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F. E. Peters: The Monotheists: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition, Volume I

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I

The Scriptures: Bible, New Testament, and Quran

JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM are all scriptural religions, that is, they affirm the existence of a divine revelation in written form. “The Sacred Writings,” “The Scripture,” and “The Book” are practically interchangeable terms among the three communities, and their adherents can all be identified, as we shall see, as People of the Book, which the Muslims in fact call them. The three Scriptures show marked differences, however. In the Jewish—and Muslim—view, God gave and Moses wrote down a distinct and discrete multipart book, the Law or Torah. But although the Torah holds pride of place in Jewish revelational history, God’s direct interventions were in one manner or another continuous between Moses and Ezra, and thus the Jewish Bible is a collective work that includes, under the three headings of Law, Prophets, and the miscellany called Writings, all of God’s revelation to his people.

This was certainly the Jewish view in Jesus’ day, and there is no reason to think that Jesus regarded Scripture any differently. He produced no new Writings or Book of his own, and so Christian Scripture is formally quite different from what the Jews thought of as such. The Gospels are accounts of Jesus’ words and deeds set down, in approximately a biographical framework, by his followers. In the eyes of Christians, Jesus did not bring a Scripture; he was himself, in his person and message, a revelation, the “Good News.” His life and sacrificial death sealed a “New Covenant” that God concluded with his people, and so the Gospels and the accounts of the deeds and thoughts of the early Christian community recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, and the letters of various of Jesus’ followers came to be regarded by Christians as a New Covenant or Testament to be set down next to the Old—that recorded and commemorated in the Jewish Bible.

Muhammad may have had a somewhat different understanding of this complex process. Though he commonly refers to the Jewish revelation as *Tawrat*, the Prophet of Islam was certainly aware that there were other Jewish

prophets, and so possibly revelations, after Moses. But he never mentions a New Testament; his sole references are to a singular “Gospel,” in Arabic *Injil*, and he seems to have thought of it as a sacred book that Jesus had brought or written, much as Moses had the Torah.

Muhammad had a strong sense of the prophetic calling and the line of prophets that had created the Judeo-Christian tradition; and after some brief initial hesitation, he placed himself firmly within that line. He too was a prophet, and when God’s earlier revelations had become distorted at the willful and perverse hands of the Jews and Christians, God had given to him, no less than to Moses and Jesus, a revealed Book. Or so it was in its final, codified version. What God himself had instructed Muhammad to call “The Recitation,” in Arabic *al-Quran*, was in fact a series of messages delivered to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel over twenty-two years. Each part was already identified as Scripture during the Prophet’s lifetime, and the Book was finally closed only with Muhammad’s death.

Of the three sets of Scriptures, only the Quran enjoys a self-conferred canonicity: it anoints itself as Scripture. In contrast, both the Bible and the New Testament underwent a long (and largely invisible) process to achieve a status that was, in the end, conferred by the community.

Three Sacred Books

Thus there came into being three sacred books, each in some sense the Word of God. Each collection has traditionally been regarded by its faith community as a complete, authoritative, and universal statement regulating the role and conduct of humankind vis-à-vis its Creator. History suggests something different, however, Direct challenges to Scripture are by and large a very modern phenomenon, but even in traditional settings each community implicitly contested the completeness of Scripture by attempting to open other channels of continuing revelation (see II/3); by struggling to wrest the authority of the words of Scripture into the hands of its interpreters (see II/2); and in more recent times, by setting next to the universality of Scripture the notion of its historical conditioning—that it was expressed in a cultural milieu that to a greater or lesser extent determined its moral parameters. Each Scripture was, furthermore, the birthright and charter for a community that had not existed before. Each community lived in the profound conviction that God had spoken to it for the last time: the Jews, for the first and final time; the Christians, for the second and final time; the Muslims, for the third and final time.

The Bible, New Testament, and Quran, though looked on as emanating from the same source, are very different works. The Bible is a complex and composite blend of religious myth, historical narrative, legal enactments, prophetic admonitions, cautionary tales, and poetry composed over a long

period and edited at some point into a single Book. The time span for the composition of the New Testament is considerably shorter, a half century perhaps, but it too has a very mixed content of quasi biography, community history, letters, and, in some versions, an apocalyptic Book of Revelation. The Quran, as we have seen, is absolutely contemporary to its revelation, twenty-two years in the lifetime of the Prophet.

There is nothing but God's own Word in the Quran, as Muhammad himself could assure the community of believers, though there were a great many of Muhammad's words circulating outside Scripture and with great consequence (see II/3). In Jewish and Christian circles, however, there were assuredly circulating other writings that had some claim to being God's Word but are not found in the Bible or the New Testament. Both these Scriptures represent, then, a deliberate decision by someone to designate certain works as authentic or canonical Scripture and to exclude others from the authoritative list that is called the canon. That decision was essentially theological, and the exclusion of the noncanonical writings, generally called Apocrypha from the Jewish or Christian Scriptures does not render them any less interesting or important from a historical point of view. The Books of Maccabees never made it into the Jewish canon, for example, nor the Gnostic gospels into the Christian, but each tells us something of the events and attitudes of the time that produced them.

People of the Book

For the Quran and Muslims generally, the phrase "People of the Book" refers to those peoples—Jews, Christians, Muslims, and latterly some others—who were recipients of a revelation in the form of a sacred book. Although the source, God, and so the truth of the Books is identical, the Scriptures themselves differed—witness their different names—not only from the beginning but particularly after the Jews and Christians began tampering with their Books, as the Muslims believe.

The Jews would deny flat out the assertion that there was more than one People of the Book, to wit, themselves: there were no further revelations after the closure of the biblical canon. Christians would agree that both they and the Jews were indeed People of the Book, in that their faith was rooted in the Bible, the only Scripture the earliest Christians knew. When the early Christians spoke of "Scripture," they meant the Jewish Scriptures or *Tanak* (see below), and it took some time (and a major separation from Judaism) for them to begin the process of assigning their own writings about Jesus to the same category of sacred Scripture. But eventually the Christians too came to regard their own books as Scripture, that is, "a Book" on a par with the Hebrew Bible, though in this case it records the New Covenant or Testament that God had concluded with his people (see below). Jesus' redemptive act was decisively

effective for all humankind, however, and so there would be no future revelations before the End. Finally, Muslims see themselves as People of the Book par excellence, since the Quran has superseded the two earlier Scriptures, which were, nonetheless authentic. (On the Muslim political implications of the essentially theological concept of People of the Book, see I/8.)

The Bible

The Bible (from Greek *biblia*, “books”) is really a collection of twenty-four separate books recognized by the Jews as the authentic record of God’s dealing with them. It is often called Tanak, an acronym for its three major divisions. *Torah* (Law) is the five books (Pentateuch) of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. *Nebiim* (Prophets) includes both the former prophets (what we might regard as books of history), namely Joshua, Judges, then Samuel and Kings (both of these latter in two books, though counted as one), and the latter prophets, that is, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets (again counted as one book). The mixed collection called *Ketubim* (Writings) includes such diverse works as the hymns called the Psalms and the Song of Solomon; the moral stories of Job, Ruth, and Esther; the wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (or Qohelet), the threnody of Lamentations, the apocalyptic Daniel, and the historical Ezra-Nehemiah (counted as one book) and Chronicles (again, two books counted as one).

Even when they returned from Exile, the Jews were losing their native Hebrew and adopting Aramaic, the Semitic language that served as the lingua franca of the eastern Mediterranean. Parts of the latest books of the Bible were actually written in Aramaic, as were later legal works like the Talmuds (see II/3). Diaspora Jews eventually adopted the Greek “common tongue” (*koine*) as their ordinary language (Hebrew never entirely disappeared as a learned language), and later spoke, and wrote, in everything from Arabic to English and a number of patois between. So there was need for the Bible to be translated. This need produced assorted Aramaic translations (called targums), which often paraphrased rather than simply translated the Bible. A Greek translation done at Alexandria in the mid-third century B.C.E. gained great currency among Diaspora Jews like Philo and Paul, and then universally among Greek-speaking Christians; it is called the Septuagint (“Seventy”) from the myth of its making.

Note: The prevalence of Greek-sounding titles (Genesis, Deuteronomy, Ecclesiastes, etc., and the very word Bible) in a collection of Hebrew books is attributable to the fact that they were most commonly cited in the literature at large by Christians, who from the beginning used the Greek Septuagint. In Hebrew the books are universally cited by the opening words of each book’s first line. Thus what is commonly referred to as Genesis is called in Hebrew *Bereshit* (“In the beginning . . .”).

What eventually drove the Septuagint out of circulation among Jews was precisely the ever-increasing Christian use of this rather loose translation, with its elastic canon (many of the Apocrypha like Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira, and 1 and 2 Maccabees were included in the Septuagint and so became part of the Christians standard Old Testament until the Protestant Reformers reverted to the Hebrew canon of twenty-four books) and the Christians' even looser interpretation of it for their own theological purposes. In the second and third centuries c.e. the Jews opted for a series of more literal Greek translations and effectively discarded the Septuagint. Jerome (d. ca. 420) used the Septuagint as the basis, though with corrections from the Hebrew, of his own Latin translation of the Old Testament, called the Vulgate, and so it passed in this form into Christian currency in Western Christendom.

Sacred Tongues

One element in understanding Jesus' significance is that his intentions were finally recalled in the form of biography, the Gospels, rather than as a mere collection of his sayings. Originally both forms may have been in competition, the narrative biography as witnessed by Mark's Gospel, for example, and a sayings collection like the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas or the famous "Q" that modern scholarship has reconstructed out of the identical, but non-Markan, verses shared by Matthew and Luke. But it was the Marcan-type biography that quickly prevailed in the churches and constituted the "Good News" for Christians. This triumph of biography over sayings may also have influenced the easy and very rapid transition from the native Aramaic of Jesus and his followers to the Greek of our New Testament, which does not appear to be a translation. It was not important, at any rate, that Jesus' own words be recalled in their original language, and the few times that Jesus' actual Aramaic is set down in the Gospels (e.g., Mark 5:41; 7:24), they give the impression that those who recollected them thought they were sacred formulas or even magical incantations rather than a historically authentic speech.

