Chapter 4

Muslims and Their Use of the Arabic Pentateuch

The early Muslim attitude to the Torah (tawrāt, or tawriya in Qurʾānic orthography) was ambivalent. As is frequently stressed in the Qurʾān, the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the New Testament, were considered to be earlier divine revelations. On the other hand, Jews were accused of having hidden and distorted the content in the course of transmission, a concept known as tabdīl or tahrīf. The Qurʾān had to be revealed as the ultimate, concluding link in the progressive sequence of previous revelations. For that reason, early Muslims regarded the Torah as a defective testimony to the original revelation (umma al-kitāb). Consulting the Torah was met with disapproval, especially after the worsening of the relations between Muḥammad and the Jews, who had rejected his prophetic status.

The transmission of biblical material, in its islamicized form, was permitted, however, and entrusted to scholars who specialized in the field that came to be known as Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ and Isrāʾīliyāt. These scholars had no direct access to written Arabic translations of the Bible, although they were well acquainted with its contents. As with the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, exact quotations of the Pentateuch and other biblical books are not found in this genre. As we have seen above, Muslim recollections of the Late Antique scriptural heritage were the result of an oral transmission process. This particular form of the reception is not the topic of this chapter.

A firsthand acquaintance with the Pentateuch, in the form of direct and explicit quotations from written Arabic translations, is found only from the second half of the ninth century onwards. In the first Islamic centuries, al-Sīra al-nabawiya (Biography of the Prophet) by Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq (ca. 704–768), in the recension of Ibn Hishām (d. 834), contains an islamicized quotation from the Gospel of John (15:23–16:1). Other Muslim scholars, including Mālik ibn Dīnār (eighth century) and Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr al-Jāhīz (d. 869), also claimed to have seen translations of the Bible into Arabic

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1 For detailed studies on this subject, see William Montgomery Watt, “The Early Development of the Muslim Attitude to the Bible,” Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society 16 (1955–1956): 50–62; Lazarus-Yafeh, Intertwined Worlds; and Adang, Muslim Writers.

(see Chapter 3). The discussion here, however, will be limited to quotations by Muslim scholars that demonstrate access to written copies or a clear acquaintance with the translation traditions dealt with in this work. In addition to their importance for the study of Muslim reception of the Bible, some of our sources provide significant evidence about the emergence of Arabic translations of the Pentateuch, and especially their dates.

4.1 ʿAlī ibn Rabban

ʿAlī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī, an East-Syriac convert to Islam, played an essential role in the transmission of biblical material within Muslim literature. He was born at the beginning of the ninth century (ca. 810). The family originated from Merv in the province of Khurāsān, but relocated to Ṭabaristān in his childhood. Sahl, his father, acquired the honorary appellation rabban (Syr. “our master”) and was active as a physician. Similarly, ‘Alī ibn Rabban was educated in this profession and entered the service of the local governor. After a period of political turmoil, he eventually settled in Sāmarrāʾ and devoted himself to the composition of medical writings. His first work, Firdaws al-ḥikma (The orchard of wisdom), is dated 235 AH (850). It was translated into Syriac by its author soon thereafter.

His conversion is not precisely datable, but appears to have taken place after the completion of Firdaws al-ḥikma, which is free of Islamic formulae. The composition is dedicated to the Caliph al-Mutawakkil (847–861). His other two tracts, al-Radd ʿalā al-naṣārā (Refutation of the Christians) and Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla (Book of Religion and Empire), are essentially apologetic in character. They date to the later period of the caliph’s reign

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3 For a full bibliography, see Adang, Muslim Writers, 23–30.