

Islam and Mormonism— A Comparison

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The late great Classical scholar Werner Jaeger once said that the only time the lectures of the immortal Eduard Meyer were really interesting and the only time he was ever able to fill his lecture hall at the University of Berlin was when he talked about the Mormons.

Eduard Meyer was the last mortal to attempt single-handed a history of the An-

cient World; others before him had written monumental histories of antiquity, "but never before had such work been undertaken by anyone with a comparable preparation."¹ "He had a special preference for the history of religion which never left him, from his dissertation (at the age of twenty) to the great work of his old age,"² and that is why in 1904 he spent a year

Illustrated by Merrill Gogan



in Utah; he was convinced that "Mormonism . . . is not just another of countless sects, but a new revealed religion. . . . What in the study of other revealed religions can only be surmised after painful research is here directly accessible in reliable witnesses. Hence the origin and history of Mormonism possesses great and unusual value for the student of religious history."³

In particular, "Mormonism," he writes, "excited my interest at an early age before all else because of the surprising analogy, extending even to the smallest details, between it and the fundamental drives, external forms, and historical development of Islam: here one might hope to discover significant clues for a proper understanding of Mohammed and his religion. . . . there is hardly another historical parallel as instructive as this one. . . . It is impossible to undertake the scholarly investigation of the one without a closer acquaintance with the other."⁴

It would be foolish not to take advantage of the spadework already done by so competent a researcher as Meyer. Let us consider then the points on which he believes the Moslems and Mormons to be most alike and on which they differ. At the outset, the resemblances pointed out by Meyer are quite superficial, while the differences are profound and fundamental.

First as to the likenesses:

Islam owed its impact on the world and its great appeal to its followers to the electrifying announcement that God had again spoken from the heavens and that after 600 years of silence the voice of a prophet was again heard in the land. It was this announcement that aroused the scorn and derision of the world and brought down storms of denunciation and persecution on the head of that prophet. Here indeed is a closer parallel to the case of Joseph Smith; in fact, early Mormon leaders saw no reason why Mohammed should not be considered a true prophet, for there have been many prophets, great and small, in the past whose words are not in the Bible.

But the striking resemblance turns almost at once into an equally striking contrast when the Moslems announce that Mohammed is the *last* of the prophets and that there can be no prophet after him. "When a doctrine is sealed," writes an eminent Moslem scholar, "it is complete, and there can be no further addition. The holy Prophet Mohammed closed the long line of Apostles. . . . there has been and will be no prophet after Mohammed."⁵ Thus Islam ignored its one unique advantage over conventional Judaism and Christianity, the joyful tidings that God still speaks from the heavens through his prophets.

Upon learning about the Mormons, Moslems usually

comment favorably on the resemblance between the Word of Wisdom and Moslem rules of abstinence; but again the parallel is weakened by the fact that only a small minority of Moslems, such as the strict and rigorous Wahabis, observe such rules. The toleration of more than one wife in both religions is based on quite different principles and at any rate has been of limited application in both societies. Both religions advocate high moral principles, but then so do most other religions.

Most fundamental are certain doctrinal traditions that, while found in the Koran, have been rejected by conventional Christianity and Judaism but have always been a part of Mormonism. Great emphasis is placed, for example, on the concept of dispensations, i.e., the restoration of prophetic gifts and divine authority after long periods of apostasy and darkness through the sending of a great prophet. This doctrine was necessary to justify Mohammed's appearance as a new prophet but became a dead letter in Islam after his death.

The Koran tells how at a great council held in the heavens at the creation of the earth God set forth the plan of salvation, and how Satan rejected the plan, refused to bow to Adam, and was cast

out of heaven by main force, falling to this earth, where he now undertakes to tempt the children of men during their time of probation here below.⁶ Such teachings enjoy great prominence in the newly discovered documents of the early Christian and Jewish saints and sectaries of the desert, documents of which Eduard Meyer knew nothing but which now go a long way toward explaining how the teachings got into the Koran.

Actually, these things belong to the mysteries of the Koran and have never meant much to Moslems. Meyer himself limits the resemblances between Mormonism and Islam to "fundamental drives, external forms, and historical development," all of which are secondary to the real genius of a religion—what its followers really believe. As mentioned before, in Meyer's work it is the differences between Islam and Mormonism that are most significant.

In the first place, Meyer, who feels quite at home with the great Moslem leaders, is puzzled and annoyed by the Mormons; he finds it "easier to reach a confident conclusion about Mohammed, Abu Bekr, Omar, than about Joseph Smith or Brigham Young, in spite of the relatively much greater amount of material surviving concerning the latter."⁷ He can explain Mohammed as a human being, plagued with doubts and misgivings about

the nature of his calling and the authenticity of his visions.