The issue of a sacred language thus scarcely arose among the Christians, and the New Testament quickly passed into a variety of vernaculars: Egyptian Coptic, the Syrian Aramaic called Syriac, Latin, Slavic, and eventually the entire range of European and Asian tongues. In Western Europe the Latin translation done (or supervised by) Jerome finally gained currency as the *versio latina vulgata* or, in English, simply the Vulgate.

Note: The Vulgate translation, like the Septuagint among the second- and first-century Jews, gained a status among medieval Christians close to the inspiration of Scripture itself. Its accuracy required increasingly spirited defense, however, against the doubts raised on purely scholarly grounds by humanists like Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457) and Desiderius Erasmus (d. 1536)

(continued)

(see below) and by the increasing number of vernacular translations varying in understanding of what was being translated. Luther's own translation of the Scriptures—beginning in 1522 and often revised during his lifetime—went behind Jerome to newly available and more reliable editions of the original: Erasmus's of the New Testament (1519) and the Soncino edition of the Hebrew Bible (1495). The Roman Church responded at the Council of Trent, which affirmed the authority of Jerome's version but at the same time called for a new critical edition of the Vulgate. This was not achieved until 1590, and had almost immediately to be revised (1592–1598). The most famous of the early English translations, the King James, appeared in 1611.

If Jesus' Aramaic quickly disappeared behind other linguistic versions of his teachings and work, the careers of the languages of the Jewish and Muslim Scriptures had quite different trajectories. Both Hebrew and Arabic were, and are, the working language of clerical elites in Judaism and Islam (as was Latin in European Christianity). Jews at large, however, began losing their Hebrew as a vernacular sometime after the Exile and increasingly spoke whatever language prevailed where they lived. It is not surprising, then, that if a German- or Arabic-speaking Jew of the Middle Ages fancied becoming a rabbi, he had perforce to learn Hebrew, just as a Persian or Turk who wished to study sharia did so not in his native tongue but in Arabic. The tension in Muslim countries between the secular vernaculars and the religious Arabic is graphically illustrated in both the Turks' 1924 abandonment of Arabic script in their desire to create a new secular republic and in the 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran's mandating the study of Arabic for high school students.

The connection between religious learning and language is obviously dictated by the language of the sacred text itself, or, to put it more pointedly, by the language of the Words of God, one version of which is found in Hebrew and the other in Arabic. Jewish and Muslim clerics have been equally enthusiastic in praising each of the two tongues as "the language of God" or "the language of the angels," but there is a very distinct difference in the relationship of each to the Book in which it is found. First, the Bible is not entirely in Hebrew: parts of the canonical books of Ezra and Daniel were written in Aramaic, and those other near-canonical extensions of God's intent for his people, the Mishnah and the two Talmuds (see II/3), show a growing mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew in the recorded rabbinic discussions. But more fundamentally, the Bible is not merely God's direct speech—indeed, direct discourse forms only a small percentage of the whole—but a composed narrative framework within which actions as well as speech unfold, and most often it is the speech of mortals. The Jews understood that the biblical books had authors, and to that extent they were linguistically conditioned, though nonetheless inspired.

The Quran, in contrast, seems to present itself as the *ipsissima verba* of God, and in “manifest” or “convincing” Arabic (Quran 16:103, etc.). It has no framing narrative however, no authorial signature or presence. In the Muslim view, Muhammad is not even a transmitter; he merely announced with absolute accuracy what he himself had heard. The consequence, then, is that the Quran contains the precise words of God, without human intervention or conditioning of any sort; that God had spoken, and Muhammad had heard and reported, Arabic speech.

Finally, both Jews and Muslims use the text of Scripture as the essential base for their liturgical prayers. Though the Mishnah (Sotah 7:1) explicitly allows the use of the vernacular (“any language”) for the central liturgical prayers, the pull of the original tongue is strong among Jews. Among Muslims the practice of using Arabic in liturgical prayer is almost universal.

On Translations

The Bible was, then, originally composed in Hebrew—though, as already noted, some of the later passages are in Aramaic—and it is available in various English translations, either alone or in combination with the New Testament. It is notable that where once sectarian differences among Jews, Catholics, and Protestants created marked discrepancies in their respective translations, the differences have presently narrowed to so few words or passages that it is possible for Jewish and Christian scholars, Catholics and Protestants, to cooperate on collaborative translations.

There had been earlier collaborations on scriptural translation. As we shall see, in 1142 Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), abbot of the monastery of Cluny, conceived of a project to assist in the conversion of Muslims. Among other pieces it was to contain a translation of the Quran, into Latin, of course. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Quran was translated again, on this occasion to save the fading tradition of the ancestral faith of the Moriscos, the converted Muslims of Spain. The Muslims of the northern parts of Spain, who had early passed under Christian sovereignty as Mudejares, eventually spoke, wrote, and read a Romance tongue rather than Arabic. They attempted to compensate, at least symbolically, by writing Romance texts in Arabic script, the practice known as Aljamiado, since the writing as well as the language of the Quran was regarded as God’s gift. But the loss of the language meant they could no longer read the Quran itself. Between 1456 and 1462 the Muslim cleric who was head of the Mudejar community in Segovia produced not only a Castilian Quran but a kind of Islamic primer for the benefit of Muslims who were rapidly descending into religious illiteracy.

In 1698 Europe got its first printed translation of the Quran, a learned version by Ludovico Marraci, once again in Latin. Although there were professors of Arabic at both Cambridge and Oxford in the 1630s—a considerable work on

Islam by one of them, Edward Pococke (d. 1691), whose Arabic tutor in Syria said knew the language “as well as the Mufti of Aleppo,” was still in Latin—the first English translation of the Quran directly from Arabic did not appear until 1734. It was the work of George Sale (d. 1736), an English lawyer who learned Arabic privately from tutors in London. The incentive may have come from the British Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, which enlisted him to translate the New Testament and Psalms into English. Sale had access to a range of standard Muslim commentaries (perhaps from Pococke via Marracci), which he used to explain the text. Even more remarkably, the translation was prefaced by a long “Preliminary Discourse” that gave English readers a detailed explanation of the Arabian background to the rise of Islam as well as a life of Muhammad. Sale’s version was the standard English translation of the Quran until well into the second half of the nineteenth century.

Muslims, for their part, have been far more reluctant to translate, and so transform, God’s own dictation. Even where the Quran has been translated by Muslims for the benefit of other Muslims without Arabic, like those living in the West, for example, the effort has sometimes been modestly disguised as a paraphrase or summary of the sacred book’s contents. A few English translations of the Quran are in print, also commonly though somewhat less properly spelled Koran. The diction of the Quran is extremely elliptical, and any English version of it will, of course, sound far more alien to Western ears long attuned to the familiar rhythms and images of the Bible and the New Testament.

But it is more than familiarity that makes both Bible and Gospels better served by their translations than is the Arabic Quran. God’s message to Muhammad was delivered in the highly charged, affective images of the sacred poet. It is allusive rather than explicit, a great body of warning, command, injunction, and instruction delivered against a background of people and manners as barren to our eyes as the steppe itself. We feel Sinai and Canaan in the Bible; Palestine, its houses, mountains, rivers, and lakes, its towns, cities, and the men and women who lived in them are all present in the Gospel narrative. In the Quran, however, we search without success for Mecca, for the profane but vividly commercial life of the Quraysh, for Muhammad’s family and companions. In its pages there is the voice of God alone. When it was heard, it overwhelmed hearts, as it still does in its written form, but it leaves the historian attending vainly, and deafly, for context.

Scriptural Criticism

Almost from the beginning, each of the Peoples of the Book has studied its Scripture seriously and in detail but always with the respect and veneration owed to the Word of God. In European academic circles of the nineteenth century, a new approach began to be followed. It differed from earlier study of the

same texts in that it regarded the Scriptures—Bible, New Testament, Quran—merely as documents, no different from Homer’s *Iliad* or Livy’s *Histories*. This critical method, as it was called, was not directed solely at Scripture; indeed, it made its formal debut as a way of studying early Roman history. The results there were startling, as long-held assumptions about the age and validity of our Latin sources began to totter on their venerable foundations, pushed over in some cases, propped up in others, by the new science of archaeology. Once the same techniques were employed on the Scriptures, people were not merely startled; they were scandalized as the results of the new critical investigations began to trickle down into popular consciousness. The faith itself seemed under attack, as perhaps in many cases it was.

Note has already been made of scriptural criticism in discussing the lives of Jesus and Muhammad. It will not otherwise be much on display here since the point of the present undertaking is principally to understand the beliefs of the communities in question as the believers understand them, not how scholars think they got to be believed in the first place. But the “higher criticism,” as it was called, is important on two scores. First, its roots run deep back into the three religious traditions that were exposed to earlier and equally potent strains of rationalism and had to react or adapt to them. Second, the critical method is now ignored only by the most radically conservative members of the three monotheistic communities. Many of the findings of scriptural criticism have been incorporated into the traditions themselves for their own use or else the communities have devised mechanisms to respond to them.

Scriptural criticism deals generally with two interrelated issues, the text itself of Scripture and its composition. Textual criticism asks questions about the preservation and transmission of the actual text of Scripture, from manuscript to print, in order to establish the most reliable and authentic version of that text. It obviously implies the collection and comparison of as many manuscripts as possible, the dating and sorting of them into “families,” an understanding of when and how they were copied, the kinds of errors that scribes make, and the kinds of things they were likely to put in or leave out of the text before them, even a text of the Word of God. The end of all this labor is either the publication of the very best manuscript (with corrections, as they may seem necessary) or, in the case of Scripture where there is a proliferation of manuscripts, the production of a critical edition, wherein the editor “creates” out of the available evidence a text that seems closest to the original, although with all the editor’s choices and variant possibilities noted for the reader’s own judgment. There are critical editions of both the Bible and the New Testament, though none as yet for the Quran since the collection and comparison of manuscripts of the latter Scripture is nowhere near complete.

