirī’s Calf was *not* alive, back in his comments on Sūra 2, he in fact told us that it *was* alive, that God had inspired it and bestowed it with *rūḥ*.

\*\*\*

In the version of the episode based on Sūra 20, the third and most elaborate portrayal of the Calf narrative to be found in Muqātil’s commentary, Aaron’s actions and motivations are minimally acknowledged, but only after Sāmirī’s unambiguous role as arch-idolater has been established beyond a shadow of a doubt. In this account, when Moses returns from Sinai and begins to interrogate the people about their actions, their attempt at apology provides Muqātil with the opportunity for a detailed exposition of events that highlights Sāmirī’s crime. As in the original Quranic account, Aaron seems to quickly fade into the background:

*They said, We did not break our promise to you of our own will—though we are responsible for our own actions—but we were made to carry the loads—that is, sins, because this one [i.e. Sāmirī] burdened them with the making and the worship of the Calf—...of ornaments belonging to the people (20:87)—that is to say, the jewelry of the people of Pharaoh, gold and silver. This is because when thirty-five days had passed, Sāmirī—he was an Israelite—said to them: O people*

of Egypt, Moses is not coming back to you.<sup>46</sup> See this burden [you carry]; it is defilement upon your women and children, on account of the jewelry of the people of Pharaoh which you appropriated by force. Therefore purify yourselves of them; immolate them in fire.

They did so, gathering them together. Then Sāmirī arose and took possession of them, and on the thirty-sixth, thirty-seventh, and thirty-eighth days he fashioned them into a calf. He fashioned it for three days, then he cast the handful which he had taken from the track of the hoof of Gabriel's horse into it, and the Calf lowed a single time, and not again. Then Sāmirī commanded them to worship the Calf on the thirty-ninth day.

Moses returned on the morning of the completion of the forty days, and thereafter it is as the verse says: *We threw* [the ornaments]... *and so*—that is, in this way—*did Sāmirī* throw the ornaments into the fire. *Then he produced the image of a calf*—that is, with a physical form that had no soul—*which mooed like a cow*—that is, that made a sound. *And they said*—[rather,] Sāmirī alone said—*This is your god and the god of Moses* (20:88), O gathered Israelites...<sup>47</sup>

Several aspects of this part of Muqātil's commentary are worthy of notice. First of all, it contains the most detailed description of the procedure Sāmirī undertook to create the Calf to be found in all of *Tafsīr Muqātil*; we will discuss this further on and compare this account to the others in Muqātil's commentary. Second, the theme of Sāmirī's stratagem of feigning interest in the illicit status of the gold in the Israelites' possession (rendered impure because it was coerced from its owners—the Israelites' neighbors in Egypt—and not technically booty taken in war) is significant, and recurs throughout the later tradition. Besides providing a convenient explanation

---

<sup>46</sup> Note the discrepancy in the timeline provided in the Sūra 2 version of the narrative. Here, the emphasis on events starting on the *thirty-fifth* day (and not the twentieth) seems to imply that the Israelites might have been expecting Moses back after thirty days, which seems to reflect the Quranic statement about God appointing thirty days and then adding ten (Q.7:142)—that is, the Israelites knew the *mī'ād* was set for thirty days, but had no way of knowing God had supplemented them with additional time.

<sup>47</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.37-8.

for how Sāmīrī got his hands on the gold in the first place (an unanswered question that pertains to orderly plot development, the sort of issue commonly addressed in narrative or “haggadic” exegesis), this theme also serves to give his character somewhat more depth. While it cannot be said to illuminate his specific motivation for his actions per se—this is never really clarified anywhere in the *tafsīr* tradition—it *does* show the degree of thought and foresight Sāmīrī supposedly put into his scheme. In other words, it renders his villainous character more vivid, and confirms the nefarious intentions that lay behind the role he took in the making of the Calf. This theme also functions to deflect some of the attention from Aaron, whose own role in the affair—or at least acquiescence—is thus implicitly denied, or at least minimized.

Notably, this also diverts attention from the people themselves to some degree. While their obedience to Sāmīrī’s command to worship the Calf—and thus their basic culpability—is taken for granted, it is striking that Muqātil exonerates them of having actually said *This is your god and the god of Moses* (Q.20:88) before it. This is a conspicuous instance of Muqātil’s willingness to “correct” the explicit statement of scripture to make its message more theologically or morally palatable.<sup>48</sup> He executes a similar maneuver—seemingly with opposite implications—at the very beginning of the passage. In commenting upon the people’s statement from Q.20:87, ‘*We did not break our promise to you of our own will*’ (*mā akhlafnā maw’idaka bi-malkinā*), he adds a short, simple gloss, *wa-naḥnu namliku amranā*—that is, roughly translated, “we are responsible for our own actions.”<sup>49</sup> The key term in the original Quranic phrase, *bi-malkinā*, and the main verb in Muqātil’s gloss, *namliku*, are both derived from the same root, *m-l-k* (literally “to own”); ironically, the use of similar phrasing provides the basis for *reversing* the plain meaning of the Quranic phrase. The motivation for this shift is obvious: the people’s response might be taken as

<sup>48</sup> Many commentators stress the fact that the sin of the Israelites was in worshipping the Calf, not in making it per se. The attribution of the utterance *This is your god and the god of Moses* (Q.20:88) to an anonymous plural subject in the Quranic account could be a reflex of the biblical account, with the “adjustment” of the original verse by attributing it to Sāmīrī instead intended to streamline the narrative.

<sup>49</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.37.

implying that they had no choice but to act the way they did, and Muqātil is striving to negate any appearance of determinism in scripture. This is unsurprising given his well-known—or at least reputed—theological inclinations.<sup>50</sup> Taken together, Muqātil’s approach to these two verses—ameliorating the negative implication of one while negating the ameliorating implication of the other—shows the moderate position he is attempting to promote; with these statements, the Israelites are asserted to be guilty, but not *too* guilty.<sup>51</sup>

Muqātil’s commentary on the episode then continues by digressing to explain that Sāmīrī knew that the Israelites would obey his command because of the bad influence exerted upon them by the Amalekites, whom they encountered when they first crossed the Red Sea after leaving Egypt. This last point hinges on the proof-text of Q.7:138 that Muqātil also invoked in the Sūra 7 version of the narrative, *When We brought the children of Israel across the sea, and they came to a people devoted to their idols, they said, ‘O Moses, make us also a god like theirs...’*; although the verse does not specifically name the idolatrous people whose gods the Israelites coveted, the identification of this people as the Amalekites is ubiquitous in the *tafsīr*. Then, citing Q.20:90-91, where it is explained that Aaron had tried to warn the people that the Calf was just a divine trial and so they should not be led astray by it,<sup>52</sup> Muqātil’s narrative goes on to describe Moses’ return to the camp:

When Moses returned, *he said to Aaron, O Aaron, when you saw that they had gone astray—that is, that they committed shirk—what hindered you from*

---

<sup>50</sup> Note that Muqātil is reported to have been the author of anti-determinist theological tracts, and even to have engaged the notorious Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/748), eponym of the predestinarian school of thought in early Islam, in disputation in Marw; see Goldfeld, “Muqātil b. Sulaymān,” 6, citing the notices on this episode mentioned in the heresiographical works of al-Ash‘arī and Ibn Ḥazm.

<sup>51</sup> Note also the statement just previous that Sāmīrī commanded the Israelites to worship the Calf on the thirty-ninth day—thus establishing that they had *just* begun to do so at the time of Moses’ return. This too might represent a device for ameliorating the guilt of the people somewhat.

<sup>52</sup> *yā qawmī innamā futintum bi-hi...* Note the occurrence of the root *f-t-n* again, which Muqātil would have seen as confirmation that the episode was primarily about a divine trial.

*following me?* (Q.20:92-93)—that is, so that you did not obey my command, and therefore disavow them?<sup>53</sup> *Did you not disobey my command?* (cont'd.)—that is, so that you disregarded what I said. It is as the verse says, *Do not follow the command of those who exceed their bounds* (Q.26:151).<sup>54</sup>

Aaron said to Moses: *O son of my mother, do not pull me by my beard or my hair*; if I had disavowed them [i.e., the worshippers of the Calf], the people would have become two parties bent on killing one another.<sup>55</sup> *I was really afraid you might say, You have created a rift among the children of Israel; you did not pay heed to my command*<sup>56</sup> (Q.20:94)—that is, you did not uphold my *waṣiyya*.

In *Sūrat al-A'rāf* the statement regarding Aaron is, *Deputise for me* [Moses] *among my people. Dispose rightly...* (Q.7.142) Aaron was more beloved of the

---

<sup>53</sup> *allā ittaba'ta amrī fa-ankarta 'alayhim*. The verb *ankarta* means to disavow someone, to take one's leave of them, even (or especially) to *publically denounce* them. I understand the second part of the phrase here as contrafactual: Moses is saying that something seems to have kept Aaron from properly fulfilling his duty, for had he done so, he would have denounced the evildoers among the Israelites and left them to their fate, which he clearly did *not* do. This meaning is confirmed by the use of the formal contrafactual in Aaron's reply. Here and below, I have paid particular attention to the subtleties of the phrasing of Muqātil's glosses on this part of the narrative because understanding his interpretation of Aaron's actions properly hinges upon carefully construing the meaning of just a few carefully placed lines in his commentary.

<sup>54</sup> *lā tuḥī'ū amra al-musrifīn*. (Ahmed Ali renders this line as *Do not follow those who are extravagant*.) This gloss would seem to be misplaced here. Admittedly, the key phrase from the verse upon which Muqātil is commenting, Q.20:93, *a-fa-'aṣayta amrī*, and the verse invoked in the gloss both use the term *amr*. Nevertheless, it would have been more appropriate to mention Q.26:151 earlier in commenting upon Aaron's remark in Q.20:90, *obey my command (aḥī'ū amrī)*, in which both the main verb and the object are the same. I cannot detect any significance to the gloss besides the lexical point; as Aaron is being accused of *disobeying* Moses' command in the main verse, a more homiletic interpretation of the gloss would be that *Moses* was among the *musrifūn* and that Aaron was right not to obey his *amr*, which cannot be correct. Perhaps the idea is that the people should not have followed *Aaron*, because he exceeded his bounds in *not* following the *amr* of Moses.

<sup>55</sup> *fa-innī law ankartu 'alayhim la-ṣārū hizbayn yaqtulu ba'duhum ba'd<sup>m</sup>*. As noted above, the use of the contrafactual here confirms that Aaron did *not* abandon the idolaters, but rather kept the peace among the people to avoid friction and bloodshed.

<sup>56</sup> I have rendered the phrasing literally here, following the use of indirect discourse in the Arabic original. Ahmed Ali maintains the use of the first person throughout: *I was afraid you may say that I had created a rift...and did not pay heed to your command...*

Israelites than even Moses himself, and seven thousand Israelites were named after him on account of that love.<sup>57</sup>

As is the case in the original Quranic passage upon which it is based, Muqātil's version of the Sūra 20 narrative then concludes with Moses' confrontation of Sāmīrī. Before proceeding to discuss this final section of the passage, we will digress momentarily to consider the deeper implications of Muqātil's exegesis of the dialogue between Moses and Aaron here.

Muqātil's comments on verses 92 through 94 seem to reflect his tremendous ambivalence regarding Aaron; to some degree, this ambivalence recurs throughout later Muslim exegesis of this episode as well, but it is particularly acute here. Although Muqātil clearly understands Sāmīrī as the ultimate architect of the Israelites' downfall, like other exegetes, he is forced to acknowledge Aaron's role in what transpired, particularly because of his ultimate responsibility for the Israelites' welfare as Moses' viceroy or surrogate (as is established in Q.7:142, as seen above). Here, Moses' probing questions in the Sūra 20 version of the episode—*What hindered you from following me? Did you not disobey my command?*—seem to be understood to mean that Aaron refused to denounce the devotees of the Calf and resist their evil inclinations, especially to the point of forming a separate faction with those who had not succumbed to the temptation to worship the Calf. According to verse 94, Aaron claims that he did not do so because then Moses could accuse him of causing a rift (*firāq*) in the community; as Muqātil understands this statement, Aaron seems to have believed that to have done so would have been tantamount to abandoning Moses' "trust" or *waṣiyya*, and the inevitable consequence of this act would have been the division of the people into "two parties (*hizbayn*) bent on killing one another."

Notably, the portrayal of Aaron here is strongly evocative of certain classical rabbinic readings of the Calf episode. The remark with which Muqātil concludes this part of the narrative before continuing to Moses' confrontation of Sāmīrī is somewhat odd, its significance difficult to

---

<sup>57</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.39-40.



discern in the immediate context: “Aaron was more beloved of the Israelites even than Moses himself... and seven thousand Israelites were named after him on account of that love.” *Without* asserting direct influence per se, we might observe an intriguing parallel from the Babylonian Talmud: in one of the several traditions on the Calf episode to be found in the Bavli, the attitudes of Aaron and Moses are juxtaposed in the context of the idolatrous mob’s murder of another leader of the Israelites named Hur.<sup>58</sup> From relatively early on in the development of the midrashic tradition, Hur is portrayed as Aaron’s partner in the leadership of the Israelites in Moses’ absence. He is depicted as extremely zealous, so much so that he stridently resisted the Israelites when they sought to make the Calf, and on account of this, the Israelites killed him. Seeing this, Aaron sought to compromise with them for various reasons, especially out of fear that a foreboding prophecy would be fulfilled if he too were to be killed; rather than allow the penalty for the murders of two of their leaders, a priest and a prophet, to fall on the Israelites’ heads, Aaron thought it better to go along with their demands, at least for the time being until Moses’ return from Sinai.<sup>59</sup>

This story is attested in full in *Vayyiqra Rabbah*, a relatively early homiletic midrash that may be dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century CE; subsequently, many other midrashic traditions allude to the story, which seems to have become very well known. The version of the Calf narrative that we have mentioned as a possible parallel to the portrayal of Aaron in *Tafsīr Muqātil* appears in

---

<sup>58</sup> Hur is a rather mysterious figure, despite his prominence in the Exodus account. When the Israelites are attacked by the Amalekites, it is Aaron and Hur who help Moses keep his hands aloft in a gesture of blessing so that Joshua and his soldiers can prevail against them (17:12-13); later, he is explicitly placed in charge of the Israelites along with Aaron when Moses departs for his journey to Sinai (24:14). He is the grandfather of Bezalel, to whom is entrusted the construction of the Tabernacle and its holy vessels (35:30).

<sup>59</sup> *Vayyiqra Rabbah* 10:3. As we mentioned above, the various apologetic traditions that portray Aaron’s subterfuges in hoping to stall the Israelites or ameliorate their sin by going along with the making of the Calf usually invoke a well-known ambiguity in the masoretic tradition: in Exodus 32:5, *And Aaron saw; and he built an altar before it* [i.e. the Calf], the consonantal text וירא can be read either as *wayyar*, “he saw,” as in MT, or as *wayyirā*, “he feared,” as in the Peshitta and other witnesses. The ambiguity of the text is exploited so that Aaron is said to have *seen* Hur slain before him, and *feared* the terrible price Israel would have to pay if he were slain too. (Sometimes it is said that he *feared* he would be killed, plain and simple.)

the Babylonian Talmud, and this version is unusual in that it casts Aaron's role in a largely *negative* light. It is cited in the context of a discussion of arbitration, which is condemned because arbitration implies compromise, and statutes, ordinances and laws that have their ultimate basis in the divine will should *never* be subjected to compromise. Thus Moses is valorized as the epitome of uncompromising adherence to the law; Aaron, on the other hand, "loved peace and pursued peace," and this led to him making compromises, albeit with good intentions. Later on in the passage this is explicitly connected to the events at Sinai: when Hūr was killed by the idolatrous mob, Aaron wanted to spare them from committing an even worse crime; because he compromised in this instance, however, he earned God's wrath and subsequently had to atone for his sin.<sup>60</sup>

The characterization of Aaron as *rôdēp šālôm*, "pursuing peace," recurs throughout rabbinic literature. The particular interpretation of this tradition in tractate *Sanhedrin* seems rather similar to the depiction of Aaron we find here in *Tafsīr Muqātil*; for Muqātil, Aaron's generally conciliatory attitude translates into the affection the Israelites had for him, in contrast, presumably, to the zealous and unyielding Moses, whom they might have found harder to love. The implication seems to be that Aaron's reluctance to introduce division in the community by actively resisting the idolaters, by force if need be, was due to this affection, which was presumably reciprocal; in the end, however, Moses took Aaron to task for his willingness to compromise, or rather his unwillingness to resist wrongdoing by force. Muqātil's remarks might also imply some subtle attempt at apologetic: Aaron meant the best for the community that loved him so, and thus he hesitated to bring violence and bloodshed into their midst. In other words, what we seem to see here is an implicit condemnation of the moral laxity that underlay his conciliatory attitude.

---

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *b. Sanh.* 6b-7a. Again, this tradition is unusual for its explicitly negative depiction of Aaron's deed; he is more typically portrayed positively in these revisionist versions of the Calf episode, because the point is usually to exonerate him for his apparent complicity in the making of the Calf.

Later Sunnī authors’ horror of *fitna*—conditioned by centuries of civil strife and the desire to suppress “perfectionist” interpretations of Islam in favor of a broad-based, consensus-minded communitarian ideal—would lead them to interpret this scene rather differently. Throughout the *tafsīr* tradition, despite the abiding tendency to exonerate Aaron for any wrongdoing in the episode, there sometimes appear subtle signs of debate over what exactly Aaron’s role was supposed to have been and what action (or inaction) he was ultimately culpable for (if any). But what is so very striking about Muqātil’s interpretation is that for him, Aaron really does seem to have been derelict in his duty in not removing himself and his loyal followers from the evildoers’ midst. That is, fearing the consequences, he did *not* abandon the idolaters to their sinful ways, refusing to publicly disavow them, lest division and civil war occur and they become “two factions bent on killing one another.” The original Quranic verse describing Aaron’s reaction to Moses’ accusation that he was derelict in his duty makes it clear that the former expected that the latter would support his decision: *I was really afraid you might say, You have created a rift among the children of Israel; you did not pay heed to my command...* Moreover, the original verse describing the question Moses puts to Aaron is ambiguous about what he expected Aaron to do: *O Aaron, when you saw that they had gone astray, what hindered you from following me?* Muqātil thus glosses this in a way that makes Moses’ attitude, at least as he understands it, more explicit: what prevented you from following me, specifically, “so that you did not obey my command, and *therefore disavow them*”? Despite Aaron’s anticipation of Moses’ support for his actions, in point of fact, it appears that, at least in Muqātil’s conception, creating a rift and allowing the Israelites to be divided into two factions, even to the point of bloodshed, was *exactly* what Moses expected him to do. That is, the right course of action was *precisely* that thing for which Aaron was afraid Moses would take him to task! Aaron *should* have disavowed them, *should* have allowed them to become “two factions bent on killing one another.”<sup>61</sup> Notably, while

---

<sup>61</sup> This interpretation of Muqātil’s interpretation is confirmed and enriched by comparison with that of al-Kalbī, who seems to have held a similar view; see below.

later exegetes often understand Aaron's motivations in precisely this way, they usually signal their approval of his decision tacitly or explicitly, presuming that his tolerance of their evildoing would have been the lesser of two evils, preferable to his taking up arms and causing conflict and bloodshed in the community.

This interpretation is borne out if we engage in our own intratextual glossing and compare Muqātil's exegesis here with that he provides in his comments to Sūra 2. There, as we have already noted, there is a particular emphasis on bloodshed and violence in the episode; this is based upon Muqātil's expansive reading of Q.2:54, Moses' command to the Israelites to "kill yourselves" (*aqtulū anfusakum*), which is understood as effecting expiation for the sin of the people's worship of the Calf. Though there is no parallel to this verse in the Sūra 20 version of the episode, and Muqātil makes no reference to this part of the episode in his comments here, one might nevertheless reasonably surmise that this aspect of the narrative, understood to be the real culmination of the Calf episode, remains an implicit part of the story here. That is, it is difficult to imagine that Aaron's specific words in his explanation as to why he did not disavow the evildoers and secede with the remaining upright Israelites—"if I had abandoned them, the people would have become two parties bent on killing one another"—do not have some kind of ironic resonance, given that Muqātil has already described the ultimate consequences of the Israelites' sin back in his comments on Sūra 2. Taking the long description there of how the righteous Israelites take up arms and massacre the evildoers at Moses' command into account, not only can we conclude that this is exactly what happened at the end of the story anyway, but also that this is what Moses thought *should* have happened all along, given that he is the direct source of the command laid upon the Israelites to "kill yourselves."

As mentioned previously, such a state of affairs—in which part of the community secedes for some reason, causing strife and disrupting the harmony that should ideally characterize a rightly-guided people—was universally termed *fitna* by classical Sunnī scholars, to whom this kind of political and religious division was to be avoided at all costs. It is clear that Muqātil is

simply not thinking about this issue the same way as later exegetes did. If we compare the exchange between Moses and Aaron in his comments on Sūra 20 with Moses' statement about hearing the "sound of *fitna*" in his comments on Sūra 2, it is apparent that in Muqātil's conception, *fitna* in its *classical* sense is exactly what is *not* going on in the Israelite camp. That is, secession of part of the community and the eventual resort to violence and bloodshed to set things right is what Moses' return to the camp precipitates, according to Muqātil's narrative based on Sūra 2. It is *not* the prevailing state of affairs in the camp beforehand, because this is precisely what Moses complains to Aaron about in their exchange in the narrative based on Sūra 20. One could argue that the sound of *fitna* Moses says he hears might be construed as a prevailing state of *injustice* and, worse, the toleration of that injustice by the duly appointed authority, whose legitimacy might then be questioned. But it is more likely that in Muqātil's conception, the situation in the camp is one brought about directly by divine fiat, as we have seen, and thus when Moses says he hears the "sound of *fitna*" in the camp, we should understand this as his perception—and confirmation—that what is going on there is a divine trial.

It should be emphasized that the two senses of *fitna* we have discussed here are by no means unrelated. According to the classical lexicographers, the basic meaning of the verb *fatana* is "to burn"; in its original context, it seems to have signified the testing of precious metals by melting—a literal "trial by fire." Extrapolation to more figurative kinds of "testing" then led to the word acquiring a secondary (or tertiary?) sense of "temptation" in the classical formulation, in that the community of the faithful may be seduced into succumbing to a divine test by following sectarian or secessionist impulses. From this, we can clearly see the further derivation of the meaning of "civil strife," "disorder," as the term came to connote the tribulations with which the Muslim community was plagued throughout its early history in the repeated contention over legitimate leadership. Again, after an articulate Sunnī identity began to be articulated in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries, this politically loaded sense of the word seems to have become

preeminent in Sunnī discourse generally, and in the mainstream commentary tradition specifically.<sup>62</sup>

But it is clear that for Muqātil, the term does *not* necessarily have this connotation, as one would expect given his circumstances, since he lived at a time in which different forms of Muslim identity were still in flux and had only begun to coalesce.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, if one reads the versions of the Calf narrative in his commentary synoptically, as we have here, it is evident that such a state of affairs did not even have particularly negative implications for Muqātil, inasmuch as this seems to be his conception of the favored outcome in the Calf episode—“sectarian” strife and purgative bloodshed.<sup>64</sup> Given Muqātil’s location in the milieu of generalized opposition to the Umayyads during the later Marwānid era, as well as his reported attempts to curry favor with the Abbasids, it is very tempting to correlate his views here with the prevailing political climate of the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century AH, especially in the eastern Islamic world.

Part of the reason for the strident Sunnī condemnation of the situation represented by the term *fitna* is that the communitarian ideal espoused by its spokesmen among the ‘*ulamā*’ was deliberately established in *opposition* to the perfectionist ideal advocated by more activist movements among the Shī’a as well as other “sectarian” formations such as the Khārijites. In its classical formation, Sunnism stressed the legitimacy of standing authority, valorized both

---

<sup>62</sup> See *ER*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Fitna” (Gardet) for a concise analysis that includes an interesting juxtaposition of Christian and Muslim conceptions of temptation. Much of Gardet’s evidence for the development of ideas about *fitna*, in particular for the Sunnī rejection of secession as illegitimate, comes from the early credal literature studied by Wensinck and others.

<sup>63</sup> Note that Muqātil died in the same year as Abū Ḥanīfa and Ibn Ishāq, and shortly after the death of Ja’far al-Sādiq.

<sup>64</sup> There are over a hundred references in the Quran to one or another sort of trial; cf. *EQ*, s.v. “Trial” (Nawas). Further, various words derived from the verbal root *f-t-n* occur over fifty times in the Quran. Confirming that Muqātil’s particular attitude towards *fitna* and the legitimacy of violent secession from the community represents an authentic, “aboriginal” strand in *tafsīr*, i.e., that this aspect of his thought genuinely distinguishes him from later Sunnī exegetes, would obviously require a more extensive investigation than I have been able to pursue here. Considering how freighted with meaning the word was for later authors, it would be interesting to see if *fitna* genuinely lacks negative connotations for Muqātil.

‘Uthmān and ‘Alī equally as rightly guided caliphs (as opposed to the Shī‘ī execration of the first three caliphs, and the Khārijī execration of all of them), and most of all emphasized political quietism. Groups that adopted a more oppositional outlook, on the other hand, tended to view what they perceived as unjust authority as illegitimate, saw the struggles of what came to be called the Great Fitna as historically definitive for group identity, and generally cultivated an ethos of resistance, whether or not it was expressed in actual militant resistance to standing authority. Most of all, these “sectarian” groups—perhaps better termed “secessionist,” especially in the immediate context—were inclined to idealize nonconformity with situations of injustice, such as the Khārijites’ refusal to accept ‘Alī’s resort to arbitration after the Battle of Ṣiffīn in 37/657, or the rejection of non-‘Alid or non-Ḥusaynid leadership of the community by the various factions and communities known somewhat diffusely as *shī‘at ‘Alī*. For these groups, protest against prevailing injustice should ideally be taken to its logical extreme, namely fissure of the community itself, whereas other groups that prioritized or at least idealized such protest while successfully resisting or suppressing the urge to secession—if not factionalism per se—managed to remain part of the Sunnī fold.<sup>65</sup>

While the historical reports about Muqātil b. Sulaymān do not generally allege that he had Shī‘ī leanings—not that such reports need be taken as objectively reliable anyway—we might nevertheless characterize the outlook expressed in his interpretation of the Calf narrative as perfectionist and secessionist, since he seems above all opposed to the ideal of conciliation that would become a cardinal virtue in classical Sunnism. At the very least, Muqātil’s explicit position regarding the crisis of leadership portrayed in the Calf episode would seem to indicate that the

---

<sup>65</sup> E.g. the Ḥanbalīs, who have frequently managed to maintain an oppositional stance throughout their history while also cultivating an image as the staunchest defenders of Sunnī orthodoxy. Robinson has recently suggested that the emergence of militant sectarianism in the late 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century may be partially explained as a failure on the part of the increasingly consolidated Arab-Islamic state to fully exploit, redirect, or suppress the time-honored *jihādī* impulse that drove the armed expansion of the *umma* in the first place; see “Prophecy and Holy Men in Early Islam.”

instinctive hostility to secessionist tendencies that would become widespread among later Sunnī authors is clearly a development posterior to his time. That is, to characterize Muqātil as a crypto-Shī'ī would simply be anachronistic, reflecting the attitude that was only *later* asserted to be “mainstream” or “orthodox.”<sup>66</sup> In contrast, later treatments of the Calf narrative, especially the “kill yourselves” episode in Sūra 2, tend to reflect the radically different view of *fitna* that would subsequently come to typify the Sunnī perspective after the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>67</sup>

\*\*\*

After portraying Moses' confrontation of Aaron, Muqātil turns his attention to Sāmīrī, whose role in creating the Calf was described earlier in his comments on the Sūra 20 version of the episode: “He fashioned it for three days, then he cast the handful which he had taken from the track of the hoof of Gabriel's horse into it, and the Calf lowed a single time, and not again.” At this juncture in the account, Moses accosts him, inquires about the reasons for his actions, and passes summary judgment upon him:

---

<sup>66</sup> Note also that the term *waṣīyya*, in its specific sense of the “trust” or “testament” handed down in prophetic succession, would eventually take on very strong Shī'ite connotations; cf. Rubin, “Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shi'a Tradition.” Various scholars have observed a particular analogy here with ideas found in certain Syriac sources, most of all the *Me'arath Gazzē* or *Cave of Treasures*, a late antique apocryphon of largely indeterminate provenance.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Ṭabarī's comments *ad loc.* Moses' dialogue with Aaron in Q.20:92-94. Note also that in various remarks distributed throughout his commentary on the different versions of the Calf narrative (for example in his exegesis of the significance of Moses' command to the Israelites to kill themselves in Q.2:54), Ṭabarī emphasizes that although different groups among the people received different punishments commensurate with the degree of their complicity, the Israelites sinned together and were punished all together. This seems to me to represent an implicit argument *against* the idea that some of the community seceded while others remained behind and were guilty of idolatry; rather, it appears that in Ṭabarī's conception, the whole community was responsible. (Note that the idea behind the command to “kill yourselves” is thus that some did the killing and others were killed, but that this was a heavy punishment for all of them regardless—that is, this is *collective* atonement for *collective* guilt.)

I will only deal with this issue in passing in my treatment of Ṭabarī's interpretation of the Calf narrative below; clearly this is a subject that merits a separate study, especially insofar as a major shift in interpretation between Muqātil on the one hand and Ṭabarī and other exegetes of a later period on the other does in fact seem to be evident here.



*Moses asked: What was the matter*—that is, what was your command?<sup>68</sup>—*O Sāmirī (Q.20:95)*—that is: So what impelled you to this thing I see before me now? *Sāmirī said, I perceived what they did not perceive*<sup>69</sup>—that is, I understood what they did not understand; that is, I knew what they did not know regarding the matter of the steed of Gabriel; *I picked up a handful of dust from the track of the steed of the messenger, that is, tread upon by the steed of Gabriel, and threw it into the fire with the remains of the ornaments; for the idea seemed attractive to me (20:96)*—that is, my soul prompted me to do so.

*He said, Go hence! All your life*—until the time of your death—you are (cursed) to say, ‘Do not touch me’—that is, you will not mingle with other people—and there is for you in the next world an appointed time<sup>70</sup>—that is, Judgment Day—you will not be able to escape—that is, that you will not avoid. *Look at your god*—that is, the Calf—to whom you are so attached—that is, which you have set up as your god. *We shall verily burn it with fire and rasp and disperse its ashes into the sea (20:97)*—that is, discarding every bit of it...<sup>71</sup>

Many of the paraphrastic expansions in this version are familiar from Muqātil’s commentary on the Calf narratives in Sūra 2 and Sūra 7, though many new elements are introduced here as well. Sāmirī understood what the people did not, namely what could be

---

<sup>68</sup> Note the pun: as a paraphrase of *mā khaṭbuka, mā amruka* would likewise appear to mean something similar—“What’s your story?” or “What was the matter?” However, in context here, it seems that we should take *amr* literally, in the sense of “order” or “command,” since mention has already been made in the narrative to Sāmirī commanding (*amara*) the people to worship the Calf.

<sup>69</sup> Note that Ahmed Ali has *I saw what they did not see* here; I have altered the verb to “perceive” because the exegetes often play on the ambiguity of the term *baṣura*, which can connote either actual sight or rather mental apprehension and comprehension. At the very least, commentators usually choose one meaning over the other, but the association with actual sight per se is by no means to be taken for granted.

<sup>70</sup> Ahmed Ali has “threat” for *maw’id* here, but Muqātil’s gloss obviously presupposes that this is a reference to an actual date, i.e. Judgment Day. Note also the repeated occurrence of the *w-’-d* root throughout the Sinai narrative—*wa’d, maw’id*, etc.

<sup>71</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.40.

achieved with the dirt from the hoof of Gabriel's horse, which is mentioned here for the first time. This he threw into the fire with the ornaments; oddly, the precise function of the handful of dirt is actually not specified here, as it is earlier in the passage, where it says that he threw it into the Calf, and it "lowed a single time, and not again." Sāmīrī's sentence is to go forth and cry *lā misāsa*, warning people not to approach him; the *maw'id* established for him, which we have translated here as "appointed time," is interpreted as the threat of inevitable punishment on Judgment Day. As in the Sūra 2 version, the "burning" of the Calf is explained as demolition through the use of both fire and abrasion.

Finally, to return to the issue we raised at the very beginning of our discussion of Muqātil's versions of the Calf narrative based on Q.7:148-152 and 20:85-98, there seem to be fundamental contradictions between these passages in his commentary and that he provides based on Q.2:51-56 regarding the nature of the Calf. We have already noted the issue of the varying chronologies that seem to inform the different passages; in the end, this is perhaps not such an important matter. Of greater import is the question of how the Calf is supposed to have been formed and whether or not it was animate. First of all, it seems that Muqātil's version of the episode based on Sūra 20 is not even *internally* consistent on this issue. Early on in the passage, in the context of Moses' confrontation of the people, we first encounter this description of the making of the Calf:

Then Sāmīrī arose and took possession of them, and on the thirty-sixth, thirty-seventh, and thirty-eighth days he fashioned them into a calf. He fashioned it for three days, then he cast the handful which he had taken from the track of the hoof of Gabriel's horse into it, and the Calf lowed a single time, and not again. Then Sāmīrī commanded them to worship the Calf on the thirty-ninth day.

This seems to indicate that Sāmīrī made the Calf by hand and then exploited the occult power of the dirt "taken from the track of the hoof of Gabriel's horse"; it was this dirt that gave the golden

idol its semblance of life, which proved extremely temporary (as it “lowed a single time and not again,” *fa-khāra al-’ijl khūra wāhida wa-lam yathin*).

But just a little further on, still in the context of the people’s explanation for their actions, it is noted—in their own words—that

... *We threw [the ornaments]... and so—that is, in this way—did Sāmirī* throw the ornaments into the fire. *Then he produced the image of a calf—that is, with a physical form that had no soul—which mooed like a cow—that is, that made a sound...*

This introduces an odd discrepancy: instead of surrendering the golden ornaments to Sāmirī, the people threw them directly into the fire he had kindled so that they could purify themselves of the impurity he claimed had become attached to them. While this discrepancy is odd, it is not insurmountable; one might suppose that *some* of the ornaments were given to Sāmirī—these he sculpted into the Calf—and the rest were immolated directly afterwards. Another alternative would be that Sāmirī actually *cast* the Calf of molten metal—another reasonable conclusion—and that the people participated in this and assisted him by throwing their ornaments directly into the fire.

But this is not the understanding of the incident implied by later developments in the account. Rather, this statement about both the people and Sāmirī throwing the ornaments into the fire is further clarified by yet another reference to the making of the Calf in this passage, one that appears somewhat further along in the narrative, in the context of Sāmirī’s “apology.” Here we learn that, in contrast to the first reference to his manufacturing the Calf by hand and then throwing the dirt into it, a different procedure entirely seems to be intended:

... *Sāmirī said, I perceived what they did not perceive—that is, I understood what they did not understand; that is, I knew what they did not know regarding the matter of the steed of Gabriel; I picked up a handful of dust from*

*the track of the steed of the messenger, that is, tread upon by the steed of Gabriel, and threw it into the fire with the remains of the ornaments...*

Although the subsequent appearance of the Calf is not mentioned here, the critical phrase “*I picked up a handful of dust from the track of the steed of the messenger, that is, tread upon by the steed of Gabriel, and threw it into the fire with the remains of the ornaments...*” makes it clear that Sāmīrī did *not* manufacture the Calf by hand and then insert the dirt directly into its sculpted form—in direct contrast to Muqātil’s earlier assertion. Rather, the implication here—confirmed by many other parallel versions in other *tafsīrs*—is that Sāmīrī threw the people’s golden ornaments directly into the fire, *not* in order to cast the metal in a mold, but rather to prepare them for the direct addition of the dirt to the gold, magically creating the shape of the Calf itself, which then presumably emerged *fully formed* from the fire.

In short, Muqātil seems to have included two variant conceptions of the making of the Calf within a single account; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that his confused portrayal of the making of the Calf in this passage reflects two different notions about its origins. Whether this conflation is accidental or deliberate is difficult to say, since the details provided here are not obviously incongruous; rather, the underlying contradictions emerge only upon close inspection of the relevant passages, especially since so many of the details remain implicit in the account. Thus, recognizing the discrepancy actually requires that one is familiar with the later *tafsīr* tradition, in which the two distinct elements provided here—Sāmīrī’s crafting the Calf and making it low by inserting the dirt in its mouth, versus Sāmīrī’s throwing the dirt directly into the fire along with the molten golden ornaments of the people—come to represent completely different exegetical options that are sometimes deliberately juxtaposed as mutually exclusive.<sup>72</sup> That this synthesis of (or rather serial reference to) two discrete traditions on the origin of the

---

<sup>72</sup> Note that the latter interpretation is presented in only a very sketchy and vague manner; one might argue that Muqātil’s inclusion of these incongruous details is inadvertent, that a vestigial conception of the animation of the Calf has simply crept in here by accident. I prefer to interpret the inclusion of these details as deliberate, however.

Calf is not accidental at all but rather represents the deliberate attempt to encompass different exegetical traditions within the scope of his commentary becomes clear when we compare this passage to the other versions of the Calf narrative in Muqātil's *tafsīr*.

While it is not entirely consistent in itself but rather embraces two different exegetical possibilities, the portrayal of the making of the Calf in Muqātil's passage on Q.20:85-98 fundamentally agrees with that in his comments on Q.7:148-152. But again, the account in *both* of these passages is directly contradicted by the version of the narrative given in his comments on Q.2:51-56. While the latter, Muqātil's first treatment of the Calf episode, clearly implies that the Calf was genuinely alive in some way—Moses having accused God of inspiring it with the breath of life or soul (*nafakha fī-hi al-rūḥ*)—the later presentations seem to explicitly militate *against* such a possibility. In Muqātil's comments on the key phrase *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>um</sup>* in Q.7:148, the first part of the phrase is glossed as meaning *sūrat 'ijl jasad*, which we take as specifying that this was merely a *physical image* of a calf; this is corroborated by the following words, *laysa fī-hi rūḥ*, meaning that it was *without* life, with no soul within it. The second part of the phrase is glossed as meaning that the Calf made a sound like that of cattle (*ṣawt al-bahā'im*), and this is further explained as having occurred but once (*lam yaṣūt ghayr marra wāḥida*). The narrative based on the Sūra 20 account essentially agrees with this characterization. Despite the fact that it seems to assert two different conceptions of the creation of the Calf serially—that Sāmīrī made it by hand *and* that he brought it forth from the fire fully formed by means of the “handful from the track of the messenger”—whichever one of these options one favors, one certainly would not conclude from *either* of these depictions that this Calf was actually alive. In the first representation of the making of the Calf (stating that Sāmīrī manufactured the form of the Calf on the thirty-sixth, thirty-seventh, and thirty-eighth days and so forth), it is explicitly noted that it lowed, but only once, just as in the Sūra 7 version, albeit with somewhat different phrasing. Likewise, in the second direct allusion to the making of the Calf, Sāmīrī is said to have thrown the dirt in the fire; “*then he produced the image of a calf*—that is, with a physical form that had

no soul—*which mooed like a cow*—that is, that made a sound...” Again, as in the Sūra 7 version, the specific emphasis seems to be on the Calf’s *lack* of authentic life, with the key phrase referring to its apparent animation glossed as meaning that it was a mere physical form without soul.<sup>73</sup>

It is likely that a larger question of ultimate culpability lies behind the irreconcilable contradictions of these portrayals. As previously noted, the dialogue between Moses and God embedded in Muqātil’s comments on Q.2:51-52 appears to be directed towards asserting the whole episode’s status as a divine test or trial—one meaning of the heavily burdened term *fitna*—with Sāmīrī relegated to the role of a mere instrument in the incident, seemingly responsible only for the actual making (*san’*) of the Calf. In the later narratives, Sāmīrī acts alone, without any acknowledgment of his conformity with the divine will in carrying out the test. In the Sūra 20 version in particular, he manufactures the Calf by hand after having resorted to a devious trick to get his hands on the gold, or else exploits the magical potency latent within the “handful of dust from the track of the steed of the messenger” to transform the people’s golden ornaments. Further, it was specifically his knowledge of what to do with this “handful”—where this knowledge came from is never specified—that allowed him to carry out his scheme.

The internal inconsistency within the Sūra 20 version is perhaps ultimately as irrelevant as the discrepancies between the different timelines presented for the making of the Calf; whatever it is that Sāmīrī is supposed to have done with the gold or the fully-formed Calf with this dirt, what is clearly being emphasized here in this version is his autonomy in causing the Calf to come forth from the fire or low through direct magical intervention. Admittedly, since divine potency was the ultimate agency behind what transpired (communicated through the passive mediation of angelic contact with the earth), one could hypothetically argue that Sāmīrī’s autonomy is only illusory. But it is significant that no such argument is made explicit in this passage in *Tafsīr*

---

<sup>73</sup> Note that the depiction of Moses destroying the Calf with file and fire is also inherently contradictory, though in this case, as we noted above, there is a direct textual basis for the contradiction in the Quran.

*Muqātil*; in both the Sūra 7 and the Sūra 20 version of the narrative, Sāmīrī clearly acts without overt divine sanction or commission.

In short, the different perspectives on Sāmīrī’s actions in these narratives may be summarized in the following way: in Sūra 2, where theodical issues and large-scale themes such as sin and atonement (not to mention the ultimate destiny of Israel) take center stage, the “macro-focus” demands that Sāmīrī’s role be reduced to that of a divine instrument; this is natural if the primary issue at hand is whether ultimate responsibility is his or God’s. In Sūra 7 and 20, on the other hand, where much more detail is supplied regarding the events surrounding the making of the Calf “on the ground,” so to speak, the “micro-focus” demands that Sāmīrī exercises at least nominal or provisional autonomy. In the latter passages, the pressing question is whether ultimate responsibility is his or *Aaron*’s, and the drive to exonerate Aaron of as much blame as possible dictates both the details of the presentation and the overarching structure of the moral economy within both of these latter accounts.

Apart from our particular interest in various aspects of his interpretation of the Calf episode, what is perhaps most important to note about the passages from *Muqātil*’s commentary we have examined at length here is that they vividly demonstrate the potential for diametrically opposed exegetical options to be incorporated *within the scope of a single work*. We have already sought to explain *Muqātil*’s interpretive choices, especially his portrayal of Sāmīrī and the animation of the Calf, in terms of the larger issues he explores in each passage. But there is also something of a socio-historical dimension to his acknowledgement of contradictory interpretations as well. As we shall see, much of the material in *Muqātil*’s commentary coincides with information found in traditionally transmitted exegetical reports presented in classical works of *tafsīr*, which by and large began to be compiled not earlier than the later 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Note the exception of *Tafsīr ‘Abd al-Razzāq*, however, to be discussed below. This work is supposedly largely based on a *tafsīr* attributed to Ma’mar b. Rashīd which is no longer extant; the

Notwithstanding the particular influence he himself may have exerted on later commentators, these coincidences might be taken as corroboration of the common view of *Tafsīr Muqātil* as a repository of established traditions of interpretation that were in general circulation in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century; they would also seem to confirm that a significant amount of the data preserved in the classical *tafsīrs* dates back at least to Muqātil's time, if not earlier.<sup>75</sup>

Assuming, then, that Muqātil's commentary might provide us with a window onto general trends in Quran interpretation in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, the fact that he embraces two completely opposite positions regarding the putative animation of the Calf, as well as two rather different positions regarding the "mechanics" of its creation (so to speak), may very well reflect the fact that there was significant difference of opinion regarding this issue in his time. Further, it would perhaps not be unreasonable to conclude that this approach might be a deliberate gesture of inclusion, in that, by framing both of the options as feasible alternatives in different parts of his *tafsīr*, each was thereby enfranchised as a genuine exegetical possibility; at the same time, their autonomy was maintained as well, since each was incorporated into his comments on *separate* scriptural passages on the Calf. As we shall see, this approach anticipates Ṭabarī's methodology to some degree; his continual insistence on providing copious evidence of different, even

---

authenticity of this latter work is somewhat debatable, though it can be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century more securely than the extant *tafsīrs* attributed to Mujāhid and Sufyān al-Thawrī, for example.

<sup>75</sup> However, it is also possible that these coincidences simply represent plagiarism of Muqātil's interpretations; as previously noted, Gilliot has observed that after Muqātil's repudiation by mainstream scholars, traditions with significantly similar content to those in his *tafsīr* entered circulation, now supplied with proper *isnāds* and attributed to authorities such as Ibn 'Abbās. Again, his commentary was clearly still being read by exegetes in the later 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, even if few if any dared to quote him directly; and even as late as the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, his work was quoted by al-Tha'labī. Even if we assume that Muqātil and the classical exegetes represent independent witnesses to older traditions of interpretation, admittedly this is not saying much, since few would deny that a significant amount of the hadith corpus must have already been in circulation by the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. For most Western scholars of hadith, the issue is not if this material was genuinely in *circulation* by the time of the Successors or shortly afterward, but rather if it can plausibly be thought to have come from the Successors themselves, if not from Companions. Obviously, such coincidences only demonstrate the antiquity of the *content* of these traditions, and have little if any bearing on the question of the authenticity of the *isnāds* attached to them in classical *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*.



mutually exclusive, positions in a vast number of exegetical debates in his commentary has been interpreted as embodying the spirit of *ijmā'* that characterized the incipient formulation of Sunnism that came into being in the later 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century. Beyond the more pragmatic implications of this approach as a means of expressing consensus as a social and political ideal, however, there is possibly a more subtle theological principle latent within such a methodology as well, in that the embracing of plural and even mutually exclusive positions may also imply a hermeneutic of polyvalency, in which exegesis becomes a perpetually open-ended, inconclusive, but endlessly dynamic and evolving enterprise due to the sheer inexhaustibility of scriptural meanings.<sup>76</sup>

In any event, while this tendency has often been observed in Ṭabarī's commentary, it has gone largely undetected and unappreciated in Muqātil's. This is most likely due to the fact that while Ṭabarī explicitly acknowledges opposing interpretations as representing the established parameters of orthodox exegetical debate (i.e., some among the *Ahl al-'ilm* say this, others say that), Muqātil's enfranchisement of opposing views—if this is indeed what he is doing—remains only implicit, because it is executed in the context of the representation of different opinions within the narrative fabric of his commentary, and is thus readily overlooked. Further, Ṭabarī often explicitly advocates one view over another, sometimes not hesitating to belittle the opinion of which he disapproves; but the fact that Muqātil does not really draw our attention to the different possibilities at all allows each of them to be maintained as a completely viable exegetical option in his commentary, without one necessarily having to be prioritized over the others.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> On polyvalence in *tafsīr*, see Saleh's comments on Tha'labī, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition, passim* but esp. 151-61.

<sup>77</sup> Of course, it is also possible that Muqātil's incorporation of mutually exclusive interpretations simply represents his interest in utilizing different but equally interesting traditions on the Calf in his commentary, and that the outlook represented here is nothing more than the agnosticism of the storyteller for whom rhetorical impact and narrative effect are more important considerations than logical (or theological) consistency. But I suspect that such a view underestimates the sophistication of his approach and his theological sensitivity and insight.

## 2. Paraphrastic exegesis, 2: *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* (a.k.a. *Tafsīr al-Kalbī*?)

As we have already noted, *Tafsīr Muqātil* is perhaps the most important extant example of the genre of scriptural commentary called *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, “free” exegesis of the Quran unconstrained by the hadith-report format that would come to dominate the commentary genre by the later 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century. It is one of the oldest complete *tafsīrs* available to us; moreover, as we have seen, examining Muqātil’s three versions of the Golden Calf episode yields a wealth of information about the interpretation of this story among early Quran interpreters. Muqātil’s sequential, narrativistic approach to commentary allows him to include diverse, even contradictory, details about the Calf as well as to emphasize different literary and theological points in each of the three versions of the episode he gives us. We have argued that this approach is likely to reflect a deliberately pluralistic attitude, the author incorporating various themes, ideas, and perspectives represented in the exegetical tradition in his time; we may thus be justified in seeing Muqātil’s rich treatment of the episode as representing a snapshot of the interpretive options on the Calf available in the field of *tafsīr* in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century.

Our perception of these different interpretive options may be heightened and expanded if we briefly examine what we might argue is another important representative of the genre of *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* from the pre-classical period. As we mentioned in the last section, although *Tafsīr Muqātil* may have been redacted two or three generations after the floruit of its putative “author,” this work has commonly been treated as an authentically early example of 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-century Quran commentary. Somewhat more controversial is the work Wansbrough identified as the *tafsīr* of the famous exegete Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī, a contemporary of Muqātil who died in 146/763.<sup>78</sup> Like Muqātil, al-Kalbī occupies a precarious place in early Islamic scholarship: he was

---

<sup>78</sup> Although much of the historical information about this man is confused and colored by partisan bias, some aspects of his biography seem reasonably secure. Abū'l-Naḍr Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī, who flourished in the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, was a famous *mufasssīr* (commonly known as *ṣāhib al-tafsīr*) and specialist on *sīra* and *maghāzī*. His son Hishām (d. 204/819),

also accused of unreliable transmission of hadith as well as of doctrinal deviation, specifically of *ta'aşşub* (excessive devotion to the 'Alids, i.e. Shī'ism, or what would have passed for Shī'ism in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century) instead of the charge of *tashbīh* with which Muqātil was tarred. Like Muqātil, some classical exegetes, Ṭabarī in particular, supposedly refused to cite al-Kalbī in their *tafsīrs*, though later exegetes such as al-Tha'labī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī would do so.<sup>79</sup>

The work some have treated as the *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī is plagued with extremely complex problems surrounding its transmission and provenance, and admittedly, its very identification as the *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī has been seriously questioned by some. The work in question is a relatively brief paraphrastic commentary of the type familiar from such later examples of the genre as the famous *tafsīr* of al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), the *Anwār al-tanzīl wa'l-asrār al-ta'wīl*, or the commentary of al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) edited and completed by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), known to posterity as the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*. All three of these works maintain a more or less even balance between scriptural text and gloss, in sharp contrast to the *Tafsīr Muqātil*, where, as we have seen, *narratio* often takes over completely, and the ratio of exposition to Quranic verse becomes quite high. The obvious formal differences between Muqātil's commentary on the one hand and those of al-Bayḍāwī and al-Suyūṭī—exemplars of the high medieval academic or *madrassa* commentary—on the other are not irrelevant, as they in turn point to significant underlying hermeneutic and methodological differences. This begs the question of the true provenance of the *tafsīr* ascribed to al-Kalbī, which in its basic format has more in common with

---

usually known simply as Ibn al-Kalbī, was an equally famous scholar who specialized in tribal lore and genealogy in particular; he was the author of the *Jamharat al-nasab*, as well as the notorious *Kitāb al-aşnām* or *Book of Idols* that appears to have been deliberately suppressed in Abbasid times.

<sup>79</sup> Note that Ṭabarī's putative rejection of both Muqātil and al-Kalbī is actually overstated, due to errors made by Ṭabarī's biographer Yāqūt; see Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 124-5. Regarding al-Kalbī's purported *ta'aşşub*, it seems likely that this was simply a false accusation, analogous to Muqātil's supposed heterodoxy. On al-Kalbī's complex place in later Islamic scholarship, see Schöller, "Sīra and Tafsīr: Muḥammad al-Kalbī on the Jews of Medina," esp. 18-23.

the aforementioned medieval commentaries than it does with the indisputably early *Tafsīr Muqātil*.

Wansbrough attributed the Turkish manuscripts Ayasofya 118 and Hamidiye 40, dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, to the senior al-Kalbī, following an identification first made by Sezgin.<sup>80</sup> But Wansbrough also recognized that the work in these manuscripts was also at some point attributed to a different author; it seems to have circulated as the work entitled *Al-Wāḍiḥ fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, ascribed to Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Wahb al-Dīnawarī (d. 308/920), a contemporary of Ṭabarī.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, as Rippin and others have observed, the work is *also* extant under the title *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, in a recension attributed to Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Fīrūzābādī, the well-known author of the *Qāmūs* (d. 817/1415).

The common thread that unites all of these versions of the *tafsīr*, which are in fact essentially identical although they are attributed to authorities of the mid-second, early fourth, and early ninth centuries AH respectively, is its basic identification as the Quran commentary of the famous Companion ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās (d. 68/686).<sup>82</sup> If one is predisposed to see the work's authorship by Ibn ʿAbbās as implausible, then an association with al-Fīrūzābādī in the 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century may seem more reasonable, at least judging by its format, which appears to establish the work as fundamentally analogous to the *tafsīrs* of al-Bayḍāwī and the Jalālayn. In point of fact, Rippin's extensive research on the work does present a formidable argument for a later date of composition—at least significantly later than al-Kalbī, if not quite as late as al-

---

<sup>80</sup> Wansbrough's main discussion of the "*Tafsīr al-Kalbī*" appears in *Quranic Studies*, 130-8, where it is compared extensively to the (supposedly) contemporary works of Muqātil and Sufyān al-Thawrī.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>82</sup> Rippin provides a comprehensive listing of most of the extant versions and witnesses to the text: cf. "*Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*," 39-59. He emphasizes repeatedly that despite its multiple attributions, the various "versions" of the text are fundamentally the same; it is only the *attributions* and not the actual *recensions* of the text that have proliferated.

Fīrūzābādī. As Rippin notes, it is hardly feasible that the work could be as early as Ibn ‘Abbās himself.<sup>83</sup>

Rippin’s argument regarding this work is complex, and we will not rehearse it in detail here. Somewhat surprisingly, he claims that the *tafsīr*’s attribution to *both* al-Kalbī and to al-Fīrūzābādī are completely spurious. The work is most often ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbās itself, but the main basis for its direct association with al-Kalbī is his prominence in the *isnāds* given in some versions of the text. Further, although the work is widely available today as the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* of al-Fīrūzābādī, he argues that this is a mistaken identification that was most likely made sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the work was first printed.<sup>84</sup> In the end, Rippin prefers to emphasize the work’s connection with al-Dīnawārī, at least to some limited degree; on the basis of a careful scrutiny of the *isnāds* of the extant witnesses to *Al-Wāḍih*, he concludes that the work actually originated two generations *before* al-Dīnawārī, and that the latter appropriated the work and claimed it as his own.<sup>85</sup>

Rippin holds that the identification of this work as the “*Tafsīr al-Kalbī*” by Sezgin, Wansbrough, and others is primarily the result of the widespread ascription of a popular commentary to this figure, as well as the frequent citation of al-Kalbī in some classical *tafsīrs*.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> See Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 129-36 and notes thereon for a comprehensive examination of the scholarship on Ibn ‘Abbās. As is the case with so many famous authorities who played (or supposedly played) formative roles in the genesis of Islamic history, law, and tradition, Ibn ‘Abbās’ actual authorship of discrete works has been the subject of considerable debate.

<sup>84</sup> See Rippin, “*Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās*,” 40-9 for his detailed discussion of the problems surrounding this text’s attribution. The first printed edition is now lost, but is probably the common source that stands behind both the earliest Bombay and Būlāq editions known to Brockelmann (44-5, and cf. Brockelmann, *GAL*, 1.190 and supp. I.331-2). Note also that Rippin provides a list of all of the extant witnesses to the text at the end of his article (75-6).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-50, 60-2. Rippin also gives a detailed chart of the *isnāds* through which the various extant witnesses to the text were transmitted; cf. 82-3.

<sup>86</sup> See Sezgin, *GAS* 1.27, 34-5. In his discussion of the extant texts attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, Sezgin cites the work of al-Kalbī and asserts its identity with the printed text of the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* of al-Fīrūzābādī; later, under his entry on al-Kalbī himself, Sezgin refers to the *tafsīr* in

Besides this, Rippin also discounts this attribution on the basis of the work's literary features and interpretive style. He observes that the work is not a "haggadic" or narrative *tafsīr* at all—*pace* Wansbrough in particular—and notes its "lack of superfluous interpretative material," the absence of the distinctive technical terms typically used as connectives to facilitate oral delivery, and the striking tendency to cite alternative exegetical options serially. Rippin concludes that the work is in fact basically "academic" in nature, presupposing considerable knowledge not only of the Quran itself but of exegetical debates and ancillary issues such as variant readings; thus, far from being one of a precious few authentic witnesses to the earliest phase of Muslim interpretation of the Quran, Rippin the so-called "haggadic" exegesis we have discussed above, this *Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās* (or rather, *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*, as we *should* call this work)—appears to be an early example of the genre of the *madrasa* commentary, a digest of standard interpretation that might have been meant for the education of local '*ulamā*'.<sup>87</sup> Overall, Rippin's approach to the work as a school text is a complete reversal of Wansbrough's treatment of it as a narrative-paraphrastic *tafsīr* characterized by the primitive exegetical style supposedly dominant during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AH.

On the other hand, in sharp contrast to Rippin's approach, Schöller has not only treated this *tafsīr* as authentically that of al-Kalbī, but also used it as a source from which genuinely early historical material (on *maghāzī* in particular) can be mined. He emphasizes that despite the ambivalence of some scholars regarding al-Kalbī's reputation, not only did some exegetes

---

the following terms: "Einer der auf Ibn al-'Abbās zurückgehenden Qur'ānkommentare war der von M. b. as-Sā'ib al-Kalbī, der uns sonst nur als Historiker, Genealoge und Geograph bekannt ist" (34). The commentary thus appears here as the work of two authorities, bolstering the reputation of both. Cf. also *GAS*, 1.42 for Sezgin's entry on al-Dīnawarī, where no connection between *Al-Wāḍiḥ* and the work of Ibn 'Abbās/al-Kalbī is mentioned.

<sup>87</sup> An obvious objection to Rippin's approach to this text would be that the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century seems rather early for us to be talking about "school texts" and the formalization of *tafsīr* as an actual discipline for study as part of a set curriculum, seeing as the *madrasa* system was just coming into being at that time. Granted, even *Tafsīr Muqātil* might be seen as presuming some kind of pedagogy, inasmuch as it represents a digest of established interpretations, but Rippin quite clearly has a formal educational setting in mind as the *Sitz im Leben* of "*Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās*."

continue to use his work, concealing their debt to him by suppressing his name in their *isnāds*, but in fact his *tafsīr* “was always studied and transmitted, especially in the eastern part of the Islamic world.”<sup>88</sup> The copious evidence he cites for the continuing prominence of al-Kalbī’s *tafsīr* seems to be implicitly marshaled against Rippin’s claim that this work was essentially lost, though admittedly the mere fact of wide attestation for the circulation of a commentary *attributed* to al-Kalbī, even only a century or two after the author’s *floruit*, hardly refutes Rippin’s conclusions.

Rippin’s main point is that the correlation between the extant text and its supposed author is tenuous at best; the work we have at hand cannot be proved to be the authentic commentary written by the historical al-Kalbī, its ascription to this author being essentially fictitious.<sup>89</sup> For the most part, Schöller simply sidesteps Rippin’s criticism. He never mentions that neither his manuscript nor any other is actually *ascribed* to al-Kalbī, and merely assumes, as so many others have done, that the work is the “*Tafsīr al-Kalbī*,” simply on the basis of al-Kalbī’s appearance in the work’s *isnād* and the wide fame of al-Kalbī as a *mufasssīr*. It is perhaps unsurprising that Schöller naively ignores Rippin’s very convincing critique, for he makes many other assumptions that most contemporary scholars of early Islamic literature would find extremely problematic; for example, he blithely compares material in the *tafsīr* at hand with quotations attributed to al-Kalbī found in later works, implicitly seeking to “reconstruct” the authentic views of the historical al-Kalbī thereby.<sup>90</sup> Oddly, despite his very different methods and assumptions, Schöller’s view of the work is in the end not so different from Rippin’s: both agree that the final *redaction* of this

---

<sup>88</sup> “*Sīra and Tafsīr: Muḥammad al-Kalbī on the Jews of Medina*,” 20-1; see esp. n. 10 thereon, in which Schöller adduces much evidence for continuing interest in the text well into the Middle Ages. He takes for granted the basic identity of al-Dīnawarī’s *Al-Wāḍiḥ* and al-Kalbī’s *tafsīr*, and does not comment on this at all.

<sup>89</sup> It is worth noting that Schöller’s main witness, Chester Beatty Ar. 4224, is, like most if not all of the other manuscripts, attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās and not al-Kalbī. See Arberry, *Chester Beatty Library: A Handlist of the Arabic Manuscripts*, where Ar. 4224 is listed simply as “Tafsīr al-Qur’an, attr. to Abd Allah b. al-Abbas (d. 68/668)” (5.70). The Chester Beatty manuscript is by no means the oldest witness to the work, being dated to Jumādā I 1159 (1746).

<sup>90</sup> “*Sīra and Tafsīr*,” 23.

work probably dates to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>/10-11<sup>th</sup> century, and while Rippin emphasizes that the work was decisively shaped in the period in which it was redacted, despite the possible presence of an authentically early core, for Schöller, *despite* the fact that the work may have taken on its final form relatively late, in its essence, the work is indisputably early.<sup>91</sup>

\*\*\*

The foregoing discussion is relevant to our topic here because a close comparison of the material on the Golden Calf episode in the *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, which we should perhaps prefer to call the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*, has a clear bearing on the issue of the work's putative provenance. Further, having conjectured that the work might in fact be genuinely early based on this comparison, the exegetical information it yields broadens our perspective on the interpretation of the Calf narrative in the pre-classical period. Although the work is not *overall* very similar to *Tafsīr Muqātil* in terms of its literary style, exegetical methodology, or format, our examination of various passages in it appears to confirm Wansbrough's initial evaluation of the work as an authentic example of early "haggadic" or paraphrastic exegesis.

Upon close inspection, a very large degree of verbatim agreement in many interpretations can be found in this work and *Tafsīr Muqātil*, so much so that it is difficult to resist the conclusion that our *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* either drew upon *Tafsīr Muqātil* directly or else derived many of its readings from the same pool of established traditional interpretations that Muqātil used. Whether or not one concludes that this text should be identified as the genuine work of the historical exegete al-Kalbī is ultimately beside the point; what is important is that this *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* seems to constitute another critical witness to the early development of the commentary tradition in general, and to the interpretation of the Quranic Calf episode more

---

<sup>91</sup> Despite his reputation as an arch-skeptic, in this particular case, one would have to characterize Wansbrough as closer to Schöller's position here than Rippin's.



specifically.<sup>92</sup> There are so many glosses in the passages in the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* pertaining to the Calf episode that are identical or at least extremely similar to those in *Tafsīr Muqātil* that cataloguing them exhaustively is beyond the scope of our treatment here, and we will make only the briefest of remarks here concerning this overlap.<sup>93</sup>

Sometimes the coincidences between the texts are dispersed throughout the account, and no doubt recur in the treatment of other Quranic narratives as well; these seem to reflect common recourse to a fairly standard lexicon of synonyms. Thus, forms of the verb *ḡalama* (to do wrong) are regularly glossed with corresponding forms of the verb *ḡarra* (to hurt, harm, impair) in both texts: e.g., *innakum ḡalamtum anfusakum* (Q.2:54) is rendered *ḡarartum*, and so forth.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, in both texts *fatana* (to test) may be glossed with *ibtalā*, as in Q.20:90.<sup>95</sup> Sometimes only partial overlap is attested in each exegete's reference to this standard lexicon of synonyms: in reference to the Quran's consistent use of various forms of the verb *wa'ada* in describing Moses'

---

<sup>92</sup> As previously mentioned, Wansbrough's text for what he called the *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī was derived from two Turkish manuscripts, Ayasofya 118 and Hamidiye 40; he also used the text of the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* printed in the margin of an old Būlāq edition of Suyūṭī's *Al-Durr al-ma'thūr*. As noted, Schöller's primary text is Chester Beatty Ar. 4224. Not having access to manuscript witnesses, I have worked eclectically by using two different printed editions together, the 1988 Beirut edition of the *Tanwīr al-miqbās* and the 2003 Beirut edition of al-Dīnawarī's *Al-Wāḡih*. The latter is based on the Hyderabad manuscript al-Maktabat al-Āṣafiya 3180, which the editor, Aḡmad Farīd, claims can be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> c. AH based on the hand. The basis of the former is simply not acknowledged in the edition, and one suspects it is simply derived from an earlier printed edition, especially since, as Rippin has shown, attribution of the text to al-Fīrūzābādī and application of the title *Tanwīr al-miqbās* is in fact based on an error made when one of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century editions of the work was printed. There is almost no significant deviation between the two texts I have used.

<sup>93</sup> Establishing *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*, in its various versions, as a source for genuine interpretations of the Quran from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century would be of great benefit for the study of early *tafsīr* generally. Doing so would obviously require a much broader comparison of the work with *Tafsīr Muqātil*, and this in turn might provide more clues as to what the true relationship between the two works is. I hope to return to this project in a future treatment dedicated to the topic.

<sup>94</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1.106; *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 8. Use of some form of *ḡarra* to gloss the corresponding form of *ḡalama* is actually more consistent in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*; there are at least two other instances of this found in the Calf passages (*Muqātil* neglects one entirely and glosses with a form of *ashraka* in the other).

<sup>95</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.39 top; *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 318.

“appointment” with God on Sinai (e.g. Q.2:51), while Muqātil tends to refer to the appointment as either *mī’ād* or *mīqāt* (appointed time), Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās may use either *mīqāt* or *wa’d*.

The use of common synonyms is attested fairly frequently in our texts, but their occurrence is sometimes inconsistent, and is perhaps not all that compelling in itself as evidence for an historical relationship between the texts, especially because other exegetes may resort to the same terms in their own paraphrases of Quranic verses.<sup>96</sup> But this phenomenon is overshadowed by another that is far more striking, namely the large number of verbatim or almost verbatim glosses that appear in both works in *very specific* scriptural contexts. That is to say, the fact that the word *mīqāt* occurs repeatedly as the word for “appointment,” especially Moses’ “appointment” on Sinai, in both commentaries, or that both tend to gloss *ḡalama* as *ḡarra*, may not be all that impressive; but the frequent resort to *precisely* the same glosses in commenting on *precisely* the same Quranic verses certainly is, especially when considerable variation in glossing is evident in other, similar works.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, both Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās interpret the phrase *min ba’dihi/ba’dika* (“in his/your absence,” “after his/your departure,” Q.2:51, 7:148, 20:85) as *min ba’d inṭilāq mūsā/inṭilāqihī/inṭilāqika ilā al-jabal* or the like. Both explain the unusual *ghaḡbana asif<sup>m</sup>* (“angry and sorrowful”?) of Q.7:150 and 20:86 as *ḡazīn<sup>m</sup>* (saddened), usually without any additional gloss. The idiomatic *hum ūlā’i* of Q.20:84 is *yajī’ūna* in each; *zīnat al-qawm* (Q.20:87) is *ḡulyy āl fir’awn* in each; *lā yamliku la-hum* (Q.20:89) is *lā yaqḡduru la-hum* in each; *sawwalat lī nafsī* (20:96) is *zayyanat lī nafsī* in each; *’ākif<sup>m</sup>* (devotedly, reverentially, Q.20:97) is glossed as *aqamta ’alayhi ’ābid<sup>m</sup>* (you cleaved to it in worship) by each. Examples of this sort are wholly

<sup>96</sup> Note that the *tafsīrs* of Bayḡāwī and the Jalālayn both often use *mīqāt* or *mī’ād*, for example.

<sup>97</sup> Because of the wealth of intratextual glossing in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, one often finds the same verse or part of a verse explained differently in different contexts. In our discussion here, we will for the most part only refer to those readings in *Tafsīr Muqātil* that correspond literally to those found in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās*; the basic fact of the common coincidence between the two works is hardly impaired just because Muqātil happens to offer more than one option for interpreting a given verse or part of a verse in some cases.

common. Somewhat less often, one finds a complex verse subdivided into portions in almost exactly the same way in each commentary and then supplied with identical or nearly identical glosses. Regarding Q.7:149 (*Then they were filled with remorse and saw that they had erred and said, If our Lord does not forgive us we will surely be lost*), the idiomatic *suqūta fī aydihim* is glossed as *nadimū* (they repented) by both; *dallū* (they erred, went astray) is supplemented with *'an al-hudā* (in regards to right guidance) by Muqātil, *'an al-ḥaqq wa'l-hudā* (in regards to truth and right guidance) by Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās; and both explain *al-khāsirīna* as those who are lost to (or on account of?) future punishment, *fī'l-'aqūba* in Muqātil, *bi'l-'aqūba* in Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās.

Again, we might admit that many of the glosses we have noted here might seem commonsensical and not particularly extraordinary in themselves. Considered individually, none of them would really compel us to contemplate the possible lines of influence or filiation between our texts in order to account for their occurrence here in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*. But the sheer number of word choices in this work that are identical or very similar to those found in *Tafsīr Muqātil* seems significant. The exceptional degree of coincidence between the works is difficult to quantify precisely, but it would not be hyperbolic to assert that throughout the passages of *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* we have examined closely, at least *thirty percent* of the glosses agree *verbatim* with those in the parallel passages in *Tafsīr Muqātil*. (This figure appears to be much lower in some places, but may be higher in others.) This is to say nothing of the much higher degree of *substantial* agreement between them (probably as high as eighty to ninety percent) where the basic interpretations are *fundamentally* synonymous with Muqātil's. Further, this agreement pertains not only to mundane or incidental details in the narrative, but extends to exegetical questions of much greater consequence as well, which is why it is worth citing the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* here in our discussion of the early exegesis of the Calf narrative.

As noted previously, Muqātil consistently understands the occurrence of various forms of the ambiguous verb *ittakhadha* in this episode (Q.2:51, 54; 7:148 (twice), 152) as “to take in worship” rather than “to make,” for he sees Sāmīrī alone as responsible for the actual making of

the Calf; he uses the term repeatedly in his commentary to describe that worship (typically in a formulation such as *ittakhadha qawm mūsā al-'ijl ilah<sup>am</sup>*).<sup>98</sup> In Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, there is a *single* gloss on *ittakhadha* (at Q.7:148) that interprets it as “to make” (*ṣāghā*); this appears to be something of a fluke, for in *every* other instance where the word is found, it is clearly glosses as signifying *to worship*.<sup>99</sup> (Note that this is the term that Muqātil uses to describe Sāmīrī's making of the Calf in his comments on Sūra 7!)

Further, and more importantly, as in Muqātil's commentary on both Sūra 7 and 20, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās emphasizes that the Calf was not animate, but rather a lifeless image: in commenting on *'ijl jasad* in Q.7:148, where Muqātil has *ṣūrat 'ijl jasad, yaqūlu laysa rūḥ fī-hi*, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās has *mujassad ṣaghīr*, which we understand as signifying that this was a small cast figure of a calf; this is basically synonymous with Muqātil's *ṣūrat 'ijl jasad*.<sup>100</sup> Even more strikingly, however, when the key phrase is repeated again at Q.20:88—where Muqātil once again emphasizes that there was no soul within it, *lā rūḥ fī-hi*—Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās includes an analogous gloss as well: here *'ijl jasad* is explained as *mujassad ṣaghīr bi-lā rūḥ* (without soul).<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Cf., e.g., 1.106 *ad loc.* Q.2:54, 2.64 *ad loc.* Q.7:148, and 2.65 *ad loc.* Q.7:152.

<sup>99</sup> Muqātil frequently neglects to gloss *ittakhadha* or its related forms when they occur in Quranic verses, but it is quite clear from the context that he understands this word as signifying the Israelites' worship of the Calf, in contrast to Sāmīrī's *making* of the Calf, for which he uses the terms *ṣana'a* or *ṣāgha*. Throughout the extended narrative portions of his commentary on these passages, Muqātil seems to use the phrases *ittikhādh al-'ijl* and *'ibadat al-'ijl* interchangeably. In contrast, the aforementioned fluke notwithstanding, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās *consistently* exchanges *ittakhadha* and related forms with *'abada* and its related forms, e.g. *'abadtum* for *ittikhadhtum* *ad loc.* Q.2:51, *bi-'ibādikum* for *bi-ittikhādhikum* *ad loc.* Q.2:54, and *'abadūhu* for *ittikhadhūhu* *ad loc.* Q.7:148 and 152.

<sup>100</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 2.64; *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 168. *mujassad* is a common term in Arabic for a statuette. One could hypothetically read the word as *mujasad*, which, as we discussed previously, is given in a few medieval lexicons as “saffron,” “yellow”; however, this meaning is rare and never applied to the Calf in *tafsīr*, and *mujassad* in the sense of “small figure” fits the context better. It is very unlikely that of all the Quran commentaries to appear during the first five or six centuries AH, *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is the *only* one that glosses *'ijl jasad* as “golden calf” rather than as a statue or image of a calf, as Muqātil and other commentators do.

Moreover, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās glosses Q.20:97, the critical verse describing the fate of Sāmīrī, in almost exactly the same way as Muqātil. Above, we noted Muqātil’s interpretation of the key phrase *taqūlu lā misāsa* (rendered by Ahmed Ali as *you are (cursed) to say, ‘Do not touch me’*) as *lā tukhāliṭ al-nās*, “you will not mingle with other people.” Likewise, the next phrase, *wa-inna la-ka maw‘id<sup>m</sup> lan tukhlafahu* (*there is for you a threat you will not be able to escape*), is glossed thusly by Muqātil, who underscores the eschatological aspect of this sentence: “*and there is for you in the next world a threat—that is, Judgment Day—you will not be able to escape—that is, that you will not avoid.*”<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās glosses *lā misāsa* with almost exactly the same phrasing—*lā tukhāliṭ aḥad<sup>m</sup> wa-lā yukhāliṭuka*, “you will not mingle with anyone else, nor they with you”; further, his interpretation of *wa-inna la-ka maw‘id<sup>m</sup> lan tukhlafahu* likewise reflects its eschatological significance: “*and there is for you a threat—an appointed time, Judgment Day—you will not be able to escape—you will not receive any reprieve from it (lan tujāwizahu).*”<sup>103</sup>

Admittedly, some of these particular exegetical choices do recur among later commentators, and thus the agreement between Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās might not seem so extraordinary. For example, as we discussed above, Muqātil specifically invokes Q.7:152, *they will suffer the anger of their Lord, and disgrace (dhilla) in the world*, in his comments on the Sūra 2 version of the Calf narrative in order to emphasize the future punishment of the Jews for their ancestors’ worship of the Calf; likewise, in his gloss on the key phrase in his comments on Sūra 7, he states, “*disgrace in the world—[i.e.] humiliation (madhalla). They will become the conquered (maqḥūrīn) until Judgment Day.*”<sup>104</sup> With this allusion to the continual subjugation

---

<sup>101</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.38; *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 318.

<sup>102</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.40.

<sup>103</sup> *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 318. The third form of the root *jawaza* means “to surpass” and thus by extension “to avoid” or “elude,” but since the root *j-w-z* generally connotes permission or license, I have taken this phrase as referring to receiving pardon.

(*qahr*) of Israel, Muqātil may be understood as referring to both the history of the Jews in general and their status in his own day as a legally, socially, and politically inferior community.

Similarly, in commenting on this phrase, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās makes an analogous connection:

“*disgrace in the world*—humiliation through having to pay the poll tax (*madhalla bi 'l-jizya*).”<sup>105</sup>

He does not elaborate any more on this, but it is clear that for him, as for Muqātil, there is direct continuity between Israel's past transgressions and the present-day fate of the Jews. It is surely significant that in both cases, the same scriptural keyword (*dhillā*, disgrace) yields the same gloss (*madhalla*, humiliation), and that this term then provides the basis for a politicizing or contemporizing interpretation. While the affinity between the two commentaries seems strong here, nevertheless, we would have to concede that many later exegetes shared the same basic understanding of Q.7:152, though their glosses do not show the same degree of verbatim agreement that we find in these two texts (e.g. in glossing *dhillā* as *madhalla* and the like).<sup>106</sup>

However, in certain instances, the readings in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* seem to coincide with the *most* exceptional and idiosyncratic elements in Muqātil's interpretation of the same passages. First, in glossing Q.20:88, as we have seen, Muqātil asserts that the phrase *And they said, This is your god and the god of Moses* actually refers to Sāmīrī alone, even though the verb is clearly plural (and thus implies participation by the people and not just the arch-idolater). This is congruous with his distinction between *ittakhadha* as signifying the people's (more passive) worship of the Calf, versus Sāmīrī's (more active) making of the Calf, which he denotes with the verbs *ṣana'a* or *ṣaghā*. The very same distinction between the people's worship and Sāmīrī's making of the Calf informs Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās' interpretation of *ittakhadha* in the Quranic narrative as well, which he consistently renders with forms of the verb *'abada*. Further, as we

---

<sup>104</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 2.65.

<sup>105</sup> *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 169.

<sup>106</sup> Bayḍāwī has the *jizya* reference here, but does not use *madhalla*; the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* refers to the Jews' ignominy until Judgment Day, but does not refer explicitly to the *jizya* or use the term *madhalla*.

have already noted, *ad loc.* Q.7:148, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās glosses *ittakhadha* in an anomalous fashion, translating it with the verb *ṣāgha*; strangely, this corresponds precisely to the verb Muqātil uses to describe the action of Sāmīrī in *his* comments on Q.7:148, and this is the one place in which he does so by using this specific verb.

Moreover, as it turns out, *ad loc.* Q.20:88, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās recapitulates the very same gloss found in Muqātil: he interprets *fa-qālū* as *qāla la-hum al-sāmīrī* (“Sāmīrī said to them...” instead of “they said...”).<sup>107</sup> Further, just as Muqātil seems to want to enfranchise two different interpretations of *la-nuḥarriqannahū* in Q.20:97 by suggesting that it means that the Calf was destroyed by both fire and file, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās does something similar by acknowledging a variant reading of the word: “*We shall verily burn it—in fire; and it is also said [that the reading is] we shall verily abrade it (la-nubarridannahū), with a file.*”<sup>108</sup>

We also drew attention to the striking allusion to the *waṣiyya* of Moses in Muqātil’s version of the dialogue between him and Aaron in Sūra 20: “*I was really afraid you might say, You have created a rift among the children of Israel; you did not pay heed to my command (20:94)—that is, you did not uphold my waṣiyya.*”<sup>109</sup> This is the only reference to the “trust” transmitted from Moses to Aaron in Muqātil’s version of the episode; as previously noted, this term eventually came to be strongly associated with the Shī’a in particular. Remarkably, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās invokes this term *three times* in glossing various verses in the dialogue between Moses and Aaron.<sup>110</sup> Further, we noted the striking reference to the “sound of *fitna*” Muqātil claims Moses heard on his way back to the Israelite camp from Mount Sinai; as we discussed previously, he inserts a detailed tradition on this into the long version of the Calf narrative he provides in his

---

<sup>107</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.38; *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 318.

<sup>108</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.40; *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 318.

<sup>109</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.39.

<sup>110</sup> *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 318.

commentary on Q.2:51-56.<sup>111</sup> Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās similarly includes brief references to this in commenting on both Q.7:150 and 20:86, parallel verses describing how Moses returned to the camp *full of anger and regret*. The “sound of *fitna*” is the specific reason the commentator provides for why this was so: thus, his gloss on Q.20:86 reads: “*So Moses returned—[i.e.] when Moses returned—to his people with the seventy, he heard the sound of fitna; then he became full of anger and regret, [i.e.] saddened.*”<sup>112</sup>

Still further, we should note that one of the most striking coincidences between *Tafsīr Muqātil* and *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* is that in the latter, as in the former, the loaded term *fitna* here seems to have a considerably different resonance or association than it would for later commentators. That is, as is the case with *Muqātil*, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās seems to interpret the passage as indicating that Aaron had in fact been obligated to resist the idolaters by force, but failed to do so; that is to say, his conspicuous dereliction of duty in the episode, the thing for which Moses specifically rebukes him, is his unwillingness to resort to violence. Thus, as in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, when Moses remarks that he hears the sound of *fitna*, this should be interpreted as indicating a divine trial here, and not specifically civil strife and disorder, though again, these are the most important connotations of the term *fitna* for later Sunnī commentators.

Just as in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, the scene of Moses’ confrontation of Aaron in Q.20:92-94 provides the main context for emphasizing this interpretation of the situation in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās*. In vs.92, when Moses asks Aaron, *What hindered you from following me? Did you not disobey my command?*, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās’ gloss is strongly reminiscent of *Muqātil*’s: “*from following me—why did you not follow my waṣiyya, so that you failed to resist them [i.e. the Calf worshippers] by force?*”<sup>113</sup> *Did you not disobey—[i.e.] did you not disregard—my command—[i.e.]*

---

<sup>111</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1.105.

<sup>112</sup> *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 317 *ad loc.* Q.20:86; cf. 169 *ad loc.* Q.7:150.

<sup>113</sup> *wa-lam tunājizhum al-qitāl*—more literally, “you did not engage them in battle.”



my *waṣiyya*?”<sup>114</sup> Likewise, in the following verse, when Aaron replies that he was afraid that Moses would accuse him of causing division among the Israelites, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās adds simply, *bi-qatl*, “through bloodshed.” The longest gloss is appended to the last phrase in the exchange: “*you did not pay heed to my command—you did not anticipate my return, and for that reason you gave up on fighting them. Then he turned to Sāmīrī...*”<sup>115</sup>

As in Muqātil’s interpretation, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās’ remarks here clearly presuppose that violent resolution of the conflict was not only inevitable but even appropriate, for his comments on the Sūra 2 version of the narrative likewise emphasize the expiatory bloodshed that followed. He does not dwell on the scene to the extent that Muqātil does, but Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās’ gloss on the key line in Q.2:54, *so now turn to your Creator in repentance, and kill yourselves; that is better with your Lord*, implies the same basic understanding of the episode’s conclusion: “*so now turn to your Creator in repentance—to Him who made you; and they said, How shall we repent? So he replied to them, ...and kill yourselves—he who did not worship the Calf shall kill him who did; that—i.e., the repentance and the killing—is better with your Lord—with Him who made you.*”<sup>116</sup>

We should again emphasize that although some of these elements do recur in later texts, many of them are particularly characteristic of *Tafsīr Muqātil*, and clearly of *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* as well. The agreement between these two works becomes even more conspicuous when we proceed to compare some of the readings from *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* with the corresponding passages from al-Bayḍāwī or *Tafsīr Jalālayn*, those later paraphrastic commentaries to which *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* appears to be most similar.<sup>117</sup> If this work was

---

<sup>114</sup> *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 318.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. “Him who made you” is *khāliqikum*, glossing the rarer *bāri’ikum*, “your Creator.”

truly a later composition, as Rippin alleges based on consideration of both its format and the *isnāds* associated with it, we would certainly expect some community of opinion to be noticeable between it and these other works, all three of them being roughly contemporary medieval Sunnī *tafsīrs* with fundamentally identical exegetical methodologies.<sup>118</sup> Further, if the coincidences between *Tafsīr Muqātil* and *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* were solely due to the predictable, commonsensical character of these glosses, then the same readings would undoubtedly be at least partially recapitulated in al-Bayḏāwī and the *Tafsīr Jalālayn*. But this is in fact not the case, for although the presentation of the Calf narrative is *substantially* the same in these works as in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, the glosses in these works are substantially the same as those in *Tafsīr Muqātil* and *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* only occasionally, whereas, as we have already noted, well over half of the glosses in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* seem to agree with those in *Tafsīr Muqātil*. Further, even when we do find significant agreement between the glosses of Bayḏāwī or *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* on the one hand and those of Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās and Muqātil on the other, this very seldom translates to *verbatim* agreement, whereas *verbatim* agreement between *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* and *Tafsīr Muqātil* is rather common.<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>117</sup> It would also be worth comparing *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* to other examples of this genre, for example the *tafsīrs* of al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076) or al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), both of which are likewise very similar to it in terms of format.

<sup>118</sup> Contemporaneity is gauged here not in terms of literal chronology, since Rippin's dating of the text to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AH places the text closer to the time of Muqātil than to that of Bayḏāwī or Suyūṭī, but rather in terms of relative location in the chronology of the development of *tafsīr* as a genre. If *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is the school text Rippin describes it as, then it contains standard interpretations established as "orthodox" in Sunnī tradition after *tafsīr* had been largely formalized, just like these later medieval works.

<sup>119</sup> Note that there are many places in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* where a gloss seems entirely prosaic, and yet Bayḏāwī differs anyway. There are a *few* places where Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, and Bayḏāwī are in substantial or even *verbatim* agreement, but this is very rare. Note also the issue of *doctrinal* agreement: while Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās stridently assert that the Calf is not alive and lacks an animating *rūḥ*, this gloss *is* found in the later *tafsīrs*. As another example, neither Bayḏāwī nor *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* ever mention the *waṣīyya* of Moses. Admittedly, the latter *do* sometimes promote the idea it was Aaron's duty to have fought the idolaters, but the earlier texts are considerably more emphatic on this point: Muqātil devotes a whole scene in his Sūra 2 narrative to the Levitical combat, and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās mentions this theme repeatedly.

Thus, if one argues that the coincidences between *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* and *Tafsīr Muqātil* simply reflect a common reliance on standard interpretations, then the lack of an even remotely analogous degree of agreement between the *tafsīr* of Bayḍāwī and either or both of these other two texts is inexplicable; the same goes for the lack of agreement between them and *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*. This lack of agreement is even more surprising if we assert that *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is essentially a medieval work; if it is genuinely late, why would *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* exhibit so many commonalities with the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-century text of Muqātil and virtually *none* with roughly contemporary texts of similar format, supposedly reflecting the same exegetical methodology?<sup>120</sup> Overall, at least judging by content rather than by overarching literary style or format, *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* would be idiosyncratic in a high medieval context; on the other hand, it *does* compare favorably with a text from the formative period of Muslim exegesis.

\*\*\*

Recovering *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* as an authentically early example of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* is pertinent to our analysis of the development of interpretation of the Quranic Calf narrative for a couple of reasons. First of all, the work might be considered to be another witness to certain key aspects of Muqātil's commentary on the narrative that appear wholly anomalous in the light of later *tafsīrs*, and thus might be claimed to corroborate these anomalous elements—the insistence on the Calf not possessing a *rūḥ*, the expectation that Aaron should have violently resisted the idolaters, the reference to the *waṣīyya* of Moses—which presumably reflect genuinely early trends in the exegesis of this episode. Moreover, and of even greater interest, there are a handful of substantial differences between the interpretation of the Calf in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn*

---

<sup>120</sup> Note again Rippin's approach to these texts: he compares the glosses in *Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās* on *Sūrat al-Fāṭiḥa* with those found in the commentaries of al-Wāḥidī and *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, and concludes that they are all fundamentally analogous in style and exegetical approach (77-81).

'Abbās and that in *Tafsīr Muqātil* as well, and these distinctions are worth examining, however briefly.

First of all, regarding the issues with which we are primarily concerned here, namely the animation of the Calf and Sāmirī's involvement in the affair, while the representation of these elements is basically the same in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* as it is in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, some of the comments found in the former seem to be slightly more developed and nuanced. We have already called attention to the fact that in Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, the Calf is explicitly asserted *not* to have been genuinely alive, *not* to have possessed an animating *rūh*, in statements analogous to those found in Muqātil's comments on Q.7:148 and 20:88. Likewise, we have already noted the specific phrase employed by Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās to paraphrase the Quranic *'ijl jasad*, namely *mujassad ṣaghīr*, again basically analogous to the phrase used by Muqātil, *ṣūrat 'ijl jasad*.

It is specifically in relation to Sāmirī's actions that Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās seems to elaborate on events in somewhat greater detail. Comparing their respective versions of Q.20:96, which we have previously termed the “apology” of Sāmirī, will provide a succinct illustration of this point:

*Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3.40:

Sāmirī said, *I perceived what they did not perceive*—that is, I understood what they did not understand; that is, I knew what they did not know regarding the matter of the steed of Gabriel; *I picked up a handful of dust from the track of the steed of the messenger*, that is, tread upon by the steed of Gabriel, *and threw it into the fire with the remains of the ornaments; for the idea seemed attractive to me* [lit., *my soul suggested it to me*] (20:96)—that is, my soul prompted me to do so.

*Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 318:

Sāmirī said, *I perceived what they did not perceive*—that is, I saw what the Israelites did not see. So Moses said to him, What did you see that they did not? He replied, I saw Gabriel upon a piebald mare (*balqā' unthā*), the Horse of Life. *I picked up a handful of dust from the track of the messenger*—from the earth trod

upon by the hoof of Gabriel's horse—and *threw it*—I cast it into the mouth of the Calf and into its posterior (*wa-dabrahu*), and then it lowed—for *the idea seemed attractive to me* [lit., *thus my soul suggested it to me*]—thus did it prompt [me].

Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās has obviously opted to interpret the key verb *baṣura* as primarily indicating literal sight rather than intellectual apprehension or perception. Additionally, and more significantly, he is quite a bit more specific about the nature of the angelic steed from whose track Sāmīrī took the magic “handful”; while Muqātil only calls this steed by the generic term *faras*, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās is far more descriptive, recognizing it as a “piebald mare,” *balqā' unthā*, and explicitly calling it *dābbat al-ḥayāt*, the “Horse of Life.” It might be argued that the surprising occurrence of these terms militates against the conclusion that this *tafsīr* is genuinely early; the sudden proliferation of such colorful details is suspect, and one would think that Muqātil would have included them if he had known of them, especially given his particular predilection for such elements.

The distinctive phrase *balqā' unthā* (or something equivalent) appears in both of the major classical *tafsīrs* we will examine below, Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* and Tha'labī's *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*. Likewise, as it turns out, both *also* have traditions referring to Gabriel's steed as the “Horse of Life” (or something equivalent). One tradition Ṭabarī cites in the name of Ibn 'Abbās calls the horse *faras unthā wadīq* (a mare in heat); another transmitted from Suddī calls the horse *faras al-ḥayāt* (Horse of Life); and another from Ibn Zayd calls the horse *faras unthā* (a mare) and *dābbat jibrīl* (horse of Gabriel). Notably, Tha'labī *also* has a tradition from Suddī calling the horse *faras al-ḥayāt*, and *his* version of the Suddī narrative *also* uses the phrase *faras balqā' unthā*, which corresponds precisely with the usage in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> See below. The Suddī narrative is cited twice in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, and plays a crucial role in his presentation of the meaning of the episode as a kind of foil to the interpretation he most wants to promote.

More specifically, Tha‘labī gives us a short passage describing the scene which refers to the horse as *faras al-ḥayāt* and *balqā’ unthā*, and this is credited directly to Suddī; but an additional gloss on *faras al-ḥayāt* is then *added* to the Suddī narrative, explaining that Gabriel had appeared upon this horse at the time of the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea. What is significant here is that Tha‘labī specifically notes that the source of the latter detail is al-Kalbī. One might surmise that the specific invocation of the distinctive term *balqā’ unthā* here is due precisely to the *combination* of narrative elements from Suddī and al-Kalbī, and it is worth emphasizing in this connection that Ṭabarī’s tradition from Suddī *lacks* the term *balqā’ unthā* entirely.<sup>122</sup>

We will encounter additional evidence later that will help to bolster the case that this terminology may in fact authentically be that of al-Kalbī, which in turn seems to corroborate his association with the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās*. While we must postpone discussion of these later traditions for now, we should note that the testimony of Tha‘labī and other witnesses should not be interpreted as absolute proof that this distinctive terminology must have originated with the historical al-Kalbī or was genuinely derived from his *tafsīr*. At the same time, this datum’s association with both al-Kalbī and Suddī seems to indicate a *general* provenance for the detail, which is at least *claimed* to have originated around the time al-Kalbī was active.

The inclusion of these additional descriptive phrases has one noteworthy effect in the passage under consideration here: it serves to bolster the identification of the *rasūl* mentioned in the verse with the angel Gabriel. The more elaborate the mythology surrounding Sāmīrī and the “handful” with which he purportedly animated the Calf became over time, the more compelling and convincing the exegetes were able to make their reconstructed version of the Sinai narrative.

---

<sup>122</sup> However, it is important to note that, as we observed previously, Tha‘labī used the *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī freely, while Ṭabarī did so only sporadically and reluctantly (though he *did* use it). One might then argue that the absence of this specific terminology in other *tafsīrs* before the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century is primarily due to Ṭabarī’s general avoidance of al-Kalbī’s interpretations. Among authorities of the early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, one often finds considerable overlap between interpretations attributed to Suddī, Kalbī, and Wabb b. Munabbih, and one suspects that traditions were sometimes rather loosely associated with (and freely transferred between) these figures.

In particular, the more details they provided about the nature of Gabriel’s steed and the miraculous power with which its track was endowed—details that were themselves glosses on a gloss, in that they described the *faras* that exegetes read into the verse early on—the more difficult it would be to imagine any other possible interpretation for the key phrase *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl*. As we have argued, this phrase has the potential to be read in a radically different way, but this meaning—“following the example of the prophet for a short time,” or something to that effect—was increasingly effaced as the basic elements of the narrative became more and more baroque in the collective imagination of the commentators.

To conclude our discussion of the important differences between the treatments of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, both emphasize that the apparent animation of the Calf was just that—only apparent—but in Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās in particular, this is accomplished by the inclusion of phrases in the gloss noting that the Calf was simply a little cast figure—*mujassad ṣaghīr*—that did not possess a soul—*bi-lā rūḥ*. Further, analogous to Muqātil’s statement that Sāmīrī’s use of the “handful from the track of the messenger” caused the Calf to low only once, in glossing the key phrase referring to the Calf’s lowing in Q.7:148, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās notes: “*la-hu khuwār*” (possessing a lowing sound)—a sound Sāmīrī brought forth for them.” It will be recalled that in his short treatment of the Sūra 7 passage on the Calf, Muqātil sought to minimize Aaron’s role in the affair and placed the blame on Sāmīrī instead: this was specifically accomplished by providing only minimal glosses for the verses that mention Aaron there and then subsequently including a synopsis of the episode that placed Sāmīrī in the foreground. (We have already noted that this was necessary because of Sāmīrī’s complete omission from the Sūra 7 account, which would have posed a problem for interpreters like Muqātil who were concerned to deflect blame from Aaron and project it onto Sāmīrī instead.) To some degree this might be true of Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās as well, in that his gloss about Sāmīrī causing the *khuwār* to come forth from the Calf for the people—again, presumably intended to underscore its artificiality—*also* functions to project Sāmīrī into a scriptural context from which he was originally absent in Sūra 7.

All that said, it should be acknowledged that there is a marked difference between Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās and Muqātil regarding their treatment of Aaron. For one thing, the former’s reference to Sāmīrī’s making the Calf low is completely isolated in his presentation of the Sūra 7 version of the narrative; Sāmīrī appears here just this once. Whereas Muqātil’s insertion of the synopsis of Sāmīrī’s involvement in the episode into the context of Sūra 7 seems wholly strategic, the single reference to Sāmīrī in the corresponding passage in Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās *cannot* function in a similar way, precisely because it is so readily overlooked. Moreover, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās appears to be far less inclined to attempt to ameliorate the Quran’s direct indictment of Aaron in Sūra 7; at the very least, fully exonerating him—or at least distracting the audience from his role—is much less of a priority for Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās than it is for Muqātil, as can be seen from his comments on verses 150 and 151:

*When Moses returned to his people, indignant and grieved—[i.e.] saddened when he heard the sound of fitna—he said, How wickedly you behaved in my absence—how wicked was that thing you wrought by worshipping the Calf after I departed for the mountain. Why must you hasten the decree of your Lord?—by your worshipping the Calf, you rushed the judgment of your Lord.*

*And he cast aside the tablets—from his hand, and the two tablets tumbled from it and shattered—and [he] pulled his brother by the hair—[i.e.] Aaron’s hair—and dragged him towards him<sup>123</sup>—[i.e.] towards himself. O son of my mother, said Aaron—for he was his brother, from the same father and mother, and he mentioned their mother so he would be kinder to him—these people reckoned me weak—they thought I was nothing<sup>124</sup>— and almost killed me—in their opposition to me. Do not let my enemies rejoice at my plight—do not*

---

<sup>123</sup> *yajurruhu ilayhi*. Strangely, Ahmed Ali does not render this phrase at all in his translation.

<sup>124</sup> *istadhallūnī*. Ahmed Ali has *These people took advantage of my weakness* for the original *innā al-qawma istada’ fūnī*, but the use of the *istaf’ala* form in both the original and the gloss seems to highlight the element of perception: *istada’ fūnī*, they regarded me as weak; *istadhallūnī*, they regarded me as nothing.



encourage my enemies, the partisans of the Calf—and do not put me down among transgressors—do not punish me along with the partisans of the Calf.<sup>125</sup>

Moses said, O Lord, forgive me—for what I did with my brother Aaron—and my brother—for not being willing to fight them. Admit us to Your grace—in Your Paradise—for You are the most compassionate of all—towards us.<sup>126</sup>

Whereas Muqātil barely comments on these verses, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās inserts a number of telling glosses which make Aaron’s guilt here plain.<sup>127</sup> For one thing, the notice about Aaron’s specific appeal to Moses as *ibn ummī*, “son of my mother,” as being a deliberate tactic employed to beseech Moses to be merciful is striking; it recurs in the corresponding passage in his comments on Sūra 20 as well.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, in the gloss on verse 151, Moses’ desire for forgiveness for what he did with his brother Aaron (*li-mā šana’tu bi-akhī hārūn*) must refer to his regret for having appointed Aaron as his surrogate while he was away. We have already referred to the specific mention of Aaron’s unwillingness to fight here (more literally, his not engaging them in battle, *lam yunājizhum bi-qitāl*); this and other remarks in Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās’ comments make it clear that Aaron’s offense was in not resisting the idolaters with force. While the

---

<sup>125</sup> The phrase *aṣḥāb al-’ijl* here is surely meant to connote factionalism in the episode, clearly indicating that the people took sides.

<sup>126</sup> *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 169.

<sup>127</sup> To reiterate, Muqātil provides almost *no* glosses on verses 150 and 151, the two most critical verses in the whole passage. In inserting the bare minimum of comments here and then providing a synopsis of Sāmīrī’s involvement in the affair, the version of events Muqātil presents runs so counter to that in the corresponding Quranic context that it is quite clear that he is not merely harmonizing the Sūra 7 account with that in Sūra 20, but is actively *revising* the former by superimposing events as described in the latter upon it. This is undoubtedly apologetically motivated.

It goes practically without saying that there is nothing in the presentation of the episode in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* that seems to indict God for His ultimate responsibility for the affair, as in Muqātil’s remarks on the Sūra 2 version. Note also that Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās’ portrayal of the Sūra 20 version is overall quite similar to Muqātil’s; the major difference between them is that in Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, the process of the Calf’s manufacture is made quite clear, unlike in Muqātil, where it seems to be ambiguous.

<sup>128</sup> *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 317 *ad loc.* Q.20:84.

underlying conception of Aaron's crime is basically the same here as in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, in the latter this is asserted much more subtly, and *only* in the context of the Sūra 20 version of the Calf episode, in which "Sāmīrī's" guilt already seems to be placed in the foreground; in Muqātil's comments on the Sūra 7 version, on the other hand, the question of Aaron's culpability is almost completely ignored. In contrast, the explicit comments here in Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās' comments on the Sūra 7 passage, especially his references to Aaron's deliberate attempt to assuage Moses' wrath and to Moses' petition on his own and Aaron's behalf—not to mention Sāmīrī's almost complete absence from the passage—are quite striking. Again, it is difficult to avoid the impression that apologetic for Aaron's involvement in the affair was simply not as much of a priority for the author of this work as it was for Muqātil; and inasmuch as this is a far more acute concern for Muqātil, his perspective, at least in this regard, is far more congruous with the future development of Sunnī *tafsīr* than that of Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās.

The general brevity of *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* compared with *Tafsīr Muqātil* necessarily means that the former omits much that is present in the latter, especially Muqātil's copious narrative material. Despite this, their basic interpretations of the episode largely coincide, and, as we have shown, there is a surprising degree of verbatim agreement in their glosses of the relevant Quranic verses. On the other hand, the presentations of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās do differ in some respects as well, though these tend to be confined to questions of nuance or some elaboration of detail, however slight. Besides the fact that the accounts of *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* tend to employ somewhat different terminology for the Calf (a "small sculpted figure," *mujassad ṣaghīr*) or for the horse of Gabriel (a "piebald mare," *balqā' unthā*, the "Horse of Life," *dābbat al-ḥayāt*), the most conspicuous element in Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās' exegesis that distinguishes it from Muqātil's is probably his more straightforward confrontation of the issue of Aaron's guilt for participating in or at least allowing the worship of the Calf.

The overall close relationship between these texts might be explained in several different ways. For example, it is logical that *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* could be an *adaptation* of *Tafsīr*

*Muqātil*, in which many of the latter's glosses were taken over directly, much of the narrative material was purged, and, in some places, supplementary material was added (e.g. *balqā' unthā*).<sup>129</sup> Another option is to see the work as basically contemporary with, and functionally analogous to, *Tafsīr Muqātil*; its author might have drawn on the same store of established exegetical traditions that Muqātil did and created a running paraphrase that is essentially a more concise complement to Muqātil's commentary. Mutual dependence on a preexistent tradition, especially an oral one, would perhaps account for both the similarities and the differences in their content.<sup>130</sup> In the latter case, it is most likely that *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is roughly contemporary with *Tafsīr Muqātil*. This is suggested by the fact that Quranic commentary of the later 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries was dominated by the *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* format, in which exegetical data was reported via individual, atomistic hadith; as an interlinear gloss on the Quran, simply judging by its format, *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is either rather early, contemporary with *Tafsīr Muqātil*, or else rather late, a medieval *madrassa* commentary. However, our comparison of its content with that of exemplars of the latter genre would seem to militate against this conclusion. Admittedly, if it were the case that *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* was derived directly from *Tafsīr Muqātil*, then there would be no telling what its true provenance was, since this editorial activity could have occurred at any time. However, in such a case, there would be no accounting for the small but significant *differences* in perspective between them, for example Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās' more straightforward and less apologetic treatment of the role of Aaron in the affair.<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>129</sup> Note that we need not assume that the text we have in hand is the original recension; this *tafsīr* could easily have been much different originally.

<sup>130</sup> Again, in some places the glosses are exactly the same; in some places they are almost the same (for example, using different forms of the same root); in some place they are partially the same; and in some places they are completely different. It is unclear to me if this variation supports an argument for mutual reliance on orally transmitted data or not.

<sup>131</sup> This is assuming, of course, that this work is *not* identical to the *Tafsīr al-Kalbī* mentioned by numerous classical and medieval authors, as Schöller claims, for if this were the case, this would

As noted previously, *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is of interest to us as another witness to early *tafsīr* and thus to the early development of commentary on the Quranic Golden Calf episode. It is the specific differences in its interpretation that make the work most valuable to us, for example the attention it directs to the issue of Aaron's guilt or the additional details it adduces in describing the Calf or the horse of Gabriel, thus further elaborating upon the more fantastic or magical aspects of the story. In the end, however, it is its similarities to *Tafsīr Muqātil* that should be emphasized here, for the particular reason that it is the idiosyncratic elements shared by Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās that justify our treating the latter as both an early and independent witness to early *tafsīr*. The fact that both make significant reference to the *waṣiyya* or "trust" of Moses, using terminology that eventually came to be strongly identified with the Shī'a and shunned by Sunnī authors, and that both emphasize that Aaron's fault lay specifically in refusing to split the community and offer armed resistance to the Calf worshippers, serves to distinguish these texts from most if not all later commentaries on the episode. The overall interpretation of the episode in both texts is extremely similar, and their particular readings even agree verbatim in many cases; at the same time, they are not always identical, and certain conspicuous differences in their exegesis, both in content and in phrasing, may be detected. Nevertheless, in the end, both may be readily distinguished from later *tafsīrs* on the basis of their content.

All of these factors would therefore tend to suggest that *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is a genuine repository of common interpretations of the Quran in general circulation around the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century AH, contemporary with *Tafsīr Muqātil*.<sup>132</sup> Its format should be interpreted not as that

---

obviously have implications for its provenance. If the work did in fact enter circulation early, one could argue that it was partially plagiarized from *Tafsīr Muqātil* as a way of preserving his interpretations by associating them with the vastly more reputable Ibn 'Abbās; if one picked and chose among the relatively large amount of interpretive material provided by Muqātil, trimming out excessively long narratives as well as the characteristic connectives (*ay, yaqūlu* etc.), one would in fact end up with a text that looked very much like the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*.

of the later *madrassa* commentary, as Rippin argues, but rather as that of genuine (so-called) *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, a genre or style of commentary that fell into disfavor, at least temporarily, with the ascendance of a competing form of scriptural commentary.<sup>133</sup> This should *not* compel us to accept that the text is actually the work of al-Kalbī, of course, as Sezgin and Wansbrough claimed; it is enough to have found some basis upon which the text's identity as a genuine *tafsīr* of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century may reasonably be asserted, regardless of its actual authorship. The latter question is in fact largely irrelevant to our concerns here.<sup>134</sup> Even so, the high degree of verbatim agreement with *Tafsīr Muqātil* is suspicious, and it is not impossible that plagiarism may be involved on some level.<sup>135</sup> But whatever the case, it is likely that *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* offers us another

---

<sup>132</sup> Even if the work must be conceded to have been secondarily derived from *Tafsīr Muqātil*, the production of this recension would have to have occurred relatively early, since it seems to contain doctrinally significant elements that a later editor would likely have removed. Also, the *tafsīr*'s content is *distinct* enough to clearly merit its being treated as an independent work, which is precisely why we have incorporated it into our analysis here.

<sup>133</sup> We should emphasize that traditional *tafsīrs* should probably be seen as repositories of early material as well; that is, *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* and *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* essentially represent two different styles of collating and arranging early material. Among contemporary scholars of *tafsīr*, this is essentially the view of Leemhuis in particular; cf., e.g., "Origins and Early Development of the *tafsīr* Tradition," *passim*.

<sup>134</sup> Note the disagreement of the text's content with quotations of "al-Kalbī" found in later texts; this is totally beside the point as far as I am concerned. I do not wish to imply that the quotations present in classical texts function as a reliable control for the Kalbī tradition, for there is no good reason that they *should* be more reliable. In the final analysis, the *isnāds* of both the traditions quoted in al-Kalbī's name and the extant witnesses to the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* could be totally fabricated anyway, attached to the work at some secondary remove, for any number of reasons. However, against this, it could be argued that al-Kalbī's poor reputation among later scholars would imply that attributions to him *are* by and large genuine, since there was nothing to be gained by associating *tafsīr* traditions with him.

<sup>135</sup> Curiously, according to some sources, Muqātil was reproved by al-Kalbī for transmitting things in his name that he had not actually heard from him. Muqātil is said to have responded: "the method by which we make a hadith interesting is by the *isnād*" (cf. Ibn Hajar, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, 10.282 bottom-283 top.)

Note also Versteegh's idiosyncratic theory regarding the origin of *Tafsīr Muqātil*: he posits that both the Kūfan grammarians and Muqātil had a common source, namely one branch of an exegetical tradition authentically stemming from Ibn 'Abbās, which was considerably augmented in later stages of transmission (cf., e.g., "Grammar and Exegesis," *passim*). Versteegh would no doubt see the conspicuous similarities between the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* and *Tafsīr Muqātil* as proof that the former (understood, no doubt, as the genuine product of Ibn 'Abbās and his

glimpse of the Quran as it was commonly understood in the second century AH; juxtaposing it with *Tafsīr Muqātil* thus enriches our understanding of how the Quranic Calf narrative was received early on and which particular exegetical issues came to the fore at this time.

\*\*\*

Although it may seem that we have paid an excessive amount of attention to *Tafsīr Muqātil* and *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* here, this may be justified for several reasons. First, these texts are among our earliest witnesses to *tafsīr*, and comparison with the handful of other available works of the pre-classical period that reflect directly or indirectly on the Calf episode help us to establish the contours of early interpretation of the narrative and determine the general parameters of the discourse at this time, at least insofar as that is possible based on the texts that have survived.<sup>136</sup> As we shall see, much of the data we might adduce from other, roughly contemporary, texts serves to corroborate the interpretations of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, although other material may appear more anomalous.

Further, although these two works are particularly distinguished from later *tafsīrs* because of their specific approach to the issue of Aaron's culpability (their idiosyncratic understanding of *fitna*, their unusual invocation of the term *waṣīyya*, et cetera), nevertheless, their basic, underlying affinity with the later tradition is striking as well.<sup>137</sup> For example, as previously noted, already in

---

school) provided some basis for the latter. Admittedly, Muqātil is supposed to have been a student of both 'Aṭā' and al-Ḍaḥḥāk, famous students of Ibn 'Abbās; if this were true, it might support Versteegh's contention that an authentic Ibn 'Abbās tradition provided the backbone of *Tafsīr Muqātil*.

<sup>136</sup> Naturally, we cannot establish the full range of interpretive (or imaginative!) possibilities available to early exegetes, only those that later tradition was willing to sanction by ensuring the transmission of the particular texts in which they were enshrined.

<sup>137</sup> The most unique element shared by both of these works—and that which is most likely to provide more or less conclusive indication that *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is genuinely early—is their idealization of separatism or secession and their use of the term *waṣīyya*. Again, this by no

these texts we can see the deliberate aggregation of details supporting the “angelic” interpretation of the key phrase *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl*; we also see that both seem to presuppose a degree of secondary reflection on the question of the Calf’s animation, in that it is asserted to have only *appeared* to have been alive, which naturally implies that some other party suggested that the Calf was *really* alive. (Fortunately for us, *Tafsīr Muqātil* even seems to have preserved both sides of the debate!) If we wish to argue that certain critical features of the classical interpretation of this story diverge radically from the original meaning of the Quranic narrative, or at least one possible reading of that narrative, it is problematic—or at least vexing—that the “classical” interpretation should already have been consolidated to such a degree at this early juncture, for, as we have already noted, there is little if any trace of the “aboriginal” reading of the episode to be recovered here. It is perhaps more sound to assert that already at this time, a strong disposition to emphasize one reading of the episode over another has already manifested itself.

Moreover, though the interpretations of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās agree in certain critical respects with later exegesis while disagreeing in others, we will find that, even in those specific areas in which they differ from later commentators, the basic questions these exegetes are asking are fundamentally similar. In the end, *Tafsīr Muqātil* and *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* seem to anticipate much of the later discussion and debate over the episode: that is, *all* Muslim exegetes, in various periods, tend to be interested in the question of Aaron’s role in the proceedings and the specific crime—if any—for which he was culpable; all are interested in the question of the Israelites’ atonement, and what the significance of the bloody expiation achieved by their “killing themselves” was; and finally, all are interested in the identity of Sāmīrī and his apparent animation of the Golden Calf. In short, by scrutinizing the approach taken to these questions in these early works, we have foreshadowed many of the most vital concerns of

---

means demonstrates an unambiguous “Shī’ite” tendency in these works, but rather indicates the preservation of concepts that were originally distributed throughout the Muslim community and only became characteristically “Shī’ite” after they were rejected by the Sunnī faction. Cf. Crone and Hinds, *God’s Caliph*, for a classic example of this phenomenon.

interpreters of the classical and medieval periods, and already rehearsed many of the themes that will be revisited again and again, even if the answers provided to key questions by those later commentators would sometimes turn out to be significantly different.



### 3. Accounts of the Calf episode in other early works: poetry, philology, history

We will conclude our presentation of early trends in the interpretation of the Quranic Calf episode by examining pertinent references to the narrative found in works from a number of different genres, primarily lexicographic and grammatical texts—in which one would predictably find citations of at least some of the apposite Quranic verses—but also in poetry, historical works, and even the *adab* encyclopedia of Ibn Qutayba. The data from these texts corroborates our evaluation of the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās to some extent, showing that the “normative” version of the Calf episode, that which would come to dominate in the field of *tafsīr*, had already emerged by the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, however, we find a few hints of dissent or diversity in the early tradition as well, indicating that even as late as the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, the version of the episode actively promoted by the *mufasssīrūn* had not become universally dominant.

Considering the centrality of the Quran in early Islamic society, presumably from the time of the Prophet himself, it is hardly surprising that presentations of the Golden Calf episode, or at least brief allusions to it, turn up in a variety of sources dating to early Abbasid or possibly even Umayyad times, sometimes in surprising contexts. For example, Sāmīrī is exploited as a poetical trope in the *Naqā’id* or polemical exchanges of Jarīr b. ‘Aṭīyya and Tammām b. Ghālib, called al-Farazdaq, famous members of rival branches of the great Arab tribe of Tamīm.<sup>138</sup> The *Naqā’id*, which presents alternating *qaṣīdas* ascribed to each of these Umayyad-era poets, is attributed to Abū ‘Ubayda (d. 209/824), whose lexical work on the Quran we will examine below.<sup>139</sup> In one verse attributed to Jarīr here, he insults his rival by stating: *ḍalalta ḍalāl al-sāmīrī wa-*

---

<sup>138</sup> On these poets and their legendary rivalry, see *EL*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Djarīr b. ‘Aṭīyya” (Schaade); “Al-Farazdaq” (Blachère).

<sup>139</sup> Strikingly, in addition to the verses of Jarīr and al-Farazdaq referring to Sāmīrī that he presents in the *Naqā’id*, Abū ‘Ubayda cites two *more* such verses in his *Majāz al-Qur’ān*, in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:96.

*qawmihi/da'āhum fa-zallū 'ākifīna 'alā'l-'ijl*, “you went astray like Sāmīrī and his people; he called them and they did wrong, devoted to the Calf”; the meaning of this image is obvious.<sup>140</sup> In turn, in a retaliatory *qaṣīda* of al-Farazdaq, Sāmīrī appears again, in a somewhat more opaque depiction, as “un personage errant” in Goldziher’s words: al-Farazdaq portrays his opponent, literally and metaphorically lost, as saying, like Sāmīrī, *da'nī fa-laysa 'alayya ghayr izārī*, “leave me be, for I’ve nothing but my *izār*.”<sup>141</sup> The previous line describes “his”—presumably Jarīr’s—straying in the desert and following a hyena as his guide, so the idea seems to be to liken the poet’s rival to the pitiful Sāmīrī, wandering hopelessly, half-naked, in his penury and error.

This characterization of Sāmīrī seems to reflect some extrapolation from the information provided by the Quran and the early *tafsīr*, inasmuch as it imagines the unfortunate arch-idolater in the time after the Sinai episode, specifically after Moses’ pronouncement of the “curse” upon him, when he has become a poverty-stricken pariah. This image of Sāmīrī in turn seems to have evolved even further, for in a rather later verse attributed to the great ‘Abbāsīd-era poet Mutanabbī (d. 354/965), Sāmīrī quite paradoxically becomes a symbol of lavish generosity! Quite appropriately, this verse appears in a panegyric on behalf of the poet’s patron, Abū’l-Ḥasan al-Mughīth b. ‘Alī of the Banū ‘Ijl (!), whose largesse is celebrated as being so gratuitous that it is as if he scorns money, positively loathes it, shunning it in the same way as Sāmīrī must shun human contact: *tuḥā'iduhu ka-annaka sāmīrī<sup>m</sup>/tuṣāfiḥuhu yad<sup>m</sup> fihā judhāmu*, “you shun it, as if you were Sāmīrī/[as if] you were touching the hand marked by leprosy.”<sup>142</sup> The understanding of

<sup>140</sup> *The Nakā'id of Jarīr and al-Farazdaq*, ed. Bevan, 165, no.33, line 53. The language here clearly evokes the phrasing used in the Quranic Calf accounts.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 331, no.49, line 30; cf. Goldziher, “Lā Misāsa,” 23, n.1, where he refers to both the verse from al-Farazdaq and another attested in the *Kitāb al-aghānī* of Abū’l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967) that supposedly portrays Sāmīrī as “le type de l’avarice.” This is found in the entry in the *Aghānī* on Bakr b. al-Naṭṭāh al-Ḥanafī (on whom see Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 63), but the reference here is extremely ambiguous (*Kitāb al-aghānī*, 21.7361, line 3). An *izār* is a “waist-wrapper,” a piece of cloth used to gird the loins.

<sup>142</sup> I have relied on the Dieterici edition of the *dīwān* of Mutanabbī with commentary by al-Wāḥidī (*Mutanabbi Carmina cum commentario Wāḥidii*, 166), and followed Silvestre de Sacy’s

Sāmīrī here is, like that of al-Farazdaq, predicated on the Quranic *lā misāsa*, understood as a curse on the arch-idolater that turns him into a pariah. But ironically, that imagery is inverted in Mutanabbī's line, so that the name of Sāmīrī and the image of the hand marked by leprosy, both of which have ominous connotations, are cleverly used to extol the fabulous wealth and generosity of his patron and bespeak his own good fortune in associating with him.

Unsurprisingly, information found in works dedicated to Quranic grammar, rhetoric, and lexicography for the most part simply seems to corroborate what we have seen in *Tafsīr Muqātil* and *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*. This is to be expected, since all of the fledgling Quranic sciences, which first emerged as discrete disciplines in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, must have had some common basis in an even earlier discourse centered on the Quran before these sciences were distinguished as clearly distinct fields of inquiry.<sup>143</sup> Some of the classic works on lexicography in particular are among our earliest—or *indisputably* earliest—extant commentaries on the Quran in general, but unfortunately, their abiding concern with philological matters, to say nothing of their usual brevity, means that for the most part, the useful information we can glean from them on the development of the early interpretation of the Calf story is rather limited. While the works of al-Farrā' (d. 207/822), Abū 'Ubayda (d. 209/824), and al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ (d. 215/830) do not really contribute much to our understanding of what the Calf's status as a *jasad* was thought to entail or how its putative lowing was explained, on the other hand, the fact that the comments on the Calf episode found in these texts are largely compatible with those of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn

---

reading and commentary on the line (*Chrestomathie Arabe* (1826), 1.340). The latter ridicules Hammer's misreading of the line, and Wormhoudt (*Diwan of Abu Tayyib Ahmad ibn al Husain al Kindi al Ju'fi al Mutanabbi*, poem 60) seems to get it wrong as well.

<sup>143</sup> Rippin in particular has emphasized the common roots of *tafsīr*, philology, and grammar in the ancient tradition of public explication of the Quranic text in preaching. The most sophisticated discussion of early grammatical commentary on the Quran remains Wansbrough, *Qur'ānic Studies*, 202-27, in which al-Farrā' and Abū 'Ubayda feature prominently. The more recent work of Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur'ānic Exegesis in Early Islam*, has been soundly criticized for its problematic investment in an excessively traditional view of the early emergence of *tafsīr* as a discipline.

‘Abbās at least serves to corroborate the idea that what became the normative understanding of the Calf episode was consolidated rather early on in the development of the Quranic sciences, apparently even as early as the pre-literary phase of their development. (As we shall see, the general dissemination of this normative interpretation of the episode does not necessarily apply to authors working in other genres.)

In the case of the lexicographic work of the famous early grammarian Abū Zakariyā’ al-Farrā’ (d. 208/822), the information he presents on the Calf *literally* corroborates what we found in our early *tafsīrs*. For example, in commenting on the first occurrence of the key phrase ‘*ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*’ in Q.7:148, al-Farrā’ first glosses ‘*ijl jasad*’ by noting that the Calf was a “hollow body,” *jasad mujawwaf*, and then explains *la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* by noting that “in the *tafsīr* it is stated that it lowed only once”; the phrasing of the latter statement agrees almost verbatim with the corresponding gloss in Muqātil.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, in commenting on the Sūra 20 version of the episode, al-Farrā’ goes even further in acknowledging his dependence on the early *tafsīr* tradition:

Regarding the verse: *But we were made to carry the loads of ornaments belonging to the people*, that is, the things of gold and silver and iron they took from the people of Pharaoh when the sea vomited them up,<sup>145</sup> [it means,] “Then we threw them in the fire, for Sāmīrī had done thus, and we followed him.” Then when the silver that they threw in became refined, and the gold as well, Sāmīrī fashioned it into a calf. He had taken a handful from the track of the horse which Gabriel rode, and, as Sāmīrī said to Moses, “It occurred to me that if I threw this handful upon something that was inanimate, it would come to life.” So he threw this handful into the snout of the bull, and into its posterior as well, and it came to life and lowed.

---

<sup>144</sup> *khāra marra<sup>m</sup> wāḥida<sup>m</sup>*, al-Farrā’, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, 1.393; cf. *lam yaṣūt ghayr marra<sup>m</sup> wāḥida<sup>m</sup>*, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 2.64.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. also *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, 1.393, *ad loc.* Q.7:148: Moses and his companions simply gathered up the Egyptians’ arms and property after they were washed up on the shore. Note the implicit allusion to the issue of the “halakhic” issue here.

Al-Farrā' said that in the *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī it says that the horse was the Horse of Life. And thus his statement *my soul suggested it to me*: that is, my soul prompted me.<sup>146</sup>

This is how the text appears in the standard printed edition of the *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*; the editor notes, however, that in one of the manuscript witnesses the arrangement of the text is somewhat different, and this alternative arrangement is worth examining in full:

Then when the silver that they threw in became refined, and the gold as well, Sāmīrī fashioned it into a calf. He had taken a handful from the track of the horse which Gabriel rode. Al-Farrā' said that in the *tafsīr* of al-Kalbī it says that the horse was the Horse of Life. Sāmīrī said to Moses, "It occurred to me that if I threw this handful upon something that was inanimate, it would come to life." So he threw this handful into the snout of the bull, and into its posterior as well, and it came to life and lowed...

This rearranged version of the text drives home a point that can be readily inferred from the standard text, namely that al-Farrā' is citing virtually the *entire* tradition about Sāmīrī, the magic handful of dirt, and the apparent animation of the Calf here from the account of al-Kalbī (and not just the single detail about the horse being the Horse of Life). Admittedly, the reference to the Calf here as *thawr* and not *'ijl* is entirely anomalous; further, the explicit reference to the Calf coming to life (*hayīya*) is not found either in Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās or in Muqātil, both of whom generally oppose the idea that the Calf was actually alive. But two striking details here are extremely important for our particular concerns: first, the description of Sāmīrī placing the handful of dirt in the Calf's mouth (or snout) *and* in its posterior (*fī dubrihi*), and second, the

---

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 2.189. Note that al-Farrā' himself is cited, which obviously indicates redaction of the work at a point posterior to the floruit of al-Farrā' himself. Wansbrough notes that no trace of this work is extant before the emergence of the main recension in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> c. Note also that Wansbrough specifically calls attention to the "tension" introduced by the occasional occurrence of "haggadic" elements in the work, "quite out of place in a masoretic context" (120). At least in his comments on the Calf episode, "haggadic" elements in fact seem to dominate here.

claim that the horse was the Horse of Life (*faras al-ḥayat*). Both of these details are *unique* to the comments on the Sūra 20 account found in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* and are *not* found in *Tafsīr Muqātil*. Along with other commentators' acknowledgement that al-Kalbī called Gabriel's steed the "Horse of Life," the correspondence between material in what we have called *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* and that which other sources attribute to al-Kalbī here might be taken as further evidence that our *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* is in fact the *Tafsīr al-Kalbī* that circulated in the early centuries AH. At the very least, it might be argued that our *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* has some genuine relationship with traditions that circulated in Kalbī's name.

Beyond the comments that al-Farrā' explicitly cites from *tafsīr* here, whether from an anonymous source (with "*tafsīr*" used to indicate the genre or discipline generically) or specifically from the commentary of al-Kalbī, the vast majority of the remarks he makes regarding the Quranic passages on the Calf are of an unambiguously lexicographic or grammatical character. This is overwhelmingly true of the works of Abū 'Ubayda and al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ as well, although these authors are far less willing to cite *tafsīr* traditions of a specifically exegetical nature; rather, their works are by and large restricted to such issues as lexicography, vocalization, and variant readings.

For example, Abu 'Ubayda has extended remarks regarding Aaron's exclamation, *yā ibna ummī*, in Q.20:94, which begins his apologetic dialogue with Moses, but his comments only address the peculiar Quranic orthography in evidence here.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, he has a long discussion of *baṣurtu bi-mā lam yabṣurū* (*I saw what they did not see...*, Q.20:96), but he only addresses lexicographic issues; the same is true for both *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup>* (*I took a handful...*) and *sawwalat lī nafsī* (*my soul suggested to me*) in the same verse.<sup>148</sup> Abū 'Ubayda's remarks tells us nothing about the specific reference points for these statements in their original scriptural

---

<sup>147</sup> *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, 2.25.

<sup>148</sup> Note also that he omits the variant readings for *la-nuḥarriqannahū* cited by other authors, although he *does* include one for *la-nansifannahū* from the same verse, Q.20:97; *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, 2.28.

context—i.e., he does not engage in *tafsīr* per se—and thus he leaves the reader wondering about what he might have thought their real meaning was. (Admittedly, Abū ‘Ubayda’s text is a specialized work, so he may have assumed that his reader was more than familiar with the standard interpretations of these phrases; in contrast, al-Farrā’ might have arbitrarily chosen to include these interpretations.)

Regarding the key phrase *‘ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* (Q.7:148 and 20:88), Abū ‘Ubayda remarks simply that *khuwār* indicates “a sound like the lowing of a cow when it lows,”<sup>149</sup> while al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ offers only a variant reading, *ju’ār*, which also seems to indicate some kind of sound, a moaning or groaning noise.<sup>150</sup> Strangely, neither comments on *jasad*, which is hardly a common term in the Quran—though it is not quite as uncommon as *khuwār*, it is perhaps rather more obscure in meaning—nor even on *‘ijl*, though later commentators almost always feel obliged to include the gloss *walad al-baqar* or its equivalent wherever *‘ijl* occurs. Other scriptural phrases relating to the Calf are similarly glossed in a prosaic manner. Abū ‘Ubayda quotes Q.20:89 (*Did they not see that it did not give them any answer, nor had it power to do them harm or bring them gain?*), only to make a dry grammatical observation regarding the use of the particle *an* here; likewise, in commenting on the key verse containing Sāmīrī’s response to Moses in his confrontation with the prophet (*I saw what they did not see* etc.), he offers only the most straightforward lexical information.<sup>151</sup> Al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ’s approach is much the same: he refers to a key phrase from Q.2:54, “...by your making of the Calf...” (*bi-ittikhādhikum al-‘ijl*), only to make a point about the particular application of the accusative case here.<sup>152</sup>

---

<sup>149</sup> *Majāz al-Qur’ān*, 1.227.

<sup>150</sup> *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, 1.337. This reading is associated with ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib by some later commentators; cf. Ṭabarsī, *Majma’ al-bayān*, 9.25.

<sup>151</sup> *Majāz al-Qur’ān*, 2.24 and 26 respectively.

<sup>152</sup> *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, 1.99. Note that al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ’s material is far more restricted in scope overall than Abū ‘Ubayda’s; his work is much shorter and contains no comments on the Sūra 20 version of the episode at all.

The only really extraordinary remark to be found among Abū ‘Ubayda’s comments appears *ad loc.* Q.20:97, specifically regarding the phrase *lā misāsa*. He does not actually explain the nature of Sāmīrī’s sentence per se, nor mention his crime, nor really even elucidate what the phrase means at first (he does eventually state briefly that *misās* is “touching and mingling with others,” *al-mumāssa wa’l-mukhālaṭa*). Given his overarching interest in lexicography, it is unsurprising that his comments are directed primarily to the question of how to properly vocalize *misāsa*; he thus cites no fewer than three verses of poetry that in fact demonstrate that the word should be vocalized as *masāsa* instead, as well as showing that it can take different case endings. Of the three lines of poetry he cites, the second seems to use the phrase as generically meaning “don’t touch,” without entailing any explicit allusion to Sāmīrī (at least from what one can tell from the line itself, though it has been removed from its original context).

The other two verses, however, are clearly poetic applications of imagery taken from the Quranic Calf narrative of Sūra 20. The first, attributed to one al-Ja’dī, states simply: *fa-aṣḥaḥa min dhāk ka’l-sāmīriyya/idh qāla mūsā la-hu lā misāsā*, “on account of this he became like Sāmīrī, when Moses said to him, ‘no touching’ ...”<sup>153</sup> The third verse, cited anonymously, is somewhat more obscure: *tamīm<sup>m</sup> ka-raḥṭi al-sāmīrī wa-qawlihi/allā lā yurīd al-sāmīrī masāsi*, “Tamīm are like the gang of Sāmīrī—and scripture says Sāmīrī doesn’t like ‘no touching’!”<sup>154</sup> We might understand this as an insult directed at the tribe of Tamīm, likened to the kind of people who would associate with an outcast and follow him as their leader; the second part of the verse seems to serve as a reminder that *lā misāsa* was a punishment imposed on Sāmīrī that he would not have obeyed voluntarily, which thus perhaps explains the ironic situation of an outcast with a

---

<sup>153</sup> *Majāz al-Qur’ān*, 2.26. The editor identifies this al-Ja’dī as ‘Imrān b. ‘Aṣamm al-Tamīmī, a poet of the early Islamic era.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.27. The editor notes that both this and the second verse (the one disconnected from the imagery of Sāmīrī) are also cited by al-Qurṭubī in his *tafsīr*. There, they appear among the author’s philological comments on Q.20:96, and their original context is no clearer. One supposes that Qurṭubī is merely citing Abū ‘Ubayda here.



troop of followers.<sup>155</sup> In any event, what these verses seem to demonstrate, like those of Jarīr, al-Farazdaq, and Mutanabbī we cited above, is the dissemination of scriptural imagery, particularly that of Sāmīrī, in literary genres and other forms of artistic or popular expression. Ironically, those expressions were then cited by later scholars who attempted to engage in a systematic analysis of the Quran, who discovered that they were useful for elucidating the basic linguistic usages found in scripture.<sup>156</sup>

The total lack of narrativistic elements (that is, traditional *tafsīr*) in the works of Abū ‘Ubayda and al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ is somewhat surprising given the attention paid to such matters by al-Farrā’; after all, the three were almost exact contemporaries, so a preference for such material, or the lack of same, would presumably not be due to any specific development of the lexico-grammatical subfield in itself. We are therefore forced to conclude that the inclusion of specifically narrativistic elements in the work of al-Farrā’ might simply reflect the author’s personal preferences.<sup>157</sup> On the other hand, if anything, there was apparently a marked movement *toward* an acknowledgment of such concerns in later examples of the lexicographic genre, for a considerable amount of narrativistic-homiletic material seems to have penetrated into the work of Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Uzayr al-Sijistānī (d. 330/942), a relatively late entry into the field. Al-

---

<sup>155</sup> An irony which of course attaches to later portrayals of Sāmīrī as the progenitor of the Samaritans, a *nation* of outcasts forbidden to associate with others (but not, it seems, with one another).

<sup>156</sup> This procedure is illogical to a certain degree, inasmuch as it seems totally incongruous to cite a *later* poem to illustrate grammatical points associated with the linguistic usages to be found in scripture. This kind of analysis might be thought to be posterior to the exegetical and philological citation of the *shawāhid*, verses from *pre-Islamic* poetry adduced to illustrate Quranic grammar, rhetoric, and style. The more widespread the belief that “poetry is the register (*dīwān*) of the Arabs” became, the more prevalent a conception of poetic expression as being *universally* relevant for understanding proper Arabic usage (of which the Quran was assumed to be the pinnacle, of course) became as well. It has sometimes been alleged, particularly by Wansbrough and Rippin, that much of the corpus of *shawāhid* was fabricated by scholars living well after the time of the Jāhiliyya in order to make various linguistic arguments, as well as to promote an image of Jāhili Arabia as the Quran’s true *Sitz im Leben*.

<sup>157</sup> But note again the open-ended question of the work’s date of redaction; the citation of Kalbī and the narrative elements could simply be later accretions.

Sijistānī lived barely a century after the three authors mentioned above, but his concise comments on the verses pertinent to the Calf narrative seem to reflect a significant infusion of *tafsīr* proper into other disciplines associated with the study of the Quran.<sup>158</sup>

Thus, in his comments on Q.7:148, regarding our key phrase, '*ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>*', al-Sijistānī explains:

... '*ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>*: that is, an image without soul (*ṣūra lā rūḥ fī-hā*), inasmuch as it is a mere corporeal form (*jasad faqat*). Regarding *khuwār*, Abū 'Umar said: The traditionists say that God made the lowing sound within it; but rather, the wind entered it, and thus was heard the lowing sound it had. *Khuwār*: it is the noise made by a cow.<sup>159</sup>

The same basic explanation of '*ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>mn</sup>*' appears *ad loc.* Q.20:88. Likewise, on Sāmīrī's cryptic statement from Q.20:96, "I took a handful from the track of the messenger," al-Sijistānī remarks: "He is saying: I grasped a handful of earth from the path taken by Gabriel's horse..."<sup>160</sup> Obviously, al-Sijistānī's approach is rather different from that of Abū 'Ubayda or al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ; on the other hand, in its straightforward reference to *tafsīr* tradition, it has much in common with the citation of al-Kalbī found in the work of al-Farrā'.

Al-Sijistānī's *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur'ān* is a sober work that is overall not terribly interested in narrative exegesis per se. One way to explain the penetration of these narrativistic elements here is that the author seems to be concerned to take note of certain important developments in

---

<sup>158</sup> On al-Sijistānī, who remains a somewhat obscure character, see Rippin, "Lexicographical Texts," 165-6. The edition of the work I have consulted is actually entitled the *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur'ān*, although in terms of its format and its overall attention to linguistic and grammatical concerns, it is still recognizably a work of philology, and Rippin cites the title of the work as *Nuzhat al-qulūb fī gharīb al-Qur'ān*. Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. 'Uzayr al-Sijistānī is not to be confused with his better-known contemporary, Abū Bakr 'Abd Allāh b. Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (d. 316/929), the Baghdādī Ḥanbalī scholar who compiled the *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* and famously persecuted Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī for his alleged Shī'ī and Jaḥmī tendencies.

<sup>159</sup> *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur'ān*, 80 *ad loc.* Q.7:148; cf. 121-2 *ad loc.* Q.20:88.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

critical approaches to the Quran that were becoming established in his day. In particular, what we see here is an acknowledgment of some secondary reflection on key exegetical issues, which ultimately bear on lexicography only inasmuch as articulating interpretive methodologies and setting hermeneutical (and disciplinary) boundaries would naturally be of concern for a scholar engaged in the scientific study of Quranic language. In his gloss on *'ijl jasad*, al-Sijistānī quotes an older authority, Abū 'Umar, citing the interpretation of others—in this case, the *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*—which Abū 'Umar then rejects. A 3<sup>rd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-century author acknowledging and dismissing the view of the *muḥaddithūn* may reasonably be expected to represent the opposite tendency, the view of those later pejoratively termed the *aṣḥāb al-ra'y*, and this certainly seems to be the case here: in criticizing the view of the traditionists, al-Sijistānī invokes an interpretation that is clearly recognizable as having Mu'tazilite associations.<sup>161</sup> Rather than attributing the Calf's lowing to supernatural agency, a conspicuously rationalist interpretation of the Calf as a kind of mechanical construct is posited here. This is in some ways a natural complement to the exegesis of *'ijl jasad* presented here, which happens to echo those of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās: the Calf was only a corporeal form, *only a jasad*, a mere body without soul. We will have occasion to comment on this conception of the Calf repeatedly in the next chapter.

The increasing domination of philology by *tafsīr*—that is, the penetration of narrativistic commentary into grammatical and lexicographic works on the Quran—is in some ways mirrored by the increasing diffusion of the version of the Calf episode first elaborated in the *tafsīr* into treatments of the story found in works outside of the Quranic sciences entirely. Eventually, given

---

<sup>161</sup> I have been unable to discern who al-Sijistānī's authority here is; is this "Abū 'Umar" in fact Abū 'Amr Ibn al-'Alā' (d. 154/770), the celebrated Baṣran grammarian? I understand the friction between the *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* and the Mu'tazila-philologists here to be primarily about jurisdiction, and only secondarily about method or epistemology: the conspicuously rationalist interpretation is marshaled primarily to staunch the attempt by the traditionists and *mufasssīrūn* to take over and monopolize the study of the Quran, or rather to monopolize the claim to authentic interpretation and dictate the meaning of scripture to others who do not share their presuppositions or aims. The conflict between competing discourses may inform the nonconformity we find among non-traditionist historians as well, to be discussed presently.

some occasion to mention the Golden Calf, for example in reference to the history of the *Banū Isrāʿīl*, historians and litterateurs would inevitably refer to the familiar version of events we have seen in the treatments of the Calf narrative by Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ʿAbbās, which are overall broadly representative of the views of the *mufasssirūn* in their time. This may seem perfectly sensible; after all, one presumes that in Islamic culture, the most important point of reference for the story of the Golden Calf would be the Quranic version of the episode; it would thus be quite natural for authors in other fields to defer to the specialists in *tafsīr* as the main authorities on explicating the Quran.

But this picture of the situation is too simple. What in fact seems to have happened is that the version of the Calf narrative elaborated in the *tafsīr* gradually supplanted other versions that at one point had some foothold or currency in early Islamic literary culture. This point can be vividly demonstrated by the fact that with the diffusion of the version promoted by the *mufasssirūn*, biblical, or at least “biblicized,” versions of the Calf story gradually became extinct, though they had originally been rather prominent in early historical sources. Here, of course, the key issue was the role ascribed to Aaron, and while biblical or “biblicized” versions of the Calf story maintained his place as a prominent actor in the events at Sinai, as we have seen, one of the main effects of the development of Sāmīrī as an autonomous character in the *tafsīr* was to dislodge Aaron from his uncomfortable place of prominence in the episode and force him into the background.

Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnāwārī (d. 276/889) gives a brief overview of the life and career of Moses in his *Kitāb al-Maʿārif*, a kind of encyclopedia of useful information intended for the general education of aspiring clerks, courtiers, and litterateurs. Ibn Qutayba, a major figure involved in the so-called “orthodox restoration” of the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil (r. 232/847-247/861), is well known as a relatively early witness for Muslim engagement with the Bible, and he seems to have been particularly interested in using the Bible as an historical source and

especially as a corrective to more folkloristic accounts of the lore of the *Banū Isrāʾīl*.<sup>162</sup> Thus, he gives short notices on both Moses and Aaron, mostly dealing with their age and physiognomy. He then does so for Miriam and Sāmīrī as well, and somewhat surprisingly, the latter's inclusion here is justified on the grounds that he was Moses' *nephew*. This tradition is occasionally attested in later sources as well, as is the name Ibn Qutayba provides for him: Mūsā b. Zafar.<sup>163</sup> While at first glance both the name and the character's connection to the prophet Moses might seem inexplicable, it in fact seems to have some remote basis in the Hebrew Bible: Ibn Qutayba, or his proximate source, has apparently conflated Sāmīrī with both Micah the Ephraimite (as the maker of idols described in Judges 17) and the Levite Micah employs to serve his idol, whose name happens to be Jonathan *ben Gershom ben Moses* (Judg.18:30). Micah's priest is of course not meant to be the son of Moses' son Gershom in the biblical account, but the name is curious nonetheless. Moreover, the Judges account is quite clearly the basis upon which Ibn Qutayba (or his source) decided that Sāmīrī must have been a descendant or relative of the prophet Moses, his putative namesake.<sup>164</sup>

This is hardly the most incongruous of the accounts we find among the early historians and *littérateurs*. The chronicle of al-Ya'qūbī (d. c. 284/897) has the story of the appearance of Gabriel on a female steed at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea; however, when the time comes for him to discuss the Golden Calf episode, the version of the episode he gives is basically a paraphrase of Exodus 32. Sāmīrī is *completely absent* here, but strikingly, the Calf is said to low

---

<sup>162</sup> On Ibn Qutayba and his *oeuvre*, see Lowry, "Ibn Qutayba (828-889)" in *Arabic Literary Culture, 500-925*, ed. Cooperson and Toorawa, 172-83, for a concise overview with up-to-date bibliography. On Ibn Qutayba's biblical literacy, see Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 112-7. Lecomte (cf. *EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Ibn Qutayba, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim al-Dīnawarī") emphasizes that because of his fame as a major representative of *adab*, Ibn Qutayba's importance as a religious thinker is often underestimated; cf. also his monograph, *Ibn Qutayba*.

<sup>163</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Al-Ma'ārif*, 43-4.

<sup>164</sup> I owe this observation about Sāmīrī's connection not only to Micah but to the Levite Jonathan as well to Halperin; cf. "Can Muslim Narrative Be Used as Commentary on Jewish Tradition?," 83-4.

(seemingly a conspicuous concession to the *tafsīr*) on account of the passage of wind through its hollow body (seemingly a conspicuous concession to the Mu'tazila).<sup>165</sup> In stark contrast to his absence from Ya'qūbī's account, Sāmīrī is quite prominent in a narrative included in the *Kitāb bad' al-khalq wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of 'Umāra b. Wathīma al-Fārisī (d. 289/902); here, however, it is the Calf story itself that is missing! 'Umāra has a strange story about the origins of a dualist group that broke off from a community of Persian fire-worshippers; after turning to the worship of the sun under the tutelage of Satan (!), members of this community secede again and then become *cow* worshippers; this community, it is said, are the “remnant of the people of Sāmīrī.”<sup>166</sup>

Finally, in his chronicle, al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/946) gives concise versions of major events in Moses' life, and under the section on Aaron, he relates the Calf narrative in its most basic details: Moses and Aaron led the Israelites out of Egypt; Moses went to Sinai to receive the Torah; the Tablets of the Testimony were broken when Moses saw the Calf worship, and the fragments were eventually placed in the Temple at Jerusalem, of which Aaron was the priest and custodian. Mas'ūdī then segues directly to various traditions on the death of Aaron without referring to the conclusion of the Calf narrative at all, though he exhibits a particular interest in, and familiarity with, the institutions and *realia* of Israelite cultus.<sup>167</sup> Mas'ūdī, perhaps best known as an historian of the Abbasids, is really a “classical” author—a younger contemporary of Ṭabarī, actually—and

<sup>165</sup> Al-Ya'qūbī, *Historiae*, 1.36-7; *L'Histoire des Prophètes*, 43-4. Cf. also the account of Moses, Aaron and the Calf in the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Safā'*, 2.283, which likewise seems to ignore the “Qurānic” (i.e. *tafsīr*) account and cleaves strongly to that from Exodus instead. Note also the description of the Incarnation in the *Rasā'il*, in which *jasad* is the term used for Christ's body animated by the spirit of God. In the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī would explicitly connect the animate Calf to the Incarnation on precisely this basis. Al-Ya'qūbī was apparently not only familiar with the Hebrew Bible, but also with a wealth of later Jewish and Christian sources, including the *Cave of Treasures*; see Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 117-20.

<sup>166</sup> Khoury, ed., *Les Légendes Prophétiques dans l'Islam*, 139-41. Note that this is very similar to an equally strange account in the Syriac *Scholion* of Theodore Bar Khonai about the origins of the Zoroastrians, whose priest is called *Azazel!*

<sup>167</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 1.61-2. On Mas'ūdī's biblical knowledge, see Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 122-6; see also 78-84 on his extensive ethnographic researches into Jewish learning and customs.

with his work, we have clearly left a period that we can justifiably term “early” in the development of Islamic civilization. Nevertheless, it is eminently appropriate to conclude our account here with him, inasmuch as he is perhaps the last author whose version of the Calf narrative (and many others as well, no doubt) reflects not only a substantial degree of direct engagement with biblical tradition, but also an implicit resistance to *tafsīr* as the authoritative discourse that must necessarily determine the primary meaning of scriptural narratives in Islamic culture.

**Chapter 5:**  
**Interpretation of the Golden Calf in Traditionist Circles:**  
**Ṭabarī and His Legacy**

He made it perfectly clear what that Calf was when He called it *a body that lows*. “Lowing” means the sound of a cow. By stating this, He is informing us about the Israelites, that they went astray on account of something on account of which a people of discrimination would never have gone astray. That is because the Lord is the one who possesses dominion over the heavens and the earth and directs them; it is hardly possible that He is *a body that lows* that does not speak with anyone nor conducts anyone to that which is good.

Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923), *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*



The 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-century *tafsīr* of Muqātil and the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-century lexicographic work of al-Sijistānī both attest, in different ways, to debates of some significance among interpreters of the Golden Calf episode in the early centuries AH. Though it has much in common with earlier grammatical works in the Quranic sciences such as those of al-Farrā', Abū 'Ubayda, and al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ, the work of al-Sijistānī reflects not only the linguistic insights of early Arabic philology but also the major controversies that were current in exegetical circles during the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries. In its own way, though it is quite different in structure, method, and purpose, al-Sijistānī's *Gharīb al-Qur'ān* is just as much a record of the early development of the discipline of *tafsīr* as the actual Quran commentaries of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās; moreover, like these works, it is deeply influenced not only by the milieu of the *quṣṣāṣ* but also by other discourses and trends as well, particularly early *kalām* and the emergence of traditionism.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in commenting on Q.7:148, al-Sijistānī cites an older authority, Abū 'Umar, who stated that the “traditionists” (*aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*) claimed that God created the lowing sound within the Calf; Abū 'Umar rejected this view, insisting that the *khuwār* that was heard issuing from the Calf was only the effect of the passage of wind through its body. As previously noted, al-Sijistānī does not really give us much of an indication of how the Calf was created, although it is noteworthy that in his comment on Q.20:96, he acknowledges that the *athar al-rasūl* was indeed

---

<sup>1</sup> Note the discussion of the work of al-Farrā' above, which also seems to be significantly influenced by exegetical debates, though this impression could be due to interpolation of *tafsīr* material when the work received its final redaction at some time considerably posterior to that of al-Farrā' himself. My comments here and in the preceding chapter should not be taken as implying that lexicography was initially (or ideally) a pure and “scientific” subdiscipline of the Quranic sciences that was eventually contaminated by *tafsīr*, which should in turn be understood as characteristically or essentially partisan, tendentious, subjective, or frivolous. But at the same time, it seems clear that lexicographic texts increasingly came to be infused with normative and explicative content that we would not generally recognize as properly philological and linguistic per se. Even in the earliest stages of the development of lexicography, philological and linguistic speculation was probably influenced by homiletic, exegetical, and “aggadic” concerns; but over time, lexicography and related subfields in the Quranic sciences seem to have lost their autonomy from *tafsīr* as independent discourses. Likewise, it is an indisputable fact that by the time of Tha'labī and Zamakhsharī, philology had come to be an important component of the *tafsīr* tradition, so the impact of *tafsīr* on the linguistic branches of the Quranic sciences was clearly not one-way.

a “handful from the dirt of the path of Gabriel’s steed” (*mil’ kaff min turāb muwaṭṭa’ faras jibrīl*).<sup>2</sup> Since in the commentaries of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās Sāmīrī was portrayed as using the handful of dirt to bring forth the Calf’s lowing magically, one wonders what the particular function of the handful of dirt was supposed to have been in Abū ‘Umar’s view, if the lowing was in fact only the effect of the passage of wind through the Calf’s body, as he alleges (*kānat al-rīḥ tadkhulu fī-hi fa-yusma’u la-hu ṣawt*).<sup>3</sup>

One might surmise that the alternative interpretation of the dirt’s function implied by Abū ‘Umar’s statement was in fact that it had transformed the golden ornaments of the Israelites into the Calf by means of magic; this clearly echoes a view that seems to be implicit in *Tafsīr Muqātil*. As we have seen, Muqātil’s presentation of the Calf’s origins and nature is extremely ambiguous. In his commentary on the Sūra 2 version of the episode, Muqātil portrays God’s acknowledgment to Moses that it was He Himself who was responsible not only for causing the Calf to make the sound it made but for actually inspiring it with soul (*rūḥ*) and bestowing authentic life upon it. Subsequently, however, in his commentary on the versions of the episode in Sūras 7 and 20, Muqātil insists that the Calf was *not* authentically inspired; Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās explicitly militates against this idea as well. Further, in the Sūra 20 passage, Muqātil seeks to shift ultimate responsibility for the Calf’s apparent lowing to Sāmīrī, attributing it in particular to the agency of the handful of dirt taken from the hoof of the angel Gabriel’s horse, although he insists that the lowing occurred only once; Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās makes exactly the same claim.

However, somewhat further on in the same passage in Muqātil’s *tafsīr*, during Sāmīrī’s apology before Moses, he describes throwing the handful of dirt *directly into the fire* among the golden ornaments, which seems to imply that the magical effect of the handful was in fact manifest specifically in transforming the gold into the form of the Calf. Thus, Muqātil seems to equivocate between at least *three* different positions regarding the Calf’s origins: either Sāmīrī

---

<sup>2</sup> *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur’ān*, 122.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

fashioned the Calf and God inspired it directly (as in his comments *ad loc.* Q.2:51), or Sāmīrī fashioned the Calf and used the handful of dirt to cause it to low (as in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88), or else Sāmīrī threw the dirt into the fire among the golden ornaments, which then created the Calf by miraculous means (as in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:96).<sup>4</sup>

Although Abū ‘Umar’s claim that the lowing sound was due only to the passage of wind through the Calf’s body and that of Muqātil (*ad loc.* Sūras 7 and 20) and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās that the sound was rather produced by the magic dirt (and only once at that), seem to be diametrically opposed, both views are likely to have been informed by a basic concern to refute the idea that the Calf was authentically alive, or even produced a convincing *appearance* of life. That is, attributing the cause of the sound to some completely external agency (the wind or the magic dirt) is most likely a gesture implicitly directed against the idea that the Calf lowed because it was genuinely animate, inspired and vivified by an authentic *rūḥ*—a view that is *also* represented, ironically enough, in Muqātil’s *tafsīr* as well (in Moses’ dialogue with God in Sūra 2), although Muqātil proceeds to *deny* such a possibility, as does Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās (*laysa fī-hi rūḥ, bi-lā rūḥ, etc.*)<sup>5</sup> At the same time, by claiming, on the authority of Abū ‘Umar, that the lowing was caused by the passage of wind through the Calf (*ad loc.* Q.7:148 and 20:87) while simultaneously maintaining the angelic origin of the handful of dirt (*ad loc.* Q.20:95-96) as well, al-Sijistānī might be insinuating that the physical form of the Calf was somehow miraculously produced from the golden ornaments by divine intervention rather than having been simply manufactured by Sāmīrī by hand. The latter view, manufacturing by hand, is the explicit view of Muqātil (*ad loc.* Sūras 2, 7 and 20, all of which refer directly to Sāmīrī’s making of the Calf, *ṣan’* or *ṣiyāgha*) and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās; however, the former interpretation, miraculous production, agrees with the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 4 above for the relevant citations from *Tafsīr Muqātil* and *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās*.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., *laysa fī-hi rūḥ* in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, *ad loc.* Q.7:148, and cf. *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, *ad loc.* Q.20:88, *mujassad ṣaghīr bi-lā rūḥ*; again, both texts assert at various junctures that the Calf lowed only once.

opinion hinted at in Muqātil's commentary on Q.20:96, where Sāmīrī acknowledges having thrown the dirt directly in the fire with the gold.

In short, in these early texts, we already see a significant degree of implicit or explicit disagreement regarding basic details of the Quranic Golden Calf narrative; more specifically, it seems that given the axiomatic interpretation of the Calf as having the appearance of life, various commentators could not agree as to what it was exactly that *caused* the Calf to have such an appearance. As we have shown, the general impression of exegetical diversity or *ikhtilāf* in the early interpretations of the narrative is considerably heightened when we take other texts of the pre-classical period into consideration, such as the accounts found in certain historical works. The possibilities for interpretation further multiply when we examine the compendious works of *tafsīr* extant from the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries, for the debate over the origin and nature of the Calf continues to be prominent in the classical Quran commentaries that emerged during this period, most of all the monumental *Jāmi' al-bayān* of Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923), in which, as we shall see, an analogous degree of speculation over the nature of the Calf to that which informs *Tafsīr Muqātil* is to be found.

Here in Ṭabarī's work, unsurprisingly, the various positions in the debate appear to have crystallized around particular Companions and Successors.<sup>6</sup> Although their authenticity has been contested by some, certain extant works of early (that is to say, pre-classical) "traditional" exegesis such as *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* may at least appear to offer partial corroboration of the putative provenance of some of the traditions preserved in Ṭabarī's titanic compilation, or at least the association of particular opinions about the Calf with specific early authorities. While our

---

<sup>6</sup> That is, due to the predominance of what we might term "traditional" or "traditionist" exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*), commentary in the form of reports transmitted from the Companions of the Prophet and their disciples. It is the very nature of the genre and its intellectual presuppositions to distribute exegetical opinions among known (or supposed) authorities on the Quran from the earliest generations of Muslims and bolster them through use of the legitimating device of the *isnād*, guaranteeing (or rather asserting) consistent transmission through reliable tradents over the centuries. This seems to me to be an equitable description of the exegetical procedure practiced by Ṭabarī and his contemporaries, wholly independent of any conclusions we might reach about the actual authenticity of attributions or provenance of traditions.

segregation of works of so-called “traditional” exegesis that purportedly come from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century from the other early commentaries that we have already considered here may seem artificial to some, maintaining this distinction will prove to be both necessary and convenient, not least of all due to the tendency for particular views to become associated with specific Companions and Successors.<sup>7</sup>

Attempting to consider all of the various extant *tafsīrs* in strict chronological order would force us to resolve insoluble problems regarding the attribution, authorship, and true provenance of their contents; for the time being, we will strive to remain as agnostic as possible on the thorny question of the authenticity of these transmitted materials, but will tend to favor the time of a particular work’s redaction as its probable chronological point of origin rather than the *floruit* of the authority with whom it is associated.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it should be noted that, regardless of whether or not they actually did originate with Companions and Successors in the later 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, it appears that at least *some* of the traditions contained in the oldest extant examples of the genre of *tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr* such as the commentaries of Mujāhid, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan’ānī, Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim *must* have been in circulation by the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century CE (c. 150 AH) at the latest, judging from the mutually corroborating attributions found in some of these works.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> It has sometimes been alleged that “traditional” exegesis is intrinsically pseudepigraphic. For example, some have argued that even as *Tafsīr Muqātil* fell into desuetude and ceased to be transmitted and copied due to its author’s increasingly poor reputation, at the same time exegetical hadith came into circulation that recycled Muqātil’s views under the guise of dicta from Companions and Successors, thus authorizing them by providing them with the credentials they needed to survive. As we shall see, something similar appears to have transpired with Mu’tazilite exegesis, which was appropriated by traditionists and similarly vindicated through fabricated *isnāds*, allowing it to conform to the prevailing ideological norms of the age.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, *Tafsīr Mujāhid* may be considered a product of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century, more or less contemporary with Ṭabarī’s *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, despite the fact that the former ostensibly originates with a Successor who died in 104/722 and was an older contemporary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān. The length of the *isnāds* in the work alone demonstrates that it is a product of Ṭabarī’s time and not of the Umayyad era.

This date is significant: Muqātil, the author of what is perhaps the most important surviving example of pre-classical *tafsīr*, died in 150 AH, and it was around this time that Mālik b. Anas was supposedly compiling—if not already transmitting—his *Muwattaʿ*, the earliest extant work of *fiqh* to employ hadith extensively.<sup>10</sup> While it has often been argued that it was the attempt to anchor legal decisions and ritual praxis in hadith that eventually led to *tafsīr* being “disciplined” through reliance on orally-transmitted reports stemming from the authority of the Companions and Successors, if not the Prophet himself, at least judging from the extant literary evidence, it appears that so-called “legal-judicial” hadith and exegetical hadith may in fact have crystallized into literary form at approximately the same time.

Overall, it is just as likely that exegetical traditions that initially circulated anonymously (in the milieu of popular preaching and other venues in which Quran commentary first developed) were made to conform to the model of religious and textual authority that increasingly dominated learned circles at the time of their collection and redaction in literary form, as it is that they genuinely derive from the Companions and Successors on whose authority they eventually came to be transmitted. In other words, while one *might* argue that the individual traditions transmitted in the names of various Companions and Successors preserved in Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* represent the

---

<sup>9</sup> To take *Tafsīr Mujāhid* as an example again, some have argued on the basis of *isnāds* and a comparison of the traditions they have in common that this work and Ṭabarī’s *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* have a common source, though skeptics would argue that *Tafsīr Mujāhid* is likely to have simply been derived directly from Ṭabarī’s work. It is generally recognized that the *tafsīr* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī is largely based on that of his teacher Maʿmar b. Rashīd (d. 154/771), which would seem to allow us to confirm the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-century origin of the material collected by Ṭabarī in the late 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>-early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century that coincides with that in *Tafsīr ʿAbd al-Razzāq*—assuming, of course, that the latter is authentic. The use of putatively pre-classical materials to corroborate the transmission of traditions collected by Ṭabarī is an enterprise riddled with difficulties, not least of all the tendency for some scholars in the Arab world to confuse the issue by disseminating partially or fully recovered *tafsīrs* like that of al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāhim (d. 105/723-4), a student of Ibn ʿAbbās; the extant commentary attributed to him published in Egypt in 2000 is quite explicitly a secondhand derivation from later sources. It is entirely feasible that the extant *Tafsīr Mujāhid* is similarly a secondhand derivation, albeit a pre-modern one.

<sup>10</sup> This early date is no sure proof of authenticity, however. There is significant debate regarding the origins of the *Muwattaʿ* and the provenance of the hadith therein; cf., e.g., Juynboll, “Nāfiʿ, the *mawla* of Ibn ʿUmar”; Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence*, 20-38, esp. 34 ff.; and Motzki, “The Prophet and the Cat.”

*original* form of these traditions, which were then stripped of their associations with particular authorities and subsequently appeared anonymously in works such as *Tafsīr Muqātil*, it is perhaps more reasonable to assume that the opposite process occurred—that is, distinct positions in a given debate and even discrete tendencies in interpretation gravitated to the names and reputations of putative authorities among the *salaf* or pious forebears, thus endowing these positions and predispositions with the legitimacy associated with time-honored tradition.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the debate over the origins of exegetical hadith, see Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 65-93; cf. also 208-15, in which he rejects Western scholars' traditional emphasis on "fabrication" in favor of a more constructive and eirenic description of the basic ethos of traditionist exegesis.

## 1. Critical perspectives on Ṭabarī as historian and exegete

In the course of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries, narrative elaborations on the Quranic Golden Calf episode (and many others as well) seem to have proliferated rapidly and circulated widely. In the limited space available to us here, we cannot possibly attempt a systematic survey of all of the extant traditions relating to the Calf episode; even if we restrict our inquiry to only that material which pertains directly to the question of the making and (apparent or actual) animation of the Calf, we still find a rather sizeable corpus of pertinent reports in the major works of traditional exegesis available to us from the later 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Foremost among these works is the *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān* of Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī.

Historically, evaluating Ṭabarī's relationship to his milieu and to the scholarly tradition that preceded him has been fraught with difficulties, simply because so much of the work of his predecessors (and his contemporaries as well) has been lost.<sup>12</sup> Although both the nascent tradition of religious scholarship and the various fields of early historical research had certainly emerged by the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, much of the literary output of this period is no longer extant, to say nothing of the learned discourse of the time that was never committed to writing in the first place. The transition from an oral to a written culture must have been gradual, but was likely well underway by the late 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century; this applies to religious scholarship, based as it was in the culture of hadith, as well as to “secular” disciplines such as history and biography—assuming that such a distinction is even valid.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of Ṭabarī's life and career, see Rosenthal's introduction to the translation of Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* in thirty-nine volumes (*The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume I: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*). Cf. also Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 120-9 and detailed notes thereon for a critical overview of scholarship on Ṭabarī to the present day. The *Jāmi' al-bayān* has a somewhat complicated publication history; see Berg, 159-60, n.42.

<sup>13</sup> Cooperson has proposed that initially the *muḥaddithūn* and the *akhbāriyyūn* represented distinct discourses in earliest Islamic times, the former being more concerned with religious matters per se and the latter with “secular” history; over time, with the increasing predominance



The shift from orality to writing culminated in the emergence of various corpora of literature that represent the attempts of scholars in various fields to evaluate and conserve the doctrines and knowledge of previous generations of authorities in the later 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ṭabarī's achievements in his *Tafsīr* and *Tārīkh* were hardly a felicitous accident; the great intellectual and religious legacy of his time was precisely this endeavor to collect and codify sound traditions on exegesis, law and ritual praxis, as well as the early history of the community as (purportedly) handed down from the first generations of Muslims through chains of reliable transmitters. It is surely no coincidence, for example, that Ṭabarī was a younger contemporary of Ibn Ḥanbal, the last of the eponymous founders of the four major Sunnī schools of jurisprudence; a near-exact contemporary of the redactors of the so-called *al-Kutub al-sittah* or "Six Books" of canonical hadith; and an older contemporary of Ibn Mujāhid, who, according to the traditional account, was responsible for the quasi-official compilation of the orthodox *qirā'āt* or variant readings of the text of the Quran.<sup>14</sup>

In context, the work of Ṭabarī in the late 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries was therefore deliberately conservative in purpose and, along with that of his most influential contemporaries, represents the coalescence of the classical Islamic scholarly tradition. But as for the period before the onset of these efforts at conservation, especially the late 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> centuries (that is, before the time of the so-called "Generation of 800" that initiated the rudimentary stages of this process), the extreme paucity of extant materials testifying to early Muslim scholarly and literary activity is conspicuous. Although a surprising number of texts from this period have been recovered and published in the last few decades—and indeed, the text of Ṭabarī's chronicle itself

---

of hadith culture in scholarly circles, those historians who had specialized primarily in the study of secular matters were either marginalized or assigned a subsidiary role in the tradition, for example as witnesses to the *sīra* or as biographers. See *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn*, esp. Chapter 1, "The Development of the Genre." On the transition from oral to written culture, see Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam," particularly his introductory remarks on 437-42, and also now Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, a summation of the author's extensive work on this subject.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Melchert, "Ibn Mujāhid and the Establishment of Seven Qur'anic Readings."

was unavailable to Western scholars until the later 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>15</sup>—scholars must still often rely upon quotations and secondary attestations of material pertaining to the early period, and thus the authenticity of such quotations and attestations, which can seldom be corroborated, remains an open question.

This basic problem is certainly relevant for the question of Ṭabarī's citation and use of his sources, for there is very little independent evidence available to corroborate many of the traditions that he quotes; thus, the views and methods of early authorities can often only be reconstructed from the claims and representations provided by Ṭabarī himself and other contemporary scholars who were engaged in similar work. It goes practically without saying that this extended process of collection and redaction of the received tradition was largely directed towards the formation of what would become classical Sunnī orthodoxy; thus, to the degree that we must depend on the collectors of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century to catch a glimpse of the previous era, we inevitably receive impressions of that era that are distorted by the orthodox tradition's idealization of the past.

Ṭabarī's commentary is often seen as the pinnacle of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, the result of a long process of evaluating exegetical hadith purportedly handed down from the Companions and Successors in order to ascertain the true meaning of the Quran solely according to interpretations endowed with the sanctity of tradition. Ṭabarī is so strongly associated with the ethos of traditionism that it is sometimes said that even the paraphrastic interpretations of scripture he includes in his *tafsīr* that are *not* directly authenticated by *isnāds* marking their route of transmission from early authorities should nevertheless be implicitly understood as ultimately vindicated by the imprimatur of tradition. Although his was not the first work of *tafsīr bi'l-*

---

<sup>15</sup> The history of the Western reception of Ṭabarī is quite curious; see Rosenthal, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume I*, 136-9. Although Ṭabarī was known to Orientalists by reputation and through quotation rather early on, as late as 1848, Mordtmann, who dubbed Ṭabarī “der Vater der arabischen Geschichte,” was still using a Turkish translation of the *Tārīkh* as his primary source. A manuscript of his *tafsīr* was not uncovered until the 1880s, when publication of the Leiden edition of the *Tārīkh* had already begun. The Būlāq edition of the *Jāmi' al-bayān* commenced publication around 1905 or 1906 and was finished in 1911.

*ma'thūr*, the atmosphere in which Ṭabarī received his intellectual upbringing is surely significant for understanding his hermeneutic perspective. In particular, among the eponymous founders of the four major Sunnī *madhhabs*, one can trace a progressive diminution of the authority of juristic precedent (the so-called “living tradition” of the local law schools) and the exercise of individual discrimination in legal questions (*ijtihād*), and a concomitant *increase* in emphasis on the prophetic Sunna as the main source of legitimate legal authority (at least theoretically). The last of the *imāms* of the four major Sunnī schools of jurisprudence, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal—who died shortly before Ṭabarī’s arrival in Baghdad as an itinerant student—made the strongest argument on behalf of this principle, seeking to limit the application of *ijtihād* by the individual jurist as much as possible; and it was the influence of Ibn Ḥanbal and his followers that would predominate in Baghdad throughout Ṭabarī’s long career there.

Thus, the milieu in which Ṭabarī lived, worked and taught was thoroughly saturated with the new ideals of Sunnī traditionism that were to prove so critical in the emergence of the mature scholarly tradition in the classical period. As extrapolated to the practice of exegesis, the notion of authoritative tradition therefore had the inevitable effect of delegitimizing the role of the individual commentator in determining the true interpretation of scripture; the invalidation of the methodology of what the traditionists pejoratively called *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, that is, “free” commentary as it had been practiced by Muqātil b. Sulaymān and his contemporaries, can be readily seen as a natural consequence of the promotion of an ideology that came to characterize the exercise of individual judgment independent of the warrant of tradition as “mere” opinion. Not only has Ṭabarī’s massive *Jāmi' al-bayān* traditionally been held to be the most comprehensive attempt at *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* ever, but, in point of fact, it was the chief example of the genre known to Western scholarship for quite some time.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> The *tafsīr* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 211/827), to be discussed below, is probably the oldest extant genuine *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, albeit a relatively rudimentary one compared to the scope and depth of the *Jāmi' al-bayān*. If this work of ‘Abd al-Razzāq is indeed genuine—and to my knowledge, no one has mounted a defense of his *tafsīr* comparable to Motzki’s thorough

The preeminence of Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* in the field of traditional exegesis, as well as that of his equally massive chronicle, the *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, in the historical field, has led scholars to adopt a variety of approaches when attempting to evaluate his achievement. Because Ṭabarī is such a critical witness to the early development of both Quran interpretation and historiography, there has sometimes been a marked tendency among scholars to see his works as mere repositories of data on the early period and the author himself simply as a passive collector or redactor. This approach was established by Wellhausen, who applied a model of development for the historical tradition in early Islam based on the Documentary Hypothesis that came to prevail in the critical study of the Hebrew Bible in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—a technique pioneered by Wellhausen himself. Wellhausen distinguished discrete “schools” engaged in historical research based in different centers of the early Islamic community in the first two centuries AH, preeminent among them the Ḥijāzī school of Medina, associated with such critical figures as 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr, al-Zuhrī, and Ibn Ishāq, and the Iraqi school, associated above all with Sayf b. 'Umar. The traditions passed down from these schools putatively became the main sources for Ṭabarī's work as an historian, while the traditions of other schools, for example those of Syria or Khurāsān, were lost to posterity.<sup>17</sup>

While some scholars sought to build on this foundation, most notably Horovitz and Duri, this approach has been severely criticized in recent years; in particular, contrary to Wellhausen's evaluation of the Medinan school as basically reliable and the Iraqi school as irremediably tendentious, Noth has demonstrated quite convincingly that *all* early Islamic historical writing is

---

vindication of his hadith collection—then the parallels and similarities in both form and content to Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* are quite significant. The fact that 'Abd al-Razzāq was a near-contemporary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān suggests that there must have been a period of some overlap between *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* and *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* during the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. As Saleh has pointed out, the comprehensiveness of the *Jāmi' al-bayān* quickly became an impediment to its effective use; see my remarks on Tha'labī's *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān* below.

<sup>17</sup> For critical evaluations of Wellhausen's contribution, see Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 82-3 and Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 10-3. The latter points out that Wellhausen's approach actually built on the insights of de Goeje, whose publication of al-Balādhurī's *Futūḥ al-buldān* in 1864 revolutionized critical scholarship on early Islamic history.

in fact deeply influenced by a thoroughgoing dependence on stock themes, tropes, and stereotyped patterns, meaning that the *whole* early tradition is to some degree tendentious.<sup>18</sup> Further, besides the basic idea that early historical writing should be approached first and foremost as a form of literary expression rather than as an (at least potentially) objective recording of historical fact, most scholars would now probably view the prospect of isolating coherent “schools” or even discrete regional or sectarian tendencies in the early historical record as it was transmitted and textualized in the classical period as rather unrealistic.<sup>19</sup>

For our present concerns, what is of particular significance is the predisposition of Wellhausen and his contemporaries to approach the great compendious works of the classical period, including the chronicle and Quran commentary of Ṭabarī, as mere compilations of traditions handed down from previous centuries and preserved wholly untouched therein; this approach has been perennially revived, despite the repeated criticisms of such a method issuing from various quarters. In particular, the view of Ṭabarī as a passive collector of older traditions has had its contemporary advocates as well, and the recurring popularity of this view perhaps demonstrates the fundamental ambiguity that characterizes Ṭabarī’s work as an author and (or?) redactor. This ambiguity is well illustrated by the problem of Ṭabarī’s citation and use of biblical material, as scholars seem to have radically different perspectives on this phenomenon.

---

<sup>18</sup> See the introduction to Noth’s *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, 1-25, for a succinct presentation of his critical perspective. Horowitz’s *The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and their Authors*, originally published in installments in *Islamic Culture* in 1927-8, takes the idea of a pristine Ḥijāzī historical tradition characterized by the scrupulous transmission of information through well-attested hadith as the starting-point for an investigation of the putative beginnings of the *sīra* tradition in early Medina. Duri’s *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs*, first published in Arabic in 1960, likewise takes a pristine Medinan tradition for granted; further, Duri introduces an interesting variation in Wellhausen’s model by positing a new school that previous scholars had generally neglected, namely the “folkloristic” Yemenite tradition represented by Wahb b. Munabbih.

<sup>19</sup> In particular, various scholars have shown interest in recent years in rehabilitating the reputation of Sayf b. ‘Umar; cf. Landau-Tasseron, “Sayf ibn ‘Umar in Medieval and Modern Scholarship” and Al-Samarrai, “Sayf ibn ‘Umar and ibn Saba’: A New Approach.”

As one extreme example, we have the case of Newby's *The Making of the Last Prophet*, a work in which the author proposes to reconstruct the lost *Kitāb al-mubtada'* sometimes ascribed to Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767). This work was supposedly the first section of the tripartite *sīra* or biography of the Prophet produced by Ibn Ishāq, only part of which was redacted and published in the extant recensions of his *sīra*, in particular in the famous recension by Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833).<sup>20</sup> The *Kitāb al-mubtada'* was, or is, a history of the pre-Islamic prophets of ancient Israel, reflecting the Muslim perspective on that history, which is presented as culminating in the prophethood of Muhammad. Despite the fundamental reorientation of prophetic history this implies, much of the material in the *Kitāb al-mubtada'* is supposed to have been derived from biblical and Jewish tradition, being transmitted to Ibn Ishāq by his informants among the *Ahl al-kitāb*. Newby's method in reconstructing the *Kitāb al-mubtada'* is primarily to scour the works of Ṭabarī and other authors for material on the pre-Islamic prophets transmitted in the name of Ibn Ishāq; the logic is that these citations should give us a solid impression of what the *Kitāb al-mubtada'* must have looked like originally.<sup>21</sup> Newby's technique has been soundly criticized, primarily for his assumption that Ṭabarī and his informants reported all this material absolutely faithfully as it was handed down from Ibn Ishāq.<sup>22</sup> Even if we provisionally accept Newby's basic assumption that Ṭabarī *did* relate everything he received in the name of his various informants verbatim, with perfect fidelity, to assume that we can simply extract traditions attributed to Ibn Ishāq from a literary work composed almost a century and a half after his death and create a replica of the text he himself reportedly produced seems utterly unjustifiable.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Ishāq transmitted his *sīra* (or at least part of his *sīra* traditions) to a great number of students, and the work was at one time apparently extant in over a dozen *riwāyāt*. Ibn Hishām's version of the *sīra* is the best known and most widely disseminated.

<sup>21</sup> See *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 15-6, for Newby's description of his method. He does cite other sources, but the bulk of his material for the reconstruction comes from Ṭabarī.

<sup>22</sup> See Conrad's review of *The Making of the Last Prophet*, "Recovering Lost Texts: Some Methodological Issues"; and cf. also Landau-Tasserón, "On the Reconstruction of Lost Sources."

But Newby's approach also assumes, of course, both that Ṭabarī's role in shaping the material at his disposal was negligible and that his engagement with and deployment of that material was perfunctory at best; here again is Wellhausen's Ṭabarī as mere compiler. That is, if we find conspicuous echoes of biblical or Jewish tradition in the *Jāmi' al-bayān* or the *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, we should conclude that these primarily reflect earlier tradents' reliance on *kitābī* informants, as in the case of Ibn Ishāq, for example, or perhaps, in some instances, the deliberate biblicizing activity of those tradents, as in the case of the famous, or notorious, Wahb b. Munabbih.<sup>23</sup> Further, if there was any degree of literary artistry involved in the translation (literal and figurative) and adaptation of biblical materials for a Muslim audience, this occurred at the putative point of direct contact between Muslims and Jews (or Christians)—and thus, again, with Ṭabarī's predecessors.

However, El-Hibri has recently argued that the portrayals of Abbasid history to be found in the major chronicles of the classical period, especially Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, are in fact saturated with allusions to biblical narrative. "Fragments of biblical resemblance are woven throughout the fabric of 'Abbāsīd representation," he notes, and patterns and archetypes from Israelite history, especially the Davidic monarchy, seem to inform Ṭabarī's portrayal of the Abbasid court on a deep, almost subliminal, level.<sup>24</sup> Although El-Hibri's discussion of this phenomenon is extremely brief, many of his examples are compelling: for example, Ṭabarī's depiction of the trials and tribulations that befell the dynasty in the time after Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170/786-183/809) are strikingly evocative of the tragic events that unfolded after the death of David; further, the portrayal of the symbolic role of the viziers at court, especially of the Barmakids before their fall, is strongly reminiscent of that of prophetic figures such as Samuel and Nathan in biblical accounts of the early Israelite kingdom.

---

<sup>23</sup> On Wahb's biblicizing, see my "*Isrā'īliyyāt*, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy: Wahb b. Munabbih and the Early Islamic Versions of the Fall of Adam and Eve."

<sup>24</sup> El-Hibri, "A Note on Biblical Narrative and 'Abbāsīd History," 64.

El-Hibri's approach here is very similar to that he adopts in his *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate*, a novel attempt to reread the representations of critical events in high Abbasid history, in particular the reign of Hārūn and the civil war between the brothers al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn (194/810-198/813), by paying attention to the literary artistry of their portrayal in the works of Ṭabarī and other classical historians, in contrast to previous scholars' specific interest in reconstructing actual events based on these accounts. In other words, to El-Hibri, what matters most is the classical historian's endeavor to communicate the wider significance of central events in caliphal history to his audience. Given such priorities, it is perhaps unsurprising that the question of "what really happened"—i.e., the specific correspondence of Ṭabarī's account to historical reality—recedes into the background. Even more pertinent to our present interests here, El-Hibri's approach elides the distance between the author-compiler and the raw material from which he creates his skillfully constructed narrative; despite the fact that Ṭabarī purportedly worked with transmitted accounts, El-Hibri seems to tacitly assume that we can treat the narrative content of his work as authentically "his."

Of course, El-Hibri is primarily interested in Abbasid history, which is commonly related on the basis of traditions that are presented as the eyewitness reports of caliphal retainers, bodyguards, slaves, courtesans, and the like; on some level, this is fundamentally different from his approach to what we might term "sacred history" as well as to exegesis, where reports are transmitted on the basis of well-attested *isnāds* populated with readily recognizable tradents.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, El-Hibri's approach suggests that one can in fact successfully pursue a meaningful investigation into Ṭabarī's work as an author that is largely separate from the question of his putative relationship to his sources and the authenticity of his reports as the genuine opinions of authorities from previous generations.

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf. El-Hibri, "The Unity of Tabari's Chronicle."



Notably, El-Hibri almost completely neglects the question of how it is that authors such as Ṭabarī managed to construct their portrayals of Abbasid history in such a way as to evoke events from biblical history in such a subtle fashion. How well did Ṭabarī know the biblical tradition? As already noted, the approach of Newby implicitly suggests that his knowledge is borrowed—it is essentially that of Ibn Ishāq, or even that of Ibn Ishāq’s sources, the assumption being that Ṭabarī could not possess any deep familiarity with the Bible or, even more important, any profound sensitivity to biblical narratives and their significance. Rather, Ṭabarī simply collects Ibn Ishāq’s biblical or quasi-biblical material and arranges it in apposite places in his Quran commentary and history; he does not really *do* anything with this material.