"For Joseph Smith, on the other hand," he reports, "it is a most distinctive characteristic that any such sort of doubt or misgiving is utterly out of the question."⁸ The biblical prophets annoy Meyer in the same way; since for him there is no such thing as revelation, he insists that "Jesus never claimed direct revelation . . . never had a vision . . . never once predicted future events." The passages in the Bible that describe the Lord as doing such things Meyer simply attributes to later invention.

"It goes without saying," Meyer decides, "that the Gospel of John is utterly worthless as a source,"⁹ and as for literal-minded prophets like Ezekiel, he simply loathes them. But the thing to notice is that Meyer puts the Mormon prophets in the same category with the deluded prophets of the Bible and in a very different category from Mohammed.

The intractable Joseph Smith "thinks of spiritual things in a far cruder and more materialistic way than Mohammed . . . all of his manifestations, visions, healings, ecstasies, etc., are quite everyday things to him and his followers. . . . For Mohammed on the other hand, the only

miracle [the 'sign'] is the revelation of the words of the divine book. . . . he forcefully denied possessing any of the other miraculous powers *possessed by the ancient prophets*. . . ."¹⁰ The italics emphasize that Joseph Smith is again classified with the prophets of Israel and not with the prophet of Islam. "Both think of God as having corporeal form," writes Meyer, "but Smith in his first vision sees God Himself, the Father and the Son, *just as Moses and others saw him*; while to Mohammed only the angel appears."¹¹ More italics reinforce the point.

While Joseph Smith taught "the continuation of direct prophetic inspiration, along with charismatic gifts of tongues, healings, etc.," to be generally enjoyed whenever the true church is upon the earth, "the idea of any miraculous powers in the possession of his followers is utterly out of the question" for Mohammed.¹² Again Joseph Smith is among the prophets: "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works . . . shall he do. . . ." (John 14:12.)

"Mohammed was able to win the loyalty of men of such superior intelligence and high social standing as Abu Bekr and Omar . . . while Joseph Smith's followers belonged almost without exception to the dregs of the people. . . ." Here one is reminded that in the early Jewish and

Christian writings the followers of the prophets are regularly designated as "the poor," because they really were the poor and outcast. But Mohammed was able "to command unswerving submission" of these followers, whereas "the first to follow [Joseph Smith] later fell away and were expelled from the Church."¹³

Among those who maintained family and party loyalty to Mohammed were many who did not take him seriously as a prophet, and many soon found it to their temporal advantage to support him regardless of their beliefs. But Joseph Smith never had anything to offer his followers but the sure word of prophecy, and Meyer notes with wonder that there were those whom he "threw out of the Church" who never denied his prophetic calling.

It was, of course, the Book of Mormon that first suggested the parallel between its author and Mohammed, each of whom claimed to have given the world a divine book brought to him personally by an angel. But there all resemblance ends; the differences between the two books are as great as those between their authors. The Book of Mormon, though transmitted and translated by divine ministrations, was an earthly book, written by the hands of men, as is all scripture, and hence apt to contain the mistakes of men. The Koran, on the

other hand, is held by most Moslems to be "identical with the uncreated eternal Word of God that is written on the heavenly tablets; literally, not in any figurative sense. . . ." Even the ink, paper, and binding are accepted in the most literal sense as the Uncreated Word of God.¹⁴

The Book of Mormon is a history of the doings of very fallible humans, while devotees of the Koran disdain to attribute to it anything as banal as human history. While Joseph Smith "copies out the peculiar written characters of the holy book," Meyer notes, "such a thing would never have occurred to Mohammed."²⁴ And whereas Joseph Smith "claims that he actually dug it up and kept it in his house . . . for Mohammed it always remains in the hands of the angel."¹⁵

