

Review Essay

Blurred Boundaries and Novel Normativities: The Jews of Arabia, the Quranic Milieu, and the “Islamic Judaism” of the Middle Ages*

Aaron W. Hughes. *Shared Identities: Medieval and Modern Imaginings of Judeo-Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 240 pp. ISBN 978-01-906-8446-4. Price: \$105.00 (cloth).

Aaron W. Hughes. *Muslim and Jew: Origins, Growth, Resentment* (London: Routledge, 2019), 106 pp. ISBN 978-11-385-9944-4. Price: \$60.00 (cloth).

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Abstract

*This article discusses critical issues surrounding the Jewish-Muslim encounter, framed as an evaluation of the approach and conclusions of two recent publications by Aaron W. Hughes: *Shared Identities: Medieval and Modern Imaginings of Judeo-Islam* (2017) and *Muslim and Jew* (2019). Hughes’s works present a critique of the established historiography on Jewish-Muslim relations and exchanges, examining such subjects as the Jews of late antique Arabia, the Jewish matrix of the Quran and formative Islam, and the Judeo-Islamic synthesis of subsequent centuries. I interrogate Hughes’s use of sources, treatment of previous scholarship, and privileging of the specific lens of the “religionist” in approaching the historical evidence. Both of the works under consideration here exhibit numerous problems of conception and argumentation that undermine their value for broadening current horizons of research or refining prevailing pedagogies. Ultimately, although they provoke numerous important questions and deftly expose the conceptual and ideological underpinnings of older scholarship, the books fail to offer a constructive path forward for specialists or stimulate a meaningful paradigm shift in the field.*

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Despite the long flourishing of scholarship on the topic, the Muslim-Jewish encounter remains for the most part an undertheorized and less than cogent field of research.¹ This is perhaps not surprising, because the scholarly work relevant to it, though considerable, is distributed among a number of areas that are notionally interconnected but have little to do with one another in practice. Thus, someone broadly interested in Jewish-Muslim relations and exchanges might take note of the significant research done in recent years on the Quran's representations of Jews and relationship to traditions of late antique Judaism, or of the perennial effort to uncover the social and religious history of the Jews of Arabia in the time of Muḥammad. Regarding the later period, the massive advances in Geniza studies over the last couple of decades, illuminating numerous aspects of the florescence of an Islamicate Judeo-Arabic culture in the high Middle Ages, are surely no less relevant for the subject. One might also consider the ongoing revision of our understanding of that titan of medieval Jewish intellectual and religious life, Maimonides, whose profound engagement with not only Arab but also Islamic thought has been at the forefront of recent endeavors to reorient the prevailing image of his significance. We could readily adduce other topics that demonstrate the persistent importance of the Muslim-Jewish encounter for our understanding of the history and development of both traditions. Given the complexity of the evidence, the lack of cross-pollination between fields, and the sheer magnitude of research production in Europe, the Americas, Israel, and parts of the Islamic world, a competent synthesis integrating these disparate areas of inquiry into a theoretically coherent whole is likely beyond the ability of any single scholar.

The perceptive reader will notice that I have already invoked a couple of slippery descriptors for the religious, cultural, social, and historical relationships between Jews and Muslims. Although terms such as “encounter,” “exchange,” and “engagement” seem innocuous enough, upon reflection they are far from transparent, and each carries a significant amount of cultural and ideological baggage. Other terms have often been deployed in describing those relationships, and many of them are even more self-evidently problematic: “influence,” “dependence,” “borrowing,” “symbiosis,” “coevolution.” This lexicon features prominently in the most important works on the subject by some of the greatest scholars of Jewish and Islamic studies stretching back two hundred years to the

1. There is no equivalent in the field of premodern Jewish-Muslim relations to Gil Anidjar's provocative and complex *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), which focuses on modernity. Anidjar prefers the ethnonym “Arab” as the antipode to “Jew” and generally eschews a specific focus on religious identity. However, despite this, many of Anidjar's observations apply equally well to Muslims as an ideological construct in European thought as to Arabs, reflecting the fact that “Muslim” and “Arab” are often used interchangeably in the heavily racialized discourses of historical and contemporary Islamophobia in the Anglo-European world. Conversely, despite the broader remit implied by Hughes's focus on Muslims and Islam, he is overwhelmingly concerned with the Arabophone world in both of the books under consideration here. Another important theoretical precursor to Hughes's endeavor in *Shared Identities* is Rina Drory's functionalist-structuralist approach to Islamicate Jewish literature in *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and Its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). Though her critique of shopworn conceptions of “influence” is relevant to Hughes's project, he cites Drory only in passing in *Shared Identities*, making one brief reference to her article on the proliferation of established Arab-Muslim genres in Karaite literature.

early nineteenth century. Despite those aspects of their work that now seem objectionable or outmoded, the impact of figures such as Abraham Geiger, Ignác Goldziher, S. D. Goitein, Bernard Lewis, and Norman Stillman still resonates today, and their vision and ideas haunt much contemporary scholarship.

The legacy previous generations of scholars have bequeathed to us, particularly the terminology and frameworks we use to conceive of and describe the dynamic of Jewish-Muslim relations, is the subject of two recent books by Aaron Hughes. The first, *Shared Identities: Medieval and Modern Imaginings of Judeo-Islam*, is an extended reflection on the historiography of the Jewish-Muslim encounter from the early Islamic period to the Middle Ages. Here Hughes focuses on the methodologies and underlying ideologies that guided past scholarship in an attempt to come to a more theoretically sophisticated understanding of that encounter. The second, *Muslim and Jew*, is a streamlined survey, presumably intended for classroom use, that is much broader in scope than *Shared Identities*.² Here Hughes offers a suite of three concise chapters centering on major themes in Jewish-Muslim relations—“Origins,” “Growth,” and “Resentment”—from the foundational period to the modern era. Hughes avers that this new survey offers a fresh perspective that builds upon the theoretical insights he developed in *Shared Identities*, setting it apart from the classic works in the genre by Goitein, Stillman, Lewis, and others that are still often used as introductory textbooks today.³ *Shared Identities* and *Muslim and Jew* perhaps represent the most significant, and certainly most ambitious, attempts at reevaluation and synthesis of the Judeo-Islamic encounter in recent years; given that such attempts are relatively rare, appearing only once every couple of decades at most, Hughes’s works warrant close and critical scrutiny.⁴

Hughes contends that much historical scholarship on the subject of Jewish-Muslim relations has been driven by questionable ideological commitments, and that these commitments merit careful examination and interrogation. This is especially so, he argues, because contemporary scholarship, though usually less transparently ideological, barely improves upon older research insofar as it tends to be theoretically anemic and so fails to come to a more refined understanding of how Jewish-Muslim relations should be

2. With a list price of 60 USD for a short hardcover, *Muslim and Jew* is perhaps not practical for classroom use, though in the post-COVID era the e-book version of the volume, priced under \$20, may present a reasonable alternative.

3. Hughes explicitly notes at the beginning of *Muslim and Jew* (p. xi) that in this book he operationalizes the “post-symbiotic” perspective developed in *Shared Identities*, where he claims to have articulated the critical vocabulary that enables the reassessment he offers in his brief survey. The most important precursors to *Muslim and Jew* in English are S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*, first published in 1955 and subsequently revised (3rd rev. ed., New York: Schocken, 1974); Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Sourcebook* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979); and Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

4. The only other synthetic work of this sort to appear in the twenty-first century, at least in English, is Jacob Lassner’s *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam: Modern Scholarship, Medieval Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), a work that is now almost a decade old. Notably, Hughes has a *third* volume on the Jewish-Muslim encounter forthcoming: *Somewhere between Islam and Judaism: Critical Reflections* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2021).

conceptualized and described. The main questions I will pursue here are whether Hughes succeeds in his task of theoretical reevaluation in the first book, and whether the second consequently represents a significant improvement over currently available surveys. I suggest that although Hughes's critical intervention is timely and necessary, his efforts in both volumes are impaired by various conceptual roadblocks that he fails to surmount. In the case of *Shared Identities*, despite the work's many virtues, pervasive problems in both conception and the handling of evidence undermines the work's value for its intended audience of scholarly specialists who work in this field. These problems recur in *Muslim and Jew*, where they are considerably exacerbated by still other problems, and these flaws obscure many of the issues that would be critical for the book's intended audience of nonspecialists and students to apprehend clearly.

A "Post-symbiotic" Perspective on the Jewish-Muslim Encounter

In *Shared Identities*, Hughes investigates the critical period from the seventh through the eleventh century CE, during which time both Judaism and Islam gradually acquired their mature forms through complex dialogical processes of mutual enrichment and codevelopment. Judaism contributed to major aspects of Islam during the latter's formation, and Islam subsequently came to "return the favor" by contributing to the reformulation and reshaping of Judaism during the high Middle Ages.⁵ This is why the history of Judeo-Islamic (or Islamo-Judaic) engagements should be characterized as a dynamic of reciprocity, in contrast to the emphasis among previous generations of scholars on Judaism's antiquity and thus originality and priority as the donor tradition, with Islam as the latecomer and so the passive recipient of that donor's largesse.⁶ As noted above, Hughes is particularly interested in dissecting and exposing "the cognitive problems associated with framing metaphors" and so seeks to rectify or discard conceptual and descriptive frameworks such as "influence," "exchange," and "symbiosis" that so frequently predominate in the literature on these processes.⁷

5. *Shared Identities*, ix.

6. Hughes presents normative Judaism and normative Islam as both only gradually crystallizing out of a complex and fluid milieu in the early centuries after the Arab conquests; this is his main justification for considering mature Judaism and Islam as the products of mutually fruitful processes of coevolution. This statement regarding messianism as a discourse transcending the boundaries between groups is typical of his approach: "[A]n unstable Islam created further instability in various Jewish and Judaizing groups by providing vocabularies and tropes, many of which had been adopted and adapted, reused and recycled, from earlier Jewish messianic circles" (*Shared Identities*, 64). Bulliet makes a similar observation about Christianity and Islam, which can be imagined as two halves of a single civilizational complex that emerged at roughly the same time and followed parallel trajectories for centuries. This argument is predicated on the idea that after the Arab conquests Christian culture was essentially "rebooted" (my term), with Islam gradually becoming demographically dominant in what became the Muslim Middle East and Christianity eventually dominant in Europe. See Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), ch. 1.

7. *Shared Identities*, 29. One does occasionally find slippages in the book, as when Hughes refers to forms of Judaism "beholden" (p. 70) or "indebted" (p. 80) to Islam. I am fully sympathetic to the difficulty he faces in critiquing problematic terminology while attempting to redescribe the phenomena to which it is

These frameworks have often been predicated on the notion that Judaism and Islam were largely well-defined and stable entities already at the time of their earliest encounters, and especially that Judaism was a fully formed and largely monolithic tradition when Islam emerged. Further, many scholars of the past proceeded from the assumption that the relationships between Jewish and Muslim communities were superficial and transactive rather than impactful and transformative. However fruitful their reciprocal engagements may have been—so the conventional narrative goes—the two communities remained separate and discrete throughout their long shared history, distinct and immutable in their spiritual and doctrinal essences.⁸ In particular, despite the considerable impact of Islamic “host cultures” upon Arab, Persian, Central Asian, and Andalusian Jews in the Middle Ages, their Judaism at its core remained a pure, unadulterated Judaism, the essential, unchanging faith of their forefathers. As Samuel Bäck put it in his 1878 *History of the Jewish People*, despite the massive achievements of the Jews of medieval Spain under Muslim rule and their profound embeddedness in a culture dominated by Islam, they “maintained a steadfast fidelity to their religion . . . [they] never forgot that they were Jews.”⁹

To Hughes, the premises that inform such an approach simply do not and cannot withstand critical scrutiny. Throughout *Shared Identities*, he repeatedly emphasizes that in fact the opposite situation must have prevailed: during the initial centuries of their interactions and engagements, not only were Judaism and Islam both quite malleable and pluriform, but at various junctures, groups of Jews and Muslims may have been largely indistinguishable from one another. Approaches that assume otherwise vastly overstate the degree to which the traditions had cohered on the practical level, let alone been codified on the doctrinal level; scholars of the past (and many today as well) err in assuming that religious communities are always and everywhere characterized by stable essences. In asserting that the porous boundaries between the traditions were populated by “Jewmuslims” or “Muslimjews” who drove the encounters that shaped both traditions over the centuries during which the classical forms of their doctrines, practices, and textual

conventionally applied, since I have myself written a number of studies critiquing the concept of “influence” and likewise struggled, perhaps even less successfully, to formulate and implement meaningful conceptual and terminological alternatives.

8. This model typically centers language as the primary index of identity, with Arabic supposedly being the medium of “secular” culture and commerce among diglossic or polyglot Jews but Hebrew maintaining its time-honored status as the preferred language of religious expression and creativity (and so being privileged as the primary and indispensable marker of personal and communal identity). With the much-discussed Greek/Hebrew divide in antiquity, “Hellenism” has traditionally been downplayed as only minimally manifest in, and so irrelevant to, “Hebraic” (that is, quintessentially Jewish) cultural forms; similarly, many scholars have tended to assume that the ongoing use of Hebrew in religious and some cultural contexts indexes an absence of significant Arabization or Islamization, at least as determining individual or communal identity. Recent research has shown, however, that Hellenism or Romanization may be reflected in and expressed through literary production in Hebrew. This is only one of the ways in which the dubious dichotomy between Hellenistic and “original” Hebraic Judaism has been challenged in contemporary scholarship.

9. Hughes’s translation of the German of Bäck’s *Die Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes* (*Shared Identities*, 23). A similar emphasis on the normative, mature, and clearly bounded form of Judaism that impacted the rise of Islam is found in the works of Geiger and Graetz; see, e.g., *Shared Identities*, 24–25 and 50–51.

traditions coalesced, Hughes sets his sights on no less grand a goal than the formulation of “a new paradigm . . . that acknowledges and taxonomizes the fluidity of religious and ethnic identity.”¹⁰ However, it is unclear whether he really achieves this goal by the book’s conclusion.

In seeking to articulate a new paradigm—explicitly described in both *Shared Identities* and *Muslim and Jew* as a “post-symbiotic” perspective¹¹—Hughes sets the stage by examining the previously (and currently) dominant outlook governing the study of Jewish-Muslim relations during this germinal period. Thus, in the introduction and chapter 1 of *Shared Identities*, he discusses the regnant categories invoked in scholarship and the various figures of the nineteenth and twentieth century—Heinrich Graetz, Bäck, Goitein, and others—whose work established much of the terminology, framing, and conceptual baggage that we still bring to the subject today and that continues to influence research agendas in ways both subtle and overt. Subsequent chapters of the book focus on specific subtopics that traverse the historical period under consideration here: the emergence of Islam and the problem of Muḥammad’s relationship to the Jews of his milieu (and supposed “debt” to Jewish informants); the heterodox fringe of early Jewish (or Judeo-Islamic) messianism after the Arab conquests; *kalām* as a shared rationalist discourse that bridged and shaped both Jewish and Muslim intellectual developments and ultimately contributed to the doctrinal (and thus notional) distinction of the traditions; the vaunted “Golden Age” of *convivencia* that produced Maimonides and other magisterial Jewish thinkers and litterateurs of the Judeo-Arabic tradition; and finally Jewish Sufism as a case study demonstrating the ongoing porousness of boundaries between Jew and Muslim after the maturation of both traditions and the general hardening of social and religious distinctions between groups.

Specialists who work in fields touching upon Muslim-Jewish relations will likely recognize the necessity, even urgency, of Hughes’s attempt to interrogate and refine the categories and language we use in seeking to describe those relations. In both books, but especially *Muslim and Jew*, Hughes explicitly acknowledges the larger political implications of this work in our contemporary context. Although he expresses some caution regarding the politicization of scholarly priorities, he himself sets an overtly political agenda for his project in *Muslim and Jew*.¹²

10. *Shared Identities*, 63. In his treatment of the early Islamic period here, Hughes repeatedly refers to the work of Peter Webb on Arab ethnogenesis (*Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016]), which has received a fair amount of criticism for exaggerating the degree to which Arab identity was an invention of the caliphal era, a point that seems germane to Hughes’s approach to the sources as well (see, e.g., the review of Youssef M. Choueiri, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 76 [2017]: 377–79).

