1. The Bible in Medieval Arabic Culture

1.1 Unlike the Christian West, in which the Bible—in its Old and New Testaments—permeated every aspect of life and culture for more than 1,500 years, the Arab-Islamic East was never directly exposed to the texts of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. Admittedly, the impact of the two older monotheist religions on Islam is far from negligible, as unmistakable echoes of their teachings can be detected in the Koran, as well as in other religious texts in medieval Islam. Nevertheless, the actual wording of the Bible rarely reverberates in these texts. Although the Bible was repeatedly translated into Arabic throughout the Middle Ages,¹ none of its translations became part of mainstream Arabic literature, and the circulation of these versions was generally limited to the non-Muslim communities of the Arab world. The Arab-Muslim multitude in pre-modern times rarely had the opportunity to read the Bible or hear it recited; and, it is quite likely that the text of the Bible was not known even to the educated élite.² Above all, the role which these translations played in Arab cultural history is scarcely comparable to the role of the Bible translations in the rise and development of European languages and literatures, as well as in the shaping of the Western ethos.

Islam is revered by its adherents as the true religion which has supplant ed the earlier monotheist religions. The Koran, the Book of Islam, is superior to the older scriptures, which, through revealed Books, were supposedly tampered with by those to whom they were entrusted.³ The


² An incident related by A.L. Tibawi in American Interests in Syria 1800-1901, London: OUP, 1966, would illustrate how far removed learned Muslims were as late as the 19th century from the most memorable of biblical texts: “Early in 1824 Fisk and Bird [American missionaries] visited Jerusalem. While distributing Bibles and some missionary tracts among Armenian pilgrims, they were arrested and tried on a charge of disturbing the peace... The qādis [Muslim judge] asked to see a copy of the books which had caused the commotion. After a quick look at the copy produced, he expressed horror at reading [in Gen. 1:2] ‘and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters’. But he ruled that so long as the circulation of this kind of literature remained confined to the ‘infidels’ he would not punish the accused, and ordered their release”. (pp. 24-25).

³ Ibn Khaldūn, however, dismisses the possibility of falsification on the ground that “custom prevents people who have a revealed religion from dealing with their divine scriptures in such a manner” (Ibn Khaldūn, The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History, trans. F. Rosenthal [N.J. Dawood’s abridged edition], Princeton, 1981, pp. 24-25.
scriptures of the Jews and Christians were deemed inferior to the Koran not only for their alleged inaccuracy, but also because the Prophet who originally received them did not record the actual words of God, but rather a paraphrase of them; or, as Ibn Khaldûn, the great fourteenth-century Islamic historian, explains:,

The Koran is alone among the divine books, in that our Prophet received it directly in the words and phrases in which it appears. In this respect, it differs from the Torah, the Gospel, and other heavenly books. The prophets received them in the form of ideas during the state of revelation. After their return to a human state, they expressed those ideas in their own ordinary words. Therefore, those books do not have the attribute of "inimitability". Inimitableness is restricted to the Koran. The other prophets received their books in a manner similar to that in which our Prophet received ideas that he attributed to God, such as are found in many traditions. The fact that he received the Koran directly, in its literal form, is attested by the following statement of Muhammad on the authority of his Lord who said: "Do not move your tongue too fast to conceal this revelation. We ourselves shall see to its collection and recital." 4

1.2 In accentuating the marginality of the biblical text in the history of Arab-Islamic culture, it is necessary to reiterate the fact that the impact of the teachings of the Bible on that culture was immense. It is well known that the Koran is replete with reference to biblical characters and situations. Several Koranic chapters (sûras) bear the names of biblical characters (such as Noah, Jonas, Joseph, Mary); and the stories of many other biblical "prophets" and personages punctuate several sections of the Koranic text. Occasionally we come across a Koranic formulation that strikes one as an Arabic rendering of a biblical verse or collocation (for instance, the words "and my righteous servants shall inherit the earth" [inna 'l-arda yarithuha cibiidl al-sâlihun] in Koran 21:105, which ostensibly reflects Ps. 37:29; indeed, the word Zabûr [Psalms] also appears in the same verse). 5 On the whole, however, the reflexes of the Bible in the Koran are thematic rather than textual. Furthermore, many of the Koranic references to Biblical stories are retold in a fashion that would indicate recourse to, if not dependence upon, extra-biblical sources (Midrashic, Aggadic and hagiographic, among others).

After the death of the Prophet, the collectors and editors of traditions relating to his life and teachings sought additional material concerning biblical issues occurring in the Koran and in the apocryphal sayings

---

4 The Mughaddimah, op. cit., p. 74.
5 For further examples of biblical quotations or paraphrase in the Koran, see "Tawrât" in EI (by J. Horovitz) and "Indjîl" in EI (by Carra de Vaux and G.C, Anawati).