

Thoughts on David Nirenberg, Chapter 4, “Jewish Enmity in Islam,” in *Anti-Judaism*

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Chapter 4 of David Nirenberg’s *Anti Judaism* surveys admirably the intrinsic tension that exists between the Muslim and Jewish traditions, and I find myself in agreement with much of what the author says in it. As Nirenberg shows, Islam must, like Christianity, define itself to be in some decisive manner *non-Jewish*. This need not mean *anti-Jewish*, but as the Christian and Islamic traditions developed historically, anti-Judaism was articulated in many ways, whereas a more neutral “non-Judaism” was seldom articulated at all.

We live, however, in a highly polemical age, one in which not a few people loudly espouse Islamophobic opinions and are glad to seize upon the statements of responsible scholars in order to bolster their view that Islam is *essentially* bad: intolerant, anti-democratic, anti-woman, whatever. I am therefore a bit concerned that this chapter might be used by some as support for their claim that the Islamic tradition is essentially hostile to Judaism.

Let me begin with the author’s formulation on page 182: “Neither the potential for nor the power of this struggle with Judaism can be dismissed as something extraneous to Islam.” This sentence distils what the chapter is all about, but what Nirenberg traces in the chapter is not so much Islam’s “struggle with Judaism” as Islam’s “struggle to understand itself in relation to Judaism.” So the “struggle” of which Nirenberg here speaks refers to the sustained, complex efforts of many generations of Muslims to define their own faith and faith-community in ways that made clear (above all, to themselves, perhaps) Islam’s distinctness from Judaism; but I think this sentence, particularly the phrase “struggle with Judaism,” might easily be taken to mean that Islam is *intrinsically hostile* to Judaism. And there is no question that Islamic tradition does contain many pronouncements (some drawn from the Qur’an, many more attributed to the prophet Muhammad) that can only be called “anti-Jewish.”

Perhaps today, in an age when ecumenism and the idea of tolerance of the Other is current and highly valued by some, Muslims can make the effort to understand their own faith traditions as merely “non-Jewish” rather than “anti-Jewish (as some thinkers in the Christian tradition have tried to do in recent years); but to do so, Muslims will have to go back into their tradition and attempt to de-fang all the hostility to Judaism that has over centuries been built into it. The question is, does the Islamic tradition provide sufficient grounds for such a re-interpretation?

The answer, I think, is yes. As Nirenberg points out, the Qur’an—the earliest and most fundamental source of the Islamic tradition—is puzzlingly ambivalent, or self-contradictory, in its attitude toward Jews (and, for that matter, Christians). On the one hand, it contains a number of verses that explicitly condemn Jews and Christians. On the other, the Qur’an also contains verses that express positive views

about these groups, often lumped together as *ahl al-kitab*, “peoples of the Book,” the righteous among whom are recognized as being truly Believers (*mu’minun*) and are promised felicity in the afterlife. There is no blanket acceptance of (or condemnation of) Judaism as such in these Qur’anic passages; rather, the Qur’an focuses on whether individuals among the Jews (or Christians) oppose Muhammad, or whether they acknowledge God’s oneness and live righteously—in which case they are Believers.

How we can best explain this contrast between what we might call “friendly” and “hostile” passages in the Qur’an remains a mystery. We might argue that they reflect different phases in Muhammad’s career and his own relations with the Jews of Medina, which is how most historians, and the Islamic *asbab al-nuzul* or “occasions of revelation” literature understand it, but to accept this argument calls into question the Qur’an’s status as a divine text of timeless validity, which is axiomatic in Muslim theology. The fact remains, regardless of whether we can understand how it comes to be, that the Qur’an contains both passages that are contemptuous of, or critical of, Jews, and others that recognize them in a positive way.

The ambivalence found in the Qur’an is replicated in later Muslim tradition. There are, as Nirenberg points out, many reports in the *sira* or traditional biography of the prophet Muhammad and in the *hadiths* or sayings supposedly uttered by the prophet that condemn the Jews or depict them negatively (by comparison, there are few that address Judaism in the abstract.). It is said that the Jews have tried to mislead Muhammad on the teachings found in the Torah, that they will fight alongside the Dajjal or Antichrist against the Believers (led by Jesus or the *mahdi*) in the cataclysmic battles preceding the End Time, that the archangel Gabriel is their enemy, etc.

Over against such negative reports, however, one must set a number of more positive, or at least neutral, reports in the tradition that suggest that Jews are different, but not inferior. Nirenberg mentions, for example, reports that note that Jews differed from Muslims in matters of ritual purity, sexual habits, and other social practices; these might be seen as neutral, almost sociological observations. There are also *hadiths* that suggest that Muslims should pay respect to, and even join in, funeral processions of Jews or Christians if they encounter them. Overall, the Islamic tradition lacks the kind of intense and theologically charged attacks on Judaism that one finds in medieval Christian tradition. This suggests that, notwithstanding the blood-curdling quality of some passages on Jews in the Qur’an and *sira*, an emphasis (such as Nirenberg offers) almost exclusively on the harshest views toward Jews is going to be misleading.

