

The Upraised Mountain and Israel's Election in the Qur'an and Talmud

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In four passages in the Qur'an (Q 2:63, 93; 4:154; 7:171), reference is made to God raising up (or shaking) a mountain. In each passage, the context is God's covenant with Israel at Sinai, and the text appears to say that God lifted up Mt. Sinai over the people of Israel. A parallel to this motif appears in early rabbinic sources, including a tradition cited twice in the Babylonian Talmud (Shab 88a and AZ 2b), which suggests that God threatened to drop Mt. Sinai on Israel if they refused to accept the Torah. In both Talmud passages, the discussion that unfolds probes the topic of God's unique choice of Israel to receive the Torah. In its own allusions to the Sinai event, the Qur'an seems to presume a background narrative similar to the tradition found in the Talmud, in that the Qur'an's references to God raising up the mountain make best contextual sense as examples where God had to force Israel to accept their covenant. In the Qur'an, the raising or shaking of the mountain represents one in a series of illustrations showing how the people were unwilling to believe and ultimately broke their covenant. The threat of the mountain also serves as a reminder that people should be on guard, in constant awareness of their accountability to God (*taqwā*). Moreover, the rhetoric surrounding the uplifted mountain theme in the Qur'an emphasizes the universality of God's command for all to believe, as if the Messenger of the Qur'an was refuting an interpretation of the Sinai event that construed it as proof of Israel's election. For both the Talmud and the Qur'an, each text's manner of handling the uplifted mountain motif reveals something about the community behind the text. The discussions we find in the Talmud about the uplifted mountain and Israel's election reflect the theological explorations we would expect to see in a developed religious culture lived out by a religious minority in an established empire. The Qur'an's discourse, in contrast, seeks to destabilize Jewish and Christian concepts of election and deploys the uplifted mountain motif to emphasize everyone's need to show reverent awareness of God.

Keywords: Qur'an; Talmud; Mt. Sinai; Torah; election

Introduction

Since the nineteenth century western scholarship on the Qur'an has identified numerous parallels between the Qur'an and biblical literature as mediated through late antique Jewish and Christian sources.¹ The basic information produced by this research has proved to be valuable. But by and large, the earliest studies in this area were content to identify parallels without offering much analysis, or else they focused exclusively on describing the channels by which traditions reached the Qur'an. Recent studies on the Qur'an and the biblical tradition, however, have sought to discuss issues of literary dependence with greater attention to how shared motifs function in each text in which they occur.²

This essay will examine an exegetical tradition rooted in Exodus 19:17 according to which God lifted up Mt. Sinai over the people of Israel, as it appears in both the Babylonian Talmud and the Qur'an. By recognizing how this motif of the uplifted mountain functions as part of the background narrative for several Qur'anic passages, we will see more clearly the rhetorical force of these passages. The topic at the forefront of this exegetical motif is Israel's election by God to receive the Torah; by comparing how the Talmud and Qur'an each handle Israel's election, an important aspect of the theology of each text will come into clearer focus. Moreover, through the theological discussions found in the Talmud and Qur'an, we can gain further insight into the communities that produced these texts.

I will begin by setting forth the exegetical issue in the book of Exodus that gave rise to the uplifted mountain motif and situate this exegesis in its late antique context. After this, I will briefly note the earliest witness to the uplifted mountain tradition, which gives some idea of the source material with which the Talmudic sages worked. Next I will discuss the two passages in the Talmud where the uplifted mountain motif occurs. Finally, I will explore how the Qur'an appropriates this motif in its own telling of the Sinai event. For both the Talmud and the Qur'an, the uplifted mountain tradition is a window into thinking about Israel's election in relation to other nations. For the Talmud, the tradition leads

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1. Key early studies include A. Geiger (1902), *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*; H. Speyer (2013), *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Quran*; W. Clair-Tisdall (1901), *The Sources of Islam: A Persian Treatise*; R. Bell (1926), *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*; and C. C. Torrey (1933), *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*.
 2. E.g., R. C. Gregg (2015), *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*; C. Bakhos (2014), *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations*; E. I. El-Badawi (2014), *The Qur'an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*; G. S. Reynolds (2010), *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*; S. L. Lowin (2006), *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives*; J. C. Reeves ed. (2003), *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*; and M. R. Waldman (1985), "New Approaches to 'Biblical' Material in the Qur'an."

to deepening theological reflection on Israel's election, divine justice, and revelation. In the Qur'an, the uplifted mountain motif is part of a broader reframing of the topic of Israel's election.

Exodus 19, Israel's election, and interpretation in Late Antiquity

Exodus 19 represents a pivotal moment, not only in the book of Exodus, but also in the Pentateuch and in the Hebrew Bible as a whole. In this chapter, Moses brings the Israelites to Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. Yahweh offers to make the people of Israel His "personal possession" (*sēgullâ*) among all peoples to serve as a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation" (Exod 19:5–6). This offer confirms Israel's identification with Abraham, since God promised to make a covenant with Abraham's descendants (Gen 17:6–8; 22:16–18). It also creates a unique relationship between God and Israel, makes Israel the caretakers of divine revelation, and gives Israel a special mission in the world.

Given Israel's whole experience with God as told in the Hebrew Scriptures, a key theological question arises: On what basis did Yahweh select Israel to receive the Torah? Did God choose Israel primarily because of Abraham's obedience (cf. Gen 22:18; 26:5)? Or were the people of Israel mainly responsible for the privilege of receiving the Torah because they trusted in Yahweh (Exod 4:31; 14:31), as exemplified in their willingness to accept the Torah (Exod 19:8; 24:3, 7)? In other words: Was Israel already special, and that is why they received the Torah? Or did Israel become special by embracing the Torah when it was offered? Deeper theological reflection leads to further questions: Was the Torah offered to other people groups, too? Or did Yahweh give other nations their own guidelines?

The exegetical motif through which the Talmud and Qur'an address Israel's election involves God lifting up Mt. Sinai and holding it above the people of Israel. In Exodus 19:17 Moses brings the people out of the camp to meet God, and the people take their place *b'tahtîṭ hāhār*, which is usually taken to mean, "at the foot of the mountain." This understanding of the phrase makes reasonable sense in the context of the narrative. Yet, based on classical Hebrew usage as otherwise attested in the Hebrew Bible, *b'tahtîṭ* is an unusual way to say "at the foot of." The word *taḥat* typically means "under," and *tahtî* is a related form that usually means "lower" or "the lower part." Elsewhere in the Bible, *tahtî* refers to the "lower" deck of the ark (Gen 6:16), Sheol "beneath" the earth (Deut 32:22; Ps 86:13; Ps 88:7 (cf. v. 4)), "lower regions" below the earth (Isa 44:23; Ezek 26:20; 31:14, 16, 18; 32:24; Ps 63:10; 139:15), the pit of the "regions below" (Lam 3:55), "lower" springs of water (Josh 15:19; Judg 1:15), and a "lower" millstone (Job 41:16).³ The specific form *b'tahtîṭ* is unique in the Hebrew Bible. If one were

3. The only possible analogue for *b'tahtîṭ* meaning "at the foot of" is Neh 4:7, where *tahtî* is part of a complex collocation: *mittaḥtiyyôṭ lammāqôm mē'ah'rê lahômâ*, "at

to press the language of the text in a literalistic fashion, one could construe this verse as saying that the people took their place “below” or “underneath” the mountain. It is precisely this kind of unusual expression in the biblical text that regularly served as a jumping off point for midrashic exegesis (see Zetterholm 2012, 70–71; Wylen 2005, 97–98; Stern 1987, 613–620; Sarason 1998, 133–154). In fact, the picture of Israel situated literally underneath the uplifted mountain supports a theological reflection on Israel's meeting with God at Sinai in the earliest rabbinic midrash on Exodus, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*.

That God raised up Mt. Sinai over Israel became a standard interpretation of Exodus 19:17 in rabbinic sources.⁴ It is notable, although not unusual, that an exegetical motif such as this should find its way into the Qur'an. In order to understand how these two documents deploy this motif in reflecting theologically on Israel's election, two principles must be kept in mind.

First, in rabbinic exegesis, attention to a linguistic peculiarity is often the pretext for a broad theological reflection on the passage as a whole. The compilers of rabbinic documents clearly understand the straightforward sense of most passages they interpret, as they show whenever they include plain sense exegesis side by side with linguistically creative readings. When they scrutinized the language of Scripture to find hooks on which to hang their theological

the lower parts of the space behind the wall.” The phrase with the *b* preposition, *b'tahtiyyôṭ*, “in the regions below the earth” occurs twice (Ps 63:10; 139:15).

4. The motif of the uplifted mountain appears in Targum *Pseudo-Jonathan* 19:17, which might be as early as the fourth century CE; see Fleisher and Chilton 2011, 155–166. Other rabbinic sources that reflect this motif, along with their dates of final redaction, include: *Song of Songs Rabbah* 8.5 (6th or 7th century); *Tanhuma*, *Noah*, 3; and *Tanhuma*, *Shofetim*, 9 (late 7th–9th centuries); the first printed edition of *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* 41 (8th or 9th century); *Midrash on Psalms* 1 (13th century); *Yalkut Shimoni* on Exod 19:17 (12th or 13th century); and *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Exod 19:17 (13th century). On these dates, see M. Bregman (2003), *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions*, 2–5; S. D. Sacks (2009), *Midrash and Multiplicity: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Renewal of Rabbinic Interpretive Culture*, 4–9; W. G. Braude (1959), *The Midrash on Psalms*, 1: xxv–xxx; and H. L. Strack and G. Stemmerger, trans. (1992), *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 315, 351–352, and 354–355. The Targum says that the mountain was clear like glass. *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* merely reports the lifting up of the mountain. The usage of the motif in *Song of Songs Rabbah* and *Midrash on the Psalms* resembles that of *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*. The passages in *Tanhuma*, *Yalkut Shimoni*, and *Midrash ha-Gadol* elaborate on the Talmudic version. The pertinent text from *Midrash ha-Gadol* has been used in the reconstruction of a much earlier midrash on Exodus; see W. D. Nelson, trans. (2006), *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai*, 229. But as Nelson indicates, the passage in question involving the uplifted mountain does not appear in any fragments of the original *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai*, but is found only in *Midrash ha-Gadol*, which in its present form looks to be dependent on the Talmud.

interpretations, they did so because they believed that God had placed clues for such understandings in the very words of the text (cf. Fishbane 2013, 13–17; and Eilberg-Schwartz 1988). Whether the textual detail gave rise to the theological reading, or the theological reading inspired them to search for a textual detail, the two worked in tandem. Therefore, one should not focus simply on the textual feature that served as the formal basis for the interpretation. To see what is really happening, we must read carefully for the theological issue at stake.