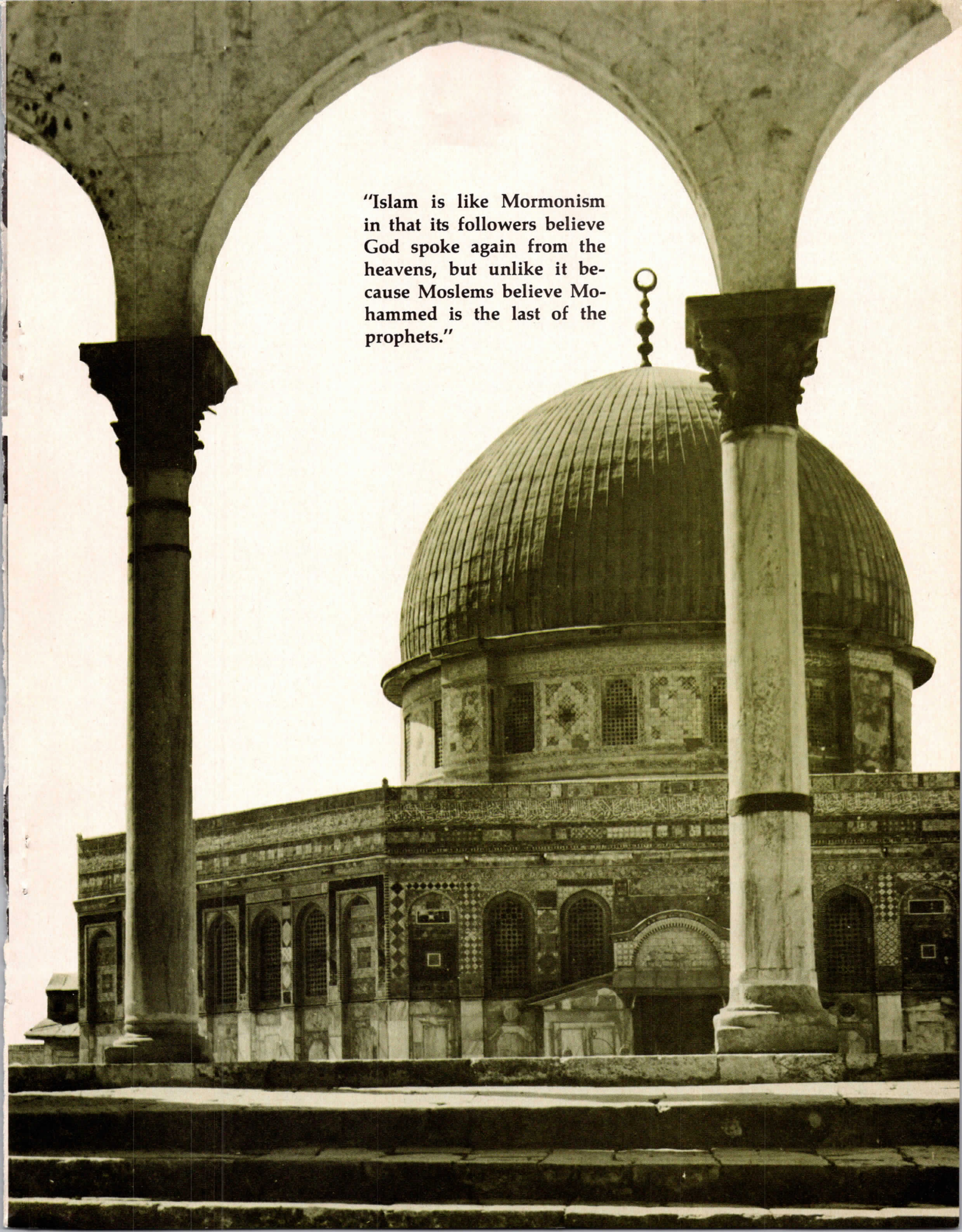
There is nothing like the testimony of the Three Witnesses to support Mohammed's story, the Koran repeatedly and solemnly affirming that it is its own witness, and though Meyer naturally rejects the testimony of the witnesses out of hand, still it jars him. "The essential thing is, that this vision was for the Three Witnesses an absolutely real occurrence, on the complete and literal actuality of which none of them ever betrayed the slightest trace of

a doubt. The opponents of the Mormons made every conceivable effort to get these men to retract their testimonies and to admit that there was a deception; but they remained unshaken, and continued to the end of their lives to affirm the truth of the revelation and the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Far harder to explain is the testimony of the eight witnesses."¹⁶

Since he will accept neither book as inspired, Meyer prefers the Koran to the Book of Mormon, because it took years of painful study to produce and it shows "a conviction won through genuinely strenuous mental effort, and even at times a poetic exaltation."¹⁷

Naturally one prefers the work of a thinker and a poet to a big history turned out all at once by a very young man who is both ignorant and strangely devoid of misgivings: ". . . the vocabulary is exceedingly limited, except for the numerous peculiar words and proper names invented by the author, in which he gives his imagination free rein."¹⁸

Mohammed, with his purely spiritual book, never takes the terrible risks that Joseph Smith does, though the Koran constantly flings out meaningless challenges. Meyer fails to appreciate that the Book of Mormon is a highly testable document, since for him there is nothing to test: there is no revelation, so there is no point to challenging any document,



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including the Bible, that claims it. While both the Koran and the Book of Mormon claim to be strictly in the biblical tradition, Mohammed, as Meyer observes, "has but a dim conception" of the Bible, and even the greatest Moslem scholars are astonishingly ignorant of the scriptures; in no way has the Book of Mormon supplanted the Bible as has the Koran.

