CHAPTER 17

"A Calf, a Body that Lows": The Golden Calf from Late Antiquity to Classical Islam

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This paper aims to address the topic of the golden calf in Islam, locating the distinctively Islamic approach to the story within the broader history of interpretation of this famous—or notorious—biblical episode.[1] Including such a treatment in a volume like this seems quite natural; what Muslim exegetes have to say about the golden calf and its place in Israel's history is just as noteworthy as what Jewish and Christian exegetes say about it. The crucial difference, of course, is that their foundational text is typically not Exod 32 but rather the qur'anic versions of the story, especially that found in the twentieth *sūrah*, Ṭa-Ha.[2] Thus, to discuss the golden calf in Islam, we must first examine the portrayal of the episode in the Qur'an as well as in Islamic literature, since classical, medieval, and modern Muslim understandings of the calf episode are quite incomprehensible without knowing how the Qur'an presents it. This in turn requires that we also come to terms with how the Qur'an engaged its own scriptural predecessors and precursors. The history of interpretation always seems to involve the excavation of layers upon layers of exegetical activity; the way the Qur'an builds upon its late antique precursors is directly analogous to the way the narratives of the canonical Hebrew Bible built upon earlier strata of biblical tradition that circulated orally in ancient Israel, which in turn were built upon still earlier precursors from Ugarit and other ancient Near Eastern cultures.

1 This paper is a concise summary of some of the major conclusions of my forthcoming monograph, which discusses the qur'anic versions of the calf narrative, their background in late antique elaborations on biblical narratives and themes, and the development of the episode in later Islamic and Jewish exegesis.

2 My use of "typically" here is deliberate; while most elaborations upon the calf episode found in Islamic sources are built upon qur'anic foundations, some approach the qur'anic story with clear knowledge of the biblical precursor as well, and a few particularly early treatments actually seem to focus more upon the biblical story than its subsequent qur'anic analogues (cf., e.g., al-Yaʿqūbī 1969, 1.36–37; *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* 1957, 2.283; and al-Masʿūdī 1965–1966, 1.61–62, all third/ninth- or fourth/tenth-century sources that seem to give greater weight to the Exodus account than to anything from the Qur'an or *tafsīr*). I follow standard practice in Islamic Studies by listing dates in accordance with both the Muslim and Western calendars.

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All that said, it is important to note from the outset that we must not elide the differences between the Qur'an and the tradition too rapidly by treating the Qur'an primarily as part of Islamic literature, or conversely, by seeing the Muslim exegetes as simply unpacking and clarifying levels of meaning that were already present, though latent, in Scripture. To posit a seamless and organic continuity between the Qur'an as foundational text and the later tradition is fallacious, similar to seeing the pentateuchal traditions and early Jewish interpretations of those traditions as basically the same, or claiming that the most authoritative and informative understanding of the Gospels is to be found among their patristic commentators. The Qur'an and the later interpretive tradition—especially the commentary literature proper, known as *tafsīr*—are quite recognizably different in milieu, background, and presumed audience.

In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike, the initial composition or revelation of scriptural materials accompanies (or even triggers) complex processes of communogenesis. But over the course of centuries (in the case of the manifold Judaisms of the Second Temple and late antique periods) or decades (in the case of the Jesus movement or the primitive Islamic community), the gradual articulation of what became each community's mature understanding (or multiple understandings) of what it meant to be a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim necessitated the revision, and eventual effacement, of what the tradition had been in its formative period. While each tradition of course asserts that its interpretation of its Scripture is the original one, this is seldom if ever really the case.

Discussions of the evolution of biblical themes in Western monotheistic tradition in conference panels and workshops, or in volumes like this one, often tend implicitly or explicitly to locate biblical and Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions on one side of the balance (the pre-Islamic material) and the Qur'an and *tafsīr* on the other (the post-Islamic material). There is a certain logic to locating the Qur'an and the *tafsīr* together, since both the Qur'an and classical Islamic exegetical material are in Arabic; further, relative to materials from the Bible, or Second Temple or rabbinic Judaism, or early Christianity, both the Qur'an and the *tafsīr* are demonstrably late. Moreover, until fairly recently, Western specialists in the Qur'an tended to treat *tafsīr* as a more or less dependable source for getting at the native meaning of the text. (This is a presumption that is quite well established in Western scholarship; somewhat strangely, the first medieval European ecclesiastical authorities who attempted to engage Islam directly actually relied upon Muslim commentators and informants in their study and translation of the qur'anic text even as they denounced the Scripture, the Prophet, and the Muslim faithful alike

as hopelessly corrupt and wallowing in error.) But relying on the tradition to recover a contextual—that is to say, historical-critical—understanding of the Qur'an is an enterprise doomed to failure: it forces the Qur'an out of its original context and into a much later conceptual and cultural world, while at the same time giving extremely short shrift to the immense creativity and ingenuity the classical commentators brought to the endeavor of interpreting the text for their particular time and place.

There was no Islam when the Qur'an was revealed; the Qur'an is not about Islam as it later comes to be constructed, using the Qur'an as one, but only one, of its constituent elements; and the Qur'an does not come from a Muslim milieu. Its *exegesis* obviously comes from a Muslim milieu, but when it was revealed, it was revealed in a late antique milieu in which Christianity (or rather, various forms of Christianity) was the dominant organized religion. Thus, to discern the Qur'an's meaning in its original context, we must decipher its message relative to its late antique subtexts. This in turn necessitates that we dislodge it from the towering edifice of centuries of Muslim exegesis—although that exegesis is itself absolutely worthy of scholarly investigation.[3] We need to redress the balance: the Qur'an belongs on the side of the ledger where we put pre-Islamic material, late antique biblical and Jewish and Christian traditions; the *tafsīr*, the classic Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an, belongs on the other side.[4] In short, speaking about the Qur'an and Islam in such a way as to gloss over the sharp differences between them really does justice to neither.

The golden calf episode is a stark example of why these distinctions matter. It demonstrates the rather dramatic gap between the Qur'an's original meaning—that is, its meaning in its revelatory context in Arabia in Late

3 This is not to say that *tafsīr* has no probative value for achieving a contextually and historically sound reading of the Qur'an, only that it must be used judiciously and discerningly; cf. Hamza 2013.

4 Scholars' hesitation to redraw these boundaries stems in part from a naturalization of the perspective of Islamic tradition, which approaches the Qur'an as an "Islamic" document; it is perhaps also informed by a perception of the Bible as an intrinsic, even inalienable, part of the Judeo-Christian heritage, while the Qur'an is seen as essentially "other" and wholly alien in its cultural orientation and presuppositions. However, just as the New Testament is now increasingly recognized to be a Jewish document—that is, a Christian canonization of literary materials generated by a movement that took Jewish ideas for granted and addressed many recognizably Jewish concerns in the formation of a new community—it might be helpful for contemporary scholars to consider viewing the Qur'an in a similar way. While it is misleading to characterize the Qur'an as a Jewish or Christian document per se, it is readily recognizable as an Islamic canonization of literary materials generated by a movement that took both Jewish and Christian ideas for granted and addressed many recognizably Jewish and Christian concerns in the formation of a new community.

Antiquity, defined by its allusion to and reworking of older scriptural materials—and its revision by Muslim exegetes and traditionists living several decades and centuries after the Arab conquests and the establishment of an Islamic empire, the caliphate. While it is absurd to suggest that classical commentators could not or did not interpret the Qur'an "correctly," it was inevitable that they would seek to construct scriptural meanings appropriate for their time, context, and cultural presuppositions. Naturally these were radically different from those of the Prophet's original followers, the first audience of the Qur'an.

The Qur'anic Episode in Islamic Tradition

The golden calf story is related in three places in the Qur'an, in Q Baqarah 2:51–54, Aʿrāf 7:148–153, and Ṭa-Ha 20:83–97, with occasional brief allusions to it elsewhere; in each of these cases, the narrative is embedded in much longer and theologically freighted excurses on Israel and its history. The main version of the story—possibly the original presupposed by the others—is that found in Sūrat Ṭa-Ha, in the context of what seems to be the closest thing to a fully developed recollection of the story of Moses to be found in the Qur'an. Overall, the amount of attention the Qur'an pays to the episode is noteworthy: verse for verse, there is probably about as much material on the golden calf in the Qur'an as there is in the canonical Hebrew Bible. The calf therefore appears to be as significant in the Qur'an's understanding of Israel and its history as it is in either the Jewish or the Christian Bible. Moreover, it generated substantial interest among later Muslim commentators, traditionists, and chroniclers, so much so that it is probably fair to say that the calf story is actually even more central to the Muslim understanding of salvation history and the fate of Israel than it is in either postbiblical Jewish or Christian tradition.

