

Why Do the Nations Rage?
Boundaries of Canon and Community in a Muslim's Rewriting of Psalm 2

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Abstract: Numerous Arabic manuscripts of the “Psalms of David” contain not the Biblical Psalms but Muslim compositions in the form of exhortations addressed by God to David. One rewritten version of Psalm 2 manipulates the form and content of the Biblical Psalms so as to highlight a conflict between the Christian and Muslim communities, and the incompatibility of their scriptural canons. Yet it also embraces the imagined idea of the Psalms of David, and incorporates elements of the Quran, *ḥadīth*, Islamic sermons, and Tales of the Prophets so as to highlight a division that cuts through both the Muslim and Christian communities, separating worldly believers from those who, like the shared figure of David, repent and pursue a life of otherworldly piety. This illustrates how sacred texts can serve as symbols of religious communities, especially in situations of conflict, and how apparently interreligious arguments can turn out to be intrareligious disputes. It shows how the content, form, and imagined identity of someone else's sacred text can be used to manipulate the boundaries of textual canons and religious communities, and it demonstrates the need for both interreligious and intrareligious frames of reference in the comparative enterprise.

Keywords: Psalms; Zabūr; David; Wabḥ ibn Munabbih; Muslim use of the Bible; interreligious use of sacred texts; canon; interreligious conflict; Jerusalem.

The essays in this issue of *Comparative Islamic Studies* illustrate just a few of the many ways in which Muslims have approached the Bible. Other examples might include criticizing the textual transmission of the Bible, redrawing the boundaries of the Biblical canon, finding linguistic or numerological proofs of Muhammad's prophethood in the Bible, using the Bible as a textbook on Christian doctrine, and even using the Bible in public worship. One more way Muslims have engaged the Bible is by rewriting it. And so without further ado, here is the real psalm 2, as it was originally revealed by God to the Prophet David, according to a Muslim author of, perhaps, the twelfth century. The Biblical Psalm 2 is set alongside it for comparison, with similar material in italics and less obviously related material underlined.

psalm 2 from Laurentian ms Orient. 267, 3a-3b

(1) *Why do the nations and the peoples surge forth? They blaze up in their zeal to overthrow what is rightly the Lord's (He is mighty and exalted). The Lord says: what is rightly mine cannot be overthrown, and my might cannot be brought low. (2) The unbelievers, idolaters, and foes join together against the Lord and those who praise him, that their word may be exalted and God's word abased. (3a) *The rulers and the kings join together against the Lord* (He is mighty and exalted). *The Lord says:* By my power I _____ed the evildoers, and assigned them their dwelling, and clothed them with the fear of me, but all this they did not _____; they gave themselves over to desire and tyranny.*

(3b) O ye people of the earth, if you *make me your refuge* in your search for sustenance, I will provide a means of sustenance for you. If love of me prevails in the heart of my servant, then I become his hearing by which he hears, and his sight by which he sees; if he contemplates a good deed I embolden him, and if he contemplates evil I restrain him.

(4) *O David, be devoted to me, and I will cause heads to bow before you, and clothe your face with dignity.*

(5) O David, if only you could see those who do as they please to the believers' inviolable thing(s). I have spoken against them a disastrous curse. I have utterly disgraced them, and have *given power* over their own inviolable thing(s) to one who will act wickedly toward them, as a *vengeance* upon their inviolable thing(s), (6) and as a sign to those who delight in this life. I will hold them accountable for every fiber and speck and skin of a date pit. Those whom I call to account, fully devoting myself to their reckoning, great is their affliction at the resurrection. (7) Those who love to cast men's inviolable thing(s) to the ground, I will cast them upon the glowing coals of hellfire.

Biblical Psalm 2¹

(1) *Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?* (2) *The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed,* saying, (3) "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us."

(4) He who sits in the heavens laughs; *the LORD* has them in derision. (5) Then he *will speak* to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, *saying*, (6) "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."

(7) I will tell of the decree of the LORD: *He said to me*, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. (8) *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.* (9) *You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*"

(10) Now therefore, O *kings*, be wise; be *warned*, O *rulers* of the earth. (11) Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling (12) kiss his feet, or he will be *angry*, and you will perish in the way; for his *wrath* is quickly kindled.

Happy are all who *take refuge in him*.

Biblical Psalm 3

A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom.

(1) *O Lord, how many are my foes!*
Many are rising against me; (2) many

¹ Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

(8) O David, once you were endowed with a deeply moving voice, before you rebelled against me; but when you rebelled I snatched the light of wisdom from your chest—though if I relent toward you I will restore it. (9) O David, exalt and sanctify me greatly! *I will protect you from whatever distresses you in this world and the next. For I surround all things.*

(10) *The words of David (peace be upon him): O Lord, what evil the people have prepared for me! But they do not realize that I am shielded and surrounded by your protection; for you reward liberally.*

are saying to me, "There is no help for you in God." Selah.

(3) *But you, O LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. (4) I cry aloud to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah. ...*

This text is from the 13th-century manuscript Orientali 267 in the Laurentian Library in Florence,² one of the oldest of a plethora of manuscripts which, altogether, represent at least four distinct Islamic renditions of “the psalms of David,” stemming from two principal source collections and extant today in at least seven recensions.³ Several such texts were studied early in the twentieth century by the European orientalists Krarup and Cheikho, and by the American missionary Zwemer.⁴ They have received only scant attention since then; Khoury discussed them briefly in 1972, and concluded that these rewritten psalms represent medieval elaborations and variations on a collection of Davidic lore ascribed to Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. ca. 110/728), an early Muslim famous for his knowledge of pre-Islamic scriptures.⁵ Such lore was preserved and refashioned by Muslim storytellers and ascetics, for whom the Prophet David served as a model of repentance. The authors of the various extant Muslim psalm texts combined these traditions with Quranic and other Islamic elements, and occasionally with echoes of the Biblical Psalms, to fashion a sermonic discourse ostensibly addressed by God to the Prophet David, but also directed to the religious situation of the authors’ own generations. The sermonic character of these rewritten psalms was stressed by J. Sadan in his study of one

² Several excerpts, including psalm 2, were edited by Ove Chr. Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen: Arabisch und Deutsch* (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1909). My translation is based on my own reading of the Florence manuscript, in which two words are partially effaced.

³ For a survey of this literature, including an overview of the Florence manuscript, see David R. Vishanoff, “An Imagined Book Gets a New Text: Psalms of the Muslim David,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22 (2011): 85-99.

⁴ See Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*; L. Cheikho, “Quelques légendes islamiques apocryphes,” *Mélanges de la Faculté orientale* 4 (1910): 33-56, especially 40-43 and 47-56, also translated (without the edited psalm texts) by Josephine Spaeth as “Some Moslem Apocryphal Legends,” *Moslem World* 2 (1912): 47-59; and S. M. Zwemer, “A Moslem Apocryphal Psalter,” *Moslem World* 5 (1915): 399-403.