Second, in the course of telling and retelling biblical narratives, an aggadic embellishment such as the uplifted mountain tradition could become so well recognized that it came to be seen as an integral part of the story.⁵ In other words, when later interpreters recounted Israel's arrival at Sinai, they might include a reference to God raising up the mountain, not as an interpretation of Exodus 19:17, but as an assumed element in the narrative. This was common in the development of Jewish Haggadah, and it also pertains to the formation of the Qur'an, where many passages recall versions of biblical accounts that include aggadic elements.⁶ So here, the Qur'an does not derive the raising up of Mt. Sinai through exegesis, but appears to have absorbed this narrative feature from previous tellings of the Sinai event. The key principle, however, is this: the function that this element served in previous sources does not determine how the Qur'an will use it. The Qur'an, it seems, wove elements of previous stories into its own discourse to make its own theological points.

The uplifted mountain in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*

The first appearance of the uplifted mountain interpretation is found in the Tannaitic midrash on Exodus, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, redacted in the second half of the third century CE (Strack and Stemberger 1992, 255). In MRI, *baḥōdeš*, chapter 3, the midrash makes the following comment on the phrase *b'tahtit hāhār* in Exodus 19:17:

This teaches that the mountain was pulled up from its place, and they (the people of Israel) drew near and stood under it, as it is said: "So you drew near and stood under the mountain" (Deut 4:11). Regarding these people, it is explained in the tradition: "O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret place of the cliff; let me see your appearance, let me hear your voice; because your voice is sweet, and your appearance is lovely" (Song 2:14). "Let me see your appearance" (Song 2:14)—these are the twelve pillars corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Exod 24:4); "let me hear your voice" (Song 2:14)—this refers to the giving of the Ten Commandments; "because your voice is sweet" (Song 2:14), after the Ten Commandments were received; "and your appearance is

5. James Kugel (1998, 23–29, 39) refers to this process as "legendizing." See also Kugel 1986, 99–100.

6. See the studies cited in notes 1 and 2.

lovely" (Song 2:14), when "All the congregation drew near and stood before the LORD" (Lev 9:5) (H. S. Horowitz, ed. 1997, 214–215).

The fact that Israel stood literally "under" the mountain is supported by quoting Deuteronomy 4:11 (*taḥaṭ hāhār*). MRI then connects this striking image with an allegorical exposition of Song of Songs 2:14, in which Israel as the female figure in the Song is reclusive like a dove that takes shelter in the cleft of a rock. This exegesis presupposes the figurative interpretation of the Song. It is possible that the literalistic reading of *b'ṭaḥtîṭ hāhār* in Exod 19:17 originated as the solution to an exegetical question in expounding the Song of Songs; namely, when God took Israel to himself as his beloved, how was Israel "in the clefts of the rock" (*b'ḥaḡwê hassēla'*), as Song 2:14 states? In this scenario, the sage searched through Scripture looking for a passage that somehow placed Israel among the rocks in God's presence. Alternately, it is also possible that a sage noticed the peculiarity of *b'ṭaḥtîṭ hāhār* and hunted for a parallel passage with which to explain it, finding such a passage in Song 2:14 (as figuratively interpreted). Whatever the origins of this interpretation, the association of Exodus 19:17 with Song 2:14 depicts Israel standing beneath Mt. Sinai as a positive experience. God pulled up the mountain and Israel came willingly to stand beneath it. For Israel, the shelter of the mountain provided protection, security, and intimacy, where the people could respond sweetly to God by accepting His commandments. In MRI, God's election of Israel to receive the Torah and His unique relationship with the people of Israel are freely affirmed. No further complications are raised.

The overturned mountain in the Babylonian Talmud

The motif of the uplifted mountain appears twice in the Babylonian Talmud, which was composed on the basis of earlier sources but appears to have received substantial literary shaping in the sixth and perhaps seventh centuries CE.⁷

7. The primary period of the Amoraim, the sages whose statements and comments on the Mishnah constitute the basic material of the Gemara, is c. 225–c. 500 CE. A traditional perspective on the redaction of the Talmud envisions editorial work on the Talmud happening contemporaneously with the latest Amoraic sages, with the "end of instruction" taking place with R. Ashi (d. 427) and Ravina (d. 499) (see BM 86a), and only minor editorial comments being added by sages of the following generations, the Saboraim; see M. Elon (1994), *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, 3: 1091–1094. Recent scholarship, however, has pointed to the significant role of anonymous post-Amoraic sages in editing the earlier sources and giving the Talmud its distinctive literary shape and pervasive dialectical quality. From this perspective, the anonymous editorial voice that speaks in the Talmud, citing sources and raising questions, can be described as "Saboraic" (e.g., R. Kalmin (1989), *The Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud: Amoraic or Saboraic?*), or else "Stammaitic," from the Hebrew *stām*, "anonymous" (e.g., see D. W. Halivni, (2013), *The Formation*

In tractates *Shabbat* and *Abodah Zarah* the following tradition is reported:

“And they stood under the mountain”: R. Abdimi b. Ḥama said: This teaches that the Holy Blessed One overturned the mountain upon them like a cask, and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, well and good; but if not, there shall be your burial.”⁸

The Talmud ascribes this interpretation to R. Abdimi b. Ḥama, a fourth century sage from the land of Israel who emigrated to Babylonia. It is not clear what point this explanation of the verse was originally intended to make. Why did God threaten to bury Israel beneath the mountain if they did not accept the Torah? Was it because they were hesitant to accept it? Was this a sign that God specially chose Israel? Was God trying to say something about His own character, or else communicate something about the nature of the Torah? One thing is clear: In the Talmud, the motif of the uplifted mountain is no longer the occasion for remembering God’s intimate protection of Israel. Instead, the R. Abdimi interpretation construes God’s action as a threat meant to compel Israel to respond favorably to the Torah. In each passage treated below, the Talmud’s redactors elaborate on this tradition in order to address theological questions related to Israel’s election.

The overturned mountain in Bavli Shabbat

The first passage is found in Bavli *Shabbat* 88a. The *suḡya* begins as a discussion of Mishnah *Shabbat* 9:3–4, which provides scriptural proof texts for a series of ritual regulations, for example, “How do we know that a circumcised child may be bathed on the third day after circumcision which falls on the Sabbath,” the answer being Genesis 34:25: “And it came to pass on the third day when they were sore” (m.Shab 9:3). After a discussion of these regulations, a Tannaitic tradition (*tānū rabbānan*) about the Ten Commandments is given: “Our Rabbis taught: On the sixth day of the month (Sivan) the Ten Commandments were given to Israel” (Shab 86b). As part of the elaboration on this tra-

of the Babylonian Talmud). The redaction of the Talmud would thus have taken place within the Sasanian Empire somewhere between 500 and 700 CE. See also M. Vidas (2014), *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*.

8. R. Abdimi b. Ḥama was a fourth generation Palestinian Amora who emigrated to Babylonia; see Strack and Stemberger (1992, 94). His name is abbreviated to “R. Dimi b. Ḥama” in *Abodah Zarah* 2b according to MS New York JTS Rab. 15 and MS Munich 95. In MS Paris 1337 he is identified as “R. Abdimi b. Ḥama from Haifa.” For *Shabbat* 88a, one important manuscript gives “R. Dimi b. Ḥama b. Ḥasa” (MS Oxford Oppenheimer Add. fol. 23), and two give “R. Abdimi b. Ḥama” (MS Munich 95 and MS Vat. Ebr. 108). These manuscripts are cited according to The Saul and Evelyn Henkind Talmud Text Databank, Lieberman Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

dition, the Gemara states, "All agree that the Torah was given to Israel on the Sabbath" (Shab 86b), and "the Divine Presence did not come to rest until the morning of the Sabbath" (Shab 87a). After this comes a series of short units describing on what days or months events connected with Sinai took place; each of these units begins with the phrase, "Come and hear" (*tā' š'ma'*) (Shab 87a-88a). Finally comes a lengthy treatment of the revelation at Sinai (Shab 88a-89b), which concludes the *sugya*. Neusner refers to this concluding segment as a "Topical Appendix on the Revelation at Sinai" (Neusner 1996, 383). The short passage referencing the uplifted mountain motif occurs right at the beginning of this appendix. The text reads:

- I. "And they stood under the mount." R. (Ab)dimi b. Ḥama b. Ḥasa said: This teaches that the Holy Blessed One overturned the mountain upon them like a cask, and said to them, "If you accept the Torah, well and good; but if not, there shall be your burial."
- II. R. Aḥa b. Jacob said: On the basis of this saying, a strong objection (*môḏā'ā*) could be made against the Torah.
- III. Raba said: Even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written: "The Jews confirmed and accepted for themselves and for their descendants" (Est 9:27). They confirmed what they had already accepted. Hezekiah said: What is meant by what is written: "From Heaven you uttered judgment; the earth feared, and was at peace" (Ps 76:9)? If it feared, why was it at peace? And if it was at peace, why did it fear? It is better to say: At first it feared, and afterward it was at peace. So, why did it fear? It is according to Resh Lakish, for Resh Lakish said: What is meant by what is written: "And there was evening and there was morning, *the sixth day*" (Gen 1:31)?⁹ This teaches that the Holy Blessed One established a condition for the works of creation, and He said to them: "If Israel accepts the Torah, well and good; but if not, I will return you to being formless and void."¹⁰

For the purpose of the present investigation, I will briefly summarize the key elements in this text's flow of thought. In the first unit (I), we have Rav Abdimi's interpretation of *b'tahtit hāhār* in Exodus 19:17 as "under the mountain," stating that God overturned (*kāpā*) the mountain upon Israel as if it were a "cask" or "tub" (*gīgīt*) (Jastrow 1950, 234). If we understand this overturned cask as an inverted dome covering Israel, then the people could in fact be seen as "in" (b) "under" (*tahtit*) the mountain. God threatens to bury Israel under the mountain if they do not accept the Torah.