11. The term “post-symbiotic” recurs a number of times in *Shared Identities*, though only once in *Muslim and Jew* (p. xi), which is, as already noted, presented as a “post-symbiotic” survey.

12. Thus, in *Shared Identities* Hughes critiques the concept of *convivencia* as problematically inflected by contemporary concerns, particularly a quest to anchor the modern value of tolerance in the past (pp. 29–30). However, he explicitly presents his own work as intended to address contemporary political problems, for example in both the introduction and chapter 3 of *Muslim and Jew*, as well as in the conclusion of *Shared Identities* itself (pp. 145–49).

Hughes’s reevaluation is particularly indebted to the pioneering and massively influential work of Daniel Boyarin, whose approach to the early Jewish-Christian relationship Hughes seeks to apply to the comparatively underexplored Jewish-Muslim dynamic.¹³ *Shared Identities* in particular also conspicuously rehearses the arguments of Steven Wasserstrom’s 1995 monograph *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam*, a groundbreaking study that likewise aimed at a serious theoretical reevaluation of the early Muslim-Jewish encounter.¹⁴ Hughes’s book retreads much of the territory covered in *Between Muslim and Jew*, pursuing fundamentally similar goals and touching upon many of the same subjects. However, in what feels like an odd manifestation of the anxiety of influence—ironic given the topic at hand—Hughes downplays the importance of Wasserstrom’s precedent and cites his work explicitly only a handful of times in *Shared Identities*.¹⁵

In *Between Muslim and Jew*, Wasserstrom drew attention to the years after the Arab conquest of the Middle East as a notoriously obscure period in Jewish history.¹⁶ He engaged Goitein’s work specifically for its foregrounding of the complex and admittedly problematic concept of symbiosis (thus the subtitle of the book) and argued that in the early period, Islam and Judaism were so closely intertwined socially and religiously that at least some communities at the margins of the traditions were practically indistinguishable or even identical. This early proximity was largely ignored by later Jewish spokesmen, while Muslim commentators effaced most traces of it, relegating groups such as the Isawiyya, whose “syncretistic” (Wasserstrom’s term, p. 86) prophetological and messianic doctrines may be seen as vestigial traces of that proximity, to the category of “heresy.” Modern scholars have long been similarly perplexed by such seemingly hybrid groups, which explains the inability of the analytical language we have inherited to describe such phenomena in a sophisticated way, as well as why attempts to do so typically come up short.¹⁷ In subsequent chapters of *Between Muslim and Jew*, Wasserstrom showed that later developments—*kalām*, heresiography, *isrāʾīliyyāt*, Judeo-Arabic philosophy—similarly preserve traces of the early intimacy (or even identity) of the traditions, as well as demonstrating the efforts

13. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). The recent work of Michael Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), explicitly seeks to apply Boyarin’s approach to the Muslim-Christian encounter under Islamic dominion in the early centuries AH.

14. Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

15. Hughes graciously acknowledges Wasserstrom as a conversation partner at the beginning of *Shared Identities* (p. xiii), but the paucity of explicit citations of *Between Muslim and Jew* in both of his books seems to me to conceal a much more broad-ranging engagement with Wasserstrom’s work than is readily apparent.

16. Steven Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, 17–18, citing, among others, Salo W. Baron, Goitein, and Leon Nemoj; cf. *Shared Identities*, 83–84, focusing on Goitein’s view of the “blackout period” in particular.

17. See *Between Muslim and Jew*, ch. 2. It is tempting to invoke the term “hybrid” in response to communal formations that seem to combine elements from others, especially larger or more dominant groups. However, the term is misleading because it implies the combination of traits from two established species, whereas both Wasserstrom and Hughes would emphasize that the existence of the “hybrid” form actually demonstrates the instability of the original entities.

of later spokesmen to separate the two traditions and marginalize, quarantine, or eliminate ambiguous or boundary-challenging phenomena.

Hughes retreads much of the same territory that Wasserstrom explored almost thirty years ago, although the former's work is rather more focused. Insofar as Hughes does acknowledge his precedent, he avers that Wasserstrom's approach is marred by an uncritical reliance on the concept of symbiosis. To be fair, however, I read Wasserstrom as rather persistently interrogating and problematizing this notion, which we mainly inherit from Goitein, throughout *Between Muslim and Jew*. Questioning the utility of symbiosis as a concept while exploring some of its lesser-known implications seems to me to be the whole point of Wasserstrom's book, and so Hughes's critique strikes me as misplaced.¹⁸

Despite its significant impact on specialists working in this field of study (or perhaps because of it), it is certainly true that Wasserstrom's book is ripe to be revisited and updated; moreover, many of his most important insights are often couched in language that is overly dense, opaque, or *recherché*.¹⁹ One of the great virtues of Hughes's work is its clarity and accessibility: his prose is direct and elegant, and he excels at analyzing and summarizing complex historiographic problems, so that his exposition of the underlying ideology and implications of historical scholarship on Jewish-Muslim encounters is deft, vigorous, and lucid. While Wasserstrom's book still strikes me as endlessly rich, provocative, and exciting, he often operates in what we might recognize as a mode of scholarly discourse characteristic of the history of religions approach pioneered in Islamic studies by Marshall Hodgson (whose inspiration Wasserstrom openly acknowledged). Like many provocative works, Wasserstrom's book can be forbidding to the uninitiated; thus, we can welcome *Shared Identities* as a productive revisiting and reformulation of Wasserstrom's attempt at a more theoretically self-conscious exploration of the Muslim-Jewish encounter that might be more comprehensible and appealing to nonspecialists.²⁰

18. While acknowledging the value of Wasserstrom's work, Hughes claims that "the term nevertheless remains his default model, and it is ultimately left intact at the end of his analysis" (*Shared Identities*, 4). As proof he cites the concluding remarks of *Between Muslim and Jew* (p. 224), where Wasserstrom summarizes the ways in which he has sought to expand and reinterpret the concept of symbiosis. It is not clear to me how Hughes improves upon this by rejecting this term (among others) outright without replacing it with any practically deployable alternative.

19. In the recent tribute volume *All Religion Is Inter-Religion: Engaging the Work of Steven M. Wasserstrom*, ed. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri and Paul Robertson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), only a couple of the contributions refer to Wasserstrom's theoretical insights in *Between Muslim and Jew*, and none engage its main subject matter directly. This suggests that it is Wasserstrom's broader work on methodology in religious studies, particularly his monograph on the Eranos School, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), that has had the widest impact on the field. However, this author can attest (admittedly only on the basis of anecdotal evidence) that numerous other scholars who now work in the field of Judeo-Islamica/Islamo-Judaica were significantly impacted by *Between Muslim and Jew* in choosing to explore this area of research. A brisk, unsystematic survey of citations of *Between Muslim and Jew* via Google search demonstrates that the book has been cited in at least a dozen monographs of significance, as well as numerous peer-reviewed journal articles and reference works.

20. Hodgson's works on both historiography and esoteric Shiism are cited in *Between Muslim and Jew*. Moreover, an early paper of Wasserstrom's dealing with both of these topics was awarded the 1984 Marshall G. S. Hodgson Memorial Prize at the University of Chicago and subsequently published as "The Moving Finger

However, specialists may find Hughes's work frustrating, for it is not clear that it represents a significant conceptual and methodological advance over Wasserstrom's achievement. For one thing, Hughes's attempt to apply Boyarin's approach to the formative Jewish-Christian encounter in *Border Lines* to its later Jewish-Muslim counterpart is obviously laudable, but the study of the former at the time Boyarin undertook this endeavor was light-years ahead of where the study of the latter is right now, despite the significant progress made in various fields of inquiry relevant to the topic over the last couple of decades. Moreover, Boyarin's insights in *Border Lines* built upon his formidable command of the sources and extensive research in the years leading up to it; his theoretical intervention was grounded in his previous work on rabbinic literature and his demonstrable philological mastery of the relevant literature. Likewise, Wasserstrom's approach was informed by his deep engagement with classical Islamic sources, particularly the work of the twelfth-century heresiologist Shahrastānī, whose survey of Jewish sects was central to Wasserstrom's (still unpublished!) doctoral dissertation at the University of Toronto.²¹

In contrast, Hughes is a specialist in medieval philosophy; thus, unsurprisingly, his chapter in *Shared Identities* on the historiography of the Spanish Golden Age is the most robust and provocative section of the book.²² He has also published numerous works of methodological reflection on the discipline of religious studies, and one can see a direct continuity between the discourse analysis of contemporary academic approaches to the study of Islam he executes in those books and the analytical lens he trains on various influential figures in the study of the Muslim-Jewish encounter among previous generations of Anglo-European scholars in *Shared Identities*.²³ However, Hughes's approach to Islamic origins and the Jews of early Islam—subjects located in a period well outside of his area of main expertise—sometimes reflects a problematic handling of the sources and a neglect of

Writes: Mughīra b. Saʿīd's Islamic Gnosis and the Myths of Its Rejection," *History of Religions* 25 (1985): 1–29. A mentor of mine who will remain anonymous here once remarked that Hodgson is the scholar most likely to induce fits of aggravation in undergraduates; my personal experience indicates that Wasserstrom is also a strong contender for this honor.

21. Steven M. Wasserstrom, "Species of Misbelief: A History of Muslim Heresiography of the Jews" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1987).

22. Hughes, *Shared Identities*, ch. 5.

23. Hughes's criticisms of the contemporary field of Islamic studies have often devolved into *ad hominem* attacks and precipitated strident counter-critiques, especially in online forums. A common response to his allegations is that they rest upon distorted characterizations of scholars of note and their claims. Thus, Hughes's *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012) focuses on a critique of what he sees as uncritical, and even "insular and apologetic" (p. 2), tendencies in the discourse and ideology of the academic study of Islam as practiced in North America, especially in circles of scholars associated with the American Academy of Religion. For an unvarnished evaluation of this book and its allegations, see Devin J. Stewart, "A Modest Proposal for Islamic Studies," in *Identity, Politics and the Study of Islam: Current Dilemmas in the Study of Religions*, ed. Matt Sheedy, 157–200 (Sheffield: Equinox, 2018). Notably, this edited volume was itself a response to a public controversy between Hughes and Omid Safi and the discussions that followed; see the interview with the editor, "Identity, Politics, and the Study of Islam," available online at <https://edge.ua.edu/nota-bene/identity-politics-and-the-study-of-islam-an-interview-with-matt-sheedy/>. Hughes reiterated many of the critiques of *Theorizing Islam* even more strenuously in *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception* (London: Equinox, 2016).

significant ongoing debates that are directly relevant to his argument. I cannot say whether his questionable interpretations and misleading representations of texts stem from an indifference to philology or an insensitivity to historical matters, but at various junctures in both of the books under consideration here, one is confronted with perplexing oversights and misprisions, especially (but not solely) pertaining to early and classical Islam.

A Skeptical Religionist Peers into the Darkness: The “Aporia” of Islam’s Origins

Of course, one cannot expect a scholar’s research interests to be bounded perpetually by their original or primary area of expertise. Naturally, scholars grow intellectually, foster expanding or divergent interests, and apply their knowledge and methods to new problems. But acknowledgment of Hughes’s disciplinary location and background—and the constraints they seem to impose on his project—seems to me to be justified not only because the issue is directly relevant to an evaluation of his work, but also because the author actually foregrounds the question of disciplinary specialization and orientation himself. At the beginning of *Shared Identities*, Hughes explicitly asserts that his work is not grounded in a historical or philological approach but rather is conceived as operating in a separate (and seemingly higher?) realm, that of the scholar of religion or “religionist.”²⁴ This perhaps explains why his “suggestive and critical intervention”²⁵ is most effective when Hughes is critiquing the established scholarship on his subject, deftly dissecting the presuppositions and implications of much of the previous work on the Jews of the Islamic world; much contemporary work in religious studies operates in this Foucauldian mode of genealogical and discourse analysis. However, Hughes overlooks much current scholarship that is pertinent to his subject and sometimes seems to be operating at a sharp disadvantage in his handling of relevant, even indispensable, primary evidence as well.

In chapter 1 of *Shared Identities*, Hughes somewhat blithely critiques a number of recent contributions to the field of Judeo-Islamic/Isamo-Judaic studies (both premodern and modern) as being mainly or solely historical or philological in nature and so failing to achieve a broader synthesis or to reach deeper and more theoretically insightful conclusions. Hughes is correct that the works he mentions here focus on specific subjects pertaining to the Muslim-Jewish encounter—dismissed rather derisively as “micro topics”²⁶—and aim at more specifically contextualized types of insights and conclusions. However, it seems rather unfair, as well as inaccurate, to disparage these authors for not reflecting on broader issues of specific concern to scholars of religion or for failing to explicitly invoke theoretical language or models that are conventional or fashionable in some circles in religious studies.

24. Further, Hughes is explicit that he is not concerned with bringing new evidence per se to the table but rather seeks to operate synthetically and critically, interrogating and critiquing the established literature. The implication often seems to be that the main task of the scholar of religion is to perform second-order analysis on data yielded by other, lower-level types of study that generally do *not* aim at or achieve true critical insights. This both sells scholarship generated in other disciplines short and effaces the significant work in critical, methodologically oriented religious studies done by scholars who directly engage the historical or contemporary phenomena they study, integrating both types of research activity.

25. *Shared Identities*, x.

26. *Ibid.*, 2.

Further, needless to say, even absent such explicit reflection on the part of these scholars, the kind of second-order theoretical analysis Hughes wishes to engage in would not be possible without the more historically grounded or philologically rigorous research into the sources conducted by the scholars he disparages here.²⁷

In chapter 2 of *Shared Identities* (“Origins”), Hughes interrogates past and contemporary scholarship on the Jews of the Prophet Muḥammad’s time.²⁸ Since the foundational work of Abraham Geiger (d. 1874), scholars have persistently explored the question of these Jews’ identity and religious orientation, a question of great significance for our understanding of the Quran and the emergence of Islam. In particular, as Hughes notes, the “strong Judaic cast” of proto-Islam induced Geiger and others to speculate regarding the possible Jewish background of the Prophet’s career and milieu, as the impact of the Jews of Muḥammad’s time on the Quran was often explained via a unidirectional movement of ideas and practices from these Jews to the fledgling community. I have elsewhere dubbed this the influence paradigm, though Hughes for some unspecified reason favors the language of “larceny.”²⁹ The logic behind this coinage escapes me, since the scholars of past generations who posited this unidirectional movement of cultural goods from the Jews to Islam almost always utilized the language of debt and borrowing and seldom, if ever, characterized this movement of ideas as theft per se.³⁰

27. In the note in which he specifies the historical-philological studies he is talking about, Hughes explicitly states: “None of them . . . are interested in larger questions supplied by the study of religion” (ibid., 152, n. 3). This is a stunningly misleading characterization of the work of the scholars in question (Mark Cohen, Marina Rustow, David Freidenreich, Jessica Goldberg, Arnold Franklin, Shai Secunda, and Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman). It is possible that Hughes simply means to distinguish himself from these scholars, identifying them (in contrast to himself) as historians or philologists by training and method rather than scholars of religion per se. However, the point of such a distinction is lost on me, and it is simply incorrect in at least one case, that of Freidenreich, whose work is squarely located in religious studies and deeply embedded in its critical discourses. I will address the question of methodology, and what Hughes specifically claims to bring to the table as a “religionist,” further below.

28. Moving into Hughes’s treatment of particular subjects in his books, I should note that on many occasions material from *Shared Identities* is repeated verbatim in *Muslim and Jew*; on others, the older material is synopsized but the takeaway is the same, while in a few other cases, *Muslim and Jew* offers a substantially different approach to a specific topic. I will sometimes note the parallels and divergences between the books below, though I have not attempted to do so systematically.

29. See *Shared Identities*, 43–53 passim. Hughes cites my early article on Geiger (“The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: The Problem of the Jewish ‘Influence’ on Islam,” *Religion Compass* 1 [2007]: 643–659) in *Shared Identities* (166, n. 41), but I did not characterize the language shared between the Quran and contemporaneous varieties of Judaism as “Semitic” in nature there, as he seems to suggest (p. 48). For a more up-to-date version of my argument about the concept of “influence” as it has historically been deployed in discussions of the background to the Quran, see my *The Golden Calf between Bible and Qur’an: Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), esp. 34–41.

