

The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an: Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam

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Michael Pregill's *The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an* draws from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources to understand how the story of the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf has been understood across scriptural communities. This book marks the first time that the story has been the subject of a comprehensive comparative treatment. Drawing from Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew primary and exegetical sources, Pregill seeks to revive the earliest approach of Western scholarship towards the Qur'an, that it should be understood as Biblical literature, or rather, late antique religious discourse. To this end, Pregill argues that the story's employment in both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an can be understood as a "continuities of discourse" rather than a communication of specific influences.

After laying out his methodology in the introduction, Pregill divides his book into three parts. The first concerns the ancient traditions that formed the basis for understanding the narrative of the Golden Calf in

the Hebrew Bible (pp. 13-103). In chapter 2, Pregill analyzes the story as it is told in Exodus and Deuteronomy. He explores the polemical imperatives surrounding each, and concludes that they markedly differ. In the latter text, worship of the Calf was no longer being presented as a cultic infraction, but rather as idolatry, a strictly unorthodox practice. In chapter 3, Pregill examines the earliest exegetical traditions of the Calf, looking at how pressures in the Greco-Roman period – especially from the Christian movement – induced rabbinical exegetes to write apologetic explanations of the story meant to mitigate the impression of idolatry.

The second part concerns the Jewish and Christian contestation of the legacy of Israel through the narrative (pp. 104-207). In chapter 4, Pregill charts the development of rabbinical apologetics concerning the story, as the Christian movement emerged as an imperial religion, and Christian writers sought to use the story to emphasize their own covenantal priority over the Jews. This led to more “imaginative” and “evasive” Jewish apologetics concerning the Prophet Aaron’s and the Israelites’ culpability in the worship. In chapter 5, Pregill focuses on the corpus of Christian literature in Syriac, which continued in its anti-Jewish polemics surrounding the story but took a milder approach to Aaron’s culpability. While these reinterpretations paralleled rabbinical writings, they were employed towards opposite ends.

The third part concerns the Qur’an’s narrative, as well as its reception in classical exegetical and Western scholarship (pp. 208-438). In chapter 6, Pregill looks at how the story of the Calf has been understood in both the Muslim exegetical tradition and Western scholarship beginning with the earliest Qur’anic translations, showing the clear and sometimes undiscerning reliance of Western scholars on Muslim tradition. In chapter 7, Pregill proposes reinterpretations of key aspects of the Qur’anic story, mainly concerning the animate nature of the Calf and the figure of *al-Sāmirī*. In chapter 8, Pregill figures his conclusions on the Qur’anic story of the Calf into its equivalent in Exodus, towards reifying an account that had been subject to polemics and apologetics. He also identifies possible motivations for the Qur’anic stories related to Samaritan and Judean rivalries, projecting them onto seventh century Medina. In the conclusion, Pregill summarizes the book’s major findings

and reiterates the need to reinterpret the Qur'an in light of late antiquity polemics and the "continuities of discourse." We will focus on this section, specifically Pregill's case for *al-Sāmirī*, as it accounts for his most radical reinterpretation, with the farthest-reaching implications for the fields of Islamic exegesis and theology.

Beginning with his introduction, Pregill identifies a problem where the vagueness of the story as presented in the Qur'an has led to fundamental misunderstandings both of its details and of its higher objectives. In the exegetical tradition, metaphorical and literal language has been misread, baseless reports have been used to make those readings feasible, and key characters have been misidentified. And according to the author, the vagueness of the Qur'anic story has meant that Western scholars have relied on the classical exegetical tradition, and thus willingly participated in the confusion.

Pregill thus makes the case for a radical reinterpretation of the story from the Qur'an. Before assessing it, it is worth applauding one of his conclusions regarding a phenomenon in Western Qur'anic scholarship. Pregill discusses how Abraham Geiger – whose 1833 *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* was widely considered to have inaugurated the discipline of Islamic Studies in Europe – harbored some flawed assumptions that would influence the field for the next 150 years. The chief assumption was that elements in the Qur'anic stories distinct from their Biblical counterparts represent "a conflation of themes and characters known from diverse sources from Jewish tradition," which include the Bible, Talmud, and the Midrash (p. 294). Subsequent scholars looked to rabbinical texts to understand why, for example, the Qur'anic narrative gives the impression that the Golden Calf was animate (although, contrary to Pregill's characterization, this by no means has been a consensus in the Muslim exegetical tradition). Scholars looked to texts such as *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, and *Midrash Tanhuma* to establish rabbinical influence on this Qur'anic variance from the Hebrew Bible. Owing to the fact that the earliest of these manuscripts date centuries after the Qur'an, Pregill criticizes the rather gratuitous assumption that they must have existed as oral traditions pre-dating Islam. Rather, he insists that these rabbinical

works should instead be characterized as “Islamicate,” that is, reflecting Islam’s cultural impact on non-Muslim communities brought under Arab dominion. Pregill thus encourages a much-needed paleographic sobriety in the rush to identify Qur’anic influences.