In the second unit (II), the Talmud's editors respond to this tradition with an argument ascribed to the early fourth century Babylonian sage Rav Aḥa b. Jacob, to the effect that R. Abdimi's interpretation could be employed as a

9. In Genesis 1, days 1–5 lack the definite article, but day six has the article.

10. This is translated according to MS Oxford Oppenheimer Add. fol. 23.

strong “objection” (*môḏā’ā*) against the Torah. The word *môḏā’ā* is defined by Michael Sokoloff as “a document of protest made in advance before witnesses in order to invalidate a transaction or a legal action to be made under duress” (Sokoloff 2002, 645).¹¹ In other words, Israel could claim that they are not obligated to the commandments because they did not accept them in the first place by their own free choice, but rather were forced to accept them.

In the third unit of this passage (III), the editorial voice of the Talmud offers two responses to this protest. First, it cites a saying of Raba (early fourth century) that interprets Esther 9:27 to mean that the Jews in Esther’s time confirmed of their own accord their obligation to keep the commandments that they had previously accepted under duress at Sinai.¹² In other words, Jews today cannot protest against the Torah that it was forced on them at Sinai, since they willingly accepted it in the days of Esther. Second, the Talmudic editors quote a tradition preserved in the name of Hezekiah, a third century *Amora* from the land of Israel, who concluded from Psalm 76:9 that the earth initially feared it would return to its pre-creation state, and only after Israel accepted the Torah did the earth find peace and assurance that it would continue to exist. This view is supported with a tradition ascribed to Resh Lakish, a younger contemporary of Hezekiah, who interpreted the idiosyncratic use of the definite article on the word “sixth” in Genesis 1:31 as an allusion to the sixth day of the month of Sivan when the Torah was given (see Shab 86b), concluding from this that the abiding existence of all creation depended on Israel accepting the Torah. This explains why God used force: Israel’s reception of the Torah was not a private matter pertaining to them alone, but was an event of cosmic significance. Therefore, it could not be left up to the whim of the people at that time either to accept or reject it. For the sake of all creation God had to take extreme measures to ensure that Israel would receive the Torah.

In sum, two theological challenges to Israel’s election appear in Bavli *Shabbat* 88a: First: that God’s unilateral election of Israel left no room for the people’s free response, thus undermining the Torah’s obligatory status. This objection is

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11. Sokoloff cites the Syriac word *mawd’ūtā’*, “indication, notice” as parallel to this usage.
 12. The pretext for this interpretation is the unexpected order of words in Esther 9:27: they “confirmed” (*qiyy’mû*) and then “accepted for themselves.” The intended sense of *qiyy’mû* in Esther 9:27 may have been that they “established” Purim, and then took it upon themselves to observe it. But the rabbis understand the normal sense of the verb *qiyy’mû* to be “confirmed,” and if so, how could they confirm what they had not yet taken upon themselves? The answer is: they confirmed something from the past, namely, the covenant at Sinai. On this passage, see A. Tropper (2014), “A Tale of Two Sinais: On the Reception of the Torah according to *bShab* 88a,” 148–151.

met with the unsatisfying answer that Israel assented by free will hundreds of years later, leaving the question unanswered whether the Torah was genuinely binding on Israel prior to Esther's time.¹³ Second: that God's forceful election of Israel depicts the Deity as a harsh, controlling dictator. This implicit charge is answered with the assertion that God needed to force matters as He did because so much more was at stake than merely the human agents involved.¹⁴ Since the whole cosmos depends on the successful bestowal of Torah upon Israel, it would be unethical for God merely to leave the outcome in the hands of a single group of flawed human beings. It was God's responsibility to compel Israel to receive the Torah for the sake of the greater good.

The overturned mountain in Bavli Abodah Zarah

The second Talmudic passage containing the overturned mountain tradition occurs at *Abodah Zarah* 2b, in the opening section of the tractate. *Abodah Zarah* addresses how Jews are to relate to Gentiles in light of the divine prohibitions against idolatry. The tractate begins with a discussion of what items may or may not be sold to, or purchased from, Gentiles around the time of a pagan festival. The basic concern is that a Jew should not become an accomplice to idolatry through business dealings with a Gentile (e.g., selling something to a Gentile that will later be used for idol worship). Although Bavli *Abodah Zarah* starts with a quotation from the Mishnah, the Gemara quickly transitions to a long compilation of aggadic traditions. The discussion of the Mishnah proper does not begin until AZ 5b. The aggadic material at the beginning provides a theological introduction to the tractate as a whole, distinguishing Israel's religion from idolatry, affirming the idea of punishment and reward in the world to come, and identifying Torah as the central reality that sets Israel apart from the nations.¹⁵ The core of this theological introduction is a homily preserved in

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13. According to Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, Rashi worked out a chronology for the Sinai event according to which Israel voluntarily received the Torah on the fifth day of Sivan, and then the mountain was overturned above them on the sixth day of Sivan, thus showing that Israel had already received the Torah willingly before the events described in Shab 88a took place; see J. B. Soloveitchik (1965), *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 43.
 14. This approach to explaining the conundrum expressed through the overturned mountain tradition was taken up by the 16th century Talmudic commentator Maharal of Prague and by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas; see L. Kaplan (1998), "Israel Under the Mountain: Emmanuel Levinas on Freedom and Constraint in the Revelation of the Torah."
 15. The beginning of *Abodah Zarah* may be described as a miscellany of rabbinic traditions compiled to address the tractate's over-arching concern; see J. Neusner, *The Bavli's Massive Miscellanies* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 49–71. Not only the overturned mountain tradition, but also the interpretations of Hezekiah and Resh Lakish, appear in *Abodah Zarah* 2b-3a, apparently borrowed from their earlier loca-

Hebrew, ascribed either to Rabbi Ḥanina bar Papa (third or fourth century) or to Rabbi Simlai (third century), which is structured around the successive clauses of Isaiah 43:9 (“all the nations are assembled together,” etc.). The homily’s narrative is set in the time to come, when God will call the nations together for judgment and reward those who have engaged themselves in Torah. The Talmud’s editorial voice adds supplementary discussions in Aramaic throughout the original homily (see J. L. Rubenstein 1999, 212–242).

In the core Hebrew homily, the nations of the world attempt to justify their neglect of Torah, first by claiming that they built roads, accumulated wealth and so forth in order to allow Israel to engage in Torah, and then by questioning whether it is fair to condemn them for failing to keep the Torah since it was never offered to them in the first place. This is the portion of the Gemara containing the overturned mountain tradition. The relevant text is given below:¹⁶

- I. **Thus the nations say before God, “Master of the World, it is not the case, is it, that you gave the Torah to us and we did not receive it?”**
- II. *But did He not give it to them? It is written, “The LORD came from Sinai, and He arose from Seir to them (Deut 33:2),” and it is written, “And God comes from Teman (Hab 3:3).” What was the Holy Blessed One looking for in Seir, and what was He looking for in Paran? R. Yohanan said: This teaches that He brought the Torah around to each nation and language, but they would not receive it, until He came to Israel, and they received it.*
- III. *Instead, thus the nations say before God: “Master of the World, it is not the case, is it, that you overturned the mountain upon us like a cask, as you overturned it upon Israel, and that we still did not accept the Torah? For it is written, ‘And they stood under the mountain’ (Exod 19:17). R. (Ab)dimi b. Ḥama said: This teaches that the Holy Blessed One overturned the mountain upon Israel like a cask, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, well and good; but if not, there shall be your burial.’”*
- IV. **God says to them: “Let them declare to us the former things” (Isa 43:9). Regarding the seven commandments that you did receive, how have you fulfilled those?**
- V. *And how do we know that they did not fulfill them? ...¹⁷*

In the section of the Hebrew homily quoted above (indicated in bold), the nations of the world object to being judged on the basis of Torah, on the grounds that God did not give them the Torah (unit I). God responds with the homily’s next clause in Isaiah 43:9, “Let them declare to us the former things,” which is

tion in *Shabbat* 88a; see L. Jacobs (1989), “Israel and the Nations: A Literary Analysis of a Talmudic Sugya.”

16. The core homily is set in bold text, and the Talmudic editor’s Aramaic material italicized.

17. This is translated according to MS New York JTS Rab. 15.

interpreted to mean that long ago God gave to all nations the seven Noahide laws (that is, the “former things”),¹⁸ and so God is justified in condemning the nations for failing to observe these laws (unit IV). In units II and III, the Talmudic editors insert comments (in *italics*) responding to the objection raised by the nations and deepening the discussion. In unit II, the editorial voice cites a tradition ascribed to R. Yohanan (third century), appealing to Deuteronomy 33:2 and Habakkuk 3:3 in order to refute the claim that the nations were not offered the Torah. God did offer it to them, and they refused.

Interestingly, the Talmud proposes another defense for the nations. In unit III, the nations are depicted as quoting the overturned mountain tradition in order to prove that God compelled Israel to receive the Torah, which He did not do for the rest of the nations. It would not be fair for God to reward Israel for accepting the Torah and punish the nations for rejecting it, if God gave extra incentive to Israel alone. This objection seems to stand. The Aramaic editorial discussion comes to an end, and the text moves on to the next part of the homily (unit IV), in which God charges the nations with failing to keep the Noahide laws. From there (unit V), the Gemara begins a discussion of the Gentiles and their culpability in violating the seven Noahide commandments.

The theological ideas in this portion of the Talmud stand at the forefront. The Hebrew homily that structures this passage (units I and IV) questions God's justice in holding the nations accountable to Israel's Torah, and it replies by appealing to the Noahide commandments, which constitute a revealed law (i.e., special revelation) that was nevertheless made accessible to all people (cf. general revelation), thus functioning as an ethically justifiable universal standard for judgment. The first Aramaic comment (unit II) asserts that Israel merited their special position by agreeing to receive the Torah when all others refused. What is most surprising about this passage is that in unit III the nations are allowed to answer back. One can perhaps see in this passage a product of the sages' real-life experience of genuine dialogue. The nations argue that Israel's acceptance of the Torah was not the result of their merit, but instead flowed from God's unique election of Israel. Consequently, no nation but Israel should be held responsible to keep the whole Torah. This theological argument was implicit in the original homily, but is fleshed out with greater clarity in the editorial comments. In *Abodah Zarah* 2b, the priority of God's action in electing Israel is emphasized (unit III), but space is still allowed for thinking about Israel's willingness (unit II). The nations are morally accountable to the God of

18. On the Noahide commandments in rabbinic literature, see D. Novak (2011), *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism*, 11–35. An important early source is Tosefta *Abodah Zarah* 8:4: “The sons of Noah received orders concerning seven commandments: establishing courts, idolatry, cursing the Name, uncovering nakedness (i.e., sexual immorality), shedding blood, theft, and the prohibition against using the torn limb of an animal.”

