

Chapter 1

BIBLICISTS AND ARABS

The ancient Israelites were keenly aware of their geographic, linguistic, and cultural kinship with Arab peoples, and they set forth a fascinating accounting for that affinity in the genealogical tables of the tenth chapter of Genesis. According to this anthropology, the great grandson of Noah's son Shem had two sons, among whose descendants a great portion of the world was divided. One, Joktan, was the progenitor of thirteen tribes, some with clear Arabic names, whose "... settlements extended from Mesha as far as Sephar, the hill country to the east" (Genesis 10:30). The other son, Peleg, is described in the following chapter as fathering the line that would result in Nahor, Terah, and finally, Abraham, the forefather of the Israelite people.¹

The striking biblical consciousness of affinity between Israelites and Arabs is tempered, however, by its attempt to maintain a separation. Abraham's son Ishmael, who would father twelve Arabian tribal groupings living to the east of Canaan (Genesis 25:12-18), was forced to leave the patriarchal home in favor of his younger half-brother, Isaac (Genesis 21:9-21). When Abraham took a second wife after Sarah's death and fathered sons with Arabic names, he made certain to send them off eastward as well in order to remove any threat to Isaac's future destiny (Genesis 25:1-6). In the following generation, Esau, who took an Arab wife (Genesis 26:34), also moved to the east of the future Land of Israel. He and his clan dwelt in the land of Edom across the river Jordan (Genesis 31:4, chapter 36).²

Peoples with Arabic names or even identified specifically as Arabs in later biblical works such as Isaiah (13:20) and Jeremiah (3:2) continued to interact with the Israelites, although they are inevitably portrayed with little love lost. In the biblical book attributed to Nehemia, for example, an Arab named Geshem (rendered *gashmu* in Nehemia 6:6, with the nominative case ending still found in classical Arabic but lost to Hebrew) joined up with the enemies of Israel to oppose those who returned from Babylon to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (Neh. 2:19; 4:1; 6:1-6).

Jewish relations with Arabs continued during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The Apocrypha refers to the Arab Nabataeans, who were powerful enough to repel two attacks by the Seleucid Syrians on their capital Petra in the late fourth century B.C.E., and whose powerful kingdom just across the Jordan River from Judea survived into the beginning of the second century C.E. The Jewish Hasmonean monarchy had good relations with the Nabataeans for a time, and as neighboring powers, they were in constant communication whether on friendly terms or not. Arabs continue to be mentioned in the Talmud (*Succah* 52b, *Ketubot* 36b, *Baba Metzi'a* 86a, b, *Kiddushin* 49b, etc.), where they are sometimes referred to as Ishmaelites.³

As may be inferred from the context of these biblical and post-biblical Jewish references, Arabs mentioned in these texts tended to be those who had moved away from the arid Arabian or Syrian wilderness and into the more settled areas of Canaan or Palestine (or today's Iraq, the Babylon of the Bible and Talmud). The process of migration and settlement from the steppe to the settled areas was an old custom practiced by Arabs from the earliest times.⁴ In fact, virtually the entire record of Arab interaction with other peoples prior to the beginning of Islam is found not in Arabic sources, but in sources deriving from the peoples among whom they settled.

These documents account for the movement of Arab groups away from their areas of origin and into the more settled areas of the Fertile Crescent. But interaction between Biblicalists⁵ and Arabs also took place upon the soil of the Arabian Peninsula. Jewish communities existed in Arabia by the period of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.⁶ So, too, early Christian communities found a refuge from Roman persecution in the isolation of various Arabian desert regions, and later groups escaped the theological compulsion of the Byzantine Empire in the safety of the Arabian Peninsula.⁷ Plenty of documentation exists to support the existence of viable Jewish and Christian communities in Arabia in the sixth century, the period immediately preceding the flowering of Islam.⁸

Jews lived in organized communities in the western central highlands of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Ḥijāz, and populated such settlements as Yathrib (Medina), Khaybar, Fadak, al-'Ulā, Taymā, Tabūk, and Wādī al-Qurrā, as well as various parts of South Arabia.⁹ Significant Christian settlements could be found in South Arabia as well as in the northern areas bordering the empires of Byzantium and Persia, although small groups or individual Christian hermits are referred to by pre-Islamic Arabian poets as residing along caravan routes in much of the central Arabian Peninsula as well.¹⁰ Both Jewish and Christian groups spoke the native languages of North or South Arabic and appear to have been deeply integrated into the language and culture if not the religious outlook of the non-Biblicist Arab communities.¹¹ For all intents and purposes, then, Jews and Christians living in the Arabian Peninsula were

culturally and ethnically Arab.¹² The common assumption that all pre-Islamic Arabs were Pagan prior to the lifetime of Muḥammad is simply erroneous.