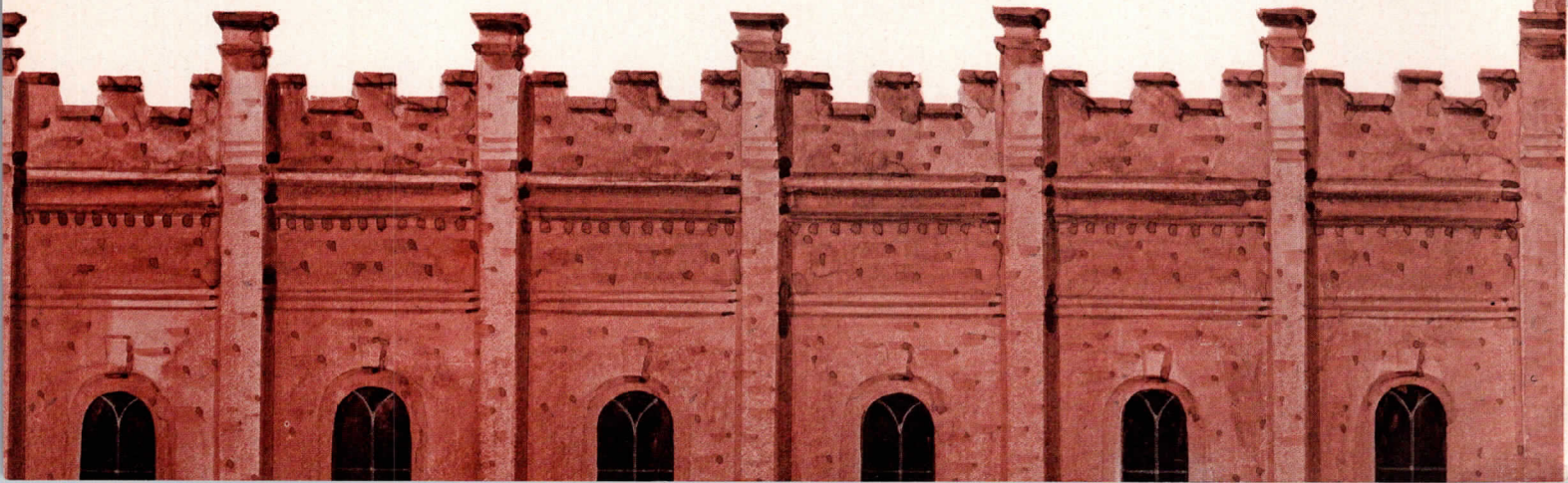
The key to understanding both the likenesses and differences between Mormonism and Islam is to be found in the double nature of the latter, which draws from both "vertical" and "horizontal" traditions. Vertical Judaism and Christianity is that brand of religion that believed in the necessity of direct revelation, inspired leaders, charismatic gifts, the coming of a real Messiah and a real millennium; the predominance of such beliefs at an early time has become apparent from the oldest Jewish and Christian manuscripts, whose recent discovery has completely changed the picture of Christian beginnings.

