

Article

Scriptures, Syncretism, and the Steppe: The Calf Across Cultures

Aton M. Holzer 

Department of Dermatology, Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, Tel Aviv 6423906, Israel; holzera@tlvmc.gov.il

Abstract

This study reexamines the Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32–33, Deuteronomy 9) through a broad literary and historical lens, highlighting its origins in Late-Bronze-Age Near-Eastern mythology, particularly the Ugaritic Baal Cycle. The episode is positioned as a polemic against Levantine polytheism, where calves symbolize a Divine progeny, conflicting with Yahwistic monotheism. Later interpretations by Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and especially the late rabbinic work *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* (PDRE) reveal evolving theological and political critiques. PDRE notably uses the narrative to challenge Byzantine icon veneration and Islamic prophetic impeccability, reflecting eighth-century Jewish responses amidst Khazar conversion and regional religious dynamics. The text's emphasis on repentance, prophetic fallibility, and rejection of idolatrous political power underscores a distinctive Judaic stance on religious authority and governance. This integrative approach illuminates an example of the evolving translation of a motif, both by the Bible and from it, across changing religious contexts, showing the Golden Calf as a dynamic symbol in religious identity formation, polemics, and political theology from pre-Sargonic Mesopotamia through early medieval Eurasia.

Keywords: cultural translation; golden calf; Baal Cycle; *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* (PDRE); Iconoclasm; Khazar conversion; prophetic inerrancy; monotheism vs. polytheism; rabbinic midrash; Byzantine Empire; Quranic interpretation

1. Introduction

The polysemic term “cultural translation” is among the newest entries into the field of translation studies. Kyle Conway, of the University of Ottawa, is the foremost theorist of this particular variety of translation. After reviewing the various uses of the term in anthropology and postcolonial studies, he offers his own summation—“...cultural translation is a form of a give-and-take over meaning... a semiotic economy where signs are exchanged for other signs on a basis negotiation rather than equivalence” (Conway 2020, p. 5). He fleshes out the manner in which meaning is lost or transmuted in the literary context in his review of Sara Maitland’s study of the subject:

In this way, an author’s intention is lost to us, and *tant mieux*, as its inaccessibility frees us to interpret texts ourselves. The author chose words intended to evoke certain associations for listeners, which in turn would evoke others (and then still others...), in a chain of associations at once idiosyncratic (different listeners, having experienced different things, will arrive at their own interpretations) and intersubjective (at a minimum, some meanings must be shared or speakers would have no tools for communicating at all). But in our world, here and now, the chains



Academic Editors: Fergus King and Anthony Rees

Received: 9 March 2026

Revised: 30 July 2026

Accepted: 3 August 2026

Published: 6 August 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

of associations have evolved. The author's words move through them differently, opening a different world for us. As we shift our interpretive attention from the author's now-inaccessible intention to the text itself, we also shift the responsibility for interpretation from the author to ourselves as readers (Conway 2019).

Conway, a recent expatriate from the United States to Canada, writes compellingly about his own experiences with cultural translation: how ideas carry very different cultural associations in the same English language between his former and current home—for example, the War of 1812—and how palpable changes in culture and “Canadianness” have occurred within his adoptive home over the past few decades (Conway 2024).

The lens of cultural translation as defined above can be usefully applied to the Hebrew Bible. This is most obviously true for the “consensus” view, which upholds the diachronic stratification of Biblical Hebrew (in contrast to the challenging view laid out by Young and Rezetko 2014). The reception of texts composed in Archaic Biblical Hebrew (1100–1000 BCE)—in which Ugaritic and other Canaanite dialects were influential and Akkadian was the lingua franca of the Near East (Rendsburg 1997)—was altered even among those who maintained spatial and linguistic continuity, as Hebrew in the Levant came under the linguistic and cultural influence of Aramaic, and later, Arabic. Scholars have identified the Akkadian *sapattu*, referring to the fifteenth of the lunar month (Levenson 2024), and referenced, e.g., in Leviticus 23: 11–16 (*mi-maharat ha-shabbat*);¹ the Ugaritic idiom *bn ʕn-*, “between the eyes,” referring to the forehead (Watson 2015), and referenced in Exodus 13: 9, 13: 16 and Deuteronomy 6: 8; and the Syro-Palestinian headband and head-fillet, ubiquitous in Egyptian and Assyrian art, and identified as the *t(w)ṭpt* of Exodus 13: 16 and Deuteronomy 6: 8 and 11: 18 (Tigay 1982). All were reinterpreted later, in the same space but in evolving cultural milieus, by Jewish groups who regarded themselves as more faithful to the text. These include, respectively, the “Boethusians” cited in bMenaḥot 66a (and) the sects represented in 4Q325 1 and 4Q326 (as well as Samaritans and later, Karaites), who began the *omer* count on a Sunday; the “ways of *minut*” cited in mMegillah 4:8, referring to unknown sectarians who wore their phylacteries on the forehead; and the Karaite understanding of *tefillin*-verses as metaphors for remembering God. Despite their spatial and linguistic continuity with the Hebrew Bible (albeit with exilic interludes), ostensibly conservative appeals to textual authority actually yielded results less “originalist” in constitutional legal parlance (that is, true to authorial intent) than the Pharisaic insistence (Schniedewind 2004) on the primacy of orally mediated tradition. The “literalists” apparently were unaware of (or unperturbed by) the possibility that ancient texts in one's own language may nonetheless require cultural translation.

The Golden Calf provides a particularly instructive example of a literary motif that has undergone cultural translation both before and after the Hebrew Bible among successive generations of Western Semitic-speaking people of the Levant, as associations and intellectual assumptions of the surrounding milieu changed, even as spatial locus and literary language remained roughly the same. I begin by summarizing previous scholarship on the evolution of this symbol before exploring the dramatic transformations that occurred both prior to and immediately after Antiquity.

The Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32–33, Deuteronomy 9)—among the most disturbing episodes in the Pentateuch—has recently received significant scholarly attention. Notable works include the 2018 conference papers on “The Reception of Golden Calf Traditions” (Mason and Lupieri 2018) and Pregill's 2020 study “The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur'an” (M. E. Pregill 2020).

Both volumes outline the development of calf discourse across 1500 years, from the early Classical period to Late Antiquity. Since Aberbach and Smolar's landmark article (Aberbach and Smolar 1967), the Pentateuchal calf narratives have been presumed

“retrofitted,” composed during the late pre-exilic or post-exilic period, to criticize either the reality or the literary construct of the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam, who installed golden calves in Bethel and Dan to deflect religious pilgrimage from Judah (1 Kings 12–13). Works falling under the loose genre of Rewritten Bible (Vermes 2014), in all its varieties, diverted the story toward diverse significations. Within the Pentateuch, M. E. Pregill (2020, pp. 56–102) notes that the Exodus narrative, with its mitigating details, presents the calf as a cultic infraction—worshiping YHWH in a proscribed manner—while Deuteronomy, self-consciously presenting (1: 1–5) a “rewritten Bible” or “inner-biblical interpretation”, recasts it as a cautionary tale of idolatrous covenant betrayal.

In the Hebrew Bible, references to the calf in Psalms 106 and Nehemiah 9, which were written after exile to address what their authors saw as another covenantal breach, highlight the Divine forgiveness shown at the covenant’s inception. Later in the Second Temple period, Hellenistic Jewish sources often express discomfort about the transgression. Idol worship seemed to be perceived as more embarrassing in a Platonizing intellectual environment, with its increasingly abstract perception of the Divine. Josephus omits the story entirely.

This shame about Israelite betrayal of the covenant was a theological opening for Christianity, which used the Calf episode to argue for Jewish disconfirmation on account of the Jews’ “stiff-necked” nature, which necessitated the Mosaic Law as (an ultimately ineffective) discipline. This appears in the Gospels’ own “Rewritten Bible” or scripturalized narrative (Vette 2022) and Patristic literature, in which Christians, as the New Israel, are warned against apostasy. Rabbinic works, written in the cultural milieu in which such interpretations were dominant, instead emphasized Divine forgiveness, or exonerated the Jews by citing mitigating circumstances, or shifted the fault to Egyptian magicians or the “mixed multitude” that joined the Exodus.

The Quran (especially *Ṭa-Ha* 20: 83–97) was long thought to reinterpret the Calf episode in an unusual way, with the apparent animation of the calf and introduction of a new antagonist, *al-Sāmirī*. Pregill argues that both are misinterpretations, and the text broadly coheres with the Biblical account. Drawing upon the Christian *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the Quran participates in Christian–Jewish interchange, presenting the Calf episode, among other instances of Divinely guided people going astray, as a cautionary tale for believers. The Quran maintains the antinomian attitude of Christian polemic, portraying Aaron’s assignment to a priestly role as punishment for his involvement. Most scholars view the Quran as supersessionist, like its Christian antecedents, extending to both Jews and Christians (Keating 2014). However, a new treatment contests both the Quran’s supersessionism and Pregill’s interpretation, arguing that his identification of *al-Sāmirī* with Aaron is untenable, and that the supersessionist claims are contradicted by the sura’s comparison of the Israelites’ sin with Adam’s—serving instead to emphasize repentance and forgiveness (Mehr 2023, pp. 41–54).

For Pregill, the calf controversy shifts when eighth-century *tafsīrs* interpret the Quran’s story differently, depicting the calf as animate and *al-Sāmirī* as independent. Pregill attributes this to boundary-setting within a newly distinct religious community: distinguishing the Quranic narrative from the Biblical one and upholding the Islamic doctrine of prophetic infallibility require Aaron, as a prophet (*An-Nisa* 4: 163), to be free from error just like Muhammad (M. Pregill 2008).