The various pre-Islamic Arabian tribal and religious populations were not isolated from one another, but enjoyed a great deal of mercantile, social, and cultural interaction. Concern for genealogical purity among the writers of later Islamicate works describing the tribal and social make-up of pre-Islamic Arabia tends to obscure the true heterogeneous nature of that society.¹³ The evidence suggests a great deal of social intercourse among Jewish, Christian, and other Arabs in day-to-day activities as well as during the annual fairs.¹⁴

Non-orthodox Jewish or Christian groups certainly made their home in the Arabian Peninsula as well.¹⁵ Outside the control of Byzantium and Persia, much of Arabia was a logical haven for heterodox groups seeking respite from the pressures and persecutions of either empire.¹⁶ As the various groups living in Arabia interacted with one another over the decades and centuries, it could be safely assumed that in addition to the natural accretion and attrition of membership between groups, new groups or offshoots of established communities formed and developed hybrid ideas and traditions.¹⁷ Certain well-known Arabs living before and during the lifetime of Muḥammad, for example, are considered to have been monotheists in their religious orientation but not clearly adherents of either Judaism or Christianity. Such figures as Zayd b. 'Amr, Umayyah b. Abī al-Ṣalt, Waraḡah b. Nawfal, and Maslama (Musaylima) may have represented early syntheses of Jewish and/or Christian and indigenous Arabian religious traditions.¹⁸

The likelihood of non-Biblicist Arab monotheists living in the peninsula raises the question of exactly what types of religion were practiced by the so-called "pagan" Arabs, the majority population of the Arabian Peninsula. The Qur'ān scorns the practices of unbelievers (*kāfirūn*) and those pagans who assign "partners" to God (*mushrikūn*), and provides some indirect information about pagan religious practice, which is, of course, given in a wholly negative light.¹⁹ At the same time that it refers to the worship of false deities, however, the Qur'ān also refers to biblical characters as if both its Muslim and pagan audiences were thoroughly familiar with them.²⁰ In spite of the numerous Qur'ānic references to Arab idolaters, any attempts to reconstruct the religious practices of pre-Islamic Arabs from the Qur'ān would be tenuous indeed, and very few early works describing pre-Islamic Arabian society are extant. To add to this difficulty, those sources that have survived tend to have been influenced by norms of historiography that obscure an objective accounting of pre-Islamic life.²¹

To summarize, it is simply not clear exactly what indigenous pre-Islamic Arabian religion(s) consisted of. Some sources stress a pantheon of gods and goddesses, while others describe astral systems.²² Despite the many references to pre-Islamic Mecca in Islamicate literature, it is still not even clear whether

the god known as Allah was considered a pan-Arabian deity or a local god whose worship expanded.²³ What appears most likely is that a variety of religious traditions were practiced by the majority of native Arabians who were not adherents of Biblicist religions. Religious traditions and practices differed between the Yemen, the Ḥijāz, and northern Arabia bordering on Byzantium and Persia. Religious ideologies undoubtedly varied from the fully pantheist to monotheist. When referring to Christian, Jewish, or pagan practice in pre-Islamic Arabia, then, one must take care not to prejudice the discussion with uninformed assumptions about the nature of these religions.

BIBLICIST LEGENDS IN ARABIA

I have noted how interaction between Arabs and Biblicists in the Arabian Peninsula was not a new phenomenon during and following the lifetime of Muḥammad. At least during the period leading up to the genesis of Islam in the early seventh century if not earlier, Jewish and Christian groups were highly integrated into the fabric of pre-Islamic Arabia. They lived in mixed settlements and, indeed, even in tribes of mixed religious traditions.²⁴ It would be naive to assume that an orthodox form of Judaism or Christianity was practiced alongside pre-Islamic Arab paganism without one influencing the other.

When people trade with one another in societies where the anonymous department store or shopping mall has not yet overtaken the institution of the private vendor of goods, merchants and customers engage in social intercourse that far transcends the simple transfer of merchandise. This kind of trade involves interaction in which traders swap stories and anecdotes as well as goods. At the annual Arabian trading fairs, where diverse tribal units from broad geographic areas gathered, as well as during other occasions of inter-communal interaction, biblical stories would naturally be traded with local Arabian religious tales. The power or attributes of a universalist God might be described in response to the telling of the power of the local deity. And stories of Arabian heros or jinnis were undoubtedly compared to stories of biblical prophets, holy men, or miracle workers.

