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# Is the Qur'an "Antisemitic"?

The Qur'an expresses significant antipathy toward Jews. Jews (or Israelites) are portrayed as disobeying God (2:93), rejecting their own covenant (2:100), failing to follow their own Torah (5:66), and distorting or twisting the meaning of the divine revelation they received (2:101, 174). Jews are even cursed by God in the Our'an (2:88; 4:51–52), and on occasion it calls to fight them (or more accurately, some of them: 9:29). For some observers, that is enough to condemn the Qur'an as "antisemitic." But this reaction is reductive, mistaken, and irresponsible. To arrive at such a conclusion requires expressly avoiding any consideration of the complexity of scripture and religion. To be precise, the Qur'an, like the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, directs resentment, anger, and even occasional rage toward its detractors. These emotions are elemental in scripture, as I will demonstrate below. To consider such sentiments whenever directed against Jews to be antisemitism is erroneous and irresponsible, for there exists a vital and unsubtle difference between the resentment and anger expressed in scriptures against parties considered threatening, and the preaching of racialized hatred that lies at the core of antisemitism. The Qur'an, like the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and other sacred texts believed by their devotees to be divinely authored or inspired, includes a significant amount of negative rhetoric directed against the communities it considers threatening. Jews are not singled out in the Qur'an. In fact, at least two other communities are feared and reviled significantly more in the Qur'an than Jews, as we shall observe in what follows.

In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the threatening communities that it reviles (Canaanites, Moabites, Amalekites, etc.) have long since disappeared from human history, so angry and even hateful language directed against them does not feel personal. It can be dismissed as symbolic or rhetorical. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Angry rhetoric directed against certain Jews perceived as threatening becomes amplified and generalized ("racialized") in later writings and teachings. It is the later layer that is truly antisemitic, though—not the scriptural negativity, which is directed also against other detractors in both the New Testament and the Qur'an. A number of definitions for antisemitism have been proposed, for which there is no universal agreement. The working definition for this volume is that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA definition), but others exist as well.

no one can self-identify seriously as Canaanites, Moabites or Amalekites today, so one does not hear of anyone becoming personally incensed for these communities' degrading portrayals in Hebrew Scripture. But that is not the case for Jews, who are understandably distressed at the negative rhetoric directed against them in the New Testament and the Qur'an, or Christians who are portrayed negatively in the Qur'an. The Hebrew Bible includes no negative references to Christians and Muslims, of course, but that is only because these two religious identities did not exist until after the canonization of the Hebrew Bible. This does not leave Judaism off the hook, since there are plenty of severely negative portrayals of Christians and Muslims in post-biblical Jewish sacred literature, just as there are plenty of negative portrayals of Jews and Christians in Muslim post-scriptural tradition and negative portrayals of Jews and Muslims in Christian post-scriptural tradition.<sup>2</sup> I will treat the problem of scripturally sanctioned animosity toward the religious Other below, but first, let us take a look at what the Qur'an really has to say about Jews.

## 1 Jews in the Qur'an

It is quite clear that the Qur'an has a lot to say about Jews, and it uses a number of different terms to refer to them. The most common is "Children of Israel" (banū isrā'īl),<sup>3</sup> which appears forty-three times and often refers to the ancient Israelites in narrations of stories with clear parallels in the Hebrew Bible. The term can also refer to Jews living contemporarily with the Qur'an, but when it does, the use of banū isrā'īl is evocative of their biblical origins—usually in relation to Israelite opposition to or rebellion against Moses and God. Parallel to this appellation are such terms as "the people of Abraham" (qawm ibrāhīm; two times), the people of Moses" (qawm mūsā; 3 times),<sup>4</sup> "those who have Judaized" (al-lad-hīna hādū; 10 times), "Jews" (al-yahūd; 8 times), and "Jew" or "Jewish" (yahūdī;

**<sup>2</sup>** See T. L. Hettema and A. van der Kooij, *Religious Polemics in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); S. Stroumsa, "Jewish Polemics Against Islam and Christianity in the Light of Judaeo-Arabic Texts," in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, ed. R. Hoyland (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2002), 201–10; N. Caputo, "Jewish-Christian Polemics Until the 15<sup>th</sup> Century," in *Oxford Bibliographies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0038.xml.

<sup>3</sup> All Qur'an translations here are based on A. J. Droge, *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

<sup>4 &</sup>quot;The people of" is a common term referring to other characters known in the Bible who may or may not have been associated with the ancient Israelites, such as "the people of Lot" and "the people of Noah."

once). The last three terms, all constructed from  $yah\bar{u}d\bar{\iota}$ , seem to refer to Jews living in the period of the Qur'an's emergence—which is usually taken to be seventh-century Arabia.

Another common locution is various forms of "People of the Book" (*ahlū al-kitāb*), which occurs thirty-three times: "[those] who have been given the Book" (*al-ladhīna ūtū al-kitāb*; 19 times), "[those] whom We have given the Book" (*al-ladhīna ātaynā al-kitāb*; 6 times), "[those] who have been given *a portion* of the Book" (*al-ladhīna ūtū naṣīban min al-kitāb*; 3 times), and occasionally other locutions, such as "[those] who read/recite the Book" (*al-ladhīna yaqra'ūna al-kitāb*) or "successors who have inherited the Book" (*khalfūn warithū al-kitāb*), and "People of the Reminder" (*ahlu al-dhikr*; twice), in which "Reminder" (*dhikr*) becomes a synonym (as it does elsewhere) for Scripture, meaning divine writ.

This last set of designations refers in general to people who are in possession of pre-Qur'anic Scripture ( $al\text{-}kit\bar{a}b$  = "the Book"), so they actually refer to both Jews and Christians. Sometimes  $ahl\bar{u}$   $al\text{-}kit\bar{a}b$  refers only to Jews, sometimes only to Christians, and sometimes to both simultaneously. But the contexts in which they appear most often reflect reference specifically to Jews. The distinctive language of the references is sometimes purposeful, such as the locution "those who were given a portion of the Book," in which "the Book" may refer generically to all of God's scriptural revelations, including the Qur'an.

