

6

The Qur'anic Calf Episode Between Orientalism and Islamic Tradition

Late Antiquity, Islamic origins, and the Qur'an

As the preceding chapters have shown, the exegesis of the Golden Calf narrative in Jewish and Christian circles in the period preceding the rise of Islam reflects both an ongoing contest over the ultimate significance of the episode and a persistent state of proximity, even intimacy, between parallel communities of interpretation. The ongoing rivalry between Jewish and Christian exegetes at this time is symptomatic of broader conditions in the Near East and Mediterranean between the third and the eighth century CE, the period now commonly termed Late Antiquity.¹ Numerous trends emerged during this era that would prove to be of tremendous significance for the history of the civilizations of western Eurasia: the decline and eventual disappearance of classical polytheisms and the spread of various forms of monotheism, most of which were rooted in the Israelite covenantal, prophetic, and scriptural legacy; the general hardening of distinctions between systems of belief and ritual, with the consequent ossification and polarization of formerly diffuse, fluid, and mutually permeable religious identities; and an ever-intensifying pattern of competition between communities, entailing implicit or explicit claims to an exclusive, or at least superior, path to truth, and even to the sole authentic means of individual and collective salvation.

Throughout the interconnected Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds, a process of communal sclerosis set in, and both discursive expressions of hostility and actual violence between everyday believers increasingly became

¹ Following Brown and others, I would argue that the distinct character of the era resides in the vast political and social changes precipitated by the rise of Sasanian Iran and the subsequent period of crisis and recovery that followed in the Roman Empire, complemented by the religious and intellectual transformations that both facilitated and proceeded from the Christianization of Rome. The effects of these developments can be seen in the various imperial struggles of subsequent centuries and the eventual emergence of Islam, the caliphate representing a continuation of older trends and tendencies rather than a radical break with the past as older European scholarship held. Cf. e.g. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*; Fowden, *From Empire to Commonwealth*; Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam*.

the order of the day.² Moreover, in this period, imperial powers frequently came to legitimate themselves through affiliation with one or another religious hierarchy, contributing to the greater centralization and institutionalization of what would become the major religious traditions dominating the region in the medieval period. In turn, belief systems and communities lacking imperial patronage or recognition—whether actual “minorities” or not—struggled to justify themselves against the claims of rivals who could now command the coercive powers of the state.

Many Jewish communities came to be marginalized in this way after the onset of Christianization in the Roman Empire in the fourth century, but other examples in the Roman sphere come to mind, including that of “paganism” itself, to say nothing of alternative formations of Christianity deemed to be heretical—or at least less than perfectly orthodox—by imperial and ecclesiastical authorities. Though less well-documented, analogous processes seem to have affected communities across the eastern frontier in the Sasanian Empire, the other great power in the region that challenged the hegemony of Rome beginning in the third century. Here too religious communities increasingly tended to coalesce around hierarchized scripturalist formations such as institutional Zoroastrianism, Assyrian Christianity, or the Judaism of the Babylonian academies; the alternatives—again including traditional religious expressions deemed to be “paganism” as well as “heretical” forms of native Iranian religion, Judaism, and Christianity—were similarly eliminated or assimilated. In areas such as Iraq, the extreme diversity of forms of religiosity and communal affiliation led to a vibrant and persistent competition between groups; spokesmen of numerous communities argued strenuously over the validity of their various claims regarding the correct means of attaining salvation, the proper formulation of creed, and which chosen community was truly favored by the universally acknowledged Creator.

One influential scholar has termed this environment the “sectarian milieu,” seeing it as the arena in which the future development of monotheism and the religious topography of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds would be decisively reshaped.³ Our discussion of developments among Jewish and

² See the evocative passage lamenting the “death of the classical world” on the eve of the rise of Islam in Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 172–6; while the lachrymose tone here is perhaps passé, Brown’s characterization of the hardening of social and religious boundaries in late Roman culture, with the cardinal distinction between insiders and outsiders being that between believers and infidels, is still compelling today.

³ The phrase is Wansbrough’s, popularized by his controversial *The Sectarial Milieu*. Wansbrough coined the term in emphasizing the competition between various religious communities in heterogeneous contexts like late antique Mesopotamia; although he was deliberately vague regarding the details, Wansbrough saw this competition as eventually generating Islam as a variant form of monotheism

Christian communities in the fourth through sixth centuries in the last chapter demonstrated the importance of the borderlands between Rome and Persia—particularly Syria and Palestine, as well as Iraq—as the primary geographical setting for the ongoing discursive confrontation between these communities reflected in the exegesis of the Calf story in this period. Moreover, as time passed, the cultural and religious ferment stimulated by this discursive confrontation appears to have overflowed the boundaries of the Roman and Persian empires and spread to other groups within their spheres of influence, drawing formerly peripheral communities into the fray.

In this atmosphere, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Golden Calf episode would continue to be central to arguments over the inheritance of the covenantal legacy of Israel, given the story's prominence in monotheistic salvation history and older debates between Jews and Christians. In former centuries, the supersessionist reading of the story promoted by Christian spokesmen was a particularly important driver of exegetical developments: the assertion that Israel's sin with the Calf signaled the disconfirmation of the Jews and the invalidation of their laws and traditions—thus making the Church's assumption of their status as God's chosen people inevitable—triggered various responses from rabbinic exegetes. The supersessionist approach to the narrative would be revived yet again with the appearance of a wholly new monotheist scripture in the Arabic language, borne by a politically and religiously expansionist Arab Muslim community in the seventh century.

According to Islamic tradition, the Qur'an consists of a series of revelations mediated through the Arabian prophet Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh (d. 11/632) of the tribe of Quraysh over the course of some twenty-two years, first in his hometown of Mecca (an ancient Arabian cult center) and then, when he had been driven out the city by his recalcitrant polytheist kinsmen, in the city of Yathrib or Medina, where he eventually became undisputed ruler of an emergent state as well as the head of a new religious community. Muḥammad taught his revelations to his followers as they appeared, so that this *qur'ān* or "recitation" was widely disseminated throughout the community even as the Prophet's preaching brought more and more "Believers," *mu'minūn*—as those who committed themselves to his message and attested to his prophethood were initially called—into the fold.⁴ After Muḥammad's death, the body of

among the Arabs, adjacent and initially affinitive to Judaism and Christianity. This is the perspective that prevails among many scholars of the Qur'an today, though such claims are still hotly contested.

⁴ For a systematic investigation of the possible significance of the shift in terminology from *mu'minūn* to *muslimūn*, see Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*.

revelations he had left behind were written down and collated relatively quickly due to the direct intervention of the community's leaders, the caliphs or successors to the Prophet. The canonical text of the Qur'an, preserved both in what is commonly called the *muṣḥaf* or codex of the "Uthmānic Recension" and in a continuing tradition of quasi-liturgical recitation (*tilāwah*), thus seems to have been established and promulgated within twenty years or so after Muḥammad's death—some acknowledged inconsistencies in the historical reports attesting to this process notwithstanding.⁵

There has been significant debate over the reliability of this account of the Prophet's career and the origins of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, very many scholars—as well as the vast majority of believing Muslims—would agree with this basic outline of events, at least in its broad details. While it is important to acknowledge the significant contributions that so-called revisionist critiques of the traditional account of the emergence of Islam have made in recent decades, there is as yet no consensus on an alternative model for the tradition's early development that most scholars in the field would accept. We will not enter into the contentious debate over the authorship of the Qur'an here. However, before proceeding, we must address two other premises Western scholars have derived—at least partially—from traditional Muslim accounts of Islam's origins.

The first premise is that the Islamic commentary tradition or *tafsīr* preserves an objectively accurate interpretation of the Qur'an, at least regarding the literal meaning of the text.⁶ Islamic tradition claims that exegetical activity commenced in the early community alongside the revelation of the Qur'an itself; this is a reasonable enough proposition, as the Prophet is held to have taught the proper interpretation of the scripture to his companions and followers, who subsequently communicated it to their companions and followers, and so on down the generations in an unbroken chain of transmission, until this traditional interpretation was committed to writing in order to preserve the teachings Muḥammad had originally entrusted to the early community. The tradition thus asserts that the interpretation of the scripture, like the *textus receptus* itself, was securely established very early, despite the

⁵ Whether the collection of the text of the Qur'an was really accomplished once and for all during the time of the caliph 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (r. 23–35/644–56), as tradition generally holds, or, as some evidence suggests, preliminary collations might have occurred at some other time during the earlier caliphal period is immaterial for our present concerns.

⁶ For a more detailed presentation of the relationship between Muslim and Western interpretation of the Qur'an, see Pregill, "Exegesis."

somewhat paradoxical fact that the extant commentary literature or *tafsīr* enshrines a dizzying array of often contradictory claims.

Although some scholars might challenge aspects of this understanding of the foundations of the *tafsīr* tradition, few would seriously doubt that some kind of exegetical activity, however rudimentary, must have accompanied the promulgation of the Qur'an by and within the primitive community. However, due to the immense value that Sunnis in particular have historically placed on the authority of tradition, there has been a strong tendency to project interpretations of the text back to the earliest generations of the community, the *salaf*, those Muslims who stood in closest proximity to the Prophet himself. Thus, the most pressing questions for scholars working on the early history of qur'anic exegesis are how much of the *tafsīr* tradition may be genuinely ancient—and thus presumably “original”—and how we might go about distinguishing that “original” interpretation from later, and thus presumably tendentious, accretions.

That said, very many scholars would agree that, on the whole, Islamic tradition preserves a more or less reliable understanding of what the words of the Qur'an literally mean (i.e. how the traditional sources explain not only its linguistic complexities but even its basic lexicon), how it should be read (i.e. as the record of the career of the Prophet Muḥammad and his revelations to his community), and what its original revelatory context was (i.e. the pagan environment of late antique Arabia).⁷ There is a simple explanation for the basic coincidence between the Western scholarly understanding of what the Qur'an means and the traditional Muslim explanation of what it means (despite the fact that Western scholars have generally not shared the theological commitments of Muslim commentators): since its earliest foundations in the Middle Ages, Western scholars have depended directly upon *tafsīr* in interpreting the Qur'an. We will elaborate upon this somewhat surprising historical phenomenon in this course of this chapter, using the example of the qur'anic Calf narrative as a case study.

The second premise Western scholars have derived from Islamic tradition is that the Qur'an—as well as its ancillary exegetical tradition—was substantially

⁷ Wansbrough seems to have been the first scholar to suggest that the traditional assumptions about when, where, and under what circumstances the Qur'an was revealed should not be taken for granted by scholars, and that both the life of Muḥammad and the pagan Arabian milieu could be literary or hermeneutic frameworks imposed on the Qur'an by the later tradition to provide it with a specific interpretive context. Even scholars who are skeptical about revisionist claims must acknowledge the problematic lack of an obvious context to the qur'anic text itself, which implies that it is entirely possible that the *ṣīrah* and *tafsīr* are wholly arbitrary constructs into which the Qur'an was inserted in order to constrain interpretive possibilities.

shaped by influences from older scriptural communities, especially the Jews. Unsurprisingly, Western scholars and Muslim scholars part ways on this issue to a large degree, but even here we find a surprising amount of agreement between their perspectives. Traditionalist Muslims do not accept that the Qur'an had a human author, either Muḥammad or anybody else, of course; and so, in this sense, the Qur'an could not have been "influenced" by anything because it is the literal—immutable and eternal—Word of God. In contrast, Western scholars have generally taken it for granted that Muḥammad wrote the Qur'an, at least until recently.⁸ That said, the Muslim tradition recognized that converts to Islam from other communities, primarily Jews and Christians, were often consulted by Muḥammad, his Companions, and their successors on a host of issues—not least of all regarding the proper interpretation of the Qur'an's frequently oblique allusions to sacred history, especially that centering on the succession of pre-Islamic prophets and other matters relating to ancient Israel.⁹

In contrast, Western scholars have usually lacked Muslims' commitment to maintaining the Qur'an's status as an authentic and original revelation. Further, they have often been substantially affected by the prejudices and presuppositions of their own cultural outlook, including a strong bias towards seeing the Bible and the "Western" religious traditions (i.e. Christianity and Judaism) as truer, more original, and more developed and sophisticated. As a result, they have gone much further in asserting the importance of influences from older traditions of Late Antiquity, particularly rabbinic Judaism, as furnishing the main stimulus for the emergence of early Islam, especially in shaping the contents of the Qur'an—the aforementioned "influence paradigm" that has historically dominated much research in Qur'anic Studies. Thus, while Muslims might readily acknowledge that Jews and Christians made some contribution to the interpretation of scripture (as well as other aspects of religious life, theology, history, etc.) early on in the tradition's history, Western scholarship easily moves this process of consultation and

⁸ It has long been unfashionable for scholars to speak of the Qur'an as the product of a human author, but despite the political problems such a perspective entails, we have recently witnessed the return of Muḥammad as author; cf. e.g. Saleh, "What If You Refuse, When Ordered to Fight?"; the monumental study of Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende*, on which see Gottfried Hagen, "The Imagined and the Historical Muḥammad"; and most recently Cole, *Muhammad*. Arguably, any attempt to correlate qur'anic narratives with events in the *ṣīrah* implies prophetic authorship for the former; if their relationship is reversed, and Qur'an given priority over *ṣīrah*, this implies an exegetical function for the latter.

⁹ On the consultation trope and the problematic status of traditions supposedly transmitted from sources outside of the Muslim community, see Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'īliyyāt* in Muslim Literature" and Pregill, "*Isrā'īliyyāt*, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy," esp. 215–22.

influence back to Muḥammad himself, and concludes that Jews and Christians must have made some direct contribution to the formation of both the Qur'an and the later exegetical tradition.

The interpretation of the qur'anic Golden Calf story in modern Western scholarship has been deeply conditioned by both of these premises. First, inasmuch as the qur'anic passages recounting the story are frequently ambiguous and require a considerable degree of elaboration and explanation in order to make coherent sense of their constituent verses, Western scholars have generally derived their understanding of the story from *tafsīr*, accepting that the traditional Muslim interpretation of those verses accurately represents the original meaning of the qur'anic narrative as conceived by Muḥammad himself. Moreover, since the beginning of the modern study of the Qur'an in Europe in the nineteenth century, Western scholars have seen the qur'anic version of the Calf story as a parade example of the formative Jewish influence on the Qur'an, inasmuch as what appear to be the narrative's significant deviations from the biblical version of the story are commonly explained as borrowings from midrashic tradition. Thus, in this case, as in so many others, Muslim tradition's acknowledgment of Muḥammad's dealings with various members of other monotheistic communities seems to furnish conclusive proof that the Qur'an must be the product of the encounter between nascent Islam and Jewish—and possibly Christian—informants.

In this chapter, we will first examine the qur'anic story of the Golden Calf as it is commonly represented by both the Muslim exegetical tradition and Western scholarship and translations. We will then consider the argument for the supposed Jewish influence on Islam in the formulation of characteristic aspects of the qur'anic story, tracing this argument back to the foundations of European engagements with Islam and the Qur'an. While Western scholars' assertion that the Qur'an was decisively shaped by Jewish influences would seem to run counter to the traditional Muslim perspective, paradoxically, in this specific case this premise actually serves to validate and reinforce the traditional Muslim reading of the Calf episode. As we shall see in the next chapter, in its original context, the qur'anic story appears to have meant something quite different from what the *tafsīr* tradition has generally held it to mean; Muslim exegetes had very particular reasons for reconstruing and reconstructing the story, and so the version of the episode recounted in *tafsīr* and other sources reflects their priorities and preferences. Subsequently, European commentators then took over the account of the Calf episode dominant in *tafsīr* almost wholesale, despite lacking these priorities and preferences.

Western scholars have generally not recognized the discrepancy between the disparate versions of the story found in the Qur'an and *tafsīr* due to their own historic—and pervasive—reliance on the traditional commentary literature in approaching the Qur'an. On account of this reliance, they have thus unwittingly participated in the drastic reshaping of the original narrative initiated in the *tafsīr* tradition. In short, modern scholarship and Qur'an translations almost unanimously reflect the conventional Muslim understanding of the story, not the sense of the narrative that is likely to have been indigenous to its original late antique revelatory context. As a consequence, the Qur'an's continuity with the exegetical and narrative developments that preceded it—developments we have explored at length in the preceding chapters—has been almost completely overlooked.