Israel, but their standard for judgment will be a more general set of rules that constitute a subset of the full Torah revelation.

*The Talmud's discussion of the upraised mountain as a window into its
historical context*

It is typically not possible to draw direct lines from specific passages in the Talmud to concrete historical situations. Much of what the Talmud offers by way of scriptural interpretation and legal reasoning can be explained from within the internal logic of the biblical text and rabbinic tradition. Still, it is natural to expect that historical conditions played some role in shaping the Talmud's discourse and that historical interests may sometimes be discernable.¹⁹ It is worth considering how the Talmudic discussions of the upraised mountain motif fit within the general historical circumstances out of which they arose, and what these passages contribute to our understanding of those circumstances.

The period from 225–425 was relatively stable for Jews living under Persian rule. Active oppression of religious minorities, including Jews, took place during the rule of Yazdgerd II (439–457) and also sporadically in the following years whenever the most aggressive factions within the Zoroastrian priesthood exerted power. But the situation was not always unbearable; for example, some Jews served in the Persian army during the reign of the emperor Kavād (488–496). Despite occasional problems, Jews had opportunities to flourish in the Sasanian empire during the sixth century. Rulers such as Khusrau (531–579) and Hormizd IV (579–590) generally tolerated religious minorities. Acts of hostility against minority groups such as Jews continued to take place from time to time throughout the late sixth and seventh centuries, especially as Persian imperial power weakened in the seventh century. But overall, and more so than in Byzantium, Jews in Sasanian Persia experienced enough normalcy of life to prosper in the various ways that a minority community can in such an empire.²⁰

Although Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion of the Sasanian Empire, Persia during this era was home to a variety of religions and people groups. Interactions between these different segments of society likely took place at multiple levels, for example through commerce, religious disputation, or government service (for example see Herman, ed. 2015; Payne 2015; and Siegal 2013). Some recent studies of the Talmud in its Iranian context emphasize meaningful intellectual contact between the sages and the broader Persian culture, pointing to similarities of thought on topics such as the importance of oral transmission and the authority of a learned class, and also pointing to the Tal-

19. Cf. the discussion of rabbinic biblical interpretation in R. Kalmin (2006b), "Midrash and Social History," 133–136.

20. On the history of this period generally, see Yarshater 1983, 3(1): 116–180; and Ben-Sasson 1976, 373–382.

rud's polemic against Zoroastrianism (for example see Elman 2007; Bakhos and Shayegan eds. 2010; Secunda 2014; and Gross 2016). Others ascribe less significance to the Sasanian cultural context and emphasize rather the insular nature of the Talmud's discourse (for example see Neusner 1976; R. Kalmin 2006a).²¹ J. S. Mokhtarian acknowledges the multicultural landscape in which the sages of the Talmud lived and also recognizes the Talmud's internal focus, concluding that an exclusivist ideology was the primary mechanism by which the Babylonian sages responded to their diverse context (Mokhtarian 2015). It is certainly true that the Talmud presents a vision of the world entirely grounded in Israel's God, Torah, and the world of the sages. But if one can see the rabbis in Sasanian Persia as "a social group with aspirations and goals, vying for import and authority in a given historical context" (Gross 2016, 254), as must have been the case, then one expects to find insights in the Talmud that reflect their interactions with the people around them.

In connection with the interpretation of *b'tahtit hāhār* in Exodus 19:17 and God's choice of Israel to receive the Torah, the Talmud reinforces the basic rabbinic worldview that places God, Israel, and Torah at the center, but it also explores the edges of this worldview where theological complications reside. The judgment scene near the beginning of *Abodah Zarah* certainly affirms the primacy of Israel among nations and Torah among value systems. The nations will not get credit for how they have incidentally aided Israel, nor do they even measure up according to the more general standards of the Noahide commandments. In a world of competing claims to truth, the Talmud asserts the primacy of Torah.

At the same time, awareness of differing viewpoints and perhaps authentic relationships with non-Jews gave rise to questions that needed answers. Among all the nations, did Israel alone choose the Torah? And how does Torah relate to the rest of the world outside the Jewish community? Bavli *Shabbat* 88a answers this last question by assuring the student that Israel's obedience to Torah sustains all of creation, including Zoroastrians, Christians, Manicheans, government officials, and everything else. Thus, all of life's experiences are brought within the realm of Torah.

Contact with thoughtful non-Jews would also raise questions about Torah as a universal criterion for evaluating human behavior. Mainstream Persian reli-

21. Hayes (1997, 178) emphasizes the internally-focused nature of the Talmudic editors' reasoning, arguing that they gave more attention to interpreting their traditions than to responding to external conditions. Yet, Hayes also gives examples where external, historical factors play a role; e.g., in *Abodah Zarah* 15b-16a, Hayes points out that a former prohibition against selling materials for weapons to gentiles was reversed by the Babylonian Talmud because of improved relations between Jews and Persians in the late Amoraic period, which led certain sages to conclude that the weapons would be used to protect Jews.

gion affirmed that works of charity are meritorious, that seeking vengeance causes harm, and that one's good and bad deeds will be evaluated at a final judgment (see Duchesne-Guillemin 1973, 93–98).²² How do these standards relate to what the Torah teaches? How would God evaluate a Persian who does good by Persian standards? Such questions may underlie the Talmud's argumentation at the beginning of tractate *Abodah Zarah*.²³ One can see in the outworking of the Talmud's analysis, especially in the Aramaic sections where the nations are given the chance to speak in their own defense, that the editors of the Talmud live in a world where they encounter religious diversity and want to provide guidance from within the tradition that will explain their lived experiences.

The raised mountain in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, the tradition of the mountain being raised up over Israel is not derived exegetically from a biblical text, as suits the Qur'an's presentation of itself as a fresh revelation from God (see Saeed 2011; Martin 2002; and Rahman 1979, 30–33).²⁴ This motif apparently became part of the Qur'an through its inclusion in whatever oral or written accounts of the Sinai event that the Qur'an employed. Because the Quran is subtle in its inclusion of this story element, it is necessary first to confirm that the Qur'an does in fact intend to convey the idea that a mountain was raised up over the people of Moses.

Four passages in the Qur'an appear to reference the tradition of the uplifted mountain: Sura 2 (*sūrat al-baqarah*) verse 63, sura 2 verse 93; sura 4 (*sūrat al-nisā'*) verse 154; and sura 7 (*sūrat al-a'rāf*) verse 171. For sura 2:63, 2:93, and 4:154, the context is God making a covenant with Israel within a narrative centered on Moses, which suggests that Sinai is the mountain in view. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the word for "mountain" is not *jabal*, but *tūr*, a term adapted from Syriac that is twice used explicitly for Sinai (Q 23:20; 95:2) and that normally stands for Sinai in the Qur'an.²⁵ By contrast, Q 7:171 does not directly

22. In the late fifth and early sixth century, a religious reformer named Mazdak promoted the elimination of hatred by abolishing social inequality (Duchesne-Guillemin 1973, 195). Such a figure and his followers could have been engaging conversation partners with Jews in Persia.
23. In the continuation of the Gemara's discussion (AZ 3a), an opinion of R. Meir is reported that even a Gentile who studies Torah is like the High Priest. The editorial voice of the Talmud seems to accept this line of thinking in part, but the point is also made that the Jew who is obligated to obey receives greater reward for Torah study than the Gentile who studies Torah but is not obligated. The question of non-Jews studying Torah may also have connected with real-life experiences in the Sasanian Empire.
24. The Qur'an denies the charge that someone is teaching the Prophet (e.g., Q 16:103; 25:4), or that the Qur'an is made up of old narratives (e.g., Q 6:25; 16:24; 23:83; 25:5).
25. See Q 2:63, 93; 4:154; 19:52; 20:80; 23:20; 28:29; 28:46; 52:1; 95:2. See also Badawi and

refer to a covenant with Israel; but its broader context is Moses in the wilderness (vv. 159–160), and the command, “Hold fast what we have given you” in Q 7:171 connects this passage with Q 2:63 and 2:93, where “what we have given you” seems to be the Torah.

The language in Q 2:63 is *warafa'nā fawqakumu l-tūra*, “and we raised up over you the mountain.” The same idiom, *rafa'a fawqa*, to “raise up over,” is used in Q 2:93 and Q 4:154. The fact that this expression actually means “to raise up over” is clear from numerous Qur'anic parallels (see Badawi and Haleem 2008, 374; and Ambros 2004, 115). Again, unique among these passages is Q 7:171, where the language is: *nataqñā l-jabala fawqahum ka-annahu žullatun*, which has the sense: “We shook the mountain (*jabal*) over them as if it were a canopy.”²⁶ As will be discussed below, the notion of “shaking” the mountain over the people is a contextually appropriate adaptation of the uplifted mountain motif.

A measure of confirmation that these passages in the Qur'an intend to depict the mountain literally being lifted up over Israel can be found in Ṭabarī's late ninth century commentary on the Qur'an. On Q 2:63, Ṭabarī quotes an interpretation ascribed to Sa'īd Ibn Zaid, who was 'Umar's brother-in-law and an early Muslim according to Ibn Ishāq's *Life of the Messenger of God*.²⁷ As Ṭabarī reports, his earlier source explained the Qur'anic text as follows:

God sent his angels, and they shook (*nataqat*) the mountain (*jabal*) over them, and it was said to them: “Do you know this?” They said: “Yes, this is the Mountain (*tūr*).” They said: “Take the Book, otherwise we shall fling it down upon you.” Then they took it with the covenant.

