EARLY MUSLIM ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE BIBLE

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This chapter examines why the Bible was important to some Muslim authors, how Muslim authors used the Bible in their writings and how Muslim views of the Bible changed over time (note that ‘Bible’ refers to both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, unless specified). Biblical texts shaped Muslim identity, legitimated Islam as a scripture-based community and fashioned Muslim views of Christianity. Muslim use of biblical passages also reveals how Islamic culture reinterpreted and transformed earlier scriptures to reaffirm their confessional identity. By tracing how Muslims re-fashioned the Bible for their own ends, contemporary participants in Christian–Muslim dialogue might better understand the Bible’s different role in each tradition.

This study covers the seventh century to the fifteenth century, primarily examining views from the Middle East as well as Andalusia. In the periods of the first four caliphs and the Umayyad Empire (661–750) Muslim attitudes towards the Bible were in a nascent form. Little data is available from this period. By the early ʿAbbāsid period (750–1258), however, in the eighth to tenth centuries, Muslims tended towards biblicising historical figures. In this period authors generally consulted informants, emended biblical texts, and/or corrected them for use as supporting arguments. By the latter half of the ʿAbbāsid period and the beginnings of Ayyūbid (1171–1260) and Mamlūk rule (1261–1517) in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, there was a greater diversity of viewpoints, when Muslims were less interested in the actual biblical text and more sceptical about its value and authenticity. Islamicising approaches became the preferable method of disseminating scriptural material (i.e. using Hadīths or collections of proof texts). Later authors generally analysed Arabic translations and/or testimonies, refuted passages as erroneous and/or concluded that the Bible was an unreliable source.

Why did Muslim authors use the Bible?

Early Muslims recognised that the Bible belonged to the communities of Judaism and Christianity and biblical interpretation was embedded within those confessional groups. As a new religion establishing its claims in continuity with Judaism and Christianity, Islam embraced pre-existing stories of revelation. Muslims achieved political supremacy in the seventh century, but they were still forming a theological structure to compete with the longstanding polemical traditions of Jews and Christians. Rather than accept or reject the Bible wholesale, they co-opted specific
biblical passages in order to adapt and transform the scriptures into carefully edited material that would clarify the history of Islam and Muslim tradition. They reworked biblical accounts in order to strengthen their historical, socio-political, and theological claims.

Muslims found the Bible appealing for several reasons. First, translations and commentaries were ubiquitous in the largely Christian late antique Middle East. Second, biblical stories have a prominent yet allusive presence in the Qurʾān, which asserts that God sent down the Torah (Tawrāt) and Gospel (Injīl) (Q 3:3), that Jesus was taught the Torah and Gospel (Q 3:48) and that earlier scriptures are complete, contain God's judgment, are helpful for guidance and mercy and serve as a criterion for truth (Q 6:154, 5:44, 10:94; Nickel 2013). But the Qurʾān cast doubt on the Bible, with claims that the scriptures had been abrogated and with accusations that Jews and Christians hid verses, misinterpreted their meaning and/or mispronounced the text (see chapter 4). The Qurʾān’s ambiguous portrait of the Bible contributed to Muslim attitudes towards the Bible as a superseded yet valuable source of authentic material or as an untrustworthy and altered text. Muslims were interested in the Bible for its practical use but wavered between hesitant acceptance on the one hand and complete rejection of its contents on the other. Some argued that passages were acceptable insofar as they verified Muhammad’s prophethood, foretold the coming of Islam and reaffirmed Islamic doctrines. Others argued that these passages ought to be recast within an Islamic context.

The Bible was never considered equal to the Qurʾān as a source of God’s revelation among Muslims because they understood the Qurʾān as God’s speech, which was quite unlike Jewish and Christian understandings of scriptural inspiration. Further, the Qurʾān critiqued the ‘Scripture People’ (ahl al-kitāb) for failing to hold to the integrity of God’s message. While the Bible initially held a notable place in writings about the historical origins and formation of Islam, Muslims progressively replaced it over time with an Islamicised version of its content through commentaries, tales of the prophets, histories and other works. Yet the Bible’s successful integration into the Islamic milieu – a Biblicised Islam – guaranteed its continued presence (Griffith 2013: 176).

In sum, the early Muslim community displayed apprehension towards the Bible since its history and authority were both attractive and problematic for Islam.