El-Hibri’s attitude is the exact opposite: in the only place in his article in which he addresses the question of how the Abbasid narratives in Ṭabarī came to be so thoroughly “biblical,” he insinuates that not only can one seek to reconstruct the *Kitāb al-mubtada’* from citations in Ṭabarī, but in point of fact, there is “a close tie between this work and the ‘Abbāsīd narratives.”<sup>26</sup> Presumably, what he means is that Ṭabarī’s knowledge of Ibn Ishāq’s work gave him enough of an awareness of biblical history and its associations to allow him to employ it as a kind of evocative substrate in his representation of major events from Abbasid history. On one hand, this is fundamentally similar to the previous conclusions of Rosenthal and Adang about Ṭabarī’s basic “biblical literacy,” since both characterize Ṭabarī’s “biblicizing” primarily as the deployment of received materials, for example the use of a handful of narratives that show up in

---

<sup>26</sup> “A Note on Biblical Narrative and ‘Abbāsīd History,” 64. El-Hibri’s disinterest in the details of how and why the biblical allusions he describes in classical Islamic chronicles came to be is advertised in the first sentence of his article: “Whether by coincidence or design (through emulation, self-representation or projection by narrators), the history of the ‘Abbāsīd family has ended up bearing some striking resemblances to that of Old Testament figures” (ibid., 63). By “emulation” and “self-representation,” I take it El-Hibri means that he thinks it is possible that figures like Hārūn might have deliberately evoked some connection to their biblical precursors, as opposed to their being endowed with such resemblance only *post facto*, through the literary design of the author of the chronicle. A similar ambiguity regarding the distinction between deliberately fashioned evocation and literary representation characterizes Rubin’s “Traditions in Transformation: The Ark of the Covenant and the Golden Calf in Biblical and Islamic Historiography”; cf. also his recent “Prophets and Caliphs: The Biblical Foundations of the Umayyad Authority.”

his *Tārīkh* that are derived from the Hebrew Bible and were likely produced by Wahb b. Munabbih and figures of that sort.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, El-Hibri's judgment regarding Ṭabarī's actual *use* of the biblical tradition in his work, its ultimate significance for his perspective on Abbasid history in particular, could not be more different.<sup>28</sup>

A compromise position that potentially bridges the gulf between approaches to the work of Ṭabarī that underestimate or ignore his particular authorial contribution and those that seem totally abstracted from or oblivious to his activity as an editor and redactor of received traditions appears in the magisterial work of Gilliot, *Exégèse, Langue, et Théologie en Islam*. Unlike the abovementioned works, Gilliot seeks to reevaluate Ṭabarī's contribution specifically in the context of his activity as a Quran commentator rather than as an historian. Gilliot examines certain passages in the *Jāmi' al-bayān* where Ṭabarī adduces numerous seemingly contradictory traditions on various issues such as the question of which son of Abraham's had been intended as the sacrifice or which prophet is meant by the reference to the man whom God struck down and

---

<sup>27</sup> In his classic article "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition on Muslim Historiography," Rosenthal acknowledges that certain early figures of the scholarly tradition like Ibn Qutayba and al-Bīrūnī engaged the original text of the Bible in a "serious scientific spirit," but while Ṭabarī "had a certain amount of accurate biblical information" at his disposal, he gave far greater weight to "traditional" Muslim sources, and in the end, it was this emphasis that essentially quashed Muslim scholars' serious investigation into the Bible as an historical source. Ṭabarī actually figures very little in Adang's comprehensive treatment of Muslim inquiry into the Hebrew Bible; one gets the sense that he is included because traditions of a clear biblical ambience, or even unambiguously derived from biblical or parascriptural tradition, are undoubtedly present in both his Quran commentary and his chronicle, but it is difficult to know how to interpret such material. See *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, *passim* but esp. 120-2.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. also the fascinating recent discussion by Maghen in *After Hardship Cometh Ease*. Despite Muslim authors' predilection for grotesquely distorted representations of Jewish law, Maghen demonstrates that Muslim authors *also* sometimes seem to possess a subtle understanding of true *halakhah*. While cases of direct Jewish influence in matters of Islamic law and jurisprudence are rare, he argues that when Muslim commentators are specifically interested in *Jewish* law, parallels between their representations and halakhic discourse are in fact common and indisputable. In particular, he shows quite convincingly that various Muslim authorities, including (*pace* Rosenthal and Adang) Ṭabarī himself, were directly familiar with the actual written texts of biblical and rabbinic sources; for example, the long passage in the *Jāmi' al-bayān* on the Israelites and the eponymous cow from *Sūrat al-Baqara* is a deliberate synthesis of biblical and rabbinic elements executed either by Ṭabarī himself or, seemingly less likely, one of his informants (*After Hardship Cometh Ease*, Chapter 7, *passim*).

then resurrected after a hundred years (cf. Q.2:259) at length. He concludes that the seemingly paradoxical representation of opposing views in the *Jāmi' al-bayān* is not accidental; rather, the motivation behind Ṭabarī's presentation of diverse versions of a given scriptural episode or varying explanations of an obscure term is his desire to portray *ijmā'*, or the consensus of the community, its unity in diversity, at work in the exegetical tradition, and to establish a realm of legitimate interpretation in which numerous views can be given equal weight or at least enfranchised as exegetical possibilities.<sup>29</sup>

In regard to Ṭabarī's sometimes overwhelming multiplication of traditions on biblical and Israelite history in particular, Tottoli, echoing Gilliot's understanding of Ṭabarī's *modus operandi*, observes that

...the profusion of variant and diverse versions [of a story] is paradoxically what determined its persuasive force and its unifying power and allowed the story of salvation to take root in the collective memory of the community of believers... In this picture, the precise determination of the events themselves is a matter of secondary importance, the primacy being attached to the religious meaning of the events that have preceded and in a sense prepared the way for Islam.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, there is a deeper theological significance to Ṭabarī's citation of so many traditions on both sides of the issue of which son was chosen as the *dhabīḥ* or sacrifice, for example. Ultimately, what is really at stake is not the identification of the son as such—though this too had become ideologically significant by Ṭabarī's time—but rather the moral economy encoded in the basic narrative, whatever the specific details described in any particular version. The repetition of variant after variant is not indicative of a slavish subservience to received tradition; rather, it is a

---

<sup>29</sup> Besides his monograph, see also his "Mythe, Récit, Histoire de Salut dans le Commentaire de Tabari," *passim*.

<sup>30</sup> Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature*, 102.

deliberate strategy that aims at communicating and instilling universal truths and values that bridge the gap between the world of the prophets of old and the reality of present-day believers. Here, the very act of anthologizing becomes a rhetorical and homiletic gesture.

Gilliot's approach to Ṭabarī's methodology in his work as an exegete is somewhat analogous to a more skeptical, or at least less positivist, strain of scholarship on Ṭabarī's historical work that has emerged in recent years as a corrective to the relative credulity of Wellhausen and his modern followers, whose conviction that one can use Ṭabarī's work uncritically to write objective history has come to seem untenable. In recent decades, a number of studies of Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* have explored the deliberate strategies of representation he pursues in his portrayal of early Islamic history in particular, attempting to get beyond the question of the simple veracity of his accounts of events to discern the deeper paradigms and concepts that inform his work. For example, Humphreys has argued quite cogently that Ṭabarī's view of the formative years as well as the ultimate legacy of the early Islamic community is profoundly conditioned by the idea of covenant, and that the particulars of Islamic history as he depicts it are viewed through paradigms and categories that are not in fact properly historical per se but rather, in the end, *moral*.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Lassner has written about Ṭabarī's approach to history, "forged on the anvil of religious scholarship," as fundamentally guided by religious concepts and concerns, above all the tendency to force historical events to conform to the idealized patterns and types of the Golden Age, the original Muslim community of the first *umma*.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Humphreys, "Qur'anic Myth and Narrative Structure," esp. 279-81. Humphreys explicitly acknowledges the insights of Noth in particular as the starting-point for his inquiry. Despite the obvious differences in their approaches, his emphasis on the essentially theological historiographic paradigms employed by Ṭabarī and other historians is also reminiscent of Wansbrough's identification of *Heilsgeschichte* as the basic concern (indeed, the fundamental operating category) of early Islamic sources in *The Sectarian Milieu*.

<sup>32</sup> See Lassner's essay "Reckoning Time, Recording History" (*passim*, but esp. 21 ff.) in his *The Middle East Remembered: Forged Identities, Competing Narratives, Contested Spaces*; although this work was not published until 2000, the essay in question is actually based on a paper Lassner delivered in 1994.

More recently, this kind of approach to Ṭabarī's work has been echoed by Shoshan, whose *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī's History* is similar to El-Hibri's in its reliance on literary-critical analysis of the *Tārīkh*, though he is specifically concerned with Ṭabarī's representation of major events from early Islamic history and not the Abbasid era as El-Hibri is. Shoshan likewise recognizes that Ṭabarī's presentation of transmitted traditions in the *Tārīkh* is thoroughly conditioned by rhetorical strategies and ideological agendas, though he is rather vague—perhaps necessarily so—as to who exactly is responsible. That is, sometimes the credit (or blame) seems to lie with the putative narrator of an account, or possibly with one of the intermediate tradents; but at other times, it is Ṭabarī himself who is held responsible for shaping an account in certain ways; simultaneously, his role in imposing the overall “programmatic aims” of the work is addressed as well; as Shoshan puts it, “one can see that part of Ṭabarī's role simply duplicates the role of the sources, yet, that in other respects Ṭabarī's input as editor is unique.”<sup>33</sup> Like Humphreys and Lassner, he also recognizes the pervasive impact of both Quranic paradigms and “Islamicized biblical tradition” on Ṭabarī's historiographic outlook.<sup>34</sup>

Oddly, Gilliot's analysis notwithstanding, for the most part, this kind of skeptical, or at least anti-positivist, approach to the study of Ṭabarī's work as an historian does not seem to have exerted much of an influence on the study of Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān*. Many scholars who are specifically interested in Ṭabarī's work as an exegete are still overwhelmingly concerned with issues of verification, as epitomized by the recent monograph of Berg. While his work presents a very helpful synthesis of the state of research on the hadith literature in general and exegetical hadith in particular, Berg's analysis of Ṭabarī's commentary primarily focuses on the question of the reliability of his *isnāds*, and he expends a titanic amount of energy in a cumulative examination of all of the chains of transmission preserved in the *Jāmi' al-bayān*. While Berg is

---

<sup>33</sup> Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography*, ix.

<sup>34</sup> See also the ambitious, thorough, and not wholly transparent treatment of Mårtensson, “Discourse and Historical Analysis: The Case of Al-Ṭabarī's History of the Messengers and the Kings.”

aware of work like Gilliot's, and he even acknowledges that Gilliot's insights are critical for understanding Ṭabarī's project, exploring the larger ramifications of Ṭabarī's activity as an exegete is clearly subordinated here to a methodology that still focuses on authentication of the transmitted material collected in his commentary.<sup>35</sup> This is to say nothing of the fact that some scholars today continue to mine Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* simply in order to recover the putative views of early generations of *mufasssīrūn*. Further, as we have seen, a more credulous approach to Ṭabarī's work has also informed the projects of some scholars who seek to evaluate his use of biblical or quasi-biblical tradition, whether it is found in his chronicle or his Quran commentary. Gilliot's analysis of Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* thus remains the only major attempt to bring a more critical perspective to bear on Ṭabarī's exegetical methodology, at least insofar as Gilliot attempts to investigate the larger purpose behind Ṭabarī's presentation and arrangement of material in his *tafsīr*.

Our approach here will build on Gilliot's insights, but at the same time, we take an even more critical view of Ṭabarī's exegetical methodology, specifically focusing on his deliberate promotion of specific interpretations represented in his *tafsīr*. In particular, we will argue that there is a greater purpose to Ṭabarī's presentation of stories such as Abraham's sacrifice or the Israelites' sin in making the Golden Calf than simply providing a general moral lesson for the community. Gilliot's understanding of Ṭabarī's hermeneutic presents it as one in which maximal latitude is provided to the would-be interpreter for determining the meaning of Quranic stories within certain limits established by the received tradition. According to this view, Ṭabarī's own

---

<sup>35</sup> Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*. Strangely, Berg is plainly conscious of the fact that his approach might seem passé. Further, the result of his titanic effort is the confirmation of a thesis many scholars would probably find intuitive or self-evident anyway, namely that there is little if any consistency in the ascription of exegetical opinions to Ibn 'Abbās, putative founder of the *tafsīr* tradition, in the massive array of traditions attributed to this authority found in Ṭabarī's commentary. Berg's analysis also seems to emphasize the organic growth of a partially authentic and partially tendentious Ibn 'Abbās tradition well before Ṭabarī's time, which once again takes the question of Ṭabarī's own activity out of the discussion, reinstating him in his familiar role as master compiler. See below for additional comments about Berg and his methodology.

attitude regarding the “son of the sacrifice” seems to be irrelevant, or at least a secondary concern; his ecumenical embrace of both interpretive possibilities, and especially the larger lessons to be drawn from Abraham as moral exemplar, is what really matters.<sup>36</sup> But in what follows, we will consider the possibility that there is more going on in Ṭabarī’s work as an exegete than the mere collation, arrangement and evaluation of the received tradition to communicate general moral lessons in the interest of promoting *ijmā’* as the cardinal value upon which the Sunnī worldview rests. Such a conception of Ṭabarī’s hermeneutic seems too fluid, too permissive, and in particular has the ultimate consequence of depriving the author of agency, inasmuch as his specific preferences and conceptions of orthodox interpretation—aside from the privileging of the normative value of *ijmā’* itself, that is—seem to be denied.

We by no means wish to shift the question back to one of merely evaluating the authenticity of the hadith gathered in Ṭabarī’s collection, a traditional concern of the scholarship on Ṭabarī’s work, at the expense of appreciating the broader picture, as Gilliot tries to do. Rather, building on Gilliot’s observations, especially to the degree to which they *restore* authorial agency to Ṭabarī, we would suggest that he is ultimately not as neutral or objective in his presentation of the debates of the past, the *ikhtilāf* or difference of opinion that often seems so overwhelming in his commentary, as some might believe. Rather, Ṭabarī seems to have operated with specific agendas and preferences in mind in shaping the material at his disposal, communicating those agendas and preferences to his audience through a number of subtle editorial techniques. That is, if we scrutinize Ṭabarī’s arrangement of hadith carefully, mindful of his additions and omissions as well as his explicit explanatory remarks, we find that he was perfectly willing and able to

---

<sup>36</sup> Both Firestone and Gilliot observe that despite the fact that he adduces more traditions in favor of Ishmael than Isaac, Ṭabarī prefers Isaac in his final judgment in the matter of the *dhabīḥ*. Firestone characterizes Ṭabarī as a late holdout against the Ishmael interpretation, although the exegetical tradition in his day was being swamped with hadith in support of it. See Firestone, “Abraham’s Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*Al-Dhabīḥ*, Qur’ān 37:99-113): Issues in Qur’ānic Exegesis,” *passim*; cf. Gilliot, “Mythe, Récit, Histoire,” 246-54. Cf. 445-6 below.

express his personal opinion in his commentary, and sought to balance this with the imperatives and constraints imposed by maintaining adherence to the ethos of traditionism.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Gilliot does recognize to some degree the active role Ṭabarī took in strategically deploying the hadith he had at his disposal in the construction of orthodoxy, but this is something of an afterthought in his analysis; cf., e.g. *Exégèse, Langue et Théologie*, 276-8. Calder's work on early jurisprudence is especially valuable in this connection, in that it emphasizes that traditionism is an *ideology*; it is both a value system and a methodology, and its advocates had to continually argue on its behalf as well as implementing it gradually over time. At the same time, traditionism is primarily a discourse on the nature of authority and not a set of monolithic guidelines for conducting historical research or commentary on scripture. And it seems wholly unreasonable to think that traditionist authors such as Ṭabarī did not exercise their individual judgment and assert their individual opinion within the confines of this value system or worldview. See *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence*, 185-95 on the use of the *isnād* and other traditionist conventions as symbolic gestures adopted in the context of an ideology of deliberate arabization that took hold among scholarly circles in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century.

My specific approach to Ṭabarī was in fact anticipated to some degree by Hodgson, who subjected Ṭabarī's presentation of the circumstances leading up to the murder of the caliph 'Uthmān in his *Tārīkh* to a somewhat similar critique. See "Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians," esp. 55-8; I thank Prof. Richard Bulliet for drawing my attention to this piece. Tayob has more recently followed up on Hodgson's insights in his "Ṭabarī on the Companions of the Prophet."



## 2. Ṭabarī's versions of the making of the Golden Calf

Ṭabarī provides four long versions of the Calf narrative in his remarks on Q.2:51, and these may be considered to be the most important treatments of the episode to be found in his compendious commentary on the Quran. Additionally, we find a host of miscellaneous reports and observations pertaining to various aspects of the episode in his comments on all three Quranic versions of the Calf story. His most extensive treatment of the episode overall is that which he supplies in his comments *ad loc.* Q.2:51, despite the fact that, as we have seen, the version of the episode in Sūra 20 is by far the longest to be found in the Quran; this is due to Ṭabarī's typical procedure (one he shares with many other exegetes) of giving the fullest treatment possible to a story wherever its first mention in scripture is attested.<sup>38</sup> The allusion to Moses' appointment on Sinai with God and the Israelites' making the Calf (or taking it in worship, depending on the interpretation of *ittakhadha*) in Q.2:51 follows immediately upon a reference to the drowning of the Egyptians at the Red Sea in the previous verse: *Remember, We parted the sea and saved you, and drowned the men of Pharaoh before your very eyes...* Ṭabarī takes the opportunity to explicitly connect the two scenes to a degree not generally found in earlier commentaries, for, as we have already noted, Gabriel's appearance at the time of the Israelites' crossing of the sea provides the context for the interpretation of the *qabḍa min athar*

---

<sup>38</sup> It is obviously convenient to give at least a basic exposition of a narrative or explanation of a character or theme when even an oblique reference to it first occurs in the Quranic text. On the other hand, this is not necessarily the only way to proceed; as a somewhat extreme example of the completely opposite tendency, in his *tafsīr*, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) provides only the most rudimentary comments on the Calf story *ad loc.* Q.2:51 and 7:141 (mostly remarks of a grammatical and lexical nature), while postponing his general commentary on the episode until Q.20:83-97, at which point his detailed exposition of the story occupies several pages. Ṭabarī offers a significant amount of commentary on the narrative in his remarks on the Sūra 2 version, makes only a few comments on the Sūra 7 version, and then again provides more substantial comments on the Sūra 20 version; notably, as we shall see, his exegesis of the Sūra 20 version differs markedly from that he provides on Sūra 2, in some way paralleling a similar distinction found in Muqātil's *tafsīr*.

*al-rasūl* as the dirt Sāmīrī took from the track of Gabriel’s angelic steed.<sup>39</sup> The continuity between the events at the Red Sea and the subsequent making of the Calf is asserted directly in Ṭabarī’s presentation, for his first long account of the Calf episode, to be discussed momentarily, cites the tradition about Gabriel’s appearance as a kind of prologue to the actual making and worship of the Calf.<sup>40</sup>

Ṭabarī opens his discussion of Q.2:51 with a brief synopsis of the Calf episode, a summary of its overall import, and a specific indication of the purpose behind its revelation to Muhammad in the Quran.<sup>41</sup> Like Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, Ṭabarī highlights the episode’s portrayal of Israel’s waywardness, but whereas earlier authors emphasized the Jews’ future subjection and humiliation as the consequence of their transgression in worshipping the Calf, Ṭabarī prefers to emphasize the episode’s significance as a morality tale specifically addressing the Jews of Muhammad’s time, situating their denial of the Prophet in the “present”—that is, the “now” of the moment of the Quranic revelation, addressed to Muhammad and his contemporaries—in the

---

<sup>39</sup> Strangely, the interpretations of the Calf narrative of both Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās seem to presuppose the story of Gabriel’s appearance at the Red Sea, but neither of them seems to refer to this moment at the appropriate point in his commentary. (Likewise, al-Sijistānī includes the crucial datum about the handful of dirt being the track from Gabriel’s steed, but also omits any reference to the scene at the Red Sea.) The basic mythology surrounding Gabriel’s appearance at Sinai therefore seems to have appeared early on in the tradition and to have been so widespread that it is simply taken for granted by early exegetes.

<sup>40</sup> This scene receives fairly extensive treatment in both Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* (in his comments on Q.2:50) as well as in the apposite place in his chronicle (*Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, ed. de Goeje, I/1.486-8).

<sup>41</sup> That is, what other exegetes would call the *sabab al-nuzūl* or “occasion of revelation,” a term not generally used by Ṭabarī himself but eventually established as a standard subgenre of Quranic exegesis. Note that Ṭabarī’s paraphrase of the verse makes it clear that, like Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, he too assumes that the key verb in the verse, *ittakhadha*, means “to take as a god,” “take in worship” rather than “to make”: “...then *they took the Calf* as a god (*ittikhadhtum al-‘ijl ilah<sup>an</sup>*) during the days of Moses’ appointment [with God], after Moses had parted from them and headed off to the appointment...” (*Jāmi’ al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.63). But like Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, Ṭabarī seems to conveniently forget that in Sūra 7 the corresponding phrase is *ittakhadha qawm mūsā... min ḥulyyhim ‘ijl<sup>an</sup>*, where the inclusion of the phrase *min ḥulyyhim* would seem to necessitate understanding *ittakhadha* in the sense of “to make” rather than “to worship.” Note also that Ṭūsī appears to be the first exegete to give an explicit reason as to why *ittakhadha* must be taken as “to take in worship” and not simply “to make,” at least vis-à-vis Q.2:51; see below.

context of their ancestors' denial of the prophets of the past. This passage in fact constitutes one of the clearest declarations of Ṭabarī's hermeneutic perspective on the tales of the Banū Isrā'īl recounted in the Quran, upon which he elaborates at considerable length in both his Quran commentary and his chronicle.

God informed those from among the Jews of the Banū Isrā'īl who denied our Prophet and called him a liar—those who are addressed in this verse—about the actions of their forefathers and ancestors, and their calling His messengers liars, and their rejection of their prophets, despite not only the succession of benefits He bestowed upon them but the fact that His blessings were known openly to them all.<sup>42</sup>

By this means, He made known to them that they themselves traveled a similar path to that of their forefathers and ancestors on account of their denial of Muhammad and their calling *him* a liar, and their rejection of his scripture, despite the fact that they knew he was genuine. He likewise warned them regarding the onslaught He would bring upon them, that which He raised up against them on account of their calling Muhammad a liar, [the same as] that which He brought upon those who went before them who called the messengers liars: the transmutation (*maskh*), and the curse (*la'n*), and all varieties of retribution.<sup>43</sup>

In this passage, Ṭabarī is neatly telescoping the various punishments that would be brought against the Israelites for their transgressions, many of which are described in the Quran in close proximity to the accounts of the Calf narrative; by doing so, he underlines the common thread that he understands to run through all of them, namely that in one way or another all of the sins of Israel are tied to their persistent tendency towards *takdhīb*, giving the lie to prophets. The specific reference to *maskh* is a clear allusion to the episode of the Sabbath-breakers transformed into apes,

---

<sup>42</sup> “Blessings known openly to them all”: *shuyū' ālā'ihī ladayhim*. The editor's gloss here emphasizes that the phrase means that the blessings were both manifest and generally distributed.

<sup>43</sup> *Jāmi' al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.63.

related in the Quran right after two of the versions of the Calf narrative (Q.2:65-66 and 7:163-166). The *la'n* or curse, on the other hand, could refer to any of the penalties incurred by the Israelites, but plausibly might be thought to be an allusion to the prophecy concerning the future subjection and dispersion of Israel that appears just after the episode of the Sabbath-breakers in Sūra 7.<sup>44</sup>

In short, the implicit temporal focus of exegesis we saw in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās is reversed in Ṭabarī's prologue. Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās situate themselves in the historical present suggested by the immediate narrative moment, namely the events at Sinai and their imminent repercussions—the “now” in which the Banū Isrā'īl are situated—and then extrapolate *forward* in time to the eventual realization of the humiliation of the Jews in punishment for their Israelite ancestors' actions (cf. Q.7:152, *Surely those who have taken the Calf (as a god) will suffer the anger of their Lord, and disgrace in the world...*) Whether this is understood as occurring in the Prophet's time or in the exegetes' own time is irrelevant; what is most important is that, in their commentaries, the narrative framework in scripture itself is the primary focus and the *actual* present is viewed as the future, in which the consequences foreshadowed by the Israelites' “present” actions will be realized. This perspective should perhaps be understood as a natural, if only accidental, effect of their basic exegetical approach, for interlinear glossing tends to obscure the distance between the scriptural point-of-view and that of the commentator.

Ṭabarī, on the other hand, begins his commentary by recalling a different moment in the past as his primary focal point, the time of these verses' revelation to Muhammad, from which point one is meant to look backwards even *further* into the past to discern the importance of their greater meaning. That is, instead of accepting the natural tendency of the “now” of the scriptural

---

<sup>44</sup> *And your Lord declared He would send men against them who would inflict dreadful suffering on them till the Day of Doom, for your Lord is swift in retribution, though He is certainly forgiving and kind. We dispersed them in groups over the earth, some righteous, some otherwise; and We tried them with good things and bad, that they may haply turn back (Q.7:167-168).*

moment to assume a position of temporal dominance, at least in his prefatory remarks, Ṭabarī's primary focus is on a moment in which the consequences of the Israelites' actions have *already* been fulfilled, that is, Muhammad's time. One could argue that this essentially constitutes a "realist" or "historicist" gesture on his part, in that he means to emphasize the fact of the Quran's revelation to the Prophet as preeminent; in other words, hypothetically the scriptural "now" should *always* be the prophetic "now," in that the basic fact of the Quran's serial revelation to Muhammad under various circumstances was asserted as a fundamental aspect of Muslim hermeneutics well before Ṭabarī's time. But it might also be argued that in emphasizing that the verses about the Calf narrative were specifically addressed to Muhammad's Jewish adversaries, Ṭabarī is implicitly claiming not only that the past deeds of the Israelites would *eventually* culminate in the dispersion and humiliation of the Jews (as in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās), but also, and more critically, that the denial of Muhammad's prophecy by the Jews of Medina fits into a larger pattern of transgression and hard-heartedness established already in the time of Moses himself with their ancestors' idolatry, one that implicitly extends forward in time to the exegete's era as well.

The degree of conceptual (and temporal) abstraction this perspective requires is in large part made possible by the format of Ṭabarī's commentary itself. The dominant mode in interlinear glossing is paraphrastic and expansive, but *always tied to the narrative flow of scripture*, and the exegete's particular perspective almost inevitably tends to be subordinated thereto. However, in *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, the fact that the commentator relies on the arrangement of discrete units of transmitted tradition adduced to clarify and elaborate upon isolated lines of scripture means that he enjoys a degree of latitude in digression and speculation almost *never* found in an interlinear gloss, no matter how expansive works of this sort may be at times.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the

---

<sup>45</sup> We have already noted the considerable amount of free narrative material adduced by Muqātil in his commentary on the Sūra 2 version of the Calf episode; it bears repeating here that these expansions are in fact almost *exclusively* narrative in nature, seemingly confirming the context of popular preaching as the work's original milieu. The difference in exegetical style between

disruption of the flow of scripture in a line-by-line commentary—its fundamental atomism—gives the commentator freedom to expand upon and clarify not only specific words and phrases but larger concepts, themes, and issues as well.<sup>46</sup> In the specific case in Ṭabarī examined here, this results not only in a sharper appreciation of the nuances of Quranic narratology; it also results in a more sophisticated polemical argument, in that the transgressions of the Israelites in the distant past are aligned with, almost made *of a moment with*, those of the Jews of Muhammad's day, and by implication those of the Jews of Ṭabarī's day as well. Ṭabarī's compression or telescoping of these temporal frameworks represents a significant advance in supersessionist ideology over that articulated by his predecessors; different historical moments are implicitly collapsed into a timeless image of Jewish sinfulness, one that has obvious political as well as historical import.

---

Muqātil and Ṭabarī could not be more obvious, however; one simply does not often see more abstract speculation on the meaning of Quranic stories in Muqātil's commentary, whereas this is something of a hallmark of Ṭabarī's work, such remarks frequently occurring at the beginning of discrete scriptural pericopes throughout the *Jāmi' al-bayān*. Studies comparing the very different exegetical styles represented by Muqātil and Ṭabarī respectively have been rather rare; cf., e.g. Forster, "Methoden arabischer Qur'ānexegeese: Muqātil b. Sulaymān, aṭ-Ṭabarī und 'Abdarrazzāq al-Qāṣānī zu Q 53, 1-18."

<sup>46</sup> Note that the basic fact of the exegetical latitude intrinsically bestowed by the line-by-line format of commentary found in 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-century *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* in itself dictates a serious reevaluation of the prevailing image of Ṭabarī as a mere compiler or redactor. A basic analogy between the activity of Ṭabarī and that of his younger commentary, al-Bukhārī, might be detected here, for while the latter is commonly viewed as the most impeccable collector of authoritative, reliable prophetic traditions—a role that would seem to implicitly deny much if any autonomy to the author—at the same time, Bukhārī is known to have inserted explanatory glosses in the section headings through which he organized the traditions in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, enabling him to assert a kind of interpretive hegemony over the material above and beyond the mere fact of controlling its arrangement. (The 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup>-century hadith critic Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ notes that Bukhārī received some criticism for this, and that some traditionists favored the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim instead on this account; cf. *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, 9-10.) Again, both Ṭabarī and Bukhārī are often taken to epitomize the type of the passive and non-intrusive redactor, but in point of fact, both were among the earliest figures in their respective fields to explicitly *interpret* the material they received and transmitted. In this regard, their critical analyses of *tafsīr* and hadith, as rudimentary as they are, are perhaps anticipated only by that of Ibn Qutayba, and possibly al-Jāḥiẓ as well. Finally, note also that the extant works of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* of both 'Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Ḥātim lack critical commentary of the sort Ṭabarī provides.

A. Ibn 'Abbās from 'Ikrima

After this brief polemical preface, Ṭabarī relates his four major traditions on the making of the Calf (or, as he puts it, on “the circumstances of their worshipping the Calf,” *sabab ittikhādhihim al-'ijl*). The first version, transmitted in the name of Ibn 'Abbās by 'Ikrima and featuring the well-known 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>-century traditionist Sufyān b. 'Uyayna in its *isnād*,<sup>47</sup> gives a rather typical account of the episode as it would come to be known in the classical *tafsīr* tradition, as well as directly linking it to the verse just prior, which alludes to the drowning of the Egyptians at the Red Sea.

When Pharaoh attacked them at the sea—he and his companions—Pharaoh was riding a long-tailed black stallion, and when he attacked at the sea, the stallion was afraid to enter it. Then Gabriel appeared to them upon a horse, a mare in heat (*faras unthā wadīq*), and when the stallion saw her, he went in after her.<sup>48</sup>

He continued: Sāmīrī recognized Gabriel because his mother, when she feared that he would be slaughtered, hid him in a cave and covered him up; Gabriel would come and suckle him with his fingers, from which milk and honey and cream would flow. He continued to suckle him until he matured. When he spotted him at the sea, he recognized him; and then he *took a handful from the track* of his horse—that is, he took a handful from [the earth trodden] beneath its hoof.

---

<sup>47</sup> The famed Meccan exegete and jurist Sufyān b. 'Uyayna (d. 196/811) is a major figure in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, along with his older contemporary Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 116/778), with whom he is often confused.

<sup>48</sup> Note that this narrative of the destruction of Pharaoh and the Egyptians is excerpted from a longer version Ṭabarī cites in his comments *ad loc.* Q.2:50 just previous, with the same *isnād*. There the editor glosses *faras unthā wadīq* as *murīda li'l-fahl tashtahīh* (desirous of coitus with the stallion)(*Jāmi' al-bayān*, 2.52, n.4).

This tradition begins by locating Sāmīrī's recognition of Gabriel at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea (obviously meant to gloss his statement in Q.20:96, *I perceived what they did not perceive...*) in the context of his origins. As in the brief account Ibn Qutayba gives in his *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, Sāmīrī is asserted to have been an Israelite; we are further told that he was hidden in a cave at the time of the slaughter of the male Israelite children by Pharaoh.<sup>49</sup> Gabriel then saved the child and ended up rearing him in the cave, and it was due to this intimacy with his angelic savior (and wetnurse!) that Sāmīrī recognized him when he appeared at the Red Sea at the time of the Egyptian army's destruction.<sup>50</sup> When Sāmīrī saw him, he took a handful of dirt from the track left behind when Gabriel's mount trod upon the ground, thus explaining his statement in Q.20:96, *I picked up a handful from the messenger's track...*<sup>51</sup> Having thus provided the requisite background for the episode, Ibn 'Abbās goes on to describe the circumstances surrounding the actual making of the Calf:

It thus occurred to Sāmīrī<sup>52</sup>: Whatever you throw this at, saying 'Become such-and-such,' it will become. And he kept the handful with him in his hand till after he had crossed the sea. Now when Moses and the Israelites crossed the sea, and God had drowned the people of Pharaoh, Moses said to his brother Aaron:

---

<sup>49</sup> The Quranic basis for the biblical slaughter of the innocents (cf. Ex.1:15-22) is found in Q.2:49: *We saved you from the Pharaoh's people who wronged and oppressed you and slew your sons but spared your women...*

<sup>50</sup> As an indirect exegetical elaboration on Sāmīrī's statement *baṣurtu bi-mā lam yaḥsurū bi-hi* in Q.20:96, note that this anecdote appears to emphasize a basic understanding of the verb *baṣura* as signifying not only vision but recognition and comprehension, although vision remains a key aspect of the narrative moment. I again deviate from Ahmed Ali's translation of the verse, which has simply *I saw what they did not see...*

<sup>51</sup> Note again that Ahmed Ali explicitly refers to the dirt in his translation of this verse, rendering the key phrase as *I picked up a handful of dust from the messenger's tracks...*; scripture specifically refers only to the *handful from the track of the messenger*. I will continue to omit this reference to the dust in quoting his translation of the verse to avoid privileging the exegesis his translation implicitly presupposes and promotes.

<sup>52</sup> *alqā fī rū' al-sāmīrī*, playing on the double meaning of *alqā* ("to throw" vs. "to suggest") that seems to inform Q.20:87, *fa-kadhālik alqā al-sāmīrī*, which can mean either "for thus did Sāmīrī cast away" or "for thus did Sāmīrī suggest..."



*Deputise for me among my people. Dispose rightly... (Q.7:142).* Then Moses went off to his meeting with his Lord.

At that time, the Israelites had jewelry that they had borrowed from the people of Pharaoh, and, as if they wished to avoid sinning through it, they threw it out so that the fire could come down and consume it.<sup>53</sup> And when they gathered it together, Sāmīrī spoke up, with the handful that he had kept with him, which he threw in with [the gold] thus—and Ibn ‘Abbās motioned like so<sup>54</sup>—and he said, ‘Become a calf, a body that lows!’ And it became *a calf, a body that lows* (Q.7:148/20:88).<sup>55</sup> Wind would enter its posterior and come out its mouth, and its lowing sound was thus heard...

Then he [Sāmīrī] said: This is your god and the god of Moses (Q.20:88), and the Israelites devoted themselves to the Calf, worshipping it. Then Aaron

---

<sup>53</sup> Most versions that make reference to the Israelites’ discarding the ornaments out of a concern for their questionable legality mention either their building a fire into which the jewelry is to be cast or else burying it until Moses’ return. This version is unusual not only in that the Israelites cast the jewelry out into the open so that it can be consumed by heavenly fire, but also in that neither Sāmīrī nor Aaron is specified as suggesting that they do so; in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, it is Sāmīrī who brings up the issue (for nefarious purposes), while in Ṭabarī’s other traditions on the Calf, it is Aaron who does so (presumably sincerely). In some later commentaries one sometimes finds the claim that the ornaments were taken off the bodies of the drowned Egyptians or were washed up on the shore of the Red Sea; although this is seldom if ever stated explicitly, the motivation behind this shift in interpretation seems to be a desire to annul the underlying “halakhic” issue (since the drowned Egyptians were fallen combatants, this makes their jewelry into legal booty).

<sup>54</sup> That is, mimicking Sāmīrī’s gesture of flinging the dirt into the pile of jewelry. The text here reads “Ibn Ishāq,” which is certainly wrong, since Ibn Ishāq is not connected with this tradition at all. One could just as easily suppose that the text should read “Sufyān” here instead (as the major traditionist with whom this version is associated), but I have somewhat arbitrarily chosen Ibn ‘Abbās as a likely replacement. The third long version of the Calf narrative related by Ṭabarī *ad loc.* Q.2:51 is associated with Ibn Ishāq, and one might easily conclude that the two traditions have become confused in transmission in some way. It could possibly be a scribal error as well, though this seems less likely. It is also entirely possible that Ṭabarī related the tradition faithfully as he heard it, and that one of the previous tradents in the chain had transmitted it incorrectly (which shifts responsibility to the individuals involved at the pre-redactive rather than the post-redactive end of the process). Strangely, the normally solicitous editor does not seem to have observed the inconsistency here. This tradition is not related in Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh*, so the reading cannot be corroborated through comparison with another citation.

<sup>55</sup> As in previous chapters, I continue to deliberately deviate from Ahmed Ali here as well; in his translation, he renders this phrase as *the image of a calf which mooed like a cow*, but this seems to imply a certain unambiguous conception of *jasad* as an inanimate form. As we shall see, the ambiguity of *jasad*, “physical form” or “body” was taken quite seriously by some commentators.

said: O my people, you are only being tested with this.<sup>56</sup> Surely your Lord is al-Rahmān, so follow me and obey my command. But they said: So long as Moses does not come back we are not going to give it up, and we will remain devoted to it... (Q.20:90-91)<sup>57</sup>

This version of the story of the Calf's creation is relatively brief and glosses over various details that longer expositions address, such as the outcome of Gabriel's appearance at the sea, the circumstances of the Israelites' coming to possess the jewelry of the Egyptians, and the specific reasons for their discarding the jewelry and thus abetting Sāmirī's making of the Calf. (It seems particularly noteworthy that while Sāmirī is actually portrayed as bringing up the issue of the questionable legality of the Israelites' possession of the ornaments in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, here it is not specified how they came to be aware of this issue—the tradition says simply that “it was as if they wished to avoid sinning through it,” *ka-annahum ta'aththamū min-hu*.<sup>58</sup>) For our present purposes, what is of greatest importance here is the particular portrayal of the process and outcome of the Calf's actual creation. Various aspects of the tradition given here by Ṭabarī are strongly reminiscent of elements we have already seen in the works of Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn

<sup>56</sup> Versus Ali's *you are being only misled with this*, which effaces the obvious connection between temptation and trial implicit in *futintum*.

<sup>57</sup> *Jāmi' al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.63-4, no.918: Ibn 'Abbās—'Ikrima—Abū Sa'īd [*sic*]—Sufyān b. 'Uyayna—Ibrāhīm b. Bashār al-Ramādī—'Abd al-Karīm b. al-Haytham. (The *isnād* heading the second part of the tradition only reaches from Abū Sa'īd to Ibn 'Abbās, but is given in full at the beginning of the first part on the previous page.) 'Ikrima (d. c. 105/723-4), a Berber *mawlā* of Ibn 'Abbās, was one of his most famous—and controversial—students, and was widely accused of fabricating hadith that he foisted on his former master and teacher. See Schacht, *ET*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “'Ikrima”; Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, 20:264-92, no.4009. “Abū Sa'īd” seems to be Abū Sa'd al-Baqqāl (d. c. 140/757-8), who frequently transmits from 'Ikrima and to Sufyān b. 'Uyayna. In his statistical analysis of the reception of Ibn 'Abbās traditions by Ṭabarī, Berg notes that the chain representing 'Ikrima's Ibn 'Abbās traditions as transmitted by 'Abd al-Karīm b. al-Haytham (d. 278/891-2; cf. Ḥallāq, *Rijāl Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 363) occurs only eighteen times in the *Jāmi' al-bayān*; moreover, 'Abd al-Karīm is a highly atypical informant of Ṭabarī, inasmuch as he transmits Ibn 'Abbās traditions *only* from 'Ikrima and from no other source (*The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 146-7).

<sup>58</sup> The verb *ta'aththama* specifically denotes forbearance in the face of temptation to sin. It will be recalled that in Muqātil's comments on Sūra 20, Sāmirī is described as convincing the Israelites to give up the gold by saying that “it is defilement upon your women and children... purify yourselves of them [i.e. the ornaments]; immolate them in fire.”

‘Abbās, and al-Sijistānī, which is perhaps unsurprising given the diversity of the interpretations of the Calf to which these previous works all directly or indirectly bear witness.

Contrary to what seems to be the dominant position in the commentaries of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, this Ibn ‘Abbās tradition *denies* that it was the dirt that caused the Calf to low (which may be the interpretation implied by the comment of Abū ‘Umar presented by al-Sijistānī that states that the *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* claimed that it was God who created the Calf’s *khuwār* as well). Rather, here the Calf’s characteristic sound was apparently caused by the motion of wind through its body, which seems to agree with the interpretation that Abū ‘Umar himself appears to have favored, and in point of fact, the terminology used in this Ibn ‘Abbās tradition is directly reminiscent of that of Abū ‘Umar: the former has *wa-kāna tadkhulu al-rīḥ fī dubrihi wa-takhruju min fī-hi yusma’u la-hu ṣawt*, the latter *kānat al-rīḥ tadkulu fī-hi fa-yusma’u la-ha ṣawt*.<sup>59</sup> In our previous comments on al-Sijistānī, we wondered what the function of the dirt could have been if it was *not* to make the Calf low, and strikingly, here we see an explicit depiction of the alternative seemingly implied by al-Sijistānī, namely that Sāmīrī used the dirt to actually create the Calf from the pile of golden ornaments. (Again, it will be recalled that this process seems to be implied in Muqātil’s comments on the Sūra 20 version of the episode as well.)

Further, Ibn ‘Abbās describes the angelic steed from under whose hoof the miraculous *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* was taken in particularly unique terms—it is not only the *faras* of Gabriel, as in Muqātil and al-Sijistānī, but specifically *unthā wadīq*, a “mare in heat.” The use of this terminology is wholly unsurprising, given that this Ibn ‘Abbās tradition on the Calf was originally part of a longer narrative that included the story about how Gabriel led Pharaoh and his army to their doom while riding this “mare in heat.” It is also somewhat reminiscent of Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās’ use of the colorful phrase *balqā’ unthā*, a “piebald mare,” and suggests that a wider narrative context is being hinted at there as well.

---

<sup>59</sup> Al-Sijistānī, *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur’ān*, 70.

Thus, the confusion or uncertainty about the means by which the Calf was created and the source of its *khuwār* that we saw in various early texts commenting on the episode seems to be further reflected in the tradition on the Calf Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn ‘Abbās. While it does help to clarify a couple of points, in the end this tradition perhaps only really adds to the confusion, without bringing us to much of a resolution of the pertinent issues. In other words, it only serves to amplify the *ikhtilāf* or exegetical disagreement we have already observed in a previous stage of the *tafsīr* tradition’s evolution, without reconciling (and perhaps even exacerbating!) the tension between the various positions proposed by, or at least attested in, earlier commentaries.<sup>60</sup> One critical issue it *does* clarify, however, is the idea that some early exegetes believed that Sāmīrī had used the handful of dirt *not* to make the Calf low, but rather to directly transform or transmute the golden ornaments into the actual physical form of the Calf’s body.

That is, our conjecture that the conception of the Calf as having been produced through magic may have been latent in Muqātil’s interpretation, or even deliberately suppressed there, seems to have been borne out by the appearance of this Ibn ‘Abbās tradition in Ṭabarī. The other key issue it helps to clarify is that of the terminology invoked in the commentary of Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās to describe the *faras jibrīl*, namely *balqā’ unthā*; why the angelic steed should specifically be *female* remains obscure unless we directly connect Gabriel’s appearance at the Red Sea with the specific theme of his luring Pharaoh to his death. This is made perfectly clear not only by the reference to the steed as *unthā wadīq* in the Ibn ‘Abbās tradition but by the direct

---

<sup>60</sup> The term *ikhtilāf* retains a more neutral sense in classical *tafsīr*, but over time, exegetes began to be troubled by the apparent lack of agreement among the Companions and Successors regarding the meaning of even basic terms in the Quranic text. The sheer range of interpretive possibilities became problematic by medieval times, and perhaps unsurprisingly, unruly *ikhtilāf* (which is really better rendered “disagreement” rather than “diversity”) came to be blamed on subversive elements in early Islamic society who sought to undermine the integrity of authentic *tafsīr* as transmitted to the Companions by the Prophet. Cf., e.g. McAuliffe, “Assessing the *Isrā’īliyyāt*.”

connection of this tradition with that which appears in the exegesis of Q.2:50 just previous, recounting the story of the drowning of Pharaoh and the Egyptians.<sup>61</sup>

Notwithstanding his comments at the end of his exegesis of Sūra 20, to Muqātil (and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās as well), the effect of the *athar al-rasūl* seems to have been to make the Golden Calf low like a real calf (however momentarily), this being some inherent potency of the angelic steed—which Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās calls *dābat al-ḥayāt* as well as *balqā’ unthā*—communicated through the medium of the dirt to the golden form physically manufactured by Sāmīrī.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, the implication of Ṭabarī’s Ibn ‘Abbās tradition is that this potency was manifest in a completely opposite way, namely causing the gold to mimic the *physical form*, and not so much the *function* or *activity*, of a living being. While Ibn ‘Abbās’ Calf is definitely not animate per se, the process of its coming into existence was rather more wondrous than what Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās describe; instead of having to go through the tedious work of sculpting or casting that was supposedly necessary to fashion the Calf, here he is spared such labor, because the dirt taken from the hoofprint of Gabriel’s horse does not work simply to bring forth a moo, but rather actually transforms the golden ornaments taken from the Egyptians into the form of a calf.

---

<sup>61</sup> Note again that Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās invokes the term *faras balqā’ unthā* specifically *ad loc.* Q.20:96, where there is no mention of the drowning of the Egyptians or the death of Pharaoh via angelic intervention at the sea. There does not seem to be any reference to this episode in his comments *ad loc.* Q.2:50 either, so it is odd that he should utilize this phrase in particular. One might conclude that although it is clearly an allusion to the Red Sea narrative, it might be considered an “orphaned” mytheme in Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās’ *tafsīr*, an allusion to an episode that simply was not included in our text as extant, although its author presumably knew of it—for why else would he identify Gabriel’s steed as a “piebald mare”?

<sup>62</sup> As we have already seen, the term frequently used by interpretations that presume that Sāmīrī physically fashioned the Calf is *ṣāgha*, which connotes metalworking. It will likewise be recalled that Muqātil claims, *ad loc.* Q.7:152, that Sāmīrī was actually a *ṣā’igh*, a goldsmith (*Tafsīr Muqātil*, 2.65 middle), a detail that does not recur in the *tafsīr* tradition again until al-Tha’labī (cf. *Al-Kashf*, 1.194 *ad loc.* Q.2:49-54; *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, 286). Occasionally one also finds *ṣana’a* used for the making of the Calf as well, e.g. Muqātil *ad loc.* Q.2:51 (1.104 bottom) in his version of the key dialogue between Moses and God about the Calf’s *rūh*.

But then, having admitted this minor miracle, Ibn Abbās—or whomever was responsible for this tradition—*denies* the dirt the power to magically tease a moo out of the golden statue. Instead, what it accomplishes is the genesis of an idol equipped to low not by magical but rather through rudimentary *mechanical* means. Thus, in each of the two interpretations attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās that we have examined so far (that in the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* on the one hand and that attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās by Ṭabarī on the other), the use of the dirt seems to have a rather different implication: contact with the angelic *faras*, even indirect contact, grants a temporary semblance of life to an inanimate body, but the manner in which that semblance or imitation of life becomes manifest appears to be interpreted in wholly opposite and incompatible ways.<sup>63</sup>

The fact that speculation as to the meaning of an obscure Quranic phrase (viz., *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl*) should generate such radically disparate interpretations is not all that peculiar in itself. What is rather surprising, however, is that exegetes should be so undecided regarding *the interpretation of an interpretation*. That is, having uniformly adopted the definite interpretation of the “handful from the track of the messenger” as the dirt taken from the earth trodden upon by Gabriel’s angelic steed, it is strange that the exegetes cannot figure out what the specific implications of this picturesque image are exactly supposed to be. As we shall see, this disparity or disagreement seems to indicate that in these commentaries we are really dealing with the literary remains of a secondary stage of reflection upon an older exegetical image, more specifically, different apologetic responses to an original development that was more logical and straightforward as initially deployed, but became more convoluted and problematic over time.

---

<sup>63</sup> This is to say nothing of the third view found in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, namely that the Calf was actually inspired by *rūḥ* through divine fiat, presumably through the agency of the handful of dirt. Note also that we are faced here with diametrically opposed and contradictory interpretations attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās. Not only is the *tafsīr* of Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās (obviously) ascribed to him, but Muqātil b. Sulaymān supposedly derived his exegetical views from either the school of Ibn ‘Abbās or else an actual *tafsīr* ascribed to him as well. As we have seen previously, at least regarding the Calf narrative, there seems to be fundamental agreement between Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās regarding basic interpretations (and this often translates to *verbatim* agreement). However, with Ṭabarī’s ‘Ikrima-Ibn ‘Abbās tradition, here we have *completely the opposite view* attributed to this key figure.

That is, aspects of an earlier, apparently widespread interpretation of the *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* as the track of the angelic steed were suppressed, and subsequent commentators' attempt to minimize or marginalize its more troubling implications led to various complications. Interpreters continued to deploy this particular image of the (magical) handful from the track of the (angelic) messenger, but altered key elements of the original interpretation inconsistently, producing disagreement, *ikhtilāf*, over basic issues in the narrative such as the means through which the Calf was actually created and what exactly made it utter its characteristic *khuwār*.<sup>64</sup>

#### B. Al-Suddī

The situation becomes even more complex when we examine the other major versions of the Calf narrative presented by Ṭabarī in his comments on Q.2:51. In all of them, there is a consistent tendency to identify the “handful from the track of the messenger” as dirt taken from the hoofprint of the horse Gabriel rode when he appeared at the Red Sea; we have already seen this basic uniformity in earlier commentaries. Further, quite strikingly, in sharp *contrast* to the positions of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās we have just discussed, in *all four* of the long versions of the narrative Ṭabarī provides here, Sāmīrī uses the handful of dirt to directly transform the golden ornaments into the shape of a calf, although all four seem to differ significantly over the question of what exactly that transformation entailed. This point should be emphasized, because this would appear to be the dominant view in Ṭabarī's commentary on the

---

<sup>64</sup> That an original complex of concepts and themes was deliberately rearranged and modified after its initial reception is clear from the fact that fundamentally different interpretations seem to share terms and images in common. For example, in the Ibn 'Abbās tradition cited by Ṭabarī that we have just examined here, wind is said to have flowed in through the Calf's posterior (*dubur*) and out of its mouth (*famm*) to make the lowing sound, which is particularly reminiscent of the odd and somewhat anomalous reference in Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās to Sāmīrī's throwing the magic dirt into both the Calf's posterior and mouth (using the same terms *dubur* and *famm* again) in order to cause it to moo. The basic mechanism being described is completely different, but the diverging interpretations seem to echo and evoke one another, and possibly point to the terminology and imagery that was used in the tradition from which both variants may have been ultimately derived.

episode; although he acknowledges certain other views as at least possible, as we shall see, his various representations of the Calf episode are carefully constructed to promote this view and marginalize (or wholly exclude) others.

The second tradition cited here *ad loc.* Q.2:51 in fact helps to clarify matters to a large extent, for, as will become abundantly clear, it appears to resolve some of the most pressing questions surrounding the different interpretations of the episode we have already examined. This second tradition is attributed to the well-known Successor Ismā‘īl b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suddī, supposedly known even in his own day as an expositor of “popular exegesis” or *tafsīr al-qawm*, a characterization that is probably polemical.<sup>65</sup> The tradition is worth quoting at length on account of the numerous novel elements it seems to introduce. Notably, it links the appearance of Gabriel at the Red Sea directly to the Calf episode, just like the prior tradition attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, although Suddī’s tradition gives a different reason for this critical event.

When God commanded Moses to take the Israelites out—that is, from the land of Egypt—Moses commanded the Israelites to go, and also to borrow the ornaments from the Egyptians. Then, when God delivered Moses and the Israelites who were with him from the sea while drowning Pharaoh and his people, Gabriel came to Moses to take him to God. When Sāmīrī saw him, he [Gabriel?] did not recognize him, but Sāmīrī said: It is the Horse of Life (*faras al-ḥayāt*)! Then, having seen him, he added: This is truly something!<sup>66</sup> He took

---

<sup>65</sup> See *EP*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Al-Suddī, Ismā‘īl b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān” (Juynboll). Cf. our previous discussion of this tradition in the context of corroborating the identification of Gabriel’s steed as *faras balqā’ unthā* as a gloss particularly associated with the *tafsīr* of Kalbī.

<sup>66</sup> The description of events here is somewhat ambiguous. I understand *fa-rāhu al-sāmīriyyu fa-ankarahu* to mean that although Sāmīrī recognized Gabriel, Gabriel did not recognize Sāmīrī; the next phrases, *wa-qāla innahu faras al-ḥayāt fa-qāla hīna rāhu inna li-hadhā li-sha’n<sup>an</sup>* are clearly Sāmīrī’s words demonstrating that this was so, and thus the object of *ankarahu* cannot be the steed. (But why is Sāmīrī’s utterance broken into two discrete statements?) Sāmīrī cannot be the subject of *ankarahu* (since the following line expresses his recognition), unless the object of the verb is *Gabriel*, meaning that although Sāmīrī did not know who Gabriel was, he somehow recognized the steed and understood its nature (thus his exclamation, “It is the Horse of Life!” and so forth); this is the interpretation of Cooper (*Commentary on the Qur’ān*, 312). Later



some of the dirt from its hoof (that is, the hoof of the horse); then Moses departed, appointing Aaron as his surrogate (*istakhlafa*) over the Israelites.

Although this tradition agrees with the previous one in beginning the account with Gabriel's appearance at the Red Sea, the specific reason given is different: it is not that Gabriel had to lure Pharaoh and the Egyptians to their doom on his "mare in heat"; rather, he arrived on his angelic steed to take Moses away for his appointment with the Lord. Notably, just as in the *tafsīr* of Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, Gabriel's steed is called *faras al-ḥayat*, the "Horse of Life," here as well.

The text then describes how God appointed thirty days for the meeting with Moses, and then added ten more; in the meantime, Aaron commanded the Israelites to collect the ornaments borrowed from the Egyptians and not to use any of it, for as illicitly gained booty, it was not theirs to dispose of as they saw fit. He thus commanded them to dig a pit and bury it until Moses could return and determine its status (note the contrast with the analogous passage in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, in which the ornaments are to be burned in a pit, as well as with the previous tradition in Ṭabarī attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, in which the ornaments are simply exposed in preparation for their being consumed by fire from heaven). Then, when the gold was all gathered together in the pit,

Sāmīrī came along with that handful and threw it in; and then God made a calf, a body that lows come forth out of the ornaments.<sup>67</sup> [At that time] the Israelites reckoned the duration of Moses' appointment with God, and they

---

attestations of this tradition seem to reflect intervention to streamline its wording and correct the ambiguity.

<sup>67</sup> The phrasing here no doubt deliberately evokes both of the Quranic occurrences of the critical phrase alluding to the Calf simultaneously, *wa-ittakhadha qawm mūsā... min ḥulyyhim 'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* in Q.7:148 and *fa-akhrāja* [that is, Sāmīrī] *la-hum 'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*, combining both and making God the unambiguous subject: *fa-akhrāja allāh min al-ḥulyy 'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*.

counted both the days and the nights as separate days, and so when the twentieth day was completed, the Calf came forth for them.

When they saw it, Sāmirī said to them, *This is your god and the god of Moses whom he has neglected* (Q.20:88)—that is, Moses has left his god here and gone off in search of him! Then they devoted themselves to the Calf, worshipping it while it was lowing and walking about. Then Aaron said to them, O Israelites, *you are only being tested with this*—that is, you are being subjected to a trial by this means (*ibtalaytum bi-hi*), meaning by the Calf. *Surely your Lord is al-Raḥmān...* (Q.20:90) Then Aaron and those Israelites who sided with him arose and would not fight them.

Moses had departed to meet his God<sup>68</sup> so He could speak with him, and when He spoke with him, He said: What made you hurry away, O Moses, from your people? He said, They are right behind me. I have hastened to You, O Lord, so that You may be pleased. He said, We have put your people on trial in your absence, and Sāmirī has led them astray (Q.20:83-85). Then He informed him of what they had done. Moses replied: O Lord, this Sāmirī commanded them to take the Calf [as a god],<sup>69</sup> but regarding its rūḥ, who was it that inspired the Calf with it? The Lord replied: It was I. Moses said: O Lord, then You were the one who led them astray!<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> *inṭalaqa mūsā ilā ilahihi*, which echoes but reverses Sāmirī's earlier contention, *taraka mūsā ilahahu hahunnā wa-dhahaba yaṭlabuhu*. Moses had not in fact *abandoned* his god, but rather went off to meet Him exactly where he knew he would find Him.

<sup>69</sup> Again *ittakhadha* is understood as “to take as a god,” “take in worship,” as in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās.

<sup>70</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.64-5, no.919: Al-Suddī—Asbāṭ b. Naṣr—‘Amr b. Ḥammād—Mūsā b. Hārūn. Note that Suddī is a *tābi’ tābi’*, that is, a disciple of Successors, although he was not much younger than other major figures in the exegetical tradition in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century who were genuine Successors such as Mujāhid and Ibn Jubayr. Sometimes when this *isnād* appears in Ṭabarī's commentary associated with other traditions, the chain of transmitters extends past Suddī as the terminal authority to the Companions Abū Mālik and Abū Ṣāliḥ, and then beyond them to Ibn ‘Abbās. Asbāṭ b. Naṣr is something of a mystery: Ibn Sa’d knows only that he transmitted from Suddī (*Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 8.497, no.3473), and he is likewise barely known to Mizzī (*Tahdhīb*, 2.357-9, no.321). Mūsā b. Hārūn occurs very frequently as an informant of Ṭabarī in the *Jāmi’ al-bayān*; unfortunately, he seems to be completely obscure (see Ḥallāq, *Rijāl Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 550, no.2644). Cf. also Horst, “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarīs,” 302 on this *isnād*.

We would perhaps be justified in concluding that this is the “original” tradition presupposed by several of our commentators, yet altered by them in various ways. Here, as in Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, the steed is termed the “Horse of Life”; but unlike all of the earlier interpretations we have surveyed here, including that of Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, the specific effect of Sāmīrī’s use of the “handful from the track of the messenger” is neither to make the fabricated Golden Calf low or to solely transmute the golden ornaments into a statue in the form of a calf, but to actually transform the gold into *a walking, lowing Golden Calf* that possessed a *rūh* or animating spirit. The close parallel here with Muqātil’s (rather anomalous) remarks on the Sūra 2 version of the story helps to clarify the nature of the dialogue recorded there: when Moses asks God who inspired the Calf with its *rūh*, we may conclude, on the basis of the parallel from Suddī, that this refers to Sāmīrī’s animation of the Calf through the medium of the handful of dirt, which God presumably permitted to become inspired and walk about and low in imitation of a real calf.<sup>71</sup> (One also wonders if the statement of Abū ‘Umar about the *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* claiming that they said it was God who caused the Calf to low reflects a tradition like that attributed to Suddī here as well.)

The subtle change that appears here in the dialogue between Moses and God seems especially significant. In Muqātil’s commentary on the Sūra 2 version of the episode, the citation of Q.20:85, *We have put your people on trial in your absence; and Sāmīrī has led them astray... (fa-innā qad fatannā qawmaka min ba’dika wa-aḍallahum al-sāmīrī)*, is the dramatic culmination of the conversation between Moses and God about the inspiration of the Calf:

Then Moses said to his Lord: But who inspired it with spirit (*man nafakha fī-hi al-rūh*)? God replied: I did. Moses replied: O Lord, Sāmīrī made the Calf for them and led them astray, but *You* made the lowing sound within it, and so it was

---

<sup>71</sup> It is worth pointing out here as well that the remark about the Israelites’ reckoning the days and nights as separate “days,” thus causing them to expect Moses to return after only twenty days, is *also* found in Muqātil’s version of the narrative based on Sūra 2. In other words, the Suddī tradition seems to exhibit a particularly strong degree of overlap with *Tafsīr Muqātil* here.

You who made the trial for my people. God responded: *Verily, We have put your people on trial in your absence, and Sāmīrī has led them astray...* (Q.20:85)<sup>72</sup>

God's part in what transpired is very clearly acknowledged and underlined here; that is, as much as Sāmīrī, if not more so, it was God who was ultimately responsible for what transpired with the Calf, for by creating the semblance of life within it, God introduced *fitna* among the Israelites.

The fundamental theodical issue that underlies the whole episode, namely the extent to which God determined that the Israelites would succumb to sin, is brought to the forefront here.

However, in the version of the dialogue attributed by Ṭabarī to Suddī, this exchange is not only placed in a broader context (in that Sāmīrī's specific actions and their consequences have been made completely explicit) but the underlying theodical issue is made much more prominent. Here, the dialogue does not culminate with the reference to Q.20:85; rather, the scriptural quotation *anticipates* the crucial culmination of the scene, and the proof-text is used to make a completely different dramatic point:

*He said, We have put your people on trial in your absence, and Sāmīrī has led them astray...* (Q.20:85) Then He informed him of what they had done.

Moses replied: O Lord, this Sāmīrī commanded them to take the Calf [as a god], but regarding its *rūḥ*, who was it that inspired the Calf with it (*man nafakhahā fī-hi*)? The Lord replied: It was I. Moses said: O Lord, then *You* were the one who led them astray (*anta idh<sup>m</sup> aḍalaltahum*)!

Instead of concluding the exchange with the Quranic verse, which would confirm God's role in establishing the trial (*fitna*) of the Israelites by inspiring the Calf with its *rūḥ*, here, what follows on the citation of the verse *subverts and contradicts it*. It is not simply that God's role in creating the trial is proved by His inspiration of the Calf; rather, through this critical act, He not only established a trial, but effectively led the Israelites astray through a direct act of divine will.

---

<sup>72</sup> *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1.104 bottom.

In reality, it is not Sāmīrī who led the people astray, but rather God Himself. Put another way, the basic claim being advanced here is that not only the *fitna* but the *ḍalāla* was ultimately His responsibility.

It seems that this is yet another element found in Muqātil's commentary that can be corrected and illuminated through reference to parallel exegetical traditions. Inasmuch as contrasting statements in his *tafsīr* seem to argue both for and against the idea that the Calf was actually inspired, and that his comments on the Sūra 20 version seem to attest almost simultaneously that the Calf was manufactured by Sāmīrī by hand *and* produced through the magical transmutation of the golden ornaments, here too Muqātil's version seems to have been abridged or altered to obscure a problematic conception, namely that God was entirely responsible for the Israelites' transgression.<sup>73</sup> The basic interpretation of the nature of the Calf in the Suddī tradition is thus as follows: Sāmīrī used the handful of dirt to transform the collected gold into the shape of a calf; this was not merely a fully formed *statue* of a calf, however, but rather, this entity was truly animate or at least appeared to be so, divinely inspired by a *rūh*, the breath or spirit of life; this occurred through the medium of the track of the angelic steed, the *faras al-ḥayat*, whose influence was miraculously enabled by God to have such an effect; and the Calf thus sprang forth fully formed from the gold "lowing and walking about" (*yakhūru wa-yamshī*). Again, we would seem to be justified in identifying the Suddī tradition as the original version of the narrative of the animation of the Calf; insofar as its interpretation of the Calf

---

<sup>73</sup> This alteration or emendation makes perfect sense in terms of Muqātil's known theological predilections, for he seems to have been a staunch anti-determinist, even supposedly having engaged the notorious Jahm b. Ṣafwān, the eponym of the predestinarian school in early Islamic thought, in disputation (Goldfeld, "Muqātil ibn Sulaymān," 6). We might thus interpret the alteration of the dialogue (of which the Suddī tradition seems to preserve a more authentic remembrance) as it appears in his *tafsīr* as an acknowledgement of the basic theodical theme expressed therein (God was partially responsible for the Israelites' transgression, in that He established the circumstances of the test), while rejecting its more radical interpretation (God actually constrained the Israelites and decreed they would sin by leading them astray, causing their *ḍalāla*). That God not only established the *fitna* but also the *ḍalāla* as well would be unacceptable to Muqātil and incongruous with the theological tendencies typically exhibited by his *tafsīr*.

appears to be that presupposed by most if not all of the others we have seen so far, *all* of these other exegeses seem in one way or another to respond to and modify Suddī's claims about the Calf and its genesis.

Although for now we should remain agnostic about the accuracy of its attribution, it is intriguing that this tradition is supposed to have been transmitted from Suddī (d. 127/745) in particular, inasmuch as even our earliest commentators, particularly Muqātil (d. 150/767), seem to be concerned to address, alter, or even suppress some of the basic ideas reflected within it. The dialogue between Moses and God as seen in the Suddī tradition appears to be echoed in Muqātil's comments on Sūra 2, which even frankly acknowledges that the Calf was animated (*nafakha*) with a genuine spirit (*rūh*), although, as we have just seen, the most critical element in that exchange is fundamentally altered by Muqātil. In other parts of his commentary, Muqātil adopts a completely different understanding of the Calf, namely, that it was fabricated by Sāmīrī by hand, with the magic dirt being used to elicit a brief lowing sound; this is the interpretation of Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās as well, and notably, both explicitly militate against the notion that the Calf was authentically animate. However, Muqātil's remarks at the end of his commentary on the Sūra 20 version seem to hint at Suddī's interpretation of the Calf as having been magically yielded directly from the gold.

Further, in al-Sijistānī's comments, his informant Abū 'Umar claimed that the traditionists alleged that God had created the lowing sound within the Calf, which similarly may have been intended as a reference to Suddī's version. On the other hand, Abū 'Umar's insistence that the sound of the *khuwār* issuing from the Calf was rather due only to the movement of the wind—the interpretation found in the first Ibn 'Abbās tradition given by Ṭabarī as well—seems specifically intended to combat any hint or suggestion that the Calf was authentically animate (although Ṭabarī's Ibn 'Abbās tradition at least preserves a basic element of supernaturalism, inasmuch as the dirt is still recognized as having transformed the gold into the form of the Calf.) In short, various elements of the presentations of the Calf found in Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, al-

Sijjānī, and Ṭabarī's Ibn 'Abbās tradition all appear to presuppose and implicitly counter the claims advanced in the Suddī tradition.

Simply comparing the two traditions from Ṭabarī we have examined so far, it is striking that the Suddī version (or some exegetical tradition very similar to it) appears to antedate and inform Muqātil's various comments on the episode, since, as we have just mentioned, if we accept the attribution to Suddī as indicating a rough date of origin (if not its actual authentic source), then chronologically the development of interpretations of the Calf seen here makes perfect sense. It is particularly worth noting that the notion that Muqātil's commentary is responding to a tradition like Suddī's helps us to better explain the demonstrable inconsistency of his various statements; at times, Muqātil may be explicitly endorsing or even inadvertently acknowledging aspects of the older interpretation, while at other times he appears to be actively moving to contradict and suppress it.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, relative to the interpretations of both Muqātil and Suddī, Ṭabarī's 'Ikrima—Ibn 'Abbās tradition seems out of place. While acknowledging the magical origin of the Calf, its basic nature as an animate or quasi-animate entity is explicitly denied here by the statement that its lowing was only produced by the movement of wind through its body. This is an opinion that is rather unlikely to antedate the view of Suddī; rather, it seems more analogous to the strident statements of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās that the Calf lowed only once and did not possess a *rūḥ*. That is, like the comments of Muqātil, the Ibn 'Abbās tradition appears to presuppose and react against the view of Suddī, and not the other way around. While exegetical

---

<sup>74</sup> Note that this particular case seems to challenge the allegation that Muqātil and other early exegetes who were criticized by the *muḥaddithūn* had their works plundered and their views appropriated and recirculated under the name of other, more reliable authorities. At least in this instance, Muqātil is reacting to an interpretation that *already* seems to have been circulating in traditionist circles. Then again, it is also possible that the Suddī tradition merely represents the distillation of an older, probably anonymous exegetical datum, and that it was this *previous* tradition that Muqātil opposed. In other words, Muqātil might not have known this interpretation as that of "Suddī" at all. (Either way, this conjecture is probably bolstered by the fact that *both* Ṭabarī's Suddī tradition and Muqātil's narrative cited *ad loc.* the Sūra 2 version of the Calf episode feature the aforementioned detail of the Israelites' counting twenty days as forty and thus expecting Moses to return from Sinai early.)

recourse to a mechanical, naturalistic explanation of the Calf's lowing seems to reflect a rationalist critique of excessively fabulous or miraculous depictions of the episode, and would thus presumably be a late development, in point of fact, this critique seems to have emerged relatively *early*, since al-Sijistānī attributes it to an authority who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, and the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās are both (arguably) products of this era as well. However, this view is hardly likely to have emerged as early as the time of Ibn 'Abbās himself.

Besides the tradition transmitted from Ibn Abbās through 'Ikrima cited in Ṭabarī's commentary, the only other sources we have seen so far that actually acknowledge the idea that the lowing of the Golden Calf was only caused by the wind are the *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur'ān* of al-Sijistānī and the *Tārīkh* of al-Ya'qūbī. As we have already noted, the phrasing in the Ibn 'Abbās tradition and in the interpretation attributed by al-Sijistānī to Abū 'Umar is surprisingly similar: in the former it is *kāna tadkhulu al-rīḥ fī dubrihi wa-takhruju min fī-hi yusma'u la-hu ṣawt*, "the wind was entering through its posterior and exiting through its mouth, and its [lowing] sound was heard"; in the latter, it is *kānat al-rīḥ tadkulu fī-hi fa-yusma'u la-ha ṣawt*, "the wind was entering it, and its [lowing] sound was heard." The phrasing in Ya'qūbī is similar as well: *kānat al-rīḥ tadkhulu fa-takhūru fī-hi*, "the wind entered it, then lowed within it."<sup>75</sup> (While Ṭabarī and al-Sijistānī ascribe this view to earlier authorities, al-Ya'qūbī does not.)

Moreover, it is perhaps no surprise that Ṭabarī, al-Sijistānī, and al-Ya'qūbī were more or less contemporaries: al-Ya'qūbī died in 284/897, Ṭabarī in 311/932, and al-Sijistānī in 330/942. In light of the fact that we find the denials of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās that the Calf possessed a *rūḥ* already in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, we should perhaps date the general tendency to deny the life of the Calf to a period considerably prior than that of Ṭabarī; nevertheless, judging by the evidence before us, it would perhaps be reasonable to locate the specific datum Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās—that it was only the wind that made the Calf low—to the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest.

<sup>75</sup> Al-Ya'qūbī, *Historiae*, 1.37; *L'Histoire des Prophètes*, 43.



As we have already mentioned, later commentators associated this explanation of the Calf's *khuwār* with the exegetes of the Mu'tazilite school. We will discuss this interpretation at greater length in the next chapter, inasmuch as the most important sources that explicitly attribute this view to figures connected with the Mu'tazila date to no earlier than the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century. In anticipation of that discussion, however, we should note here that this claim that the Calf only lowed with the passage of the wind through its body was certainly known as a Mu'tazilite interpretation in Ṭabarī's day, as it is commonly attributed in later sources to Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915), perhaps the greatest exegete the Mu'tazila ever produced. Along with al-Khayyāṭ and Abū'l-Qāsim al-Balkhī, al-Jubbā'ī was one of the dominant figures in the school following its repudiation by the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 233-47/847-61) in the so-called "orthodox revival" that ended the school's establishment as the official doctrine of the Caliphate.

The work of al-Jubbā'ī represents an attempt to both codify and renovate the received tradition of the Mu'tazila; thus, his exegetical activity may be seen as roughly analogous to that of Ṭabarī, inasmuch as the work of each represents the first major attempt to systematize and organize the Quran interpretation associated with their respective schools or tendencies, the rationalist on the one hand and the traditionalist on the other. It is hardly surprising that the two were contemporaries, nor that, in the end, the interpretive traditions collected by each should overlap in significant ways. Though al-Jubbā'ī's *tafsīr* is no longer extant and can only be reconstructed on the basis of later quotations, nevertheless, it is clear that his exegesis of the Quran represents the pinnacle of rationalist *tafsīr*, an exegetical approach that is perhaps epitomized by the claim that the lowing Golden Calf was in fact a mere mechanical contrivance.<sup>76</sup>

Whether or not Ṭabarī himself may be thought to be responsible, it thus appears that his 'Ikrima—Ibn 'Abbās tradition might represent an appropriation of an exegetical opinion in

<sup>76</sup> On al-Jubbā'ī, see Gardet, *EL*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Al-Djubbā'ī, Abū 'Alī Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb" and also Gimaret's substantially annotated reconstruction of al-Jubbā'ī's *tafsīr*, *Une Lecture Mu'tazilite du Coran*. The main extant sources for our knowledge of al-Jubbā'ī's *tafsīr* are the Imāmī *tafsīrs* of al-Ṭūsī (d. 459/1066) and al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1154); the former will be discussed in Chapter 6 below.

circulation in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries, “domesticated” and legitimized by being made to conform to the hadith format and attributed to a great authority on *tafsīr* (actually the greatest) among the Companions. The projection of a late interpretation onto Ibn ‘Abbās, whose reputation among the traditionists as the foremost authority on the Quran had been established by this time, should not surprise us at all, especially considering that this interpretation appears to have been promoted in reaction to another attributed to an authority among the Successors. This is in fact a very common—not to mention widely commented-upon—phenomenon in the *tafsīr* literature, not to mention in the hadith in general.<sup>77</sup>

### C. Ibn ‘Abbās from Ibn Jubayr

Ṭabarī’s third long tradition on the Calf, which, like the first, is claimed to go back to Ibn ‘Abbās, is prefaced by a short tradition transmitted from the famous historian and exegete Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) that briefly describes how the Israelites borrowed the golden ornaments and other goods from the Egyptians before the Exodus.<sup>78</sup> Citation of this tradition is necessary

---

<sup>77</sup> Building on Goldziher’s observations regarding the emergence of hadith in sectarian and doctrinal disputes, it was Schacht who first articulated the argument that *isnāds* tended to be improved over time, with gaps in the chains being filled out and the date of the terminal authority to whom traditions were attributed being pushed further and further back; thus, in his view, deficient *isnāds* are more likely to be genuine than perfect ones, and Companion and Successor hadith more likely to be genuine than hadith attributed to the Prophet himself. Cf. Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, *passim* but esp. 163-75. Moreover, in the *tafsīr* genre in particular, considering the preeminence of Ibn ‘Abbās as the supreme *tarjumān* (explicator) of the Quran, this logic seems to hold true as well: traditions attributed to Successors and lesser-known Companions are more likely to be authentic (or at least less likely to be fabricated) than traditions attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās himself, a point vividly demonstrated by Firestone; cf. “Abraham’s Son as the Intended Sacrifice.” Goldziher himself notes this trend as well; cf. his classic treatment of the debate over the *dhabīh allāh* and the role played in the controversy by Ibn ‘Abbās (or rather by traditions spuriously attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās!) in *Richtungen*, 79-81.

<sup>78</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 2.65-6, no.920. The borrowed ornaments are here specifically described as a pretext for Pharaoh’s inciting his people against the Israelites. Muḥammad b. Ishāq was one of the most important authorities of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century and the author of the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, the definitive biography of the Prophet in the classical period. The scholarship on Ibn Ishāq and his legacy is vast; the treatment of Jones (*EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ibn Ishāq”) is out of date but still useful. Cf. also

because the Ibn 'Abbās narrative that follows relies heavily upon the motif of the gold and other materials taken by the Israelites from Egypt, but provides no explanation as to how they acquired it. In contrast to the previous tradition cited by Ṭabarī in the name of Ibn 'Abbās, transmitted in his name by his student 'Ikrima and featuring the noted traditionist Sufyān b. 'Uyayna in its *isnād*, this latter version is transmitted by a different student, another noted authority on *tafsīr* among the Successors, Sa'īd b. Jubayr. Further, instead of Sufyān, the key scholar featured in the *isnād* is Ibn Ishāq, the source of the anecdote about the Egyptian spoils quoted just previous.

While its basic outlook on the making of the Calf is fundamentally similar to the version transmitted through Sufyān, in contrast to the previous tradition transmitted from Suddī, throughout, its differences from Sufyān's Ibn 'Abbās tradition are conspicuous as well, for example regarding the biographical data it adduces for Sāmīrī.<sup>79</sup> What is *most* noteworthy about this tradition, however, is its relative silence regarding the specific nature of the Calf. Those few details that *are* included here allow us to make certain deductions regarding the underlying conception of the nature of the Calf that seems to inform it; moreover, as we shall see, some of the novel details of Sāmīrī's biography featured here—or, more specifically, some of the ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic details it connects to him—provide us with allusive clues that allow us to draw particular conclusions in this direction as well.

Sāmīrī was a man from the people of Bājarmā, and specifically from a community (*umma*) that worshipped cows. There was a secret affection for the worship of the cow in his heart, though he made an outward show of Islam among the Israelites.

---

the introduction to Newby, *Making of the Last Prophet*. Ibn Ishāq was unfortunately omitted from Cooperson and Toorawa, ed. *Arabic Literary Culture, 500-925*, presumably because his work is only extant in recensions by later authors.

<sup>79</sup> Again, Ibn Ishāq's prominence here perhaps explains the anomalous reference to him in the *matn* of the previous tradition Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās.

While Moses went off to meet his Lord, Aaron went to the Israelites and said to them: You have been burdened with the ornaments of the people<sup>80</sup>—the people of Pharaoh—and their goods and jewelry; now, purify yourselves of them, for they are a source of uncleanness. Then he kindled a fire for them and said: Throw whatever you have of this sort in here. And they agreed, and began to bring whatever they had from those goods and jewelry, and threw it in there, until the ornaments began to melt down within it.

Then Sāmirī saw the track of the horse of Gabriel, and took some of the dirt from the track of its hoof. Then he drew near to the fire and said to Aaron: O prophet of God, shall I throw in what I have here in my hand? And Aaron agreed, supposing that he had something like what the others were bringing from the jewelry and ornaments. He threw it in and said, *Become a calf, a body that lows!*, and it became so, for trial and *fitna*.<sup>81</sup> Then he said: *This is your god and the god of Moses* (Q.20:88). The people devoted themselves to it, and loved it more than they had ever loved anything else...<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> *antum qad ḥummiltum awzār<sup>an</sup> min zinat al-qawm*, an obvious allusion to the excuse the people give Moses in Q.20:87, *wa-lakinnā ḥummilnā awzār<sup>an</sup> min zinat al-qawm...*

<sup>81</sup> *fa-kāna, li'l-balā' wa'l-fitna*. The comma is the editor's and is obviously not found in the original text (فكان، للبلاء والفتنة). The terms *balā'* and *ibtalā'* are commonly employed as synonyms for *fitna* and *fatana* in the *tafsīr* literature and related sources, beginning already with Muqātil. This statement also resonates with Muqātil's description of how Moses heard the "sound of *fitna*" in the camp as he and the elders approached.

<sup>82</sup> This last detail has an ironic resonance in Ṭabarī's account: in the passage describing the miraculous restoration of the Torah after the Babylonian exile, it is said that when Ezra revealed the Torah and its statutes to the people, they loved it (?) as they had never loved anything else, *aḥabbūhu ḥubb<sup>an</sup> lam yuḥibbūhu shay<sup>an</sup> qatt!* (*Annales*, ed. de Goeje, I/2.670, cited in Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 230). The authorities mentioned at the beginning of the passage are Suddī, Ibn Ishāq, and Wahb b. Munabbih, but it is uncertain to whom this tradition should be attributed. But note the gender of the objective suffix *aḥabbūhu*; does this really refer to the *Tawrāt* (which is feminine) or rather in fact to 'Uzayr (Ezra)? The latter seems like a distinct possibility, considering that the passage goes on to describe how the Jews divinized Ezra and deemed him to be the son of God after his death (thus explaining, i.e., on the basis of, Q.9:30). Both Adang and Brinner (*The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume IV: The Ancient Kingdoms*, 65) take the phrase as referring to the Torah, but the parallel with the reference to the Israelites' love of the Calf should perhaps encourage us to reconsider, especially given the grammatical problem this poses.

Leaving aside the question of the specifics of the biographical details that are provided here about Sāmīrī, the particular prominence of what we might term the “halakhic” issue in the narrative here is noteworthy. Like the previous tradition from Suddī, this Ibn ‘Abbās tradition emphasizes Aaron’s role in paving the way for the making of the Calf, inasmuch as it was his idea to have the Israelites gather the golden ornaments so as to avoid sinning through them; notably, in this respect the Ibn Jubayr version of the Ibn ‘Abbās tradition differs from that of ‘Ikrima, in which the collection of the gold is not blamed on anyone in particular. What is even more striking about this narrative is the almost incidental way in which Sāmīrī seems to get involved; instead of concealing the dirt from the track of Gabriel’s steed beforehand (as in the previous two versions, including ‘Ikrima’s version of the Ibn ‘Abbās narrative), here, he happens to see the dirt and picks it up and throws it into the fire, without any explanation as to why he would do so. (It is taken for granted that Gabriel had passed by on his angelic steed, but there is no allusion here to this event at all, as there is in both of the previous traditions.<sup>83</sup>)

Nevertheless, Sāmīrī is still unambiguously cast as a malefactor here. His “secret affection” for bovine worship (*wa-kāna ḥubb ‘ibādat al-baqar fī nafsihi*), his leading the Israelites to worship the Calf after its emergence, and most of all the subterfuge he uses to trick Aaron into allowing him access to the heaped-up Egyptian gold—all of these elements mark him as the villain of the story, even though once again it is Aaron who is described as having initiated the process that led to the making of the Calf, inasmuch as it was he who commanded the gold to be gathered together. Even more significant, however, is the description of how the Calf was created in this tradition (or rather, of how it “came to be, for trial and *fitna*”).

Although it oddly lacks any specific details about the outcome, Ibn Jubayr’s Ibn ‘Abbās tradition fundamentally agrees with ‘Ikrima’s, in that, besides the requisite element of the magic

---

<sup>83</sup> It is also possible, of course, that Ṭabarī has shortened the tradition as he received it, having already related two versions of the narrative just previous. The parallel in the *Tārīkh* begins in the same place, and likewise omits the first part of the story, which is also supplied by foregoing traditions here as well (*Annales*, I/1.492-3).

dirt added to the gold, the key ingredient in the process seems to be Sāmīrī's quasi-prophetic pronouncement of the magic words *kun 'ijl<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*. Through these words and the catalyst of the magic dirt, the Calf came into existence, though we are given no clue as to whether it was animate, or only seemed to be so, or was most definitely only a statue that momentarily made a lowing sound, for this version omits any direct reference that would clarify this issue at all. At the very least, however, the main elements here seem to be *overall* congruous with 'Ikrima's Ibn 'Abbās tradition, and we might conclude, at least tentatively, that they are basically compatible—that in both, the Calf was created by the magic dirt but was not really animate, only lowing with the passage of wind through its body. We simply lack any information that would allow us to be more specific about the underlying conception of the Calf that informs this tradition, and must assume that, in the absence of contradictory evidence, the basic idea is the same as in the previously cited Ibn 'Abbās tradition.

The almost incidental nature of Sāmīrī's involvement notwithstanding, there is another element held in common by the two Ibn 'Abbās traditions cited by Ṭabarī that distinguishes them subtly from the Suddī tradition (in which, of course, the conception of the nature of the Calf itself appears to be fundamentally different). This is their overt interest in Sāmīrī's background, which is significant in and of itself entirely apart from the question of the specific *details* about his background provided by each. The Suddī tradition might be termed a “maximalist” interpretation of the Calf's origins, in that the basic conception of the Calf is almost gratuitously supernaturalized, as well as being directly linked to divine will and agency: the gold is miraculously transmuted into a lowing, walking calf, which is depicted as having been animated by God Himself. With such an emphasis on God's involvement and the conspicuously miraculous nature of the Calf, it is perhaps no surprise that Sāmīrī recedes into the background somewhat; he becomes the mere agent of the divine trial, the necessary conduit through which the magic dirt was delivered to the spoliated gold. In this situation, his only major transgression was his leading the Israelites to take the Calf in worship, and even then, despite this, in the Suddī tradition it is

directly alleged that *God* led Israel astray. The analogy with the version of the episode Muqātil provides in his comments on the Sūra 2 passage is obvious, where the parallel to Suddī's dialogue between Moses and God is found: it is here that the Calf is said to have been animate, inspired with *rūh*, with Sāmīrī receding into the background, commensurate with his complete absence from the corresponding Quranic verses in Sūra 2.

In the Ibn 'Abbās traditions, on the other hand, the Calf is less fully supernaturalized; its emergence may have been miraculous, but (at least in 'Ikrima's version, and possibly in Ibn Jubayr's as well) its lowing is entirely mundane, solely due to its mechanical properties and caused by a natural phenomenon. We might consider this to be a deliberate narrative strategy adopted to reduce the degree of God's involvement in the episode; insofar as this might be the case, it is plausible that the particular interest in Sāmīrī exhibited by the Ibn 'Abbās traditions reflects the same concern, deflecting blame away from God and onto his human agent. To the degree that background details on Sāmīrī's life are adduced in both of these traditions, then, we might therefore conclude that an underlying theodical concern is involved here. Again, this seems to be a common thread in Ṭabarī's Ibn 'Abbās traditions *that distinguishes them from the Suddī tradition*.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, here the obvious analogy is with Muqātil's version of the narrative based on Sūra 20, where Sāmīrī now comes into the spotlight as the main driving force behind the episode, corresponding with his obvious prominence in the version of the episode in Sūra 20. It is here (and in Muqātil's comments on Sūra 7 as well) that the Calf is said to have been lifeless,

---

<sup>84</sup> One might object that a particular interest in Sāmīrī's background need not mean that God is really thought to be less involved in the episode. After all, the story of Sāmīrī's rescue by Gabriel could be taken as a specific attempt to bolster the idea that the entire episode was providentially determined—that is, Sāmīrī was divinely decreed to play the role God wished him to play (this is in fact a common theme in later medieval commentary on the episode). But I would argue that even when this is the case, emphasizing Sāmīrī's role as divine agent still has the overarching narrative effect of distancing God from the proceedings, in shifting more attention to the agent and away from God Himself, as opposed to traditions that posit that He intervened directly, inspired the Calf with its *rūh*, and so forth. After all, no exegete would ever claim that the episode could have occurred without *any* involvement from God at all. Ultimately, the main issue here is not theological, but rather narratological.

without *rūh*, analogous to the Calf's description as a mere mechanical construct in the 'Ikrima—Ibn 'Abbās tradition we have just examined.

Thus, it seems quite significant that, in addition to the various details about Sāmīrī with which it begins (he was a man from the people of Bājarmā who worshipped cows, etc.), the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās account proceeds to adduce even *more* details about Sāmīrī's background after narrating how the Calf was made. After remarking that the Israelites were more devoted to the Calf than they ever had been to anything else, it continues with a novel interpretation of *fa-nasiya* from Q.20:88 (he forgot, he neglected), typically understood to refer to the words Sāmīrī and the idolaters spoke about Moses (i.e., *This is your god and the god of Moses whom he has neglected...*):

God's words: *Then he forgot* (Q.20:88)—that is, he forgot his *islām*, referring to Sāmīrī.<sup>85</sup> *Did they not see that it did not give them any answer, nor had it power to do them harm or bring them gain?* (Q.20:89) Sāmīrī's given name was Mūsā b. Zafar; he had been residing in Egypt and became associated with the Israelites at that time.

When Aaron saw what they were doing with it [the Calf] he said: O my people, you are only being tried with this. Surely your Lord is al-Raḥmān. So follow me and obey my command. They said, So long as Moses does not come back we are not going to give it up, and we will remain devoted to it (Q.20:90-91).

Then Aaron roused those who were with him, Muslims who had not succumbed to temptation, and he began to part ways with those who were worshipping the Calf in the manner of calf worshippers; but then Aaron feared that, should he depart with those Muslims who were with him, Moses would say:

---

<sup>85</sup> Or rather, he forgot to maintain his *appearance* of Islam. But the reference is not to his *izhār* or (false) appearance of Islam, but rather the actual duties of Islam incumbent upon him.



