

**Children of Abraham: A Trialogue of Civilizations  
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"Interdependence of Scripture"

Prof. Benjamin Braude  
Co-director of the Program in  
Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Boston College

DRAFT - - Without Notes

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The Bible, as conventionally imagined today, was invented by Luther, Gutenberg, and Gideon, with considerable help from the Prophet Muhammad. Most of us know Luther and Gutenberg and can imagine how each contributed to the invention of the current Bible. Luther was the first to showcase it as the fount of all Christian truth, *sola scriptura*. Gutenberg was the first to set it to the printer's font, fostering its ultimate emergence as the cheap, compact, convenient, medium that Gideon has placed in hotel rooms throughout the country. You remember Gideon. He was the one who left his Bible to help with Rocky Raccoon's revival, according to the gospel of Paul... McCartney. However Islam's invention of the Christian Bible is not commonly taught in Sunday School. Yet Muhammad and his successors, including Luther's contemporaries, the mighty Sultans of the Ottoman Empire, have all played a role in creating a book whose existence is today taken for granted as a distinctly Judeo-Christian icon.

Conventional assumptions about Abrahamic scriptures typically treat them as three different developments of greater or lesser independence. The Jews had their Bible which they had gathered over the centuries. Around the second century after the birth of Jesus Christ, the Christians added an appendix to the book the Jews had written, tagging their distinct addition the New Covenant or Testament, and the prior work the Old. In the seventh century Muslims developed a scripture of their own that came to be called the Quran, that is, the Recitation. This simpleminded history has provided one justification for contemporary political nostrums that contrast the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition with Islam, or the West with the East. Since Jews and Christians share, to a degree, a Bible and since Muslims do not, there seems to be a foundational difference between the first two religions and the last. However the conventional history is not merely simpleminded, it is wrong.

The scriptural reality is far more complicated. Jews and Christians do not truly share the Old Testament, let alone the Bible as a whole. Quite apart from the elementary details of name, language, text, and, most important of all, hermeneutic, the actual books of the Christian Old Testament differ from what Jews put in their Scripture. It is a cardinal belief of the Christian biblical hermeneutic that the first part of their Bible is what was given to the Jews, but historically Jews have rejected that notion. Even among Christians there is no agreement as to what constitutes the Bible, for Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants also differ with each other on its contents. To be sure *grosso modo*, Jews and Christians do share many of, but not all, the books of the Bible, a sharing in which Muslims do not participate. On the other hand, the Quran does include many of the stories of Torah and Gospel, including the latter's core. Jesus and Mary, important characters in the Quran, are absent from Hebrew Holy Writ. Thus in that crucial respect the Quran is closer to the New Testament than anything within the Jewish tradition. By contrast the role of scripture in Islam is far closer to its role in Judaism than in Christianity. Both Jews and Muslims believe that the most important gift God has given humanity is the Holy Word of Revelation. For Christians alone, Jesus Christ trumps Scripture. In sum the scriptural traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam represent a complex changing nexus of divergence and convergence. Depending on the criterion, anyone's scripturality may or may not be more or less different from any other's.

None of this should be surprising once we recognize that, despite the current convention, the Good Book is not one book, but many. The history of the word reveals the history of its complexity. Hebrew has no true equivalent for Bible. Today the term most commonly employed for the Jewish scripture is not a word, but rather the initial letters of the Jewish holy writ's traditional three cores, *TaNakh*\* the acronym of *Torah* ("Teaching"), *Nevi'im* ("Prophets"), and *Ketuvim* ("Writings"). Translated into English the word would be TPW, hardly a term to inspire thoughts of divine revelation since it sounds like a manufacturer of automotive parts. The origins of the term, *TaNakh*, are obscure, but seem to date no earlier than the sixth or seventh centuries,

perhaps later. "Bible" is not a Hebrew word nor is it, as conventionally understood, a Jewish concept. That word is derived from Greek. It was probably first employed by the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria in Hellenistic Egypt beginning in the third century before the current era. They translated Hebrew holy writings into Greek, a text later known as the Septuagint, so called because by legend seventy or so scholars produced it. The words - - note the "s" - - they employed to describe this collective effort were *Ta Biblia*, literally "The Scrolls", a plural expression, reflecting many multiplicities, of the translators, of their sources, and of their products, as well as the medium through which this work circulated. What Greek-speaking Jewry regarded as holy writ, what they included among *Ta Biblia*, was not exactly what later Jews and many Christians have called the Bible. Although most of it would be familiar to today's believers much of it would not, since it included books which later came to be excluded from one canon or another. *Ta Biblia* illustrate an element of indeterminacy characteristic of the development of holy writ in general. It requires a very long process for the holiness of its component parts to be finally determined. And even believers who claim to subscribe to the same beliefs do not necessarily agree about the holiness of the same texts. So what emerges is a changing corpus of texts that we may call a loose canon, with all the flexibility, ambiguity, and potential divisiveness that such a term implies.

As *Ta Biblia*, suggest, one simple reason for the difficulty of defining the contents of scripture thousands of years ago was that, unlike today, they could not easily exist as a single physical unit. The physical medium through which Holy Writ is expressed is often ignored by believers and scholars alike. In fact the varied forms scriptures have taken offer one key to understanding the similarities and differences between Torah, Gospel, and Quran. Consider the written media available in the ancient world. Characteristic of Mesopotamia were clay tablets and cylinders, but such documents were too heavy to be long. About two thousand years ago, at the beginning of the current era, the clay tablet finally disappeared in the Mediterranean basin, though

it survived further east. Within the Hellenistic world Nile papyrus beat Mesopotamian clay. The writing material which in turn supplanted papyrus, universally available and more resilient, was leather and, its later evolution, parchment. It was more durable than papyrus and certainly more widely available in and suited for different climates, but it was more expensive. It was tough enough for lengthy scrolls. It may be no accident that the earliest antecedent for Bible, *Ta Biblia*, dates from the century that, at least according to tradition, witnessed the popularization of parchment. However exactly when and where parchment became well-established is unknown and papyrus continued to be used, most notably in Egypt.