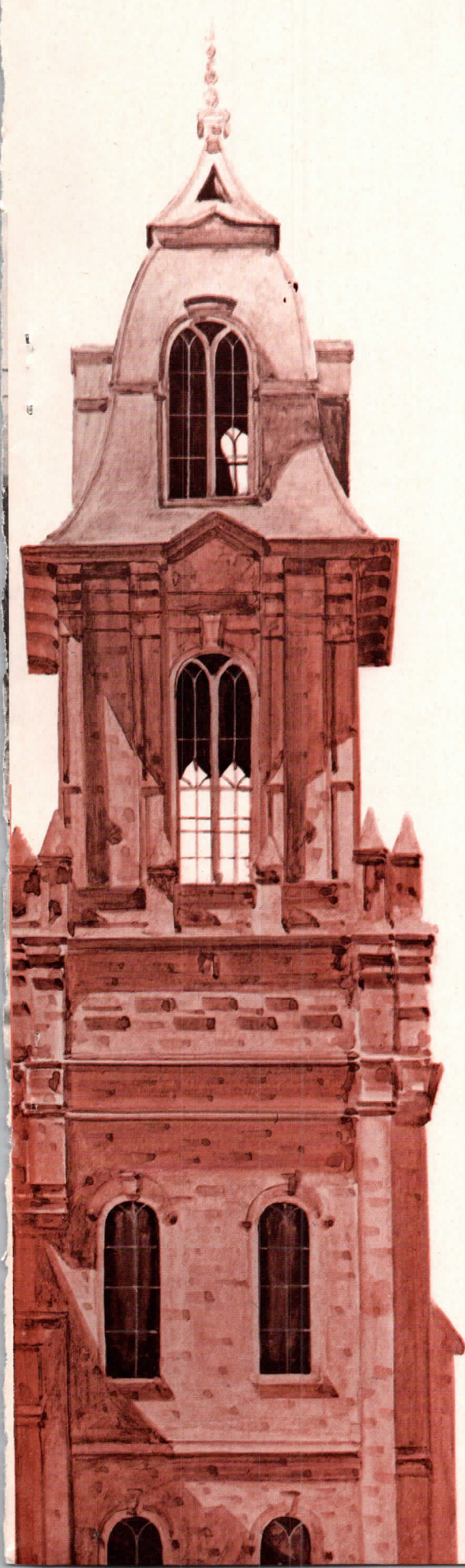
Both Judaism and Christianity, it would now appear, began as charismatic vertical religions that were in time completely suppressed and supplanted by the horizontal or academic way of thinking, which holds that one should reverence only the tradition handed down horizontally from one generation of teachers and scholars to the next and that the complete religious life is comprised in the proper observance of established customs and the acceptance of officially approved doctrines. However, Islam arose in a time and place in which much of the old vertical attitudes of the desert sectaries still survived, but in which also the influence of the schoolmen was well established and on the increase. Hence the two elements mingle and impart a spirit of ambiguity and controversy to every Moslem discussion.

Since Islam's debt to the early desert sectaries (such as those represented by the Dead Sea scrolls) has not yet been seriously studied, a few illustrations may be helpful.

One evening in March of the year A.D. 620 Mohammed took a walk to the valley of Mina on the western outskirts of his hometown of Mecca, where some pilgrims were camping. Some of the campers were Jews—Chasraj from Yathrib in the north—who had separated themselves from the rest of their people, after the immemorial custom of the desert sectaries. They were looking for a prophet, and they accepted Mohammed as their inspired leader; the next year they returned and secretly entered a covenant to support him. Thus the Prophet's first solid support came from the vertically minded sectaries of the desert.

At the same time he had his famous dream of journeying to heaven from the temple at Jerusalem and there meeting Moses, Christ, Abraham, John the Baptist, Enoch, and Aaron, and seeing Adam presiding as judge over the great assembly of all his children. These are the figures that dominate in the early apocryphal writings of the Jews and Christians—no wonder Mohammed's Ara-





bic relatives shook their heads in perplexity and doubt. And when Mohammed himself had serious doubts about the divinity of his calling, it was one of the sectaries who had read both the Old Testament and the New, his wife's uncle Maraka, who told him that his visions were genuine and that he would be the special prophet to his people.

But the early Christian and Jewish traditions that survive in the Koran and in works by its early commentators came to the Arabs secondhand and were never really assimilated or understood by them. "No knowledge have I of the chiefs on high, discussing among themselves," says Mohammed; "only this has been revealed to me: to give warning plainly and publicly."¹⁹ That is, Mohammed has heard about the council in heaven, but he really knows nothing about it. So we are told of God's plan, laid down at the foundation of the earth; and yet the plan is no plan at all, for punishment and reward have nothing whatever to do with individual behavior and all things happen—"don't ask why or how" (*bila kaif*)—according to the imponderable will and pleasure of God.

Like the early Christians and Jews, the Koran is aware of the great importance of the rites and ordinances of the temple, yet the cult of Jerusalem was supplanted almost immediately by the more familiar

and very ancient cult of Mecca. "Though Mohammed was in fact a charismatic leader," after the manner of the early sectaries, according to a recent study, ". . . the concept of the charismatic leader had little part in the Qur'anic system of ideas."²⁰

Though the Koran recalls the marvelous works of God for and among the Chosen People, "Mohammed did not claim to be a saint, and deliberately renounced the doing of miracles."²¹ He was not in the line of the great prophets, the restorers, all of whom spoke with the Lord face to face and whose ministries were marked by signs and wonders; he was, as Waraka said, "The prophet for *this* people (*an-nabi li-hadhihi-l-'ummah*)." He was a reformer and a great one, but he was not a restorer; of the things the Bible talks about he had, as Meyer observes, little or no understanding.