*you have created a rift among the Children of Israel, and did not pay heed to my command (Q.20:94). And he was greatly afraid of that.*<sup>86</sup>

The tradition ends abruptly here. As we saw previously, the 'Ikrima—Ibn 'Abbās tradition portrays Sāmīrī as an Israelite, and specifically focuses on his rescue and nurturing by the angel Gabriel. Here, on the other hand, in this account transmitted from Ibn 'Abbās through Ibn Jubayr, it is first asserted that Sāmīrī was *not* an Israelite, but rather hailed from the people of “Bājarmā,” in particular “from a community (*umma*) that worshipped cows.” But subsequently, his presence among the Israelites is explained essentially by characterizing him as a *gēr*, a non-Israelite who became attached to the Israelite community during their sojourn in Egypt; this is strongly reminiscent of various midrashic traditions that blame the making of the Golden Calf on the “mixed multitude” or the Egyptian sorcerers, parties who participated in the Exodus but were not really Israelites. The combination of elements here seems to reflect some reliance on previous elaborations on the episode; in particular, both the name Mūsā b. Zafar and the reference to the people of “Bājarmā” are attested in the brief report on the story of Moses given in Ibn Qutayba’s *Kitāb al-Ma’ārif*.

We have already briefly mentioned the attribution of the name Mūsā b. Zafar to Sāmīrī in Ibn Qutayba’s account, in particular noting that this name seems to signal an underlying association between Sāmīrī and the biblical Micah, inasmuch as it may be an echo of the name of

---

<sup>86</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.66-67, no.921: Ibn ‘Abbās—Sa’īd b. Jubayr—Ḥakīm b. Jubayr—Muḥammad b. Ishāq—Salama [b. Faḍl]—Ibn Ḥumayd. Ibn Jubayr was one of the most accomplished pupils of Ibn ‘Abbās among the Successors; see Motzki, *ET*, s.v. “Sa’īd b. Ḍjubayr b. Hishām.” Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Rāzī (d. 248/862) was one of Ṭabarī’s most important teachers, particularly because he had received the *ijāza* to teach the works of Ibn Ishāq from the latter’s pupil Salama b. Faḍl al-Azraq (d. 190/805-6) (Rosenthal, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume I*, 17-9). Moreover, the *isnād* running from Ibn Jubayr to Ibn Ḥumayd is one of the most critical chains in the *Jāmi’ al-bayān* for Ṭabarī’s reception of Ibn ‘Abbās traditions; see Horst, “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarī,” 303.

Note the emphasis on Aaron’s fear of causing a rift (*firāq*) here; there is no corresponding emphasis on any claim on Moses’ part that Aaron should have done so, *pace* Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās. In the Suddī tradition that Ṭabarī cites previous to this one, it specifies that Aaron and those who remained loyal to him did not fight the idolaters, but the significance of this is not made explicit.

Jonathan b. Gershom b. Moses, the Levite established as the priest of Micah's shrine in Judges 17-18.<sup>87</sup> The way Ibn Qutayba presents this datum, however, is as follows: "*al-sāmirī*: he is Mūsā b. Zafar; and it is said that he was from the people (*ahl*) of Bājarmā, or that he was an Israelite, from the family of his uncle, Moses b. Amram."<sup>88</sup> Thus, the connection between Sāmirī and Jonathan seems to rest on the conflation of Micah, the maker of the idol, and Jonathan, whose patronymic appears to be the source of both the name and supposed lineage of "Mūsā b. Zafar."

However, in the two Ibn 'Abbās traditions under consideration here, while Sāmirī is directly asserted to have been an Israelite in the narrative transmitted from 'Ikrima, in the narrative from Ibn Jubayr, on the other hand, he is *not* an Israelite, but rather from the *Ahl Bājarmā*. Each of these separate Ibn 'Abbās traditions thus incorporates or represents one or another of the options presented in Ibn Qutayba's statement, but *not* both. But what is particularly curious here is the fact that the name Mūsā b. Zafar has now been *disconnected* from Sāmirī's status as an Israelite; while one would assume he was called "Moses" in Ibn Qutayba's tradition in the context of his possible descent from the family of the prophet Moses, in the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition, he is from Bājarmā, a non-Israelite, and yet still bears this name (though it is perhaps to be understood that he assumed the name Mūsā b. Zafar in the context of his

---

<sup>87</sup> Again, some scholars have used the appearance of this name to prove the derivation of the Quranic *al-sāmirī* from biblical and midrashic tradition; it is also a crucial element in Halperin's argument that Micah/Sāmirī is supposed to be a doppelganger for Moses himself. Cf. also the reading in the printed edition of Tha'labī, *Mūsā Zāfir*, which Brinner reads as "Moses Triumphant." This, along with the detail that Sāmirī was putatively a kinsman of Moses himself, points to an odd literary symmetry that is built up between the two Mūsās in some later sources; occasionally one comes across strange accounts that claim that Moses taught magic, alchemy, and other esoteric arts to both Sāmirī and Korah.

<sup>88</sup> *Al-Ma'ārif*, 44. The report on Moses is prefaced by the statement *qāla Wahb b. Munabbih*, and it is unclear if this means the first section of the report or the whole thing. In Ibn Qutayba's work, Wahb is commonly presented as a source for apocrypha, which might explain the "Mūsā b. Zafar" element, which seems like a secondary development from the original biblical passage in Judges. I understand the phrasing here (*wa-kāna min banī isrā'īl*) as signifying a contrast with what came before—he was of Bājarmā, *or* he was an Israelite.

association with the Israelites in Egypt).<sup>89</sup> In short, the name no longer reflects Sāmīrī's unequivocal identity as an Israelite per se, let alone blood relation to Moses; the critical link that might allow us to trace the underlying logic of the name, his status as an Israelite and his kinship with Moses, has been severed here in the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition.<sup>90</sup>

The connection with “Bājarmā,” which likewise goes back to Ibn Qutayba, is a tantalizing one, though admittedly, this datum is as difficult to decipher as “Mūsā b. Zafar,” perhaps even more so. Consulting the work of Shihāb al-Dīn Abī 'Abd Allāh Yāqūt (d. 626/1229), the greatest of the classical Arab geographers, we discover that “Bājarmā is a village among the districts of the Balīkh river, near Raqqa, in the Jazīra.”<sup>91</sup> Raqqa, well known as a major urban center beginning in early Abbasid times, is the largest city of the western Jazīra, the sprawling plain that constitutes the northeastern part of modern Syria, the northern and northwestern part of modern Iraq, and the southeastern part of modern Turkey. *Pace* Yāqūt, however, according to Streck, Bājarmā actually seems to be rather further east; he notes that it is a district centered on Kirkūk

---

<sup>89</sup> The text says simply that *dakhala fī banī isrā'īl*, but one wonders if Sāmīrī is imagined as a *mawlā* of the Israelites here, thus perhaps explaining his assumption of an Israelite name.

<sup>90</sup> This tradition undergoes further permutations in the later commentary tradition. In his *tafsīr*, Tha'labī identifies Sāmīrī as coming a people called *Bājraw*, and that his name was *Micah*; it is also reported that Ibn 'Abbās said his name was Mūsā b. Zafar, and that he was a hypocrite who made an outward show of Islam, though he was from a people who worshipped cows, and remained secretly devoted to cows. In his *qiṣaṣ* work, Tha'labī gives much the same data, but “Micah,” *مِخَا*, appears as *مِنَا*. Similar errors recur in later works; for example, the name occurs as *مِنَا* in the abovementioned work by al-Qarāfī (see n.164 in Chapter 2 above); further, as already noted, the edition of Tha'labī's *qiṣaṣ* Brinner used for his translation seems to have the name as *Mūsā Zāfir*, “Moses Triumphant” (*'Arā'is al-majālis*, 345; my edition has *Mūsā Zafar*). Zamakhsharī and Ṭabarsī have similar data to Tha'labī's. To my knowledge, the only commentator who testifies that Sāmīrī was Moses' kinsman is Ibn Qutayba; the familial connection that allows us to deduce the biblical basis for this tradition seems to have been severed after him.

<sup>91</sup> Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, 1.313.

that is actually part of the administrative district attached to Mosul.<sup>92</sup> Streck's identification actually makes more sense in light of Bājarmā's significance for Syrian Christians, inasmuch as Syriac sources demonstrate that "Bājarmā" was in fact not a single town or village as Yāqūt has it, but rather a group of settlements incorporated into a single diocese, "Bēth-Garmē," which was supposedly very close to Nisibis, a major center of Nestorian learning in Late Antiquity (which is actually on the Turkish side of the Syrian border today).<sup>93</sup> Further, Bājarmā's geographical and cultural proximity to Nisibis brings other associations with it, for example with Edessa, the major center of the Syrian Monophysite church, barely 40 km from Nestorian Nisibis, as well as with another city often connected with these two Christian centers, Ḥarrān, likewise about 40 km from Nisibis, and once one of the dominant cities of the Balīkh valley.

We do not intend to suggest an actual historical basis for the claim that Sāmīrī was descended from the cow-worshipping people of Bājarmā, of course. Rather, it is likely that this identification had certain conspicuous associations for the audience of the commentator who generated it, sometime in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, or perhaps somewhat earlier. These associations may or may not have been sustained over time as the datum about Sāmīrī's descent from the people of Bājarmā was transmitted within the *tafsīr* tradition; but it must have meant *something* at the time the identification emerged. Various sources testify to Bājarmā being the home of certain ancient tribal groups; both Streck and Morony emphasize that Greek, Syriac, and Persian sources testify

---

<sup>92</sup> See Streck, *El*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Bādjarmā, or Bādjarmak" (the latter is apparently the old Persian name for the district). Kirkūk is in fact a considerable distance from Raqqa. Cf. also Morony, *Elr*, s.v. "Bēt Garmē," and *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, *passim*.

<sup>93</sup> On the School of Nisibis, see now Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*. In trying to reconcile the somewhat different geographical data our various sources seem to provide, we would perhaps be safe in speaking of the diocese of Bēth Garmē as being distributed through the triangular zone between Raqqa in the west, Nisibis in the northeast, and Kirkūk in the southeast. Yāqūt's identification of the location of the *district* of Bājarmā might reflect some conflation of it with an actual *town* called Bājarwān, also in the Jazīra, near Raqqa; cf. Dunlop, *El*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Bādjarwān." On the entry on this latter town in Yāqūt's work, see below.

to the *Garamikān* or *Garamaioi* as an Iranian nomadic people who occupied the area and gave the territory its name; cuneiform inscriptions from the area call these people the *Gurumu*.

Rather than privilege this connection, however, we would prefer to think of the association of Sāmīrī with Bājarmā as a possible reflex of the connotations that Ḥarrān and other ancient centers in the area might have had for early Muslims, especially given this particular city's strong connection to paganism, idolatry, and magic in the Arab Muslim literary (and presumably popular) tradition. Ḥarrān, the legendary home of the Quranic Sabians, features quite prominently as a symbol for arcane learning in the early Islamic esoteric tradition, especially astral magic and astrology, and in literary representations as a mysterious and exotic home of occult knowledge. Particularly prominent in the lore associated with Ḥarran is the theme of animate idols; the city walls were supposedly encrusted not only with apotropaic talismans but also all kinds of statuary that would come to life to defend the city if it ever came under attack.<sup>94</sup>

The most obvious explanation for the connection between Sāmīrī and Bājarmā is thus that in some way the latter term signals a connection to a legendary tradition surrounding the creation of animate statues. One might very well object, of course, that if this were really the basis of the identification, then why do the commentators bother to say "Bājarmā," if what they really mean is that Sāmīrī is a Sabian or Ḥarranian? However, we do not mean to suggest that Bājarmā is a code word for these other, better-known terms, but rather that in some way the name might have had much the same connotation for an early Muslim audience. The other possibility, of course, is that the name Bājarmā was still associated with the original nomadic people who gave their name to the territory, and that these Iranian pastoral tribesmen actually were famous for their bovolatry.

---

<sup>94</sup> On Ḥarrān in Late Antiquity see Segal, *Edessa and Harran*; on the city's representation in the Arabic literary tradition and its associations with idolatry and magic, see Peters, "Hermes and Harran: The Roots of Arabic-Islamic Occultism" and Genequand, "Idolâtrie, Astrolâtrie et Sabéisme" (note, however, that the former treatment inadequately distinguishes between literary portrayal and historical fact). On the Quranic Sabians, see McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Šābi'ūn." On the tradition of animate statues used as *apotropeia* in Late Antiquity, see Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual*, though his emphasis is largely on phenomena predating the Hellenistic period.

Admittedly, the reference in Ibn Qutayba and the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās tradition to “the *umma* of Bājarmā who worship cows” does have the feel of a trope, and is in some ways reminiscent of the tradition from the *Kitāb bad’ al-khalq* of ‘Umāra b. Wathīma about the sectarian Zoroastrian community who become the cow-worshipping people of Sāmīrī.<sup>95</sup> It is worth mentioning that certain other commentators (Ibn Abī Ḥatim and Tha‘labī in particular) identify Sāmīrī as a man of *Kirmān*, in central Iran. This gloss has no obvious connotation at all, aside from providing a distant corroboration of the imagined Persian and Zoroastrian background that in some way informs ‘Umāra’s (admittedly largely incomprehensible) Sāmīrī tradition. In the end, these various allusions could reflect actual ethnographic data, either of pre-Islamic religion or of some pagan survival in early Islamic times; alternatively, they could simply rely upon and exploit legendary associations that are now almost totally obscure to us, having left only the most oblique traces in the sources that are available to us. Unfortunately, in the end, we have very little secure knowledge that would allow us to decipher Sāmīrī’s putative origins among the people of Bājarmā, or Bēth Garmē, or the *Gurumu*, with any degree of confidence.<sup>96</sup>

D. Ibn Zayd; Mujāhid; Qatāda; ‘Aṭīyya

The fourth long version of the narrative cited by Ṭabarī is a tradition transmitted from Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam (d. 182/798), an important early authority to whom a *tafsīr*, now lost, is commonly attributed.<sup>97</sup> The tradition is transmitted from Ibn Zayd by the noted Egyptian

---

<sup>95</sup> Khoury, ed., *Les Légendes Prophétiques dans l’Islam*, 139-41.

<sup>96</sup> Further complicating and enriching the web of associations that might be mentioned here is Yāqūt’s identification of Bājarwān (*not* Bājarmā) as the place where the immortal prophet Khidr discovered the wellspring of the water of life, which is intriguing given the later connection some exegetes made between the *rasūl* of Q.20:96 and Khidr instead of Gabriel; cf. *Mu’jam al-buldān*, 1.313.

traditionist Ibn Wahb (d. 197/812); in Ṭabarī's day, Ibn Wahb's legacy had been carried on by his noted pupil Yūnus (d. 264/877), with whom Ṭabarī studied during his sojourn in Egypt sometime in the 250s/860s.<sup>98</sup> It is to a large extent simply a variation on the two Ibn 'Abbās versions of the narrative previously supplied by Ṭabarī, and since much in this tradition is familiar from these versions, we will not quote it at length here. It begins by referring to Moses' departure for the meeting with God on the mount after the drowning of Pharaoh and his people in the sea, and, like the 'Ikrima-Ibn 'Abbās tradition, it explicitly cites Q.7:142, *Deputise for me among my people. Dispose rightly, and do not follow the way of the authors of evil (akhlufnī fī qawmī wa-aṣliḥ wa-la tattabi' sabīl al-mufsadīna)*, in connection with Moses' appointment of Aaron as his surrogate. As in the Suddī tradition and the Ibn Ishāq—Ibn Jubayr version of the Ibn 'Abbās tradition, Aaron declares the ornaments and other goods spoliated from the Egyptians unlawful (because they were taken on loan, and thus do not really qualify as spoils at all), and commands the people to make a fire and throw these things in so that they may be burned.<sup>99</sup> The tradition then continues with a terse description of Sāmīrī's deeds that features several elements that are distinctive to this version, at least among those found in Ṭabarī:

And then Sāmīrī looked at the track of Gabriel's horse (*dābbat jibrīl*)—for he had appeared astride a mare (*faras unthā*)—and Sāmīrī was one of Moses' people. Then he looked at its track, and took a handful from it and clutched it

---

<sup>97</sup> Note that Ibn Zayd's father, Zayd b. Aslam (d. 130/747), was a noted transmitter among the Successors in his own right. Given the date of his death, it is very unlikely that this is the same Zayd b. Aslam who was *kātib* to the notorious Umayyad governor al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume I*, 27-8 on Ṭabarī's journey to Egypt. The *tafsīr* of Ibn Wahb, the *Jāmi'*, is still extant and has been published by Muranyi; unfortunately, this tradition is not represented there and so neither the text nor the *isnād* can be corroborated. (This work is not to be confused with the *tafsīr* of al-Dīnāwārī discussed in the last chapter as one of the witnesses to the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*, which is often called *Tafsīr Ibn Wahb*.)

<sup>99</sup> Note that in three of Ṭabarī's traditions on the Calf, it is Aaron who brings up the issue of the legality of the gold, while it remains ambiguous in another; this is in sharp contrast to Muqātil's *tafsīr*, in which Sāmīrī is held responsible for bringing the "halakhic" issue up, and explicitly does so in order to mislead the Israelites.

tight.<sup>100</sup> And when the people of Moses were throwing the ornaments into the fire, and Sāmirī threw in the handful with them, God fashioned (*ṣawwara*) it into a calf of gold for them. Then wind entered it, and that was its lowing.<sup>101</sup>

First of all, as in the previous three versions of the narrative in Ṭabarī's commentary to Q.2:51, the "handful from the track of the messenger" seems to magically produce the Calf when Sāmirī throws it into the fire along with the golden jewelry cast off by the people. But admittedly, to say that the dirt "magically produces" the Calf here is misleading, for what the tradition actually says is that God Himself literally *fashioned* (*ṣawwara*) the ornaments into a calf of gold. As in the version of the narrative related from Suddī, the making of the Calf is unambiguously attributed to God Himself, although this is certainly implicit in all of the traditions here, inasmuch as the gold is transformed into the Calf through the agency of the dirt, which ultimately implies divine fiat in the working of a miracle (or at the very least, divine assent in its magical operation). However, not only is this tradition unique in referring to a literal calf of *gold* (*'ijl dhahab*), but God's action in making the Calf is described by the verb *ṣawwara*, "to fashion"; this is not used of God's creative activity vis-à-vis the Calf in any of the other traditions in Ṭabarī we have seen.<sup>102</sup> As in the Suddī tradition, then, the Ibn Zayd tradition seems to be deliberately asserting God's direct and unambiguous connection to these events. On the other hand, regarding the specific nature of the Calf, it is noteworthy that this tradition is more analogous to the two

---

<sup>100</sup> *yabisat 'alayhā yadahu*, lit., "his hand hardened around it."

<sup>101</sup> The tradition continues briefly after this point, mostly with an extensive citation of Quranic verses from the Sūra 20 version of the episode. *Jāmi' al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.67-8, no.922: Ibn Zayd—Ibn Wahb—Yūnus b. 'Abd al-A'lā. Note that Ibn Zayd, like Suddī, was a *tābi' tābi'*, possessing conspicuously less prestige than many of the other authorities cited in connection with these traditions like Ibn Jubayr and 'Ikrima (let alone Ibn 'Abbās). Cf. Horst, "Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarīs," 305.

<sup>102</sup> It does not seem to be used in reference to God's making of the Calf in any other source with which I am familiar either. However, while Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās tend to use the verbs *ṣana'a* or *ṣāgha* in reference to Sāmirī's making of the Calf, *ṣawwara* is used in one of the two hadith Ṭabarī cites in his commentary on the Sūra 20 version of the episode attributed to Qatāda to refer to Sāmirī; the other uses *ṣāgha*. See below.



versions of the Ibn 'Abbās tradition than it is to the Suddī tradition, in that here we do not see a fully animate Calf, but rather only a physical form that emitted a lowing sound with the passage of the wind through its body.<sup>103</sup>

\*\*\*

Overall, Ṭabarī's four long traditions on this episode seem to represent many (though by no means all) of the possible interpretations of the Calf episode in circulation in his time. One assumes that he felt compelled to cite each of these traditions at length in order to acknowledge their differences, as well as to underscore what they all have in common. Every one of them posits that the dirt taken from the track of Gabriel's steed created the Calf out of the golden ornaments discarded by the people; similarly, each of them seems to presuppose that Sāmirī took advantage of the situation to deliberately lead the Israelites astray. On the other hand, these traditions all seem to differ to a greater or lesser degree about the specific circumstances that led up to the Calf's creation, the particular nature of the Calf that emerged, and the various details of Sāmirī's background and motivations. In particular, regarding the nature of the Calf's animation, the first tradition attributed to Ibn 'Abbās (that of 'Ikrima) as well as that of Ibn Zayd specifically state that the Calf's lowing (*khurwār*) was caused by the passage of wind through the body of the Calf; this may be implied by the second as well; but the tradition attributed to Suddī, in contrast, seems to portray the Calf as an animate statue, endowed by God with a genuine *rūḥ* and entrancing the Israelites with its continual lowing and movement ("they devoted themselves to the Calf, worshipping it while it was lowing and walking about," *'akafū 'alayhi ya'badūnahu wa-kāna yakhūru wa-yamshī*).

---

<sup>103</sup> Note also the conspicuous use of the terms *dābba* and *faras unthā*, reminiscent of the parallel usages in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās; for further discussion of this terminology and its significance, see Chapter 6 below.

It is worth noting again that these traditions all seem to reflect the *opposite* view of that we found in the major pre-classical exegetical sources we examined previously. In Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, rather than transforming the golden ornaments directly into the Calf, the handful of dirt usually causes the lowing sound to emanate from its body, which was fashioned by hand by Sāmīrī; in these sources, the idea that the Calf was actually magically generated is at best only implicit, as may be suggested by Muqātil’s comments on Q.20:96. As we have already observed, it may well be the case that the Suddī version, in which the handful of dirt transformed the discarded jewelry into a fully animate, lowing and walking Golden Calf, represents the oldest version of the narrative, with the other exegeses we have seen—that which states that Sāmīrī made the Calf but the dirt made it low on the one hand and that which states that the dirt created the Calf from the gold but that its lowing was simply caused by the wind on the other—reflect counter-interpretations, deliberate attempts to recast the Suddī version and partially or totally suppress its full-fledged supernaturalism.

Even more complexity emerges when we take into consideration a number of shorter traditions that Ṭabarī presents dealing with the creation of the Calf; they appear here in his commentary on Q.2:51 as supplements to his longer traditions on the Calf, as well as in his exegesis of the other Quranic passages on the Calf in Sūra 7 and 20. First of all, after citing the tradition attributed to Ibn Zayd, Ṭabarī quotes a very short tradition that supplies a kind of terse recap of the whole episode that nevertheless departs subtly from the exegetical alternatives he has already explored. Keeping in mind that three of Ṭabarī’s traditions (two from Ibn ‘Abbās, one from Ibn Zayd) either imply or state directly that God created the body of the Calf (through the agency of the magical dirt) while the wind made it low, while another (that from Suddī) attributes *both* the formation of the Calf’s body *and* its lowing (not to mention its walking around) to God (again through the agency of the dirt), the interpretation implied here in the “recap,” attributed to the Successor Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. c. 100/718), another famous exegete and disciple of Ibn ‘Abbās, is somewhat surprising:

... you took the Calf in his absence (and worshipped it)... (Q.2:51) “Calf”: i.e., the offspring of a cow. The jewelry was that which they had borrowed from the people of Pharaoh. Aaron told them: Bring them out so as to purify yourselves of them; set fire to them. Sāmīrī took the handful from the track of Gabriel’s horse and then tossed it among it [i.e. the gold], and it was cast (*insabaka*) [i.e., into the form of the Calf], and it had something like a *jawf* through which the wind moved.<sup>104</sup>

The term *jawf* means an empty space within a physical body of some sort, such as the hollow of a tree or the belly of a man or an animal; *fī jawfi* simply means “within, inside,” and indeed, in some of the other interpretations of the making of the Calf, Sāmīrī is said to have thrown the dirt *fī jawfi* the form of the Calf he had fashioned.<sup>105</sup> What seems to be intended here is that the Calf was formed with some kind of inner space or chamber or even organ—a ‘gullet’ or ‘diaphragm’ perhaps?—that channeled wind through its body, presumably to create the lowing sound that it was heard to emit. It is puzzling, though, that there is no explicit reference here to the function that the passage of the wind through the *jawf* of this Calf was supposed to have, namely generating the *khuwār* sound. One assumes the *jawf* was formed within it to cause it to low; why else would it be mentioned here?

Assuming that this is indeed the intended function of the *jawf* within the body of the Golden Calf, then the Mujāhid tradition appears to be clearly aligned with the interpretations of

<sup>104</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.68, no.923: Mujāhid—Ibn Jurayj—Ḥajjāj—al-Ḥusayn—al-Qāsim b. al-Ḥusayn. On Mujāhid, see Rippin, *EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Muḏjāhid b. Ḍjabr al-Makkī,” who notes a particular tendency of Mujāhid to be associated with rationalism in exegesis, citing the earlier treatment of Goldziher in *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*. (See also our comments on the extant *Tafsīr Mujāhid* in Chapter 6 below.) Note also that nos.925 and 926 are alternate *isnāds* for 923 given without the *matn*: Mujāhid—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—‘Isā—Abū ‘Āṣim—Muḥammad b. ‘Amr al-Bāhilī (925); Mujāhid—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—Shibl—Abū Ḥudhayfa—al-Muthannā b. Ibrāhīm (926). The paths of transmission of Mujāhid’s traditions to Ṭabarī are extremely complex; see Horst, “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarī,” 294-8.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. the second tradition related from Qatāda b. Di’āma (through Ma’mar b. Rashīd) *ad loc.* Q.20:88 (*Jāmi’ al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.200), discussed below.

Ibn ‘Abbās and Ibn Zayd, with Suddī remaining the odd man out on the matter of the origin of the Calf’s lowing.<sup>106</sup> Our perception of a basic dichotomy between these interpretations would seem to be validated by Ṭabarī’s own comments later on in his *tafsīr*. In his commentary on the version of the Calf narrative in Q.20:83-97, he states that there is some debate over the means by which Sāmīrī brought forth the Calf (*ikhtalafa ahl al-‘ilm fī kayfiyat ikhrāj al-sāmīrī al-‘ijl*); he then proceeds to elaborate upon two opposing viewpoints found among the exegetes.<sup>107</sup> However, what is *exceedingly* curious here is that, when we compare the traditions he adduces here in illustrating these opposing viewpoints with the five traditions he cites in his comments on Sūra 2, the opposing viewpoints he gives here *do not correspond to those implicit in the traditions he cited earlier*.

True, one of them *is* the position put forward in the tradition attributed to Suddī—that Sāmīrī was involved to some extent, but that it was primarily God who brought forth the Calf and enabled it to low—but the other is *not* that we would readily associate with Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Zayd, or Mujāhid, namely, that the dirt produced the form of the Calf and the wind its lowing sound. Rather, the opposing position he contrasts with the Suddī tradition is the very same interpretation we have seen in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, which is again *nowhere* to be found in his

---

<sup>106</sup> Note also the extremely laconic and passive reference to the actual physical production of the Calf, “Sāmīrī took the handful... *and then tossed it among it* [i.e., the ornaments], and then it was cast” (*fa-taraḥahu fī-hi fa-insabaka*). While this essentially agrees with the interpretations advanced in the traditions cited from Ibn ‘Abbās and Ibn Zayd, even though the transformation of the gold into the Calf is essentially attributed to divine fiat through the agency of the handful of dirt, it is striking that Mujāhid’s exegesis seems to distance God as much as possible from the creation of the Calf—rather than claiming that God fashions (*sawwara*) the Calf, here the Calf is merely formed (*insabaka*). The role played by divine fiat seems to be assumed, since the handful of dirt must act as a catalyst for the exercise of divine power, but this is at most only implied here. In direct contrast to the Suddī tradition, we might be justified in terming this a “minimalist” interpretation of the episode: the creation of the Calf through magic—and ultimately through divine fiat—is only begrudgingly acknowledged.

<sup>107</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.200, top. For the most part, Ṭabarī’s comments on the Sūra 7 version of the episode are brief and perfunctory, but note my remarks below on the importance of his summary comments in this passage.

commentary on the Sūra 2 version. Even more strangely, here there is no mention of the interpretation one would associate with Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Zayd, and Mujāhid at all!

Thus, after acknowledging the general *ikhtilāf* on the nature of the Calf, Ṭabarī cites various traditions in support of the two positions he wishes to examine. The first position he gives is that which has so far been entirely absent in his commentary, which he describes as follows: “Some say he [i.e. Sāmīrī] fashioned it by working the metal himself,<sup>108</sup> then threw some of the dirt from the hoof of Gabriel’s horse in its mouth, and it lowed.” He then gives two versions of a tradition from the Successor Qatāda b. Di‘āma (d. 117/735), yet another well-known student of Ibn ‘Abbās.<sup>109</sup> The first is transmitted through Sa‘īd b. Abī ‘Arūba, the second from Ma‘mar b. Rashīd; both were important early authorities on *tafsīr* who died around 150/767. Even in the case of these two short versions here, we find certain crucial differences in each, and notably, *only one of them really fits Ṭabarī’s explicit representation of their meaning*. The version transmitted through Ibn Abī ‘Arūba describes how Sāmīrī convinced the Israelites to give up their jewelry and created an image of a cow from some of it (*fa-ṣawwarahā ṣūrat baqara*); he threw the dirt, the image, and the gold together in a pile (a fire is never mentioned here), and a calf then emerged: “*Then he produced a calf, a body that lows (Q.20:88), and then it began to make the lowing sound that cows make (fa-ja‘ala yakhūru khuwār al-baqar).*”<sup>110</sup>

Notably, this is not quite what Ṭabarī has already described in his synopsis just previous: here, Sāmīrī does *not* throw the dirt into the mouth of the previously formed Calf in order to make

---

<sup>108</sup> *ṣāgha ṣiyāgha*. It is impossible to convey the elegance of the Arabic phrase in English. Note again that the verb *ṣāgha* means “to craft, fashion,” but can specifically connote metalworking, and more specifically goldsmithing, as in Muqātil’s comment *ad loc.* the Sūra 7 account that Sāmīrī was a *ṣā’igh*.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. *EP*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Qatāda b. Di‘āma” (Pellat). Note also the *Kitāb al-nāsikh wa’l-mansūkh* attributed to him, ostensibly the first work ever in this important genre.

<sup>110</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.200: Qatāda—Sa‘īd [b. Abī ‘Arūba]—Yazīd [b. Zuray’, Abū Mu‘āwiya]—Bishr [b. Mu‘ādh]. This is one of Ṭabarī’s most important *isnāds* for Baṣran traditions; see Horst, “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarīs,” 301-2. Note the implicit parallel to Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās: Sāmīrī creates a *ṣūra* of a Calf according to the former, a *mujassad ṣaghīr* according to the latter.

it low, but rather fashions some of the gold into a figure of a calf which is then combined with the rest of the gold and the handful of dirt, and this act then causes the emergence of a fully formed Calf, which then “began to make the lowing sound that cows make.” The addition of the dirt to the sculptured form of the Calf appears to be the catalyst for some process of transformation, and does not simply function to elicit the lowing sound. Also, the specific phrase *fa-ja’ala yakhūru khuwār al-baqar* may be taken to imply *continual* lowing, and not just a single *khuwār* generated by the insertion of the dirt.

Therefore, despite what Ṭabarī’s explicit remarks at the beginning of this passage appear to establish as the position described by the Qatāda tradition, at least in this version, it actually resembles *both* the Ibn ‘Abbās-Ibn Zayd-Mujāhid tradition and the Suddī tradition, overlapping with each in significant ways. We may possibly be justified in interpreting it as a kind of intermediate position between them, in that Sāmīrī plays a more active role (in that he actually fabricates a calf figure, though not the actual form that emerged from the pile of gold), the magic dirt acts as a catalyst for the actual transformation of the gold (as in the Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Zayd, and Mujāhid traditions), and the Calf continually lows when it emerges (as in Suddī, and not only once as in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās). As yet another variation on the scene, one that both differs from and resembles the others in various subtle ways, this first Qatāda tradition would seem to corroborate our contention that this *ikhtilāf* was produced by deliberate alteration of an original Calf narrative, one that probably most closely resembled the Suddī tradition.

That said, a second, slightly shorter version of the Qatāda narrative follows immediately after the first, and this one, transmitted through the noted authorities Ma’mar b. Rashīd and ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *does* fit Ṭabarī’s synopsis quite closely. It is basically similar to the first, except for some crucial differences in emphasis which streamline and simplify the narrative: Sāmīrī took the jewelry and “then made a calf from it” (*fa-ṣāgha min-hu ‘ijl<sup>an</sup>*); then he took the dirt and threw it

into it (*fī jawfihi*), “and behold, it became a calf, a body that lows...”<sup>111</sup> There are no specific comments here that allow us to infer what the nature of the Calf was, whether it lowed only once or continually, was animate or rather remained an immobile statue, but, unlike the previous version attributed to Qatāda, the process of the Calf’s creation is totally unambiguous: Sāmīrī fabricated a calf of gold and then inserted the dirt, which elicited the *khuwār* (or perhaps actually animated the Calf—we simply have no way to tell).

We should emphasize here that the portrayal of the making of the Calf in this second Qatāda tradition is basically compatible not only with Ṭabarī’s explicit remarks about the episode at the beginning of the passage but also with the depiction of the scene in Muqātil’s comments on Sūras 7 and 20 (in which “the dirt made it low but once”), as well as with the exegesis in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās*, which focuses on the *mujassad ṣaghīr* or “little cast figure” crafted by Sāmīrī, into the mouth and posterior of which he threw the dirt, producing the Calf’s lowing sound (likewise stated to have happened but once).

Ṭabarī then introduces the second of the two positions he wishes to acknowledge here by simply stating, “Others say regarding this...”; he never explicitly describes this view, which is clearly that of Suddī. The exact same tradition from Suddī that he cited in his comments on Q.2:51 follows here, demonstrating that the alternative to the Qatāda position he has in mind here is that the handful of dirt not only caused the Calf’s lowing, but directly generated the Calf from the people’s golden ornaments, though this magical or miraculous event is ultimately attributed to divine fiat. (As we have just seen, this actually seems to be implied in the first version of the *Qatāda* tradition he provides as well!) Though the version of the Suddī tradition he cites here in

---

<sup>111</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.200: Qatāda—Ma’mar [b. Rashīd]—‘Abd al-Razzāq [b. Hammām al-Ṣan’ānī]—al-Ḥasan [b. Yaḥyā, Abū’l-Rabī’]. ‘Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827) was an extremely influential scholar of Ṣan’ā’ who was not only played a formative role in establishing hadith scholarship in the Yemen but acted as a crucial bridge between authorities of the generation of the Successors such as Ibn Jurayj and Mālik b. Anas and major figures of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century such as Yaḥyā b. Ma’īn and Ibn Ḥanbal. Motzki has devoted considerable attention to the extant works ascribed to him, including his hadith collection, the *Muṣannaḥ*, though a major study of his *tafsīr* is still a desideratum; see Motzki, *EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Al-Ṣan’ānī, ‘Abd al-Razzāq.”

his comments on Q.20:87-88 is undoubtedly the same one as before, Ṭabarī does omit the initial reference to Gabriel coming to take Moses away for his appointed meeting with God, and likewise the depiction of Sāmīrī's recognition of the angelic steed ("it is the Horse of Life" etc.). Similarly, the dialogue between Moses and God (in which God's direct inspiration of the Calf is acknowledged) is also omitted.<sup>112</sup>

Again, it should be emphasized that the main juxtaposition Ṭabarī is supposed to be establishing here in his comments on the Sūra 20 version of the episode regards the "manner of Sāmīrī's bringing out the Calf" (*kayfiyat ikhrāj al-sāmīrī al-'ijl*). Presumably, the question is whether Sāmīrī manufactured the Calf by hand and then made it low with the handful of dirt (unambiguously described in the second Qatāda tradition) or conjured it fully formed from the amassed golden ornaments through the use of the dirt (as described in the Suddī tradition, but also seemingly implied in the first Qatāda tradition he quotes here as well). However, it might also be observed that the other major difference between the two contrasting positions he juxtaposes here is that the Qatāda traditions are simply not very explicit about the nature of the Calf itself per se, whereas the Suddī tradition unambiguously asserts that it *was* animate ("lowing and walking about"), even though here the specific reference to its *rūh* (in the dialogue between Moses and God) has been omitted.

There is one more place in Ṭabarī's commentary where he gathers material pertinent to this issue, namely, in his comments on Q.20:95-96, the passage which contains Sāmīrī's key statement, *I picked up a handful from the messenger's tracks and threw it in...* For the most part, in this context, Ṭabarī seems most interested in the question of what *baṣūra* (to see, know,

---

<sup>112</sup> However, note that this second quotation of the Suddī tradition *does* include some explanatory glosses at the end that Ṭabarī's citation of it in his comments *ad loc.* Q.2:51, lacks. These glosses are primarily directed towards addressing the question of whether *fa-nasiya* (for he has forgotten) at the end of Q.20:88 refers to Sāmīrī's words about Moses or else to Sāmīrī himself. Ṭabarī goes on to cite various authorities in support of each position, but clearly prefers the former, as do very many other exegetes. *Jāmi' al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.200. The version examined above *ad loc.* Q.2:51 is no.919 of the Shākir ed. of the *Jāmi' al-bayān* (2.64-64) and the *isnād* is the same as well (Suddī—Asbāṭ b. Naṣr—'Amr b. Ḥammād—Mūsa b. Hārūn).



recognize, understand) exactly signifies in verse 95, but he does broach the topic of how Sāmīrī created the Calf again here, and provides a short précis of contrasting traditions. The first version he gives is an abbreviated version of the third tradition cited in his commentary on Sūra 2 (that from Ibn ‘Abbās through Ibn Jubayr), which describes how Sāmīrī threw in the dirt and magically generated the Calf; with his words *kun ‘ij<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*, the Calf “came to be, for trial and *fitna*.”<sup>113</sup> The second version he gives here is a very short tradition also attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, not really represented among his other treatments of the episode; this tradition is transmitted by one of Ṭabarī’s main informants, Muḥammad b. Sa’d (d. 276/889, not to be confused with the more famous author of *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* of the same name, who died in 230/845) on the basis of a family *isnād* traced back to his great-great-grandfather, ‘Aṭīyya b. Sa’d, who heard it from Ibn ‘Abbās. Here, it simply says that Sāmīrī took a handful from the track of Gabriel (*athar jibrā’il*; note the absence of any reference to the horse!) and cast it among the ornaments of the people; then it became *a calf, a body that lows* (*fa-ṣāra ‘ij<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>*).<sup>114</sup>

This is directly followed by a third tradition, yet another version of the Mujāhid tradition previously cited *ad loc.* Q.2:51 as a kind of recap of the episode following Ṭabarī’s four long versions of the narrative there. In the passage on Q.2:51, Ṭabarī first related the Mujāhid tradition with an *isnād* traced back to him through his disciple Ibn Jurayj, and then provided two alternative *isnāds*, both of which were traced back to him through another student, Ibn Abī

<sup>113</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.205 middle. The longer version of this tradition examined above *ad loc.* Q.2:51 is no.921 of the Shākir ed. of the *Jāmi’ al-bayān* (2.66-67). The *isnād* is Ibn ‘Abbās—Sa’īd b. Jubayr—Ḥakīm b. Jubayr—Ibn Ishāq—Salama—Ibn Ḥumayd.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* The *isnād* (going from Ṭabarī’s informant back to Ibn ‘Abbās rather than the other way around): Muḥammad b. Sa’d—his father [Sa’d b. Muḥammad]—his [Sa’d’s] uncle [al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥasan]—his father [al-Ḥasan b. ‘Aṭīyya]—his father [‘Aṭīyya b. Sa’d b. Junāda al-‘Awfī]—Ibn ‘Abbās. Many scholars have drawn attention to this conspicuous family *isnād* in Ṭabarī’s work; see Horst, “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarī,” 293-4; Rosenthal, *History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume I*, 215, n.337; and Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 70-1 and notes thereon. Berg contends that this is the most common *isnād* in the *Jāmi’ al-bayān* as a whole.

Najayḥ.<sup>115</sup> Here, the Mujāhid tradition is related through two *isnāds*, both of which again are traced back through Ibn Abī Najayḥ, and only one of which coincides with one of those previously given.<sup>116</sup> (In other words, between the two passages, we are given four *isnāds* total for the Mujāhid tradition, one of which features Ibn Jurayj and three of which feature Ibn Abī Najayḥ; and one of the latter is related twice, once in each of the pertinent passages in the *tafsīr*.) The version cited here in his comments on Sūra 20 features a particularly interesting variation in phrasing, however. In the Mujāhid tradition cited in Ṭabarī’s comments on Sūra 2, the critical line reads: “Sāmīrī took the handful from the track of Gabriel’s horse and then tossed it among it [i.e. the gold], and it was cast, and it had something like a *jawf* through which the wind moved...” (*kāna la-hu ka’l-jawf tahwā fī-hi al-riyāh*). In contrast, the critical portion of the Mujāhid tradition cited here *ad loc* Q.20:95-96 reads:

...I picked up a handful from the messenger’s tracks and threw it in...

(Q.20:96): [he picked it up from] beneath the hoof of Gabriel’s horse, and Sāmīrī tossed it among the jewelry of the Israelites, and then it was cast (*insabaka*) into a calf, a body that lows, and the sound of the wind within it (*ḥafīf al-rīḥ fī-hi*) was what made its lowing. “Calf”: the offspring of a cow.<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.68, nos.923, 925, and 926. See n.100 above for these *isnāds* in full.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Diagram 1 below.

<sup>117</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.205. Again, the first *isnād* is identical to one of those attached to the parallel from Sūra 2 (no.925 of the Shākir ed.), namely Mujāhid—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—Isā—Abū ‘Āṣim—Muḥammad b. ‘Amr, even though the phrasing here is somewhat different from that of the text relayed there (no.923). The second *isnād*, Mujāhid—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—Warqā’—al-Ḥasan—al-Ḥārith, overlaps with that through which the traditions of the extant *Tafsīr Mujāhid* are relayed.

Regarding *ḥafīf*, this appears to primarily denote a dry, rustling sound such as the wind makes blowing through trees, but apparently a low moaning sound could be meant as well, and this seems more apposite for what is being described here (cf. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. حَفَفَ). The term is used in a parallel citation from the extant *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, and is cited in the commentaries of al-Tha’labī and al-Baghāwī as well; see discussion below in Chapter 6.

This version makes explicit what the other citation only implies, namely that the function of the *jawf*-like thing the Calf is said to possess is to capture wind and channel it through the body of the statue so that it would seem to low like a real calf.

To sum up, then: here in his exegesis of Sūra 20, Ṭabarī gives one tradition from Qatāda that portrays the dirt as magically transmuting the golden ornaments and a figure of a calf made by Sāmirī into a fully-formed, lowing Golden Calf; another from Qatāda that presents Sāmirī constructing the Calf and making it low by throwing the magic dirt into its mouth; another from Suddī that portrays the dirt creating the Calf spontaneously from the golden ornaments, a Golden Calf that continually walked and lowed (and which was genuinely inspired, according to the parallel cited in his comments on Sūra 2); another tradition attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās that shows that the Calf was generated from the gold by magic (and which the parallel confirms was *not* really animate, its lowing caused by the wind); a second from Ibn ‘Abbās that may or may not say the same thing; and another from Mujāhid, bolstered by two *isnāds*, that most definitely says the same thing.

In short, taken together, Ṭabarī’s comments on the Sūra 20 version of the Calf episode (*ad loc.* Q.20:87-88 and 20:95-96) give the fullest range of interpretations to be found anywhere in his Quran commentary. Read alongside his extensive comments on the Sūra 2 version of the episode, we are faced with a dizzying range of possible interpretations of the Calf’s origins and nature. It is difficult to imagine another instance in which such seemingly trivial scriptural cues—*a calf, a body that lows* (Q.7:148/20:88), *I picked up a handful from the messenger’s tracks* (Q.20:96)—could generate such a bewildering array of contradictory speculations. It is not difficult to see why later medieval exegetes became frustrated when dealing with Ṭabarī’s legacy, for this is truly *ikhtilāf* with a vengeance, and it is not at all apparent from Ṭabarī’s explicit remarks what is at stake here, or why earlier commentators expended such energy in trying to elucidate the situation, or why the interpretation of these obscure verses really matters at all.

### 3. The hidden logic of *ikhtilāf*: the exegetical strategies of Ṭabarī's commentary

Along with the fact that the *Jāmi' al-bayān* preserves a vast amount of early exegetical material (or putatively early material) that would otherwise have been lost, Ṭabarī's work is of critical importance because it is one of the first (or first surviving) examples of the *tafsīr* genre in which the author provides substantial commentary and analysis of both the Quran itself and exegetical hadith transmitted from previous generations of interpreters of the sacred text. Thus, one finds key statements dispersed throughout his presentation of exegetical traditions on the Calf episode that seem to at least hint at his own understanding of the narrative. He is by no means completely transparent regarding his motivations or the larger issues at stake here—as we will see, quite the contrary is true—but at the very least, Ṭabarī does occasionally provide us with relatively clear signposts along the way that potentially direct us to the positions that he favors. The problem here, unfortunately, is that even in what seem to be some of Ṭabarī's most straightforward remarks about the Calf, he still seems to present us with contradictory information, and paradoxically seems to favor first one account of its creation transmitted from the early exegetes, then another.

Just after citing the aforementioned Mujāhid tradition (“the sound of the wind within it was what made its lowing,” etc.) in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:96, Ṭabarī observes some disagreement among the Quran reciters regarding the pronunciation of one of the critical verbs that occurs in the verse. Apparently, while some reciters recited the verse as *baṣurtu bi-mā lam yabṣurū bi-hi* (“I saw what they did not see,” the reading in the canonical text of the Quran), others recited it as *baṣurtu bi-mā lam tabṣurū bi-hi* (“I saw what you did not see”), interpreting the verb as specifically reflecting Sāmīrī's direct address to Moses. In the end, however, the distinction is moot:

Regarding this matter, it seems to me that both ways of reciting [i.e. *yabṣurū* and *tabṣurū*] are well attested,<sup>118</sup> and each of them is recited by learned men from among the Quran reciters, with each being correct as regards its meaning. This is because it is possible that Sāmīrī had really seen Gabriel, so that it came to pass that (whether on account of it just occurring to him or for some other reason<sup>119</sup>) the dirt from the hoof of the steed Gabriel was riding was able to do what Sāmīrī said it did when he threw it in the *jawf* of the Calf.

Moses had no knowledge of this, nor did his companions among the Israelites. On account of this, Sāmīrī said to Moses: *I saw what you did not see*, that is, I knew what you did not know. On the other hand, when it is read *I saw what they did not see*, changing the first letter [so it becomes *yabṣurū* and not *tabṣurū*], it makes no difference,<sup>120</sup> for it is simply understood that it refers to the Israelites [collectively] not knowing what that dirt was able to do...<sup>121</sup>

Entirely apart from the issue of the proper pronunciation of the verb in question, what is of obvious interest to us here is the basic description of events embedded within Ṭabarī's comments. According to his remarks here, Sāmīrī took the dirt and, presumably knowing what would happen when he did so, threw it into the *jawf* of the Calf; this presupposes, of course, the existence of the Calf prior to the dirt being thrown, meaning that Sāmīrī must have fashioned it by hand before throwing the magic dirt within. In short, this depiction of the events is given in accordance with

<sup>118</sup> *ma'arūf*, clearly connoting not only wide attestation but the authority that was thus bestowed, according to the general value system of the culture of traditionism.

<sup>119</sup> *bi-an ḥaddathathu nafsuhu bi-dhālik, aw bi-ghayr dhālik min al-asbāb*. The specific choice of phrase here, *ḥaddathathu nafsuhu bi-dhālik* (his soul/self told him, i.e. it occurred to him) seems like a direct allusion to Sāmīrī's statement in Q.20:96, *my soul suggested it to me (sawwalat lī nafsī)*. The issue here is most obviously that of whether a little voice told Sāmīrī what to do or not—i.e., did he really have some inkling of what using the dirt was going to do? Was his creation of the Calf premeditated? The answer would seem to be yes, considering that knowledge is the key element here, being the basis for Sāmīrī's statement about why he did what he did (*I perceived that which they did not perceive etc.*)

<sup>120</sup> Lit., "there is no burden in it," or perhaps better, "it has no weight," *fa-lā mu'na fī-hi*.

<sup>121</sup> *Jāmi' al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.205 bottom-206 top.

the narrative of Qatāda (and specifically in accordance with the second version given by Ṭabarī, that transmitted by Ma'mar and 'Abd al-Razzāq), in which Sāmīrī makes the Calf and throws the dirt in its *jawf*, which makes it into *a calf, a body that lows...*

Ṭabarī's seeming preference for this version here is striking, considering that the Qatāda narrative does not occur in the passage that just precedes this discussion, but rather appears a few pages previous, *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88. On the other hand, here, *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96, as we have just seen, he gives two accounts attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and one attributed to Mujāhid, and *none* of these contains the version of events he describes in evaluating the variant reading *yabṣurū/tabṣurū* in verse 96! That is, in synopsisizing the making of the Calf, his description actually hearkens back to a tradition cited earlier (Sāmīrī made the Calf by hand, the insertion of the dirt caused its apparent animation and/or lowing), and implicitly challenges the interpretation which he has just related (since in all of the traditions related just previous, the dirt transforms the gold into the Calf, and in at least one of them, its lowing is purely illusory and only mechanically generated).

A similar issue regarding variant readings comes up just afterwards, when Ṭabarī discusses an analogous situation regarding the recitation of the second part of Q.20:96, *I picked up a handful from the messenger's tracks....* While most reciters read the line as *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl*, meaning, as Ṭabarī puts it, "I took some dirt from the track of the messenger's steed in my palm," some reciters apparently preferred to read the key phrase as *qabaṣtu qabaṣat<sup>n</sup> min athar al-rasūl*, the difference being in the amount taken—*qabḍa* supposedly meaning a full handful of something and *qabaṣa* just a pinch taken with the tips of one's fingers. In this case as well, whichever option one chooses, the end result is much the same.<sup>122</sup> Right after this, Ṭabarī

---

<sup>122</sup> Note that in both this case and in the previous case of *yabṣurū/tabṣurū*, the fundamental issue in the recitation of the text appears to be the proper vocalization of a *written consonantal text*. That is, presuming an original unvocalized text in which the first two letters lacked diacritical points (i.e. ت and ي both appeared as ب), the deviations to which the *qirā'āt* tradition appears to bear witness are precisely those that might be generated through speculation as to the correct application of vowel points to the consonantal skeleton, and would be rather unlikely to result

again quickly summarizes the whole process of the Calf's creation in glossing another key phrase from the verse:

...for the idea seemed attractive to me... (Q.20:96): that is, just as I threw the handful which I took from the track of the steed upon the ornaments which had been kindled, so that they were cast (*insabaka*), becoming a calf, a body that lows, the idea seemed attractive to me—that is, it occurred to me that this would happen.<sup>123</sup>

Puzzlingly, as Ṭabarī once again represents the events surrounding the making of the Calf in his own words, this time, he does *not* hearken back to the Qatāda version, but rather to one which might be considered more or less its *opposite*, namely the Mujāhid version. As we have seen, various traditions related by Ṭabarī portray the magic dirt as transforming the gold into the form of the Calf, as seems to be the case here; only in the two different versions attributed to Mujāhid does the specific term *insabaka*, “cast,” with its peculiarly passive connotation, appear. Once again, according to the Mujāhid narrative, it was the primary function of the dirt to act as a catalyst for the actual *creation* of the Calf; this is the diametrical opposite of the situation in the Qatāda narrative, according to at least one version of which the dirt was the catalyst for the Calf's apparent *animation*, not its creation per se.

In short, when we examine Ṭabarī's explicit remarks about and representations of the genesis of the Calf external to the hadith on the subject he relates here in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:96, the main result is that yet more *ikhtilāf* emerges. At the very least, the commentator's explicit remarks do nothing to resolve or reconcile the conspicuous contradictions with which the transmitted traditions on the Calf are thoroughly riddled.

---

from corruption of an oral tradition (since *yabṣurū* and *tabṣurū* are readily distinguished by the ear). This seems to be true of a very large proportion of the corpus of canonical variant readings, but this phenomenon has very seldom been discussed in modern scholarship on the Quran.

<sup>123</sup> *Jāmi' al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.205.

How can we make sense of the welter of data and contradictory interpretations Ṭabarī provides on the making of the Calf, or meaningfully evaluate his larger purpose in presenting all this information, or even discern his real understanding of the narrative and its significance? What seems to be a problem intrinsic to the study of compendia in general—namely the opacity of the author-compiler’s real judgments and opinions—is in this case exacerbated by the contradictory nature of the exegete’s own remarks as well. Again, an almost bewilderingly amount of information on the Calf is presented in Ṭabarī’s commentary in the form of received traditions on the relevant passages, and the common threads linking the views of the Companions and Successors he cites are often quite difficult to untangle.

Moreover, though he sometimes duplicates traditions, Ṭabarī often cites them in abbreviated and laconic form, and one must sometimes compare two different citations to capture the meaning of a particular tradition; further, in some cases (as with the version of the Ibn ‘Abbās tradition transmitted through ‘Aṭīyya b. Sa’d), he *only* gives us what seems to be an abbreviated version of the tradition, so that we are left guessing as to what its real meaning is. Moreover, Ṭabarī himself does not represent the interpretive possibilities the same way in his comments on Sūra 2 as in those on Sūra 20; further, his relevant comments on Sūra 20 occur in two different places; still further, sometimes traditions do not say exactly what he says they say (for example, in that only one of the two traditions from Qatāda he quotes *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88 really fits the description he gives of their content). And finally, as we have just seen, even in relating seemingly peripheral matters to the question of the creation of the Calf, Ṭabarī sometimes prefers one authority’s description of that process, and sometimes another’s, apparently arbitrarily.

In some instances, Ṭabarī makes his individual exegetical judgments entirely explicit. These cases are overshadowed, however, by the numerous other instances in which he is ultimately silent about the interpretation he prefers, or only hints at his true opinion. Fortunately, we have several different methods available to us for pursuing a deeper analysis of Ṭabarī’s presentation of his material that might help to clarify the situation—to interpret the interpretation,



as it were, and assist us in making our way through the labyrinth of contrary claims and obscure clues laid before us. In the study of traditionally transmitted materials preserved in the extensive Islamic literary corpus—not only legal-juridical hadith but also exegetical and historical reports—scholars have devised numerous techniques of evaluation: *isnād* analysis, uncovering and deciphering the partisan or political content of hadith, classification of the legal or exegetical methodology employed therein, or some combination of these methods, usually undertaken for the primary purpose of determining authenticity and resolving issues of dating or at least relative chronology. While verifying or disproving the attribution of Ṭabarī's traditions on the Calf to authorities on *tafsīr* among the Companions, Successors, and their students is of little concern to us here in itself, nevertheless, *isnād* analysis has become one of the most time-honored methods of evaluating hadith preserved in classical Islamic literary sources (regardless of genre or discipline); therefore, it is possible that a consideration of this aspect of the traditions we have examined here will prove illuminating.<sup>124</sup>

Ṭabarī relates eleven full texts on the creation of the Calf, in three different places in his commentary (*ad loc.* Q.2:51, 20:87-88, and 20:95-96). These eleven texts portray what seem to be eight unique versions of the narrative, representing three (or possibly four) distinct positions regarding the Calf's creation and (real or apparent) animation.<sup>125</sup> There are eleven separate *isnāds*

---

<sup>124</sup> See Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 65 ff. for an overview of the diverse methods that have been proposed over the years for the analysis of exegetical hadith in particular. (Note also Berg's rather unsatisfying attempt to implement a systematic analysis of Ṭabarī's reception of Ibn 'Abbās traditions based on a putatively objective tally of the exegetical procedures employed in those traditions; *ibid.*, 173 ff.) Detection of political or polemical bias was fundamental to Schacht's method, though he was criticized for the arbitrary basis on which he decided the relative chronology of traditions and dissected *isnāds*. Note also that *isnād* analysis has become fairly common as an analytical tool when dealing with traditionally transmitted materials in Islamic literature, although neither the procedure nor even its basic implications are agreed upon; cf. the many works of Juynboll in this area and the various criticisms levied against his work by Cook, e.g. "Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions."

<sup>125</sup> I am counting the two Qatāda traditions related *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88 separately, but recognize one basic Mujāhid tradition despite the variation in the texts Ṭabarī provides *ad loc.* Q.2:51 and 20:95-96. To distinguish three discrete positions on the creation and animation of the Calf, I

given in support of these traditions, though the eleven *isnāds* do not correspond to the eleven distinct texts, since some texts are repeated—i.e. the Suddī tradition is given twice, once *ad loc.* Q.2:51 and once *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88—while other texts are bolstered by multiple *isnāds*, no fewer than four being provided for the Mujāhid tradition, for example. Five widely recognized authorities among the *salaf* or founding generations of the Muslim community are cited for their opinions on the making of the Calf: one Companion (Ibn ‘Abbās), two Successors (Mujāhid and Qatāda), and two disciples of Successors (Suddī and Ibn Zayd).

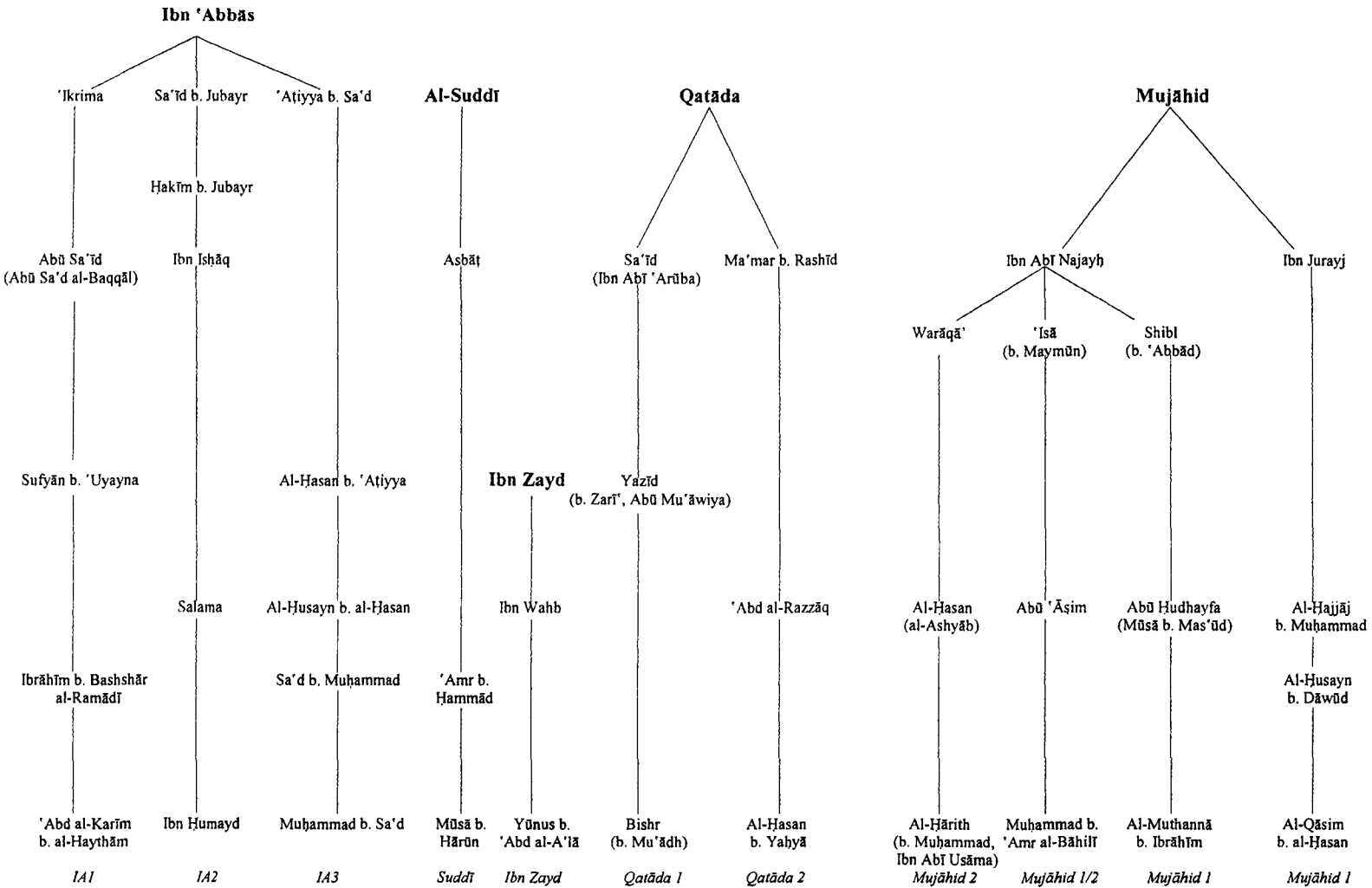
Arranging the *isnāds* in the familiar tree patterns conventionally used in *isnād* analysis (see Diagram 1), one is struck by the absolute lack of intersection between the chains.<sup>126</sup> Despite the relatively large number of traditions on our theme gathered by Ṭabarī, related on the authority of several well-known early experts on *tafsīr*, it is curious that none of the transmitters seem to

---

would count Ibn ‘Abbās-Ibn Zayd-Mujāhid as one, Suddī as another, and Qatāda as another, but it is rather clear that each of the Qatāda traditions could also be counted separately.

<sup>126</sup> Regarding Diagram 1, I have attempted to arrange the tradents represented in Ṭabarī’s *isnāds* according to a very rough estimate of *floruit*; it is somewhat conventional to simply array the tradents in *isnāds* in rows so that the corresponding links in each chain line up (i.e. all the first terms in one band, all the second terms in another, and so forth), but I have felt that this is disingenuous and can result in misleading perceptions about what is going on in the putative transmission of these traditions. For example, comparing two *isnāds* that are associated with Ibn ‘Abbās traditions here, it is noteworthy that Ibn Ishāq and Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna are each the third tradent to pass on their respective traditions from Ibn ‘Abbās; however, locating them as “neighbors” on the *isnād* chart would be misleading because Sufyān (107/725-196/812) was born more than twenty years after Ibn Ishāq (85/704-150/767), who predeceased him by *forty-five* years. That is, they are not the same “generation” at all, though they might seem to be based on their relative position in Ṭabarī’s *isnāds*. On the other hand, Ibn Sa’d identifies both as fifth-generation *tābi ‘ūn*, Ibn Ishāq of Medina and Sufyān of Mecca (*Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 7.552-3, no.2151; 8.59, no.2468). But I would argue that Ibn Sa’d’s arrangement is primarily predicated upon the typical location of a tradent in *isnād* chains and only secondarily upon their actual *floruit*. In most cases, a tradent’s *floruit* can only be very roughly determined to the nearest quarter-century or half-century, generally working backwards from their death date. Even then, such an estimation can readily be proved wrong, as when a traditionist dies young; further, very many traditionists of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries were claimed to be *mu‘ammarūn*, reaching the age of one hundred or more (on this, see Juynboll, “The Role of *Mu‘ammarūn* in the Early Development of the *Isnād*”). The death dates of the transmitters have largely been taken from Rosenthal, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume I* and Ḥallāq, *Rijāl Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*. I have also relied extensively on Horst, “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarī,” for clarification of these *isnāds*.

**Diagram 1:** Chains of transmission for Ṭabarī's exegetical hadith on the Golden Calf



Note that al-Ṭabarī's shaykhs all died between 240/850 and 280/890, but that he heard their traditions between 240/850 and 260/870.

overlap here at all.<sup>127</sup> The most significant phenomenon we can observe by comparing the *isnāds* is the proliferation of chains of transmission associated with the Companion Ibn ‘Abbās, the *tarjumān al-Qur’ān*, and his student Mujāhid. A naïve interpretation of the evidence would be that the traditions anchored to the authority of these two famous exegetes should thus be taken as the most authentic, due to their wide attestation; however, this is quite self-evidently not the case.

In the case of the versions attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, what we have here is rather a direct demonstration of the widely observed phenomenon of the general appropriation of this figure’s name and reputation in support of diverse exegetical viewpoints. On the one hand, the three distinct versions of the Calf narrative attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās by Ṭabarī (two *ad loc.* Q.2:51 and one *ad loc.* 20:95-96<sup>128</sup>) do seem to represent a particular *position* vis-à-vis the Calf—that is, two versions (those transmitted by ‘Ikrima and Ibn Jubayr) posit the Calf’s magical generation from the gold via the handful of dirt, while the other (that transmitted by Muḥammad b. Sa’d al-‘Awfī from his great-great-grandfather ‘Aṭīyya b. Sa’d), though ambiguous, at the very least does not seem to contradict such a view. But on the other hand, these narratives all clearly represent *separate and independent elaborations on common themes*; it would be disingenuous to refer to them as representing a *single* tradition simply on the basis of their *overall* thematic agreement as well as their attribution. (This is even more apparent in respect to the Qatāda traditions, which quite clearly represent different interpretations of the making of the Calf.) Moreover, as we have already suggested, it is entirely probable that the position articulated as that of “Ibn ‘Abbās” is

---

<sup>127</sup> Detecting and exploiting such overlap is generally the main point of *isnād* analysis, especially as practiced by Juynboll, since this usually demonstrates the tradent most readily identifiable as the so-called common link and thus the party most likely to have been responsible for disseminating the hadith in question. Such a procedure does not apply in this case, since I am not comparing *isnāds* attached to a single tradition but rather a group of thematically related traditions.

<sup>128</sup> I am not counting the abridged version of the Ibn Jubayr-Ibn ‘Abbās tradition that Ṭabarī cites *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96 here.

subsequent to, and presupposes, the Suddī tradition, which it seems particularly designed to undermine and refute.<sup>129</sup>

The case is somewhat similar with Mujāhid’s traditions. As with the *tafsīr* (or *tafsīrs*) attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, Ṭabarī apparently had access to multiple recensions of the commentary ascribed to this authority.<sup>130</sup> In the case of the Mujāhid tradition on the Calf, here we simply see a proliferation of *isnāds*, and the same caveat seems to apply as with the case of the Ibn ‘Abbās tradition(s), except that here the situation is even trickier, inasmuch as we are given only two actual *matns*, and in adducing additional *isnāds* Ṭabarī says only that the versions of the hadith associated with them are basically the same as the texts he explicitly relates. But we know that this assertion is not exactly true, for we have the conspicuous example here of one *isnād* adduced in two different places in support of texts that are not *quite* identical, though almost so. While the two versions of the Mujāhid tradition may *seem* similar enough (much more so than the various Ibn ‘Abbās traditions, for example), and both certainly express the same *overall* interpretation of the Calf, there is enough deviation in wording between them to suggest that we should perhaps not blithely accept the situation as it looks on paper as the whole truth—that is, that Ṭabarī has four *isnāds* corroborating the transmission of a single hadith from Mujāhid with only minor

---

<sup>129</sup> This is to say nothing of the overall disagreement between these traditions and the glosses of Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, which only supports our point about the general appropriation of this Companion’s name to bolster diverse interpretations. Note also that we should not be tempted to infer that the lack of explicit *conceptual* disagreement between the Ibn ‘Abbās traditions adduced by Ṭabarī (despite their many variations in wording) might demonstrate the basic authenticity of the underlying ideas, which one could then associate with the historical Ibn ‘Abbās. Rather, what this phenomenon might point to is the role played by Ṭabarī in *policing* these traditions, that is, in excluding anomalous or incongruous attributions to Ibn ‘Abbās. Notably, Ṭabarī does not actually see fit to do this in every instance, as is shown by his juxtaposition of the two conspicuously contradictory Qatāda traditions.

<sup>130</sup> Naturally, we are faced with the weighty problem of what exactly this *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās* used by Ṭabarī could have been; it is quite clear that it was *not* identical to our *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās* (which, as we shall see, appears to have been used by Tha’labī, though he may or may not have known it by that name). Again, see Horst, “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarī,” 295-8 on the complex *isnāds* for Ṭabarī’s Mujāhid traditions, and cf. also Berg, *Development of Exegesis*, 73-8 (esp. Diagram 11 on 74) for a concise overview of Stauth’s sophisticated analysis of the transmission of Mujāhid’s *tafsīr*.

variations in phrasing. Nevertheless, it would be logical to assume that this is precisely the impression that Ṭabarī wishes to give, in order to specifically bolster the authority of Mujāhid’s position by adducing multiple *isnāds*, similar to his intention in providing multiple versions of what might be taken as a single Ibn ‘Abbās tradition on the making of the Calf (which in fact might have originated as *distinct* traditions that were then secondarily assimilated to one another on the basis of their mutual—and most likely *post facto*—attribution to one influential authority).

It hardly seems like a coincidence that the positions adumbrated in the Ibn ‘Abbās tradition and the Mujāhid tradition are basically compatible (i.e., the handful of dirt created the physical form of the Calf, which nevertheless was not alive but rather only mooed on account of the wind), and one might readily conclude that this is the view that Ṭabarī most likely wishes to endorse. Despite the slight differences in phrasing in the two *matns* he provides for the Mujāhid tradition and the rather more significant discrepancies between his three Ibn ‘Abbās traditions, nevertheless, it might seem that in the end it is their fundamental similarity that counts, in that the basic position on the question of the Calf they represent is reinforced through sheer repetition. (We will elaborate more on this in a moment.) This conjecture seems to be borne out if we approach the question of Ṭabarī’s *isnāds* from another angle, taking into consideration not only the number of chains he adduces in support of a given position (in this case, eight out of eleven total, namely three for Ibn ‘Abbās, four for Mujāhid, and one for Ibn Zayd) but also what we might term the *hierarchy of authority* they seem to represent.

It is abundantly clear that this position has the single highest exegetical authority bolstering it, namely Ibn ‘Abbās, whose reputation in exegetical matters is such that his putative support of a particular interpretation is basically tantamount to invoking the authority of the Prophet in juridical matters. Further, Mujāhid was one of the best-known of the students of Ibn ‘Abbās from among the Successors, and it surely is no coincidence that two of his most famous peers who might plausibly challenge his title for preeminence in the “school of Ibn ‘Abbās,” namely ‘Ikrima

and Ibn Jubayr, appear here as transmitters of the view of the master himself, further supporting the basic position represented in all of these hadith.

Admittedly, Ibn Zayd is a rather less formidable figure in terms of the hierarchy of authority because of his late date (once again, he is a *tābi' tābi'*, a disciple of Successors), but this is irrelevant for the overall picture, for we can clearly imagine that his tradition plays a supplementary or supporting role here. What matters the most is that, according to the value system of the culture of traditionism, the position represented by the hadith of Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, and Ibn Zayd here simply has the greatest clout. In contrast, the alternative positions acknowledged in Ṭabarī's commentary, those of Qatāda and Suddī, are promoted on the basis of the authority of a Successor and another *tābi' tābi'*, a student of Successors. It bears mentioning as well that although he is technically a Successor himself, and in particular is sometimes identified as a student of Ibn 'Abbās, for the most part, Qatāda is best known as a transmitter of traditions from other Successors, most notably al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and the renowned oneirocritic Ibn Sīrīn.

Suddī, on the other hand, as we have already mentioned, was a somewhat controversial figure in his day because of his connection with what was termed *tafsīr al-qawm*, presumably intended to signify "popular exegesis," possibly the *tafsīr* of the storytellers. This is not to suggest that Ṭabarī was deliberately promoting *unsound* traditions that he did not expect his readers to take seriously by invoking the names of Qatāda and Suddī; that is, these transmitters are by no means to be understood as unreliable in themselves. But at the same time, it seems clear that his readers, ostensibly traditionists themselves, would have readily recognized some qualitative difference between a tradition transmitted on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās or Mujāhid and one transmitted on the authority of Qatāda or Suddī.<sup>131</sup> Further, the traditions of Qatāda and Suddī are

---

<sup>131</sup> Perhaps an illustrative analogy would be to compare this to the difference between an opinion found in a classical *fiqh* source attributed to Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī (d. 96/717) or al-Shaybānī (d. 189/805) and one transmitted on the authority of a Companion or even the Prophet himself. The difference between them would have been self-evident to *fuqahā'*, despite the Schachtian

not only trumped at some basic level by that of Ibn ‘Abbās, but *through the corroboration of Ibn ‘Abbās’ position by Mujāhid and Ibn Zayd as well*. This is especially the case given the fact that the traditions of Qatāda and Suddī do not support one another, but seem to represent two distinct positions on the matter at hand, in contrast to the seeming unanimity of the others. Still further, arguably, when one reads the texts closely, one sees that *the two traditions attributed to Qatāda do not support one another either*, which ostensibly works to undermine the authority of his position as well, in contrast to the mutual corroboration of Ibn ‘Abbās, Mujāhid, and Ibn Zayd. It would perhaps not be too outlandish to suggest that the direct juxtaposition of two conflicting versions of the Qatāda tradition here might very well have been intentional, in order to draw attention to their inherent contradictions and imply that this interpretation is less reliable, without Ṭabarī having to come out and say so explicitly.<sup>132</sup>

Another possible approach is to consider Ṭabarī’s overall presentation of the material in a kind of rudimentary redaction criticism. Such an approach presupposes that there might be a greater design that informs Ṭabarī’s presentation that is not immediately betrayed by his explicit comments, and that our understanding of his intentions may be enriched by seeking to grasp the larger purpose that could be subtly communicated simply through his selection, placement, and even repetition of the traditionally transmitted material at his disposal. As we have already noted, in three different places in his Quran commentary, Ṭabarī relates a total of eleven texts pertaining to the creation of the Calf; eight of these traditions represent unique texts per se, while the three others are repetitions of material previously cited. Looking at the data in this fashion, we again

---

argument that the former rather than the latter would be more deserving of historical credence. Ibn Sa’d ranks Qatāda as a third-generation Baṣran *tābi*, Suddī as a third-generation Kūfan *tābi*. Incidentally, Ibn Zayd ranks as a *sixth*-generation Medinan *tābi*. *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 9.228, no.3967; 8.441, no.3270; 7.592, no.2240.

<sup>132</sup> In contrast, Ṭabarī directly juxtaposes Ibn ‘Abbās traditions in only *one* place, *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96. Notably, these two versions (those related through Ibn Jubayr and ‘Aṭīyya b. Sa’d) are fundamentally similar; moreover, these are two of the three Ibn ‘Abbās traditions on the making of the Calf in Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr* in which the nature of the Calf is left basically ambiguous. Presumably he avoids juxtaposing contradictory Ibn ‘Abbās traditions in order not to undermine the position he wants to highlight as most legitimate.



take notice of the curious fact that Ṭabarī represents the situation somewhat differently in his comments on each of the three main scriptural passages that occasion remarks about the making and nature of the Calf.

In his comments on Q.2:51, the “majority” position (represented by traditions attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Zayd, and Mujāhid) is that the Calf was generated magically from the gold, while its sound was purely artificial, the wind causing it to low; the “minority” position, on the other hand, is represented by a tradition attributed to Suddī, namely that the Calf was generated magically from the gold but seems to have walked and mooed continually, seemingly of its own accord. But in his comments on Q.20:87-88, Ṭabarī explicitly draws a distinction between the view that the Calf was fashioned by hand by Sāmīrī but that the handful of dirt cast into its mouth made it low—a view that had not yet in fact been elaborated in his *tafsīr* at all—and another, unspecified view. He then gives two versions of a tradition from Qatāda, one that represents the view he has just introduced and another that says something more or less analogous yet somewhat different, namely that Sāmīrī fashioned a calf figure that he threw among the dirt and the golden ornaments, and that the Calf was then magically transmuted out of these materials. (In both versions attributed to Qatāda, it is unclear how or why the Calf lowed.) Again, these represent the first view he mentions, which again does not correspond to *either* of the two positions established in his comments on Q.2:51.

The contrasting view, which he does not articulate explicitly, ends up being that of Suddī, and he then relates the Suddī tradition previously given *ad loc.* Q.2:51, omitting many details and including some new material at the end. Finally, in his comments on Q.20:95-96 somewhat further on, Ṭabarī essentially manages to reconcile these presentations to some degree, in that he repeats one of the “majority” traditions from Ibn ‘Abbās from Q.2:51 (the handful created the Calf, the wind made it low), then gives a new tradition, also cited on Ibn ‘Abbās’ authority, that seems to say the same thing (the version transmitted from ‘Aṭīyya), and then repeats *another* one of the “mainstream” traditions from Q.2:51, that of Mujāhid.

In short, if we at least provisionally overlook the differences between the two versions of the Qatāda tradition provided *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88, then Ṭabarī's received material on the Calf seems to represent three distinct positions regarding its creation and animation: the "majority" position cited *ad loc.* Q.2:51 (Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn Zayd, Mujāhid) may be termed position A, and the "minority" position cited there *ad loc.* Q.2:51 (Suddī) position B; the traditions cited *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88 represent position B (Suddī) again, in addition to the Qatāda position, which we may term position C. Ṭabarī's arrangement of material *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96 redresses the balance, in that all three of the exegetical hadith given here represent position A again, which had omitted from his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88 (see Diagram 2).<sup>133</sup>

Despite their variations in detail, it is extremely noteworthy that the three different versions of the narrative Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās (the traditions transmitted from 'Ikrima and Ibn Jubayr *ad loc.* Q.2:51 and that from 'Aṭīyya b. Sa'd *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96) are fundamentally compatible in terms of the basic interpretation of the Calf reflected in each. In light of the conspicuous tendency generally exhibited in traditional *tafsīrs* to appropriate Ibn 'Abbās' name and reputation for contradictory viewpoints, this consistency is quite remarkable.<sup>134</sup>

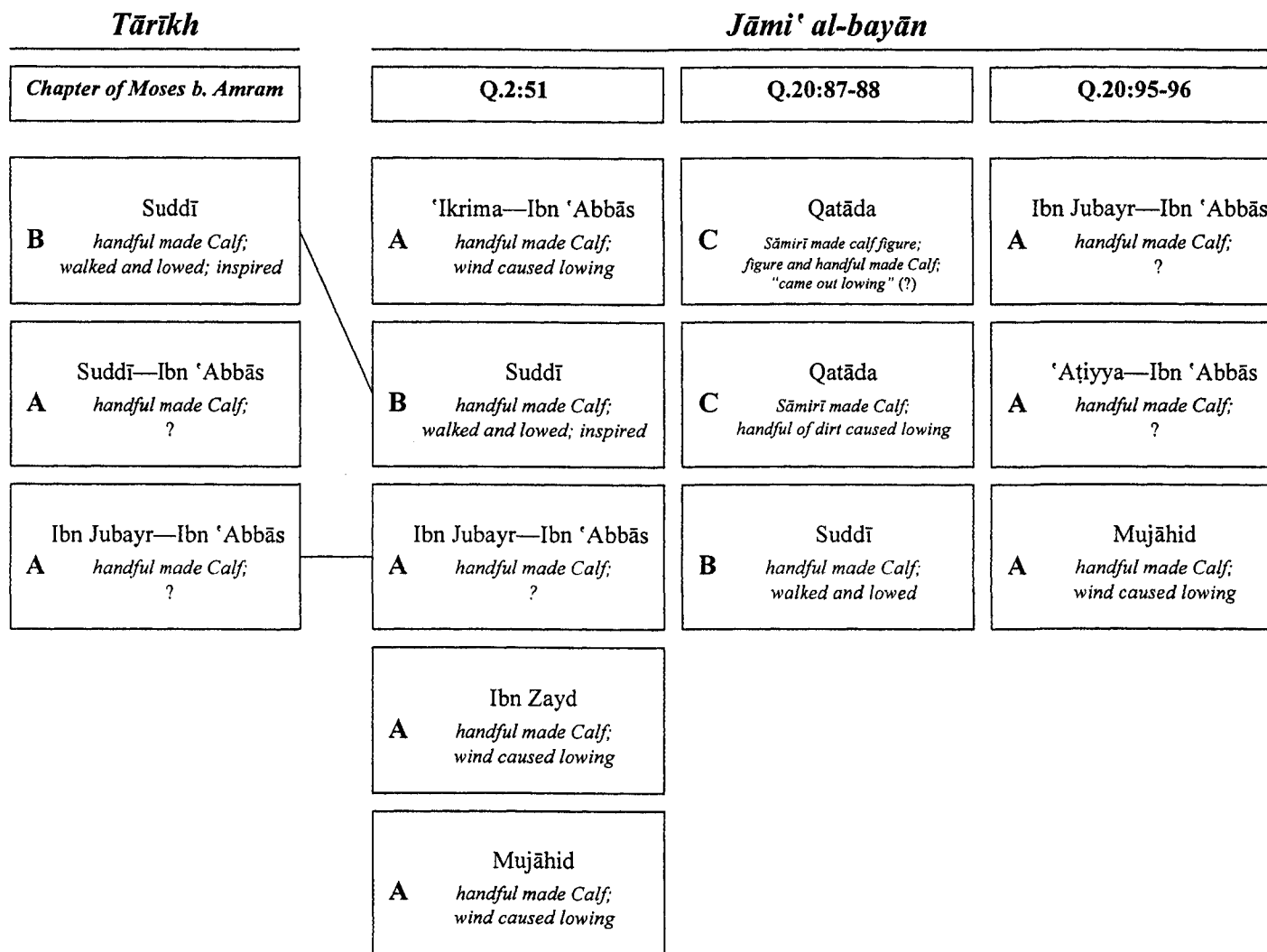
Likewise, despite the critical differences in wording between them, the two versions of the Mujāhid tradition likewise represent the same basic position. If we tally up the number of texts representing each position, then, overall, it is position A (Ibn 'Abbās-Ibn Zayd-Mujāhid) that is presented the greatest number of times—*seven* of the eleven texts total, as opposed to only two instances of position B and two of position C. (And again, the two instances of position C are

---

<sup>133</sup> Cf. Muqātil's presentation, which shifts in an analogous way.

<sup>134</sup> It is possible as well that Ṭabarī is responsible for "enforcing" this consistency by excluding Ibn 'Abbās traditions that do not fit the pattern, especially insofar as certain "deviant" Ibn 'Abbās traditions on the Calf do show up in the later tradition. As we shall see, evidence presented in Tha'labī's *tafsīr* may suggest that Ṭabarī in fact imposed the most characteristic element of the Ibn 'Abbās position—the claim that the Calf only lowed with the passage of the wind—onto his Ibn 'Abbās hadith, transferring it from the Mujāhid tradition. In other words, even the Ibn 'Abbās traditions might not really reflect what Ṭabarī represents as the Ibn 'Abbās position.

Diagram 2: Material on the Golden Calf in Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* and *Jāmi' al-bayān*



fundamentally different, even though they are both attributed to one authority, a fact that may have been deliberately emphasized by directly juxtaposing them; on the other hand, it is doubtful that the differences between the two texts of the Mujāhid tradition provided *ad loc.* Q.2:51 and 20:95-96 respectively would have been thought to impair its credibility much.)

That two of these texts are not unique but rather repetitions is irrelevant for our present concerns. In point of fact, in an analysis such as that we are attempting here, it is precisely the cumulative force of continual repetition of a position that we wish to consider and take seriously. It seems almost unquestionable that Ṭabarī's serial repetition of versions of the narrative that all fundamentally say much the same thing is a *deliberate exegetical strategy*, the nature of which is generally concealed because it is pursued through the subtle mechanisms of textual redaction and arrangement. Admittedly, *three* of the representatives of what we have termed position A exhibit some basic ambiguity regarding the nature of the Calf; each of them makes it plain that the Calf was created through the action of the handful of magic dirt, but none of them really provides us with any clue as to what the nature of the Calf that emerged from the golden ornaments really was.

But these traditions can hardly be confused with those of Qatāda, which express what we have termed position C. Despite their conspicuous differences, the Qatāda hadith agree in depicting the creation of the Calf as partially or fully requiring Sāmīrī's direct involvement in sculpting its form; in the first, the Calf is said to come forth from the fire lowing due to the addition of the handful of dirt, while in the other, the handful is said to have made it into a lowing Calf. On the other hand, there is no indication in *any* of the traditions that reflect position A that Sāmīrī fashioned the Calf directly, even in the most ambiguous of them. In point of fact, their ambiguity probably presupposes that, all things being equal, the reader should infer that these more ambiguous traditions *are* in fact variations on the basic Ibn 'Abbās position. The more laconic and ambiguous versions attributed to the authority of Ibn 'Abbās may perhaps be thought to play a corroborating or supportive role, in the same way that the Ibn Zayd tradition serves to corroborate or support the corpus of Ibn 'Abbās traditions gathered here.

The Suddī tradition (position B)—cited twice but expressed in more or less the same form in both of the places where it occurs—is more problematic in this respect, for it shows more potential overlap with position A than the Qatāda tradition(s). What distinguishes position A from position B in the end is the conception of the nature of the Calf it expresses; according to both positions A and B, the Calf’s *origin* is the same (the handful of dirt creates its form) but the consequence is quite different (in one, it lowed merely as an effect of the wind; in the other, the lowing was indicative of the Calf’s animate or quasi-animate state). How do we know in the end that the more ambiguous versions of the Ibn ‘Abbās narrative do not imply or presuppose a view of the Calf analogous to Suddī’s, according to which the Calf walked and lowed continually? We would argue that it is the deliberate purpose of Ṭabarī’s presentation both to militate against this view of the Calf and prevent any confusion of it with position A, the majority view associated with Ibn ‘Abbās.

For one thing, when the long version of the Suddī tradition is cited *ad loc.* Q.2:51, it follows the ‘Ikrima-Ibn ‘Abbās tradition that is cited first in the passage, and is quite clearly contrasted with it; further, Ṭabarī then places two more long traditions, another attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās and that attributed to Ibn Zayd, directly after it, which are followed in turn by the short Mujāhid tradition and its alternate *isnāds*. In short, in terms of the basic interpretive positions being displayed here, the pattern of representation in his commentary *ad loc.* Q.2:51 is A—B—A—A—A, as can be seen from Diagram 2. Further, in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88, he cites the two Qatāda traditions first, and then repeats the Suddī tradition, in sharply abridged form. Here the pattern is C—C—B, an arrangement that would naturally tend to lend interpretive weight to the Qatāda position. This would seem to be corroborated by the fact that Ṭabarī is explicitly juxtaposing two alternative viewpoints here, but deigns only to summarize that which is expressed in the Qatāda tradition(s). The citation of the Suddī tradition here is prefaced only by the remark “others say...” It is perhaps not too fantastic to imagine that this is Ṭabarī’s way of saying that the interpretation expressed therein is not really worth talking about or taking too

seriously. Finally, as we have already noted repeatedly, in his final selection of traditions on the Calf, in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96, Ṭabarī gives us three brief traditions, two that are repetitions and one that is new; here *all three represent position A*.

One might object that it is unreasonable to imagine that Ṭabarī has arranged his traditions on the Calf so that in one place in his commentary (*ad loc.* Q.2:51) he implicitly endorses position A while in another place (*ad loc.* Q.20:87-88) he implicitly endorses *position C*, solely for the purpose of undermining the authority of position B, the “minority” position in both of these passages. If position A is the one he really wants to promote, as we have argued, why would he privilege position C in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88? For that matter, why does he not simply *exclude* position B altogether? In response to such potential objections, we must note first that, as we shall see, to some extent Ṭabarī *is* suppressing a position he wants to exclude entirely; he has done so quite successfully, in fact. Because so many of the other commentators of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries excluded this position as well, it is quite easy to overlook the omission; but we would argue that one is also led to overlook this omission because of the sheer fact of the diversity of views Ṭabarī *does* include. This is most likely the specific reason he did not omit the Suddī tradition entirely—essentially, to distract the reader from discerning that he has omitted something else.

Again, we do not wish to suggest that Ṭabarī included materials of seriously questionable value or authenticity in his commentary. At the same time, however, we *do* want to stress that various aspects of Ṭabarī’s activity as an editor and commentator, some quite subtle, work to guide the reader towards those interpretations he believes are most valid, and away from those he believes are less so. He does not need to explicitly endorse a given position to signal his approval, although he sometimes does so; conversely, he does not need to censor a tradition outright in order to demonstrate his disapproval, although he sometimes does this as well. In short, the *ikhṭilāf* seen in his work is deliberately intended to bestow the appearance of ecumenism; this

ecumenism is not completely illusory, but it is not by any means perfect either. Nor is it accidental; nor is it uncontrolled.

