In presenting itself as the final revelation of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, the Quran recounts the stories of prophets from Adam to Muhammad, encapsulating much of the sacred history that precedes it.\(^1\) According to the Quran, prophets have been sent at different times to all human collectivities with revelations in different tongues, but their message was one: \textit{lā ilāha illa’Llāh}—there is no god but God. From this perspective, the history of humanity is a history of forgetting and being reminded again and again of this eternal truth. Hence the trials, triumphs, defeats, and rebellions confronted by the prophets of old are not told with a view to historicity in the modern sense. Rather, the history related in the Quran tells the story of the epic struggle between truth and falsehood or good and evil that takes place among peoples and within each individual’s soul. From a Quranic perspective, the principles that govern the cosmos also determine the reality of the human microcosm,\(^2\) and just as the Will of God has shaped the destiny of humanity, so too does it shape the life of every individual human being.

Presenting itself as the culmination of all revelation, the Quran expands upon the theme of religious continuity more extensively than previous revelations. The unity of revelation as such is implicit throughout the Quran, but many verses make it explicit. In one, Jesus tells his disciples, \textit{[I come] confirming that which was before me, the Torah, and to make lawful unto you part of that which was forbidden unto you} (3:50). In this vein, the Quran presents itself as \textit{a Book sent down after Moses, confirming what came before it, guiding to the truth and to a straight road} (46:30). From a Quranic perspective, every prophet has confirmed what the previous prophets brought, which is first and foremost an essential message of Divine Unity (\textit{tawḥīd}); thus the Prophet is told, \textit{And We sent no messenger before thee, save that We revealed unto him, “Verily, there is no god but I; so worship Me!”} (21:25). Other prophets are also presented as saying to their communities, \textit{O my people! Worship God! You have no god other than Him} (7:59, 65, 73, 85). Since every prophet is believed to have been sent with this same essential message, the Quran commands Muslims to believe in all of them:

\textit{Say, “We believe in God, and in that which was sent down unto us, and in that which was sent down unto Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses and Jesus were given, and}
in what the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit.” (2:136; cf. 3:84)

Each phase of the Abrahamic tradition, and implicit other religious traditions, can thus be seen as the continuation of a single stream of revelation beginning with Adam and ending with the Prophet Muhammad. The forms of the message change, since God has sent no messenger, save in the language of his people, that he might make clear unto them (14:4). But the content remains the same, for the Word of thy Lord is fulfilled in truth and justice. None alters His Words (6:115; cf. 6:34, 10:64, 18:27). Accordingly, the Quran declares of itself:

Truly it is a revelation of the Lord of the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit upon thine heart—that thou mayest be among the warners—in a clear, Arabic tongue. It is indeed in the scriptures (zubur) of those of old. (26:192–96)

Another passage reads, Truly this (message) is in the scriptures of old, the scriptures of Abraham and Moses (87:18–19).

Confirming the underlying unity to which such verses allude, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “The prophets are half brothers; their mothers differ, and their religion (dīn) is one.” Thus, like David, Jesus, and other prophets before them, the Prophet Muhammad was not sent to destroy previous religions, but to reaffirm their essential content. From this perspective, each revelation is a formal manifestation of an eternal formless truth. The variegated religious forms do not contravene the validity and efficacy of one another, but are part of a test that human beings confront in this world, a test emphasized in 5:48:

For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ. (emphasis added)

From a Quranic perspective, there are thus different ways of revering and worshipping God for different human communities. God has not revealed one law, but many laws, and to each law corresponds a particular path that is based upon the performance of rites particular to that form of worship:
For every community We have appointed a rite they are to perform; so let them not argue with thee over the matter. And call to thy Lord. Truly thou art following a straight guidance. And if they dispute with thee, say, “God knows best what you do. God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection concerning that wherein you used to differ.” (22:67–69)

Other verses reiterate that the Quran confirms previous revelations and even religions (e.g., 2:97; 3:3; 10:37; 35:31; 46:30). The notion that previous scriptures have been abrogated in the sense of being nullified or excessively distorted to such an extent that their message no longer reflects the particularity of the original teachings, as some Muslims maintain, would seem to be contradicted by verses such as 5:43: And how is it that they come to thee for judgment, when they have the Torah, wherein is God’s Judgment? and 5:68: Say, “O People of the Book! You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord.” In this same vein, 5:47 says of Christians: Let the people of the Gospel judge by that which God has sent down therein. It would be contradictory for the Quran to speak of the efficacy of judging by the Torah and the Gospel if it were to also maintain that these scriptures have been abrogated or excessively distorted. It would also make little sense to say that the religions in which these scriptures are applicable are defunct, or were defunct at the time the Quran was revealed, for it is the methodologies developed within the religions that would provide their followers with the ability to judge in accord with them. If previous religions were abrogated by the revelation of the Quran, it would be implausible to tell the Prophet Muhammad to seek their counsel when it says, Ask the people of the Reminder, if you know not (16:43; cf. 21:7).7

Modes of prayer derived from their scriptures would also be of little benefit and would have little or no soteriological efficacy, a position that would stand in direct contrast to 48:29, which likens the prayers of Jews and Christians to those of Muslims:

Muhammad is the Messenger of God. Those who are with him are harsh against the disbelievers, merciful to one another. You see them bowing, prostrating, seeking bounty from God and contentment; their mark upon their faces is from the effect of prostration. That is their likeness in the Torah. And their likeness in the Gospel is a sapling that puts forth its shoot and strengthens it, such that it grows stout and rises firmly upon its stalk, impressing the sowers, that through them He may enrage the disbelievers. God has
promised forgiveness and a great reward to those among them who believe and perform righteous deeds.