When did Muslims begin using the Bible?

While the Qurʾān is the first Islamic source interested in the Bible (see chapter 4), there is little evidence of Islamic awareness of the text until later centuries. By the eighth century, biblical texts entered Muslim consciousness in a variety of ways, including conversion, awareness of the late antique Jewish and Christian cultural background, and direct contact with rabbis, monks and clergy (Pregill 2008: 230). Biblical citations usually made their way into the oral traditions (Hadīths) piecemeal, as relevant sections rather than entire books. Further, many oral traditions are approximations to the biblical text and/or postbiblical material (e.g. the Proto-Gospel of James). A number of these traditions of Jewish and Syriac Christian provenance are attributed to the figures Kaʾb al-Aḥbār (d. 652/3), ʿAbd Allāh ibn Salām (d. 663/4) and Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 728 or 732). These traditions came to be known as Isrāʾīlyyāt because of their biblical and postbiblical content. For example, traditions about the fall of Adam and Eve ascribed to Wahb ibn Munabbih include quotations from Genesis 3 as a source for the narrative (Pregill 2008: 237). In most cases traditionists alluded to biblical texts, rather than directly citing them. While these oral traditions appear to be the earliest layer of engagement with the Bible, much of the material in these sources was often attributed retrospectively to a suitable successor to the Prophet. Yet the decision to include these traditions authorised the material as authentically Islamic (Pregill 2008: 240–1).
Islamic traditions about Jesus were quite popular, but his biblical sayings appeared with much less frequency than novel maxims attributed to him (Khalidi 2001). Muslims tended to quote him from apocryphal texts, the Qurʾān, or Islamic wisdom or ascetical sayings. Some traditionists used Gospel sayings of Jesus to frame certain theological ideas that they wanted to promote. For instance, Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s Ḥadīṯ collection includes a reworking of Jesus’ temptation by the devil (Matthew 4:3–11; Luke 4:1–13) in which Satan challenges Jesus to jump from the temple in Jerusalem to prove that the angels will save him. In the Islamic version, Jesus responds that he does not know whether God will save him or not (Khalidi 2001: 72). David Cook has located 59 passages in oral traditions that resemble New Testament sayings of Jesus, including 43 instances from the Gospel of Matthew. Many of these citations come from the Sermon on the Mount, such as ‘whoever has two garments (qamīṣayn), let him wear just one of them, and give the other (away)’ (Cook 2006: 194). We even find an instance of an Islamicised version of the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ (Cook 2006: 196). Much of the material is traced from Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 1175/6). Ibn ‘Asākir’s collection reveals that many biblical passages in the Ḥadīths have their origins in oral transmissions from monks in Syria and Palestine (Cook 2006: 201–4).

Besides the Ḥadīths, the earliest examples of Muslim use of the Bible appear in the eighth century with the biography (ṣīra) of Muḥammad attributed to Ibn ʿIṣḥāq (d. 767) via the version of Ibn Hishām (d. 834). Since the Qurʾān says the Torah and Gospel mention Muḥammad (Q 7:157; 61:6), and contemporaneous Jews and Christians denied this claim, Ibn ʿIṣḥāq argued that the scriptures had been misinterpreted and therefore it was possible to search them out for proof of Muḥammad’s prophetic status. Ibn ʿIṣḥāq paraphrases the Gospel of John 15:26–16:1, where it refers to the coming of the Paraclete/Comforter. If the Qurʾān states that Jesus predicted Muḥammad’s coming and the Bible claims Jesus predicted the coming of a Comforter, then Muḥammad must be the predicted Comforter. Ibn ʿIṣḥāq also edits the passage to what he thought was the original verse that God gave to Jesus, so ‘Father’ has been changed to ‘Lord’. He likely highlighted this passage to authorise Muḥammad’s biography via the Bible’s legitimating authority.

What was the Bible’s value for Muslim doctrine?

Early Muslim attitudes towards the Bible’s value were quite diverse. By the ninth century, when biblical texts became more widely available through Arabic translations, Muslims were able to engage more deeply with the Bible. They focused their energies on ascertaining the value of the biblical content, its interpretation (positively to prove Islam) and its integrity (negatively to disprove Christianity).

