

4-11-2006

Disputed History: Jacob Van Maerlant, Richard Bell, and the “Borrowing” of Christianity in Islam

Emily Gastineau
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/islam>

Recommended Citation

Gastineau, Emily (2006) "Disputed History: Jacob Van Maerlant, Richard Bell, and the “Borrowing” of Christianity in Islam," *Macalester Islam Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/islam/vol1/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester Islam Journal by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

*Disputed History: Jacob Van Maerlant, Richard Bell, and the
“Borrowing” of Christianity in Islam*

Emily Gastineau

The notion that Muhammad “borrowed” ideas and practices from the Bible and from Christianity to craft his new religion has existed for hundreds of years in varying forms. While not the first text to make such a claim, Jacob Van Maerlant’s *Spiegel Historiae*, which was written between 1283 and 1288, is a primary example of this strain of Christian thought from the medieval era. In his discussion of Muhammad’s life and the creation of Islam, Maerlant draws on many previous texts to systematically attribute different facets of Islam either to a Christian or a Jewish source. This method serves to discredit the religion’s claim to being an original divine revelation—why would Muhammad have to copy from the Bible if he was receiving the direct word of God?

This kind of sweeping attack on Islam manifested itself again over 600 years later in a series of nine lectures delivered by Richard Bell at Divinity Hall of Edinburgh University in 1925, collectively entitled *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*. Even though this source is not as current as some others, it directly addresses the idea under question and still illustrates how it survived into the modern era. Both writers claim that Muhammad used Christian and Jewish arguments in the writing of the Qur’an, but the variations in their arguments lie in what was borrowed and the rationale behind the borrowing. This is due primarily to different historical information about Muhammad, what he had learned about Judaism and Christianity and when in his career he learned it. These accounts of how Muhammad strategically constructed the Qur’an (because, from the Christian perspective, that must have been the case) always depict him as an opportunist, but he is more devious in the medieval era and simply practical in the modern.

In Jacob Van Maerlant’s description of the creation of Islam, Muhammad consciously pieces together aspects of Judaism and Christianity in full knowledge of both traditions and with the tacit goal of obtaining power. Maerlant emphasizes Muhammad’s career as a merchant, which allowed him to travel

widely. He assumes that a direct consequence of those travels was the acquisition of knowledge about both religions:

Often he made his way with camels to Egypt and he knew Jews and Christians too in many cities. And from them he learned in due time the New Law and the Old, in such measure that he could speak well about it, if necessary, on many an occasion. (qtd. in Claassens 218)

Maerlant is suggesting that Muhammad was an expert on religion before he began to craft his own. He drives the point further by telling the story of Sergius, a Nestorian monk who taught Muhammad his corrupted interpretation of the Bible and then supervised the writing of the Qur'an. This groups Islam along with despised Christian heresies, but more importantly it makes Muhammad seem completely in control of how he was using preexisting Christian ideas to further his own designs. Maerlant paints a picture of an evil collaboration that twisted the biblical text and then consciously deployed it.

Maerlant specifies explicitly which concepts Muhammad borrowed from each religion. He attributes fasting, ordered times of prayer, and ordered times of purification to Christianity (ignoring the fact that some of these concepts began first in Judaism). He says that "the prohibition of the consumption of pork has been copied from the Jews (Claassens 226)." While these are the only specific things he discusses, other connections could presumably be drawn. Even those few things accomplish his task of discrediting Islam as an original divine revelation—if Muhammad stole these ideas from Christianity, then his status as a prophet is considerably undermined.

Maerlant also shows Muhammad to be conscious of his status in another way: his attempts to be compared to Jesus. He describes at length how Muhammad deceived people into believing that he could perform false miracles with a dove, a bull, and barrels of milk and honey (Claassens 222). This makes it seem as if Muhammad puts up an elaborate façade to make it seem like he is capable of the same miracles, which are in truth only cheap tricks. Maerlant also recounts the story of Muhammad's death, and how he claimed that he would ascend to heaven three days after he died. As the Christian story goes, his

body began to rot and so he was just buried—he obviously could not repeat Jesus’ miraculous resurrection.