Position A, as we have already noted, appears to tolerate a limited degree of supernaturalism in the episode, in that Sāmīrī's handful of dirt is portrayed as having the power to transform the borrowed ornaments of the Israelites into the Golden Calf. The real distinguishing mark of this position, however, is its wholly naturalistic explanation for the Calf's characteristic *khuwār* sound: the traditions that represent this position claim that once it emerged from the gold, the Calf emitted its lowing sound not due to magic or any inherent life it possessed, but rather due to the movement of wind through its body. Position C, on the other hand, is the opposite: this is the claim that, once he created the Calf from the gold using wholly mundane means, Sāmīrī's addition of the handful of dirt did something to enable it to low, for it then "became a lowing calf" or "came out lowing," its exact nature at that point being rather ambiguous. Position B is somewhat intermediate between the other two positions: as in the traditions representing position A, the Calf is created by magical means; but here, the lowing sound is *not* due to naturalistic causes, for the result of Sāmīrī's use of the handful of dirt is apparently not only to create the Calf per se but to bestow a semblance of life upon it, for afterwards it "lowed and walked about."

Again, it is clear that Ṭabarī most likely advocates the view reflected in position A. But why does he seem to endorse (or at least provisionally prefer) position C *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88, where he juxtaposes C and B and omits A? A is of course only *temporarily* displaced here, for it is subsequently given pride of place in Ṭabarī's subsequent comments on the culmination of the episode in Q.20:95-96. It must be because juxtaposing position B and C, in such a way as to give position C greater weight, thus endorses the latter as the preferred alternative to position A. Allowing position C pride of place in this specific passage is hardly an arbitrary lapse; rather, it allows Ṭabarī to establish a hierarchy of acceptable interpretations, viz., position A (the Ibn 'Abbās-Ibn Zayd-Mujāhid tradition, which has no fewer than five discrete texts and eight unique *isnāds* supporting it, more than any other), then C (Qatāda, a remote second, with only two

conspicuously conflicting texts, each with a unique *isnād*), then B (Suddī, with only one text bolstered by a single *isnād*, though that text is quoted twice).<sup>135</sup>

This may be comprehensible strategically; but in what way is it logically—or exegetically—consistent? After all, A and C represent completely opposite understandings of the origin and nature of the Calf. Would it not be more suitable for Ṭabarī to establish B as the desirable alternative, since it is more similar to A? We would argue, however, that this similarity is exactly the problem. Position A, which we have characterized as representing a limited supernaturalism, allows the Calf a seemingly miraculous origin, but absolutely denies it even the semblance of life. Position C establishes a mundane origin for the Calf, and attributes its lowing to seemingly miraculous means, but is ultimately ambiguous about the nature of the Calf that resulted from Sāmīrī’s use of the handful of dirt. Though incompatible, what these two positions have in common is that both avoid attributing anything resembling authentic life to the Calf, at least explicitly; this is the crux of the Suddī tradition, however, even though its expression (“they devoted themselves to the Calf, worshipping it while it was lowing and walking about”) hardly seems excessively baroque or fantastic. The *sustained* animation of the Calf is the key element that differentiates position B from the others, and this dictates Ṭabarī’s attempts to marginalize the Suddī tradition to the greatest degree possible.

It is worth noting here that, if our conjecture about the strategy informing Ṭabarī’s presentation of his material on the Calf is correct, then this explains the apparent inconsistency of the explicit remarks that he makes *ad loc.* Q.20:96. As we mentioned previously, in citing the variant reading of the first part of the verse, *baṣurtu bi-mā lam yabṣurū bi-hi*, Ṭabarī summarizes the Calf story in a fashion closely resembling the version of Qatāda; subsequently, he seems to

---

<sup>135</sup> Arguably, if Ṭabarī had integrated another tradition representing position A into his presentation of material *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88, for example after his presentation of C—C—B, this would really have driven home the point that this was the interpretation to be preferred. However, if our understanding of his *modus operandi* is correct, then he could not have omitted C entirely (for example, in presenting A—A—B here, similar to what he does *ad loc.* Q.2:51) and still managed to maintain the illusion of preserving the maximum possible latitude for interpretation.



contradict himself, in that he then cites a variant reading of the last part of the verse, *qabādu qabḍat<sup>an</sup> min athar al-rasūl*, but proceeds to summarize the Calf story in a fashion that resembles the version of Mujāhid. We could not explain why it is that Ṭabarī seems to shift in his explication of key events from the narrative, first appearing to favor the Qatāda account, and then the Mujāhid account; in the light of the foregoing discussion, however, it is striking that the traditions associated with Qatāda and Mujāhid represent positions C and A respectively, *precisely* the positions that we argue Ṭabarī sees as the two most preferable exegetical alternatives. The only way his implicitly contradictory remarks in this passage are comprehensible is if he is understood to be quietly endorsing or promoting both a primary view and an acceptable alternative, and simultaneously marginalizing another, less palatable, alternative.

Admittedly, the most serious objection to our reconstruction of the underlying agenda informing Ṭabarī's presentation of his material pertaining to the creation of the Calf in his *tafsīr* is that his presentation of similar material in the appropriate place in his chronicle, the *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, is far less coherent, at least in terms of the analytical approach we have taken here.<sup>136</sup> Here, Ṭabarī's arrangement of material mirrors that we find in his comments on Q.2:51 to some extent (see Diagram 2 again). He cites the Suddī tradition to start with, in the version related *ad loc.* Q.2:51 (complete with the reference to God's inspiration of the Calf). Then, after a digression, he gives an account from Ibn 'Abbās that is *actually transmitted from Suddī* not found in his *tafsīr*; in this portrayal, the handful of dirt creates the Calf, but there is no reference here to the nature of the Calf at all. In this respect, this Suddī—Ibn 'Abbās tradition is analogous to the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition cited twice in the *tafsīr*; strikingly, after another digression, this tradition is followed somewhat later on by a citation of that very same Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition. The text is *exactly* the same as that he cites *ad loc.* Q.2:51 in his Quran commentary, and again, here, as there, there is no reference to the nature of the Calf to be found at all.

---

<sup>136</sup> Hypothetically, one could argue that a “religious” ethos informs Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* while his chronicle remains “secular”; this, however, would be fallacious.

Thus, to some degree the presentation of the making of the Calf here is *morphologically* similar to that Ṭabarī provides in his *tafsīr* in his comments on the Sūra 2 version (B—A—A), but strangely, the most explicit depiction of the nature of the Calf here appears in the Suddī tradition, stating that it “lowed and walked about.” Further, what we have argued is the dominant interpretation of the nature of the Calf in the *tafsīr*, and especially that it lowed solely due to the wind, is *nowhere to be found* here in Ṭabarī’s chronicle. This seems virtually inexplicable given what seems to be the very carefully constructed agenda Ṭabarī pursues in the corresponding passages of his *tafsīr*. If it really mattered so much as it seems to in the *tafsīr*, one would imagine that Ṭabarī would provide at least one version of a tradition expressing position A that makes the Calf’s artificiality explicit (e.g. the Mujāhid tradition), and that instead of the Suddī tradition, he would provide one or another of the Qatāda traditions (thus producing the structural arrangement C—A—A or something similar).

Compared to his treatment of the narrative in his *tafsīr*, here in his chronicle, Ṭabarī’s presentation of the material simply seems inchoate and totally arbitrary. The only convincing explanation for this discrepancy would be that there is some fundamental distinction between Ṭabarī’s agenda in his chronicle and that he pursues in his Quran commentary, or rather that the latter *is* in fact characterized by a discernable agenda that informs his meticulous and subtle arrangement of material there, while there is no such imperative guiding the corresponding arrangement of material in the former (at least in this specific case).

It bears repeating here that two of the Ibn ‘Abbās traditions on the Calf related by Ṭabarī (that from Ibn Jubayr and that from ‘Aṭīyya b. Sa’d) say *nothing* about the nature of the Calf at all. We previously identified these as representative of position A (the magic dirt produced the Calf, but the wind caused it to low), that which we predominantly associate with Ibn ‘Abbās (as expressed, for example, in the version transmitted from ‘Ikrima), as well as with Ibn Zayd and Mujāhid. But admittedly, though it seems unlikely, for all we know, this tradition could in fact presuppose what we have been characterizing as the *opposite* of the Ibn ‘Abbās position, namely

that of Suddī (the Calf came forth from the golden ornaments continually walking and lowing). We simply have no way of knowing, and must infer that this is probably not the case simply due to the fact that Suddī's opinion appears to be one of the minority positions. Notably, this is an impression communicated for the most part by *Ṭabarī's arrangement of the material*. Put another way, we naturally tend to assimilate the more obscure Ibn 'Abbās traditions to others that are more explicit regarding the nature of the Calf on the primary basis of that attribution.

Through adducing numerous traditions that demonstrate this "Ibn 'Abbās position," Ṭabarī makes it seem as if this is the view that was dominant in the tradition through being most widely attested. But it bears keeping in mind that out of eight texts that we readily conclude must support this position—namely, the view that the handful made the Calf, but its lowing was due only to the wind—which again represents the *majority* of the eleven texts total Ṭabarī adduces on the making of the Calf, *three* of them are actually completely ambiguous regarding the Calf's true nature. Ṭabarī encourages us to overlook this fact by relating his most explicit version of the Ibn 'Abbās tradition—that transmitted through 'Ikrima—first out of all of them; when confronting with his two more ambiguous versions of the Ibn 'Abbās traditions, one simply tends to assume that these are simply new variations on that same tradition. That is, in his comments *ad loc.* Q.2:51, Ṭabarī gives the 'Ikrima—Ibn 'Abbās tradition first, which states unambiguously that the wind caused the Calf to low; he follows this with a contrasting tradition (Suddī, representing position B), then reverts to Ibn 'Abbās again, specifically relating the tradition transmitted from Ibn Jubayr, which does not specify what the nature of the Calf was.

The natural tendency, then, is for one to read the Ibn Jubayr tradition in the light of the initial 'Ikrima tradition because they are basically congruous—that is, they lack any conspicuous contradictions—and both claim to be anchored in the authority of Ibn 'Abbās. When the ambiguous Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition is repeated *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96 and then followed by *another* one that is similarly ambiguous ('Aṭīyya b. Sa'd—Ibn 'Abbās), the tendency again is to read these in the light of the first, unambiguous Ibn 'Abbās tradition. This is encouraged yet

*further* by Ṭabarī's citation of other traditions attributed to lesser authorities (Ibn Zayd and Mujāhid) that are similarly unambiguous. Again, Ṭabarī's arrangement of the material seems purposefully designed to present an implicit argument on behalf of the validity of what he wants to promote as the "majority" view—that the Calf may have been created by magic, but it was not really alive, because its lowing was due only to the wind.

That Ṭabarī's presentation of the material is deliberately constructed to present such an argument would appear to be corroborated by the fact that the association of this "majority" view with Ṭabarī's main authority, Ibn 'Abbās, is in fact actually rather *weak*, for again, only *one* of his Ibn 'Abbās traditions actually expresses this view directly. It is worth reiterating, however, that he places this tradition *first*, in his extended comments on Q.2:51. Thus, the immediate benefit we derive from viewing Ṭabarī's several texts on the Calf as a set of variations on a theme is that, having recognized that the Ibn 'Abbās traditions that are ambiguous about the nature of the Calf might be considered as substantially distinct from the one Ibn 'Abbās tradition that is *unambiguous* about it, we can now better appreciate the way Ṭabarī's editorial arrangement works to methodically, yet subliminally, promote a specific view and bestow it with a veneer of authority that it does not in actuality possess.

In short, as so often happens to be the case, upon investigation, Ibn 'Abbās turns out to *not* be the absolute champion of the view particularly favored by the exegete at all; moreover, as we shall discuss momentarily, this is by no means the only case in which Ṭabarī's selection and presentation of material facilitates the partial or wholesale misrepresentation of the view of an early exegetical authority. That Ṭabarī was nevertheless particularly effective in this case can be demonstrated by the fact that many commentators after him continued to cite *various* Ibn 'Abbās traditions, and *not* solely that transmitted by 'Ikrima, as examples of the "Ibn 'Abbās position."

But as we have shown, it is questionable whether this position can really be accurately characterized as self-evidently that of Ibn 'Abbās at all.<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Cf. the discussion below of Tha'labī's citations of parallels to Ṭabarī's Ibn 'Abbās traditions, which conspicuously lack any reference to the Calf only lowing with the passage of wind through its body.

#### 4. Interpreting the interpretation: building consensus or managing diversity of opinion?

As we have already noted, Ṭabarī's treatment of the Sūra 7 version of the episode is relatively brief, and for the most part, he is content to provide only a brief overview of the narrative in his remarks on Q.7:148, the key verse in the passage. Notably, he does not supply us with any received traditions on the Calf here, but merely describes the situation in the Quranic story in his own words. It is here that we may find what is perhaps his most unambiguous statements regarding his interpretation of the episode, and thus it is fitting to conclude our treatment of Ṭabarī's exegesis by considering these laconic remarks.

In the absence of Moses his people worshipped a calf, a body that lows, from their ornaments; yet they did not see it could neither speak to them nor guide them to the right path. Even then they took it (as a god) and did wrong (Q.7:148).<sup>138</sup>

Abū Ja'far [i.e. Ṭabarī] says: The meaning of His statement here is as follows. The Israelites, the people of Moses, after he had departed from them to go off to His Lord for his intimate conversation with Him (*li-munājātihi*), to fulfill the appointment which His Lord had made with him, took [as a god] *a calf*—meaning the offspring of a cow—[made] *from their ornaments* that they then worshipped. Then He made it perfectly clear what that Calf was when He called it *a body that lows*. “Lows” means the sound of the cow. By stating this, He is informing us about the Israelites, that they went astray on account of something on account of which a people of discrimination (*ahl al-'aql*) would never have gone astray.

---

<sup>138</sup> I have once again deviated somewhat from Ahmed Ali's translation here. His rendition of *wa-ittakhadha qawm mūsā min ba'dihi min ḥulyiyihim 'ij<sup>m</sup> jasad<sup>m</sup>* reads *In the absence of Moses his people prepared the image of a calf from their ornaments...* This is somewhat anomalous since later on in the passage he then renders the phrase *ittakhadhūhu wa-kānū zālimīna* as *They took it (for a deity) and did wrong*, when it would be more consistent to translate *ittakhadha* as either “to make” or “to take in worship” in *both* places. I have altered his translation of the first part of the verse in accordance with Ṭabarī's understanding of the verse. Regarding the problematic *min ḥulyiyihim*, see n.102 above.

That is because the Lord is the one who possesses dominion over the heavens and the earth and directs them; it is hardly possible that He is *a body that lows* that does not speak with anyone nor conducts anyone to that which is good. And He is saying that these [the Israelites] are the people whose story God is telling thusly as one of ignorance and obstinacy towards Him and going astray—those who said *This is your god and the god of Moses* (Q.20:88), and then became devoted to it and worshipped it.<sup>139</sup>

Ṭabarī then notes that he will not expand further here on the reason for their worshipping the Calf or the manner in which they did so, having already addressed this topic previously (i.e. *ad loc.* Q.2:51). He does elaborate more on the specific question of the nature of the Israelites' sin somewhat further on, however.

Regarding His statement: *...yet they did not see it could neither speak to them nor guide them to the right path...* He is saying: Those who were devoted to the Calf which they took as a god, [made] from their ornaments, which they worshipped—they did not see that the Calf *could neither speak to them nor guide them to the right path*, nor conduct them on their way. These are not the characteristics of the Lord to whom worship is truly due; rather, He speaks with His prophets and messengers, and conducts His creatures on the path to good, and forbids them the path of the perishing and the wicked.

God is saying with his expression *They took it...* that they took the Calf as their god (*ittakhadhū al-'ijl ilah<sup>m</sup>*), and thus, with this taking it as their Lord and object of worship (*bi-ittikhādihim iyāh rabb<sup>m</sup> ma'būd<sup>m</sup>*), they *did wrong* to themselves, on account of their worshipping something other than Him to whom worship is due, and their attributing divinity to other than Him who is really divine.<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>139</sup> *Jāmi' al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 13.117.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.118. Ṭabarī defines *ẓulm*, injustice, as placing something where it doesn't belong; this recurs throughout his *tafsīr* and is repeated throughout the later commentary tradition.

As we noted previously, Gilliot's basic approach to Ṭabarī's hermeneutic is to view it as one in which maximal latitude is granted to the would-be interpreter for understanding Quranic meaning within the limits set by the exegesis of the *salaf*. Thus, regardless of how Ṭabarī himself preferred to interpret the various passage dealing with *al-dhabīḥ*, the so-called "Son of the Sacrifice," the point behind his inclusion of so many traditions favoring both sides, that is, those who favored Isaac *and* those who favored Ishmael, is supposedly that he wished to stress the underlying themes in the story as the critical focus of the believer's attention, the specific details being, in the end, irrelevant.<sup>141</sup> That is, aside from the partisan question of who *al-dhabīḥ* really was and which community's claim to preeminence, the Arabs or the Jews, might be correct, the point Ṭabarī really wants to drive home is that Abraham's son who was willing to be sacrificed—whoever he was—should be emulated by Muslims as a model of perfect devotion. This is a lesson that obtains entirely apart from the specifics of the narrative, and thus, in this case, *ikhṭilāf* may be thought to represent dissent over superficial details, no matter how key some people might consider those details to be. (Naturally, this pertains to maintaining exegetical pluralism *within* Islam, and should not be mistaken as a gesture of ecumenism; it is clearly *not* Ṭabarī's intention to enfranchise Jewish or Christian readings of the Calf narrative.) This might be considered to be the very essence of *tafsīr* practiced for the sake of constructing and asserting consensus: maximal latitude is provided to variations in individual interpretation, while a bedrock foundation of critical values and ideals is established through the expression and negotiation of those variations.

Again, it is very hard to see in his overarching comments on the episode what Ṭabarī's real conception of the Calf is or how it was created, and arguably this is due to the fact that what Ṭabarī really wishes to emphasize overall here is the sheer stupidity of those who went astray after it. Regardless of whether the Calf was a hand-crafted statue that lowed but once or rather a magical entity that miraculously leapt forth from the fire and cavorted about, the lesson to be

---

<sup>141</sup> Although it bears repeating that, as both Firestone and Gilliot acknowledge, Ṭabarī actually preferred Isaac, in spite of the fact that by his time the weight of the tradition seems to have shifted in favor of Ishmael.



learned by believers is exactly the same, namely, that this was a *mere image* that did not deserve worship, being no substitute for the Lord. That is, no matter what account of the Calf's creation one prefers, in Ṭabarī's view *'ijl jasad* will *always* be understood as a *mere image of a Calf*; whether it lowed only once or repeatedly, it still *could neither speak to them nor guide them to the right path*.<sup>142</sup> As in Gilliot's analysis of his presentation of the debate over *al-dhabīh*, despite its complexity and uncertainties, Ṭabarī's treatment of the Calf episode likewise seems to confirm that his real priority is to bring the basic ethical and theological points communicated in the Quranic narratives home to the Muslim reader. That is, in the end, these issues should come to the forefront in interpretation, even—or especially—in the face of the bewildering amount of disagreement or *ikhtilāf* that seems to characterize the early exegetes' conception of the narrative.<sup>143</sup>

Overall, then, considering both the traditions that Ṭabarī actually relates in his *tafsīr* and these overarching interpretive comments presented in his remarks to the Sūra 7 episode, we might come to one of two conclusions about his general activity as an exegete; further, in the end these conclusions are probably not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, as we previously emphasized, Ṭabarī's apparent embrace of *ikhtilāf* might actually mask a manipulation of the data for his own ends, in that it enables him to endorse a particular interpretation of which he approves without

---

<sup>142</sup> Some later exegetes were considerably more sympathetic to the Israelites than Ṭabarī was; cf., e.g., Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who seems particularly interested in trying to understand why the people found this entity so fascinating and compelling as to be led into idolatry by it.

<sup>143</sup> Of course, the situation with the Calf is different from that of *al-dhabīh*, inasmuch as there are far fewer accumulated traditions on the former than on the latter, but at the same time, there seems to have been a greater *variety* of exegetical opinions on the former, whereas, regarding the interpretation of the latter, there are in the end only two possible choices. Cf. also Ṭabarī's comments on Q.20:89-91 (*Jāmi' al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.202), where God's testing of the Israelites is discussed: here, it is stressed that God was the direct source of any indication of life or power the Calf might have possessed, which confirms that the episode was nothing but a divine trial. In other words, no matter whether Sāmīri built the Calf and caused it low through the use of the dirt, or the use of the dirt actually generated a continually animate Calf from the gold through an apparent miracle, or else the dirt generated a mere form that could only give the appearance of lowing due to the blowing of the wind, again, the underlying theological point of the narrative is the same.

saying so, and further even allows him to promote or marginalize other interpretations as more or less palatable alternatives. On the other hand, as we have just suggested, it is possible that *ikhṭilāf* has a greater significance *in itself* for Ṭabarī, in that it permits him to communicate broader ethical, theological, or religious ideas latent within all of the numerous variations on a theme that the exegetical hadith he relates on a given subject represent. Admittedly, how attractive either of these possibilities appears depends upon one's general attitude towards religious scholarship and the representation of sacred truths (or sacred history, for that matter).

The first option makes Ṭabarī's presentation of his material seem Machiavellian, directed towards a tendentious representation of the opinions of previous generations of exegetes; the latter, on the other hand, makes that presentation seem altruistic, untouched by the contamination of the commentator's individual judgment—the author in fact *abdicates* his own opinion and adopts a position of ultimate agnosticism, content to promote timeless, eternal truths for the good of the community, steering clear of partisan quibbling over irrelevant details. But in fact, these two goals are not incompatible: Ṭabarī could very well have seen one interpretation promoted among the *salaf* as correct and others as incorrect, or at least less likely to be correct, and have wished to weigh in on the matter, however subtly or discreetly. On the other hand, he could *also* have wished to foreground the major issues underlying the debate over the nature of the Calf—the first priority, it seems, being the demonstration of the disconfirmation of Israel through their hard-hearted and indiscriminating lapse into idolatry.<sup>144</sup>

In the absence of any explicit endorsement of a particular position, it is reasonable to infer that Ṭabarī supports the interpretation that he represents as that of Ibn 'Abbās: the handful of dirt made the Calf, and the wind made it low. As we have mentioned before, the notion that the Calf's

---

<sup>144</sup> Note also Saleh's discussion of polyvalence in classical Quran commentaries; he argues that in fact only Tha'labī really has an authentic conception of scriptural polyvalency, whereas both Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī give the *appearance* of such a conception, while in fact seeking to constrain the interpretive options presented to the reader. This appraisal is in fact quite congruous with our own observations of the exegetical strategies pursued by Ṭabarī in his presentation, but we would also argue that Tha'labī can hardly be thought to be innocent of this either; see our discussion of his *tafsīr* in the next chapter.

lowing was only caused by the wind seems to have been particularly associated with the Mu'tazila, probably formulated as a response to the traditional interpretation of the Calf episode, best represented by the Suddī tradition, which posits that the Calf was produced miraculously and seemed to be alive. The traditions connected with Ibn 'Abbās and other authorities (Ibn Zayd, Mujāhid) that claim that the Calf was mechanical rather than magical in nature thus appear to have been appropriated from rationalist circles and adapted in conformity with the style of exegesis preferred by the traditionists, namely, rendered into hadith transmitted on the authority of Companions and Successors.

However, the Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn Zayd, and Mujāhid traditions seem to represent only a *partial* adaptation of Mu'tazilite exegesis, for in point of fact, judging by later citations of exegetes such as al-Jubbā'ī, the Mu'tazila held that the Calf's origins were wholly mundane. This is in sharp contrast with the way in which the Calf seems to be created in these traditions in Ṭabarī.<sup>145</sup> More specifically, the view that Ṭabarī advocates, what we have termed the Ibn 'Abbās position, in fact represents the *least* miraculous view of the Calf one can imagine *while still maintaining the miraculous function of the dirt*. That is, in a fully "rationalist" account, Sāmirī would appear as a complete charlatan, fashioning the Calf by hand so that the wind would cause it to low, thus denying any magical or miraculous aspect to the story at all. But in this case, what would have been the purpose of the handful of dirt Sāmirī is said to have used in Q.20:96? Admittedly, one could argue that since the description of this occurs in the words of Sāmirī himself, that it is a lie; as we have seen, some modern exegetes such as Mawdūdī use this approach.

We will argue, however, that Ṭabarī's reason for promoting the Ibn 'Abbās position has everything to do with the fact that without some specific narrative function for Sāmirī's "handful from the track of the messenger," there was too much potential for readings of the episode to veer

---

<sup>145</sup> And recall again the presentation of al-Sijistānī, where his authority Abū 'Umar is cited *ad loc.* Q.7:148 as stating that the Calf only lowed due to the passage of wind through its body, and yet the interpretation of *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* as a handful from the literal track of the angelic messenger is acknowledged in his statement appearing in the comments *ad loc.* Q.20:96.

back towards what we have suggested is the original meaning of the Quranic episode—that the “handful” is in fact the prophetic example set by Moses that “Sāmīrī,” that is, *Aaron*, was obligated to follow. On the other hand, for Ṭabarī, maintaining the supernatural associations of the *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* as the “handful of dirt from the track of the angelic messenger” likely served as a smokescreen obscuring the metaphorical interpretation of the phrase, preventing a reversion to the original meaning of the episode that the story of Sāmīrī and the animate Calf was intended to supplant.

Overall, the degree to which the different interpretations of the Calf cited by Ṭabarī seem to blend into one another becomes more apparent when we adduce evidence from outside of his commentary. Trying to decipher the nuances of the data yielded by Ṭabarī’s commentary is difficult enough by itself, but when we take the data from earlier texts into account as well, the situation becomes even more complex—as in the case of Muqātil’s apparent inconsistencies—and the permutations of the story of the Calf’s creation begin to seem virtually endless. It would be natural to conclude that the diversity of opinion apparent in this particular case in Ṭabarī’s commentary (and other early examples of the genre as well) must in fact reflect that which characterized the early exegetical tradition as a whole. But it turns out that the apparent diversity of opinion exhibited in Ṭabarī’s commentary is one that is carefully managed and manipulated to *control* diversity, to impose a particular order upon it and bring certain ideas to the foreground while marginalizing or even suppressing others.

Again, there was no doubt a great amount of disagreement among early exegetes regarding the nature of the Calf, as with many other matters; and it seems wholly plausible that this diversity of opinion ultimately derived from the gradual evolution of *tafsīr* in the milieu of popular storytelling and preaching. Once a certain basic understanding of the Quranic Calf as animate or quasi-animate and lowing had emerged, preachers, storytellers, and commentators amplified and modified this basic interpretation as they saw fit. But already by the time the early *tafsīr* tradition began to be textualized, authors like Muqātil saw fit to amend and manipulate the

received tradition to promote certain interpretations and exclude others. This enterprise was continued by and in a certain sense reaches its culmination with Ṭabarī. In the next chapter, we will seek to reconstruct the actual contours of the early exegetical tradition, restoring the interpretive landscape as it were, from evidence contained in later examples of the genre; examining evidence taken from other extant *tafsīrs* dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries will enable us to better appreciate the subtleties and nuances—to say nothing of the glaring omissions—of Ṭabarī's presentation of the Calf narrative.

**Chapter 6:**  
**Reevaluating Ṭabarī's Achievement:**  
**A Brilliant Failure?**

The meaning of His statement *Then you took the Calf in his absence and did wrong...* is: you took it as a god [in worship]. This is because they would not be doing wrong simply through the act of making the Calf in itself, on account that it is not a forbidden act per se, simply a detested one.

Ḥasan said: It became flesh and blood. Others objected that this is impossible, since that would constitute an evidentiary miracle of the sort associated with the prophets.

Abū Ja'far Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī (d. 459/1066), *Al-Tibyān*

As should now be quite clear, Ṭabarī's commentary yields a dizzying amount of information regarding how the Calf might have come into being and what lay behind its apparent animation, addressing (but usually not resolving) questions such as whether the handful of dirt Sāmirī took from the hoofprint of Gabriel's horse created the Calf from the golden ornaments, or rather Sāmirī fabricated the Calf by hand from the gold himself; whether the Calf's lowing was a magical effect of Sāmirī's throwing that dirt into its (presumably inanimate) golden form, or rather was simply caused by the movement of wind through passages built into it so it would appear to low like a real calf; and, perhaps most critically and tantalizingly, whether the lowing was a mere illusion, the consequence of a charlatan's trickery, or rather indicates that Sāmirī accomplished something rather more miraculous here, the Calf "lowing and walking about" according to the tradition attributed to the Successor Suddī.

Further, as we have just discussed, although Ṭabarī's presentation of the material differs from place to place in his commentary, it is clear that he essentially only acknowledges three discrete views, each of which may be associated with distinct authorities among the Companions and Successors, namely Ibn 'Abbās, Qatāda, and Suddī. The view of Ibn 'Abbās in particular is bolstered by adducing traditions from other authorities such as Mujāhid and Ibn Zayd; moreover, some of the traditions Ṭabarī cites are harder to categorize because of their brevity or ambiguity, and, in the final analysis, some of the evidence supporting the "majority" view associated with Ibn 'Abbās' appears to be somewhat questionable. We have concluded that Ṭabarī's role in shaping material transmitted from the *salaf*, even by simply encouraging the reader to draw certain conclusions through his presentation, can hardly be characterized as a merely passive and receptive one. While some scholars have accepted that Ṭabarī actively worked to shape that material, effectively giving the reader a distorted picture of the views of his predecessors, this insight has largely been confined to his activity as an historian; scholars of his Quran commentary have far less often been willing to countenance the idea that he did the same in his presentation of the early *tafsīr* tradition.

Even given the active role he took in shaping his presentation of the early exegetical tradition, the main phenomenon to which the diverse material presented by Ṭabarī attests is the considerable degree of disagreement or *ikhtilāf* encompassed within the contours of that tradition; this is confirmed by other witnesses to the early stages of that tradition's development, for example the *tafsīr* of Muqātil. The Golden Calf narrative is certainly not the only case that can serve to illustrate this point, but this particular example does demonstrate the sheer variety of opinions that the early exegetes could adopt on the questions generated by obscure scriptural allusions of relatively minor import. At the same time, however, it is not just that the key phrase *a calf, a body that lows* spontaneously gave rise to a variety of arbitrary conjectures as to its possible meaning; rather, it seems more accurate to say that at some point very early on in the interpretation of the Quranic text, *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* was correlated with another elliptical phrase that occurs in one of the two scriptural contexts in which it is found, namely *qabḍtu qabḍat<sup>an</sup> min athar al-rasūl fa-nabadhtuhā*, and the conjunction of these two elements then provided a basis for the elaboration of the story of Sāmīrī's nefarious doings at Sinai. However, once this version of events became the prevailing interpretation of what the Quranic passage in question described—an interpretation that we have already suggested may differ considerably from its significance in the context of the Quranic narrative itself—exegetes still had to puzzle out the specifics of the story.

It was assumed by all (or almost all) commentators that the phrase *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* signifies either an *image* or a *body* of a calf that lowed (meaning specifically that it lowed at the moment of its creation or shortly thereafter), and likewise that the *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* meant a literal handful of dirt taken from the track of the messenger Gabriel, or, more typically, his angelic steed. But sorting out further details associated with the narrative required some effort and created a host of further elaborations on the tale—interpretation of the interpretation. Notably, the absolute hegemony of the primary interpretation upon which these secondary elaborations were foisted is unquestionable; despite the clear *ikhtilāf* reflected in the texts of Muqātil, al-



Sijistānī, Ṭabarī, et al., none of them attempt to gloss the narrative without citing *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* as a key proof-text speaking to the nature of the Calf, and almost never without citing the “handful from the track of the messenger” in connection with it. For some reason, these phrases rapidly became indispensable in commentary on the episode, and always compel significant attention from exegetes.<sup>1</sup>

Besides demonstrating the considerable (but certainly not boundless) *ikhtilāf* these phrases provoked among early commentators, examining the details and context of the various traditions allows us to see some of the most characteristic traits of the exegetes at work. For example, regarding Muqātil b. Sulaymān, particularly in the case of his comments on Q.2:51-56, we have seen the extensive narrative expansions he builds up around each verse. Further, it is no exaggeration to say that in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, each separate scriptural reference to a specific episode potentially generates a distinct, autonomous narrative with its own dominant themes and ideas. Regarding the *tafsīr* of Ṭabarī, on the other hand, we see analogous processes at work, despite the profound differences between the two exegetes and the interval of almost two centuries that separates them. Each preserves a significant amount of the *ikhtilāf* of previous generations of Quranic commentators, albeit in different ways; further, each implicitly or explicitly militates against disagreeable interpretations (often the *same* disagreeable interpretations), likewise in different ways. We have already examined at length, for example, how Ṭabarī’s placement and presentation of received materials on the Calf serves to promote certain interpretations and conceal—if not suppress—others.

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare this with the contrary example of the key phrase from Q.20:97, *fa-inna la-ka fī'l-ḥayāt an taqūla lā misāsa* (rendered by Ahmed Ali as *All your life you are (cursed) to say: Do not touch me!*) While this verse, which appears to describe Sāmīrī’s punishment for making the Calf, would seem to be of comparable importance for understanding the nature of his actions, in point of fact, early and classical exegetes seem to have been relatively uninterested in commenting upon it; Ṭabarī’s remarks on it, for example, are rather paltry. This verse is obviously crucial for linking Sāmīrī to the Samaritans, but the influx of ethnographic details on the Samaritan community into Muslim scholarship seems to be a medieval phenomenon. For example, as we saw above in Chapter 2, much of al-Maqrīzī’s influential account was derived directly from older Jewish and Christian sources and not built on the foundation of previous *tafsīr*.

Thus, the seemingly trivial matter of how different commentators among the Companions and Successors explained the Quran's oblique reference to the creation of *a calf, a body that lows* at Sinai shows us not only how much speculation could be stimulated by a single elliptical Quranic phrase, but also how one of our most important witnesses to the early *tafsīr* tradition actively but quietly manipulated the received material at his disposal. If nothing else, our examination demonstrates how carefully classical compilations such as Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* must be read, with a keen eye turned towards their subtle interpretive agendas. Therefore, beyond the issue of the putative authenticity or inauthenticity of the attributions of the hadith collected therein, the far more pressing question is whether classical compilations of traditionally transmitted material accurately represent the diversity of views generally expressed in the earlier tradition. Although Western scholars have almost always seen both the early Islamic historical tradition and the hadith corpus (especially the latter) as fundamentally tendentious, at the same time, the basic reliability of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-century *collectors*—Bukhārī, Muslim, and the other compilers of the Six Books in particular—has generally been taken for granted.

That is to say, even though it may be widely acknowledged, or at least suspected, that the projection of extant traditions back onto the Companions and Successors—and even (especially) the Prophet himself—or even the wholesale fabrication of traditions might have been common practice in the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is usually taken for granted that collectors such as Bukhārī were basically honest and represented the material they received accurately. It is typically presumed that by this time, the prevailing ethos of traditionism and the refinement of hadith scholarship must have acted as powerful disincentives to tampering or outright forgery. As if personal integrity were somehow really the main issue, the sincerity and honesty of the scholars of the classical period are very seldom impugned. Thus, the claim that the Six Books, especially the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, represent at least the attempt to conserve the most reliable hadith in circulation towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century is challenged so infrequently that Juynboll's casual allegation that Muslim himself simply forged some of the *isnāds* in his collection in order to

bolster weakly supported traditions is startling, even if one is not particularly invested in the question of the authenticity of the hadith corpus.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, despite his reputation as a staunch champion of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, it is quite clear not only that Ṭabarī is no mere anthologist, but also that his biases and preferences had a distinct impact on the hadith he collected. Even beyond the question of his specific arrangement or presentation of material—through which he promotes or marginalizes certain views despite refusing to explicitly endorse or reject them—by examining additional data taken from other collections of traditional material, we can cast his exegetical activity in a significantly different light, one in which the underlying theological as well as exegetical presuppositions guiding his interpretation may become clearer. As it turns out, despite the sometimes incomplete or poorly attested nature of other early collections of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*, there is enough extant evidence regarding the state of traditionally transmitted *tafsīr* in Ṭabarī's day to allow us to demonstrate that in at least a handful of instances, he was in fact entirely selective in his representation of the older tradition, manipulating the received material he had at hand directly as well as indirectly.

It is not until we compare our data from the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, al-Sijistānī, and Ṭabarī with that found in other works of traditional exegesis—some of highly ambiguous or debated provenance—that we can fully appreciate the degree to which these early authors, especially Ṭabarī, attempted to constrain the possibilities for interpretation, despite the appearance of embracing considerable *ikhtilāf*. Appreciating the full contours of the *tafsīr* tradition on the Calf (as well as many other subjects of commentary, one suspects) requires that we examine numerous sources and attempt to piece together a fuller picture of the exegetical field;

---

<sup>2</sup> Juynboll, “Nāfi’, the *mawlā* of Ibn ‘Umar, and his Position in Muslim *Hadīth* Literature.” Cf. also his evaluation of the *Muwatta’*: “Mālik’s role in the wording and transmission of what we might cautiously call his *matns* has until today not been fully realized” (238; by “his *matns*” Juynboll means texts that Mālik either invented or significantly reworked). The general attitude regarding the basic fidelity of the classical collectors that we have described here stands in sharp contrast with modern Muslim ideologues’ allegations regarding *isrā’īliyyāt*, which leads the most radical critics to indict Ṭabarī and even Bukhārī for disseminating this material. This discourse is naturally of a qualitatively different character, however.

as it turns out, we must rely on certain sources dating from as late as the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century to acquire a better understanding of what the possibilities for interpretation really were in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries. For instance, what we might term the most rationalist conception of the Calf, that of the Mu'tazila, who seem to have held that the Calf was a mere statue, was partially obscured by later commentators; exegetes from this school apparently claimed not only that the Calf had lowed only due to the passage of wind through its body (as is also claimed in exegetical hadith attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn Zayd, and Mujāhid by Ṭabarī), but also that Sāmīrī had manufactured the body of the Calf by hand (in *contrast* to these very same traditions, in which the body of the Calf is created magically).

Likewise, what we might see as the most supernaturally-oriented conception of the Calf, namely, that the Calf was genuinely animate, seems to have been purged almost completely from the classical *tafsīr* tradition, a few obscure hints notwithstanding. We might think of traditions such as that attributed to Qatāda by Ṭabarī that present the Calf as lowing continually as dim vestiges of an earlier strain of interpretation—possibly the *earliest*—in which the Calf was thought of as being fully, unambiguously, gloriously *animate*, a real flesh-and-blood animal created from transmuted gold. Authors of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century apparently worked very hard to expunge this view from the realm of acceptable interpretation, along with others that they deemed unacceptable. That they did not succeed becomes particularly clear when we examine *tafsīrs* of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards, for despite the marginalization of certain exegetical options that are almost wholly unacknowledged in the early tradition, merely a century after Ṭabarī, other authors already felt free to make unambiguous reference to them.

## 1. Traces of the living Calf in early *tafsīr*: the “real” Qatāda tradition

To briefly summarize our previous findings, even if we restrict our investigation to exegetical hadith that specifically address how the Calf was created and what the nature of its *khawār* was, between the three passages in his commentary where Ṭabarī examines these questions at length (*ad loc.* Q.2:50-51, 20:87-88 and 95-96), we find traditions traced back to no fewer than five major authorities among the Companions and Successors, transmitted through eleven separate *isnāds*—one each from Suddī and Ibn Zayd, two from Qatāda, three from Ibn ‘Abbās, and four from Mujāhid. However, as we have already noted, this wealth of material really only adds up to three (or possibly four) distinct interpretive positions regarding the creation and animation of the Calf. All of them seem to share certain basic presuppositions, namely that the Calf was made of metal, specifically from the gold that the Israelites had either borrowed or spoliated from the Egyptians, and that the Israelites originally had the best of intentions in gathering up and handing over the jewelry, in that they were commanded by either Aaron or Sāmīrī to give it up since it was not licit to keep it, and it would potentially become a “source of sin” for them.

Further, at least as reflected in Ṭabarī’s traditions and in other early commentaries as well (Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, al-Sijistānī), the debate really centers on only two key issues: whether the Calf was fashioned by Sāmīrī by hand or else emerged miraculously from the gold through the application of the handful of dirt, and whether the Calf was actually animated (either momentarily or for some prolonged period of time) by the use of the dirt or else only *appeared* to possess life because of the lowing sound made by the passage of wind through it. On the former question, the debate seems to be defined by the Qatāda tradition as well as the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās on one side and the Ibn ‘Abbās tradition (and those which seem to corroborate it) on the other. On the latter question, the opposing positions are exemplified by Suddī on the one side and Ibn ‘Abbās once again on the other.

As already mentioned, it has recently been argued that Ṭabarī's characteristic practice of providing substantial amounts of information regarding diametrically opposed positions suggests that in his work as an exegete, his primary aim was to emphasize the underlying themes and deeper moral and spiritual significance of scriptural episodes. That significance could be communicated entirely apart from the specific details found within these episodes, and thus, even though these details may in many instances seem to be freighted with profound religious or even political import, Ṭabarī may have thought that they were ultimately of only secondary consequence. The obvious example of this, one discussed at length by both Firestone and Gilliot, is of course the question of whether the son of Abraham destined for sacrifice was Ishmael or Isaac.

While this principle might in fact apply in the specific case of *al-dhabīh*, and, if extrapolated to Ṭabarī's activity as an exegete as a whole, may very well provide an elegant interpretation of the embrace of *ikhṭilāf* or interpretive diversity that seems to characterize the *Jāmi' al-bayān* overall, nevertheless, we might argue that such an approach probably makes Ṭabarī seem far too ecumenical. That is, while it may very well be true that Ṭabarī wants to underline the deeper moral or spiritual lessons to be learned from stories such as that of Abraham's sacrifice, we need not therefore conclude that he was completely agnostic and refused to advocate one position over another. In the final analysis, such an interpretation of Ṭabarī's hermeneutic not only makes him seem far more modern (or postmodern) than is really warranted; it also reinforces the classic characterization of him (and of others like him who worked with traditionally transmitted materials) as a mere compiler first and foremost.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say, however, that I disagree entirely with Gilliot's characterization of Ṭabarī's exegetical choices as primarily driven by his desire to embody the principle of *ijmā'*; on the contrary, I would argue that Ṭabarī exercised his powers of selection and discrimination precisely to marginalize those points of view that he believed could not *possibly* be representative of the emergent Sunnī consensus as he understood it. Of course, paradoxical though it seems, that consensus was both something to which Ṭabarī strove to conform and something that was effectively constructed through his own exegetical activity as well. The same is true for other architects of Sunnī *'ijma* such as Ibn Ḥanbal, al-Tha'labī, and al-Ghazālī.

While one might initially get the impression from the generous amount of material cited by Ṭabarī that his intention is to provide the reader with maximum latitude in interpreting the Golden Calf episode, as we have already seen, this is really not the case. In particular, in the case of his representation of the position he associates with Ibn ‘Abbās in his treatment of the Golden Calf episode, Ṭabarī’s selection and arrangement of traditions seems to be specifically tailored to maximize the impression that the view he favors has the greatest authority and was most widespread among the early exegetes. An examination of other, more or less contemporary collections of traditional material from the 9<sup>th</sup> and early 10<sup>th</sup> centuries (or possibly before, though it is difficult to say with certainty) in fact demonstrates that Ṭabarī, despite the sizable amount of material he includes in his *tafsīr*, appears to have completely avoided one very important view of the Calf, and the same appears to be true of Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, and al-Sijistānī as well, for *none* of them acknowledge this interpretation explicitly, although later commentators did so. This is the idea that the Calf was not only continually animate, a walking, lowing statue with a genuine *rūh*, but in point of fact was actually alive, made of flesh and blood.

It may in fact be quite plausibly argued that this marginalized interpretation was the *original*, oldest interpretation of the Calf episode, and that many other later interpretations seem to take it for granted and react against it. We have already suggested that this might have been the case with the Suddī tradition, in which the Calf is created and actually walked around and lowed as well as possessing an authentic *rūh*. Arguably, the idea that the Calf was actually flesh and blood might actually be presupposed by the Suddī tradition; it is even possible that this is really what the Suddī tradition is really getting at.

If we posit that this interpretation may have been prevalent or even dominant in the earliest phase of the *tafsīr* tradition’s development, we may then proceed to reevaluate some of the traditions we have already discussed, which appear in a clearer light once we realize that they may represent deliberate *reactions* against the view embodied (so to speak!) by this marginalized interpretation. Thus, even though Ṭabarī provides us with a substantial amount of material on the

Calf in his commentary, this by no means reflects an indiscriminate representation of the various exegetical possibilities embraced by earlier generations of exegetes; not only does he implicitly favor some views over others, but he was in fact clearly not above simply censoring the earlier tradition as well. Again, the impression we therefore receive of his exegetical activity is that he strove to manage, or even *minimize*, the range of exegetical possibility to some extent; even though he permits a degree of *ikhtilāf* in admitting a plurality of interpretations, these are nevertheless still implicitly constrained by his preferences and judgments, and in the end only represent those possibilities he saw fit to acknowledge and enfranchise. Other possibilities could not even be countenanced, and so Ṭabarī and his peers quietly militated against them, without ever explicitly mentioning them; once evidence is adduced that demonstrates that these exegetes were most likely aware of these other possibilities, however, it becomes possible to read between the lines, as it were, and to see how Ṭabarī is quietly addressing and dismissing these views as illegitimate.<sup>4</sup>

That Ṭabarī should have done so is hardly surprising; simply because in his day the received interpretations passed down from previous generations of exegetes were given pride of place in Quran commentary (as in other branches of religious creativity) hardly implies that *all* of the received interpretations known in his day were accepted equally. Put another way, even if a tradition aspires to be pluralistic or ecumenical—as the ideal of *ijmā'* or consensus seems to imply—does not mean that it is necessarily boundless, or endlessly permeable, or indiscriminately hospitable to all views equally.

There are interpretive possibilities that Ṭabarī and his contemporaries (as well as their immediate predecessors) wished to enfranchise *as* possibilities, while others, in their view, were

---

<sup>4</sup> This is a phenomenon that is commonly encountered when dealing with polemical texts, for example. When investigating various discourses in early Islamic civilization, one often has to struggle to reconstruct the positions that a given author presupposes and reacts against; and arguably, many developments in “orthodox” Sunnī or Twelver Shī'ite law, doctrine, and exegesis are in fact reactions to aspects of earlier tradition that were successfully marginalized and virtually eradicated from memory.



simply beyond the pale of legitimate interpretation. The exegetical diversity Ṭabarī presents is not a sign of a global tolerance of all potential interpretations, but is rather indicative of his attempt to wield a degree of control over the material by silently dictating what the precise boundaries of the debate in this specific case (and no doubt in many others besides) should be. To suppose anything less is to underestimate the role of Ṭabarī and his colleagues in shaping the received tradition, and to once again render him a “mere” anthologist, a passive collector of tradition. It is simply unrealistic to claim that his degree of control over the material presented in the *Jāmi’ al-bayān* rests solely on his advocating one view or the other after naïvely representing all possible points of view, for he was by no means forced to present all options as equally valid or even possible.

\*\*\*

In his comments on Q.20:87-88, Ṭabarī refers to two different opinions in circulation among the scholars (*ahl al-‘ilm*) regarding the means by which the Calf was brought into existence by Sāmīrī. The first option he gives is the view associated with Qatāda: “Some say he fashioned it by working the metal himself, then he threw some of the dirt from the hoof of Gabriel’s horse in its mouth, and it lowed.” As previously discussed, this interpretation is in fact only found in the *second* of the two traditions he then proceeds to quote. In the first, Sāmīrī is depicted throwing a figure of a calf he made from the Israelites’ golden jewelry together with the handful of dirt and the remainder of the jewelry; these elements then seem to have worked together to create the Calf. (The second tradition, which conforms to Ṭabarī’s description, represents the view of Muqātil *ad loc.* the Sūra 7 and 20 versions of the episodes, as well as that of Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās; additionally, both of them emphasize that the addition of the dirt made the Calf low only once and not again.) The second option given by Ṭabarī is that associated with Suddī, which claims that the handful of dirt cast among the gold ornaments discarded by the Israelites caused a fully-formed Calf to emerge miraculously from the gold, “lowing and walking

about”; notably, Ṭabarī refrains from actually describing this view, allowing the Suddī tradition to speak for itself, as it were. (As noted above, the first, more anomalous tradition attributed to Qatāda here is in the final analysis not all that different from that attributed to Suddī.)

In either case, one would assume from the descriptions given in these traditions that we are dealing with an animate Calf made of gold, a living statue such as one might find in the *Arabian Nights* or the medieval Jewish legends of the Golem. However, this impression appears to be quite wrong, at least as regards the interpretation or interpretations attributed to Qatāda, judging by other versions that were apparently in circulation in Ṭabarī’s day. Ṭabarī’s two versions of the Qatāda tradition read as follows:

[A] (→ Sa’īd b. Abī ‘Arūba)

*For thus did Sāmīrī throw [them] away... (Q.20:87):* He said: God had appointed thirty nights for Moses, then completed them with ten more. When the thirty passed, the enemy of God, Sāmīrī, said: Truly, whatever befalls you will befall you as punishment for the jewelry that you have with you, so bring it here! It was jewelry they had borrowed from the people of Pharaoh; then they went forth [from Egypt] while they had it with them. So they threw it over to him, and he made it into the image of a cow (*fa-ṣawwarahā ṣūrat baqara*). Beforehand he had secreted in his turban or his robe a handful from the track of Gabriel’s horse, and he threw this together with the jewelry and the image, and *then he produced for them a calf, a body that lows (vs.88)*, and then it began to make the lowing sound that cows make, and he said: *This is your God and the God of Moses...*  
(cont’d.)

[B] (→ Ma’mar b. Rashīd)

When Moses kept his people waiting, Sāmīrī said to them: Only I can prevent what is coming upon you on account of that jewelry you have with you! For they had borrowed jewelry from the people of Pharaoh. So they gathered it up and gave it to Sāmīrī, and then he made a calf from it (*fa-ṣāgha min-hu ‘ijl<sup>m</sup>*), and he took the handful which he had taken from the track of the horse, the horse

of the angel, and he cast it into it (*fī jawfihī*), and behold, it became *a calf, a body that lows* (vs. 88). They said: *This is your God and the God of Moses* (cont'd.)— but Moses forgot that his Lord is among you!<sup>5</sup>

Occasionally, we may be fortunate enough to be able to turn to other sources to corroborate Ṭabarī's transmissions from his authorities, and this is the case with one of his Qatāda traditions. The extant *tafsīr* attributed to 'Abd al-Razzāq contains two similar traditions on the Calf attributed to Qatāda, one found in his comments on the Sūra 7 version of the episode, the other on the Sūra 20 version. The latter, commenting on Q.20:88, is in fact *identical* to the second version of the tradition given by Ṭabarī (version B).<sup>6</sup> This is hardly surprising, since the *tafsīr* of 'Abd al-Razzāq is based in large part on an orally transmitted work of his teacher Ma'mar, the authority from whom Ṭabarī is supposed to have received *his* version of the tradition. Ma'mar b. Rashīd himself was in turn a leading student of Qatāda, from whom much of the content of both 'Abd al-Razzāq's *Tafsīr* and *Muṣannaḥ* was transmitted.

However, regarding the *former* tradition cited by 'Abd al-Razzāq (i.e., that commenting on Q.7:148), it has exactly the same *isnād* as the latter tradition (Qatāda—Ma'mar—'Abd al-Razzāq), but it appears to be slightly different from it. It is essentially an abbreviated version of

---

<sup>5</sup> *Jāmi' al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.200.

<sup>6</sup> *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, 2.375, no.1824. The published edition of the *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* is an eclectic text edited by Maḥmūd Muḥammad 'Abduh from two partial manuscripts. 'Abd al-Razzāq transmitted his text to his pupil Salama b. Shabīb, who transmitted it to his pupil al-Khashanī; after the latter's transmission of the work to his students, three discrete *riwāyāt* emerged, and 'Abduh's main witness, the Dār al-Kutub manuscript, represents a distinctly Spanish line of transmission. On the students of 'Abd al-Razzāq who transmitted his *tafsīr*, see 'Abduh, *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, 1.58-60; on the manuscripts, 1.221-7; and on al-Khashanī and the Spanish transmission of the text, 1.229-34. Motzki relies heavily on medieval attestations of multiple *isnāds* for 'Abd al-Razzāq's *Muṣannaḥ* in his argument for the authenticity of this author's hadith compilation; see "The Author and his Work in the Islamic Literature of the First Centuries: The Case of 'Abd al-Razzāq's *Muṣannaḥ*," esp. 176-83. The attestation of multiple *isnāds* for the *tafsīr* in the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century that go all the way back to al-Khashanī in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century likewise appears to demonstrate that *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* is a genuinely early work, redacted by the later 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> or early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century at the latest. 'Abd al-Razzāq seems to have transmitted a copious amount of material to be found in the *tafsīrs* of both Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim through Ḥasan b. Yaḥyā, who was a major source for both of these later authors.

the latter tradition, but diverges from it in one major respect, which distinguishes it from both the latter and Ṭabarī's Qatāda traditions as well.<sup>7</sup>

[C] (→ Ma'mar b. Rashīd)

*From their jewelry, a calf, a body... (Q.7:148). He said: they borrowed jewelry from the people of Pharaoh; Sāmīrī carried it off, and then he made a calf from it (fa-ṣāgha min-hu 'ijl<sup>m</sup>); then God made it into a body—of flesh and blood—that lows (cont'd.)<sup>8</sup>*

Suddenly the implications of Qatāda's interpretation become clear. It is not that the handful of dirt merely transformed the gold into a lowing image of a calf; rather, it brought forth from the gold a *real* calf, of flesh and blood (*lahm wa-damm*), which one would quite naturally expect to low. Thus Qatāda's position is not only that the Calf appeared to be animate, but that it was authentically *alive*.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, it must be admitted that in this version of the Qatāda tradition, both the handful of dirt and Gabriel's angelic steed are *completely absent*. Here, Sāmīrī fashions the form of the Calf and God makes it directly into a *jasad* of flesh and blood. But we would perhaps not be unjustified in concluding from this abbreviated tradition that the basic underlying conception of the Calf that informs all three versions of the Qatāda narrative is that the Calf was actually

---

<sup>7</sup> We will refer to this as version C; see Diagram 3 for clarification of the paths of transmission of the variant versions of the Qatāda tradition.

<sup>8</sup> *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, 2.90, no. 937. Note the editor's comments here: he observes that most commentators claim that the calf is made of gold, and is thus puzzled because this tradition seems to suggest that it is genuinely alive!

<sup>9</sup> Note that according to Qatāda's interpretation, the proper translation of the phrase *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* might thus be "a flesh-and-blood calf"—taking *jasad* as a real physical body—"the kind of animal that lows," and not, as some had it, "an image of a calf that emitted a lowing sound" (either once or continually). This seems to imply not only that our previous conjectures about the original or contextual meaning of the Quranic phrase might be correct, but also that the earliest stratum of interpretation currently extant in the *tafsīr* tradition—that seemingly reflected in the Qatāda tradition—*still recognized that contextual meaning on some level*, even though it obviously posits that the Calf was actually alive and could low (because it specifically was the *kind* of animal that lows).

Diagram 3: Versions of the Qatāda tradition on the animation of the Calf

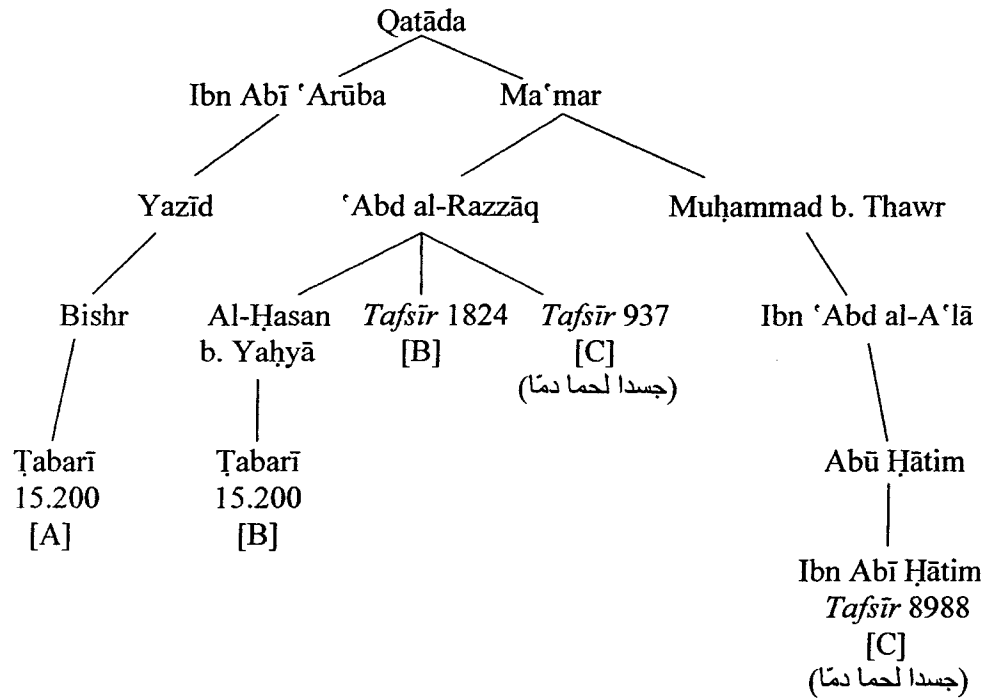
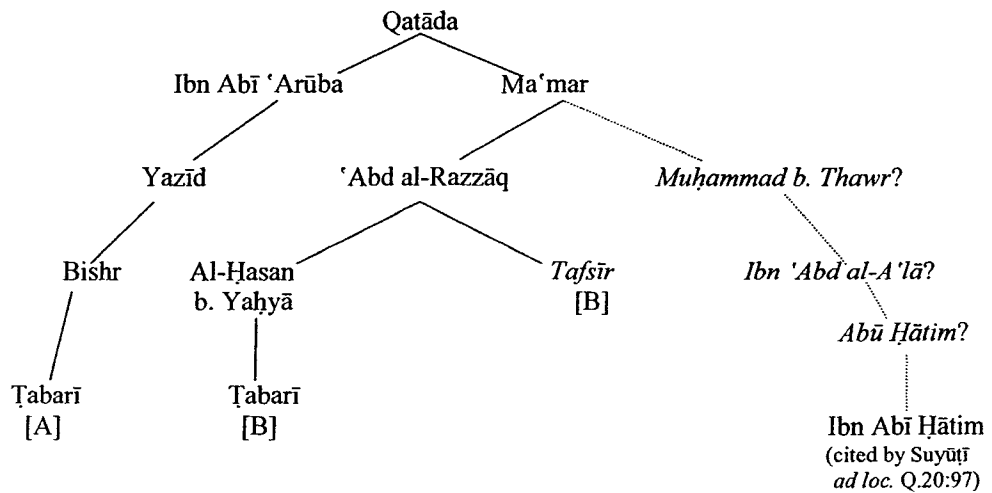


Diagram 3b: Versions of the Qatāda tradition on the slaughtering of the Calf



created as flesh and blood, a living animal, through the medium of the “handful from the track of the messenger.” It is this underlying commonality that explains the attribution of both versions A and B in particular to Qatāda despite their differences.<sup>10</sup> In version A, as we have just discussed, Sāmirī makes a golden image which, when combined with the rest of the golden ornaments and the magic dirt, yields a Calf which, as we now discern, was a living, flesh-and-blood Calf. In version B, Sāmirī is depicted as shaping a fully-formed (and presumably life-sized) statue of the Calf which “became a calf, a body that lows” (i.e. flesh and blood) due to the magic dirt inserted into its mouth (or rather, cast into its *jawf*). Despite the fact that the underlying procedure is different in each case, the same basic outcome results; it is thus presumably the common element of the handful of dirt and its transformative power that allows both traditions to be anchored in the name and reputation of Qatāda, and allows them to be distinguished from those traditions anchored in the name and reputation of Ibn ‘Abbās or Mujāhid, for example.

We are thus probably justified in “reading in” the handful of dirt as an implicit but critical element in version C as well. This brings up another point, namely the consequences of the adjustment of our understanding of the Qatāda tradition for our interpretation of the other traditions on the Calf. Considering the degree to which so many of the other versions of the narrative presented by Ṭabarī emphasize the theme of wondrous transformation, it is amazing that, among sources of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries, only here, in one short version of the Qatāda hadith in *Tafsīr ‘Abd al-Razzāq*, do we find any explicit reference to the Calf’s being transformed into flesh and blood. We might reasonably conclude that this is entirely deliberate,

---

<sup>10</sup> This also helps us to clarify a certain difficulty in the first version of the Qatāda tradition presented by Ṭabarī, that transmitted by Ibn Abī ‘Arūba (version A). Here, Sāmirī fashions the gold into an image of a cow (*ṣawwarahā ṣūrat baqara*), and takes out the handful of dirt he has been carrying around with him; instead of saying that he threw the dirt into the mouth of the image (as in many other versions of the narrative, even the other version attributed to Qatāda!), this version says that “he threw it together with the jewelry and the image” (*qadhafahā ma’a al-hulyy wa’l-ṣūra*). It is not that he has made a full-sized image of a calf which he expects to animate with the dirt, but rather, as we have already supposed, he has apparently made a kind of fetish from some of the gold, and combined it with the remaining gold and the dirt; the result, presumably, is that the agency of the dirt transmutes the gold into the shape of the fetish.

due to the exegetical and theological priorities of our various authors. We might also note that the repeated insistence of both Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās that the Calf was *not* genuinely alive now seems quite significant; their objections in fact presuppose knowledge of this particular strain of interpretation in the early tradition, and *transparently militate against it*.

In fact, neither Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās state explicitly that the Calf was *not* alive, but rather that it did not possess a *rūḥ*; however, we might quite reasonably conclude that claims that the Calf *did* possess an animating *rūḥ* were not meant to suggest that the Calf was an animate statue but rather that it was authentically alive, flesh and blood, as in the Qatāda versions. This in turn may imply that Suddī’s interpretation (which states both that the Calf walked about and lowed continually and that God inspired it with a *rūḥ*) *might posit a flesh-and-blood Calf as well*.<sup>11</sup> And finally, this *also* hypothetically explains the background to Muqātil’s comments on Sūra 2, where he preserves the dialogue between God and Moses that alleges that it was God Himself who introduced *fitna* among the Israelites by inspiring the Calf; here too do we find a Calf that seemingly possessed life, possessed a *rūḥ*.

Admittedly, it is also quite feasible that the Suddī tradition does *not* posit a full-blown transmutation of the Calf into flesh and blood, but rather, as we have noted, presumes that it became a living statue; in the end, we simply have no way of telling from the evidence directly at hand.<sup>12</sup> What *is* clear is that the traditions we have associated with Ibn ‘Abbās, the “majority”

---

<sup>11</sup> Note that both the Suddī tradition and the second Qatāda tradition in Ṭabarī’s collection describe the calf as *continually* lowing—in that of Suddī, it was “lowing and walking” (*yakhūru wa-yamshī*); in the second Qatāda tradition, it “*began to make the lowing sound that cows make*” (*ja’ala yakhūru khuwār al-baqar*). To my knowledge, there are no extant versions of Suddī’s tradition that specifically mention the Calf’s transformation into flesh and blood, but, as we shall see, later commentators attribute the opinion that the Calf was flesh and blood to both Qatāda and Suddī.

<sup>12</sup> As already noted, in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88, Ṭabarī specifically juxtaposes the two Qatāda traditions with that of Suddī as representative of opposite positions on the Calf; the former seem to represent the view that Sāmīrī made the Calf by hand, the latter that it was spontaneously generated by the handful of dirt. If both the Qatāda and the Suddī traditions originally stated that the Calf that resulted from Sāmīrī’s procedure (whatever it was) was in fact truly alive, it is ironic

position as presented by Ṭabarī, may be taken as similarly presupposing that at least some exegetes held that the Calf was actually alive. Their insistence that the Calf only lowed with the passage of wind through its body—implying in turn that the magically produced form of the Calf was only metal and remained metal (and inert metal at that)—quite logically constitutes an argument against the position of Qatāda, and possibly that of Suddī as well.<sup>13</sup>

Again, this is likewise true of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, who do not state that the Calf was alive per se, but only that it did not possess a *rūḥ*. Further, we can now recognize the references in each to the Calf’s lowing once (and only once) with the casting of the dirt into its mouth as an attempt to appropriate an image employed in the earlier exegetical tradition (Sāmīrī uses the dirt to make the Golden Calf low). However, the effect of this appropriation is to *dislocate* the motif from its original context, in which the gesture as originally depicted effects a miracle with which both later commentators seem to have been uncomfortable. As Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās describe it, Sāmīrī’s miracle seems quite meager—after all, why should the Israelites have been impressed that a handful of dirt made a hollow golden statue moo?—and the motif makes much more sense if it is understood to reflect a description that was originally far more generous and imaginative.

In other words, Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās undertake one strategy to militate against the Qatāda/Suddī position: the dirt *did* make the Calf low, but only once—it was the crucial element, but it only produced the momentary *appearance* of life, and not genuine life. The

---

that Ṭabarī deliberately juxtaposes them here. Would we in fact be justified in concluding that he knew that both had originally represented such a claim?

<sup>13</sup> Or rather that *attributed* to Qatāda, and possibly Suddī as well. Again, we do not mean to suggest that we are dealing with the authentic views of the authorities among the Companions and Successors to whom these traditions are attributed. The situation here has become particularly awkward, in that we are dealing not with actual cultural artifacts of the period of the *Ṣaḥāba* and *Tābi‘ūn* but rather later recollections of them, or rather invocations of their authority, and this is now further complicated by the fact that we can apparently point to some degree of manipulation of the material that was attributed to them. In other words, it seems that we are not dealing with the views that were *initially* attributed to them, but rather a secondary stage of development in which the initial views attributed to them have been obscured or concealed through programmatic misrepresentation.



position represented by Ibn ‘Abbās in Ṭabarī’s commentary represents another: the causality of the Qatāda/Suddī position is inverted, in that the handful of dirt is allowed the role of *creating* the form of the Calf, but it is *denied* the power to effect even that momentary appearance of life that Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās grant it.

\*\*\*

We should reiterate at this juncture that version B, which states that Sāmīrī “took the handful which he had taken from the track of the horse, the horse of the angel, and cast it into it (*fī jawfihi*), and behold, it became *a calf, a body that lows...*,” is common to the *tafsīrs* of both Ṭabarī and ‘Abd al-Razzāq. As such, we should not assume at the outset that the former simply expurgated any reference to the Calf’s becoming flesh and blood from the two versions of the Qatāda hadith he cites (A and B); after all, ‘Abd al-Razzāq quotes *both* B and C, seemingly unconcerned with the discrepancy between them.<sup>14</sup> Ṭabarī’s version A very well *could* have included reference to the Calf’s being flesh and blood at some point, but it is difficult to tell for sure.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Note again that versions B and C are fundamentally compatible: both presume that Sāmīrī made the Calf by hand (even using exactly the same terminology, *fa-ṣāgha min-hu ‘ijl<sup>m</sup>*), and that it was transformed or animated by supernatural means. It is thus most likely that C is simply an abbreviation of B, even though the former includes the gloss about the Calf becoming flesh and blood and omits any reference to the handful of dirt.

<sup>15</sup> Then again, the fact that ‘Abd al-Razzāq has one version that omits the detail about the Calf’s being flesh and blood (B) and one that includes it (C) forces us to conclude that *someone* in the *isnād* of version B (presumably either Qatāda or Ma‘mar, since it is unlikely to have been ‘Abd al-Razzāq himself) must have been responsible for its omission. Since these are the same authorities responsible for transmitting version C, it is completely unclear why such a crucial detail would have been left merely implicit in version B while being made totally explicit in the much shorter version C. Assuming that the *isnāds* are authentic, the distinction seems completely arbitrary. The situation becomes somewhat clearer if we consult another collection of exegetical hadith, for the *Tafsīr* of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, which we shall discuss more presently, preserves a single version of the Qatāda tradition *ad loc.* Q.7:148, one that is, in fact, *identical* to version C from *Tafsīr ‘Abd al-Razzāq*. As the upper part of the *isnād* attests to its transmission from Qatāda to Ma‘mar to Muḥammad b. Thawr (and not ‘Abd al-Razzāq), we must conclude that version C—

As we have already mentioned, we cannot really accuse Ṭabarī of deliberately altering the versions of the Qatāda tradition preserved in his *tafsīr*, since we have no direct evidence to suggest that he removed a direct reference to the Calf's being flesh and blood from his text of version B of the Qatāda tradition (or from version A either). We *would* suggest, nevertheless, that Ṭabarī was undoubtedly familiar with the idea that the Calf was flesh and blood, but simply wished to avoid calling attention to it or acknowledging it in any but the most oblique and indirect way. Because of his near-total silence regarding this idea, the obscure references in his commentary that seem to hint at it become all the more conspicuous thereby. Not the least of these is perhaps the comment in version A of the Qatāda tradition (transmitted from Ibn Abī 'Arūba) that the Calf *began to low* (*fa-ja'ala yakhūru khuwār al-baqar*) when it came forth out of the assembled golden ornaments, for this remark seems to suggest that the underlying conception here is one of continuous animation and thus possibly of a fully animate—if not fully *organic*—Calf.

Another such element comes clearly into view when we take other traditions preserved in the *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* into consideration, for example one that specifically alludes to the strange epithet of Gabriel's steed, *dābat al-ḥayāt*, which we have already seen in other texts and traditions. Among his comments on Q.20:87-88, just after the citation of version B of the Qatāda tradition (that is, the one that *omits* any reference to the Calf's being flesh and blood), 'Abd al-Razzāq cites a short tradition in the name of the early authority al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), whom we have already discussed previously as the possible source of what we have called *Tafsīr Pseudo-*

---

and *specifically* its unique inclusion of the reference to the flesh and blood Calf—really originated at least as early as Ma'mar, and perhaps even with Qatāda himself (see Diagram 3 again). Thus, Ma'mar or Qatāda did transmit at least one version of this tradition that stated explicitly that the Calf was flesh and blood, which would perhaps imply that we should perhaps be skeptical of traditions attributed to them that omit this crucial detail. In fact, in the absence of more data, we can conclude that they did in fact transmit versions that *omitted* this detail only if *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* is genuinely independent of Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān*, an issue that has yet to really be addressed in modern scholarship; if *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* happens to be a *post facto* derivation from Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, then the inconsistency makes perfect sense, for then we could simply conclude that Ṭabarī himself was responsible for the omission.

*Ibn 'Abbās*. In this short tradition, we find a close parallel to the Qatāda tradition, one that, like version B of the latter cited just beforehand, seems to either avoid the notion that the Calf was transformed into a flesh and blood animal, or else simply overlooks it: “The horse which Gabriel rode was *al-Ḥayāt* (“Life”), so Sāmīrī took a handful of dirt from its track and then tossed it into the Calf, and it lowed.”<sup>16</sup> The basic mechanics of the creation of the Calf here are the same as in version B of the Qatāda tradition, namely, Sāmīrī took the handful of dirt and inserted it into the form of the Calf he had fashioned, causing it to low. But notably, as in version B of the Qatāda tradition, the nature of the Calf remains ambiguous—we are told simply that Sāmīrī cast the dirt inside it and it lowed (*fa-lammā nabadhahu fī'l- 'ijl khāra*), and we are left to wonder what the implication of the sound really was. It is especially noteworthy, however, that this brief reference to the view of al-Kalbī agrees fundamentally with the interpretation we found in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*: the process of the Calf’s manufacture is the same (dirt is placed into the cast form of the Calf), no explicit reference is made to its animation or life, only that it lowed, and, most curiously, the steed of Gabriel is identified as *al-Ḥayāt*.<sup>17</sup>

In both cases, the reference to the horse as *al-Ḥayāt* or *faras al-ḥayāt* is conspicuous. First of all, the phrasing makes it seem as if there was some confusion as to whether this was the horse’s *name* or rather a kind of epithet for it.<sup>18</sup> Further, in both ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s tradition and

---

<sup>16</sup> *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, 2.375, no.1825: Al-Kalbī—Ma‘mar—‘Abd al-Razzāq. Just on the basis of plausible dating, this must be Muḥammad b. al-Sā‘ib al-Kalbī, and not his son Hishām, who died in 204/819. (Ma‘mar b. Rashīd died in 154/771, ‘Abd al-Razzāq in 211/827.) Strikingly, the editor’s footnote here specifically refers to the alternative interpretation of the *qabḍa min athar al-rasūl* found in the *tafsīr* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and attributed to Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī.

<sup>17</sup> The correspondence with *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* makes one wonder if ‘Abd al-Razzāq means to cite a written account transmitted in the name of al-Kalbī here, possibly a *tafsīr* that resembled (or was identical to?) the text now preserved as our *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*, that is, the *Tanwīr al-miqbās*. In connection with the argument we made earlier about the possible usefulness of the *Tanwīr* for deriving authentic exegetical views of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, the agreement between it and ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s citation of this opinion of Kalbī’s is striking.

<sup>18</sup> Again, the form in the Suddī tradition is *faras al-ḥayāt*, while in the *Tanwīr*, it is *dābbat al-ḥayāt*. It is possible that this is how al-Kalbī had it originally, and that the comment in *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* has been altered accidentally due to haplography. That is, it is possible that one

*Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*, the Calf appears to be *less* animate than it does in the tradition that invokes this epithet for the horse in Ṭabarī, namely that of Suddī, in which the steed is also called *faras al-ḥayat* but the Calf is stated to have lowed and walked around. Now that a “revisionist” reading of the Qatāda tradition becomes possible, however, we might justifiably wonder if the coincidence of these two elements, the epithet for Gabriel’s steed and the continual animation or quasi-animation of the Calf, do not in fact demonstrate that Suddī’s opinion was originally that the Calf was alive, just as it was Qatāda’s; further, we might then consider the possibility that *this was al-Kalbī’s original opinion as well*.

To take the occurrence of the term *faras al-ḥayāt* as it appears in the Suddī tradition under consideration again, it will be recalled that we previously termed Suddī’s tradition the “maximalist” interpretation of the animation of the Calf—it is the handful of dirt that both creates the Calf from the gold of the Israelites and causes it to low and walk about. Likewise, although Suddī nowhere states that the Calf was actually transformed into flesh and blood, the fact that this idea seems to be implicit in the Qatāda tradition should permit us to at least consider the possibility that this is also the subtext of Suddī’s interpretation. Early on in this tradition, when the origin of Sāmīrī’s handful of dirt is described, he is said to have recognized Gabriel when he appeared to take Moses away to Sinai for his appointment with God to receive the Torah, and he said to himself, “Truly it is the Horse of Life” (*innahu faras al-ḥayāt*).<sup>19</sup> The fact that Suddī’s tradition uses this epithet for Gabriel’s steed, combined with its relative lack of inhibition regarding the miraculousness of the Calf’s creation and animation, would seem to support the idea that this version of the narrative really does insinuate the Calf’s actual transmutation into flesh and blood.

---

should read the critical phrase not as *إن الفرس التي كان عليها جبريل كانت الحياة* (the horse was *al-ḥayāt*) but rather as *إن الفرس التي كان عليها جبريل كانت فرس الحياة* (the horse was the *faras al-ḥayāt*).

<sup>19</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.65, no. 919.

Further, given the coincidence between the terminology for the horse used in the Suddī tradition, in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*, and in 'Abd al-Razzāq's Kalbī tradition, it is possible that the full implication of its appearance in *all* of these sources can only properly be appreciated in the light of 'Abd al-Razzāq's unique version of the Qatāda tradition, namely that *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>m</sup>* indicates that the Calf possessed real life and was transformed into flesh and blood. Whether or not the gist of al-Kalbī's statement ("Sāmīrī took a handful of dirt from its track and then tossed it into the Calf, and it lowed") is that the Calf really became flesh and blood, or rather that it was only animate metal, or rather even that it simply lowed once (and not again), the association of the term *al-Ḥayāt* with Gabriel's horse seems to underline the idea that the transformative effect of the handful of dirt was due to sympathetic magic, the Frazerian law of contagion: the vital energy from the angelic steed suffused even the tracks it left behind, which Sāmīrī communicated to his golden idol by throwing some of the dirt into it. The association of a calf presumably made by hand by Sāmīrī, the element of the handful of dirt, and the Calf's lowing as a consequence of the insertion of that dirt into its body in both the *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās* and the dictum attributed to al-Kalbī by 'Abd al-Razzāq is noteworthy.

This is particularly the case given that what these associated elements seem to insinuate—namely, the actual animation and embodiment of the Golden Calf as seen in version C of the Qatāda tradition—is *wholly incongruous* in context of the dominant view seen in *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*, in which it is explicitly stated that the Calf did low, but *only* once, and that it most emphatically did *not* possess an authentic *rūh*. One wonders if in fact both of these witnesses (the *tafsīr* and the tradition quoted by 'Abd al-Razzāq) have been expurgated or censored in some way; if the original view of al-Kalbī was that the Calf was absolutely, positively *not* alive, did *not* possess a *rūh*, and did *not* simulate life, then how might we otherwise explain the persistent association of this telling epithet for Gabriel's steed, "Horse of Life," with the name of al-

Kalbī?<sup>20</sup> The conclusion that Kalbī’s view has been censored just like Qatāda’s may be supported by the fact that ‘Abd al-Razzāq directly juxtaposes his citation of version B of the Qatāda tradition, that which *lacks* the reference to the Calf’s being flesh and blood (“he made a calf from [the gold], and then he took the handful... and he cast it into it (*fī jawfihi*), and behold, it became a calf, a body that lows”) with the statement of Kalbī (“Sāmirī took a handful of dirt from its track and then tossed it into the Calf, and it lowed”) in his comments *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88.

‘Abd al-Razzāq himself may or may not have been particularly aware of the underlying issue here, but his association of the two traditions, which say fundamentally the same thing, seems to highlight what seems to be left *unsaid* by the Kalbī tradition, or rather, what was perhaps purposefully removed from it. That is, just as this second citation of Qatāda lacks the key element included in his *first* citation of that authority (*fa-ja’alahu allāh jasad<sup>an</sup> lahm<sup>an</sup> damm<sup>an</sup>*), the Kalbī tradition, which again says basically the same thing as the preceding Qatāda tradition, *also* lacks that key element which it should by all rights include. In any event, the epithet *faras al-hayat* would be popularized in the later tradition; somewhat ironically, it became one of the most common phrases associated with the Calf by subsequent commentators, who not only cited it specifically in the name of al-Kalbī (or occasionally Ibn al-Kalbī) but *also* recognized that the Calf was indeed alive, made of flesh and blood.

---

<sup>20</sup> But note that this becomes more explicable if we conclude that ‘Abd al-Razzāq is citing Kalbī’s *tafsīr* in a form analogous (or even identical) to that in which we have it now, i.e. the *Tanwīr al-miqbās*. In other words, our two sources for the view of Kalbī might not be independent of one another. Note also that it is very possible that Kalbī himself was responsible for the expurgation: somewhat similar to the case of Muqātil (who says both that the Calf had a *rūḥ* and that it *didn’t* have a *rūḥ*, as well as that it lowed only once and not again), though he deliberately militates against it (i.e., the Calf did not have a *rūḥ*), Kalbī’s interpretation bears key traces of the earlier exegesis (i.e., the horse was the Horse of Life).

\*\*\*

Some significant evidence to suggest that Ṭabarī was most likely not ignorant of the deeper implications of the Suddī and Qatāda traditions can be found in the *Jāmi' al-bayān* itself. As mentioned previously, the tradition from Suddī on the walking, lowing Calf Ṭabarī cites *ad loc.* Q.2:51 is only part of a much longer narrative supposedly transmitted from Suddī on the events of the Exodus. Thus, the portion cited previously *ad loc.* Q.2:50 actually continues in the later portion cited *ad loc.* Q.2:51 which we have already examined. The former passage describes the drowning of Pharaoh and his people at the Red Sea, while the latter depicts Gabriel's subsequent arrival at the Israelite camp to take Moses away for his meeting with God, Sāmīrī's recognition of the *faras al-hayat*, the making of the Calf, and Sāmīrī leading the Israelites astray into idolatry, finally culminating with God's confrontation of Moses about what transpired. As previously noted, this tradition concludes with Moses' statement that inasmuch as God inspired the Calf with its *rūḥ* (thus enabling it to low), it was in fact *He* who led the Israelites astray. However, this is obviously not the end of the story, and in fact somewhat further on in his commentary, specifically *ad loc.* Q.2:54, Ṭabarī supplies the *next* portion of the Suddī tradition, the third part of his long narrative on the events at Sinai.<sup>21</sup>

Q.2:54 is the ambiguous verse in which the Israelites are commanded to kill themselves (or rather each other) as atonement for the sin of making and worshipping the Calf. Suddī's is not the only tradition cited *ad loc.* Q.2:51 that continues here; for example, that attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and transmitted through Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Ishāq does so as well. Nevertheless, the portion of the Suddī tradition cited by Ṭabarī in this latter passage is of particular interest for the issues that

---

<sup>21</sup> Note that Ṭabarī has a tremendous number of accounts on biblical history in both his *Tafsīr* and *Tārīkh* transmitted from Suddī; for example, approximately one-third of his *total* material in the latter on the story of Joseph is attributed to Suddī. To my knowledge, no one has ever attempted to isolate the Suddī tradition in Ṭabarī or account for his particular specialization in biblical (or quasi-biblical) narratives; curiously, he is never mentioned in modern accounts as a particularly important source of so-called *isrā'īliyyāt*.

most concern us here. The section quoted here picks up right where the last section left off, with Moses' return to the camp after his dialogue with God:

When Moses returned to his people he said: *O my people, did your Lord not make you a better promise? (etc.) ...until for thus did Sāmirī throw (Q.20:86-87).*<sup>22</sup> *Then Moses threw the Tablets and pulled his brother by the hair, dragging him towards himself (Q.7:150). Then he replied, O son of my mother, do not pull me by my beard or my hair! I was really afraid you might say that I created a rift among the children of Israel, and did not pay heed to your command (Q.20:94).* Then Moses left Aaron and turned to Sāmirī, and said, *O Sāmirī, what was the matter? (etc.) ...until then we shall disperse its ashes into the sea (Q.20:95-97).*<sup>23</sup>

Then Moses took the Calf and slaughtered it; then he ground it up with a file, and strewed it upon the sea. There is no sea that flows today that does not contain some part of it. Then Aaron said: Drink it! They drank, and the gold ran out onto the mustaches of those who had sincerely worshipped the Calf.<sup>24</sup> This is what is referred to in the verse: *In their ignorance, they drank in the Calf, deep in their hearts (Q.2:93).*<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> There is a lacuna in the quotation of the Quranic verses here, though the text indicates that the transmitter(s) recited the passage in full, which reads: *O my people, did your Lord not make you a better promise? Did the time of covenant seem too long to you? Or did you wish the wrath of your Lord to fall upon you, so that you broke the promise you had made to me? They said: We did not break our promise to you of our own will, but we were made to carry the loads of ornaments belonging to the people, which we threw (into the fire), for thus did Sāmirī throw...*

<sup>23</sup> Another lacuna; the passage in full reads: *O Sāmirī, what was the matter? He said, I saw what they did not see. I picked up a handful from the messenger's tracks and threw it in, for the idea seemed attractive to me. [Moses] said, Go hence! All your life you are to say, 'Do not touch me!', and a threat hangs over you which you will not be able to escape. Look at your god to whom you are so attached: we shall verily burn it, and disperse its ashes into the sea. Note the strong emphasis on intertextual glossing here.*

<sup>24</sup> Literally, "those who had loved it."

<sup>25</sup> *wa-ashribū fī qulūbihim al-'ijl bi-kufrihim.* Ahmed Ali has: *(Love) of the Calf had sunk deep into their hearts on account of unbelief.* However, the commentary clearly presupposes a literal understanding of the phrase. In the account of the Calf episode in *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45, it is said that the lips of those who had kissed the Calf in worship turned a golden color.



The passage proceeds to describe the Israelites' repentance and the subsequent atonement secured for the community through collective bloodshed after Moses' command to the idolaters to "kill yourselves."<sup>26</sup> As mentioned above, like Muqātil, Ṭabarī is mainly concerned with the killing here, but unlike Muqātil, he stresses a non-sectarian interpretation of these events conditioned by his well-known horror of *fitna*.

For our present concerns, what is obviously most striking about this passage is the casual—and quite puzzling—reference first to the *slaughtering* of the Golden Calf (*akhadhahu fa-dhabahahu*), then to its destruction by being worn away with a file (*thumma ḥaraqahu bi'l-mibrad*) and strewn upon the sea (*thumma dharrāhu fi'l-yamm*). This is not the only conception of how Moses' disposal of the Calf occurred to be found here; for example, in the corresponding narrative attributed to Ibn Ishāq found below, it is stated simply that they set fire to the Calf (*ahraqa al-'ijl*) and then strewed its remains into the sea (*dharrāhu fi'l-yamm*). Understanding the discrepancy between these glosses requires an examination of the somewhat obscure description of the destruction of the Calf given in Q.20:97; ironically, this verse is cited only partially in the tradition from Suddī cited above, but the most critical element of the verse is in fact elided in the text as given by Ṭabarī.

As partially quoted in the Suddī tradition, in the version of the Calf narrative from Sūra 20, after Moses' confrontation of Aaron and Sāmirī and the latter's cryptic explanation of why he did what he did (*I perceived that which they did not perceive* etc., vs.96), Moses then seems to pronounce what commentators universally assumed was a curse upon Sāmirī (*do not touch me!*) and then declares that the Calf (*your God, to whom you are so attached*) is to be utterly destroyed, without a trace remaining: *we shall verily burn it, then disperse its ashes into the sea...*

---

<sup>26</sup> *Jāmi' al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.74-5, no.937. The *isnād* is obviously the same as that given for the sections cited *ad loc.* Q.2:50-51, which provides us with our main clue that this was originally transmitted as one long narrative. There are well-known midrashic parallels to the statement that the particles of the Calf abide in the oceans and seas even today, which is clearly symbolic of another concept found in the midrash, namely that every generation receives some small amount of punishment on account of the Israelites' sin with the Calf (cf. *b. Śanh.* 102a).

(vs.97) Only the second part of this verse is quoted directly in the text as given by Ṭabarī (*thumma nansifannahu fī'l-yamm nasf<sup>m</sup>*, literally “we will make it as dust upon the sea”), but the most crucial element pertaining to the destruction of the Calf appears in the first part: *la-nuḥarriqannahu*, an intensive form that might be literally rendered as “we shall surely incinerate it completely.”

The plain sense of the Quranic verse thus seems to be something akin to “we shall surely burn it up completely, and make it as dust upon the sea.” However, without delving too much into the intricacies of the various attested positions, the *tafsīr* literature registers some controversy among the exegetes as to what exactly the real meaning of the verse is, focusing on the proper reading of *la-nuḥarriqannahu*. First of all, although the canonical reading seems to reflect an understanding of the verb underlying this form as *ḥarraqa* (“to burn”), derived from the second, intensive verbal form of the root *ḥ-r-q* (“to rub, grind, burn”), there is some indication that some reciters read the word as *la-naḥruqannahu* or *la-nuḥriqannahu* instead. The former reading understands the underlying verb as *ḥaraqa*, the first, basic verbal form from *ḥ-r-q*, and the latter understands it as *aḥraqa*, the fourth, causative form from the same verbal root. Both *ḥarraqa* and *aḥraqa* seem to mean much the same thing, namely to burn something up, to immolate it completely until nothing but ashes remain. Of course, one cannot *burn* a golden idol per se, and so some modern translators at least seem to understand *la-nuḥarriqannahu* as indicating that the Calf is to be *melted down*.

This view does not seem to have gained much of a foothold among earlier exegetes, however, who sometimes chose an alternative explanation: *ḥaraqa*, the first verbal form from the root *ḥ-r-q*, seems to mean not “to burn” but rather “to grind up, abrade, or pulverize,” especially with a file (*mibrad*), and this is in fact how Moses got rid of the Calf.<sup>27</sup> Thus, in the passage from Suddī that Ṭabarī cites *ad loc.* Q.2:54, after the odd reference to the “slaughter” of the Calf, it is

---

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, and al-Sijistānī, all of whom say that the word means either burning it up or grinding it up with a file. Muqātil actually says it was destroyed with *both* fire and file.

stated: *thumma ḥaraqahu bi'l-mibrad*, the meaning of which is unambiguous: “he ground it down with a file.” This presumes that the reading should be *la-naḥruqannahu*. On the other hand, in the passage from Ibn Ishāq cited on the same verse, he states simply *aḥraqa al- 'ijl*, he burned the Calf up, which presumes that the reading is *la-nuḥriqannahu*.