**Religious Form**

According to the Quran, every religion entails prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, among other obligations, though the specific forms differ. The Quranic understanding of such differences in creed and practice is stated in 49:13:

> O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. Surely the most noble of you before God are the most reverent of you.

That the *most noble* are the *most reverent* emphasizes the preeminent importance of reverence or *taqwā*, an all-encompassing awareness of the Divine Reality, rather than the simple fact of following a particular creed or forms of practice.

This does not mean that people are free to invent new creeds, laws, and ways. Rather, it indicates that God has revealed many ways and many religions for humanity. The fact that other people have been given different creeds and rites for remembering and worshipping God thus provides a means by which one can look beyond outward differences and value people for what the Quran considers to be most important—the degree of their reverence and piety toward God. In this vein the Quran chastises those who equate outward deeds with faith itself: *Do you consider giving drink to the pilgrims and maintaining the Sacred Mosque to be like those who believe in God and the Last Day and strive in God’s way?* (9:19). Such hypocrisy implies a grave lack of discernment and is a mark of failing the test to which allusion is made in 5:48.

Like the Bible, many verses of the Quran condemn those who fail to adhere to the teachings of previous prophets. But these concern those who falsify religion by submitting it to human desires, not those who follow religion by submitting their desires to God. Therefore, those who continue to submit to the ways ordained by former prophets are praised:

> Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabaeans—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. (2:62; cf. 5:69)
The broad applicability of this verse is confirmed by Muḥammad ibn Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), the dean of Quranic commentators, who writes: “As regards the bestowal of reward for virtuous action with faith, God has not singled out some of His creatures as opposed to others.” He then relates the view of others that “those who believe among this community [i.e., Muslims], and those who are Christians, Jews, and Sabeans—those among the Jews, Christians, and Sabeans who believe in God and the Last Day—they shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.” The Quran thus says of those who follow the previous revelations:

*Among the People of the Book is an upright community who recite God’s signs in the watches of the night, while they prostrate. They believe in God and the Last Day, enjoin right and forbid wrong, and hasten unto good deeds. And they are among the righteous. Whateoever good they do, they will not be denied it.* (3:113–15)

**The Covenant**

As in the Bible, the Quranic view of human history is one of people being called time and again to observe a covenant with God. The Quran honors the covenant made by God with previous religious communities, though each is seen as but one manifestation of a pre-eternal covenant that God made with all of humanity when they were still in Adam’s loins: And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, “Am I not your Lord?” they said, “Yea, we bear witness” (7:172). Though reminiscent of God’s Promise to the Israelites in Exodus, this verse refers to existence before creation, when the spirits of all human beings are said to have been assembled before God. *Am I not your Lord?* is a rhetorical question whereby God affirms His principal Reality as the Lord of all that is on earth and in Heaven. And the human response is the everlasting affirmation of this covenant. Every covenant made while human beings are on earth is thus a recognition, renewal, and continuation of this pretemporal covenant. From this perspective, the history of religion is a multifaceted series of temporal reassertions of a single pretemporal covenant.

The next verses reveal that God has reminded human beings of this pretemporal covenant through the various prophets, so that no human beings can claim that they are not responsible for observing it:

*Lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, “Truly of this we*
were heedless,” or lest you should say, “[It is] only that our fathers ascribed partners unto God aforetime, and we were their progeny after them. Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the falsifiers have done?” (7:172–73)

Seen in this light, all of humanity bears the imprint of the pretemporal covenant within. The functions of revelation and prophecy are to reawaken the awareness of this imprint and remind all people that they must observe the covenant with God. Hence every human collectivity has been sent a reminder: We indeed sent a messenger unto every community (16:36). This is reinforced by 10:47: For every community there is a messenger, and when their messenger comes, judgment shall be rendered between them with justice, and they will not be wronged. The Quran mentions a handful of these messengers by name, yet also alludes to the existence of others:

Verily We have revealed unto thee, as We revealed unto Noah and the prophets after him, and as We revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and unto David We gave the Psalms, and messengers We have recounted unto thee before, and messengers We have not recounted unto thee; and unto Moses God spoke directly, messengers as bearers of glad tidings and as warners, that mankind might have no argument against God after the messengers. And God is Mighty, Wise. (4:163–65)

According to Islamic tradition, the messengers not recounted in the Quran are far more numerous than those recounted; the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have stated that there have been 315 messengers in human history and 124,000 prophets.14

Presented as a continuation of the Abrahamic line of prophecy, the Quran confirms explicitly the covenant that God made with previous communities through the revelations to His messengers. But whereas the New Testament claims to establish a new covenant that supplants the covenant between God and the Israelites,15 the Quran seeks to reaffirm the essential substance that is at the heart of every covenant. As the Prophet Muhammad is considered to be the Seal of the Prophets (khātam al-nabiyyīn; 33:40), it is believed that he completed the prophetic cycle, but brought nothing concerning tawḥīd that was not brought by the preceding prophets in one form or another. As a verse addressed to the Prophet Muhammad proclaims, Naught has been said unto thee save that which has been said unto the messengers before thee (41:43; see also 26:192–96; 87:18–19, cited
This line of prophecy does not begin with Abraham as in the Bible; rather, according to the Quran it is said to begin with Adam, the first of all prophets and the first with whom God made a covenant: And We indeed made a pact with Adam aforetime, but he forgot. And We found no resoluteness in him (20:115). Hence the cyclical drama of receiving, forgetting, breaking, and renewing the covenant, which is a central theme of the Bible, begins in the Quran with the first human being. The whole of the human drama is in fact encapsulated in the life of Adam himself.