The *sine qua non* of the modern Bible was the codex, a breakthrough that was to shape scripture in Christianity and Islam. The codex consisted of bound parchment or papyrus, later paper, on which a scribe transcribed text. Like the modern book its folios were composed of many large sheets carefully folded within each other and sewn together at one edge to create a tightly connected unit, usually put between two covers and bound. In many respects its invention was even more revolutionary than Gutenberg's moveable type. In no way is that to diminish the awesome consequences of the Gutenberg revolution, rather it is to underscore how significant the codex was. Gutenberg took this existing medium and mechanized the way it was written -- moveable type replaced the scribal hand. The result of that mechanization created something that proved to be a huge source of cultural change through the diffusion of hundreds and later thousands of copies of the same text. However physically, the printed book did not look much different, at least initially, from the manuscript book.

The codex as opposed to the scroll, on the other hand, felt different, and was handled differently. With its own bound cover, the codex no longer needed pottery or pigeonholes to protect it. It was significantly more compact and much more easily transported in bulk, particularly for long texts, since unlike scrolls both sides of the page could be used. Most significantly of all,

the angular codex imposed upon text the abstract Aristotelian notions of beginning, middle, and end in a way that the infinite curvature of a scroll could not. The scroll was an open expandable tube that curved in on itself. The codex was a closable box. Sew or paste another parchment or papyrus onto the scroll and it could keep expanding. The consequent bulk would set limits, but a bit here and there would not matter. Scrolls conveyed a marvelous sense of textual fluidity. While there were limits to what a single scroll could practically contain, scrolls could temporarily envelop scrolls, metaphorically signaling that while each component retained its own identity it still was part of a larger changing whole. Codices cannot contain each other. Rearrange, add, or subtract scrolls of *Ta Biblia* in their honeycombed shelving and the biblical order and canon was changed. If *Ta Biblia* are contained within a bound book, order and canon are bound as well.

#### Codex and Christianity

It has long been accepted by historians of the book that the triumph of the codex was somehow linked to the rise of Christianity. The adoption of the codex despite its disadvantages of time and cost over the scroll - - calculating the number of pages and sewing the sheets together in advance of the actual writing was a painstaking process - - enabled Christianity to manifest core differences with Judaism not only in terms of form and ritual, but also in terms of content and belief. One element which distinguished Christianity from Judaism was its conception and dating of a critical rupture in the history of divine revelation, a distinction between what it came to call the Old and the New Testaments. A version of this distinction appeared first in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians (3:6 and 14). It was elaborated by the founding Church Father of Christian exegesis, Irenaeus, in the second century. The codex, as a closed book, metaphorically represented this distinctive rupture far more effectively than did the scroll. By putting the Jewish *Ta Biblia* into codices Christianity neatly conveyed two significant messages simultaneously. By using a new form Christianity was signaling its own novel departure from the old covenant. By putting its version of that old sacred text into a format whose beginning and end were immediately and clearly apparent, Christianity signaled that the book could now be closed on the old

dispensation. Once Christianity adapted the codex for the original revelation to the Children of Israel, force of habit and established practice continued it for its own message.

Thus a basic difference between the Jewish and Christian understandings of *Ta Biblia* lay in the very forms in which each presented sacred text. But the degree of this difference in form should be qualified. True, Judaism was a scroll religion. Its continued insistence upon the scroll in its liturgical use of scripture - - a single large scroll for the Pentateuch and scrolls of varying length for the other sections - - can be understood as conservative resistance to Christianity's adoption of the new form. Christianity was a codex religion, but it first developed in a scroll religious context. Although Judaism liturgically revered Torah as a scroll, it apparently did adopt the codex, albeit in the study house not the house of prayer. In the fourth century after Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as the state religion, he ordered that dozens of elaborate parchment codices be prepared for the churches of his new capital, Constantinople. Thereby he proclaimed not only imperial support for this religion, but it also its distinctive textual medium. Still the Eastern Churches did retain the scroll for its liturgy. Thus while recognizing the textual preferences within each religion it would be a mistake to insist upon a consistent categorical distinction.

One indication of the continuing plurality of media that was so characteristic of transitional scroll-codex culture was Jerome's late fourth century term for Bible, *Bibliotheca*, the sacred library, which he used in preference to *Ta Biblia*. Since Jerome had translated its entirety from Hebrew and Greek, his judgment deserves respect. Had the only Bible Jerome known been the magnificent single volume codices of Constantine's donation, such a term would have been as strange to him as it might seem to us, 1600 years later. By adopting *Bibliotheca* Jerome acknowledged *Ta Biblia*, its many books, a library of sacred writ in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, in scroll and codex, in parchment and papyrus, and his term captured the diversity of this literature. Jerome's *Bibliotheca* was retained into the middle ages, persisting in both Old English

and in the Latin of the British isles. As to the content of this library, there are significant variations and conflicts. According to the usage of some early Christians, retained into the sixteenth century and persisting even today among a few dialects of modern English, the sacred library consisted of the Bible (i.e. the Old Testament) and the Testament (i.e. New Testament).