This debate is further illuminated by Ṭabarī’s commentary on the actual passage in which the key verse occurs.<sup>28</sup> He explicitly distinguishes all three of these possible readings, notes the reciters with whom each is associated, and then proceeds to give his own opinion on the matter:

Regarding His statement *la-nuḥarriqannahu* (we shall surely burn it up), the reciters differ on the reading of this word. The reciters of the Ḥijāz and Iraq generally read it as *la-nuḥarriqannahu*, meaning: we shall surely burn it up with fire bit by bit. On the other hand, it is related from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī that he used to read this as *la-nuḥriqannahu*, meaning: we shall surely burn it up with fire whole. Finally, Abū Ja’far al-Qārī read it as *la-naḥruqannahu*, meaning: we shall surely grind it up with a file (*la-nabrudannahu bi'l-mibrād*)...

Ṭabarī then states that in his opinion the correct reading is *la-nuḥarriqannahu*, indicating that it was burned up in fire. In support of this, he cites two traditions from Ibn ‘Abbās confirming this reading, one transmitted through ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and another through ‘Aṭiyya b. Sa’d. Curiously, Ṭabarī then proceeds to note that in his opinion, the interpretation of Abū Ja’far al-Qārī derives from what is related on the matter from Suddī:

...*Look at your god to whom you are so attached: we shall verily burn it, then disperse its ashes into the sea: then he took it, and he slaughtered it, then he ground it up with a file, and strewed it upon the sea. There is no sea that flows today that does not contain some part of it.*

---

<sup>28</sup> *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, Cairo ed., 16.208.

This is obviously an excerpt from the longer passage quoted from Suddī *ad loc.* Q.2:54; it is related through the same *isnād* (i.e. al-Suddī—Asbāṭ—‘Amr [b. Ḥammād]—Mūsā b. Hārūn).

Presumably to counter the view that the reading should be *la-naḥruqannahu*, meaning “we shall surely grind it up with a file,” Ṭabarī then adduces two more short traditions, both attributed to Qatāda, that seem to bolster his own preference for the interpretation of the word as indicating that the Calf was burned up:

[A] → Ibn Abī ‘Arūba:

*Look at your god to whom you are so attached: we shall verily burn it, and disperse its ashes into the sea... Qatāda said: Among some of the reciters, this verse is read: ...we shall verily slaughter it, then burn it, then disperse its ashes into the sea...*

[B] → Ma‘mar b. Rashīd:

According to Qatāda, in the version of Ibn Mas‘ūd, this verse read: *Look at your god to whom you are so attached: we shall verily slaughter it, then burn it, then disperse its ashes into the sea...*<sup>29</sup>

Notably, Ṭabarī cites these two Qatāda traditions without comment. They clearly serve to vindicate his understanding of the key word in Q.20:97 as *la-nuḥarriqannahu*, but they *also* serve to corroborate Suddī’s claim that they “slaughtered” the Calf. Nothing about the exegetical and masoretic debate over *la-nuḥarriqannahu* explains the basis for this claim; again, the disagreement over the reading probably stemmed from confusion over how a calf of gold could be burned, and the controversy then generated an alternative reading or readings of the key word that supplies the basis for interpretation.<sup>30</sup> But the claim that the Calf was slaughtered is quite

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. The *isnāds* for these traditions are the same as for Ṭabarī’s two Qatāda hadith cited *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88, respectively, Bishr—Yazīd—Sa‘īd [Ibn Abī ‘Arūba] and al-Ḥasan [b. Yaḥyā]—‘Abd al-Razzāq—Ma‘mar. On the *ḥarf Ibn Mas‘ūd*, see below.

<sup>30</sup> This would imply that *la-naḥruqannahu* (from *ḥaraqqa*) is a secondary, artificial reading, amounting to an exegetically generated emendation of the text. See below on this issue. Once

immaterial for deciding the question of how *la-nuḥarriqannahu* is to be understood, since *both* Suddī and Qatāda include this detail *despite* their opposite opinions on the next step in the disposal of the Calf (i.e., whether it was ground down or burned up). Further, it is not directly tied to the specific masoretic issue at hand, since the key word here, *la-nadhbaḥannahu* (we shall surely slaughter it) is simply *added* to verse, preceding the problematic term taken to refer either to burning or filing, and is thus independent of it.

Despite their disagreement over *la-nuḥarriqannahu*, it is surely no accident that the interpretation of the Calf as having actually been *slaughtered* is connected with the names of Suddī and Qatāda, since, as we have previously shown, the original view associated with Qatāda is that the Calf was flesh and blood; further, we conjectured that this was quite possibly the view of Suddī as well, since his tradition on the walking, lowing Calf is as readily characterized as representative of the “maximalist” interpretation of the episode as Qatāda’s. It is somewhat curious, perhaps even inexplicable, that Ṭabarī cites the tradition from Qatāda so casually in commenting on both Q.2:54 and 20:87 and another from Suddī (making an opposite point, yet *still* attesting to the putative slaughter of the Calf) on the latter verse as well. Admittedly, he does not remark directly on the most conspicuous aspect found in these traditions, the slaughtered Calf, in either place, which corroborates our contention that this interpretation is problematic for him.

And yet, it is puzzling that Ṭabarī does not omit these traditions entirely from his *tafsīr*, or at least remove the potentially objectionable term; after all, the purported “slaughter” of the Calf is not at all necessary for him to make the point he wishes to communicate in either place!<sup>31</sup>

---

again we see that the *qirā’āt* appear to proceed from debate over the proper reading of a written, unvocalized text, for it is unlikely that confusion over whether to read *lnḥrqnh* as *la-nuḥarriqannahu* or *la-naḥruqannahu* (et al.) stemmed from uncertainty over proper pronunciation per se in the course of mainly oral transmission.

<sup>31</sup> That is, *ad loc.* Q.20:87, the main point of adducing both the Suddī and the Qatāda tradition is to acknowledge the possible reading of the questionable word in the verse (*lnḥrqnh*) as either *la-naḥruqannahu* (implying filing, as for Suddī) or *la-nuḥarriqannahu* (implying burning, as for Qatāda). Yet here, though the Qatāda tradition is adduced to counter the interpretation of *lnḥrqnh* of the Suddī tradition, the fact that *both* refer to the slaughter of the Calf seems highly

Perhaps it is the case that because the question of the nature of the Calf is really not in the foreground in either passage, only the consequences of its creation and the procedures involved in its disposal, Ṭabarī felt that inclusion of this “slaughtering” tradition would be relatively innocuous in these specific passages. This seems unlikely, however, inasmuch as admitting that some exegetes thought the Calf *was* supposed to have been slaughtered would automatically bring the question of its nature up again. Whatever his motivation here, however, the fact that Ṭabarī acknowledges this interpretation, at least indirectly (since slaughtering only implies life, and does not assert it explicitly), in passages dealing with *collateral* issues, but *omits* any acknowledgment of it in the actual discussions of the nature of the Calf, does, again, seem to imply that he was well aware of the possible interpretation of the Calf as having been flesh and blood. Having subtly maneuvered around this exegesis in various places in his commentary that seek to explain the nature of the Calf, it again resurfaces in textual circumstances in which its full implications might not have been felt, or its anomalous nature might have seemed less conspicuous.<sup>32</sup>

Ṭabarī’s two traditions from Qatāda regarding the slaughtering of the Calf (i.e. *ad loc.* Q.20:87) are in fact corroborated by parallel citations in other *tafsīrs* (see Diagram 3b). First of all, version B, transmitted from Ma’mar (in which Qatāda explicitly cites the reading of Ibn Mas’ūd) also appears in the *Tafsīr ‘Abd al-Razzāq* in comments on the same verse, which is hardly surprising, inasmuch as Ṭabarī’s version of the tradition purports to be transmitted through ‘Abd

---

problematic, since this would appear to imply that in either case, whatever *Inḥrqnḥ* really means, the Calf really was meant to be slaughtered.

<sup>32</sup> Note again the way this element of Qatāda’s interpretation seems to resurface *ad loc.* Q.2:54. The previous section of the long tradition from Suddī that Ṭabarī cites *ad loc.* Q.2:51 brings us right up to the point where the Calf is created, the Israelites go astray, and Moses begins to return to the camp, finally digressing to the issue of the Calf’s *rūḥ*. In all of this, the question of the Calf’s putative or apparent life is mostly skirted. Then, when the Suddī tradition resumes in the subsequent passage *ad loc.* Q.2:54, Moses’ declaration of his intention to slaughter the Calf is quickly noted, and then the narrative moves on to the destruction of the Calf and the issue of the Israelites’ atonement. One gets the feeling that the crucial element, the description of the Calf’s nature as flesh and blood, has fallen between the cracks, slipped into the lacuna between the two passages as Ṭabarī has cited them.

al-Razzāq himself.<sup>33</sup> Further, version A, which leaves Qatāda's source anonymous, citing only "some of the reciters" (*ba'd al-qurrā'*), appears in slightly different form in the partially reconstructed *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim*.<sup>34</sup> Unlike the previous tradition we cited from this work, however, the problem here is that it in fact occurs in the portion of the text that is no longer actually extant, since the commentary to Sūras 14 to 22 (as well as for Sūra 30 on) does not survive except in later quotations. If this tradition were in fact genuine, it would once again be extremely significant for our understanding of Ṭabarī's representation of the older exegetical tradition, for obvious reasons: "*We shall verily burn it... Qatāda related to us that in one reading it states: We will surely slaughter it then burn it up... He continued: For it possessed flesh and blood (kāna la-hu laḥm wa-damm).*"<sup>35</sup>

According to the testimony of al-Suyūṭī, as cited by Ibn Abī Ḥātim, version A of the tradition on Q.20:97 attributed to Qatāda originally not only addressed the reading of the critical verb here and posited the interpolation of *la-nadhbaḥannahu* into the line, but actually cited as the particular reason for this interpolation the fact that the Calf was flesh and blood. That is, according to some quotations of it, this brief gloss on the verse at one point made specific reference to the longer Qatāda tradition on the Calf, but obviously not in the form of the gloss preserved by Ṭabarī. The implication here seems to be that Ṭabarī not only avoided specifically citing versions of the Qatāda tradition on the making of the Calf that explicitly claimed it was made of flesh and blood (as in the version of the tradition on Q.20:87-88 preserved in *Tafsīr 'Abd*

<sup>33</sup> *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, 2.376, no.1826: 'Abd al-Razzāq—Ma'mar—Qatāda. Note that Qatāda is actually citing the reading of Ibn Mas'ūd and not actually proposing the emendation (or rather augmentation) of the verse on his own authority. The fact that much of what we know of the *qirā'āt* derives from exegetical traditions such as this one cited by Ṭabarī might be thought to lend credence to Wansbrough's claim that the *qirā'āt* are in fact not true variant readings per se, but were actually secondarily derived from the canonical text in order to facilitate interpretation of problematic verses.

<sup>34</sup> But note that *ba'd al-qurrā'* can also mean "a certain reciter."

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, 7.2433, no.13514), without *isnād*. (One presumes that it would be Ibn Abī Ḥātim—Muḥammad b. Thawr—Ma'mar—Qatāda, as in the *isnād* for version C of the main Qatāda tradition discussed above.)

*al-Razzāq*) but that he (or one of his predecessors) may have altered Qatāda's gloss on Q.20:97 to actually remove this key phrase as well.

\*\*\*

In conclusion, the significance of these partial (but *only* partial) corroborations of Ṭabarī's exegetical hadith in the *tafsīrs* of 'Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Ḥātim cannot be overstated. They provide us with virtually the only basis upon which to attempt to evaluate Ṭabarī's selection and citation of transmitted exegetical material relative to the total material potentially available to commentators in his day. Even the scanty evidence they offer is of signal importance for demonstrating that Ṭabarī's vast compendium of *tafsīr* is not a neutral or unmediated representation of the full range of possible interpretations of Quranic passages circulating in the early Islamic milieu, but rather reflects his subtle manipulation of material to marginalize or suppress views of which he disapproved. Both the *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* and the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* clearly represent the view of Qatāda that the Calf was made of flesh and blood, an opinion that Ṭabarī studiously avoids in his discussions of the nature of the Calf. Further, although he admittedly acknowledges the corollary view attributed to the same authority that the Calf was actually supposed to be slaughtered (which naturally entails the former view), as we have seen, even here, Ṭabarī may have altered the original Qatāda tradition that expressed it, since Suyūfī quotes the version of the tradition transmitted by Ibn Abī Ḥātim stating that it was slaughtered because it "possessed flesh and blood (*kāna la-hu laḥm wa-damm*).” Otherwise, Ṭabarī may simply have deliberately selected another version of that tradition which he had at his disposal, one that happened to omit the objectionable element.

We have yet to really address the question of the seeming contradiction in the Suddī tradition on the destruction of the Calf; unlike the Qatāda traditions, this tradition is seemingly cited only by Ṭabarī among the authors of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century and earlier. Here, we saw that Moses' actions in destroying the Calf were described in the following terms: "...then he took it,



and he slaughtered it, then he ground it up with a file, and strewed it upon the sea.” It will be recalled that Ṭabarī specifically cites the two versions of the Qatāda “slaughtering” tradition *ad loc.* Q.20:97 in order to contradict Suddī’s interpretation of the key verb form vocalized as *lanuḥarriqannahu* in the canonical Quranic text; as represented in the Qatāda tradition, slaughtering and then burning seem perfectly sensible, but in the Suddī tradition, slaughtering and then grinding to pieces seem totally incongruous. This odd juxtaposition provokes the question of whether this was really supposed to be a living, breathing calf to be butchered like an ordinary animal, or rather a golden idol to be demolished, rendered into scrap and pulverized. That is, at least as far as the Suddī tradition is concerned, “slaughtering” could be metaphorical, a way of describing the destruction of the (wholly inorganic) Calf possibly presupposed by the Suddī tradition. In other words, though we have asserted that the view of Suddī was *probably* that the Calf was alive, as in Qatāda’s traditions, this incongruous juxtaposition should perhaps encourage us to think otherwise.

The situation may be clarified through reference to a later attestation of this hadith. In the tafsīr of the great Andalusian exegete, traditionist, and Mālikī jurist al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), among his comments on Q.20:97, we find the following: “Suddī said: he slaughtered the Calf, and there flowed from it something like that which flows from calves when they are slaughtered; then he pulverized its bones with a file and burned them.” He then cites Ibn Mas’ūd’s reading of the verse as *la-nadhbaḥannahu thumma la-nuḥarriqannahu* (we will surely slaughter it then burn it up), which is exactly the reading attributed to Ibn Mas’ūd by Qatāda in the version of the tradition cited *ad loc.* Q.20:97 by both Ṭabarī and ‘Abd al-Razzāq (version B).<sup>36</sup> Presumably, then, the statement that Moses “pulverized it with a file” in the tradition from Suddī that Ṭabarī cites *ad loc.* the same verse does *not* posit that the Calf was a mere metal idol, thus contradicting the previous statement that it was actually slaughtered, but rather should be understood to refer to the destruction of the *bones* left over from the butchering of this once-living, and formerly fully

---

<sup>36</sup> Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi’ al-aḥkām*, 11.242 bottom.

animate, Calf. We might reasonably question whether or not this is authentically the view of Suddī—that is, whether this explanation really illustrates the conceptual background to the tradition represented in Ṭabarī (he slaughtered it, then he ground it up) or rather merely reflects a later attempt to make sense of the Suddī tradition *as* cited by Ṭabarī. That is, this could simply be a gloss on a gloss. What seems most significant here, however, is that in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed perfectly natural to wholeheartedly associate the view that the Calf *was* alive with Suddī, which thus motivated the attempt to overcome the problematic contradiction between the elements of “slaughtering” and “grinding up” in the tradition attributed to him. In other words, this is perhaps yet more evidence that Ṭabarī’s representation of the situation—particularly of the views of Qatāda and Suddī—is rather suspicious, vitiated both by the traditions preserved in contemporary *tafsīr* works and in later comments about those traditions as well.

In short, the fact that Ṭabarī preserves both Suddī’s reference to Gabriel’s steed as the “Horse of Life” (*faras al-Ḥayāt*) and his claim that Moses actually *slaughtered* and did not simply burn or pulverize the Calf, combined with the fact that he cites specifically those versions of the traditions attributed to Qatāda that lack any reference to the Calf’s transformation into flesh and blood while *omitting* versions that does (as are attested in both the *Tafsīr ‘Abd al-Razzāq* and the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim*) should certainly give us pause. We might also take into account the fact that, as already noted, the interpretations of the Calf episode found in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās in particular seem specifically designed to suppress the deeper implications of an interpretation like Qatāda’s, *while nevertheless superficially resembling it*. That is, in both Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, Sāmīrī fashions the Calf by hand and the handful of dirt causes the Calf to *low*, which is basically what version A of the Qatāda tradition in Ṭabarī says. Further, in adopting and adapting the basic presentation of the mechanics of the Calf’s creation as seen in the Qatāda tradition, at the same time, Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās both explicitly *deny* that the Calf was really alive, did not possess an animating *rūḥ*, and this may be taken as implicit recognition that some in fact claimed that the Calf *was* alive, and *did* possess such an animating

*rūh*. A similar interest in concealment or suppression seems to inform Ṭabarī's presentation of the situation.

## 2. Ṭabarī's contemporaries: the *tafsīrs* of al-'Ayyāshī, Mujāhid, and Ibn Abī Ḥātim

It now seems fairly certain that Ṭabarī took deliberate steps in his representation of the received interpretation of the Golden Calf narrative to avoid, if not suppress completely, a major strand in early exegesis of the episode, namely, the claim that the Calf was actually alive. As we have seen, this entailed a partial misrepresentation, or at least *selective* representation, of the tradition associated with the Successor Qatāda, who was associated at one time with the claim that the Calf had been flesh and blood, as well as the marginalization of the tradition associated with the Successor Suddī, who supposedly portrayed the Calf as fully animate, able to continually walk around and low like a real animal.

Ṭabarī's disapproval of these interpretations was possibly motivated, as we have conjectured, by the desire to avoid the problematic insinuation of a quasi-prophetic status for Sāmīrī, which led the commentator to a corresponding emphasis on what we might see as the diametrical opposite of the Qatāda and Suddī interpretations, namely, the conception of the Calf as a magically produced but ultimately dumb and inanimate construct that could only produce a tentative semblance of lowing with the passage of wind through its body. The creation of the Calf, in short, was charlatanism, not a miracle. Ṭabarī's attitude was clearly shared by many other exegetes of the period, going back to Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, for, as we have seen, although these commentators were willing to grant Sāmīrī's "handful from the track of the messenger" the ability to yield a moo from the cast form of the Calf, they too stridently denied the Calf any authentic life, or specifically, an authentic animating *rūḥ*.

This apologetic or ameliorating attitude is by no means restricted to these authors. An analogous example may be seen in the commentary attributed to Abū'l-Naṣr Muḥammad b. Mas'ūd al-Sulamī, called al-'Ayyāshī (d. 311/932), a contemporary of Ṭabarī. Although it is only partially extant, the *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī* is nevertheless of great interest as one of the earliest extant

examples of Shī'ite *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*.<sup>37</sup> Certain traditions on the Calf narrative found in 'Ayyāshī's work seem to reflect the *opposite* tendency to those of 'Abd al-Razzāq. The *tafsīr* of the latter preserves material that testifies directly to the idea that some early exegetes claimed that the Golden Calf was actually alive, made of flesh and blood, and thus his work seems to be relatively free of those religious or ideological scruples that provide the animus guiding Ṭabarī's extremely subtle selection, representation, and even manipulation of the received material on the Calf. On the other hand, in contrast to the seemingly unadulterated preservation of earlier exegetical trends in 'Abd al-Razzāq's commentary, 'Ayyāshī's work, by contrast, seems to reflect the impulse to abridge or recast received material in order to curtail or conceal tendencies manifest among earlier exegetes that were subsequently considered suspect.

As is the case with the *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, the *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī* contains only a few traditions that pertain to our concerns here, though they are equally enlightening, for they reflect directly upon our interpretation of Ṭabarī's Suddī tradition, in particular the dialogue between God and Moses found there. It will be recalled that both *Tafsīr Muqātil* and a tradition attributed to Suddī by Ṭabarī describe a dialogue between Moses and God in which the question of ultimate responsibility for the event of the worship of the Calf is broached. In both, God is explicitly acknowledged as having inspired the Calf with its *rūḥ* (spirit, breath). As we have already noted, the main difference between them is that while Muqātil's version uses Q.20:85 (*We have put your people on trial in your absence, and Sāmirī has led them astray*) as a proof-text to show that by inspiring the Calf and causing it to bow to God created a trial for the Israelites, in Suddī's version, the point of the dialogue is actually to *contradict* what is stated in this verse; here, it is clearly asserted that by inspiring the Calf and causing it to bow, it was really God and *not* Sāmirī who actually led the people astray. Curiously, al-'Ayyāshī has no fewer than three versions of this tradition, which exhibit a considerable degree of variation between them:

---

<sup>37</sup> See Gilliot, "Qur'anic Exegesis," 108; Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shiism*, 56-63. Despite the fact that 'Ayyāshī's *tafsīr* was first published in Qumm in 1380/1960-1 and is available in a more contemporary edition as well, few Western scholars appear to have employed this important work.

[A] → Abū 'Abd Allāh [i.e. Ja'far al-Sādiq, the Sixth Imām]:

Regarding the verse: *In the absence of Moses his people worshipped a calf, a body that lows, from their ornaments* (Q.7:148). Then Moses said: O Lord, who was it that caused the idol to low? God replied: It was I, O Moses, who made it low. Moses then said: *This is but a trial from You, whereby You will lead whom You will astray, and guide whom You please* (Q.7:155).<sup>38</sup>

[B] → Abū Ja'far [i.e. Muḥammad al-Bāqir, the Fifth Imām]:

Regarding what God said to Moses during their intimate conversation (*nājā*), the latter said: O Lord, this Sāmīrī made the Calf; but regarding its lowing, who made that? God then revealed (*awḥā*) to him: O Moses, indeed, this is My trial; do not presume to examine Me about it.<sup>39</sup>

[C] → Abū Ja'far:

When Moses was in intimate conversation with God, God revealed to him: O Moses, I have made a trial (*fatantu*) for your people. Moses replied: How so, Lord? He said: Through Sāmīrī; he has made them *a calf from their ornaments*. Moses replied: O Lord, regarding their ornaments, it is possible that [an image of]

---

<sup>38</sup> *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī*, 2.32, no.79: Muḥammad b. Abī Ḥamza—*fulān*—Abū 'Abd Allāh. The *isnāds* in this work are rudimentary, pointing to the relatively undeveloped character of Imāmī *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* at this time. Note that the editor gives a concise list of the later attestations of this tradition, and then seeks to impose the Mu'tazilite reading of the episode, insisting that it was only the wind that made the Calf seem to low. According to Modarressi, Ibn Abī Ḥamza was known as a transmitter of the *ṣaḥīfas* or “notebooks” of hadith associated with two of the disciples of the Imām Ja'far, Dāwūd b. Sirḥān and Ya'qūb al-Maythamī (*Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographic Survey of Early Shī'ite Literature*, 215, 398).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.33, no.80: Ibn Muskān—al-Waṣṣāf—Abū Ja'far. On the *tafsīr* of the Imām al-Bāqir, see Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, 37-8; on 'Abd Allāh b. Muskān, a jurist of the generation of Ja'far whose works on the family of the Prophet and *fiqh* were very widely quoted among later Shī'ī scholars, *ibid.*, 150-5. In Quranic parlance, descriptions of God's communications with prophets often use the term *nājā* to signify privileged and intimate speech, and so the revelation to Moses on Sinai is often termed a *munāja* as well as a *maw'id* or appointment. Note, however, the shift from *nājā* to *awḥā* in the course of the narrative, and the contrast between the terms in the next tradition.

a gazelle, or a likeness [of something else], or a calf could be made from them; but how did You make a *trial* for my people out of them?<sup>40</sup>

God said: Sāmīrī made them a calf, then it lowed. Moses replied: O Lord, who made it low? I did, He said. Moses then said to Him: *This is but a trial from You, whereby You will lead whom You will astray, and guide whom You please* (Q.7:155).<sup>41</sup>

Versions A and C are basically the same, and the former can be readily understood as an abbreviation of the latter. Here, the theodical challenge implied by the dialogue, or at least in Muqātil and Suddī's versions of the dialogue, becomes considerably more muted, receding into the background and disappearing almost completely. Q.20:85, which compares the roles played by God and Sāmīrī, has been omitted, replaced with Q.7:155, which in its original context actually refers to the episode with the seventy elders that is related both here and in Sūra 2 directly after the narration of the Calf episode. Intriguingly, this verse juxtaposes *fitna* and *ḍalāla*, trial and leading astray, as *both* being aspects of divine activity (along with *hudā*, guidance), as opposed to the *separate* roles God and Sāmīrī are posited to have played in Q.20:85, the former establishing the trial and the latter leading the Israelites astray. Nevertheless, even though a Quranic verse is thus adduced here as proof of the same point the Suddī tradition makes (and that the Muqātil version seems to *shy away* from making), the overall tone of this tradition is quite

---

<sup>40</sup> There is quite evidently something wrong with the text here. 'Ayyāshī has *yā rabb innā hulyyahum lā yaḥtamila an yuṣāgha minhu...*, i.e., "it is *not* possible that such-and such could be made from them..." It is thus necessary to read the line in accordance with the later parallel from the *Burhān*, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century compendium of Imāmī *tafsīr* of Baḥrānī, as the editor indicates. Likewise, something is amiss with the phrase *ghazāl wa-timthāl wa-'ijl* (which the editor corrects to *ghazāl aw timthāl aw 'ijl*), but this is the reading in the citation of this tradition in the *Burhān* (Sayyid Hāshim b. Sulaymān al-Baḥrānī, *Kitāb al-burhān*, 2.39).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2.34, no.85: Abū Baṣīr—Abū Ja'far. According to Modarressi, Abū Muḥammad Yahyā b. al-Qāsim al-Asadī, a.k.a. Abū Baṣīr the Blind, was "arguably the most prolific Shī'ite transmitter of hadith in the second century" (*Tradition and Survival*, 395); he transmitted from both al-Bāqir and Ja'far al-Sādiq, and was the dominant figure of a major circle of Imāmī scholars in Kufa in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century.

different from that of these other texts. In versions A and C in 'Ayyāshī's collection, Moses' quotation of Q.7:155 is quiescent, reflective, seemingly expressing his awe and humility when faced with the magnitude and mystery of the inscrutable divine will. In contrast, the direct assertion Moses makes in Suddī's hadith—"You were the one who led them astray!"—seems bold and confrontational; and the same is even true of Muqātil's more restrained "It was You who made the trial for my people."

This difference in overall tone is reflected in version B of the dialogue in 'Ayyāshī's collection as well. In version A, Moses simply asks about the source of the Calf's lowing, and in version C, he asks in direct response to God's statement about the trial He has established. But the terseness of the question of version B ("O Lord, this Sāmīrī made the Calf; but regarding its lowing, who made that?"), quite similar to the question as posed in the Suddī tradition ("this Sāmīrī commanded them to worship the Calf, but who inspired the Calf with its *rūḥ*?"), seems more than a bit impertinent, even contemptuously familiar. It is no wonder, then, that God replies with a rebuke that makes much the same point as is communicated in versions A and C: "this is My trial; do not presume to examine Me about it." It is not for mortals to plumb the depths of His motivations, or to interrogate Him about His plan or decree. Whereas Moses' question merely elicits God's admission of His role in versions A and C, in version B, the question provokes a brusque retort.

The most significant aspect of 'Ayyāshī's commentary here is that all of these traditions essentially agree on the role God is supposed to have played: Sāmīrī may have made the Calf, but God created its lowing; and this was God's trial for the Israelites, through which He led them astray in accordance with His will. In contrast, Muqātil's version emphasizes that it was Sāmīrī who made the Calf *and* led them astray, even though God is acknowledged as having caused the Calf's lowing and established the trial; as we have already noted, this seems to reflect the deliberate attempt to ameliorate the portrayal of the Suddī tradition, in which Sāmīrī is blamed only for commanding the Israelites to worship the Calf, but God is stridently accused of having



led them astray.<sup>42</sup> Beyond the variations in theodical outlook and tone in these traditions, however, the element that most clearly links ‘Ayyāshī’s three versions of the dialogue and distinguishes them from those of both Muqātil and Suddī is, of course, that here *the inspiration of the Calf is never explicitly acknowledged as such*. This is quite striking, inasmuch as even Ṭabarī, who, as we have seen, is quite concerned to circumscribe or marginalize the more “supernaturalized” interpretations of the Calf’s nature, accepts the explicit reference in the Suddī tradition to the *rūḥ* with which God inspired it. ‘Ayyāshī’s three versions of the dialogue between God and Moses regarding the Calf episode are all rather more circumspect and restrained than even Ṭabarī’s version of the Suddī tradition.

\*\*\*

Of all of the texts we have considered here, *Tafsīr Mujāhid* is the only one that is undeniably not the work of its eponym, which is to say that even the most conservative scholars are not likely to claim that the Successor Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 100/718) actually produced this text in its current form. (Of course, there is also the matter of our so-called *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās*, but none of the extant manuscripts or editions of this work are actually called this.) We have already encountered Mujāhid because of his citation by Ṭabarī, particularly in connection with the claim that Sāmīrī’s addition of the handful of dirt to the gathered golden ornaments caused them to be “cast” (*insabaka*) into the form of the Calf, and that its lowing was merely the sound of the passage of the wind (*ḥafīf al-rīḥ*) through its hollow body. The extant work identified as his *tafsīr* is of particular interest to us because on the one hand, it does seem to confirm Ṭabarī’s representation of Mujāhid’s view of the Calf. On the other hand, it contains anomalous material that, if he knew of it, Ṭabarī most likely deliberately omitted from his work.

---

<sup>42</sup> In Suddī’s version Sāmīrī *cannot* be accused of making the Calf, inasmuch as this is one of the versions in which the handful of dirt spontaneously generates it from the amassed golden ornaments.

The debate over the date and provenance of *Tafsīr Mujāhid* is extremely complex.<sup>43</sup> The scrupulous analysis of Stauth and others has proved almost beyond a shadow of a doubt that this work is an independent collation and transmission of hadith attributed to Mujāhid and was not simply extracted from attestations of those hadith in later works.<sup>44</sup> Some might argue that the initial recension of the commentary occurred much closer to the *floruit* of Mujāhid himself in the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century than to that of Ṭabarī (whose *tafsīr* preserves several lines of transmission from Mujāhid, as we have already seen) in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>. However, the fact remains that, at least judging by the *isnāds* preserved in the work itself, this collection is probably best understood as a product of the late 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century; just because it provides traditionally transmitted material attributed to *one* early authority rather than many does not mean that its contents are any more (or less) “authentic” than those of the *tafsīr* of Ṭabarī or other collections of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century. That is, Mujāhid himself was certainly not a “contemporary” of Ṭabarī, but this *work* appears to be, and it is likewise completely possible that the hadith it contains are also products of a later era. At the very least, the organization and presentation of the work as the *tafsīr* of the Successor Mujāhid is hardly a guarantee of the antiquity of its contents in and of itself.

Conversely, regardless of whether or not we can actually recover 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup>-century material from it, *Tafsīr Mujāhid* is still a 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-century *presentation* of that material; thus, like the *tafsīrs* of Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Tha’labī, it is most relevant for our concerns here insofar as it may corroborate or contradict Ṭabarī’s representation of the early tradition. That is, we are not so

---

<sup>43</sup> We have already broached this topic, at least in passing, because of the question of the relationship of putatively early *tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr* like this work, or the similar commentary ascribed to Sufyān al-Thawrī, to works like *Tafsīr Muqātil*. This problem has been much discussed by scholars such as Wansbrough, Stauth, and Leemhuis.

<sup>44</sup> Stauth’s 1969 dissertation, “Die Überlieferung des Korankommentars Muğāhid b. Ğabr’s: Zur Frage der Rekonstruktion der in den Sammelwerken des 3. Jh.d.H. benutzen frühislamischen Quellenwerke,” is the authoritative treatment of *Tafsīr Mujāhid* and has been much analyzed in the literature on early *tafsīr*, but it has never been published. See Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 73-8 and notes thereon for a thorough examination of Stauth’s presuppositions, methods and conclusions. Note esp. Diagram 11 on 74, which lays out the various paths of transmission of the work and shows the putative basis for the considerable overlap of *Tafsīr Mujāhid* with the work of Ṭabarī.

much interested in what the Successor Mujāhid might have “really” said about the Calf, but rather in demonstrating the degree to which classical sources accurately represent the range of interpretive options that might have been available to early exegetes.

As we have already seen, Ṭabarī provides us with two versions of a tradition on the Calf from Mujāhid, supported by a total of four *isnāds* (see Diagram 4). That given in his comments *ad loc.* Q.2:51 (version A) is supported with three *isnāds*, and may be associated with Ibn Jurayj.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the slightly different version that appears in Ṭabarī’s comments *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96 (version B) is supported with two *isnāds*, one of which is identical to one of those previously cited; and this version may be associated with Ibn Abī Najayh.<sup>46</sup> One could easily account for the discrepancies between them by attributing the divergence to these different lines of transmission, especially given that their content is overall congruous. Again, the two versions of the Mujāhid tradition read as follows:

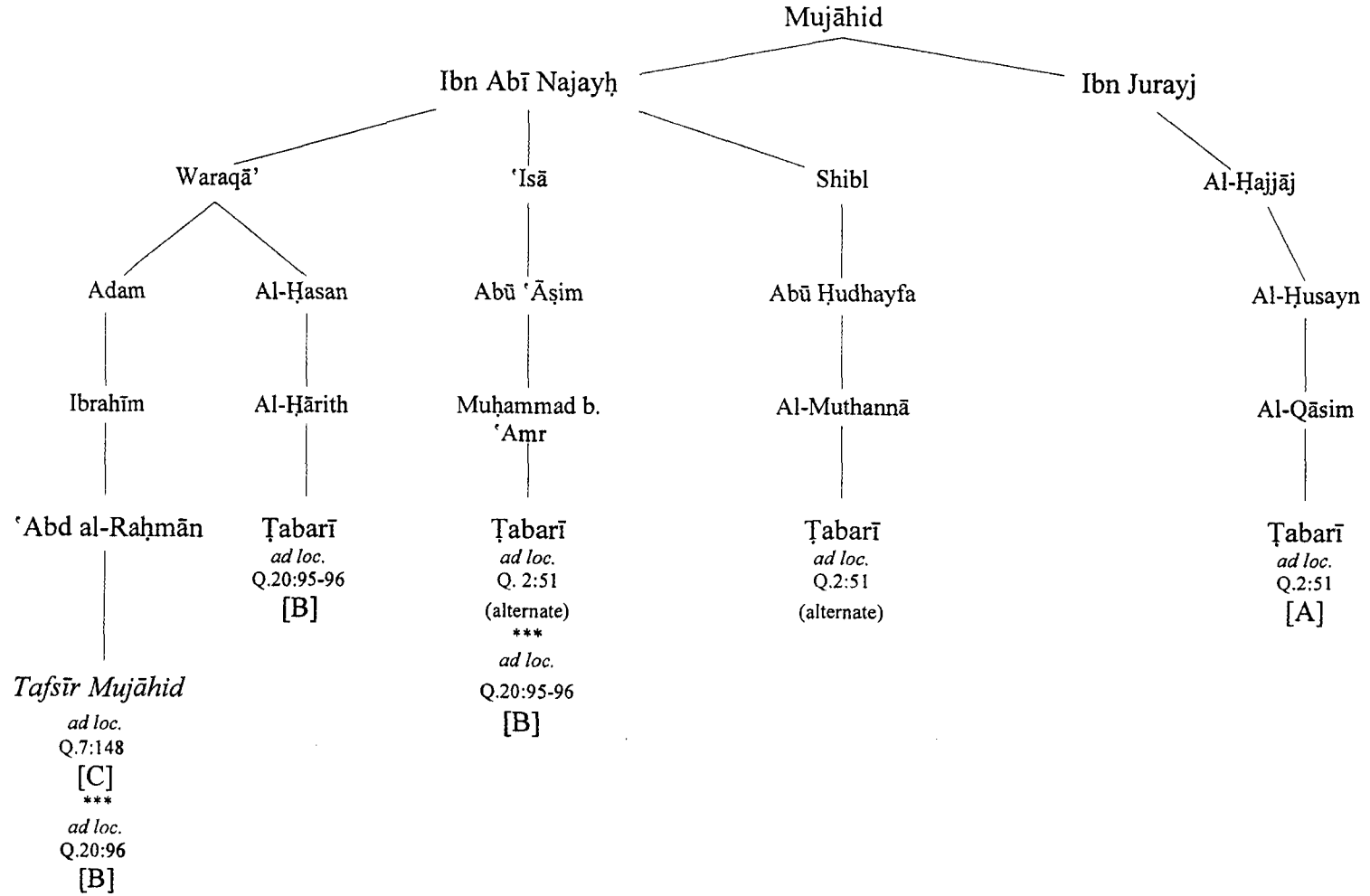
[A] Ibn Jurayj → Mujāhid:

... *you took the Calf in his absence (and worshipped it)...* (Q.2:51) “Calf”:  
 i.e., the offspring of a cow. The jewelry was that which they had borrowed from the people of Pharaoh. Aaron told them: Bring them out so as to purify yourselves of them; set fire to them. Sāmīrī took the handful from the track of Gabriel’s horse and then tossed it among it [the gold], and it was cast (*insabaka*) [i.e., into the form of the Calf], and it had something like a *jawf* through which the wind moved (*kāna la-hu ka’l-jawf tahwī fīhi al-riyāh*).

<sup>45</sup> First the text is given according to the *riwāya* from al-Qāsim b. al-Ḥasan, traced back to Mujāhid through Ibn Jurayj, and then two auxiliary *isnāds* are supplied, with Ṭabarī’s sources Muḥammad b. ‘Amr and al-Muthannā b. Ibrāhīm both tracing their transmission of the hadith back to Mujāhid through Ibn Abī Najayh. Ṭabarī explicitly notes in both of these latter cases that Muḥammad and al-Muthannā transmitted traditions *bi-nahwa* or approximating the tradition of al-Qāsim; note also that the *isnād* for the first as represented in the Shākir edition (*Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 2.68, no. 925) has a significant misprint (read *بنحو حديث القاسم بن الحسن* instead of *بنحو حديث القاسم عن الحسن*).

<sup>46</sup> Ṭabarī gives this text with a joint *isnād*, as it supposedly represents the transmissions of both Muḥammad b. ‘Amr and another of Ṭabarī’s *shaykhs*, al-Ḥārith b. Muḥammad, from Mujāhid through Ibn Abī Najayh.

Diagram 4: Versions of the Mujāhid tradition on the Calf



[B] Ibn Abī Najayḥ → Mujāhid:

*...I picked up a handful from the messenger's tracks and threw it in...*

(Q.20:96): [he picked it up from] beneath the hoof of Gabriel's horse, and Sāmīrī tossed it among the jewelry of the Israelites, and then it was cast (*insabaka*) into a calf, a body that lows, and the sound of the wind within it (*ḥafīf al-rīḥ fīhi*) was what made its lowing. "Calf": the offspring of a cow.

In the printed edition of *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, we find two occurrences of what we have termed the Mujāhid tradition; the first appears in the commentary on the Sūra 7 version of the Calf episode, *ad loc.* Q.7:148.<sup>47</sup> This seems to represent a *third* distinct version of the Mujāhid tradition, particularly because, in contrast to the two versions from the *Jāmi' al-bayān*, it *lacks* the most distinctive aspects of the Mujāhid tradition as related by Ṭabarī; most notably, it omits the reference to the Calf's being cast (*insabaka*) when Sāmīrī threw the handful of dirt among the golden ornaments, as well as the description of how the wind caused the Calf to appear to low. Surprisingly, what we find here instead is a straightforward rendition of a transmutation scene that is broadly similar to the Ibn 'Abbās and Ibn Zayd versions of the story related by Ṭabarī. Notably, like most of the content of the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, this tradition (to be referred to as version C) also represents a transmission from Mujāhid through Ibn Abī Najayḥ, like Ṭabarī's version B:

[C] Ibn Abī Najayḥ → Mujāhid

*In his absence, the people of Moses made from their ornaments...*

(Q.7:148)—that is, when they buried them, Sāmīrī threw among them a handful

---

<sup>47</sup> It will be recalled that Ṭabarī does not relate any exegetical hadith on the Calf in his comments on the Sūra 7 version of the episode at all; conversely, the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* lacks any such traditions *ad loc.* Q.2:51, where we find several of Ṭabarī's main traditions on the episode.

of earth from the track of Gabriel’s horse, and then they became *a calf, a body that lows* (cont’d.)<sup>48</sup>

Admittedly, nothing in this brief hadith specifically contradicts Ṭabarī’s versions of the Mujāhid tradition, though again it is striking that it omits what we might consider the most characteristic elements of the latter.

Not only is version C transmitted from the same source for Mujāhid’s teachings as Ṭabarī’s version B, Ibn Abī Najayḥ, but, as it turns out, their *isnāds* partially converge at the point of the transmitter *below* Ibn Abī Najayḥ, specifically with Warāqā’ (see Diagram 4 again). Since Ṭabarī’s versions A and B have much more in common than Ṭabarī’s version B does with version C as attested in *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, the natural conclusion would be that one of the transmitters of the latter after Warāqā’ might have abridged version B to produce version C. (It is also quite possible that it was abridged by the editor-redactor of the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* as well.) This conjecture would seem to be confirmed by the second occurrence of the Mujāhid tradition in the work, among the comments on the Sūra 20 version of the episode. Here, appearing with the same *isnād* as is given with version C related *ad loc.* Q.7:148, is a tradition virtually identical to Ṭabarī’s version B as quoted above, with only minor variations in phrasing.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, 246: ‘Abd al-Raḥmān—Ibrāhīm—Ādam—Warāqā’—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—Mujāhid. Note that, at least according to the way the text is presented here, the key verb *ittakhadha* in *ittakhadha qawm mūsā min ba’dihi min ḥuluyyihim* must mean “to make” rather than “to worship, take as a god,” even though it is Sāmīrī who is actually depicted as doing the making.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 402. Unfortunately, the key phrase appears to be corrupt: instead of *la-hu khuwār: ḥafif al-rīḥ fihi fa-huwa khuwāruhu* (“...that lowed—the sound of the wind within it was what made its lowing”) the line as it appears in *Tafsīr Mujāhid ad loc.* Q.20:96 is *la-hu khuwār: ḥafif wa-huwa al-rīḥ wa-huwa khuwār*. We might attempt to decipher this as “that lowed—i.e., a [moaning or rustling] sound, that is, from the wind—that was its lowing,” but it is just as likely that this simply reflects a garbled version of the original line, and that the line as preserved by Ṭabarī is much closer to the original. Note also that a parallel to version B, quite similar in phrasing, is cited in the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim ad loc.* Q.20:86; here, the key line is *ḥafif al-rīḥ fihi fa-huwa khuwāruhu*. This parallel is significant, since *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim*, like the *Jāmi’ al-bayān* and the extant recension of the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, also dates to the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century (*Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*, 7.2431-2, no.13501, redacted from al-Suyūṭī’s *Al-Durr al-manthūr*).

Taking version C as an abridgement of version B, then, our original conjecture about Ṭabarī's two versions of the Mujāhid tradition seems to have been confirmed: version A would seem to be associated with Ibn Jurayj's transmission from Mujāhid; version B with Ibn Abī Najayḥ, the penultimate source for this version according to the evidence of both Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* and the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*; and version C is recognizable as a simple abbreviation of the latter. This appears to confirm the authenticity of Ṭabarī's Mujāhid material; at the very least, it provides independent corroboration of the transmission of this material by Waraqā', who is the common link for version B in both texts. But again, the point is not that any such corroboration should prove the association of this tradition with the historical Mujāhid b. Jabr. Rather, we would prefer to see the *Jāmi' al-bayān* and the extant *Tafsīr Mujāhid* as two largely contemporary redactions of material *associated* with the Successor Mujāhid in circulation in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century.

Although it can offer us important corroboration of some of Ṭabarī's material, because of the extremely limited scope of *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, it is by no means a comparable collection of exegetical hadith to the *Jāmi' al-bayān*. For example, it contains less than a dozen very short traditions on the Sūra 20 version of the Calf episode, which spans more than fifteen verses in the *sūra*; the corresponding section in Ṭabarī takes up fourteen pages in the Cairo edition, which contain about fifty hadith total as well as substantial commentary from Ṭabarī himself. There are too few traditions represented here on the making of the Calf and related issues for us to get any substantial sense of the overarching conception of the episode that informs the selection of hadith here, which is perhaps to be expected since the major criterion guiding the collection of the transmitted material in this work was, in the end, simply attribution to Mujāhid himself. As we have seen, the two versions of the tradition on the making of the Calf that are preserved here

---

Regarding the obscure word *ḥafīf*, as noted above, the basic meaning of the root is apparently "to be or become dry," which then leads to a secondary meaning of "to rustle or crinkle due to dryness" (i.e. of skin, paper, dry leaves, the scales of a snake, etc.) See Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. "حف".

fundamentally agree with Ṭabarī's Mujāhid material and seem to go a long way towards confirming the accuracy of his presentation of Mujāhid's opinion— although, in the final analysis, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Ṭabarī's commentary and the extant *Tafsīr Mujāhid* are mutually corroborating presentations of what Mujāhid's opinion was *believed to be* in the early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>50</sup>

But the material contained in *Tafsīr Mujāhid* not only potentially confirms and validates Ṭabarī's representation of the early exegetical tradition, however; it also conflicts with it in one significant respect. We find another tradition on the Calf narrative in *Tafsīr Mujāhid* that does not appear in Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* or in *any* of the other early sources we have examined so far:

*Then he produced for them a calf, a body that lows (Q.20:88). Aaron passed by Sāmīrī while he was making the Calf, and said to him: What are you making? He replied: I am making something that does harm and does not bring gain.<sup>51</sup> Aaron then said: O God, grant him whatever he wants<sup>52</sup> that he should ask of You. Then, when Aaron had proceeded on his way, Sāmīrī said: O God, I ask of You that it should low; and it did. So it was that when it lowed, they prostrated themselves before it, and when it did so again, they raised their heads. It only lowed on account of the prayer of Aaron.<sup>53</sup>*

---

<sup>50</sup> If their *isnāds* are taken to be genuine and their largely identical texts of version B are truly independent of one another, then we would perhaps be justified in identifying Waraqā', the evident common link in the lines of transmission for that version of the Mujāhid tradition, as the earliest secure source for that version; notably, he seems to have flourished during the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, we do not seem to have independent corroboration of the other major version of the Mujāhid tradition, the text in Ṭabarī's commentary we have designated version A, transmitted from Ibn Jurayj rather than Ibn Abī Najayḥ. As it stands, we cannot determine if this very similar text is truly autonomous of version B—which would tend to confirm that both reflect the genuine views of Mujāhid—or if it was rather in fact derived from it and then supplied with an authenticating *isnād* traced back to a different student of Mujāhid's.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Q.20:89, which says of the Calf, *Did they not see that it did not give them any answer, nor had it power to do them harm or bring them gain?*

<sup>52</sup> *'alā mā fī nafsihi*, literally, according to what is in his soul (or as we would say, his heart); this is a clear allusion to Sāmīrī's statement in Q.20:96, *the idea seemed attractive to me*, or rather, "thus did my soul suggest to me" (*sawwalat lī nafsī*).



It is perhaps not surprising that this tradition was omitted from so many early texts, for it is not difficult to imagine the potential objections it would raise. In many of the traditions we have seen thus far, Aaron seems to bear partial responsibility for the making of the Calf, in that he is sometimes portrayed as having been an unwitting accessory or accomplice to Sāmirī's plans. For example, in three of the four major traditions on the making of the Calf collected by Ṭabarī in his comments on Q.2:51, it is Aaron who brings up the "halakhic" issue regarding the illicitness of the gold the Israelites borrowed from the Egyptians, while the one tradition that does *not* attribute this to Aaron does not specify who is responsible.<sup>54</sup>

Further, we might recall the version of the Ibn 'Abbās tradition transmitted from Ibn Jubayr in particular, in which Sāmirī actually dupes Aaron and tricks him into allowing him access to the gathered gold: after Aaron commands the Israelites to throw their jewelry into the fire, Sāmirī approaches with the handful of dirt concealed in his hand; then, "he drew near to the fire and said to Aaron: O prophet of God, shall I throw in what I have here in my hand? And Aaron agreed, supposing that he had something like what the others were bringing from the jewelry and ornaments. He threw it in and said, *Become a calf, a body that lows!*, and it became so, for trial and *fitna*..."<sup>55</sup> Whereas in the Ibn Jubayr tradition Aaron only unwittingly allows Sāmirī to proceed with his plans, the tradition quoted above from the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* inverts this relationship. Although Sāmirī admits here that he is up to no good ("I am making something that does harm and does not bring gain"), Aaron inexplicably intervenes not only when he has no specific reason to do so, but even *in spite of* the explicit warning given by Sāmirī. Thus, although

---

<sup>53</sup> *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, 400-1: 'Abd al-Raḥmān—Ibrāhīm—Ādam—Ḥammād b. Salama—Sammāk b. Ḥarb—Sa'id b. Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās. Note that the text here may be corrupt; parallels to the statement about the Israelites' worship of the Calf state that when it *fell silent*, they raised their heads.

<sup>54</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the presentation in *Tafsīr Muqātil*, where it is Sāmirī himself who brings up this issue, presumably as a ruse to trick the Israelites into surrendering the gold.

<sup>55</sup> *Jāmi' al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.66.

he is again to some degree an unwitting accomplice in what occurs—in that he did not know exactly what Sāmirī would ask for—Aaron is portrayed in a much less sympathetic light here than before.

The making of the Calf has obvious negative implications, and thus it seems extremely significant that this tradition concludes after the people’s degeneration into idolatry with what seems to be a direct indictment of Aaron’s involvement: the people bowed down when the Calf lowed, and “*it only lowed on account of the prayer of Aaron.*” None of the other traditions on the making of the Calf we have seen associate Sāmirī and Aaron so closely, or portray them so similarly, or leave the distribution of blame in the story so ambiguous. While one might assume that Sāmirī’s motives here are malicious and Aaron’s perfectly innocent, it is striking that neither point is asserted explicitly here. If anything, the narrative element that seems to occupy center stage here is the unbelievable hubris and irresponsibility of Aaron in interceding for Sāmirī without justification and allowing his prophetic prerogatives to be misused. At the very least, he is depicted as basically inept, a leader of dubious judgment. (Notably, this portrayal dovetails with that of the biblical narrative in Exodus and, as we have argued, with that of the Quran as well.)

Admittedly, there are many reasons why this tradition might not have been cited by Ṭabarī. First of all, this is a collateral tradition in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*; it is not attributed to Mujāhid at all, but rather to Mujāhid’s teacher Ibn ‘Abbās, through none other than Ibn Jubayr—the source of the rather different tradition on Aaron and Sāmirī related by Ṭabarī that we have just cited.<sup>56</sup> In short, despite the large amount of Ibn ‘Abbās material found in the *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, even Ibn

---

<sup>56</sup> Its inclusion in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* may be explained by the fact that ‘Abd al-Rahmān (al-Hamadhānī, d. 352/963, the immediate source for the work’s redactor, Ibn Shādhān), received this tradition from his *shaykh* Ibrāhīm (d. 281/894), who in turn had it from Ādam (b. Abī Iyyās, d. 220/835), who may be identified as the key figure in the coalescence of this work. While most of the text represents Ādam’s Mujāhid hadith transmitted to him by his *shaykh* Waraqā’, one does occasionally find material from other sources represented here as well, such as this Ibn ‘Abbās tradition transmitted to Ādam through the chain Ḥammād b. Salama—Sammāk b. Ḥarb—Sa’īd b. Jubayr. See Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 74.

‘Abbās material transmitted from Ibn Jubayr in particular (one of the most prolific of the Successors associated with Ibn ‘Abbās traditions in Ṭabarī’s commentary, actually), there is no specific reason for us to conclude that Ṭabarī *must* have known this tradition.

On the other hand, there are obvious theological (or rather ideological) reasons why he would have declined to include it in his collection. Most obviously, it undermines the attempt to distance Aaron from the creation of the Calf, for which both the biblical account in Exodus and the Quran seem to indict him. (Exonerating Aaron of blame for the making of the Calf was very likely one of the main factors motivating the development of a unique reading of the Quranic version of the Calf narrative by the Muslim exegetes in the first place.) Moreover, as we shall see, the “Prayer of Aaron” tradition is attested in numerous other sources after the time of Ṭabarī; like the acknowledgment of the interpretation of the Calf as having been flesh and blood, it became part of the standard corpus of traditions cited in connection with the Calf episode. One *could* argue that this merely indicates that the tradition in fact emerged late—that the absence of any hint of it in the *Jāmi’ al-bayān* or any other *tafsīr* of Ṭabarī’s time or previous indicates that it was simply unknown to earlier exegetes.

But we would prefer to see this tradition as essentially atavistic, reflecting a particularly early aspect of the interpretive tradition that was effectively suppressed for some time but reappeared in the course of the tradition’s later development. In a sense, the “Prayer of Aaron” tradition is even more atavistic than the Qatāda interpretation of the Calf as flesh and blood: in the case of the latter, there are at least hints and traces of this tradition in the *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, whereas, in the case of the former, although Ṭabarī’s Ibn Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās tradition on the making of the Calf says *remotely* similar things, *none* of the exegetical hadith he preserves comes anywhere near the tradition in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* in its clear willingness to indict Aaron more or less directly for his involvement in the making of the Calf.

A much fuller and richer presentation of traditionally transmitted material from the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century than that of *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, one more comparable to that of Ṭabarī, may be found in the commentary of another of the latter's contemporaries, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Rāzī, usually known as Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938).<sup>57</sup> Ibn Abī Ḥātim is primarily known as a *muḥaddīth* and specialist in the then-nascent field of *rijāl* evaluation or criticism of transmitters, his *Kitāb al-jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl* being one of the earliest extant works in what would become a classic genre of Islamic religious literature; in this, he was primarily continuing the legacy of his father and teacher, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, a titanic figure in the tradition who was instrumental in the consolidation of hadith science.<sup>58</sup> Like the *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*, the extant *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* has been assembled from different witnesses to the original text, which is not available in any one complete manuscript; further, like the *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī*, a significant portion of the work seems to have been almost completely lost.

But whereas much of the *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī* perished just a few centuries after its author's death, the work of Ibn Abī Ḥātim seems to have survived and been quoted extensively in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus, the modern editor of the work, al-Ṭayyib, has engaged in a somewhat questionable enterprise of recovering the lost portions of Ibn Abī Ḥātim's *tafsīr* on the basis of these later quotations, and elected to present the commentary in full as an integral text. As Saleh and others have noted, there has been extreme interest among Wahhābī scholars in Saudi Arabia in particular in salvaging works of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* like that of Ibn Abī Ḥātim due to the

---

<sup>57</sup> For biographical details, see Dickinson, *The Development of Early Sunnite Ḥadīth Criticism*, and cf. 36-7 on his *tafsīr*.

<sup>58</sup> On the critical contribution of Abū Ḥātim and Ibn Abī Ḥātim to *rijāl* criticism, see Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition, passim*; both are ubiquitous in Juynboll's discussions of the evolution of the tradition. Abū Ḥātim is not to be confused with his contemporary of the same name, the prominent Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* (d. 322/933) who is best known as the main opponent of the notorious freethinker Abū Bakr al-Rāzī.

emphasis on this form of commentary—that is, exegesis through reliance on authenticated tradition—by Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Suyūfī (the latter two are in fact now our most important witnesses to Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s *tafsīr*). Because medieval commentators reverted to what was essentially *tafsīr bi’l-ra’y* or “free” exegesis of the Quran without the use of exegetical hadith per se, Ṭabarī’s *Jāmi’ al-bayān* is in fact our only early *tafsīr* that is formally correct from this point of view. This explains the enthusiasm with which a circle of Saudi scholars, of whom al-Ṭayyib is a prominent member, have labored to restore Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s work to the light of day: due to the frequent correspondence of his *isnāds* with those of Ṭabarī, his *tafsīr* appears to offer at least partial corroboration of the authenticity and reliability of the latter’s work.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the fact that many scholars might see such attempts at reconstruction as inherently problematic, we might assume, at least provisionally, that such major authorities as Ibn Kathīr and Suyūfī may be trusted to have quoted Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s (at that time still well-known) *tafsīr* relatively accurately; thus, we will attempt to evaluate Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s presentation of the Calf episode here, similar to the way we evaluated that of Ṭabarī previously. Even though Ibn Kathīr and Suyūfī no doubt exercised discretion in selecting traditions from Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s *tafsīr* in constructing their own presentations, and we thus have no way to really ascertain what they might have omitted, at the same time, as we shall see, we can glean enough information from their

---

<sup>59</sup> In point of fact, Ibn Kathīr actually held that Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s *tafsīr* was *superior* to that of Ṭabarī. The recent article of Koç, “*Isnāds and Rijāl Expertise in the Exegesis of Ibn Abī Ḥātim (327/939)*,” is mainly directed towards the investigation of the *isnāds* in the *tafsīr* and specifically evaluates them on the basis of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s own *rijāl* work, coming to the surprising conclusion that many of the exegetical hadith in his commentary are transmitted on the basis of weak *isnāds* and rely upon transmitters he declares objectionable in the *Kitāb al-jarḥ wa’l-ta’dīl*! Koç’s somewhat predictable explanation for this phenomenon is that Ibn Abī Ḥātim must have approved of reliance on weak, or weaker, transmitters regarding exegetical matters of secondary (i.e. non-normative or juridical) importance. Koç criticizes al-Ṭayyib’s edition severely, not because it is a partially reconstructed work but because of various formal errors committed in the production of the edition.

quotations of his work—which again they were unlikely to alter significantly—in order to get some idea of the overall shape of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s representation of the episode.<sup>60</sup>

Although there are important points of overlap with the traditions collected by Ṭabarī and the other contemporary exegetes whose works we have examined, the most striking phenomenon one observes in Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s presentation of the Calf narrative is the sheer amount of wholly unique material on the episode his commentary seems to preserve. That said, despite the fact that they do not have very many traditions in common, nevertheless, the underlying *function* of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s presentation of the material is rather similar to Ṭabarī’s. That is, although a tremendous variety of interpretations from the early exegetical tradition seems to be represented here, even though Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s *tafsīr* lacks explanatory remarks such as those found in Ṭabarī’s *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, one can still discern specific preferences and a particular outlook informing his treatment of the episode. In other words, in his own way, Ibn Abī Ḥātim likewise seeks to manage *ikhtilāf* and perhaps minimize or even negate the consequences of the diversity of opinion that prevailed among the early exegetes.<sup>61</sup>

Among the several traditions he adduces in commentary on the first Calf narrative (Q.2:51-54), Ibn Abī Ḥātim cites two from the Waraqā’—Ibn Abī Najayḥ transmission from Mujāhid. Not surprisingly, they are quite similar to the parallel attestations of this material we have seen in the

---

<sup>60</sup> Admittedly, in the course of this exercise, we may very well discover that our basic assumption of the reliability of Ibn Kathīr and Suyūṭī is wrong, inasmuch as there is some evidence to suggest that the former might have altered or selectively represented the view of at least one of the authorities he cites.

<sup>61</sup> Again, I freely acknowledge that the possibility of performing something resembling redaction criticism in this case is severely hampered by our insurmountable ignorance regarding the full scope and arrangement of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s material on the Sūra 20 version of the episode. The editor of the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim*, al-Ṭayyib, derived whatever material transmitted from Ibn Abī Ḥātim that he could find in Ibn Kathīr and Suyūṭī, seemingly indiscriminately; we are thus ill-equipped to ascertain what Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s presentation of the Sūra 20 narrative would really have looked like *overall*, considering that we have no way of knowing what Ibn Kathīr and Suyūṭī *omitted*. At the very least, we can attempt to understand the significance of the material they saw fit to include. Further, although we have not done so here, it might hypothetically be worthwhile to consider what material came from which commentator, to see if any preference on either of their parts can be detected, as well to locate the Ibn Abī Ḥātim material in the context of the overall presentations of the episode by Ibn Kathīr and Suyūṭī.

*Jāmi' al-bayān* and *Tafsīr Mujāhid*. *Ad loc.* Q.2:51, *You took the Calf in his absence (and worshipped it), and you did wrong...*, he states: “*The Calf*: the offspring of a cow (*ḥasīl al-baqara*), the whelp of a cow.”<sup>62</sup> Further, *ad loc.* Q.2:54, *When Moses said to his people, O people, by taking this Calf you have done yourselves harm...*, he states: “*By your making of the Calf*: [from] the ornaments that you borrowed from the people of Pharaoh. Then Aaron said to them: Burn them, purify yourselves of them.”<sup>63</sup> These both agree verbatim with at least part of version A of the Mujāhid tradition which is cited by Ṭabarī *ad loc.* Q.2:51 (and which is absent from *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, in which we find version B, cited by Ṭabarī *ad loc.* Q.20:95-96, and version C, which is unique to it).<sup>64</sup> It is worth noting here, however, that, somewhat analogous to version C of the Mujāhid tradition found in *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, the most characteristic elements of that tradition as known from Ṭabarī’s commentary—that the Calf was cast (*insabaka*) from the addition of the handful of dirt to the amassed golden ornaments, but the wind made it low—are *completely lacking* here.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*, 1.108, no.513: Al-Ḥajjāj b. Ḥamza—Shabāba—Waraqā’—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—Mujāhid. According to Koç, this *isnād* appears more than 500 times in the *tafsīr*, though admittedly over 16,000 discrete *isnāds* are registered in the work as a whole. Note that Koç particularly criticizes the faulty and misleading enumeration system employed in the edition.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.109, no.524: Al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāḥ—Shabāba—Waraqā’—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—Mujāhid.

<sup>64</sup> Note, however, that despite the fact that one might readily conclude that these short traditions seem to be excerpted from version A, especially since they contain elements *missing* from both versions B and C as they are known from Ṭabarī and *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s *isnāds* for both of these traditions indicate that they were supposedly transmitted through the chain Mujāhid—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—Waraqā’. This is odd, since it is Ṭabarī’s *version B* that derives from Mujāhid—Ibn Abī Najayḥ—Waraqā’; he has *version A*, from which both these excerpts in *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* seem to be derived, through the Ibn Jurayj—Mujāhid chain! What this suggests about the integrity of the *isnāds* through which Mujāhid’s traditions were ostensibly transmitted is that the *matns* of the hadith handed on in Mujāhid’s name and the *isnāds* associated with those transmissions were apparently interchangeable to some degree.

<sup>65</sup> Admittedly, at least according to the secondary evidence provided by Suyūṭī, a more recognizable version of the Mujāhid tradition *does* (or *should*) occur in the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim ad loc.* the Sūra 20 version of the episode.

There is considerably more material of interest cited in the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* on the Sūra 7 version of the narrative. As we did in our discussion of Ṭabarī's material, we will only take note of those traditions that bear directly on the issue of the making and animation of the Calf. Most surprisingly, the very first hadith cited here *ad loc.* Q.7:148 is *another* version of what we have termed the "Prayer of Aaron" tradition, which we quoted previously from the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, in which it was attributed to Ibn 'Abbās through Sa'īd b. Jubayr. Here, the same major authorities are cited as the ultimate source, but Ibn Abī Ḥātim's *isnād* for the tradition deviates from that in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* after Ibn Jubayr, and we should thus perhaps not be too surprised to discover that both the wording and the overall gist of the tradition are quite different.

Aaron addressed the people and said: You have come forth from Egypt in possession of things the Egyptians entrusted to you, borrowed goods and things of that sort. It is my opinion that you should put aside their property which is in your possession; I will not declare anything placed in your trust lawful for you to have, nor anything borrowed. We will not consume any of these goods that belong to them, nor take them as our own.

Then he dug a pit and commanded the whole people to throw into the pit any of the property or ornaments they had with them [taken from the Egyptians]. Then he kindled a fire upon it and immolated it, declaring: We shall not have it, and neither shall they.

Sāmīrī was a man from a people that worshipped the cow, neighbors of the Israelites; he was not an Israelite himself. When they brought their things [to be burned] he did so as well, but added to it that track he had seen. He took a handful from it, and when he passed by Aaron the latter said to him: O Sāmīrī, will you not throw in what you have in your hand—for he clasped his hand around it, and no one saw what he had. He replied: This is a handful from the



track of the messenger who passed by you at the sea; I will not throw any of it in unless you will pray that it will become whatever I want when I throw it in.<sup>66</sup>

Then he threw it in, and Aaron prayed on his behalf, and Sāmīrī said: I want it to become *a calf*—and whatever property was in the pit, brass or [golden] ornaments or iron, was gathered up, and it became a calf, hollow (*ajwaf*), without a *rūh*—that lows.<sup>67</sup>

There are in fact very few elements here that would allow us to really connect Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s tradition on the prayer of Aaron with that found in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*; besides common attribution to Ibn ‘Abbās through Ibn Jubayr, the claim that the Calf was created due to Aaron’s prayer on Sāmīrī’s behalf is in fact the only major thematic element they really seem to share. In both cases, Aaron’s motivation for praying for Sāmīrī is completely obscure: in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* version, he offers the prayer spontaneously, without any knowledge of Sāmīrī’s intentions or what he was making (although Sāmīrī does warn him in advance that he is making something that is harmful and of no benefit). In Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s version, on the other hand, he offers the prayer in response to an ostensible *demand* from Sāmīrī, who explains *exactly* what it is he is concealing from Aaron, but he again does not acknowledge his intentions; and again, Aaron’s reasons for going along with it are completely obscure. Further, unlike the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* version, this version is explicitly “Mu’tazilite,” in that it specifically denies that the Calf was really animate in any way, being “hollow, without a *rūh*.”

What is perhaps more surprising here is the rather significant degree of overlap between this tradition and the *other* close parallel to it, the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās tradition cited by

---

<sup>66</sup> Inexplicably, “you will pray” is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person *plural* here (*illā an tad’ū allāh idhā alqaytuhā an takūna mā urīd...*); presumably what this means is that it is the prayer of the *people* that Sāmīrī supposes will have the desired effect. Subsequently, however, it is Aaron’s prayer that does the trick, and the people do not seem to be involved.

<sup>67</sup> *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*, 5.1567-68, no.8986: ‘Ammār b. Khālīd al-Wāsiṭī—Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan and Yazīd b. Hārūn—Aṣbagh b. Yazīd al-Warrāq—al-Qāsim b. Abī ‘Ayyūb—Sa’īd b. Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās. Regarding *ajwaf*, “hollow,” note that this term is related to *jawf* (as in the various traditions that state that the handful of dirt that animated the Calf was thrown *fī jawfihi*).

Ṭabarī *ad loc.* Q.2:51. The question of Aaron’s prayer aside, Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s version of the narrative is actually much closer to Ṭabarī’s overall; although very little of their wording per se coincides, they agree thematically in three major ways. First of all, in both, Aaron initiates the process of the gathering of the gold on “halakhic” grounds, and summons the Israelites to bring them forth and throw them in a pit to be burned. (Admittedly, as already mentioned, three of Ṭabarī’s long traditions on the episode share this basic element in common, although in the Suddī tradition the gold is to be buried, while in those of Ibn Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās and Ibn Zayd, they are specifically going to be burned or melted down.)

Second, two of Ṭabarī’s traditions provide biographical details on Sāmīrī, and it is in the tradition from Ibn ‘Abbās through Ibn Jubayr that he is specifically asserted to have *not* been an Israelite but rather come from a people of the *Bājarmā* who worship cows; later in the same tradition, his name is given as Mūsā b. Zafar. Although *Bājarmā* is not mentioned here in Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s version of the tradition, it is striking that here too Sāmīrī is explicitly noted to have not been an Israelite, but rather to have come from some cow-worshipping nation. (In contrast, the other tradition that Ṭabarī has that provides particular details about his background, that from Ibn ‘Abbās through ‘Ikrima, says explicitly that he *was* an Israelite!)

The third area of thematic agreement between the two traditions both Ṭabarī and Ibn Abī Ḥātim have from Ibn ‘Abbās through Ibn Jubayr is, of course, the dialogue between Aaron and Sāmīrī. The three extant versions of this dialogue in fact seem rather distinct:

Ṭabarī (Ibn Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās):

Then Sāmīrī saw the track of the horse of Gabriel, and took some of the dirt from the track of its hoof. Then he drew near to the fire and said to Aaron: O prophet of God, shall I throw in what I have here in my hand? And Aaron agreed, supposing that he had something like what the others were bringing from the jewelry and ornaments. He threw it in and said, *Become a calf, a body that lows!*, and it became so, for trial and *fitna*.

*Tafsīr Mujāhid* (Ibn Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās):

Aaron passed by Sāmīrī while he was making the Calf, and said to him: What are you making? He replied: I am making something that does harm and does not bring gain. Aaron then said: O God, grant him whatever he wants that he should ask of You. Then, when Aaron had proceeded on his way, Sāmīrī said: O God, I ask of You that it should low; and it did.

Ibn Abī Ḥātīm (Ibn Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās):

He took a handful from [the track], and when he passed by Aaron the latter said to him: O Sāmīrī, will you not throw in what you have in your hand—for he clasped his hand around it, and no one saw what he had. He replied: This is a handful from the track of the messenger who passed by you at the sea; I will not throw any of it in unless you pray that it will become whatever I want when I throw it in. Then he threw it in, and Aaron prayed on his behalf, and Sāmīrī said: I want it to become *a calf*—and whatever property was in the pit, brass or [golden] ornaments or iron, was gathered up, and it became a calf, hollow (*ajwaf*), without a *rūḥ*—*that lows*.

Clearly, different characterizations of Aaron prevail in each of these traditions. Ṭabarī’s version is unambiguous in portraying Aaron’s acquiescence as both justified and wholly passive; Sāmīrī tricked him and what resulted was really not Aaron’s fault. The version from *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, on the other hand, depicts him as both negligent and somewhat arrogant; without thinking of the consequences, or even being asked to intervene—and despite Sāmīrī’s acknowledgement of wrongdoing—Aaron beseeches God on Sāmīrī’s behalf, enabling him to create the Calf. In Ibn Abī Ḥātīm’s version, finally, his actions are simply inscrutable; without any good reason for doing so, Aaron simply accedes to Sāmīrī’s demand. Besides these key variations in characterization, however, the most critical difference between them is that Ṭabarī *simply omits any reference to the prayer at all*, which hardly seems surprising given the implications, namely that he directly and willfully enabled Sāmīrī to create the Calf. A more

meaningful question is why *other* exegetes were not bothered by versions of the tradition that made Aaron's active role in creating the Calf explicitly, or portrayed him in a negative light.<sup>68</sup>

Curiously, the Ibn Abī Ḥātim version seems to utilize terminology referring to the Calf that is very similar to that found in *Tafsīr Muqātil* and *Tafsīr Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās*; here, it is described as *'ijl ajwaf laysa fī-hi rūḥ*, “a calf, hollow, without soul,” reminiscent of the phrase used in both of these earlier works, *laysa fī-hi rūḥ*. (Likewise, the specific term *ajwaf*, “hollow,” is congruous with their references to the Calf as a *ṣūra*, a mere image, or *mujassad ṣaghīr*, a small cast figure.) Moreover, this version generally conforms to the Ibn 'Abbās position as represented by Ṭabarī—the Calf was miraculously produced through the influence exerted on the gold by the handful of dirt—but it *lacks* any reference to the lowing being caused by the wind, though this may be implied. In fact, no explanation of the Calf's lowing is provided by the Ibn Abī Ḥātim tradition at all, another element it has in common with Ṭabarī's Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition, in which this issue is likewise left unaddressed (it will be recalled that it is the traditions Ṭabarī has from Ibn 'Abbās through 'Ikrima, Ibn Zayd, and Mujāhid that specify that it was caused by the wind). Again, the key point of difference seems to be that in *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* the central element is the prayer of Aaron, which enables Sāmīrī to request that God transform the gold into the form of the Calf; this is missing completely from Ṭabarī's Ibn Jubayr tradition, but it is striking that in this latter version (and in his 'Ikrima—Ibn 'Abbās tradition as well) the element that triggers the transformation is Sāmīrī's *command* that the gold be so transformed, that is, his use of the “magic words” *kun 'ijl<sup>an</sup> jasad<sup>an</sup> la-hu khuwār<sup>an</sup>*.

What are we to make of the similarities and differences between Ibn Abī Ḥātim's account and these parallel traditions? It seems reasonable to conclude that the three versions of the Aaron tradition we cite above represent discrete stages in the development of this theme. That preserved

---

<sup>68</sup> Note the analogy with the example of the dialogue between God and Moses found in different forms in various commentaries, e.g. *Tafsīr Muqātil*, the Suddī tradition cited by Ṭabarī, and *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī*. The same core of material can be rearranged in different and subtle ways to yield rather different theological or theodical messages.

in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* seems to be the most atavistic, inasmuch as it portrays Aaron in the most unfavorable light possible, and likewise lacks any kind of equivocation regarding the nature of the Calf (Sāmīrī fashions it by hand and God causes it to low). That presented by Ṭabarī, on the other hand, is the most clearly apologetic: Aaron is not really portrayed as being responsible per se, for his involvement is unintentional; further, this tradition is highly ambiguous about the nature of the Calf, though it seems to imply (congruous with other representatives of the “Ibn ‘Abbās position” in Ṭabarī) that it was miraculously produced, but that its lowing was artificial. Finally, Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s version perhaps represents a stage of narrative development intermediate between the other two; on the one hand, the portrayal of Aaron is more candid than that in Ṭabarī, but less explicit than in *Tafsīr Mujāhid*; further, the Calf’s *creation* is mundane (due to Sāmīrī’s manufacturing its body), but the dirt seems to effect its animation, genuine or only apparent.

At the same time, a fully supernaturalized or miraculous nature is *denied* the Calf here, inasmuch as, like the portrayals of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, the version in Ibn Abī Ḥātim insists that the Calf was not actually alive, not possessed of an authentic *rūḥ*. Nevertheless, the fundamental similarity between the version in the *tafsīr* of Mujāhid and that cited here in the *tafsīr* of Ibn Abī Ḥātim is striking, and it seems significant that, as we shall see below, Ibn Abī Ḥātim appears to have transmitted *another* version of this tradition that is in fact practically identical to that found in *Tafsīr Mujāhid*. Overall, the coincidence in terminology with the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās here is striking considering the second tradition related by Ibn Abī Ḥātim in his commentary on Q.7:148. It is a short version of the episode attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās through the Successor Ibn Abī Ṭalḥa that is overall quite similar to the various Ibn ‘Abbās traditions related by Ṭabarī:

Sāmīrī had perceived (*abṣara*) Gabriel upon a horse, and took a handful of dirt from the track of the horse. When thirty days had passed he said: O Israelites, you have ornaments from the ornaments of the people of Pharaoh in your

possession; this is forbidden to you. Give me whatever you have, and we will burn it up. So they brought him what they had, and they kindled a fire, and he threw the ornaments into the fire, and when the ornaments melted down, he also threw in that handful of dirt, and it became *a calf* possessing *a body that lowed*—then it lowed a single time, and not again.<sup>69</sup>

This tradition also seems to represent what we have come to generically recognize as the Ibn ‘Abbās position, but again without any specific mention of the Calf’s lowing being due to the passage of the wind. What is particularly noteworthy here, though, is the conformity of this tradition, at least regarding a couple of points, with what Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās state in their commentaries on the episode. It is Sāmīrī who is responsible for bringing up the “halakhic” issue of the illicitness of the Israelites’ possession of the gold; he kindles a fire in which the gold is to be melted down; and, most notably, the resulting Calf “lowed a single time and not again.” Further, as in Ṭabarī’s Ibn ‘Abbās traditions, the Calf is spontaneously generated when Sāmīrī throws the gold into the fire, which, as we have seen, seems to be hinted at in Muqātil’s comments *ad loc.* Q.20:96 as well. But the dominant interpretation in Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās is, of course, that the Calf was made by Sāmīrī by hand and then made to low with the insertion of the handful of dirt, which is *not* the conception of the Calf’s origin here. In short, this version of the narrative seems to combine elements from what we have seen in Ṭabarī’s Ibn ‘Abbās traditions on the one hand and the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās on the other.

Ibn Abī Ḥātim relates a handful of other traditions *ad loc.* Q.7:148, all of them extremely laconic; most of them overlap with traditions from other *tafsīrs* that we have already examined here, and we will not dwell on them in detail. Among them we find the aforementioned version of the tradition attributed to Qatāda claiming that the Calf was flesh and blood (“Sāmīrī gathered

---

<sup>69</sup> *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘azīm*, 5.1568, no.8987: Abū Ḥātim—Abū Šāliḥ—Mu’āwiya b. Šāliḥ—‘Alī b. Abī Ṭalḥa—Ibn ‘Abbās. According to Koç, this is the single most frequently occurring *isnād* in Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s *tafsīr*, appearing more than 807 times. According to Horst, it is the most frequently occurring *isnād* in Ṭabarī’s as well, attested 970 times (“Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarīs,” 293), but Berg contests this.

them [i.e. the ornaments] together and crafted a calf from them; then God made it into a body of flesh and blood *that lowed*<sup>70</sup>). Another element worth mentioning here is a laconic version of the Suddī tradition on the dialogue between God and Moses: “Moses said: O Lord, this Sāmīrī commanded them to worship the Calf; but regarding its *rūh*, who inspired the Calf with it? The Lord replied: I did. Moses said: O Lord, then it was you who led them astray.”<sup>71</sup> It is striking not only that the name of Suddī continues to be identified with the particular theme of the dialogue between God and Moses about the Calf’s *rūh*, but that Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s version of the tradition conforms to that of Ṭabarī and not those of either Muqātil or al-‘Ayyāshī.

Even taking into account the fact that we are dealing with a partially reconstructed text, consideration of the traditions found in *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* commenting on the Sūra 20 version of the episode (part of that section of the work that is no longer extant except in quotation) further bolsters the impressions received from our survey of the traditions related in the passages commenting on the versions in Sūra 2 and 7. We find several traditions of interest here, some quite unique; as we shall see, overall, the impression of widespread *ikhtilāf* or exegetical diversity given by Ibn Abī Ḥātim is analogous to that given by Ṭabarī in his commentary. Again, we must be cautious and not infer too much from any patterns discerned in the presentation of material in this portion of the *tafsīr*, inasmuch as this section of the work was entirely reconstructed on the basis of much later texts that preserve exegetical traditions supposedly derived from the original *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim*.

The first traditions of interest in the commentary to Sūra 20 are actually cited here *ad loc.* Q.20:82, *But I am gracious to him who repents, and believes, and does right, and follows the straight path...* (This verse appears at the beginning of the Calf narrative in Q.20:83-98, and follows upon a brief reference to Pharaoh’s pursuit of the Israelites, God’s covenant with Israel,

<sup>70</sup> *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘azīm*, 5.1568, no.8988: Abū Ḥātim—Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-A‘lā—Muḥammad b. Thawr—Ma‘mar—Qatāda. See discussion above.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1568, no.8989: Abū Zar‘a—‘Amr b. Ḥammād—Asbāṭ—al-Suddī. Another popular *isnād*, occurring in the *tafsīr* almost 400 times.

and the manifestations of His beneficence and mercy such as sending the manna and quail to feed the Israelites in the wilderness.) Two traditions appear here transmitted on the authority of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, a previously uncited source for traditions on the Calf; to some degree these may be thought to be parallel versions of the same tradition, and it is noteworthy that they have each been taken from a different source.

The first version is essentially a brief overview of the episode, derived from the Quran commentary of Ibn Kathīr:

When Moses rushed off to meet his Lord, Sāmīrī arose and gathered up as much of the ornaments of the Israelite women as he could, and then made it (*ṣawwarahu*) into a calf. Then Moses arose before the Calf and went to work on it with a file; he ground it down and strewed it at the edge of the river [*sic*]. Anyone who had worshipped the Calf who drank of its water had their face turn yellow like gold. Then they said to Moses: Accept our repentance! He replied: Kill yourselves.<sup>72</sup>

The culmination of the account clearly alludes to the Calf narratives of both Sūra 2 and Sūra 7; the people's urgent desire to repent of their actions is expressed in Q.7:149, while Moses' strident demand that they do so by killing one another appears in Q.2:54. Although Q.20:82 is not explicitly cited here, this tradition is doubly apposite as a gloss on this verse, inasmuch as it both narrates the Calf story (which the verse essentially prefaces) in encapsulated form and resonates directly with the reference in the verse to God's pardon bestowed upon those who repent.

While the narrative detail about the water into which the Calf's remains had been strewn turning its worshippers' faces yellow is reminiscent of the similar detail in the Suddī tradition cited by Ṭabarī *ad loc.* Q.2:54, the most striking and significant element in this tradition is the complete *lack* of any reference to the Calf's lowing or any other miraculous or quasi-miraculous

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, 7.2430, no.13497: Abū Ḥātim—'Abd Allāh b. Rajā'—Isrā'īl—Abū Ishāq—'Ammāra b. 'Abd and Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān—'Alī. From the *tafsīr* of Ibn Kathīr.



element involved in its creation. Sāmīrī is simply said to have fashioned the Calf by hand (*ṣawwara*), then Moses destroyed it by grinding it down with a file (the implicit reading of the key verb from Q.20:97 being *la-naḥruqannahu*, “we shall surely grind it down” etc.) In sharp contrast to virtually *every other* text or tradition on the Calf we have examined here (that is, every other extant tradition from the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century or earlier), in the exegesis attributed to ‘Alī, the Calf appears here as a *mere statue* and absolutely nothing more.

The second tradition attributed to ‘Alī, taken from Suyūṭī’s *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, is somewhat more expansive than the first, but shows many points of similarity with it; in particular, much of the phrasing is the same in these two traditions.

When Moses rushed off to meet his Lord, Sāmīrī arose and gathered up as much of the ornaments of the Israelites as he could, and then made it (*ḍarabahu*) into a likeness of a calf; then he threw the handful into it (*fī jawfihi*), and behold, it was a calf, a body that lows, and Sāmīrī said to them: *This is your god and the god of Moses...* (Q.20:88) But Aaron said to them: *O people, did not your Lord make you a better promise?* (Q.20:86)

Then, when Moses returned, he seized his brother by the hair, and Aaron said what he said to him. Then Moses said to Sāmīrī: *What was the matter?* (Q.20:95) And he replied: *I picked up a handful from the track of the messenger and threw it, for the idea seemed attractive to me.* (Q.20:96) Then Moses arose before the Calf and went to work on it with a file; he ground it down and strewed it at the edge of the river [*sic*]. Anyone who had worshipped that Calf who drank of its water had their face turn yellow like gold. Then they said to Moses: Accept our repentance! He replied: Kill yourselves. They picked up knives and each man set about slaying his father and his brother and his son, and paid no mind to whom it was that he was killing; this continued until seven thousand of them had fallen. Then God revealed to Moses that it was time to come between them so

that they cease fighting; He granted pardon to whomever was killed, and forgave whomever was left standing.<sup>73</sup>

This second version of 'Alī's account places considerable emphasis on the scene of the Israelites' atonement through collective bloodshed, but in most other respects, it resembles the first version of the 'Alī narrative we cited just previous. There are a few anomalous or unusual details here; for example, in the first part of the tradition, a line that appears in the original Quranic text as the utterance of Moses—*O people, did not your Lord make you a better promise?* (Q.20:86)—is inexplicably placed in the mouth of Aaron, though this is not incongruous in the immediate context. Further, there is a specific evocation of the original biblical Calf narrative here: the line describing the combat that follows Moses' command that they kill themselves is very strongly reminiscent of Exodus 32:27-28, which states, however, that only three thousand Israelites fell that day.<sup>74</sup> The most conspicuous difference between the two versions of the 'Alī tradition, however, is that while the Calf is a mere statue in the first, here in the second, it is described in terms more similar to what we have seen in previous treatments of the episode: Sāmīrī makes a likeness of a calf (using a unique term, *ḍaraba*, literally meaning to “strike” an image of something), and the dirt turns it into *a lowing calf*.

Curiously, the nature of the Calf is left ambiguous here as it is in so many other traditions; especially noteworthy here is the fact that just as in Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, and Ṭabarī's Qatāda traditions (or at least one of them), the Calf is fashioned by hand and the dirt makes it into a “lowing calf.” In light of the particular import of Qatāda's exegesis of the Calf—namely, that it actually became flesh and blood and came to life, despite Ṭabarī's apparent disapproval—it is reasonable to wonder if a similar conception is implied here. Further, one might readily conclude

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 7.2430-1, no.13498. From the commentary of al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, which does not give full *isnāds* in the body of the work.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. the parallel from Ṭabarī cited *ad loc.* Q.2:54 (*Jāmi' al-bayān*, ed. Shākir, 2.77-8. no.945) transmitted from Ibn Zayd; it also mentions the figure of seven thousand and likewise resembles the line from Exodus.

that the first, shorter version of ‘Alī’s tradition is simply an abbreviation of the first, but notably, in rendering the Calf into a mere statue, one cannot help but notice that the tradition seems to have been edited in particularly significant, even strategic ways.<sup>75</sup>

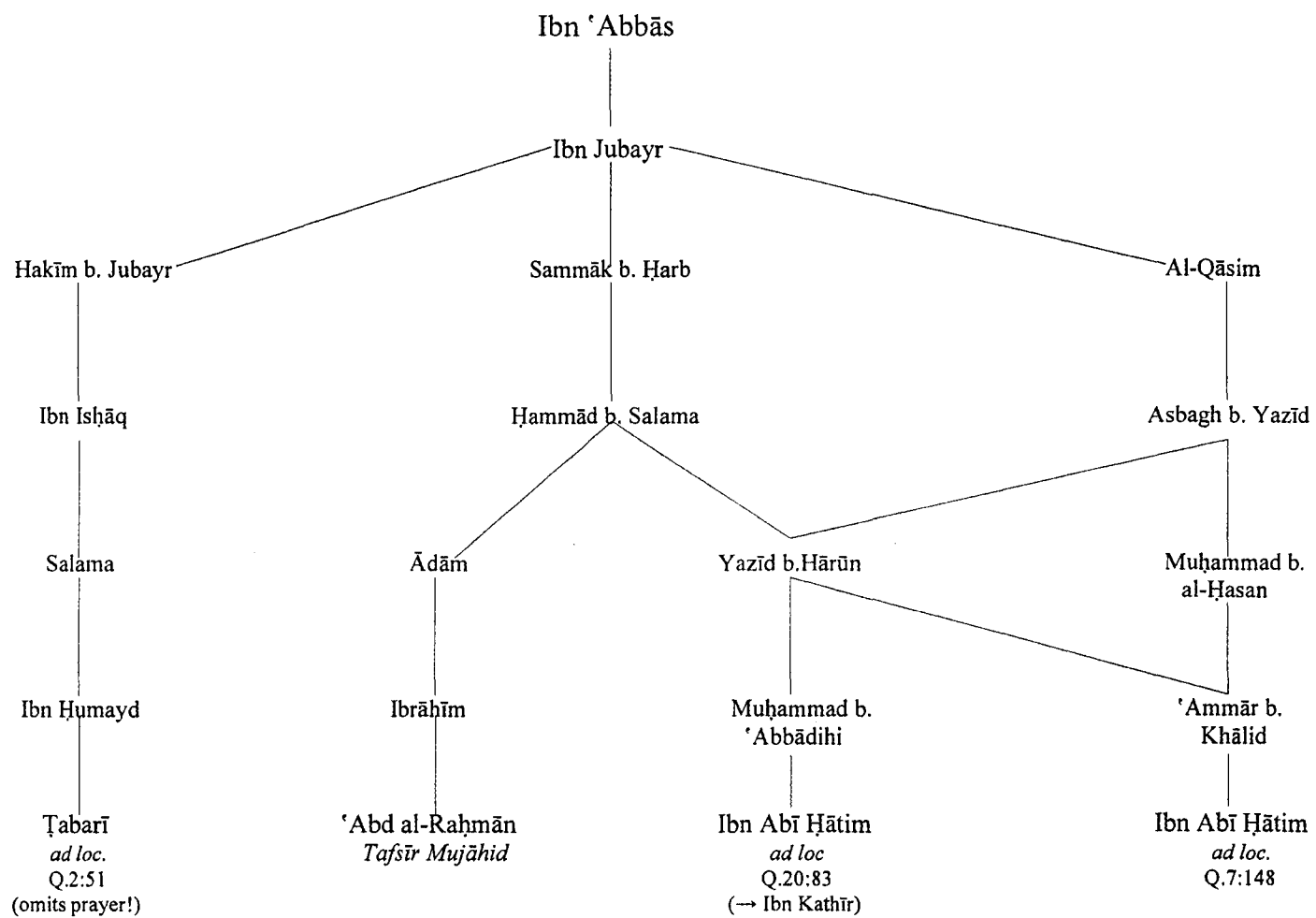
Several other traditions that relate directly to the question of the origin and nature of the Calf are found in the reconstructed section of the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* that corresponds to the main verses of the Calf narrative in Sūra 20; each of these either closely resembles or is identical to a tradition we have seen elsewhere. After briefly examining a few of them here, we will conclude by considering the overarching importance of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s representation of the earlier exegetical tradition on the Golden Calf, and in particular how that representation compares with that of Ṭabarī overall.