⁵ Raif Georges Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih. Teil 1: Der Heidelberger Papyrus PSR Heid Arab 23. Leben und Werk des Dichters*, *Codices Arabici Antiqui*, no. 1 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 261-263.

particular text, which was initially composed as a rewritten Torah but was later circulated under the title of psalms as well.⁶

In most of these rewritten psalm texts, there is little trace of the Biblical Psalms beyond the opening lines of Psalm 1 and a few words from Psalm 2. This particular version of psalm 2, however, combines Islamic materials with some very deliberate transformations of phrases and ideas from Biblical Psalms 2 and 3. A careful comparison of the Biblical and rewritten texts will show that the author has manipulated the content and form of the Biblical Psalms in such a way as to highlight a conflict between the Christian and Muslim communities, and point out incompatibilities between their scriptural canons. When we compare this rewritten psalm with relevant parts of its Islamic literary context, however, we will see that the author was less interested in form and content than in the imagined idea of “the psalms of David.” He⁷ employed this idea not to create an opposition between religious communities, but to contrast worldly people with otherworldly people. He thus drew a boundary that cut across religious lines, in order to voice an internal critique directed at parts of the Muslim community itself. These two comparisons will yield some general conclusions about how different aspects of a community’s sacred texts—their content, form, and imagined identities—can be used by adherents of other religions to manipulate the imagined boundaries of textual canons and religious communities.

Comparison with the Bible

Very little of the content of our rewritten psalm is drawn verbatim from the Biblical text. The most obvious verbal similarities are “why do the nations and the peoples,” and “the rulers and the kings join together against the Lord.” Many other parts of the psalm, however, are derived from the Biblical text by way of free and inventive paraphrasing. This common material is indicated in italics in the translation above. Notions such as tyrannical and destructive power (vv. 3a and 5), taking refuge in God (v. 3b), being given dominion over others (v. 4), warning (v. 6), and divine protection from enemies (vv. 9-10) are all drawn from Psalm 2 and from the beginning of Psalm 3. Indeed there is very little in the Biblical text that the rewritten psalm does not preserve in one form or another. Two noteworthy omissions are the term “anointed,” or messiah, which the Quran associates with Jesus, and the reference to God begetting a son, an idea that the Quran denounces as a Christian blasphemy. These

⁶ J. Sadan, “Some Literary Problems Concerning Judaism and Jewry in Medieval Arabic Sources,” in *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization, in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*, ed. M. Sharon (Jerusalem: Cana, and Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 370-398.

⁷ I believe the author was likely a man, whom I will identify tentatively below.

omissions indicate that our Muslim author was concerned with specifically Christian (rather than Jewish) understandings of Psalm 2.

Some Biblical content appears to have been omitted, but actually shows up in the rewritten psalm in forms that are unrecognizable in English translation. This material is underlined in the text above. The Hebrew *yehgû*, which can mean to murmur or speak or meditate and is translated “plot” in Ps. 2:1, must have been translated into Arabic using the related verb *hajiû*, which has the sense of a fire blazing up or making a murmuring noise; either the translator or our author then replaced *hajiû* with the synonym *ajjû*,⁸ which I have translated “blaze up.” The meaning of the Hebrew is thus entirely lost, even though a verbal root indirectly related to the Hebrew persists. Another example is “in vain” in Ps. 2:1. This must have been translated correctly using some form of the Arabic *buṭlān*, and the author doubtless understood this translation in the sense of vanity, for he expounded the futility of the nations’ efforts in his own words. But he transformed the meaning of *buṭlān* by replacing it with *baṭāla*, which signifies not vanity but rather, among other things, bravery (“zeal” in my rendering of v. 1). Also in verse 1, “to overthrow what is rightly the Lord’s” could instead be translated “to avert the Lord’s decree” (*ḥaqq*); this refers back to “the decree (*ḥōq*) of the LORD” in Ps. 2:7. In all these cases, the author has transformed the meaning of a Biblical word by manipulating the form of a Semitic root, or by reusing it in a new context, in ways that are almost playful. This indicates that our author worked from an Arabic translation of the Psalms that was made directly from Hebrew, or perhaps via another Semitic language, but not via Greek or Latin. It also reveals that the author did not regard his task as one of exegesis or textual revision, but playful literary bricolage.

Two further instances of wordplay are especially significant for the interreligious implications of this act of rewriting. The first involves the root *ḥrm*, which I have rendered ambiguously as “inviolable thing(s)” in verses 5 and 7. The copyist who produced the Laurentian Library manuscript in 1262, as well as the orientalist who edited this part of it in 1909, read *ḥuram* (plural of *ḥurma*) and took it to mean the believers’ wives. These wives are violated by the aggressor nations, whose own wives will therefore be violated in revenge. Accordingly, the copyist entitled this psalm “concerning sexual sin” (*fī al-zinā*). At first glance this reading seems reasonable, since the very next psalm speaks of sexual sin (*zinā*) and uses the word *ḥuram* in the sense of wives.⁹ This reading is certainly appropriate in another version of this passage, in chapter 15 of another Muslim rendition of the psalms, where the idea of

⁸ The emendation in Krarup’s edition may be disregarded.

⁹ Ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 4a-4b.

sexual sin is made more explicit by a reference to “one who will lay bare their private parts.”¹⁰ In our rendition of psalm 2, however, this interpretation of *ḥrm* is grammatically problematic, because the pronoun “them” at the end of “one who will act wickedly toward them” (v. 5) is masculine. More importantly, the idea of sexual sin is out of place in this psalm, and it bears no connection to the Biblical Psalm 2, whereas just about every other part of the psalm, except those parts that we will soon trace to Islamic sources, relates to the Biblical text in one way or another. I suggest, therefore, that *ḥrm* be read as *ḥaram*, with the meaning of a sacred place or sanctuary. It then has a clear basis in Ps. 2:6: “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill”—a place that the Muslim author would likely have known as *al-ḥaram al-sharīf*, the noble sanctuary, and as “the third of the two sacred precincts” (*thālith al-ḥaramayn*). Read in this way, verses 5 and 7 describe some kind of violence against the sanctuary in Jerusalem, and promise divine vengeance against the aggressors. The chosen word forms could also evoke sexual violence: *ḥrm* can indeed be read as “wives,” and “those who do as they please” (*al-mutaqallibīn*) in v. 5 was read by the copyist and the modern editor as *al-munqalibīn*, which could mean either “those who return” to the believers’ sanctuary, or “those who turn” to the believers’ wives for intercourse.¹¹ Perhaps this ambiguity is deliberate. But when this psalm is read against the background of the Biblical text to which it was a response, it is clear that the primary referent of *ḥrm*, for the author if not for the copyist, was the sanctuary in Jerusalem.¹²

A second pivotal transformation is in verse 2, where the Hebrew “against the LORD and his anointed” becomes in Arabic “against the Lord and those who praise him.” By the removal of a single dot beneath the *yāʾ* in the Arabic translation, *masīḥih* (مسيحه his messiah) has become *musabbīḥih* (مسيحه the one who praises him). The author has then made the word plural (the ones who praise him), thus replacing God’s messiah with the community of God’s worshippers. The word “anointed,” then, was not simply omitted out of distaste for its Christian connotations; it too, like so much else in the Biblical Psalm, was deftly transformed to serve the Muslim author’s purpose.

¹⁰ Ms Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hunt. 515, 17a, which contains what I have called the Pious psalms text (see Vishanoff, “An Imagined Book Gets a New Text”). The same language is preserved in psalm 11 of the Broken Pious recension (Cheikh, “Quelques légendes islamiques apocryphes,” 53) and of the Broken Pious with Moses recension (ms Princeton, Garrett 108B, 13b). The pronoun in “their private parts” is, however, masculine, which suggests the text is corrupt. Furthermore, the reference to private parts is missing from the corresponding passage in psalm 14 of the Orthodox text (ms Leiden, Or. 6129, 11b), which suggests that in the Core source collection of psalms material from which the author of the Florence text drew, this passage did not have an explicitly sexual meaning.