30. Hughes appears to attribute the language not only of borrowing but also of theft to Abraham Geiger (*Shared Identities*, 48), but I have not found a single reference to Muḥammad’s relationship to Judaism as *Diebstahl* in Geiger’s *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*, rev. ed. (Leipzig: Kaufmann; New York: Bloch, 1902), whereas references to *Aufnahme* or *Ableitung* are ubiquitous. Hughes is certainly correct in noting the extremely widespread impact of Geiger’s approach among scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (*Shared Identities*, 48–49), but my overarching impression of this literature is that

Be that as it may, Hughes effectively unpacks the conspicuous and problematic political and ideological commitments that have so often informed scholarship in this area. In particular, he emphasizes that many attempts to resolve the question of the origins and pedigree of the Jews of the Ḥijāz reflect a deep-seated—and ultimately defensive and apologetic—concern with continuity. By asserting the antiquity of this Jewish community, as well as its basically rabbinic orientation, Geiger and his many followers establish not only the privileged and more original status of the Jews vis-à-vis Islam, but also forge an important link in a chain that stretches from Jewish antiquity to the Middle Ages, rooting the culture of European Jewry in the legacy of ancient Israel. However, as Hughes recognizes, the notion of a teleological spread of normative Judaism in this period—and the monolithic hegemony of rabbinic Judaism, in particular—has fallen out of favor among most scholars, as numerous studies have shown that rabbinic authority was only gradually constructed and established in diasporic Jewish communities in the high Middle Ages.³¹

The main impression one gets from Hughes's approach to both Islamic origins in general and the Jewish background to Islam specifically is that of a pervasive agnosticism. In discussing older trajectories of scholarship, Hughes problematizes the idea that the Jews of Muḥammad's time were straightforwardly rabbinic and thus that their beliefs—and consequent impact on the Quran and formative Islam—conform to the supposedly “traditional” Judaism naturalized as authoritative in the classical rabbinic canon. He concludes this discussion by stating: “[T]he problem remains: What did Judaism look like on the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth and seventh centuries? Since we have no idea, how and why do we continue to claim that a normative rabbinic Judaism was present at the ‘birth’ of Islam” (p. 46). It is true that the array of questionable presuppositions and ideologically suspect answers scholars working on the “Jewish question” in Islamic origins have sometimes produced suggests that, like views on the historical Jesus, any conclusion one might draw about the Jews of Muḥammad's time ultimately reflects only the image of the beholder. In other words, from the time of Geiger to the present day, scholars have gazed eagerly into the darkness, striving to catch a glimpse of historical reality, but have often just spotted their own reflection and so in the end merely confirmed their own

Geiger's followers have similarly favored the language of transaction and indebtedness rather than that of theft, and that the most prevalent characterization of the situation is not one of Jews being victims of “larceny,” but rather of Muslims being pervasively indebted to exemplary Jewish models. This is one of the most fundamental ways in which Geiger's work impacted approaches to the Quran and Islamic origins in the Anglo-European tradition. In any event, Hughes presents the term “larceny” in quotation marks (e.g., in the heading “‘Larceny’: The History of an Idea,” 50) as if he is quoting someone else's coinage, but I have been unable to discern any precedent for it. None is indicated by direct citation.

31. See, e.g., Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). Hughes productively makes use of—dare I say “borrows”—Bulliet's metaphor of the “spreading inkblot” to describe ingrained conceptions of the spread of Islam after the Arab conquests—ineluctable, natural, and homogeneous. Hughes suggests, quite rightly in my view, that this is also how the spread of normative rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity is commonly imagined (*Shared Identities*, 8; cf. 53).

presuppositions and biases.³² Here Hughes, too, gazes into the abyss, but what he sees is rather different from what previous generations managed to glimpse.

To be clear, I absolutely share Hughes's skepticism of overly positivistic studies on the subject of the Jews of late antique Arabia and the Jewish social and religious context of the Quran. Most notably, we concur in our evaluations of the 2014 monograph of Haggai Mazuz, who argues on the basis of a highly problematic negotiation of the evidence that the Jews of Medina were thoroughly rabbinic in orientation.³³ Similarly, it is difficult to disagree with Hughes's assertion that Islam could not have been—as Geiger and his followers postulated—the product of a unilateral communication of “influences” from a stable, well-defined Judaism to the Prophet and his fledgling Muslim community. As already noted, Hughes favors an alternative position, conjecturing that a host of diverse, but by and large unknowable, expressions of Jewish identity in the late antique milieu contributed to the precipitation of early Islam out of a variegated matrix, with what became the mature, normative forms of both traditions gradually emerging only over the course of centuries through a complex dynamic of mutual exchange and coevolution.

However, I am not confident that a position of complete agnosticism is merited or that it is the current consensus position among contemporary scholars working in this area. For one thing, considerable progress has been made in the study of Arabian Jewry on the basis of epigraphic evidence, in particular. In the case of South Arabia, the massive output of Christian Julien Robin and other scholars over the last two decades might allow us to draw *some* conclusions, however provisional, about the development and spread of some form of Judaism on the peninsula in Late Antiquity. In *Shared Identities*, Hughes briefly cites a single piece by Robin, his long article “Himyar et Israël” from 2004, but he does not take into account the substantial development of Robin's thinking in the fifteen years since in his numerous subsequent contributions, nor the more recent and complementary work of Iwona Gajda and others. Granted, we cannot *directly* ascertain anything about how normative the Judaism of the Jewish tribes of Medina was—the main question of interest to Hughes—by studying the rather earlier Judaization of Ḥimyar, quite far afield from the Ḥijāz, though linked to it through trade and other networks maintained by the highly

32. This tendency is, of course, true of scholarly engagements with Muḥammad himself; for an incisive investigation of the complex investments Western scholars have brought to inquiry into the biography of the Prophet, see Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Hughes himself asserts that contemporary professors of Islamic studies have produced an image of Muḥammad of a particularly apologetic bent by projecting their own values upon the founder of Islam (*Theorizing Islam*, 34).

33. Haggai Mazuz, *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). Compare Hughes's review in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83 (2015): 580–82 and my “The Jews of Medina and the Challenge of Early Islamic Historiography,” *Review of Qur'anic Research* 2, no. 2 (2016), <https://lockwoodonlinejournals.com/index.php/rqr/article/view/332>. Hughes efficiently exposes the problems with Mazuz's methodology, focusing particularly on the latter's problematic reliance on the principle of *mukhālafā* and positing that early Muslims' insistence on acting in a fashion dissimilar to Jews in fact signals self-consciousness about the original similarity, or even identity, of the groups. Hughes's criticism of the shortcomings of Mazuz's methodology is spot on, but his critique would have been strengthened considerably by engagement with the major discussion of *mukhālafā* in Ze'ev Maghen, *After Hardship Cometh Ease: The Jews as Backdrop for Muslim Moderation* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), which he overlooks.

mobile population at the time. Nevertheless, the case of Ḥimyar provides an important precedent for the similar (and far more successful) project of monotheization pursued by Muḥammad in the Ḥijāz. Moreover, considering what scholars have learned about “Judaism” and how it can or should be defined in the Yemenite milieu is surely informative for similar questions of definition as they might pertain to the later Ḥijāzī milieu. I am not suggesting that the example of Ḥimyar contradicts any of the conclusions Hughes draws here, only that given its direct relevance to the questions Hughes is asking, I would have imagined this case would have merited far greater consideration in his theoretical investigation in *Shared Identities*.³⁴ Presumably Hughes came to recognize this lacuna himself, because *Muslim and Jew* includes a slightly more robust discussion of the Ḥimyarite evidence, where Hughes briefly notes its utility for corroborating the fluid and heteronormative nature of the “Judaism” to which the Yemenite kingdom supposedly converted in Late Antiquity.³⁵

We might also consider the significant contributions to the question of the Jewish background to Islam that have been made recently by scholars in Quranic studies. It is true that many scholars working on the Quran in a textualist-philological vein are generally reticent to advance more sweeping hypotheses of a positivist historical sort.³⁶ Nevertheless, much of the work done in Quranic studies over the last decade is extremely pertinent to the topic of the Jewish impact on the Quran and Muḥammad, yet Hughes almost completely neglects this literature here, engaging it only as it relates to more peripheral topics.³⁷

34. On the other hand, the case of Ḥimyar is *not* relevant for the reason Hughes explicitly adduces here, namely that Muḥammad sent some of his followers to seek refuge in Yemen “among other communities of monotheists” when he was being persecuted in Mecca (*Shared Identities*, 44). Hughes is likely thinking of the so-called first *hijra* to Axum, in which a small group of the Prophet’s followers fled to Ethiopia under the leadership of Ja’far b. Abī Ṭālib, Muḥammad’s cousin.

35. *Muslim and Jew*, 14–16, citing a much broader body of secondary literature, including recent or relatively recent work by G. W. Bowersock, George Hatke, Norbert Nebes, and Iwona Gajda alongside somewhat older studies by Reuben Ahroni and Joseph Naveh (curiously, Robin continues to be represented by only the single article from 2004). Hughes has recently devoted a longer piece to the subject that more adroitly navigates the relevant primary and secondary sources: “South Arabian ‘Judaism,’ Ḥimyarite Raḥmanism, and the Origins of Islam,” in *Remapping Emergent Islam: Texts, Social Settings, and Ideological Trajectories*, ed. Carlos A. Segovia, 15–43 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020). Here Hughes aptly conjectures that Ḥimyarite monotheism may have been a combination of elements, “a thin overlay of some type of non-normative Judaism over a type of autochthonous Arabian monotheism,” and implies that a similar synthesis of elements may have been behind the rise of Islam in the Ḥijāz far to the north (pp. 37–38).

36. See my discussion of the problematic disjunction between contemporary Quranic studies and current historical perspectives on the late antique milieu in which Islam emerged in “Positivism, Revisionism, and Agnosticism in the Study of Late Antiquity and the Qur’ān,” *Journal of the International Qur’anic Studies Association* 2 (2017): 169–99.

37. Thus, the monographs of Holger Zellentin (*The Qur’ān’s Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013]) and Emran El-Badawi (*The Qur’ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* [Abingdon: Routledge, 2014]) appear in a note concerning Jewish Christianity in the early Islamic milieu (*Shared Identities*, 175, n. 64), though one readily imagines that they are, or should have been, much more central to Hughes’s discussion. Patricia Crone, “Jewish Christianity and the Qur’ān (Part One),” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74 (2015): 225–53 appears here as well (though not its sequel from the following year). This is the only one of Crone’s more recent articles Hughes cites, although her notorious early study with Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) is cited in both

Ignoring the substantial discussions of the Quran among specialists is a peculiar decision given their relevance to the question of what reliable information about the Prophet's milieu may be discerned in or extrapolated from the corpus, broadly recognized as the most important primary source for the rise of Islam. To be fair, Wasserstrom did not engage with contemporary debates on the Quran at all either, but he published *Between Muslim and Jew* at a time when Quranic studies was a far less active field of inquiry than it is today. If one had to judge by Hughes's bibliography, one would conclude—quite wrongly—that not much of significance had been happening in this area of research over the last fifteen years or so.³⁸

Admittedly, much contemporary work on the biblical currents or subtexts in the Quran trends against the idea of a direct impact of rabbinic Judaism on the prophetic milieu—favoring, for example, Syriac Christian literature as a more pervasive and proximate literary context.³⁹ However, there is no shortage of other research that would tend to ratify the conclusion of Geiger and others that the Quran directly reflects the stamp of late antique

Shared Identities and Muslim and Jew, and her *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) appears in the former. Stupendously, there is no reference to Angelika Neuwirth at all except as coeditor of the collection in which the previously mentioned article of Nebes appears. The works of John Wansbrough receive some attention in *Shared Identities*, for example in dialogue with the work of Boyarin (pp. 85–86). Hughes is certainly correct in discerning Wansbrough's analogous significance for inducing skepticism about the received narratives of Islam's origins, but however instrumental Wansbrough may have been in triggering major changes in our understanding of formative Islam and the emergence of the Quran, his work is hardly reflective of where the field is today. The Quran features somewhat more prominently in Hughes's article "Religion without Religion: Integrating Islamic Origins into Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85 (2017): 867–88, though much of the relevant research of the last decade is again ignored.

38. There is a brief discussion of the Quran in *Muslim and Jew*, 18–19, that seems to reflect some minor improvement in the author's awareness of issues of significance in the field today, such as the possible impact of the Quran on Jewish literature rather than vice versa as Geiger et al. asserted, but no secondary sources other than Geiger and James Kugel on midrash (*In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990]) are cited here. The reader is given the impression that Hughes's insights on chronology are original, which they are not. This is hardly the only place in either book in which well-trodden arguments are presented as if *ex novo*, or current scholarship is neglected. Another striking example is the discussion of Jewish Sufism in chapter 6 of *Shared Identities*; this topic has recently benefited from a significant uptick in scholarly interest, but judging by Hughes's bibliography on the subject, one might conclude that very little had been published on it since the 1980s.

39. In this connection, it should be noted that most scholars working on the origins of Islam and the background to the Quran today would emphasize that both were undoubtedly the products of complex interactions and dialogues between multiple communities in Late Antiquity, in which not only Jews but also Christians and pagans participated along with the Quranic community; this multifaceted dynamic continued well into the early and medieval periods of Islamic history. Hughes's work reflects and responds to a particular trajectory in the historical scholarship, and so he emphasizes the Jewish-Muslim dialogue to the exclusion of other participants. For a model study that often succeeds in capturing the polyvalent complexities of social and religious interactions among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others from Late Antiquity to the high Middle Ages, see Uriel Simonsohn, *A Common Justice: The Legal Alliances of Christians and Jews under Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). The aforementioned work of Lassner, *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam*, likewise succeeds at triangulating between the traditions both theoretically and in the case studies it considers.

Jewish thought, though this is now conceived and articulated in a more sophisticated, less reductive way than it has been in the past.

Here a conspicuous problem presents itself. On the one hand, the archaeological and epigraphic data suggest that a form or forms of Judaism prevailed in both Ḥimyar and the Ḥijāz that we can characterize at most as diffuse and heteronormative (at least relative to rabbinic normativity, an entirely problematic construct in the late antique context). On the other hand, some contemporary work on the Quranic evidence suggests that textual traditions rather close to those that survive either in the standard rabbinic corpus or in “pararabbinic” corpora (such as the piyyutim) supply the most plausible literary precursors for the Quran.⁴⁰ It is not clear whether and how these trajectories can be reconciled. As with the case of Ḥimyar, it is striking that Hughes almost entirely ignores them.

It is a shame that Hughes generally overlooks recent work on the Quran, because there is much here that would enrich his perspective and perhaps move his argument forward out of the foggy state of agnosticism that he dwells in when discussing this critical period. In acknowledging the presence of Jews in and around the Arabian milieu, Hughes briefly mentions Ḥimyar but also refers to the famous community settled at Elephantine in Egypt during the Persian period; since the papyrus remains of the Jewish colony there date to the fifth century BCE, one wonders if this datum is really a relevant comparandum for illuminating the situation in Late Antiquity.⁴¹ What is surely more relevant is Crone’s work on the belief system the Quran attributes to the *mushrikūn*, Muḥammad’s “pagan” opponents. In a number of publications before her untimely death in 2015, Crone argued that the evidence of the Quran itself militates in favor of a view of the Prophet’s interlocutors as themselves informed by—and so presumably acculturated to—a worldview that is fundamentally “biblical.” Neither the tradition nor the Quran identifies the *mushrikūn* as Jews, and Crone opts for the hypothesis that at some point, presumably through direct contact with “Israelites”—a population somehow anchored in and defining itself in relation to some register of ancient biblical tradition—the Ḥijāzī Arabs of Muḥammad’s time had become strongly assimilated to monotheism of an Israelite-Judaic stripe.⁴² As in the case of Ḥimyar, the evidence of the Quran suggests gradual acculturation to a diffuse form of Israelite monotheism rather than conversion to a formally defined rabbinic or quasi-rabbinic Judaism. This way of understanding the milieu and Muḥammad’s contemporaries

40. On the question of canonical rabbinic or pararabbinic precursors to Quranic material, see now my “The Two Sons of Adam: Rabbinic Resonances and Scriptural Virtuosity in Sūrat al-Mā’idah,” *Journal of the International Qur’anic Studies Association* 6 (2021) (forthcoming) and the bibliography therein.