The Qur'an uses still other terms, such as "[those] who have been given the Knowledge beforehand" (al-ladhīna ūtū al-'ilm min qablihi, 17:107) and the collective "one who has knowledge of the Book" (man 'indahu 'ilmu al-kitāb, 13:43), which probably refers not only to Jews and Christians but also to followers of Muhammad. Other appellations include "People of Abraham" (āl ibrāhīm, 4:54), who were given "the Book and the wisdom and [...] a great kingdom," and "the tribes" (al-asbāṭ), which always (four times) occurs in the expression "Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes."

The Qur'an also refers to two additional categories within the community of Jews. One refers to rabbis—*rabbāniyūn* (3:79; 5:44, 5:63) and perhaps *rabbiyyūn* (3:14)—and the other to scholar-colleagues—*aḥbār* (sing: *ḥabr*, 5:44, 5:63; 9:34). The latter category is known in the Talmud as *ḥaver/ḥaverim*—learned Jews at a slightly lower status than rabbis.<sup>5</sup> Qur'anic regard toward Jews is not all negative. It calls on sceptics to consult with the "People of the Reminder" to learn the truth about revelation and Scripture (16:43–44) and even instructs the

<sup>5</sup> M. Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (Jerusalem: Chorev, n.d.), 421–22; M. Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2002), 428–29.

Prophet to consult "[those who] have been reciting the Book before you" (10:94) if he has any doubts about the revelation he himself received.

The large number of references to Jews and their ancestors, the Israelites, reveals the important status Jews held in the region from which the Qur'an emerged in late antiquity.<sup>6</sup> It also attests to the literary complexity of the use of these references, for it is likely that the different ways of referring to Jews carry different cultural meanings that might be recovered with further indepth research. The Qur'an cannot avoid the Jews, nor does it wish to, yet it nevertheless expresses a clear ambivalence. In some contexts it expresses admiration and esteem: "Surely We sent down the Torah, containing guidance and light. By means of it the prophets who had submitted (al-nabīyūn al-ladhīna asla $m\bar{u}$ ) rendered judgment for the Jews, and [so did] the rabbis and the teachers (wal-rabbāniyyūn wal-aḥbār), with what they were entrusted of the Book of God, and they were witnesses to it" (5:44). More often, however, the Qur'an is highly critical of Jews. Jews are accused of refusing to accept their own divinely inspired prophets and even going to the extreme of killing many of them (2:87, 92; 3:52, 112, 183; 5:70). They are cursed by God for their unbelief and refusal to accept God's messages (2:88; 4:51-52). God is angry with them (3:112). They consistently disobey God (2:93), reject their own divine covenant (2:100; 3:187; 4:155; 5:12-13), and fail to follow their own Torah (5:66). They (or some of them) hide or distort and twist the very revelation they received from God (2:101, 174; 3:78; 4:46; 5:13, 41). They claim that Ezra ('*Uzayr*) is the son of God (9:30). They lack true commitment to God (2:246), speak lies against God (3:78, 93; 6:20-24, 28; 61:6-7), and followed the words of the satans (al-shavātīn) in the time of Solomon (2:102). As a result of their stubbornness and evil behaviour, God ordained that they observe strict behavioural laws (4:160 – 161; 6:146 – 147; 16:118) and punished them in various ways, including exile from their land (59:2-4).8

<sup>6</sup> The best source for information about the Jews during the earliest period of emerging Islam is M. Lecker's many studies, including *The Banū Sulaym: A Contribution to the Study of Early Islam* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1989); *Muslims, Jews and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); *Jews and Arabs in Pre- and Early Islamic Arabia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998); *The "Constitution of Medina": Muḥammad's First Legal Document* (Princeton: Darwin, 2004); *People, Tribes and Society in Arabia around the Time of Muḥammad* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and *Muḥammad and the Jews* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2014) [Hebrew].

**<sup>7</sup>** Some of the negative references that follow may be directed at both Jews and Christians, though they are usually directed specifically against Jews.

<sup>8</sup> Some of these criticisms are also found in the New Testament, and many can be observed in the self-critical nature of the Hebrew Bible itself.

The Our'an complains that the Jews refuse to accept the prophethood of Muhammad and the revelation he was given (2:105: 5:59: 61:6). Jews wish to turn believers into disbelievers and lead them astray (2:109; 3:98; 5:77). Jews (and Christians) will never accept anyone who does not follow their creed (2:120, 135; 3:69), nor will they ever accept the leadership or believe the revelations of Muhammad, even though they recognize their validity and truth (2:145 – 146; 3:98). They mix truth with falsehood and conceal the truth (3:71). They demand that the prophet bring down a book from the sky to prove the authenticity of his mission (4:153). Of all the opponents of the prophet, the Jews (along with the idolaters) are among the most violent in their enmity (5:82).9

The Qur'an recognises that not all Jews (or not all Jews and Christians) are alike. Some are believers and behave properly by doing good deeds and acting righteously (2:62; 3:113, 3:199; 4:54, 4:155; 5:69; 22:17; 28:52-55). Such references may refer to those Jews who recognise the prophethood of Muhammad and accept his revelation (3:199; 4:162).

## 2 Contextualising Polemic in the Emergence of **New Religion**

If we were to organise the Qur'anic references to Jews on a continuum from positive to negative, the great majority would fall into the negative category. Of this there can be no doubt, but in order to truly understand and appreciate the anti-Jewish polemic of the Qur'an, it needs to be put into context in three ways.