The qur'anic Calf narrative according to *tafsīr* and Western scholarship

The longest and most complex version of the Golden Calf narrative in the Qur'an appears in Sūrah 20, *Ṭā-Hā*, and will provide the main focus of our discussion here. Notably, according to the traditionally established chronology of the qur'anic revelations, this is the earliest version of the story in the Qur'an as well, and it is not unreasonable to think of the other versions of the narrative as alluding to this earlier version, as traditional Muslim scholarship would. In what follows here, we will present the meaning of the Arabic text according to its typical interpretation in both the Muslim commentary tradition and translations into Western languages, occasionally citing specific examples of both. Given the ambiguity of a number of critical terms and phrases found in the Qur'an's portrayal of the episode, both in Sūrah 20 and elsewhere, it is striking that we find almost complete unanimity among both classical and modern interpreters, Muslims and non-Muslims, regarding what the qur'anic story is fundamentally about. This is noteworthy in itself, but, as we shall see, it seems especially so in this case given the large amount of extraneous material of a legendary nature that has to be read into the pertinent qur'anic passages to support that reading of the episode. Most Western scholarship on the Calf episode in Sūrah 20 simply takes this extraneous material for granted as supplying the authentic narrative context in which the story should be understood.

As in the biblical version of the story, the Sūrah 20 version locates the Golden Calf episode in the context of the revelation of the Torah to Moses on

Mount Sinai. While the Calf narrative of Exodus appears in the middle of the account of the revelation of the Law on Sinai, the Sūrah 20 narrative follows immediately upon a description of the crossing of the Red Sea (vv. 77–9) and God's reminder to the Israelites of His providence and a warning not to overstep the bounds He established for them (vv. 80–2). This serves to underscore the Israelites' ingratitude, since the timing of the Calf narrative in the larger context of the *sūrah* makes it seem as they have only just been liberated from Egypt.¹⁰ Further, as in the biblical version, Moses is ignorant of what the Israelites have done until God notifies him of what has transpired in his absence.

However, many aspects of the structure of the Sūrah 20 account are conspicuously different from those of the biblical version. Exodus 32 begins with the deed of the people in the camp, demanding "gods to go before us" from Aaron (v. 1), who seems to acquiesce to their demand without any protest (vv. 2–5); then the action moves from the Israelite camp to the mountain, where God relates the affair to Moses, describing exactly what has just occurred (vv. 7–8). In the Sūrah 20 version, in contrast, the episode begins on Sinai with God's questioning Moses as to why he has been so quick to abandon his people: "*What has caused you to hasten (mā a'jalaka) away from your people, O Moses?*" (v. 83, with the verb "to hasten" clearly a pun on "calf," *'ijl*).¹¹ This is followed by a cryptic statement about what has transpired: "*We have put your people on trial in your absence, and al-sāmīrī has led them astray*" (v. 85). The basic structure of most of what follows in the rest of the passage (vv. 86–98) parallels what is described in Exodus 32:15–30: Moses returns to the camp; confronts the people about their deed; interrogates Aaron, his brother and surrogate, about his role in the affair; and then finally destroys the Calf (see Table 1).

Much of our discussion of this narrative hinges upon the significance and impact of the qur'anic version's omission of what in the biblical narrative represents the crucial exposition driving the rest of the story, the initial making and worship of the Calf in Moses's absence. There is a heightened sense of suspense in the qur'anic version that is lacking in the biblical precursor because of this omission: while in Exodus 32 the people's idolatry is described in detail before the scene shifts to Moses's audience with God, in the Sūrah 20 version, we begin with that audience, and we are kept in the dark about what

¹⁰ For general overviews of the treatment of the Moses story and the Exodus in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, see Causse, "The Theology of Separation and the Theology of Community"; Neuwirth, "Narrative as Canonical Process"; and Obermann, "Koran and Agada."

¹¹ Also reflected in the parallel narrative in Sūrah 7, in which Moses asks the sinful people "*Did you seek to hasten (a-'ajiltum) your Lord's judgment upon you?*", using a different form of the same verbal root (*'ajila* vs. *a'jala*) but likewise playing on the verbal similarity to *'ijl*, "calf." See my remarks on this punning in Chapter 8.

Table 1. The Golden Calf narrative of Sūrah 20 according to its traditional interpretation

(83) [God said:] “What has caused you to hasten away from your people, O Moses?”	وَمَا أَغْجَلَكَ عَنْ قَوْمِكَ يَا مُوسَى
(84) [Moses] replied: “They are right behind me; I have hurried ahead to You to do Your bidding, Lord!”	قَالَ هُمْ أُولَاءُ عَلَىٰ أَثَرِي وَعَجِلْتُ إِلَيْكَ رَبِّ لِتَرْضَىٰ
(85) [God] said: “We have put your people on trial in your absence, and Sāmīrī has led them astray.”	قَالَ فَإِنَّا قَدْ فَتَنَّا قَوْمَكَ مِن بَعْدِكَ وَأَضَلَّهُمُ السَّامِرِيُّ
(86) Then Moses returned to his people, angry and sorrowful; and he said: “O people, didn’t your Lord make you a solid promise? Did the time of covenant take too long for you, or did you actually wish to incur your Lord’s anger, so that you violated your covenant with me?”	فَرَجَعَ مُوسَىٰ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ غَضْبَانَ أَسِفًا قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ أَلَمْ يَعِدْكُمْ رَبِّكُمْ وَعْدًا حَسَنًا أَفَطَالَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْعَهْدُ أَمْ أَرَدْتُمْ أَن يَحِلَّ عَلَيْكُمْ غَضَبٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ فَأَخْلَفْتُم مَّوْعِدِي
(87) They replied: “We did not break our promise to you of our own will; rather, we were made to carry the burden of the [golden] ornaments that belonged to the [Egyptian] people, which we threw [into the fire], for thus did Sāmīrī suggest . . .”	قَالُوا مَا أَخْلَفْنَا مَوْعِدَكَ بِمَلِكِنَا وَلَكِنَّا حَمَلْنَا أَوزَارًا مِّن زِينَةِ الْقَوْمِ فَقَذَفْنَاهَا فَكَذَلِكَ أَلَقَى السَّامِرِيُّ
(88) Then he brought forth for them a calf, a body that lowed. And they said: “This is your god and the god of Moses [whom] he has forgotten . . .”	فَأَخْرَجَ لَهُمْ عِجْلًا جَسَدًا لَهُ خُورٌ قَالُوا هَذَا إِلَهُكُمْ وَإِلَهُ مُوسَىٰ فَنَسِيَ
(89) Did they not see that it could not reply to them, nor had any power to harm or benefit them?	أَفَلَا يَرَوْنَ أَنَّهُ لَا يُرْجِعُ إِلَيْهِمْ قَوْلًا وَلَا تَمْلِكُ لَهُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا
(90) Indeed, Aaron had told them beforehand: “O people, you are surely only being tested with it; it is al-Rahmān who is really your Lord, so follow me and obey my command.”	وَلَقَدْ قَالَ لَهُمْ هَارُونُ مِن قَبْلُ يَا قَوْمِ إِنَّمَا فُتِنْتُمْ بِهِ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ الرَّحْمَنُ فَاتَّبِعُونِي وَأَطِيعُوا أَمْرِي
(91) But they replied: “So long as Moses does not return to us, we will not cease our devotion to it.”	قَالُوا لَنْ نَبْرَحَ عَلَيْهِ عَاكِفِينَ حَتَّىٰ يَرْجِعَ إِلَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ
(92–93) [Moses] said: “O Aaron, when you saw that they had gone astray, what hindered you from following me? Did you not disobey my command?”	قَالَ يَا هَارُونُ مَا مَنَعَكَ إِذْ رَأَيْتَهُمْ ضَلُّوا أَلَّا تَتَّبِعَنِ أَفَعَصَيْتَ أَمْرِي
(94) [Aaron cried:] “O son of my mother, do not pull me by my beard or my hair! I was really afraid that you would say, ‘You have introduced division among the Israelites, and did not pay heed to my command.’”	قَالَ يَا اِبْنُ أُمِّئِى لَا تَأْخُذْ بِرَأْسِي وَلَا بِخَبْئِي إِنِّي خَشِيتُ أَن تَقُولَ فَرَّقْتَ بَيْنَ بَنِي إِسْرَآئِيلَ وَلَمْ تَرْقُبْ قَوْلِي
(95) [Turning to Sāmīrī,] He [Moses] asked: “So, what do you have to say for yourself, O Sāmīrī?”	قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكَ يَا سَامِرِيُّ
(96) He said: “I perceived that which they did not [i.e. an angel]. I picked up a handful [of dust] from the [angelic] messenger’s tracks and threw it in; I imagined this to be best.”	قَالَ بَصُرْتُ بِمَا لَمْ يَبْصُرُوا بِهِ فَقَبَضْتُ قَبْضَةً مِّنْ أَثَرِ الرَّسُولِ فَنَبَذْتُهَا وَكَذَلِكَ سَوَّلَتْ لِي نَفْسِي
(97) [Moses] said: “Begone! All your life you are [cursed] to say: ‘Do not touch me [for I am an exile].’ A threat hangs over you that you will not be able to escape. Look at your god to whom you are so devoted: verily, we shall burn it up and disperse it into the sea as ashes.”	قَالَ فَادْهَبْ فَإِنَّ لَكَ فِي الْحَيَاةِ أَن تَقُولَ لَا مِسَاسَ وَإِنَّ لَكَ مَوْعِدًا لَّنْ يُخْلَفَهُ وَانْظُرْ إِلَى إِلَهِكَ الَّذِي ظَلْتَ عَلَيْهِ عَاكِفًا لَنُحَرِّقَنَّهُ ثُمَّ لَنَنْسِفَنَّهُ فِي الْيَمِّ نَسْفًا

exactly has transpired back in the camp. As readers or listeners, we are told virtually nothing here about the events beforehand; instead, we follow the path of Moses himself as God breaks the bad news to him about the people's transgression, and he proceeds to uncover the truth of what has happened gradually. We are thus silent witnesses to the investigation that Moses undertakes when he rushes back to the camp to find out what has gone on in his absence; we know no more than he does until the narrative reaches its denouement.

This sense of suspense, of details revealed bit by bit as Moses discovers the import of God's words "*We have put your people on trial in your absence; and al-sāmīrī has led them astray*" is central to the narrative art of this episode. What sort of trial? Who is this *al-sāmīrī*? How has he led the people astray? The element of suspense is also an aspect of the story that has been largely overlooked by modern scholars; few have ever seen fit to comment upon the Qur'an's deliberate omission of the most important element of the biblical precursor, the initial exposition of the affair in Exodus 32:1–6. This is perhaps due to Western scholars' basic familiarity with the biblical account; if one already knows what is going to happen in the story, or how it is supposed to end, it is hard to appreciate how little the qur'anic account tells us at the outset. However, the forensic structure employed in this narrative is absolutely central to its literary art; the narrative techniques and strategies deployed here are fundamental to the Qur'an's approach to the episode. As much as anything else, Western scholars' lack of appreciation for the fact that the qur'anic narrative deliberately obscures the circumstances of the Calf's creation before Moses's arrival on the scene has led them to misconstrue the story's meaning.¹²

After God's announcement that his people have gone astray, Moses rushes back down the mountain to confront the wayward Israelites, who explain their actions thus:

87 "*We did not break our promise to you of our own will; rather, we were made to carry the burden of the [golden] ornaments that belonged to the [Egyptian] people, which we threw [into the fire], for thus did al-sāmīrī suggest.*"¹³

¹² Bible readers can approximate the literary effect of this strategic alteration by starting the narrative in Exodus 32 at verse 7, skipping verses 1–6 altogether, and then trying to infer what is going on in the story based on the subsequent allusions to what happened at the beginning.

¹³ The reference to "throwing" here uses the verb *qadhafa*, while that to *al-sāmīrī*'s suggestion uses the verb *alqā*, which has the literal meaning "to throw" as well. The pun is difficult to convey in English without obscuring the sense of the verse. It anticipates *al-sāmīrī*'s "throwing" in verse 96 following, where a third verb, *nabadha*, is used.

88 Then he brought forth for them a calf, a body that lowed. And they said: "This is your god and the god of Moses [whom] he has forgotten." 89 Did they not see that it could not reply to them, nor had any power to harm or benefit them? 90 Indeed, Aaron had told them beforehand: "O people, you are surely only being tested with it; it is the Merciful One (*al-Raḥmān*) who is really your Lord, so follow me and obey my command."

91 But they replied: "So long as Moses does not return to us, we will not cease our devotion to it."¹⁴

Many aspects of this passage are familiar from the biblical precursor, but the key phrase here seems entirely novel: the aforementioned *al-sāmirī* is said to have produced for the people *‘ijl jasad lahu khuwārun*, "a calf, a body that lowed." This phrase often serves as the centerpiece of Muslim commentary on the narrative.

The term *‘ijl*, "calf," is comprehensible enough, especially because it is cognate with Hebrew *‘ēgel*, the word used to refer to the Golden Calf throughout Exodus 32 and in many other passages in the Hebrew Bible that allude to the episode.¹⁵ The sense of *jasad* is more elusive: in the Qur'an, this term seems to mean "body" or "physical form," and is apparently synonymous with *jism*, the more common Arabic word for "body."¹⁶ The phrase *lahu khuwārun* has inspired surprisingly little debate among either classical commentators or Western scholars, despite the fact that it is the sole textual basis for the claim that the Golden Calf was brought to life, or at least possessed an illusory semblance of life. In the narratives presented by the commentary tradition expanding on the qur'anic episode, *‘ijl jasad lahu khuwārun* is interpreted as referring to a statue magically endowed with the ability to low like a real cow; a mechanical automaton designed to give a false impression that it lowed like a real cow; or, most strikingly, a golden figure transmuted into a flesh and blood animal. Notably, the phrase is consistently understood to modify *jasad*, which is thus sometimes presented as a "lowing body" or the like, and not *‘ijl*. This is a point of some significance to which we will return.

¹⁴ Q 20:87–91.

¹⁵ As we have seen, in the Hebrew Bible, both the Golden 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.

¹⁶ The term *jism* occurs only a couple of times in the Qur'an but is a more common term for "body" in post-qur'anic Arabic; conversely, *jasad* occurs slightly more often in the Qur'an but acquires a more specialized sense in post-qur'anic usage. The attempt to find some essential element that distinguishes *jasad* from *jism* is rendered more complicated by the obscurity of the other qur'anic usages of the former, for example the puzzling allusion to the *jasad* that was placed on Solomon's throne as a trial (Q 38:34).

The reference in these verses to Aaron's futile attempt at damage control when the people sought to turn to the Calf in devotion provides the transition to the culmination of the episode, Moses's confrontation of both his brother Aaron and the mysterious *al-sāmirī*. In response to Moses's question of why he did not intervene when he witnessed the people's sin—"when you saw that they had gone astray, what hindered you from following me? Did you not disobey my command?"¹⁷—Aaron provides an excuse that some later commentators found provocative: "I was really afraid that you would say, 'You have introduced division among the Israelites, and did not pay heed to my command.'" His reply appears to show that his seeming collusion with the idolaters was motivated by a desire to avoid strife within the community.

At this juncture, Moses appears to turn abruptly to the abovementioned *al-sāmirī*, who, though unmentioned in the narrative since verse 85 ("and *al-sāmirī* has led them astray . . ."), has apparently been lurking there the whole time, waiting in the wings as it were. The conversation between Moses and this *al-sāmirī* provides the climax of the narrative. The revelation of who this person is and how he led Moses's people astray is the crux of the story as it is recounted in Sūrah 20, inasmuch as it had begun with the cryptic reference to his leading the people astray, without specifying who he is or what his motivations for doing this were:

95 He [i.e. Moses] asked: "So, what do you have to say for yourself, O *sāmirī*?"

96 He said: "I perceived that which they did not [i.e. an angel]. I picked up a handful [of dust] from the [angelic] messenger's tracks and threw it in; I imagined this to be best."¹⁸

97 [Moses] said: "Begone! All your life you are [cursed] to say: 'Do not touch me [for I am an exile].' A threat hangs over you that you will not be able to escape. Look at your god to whom you are so devoted: we shall verily burn it up and disperse it into the sea as ashes."¹⁹

All of the traditional Muslim commentators—and the vast majority of Western scholars and translators after them—imagine that what is taking

¹⁷ *mā manaʿaka idh raʾaytahum ḍallū allā tattabʿanī a-fa-ʿaṣayta amrī*. Some commentators and translators understand *ittabaʿa* as to "go after" in a metaphorical sense: Aaron failed by not following Moses's example. Others see the verb as implying that Moses expected Aaron to literally follow him up the mountain to bring him back to the camp from the mountain when things went awry, or to abandon the idolatrous people to their fate.

¹⁸ Literally, "my soul suggested it to me" (*sawwalat lī nafsī*). In qur'anic usage this phrase connotes an individual's being led astray either by their own desires and schemes or else by the promptings and machinations of Satan: cf. e.g. 12:18, 12:83, and 47:25.

