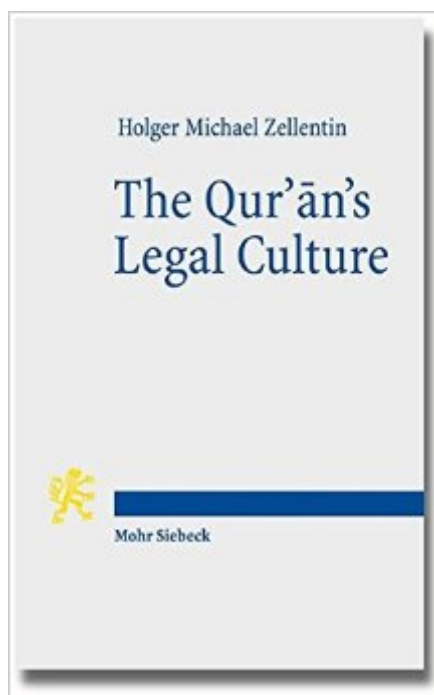


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The Qur'an's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum As A Point Of Departure



Synopsis

The Qur'an preserves aspects of an earlier Jesus movement that most Christian groups diluted or rejected. The Didascalia Apostolorum, a late ancient church order, records a significant number of the laws promulgated in the Qur'an, but does not fully endorse them when it comes to purity. Likewise, the Didascalia's legal narratives about the Israelites and about Jesus, as well as the legal and theological vocabulary of the Syriac (Eastern Christian Aramaic) version of the Didascalia, recurrently show kinship with the Arabic Qur'an. The Qur'an, however, is not "based" on the Didascalia in any direct way. Both texts should rather be read against the background of the practices and the oral discourse shared by their respective audiences: a common legal culture. In this volume, Holger M. Zellentin offers new insights into Late Antique Judaism and Christianity, into the continuity of Judaeo-Christian law and narrative within Jewish and Christian mainstream communities past the fourth century, and into the community that the Qur'an first addressed.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This short "pocket-book" punches over its weight. Zellentin here takes an old argument, that there existed a Jewish-Christian milieu which influenced the Qur'an, and he updates it thoroughly. Earlier scholars had proposed a specific sect or other of Jewish-Christians; usually the Clementine Homilies were brought up, and Schlomo Pines was cited. *This* book accepts the Homilies, for what they were; but concedes that Pines's most forceful argument to that end is dead: 176f fn. 2. For Zellentin, it suffices that Jewish-Christian ideals survived to the Islamic era. Zellentin brings from the past, the Didascalia; and from the (post-Muhammadan) future, patriarch Athanasius of Balad.

Between them, they bridge the gap between the Clementine Homilies and the Qur'an's community. Zellentin develops his thesis by parallel. For instance, we find that the Didascalia insisted on refraining from impure meat - like that sacrificed to a false god. In this it contradicted Saint Paul, and followed Jewish law and the Clementines. The later Athanasius of Balad agreed with the Didascalia, updating the doctrines such that Christians should not eat halal. The Qur'an for its part takes the opposite tack, that Muslims *must* eat halal (or kosher) and avoid Christian food. Either way, both Athanasius and the Qur'an agree on the same principles, which one might label *meta*-Jewish-Christian; or, in a more Oriental vein, Jewish-Christian *usul al-fiqh*. The book is self-consciously impressionistic. It does not take sides as to when this or that sura may have been composed. I do detect that it focuses on the *legal* suras, of which I'm mostly catching suras 5, 6, and 17. The book sports a sura-index at the end, which namechecks many more ayat; but those don't figure in the argument.

A review by Lev Weitz made me order a copy of Holger Michael Zellentin's *The Qur'an's Legal Culture*. Hence, I do not repeat the praise and criticism other than the problematic document history of the Didascalia. Arguments based on oral transmissions should be rejected outright since they attempt to rationalize why documents appear as late as the criticism by its opponents. Having said that, I need to disclose that my expertise is in the economics of religion and religious fraud. Perhaps the key sentence in Zellentin's work is that the overlap between the Qur'anic and Judaeo-Christian lawcodes (here the Homilies and perhaps also the Rabbinic literature) are well worth considering from the point of view of critical historiography. However, if the document history of the Didascalia is problematic, then the author's attempt is threatened to be circular. Research needs to first map out the real history of Judaic religions. For this purpose, the Koran provides for such a pivotal moment and an unshakable piece of evidence (give or take a few decades) that it might well serve as the departing point for such a research project in both directions on the timeline. The author seems to partly recognize this importance in stating that his work might make as much of a difference for the study of Late Antiquity as for the study of the Qur'an. Indeed, decoding the Koran will change everything. But let us be frank: Islam is a Judaic religion, and it is childish for the faithful to believe that the Koran grew out of a Pagan environment, when Paganism should have long succumbed to other Judaic sects. For those that still believe in the fairy tale, Zellentin is deafening.

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