One common argument about the Bible was that it predicted the arrival of the Prophet Muḥammad and the coming of Islam. The presupposition that the Bible contained passages pertaining to Islam was based upon verses such as Q 61:6 (the coming of ‘Aḥmad’). One technique was to find messianic verses in the Hebrew Bible and explain that they fulfilled promises made to Muḥammad. Citations from Deuteronomy 33:2 and 18:18 (‘I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth’) were quoted as prophetic proofs by Ibn Ḥūṭayba (d. 889) in his Al-Am al-nubuwwa (‘Signs of prophethood’) (Adang 1996: 268–9). His collection of biblical citations enjoyed a wide reception among later Muslim writers (Schmidtke 2011: 251–2). Ibn Ḥūṭayba also took the riders on camels in Isaiah 21:6–7 to mean that Muḥammad and the Arabs would have dominion over the region (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992: 75–110; especially 102). Many apologists cited God’s promise to make Ishmael’s descendants into a great nation in Genesis 17:20 as a prophetic sign. Ibn Ḥūṭayba also argues that the prophet Isaiah anticipated the importance of the Ka’ba in Mecca (Adang 1996: 272–5). Some writers even transcribed Hebrew passages into Arabic to lend authority to their claims,
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such as al-Maqdisī (d. 991) and the fourteenth-century Jewish convert to Islam, Saʿīd ibn Ḥasan al-Iskandarī (Halft 2014).

For Muslim apologists, Muhammad walked in the way of the prophets by virtue of his message, his scripture and his miracles. In the Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-daula ('Book of religion and empire'), the Christian convert to Islam ʿĀlī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. c. 860) composed an apologetic work that cited numerous biblical passages (Mingana 1922). Utilising John 15:26, he and other Muslim authors all argued that the verse predicted Muḥammad’s arrival as the ‘Seal of the Prophets’. Al-Ṭabarī’s ‘biblical annunciations’ of Muḥammad’s prophethood were popular enough to be copied by the Muʿtazil theologians Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 1044) and al-Ḥimmaṣī l-Rāzī (d. 1204) (Adang 2007).

Muslims also used the Bible for intra-Islamic concerns. Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), in his Kitāb taʾwil mukhtalīf al-ḥadīth ('Book of interpretation of the differences between Ḥadīths'), cited the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) to verify the authenticity of certain Islamic oral traditions (Accad 2003b: 71, 213). The historian Aḥmad al-Yaʿqūbī (d. c. 897) in his world chronicle quoted directly from the Bible without changing the text.

Muslims employed a variety of approaches to the New Testament and to the Gospels in particular (Accad 2003b: 69–71). First, concerning monotheism, Muslims cited biblical passages to demonstrate God’s unicity (tauhīd) in contrast to claims affirming Jesus’ divinity. For instance, ʿĀlī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī in his Radd ʿalā l-Naṣārā ('Reply to the Christians') cited Mark 10:18: ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Khalifé and Kutsch 1959: 121). Second, concerning Jesus Christ, Muslims quoted Gospel passages that emphasised Jesus’ humanity, such as John 20:17, when the risen Jesus instructs Mary Magdalene to tell his disciples: ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ (Accad 2003c). John 20:17 was the most popular New Testament verse for Muslim authors because of its implication that Jesus was part of the larger framework of prophetic messengers. This view suggested that Jesus was a true Muslim and that exalted references to him in the Bible were symbolic in nature.

Citing the Gospels was very popular but also challenging for Muslims due to their Christology. Muslims avoided biographical portraits of Jesus, instead preferring to quote proof texts. The Zaydī Imām al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (d. 860) in his Al-radd ʿalā l-Naṣārā ('Reply to the Christians') cited selected passages to suggest John the Evangelist did not believe Jesus was God’s unique son (Thomas 1996). But the Muslim author Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī (d. 1014) felt the primary problem with scripture is one of Christian interpretation (taʾwil). He argues that Christians interpret passages too literally, such as John 8:58: ‘Before Abraham was, I am’ (Beaumont 2008: 185–9). Likewise, the author of Al-radd al-jamiʿī ('A fitting reply'), which has wrongly been attributed to al-Ghazālī, claims that Christians misunderstood the metaphorical interpretations of passages about Jesus that demonstrated his servanthood. More specifically, the author attempts to reconcile biblical passages with the Qurʾān, redefine terminology to fit Islamic vocabulary, reinterpret passages, highlight persuasive verses, reascribe statements about Jesus Christ to God alone, and reject certain passages as unreliable (Whittingham 2011: 212–14). The author quotes numerous Gospel passages, as well as Acts 2:22 (Peter’s sermon at Pentecost), Paul’s letters (1 Corinthians 2:7, 8:4–6, 15:28; Ephesians 1:16–17) and other letters (1 John 4:12–15; Hebrews 3:1–4) (Beaumont 2011: 75–9; Chidiac 1939).

