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**F. E. Peters: The Children of Abraham**

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## INTRODUCTION

# *The Scriptures: Some Preliminary Notions*

The three great faiths called Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were born of an event that each remembers as a moment in history, when the One True God appeared to an Iron Age sheikh named Abram and bound him in a covenant forever. Abram is the later Abraham, the father of all believers and the linchpin of the faith, and indeed the theology, from which the three communities of that God's worshipers emerged. The history of monotheism had begun.

### *One God*

The monotheists not only worship one god; he is the same god for all. Whether called Yahweh or Elohim, God the Father or Allah, it is the selfsame deity who created the world out of nothing, who fashioned humankind in his own image, who made the covenant with Abraham and his progeny, and who subsequently intervened in human history to punish his enemies and chastise his friends, and to send instructions, warnings, and encouragement to those who would listen. The divergent names are occasionally troublesome, however, most notably the persistence of the untranslated "Allah" in Western languages, and some Jews and Christians, and even some Muslims, appear to think that they are worshiping different gods.

There are even more profound dislocations. Though historically and ontologically the divinity worshiped by Jews, Christians, and Muslims is one and the same, his portrait, which is more often than not a self-portrait, is quite different in the various books they call Scripture. The biblical Yahweh is not only majestic; he is often homely, at times familiar and even regretful on occasion. His providence for his creation is universal but his interventions in the affairs of humankind are often specific and concrete. The Quran's Allah is equally majestic, equally omnipotent and provident, but he is also supremely transcendent; he walks not among humankind. His ninety-nine quranic attributes—he is the compassionate, the merciful—are pronounced, rehearsed, listed in the Quran, but they are rarely experienced there. The Bible is dramatic, expository, and descriptive; the Quran is hortatory and assertive; and their portraits of God differ accordingly.<sup>1</sup> As for Christians, God the Father, though conceptually identical to his biblical prototype, has receded into the shadow of his celebrated and equally divine Son.

### *People of the Book*

Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all “People of the Book.” God’s covenant with Abraham was recorded and collected in a book that contained not only the contract but also, in the book’s varying parts, the working out of the covenant in history. They call this record simply “The Book” or “The Writing” (Scripture), or, more descriptively, “The Good News” or “The Recitation.” These Scriptures, all purporting to be in some sense the words of the One True God, are by no means identical, nor are they thought to be such by the three communities. That there is a Book, all agree, but whether that Book is the present Bible, or the New Testament, or the Quran is precisely the point that separates Jews, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

In the Jewish—and Muslim—view, God gave and Moses wrote down a distinct and discrete multipart book, the Law or Torah. But although the Torah holds pride of place in Jewish revelational history, God’s direct interventions were in one manner or another continuous between Moses and Ezra, and thus the Jewish Bible is a collective work that includes, under the three headings of Law,

Prophets, and the miscellany called Writings, all of God's revelation to his people.

This was certainly the Jewish view in Jesus' day, and there is no reason to think that Jesus regarded Scripture any differently. He in turn produced no new Writings or Book of his own, and so Christian "Scripture" is formally quite different from what the Jews thought of as such. The Gospels are accounts of Jesus' words and deeds set down, in approximately a biographical framework, by his followers. In the eyes of Christians, Jesus did not bring a Scripture; he was himself, in his person and message, a revelation, the "Good News." His life and sacrificial death sealed a "New Covenant" that God had promised—it is foreshadowed in the Old Testament—and so the Gospels and the accounts of the deeds and thoughts of the early Christian community recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of various Jesus followers came to be regarded by Christians as a New Covenant or Testament to be set down next to the Old, that recorded and commemorated in the Jewish Bible.

Muhammad may have had only an imperfect understanding of this somewhat complex process. Though he commonly refers to the Jewish revelation as *Tawrat*, the Prophet of Islam was certainly aware that there were other Jewish prophets, and so possibly revelations, after Moses. But he never mentions a New Testament; his sole references are to "the Gospel," in Arabic *Injil*, and he seems to have thought of it as a sacred book that Jesus had brought or written, much as Moses had the Torah.

Muhammad had a strong sense of the prophetic calling and of the line of prophets who had created the Judeo-Christian tradition, and after some brief initial hesitation, he placed himself firmly within that line. He too was a prophet, and now in these latter times, when God's earlier revelations had become distorted at the willful and perverse hands of the Jews and Christians, Allah had given to him, no less than to Moses and Jesus, a revealed Book. Or so it was in its final, codified version. What God himself had instructed Muhammad to call The Recitation, in Arabic *al-Quran*, was in fact a series of messages delivered to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel over a period of twenty-two years. Each part was already identified as Scripture during the Prophet's lifetime, and the Book was finally closed only with Muhammad's death.