(Cooper, trans. 1987, 365; Cf. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an-ta'wil āy al-Qur'ān* (Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī) 1:427)

Noteworthy in this tradition is the language of “shaking” the mountain, as in Q 7:171, and also the threat of dropping the mountain on the people if they do not accept the Scripture, as in the Talmud.²⁸ This tradition reported by Ṭabarī does not by itself prove that the Qur'an originally meant to say that the moun-

Haleem 2008, 575. Cf. *Targum Onkelos* Exod 19:18, *tūrā d'e'sīnay*, “Mount Sinai.”

26. The verb *nataqa* occurs only here in the Qur'an. For the meaning “to shake s.th.,” see Ambros 2004, 262. Badawi and Haleem (2008, 918), explains the root *ntq* with the English glosses: “to shake; to raise, to lift up, to overturn, to pour out by overturning; (of a camel's rigging) to become loose,” and gives the meaning “to raise, to hoist” for Q 7:171. Cf. Bell, Bosworth and Richardson eds. 1991, 1:259: “*nataqa*, only here, ‘uproot,’ properly ‘shake.’”
27. On Sa'īd Ibn Zaid, see Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sirat Rasūl Allāh* (1955, 156–157, 486–487, 684).
28. After Ṭabarī (d. 923), the idea that the Qur'an suggests that the mountain was actually raised up in the air was developed by other commentators such as Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), Rāzī (d. 1210), Qurṭubī (d. 1272), Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) and *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (finished by 1505); see Nasr, ed. 2015, 33; Ayoub 1984, 112–113; and Katsh 1954, 65.

tain was actually raised into the air; it is theoretically possible that the “Ibn Zaid” interpretation has misconstrued the Qur’an by wrongly invoking a motif borrowed from the midrash. Some have argued that the Qur’an merely says that the mountain “loomed” over them.²⁹ Yet, given the language of “raising up” or “shaking” and not simply “standing” above the people, the narrative context of Moses, Israel, and covenant, and the fact that Ṭabarī and his source saw the “Ibn Zaid” interpretation as a plausible way to explain the Qur’an’s wording, it is highly likely that these passages reflect the aggadic motif that Mt. Sinai was literally raised up over Israel when they received the Torah.

That the Qur’an and the Talmud share this motif was recognized by earlier scholarship. Abraham Geiger noted the parallel between the Qur’an and Bavli *Abodah Zarah*, but did not comment further (Geiger 1902, 161). Heinrich Speyer (2013, 303–304) cited Geiger’s study and added the reference to Talmud *Shabbat*. Moreover, Speyer argued that the Talmud’s “like a cask” (*cēgīgīt*) was adapted by Q 7:171 as *ka-annahu zullatun*, “as if it were a shadow” (not “canopy”), explaining the word *zullatun* through Q 26:189: *‘adhābu yawmi l-zullati*, “the punishment of the day of the shadow.” Julian Obermann (1941, 34–37) discussed several Jewish sources as background for the Qur’anic passages that present the uplifted mountain motif. Obermann’s primary interest was to demonstrate that Muhammad received biblical traditions orally as refracted through Jewish aggadah.³⁰ A few other scholars have treated the parallels between Jewish texts and the Qur’an on this topic (see for example Caquot 2003, 48; and Katsh 1954, 65). The overriding concern of previous studies has been to identify sources underlying the Qur’an or to describe the avenues by which traditions reached the Qur’an. In what follows, I will focus attention on what the Qur’anic passages are doing rhetorically and theologically with the traditions they deploy.

The upraised mountain in sūrat al-baqarah, vv. 63 and 93

The second *sura* is the longest in the Qur’an. The extent to which one can describe the content of this *sura* according to a comprehensive literary structure is not fully clear.³¹ Roughly speaking, the first 141 verses recount narratives and offer

29. E.g., Nasr ed. 2015, 32–33, states: “There is general agreement among the interpreters that this verse literally means that a mountain, either Sinai or a mountain from Palestine, was uprooted and made to physically move and float over the Israelites, in order to frighten them,” but the editors conclude that “it seems just as likely that the phrasing here, *raised the Mount over you*, parallels the English construction ‘the mountain loomed above them.’”
30. Obermann (1941, 36), recognizes that Q 7:171 presumes the idea that Israel had to be compelled to accept the Torah.
31. A number of recent studies have offered coherent literary readings of *sūrat al-baqarah* by pointing to features such as chiasmic structure, inclusio, ring composition techniques, key word linkages, crescendo, and the text’s orality; e.g., see Reda 2017;

warnings and admonitions; verses 142–242 contain ordinances for the believers; and verses 243–286 present a mixture of narratives, parables, injunctions, confessional statements (e.g., vv. 255–256; 284–286), and a final invocation to God (v. 286).³² Within the first section, verses 30–39 recount details from the story of Adam. In v. 40, the text turns to address the “sons of Israel,” and challenges them, “Fulfill my covenant (and) I shall fulfill your covenant.” Verse 49 recollects Israel’s rescue from Pharaoh, and in v. 51 the Qur’an mentions Moses explicitly. Admonitions that invoke scenes from the story of Moses reminiscent of the biblical books of Exodus and Numbers take up most of verses 49 through 93.

The first occurrence of the upraised mountain motif is found in the unit represented by verses 63–66, which is preceded by a statement on belief and reward in v. 62.

Q 2:62, 63–66: **62** Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians – whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and does righteousness—they have their reward with their Lord.

63 (Remember) when We made a covenant with you, and raised the mountain above you: “Hold fast what We have given you, and remember what is in it, so that you may guard (yourselves).” **64** Then you turned away after that, and if (it were) not (for the) favor of God on you, and His mercy, you would indeed have been among the losers. **65** Certainly you know those of you who transgressed in (the matter of) the Sabbath, and (that) We said to them, “Become apes, skulking away!” **66** We made it a punishment for their own time and what followed, and an admonition for the ones who guard (themselves).³³

According to v. 62, anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and does righteousness will have reward with God, whether they are Jews, Christians, Sabians, or anyone else. Verse 63 recalls the covenant with Israel and raising up the mountain over them, with admonitions to hold fast what God gave them,³⁴ to remember what is in it, and to be on guard in fear of God (*tattaqūn*; cf. *taqwā*, “fear,” in the sense of “constant awareness of one’s accountability toward God”).³⁵

Farrin 2014, 9–21; Ernst 2011, esp. 155–204, 223–226; and Zahniser 2000, 26–55. It is still a question whether this approach can offer a plausible account of the content of *sūrat al-baqarah* that arises naturally from the text itself.

32. For a helpful overview, see Jones trans. 2007, 24.

33. Translations of the Qur’an are from Droge 2013.

34. The command “Hold fast what We have given you” (*khudhū mā ātaynākum*) occurs in connection with God’s revelation to Moses in 2:63; 2:93; 7:171. Cf. 7:145, “So hold it fast” (*fa-khudh-hā*).

35. The concept of *taqwā* represents a fundamental element in Qur’anic thought, such that “fear” and “belief” are often used synonymously; see Izutsu 2002, 195–200.

After these admonitions, v. 64 notes how Israel turned away from God,³⁶ and illustrates this with reference to an act of disobedience concerning the Sabbath.³⁷ What follows this unit are several reminiscences of Israel's stubbornness and disobedience: Israel resisted and almost did not obey God's command to sacrifice a cow as God requested, a yellow cow without blemish that is not too old or young (vv. 67–71); they killed a man and argued about it (v. 72); their hearts were hard (v. 74); they altered the words of God (v. 75) and corrupted the Book (v. 79); and most of the sons of Israel turned away from God (v. 83) and expelled their own from their homes (vv. 84–86). After this comes the next unit of text where the upraised mountain tradition appears:

Q 2: 87–93, 94: **87** Certainly We gave Moses the Book, and followed up after him with the messengers, and We gave Jesus, son of Mary, the clear signs, and supported him with the holy spirit. (But) whenever a messenger brought you what you yourselves did not desire, did you become arrogant, and some you called liars and some you killed? **88** And they say, "Our hearts are covered." No! God has cursed them for their disbelief, and so little will they believe.

89 When (there) came to them a Book from God, confirming what was with them —though before (this) they had asked for victory against those who disbelieved — when what they recognized came to them, they disbelieved in it. So the curse of God is on the disbelievers. **90** Evil is what they have sold themselves for: they disbelieve in what God has sent down, (because of) envy that God should send down some of his favor on whomever He pleases of His servants. So they have incurred anger upon anger, and for the disbelievers (there is) a humiliating punishment.

91 When it is said to them, "Believe in what God has sent down," they say, "We believe in what has been sent down on us," but they disbelieve in anything after that, when it is the truth confirming what is with them. Say: "Why did you kill the prophets of God before, if you were believers?" **92** Certainly Moses brought you the clear signs, (but) then you took the calf after he (was gone), and you were evildoers. **93** And when We made a covenant with you, and raised the mountain above you: "Hold fast what we have given you, and hear," they said, "We hear and disobey." And they were made to drink the calf in their hearts because of their disbelief. Say: "Evil is what your belief commands you, if you are believers."

94 Say: "If the Home of the Hereafter with God is yours alone, to the exclusion of the people, and not for (the rest of) the people, wish for death, if you are truthful."

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36. On God's making a covenant with Israel and Israel's breaking the covenant, see Q 5:12–13, 70–71. Cf. also Q 3:81–82: "(Remember) when God made a covenant with the prophets ... Whoever turns away after that, those—they are the wicked."
37. The fullest description of this incident when Israel disobeyed the Sabbath is found in Q 7:163–167. See also 4:47, 157. For the punishment of being turned into apes, see also 5:60. Biblical texts that report tests and punishments related to the Sabbath include Exod 16 (falling of manna) and Num 15:32–36 (sinning "with a high hand"). For discussion of the possible background elements for the Qur'anic passages, see R. Firestone 2015, 26–48.

Especially notable in this passage for the present discussion is the reference to Israel's arrogance in v. 87, and the claim in v. 90 that Israel disbelieved because of their envy that God sends down His favor on whomever He pleases. Verses 91–93 recall Israel's disobedience in killing the prophets and in the incident of the (golden) calf (cf. Exod 32). Within this context, reference is made to when God made a covenant with Israel and raised up the mountain above them, urging them to hold fast what God gave. Directly following this unit is a sarcastic condemnation of the Jews (v. 94), which mocks their purported claim to have exclusive possession of the abode with God in the Hereafter.³⁸ What can we conclude about these applications of the upraised mountain motif in *sūrat al-baqarah*?