¹¹ For an example of the latter meaning, see Susan A. Spector, trans., *Chapters on Marriage and Divorce: Responses of Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Rāḥwayh* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 71.

¹² Jerusalem is mentioned in the next rewritten psalm as well. Ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 5a line 10.

We now have enough clues to guess what that purpose was, and perhaps even who the author was. We know that the author was troubled by some specifically Christian connotations of Psalm 2, and by some unspecified violence against the holy sanctuary in Jerusalem. If we suppose that the author read an Arabic translation of the Biblical Psalm 2 as a Christian text, against the backdrop of the First Crusade, we can well imagine how he might have perceived it as a Christian threat against any Muslim nations that might “conspire and plot in vain” to overthrow the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem that God had established “on Zion, my holy hill.” Indeed, some Christians may well have understood Psalm 2 in that way, for the Psalms were an important source of justification and encouragement and propaganda for the crusades.¹³ This hypothesis fits the one piece of data that we have about this text’s provenance: although the Laurentian Library manuscript contains no hint of authorship, another manuscript containing a very similar rendition of the psalms¹⁴ gives a chain of transmission from Wahb ibn Munabbih down to Abū Walīd ibn Yūnus, a preacher in the mosque of Cordova who travelled to Egypt and Arabia and died in India in 1156.¹⁵ This Abū Walīd would have been in an excellent position to rewrite Psalm 2 in response to the Crusaders’ capture of Jerusalem, drawing on an existing body of Islamic material about David and the psalms, but addressing the concerns of his own time. This must remain a mere hypothesis, and it need not be pressed. What matters for our analysis is that the author was responding to some kind of Christian aggression against a Muslim sanctuary, probably in Jerusalem, and that he did so by turning the Biblical Psalm 2 on its head. By transforming “his anointed one” into “those who praise him,” he effectively transposed the main actors in the psalm, so that the aggressors are no longer the presumably Muslim nations who plot against God’s putatively Christian king in Jerusalem, but rather the Christian nations, who join together against God’s community of worshippers, the Muslims, and attack their holy precinct, their *ḥaram*. God’s promise of protection now applies to the Muslim community, whereas the Christians will see their own sacred place sacked (v. 5), and will be thrown upon the glowing coals of hellfire (v. 7).

By comparing the content of this Islamic psalm with the corresponding Biblical Psalms, we have found that this act of rewriting reinforced a division and indeed an opposition between two religious communities—not the Davidic kingdom of Israel and its gentile neighbors, but Muslims and Christians. Content, however, is only one aspect of this textual

¹³ Psalm 79 was used this way; see Penny J. Cole, “‘O God, the Heathen Have Come into Your Inheritance’ (Ps. 78.1): The Theme of Religious Pollution in Crusade Documents, 1095–1188,” in *Crusaders and Muslims in Twelfth-Century Syria*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 95, 97, 106.

¹⁴ I have been unable to locate the manuscript described in Zwemer, “A Moslem Apocryphal Psalter,” but his quotation and description indicate its text is similar in part, though perhaps not entirely identical, to that of the Laurentian Library manuscript.

¹⁵ Zwemer, “A Moslem Apocryphal Psalter,” 399, 402.

transformation. A comparison at the level of literary form reveals a second important division and opposition, between two textual canons.

In principle, we might expect our author to regard the psalms as an area of overlap between the scriptural canons of Christians (whom he seems to regard as the owners of this text) and of Muslims. The Quran presents David as a legitimate prophet to whom was revealed a *zabūr*—a generic term for a mundane or sacred written text, which came to be used as a title for the psalms of David, in keeping with Jewish and Christian traditions that ascribe the Psalms to David.¹⁶ Our author attributed his text to David and called it both psalms (*mazāmīr*) and *zabūr*, thus identifying the Davidic scripture affirmed in the Quran as a book of psalms. In principle, therefore, he embraced the “psalms of David” within his Islamic definition of scripture. But the very act of modifying the textual content that is labeled “Psalms” in the Bible challenged the canonical status of the actual Biblical text. Such a challenge is not surprising, given the widely held Islamic doctrine of corruption (*tahrīf*), according to which the copies of scriptures possessed by Jews and Christians are suspected of having been modified, and are therefore not regarded as identical to the books that the Quran says were revealed to Moses and David and Jesus. Our author modified the content of the Biblical Psalms quite dramatically, which seems to suggest that he held the uncommonly strong view that the entire content of the Bible had been subject to wholesale corruption.¹⁷ But more than that, by also modifying their literary form, our author implicitly declared that the very form of the Biblical Psalms made it impossible to consider them canonical. One of the defining formal features of Biblical Psalms is that they are in a human voice, invoking or crying out to God. Thus Psalm 2 is spoken from the perspective of a human being; it describes God in the third person, and it frames God’s speech as a quotation. This form is incompatible, however, with the Quranic notion that a scripture constitutes God’s own speech sent down to a prophet. Our Muslim author therefore placed most of his psalm in the mouth of God, who calls out “O David” and “O ye people of the earth” (vv. 3b-9). After the first few verses, which imitate the Biblical Psalm by quoting God and describing him in the third person, God becomes “me” and “I.” “Happy are those who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:12) becomes “make me your refuge” (v. 3b); “you, O LORD, are a shield around me” (Ps. 3:3) becomes “I surround all things” (v. 9). Only at the end does the Biblical content—the Psalmist’s outcry in Ps. 3:1-3—lead our author to put words in David’s mouth; but even then he follows the example of the Quran by framing the prophet’s words as a quote: he converts the Biblical heading “A Psalm of David” into a marker of a quotation, “the words of David,” which sets off the human speech of verse 10 as a quotation within an

¹⁶ J. Horowitz and R. Firestone, “Zabūr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed.

¹⁷ See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “The Qur’ānic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996): 144-148, 153.

otherwise divine address. These formal modifications allow the author to reuse most of the Biblical content, and accommodate it to the Islamic canon, while rejecting the Biblical form of psalmody as antithetical to his own notion of scripture.

Transformations at the level of form thus draw a clear boundary between two rival canons—that is, between two rival claims about what texts constitute sacred scripture. By bringing the psalms into formal agreement with his Islamic notion of scripture, the author declares that the original form of the Biblical Psalms precludes any possibility of their being considered authentic or canonical. This frees him to transform their content as he pleases, omitting theologically objectionable material, and reversing the roles of Christians and Muslims. An incompatibility between two canons at the level of form legitimates an inversion at the level of content, which serves to create a rhetorical opposition between the two religious communities that hold those canons sacred.

Comparison with Islamic literatures

This analysis, however, is incomplete. So far we have only considered how the content and form of the Biblical Psalms were transformed by our Muslim author. We have explained what was done with just about all the content of Ps. 2:1-3:3, but a large portion of the Islamic psalm remains unaccounted for, including several long stretches without any underlining or italics in the text above. These sections are full of allusions to various types of Islamic literature. When we shift our comparative focus from the Biblical Psalms to the Islamic literary tradition, and consider how our author has made intertextual use of that literature, we will have to reconsider our conclusion that this act of rewriting reinforces canonical and communal boundaries between Christians and Muslims.