¹⁹ Q. 20:95–7.

place here is that Moses, satisfied with Aaron's reply to his questions, suddenly turns to address this mysterious figure *al-sāmīrī*, who is engaged curtly with the simple question *mā khaṭbuka yā sāmīrī*? The phrase *mā khaṭbuka* literally means "what is your affair?" or something of this sort, but is typically used in the sense of "explain yourself," "what happened?" or the like.²⁰

It is also important to note here that the commentators generally add a significant amount of material into different parts of this passage regarding the origins of *Sāmīrī*—a term they unanimously understand as a proper name—and the circumstances that led to the making of the Calf. For example, in commenting on verse 85, the famous commentator al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286) compresses a substantial amount of biographical detail about him into a few short lines:

And Sāmīrī has led them astray—by making the Calf and inducing them to worship it... the name "Sāmīrī" means he is from a tribe from among the Israelites called al-Sāmīrah. It is also said he was a rustic (*ʿiljan*) from Kirman, or that he was from the people of the district of Bājarmā, and that his given name was Mūsā b. Ẓafar, and that he was a traitor to his religion (*munāfiq*)...²¹

Supplying such details and backstory for *Sāmīrī* serves to blunt the sharp edges of the abrupt narrative shifts that occur when the term is mentioned, providing much-needed context for the character's involvement in the episode.

In this vein, sometimes commentators project *Sāmīrī* further back in the narrative of the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness in anticipation of the role he would play in the Calf episode, even though he does not appear in the Qur'an prior to this.²² It goes practically without saying that the commentators of necessity drew this material from traditions external to the Qur'an, because *Sāmīrī* is only mentioned three times here in these verses from Sūrah 20, and

²⁰ The semantic range of this expression and similar usages of words from the root *kh-ṭ-b* will be discussed in the next chapter.

²¹ Al-Bayḍāwī, *Tafsīr*, 3.89–90, an abridgment of al-Zamakhsharī's comment at *Al-Kashshāf*, 2.549. Curiously, exegetes often identify *Sāmīrah* as an Israelite tribe, but seldom if ever correlate this tribal entity with the Samaritan community of their own time. The reference to *Sāmīrī* as *ʿilj* (a coarse, bulky, ignorant man prone to laxity in religious matters) is an obvious pun on *ʿijl*, "calf." By terming him a *munāfiq* (a common qur'anic term associated with the "Hypocrites," a group in Medina in the time of the Prophet who first accepted Islam and then later shirked their obligations to him and the community), Bayḍāwī is underscoring the idea that *Sāmīrī* was supposed to have accepted Moses's religion initially but subsequently abandoned it.

²² For example, he is often mentioned in conjunction with the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea (depicted in Q 2:50), as a way of establishing the moment when he encountered Gabriel—an event of some significance for explaining his action with the Calf.

nowhere else in the text. Obviously, he is entirely absent from the biblical precursor in Exodus, although, as we shall see, some exegetes did adduce other information from the Hebrew Bible in their attempts to shed light on the character's origins or motivations. Others, such as the association with the Iranian region of Kirman or the district of Bājarmā in Iraq, are rather more obscure.²³

In the original qur'anic narrative, *al-sāmīrī*'s response to Moses and the subsequent denouement function as the climax of the story. That being the case, it is surprising how opaque the key phrases here are. This is especially true of *qabaḍtu qabḍatan min athar al-rasūl fa-nabadhtuhā*, a brief sequence of six words (and one conjunction) that generates a spectacular amount of narrative elaboration by the exegetes. While a literal rendering of this verse would be "I took a handful from the track of the messenger and threw it," commentators understand this verse to presuppose a significant amount of extraneous detail and backstory, namely that Sāmīrī had secreted away some of the dirt trodden upon by the angel Gabriel—or, more commonly, by the angelic steed that he rode—at the time of the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea, or when he appeared among them to escort Moses up to the mountain to receive the Torah.²⁴ Sāmīrī somehow knew this dirt possessed magical power, which he then imparted to the Golden Calf by throwing the dirt into the gold he was forging into the idol the Israelites had urged Aaron to make. There is some difference of opinion regarding what the addition of the handful of dirt was actually supposed to have accomplished, but commentators are virtually unanimous regarding this phrase's basic import.²⁵

Notably, many translators of the Qur'an into other languages perceive it as so necessary to locate verse 96 in this legendary context—that is, to impose this extraneous narrative frame upon it—that they interpolate additional glosses into the verse. Most who are inclined to include glosses of this sort insert only

²³ For reasons that are unclear, some commentators specify that the people of Bājarmā (Beth Garne), a district in Mesopotamia, are notorious for their worship of bovines. See the tradition on the making of the Calf attributed to the Companion 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās (d. 68/687) in al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, ed. de Goeje, 1.492; *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume III*, trans. Brinner, 75.

²⁴ Numerous traditions depict Gabriel's involvement in the destruction of the Egyptian army pursuing the Israelites into the Red Sea, most typically by leading Pharaoh and his soldiers into the dry sea bed to be drowned when the waters surged back after the Israelites' safe passage; see Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ed. de Goeje, 1.480, 487–8; *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume III*, trans. Brinner, 65, 70–1. Gabriel's appearance mounted on his horse, sometimes leading an invisible angelic cavalry, is often used in Islamic historiography as a sign of God's deliverance and protection of his chosen people, as when this angelic host intervened on behalf of Muḥammad's community at the battle of Badr; for a well-known version of this account (in which Gabriel's mare's name is given as Ḥayzūm), see Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ed. de Goeje, 1.1327–9; *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume VII*, trans. Watt and McDonald, 60–1.

²⁵ For representative accounts, see Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ed. de Goeje, 1.489–93; *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume III*, trans. Brinner, 71–6.

a word or two, but occasionally one finds exuberantly expansive renderings as well, for example:

*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."*²⁶

In keeping with this tendency, we have rendered the line as "I perceived that which they did not [i.e. an angel]. I picked up a handful [of dust] from the [angelic] messenger's tracks and threw it in; I imagined this to be best."

This type of exegetical expansion has extremely ancient roots. Not only do classical Qur'an commentators frequently elaborate upon the verse in this way, but there is even a well-attested tradition that according to the Companion Ibn Mas'ūd (d. c.32–3/652–4) the phrase *qabaḍtu qabḍatan min athar al-rasūl* had actually originally been revealed—and thus should be recited—as *qabaḍtu qabḍatan min athar faras al-rasūl*, "I picked up a handful of dust from the track of the horse of the messenger."²⁷ This is a clear allusion to the aforementioned story of Sāmīrī's collection of some of the dirt trodden upon by Gabriel's steed at the time of the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea.

If this variant reading from the purported qur'anic recension of Ibn Mas'ūd were genuine, it would validate the countless exegetical traditions circulating in the *tafsīr* literature concerning the supernatural events surrounding Sāmīrī's creation of the Calf as actually implicit in the Qur'an. However, scholars have long recognized that the tradition of adding *faras* after *athar* in the recitation of this verse probably does not reflect an authentically early variant reading of the qur'anic text itself, but rather an exegetical flourish disguised as a textual variant. That is, the supposed variant reading cannot confirm the veracity of the interpretation, because it was that very interpretation that gave rise to this supposed variant in the first place.²⁸

²⁶ Turner, *The Qur'ān: A New Translation*, 189; this translation is based on the expansive Persian translation and exegesis of Behbūdi, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, published in Iran in 1990. Examples of this tendency abound in the dozens of translations I have reviewed.

²⁷ See Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān*, 61; al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 5.489.

²⁸ Cf. Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 3.70: "hinter *اثر* hinzu *فرس*, entsprechend der verbreiteteren Erzählungsvariante" ("the addition of *faras* after *athar* expresses a widely disseminated narrative expansion"). Note, however, the argument of Witztum that a variant reading of Q 33:69 transmitted

In the canonical text of the Qur'an, Sāmīrī's opaque words explaining his deed remain wholly unexplained. Instead, the account concludes with the destruction of the Golden Calf, as well as with what has appeared to most commentators, translators, and scholars to be a curse placed on Sāmīrī by Moses in punishment for his role in leading the Israelites astray. The Calf is to be destroyed; as for Sāmīrī, Moses commands him, "*Begone! All your life you are [cursed] to say: 'Do not touch me [for I am an exile].'*" *A threat hangs over you that you will not be able to escape*" (v. 97). Once again, interpolations into the verbatim words of the qur'anic text itself prove necessary because of its laconism; Moses's words to *al-sāmīrī* here are simply *fa'dhhab fa-innā laka fi'l-ḥayāt an taqūla lā misāsa fa-innā laka maw'idan lan tukhlafahu*, rendered more literally as: "*Go, for it is for you in life to say 'No touching'; for there is for you a commitment you cannot shirk.*"²⁹

Commentators generally explain that *lā misāsa* means that Sāmīrī is condemned to be an outcast; he is forbidden from interacting with others, and they with him, until Judgment Day (possibly this is the "commitment he cannot shirk"). Further, at some point in the development of commentary on this verse, exegetes begin to correlate it with ethnographic—or pseudo-ethnographic—data on the Samaritan community. The claim is then made that these people observe stringent laws restricting social intercourse with outsiders because of the penalty imposed on their eponymous ancestor by Moses. This is another issue we will have ample cause to revisit later because of the general acceptance of this interpretation among Western scholars.

Among the other references to the Golden Calf episode in the Qur'an, the most significant is found in Sūrah 7, where the account is related much more briefly.³⁰ Notably, the conception of the making of the Calf in Q 7:148 is basically the same here, and identical phrasing is used to describe the Calf itself: *In his absence, the people of Moses made a calf, a body that lowed from their ornaments. Did they not see it could not speak to them, nor guide them on the way? They took it in worship and became wrongdoers...* The account continues in verses 149–51, in which the Israelites' repentance for their error

in the name of Ibn Mas'ūd may have a greater claim to authenticity than the reading in the *textus receptus* given its similarity to a parallel verse in the Bible; see "'O Believers, Be Not as Those Who Hurt Moses,'" 131–3.

²⁹ The term *maw'id* seldom has the negative connotation of "threat," though other noun forms from the root *w-'d* such as *wa'id* do. See the discussion in the next chapter.

³⁰ Notably, Sūrah 7 inserts an explanation for the making of the Calf as a prologue to the parallel account there: on their way through the wilderness, the Israelites encounter an idolatrous people and crave a god like theirs for themselves; Moses then denounces their ingratitude in seeking such an idol (vv. 138–41). The commentators commonly specify that this idol was a calf.

is mentioned, along with a description of the exchange between Moses and Aaron that is basically similar to that quoted above from Q 20:92–4. Here Aaron's excuse is 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, as in Sūrah 20, but rather out of fear that the people would have killed him if he had dared to impede their idolatry: *"The people perceived me as weak, and were on the verge of slaying me; so do not count me among the enemies, nor place me with the wrongdoers..."* (Q 7:150).³¹

There is one aspect of the version of the narrative in Sūrah 7 that is extremely noteworthy: surprisingly, the passage lacks any reference whatsoever to the mysterious figure *al-sāmirī*, who appears to be so central to the longer version of the narrative in Sūrah 20. After the statement about how the Israelites made the Calf and Moses's confrontation of Aaron for failing to intervene and prevent the people from degenerating into idolatry, the account proceeds directly to its conclusion with Moses's poignant petition for pardon before God: *"O Lord, forgive me and my brother, and accommodate us in Your mercy, for You are the most merciful of all"* (v. 151). Why Moses and Aaron would need to entreat God to show mercy is somewhat unclear, though many commentators conclude, reasonably enough, that they seek to atone for allowing the event of the Israelites' making and worship of the Calf to transpire in the first place.

Given how instrumental he is in the much more developed version of the narrative in Sūrah 20, the absence of any reference to *al-sāmirī* in the Sūrah 7 version has often puzzled Western scholars. A common way of explaining this has been to assert that the Sūrah 20 version was Muḥammad's first attempt at composing a version of the Calf story; subsequently, he realized that he had erred in blaming the making of the Calf on this "Samaritan," and thus rectified his mistake when he composed Sūrah 7. The implication here, of course, is that in the Sūrah 7 version it is tacitly understood that it was Aaron who made the Calf.³²

³¹ This verse supplies the actual description of Moses physically accosting his brother after breaking the Tablets that seems to be lacking in the Sūrah 20 account—[Moses] *grasped his brother by the hair of his head and pulled him towards him*—even though the latter gives us Aaron's direct response to this action—*"O son of my mother, do not pull me by my beard or my hair!"* Intriguingly, the Sūrah 20 account omits any mention of the breaking of the Tablets as well.

³² In her discussions of the qur'anic Calf episodes, Neuwirth seeks to address the thematic and rhetorical differences between the Sūrah 20 and Sūrah 7 versions of the narrative, emphasizing, for example, that themes of wrath and forgiveness are more prominent in the latter version, which plays a different role in its larger discursive context in the *sūrah* than that of Sūrah 20 in its corresponding context. Thus, in her view, we should not treat the Sūrah 7 version as a mere abridgment of the Sūrah 20 version. Neuwirth does not address the question of why there is no reference to *al-sāmirī* in the Sūrah 7 version. See "Meccan Texts—Medinan Additions?" and "Oral Scriptures in Contact."

The other major reference to the Golden Calf episode in the Qur'an appears in Sūrah 2:51–4, in a long passage detailing various events in Israelite history. The brief reference to the episode there is worth quoting in full:

When We appointed a meeting of forty nights with Moses, then it was that you took the Calf as a god in his absence, and did wrong. But We pardoned you afterwards, so that you would perhaps be grateful. And we gave Moses the Book and the Criterion, so that you would perhaps be guided. Then Moses said to his people, "O people, you have wronged yourselves by taking the Calf as a god, so turn in repentance to your Creator, then slay yourselves; that would be better for you with your Creator. He may then turn to accept your repentance, for truly He is the one who turns to accept repentance, the most merciful.

In this short passage, the narrative focus is quite different from that of the other two major qur'anic presentations of the episode. For example, this passage lacks any reference to either *al-sāmirī* or Aaron; there is no reference to the Calf's supposed animation or lowing sound either. Instead, these verses seem to emphasize a different aspect of the biblical precursor, namely the Levitical election.

As recounted in the version of the episode in the book of Exodus, Moses summons "*whoever is on THE LORD's side*" to rally to him; when the faithful men of the tribe of Levi respond, Moses commands them: "*Let every man strap his sword to his leg, and go back and forth between the gates of the camp; and let each man slay his brother and his neighbor and his kinsman*" (Exod 32:26–7). We have already discussed the complex background to this aspect of the biblical story, which seems to provide important clues to the historical and ideological circumstances in which the Golden Calf story was originally composed, in particular as regards the rivalry between different priestly groups in early Israel. In the Qur'an, however, the episode has been reduced to one of a number of examples of a common trope, that of a sinful humanity turning in repentance to God and God's reciprocal turning to the penitent; thus Moses's command to the people: "*so turn in repentance to your Creator (fa-tūbū ilā bārī'ikum) . . . He may then turn to accept your repentance (fa-tāba 'alaykum), for truly He is the one who turns to accept repentance (al-tawwāb).*"³³

³³ See Rubin, "Repentance and Penance." This seems to be the only place in the Qur'an where repentance is effected through an act of violence. Some Muslim exegetes were troubled by this passage's depiction of the killing of the wayward Israelites; see Pregill, "'Turn in Repentance to Your Creator, then Slay Yourselves.'"

Finally, we might take note of the brief allusion to the episode that introduces an extended polemic against the Jews in Q 4:153:

The People of the Book ask you to make a book descend from Heaven. They asked even more of Moses, saying "Show us God face to face!" Then the thunderbolt struck them dead on account of their wrongdoing. Even after clear demonstrations had come down for them, they took the Calf in worship...

The overarching themes here are those of manifestation and visibility: the Jews of Muḥammad's day ask for a visible sign, just as some of the Israelites in the past demanded that they be allowed to encounter God directly as Moses had. The subsequent making of the Calf only proves the Jews' need for a tangible presence of the divine among them, despite God's repeated revelation of signs and clear demonstrations (*bayyināt*) in the form of scripture to them—a clear cautionary tale for Muḥammad's own community.