How did Muslims view the integrity of the Bible?

One constant in Muslim views about the Bible was the claim that Christians and Jews tampered with their scriptures (tabrīf). Gordon Nickel has listed six accusations that the Qurʾān ascribes to ‘Scripture People’ which later Muslims used in their arguments, including that they confounded,
concealed, substituted, tampered, twisted and/or forgot their scriptures (Nickel 2011: 52–61). They reasoned that earlier texts were not identical with the originals, based upon verses in the Qurʾān (e.g. 2:79; 3:78). If they found biblical passages contradicting the Qurʾān, then Muslims reasoned that the inconsistencies discredited Judaism and Christianity. Muslim authors offered a range of opinions, however, about the way this tampering occurred:

Christians hid verses by not reciting them, mispronouncing them and/or concealing them. Christians misinterpreted verses, corrupting the meaning (turāṣṣ al maʾnāwī). Christians (and Jews) had altered the text itself (turāṣṣ lazţī).

In the first two categories, Muslim authors recognised a sense of continuity between the Bible and Qurʾān and that many biblical passages were in some way authoritative. However, the passages also required further reinterpretation to fully elucidate their meanings. In his Radd ʿalā l-Nasāʾī, al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 860) removed references to ‘Father’ and ‘Son of God’ from the Gospel of Matthew because he believed they were additions. Abū ʿl-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992) agreed that corrupt biblical interpretation was the cause of Christian–Muslim disagreement. In his Kitāb al-tamhīd (‘Book of introduction’), al-Baqillānī accepted favourable biblical passages and rejected problematic ones as illegitimate translations (Accad 2003a: 85–6). Prior to the eleventh century, most Muslims did not consider the Qurʾān to be accusing Jews and Christians of corrupting their scriptures. Most believed that the problems originated with copyists’ errors and translations, neither of which indicate their deliberate falsification.

The third category represents Muslims who argued that the Christian Bible did not resemble the Gospel that God sent down to Jesus. Emerging in the eleventh century and later, this accusation most likely developed from interreligious encounters with Christians rather than from historical or theological concerns (Accad 2003a: 68). This view supposed that Christians intentionally corrupted their scriptures to hide the coming of Islam. But Muslim writers did not agree on the process by which the tampering happened, who were the individuals responsible for this corruption or the time period in which the alterations took place. Some claimed it may have been an individual (e.g. the Apostle Paul), a group or all the disciples; it may have occurred immediately after Jesus’ death, decades later, at the time of the Emperor Constantine or at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad. Further, Muslims never agreed about the motivations for the alleged tampering. Some blamed scribes at the time of Muḥammad for deliberately changing the text. Others such as the Muʿtazilī theologian ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī (d. 1025) blamed the New Testament Gospel authors for leaving out much of Jesus’ original Gospel and including additions about matters such as his crucifixion. He claimed the Bible was further corrupted by the apostle Paul and later by the Emperor Constantine (d. 337) (Reynolds and Samir 2010: 92–112). ʿAbd al-Jabbār also noted that unlike broadly authenticated transmission lines (tawāṭūr) in Islam, Christian texts ‘were in error with regard to transmission and interpretation’ (Thomas 2008: 358–9).

The most incisive critic of the Bible was the Andalusian polemicist Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064). The 244 citations of the Bible he made in his Kitāb al-fiṣal fī l-mīla l wa-l-aḥwāʾ wa-l-nīhaḥ (‘The book of judgement regarding the confessions, inclinations and sects’) were also substantially greater than those by any other author. Ibn Ḥazm’s main claims for biblical corruption were computational mistakes, chronological and geographical inaccuracies, theological impossibilities (e.g. anthropomorphism), internal contradictions and the embarrassing behaviour of biblical figures (Lazarus-Yafeh 1992: 28–35). Regarding the Hebrew Bible, he explains that it underwent alteration when the scribe Ezra had to reconstruct the text from memory at the beginning of the Second Temple Period (Powers 1986). As for the New Testament, Ibn Ḥazm argues it was filled with lies — he
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gives pejorative titles to the Gospel authors as well as to Peter and Paul, since they led Christians astray (Accad 2003c: 210).