Historical, literary, and redaction criticism all address the actual composition of the text. Historical criticism investigates the date, time, place, authorship, and circumstances of composition—of Paul’s letters, for example, or the Book

of Daniel—and, crucially here since these texts are thought to derive from God, the sources used by the author(s). Literary criticism studies both the language of the text—all three communities did this almost from the beginning—and the literary form(s) of either the whole work or its parts, the parables, for instance, in the Gospels or the oaths with which many chapters of the Quran open, and this in the light of what we know from elsewhere about the rules governing such forms. Finally, redaction criticism attempts to understand the editorial processes that led to final production of the work as we have it, how its apparent strands came together to form our Genesis, or what Matthew and Luke did to Mark’s Gospel in producing their own.

Who Wrote the Bible?

There are two types of answers to who wrote the Bible. One is complex but highly responsive and comes from Jewish tradition. It knows precisely who wrote each book of the Bible. Indeed, some authors still have their names on their books, like Joshua, Samuel, Jeremiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Others are rather easy to figure out: Moses the Pentateuch, David the Psalms. But still others can only be deduced, which the rabbis adroitly did. Moses also wrote the Book of Job, and Samuel also authored Judges and Ruth; Jeremiah wrote Kings and Lamentations besides his own book; Ezekiel and his group wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs; the men of the Great Synagogue wrote Ezekiel, the books of the twelve minor prophets, Daniel and Esther; Ezra also wrote Chronicles.

The other answer, which comes from modern biblical criticism, runs in precisely the opposite direction: we have no idea who composed the Bible. Nor can we, since the biblical books we possess are all the work of anonymous editors, or even “schools” of editors, who over a long period assembled these books out of older, equally anonymous materials. Even the prophetic works, which have the straightforward look of compositions of single authorship, turn out to have numerous interpolations and additions. The prophet the tradition knows simply as Isaiah turns out to have lived circa 742–701 B.C.E. and to have written only chapters 1–39 of that book; chapters 40–55 belong to a later Exilic second Isaiah (ca. 587–539 B.C.E.) and chapters 56–66 to a third Isaiah who wrote sometime after the Exile. Where the going gets extremely sticky, of course, is in the Bible’s opening cluster of five books, the Torah or Pentateuch. The tradition calls them the “Books of Moses”; the “Yahwist” did it, responds the critic, or the “Elohists” (see below), and both with a lot of editorial help.

As even the casual reader may observe, the Torah repeats stories, the creation of Adam, to cite but one famous example, with different and often conflicting details, and sets down different versions of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The fact was early on noted and explained—or explained

away—in assorted ingenious ways that left the question of Mosaic authorship untouched and untroubled. But one astute medieval exegete, the commentator Abraham ibn Ezra (d. 1164) (see II/2), proposed a more economical, if somewhat more dangerous, solution. When the laws differed, he explained, it was because one version came directly from God and the other from Moses. By the nineteenth century, however, God’s claim to authorship had been disallowed by the critics, and it simply remained to identify the human hands responsible for such anomalies in the Torah.

In 1883 Julius Wellhausen, in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, offered a solution to the composition of the Torah, plus Joshua, the so-called Hexateuch, or “Six Parts,” that explained those anomalies. This “documentary theory,” as it is generally called, remains, in one form or other, the prevailing critical theory on the Torah’s composition. The issue of authorship may be dismissed immediately: the Hexateuch as we have it was assembled out of various older materials in the fifth century B.C.E., after the return from Exile. It was the origin and nature of these “older materials” that Wellhausen undertook to demonstrate. He showed on linguistic and stylistic grounds that different strands of material run through our Hexateuch. By way of hypothesis, he called the two oldest authors/editors the “Yahwist” and the “Elohists” because of their habit of calling the deity “Yahweh” (in German, *Jahweh*, hence the abbreviation J) and “Elohim” (E), respectively. Wellhausen thought both originated in the divided kingdom that followed Solomon’s death, J in the early days of the southern kingdom of Judah (870 B.C.E.?) and E in the northern kingdom of Israel (770 B.C.E.?). Their work may have been combined sometime about 680 B.C.E., and then the D material (the Deuteronomist Source) was added under Josiah, the king of Judah who in 621 B.C.E. discovered and promulgated a “book of law” discovered in the temple (2 Kings 23:8–10) that is thought to be the central core (chapters 5–28) of Deuteronomy. The writing up of the last source, P, or the Priestly Source, which is responsible for most of the ceremonial laws in the Torah, explanations of things like circumcision (Gen. 17:9–14), and the dietary laws (Gen. 9:4), was in this hypothesis begun after the Exile and continued down to the point when it was finally combined with the work of J, E, and D to form the Torah, perhaps about 450 B.C.E.

Explaining Revelation

In the context of our discussion thus far, revelation has appeared to be a matter of a book or writing, in short, of Scripture. But there lay beneath the sacred text what is, by general agreement, an oral-aural foundation. God spoke and the messenger heard, whether that latter was Moses or Muhammad. Revelation, then, at least in its Jewish and Muslim versions, has three distinct moments: God’s oral communication with his messenger; the messenger’s

public pronouncement of God's message, generally understood to be in oral form, though in Moses' case at least God managed his own publication by providing Moses with a summary copy of his laws written in God's own hand on tablets of stone (Exod. 32:15–16); and finally, the committing of God's pronouncements to writing so that the community might continue to possess them in the form of a book.

All three stages of the process just described are subject to some degree of authentication. The believers must be assured that it was in fact God who spoke to the messenger and thus what was coming from the latter's mouth was truly oracular, not the product of some malign spirit or self-delusion, as was alleged by some in Muhammad's audience (see I/3). The so-called Thirteen Principles of Judaism formulated by Maimonides (d. 1204) address all three of these propositions. His seventh principle is the affirmation by all Jews of the fact of Moses' prophetic powers (and their priority to all others'). The eighth affirms that the Torah is indeed from God—the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:1) had already denied a share in the Afterlife to “the one who says the Torah is not from heaven”—and the ninth asserts that “the Torah is precisely transcribed from God and no one else.” Muslims affirm the same. The shahada or Islamic profession of faith has as the second of its two clauses the statement that “Muhammad is God's messenger,” an affirmation that implicates the divine authority of the Quran.

The messenger or prophet and the sacred text that comes down from him are the foci of most subsequent discussions of authenticity. The first, the question of the messenger, was principally a matter of the “proofs of prophecy,” as the Muslims called an entire literary genre devoted to it: how the messenger demonstrated to his immediate audience, and so to later generations of believers, that he was indeed the bearer of God's Word. It was only much later, and almost certainly under alien cultural pressure, that the believers also had to fashion for themselves a rationally adequate explanation of how that communication took place between God and his prophet.

The preeminent proof of prophecy is the miracle. The prophet can invoke, or God can merely unbidden provide, some visible demonstration of supernatural intervention. Moses had to convince the Pharaoh that he was the bearer of God's Word, a task he doubted he could perform (Exod. 6:30). God assured him, however, that he would provide a demonstration (7:3–4; 10:1–2), which he did in part in the dramatic contest with the Pharaoh's wizards (7:7–8; cf. Quran 7:103–137) and by the spectacular plagues he sent upon the land and its people (Exod. 7:14–12:36). Once out of Egypt, the Israelites began to have their doubts, doubts regularly assuaged by Moses' being miraculously able to provide food and drink, for example (16:2–17:7). The Quran told the same stories and others about earlier prophets and their authentication through miracle (40:78), but when Muhammad's audience not unnaturally demanded similar signs from this self-proclaimed prophet (6:37; 13:7; 21:5), he refused. The Quran was his miracle; let anyone who doubted it produce another Quran (2:23; 10:38; 11:13). It is the Quran's inimitability that at base validates

Muhammad's prophethood. Even so, the later biographies of Muhammad adduced a full range of more traditional miracles to buttress the Quran.

God speaks to Moses almost continuously from the opening of Exodus to the end of the Torah. The reader is left with little doubt that the laws that fill up most of the last four of the five books of the Pentateuch originated with God and that Moses is by and large reporting what he has received from on high. But Genesis has a far different ring to it, as do the narrative sections of Exodus and the rest of the Bible generally from Joshua onward. Here the tradition designates human authors—Moses, Joshua, David, the men of the Great Synagogue, and so on—not God. The post-Pentateuchal books may be about God or, more accurately, about God's Chosen People, but they are not from or by God in the same sense as the laws in the Torah. God spoke to Moses "face to face, as one man speaks to another" (Exod. 33:11). Did he also speak thus to Joshua, David, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezra and Nehemiah?

The answer is obviously nuanced. God did speak to Jeremiah—"I put My words in your mouth" (1:10)—as he did to Isaiah, after that prophet's lips had been cleansed with a hot coal (6:6–9). And "the word of the Lord" came to the other prophets as well. Joshua, however, and David, "the singer of Israel's psalms" (2 Sam. 23:1), to cite but two examples, stand well behind their ascribed works. Here we are in the presence not of oracles but of distinctly authorial acts—editorial acts according to modern scholarship—where God's role is not asserted but must be assumed. We are even on occasion given a glimpse of the author at work. In the introduction to his wisdom work, Ben Sira explains the care and toil he put into his writing and asks that the reader overlook any imperfections there might be. The author of 2 Maccabees does the same: he did his best and assumes responsibility for whatever shortcoming the work has (2:24–33).

Believers make many different assumptions about Scripture, in this case the Hebrew Bible, which arose in stages we cannot always trace. The divine origin of the Law is asserted in the Bible itself, but the conviction that the contents of the *whole* Bible are relevant and important—why else would the rest be collected and preserved together with the venerable Torah?—came much later, and very gradually, insofar as we can see. By the first century B.C.E. all of Scripture was cited as authoritative, even though what precisely was in Scripture had yet to be determined. By then what was believed of the works of Moses and the other prophets was extended, in some analogous fashion, to that of all the biblical authors: the authors of Judges and Kings were prophets no less than Jeremiah and Isaiah, and David's privileges were extended to the authors of Proverbs, Ruth, and Esther. Thus, a divine provenance certified the work of authors from Moses to Ezra: their books were sacred as well.