Individual traditions, pro or con, might be dismissed as the benign, or malign, influence of individual Muslim traditionists, who worked into the corpus reports that reflected their own personal attitude of toleration or anti-Judaism. Far more important, however, is the *shari’a*’s insistence that the “peoples of the Book”—Jews and Christians—occupy a recognized and protected status in Muslim society. As

persons who explicitly do not believe in the prophethood of Muhammad or the status of the Qur'an as God's revelation, Jews and Christians are according to the law subject to certain disabilities, such as the requirement to pay the *jizya* or poll tax; but they are nonetheless accepted as a part of a Muslim polity, granted definite rights within Muslim society, and guaranteed protection against abuse. Modern critics of Islam will of course sniff that this is merely "second class citizenship," but the *shari'a* provided over the centuries a legal basis for Jews to live in relative security in Muslim societies. It was not perfect tolerance, of course; but it was far better than what was found anywhere else in the pre-modern world, where Jews were not guaranteed citizenship at all. Moreover, unlike individual traditions (whether pro or con), this feature of Islamic law means that fundamental tolerance of Jews is built into the very architecture of the Islamic tradition.

The Islamic tradition's potential for tolerance toward Jews and Judaism is thus deeply entrenched. This potential for tolerance is especially remarkable in view of the Islamic tradition's need, so clearly sketched out by Nirenberg, to define itself in contradistinction to Jews and Judaism; given this need, a straightforward negative stance toward Jews in both the Qur'an and the *shari'a* would seem more likely. How, then, are we to explain this relative tolerance toward the *ahl al-kitab*, their acceptance as a legitimate part of an Islamic society? Are we to take it as merely a practical concession to the fact that when the *shari'a* first coalesced in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, the ruling Muslims were still a minority in the *dar al-islam*, greatly outnumbered by Christians and Jews? Or is the positive stream the residue of an original openness to Jews and Judaism in a non-confessional "Believers' movement" of pious monotheists, as I have tried to suggest in my own work? The "Constitution of Medina" or text of the agreement drawn up between Muhammad and the clans of Yathrib/Medina when he migrated there includes the Jews of Yathrib unequivocally in the new *umma* or community organized by Muhammad, which points to an openness to the Jews at least at that time. The *sira* depicts a neat progression of Jewish enmity over the course of Muhammad's lifetime and increasingly harsh treatment of them by Muhammad, culminating in the massacre of the Banu Qurayza. But the "Constitution of Medina," while it notes that Jews of various clans were part of *umma*, doesn't mention the clans of Nadir, Qaynuqa, and Qurayza, which according to the rest of the *sira* were the three most important Jewish clans of Medina. Why are they not in the "Constitution?" Was reference to them expunged after their exile or massacre? Or are they merely a literary fiction of the *sira*, a confection of later times, created to show the prophet being "prophetlike" and vanquishing his enemies? It is curious that no trace of the Qurayza massacre can be found in medieval Jewish tradition—even though the women and children of Qurayza are described as surviving to be sold into slavery, and could likely have been able to pass the story on in later years.

Nirenberg points out (p. 160) that in later Islamic tradition, Jews appear as foils to demonstrate the principles of a Muslim polity. It is worth remembering, however, that the Qur'an itself is almost completely devoid of guidance on politics; it focuses tightly on the moral demands that each individual in its audience must face. This

Qur'anic silence on matters political means that Islamic political thought—including the use of Jews as negative examples—is almost completely a product of the *sira* and tradition literature, that is, of the eighth and later centuries CE. Many of the stories (about Khaybar's Jews for example, or the “no two religions in Arabia” tradition) have the ring of having been designed precisely to delineate a political world where Jews (and Christians) were more separated from Muslims than had originally been the case; but the fact that *ahl al-kitab* have a protected status in the *shari'a* seems to reflect an older situation. The tradition “no two religions in Arabia” also seems, to me, likely to be of late date with its emphasis on “the Arabs,” not a concept really found in Qur'an.

The tradition noted by Nirenberg about the emergence of the Dajjal or Antichrist, and Jesus coming to slay all the Jews, is also interesting. Some reports say specifically that the Dajjal will be followed by the Jews, or the Jews of Isfahan, as well as by other groups, such as women or Bedouin. The groups mentioned give us some idea of the intellectual environment in which such traditions were fabricated, presumably one of town-based traditionalists who disdained nomads as boors and were deep into a male-bonding mode of religiosity that saw women as foolish and a dangerous source of temptation. In short, such traditions give us a glimpse of the kinds of biases and prejudices that circulated among the scholarly elite (and perhaps the wider settled populations) of medieval Islamic societies.

Disdain for and hostility to Jews was one of these prejudices, shared not universally but clearly by many in medieval Islamic societies. But we cannot equate these prejudices of individuals, however widespread, with the “essence” of the Islamic tradition, which—if it is to be found anywhere—must be sought in the basic injunctions of Islamic law; and there, as we have seen, the *ahl al-kitab*, “Peoples of the Book,” are recognized as having definite rights in an Islamic society, including security of their persons and possessions. In the twenty-first century it would clearly not be appropriate to use any medieval law code, including the *shari'a*, in unadulterated form as the basis of a legal system. But it seems evident that a system of laws could be generated today that would harmonize modern demands for religious equality and respect for the Other with the *shari'a*'s granting of protected status to the “Peoples of the Book.” The hard work for Muslim thinkers of today and tomorrow will be to follow through and meet this challenge by establishing in Muslim-majority states Constitutions that simultaneously honor key parts of their Islamic heritage while safeguarding the civil rights and privileges of all non-Muslims who live in their midst. Those who claim that this is an unattainable goal, that Islam is hopelessly bigoted and undemocratic, are merely using that claim as justification for their own desire to exclude Muslims from full and equal participation in today's society.