The scope of these studies may, however, be broadened further.

Focusing on the historical “droving” of the calf through Antiquity overlooks key developments beyond Antiquity’s chronological boundaries.

Diachronic interpretations of Hebrew Scripture often rest on shaky foundations. Scholars’ attributions of dates and assessments of authenticity frequently change when

solid archaeological evidence is absent. However, the Pentateuch narrative holds together in synchronic analysis and links to an earlier religious exchange in the Late Bronze Age setting. This exchange is located more in the realm of shared cultural motifs than direct literary dependence, which is either absent or inaccessible due to the (quite literally) fragmentary nature of the ancient Near-East textual corpus.

2. Before the Bible: Against Rewritten Baal

Scholars have noted that the Hebrew Bible is rich with irony (Häner and Miller 2023). The Pentateuch, in particular, is a countercultural document that speaks in the coin of, and polemicalizes against, the cultic systems of Israelites' erstwhile neighboring civilizations.

The structured creation narrative in Genesis 1 contrasts with the Enūma Eliš and other theomachic cosmogonies from Mesopotamian cultures to the northeast (Watson and Curtis 2022, pp. 203–52). Babylonia's origin story and ziggurats are satirized in Genesis 11 (Walton 1995). In Exodus, the ten plagues (Rendsburg 2006, 2015; Zevit 1990) reflect critically on the myths, rituals, and deities of Egypt, to the southwest, especially sun-god Ra (Rendsburg 1988), Akhenaten's favorite (as Aten). The Tabernacle design responds to New Kingdom royal propaganda (Berman 2017, pp. 35–60). In Leviticus, systems of sacrifice (Meshel 2014, p. 204) and holiness (Cohen 2018) are structurally similar to the Hittite religion to the northwest, so that key differences stand out sharply (Holzer 2023). The Midianite–Kenite hypothesis (Avner 2021; Miller 2021) argues that Yahwism came to Israelites from desert tribes. The Midianites left no texts, but the book of Numbers, set in those southeast deserts, anathematizes Midianite worship and sexual practices at Baal Peor, even declaring war upon them. Deuteronomy execrates (Feder 2013) Canaanite religion, shrines, and practices, especially (Phoenician) child sacrifice, which the Bible sees as the worst sin (Markl 2019), as stated in Deuteronomy 12.

A further example may be added.

The Pentateuch's nearest literary precursor is the Baal Cycle. Six cuneiform tablets (KTU 1.1–1.6) were unearthed by French researchers in the 1920s at Ras Shamra, Syria, at the tell of Ugarit, a trade center destroyed in the Late-Bronze Age collapse. The Cycle dates to the thirteenth century BCE, coincident with Israel's first mention in the archaeological record, in the Merneptah Stele; correspondence with Merneptah (RS 88.2158, KTU2 2.81) was found at the site. Its account of West Semitic gods—Baal, El, Athirat, Anat, Shapshu, Yam, Mot, Athtar and Kothar wa-Hasis, worshiped throughout Phoenicia and the Levant—contains type-scenes, formulae, Divine depictions, and names that appear in the Hebrew Bible (Smith 1994, p. xxvi). The southern Levant likely had its own homologous variants (Ayali-Darshan 2020, pp. 156–73), which have since been lost.

The first two tablets describe Baal's battle with sea-god Yamm, which ends in Baal's victory and recognition as king. The middle tablets depict a banquet with seventy gods, and the construction of Baal's palace on Mount Zaphon. The final tablets have Baal confront death-god Mot. Baal surrenders to Mot, leading to Baal's apparent death, mourned by his sister Anat and father El. Anat seeks Baal in the netherworld and avenges him against Mot. Both gods return, battle, and Mot accepts Baal as king. Whether Baal truly died and was resurrected, used a decoy, or simply vanished remains debated due to tablet damage. Ayali-Darshan's recent monograph argues convincingly for the death-resurrection interpretation, citing philology and descriptions of mourning and celebration (Ayali-Darshan 2024, pp. 65–69).

Loewenstamm noted that the Bible's Calf episode has an explicit textual reference to the Baal Cycle: Moses' burning and grinding of the calf—rather than melting it down—precisely matches grief-stricken Anat's treatment of Mot (Loewenstamm 1967).

The Baal Cycle and the Exodus account share thematic progression. On YHWH's initiative, Moses splits the sea, followed by a poem recapitulating motifs from the "Yamm battle" epic (Cassuto 1975). At Sinai, Moses and the people banquet with seventy elders, and Moses then ascends to receive instructions for YHWH's "palace," the Tabernacle. The Song at the Sea (Exodus 15: 17) precedes this sequence with all three mythic elements of the Baal Cycle: (1) the Divine Warrior's combat and victory at the sea, (2) the building of a sanctuary on the "mount of possession," and (3) his manifestation of "eternal" kingship (Cross 1997, p. 142).

The affinity between West Semitic cosmogony and Israel's origin story is polemically coherent. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, Levantine thought-world symbols are repurposed as Israelite history. If de Moor's school (De Moor 1971) is correct that the Baal Cycle tracks the seasons—this remains debated—then the linkage of historical events to seasonal holidays in the envelope of the calf narrative forms part of this cultural supersession.

Moses ascends a fiery mountain, Sinai, just as Baal ascended Mount Kankaniya to be devoured by Mot. Moses's prolonged absence prompts the people to gather before Aaron: "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him" (Exodus 32: 1).

The Baal Cycle proffers a solution: after Baal's surrender to Mot, but before his corpse is found, "He loved a heifer in the pasture, a young cow in the steppe at the shore of death. He lay with her seventy-seven times, she made him mount eighty-eight times, and she conceived and bore a young male" (KTU 1.5 v. 18–22). This adapts an ancient Mesopotamian myth regarding moon-god Sin, though its application to Baal is unexpected (Ayali-Darshan 2019). Due to poor tablet preservation, the calf's purpose remains unclear—scholars debate whether Baal intended to create an heir or a body double to fool Mot (Sanders 2003, pp. 159–62).

In the Biblical context, when YHWH's messenger Moses is presumed to have succumbed to the underworld in the month of Dumuzi/Tammuz, forty days after the Sinai "banquet", Aaron "found" the Divine calf—a cultic stand (VanDyke 2023, pp. 31–40) enabling YHWH's return. Bull statuary was a symbol of power *par excellence* in Bronze Age economies (Arbuckle 2014) and was not taboo, appearing in Solomon's Temple,² Ezekiel's Divine chariot vision, and possibly as winged cherubs on the Ark of the covenant (Eichler 2015, pp. 26–38). Aaron's claim of the calf's Divine origination aligns with the ancient Near Eastern practice of creating cultic images (Walker and Dick 1999). His consecration of the calf to YHWH (32: 5) follows the narrative's pattern of replacing Baal with YHWH, just as the Baal Cycle replaced the Mesopotamian/Aramean moon-god in its "Calf Story," evidenced in the Ugaritic denigration of *yarih* in KTU 1.114 (Theuer 2000, p. 110). This replacement of Baal with YHWH continues throughout the Hebrew Bible (Anderson 2015).

The celebrations culminated in "arising to laugh" (*le-tzahlek*) (Exodus 32: 6).

While no rituals for Baal's death and resurrection exist in Ugarit, the Mesopotamian god Dumuzi's commemoration involved women's wailing, similar to that of his consort Inanna/Ištar and Baal's sister Anat. This practice, documented from 18th-century BCE Mari tablets to the Jerusalem Temple (Ezekiel 8: 14),³ persisted among Harran's "Sābians" until the 10th century CE (Ehara 2024). In West Semitic Mari, Dumuzi's return from the dead also has an associated ceremony, possibly with ritual celebratory *laughter* (Ayali-Darshan 2024, p. 61). The Baal Cycle records El laughing upon Baal's resurrection. Ayali-Darshan (2024, pp. 128–31) connects seasonal weeping at sowing and laughing at harvest, documented by Origen and Jerome, to Psalm 126.

2.1. Why Was This Wrong?

Divine pique appears to be directed not merely at the worship directed toward a molten image, but at the identity of that image—“a molten calf” (32: 8). Calves are *never* associated with the chief god of a pantheon, but rather always its vigorous young offspring (Fleming 1999). The very use of a calf implies “calf of...” (Greer 2024, p. 50)⁴—the existence of a parental chief god. This perhaps better explains the people’s declaration, in plural, “These are your Gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (32: 4), than the conventional proposition of a clumsy retrojection of a dubious citation of Jeroboam I:

What, then, is the distinctive feature of polytheism as against monotheism? Such deities as “the assembly of gods” (*phr ilm*) are treated as a single entity in the sacrificial lists in Ugarit, and the “golden calf” is treated as “gods” regardless of the number of idols, whether one calf (Ex 32: 8) or two calves (1 Kgs 12: 28) in the Hebrew Bible. This would suggest that we should not apply our modern concept of monotheistic religions for understanding the concept of polytheism. In polytheistic thinking, the generic “god” and its plural form “gods” are often used interchangeably, and the Ugaritic graph IL can refer either to “a god” (*ʾilu*) or to “the collective godhead” (*ʾilū*) as *kami* in Japanese polytheism (Tsumura 2024, p. 236).