First, as mentioned previously, another version of what we have termed the “Prayer of Aaron” tradition is cited here *ad loc.* Q.20:83. It will be recalled that the version of the tradition cited by Ibn Abī Ḥātim *ad loc.* Q.7:148 deviated significantly from the version found in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, as well as from the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās tradition in Ṭabarī, which lacks any reference to a prayer of Aaron’s at all but clearly overlaps with these other traditions in significant ways. As it turns out, the second version of the tradition in the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* is in fact practically *identical* to that of Mujāhid; this is perhaps not surprising, since the *isnāds* attached to each are branches of the same chain (representing the transmission of Ibn Jubayr’s Ibn ‘Abbās tradition from Sammāk b. Ḥarb to Ḥammād b. Salama, then by Ḥammād on to his students) and are distinct from the *isnād* on the basis of which Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s other version of this tradition is transmitted (see Diagram 5). Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s second version of this tradition differs from that from *Tafsīr Mujāhid* in one key way. In the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* version, Aaron’s role is foregrounded: he intervenes without being asked to do so and spontaneously prays on Sāmīrī’s behalf that God should grant the latter whatever he wants. At the end, it is stated plainly that the

---

<sup>75</sup> In this connection, it seems noteworthy that one version comes from Ibn Kathīr and the other from Suyūṭī. See discussion below.

Diagram 5: Versions of the “Prayer of Aaron” tradition



Calf “only lowed on account of the prayer of Aaron.” Strikingly, this final line is simply *missing* from the version cited in the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim ad loc.* Q.20:83.<sup>76</sup>

The second tradition of note in the reconstructed section of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s *tafsīr* is also cited *ad loc.* Q.20:83, and is attributed to ‘Ikrima, the *mawlā* of Ibn ‘Abbās. As we have seen, Ṭabarī’s first major tradition on the Calf is transmitted from Ibn ‘Abbās through ‘Ikrima, and notably, Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s ‘Ikrima tradition overlaps with it in various ways. Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s tradition is considerably shorter, but much of its phrasing is identical to that from the parallel in Ṭabarī. It will be recalled that the latter actually begins with an extended description of the drowning of the Egyptians at the Red Sea and Sāmīrī’s taking possession of the handful of dirt when Gabriel appeared there on his “mare in heat” (*faras unthā wadīq*). The narrative in Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s version likewise seems to follow directly upon these events, at least implicitly.

Sāmīrī saw the messenger [Gabriel], and then it occurred to him: Take a handful from the track of this horse; whatever you throw this at, saying ‘Become...,’ that will it become. So he took the handful from the track of the messenger and clutched his fingers tight around it (*yabīsat aṣābi ‘uḥi ‘alā ‘l-qabḍa*). When Moses went for his appointment, at that time, the Israelites had borrowed the jewelry of the people of Pharaoh, so Sāmīrī said to them: Something is coming upon you on account of this jewelry, so gather it up! Then they gathered it up and kindled a fire around it, and it began to melt. Then it occurred to him: If you throw this handful in, then say, ‘Become...,’ that will it

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*, 7.2431, no.13499: Muḥammad b. ‘Abbādihi b. al-Bukhtarī—Yazīd b. Hārūn—Ḥammād—Sammāk—Sa’īd b. Jubayr—Ibn ‘Abbās. From Ibn Kathīr. Note the partial coincidence with the *isnād* for the version cited *ad loc.* Q.7:148 due to the intersection at Yazīd b. Hārūn (cf. Diagram 5 again). Mujāhid. At the beginning of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s version, the verb *naḥata* (to hew, sculpt, carve) appears in reference to Sāmīrī’s fashioning the Calf, where the parallel in *Tafsīr Mujāhid* only has *ṣana ‘a*; this is of note only because this word is not registered in any other tradition in reference to Sāmīrī’s creation of the Calf.

become. He threw the handful and said: Become a calf, a body that lows! Then he said: *This is your god and the god of Moses (Q.20:88)*.<sup>77</sup>

The similarities between this version and Ṭabarī's are conspicuous. First of all, the overall conception of how the Calf was created is the same here as in Ṭabarī's tradition: Sāmīrī somehow knew what the quality of the handful of dirt was, secreted it away until the appropriate time, and then, when the golden ornaments had been gathered and set ablaze, threw the dirt among them and uttered the magic words, "Become a calf, a body that lows!" In describing all this, Ibn Abī Ḥātim's version of the tradition uses similar or the same phrasing as Ṭabarī's, and it will be recalled that the 'Ikrima-Ibn 'Abbās tradition preserved by the latter is one of only *two* he has that specifically refer to Sāmīrī's use of such words (the other is Ṭabarī's version of the Ibn 'Abbās tradition transmitted from Ibn Jubayr). Likewise, only the two traditions associated with 'Ikrima use the particular phrase *alqā fi ru'ihī* to describe how Sāmīrī knew how to use the dirt—it "popped into his head," an obvious gloss on his later statement in Q.20:96, *for the idea seemed attractive to me...*—literally, "thus did my soul suggest to me" (*ka-dhālika sawwalat lī nafsī*).

On the other hand, there are both major and minor differences between the two 'Ikrima traditions. The specific detail that Sāmīrī "clutched his fingers tight around the handful" (*yabisat aṣābi'uhu 'alā'l-qabḍa*) is familiar from Ṭabarī, but there, it appears in the *Ibn Zayd* tradition, not the 'Ikrima tradition. Likewise, here it is Sāmīrī who brings up the "halakhic" issue of the legality of the ornaments for the Israelites; this is not the case in Ṭabarī's 'Ikrima tradition or any other version found in his *tafsīr*, but is rather comparable to what we find in *Tafsīr Muqātil*. Further, in Ṭabarī's 'Ikrima tradition, fire is not "kindled around it"; rather, the ornaments are left in the open to be consumed by heavenly fire. One possible explanation for these variations is that different versions of narratives could quite realistically come to contaminate one another in the course of

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 7.2431, no.13500: Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā—'Alī b. al-Madīnī—Yazīd b. Zuray'—'Ammār—'Ikrima. From Ibn Kathīr.

transmission, so images and specific phrasing that appear in one version in Ṭabarī might be expected to turn up in similar traditions attributed to different authorities in another compilation.

But there are major differences to be seen here as well. Most notably, Ṭabarī's version of the 'Ikrima tradition has the "Mu'tazilite" gloss at the end about the Calf's lowing being due to the blowing of the wind; here, the nature of both the Calf and its lowing are left completely vague, just as in Ṭabarī's Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition. In fact, in this version, we are not even told if Sāmīrī's spell worked (though presumably it did). Also, there is the question of the putative source: Ṭabarī's version is attributed directly to Ibn 'Abbās, while in Ibn Abī Ḥātim's version the *isnād* terminates in 'Ikrima per se. One would be tempted to attribute this to the familiar phenomenon of the so-called "backwards growth" of *isnāds*, but in point of fact, the path of transmission of this hadith is difficult to ascertain precisely, since the *isnād* does not really coincide with Ṭabarī's except for naming 'Ikrima as the ultimate (or penultimate) source, though on the textual level, the relationship between the versions is conspicuous.

The other traditions of note found in Ibn Abī Ḥātim's comments on Sūra 20 can be summarized briefly. We find another version of the Mujāhid tradition, which we have already mentioned above as seemingly corroborating the versions of the tradition found in the *Jāmi' al-bayān* and the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*.<sup>78</sup> Another significant tradition is cited *ad loc.* the key phrase from Q.20:88, *a calf, a body that lows...* It is an abbreviated version of the Ibn 'Abbās tradition in which, quite predictably, the gold is transformed into the Calf through the addition of the handful of dirt; there is nothing here about its nature or lowing one way or another. The only thing unusual here is that a short tradition appears at the end as an addendum to the tradition, and this states simply that Sāmīrī was from the *Ahl Kirmān*.<sup>79</sup> The final tradition worth mentioning here is another version of Qatāda's tradition on the slaughtering of the Calf: "*We shall verily burn it...* Qatāda related to us that in one reading it states: *We will surely slaughter it then burn it up...* He

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, 7.2431-2, no.13501.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.2432, nos.13504 and 13504.

continued: For it possessed flesh and blood (*kāna la-hu laḥm wa-damm*).”<sup>80</sup> We have mentioned this tradition previously as corroboration for the parallel in *Tafsīr ‘Abd al-Razzāq* that demonstrates the association of the idea that the Calf was alive with Qatāda. Here, as in other commentaries, the view that the Calf was actually slaughtered it is juxtaposed with other traditions describing it as being burned and ground down with a file.

Like Ṭabarī’s *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, the *tafsīr* of Ibn Abī Ḥātim preserves a variety of distinct and even ultimately irreconcilable views. His traditions on the Calf are similarly distributed among several conspicuously different exegetical options; further, as in Ṭabarī, we see an analogous emphasis here on the idea of the Calf’s lowing as a mechanical function. However, *unlike* Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim acknowledges the Qatāda tradition that the Calf was flesh and blood, as well as preserving not one but two versions of the “Prayer of Aaron” tradition, including one that is markedly unflattering to the prophet. We might thus conclude that Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s perspective on the tradition of interpretation of the Golden Calf episode is similar to Ṭabarī’s, but lacks any conspicuous deformation of the received tradition; that is, when we compare his presentation to what we know the tradition as a whole looked like—at least as far as we can tell from the extant evidence—we do not discern any conspicuous lacunae, gaps where significant ideas about the nature of the Calf or its origins that circulated in previous generations *should* be found, as is the case with Ṭabarī’s presentation. We even discover here a view wholly unattested in other contemporary works (even the *tafsīr* of the Imāmī al-‘Ayyāshī!), that of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib claiming (at least implicitly) that the Calf was a mere statue that did not low at all.

It appears that Ibn Abī Ḥātim is simply not as anxious as Ṭabarī about portraying Aaron’s role as having been somewhat ambiguous, or acknowledging the (apparent) minority view that the Calf was really transmuted from gold to a living animal. (Note, however, that this is still represented as a minority view here; for all we know, it was nothing of the sort. But had we to

---

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.2433, no.13514. These three traditions I have just mentioned are all taken from Suyūfī, and related without *isnād*.



depend on Ṭabarī as our sole source of information, we would not know that this view even existed in the previous tradition, except perhaps through deduction.) Again, we must be cautious about drawing any conclusions about Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s presentation of the episode that depend upon a *total* view of that presentation; that is, we cannot say for sure that his commentary *lacked* a given datum, since we have no way of knowing what his commentary on Sūra 20 really looked like. But if we invest some confidence in those later sources that preserved at least *some* of his comments on Sūra 20, we discover that Ibn Abī Ḥātim actually provides the reader with an astonishingly diverse collection of interpretations of the Calf, one that is rather more varied than the more copious body of traditions presented by Ṭabarī. Again, especially given that Ibn Kathīr and Suyūfī were both quoting an actual book in circulation in their time, it is relatively unlikely that they would have invented traditions out of whole cloth and attributed them to a well-known early authority. Even if they altered traditions to remove objectionable statements and deliberately ignored whole hadith of which they did not approve, we can at least hope that they accurately represented the traditions that they acknowledge *were* there in the work of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, even if the overall contours of Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s treatment of the Sūra 20 version might be deformed by their omissions.<sup>81</sup>

Overall, what the *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* demonstrates is that, while Ṭabarī was certainly not alone in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century in promoting the ideology of *tafsīr bi’l-ma’t’hūr*, recovering another contemporary example of this genre yields material for comparison that is overall quite *similar* to his, but quite clearly *not* the same. There is a certain irony to the fact that modern scholars have labored to bring this lost work to light due to an ideological commitment to the ideals of traditionism, thus seeking to bolster Ṭabarī’s *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, the greatest work of strict *tafsīr bi’l-ma’t’hūr* ever produced, with supplementary commentaries that can corroborate his representation of the views of the Companions and Successors on the Quran. What we discover when we

---

<sup>81</sup> But again, note the issue of the apparent disagreement between certain traditions related from Ibn Abī Ḥātim by Ibn Kathīr and al-Suyūfī noted above.

examine Ibn Abī Ḥātim's *tafsīr* next to Ṭabarī's is that, inasmuch as many of the same *isnāds* and traditions show up there, the presentation of the former supports and verifies that of the latter in some *general* sense; however, at the same time, such comparison also seems to expose Ṭabarī's subtle manipulation of the tradition, exercised largely through selective representation of his received material and the strategic omission of problematic hadith. This is certainly an ambiguous legacy for those modern advocates of traditionism who have struggled to restore this classic of the *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* genre and preserve it for posterity.

### 3. Revisions of Ṭabarī and the (re)making of classical *tafsīr*: al-Tha'labī and al-Ṭūsī

Although Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* was a monumental achievement in its time, for various reasons, his presentation of the Calf narrative did not become the most authoritative version of the episode in the field of classical Quran interpretation. Alternative presentations that are similar to Ṭabarī's, but that ultimately *undermine* the version of events he wished to promote, are already to be found in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, most notably in the work of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, a *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* that is analogous to Ṭabarī's, though far more modest in scope. Although this latter work has not come down to us intact, it was undoubtedly popular for centuries, enjoying wide circulation at least through the 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> century.

Nor is the success of Ibn Abī Ḥātim's *tafsīr* the only sign of the failure of Ṭabarī's work to achieve total hegemony in the field of traditionist exegesis. More significant in this regard is the advent of other major commentaries in the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century that were to command even wider audiences than Ṭabarī's work, despite the preeminence that modern scholars of *tafsīr* have generally bestowed upon the latter. One of the major problems with the *Jāmi' al-bayān* is, of course, its titanic volume. Its size was felt to be a serious impediment to its effective use already in the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, for one of the main factors that supposedly motivated Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) to compose his own compendious work of *tafsīr*, *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, was a desire to facilitate the further development of traditionist interpretation of the Quran, built on the foundation of reliably transmitted exegetical tradition established by Ṭabarī, but unhindered by the sheer mechanical difficulties of employing his voluminous work.

The problems involved in navigating Ṭabarī's massive commentary were overcome primarily through a radical restructuring of the *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* format. Ṭabarī provides a complete *isnād* for every individual hadith he cites, and occasionally provides supplementary *isnāds* as well, as we have seen in the case of the Mujāhid tradition. In contrast, although he also sought to rely as much as possible on authenticated traditions, because Tha'labī mostly depends

upon hadith that were already transmitted in the written works of his predecessors, he can merely cite the *isnāds* through which he had received the *ijāzāt* for these works, confining them to the beginning of his *tafsīr*. Streamlining the process in this way allows him to construct a presentation of the received tradition of exegesis on any given scriptural passage that is both more condensed and more comprehensive than that of Ṭabarī.<sup>82</sup> This is one critical aspect of Tha‘labī’s work as a commentator. The other is that he sought to combine the accumulated exegetical insights represented in Ṭabarī’s work, the greatest achievement of traditionist exegesis of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, with those of works produced in the intervening century, many of which are now only extant in quotation in Tha‘labī’s commentary.<sup>83</sup> Further, Tha‘labī actually went back to many of the sources Ṭabarī had used in compiling his vast *tafsīr* and re-aggregated the traditions therein into his own work; and he also seems to have used certain works that Ṭabarī had only reluctantly or sporadically quoted as well.

There is of course no denying that Tha‘labī’s work would have been impossible without Ṭabarī’s accomplishment in the *Jāmi’ al-bayān*. But in a sense, that accomplishment could only truly be realized and put to practical use through the mediation of Tha‘labī’s *Al-Kashf wa’l-bayān*, which rendered the vast material compiled by Ṭabarī more manageable, reworked it in numerous ways, and, perhaps most important, supplemented it considerably. The literal scope of Tha‘labī’s work is narrower, but its vision is effectively much broader. Making his work more comprehensive and yet easier to digest ensured that Tha‘labī’s *tafsīr* would be tremendously successful, and in point of fact, it came to overshadow the work of Ṭabarī in a very short time. As Saleh has shown, it is Tha‘labī’s work and not Ṭabarī’s that truly epitomizes classical Sunnī *tafsīr*,

---

<sup>82</sup> An *ijāza* is essentially an *isnād* for a collection of hadith or other traditionally transmitted work, authorizing the recipient to transmit the work to others. On the format of *Al-Kashf wa’l-bayān*, see Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 67-76. The list of Tha‘labī’s sources with his *isnāds* for the works appears on 1.73-87 in the printed edition of the *Kashf* edited by ‘Āshūr.

<sup>83</sup> For a list of sources used by Tha‘labī that are no longer extant, see Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 245-50.

and which was the most widely disseminated and influential Quran commentary of the Middle Ages.<sup>84</sup>

The particular success of Tha'labī's *tafsīr* is an especially important point that must be underlined here, because even though Tha'labī's presentation of the Calf narrative is overall not so very different from Ṭabarī's, and the two may in the end be characterized as having very similar interpretive priorities vis-à-vis the episode, there are nevertheless subtle differences between them as well. Most significantly, as is the case with Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Tha'labī's commentary on the pertinent Quranic passages includes exegetical hadith representing interpretations Ṭabarī and other early exegetes appear to have deliberately excluded; again, this was made possible because of Tha'labī's direct use of Ṭabarī's sources as well as his consideration of works that came after Ṭabarī's time, or that he had avoided or generally neglected. Moreover, because the *Kashf* was even more widespread and influential in later exegetical circles than the commentary of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, the reappearance of these marginalized traditions in Tha'labī's commentary in particular would prove to be momentous for the further development of *tafsīr*, and seems to represent nothing less than the collapse of the exegetical agenda established by Ṭabarī barely a century previous. In the context of our discussion here, we are specifically speaking about Ṭabarī's attempt to dictate specific parameters for acceptable interpretation of the Calf episode, but this observation can no doubt be extended to numerous other cases as well.

Undermining or overturning the consensus of previous centuries—or what Ṭabarī strove to *represent* as the consensus of previous centuries—does not appear to have been Tha'labī's intention, however. If anything, he sought to *bolster* the authority of the interpretations promoted by Ṭabarī and the exegetes of the pre-classical period; for example, in the passages in his commentary dealing with the Calf episode, Tha'labī evidently relies very heavily on the traditions

---

<sup>84</sup> Our understanding of classical Sunnī *tafsīr* is no doubt potentially improved considerably by the recent publication of the Quran commentary of al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), a rich work that has received very little attention in the past.

transmitted by Ṭabarī in his *Jāmi' al-bayān*, as well, it seems, on the *tafsīr* of Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, which he arguably knew as the *Tafsīr al-Kalbī*. Nevertheless, due to his tendency to supplement Ṭabarī's presentation by going back to older sources or citing newer ones (which themselves often preserve older traditions not included by Ṭabarī in his work), Tha'labī creates a space in his commentary that allows alternative voices to be heard; to some extent, it is specifically these voices that most clearly challenge the exegetical agenda that Ṭabarī and Tha'labī himself seem to share. This situation becomes most apparent when we compare the treatment of the Calf narrative in the *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān* with that found in Tha'labī's other major work, the '*Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*', where he seems to have been even *more* open to allowing alternative voices to have their say.

Like Ṭabarī, Tha'labī appears to pay greatest attention to the Calf episode when it is first mentioned in Sūra 2, and in this part of his commentary, we find a sequence of paragraphs that serve to provide an overview of the narrative by knitting elements from several different sources into a coherent whole. Like Ṭabarī, before commenting on Q.2:51 (*you took the Calf in his absence (and worshipped it) and did wrong*, etc.), Tha'labī first attends to the reference in the previous verse to the drowning of the Egyptians, and relates events that occurred at that time to what subsequently transpired with the Calf. Tha'labī thus relates the story of how the Egyptians hesitated to enter the sea after the miraculous parting of the waters, but Gabriel appeared riding a mare in heat (*faras unthā wadīq*) and lured the Egyptian stallions in; Michael then appeared behind them to drive the stragglers in as well, causing all the Egyptians to perish when the waters come crashing down.<sup>85</sup>

The inclusion of this story at this specific juncture is particularly noteworthy because, in point of fact, the anecdote is largely superfluous here: in proceeding to describe the making of the Calf in commenting on the next verse, Tha'labī relies on the account related by Suddī, in which,

---

<sup>85</sup> Al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, 1.93. Note that there is significant overlap with Ṭabarī's account here.

as we have seen, it is claimed that Sāmīrī saw Gabriel astride his angelic steed *not* at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea, but rather when Gabriel appeared in the Israelite camp *after* the crossing to take Moses to his appointment with God on the mount. (However, as we have already noted, in point of fact, Suddī seems to have narrated *both* episodes, Gabriel’s appearance at the sea *and* his arrival in the camp to take Moses away to Sinai.)

That said, Tha’labī does not rely *solely* on the Suddī account here, but rather draws upon multiple versions of the story of the making of the Calf related by Ṭabarī and other previous commentators, knitting them together into a more or less coherent whole:

When the time for the appointment came, Gabriel arrived on a horse—it is called the Horse of Life, for whatever it touches comes alive—to take Moses to his Lord. When Sāmīrī saw it—he was a man, actually a goldsmith (*ṣā’igh*), from a people called *Bājaraw* [i.e. Bājarmā], and his name was Micah, though Ibn ‘Abbās said that his name was Mūsā b. Ḥafṣ, and that he was a hypocrite who gave only the appearance of submission to Islam, and that he was from a people who worshipped cows, and the worship of cows was still dear to him. When he saw Gabriel on that steed, he said, Now this is really something! Then he took a handful of dirt from the hoof of Gabriel’s horse.

This account synthesizes two versions of the Calf narrative from Ṭabarī, without acknowledging the actual sources. Several phrases here are taken straight from the account of Suddī; for example, as we have already noted, the notion that Sāmīrī saw Gabriel when he arrived to take Moses away for the appointment with God is a characteristic element in Suddī’s version. Likewise, it is in Suddī’s version that Sāmīrī exclaims, “It is the Horse of Life, and truly something!” On the other hand, the references to *Bājaraw* (i.e. Bājarmā) and Mūsā b. Ḥafṣ, as well as the specific notice about Sāmīrī being a hypocrite, are all taken from the third long tradition Ṭabarī cites *ad loc.*

Q.2:51, transmitted from Ibn ‘Abbās through Ibn Jubayr. Further, we have only seen the reference to Sāmīrī being a goldsmith in the commentary of Muqātil.<sup>86</sup>

All that said, lest it seem that Tha‘labī has nothing new to offer us, there seem to be two distinctive elements included here. One is the reference to Sāmīrī (or Mūsā’s!) name being *Micah*; we have already remarked on this at length in connection with Ibn Qutayba’s citation of the “Mūsā b. Zafar” datum, which appears to rely on some subterranean connection between Sāmīrī and the story of Micah in Judges 17-18. We will not dwell on this point further here, but will add only that Tha‘labī was an older contemporary of the Jewish biblical commentator Rashi, who, as we have seen, places particular emphasis on Micah’s connection to the Calf episode. The second distinctive element is the particular gloss on the term “Horse of Life,” which seems to be unique to Tha‘labī among the various treatments of the Calf episode we have examined.

Tha‘labī’s account then continues:

At that time, the Israelites had borrowed a great many ornaments from the people of Pharaoh—even though they wanted to leave Egypt—for a wedding they were set to have. Then God destroyed the people of Pharaoh, and those ornaments were left in the hands of the Israelites. When Moses departed, Sāmīrī said: The goods and ornaments that you borrowed from the people of Pharaoh are booty that it is not lawful for you to possess; therefore, you should dig a trench and bury it, until such time as Moses returns and renders an opinion about it; go forth and do this.

Again, Suddī’s version appears to prevail here. The story of the wedding appears to be new; also, as is usually the case in Ṭabarī’s accounts of the making of the Calf, it is actually Aaron who brings up the issue of the illegality of the Israelites’ possession of the borrowed golden ornaments, while here responsibility for this has been shifted to Sāmīrī. (Notably, this is particularly characteristic of Muqātil’s treatment, though this detail also appears in Ṭabarī’s Qatāda traditions

---

<sup>86</sup> Note that Tha‘labī knew and used *Tafsīr Muqātil* in two different recensions.



cited *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88.) Nevertheless, this still seems to be Suddī's version, the main giveaway being the fact that the ornaments are supposed to be buried rather than burned up.

The narrative continues:

When the ornaments had been gathered together, Sāmirī fashioned them (*ṣāghahā*) and then threw in the handful he had taken from the dirt tread upon by Gabriel's steed, and out came a calf made of gold, inlaid with precious stones, as fine as could be, and it lowed once. Suddī said: it was lowing and walking about [continuously]. [Then he said] *This is your god and the god of Moses whom he has forgotten*—that is, he has left him here and gone off in search of him.

The Israelites broke their covenant (*wa'd*). They reckoned day and night as two days, and when twenty such "days" had passed and Moses had not yet returned, and they saw the Calf and heard what Sāmirī said, eight thousand of them succumbed to the trial of the Calf (*ifātana bi'l-'ijl*), and they became devoted to it, worshipping it instead of God.<sup>87</sup>

Tha'labī's description of Sāmirī's actions here is rather ambiguous: he takes the gold and fashions it, *ṣāghahā*, but it is unclear into what, exactly; then he throws the handful into or among the gold and the Calf emerges. In contrast, Ṭabarī's first version of the Qatāda narrative cited *ad loc.* Q.20:87-88 says that Sāmirī fashions a figure of a calf, *ṣūrat baqara*—though the verb used is *ṣawwara*—and throws the figure and the handful into the rest of the gold, and the Calf emerges. In the second version of the Qatāda narrative, on the other hand, the verb used is *ṣāgha*, and Sāmirī is portrayed as fashioning the Calf and throwing the handful of dirt into it, causing it to low. Tha'labī's version is obviously more like the first Qatāda tradition, though it is particularly odd that it does not specify what Sāmirī fashioned, and the use of the verb *ṣāgha*, characteristic of the second Qatāda narrative and of *Tafsīr Muqātil* as well, is conspicuous.

---

<sup>87</sup> *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, 1.93. Most of the rest of Tha'labī's presentation on Q.2:51-54 is similar to Ṭabarī's. Commensurate with his particular interest in pietism and homiletics, there is an interesting digression on the nature of gratitude *ad loc.* Q.2:54.

The inclusion of heretofore-unseen details about the Calf, specifically that it was “inlaid with precious stones, as fine as could be,” is conspicuous here as well. But the single most striking aspect of Tha’labī’s portrayal of the making of the Calf is its apparent synthesis of Qatāda’s version of events with that of Suddī. Even though Qatāda’s conception of how the Calf was actually made prevails here, perhaps the single most distinctive aspect of Suddī’s interpretation is incorporated here as well, namely that the Calf was “lowing and walking about.” In this connection, it is extremely noteworthy that Tha’labī has specifically combined aspects of those traditions that Ṭabarī seemed rather interested in *discounting* in favor of the view that dominates in his *tafsīr*, the Ibn ‘Abbās position (the handful of dirt created the Calf from the gold and the lowing was caused by the wind). At the same time, however, it is also noteworthy that the conception of the Calf associated with Qatāda here is *not* that the Calf was flesh and blood, authentically alive; further, and somewhat paradoxically, Tha’labī *also* includes a gloss here that we would overall associate with treatments such as Muqātil’s, namely that the Calf only lowed once (*khāra khuwārat<sup>m</sup>*). This gloss seems wholly irreconcilable with Suddī’s statement that it lowed and walked continually (*yakhūru wa-yamshī*).

The apparent confusion here signals that we are dealing with a deliberately synthetic portrayal, and Tha’labī’s hybrid account, in which Sāmīrī fashions the gold, adds the handful of dirt, and produces a Calf that is functionally (or implicitly) animate, amounts to yet another permutation of this constantly shifting story. At the same time, despite the slightly maladroit nature of the account, the overarching impression of the episode one gets is generally coherent. The theme of Sāmīrī’s responsibility for what transpired is emphasized, as it often is, as is his “outsider” status—he is a *munāfiq* or hypocrite who feigns Islam, i.e. submission to Moses’ authority, while the Israelites are in Egypt, but he is not an Israelite himself. Likewise, despite the inclusion of Suddī’s gloss (the Calf was lowing and walking about), the abiding impression of the Calf is that it is only minimally or marginally miraculous: Sāmīrī fashioned it by hand, the handful of dirt brought it forth but it possibly lowed only once; further, there is no reference to

the Calf's being flesh and blood here, or to its possessing an authentic *rūh* or spirit. Thus, despite the pervasive reliance on the Suddī tradition here, this account is *overall* similar to that of Ṭabarī's Ibn 'Abbās traditions; in particular, Sāmīrī's responsibility is foregrounded, and divine involvement is minimized.

In contrast to the complex, hybrid account Tha'labī presents in his comments on the Sūra 2 episode, his presentation of the episode in his commentary on the Sūra 7 version of the narrative is overall rather more condensed; that in his commentary on Sūra 20 is equally concise. Moreover, much of what he has to say in the latter two passages is devoted to *qirā'āt* and related issues, so it is relatively easy to isolate the key statements that represent the major narrative or exegetical elements of importance in these latter presentations. Most of what we find in these latter passages is congruous with the account Tha'labī gives *ad loc.* Sūra 2, although there are occasional surprises.

In his commentary on Q.7:148-152, his exegesis of this version of the narrative is summed up in just a few lines:

Among the Egyptians, the Israelites held a position analogous to that of the *Ahl al-jizya* in Islam. They had a certain holiday on which they would adorn themselves, and they would borrow ornaments from the Egyptians to do so. The time for their holiday had arrived [i.e., when the Exodus occurred], and they had borrowed the ornaments of the Egyptians, but when God brought them out of Egypt and drowned Pharaoh, those ornaments remained in their hands. Then Sāmīrī made a calf—the offspring of a cow—from them, *an image of a calf* ('*ijl<sup>an</sup> jasad<sup>an</sup>*), a cast figure without soul in it (*mujassad lā rūh fīhi*).

Wahb said: [it was] a body of flesh and blood (*jasad<sup>an</sup> lahm<sup>an</sup> wa-damm<sup>an</sup>*). *That lowed*: the sound of the cow. It lowed only once, and not again. Wahb also said: it was heard to low, but did not move.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, 4.285.

The dependence on Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās (or al-Kalbī) here is conspicuous. One presumes that this is the interpretation of the nature of the Calf Tha'labī himself prefers, for the subsequent comment that contradicts it is given in the name of the authority with whom it is to be associated (specifically Wahb b. Munabbih), which arguably has the effect of establishing it as a dissenting opinion contravening the majority view embodied in the “master narrative” represented by Tha'labī's unattributed comments. It is significant that the Qatāda interpretation of the Calf as being flesh and blood has now been connected with Wahb, and is juxtaposed with other short glosses that seem to contradict it, even one transmitted in the name of Wahb himself! This datum about the flesh-and-blood Calf is in fact *never* cited in the name of Qatāda by Tha'labī; one might surmise from this that he simply does not know that Qatāda is associated with this tradition, or else, possibly, that he wishes to *dissociate* Qatāda from it, and so he connects it with Wahb instead, who is better known as a transmitter of apocrypha.<sup>89</sup> Tha'labī has clearly let the cat out of the bag, so to speak, by acknowledging the interpretation of the Calf as flesh and blood, for, as we have seen, Ṭabarī seems to have worked very hard to avoid having to do so. At the same time, it can hardly be thought to constitute the cornerstone of Tha'labī's exegesis of the Calf episode.

These short comments are followed by an extended discussion of *qirā'āt* traditions on *khuwār* and *hulyy* and related matters, and this seems to overshadow his foregoing comments. In particular, it is striking how little attention Tha'labī really pays to the claim that the Calf was actually alive, having acknowledged this surprising idea. In fact, nothing more is said in this passage about the nature of the Calf, and the subsequent dialogue between Moses and Aaron receives only perfunctory glosses.

Much of this is repeated in Tha'labī's commentary on the Sūra 20 version of the episode. Here, he states that all 600,000 Israelites succumbed to the temptation to worship the Calf except for 12,000 of them; these, he will later explain, were the faithful Israelites who cleaved to Aaron

---

<sup>89</sup> Consulting the list of authorities Tha'labī gives at the beginning of his *tafsīr*, it is in fact striking that *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* is not listed there; nor does he purport to have been familiar with any commentary associated with Ma'mar b. Rashīd or Qatāda either.

and refused to worship the Calf. Sāmīrī's offense is specifically explained as his leading the Israelites astray by summoning them and diverting them to the worship of the Calf and his exhorting them towards it: *da'āhum wa-ṣarafahum ilā 'ibadat al-'ijl wa-ḥamalahum 'alayhā*.<sup>90</sup> Tha'labī then proceeds to give another terse description of the scene of the making of the Calf, this time including different biographical details in a tradition attributed to Sa'īd b. Jubayr that appears *ad loc.* Q.20:87:

Sa'īd b. Jubayr said: Sāmīrī was from the people of Kirmān, and said to them: Punishment may strike you because of these ornaments you carry with you—these were the ornaments they borrowed from the Egyptians—so bring them forth and gather them up until such time as Moses returns and passes judgment concerning them. They were gathered up and handed over to him; and in three days' time he made (*ṣāgha*) of them a calf; and then he cast the handful which he had taken from the track of Gabriel's steed into it, and then Moses' people said *We did not break our promise to you of our own will...* (Q.20:87)<sup>91</sup>

This version is quite recognizably that of Muqātil: it is Sāmīrī who compels the Israelites to give up the golden ornaments which he fashions (*ṣāgha*) into a Calf; and the key element in the procedure is the insertion of the handful of dirt into the Calf's hollow form. Moreover, the specific theme of the three days Sāmīrī took to create the Calf is a distinctive element, but is reminiscent of a detail from Muqātil's comments *ad loc.* Q.7:148-152, where it is said that Sāmīrī made the people the Calf on the thirty-eighth day after Moses left for Sinai, and that they worshipped it on the thirty-ninth and fortieth day. The inclusion of the detail about Sāmīrī coming from the *Ahl Kirmān* is unusual; it only appears in the commentaries of a couple of Tha'labī's

---

<sup>90</sup> *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, 6.257. The idea here seems to be that it was the worship of the Calf that constituted the main part of the sin of Sāmīrī and the Israelites, not the actual making of the Calf per se. Cf. Ṭūsī's remarks regarding the nature of the Israelites' sin noted below.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

predecessors, though it became a standard feature of the exegesis of the episode in the time after Tha'labī.<sup>92</sup>

After citing some variant readings for *bi-malkinā* in Q.20:87, Tha'labī proceeds to a closer investigation into the nature of the Calf again, and his interpretation here largely conforms to that he presents in his commentary to the Sūra 2 narrative. Notably, he cites Q.7:148 here instead of Q.20:88, presumably because the former seems to emphasize Sāmirī's direct agency in creating the Calf: "*Then he brought out for them a calf, a body—without soul in it; he fashioned for them a calf from gold inlaid with precious stones—that lowed—a sound, indicating that it lowed once and not again.*" As in his previous comments, Tha'labī once again emphasizes that Sāmirī made the Calf by hand and used the handful of dirt to animate it, or at least to elicit the mooing sound.

Despite the fact that he acknowledges both the Suddī comment that the Calf mooed and walked around and the tradition he attributes to Wahb that the Calf was flesh and blood, it is evident that the view Tha'labī prefers is that represented in the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, which we might also affiliate with the Qatāda position (at least as Ṭabarī presents it). If one had to summarize the debate over the nature of the Calf as Tha'labī seems to understand it, the Muqātil/Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās/Qatāda position clearly dominates, with the traditions of Suddī and Wahb perhaps representing minor dissenting positions. But the most striking thing about all of this is that the view preferred by Ṭabarī, that which we have termed the Ibn 'Abbās position and that clearly dominates in his *tafsīr*, is *nowhere to be found here*.

Even more surprisingly, these comments are immediately followed by a version of the now-familiar "Prayer of Aaron" tradition that Tha'labī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās. (It will be recalled that all three versions of this tradition that we have encountered so far, even that in Ṭabarī which omits the element of the prayer entirely, are transmitted from Ibn 'Abbās through Ibn Jubayr):

---

<sup>92</sup> Precedent for this detail is found, as we have seen, in the *tafsīr* of Ibn Abī Ḥātim, as well as in the extant *tafsīr* of Zayd b. 'Alī, which otherwise lacks details pertinent to our discussion here.

Aaron came upon Sāmīrī while he was making the Calf, and said to him: What are you making? He replied: I am making something that does harm and does not bring gain. Aaron then said: O God, grant him whatever he wants that he should ask of You. Then, when [Aaron had proceeded on his way, Sāmīrī] said<sup>93</sup>: O God, I ask of You that it should low. And then it lowed, and he prostrated himself before it. It only lowed on account of Aaron's prayer. *Then they said: This is your god and the god of Moses, (whom) he has neglected* (Q.20:88)—that is, he has gone astray and erred regarding the way. It is also said that it means: He has left [his god] here and gone off in search of him.<sup>94</sup>

Minor corruptions in the text notwithstanding, this version of the tradition is virtually identical to that found in the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*. The main differences are that the *Tafsīr Mujāhid* version ends with the statement that “it only lowed on account of Aaron's prayer,” omitting the exegesis of the end of Q.20:88; it also includes the brief statement that “when it lowed, they prostrated themselves before it, and when it did so again, they raised their heads.”

After a considerable digression into the issue of Aaron's withdrawal from the scene, his fear of secession and of confronting the idolaters by force, and so forth, Tha'labī concludes his presentation of the Sūra 20 Calf narrative with a substantial amount of material attributed to Qatāda that includes more details about Sāmīrī's background:

Sāmīrī was a notable (*'aẓīm*) from among the notables of the Israelites, from a tribe called Sāmira. But the enemy of God became a hypocrite after crossing the sea with the Israelites. When the Israelites passed by the Amalekites (*al-'amāliqa*) while they were worshipping their idols, and they said, O Moses, make us a god like the gods they have! Then Sāmīrī seized his opportunity and made them the Calf.

---

<sup>93</sup> Again, the text is corrupt and must be emended according to the reading in *Tafsīr Mujāhid*. Saleh has pointed out the various technical shortcomings of 'Āshūr's edition, largely due to his reliance on inferior witnesses to the text.

<sup>94</sup> *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān*, 6.257.

In reply to his question, Sāmīrī said to Moses, *I perceived what they did not perceive*, meaning I saw that which they did not see, and knew that which they did not know, and comprehended that which they did not comprehend. (Yahyā b. Wathāb and al-A‘mash and Ḥamza and al-Kisā‘ī read the key verb as *I perceived what you did not perceive*, taking it as the second-person, though the others read it as the third-person.<sup>95</sup>) *I took a handful from the track of the messenger...*, that is, I took dirt from the track of Gabriel’s horse...<sup>96</sup>

The passage continues with discussion of the variant readings of *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>am</sup>*, glosses *fanabadhtuhā* (then I cast it) as “I threw it into the Calf,” and then concludes with an explanation of Sāmīrī’s fate as well as a brief overview of the different interpretations of how the Calf was destroyed, in which Tha‘labī acknowledges the claim that the Calf was actually slaughtered.

How are we to make sense of Tha‘labī’s presentation? Although his view of the means through which the Calf was created and its nature is different from that of Ṭabarī, Tha‘labī’s dependence on his predecessor’s work is conspicuous, especially in the passage of his commentary dealing with the Sūra 2 version of the episode. But specifically because of Tha‘labī’s clear preference for the idea that Sāmīrī fashioned the Calf and the handful of dirt caused it to low (Ṭabarī’s Qatāda position), Ṭabarī’s material is filtered, as it were, through that taken from other commentators as well, primarily Muqātil. Because of this preference, the overarching effect is that Sāmīrī is placed in the foreground (even more so than in Ṭabarī’s commentary), and it is quite noteworthy that Aaron thus recedes even further into the background (again even more so than in Ṭabarī’s commentary). Although he *never* acknowledges the Ibn ‘Abbās position favored by Ṭabarī—that it was only the wind that made the Calf low—Tha‘labī nevertheless privileges another “minimalist” version of the creation and nature of the Calf: it is fashioned by hand and made to low by the insertion of the handful of dirt, but, thanks to the glosses he derives from

---

<sup>95</sup> Literally, “with a *tā’* of address.”

<sup>96</sup> *Al-Kashf wa’l-bayān*, 6.258.



Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, Tha‘labī is able to emphasize that there was no authentic life in the Calf (i.e., that it did not possess a *rūḥ*); moreover, when it lowed, it lowed only once (*khāra khuwāra<sup>m</sup>*). The overall impression one takes away from his interpretation, therefore, is that it is not all that different from that we get from Ṭabarī, and we would surely be justified in grouping Tha‘labī together with Ṭabarī, Muqātil, and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās as representing a moderate and only partially supernaturalized conception of the Quranic Golden Calf.

At the same time, there are occasional dissonant notes to be found here as well.

Tha‘labī’s presentation places the emphasis on Sāmīrī’s role, yet he also includes a version of the “Prayer of Aaron” tradition that clearly indicts Aaron for his involvement. He favors the interpretation of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās that the Calf lowed but once, but then *also* acknowledges the Suddī tradition maintaining that the Calf lowed *continually*. And finally, he repeatedly states that the Calf had no *rūḥ*, no authentic life within it, but then openly acknowledges the interpretation (attributed to Wahb) that the Calf was flesh and blood (and then promptly cites a contradictory tradition from Wahb as well that states that the Calf did not move, which it presumably would have done if it were a real flesh and blood animal). Ṭabarī’s presentation of multiple positions attributed to various authorities conveys some sense of the bewildering exegetical diversity that could be acknowledged within the boundaries of acceptable interpretation; is this the impression Tha‘labī means to give us as well? As we have shown, close scrutiny of Ṭabarī’s treatment of the Calf episode shows us that a specific agenda informs his carefully constructed presentation; inasmuch as he seems to contradict his own obvious preferences at several different junctures, what could the deeper agenda behind Tha‘labī’s presentation be?

Saleh’s approach to Tha‘labī’s *tafsīr* emphasizes that the *Kashf* manifests or realizes the ideal of scriptural polyvalence far more than the commentaries of Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī. That is, like these equally influential and comprehensive *tafsīrs*, Tha‘labī’s work aspires to be encyclopedic and strives to represent the diversity of the tradition of Quran interpretation from

earliest Islamic times to his own day, but unlike these other authors, Thaʿlabī does not feel obliged to assert his own opinion as to what the correct interpretation of any given verse or passage should be.<sup>97</sup> This may very well be true in terms of *explicit* assertions of exegetical preference, which are certainly to be found throughout the works of both Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī. However, as we have seen, Ṭabarī is certainly capable of asserting his preferences covertly as well, through the use of a number of subtle literary and editorial strategies. It would seem that Thaʿlabī is likewise willing to pursue such strategies as well.

On the one hand, his exegesis *seems* to be more open and pluralistic than Ṭabarī's; he directly juxtaposes traditions stating that the Calf was flesh and blood with others that unequivocally deny that it possessed any life at all. On the other hand, however, as we have seen, the latter traditions do seem to overshadow the former; Thaʿlabī's clear preference is for the position represented by Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, and Qatāda (or at least Qatāda as Ṭabarī presents him). Likewise, Thaʿlabī acknowledges what we have called the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās "Prayer of Aaron" tradition, which is so well attested in various forms that it seems unlikely that Ṭabarī could have been ignorant of it; his single citation of a variant of this tradition, as we have seen, in fact omits the critical element of Aaron's prayer completely, which profoundly alters the character of the tradition. But despite Thaʿlabī's inclusion of a more explicit (or unadulterated) version of this tradition, this single narrative that appears to indict Aaron, at least partially, for his participation in the making of the Calf, is totally overwhelmed by the numerous *other* traditions that Thaʿlabī cites that clearly and unambiguously place the blame on Sāmīrī.

Thaʿlabī may in the end have been more willing to acknowledge marginal traditions that deviate from the main exegetical points he wished to emphasize; but this is no more a boundless and completely objective presentation of *ikhtilāf* than that of Ṭabarī. The possibilities Thaʿlabī acknowledges are even more diverse than those embraced by Ṭabarī, but he is by no means neutral or indifferent regarding those possibilities; rather, just like Ṭabarī, he exercises discretion

---

<sup>97</sup> See Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafṣīr Tradition*, *passim* but esp. 15-23.

in the selection and arrangement of the traditions he presents, and implicitly demonstrates that some options are clearly preferable simply by focusing his attention upon them and highlighting them through extended narration or repetition. We might think of Tha'labī's treatment of the episode as analogous to Ibn Abī Ḥātim's: certain alternative strands of tradition that Ṭabarī omitted *are* acknowledged, but a certain anti-miraculous tendency still seems to dominate, which is ultimately congruous with Ṭabarī's overall agenda.

Nevertheless, that Tha'labī is guiding the reader towards certain interpretations and not others, and, like Ṭabarī, is likely to have deliberately omitted alternatives he found unpalatable, can be proven by the simple fact that he *nowhere* acknowledges what we have termed the Mu'tazilite position here. He repeatedly notes, presumably following Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās (or possibly al-Kalbī) that the Calf had no life, no soul; but he never acknowledges the idea that it was only the wind that made the Calf low. Considering the prominence of this claim in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, with which he was intimately familiar, it is virtually impossible to believe that he was unaware of it. He simply chose not to endorse it, presumably because he saw it as beyond the pale of legitimate interpretation; he may even have specifically rejected it because of its recognizable association with the Mu'tazila.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> But note also that, as we have observed above, Tha'labī's hybrid account of the making of the Calf cited *ad loc.* Q.2:51 synthesizes a number of versions, including, it seems, both the Suddī and the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās accounts found in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr ad loc.* the same verse. One might argue that the reason he omits the critical datum about the Calf only lowing with the passage of the wind is that his source for the Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition is a commentary other than Ṭabarī's, which implies, of course, that *Ṭabarī may have inserted this datum into his Ibn 'Abbās traditions himself.* It is worth noting in this connection that Tha'labī does not seem to cite Mujāhid at all, the authority with whom we might most unambiguously associate this idea; all versions of the Mujāhid tradition refer to the Calf either as lowing with the passage of the wind or at least as having a *jawf* or hollow space in its body through which wind could pass. In contrast, some Ibn 'Abbās traditions are wholly ambiguous about the nature of the Calf.

\*\*\*

Our discussion of Tha'labī and his contribution to the development of the exegesis of the Calf episode—indeed, to the *tafsīr* tradition in general—would not be complete without considering, at least in brief, his presentation of the narrative in his other major work, which at least in modern times has in fact eclipsed his Quran commentary: the '*Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. While Tha'labī's *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān* exerted a tremendous influence throughout the Middle Ages, directly informing several widely disseminated abbreviations and abridgments (particularly the concise *tafsīrs* of al-Wāhidī and al-Baghawī), it has been largely neglected in modern times, only being printed, at long last, in 2002.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, Tha'labī's *qīṣaṣ* work has been perennially popular right up to the present day, and survives in a great many manuscripts and printed editions.

To some extent, Tha'labī's presentation in the '*Arā'is* reiterates that of the *Kashf*. For example, in the apposite place in the story of Moses, he gives essentially the same tradition on the appearance of Gabriel and Michael at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea as he does *ad loc.* Q.2:51 in his *tafsīr*. Moreover, in his extended treatment of the story of the making of the Calf (related under the rubric *Chapter on the story of the Israelites and Aaron, along with that of Sāmīrī when he made them the Calf*), he basically provides a synopsis of the various interpretive possibilities he related in the *tafsīr* in his commentary on the versions of the story in Sūras 2, 7, and 20, juxtaposing various traditions and drawing attention to the different claims made about Sāmīrī's origins and the nature of the Calf. Virtually all of the details he relates in the *Kashf* on these matters appears here in the '*Arā'is*'; what is of special interest here, however, is the variety of additional details that appear for the first time here as well.

---

<sup>99</sup> On the edition of 'Āshūr, see Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 229-30; as Saleh notes elsewhere in the work, part of the reason for the neglect of Tha'labī's *tafsīr* in modern times is the widely held suspicion among Sunnīs that Tha'labī harbored Shī'ī tendencies. 'Āshūr is in fact a Shī'ī 'ālim.

After making a number of miscellaneous observations about the episode, adducing many familiar details about Sāmirī and so forth from various sources, Tha'labī proceeds to relate a number of different traditions on the specific events leading up to the making of the Calf. Whereas in the *Kashf*, Tha'labī's main account seems for the most part like a combination of Ṭabarī's Qatāda and Suddī traditions, in the account in the *'Arā'is*, by contrast, Tha'labī gives several short versions of the story one after the other, so that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the next begins. The first two are both seemingly derived from Ṭabarī's Ibn Jubayr—Ibn 'Abbās tradition (that is, Ṭabarī's version of the “Prayer of Aaron” that happens to lack the prayer). The third account is a condensed version of Tha'labī's hybrid account from the *Kashf* (that combining the Qatāda and Suddī traditions with material from Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās), including Suddī's statement that the Calf was lowing and walking about. The fourth, which is unattributed, simply states that Sāmirī brought forth a calf “made of gold, inlaid with precious stones, as fine as could be” and so forth, another detail familiar from the hybrid account he relates in his *tafsīr* in his comments on Sūra 2.

In short, by relating these traditions in quick succession, Tha'labī is providing a concise overview of the previous exegetical tradition, similar to what Ṭabarī does in his comments on Q.2:51, albeit rather more economically. Some of the material here overlaps with what he relates in the *Kashf*, but some of it does not. Likewise, some of it overlaps with Ṭabarī's presentation on Sūra 2; but notably, despite that overlap, especially with Ṭabarī's Ibn 'Abbās traditions in particular, as is the case with Tha'labī's accounts of the making of the Calf in his *tafsīr*, the major element in Ṭabarī's presentation is completely missing here. This again begs the question of the reason for Tha'labī's omission of the claim that the Calf lowed on account of the wind; and again

we might suppose that he was either opposed to it on exegetical or theological grounds, or else he recognized it as a tendentious projection onto the “genuine” Ibn ‘Abbās tradition.<sup>100</sup>

This overview is followed by a closer examination of the debate over the Calf’s animation, and here Tha’labī presents a number of previously unattested details of seemingly apocryphal provenance:

In some accounts (*riwāyāt*), it is said that when Sāmīrī made the Calf and threw the handful into it, he bestowed consciousness upon it, and it ran around and lowed, for it had become flesh and blood. It is also related that it was Iblīs who lowed within it.<sup>101</sup> It is also said that Sāmīrī placed the rear end of the Calf facing towards a wall, and dug a pit on the far side of the wall, and made someone sit in the pit with his mouth on the Calf’s posterior, and that this man lowed and spoke the words the Calf was supposed to say, and that it was he who said *This is your god and the god of Moses*. Thus did Sāmīrī deceive the miserable ones among the Israelites, and those who were ignorant, until he led them astray.

He said to them: Moses has erred regarding his Lord, so his Lord has come to you! He wanted to show you that He is able to summon you to Himself by Himself, and that He did not send Moses to you out of any real need for him, and that He has made the Calf appear before you so as to speak to you from within it, just as He spoke to Moses from within the Burning Bush.<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, 286-7. Note that in his translation of the ‘*Arā’is*, Brinner repeatedly renders ‘*ijl jasad*’ as “a calf of flesh and blood,” thus confusing the issue considerably (cf. ‘*Arā’is al-Majālis*, 344-7 on this passage).

<sup>101</sup> The occurrence of this datum, as well as the previous reference to Micah, in Tha’labī’s work is striking; these details have conspicuous direct parallels in the midrash. The emphasis on these details in particular in the commentary of Rashi seems especially noteworthy, since he and Tha’labī were near-contemporaries. There appear to be analogous points of contact in the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup>-century commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who were also contemporaries.

<sup>102</sup> Note how this parallels what one might argue is the *oldest* meaning of the Calf, namely as a token marker of the invisible divine presence, a vehicle for the manifestation of the immaterial and transcendent God. This was most likely the concept behind the original golden calves of the

‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, may God be pleased with him, said: It is called “calf” (*‘ijl*) because they hurried (*ta’ajjala*) to worship it before Moses returned to them. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said that the name of the Calf that the Israelites worshipped was Behemoth.<sup>103</sup>

It is extremely noteworthy that almost *none* of this material on the Calf appears in either the *Kashf* or in any of the other sources we have examined so far; the obvious exception, of course, is the claim that the Calf became flesh and blood, which the *tafsīrs* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Ḥātim attribute to Qatāda, but Tha‘labī himself attributes to Wahb in the *Kashf*. This is probably the most crucial passage on the Calf to be found in the *‘Arā’is*; in particular, here Tha‘labī explicitly acknowledges exegetical possibilities found nowhere in his *tafsīr*, including a form of the Mu‘tazilite interpretation we have not seen before—Sāmīrī had an accomplice whose voice was projected into the Calf’s hollow body, causing it to low and even speak!

One might surmise that these minor traditions, concatenated together in a single synopsis here, were implicitly deemed by Tha‘labī to be of lesser authority; none of them is developed at any real length, almost none of them is found in his *tafsīr*, and none of them is attributed to a specific source. It is extremely noteworthy that among these traditions we find both “maximalist” and “minimalist” views—the Calf possessed consciousness, or it was flesh and blood, or Satan was within it causing it to low, or it was mere charlatanry, simply an elaborate ruse. And yet, despite the seemingly endless possibilities Tha‘labī is willing to countenance here, include the colorful flourish of Sāmīrī’s blasphemous claim that God was dwelling within the Calf, he *still* does not acknowledge Ṭabarī’s Ibn ‘Abbās tradition that the Calf’s lowing was nothing but the passage of wind through its body.

---

shrines of Bethel and Dan in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the seeming inspiration for the Golden Calf of Exodus 32.

<sup>103</sup> *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, 287.

Tha'labī's account here ends with his description of the events following the return of Moses to the camp, including a vivid portrayal of the killing and bloodshed that occur after his command to the people to "kill yourselves." This then leads to his account of the punishment of Sāmirī, which includes the unique detail that Moses forced him to urinate on the ashes of the Calf after it had been burned up. Interest in such memorable and picturesque details would increase in the commentary tradition in the time after Tha'labī; overall, comparing his presentation in the *tafsīr* with that in his *qiṣaṣ*—undoubtedly one of the most successful works ever in the history of this genre—we might reasonably conclude that given the tendency for such apocryphal details to multiply almost uncontrollably in the tradition, Tha'labī might have been attempting to put a stop to their proliferation in *tafsīr* by limiting them to the *'Arā'is* and giving them free rein there.

\*\*\*

The other major commentator of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, with whom we shall conclude here, is Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 459/1066), one of the major architects of the florescence of Imāmī Shī'ism in Baghdad in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In many ways Ṭūsī is the direct opposite of Tha'labī, his older contemporary, and there is a certain irony to the fact that it was the increasing domination of Khurāsān, especially its capital of Nishapur, by the Shāfi'ī *madhhab* at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century that forced the young Ṭūsī to relocate to Iraq, where he quickly associated himself with the circle of the greatest Imāmī thinker of the time, al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022). Although the perspectives of Ṭūsī and Tha'labī are worlds apart—as we shall see, the neo-Mu'tazilite rationalism of the former stands in sharp contrast to the Sufism-inflected traditionism of the latter—nevertheless, taken together, the exegeses of both of these towering figures of the early Islamic Middle Ages allow us to better appreciate the



background to Ṭabarī's presentation of the Calf narrative in the evolution of debate over the episode in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>104</sup>

Ṭūsī's commentary is of particular value for understanding the history of *tafsīr* for a number of reasons. First of all, it is one of the earliest extant *tafsīrs* that reflects the emergence of a new format of commentary, one which might be thought of as a return to *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, but is probably more accurately described as the advent of philosophical or rationalist exegesis; this new mode of exegesis is quite different from previously attested forms such as the interlinear glosses of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, lexical works such as those of al-Farrā' and his contemporaries, and the *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* style epitomized by Ṭabarī. In Ṭūsī's work, as in the more famous commentaries in this genre that followed such as those of al-Zamakhsharī or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, while the exegete acknowledges the interpretive traditions handed down from the time of the *salaf* and may even quote them verbatim at great length, for the most part, exegetical hadith are cited in such works without *isnād*, and, more crucially, as only one part of a much larger conversation—a conversation that is completely monopolized by hadith in the works of Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, or even Tha'labī. It is likely that this genre emerged as a hybrid of the prevailing approaches of the Mu'tazila and other *mutakallimūn* on the one hand and traditionist exegetes on the other; in such commentaries, the views of the *salaf* are represented, but are often juxtaposed with both the critiques of the Mu'tazilites and other rationalists and the summary evaluations of the author himself.

Considering the long-held scholarly consensus that it was the Imāmī Shī'a who were most responsible for adopting Mu'tazilite views and methods into the mainstream disciplines of the

---

<sup>104</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> c. Imāmī exegete under consideration here is not to be confused with Naṣīr al-Dīn Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, the famous polymath of the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century. There have been very few scholarly treatments of “our” Ṭūsī; see *EL*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Al-Ṭūsī, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan” (Amir-Moezzi). On Mufīd, see *EL*<sup>2</sup>, “Mufīd, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad” (Madelung) as well as the recent overview by Bayhom-Daou, *Shaykh Mufīd*. For background on the Baghdad school, see Halm, *Shi'ism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 48-56; Madelung, “Imamism and Mu'tazilite Theology” and “The Shiite and Khārijite Contribution to Pre-Ash'arite *Kalām*”; and Kohlberg, “From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-'Ashariyya.”

nascent Islamic religious sciences, it thus comes as no surprise that the commentary of Ṭūsī, *Al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, is one of our earliest extant witnesses to the Quran interpretations of major Mu'tazilite exegetes of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> such as Abū'l-Jaysh al-Balkhī and Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī, whose works are no longer extant. Not only is Ṭūsī's work valuable because of the window it provides onto 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century Imāmī exegesis; it is also valuable because it seems to be the earliest readily available work to explicitly describe the debate over details of the Calf episode as it was known to scholars of his time and their predecessors. A major aspect of Ṭūsī's refreshing transparency in this regard is the specific citation of the views of the Mu'tazilite school, and, as we shall see, his description of their interpretations may be confirmed by later sources as well. Examination of Ṭūsī's discussion of the Calf narrative will prove to be extremely illuminating in regards to the presentation of the episode found in Ṭabarī and other early commentaries, for we can at last come to understand the wider context in which the interpretations promoted in these earlier works were formulated, what their authors' presuppositions really were, and what was actually at stake in these controversies.

Ṭūsī's presentation of the Calf episode is not as rich or as dense as that of Ṭabarī or Tha'labī, but in many respects, it is not so radically different from that of these earlier authors. For example, before his initial remarks on the Calf proper, under the rubric of *qiṣṣat Mūsā*, commenting on Q.2:50, Ṭūsī relates a story on the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās; though it is not precisely the same story given by Tha'labī in the corresponding places in his *Kashf* and *'Arā'is*, it is overall quite similar, mentioning Gabriel's appearance on the *faras unthā wadīq* and so forth.<sup>105</sup> The distinctions between Ṭūsī's approach and that of Ṭabarī and Tha'labī become more apparent further on, when he comments upon Q.2:51, *Yet remember, as We communed with Moses for forty nights you took the Calf in his absence and did wrong...* The most obvious difference in Ṭūsī's commentary is the compartmentalization of different types of interpretation, a hallmark of rationalist or

---

<sup>105</sup> Al-Ṭūsī, *Al-Tibyān*, 1.230-1.

philosophical commentary, in which examination of *lughā*, linguistic significance, is distinguished from *ma'na*, explicit meaning, and *qiṣṣa*, narrative. Thus, after a thorough investigation of grammatical aspects of both *ittakhadha* (to make or take in worship) and *'ijl* (calf), Ṭūsī comes to one of several substantial passages in which he examines the deeper meaning of the story and the nature of the Calf itself:

The meaning of His statement *Then you took the Calf in his absence and did wrong...* is: you took it as a god [in worship]. This is because they would not be doing wrong simply through the act of making the Calf in itself, on account that it is not a forbidden act per se, simply a detested one.<sup>106</sup> This accords with what is related about the Prophet, that he cursed the makers of images (*muṣawwarūn*), meaning anyone who directly likens God to His creation or believes that He is an image. This is the meaning intended in this short statement in the verse.

Similarly, He states [in this verse]: You took it as a god. This is because they worshipped the Calf after Moses departed, when Sāmīrī said to them: *This is your god and the god of Moses whom he has forgotten*, i.e., he abandoned their god and set off, having forgotten about it. It is also said that the phrase means that he [i.e. Sāmīrī] abandoned that which was incumbent upon him regarding the worship of God.<sup>107</sup>

Ṭūsī then proceeds to explain the background to the Israelites' worship of the Calf by citing another tradition from Ibn 'Abbās; specifically, it is identical to Ṭabarī's tradition from Ibn 'Abbās transmitted through Ibn Jubayr, in which, it may be recalled, the nature of the Calf is left extremely ambiguous ("he threw it in and said, *Become a calf, a body that lows!*, and it became so, for trial and *fitna...*"), although Ṭūsī's version ends with the making of the Calf and does not

---

<sup>106</sup> That is, it is *makrūh* but not *maḥẓūr* (i.e. *ḥarām*). Like other exegetes, Ṭūsī clearly understands the reference in the verse to the Israelites' "doing wrong" (lit. "becoming wrongdoers") in the sense of incurring divine wrath through commission of a major sin; thus the necessary distinction between *ittakhadha* as signifying the *making* of the Calf versus actually *worshipping* the Calf.

<sup>107</sup> *Al-Tibyān*, 1.236-7.

proceed to describe the aftermath.<sup>108</sup> The ambiguity of the Calf in this tradition provides the perfect occasion for an investigation of this issue, and so, under the pretext of evaluating the *lughā* of 'ijl ("calf"), after a few perfunctory comments, Ṭūsī proceeds to discuss different traditions on its nature, laying out the various partisan positions in the debate:

Ḥasan said: It became flesh and blood. Others objected that this is impossible, since that would constitute an evidentiary miracle of the sort associated with the prophets (*mu'jizāt al-anbiyā'*). Those who agreed with Ḥasan said that God endowed the handful from the track of the angel with this quality, namely that whatever image it was thrown upon would come to life; in that case, it would not be an evidentiary miracle, since it would work for anyone equally, Sāmīrī or otherwise. Those who disagreed with the idea that it had come to life said that, regarding its lowing, Sāmīrī had made holes in the Calf's body through which the wind could pass, and that by this means a sound like lowing appeared in it.<sup>109</sup>

This is a remarkable passage, inasmuch as for the first time in the *tafsīr* tradition, Ṭūsī provides us with an explicit statement of the fundamental issues that seem to have affected the interpretation of the Calf narrative since at least the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. While we should not assume that a doctrinally coherent prophetology had emerged already in Muqātil's time, it seems likely that the basic issue here—that the claim that Sāmīrī had brought the Golden Calf to life potentially endowed him with too much of an aura of sanctity or spiritual authority—could certainly have been on exegetes' minds at that point in the development of the tradition. Besides his seeming candor, other aspects of Ṭūsī's comments here are worthy of note. For one thing, like Tha'labī, he associates the idea of the living Calf with al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and not Qatāda. Further, he does not state explicitly who opposed this claim about the living Calf, though he will make this more clear in subsequent passages. Finally, Ṭūsī's explanation of the controversy is strangely

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 1.237; cf. *Jāmi' al-bayān*, ed. Shākīr, 2.66-7, no.921.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 1.237-8.

detached; it is curious that he seems to adopt a position of agnosticism here, given that the different options he acknowledges are so radically different.

Ṭūsī's own opinion about the debate becomes clearer in subsequent treatments in the *Tibyān*, especially in one long passage found in his commentary to the Sūra 7 version of the episode, where he provides his most in-depth remarks on the narrative. Of particular interest is the specific and almost technical way in which he discusses the controversy over the physical nature of the Golden Calf; his familiarity with and assimilation of the philosophical terms and categories associated with Mu'tazilite tradition is evident here, and this is not incidental to the position he ends up adopting vis-à-vis the Calf.

It is said that they made the Calf from gold, and that, regarding His statement *a body that lows* (*jasad<sup>m</sup> la-hu khuwār*), that *jasad* is specifically a term for the physical form (*jism*) of the living animal, similar to *badan* (body), and that it was comprised of spirit and body, the spirit being the component that is subtle, and the body that which is corporeal. The term "physical form" (*jism*), on the other hand, indicates either the corporeal body of the living animal or otherwise an inanimate physical object.

Regarding *khuwār*, it is the sound of the bull. It is a heavy sound, like *ju'ār*... there is difference of opinion regarding how it was that the Calf was able to low despite being fashioned from gold. Al-Ḥasan said that Sāmīrī took a handful from the dirt from the track of the horse of Gabriel on the day of the crossing of the Red Sea, and then threw that dirt in the mouth of the Calf, which was then transformed into flesh and blood. This was a normal event not in violation of natural laws; it was possible because God had endowed it with this ability.

But al-Jubbā'ī and al-Balkhī said that he employed the movement of air through it so that a sound like lowing was heard emanating from it, just like people do today. Then the Exalted made it known, saying: *Did they not see it could neither speak to them nor guide them to the right path?*—by way of signifying disapproval of them and amazement at their ignorance... Thus he said

that they took it as a god and did wrong, since in their taking it as a god they were performing worship where it did not belong...<sup>110</sup>

The direct citation of al-Balkhī and al-Jubbā'ī here is striking, for at last now we have unambiguous attestation of what we have repeatedly termed the “Mu'tazilite position” with actual Mu'tazilites!<sup>111</sup> One can infer from his comments that Ṭūsī himself seems to implicitly approve of al-Ḥasan's position, or at least opposes the Mu'tazilite position on some basis; in particular, regarding the nature of the Calf, Ṭūsī seems to sympathize with the claim that “this was a normal event not in violation of natural laws; it was possible because God had endowed it with this ability.” What is of particular interest here is the way in which Mu'tazilite thinking and categories has deeply informed Ṭūsī's perception and presentation of the issues at hand, yet he ultimately appears to side *against* the actual position of the Mu'tazila in favor of a “traditional” interpretation. This phenomenon is characteristic of the approach of the Baghdad school to the adaptation of Mu'tazilite argumentation for promoting Imāmī claims in general; one could arguably also see in this a parallel to Ash'arism.

These are Ṭūsī's most condensed remarks about the Calf episode. Those that appear in his comments on the Sūra 20 version of the narrative are more diffuse and for the most part reiterate points he has already made, but now and again one finds novel elements even here. For example, *ad loc.* Q.20:96, he once again acknowledges the interpretation of the phrase *'ijl jasad la-hu khuwār<sup>un</sup>* as signifying the transformation of the gold statue into a living creature; notably, this is now indicated as the interpretation not only of al-Ḥasan but of *Qatāda and Suddī as well*. Besides the fact that this seems to confirm our previous impressions about Ṭabarī's apparent manipulation of the “traditional” evidence, it is also noteworthy that Ṭūsī mainly appears to favor the presentation of only two diametrically opposed interpretations—the Calf was either totally fake or

---

<sup>110</sup> *Al-Tibyān*, 4.578-9.

<sup>111</sup> See the discussion of Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī and his school in Chapter 3 above.

completely alive! He then goes on to acknowledge the Mu'tazilite interpretation again, this time directly affiliating it (and rightly so) with Mujāhid: "Mujāhid said: Its lowing was by means of the passage of air, when it entered into its *jawf*."<sup>112</sup>

Although Ṭūsī offers us a remarkably subtle and sophisticated presentation of the Calf narrative and the larger debates that informed its exegesis, we have only been able to indulge in the most cursory treatment of his *tafsīr* here. His brief remarks about the *mu'jizāt al-anbiyā'* and the Mu'tazilite position regarding the apparent animation of the Calf are of inestimable value for our evaluation of the older *tafsīr* tradition on the episode, and confirm many of our intuitions about the underlying motivations informing the interpretations of Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, Ṭabarī, and other commentators of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>113</sup>

Moreover, like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's preservation of Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī's interpretation of the "handful from the track of the messenger," Ṭūsī's affiliation of the exegesis of Mujāhid in particular with the Mu'tazila, as well as his testimony that not only al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī but also Qatāda and al-Suddī claimed that the Calf was authentically alive, verifies some of our conjectures about the historical background to the emergence of traditionist *tafsīr* on the Calf episode. As we supposed, the presentations of commentators like 'Abd al-Razzāq, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Tha'labī, and especially Ṭabarī cannot be taken at face value, but rather must be scrutinized carefully in order to discern the deeper issues and prior developments that inform their representations of the realm of exegetical possibility. Not only is it the case that *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* likely involved a good deal of pseudepigraphy; it is also the case that, once specific positions were associated with particular authorities among the Companions and Successors, the

---

<sup>112</sup> *Al-Tibyān*, 7.198-9.

<sup>113</sup> As it turns out, Ṭūsī's representation of the views of the Mu'tazila are relatively rudimentary compared to those of later Shī'ī authors such as al-Ḥakīm al-Jushamī (d. 484/1101) and Abū Maṣ'ūd al-Ṭabarsī (620/1223?) Gimaret's reconstruction of the lost *tafsīr* of al-Jubbā'ī rests on citations of his work in all three of these authors, but far more on al-Jushamī and al-Ṭabarsī, who are much more explicit and specific when quoting Jubbā'ī than Ṭūsī. See *Une Lecture Mu'tazilite du Coran*, esp. 88 (*ad loc.* Q.2:51), 365 (*ad loc.* Q.7:148), and 604 (*ad loc.* Q.20:87, 88, 96).

tradition continued to shift and evolve, with those positions being concealed, exchanged, or otherwise reworked to suit commentators' individual agendas and preferences.



## Conclusion to Part II

Any exegesis whatsoever ratifies a theological decision.

Josef Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*

As yet, we have not really addressed the question of why Muslim exegetes should have elaborated a version of the Sinai narrative that was radically different from that which is native to the Quran. Ultimately, any solution we might offer to this problem must remain conjectural, insofar as we lack any substantial direct evidence upon which to base such a claim. This is largely due to the fact that most of our witnesses to the early *tafsīr* tradition date to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest. Though there are many extant traditions attributed to authorities on *tafsīr* from the time of the Companions and Successors, that is, the first century AH, nevertheless, these traditions are generally not available to us except as gathered in early works of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*. In turn, even when these works might appear to be early, it is often the case that the recensions that are still available to us today are relatively late. For example, the *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq* might very plausibly be understood as a work of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, but it can be granted only very qualified acceptance as the authentic *tafsīr* of 'Abd al-Razzāq's teacher Ma'mar b. Rashīd, let alone as that of *his* teacher, Qatāda b. Dī'āma. Another example that we have discussed here at some length is the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, which is most likely a product of the early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, and thus hardly acceptable as an unambiguous example of authentic *tafsīr* of the time of the Companions despite its ascription to one of the most famous students of Ibn 'Abbās.

Nevertheless, there are distinct signs in the later *tafsīr* tradition that the original interpretation of the Calf episode in the Muslim community might have more closely resembled the reading that seems to be native to the Quran, recognizing the Calf as a mere statue, or the “handful from the track of the messenger” as a metaphor for following the precedent or

guidelines set by the prophet Moses, i.e. his *sunna*. For example, already in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, commentators such as Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās struggle with the claim that the Calf is animate, striving to suppress the idea that it is actually alive; later on, Ṭabarī and other exegetes bear witness to the tremendous amount of diversity of opinion in the early tradition regarding the nature of the Calf. We have suggested that this is in fact symptomatic of wide-ranging disagreement over the interpretation of an interpretation; that is, once projected onto the Quranic template, the image of the Calf as simulating life (or actually coming to life) and lowing generated numerous variations on the basic theme. The only common thread tying them together, it seems, is that all of these variations are directed towards bolstering the idea that the Calf was brought to life, or made to appear alive, by “Sāmīrī,” whose role in the episode had to be substantiated. Some traditions are demonstrably vague about the nature of the being that emerged as *a calf, a body that lows*; further, we have seen at least one tradition (that attributed to ‘Alī by Ibn Abī Ḥātim) that seems to presume that the Calf was merely a statue.

We have also taken note of the alternative explanation for the obscure phrase “I took a handful from the track of the messenger” in Q.20:96 by a rationalist exegete of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century; this indicates that the early commentary tradition might have countenanced the possibility that “Sāmīrī” was not referring here to the track of the angelic messenger, of course, but rather to the prophetic example set by Moses that he should have followed. This exegesis is not preserved by any extant source earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century, but it is precisely in the post-classical commentary tradition that views that were deliberately marginalized in the earlier period seem to resurface. We would argue that this exegesis dropped out of circulation—or rather was deliberately neglected—because the natural conclusion that could be drawn from a metaphorical rather than literal (not to mention supernatural) reading of the “handful from the track of the messenger” is that “Sāmīrī” is in fact Aaron.

The identification of Aaron and *al-sāmīrī*, or rather the tradition’s deliberate *avoidance* of such an identification, is the key to the development of what we might term a Muslim counter-

reading of the Golden Calf episode. As we have noted repeatedly, it is not our intention to suggest that Muslim exegetes were ignorant of the original meaning of the Quranic version of the episode; rather, we prefer to argue that they were very much aware of that meaning, but sought to circumvent it or undermine it through a deliberate reconstruction of it. Quite early on in the tradition's development, Muslim interpreters must have been aware of the proximity of Quranic material to Jewish and Christian scripture, especially its numerous stories about Muhammad's prophetic predecessors. They might also have recognized that the indigenous interpretive traditions of these communities were ancient, well-developed, and quite sophisticated.

We can thus imagine a completely natural process whereby Muslim commentators strove to distinguish the Quran from its apparent biblical precursors by elaborating unique versions of the stories therein in order to assert their own authority as interpreters. This phenomenon need not be understood as conspiratorial in nature; rather, the emergence of counter-readings of familiar biblical stories among the Muslim exegetes, who separated themselves, their Prophet, and their scripture from their Jewish and Christian counterparts thereby, reflected a wholly organic drive to assert the community's exegetical sovereignty. It is not so much that the Quranic narrative's original meaning—which we have argued might be understood as being much closer to that of the Hebrew Bible than to that of the midrash—was *suppressed per se*; rather, it was reconstructed and renovated in response to contemporary needs through imaginative rereading, and the prophetic legacy of ancient Israel, to which Jews and Christians also laid claim, could thus be more effectively appropriated.

Thus, in constructing the image of Sāmirī and his sorcery at Sinai, the Muslim exegetes carved out a space in which their scripture had autonomy and their interpretation had supremacy. An obvious concern that would seem to inform the introduction of Sāmirī and his animate Calf into the Sinai narrative is that of prophetic impeccability, *'iṣma*. Although the formal articulation of *'iṣma* as a doctrine could not have occurred until the late 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest, there are signs that Muslims took a natural interest in the figure of the Prophet quite early on, and the most

rudimentary ideas about prophetic sanctity might have emerged quite early on as well.<sup>1</sup> Without necessarily endorsing Newby's project of reconstructing the actual *Kitāb al-mubtada'* of Ibn Ishāq from later witnesses, we might nevertheless acknowledge that by the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, the deliberate attempt on the part of Muslims to appropriate the legacy of Israelite prophecy and cast Muhammad as the inheritor and culmination of that legacy was well under way: the assimilation and adaptation (and actual creation) of narratives about the pre-Islamic prophets provided the critical material for forging the link between them.

In early *tafsīr*, the Quranic precursors to Muhammad are cast in his image, as he is cast in theirs; and, inasmuch as the sanctity of the Quran and the exaltedness of Muhammad are guaranteed by insulating *all* prophets from criticism, then the introduction of the character "Sāmīrī" into the Quranic Sinai narrative makes perfect sense. Aaron is therefore exonerated from blame for the making of the Calf, and responsibility is projected onto another individual, an outsider. As we have seen, while some traditions claim that Sāmīrī was an Israelite, many oppose that view, and a certain compromise position that establishes him as a non-Israelite who became associated with the Israelite community in Egypt appears to have become popular among exegetes at a certain point. Both the theme of the Calf's apparent or real animation and the interpretation of the "handful from the track of the messenger" may be seen as subsidiary to the purpose of casting or deflecting blame onto Sāmīrī; to the degree that exegetes could manage to bring these themes to the forefront of interest in the narrative by focusing attention upon them, the image of Sāmīrī as a malevolent interloper became more compelling. The particular interest some exegetes seem to have taken in supplying biographical details about Sāmīrī serves the same function.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, on the gradual emergence of Muslim (or rather proto-Muslim or "believer") interest in the figure of the Prophet as a distinguishing marker of communal identity, and Ahmed, "The Satanic Verses Incident in the Memory of the Early Muslim Community" on the development of the doctrine of *'iṣma*.

An obvious parallel to this process of reconstruction is the emergence of a uniquely Muslim body of narratives and legends about Abraham in the early centuries AH, in particular those that focus on the story of the sacrifice of Ishmael. As we have seen, debate over which son was the *dhabīh*, the one intended for slaughter, seems to have continued throughout the first two centuries AH, with a decisive shift in favor of Ishmael occurring in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was probably due to the success of a certain program of arabization that depended upon asserting an unambiguous Arabian identity for Islam, partly established by promoting an Arabian pedigree for Abrahamic monotheism; this agenda was obviously well served by asserting Ishmael, legendary forefather of the Arabs, as the true successor to Abraham. Given that in the Quranic context the sacrifice was most likely supposed to have been Isaac, it took considerable effort to shift interpretation in favor of Ishmael, and doing so required the simultaneous pursuit of several different but mutually corroborating narrative strategies, for example a particular focus on mythologizing the Hījāz as the primary arena for Abraham’s activities and thus the location that was probably intended for the sacrifice. The obvious purpose of this was to deflect attention away from interpretations that focused on Syria-Palestine as the focal point for various stories about Abraham, which would tend to support the identification of the *dhabīh* as Isaac.<sup>2</sup>

The Muslim appropriation of Abraham in fact recapitulated an earlier process whereby Christians appropriated him as an exemplar of faith and Isaac as a prototype for Christ; again a community’s drive to assert exegetical sovereignty can clearly be seen. This shift in interpretation not only helped to consolidate Christian claims that the Church was the true Israel; it also sought to establish the Christian reading of scripture as the correct one. In the case of Abraham, the rudiments of an appropriation of Abraham are already to be found in the Quran, but this process was completed only through the instrument of *tafsīr*, the main vehicle for Muslim mythmaking. Similarly, as we have argued, the original meaning of the Quranic Calf episode centers on the theme of prophetic leadership, which both hearkens back to the original meaning of the precursor

---

<sup>2</sup> Firestone, “Abraham’s Son as the Intended Sacrifice.”

narrative in Exodus and represents another appropriation, specifically of Moses as prophetic precursor to Muhammad.

In both cases, the *tafsīr* builds upon gestures and strategies of appropriation inherent to the Quran and reorients them in significant ways. In the case of Abraham, the ambiguity of the identity of the sacrifice was first exploited and then resolved in the *tafsīr* in favor of the “Ishmaelite” interpretation, thus cementing the appropriation of Abraham as forefather. On the other hand, in the case of the Calf narrative, the ambiguity of *al-sāmīrī* was exploited and resolved as well, but for different purposes; here, the main result of revising the Quranic account through the instrument of *tafsīr* was not to heighten or enhance the central theme of that original account per se (although the *mufasssīrūn* certainly were interested in the question of prophetic leadership). Rather, this revision served to prevent the perpetuation of an objectionable reading of the episode—namely, Aaron’s seemingly collusion with idolatry—which ultimately served the purpose of reinforcing an idealized conception of prophecy in general, albeit indirectly.<sup>3</sup>

The avoidance of imputing sin to any of the prophets in order to bolster the increasingly idealized picture of Muhammad developing in early Islamic discourse is only part of the explanation for why it was necessary and desirable for Muslim exegetes to construct a radically revised version of the Calf narrative. Such an idea implies that *apologetic* interests were at the forefront of this endeavor; but this is to overlook the considerable *polemical* advantages that accrued to Muslims due to this reconstruction as well. The claim that Jews and Christians had

---

<sup>3</sup> One potential objection to my hypothesis is the fact that it took Muslim exegetes centuries to execute the shift from Isaac to Ishmael in the case of the controversy over the *dhabīh*, and that this shift is plainly visible in the evidence preserved in the classical *tafsīrs* and other works. On the other hand, the shift from Aaron to Sāmīrī as perpetrator of the making of the Calf seems to have taken place entirely *prior* to the emergence of our earliest extant *tafsīrs*, and left very little trace in either those texts or later ones. But there is no reason why such major shifts in interpretation must be thought to have taken place simultaneously, or only in the early period, or only in the pre-textual phase of *tafsīr*’s development. Also, note that I do not mean to argue that the doctrine of *’iṣma* must have emerged early in order to have exerted an impact on the shift I have described here; rather, *both* the emergence of the doctrine of *’iṣma* and the reconstruction of the Quranic Calf narrative may be thought to reflect certain theological, apologetic, or hagiographic tendencies that might have emerged much earlier. That is, the articulation of *’iṣma* as actual dogma expressed in creeds is a *consequence* of these trends, not their cause.

slandered the prophets in their corrupted scriptures—by saying, for example, that Aaron was complicit in making the Golden Calf—became a major weapon in Muslim polemic early on; and it is striking that specific reference is made to the case of Aaron and the Calf in some of the best-known literary representations of that polemic.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, *tafsīr* became the crucial instrument through which Muslims differentiated the Quran from its biblical precursors, enhanced the Prophet's aura of sanctity by rendering his predecessors impeccable, and finally, in a kind of scriptural one-upmanship, allowed Muslim spokesmen to denigrate their Jewish and Christian rivals, whose scriptures contained stories about the prophets that were, to Muslims, patently untrue, not to mention scandalous. Although Jewish interpreters had previously struggled to distance Aaron from the idolatrous proceedings in the Calf narrative, it was Muslim exegetes who succeeded in exonerating him completely of wrongdoing in the episode; and the portrayal of Sāmīrī and the animate Calf provided Muslims with a critical counter-narrative to the biblical Sinai story.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, this counter-narrative, complemented by Muslims' knowledge of the account held to be canonical by both Jews and Christians, contributed directly to their elaboration of an image of the *Ahl al-Kitāb* as errant scriptuaries, which in turn provided a critical foil to Muslims' self-conception as the sole rightly-guided community.

That Muslim exegetes' reconstruction of the Calf narrative ultimately became the basis for Western scholars' claim of the dependence of not only the *tafsīr* but the Quran itself on Judaism is supremely ironic, considering that this reconstruction was likely primarily motivated by the desire to *distance* the Quran from the Bible. Moreover, our presentation here is intended to show how reconstructions like this one epitomize *tafsīr*'s essence as an autonomous discourse,

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the portrayal of a disputation between a Copt and a Jew at the court of Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 270/884), 'Abbāsīd governor of Egypt, in the *Murūj al-dhahab* of al-Mas'ūdī, cited in Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 78-9.

<sup>5</sup> Whereas Jews and Christians were stuck with an unambiguous description of Aaron as complicit in idolatry in the canonical text of Exodus 32, the Quranic account, employing the epithet *al-sāmīrī* in its unique narrative style, provided Muslim exegetes with a kind of scriptural loophole enabling them to radically revise the original story.

intimately linked with, but by no means simply subordinate to, the Quran. But considering that *tafsīr* might be understood as a means for creating new scriptural meaning, it is also deeply ironic that Western scholars should have relied on the *tafsīr* tradition itself not only to reassert the links between Islam and its predecessors and portray the Quran virtually as a product of rabbinic Judaism, but also to effectively *erase* the contribution made by *tafsīr* in the first place. Jewish parallels to the *tafsīr*—most likely reflections of or responses to the *tafsīr*, in point of fact—were marshaled by scholars already predisposed to view Islam as a dependent tradition to undo the work of differentiation accomplished by the Muslim commentators over the course of centuries.

Nor are these the only ironies that inhere in this complex and contradictory history. As our examination of the development of the early *tafsīr* tradition makes clear, this reconstructed version of the Calf narrative was by no means stagnant or inert. Rather, although the Muslim reconstruction of the episode succeeded in asserting the autonomy of the Quran and helped to demonstrate the perverse slanders against the prophets that were held to be characteristic of Jewish and Christian scripture, tensions emerged within the *tafsīr* tradition surrounding the issue of the animate Calf. Again, this particular theme was most likely secondary in the original elaborations of the reworked narrative; in the end, the primary function of depicting the animation of the Calf is to enhance Sāmīrī's image as a malevolent wonder-worker. But both the nature of the Calf and the means through which Sāmīrī had accomplished this seeming wonder became problematic.

As we have seen, the presentations of the Calf episode in the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās, and Ṭabarī are profoundly informed by a concern to avoid giving the impression that the Calf was really alive, possessing an animating *rūḥ* or even appearing to be too active. Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbās prefer the view that the Calf was built by hand, and that the addition of the angelic "handful from the track of the messenger" caused it to low, but only once; this is the view favored by Tha'labī as well. Ṭabarī takes another approach, seeing the Calf's actual *origin* as



miraculous, claiming that it was spontaneously generated by the handful of dirt, but that its lowing was wholly illusory.

As the evidence of other *tafsīrs* dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century demonstrates, what Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, and Ṭabarī are all strenuously avoiding is the claim that the Calf was actually flesh and blood, which appears to have been originally associated with the Successor Qatāda, and possibly with other early authorities such as Suddī as well. The presentation of the Calf narrative by Tha‘labī indicates not only that this claim was eventually associated with *other* authorities such as Wahb b. Munabbih or al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī instead of Qatāda, but also that a great variety of other traditions on the nature of the Calf—that it was animated by Satan, that it was conscious or seemed to speak—either sprang up in the time after Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, and Ṭabarī, or else were simply not accepted or acknowledged by these earlier exegetes. Tha‘labī’s commentary thus demonstrates one way in which the later *tafsīr* tradition provides us with crucial information for understanding the wider context in which Ṭabarī and his peers worked in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century. That of Ṭūsī demonstrates another, since he provides us with an explicit description of the controversies and debates informing that earlier era that Ṭabarī and his contemporaries never really acknowledge explicitly.