There are noteworthy exceptions here, however. In some Syriac Christian sources of Late Antiquity, in particular the *Didascalia apostolorum*, Ephrem, and Aphrahat, the golden calf episode is likewise understood to be utterly central to salvation history, specifically because it signaled the ultimate disconfirmation of the Jews.[5] This interpretation of the episode is found already in patristic tradition, as early as the *Epistle of Barnabas* and more fully developed by authors such as Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian; but the calf takes on a special prominence in Syriac (or Syrian) sources of the third and fourth century

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5 See discussions of these texts in the chapters by Wesley Dingman and Andrew J. Hayes in this volume.

in particular. The analogous interest in the narrative found in the Qur'an and later Islamic tradition can hardly be coincidental: the Qur'an's understanding of the episode is likely to have been informed in some way by Christian polemic, as was its general perception of Jews and the status of Israel. Moreover, Muslim exegetes' engagement with the story is informed not only by a desire to contextualize and develop qur'anic ideas about idolatry (the calf naturally attracting interest as the main example of Israel's idolatry found in the canonical Scripture) but also by the larger attempt by Muslim spokesmen to appropriate and rearticulate Christian anti-Judaism for their own ends. In short, the calf's importance in Islamic tradition is partially exegetical and partially theological, and the theological strands in particular hearken back to clear precedents in late antique Syriac Christianity.[6]

Rather than start by addressing the content and background of the qur'anic accounts themselves, let us work backwards by describing what Muslim readers have traditionally seen when they look at this story. For Muslim exegetes, the calf story stands as an indictment of the perversity of Israel, and thus, by implication, their contemporary descendants, the Jews. God covenanted with the Israelites and gave them ample providential blessings, redeeming them from slavery in Egypt and caring for them in the wilderness. Nevertheless, while their prophet Moses was away receiving the torah on Sinai, they went astray and worshiped an idol, a calf constructed from their gathered golden ornaments. In its broad outlines, this story is similar to that recounted in the book of Exodus; moreover, Christian and Muslim exegetes would agree on the basic message here, namely that it demonstrates the ingratitude of Israel for God's beneficence and their seemingly innate predisposition to sin and disobey—and thus ultimately proves that they are undeserving of divine favor.[7]

Notably, the three main qur'anic passages on the calf communicate somewhat different messages, largely due to their drawing on different aspects of the story as it is known from the canonical precursor in Exod 32. While the versions of Sūrat Ṭa-Ha and Sūrat al-Aʿrāf focus on the relationship between Moses and Aaron in particular and the circumstances surrounding the making of the calf while Moses was away on Sinai, the shorter portrayal of the episode in Sūrat al-Baqarah places the sin of the people in the foreground, emphasizing the need for them to express their sincere repentance for their transgression through a violent act of atonement:

6 On the qur'anic and Islamic rehearsal of classic Christian anti-Jewish tropes, see chapter 4 of Nirenberg 2013.

7 On qur'anic notions of covenant, see Gwynne 2014, 1–24; on the basic contours of qur'anic and Islamic understandings of the Exodus, see Pregill 2014.

> 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 then accepted your repentance, for truly he is the one who accepts repentance, the most merciful.
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> *Q Baqarah* 2:51–54[8]

At its core, this passage is clearly an allusion to the Levitical election in Exod 32:25–29—especially insofar that exegetes generally recognize that Moses's command to the Israelites to "slay yourselves" (*aqtulū anfusakum*) to secure forgiveness for their act clearly means that some of them (presumably the innocent) should slay the others (presumably the guilty).[9]

The question of atonement through bloodshed aside, this version of the episode is thematically linked to other qur'anic stories about sin and forgiveness such as those of Adam and David, although Muslim discussions of the calf incident tend to emphasize Israel's sinfulness much more than the element of atonement or forgiveness. Noteworthy in this connection is the fact that all of the qur'anic versions omit a major aspect of the biblical narrative, namely Moses's successful intercession for the people; as other contributions to this volume have shown, for some Jewish exegetes of antiquity such as Pseudo-Philo, Moses's intercession was in fact the central event of the episode. In contrast, in the eyes of both the Qur'an and later Muslim exegetes, the idea of

8 All translations from the Qur'an and other primary sources here are mine. The narrative voice here is that of the Deity, addressing Israel directly through the Qur'an—a message implicitly understood by the tradition to be delivered by Muhammad to Jewish interlocutors.

9 The exegetes never countenance the possibility that Moses's words are actually a command to the Israelites to commit suicide; rather, they generally recognize that this is a command issued to the people as a collective, the intent being for the Israelites to slay one another. The interpretation of who it is that is doing the killing, who it is that is killed, and for what reason eventually becomes a major barometer of exegetes' attitudes towards questions of political and communal identity, especially regarding the legitimacy of violence in the resolution of disputes over leadership; see Pregill 2010. Some Sunni exegetes became so uncomfortable with the implications of Moses's apparent sanction of a violent purge of sinners from the community—a perspective embraced by exegetes of more sectarian leanings—that they proposed a wholly figurative interpretation of the command to "slay yourselves," reading it as an injunction to adopt a posture of self-abnegating contrition (i.e., "slay your pride" or the like).

divine vacillation is problematic, and so the whole theme of God resolving to destroy the people and then changing his mind must be omitted.

Moreover, Muslim exegetes tend to understand the killing prescribed here less as a means of overcoming the breach introduced into the relationship between God and Israel by the making of the calf and more as a simple punishment, especially since they generally see this sin as annulling God's covenant with them. The conclusion the exegetes draw about the significance of the sin of the calf is that God made the Jews a weak, subjugated people as a consequence of their idolatry *despite* their obedience to the command to "slay yourselves": "Whoever escaped from the killing, God cursed them and then imposed upon them disgrace and miserable degradation" (Muqātil 1979–1989, 1.107; cf. 2.265 *ad* Q Aʿrāf 7:152). This is tantamount to—and perhaps on some level inspired by—the classic Christian supersessionist reading of the event as signaling Israel's disconfirmation as the chosen people, with the added nuance, typical of Islamic supersessionism, of drawing a direct connection between Israel's loss of divine favor and the humiliation of being a powerless people subjected to the rule of others.

This is not to say that Muslim exegetes do not bring some unique—that is, unprecedented—concerns to their interpretation of the episode. Pages upon pages in the *tafsīr* are devoted to two major questions that come up in connection with the episode. First, how was it that the calf was animated, and what was the nature of its transitory—or illusory—life? Second, who was the "Samaritan" (al-Sāmirī), and why did he create the calf and bring it to life, and how was this accomplished? The reader who is only familiar with the canonical precursor in Exod 32, or with Jewish and Christian elaborations on the story, no doubt finds these questions incomprehensible, if not disconcerting; but they are by no means peripheral to our discussion here. The animation of the calf and the role of the Samaritan are in fact the main subjects explored by commentators on the qur'anic calf narrative. To make sense of this, we must understand how they approached the Sūrah 20 version of the episode in particular. The exegetes' response to specific textual problems in the obscure verses of this chapter had a decisive, even transformative, impact on the Muslim understanding of Israel's sin on the whole.

As it is usually understood, responsibility for the making of the golden calf in the Sūrah 20 version of the story seems to have shifted from Aaron, the maker of the calf in the biblical precursor in Exodus, to a mysterious personage called al-Sāmirī, the "Samaritan" (see Table 17.1). In v. 85, God notifies Moses that "we have put your people on trial in your absence, and the Samaritan has led them astray"; this is the first reference to the character in the Qur'an, who appears only in this episode, and is only mentioned three times here (vv. 85, 87, 95).