As for his reinterpretation of the Qur’anic story, Pregill claims that it was actually the Prophet Aaron who led the Israelites to worship the Golden Calf. This would make Aaron the same person as *al-Sāmīrī*, the traditionally understood culprit. The author makes his claim by laying out a narrative from Sūrah XX, in which the Prophet Moses leaves his brother Aaron in charge of the Israelite camp while he goes to the Mount to meet with God (p. 338). There, God asks Moses why he has hurried away from his people. Moses then explains to the effect that the people “are upon my tracks” (*‘alā atharī*) – a metaphor for prophetic guidance – because they have been left in Aaron’s care (v. 84). God then tells Moses that this is not the case because “*al-Sāmīrī*” (the author’s “Aaron”) has led them astray (v. 85). Moses returns angrily and asks Aaron what kept him when he saw them going astray from “following me” (*āllā tattabi‘anī*) – an expression traditionally understood literally, but understood by Pregill as metaphorical to render synonymous with “being upon my tracks” (vv. 92-3). Aaron says that he did not disobey Moses’ command, but rather sought to obey it. “However,” Pregill says, “he is vague about exactly what happened.” Then Moses says “so, *al-Sāmīrī*, [that is, Aaron] what do you have to say for yourself?” (v. 95). That is, “what about my *athar*, which you should have upheld?” Rather than two dialogues, Pregill thus argues that there was only one – between Moses and Aaron, who halfway through is called *al-Sāmīrī*.

Here, we can point out some of the flaws in this argument. As Pregill’s reading indicates, his case for a single *al-Sāmīrī*-Aaron character rests largely on the theme of following prophetic guidance, which, the author claims, Aaron failed to do. But in highlighting this, which he does by rendering two different expressions metaphorical and synonymous (*‘alā atharī* and *āllā tattabi‘anī*), he also downplays the visibly prominent theme of lieutenantcy, or discharging a leadership trust. It is in this respect that Aaron is culpable. In Sūrah VII’s narrative of the story that the author gives far less attention, Moses says to his brother before departing the Israelite camp for his appointment with God, “Lead in my place amongst

my people and do right and do not follow the way of the corrupters.” (v. 146). The verse giving Aaron instructions to lead implies that corrupt elements among the Israelite camp were already known. Indeed, calf-worship was foreshadowed in v. 138, which states that the Israelites, fresh from the parted sea, came across a people worshipping their idols, and asked Moses to make for them a god just like theirs. And any vagueness Pregill ascribes to Aaron’s defense in v. 94 is supplemented with his rather clear explanation in *Sūrah VII*, v. 150, “Indeed, the people overcame me and were about to kill me, so do not let the enemies rejoice over me, and do not place me among the wrongdoing people.” This account of Aaron being overpowered by a group of wrongdoers is difficult to square with his being the initiator of the Golden Calf worship. That claim is further problematized by the exchange in *Sūrah XX*, vv. 90-1 (that oddly the author only addresses in a Biblical context) in which Aaron tells the calf-worshippers, “Oh my people, you are only being tested by it, and indeed your Lord is the Most Merciful, so follow me and obey my order.” The people reply, “We will not stop being devoted to the calf until Moses returns to us.” In Moses’ angered return to the camp, never does he accuse Aaron of worshipping the calf. Rather, he asks him about those who did. So, if Moses first directed his anger towards Aaron, it was for failing in his lieutenancy to keep the Israelites upon prophetic guidance. This is quite different from any suggestion that he had initiated the calf worship.