But YHWH had already established that there is *no* Divine family. The Decalogue opens with not “we” but “I,” *anokhi*. He informs Moses early that he and El are one and the same (Exodus 6: 3). Baal’s brother Yamm is demythologized into the inanimate sea, like other gods’ demythologization in Genesis’ “chaoskampf” (or lack thereof). Thus, Aaron’s cultural translation has failed.

The cultic infraction of a *calf*-stand facilitated polytheism: a calf could pedestalize only a second-generation god, inherently as another alongside YHWH (cf. Exodus 20: 3). In Exodus, Aaron’s failed attempt at supersession of Baal among brand-new Yahwists ignited immediate reversion to Levantine polytheism. Exodus and Deuteronomy agree: *this* type of cultic infraction is, ineluctably, idolatry. With Jeroboam’s calf-stands, among veteran Yahwists, polytheism followed a bit later, with a half-century delay, once the Phoenician Jezebel resurrected the usual calf-jockey, Baal.

Familiarity with the Baal Cycle mythology in the Near-East persisted into Late Antiquity; it appears in a Safaito-Hismaic inscription in northern Jordan from the first through the fourth centuries CE (Al-Jallad 2015), and its imagery appears in Revelation 21:1–4 (Smith 1994, p. xxvii), in works of the fourth-century Church Father Ephrem of Nisibis (Annus 2006), and in the ḥadīth literature (Cole 2025, p. 103). This familiarity, no less than Christian polemic, might inform some Midrashic passages that emerged in the same cultural milieu. For example, in third-century *Mekhilta de-rabi Yishmaʿel* (*masekhtha de-bahodesh* 9: 12):

...R. Yossi says: On this condition did they stand on Mount Sinai, that the angel of death not prevail over them, as it is written (Psalms 82: 6) “I said (when I gave you the Torah): You are angels and all heavenly creatures. But, as Adam you will die, (having ruined your ways as he did), and as one of the (first) princes will you fall.”

In this reading, found in other late antique works such as *bAvodah Zarah* 5a, *Leviticus Rabbah* 18: 3, and *Pesikta Rabbati* 14 et al., the denouement of the Exodus–Baal Cycle parallel was intended to be the “conquest of Mot,” which, when demythologized, means immortality.

Instead, Mot, in calf form, won, restoring mortality to the Israelites. The calf statue thus receives the same abuse as Mot does in the Baal Cycle, as Loewenstamm noted. *Pesikta Rabbati* (14) thus presents the red heifer, which removes death contamination, as redress

for the Golden Calf and the death it “resurrected”. The Aaronide priest subjects it to incineration and placement in water, in the desert that lies east of the Temple, “on the steppe at the shore of death.”

...Why do all the sacrifices come as males, and this one comes as a female? Rabbi Aibu said, [it can be compared] to the son of a maidservant who soiled the king’s palace. The king said, “Let his mother come and wipe the excrement.” Thus said the Holy One, blessed be He, “Let a cow come and atone for the deed of the calf.”

2.2. Before Baal

In fact, the Pentateuch’s subversiveness is not novel. If Exodus 14–34 demythologizes the Baal Cycle, the Cycle, with its protagonist Baal—like Ugarit, an unloved upstart which disrupts Divine kinship relations—may subvert the Enūma Eliš, in which Marduk, Babylonian chief god, establishes a fixed (political) hierarchy in the cosmogony (Tugendhaft 2017, pp. 125–31). And Enūma Eliš itself subverts earlier myths by replacing other deities’ roles with Marduk—notably, Inanna/Ištar and her shared celestial rule with sun and moon—reflecting the Mesopotamian marginalization of goddesses from the third to the first millennia BCE (Gabriel 2025). The calf motif is preserved and translated in accordance with cultural transformations in the Fertile Crescent.

The calf even becomes something of a palimpsest for these processes. As Ayali-Darshan shows (Ayali-Darshan 2019), in pre-Sargonic (third-millennium BCE) iterations of incantations for parturients, Šîn, the moon-god and Inanna/Ištar’s coregent, loves a beautiful cow, adorns her to be favored by herdsmen, hears her calving cries, and sends protective spirits to assist. The Old Babylonian period sees variants which replace Šîn with the Great King—the sun-god Šamaš, the “Marduk-equivalent” chief god in Sippar. In the Baal Cycle, the narrative emphasis shifts again, to the young upstart’s procreative virility.

Finally, with Exodus, religious texts’ reflection of political realities abruptly ends. The attempt to appropriate Baal’s calf for Yahwist supersession reveals the calf to be a Trojan horse. As a symbol of multigenerational Divine family, it imports the Divine kingship hierarchy; this undermines the axializing Yahwistic covenant, which aims to uncouple religion from the reification of political power. The Yahwistic calf represents rebellion against the prevailing order, but not revolution, so it falls too far short. In the final analysis, it is no better than Mot and is treated to the same fate.

Rabbinic Midrash, composed in a culture that included the dimming embers of ancient Near-Eastern myth, preserves traces of this process, remembering and rejecting the familial logic of the Baal Cycle, even as it strove to repel the ironic claims of a new cultural movement that insisted that Jewish disconfirmation through worship of the calf presaged the Jews’ rejection of a new “Divine family.”

3. After Tafsir: The Calf as Living Icon

The late Rabbinic work *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* (PDRE), dated to 750–800 CE,⁵ retells Biblical history from Genesis to the Israelites’ desert wanderings, in a manner similar to Second Temple “Rewritten Bible” works. In this, it marks a sharp break from lemmatic Midrashic compositions (Adelman 2014). While incorporating material from those compositions, liturgy and customs, it foregrounds content seemingly “repressed” in earlier Rabbinic sources—myths found in Apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, Syriac texts, and the Quran.

PDRE was enormously popular, with many manuscript witnesses and rapid, widespread dissemination—Eretz-Israeli in origin but attested already in ninth-century Babylonia—and is cited by medieval Biblical exegetes from Rashi onward (McDowell 2021, p. 383).

Its authorship and intended audience remain a mystery, given the eighth century’s status as a “Dark Age” for Jewish literature. Adelman sees it as eschatological, linked per-

haps to messianic groups like the *ʿĪsāwīyya* (Adelman 2009, pp. 261–64). Blachorsky connects it to post-Islamic conquest Rabinization (Blachorsky 2022). Keim views it against Arabic ethical literature (Keim 2016, pp. 201–4), while McDowell reads it as a Jewish *Historienbibel*—narrative adaptations of Biblical history, like the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* and Muslim *Stories of the Prophets* (*Qışaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*), aimed at corralling unlettered agrarian believers who were prone to drifting across confessional boundaries (McDowell 2025, p. 433). It contains extensive polemics against Christian and Muslim traditions (Adelman 2009, pp. 211–58; Keim 2016, pp. 184–95).

How this work treats the Golden Calf episode is an example of cultural translation that can be back-translated to reveal its *vorlage*, illuminating its milieu and suggesting a new role for *PDRE* within it, where it appears to promote the selfsame Pentateuchal polemic against political paganism.

4. Against Byzantium: The Calf and Iconophilia

PDRE was written during or soon after the first Iconoclasm (726–787), and there are signs that the work redeploys the calf narrative against none other than the erstwhile vanguard of Christianity itself, the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire.

The narrative in chapter 45 diverges from the Biblical text in identifying the people's motivation: "The Egyptians were carrying their god, singing hymns before it. Make unto us a god like the gods of the Egyptians, and let us see it before us."⁶ The repeated use of the singular for the Egyptian gods—*lefanav, oto* in Hebrew—hints at Christ icons (Keim 2016, p. 126). *PDRE*'s *mitzrayim* is not the polytheistic Pharaonic Egypt but the late antique Egypt, the birthplace (Mathews 2021) of icons—religious paintings for veneration in processions with hymns. Descended from Roman imperial portraits of the emperor syncretized with Serapis, icons were most visible in Egypt during *PDRE*'s writing due to their ubiquity and the Byzantine iconomachy elsewhere. Umayyad Egypt remained beyond iconoclasts' reach, and except for Yazid II's brief iconoclasm in 723—lamented in Coptic texts (Sahner 2017)—religious images were tolerated in Islamdom (Natif 2019).

Patricia Crone suggested that the successes of the more rigorously monotheistic, aniconic Arabs spurred Byzantine Iconoclasm (Crone 2017). Her thesis remains controversial, as iconoclast emperors' arguments were expunged by iconodule victors. But whether or not Leo III and Constantine V saw icons as idols, Jews certainly did. The championing of icons in Orthodox worship by John of Damascus, affirmed at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, further intensified this friction.

In the Biblical account, Aaron engraved the calf but *claimed* that it materialized on its own. In the telling of *PDRE*, spontaneous generation indeed did occur, rendering the calf as the most revered kind of Byzantine icon, the *acheiropoieton*, miraculously created without human involvement.⁷

An artifact of icon worship is referenced later in the *PDRE* narrative: "[Moses] made Israel drink the water (with the dust of the calf). Everyone who had kissed the calf with all his heart, his lips became golden." Extensive gilding is a particular feature of Byzantine art (Garnczarska 2020), and the image of gold particles adhering to Byzantine lips after kissing icons would likely have resonated with ninth-century Jews in erstwhile Byzantine lands.