The later authors al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) also expressed doubt about the authenticity of the Bible. Al-Juwaynī points out that the Gospel authors only composed their texts nine to 30 years after Jesus’ ascension. Some specific discrepancies he adduces include the genealogies of Jesus, how Peter denied Jesus three times, the manner of the crucifixion and whether miracles occurred after Jesus’ death (Thomas 2007: 189). By the post-Crusader era, attacking the Bible as corrupt became a more attractive method for Muslim critics. If Islam restored God’s religion from an age of imperfection, then it was only natural to apply this assumption to the Bible itself.

Prior to the eleventh century, Muslims generally cited the Bible as an authority or a misinterpreted text to be corrected. Only later did systematic arguments that the Bible was deliberately corrupted appear. There were important exceptions such as Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 1285), who listed 15 contradictions to the Bible that he felt were due to faulty transmitters in his Al-aḫriba al-fākhira ‘an al-as’ila l-fājira (‘Glorious answers to wicked questions’). The polemicist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) recognised that Muslims agreed about the corrupted interpretation of the Bible but were divided over whether Christians had intentionally altered it (Michel 1984: 213).

A contributing factor in Muslim criticisms of the Bible was the assumption of what the word ‘scripture’ entails. Given the premise of inimitability, the Qurān’s anthropomorphisms, inaccuracies and contradictions were explainable while the same instances in the Bible showed it was a fallible human product. Another causal factor was the emergence of Christian Arabic apologetics and polemics. Some Christian Arabic treatises presented the Qurān with a sympathetic interpretation of Christianity. Others attacked the Qurān as a defective scripture. Paul of Antioch’s Risāla ilā ba’d asdiqā’ihi (‘Letter to a Muslim friend’) drew responses from al-Qarāfī, Ibn Taymiyya and Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316). The Ḥanbalī theologian al-Ṭūfī responded with a critical biblical commentary that rejected the possibility of a harmonised reading (Demiri 2013). By the later medieval period, most Muslims doubted that the Bible was worthy of use in Islamic education.

What biblical translations did Muslims use in their writing?

Muslim authors usually cited the Bible in proof-text format. There is no evidence, from the early centuries, at least, to suggest they had access to the entire biblical text of the Hebrew Bible and/or New Testament, though in individual cases they may have made use of Christian Arabic translations of the Bible. Translations became commonplace after the ninth century, but mostly in the form of individual books or testimonies (Griffith 2013: 106–26; 143–6). Muslims probably employed improvised translations, because Eastern Christians did not develop a standardised version of the Arabic Bible. The most likely process by which biblical translations made their way into Islamic texts is through collections of proof texts assembled according to doctrinal themes (Schmidtke 2014: 5). Biblical passages made their way into Muslim works through bilingual converts such as ʿAlī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī or authors with access to oral informants, or those with experience in religious debate. Composing pseudo-biblical passages was also popular, such as the Muslim Psalms of David (Vishanoff 2011).

When Muslim scholars cited biblical texts, they tended to come from the same parts: the Torah, Prophets, Psalms and Gospels. One of the few exceptions to this approach is ʿAbd al-Jabārī (d. 1025), who in his Tāḥḥīḥ dalāʾ il al-nubuwwa (‘Confirmation of the proofs of prophethood’) also quoted from the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline letters and the Catholic Epistles (Reynolds and Samir 2010). Al-Ḥasan ibn Ayyūb (d. before 987), a convert from Christianity, is one of the few others to cite Christian sources outside the Gospels (Reynolds and Samir 2010: xxviii–ix).
What kinds of literature did Muslims employ to examine the Bible?

There are at least five genres that Muslims commonly used to analyse the Bible. First, traditionists cited biblical stories in the Hadiths to confirm tales from Jewish and Syriac Christian sources (Isrāʾīlyyāt). Nonpolemical interest in the Bible was typically directed towards the prophets. Here Muslims presented the Bible as a criterion for judging the reliability of Islamic oral traditions.