41. *Shared Identities*, 44. One could argue that the case of Elephantine is in fact relevant since the form of Judaism reflected in the papyri sometimes diverges quite acutely from what we know of the “normative” or “mainstream” Judaism of the time as evidenced in the literary (that is, biblical) sources for the period. Moreover, Karel van der Toorn has proposed that the Elephantine community was originally Samaritan in origin and only gradually acquired a diasporic Jewish identity in response to changing circumstances in Egypt; see his *Becoming Diaspora Jews: Behind the Story of Elephantine* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). These points seem to me to be quite relevant for Hughes’s argument, but the case of Elephantine is raised only as evidence of a Jewish presence in the Arabian (or at least Eastern Roman) environs in the pre-Islamic period.

42. Most of the studies collected in Patricia Crone, *The Qur’ānic Pagans and Related Matters*, vol. 1 of *Collected Studies in Three Volumes*, ed. Hanna Siurua (Leiden: Brill, 2016) are pertinent to this theme.

is surely pertinent to Hughes's main point of interest in the proto-Islamic period, namely, the presence and status of Jews—or "Jews"—in the milieu, and his work would have been considerably enriched by engaging with Crone and other scholars working in the field of Quranic studies.⁴³

Intriguingly, Crone's approach dovetails with a strand in older scholarship that postulated that the Jewish tribes of Muḥammad's time were "converts"—Judaized Arabs rather than Arabized Jews, as it were.⁴⁴ It is emblematic of Hughes's agnosticism about the Jews of the Ḥijāz that he is skeptical *both* of claims of the ancient Palestinian origins of the community *and* of the thesis that they were converts, as earlier scholars such as Hugo Winckler and D. S. Margoliouth held.⁴⁵ However, although some of their ideas are now problematic, the approach of these older scholars is in some sense vindicated by contemporary research on the spread of some form of Israelite or Jewish identity in both Yemen and the Ḥijāz in the pre-Islamic period. Hughes's objection to this approach centers on the fact that he sees conversion itself as a problematic notion in this context. Given the lack of doctrinal and institutional coherence Hughes sees as typical of most (all?) varieties of late antique Judaism, he justifiably asks what such putative converts are thought to be converting *to*; surely we cannot take for granted any kind of formal process of conversion signifying a decisive movement from one clearly delineated system of belief and practice to another. Another strange lacuna in Hughes's work confronts us in this connection, for there is an established, and considerable, scholarly literature on conversion, expressions of communal belonging, and nominal-symbolic or practical boundary-crossing between communities in Late Antiquity, much of which would surely have been relevant to his interests here.

Be that as it may, if we accept the notion that the "Jews" of Muḥammad's time were neither rabbinic in orientation nor formal converts but rather Arabs who assimilated to some form of Judaic or Israelite cultural identity—Crone's "God-fearers"⁴⁶—we again face the question that is central to Hughes's enterprise: what was Judaism in the late antique, proto-Islamic milieu anyway? The evidence of the Quran, at least as read by Crone, corroborates Hughes's thesis of a diffuse, poorly defined, heteronormative Judaism in this environment. And yet we must ask how diffuse membership in the Jewish community (or Banū Isrāʿīl, or

43. As noted, one of the most striking omissions is the work of Neuwirth, who for many years, in a massive corpus of publications, has articulated an extremely sophisticated approach to the genesis of the Quranic revelation, rejecting the influence paradigm that prevailed in the past in favor of a sophisticated, nuanced presentation of the Prophet and his community as deeply engaged with a Judaic literary and social environment. This is extremely relevant to the "Jewish question" as it pertains to Islamic origins, and so Neuwirth's absence from Hughes's discussion is especially glaring.

44. In his discussion of the origins of Arabian Jewry in his classic *A History of the Jews of Arabia from Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), Gordon Newby strikes a judicious balance between the accounts of ancient Jewish migration into Arabia—which he seems to perceive as grounded in historical reality despite the obvious ideological commitments of many scholars positing this model of origins—and the numerous traditions that suggest that many of the Jews of Arabia were converts. Trenchantly, Newby observes pre-Islamic Arab conversion to Judaism as a foreshadowing of Islamization (p. 53).

45. *Shared Identities*, 51–53.

46. Patricia Crone, "Pagan Arabs as God-fearers," in *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, ed. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook. 140–64 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Ahl al-Kitāb, all floating signifiers) could really have been in Muḥammad's time, since it was cogent enough to be a major criterion of social distinction in the Quran itself. Quranic discourse presupposes that individual and communal identity are determined by the path one follows, and so we must infer from this that the criteria of distinction between the prophetic community of Believers and the Jews (*yahūd*, sometimes styled *alladhīna hādū*, "those who profess Judaism") were substantial enough to be both legible and meaningful to the Quran's audience. It is difficult to imagine that when the Quranic revelation insinuates that the Jews merit both worldly sanction and eschatological punishment for their misdeeds, the Prophet's followers were uncertain about who was meant or how they differed from members of their own community. Though the distinctions may have been rudimentary and the social boundaries blurry at times, they must have been basically coherent; to be a Jew, whatever that meant, was something significant to the Quran's audience. Nor could such distinctions have been ideal or abstract, unless one imagines—contrary to the consensus—that the Quran was revealed in a vacuum and that its message had no direct social implications. I assume Hughes would agree with this overall appraisal, but to me this all underscores the pertinence of the Quranic evidence to arguments about the Jewish context of Islam's origins.

Those of us who work in this area are well accustomed to abiding in the shadowy realm of conjecture, and so we typically aim at probability and plausibility rather than absolute certitude. However, it is debatable whether a position of total agnosticism is still warranted today and whether we should be content to throw up our hands and claim that the attempt to reach *any* conclusions about the varieties of Judaism represented in the ambit of the proto-Islamic community is hopeless. There are surely some arch-revisionists still out there who would share Hughes's supposition that we have no idea what was happening in the Ḥijāz in this period, but to present this as the *status quaestionis* seems like a rather nihilistic mischaracterization of the field as it now stands. Although this subject must surely be treated with caution and approached with skepticism, Hughes's repeated emphasis on the "aporia" of the Jews of Late Antiquity and early Islam in our historical understanding—an extreme, though at times selective, revisionism—is conspicuously uninformed by contemporary debates.⁴⁷ It is clear we cannot go back to the unreflective and unselfconscious positivism of the nineteenth century; but the Jewish presence in pre-Islamic Arabia is hardly a total black box either, and recent approaches have rehabilitated the perspectives of at least some of the scholars of past generations, though these approaches are largely overlooked by Hughes.

Among the Believers: From the Prophetic to the Early Islamic Period

A pervasive ambiguity regarding the reliability of the available sources for the proto-Islamic period runs throughout Hughes's work. While he generally adopts a skeptical pose, at times he equivocates and becomes more sanguine regarding what exactly we can know

47. The term *aporia* (literally a disjunction or impasse) recurs several times in *Shared Identities*; Hughes employs it to signify what he alleges to be the current state of our historical understanding (or lack of understanding) of the nature of Jewish-Muslim relations in periods for which we either have no sources or our sources cannot answer the kinds of questions we wish to pose to them.

about the prophetic milieu (or at least what questions we can ask and plausibly answer on the basis of the sources). His perspective on the so-called Constitution of Medina is instructive in this regard. Hughes initially sounds a rather pessimistic note about this document given that it survives only in a source dating to more than a century after the time of the Prophet, the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767). He observes that both Michael Lecker and Uri Rubin have sought to address the question of the identity (and specifically the tribal affiliations) of the document's Jewish signatories and concludes that even if we judge it reliable, what it primarily attests to is the fuzziness of the boundaries delineating Jewish groups from others in the milieu: "[T]he contours of these 'Jewish' groups . . . are impossible to ascertain with any historical clarity."⁴⁸ He thus reads the document as an imperfect approximation of a complex reality in which "Jews," however they might have been defined or identified themselves, were incorporated into or accommodated by the early *umma*. However, one might object that in the end, it is clear that the Jews are not reducible to simply one of several tribal configurations among the others mentioned in the Constitution of Medina; rather, these groups are exceptional among its signatories. *Pace* Hughes, one wonders what the basis of that exceptionalism is if it is not somehow religious in nature.

One senses a kind of revisionist sleight of hand here: the text of the pact, like the vast majority of extant traditions on the rise of Islam, is preserved in a source that dates from at least a century after the event and so is asserted to be intrinsically suspect; but at the same time, insofar as it *is* reliable, what it supposedly signals for Hughes is the blurry boundaries of the early *umma* and the impossibility of determining what "Jewish" identity could have meant in this context.⁴⁹ Although Hughes does not cite him in this passage, one senses Fred Donner's well-known thesis about the fluidity of the early movement of the Believers (as he dubs the primitive community under the guidance of the Prophet) in the background here.⁵⁰ Donner, according to whom *muslim* was not a distinct, formal religious identity per se but rather a designation limited to Arab converts lacking a previous monotheistic communal identity, is acknowledged elsewhere in *Shared Identities*, however; for example, he is cited as corroborating Hughes in emphasizing the vagueness of the terms qualifying someone as a member of the early community (p. 9), though in a footnote to this passage, Hughes actually criticizes Donner for characterizing the early movement as specifically "religious" in nature (p. 153, n. 21).

48. *Shared Identities*, 60. Stunningly, this is the only reference to Uri Rubin's important work in either book. This is perhaps the apposite place to observe that Hughes chronically undercites works and authors relevant to his argument throughout both books; sometimes the omissions are quite startling, as when Hughes ignores studies that are indispensable to a responsible handling of the topic at hand. The problem is especially acute in *Muslim and Jew*.

49. This ambiguity is characteristic of Hughes's approach to the Isawiyya as well, where late and problematically ideological sources are by and large assumed to represent historical verities when they confirm Hughes's basic thesis about the blurring of boundaries and the ambiguity of identities. In this, Hughes follows Wasserstrom, who struggles to negotiate a critical approach to heresiography while relying on such works for his revisionist historiography. See the discussion of the Isawiyya and messianism below.

50. Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010).

However, it is not clear to me that Hughes has apprehended the real point of Donner's argument. Donner's project in *Muhammad and the Believers* is to show—primarily on the evidence of the Quran itself—that the early *umma* was far more ecumenical than has been previously recognized, and specifically that the first followers of Muḥammad welcomed pious Jews and Christians alongside *muslim* or “submitting” Arabs in a common pietistic and apocalyptic movement.⁵¹ To Donner, the Prophet was not founding a new, formally bounded and well-defined “religion” in the modern sense (and so here he and Hughes are in agreement), or even in the sense according to which Muslims would assert categorical prerogatives over Jews and Christians as an imperial ruling class only a few decades after his death. This does not mean, however, that markers of identity and distinction were not operative in the early community, or that they did not quickly come to predominate in the conceptual repertoire shared by various groups in the caliphal period—points Hughes fails to appreciate.⁵²

It is noteworthy that Hughes acknowledges Lecker more substantially in his discussion of the Constitution of Medina.⁵³ In numerous studies published over the course of decades, Lecker has shown through methodical and at times ingenious interpretation of data provided in the oft-maligned traditional Muslim sources on the formative Islamic period that we can actually discern much useful and plausibly reliable historical information in those sources. Much of Lecker's work pertains to the Jews of the Ḥijāz, and although he is predominantly interested in questions of tribal affiliation, diplomatic relations, genealogy, and so forth, he has also offered various conjectures pertinent to the subject of the Jewish tribes' religion and its impact upon the formative Muslim tradition. However, most of Lecker's titanic output is dismissed or simply overlooked by Hughes; there is no acknowledgment, for example, of his major 2014 monograph on Muḥammad and the Jews.⁵⁴ One might imagine that Lecker's work was of limited benefit to Hughes's project because Lecker by and large seems to assume that the Jewish tribes of Arabia were aligned with the rabbinic Judaism of Palestine and Babylonia; his conclusion that aspects of the Medinan Jews' culture reflected a hegemonic rabbinic normativity contradicts Hughes's argument on a fundamental level.⁵⁵ More broadly, it is possible that Lecker's disposition toward drawing

51. See now also Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), emphasizing apocalyptic piety both as the basis of the “ecumenism” of Muḥammad's movement and as the common denominator shared with many other communities in the late antique and early Islamic period.

52. Donner's thesis is cited more straightforwardly in *Muslim and Jew*, but again as demonstrating the indistinctness of the categories “Muslim” and “Jew” rather than the ecumenism of the *umma*, which I take to be the real thrust of Donner's argument.

53. See *Shared Identities*, 59–60; a briefer discussion appears in *Muslim and Jew*, 30.

54. Michael Lecker, *Muḥammad ve-ha-Yehûdîm [Muḥammad and the Jews]* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ben-Tzvi, 2014). Lecker's extensive scholarly output in English from the last twenty years is readily available in a number of collected volumes.

55. Alternately, we might imagine that not enough of Lecker's work addresses the religion of the Jews of Medina per se, although—as Hughes himself would remind us—it is supposedly impossible to isolate religion from other categories of identity and behavior at this time (this is the crux of his critique of Donner, which strikes me as somewhat misplaced).

positivistic conclusions about the primitive Islamic milieu on the basis of the later Muslim sources is simply unappealing to Hughes, as it seems to be to many scholars of a revisionist bent; Hughes is hardly the only contemporary scholar who seems at best indifferent to Lecker's numerous contributions to the field, whether published in Hebrew or in English.

The problematic nature of other aspects of Hughes's navigation of the early historiographic tradition becomes apparent as he transitions from the prophetic period to the early centuries of the Islamic dominion. Aspects of Hughes's treatment of the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq in *Muslim and Jew* are strong, as when he recognizes that *sīra* traditions function exegetically, anchoring the interpretation of the Quran in episodes in the life of the Prophet rather than conveying objectively reliable historical information. He also notes that some aspects of the *sīra* serve to cast Muḥammad as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, a well-established argument in the field.⁵⁶ However, he veers into somewhat dubious territory when he asserts that the first section of Ibn Ishāq's work, the so-called *mubtada'*, which collects traditions on Muḥammad's prophetic precursors, was sheared off by Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) and other transmitters specifically because of Ibn Ishāq's copious reliance upon *isrā'iliyyāt*, which had fallen into "disrepute" by this time.⁵⁷

Although the abridgment of the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* has been much discussed, the claim that it was judged to be necessary on the basis of on the work's proliferation of *isrā'iliyyāt* already in the third/ninth century (as Newby, Hughes's source here, avers) is no longer tenable. For one thing, insofar as Ibn Hishām's motivations for his interventions into Ibn Ishāq's work may be thought to be dogmatic in nature, this perception more likely stems from problematic narratives such as the famous Satanic Verses episode.⁵⁸ As regards the *mubtada'* specifically, most scholars would understand the truncation of the work as reflecting the rapid obsolescence of an approach to the *sīra* that anchored it in pre-Islamic prophetic tradition. The wide circulation of Ibn Ishāq's material on pre-Islamic history in other sources of the period—the basis of Newby's reconstruction of the *mubtada'*—demonstrates that the supposedly censorious attitude toward that material that Hughes attributes to Ibn Hishām and other transmitters of the *sīra* could hardly have been widespread in the early centuries of Islamic history. Insofar as objections to the inclusion in the *Sīra* of material on the pre-Islamic prophets arose in this period, they were more likely based on evolving conceptions of genre than an aversion to reliance on materials of a Jewish or quasi-Jewish ambience such as would prevail in some circles much later on.

56. These statements (*Muslim and Jew*, 21–22) reflect a nuanced understanding of the nature of *sīra* and how it functioned in the early period; however, they are rather familiar ones in contemporary scholarship, and Hughes fails to cite a single corroborating source here.

