10 Arabizing the Bible

Racial supersessionism in nineteenth-century Christian art and biblical scholarship

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Between the Renaissance and the middle of the twentieth century, the Israelites of the Bible came to be imagined in the West, on the basis of information, and misinformation, as the inhabitants of Muslim West Asia and North Africa. A near-equation of ancient Jew and contemporary Muslim followed from the typical orientalist assumption that the “Orient” was ahistorical and monolithic. The current peoples of the Orient, it was thought, lived in the same kind of civilization as their “ancestors.” And, as one oriental was like another, it mattered little if these ancestors had been Jews, Turks, or Arabs. The record of this orientalization of the Bible is pervasive and extensive. I will have space to illustrate it with only a few almost randomly chosen examples. My focus is on the long nineteenth century. My examples are from two areas that have still not quite received all the attention they deserve in the literature on orientalism: Christian art, and biblical scholarship.

The orientalization (eventually, Arabization) of the Bible was part of a general transformation of Christian notions that is commonly but rather imprecisely referred to as secularization. I would like to show how inherited Christian notions were developed into newer ideas about the Orient. These ideas were expressed in the ostensibly secular, pseudo-scientific vocabulary of “race.” But racial “thought” in the nineteenth century did not replace inherited Christian conceptions. Rather, it reinvigorated and gave support to them.

I argue that the relationship imagined to hold between the “Aryan” races of Europe and the “Semitic” races of Asia was the latest manifestation of a long, theological tradition of Christian supersessionism. Christian supersessionists believe that the Christian gospels announced the replacement of Judaism and the Old Testament as the vanguard of sacred history, with the place of Israel taken by the Christian Church. Racial supersessionists of the long nineteenth century believed that the peoples of the West had similarly taken over from the peoples of the Orient, a project that was referred to as progress and the civilizing mission. To many, however, progress in civilization was essentially related to progress in religion.

There were, to be sure, those who distanced themselves from Christian traditions, or even saw “progress” as a form of degeneration rather than advance. Yet even most of these agreed that a more primitive, Semitic or “Arabian” spirit infused the Old Testament, while Christianity was the product of a more modern race.
This reformulation of the religious tradition was part of a wider racialization of history, which legitimated the rule of the Aryan Christians, as the most advanced race, over those who were more backward. But beyond that, the specific contrast between Aryans and Semites had some more or less unintended side effects. These included racial anti-Semitism and calls for the Jewish people to resettle, or be resettled, in their oriental homeland outside of Europe and the West.

**Before the long nineteenth century**

Imagining the Bible in terms of contemporary information about the Orient became common only towards the end of the fourteenth century. Neighboring Asia was then becoming stranger than ever to western Christians. All of West Asia became a Muslim dominion with the Ottoman conquest of Christendom’s ancient capital, Constantinople, in 1453. Around this time many Christian artists in the West began to model biblical characters on what they knew of contemporary “Turks” (a rather generic term used more or less for all residents of the Ottoman Empire). The most striking, and most enduring, iconographic legacy from this period is the use of turbans on biblical personages.

This Israelites-in-turbans convention was still in evidence in the biblical canvases of Rembrandt. Most of his biblical paintings, such as *Saul and David* or *David and Uriah*, as well as some of his self-portraits as a biblical prophet, feature the turban. There is no evidence that such headwear was worn in ancient Israel, and Rembrandt’s portraits of Jewish Amsterdammers show that it was not worn by Jews there, either. Rather, Rembrandt, a collector of exotic artifacts, visualized Saul and David’s attire as what was worn, he imagined, by the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire.

In Rembrandt’s time, information about non-Jewish “orientals” also served scholars who studied the Bible, although here Arabs rather than “Turks” were the model, because of the kinship between the Arabic and Hebrew languages that was already well recognized. Biblical scholarship was probably the major motivator of a resurgence in Arabic studies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The first scholar to hold the new chair of Arabic at Oxford, Edward Pococke (1604–1691), was a Hebraist, who published commentaries on several books of the Bible.

