

TRADITIONS IN TRANSFORMATION
The Ark of the Covenant and the Golden Calf in Biblical and
Islamic Historiography

by

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For Franz Rosenthal on his eighty-fifth birthday

Islam, the youngest of the three monotheistic religions, represents a fairly advanced stage in the evolution of traditions which could already be encountered in Jewish and Christian sources. Since the 19th century and even earlier, scholars who noticed this well-known phenomenon, have usually confined themselves merely to asserting the Jewish or Christian origins of traditions recounted in the Islamic sources, without further investigating the new life that was infused into these traditions in the Islamic sphere. In the following, traditions of a clearly Biblical origin will be examined in their specific Islamic connotation, thus perhaps enabling us to gain more insight into the role the Biblical history of Israel plays in Islamic historical consciousness.² This will serve to shed more light on the Islamic conviction that the divinely pre-ordained history of humankind which began with the People of Israel is continued through the history of Muḥammad's community.³

For this investigation, the Ark of the Covenant and the Golden Calf have been chosen. These two ritual objects play a significant role in Biblical and Qur'ānic historiography, as well as in early Islamic tradition (*ḥadith*). In spite of their contrasting ritual significance (monotheistic as opposed to pagan), they have much in common as symbols of divinity, and in fact stand in an inverted symmetry to each other. The mutual role of these objects in Islam

¹ This article was completed during my stay in 1999 as a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University.

² About which see Franz Rosenthal, "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition on Muslim Historiography", in Bernard Lewis *et al.*, eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), 35-45.

³ For a more detailed discussion see Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān: the Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image*, Princeton, 1999.

will be analyzed to discover how reference to these Israelite ritual symbols became ammunition in inner Islamic politics.

In order to evaluate more thoroughly the role of the Ark and the Calf in Islam, reference must first be made to the Bible.

The Biblical Context of the Calf and the Ark

The Golden Calf

In the Old Testament, the Golden Calf is made in compliance with the Children of Israel's request while Moses is away on the mountain receiving the Tablets. Due to the prolonged absence of Moses, the Children of Israel demand of Aaron his brother to make them a god that would go before them, because Moses has disappeared and they do not know what has become of him.⁴ Aaron collects the earrings of the Israelites and makes the Golden Calf from them. When the Calf is ready the Israelites say: "This is your Lord, oh Israel, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt."⁵ To ensure its grace, they perform sacrificial rites at the altar which was built in front of the Golden Calf.⁶ God offers to Moses, who is still on the mountain, to destroy the sinful Israelites and make him into a great nation instead of them. Moses asks for God's mercy,⁷ but later on, when he descends from the mountain and sees the Calf, he breaks the Tablets,⁸ destroys the Calf,⁹ and orders the sons of Levi to execute their sinful brethren.¹⁰

In the immediate context of the Book of Exodus, the Calf is identified with the god that brought Israel out of Egypt,¹¹ and its making marks Israel's need for a visible image of God. This need has become urgent due to the absence of Moses, God's emissary among them. In the absence of the great human leader the Israelites need a new ritual object on which to focus their attention and admiration during their journey, and the rites around the Calf fulfil this need for a communal consolidating axis. Their sin is therefore not merely the pagan worship of the Calf, but also their loss of faith in Moses, whom they thought dead, and their diversion from him to another object of veneration and obedience. In God's own words, "They have turned aside

⁴ Exodus 32:1-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32:3-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32:5-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32:10-14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32:19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32:20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32:26-29.

¹¹ Cf. Samuel E. Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, trans. Baruch J. Schwartz (Jerusalem, 1992), 53.

quickly from the way which I commanded them. They have made them a molten Calf... ”¹²

In later periods the Golden Calf again emerges. Jeroboam makes new images of it when he establishes the Kingdom of Israel.¹³ He makes two golden calves and declares that they represent the God that has brought Israel out of Egypt, indicating that his intention is to renew the Golden Calf of the time of the Exodus from Egypt. His aim is to establish in his own Kingdom a new system of ritual which will replace the old one of the Kingdom of Judah that was centered on Jerusalem. In order to prevent people from going to Jerusalem, he places his own calves at Bethel and at Dan.

Ba'al-pe'or

There is another scene in the Bible apart from the one of the Calf in which the Children of Israel deviate from God towards other deities. This is found in Numbers 25:1-8, where the Children of Israel commit adultery with the daughters of Moab and “cleave” (*wa-yiṣṣamed*) to the worship of Ba'al-pe'or. Moses commands the Israelites to execute the sinners guilty of “cleaving” (*haniṣmadim*) to Ba'al-pe'or, and one of the sinners is mentioned by name: Zimri ben Salu, who is being slain.

Although this event takes place after that of the Calf, it is nevertheless relevant to the discussion here because, as will be seen below, the Qur'ān links it to the worship of the Calf.