The Quran

Some of the remaining material in our psalm stems from the Quran itself. Verse 2 alludes to Q 9:40, recalling a story dear to the Sufis, in which the Prophet Muhammad took refuge in a cave from the Meccan unbelievers who were pursuing him and Abū Bakr. This allusion is particularly apt for a Davidic psalm, because in Jewish and Islamic literature David too was said to have hidden in a cave while fleeing Saul, and like Muhammad he was protected by a spider who wove a web over the mouth of the cave.¹⁸ When the Quran mentions the story of Muhammad's adventure, it says that "God caused the unbelievers' word to be abased while God's word was exalted." Just as our author has reversed some elements of the Biblical Psalm, he now reverses that Quranic phrase: the unbelievers desire "that their word may be exalted and God's word abased." The effect of this inverted Quranic allusion is to imply that what the

¹⁸ Jean-Louis Déclais, *David raconté par les musulmans*, Patrimoines Islam (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 151-153.

unbelievers desire will certainly not come to pass. This helps to convey the notion of futility that is expressed in Ps. 2:1 by the phrase “in vain.”

Quranic vocabulary and themes also appear in verses 6-7, where the author expands on the warning about God’s wrath in Ps. 2:10-12. He refers to reckoning, resurrection, and hellfire; he calls God’s vengeance on the aggressors “a sign to those who delight in this life;”¹⁹ and he promises that God “will hold them accountable for every fiber and speck and skin of a date pit.”²⁰ All these echoes of Quranic language bring the rewritten psalm into the conceptual and rhetorical sphere of the Quran, seamlessly integrating Biblical and Quranic themes. The author plays freely with both Biblical and Quranic language, and puts them both to the service of his own message, which is that violent pursuit of worldly power is futile, so one should cast one’s worldly cares upon God and meditate upon the judgment to come.

A Divine Saying

This otherworldly message is also evident in verse 3b, which echoes parts of a famous divine saying (*ḥadīth qudsī*) that is likewise dear to Sufis: “When I love [my servant], I become his hearing by which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks; if he asks me I will surely give to him, and if he takes refuge in me I will surely protect him.”²¹ That saying is usually transmitted from the Prophet Muhammad as an isolated, non-Quranic fragment of divine speech. It is usually regarded not as part of any one book revealed to any one religious community, but rather as part of that broader, universal category of divine speech that is the heavenly source of all genuine scriptures. By choosing to give this divine saying a home in his psalms,²² our author identifies “the psalms of David” as a repository of genuine divine speech, and thus incorporates them into what he regards as a universal canon of revelation. Not that he canonizes the text of the Biblical Psalms—we have seen that he rejects both their content and their form. Rather, it is the idea of “the psalms of David”—the imagined figure of David and the story about his beautiful voice and moving recitations—that he embraces as part of an imagined canon shared by Muslims, Christians, and Jews. This interreligious commonality is further highlighted by the particular way in which he uses the divine saying. He suppresses the second half of the saying,

¹⁹ *‘Ajaban li-man* could also be translated “how astonishing are those who...,” but I have taken *‘ajaban* in the sense of “as a wonder,” in apposition to *intiḳāman*, “as a vengeance.” On delighting in this life, see for example Q 2:212, 3:14, 6:70.

²⁰ For the imagery of date pellicles, cf. Q 4:49, 53, 77, 124, 17:71, 35:13.

²¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-riqāq, bāb 38.*

²² The association of this *ḥadīth qudsī* with David may have been suggested by another saying attributed to David in ascetic literature: “O God, make love for you more dear to me than my own self, my hearing, my sight, and my family, and dearer than cold water.” Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Zuhd*, ed. Ḥāmid al-Ṭāhir al-Basyūnī (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1425/2004), 102 ¶364.

with its reference to violent “striking,” and retains only the ideas of sight, hearing, love, taking refuge in God, and God’s provision. This serves his message, which is not a call to retaliation against the aggression of a religious other—vengeance is left up to God—but rather a universal call to all “people of the earth” to give up striving for worldly gain and trust in God alone. Thus even as he rejects the content and the form of the Biblical Psalms, in ways that stress the divisions between Christians and Muslims and between their respective canons, our author embraces the imagined idea of “the psalms of David” in a way that negates those boundaries and oppositions.

Tales of the Prophets

The last section of our rewritten psalm that remains unaccounted for is verses 8 and 9a. This section alludes to several stock elements of the story of David as it is known in Islamic literature: his revelations, beautiful voice, devotion to worship, sin, repentance, and forgiveness. These elements, however, represent only one side of the Islamic literature on David. Early and classical writings on “Tales of the Prophets” (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*), drawing on Muslim authorities such as Wahb ibn Munabbih,²³ generally present David as a complex, multidimensional, and even paradoxical figure. On the one hand, he is the quintessential worshipper: the book that God reveals to him contains no law but only prayers of praise,²⁴ which he recites in such a beautiful voice that wild animals come to listen and the birds and the mountains join him in worship. He devotes a third of his days to worship. On the other hand, he is a man of the world: a courageous warrior who wins his fame by slaying Goliath, a mighty king with a large army, and the first manufacturer of chain mail. He devotes a third of his days to his many wives. These two facets of the David of Islamic literature come together in the story of his sin: he boasts that he can remain focused in worship for one hour, but he is distracted by a golden dove, in pursuit of which he comes to gaze upon Uriah’s wife, whom he is then able to marry (quite properly and legally) only after arranging Uriah’s death. This tension between the worldly and spiritual aspects of his character is resolved in the dramatic story of David’s repentance: overcome by remorse and fear of the day of judgment, he weeps in continual prostration until his tears cause grass to grow beneath him. His day of worship becomes a day of weeping (still accompanied by the wild animals and the birds and the mountains); he begins to spend every fourth day bemoaning his sin in the company of monks;

²³ Raif Georges Khoury’s detailed studies, in *Wahb b. Munabbih* and in *Les légendes prophétiques dans l’Islam depuis le I^{er} jusqu’au III^e siècle de l’Hégire* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), have led him to regard Wahb as a major source of such narratives, who authored his own book of “stories of the prophets.” Others, however, have suggested that Wahb may have been less important as an author than as a label that later scholars used to legitimate their reports of prophetic stories (Déclais, *David raconté par les musulmans*, 53 n. 17, 113).

²⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-qurʾān*, ed. Ṣidqī Jamil al-ʿAṭṭār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2001), 15:117 (on Q 17:55).

and he neglects his kingdom. His conflicted personality makes him the perfect exemplar of repentance.²⁵

This image of fearful and tearful repentance was seized upon in the Islamic literature on asceticism, where it crowded out the other elements of David's story. The *Book of Asceticism* attributed to Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal has no use for stories of David's military exploits, or even his beautiful voice. It mentions that David earns his living by the work of his own hands, but instead of manufacturing chain mail from iron, he weaves baskets from palm leaves.²⁶ Its portrait of the ascetic David highlights his night-time worship, his fear of the coming judgment, his weeping, and above all his repentance.²⁷ This is in marked contrast to another strand of Islamic literature, reflected in Ibn Qutayba's *ʿUyūn al-akḥbār*, which employs David as an illustration of the legitimacy of worldly pleasure as a complement to spiritual discipline. Ibn Qutayba relates from David the following bit of wisdom, via Wabḥ ibn Munabbih: "A discerning person should not omit any of these four: the time he spends confiding in his Lord, the time he spends calling his own soul to account, the time he spends alone with brothers who advise him in his religion and are frank with him about his faults, and the time he spends giving free rein to his legal and praiseworthy pleasures; for truly this last period is a support to the others, a bounty beyond the bare necessities of life, and a relaxation for the heart."²⁸

The author of our rewritten psalm sides with the repentant view of David favored by the ascetic tradition, rather than the more worldly view of David presented by Ibn Qutayba. Our author knows and retains the story of David's beautiful voice, and he refers to David's wisdom (*ḥikma*) (verse 8), which he probably takes to mean his prophethood. (That is how commentators often interpreted the Quran's references to David's wisdom,²⁹ ordinary wisdom being associated more with Solomon than with David in Islamic stories of the prophets.³⁰) David's prophetic status and his voice are important to our author because they provide the ground for the very idea of "the psalms of David;" but they are overshadowed, and even negated, by our text's allusion to the story of David's sin and repentance and forgiveness (v. 8). The old literary theme of David's worldliness is subsumed in his sin and repentance, and his military prowess is completely suppressed in favor of dependence on God's protection.