The Quran thus gives a different account of Adam’s fall than does the Bible. Here Adam is not tempted through Eve; rather, Adam and Eve are both tempted by Satan, and both are responsible for the fall from the paradisal Garden (7:19–22). Because of their transgression, the progeny of Adam and Eve are banished to the earth: Then Satan made them stumble therefrom, and expelled them from that wherein they were, and We said, “Get you [all] down, each of you an enemy to the other. On the earth a dwelling place and enjoyment shall be yours, for a time” (2:36; cf. 7:24). This descent, each an enemy to the other, represents the consequence of forgetting and breaking the covenant. But unlike in the Biblical account, in the Quran Adam and Eve repent for their sin: They said, “Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If Thou dost not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we shall surely be among the losers” (7:23). Then God relents and renews the covenant by offering words of revelation:

Then Adam received words from his Lord, and He relented unto him. Indeed, He is the Relenting, the Merciful. We said, “Get down from it, all of you. If Guidance should come to you from Me, then whosoever follows My Guidance, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.” (2:37–38)

These words received by Adam mark the beginning of the cycle of revelation, for before falling from grace Adam and Eve were in no need of words to remind them of the pretemporal covenant. But having forgotten, human beings are in need of periodic revelations to remind them of their true nature and help them return to it.

The Primordial Norm

Seen in this light, the underlying substance of the human condition is the Adamic nature before the fall, a nature by virtue of which one is ever aware of the pretemporal covenant with God. In the Quran this nature is referred to as the fiṭrah,
the primordial norm. It is to bring human beings back to this primordial norm, this inherent equilibrium, that all religions are fashioned. But over time, human beings lose sight of this reality and read their prejudices and predilections into religion. Religions then come to be regarded as absolute in and of themselves rather than as paths to the Absolute. In reference to such devolution the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “Every child is born according to the fitrah. Then the parents make the child a Christian, a Jew, or a Zoroastrian.”

This does not mean that all previous religions are deviant in principle. Rather, it implies that insofar as religions that have decayed or been corrupted by human beings are concerned, they no longer serve to bring about the basic equilibrium through submission that all prophets have practiced and taught. According to Muslim belief, all people continue to be born into the fitrah and, when not corrupted, each faith provides the means by which one can live in accord with this fundamental human disposition and thus renew and maintain the pretemporal, primordial covenant.

Accordingly, the Quran enjoins:

Set thy face to religion as a ḥanīf, in the primordial nature from God upon which He originated mankind—there is no altering the creation of God; that is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not—turning unto Him. And reverence Him and perform the prayer; and be not among the idolaters. (30:30–31)

Here the word ḥanīf refers to a pure believer who is fully devoted to God in His Oneness and is thus unswayed by the false constructions of belief of those around him. To be a ḥanīf is thus to be a pure monotheist, to have pure unswerving faith and hence to live in conformity with the primordial norm according to which all human beings have been created. One cannot change this underlying nature, because there is no altering the creation of God. To accept this truth and live in accord with one’s fundamental primordial nature is thus considered to be the foundation and substance of true worship.

Reminding human beings that blind adherence to a particular religious form is not the ultimate goal of religious practice, the Quran says, The most noble of you before God are the most reverent of you (49:13). Such nobility, reverence, piety, and devotion are expressed in the quality of submission attributed to the prophet Abraham: And who is better in religion than one who submits his face to God, and is virtueus, and follows the creed of Abraham, as a ḥanīf? (4:125). The Quran thus enjoins, Set thy face toward the religion as a ḥanīf, and be thou not among the idolaters (10:105; cf. 22:31, 30:30), and chastises all who fail to adhere to the way of Abraham: And who shuns the creed of Abraham, but a foolish soul? We chose him in the world and in the Hereafter he shall be among the
Abraham was not chosen because he followed a particular creed and practice, but because he submitted himself entirely to God: *When his Lord said to him, “Submit!” he said, “I submit to the Lord of the worlds”* (2:131). In this way, the fundamental reality of submission cannot be confined to any single form; rather, universal, nonsectarian submission is the sine qua non for observing God’s covenant and preexists the religion that takes the name “submission”—islām. For both Muslims and non-Muslims today, islām is taken as a reference to the reified religion of those who follow Muhammad. But its original Quranic usage refers to the submission of all human beings to God and the attitude of submission that is believed to be inherent in true faith. This universal, presectarian submission is presented throughout the Quran as the quintessence of all religions. In many different verses, the prophets Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael, and Joseph all refer to themselves or are referred to as submitters (*muslims*) or pray to God to make them true submitters.\(^{22}\)