TABLE 17.1 Q Ṭa-Ha 20:83–97 according to its traditional interpretation

(83) [God said:] "What has caused you to hurry away from your people, O Moses?"	وَمَا أَعْجَلَكَ عَن قَوْمِكَ يَا مُوسَىٰ
(84) [Moses] replied: "They are right behind me; I have hurried ahead to you to do your bidding, Lord!"	قَالَ هُمْ أُولَاءِ عَلَىٰ أَثَرِي وَعَجِلْتُ إِلَيْكَ رَبِّ لِتَرْضَىٰ
(85) [God] said: "We have put your people on trial in your absence, and the Samaritan 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 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 رَبُّكُمْ وَعْدًا حَسَنًا أَفَطَالَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْعَهْدُ أَمْ أَرَدتُّمْ 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 the Samaritan suggest …"	قَالُوا مَا أَخْلَفْنَا مَوْعِدَكَ بِمَلْكِنَا وَلَـٰكِنَّا حُمِّلْنَا أَوْزَارًا مِّن زِينَةِ الْقَوْمِ فَقَذَفْنَاهَا فَكَذَٰلِكَ أَلْقَى السَّامِرِيُّ
(88) Then he brought forth a lowing image of a calf. And they said: "This is your god and the god of Moses [whom] he has forgotten …"	فَأَخْرَجَ لَهُمْ عِجْلاً جَسَدًا لَّهُ خُوَارٌ فَقَالُوا هَـٰذَا إِلَـٰهُكُمْ وَإِلَـٰهُ 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 أَلَّا يَرْجِعُ إِلَيْهِمْ قَوْلاً وَلَا يَمْلِكُ لَهُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا
(90) Aaron had said to them beforehand: "O people, you are surely only being tested with it; it is al-*Raḥmān* who is really your Lord, so follow me and obey my command."	وَلَقَدْ قَالَ لَهُمْ هَارُونُ مِن قَبْلُ يَا قَوْمِ إِنَّمَا فُتِنتُم بِهِ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ الرَّحْمَـٰنُ فَاتَّبِعُونِي وَأَطِيعُوا أَمْرِي

TABLE 17.1 Q Ṭa-Ha 20:83–97 according to its traditional interpretation (*cont.*)

[91] But they replied: “So long as Moses does not return to us, we will not cease our devotion to it.”	قَالُوا لَن نَّبْرَحَ 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 ابْنَ أُمَّ لَا تَأْخُذْ بِلِحْيَتِي وَلَا بِرَأْسِي إِنِّي خَشِيتُ أَن تَقُولَ فَرَّقْتَ بَيْنَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ وَلَمْ تَرْقُبْ قَوْلِي
[95] [Turning to the Samaritan, Moses] asked: “So, what do you have to say for yourself, O Samaritan?”	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 track of the [angelic] messenger and threw it in; I imagined this to be best.”	قَالَ بَصُرْتُ بِمَا لَمْ يَبْصُرُوا بِهِ فَقَبَضْتُ قَبْضَةً مِّنْ أَثَرِ الرَّسُولِ فَنَبَذْتُهَا وَكَذَٰلِكَ 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 which you will not be able to escape. Look at your god to whom you are so devoted: verily, we shall burn it up, dispersing it into the sea as ashes.”	قَالَ فَاذْهَبْ فَإِنَّ لَكَ فِي الْحَيَاةِ أَن تَقُولَ لَا مِسَاسَ وَإِنَّ لَكَ مَوْعِدًا لَّن تُخْلَفَهُ وَانظُرْ إِلَىٰ إِلَٰهِكَ الَّذِي ظَلْتَ عَلَيْهِ عَاكِفًا لَّنُحَرِّقَنَّهُ ثُمَّ لَنَنسِفَنَّهُ فِي الْيَمِّ نَسْفًا

Moses then rushes down from the mountain, accosts Aaron, and, as in Exodus, receives a weak excuse from him about why he let the people commit this act: “I was really afraid that you would say, ‘You have introduced division among the Israelites, and did not pay heed to my command’” (v. 94). That is, Aaron feared that by intervening he would cause schism among the people, and that

Moses would find this worse than letting them indulge in idolatry temporarily. (In the parallel narrative in Sūrah 7, Aaron's excuse is rather that his life was in jeopardy because the people did not respect his leadership and would have killed him for opposing their plans to venerate the calf.)

Then, abruptly, Moses seems to turn to the Samaritan, who has not been mentioned at all in the narrative since God's oblique reference to him in v. 85 at the beginning of the story. In response to Moses's curt question, "So, what do you have to say for yourself, O Samaritan?" the previously invisible Samaritan confesses that, "I perceived that which they did not. I picked up a handful from the track of the messenger and threw it in; I imagined this to be best." This action resulted in the creation of a calf described in peculiar terms: *ʿijl jasad lahu khuwārun*, "a lowing image of a calf" (literally "a calf, a body that lows"). The commentators almost universally agree that what is going on here is that al-Sāmirī, a member of the Israelite "clan" of the Samaritans (*Sāmirah*), was either a malevolent interloper among the Israelites or else a treacherous follower of Moses. For some undisclosed reason, he made the calf and, usurping leadership of the people from Aaron, commanded the credulous or desperate people to worship it.

Although commentators differ as to why and how this came to be, the reference to "a calf, a body that lows" is usually taken to indicate that, having made a calf of gold, the Samaritan induced it to imitate life in some way, especially by lowing like a real cow. Equally ubiquitous is the explanation of the "handful from the track of the messenger," which is usually glossed as a reference to the appearance of Gabriel among the Israelites when they crossed the Red Sea after escaping from Egypt; at that time, he rode upon a horse that was so imbued with divine potency that everything it touched came to life.[10] Even taking just a bit of the earth it had trodden, the "track of the messenger," the Samaritan was able to induce the calf to low like a real cow or even to animate it, at least temporarily. After his confession, Moses pronounces what is universally understood as a curse upon him: *fa-dhhab fa-inna laka fīʾl-ḥayāt an taqūla*

10 Notably, although Gabriel is invoked by name in three places in the Qur'an, he is not mentioned in connection with the crossing of the Red Sea (depicted at Q Baqarah 2:50, immediately preceding the version of the calf narrative found in that *sūrah*); in point of fact, he is never depicted in a narrative context anywhere in the Qur'an at all. Nevertheless, the exegetes and historians commonly relate narratives about how Gabriel appeared on his angelic steed at that time, usually describing how he led the pursuing Egyptians to their death by drawing them between the parted halves of the sea, where they drowned when the sea returned to its former state after the Israelites passed through to the other side (both Exodus and the Qur'an claim that Pharaoh and his people were drowned, though neither mentions Gabriel as the one responsible; cf. Exod 14:27–28; Q 17:103; 28:40; 43:55).

lā misāsa wa-inna laka mawʿidan lan tukhlafahu—as one popular translation has it, "begone, all your life you are cursed to say 'Do not touch me'; a threat hangs over you that you will not be able to escape" (Ali 1988 *ad* Q Ṭa-Ha 20:97). It is important to note that the word "curse" does not actually occur here, and "threat" is a bit of a stretch for *mawʿid*, which literally means "appointment" or "obligation."

Although the calf is described in the same obscure terms in the Sūrah 7 version of the story as well, strangely, al-Sāmirī is totally missing from this account. Instead, we only see the interaction between Moses, Aaron, and the people here, as in the biblical version:

> In his absence, the people of Moses made a lowing image of a calf 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. When [the people] repented of their actions and saw that they had gone astray, they said, "If our Lord does not show mercy to us and forgive us, surely we will be among the losers!"
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> When Moses returned to his people, angry and regretful, he said, "What evil you have wrought against me in my absence! Did you wish to hasten your Lord's judgment upon yourselves?" And he threw the tablets, and grabbed his brother by the hair of his head and pulled him towards him, but [Aaron] said, "O son of my mother! 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…." [Moses then] said, "O Lord, forgive me and my brother, and accommodate us in your mercy, for you are the most merciful of all…."
>
> *Q Aʿrāf* 7:148–151

The Samaritan's absence here is generally of no concern to the traditional exegetes; rather than sensing some discrepancy, they merely read this version in Sūrah 7 as an abbreviation of the longer one in Sūrah 20; this is supported by the traditional chronology that is assigned to the Qur'an, insofar as Q 20 was purportedly revealed first, then Q 7, then Q 2.[11] The shorter, later narratives

11 The traditional scheme of the chronology of the revelation of the qur'anic *sūrah*s has come to be held as suspect by some contemporary scholars. There are many signs that it was not assembled on an objective basis, but rather was generated as an aid to exegesis of individual *sūrah*s by assigning obscure passages to particular "occasions of revelation," as the tradition terms them. Other scholars still find the scheme generally vindicable, especially as placed on a supposedly more "scientific" basis by Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930). I will not wade into this controversy here; I only wish to observe that the proposed sequential

are thus seen as alluding to and presupposing the first one; they are not acknowledged as different “versions” per se, especially given that the traditional commentators shy away from any idea of inconsistency in the Qur’an. In turn, Western scholars have had a variety of reactions to the perceived contradiction here, but their answers to the problem have generally been unsatisfactory. One approach has been to see the Sūrah 20 account as fundamentally garbled, with the attribution of the making of the calf not to Aaron but to another party as due to Muhammad’s confusion, while the later version in Sūrah 7 represents a rectification of the earlier error that generated the references to the Samaritan.

Again, the questions of greatest concern to the traditional exegetes are what exactly happened when the Samaritan brought the calf to life, or made it seem to be alive, and where he had come from. The earliest exegetes seem to have naturally assumed that “al-Sāmirī” is a *nisbah*, a tribal or ethnic appellation, and thus concluded that Sāmirah was the name of an Israelite clan; later speculation that he was actually an outsider was perhaps prompted by the difficulty involved in accepting that an Israelite under Moses’s prophetic guidance had not only succumbed to idolatry but actually orchestrated the affair, a problem rendered more acute by some early speculation that this individual was actually a kinsman of Moses (cf. Ibn Qutaybah 1960, 43–44).