²⁵ For the details of this portrait and its many variants, see Déclais, *David raconté par les musulmans*, passim, especially chs. 8-10, and the works cited there.

²⁶ Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Zuhd*, 104 ¶373, 105 ¶382.

²⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Zuhd*, 101-105.

²⁸ Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb ʿuyūn al-akḥbār*, ed. Muḥammad al-Iskandarānī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 2002), 1:322.

²⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-qurʾān*, 2:776 (on Q 2:251), 23:149 (on Q 38:20).

³⁰ Indeed David is repeatedly shown up by the superior wisdom of his son. See Déclais, *David raconté par les musulmans*, ch. 13.

This active reshaping of the Islamic figure of David counteracts, in two ways, the Christian-Muslim antagonism that emerged from our earlier comparison with the form and content of Psalm 2. First, rather than responding in kind to the martial and militaristic tone of the Biblical Psalm with its tyrannical king, the author alludes to a humble and penitent David. Like his omission of “striking” from the *ḥadīth qudsī*, this serves his own message, which is a call to reliance on God rather than retaliation against Christian aggressors. Second, this selective portrait of David shows that our author is taking sides in an ongoing intramural Muslim debate about how the story of David should be told. These rewritten psalms are just as much a retelling of David’s story as a rewriting of the Psalms. They do not narrate his life at length, but taken as a whole, they contain far more references to the life of David than borrowings from the text of the Bible. In fact, one copyist must have regarded them as closely related to the Islamic “stories of the prophets” genre, because he embedded them in an anthology of such literature.³¹ This helps to explain why the various Muslim authors who rewrote the psalms of David showed so little concern for achieving a single authentic text: they reworked and reordered and added material very freely³² because they regarded themselves not as transmitters of a revealed book, but as contributors to an ongoing and constructive literary project of storytelling. When we read these psalms as part of the Islamic literature on prophets, rather than as rewritten scripture, we see that they are not just about the relationship between Christians and Muslims. When we shift our comparative focus from the Biblical Psalms to Islamic literature, our text no longer looks like an interreligious argument against the form and content of the Christian canon, and against the Christian community itself; it begins to look instead like part of an intrareligious debate about how Muslims should imagine the prophet David: as a well-balanced illustration of the compatibility of religion and worldly pleasures, or as a model of repentance and otherworldly renunciation.

Sermons

In fact, if we expand our comparative and intertextual frame of reference a bit further to include the Islamic genre of the sermon (*maw‘īza*), it becomes apparent that this intramural debate between world-affirming and ascetic Muslims was our author’s foremost concern. J. Sadan has observed that one set of rewritten psalms (the one that circulated as both “Torah of Moses” and “psalms of David”) appears to have been composed not as a putatively sacred text, but as a set of sermons.³³ One copy was actually preserved in an anthology of sermons.³⁴

³¹ Ms Leiden, Or. 14.027, fols. 141a-148b, described in J. J. Witkam, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the University of Leiden and Other Collections in the Netherlands*, fasc. 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), 46-48.

³² For a fuller description of how the authors of the extant psalm texts reworked their material, see Vishanoff, “An Imagined Book Gets a New Text.”

³³ Sadan, “Some Literary Problems Concerning Judaism and Jewry in Medieval Arabic Sources,” 374-378, 384-385.

Quotations from prophets were commonly used in sermons as a rhetorical device;³⁵ indeed the development of the Tales of the Prophets genre was intimately bound up with the art of preaching, from the storytelling of early preachers (*quṣṣāṣ*) to the distinctly homiletic narratives of al-Thaʿlabī.³⁶ It was just a short step from composing sermons full of prophetic sayings to compiling whole collections of prophetic logia. The idea of “the psalms of David” provided an ideal hook on which to hang such a composition.

All the known versions of the Islamic psalms of David, including the one we are examining, can in fact be characterized as sermonic in content and tone. They consist largely of pious admonitions, interspersed with stories illustrating the fate of the wicked³⁷ and similes typifying the heedless state of worldly hypocrites: belief without works is like a sword without a hilt or a bow without an arrow;³⁸ knowledge without action is like a tree without fruit; preaching to one who does not care is like playing music in a graveyard.³⁹ These psalms are especially concerned to warn against the dangers of worldly comfort and greed, and to urge worldly believers to repent and pursue a life of ascetic or at least otherworldly piety.⁴⁰ Earnest warnings are addressed to those who accumulate women or wealth;⁴¹ David is told to exhort the Israelites to stop driving the poor and the orphaned from their doors, and instead to arise at night with fearful hearts and tearful eyes.⁴² “O Children of Adam, laugh little and weep much!”⁴³ As a whole, this body of literature constitutes an internal critique directed at worldly

³⁴ Ms Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Reisülküttab 927, where the material is labeled as “Torah.” Described in Sadan, “Some Literary Problems Concerning Judaism and Jewry in Medieval Arabic Sources,” 374. Some other copies were presented as collections of divine sayings (*ḥadīth qudsī*) (*ibid.*, 378 n. 74, 381).

³⁵ Sadan, “Some Literary Problems Concerning Judaism and Jewry in Medieval Arabic Sources,” 385; see also 397 ¶VI.

³⁶ See Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 28-29.

³⁷ E.g. ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 32b-33a; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, 12-13 and Arabic p. 15; ms Princeton, Garrett 108B, 4b, 7b-8a; Cheikho, “Quelques légendes islamiques apocryphes,” 48, 50.

³⁸ Ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 35a; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, 14 and Arabic p. 16.

³⁹ Ms Princeton, Garrett 108B, 113a-113b.

⁴⁰ Some psalms advocate outright asceticism (*zuhd*); see ms Princeton, Garrett 108B, 9b, 74b; Cheikho, “Quelques légendes islamiques apocryphes,” 50. Sadan’s Torah/psalms text, though it employs the word *zuhd*, displays a certain aversion to extreme asceticism; see Sadan, “Some Literary Problems Concerning Judaism and Jewry in Medieval Arabic Sources,” 387, 389 n. 93, 393 #34.

⁴¹ Ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 36b-37a; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, 17-18 and Arabic pp. 19-20.

⁴² Ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 2b; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, 9 and Arabic pp. 10-11.

⁴³ Ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 59b; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, 22 and Arabic p. 23.

members of the author's own community, though it is framed in universal terms and employs language and ideas drawn from a shared Muslim-Christian-Jewish discourse.