First, the Qur'an's view of Jews needs to be examined in relation to its positions on other communities that contested its self-proclaimed status as a divinely revealed text. These include Christians, as mentioned above, but also practitioners of indigenous Arabian religion, usually designated specifically as mushrikūn -literally "associaters," who associate other beings or divinities with God. Perhaps the most threatening to the early community were those who joined up with Muhammad but were later perceived by the Qur'an as undermining him. These are designated as munāfiqūn or "hypocrites." Sorting out these complex

<sup>9 &</sup>quot;The closest [...] in affection to the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians'" (5:82). **10** This Arabic root is associated with the Aramaic/Syriac *n.f.q.*, the basic meaning of which is "to go out" (the closest parallel is between the causative forms in the two languages) and which can mean "to change from one status to another" (Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, 764). I find that a better translation in the context of the Qur'an may sometimes be "dissenter."

views would require a much larger study than is possible in this chapter. Suffice it to say here that the Our'an, like the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, rails mightily against all those who oppose its authority and the community that it represents. For readers of the Qur'an to single out only one community as the singular victim while ignoring all others creates a distorted picture and fails to consider the important phenomenology of scriptural polemic in general, which must be taken into account in a fair and scholarly inquiry.

Second, the Qur'an's view of Jews must be observed historically in relation to the emergence of the Qur'an in late antiquity. What was the position of Jews in the historical context of Qur'anic emergence? How were Jews perceived in general at the time? What was their influence on contemporary religious communities in general? While I will take these questions into consideration in what follows, any comprehensive illumination would also require a much larger and deeper study, which is not possible here.

Finally, the Qur'anic attitude towards Jews must be considered phenomenologically in reference to the emergence of Scripture and the birth of religion in general. It is this third aspect that I will attempt to treat here in some detail.

Sacred Scripture can be described in many ways, and it serves many purposes. Among them is its function as a recorded testimony chronicling a community's experience of the transcendent. It is generally understood as a communication from beyond normal human experience and is often referred to as a documentation and record of divine revelation. In fact, the very term "Scripture"-used in the West to describe these testimonies of divine communication -connotes their nature as proof of God's will in written form. 11 Among the scriptural monotheisms, because the "One Great God" is presumed to be the one and only source of ultimate power and authority, every religious community attributes its own revelation to the same divine source. As Jan Assmann and others have pointed out, this creates an immediate problem, because the obvious dissimilarities and disparities between revelations in their fixed scriptural form rais-

<sup>11</sup> It has proven difficult to offer a succinct and inclusive definition of Scripture because it appears in a variety of forms among various world communities. I limit my comments here to the scriptural monotheisms. See F. Denny and R. Taylor, eds., The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 2-4; W. Cantwell Smith, What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 1-20 and 212-42; M. Levering, "Rethinking Scripture," in Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective, ed. M. Levering (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1-24; W. Graham, Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5-8. Current scholarship insists on the existence and importance of oral-aural "scripture" (see Smith, What is Scripture?, 7-9; Levering, "Rethinking Scripture," 5; Graham, Beyond the Written Word).

es the question of which proclaimed rendering of the divine will actually and truly reflects the authentic will of God.<sup>12</sup>

Although new religions tend to emerge fluidly and develop, adjust, and grow organically by responding to stimuli in a manner comparable to a living organism, at some point in their growth and development they institutionalize. Institutionalization does not stop change and development, but it does create leaderships and hierarchies as power becomes concentrated among various parties within large communities of believers. As part of this institutionalization process, the record of divine dispensation becomes canonized in a discrete and delimited sacred written text. Canonization is a process that determines which material is authentic, and thus sacred, and which is not. Only what is deemed to be authentic material can be included in the official canon of Holy Scripture. Once canonization occurs, it is virtually impossible for any new communication or message to be added to it, nor is it possible to remove anything from it (Deut 4:2, 13:1; Rev 22:18; Qur'an 33:40). The act of canonization is highly political and

**<sup>12</sup>** J. Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); J. Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); M. Jaffee, "One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheisms," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (2001): 753–75; R. Firestone, "A Problem with Monotheism: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Dialogue and Dissent," in *Heirs of Abraham: The Future of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian Relations*, ed. B. Hinze (New York: Orbis, 2005), 20–54.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that religions necessarily experience any particular evolution. My point is that, as humanly constructed communal institutions, religions tend to undergo the same kinds of processes as other social institutions. This inevitably includes the development of structures and hierarchies as they reach a particular critical mass.

**<sup>14</sup>** L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002); C. A. Evans and E. Tov, *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); L. M. McDonald, *Forgotten Scriptures: The Selection and Rejection of Early Religious Writings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. D. S. Powers, Muḥammad is not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). A possible exception to this rule might be Judaism's "Oral Torah," which emerged after the destruction of the Second Temple and after the canonization of the Hebrew Bible. According to rabbinic Judaism, however, the Oral Torah is not new at all but actually contemporaneous with the Torah given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. The difference is that the "Oral Torah" was not written down but passed down orally through the generations until it was finally written down centuries after the canonization of the "Written Torah." Modern critical scholarship considers this narrative fiction and an attempt to provide scriptural authority for what is essentially a new religion: the religion of rabbinic Judaism. This development parallels the development of a new "testimony" of the divine will in the New Testament. In each case, the new Scripture authorizes new religious practice, liturgy, the-

institutional. It is carried out by the leaders of a religious community, who claim authority over interpretation of the divine message and responsibility for articulating Scripture's meaning for the community of believers.

In the scriptural monotheisms, it is God who is the ultimate authority for religion. But God's transcendence requires the medium of interpretation in order to clarify the divine message for the common people. That interpretation is typically controlled by religious leaders, who inevitably differ over who has the most accurate and thus most legitimate interpretation of God's word. <sup>16</sup> Whenever an establishment or hierarchy develops within a religious community, some oppose it. When the basis for religious authority is knowledge of Scripture (and thus knowledge of God's will and design), those who oppose the establishment may argue over interpretations of Scripture and ultimately over the religious establishment's authority to proclaim its meaning.