### Incremental Reluctant Canonization

The rise of Christianity helped force the canonization of *Ta Biblia*. Its adoption and dissemination of the codex created a textual medium naturally more inclined to binding order and organization than the scroll. Its desire to categorize the historic *Ta Biblia* as the Old Testament, advanced the impulse towards the scriptural rigidity of a canon. The loose canon was starting to lose its looseness. To be sure within Judaism there had already been a tendency towards incremental canonization. Within centuries of their original composition and subsequent redaction the contents and order of different books became generally accepted as normative, ideally no longer subject to alteration or addition. While the first and second parts, the Torah had been set by roughly the fifth (if not earlier) century bce, and the Prophets, a bit later, the third part, the Writings, were still a open grab-bag in the age of Jesus. In order to define a specific form of Judaism against rivals, notably other religions that have not survived and the one which proclaimed itself the continuation of the old, it was necessary metaphorically to close the book against what was perceived as an increasingly alien penetration, even though this was contrary to the psychology of scroll culture. Not only were Christian writings excluded, but also other religious texts of Jewish, Jewish-Christian, Jewish sectarian, or uncertain origin which for a variety of reasons were not considered appropriate by the rabbinical canonizers, though they had been part of the part of the community's holy legacy. Among these were the so-called Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical books, late writings of a scriptural character which are today accepted as Biblical and canonized into the Old Testament by the Roman Catholic Church and, to a degree, the Eastern Orthodox, but rejected by Protestants. These include the Books of Tobias, Judith,

Ecclesiasticus (as opposed to Ecclesiastes), and Maccabees. Further differences arose within the Old Testament text itself. Christianity rejected the tripartite division of Jewish scripture. While Christianity proclaimed itself the fulfillment of *Ta Biblia* and accepted a version of this scripture as its own, there are some passages in works such as Jeremiah, Esther, and Daniel which appear in most Christian, but not the Jewish versions. Thus the differences between the Jewish and various Christian canons involved the organization and order of the books of the Bible, the presence or absence of specific books, and the actual contents of others. Judaism survived with a loose canon for a century or so after the birth of Jesus. With the rise of Christianity and a host of other increasingly vociferous cults within Judaism, the risks of a loose canon became increasingly apparent.

#### The End of a Roll

Christianity and the codex were but two of the reasons for the decline of scroll culture. More important than either and in fact the cause of the first were the radical political challenges of the first and second centuries caused by Roman imperial expansion. The destruction of the Temple and the Judean kingdom in the year 70, the Roman suppression of repeated Jewish uprisings through the early centuries of the current era, coupled with the rise of the Jesus movement created an existential crisis of survival. The community of Israel had three pillars: the Judean commonwealth, the Temple in Jerusalem, and the Torah. The Roman conquest of 70 left only one standing. With the major institutions of identity removed, a core scripture was forced to assume a far greater role as the foundation to hold the community together.

Nearly two millennia later after WW I the community of Islam faced a similar crisis following the collapse of the Caliphate. Like the Ottoman Caliphate, the Herodian monarchy in Palestine deviated from the pious traditions of their respective religions and provoked much internal opposition, but each acted as a recognized symbol of unity and identity for its community. The disappearance of the caliphate and the Ottoman Empire, for centuries bulwarks of Islamic

power and self-confidence, compelled a greater reliance on the other elements of Islamic society, notably a reinforcement of its textual foundation, the Quran, and its normative elaboration, the Sharia. The consequences of this unsettling shift are still unfolding. If the Jewish precedent is any indication, they will be far-reaching.

Within the Jewish tradition these challenges effected a radical change in the nature and interpretation of scripture. Otherwise, the grab-bag third part of *Ta Biblia, Writings*, might have continued to expand to include the Apocrypha, as it then existed, and also the later rabbinic writings which eventually took different formats, created different genres, and came to be called Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash and so on endlessly. Physically, all such incorporation required was more space on the shelves for additional scrolls. Preventing this was an opposing preservative instinct which came to dominate in the midst of the crisis. The emerging rabbinic leadership could not tolerate the risk that Jewish holy writ would be undermined by the integration of doctrine which they dismissed as spurious and alien. Yet the older instincts of permanent scriptural expansion and inclusion could not be completely abandoned. Here there was an inherent conflict. A fluid notion of scripture had allowed those who called themselves successively and variously Hebrews, Israelites, Judeans and later Jews, to move from polytheist nature worship, to Yahweh-focused sacrificial cult, to state-centralized Jerusalem Temple-based monotheist supremacy, and to the beginnings of de-territorialized ethical-spiritual text-based monotheism. But could this protean procession continue without end? If it did, would it not run the risk of transforming itself out of existence, particularly during the confrontation with the various millenarian movements that flourished after 70, Christianity included? The solution as it evolved in the second and third centuries was a classic example of attempting to eat one's cake while keeping it afterward. Part of the corpus would be declared inviolate and untouchable, still the scroll psychology of textual agglutination would continue. Teaching, Prophets, and Writings were not to be the alpha and omega of divine revelation according to Judaism. They were to be framed by the Oral Tradition, an umbrella category for the new rabbinic writings including the Talmud and

Midrash, the former the legal-normative exploration of Scripture, the later its homiletic-legendary exposition. The Oral Tradition occupied a position of authority different from that of the Written Tradition, as scripture (particularly the Pentateuch) was called. The Oral Tradition was an essential tool for collective survival. Two traditional pillars of communal existence had been destroyed and it was necessary to invent new institutions and practices to replace them. Still the principle of tradition had to be upheld even as its content of kingdom and sacrificial cult had been destroyed. Otherwise the surviving heirs might very well be destroyed as well, or at the very least disappear. Few moments in history are as fraught as the destruction that the community confronted. Torah and learning had to replace Temple and sacrifice. Torah had to be maintained as a firm pillar even as it assumed this new role as a flexible bridge to new forms of communal existence and religious ritual.