These various psalm texts do contain some scattered jabs at Christians, and perhaps also at Jews.⁴⁴ There are occasional passing references to God not having a child,⁴⁵ but this is such a common refrain in the Quran and Islamic literature that it hardly indicates any special interest in anti-Christian polemic. Some versions contain a prediction of the Christian doctrine of Jesus' divinity.⁴⁶ There are pleas to believe in all God's prophets without exception,⁴⁷ and even an explicit prediction of Muhammad and of those Christians (born of Satan's seed) who will erase his name from their scriptures. The beginning of this prediction is missing because the relevant folio has been cut out of the manuscript, presumably by someone who (unlike the author) thought this prediction the most important aspect of the text.⁴⁸ But these polemical elements are few and far between, and they seem quite incidental to the main thrust of these psalms. Indeed Sadan has remarked that the artfulness of a psalm often stems from the way it actually addresses Muslims even while appearing to address the Children of Israel. Such psalms, he says, must be read at two levels, with interreligious polemic being distinctly secondary to exhortation of Muslims.⁴⁹ In one psalm, for example, the People of the Book are criticized for doing good only to those who do them good in return, for giving only to those who give in return, and the like.⁵⁰ This sounds like a condemnation of Christians for failing to follow Jesus' Sermon on the Mount,⁵¹ but in the context of a collection of Islamic sermons, this allusion to the Gospels, delivered through the prophet David, serves mainly to rebuke selfish and worldly Muslims.

This characterization of the rewritten psalms literature as a whole, as a contribution to Islamic sermons and Tales of the Prophets literature, sheds new light on the particular psalm we have been examining. When read against the Biblical Psalm 2, it appeared to be a rejection of the form and content of the Christian canon, and a reaction against Christian aggression. It

⁴⁴ Sadan has identified some anti-Jewish polemic in his Torah/psalms text. Sadan, "Some Literary Problems Concerning Judaism and Jewry in Medieval Arabic Sources," 387.

⁴⁵ E.g. ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 37a, 44b; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, 18, 19, and Arabic pp. 19, 21; ms Princeton, Garrett 108B, 91a.

⁴⁶ Ms Leiden, Or. 6129, 2a; ms Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hunt. 515, 6b; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, Arabic p. 12.

⁴⁷ Ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 45a; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, 20 and Arabic p. 21.

⁴⁸ Ms Florence, Laurentian Library, Orientali 267, 76a; Krarup, *Auswahl Pseudo-Davidischer Psalmen*, 24 and Arabic p. 25. Another prediction of Muhammad appears in ms Princeton, Garrett 108B, 64a.

⁴⁹ Sadan, "Some Literary Problems Concerning Judaism and Jewry in Medieval Arabic Sources," 386-388, 390 n. 96, 391 n. 98, 392 n. 100 and n. 106.

⁵⁰ Ms Princeton, Garrett 108B, 98a-98b. Cf. Sadan, "Some Literary Problems Concerning Judaism and Jewry in Medieval Arabic Sources," 390 #9.

⁵¹ See Matthew 5:43-47 and Luke 6:27-35.

appeared to draw a sharp line between the Islamic and Christian canons, and between the Muslim and Christian communities. But when read in relation to its Islamic sources and literary context, this psalm takes on a second layer of meaning. It constitutes an argument in a Muslim debate over how to represent the figure of David, which is itself part of a broader Muslim debate over the proper attitude toward the life of this world. Our psalm constitutes a redeployment of a shared figure, and of the imagined idea of a shared scripture belonging to a universal canon of divine speech, with a universal message for all “ye people of the earth” (v. 3b). It deploys that shared figure and that imagined scripture in service of a Muslim preacher’s plea to his fellow Muslims, calling them to abandon their futile worldly striving (vv. 1-3a), trust God for the needs of this life (vv. 3b-4, 9b-10), repent (vv. 8-9a), and focus on the coming judgment (vv. 5-7). It draws a line not between religious communities, but right through the Muslim community itself, and indeed across all communities, separating worldly believers from those who, like the shared figure of David, repent and pursue a life of otherworldly piety. From the perspective of our twelfth-century Muslim author, who reworked the Biblical Psalm 2 and made it fit into his collection of sermonic material, this second layer of meaning, and this second kind of religious boundary, were far more important than his critique of Christians and their canon.

Conclusions

Now that we have accounted for all the contents of our rewritten psalm, and analyzed its intertextual relationships to both the Bible and Islamic literature,⁵² we are in a position to consider what this instance of “Muslim Biblical studies” might tell us about the use of sacred texts across religious lines. Four principal conclusions have emerged. First, sacred textual canons can be regarded and used as symbols of religious communities, so that religious and even political conflicts can be played out through the manipulation of those canons. Second, someone else’s scripture can be used to make internal arguments and to draw intrareligious boundaries, not just interreligious ones. Third, our perception of the significance of using sacred texts across religious lines can change dramatically when we shift from an interreligious to an intrareligious comparative frame of reference. Fourth, it is important to distinguish different aspects of texts that can be used across religious lines: the content, the form, and the imagined identity of a sacred text can each be manipulated independently, and simultaneously, to very different ends. I will elaborate on each of these four conclusions in turn, illustrating them with some additional examples of the practice of using and rewriting scripture across religious lines.

⁵² For comparisons with several other types of Islamic literature—polemics, wisdom, law, and “dialogues with God” (*munājāt*)—see Vishanoff, “An Imagined Book Gets a New Text.”

Our first conclusion concerns the role of canons in intercommunal conflict. We noted that our author's challenge to the form and canonicity of the Biblical Psalms was bound up with his transformation of its contents. Challenging the Christian definition of scripture allowed him to challenge what he perceived to be the aggressive Christian message of Psalm 2. He used the psalms of David as a site for literary resistance to military aggression. This is not an isolated phenomenon. The complete rewriting of a book of the Bible is an unusual act for a Muslim, but it is not without parallel. Other than the "rewritten Torah" studied by Sadan, which came to be included in the Islamic psalms literature, the closest Islamic analogue that I can identify is the Gospel of Barnabas, a radically revisionist account of the life of Jesus that incorporates elements from the canonical Gospels and the Diatessaron⁵³—though it does not pretend to be itself the original Gospel revealed to Jesus, as our text claims to be the true psalms of David. It is no coincidence that both the Gospel of Barnabas and our Islamic psalms were apparently composed in response to Christian exercises of political power against Muslims. The Gospel of Barnabas appears to have been written (or at least translated into Spanish) in response to the persecution of Moriscos by Spanish Christians, and centuries later it was translated and widely publicized by Arab Muslims, early in the 20th century, at a time when Muslims were again keenly aware of the power wielded over them by Christians nations.⁵⁴ Likewise, our version of the psalms appears to have been composed or redacted in response to some Christian political aggression such as the Crusades. This suggests that conflict and the exertion of Christian power over Muslims may have been an important factor in the decision to study Christian scripture by rewriting it.

This illustrates an important feature of sacred texts as sites of religious interaction: they can be used as symbols of religious communities, so that religious and even political conflicts can be played out through the manipulation of those texts. As community symbols, texts have special properties. A sacred place such as Jerusalem or Ayodhya can also come to symbolize a community, but such symbols are susceptible to physical and violent seizure by one religious group to the exclusion of others. A sacred text, on the other hand, once it has become widely accessible in a vernacular language, cannot be physically monopolized. It can be interpreted and manipulated by the literate of any religious tradition, with or without political power. Studying someone else's sacred text can therefore be a form of resistance to political power, thanks to the special role that sacred textual canons can play as potent but relatively accessible symbols of their communities.