But if Islam came early enough to catch the last echoes of early Christianity and vertical Judaism, it also came late enough to find the schoolmen in complete control of the situation. The official theology of the church and the synagogue was that which the churchmen and the rabbis had learned from the University of Alexandria, and the Moslems lost no time falling in line, quickly producing a host of learned theologians whose mental and verbal gymnastics could put

the Christian and the Jewish doctors to shame.

Their interpretations, imposed upon the more "primitive" teaching of the Koran, make every point of doctrine in Islam a disputed one. The mollahs (Muslims trained in law and doctrine) insist that Islam is the ultimate world religion and criticize other religions as being geographically limited and culturally conditioned; yet the ordinary Moslem boasts that no one can understand the Koran except a born Arab.

While the official theology constantly reiterates that Mohammed is the last of the prophets (a point not pressed in the Koran itself), a large part of the Moslem world looks forward to the coming of other prophets, notably the Mahdi, and has ever been eager to follow leaders claiming divine inspiration. Trying to reconcile the two views, A. Y. Ali writes, "God's teaching is and will always be continuous, but there has been and will be no prophet after Mohammed."²²

If God can teach continuously without a prophet, why Mohammed? If God's entire message could be put in a small book 1200 years ago, why not 2400 or 3600 years ago? If men have needed prophets in the past, as the Koran itself pointedly asks, why not today? Though it was its vivid eschatology that gave Islam its great initial appeal (as it did Christianity and Judaism), Islam, like its sister religions,

has become particularly weak in the field of eschatology: Mohammed now turns out to be a prophet who does not prophesy.

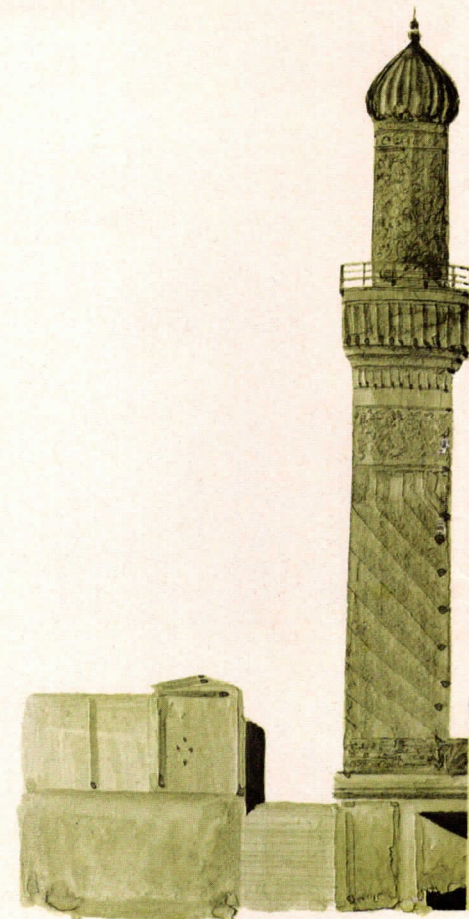
Constantly repeating the old formula of the sectaries, that God is gentle and forbearing, the Moslems early adopted a policy of conquest by force and have ever been imbued with the polemical and party spirit that has kept the doctors of all religions divided and squabbling through the centuries.