In this setting, God raised up the mountain over Israel as a warning to them, to inspire in them a fearful awareness of God (v. 63). This suggests a background narrative similar to the Talmud, where God lifted up the mountain as a threat, rather than to *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* with its affirming image. Moreover, just as in Q 2:67–71 where Israel resisted sacrificing the yellow cow and nearly did not do it (cf. the red heifer ritual in Num 19),³⁹ so also the story of the raised mountain might have been heard by an audience who knew the full story as another example where Israel was unwilling to follow a command, in this case to receive the Torah, and did so only because they were compelled. The surrounding literary context is also illuminating. Israel is accused of arrogance (v. 87) and envy that God would send His favor on someone else (v. 90). Verse 62 made clear that divine reward is given to anyone who believes, and verse 94 mocks the idea that the Hereafter belongs to Israel alone, to the exclusion of other people. One might conclude that the author of *sūrat al-baqarah* knew the upraised mountain narrative in a theological conversation like that of Bavli *Abodah Zarah* where the special election of Israel was emphasized. It was the Qur'an's aim to counter this idea.

The upraised mountain in sūrat al-nisā', v. 154

Sūrat al-nisā', verses 135–137 are addressed to “You who believe!” Verse 135 urges the believers to establish justice and witness to God at all costs. In verses 136–137, they are reminded to believe in God and His messenger, to believe

38. Cf. Q 62:6: “Say: You who are Jews! If you claim that you are the allies of God to the exclusion of the people, wish for death, if you are truthful.”

39. In Num 19:2, the red heifer must be “sound” (*ṭmīmā*), “without blemish” (*ʿēn bāh mūm*), and such that no yoke has ever been placed on it (*lō' ʿālā ʿāleyhā ʿōl*); cf. Q 2:71: “sound” (*musallama*), “without any blemish on it” (*lā shiyata fihā*), and “not made subservient to plough the earth” (*lā dhalūlun tuthīru l-arḍa*). In the Pentateuch, there are several offerings that require an animal one year old (e.g., Exod 12:5; 29:38; Lev 9:3; 12:6; Num 28–29); cf. Q 2:68: “a cow, not old and not young, (but) an age between that.”

in the Book sent down to the messenger together with the Book which God sent down before, and not to waiver between belief and unbelief. Following this, verses 138–149 offer rebukes and warnings directed at the “hypocrites.” In verses 150–152, the Qur’an criticizes “those who disbelieve in God and His messengers, and wish to make a distinction between God and His messengers, and say, ‘We believe in part, but disbelieve in part’” (v. 150). This suggests that previous People of the Book who believe in earlier messengers, but do not believe in the Qur’anic Prophet, are in reality disbelievers. Humiliating punishment is prepared for the disbelievers, but God shows His compassion and forgiveness to those who believe and make no distinction between God’s messengers. What follows, then, in verses 153–158 is a survey of disbelieving acts perpetrated by People of the Book:

Q 4:153–158: **153** The People of the Book ask you to bring down on them a Book from the sky. They had already asked Moses for (something) greater than that, for they said, “Show us God openly!” So the thunderbolt took them for their evil-doing. Then they took the calf, after the clear signs had come to them. But We pardoned them for that, and We gave Moses clear authority. **154** And We raised the mountain above them, with their covenant, and we said to them, “Enter the gate in prostration.” And We said to them, “Do not transgress the Sabbath.” And We made a firm covenant with them. **155** So for their breaking their covenant, and their disbelief in the signs of God, and their killing the prophets without any right, and their saying, “Our hearts are covered”—No! God set a seal on them for their disbelief, so they do not believe, except for a few—**156** and for their disbelief, and their saying against Mary a great slander, **157** and for their saying, “Surely we killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of God”—yet they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it (only) seemed like (that) to them. Surely those who differ about him are indeed in doubt about him. They have no knowledge about him, only the following of conjecture. Certainly they did not kill him. **158** No! God raised him up to Himself. God is mighty, wise.

First, the People of the Book demand to see a sign of the messenger’s authenticity, such as a Book from the sky, that is, like the Torah sent down from Heaven.⁴⁰ Previously they showed their impertinence by asking Moses to show them God, which is reminiscent of Exodus 19:21, when Moses charged the people not to force their way to see God.⁴¹ The People of the Book also showed unbelief

40. Q 6:91 refers to the Book sent down to Moses, which he brought as a light and guidance for people. The Qur’an asserts, however, that even if God sent down to the Prophet a Book written on papyrus, the disbelievers would still deny the message (Q 6:7). Elsewhere, contemporaries of the Prophet are reported to say that they will not believe unless he ascends into the sky (Q 17:93), presumably to bring down a Book, just as Moses ascended in order to bring down the Torah. For discussions in Jewish sources on whether or not Moses ascended to heaven in order to receive the Torah, see Heschel 2005, 343–353.

41. Cf. Exod 33:18–23, where Moses asks to see God’s glory, and God shows him His

when they took to themselves the calf, an incident referred to elsewhere in the Qur'an and corresponding to the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32.⁴² In the Qur'an (v. 135) as in the book of Exodus (Exod 33:19; 34:1-7), God pardoned them for the sin of the calf.

The upraised mountain motif occurs in v. 154, where it is paired with the reception of their covenant, namely, the covenant at Mt. Sinai. Two commands are reported in conjunction with the covenant. First, they are ordered: "Enter the gate in prostration." This alludes to a time when the people, shaded by a cloud and fed with manna and quails, were told to enter a town and prostrate at the gate, but they disobeyed the command and acted wrongly (see Q 2:57-59; 7:160-162).⁴³ Second, they are told: "Do not transgress the Sabbath." This refers to the incident of Sabbath violation mentioned in Q 2:65-66 (cf. Q 7:163-167; see n. 37). In this context, the statement that God raised up the mountain probably refers to another occasion, known to the Qur'an's audience, when the People of the Book disobeyed God and acted as unbelievers. A likely explanation is that, in the Qur'anic background narrative, the people were so unwilling to receive the Torah that God had to compel them to accept it by threatening to throw the mountain on them.

The passage concludes with further charges against the People of the Book. They broke God's covenant and disbelieved in God's signs. They killed the

goodness, but not His face. A related story is found in Q 7:143, where Moses says to God, "Show me (Yourself), so that I may look at You." God responds, "You will not see Me, but look at the mountain. If it remains in its place, you will see Me." Then God reveals His splendor and shatters the mountain, and Moses falls down thunderstruck. On judgment by thunderbolt, see also Q 2:55.

42. On the incident involving the calf of gold, see Q 2:51, 54, 92-93; 4:153; 7:148-53; 20:83-98; see Hawting, "Calf of Gold," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, 1:272-276. For a diachronic reading of the Qur'anic golden calf passages that postulates oral settings for hearing and responding to biblical traditions, see Neuwirth 2006, 71-91.
43. Cf. Q 2:58: "(Remember) when we said, 'Enter this town and eat freely of it wherever you please, and enter the gate in prostration and say: *ḥiṭṭa*. We shall forgive you your sins and increase the doers of good.'" See also Q 7:161. The situation envisioned and the meaning of the word *ḥiṭṭa* are unclear. One proposal is that this refers to God's command to the spies in Num 13 to enter the land and explore its bounty (cf. Num 13:17-20); in this case, *ḥiṭṭa* may be related to Hebrew *ḥiṭṭā*, "wheat" (cf. Deut 8:8). A related proposal is that *ḥiṭṭa* relates to Hebrew *ḥāṭā'nū*, "we have sinned," which the people confess after their refusal to enter the land (Num 14:40). Another possibility is that the town is Jerusalem and the situation is the Day of Atonement (Lev 16), when God "shall forgive you your sins" (as in Q 2:58). In this case, *ḥiṭṭa* could be related to the confession made by the High Priest, which according to the Mishnah includes the word *ḥāṭā'ī*, "I have sinned" (see m.Yoma 3:8; 4:2; cf. 6:2). See Paret 2012, 19-20.

prophets unjustly,⁴⁴ and they declared that their hearts are “covered” (*ghulfun*), that is, “uncircumcised.”⁴⁵ Finally, the People of the Book are censured for slandering Mary and (in a much-discussed passage) for claiming that they killed the Messiah, even though they did not.⁴⁶ The subject of *sūrat al-nisāʾ*, vv. 153–158 is the disobedience of the People of the Book. In this recitation of their misdeeds, the image of God raising up the mountain over them serves to remind the audience that Israel stubbornly refused to receive the Torah, so that God had to force them to take it.

The upraised mountain in sūrat al-aʿrāf, v. 171

The reference to the upraised mountain in *sūrat al-aʿrāf*, verse 171 reflects a number of elements familiar from other Qurʾanic passages, but also some unique details.

Verse 159 of this *sūra* states that among the people (*qawm*) of Moses there was a community (*ummah*) guided by the truth. In v. 160 we learn that God divided them into twelve tribes, overshadowed them with a cloud, fed them with manna and quails,⁴⁷ and made water flow from twelve springs for them when Moses struck a rock with his staff,⁴⁸ and yet they still acted wickedly. The next unit (vv. 161–162) begins “And (remember) when” (*waʿidh*), recalling when they were told to inhabit a town and enter the gate in prostration (see n. 43). At that time, God promised to forgive them and increase those who do good, but the people changed what God spoke to them and thereby brought divine wrath upon themselves. The background narrative to which allusion is being made is clearly a version of the story of Moses and Israel in the wilderness, appropriated

44. Cf. Q 2:61, 87, 91; 3:21, 112, 181, 183; 5:70. This theme occurs in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., 1 Kgs 18:4; 19:9–10; Jer 26:20–23; 2 Chron 24:20–21; Neh 9:26); and the New Testament (Luke 11:47–51; 13:34; Matt 23:29–32, 37; 5:12; Acts 7:52; Rom 11:3; 1 Thes 2:14–15; Heb 11:37), and became part of later Christian anti-Jewish polemic; see Reynolds 2012, 9–32. J. Horowitz (1926, 40) proposed Matt 23:37 and Luke 13:34 as possible sources for the Qurʾan’s rhetoric.