As a result, pre-Islamic Arabia contained a wide variety of religious traditions and phenomena, many of which derived from a Biblicist environment. The many references to biblical stories in the Qur'ān are perhaps the most convincing evidence that these or similar stories were known to non-Biblicist Arabs in Mecca and Medina even before the lifetime of Muḥammad.²⁵ I have previously noted that Qur'ānic references to stories or characters found also in the Bible tend to assume that its listeners were already familiar with them. The Qur'ān also provides evidence for the notion that those who opposed Muḥammad in Mecca were familiar with stories of biblical figures before hear-

ing the recitation of the qur'ānic revelations.²⁶ And a group of Meccan tribal groupings calling themselves *Hums* already associated themselves with Abraham by the year of Muḥammad's birth or before.²⁷

As Islam came to dominate the Arabian Peninsula, much of pre-Islamic religious tradition died out or was eliminated. Some of the lore simply lost its inherent power and influence over the people. Divorced from the concrete reinforcement of an active religious cult, for example, legends informing the sanctity of a local religious shrine were soon forgotten. Other material devoted to themes unacceptable to the gradually less compromising Islamic monotheism were purposefully eliminated from the corpus of acceptable tradition.²⁸

One result of the great changes brought about by Islamic domination of the Arabian Peninsula was that the once colorful fabric representing the diverse religio-cultural expressions of sixth and seventh century Arabia survived only as disjointed remnants. Some pre-Islamic legends survived through reinterpretation according to the developing religious standards of early Islam. But more often, certain bits and pieces of ancient tales survived as they were reworked into the legends, evolving to serve as foundations for the newly developing religious system. As noted above, one such source containing material bearing strong similarities to Biblicist and indigenous pre-Islamic tradition is the revelation known as the Qur'ān.

THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'ĀN

The Qur'ān, sacred scripture to hundreds of millions of Muslims throughout the world, is a complex literary work composed of laws, sermons, and theological doctrine. Though unique in its entirety, a great deal of material contained in it is quite reminiscent of material located also in the Bible. This includes a variety of laws, customs, and religious concepts found in similar form in both scriptures. Just as striking, important figures assumed by most Western readers to represent exclusively biblical characters can be found throughout the Qur'ān. Such important figures as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Job, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Mary occur quite commonly, and major personages such as Abraham and Moses are mentioned hundreds of times in tens of chapters. These "biblical" figures, however, tend to assume somewhat different characters and roles in the Qur'ān, though they would be easily recognizable to anyone familiar with the Bible.

The affinity between the Qur'ān and the Bible was clear to Jews, Christians, and Muslims since the very beginning of the Prophet Muḥammad's religious mission in the early seventh century. Attempts to explain or reconcile the differences have been offered from this period onward and continue to be suggested to this day. Jews and Christians, who consider biblical scrip-

ture more ancient and precedential to qur'ānic scripture, have tended to assume an Islamic "borrowing" of biblical material. The supposition of borrowing, of course, denies the viability of true Islamic revelation. Discrepancies between the two texts have therefore been attributed to mistakes on the part of Muslims, who were not able or not willing to borrow or learn the biblical material accurately.²⁹

Muslims, on the other hand, and partly in response to Jewish and Christian disdain for the supposed inaccuracy of the Qur'ān, have claimed that qur'ānic and biblical revelation originated from the same heavenly scripture. The existence of parallels can therefore be explained simply by the fact that they both derive from the same original revelation. According to this view, however, it is the Qur'ān, not the Bible, which represents the only truly accurate record of God's will to humanity. Differences between the two scriptures have therefore tended to be explained as resulting from Jewish and Christian distortion of the Bible. One reason for the presumed distortion, known most commonly as *tahṛīf* in Arabic, was to eliminate the once extant prophecies of the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad and the ascendancy of Islam, both of which are assumed to have been primary components of the original and true Revelation.³⁰

Until recently, the approach of modern Western Orientalist scholarship has not differed significantly from that of medieval European religious disputants. Christian scholars tended to assume a direct borrowing from Christian sources, while Jewish scholars generally assumed a Jewish derivation.³¹ A major goal of this type of scholarship was to locate the literary source or "Urtext" of subsequent versions, a scholarly quest which is far less popular in modern approaches to literary research.³² Modern perspectives on orality-literacy relationships and literary theory have now substantially enhanced our ability to understand the textuality of Islamic religious literature.³³ We are far better equipped today to account for the striking affinity between Biblicist and Islamic texts than the great Orientalist scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But textual analysis of this sort is far more meaningful if conducted with an understanding of the *context*, the historical and cultural environments in which the people referring to the texts interacted.

Social, mercantile, and cultural exchange between the various religious communities of pre-Islamic Arabia has already been discussed. This type of interaction continued throughout the Islamicate world after the Islamic conquests as well. Throughout the first and the beginning of the second Islamic centuries, Muslims were not prevented from seeking out traditions and legends from Jews and Christians.³⁴ In fact, they were encouraged to learn traditions about the biblical and extra-biblical pre-Islamic prophets, though they were apparently forbidden to study and copy Jewish or Christian scripture or learn their religious practices.³⁵ One reason for this approach was that early

Muslims seem to have had difficulty making sense of significant portions of their new revelation following the death of Muḥammad.³⁶ The Qur'ān often makes reference to stories and legends of biblical characters, for example, without actually providing the narratives in the text. It assumes in homiletical fashion that the listener is already familiar with the broad topics being discussed. The details or lessons of the narratives are presumed to have then been provided in discussion subsequent to hearing the recitation of the text. Some of these comments in edited form became the contents of exegetical literature on the Qur'ān, which began to evolve shortly after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad.³⁷ It is immediately evident from reading samples of Qur'ānic exegesis that their contents and style often parallel sources to whom Biblicist lore was familiar. Some are extremely close to known Jewish and Christian extra-biblical legends.

Such prodigious early traditionists as Abū Hurayra (d. 58 A.H./678 C.E.³⁸ and Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687) were known to be familiar with the Hebrew Bible or to collect traditions from Jews and Christians.³⁹ But Muslims would soon strive to rely only upon what they recognized as their own scholarship and lore. During the period when Muslim rulers attained their status as the mightiest world powers of their day under the great Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, religious scholars (*'ulamā*) began to forbid the transmission of traditions deriving from foreign sources.⁴⁰ It was during this period, beginning in the later half of the eighth century C.E., that traditions considered untrustworthy were excluded from the compilations of Islamic lore and legal literature that were being collected at the time. Although this development corresponds chronologically with the period in which the majority population of eastern Islamdom had become Muslim, anti-Jewish or anti-Christian sentiment appears not to have been the driving force behind it.⁴¹ It seems to be connected, rather, with a growing sense of Islamic pride and concern for an integral identity and standardization of practice among what had become an increasingly diverse ethnic Muslim population.

The historical complexities resulting in a greater consolidation of Islam through the institutionalization of Islamic law (*shari'a*) is a subject that is beyond the scope of this study. I digress briefly nonetheless only in order to comment upon the probable reasons for limiting Biblicist traditions after the end of the eighth century. During the period when the population living under the eastern caliphate had become increasingly Muslim, religious leaders were consolidating and establishing a communal Islamic framework for daily life. Prior to this time greater lenience in practice was the custom, partly because daily practice was based on a looser base of Arabian (as opposed to Islamic) cultural norms, and partly because Islamic religious ideology was still in the process of development. By the late eighth century, caliphal society assumed a more fully Islamic demographic character at the same time that those who had

emigrated away from a homogeneous Arabian cultural environment felt less bound by the norms of their Arab cultural heritage. During this time, there grew a greater interest among the religious leadership in re-establishing a homogeneous way of life based on the pristine practice of the young Muslim community of Medina under the leadership of Muḥammad.⁴²

In order to promote greater religio-cultural homogeneity among Muslims, huge numbers of whom were converts or were children or grandchildren of converts, the demand grew among the pious to establish a way of life based upon the very acts of the Prophet or those acts approved by him. Because Muḥammad was God's last and greatest prophet, Muḥammad was becoming accepted by this time as having been divinely protected from error.⁴³ The *sunna* of the Prophet became the norm upon which religious (which included many societal) activities were derived. Its power lay in the fact that its source (God and His Prophet) was purely Islamic; the fact that the actual practice it taught was derived largely from pre-Islamic Arab custom became increasingly irrelevant. Material recognizably distinct from this base, including much of the previously sought-after Biblicist lore, was then considered foreign and unacceptable for inclusion into the corpus of authoritative literature evolving under the tutelage of the religious leadership.⁴⁴

The concern for eliminating foreign religio-cultural lore reflected the growing pride of an empire becoming increasingly Muslim through the voluntary conversion of its subject peoples. Islam came to be seen as first ruling over and then superseding all other religious communities.⁴⁵ By the time the issue of foreign lore had become a concern, however, many traditions derived from foreign sources in the pre-Islamic period or collected during the first century and more of Islam had already evolved into a form that would be admissible to the developing canon of tradition. Some material deriving from Biblicist and pre-Islamic pagan environments had become so well integrated into Islamic lore that they were included in the most respected collections and cited freely in authoritative exegesis of the Qur'ān.