Strangely, it is not until the fifth/eleventh century that some commentators draw a connection between the name al-Sāmirī and the Samaritan community found in Nablus and other centers in Palestine under Muslim rule in the Middle Ages. The seeming lack of awareness of the ethnographic reality of a Samaritan community in the *tafsīr* tradition for centuries is particularly strange given that scholars have commonly held that the qur’anic depiction of a Samaritan as responsible for the sin of the golden calf must represent an appropriation of some rabbinic tradition of apology on behalf of Aaron that asserts exactly this, though no trace of any such tradition in pre-Islamic Jewish lore has ever come to light.[12] The evidence of the Qur’an itself is no help in this regard, insofar as the only indication of knowledge of Samaritans is the occurrence of the name al-Sāmirī in this very passage.

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development from Q 20 to 7 to 2 is quite plausible as regards the narrative evolution of representations of the calf narrative in the Qur’an.

12 The claim that any aspect of the qur’anic portrayal of biblical characters and themes that deviates from what is literally found in the Bible must be of Jewish origin has a long pedigree in Western engagements with Islam. Ludovico Marracci’s Latin Qur’an of 1698 seems to have been particularly influential in this regard; Marracci regularly denounces anything he perceives as peculiar or irregular in the Qur’an as talmudic fables, Jewish frivolities, and the like.

The physical nature of this seemingly animate calf became a point of even greater controversy because the oldest tradition of interpretation seems to have held that the Samaritan had actually transformed the golden calf into an animal of flesh and blood.[13] There was subsequently a reaction against this among rationalist commentators who were bothered by the story's seeming attribution of a miracle to the Samaritan, obviously a malefactor, because of the thorny issue of the *muʿjizāt*, evidentiary miracles that function to validate prophecy. Evidentiary miracles were problematic for the tradition because it seems that early Muslim spokesmen were often challenged by Jewish and Christian interlocutors to produce some proof that Muhammad had worked miracles as a demonstration of his divine warrant; this eventually generated the doctrine that the revelation of the Qur'an itself had constituted such proof.[14] While the earliest exegetes were unconcerned with the idea of the Samaritan's wonderworking, by the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, some commentators shied away from this approach to the story, asserting instead that the calf's animation was only an illusion, that it was a kind of robot or automaton that only appeared to be alive, or a clever contraption that made a sound when the wind blew through it but could not in any way be mistaken for a living, flesh-and-blood creature.

While the rationalist approach to Scripture and tradition embraced by the Muʿtazilah, the school that promoted this desupernaturalized view of the calf, eventually came to be seen by many Sunnis as problematic, their exegesis of this and many other passages in the Qur'an was highly influential. The interpretation of the calf episode in many classic commentaries—especially that of Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923), the exemplar of classical Sunni qur'anic exegesis—must be understood in the light of the Muʿtazilite critique of early claims that the calf was alive.[15] That said, by the high Middle Ages exegetical

13 The claim of the organic nature of the calf hinges on the term *jasad*, the precise meaning of which is difficult to determine. While *jasad* appears to mean "image" or "likeness" in the qur'anic lexicon (cf. 21:8 and 38:34), it may also be taken as meaning "body," which facilitated the interpretation of the calf as having been transformed into a living, flesh and blood animal here. The discussion of the term in lexicographic sources is clearly inflected by the theological and exegetical concerns surrounding its usage in the Qur'an.

14 The development of ideas about the proofs of prophecy, especially through ongoing dialogue between spokesmen of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities over the course of centuries in the early and medieval Islamic periods, has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Cf. Griffith 1979; Stroumsa 1985; and Pregill 2011a.

15 Cf., e.g., the tradition cited by al-Ṭabarī *ad* Q Baqarah 2:51 attributed to the Companion ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās (d. ca. 68/687) that portrays the calf as having been magically generated by the Samaritan's use of the "handful of the track of the messenger" but asserts that its lowing was due only to the passage of wind through its body (al-Ṭabarī 1954–1969,

priorities shifted once again, and authenticating Muhammad's prophetic status (and diminishing seeming challenges and competition to it) was no longer as pressing a task as it had been previously. That being the case, many commentators no longer felt it necessary to avoid asserting that the calf had actually been brought to life, and they casually acknowledged the difference of opinion among the early exegetes on whether the calf was actually made of flesh and blood or rather had been mechanical in nature.

The Problem of Jewish "Influence" on the Qur'anic Episode

Differences in opinion over the nature of the animate calf and the Samaritan's origins notwithstanding, Muslim exegesis of the qur'anic episode are remarkably stable over the course of the tradition's development from early Islamic up to modern times. Further, since the emergence of modern scholarship on the Qur'an in the European academy with the work of Abraham Geiger and his contemporaries in the nineteenth century, Western scholars have been in almost total agreement with the tradition in understanding the qur'anic story to mean what the tradition has said it means. Thus, in the common scholarly view, the qur'anic narrative differs from that of the Bible in two major ways: it asserts that the Israelites worshiped the calf because it appeared to be alive, and it blames the making of the idol on the mysterious "Samaritan" rather than Aaron. The historical reasons for the Qur'an's major departures from the understanding of the episode in Exodus are unclear, but have often been the subject of scholarly conjecture.

The general conformity of Western scholars' interpretation of the calf episode to that promoted in *tafsīr* requires some explanation. Western scholars' acceptance of the traditional interpretation in this case is typical of a pervasive reliance on Muslim commentary in the Anglo-European scholarly tradition. This reliance dates back almost to the very beginning of Western Christian reception of the Scripture (cf. Burman 2007), and many if not most of the oldest European translations of and commentaries on the Qur'an are heavily

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2.63–64, no. 918). Such traditions clearly emerged as a compromise position on the nature of the calf, preserving some role for supernaturalism in the episode and explaining how the calf emitted its characteristic *khuwār* or lowing sound, while simultaneously denying that the Samaritan had actually worked a miracle. Though al-Ṭabarī cites a number of different traditions on the calf, representing a spectrum of interpretive possibilities, this is clearly the one he favors. The claim that the calf was flesh and blood is conspicuously absent from his work, as it is from a number of other Qur'an commentaries from the later second/eighth through the fourth/tenth century.

dependent on classical Muslim exegesis. The aligning of Western scholarship with *tafsīr* has meant that scholars have generally seen qur'anic narrative through a lens imposed by the hegemonic discourse of traditional interpretation, adopting and adapting a fundamentally Muslim frame for thinking about Islam's origins. In concrete terms, this means in particular that the reading of the Qur'an has until recently almost always been anchored in conventional accounts of the life of Muhammad that emphasize the exceptional (and obviously inspired) nature of the text; this is at the expense of recognizing the Qur'an as an expression of late antique religious, cultural, and political tendencies.

The reliance on the interpretive frame imposed by Muslim tradition—a hermeneutic guided by hagiographic, prophetological, and apologetic imperatives—is perhaps most evident in scholars' perennial interest in uncovering the Jewish sources of the Qur'an, insofar as the *sīrah* (the traditional biography of Muhammad) posits extensive contacts between Muhammad and the Jews during his community's formative period. With the emergence of more objective and less polemical scholarship on Islam in post-Enlightenment Europe, the work of Abraham Geiger in particular exerted a tremendous impact on Western attitudes, encouraging a view of Islam not as a deviant, heretical form of Christianity, as the medieval tradition often asserted, but rather as a sibling tradition to Christianity—both of the younger traditions having been decisively shaped by reliance on Judaism in their formative years (Lassner 1999; Heschel 2001). Geiger's understanding of the Qur'an as essentially derived from rabbinic sources in his massively influential 1833 thesis *Was hat Mohamed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (*What did Muhammad borrow from Judaism?*), translated into English simply as *Judaism and Islám* in 1898, determined the basic approach of Western scholars to qur'anic narrative for well over a century.[16] Geiger sought to investigate the possible roots of the Qur'an in late ancient Judaism as a means of fostering an appreciation for the commonalities between the faiths, a self-evidently laudable goal. However, Geiger's approach had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing traditional claims that much of the Qur'an was produced during Muhammad's direct interactions with the Jews of Medina, which has sometimes encouraged the misleading conclusion that the Qur'an was essentially plagiarized.

16 Notably, Marracci's annotated translation of the Qur'an—particularly his copious quotations from the *tafsīr*—was used extensively by Geiger. Geiger's special contribution to the emergence of the modern discipline of qur'anic studies was thus not positing Jewish "influence" on the Qur'an per se—a theme he clearly derived from his predecessors—but rather drawing on his proficiency with rabbinic sources—a proficiency his Christian predecessors lacked—in attempting to substantiate that claim in a serious way.