As noted above, the most powerful religious authorities in scriptural monotheisms act at some point in their history to control the canon by defining what is included within it and then fixing it. Making an absolute and definitive determination of what lies within the canon also defines what lies without. The establishment of a canon is a foundational act of institution-building. Fixing a canon also represents a declaration that God's direct revelation has ceased.<sup>17</sup> After that moment, knowledge of the divine will can continue to develop through the interpretation of canonized Scripture, but no new revelation will be accepted as a means of learning the will of God.

Despite the power of religious establishments to fix a canon of revealed Scripture, however, they cannot actually control future revelation. It is always

ology, and creed. In the case of the New Testament, this new Scripture is celebrated as a new divine dispensation for legitimizing reasons. In the case of the Oral Torah, however, the newness was hidden, also for legitimizing reasons, as it is its ancient status of text in its ancient oral form, given at Sinai, that provides its authority.

<sup>16</sup> This divide may produce sectarian movements and even, eventually—if the divide is great enough-a new religion.

<sup>17</sup> This is codified classically in rabbinic Judaism in the Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b (with slightly different wording in Sanhedrin 11a; Jerusalem Talmud Sota 9:24; Tosefta Sota 13:2): "The rabbis taught: when [the last biblical prophets] Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit left Israel, though they could still use the bat kol." This was not the end of the story, however, as there remained significant controversy over the end of prophecy (P. Alexander, "A Sixtieth Part of Prophecy': The Problem of Continuing Revelation in Judaism," in Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer, ed. J. Davies et al. [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995], 414 – 33). The New Testament and the Qur'an also reflect anxiety about the likelihood that some in the future may claim prophethood (Matt 7:15, 24:24; Acts 20:28 – 30; 2 Pet 2:1 – 2; Qur'an 33:40). So do post-scriptural writings in all three traditions.

theoretically possible that God will reveal again. Even powerful religious establishments cannot control or inhibit the possibility of God's return to immanence through the provision of new revelation. And in every generation, some individuals believe that they experience God through a variety of means: visions, voices, feelings, dreams, and so forth. In many cases, people with such experiences are accorded a certain level of credence within religious communities, as soothsayers, clairvoyants, or psychics. But it is extremely rare for them to be considered seers or prophets, because these latter offices tend to be associated with the authority of God and therefore challenge the authority of religious establishments over the communities of believers they represent.

The appearance of a new prophet is a statement which represents a direct challenge to established religious authorities. Nevertheless, the assertions of new prophetic claimants are usually ignored at first by members of established religions, and most prophetic aspirants falter and disappear as a result of their failure to convince enough people of their authenticity. However, when the new candidate for divine representative succeeds in attracting a sizable following, he or she inevitably draws the attention of representatives of religious establishments. Thus we observe how Jesus is tested by Pharisees and Sadducees in the New Testament, and the Israelites as a whole are in effect tested by a Moabite holy man, Balaam, in the Hebrew Bible. The *Sīra* or official biography of Muhammad, first written by Muhammad ibn Isḥāq, also records a series of attestation narratives in which Muhammad was tested by Jews and Christians. Attestation narratives may be much more than simple tests. They are often portrayed as attempts to trip up the prophetic claimant in order to prove that he or she is not credible and that the alleged revelation is not a truly divine revelation.

**<sup>18</sup>** I recognize that a prophet can be male or female in the scriptural monotheist tradition. Some female prophets in the Hebrew Bible are Miriam (Exod 15:20), Deborah (Judg 4:4), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chr 34:22), "No'adiah the prophetess" (Neh 6:14); and "the prophetess" (*hanevi'ah*) (Isa 8:3). But English still relies on gendered pronouns. Because we are treating Muhammad's prophethood here, I feel it is legitimate to use the male pronoun.

<sup>19</sup> Matt 16:1, 19:3, 22:23-46; Mark 10:2-12.

**<sup>20</sup>** Num 22–24. The Samaritan Pentateuch and Syriac Peshitta identify Balaam as an Ammonite, while the Talmud (Baba Batra 15b) identifies him as a prophet.

<sup>21</sup> See R. Firestone, "The Problematic of Prophecy: 2015 IQSA Presidential Address," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 1 (2016): 11–22; B. Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 37–60

<sup>22</sup> As Roggema points out, the same basic attestation narratives may appear differently among different parties. A classic case is the tests of Muhammad's prophethood. While the Muslim ver-

The Qur'anic polemic against Jews and Judaism must be understood in relation to this phenomenology of scriptural and religious emergence. The Qur'an provides a great deal of evidence that Jews tested the Prophet's authority in a variety of ways, such as by their insistence that he bring down a new revelation in their presence (4:153).

## 3 Scripture Is Polemic

One must bear in mind that the appearance of a new revelation conveyed by a prophet claiming the authority of God is a very powerful message. The Qur'an's appearance as a divine disclosure occurring after the closure of Jewish and Christian scriptural canons represents a criticism of prior Scripture and the religious communities and practices that prior Scripture authorises. In other words, the very *existence* of the Qur'an is a polemical statement. Its appearance conveys the message that prior religion is inadequate or incomplete, and that prior Scriptures, practices, and beliefs are flawed. Why else would God cleave the heavens to provide a new revelation when a Scripture already exists? This is a fundamental characteristic of emergent Scripture and religion. They cannot avoid representing a critique of the practices and assumptions of the religions that came before.

Since according to Jews and Christians their Scriptures are sufficient for carrying out God's will,<sup>23</sup> any new divine dispensation is burdened with the need to justify its existence. At the same time, emergent Scripture is inevitably criticized by members of established religions for being inauthentic and false, even deceptive. Thus the motivating factors that produce the polemic in emergent Scripture derive not only from its very existence as critique but also in reaction to attacks by members of established religions.