The Ark of the Covenant

A point to be stressed is that God Himself recognizes the need for a visible ritual focus that will accompany the Israelites in their journey. Thus, soon after the episode of the Calf, God commands the Israelites to build the Ark of the Covenant (or of the Testimony, as it is often called) and the Tent of Meeting which was to house the Ark.¹⁴

In later periods in the history of Israel as described in the Bible, the Ark is mentioned mainly in association with miracles that attest to God's might in guiding and protecting His chosen people. The Ark accompanies the Children of Israel when they cross the River Jordan into the Promised Land, and as soon as the priests who carry the Ark enter the river, its waters retreat.¹⁵ The bearers of the Ark circle the city of Jericho seven times and the

¹² *Ibid.*, 32:8.

¹³ I Kings 12:28-33.

¹⁴ Exodus 35-40.

¹⁵ Joshua 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

walls of the city collapse.¹⁶ Later on, too, the presence of the Ark brings down calamities on the Philistines who fight against Israel.¹⁷

Hence, the Calf and the Ark are ritual symbols of a communal significance, sharing some crucial features in common. Both represent the God that has brought Israel out of Egypt;¹⁸ both are shaped as golden images of animals (a pair of Cherubim, i.e. angels, are mounted on the Ark) which were considered the seat of God; both marked an area of sacrificial slaughter; both were made from donations. However, while the Ark marks the distinctive identity of Israel as a chosen community, guided and protected by God, the Calf marks their deviation towards a different ritual system which represents the breaking up of a community united in loyalty to one legitimate authority.

The Qur'ānic Setting

Islamic sources appropriated the themes of the Ark and the Calf and assigned to them specific roles which reflect divergent aspects of the relationship between Israelite and Islamic history. The earliest Islamic source in which these objects appear is the Qur'ān.

The Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant (in Arabic *tābūt*, a “chest” a “box”¹⁹) is only mentioned once in the Qur'ān, in Sūrat al-Baqara (2):248. Here it functions as a divine sign for the skeptic Children of Israel and is designed to convince them that Saul (Ṭālūt) is indeed entitled to be their king. Their prophet says to them that the sign of the kingship of Ṭālūt is the Ark that will come to them, and in it will be the “Shechina from your Lord, and a remnant of what the folk of Moses and Aaron’s folk left behind, the angels bearing it.”

This passage is only loosely connected with the Biblical history of the Ark. In the Bible there is no direct link between the Ark and Saul. However, before Saul becomes a king, the Ark plays a role in Israel’s battles against the Philistines, during which it is captured by the Philistines but brings destruction to them and their gods.²⁰

In contrast to the Bible, in which the Ark has a variety of functions in the relationship between man and God (revelation, protection, guidance, etc.),

¹⁷ I Samuel 3-5.

¹⁸ Cf. Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, 53.

¹⁹ Elsewhere *tābūt* denotes the ark into which Moses’ mother put him (Qur’ān 20:39).

²⁰ I Samuel 4-7.

in the Qur'ān it has one function only, which is quite different from any it has in the Bible. Its role is to legitimize authority. The Children of Israel do not want Saul as a king because of his inferior social status, but the Ark legitimizes his position as king. This development in the function of the Ark is quite understandable in view of the fact that the Qur'ān is indeed preoccupied with problems of authority. The authority of the Qur'ānic prophet is far from being self-evident. He is rejected and even persecuted by his fellow-tribesmen, and many efforts are made in the Qur'ān to legitimize his position as a messenger of God. The Qur'ānic Prophet's situation is often projected onto other prophets whose stories are recounted in the Qur'ān, as well as on Saul, who, although but a king, is also similarly described as having to struggle to establish his authority.

The function of the Ark as a basis of authority originates with the Shechina which is placed within it, as well as with the legacy of Moses and Aaron. The Qur'ānic description of this legacy vaguely echoes the Biblical statement that the "Book of the Law" (the Torah) was kept beside the Ark,²¹ as well as the rod of Aaron,²² and the pot of manna which Aaron placed before it.²³

As for the notion that the Shechina was within the Ark, this could have its origin in the Biblical idea that Moses received God's communication "from between the two Cherubim" of the Ark.²⁴ This means that the Ark, is a prophetic instrument.

The Shechina is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān, and signifies something which emanates from God and embraces the Prophet as well as the believers. In Arabic it has acquired the form *sakīna*, turning it into a derivative of the Arabic root *s.k.n.* which denotes a state of "rest", "calmness", "tranquillity". This is how Muslim exegetes usually explain the various occurrences of *sakīna* in the Qur'ān.²⁵

However, in the verse dealt with here, the *sakīna* is confined to the Ark and does not reach beyond it, which means that it should be understood in the context of revelation, as is the case with the term *shekhina* in Jewish sources. In the latter, it signifies the presence of God, although it is not clear whether it is entirely identical with God Himself. In any case, it is evident that the present Qur'ānic passage reflects the Biblical function of the Ark,

²¹ Deuteronomy 31:26.

²² Numbers 17:25.

²³ Exodus 16:33-34.

²⁴ Exodus 25:21-22.