### *Three Sacred Books*

Thus there came into being three sacred books, each in some sense the Word of God; each regarded as a complete, final, and authoritative statement regulating the role and conduct of humankind vis-à-vis its Creator; and each a birthright and charter for a community that had not existed before. And each community lived in the conviction that God had spoken to it for the last time: the Jews, for the first and final time; the Christians, for the second and final time; the Muslims, for the third and final time.

As already remarked, the Bible, New Testament, and Quran, though looked on as emanating from the same source, are very different works. The Bible is a composite and varied blend of religious myth, historical narrative, legal enactments, prophetic admonitions, cautionary tales, and poetry composed over a long period.<sup>3</sup> The time span of the New Testament is considerably shorter, a half-century perhaps, but it too has a very mixed content of quasi biography, community history, letters, and an apocalyptic Book of Revelation. The Quran, as already noted, is absolutely contemporary to its revelation, twenty-two years in the lifetime of the Prophet.

There is nothing but God's own Word in the Quran, as Muhammad himself could assure the community of believers. In Jewish and Christian circles, however, there were assuredly circulating other writings that had some claim to being God's Word but are not found in the Bible or the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> Both these Scriptures represent, then, a deliberate decision by someone to designate certain works as authentic Scripture and to exclude others from the canon.<sup>5</sup> That decision was essentially theological, and the exclusion of the noncanonical writings, generally called Apocrypha, from the Jewish or Christian Scriptures does not render them any less interesting or important from a historical point of view. The Books of Maccabees never made it into the Jewish canon, for example, nor the Gnostic gospels into the Christian, but each tells us something of the events and attitudes of the time that produced them.

### *On Translation*

It is notable that where once sectarian differences among Jews, Catholics, and Protestants created marked discrepancies in their respective translations of Scripture, the differences have presently

narrowed to so few words or passages that it is possible for Jewish and Christian scholars to collaborate in such translation projects.<sup>6</sup> There is no need and no urgency toward collaborative translations of the Quran, however. On a few occasions in the past Shiite Muslims have accused Sunni Muslims of tampering with the text of the Quran, but the theme is muted in Islam and the overwhelming majority of Muslims are convinced that the present text of the Book is the uniquely authentic one.<sup>7</sup>

Muslims, like many Jews, have a strong sense of Scripture as the *ipsissima verba* of God, enhanced, in the Muslim instance, by the absence of any intervening notion of author: Moses may have been the author of the Pentateuch, but Muhammad merely repeated the Quran verbatim. The Quran itself underlines this claim. Do you doubt the divine origins of this Book, it asks. Then you try to produce another like it (Quran 10:38, etc.). The doubters did not, of course, and, in the later Muslim view, could not. Islam has few dogmas, but one, surely, is the intrinsic inimitability of the Quran, a conviction that makes all translations of the Book problematic.

The Quran has been translated, but those efforts have been relatively slow in coming—the earliest known translation was into Latin in twelfth-century Spain for Christian missionary purposes—and often by non-Muslims. But Islam no less than Christianity is a missionary faith, and belief in the Quran as the Word of God spreads far more quickly, and eventually more widely, than knowledge of its Arabic. There finally did appear, reluctantly and tentatively—sometimes transparently disguised as paraphrases—Muslim translations of God’s words for the benefit of Persian and Turkish speakers, and then for the growing number of converts in western Europe and the Americas.<sup>8</sup>

The Bible, Old and New Testament, has long been available in English, and early on in a version that shaped the English language itself, the so-called King James version of 1611. But it is more than familiarity that makes both Bible and Gospels better served by their translations than is the Arabic Quran. God’s message to Muhammad was delivered in the highly charged, affective images of the sacred poet. It is allusive rather than explicit, a great body of warning, command, injunction, and instruction delivered against a background as barren to our eyes as the steppe itself. We feel Sinai and Canaan in the Bible; Palestine, its houses, mountains, rivers and lakes, its towns and cities and the people who inhabited

them are all present in the Gospel narrative. In the Quran, however, we search without success for Mecca, for the profane but vividly commercial life of the Quraysh, for Muhammad's family and companions. In its pages there is only a voice, the voice of God alone. When it was heard, it overwhelmed hearts, as it still does in its written form, but it leaves the historian attending vainly, and deafly, for context.