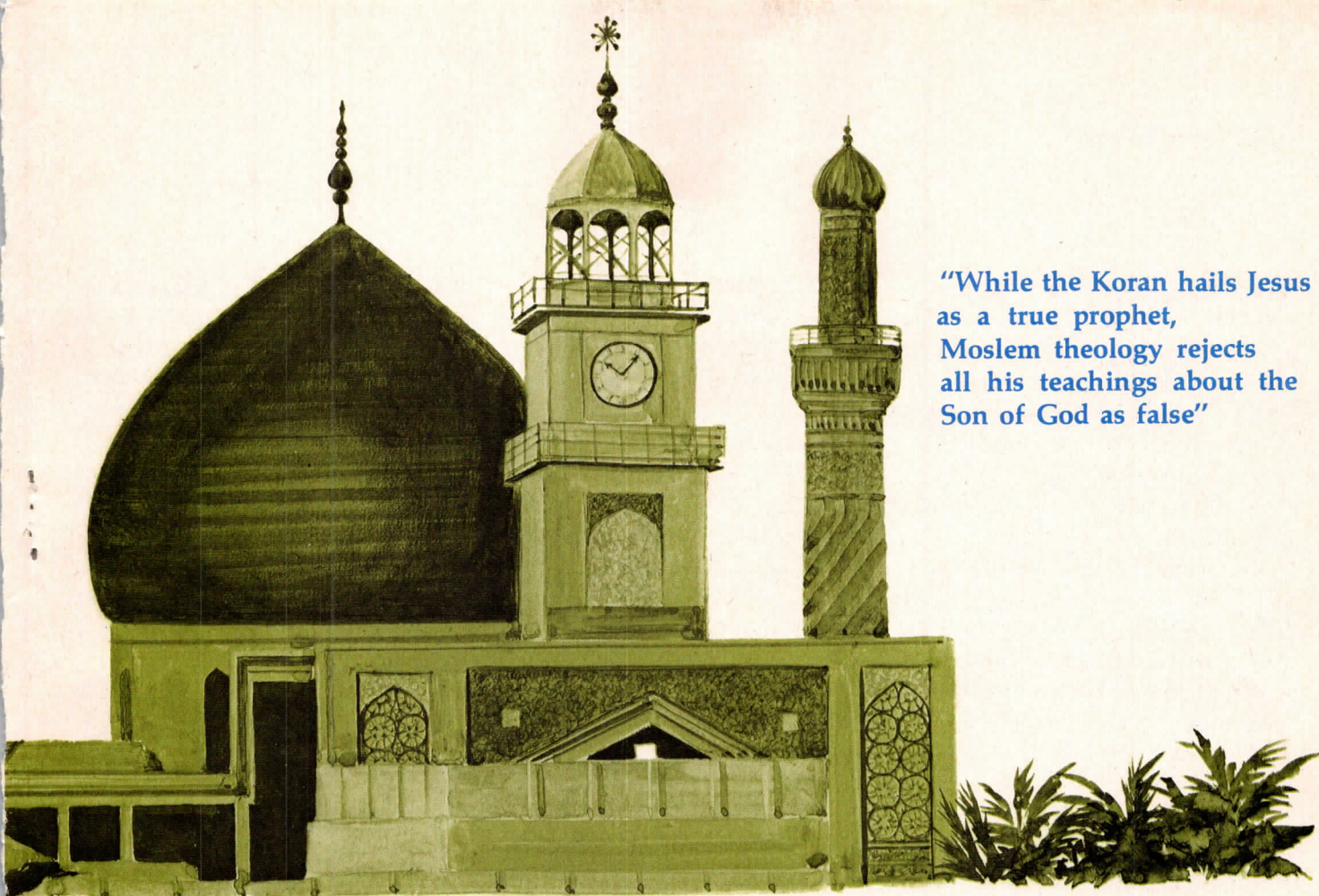
The same ambivalence is apparent in the attitude to the Koran. Hailed as "the book that makes things clear," in a world in which the rabbis and the doctors of the church could never agree among themselves about their own scriptures, the Koran soon turned out to be an object of even greater disagreement than the Bible, while many Moslems point to its supreme obscurity as a sign of its divinity. There are as many conflicting commentaries on the Koran as there are on the Bible, and as many conflicting sects claiming its true interpretation: one of the most famous *hadiths* or sayings attributed to Mohammed is that "there are seventy-seven sects in Islam (already in his day) and all but one are for the burning!"

It is claimed that the Koran eschews the arts of rhetoric for the plain, simple language that can be grasped by one and all, yet in the teaching of the Koran the principal em-

phasis has always been on *i'rab*, correct pronunciation, with the insistence that it is more important to pronounce the words with the correct enunciation and the proper tone of voice than it is to understand what they mean.

The Koran claims to be the complete and final word of God, yet the doctors of Islam have handed down tens of thousands of *hadiths*, that is, things that Mohammed is reported to have said or would have said (according to them) to clarify and extend the teaching. The Koran declares that no amount of intellectual effort will avail in understanding the word of God, yet it was the Moslem teachers who first turned wholeheartedly to Aristotle to find an answer to theological questions, and it





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was from them that the scholastic philosophers of the medieval church later took over.

The central theme of Moslem as of Christian theology is the nature of God, and while the Moslem doctors boast of being free of the contradictions and obscurities that have ever marked the course of trinitarian theology, their wholehearted acceptance (along with the Christians and the Jews) of the God of the Alexandrian schoolmen—absolutely, exclusively, totally, inconceivably *one*—soon got them into even worse predicaments than the Christian theologians.

Thus the Moslem doctors have often noted that a God who is totally incomprehensible leads straight to atheism and idolatry (as among the Sabaeans); yet incomprehensible he

must be if he is to be absolutely unique, unapproachable, indescribable, totally unlike *any* other thing—and he must be all those things if he is to be the Only One: there can be nothing like him.

