

Response to David Nirenberg, “‘To Every Prophet an Adversary’: Jewish Enmity in Islam”
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David Nirenberg has surprised us with a lucid and beautifully written chapter on a part of the Qur’an – the Medinan suras – which in Qur’anic research has been hitherto understudied. Any new approach to these texts is most welcome – though not unproblematic. Unfortunately, our basic question ‘What is the Qur’an?’ has not yet received a consensual answer. Should the Qur’an be studied as the gradually emerging identity document of a historical community or as a material source for the early Arabic reception of Jewish-Christian tradition? Modern scholars in the majority have opted for their own Jewish-Christian heritage, privileging it over the Qur’anic text. This is in tune with an almost axiomatic view, often encountered in the Western public in general, that assigns to the Bible the status of a charter of truth – reserved, however, to the addresses of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, i.e. Jews and Christians. The option for the Jewish-Christian tradition is no academic trifle. “Preference” is a basic principle of hermeneutics. It had in earlier scholarship been applied in the opposite way: scholars had privileged the final shape of the Qur’an over its postulated historical layers. Present Qur’anic scholarship does not bother about the Qur’an’s literary form, which in philological scholarship would need to be decoded according to the methods of literary criticism. Instead, the text is immediately broken down, into haphazard textual bits that only need to be screened for their Jewish-Christian essence. Essential steps of philology have been discarded - thus clearing the way for speculations.

David Nirenberg cannot be blamed for the desolate state of the art in Qur’anic studies. He deserves praise for a number of important observations, including the documentation of several Jewish “intertexts”, traditions that seem to be echoed in the Qur’an. Yet, I feel he thinks too highly of the current revisionist scholarship which regards the Qur’an as a text whose textual history – probably postdating the events reflected in the text - is shrouded in mystery, leaving us with the *fait accompli* of the transmitted Qur’an unrelated to a concrete time of place and thus open to a synchronic reading, detached from any particular historical situation. Any verse of the Qur’an can thus be contextualized with any other. This would be an adventurous approach to any text. In the case of the Qur’an, which is completely address, speech directed to listeners, it blurs the intent of the text to be part of a debate. In our special case, this reading supports the construction of the judaiophobic stereotype announced in the title of chapter: ‘To any Prophet his adversary’. This is, however, not quintessential to the Qur’an.

Let me revisit one particular point of Nirenberg’s presentation (p.140): the author, referring to Q 2:93 – where Ex 24:7 and Deut 5.24 are reproduced, though with a decisive twist owed to a Rabbinic intertext and corroborated by a multilingual pun - acknowledges the existence of a “shared linguistic, cultural, and scriptural space of the diverse community that receives it (the Qur’an)”. Here ‘the Qur’an’ is taken to be the textual message. But then the author immediately hypostasizes the Qur’an – which is no longer the message but the willful agent in a controversy - and claims that it “shatters this shared space at the same time that it reveals it”. Nirenberg does not refer to the mention of a punishment of the idolators (those who venerated the golden calf) that concludes Q 2:93 and that (as was shown by Gerald Hawting) simply reflects a related Biblical verse, but has another verse in mind: Q 4:46 “Of the Jews, there are those who displace verses from their right places and say ‘We hear and we disobey’”. Is this a reflex of the same situation? Or are we rather confronted with a new phase of interaction, where the old Christian polemic topos of the

falsification of scripture (demonstrated by Hava Lazarus-Yafeh) is introduced as a weapon? In Q 2 Jews are immediately addressed, in the later text Q 4 they are already absent from the scene. An escalation of the conflict thus may have occurred. One should distinguish between the Qur'an as the overall text that we have and the interaction between the human agency of the Prophet with his adherents and their opponents whose statements have not been transmitted but must be presupposed to have challenged the community.

Why cement one polemic stage of the Qur'anic development without rethinking its situatedness? Why not consider all these polemic and apologetic statements as what they originally were: stages in a debate embedded in particular political situations? Why privilege the polemical statements over the more discursive ones? Why treat the Medinan suras as a corpus separatum from the Meccan ones? Why not rather be curious about the image and status of the Bible underlying the diverse assertions respectively? It is not altogether irrelevant that this concept changes in the process of Qur'anic development. There is the typical Christian image of the Bible as the authoritative heavenly scripture aloof from history, particularly from Jewish history, which is cherished in Mecca, where even the Decalogue (Q 17) is reported detached from Moses. There is a completely different image in Medina however, where the Bible, i.e. Biblical tradition as much as the text considered as *tawrat*, Tora, – thanks to the presence of the Jewish community *in situ* – is reconnected to its history: Current Jewish interpretations provided by immediate neighbors are taken most seriously and accepted as momentous dealings with the Bible. This junctim of Bible and Jews had been banned in Christian tradition (as we were recently reminded by Maurice Olender), where the “Hebrews” were constructed as being excluded from history, the Jews (symbolized by the image of blind Synagoga found over the entrance of innumerable cathedrals all over Northern Europe) being considered blind as to their own unique gift to humanity, the monotheist scripture. The opposite is the case in the Medinan community. One might even claim that the discovery of the Bible as inseparable from Jewish history, i.e. the discovery of the Bible as a stage for debate, might have been the essential trigger for the Islamic nation building (or *umma* building) that was successfully completed in Medina.