Surviving iconophile literature portrays women as heroines of the iconomachy, protesting against the removal of Jesus's image from the Chalke gate of the palace and suffering martyrdom as a result. Earlier scholars, taking these reports literally, connected icon veneration with female spirituality. Recent assessments locate their origins in Iconoclastic propaganda, linking iconophilia with women, who are considered outsiders and enemies of order (Cormack 2013). In *PDRE*, women are heroines, but as *iconophobes*: "The women heard (this), but they were unwilling to give their earrings to their husbands; but

they said to them: You desire to make a detestation and abomination without any power in it to save?" Here, "power to save," *ko'ah le-hatzil*, references the power Christians claimed for Jesus—salvation.

The women's reward counters Christian polemic: "...What reward did He give [the women] in this world? That they should observe the New Moons more stringently than the men." Whereas Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and the Quran view Law observance as punishment for Jewish idolatry, *PDRE* presents Law as a reward: women received an *additional* observance for nonparticipation. The Decalogue—in Patristic teaching, the only non-punitive Law—was [temporarily] revoked as punishment; that text "fled" from the tablets "when they beheld the calf." Contrary to patristic teaching on idolatry and Tertullian's identification of feminine adornment with idolatry (Freedberg 2013, pp. 396–98), in *PDRE*, the men, not the women, permanently divest themselves of jewelry after the calf incident.

5. Against the Caliphate: Prophetic Inerrancy

Interwoven with the elements of the anti-icon polemic are passages that pull in a different direction, if more subtly, pointing to another presence in *PDRE*'s cultural milieu.

Rabbinic commentators take great care to explain the connection between the preface of chapter 45 and the ensuing calf story:

Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed to Moses out of the thorn-bush, in order to send him to Egypt, Moses spake before the Holy One, blessed be He (saying): 'Sovereign of all the worlds! Swear to me that all things which I desire to do, Thou wilt do, so that I should not speak words before Pharaoh, and Thou wilt not fulfil them, for then will he slay me.' And He swore unto him that 'whatsoever thou desirest to do, I will do, except with reference to two things,' (namely,) to let him enter the land (of Canaan), and (to postpone) the day of (his) death.

The Pharaoh who may slay Moses resembles less the amused, peevish tyrant of Exodus 5 and more the bloodthirsty Fir'awn of the Quran, who crucifies his magicians after their defeat (Al-A'raf 7: 103–126). Hints of Quranic influence appear in *PDRE*'s portrayal of an animate, lowing calf, and it is the jewelry of male "Egyptians and Arabs," not Byzantines, referenced in the passage.

In an Islamic milieu, Moses' prayer in *PDRE* would have raised eyebrows. Although not mentioned in the Quran, *'isma*—infallibility and sinlessness—is extended to all prophets (and by Shi'a Islam to the Twelve Imams); Christianity applies impeccability to Jesus (von Stosch 2021). Moses is listed as a prophet in the Quran (An-Nisa 4: 163). By Islamic lights, a prophet is perfect and already has Divine protection from error. In *PDRE*'s view, even the greatest prophet must pray for Divine deliverance from error.

Some might have needed to pray more than others. The next digression in the *PDRE* text reads:

They betook themselves to the one who carried out the words of Moses, (to) Aaron his brother, and Hur, the son of his sister. Whence (do we know) that Hur was the son of (Moses') sister? Because it is said, "And Caleb took unto him Ephrath, which bare him Hur" (1 Chronicles 2: 19). Why was Miriam's name called Ephrath? Because she was a daughter of the palace, a daughter of kings, one of the magnates of the generation; for every prince and great man who arose in Israel had his name called an Ephrathite, as it is said, "And Jeroboam... an Ephrathite" (1 Kings 11: 26); and it says, "And David was the son of that

Ephrathite” (1 Samuel 17: 12). Was he not of the tribe of Judah? But he was a nobleman, a son of kings.

The focus on disambiguating Miriam’s identity—which, in contrast with parallels such as Sifri Bamidbar 78 and Shemot Rabbah 1: 17, separates her from David’s lineage—addresses one of the earliest challenges to Quranic inerrancy: its identification of Miriam, Moses’s sister, with Mary, mother of Jesus. The ḥadīth literature notes that this apparent⁸ error spurred Christian challenges during Muhammad’s lifetime and Jewish challenges thereafter (Rubinstein-Shemer 2021). Thus, PDRE attacks the principle of *‘isma*, and its corollary doctrines *i ‘jāz al-Qur’ān* (Quran’s inimitability) and *naskh* (Quran’s nullification of prior revelations).

6. Remythologization: Toward Tengrism?

The passage concludes with a reworking of an earlier Midrashic passage, found⁹ in Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4: 3:

Joshua interpreted the verse as referring to Israel when they stood before Mount Sinai. Since they participated in the act [of making the Golden Calf], Moses left no piece of ground on the mountain upon which he did not prostrate himself and beg mercy for Israel, but he was not answered; and five destroying angels attached themselves to him, viz. Kezef (Wrath), Mashhith (Destruction), Hashmed (Annihilation), Af (Anger), and Hemah (Hot Displeasure). Moses was at once afraid of them; so what did he do? He had recourse to the deeds of the patriarchs. He immediately recalled them and said, ‘Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants’ (Exodus 32: 13). The Holy One, blessed be He, spake to him: ‘Moses, what claims have the patriarchs of old upon Me? If I come to examine them, I have grievances against them... When, however, Moses said, To whom Thou didst swear by Thine own self (Exodus *loc. cit.*), the Holy One, blessed be He, was filled with compassion for them... Forthwith three of the destroying angels, viz. Kezef, Mashhith, and Hashmed, departed from him, and two were left, viz. Af and Hemah... Moses said before Him: ‘Lord of the universe, can I stand against the two of them? Do Thou tackle one and I the other...’¹⁰

In PDRE:

The Holy One, blessed be He, sent five angels to destroy Israel. Wrath, Anger, Temper, Destruction, and Glow of Anger. Moses heard, and he went to invoke Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the Cave of Machpelah, and he said: If ye be of the children of the world to come, stand ye before me in this hour, for behold your children are given over like sheep to the slaughter. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stood there before him. Moses spake before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of all the worlds! Didst Thou not swear to these thus to increase their seed like the stars of the heaven... By the merit of the three patriarchs, the three angels, Wrath, Anger, and Temper, were restrained from Israel. But two remained. Moses spake before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of all the universe! For the sake of the oath which Thou didst swear unto them, keep back Destruction from Israel... and Destruction was kept back from Israel... Moses spake before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of all worlds! For the sake of Thy great and holy Name, which Thou didst make known unto me, hold back from Israel Glow of Anger... What did Moses do? He dug in the earth in the possession of Gad, as a large dwelling, and he buried “Fierce Anger” in the earth, like a man who is bound in the prison. Every time Israel sins it arises and opens its mouth to bite with its breath, and to destroy Israel. Moses pronounced against

it the Name, and brought it down beneath the earth. Therefore is its name called Peor (the one who opens). When Moses died, what did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He put his burial-place opposite to it. Every time Israel sins it opens its mouth to bite with its breath, and to destroy Israel, but it sees the burial-place of Moses opposite to it, it returns backward...

Notable here is *PDRE*'s mythologization of the earlier narrative. The patriarchs are not merely *invoked* for their merit; their souls are raised from the dead—at the Cave of Machpelah. This is no small feat for Moses, who was famously denied entry to the land of Israel. Furthermore, the personification of the angel *haron af* ("Glow of Anger") and the tale of his imprisonment in the earth's bowels is an unusual excursus if intended merely as a flourish.

Perhaps there is something more at play here, another cultural context that cannot be accounted for by the assumptions of Byzantine Christianity or Islam.

PDRE arrives on the scene at an advanced phase of the solidification of a new political order: pagan tribes on the periphery of the great empires had coalesced into ethnicities upon the adoption of one of two monotheistic religions, networked into families of nations—*oikoumene* (ecumene) or *ummah*—constituting (Latin and Orthodox) Christendom and Islamdom.

How these "families" arose remains debated by scholars. Extant sources are late hagiographies, liturgies, and polemics, rather than contemporary histories. The outcome—Christian and Islamic (Feldman 2024, p. 7) commonwealths of feudal/mercantilist nations—suggests that where conversion was completed by a "top-down" process, leaders chose monotheism (1) to create a unified ethnic identity from fluid tribal ones and (2) to impose laws and sacred texts perpetuating the ruling dynasty's legitimacy and wealth (Feldman 2022, pp. 1–6).

But this is not necessarily why these monotheization processes began. The phenomenon was not initially limited to Christianity and Islam. Anatoly Khazanov notes that "in the medieval period the nomads became acquainted with and tried on for size all the world and universal religions, even including their numerous denominations: Manichaeism, Judaism, Buddhism (including Lamaism), Christianity (Nestorianism, Greek Orthodoxy, and even Catholicism), and Islam (both Sunni and Shi'a). They were familiar with Zoroastrianism (including Mazdaism) and Hinduism (including Sivaism), with Confucianism and Taoism. Some nomadic societies not only accepted a religion, but also changed them, sometimes more than once (Khazanov 1994)." Steppe peoples adopted world religions as forms of either opposition or adjustment to neighboring sedentary societies.

But the pressure may not have been entirely external. Norenzayan (2013) proposed that the development of prosocial, moralizing, punitive universal deities—"Big Gods"—facilitated or coevolved (Norenzayan et al. 2016) with the sociopolitical complexity associated with large states and empires. Others (Whitehouse et al. 2023) argue that such theological developments followed, rather than preceded, complex societies. As environmental conditions and tribal rivalries pushed peoples of the great Eurasian steppe westward, they eventually encountered fertile land, which supported agriculture, trade, and urbanization (Harl 2024, pp. 22–43, 173). Norenzayan notes that kin selection and reciprocity alone cannot support cooperation in groups larger than three hundred people (Norenzayan 2013, p. 126), and so adopting one of the moralizing monotheisms was vital for nomadic sedentarization (Skaperdas and Vaidya 2020), which could not be sustained by the non-dogmatic, individualistic, textless Tengrism of the steppe tribes (Isaacs 2021, pp. 451–60).