Western polemic, philology, and the quest for lost Jewish tradition

Given the once-common tendency for Western scholars to critique the shortcomings of the traditional Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an—a tendency sometimes manifest even today—it may seem surprising that the view of the Qur'anic Golden Calf episode is in fact essentially the same in both Western scholarship and *tafsīr*. This is due to the historical dependence of the former on the latter for ascertaining the basic meaning of the Muslim scripture. Going back to the earliest significant European engagements with Islam in the Middle Ages, ecclesiastical spokesmen relied substantially on translations of Islamic sources, including Qur'an commentaries, for an understanding of the tradition they sought to denigrate and delegitimize.³⁴ The degree to which modern academic work on the Qur'an is indebted to both legacies—the *tafsīr* tradition and medieval ecclesiastical scholarship on Islam—is seldom recognized today.

Western apperceptions of the Qur'an, as of most other aspects of Islamic tradition such as the history of the community, the biography of the Prophet,

³⁴ For broad overviews of the Western engagement with Islam beginning in the Middle Ages, see Daniel, *Islam and the West*; Cardini, *Europe and Islam*; and Quinn, *The Sum of All Heresies*.

ritual life, and doctrine, were first formed in an ecclesiastical discourse highly predisposed to polemic against Islam. This in turn explains Western scholars' perennial insistence that the Qur'an was decisively shaped by Jewish influences in the time of the Prophet, since Christian polemicists frequently claimed that Muḥammad had been tutored by Jews and Christian heretics, rendering his scripture self-evidently suspect.³⁵ Though most scholars today would avoid making overtly derogatory statements to this effect, the quest to discern the sectarian sources that shaped the Qur'an reflects these ancient polemical imperatives and echoes the agendas of the medieval Church.

The qur'anic Golden Calf story provides us with a model example of how the reliance on *tafsīr* for interpreting the Qur'an and claims of Jewish influence went hand-in-hand in the formative period of the Western study of Islam. A natural place to begin would be the *Corpus Toletanum*, one of the most important European sources on Islam of the Middle Ages. Produced under the direction of Peter of Cluny in the twelfth century, this massive resource included not only a translation of the Qur'an—the *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*—but also of a number of other Arabic dogmatic, hagiographical, and historical works, prefaced by Peter's *Summa Totius Haeresis Saracenorum*, a systematic condemnation and refutation of Islam.³⁶ The *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* of Robert of Ketton was not the only Latin version of the Qur'an available at this time, but it had a significant impact on European culture for centuries afterward, especially in serving as the basis of the so-called "Basel Koran" of Bibliander in 1543, the first Qur'an to be printed in Europe. In turn, as it was translated into a number of other languages over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Bibliander's Latin Qur'an was early modern Europe's most important introduction to the Muslim scripture, part of the foundation upon which the golden age of European Orientalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was built.³⁷

³⁵ It is worth noting that in medieval discourse there is often little distinction between Jews—often classed as a species of heretic—and Christian heretics proper—commonly asserted to be Judaizers or crypto-Jews.

³⁶ The literature on Peter, Robert, and the twelfth-century translation project to which they contributed is vast. See d'Alverny, "Deux traductions Latines du Coran au Moyen Âge"; d'Alverny, "Translations and Translators"; Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*; and Tolan, *Saracens*, 135–69.

³⁷ On Bibliander's project, see Clark, "The Publication of the Koran in Latin" and Bobzin, *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation*, 159 ff. In citing Robert's Latin here, I have compared the 1543 edition of Bibliander, *Machumetis Saracenorum principis*, with *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* as represented in MS Arsenal 1162, identified by d'Alverny as the original manuscript of the *Corpus Toletanum* (see "Deux Traductions," 77 ff.) This procedure is necessary given the frequently corrupt state of Bibliander's work, though occasionally one finds that the textual problems that plague the original edition are corrected in the subsequent edition of 1550.

Robert's translation of the Qur'an is often extremely periphrastic. This is partially due to his thoroughgoing reliance on Muslim interpretation for his reading of the Arabic text—including, it seems, on traditions of exegesis that are no longer otherwise extant. While his rendition of various verses pertaining to the Calf episode is actually relatively literal, his overall understanding of the narrative bears the subtle stamp of the influence of *tafsīr*. In rendering the pertinent qur'anic verses referring to the making of the Calf as *Sāmīrī cast a bull, corporeal, emitting a mooing sound* (20:88) and *while Moses was absent, his people made themselves, from their rings and necklaces, an image of a bull making a snoring sound* (7:148), Robert may appear to be cleaving rather close to the original Arabic.³⁸ However, as Thomas Burman has demonstrated, Robert's interpretation of the Qur'an is everywhere informed by a pervasive reliance on Muslim exegesis, even when this is not immediately obvious.³⁹

This explains why Robert's understanding of the Calf narrative agrees so closely with the traditional Muslim reading of the episode, particularly in his interpretation of the obscure qur'anic phrase *'ijl jasad lahu khuwārūn* as meaning that the Golden Calf was animate and that it lowed at the moment of its creation as a sign of its illusory or actual life. The contrast with the Latin translation of Robert's younger contemporary Mark of Toledo is illuminating. Mark renders the key qur'anic phrases describing the Calf somewhat awkwardly as *uitulum corpulentem mugitum habentem* (Q 7:148) and *uitulus corpulentus habens mugitum* (20:88)—that is, in both places, the Calf is said to be a *fleshy cow possessing a mooing*.⁴⁰ This is obviously much less similar to the traditional Muslim reading of this key verse than Robert's. For example, Robert's use of *statua* to render the qur'anic *jasad* is much closer to the general consensus of Muslim commentators regarding the term's meaning than Mark's use of *corpulentus*.

Moreover, Mark has rendered *lahu khuwārūn* literally, as *possessing a mooing* (*habens mugitum*), whereas Robert has inferred, presumably by following the traditional Muslim interpretation, that this oblique phrase signifies

³⁸ Robert of Ketton, *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*, 86r, col. A bottom–col. B top and 56v, col. B bottom; *Machumetis Saracenorum principis*, ed. Bibliander, 102, 57. The interpretation of *khuwār* as a sound resembling snoring, as opposed to the cry or bellow of an animal, is not registered in classical Arabic lexicography, but it is not difficult to understand it as an extrapolation from the basic meaning.

³⁹ See Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560*, 36–40. Burman emphasizes that Robert's reliance on Muslim traditions of exegesis available to him makes his translation a fairer and more informative representation of the meaning of the text as it was understood by Muslims of his day, specifically contrasting his method with the literalism of Mark of Toledo.

⁴⁰ Mark of Toledo, *Liber Alchorani*, 22r col. A *ad* Q 7:148 and 43r, col. B *ad* 20:88. I thank Thomas Burman profusely for procuring these readings for me and for his generous advice regarding these medieval Latin sources.

that the calf was making a lowing sound at that moment, then and there (*emittentem mugitum*).⁴¹ Robert's reliance on *tafsīr* did not go unnoticed even by his medieval audience; Juan of Segovia (d. 1458), the first in a long line of detractors of Robert's method, noted that "in many passages . . . just as one commenting, [he] explicates the Muslim meaning, though it scarcely is available in the literal Arabic."⁴² At the same time, Robert's reliance on *tafsīr* does not seem to have been all-encompassing; for example, he renders the key phrase from 20:96 quite literally as *I threw in a thing from the track of the prophet enclosed in my hand* (*ego de prophetae uestigiis manu mea clausum*).⁴³ As we have seen, the *tafsīr* tradition overwhelmingly favors the identification of the *athar al-rasūl* as a reference to the track of the angel Gabriel, for whom the appellation "prophet" would be rather maladroit. Possibly Robert had intuited that the *rasūl* in question here might in fact be Moses, as some later scholars would surmise, although it is also possible that he simply rendered *rasūl* as "prophet" according to the most common understanding of the word.

While there is no reference to the putative Jewish sources of the Calf narrative here in Robert's translation, the original audience of the *Corpus Toletanum* would have been directly exposed to such claims. One of the other documents included in the collection is the *Rescriptum Christiani et Rescriptum Saraceni*, a Latin translation of the ninth-century polemical *Apology* or *Risālah* attributed to al-Kindī. This document, which purports to represent a correspondence between a Muslim and a Christian on the virtues of their respective religions, is one of the earliest sources to assert that Muḥammad had Jewish tutors when he wrote the Qur'an.⁴⁴ The claim of Muḥammad's debt to Jews extends even further back than the time of Kindī; it in fact appears in some of the earliest Syriac Christian sources on Islam

⁴¹ Mark's rendering of *jasad* as *corpulentus* could very well reflect a "textbook" definition of the word as *jašīm* (fat), based on the common equation of *jasad* and *jism* as basically synonymous. One wonders, however, if this is also based, however remotely, on the common gloss on *jasad* as *lahm wadam* (flesh and blood) which is found in some *tafsīrs*. Similarly, one wonders if Robert's *statua* is perhaps not just meant to render *jasad* as "image" but literally as "statue"—another option commonly provided in *tafsīr*. This is to say that these Latin translators of the twelfth century might both be drawing on and representing aspects of Muslim traditions of interpretation—Robert favoring one exegetical option (the Calf was alive) and Mark the other (the Calf was merely a statue). Mark does in fact seem to draw on *tafsīr* occasionally, though far less often than Robert.

⁴² Cited in Burman, *Reading the Qur'an*, 44.

⁴³ Robert of Ketton, *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*, 86r, col. B, bottom; *Machumetis Saracenorum principis*, ed. Bibliander, 103.

⁴⁴ The consensus seems to be that the *Risālat al-Kindī* was composed in Syriac and subsequently translated into Arabic. Peter seems to have included the work as a witness to a genuinely "Mozarabic" perspective on Islam that was informed by authentic firsthand knowledge. For the text, see Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 101–7, and discussion in Tolan, *Saracens*, 155–65.

written immediately after the Arab conquests, and so was well established by Kindī's time.⁴⁵

The claim of a formative Jewish influence on Muḥammad would thus have been the subtext informing the way a reader of Robert's translation would have understood the Qur'an, especially as they sought to make sense of the many narratives therein that resembled stories from the Bible, yet deviated from them in conspicuous and strange ways. Moreover, centuries later, when Bibliander utilized Robert's translation in producing his printed edition of the Qur'an, he inserted glosses in the margins that point out biblical parallels where appropriate, but also marked the evident "distortions" of those parallels as due to Jewish corruptions.⁴⁶ It stands to reason that readers of Robert's translation in the centuries before Bibliander would have understood these "distortions" in a similar way.

Later European translators would make the claim of the derivation of the Qur'anic Golden Calf story from Jewish sources explicitly, even while openly acknowledging their debt to the traditional Muslim explanation of the narrative. While Bibliander's publication of Robert's Latin translation served as the definitive version of the Qur'an for Europeans in the age of the Reformation, it was eventually supplanted by new translations into both Latin and vernacular languages. Of particular interest is the Latin Qur'an of the Jesuit Ludovico Marracci, published in 1698, which was authoritative for many Orientalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Marracci may have been the first Western scholar to comment extensively on the entire text of the Qur'an: he presents short portions of the text both in Arabic and Latin translation, followed by a sequence of brief annotations and glosses, and then by another section containing more substantial analysis and "refutations" pointing out the doctrinally objectionable material in the passage at hand. Marracci's extensive apparatus gives us unique insight into both his methodology and his understanding of the subject matter, and is thus of inestimable value for exploring the attitudes of learned Europeans towards the Qur'an and Islam in the early modern era.⁴⁷

Unlike Robert of Ketton, Marracci is careful to distinguish the text of the Qur'an in his translation from the interpolated glosses; these, as his notes make absolutely clear, are drawn from major works of *tafsīr* that he consulted

⁴⁵ See Brock, "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam," 11–12. On the milieu, see Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, ch. 1.

⁴⁶ For example, Bibliander recognized in the Qur'anic story of the command to the Israelites to sacrifice a yellow cow (Q 2:67–9) a genuine echo of the red heifer of Numbers 29, though it had become garbled by having been mixed up with Jewish traditions: *fabulosa admiscet, nimirum ex iudeorum traditionibus* (cited in Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān*, 255, n. 213; cf. discussion on 116–17).

⁴⁷ On Marracci's method, see Borrmans, "Ludovico Marracci et sa Traduction Latine du Coran."

directly.⁴⁸ Thus, he renders *aḍallahum al-sāmīrī* in Q 20:85 (the first verse in the Qur'an to mention *al-sāmīrī*) as “errare fecit eos Samarita *per adorationem vituli*”: “the Samaritan has led them astray through the worship of the Calf.”⁴⁹ These glosses mimic those commonly supplied in classical Islamic commentaries (and anticipate those a modern scholar might use). Further, like Robert of Ketton, Marracci renders the key phrase describing the Calf idiomatically, in line with Muslim commentators, in contrast to Mark of Toledo's slavishly literal reading: whether it was the people themselves (7:148) or *Sāmīrī* (20:88), they made “*vitulum habentem corpus: ipsi erat mugitus*,” “a calf possessing a body that lowed.”⁵⁰ Marracci's note on Q 7:148 even quotes a gloss from *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (“Gelaeddinus”) that asserts that the Calf came to life in both Arabic and Latin:

لحمًا ودمًا, *carnem, & sanguinem*. Quod autem addit, ipsi fuisse mugitum, exponit idem Auctor صوت يسمع, *vocem, quae audiebatur*: & addit

انقلب كذلك بوضع التراب الذي اخذه من حافر فرس حبرائيل في فمه فان اثره الحياة فيما يوضع به.

Ita autem conversus fuerat per oppositionem pulveris ungulae equi Gabrielis in ore ejus (nimirum ab eadem ungula excitati vel compressi) *nam ubi in ponebatur, vitae vestigia apparebant.*

A calf possessing a body—[that is,] flesh and blood . . . [The text] also adds, which was lowing, 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 trodden down by that hoof), for the trace of life appeared in that which he was placing in it.”⁵¹

The significant amount of material from *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* that Marracci interpolates to interpret this verse is also reflected in his translation of Q 20:96, the critical verse in which *Sāmīrī* explains himself:

⁴⁸ Marracci's sources are discussed exhaustively in Nallino, “Le fonti arabe manoscritte dell'opera di Ludovico Marracci sul Corano”; compare now Tottoli, “New Light on the Translation of the Qur'an of Ludovico Marracci from His Manuscripts Recently Discovered at the Order of the Mother of God in Rome.” Marracci's extensive and explicit use of Muslim sources was anticipated in Du Ryer's French translation of 1647, the first original translation of the Qur'an in Europe in almost five hundred years.

⁴⁹ Marracci, *Alcorani textus universus*, 2.445 *ad* Q 20:85 [81]. The italics supplied in the original indicate the interpolations, the reverse of my method of differentiating text and gloss here.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 2.281 *ad* 7:148 and 2.445 *ad* Q 20:88 [85].

⁵¹ Ibid. 2.285, n. 144; cf. al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, 168 *ad* Q 7:148. Like the *tafsīr* of Bayḍawī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* has long been popular among Western scholars. Marracci cites many other Muslim authorities in his work, including “Zamchascerius” (Zamakhsharī), “Ebn-Abbas” (‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās), and “Jahias” (Yaḥyā b. Salām, cited in the *mukhtaṣar* of Ibn Abī Zamanīn).

*"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."*⁵²

Marracci is once again careful to distinguish the original words of the Qur'an from the glosses he interpolates; nevertheless, his method has the clear effect of mediating the scriptural text through the exegetical lens of *tafsīr*. What Robert of Ketton did implicitly, Marracci does quite explicitly.

The objectivity and rigor that Marracci displays here is belied by his comments in his "refutation." For one thing, his remarks make it clear that, like his medieval predecessors, he saw the Qur'an as having been shaped by the pernicious influence of Jews on both Muḥammad and the Islamic tradition; as in previous centuries, affiliating the Qur'an and Islam with Judaism serves to mark them as hopelessly errant and unworthy of serious consideration. Marracci does not cite sources such as "Gelaeddinus" because he respects the Muslim exegetes' insights into the Qur'an, but rather, as one of his "refutations" of Q 7:148 states, in order to belittle them:

Among the rabbinic, which is to say talmudic, fables that we must examine is the one which *Alcoranus* and its expositors fabricated regarding the Calf that was worshipped by the Israelites . . . 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.⁵³

Similar notes appear in his comments on the Sūrah 20 version, where he again derides the story of the Samaritan and his creation of a lowing calf for being nothing but "fable" and "frivolity."⁵⁴

Comments like this also indicate that Marracci does not perceive any substantial difference between the Qur'an itself and the glosses of the Muslim commentators; all are indicted together for their unreliable and ridiculous distortions of the Bible. Ironically, though he carefully separates

⁵² Ibid. 2.445.