Unfortunately, the customary English terms, Written and Oral Traditions, misrepresent the original. The Hebrew for Tradition in each case is in fact Torah, the Memorized Torah and the Written Torah respectively-- literally "the Torah on the Mouth" and "the Torah in Writing". The modern periphrastic preference for the word "Tradition" reflected the desire on the part of modern scholars to avoid any confusion between Torah and Torah. That misses the point. It is precisely the lack of boundary between these two which is at the heart of the Jewish concept of sacred textual space. The omnipresence and flexibility of Torah allowed for the expansion of the canon. Control of this loose canon had to be in the hands of those who devoted their lives to its mastery and study. Otherwise it could be dangerous. Reflecting the trauma caused by the secession of the followers of Jesus and other ancient dissidents, for many centuries the rabbis, invoking an oft-repeated story, refused to permit the writing down of the Memorized Torah lest it, like *Ta Biblia*, also fall into hostile hands. And so the rabbinical tradition claimed that this Torah literally came to be committed to memory. Scholars and later scribes who preserved and propounded it gradually took over from prophets and priests who had first composed it. Although the possibility of false messengers, fraudulent messiahs, and their followers was not eliminated, the arduous process of

education and socialization necessary to achieve authority in this community of learning made interloping difficult.

Torah, thus understood, came to encompass the entire enterprise of Jewish learning, creating to a degree, an almost seamless web of intellectual devotion to text. It is this quality of Torah inextricably and almost indistinguishably enveloped within the warp and woof of an ongoing and evolving creative enterprise that makes the modern concept of Bible as a separate and distinct book apart, so alien to the Jewish tradition of open-ended scroll culture. That is one more reason to expose the Judeo-Christian tradition as a fraud.

#### The Expansion of the Christian Great Bible

As we have already learned, Christians have read *Ta Biblia* differently from Jews. These differences were expressed not only through different languages, different canons, and in some instances, different contents, but also through a different set of exegetical principles and questions, an overarching hermeneutic. Christianity rejected, in principle, the Memorized Torah. However in practice the relationship between Christian and rabbinic interpretation was much more complicated. Since the nineteenth century a considerable amount of scholarly energy has been expended to ferret out the parallels between rabbinic and patristic explication of scripture, but similarity is no proof of interaction and influence. In many instances these parallels may simply have reflected an earlier Israelite source common to both. Yet among such central figures in the history of the Church as Origen (185?-254?) and Jerome (340?-420) at least some rabbinic influence has been demonstrated.

Despite such interaction there was an all-powerful difference between the two. For Christians, *Ta Biblia* were secondary to Jesus Christ. Revelation was overwhelmed by Incarnation. The Old Testament was problematic for early Christianity. It evoked two contradictory impulses. Some wished to abandon it completely in order to proclaim Christianity's

total break with its Jewish past. But others, while accepting Jesus as the Christ, wished to hold on to the Israelite *Ta Biblia*. The compromise which eventually triumphed accepted *Ta Biblia*, but with the insistence that it be read to prove that Jesus was indeed the Messiah promised by Israelite prophecy. This hermeneutic began in the New Testament and was continued by the Church Fathers. The effect was structurally similar to the Memorized Torah in Rabbinic Judaism. While the Fathers rejected its claims, they accepted the underlying principle behind it, namely that there must be a tradition of interpretation, in this case, the Magisterial Teaching of the Church, that offered the only correct way to understand sacred writ. The Church Fathers accepted this notion of an expanded bible, but to a more limited and precise degree than did the Rabbis. The Christian hermeneutic had to adhere to a rigid discipline of purposeful and consistent interpretation to insure that its Old Testament not be allowed to deviate from the correct theological line. Those parts of the text which did not lend themselves to such interpretation were neglected. The mental discipline required to navigate the extremely narrow passage between rejection and acceptance of the Israelite *Biblia* was extremely demanding.

By the dawn of the seventh century, before the age of Muhammad, both Judaism and Christianity had developed similar bibles. Each took as their foundation ancient Near Eastern Hebrew and Aramaic texts preserved by the Israelites and the Judeans. Their selection of texts from this corpus overlapped, but was not the same. Each employed a tendentious hermeneutic lens to understand these texts, thereby shaping and expanding the content and meaning of the original stories, in order to create their respective Great Bibles. The rabbinic lens was intended to facilitate the transition from a temple-centered polity to a state-free text-based community. The patristic lens was intended to facilitate the transition of those texts from their roots in that polity and community to the savior-based faithful. Together Judaism and Christianity had established and diffused a dominant narrative discourse that drew upon and expanded a corpus of stories now universalized beyond their distinctive origins to become a kind of religious lingua franca.

That expanded narrative created a sacred textual space in which both participated, whether in concord or discord. Soon a third joined that community of discourse.

### The Development and Influence of the Muslim Bible

Islam succeeded in the seventh century because Christianity destroyed itself. Islam can be understood as the resolution of two nearly fatal original problems in Christianity -- Christology and *Ta Biblia*. The nature of Jesus Christ - - divine, human, or some mysterious position in between or combining both - - was the central question fissuring Christianity in the centuries before the rise of Islam. It had led to civil wars, exacerbated by the Roman imperialization of Christianity under Constantine. Only after Islam conquered the Byzantine territory dominated by one disaffected faction -- the so-called Monophysite position -- and effectively took them out of combat, did this war end. Ultimately the civil wars and the rise of Islam effectively ended Christianity in its heartland. The hierarchical imperial late-comers, Rome and Constantinople, the only centers free of Muslim control, now became more powerful than ever. The Muslim conquests of the seventh century completely disrupted the balance of ecclesiastical power, transforming the church forever. Eight centuries later the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople undermined Rome's surviving rival and gave the Bishop of Rome more power than he had ever known. Muhammad was the greatest ally the papacy has ever had.