The earliest Christians, who were fond of citing it, provide a privileged view of how the Bible (loosely defined; see below) was regarded. Jesus himself calls the entire Bible "Scripture" (*graphē*) and asserts that "it cannot be put aside" (John 10:34–35). The authors of the New Testament likewise consider

the Bible nothing more nor less than the Words of God (Heb. 1:5–13; Rom. 5:9–12). The author of 2 Timothy, referring to the Bible, declares that “all inspired Scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, or for the reformation of manners and discipline in right living, and also that the man of God may be capable and equipped for good work of every kind” (3:15–16); 2 Peter sums it up as follows: “It was not on any human initiative that prophecy came; rather it was under the compulsion of the Holy Spirit that people spoke as messengers of God.” There is no discernible difference between these views and Josephus’s first-century summary, for the pagan world, of how the Jews regard their Scripture: “It is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them [the Scriptures] as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if necessary, to die for them gladly” (*Against Apion* 1.8.42).

Islam did not have, or did not recognize, an author or a multiple-author problem. God had spoken in this instance to one sole messenger, Muhammad, and the Quran is, in effect, his Torah; it is, in its entirety, the ipsissima verba of God, without the addition of either Kings or Job. Muslims, moreover, will distinguish rather sharply the “inspired” Muhammad, whose word was Torah, from the man of Mecca and Medina who offered explanation, advice, and wise counsel. These latter were not in the Quran but were collected in a kind of deuterocanonical form in the *hadith* (see II/3). Nor did Muslims much concern themselves with how precisely the communication with Muhammad took place except to note that its form was oral/aural, as a number of stories attest, and that it was, in the manner of late antiquity’s embrace of divine messengers and intermediaries (I/1), not directly from God but through the agency of his angel, Gabriel (Quran 2:97).

Note: Some non-Muslims have argued that these hadith are a kind of Muslim apocrypha, the sayings pool out of which the Quran was selected and anointed as revelation, but the vocabulary, style, and content of the great body of hadith are so different from what we have in the Quran as to make that possibility highly unlikely. The hadith belong to another world. They had their origin in Muhammad’s own inspired, but decidedly human, head and heart, according to the Muslims, or in the fertile but tendentious imaginations of eighth- or ninth-century lawyers, according to most non-Muslims.

High Prophetology

What urged, or perhaps constrained, Jews and Muslims to give more deliberative thought to the modes of revelation was their exposure to larger categories of epistemology, when they had to accept (or reject) the prophet as the

possessor of the same intuitive knowledge that occurred in more spacious theories of knowledge. Philo, for example—the Hellenized Alexandrian Jew who had at his disposal several sophisticated theories of how knowledge is achieved—undertook to explain how Moses knew God’s truths by invoking the two Hellenic models of the philosopher and the legislator. Moses grasped the “realities” in the intuitive manner of the Platonic philosopher; what set him apart was his ability, as a supreme legislator, to translate those transcendent truths into a concrete code of conduct for his people.

By adopting these Hellenic cognitive categories, Philo could explain Moses’ prophetic knowledge in an intellectually satisfactory way, as did the later Muslim aficionados of Greek learning, though at the perhaps fatal price of vacating any claim to Moses’ or Muhammad’s unique status as a prophet. This is what might be termed “high prophetology.” The prophet’s highest cognitive faculty is illumined by or becomes identical with an even more transcendental intelligence outside himself. For many Greeks this was the so-called agent intellect, which is “always in act”; for the monotheists it was an angelic intelligence, traditionally Gabriel’s. Its only miraculous quality is perhaps God’s choice of a Moses or a Muhammad; the actual process of prophecy uses all the subtle cognitive machinery already in place in Greek theories of intellectual cognition. It is set against the “low prophetology” of the Bible’s account of God speaking to Moses “man to man” and the Muslim biographical tradition that has Gabriel sitting on Muhammad’s chest and reciting the Quran to him. Each explanation was preposterous to adherents of the other, the first for its secular and reductive quality, the second for its blatant anthropomorphism.

Heavenly Books

It was not enough to authenticate God’s prophets; the books they promulgated had also to be verified. So strong was the conviction of authenticity that sometimes it could simply be asserted, as Josephus did in his tract *Against Apion*; “although long ages have now passed, no one has dared to add, remove, or change a syllable [of Scripture]” (1.8.42). But there were also strong external props to support it. One was quite traditional: both the Bible and the Quran were thought to have eternal and invariable heavenly prototypes, a belief that directly addressed their authority as *books*. This idea is very old in the Middle East, and the Jews and Muslims were not the only ones to believe in the existence of an eternal heavenly book in which divine decrees, and so the fate of humankind, were inscribed. That notion is expressed in passing in the Bible (e.g., Ps. 139:16), in the New Testament’s Book of Revelation 5–6, and most insistently of all, in the Quran (e.g., 69:19,25; 82:10–12, etc.). But that was not the same book given to Moses or Muhammad. The heavenly books in this instance are the archetypes of the Torah and the Quran, in the Jewish

case, created before the universe, and, in the Muslim one, uncreated (for the debate on this matter, see II/7). The Torah's claims to a transcendental existence as well as an earthly one with its bestowal on Moses were put forward in post-Exilic days in the wisdom literature popular at the time (see I/1) and reached their apogee in the rabbinic era, when the Torah had become the central focus of Jewish life. The Quran, in contrast, advances its own claim: behind the Quran revealed by Muhammad stands the "Mother of the Book" (43:3–4), a "hidden Book" (56:78) accessible only to God.

For the Jews, the sacredness of Scripture opened another issue. Scripture, like all sacred objects, was the source of ritual taboo—what is sometimes called "ritual impurity"—a state that is possible to transfer by contact. The rabbis determined early on that "all the scrolls (of Scripture) render the hands unclean" (Mishnah Kelim 15:6)—that is, transfer their taboo quality to those who handle them. A section of the Mishnah titled "Hands" (Yadaim) is given over to determining precisely which books and what physical parts of those books constituted Scripture and so were holy enough to "defile the hands" (3:4–5). Even the original Aramaic snippets in Ezra and the Aramaic sections of Daniel qualify, but not translations of Scripture (Yadaim 4:5). Nor do the Bibles of the Christians: there is no sanctity there (4:5–6).

The New Testament: Notion, Text, and Canon

The New Testament is at once an idea and a collection of texts thought to both describe and embody that same idea. The idea is one of the basic elements of the Christians' construction of a self-identity in the years following Jesus' death. Like much else in that construct, it was a Jewish idea. "Covenant," here called "testament" by way of the Septuagint's Greek rendering of Hebrew *berit* as *diatheke* (Lat. *testamentum*), is the Abrahamic cornerstone of the Jewish self-identification as God's Chosen People. God's Covenant with Israel underwent frequent renewals and rethinkings in the long history of that people, but for the Christians a critical recasting of the Covenant was announced by Jeremiah (31:31–33), who said, "The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors. . . . I will place My law within them and write it upon their hearts. I will be their God and they will be My people." Early on, this theme began to be echoed by Jesus' followers (2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 4:24–26) and may even have been introduced by Jesus himself since the phrase "a new covenant"—which was to be sealed by his blood—occurs in his own reported words on the occasion of his eucharistic supper the night before his execution (Mark 14:4 and parallels). Thus a new covenant or new testament is a theological notion, and the Christians used it to bundle together the body of texts thought to describe (as in the Gospels) and explain (as in Paul's letters) how the

events of Jesus' life, both his actions and his teachings, make it certain that through him God had indeed initiated the new covenant/testament of prophetic promise.

Theological ideas invariably create theological collections of texts, and such indeed is the Christians' New Testament, as certainly as is the Jews' own Bible. Like the Bible, the texts collected by the Christians as their covenantal brief included some that presented themselves purely and simply as some type of history. As we have already seen, the two volumes by Luke, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, are quite formally works of history. Other pieces finally included in the New Testament, notably the letters of Paul, although more concerned with the meaning of Jesus' life rather than its discrete events, also contain bits and pieces of what appears to be historical information.

The bundling of the New Testament into a single package was neither immediate nor uniform. The works eventually included were written sometime between 50 and 150 c.e., but only in the second century did the designation "New Testament" first appear. Before and after that moment different churches had different ideas of what constituted the New Testament dossier. One such idea, that put forward in Rome by a certain Marcion (d. ca. 160), was so narrow in scope—on ideological grounds it limited Christian Scripture to Paul's letters and an edited version of Luke—that the Church was driven to make explicit exactly what constituted this New Testament. The present collection of four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude, and, finally, the Book of Revelation, an apocalypse attributed to John, did not entirely stabilize until the fourth century when all the churches of both the Greek East and the Latin West reached a consensus on what constituted their New Testament.

Although this Church-wide consensus did not emerge until the fourth century c.e., numerous prescriptive lists of "received works" already existed in most if not all the Christian assemblies (*ekklesiai*) we call churches. Such lists were later called canons (Gk. *kanones*, "measures," "standards"), so named because of their association with certain criteria of authenticity known by somewhat later Christian writers as the "earmarks of canonicity." This weighing of sacred writings also owes something to the process of judging and winnowing, of "canonization," practiced among Greek academic literary critics who centuries earlier had compiled authoritative lists of the "received" tragedians, lyric poets, and so forth that ended up as the literary benchmarks of most of Western culture.

The earmarks of canonicity were both theological and historical. For inclusion a work had to pass a test of orthodoxy: was it congruent with the "rule of faith" followed by the church in question and, somewhat more generally, was it "apostolic" in origin? It seems doubtful that the churches looked on the latter notion as a strictly historical criterion whereby "apostolic" meant only and exclusively "eyewitness"—the apostolic designation more likely spoke to the spiritually guaranteed probity of the witness than to the mere act of

witnessing—but it carried with it an assurance that the document was in fact early, and hence more reliable.