⁵³ Ibid. 2.286, n. 9.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 2.447, n. 77 and 2.448, n. 3. Notably, Marracci's reading of the Qur'an was widely disseminated to a European audience through the 1721 abridgment of Reinicci, *Mohammedis filii Abdaliae pseudo-prophetae fides Islamitica*, i.e. *Al-Coranus*, which excises all of the Arabic text as well as the annotations and the vast majority of the "refutations." Nevertheless, the original two-volume edition continued to have a significant impact in scholarly circles.

"Alcoranus" from its "expositors" typographically, he does not bother to distinguish them conceptually; they are simply all of a piece in their collective error and folly. Marracci's failure to observe any distinction between Qur'an and *tafsīr* here is symptomatic of a chronic essentialism, an indifference to particulars of time and place, that Western scholarship on the Qur'an has only begun to transcend relatively recently. In this view, *tafsīr* serves only to express timeless meanings already inherent in the Qur'an, rather than functioning to mediate the text to new audiences and thus recreate its meaning for believers living in significantly different social, cultural, and ideological contexts than that in which the Qur'an was initially revealed. We can perhaps forgive Marracci this lapse, however, inasmuch as this fallacy has continued to be manifest in Western scholarship until contemporary times.

In spite of its obvious flaws, Marracci's work represents a watershed in the development of Western scholarship on the Qur'an.⁵⁵ Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Western engagement with, study of, and knowledge about Islam would be professionalized and disciplined according to the most rigorous scientific and philological methodologies then current in European culture. Consequently, the study of Islam would pass from the domain of churchmen—as well as the occasional diplomat, dragoman, or adventurer—to that of academic professionals trained in major university departments dedicated to the study of the "Orient."⁵⁶ Marracci's work stands at the beginning of this process, straddling the line between ecclesiastical polemic and philological rigor. In many ways the groundbreaking work of Abraham Geiger, which we introduced in Chapter 1, represents the culmination of that process of transition to modernity, inasmuch as it inaugurates a new spirit of scholarly objectivity, though echoes of the medieval Church's hostile engagements with Islam are still perceptible here in Geiger's work as well.⁵⁷

Marracci and Geiger could not have been more different. The former was an Italian Jesuit who served as the confessor of Pope Innocent XI, while the latter was a German rabbi and scholar of the age of Emancipation who is best known

⁵⁵ Borrmans draws a distinction between Marracci's approach in his Qur'an translation proper, which he lauds as a pioneering achievement of philological rigor, and that in his refutations, directed towards a Christian audience still in need of cogent arguments against Islam ("Ludovico Marracci," 82).

⁵⁶ On the professionalization of Orientalism at this time, see Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, ch. 6.

⁵⁷ There are a number of other Orientalist sources of the seventeenth and eighteenth century mirroring Marracci's approach to a greater or lesser degree that exerted some direct or indirect influence on Geiger, most notably Barthelmy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*, published posthumously by Antoine Galland in 1697, a year before the first edition of Marracci's work. D'Herbelot's various treatments of qur'anic subjects are so strongly mediated through *tafsīr*, particularly the Persian commentary of al-Kāshifī (d. 1504), that one is sometimes uncertain if he was familiar with the actual text of the Qur'an itself.

as one of the founders of Reform Judaism. But it was Marracci who first attempted a systematic and philologically-informed exposition of the meaning of the Qur'an, particularly by supplying his learned audience with the textual resources required for serious analysis of the Muslim scripture. In repeatedly asserting the Jewish roots of that scripture, Marracci worked under a set of assumptions inherited from his predecessors, although he did not possess the tools or skills necessary for an objective demonstration of the Qur'an's links to Judaism. About a century later, Geiger did possess the requisite tools and skills, given his training in both Rabbinics and Oriental Studies; and so in some sense he realized the potential that could first be glimpsed in Marracci's project. Notably, Geiger depended heavily on Marracci's Qur'an in his work, not only for the Jesuit's exegesis of the meaning of the text, but also for his lengthy quotations from the classical Muslim commentators.

Geiger's work takes the project of Marracci and his predecessors in new directions, but we must acknowledge that in many ways, it is a direct extension of that older project. Geiger wrote his *Preisschrift* in response to an invitation issued by the Faculty of Philosophy of Bonn in 1832 soliciting theses demonstrating the Qur'an's dependence upon Judaism: *Inquiratur in fontes Alcorani seu Legis Mohammadicae eas, qui ex Judaismo derivandi sunt* ("we inquire regarding the sources of the Qur'an, the Law of Muḥammad, which derives from Judaism").⁵⁸ Geiger subsequently revised his award-winning thesis and published it in 1833 as *Was hat Mohamed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* As noted in Chapter 1, this work is widely considered to have inaugurated the modern discipline of Qur'anic Studies in Europe, first because of the spirit of relative objectivity with which Geiger approached the Qur'an, and second because of its solid philological basis, given Geiger's command of the various languages and literatures necessary for attempting a serious historical-critical analysis of the text.

Despite the major breakthrough Geiger's work represents, however, his approach is solidly grounded in the presuppositions and assumptions of previous generations of scholars, going all the way back to the medieval ecclesiastics.⁵⁹ Occasionally scholars have sought to present European Jews of the nineteenth and twentieth century engaged in the study of Islam as representing a significant exception or alternative to the politically driven and ideologically suspect work of mainstream European Orientalism. Arguably,

⁵⁸ This is sometimes mistakenly reported as the title of Geiger's *Preisschrift* itself.

⁵⁹ On Geiger's complex engagement with Christianity and Islam, see the secondary sources cited in Chapter 1.

Said's sweeping indictment of the Orientalists and their links to—and justifications of—colonialism and imperial domination fails to discern the different positionality and motivations of Jews involved in this scholarly enterprise, who were subalterns themselves and thus had no access to or influence upon channels of power in Western European states. If anything—so these scholars assert—the work of Geiger and his successors helped to ameliorate those aspects of Orientalism that supported ideologies of domination.⁶⁰

In a similar vein, we might be inclined to exonerate Geiger from complicity in the program of transmuting ecclesiastical tropes into scholarly axioms. However, it cannot be denied that he was actually prompted to locate his inquiry in this very context by the *Preisschrift* invitation. Further, his training in *Orientalistik* no doubt inculcated him in the views of his Christian predecessors, at least to some degree. In responding to the Faculty of Philosophy's invitation, which itself reflected a desire to vindicate old prejudices with new scientific methodologies, Geiger actually sought to systematically demonstrate that this ancient polemic was essentially accurate, and thus he attempted to show how, why, and to what end Muḥammad had in fact borrowed so heavily from Judaism in composing the Qur'an. Geiger's significant accomplishments are undeniable, but so are his work's roots in an older discourse of domination and polemic.

In the introductory sections of his work, Geiger strove to show that Muḥammad had not only the motivation but also the means to borrow from Jewish tradition, especially given his ready access to Jewish informants such as Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Ibn Salām—personages familiar from the *Risālah* of Kindī and the *Corpus Toletanum*.⁶¹ Further, like his predecessors, Geiger relied heavily on *tafsīr* for his understanding of the basic meaning of the qur'anic text. Yet inexplicably, he claims that he has come to an unbiased view of the Qur'an unmediated through Islamic tradition.⁶² Geiger's commentary on the Golden Calf episode epitomizes his approach to qur'anic narrative, and generations of scholars after him would reiterate his conclusions; even when his successors seek to vitiate his claims, their approach validates his basic

⁶⁰ See e.g. Kramer's introduction to *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*.

⁶¹ On the feasibility of Muḥammad borrowing from Judaism due to his intimacy with people such as Ibn Salām and Waraḡah b. Nawfal (whom Geiger identifies as a former Jew), see *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*, 23 ff.; *Judaism and Islām*, 17 ff.

⁶² In his introductory comments in the 1833 publication, Geiger notes that he relied solely on the text of the Qur'an and some excerpts from the *tafsīr* of Bayḏāwī provided to him by his teacher Freytag in writing the original prize essay (Geiger, *Mohammed*, iii; *Judaism and Islām*, vi–vii). The revised version of the thesis was significantly expanded through the use of numerous exegetical aids, including Marracci's work and a number of classical *tafsīrs*—despite the fact that Geiger's stated intention was to discern the Jewish sources of the Qur'an itself.

methodology and assumptions. Geiger's overarching explanation for the distinctive elements in the qur'anic version of the Calf story—the animate Calf and the outside interloper—is that they represent a conflation of themes and characters known from diverse sources from Jewish tradition, ranging from the Bible to the Talmud and midrashim.

Thus, Geiger speculates that the term *al-sāmīrī* might be related to Samael, “the name of one who is supposed by Jews to have been helpful at the making of the Calf.”⁶³ In his later comments, he cites the midrashic work *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, which says that Samael entered the Calf and caused it to low, as the source of Muḥammad's claim in the Qur'an that the Calf lowed as it came forth.⁶⁴ He also suggests another parallel for the idea of the interloper in the form of a tradition about a man named Micah (a character from the book of Judges) who is sometimes blamed for making the Calf; Geiger cites Rashi (R. Shlomo Yitshāqi, d. 1105) as his source here.⁶⁵ Strikingly, Geiger even claims that Islamic tradition (or “many Arabians”) confirms the basic identity of Sāmīrī and Micah.

Somewhat strangely, Geiger *also* notes that it is possible that the qur'anic depiction of *al-sāmīrī* might actually have some authentic connection to the Samaritans as well. Explaining Moses's judgment on Sāmīrī, that he must go forth crying out “do not touch me” (*lā misāsa*), Geiger claims that this is a distant echo of a talmudic tradition about a sect of the Pharisees—“I have only a dim recollection of the passage”—called “the set-apart, touch-me-not” (with this appellation given in fully vocalized Hebrew in a note as *pārūš al tāmūšēnī*). At some point, this tradition became mistakenly attached to the Samaritans, who according to Arab tradition are called the *lā-misāsiyyah* (the no-touching people); “the Samaritans were certainly known to later Arabians by this name, and Muḥammad doubtless knew them by it too.”⁶⁶ The qur'anic account of the making of the Calf casts the founder of this community as the architect of the episode, and portrays Moses condemning him to exile on account of some confusion with the legend of the Wandering Jew.⁶⁷

Though Geiger's account here represents a quantum leap in sophistication over previous discussions of the Calf episode, his blithe indifference to issues

⁶³ Geiger, *Mohammed*, 163; *Judaism and Islām*, 131.

⁶⁴ Some of the manuscripts and editions of *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* read “Samael,” while others read “Satan”; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, which Geiger also used, likewise mentions Satan. Even if Geiger knew a tradition that uses the name Satan and not Samael, a switch to the latter name would be natural given their interchangeability.

⁶⁵ Geiger's source here is Rashi's commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, *b. Sanh.* 101b.

⁶⁶ Geiger, *Mohammed*, 163–4; *Judaism and Islām*, 131–2.

⁶⁷ Geiger, *Mohammed*, 164; *Judaism and Islām*, 132.

of chronology is unfortunate, inasmuch as many future scholars who used his work generally accepted both his conclusions and his basic approach. However, much of this argument falls apart upon closer inspection of the evidence. Geiger is unable to give a specific citation for the sect of Pharisees called “the set-apart, touch-me-not” because there simply is none; while there is a tradition found in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds on the various sects of Pharisees, there is no mention of this specific group there.⁶⁸ His source that “Arabians” (or simply “Arabs,” *Araber*) recognize the connection between Micah and Sāmīrī is “Aḥmad b. Idrīs”; this is the famous Mālikī jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfi (d. 684/1285), who does make such an identification. However, Qarāfi lived in the seventh/thirteenth century; his work *Al-Ajwibah al-fākhīrah ‘an al-as’ilah al-fājīrah* is an apologetic treatise that draws on both biblical and rabbinic tradition to refute the claims of the Christians and Jews, and Qarāfi’s knowledge of the Micah story no doubt reflects his direct or indirect awareness of aggadah, and so he cannot supply us with any evidence we could plausibly use to interpret the Qur’an itself.⁶⁹

Further, Geiger’s claim that the connection between the Samaritans and untouchability reflected in the Qur’an comes from a longstanding Arab tradition of calling the Samaritans the *lā-misāsiyyah* is similarly anachronistic: the source he cites here, the *Āthār al-bāqiyyah* of al-Bīrūnī (d. c.442/1050), dates to the fifth/eleventh century.⁷⁰ This tradition has no serious claim to be pre-Islamic, and in point of fact, the notion that a sect of Samaritans is called the *lā-misāsiyyah* is most likely secondarily derived from the terminology of the qur’anic text. That is, like so many “facts” of early Islamic history, it is likely to have been exegetically generated. Finally, the possible connection to the legend of the Wandering Jew appears similarly far-fetched; despite the “Oriental” trappings in which it is often wrapped, the motif of the Wandering Jew is not attested before the thirteenth century, and is a conspicuously

⁶⁸ The Hebrew word *parūsh*, literally “set-apart,” is itself the basis for the rabbinic term for “Pharisee,” which might explain Geiger’s confusion. The passage about the different types of Pharisees is found at *b. Sot.* 22b and *y. Ber.* 9.5.

⁶⁹ The identification of Micah and Sāmīrī is already to be found in the influential work of al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035), and thus became relatively standard in *tafsīr* and other Muslim sources in the Middle Ages. Geiger took the reference to Qarāfi from a famous Orientalist work of the seventeenth century, Hottinger’s *Historia Orientalis*; ironically, he seems to have missed the point of Hottinger’s discussion of the tradition on Sāmīrī, for, like other Orientalists of his day, Hottinger argued that the term *al-sāmīrī* actually refers to Aaron. See discussion in Chapter 7.

⁷⁰ Bīrūnī’s tradition on the Samaritans will likewise be discussed in the next chapter. Geiger cites the Arabic text of Bīrūnī’s statement about the *lā-misāsiyyah* at a double remove from the original source, inasmuch as he takes the quote from Bīrūnī from another work, the *Khiṭaṭ* of al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), as that work is itself excerpted in Silvestre de Sacy’s *Chrestomathie Arabe* (published in Paris in 1806 and then in a revised edition in 1826; Geiger apparently knew both editions).

European invention.⁷¹ Taken as a whole, Geiger's elaborate attempt to explain the qur'anic *al-sāmirī* is incoherent, and none of its constituent parts seem particularly worthy of serious consideration.

* * *

Geiger's work would be massively influential on European and American scholarship on the Qur'an for a hundred and fifty years. Many of his followers in subsequent generations were inspired by his example, but in some ways overlooked—or perhaps deliberately discarded—his basically eirenic intentions. Thus, their works borrow his thesis and arguments about the Qur'an's fundamental dependence on Judaism, but use this “fact” to ridicule the Prophet and Muslim faithful, much as Geiger's polemical predecessors had. Further, Geiger's claim that the qur'anic depiction of *al-sāmirī* represents a conflation of different strands from biblical and midrashic sources provides some of his followers with a pretext for portraying Muḥammad as hopelessly befuddled and the Qur'an as utterly garbled due to its careless confusion of multiple characters and traditions in one personage.⁷² By lumping together one conjectured source after another without reflecting on how or why the Qur'an might make use of older materials, scholars after Geiger not only validated his methodology, but laid the blame for its flaws at the feet of Muḥammad. That is, by representing this (and other qur'anic narratives as well) as an ill-tailored bricolage of random legends and tropes, the Qur'an is made to seem more disjointed and incoherent than it really is; the fault for this incoherence is made to lie with the Prophet, concealing the fact that it is largely scholars' own procedure of “explaining” qur'anic narratives by piling up one putative “influence” upon another that actually creates this impression.

Over time, a few scholars came to express skepticism about the qur'anic story's relationship to the Jewish traditions Geiger had claimed were its direct sources, primarily due to the conspicuous gap between the obscure verses of the Qur'an itself and the fantastic and baroque details adduced in both its purported midrashic precursors and in Muslim exegesis. However, on the whole, most references to the qur'anic Golden Calf episode in Western scholarship and translations of the Qur'an into Western languages from the

⁷¹ The classic treatment of the Wandering Jew legend is found in Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*, 1–31. Geiger may have gotten this idea from Silvestre de Sacy, who makes a brief reference to it in the 1826 edition of his *Chrestomathie Arabe* (1.340).