45. Cf. Q 2:88. For the root *gh-l-f*, Badawi and Haleem (2008, 673) offer this definition: “to cover, to wrap, to seal; to be uncircumcised; to be covered with vegetation.” E. W. Lane (1877, book 1, part 6, 2283) gives: “The state of being uncircumcised.” On “circumcision” of the heart, cf. Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:26; Ezek 44:7, 9; Acts 7:51; Rom 2:25–29; Col 2:11.

46. On this passage, see T. Lawson 2009.

47. See also Q 2:57; 20:80. Cf. Gen 49:28; Exod 24:4; 28:21 (twelve tribes); Exod 13:21–22; 14:19–20; 16:10; Exod 19:9, 16; 24:15–18; 33:9–10; 40:34–38; Num 14:14; Ps 105:39; 1 Cor 10:1 (cloud); Exod 16:1–36; Num 11:1–35; Deut 8:3, 16; Josh 5:12; Ps 78:24; Ps 105:40; John 6:31; 1 Cor 10:3 (manna and quails).

48. See also Q 2:60. Cf. Exod 17:1–7; Num 20:2–13 (striking the rock); Deut 8:15; Isa 48:21; Ps 78:16, 20; 105:41; 114:8 (water in the desert); Exod 15:27 (twelve springs).

as an account of God's benevolence and the people's corruption of God's words.

What follows is a literary block made up of three subunits: first, an extended account of the story about the people disobeying with regard to the Sabbath and being turned into apes (vv. 163–166; see n. 37); second, a reminder of when God declared that He would raise up others to punish them (v. 167);⁴⁹ and third, a series of statements explaining that God tested the people to cause them to return, but their successors who inherited the Book and the covenant preferred this world to the afterlife, even though they studied what was in the Book (vv. 168–170). Some traditional Qur'anic scholars held that verses 163–170 constitute a Medinan insertion within this predominantly Meccan *sūra*.⁵⁰ To be sure, one can see a link between the material just before the alleged insertion (vv. 159–162), which deals with Moses in the wilderness, and the verse just after the alleged insertion (v. 171), which returns to Moses and Israel with a reminder (*wa'idh*) of Moses at Mt. Sinai. Perhaps at an earlier stage of the Qur'an's development, v. 171 followed directly after v. 162, with vv. 163–170 being added later in order to focus criticism more directly at contemporary Jews (hence the "Medinan" classification). In any case, the overall literary context of v. 171 suggests that the setting for this verse is Moses and Israel at Sinai, and it also leads us to expect a negative portrayal of Israel.

The specific wording of the upraised mountain motif in verse 171 is as follows:

Q 7:171: (Remember) when we shook the mountain above them, as if it were a canopy [or "shadow," *zullatun*; see p. 157], and they thought it was going to fall on them: "Hold fast what We have given you, and remember what is in it, so that you may guard (yourselves)."

In its basic message, this passage is similar to the other three examples of the upraised mountain motif in the Qur'an. Two special points are worth noting: first, in this verse God "shook" (*nataqnā*) the mountain over them, which enhances the sense of danger and makes clear that this was a threat; second, this verse states explicitly that the people thought the mountain would fall on them. God's intention is clarified, and the people's fear is more vivid. This verse goes further than the other passages in highlighting the background narrative of the uplifted mountain. As in the Talmud, in *sūrat al-a'rāf*, verse 171 God

49. This likely refers to the Hebrew prophets who warned Israel that God would punish them by subjugating them to foreign political powers, such as (viewed from this time period) the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Hellenistic kingdoms, Romans, Byzantines, and Sasanians.

50. The Cairo edition marks this unit (vv. 163–170) as a Medinan insertion. Suyūfī (d. 1505), *al-Itqān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* ("The Perfection in the Science of the Qur'an") regarded the insertion as starting at v. 163 and extending to v. 172, but this seems unlikely based on the close syntactical connection between v. 172 and v. 173; see Nagel 1995, 30.

threatens to drop the mountain on Israel; but here in the Quran, the emphasis is not on God's election of Israel to receive the Torah. Instead, the Qur'an employs this as one of many examples when God warned Israel and reminded them that they must be on their guard (*yattaqūn*, vv. 164, 169).

***The Qur'an's discussion of the upraised mountain
as a window into its historical context***

Describing the Qur'an's historical context is not a simple or straightforward endeavor.⁵¹ The Qur'an itself contains few references to specific persons, places, or events. Later Islamic sources supply information about the circumstances in Mecca and Medina during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (570–632), including narrations that purport to give the occasions on which specific passages from the Qur'an were revealed. Some scholars emphasize caution in using traditional Islamic sources to describe the historical backdrop of the Qur'an (for example Berg 2012, 271–302). Others are more positive about employing such sources, at least for the main contours of Muhammad's career.⁵² For the purpose of this essay, all that can be done is to sketch out in broad outline the circumstances of late sixth and early seventh century Arabia that might clarify why the Qur'an deploys the upraised mountain motif as it does. What follows is based on contemporary research on the world out of which the Qur'an emerged,⁵³ with specific focus on how the rhetoric surrounding the upraised mountain motif could have fit within its historical context.

The Qur'an engaged an audience made up of various parties, including Jews, Christians, "Sabians" (Q 2: 62; 5:69), "Magians" (i.e., Zoroastrians; Q22:17), and people who denied the resurrection (e.g., Q 13:5; 17:49–51, 98; 19:66; 22:5). Jews and Christians appear frequently in the Qur'an's polemic, as do narrations and themes familiar from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Christianity was the religious ideology of the Byzantine Empire northwest of the Arabian Peninsula. In the fourth through early seventh centuries, the Byzantines were often in conflict with the empire northeast of Arabia, Sasanian Iran, whose dominant religion was Zoroastrianism, but which also contained sizeable communities of Jews and also non-Chalcedonian Christians. The Byzantine Empire aligned itself

51. For a survey of recent discussions, see Berg ed. 2018, esp. 37–125; and Donner (2010a), "Modern Approaches to Early Islamic History," 625–647.

52. A. Neuwirth (2014, 16) suggests that traditional Islamic reports can be relied upon in describing the major events of Muhammad's public activities, but are not necessarily to be followed in their accounts of specific episodes in Muhammad's life. On the need for caution in drawing historical conclusions from "occasion of revelation" material, see Rippin 2001, section XIX.

53. For a useful summary of pre-Islamic Near Eastern history relevant to Qur'anic origins, see Donner (2010b), *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, 1–34.

in these years with the Kingdom of Aksum (modern Ethiopia), which by the fourth century had become Christian (non-Chalcedonian) and was highly active in trade throughout the Red Sea region.⁵⁴ By the early sixth century, a substantial Christian presence existed in the southwestern city of Najran (northern Yemen), in other regions such as Rusafa (northern Syria) and Hira (southern Iraq), and in the Kingdom of Ḥimyar (Yemen), especially after c. 550 (see Hoyland 2015, 12–16; Nebes 2011, 47–49; and Robin 2015, 148, 153–154). Christianity in various forms penetrated areas throughout Arabia through desert monasticism, and also through political alliances between Byzantium and tribal groups, especially the tribe of Ghassān.⁵⁵ As for the Jewish presence in Arabia, a form of monotheism strongly influenced by Judaism was dominant in the Kingdom of Ḥimyar in the fifth and early sixth centuries (see Bowersock 2013, 78–91; Robin 2015, 129–130). Jews who spoke Arabic were found throughout most of the Arabian Peninsula, especially in Ḥimyar and in northwestern towns such as Tabuk, Khaybar, and Yathrib (Medina) (Donner 2010b, 30). Moreover, just as the Byzantines made alliances with Arab tribes to promote their interests in the region, the Persian empire created alliances of similar kind, in particular with the tribe of Lakhm.⁵⁶ Through Persia's interventions in the area, both Zoroastrian and Jewish influences were extended in Arabia. In sum, it is clear that local Jewish and Christian communities were part of the matrix out of which the prophetic figure and literary shapers of the Qur'an emerged.⁵⁷

In western Arabia during the late sixth and early seventh centuries, with Christianity and Judaism each holding ground as established religious entities, the Qur'an asserted a new religious configuration that needed to set aside the older paradigms in order to create space for its own primacy.⁵⁸ Jews understood

54. On the Aksumite kingdom, see G. W. Bowersock (2013), *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*.

55. See Millar 2015, 679–713. Millar provides a list of Arabian bishops, with cities of origin and a map, who attended the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (see pp. 683–685). See also G. Fisher and P. Wood *et al.* 2015, 276–372. On the tribe of Ghassān (or “Jafnids”), see pp. 313–347.

56. In addition to the above studies, see also P. Edwell *et al.* 2015, 214–275. In the war between Aksum and Ḥimyar in the sixth century, the Byzantines supported the Christian Kingdom of Aksum, whereas the predominantly Jewish Kingdom of Ḥimyar received support from Persia and their intermediaries, the tribe of Lakhm (or “Naşrids”).

57. There has been considerable scholarly discussion on whether Jewish or Christian sources had greater impact on the formation of the Qur'an. It is also possible that Jewish-Christian groups could have been part of this mix; see P. Crone 2015, 225–253, 2016, 1–21; and G. G. Stroumsa 2015, 72–96.

58. Criticisms of Jewish and Christian ideas and practices permeate much of the Qur'an, even in passages where such criticism may not be obvious at the surface level. For

themselves to be God's chosen people, descendants of Abraham, uniquely connected to God through Torah, and beneficiaries of the "merit of the Fathers" (*z'kūt 'abôt*).⁵⁹ Christians likewise regarded themselves as the elect, descendants of Abraham by faith in Jesus, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, and the true spiritual Israel.⁶⁰ One goal of the Qur'an's polemic against Jews and Christians was to destabilize these assertions of "chosen" status.⁶¹

Throughout the Qur'an, Abraham is presented as divinely favored, and yet the Qur'an also emphasizes that he was not a Jew or Christian, but one who submitted to God, that is, a *muslim* (e.g., Q 2:135, 140; 3:65–68). It is acknowledged that Israel was favored "over the worlds" (e.g., Q 2:47, 122; 7:140; 44:32; 45:16; cf. 5:20); yet, figures such as Adam and Noah are also said to have been favored "over the worlds" (Q: 3:33; 6:86), which suggests that this expression denotes a special divine calling, but not a chosen peoplehood status unique to Israel. In the Qur'an, God sends to every town and people a messenger to warn them (e.g., Q 6:130–133; 12:109; 14:4; 17:15), whether these be "biblical" prophets such as Noah and Lot, or Arabian prophets such as Ḥūd and Ṣāliḥ (e.g., Q 7:59–94; 22:42–51; 25:35–40; 29:14–40). The key for everyone is to heed the warning that is sent. According to the Qur'an, a good many Jews and Christians in their disputes with one another do not heed God's warnings (e.g., Q 2:113; 5:18). Formerly esteemed groups such as Israel and Christians can be rejected and replaced if they fail to obey what God sent and is sending down to them (e.g., Q 5:12–14, 54; 11:57),⁶²

example, many passages where the Qur'an censures *mushrikūn*, "idolaters," which traditionally were read as refutations of pagan polytheism, upon closer inspection appear to be aimed at monotheists (especially Jews and Christians) who are being caustically characterized as "idolaters." See Hawting 2010, 408–421; and Hawting 1999, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*.