Regarding this last point, it is worth considering the difference between the polemics of sectarian movements that share a Scripture with an established religion and the polemics of new religions that emerge in conjunction with a new Scripture. New sectarian movements *within* established religions criticise practices or beliefs of the religious establishment while maintaining what they claim to be the authentic truth and meaning of its established Scripture. That is, sectarian movements critique the faith and practice but not the Scripture of an established

sions show Jewish and Christian religious authorities attesting to the authenticity of Muhammad's prophetic status, Jewish and Christian versions of the same basic story show the opposite.

23 On this Jews and Christians can agree in general, but of course, they do not customarily agree over the validity of each other's respective scriptural canon, theology, and practice.

religion. In fact, they criticise the way in which Scripture is understood and interpreted by the establishment while insisting that their ideals and/or practices reflect the true intent of the commonly recognized Scripture.

New religions claiming a new revelation, however, critique both the faith and practice *and* the sacred Scripture of established religions. New religious movements that justify their existence through new prophecy and revelation must demonstrate that these are authentic and authorized by God. But for God to make the extraordinary move of cleaving the heavens by bringing a new dispensation is in itself a statement that it is not only the faith, practice, and prior claims to ownership of divine communication that are faulty, but that the established divine communication itself is defective. In the case of the New Testament's critique of the "Old" Testament, it argues that a new dispensation came with the arrival of God's new revelation in the person of Jesus, the "walking revelation" of Christ as God incarnate. The prior testimony of God in the Old Testament represented an earlier and subsequently outmoded, transcended stage.

The Qur'an likewise justifies its existence in relation to prior Scripture. It claims, for example, that the words of former Scriptures are inaccurate and do not represent the complete and unadulterated will of God because they have been physically altered and/or their meaning has been distorted (2:75; 4:44–46; 5:13, 5:41). It also argues that Jews (and Christians) do not practice religion properly, so they need a new divine dispensation (4:160–161). They hold improper beliefs (9:30–31). The details of these critiques reflect a significant knowledge of Jewish and Christian Scripture, religious practice, and belief, though some references—such as the condemnation of Jews for claiming that Ezra is the son of God— have perplexed Jews for centuries (9:30: *qālat alyahūd 'uzayr ibnu Allāh*). And as I will demonstrate below, specific details within the verses in question suggest that some or even many of the Qur'anic critiques represent reactions to Jewish critiques of Muhammad and the message he claimed to have brought. I will attempt to reconstruct some of these criticisms below.

Knowledge of prior Scripture and religious practice is not obvious, or perhaps not deemed particularly important, in what are generally considered the early parts of the Qur'an.<sup>25</sup> While I do not uncritically accept the standard chronological assumptions of Islamic tradition regarding the order of revelation

**<sup>24</sup>** The Qur'an often notes exceptions and is often careful not to condemn all practitioners of established religions (Q. 2:62; 3:100 – 115, 199; 4:162; 5:69; 22:17?).

**<sup>25</sup>** On the chronology of revelation, see W. M. Watt and R. Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 108 – 20; T. Nöldeke, F. Schwally, G. Bergsträßer, and O. Pretzl, *The History of the Qur'ān*, ed. and trans. W. Behn (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

(which have been accepted in general by most modern critical scholarship), it does appear that little to no anti-Jewish polemic occurs in presumably early  $s\bar{u}ras$ .

This observation would seem reasonable, given our general view of scriptural and religious emergence. What are identified as the earliest utterances of the new revelation of the Qur'an are generally exhortative, directed at the local audience, which is mostly made up of practitioners of indigenous Arabian religion(s), but likely includes a smattering of Jews and Christians of one sort or another, along with people who hold other religious beliefs as well (perhaps deriving from Zoroastrian or African milieus). These exhortations represent innocent calls to respond to the newly articulated divine message delivered by the new prophet. Any polemics are directed against the presumably common practice of polytheism, along with the call to worship the One Great God. They are not directed at monotheists but rather call on all the indigenous Arabian polytheists to abandon their traditions and become monotheists themselves.

When such prophetic messages become known to the larger community, members or representatives of religious establishments inevitably come to test their assertions. Moreover, Jewish tradition awaits the coming of a redemptive messianic figure, and the Hebrew Bible cautions its audience that God will continue to send prophets (Deut 13:2–6; 18:15–22). It is quite logical, therefore, that some Jews would test Muhammad's claims, for there is always the possibility that a new prophetic figure may indeed be the one they are waiting for.<sup>26</sup> Testing includes questioning and critiquing the new messages and claims pronounced with alleged divine authority. In such a situation, it can safely be assumed that argument would naturally ensue, and those investigators who were unconvinced would predictably criticise the authority of the new prophet and the validity of the new revelation. Subsequent revelations could then be received in response to these critiques and attacks, serving as countermeasures in the form of polemics directed against the claims of the critics or against the critics themselves.

Qur'anic polemic indeed includes much material that appears to be reactive to arguments directed against it and to the authors of those arguments. It some-

<sup>26</sup> One of the most provocative sections is Deut 18:15–22. For a history of messianic Jewish movements, see A. Ze'ev Aescoly, Jewish Messianic Movements. Sources & Documents on Messianism in Jewish History: From the Bar Kokhba Revolt until the Recent Times, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1956, in Hebrew); A. H. Silver, A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel: From the First through the Seventeenth Centuries (Boston: Beacon, 1927); G. Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971); M. Saperstein, Essential Papers on Messianic Movements and Personalities (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

times preserves portions of the arguments within its own ripostes. Polemics and apologetics are closely related. As the adage teaches, "the best defence is a good offense," and the Qur'an clearly contains both.

## 4 Examples

As noted above, polemical references in the Qur'an often suggest, indicate, or allude to criticisms and challenges to which they are responding. This observation is not new, but in the following I will try to organise these references in relation to what are most likely Jewish critiques of the new prophet and his message. Because Jewish criticism of Muhammad and the Qur'an is alluded to but rarely recorded verbatim, it is not always clear which particular issues the Jews were attempting to critique. Nevertheless, trends can be noted, and they fit into a few basic categories.