In response to the mystery of incarnation and all the theological gymnastics and civil wars that followed, Islam reasserted absolute monotheism. Islam's creedal statements can be read as a direct polemic against the Trinity - - "There is no God, but God" and "He begetteth not, nor is He begotten". The second problem, *Ta Biblia*, has received less attention, but was also addressed by Islam. Islam resolved to avoid the textual bigamy which Christianity imposed on what it called the Old Testament. Instead of trying to claim for itself that same coveted text through editorial and exegetical sleight of hand, Islam offered its own, a kind of *Reader's Digest* revised version of the existing Great Bible. Its stories are to be found in the Quran, but now

conform to the new dispensation. The Jewish Great Bible is denuded of family history and genealogies. The Christian Great Bible is stripped of any hints at the divinity of Jesus. There are few names and places in the Quran - - to the point that not even Mecca or Jerusalem, as such, merit a mention. Much that appears part of the biblical accounts is absent from the Quran, while other stories and episodes, though presented with the same authority as those to be found in the Torah (narrowly defined) or the Gospels, in fact do not originate there. Where did they come from? While absent from *Ta Biblia* these stories do reflect the contents of the Great Bibles, the shared sacred scriptural space that was pervasive in the orally-attuned ancient world of late scroll culture, preserved and promulgated in the expanded genres of Jewish and Christian exegesis.

Dominating the Quranic narrative are two themes, the transcendence of the One God, and the history of His revelation, conveyed through a succession of prophets, culminating in the seal of the prophets, Muhammad. Islam's understanding of prophethood differed, although most of the Quran's cast of prophetic characters did appear in the Jewish or Christian Great Bibles. The most important of the Prophets were transmitters of a revelation from God, and as such, though never divine, the closest on earth to God. Muhammad, as the last best hope of humanity, was the closest to God that has ever been or will be.

The importance of scripture to Islam cannot be overestimated. The Quran is to Islam, what Christ is to Christianity. Islam reversed a relationship established when Christ's incarnation overwhelmed Israel's revelation. Now text trumped all. Although Christianity has been linked to the codex, it began in a scroll culture. Islam was the first codex religion. It arose in the seventh century, long after this form had been well-established. The implications of this fact are significant. While the scroll-culture Torah became a term infinitely expanding to encompass ever more Jewish learning, the Quran never designated anything but itself. And while Islam developed an interpretive tradition for the Quran, the distinction between this tradition and the Quran itself was scrupulously maintained. For instance the gloss-enveloped or bordered *Ta Biblia* such as the

medieval *Biblia Latina cum Glossa Ordinaria*, the Reformation *Geneva Bible* or the Hebrew *Mikraot Gidolat* has no equivalent in Islam. When gloss or commentary accompanied the text of the Quran such a volume could never be called a Quran in traditional usage, but rather was named after its commentator alone. Nonetheless the Quran did not emerge as a neatly-bound self-contained volume out of the head of Zeus, or, in this case, the angel Gabriel, but instead rapidly experienced all of the historic stages involved in the preservation of divine revelation. The Quran literally means "Recitation". Its verses were first preserved through memory, palm-branches, tablets, flat stones, and whatever else was handy. According to later traditions, as pious Quran memorizers started to be lost in the early battles of Islam, steps were taken within a decade of the death of the prophet Muhammad to compile their verses into a book. Its scattered origins as well as its *Ta Biblia* antecedents are reflected in its synonym, the plural *al-Mushaf*, i.e. *The Pages* or *The Texts*, the name given by the companion of the prophet, Salim, who was one of the early collectors of Quranic texts. Significantly that plural name Salim had first heard in Christian Ethiopia, whose Eastern Christianity preserved a scroll culture distant from Constantine's codex donations. The operative process is revealingly described as "to collect the Quran between two covers", a physical conception of sacred text not employed at so early a stage by Islam's predecessors. The process of creating a canon that took at least six centuries in Judaism and about three in Christianity, in Islam took a matter of decades. With the rise of Islam, codex culture had fully triumphed.

In Islam The Book became literally a matter of life or death. Islam divided non-Muslims into two categories, those who had a Book and those who did not. Life, with certain restrictions, was allowed the first. Death or conversion to Islam was theoretically the fate of the second. As presented in the Quran, the first category covered Jews and Christians who were clearly heirs to the Great Biblical prophetic tradition, as well as the obscure Sabians. The Quran called them *ahl al-kitab*, literally People of the Book. The second group was more difficult to define. It included those outside this tradition, primarily the idol-worshipping polytheist pagans who had been

Muhammad's first adversaries in Mecca, and others who could be described as beyond the pale of properly organized religion. As Islam came into contact with Zoroastrians and Hindus, problems arose. The second category seemed to apply to both groups, but the practical difficulties of mass forced conversion or mass murder prevented the consistent application of either policy. One solution was the quickie book. Muslim jurists started to recognize as a Book the fluid sacred textual traditions in each of these religions, who could be linked to the Sabians. While Judaism and Christianity were not under such pressure, the Islamic life or death insistence on having a book - - some academics might claim it reminiscent of the tenure process - - gave impetus to focus on their respective *Biblia*.