²⁵ E.g. Qur'ān 48:4, 18, 26, etc.

²⁶ E.g. *EB*, I, 542-46.

and especially of the Cherubim, as the seat of God.²⁶ The fact that in the Qur'ān the Shechina is the origin of the authority of a king may perhaps correspond to the fact that in Jewish Qabbala the Shechina is also known as *malkhūt*: "kingship".²⁷

The Golden Calf

In contrast to the Ark which the Qur'ān mentions only once, the making of the Calf is described in two parallel versions, apart from occasional references to it elsewhere.

Sūrat al-A'raf (7)

One version is recorded in Sūrat al-A'raf (7) where the episode of the Calf is embedded in accounts of the sins the Children of Israel committed on their way to the Promised Land. After crossing the sea, the Children of Israel come across a people cleaving (*ya'kufūn*) to idols. The Israelites then ask Moses to make for them a god like the one the other people have, but Moses refuses (7:138-40). This episode serves as an introduction to the making of the Calf and implies that the Calf which the Children of Israel make later on is designed to resemble the gods of other nations. The episode seems to be based on Numbers 25:1-8, in which, as seen above, the Children of Israel "cleave" (*nišmadim*) to the worship of Ba'al-pe'or. This reveals a parallelism between the Arabic *ya'kufūn* and the Biblical *nišmadim*, and hence the relationship between the Biblical scene of Ba'al pe'or and the Qur'ānic one is corroborated.

In the present Qur'ānic version, Moses refuses to make the idol as requested by the Israelites, and proceeds to spend 40 (30 + 10) nights with God, after having left his brother Aaron in charge of the Children of Israel (7:142-44). Moses receives the Tablets written for him by God (7:145-47), but at the same time, the Children of Israel, or the people of Moses, as they are called here and elsewhere in the Qur'ān, make a Calf from their ornaments, which is a "mere body that lowed". But the calf fails to accomplish its task as it neither speaks to them nor guides them in any path, so that they regret their deed (7:148-49). Thereupon Moses returns furious, smashes the Tablets, and grabs his brother's head, dragging him in anger (7:150).

In this version, the theme of the Calf, which is preceded by the request to have gods like those of other nations, comes up in connection with the idea that the People of Israel, whom God elected above all other people, have betrayed the love of God and sought other deities. The statement that

²⁷ EH, XXXI, 866.

the Calf failed to guide them in any path preserves the Biblical notion that the Calf was supposed to go before the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. However, in the Qur'ān the Calf makes a sound of some sort which has no Biblical parallel. This may indicate that some life was infused into it (about which see below), but it may also indicate something else. A tradition of Sa'id ibn Jubayr (Kūfan d. AH 95) says that the Calf had no voice at all, and the sound that was heard was the result of the wind that was blowing through its hollow body, from its rear end and out through its open mouth.²⁸ It may therefore be supposed that in the Qur'ān the sound demonstrates the beastly or demonic nature of the image. It is unable to speak and give real guidance, but only makes an eerie howling sound, as the wind blows through it.

Sūrat Tāhā (20):83-98

The second version of the scene of the Calf, which appears in Sūrat Tāhā (20):77-98, contains some additional intriguing details that revolve around the figure of the "Samaritan" (al-Sāmiri) the person who makes the Calf for the Children of Israel. The latter cast their ornaments into the fire and the Sāmiri brings out a Calf for them, a mere body that lows, and in spite of Aaron's protest, the Israelites say (20:91): "We will not cease to cleave to it until Moses returns to us". When Moses does return he curses the Sāmiri that all his life he will cry out: "Untouchable" (20:97).

The appellation "Sāmiri" is usually translated as "the Samaritan", and the Qur'ānic story about him is taken as an etiological episode designed to explain the Samaritan ritual separation from non-Samaritans.²⁹ However, even if this were the case, the formal affinity between the Qur'ānic Sāmiri and the Biblical Zimri of the episode of Ba'al-pe'or cannot be ignored. This episode clearly stands behind a Qur'ānic scene that features as an introduction to the making of the Calf (see above). Heinrich Speyer has already suggested many years ago that the form al-Sāmiri has its origin in the name of Zimri.³⁰

The link between the Sāmiri and the episode of Ba'al-pe'or has been preserved in Muslim tradition. It is related that in making the Calf, the Sāmiri took advantage of the Israelites' request to imitate the people who cleaved to their idols (Qur'ān 7:138).³¹ In the Bible Zimri is executed by Phinehas the grandson of Aaron, and in the Qur'ān the Sāmiri is cursed for life by Moses.

²⁸ Ibn Abi Ḥātim, *Tafsīr*, V, 1568 (no. 8990).

²⁹ See *EP*², VIII, 1046, s.v. "Sāmiri" (B. Heller-A. Rippin).

³⁰ Quoted in Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart, 1971), 335.

³¹ Muqātil, III, 38.