57. Hughes's source is the introduction to Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muḥammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989). Newby's account of the evolution of the Ibn Ishāq corpus was stridently criticized at the time of its publication (see the review of Lawrence I. Conrad, "Recovering Lost Texts: Some Methodological Issues," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 [1993]: 258–63) and is quite out of date today.

58. On the complex history of Ibn Ishāq's account of this episode, see Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Hughes's position here demonstrates a clear misunderstanding of the history and development of *isrāʿīliyyāt* as a concept. The copious preservation of Ibn Ishāq's material on pre-Islamic history itself suggests that the kind of censorial activity Hughes attributes to Ibn Hishām, based on the material's "disreputable" association with Jews, is plainly anachronistic for the third/ninth century. But more to the point, much critical investigation of *isrāʿīliyyāt* has shown that this construct should not be taken at face value or understood to be operative in the early centuries of Islamic tradition, as is still sometimes assumed. Numerous studies have shown that the concept of the *isrāʿīliyyāt* is an ideological tool that developed quite late in the history of the tradition, but the notion of a categorical opposition to this material because of its questionable authenticity and association with Jews and Judaism has often been projected back and nativized as an aspect of Muslim scholarship early on, a position that simply does not hold up to critical scrutiny.⁵⁹ The motivation to censor the *mubtadaʿ* as part of a concerted effort to suppress material of a Judaic cast can only fancifully be ascribed to authors and transmitters of the early centuries AH.

Hughes's approach to the question of the *isrāʿīliyyāt* is unfortunate because this phenomenon is undoubtedly significant for his larger project; as a discourse, *isrāʿīliyyāt* is a preeminent example of an ideologically freighted form of traditional Muslim engagement with Judaism. The idea of the *isrāʿīliyyāt* as a corpus of traditions that contaminated and undermined a pure, genuinely "Islamic" form of knowledge handed down from the Prophet and the *salaf* is one component of an ideology of separation or boundary-drawing between Sunnism and various supposed heterodoxies that developed in the post-Mongol era—assuming, as many would, that the Mamluk-era jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) should be recognized as the watershed figure in that development. Asserting that there was authentic hostility to supposed Jewish intrusions into the pure stream of prophetically validated religious knowledge from Islam's very beginnings, or even in the early centuries AH, or that a corpus of so-called *isrāʿīliyyāt* could be objectively demarcated and partitioned off from genuinely Muslim lore, is to naturalize and validate a much later, conspicuously polemical, conception of the received tradition. Concerned as he is with the dynamics of differentiation and separation that have contributed to false ideas of a coherent distinction between Judaism and Islam—a distinction Hughes repeatedly avers was objectively lacking—one would imagine that he would be more sensitive to the function of the very category of *isrāʿīliyyāt* as an ideologically motivated discursive tool used to promote a myth of pristine origins for the received tradition of Islamic religious knowledge. (One also imagines that Hughes should have been more sensitive to anachronistic arguments, given his propensity to target them in others' works.) Curiously, when Hughes discusses the importance of such origin myths elsewhere, no reference to the discourse of *isrāʿīliyyāt* is to be found, though it would have augmented his argument considerably. I will return to this point presently.

59. See Roberto Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrāʿīliyyāt* in Muslim Literature," *Arabica* 46 (1999): 193–210 and Michael Pregill, "*Isrāʿīliyyāt*, Myth, and Pseudepigraphy: Wahb b. Munabbih and the Early Islamic Versions of the Fall of Adam and Eve," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008): 215–84, esp. 237–41. Hughes cites the latter article in his bibliography in *Shared Identities* but seems to miss the import of my argument.

Hughes's approach to other primary sources for the period and their interpretation is similarly problematic.⁶⁰ One of these is the *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*, a complex text in the Christian *adversus iudaeos* tradition that has attracted scholarly attention both for its putatively accurate attendance to actual Jewish beliefs on the eve of Islam and for certain statements it makes about Muḥammad, in particular its seeming attestation of Jewish belief in Muḥammad as a herald of the Messiah. Notably, the date of the text has been disputed: some see it as genuine contemporary testimony to early Jewish support for Islam as a messianic movement, while others note that at least some of the claims made in the text clearly reflect later conceptions.⁶¹ Hughes repeatedly cites the text (consistently referring to it as the *Doctrina Iacoba*) as evidence of the interconnection and porousness of the three monotheisms at the time, seeing groups from each community genuinely marshaled together under the apocalyptic banner of early Islam: "a rather generic late antique apocalypticism encompasses Jews, Christians, and Muslims."⁶² However, the most cautious reading of the *Doctrina* is that it has conflated the Jewish belief that the rise of Islam is a harbinger of the coming of the Messiah (a plausible claim borne out by other sources) with the notion of actual active Jewish support for Islamic dominion (a rather less plausible one). It is more problematic, in my view, to read the text as evidence that Jews widely embraced Islam, that the movement was perceptible from the outside as "ecumenical" and friendly to Jews, or—the notorious reading of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Hagarism*—that proto-Islam was rooted in a kind of Jewish messianic revolt. (I would judge all of these claims to be rather farfetched, as they seem to me to misconstrue what are at most polemical assertions about Jews in the *Doctrina*, but again, I admit that there is disagreement about all this.) At most, what the *Doctrina* seems to testify to is the coincidence of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic expectations on the eve of Islam, and that the mission of Muḥammad and the subsequent Arab conquests appeared to validate those expectations in the eyes of both.⁶³

60. In *Muslim and Jew* Hughes raises the subject of "non-canonical" sources that shed light on early Islam (p. 26), though what he actually seems to mean are references to the Prophet and the rise of Islam found in early *non-Muslim* sources. These texts are indeed technically "non-canonical" from the Islamic perspective, in distinction to the Quran and hadith, but this strikes me as a rather idiosyncratic way to characterize them. I infer that the choice of label is motivated by Hughes's desire not to project confessional categories onto the sources, his whole point being that we should not reify the distinctions between Islam and other traditions in this period.

61. The established consensus among scholars of Late Antiquity is that the text is genuinely dateable to the 630s. Among Islamicists, this dating is accepted by Robert Hoyland and Shoemaker (Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* [Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997], 55–61; Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Islam*, 87–89, and compare his treatment in *A Prophet Has Appeared: The Rise of Islam through Christian and Jewish Eyes* [Oakland: University of California Press, 2021], 37–44). However, Sean Anthony favors a later date of composition sometime around the 670s (Sean W. Anthony, "Muḥammad, the Keys to Paradise, and the *Doctrina Iacobi*: A Late Antique Puzzle," *Der Islam* 91 [2014]: 243–65, now reiterated in *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam* [Oakland: University of California Press, 2020], 41–58).

62. *Muslim and Jew*, 27. As Hughes himself acknowledges, much of this chapter recycles material from his article "Religion without Religion," and so this passage recapitulates the mishandling of the *Doctrina* found there (pp. 877–78).

63. Hughes's main source for his discussion of the *Doctrina* is Shoemaker's *The Death of a Prophet: The End*

It seems like a significant overreading to suggest that the text is proof that “the three monotheisms are not separate from one another at this point in history.”⁶⁴

Hughes’s discussion of the *Doctrina* is closely linked to the subject of the sect of the Isawiyya; Hughes views both that movement and the “polythetic and inclusive” messianic literary works of the period as reflecting the spirit of an age in which Jewish, Christian, and Muslim groups circulated, absorbed, and operationalized numerous ideas and claims that would later be branded as heterodox.⁶⁵ For Hughes, as for Wasserstrom before him, this shadowy sect is particularly valuable as prime evidence of the reciprocity of messianic developments among Muslims and Jews in the early period.⁶⁶ Muslims drew on Jewish traditions about the Messiah in articulating their own ideas about the imminence of the eschaton, while “hybrid” or “syncretic” groups such as the Isawiyya seem to have remained oriented toward a publicly Jewish identity as they articulated a theology that strongly overlapped with emergent forms of early Shi‘ism. The Isawiyya apparently combined Muslim and Jewish terms, concepts, and practices in such a way as to be legible to both communities; their theology was Muslim, but their rituals were Jewish (Jewish enough that they apparently intermarried with Rabbanites, according to Shahrastānī). As Hughes cleverly puts it, the group appears to have operated in that liminal space “on the margins of the hyphen in the phrase ‘Jewish-Muslim.’”⁶⁷ For him, they epitomize (to again invoke his terms) the type of the Muslimjew or Jewmuslim that ultimately challenges the conceptual stability of the terms Jew and Muslim, which scholars have only artificially naturalized as antipodes. As I read them, a crucial difference between Wasserstrom and Hughes seems

of *Muhammad’s Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), who here sees both the *Doctrina* and the *Secrets of Shim’on bar Yoḥai* as testifying to Jewish believers (or Believers) aligned with Muḥammad’s community (pp. 20–33), though Shoemaker seems rather more cautious about such claims in his more recent *Apocalypse of Empire*.

64. *Muslim and Jew*, 27, reiterating “Religion without Religion,” 878.

65. *Shared Identities*, 70–75; the reference to “polythetic and inclusive messianic works” (specifically the *Doctrina* and the *Secrets of Shim’on bar Yoḥai*) is on p. 74. Hughes’s reliance on Wasserstrom is particularly strong here.

66. Hughes here attributes a peculiar claim to Shlomo Pines, stating that Pines argued that the Isawiyya were directly “influenced” by apocalyptic sources such as the *Doctrina*; Hughes critiques this view as reducing the complex dynamics that gave rise to the sect to mere “borrowing” facilitated by the circulation of texts (*Shared Identities*, 71–72). The Pines piece cited here is “The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity according to a New Source,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2, no. 13 (1966), which discusses the then-recently discovered *Tathbīt dalā’il al-nubuwwa* of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār and advances the controversial thesis that this eleventh-century Mu’tazilite text preserves evidence of the endurance of Jewish Christianity well into the Islamic period. Pines briefly mentions the founder of the Isawiyya, Abū ‘Īsā al-Iṣfahānī, at 44–45; however, the textualist argument for “influence” of apocalyptic texts on the movement decried by Hughes is nowhere to be found in Pines’s long article. Nor is there any reference here to the *Doctrina* or any other apocalyptic text. The gist of Wasserstrom’s critique of Pines is not that the latter overstates processes of “influence” in the emergence of the Isawiyya but rather that he mistakenly insists that the group is a late survival of an authentically ancient Jewish Christianity and not a reflex of contemporary Islamic phenomena (Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, 37–38, and cf. the comparison with the approach of Israel Friedlaender at 82).

67. *Shared Identities*, 73.

to lie in how typical each imagines the Isawiyya and other “hybrid” groups to be. For Wasserstrom, such groups are provocative because they are so anomalous, compelling us to interrogate our theoretical and phenomenological assumptions (particularly the absence of Jewish sectarianism between the Second Temple period and the Karaites). For Hughes, by contrast, the Isawiyya seem to be *exemplary*, demonstrating an ambiguity in the distinction between Jew and Muslim that he sees as chronic, pervasive, and persistent.⁶⁸

In *Shared Identities*, Hughes’s discussion of the Isawiyya segues to the *Secrets of Shim’on bar Yoḥai*, a Jewish apocalyptic text dated to around the mid-eighth century CE; Hughes holds that this work is significant for his argument because it “identifies Muhammad as the fulfillment of Jewish messianic speculation.”⁶⁹ Hughes is correct in noting that the work is evidence of a kind of feedback loop between Jewish and Muslim communities in this period, as the *Secrets* “recycles Muslim apocalyptic speculation, some of which had already been paradoxically recycled from Jewish sources by early Muslims.”⁷⁰ He elegantly describes the creative process that generated the text as an example of “collective world-making in an environment wherein ideas moved freely between porous boundaries,” but perplexingly, he concludes the paragraph by stating: “The result is that it is impossible to know what is ‘Jewish’ and what is ‘Muslim.’”⁷¹ This verdict seems farfetched to me, since what this source testifies to is the availability of shared symbolic and imaginative resources to diverse communities operating in the early Islamic period, a kind of messianic-apocalyptic *koine*, but one whose meaning was clearly contested by the various participants who appropriated and deployed this *koine* for their own ends.

I imagine that Hughes would likely see this as an oversimplification, but to me it seems rather evident that the deployment of this *koine* to advance an argument for Islam as the final prophetic dispensation may simply be called “Muslim,” while its deployment as a prophecy of the imminent redemption of Israel may be called “Jewish.” The specific origins of particular aspects of the *koine* may be ambiguous, but as operationalized in the *Secrets*, it is not evidence of blurred boundaries; it is evidence of the articulation of a specific communitarian and sectarian orientation through contesting the meaning of the aforementioned shared symbolic and imaginative resources. I am not even sure that “collective worldmaking” is really an accurate characterization of this dynamic, since this “collective worldmaking” was pursued in the service of mutually incompatible worldviews. This is abundantly clear in the *Secrets*, because the text as redacted contains at least two strata: an early one that presents the Ishmaelite kingdom as a divine instrument used to deliver the Jews from Rome and thus as a harbinger of the redemption—a clear endorsement

68. Another significant difference in their approaches is highlighted by Hughes himself: whereas Wasserstrom presents the Isawiyya and other contemporary Jewish groups as reacting to Islamicization, Hughes sees them as “caught up in” that very process—embedded and participating in larger religious, political, and cultural trends that ultimately shaped both traditions (*Shared Identities*, 77).

69. *Shared Identities*, 76. To be fair, this characterization is Shoemaker’s, who uses almost the exact same phrasing, “the fulfillment of Jewish messianic expectations” (*Death of a Prophet*, 24), though he is not cited here.

70. *Shared Identities*, 77. It is unclear to me why the “paradoxically” should be necessary here.

71. *Ibid.*

of and participation in the imperial eschatology seemingly embraced by the Umayyad dominion in the first/seventh century—and a later one that is considerably more negative regarding that dominion. But *neither* stratum should really be understood as presenting the Prophet as the “fulfillment of Jewish messianic speculation.”⁷² At best, the coming of Muḥammad is here interpreted as a positive sign of the imminence of the messianic era; at worst, it is understood as the beginning of the Messiah’s birth pangs, a time of extreme, though portentous, suffering for Jews. As extant, the *Secrets* testifies to both viewpoints, and neither represents Islam as anything but instrumental.

At most, one might argue that the *Secrets* contains evidence that some Jews in the Umayyad period saw the caliphate favorably and even assimilated it into older schemes of the imperial succession that would precede the advent of the messianic age, though this view would be tempered not long after. It is peculiar that Hughes does not recognize the composite nature of the text of the *Secrets* and thus the disparate perspectives that inform it, given that he quotes the text according to a witness from the Cairo Geniza that actually refers to Muḥammad disparagingly as “a crazy man possessed by a spirit . . . [who] speaks lies about the Holy One”; this is seemingly an emendation of an originally pro-Umayyad tradition in the text that brings it into line with the later tradition that is here redacted together with it. One would think that all this signals a text that is clearly Jewish in outlook—though perhaps complicating our ideas of the boundaries of Judaism—and not by any means identifiable as Muslim.⁷³ Overall, Hughes is right to emphasize that messianism provides us with a distinctive basis for studying Jewish-Muslim engagements, as messianic groups “draw upon sets of decentralized messianic narratives to carve out ontic space for themselves”—a clear improvement over prevailing approaches to the traditions as cleanly defined binaries.⁷⁴ But in the end, Hughes overstates the degree to which the messianic enthusiasms shared by Jews and Muslims in the early Islamic period really represent some kind of collective enterprise. Apocalypticism may have been a common discourse legible to different groups, but that discourse was deployed to articulate utterly dichotomous truth-claims. There was nothing “generic” about its expressions at all.

There are numerous other sources and phenomena from the early Islamic period that would have further supported or nuanced Hughes’s argument in both works yet curiously remain unmentioned in either book.⁷⁵ These omissions are sometimes rather perplexing;

72. On the *Secrets* and imperial eschatology, see Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Empire*, 98–100; on the redactional strata in the text, see the discussion, translation, and commentary of John C. Reeves in *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postbiblical Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 76–89.