At the close of Late Antiquity, one emergent steppe empire was eyed covetously by Christendom and Islamdom, a buffer state that could turn the tide in their civilizational struggle. The Khazar kingdom, reorganized by the 630s from ten tribes of the Western Ten-

grist Göktürk nomad empire, resisted Arab conquest (except for brief coerced Islamization in the 730s). Umayyad Islam was not viable for Turkic kingdoms, given the former's emphasis on Arab supremacy (Göksu 2024). Byzantine Christianity, in contrast, likely faced resistance similar to that experienced by Orthodox Christianity among pagans in the same steppe region today:

To pagans, Orthodox images are suspect because they uphold the distinction between medium and source too strictly, and thus offer no indexical proof that the source actually exists. "Jesus Christ is an image painted by someone," the *chimari* high priest of Marii El, Aleksandr Tanygin, said in an interview with me. He was referring to the low reliability of biblical reports about Jesus's teachings, and at the same time pointing out that the gods the Mari worship are so real that they need not be depicted but can be immediately experienced in groves where sacred trees grow as a result of their creative energy. From this point of view, the icon becomes at best an unnecessary addition to places that are already inherently sacred, at worst a weapon of hostile takeover by the church... (Luehrmann 2010)

Shapira noted that the periods of Byzantine Iconoclasm correlate precisely with those of entente between Byzantium and Khazaria (Shapira 2008). Part of the motivation of the iconoclast emperors—fighting momentous battles against Islamic conquest—may have been outreach to their Tengrist neighbors by attenuating the barrier between Byzantium's thick visual culture situated in architecture, sculpture, and gilded artwork (the synthetic) and the shamanistic, animistic, totemistic, yurt-dwelling semi-nomads who lived in the fulness of nature. But this was not enough to bridge the gap.

The Khazars instead reached for Judaism.

Judaism should have faced a steeper climb in appealing to steppe peoples, with its aversion to proselytism, more stringent ethnic identity than even Umayyad Islam, and "thick culture" (cf. Mishler and Pollack 2003) of rules governing all aspects of life. But these could be overcome.

Late antique Jewish culture was indeed "thick," recently shown to partake of the same image discourse as pre-Iconoclasm Byzantium (Sivertsev 2024). But to the extent that Judaism had "icons," they were imagined, as the image of the Jewish people or of Jacob inscribed on the Divine throne (and later, the moon) (Wolfson 1997), and not material. And Jews had been increasingly rendered effective nomads in the centuries after the Temple's destruction and had no centralized architecture, much less a Hagia Sophia to compete with the vast expanses of sky and nature. The Rabbinically reconfigured religion needed none of these; it was entirely portable.

Sparse ninth-century documents describe the Khazar conversion as a *restoration*, situating them Biblically as descendants of Japheth's son Togarmah (King Joseph's Letter/Khazar Correspondence) or, in popular imagination, the lost tribe of Simeon (Schechter Letter) (Naeve 2022, pp. 108–9); hence, a parallel but fully Israelite ethnicity. The existence of a Jewish version of Prester John (Knobler 2017), the ten lost tribes, meant that even if ethnic Jews were an Israelite "tribe," there could be others. Some argue they named the westernmost Khazar city, Kyiv, and its fortress, Sambatas, after the Dnieper River, which they identified as the Sambatyon, after the raging river that sequesters the ten lost tribes in Rabbinic sources (Arkhipov 1995, pp. 71–96). Both the Schechter document and the Khazar Correspondence—and even some Arabic sources (Golden 2016)—characterize the process as a "return" to proper observance after an initial conversionary or penitent event, aided by imported Jewish scholars and interpreted texts in a cave in the "valley of Tizol."

We know that the process of Judaization of the elite was complete no later than 837/8, on the basis of Khazar dirhams inscribed "Mūsā rasūl Allāh," coins clearly intended to simulate, or parody, the segment of the *shahādah* minted on contemporaneous coins of the Ab-

basids and their satellite dynasties that ascribes the title of God's prophet to Muhammad. This means that even before the famed disputation before the Khazar king in 860 between Jewish scholars, Christians (Cyril-Constantine) and a Muslim royal advisor, recorded in the *Vita Constantinii* (Komatina 2025) and fictionalized and immortalized in Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari* (Kitāb al-Khazari), the [minting] die was literally cast in Judaism's favor.

Yet there is no trace of any of this in the Babylonian responsa literature, and likely for good reason. The Geonate, which had relocated around this time to Baghdad, was a "creation of the Abbasid Caliphate (Soloveitchik 2014)." While the Abbasids ultimately took a less confrontational approach to the Khazars militarily, they also pursued a policy of proselytization on their frontiers (Feldman 2022, p. 36) to project their influence, and the Khazar conversion project was a direct affront to those efforts.

A possible textual remnant may survive in *PDRE*. Circulating around the time of Khazar dirhams, it appears to be a Rewritten Bible for "returnees". Repentance is a major theme, and its prolegomenon is particularly striking: a version of an older Rabbinic story from Genesis Rabbah (42: 1) about the teshuva of Tanna R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus. Blachorsky showed that *PDRE*'s deviations from Avot de-Rabbi Nathan were intentional, making R. Eliezer an ascetic like Christian holy men in the early medieval Near-East (Blachorsky 2022, pp. 34–73). The story in *PDRE* 1–2, in which young Eliezer, a wealthy heir, experiences unexplained grief while plowing both harsh and soft land, mirrors the Khazar elite's spiritual "awakening" as it moved from steppe to sedentary living and echoes the Khazar king's account cited from the lost *Kitāb al-Tawārikh*:

A dream came to him repeatedly as though an angel was addressing him, saying, "Your intention is pleasing to God, but your actions are not pleasing." Now, he used to be very diligent with regard to the worship prescribed by the Khazar religion, to the extent that he himself used to officiate at the temple service and [at] the sacrifices with pure and sincere intent. Nevertheless, each time he exerted himself diligently in regard to those acts, the angel came to him at night, telling him, "Your intention is pleasing, but your actions are not pleasing." This prompted him to investigate the various religions and sects, and ultimately both he and the multitude of the Khazars became Jews.

There are signs of a Eurasian steppe *sitz im leben*, such as (chapter 3) the use of snow to create the earth—permafrost—combined with the dark, forbidden northerly direction, fitting for a land near the Siberian steppe but less so for one south of Damascus. The text also emphasizes a kingdom's need for many advisers, characteristic of Khazar governance (Noonan 2007). Japheth, the Khazar ancestor, is assigned the steppe (chapter 24). The coat of Adam, passed to Nimrod and Esau, conveys heroic powers and represents fur, central to the Khazar economy (Noonan 2007, p. 231). Proselytes require seven generations for trust (chapter 29), aligning with the Tengrist tradition of recalling seven generations of ancestors (Isaacs 2021, p. 452). The *ba'alat ov* witch serves as a spirit conduit, like Tengrist shamans (chapter 33). Teraphim are preserved human heads (chapter 36), common in steppe head-hunting (Heron 2020). A description covers the exile of the ten tribes and a failed rabbinic (!) repatriation attempt (chapter 38). Israelites traversed the wilderness "in smoothness" (chapter 41), a skill of steppe nomads (Harl 2024, p. 44). The portrayal of women's superiority (chapter 45) better fits egalitarian Turko-Mongolian society than Byzantine or Islamic contexts. R. Eliezer of Worms notes¹¹ that the (pseudonymous) authors of Midrashic texts, including *PDRE*, are encoded in the numerical value (gematria) of their opening words. A direct reference to the gematria of the name Eliezer (318) is found in chapter 27. This numerical value happens to be shared by the name Khazaria, as it is spelled in the Schechter letter (קזריא).

Most of all, the book, covering sacred history from creation until the Israelites' desert sojourn, focuses extensively on cosmology and angelology (Keim 2016, pp. 97–106), presenting a "Jewish understanding of the natural order of the world" (Urowitz-Freudenstein 1994). Its exploration of Jonah's sea journey completes the Jewish structure of sky and sea—a Rabbinic oceanography. Tengrism is described as "provid[ing] a belief system which gave meaning to life through a psychogeographical relationship with nature and the vast open Central Asian steppe and which guided day-to-day practices that provided the basis of material and social life for the nomadic populations of the Eurasian steppe (Isaacs 2021, p. 453)". *PDRE* appears to adapt Rabbinic teachings for this purpose.

PDRE's author likely emerged from the Galilee study hall (for some scholars, the Geonic academy) of the eighth-century liturgist Pinhas ha-Kohen, with whom he shares dozens of unique Midrashic motifs and customs (Elizur 2004, pp. 201–2). He was also immersed in the broader culture of Byzantine-influenced Eastern Christianity ruled by an Islamic elite. From there, he engaged in a remarkable feat of cultural translation: he wrote a work for the Khazar "repentance" movement and crafted a *Historienbibel* that, alongside its role as a polemic against the two competing monotheisms seeking world domination, would speak to the needs of the nomads of the steppe, offering a redemption-oriented linearity of time, respect for texts, and moralizing attitudes,¹² and, most crucially, reconfiguring their divinized landscape into a Jewish one. Similar strategies would ultimately be taken by Sufi Islam, which, in the ensuing century, would (more or less) win over the remainder of the Turkic tribes with a syncretistic approach (Yerkesheva 2022).