Each prophet observes the universal submission to which the story of Abraham alludes, but he simultaneously brings a specific form of submission with particular laws and rites. Though relative in and of themselves, the forms contain and convey something of the Absolute. Thus, as a reassertion of the pretemporal covenant, each form partakes of the same substance, but as a form it excludes others, for it is the nature of form to exclude other forms. Although most religious authorities deny other religious forms in order to safeguard the sanctity of one form, the Quran opposes the tendency to make one single form of submission—one way of observing the covenant—absolute in and of itself. In this way it safeguards both the Immutable Absolute, which each religion seeks to convey, and the Transcendent Infinite, to which the multiplicity of revelation bears witness. Therefore, the Quran criticizes those who claim Abraham and other prophets for themselves exclusively:

> Or say you that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes were Jews or Christians? Say, “Do you know better, or does God?” And who does greater wrong than one who conceals a testimony he has from God? God is not heedless of what you do. (2:140)

Rather than being described as a Jew or Christian, Abraham is again portrayed as a ḥanīf:

> O People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham, as neither the Torah nor the Gospel was sent down until after him? Do you not understand? Behold! You are the very same who dispute concerning that of which you have knowledge; so why do you dispute
concerning that of which you have no knowledge? God knows, and you know not. Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian, but rather was a ḥanīf, a submitter (muslim), and he was not one of the idolaters. (3:65–67, emphasis added)

At first blush, such verses may appear to reject Judaism and Christianity in favor of Islam, but these and many similar verses can also be read as an affirmation of all forms of submission—that is, of all revealed religions. The Quran never declares that the covenant as observed by previous religious communities has been abrogated or rendered obsolete. Rather, it reaffirms the covenant of those who came before, enjoins all people to follow the way that precedes sectarian associations—the way of Abraham: Say, “God has spoken true. So follow the creed of Abraham, a ḥanīf, and he was not of the idolaters” (3:95)—and warns believers not to differentiate between God’s prophets: He has prescribed for you as religion that which He enjoined upon Noah, and that which We revealed unto thee, and that which We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, that you uphold religion and not become divided therein (42:13).

The Jewish Covenant in the Quran

From a Quranic perspective, nothing could be greater than the fundamental difference between those who observe the covenant with God and those who break it. This essential demarcation is outlined in the following passage:

Is one who knows that what has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord is the truth like one who is blind? Only those who possess intellect reflect, who fulfill the pact with God and break not the covenant, who join what God has commanded be joined, fear their Lord, and dread an evil reckoning, and who are patient, seeking the Face of their Lord, perform the prayer, and spend from that which We have provided them, secretly and openly, and repel evil with good. For them there shall be the reward of the Abode—Gardens of Eden that they shall enter along with those who were righteous from among their fathers, their spouses, and their progeny; and angels shall enter upon them from every gate. “Peace be upon you because you were patient.” How excellent is the Ultimate Abode! And for those who break God’s pact after accepting His covenant, and sever what God has commanded be joined, and work corruption upon the earth, it is they who shall have the curse, and theirs shall be the evil
According to this passage all religious communities are to be judged by the extent to which they have been able to persist in observing the covenant with God. Many instances of the word “covenant” in the Quran thus refer to the specific covenant made with the Children of Israel:

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\text{And We raised the Mount over them,}^{\text{24}} \text{ at [the making of] their covenant, and We said to them, “Enter the gate, prostrating,” and We said to them, “Do not transgress the Sabbath.” And We made with them a solemn covenant. (4:154)}
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God had made a covenant with the Children of Israel, and We raised among them twelve chieftains. And God said, “I am with you!” Surely, if you perform the prayer, and give the alms and believe in My messengers and support them, and lend unto God a goodly loan, I shall surely absolve you of your evil deeds, and shall cause you to enter Gardens watered by flowing streams. But whosoever among you disbelieves thereafter, surely he has strayed from the right way. (5:12)

Like many passages of the Bible, verses such as these call for a return to the covenant that God has made with His “chosen people” and promise that if they keep the covenant, God will keep the covenant: O Children of Israel! Remember My Blessing which I bestowed upon you, and fulfill My covenant, and I shall fulfill your covenant (2:40). Yet such verses also serve as a warning of what will befall those who do not observe the covenant, for there has been no community but that a warner has passed among them (35:24). Approximately one-third of the Quran is in fact a retelling of the challenges faced by previous prophets when they tried to deliver God’s message. Moses’ epic struggle with Pharaoh and with his own people is the most featured narrative, appearing in at least ten passages and alluded to in many others.

The basic outline of Moses’ life in the Quran is the same as that of the Bible, with minor variations that reflect other aspects of his prophetic mission. As in the Bible, this mission begins at the age of forty, when he encounters the burning bush and he and his brother, Aaron, are ordered:

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\text{“Go, both of you, unto Pharaoh! Truly he has rebelled! Yet speak unto him gently, that haply he may remember or have fear.” They said, “Our Lord! Truly we fear that he will deal hastily with us, or}
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that he will transgress.” He said, “Fear not! Truly I am with ye twain; I hear and I see. So come unto him and say, ‘Truly we are two messengers of your Lord. So send forth with us the Children of Israel and punish them not.’” (20:43–47)

This initial warning is followed by many afflictions until Pharaoh releases the Israelites, who are acknowledged as the “chosen people” whom God has favored over others (2:47, 122; 45:16). On their journey to the promised land, Moses is called to Mt. Sinai, where he stays for forty days; he returns to find that the people have taken to worshipping the golden calf, thus forsaking all that had been ordained and breaking the covenant with God. Unlike in the Biblical account, however, in the Quran Aaron is not blamed for this transgression. Instead, it is a man referred to as “the Samaritan” (al-Sāmirī) who tells the people, This is your god and the god of Moses, though he has forgotten (20:88). Moses becomes infuriated and casts down the tablets given to him by God (7:150); he then returns to the mountain and receives a new set of tablets.