73. Hughes’s source for the text of the *Secrets* is the classic discussion of Bernard Lewis (“An Apocalyptic Vision of Islamic History,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 13 [1950]: 308–38), who actually takes note of both the original and the pejorative readings registered in the witnesses, though Hughes oddly does not acknowledge the original reading that supports his argument. Compare Reeves, *Trajectories*, 79, n. 20. Hughes’s discussion in *Muslim and Jew*, 28–29, an abbreviation that makes the same points and cites the same source, likewise acknowledges only the pejorative reading.

74. *Shared Identities*, 81.

75. As just one example, Hughes is aware—again following Wasserstrom—that the interface between the early Shi‘a and contemporary Jewish movements represents a productive site of inquiry regarding his concerns,

for example, though he is concerned with boundary construction and the delineation of discourses about the other, Hughes never mentions the word *dhimmī* and omits any reference to the Pact of Umar or the narratives about ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb’s interactions with Jews, though these are crucial for understanding the normative discourse surrounding social and religious boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims through the premodern period.⁷⁶ Further, the study of Jews and Christians as imperial subalterns in the caliphal period into the Middle Ages flourishes in contemporary scholarship, yet Hughes ignores much of the recent secondary literature relevant to his arguments. Overall, one gets the sense that Hughes overstates his case for the blurriness of categorical distinctions between Jews and Muslims in the early period, and that this misprision is exacerbated by his chronic misreading of texts and lack of attention to critical debates in the scholarly literature. Although social configurations and religious orientations certainly mapped differently in the early Islamic period than they would later and were no doubt characterized by some fluidity in certain circumstances, the claim that boundaries were totally porous and that distinctions did not matter at all in this period seems like a clear exaggeration to me. It is especially implausible because of the evident propensity in this period for identity markers to be used strategically and ideologically as critical signifiers in apologetic and polemical discourse, beginning with the Quran itself.

Was “Islamic Judaism” Invented?⁷⁷

It is important not to lose sight of Hughes’s wholly admirable agenda of adopting a more theoretically sophisticated approach to the Muslim-Jewish relationship and critiquing the taxonomies and frameworks typically applied to the study of these communities in their formative period, with the ultimate goal of interrogating the nature of religious identity itself. Putting aside the various issues of specialist concern that Hughes’s treatment of particular bodies of evidence and areas of scholarship raises, we might ask whether his work succeeds overall as an exercise in the critical study of religion. That is, does Hughes attain a more theoretically nuanced approach to the material, especially one that is of probative value for larger questions in the discipline of religious studies per se?

From the outset, one might note that Hughes’s inconsistent approach to historical evidence demonstrates why his explicit location of his own work at a supposedly higher level of theoretical conjecture and insight is problematic. Aside from that, we might ask exactly how such an Archimedean positioning of oneself as a theorist or religionist above

but this possibility is barely fleshed out in either book, despite the significant research that has been done on the early Shi‘a over the last two decades (e.g., Hughes cites Wasserstrom on Ibn Saba’ but totally overlooks the important study of Sean W. Anthony, *The Caliph and the Heretic: Ibn Saba’ and the Origins of Shi‘ism* [Leiden: Brill, 2012]). Hughes’s treatment of Shi‘ism is particularly idiosyncratic (if not erroneous) at times, as when he refers to the Kharijites as pro-‘Alid and subsumes them under the rubric of *ghulāt* (*Shared Identities*, 71).

76. See the robust treatments in Lassner, *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam* and Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Both studies are ignored by Hughes. Lassner’s book, in particular, overlaps in many ways with the concerns of *Shared Identities*.

77. With apologies to Brian Pennington for the shameless pastiche of his book title: *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

and apart from the narrow details of historical or textual specifics is ideally meant to work. What methodology should religionists follow in order to transcend the conventional limitations of overly detail-oriented “micro study,” and what are the rules of the game? Can such an attempt at achieving a god’s-eye view of the phenomena under discussion actually yield cogent insights?

I agree wholeheartedly with Hughes’s basic diagnosis of the problem: much historical and contemporary scholarship on premodern Muslims and Jews still labors under overly positivistic and sometimes anachronistic assumptions that project the stable and well-defined categories of a later age back to the formative period and reify ethnic, religious, cultural, national, or even racial essences as the basis of premodern identities. These reified essences often come into play when scholars seek to imagine intercommunal relations transactively, positing that groups have reciprocally “influenced” one another through different phases in which one “loans” elements that the other “borrows.” All of this is ripe for reexamination and reevaluation. Adopting a more nuanced perspective, we may recognize that it is the phenomenon of engagement and exchange across permeable and even purely notional boundaries that is itself definitive for various groups exhibiting highly contingent and fluid characteristics profoundly shaped by the particulars of specific social and cultural circumstances. Thus, to overcome anachronistic essentialisms, we should attempt to understand the posture and attitude of groups as they engage in moments of dynamic interaction as the most salient means of apprehending how communities construct themselves and their others—or rather, construct themselves *by means of* constructing their others. Hughes foregrounds this perspective when he asserts, in Boyarinesque mode, that his goal is to show how Judaism and Islam—like Judaism and Christianity in a previous age—“emerged dialectically with and from one another.”⁷⁸

However, when we scrutinize the specifics of Hughes’s approach to the Muslim-Jewish encounter—epitomized by his statement (again strongly echoing Boyarin) that “the ‘history’ of the border between Judaism and Islam has primarily been interpretive and that what brings it into existence is a set of imaginative acts”⁷⁹—one wonders whether this perpetual insistence on fluidity, blurry boundaries, and lack of clear definitions is perhaps at times misplaced.⁸⁰ Following Wasserstrom, Hughes sees the early Islamic period as characterized by an abundance of “manifold and overlapping Muslim and Jewish subcultures that shared a common vocabulary and set of taxonomies,” a diversity that supposedly persisted into the Middle Ages.⁸¹ For Hughes, as for Wasserstrom, this diversity is epitomized by the aforementioned sect of the Isawiyya, but—as already noted—one often gets the impression

78. *Shared Identities*, 5.

79. *Ibid.*, 18.

80. Hughes’s debt to Boyarin is acknowledged explicitly (e.g., *Shared Identities*, 4), though perhaps not often enough. One detects other theoretical precursors lurking in the background, for example Bruce Lincoln’s work on discourse and authority; Lincoln is credited once in this role alongside J. Z. Smith and Russell McCutcheon (*ibid.*, 3) but not again. Judith Butler’s germinal thought on the performative nature of identity seems to me to be quite relevant here as well, though their work is not cited by Hughes in either book (and only once in Boyarin’s *Border Lines*).

81. *Shared Identities*, 19.

that Hughes sees this diversity, manifest in a plenitude of overlapping social formations, as both pervasive and persistent. Thus, the Isawiyya are not an anomalous case that tests our assumptions about norms; rather, Hughes sees fluidity itself as the norm, in numerous settings, for quite some time.

I readily admit that such an approach is a refreshing alternative to the prevailing view in much of the classic scholarship in the field, in which Judaism and Islam are perceived as wholly separate and integral monoliths that are largely unchanging in their historical essences, with the occasional moments of interface between them characterized as isolated instances of exchange (the transactive movement of some quantum from one to the other group), convergence (the metaphorical intersection of two discrete bodies moving in parallel courses throughout time), or hybridity (the exceptional grafting of two originally discrete species together to make a third entity distinct from both).⁸² As Hughes skillfully demonstrates, this approach, especially common among Jewish historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was particularly motivated by an emphasis on Jewish distinctiveness, predicated upon the notion of an unchanging ethical core eternally at the heart of Judaism across the centuries, as well as an anxiety about that Jewish core being contaminated by external factors, especially aspects of Arab and/or Muslim culture.⁸³ Such a conception of the Jewish-Muslim encounter, constructed as an apologetic for Jewish distinction, significantly underestimates the dynamism and vitality of both communities, as well as effacing the integral role that encounter played in their mutual development.

Scholars of religion have long recognized that boundary construction and maintenance not only are traditional obsessions of religious authorities but have often been replicated in various ways in the modern field of religious studies itself. Previous generations of scholars implied or explicitly asserted that various religious phenomena can be neatly organized and cleanly demarcated, in theory and in practice; in directing considerable amounts of intellectual labor toward this goal, scholars often inadvertently recapitulated the normative and prescriptive discourses indigenous to the very traditions they sought to objectively describe. As scholars' primary means of access to information about traditions, especially premodern ones, has been the literature generated through such normative discourses, in whatever cultural milieu and historical setting, the field has unfortunately often exhibited a characteristic confusion of prescriptive claims with lived religious realities, which more often than not tend to be messy, diverse, and inchoate (like most realms of human endeavor).

82. Another familiar metaphor is intertwining, made famous as a metaphor for Jewish-Muslim engagements by the influential monograph of Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Intertwining implies that two separate things have come together to make up a single strand, balancing the notion of unity with that of distinctiveness and separability. It is the latter aspects that Hughes would likely find objectionable in the metaphor.

83. This theme is a familiar one in religious studies, the quest for pristine origins of religious traditions having been thoroughly exposed by contemporary scholars such as Russell McCutcheon (*Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997]) and Tomoko Masuzawa (*In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993]), both of whom Hughes cites in *Shared Identities*.

The main analytical payoff of work exposing the underlying ideologies and unacknowledged blind spots of the field is the insight that the idealizing perspectives of religious authorities preserved in canonical texts and other literary sources should not be confused with the elusive historical realities of social configurations, quotidian practice, and non-elite worldviews. That said, it is ironic that throughout Hughes's work, which emphasizes the fluidity of phenomena and the artificiality of attempts at boundary construction, the distinction between lived realities and normative discourse is itself blurred.

In chapter 4 of *Shared Identities* ("The Manufacture of Orthodoxy"), Hughes transitions to a discussion of what he repeatedly terms "Islamic Judaism," a form or forms of Jewish discourse in the high Middle Ages that sought to construct a new Jewish normativity while operating in the realm of—and thus being fundamentally shaped by—Islamic (or Islamicate) discourse.⁸⁴ Here Hughes deliberately moves to counter older scholarly approaches and biases: thus, he explains "Islamic Judaism" as a mode in which Jews "think Arabically and Islamically," though Goitein and others characterized the work of such figures as Sa'adya Gaon and Maimonides as reflecting only a superficial Islamic "influence" on Judaism.⁸⁵

One can certainly sympathize with Hughes's desire to overcome the reified categories and essentialism that constrain earlier studies of these major intellectual figures of the Islamic Middle Ages. But we might also note a particular tension surrounding notions of identity and distinction that emerges here and subsequently recurs throughout both of Hughes's books. One imagines that by the period under discussion, both Judaism and Islam had developed enough to be readily distinguishable, at least in theory if not always in practice—though the juridical prescriptions enforcing social distinctions would have made the boundary between Muslims and Jews real enough. Islam, in particular, was culturally, politically, and legally dominant in the Abbasid era, and so the Jews of Muslim lands constituted a subculture, but one that was so thoroughly shaped by prevailing Islamic patterns, norms, and frameworks that it came to be fundamentally "Islamic" in character, orientation, and articulation.⁸⁶ This would actually seem to imply much less blurriness than

84. A condensed summary of Hughes's perspective on the phenomenon of "Islamic Judaism" that emphasizes its emergence out of the dazzling variety of expressions of Jewish identity that prevailed during the geonic period is found in his "Messianism and the Shadow of History: Judaism and Islam in a Time of Uncertainty," in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, ed. Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh, 145–63 (Leiden: Brill, 2017). Here again the familiar leitmotifs of Hughes's books abide: the importance of normative rabbinic Judaism has been overstated, boundaries between Judaism and Islam were blurred or nonexistent in the formative period, and many forms of Jewish belief and practice were functionally indistinguishable from their Muslim counterparts in the early Islamic milieu.

85. *Shared Identities*, 83. The phrase "Islamic Judaism" appears a number of times in both *Shared Identities* and *Muslim and Jew* and should be understood as central to Hughes's thinking on the subject at hand.

86. Whether minority groups impacted by Islamic cultural patterns may be thought to have performed Islam within the contours of their own traditions is a question usefully provoked by Shahab Ahmed's much-discussed *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), where he gives the example of Sikh wrestlers who ritually invoke 'Alī before competing (pp. 445–46). (Ahmed's conception of Islam as performative itself strongly echoes Butler, who is ignored by Ahmed as well as Hughes.) Of the numerous scholars overlooked by Hughes, Ahmed is one of the most conspicuous, as many of his theoretical

purportedly prevailed in the earlier period discussed by Hughes, and yet he often discusses the major figures of this era—Sa’adya, Maimonides, Abraham ibn Ezra, Bahya ibn Paquda, and others—as if they were still dwelling in the earlier era of foggy indeterminacy.⁸⁷

Whether there was actually anything like an “Islamic Judaism” and whether the phantasmal “Jewmuslims” or “Muslimjews” Hughes posits ever actually existed are still, to my mind, unanswered questions. But we certainly must acknowledge the reality of potent discourses of separation and distinction that operated throughout the history of the Jewish-Muslim encounter from the very beginning. It was certainly the case, for many if not most insiders, that the boundary between Judaism and Islam was *very* real, regardless of whether those constructs corresponded exactly to the doctrinally coherent and largely orthopractic varieties that prevailed later on. As we have already seen, a distinction between Judaism and Islam is basic to the Quran; that the differences between them had yet to be fleshed out dogmatically, institutionally, and otherwise seems to me to be beside the point. Likewise, even if the distinctions between the traditions were irrelevant to some in the early centuries of Islam—whoever they may have been—many others were certainly keenly aware of them, and it is these others who tended to be responsible for the surviving cultural productions of the period that allow us our shadowy glimpses of the past.

I do not think that this point is immaterial, yet it frequently appears to be a blind spot in Hughes’s analysis. He often seems to overstate his case in repeatedly asserting that boundaries and distinctions were largely artificial and themselves the products of a long, drawn-out historical process of engagement between Jews and their Muslim counterparts/others/doppelgängers—that the entire history of the encounter between “Muslimjews” and “Jewmuslims” is a “genealogy of indeterminacy.”⁸⁸ The problem comes to the fore in his approach to the “Islamic Judaism” of the high Middle Ages. He asserts that modern scholars largely invented the idea of Judaism and Islam as discrete and autonomous entities, noting that narratives of boundaries and distinctions “were manufactured in scholarly workshops.”⁸⁹ But if this were really the case, what should we make of our normativizing

insights seem quite germane to Hughes’s argument. One might suppose that Ahmed’s book, which was published in 2015 and widely discussed in 2016, appeared too close to the publication of *Shared Identities* for Hughes to take it into account, but I observe several books and articles from 2016 cited in Hughes’s bibliography (e.g., the aforementioned monograph of Webb, cited a number of times in the book), so the omission is not circumstantial. Hughes did address Ahmed’s work in a short review published on the blog of the American Academy of Religion on September 8, 2017 (<https://readingreligion.org/books/what-islam>).

87. As just one example, see *Shared Identities*, 134–35, where Hughes evocatively describes the Avicennian echoes in a poem by Ibn Ezra as reflecting an attempt at “producing a Judaism that conformed to the intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities of Arab-Islamic culture” (p. 135). However, this enterprise was hardly novel in Ibn Ezra’s time, by that stage having already been centuries in the making. Further, Hughes’s conclusion simply does not follow from the evidence: “This could only be done . . . if Judaism was a lot more unstable than the likes of Goitein would have us believe” (ibid.). By this logic, Judaism is *perpetually* unstable, being redefined at every historical moment, in every era. Perhaps this is Hughes’s intention, but if that is the case, there is nothing exceptional about the Jewish-Muslim engagements of the Middle Ages, and Hughes’s project in these books threatens to collapse.

88. *Shared Identities*, 86.

89. *Shared Identities*, 18. It is clear from the context that Hughes here refers to the work of modern

sources for the period, which seem quite conspicuously concerned with erecting boundaries and enforcing distinctions from early on, virtually from the dawn of Islam? At times—again following the Boyarin approach—Hughes recognizes that the work of partition is exactly what the communal spokesmen who furnish us with our primary sources for the period are doing. That is, we can plainly see that figures such as Sa’adya Gaon and Maimonides seek to articulate Jewish orthodoxy in Islamic terms—a project that is novel in their time, though not entirely innovative, as Hellenistic Jews had sought to do much the same in seeking to define Judaism according to the canons and categories that dominated the philosophical discourse of their day.⁹⁰ Yet the “manufacturing” of orthodoxy is repeatedly asserted to be a modern phenomenon.