When read together, the *Qur’an*’s narratives do not support a single al-*Sāmīrī*-Aaron character. The narratives as told in both *Sūrah VII* and *Sūrah XX* are concluded in ways that show that Aaron and al-*Sāmīrī* are two distinct characters. In *Sūrah XX*, v. 97, Moses says to al-*Sāmīrī*, “Then go. And it is for you to say in this worldly life, ‘no contact.’ And you have an appointment you will not fail to keep. And look at your god that you tarried in worship. We will certainly burn it and scatter its ashes in the sea.” But in *Sūrah VII*, v. 151, Moses says, “My Lord, forgive me and my brother, and admit us into Your mercy, for You are the most merciful of the merciful.” These are two completely different responses. Furthermore, the *Qur’anic* portrayal of Aaron following the episode of the Golden Calf differs greatly from the fate meted out to al-*Sāmīrī*. It is clear that the “no contact” decreed for al-*Sāmīrī* was not applicable

to Aaron, who was evidently alongside his brother a while later when the Israelites refused the command to enter the Holy Land and Moses said, “My Lord, indeed I do not possess but myself and neither does my brother, so part us from the defiantly disobedient people.” (Sūrah V, v. 25). Not only is Aaron still very much part of the Israelite community, but again he is being distinguished from its wrongdoers.

At a fundamental level, it is important to keep in mind that Aaron is described in the Qur’an as a “messenger” (*rāsūl*). This description carries a certain moral weight, and involves certain parameters. In the Islamic tradition, there exists a lively debate about whether messengers are infallible or can commit minor sins. Worshipping other than God (*shirk*) is considered the worst of the major sins. While there is nothing wrong with examining the Qur’anic text in ways that could revise doctrine, this ought to be done with some consideration that the parameters of doctrine have also been informed by the Qur’anic text. Thus, regarding Pregill’s claim that Aaron led the Israelites to worship the Golden Calf, there is a sequence of verses in Sūrah VI naming 18 prophets and messengers – among them Aaron. The sequence ends with, “And if they had worshipped other than God (*ashrakū*), then worthless would be anything they were doing.” (v. 88). And, “Those are the ones whom God has guided, so from their guidance take an example.” (v. 90). In several other places in the Qur’an, the Qur’an places Moses and Aaron in the same moral league. Moses and Aaron together are the recipients of the Torah (Sūrah XXI, v. 48). This honorific would be hard to fathom if the Torah was being revealed at the same time that Aaron was allegedly leading the Israelites into the worst sin. Then there is mention of the two being guided by God on the straight path, and having a favorable mention amongst later generations as a reward for their good-doing (Sūrah XXXVII, vv. 114-121). While the Qur’an allows for the possibility of a messenger miscarrying a trust, as indicated in the story of Prophet Jonah prematurely escaping his community’s impending punishment (vv. 139-148), nowhere does it remotely imply that a prophet or messenger would engage in polytheism.

Even if we overlook Pregill’s neglect of key verses within his chosen narrative, his claim shows the dangers of constructing a complete account by choosing one Qur’anic narrative out of multiple ones. Perhaps knowing

better, he seems to betray a broad documentarian persuasion in doing this. In that methodology, scholars consider the distinct sources in which Biblical stories are “doubled” to identify source-authors’ motivations or higher objectives for casting characters in certain ways. It is perhaps unsurprising that Pregill’s primary gain in identifying Aaron as al-Sāmīrī is to associate Aaron with Biblical Samaria. Pregill mentions that in Deuteronomy, the practice of worshipping golden calves in the Samaritan cities of Bethel and Dan is attributed to Jeroboam, a blame designed for anti-priestly polemics (though Pregill glosses over what is a far more approximate regional precedent for calf-worship in *Sūrah VII*, v. 138). Pregill claims that the rationale or higher objective of the story’s inclusion in the *Qur’an* is to shame the Jewish tribes of seventh century Medina, whom the early Muslim historian Ibn Ishāq identified as Aaronites – and delegitimize “their claims to the prestige associated with priestly descent when they had come to oppose Muḥammad.” Fortunately, Pregill admits that such an interpretation is “completely conjectural,” but not until selectively choosing verses from the *Qur’anic* narrative to make it possible (p. 427).

While Pregill warns of the dangers of reading *Qur’anic* stories through the lens of classical exegesis and rabbinical sources, he seems to fall into the trap of reading them through the lens of the Hebrew Bible. After all, he does frame the *Qur’an* as a continuation of its discourse. But the tools that have been effective for understanding the Hebrew Bible, its objectives and polemics, might not all be transferable to the *Qur’an*. The urge to project those polemics onto the *Qur’an* without first considering all of its relevant texts, let alone the parameters of doctrine that have formed around them, can lead to some unpalatable narrative reconstructions. Nonetheless, Pregill does a commendable job in synthesizing sources across scriptural communities, and on the way, making critical observations on both classical exegesis and Western scholarship.

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