The Qur'an's representation of Israel and its history, especially its interpretation and retelling of biblical stories, has perennially been seen, by and large, as copied from midrashic precedents, a view that has usually inspired various biased attempts to excavate the Jewish sources of the Qur'an that assume a total lack of originality—or even basic comprehension—in its flawed and derivative appropriations of those stories (cf. Pregill 2007). This one-dimensional, frequently polemical approach has largely been rejected by responsible scholars today, but the blatantly reductionist attitude adopted by much of the older scholarship on the Qur'an has discouraged new investigations into its connections to the literary materials of older monotheistic communities that preceded the rise of Islam until fairly recently. That is, the inadequate and unsophisticated way previous generations of scholars approached the question of Islamic origins, along with the desire to avoid offending committed Muslims with frank discussions of the tradition's possible relationship to its precursors, has generally had a retarding effect on qur'anic studies as a whole (cf. Reynolds 2011).

The thesis—or rather assumption—that the Qur'an is heavily dependent upon rabbinic sources generally appears to be confirmed by its coincidence with midrashic tradition at numerous points. To some degree, it is natural to expect such coincidence; Jewish narrative traditions circulated widely in Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an's thoroughgoing concern with Jews and Judaism does at various junctures seem to be informed by knowledge of traditions that are authentically preserved in rabbinic literature. However, two methodological problems emerge here.

First, due to Geiger's titanic impact on modern scholarship on the Qur'an, the Jewish matrix of early Islam has received much more attention than other aspects of the literary, cultural, and religious horizon that informed its vision. While dialogue with some form of Christianity (sometimes posited to have been a heterodox "Jewish Christianity") has always been acknowledged as having some impact on the Qur'an, scholars have long prioritized the purported Jewish precursors to the Qur'an's understanding of Israel and its history in particular. But the Qur'an's engagement with biblical themes, ideas, and symbols need not be understood as narrowly or exclusively—or even primarily—Jewish in origin and orientation. Recently a number of scholars have shed light on the impact the traditions of biblical interpretation associated with varieties of Near Eastern Christianity may have exerted on the Qur'an instead (cf., e.g., El-Badawi 2014).

Second, while striking points of similarity can certainly be seen between the Qur'an and midrashic tradition, a certain ahistorical view of the midrash as representing the ancient, timeless legacy of the sages of the tannaitic and

amoraic periods (that is, the first through fifth centuries) has encouraged a monolithic conception of the midrash as uniformly pre-Islamic as well as quintessentially Jewish. While for decades scholars have recognized that the midrashic tradition and other aspects of classical rabbinic Judaism were profoundly shaped by engagement with Christianity, a corresponding recognition that some major midrashic sources were redacted after the rise of Islam and thus contain traditions that were not only addressing Muslim claims but actually informed by some knowledge of the early Islamic tradition has been slow in coming.

However, this is particularly critical in the case before us; here and elsewhere, what appear to be midrashic precursors to material in the Qur'an itself are actually Jewish responses to Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an that emerged significantly after the rise of Islam. That is, Muslim approaches to the stories of the prophets and patriarchs in the Qur'an gradually came to inform Jewish understandings of corresponding material in the Bible; these understandings were eventually textualized and preserved in compendious collections of rabbinic lore alongside much older—and indisputably pre-Islamic—material. This encyclopedism lent an impression of antiquity to traditions that emerged quite late in the rabbinic tradition's development, at a time when it was permeable to claims and ideas circulating in a Near Eastern world dominated by Islam after the seventh and eighth centuries.

While traditions on the golden calf episode in older (i.e., indisputably pre-Islamic) midrashic collections do exhibit a particular tendency towards apologetic in their representation of the role of Aaron in the affair, they do not go so far as to seek to exonerate Aaron completely by attributing the making of the calf entirely to another party; nor is the calf ever really understood as animate the way it is in Muslim exegetical traditions. In some pre-Islamic rabbinic traditions, outside malefactors may get involved: one from *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* asserts that the Egyptian sorcerers who dueled with Moses at Pharaoh's court had followed the Israelites out of Egypt, and that they used enchantments to make the golden calf shudder before the credulous people. Another tradition, this one found in the Babylonian Talmud, depicts Satan using an illusion to try to convince the Israelites that Moses had died while he was away on the mountain so that they would turn to the calf as their savior (*Cant. Rab.* 1.9.3; *b. Šabb.* 89a).

Building on this, three midrashic sources portray one or another malefactor making the calf seem to come to life through supernatural means: in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the printed (which is to say later) version of *Midrash Tanḥuma*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, Satan, the Egyptian sorcerers, or other nefarious individuals seek to lead Israel astray by making the calf dance or low before

the people (*Pirqe R. El.* 45; *Midrash Tanḥuma, Ki-tissa* 19; *Tg. Ps.-J. ad* Exod 32:19, 24). Anyone familiar with rabbinic literature will recognize that these are suspiciously late sources; nevertheless, since the work of Geiger in the 1830s, almost every scholar who has discussed the sources of the qur'anic calf narrative has pointed to such parallels—especially that in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*—as precursors to, and thus the proximate sources of, the qur'anic story (cf., e.g., Geiger 1898, 131–32).

While there is a clear logic informing the development of attitudes towards Aaron's role in the episode in rabbinic sources—moving from candid admission of guilt to attempts to provide excuses for his actions to minimizing his role as much as possible by shifting blame onto others—the trajectory of this development is not one that is wholly insulated from an external context. The move from candor to evasion among Jewish commentators on the episode was clearly stimulated by Christian attempts to polemicize against Jews on the basis of the story. Similarly, the move from portraying the mitigating circumstances for Aaron's making of the calf to placing almost exclusive emphasis on the involvement of outsiders was in no small part due to the prevalence of an understanding of the episode among Muslim commentators in which Aaron was almost totally exonerated, with the making and animation of the calf attributed to al-Sāmirī, the Samaritan, instead. Thus, the accounts of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the later *Tanḥuma*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* are clearly "post-Islamic"; they reflect the appropriation of a new conception of the story among Muslim exegetes by Jewish exegetes who apparently perceived the trope of the animation of the calf by an outsider as totally congruous with their understanding of the episode, especially since their own tradition's approach was already heading in this direction.

The story of the golden calf is not alone in this regard. Time and again we see distinctive developments in the interpretation of major biblical stories in these late midrashim; almost innumerable examples can be found in Ginzburg's encyclopedic *Legends of the Jews*, in which the author famously lumped together exegetical traditions from Second Temple, rabbinic, and medieval sources without any regard for their chronological development or periodization. Scholarship in this area of research is still in its infancy, but even casual comparison of developments in later Jewish sources with parallel developments in Muslim exegesis of corresponding stories from the Qur'an in Islam's formative period demonstrates many points of similarity between the two traditions.

No doubt some of the overlap may be attributed to coincidence, but some of it must be attributable to convergence as well. This is especially likely given the enormous impact of Islamic civilization in the Near Eastern-Mediterranean

oikoumene on Jewish culture during the gaonic period, when many of the normative sources of rabbinic Judaism (not least of all the Babylonian Talmud) were redacted and transmitted from centers of Jewish culture in the east throughout the Diaspora, including to Europe. Jews were no more passive receptacles for the influx of Islamic "influences" than Muslims were for Jewish "influences"; rather, both communities were equal partners in an ongoing dialogue in which the legacy of ancient Israel, canonized in Scripture, was perennially contested, each community seeking to demonstrate that it was the exclusive heir to Israel's covenantal, prophetic, and messianic heritage (cf. Newby 2000).

This dynamic is entirely familiar to students of late antique exegetical discourse. In an earlier era, we see Jewish and Christian interpreters of Scripture involved in similar processes that are simultaneously symbiotic and competitive. The earlier dialectic of Jewish-Christian relations made a significant contribution to the formation of the Qur'an itself; the process would be repeated again after the establishment of the caliphal empire, but this time the Jews' main interlocutors were Muslims, and the products of their mutual engagement were the mature traditions of medieval Islam and Judaism, each definitively shaped through encounter with the other.

The Qur'anic Episode in its Late Antique Context

A few Western scholars have expressed skepticism about the meaning of the qur'anic golden calf narrative as it has been understood by the Islamic exegetical tradition (e.g., Hawting 2001; Rippin 1995). The interpretation of al-Sāmirī as a Samaritan interloper is questionable, given the total absence of any other reference to the Samaritans in the Qur'an, to say nothing of Muslims' generally minimal knowledge of this community during the first several centuries of the tradition's development. Moreover, many scholars have sought to discover the conjectured midrashic precursor to the Qur'an's portrayal of a Samaritan as the architect of the calf episode, assuming that such a portrayal must have originated as a Jewish polemic against Samaritans. However, no such precursor has ever been discovered, or rather recovered, though its existence was taken for granted by scholars for a number of decades.