It should be kept in mind that criticisms can fit into more than one category, and it should also be noted that polemical statements in the Qur'an are not always applied indiscriminately. They are sometimes directed only to a portion of the identified group – that portion likely made up of those who opposed or critiqued Muhammad and his message. 6:160, for example, begins with: "So for the evildoing of those who are Jews ["those who are Jews" is an idiom for Jews in general], We have made [certain] good things forbidden to them [...] for keeping many [people] from the way of God. And for their taking usury [...] their consuming the wealth of the people by means of falsehood." But the tone changes in verse 162: "But the ones who are firm in knowledge among them [...] who observe prayer and give alms [...] We shall give them a great reward."

In the following survey, the headings represent categories of critique levelled against the new prophet and his message, to which the Qur'an seems to be responding. Because of the great volume and complexity of the material, I have included only those parts of the Qur'anic arguments that relate to the specific category under which they are listed. Sometimes, therefore, the sections of the Qur'an that identify the criticising party as Jews are missing. These can easily be identified, however, by reading the verses that precede those cited. The schema and samples in this preliminary exercise are not exhaustive, and the categories could be altered significantly.

#### 4.1 Jewish Rejection of the New Revelation

2:91: "When it is said to them,<sup>27</sup> 'Believe in what God has sent down,' they say, 'We believe in what has been sent down on us,' but they disbelieve in anything after that, when it is the truth confirming what is with them. Say: 'Why did you kill the prophets of God before, if you were believers?'"

2:105: "Those who disbelieve among the People of the Book, and the idolaters, do not like [it] that anything good should be sent down on you from your Lord. But God chooses whomever He pleases for His mercy, and God is full of great favour."

3:70: "People of the Book! Why do you disbelieve in the signs of God, when you are witnesses [to them]?"

3:98: "Say: 'People of the Book! Why do you disbelieve in the signs of God, when God is a witness of what you do?"" 28

4:155: "So for those breaking their covenant, and their disbelief in the signs of God, and their killing the prophets without any right, and their saying, 'Our hearts are covered' – No! God set a seal on them for their disbelief, so they do not believe, except for a few."

6:20 – 21: "Those to whom We have given the Book recognize it, as they recognize their own sons. Those who have lost their [own] selves, they do not believe. Who is more evil than the one who forges a lie against God, or calls His signs a lie? Surely the evildoers will not prosper."

6:157: "Or you would say, 'If [only] the Book had been sent down to us, we would indeed have been better guided than them.' Yet a clear sign has come to you from your Lord, and a guidance and mercy. Who is more evil than the one who calls the signs of God a lie, and turns away from them? We shall repay those who turn away from Our signs [with] an evil punishment for their turning away."

62:5–7: "Those who have been loaded down with the Torah (*al-tawrāt*), [and] then have not carried it, are like a donkey carrying books. Evil is the parable of the people who have called the signs of God a lie. God does not guide the people who are evildoers. Say: 'You who are Jews! If you claim that you are the allies of God to the exclusion of the people, wish for death, if you are truthful.' But they will never wish for it because of what their [own] hands have sent forward. God knows the evildoers."

**<sup>27</sup>** This is a continuation of an argument begun earlier, in which Jews are identified as "Children of Israel" in 2:83.

**<sup>28</sup>** See also 3:110, 199. In the idiom, "Why do you disbelieve in the signs of God?" (*limā takfurūna bi'ayātil-Lah*), "signs" in Arabic is the same word used to refer to Qur'anic verses (*ayāt*), so at the very least, this serves as a subtext—if not a direct accusation—of refusing to accept the new divine utterance.

#### 4.2 **Jewish Criticism of the New Revelation**

3:65 – 66: "People of the Book! Why do you dispute about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not sent down until after him? Will you not understand? There you are! Those who have disputed about what you know. Why do you dispute about what you do not know? God knows, but you do not know."

3:71: "People of the Book! Why do you mix the truth with falsehood, and conceal the truth, when you know [better]?"

3:78: "Surely [there is] indeed a group of them who twist their tongues with the Book, so that you will think it is from the Book, when it is not from the Book. And they say, 'It is from God,' when it is not from God. They speak lies against God, and they know [it]."

5:15: "People of the Book! Our messenger has come to you, making clear to you much of what you have been hiding in the Book, and overlooking much. Now a light and a clear Book from God has come to vou."

## 4.3 Jewish Rejection and Undermining of the Authority of the **Prophet**

2:109: "Many of the People of the Book would like [it] if you turned back into disbelievers, after your believing, [because of] jealousy on their part, after the truth has become clear to them. So pardon and excuse [them], until God brings His command. Surely God is powerful over everything."

2:120: "Neither the Jews nor the Christians will ever be pleased with you until you follow their creed. Say: 'Surely the guidance of God—it is the [true] guidance.' If indeed you follow their [vain] desires, after the knowledge which has come to you, you will have no ally and no helper against God."

2:145 – 146: "Yet even if you bring every sign to those who have been given the Book, they will not follow your direction. You are not a follower of their direction, nor are they followers of each other's direction. If indeed you follow their [vain] desires, after the knowledge which has come to you, surely then you will indeed be among the evildoers. Those to whom We have given the Book recognize it, as they recognize their [own] sons, yet surely a group of them indeed conceals the truth-and they know [it]."

3:69: "A group of the People of the Book would like to lead you astray, but they only lead themselves astray, though they do not realize [it]."

3:72-73: "A contingent of the People of the Book has said, 'Believe in what has been sent down on those who believe at the beginning of the day, and disbelieve at the end of it; perhaps [then] they may return.' And: 'Do not believe (anyone) except the one who follows your religion.' Say: 'Surely the [true] guidance is the guidance of God—that anyone should be given what you have been given, or [that] they should dispute with you before your Lord!' Say: Surely favour is in the hand of God. He gives it to whomever He pleases. God is embracing, knowing."