The canon of the New Testament, which may originally have been designed to *include*, ended by *excluding* from “official” consideration a broad range of writings circulating among Christians from at least the second century onward. Some of them were gospels, that is, narrative-framed discourses on the life and sayings of Jesus, whereas others were simply collections of the Savior’s *logia* or sayings. From a theological point of view, such writings were thought to be beyond the pale, useful, perhaps, in some instances for edification or entertainment, but generally of suspicious orthodoxy. For many centuries, for all their occasional effect on popular piety—the “Infancy Gospel of James,” for instance, supplied many of the popular notions in the celebration of Christmas—the “excluded” or “apocryphal” (Gk. *apocrypha*, “hidden”) gospels had little role in either the construction of Christian belief or an appreciation of the historical dimensions of Jesus. Even when the quest for the historical Jesus took a decidedly secular and skeptical turn in the nineteenth century, the early Christian Apocrypha continued to labor under their explicit theological (and implicit historical) derogation. In the most recent Jesus scholarship, however, the apocryphal gospels, like that of Thomas, are undergoing considerable historical rehabilitation.

The Biblical Canon

The word “canon” in the context of sacred writings was, then, a Christian usage, borrowed from an earlier Greek literary practice to describe works that were “received” by Christian congregations and so constituted the New Testament. The New Testament itself, when speaking of the Bible, simply refers to “the Scripture” or, as in 2 Timothy 3:15, to the “sacred writings,” identical to the common Jewish way of referring to the same material. But, the word apart, did the Jews too hold, by decree or common consensus, that a closed body of writings constituted the Bible? Apparently so, at least by the first century C.E., since Josephus (d. ca. 100 C.E.) describes a collection of writings regarded by the Jews as “decrees of God” that has remained unchanged since their composition. There are, he tells his Gentile audience, twenty-two such works, five composed by Moses, thirteen prophetic compositions, and four others containing hymns and moral precepts; altogether they cover the period from Moses to the death of Shah Artaxerxes I (424 B.C.E.).

Josephus’s testimony speaks to a common Jewish conviction that there was a closed canon of divinely inspired Scripture divided into three parts akin to the later division of Tanak, but he provides no clue as to how the process of acceptance took place or why. In rabbinic times, the criterion, or rather, the sign of inclusion among the Words of God, was whether or not a book “defiled

the hands,” that is, partook of the taboo of the sacred. We do know, however, that other religious writings that enjoyed some degree of prestige and authority circulated among Jews, though they were not regarded as Scripture. Josephus himself, for example, does not tell us whether he is using “canonical” or other books when paraphrasing Jewish history in his *Antiquities*, and the Essene library discovered at Qumran contains a wide range of religious texts that are not in the standard Hebrew Bible yet are cited authoritatively and without prejudice. The New Testament too, the product of a first-century Jewish milieu, used a variety of writings it regarded as still possessing authority among Jews. Finally, the books called 2 Esdras, roughly contemporary with Josephus, describe Ezra as redictating, under divine inspiration, the entire collection of Scripture, which had been destroyed by fire. According to that account, the finished product comprised twenty-four works for general circulation—presumably the “canon” mentioned by Josephus—and seventy additional books for the exclusive use of “the wise among your people.” These latter are apparently the Apocrypha, which were also believed, it appears from this story, to have been composed before Ezra’s time.

All this evidence speaks to the Bible as a whole and suggests that in the first century c.e. Tanak was a more or less open body of text, at least as far as the category called Writings (Ketubim) is concerned, and that the rabbis continued to discuss the canonical status of some books well into the second century. There is reason to think, however, that the Mosaic Pentateuch was much earlier recognized as a closed scriptural unit. As we have already seen, Deuteronomy, the last of those five books, was “discovered,” it appears, in 621 b.c.e., during Josiah’s reign, and so closed at least the initial redaction of the Pentateuch canon. This is supported by the fact that the Samaritans, who broke away from their southern brethren in the fourth-century b.c.e. at the latest (see I/1), recognized only the Pentateuch as Scripture, that is, Prophets and Writings were added sometime after that schism. But we have also seen that Jews were willing to accept certain works as authentic revelation perhaps as late as the mid-second

Note: The Old Testaments read by Catholics and Protestants are markedly different. Catholic Bibles have 73 books in all, 46 of them in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. Protestant Bibles have 66 books since they include only 39 books in the Old Testament. The books omitted from the Protestant versions are Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Wisdom, Sirach, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and parts of Esther and Daniel. These books are called “Deuterocanonical” by the Catholics, who do include them, and “Apocryphal” by the Protestants, who do not. The difference dates back to Luther, who relegated those seven books to an appendix in his translation of the Bible. They continued to be printed as an appendix in most Protestant Bibles until about 1826, when they were omitted altogether.

century, when the Bar Kokhba revolt showed the danger of appeals to apocalyptic scenarios and messianic hopes that filled some of these later books. The rabbis, then, pruned down the list of what was circulating as Scripture: a great many books once implicitly accepted as Scripture were then explicitly excluded and the present Hebrew Bible came into existence. The voice of prophecy, a dangerous voice as recent history had shown, was now stilled. But perhaps, from the Jewish perspective, this occurred just a bit too late.

The Inspiration of Scripture

For Jews and Muslims Scripture is revelation; for Christians revelation is *in* Scripture, or to put it in more current terms, Scripture is where the Christian encounters revelation. That revelation is Jesus Christ, and although Christians continue to debate the relative roles of his teaching, his life, and the event of the resurrection, or whether the Christian encounters revelation *outside* Scripture as well—the issue between Catholics and Protestants—the equation itself remains fixed. Thus, the “proofs of prophecy” take on a different quality in the instance of Jesus, where they become the “proofs of messiahship” or, in a more elevated Christology, “proofs of divine Sonship.”

Scripture itself is somewhat more problematic among Christians than among Jews and certainly among Muslims. Both those other Scriptures are dominated by the prophecy model, where God delivers a message to a privileged but human messenger for public proclamation. Although Jesus was thought a prophet by some of his contemporaries (Matt. 16:14), and the Quran identifies him as a prophet to whom a Scripture had been revealed in the manner of Moses and Muhammad (5:46), Christians have rejected Jesus’ identification as a prophet, first in favor of Messiah and finally of Son of God.

At first the Christians knew only one Scripture, the Jewish Bible, which they used in its expanded and Greek translated Septuagint version. Their own writings, like some books of the Bible, had authors’ names attached to them, but whoever else they were—“witnesses” is a characterization that recurs in the early discussions—these New Testament authors were not prophets. None of the four evangelists was either a Moses, who brought the Law, or an Isaiah, who brought God’s warnings and promises to Israel. Mark was merely a reporter; Matthew and John were supposedly eye witnesses to events, the latter somewhat more personally involved; and Luke apparently fancied himself an actual writer, a historian. Paul was a struggling and distraught letter-writer (1 Cor. 1:17), who dictated his work (16:21).

When the Christians bethought themselves to explain the exaltation of biography and letter-writing into sacred Scripture—the authors of Enoch, Baruch, and the Wisdom of Solomon had at least borrowed some distinguished names—they had at hand an extensive repertoire of literary terms in Greek and

Latin that might be used to describe the “creative” aspect of poetry, for example. Thus “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*) and “God-posessed” (*theophoretos*) were available to describe divinely assisted composition, terms that had already been applied by Christian writers to the Jewish Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21, already cited). The Latin provided *afflatus*, “blowing into,” and similar terms. Among them, the Greek *epipneia*/Latin *inspiratio*, “breathing into,” which both Philo and Josephus had used in connection with the Bible, finally became the Christian commonplace description of God’s action on the human authors of Scripture, whether of the Old, or now, the New Testament: they were “inspired.”

In late antiquity a definitive formula was enunciated, for the first time by Pope Gregory I (called “the Great”) (r. 590–604), and often repeated thereafter. God was the author (*auctor*) of Scripture, man its writer (*scriptor*); or as Thomas Aquinas later put it, somewhat more technically, the Holy Spirit is the principal author of Scripture, men the instrumental authors. How this actually worked was a somewhat more delicate matter. Greek cognitive theories had already provided a kind of dual model of inspiration. In the first, the human intellect of the prophet/author becomes illuminated by the higher divine (or divineline) intellect. In the second, they become identical: the prophet’s own faculties are suspended, and the Spirit takes over and speaks through him. Some Jews and Muslims were attracted to this latter model of prophetic inspiration—it proved far more dangerously attractive to all three in a mystical context—but the Christians, except for the occasional brief flirtation, would have none of it. The authors of the New Testament were enlightened by the Holy Spirit, not possessed by it.

Contingency and the Constraints of History

But if God is, in some profound sense, responsible for Scripture, and if the latter was intended to be an authoritative guide to salvation, how to explain the apparent errors in Scripture? What of the self-contradictions, between John and the synoptic Gospels, for example, and the scientific and historical inaccuracies? Should Scripture not be inerrant? The ancient and medieval answer was “yes”; the more modern one is edging ever more closely to “no.”

If “yes,” the apparent discrepancies in Scripture must be explained, which they were (and are) with considerable ingenuity and elegance in the practice of exegesis or scriptural interpretation (see II/2). What opened the possibility of “no” was the recognition, from the outset, that a human agent was involved, as remote as Moses, as present as Paul or Muhammad. Indeed, an oral revelation, an act of speech, immediately invokes a question of language and draws further attention to the fact that revelation is in reality conditioned—that is, whatever God’s intent, the actual revelation was given in these words

to this man in this time and place. It has in the first instance to be comprehensible to him, appropriate to his intelligence and understanding, which the theory of inspiration had addressed. But the conditioning did not stop there. The message, as delivered, had to be intelligible and consequential to an audience also limited in language and the skills of understanding—to newly nomadic Israelites wandering somewhere in Sinai, or to the fishermen and farmers of first-century Galilee, or to the illiterate townspeople of remote, seventh-century Mecca.