Hughes’s approach to Sa’adya Gaon epitomizes some of these tensions. He locates Sa’adya’s work in the context of the contemporaneous project of hadith collectors, jurists, and Quran commentators to define and articulate Islamic norms; thus, Sa’adya usefully comes into focus as a Jewish analogue to Muslim peers who formulated the doctrinally cogent expressions of identity that eventually produced the mature forms of classical Islam.⁹¹ But this does not mean that a coherent conception of Judaism did not precede Sa’adya, just as a coherent conception of Islam surely preceded al-Ṭabarī.⁹² Yet Hughes

scholars, the “genealogies of terms and narratives” (p. 19) that continue to have repercussions in contemporary scholarship, though somewhat earlier on he refers to the “workshops” in which the Babylonian rabbis sought to develop a normative Judaism in Late Antiquity (p. 14). The metaphor of the scholarly workshop is reminiscent of Masuzawa’s discussion of Max Müller in *In Search of Dreamtime*, which appropriates the metaphor from Müller himself: the latter titled his multivolume collection of philological essays *Chips from a German Workshop* (1867–75). As Masuzawa and Hughes depict Müller and various other scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the metaphor seems to me to be meant to evoke a kind of idealizing imaginative work divorced from reality.

90. It is one thing to suggest that a broadly imposed rabbinic normativity was still novel in this era and only beginning to be widely diffused throughout the Jewish world—this, to me, is the crux of work on rabbinization by Seth Schwartz, Hayim Lapin, Talya Fishman, and others. It is entirely another to claim that there was no stable sense of Jewish identity prior to the time of Sa’adya at all, which is the impression one gets (albeit somewhat inconsistently) from Hughes’s approach.

91. As with his discussions of the early Islamic period, there are numerous aspects of Hughes’s treatment of the Islamic Middle Ages that cry out for elaboration, and many scholars whose work I would consider indispensable to consider in this context are almost entirely ignored. The short shrift given to such major scholars as Camilla Adang, Haggai Ben-Shammai, Ross Brann, Lassner, Lazarus-Yafeh, and Meira Polliack in both books is surprising, but Hughes either mentions these scholars only in passing in notes or includes them in the bibliography without comment. Much contemporary work of relevance is simply ignored, which is especially surprising given that *Shared Identities* is a work of historiography directed at the critical evaluation of scholarly trends.

92. In his approach to major thinkers of the Islamic Middle Ages, Hughes is clearly deeply influenced (so to speak) by Boyarin’s work on figures such as Justin Martyr, whom Boyarin spotlights as a major architect of Christian difference and distinction. Hughes is of course correct in casting Sa’adya as a seminal figure in the emergence of a doctrinally and halakhically coherent form of normative Judaism that would have a wide impact on Jewish communities throughout the Islamic world, the Mediterranean, and Europe. But Hughes often writes as if Sa’adya worked in the religious and social environment of the second century CE, in which the distinctions between Jews, Christians, and others were rudimentary (at least according to Boyarin’s model), and not in the rather different milieu of the tenth.

seems to imply exactly this at times, for example in characterizing Sa'adya as the originator of a Jewish normativity that was only beginning to be imagined in the high Middle Ages. *Reimagined*, perhaps; but surely Sa'adya did not invent what became normative Judaism *ex nihilo*.

Further, at other times Hughes seems to insinuate that Sa'adya and Maimonides were not simply proposing an Islamically inflected conception of Judaism—using Islam as an instrument to refine and reorient that prevailing conception—but were in some substantial way “doing” Islam and reshaping it *into* Judaism.⁹³ Is this what Sa'adya and Maimonides perceived themselves to be doing? It is one thing to say there is no firm categorical or phenomenological difference between their activity and that of their Muslim peers. But was it not precisely their intention to impose a distinction between the traditions through implementing those very shared discourses that positions them on the boundary between Judaism and Islam? They surely did not believe they were inventing Judaism from whole cloth; rather, they were using Islam, the well-defined and socially dominant creed and culture in their environment, to reshape another creed and culture that they understood as distinct, even though Hughes as a critical religionist may insist that the distinctions are fuzzy, ephemeral, artificial, or illusory. I myself prefer the formulation that Sa'adya was “doing” *Judaism* by selectively appropriating aspects of Islam, through an instrumental engagement with Islam as a primary resource available to him in articulating his vision of Judaism.⁹⁴ We must concede that boundaries and definitions are at least at times emic and not etic; if we do not, we adopt the position that spokesmen like Sa'adya and Maimonides were wholly alienated from the tradition they sought to uphold and the community whose integrity they aspired to defend.

Again, from the outside, it may be productive for us to recognize that Sa'adya was functionally a *mutakallim* or Maimonides a *faylasūf*, essentially no different from their contemporary Muslim counterparts, without any need to impose the adjective “Jewish” to make such characterizations cogent or convincing.⁹⁵ I believe this is the main insight Hughes means to express through his treatment of these figures. However, the key point as I see it is that these people participated in a common discourse with their Muslim peers *despite* seeing themselves as categorically different; wholly apart from the question of whether their work was in any substantial sense distinct from that of their peers, it seems obtuse to suggest that they themselves did not conceive of such a difference or actually invented it themselves. Objectively speaking, the boundary between Judaism and

93. Again, insofar as we might imagine Sa'adya “doing” Islam in his mode as *mutakallim* (and not a specifically *Jewish* kind of *kalām*), both Butler and Ahmed seem indispensable to Hughes's approach here.

94. I would thus object to the aforementioned account of Ahmed portraying Sikh wrestlers as “doing” Islam. It rather seems to me that if we take their intentionality into account—intent and agency being central to Ahmed's understanding of what it means for Muslims to “do” Islam—then these Sikh wrestlers are actually “doing” Sikhism through or with Islam, appropriating aspects of Islam in their articulation of their Sikhism.

95. For example, in introducing the “Islamic Judaism” of Maimonides in *Shared Identities* (p. 109), Hughes emphasizes that the creed of Maimonides “betrays no sense of the hyphen” imposed in such formulations as “Jewish-Muslim,” by which I believe he means that it is misleading to think of his Judaism as somehow hybrid or syncretic. Is this “Islamic Judaism” then simply a form of Islam? Here Hughes's meaning is rather unclear.

Islam might have been all in their heads, but is it not the case that religious activity is commonly, if not exclusively, constituted by imaginative acts? On some level, it is *always* all in our heads, and the perception and intentionality of a Sa'adya or Maimonides—let alone of the rank-and-file religious subjects who lived the messy realities we as historians or religionists aspire to capture and convey—is surely as significant as any phenomenological reconstruction we might generate for the sake of analysis. In seeking to avoid overly reified conceptions of Judaism and Islam, we perhaps run the risk of overstating the evanescence of categories and distinctions that were entirely real for historical religious subjects. Of course their categories and distinctions were different from ours, but likely no less “real” from their perspective; even if Sa'adya and Maimonides merely crafted these categories and distinctions in their own “scholarly workshops,” they had to have some plausible claim of facticity to have any traction for their coreligionists.

Hughes's constant emphasis on the blurriness of the boundaries between Judaism and Islam results in some misrepresentation of the major figures who stood at the interface of the traditions, and this seems to me to be the real danger we face in imposing the heuristic of the phenomenologist (for whom distinctions seem ephemeral) upon historical subjects (for whom distinctions appear conceptually, practically, and affectively real). For example, he presents Sa'adya as if he differs from his Muslim *mutakallim* counterparts simply in citing biblical prooftexts for his arguments instead of Quranic ones and even claims that “it is difficult to know how ‘Jewish’ someone like Saadia regarded his thinking to be.”⁹⁶ But the point, I think, is that *kalām* was a shared discourse that did not differ substantially whether it was a Jew or a Muslim (or a Christian) who employed its techniques, and thus that *kalām* was essentially, for lack of a better term, nondenominational. The point is surely *not* that the *mutakallim* abandoned any sense of their own or their tradition's particularism by engaging in it. It is hard for me to imagine that Sa'adya regarded his thinking as anything *but* Jewish.

I wholeheartedly agree that Hughes's approach presents a much-needed corrective to a prevalent view of Sa'adya that insulates his religious views—his “essential” Jewish identity—from his Islamic milieu, an approach that has historically dominated the study of Maimonides as well.⁹⁷ But Hughes seems to me to go too far in effacing the critical element of Sa'adya's self-perception in the formation of his religious ideas and ideals; he certainly did not see himself as a *mutakallim* first and foremost and as a Jew second, which is the impression one might get from Hughes's presentation. To presume that Jewish authors did not operate with a strong sense of the distinction between their tradition and Islam, despite the *de facto* proximity between the traditions, strips them of agency. It should not

96. *Shared Identities*, 100.

97. A sterling example of this trend is Robert Brody's biography *Sa'adyah Gaon* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), a rich and nuanced treatment of Sa'adya's background in and contributions to contemporary Judaism that almost completely ignores his Islamic cultural and intellectual context. Sa'adya's work is ripe for a revisionist corrective along the lines of what has transpired in the rethinking of Maimonides and his significance in the twenty-first century; see, e.g., Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008) and Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

be impossible for us to balance a recognition of the phenomenological similarity, or even points of practical identity, between Judaism and Islam in the formative period of both with an acknowledgment of these figures' self-conception and intentional appropriation of Islamic ideas in the shaping and reframing of what they considered to be the wholly unique reality of Judaism.⁹⁸

Time and again Hughes depicts the thought of Islamicate Jews, especially in the Middle Ages, as evidence of the persistent lack of a stable core to the Jewish tradition and the anxieties this produced—try as they might, they could not find any essential aspect of their religion to “fall back on or turn to in solace.”⁹⁹ I am sympathetic to the work of reframing that such a characterization is meant to do, but I remain deeply skeptical that it accurately captures the attitude of Sa'adya, or Maimonides, or any of the other figures Hughes discusses. The thought of these figures seems to me to reflect medieval Jewish acculturation to Islam—the deliberate or inadvertent conforming of a previous assemblage of beliefs, practices, and attitudes to that of the dominant, and quite distinct, communal formation in the environment. Hughes often seems to be at war with himself on this score: sometimes Sa'adya is unprecedented in creating a normative Judaism of the sort we might recognize as a distinct religious tradition; at other times, as when Hughes says Sa'adya's accomplishment is his framing Judaism in terms of Islam, or rather “the creation of an Islam recast as a Judaism,” he seems to concede that some notion of Judaism must have preceded Sa'adya (otherwise, what was it that guided this “recasting”?).¹⁰⁰ Would that older heritage of Judaism not be exactly what Sa'adyah or others would “fall back on or turn to in solace”? And yet Hughes's overattention to semantics brings us to a point of near-incoherence: “Rather than characterize Saadya as a ‘Jewish *mutakallim*,’ we should envisage him simply as a *mutakallim* who was Jewish. . . . [This] avoids the religio-ethnic signifier and instead sees Saadya as but another Arab-speaking *mutakallim* . . .”¹⁰¹ But what, then, did his Judaism consist of? How does this leave us with any trace of his significance for Judaism—or better, of the significance of Judaism for him, which was surely considerable?

We can (and should) continue to consider whether and to what degree the twinned traditions of Judaism and Islam were really distinct in theory or practice; we might even entertain the notion that the Islamicate civilization of this time actually constituted a

98. Hughes's exaggeration of the porousness and indefiniteness of the boundary between Judaism and Islam in this period is epitomized by his depiction of the famous Muslim polemicist Ibn Ḥazm, who made use of contemporary Jewish writings in his polemics. Astoundingly, what this represents for Hughes is that “Jewish and Muslim *mutakallimūn* do not neatly and simply bifurcate into . . . religious adjectives. The border . . . is not yet closed” (*Shared Identities*, 100). Once again, one senses Boyarin's approach to Justin Martyr in the background here, but it seems unimaginable to me that we can understand the Andalusian context in the eleventh century as anything like that of Palestine in the second. The availability of Jewish writings to Ibn Ḥazm by no means implies the kind of indeterminacy Hughes eagerly seeks here; social intimacy and intellectual proximity do not equate to porous boundaries. In many cases, intimacy and proximity lead to *anxiety* about boundaries, and so to efforts to shore them up.

99. *Muslim and Jew*, 65 (a curiously vague passage that implies that medieval Jews were cognizant of the historical flux and development that shaped their tradition).

100. *Shared Identities*, 99.

101. *Ibid.*

single shared tradition expressed in two separate idioms, one Jewish and one Muslim.¹⁰² But it seems exceedingly unlikely to me that Muslims or Jews of the time would have seen it that way, and it is dangerously anachronistic to suggest that the distinction between Islam and Judaism was only heuristic, or merely a distant convention to premodern members of either community.¹⁰³ Put another way, although we might see the difference between them as epiphenomenal, from the inside the perceived difference must have been monumental. Otherwise, what would have been the point of all the intellectual work of definition and differentiation that these medieval thinkers undertook? And yet somehow Hughes concludes that “such towering medieval thinkers did not see a clear boundary between Judaism and Islam . . .”¹⁰⁴ In insisting on characterizing the situation this way, Hughes seems to confuse the persistent permeability between Islam and Judaism in the Middle Ages with the fluidity he asserts to have been the norm in earlier centuries.¹⁰⁵

Modern Politics, Representations, and Realities

As noted above, Hughes adopts a more explicitly political agenda in *Muslim and Jew*, suggesting that the critical study of the dynamics of Jewish-Muslim engagements in the past may help to address and somehow ameliorate our contemporary political situation. Asserting that the tensions surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are “structurally similar to that produced by earlier iterations of Muslim-Jewish cohabitation” (p. viii), Hughes claims that examining significant aspects of the historical Jewish-Muslim relationship can illuminate the current version of the “dialectic of self-definition and other-abnegation” (p. ix) that continues to have repercussions today.

Although this is a perfectly admirable intention, one cannot fail to notice that something important appears to have been elided here. Despite the significant infusion of conspicuously

102. Or that Jews constituted a Muslim subculture, with all that that implies. I borrow the metaphor of Judaism and Islam as dialects or idioms from Boyarin, who applies it (with some reservations) to Judaism and Christianity in their formative period; see *Border Lines*, 17–22. Marshall Hodgson’s widely influential concept of the “Islamicate” has been criticized in recent years, particularly for the way in which it segregates “religion” as a special category of cultural production and meaning-making (see, e.g., Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 157–75), but it remains a salient category for many scholars in Islamic studies.

103. Admittedly, one might cite the famous Averroist conception of the double truth to support exactly the claim that at least some medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophers would have embraced the idea that rationally apprehended truth is unitary and the distinctions between creeds are ultimately irrelevant. Without delving into this possibility here, I will note only that Hughes himself does not invoke this concept to vindicate his claims, so I do not feel obligated to stage a defense on his behalf on this basis either.

104. *Shared Identities*, 19.

105. See also Hughes’s discussion of Bahya ibn Paquda as “but one iteration of how Jews used the dominant narrative of Islam to actively create Judaism” (*Shared Identities*, 138; cf. *Muslim and Jew*, 52–54)—not *recreate*? Compare the discussion of Ibn Kammuna (*Shared Identities*, 100–102; *Muslim and Jew*, 45–46), where Hughes avers that labels such as “Jewish” and “Muslim” are anachronistic and unhelpful in characterizing him, though it seems equally accurate to represent him as a rationalist Jew who was particularly openminded about Islam (and “Jewish” and “Muslim” were surely not anachronistic categories in thirteenth-century Ilkhanid Baghdad). Chapter 2 of *Muslim and Jew* improves on this situation somewhat by concluding with a discussion of the Sabbateans, to whom talk of porous boundaries and blurred categories seems rather more applicable.

religious ideologies into both the Palestinian resistance and mainstream Zionism since the 1980s, Arab opposition to Israel is by no means reducible to “Islamic” factors, nor are Zionist positions or Israeli state policy simply translations of Jewish outlooks. Hughes is surely aware of this, but he sometimes effaces what seem to me to be important distinctions, and the continuities he asserts are often left implicit and not carefully explained or justified.