But the “Samaritan” significance of the Qur’ānic Sāmīri can also be retained. As seen above, Jeroboam made two golden calves and declared that they represented the God that had brought Israel out of Egypt. His capital was situated in Shomron and the Calf of Shomron is explicitly mentioned in Hosea 8:5, as already noted by Josef Horovitz.³² In this case, the Qur’ānic Sāmīri represents the breaking of Israel’s ritual unity and their deviation to foreign rites.

The manner in which the Sāmīri makes the Calf is a mystery. He sees a “messenger” which others cannot see, and he seizes a handful of dust from the messenger’s track, casting it “into the thing” (v. 96). Muslim exegetes provide the biography of the Sāmīri, which resembles slightly the Biblical biography of Moses. They say that the Sāmīri was one of the Children of Israel who, when born, was hidden by his mother in a cave to prevent him from being slain by the Egyptians. The Angel Gabriel looked after him during all the years of concealment, till he grew up. Later on, when Israel came out of Egypt, Gabriel accompanied them mounted on a horse that was a “horse of life”. The Sāmīri who had known Gabriel since infancy recognized him and his horse, and when the Calf was made, he took a handful of dust from under the foot of the horse of life, and cast it into the Calf. Thus life was infused into it. Some say that the Calf became a creature of flesh and blood.³³

In conclusion, the making of the Calf serves in the Qur’ān to build up a sinful image of the Children of Israel. This fits in with other Qur’ānic references to them. Generally speaking, the Qur’ān strives to prove that the People of Israel betrayed God’s love and lost their status of God’s chosen community, which implies that the believers who follow the Qur’ānic prophet replace the Children of Israel as God’s new chosen community. To prove this, the Qur’ān concentrates on the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, which exemplifies the election of Israel as well as their sin.

The most explicit formulation of the idea of Israel’s election is provided in Qur’ān 44:30-33, in which God announces that He has chosen the Children of Israel (*ikhtarnāhum*) above all beings. This statement is coupled with the story of Israel’s deliverance from Pharaoh, including the “signs” (*āyāt*) that were given to Israel during their deliverance.

Israel’s redemption from Pharaoh provides the clearest manifestation of God’s blessing (*ni‘ma*) on them (Qur’ān 14:6). This event, as well as the journey of the Israelites to the Holy Land, are recounted in the Qur’ān in several parallel passages of varying lengths. A detailed version is found in Sūrat al-A‘rāf (7) which was examined above. Here the story begins with

³² Quoted in Paret, 335. Cf. also Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977), 177 n. 60.

³³ Samarqandi, II, 352.

the encounter of Moses and Aaron with Pharaoh, including the “signs”, i.e. the miracles they perform and the plagues they bring down on Pharaoh (vv. 103-33). This is followed by the departure of Israel from Egypt and the drowning of Pharaoh’s troops in the sea (vv. 134-36). Then God bequeaths the Holy Land to the Children of Israel (v. 137). This version of Pharaoh’s story is one of a series of well-known Qur’ānic “punishment stories” which deal with extinct nations that were destroyed because of their disobedience. Sometimes Pharaoh’s punishment story appears, separately from the story of the Israelites.³⁴ In Sūrat al-A’raf, Pharaoh’s punishment is followed by an account of the events that take place after the Children of Israel cross the sea. The plot now focuses on their sins, and mainly on the making of the Calf which results in the breaking of the Tablets (vv. 138-51). Another sin mentioned in this *sūra* is the refusal to say *ḥiṭṭa*, for which they are destroyed in a disaster (*rijz*) sent from heaven.³⁵ They also violate the Sabbath, for which they are turned into apes (vv. 163-67). Elsewhere the Qur’ān recounts the sin of the Israelites when refusing to wage war on the mighty inhabitants of the Promised Land, for which, as punishment, they must wander in the wilderness for forty years (until they perish).³⁶ This is based on the Biblical affair of the spies.³⁷

The theme of the Children of Israel serves polemical needs in the Qur’ān arising from tensions between Muslim believers and contemporary Jews and Christians. The Qur’ān strives to prove that the Muslim believers are God’s new chosen community, and that the Children of Israel, i.e. the Jews and the Christians, are no longer a chosen community. This is explicitly stated in Qur’ān 5:18, in which the Jews and the Christians claim to be “the sons of God and His beloved ones”. To this the Qur’ān responds by asserting that they are merely mortals (*bashar*) whom God punishes for having sinned.

Islamic Tradition

The Golden Calf

Islamic post-Qur’ānic tradition has retained the Qur’ānic insubordinate image of the Children of Israel and has turned it into a model of evildoing which the believers must avoid at all costs. Here too the Calf represents the Israelite model of sin. However, whereas in the Qur’ān the sin of the Calf brings out the sinful nature of the Israelites, in Islamic tradition the same

³⁴ Qur’ān 26: 10-68, 27:7-14; 28:3-47; 43:46-56; 51:39-40; 79:15-29.

³⁵ Vv. 161-62. See also Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān*, 83-99.

³⁶ Qur’ān 5:20-26.