Second, interpreters used the Bible in Qurʾān commentaries (tafsīr) to illustrate the historical context of certain verses. The most optimistic attitude is found in Abū l-Ḥasan Ibrāhīm al-Biqāʾī’s (d. 1480) defence of quoting from the Bible, Al-aqwāl al-qawāima fī ḥukm al-naqīl min al-kutub al-qadima (‘Just words on the permissibility of quoting from the ancient books’). By the fifteenth century in Mamlūk Egypt, his citation of the Bible in a Qurʾān commentary was divisive enough to elicit fatawā against reading it. Al-Biqāʾī cites passages as they appear in Christian Arabic translations, and he even accepted that the genuine parts of the Bible were from God (Saleh 2008a: 651; 2008b).

Third, historians cited the Bible in their chronicles and histories (taʾrikh) to elaborate on the pre-Islamic period. The historian al-Yaʿqūbī (d. c. 897) quoted the Bible in a sympathetic fashion for his world history. It has been shown that he used the Christian Syriac book The cave of treasures, an exegetical narrative about the Patriarchs, as a source. He also used the biblical names of characters even when they have different Arabic names in the Qurʾān (Griffith 2013: 182–98). He also presented Jesus as he appears in the Gospels, pointing out for instance that he does not speak from the cradle as he does in the Qurʾān. He often quoted biblical verses as they appeared in the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Fourth, polemists selected particular passages to emphasise that tampering took place in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Speculative theologians (mutakallimin) commonly employed this tactic. ʿAbd al-Jabbār quotes from Gospel texts and New Testament letters as well as Christian history. He cites Paul’s letters more than 25 times (Reynolds and Samir 2010).

Fifth, apologetic authors such as those who composed the qīṣṣa al-anbiyāʾ (‘Stories of the Prophets’) cited the Bible to suggest that it foretold the coming of Muḥammad or the rise of the Arab nation. Authors such as Ahmad ibn Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī (d. 1035), al-Kīṣāʾ (d. c. 1200) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) presented homiletic stories that were part biblical, part noncanonical Jewish or Christian sources and/or part unique legends. Their citations followed a formula to demonstrate the continuous prophetic line from Adam to Muḥammad.

How did Christians respond to Muslim biblical criticism?

The story of Muslim attitudes towards the Bible fits into the larger narrative of Christian responses to Islamic views. Just as Muslims reinterpreted the Bible, Christians appropriated the Qurʾān. Christians asked for proof of tampering, critiqued the Qurʾān as corrupt, and then concluded with evidence showing the Bible is a reliable source.

In a dialogue between Timothy I, Patriarch of the Church of the East, and the Caliph al-Mahdī held in 781, the caliph declares that the Bible has been changed. Timothy asks him to produce the altered manuscripts so that they may examine them together (Mingana 1928: 171–2; 191–2). The ninth-century polemical letter (Risāla) attributed to ʿAbd al-Maṣūḥ ibn Iṣḥāq al-Kindī provides the most detailed critique of the Qurʾān’s origins (Newman 1993). The ninth-century account of a debate between Theodore Abū Qurra (d. ca. 829) and the Caliph al-Maʿmūn deftly proof texts the Qurʾān (Nasry 2008). In his Kitāb al-masāʿil wa-l-ajwība (‘Book of questions and answers’), ʿAmmar al-Baṣrī gives six reasons why people might accept a false scripture: moral laxity, violent threats, financial incentives, ethnic loyalty, magic or political coercion (Beaumont
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2007: 250–4). Christians were aware of Muslim arguments, asserted the authenticity of their scriptures, and criticised Muslims for the shortcomings of their own scripture.

Conclusion

The Bible exercised a dual role within the pre-modern Islamic world. Many early Muslims believed that Biblicising Islamic material legitimated their historical claims. Others believed that Islamicising biblical material provided a way to recast key figures and concepts. Later, Muslims expressed more doubt about the reliability of earlier scriptures. The Muslim community was ambivalent about the value of Christian scripture in their tradition, viewing it as a beneficial yet flawed scripture. As Muslim authors became comfortable with the Bible’s place in their tradition, its text was no longer essential to the community’s confession. Pre-modern Muslim biblical scholarship was primarily an internal dialogue written for other Muslims and a self-reflective analysis of Islam.

References


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Further reading