Even more problematic is the total absence of any reference to Gabriel's involvement in the episode in the Qur'an, which provides a crucial basis for the interpretation of the key phrase "I picked up a handful from the track of the messenger and threw it in" (20:96), the Samaritan's explanation of how the

idol was created and transformed from gathered gold ornaments into "a calf, a body that lows." Further, although the animation of the calf would seem to be a major aspect of the narrative, it is puzzling that such a major plot development should be communicated in that narrative through a single obscure phrase. Moreover, as noted previously, why this phrase should recur in the version of the narrative in Sūrat al-Aʿrāf, presumably signaling the calf's magical creation and animation there as well, while al-Sāmirī is totally omitted from that version, has long perplexed scholars.

In examining the qur'anic narratives on the golden calf, particularly that of Sūrah 20, in the context of the development of the qur'anic corpus itself as well as in the history of the episode's interpretation both in pre-Islamic Late Antiquity and the Islamic commentary tradition, we may come to a rather different understanding of the Qur'an's portrayal of the episode. I would argue that the narrative in Q Ṭa-Ha 20:83–97 is neither a radically new reinterpretation of the episode, nor particularly indebted either to midrashic precursors or to some other imaginative retelling of the story in circulation in Late Antiquity. Rather, the Sūrah 20 version of the story is actually much closer to the biblical account of Exod 32, albeit with a few unique flourishes. This is not to say that Muslim exegetes *misunderstood* the story; rather, I would argue that they deliberately exploited the obscure, allusive language utilized in this passage in order to fundamentally reshape its meaning for their own purposes.

Although scholars of the Qur'an have sometimes discerned a perceptible gap between the scriptural meanings promoted in the *tafsīr* and those that seem indigenous to the text itself, this disjunction has all too often been represented as due to the shortcomings of the exegetes, as if they could not attain an objective perspective on the Qur'an but were rather constrained by their own narrow biases and theological agendas. I prefer to construe this gap in a more positive way, to the credit of the commentators: it is not so much that they could not read Scripture "correctly," but rather that they made deliberate exegetical choices that established their particular mastery of Scripture in producing a nexus of textual meanings congruous with their unique priorities and insights.

Although the term has been problematized in various ways, it is perhaps helpful to characterize the account of Sūrat Ṭa-Ha as "rewritten torah" in Arabic: like the Jewish and Christian works of the Second Temple and late antique periods that are often designated by this term, the qur'anic story engages with and reconstructs a narrative similar to that found in the canonical precursor in the Bible (here specifically Exodus), but it remains faithful to both the main narrative contours and the thematic emphases of the original, while

also actively reconstruing the story for its own particular theological purposes.[17] Notably, while largely based upon a careful and deliberate restructuring and rescripting of Exod 32, the Sūrah 20 version also alludes to other biblical passages pertinent to the calf episode, incorporating those allusions alongside renditions of portions of the Exodus narrative into Arabic (see Table 17.2).

Like the precursor narrative in Exodus, the qur'anic story is essentially about a crisis of leadership—specifically, what happens when prophetic authority is wrongfully delegated to surrogates. The main narrative undercurrent here is that although Aaron was designated the helper of Moses (cf. Q Furqān 25:35) and his representative in his absence (cf. Q Aʿrāf 7:142), he was clearly his brother's subordinate, and could not provide the guidance to the people his brother, a real prophet, could. Thus, in the absence of Moses, left to his own devices—or rather to make decisions based on his own fallible judgment—Aaron allowed the people to go astray after an idol.

This subtext helps us clarify the meaning of the key phrase *qabaḍtu qabḍatan min athar al-rasūl fa-nabadhtuhā*, "I picked up a handful from the track of the messenger and threw it in" (Q 20:96). As is occasionally noted by the classical commentators themselves, this phrase does not necessarily refer to a physical "taking" and "throwing" of dust or dirt from the literal footprint of a messenger, angelic or otherwise. Rather, *qabaḍtu qabḍatan*, "taking a handful," is an idiom meaning "to sample, to do something for a little while." Similarly, *nabadha* can convey the metaphorical sense of *rejecting* as well as a literal "throwing." Thus, in al-Sāmirī's apology before Moses, his statement really means, "I followed the path of the messenger for a while, then rejected it"—meaning, al-Sāmirī initially followed Moses's *example*, then abandoned it and went his own way. This phrase makes little sense if it is associated with an individual who had no obligation to follow Moses's guidance, but it makes perfect sense as a thin alibi that might be given by Aaron in attempting to explain his gratuitous dereliction of duty.

That is, this "Samaritan" al-Sāmirī is not a mysterious third party who intervenes between Moses and Aaron in the episode; he actually *is* Aaron, whom we can readily recognize as the main architect of the episode based on the precedent of the canonical precursor from the Bible. The use of the appellation al-Sāmirī, I argue, is not meant to cast blame for the calf on the Samaritans. Rather, it suggests that the story is providing an etiology for the form of calf

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17 *Pace* the recent judgment of Griffith 2013, who asserts that while a general familiarity with biblical themes, concepts, and narratives suffuses the Qur'an, there is very little evidence of direct familiarity with the text of the Bible as we know it: "[t]he Bible is at the same time everywhere and nowhere in the Arabic Qur'ān" (2).

TABLE 17.2 Q Ṭa-Ha 20:83–97 according to its biblical subtexts

SECTION 1: God confronts Moses on the Mount (**Q 20:83–85** = revision of **Exod 32:7–8** with allusion to biblical traditions on Samaria)	
(83) [God said:] "What has caused you to hurry away from your people, O Moses?" (84) [Moses] replied: "They are faithfully following my example while I have hurried ahead to you to do your bidding, Lord!"	(Exod 32:7–8) And the Lord said to Moses: "Get down from here, for the people you brought forth from Egypt have become corrupt … they have made themselves an image of a calf, and worshiped it and offered it sacrifices …"
(85) [God] said: "We have tempted your people in your absence, and the **Samarian** has led them astray."	(Hos 8:5–6) **Your calf, O Samaria**, is rejected **… the calf of Samaria** shall be utterly shattered. (2 Kgs 17:21) Jeroboam drew Israel away from following the Lord, and **caused them to sin a great sin** …
TRANSITION: Moses returns and confronts the people (**Q 20:86**)	
(86) Then Moses returned to his people, angry and sorrowful, and he said: "O people, didn't your Lord make you a fair deal? Did the time of covenant take too long for you, or did you wish to provoke your Lord's anger by shirking the duty you accepted through me?"	
SECTION 2: recollection of the making of the Calf (**Q 20:87–91** = rearrangement and paraphrase of **Exod 32:1–5** with underlying allusion to Ps 106:20–21)	
(87) They replied: "We did not shirk the duty we accepted through you willingly; 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 the Samarian suggest …"	(Exod 32:2–3) Then Aaron replied to them: "Remove the golden earrings of your wives, sons, and daughters, and bring them to me." **Then all the people removed their own golden earrings straightaway and brought them to Aaron.**

TABLE 17.2 Q Ṭa-Ha 20:83–97 according to its biblical subtexts (*cont.*)

(88a) He brought forth an image of a calf, [an animal] that lows …	(Exod 32:4a) He took [the gold] from their hands and fashioned it with a tool and made of it **an image of a calf** … (Ps 106:20) They exchanged their glory for **an image of an ox,** [an animal] **that eats grass** …
(88b) … **and they said: "This is your god** and the god of Moses," and **they forgot** [their true God] …	(Exod 32:4b) … and **they said: "This is your god,** O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt …" (Ps 106:21) **They forgot** God their savior, who did great things in Egypt.
(89) Did they not see that it could not reply to them, nor had any power to harm or benefit them?	
(90) Aaron had said to them beforehand: "O people, although you may be tempted by it, in fact, **your Lord is al-Raḥmān**, so follow me and obey my command."	(Exod 32:5) When Aaron saw … he built an altar and said, **"Tomorrow is a festival for the Lord …"**
(91) But they replied: "We will only remain devoted to it until Moses returns to us."	(Exod 32:1) Then the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain; and they gathered against Aaron and said: "Up, make us gods to go before us, **for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what's become of him.**"
SECTION 3: Moses confronts Aaron/al-Sāmirī (**Q 20:92–97** = rearrangement and rescripting of **Exod 32:20–24**)	
(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?"	(Exod 32:21–24) Then Moses said to Aaron: "What did this people do to you, that you brought upon them such great sin?" And Aaron replied: "Let not your wrath blaze forth, my lord; you know that the people are