In 1706, Rembrandt’s countryman Albert Schultens would advocate explicitly the use of Arabic in interpreting Scripture. To him, it was not only Arabic language but also what we would now call Arabic culture that provided a key to the world of the Old Testament. Arabic philosophy and popular proverbs illustrated, to Schultens, facets of biblical thought.

Eighteenth-century English scholars, also, believed that the Hebrew Scriptures embodied the spirit of a wider, oriental world. This attitude was in fact probably responsible for the introduction of the term “orientalism” into the English language. If Joseph Spence, who used it in his *Essay on Pope’s Odyssey*, published in 1726, is to be trusted, “orientalism” was his own “new word.” In Spence’s *Essay* one of his characters comments as follows on a Homeric passage that he says is his “particular favourite:”
now you repeat it in English, I seem to want something of the strong pleasure it used to afford me, where the Greek speaks “Of the sun being perished out of Heaven, and of darkness rushing over the Earth!” I cannot express the fullness of the words – But you know the original; and, I fear, will never see a translation equal to it. This whole prophetic vision … is the True Sublime; and in particular, gives us an higher Orientalism than we meet with in any other part of Homer’s writings. You will pardon me a new word, where we have no old one to my purpose: You know what I mean, that Eastern way of expressing Revolutions in Government, by a confusion or extinction of light in the Heavens.4

Clearly, the reference to the sky and government is only one specific example rather than an exhaustive definition; “orientalism” is not merely “a way of expressing Revolutions in Government,” but rather the “Eastern way of expressing” such Revolutions is one particular example of orientalism as a broader category. The implication is that there are other examples, and that it is the broader category of orientalism in general that is capable of expressing the “True Sublime.” (That Homer was subject to oriental influences was a common belief at the time.)

The English biblical scholar Robert Lowth (1710–1787) frequently drew on Arabic to elucidate elements of the biblical Hebrew text. This practice was in conformity not only with Schultens’ program, but also with the German school of biblical criticism that was beginning to come to prominence at the time. The influential German orientalist scholar Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791), whose comments on Lowth’s Sacred Poetry were included in its successive republications, was a major believer in using Arabic as a key to the Hebrew Bible. One of Lowth’s propositions that Michaelis espoused enthusiastically was that the Book of Job was the oldest of the Bible and that it “seems to have little connexion with the other writings of the Hebrews, and no relation whatever to the affairs of the Israelites.” Its characters are “Idumaeans, or at least Arabians of the adjacent country, all originally of the race of Abraham.” The book of Job was written “before Moses, and [is] probably contemporary with the patriarchs.” Michaelis added approvingly regarding the characters of Job that “As to the manners, they are what I called Abrahamic, or such as were at that period common to all the seed of Abraham at that time, Israelites, Ishmaelites, and Idumaeans.” In fact, “most of the peculiar customs of the Israelites, those I mean which distinguished them from other descendants of Abraham, were either derived from the Egyptians, or were taught them by Moses.” In other words, Michaelis believed that the Israelites had brought to Egypt nothing peculiar to themselves, as opposed to oriental peoples in general.

Traveling in search of the Bible

One logical, and probably intended, consequence of this denial of a distinctive Jewish cultural character of the Bible was to refuse to contemporary Jews the mantle of modern-day carriers of the biblical spirit. Instead, to find
a still-living biblical culture one needed to look for a people who shared that achievement but had *not* changed. And these, Michaelis believed, were the Arabs. In Michaelis’ mind,

One will hardly find a people that has kept its customs the same for so long as the Arabs; which is a result of their never having been brought under the yoke of other peoples. Everything we know about these customs coincides so exactly with the most ancient customs of the Israelites and thus gives the richest and most beautiful elucidations to the Bible. In contrast, the customs of the Jews themselves among the Persians, Greeks and Romans, and since their European Diaspora, have changed so much that one can no longer see in them the descendants of the people of whom the Bible speaks.6

Michaelis convinced the enlightened King of Denmark to send five men to “Arabia and other Countries of the East” in order to study the local population as well as the local flora and fauna, which, too, Michaelis thought would closely resemble the biblical environment.7 The expedition achieved great fame in Europe8 and became the mother of all expeditions to the East and of that branch of scholarly orientalism – Middle and Near Eastern ethnography and archeology – that relies on them.