Hughes recognizes, of course, that not all Palestinians are Muslim, but he nevertheless holds that significant elements of older Jewish-Muslim dynamics of engagement are recapitulated in the modern conflict, in particular the tendency for each group to evoke ideas about the antipodal other as a means of shaping conceptions of an ideal self. Echoing one of the leitmotifs of *Shared Identities*, Hughes provocatively suggests that the self-consciousness and anxiety triggered by social and religious proximity in the past has in the modern period been triggered by actual physical proximity instead; thus, contemporary struggles are only “the latest attempt on behalf of Jews and Muslims to invoke their religious traditions to make sense of an encounter fraught with the nearness and concomitant apprehension of the other.”¹⁰⁶ But although anyone who teaches Jewish-Muslim relations in broad perspective surely has to address the impact of the rise of Zionism and the conflict over Palestine on both groups in the modern period, the overly neat way in which Hughes dovetails the past into the present here seems too clever by half. The proposition that the political conflict between Arabs and Jews in the modern era refracts and reconfigures aspects of the tensions between Jews and Muslims in premodern Islamicate societies is intriguing, but as executed in the brief chapters of *Muslim and Jew* (especially chapter 3, dedicated to the modern period), Hughes’s argument is barely substantiated and relies on vague and at times misleading suggestions. At worst, it rests on a conspicuous misrepresentation of the textual evidence, recapitulating some of the problems that recur throughout *Shared Identities*.

It is true that spokesmen on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide have often positioned themselves as heirs to a perpetual struggle that long preceded Arab or Jewish nationalist ambitions, and so both groups have repeatedly invoked what Hughes terms “nostalgic” and “lachrymose” paradigms—Arabs alluding to the glorious heritage of Islamic dominion and cultural achievement, Jews to the centuries of oppression, discrimination, and violence to which they were perennially subjected under Muslim rule.¹⁰⁷ In order to

106. *Muslim and Jew*, 66.

107. In *Muslim and Jew*, 3, “lachrymose” is presented as if it is Hughes’s own coinage, though it is not. As noted by Mark Cohen, Baron characterized the negative conceptions of Jewish life in Christian Europe prevalent in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historiography in this way; in turn, Cohen adapts this characterization and applies the term “neo-lachrymose” to the pessimistic view of Jewish history under Islamic rule that became popular in certain circles after the Six-Day War in 1967 (Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994], ch. 1). Hughes acknowledges Cohen’s “neo-lachrymose” terminology once in *Shared Identities* (p. 34). The citational problems are distinctly more acute in *Muslim and Jew* than they are in *Shared Identities*, but they appear repeatedly in both books. Note, e.g., the references to “epistemic space” (*Muslim and Jew*, 5, 86), which I read as allusions to Neuwirth, who has used exactly this terminology in her work (e.g., “Locating the Qurʾān in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity,” in *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World: Studies Presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. Andrew Rippin and Roberto Tottoli, 159–79 [Leiden: Brill, 2015]), but who is absent from both

substantiate this point in chapter 3, Hughes might have adduced examples of modern ideologues from both the Arab and Zionist camps drawing upon particular aspects of traditional thinking—nationalist arguments on either side rehearsing the terms of older religious polemic—or evoking the ideas and ideals of a previous age to explain modern conditions. I infer that this is what Hughes meant to do in the chapter of *Muslim and Jew* he dedicates to the modern period. However, for the most part what he offers us here is a basic overview of major political developments from the rise of Zionism to contemporary times. This survey is occasionally punctuated by substantial quotations from primary sources that are presumably intended to support his contentions but are actually of questionable probative value for his argument.

Here the contradiction between the evident significance of texts and the meaning Hughes imputes to them—a chronic problem in both books—seems particularly acute. Early on in the chapter, Hughes suggests that both sides in the modern conflict invoke ancient history as a way of alleviating tensions and anxieties; both Jews and Palestinians take recourse to narratives of a sacred past as an explanatory mechanism that endows the present struggle with meaning. As an example, he refers to Arafat’s famous 1974 address to the United Nations, claiming that it “appeals indirectly to the past, to the shared destiny of Jews and Muslims in places like the Arabian Peninsula and Muslim Spain.” However, this subtext is wholly absent from the passage Hughes quotes here, which actually speaks to the distinction between Judaism and Jewish colonialism and warns of the threat to international security posed by Zionist “terrorism.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, a long quotation from Jabotinsky is cited as foreshadowing the idea of a transfer of the Palestinian population out of Israel to other Arab territories, but the whole point of the quoted passage is that the Arabs would be allowed to *remain* on the land (and might actually become even more numerous) but would eventually have to accommodate the reality of becoming a minority with the continuing migration of Jews to Palestine. Jabotinsky notes explicitly that forced relocation would *not* be necessary for the future Zionist state (“there is no question of ousting the Arabs”)—the opposite of the point Hughes claims the passage makes.¹⁰⁹ Still further, one would imagine that discussion of Hamas would be especially productive for Hughes, as the group’s political discourse explicitly capitalizes on older narratives representing the Jews of Muḥammad’s time as subversive, perfidious, and treacherous; this technique would seem to epitomize, as Hughes puts it, the use of a past “selectively remembered to make a political point in the present.”¹¹⁰ But the texts from Hamas he subsequently quotes simply do not demonstrate this.¹¹¹ Hughes then goes on to mention the importance of an idealized unity

books, as noted above. Admittedly, Boyarin also refers to the “epistemic” in *Border Lines*. In any event, Hughes is hardly original in applying the Foucauldian notion of the episteme to the exchanges and confrontations between Jews, Christians, and the Quranic community in Late Antiquity.

108. *Muslim and Jew*, 79.

109. *Ibid.*, 75.

110. *Ibid.*, 82.

111. The long quotation from article 8 of the Hamas charter (*ibid.*, 82) discusses the Zionist conspiracy throughout modern history; the subsequent long quotation from article 28 (*ibid.*, 82–83) discusses Zionist infiltration of modern institutions; and the next quotation, from article 31 (*ibid.*, 83), portrays the Hamas vision

under the caliphate to modern Muslim ideologues—another apposite theme—but does not support this claim in any way.¹¹²

The maladroit, partial, and inadequate nature of the evidence Hughes offers in support of his argument is rather conspicuous in this chapter. In the end, the arguments he proposes to make at the beginning simply do not manifest; at best, we are presented with a conspicuously circular logic, in which texts in which Arabs and Zionists express their anxieties about the other are cited as proof that Arabs and Zionists experience anxieties about the other. There is certainly an important point to be made about the persistence of certain ideas about the past and their deployment for ideological and political gain in the propaganda of hardline religious groups in both the Jewish and Palestinian camps, but Hughes's continuing misrepresentation of texts and their meaning in this chapter impairs and overshadows his discussion. This is to say nothing of the numerous conspicuous omissions: as noted previously, Hughes's argument would have been well served if he had addressed the question of the *isrāʿīliyyāt* in this context, as this would have provided a compelling example of a modern Muslim discourse that conflates the distant Islamic past and present political realities. Moreover, one cannot fail to notice that two of the most important thinkers germane to Hughes's argument—Sayyid Qutb and Meir Kahane—receive no mention here, though the type of ideologically burdened evocations of history that Hughes wishes to highlight are central to the intellectual projects of both.

Hughes's arguments are less effective than they should be in other respects as well. In both *Shared Identities* and *Muslim and Jew*, the distinction between representation and reality is not always evident. At times Hughes seems entirely cognizant that our available sources, especially Muslim depictions of Jews, serve an ideological function, each group's portrayal of the other serving to address internal communal issues. (This is exactly the argument he purportedly wishes to make in chapter 3 of *Muslim and Jew*.) Such awareness aligns Hughes's project with a number of important studies from the last decade, particularly those of Ze'ev Maghen, David Freidenreich, and most of all David Nirenberg, concerning what we might term the imaginative politics of Christian and Muslim representations of Jews.¹¹³ But at other times Hughes cites his sources as evidence of the blurriness or

of Islamism as a creed promoting justice and peaceful coexistence. These passages touch on themes familiar from traditional sources, such as Jewish corruption and subversion, but none refers to premodern history.

112. Ibid., 84. On this important topic, see, e.g., Mona Hassan, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

113. As noted above, Maghen's work is overlooked by Hughes, while that of Freidenreich is casually dismissed in *Shared Identities*. An older monograph by Nirenberg is briefly cited in *Shared Identities*, but Hughes does not engage with his magnum opus, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2013), at all in either book, another puzzling omission. Strangely, in *Muslim and Jew* Hughes coins the term "theology" for the primary "prism" framing his analysis, by which he means the various expressions of a religious community thinking about itself through representations of the other, providing "the script whereby a group situates itself, ideally and theoretically, within a social space" (p. 6). It is unclear to me why "theology" should be the preferred term for such strategies of representation. The term is also used according to its more conventional sense (e.g., for the discourse of *kalām*) in this book, and in *Shared Identities* it is used *solely* in the conventional sense (e.g., "Theology represents the systematic articulation of what are imagined as religious truths—the nature of God, the relationship between God and humans, providence . . ."; p. 89).

fluidity he so frequently seeks to discern in various historical periods, when what those sources actually attest to is the proclivity of Jews and Muslims across the centuries to invoke the other in constructing an ideal self or promoting myths of communal origins. His two arguments thus seem to be unhelpfully conflated.

For example, in chapter 1 of *Muslim and Jew*, Hughes once again foregrounds the question of “decentralized pluralism,” the blurred boundaries he asserts were typical of the era in which Islam emerged, but the texts quoted here sometimes seem to attest instead to later authors’ concern with *solidifying* the boundaries between groups and with sanctifying and sanitizing Islam’s origins by emphasizing Jewish difference and distinction from the followers of Muḥammad.¹¹⁴ This is particularly striking as later in the chapter he explicitly recognizes that identities are not only maintained but actually defined at (imagined or real) borders as sites of encounter through the negotiation of (imagined or real) difference in dialectic with the other. In chapter 2, which focuses on the Middle Ages, Hughes begins by claiming that the subject to be discussed is the tendency among both Muslims and Jews to deploy portrayals of the other as “literary stand-ins” in discourses of self-reflection. Here he will supposedly focus on the use of a fictive Jew as a foil by Muslim authors to construct an image of the ideal Muslim, marginalize certain varieties of Islam as illegitimate (by reclassifying them as Jewish), and enforce the boundary between Islam and Judaism.¹¹⁵ I agree wholeheartedly that this is exactly what many Muslim depictions of Jews and Judaism throughout the centuries, especially in classical and medieval Islamic texts, are intended to do. However, this agenda quickly recedes into the background in the chapter and is never directly discussed again. Instead, most of the chapter actually discusses the impact of Islam on Jewish thinkers and movements, first addressing major medieval figures and then groups such as the Sabbateans. Despite this, at the end of the chapter, Hughes emphasizes that in this era, when Muslims talked about Jews, they were really talking about Islamic orthodoxy. One can readily agree with this contention, which has been established in a number of other studies published over the last decade, but not on the strength of the foregoing discussion by Hughes himself. This incongruity is paralleled in *Shared Identities*. In the final chapter of that book (chapter 6, “Re-Frame”) Hughes initially seems acutely aware of the function of literary texts in manipulating representations for various ideological ends, as he discusses the antipodes “Muslim” and “Jew” as sites for self-fashioning in each community’s discourse.¹¹⁶ But by the end of the chapter he veers back into his favorite subject, the persistent blurred boundaries between groups across the centuries, and the question of the political and ideological aspects of representation unfortunately recedes into the background again.¹¹⁷

114. E.g., the quotation from the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq concerning Jewish opposition to Muḥammad and hypocrisy (*Muslim and Jew*, 20).

115. *Ibid.*, 36.

116. Once again, this section feels like a reformulation of the insights of other scholars who remain unacknowledged in the discussion, such as Rubin and Nirenberg.

117. It is difficult to account for the multiple disconnects between Hughes’s framing and summative statements in both books and the actual subject matter dealt with in his chapters. Hughes acknowledges that the first two chapters of *Muslim and Jew* rework previously published articles, and much of the material here

Conclusion

In sum, Hughes's recent offerings in the area of Jewish-Muslim exchanges and engagements raise numerous important issues, but specialists may find these works to be of limited value for advancing the field. As noted, Hughes criticizes Wasserstrom for interrogating the construct of "symbiosis" without going far enough in proposing a coherent alternative. The same critique may be leveled at Hughes himself; he problematizes many aspects of the established scholarship—and rightly so—but falls short of moving the field forward substantially in terms of offering a coherent methodology, let alone in achieving anything like the paradigm shift at which he aims.

It is certainly true that Hughes has performed a significant service to the field simply by raising these issues and indexing the abiding and persistent problems that chronically haunt explorations of the intersections between Judaism and Islam. As he himself has noted, Jewish studies, in particular, has long been insulated from other fields and so has often been quite slow to accommodate new perspectives not anchored in the traditional commitments of insiders. This has had an array of implications for the field, not least regarding approaches to the study of Jewish-Muslim relations.¹¹⁸ Anyone familiar with the discipline, at least in North America, will recognize that however much the field has changed over the last decades, there is still considerable work to be done in broadening the scope of its scholarly purview. The impact of traditional commitments and orientations on the study of the Jews of Late Antiquity, in particular, has long been noted, especially the double hegemony that the rabbinic tradition enjoys in many institutional and scholarly contexts: first, it is still frequently—and anachronistically—assumed to have been the *de facto* reality for the vast majority of Jews in the Mediterranean and Middle East by the time of the emergence of Islam (despite numerous critiques arguing against this position); and second, it is all too readily naturalized as the default object of study in conversations about Judaism in antiquity after the Greco-Roman period, which is still often assumed to be largely synonymous with the Judaism of the Palestinian and Babylonian academies.

I remain skeptical regarding Hughes's near-total agnosticism about what we can or cannot know about the Judaisms of Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period. However, we can readily recognize the corrective value of such a posture in dislodging many of the still-regnant axioms and assumptions enshrined in various institutional contexts in the field of Jewish studies. I do not think it unfair to say that inquiry into the intersections between Islam and Judaism, especially in the era before the full flowering of the Judeo-Arabic culture of the Middle Ages, remains marginal to mainstream Jewish studies despite the important implications of such research.¹¹⁹ Hughes positions himself as a scholar of religion first and

seems condensed and repurposed (or simply taken over verbatim) from *Shared Identities* as well. That being the case, one wonders whether the incongruities and redactional seams are an unfortunate result of the author's compositional process.

118. Aaron W. Hughes, "Jewish Studies Is Too Jewish," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 24, 2014. For a recent reevaluation of Hughes's argument, see Sarah Imhoff, "Jews, Jewish Studies and the Study of Islam," in Sheedy, *Identity, Politics and the Study of Islam*, 121–37.

119. As one means of indexing this marginality, one might peruse the conference schedules and archived

foremost, but his main academic appointment is in Jewish studies, and so his books address numerous problematic approaches and conceptions that remain conspicuous in the latter field: the persistent emphasis on rabbinic normativity; the perennial quest to discern the original roots of an essentialized Judaism; the corresponding neglect of the complex and, yes, fluid nature of Jewish identity at various points in Late Antiquity; and the consequent foreclosure of the possibility that the historical dialogue between Jews and Muslims exerted a significant impact on integral aspects of both.

Seen in this light, Hughes's attempt to revive Wasserstrom's project is laudable, renewing the call for a more vigorous investigation of this supposedly obscure period in Jewish history and especially for more scholarly activity in this area on the model of the ample attention now paid to the Jewish-Christian "symbiosis" of the early centuries CE. Especially given the progress in the field of Jewish-Muslim exchanges and encounters since the early 1990s, Hughes's theoretical intervention is timely, and succeeds in provoking and sustaining important questions even if his books fail to deliver in other respects, especially in providing a reliable and cogent point of entry to this area of research for students and nonspecialists.

abstracts from the past two decades of the annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, available at <https://www.associationforjewishstudies.org/2020-annual-conference/past-conferences>. Even a cursory search of the programs of past meetings demonstrates that only a tiny number of panels and presentations have addressed Jewish-Muslim engagements in any period, especially earlier phases.

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