⁵³ Jan Joosten, "The *Gospel of Barnabas* and the Diatessaron," *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002): 85-96.

⁵⁴ See Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e Islamici, 1990), 1:206-209; Jan Slomp, "The 'Gospel of Barnabas' in Recent Research," *Islamochristiana* 23 (1997): 81-109; Joosten, "The *Gospel of Barnabas* and the Diatessaron," 73-75, 96.

Our second conclusion concerns the kinds of boundaries that are drawn by the use of someone else's scripture. We observed that our author transformed the content and form of Psalm 2 so as to emphasize disjuncture and opposition between the Muslim and Christian communities, and between their canons. But then we found that his primary purpose was to draw a boundary that split the Muslim community itself, and that extended to cut across other religious communities as well, dividing religious people not by communal label but by their orientation to the life of this world. This illustrates a second important feature of sacred texts as sites of religious interaction: what appears on the surface to be an interreligious dispute or dialogue over a sacred text often turns out to be motivated by an agenda of internal reform within the author's own religious community.

I encountered a similar phenomenon while studying Muslims, Christians, and Hindus who wrote about each other's sacred texts in colonial India. For example, Rammohun Roy, founder of the liberal Hindu reform movement known as the Brahmo Samaj, compiled an anthology of excerpts from the Gospels. This certainly constituted a form of engagement with Christians,⁵⁵ but it was also intended as a biting critique of Brahminical Hindu priests who, Roy believed, were perpetuating an idolatrous ritual system for their own advantage. He therefore included Jesus' moral teachings, which he felt Hindus were sorely lacking, but he only included miracle stories (which he found incredible)⁵⁶ if they illustrated Jesus' opposition to the Jewish religious establishment and its preoccupation with strict ritual observance—as when Jesus defied the Pharisees by healing a man's withered hand on the Sabbath.⁵⁷ Roy was using Christian scriptures to argue with a Hindu religious establishment; that is why he published his anthology in Bengali and Sanskrit as well as English.

An Islamic example of using the Bible in an internal argument may be found in the Quran itself, which retells the Biblical story of Abraham so as to claim him as a “muslim.”⁵⁸ This can be read as an attempt to heighten intercommunal boundaries and put Abraham on the “Muslim” side; but in the same breath the Quran explicitly condemns such arguing.⁵⁹ Alternatively, the Quran's use of the story of Abraham can be read as an attempt to distinguish truly submissive (“muslim”) believers of all religions from quarrelsome hypocrites, whom the

⁵⁵ Indeed it embroiled him in an internal Christian argument between Unitarians and Trinitarians. The Unitarian Society in London reprinted his anthology, whereas Trinitarian Baptist missionaries in India attacked it in their newspapers. Rammohun Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness, Extracted From the Books of the New Testament Ascribed to the Four Evangelists. To Which Are Added, the First and Second Appeal to the Christian Public, In Reply to the Observations of Dr. Marshman, of Serampore*, from the London Edition (New York: B. Bates, 1825).

⁵⁶ Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus*, xviii-xix, xxv.

⁵⁷ Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus*, 14, from Matthew 12:9-13; cf. 77, from Luke 13:14.

⁵⁸ Q 2:124-141, 3:65-68.

⁵⁹ Q 2:140, 3:65.

Quran condemns equally whether they be People of the Book or members of the Muslim community itself.⁶⁰

This shows that the analysis of interactions across religious boundaries needs to remain alert to the intrareligious as well as the interreligious dimensions of such interactions. It also demonstrates the special value of focusing the study of religion on the boundaries and points of interaction between communities. Studying religions at their boundaries holds great promise as a scholarly and pedagogical method for understanding not only the interactions but also the internal workings of religious traditions.

Our third conclusion follows directly from this observation, and concerns the comparative process itself. Simply put, our choice of a comparative frame of reference all but determines our perception of what it means to use sacred texts across religious lines. If we contrast our Islamic psalms with the Biblical Psalms, as Goldziher and Cheikho and Zwemer did a century ago, we like them are likely to regard these rewritten scriptures as apocryphal and inauthentic alternatives to the Bible,⁶¹ as “forgeries,”⁶² or at least as instances of interreligious polemic. This was certainly the outcome of our detailed comparison of our psalm with its Biblical counterpart. If, however, like Sadan, we focus on these psalms’ relationship to Islamic literatures, we will be able to appreciate their own constructive literary goals and qualities. Studying religions at their boundaries and points of interaction certainly calls for some interreligious comparison, but this must not be allowed to monopolize the comparative enterprise. Interreligious comparison must be accompanied by intrareligious comparison.

Fourth and finally, sacred texts are not just bodies of verbal content; they also embody literary forms, and they are liable to take on narrative or conceptual identities of their own in the imaginations of those who adhere to them and those who criticize them. It is therefore important to distinguish between the content, the form, and the imagined identity of a sacred text, and ask how each one is preserved or transformed or otherwise manipulated in any given instance of Muslim Biblical studies.

At the level of content, we found that our author drew far more from his Biblical source than first met the eye, through shared wording, shared ideas, and shared verbal roots. But that shared content was transformed, and even turned on its head, to serve the polemical goals of the author. The use of Biblical content across religious lines is not always polemical: the Quran

⁶⁰ See for example Q 2:111-112, 121, 137, 3:70-73, 103, 105, 113-115, 154, 166-167, 199.

⁶¹ So Cheikho, “Quelques légendes islamiques apocryphes,” 33, 39-43. He assumed that the Quran’s references to the *Zabūr* referred not to an imagined scripture, but to an actual text whose content differed from the Biblical Psalms.

⁶² So Ignaz Goldziher, “Ueber muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-kitâb,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 32 (1878): 351; Zwemer, “A Moslem Apocryphal Psalter,” 402, 403.

itself uses much Biblical content, including many narratives and a few echoes of the Psalms,⁶³ for its own constructive purposes; and Peter Wright's essay in this issue of *Comparative Islamic Studies* shows how Biblical content was employed tacitly and constructively by the author of the Prophet's biography. More often than not, however, specific quotations from the Bible have been used by Muslims to call into question aspects of Judaism and Christianity, to question the authenticity of the Biblical text itself, or to prove the prophethood of Muhammad.