³⁷ Numbers, 13-14.

sin is attributed to groups within the Islamic community, thus revealing the common sinful way shared by Israelites and Muslims. As a result of this, these groups are detached from the main body of believers who adhere to the true religion.

Dhāt Anwāt

To begin with, the link between the Qur'ānic model of Israelite sin and sections within the Islamic community is established in a tradition recorded in Ibn Ishāq's (d. AH 150) biography of Muḥammad,³⁸ which reappears in numerous other sources.³⁹ This tradition has an *isnād* of al-Zuhri (Medinan d. AH 124),⁴⁰ who relates that during a military campaign (to Ḥunayn), the Muslims asked the Prophet to set up a place of worship for them at a nearby lote tree (*sidra*). They want this place to resemble a sanctuary which the polytheists have close to a giant tree called Dhāt Anwāt, namely, "[a tree] with objects hanging from it." The polytheists thus named it because they used to hang their weapons on it. It is further related that they used to cleave (*ya'kufūna*) to it every day. The Prophet refuses, saying that the Muslims are making the same request that the people of Moses made, and then goes on to declare:

Such are the evil ways (*sanān/sunan*); you will surely follow the way of those who were before you (*man kāna qablakum*).

In this tradition, the Prophet predicts the deviation of the Muslims from the good *sunna* to the evil *sunna* of those before them. This prediction is made in relation to the Qur'ānic story (Qur'ān 7:138) which serves as an introduction to the making of the Calf. As seen above, this story describes how the Children of Israel come across people cleaving (*ya'kufūn*) to idols they have, and how Moses refuses to make for the Israelites a god like that of the other people.

In this tradition the deviation of the Muslims towards foreign rituals is built into conditions of Muḥammad's own time, when the Islamic faith is not yet deeply rooted in the minds of Muḥammad's Arab followers. However, it must be borne in mind that traditions describing conditions in Muḥammad's time are often a product of later generations, which means that they reflect later conditions which were projected back into the life of the Prophet, so as to give him the opportunity to condemn these conditions. The

³⁸ Ibn Hishām, *Sira*, IV, 84-85.

³⁹ For which see Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān*, 171-72.

⁴⁰ The *isnād*: Zuhri ← Sinān ibn Abī Sinān al-Dīlī (Medinan, d. AH 105) ← Abū Wāqid al Laythī (al-Hārith ibn Mālik, Companion, d. AH 68) ← Prophet.

present tradition seems to be aimed against certain factions which were accused of introducing foreign models of religious devotion into Islamic society.

More light on their identity is thrown in further traditions predicting the deviation of Muslims to the evil *sunna* of other communities. In these traditions the sinful precedent of the Israelites is attached mainly to the 'Alids, i.e. the Shī'ī supporters of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.

Al-Mukhtār and the Chair of 'Alī

The Shī'ī movement began gaining momentum during the time of the Umayyad caliphate, when many anti-Umayyad campaigns were instigated by Shī's. One of them was led by a rather eccentric individual named al-Mukhtār ibn Abī 'Ubayd, who claimed to have special spiritual or even prophetic powers. He proclaimed 'Alī's son, Muḥammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, as the messianic savior, i.e. a *mahdī*.⁴¹ The traditions attach to al-Mukhtār's campaign an Israelite stigma which seems to indicate that Shī'is in particular were found guilty of introducing evil ritual models into Islamic society. The theme of the Calf comes up in connection with a ritual object that stood at the center of al-Mukhtār's campaign.

Abū Mikhnaḥ (Kūfan, d. AH 157) recounts, that among al-Mukhtār's companions was a group of people that venerated a chair (*kursiyy*) which they carried on a mule, believing that its presence in battle could ensure them victory.⁴² Some, including al-Mukhtār himself, seem to have believed that 'Alī used to sit on this chair.⁴³

In the traditions discussed here the veneration of the Chair is considered a sign of deviation towards non-Islamic ritual models, and the Chair is equated with the Calf of the Children of Israel. This comes out in a tradition of Abū Mikhnaḥ who relates that Ibrāhīm ibn al-Ashtar, a general in al-Mukhtār's own army, walked besides the Chair and saw people cleaving ('*akafū*) to it, raising their hands in prayer for victory. Thereupon he said:

Oh God, do not punish us for what these fools have been doing, following the way (*sunna*) of the Children of Israel, by God, when they cleaved ('*akafū*) to their Calf.⁴⁴

Apart from the explicit equation of the Chair with the Calf, the tradition uses the verb '*akafū*' to describe the veneration of the Chair, and thus an ad-

⁴¹ Cf. Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: the Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London and New York, 1994), 95-97.

⁴² Ṭabari, *Tārīkh*, VI, 81 (II, 701).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, VI, 82-85 (II, 702-706).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 82 (II, 702). See further Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān*, 170.

ditional allusion is provided to Qur'ān 7:138, which serves as an introduction to the making of the Calf.