Almost from the beginning, Christians seemed willing to make some concession to the human element in the composition of Scripture. The Greek Father Origen attempted to draw a distinction between the words of revelation the authors had received from the Holy Spirit and what they chose to say about them, their own commentary, in a sense, though both are included in Scripture, and in the latter they might indeed err. Augustine, who strongly insisted on the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, gave their human authors even greater latitude. They could not change the subject matter, which is from God, but the choice of words and modes of expression were theirs, and in this they might indeed fall short of perfection.

Note: Augustine himself thought that Scripture was dictated, and in the scriptural debates that took on new fire in the Reformation, both sides availed themselves of the theory. Calvin (d. 1564) used it consistently to explain the composition of Scripture, although apostolic scribes could err. On the Catholic side the dictation theory is enshrined in a decree of the Council of Trent in 1546, which was repeated verbatim by the First Vatican Council in 1870.

Christianity has come slowly to consider the implications of a human element in the production of Scripture. One of the primary motive forces was the rise of textual criticism, with its discovery of thousands of variants in the manuscripts of the New Testament. Which were the “inspired” ones? Verbal inspiration could no longer be thought about the same way. The Church was driven too, rather than led, by the parallel movement of historical criticism that since the early nineteenth century has insisted on treating the Gospels as human documents rather than the work of the Holy Spirit. The human author was gradually moved to the front of Scripture, to a position of responsibility, and it became important as never before to know who he was, when and where he wrote, and, most radical of all, for whom. The religious tradition in all three faiths had always stressed the universal character of Scripture; in the twentieth century there came a growing realization that these books were written for specific historical communities and that the needs and aspirations of those communities shaped the works that lie before us.

What has been said about the conditioning, the human parameters that have been called the “constraints of history” that operate on the Bible and the New

Testament, is obviously true of the Quran as well. But only if those same assumptions regarding inspiration are made—assumptions Muslims do not make. Muslims continue to maintain—as do a number of conservative or traditionalist Jews and Christians regarding their own Scriptures—what has been called the theory of “plenary verbal inspiration,” that every word of the Quran is directly inspired by God, with the result that (1) it is quite literally the word of God; (2) every word is true; and (3) the truth of revelation rests in propositions of the Quran, not in the events of history. Muhammad, in this view, which represents Muslim orthodoxy, was in no sense the author of the Quran; at most he was its transmitter. The Quran is eternal and unconditioned.

Humanist Critics of Scripture

With the beginning of the European Renaissance, and its rediscovery of the Greek and Latin classics, the human, and so the conditioned and perhaps problematic, aspects of Scripture appeared in a new light. In the fifteenth century graduates of the arts faculties of the European universities, where the literary classics of antiquity were being newly appreciated and scrutinized, turned their attention to the classics of Western Christianity, notably the Latin version of Scripture produced by Jerome a millennium earlier with papal approval. The best known among these scholars was probably Lorenzo Valla, who taught at the universities of Pavia and Rome. His intellectual career was marked by a series of challenges (which anticipated the later Reformers’ own) to several of the Church’s traditional positions: he denied the spiritual preeminence accorded to the monastic orders over ordinary Christians, preferred the early Fathers to the scholastic theology that was almost exclusively studied in his own day (see II/7), and had grave doubts that faith could in the end be reconciled with reason. He was, in addition, one of the first to contest the authenticity of the Donation of Constantine, the document that provided the foundation for the Church’s political possessions in Italy (see I/7).

Valla’s work on Christian Scripture is summed up in his *Collation of the New Testament*, a series of textual and literary observations on the Vulgate, Jerome’s famous Latin translation prepared in Rome in 383–384 at the request of Pope Damasus. By Valla’s day the Vulgate shared some of the aura of inspiration granted to the Greek originals, and was in 1546 formally declared the authentic version for “public reading, disputations, sermons and explanations” by the Council of Trent—although the council also called for a new critical edition of the text, which did not appear until 1590. Valla’s notes were a first step toward that critical edition a century before Trent, but they also pointed out in grim detail the all too human inaccuracies, ambiguities, and errors in Jerome’s own work and so seemed to call into doubt one of the scriptural pillars of Western faith.

Valla's Spanish counterpart was Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522), who learned his humanism in Italy and taught it at Salamanca as a professor of grammar, at least until he applied his philological skills somewhat too enthusiastically to the Bible. Despite the criticism, and the fact that he was a layman, not a cleric, he was chosen by Francisco Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, the Franciscan confidant of Isabella who became archbishop of Toledo, primate of Spain, and, in 1507, inquisitor-general of Spain (see I/5), to collaborate on a new multilingual Bible known as the *Polyglot Complutense* after the city of Alcalá (Lat. Complutensis), where it was published in 1521. The finished version printed in parallel columns the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate texts, as well as the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Syriac text of the Pentateuch. But it did not correct the Latin from either the Hebrew or the Greek texts, which was Nebrija's understanding of the project and, in his mind, its most significant contribution, and so he withdrew from the work before its completion.

The Old Testament and the New

It is reductive to say “Old Testament” is merely the Christians' slightly disparaging term for the Hebrew Bible. In a sense it is true. The Covenant made by God with Abraham and his descendants is recorded and its history described in the Hebrew Bible. That Covenant is replaced by that made with the Christians through Christ and whose witness is found in the Christian writings that they too eventually came to regard as Scripture. But the Jewish Bible was not simply discarded, as some Christians suggested be done in the second century; it still served an important Christian purpose, as we shall see. But it was not the same work. Materially and formally the Hebrew Bible of the Jews and what the Christians began to call the Old Testament were and are two very different books.

First and most obviously, there is the matter of language. Jews read or, more accurately, Jews *expound* a collection of books written almost exclusively in Hebrew. The Christians, with a few exceptions like Origen and Jerome, read, understand, and interpret the Old Testament on the basis of either a Greek (Septuagint) or Latin (Vulgate) translation where the words have quite different resonances and often carry quite different implications than those in the Hebrew. But even more tellingly, the Jews and Christians are reading different books in their Bibles, ordered in a different way as well. As already remarked, the anonymous second-century rabbis who finally determined what was to be in the Bible rejected several books that earlier generations of Jews, including Jesus, his followers, and even the next generation of Christians, regarded as authentic prophecy. Those books—Wisdom, Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees—survived into the Christian canon of the Old Testament. Although the Protestant Reformers' desire for historical correctness

led them to purge the texts in the sixteenth century—they are still present in Roman Catholic versions of the Bible—those same books were, for a millennium and a half, an essential part of Christian thinking about the biblical past.

Besides differences on which books to include, the Christians arranged their Old Testament books in a significantly different way from the Jews. The last works in the Tanak's Writings are Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles, and so the Hebrew Bible ends with the disaster of the Exile and the elegiac return and attempt at a restoration. The Christian Old Testament, in contrast, whether in its Protestant or Catholic version, has four divisions rather than three. The Hebrew Nebiim is broken up into historical books (the former prophets, Joshua et al.) and prophetic books (the "latter prophets, Jeremiah et al.); the Christian Old Testament ends with Prophets. This final placement is patently theological. The Old Testament does not close; it is continuous with the New and the prophets lead directly to Jesus.

Americans and Britons are two peoples divided by a common language, Oscar Wilde once famously remarked. With equal justice, though considerably less originality, it has also been said that Jews and Christians are two peoples divided by a common book, the Bible. The two versions, the Hebrew Bible of the Jews and the Old Testament of the Christians, not only read differently in terms of their language, content, and structure; they are also read differently by the two communities. Rabbinic Judaism of the mishnaic and talmudic eras, called in more modern times the Orthodox tradition, understands the Bible overwhelmingly in legal or halakic terms, whereas Christians from the beginning took the story, the haggadic elements of the Bible, and let the halakah go (see II/2).

The Arrangement of the Quran

As already remarked many times, the founding document of Islam is called *al-Quran*, "The Recitation." It also calls itself a "Book," although that word is to be understood in its symbolic sense, in much the same way we use "Scripture." These revelations, the Quran asserts, are a Book in the same sense that the Jews and Christians possess a Book, a Scripture. That Book came from God, it is made clear, was delivered to Muhammad and pronounced by him, but the actual physical book in the sense of pages within covers came later and was produced by human beings. The latter, which in length is roughly the size of the New Testament, is a collection of 114 suras further subdivided, like their counterpart "chapters" in the other Scriptures, into verses (*aya*; pl. *ayat*) of varying length.

The sacred content of the Quran—our copies have various editorial additions like titles and other brief indications—comprises a series of revelations given to Muhammad between 610 and his death in 632. They were delivered orally, in diverse circumstances, and, as it was explained, through the medium

of the angel Gabriel. These God-sent communications were repeated verbatim and publicly by Muhammad over the twenty-two years of his ministry, first at Mecca between 610 and 622, and then at Medina from 622 to 632 (see I/3). Thus the Quran is literally the Words of God, repeated, without error, by his “envoy” or “messenger” (*rasul*), as he is called in the Quran, and as every Muslim must believe.

The suras as we now have them in *our* version are arranged, after a short introductory prayer (the *Fatiba*, or “Opening”), roughly in descending length. This arrangement, whose original purpose we cannot fathom, obviously tells us nothing about the order in which they were actually revealed to Muhammad, but it is possible, based on their changing style and differing content, among other things, to discern somewhat generally their original chronological sequence.