Interreligious polemic is also sometimes the goal of Jewish and Christian "rewritten Bible"—a term for reworkings of Biblical content that may be found in literatures such as the Apocrypha, the Targums, the New Testament, and the Church Fathers.⁶⁴ Hebrews 1:3-5, for example, quotes Ps. 2:7 as evidence of Jesus' divine sonship; but the Jewish Targum (Aramaic "translation") of the Psalms rewrites the verse so that God says to his anointed king "you are beloved to me as a son to a father, righteous as if I created you this day." This precludes the Christian interpretation, and was quite possibly written in conscious reaction to it, in an attempt to reclaim Psalm 2 as a Jewish text.⁶⁵ Some Christians interpreted Ps. 2:1-3 as a rebuke not of gentile nations but of the Jews' opposition to Christ; they built this interpretation into a heading that introduced a poetic Arabic rendition of Psalm 2 as "the voice of the Apostles concerning Pilate and Herod and all the Jews, and the reign that God the Father granted to Christ, consisting of the nations who believed in him and became his inheritance."⁶⁶ Our Muslim author has taken this process one step further, by rewriting these same verses so that Christians are now the aggressive nations, seeking to overthrow Muslims. A similar interreligious polemic permeates retellings of the story of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac. In Romans 4 and 9 and in Galatians 3 to 4, Paul identifies Christians as Abraham's true religious heirs. Many Muslim exegetes take this process one step further: by taking advantage of an ambiguity in Q 37:99-113, they are able to identify Ishmael (whom they regard as a forefather of the Arabs) as the promised son who exemplified *islām* by submitting to God's command that he be sacrificed.⁶⁷ The Jewish author of the relatively late (7th-10th century) Targum Pseudo-

⁶³ Q 21:105 quotes Ps. 37:29 explicitly. Angelika Neuwirth has identified connections between Q 78 and Psalm 104, and between Q 55 and Psalm 136. Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 2d ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 51*.

⁶⁴ On the history and meanings of the term "rewritten Bible," see Erkki Koskeniemi and Pekka Lindqvist, "Rewritten Bible, Rewritten Stories: Methodological Aspects," in *Rewritten Bible Reconsidered*, ed. Antti Laato and Jacques van Ruiten (Turku: Åbo Akademi University, 2008; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 11-39.

⁶⁵ Timothy Edwards, *Exegesis in the Targum of The Psalms* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2007), 192-196, 228-229.

⁶⁶ *Le Psautier Mozarabe de Hafs le Goth*, ed. and trans. Marie-Thérèse Urvoy (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1994), 21.

⁶⁷ See for example Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*al-Dhabīh*, Qur'ān 37:99-113): Issues in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989): 95-131.

Jonathan seems to be reacting to this Muslim claim when he expands Genesis 22 into a competition, in which Isaac proves himself to be Abraham's true heir by submitting to the sacrificial knife, thus besting Ishmael's boast that he, unlike Isaac, had submitted willingly to the knife of circumcision. This common practice of reworking the content of the Hebrew scriptures has served to bind the three Abrahamic traditions together in a shared narrative and textual heritage, while simultaneously setting these communities off against each other in competition over the meaning and true ownership of that heritage.

Thus the content of a sacred text, when it is not simply ignored by those of other traditions, is often seized upon or manipulated for the sake of reinforcing communal boundaries and differentiating religious identities. This is not always the case; in some contexts, especially before the crystallization of a Muslim identity distinct from Judaism and Christianity, the content of the Bible has served rather as a shared resource, as demonstrated in the Quran and in Peter Wright's analysis of the Prophet's Biography. But by the twelfth century, when our author probably penned his psalms in response to the Crusades, the content of the Biblical Psalm 2 called out to be contested and even rewritten.

Manipulating literary form can likewise be a means of polemic, as in the case of our psalm. The term "psalm" designates not only a specific set of textual content in the Bible, but also a certain type of literature: a song in a human authorial voice, addressed to or invoking God, typically characterized by refrains and repetitions suited to liturgical usage.⁶⁸ Our author found the human voice to be incompatible with his Quranic conception of a divine scripture revealed to a prophet, so whatever content he retained from his Biblical source he transformed or reframed so that it would fit into a divine admonition directed to humans. This highlighted the division between the Islamic and Christian canons, and legitimated his polemical transformation of Biblical content. Certainly, Biblical forms can be employed and even transformed across religious lines without polemical intent. Jews and Christians have composed psalms, emulating the form and drawing on the content of the Biblical Psalms,⁶⁹ and Muslims have done so as well. The Quran itself, indebted perhaps to Christian liturgical use of the Psalms, replicates some formal features of psalms such as the refrain in Q 55, according to Angelika Neuwirth.⁷⁰ And some Islamic prayers, directed to God from a human perspective, are so reminiscent of the Biblical Psalms that they have been called the "psalms of the Household of Muhammad."⁷¹ But for the most part, Muslims considering the literary forms of Biblical

⁶⁸ See Edward Greenstein, "Psalms," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed.

⁶⁹ See Greenstein, "Psalms."

⁷⁰ Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 2d ed., 46*-47*, 51*.

⁷¹ Zayn al-ʿAbidin ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn, *The Psalms of Islam: al-Ṣaḥīfat al-Kāmilat al-Sajjādiyya*, trans. William C. Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1988), xviii.

Psalms or Gospels have found them incompatible with their definition of scripture as divine speech, resulting in a long history of criticism of the Christian canon.

More than content or form, however, it is the imagined idea of “the psalms of David” that our author uses and develops to serve his own ends. The minute bits and pieces of Biblical content that are preserved at the very beginning of the several extant Islamic psalm texts are mere tokens that serve to establish the identity of the text, and link it to the figure of David. Our Muslim psalmist keeps his eye on the Biblical text only through the beginning of Psalm 3; thereafter he abandons the content of the Psalms and pursues his own imaginative reworking of the figure of David, and of the associated theme of repentant renunciation. In this he may be said to follow the example of the Quran itself. The Quran employs Moses and David and Jesus, and their respective scriptures, primarily as symbolic and narrative tools for advancing its own message of warning, revelation, and coming judgment. The Quran is less concerned with the actual texts of the Torah and the Psalms and the Gospel, than with their imagined status as divine revelations nearly identical to the Quran, brought by prophets nearly identical to Muhammad. It is as imagined entities that these scriptures knit the nascent Muslim community together with Jews and Christians, into a common prophetic heritage. When the Quran refers to the Torah and the Gospel as imagined entities, it draws boundaries that cut across religious lines, criticizing those of all communities who refuse to follow prophetic revelation, while affirming those Jews and Christians who are said to have actually followed the Torah and Gospel.⁷² For the purpose of drawing that internal and trans-religious boundary between followers and rejecters of revelation, the content and form of the Torah and Psalms and Gospel are less important than their imagined identities. Textual form and content, had they been known to the Quran’s audience, might have generated more division than affirmation, or sparked charges of textual corruption. Indeed, as Muslim scholars became familiar with the form and content of the Bible, they made them a focus of interreligious polemics. But the imagined idea of the psalms, as that collection of praises that David was given by God to utter with his beautiful voice, remained untarnished by that polemic. That idea has remained part of an imagined universal canon that spans the Abrahamic faiths. That idea lies behind the beautifully illuminated, Quran-like copies of the Islamic psalms of David that are preserved today in the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul,⁷³ their content still ignored by Muslim as by Western scholars.

There is no strict correlation between the interreligious use of Biblical content and form, and the drawing of interreligious boundaries; nor between the interreligious use of the

⁷² See for example Q 5:44-48, 66-69.

⁷³ Mss Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Laleli 19 and 20. The latter has full vowelings, verse dividers, and a gold header and *bismillah* before each psalm.

imagined idea of a sacred text, and the drawing of intrareligious or trans-religious boundaries. But the history of Muslim engagement with the Bible has seen a great deal of polemic, primarily regarding the Bible's form and content. If research into Muslim Biblical studies is to avoid focusing exclusively on interreligious differences and divisions, and come to appreciate the constructive role the Bible has played in Islamic literature and life, it will need to look beyond form and content, to the conceptual and narrative identity that the Bible has in Muslims' imagination. In addition to a field of "rewritten Bible," there must be a field of study called "imagined Bible," and Islamic literature must be a part of it.

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