Ibn al-Ashtar's statement shows that the Israelite model of the Calf was applied to Islamic groups opposed to the Sunnī regime, whose rituals were thereby reduced to sinful acts representing nothing but deviation towards a foreign *sunna*. The deviators must await God's punishment which was already meted out to those who had followed the same deplorable *sunna* before them. In other words, this tradition places Israelites and Muslims on the same level of sin and punishment.

al-Walīd II

The association of Shī'īs with the Calf did not stop with al-Mukhtār's people, and in later periods more Shī'īs were linked to it. Thus it is reported that the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd II called the 'Alīd Yaḥyā ibn Zayd "the Calf of Iraq" (*'ijl al-'Irāq*).⁴⁵

The Calf and *Ahl al-Ahwā'*

The function of the Calf in labeling opposing groups as deviators was not merely anti-'Alīd, but was also used to denounce other groups that did not belong to Islam's mainstream. These were groups or trends called *ahl al-ahwā'*, a title which is based on a Qur'ānic designation of people of evil inclinations.⁴⁶ The traditions apply it to Khawārij, Qadarīs, Murjī'is and others.⁴⁷

The application of the Calf to *ahl al-ahwā'* is demonstrated in an exegetical manipulation of Sūrat al-A'rāf (7):152, which states that those who made the Calf (that is, the Children of Israel) will be overtaken with "abasement" (*dhulla*). The Baṣran Ayyūb al-Sakhtiyānī (d. AH 131) reportedly saw a person of "deviations", and said: "I recognize abasement in his face." He then recited this Qur'ānic verse and said that this was the punishment for every "forger" (*muftarin*).⁴⁸ It follows that the heretics among the Muslims were perceived as repeating the Israelite sin of the Calf, and their dissension thus became an extension of an Israelite model of sin.

The Calf as a symbol of deviation also features in some versions of what I have elsewhere called "*sunna* statements", in which the inclination of the

⁴⁵ Ṭabari, *Tārīkh*, VII, 230 (II, 1774). Quoted in Crone, *Hagarism*, 177 n. 60.

⁴⁶ E.g. Qur'ān 5:77; 6:150; 45:18, etc.

⁴⁷ On the term *ahl al-ahwā'* see further, Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh 1998), 29.

⁴⁸ Lālikā'i, I, no. 289. See also Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān*, 162.

Muslims to the deplorable *sunna* of other communities is condemned. One such statement is attributed to ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas‘ūd (Medinan/Kūfan Companion d. AH 32):

You are more similar than any other people are to the Children of Israel, in behavior (*samt*) and in conduct (*hady*). You will follow their way (in precise symmetry), as one feather of an arrow matches another, and as one sole of a shoe matches another. However, I am not sure whether you too will worship the Calf.⁴⁹

The final clause in which Ibn Mas‘ūd expresses doubts as to whether or not the Muslims will worship the Calf means that it is highly probable that they will.

There are also statements attributed to the Kūfan Companion Ḥudhayfa ibn al-Yamān, and in one of them, transmitted by Rib‘ī ibn Ḥirāsh (Kufan, d. AH 100), Ḥudhayfa repeats the fear felt that the Muslims might worship the Calf.⁵⁰

On the whole, the function of the symbol of the Calf as an anti-heretical weapon reveals a crucial aspect in the Islamic quest for a distinctive identity. It was used to expose the Israelite orientation of heretical groups who deviated from the righteous *Sunna*,⁵¹ around which efforts were made to unite the Islamic community.

The Calf Applied to Sunnis

The model of the Calf did not function as ammunition for one side only. Apart from traditions in which it has a clear anti-Shī‘ī and anti-heretical role, there are other traditions in which the Shī‘īs themselves employ the same weapon against their Sunnī rivals.

Reference to the Calf is made in connection to Sunnis in some traditions which criticize the first two Sunnī caliphs Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. The Shī‘īs held that ‘Alī was Muḥammad’s only legitimate legate, and that Abū Bakr and ‘Umar deprived him of his right to be the first caliph after the Prophet. A tradition attributed to ‘Alī equates Abū Bakr and ‘Umar with the worshippers of the Calf; ‘Alī states that after the death of the Prophet people were divided into two groups, one resembling Aaron, Moses’ brother, and the other resembling the worshippers of the Calf. ‘Alī himself belongs to the former group, while Abū Bakr belongs to the latter. ‘Alī equates him with an *‘ijl*

⁴⁹ This version is recorded in the commentaries on Qur’ān 9:69. See Baghawī, *Ma‘ālim al-tanzil*, III, 79; Ṭabrisī, *Majma‘*, X, 97. See further Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān*, 174.

⁵⁰ Ibn Abī Shayba, XV, 106 (no. 19234). See further Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān*, 175.

⁵¹ For the Israelite, or rather Jewish and Christian, connection of various Islamic factions and trends see Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān*, 147-67; 177-80.