From the point of view of prayer, ritual, or meditation, the chronological order of the suras is of no concern whatsoever to Muslims, who recite the work in its present nonchronological order, either by selecting passages deemed suitable for special occasions or in a monthly cycle. For this latter purpose, the standard edition of the Quran is divided, just as the Hebrew Bible is for an annual reading cycle, into thirty sequential “portions” of roughly equal length—they are generally marked in the printed text—to be recited as an act of piety, half a portion at the morning, half at the evening prayer, over the course of a month. But some Muslims *were* interested in the historical order of the revelation—even the original editors had affixed “Mecca” or “Medina” at the head of the suras. These were chiefly lawyers and exegetes for whom it was important to establish the context of each revelation, the so-called occasions of revelation, so that the exact legal implications of each enactment might be understood. As we shall also see, there was the doctrine of “abrogation” that held that a later verse of the Quran might nullify an earlier one, a view that obviously puts the historical order of the suras, and even their verses, in play. Finally, later historians desired to provide a biography of Muhammad, for which the Quran was an important if elusive source.

The Muslims had, then, good reason to attempt to arrange the suras in their chronological order—though never to publish the Quran in that form, as is sometimes done in the West. The standard edition of the Quran, the present version of the book, has become in effect almost as canonical as the Book itself. Non-Muslims embarked on the enterprise of rearranging the suras only in the mid-nineteenth century as part of the general Enlightenment project to treat even sacred books, whether Bible, Gospels, or Quran, as documents rather than as Holy Writ. The results were not very different from what medieval Muslim scholars themselves arrived at: the Meccan suras can be divided into “early,” “middle,” and “late,” whereas the long suras dating from

the Medina period of the Prophet's activity, many of which are composite, defy much further categorization.

With these admittedly tentative results in hand, we can begin to trace the trajectory of Muhammad's ministry. Many of the suras that appear to be early show a manner and elevation of style not unlike that of the Jewish prophets, as they admonish humans to reform, or warn of the judgment of eternity. The later suras are longer and contain detailed regulations for the conduct of the already converted. Little wonder. At Mecca Muhammad was chiefly engaged in converting pagans, persuading their submission to the One True God. At that early stage submission meant primarily daily prayer, almsgiving, and a strict commitment to worship only Allah, a deity well known to the Meccans—who nonetheless associated other gods, his so-called daughters, with him. Muhammad warned his fellow Meccans that in the past God had visited terrible punishments on those who ignored the prophets—many of the examples are drawn, as has been noted, from Bible history—God had sent to them. To no avail. Driven from Mecca to Medina in 622, Muhammad began to gain a more favorable hearing, and the Medina suras show him now addressing a Muslim rather than a pagan audience. Both the background of his revelations and what is implied by submission are now spelled out in greater detail. Muhammad, we discover, stands at the end—there will be no other after him—of a line of prophets that began with Adam. Three of these prophets were notably entrusted with a public revelation in the form of sacred books—Moses the Tawrat, Jesus the Injil and Muhammad the Quran—illustrating God's continuing mercy toward a wayward humanity. The present revelation is, in a sense, the most fundamental of the three since it goes back to, and revives, the religion of Abraham, which had managed to survive at Mecca in a disfigured form for centuries. That is why Islam still venerates the Kaaba built by Abraham and Ishmael—toward which Muslims now pray—and must continue to practice the ritual of the hajj (pilgrimage) begun in Abraham's day (see II/6).

The Composition of the Quran

We have already touched on the complex question of the inspiration of Scripture: how the task of producing Holy Writ was shared by God, whom all believers agree somehow to be the source of its contents, and his human agents—Moses, Mark, or Muhammad—who were chosen to mediate those contents to their contemporaries and beyond. As we have also seen, the inspiration thought to lie behind the Quran is straightforward: God, through the agency of the angel Gabriel (how precisely this occurred is not entirely clear; see below), relayed the text verbatim, and thus in Arabic, to Muhammad, who then reported it to the people on various occasions of revelation.

On the evidence of the final product, the Quran could have been composed either orally or in writing, but when we examine the text more closely, the issue becomes far more complex. Long sections of the Medina suras might well have been composed in writing: they are made up of long periods, are prosaic in diction and didactic in manner. Those ascribed by Muslims and non-Muslims alike to the Meccan period, in contrast, bear many signs of oral performance, and even, the non-Muslim might argue, of oral composition. The diction is poetic, indeed rhymed; the style is emotive, rapid; the expression brief, colorful, often abrupt. There are repetitions of the type we have come to expect of oral poetry. And finally, Muhammad's own contemporaries identified what they were *hearing* as poetry and Muhammad as a poet (Quran 21:5, etc.). He denied the charge (36:69), as well he might since none of the preserved pre-Islamic poetry has as its subject God, salvation, or resurrection.

But Muhammad may have seemed like a poet nonetheless, certainly by his diction and perhaps also in his manner. We do not know and cannot imagine how those suras came forth from his lips; the Meccan suras have none of the sometimes chatty tone of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount nor the pedantic assurance of Leviticus or Numbers. God seems often to shout in the Quran, and we can only assume that Muhammad did so as well on occasion. Did he in fact appear jinn-possessed, as some of his contemporaries thought (52:29)?

It is now an almost dogmatic belief of the hardened Muslim historical tradition that the "clear Arabic" of the Quran (16:103; 26:195) was in fact the Meccan dialect of the Quraysh. It does not seem so, however. Although there is no unanimity on the subject, a substantial number of scholars are convinced that the Arabic of the Quran is expressed in a kind of art-speech, a poetic *koine* that was the linguistic currency of the poet and comprehensible throughout Arabia. That fact too may have convinced Muhammad's Meccan audience that they were listening to a poet, albeit a rather odd one who spoke not of love or the deeds of war but of God's justice and mercy and the Afterlife. Nonetheless, the argument may be taken as closed. We can grant Muhammad his denial that he was a poet; at the same time, what is heard and read in the Meccan suras of the Quran is assuredly poetry.

The composition of the Medina suras presents a far more serious problem. They smack of prose and of the pen, more of reflection than of intuition, and yet we know with certainty that Muhammad lacked the skill to write much less to compose in writing. The Medina suras were perhaps dictated, carefully and thoughtfully. That process would explain the style and diction of the later parts of the Quran, but we may also suppose there were at the agricultural oasis of Medina near-professional scribes capable of writing down, in the highly defective Arabic script of that day, what the Prophet spoke to them. The supposition is not impossible, merely discouragingly implausible in that setting. It remains, however, our best guess.

The Editing of the Quran

As already noted, the suras in our copies of the Quran vary widely in length, from the two verses of the early Meccan sura 112 to the 286 verses of the Medina sura 2. In addition, many of the suras are transparently composite. If we take the very early Meccan sura 74, for example, we note that verse 26 affirms that one of Muhammad's opponents will be flung into "the burning." This is apparently a new word or usage, since it is immediately followed (v. 27) by the stereotyped quranic phrase used to signal an explanation: "What will explain to you what 'the burning' is?" There quickly follow verses characterizing "the burning" for the audience. The last of these (v. 30) says, "over it are nineteen." Nineteen what? And why nineteen? The same questions must have occurred to others in Mecca, and perhaps in Medina as well, since verse 31 is a long, rambling, and quite combative rejoinder to those who had made an issue over "nineteen." The verse is obviously intrusive, a later insertion wholly different in style from what precedes and follows. At verse 32 there appears to be a seam, a series of oaths that typically begin the early Meccan suras and so here probably represent what was once the beginning of a new pronouncement.

Thus, many of what we have called the Quran's "chapters" are in fact composites and raise the larger question of the work's authorial unity and the variety within it. The whole Quran is, on its own testimony, certainly to be thought of as constituting a book, like those of the Jews and the Christians (3:3–4). Yet, again by its own witness, it was delivered piecemeal (17:106). Sura 25:32 famously states: "And the disbelievers say, 'Why is not the Quran revealed to him all at once?' It is revealed thus that We may strengthen your [i.e., Muhammad's] heart thereby. And We have measured it out in measured stages." At first glance we might think those "measured stages" refer to the suras, the Quran's 114 well-marked divisions. But almost everywhere in the Quran occur the same abrupt changes of subject, diction, rhythm, and rhyme that unmistakably signal a paste-up of Muhammad's pronouncements. There are, in short, more than 114 revelations in the Quran, a fact apparent to Muslim as well as non-Muslim students of the text, although they disagree on who is responsible for such editing. One Muslim tradition from Ibn Abbas (d. 687), a nephew of the Prophet, has Muhammad instructing his scribe after the revelation of some verses to "put those verses in the sura in which such-and-such is mentioned." The report thus shows Muhammad as his own editor, counter to the general Muslim tradition, which was, as we shall see, that the Quran was assembled as a whole well after Muhammad's death.

Among Western critics—the Muslims' own theological aesthetic of the Quran's inimitability (see II/7) bars them from this type of analysis—the general judgment that many of the suras are pastiches is by no means unanimous.

A case has been made that at least the Meccan suras represent structured unities, and that their composition as such was the work of Muhammad. The latter point seems correct: it is difficult to imagine any scribe or collector, even at the bidding of a caliph, “editing” the Word of God, unless there was Muhammad’s own precedent to encourage him. Regarding the suras’ unity, both sides in the debate—those who wish to dissolve them into small pieces, a couple of verses at most, and those who argue for some degree of intrinsic unity among the suras—may be correct. Even if we except the clear interpolations, the early revelations do give the appearance of having been assembled, though without a great deal of regard for logic or consistency. Two motives suggest themselves. The first is liturgical. Very early on, in sura 73:1–5, Muhammad himself is instructed to spend part of the night “reciting The Recitation in measured fashion.” The injunction does not refer here to the public announcement of the Quran—it is, after all, nighttime—but rather to a liturgical action. Even more clearly, Meccan sura 29:45 commands Muhammad to “follow what has been sent to you of the Book by inspiration and establish prayer.” The first command appears to refer to the public promulgation of God’s revealed message, and the second to its use in liturgical prayer. In short, the early Muslims prayed the Quran after they had heard it preached, and for this purpose some of the pronouncements may have been joined to make units appropriate for liturgical repetition, where neither internal logic nor consistency is demanded.