In Judaism this was reflected in even greater attention to the work of the Masoretes, the scribes and scholars who preserved the text of Hebrew scripture. Around the time of the rise of Islam, the culmination of their work was achieved, the vocalization - - that is the addition of vowel marks - - of the text, which, remember, had survived in the consonant-only vowel-free Semitic alphabet. Out of this enterprise the acronym *TaNakh*, the closest Hebrew equivalent to the term Bible developed, as we have already learned. But since these events cannot be dated precisely, the causal relationship remains uncertain. It is worth noting that vocalizing the *TaNakh* produced a text that closely resembled the Quran which was also painstakingly vocalized by Arab grammarians. Suffice it to say that both the collection and preservation of the Quran and the work of the Masoretes were closely parallel activities. The connection is much more compelling in another development which clearly did emerge after the message spread by Muhammad. The Karaite challenge to Rabbinite Judaism arose in the ninth century within the lands of Islam. It insisted on the primacy of the entire Written Torah, Prophets, and Writings and rejected the Memorized Torah. In practice the Karaites adopted their own interpretive devices which bore similarities even to their Rabbinite opponents. Karaism's claim to get back to the text echoed Islam's own text-based identity and anticipated by seven centuries a similar effort by Luther and the Reformation. Both its name, Karaite (or Qaraite) - - etymologically related to Quran - - and its

focus clearly reflected its interaction with Islam. Although Karaism never displaced Rabbinite dominance, it did force Judaism to give greater attention to its scriptural heritage.

Since the extra-biblical genres in Christianity never assumed the bulk and importance that rabbinic literature did in Judaism, it did not respond to Islam's challenge with the same convulsions as the earlier religion. However in the aftermath of the rise of Islam an almost imperceptibly subtle change did take place in the Christian attitude toward its scripture. The Greek neuter plural, *Ta Biblia*, "The Scrolls", had smoothly been accepted in Latin as the same gender and number, *Biblia*. But at some point in the middle ages -- it is attested by at least the eleventh century -- *Biblia* started to become a Latin feminine singular. Conceptually a single unit, a book, began to replace a collection of scrolls, only three-quarters of a millennium or so after the invention of the codex. The Christians now at last had a *Kitab*.

The Quran is an admirably austere and seemingly universalist book with few betrayals of its origin. The transcendence of its God, the virtue of His messengers, the over-riding purity of its ethics are messages repeated again and again, with remarkably few details of time, place, and person. The contrast to the gossipy, anecdotal, exuberant digressiveness of biblical tales is striking. How could the Quran maintain such laconic consistency? Islam itself has claimed that the Quran was the original essence of the message given all God's messengers from Adam on and that the superfluities of the Jewish and Christian writs represented the accretions and distortions caused by a centuries-old game of broken telephone and worse. As dismissive as Islam was of all that accumulation of misinformed gossip, Muslims not only heard it and knew it very well, but also, to a large measure, came to accept it and understand the Quran through it. The possessors of the Quran exploited what economists call the free-rider principle. That is the ability to take advantage of generally available benefits without having to pay for them. Muslims could maintain a comparatively pristine and consistent text bearing a clear ethical message, without having to be distracted by the messy narrative contradictions and complexities of time,

place, and personality, because all those missing details were already supplied and paid for by the well-known accounts of the Jewish and Christian Great Bibles. Whatever problems arose out of those details were not the concern of Islam, but rather reflected the misunderstandings piled on the true original text -- as preserved in the Quran -- by those less reliable Jews and Christians.

Despite professed disdain, elements of their Great Bibles rapidly came to be assimilated into the accepted interpretation of the Quran. Like the Memorized Torah for the Jews, and the New Testament and Magisterial Teaching of the Church for Christians, Muslims too acquired a tradition of interpretation by which their scripture could reliably be understood. This was called the *Sunna*. Like the Memorized Torah, the *Sunna* was not a specific text, but rather originally an oral tradition. At its core, were the events or sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad or his close companions by a meticulously studied chain of tradition, known as *Hadith* ("deed" or "utterance") literature. This literature was immense and offered a diverse abundance of grist for the interpretive mill. The earliest efforts at understanding the Quran were expressed through the careful collection of such stories and the systematic verification of the reliability and existence at the time and place in question of each individual who, purportedly, witnessed or transmitted the saying or event. Of prime importance were the Sayings of the Prophet on the meaning of the Quran. But what his followers had to say - - though clearly of lesser authority - - was not ignored. Those known to be learned in the Jewish and Christian Great Bibles were an important direct source for Muslim interpretation. Revealingly, attitudes toward the value of their accounts in explicating the Quran have varied over the centuries of Islam. Initially they tended to command respect, but subsequently they came to be dismissed.

In the late ninth-early tenth century Quranic studies matured beyond the collection and verification of the *hadith* to its next stage, *tafsir*, that is the explication of the meaning of the text on the basis of the Sayings of the Prophet and his companions. The earliest major work in this genre was by Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839-923), a Persian who wrote in Arabic

and was one of the most accomplished and prolific scholars in the history of culture. His wide-ranging erudition, literary style, and critical judgment were astounding. He carefully assessed the corpus of Muslim traditions and proposed his own interpretations to resolve their contradictions and disagreements, an effort which fully justified the title he gave it, *The Complete Clarification of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Quran*. *The Complete Clarification*, usually called *The Tafsir*, was completed sometime between 896 and 903 and fills at least 15 volumes in modern printings. What he had learned and could not incorporate into his commentary he assembled for his next mammoth project, a history of the world, based upon his own Muslim Persian perspective, from creation until 915, *The History of Prophets and Kings*. Its English translation consumes 38 volumes. As the title suggests, Tabari's interests were not limited to royalty but encompassed as well the very same prophets whose divine messages formed the Quran.