The remainder of chapter 45 is readily understood. An audience of ancestor-worshiping nomads needed more than abstract references to ancestral merit; if local shamans could raise dead souls, Judaism's greatest prophet must do no less. The chapter then completes the revision of Turkic cosmology: the underworld exists below sky and earth–water, ruled by the banished evil god Erlik, who is now transformed into an angelic embodiment of God's wrath, controlled by Moses.¹³

The passage in chapter 45 rewarding women with the New Moon festival might just be a précis of Jewish Khazaria's "repentance" narrative. The khagan was the Turkic sacred king, and the Jewish deputy king and military commander, per the Schechter document, was known as the Beg, or in a Muslim source, Ishah. Shaul Stampfer, doubting the Khazar conversion's historicity, notes "The term *ishah* in Hebrew can mean 'woman,' and one cannot rule out the possibility that a Jewish source was pulling a sort of practical joke by describing the warlike Khazars as being ruled by a woman" (Stampfer 2013). For *PDRE*, this was no joke. The Khazar tribe of Simeon had lost its way in exile in the steppe. In cultic matters, the "woman" (*ishah*), the Jewish-born Beg, showed himself to outrank even the kohen/khagan—high priest—represented by Aaron, who yielded to idolatry. Some Turkic beliefs (Shadkam and Opabekova 2018)¹⁴ could be "recovered" for Judaism, but natural religion's idolatrous potential would be prevented by placing it in the *ishah*'s hands.

Unlike earlier Midrash, *PDRE* probably has no direct connection to the Baal Cycle. It is therefore striking that, at the end of Antiquity, it remythologizes Midrash, allowing women and the moon—marginalized earlier in Antiquity by Marduk and Baal successively—to emerge in full refulgence: a true return of the repressed!

Conclusions: Did Rabbinic Cultural Translation Succeed?

Keim (2016, pp. 127–29) is puzzled by *PDRE*'s focus on idolatry in non-idolatrous Islamic Palestine, where paganism was largely eradicated. While Tengrism offers one explanation, the *PDRE*'s retelling of the Calf episode contains two polemics against Byzantine icon veneration and Islamic prophetic impeccability, both addressing idolization of human leaders.

The Quran (Al-Hijr 15: 28–35) presents a creation story derived from the Syriac Christian *Cave of Treasures* 2:10–3:6, which comes from the Christian *Vita Adami et Evae* (Adelman 2009, pp. 80–81) and sectarian Jewish 2 Enoch (Minov 2015). In this narrative, God orders his creatures to worship Adam. All comply except Satan/Iblis, who is consequently banished from heaven.

Rabbinic Midrash inverts this motif, showing God or angels correcting misguided angelic worship of Adam. Peter Schäfer sees this as a response to Christological interpretations of the Adam myth (Schäfer 2012, pp. 203–13). *PDRE*'s version (*chapter 11*) reads:

Adam stood and he began to gaze upwards and downwards. He saw all the creatures which the Holy One, blessed be He, had created; and he was wondering in his heart, and he began to praise and glorify his Creator, saying, "O Lord, how manifold are thy works!" (Ps. 104: 24). He stood on his feet and was adorned with the Divine Image. His height was from east to west, as it is said, "Thou hast beset me behind and before" (Ps. 139: 5). "Behind" refers to the west, "before" refers to the east. All the creatures saw him and became afraid of him, thinking that he was their Creator, and they came to prostrate themselves before him. Adam said to them: What (is this), ye creatures! Why are ye come to prostrate yourselves before me? Come, I and you, let us go and adorn in majesty and might, and acclaim as King over us the One who created us. If there be no people to acclaim the king as king, the king acclaims himself. If there be no people to praise the king, the king praises himself. In that hour Adam opened his mouth and all the creatures answered after him, and they adorned in majesty and might and acclaimed their Creator as King over themselves, and they said, "The Lord reigneth, he is apparelled with majesty" (Ps. 93: 1).

PDRE vitiates the Quranic and Christian narratives: men are not to be worshiped as gods or Divine proxies—God has no *need* for men. The mid-eighth century saw the proliferation of the *ghulāt*, "exaggerators," who elevated Muhammad, 'Ali or others to divinity, ascribed miracles to them, and denied their mortality (Legenhausen 2021). This may be the target of the polemic in *PDRE*'s report of God's exclusion of immortality from Moses's requests. The idolization of humans even in orthodox Islam seems to have troubled *PDRE*. Both late antique idolatries—icon worship of Jesus and excessive veneration of Muhammad and the prophets (Adam being the first, according to the Quran (Patel 2022))—are misplaced. For *PDRE*, both monotheisms, in this respect, embraced the Golden Calf.

The critique of religion as a political instrument echoes the Biblical critique of Baalism, now targeting the new medievalizing world order of authoritarianism and world domination. *PDRE*'s vision of consultative governance, aversion to proselytization and assertion of women's religious superiority contrast with the two ecclesiastical "commonwealths," with their Divine kingship, top-down conversion, and [inherited Greco-Roman] (El-Badawi 2024, pp. 154–55; Levick 2012, pp. 96–106) structures enforcing feminine inferiority. In its Biblicizations of Eretz-Israeli custom, *PDRE* may protest similar intra-Jewish impulses in the Babylonian Geonate.¹⁵ The resulting polity attenuated the Khaganate's traditional Divine kingship (Olsson 2013), creating a kingdom with confessional freedom that rejected (Feldman 2023) the calf—the use of religion to solidify political power and dynastic wealth—and thus anticipated more modern polities.

Thus, at least in the early medieval Levant, the evolution of the calf motif from Rabbinic Midrash to *PDRE* appears to have preserved a meaning latent in the Book of Exodus's own transformation of the calf motif in *its* cultural context, namely rendering it an avatar of the use of religion to reify political power, which was henceforth verboten. The preservation of this motif renders *PDRE*'s treatment of the calf a particularly instructive example of successful cultural translation of a passage in the Hebrew Bible.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ As well as, most likely, 2 Kings 4: 23 and Isaiah 66: 23, although these did not give rise to Jewish legal controversies.
- ² See discussion in Greer (2024).
- ³ See Jacobson (1991) for pseudo-Philo's read of Tammuz into the book of Judges.
- ⁴ This point is made by Jonathan S. Greer with regard to the calves of Jeroboam, but in his view the latter's "sin" lies in his subordination of his cult to the Jerusalem cult, an expression of political machinations in religion.
- ⁵ See discussion in Keim (2016, pp. 40–43); see now McDowell (2025, pp. 56–67).
- ⁶ Translations with minor modifications from Friedländer (1916).
- ⁷ For *acheiropoieta* in Rabbinic and Christian sources, see Sivertsev (2024, pp. 232–42).
- ⁸ Gabriel Said Reynolds reviews the literature and concludes that the Quran aims for typology, not history. See Reynolds (2010, pp. 130–47).
- ⁹ A similar passage also appears in Deuteronomy Rabbah, Tanhuma, Shemot Rabbah, and Midrash Tehillim, but only Ecclesiastes Rabbah is securely dated prior to PDRE (Kiperwasser 2024).
- ¹⁰ Translation from Cohen (Freedman and Simon 1939, pp. 112–13).
- ¹¹ Introduction to *Sefer ha-Roke'ah*, p. 5 (Rosenfeld ed.).
- ¹² All four are highlighted by Keim (2016, pp. 106–33).
- ¹³ It may be worth considering whether PDRE's focus on personified agents of evil, such as this figure and Satan/Azazel/Samael, is motivated less by the resurfacing of traditions from pseudepigrapha, as suggested by Adelman (2009, pp. 49–70), or by borrowings from Christian works, as suggested by Spurling and Grypeou (2007), and more by the reconfiguration of existing Rabbinic motifs—as proposed by Dulkan (2014)—for the purpose of Judaization of Tengrist beliefs. The latter included a personified force of evil that, although a "son of god (Tengri)", had strong affinities with Zoroastrian dualism. See Özkan (2022).
- ¹⁴ Compare PDRE's "what reward will He give them in the world to come? They are destined to be renewed like the New Moons, as it is said, 'Who satisfieth thy years with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle'" with "Three phases of the moon also had their signs. It was believed that at 'ainaazy' (new moon) the moon symbolized a young girl, who grew day to day. She is pure and modest. At 'aitoly', 'tulyai' (complete moon) Moon personified a mature woman—mother. In this period she is good-natured and favorable. At 'aikarty' (old moon) the Moon aged, became wise, but at the same time quarrelsome and malicious. Before death Moon reigned in absolutely dark night, She was not visible. In these three nights, it was believed, life and death meet together. After the meeting they separate, to meet again in a definite period. The old Moon died, a new one was born, and together with Her a new life, new cycle, new round was born, and so on indefinitely."
- ¹⁵ See Sacks (2009, pp. 109–19), who takes a different view on the sequencing or biblicization and custom.