Upon reaching the promised land, the Israelites again disobey Moses because they fear its inhabitants:

“Our my people! Enter the Holy Land, which God has prescribed for you, and do not turn back, or you shall become losers.” They said, “O Moses! In this land are a domineering people. We shall not enter it till they leave it. But if they leave it, we shall enter.” Two men whom God had blessed among those who feared [Him] said, “Enter in upon them by the gate, for once you have entered it, you will be victors. And trust in God, if you are believers.” They said, “O Moses! We shall never enter it, so long as they remain therein. So go forth, thou and thy Lord, and fight! We shall sit here.” (5:21–24)

For their intransigence the Israelites are banished from entering the promised land for forty years: Then verily it shall be forbidden them for forty years, while they shall wander on the earth. So grieve not for the iniquitous people (5:26).

Unlike in the Bible, the fate of Moses after this event is never made known in the Quran. The Israelites are, however, referred to in several verses that illustrate God’s continuing efforts to guide them. Such Quranic accounts reflect the Biblical lament: “They have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant” (Isaiah 24:5), but also that

He is mindful of His covenant forever, of the word that He commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that He made
with Abraham, and His sworn Promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant. (Psalm 105:8–10)

The Christian Covenant in the Quran

The Quranic passages cited above reflect those passages from the Bible that speak of the covenant that has been made with previous prophets. Other passages add Jesus and Muhammad to the list of those with whom God has made a covenant: And [remember] when We made with the prophets their covenant, and with thee, and with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary; We made with them a solemn covenant (33:7). This confirms, as do the Letters of the New Testament, that the new covenant sealed through Jesus’ pact with God is a continuation and universalization of the covenant that had previously been sealed through the pact with Moses and the Children of Israel.

Jesus is referred to in the Quran as a messenger of God and as God’s Word (3:45; 4:171), who is aided by the Holy Spirit (2:87, 253; 5:110). Although he is regarded as the Messiah (al-Masīḥ), he is not referred to as the “Son of God” or as “God incarnate.” Belief in the incarnation of God in Jesus is in fact repudiated in two Quranic verses: They indeed have disbelieved who say, “God is the Messiah, son of Mary” (5:17, 72). The Quran emphasizes that Jesus was not God, but a servant and messenger of God: The Messiah would never disdain to be a servant of God (4:172); The Messiah, son of Mary, was naught but a messenger—messengers have passed away before him. And his mother was truthful. Both of them ate food (5:75).

Despite this emphasis upon his human nature, Jesus is recognized as holding an exalted position in relation to other prophets: Those are the messengers. We have favored some above others. Among them are those to whom God spoke, and some He raised up in ranks. And We gave Jesus son of Mary clear proofs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit (2:253). The best example of Jesus’ particular distinction among the prophets is the miracle of the virgin birth, to which the Quran attests:

And remember Mary in the Book, when she withdrew from her family to an eastern place. And she veiled herself from them. Then We sent unto her Our Spirit, and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man. She said, “I seek refuge from thee in the Compassionate, if you are reverent!” He said, “I am but a messenger of thy Lord, to bestow upon thee a pure boy.” She said, “How shall I have a boy when no
man has touched me; nor have I been unchaste?’” He said, “Thus shall it be. Thy Lord says, ‘It is easy for Me.’” And [it is thus] that We might make him a sign unto mankind, and a mercy from Us. And it is a matter decreed.’” (19:16–21; see also 3:45–47)²⁹

The Prophet Muhammad is said to have confirmed that of all human beings, only Jesus and the Virgin Mary were born without the stain of sin: “There is none born among the offspring of Adam, but that Satan touches it. A child, therefore, cries loudly at the time of its birth because of the touch of Satan, except for Mary and her child.”³⁰

Not only was the birth of Jesus a miracle, but other passages bear witness to a creative life-giving power possessed by Jesus that was not granted to any other prophet:

Truly I have brought you a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay the shape of a bird. Then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird by God’s leave. And I will heal the blind and the leper and give life to the dead by God’s leave. And I will inform you about what you eat and what you store up in your houses. Truly in that is a sign for you, if you are believers. (3:49; see also 5:110)

Despite these affirmations of Jesus’ Divinely given powers, the concept of the Trinity is criticized in the Quran: And say not “Three.” Refrain! It is better for you. God is only one God; Glory be to Him (4:171). Another verse is more severe, condemning those who claim that God is one of three: They certainly disbelieve, those who say, “Truly God is the third of three,” while there is no god save one God. If they refrain not from what they say, a painful punishment will befall those among them who disbelieved (5:73). This, however, is not a direct condemnation of Christian theology, for trinitarian theology does not make God one of three, but rather speaks of the triune God, Who is both one and three in a manner that transcends human understanding.³¹ Viewed in this light, 5:73 does not oppose the various forms of orthodox trinitarian doctrines that have prevailed for most of Christian history. Rather, it appears to oppose crude misunderstandings of it that would lead one to believe that there are three gods instead of one. That the Quranic discussion of the Trinity is addressed to misunderstandings of Christian doctrine is made clear in 5:116–17:

And when God said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, ‘Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?’” he said, “Glory be to Thee! It is not for me to utter that to which I have
no right. Had I said it, Thou wouldst surely have known it. Thou knowest that which is in my self and I know not that which is in Thy Self. Truly it is Thou Who knowest best the things unseen. I said naught to them save that which Thou commanded me: ‘Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.’”