Even to imagine God as having any “partners” of any kind sharing his nature and his activities is the great crime of *shirk*; he does all things himself without the need or wish for any helpers—yet the Moslem creed requires belief in God, his angels, his prophets, his apostles, his books, i.e., with a whole host of agents through whom the all-sufficient God somehow operates in his dealings with men. And while it is wicked to think of man as having anything whatever in common with God, still man is supposed

to love him, yearn to be with him, seek the reward of gazing upon his face, and in the end become completely identified with him, one with whom he can have nothing in common!

It is outrageous blasphemy to think of a *Son* as participating in his glory and power; how much worse, then, to conceive of other and lesser beings existing beside him—man’s very existence is a crime: yet the Moslem theologians admit that man exists, along with a lot of other not so glorious things. For though God alone created all things, and though he is perfectly good and does only what he wants to do, the doctors insist that evil is a reality and that the world is full of it. The problem of evil goes thus unanswered.

The idea that God might

have children is utterly abhorrent to the Moslems: we are not his children but things that he has created out of nothing; but he created us with tragic weaknesses in our nature: this anomaly leads to the fatalism and cynicism of an Omar Khayyam.

The Koran hails Jesus as a true prophet and a great one, yet Moslem theology rejects all his teachings about the Son of God as false; it teaches that Mary was "the woman of truth" who conceived Jesus by the Holy Ghost and bore him when she was still a virgin, yet it deplores the idea that God should have a Son.

A well-known teaching in Islam is that "we come out from God and to him we shall return." This has led to much controversy among Moslem theologians. How can we go from and return to him if he is everywhere? In nothing is the dual tradition of Islam more apparent than in the division of its great teachers into two main schools, one of which insists on a completely formless and incomprehensible God while the other teaches of a God who has a body just like a man's. The former asks: "Can God have any attributes whatever without completely destroying belief in his invisible, unchanging Oneness?"²³ Yet a famous teacher of the other school, Abu Amir, "would slap on his own thigh and say [commenting on Sura 68:42], 'God has a real thigh,

just like this one here!'"²³

The Koran can define God in terms of the schools and then go right on talking about him as a real person. It can tell us that men are lost or saved by his good pleasure alone and through no act of theirs and then insist that all men are individually responsible in all things. It swears by the Bible, which it never reads, and knows nothing of the Messiah. The Moslems insist that nothing whatever can be known about God and then fill libraries with treatises on his true nature. It is outrageous presumption for anything to exist beside him, they say—yet here *we* are. He created absolutely everything that is out of his own perfect nature, and yet the world is full of evil.

Ability to live with such basic contradictions would seem to be a highly developed trait among the Arabs. "The Oriental is not a realist," writes a famous Moslem scholar; "he is above all an idealist. He certainly hears and contemplates nature . . . but what he grasps is very soon altered, or rather stylized"; then he quotes P. Ricard: "Muslim art . . . turns away from the reality of existing things. It appears to reject all that binds it closely or remotely to the living world. It only permits the representation of inner, imaginary *vues* . . ." ²⁴

The Arab sees what he wants to or as he wants it to be. The same type of licensed thinking

is the hallmark of conventional Christian theology, and it was because Mormonism turned away from this theology of freewheeling symbol and fantasy that it was anathema to all the churches. For all its superficial resemblances to Islam, Mormonism is even farther removed from it than from sectarian Christianity. □

Footnotes

¹*Enciclopedia Italiana*, s.v. Eduard Meyer, vol. 23, p. 140.

²*Der Grosse Brockhaus* (1932), vol. 12, p. 494.

³Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen* (Halle, 1912), p. 2.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an* (Lahore, 1938), in his commentary on Sura 33:40.

⁶Koran 2:30-37; 15:29-51; 17:62-66; 18:51f; 20:117-21; 38:70-89.

⁷Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 278ff.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁴I. Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam* (Heidelberg, 1910), p. 112; the quotation is from al-Ash'ari.

¹⁵Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁹Koran 38:70f. In the verses that immediately follow, the story of the council in heaven is recounted in some detail, following the Jewish and Apocryphal writings quite closely.

²⁰W. M. Watt, in *Numen*, vol. 7 (1960), p. 78.

²¹Goldziher, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

²²Ali, *op. cit.*, comm. on Sura 33:40.

²³Goldziher, pp. 103, 106.

²⁴Mohammed Zerrouki, in *The Islamic Review*, March-April 1951, p. 57.

Note: Additional footnote explanations and supportive material are available upon request from the ENSIGN, 79 South State Street, Salt Lake City, Utah 84111.