The second motive has left no such telltale signs in the text itself, but we know with some certainty that large parts of the Quran were memorized—tradition assures us some individuals had memorized it in its entirety—and to accomplish this, or at least facilitate it, some assemblage was required. The smaller units must have been joined together in some rough fashion to form larger ones with a degree of internal integrity. In both instances, whether for liturgical purposes or for memorization, the “editor” was doubtless Muhammad. He too later inserted prose clarifications or annotations into some of the already assembled units.

These are essentially editorial questions posed in connection with the earliest compiling of the Quran, a process that lasted most of Muhammad’s prophetic career. His death inaugurated a new process: an attempt, or perhaps attempts, at collecting all the suras created by the Prophet and arranging them in some kind of order that had not existed theretofore.

The Collection of the Quran

Although its content authentically represents the revelations given to Muhammad, the finished Quran as we have it is surely not the work of the Prophet himself: other hands collected the suras. If Muhammad himself was

not responsible, these same hands may even have joined some of the suras together since many of them, as we have just seen, appear to be composite, made up of more than a single revelation. What those near-anonymous editors certainly did was arrange the suras in their present order, which is generally in descending length, longest to shortest, and assign them the names—"The Opening," "The Cow," "The Abundance," and so forth—by which Muslims generally cite them.

Systematic study of the Quran as a canonical document began in Islam in the late eighth or early ninth century. Western scholarship has been trying for somewhat more than a century to restore the original order and understand the editorial process that began at Muhammad's death and led to the Quran that is before us. The task has not been easy. The Quran as it stands is a very complex and often opaque text, and we know remarkably little about what was happening in the Muslim community in the crucial first century of its existence. Almost all the sources of our information about the earliest community of Muslims, their concerns and accomplishments, date from after 750, or even later, better than a century after Muhammad's death.

The Bible and the Gospels are filled with many of the same themes and images as the Quran, but in the former books they are surrounded by a body of narrative that provides a context that smoothes the way to comprehension. The Quran, in contrast, has no narrative framework. It is not that God's utterances are totally disassociated from contemporary events; it is simply that we do not always, or even often, know what he is talking about, though Muhammad and his audience apparently did. Where the revelation does take the form of a story, in the "Joseph" sura (Quran 12), for example, the narrative is so allusive and disjointed that one can only assume that the Meccan and Medinan listeners were already somewhat familiar with the matter.

The Quran's literary style has been characterized as "referential rather than expository." The audience, we must assume, caught the references, but there is somewhat more to it than the listeners' privileged position. The ellipses and repetition of themes in the text, the abrupt shifts in the narrative point of view from first to second to third person, the great number of hanging pronouns whose antecedents are uncertain also point to a text that was orally composed—or, to be more theologically correct, orally recollected and orally delivered. Seventh-century western Arabia was an overwhelmingly oral society, and whatever knowledge of writing existed was surely limited to a very few practitioners and to a few occasions. Nobody suggests that Muhammad himself wrote down the Quran, though there is strong evidence that he edited it. Muslim sources do insist that, while many were memorizing the Quran as it was delivered, parts at least were written down by others during Muhammad's lifetime. We know not what to make of this. The orality of the culture and the deficiencies of Arab script at that time and place—its signs could only very imperfectly distinguish one letter from another: initial *y*, *b*, *t*, *th*, and *n* would all

appear identical, for example—make it seem highly unlikely that such was the case. But the Muslim tradition says it was so, and Muslims accept this.

At Muhammad's death, there were Muslims who had memorized the Quran, while others, like his wife Hafsa, the daughter of the later caliph Umar, possessed written "copies." The tradition goes on to assert that under the early caliphs there were three separate attempts to collect and codify these various testimonies to the Quran. The first was under Abu Bakr (r. 632–634) immediately after the Prophet's death; the second, under Umar (r. 634–644); and a final, definitive effort under Uthman (r. 644–656). All three attempts seem very similar, with respect to motive—the fear of the multiplication of different versions and the death of "reciters" who knew the full text by heart—and even procedure. To accomplish their task, a committee was assembled, generally under the direction of the Prophet's "secretary," Zayd ibn Thabit, to collect all the available evidence, to "debrief" the reciters, and to assemble and collate the various written versions of the Quran. So it was done, and a standard edition was produced. Copies were sent to all the Muslim centers, with the order that older versions be destroyed. The latter might seem an impossible task in an early medieval society, and so it evidently was since modern scholars have identified in the remains of ancient commentaries and newly discovered manuscripts various somewhat different readings of quranic lines and verses. None of these variants challenges the basic meaning of the received text, but there are enough of them to cause us to believe that differing versions of the Quran were in circulation long after 650, and to suggest to others the even more radical position that the Quran as we know it, at least in the form we know it, did not come into existence until well into the eighth century.

Qere and Ketib

The Hebrew Bible and the Arabic Quran show a marked textual affinity. Both are written in Semitic languages where scribal custom was to write merely the consonantal text and to leave unmarked the short vowels that determine the exact pronunciation. Thus in both Scriptures there is a difference between what is written and what is actually read, in Hebrew, between the *qere* and the *ketib*. The sacred text was too important for that vocalization to be left to chance, and so both Jewish and Muslim scribes began to mark the short vowels in written texts of Scripture with a series of diacritical marks. In the biblical tradition, where from early on the Scripture was both written and read, the scribal experts who supplied the diacritical coding were called *Masoretes*, and the vocalized text (*masorah*) they sought to protect from the vagaries of both script and pronunciation is called in English the Masoretic Text. To this they appended voluminous critical annotations—which are never included in Torah copies used for liturgical purposes in synagogues—a large pool of *qere* variants in which later Bible

commentators could fish at their pleasure. The work of these virtuosi did not produce a single uniform Masorah, however. Tradition remembered there were a number of such, chiefly stemming from Palestine, Babylonia, and—the one that since about 1000 has enjoyed preeminence—Tiberias.

In Islam, the emphasis was and is quite different. The preservation and transmission of the Quran has been overwhelmingly oral in nature, and so experts in the Book have been reciters (*qurra*) rather than scribes (*kuttab*). Thus there have been no Masorettes jealously guarding a textual tradition and, in the process, noting the slightest variants. Among the Jews the effort was to preserve a properly written text, whereas the Muslims have been more concerned with a properly remembered text. The objective has certainly been achieved. There are remarkably few variants in the preserved manuscript copies of the Quran and so even fewer in the printed versions: almost all printed copies of the Quran reflect the text printed in Egypt in 1924, which stems from the line of transmission attributed to Abu Umar Hafis ibn Sulayman (d. 796). But the Muslims have their own tradition of differing ways of reciting the text (*qira*). Seven such were thought to have gone back to the earliest days of Islam—some maintained that they all derived from the Prophet himself—and they received community and scholarly approval in the Middle Ages. But absent a masoretic tradition among Muslims, the variants on the quranic text—as there certainly must have been with the early defective Arabic writing system that scarcely distinguished some consonants, much less vowels—have largely disappeared, and those that have survived are largely inconsequential to the text.

Interpolation and Abrogation

It is a commonplace belief in the three communities that Scripture interprets itself, that later verses sometimes elucidate and explain earlier ones. The Quran, however, introduces a radical form of scriptural reinterpretation. The notion of inspiration, coupled with the conviction that God is both omniscient and unchanging, strongly argues that God's Words are totally and simultaneously true, and the three monotheistic communities have generally regarded them as such. Apparent contradictions or inconsistencies between two passages could be ironed out by careful application of a harmonizing exegesis (see II/2). But at two points in the Quran (2:106 and 16:101), God allows that on occasion he himself has substituted one verse for another, thereby abrogating or canceling the earlier verse. Besides serving as a powerful inducement for Muslims to attempt to discover the actual chronological order of the suras—the later verse would presumably abrogate the earlier one—the notion led to considerable speculation about whether any of the abrogated verses were still in our Quran and why such action was necessary in the first place.

On another occasion (22:52–53) the Quran says that Satan has inserted certain verses in the Quran, which God eventually cancels, in order to test the believers' faith. The remark is baffling, but it may go back to a historical incident in which Muhammad, yielding to a satanic temptation to appease the Quraysh, allowed that the “daughters of Allah” had some intercessory power with God. As we have already seen (I/3), these so-called satanic verses occurred after Quran 53:20, but God soon intervened—exactly how soon or under what circumstances is not said—and the offending verses were canceled and our present 53:21–23 were put in their place.

The Muslims recognize that both the Torah and the Gospels originally represented true and authentic revelations from genuine and esteemed prophets, Moses (Musa) and Jesus (Isa). But subsequently Jews and Christians tampered with the texts—they removed predictions of Muhammad, for one—and so their present versions are generally unreliable. They are not, in any event, either required or even recommended reading for Muslims. Within Islam, Shiites have accused the Sunnis of tampering with the Quran by removing the pronouncement of Ali's appointment as Muhammad's successor.

Closure

The canonization of Scripture marks its closure. God's final words have been uttered, the Book closed and sealed. The process is unmistakable in Islam. The Quran was God's revealed Word delivered to humankind through the agency of his prophet, Muhammad. At Muhammad's death the revelation was completed, as was the Quran, the Book, heavenly and earthly, that contains it. It will not be reopened or continued through another prophet. The Quran uniquely announces its own canonization. Muhammad is the “seal of the prophets” (33:40); there will be no other. The matter is not so clear-cut in the case of the Jews and Christians. Both the Bible and the New Testament are constituted of a series of books, the overwhelming majority of them independent of one another, and their contents are not always sequential in the manner of Exodus-Joshua-Judges-Kings or Luke-Acts. There is no reason, then, why there should not be more such books, another prophet in the Bible, for example, or another gospel in the New Testament. Indeed, John's Gospel unself-consciously announces that “There is much else that Jesus did. If it were all to be recorded in detail, I suppose the whole world could not hold the books that would be written” (21:25). There were in fact such books, but just as the Muslim community refused authorization to those who claimed prophethood after Muhammad, so the Jews and Christians in the end denied those other books all claim to the title “Word of God.” The canon was closed by consensus among the Jews and Christians, by Muhammad's death for Muslims.