TABLE 17.2 Q Ṭa-Ha 20:83–97 according to its biblical subtexts (*cont.*)

(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.'" (95) Then Moses asked: "So, why did you do it, O Samarian?"	ever bent on evil. They said to me: 'Make us gods to go before us, for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what's become of him.' Then I said to them: 'Whoever has gold, remove it straightaway and give it to me.' Then I threw it in the fire, and out came this calf!"
(96) He said: "I did realize, unlike them, that this would all end up badly. I took hold of the prophet's example for a while [i.e., your example, Moses], but then I rejected it—my way seemed better at the time!"	
(97) [Moses] said: "Go! For the rest of your life you are to say: 'Do not touch me [for I am holy].' You now have a duty you will not be able to shirk. Look at your god to whom you are so devoted: verily, **we shall burn it up, dispersing it into the sea as ashes**."	(Exod 32:20) And he took the calf that they made, **and burned it in the fire, and ground it until it became powder, and strewed it upon the surface of the water**; and then he made the Israelites drink it.

worship that would later prevail in Israel by blaming the making of the calf on Aaron, the watchman of the people while Moses was away—in Arabic, *samīr* or *sāmir*. The *sāmir*, or as he is called here *al-sāmirī* (a relative adjective that suggests the same meaning), succumbs to pressure from the people and leads them astray by making them a calf; this is why, according to the Qur'an, the people of Israel who would later on come to worship calves according to the biblical account were called *Samaria*—after Israel's watchman, Aaron, the *sāmir* al-Sāmirī, who was the first to introduce the Israelites to this worship.

We can now understand why it is only in the Sūrah 20 version of the narrative that al-Sāmirī is held responsible for the making of the calf; he is Aaron, upon whom responsibility for the making of the calf falls in the Sūrah 7 version. It is not that the author of the Qur'an erred in blaming the affair on a Samaritan in the former and subsequently corrected this error in the latter. Rather, the latter portrayal of the episode is an abbreviation of the former; instead of making the same oblique point in the Sūrat al-Aʿrāf version that he

originally made by previously calling Aaron al-Sāmirī, the author simply cut to the chase and conveyed the details of the narrative in a more streamlined way.

In this respect, we can see that Aaron seems to have been assimilated to some degree to Jeroboam. Thus, v. 85 about al-Sāmirī—that is, the *Samarian*, not the Samaritan—leading the people astray distinctly echoes biblical verses like 2 Kgs 17:21, which says that Jeroboam caused Israel to sin a great sin. The author of the qur'anic account seems to have drawn an intertextual connection between the Exodus narrative and another biblical passage pertinent to the calf story. A few scholars have recognized the potential connection between Jeroboam and al-Sāmirī, but not that the name al-Sāmirī provides a crucial narrative link between Jeroboam and Aaron. Further, when the possible connection to Jeroboam has been evoked, this is usually done to assert that the narrative of Sūrat Ṭa-Ha is a hopelessly garbled pastiche of biblical passages—often phrased in very crude terms as Muhammad's befuddled confusion of authentic traditions about the golden calf that his well-intentioned Jewish tutors sought to convey to him.[18]

Nor is this the only allusion to a biblical subtext of import in the qur'anic story. If the maker of the calf is not a Samaritan interloper, and he is no longer throwing a handful of magic dust into the pile of golden ornaments to create an animate golden calf, how do we explain that semblance of life—genuine or illusory—that so concerned the traditional exegetes? I would argue that the exegetes exploited the linguistic ambiguity of the key phrase *ʿijl jasad lahu khuwārun* in explaining it as "a calf, a body that lows," i.e., a lowing image of a calf. This phrase makes more sense if we interpret it not as a lowing image of a calf at all, but rather as *an image of a lowing calf*—that the lowing it possesses (*lahu khuwārun*) is a generic quality of the type of animal depicted and not a specific quality of the object created. The odd structure of the phrase is apparently due to its nature as a kind of scriptural calque, as it is modeled on a psalmic reference to the calf as *tavnît shôr ʾōkēl ʿēsev* (Ps 106:20)—"an image of an ox eating grass," or, more literally, "an image, an ox, eater of grass"—where it is the ox, and not the image, that is a grass-eater.

As Neuwirth has shown, many passages in the Qur'an appear to be echoes of the psalter and other liturgically significant passages from Scripture like the *Shmaʿ* (2010; 2014, 81–95). These passages are often conspicuous because

18 For classic expressions of this "confusion" approach to the formulation of the different qur'anic calf narratives, see St. Clair Tisdall 1905, 112–13; Yahuda 1948, 287. However, compare these with the entirely different approach of Neuwirth 2006, who sees the differences between the versions as reflecting an organic progression through changing narrative priorities in response to the growth of the qur'anic community.

of their awkward phrasing or ungrammatical nature, in large part due to their deliberate mimicking of Hebrew linguistic structures. It is the idiosyncratic phrasing of the psalmic reference to the calf as “an image of an ox eating grass” that explains the equally idiosyncratic phrasing of the subsequent reference to the calf made by the “Samarian” Aaron as “a calf, a body that lows.” This seems especially likely given that v. 88 continues with a reference to the people *forgetting*, i.e., forgetting their true God—a seeming allusion to the very next verse of the psalmic subtext: “They forgot God their savior who did great things in Egypt” (Ps 106:21).[19]

So far, we have seen that the version of the calf narrative in the midrash that supposedly supplies us with the proximate source of the qur’anic versions is in fact derived from and mirrors the version of the story in the *tafsīr*, and thus could not have provided the template for the qur’anic story itself. Moreover, the story as it is presented in the *tafsīr* is significantly different from that of the Qur’an, which is much closer to the Exodus story in the Pentateuch, though it also contains a number of intertextual glosses and allusions to other biblical passages.[20] However, though it is not, as has so often been alleged, simply copied from rabbinic traditions on the episode, it would be misleading to conclude that the Qur’an is totally isolated from the wider cultural and religious context in its engagement with the canonical precursor.

Contemporary scholars of the Qur’an are currently developing a new paradigm in which we no longer see the content of this Scripture as being essentially plagiarized, determined by Jewish and Christian vectors of influence that

19 The traditional commentators are divided over who it is exactly that is the subject of *fanasiya* here, but they tend to read this as al-Sāmirī claiming that Moses forgot that his god is actually the calf when he abandoned the Israelites to go up to Mount Sinai. The verb is singular, but could as easily refer to the people (*qawm Mūsā,* a collective masculine singular noun) as it could to Moses. Note that in the same chapter, Adam’s sin is described as caused by his forgetting (v. 115); shortly after, the Qur’an speaks of the fate of the wrongdoer who forgets God’s signs and so will be resurrected blind at the Last Judgment (v. 126). Forgetting thus stands as a recurring symbol of human waywardness: it is the fatal flaw of Adam, the main cause of Israel’s downfall as a covenanted people, and the characteristic sin of those who disregard God’s commands and thus earn divine wrath in the hereafter.

20 The second point makes the first point almost logically inevitable. That is, if the Qur’an essentially follows the broad narrative outline of Exod 32 while the *tafsīr* uniformly presents the novel themes of the outside interloper and the animate calf, it would be difficult to explain why the Qur’an lacks these elements if they were found in full-fledged form in genuinely pre-Islamic midrash. Apart from the fact that they only appear in conspicuously late midrashic sources, we would almost have to posit that the Jewish traditions that reflect a similar approach to the narrative *must* be late to account for the fact that this important development seems to have skipped over the Qur’an completely and is not reflected there at all.

were alien or foreign to its predominantly pagan environment. Rather, we now tend to see the Qur'an as having been carefully composed in an environment that was deeply saturated with the monotheistic scripturalist culture that prevailed throughout the late antique Near East. Further, more and more scholars are paying attention to Syriac Christian tradition as furnishing the closest parallels to the claims, concepts, and language deployed in the Qur'an.

It should be emphasized again that this new approach, which informs many of the most cutting-edge studies of the last several years, has abandoned the claim that the qur'anic author is directly appropriating sources that were largely novel in the environment. Rather, by uncovering parallels and precursors, especially in Syriac sources, this allows us to reconstruct the larger literary, cultural, and religious horizons that *both* the author and the audience would have taken for granted. For the case at hand, the most germane precursor is the aforementioned *Didascalia apostolorum*, originally composed in Greek somewhere in the ambit of Antioch in the mid-third century CE; the work circulated widely in a Syriac translation for centuries, and large parts of the text were incorporated into another influential document, the *Apostolic Constitutions.*

The sin of the calf is absolutely central to the *Didascalia*'s argument about the supersession of Judaism by Christianity; in particular, it posits that the yoke of the "Second Legislation" (*tenyān nāmūsā*, i.e., *deutérōsis*, which actually encompasses all law beyond the Decalogue) was imposed on Israel because of that sin. As Zellentin has argued quite convincingly, the Qur'an not only seems to exhibit a general familiarity with the *Didascalia*, both its general arguments and specific legal prescriptions from it; rather, in certain passages, the Qur'an actually seems to appropriate particular arguments from that text for its own purposes (Zellentin 2013). Thus, a passage in Q Nisāʾ 4 not only alludes to the calf episode, but does so in the specific context of describing how the Jews accepted the covenant but then fell into disbelief and worshiped the calf, with the subsequent imposition of punitive restrictions on Israel being a direct response to this sin. This passage is extremely similar to a parallel passage from the *Didascalia* that makes essentially the same argument:

> Then the Israelites took the calf in worship after all the signs had come to them, though we forgave them for that; we gave Moses indisputable authority, and we raised Mount Sinai above them as token of their covenant.... And we took from them an awesome covenant. Then on account of their breaking their covenant, and their disbelief in the signs of God, and their killing the prophets on dishonest pretext, and for admitting their hearts are uncircumcised, God has set a seal on them for their disbelief; only a few of them really believe. Also for their disbelief when

> they spoke their great slander about Mary, and for when they said "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God …" For the wrongdoing of those who were formerly guided, we forbade them some of the good things that were formerly licit for them—for example, because they derailed many who were formerly on the path of God….
>
> *Q Nisāʾ* 4:153–157, 160

> Jesus said, "I have not come to abrogate the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them." The Law is permanent, but the Second Legislation is temporary and impermanent. The Law is the Ten Commandments and the statutes, to which Jesus bore witness … But when the people denied God … who set up the law for them in the mount—it was he they denied and said: "We have no God to go before us"; and they made them a molten calf and worshiped it and sacrificed to a graven image. Therefore the Lord became angry, and in the heat of his anger—yet with the mercy of his goodness—he bound them with the Second Legislation, and laid heavy burdens upon them and a hard yoke upon their neck.
>
> *Did. apost.* 26:242–245

The Qur'an's unique contribution here, however, is the link it establishes between the role of Aaron on the one hand and the concept of the Jewish law as a punitive imposition upon Israel on the other: this is the concept that underlies the oft-misunderstood judgment imposed on al-Sāmirī in Q Ṭa-Ha 20:97, traditionally read as "All your life you are [cursed] to say: 'Do not touch me [for I am an exile].' A threat hangs over you which you will not be able to escape." This is hardly a curse of exile imposed on the Samaritan, as the Muslim commentary tradition holds; it is barely a curse at all. Rather, I would argue it is a qur'anic etiology for the origins of the Israelite priesthood, the critical phrase *lā misāsa*—"no touching"—having a clear connotation of holiness and ritual purity elsewhere in the Qur'an.[21] Having overstepped his bounds and failed as a surrogate leader in Moses's absence, the role of Aaron, the inventor of "Samarian" worship, is now clearly delineated. He is the priestly counterpart to the prophet, responsible for the sacrificial regime now imposed on Israel as a penalty for leading them astray: "For the rest of your life you are to say: 'Do not touch me [for I am holy].' You now have a duty you will not be able to shirk."

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21 Cf. Q Āl ʿImrān 3:47, in reference to Mary's virginity, and Q Wāqiʿah 56:79, in reference to the Qur'an itself, a "protected book" that none but the pure may touch.

Conclusion

The obvious question that still needs to be addressed here is what Muslim exegetes gained by so radically reconstructing the calf story as it was previously known. If the qur'anic calf episode can be read in such a way that its links to biblical tradition become quite obvious, why did Muslim exegetes simply not go with that, endeavoring instead to create a wholly new story? One possible answer is that an early, rudimentary version of what eventually evolved into the doctrine of *ʿiṣmah*, prophetic infallibility, motivated exegetes to obscure Aaron's involvement in the making of the calf through transforming the epithet al-Sāmirī, the Samarian, into a completely new character in the drama: al-Sāmirī the *Samaritan*. Muslim exegetes were unconcerned about Aaron's status as a priestly progenitor, as he is understood elsewhere in the Qur'an—a matter of great significance to both Jewish and Christian exegetes in Late Antiquity. However, they were deeply concerned with Aaron's role as a prophetic predecessor to Muhammad himself.

The Qur'an tends to flatten the distinction between prophets per se and other Israelite figures of significance such as kings and patriarchs who were not technically prophets, but who nevertheless communed with God and both received and conveyed divine guidance. While the Sūrah 20 story in particular draws a distinction between Moses's status as prophetic leader and Aaron's lack of such status, the later tradition forced all of the notable figures from Israel's past into a more or less singular mold as the elite chosen by God to guide humanity—the only significant distinction being between those who were mere warners and those who were emissaries, *anbiyāʾ* (sing. *nabī*) and *rusul* (sing. *rasūl*), the latter being entrusted with conveying Scripture while the former were not.[22] All of these figures were seen as precursors to Muhammad, and thus his status became intimately tied up with theirs; this meant that over time all of these chosen figures were understood as equally protected from sin and thus infallible (*maʿṣūm*).[23] The possibility of any prophet actually going

22 Aaron is explicitly called *nabī* in Q Maryam 19:53, but even here he is subordinated to Moses, which again is the overarching point made by the Q 20 version of the calf story.

23 The Qur'an is already moving in this direction, but it is important to distinguish the subtle and evasive way it approaches narratives about the sins of prophets from the formal articulation of the actual doctrine of *ʿiṣmah* in classical Islamic theology. It is noteworthy that the three individuals in the Qur'an who are described as *khalīfah*, representatives of God or other prophets, are all famously associated with major sins: Adam (2:30), Aaron (7:142), and David (38:26), which perhaps suggests some tragic link between delegated authority and human failings. Of the three, only the sin of Adam is depicted in a direct and straightforward way, while the Qur'an is much more circumspect about the transgressions of the

so astray as to lead his people into idolatry was unthinkable to exegetes conditioned by such concerns, which encouraged the deliberate attempt to obscure Aaron's role in the calf affair.[24]

The creation of a new personage responsible for the making of the calf, the mysterious "Samaritan," functioned well to dissociate Aaron from Israel's sin. Even more than this, however, there was a particular benefit gained by taking an ambiguous qur'anic account with a clear biblical antecedent and transmuting it into something altogether new. Muslim exegetes could therefore exercise a kind of interpretive agency or sovereignty over their Scripture, forcing a distinction between their Qur'an, the final and perfect revelation, and the older, corrupted Scriptures of Jews and Christians. Dissociating Aaron from al-Sāmirī made the qur'anic story of the golden calf different and unique—and altogether *truer*, insofar as Muslim commentators would have found it difficult to accept that true revelation could possibly indict a prophet of so heinous a crime as idolatry.

A parallel may be drawn with the long exegetical controversy over which of Abraham's sons had been honored by being chosen as the one to be sacrificed at God's command. Scholars are still divided about whether it is Isaac or Ishmael who is presupposed as the victim in the highly ambiguous narrative at Q Ṣāffāt 37:100–111, but as Firestone has demonstrated, early Muslim commentators actually read the qur'anic story through the lens of Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible, where it is Isaac who is unambiguously indicated. Over time, the mainstream of opinion among the Muslim commentators shifted from Isaac to Ishmael—the obvious logic being that it would naturally have been Ishmael, ancestor of the Arabs in general and the tribe of Quraysh in particular, including Muhammad himself, whom God would have favored with the distinction of being selected as the sacrifice (Firestone 1989).

It has long been observed that every nascent religious community must distance itself from what came before in the process of its formation and maturation. In the emergence of classical Islam, exegesis of the Qur'an—and in particular, distinguishing its message from that of previous revelations—both reflected and facilitated larger processes of social and religious distinction that brought the fledgling community out of the shadow of their monotheist predecessors and allowed them to assert their own unique identity. It is this

other two. On the qur'anic and Islamic portrayals of the Bathsheba affair, see Pregill 2011b and Muhammad 2014.

24 Even the possibility that Muhammad might merely have participated in idolatrous rites before his prophetic call was eventually deemed unthinkable by the community, though it was apparently countenanced early on. See Kister 1970.

larger context that provides the necessary background for us to understand the imperatives that turned qur'anic exegetes away from an understanding of *al-sāmirī* as an epithet for Aaron in the golden calf narrative of Sūrat Ṭa-Ha towards an alternative that proved to be more palatable to the nascent tradition, leading them to construct the Samaritan as a separate personage upon whom the blame for the sin of the calf could more easily be cast.

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