("calf"), which is evidently a derogatory pun on *bakr* ("young camel"). 'Umar, 'Ali says, resembles the Sāmīrī, who, as seen above, made the Calf for the Children of Israel.⁵²

A crucial event to which the Shi'is applied the sin of worshipping the Calf was the massacre of 'Ali's son al-Ḥusayn and many of his entourage by the Umayyads in Karbalā' (61,680). The link between the Umayyad aggression and the sin of the Calf is established in traditions recounting that after the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn, some Shi'is decided to avenge his death with self-defiance. They relied on the Qur'ānic request of the Children of Israel to "kill themselves", and thus atone for the sin of their brethren who made the Calf (Qur'an 2:54). In other words, the murder of al-Ḥusayn has thus been equated with the worship of the Calf, and became a sin that had to be avenged by waging a hopeless war on the Umayyads. However, the traditions say that other Shi'is refused to die in a hopeless battle, and claimed that contrary to the Children of Israel, the Muslims were not permitted to take their own lives.⁵³

The Ark of the Covenant

Just as the Calf was employed to discredit authority, so, too, the Ark was used to legitimize it, and this again appears to have been used by everyone, Shi'is and Sunnis alike, each side defending the position of its own leaders by means of this Israelite model. As for the Shi'is, they sought to establish the authority of the *imāms* on the model of the Israelite prophets, in whom they saw a divine chain of successive authority that was continued in Islam through Muḥammad and the Shi'i *imāms*. The Ark of the Covenant, which in the Qur'an already features as an origin of authority, was employed by the Shi'is to legitimize the authority of their own leaders.

The Ark and the Chair of 'Ali

The first glimpses of the Shi'i role of the Ark can be caught in further traditions about al-Mukhtār and 'Ali's chair. While at-Mukhtār's critics equated the Chair to the Calf, al-Mukhtār, for his part, reportedly compared it with the Ark of the Covenant.

Ma'bad ibn Khālīd (Kūfān d. AH 118) relates that one day at-Mukhtār stood before 'Ali's Chair, and stated:

Whatever happened to past communities (*al-umam al-khāliya*) will happen to you in

⁵² Sulaym ibn Qays, 92-93. See further Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'an*, 187.

⁵³ Tabari, *Tārīkh*, V, 554-55 (II, 500-501). See further Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'an*, 79.

a similar way. The Children of Israel had the Ark, in which there was a remnant of what the folk of Moses and Aaron's folk had left behind, and this [Chair] among us is like the Ark.

Thereupon, people of the Saba'iyya raised their hands, and cried out: "God is great."⁵⁴

The term Saba'iyya, by which the people participating in the veneration of the Chair are described, is usually applied to Shī'ī *ghulāt* ("extremists") who believed in the supernatural character of 'Alī. They were called after 'Abdallāh ibn Saba', who was of Yemenite descent, and had reportedly refused to recognize the death of 'Alī.⁵⁵

In the present account about the Chair, the Shī'īs emerge as deliberately and consciously linking themselves with the Israelite tradition as they knew it from the Qur'ān, and employ it for their campaign in support of the house of 'Alī.

The comparison of 'Alī's Chair with the Ark implies that al-Mukhtār's people possessed an origin of a legitimate authority, meaning that they should be entrusted with the leadership of the Muslims. On a broader scale, in contrast to the former Sunni traditions which lament the common sinful ways shared by Israelites and Muslims, in the present Shī'ī traditions the common denominator of Israelites and Muslims is that of righteousness.

The Ark and the *Imāms*

The story of al-Mukhtar reveals the typical Shī'ī trend to identify themselves as a chosen community which preserves among the Muslims the divine Israelite model. This can be demonstrated in further traditions in which the Ark plays an essential role in Shī'ī traditions aimed at establishing the authority of the *imāms* through whom the Biblical line of prophets is continued. The Ark has here become a symbol of the hereditary divine authority of the *imāms*. Accordingly, a widely current Shī'ī tradition says that the armor (*silāh*) of the Prophet is equivalent to the Israelite Ark. It is passed on in succession from one *imām* to another, and wherever it goes, knowledge and authority go with it.⁵⁶ It is implied here that the *imāms* pass on from one to another a legacy equal to that which is passed on from one Biblical prophet to another. The Shī'ī traditions actually hold that the Ark was already being passed on since the days of Adam. He is regarded as the first link in the line of prophets and legatees (*awṣiyā'*) which is continued through the Shī'īs.

⁵⁴ Tabari, *Tārīkh*, VI, 83 (II, 703). See further Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān*, 198.

⁵⁵ Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (London and New York, 1979), 300-301.

⁵⁶ Kulini, I, 233, 238, 284. See further Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān*, 188.