Although there are many correspondences between the stories of Jesus in the Quran and the Gospels, most of the divergences can be understood and even resolved by contextualizing them within the different theological environments in which they arise. It is, however, almost impossible to reconcile the greatest divergence, that between the different accounts of Jesus’ death. Christians maintain that Jesus took on the sins of all humanity and was crucified for their salvation, but the Quran states:

And for their saying, “We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God”—though they did not slay him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared so unto them. Those who differ concerning him are in doubt thereof. They have no knowledge of it, but follow only conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But God raised him up unto Himself, and God is Mighty, Wise. (4:157–58, emphasis added)

Most Muslim scholars throughout the centuries up to this day have viewed these verses as a straightforward denial of the crucifixion. They maintain that Jesus was assumed directly into Heaven and that another was crucified in his place. In the exegetical tradition, it is usually suggested that the one who betrayed Jesus was made to appear like him and then made to suffer on the cross. Other exegetes maintain that Jesus was nailed to the cross, but that he only lost consciousness and was then taken down and placed in the tomb. There is, however, no direct support for any of these interpretations in the Quran itself or in the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. One of the most prominent Muslim exegetes, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), even states that all of these interpretations “are mutually contradictory and incompatible.” The crucifixion is thus one aspect of Jesus’ mission regarding which Muslims and Christians may not be able to find common ground. Nonetheless, both agree that God raised him up unto Himself (4:158), and that those who follow Jesus are favored by God over those who do not, as God said, O Jesus, I shall take thee and raise thee unto Me, and purify thee of those who disbelieved, and place those who followed thee above those who disbelieved, until the Day of Resurrection (3:55).

The fundamental difference between the Islamic and Christian understandings of
Jesus is that Islam follows the Quran in always seeking to reaffirm the transcendence of the Divine by focusing upon Jesus’ humanity, whereas traditional Christian theology presupposes his divinity, while confirming his humanity. This derives from the different nature of each religious tradition. Islam focuses upon the Absolute, Who is one in and of Himself, beyond all else, while Christianity emphasizes the manifestation of the Absolute in Jesus.

These different emphases are reflected in the different religious, historical, and sociological circumstances under which Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad appeared. Jesus came to a mostly Jewish community that was already well versed in the teachings of Abrahamic monotheism and alert to the dangers of idolatry. The Prophet Muhammad arose within a community still under the influence of polytheism and idol worship. The community to which Jesus preached was accused of forgetting the true meaning and purpose of scripture and focusing upon the minutiae of the law instead of the spirit. The community to which the Prophet Muhammad preached was accused of forgetting completely that there was even such a thing as revelation.

Each message thus emphasized different aspects of the Divine Word, while implicitly comprising the whole. The message of the New Testament focuses upon the Presence of the Divine in the person of Jesus. The message that the Prophet Muhammad delivered focuses upon the perennial truth of the Divine Word in the Quran and in all previous revelations. It thus relegates all prophets to a secondary function in relation to the Divine Word Itself through which all scriptures are revealed.

The idea that each revelation is determined by God for the human group destined to receive it is mentioned in 14:4: *We have sent no messenger, save in the language of his people, that he might make clear unto them.* From this perspective, each revelation necessarily contains in principle the whole of God’s Wisdom, for it is the Divine Word as such. But each revelation also emphasizes different aspects of that Word in accordance with the needs of the human collectivity to which it is sent. Jesus is thus seen as the Word of God Itself (4:171), though he is still a messenger.

Unlike the Gospels and the Letters, the Quran does not declare that the covenant through Jesus supplants the covenant with Abraham or the one with the Children of Israel. The Quran does, however, apply to Christians the Biblical and New Testament condemnations of those who break God’s covenant: *And with those who say, “We are Christians,”* *We made a covenant. Then they forgot a part of that whereof they were reminded* (5:14). In this way, the Quran presents itself as part of the unbroken chain of Abrahamic scriptures in which God renews the covenant, only to have it broken by human beings and forgotten time and again. Then, through mercy and love, He relents unto humanity, providing another reminder of the eternal covenant and a new means for observing it. The Quranic covenant is thus a
continuation of sacred history presented as both a reaffirmation of the one pretemporal covenant and an extension of the covenant(s) that God made through the Torah and the Gospels. As the Quran states:

\[
\text{Truly God has purchased from the believers their souls and their}
\]
\[
\text{wealth in exchange for the Garden being theirs. They fight in the}
\]
\[
\text{way of God, slaying and being slain. [It is] a promise binding upon}
\]
\[
\text{Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran. And who is truer to}
\]
\[
\text{His pact than God? So rejoice in the bargain which you have made.}
\]
\[
\text{That indeed is the great triumph. (9:111)}
\]

The Quran does not reaffirm the covenant because previous religions are deemed invalid, but because those who followed them have forgotten part of their religion:

\[
\text{Then for their breaking of their covenant, We cursed them and}
\]
\[
\text{hardened their hearts. They distort the meaning of the word, and}
\]
\[
\text{have forgotten a part of that whereof they were reminded. Thou wilt}
\]
\[
\text{not cease to discover their treachery, from all save a few of them. So}
\]
\[
\text{pardon them, and forbear. Truly God loves the virtuous. (5:13)}
\]

The Quranic account does not provide the details of the covenant, as found in the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospels. It focuses instead upon the principle of the covenant and how previous communities have forgotten a part of that whereof they were reminded. Indeed, this tendency to neglect a portion of what God has revealed is the drama of religion played out in all of the Abrahamic scriptures. As with the Hebrew prophets, the criticisms the Quran makes of previous religious communities are made with a view to restoring the covenant with individual human beings and with humanity at large. Therefore, the Quran never condemns other revealed religions as such.