3:81–85: "[Remember] when God made a covenant with the prophets: 'Whatever indeed I have given you of the Book and wisdom, when a messenger comes to you confirming what is with you, you are to believe in him and you are to help him.' He said, 'Do you agree and accept My burden of that [condition]?' They said, 'We agree.' He said, 'Bear witness, and I shall be with you among the witnesses.' Whoever turns away after that, those—they are the wicked. Do they desire a religion other than God's, when whoever is in the heaven and the earth has submitted to Him, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they will be returned? Say: 'We believe in God, and what has been sent down on us, and what has been sent down on Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and what was given to Moses, and Jesus, and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we submit.' Whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers."

3:99: "Say: 'People of the Book! Why do you keep those who believe from the way of God, desiring [to make] it crooked, when you are witnesses? God is not oblivious of what you do."

3:110 – 112: "You are the best community [ever] brought forth for humankind, commanding right and forbidding wrong, and believing in God. If the People of the Book had believed, it would indeed have been better for them. Some of them are believers, but most of them are wicked. They will not cause you any harm, except for a [little] hurt. And if they fight you, they will turn their backs to you, [and] then they will not be helped. Humiliation will be stamped upon them wherever they are found, unless [they grasp] a rope from God and a rope from the people. They have incurred the anger of God, and poverty will be stamped upon them. That is because they have disobeyed and transgressed."

3:183–184: "Those [are the same people] who said, 'Surely God has made us promise not to believe in any messenger until he brings a sacrifice which fire devours.' Say: 'Messengers have come to you before me with the clear signs, and with that which you spoke of. So why did you kill them, if you are truthful?' If they call you a liar, [know that] messengers have been called liars before you, who brought the clear signs, and the scriptures, and the illuminating Book."

4:51–56: "Do you not see those who have been given a portion of the Book? They believe in al-Jibt and al-Ṭāghūt,²9 and they say to those who disbelieve, 'These are better guided [as to the] way than those who believe. Those are the ones whom God has cursed [...] Or are they jealous of the people for what God has given them of His favor? Yet We gave the house of Abraham the Book and the wisdom, and We gave them a great kingdom. [There are] some of them who believe in it, and some of them who keep [people] from it. Gehenna is sufficient as a blazing [fire]. Surely those who disbelieve in Our signs—We shall burn them in a

<sup>29</sup> These appear to be the names of gods. Jibt occurs in the Qur'an only in this verse, but Ṭāghūt appears elsewhere in the Qur'an as well. The Hebrew-Aramaic cognate,  $t\bar{a}$  ' $t\bar{u}$  /  $t\bar{a}$  ' $t\bar{u}$  /  $t\bar{u}$  ' $t\bar{u}$  , carries the meaning of "error" but can also denote a spirit or false god in the Jewish targumim (Aramaic translations of the Bible), such as Deut 4:28: "And there you will serve gods, the work of men's hands." Targum Onkelos renders it:  $vetiflih\bar{u}$   $tam\bar{u}$   $tam\bar{u}$ 

Fire. Whenever their skins are completely burned, We shall exchange their skins for others, so that they may [continue to] feel the punishment. Surely God is mighty, wise."

4:150 – 151: "Surely those who disbelieve in God and His messengers, and wish to make a distinction between God and His messengers, and say, 'We believe in part, but disbelieve in part,' and wish to take a way between [this and] that, those—they in truth are the disbelievers. And We have prepared for the disbelievers a humiliating punishment."

4:153: "The People of the Book ask you to bring down on them a Book from the sky. They have already asked Moses for [something] greater than that, for they said, 'Show us God openly!' So the thunderbolt took them for their evildoing. Then they took the calf after the clear signs had come to them. But We pardoned them for that, and We gave Moses clear authority."

4:156–159: "and for their disbelief, and their saying against Mary a great slander, and for their saying, 'Surely we killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of God'—yet they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it [only] seemed like [that] to them. Surely those who differ about him are indeed in doubt about him. They have no knowledge about him, only the following of conjecture. Certainly they did not kill him. No! God raised him up to himself. God is mighty, wise. [There is] not one of the People of the Book who will indeed believe in him before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them."

4:160: "So for the evildoing of those who are Jews, We have made [certain] good things forbidden to them which were permitted to them [before], and [also] for their keeping many [people] from the way of God."<sup>30</sup>

6:25: "[There are] some of them who listen to you, but We have made coverings over their hearts, so that they do not understand it, and a heaviness in their ears. If they see any sign, they do not believe in it, so that when they come to dispute with you, those who disbelieve say, 'This is nothing but old tales.'"

6:147: "If they call you a liar, say: 'Your Lord is full of abundant mercy, but His violence will not be turned back from the people who are sinners."

### 4.4 Jewish Criticism of New Religious Practices (?)

3:93 – 94: "All food was permitted to the Children of Israel, except for what Israel forbade itself before the Torah was sent down. Say: 'Bring the Torah and read it, if you are truthful.' Whoever forges lies against God after that, those—they are the evildoers."

5:57–59: "You who believe! Do not take those who take your religion in mockery and jest as allies, [either] from those who were given the Book before you, or [from] the disbelievers.

**<sup>30</sup>** The section continues with the accusation of Jewish usury: "And [for] their taking usury, when they were forbidden [to take] it, and [for] their consuming the wealth of the people by means of falsehood, We have prepared for the disbelievers among them a painful punishment."

Guard [yourselves] against God, if you are believers. When you make the call to prayer, they take it in mockery and jest. That is because they are a people who do not understand. Say: 'People of the Book! Do you take vengeance on us [for any other reason] than that we believe in God and what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down before [this], and because most of you are wicked?'"