References

- Aberbach, Moses, and Leivy Smolar. 1967. Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86: 129–40. [CrossRef]
- Adelman, Rachel. 2009. *The Return of the Repressed: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha*. Leiden: Brill.
- Adelman, Rachel. 2014. Can we apply the term "Rewritten Bible" to Midrash? The case of Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer. In *Rewritten Bible After Fifty Years: Texts, Terms, or Techniques? A Last Dialogue with Geza Vermes*. Edited by József Zsengellér. Leiden: Brill, pp. 295–317.
- Al-Jallad, Ahmad. 2015. Echoes of the Baal Cycle in a Safaito-Hismaic Inscription. *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 15: 5–19. [CrossRef]
- Anderson, James S. 2015. *Monotheism and Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Annus, Amar. 2006. The Survivals of the Ancient Syrian and Mesopotamian Intellectual Traditions in the Writings of Ephrem Syrus. *Ugarit-Forschungen* 38: 1.
- Arbuckle, Benjamin S. 2014. The Rise of Cattle Cultures in Bronze Age Anatolia. *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies* 2: 277–97.

- Arkhipov, Andrei. 1995. *Po tu Storonu Sambationa. Etiudy o Russko-Evreiskikh Kkul'turnykh, Iazykovykh i Literaturnykh Kontaktakh v X-XVI Vekakh*. Oakland: Berkeley Slavic Specialties.
- Avner, Uzi. 2021. The Desert's Role in the Formation of Early Israel and the Origin of Yhwh. *Entangled Religions* 12: 1–58. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ayali-Darshan, Noga. 2019. The Literary Development of the Myth of the Moon-God and his Cow. *Ugarit-Forschungen* 50: 3–32.
- Ayali-Darshan, Noga. 2020. *The Storm-God and the Sea: The Origin, Versions, and Diffusion of a Myth Throughout the Ancient Near East*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Ayali-Darshan, Noga. 2024. *Dying and Rising Gods: The History of a Mythologem in West Asia of the Second Millennium BCE*. Münster: Zaphon.
- Berman, Joshua A. 2017. *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blachorsky, Joshua. 2022. Beyond Late Midrash: 8–9th Century Jewish Palestinian Literature in Its Early Medieval Context. Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, New York, NY, USA.
- Cassuto, Umberto. 1975. The Israelite Epic. In *Biblical and Oriental Studies*. Edited by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, pp. 69–109.
- Cohen, Ada Taggar, ed. 2018. Religious Restrictions in the Bible and Hittite cultures: On Holiness in Both Cultures. In *Proceedings of The Third International Symposium on Jewish Studies: Judaism in Modern Era Interpretative Studies of Ancient and Current Texts*. Kyoto: Doshisha University, pp. 27–37.
- Cole, Juan. 2025. *Rethinking the Qur'ān in Late Antiquity*. Boston: De Gruyter.
- Conway, Kyle. 2019. What Is Cultural Translation? *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change* 4: 17.
- Conway, Kyle. 2020. *The Art of Communication in a Polarized World*. Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, p. 5.
- Conway, Kyle. 2024. Translation and the Paradox of Cultural Flux. *Cultus: The Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication* 17: 46–64.
- Cormack, Robin. 2013. Women and Icons, and Women in Icons. In *Women, Men and Eunuchs*. Edited by Lizabeth James. New York: Routledge, pp. 24–51.
- Crone, Patricia. 2017. Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm. In *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times*. Edited by Michael Bonner. New York: Routledge, pp. 361–97.
- Cross, Frank Moore. 1997. *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- De Moor, Johannes Cornelis. 1971. *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'lu: According to the Version of Ilmilku*. Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker.
- Dulkan, Ryan S. 2014. The Devil Within: A Rabbinic Traditions-History of the Samael Story in “Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer”. *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21: 153–75. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ehara, Satoko. 2024. Continuity and Transformation of the Weeping Ritual Focusing on the Tammūz Ritual During the Islamic period. *Orient* 59: 91–106. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Eichler, Raanan. 2015. Cherub: A History of Interpretation. *Biblica* 96: 26–38.
- El-Badawi, Emran. 2024. *Female Divinity in the Qur'an*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Elizur, Shulamit. 2004. *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Pinhas Ha-Kohen*. Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies.
- Feder, Yitzhaq. 2013. The Aniconic Tradition, Deuteronomy 4, and the Politics of Israelite Identity. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132: 251–74. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Feldman, Alex M. 2022. *Monotheisation of Pontic-Caspian Eurasia: From the Eighth to the Thirteenth Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Feldman, Alex M. 2023. Khazaria: The Exception Which Proves the Rules. In *How Medieval Europe Was Ruled*. Edited by Christian Raffensperger. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, pp. 41–58.
- Feldman, Alex M. 2024. *Orthodox Mercantilism: Political Economy in the Byzantine Commonwealth*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Fleming, Daniel E. 1999. If El is a Bull, Who is a Calf? Reflections on Religion in Second-Millennium Syria-Palestine. *Eretz-Israel* 26: 23–27.
- Freedberg, David. 2013. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Freedman, Harry, and Maurice Simon. 1939. *Midrash Rabbah, Ecclesiastes*. London: Soncino Press.
- Friedländer, Gerald. 1916. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer: (The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great) According to the Text of the Manuscript Belonging to Abraham Epstein of Vienna*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.
- Gabriel, Gösta. 2025. Ištar in Enūma Eliš: A Silent Displacement. *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 25: 23–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Garnzczarska, Magdalena. 2020. Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold Based on Byzantine Ekphraseis of Works of Art. *Studia Ceranea. Journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe* 10: 83–121. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Golden, Peter B. 2016. The Khazars as ‘Sons of Abraham’. *Khazar Almanac* 14: 322–48.

- Göksu, Erkan. 2024. The Establishment of Islam in Central Asia: Geo-Cultural Patterns and Geographical Realities. In *Mass Conversions to Christianity and Islam, 800–1100*. Edited by Tsvetelin Stepanov and Osman Karatay. Cham: Springer, pp. 265–300.
- Greer, Jonathan Samuel. 2024. Recasting the Sin of the Calf: The Deference of Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12 and the Formation of the Earliest History of Israel and Judah. In *The Formation of Biblical Texts: Chronicling the Legacy of Gary N. Knoppers*. Edited by Deirdre N. Fulton, Kenneth A. Ristau, Jonathan S. Greer and Margaret E. Cohen. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 41–56.
- Harl, Kenneth W. 2024. *Empires of the Steppes: The Nomadic Tribes Who Shaped Civilisation*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Häner, Tobias, and Virginia Miller. 2023. Introduction: Reading Irony in Ancient Texts. In *Irony in the Bible: Between Subversion and Innovation*. Edited by Tobias Häner, Virginia Miller and Carolyn J. Sharp. Leiden: Brill, pp. 1–11.
- Heron, Tobias. 2020. Headhunting in Iron Age Europe. In *1884 Rhifyn Arbennig/Special Issue 1*. Mumbai: RK Publications, pp. 1–74.
- Holzer, Aton M. 2023. Ma'ot Hittite: Finding Divine Morality in Borrowing from an Ancient Near East Context. *Megadim* 62: 5–22.
- Isaacs, Rico. 2021. Tengrism. In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia*. Edited by Rico Isaacs and Erica Marat. London: Routledge, pp. 451–60.
- Jacobson, Howard. 1991. The Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum and Tammuz. *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 4: 63–65. [CrossRef]
- Keating, Sandra Toenies. 2014. Revisiting the Charge of Tahrif: The Question of Supersessionism in Early Islam and the Qur'an. In *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages*. Edited by Ian Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtković and Donald F. Duclow. Leiden: Brill, pp. 202–17.
- Keim, Katharina E. 2016. *Pirquei deRabbi Eliezer: Structure, Coherence, Intertextuality*. Leiden: Brill.
- Khazanov, Anatoly M. 1994. The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies of the Eurasian Steppes. In *Nomadic Diplomacy, Destruction and Religion from the Pacific to the Adriatic*. Edited by Michael Gervers and Wayne Schlepp. Toronto: University of Toronto, pp. 11–33.
- Kiperwasser, Reuven. 2024. Ecclesiastes Rabbah. In *Targums and Rabbinic Literature*. Edited by Bruce Chilton and Alan J. Avery-Peck. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, pp. 369–73.
- Knobler, Adam. 2017. Prester John, the Ten Tribes, and the Raja Rum: Representing the Distant Ally in Three Pre-Modern Societies. In *Locating Religions*. Edited by Reinhold Gleis and Nikolas Jaspert. Leiden: Brill, pp. 151–72.
- Komatina, Predrag. 2025. The Gospel Beyond the Hospitable Seas: The Khazar Mission and the First Baptism of the Russians. In *Church Policy of Byzantium After the Triumph of Orthodoxy (843–886)*. Edited by Predrag Komatina. Cham: Springer Nature, pp. 153–77.
- Legenhausen, Muhammad. 2021. Inerrancy and Exaggeration in Shi'i Theology. In *Impeccability and Temptation*. Edited by Johannes Grössl and Klaus von Stosch. London: Routledge, pp. 253–70.
- Levenson, Jon D. 2024. *Israel's Day of Light and Joy: The Origin, Development, and Enduring Meaning of the Jewish Sabbath*. University Park: Penn State Press, pp. 17–48.
- Levick, Barbara. 2012. Women and Law. In *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*. Edited by Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 96–106.
- Loewenstamm, Samuel E. 1967. The Making and Destruction of the Golden Calf. *Biblica* 48: 481–90.
- Luehrmann, Sonja. 2010. A Dual Quarrel of Images on the Middle Volga: Icon Veneration in the Face of Protestant and Pagan Critique. In *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*. Edited by Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 56–78.
- Markl, Dominik. 2019. Polemics Against Child Sacrifice in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. In *Intolerance, Polemics, and Debate in Antiquity: Politico-Cultural, Philosophical, and Religious Forms of Critical Conversation*. Edited by George van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten. Leiden: Brill, pp. 57–91.
- Mason, Eric F., and Edmondo F. Lupieri. 2018. *The Reception of Golden Calf Traditions in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Leiden: Brill.
- Mathews, Thomas F. 2021. The Origin of Icons. In *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Art and Architecture*. Edited by Ellen C. Schwartz. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 21–29.
- McDowell, Gavin. 2021. Rabbinization of Non-Rabbinic Material in Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer. In *Diversity and Rabbinization: Texts and Societies in Late Antique Judaism Between 400 and 1000 CE*. Edited by Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, pp. 381–412.
- McDowell, Gavin. 2025. *The Rewritten Bible in Late Antiquity: Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer, Jubilees and the Cave of Treasures*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Mehr, Vahid Mahdavi. 2023. *Is the Quran Supersessionist? Toward Identifying the Quran's Theological Framework of Engagement with Earlier Abrahamic Traditions*. Leiden: Brill Schöningh.
- Meshel, Naphtali S. 2014. *The 'Grammar' of Sacrifice: A Generativist Study of the Israelite Sacrificial System in the Priestly Writings with A 'Grammar' of Σ*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, Robert D., II. 2021. *Yahweh: Origin of a Desert God*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

