

Robert Gleave's response to "To Every Prophet an adversary" Jewish Enmity in Islam, David Nirenberg

Islam has a number of "others": polytheists, pagans, Christians, Zoroastrians, Romans, Greeks, Hindus and, of course, Jews. If David Nirenberg is right though, the Islamic othering of Judaism and Jews is distinctive – it follows different rules, works according to a different set of stereotypes; a different canon of polemics is employed against "the Jews" and their religion. However, the unfolding of Islam's anti-Judaism, for all its particularity, is also conventional; themes reoccur, and that is why Nirenberg believes it deserves to be part of a wider narrative.

Self-definition is, of course, crucial to a tradition's self-development, but is a tradition's self-awareness only possible if the "not-self" is defined as an adversary? Reading Nirenberg's engaging analysis throughout the whole monograph on *Anti-Judaism*, but particularly this chapter on *Jewish Enmity in Islam*, one would think so. Islam, like Christianity before it, needed to identify how it was different (read: superior) to an imagined Judaism, and this rhetoric implied actual Muslim rule over real Jews. One can, Nirenberg argues, see this in the Qur'an itself, where the Jews are picked out as being particularly hostile to the new dispensation; the anti-Judaism extends into the biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad, and ultimately into the formative texts of Islamic law. The anti-Judaism, though, is not simple vilification. It is a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of Judaism: "a double gesture of inclusion and exclusion." "Inclusion" as Islam affirms its Israelite origins and incorporates Judaic history into its own narrative; "exclusion" because this history, these Prophets, can only be incorporated on the new faith's terms.

Compelling as the argument is, a number of comments are in order.

To begin with, the distinctiveness of Islam's anti-Judaism is perhaps not a stupendous observation: each perception of an "other" is distinctive, so every process of othering is special. One would expect Islam's anti-polytheism tropes to differ from its anti-Christian ones, operating with different clichés. The pathos engendered by the anti-Judaism tropes, of course, is intensified by the history of their rhetorical employment in both Muslim and Christian majority contexts, but the fact of their particularity is not so surprising.

Second, there is a seductive slippage between the Qur'anic presentation of the new message of Muḥammad, and the Islam of the later tradition of prophetic biographies and Islamic law: the Qur'anic "Jewish enmity" should not be seen as seamlessly merging into later Muslim doctrine. The Qur'an creates its own universe, drawing on the models and traditions of previous narratives; the relationship between this and later, elaborated Islamic doctrine (in salvation history, in law, in theology) is complex. It would seem reasonable to assume that the alleged anti-Judaism in the Qur'an is not identical, nor is it even organically linked, with later manifestations of anti-Judaism in Islamic thought.

This potential dissonance between the Qur'an and tradition can be illustrated by the allegation of *tahrīf* – the doctrine that Jews (and Christians) have altered their scriptures in acts of betrayal to the original message of their Prophets. Nirenberg cites this as an example of the "Jewish enmity" trope: the Jews' resistance to the truth is so endemic that they would even alter their own scripture to suit their own needs. Qur'an 4.46, Nirenberg mentions, "explicitly underwrites the Islamic doctrine of *tahrīf*." What process of doctrinal transmission is the arresting phrase "explicitly underwrites" describing? That verses such as Q4.46 were used to justify the *tahrīf* doctrine is undeniable; that *tahrīf* (according to its later doctrinal definition) is "explicitly" postulated by such verses, less so. That the verses

“allowed” the subsequent Islamic community to adopt this or that attitude to previous scriptures (as Nirenberg puts it) is a rather imprecise formulation, I would argue. Scriptures “allow” many (perhaps infinite) interpretations; and to say one interpretation is more “explicit” than another, permitting (or “underwriting”) one doctrine or another, is a normative, rather than scientific, judgement.

I would argue that the *tahrīf* doctrine, as it was understood in post-Qur’anic Muslim writings, has its own history, which at times intersects with the Qur’anic texts, but is not, in truth, dependent upon them. Scriptural *alteration* is not an inevitable growth from the use of the relevant verb, *ḥarrafa*, in the Qur’an. My line of argumentation posits a distinctive Qur’anic worldview which is to be distinguished from the life of the text in later exegesis. It has become quite fashionable to approach the material with this assumption, and has proven a productive methodological supposition in recent scholarship. The Qur’anic uses of the term, and its usage in relation to Jews (or more precisely “a group of Jews”/“some of the Jews”) is obscure in certain respects. The indication that not all Jews are party to this act of *tahrīf* (whatever it might actually be) should cause pause before one makes any assertion that the Qur’an portrays this as an innate Jewish characteristic, whatever the doctrines life in later anti-Jewish polemics. Clearly, the Qur’anic description is discriminating (i.e. not all Jews are like this).

Furthermore, and as I have argued elsewhere (*Islam and Literalism*, p.70-71), a more plausible reading might see the Quranic *ḥarrafa* and its cognates as referring to a *deliberate misreading* of scripture rather than the accusation of *alteration*. Hence my proposed translation of *ḥarrafa* as “twist,” as in the English phrase, “you have twisted my words” (which means not that you have *changed* my words, but that you have deliberately *misinterpreted* them). Now, the accusation of deliberate misinterpretation of a text is quite different from that of altering a text; some might argue it is a less serious charge. What it illustrates, I would argue, is that the alleged Quranic anti-Judaism cannot be simply elided into that of the later tradition. There is no explicit underwriting here, but rather the exploitation of scriptural ambiguity as to the referent of the verb *ḥarrafa*.

It could be argued, further, that there appears to be an intimate connection between Judaism and the distortion of language in the Qur’anic material. As an aside, the Qur’anic references to Jews give rise to some of the more challenging hermeneutic issues in early Muslim exegesis. Jews are likened to donkeys and apes in the Qur’an, but the early Muslim exegetes use these passages as opportunities to explore the theory of non-literal usage. Sometimes a figure of speech is explicitly marked as such (*ka-*“like/similar” – the Jews are *like* donkeys); sometimes it is baldly stated (They *are* monkeys). Clearly, the Jews are not (literally) apes or donkeys, but they are *like* them – how does this likeness work in each case given the text we have? We do not need to explore the early Muslim theories of metaphor here, but the connection between Jews and the disruption of the usual workings of language is established, and (it might be proposed) is a trope. Even describing the characteristics of the Jews is problematic, leading to the sticky conclusion that at times God does not always mean what he says.

Nirenberg has certainly hit on something here – even with my proposed tweaks and adjustments. I fully support bringing the Qur’an (and Islam more generally) into an account of the “Western” tradition. That Islam and Christianity (and their sacred texts) participate in the same tradition of anti-Judaism may be morally uncomfortable in the rush to create Abrahamic dialogue, but it certainly forms an intellectually powerful argument. Too often, analyses of Western (European) heritage are written as if Islam is entirely alien, and Nirenberg’s account dispels this with his usual élan.