When speaking of the deviations committed by previous communities, it even reminds us that a few remain who continue to practice with reverence and piety. It thus promises: As for those who cling to the Book and perform the prayer—surely We neglect not the reward of the workers of righteousness (7:170). Nonetheless, Those who break God’s pact after accepting His covenant, and sever what God has commanded be joined, and work corruption upon the earth, it is they who are the losers (2:27). Thus the Quran implores: Sell not the pact of God for a paltry price. Surely that which is with God is better for you, if you but knew (16:95). Taking this a step further, the Quran even proposes that the reward of the righteous who hold fast to the Book of God is not limited to Muslims alone:
Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.\(^{35}\) (2:62)

**Betraying the Covenant**

Exchanging or selling God’s covenant, verses, or guidance for a small a price is criticized in several Quranic passages. It connotes a profound lack of discernment that leads one to seek the vain pleasures of this world over and above the joys of the world to come:

> Those who sell God’s pact and their oaths for a paltry price, they shall have no share in the Hereafter and God will not speak to them; nor will He look at them on the Day of Resurrection; nor will He purify them. And theirs shall be a painful punishment. (3:77)

Selling the covenant for a small price is thus akin to breaking the covenant and is among the chief transgressions said to have been committed by previous religious communities. The Quran maintains that this is the process that many among all peoples have followed and even implies that many of those to whom the Quran is presented will also confront it:

> We did indeed send down to you clear signs, and only the iniquitous disbelieve in them. Is it not that, whenever they make a covenant, a group of them cast it aside? Indeed, most of them do not believe. And when there came to them a messenger from God, confirming that which is with them, a group of those who have been given the Book cast the Book of God behind their backs, as if they know not. (2:99–101)

Such verses indicate that although the outer dictates of the religion may remain, the principles and spiritual guidance they convey may be forgotten. People of different faiths will then fight about the forms, because they have forgotten their inner meanings. But the Quran maintains that a few will, nonetheless, remain truly faithful:

> And [remember] when We made a covenant with the Children of Israel, “Worship none but God; be virtuous toward parents,
kinsfolk, orphans, and the indigent; and speak to people in a goodly way; and perform the prayer and give the alms.” Then you turned away, save a few of you, swerving aside. (2:83, emphasis added)

The New Form of the One Covenant

Having established the continuation of the covenant through the history of prophecy, even though it was repeatedly broken and forgotten, the Quran then speaks of the covenant God has made with the followers of Muhammad. As one of the last verses to be revealed states: And remember God’s Blessing upon you, and His covenant by which He bound you, when you said, “We hear and we obey.” And reverence God. Surely God knows what lies within breasts (5:7). Reminiscent of Quranic verses addressed to the Children of Israel, this verse follows an explanation of the manner in which Muslims are to purify themselves for prayer. This alludes to the fact that the specific form of prayer revealed through Muhammad is the means by which Muslims are to observe the covenant, as did Jews through the Temple sacrifice and as did Christians through the sacraments.

The basic practices of Islam, the “five pillars” as they are known—testifying to the Oneness of God, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage—can thus be seen as means by which human beings return to their primordial nature, the fiṭrah, where they are ever cognizant of the covenant with God. When observed with sincerity, the rites of Islam, like those of Judaism and Christianity, serve to reintegrate and reorient the dispersed elements of one’s human nature. The rhythm of life thus comes to be fashioned upon the norms that God has ordained for humanity, rather than upon the aberrations that human beings have created for themselves. One is then able to live a life based upon what one has been reminded of through revelation, rather than forgetting a portion of what all humanity has been reminded of and thus forsaking the covenant.

As particular modes of observance, every religion embodies the fullness of the primordial covenant, the religion of the fiṭrah, which was the religion of Abraham—true devotion and universal submission (islām). But as the covenant is pretemporal, it is in essence not of this world and therefore cannot be confined to one particular manifestation—to one single religion. For this reason, the Quran emphasizes the eternal principles and fundamental practices that transcend the particularity of each covenant in order to reaffirm what it maintains to be the pure essence of all covenants—full submission to God.
1. For a comprehensive treatment of the history of prophets and prophethood in the Quran, see Brannon M. Wheeler, Prophets of the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis (New York: Continuum, 2002); also see Uri Rubin, “Prophets and Prophethood,” in The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān, ed. Andrew Rippin (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 234–47.

2. In this vein the Quran says: We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth (41:53).

3. The word zubur is translated here “scriptures.” The singular, zabūr, identifies the revelation with the Prophet David (4:163; 17:55). Zubur could thus be translated “Psalms” or “scriptures.”

4. Al-Bukhārī 60.51 (no. 3481).

5. Several verses also speak of Jesus as confirming what came before him (3:50; 5:46; 61:6), and Moses is said to confirm what was already with his people, i.e., the Torah (2:41, 89, 91; 4:47).