- Minov, Sergey. 2015. Satan's Refusal to Worship Adam: A Jewish Motif and its Reception in Syriac Christian Tradition. In *Tradition, Transmission, and Transformation from Second Temple Literature Through Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity*. Edited by Menahem Kister, Hillel Newman, Michael Segal and Ruth Clements. Leiden: Brill, pp. 230–71.
- Mishler, William, and Detlef Pollack. 2003. On Culture, Thick and Thin: Toward a Neo-Cultural Synthesis. In *Political Culture in Post-Communist Europe: Attitudes in New Democracies*. Edited by Detlef Pollack, Jorg Jacobs, Olaf Muller and Gert Pickel. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, pp. 237–56.
- Naeve, Patrick. 2022. Anagenesis: Migration, Conversion, and the Making of History in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, New York, NY, USA.
- Natif, Mika. 2019. Painters Will Be Punished: The Politics of Figural Representation Amongst the Umayyads. In *The Image Debate Figural Representation in Islam and Across the World*. Edited by Christiane Gruber. Berkeley: Gingko, pp. 32–45.
- Noonan, Thomas S. 2007. Some Observations on the Economy of the Khazar Khaganate. In *The World of the Khazars*. Edited by Peter Golden, Haggai Ben-Shammai and András Roná-Tas. Leiden: Brill, pp. 207–44.
- Norenzayan, Ara. 2013. *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Norenzayan, Ara, Azim F. Shariff, Will M. Gervais, Aiyana K. Willard, Rita A. McNamara, Edward Slingerland, and Joseph Henrich. 2016. The Cultural Evolution of Prosocial Religions. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 39: e1. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Olsson, Joshua T. 2013. Coup d'état, Coronation and Conversion: Some Reflections on the Adoption of Judaism by the Khazar Khaganate. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23: 495–526. [CrossRef]
- Özkan, Murat Sultan. 2022. Dualist Understanding of Existence in Turkish-Iranian Mythology and Beliefs. *Asya Studies* 6: 217–36. [CrossRef]
- Patel, Aaminah Kulsum. 2022. The Ascent of Adam: Re-Evaluating the First Prophet in Quranic Exegesis. Ph.D. dissertation, King's College London, London, UK.
- Pregill, Michael. 2008. The Living Calf of Sinai: Orientalism, "Influence," and the Foundations of the Islamic Exegetical Tradition. Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA.
- Pregill, Michael E. 2020. *The Golden Calf Between Bible and Qur'an: Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rendsburg, Gary A. 1988. The Egyptian Sun-God Ra in the Pentateuch. *Henoch* 10: 3–15.
- Rendsburg, Gary A. 1997. Ancient Hebrew Phonology. In *Phonologies of Asia and Africa (Including the Caucasus)* 1. Edited by Alan S. Kaye. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, pp. 65–83.
- Rendsburg, Gary A. 2006. Moses as Equal to Pharaoh. In *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*. Edited by Gary M. Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis. Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, pp. 201–19.
- Rendsburg, Gary A. 2015. Moses the Magician. In *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*. Edited by Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider and William H. C. Propp. Berlin: Springer, pp. 243–58.
- Reynolds, Gabriel Said. 2010. *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*. London: Routledge.
- Rubinstein-Shemer, Nesya. 2021. The Qur'anic Mary in the Light of Rabbinic Texts. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 32: 129–58. [CrossRef]
- Sacks, Steven Daniel. 2009. *Midrash and Multiplicity: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Renewal of Rabbinic Interpretive Culture*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Sahner, Christian C. 2017. The First Iconoclasm in Islam: A New History of the Edict of Yazīd II (AH 104/AD 723). *Der Islam* 94: 5–56. [CrossRef]
- Sanders, Susan J. 2003. Towards a Theology of Baal: Revisiting the Interpretation of the Ugaritic Texts. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK.
- Schäfer, Peter. 2012. *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Schniedewind, William M. 2004. *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shadkam, Zubaida, and Gulmira Paritonovna Opabekova. 2018. World Outlook and Worship of Ancient Turks. *Al-Farabi Kazakh National University Journal of Oriental Studies* 3: 140–47.
- Shapira, Dan. 2008. Iconoclasts and Khazars, a Note. *Scrinium* 4: 341–47. [CrossRef]
- Sivertsev, Alexei M. 2024. *Jews, Christians, and the Discourse on Images Before Iconoclasm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Skaperdas, Stergios, and Samarth Vaidya. 2020. Why Did Pre-Modern States Adopt Big-God Religions? *Public Choice* 182: 373–94. [CrossRef]
- Smith, Mark S. 1994. *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle, Vol. 1: Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU 1.1–1.2*. Leiden: Brill.
- Soloveitchik, Haym. 2014. The Third Yeshivah of Bavel. In *Collected Essays II*. Edited by Haym Soloveitchik. Oxford: Littmann Library of Jewish Civilization, pp. 150–215.
- Spurling, Helen, and Emmanouela Grypeou. 2007. Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and Eastern Christian Exegesis. *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 4: 217–43.

- Stampfer, Shaul. 2013. Did the Khazars Convert to Judaism? *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 19: 1–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Theuer, Gabriele. 2000. *Der Mondgott in den Religionen Syrien-Palästinas: Unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung von KTU 1.24*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Tigay, Jeffrey H. 1982. On the Meaning of T(w)tp̄. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101: 321–31.
- Tsumura, David Toshio. 2024. *Was There a Cult of El in Ancient Canaan? Essays on Ugaritic Religion and Language*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Tugendhaft, Aaron. 2017. *Baal and the Politics of Poetry*. New York: Routledge.
- Urowitz-Freudenstein, Anna. 1994. Pseudepigraphic Support of Pseudepigraphical Sources: The Case of Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer. In *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*. Edited by John C. Reeves. Atlanta: SBL, pp. 35–53.
- VanDyke, Elizabeth Grace. 2023. *The Calf of Samaria: The Politics of Cultic Images in Eighth Century Israel*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA.
- Vermes, Géza. 2014. The Genesis of the Concept of “Rewritten Bible”. In *Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years: Texts, Terms, or Techniques? A Last Dialogue with Geza Vermes*. Edited by József Zsengellér. Leiden: Brill, pp. 3–9.
- Vette, Nathanael. 2022. *Writing with Scripture: Scripturalized Narrative in the Gospel of Mark*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- von Stosch, Klaus. 2021. Conclusion: Impeccability and Sinlessness in Islam and Christianity. In *Impeccability and Temptation*. Edited by Johannes Grössl and Klaus von Stosch. London: Routledge, pp. 286–95.
- Walker, Christopher, and Michael B. Dick. 1999. The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Miš Pi Ritual. In *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*. Edited by Michael B. Dick. University Park: Penn State Press, pp. 55–121.
- Walton, John H. 1995. The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications. *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5: 155–75. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Watson, Rebecca S., and Adrian H. W. Curtis. 2022. *Conversations on Canaanite and Biblical Themes: Creation, Chaos and Monotheism*. Boston: De Gruyter.
- Watson, Wilfred G. E. 2015. From Hair to Heel: Ugaritic Terms for Parts of the Body. *Folia Orientalia* 52: 323–64.
- Whitehouse, Harvey, Pieter François, Patrick E. Savage, Daniel Hoyer, Kevin C. Feeney, Enrico Cioni, Rosalind Purcell, Jennifer Larson, John Baines, Barend ter Haar, and et al. 2023. Testing the Big Gods Hypothesis with Global Historical Data: A Review and “Retake”. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 13: 124–66. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Wolfson, Elliot R. 1997. The Face of Jacob in the Moon: Mystical Transformations of an Aggadic Myth. In *The Seductiveness of Jewish Myth: Challenge or Response?* Edited by S. Daniel Breslauer. Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 235–70.
- Yerekesheva, Laura Gibratovna. 2022. Sufism and Religious Syncretism in the History of Central Asia. In *Sufism in India and Central Asia*. Edited by Nasir Raza Khan. London: Routledge, pp. 141–48.
- Young, Ian, and Robert Rezetko. 2014. *Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts, Vol. 1*. London: Routledge.
- Zevit, Ziony. 1990. Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues. *Bible Review* 6: 16–23.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.