The critical datum for which we are truly indebted to Ṭūsī is his statement that while some exegetes (in his account, specifically al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī) claimed that the Calf had been transmuted from gold into flesh and blood, “others objected that this is impossible, since that would constitute an evidentiary miracle of the sort associated with the prophets (*mu’jizāt al-‘anbiyā’*).” This would seem to be the key to understanding the perspective that informs the complex presentation of Ṭabarī, even though he never directly acknowledges that this is the fundamental issue for him. Previous generations of exegetes had built up the portrayal of Sāmīrī as foreign interloper as much as possible, likely drawing on an established image of Egyptian sorcery in circulation in Late Antiquity in the process; and the theme of the animation of the Calf served the needs of *tafsīr* in its earliest stage of development, successfully enabling commentators

to shift blame for the making of the Calf from Aaron to “Sāmīrī.” But as conceptions of prophecy continued to evolve and an actual theory of prophethood came to be articulated, the issue of evidentiary miracles came to be particularly problematic for Muslims, inasmuch as Muhammad did not seem to have performed any, at least not according to the most ancient hagiographical traditions. It has been widely observed that the doctrine of *’ijāz* or the “inimitability” of the Quran eventually emerged to supply Muhammad with an evidentiary miracle, namely the revelation of the Quran itself. Further, as time went on, additional miracles of a more conventional variety—that is, of the sort that Jews and Christians were more likely to find more persuasive—were also attested.<sup>6</sup>

It is specifically in this context that Sāmīrī’s animation or transmutation of the Calf became most problematic for Muslim commentators. It is striking that in the discussion of Ṭūsī noted above, he establishes two opposing perspectives on the question of transmutation: those who said the Calf did not become flesh and blood said so because this would be tantamount to a *mu’jiz* performed by Sāmīrī; those who said it *did* become flesh and blood claimed that it was *not* a *mu’jiz*, because the transmutation occurred due to the power inherent in the “handful from the track of the messenger,” and thus could not be considered a miracle worked by Sāmīrī himself. The basic presupposition shared by both sides, it seems, is that if Sāmīrī *had* performed this feat due to his own power or ability, this *would* have been tantamount to an evidentiary miracle; and everyone implicitly agrees that this is simply unacceptable.<sup>7</sup> It is quite unlikely that such a distinction could possibly have informed debate over the meaning of the Calf episode in the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> On shifting perspectives on prophetic miracles in the early centuries AH, see Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims*. Both Griffith and Stroumsa have emphasized the central place of evidentiary miracles (and Muhammad’s lack of them) in the evolution of a common theory of prophecy in early Islamic times developed through polemical discourse between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Cf. Griffith, “Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians” and Stroumsa, “The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature.”

<sup>7</sup> The problematic nature of transmutation, albeit in a rather different context, can be seen in the debates surrounding the episode of the so-called Sabbath-breakers; see Lichtenstadter, ““And Become Ye Accursed Apes”” and Cook, “Ibn Qutayba and the Monkeys.”

and early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, when the myth of Sāmīrī was first developed, but it evidently did so in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Already in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, Muqātil's presentation of the episode seems to be informed by questions of this sort, and his *tafsīr* may thus perhaps be thought to represent a turning point in exegesis, though it is difficult to say for sure. Again, we suggest that the portrayal of Sāmīrī was built up specifically to deflect blame for the making of the Calf in the Quran from Aaron to another party, thus enabling Muslim polemicists to attack Jews and Christians over the theologically objectionable portrayal of Aaron canonized in their scripture. It is thus ironic that a consequence of this shift, the claim that the Calf was apparently or actually animate, became the focal point for debate among Muslim commentators after the dominant understanding of Sāmīrī and his activities, the product of their own *reconstruction* of the Quranic story, became "canonized" in the *tafsīr* tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Ṭūsī is one of the earliest direct witnesses we have to the Mu'tazilite solution to this interpretive quandary, which was to posit a Golden Calf that only *seemed* to *low* due to mechanical and naturalistic rather than miraculous or magical means; like the image of Sāmīrī as Egyptian magician, this conception likewise seems to draw on late antique prototypes, as it was sometimes claimed by rationalist critics in the Hellenistic era that quasi-animate oracular statues only appeared to speak due to the trickery of devious priests. But we have copious *indirect* evidence of the Mu'tazilite solution of depicting Sāmīrī as a charlatan in the form of the position

---

<sup>8</sup> Van Ess points to an analogous situation concerning the *mi'raj* tradition and the exegesis of the Quranic verses that were cited as prooftexts for the account of Muhammad's ascension and vision of God. In the first phase of the tradition's development, a tripartite scheme of Abraham as the friend of God (*khalīl Allāh*), Moses as he who had spoken with God (*kalīm Allāh*), and Muhammad as he who had actually *seen* God emerged as a supersessionist claim supporting Islam's supremacy over other faiths (Judaism in particular). As the tradition developed, Q.17:1 was cited as the prooftext for the *isrā'* or "Night Journey" from Mecca to Jerusalem, Q.53:1-18 as proof of the vision. However, in the wake of rationalist opposition to the anthropomorphism and immanence suggested by interpreting the latter as referring to a direct encounter between Muhammad and God, exegesis shifted to a position that favored an understanding of the passage as describing the first encounter between Muhammad and *Gabriel* instead. See *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 45-77.

that dominates in Ṭabarī's interpretation, associated with Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn Zayd, and Mujāhid, namely that the hollow body of the Calf was produced by the handful of dirt, though it only lowed with the passage of the wind through it. This position is predominantly connected with the name of Mujāhid, on whose authority it may have circulated initially, possibly only being incorporated into the Ibn 'Abbās traditions secondarily, presumably to bolster its legitimacy. It is likewise almost certain that this Mujāhid tradition represents a traditionist adaptation of Mu'tazilite exegesis, and there are probably other examples of adaptations of this sort attested in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* and other sources as well.

But as we have seen, the Ibn 'Abbās position as presented by Ṭabarī is not a wholly passive and uncritical adaptation of the rationalist solution; even the Mujāhid tradition, the most "minimalist" of his traditions on the making of the Calf, states that the handful of dirt caused the gold to be cast (*insabaka*) into the shape of the Calf, while the hadith that Ṭabarī cites as representative of the majority position clearly state that the handful of dirt created the Calf by magical means. The position Ṭabarī associates with Ibn 'Abbās is thus not an unambiguously rationalist interpretation of the nature of the Calf, but rather seems to represent an *accommodation* of the rationalist interpretation with the view of the Calf as seemingly or actually animate. Put another way, *partially* adopting the Mu'tazilite view allowed exegetes who found the traditional interpretation somewhat problematic to temper that interpretation and reconcile the supernaturalist and rationalist perspectives, thus minimizing, but not entirely dispelling, the magical or miraculous ambience surrounding the creation of the Calf.

This careful negotiation of conflicting claims is not only characteristic of Ṭabarī's presentation; it seems to be in evidence in that of al-Sijistānī as well, inasmuch as his authority Abū 'Umar is said to have claimed that the Calf only lowed due to the wind, but at the same time also supposed to have acknowledged that the "handful from the track of the messenger" was that of Gabriel's angelic steed, which must then be concluded to have played *some* role in the Calf's creation. An analogous solution is that which Ṭabarī associates (somewhat disingenuously, it

seems) with the Successor Qatāda, and which is found in the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās as well: the Calf was manufactured by Sāmīrī by hand, but the handful of dirt made it low. One can understand why Ṭabarī might have seen fit to choose an alternative explanation, since this version still seems to leave some potential for a more supernaturalized Calf to emerge from the process; and this might be why both Muqātil and Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās insist that although the handful of dirt made the Calf low, it only lowed once, and not again.

The ultimate reason for the partial, but *only* partial, accommodation of the traditional and rationalist perspectives in so many of our sources—Muqātil, Pseudo-Ibn ‘Abbās, Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Tha‘labī—is obvious. The Mu‘tazilite solution, which presents the Calf as unambiguously inanimate and artificial, reserves no conspicuous function for the “handful from the track of the messenger,” which, as we have seen, still plays a key role in all the abovementioned interpretations, whether it is used simply to make the Calf low or rather to generate it spontaneously out of the Israelites’ golden ornaments. It is striking that none of our extant witnesses to the *tafsīr* of al-Jubbā’ī make note of his interpretation of the key line *qabaḍtu qabḍat<sup>m</sup> min athar al-rasūl*, “I took a handful from the track of the messenger.” One could suppose that a rationalist like al-Jubbā’ī would have interpreted this phrase in some way similar to Paret or Mawdūdī, for example—that this represents Sāmīrī’s false and obsequious words to Moses (i.e., I believed that your exalted footprint holds supernatural power) rather than testifying to the actual supernatural origin of the Calf. But it is more likely that al-Jubbā’ī would have understood this line as his colleague Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī did—as indicating Sāmīrī’s rejection of the way or *sunna* of the prophet Moses in leading the people astray.

As we have suggested, such an interpretation of this line leads directly to the question of why one would suppose that Sāmīrī should have followed Moses’ *athar* in the first place. One could then argue that Sāmīrī had originally pretended to be a faithful follower of Moses and then abandoned his *islām*, as some classical exegetes held; he was thus obligated to follow Moses’ *athar* like any one else among the Israelites. But one could also conclude that his abandonment of

the *athar* specifically had something to do with his leading the people to worship the Calf, or rather (more in keeping with the original Quranic phraseology) with “bringing out a Calf for them” and thus “leading them astray.” This brings us back to the interpretation of the original Quranic episode that we have proposed here, namely that *al-sāmirī* is an epithet for Aaron that ironically underlines his obligation to lead the people in conformity with Moses’ *athar*, a task in which he failed miserably. In short, despite the obvious advantages of adapting the rationalist interpretation in order to minimize the impression of the Calf’s miraculous nature and thus of Sāmirī’s quasi-prophetic status, the classical exegetes could only partially embrace the Mu’tazilite exegesis, because they still had to preserve the idea of the literal and supernatural meaning of the “handful from the track of the messenger.” If not, the metaphorical interpretation of the phrase loomed nearby, as if waiting for an opportunity to reappear—if the “handful” is not a literal “handful,” the “track” not a literal “track,” then what could they be? With the restoration of that metaphorical interpretation, “Sāmirī” might no longer effectively function as a cipher for Aaron. This was the one possibility that the *tafsīr* tradition—despite the dazzling, at times overwhelming and maddening, diversity it encompassed—could not under any circumstances accept.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Abbreviations*

- ABD* *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Ed. D. Freedman et al. 6 vols. Doubleday, 1992.
- BHS* *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Ed. R. Kittel et al. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1990.
- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
- EI* *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition. 4 vols. + Supplement. E.J. Brill, 1913-1938.
- EI<sup>2</sup>* *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition. Ed. H.A.R. Gibb et al. E.J. Brill, 1960-2004.
- EIr* *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Ed. E. Yarshater. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982-present.
- EJ* *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Ed. C. Roth et al. 16 vols. Macmillan, 1971-1972.
- EJ<sup>2</sup>* *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. F. Skolnik et al. 22 vols. Macmillan, 2007.
- EQ* *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*. Ed. J. McAuliffe. 6 vols. Brill, 2001-2006.
- ER* *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. M. Eliade et al. 16 vols. Macmillan, 1987.
- GAL* *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*. Ed. C. Brockelmann. 2 vols. Weimar; Berlin: Emil Felber, 1898-1902.
- GAS* *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*. Ed. F. Sezgin. 10 vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967-2000.
- JAOS* *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
- JSAI* *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
- JJS* *Journal of Jewish Studies*
- JSS* *Journal of Semitic Studies*
- NCE* *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. 15 vols. + Supplements. McGraw-Hill, 1967.
- ODJR* *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. Ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and G. Wigoder. Oxford, 1997.
- SLAEI* *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*
- ZDMG* *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*

*Arabic and Persian primary sources*

- 'Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Ḥimyarī al-Ṣan'ānī. *Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq*. Ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad 'Abduh. 3 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1999.
- Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, Muḥammad b. Yūsuf. *Tafsīr al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*. 8 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1983.
- Abū 'Ubayda, Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā al-Tamīmī. *Majāz al-Qur'ān*. Ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād Sezgīn. 2 vols. Egypt: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1954.
- Al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ, Abū'l-Ḥasan Sa'id b. Mas'ada. *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*. Ed. Hudā Maḥmūd Qurra'a. 2 vols. Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1990.
- Al-'Ayyāshī, Abū'l-Naṣr Muḥammad b. Mas'ūd b. 'Ayyāsh al-Salamī al-Samarqandī. *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī*. Ed. Hāshim al-Rasūlī al-Maḥallatī. 2 vols. [incomplete]. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lamī, 1991.
- Al-Azharī, Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad b. Aḥmad. *Tahdhīb al-luḡha*. Ed. 'Alī Ḥasan Hilālī and Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār. 15 vols. Cairo: Al-Dār al-Miṣriyya, 1966.
- Al-Baḥrānī, Sayyid Hāshim b. Sulaymān. *Kitāb al-burhān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 4 vols. Tehran: Chāpkhāna-i Āftāb, 1375 [1956].
- Al-Bayḍāwī, Nāṣir al-Dīn Abū Sa'id 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar al-Shīrāzī. *Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī*. 4 vols. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lamī, 1990.
- Bevan, Anthony Ashley, ed. *The Nakā'id of Jarīr and al-Farazdak*. 3 vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1905.
- Al-Bīrūnī, Abū'l-Rayḥān Muḥammad b. Aḥmad. *Al-Athār al-bāqīyya 'an al-qurūn al-khāliya*. Ed. Khalīl 'Imrān Manṣūr. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000.
- . *The Chronology of Ancient Nations: An English Version of the Arabic Text of the Athār-ul-Bākiya of Albīrūnī, or "Vestiges of the Past," Collected and Reduced to Writing by the Author in A.H. 390-1, A.D. 1000*. Ed. and tr. C. Edward Sachau. London: W.H. Allen for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1879.
- Al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā'il. *Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*. Jam' jawāmi' al-aḥādīth wa'l-asānīd wa-makniz al-ṣiḥāḥ wa'l-sunan wa'l-masānīd. 3 vols. Vaduz: Jam'iyat al-Maknaz al-Islāmī, 2000.
- Al-Dīnawarī, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Wahb. *Tafsīr Ibn Wahb, al-musammā Al-Wāḍiḥ fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*. Ed. Aḥmad Faryad. 2 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003.
- Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Muḥammad b. 'Umar. *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr [Mafātiḥ al-ghayb]*. 32 vols. in 16. Egypt: Al-Maṭba'a al-Bāhiya al-Miṣriyya, 1934-1962; repr. Tehran: Shirkat Ṣaḥāfī Nawīn, [1980].



- Al-Fārisī, 'Umāra b. Wathīma. *Les Légendes Prophétiques dans l'islam depuis le I<sup>er</sup> jusqu'au III<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'Hégire. Kitāb bad' al-khalq wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*. Avec édition critique du texte. Ed. R.G. Khoury. Codices Arabici Antiqui 3. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978.
- Al-Farrā', Abū Zakariyā Yaḥyā b. Ziyād. *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*. Ed. Aḥmad Yūsuf Najātī and Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār. 3 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Surūr, 1980.
- Al-Firūzābādī, Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb. *Tanwīr al-miqbās min Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās*. Beirut: Dār al-Ashrāf, 1988.
- Al-Ḥākīm al-Jushamī. *Faḍl al-i'tizāl wa-ṭabaqāt al-Mu'tazila*. Ed. Fu'ād Sayyid. Tunis: Dār Tūnisiyya, 1974. [Note that Abū'l-Qāsim al-Balkhī, 'Abd al-Jabbār, and Al-Ḥākīm al-Jushamī all appear as authors of the work on the title page.]
- Ibn Abī Ḥātim, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Rāzī. *Kitāb al-jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl*. 9 vols. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1952; repr. Beirut: Dār al-Umam, 1973.
- . *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm*. Ed. As'ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib. 14 vols. Mecca and Riyadh: Maktaba Nazār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1997-1999.
- Ibn Durayd, Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Azdī. *Jamharat al-lughā*. 4 vols. [Baghdad]: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1970. (Originally published Hyderabad, 1345 [1926].)
- Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, Abū Faḍl Aḥmad b. 'Alī. *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*. 12 vols. Hyderabad: Maṭba'at Majlis Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Nizāmiyya, 1325-27 [1907-9]; repr. Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 1968.
- Ibn Ḥanbal, Aḥmad. *Al-Musnad*. Ed. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūṭ and 'Ādil Murshad. 50 vols. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1993.
- Ibn Hishām, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh. *Al-Sīra al-nabawiya*. Ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī and 'Abd al-Ḥafīz Shalabī. 2<sup>nd</sup> printing. 2 vols. Egypt: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī and Sons, 1955.
- Ibn al-Jawzī, Abū'l-Faraj 'Abd al-Raḥmān. *Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb al-Quṣṣāṣ wa'l-Mudhakkirīn*. Ed. and tr. Merlin L. Swartz. Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1971.
- Ibn Kathīr, Abū'l-Fidā' Ismā'īl b. 'Umar. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm*. Ed. Sāmī b. Muḥammad al-Salāma. 8 vols. Riyadh: Dār al-Ṭība li'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzī', 1997.
- Ibn al-Murtaḍā, Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā. *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-Mu'tazila*. Ed. Susanna Diwald-Wilzer. Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, 1980.
- Ibn Qutayba, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim. *Al-Ma'ārif li-Ibn Qutayba*. Ed. Tharwat 'Ukkāsha. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1960.
- Ibn Sa'd, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad. *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*. 9 vols. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir and Dār Bayrūt, 1957-68.
- Ibn al-Ṣalāh, Abū 'Amr 'Uthmān b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Shahrazūrī. *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāh fī ulūm al-ḥadīth*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1978.

- Ibn Shāhīn, Nissim ben Jacob ben Nissim. *The Arabic Original of Ibn Shāhīn's Book of Comfort, Known as the Hibbūr Yaphē of R. Nissim b. Ya'aqobh*. Ed. Julian Obermann. Yale Oriental Series 17. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press and Paris, P. Geuthner, 1933.
- . *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity*. Tr. William Brinner. Yale Judaica Series 20. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Ibn Zakariyā, Abū'l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad b. Fāris. *Maqāyis al-lughā*. Ed. 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn. 6 vols. Cairo: 'Isā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1946-1952.
- "Ikhwān al-Safā'." *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Safā'*. 4 vols. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957.
- Al-Iṣbahānī [Al-Iṣfahānī], Abū'l- Faraj 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Qarashī. *Kitāb al-aghānī*. Ed. Ibrāhīm al-Ibyārī. 31 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Sha'b, 1969-1982.
- Al-Jawhārī, Ismā'īl b. Ḥammād. *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ, tāj al-lughā wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-'arabiyya*. Ed. Aḥmad 'Abd al-Ghafūr 'Aṭṭār. 6 vols. Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm al-Malāyīn, 1979.
- Al-Jubbā'ī, Abū 'Alī Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb. *Une Lecture Mu'tazilite du Coran: Le Tafsīr d'Abū 'Alī al-Djubbā'ī (m. 303/915), partiellement reconstitué à partir de ses citeurs*. Ed. and tr. D. Gimaret. Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études: Section des Sciences Religieuses 101. Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 1994.
- Kāshifī, Kamāl al-Dīn Ḥusayn Vā'iz. *Mavāheḥ-i 'aliyya, yā Tafsīr-i Ḥusaynī*. Ed. Sayyed Moḥammed Rezā Jalālī Nā'īnī. 4 vols. [Tehran]: Iqbal, 1938.
- Al-Khalīl, Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīd. *Kitāb al-'ayn*. Ed. Mahdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Samarrā'ī. 7 vols. Qumm: Dār al-Hijra, 1984. (Originally published Baghdad, 1981?)
- Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Abū Bakr b. Aḥmad. *Tārīkh Baghdād aw Madīnat al-Salām*. 14 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Khānjī, 1931.
- Al-Kindī, 'Abd al-Masīḥ b. Ishāq, [Pseudo-]. *Risālat 'Abd Allāh b. Ismā'īl al-Hāshimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīḥ b. Ishāq al-Kindī yad'ūhu bi-hā ilā'l-Islām, wa-risālat 'Abd al-Masīḥ ilā'l-Hāshimī yaruddu bi-hā 'alayhi wa-yad'ūhu ilā'l-Naṣrāniyya. (The Apology of El-Kindy: A Work of the Ninth Century, Written in Defence of Christianity by an Arab.)* Ed. A. Tien. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1880.
- . *The Apology of Al Kindy, Written at the Court of Al Māmūn (A.H. 215; A.D. 830) in Defense of Christianity against Islam. With an Essay on Its Age and Authorship Read before the Royal Asiatic Society*. Tr. W. Muir. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1882.
- . *Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien sous le Calife Al-Ma'mūn (813-834): Les Épîtres d'al-Hāshimī et d'al-Kindī*. Ed. G. Tartar. Etudes Coraniques. Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1985.
- Al-Maḥallī, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, and Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm [Tafsīr al-Jalālayn]*. 2 vols. in 1. [Būlāq]: Al-Maṭba'a al-Maymaniyya, 1882.

- Al-Maqrīzī, Taqī al-Dīn Abū'l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Qādir al-'Ubaydī. *Al-Mawā'iz wa'l-i'tibār bi-dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa'l-athār*. Ed. Khalīl Maṣṣūr. 4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998.
- Al-Mas'ūdī, Abū'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī. *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*. Ed. Yusūf As'ad Dāghir. 4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1965-1966.
- Al-Mizzī, Jamāl al-Dīn Abū'l-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf. *Tahdhīb al-kamāl fī asmā' al-rijāl*. Ed. Bashshār 'Awwād Ma'rūf. 35 vols. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2002.
- Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Makkī. *Tafsīr Mujāhid*. Ed. 'Abd al-Ṭāhir b. Muḥammad al-Sūrātī. 2 vols. Islamabad: Majma' al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyya, 1970.
- Muqātil b. Sulaymān. *Tafsīr Muqātil*. Ed. 'Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta. 5 vols. Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, 1967; repr. Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li'l-Kitāb, 1979-1989.
- Mutanabbī, Abū'l-Ṭayyib Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn. *Mutanabbi Carmina cum Commentario Wāhidii*. Ed. Fr. Dieterici. Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1861.
- . *The Diwan of Abu Tayyib Ahmad ibn al Husain al Mutanabbi*. Tr. Arthur Wormhoudt. Oskaloosa, Iowa: William Penn College, 1971.
- Al-Qarāfī, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Idrīs al-Mālikī. *Al-Ajwiba al-fākhira*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1406/1986.
- Al-Qurṭubī, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad. *Al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*. 20 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1935; repr. Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī, 1967.
- Al-Sijistānī. *Tafsīr gharīb al-Qur'ān*. Ed. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq Qamḥāwī. Egypt: Maktabat al-Jundī, 1970.
- Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn Abū'l-Faḍl 'Abd al-Raḥmān. *Tafsīr al-durr al-manthūr fī tafsīr al-ma'thūr*. 8 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1983.
- Al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr. *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Jarir at-Tabari*. Ed. M. J. de Goeje. 16 vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1879-1901.
- . *The Commentary on the Qur'ān by Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī*. Trans. Alan Cooper. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- . *The History of Al-Ṭabarī, Volume I: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*. Tr. Franz Rosenthal. Bibliotheca Persica, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989.
- . *The History of Al-Ṭabarī, Volume II: Prophets and Patriarchs*. Tr. William Brinner. Bibliotheca Persica, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- . *The History of Al-Ṭabarī, Volume III: The Children of Israel*. Tr. William Brinner. Bibliotheca Persica, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991.

- . *The History of Al-Ṭabarī, Volume IV: The Ancient Kingdoms*. Tr. M. Perlmann. Bibliotheca Persica, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- . *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Ed. Muḥammad al-Zahrī al-Ghamrāwī. 30 vols. in 11. Cairo: Al-Maṭba'at al-Maymaniyya, 1321 [1903].
- . *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qurān*. Ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākīr. 16 vols. [incomplete]. Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1954-1969.
- Al-Ṭabarsī, al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan. *Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. 30 vols. in 7. Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, 1380/1961.
- Al-Ṭayālīsī, Abū Dā'ūd Sulaymān b. al-Ash'ath al-Sijistānī. *Musnad Abī Dā'ūd al-Ṭayālīsī*. Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, [n.d.]
- Al-Tha'labī, Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad. *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā', or, 'Lives of the Prophets' as recounted by Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī*. Tr. William M. Brinner. Studies in Arabic Literature 24. Brill: Leiden, Boston, and Köln, 2002.
- . *Al-Kashf wa'l-bayān, al-ma'arūf Tafsīr al-Tha'labī*. 10 vols. Ed. Abī Muḥammad b. 'Āshūr. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2002.
- . *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' al-musammā 'Arā'is al-majālis*. Cairo: Dār al-Fajr li'l-Turāth, 2001.
- Al-Tirmidhī, Muḥammad b. 'Īsā. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī. Jam' jawāmi' al-aḥādith wa'l-asānīd wa-makniz al-ṣiḥāḥ wa'l-sunan wa'l-masānīd*. 2 vols. Vaduz: Jam'iyat al-Maknaz al-Islāmī, 2000.
- Al-Ṭūsī, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan. *Al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. Ed. Buzurk al-Ṭihrānī. 10 vols. Najaf: Al-Maṭba'a al-'Ilmiyya, 1957-1963.
- Al-Ya'qūbī, Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb. *Ibn-Wādhih qui dicitur Al-Ja'qūbī, Historiae. Pars prior: Historiam ante-Islamicam continens*. Ed. M.Th. Houtsma. 2 vols. E.J. Brill, 1883; repr. 1969.
- . *L'Histoire des Prophètes d'après al-Ya'qūbī, d'Adam à Jésus*. Ed. and tr. André Ferré. Etudes Arabes 96. Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica (P.I.S.A.I.), 2000.
- Yāqūt, Shihāb al-Dīn Ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī. *Mu'jam al-buldān*. 5 vols. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1984.
- Al-Zabīdī, Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Ḥusaynī. *Tāj al-'arūs min jawāhir al-qāmūs*. 40 vols. Kuwait: Kuwait Government Press, 1965-2001.

*Hebrew and Aramaic primary sources*

- Berman, Samuel A., tr. *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1995.
- Börner-Klein, Dagmar, ed. and tr. *Pirke de-Rabbi Elieser: Nach der Edition Venedig 1544 unter Berücksichtigung der Edition Warschau 1852*. Studia Judaica 26. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004.
- Buber, Solomon, ed. *Midrash Tanhuma: Ein Aggadischer Commentar zum Pentateuch von Rabbi Tanchuma ben Rabbi Abba*. 2 vols. Vilna: Romm, 1885; repr. Jerusalem: Orzel, 1964.
- Clarke, E.G., ed., with collaboration by W.E. Aufrecht, J.G. Hurd, and F. Spitzer. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance*. 2 vols. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1984.
- Danby, Herbert, tr. *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew, with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933.
- Díez Macho, Alejandro, ed. and tr. *Neophyti I: Targum Palestinense Ms. de la Biblioteca Vaticana*. 6 vols. Madrid and Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968-1979.
- Epstein, I., ed. *The Babylonian Talmud*. Hebrew-English ed. in 36 vols. London: The Soncino Press, 1965-1990.
- Friedlander, Gerald, tr. *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer (The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great)*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd. and New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1916.
- Freedman, H., and Maurice Simon, eds. *Midrash Rabbah*. 10 vols. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Soncino Press, 1983. (First edition published 1939.)
- Grossfeld, Bernard, tr. *Targum Onqelos to Exodus*. The Aramaic Bible 7. Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1988.
- Lauterbach, Jacob Z., ed. and tr. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*. Schiff Library of Jewish Classics. 3 vols. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933.
- Mandelbaum, Bernard, ed. *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*. 2 vols. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 5722/1962.
- McNamara, Martin, tr. *Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus*, with notes by Robert Hayward, and Maher, Michael, tr. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus*. The Aramaic Bible 2. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1986.
- Midrash Rabbah*. 2 vols. Vilna: Romm, 1887; repr. Jerusalem: Hoza'at Sefer, 1969.
- Midrash Tanhuma*. Vilna, 1831; repr. Jerusalem: Levin-Epstein, 1964.

- Neusner, Jacob, tr. *The Midrash Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries: Volume Four: Song of Songs Rabbah*. Brown Judaic Studies 190. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989.
- Pirqa Rabbi Eli'ezer*. Warsaw: Bomberg, 1852.
- Simon, Maurice, tr. *Midrash Rabbah: The Song of Songs*. London: Soncino Press, 1939.
- Sperber, Alexander. *The Bible in Aramaic, Vol.1: The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos*. Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1959.
- Townsend, John, tr. *Midrash Tanhuma: Translated into English with Introduction, Indices, and Brief Notes*. 3 vols. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989-2003.
- Ziyyoni, Menaḥem. *Sefer Ziyyoni: Perush 'al ha-Torah 'al Derekh ha-Emet*. Lemberg, 1882; repr. Jerusalem, [5]724 [1963 or 1964].
- Zussman, Ya'akov, ed. *Talmud Yerushalmi, According to Ms. Or. 4720 (Scal. 3) of the Leiden University Library with Restorations and Corrections*. Jerusalem: Ha-Aqademyah la-Lashon ha-'Ivrit, 2001.

*Qur'ān translations*

- Abdel Haleem, M.A.S. *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Abdul Latif, Syed. *Al-Quran*. Hyderabad: Academy of Islamic Studies, 1969.
- Abu'l-Fadl, Mirzā. *The Qur'ān: Arabic Text and English Translation, Arranged Chronologically, with an Abstract*. 2 vols. Allahabad: G.A. Asghar & Co., 1911.
- Ahmad, Bashiruddin Mahmud. *The Holy Quran, with English Translation and Commentary*. 5 vols. Tilford, Surrey, UK: Islam International Publications, 1988.
- Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*. New ed. with rev. translation, commentary, and newly compiled comprehensive index. Beltsville, Md.: Amana Publications, 1997. (First edition published 1934.)
- Ali, Ahmed. *Al-Qur'ān: A Contemporary Translation*. Rev. ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988. (First edition published 1984.)
- Ali, Maulana Muhammad. *The Holy Qur-ān, Containing the Arabic Text with English Translation and Commentary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Lahore: Ahmadiyya Anjuman-i-Isha'at-i-Islam, 1920. (First edition published 1917.)
- . *Translation of the Holy Quran*. 4th, rev. ed. Lahore: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1951.
- . *The Holy Qur'ān, Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary*. 7<sup>th</sup>, rev. ed. Lahore: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1991.
- Ali, Sher. *The Holy Quran with English Translation and Commentary*. Notes by Malik Ghulam Farid. Rabwah, Pakistan: Published under the auspices of Hadrat Mirza Nasir Ahmad by the Oriental and Religious Pub. Corp., 1988. (First edition published 1969.)
- Arberry, A. J. *The Koran Interpreted*. London: Allen & Unwin and New York: Macmillan, 1955.
- Arrivabene, Andrea. *L'Alcorano di Macometto, nel qual si contiene la dottrina, la vita, i costumi, et le leggi sue*. [Venice], 1547.
- Asad, Muhammad. *The Message of the Quran*. Gibraltar and London: Dar al-Andalus, distributed by Brill, 1980.
- Azad, Abul Kalam. *The Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*. Ed. and tr. Syed Abdul Latif. 2 vols. London: Asia Publishing House, 1962.
- Bell, Richard. *The Qur'an, Translated, with a Critical Re-Arrangement of the Surahs*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937-1939.
- Ben Shemesh, Aharon. *Ha-Qur'an: Sefer ha-Sefarim shel ha-Islam*. Tel-Aviv: Qarni Publishers, 1978.

- Bibliander, Theodorus. *Machumetis Saracenorum principis, vita ac doctrina omnis... Alcoranum dicitur* [et al.] Basel, 1543.
- . *Machumetis, Saracenorum Principis, eiusque successorum vitae, doctrina, ac ipse Alcoran* [et al.] Basel, 1550.
- Blachère, Régis. *Le Coran*. 3 vols. Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve, 1947-1950.
- Boubakeur, Hamza. *Le Coran*. 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. 2 vols. Paris: Fayard, 1985.
- Cragg, Kenneth. *Readings in the Qur'ān*. San Francisco: Collins, 1988.
- Daryabādī, Abdul Majid. *The Holy Qur'an*. Karachi: Taj, 1971. (First edition published 1941.)
- Dawood, N.J. *The Koran, With a Parallel Arabic Text*. 5th rev. ed. London and New York: Penguin Classics, 1993. (First edition published 1956.)
- Fakhry, Majid. *The Qur'an: A Modern English Version*. Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1996.
- Farid, Malik Ghulam. *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation with Commentary*. Published under the auspices of Hadrat Mirza Nasir Ahmad. London: London Mosque, 1981. (Originally published 1962.)
- Grimme, Hubert. *Der Koran Ausgewählt: Angeordnet und im Metrum des Originals Übertragen*. Dokumente der Religion 8. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1923.
- Irving, Thomas Ballantine. *The Qur'ān: The First American Version*. Brattleboro, Vt.: Amana Books, 1985.
- Jeffery, Arthur. *The Koran, Selected Suras*. New York: Heritage Press, 1958.
- Jullundri, Ali Ahmad Khan. *After a Few Centuries a True and Easy Translation of the Glorious Holy Qur'an, with Commentary*. Rev. ed. Lahore, Pakistan: World Islamic Mission, 1978. (First edition published 1962.)
- Kasimirski, M. *Le Koran, Traduction Nouvelle*. Paris: Charpentier, 1859.
- Khalifa, Rashad. *Quran: The Final Testament, Authorized English Version with the Arabic Text*. Tucson: Islamic Productions, 1992. (First edition published 1981.)
- Khan, Muhammad Zafrulla. *The Koran: The Eternal Revelation Vouchsafed to Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets*. 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. London: Curzon, 1981. (First edition published 1970.)
- Khatib, M.M. *The Bounteous Koran: A Translation of Meaning and Commentary*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986.
- Khoury, Adel Theodor. *Der Koran*. 12 vols. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1990.
- Laïmèche, Ahmed, and B. Ben Daoud. *Le Coran: Lecture par excellence*. Oran: Éditions Heintz Frères, 1932.



- Mark of Toledo. *Liber Alchorani*. Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, ms. F. v. 35.
- Marracci, Ludovico. *Alcorani textus universus ex correctioribus Arabum exemplaribus summa fide* [et al.] Padua, 1698.
- . *Mohammedis filii Abdaliae pseudo-prophetae fides Islamitica, i.e. Al-Coranus ex idiomate Arabico* [et al.] Ed. C. Reinicci. Leipzig, 1721.
- Maudūdī [Mawdūdī], Sayyid Abu'l-A'lā. *The Holy Qur'ān: Text, Translation, and Brief Notes*. Tr. Muḥammad Akbar Murādpūrī and 'Abdul 'Azīz Kamāl. Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1982.
- Nawawi Foundation. *The Majestic Qur'an: An English Rendition of Its Meanings*. 4th ed. Chicago: Nawawi Foundation and London: Ibn Khaldun Foundation, 2000.
- Nikayin, Fazlollah. *The Quran: The First Poetic Translation*. Skokie, Ill.: Ultimate Book, 2000.
- Palmer, Edward Henry. *The Koran (Qur'an)*. The World's Classics 328. London: H. Milford and Oxford University Press, 1928. (First edition published 1880.)
- Paret, Rudi. *Der Koran*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln and Mainz: W. Kohlhammer, 1982. (First edition published 1975).
- Pickthall, Marmaduke William. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1930.
- Robert of Ketton. *Lex Mahumet pseudo-prophete que arabice Alchoran*. Paris, Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, ms. Lat. 1162, fols. 26-140.
- Rodwell, J.M. *The Koran: Translated from the Arabic, the Suras Arranged in Chronological Order, with Notes and Index*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1861.
- Rückert, Friedrich. *Der Koran in der Übersetzung von Friedrich Rückert*. Ed. Hartmut Bobzin, with notes by Wolfdietrich Fischer. Würzburg: ERGON, 1995.
- Du Ryer, André. *L'Alcoran de Mahomet*. Paris: Chez Anthoine de Sommaville, 1651. (First edition published 1647.)
- Sale, George. *The Koran, Commonly Called the Alkoran of Mohammed, Translated into English from the Original Arabic, with Explanatory Notes Taken from the Most Approved Commentators. To Which is Prefaced a Preliminary Discourse by George Sale*. London: Frederick Warne and Co., [n.d.] (First edition published 1734.)
- . *The Koran: Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed... A New Ed., with a Memoir of the Translator, and with Various Readings and Illustrative Notes from Savary's Version of the Koran*. Philadelphia: T. Wardle, 1833.
- Sarwar, Ghulam. *Translation of the Holy Qur-an from the Original Arabic Text with Critical Essays, Life of Muhammad, Complete Summary of Contents*. Singapore and Woking, UK: [n.p.], 1920.

- Savary, M. *Le Koran*. Paris: Librairie Garnier Frères, 1937. (First edition published 1783.)
- Schweigger, Salomon. *De Arabische Alkoran*. Hamburg: B. Az. Berentsma, 1641.
- . *Al-Koranum Mahumedanum, das ist, Der Türcken Religion, Gesetz, und gottslästerliche Lehr, mit einer Schriftmässigen widerlegung der jüdischen Fabeln, mahumedischen Träumen* [et al.] Nürnberg: J.A. und W. Endter, 1664. (First edition published 1616 .)
- Shakir, M.H. *Holy Qur'ān (Al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm)*. New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1982.
- Starkovsky, Nicolas. *The Koran Handbook: An Annotated Translation*. New York: Algora Publishing, 2005.
- Turner, Colin, tr. *The Quran: A New Interpretation*. Textual exegesis by Muhammad Bāqir Behbūdī. Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1997.
- Watt, W. Montgomery. *Companion to the Qur'ān*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1967.

*Secondary sources*

- Abbott, Nabia. *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Quranic Commentary and Tradition*. University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications LXXVI. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Abou-Bakr, Omaima. "Islamic Sources in Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina Clericalis*." In *Proceedings of the International Conference: Comparative Literature in the Arab World*. Cairo: Cairo University, 1998, 120-32.
- Abū'l-Faḍl Gulpáygáni. *Miracles and Metaphors*. Tr. Juan Ricardo Cole. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1981.
- Adang, Camilla. *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*. Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science 22. Leiden, New York, and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996.
- Ahmed, Shahab. "The Satanic Verses Incident in the Memory of the Early Muslim Community: An Analysis of the Early *Riwāyahs* and their *Isnāds*." Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1999.
- Ahrens, Karl. *Muhammed als Religionsstifter*. Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 19, no. 4. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1935.
- Albayrak, İsmail. "Isrā'īliyyāt and Classical Exegetes' Comments on the Calf with a Hollow Sound. Q:20:83-98/7:147-155 with Special Reference to Ibn 'Aṭīyya." *JSS* 47:1 (2002): 39-65.
- Ali, Muhammad. *History of the Prophets, as Narrated in the Holy Qur'ān, compared with the Bible*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Lahore and Ohio: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam Lahore, 1996. (First edition published 1946.)
- D'Alverny, Marie-Therese. "Deux Traductions Latines du Coran au Moyen Age." *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* 16 (1948): 69-131.
- . "Quelques Manuscrits de la "Collectio Toletana."" In *Petrus Venerabilis 1156-1956*, ed. G. Constable and J. Kritzeck. *Studia Anselmiana* 40. Rome: Herder, 1956, 202-18.
- . "Pierre le Vénérable et la Légende de Mahomet." In *A Cluny, Congrès Scientifique: Fêtes et Cérémonies Liturgiques en l'Honneur des Saints Abbés Odon et Odillon, 9-11 Juillet 1949*. Dijon: Société des Amis de Cluny avec le CNRS, 1950, 161-70.
- . "La Connaissance de l'Islam en Occident du IX<sup>e</sup> au Milieu du XII<sup>e</sup> Siècle." In *L'Occidente e l'Islam nell'alto Medioevo, Spoleto 2-8 Aprile 1964, Vol. 2: Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo*. Spoleto [Italy]: Presso La Sede del Centro, 1965, 577-602.
- . "Translations and Translators." In *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. R.L. Benson and G. Constable. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, 421-62.

- Amir-Moezzi, Mohammed Ali. *Et*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Al-Ṭūsī, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī Abū Dja‘far” (2000).
- Anderson, Robert T., and Terry Giles. *The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002.
- Andræ, Tor. *Mohammed, the Man and His Faith*. Tr. Theophil Menzel. New York: Scribner’s, 1936.
- Anidjar, Gil. *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*. Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Arberry, A. J. *Chester Beatty Library. A Handlist of the Arabic Manuscripts*. 8 vols. Dublin : Emery Walker and Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1955.
- Bakhos, Carol. *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- . “Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash.” In *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. C. Bakhos. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006, 161-87.
- Bar-Asher, M.M. *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shiism*. Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science 37. Leiden and Boston: Brill and Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999.
- Baring-Gould, S. *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*. London: Rivingtons, 1866.
- Bayhom-Daou, Tamima. *Shaykh Mufid*. Makers of the Muslim World. Oxford: Oneworld, 2005.
- Becker, Adam H. *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
- Bell, Richard. *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh University 1925*. London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1926.
- . *Introduction to the Qur’ān*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953.
- . *A Commentary on the Qur’ān*. Ed. C. Edmund Bosworth and M.E.J. Richardson. Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph 14. 2 vols. Manchester, UK: University of Manchester, 1991.
- Berg, Herbert. *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period*. Curzon Studies in the Qur’ān. Richmond: Curzon, 2000.
- Berkey, Jonathan. *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East*. Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2001.
- . *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

- Berkowitz, David Sandler. *John Selden's Formative Years: Politics and Society in Early Seventeenth-Century England*. Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988.
- Berlinerblau, Jacques. *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Bialik, Hayyim Nahman, and Y.H. Ravnitzky. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. Tr. William G. Braude. Introduction by David Stern. New York: Schocken Books, 1992.
- Bijlefeld, W. A. "Some Recent Contributions to Qur'anic Studies: Selected Publications in English, French, and German, 1964-1973." *Muslim World*, 64:2 (1974): 79-102; 64:3 (1974): 172-9; 64:4 (1974) 259-74.
- Blachère, R. *Et*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Al-Farazdaq" (1964).
- Bobzin, Hartmut. "Latin Translations of the Koran: A Short Overview." *Der Islam* 70:2 (1993): 193-206.
- . *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation: Studien zur Frühgeschichte der Arabistik und Islamkunde in Europa*. Beirut: Texte und Studien 42. Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft and Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1995.
- . "'A Treasury of Heresies': Christian Polemics against the Koran." In *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. S. Wild. Leiden, New York, and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996, 157-75.
- Boettcher, Susan R. "German Orientalism in the Age of Confessional Consolidation: Jacob Andreae's *Thirteen Sermons on the Turk*, 1568." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24:2 (2004) 101-115.
- Bori, Pier Cesare. *The Golden Calf and the Origins of the Anti-Jewish Controversy*. South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 16. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990.
- Borrmans, Maurice. "Ludovico Marracci et sa Traduction Latine du Coran." *Islamochristiana* 28 (2002): 73-86.
- Bowker, John. *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Boyarin, Daniel. "Inner Biblical Ambiguity, Intertextuality and the Dialectic of Midrash: The Waters of Marah." *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 29-48.
- . *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Bregman, Marc. "Midrash Rabbah and the Medieval Collector Mentality." *Prooftexts* 17 (1997): 63-76.
- . *ODJR*, s.v. "Tanḥuma'-Yelammedenu."

- . *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003.
- . “Mishnah and LXX as Mystery: An Example of Jewish-Christian Polemic in the Byzantine Period.” In *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, ed. L. Levine. Jerusalem: Dinur Center for the Study of Jewish History and Yad Ben-Zvi Press in association with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004, 333-42.
- Brock, Sebastian P. “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam.” In *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll. Carbondale, Il.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, 9-21, 199-203.
- Brown, Daniel. *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Buhl, Fr. *EP*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “al-Ḥasan b. Zayd b. Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl b. al-Ḥasan b. Zayd” (1966).
- Al-Bundāq, Muḥammad Šālih, ed. *Hidāyat al-Raḥmān li-alfāz wa-ayāt al-Qur’ān*. Beirut: Dār al-Afāq al-Jadīda, 1981.
- Burman, Thomas. “*Tafsīr* and Translation: Traditional Arabic Qur’ān Exegesis and the Latin Qur’āns of Robert of Ketton and Mark of Toledo.” *Speculum* 73:3 (1998): 703-32.
- . *Reading the Qur’ān in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.
- Busse, Heribert. *Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: Theological and Historical Affiliations*. Tr. Allison Brown. Princeton Series on the Middle East. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998. (Originally published as *Die theologischen Beziehungen des Islams zu Judentum und Christentum: Grundlagen des Dialogs im Koran und die gegenwärtige Situation*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges, 1991.)
- Calder, Norman. *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- . “*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham.” In *Approaches to the Qur’an*, ed. G. Hawting and A. A. Shareef. London and New York: Routledge, 1993, 101-40.
- Clark, Harry. “The Publication of the Koran in Latin: A Reformation Dilemma.” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15:1 (1984): 3-12.
- Conrad, Lawrence I. “Recovering Lost Texts: Some Methodological Issues.” *JAOS* 113:2 (1993): 258-63.
- Constable, Giles, and James Kritzeck, eds. *Petrus Venerabilis, 1156-1956: Studies and Texts Commemorating the Eighth Centenary of His Death*. Studia Anselmiana 40. Rome: Herder, 1956.
- Cook, Michael. “Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions.” *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies* 1 (1992): 23-47.

- . “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam.” *Arabica* 44 (1997): 437-523.
- . “Ibn Qutayba and the Monkeys.” *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 43-74.
- Cooperson, Michael. *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of Al-Ma'mūn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- ., and Shawkat M. Toorawa, eds. *Arabic Literary Culture, 500-925*. Dictionary of Literary Biography 311. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.
- Corinaldi, Michael. “The Relationship between the *Beta Israel* Tradition and the *Book of Jubilees*.” In *Jews of Ethiopia: The Birth of an Elite*, ed. T. Parfitt and E. Semi. London and New York: Routledge, 2005, 193-204.
- Crone, Patricia. *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- . *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- ., and Martin Hinds. *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Dan, Joseph. *EJ*, s.v. “Menachem Ziyoni” (1971-1972).
- . “Samael and the Problem of Jewish Gnosticism.” In *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, ed. A. Ivry. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1988, 257-76.
- Daniel, Norman. *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Rev. ed. Oxford: Oneworld, 1993.
- Dickinson, Eerik. *The Development of Early Sunnite Ḥadīth Criticism: The Taqdimā of Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (240/854-327/938)*. *Islamic History and Civilization* 38. Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill, 2001.
- Díez Merino, Luis. “Targum Manuscripts and Critical Editions.” In *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, ed. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 166. Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1994, 51-91.
- Donner, Fred. *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*. SLAEI 14. Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998.
- . “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community.” *Al-Abḥath* 50-51 (2002-3): 9-53.
- Dunlop, D.M. *EJ*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Bādjār wān” (1960).
- Duri, Abd al-Aziz. *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs*. Ed. and tr. Lawrence I. Conrad. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- El-Hibri, Tayeb. *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate*. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

- . “The Unity of Tabari’s Chronicle.” *Al-’Usur al-Wusta* 11:1 (1999): 1-3.
- . “A Note on Biblical Narrative and ‘Abbāsīd History.” In *Views from the Edge: Essays in Honor of Richard W. Bulliet*, ed. N. Yavari, L. Potter, and J.-M. Ran Oppenheim. New York: Columbia University Press for the Middle East Institute, Columbia University, 2004.
- Elad, Amikam. “Community of Believers of ‘Holy Men’ and ‘Saints’ or Community of Muslims? The Rise and Development of Early Muslim Historiography.” *JSS* 47:1 (2002): 241-308.
- Elbaum, Jacob. “*Yalqut Shim’oni* and the Medieval Midrashic Anthology.” *Prooftexts* 17:2 (1997): 133-51.
- Elman, Yaakov, and Israel Gershoni. *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion*. New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Esposito, John, and John Voll. *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Ess, Josef van. *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Eyal, Gil. *The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State*. Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Faraone, Christopher A. *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Firestone, Reuven. “Abraham’s Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*Al-Dhabīh*, Qur’ān 37:99-113): Issues in Qur’ānic Exegesis.” *JSS* 34:1 (1989): 95-131.
- . “Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam.” In *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. D. Biale. New York: Schocken, 2002, 267-302.
- Forster, Regula. “Methoden Arabischer Qur’ānexegese: Muqātil b. Sulaymān, aṭ-Ṭabarī und ‘Abdarrazzāq al-Qāshānī zu Q 53, 1-18.” In *Sinnvermittlung: Studien zur Geschichte von Exegese und Hermeneutik*, ed. P. Michel and H. Weder. Zürich: Pano, 2000, 385-443.
- Fraade, Steven D. “Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary.” In *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. C. Bakhos. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006, 59-78.
- Fraenkel, S. “Miscellen zum Koran.” *ZDMG* 46 (1892): 71-73.
- Freytag, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Lexicon Arabico-Latinum praesertim ex Djeuharii Firuzbadiique et aliorum Arabum operibus* [et al.] 4 vols. Halis Saxonum: C.A. Schwetschke and Sons, 1830.
- Friedmann, Yohanan. *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Aḥmadī Religious Thought and its Medieval Background*. Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 3. Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1989.



- Fudge, Bruce. "Qur'ānic Exegesis in Medieval Islam and Modern Orientalism." *Die Welt des Islams* 46:2 (2006): 115-47.
- Fück, J. "The Originality of the Arabian Prophet." In *Studies on Islam*, ed. and tr. M. Swartz. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, 86-98. (Originally published as "Die Originalität des arabischen Propheten," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 90 (1936): 509-25.)
- Gallagher, Nancy Elizabeth. *Approaches to the History of the Middle East: Interviews with Leading Middle East Historians*. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1994.
- García González, J. "El Contacto de Dos Lenguas: Los Arabismos en el Español Medieval y en la Obra Alfonsí." *Cahiers de Linguistique Hispanique Médiévale* 18-19 (1994): 335-65.
- Gardet, L. *EP*, s.v. "Fitna" (1959).
- . *EP*, s.v. "Al-Djubbā'ī, Abū 'Alī Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb" (1963).
- Gaster, Moses, ed. and tr. *The Asatir: The Samaritan Book of the "Secrets of Moses," Together with the Pitron or Samaritan Commentary and the Samaritan Story of the Death of Moses*. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1927.
- Gastfreund, I. *Mohamed nach Talmud und Midrasch*. Berlin: Louis Gerschel, 1875.
- Geiger, Abraham. *Was Hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume Aufgenommen. Eine von der Königl. Preussischen Rheinuniversität Gekrönte Preisschrift*. Bonn: F. Baaden, 1834.
- . *Judaism and Islām. A Prize Essay*. Tr. F.M. Young. Vepery (Madras): M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1898.
- Genequand, Charles. "Idolâtrie, Astrolâtrie et Sabéisme." *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 109-28.
- Gilliot, Claude. "Portrait <<Mythique>> d'Ibn 'Abbās." *Arabica* 32 (1985): 127-84.
- . *Exégèse, Langue et Théologie en Islam: L'Exégèse Coranique de Tabari (m. 311/923)*. Études Musulmanes 32. Paris: Libr. J. Vrin, 1990.
- ., "Muqātil, Grand Exégète, Traditionniste et Théologien Maudit." *Journal Asiatique* 279:1 (1991): 39-92.
- . "Mythe, Récit, Histoire de Salut dans le Commentaire de Tabari." *Journal Asiatique* 282:2 (1994): 237-70.
- . "Les <<Informateurs>> Juifs et Chrétiens de Muḥammad." *JSAI* 22 (1998): 84 -126.
- . "The Beginnings of Qur'ānic Exegesis." In *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation*, ed. A. Rippin. The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 25. Ashgate Variorum: Ashgate, UK and Brookfield, Vt., 1999, 1-27. (Originally published as "Les débuts de l'exégèse coranique." *Revue de Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 58 (1990): 82-100.)
- . "L'Exégèse du Coran en Asie Centrale et au Khorasan." *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 129-64.

- . “Qur’anic Exegesis.” In *History of Civilizations of Central Asia Volume IV, The Age of Achievement: A.D. 750 to the End of the Fifteenth Century, Part Two, The Achievements*, ed. C.E. Bosworth and M.S. Asimov. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2000, 97-116.
- Gimaret, Daniel. *EF*, s.v. “Mu’tazila” (1992).
- Ginzberg, Louis. “Haggadot Qeṭu’ot.” *Ha-Goren* 9-10 (1922): 31-68.
- . *Legends of the Bible*: Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956.
- . *The Legends of the Jews*. Tr. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin. Foreword by James L. Kugel. 7 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. (First edition published 1909-1939.)
- Girón Blanc, Luis F. “Song of Songs in Song of Songs Rabbah.” In *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. J. Neusner and A. Peck. 2 vols. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005, 2.857-71.
- De Goeje, M. J. *Mémoire sur les Migrations des Tsiganes à Travers l’Asie*. Mémoires d’Histoire et de Géographie Orientales par M. J. De Goeje 3. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1903.
- Goitein, S. D. “Who Were the Sage Teachers of Muhammad?” [Heb.] *Tarbiz* 23 (1952): 146-59.
- . “Muhammad’s Inspiration by Judaism.” *JJS* 9:3-4 (1958): 149-62.
- . *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages*. 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1974. (First edition published 1955.)
- Goldfeld, Isaiah. “Muqātil ibn Sulaymān.” In *Arabic and Islamic Studies*, ed. Jacob Mansour. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1973, 2.13-30.
- Goldziher, Ignác. “Lā Misāsa.” *Revue Africaine* 52 (1908): 23-8.
- . *Die Richtungen des Islamischen Koranauslegung*. Veröffentlichungen der “De Goeje-Stiftung” 6. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1920.
- Griffith, Sidney H. “Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians.” In *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Conference (Villanova University, Pennsylvania)* 4 (1979): 63-86.
- Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. 16 vols. in 33. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1984.
- Grossfeld, Bernard. *EJ*, s.v. “Bible, Translations, Ancient Versions: Aramaic: The Targumim” (1971-1972).
- Halévy, J., ed. *Teezāza Sanbat (Commandements du Sabbat). Accompagné de Six Autres Écrits Pseudo-Épigraphiques Admis par les Falachas ou Juifs d’Abyssinie*. Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études... Sciences Historiques et Philologiques 137. Paris: É. Bouillon, 1902.

- . “Les Samaritains dans le Coran.” *Revue Sémitique* 16 (1908): 419-29.
- Halivni, David. *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Ḥallāq, Muḥammad Ṣubhī b. Ḥasan. *Rijāl Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī jarḥ<sup>an</sup> wa-ta’dīl<sup>an</sup> min taḥqīq Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl al-Qur’ān li-Aḥmad Shākīr wa-Maḥmūd Shākīr*. Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1999.
- Halm, Heinz. *Shi’ism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Tr. J. Watson and M. Hill. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Halperin, David J. “Can Muslim Narrative Be Used as Commentary on Jewish Tradition?” In *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. R. Nettler. Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations 2. Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers (in cooperation with the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies), 1995, 73-88.
- . *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel’s Vision*. Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 16. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988.
- Hamilton, Alastair and Francis Richard. *André du Ryer and Oriental Studies in Seventeenth-Century France*. Studies in the Arcadian Library 1. Oxford: The Arcadian Library in association with Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Hawting, G.R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- . *EQ*, s.v. “Calf of Gold” (2001).
- Hayward, Robert. “Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Anti-Islamic Polemic.” *JSS* 34:1 (1989): 77-93.
- . “Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.” *JJS* 42:2 (1991): 215-46
- . “Red Heifer and Golden Calf: Dating Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.” In *Targum Studies, Volume 1: Textual and Contextual Studies in the Pentateuchal Targums*, ed. P. Fleisher. South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 55. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1992, 9-32.
- Haywood, John A. *Arabic Lexicography: Its History, and Its Place in the General History of Lexicography*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965.
- . *EF<sup>2</sup>*, s.v. “Ḳāmūs [1. Arabic Lexicography]” (1975).
- Heller, Bernard. *El*, s.v. “Al-Sāmīr” (1934).
- ., rev. A. Rippin. *EF<sup>2</sup>*, s.v. “Al-Sāmīr” (1995).
- D’Herbelot, Barthelemy. *Bibliothèque Orientale, ou Dictionnaire Universel, Contenant Generalement Tout ce qui Regarde la Connoissance des Peuples de l’Orient, Leurs Histoires et Traditions Veritables*. Maestricht: J.E. Dufour & P. Roux, 1776. (First edition published 1697.)

- Heschel, Susannah. *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- . “How the Jews Invented Jesus and Muhammed: Christianity and Islam in the Work of Abraham Geiger.” In *Ethical Monotheism, Past and Present: Essays in Honor of Wendell S. Dietrich*, ed. T. Vial and M. Hadley. Brown Judaic Studies 329. Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2001, 49-73.
- Hirschberg, H. Z. *Jüdische und Christliche Lehren im Vor- und Frühislamischen Arabien: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Islams*. Komisji Orientalistycznej 32. Krakow: Nakl. Polskiej Akademii Umiejetnosci, 1939.
- . *EJ*, s.v. “Bible: In Islam”; “Islam: Judaism in Islam” (1971-1972).
- Hirschfeld, Hartwig. *Jüdische Elemente im Korân: Ein Beitrag zur Korânforschung*. Berlin: [n.p.], 1878.
- Hodgson, Marshall G.S. “Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians: Pitfalls and Opportunities in Presenting them to Moderns.” In *Towards World Community*, ed. John Nef. World Academy of Art and Science 5. New York: Humanities Press and The Hague: W. Junk, 1968, 53-68.
- Hofmann, Murad W. “German Translations of the Holy Qur’ân” *Islamic Studies* 41:1 (2002): 87-96.
- Horovitz, Josef. *Koranische Untersuchungen*. Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients 4. Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1926.
- . *The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors*. Ed. Lawrence I. Conrad. SLAEI 11. Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002.
- Horst, Heribert. “Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar at-Ṭabarī.” *ZDMG* 103 (1953): 290-307.
- Hottinger, Johann Heinrich. *Historia Orientalis quæ ex Variis Orientalium Monumentis Collecta*. Editio posterior & auctor, caractere novo orientali nunc primùm vestita. Tiguri: Joh. Jacobi Bodmeri, 1660.
- Humphreys, R. Stephen. “Qur’anic Myth and Narrative Structure in Early Islamic Historiography.” In *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, ed. F. Clover and R. S. Humphreys. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 271-92.
- . *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*. Rev. ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Huss, Boaz. “Demonology and Magic in the Writings of R Menahem Ziyoni.” *Kabbalah* 10 (2004): 55-72.
- Ichwan, Moch Nur. “Differing Responses to an Ahmadi Translation and Exegesis: *The Holy Qur’ân* in Egypt and Indonesia.” *Archipel* 62 (2001): 143-61.

- Irwin, Robert. *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*. London: Allen Lane, 1994.
- . *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2006.
- Izutsu, Toshihiko. *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*. Studies in the Humanities and Social Relations 5. Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistics Studies, 1964.
- . *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ân*. McGill Islamic Studies 1. Montreal: McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University Press, 1966.
- Jackson, Sherman. *EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ḳarāfī, Abu ‘l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Abi ‘l-‘Alā’ Idrīs b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Yallīn” (1996).
- Jameelah, Maryam. *Islam and Orientalism*. Rev. ed. Lahore, Pakistan: Mohammad Yusuf Khan & Sons, 1981.
- . *Islam Versus Ahl Al-Kitab: Past and Present*. 4th ed. Lahore: Mohammad Yusuf Khan, 1988.
- Jastrow, Marcus. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. New York: Judaica Press, 1992. (First edition published 1886.)
- Jeffery, Arthur, ed. *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ân: The Old Codices*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937.
- . *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ân*. Gaekwad's Oriental Series 79. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938.
- Jomier, Jacques. *Bible et Coran*. Paris: Cerf, 1959.
- . “The Divine Name “Al-Raḥmān” in the Qur'ân.” Tr. A. Rippin. In *The Qur'ân: Style and Contents*, ed. A. Rippin. The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 24. Ashgate Variorum: Aldershot, UK and Brookfield, Vt., 2001, 197-212. (Originally published as “Le nom divin ‘al-Raḥmān’ dans le Coran.” In *Mélanges Louis Massignon*. Damascus: Institut Français d'études Arabes de Damas, 1957, 361-81.)
- Jones, D. *A Compleat History of the Turks: From Their Origin in the Year 755, to the Year 1718*. 4 vols. London: Printed by J. Darby for A. Bell, W. Taylor, and J. Osborne, 1718.
- Jones, J.M.B. *EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Ibn Ishāk, Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāk b. Yasār b. Khiyār” (1968).
- Juynboll, G.H.A. *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969.
- . *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance, and Authorship of Early Ḥadīth*. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- . “The Role of *Mu'ammārūn* in the Early Development of the *Isnād*.” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 81 (1991): 155-75.

- . “Nāfi’, the *mawlā* of Ibn ‘Umar, and His Position in Muslim *Ḥadīth* Literature.” *Der Islam* 70 (1993): 207-16.
- . *EJ*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Al-Suddī, Ismā‘īl b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān.” (1997).
- Kalmar, Ivan Davidson, and Derek J. Penslar, eds. *Orientalism and the Jews*. Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press and Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 2005.
- Kalmin, Richard. “The Use of Midrash for Social History.” In *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. C. Bakhos. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006, 133-59.
- Kaplan, Steven. “Te’ezāza Sanbat: A Beta Israel Work Reconsidered.” In *Gilgul: Essays on Transformation, Revolution, and Permanence in the History of Religions dedicated to R. J. Zwi Werblowsky*, ed. S. Shaked, D. Shulman, and G.G. Stroumsa. Leiden, New York, Copenhagen and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1987.
- . ““Falasha” Religion: Ancient Judaism or Evolving Ethiopian Tradition?: A Review Article.” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79:1 (1988): 49-65.
- . *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*. New York: New York University Press, 1992.
- . *EJ*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “Beta Israel” (2007).
- Katsh, Abraham I. *Judaism and the Koran: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and Its Commentaries*. New York: A.S. Barnes, 1962. (Originally published as *Judaism in Islām: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and Its Commentaries, Suras II and III*. [New York]: Bloch Publishing Co. for New York University Press, 1954.)
- Katz, Marion Holmes. *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007 [forthcoming].
- Kessler, David. *The Falashas: A Short History of the Ethiopian Jews*. 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. London and Portland, Or.: Frank Cass, 1996.
- Khalifa, Mohammad. *The Sublime Qur’ān and Orientalism*. London and New York: Longman, 1983.
- Khan, Mofakhar Hussain. “English Translations of the Holy Qur’an: A Bio-Bibliographic Study.” *Islamic Quarterly* 30:2 (1986): 82-108.
- Al-Khaṭīb, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf. *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*. 11 vols. Cairo: Dār Sa’d al-Dīn, 2002.
- Kidwai, A. R. “Translating the Untranslatable: A Survey of English Translations of the Qur’ān.” *Muslim World Book Review* 7:4 (1987): 66-71.
- Kilpatrick, Hilary. *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author’s Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī’s Kitāb al-aghānī*. RoutledgeCurzon Studies in Arabic and Middle-Eastern Literature. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

- Klapholtz, Yisrael Ya'aqov. *Ozar Aggadat ha-Torah*. [Bene Berak]: [n.p.], 5730 [1970].
- Koç, Mehmet Akif. *Isnāds and Rijāl Expertise in the Exegesis of Ibn Abī Ḥātim (327/939).*” *Der Islam* 82 (2005): 146-68.
- Kohlberg, Etan. “From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-‘Ashariyya.” *BSOAS* 39 (1976): 521-34.
- Kramer, Martin S., ed. *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis*. Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1999.
- Kritzeck, James. “Robert of Ketton’s Translation of the Qur’ān.” *Islamic Quarterly* 2:4 (1955): 309-12.
- . *Peter the Venerable and Islam*. Princeton Oriental Studies 23. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964.
- Lagarde, Michel. *Index du Grand Commentaire de Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung, Der Nahe und Mittlere Osten 22. Leiden, New York, and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996.
- Landau-Tasseron, Ella. “Sayf ibn ‘Umar in Medieval and Modern Scholarship.” *Der Islam* 67 (1990): 1-26.
- . “On the Reconstruction of Lost Sources.” *Al-Qanṭara* 25:1 (2004): 45-91.
- Lane, Edward William. *An Arabic-English Lexicon, Derived from the Best and the Most Copious Eastern Sources*. 1 vol. in 8. London: Williams and Norgate, 1863-1893.
- Langermann, Y. Tzvi. *Yemenite Midrash: Philosophical Commentaries on the Torah*. The Sacred Literature Series. San Francisco, Ca.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.
- Larson, Warren. “Unveiling the Truth About Islam: Too Many Christian Books Miss the Mark.” *Christianity Today* 50:6 (2006): 38-40.
- Lassner, Jacob. *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- . “Abraham Geiger: A Nineteenth-Century Jewish Reformer on the Origins of Islam.” In *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. M. Kramer. Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1999, 103-35.
- . *The Middle East Remembered: Forged Identities, Competing Narratives, Contested Spaces*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Laura, Heidi. “Collected Traditions and Scattered Secrets: Eclecticism and Esotericism in the Works of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Ashkenazi Kabbalist Menahem Ziyoni of Cologne.” *Nordisk Judaistik (Scandinavian Jewish Studies)* 20:1-2 (1999): 19-44.

- Lecomte, Gérard. *Ibn Qutayba (Mort en 276/889): L'Homme, son Oeuvre, ses Idées*. Damascus: L'Institut Français de Damas, 1965.
- . *EF*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Ibn Qutayba, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim al-Dīnawarī" (1968).
- Leemhuis, Fred. "Origins and Early Development of the *tafsīr* Tradition." In *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. A Rippin. Oxford: Clarendon Press and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 13-30.
- Leslau, Wolf, tr. and ed. *Falasha Anthology*. Yale Judaica Series 6. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951.
- Levenson, Jon D. *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.
- Lewinstein, Keith. "Recent Critical Scholarship and the Teaching of Islam." In *Teaching Islam*, ed. B. Wheeler. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 46-60.
- Lichtenstaedter, Ilse. "'And Become Ye Accursed Apes'." *JSAI* 14 (1991): 153-75.
- Lieberman, Saul. *Sheqi'im; Midrashei Teman*. 2<sup>nd</sup>, rev. ed. Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1970.
- Lipton, Boruch Yonah. *The Sin of the Golden Calf According to Rashi: An Explanation of Rashi's Commentary on Exodus 31:18-34:10, Including the Thirteen Middos ("Qualities") of G-d*. Brooklyn, NY: Boruch Yonah Lipton, 1998.
- Lowry, Joseph. "Ibn Qutayba (828-889)." In *Arabic Literary Culture, 500-925*, ed. M. Cooperson and S. Toorawa. Dictionary of Literary Biography 311. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005, 172-83.
- Lüxenberg, Christoph. *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*. 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. [S.I.]: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2004. (First edition published 2000.)
- Macray, William Dunn. *Annals of the Bodleian Library, Oxford: With a Notice of the Earlier Library of the University*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., enlarged and continued from 1868 to 1880. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890.
- Madelung, Wilferd. "Imamism and Mu'tazilite Theology." In *Le Shī'isme Imāmite: Colloque de Strasbourg*, ed. T. Fahd. Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1970, 13-29.
- . "The Shiite and Khārijite Contribution to Pre-Ash'arite *Kalām*." In *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, ed. P. Morewedge. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979, 120-39.
- . *EF*<sup>2</sup>, "Mufīd, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nu'mān al-Ḥārithī al-'Ukbarī" (1991).
- Madigan, Daniel A. *The Qur'an's Self Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001.



- Maghen, Ze'ev. *After Hardship Cometh Ease: The Jews as Backdrop for Muslim Moderation*. Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients: Beihefte zur Zeitschrift "Der Islam" 17. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004.
- Mandelbaum, Irving J. "Tannaitic Exegesis of the Golden Calf Episode." In *A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History*, ed. P. Davies and R. White. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 100. Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1990, 207-23.
- Margoliouth, D. S. *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*. New York: Putnam, 1905.
- Mårtensson, Ulrika. "Discourse and Historical Analysis: The Case of al-Ṭabarī's History of the Messengers and the Kings." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 16:3 (2005): 287-331.
- Martin, Richard C., ed. *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1985.
- Masson, Denise. *Le Coran et la Révélation Judeo-Chrétienne: Études Comparées*. 2 vols. Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1958.
- Mawdūdī, Sayyid Abul A'lā. *Towards Understanding the Qur'ān*. Tr. Zafar Ishaq Ansari. 7 vols. Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation, 1988.
- McAuliffe, Jane Dammen. "Exegetical Identification of the Ṣābi'ūn." *Muslim World* 72:2 (1982): 95-106.
- . "Assessing the *Isrā'īliyyāt*: An Exegetical Conundrum." In *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature*, ed. S. Leder. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998, 345-69.
- , ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Melchert, Christopher. "Ibn Mujāhid and the Establishment of Seven Qur'anic Readings." *Studia Islamica* 91 (2000): 5-22.
- Al-Miṣrī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān. *Mu'jam al-Qur'ān wa-huwa qāmūs mufradāt al-Qur'ān wa-gharībihi*. 2 vols. in 1. Jerusalem: Maṭba'at Bayt al-Muqaddas, 1945; repr. Cairo: Maṭba'at Hijāzī, 1368/1948.
- Modarressi, Hossein. *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographic Survey of Early Shī'ite Literature*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2003.
- Mohammed, Khaleel. "Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an." *Middle East Quarterly* 12:2 (2005): 59-71.
- Morony, Michael G. *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*. Princeton Studies on the Near East. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

- . *Elr*, s.v. “Bēt Garmē.”
- Mortensen, Beverly P. *The Priesthood in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Renewing the Profession. Studies in the Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture 4*. 2 vols. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006.
- Motzki, Harald. *EF<sup>2</sup>*, s.v. “Al-Ṣan‘ānī, ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām b. Nāfi’, Abū Bakr al-Yamanī al-Ḥimyarī” (1995).
- . “The Prophet and the Cat: On Dating Mālik’s *Muwatta’* and Legal Traditions.” *JSAI* 22 (1998): 18-83.
- . “The Author and his Work in the Islamic Literature of the First Centuries: The Case of ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s *Muṣannaf*.” *JSAI* 28 (2003): 171-201.
- . “Alternative Accounts of the Qur’ān’s Formation.” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. J. McAuliffe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 59-75.
- Muir, William. *The Life of Mahomet, from Original Sources*. New ed. London: Smith, Elder, 1877.
- Al-Najjār, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*. Cairo: Mu’assasat al-Ḥalabī, 1966.
- Nallino, Carlo. “Le Fonti Arabe Manoscritte dell’Opera di Ludovico Marracci sul Corano.” *Rediconti R. Accademia dei Lincei* 6 (1932): 303-49.
- Nawas, John A. *EQ*, s.v. “Trial” (2005).
- Nettler, Ronald L. “Early Islam, Modern Islam and Judaism: The *Isra’iliyyat* in Modern Islamic Thought.” In *Muslim-Jewish Encounters: Intellectual Traditions and Modern Politics*, ed. R. Nettler and S. Taji-Farouki. Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations 4. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998, 1-14.
- Neusner, Jacob. “Rabbinic Midrash in Historical Context, the Fourth and Fifth Century Compilations.” In *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. J. Neusner and A. Peck. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005, 2.709-37.
- . “Song of Songs Rabbah, Theology of.” In *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. J. Neusner and A. Peck. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005, 2.871-89
- Newby, Gordon D. “Tafsir *Isra’iliyyat*: The Development of Qur’an Commentary in Early Islam in its Relationship to Judaeo-Christian Traditions of Scriptural Commentary.” *JAAR* Thematic Issue 47:4S (1979): 685-697.
- . *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.
- . “Text and Territory: Jewish-Muslim Relations 632-750 CE.” In *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, ed. B. Hary, J. Hayes, and F. Astren. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000, 83-95.

- Nöldeke, Theodor. *Geschichte des Qorāns*. 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. Ed. F. Schwally, G. Bergsträber and O. Pretzl. Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909-1938. (First edition published 1860.)
- . Northrup, Linda S. "The Bahṛī Mamlūk Sultanate, 1250-1390." In *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. 1: Islamic Egypt, 640-1571*, ed. Carl F. Petry. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 242-289.
- Noth, Albrecht. *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. in collaboration with Lawrence I. Conrad. SLAEI 3. Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994.
- O'Malley, A. *NCE*, s.v. "Peter Alfonsi."
- Paret, Rudi. *Der Koran: Kommentar und Kondordanz*. 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1977.
- Pearson, J.D. "Appendix: Bibliography of Translations of the Qur'ān into European Languages." In *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. by A.F.L. Beeston, T.M. Johnstone, R.B. Serjeant, and G.R. Smith. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 502-20.
- Pedersen, Johannes. "The Islamic Preacher: *wā'iz, mudhakkir, qāṣṣ*." In *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume I*, ed. S. Löwinger and J. Somogyi. Budapest: Globus Nyomdai Müintézet, 1948, 226-51.
- Pellat, Charles. *ET<sup>2</sup>*, s.v. "Ḳatāda b. Di'āma b. Ḳatāda al-Sadūsī, Abū'l-Khattāb" (1976).
- Peters, Francis E. "Hermes and Harran: The Roots of Arabic-Islamic Occultism." In *Intellectual Studies on Islam*, ed. M. Mazzaoui and V. Moreen. Salt Lake City, Ut.: University of Utah Press, 1990.
- Petrus Alfonsi. *Diálogo contra los Judíos*. Ed. M. Lacarra. Latin text ed. K.-P. Mieth, tr. E. Ducay. Larumbe 9. Huesca [Spain]: Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses, 1996.
- . *Dialogue against the Jews*. Tr. Irvn M. Resnick. The Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation 8. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006.
- Pietersma, Albert. *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians: P. Chester Beatty XVI (with New Editions of Papyrus Vindobonensis Greek Inv. 29456+29828 Verso and British Library Cotton Tiberius B. V F. 87)*. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 119. Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1994.
- Pregill, Michael E. "Isrā'īliyyāt, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy: Wahb b. Munabbih and the Early Islamic Versions of the Fall of Adam and Eve." *JSAI* 34 (2008) [forthcoming].
- Pummer, Reinhard. *Early Christian Authors on Samaritans and Samaritanism: Texts, Translations and Commentary*. Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 92. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002.
- Al-Qādī, Wadad. "The Term 'Khalīfa' in Early Exegetical Literature." *Die Welt des Islams* 28 (1988): 393-411.

- Rabbat, Nasser. "Who was al-Maqrīzī? A Biographical Sketch." *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7:2 (2003): 1-19.
- Reed, Annette Yoshiko. "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist and Father of the Jews: Josephus, *Ant.* 1.154-168, and the Greco-Roman Discourse about Astronomy/Astrology." *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 35:2 (2004): 119-58.
- Riccoldo [Ricolodus] da Montecroce and Martin Luther. *Ricoldus de Montecrucis, Confutatio Alcorani (1300); Martin Luther, Verlegung des Alcoran (1442)*. Ed. J. Ehmann. Corpus Islamo-Christianum (CISC), Series Latina 6. Würzburg: Echter Verlag and Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 1999.
- . *Islam in the Crucible: Can It Pass the Test?* Thomas C. Pfotenhauer, ed. and tr. New Haven, Miss.: Lutheran News, Inc., 2002.
- Rippin, Andrew. *ER*, s.v. "Tafsīr" (1987).
- . "Lexicographical Texts and the Qur'ān." In *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 158-74.
- . *EF*, s.v. "Muḏjāhid b. Ḍjabr al-Makkī, Abū'l-Ḥadjdjādī" (1991).
- . "RḤMNN and the Ḥanīfs." In *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, ed. W. Hallaq and D. Little. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991, 153-68.
- . "Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās and Criteria for Dating Early Tafsīr Texts." *JSAI* 18 (1994): 38-83.
- , ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*. Malden, Mass., Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell, 2006.
- Robinson, Chase. "Prophecy and Holy Men in Early Islam." In *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. J.D. Howard-Johnston and P. Hayward. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 241-62.
- . "Reconstructing Early Islam: Truth and Consequences." In *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. H. Berg. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- Robinson, Neal. "Sectarian and Ideological Bias in Muslim Translations of the Qur'ān." *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 8 (1997): 261-78.
- Rodinson, Maxime. "A Critical Survey of Modern Studies on Muhammad." In *Studies on Islam*, ed. and tr. M. Swartz. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, 23-85. (Originally published as "Bilan des études mohammediennes," *Review Historique* 229 (1963): 169-220.)
- Rosenthal, Franz. "The Influence of Biblical Tradition on Muslim Historiography." In *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. B. Lewis and P.M. Holt. London: Oxford University Press, 1962, 35-45.
- Ross, E. Denison. "Ludovico Marracci." *BSOAS* 2:1 (1921): 117-23.

- Rowse, A. L. *Four Caroline Portraits: Thomas Hobbes, Henry Marten, Hugh Peters, John Selden*. London: Duckworth, 1993.
- Rubenstein, Jeffrey L. "From Mythic Motifs to Sustained Myth: The Revision of Rabbinic Traditions in Medieval Midrashim." *Harvard Theological Review* 89:2 (1996): 131-59.
- Rubin, Uri. "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shi'a Tradition." *JSAI* 1 (1979): 41-65.
- . *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims, A Textual Analysis*. SLAEI 5. Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995.
- . "Traditions in Transformation: The Ark of the Covenant and the Golden Calf in Biblical and Islamic Historiography." *Oriens* 36 (2001): 196-214.
- . "Prophets and Caliphs: The Biblical Foundations of the Umayyad Authority." In *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. H. Berg. Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2003, 73-99.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. New York: Seabury Press, 1974.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Saleh, Walid A. *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)*. Texts and Studies on the Qur'an 1. Boston: Brill, 2004.
- Al-Samarrai, Qasim. "Sayf ibn 'Umar and ibn Saba': A New Approach." In *Israel and Ishmael: Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. T. Parfitt. Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000, 52-8.
- Sandmel, Samuel. "Parallelomania." *JBL* 81 (1962): 1-13.
- Sands, Kristin Zahra. "On the Popularity of Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifi's *Mavāhib-i 'aliyya*: A Persian Commentary on the Qur'an." *Iranian Studies: Journal of the Society for Iranian Studies* 36:4 (2003): 469-83.
- Sanyal, Usha. *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilwi and his Movement, 1870-1920*. Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Schacht, Joseph. *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950.
- . *EF*, s.v. "Ikrima" (1970).
- Schaade, A., rev. H. Gätje. *EF*, s.v. "Djarīr b. 'Aṭīyya b. al-Khāṭafa (Hudhayfa) b. Badr" (1957).
- Schäfer, Peter. *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen: Untersuchungen zur rabbinischen Engelvorstellung*. Studia Judaica 8. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975.
- . *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Schapiro, Israel. *Die haggadischen Elemente im erzählenden Teil des Korans*. Leipzig: Gustav Fock, 1907.

- Schoeler, Gregor. *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*. Tr. U. Vagelpohl. Ed. J. Montgomery. Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures 13. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Scholem, Gershom. *EJ*, s.v. "Demonology [in Kabbalah]"; "Samael" (1971-1972).
- Schöller, Marco. "Sīra and Tafsīr: Muḥammad al-Kalbī on the Jews of Medina." In *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources*, ed. H. Motzki. Islamic History and Civilization 32. Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill, 2000, 18-48.
- Schorsch, Ismar. "The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy." *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 34 (1989): 47-66.
- Schützinger, H. *Ursprung und Entwicklung der arabischen Abraham-Nimrod-Legende*. Bonner Orientalistische Studien 11. Bonn: [n.p.], 1961.
- Schwarzbaum, Haim. "International Folklore Motifs in Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina Clericalis*." *Sefarad* 21 (1961) 267-99; 22 (1962): 17-58, 321-44; 23 (1963): 54-73.
- . *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends in Islamic Folk-Literature*. Beiträge zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte des Orients 30. Walldorf-Hessen: Verlag für Orientkunde Dr. H. Vorndran, 1982.
- Schwarzenau, Paul. *Korankunde für Christen: Ein Zugang zum heiligen Buch der Moslems*. Stuttgart and Berlin: Kreuz Verlag, 1982.
- Seale, M. S. *Qur'an and Bible: Studies in Interpretation and Dialogue*. London: Croom Helm, 1978.
- Segal, J.B. *Edessa and Harran*. London: SOAS, University of London, 1963.
- Selden, John. *De dis Syris, Syntagmata II: Adversaria nempè de numinibus commentitiis in veteri instrumento memoratis; accedunt ferè quae sunt reliqua Syrorum, prisca porrò Arabum, Aegyptiorum, Persarum, Afrorum, Europaeorum item theologia, subindè illustratur*. London: Guilielmus Stansbeius, 1617.
- . *De dis Syris, Syntagmata II: Adversaria nempè de numinibus commentitiis in veteri instrumento memoratis; accedunt ferè quae sunt reliqua Syrorum* [et al.]. Ed. Andreas Beyerus. Leiden: Johannis Coleri, 1672. (Originally published 1668.)
- Sellheim, R. *ET*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad b. 'Amr b. Tamīm al-Farāhidī [al-Furhūdī] al-Azdī al-Yahmadī al-Baṣrī Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān" (1977).
- Shahīd, Irfan. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995.
- Sherif, Faruq. *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an*. London: Ithaca Press, 1985.
- Shoshan, Boaz. *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī's History*. Islamic History and Civilization Studies and Texts 53. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004.

- Sidersky, D. *Les Origines des Légendes Musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les Vies des Prophètes*. Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1933.
- Silvestre de Sacy, Antoine Isaac. *Chrestomathie Arabe, ou, Extraits de divers écrivains Arabes, tant en prose qu'en vers, à l'usage des élèves de l'École Spéciale des Langues Orientales Vivantes*. Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1806.
- . *Chrestomathie Arabe, ou, Extraits de divers écrivains Arabes, tant en prose qu'en vers, avec une traduction Française et des notes, à l'usage des élèves de l'École Royale et Spéciale des Langues Orientales Vivantes*. 2<sup>nd</sup> corrected and expanded ed. Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1826.
- Spencer, John R. *ABD*, s.v. "Golden Calf."
- Spencer, Robert. *Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002.
- . *Onward Muslim Soldiers: How Jihad Still Threatens America and the West*. Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003.
- . *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*. Lanham, Md.: Regnery, 2005.
- . *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*. Washington, DC: Regnery, 2006.
- . "Agreeing and Disagreeing with Ayaan Hirsi Ali," posted 02/06/07, [http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/2007\\_02.php](http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/2007_02.php).
- . "Typical Jewish Propaganda," posted 02/12/07, [http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/2007\\_02.php](http://www.jihadwatch.org/archives/2007_02.php).
- Speyer, Heinrich. *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*. Gräfenhainichen: C. Schultze & Co., 1931.
- Sprenger, A. *Mohammed und der Koran: Eine Psychologische Studie*. Hamburg: Verlagsanstalt und Druckerei A.-G. (vormals Richter), 1889.
- Stauth, Georg. "Die Überlieferung des Korankommentars Muğahid b. Ğabr's: Zur Frage der Rekonstruktion der in den Sammelwerken des 3. Jh.d.H. benutzten frühislamischen Quellenwerke." Ph.D. dissertation, Universität Gießen, 1969.
- Strack, H.L. and Günter Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. Tr. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991.
- Stroumsa, Sarah. "The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature." *Harvard Theological Review* 78:1-2 (1985): 101-14.
- . *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought*. Islamic Philosophy Theology and Science 35. Leiden, Boston, and Köln: Brill, 1999.

- Stratton, Lawrence M. "Tory Muslim: The Conversion of Marmaduke Pickthall." *Koinonia* 16 (2004): 78-100.
- Streck, M. *EL*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Bādjarmā, or Bādjarmak" (1960).
- Syrén, Roger. "Ishmael and Esau in the Book of *Jubilees* and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan." In *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, ed. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 166. Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1994, 310-15.
- Tal (Rosenthal), Abraham. "Ms. Neophyti 1: The Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch." *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 31-41.
- Tamrat, Tadesse. "Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Horn." In *The Cambridge History of Africa: Volume 3, From c. 1050 to c. 1600*, ed. R. Oliver. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 98-182.
- Tayob, Abdulkader. "An Analytical Survey of al-Ṭabarī's Exegesis of the Cultural Symbolic Construct of *Fitna*." In *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. G. Hawting and A. A. Shareef. London and New York: Routledge, 1993, 157-72.
- . "Ṭabarī on the Companions of the Prophet: Moral and Political Contours in Islamic Historical Writing." *JAOS* 119:2 (1999): 203-10.
- Teugels, Lieve M., and Rivka Ulmer, eds. *Midrash and Context: Proceedings of the 2004 and 2005 SBL Consultation on Midrash*. Judaism in Context 5. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007.
- Thyen, Johann-Dietrich. *Bibel und Koran: Eine Synopse Gemeinsamer Überlieferungen*. Kölner Veröffentlichungen zur Religionsgeschichte 19. Köln and Vienna: Böhlau, 1989.
- Tisdall, William St. Clair. *The Original Sources of the Qur'an*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and New York: E.S. Gorham, 1905.
- Tolan, John V. *Petrus Alfonsi and his Medieval Readers*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993.
- . *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Toorawa, Shawkat. *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr and Arabic Writerly Culture: A Ninth-Century Bookman in Baghdad*. RoutledgeCurzon Studies in Arabic and Middle-Eastern Literatures 7. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.
- Torrey, Charles Cutler. *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*. Introduction by Franz Rosenthal. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1967. (Originally published as *The Jewish Foundation of Islam: The Hilda Stich Stroock Lectures at the Jewish Institute of Religion*. New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933.)
- Tottoli, Roberto. "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īliyyāt* in Muslim Literature." *Arabica* 46:2 (1999): 193-210.



- . *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature*. Curzon Studies in the Qur'ān. Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2002.
- Townsend, John. "Rabbinic Sources." In *The Study of Judaism: Bibliographical Essays*. New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1972, 35-80.
- Urowitz-Freudenstein, Anna. "Pseudepigraphic Support of Pseudepigraphical Sources: The Case of *Pirge de Rabbi Eliezer*." In *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. Reeves. Society of Biblical Literature: Early Judaism and its Literature 6. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1994, 35-53.
- Vadet, J.-C. *EF*, s.v. "Ibn Mas'ūd, 'Abd Allāh b. Ghāfil b. Ḥabīb... b. Hudhayl" (1968).
- Vehlow, Katya. "The Swiss Reformers Zwingli, Bullinger and Bibliander and their Attitude to Islam (1520-1560)." *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 6 (1995): 229-54.
- Versteegh, C.H.M. [Kees]. "Grammar and Exegesis: The Origins of Kufan Grammar and the *Tafsīr Muqātil*." *Islam* 67:2 (1990): 206-42.
- . *Arabic Grammar and Qur'ānic Exegesis in Early Islam*. Studies in Semitic Languages and Literatures 19. Leiden, New York, and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1993.
- Waldman, Marilyn Robinson. "New Approaches To "Biblical" Materials in the Qur'an." *Muslim World* 75:1 (1985): 1-16.
- Wansbrough, John. *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. Foreword, translations, and expanded notes by Andrew Rippin. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004. (First edition published 1977.)
- Wasserstrom, Steven M. "Species of Misbelief: A History of Muslim Heresiography of the Jews." Ph.D. diss., 1987.
- . "Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Muslim Literature: A Bibliographical and Methodological Sketch." In *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. Reeves. Society of Biblical Literature: Early Judaism and its Literature 6. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1994, 87-114.
- . *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- . Review of J. Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam*. *JAAR* 64:4 (1996): 874-5.
- . "Jewish Pseudepigrapha and *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*." In *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, ed. B. Hary, J. Hayes, and F. Astren. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000, 237-56.
- Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Mecca*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.
- . *Muhammad at Medina*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.

- Weil, Gustav. *Biblische Legenden der Muselmänner. Aus Arabischen Quellen Zusammengetragen und mit Judischen Sagen Verglichen*. Frankfurt a.M.: J. Rütten, 1845.
- . *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud: Or, Biblical Legends of the Mussulmans*. Harper's New Miscellany 15. New York: Harper, 1846.
- Wheeler, Brannon. "The Jewish Origins of Qur'ān 18:65-82? Reexamining Arent Jan Wensinck's Theory." *JAOS* 118:2 (1998): 153-71.
- . *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*. RoutledgeCurzon Studies in the Quran. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.
- ., ed. *Teaching Islam*. American Academy of Religion Teaching Religious Studies Series. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Wherry, E. M. *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Qur'ān, Comprising Sale's Translation and Preliminary Discourse, with Additional Notes and Emendations, Together with a Complete Index to the Text, Preliminary Discourse and Notes*. 4 vols. The English and Foreign Philosophical Library 29, 32-34. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1882-1886.
- Wurmbrand, M. *EJ*, s.v. "Falasha" (1971-1972).
- Yahuda, A.S. "A Contribution to Qur'ān and Ḥadīth Interpretation." In *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume, Part I*, ed. S. Löwinger and J. Somogyi. Budapest: Globus Nyomdai Müintézet, 1948, 280-308.
- Zammit, Martin R. *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'ānic Arabic*. Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section One: The Near and Middle East 61. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001.
- Zaoui, André C. *Meqorot Yehudiyim ba-Qur'an*. Jerusalem: Rafael Ḥayyim Hakohen, 1983.
- Zwemer, S. M. "Translations of the Koran." *Moslem World* 5:3 (1915): 244-61.