Tabari was highly influential. He was not only prolific, but popular. Copies of his works - - in the original and, for the *History*, in abridgement and translations as well - - spread throughout the Muslim world. One reason for such widespread diffusion was the last major innovation in the technology of the book, before printing itself, the invention and adoption of paper. The Chinese invented paper probably about two millennia ago, but Muslims started to use and manufacture it many centuries before Europeans. It was already well-established in Baghdad when Tabari embarked upon his voluminous production. Paper was far cheaper, lighter, and more manageable than parchment. It was also more widely available and flexible than papyrus, whose continued use by this period was largely confined to Egypt. Paper made books far cheaper and more easily available, but paper did not immediately effect production of the Quran. Just as a conservative impulse maintained the scroll for Torah in Judaism so parchment survived for the Quran in Islam, but Muslim conservatism was weaker than Jewish and by the tenth century paper Qurans started to appear.

Paper took longer to reach Europe. It did not make its way directly from China, but rather through the Islamic world. The first areas to use it were the closest to Islam, Italy, starting in the late eleventh century, and Spain. By the thirteenth century the material had become so common that Europeans started to manufacture it themselves widely. Taking advantage of widespread water-power to run the mills, their paper was cheaper and soon it flooded the entire Mediterranean market, Muslim as well as Christian. Paper was the essential raw material for that next innovation, the printing press. Just as Islam had been the first of the three Abrahamic religions to insist that divine revelation be a book, so it was the first to adopt and spread the technology, paper, that ultimately made that medium an affordable commonplace.

#### The Development of the Christian Great Bible

Compared to the abundant attention to scripture displayed by Jews and Muslims, and despite their early efforts Christians still lagged behind. Its major breakthrough did not occur until quite late, the twelfth century, after scripture started to become a feminine singular. Not coincidentally this was during the very period which saw Peter the Venerable organize in Cluny, some two hundred and forty miles from Paris, a team of scholars to translate the Quran and other Muslim texts into Latin. Around the mid-twelfth century in Laon, much closer to the metropolis, another school of scholars completed the *Glossa ordinaria*, extracts mainly from early Church Fathers, organized as a running commentary on the whole Bible. At the beginning of that same century the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris was founded. It transformed biblical study in Christendom, producing a series of works, in the Great Biblical tradition, which defined the subject for the rest of the middle ages. The most important of these was the *Historia Scholastica* of Peter Comestor, who was to become the chancellor of the cathedral school of Paris.

Peter the Eater, to give his name its literal translation, like the great medieval Jewish commentator Rashi (Rabbi Solomon bar Isaac), came from Troyes, about one hundred miles east of Paris. He was born around 1100 just five years before that rabbi's death. Whether or not the

work of Rashi and his colleagues and successors were directly known to Comestor remains a matter of scholarly debate, though the coincidence of their near contemporaneity, shared origin, and common enterprise has made the assumption of a connection tempting. Whatever the sources and influences, Peter's book represented the most successful revolution in the history of Christian biblical exegesis from its origins until the era of the Renaissance, printing, and the Reformation. It rescued *Ta Biblia* from the strait-jacket of theology in which Irenaeus had protectively placed it in the second century. In terms of the history of the Great Bibles, Peter finally introduced into Christianity literary forms and approaches which had existed in Judaism and Islam for centuries, the rewritten Bible, e.g. Jubilees (a work preserved largely in a sixth century Ethiopic translation, but believed to have originated in second century Palestine) the Dead Sea Scroll text, *The Genesis Apocryphon*, and Tabari's *History*. It is not that Christianity had neglected *Ta Biblia*. Christians had given much devotion to their study, but they pursued narrow well-trodden paths, directed primarily to the New Testament. And their approach to the Old Testament reaffirmed the typological approach that made every Old character anticipate the New. While Comestor in no way whatsoever departed from those principles, his method created tensions that opened *Ta Biblia* to other perspectives and interpretations. At least one of his contemporaries, Peter the Chanter, warned that Comestor's presentation of the literal narrative undermined the far more important attention to allegory, which was the highest level of interpretation. The title and continuous structure of the book created a linear logic of its own. It had to present the subject and its stories on their own biblical terms. Nearly three-quarters of *Historia Scholastica* dealt with Old Testament subjects. As a *Historia*, it was concerned with the literal reality of the characters in *Ta Biblia*. In popular terms, the *Historia Scholastica* became the bible of Latin Christendom for some five centuries, from its completion around 1173 until finally it started to be displaced by Luther and his contemporaries in the sixteenth century. The work was an immediate success by almost every conceivable indicator. It represents a close parallel to Tabari's own work of history. And similarly it too benefited from the spread of paper that allowed it to be cheaply reproduced all over Europe.

In many respects the *Historia Scholastica* helped prepare the way for what Jaroslav Pelikan has called the reformation of the Bible and the Bible of the Reformation. There was still a considerable distance in time and understanding between that Reformation achievement and the Great Christian Bibles of the late middle ages. The basic difference is that while Comestor's work stirred interest in *Ta Biblia* for their own sakes, it was not itself the Bible.

The more proximate causes for the invention of the Bible as we now know it were the three closely related developments of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the Renaissance, printing and the Reformation. On its face the Renaissance seems unlikely since it, conventionally, focused on the Greek and Latin heritage of Europe to the neglect of the biblical heritage. However by paying attention to the authentic remains of one part of the ancient world, the Renaissance willy-nilly raised questions about the other. The philological skills first applied to the classics of pagan culture soon were transferred to patristic writings. Refined mastery of Greek fostered reexamination of the Septuagint. Hebrew naturally followed, leading to direct study of the Hebrew Truth. The Renaissance was animated by the belief that it could leap over the centuries to recover ancient truths obscured by the neglect, ignorance, and corruption of the centuries. At the heart of the Reformation was the very same claim.