⁷² Cf. e.g. St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'ān*, 112–13, quoted in Chapter 1. The tropes of Muḥammad's confusion and plagiarism continue to be recycled as grist for the polemical mill right up to the present, especially by popular Islamophobic authors such as Robert Spencer and Christopher Hitchens.

later nineteenth through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century simply conform to the basic interpretation of the narrative advanced by Geiger and his predecessors.⁷³ But even when scholars and translators express some doubt about the accuracy of the classical Muslim commentators' interpretation of the story and hesitate to reduce it to a mere borrowing from the midrash, a convincing alternative exegesis of the qur'anic narrative that makes better sense of it in its original religious and literary context has been lacking. Thus, up to the present day, Western scholarship has presented an interpretation of the Calf episode that is largely monolithic, with few notes of dissent, and that generally agrees with the understanding of the episode found in classical *tafsīr*.⁷⁴ This is to say nothing of contemporary Muslim scholars' presentation of the episode, which—whether in English, Arabic, or some other language—tend to avoid discussing the problem of sources in favor of literary or theological analysis.⁷⁵ When modern Muslim authors writing in Islamic political or religious contexts do take up the question of sources, it is usually to polemicize against the discrepancies in the biblical account of the story, or else to decry the impact of the reliance on so-called *isrā'iliyyāt* in traditional commentators' exegesis of the qur'anic accounts.⁷⁶

Perhaps the most interesting development in later scholarship on the episode is the work of a number of scholars who sought to refine Geiger's thesis by addressing the problem of why exactly the Qur'an would anachronistically depict a Samaritan malefactor at Sinai during the Mosaic age. These

⁷³ In addition to the discussions cited below, the most serious investigations of the Calf narrative in twentieth-century scholarship are found in Heller, "Al-Sāmīrī"; Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 114–15; Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, 158–9; Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, 174, 334–6; and Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Quran*, 323–34. Aspects of these scholars' treatments of the narrative will be mentioned in the following discussion, but, for the most part, these draw on the same sources as the older studies we have cited here, and tend to reach the same conclusions. This is to say nothing of the endless reiterations of Geiger's position in more popular works on the Jewish material in the Qur'an, which continue to be produced right up to the present. See e.g. Garsiel's literally schematic demonstration of the dependence of the qur'anic Calf account on the midrash in *Miqrā Midrash ve-Qūrān*, 140–7.

⁷⁴ A handful of scholars have sounded notes of caution or skepticism regarding the interpretation of the qur'anic Calf narrative. Cf. Rippin's revision of Heller, "Al-Sāmīrī," and Hawting, "Calf of Gold." Abdel Haleem seems to reject some aspects of the traditional interpretation due to his reliance on rationalist exegetes in his translation; see Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 199–200.

⁷⁵ As an example of such an approach, Albayrak, "The Qur'anic Narratives of the Golden Calf Episode" is frequently insightful regarding the literary artistry of the main qur'anic versions of the story, but the author often fails to distinguish key elements of the qur'anic versions from their depiction in the *tafsīr* tradition.

⁷⁶ Some of the basic issues are explored in Albayrak, "Isrā'iliyyāt and Classical Exegetes' Comments on the Calf with a Hollow Sound." Among modern authors, the treatment of the Calf episode in al-Najjar's 1966 study of the Islamic tales of the prophets (*Qışaş al-anbiyā'*, 218–26) is exemplary for its attempt to navigate between polemic against the defects of the biblical account and skepticism about the excessive and fantastic claims found in classical *tafsīr*.

scholars tend to focus on the characterization of Sāmīrī himself in the traditional exegetical accounts, and generally ignore other aspects of the narrative such as the Calf's miraculous animation or the angelic origin of the "*handful from the track of the messenger*." This is perhaps because these elements seem like flights of fancy not worthy of serious consideration; or else scholars recognize the tenuousness of the evidence for the association of these ideas with the qur'anic narrative itself, since they derive exclusively from the commentary tradition. In contrast, the rationale behind the appearance of the "Samaritan" at Sinai appears like an historical problem more worthy of careful investigation.⁷⁷ Geiger's impact on these later scholars is quite evident, however; even as they reject his particular suggestions about the sources of the narrative, they posit either that some lost midrashic tradition must have been Muḥammad's primary inspiration for the character, or else that this source is actually to be found in some surviving corpus of Jewish materials outside the rabbinic mainstream. Either way, the methodological premise is the same, and a basically reductionist attitude towards the qur'anic text prevails.

In a short notice published in 1902, Siegmund Fraenkel interprets the qur'anic story as primarily reflecting an attempt by rabbinic Jews to cast blame for the Sinai episode on the Samaritans. His assumption is that this is an exegesis Muḥammad could not or would not have come up with by himself, as there is no known basis for Arab antipathy towards the Samaritans. Fraenkel therefore posits that Muḥammad must have relied on some midrashic source now lost to us. He seems to have been the first commentator on the qur'anic Calf story to have done so.⁷⁸

A few years later, no less an authority than Ignác Goldziher took up the question of Sāmīrī's origins. In his article devoted to the subject, he adduces a bewildering amount of evidence in revisiting Geiger's reference to the possible source of the Qur'an's portrayal of the character in an ancient tradition about a Samaritan sect that shunned outsiders.⁷⁹ He connects these *lā-misāsiyyah* to various strands of evidence about late antique Christian sects such as the Athigganoi who observed strict rules of ritual purity.⁸⁰ The most novel element

⁷⁷ Speyer takes an unusual approach to the problem, conjecturing that the Samaritan may be a conflation of New Testament references to the Samaritans and the figure of Zimri b. Salu, the Israelite slain by the zealot Pinḥas for fornicating with a Midianite woman (Num 25:14; see *Biblischen Erzählungen*, 330–1).

⁷⁸ Fraenkel, "Miscellen zum Koran."

⁷⁹ On Goldziher's engagement of the question of Jewish influences on Islam, see Niewöhner, "Der Gefangene von Budapest."

⁸⁰ Goldziher, "Lā Misāsa." Similar to Geiger, Goldziher focuses here on the datum about the Samaritan sect called *lā-misāsiyyah* preserved by later Muslim authors, considerably bolstered by (supposedly) corroborating data adduced by other scholars like de Goeje. As before, most of the

proposed by Goldziher is a connection to the Beta Israel or Falasha, the Jews of Ethiopia, who may have provided the ultimate inspiration for Muḥammad's conception of the law of the Samaritans as forbidding contact with outsiders, which he then projected back to a putative ancestor who lived at the time of the Exodus.⁸¹ Lacking any direct evidence for these claims, Goldziher in the end likewise falls back on the suggestion that Muḥammad must have relied on a now-lost midrash, perhaps an orally transmitted aggadic tradition that was never textualized.

Goldziher's proposal in turn drew a response from Joseph Halévy, an eminent scholar of the Beta Israel. While Halévy soundly rejects some of Goldziher's claims about the community as mischaracterizations (especially the notion that they are somehow "Samaritan" in religious orientation), he nevertheless confirms Goldziher's basic thesis that the tradition of these Ethiopian Jews must have influenced the Qur'an. He cites a passage from one of this community's most important texts, the *Te'ezaza Sanbat*, that describes the secession of the Calf worshippers of Sinai from the main body of Israelites and their resettlement in territory that would later be associated with the Northern Kingdom of Israel—that is, the regime of Samaria.⁸² This, in his view, is the origin of the Qur'an's supposed equation of the creator of the Calf with a Samaritan.

Halévy's claim of the impact of the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* on the Qur'an in many ways epitomizes scholars' quixotic search for a lost midrashic source for the Qur'anic Calf narrative. Instead of claiming that Muḥammad was himself responsible for conflating a host of different materials from biblical and Jewish tradition in constructing his own garbled version of the Calf episode, as Geiger had, Halévy argues that the Prophet actually drew on a ready-made Jewish legend about the origins of a Samaritan sect at the time of the Israelites' worship of the Calf at Sinai. The presupposition that the Qur'an must reflect a direct transfer of ideas or claims from a Jewish source emerges here once

sources mentioned are conspicuously post-Islamic, including the ninth-century Jewish *mutakallim* al-Muqammiṣ and the famous Muslim heresiographer al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153). Goldziher's emphasis on "oral tradition" is familiar as a typical means by which scholars address (or dismiss) the problem of absent documentary evidence, to the detriment of exploring it as a legitimate and comprehensible means of cultural diffusion. For a trenchant critique of this age-old tendency in Jewish Studies, see Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, 218–24.

⁸¹ Goldziher, "Lā Misāsa," 27–8.

⁸² The location of this settlement in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* is ambiguous. Some have read the pertinent passage as pointing to Jebusite territory (which seems to imply an association with Judah or even Jerusalem), but Halévy identifies the locality as Jabesh-Gil'ad, a Transjordanian city with ties to the tribe of Benjamin; this city was at one time frequented by royalty and notables of the Northern Kingdom. See Halévy, "Les Samaritains dans le Coran," 427–8.

again, not in the form of Jewish informants like Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Ibn Salām who purportedly acted as tutors to Muḥammad, but rather in that of a textual tradition that supplied the basic literary template for the qur'anic narrative. Notably, Geiger's disregard for chronology is exacerbated in Halévy's analysis, inasmuch as the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* is of conspicuously late provenance, as many scholars have recognized.⁸³

A similar approach to that of Halévy is found in the treatment of the qur'anic episode by A. S. Yahuda, published, notably enough, in a *Festschrift* for Goldziher.⁸⁴ Yahuda's treatment of *al-sāmīrī* is remarkable because he begins by actually rejecting many of the claims of his predecessors, especially their emphasis on later traditions about the Samaritans and their supposed taboos against mingling with outsiders. Yahuda intuitively—quite correctly in our view—that most of this data comes from sources secondary to the Qur'an and is actually predicated upon the *tafsīr* tradition on Sāmīrī, and so has no salience for interpreting the Qur'an itself. Instead, Yahuda reverts to an older argument about *al-sāmīrī* being a reminiscence of biblical accounts of Jeroboam and the idolatry of the Northern Kingdom, which the Prophet supposedly confused with the Sinai narrative.

Here, Yahuda's particular reiteration of the trope of Jewish influence is striking, inasmuch as he imaginatively recreates the very moment when a Jewish informant told Muḥammad about these traditions, even supposing that the Jew must have used the very Arabic terminology that occurs in the qur'anic narrative when he recounted these stories to Muḥammad:

The clue . . . is given in the words of v. 87 'the *sāmīrī* has misled them' *wa-aḍallahumu 's-sāmīriyyu*. 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, 28). In telling him that the Jew called Jeroboam *Sāmīrī*, 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' . . .⁸⁵

Oddly, having critiqued the anachronism of earlier scholars' assertions about the Samaritan roots of the qur'anic *al-sāmīrī*, Yahuda mysteriously succumbs to a similar impulse himself. In contrast to most of his predecessors since

⁸³ Even contemporary scholarship on the Beta Israel has tended to exaggerate both the antiquity of the community and the essential Jewishness of their traditions; see Kaplan, "Te'ezāza Sanbat" and "Falasha' Religion."

⁸⁴ Yahuda, "A Contribution to Qur'an and Ḥadīth Interpretation."

⁸⁵ Ibid. 286–7.

Geiger, Yahuda takes up the question of the source of the Qur'an's portrayal of the animation of the Calf in Sūrah 20; it is here that his approach is most directly analogous to that adopted by Halévy forty years previous. Yahuda cites a fragmentary midrash of Yemenite origin salvaged from the Cairo Geniza and first published by Louis Ginzberg a number of decades earlier; following Saul Lieberman, who also discussed this midrash, Yahuda sees this fragment as the missing link that provides us with the direct source for the qur'anic depiction of the animation of the Calf.

The pertinent tradition appears in the context of a commentary on the Song of Songs, and seems to draw on the older aggadic association of the Golden Calf with the ox of the Divine Chariot. The tradition states that when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, they glimpsed the Holy One crossing over along with them attended by the *ḥayyôt* or angelic beasts of the Chariot:

When Israel saw a likeness of a bull walking to His left, 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 . . . As scripture says [quoting Aaron], "*I threw it in the fire, and out came this calf!*" (Exod 32:24). It does not say, "I brought it out" (*ve-ôtse*'), but rather, "it came out" (*vayyetse*'). This is to teach you that the Calf came out by itself.⁸⁶

As noted by Lieberman—whom Yahuda credits with first recognizing that this midrash must be the original source of the qur'anic story of the Calf—the tradition contained in this Geniza fragment is not part of *Song of Songs Rabbah*, the standard midrashic collection on the Song of Songs; nor is it found anywhere else in the known midrashic corpus either. Nevertheless, Lieberman concludes that the tradition must be genuinely ancient, a fact that is confirmed for him *by its clear influence on the qur'anic Calf narrative*.⁸⁷ For his part, Yahuda emphasizes that although the qur'anic account distorts some of the details (particularly by confusing the angelic ox with Moses, the *rasūl* or messenger of the story), it is clearly derived from the midrash, and the later Muslim commentators (who interpreted the *rasūl* as Gabriel instead) likewise must have known the midrashic tradition as well.⁸⁸

The claim that the Israelites' desire to make the Golden Calf was somehow inspired by a vision of the ox of the Divine Chariot is, as we have already

⁸⁶ Ginzberg, "Haggadot Qeṭu'ot," 66. Cf. Lieberman, *Midrashei Teman*, 17–18 and Yahuda, "A Contribution," 288.

⁸⁷ *Midrashei Teman*, 18.

⁸⁸ "A Contribution," 288.

noted, occasionally found in amoraic-era midrashim; further, it may have an ancient precursor in the aforementioned tradition in the *Mekhilta* about Pappias's speculation about the connection between the Calf and the "ox on high." But Ginzberg and Lieberman's assumption that this midrashic fragment is genuinely pre-Islamic primarily reflects their desire to uncover authentically ancient traces of so-called "Merkavah mysticism," a supposedly ancient esoteric strand in rabbinic Judaism centering on visions of the Chariot, in a previously unknown work of "Oriental" provenance. This prejudiced their view of this text, which in turn encouraged Yahuda, following Lieberman's suggestion, to confirm this Yemenite text as the lost midrashic source of the Qur'anic narrative. However, a Geniza fragment of an otherwise unknown midrashic tradition is unlikely to actually be ancient, or even of sufficient vintage to have exerted a decisive influence on the formation of a parallel narrative found in the Qur'an, as the scholars who worked on the fragment should have recognized. As all of these scholars knew quite well, the heyday of Yemenite Jewish literary production occurred from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries CE, and the most direct parallels to this fragment are found in late medieval works.

Thus, just as it is implausible that the Calf episode as represented in the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* provides us with the single germinal influence that decisively shaped the portrayal of *al-sāmirī* in the Qur'an, it is similarly implausible that the Yemenite fragment on the Calf and the ox of the Divine Chariot cited by Ginzberg, Lieberman, and Yahuda is really the source of the Qur'an's living Calf. It is much more likely that traditions like these reflect the cultural and religious conditions of a much later era, one in which Jewish exegesis was permeable to influences from the *tafsīr* produced during the classical period in the tenth and eleventh centuries, when Jewish and Muslim exegetes engaged their respective scriptures through shared ideas, themes, and symbols in the Islamicate milieu of the Middle Ages. That is, the traditions contained in these late sources are artifacts of the absorption and appropriation of strands of later Muslim elaboration on the Qur'an into Jewish tradition, and so tell us nothing about the literary background to the Qur'an itself.

The treatments of both Halévy and Yahuda reflect an impulse to seek the sources of the Qur'an in marginal or sectarian contexts rather than in mainstream or "orthodox" Judaism or Christianity that was quite fashionable among scholars in the first half of the twentieth century.⁸⁹ Both Halévy and

⁸⁹ The works of Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*, and Andræ, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum*, are exceptional as early examples of attempts to seek the germinal

Yahuda assert the Qur'an's reliance on traditions that had previously been largely or completely unknown to Europeans, with the assumption that these traditions are both genuinely ancient and essentially Jewish. However, in still arguing for the basic dependence of the qur'anic Calf episode on Jewish precursors, the work of both of these scholars is in many ways a direct continuation of a single line of argument begun by Geiger, one given a new impetus by the insinuations of Fraenkel and other scholars about the role some lost midrashic tradition might have played in the formation of the qur'anic narrative. All that said, for the most part, the contributions of these later scholars did not have as much of an impact on scholarly perceptions of the qur'anic narrative as Geiger's had early on. Rather, discussions of the episode in surveys and translations of the Qur'an in recent decades have continued for the most part to cite the work of Geiger and his more conventional followers, especially in pointing to classical rabbinic midrash as the most plausible source of the qur'anic Calf narrative.

The midrashic “influences” on the qur'anic narrative: precursors or parallels?

Despite their perennial importance in discussions of the qur'anic Calf narrative, the major traditions from the classical midrashim that most closely resemble the qur'anic account have never been examined systematically or critically. Overall, the aggadah on the Calf narrative, as with so many other narratives, continues to be treated ahistorically, bolstering the perception of rabbinic creativity as a timeless monolith.⁹⁰ But the question of the relationship of the Calf as portrayed in the midrashic corpus to that in the Qur'an, and Islamic tradition after it, demonstrates with absolute lucidity why such an ahistorical approach to Jewish traditions of interpretation is enormously misleading, encouraging—among other things—a wholly anachronistic

influences on Islam in eastern Christianity, especially in more obscure communal formations, and not in rabbinic Judaism. In this, a clear reaction against the popularity of Geiger's approach can be detected.

⁹⁰ For a recent example, see Schoenfeld, “A Good Argument to Penitents.” While Schoenfeld deftly probes the theological issues that emerge from a synoptic perspective on Jewish readings of the Calf episode, she adduces midrashic texts from a very wide corpus of sources, ranging from genuinely early rabbinic texts to medieval commentaries. The location of this radically dehistoricized chapter in a chronologically organized collection of discussions of Golden Calf traditions is telling: the author's chapter on the midrashim is placed between those dealing with New Testament sources on the one hand and those discussing patristic interpretations on the other, suggesting the particular antiquity of the aggadic material gathered therein.

conception of the background to the Qur'an and the nature of its engagement with its literary precursors.

It is easy to dismiss claims that the most pertinent parallels to the qur'anic story are to be found in Ethiopian Jewish literature or medieval Yemenite midrash, sources clearly posterior to—and likely dependent upon—later Islamic traditions elaborating upon the Qur'an. But Geiger's core argument rests on traditions that can be found in standard midrashic sources, collections of exegetical and aggadic lore closely associated with the classical Judaism of the late antique age. This is a fundamental issue for the interpretation of the qur'anic Calf narrative because the existence of these supposed midrashic precursors appears to validate both the interpretation of the story found in Islamic tradition (which coincides to a large extent with that found in these purportedly ancient precursors) and the basic thesis of Muḥammad's "borrowing" from Judaism.

There are many problems apparent in Geiger's work: the clear anachronism and less than meticulous use of textual evidence; the ideologically-charged attempt to subordinate both Christianity and Islam to Judaism as the offshoots or children of the Jewish matrix; the latent polemical agendas still visible beneath the surface. And yet, Geiger's basic proposition, that a qur'anic retelling of a major episode from Exodus is somehow derived from and indebted to Jewish traditions of exegesis of the Bible, seems, *prima facie*, fundamentally plausible. In the foregoing chapters, we have documented the intense interest in retelling the biblical story found among both Jewish and Christian exegetes of Late Antiquity, so it is wholly reasonable to conclude that the qur'anic rehearsal of the story would in turn be impacted by these precursors. However, although older exegetical debates certainly do resonate in the qur'anic Calf narrative, we will argue here that Geiger, and thus the many scholars who followed him in studying this narrative, was mistaken about the specific currents of late antique discourse that flow into and resurface in the qur'anic episode.

Previously, we carefully examined numerous traditions on the Golden Calf episode preserved in the rich and varied rabbinic literature of the centuries prior to the emergence of Islam. There are three midrashic versions of the Golden Calf story found in major works of the classical rabbinic corpus that were omitted from that discussion; all three resemble the qur'anic account in extremely striking ways. These versions all seem to build upon the traditions we previously examined from amoraic-era sources such as *Leviticus Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud. The tradition that is cited most consistently in connection with the qur'anic Calf narrative is found in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*,

which, as we have just seen, is central to Geiger's assertion of the qur'anic story's dependence on rabbinic precursors.

Both in this text and in the other traditions to be considered here, we see a combination of themes and tropes that were originally separate and autonomous in earlier midrashim such as the murder of Hur, the enchantment of the Calf by Egyptian magic or magicians, and the involvement of Satan. Thus, in *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45, after describing Hur's attempt to prevent the people's idolatry and Aaron's attempts at subterfuge after Hur's murder, the text depicts Satan (or Samael) as actually entering the hollow form of the Golden Calf, "lowing to lead Israel astray":

Among the earrings, Aaron found a plaque of gold with the Holy Name written on it and an image of a calf engraved upon it. This alone he threw into the fire, as it is stated, "*And they gave it to me [and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!]*" (Exod 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!*"—lowing (*gō'eh*), and all Israel saw.

R. Judah said: "Samael had entered it, lowing to lead Israel astray, as it is stated, *The ox knows his master* (Isa 1:3).⁹¹ All Israel saw this, and they offered it libations, and bowed down before it, and sacrificed to it."⁹²

The image of the Golden Calf being diabolically inspired so that it was "lowing to lead Israel astray" is also found in another classic source of midrashic tradition, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, identified by Geiger as one of the two recensions of the "Jerusalem Targum." This targum is particularly noteworthy for the conspicuous amount of aggadic interpretive material it embeds in its extremely expansive renditions of biblical passages, in contrast to other extant examples of the genre such as Targum Onqelos, which are more minimalist in their approach to the biblical text. Thus, translating Exodus 32:19, *When he drew near to the camp and saw the Calf and the merriment, Moses's wrath burned hot, and he cast the Tablets from his hands and broke them there at the*

⁹¹ That is, it does what its master, Satan or Samael, commands it to do. The verse is cited with different import in *Leviticus Rabbah* 27.8; see Chapter 4.

⁹² *Pirquei R. El.* 45 (ed. Börner-Klein, 610–11). The 1852 Warsaw edition and others dependent upon it read "Satan" here and not "Samael," 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, Samael that which predominates among Jews.

foot of the mount . . . , Targum Pseudo-Jonathan weaves a considerable amount of colorful detail into the verse:

When Moses drew near to the camp and saw 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 around⁹³ before the people, immediately Moses's wrath burned exceedingly hot, and he cast 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 to the people who heard from the mouth of the Holy One at Sinai, 'You shall not make yourselves a graven idol, nor an image, nor any likeness' (Exod 20:3) and yet after forty days made a molten calf utterly without substance!"⁹⁴

Similarly, where the Hebrew of the Masoretic text of Exodus gives verse 24 simply as "*I threw it into the fire and out came this calf!*", Targum Pseudo-Jonathan has "*I threw it in the fire, and Satan had entered into it, and out of it came the likeness of this calf!*"⁹⁵ Notably, by the time this tradition was composed, the old rabbinic prohibition on translating the objectionable phrase in this verse seems to have been forgotten. Possibly it seemed irrelevant, inasmuch as the theme of the animation of the Calf was now presumably seen as facilitating apologetic, rather than potentially eliciting criticism.

Both here in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and in *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the Calf is made to appear to be alive—lowing or leaping and running around like a real calf—through the direct intervention of Satan. Further, the passage in *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* has another striking supernatural element as well: it claims that the Calf was not simply physically fashioned by Aaron, but rather seems to have been spontaneously generated by means of magic. This was due to his use of a golden plaque among the earrings that he had taken from the people; this slip had both an image of a calf and the holy name of God, the Tetragrammaton, inscribed upon it.⁹⁶ The somewhat incongruous mention of

⁹³ I understand the *paal* participles *mtpz* and *mswwr* here as causative. The latter, *mesawwar*, may be a pun on *shôr* (ox). However, Maher does not seem to take the verbs as causative, rendering simply "Satan was in the middle of it, leaping and jumping before the people" (trans. Maher, 253).

⁹⁴ Tg. Ps.-J. *ad* Exod 32:19 (ed. Clarke, 107).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ The misuse of the Tetragrammaton for evil purposes is a familiar trope in rabbinic lore, and later popular Jewish literature as well. The motif of the object used to generate or animate the Calf by accessing occult powers has a complex afterlife in both Jewish and Islamic sources; see Pregill, "Some Reflections on Borrowing, Influence, and the Entwinning of Jewish and Islamic Traditions." As noted above, *b. Sanh.* 107b portrays Gehazi tricking the Israelites by using the Tetragrammaton to cause his floating Calf to utter the Shema.

this magical object here becomes more comprehensible when we realize that in yet other midrashic treatments of the story, different malefactors appear as the main *agents provocateurs* behind the episode, and these characters are often held to have employed similar means to bring the Calf to life, or at least make it *seem* to be alive.

A model example of such a tradition is found in one of the recensions of *Midrash Tanḥuma*, among the most important extant collections of amoraic-era rabbinic exegesis. Once again, as in earlier midrashim, the blame is placed on Egyptian interlopers who followed the Israelites on their exodus into the wilderness; specifically, as in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, the blame for the making of the Calf is placed on the evil sorcerers—presumably the same ones who had opposed Moses at Pharaoh's court, commonly called Jannes and Jambres though they are anonymous here—who continued to plague the people at Sinai. Mention is also made here of an individual named Micah who was actually an Israelite, but for unstated reasons turned against his people and facilitated their fall into idolatry (Geiger cites Rashi for this datum, though he could have been familiar with the *Tanḥuma* version of this tradition as well).

After describing the martyrdom of Ḥur, the *Tanḥuma* tradition states that either the Egyptian magicians or Micah was responsible, but in any case, on account of sorcery, the Calf jumped out of the fire into which Aaron cast the golden ornaments of the people, “lowing as it leapt about” and thus tricking the credulous Israelites:

R. Yirmeyah said: “When [the people] brought the earrings, Aaron looked heavenwards, and he said, ‘*Unto you, who dwells in heaven, I set my eyes* (Ps 123:1). You know all thoughts, and thus know that I do this only because I am forced to . . .’ He threw them into the fire, and the sorcerers came and made it with their sorceries.”

Some say it was Micah, who was crushed in a building, whom Moses rescued from among the bricks; he pulled out the tablet upon which Moses had written “Up, ox!” when he raised the coffin of Joseph. They cast it into the fire amidst the earrings, and out came the Calf, lowing as it leapt about. Then they began to say, “*These are your gods, O Israel . . .*” (Exod 32:4)⁹⁷

⁹⁷ *Tanḥ.*, *Ki-tissa* 19; R. Yirmeyah, fourth-generation Palestinian amora. The nonsensical גער (“rebuking,” probably due to homeoarchon from the previous line reading “immediately Ḥur arose, rebuking them”) in the standard edition must be emended to נוקה (“lowing”). This is the same verb used in the *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* version and in others as well. Berman’s translation has simply “Then the calf came forth leaping” (*Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 599).

This tradition relies on a dense web of intertextual allusions to a number of legendary narrative components that are absent from previous midrashic depictions of the Calf narrative; it seems to take for granted that the audience will recognize them and appreciate their significance.⁹⁸

For the moment, what is of greatest importance here is the tradition's explicit reference to a magical intervention that results in the creation of a seemingly animate Golden Calf, "lowing as it leapt about," similar to the *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer's* calf that was "lowing to lead Israel astray," or Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's reference to Satan's making the calf "leap and run around before the people." (Notably, the reference to the spontaneous generation of the Calf here in the *Tanḥuma* is not explicitly linked to Exodus 32:24, as it is in *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.) As in the other texts, the older concern for circumspection about the problematic assertion of the Calf's appearance of life seems to have disappeared here in this tradition.

Clearly all of these texts reflect a distinct predisposition on the part of exegetes to utilize established midrashic themes for both dramatic effect and apologetic force when interpreting the biblical story of the Golden Calf from Exodus. Many of the major themes of note here have distinct precedents in older aggadic tradition: the diabolical interloper who intervenes at Sinai to lead the Israelites astray, as in the talmudic tradition about Satan's illusion from Bavli tractate *Shabbat*; the enchantment of the Calf by malevolent outsiders, especially the Egyptian magicians, as in *Song of Songs Rabbah*; and Aaron's subterfuges after witnessing the murder of Hur, as in *Leviticus Rabbah*. (The idea of enchanting the Calf to create an artificial semblance of life may even be a remote allusion to a tradition not originally linked to the Golden Calf of Sinai at all, namely the Bavli's depiction of Gehazi's trickery with one of Jeroboam's calves.) However, in these later texts, these themes seem to have been enhanced and developed in striking new ways, especially in bolstering the specific claim that the Calf was brought to life or at least made to appear to be alive in all three texts.

All of these midrashic traditions appear to be directly relevant for understanding the qur'anic story, insofar as their most distinctive themes are mirrored there. In the qur'anic story as it is conventionally understood in both Muslim and Western commentary, while the Devil and his various

⁹⁸ This Micah has a biblical pedigree; his story is told in Judges 17, in which he is depicted as a man of the tribe of Ephraim who set up an idol in his house and made his home into a shrine. Micah is the focus of a number of traditions that portray him as being saved from death as a child by Moses during the persecution of the Israelites in Egypt; he then went on to lead the Israelites into idolatry, and some traditions posit that he obtained his idol in Egypt and brought it along with him during the exodus.

accomplices are absent, a new outside interloper, Sāmīrī, seems to take their place in seeking to lead the people astray while Moses is away by enchanting the Calf and making it appear to be alive, using the supernaturally-charged “*handful from the track of the messenger*.” This is fundamentally similar to what Satan, the sorcerers, or Micah are portrayed as doing in *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and *Midrash Tanḥuma*. Further, the Golden Calf of these midrashic traditions is described as leaping, running, and lowing, striking parallels to the qur’anic reference to the idol transmuted into a calf, a body that lowed. Given the number of similarities between these treatments of the episode, it is unsurprising that Geiger and many scholars after him asserted so directly that these traditions provide us with direct evidence for the Jewish influence on the qur’anic narrative.⁹⁹

However, it is an odd coincidence that all three of the texts containing the midrashic versions of the story that appear to be most similar to the account of Sāmīrī and the lowing Calf are actually relatively late sources in the rabbinic canon. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, and *Midrash Tanḥuma* are obviously all attributed to older rabbinic authorities: Jonathan b. Uzziel was putatively a student of Hillel himself, Eliezer b. Hyrcanus was a second-generation tanna, and Tanḥuma b. Abba was a fifth-generation Palestinian amora. However, these attributions are all clearly pseudepigraphic, and tell us nothing about the actual provenance of the contents of the works at hand.¹⁰⁰ While their contents display many points of connection with and similarity to aggadic traditions of the amoraic era, these works are all generally recognized as having received their final form during the geonic era, broadly speaking—the same era in which the Babylonian Talmud began to be promulgated throughout the Jewish world through the wide-ranging influence of the Babylonian academies. The geonic period began under the Sasanian dominion in Iraq in the sixth century, but continued for centuries after the Arab conquests, while the heyday of the Babylonian academies coincided with the golden age of the Abbasid Caliphate in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Just as scholars now commonly recognize that the talmudic corpus was closed much later than was previously thought, many would acknowledge that certain works in the canon of the classical midrashim such as the *Tanḥuma*

⁹⁹ To be more precise, it is the *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan accounts that are most commonly acknowledged in the literature due to their direct citation by Geiger in his discussion of the Calf, while the *Tanḥuma* passage has generally been overlooked.

¹⁰⁰ At the most, it is possible that the historical R. Tanḥuma might actually have composed aggadic collections that provided the foundation of the extant corpus of midrashic works now collectively associated with his name. As for Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, this work’s common ascription to Jonathan b. Uzziel is a medieval convention.

and *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* were redacted at a point well after the seventh century, and are thus likely to contain “post-Islamic” strata of material (that is, dating to the period after the Arab conquests). Of the three works under consideration here, it is *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* that has most commonly been recognized as having been composed after the rise of Islam.¹⁰¹ 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—a characteristic that leads some to denote the text as the first authored literary work of the Jewish Middle Ages.

Further, the dating of *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* to sometime after the seventh or eighth century seems indisputable, given its borrowing of the names of one of the wives and one of the daughters of the Prophet (ʿĀʾishah and Fāṭimah, respectively) as the names of the wives of Ishmael (whence they become “Aysha” and “Paṭūmah”).¹⁰² To some, the work’s literary structure points to an implicit engagement with the supersessionist claims of Muslim spokesmen, who, like Christian spokesmen before them, emphasized the disconfirmation of the Jews as God’s chosen people and appropriated the symbols associated with the ancient prophetic and covenantal legacy of Israel to bolster Islam’s claims of primacy instead.¹⁰³ Insofar as it seems to represent an implicit Jewish response to such claims, and the first formal articulations of Muslim theology and ideology only began to appear in the late seventh and early eighth century, *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* can only realistically be thought to have reached its final form in the mid-eighth century at the absolute earliest.¹⁰⁴

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan contains similar references to the wives of Ishmael: here they appear as “Pāṭimā” and “ʿAdīsha” (or “Ḥadīsha”), the latter being conspicuously derived from the name of Khadijah bt. Khuwaylid,

¹⁰¹ A date of composition, or at least final redaction, after the rise of Islam was proposed already in the time of Zunz and reiterated by Heller (“Muhammedanisches und Antimuhammedanisches in den Pirke Rabbi Eliezer”) in the early twentieth century. In his brief discussion of this passage, Schäfer observes that the portrayal of the Calf episode in *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* is unique among traditions on satanic interference at Sinai and remarks that “eine genauere Datierung ist nicht möglich” (*Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen*, 159).