#### 5 Conclusion

As noted above, these verses appear to represent responses to disapproval and disparagement levelled against the new community of believers, its revelation, and its prophet. The strong Qur'anic reaction is directed not only against Jews, but against Christians and indigenous practitioners of Arabian religions as well, but the prominent and respected status of Jews living in Arabia in the seventh century seems to have made them a particularly important target for rebuttal. Early Muslim traditions refer to the highly respected status of Jews living among native Arabian peoples, so it is likely that Jewish critiques of Muhammad and the revelation he brought had to be countered vigorously. The Jewish community as a whole clearly did not accept Muhammad's prophetic claims, though some individuals certainly did, which then defined those Jews who followed the Prophet and his revelation as apostates from the Jewish perspective.

Islamic tradition depicts some Arabian Jews as anticipating the coming of a prophetic or redemptive leader from somewhere in Arabia.<sup>32</sup> If it is true that some Jews were expecting a redemptive figure, then it would be likely that those Jews who did not consider Muhammad to be the awaited one would have been particularly unhappy with their fellow religionists who did and thus likely to level strong criticisms both against them and against Muhammad and his message.<sup>33</sup>

**<sup>31</sup>** R. Firestone, "Muslim-Jewish Relations," in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), published online January 2016, http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-17.

**<sup>32</sup>** *Al-Sīra al-nabawiyya li'ibn hishām*, 2 vols., *Dār al-thiqāfa al-'arabiyya* (Beirut, n.d.), 1:213 – 14, 513 – 14, 527; 2:522 – 23; A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 93 – 95 and 239 – 41; Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqāt al-Kubrā*, 8 vols. + index (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1997/1418), 1:126.

**<sup>33</sup>** This sentiment seems to be reflected in the story of 'Abdullah b. Salām, a learned Jew who converted to Islam according to Muslim sources, for which he was harshly attacked by his fellow Jews (*Al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, 1:516–17; Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 240–41). The story may not be historical, but it certainly reflects a historically accurate Jewish sentiment directed against

The concerns of Jews considering the possible redemptive status of Muhammad are intrinsic to all the scriptural monotheisms, which are sceptical (at the very least!) when evaluating the authenticity of prophetic claimants. The problematic issue revolves around the tension between scriptural canonization on the one hand and the possibility of new divine communication on the other. As noted above, centres of religious power, at some point in their institutional development, determine that all the revelation that can be recorded into an official repository of divine communication has come to an end. The decision becomes institutionalized through the act of canonization—that is, determining what is official divine revelation and what is not, recording the official material, and then excluding all else from the official canon. The official, accredited material is sanctified in the form of an official document, which we refer to today as Holy Scripture. All other material must then be rejected as false claims to divine disclosure.

Yet while a religious body can designate and limit an official canon, it does not have the authority to proclaim that henceforth God can never provide any new communication to humanity. There is always the *possibility* of more, but it is also always in the interest of the religious establishment to limit that possibility, because new divine revelation carries with it a higher authority than that of any institutional religious establishment. It is impossible for claims to new revelation to be approved or endorsed by religious establishments, because such an approval would invalidate the authority of their own religion and their status as religious leaders. This tension is evident among the three traditional scriptural monotheisms, all of which reject the authenticity, reliability, or relevance of competing Scriptures.

Most new religious movements fail, but some that claim the authority of divine revelation do indeed succeed in establishing new religions. When this occurs, they remain forever threatening to the authority of previously established religions. Earlier scriptural monotheisms therefore continue to disparage newer religions even after they become established. The newer religions, in turn, carry within their sacred Scriptures the institutional memory of those early attacks and their own defensive reactions in the form of invective directed against their accusers. As a result, the hostility becomes embedded in both religions' worldviews, as it is internalized and then preserved forevermore in theology, ritual, law, and practice. Qur'anic anti-Jewish polemics cannot be properly understood without taking into account the historical and phenomenological

those Jews who apostatized and then used their knowledge of Judaism to attack their former religious brethren.

context of their origin. Given the phenomenology of religious emergence, it should not be surprising that religious resentment, fear, and prejudice are so difficult to transcend.

One last observation is in order. We examined what the Our'an says about Jews. We did not consider what it does not say. It is important to note that the Our'an does not call anywhere to "kill the Jews." Neither does it single out "the Jews" as the enemy. Moreover, the Qur'an never associates Jews with the devil, despite the fact that al-shaytān and iblīs occur as regular terms for Satan within it. These malicious sentiments and accusations against Jews were floating around in Christian writings by the time of Qur'anic emergence, yet the Qur'an does not pick them up. It would be wrong to label the Qur'an as antisemitic. The Qur'an does not racialize Jews, nor does it dehumanize them.<sup>34</sup> It certainly does not call for their destruction.

But some Muslim leaders do racialize and dehumanize Iews, and some do indeed call for the Jews' destruction. And some Muslim religious leaders cherry-pick so-called "proof-texts" from the Qur'an and use them to support their antisemitic views. Like all scriptures, the Qur'an includes plenty of negative material about opponents. Negative Qur'anic references to Jews or Israelites can be and are exploited today to promote antisemitic sentiments, policies, and actions. Put differently, antisemitism is not inherent to the Qur'an, but the Qur'an can nevertheless be exploited to promote antisemitism. A deeper understanding how scripture "works" helps to make sense of all this. In order to resolve our issues, we need to move beyond accusations and work toward educating ourselves and those with whom we find ourselves in conflict for the mutual benefit of all our communities.

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<sup>34</sup> Some might refer to the supposed Qur'anic accusation that Jews and Christians are all "pigs and apes." For a careful study of the relevant Qur'anic sources, see R. Firestone, "Apes and the Sabbath Problem," in The Festschrift Darkhei Noam: The Jews of Arab Lands, ed. C. Schapkow, S. Shepkaru, and A. Levenson (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 26–48.

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