59. See Urbach 1979, 524–541, 554–564; and Schechter 1909, 46–64, 170–198. On the "merit of the Fathers" in particular, see m.Abod 2:2; Sifre Deut 96; GenR 29.5; LevR 2.11; p.Sanh 10:1, 27d; Shab 30a; and Ber 10b. Key biblical texts for this idea include Gen 26:3–5, Exod 20:5–6, 32:11–13, Lev 26:45, Deut 9:27, 2 Kgs 13:23, 19:34, 20:3–6, 2 Chron 6:42, 21:7, and Isa 38:5, 55:3.
60. On this trajectory in Christian thought, see Wilson 1995, 110–142; Philippou 1970, 140–151; and Ruether 1979, 27–50. Important New Testament passages include Rom 8:33; Col 3:12; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1; 2:9–10; 2 John 1:1; Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8; Rom 4:9–25; 9:1–10:4; 2 Cor 3:4–18; 6:16; Gal 3:6–29; 4:21–31; 6:16; and Eph 1:3–14.
61. On the Qur'an's response to Jewish and Christian concepts of election, see Firestone 2011, 393–410.
62. It makes sense in this context that the Qur'an would appropriate certain arguments of one previous group against another, e.g., appropriating Christian anti-Jewish polemic when discoursing against Jews. Thus, one finds in Aphrahat's polemic against Judaism charges known also in the Qur'an, such as the charge that the Jews are prideful about being God's people and children of Abraham, that Jews have

just as Qur'anic believers are warned that they may be replaced if they turn away (Q 9:39; 47:38). Even the descendants of righteous figures such as Abraham and Noah are not automatically favored by God, but find favor only if they obey (Q 2:124; 11:45–46). In Qur'anic perspective, the criterion for determining whether one is right with God is the extent to which one is heeding the message of the Qur'an itself (e.g., 2:91; 3:3–4, 110; 6:91–92; 9:33; 17:105–106).⁶³

The Qur'an does not apply the concept of election to its own believing community in the same way that Jews and Christians at the time did. It is not that the Qur'an lacks passages that could suggest a doctrine of individual predestination (e.g., "He leads astray whomever He wishes and guides whomever He wishes," Q 16:93; 74:31; cf. 6:125; 13:27; 76:30–31).⁶⁴ Neither is the Qur'an lacking in passages that speak of God's choosing individuals for the prophetic office (e.g., Q 20:13), or for some specific mission (e.g., Q 23:78). But in the Qur'an, God guides individuals who believe the Qur'an's message and act rightly, no matter what community they belong to. As F. Rahman says in summing up the Qur'an's perspective: "No community may lay claims to be uniquely guided and elected. The whole tenor of the Qur'anic argument is against election (Rahman, 2009, 165)." Thus, the Qur'an has no place for the irrevocable election of other communities (Rahman, 2009, 56). The theological reframing of the uplifted mountain tradition contributed to the Qur'an's objective to summon all people from every community, including Jews and Christians, to believe God and His Messenger in accordance with Qur'anic revelation.

Conclusion

In the four passages in the Qur'an where reference is made to God raising up (or shaking) a mountain, the context is God's covenant with Israel at Sinai, and the text appears to say that God lifted up Mt. Sinai over the people of Israel. A parallel to this motif appears in early rabbinic sources, where Exodus 19:17 is

never accepted correction, and that Israel's own prophets say that the Jews have been rejected; see Neusner 1971, 55, 61, 66–67, 86–87.

63. Several passages in the Qur'an can be interpreted as suggesting that the Qur'an simply comes alongside the Jewish Scriptures ("Torah") and Christian Scriptures ("Gospel") to teach a general monotheistic faith common to Jews, Christians, and Muslims (e.g., Q 2:136; 5:44–47). The surrounding context, however, usually implies that one must understand the Torah and Gospel as teaching the same religion as the Qur'an in order to be rightly guided by them (see Q 2:137; 5:48–49), which does not accord with how mainstream Jews or mainstream Christians interpret their own sacred books.
64. Other passages suggest that God's guidance or leading astray comes to those who deserve such treatment based on their own prior choices (e.g., Q 2:26; 3:86), and that God offers help and guidance to all (e.g., Q 18:29; 41:17). On the Qur'an's complexity on this topic and its development in later Islamic theology, see Frolov (2002, 2:267–271), "Freedom and Predistination," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*.

interpreted such that the people stood literally “under the mountain” (*b’tahtit hāhār*). This tradition is construed in a positive way, with Israel taking shelter under the mountain, in rabbinic sources such as *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* and *Midrash on the Psalms*. But a different interpretation of this tradition, cited twice in the Babylonian Talmud (Shab 88a and AZ 2b), suggests that God threatened to drop Mt. Sinai on Israel if they refused to accept the Torah. In both Talmud passages, the discussion that unfolds probes the topic of God’s unique choice of Israel to receive the Torah. In its own allusions to the Sinai event, the Qur’an seems to presume a background narrative similar to the version of this tradition found in the Talmud, in that the Qur’an’s references to God raising up the mountain make best contextual sense as examples where God had to force Israel to accept their covenant. In the Qur’an, the raising or shaking of the mountain represents one in a series of illustrations showing how the people were unwilling to believe and ultimately broke their covenant. The threat of the mountain also serves as a reminder that people should be on guard, in constant awareness of their accountability to God (*taqwā*). Moreover, the rhetoric surrounding the uplifted mountain theme in the Qur’an emphasizes the universality of God’s command for all to believe, as if the Messenger of the Qur’an was refuting an interpretation of the Sinai event that construed it as proof of Israel’s election.

For both the Talmud and the Qur’an, each text’s manner of handling the uplifted mountain motif reveals something about the community behind the text. As a minority community in an established empire, Babylonian Jews in the Persian Empire had occasion both to reinforce their Torah-based worldview and also to answer questions about how the Torah relates to the broader culture. The sages of the Talmud helped maintain their community’s identity by upholding confidence in the Torah as God’s supreme revelation given uniquely to Israel. Yet, they also helped Jews think constructively about those outside their community with whom they might do business or interact in some other day-to-day fashion. Moreover, as heirs to an old religious tradition with a significant literary history, the sages of the Talmud and their students were prepared to reflect on possible implications of their theology. The contexts of rabbinic study actually promoted such reflection. During the period of the Amoraim (c. 225–c. 500), rabbinic learning among Babylonian Jews centered around a teacher and his circle of disciples, where students and teachers might display their insights by approaching problems from fresh angles and coming up with new solutions. In the subsequent period when the anonymous editors of the Talmud composed the texts we have (c. 500–700), major rabbinic academies developed that valued a dialectical style of discourse, which gave even further impetus to the Talmud’s spirit of theological exploration.⁶⁵ In sum, the

65. On the social contexts of study in rabbinic Babylonia, see Rubenstein 2007, 66–73;

discussions we find in the Talmud about the uplifted mountain and Israel's election converge well both with the culture of rabbinic discipleship and also the general Jewish situation in the Sasanian Empire.⁶⁶

Although the Qur'an, as suggested above, also arose out of a religiously diverse environment, the Messenger and audience of the Qur'an seem to be located in a social context quite different from that of the Iranian Jewish community. The Qur'an's rhetoric is more consistently polarized between belief and unbelief, and the call to follow the true path is more persistent. These features probably reflect the fact that the Qur'anic community was a kind of New Religious Movement.⁶⁷ Unlike in the Sasanian Empire, the ideological pluralism of western Arabia was not dominated by a single, state-supported religion; matters were more up in the air. In this context, the first generation of believers in the Qur'an's message may have been perceived as a serious threat to established religions, which could result in fierce opposition to the new community and consequently an urgent need for the new community to defend itself in the strongest terms. The Qur'an's setting was not such that would lead believers to reflect on the broader implications of their theology; rather, the setting was such that provoked the Messenger and the believers to refute the arguments of the older religions and justify their own religious understanding at every turn. This makes sense for the Qur'an, standing as it does at the beginning of the Islamic literary tradition. Hard questions about key dogmas and nuanced theological reflection came later, as Islam developed as a religious culture.

and Goodblatt 1975, 39–43, 263–285.

66. The idea that a Jewish tradition which developed in Babylonia was known to the Qur'an's Messenger in no way suggests that the Qur'an is not also familiar with Palestinian Jewish traditions. In some cases, the Qur'an might reflect a tradition associated specifically with Palestinian Jewish sources. For example Zellentin (2016, 270–271), argues that the Qur'an employs the term *aḥbār* in a manner that suggests familiarity with the Palestinian rather than Babylonian usage of the term *ḥbr*. It is not necessary, however, to identify either the Palestinian or the Babylonian community as the Qur'an's sole Jewish interlocutor. Channels of communication existed from both communities to Arabia, as expressed by Zellentin (2016, 268); Zellentin (2013, 105, 211, 214). Literary parallels with the Qur'an suggesting shared historical context are cited for both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds in Galadari 2013: 165–194.
67. See the characteristics of first-generation movements in Bromley 2012, 14–15. Cf. Firestone 2011, 407–408. The concept of “New Religious Movement” and the significance of rhetoric in conceptualizing the Qur'an and its context was highlighted by Mårtensson in a paper presented at the Fourth Nangeroni Meeting 2015 (now in press), “History and Linguistics: A Preliminary, Discipline-based Approach to Ibn Hishām (d. c. 215/830) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) on the Origins of Islam and the Qur'an.”

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