The history of expeditions to the Orient in search of studying what might be called the “historical Bible” needs to be far more fully investigated and documented than scholars have done to date. Suffice it to say that such travel, even for short periods, became almost *de rigueur* for people claiming expertise on the Bible that was more than just strictly philological. Among the long list of nineteenth-century travelers who shared their insights into biblical culture, one might rather arbitrarily mention the French author and diplomat François-René de Chateaubriand (in the Orient in 1806);9 the author–politician Benjamin Disraeli (traveled 1830–1831);10 the orientalist and author of a major book on the historical Jesus, Ernest Renan (1860);11 and the dean in his day of all orientalists, Ignaz Goldziher (1873–1874).12 Although travelers often devoted special attention to the local Jews, their musings about resemblances between the contemporary Orient and the Bible were usually based on their encounters with Muslim and Christian Arabs.

True, the most celebrated biblical scholars never set foot in the Orient. The list includes Michaelis’ student Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1753–1827), conventionally considered the founder of the new biblical criticism, whose thesis was on Arab uses of money; Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) who, too, was an Arabist as well as a daring revisionist of biblical scholarship; and William Robertson Smith (1846–1894), a professor of Arabic who wrote in English on both the Bible and Arab customs. However, these armchair experts relied frequently on the reports of Orient travelers.

The same cachet of special knowledge that oriental voyaging gave to popular and scientific authors was acquired by the many artists who traveled to, or even lived in, the Orient. *Orientalisme* was a recognized genre of visual art in the long nineteenth century.13 A decisive influence on the manner in which the Orient was
depicted and orientalist art distributed was Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). This academic painter traveled to the Orient on a number of occasions. He married the daughter of Adolphe Goupil, one of the most important and innovative art merchants of the period. Goupil seized the potential of new reproductive technologies, and had the full cooperation of his son-in-law. In particular, the Goupil firm was instrumental in selling volumes of photographic reproductions of Gérôme’s art in the United States.¹⁴

As in biblical criticism, there was in biblical art a fertile cross-referencing among representations of the contemporary Orient and of biblical Israel. No doubt the scholarly Arabization of the Bible reinforced the artistic and vice versa. (It must be assumed that the scholars, no less than other educated people, spent their time surrounded by the orientalist art and bric-a-brac that was required in period homes to certify bourgeois status.) In the long nineteenth century, art and biblical criticism came even closer to one another in the way they orientalized the Bible. Earlier, artists tended to portray biblical Israelites as if they were “Turks.” Biblical scholars (who came on the scene later than the artists), as we have seen, took Arabs, instead, as their model. But – given the relative decline of the Ottoman government and greater western familiarity with, and imperial designs on, its Arab subjects – even in art the default sartorial representation of biblical Jews changed from “Turkish” to (Bedouin) “Arabic.” On the heads of male Israelites in Christian art, the turban did not entirely disappear, but was often replaced by the flowing kaffiyeh.

The prime example of this is the best-selling illustrated Bible of the nineteenth century, by Gustave Doré (1832–1883). His images of biblical personages are ethnographically relatively faithful renderings of contemporary Arab costume in Palestine and beyond. The implicit supersessionism here as elsewhere, however, does not permit depicting Jesus himself as an Arab.¹⁵ He always wears “classic” European garb. In fact, the rather amusing sequence of the Descent of the Spirit (Figure 10.1) followed by the Ascension (Figure 10.2) has Jesus’ disciples dressed as Bedouin in the first and as European monks in the second. Having received the Spirit, it seems that the apostles also managed to supersede their identity as orientals.

**Racial supersessionism**

To recapitulate, the relationship between this oriental spirit and that of the Christian West came in the nineteenth century to be associated to a large extent (though never exclusively) with the relationship between an alleged Semitic and an alleged Aryan race. The development of the race concept here and elsewhere is closely tied to the development in the West of various forms of evolutionary thought. Within human society, evolutionist schemes represented the civilization of the ascendant West, with its Christian heritage, as the pinnacle of lawful historical processes. A new concept of time took hold, dubbed “mundane time” by Johannes Fabian. The term refers to a revised concept of time not as an abstract entity independent of cultural content, but as a sequence of “ages and stages,” one following the other.¹⁶
The weightiest example is the evolutionary scheme propounded by Hegel. Hegel posited several stages of religious civilization, each the property of a distinctive population. He classified Judaism and Islam together as “religions of the sublime”: sublime in his view because they subordinated all reality to the concept of an external One God. This was not a complement. Hegel explained that in the Jewish religion consciousness of the self was no more than an element of being conscious of divine power, i.e.

my consciousness knows itself through and through as dependent, as unfree. The relationship [is that] of the servant to a Lord; the fear of the lord is what defines it. In any religion, *such as Judaism or Islam*, where God is comprehended only under the abstract category of the one, this human lack of freedom is the real basis, and humanity’s relationship to God takes the form of a heavy yoke, of onerous service. True liberation is to be found in Christianity, in the Trinity.

Elsewhere Hegel suggests that the proposition that there is only one God and “he is a jealous God who will have no other gods before him” is “the great thesis of the Jewish, of overall Arab religion of the western Orient and Africa.” Notice that Hegel speaks here of “Arab,” not “Islamic” religion. He may be conceptualizing “Jewish” as an instance of “Arab,” a usage that notably occurs, though some decades later, in Benjamin Disraeli’s fiction. At any rate, in Hegel’s conception of history as one tremendous dialectic, major stages chart the evolution from self-aliensating slavery to self-realizing citizenship, and the Jewish–Islamic stage occupies a stage lower than that of western Christianity.
Hegel’s writing on the progress of the Geist from “Arabic” Judaism and Islam to Christian and “Germanic” Protestantism is racist in the cultural but not yet the biological sense. However, he was writing at a time when cultural racism and biological racism were already allied in contemporary debates about slavery, which connected skin color to one’s cultural capacity to live free.\(^2\) His evolutionary scheme of civilizations is implicitly a part of an effort to find independent justification for Northern European imperialism, which was on the surge during his lifetime.

Looked at specifically in the context of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, Hegel’s scheme was also a sort of secularization of the classic Christian attitude to the difference between the two religions, and between the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New: supersessionism. A supersessionist attitude does not reject the earlier stage as worthless. On the contrary, it sees it as essential, and may even romanticize it as glorious.

**The Aryanization of Jesus**

Some western Christians took this racial supersessionism to yet another degree, rejecting not only Judaism but to some extent also classic Christianity itself as a defunct stage in intellectual development, superseded by a higher western sensibility.

The influential French orientalist and author Ernest Renan (1823–1892) is probably the person who popularized the term “Semite” as referring to a racial grouping rather than just a language family. In his *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, published in 1855,\(^2\) the racialization of civilizational stages and their supersessionist interpretation is clear.

At times Renan seemed unsparing in his compliments. “It is the Semitic race,” he would write, “which has the glory of having made the religion of humanity. Far beyond the confines of history, resting under his tent free from the taint of a corrupted world, the Bedouin patriarch prepared the faith of mankind.”\(^2\) Yet the *Histoire* abounds with apparent insults such as “The Semitic people lack curiosity almost completely” (10), “In general, the perception of nuances is deeply absent among the Semitic peoples” (11), “polygamy, consequence of an original nomadic way of life, has blocked among the Semites the development of all that we call society, and has formed a race that is exclusively virile, without flexibility or finesse” (11), “The military inferiority of the Semites is due to this total lack of ability for discipline or subordination” (14), or “Morality has always been understood by this race in a manner very different from ours” (15). Obviously, the admirable qualities of the Semites do not compare with “ours.”