If the Renaissance fostered the culture of textual authenticity, the print revolution fostered the culture of textual availability. Taken together these two elements distinguished the success of the Reformation in Christianity from the failure of Karaism in Judaism centuries earlier. Karaism could not build upon the kind of general transformation in hermeneutic consciousness wrought by the Renaissance. Nor could it diffuse its message through the technological breakthrough wrought by movable type. The effect this had on *Ta Biblia* was revolutionary. In the middle ages a complete manuscript of scripture was a rare commodity. People did not know scripture directly, but through a variety of other media -- liturgy, sermons, public art, and elaborated popular tales for

the common folk, works of theology for the educated, and the *Historia Scholastica* for both. The diversity of forms that *Ta Biblia* took created a diversity of meaning for its contents. As long as *Ta Biblia* themselves were a rarely accessible icon, any number of theologically irrelevant claims could be made in its name with little fear of contradiction. But as the Bible came to be more widely available, it also grew smaller in size. Printing invented the Little Bible, replacing the Great Bibles which had evolved over the centuries. Luther built upon this foundation, making the Bible his pillar to replace the papal hierarchy similar to the way in which the Rabbis used a version of it to replace the fallen Temple and Judean commonwealth.

While these were the proximate causes, underlying this movement, purportedly back to the book was something else, the impetus for putting revelation between two covers, the impulse that had led to the creation of the first Abrahamic comprehensive book of Holy Writ, the Quran. Islam's codex-*kitab* culture set forth a model for religious text that repeatedly intrigued its co-Abrahamites. It would be contrary to the conventions of religious belief to acknowledge explicitly that any other religious belief was influencing its own. However such interaction is the very essence of religious existence for no one could survive without the other. The Jews would long since have disappeared if Christians and Muslims had not believed the stories they first told in their scripture. Without a foundation drawing upon the Israelite textual tradition, Christianity would have gone the way of Gnosticism, the mystery religions, and the other spiritual curiosities of the Hellenistic world. Without the other two Abrahamic religions, the Quran would have made little sense in a world filled with the sacred textual space created by its established precursors. The Abrahamic religions are a three-legged stool. No one leg can stand on its own.

Faith follows power, although pious protests might deny that fact. Without the conquests of the seventh century Islam would have long since disappeared into the Ka'aba. The Renaissance and Reformation witnessed the most dramatic intrusion of Islam into Christendom since that first triumph. Constantinople fell in 1453 and Rome and Vienna quickly became the

next Ottoman targets. One Pope was reported to have offered Rome to the Sultan for a mass, but Mehmed could not be bought as easily as Henri IV and Rome is not Paris. Astute political observers such as Machiavelli and Ogier de Busbecq, a high ranking Habsburg diplomat, sought to learn the lessons of Ottoman success. Religious observers could not cite such lessons as openly, but given the scriptural interaction that had constantly characterized the history of these three religions, it makes sense that the primacy of the Quran in an Islam that was ever more successfully penetrating Europe, would have prompted Christians - - perhaps unconsciously - - to hearken more fully to their own scripture. Luther was acutely aware of the Turkish threat. He repeatedly preached against it as it moved ever closer to the German lands. It was certainly one of the many reasons that moved him to make the Bible, the centerpiece of his own theology. Whether Luther knew it or not, his emphasis on what had now become a book drew upon a long and complicated history in which Islam played a crucial part.

#### By Way of Conclusion

A comparison among any of the three Abrahamic religions, as opposed, perhaps, to an exercise of comparing any one of them to a more distant system of belief and practice, such as North American animism or Japanese Buddhism -- somewhere in the middle are the relations between Islam and Hinduism -- runs afoul of the lack of an uncontaminated sample. Each self-consciously recognizes and, to a degree, perhaps unconscious, reflects the other. What the Abrahamic religions create is a complex commingling of identities. Is it possible to distinguish between truly Islamic as opposed to Jewish as opposed to Christian? Of course, one may identify distinguishing characteristics for each and there are differences, but there is also such a range of commonalities that in some areas the distinctions are very hard to draw. Furthermore this range of commonalities is so strong that it is very easy for any one of the three either to appropriate something from the other and claim it as its own or attribute something to the other that is in fact its own invention or to indulge a complex mixture of the

two. It is also possible for each to work together interactively all the while denying or pretending to deny that very fact.

The commonalities and divergences are particularly noteworthy with regard to Scripture. Christians, Jews, and Muslims do and do not "read" the same sacred text. I put "read" in quotation marks since historically most Muslims, Christians, and even Jews heard rather than read sacred text. Two share more scripture with each other than they do with the third, but the sacred words of Jews are not exactly the same as the sacred words of Christians. The Quran of Islam represents not only a triumph of Arabic letters, but also a deracinated distillation of both Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Read on its own, the Quran can seem like the sound of one hand clapping. Through ancillary quranic genres that incorporate both Muslim insight and abundant Jewish and Christian biblical traditions, the second hand appeared. In this regard, Islam was by no means exceptional. Each sectarian tradition must be understood as part of a hermeneutic enterprise that is greater than any one text alone. The interconnectedness of the three demonstrates that despite these many differences, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share the same sacred textual space. In that sense the three do read the same sacred text.

At the outset I dismissed the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the course of this essay in what might seem to be a contradictory mode I have also argued for Abrahamic commonalities. In fact my objection to the Judeo-Christian tradition is not so much that it is wrong, but rather that it is incomplete. All three religions together form a triune community. The correct term should be the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition.