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# Introduction

THE PRESENT WORK seeks to consider the nature of the affinities between Islam and Judaism. To do so, it is indispensable to return to the sources—that is, to the issues at play in the Qur’an itself. As it is neither possible nor fair to consider the Qur’an in isolation from the literature to which it gave rise, however, I will also as far as possible consider the Islamic religious literature that draws its inspiration from the Qur’an: the oral tradition attributed to the Prophet of Islam, known as the Ḥadith; the commentaries on the Qur’an; the Islamic polemical literature against Judaism, and so on. The same dynamic characterizes Judaism, for the written and oral Torah are also inextricably mixed. Very often, it is impossible to understand Qur’anic text and context without appealing to the post-Qur’anic tradition. At the very least, this oral tradition allows us to grasp how, at various periods, Muslims understood the Qur’an. This is why all of this book’s chapters call upon post-Qur’anic sources to varying degrees.

I have attempted to account for the Qur’anic relationship to the Jews across all of its shades and gradations, from the brightest to the most somber. Jews, their religion and their Holy Scriptures are quite frequently mentioned in the Qur’an. It

recounts many well-known biblical episodes in close detail, some of them more than once. These include: the history of the Patriarchs; the servitude of the children of Israel in the land of Pharaoh; their departure from Egypt; their arrival and settling of the Holy Land; and the giving of the Torah. One also finds references to various miracles that occurred to the children of Israel during their time in the desert: the pillar of cloud that accompanied them; the manna from heaven; the quail that fell from the sky; and the water that sprang forth from a rock to slake the people's thirst.

The biblical figures whose stories are mentioned several times include those of Abraham and his family; Lot and his kin; Moses and the children of Israel's suffering in Egypt; and, in passing, the story of the scouts sent by Moses before entering the Promised Land; David and Solomon, Jonah (*Yunus*), also called *Dhu l-nun* (the man of the fish), Job (*Ayyub*), and many others.

It is not only the voices of the Bible's heroes that we hear in the Qur'an. Faith and law—public, private, and religious—all occupy a very prominent place in the text and all show extensive evidence of cross-pollination with Biblical and other Jewish sources. These we will discuss later.

First let us consider the extent and depth of the ties joining the Qur'an to the Bible and postbiblical Judaism, a question that has of course been much debated by scholars. In this book, I shall present the historical and cultural context in which Islam emerged by describing in detail Judaism as it was practiced by the Jews of Arabia at the time Muhammad began his prophetic career. As recounted by Muslim tradition, this period spanned twelve years, from 610 to 622, and follows Muhammad from Mecca, his birthplace, to Yathrib, later known as al-Madina (Medina). Muhammad is said to have come into contact with

Jews primarily in Medina and its surroundings, where he was active during the last ten years of his life, from 622 to 632. It was there that he learned their religion and history.

The book will first present the historical background of the encounter between Jews and Arabs in the centuries preceding the advent of Islam, mainly as related by Arab sources, and will later explore early relations between Jews and Muslims. We will then look at the image of Jews and Judaism presented by the Qur'an.

We shall begin by examining the terminology and various names by which the Qur'an refers to Jews. I shall identify the characteristics of each of these names and what they tell us about how the Jews and their religion were regarded. Three terms will receive particular attention: *banu isra'il* (the children of Israel, *al-yahud* (Jews) and *ahl al-kitab* (the People of the Book).

I will then note the various, contradictory ways in which the Qur'an depicts Jews and their religion. On the one hand, there are the positive declarations: the Israelites are presented as the chosen people upon whom God lavished his kindness, freeing them from slavery in Egypt, bestowing upon them the Torah, creating prophets in their midst, and leading them to the Promised Land. On the other hand, they are presented as a people that broke its Covenant with God, reverted to idolatry, falsified the God-given Torah, and killed the prophets sent to restore them to the straight and narrow path. In short, a people who, by virtue of having broken their Covenant with God, were unworthy of alliance: "O you who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as friends. They are friends of each other" (Q. 5:51).<sup>1</sup>

The last two chapters, in particular, call for an additional word of explanation. Devoted to the "Qur'anic foundations of the legal status of Jews under Islamic domination," Chapter 5

might at first glance seem a doubtful fit in this book to the degree that it concerns politico-theological developments that took place after the Qur'anic source had achieved its final form. Its inclusion is nevertheless justified by the fact that this process, though not "Qur'anic" in itself, drew upon Qur'anic verses in elucidating the legal status of Jews and other religious minorities. The same goes for Chapter 6, devoted to "the place of Judaism and Jews in Twelver Shi'ism": while it is true that these are late developments in Islam, they appeal to notions that are in fact discussed in the Qur'an itself. This closing chapter also allows us to move beyond a strictly Sunni majoritarian vantage point to encompass the Shi'i world that, minoritarian though it may be, is none the less powerful. It is estimated that the various Shi'i branches count 150 million followers, or a tenth of the world's Muslim population; and within Shi'ism, the Twelver branch occupies by far the majority position today.