Shlomo Sand suggests that the young Renan who wrote the *Histoire générale et système comparé* with its negative judgments of the Semites had a change of heart later, which would account for his apparently contradictory, positive assessment.\(^2\) But Renan never renounced the opinions made in this early tome. Rather than considering admiration and condemnation as a contradiction here, it is more useful – as it is in the case of orientalism in general – to think of consistent
supersessionism. One can admire the contribution of a relatively primitive race to a civilization that would then be developed by a more advanced race. But from the vantage point of the more advanced the achievement of the less advanced, though valuable and praiseworthy, ultimately fails to arrive at the goals to which history has tended.

Renan was no more a biological racist than was Hegel: both posited a cultural/civilizational latter of how the human spirit developed, and not necessarily a physiological one. But that said, Renan’s Aryan racism goes well beyond Hegel’s. Monotheism is Renan’s *bête noire*. He is able to write, for example, that “The intolerance of the Semitic peoples is a necessary consequence of their monotheism” (7). The attempt is openly to devalue the Semitic monotheism that underlies Christianity, and to identify instead with the Indo-European mind, which is based in a polytheist tradition but which, Renan thinks, is better suited than Judaism to evolve a rational religion.

Research that is reflexive, independent, rigorous, courageous, philosophical – in a word, the search for truth – seems to have been the heritage of that Indo-European race that has, from deep India to the northern extremities of the West and of the North, from the remotest centuries to modern times, sought to explain God, man and the world by a rational system, and left behind, like rungs to different levels (*echelonnées aux divers degrés*) of its history, philosophical creations that have always and everywhere been submitted to the laws of logical development. But to the Semitic race belong those firm and certain intuitions that have been first to free the divinity of its veils and, without reflection or reasoning, attained the most purified religious form that antiquity has known.

Later, in his famous *Life of Jesus* published in 1860, Renan made an effort to rescue Christianity from its Hebraic roots and to show whatever is left as the product of the non-Semitic, Aryan genius. Renan did travel to the Holy Land. He used his field work as the basis for describing Jesus as completely human, but also a human who rises radically above his oriental environment. Renan insisted that Jesus, a native resident of the ethnically mixed Galilee, was hardly a Semite. Here, arguably, Jesus supersedes Christianity, which supersedes Judaism but remains marked by Semitism. More radical developments of this theme later included the hugely popular *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899) by Houston Chamberlain.

The Aryanization of Jesus played an important role in establishing, during the long nineteenth century, the extra-European character of the imagined Semitic “race.” As such, it was one of the cornerstones of the argument, by both friends and enemies of the Jews, for resettling them outside the Christian continent, preferably in their ancient oriental homeland. And, of course, it was a cornerstone on which the appalling history of anti-Semitism was built. But the Aryanization of Jesus was itself a consequence of an earlier Arabization of the Bible, whose contours I have sketched out in this essay.
Notes


3. This is known from an inventory of his possessions taken at the time of his death: “Inventaris van de schilderijen mitsgaders meubilen en de huijsraet bevonden in den boedel van Rembrandt van Rijn,” Amsterdam Municipal Archives, Register of Inventories B, DBK 364, fos. 29r–38v. Reproduced, with a translation, by Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, The Rembrandt Documents (New York: Abaris, 1979), item 1656/12.


8. See the papers in Josef Wiesehöfer and Stephan Conermann (eds.), Carsten Niebuhr, 1733–1815, und seine Zeit (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2002).


13. See, for example, Nicholas Tromans and Rana Kabbani (eds.), The Lure of the East: British orientalist painting (London: Tate, 2008); Kristian Davies, The Orientalists: Western artists in Arabia, the Sahara, Persia and India (New York: Laynfaroh, 2005); Christine Peltre, Orientalisme (Paris: Terrain, 2004).


15. Kalmar, “Jesus did Not Wear a Turban.”


19. That, in any case, is the most literal translation; the German reads großer Satz der jüdischen, überhaupt arabischen Religion des westlichen Morgenlandes und Afrikas.
Peter C. Hodgson translates it as “the great thesis of Jewish and of Arab religion generally” (Philosophy of Religion, p. 129).


25 Ernest Renan, The Life of Jesus, p. 83.


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