6. For a discussion of Muslims who maintained that the previous scriptures had been abrogated, see Camilla Adang, Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Ḥazm (Leiden: Brill, 1996), chap. 6.


8. Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 1:369. Regarding the claim that 2:62 is abrogated by 3:85, the sixth/twelfth-century commentator al-Ṭabrisī says: “This is far [from the mark], because it is not permissible for abrogation to be applied to a report that contains a [Divine] Promise.” Abū ʿAlī al-Fadl al-Ṭabrisī, Majmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān, 10 vols.
10. Many prefer to interpret these verses as a reference to a group of Jews who became Muslim, but the argument is illogical, as they would no longer be referred to as “People of the Book” after having joined the Islamic community. In addition, many exegetes, such as al-Qurṭūbī (2:532), also mention that it could refer to a group among the People of the Book who believe as opposed to a group who disbelieve (as in 98:1–4). Al-Ṭabarī gives preference to this interpretation, saying that it refers to two groups among the People of the Book, one believing and one disbelieving (4:67).

11. Though the Biblical presentation of the covenant is heavily disputed, making it difficult to draw specific comparisons between the Quranic and the Biblical accounts, the general concept is nonetheless similar enough to warrant comparison. For the Biblical treatment of the covenant, see Delbert R. Hillers, Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969).

12. “Then he [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, ‘See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Exodus 24:7–8).

13. The Quranic assertion that God spoke to Moses directly, which is also part of the Biblical tradition, is the basis of Moses’ Islamic title Kalīm Allāh; it is also the basis for Moses’ particular degree of distinction among the prophets as implied (without mentioning his name explicitly) in Quran 2:253.

14. Aḥmad 9.24 (no. 22719). “Messenger” and “Prophet” are sometimes used interchangeably, but many consider each to have specific technical meaning. A prophet (nabī) is said to differ from a messenger (rasūl) in that a messenger brings a new religion (dīn), whereas a prophet only reaffirms a previous revealed religion and reestablishes its proper observance or, as in the case of John the Baptist, heralds the coming of a messenger. A messenger thus fulfills all the functions of a prophet and is a prophet, but a prophet does not necessarily perform all the functions of a messenger and is not a messenger.

15. The Gospels implicitly and the Letters explicitly present the new covenant through the blood of Jesus as a return to the universal covenant of Abraham that is for both Jew and Gentile. But the Letter to the Hebrews goes so far as to argue that the former covenant has been rendered “weak and ineffectual” (7:18–19), such that “Jesus has also
become the guarantee of a better covenant” (7:22). Jesus is thus believed to replace the Levitical priesthood, because “he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises” (8:6).


17. Al-Bukhārī 23.79 (nos. 1373–74), 65.[30].2 (no. 4822); Muslim 47.6 (nos. 6926, 6929, 6932).

18. Such corruption is said to occur through distortion (taḥrīf) of scripture (2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41), forgetting a part of that whereof they were reminded (5:13; cf. 23:110), and intentionally concealing the truth (2:146, 159, 174; 3:71), among other vices.

19. The notion of the covenant as presented in the Quran could in principle be applied also to non-Abrahamic religions. Such an allusion is found in 4:163–65, cited above. But as such religions are not mentioned directly in the Quran, they are beyond the scope of this essay.


23. Jewish scholarship recognizes that Abraham did not practice the central rites of Judaism, which were revealed on Mt. Sinai, and was not technically a Jew. The term “Judaism” originates as a designation for the tribe that descended from Jacob’s fourth son, Judah. The religion that we now know as Judaism (Yahadut) was first given that name in 2 Maccabees 2:21 and 8:1, written seventeen hundred years after Abraham. The term “Jews” (Yahudim) appears before this, in Esther 8:17, which is still over a millennium after the period in which Abraham is believed to have lived.

25. For comparison of the Quranic and Biblical stories of the prophets, see Roberto Tottoli, Biblical Prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim Literature (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002).


27. For an examination of the story of Moses in the Quran, see Brannon M. Wheeler, Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002).


29. This is similar to the account of the Annunciation in the Gospel of Luke, according to which Mary shows fear and asks the Archangel Gabriel: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:34), to which Gabriel responds, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37).

30. Al-Bukhārī 60.47 (no. 3468), 65.[3].2 (no. 4590). Another account of this saying reads: “No child is born but that he is pricked by Satan and begins to weep because of the pricking of Satan, except for the son of Mary and his mother” (Muslim 44.40 [no. 6282]). A third version states: “Satan touches every son of Adam on the day when his mother gives birth to him, except for Mary and her son” (Muslim 44.40 [no. 6284]).

31. That the Oneness of God is fundamental to traditional Christianity is clear from the beginning of the Nicene Creed: “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” As the third-century church father Tertullian writes: “Father and Son and Spirit are three, however, not in status but in rank, not in substance but in form, not in power but in appearance; they are, however, of one substance and of one status and of one power, because God is one, from whom these ranks and forms and appearances are designated in name as Father and Son and Holy Spirit” (Adversus Praxean, chap. 2; cited in Luke Timothy Johnson, The Creed [New York: Doubleday, 2004], 121).


34. For further elaboration of the manner in which the Quran can be seen as presenting all revelations as deriving from a single source, see 85:21–22c (also see 3:7; 13:39; 43:4).

35. See n. 8.