This book seeks to reveal the extent to which the two religions are inextricably entwined—at once close and distant, friendly and hostile. This ambivalence lies at the heart of Islam's relationship to Judaism and the Jews, and it assumes several aspects that are worth exploring. It may be detected in the Qur'an's complex attitude toward the Bible. On the one hand, the Qur'an sees the Bible as a text revealed by God to the human race and thus as a book capable of authenticating the revelation offered Muhammad in the Qur'an, as both have the same divine source. On the other hand, the Qur'an sees the Bible as a book given the Jews that lost its value after they knowingly altered it, among other reasons so as to remove all references to the future advent of Muhammad and the new religion he would bring into the world. It goes without saying that the Bible's falsification renders it inferior to the Qur'an, which is considered to be the authentic word of God. In other words, the Jews are as much

People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) as they are “an ass carrying books” (Q. 62:5)—that is, a people bearing an immense heritage on their shoulders but of which they are ignorant and which, in reality, they do not deserve.

The Qur’an’s ambiguity vis-à-vis the biblical (and post-biblical) heritage is also evident in Qur’anic law. Everything that concerns prayer, fasting, dietary rules, purity, and impurity bears a clear relation to the Bible and post-biblical Jewish sources. Yet one also observes many laws that exhibit a deliberate desire to draw away from Judaism. Among the most striking examples, one may note the decision to shift the direction of prayer (*qibla*) from Jerusalem to Mecca, changes to the fasting (*ṣawm*) and dietary laws, and revisions to the calendar, a subject we will revisit.

The links between the Qur’an and the Bible have been noted from the earliest days of Islamic studies and the pioneering work of Abraham Geiger, best known as a founding father of the Jewish reformist movement in Germany. In 1833, he published his study, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (translated as, *Islam and Judaism*), in Bonn. A large number of scholars have followed his lead. I will only cite a few of them here, all of whom devoted major studies to the ties between Judaism and Islam. In his book, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Qur’anic Studies), which appeared in Berlin and Leipzig in 1926, Josef Horowitz identified the various passages where the Qur’an and the biblical and post-biblical sources intersect. In *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Biblical Stories in the Qur’an), published in Hildesheim in 1961, Heinrich Speyer noted the many parallels between accounts in the Qur’an and those in the Bible and Talmudic literature. In the same vein, one may cite David Sidersky, *Les Origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et les vies des prophètes* (“The

Origins of Muslim Legends in the Qur'an and the Lives of the Prophets").<sup>2</sup>

Closer to our times, one may mention the many articles by Sidney Griffith and, more particularly, his book, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam*, as well as the work of Uri Rubin, especially his *Between Bible and Qur'an*.<sup>3</sup> A major contribution was Jacqueline Chabbi's *Le Coran décrypté, Figures bibliques en Arabie* (Paris, 2008). Daniel Sibony authored a general study, *Coran et Bible en questions et réponses* (Paris, 2017), and most recently we have Gabriel S. Reynolds' book, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven, 2018). These are just a few of the titles to have appeared in this proliferating field over the past two centuries.

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The Qur'anic citations used in this volume are from Alan Jones' translation of *The Qur'an* (Exeter, 2007), with slight modifications.

In order to facilitate the reading experience of non-specialists, I have adopted a simplified transcription that will be easily recognizable to Arabic scholars. For the benefit of the former, a few remarks regarding pronunciation: ' indicates the *hamza*, which corresponds to a glottal stop (e.g., the vowel between *uh-oh!*) and ʿ indicates a guttural sound characteristic of Arabic and other Semitic languages; *gh* corresponds to the uvular pronunciation of *r* as in Parisian French; *h* is pronounced as a pharyngeal (at the back of the throat); *kh* corresponds to the German *ch* (as in the word *Buch*); *q* is pronounced as an emphatic *k* (at the back of the throat); *s* is always unvoiced, as in *essay*, never as in *easy*; *ṣ* is realized as an emphatic *s* (at the back of the

throat); and *th* corresponds to the English *th* as in *thing* and *dh* to the English *th* as in *this*.

For reasons of simplicity, dates exclusively follow the Gregorian calendar, without the addition of their equivalent in what is known as the *hijri* calendar.

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