Accordingly, a Shī'ī tradition describes how Adam prepared the Ark in compliance with God's instructions, and how he placed in it the emblems of his legacy (*waṣīyya*) and his secret knowledge, including God's Greatest Name. He passes all this on to his son Seth (called in Arabic Hibatullāh), and on entrusting him with the Ark, Adam tells Seth that after his death, he must excavate Adam's body and place his bones in the Ark, and when his own time comes, Seth must pass on the Ark to his own son, in which there will be placed his own legacy. The Ark is similarly supposed to pass through all the rest of Adam's chosen legatees and prophets.⁵⁷

Other traditions say that Adam brought the Ark out of Paradise. It was made of diamonds, with two doors locked with a golden chain and two emerald handles. The Ark had prophetic functions, and when it was opened the future emergence of subsequent prophets and legatees could be seen through it. Thus each one of its holders could know who among his descendants was destined to be in charge of it.⁵⁸

The theme of images of select people who can be seen through the open Ark was used to highlight the position of Muḥammad among the prophets. Hence, there is a tradition according to which the Ark contained the portraits of all the prophets, including that of Muḥammad. They were wrapped up in a silk cloth, and Alexander the Great (Dhū l-Qarnayn) reportedly took them out of the Ark. This is how they ended up in the possession of the Byzantine emperor of Muḥammad's time, who displayed them to some Muslims at his court.⁵⁹

The Arabian Line of Transmission

The line of transmission of the Ark was subjected to manipulations which reveal particularistic efforts to give more weight to the local Arabian origins of Islam, and thus diminish the role of the legacy of the prophets of non-Arab communities. This was achieved by diverting the course of the transmission from the Biblical to the Arabian line. Such a diversion is discernible not only with respect to the Ark but also in relation to other components of the prophetic legacy, and mainly the Divine Light. The Arabian course of the Light emerges in traditions about the Light of Muḥammad (*Nūr Muḥammad*), according to which the Prophet inherited his Light from his Arab ancestors (and not from the Israelite prophets).⁶⁰ The same notion is

⁵⁷ 'Ayyāshī, I, 335-41 (on Qur'ān 5:27).

⁵⁸ Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shī'a Tradition", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979), 46-47.

⁵⁹ Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, I, 104-105.

⁶⁰ See Uri Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light – Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muḥammad", *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975), 62-119.

detected in traditions changing the course of the transmission of the Ark, so as to make it go through some Arabian ancestors. These traditions describe the arrival of the Ark in Arabia, where it is transmitted from one ancestor to another. In some cases they are persons of a Yemenite descent,⁶¹ which indicates the aspirations of Yemenite groups in Islamic society. Other traditions concentrate on the stage at which the Ark is passed on from Abraham. In our Arabian-oriented traditions Abraham hands it over to his son Ishmael (and not to Isaac), and from Ishmael the Ark reaches Kedar, who is also in possession of the Light of Muḥammad. However, the sons of Isaac claim the Ark back, and he himself is unable to open it, because he is not a prophet. Finally, an angel commands Kedar to return the Ark to Jacob, the father of Israel, and he carries it back to the Land of Canaan, where Jacob receives the Ark from him.⁶²

The Ark in Sunnī Traditions

The traditions about the Ark were also subjected to manipulations reflecting a Sunnī attempt to legitimize the authority of the Sunnī caliphs. The Ark emerges in the Sunnī versions in its prophetic function. Thus it is related that when the Ark was in the possession of Abraham, he opened it and displayed to his children the “houses” of all the future prophets, the last being Muḥammad. The Prophet was seen accompanied by his Companions, the four Righteous Caliphs, namely, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī.⁶³

The Messianic Context

Finally, it should be observed that not only does the Ark feature in traditions about past prophets, but also in apocalyptic traditions in which it forms part of the lost legacy that is about to be rediscovered in the course of the revival of the idealized past. Shi‘ī traditions say that the Ark will be retrieved by the Redeemer from the lake of Tiberias,⁶⁴ whereas Sunnī traditions describe its retrieval from various other places.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibn Hishām, *Tijān*, 189-90, 196-97.

⁶² Khargūshī, fol. 10b-11b; Mas‘ūdi (ps.-), *Ithbāt al-waṣīyya*, 104-106; Tha‘labī, *Qīṣaṣ*, 236-37.

⁶³ Khargūshī, fol. 9b-10a. See also Tha‘labī, *Qīṣaṣ*, 236.

⁶⁴ Nu‘mānī, *Ghayba*, 157.

⁶⁵ Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Fitan*, 220, 272, 295, 430; Ibn Ṭāwūs, *Malāḥim*, 61, 129; Wilferd Madelung, “Apocalyptic Prophecies in Hims in the Umayyad Age”, *Journals of Semitic Studies* 31 (1986), 149; *idem*, s.v. “Mahdī”, *EP* (p. 1232b).

Conclusion

The above material about the Ark and the Calf demonstrates the new life post-Qur'ānic tradition has infused into Qur'ānic models of Biblical origin. These models owe their vitality to the Islamic tendency to anchor the history of the Islamic community in the global course of world history. The role assigned to these two opposing ritual objects in the sphere of inner Islamic politics reveals the close relationship which Islamic tradition sees between Israelite and Islamic historical fate. The glorious aspects of this fate have been linked to the symbol of the Ark while the deplorable aspects of the same fate have been represented by the Calf. Occasionally, the same Islamic theme (such as the Chair of 'Alī) has been linked to both of these symbols by different parties who viewed it in two contrasting ways.

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