¹⁰² *Pirquei R. El.* 30 (ed. Börner-Klein, 340–3). On the well-known scene of Abraham’s visit to Ishmael and encounter with these wives, see Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, ch. 4.

¹⁰³ As eloquently argued by Newby, “Text and Territory: Jewish–Muslim Relations 632–750 CE,” in which the author juxtaposes *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* with the lost prologue to the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* of Ibn Ishāq dealing with the pre-Islamic prophets as forerunners to Muḥammad.

¹⁰⁴ That said, Poorthuis has argued quite convincingly that the core of this story is genuinely pre-Islamic and that the evolution of both the story of Abraham’s visit and that of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and Islamic parallels reflects a complex intertwining of Jewish and Muslim exegesis; see “Hagar’s Wanderings.”

Muḥammad's first wife.¹⁰⁵ This would again seem to support a late date of redaction for the work. However, there has been substantial controversy over the dating of the targum, centering not on the question of when it reached its final form—a seemingly moot question due to its inclusion of forms of the abovementioned Arabic names—but rather on how the work should be characterized on the whole. Despite the considerable interpenetration of later midrashic themes and motifs into the text at numerous points, some scholars emphasize that the work does not really display any substantial knowledge of, or overtly respond to, Islam. For example, Robert Hayward has repeatedly argued that practically all of the references to the “Ishmaelites” and their culture in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan can be explained as actually deriving from developments and debates internal to Judaism, and that on the whole, the work is in fact almost completely isolated from the wider Islamic milieu in which it received its final form.¹⁰⁶

In the end, Hayward emphasizes the necessity of a nuanced approach to the complex processes of composition and redaction that produced Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and argues against concluding that the text should be dismissed as *uniformly* post-Islamic, as some older scholars were inclined to do.¹⁰⁷ Various elements in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's translation (or rather paraphrase) of Exodus 32 are of considerable vintage, for example the killing of Hur and the letters of the holy writing flying off of the Tablets of Testimony when Moses shatters them. However, the specific reference to Satan entering the Calf, making it “leap and run around before the people,” does not appear to be one of them.

Even if the targum as a whole can be claimed to be substantially older—and even perhaps thought to preserve midrashic traditions antedating the rise of Christianity, as Hayward and others maintain—one cannot deny that various supplementary additions seem to have been redacted into the text at a later date.

¹⁰⁵ Tg. Ps.-J. *ad* Gen 21:21 (ed. Clarke, 23). Clarke's text reads ‘*dys*’ (“Adisha”) here, but other witnesses apparently have *hdis*’ (“Hādisha”) or ‘*ys*’ (“Aysha”), and ‘*dys*’ is presumably a conflation of these.

¹⁰⁶ Hayward, “Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Anti-Islamic Polemic.” This is the position of Shinan as well, who sees the copious aggadic traditions that are unique to this and other targums as either the unique contributions of their authors or as lost midrashim, “once common to rabbinic composition but now lost and unknown” (“The Aggadah of the Palestinian Targums of the Pentateuch and Rabbinic Aggadah,” 216).

¹⁰⁷ Cf. also his “Red Heifer and Golden Calf” (which does not actually deal with Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's main version of the Calf episode). Despite an overall shift in the study of ancient Judaism towards understanding textual production in the context of reception and redaction (and not merely mining texts to uncover “original” or ancient sources), a persistent emphasis on the antiquity of the contents of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan continues to recur in the scholarship.

These particular elements are most readily recognized because they lack distinct older precedents found among rabbinic traditions collected in tannaitic and amoraic sources. This is precisely the point we wish to make about the appearance of the diabolically-animated Golden Calf here in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: insofar as the post-Islamic additions in this work are very likely to have been drawn directly from *Pirquei de Rabbi-Eliezer*, this suggests an analogous *terminus post quem* for the targum of the mid-eighth century at the earliest.¹⁰⁸

The only other seemingly contemporary rabbinic text containing a tradition on the animation of the Golden Calf is *Midrash Tanhuma*, in which—as we saw above—it is either the Egyptian sorcerers or the mysterious Micah who are said to spontaneously generate the Calf and enchant it with their sorcery so that it was “lowing as it leapt about.” The redactional history of this important midrashic work, extant in two major recensions and a host of related texts, is exceedingly complex. Suffice to say that the *Tanhuma* represents not so much a discrete work but rather a corpus of related homiletic commentaries on the Pentateuch with fluid textual boundaries containing diverse strands of tradition, found not only in our two major recensions of the actual work bearing the title *Midrash Tanhuma* but in various other literary forms as well, including large sections of the rather heterogeneous medieval compilation commonly known as *Midrash Rabbah*.¹⁰⁹

Traditionally, scholars regarded the *Tanhuma* (meaning the specific, widely disseminated printed collection bearing this name) as a late work, dated to the ninth century by Zunz on the basis of the affinity of some of its contents with writings of the geonic era. Later, some scholars rejected Zunz’s position, attempting to establish a much earlier date for a core of material at the root of the tradition, possibly as early as 400 CE. Thus, Bregman—who generally views the *Tanhuma*–*Yelammedenu* material as representing a genre rather than a textual corpus per se—has demonstrated that although the extant works containing *Tanhuma* material may have been redacted quite late, they still preserve traditions that clearly reflect the pre-Islamic late antique milieu, specifically Byzantine Palestine of the fourth or fifth century.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ However, one must acknowledge Hayward’s “*Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan,” an intimidatingly thorough point-by-point refutation of many of the alleged parallels between the two works.

¹⁰⁹ On the gradual emergence of *Midrash Rabbah* as an all-encompassing anthology of midrashic tradition and its relationship to the *Tanhuma* corpus, see Bregman, “Midrash Rabbah and the Medieval Collector Mentality.” Similar issues characterize the corpus of witnesses to *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, though perhaps on a smaller scale; see Barth, “Is Every Medieval Hebrew Manuscript a New Composition?”

¹¹⁰ See Bregman, *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*.

Be that as it may, of the extant witnesses to the *Tanḥuma* tradition, it is clear that the “traditional” text of *Midrash Tanḥuma*, first printed in Constantinople in the sixteenth century, differs considerably from the version later edited by Solomon Buber and published in Vilna in 1885. It has sometimes been asserted that Buber’s version of *Midrash Tanḥuma* may be the oldest extant midrashic commentary on the entire Pentateuch, in distinction to the “traditional,” more widely disseminated *Tanḥuma*, which seems to have been produced by combining material from the older text as is now represented in the Buber *Tanḥuma* with another collection ascribed to R. Tanḥuma that is now unfortunately lost.¹¹¹ In recent years, the attempt to establish the Buber *Tanḥuma* as relatively early has come to be challenged, with a new consensus emerging that both major recensions may actually be quite late.¹¹²

Whatever the case, what is most germane to our concerns here is the fact that the “traditional” *Tanḥuma* seems to contain a substantial amount of material not found in the Buber *Tanḥuma*, and this material is arguably of distinctly late vintage, originating sometime after the rise of Islam, if not the high Middle Ages, when both the Buber and traditional recensions of the work are likely to have been compiled. Comparison of these two extant recensions with other midrashic collections can serve as a productive means of distinguishing traditions therein that may have some plausible claim to be early from those that are more likely to be late.

Sure enough, when we examine the passage on the making of the Calf in the Buber *Tanḥuma*, it has the tradition on Satan’s illusion from the Talmud, an extended portrayal of the killing of Ḥur and Aaron’s stratagems similar to that in *Leviticus Rabbah*, and concludes with Moses fending off the angels of destruction who came to annihilate Israel because of their sin. These are the narrative elements commonly found among the classic late antique portrayals of the narrative, and sometimes shared between Jewish and Christian sources, as we have seen. But the Buber *Tanḥuma* lacks any mention of the sorcerers, Micah and the golden tablet, or the lowing, leaping Calf; these elements only appear in the version of the narrative in the standard version of *Midrash Tanḥuma*.¹¹³ While the mere presence of specific material in the Buber recension is not sufficient to establish it as early, the absence of said material

¹¹¹ See Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 302–6 for an overview of scholarly debates over the origins of the *Tanḥuma*.

¹¹² See e.g. Herr’s remarks on the chronology of the major collections in his survey “Midrash” in the second edition of *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

¹¹³ *Tanḥ. Buber, Ki-tissa* 13. There are numerous genuinely ancient traditions associated with Jannes and Jambres, but as Osawa, “Jannes and Jambres,” notes, the *Tanḥuma* tradition discussed here is the first to associate them with the making of the Calf. Other late traditions depict them drowning with

there, represented only in the traditional recension instead, would seem to suggest that this material is likely to be late.

* * *

In considering the traditions on the animate Golden Calf in *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and *Midrash Tanhuma*, we can leave aside the question of whether these works might contain authentically ancient material or are even on the whole substantially early (and thus only preserve a few anomalous and intrusive later elements, as some would argue). The point is that they indisputably contain some material that is not only quite late and posterior to the rise of Islam, but can actually be characterized as “Islamicate”—that is, reflecting Islam’s general cultural impact on non-Muslim communities brought under Arab dominion. The portrayal of the animation or quasi-animation of the Golden Calf episode in *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and the later recension of the *Tanhuma* appears to be a tradition of this sort, especially given that it is entirely absent from earlier midrashic collections, but is absolutely ubiquitous in later sources, both Jewish and Islamic.¹¹⁴ Our careful re-evaluation of these late midrashic traditions is instrumental for our attempt to reconsider the literary history of the Calf episode, and in particular to properly understand the Qur’an’s relationship to its putative Jewish precursors—a question of much broader significance in the study of the Qur’an beyond this specific narrative.

If we take care to distinguish stages in the thematic development of apologetic portrayals of the Golden Calf episode in rabbinic tradition, then the traditions on the Calf in *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and the other works we have examined here represent a discrete and distinctly late stage in that development. At an earlier stage, rabbinic exegetes openly acknowledged the sin of the Calf, but downplayed its ultimate significance, for example by asserting that

Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea or, notably, being killed along with the 3,000 Israelites slaughtered by the Levites during their pacification of the camp at Moses’s command.

¹¹⁴ On the complex interweaving of later midrashic accounts of the Calf with Islamic exegetical and narrative material, see Pregill, “Some Reflections on Borrowing.” On the whole, scholars have been extremely reluctant to acknowledge the possibility of Islamic material having an impact on Jewish approaches to the Bible before the full flourishing of Judeo-Arabic culture in the high Middle Ages, the point at which such impact becomes difficult to deny. A significant forerunner to this approach is the section on “Relation of the Aggadah to Islamic Legends” found in Heller’s long review of Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews*, in which the author emphasizes the wide absorption of Muslim material into later aggadic material, often with the intention of deliberately countering and defanging it through Judaizing it.

the cultic rites prescribed by God for Israel acted to expiate the lingering traces of the sin. Somewhat later, exegetes employed various strategies to remove Aaron from suspicion, or at least to ameliorate the appearance of his collusion with the idolaters; this approach is exemplified by the complex of traditions on Hur's involvement in the episode and Aaron's stratagems after his death. Another stage followed in which exegetes first came to blame the making of the Calf or the inducement of the Israelites to worship it on outside elements such as the "mixed multitude," the Egyptian magicians, or Satan. As we argued in previous chapters, the elaboration of apologetic revisions of the biblical episode in rabbinic exegesis was provoked by Christian polemical interpretations, which themselves often drew upon and subverted apologetic themes originating in Jewish circles.

But at another, still later stage of development, reflected in the various traditions we have just examined here, multiple apologetic elements from earlier midrashim were drawn together, further elaborated, and finally supplemented by a significant new theme, the claim that the Calf was actually brought to life or at least made to seem to be alive through the intervention of a malevolent interloper. While the tradition from the Babylonian Talmud on Satan's illusion and that from *Song of Songs Rabbah* on the Egyptian magicians making the Calf quiver surely represent significant forerunners to this major new theme, the lowing, leaping, cavorting Golden Calf really only makes its debut in its full-fledged form in traditions preserved in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and *Midrash Tanhuma*.

The emergence of the explicit claim that the Calf was actually brought to life in some way—a claim that flies in the face of earlier rabbinic discomfort with the portrayal of the Calf as anything other than a dumb, lifeless statue—represents the culmination of the long process of evolution of apologetic approaches to the narrative that began in the amoraic-era midrashim commenting on this episode. While this process was initiated in response to Christian attacks that made the Calf episode the center of polemical claims of the utter supersession of Israel by the Church, given that it only appears in the late collections of midrashic material we have discussed here, it seems more likely that the distinctive claim of the Calf's animation occurred specifically in response to the emergence of new readings of the episode that circulated after the rise of Islam—readings in which the animation of the Calf is central to the exegesis of the narrative. This is a thesis that was occasionally proposed in early twentieth-century reflections on the late midrashic account of the Calf, but that seems to have had no impact on scholarship on the qur'anic story per se; critically, it undermines what is perhaps the

central piece of evidence cited by Geiger and many others to prove the qur'anic narrative's supposed dependence on a Jewish source.¹¹⁵

All this is of great importance for our understanding of the qur'anic Calf narrative on account of the fact that Western commentators have so frequently cited these midrashic traditions, especially the *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* passage, as the putative sources of that version of the story. The qur'anic and later midrashic versions *seem* to share both basic thematic elements and exegetical priorities in common, in that they seek to exonerate Aaron (conceived primarily as a prophet in the Islamic tradition rather than as the father of the priesthood) by relocating blame for the affair onto an outside malefactor, and explaining the sin of the people as due to their being misled by a miraculously animate Golden Calf. However, if all of these supposed midrashic precursors appear in collections assembled after the rise of Islam, some of which even contain material that *must* reflect some knowledge of Islamic tradition (as *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan surely do), then this calls into question the claim that they should be read as the direct sources of the qur'anic story.

This conclusion should lead us to discard these traditions as evidence for the formative impact or "influence" of midrashic tradition on the qur'anic story. While the qur'anic story may reflect trends in exegesis that also shaped the versions of *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and other later midrashim in a general way—for example, the impulse to exonerate Aaron—these Jewish traditions cannot provide us with the midrashic template upon which the qur'anic story was shaped, as generations of previous scholars have assumed. They cannot possibly be precursors to the qur'anic story, but rather at most represent parallels to it. This compels us to forgo using these traditions as tools that can help us interpret the ambiguous qur'anic story itself.

This also calls into question the reliability of the accounts in the *tafsīr* for interpreting the qur'anic story as well. That is, midrashic tradition can no longer be held to corroborate the supposedly pre-qur'anic origins of the tale of the Samaritan and the animate Calf that is so prevalent in traditional Muslim commentary, but that seems only obliquely connected to the verses of the qur'anic narrative itself. Thus, both *tafsīr* and midrash lose their probative

¹¹⁵ In his 1912 article "A Moses Legend," Krauss mentions in passing that the concept of the animate Calf is a "Mohammedan notion," and, following Zunz, recognizes *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer*'s diabolically inspired Calf as patterned after it (342–3). Similarly, Heller, "Muhammedanisches und Antimuhammedanisches in den Pirke Rabbi Eliezer," 52–4, follows Geiger and Goldziher in his understanding of the genesis of the qur'anic Calf story (and thus equates the qur'anic and *tafsīr* portrayals of the Calf), but likewise sees the *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer* account as deriving from Islamic precursors, and not the other way around.

value for understanding the background to the qur'anic story; they only corroborate each other as mutually dependent narrative complexes originating in the early centuries of the Islamic era, after the revelation and canonization of the Qur'an.

We must therefore consider other options for explaining the significance of the qur'anic Calf story. However, how are we to understand that version's apparent deviations from the biblical precursor? If the most novel and surprising elements in the qur'anic story are not "borrowings" from rabbinic tradition, then where did they come from? For centuries, scholars have expected to find such borrowings in the Qur'an; this predisposed them to interpret the qur'anic Calf story (and many others) in the light of midrashic parallels. In turn, this generated a reading of the qur'anic story that validated the basic thesis of Jewish influence, an exegesis in which the episode as portrayed in the Qur'an is made to conform to the narrative contours of both midrash and *tafsīr*. The circularity of this procedure is conspicuous. The predominance of a reading conditioned by centuries of reliance on both midrash and *tafsīr* has prevented scholars from considering and evaluating other options, but in the next chapter, we will propose an alternative reading of the qur'anic version of the story, one that not only frees it from the constraints of the traditional interpretation imposed by both classical Muslim exegetes and Western scholars, but also re-establishes its critical connections with the biblical precursor in Exodus and restores it to its place in the genuinely pre-Islamic exegetical discourse that we surveyed in previous chapters.