Jacob Van Maerlant’s details taken together give the reader a clear vision of the way that Muhammad shaped his new religion: through full knowledge and a heretical collaboration, he appropriated components of Christianity and Judaism into the law that was set down in the Qur’an. He tried to create a powerful persona for himself that could be compared to Jesus, but it was really just a deceptive and empty shell.

In Richard Bell’s 1925 lectures, both the historical evidence and the tone disagree with Maerlant, while both accounts presume Muhammad to have fashioned his new religion through an opportunistic selection of preexisting ideas.

Bell sets up a very different framework to account for the similarities between Islam and Christianity. He speaks of several stages in the prophet’s life and the corresponding knowledge of and reactions to Christianity at those times. One of the central points in Bell’s essays is that when Muhammad began to write the Qur’an, he had virtually no knowledge of either Judaism or Christianity, and only later did he start to incorporate their ideas. There is almost no discussion of Muhammad’s time spent traveling as a merchant, and absolutely no mention of Sergius or any kind of teacher figure who would expose him to the Bible. (According to Bell, the only influence that being a merchant had on Muhammad was to make him practical in his later selection of which parts of Christianity to introduce to Islam.) He goes on to say that Muhammad would only have been able to learn about biblical stories orally and through third- and fourth-hand accounts, certainly never through primary texts.

From what we know of his methods later it is very improbable that he used any written source. He would rely upon oral information given him in response to his inquiries. We cannot even say definitely whether it was Jewish or Christian informants with whom he had got in touch (Bell 104).

This kind of historical detail departs completely from Maerlant’s portrait of Muhammad as an almost omniscient strategist of a religion that was calculated to win converts. Instead, the prophet is uninformed and alone in the early stages of writing the Qur’an.

Bell is not willing, however, to suggest that Muhammad came up with these ideas on his own: "He is not the originator of monotheism in Arabia" (Bell 62). Instead of suggesting some kind of direct influence of Christianity on Muhammad, Bell argues that the presence of both of those religions in the Arabian Peninsula at the time had to have influenced Muhammad's conceptions of "what was meant by a prophet, a holy book, revelation, prayer, and praise" (Bell 52). The existence of Judaism and Christianity in that area, however slight, laid the groundwork for the development and acceptance of Muhammad's ideas.

Once Muhammad did start to be exposed to the specifics of the two religions, Bell argues that he respected them as previous monotheistic revelations: "He thoroughly believed that the Monotheistic religion which prevailed around Arabia was the same as that which he sought to establish. How could there be more than one form of the religion of the One God? (Bell 100)." Since his ideas had been influenced by these monotheisms in the first place, the details he began to learn about them through conversation seemed to further his arguments, and so he incorporated them.

Although Bell attributes many separate aspects of Islam as being derived from Christianity throughout the nine lectures, the one he is most sure about is the treatment of the apocalypse in the Qur'an. He says that "all of this material is directly borrowed" because he finds it expedient to impress "upon the hard-hearted Meccans the consequences of their unbelief (Bell 103)." Bell cites numerous other specific instances, another of which is the shift of the Islamic creation story from one of birth out of a womb to one of molding out of clay by God, which gave a clearer justification for God's power over his people (Bell 77). As for the rituals that Maerlant brings up, Bell somewhat strangely attributes all of them—fasting, times of prayer, and times of purification—directly to the Jews, even though earlier in the lectures he argues that Muhammad received many Jewish ideas through Christian channels (Bell 14). In terms of designating Judeo-Christian causes for components of Islam, the accounts of 1288 and 1925 are remarkably similar in tone and action even though they cite different examples out of countless possible options.

Once Islam began to accumulate followers and Muhammad moved to Medina, he began to learn more about and incorporate more of Judaism and Christianity because he had closer contact with them. At this stage, while Maerlant might argue that Muhammad tried to relate himself to Jesus, Bell suggests that Muhammad was most interested in the line of prophets that he gradually discovered and placed himself in the powerful position of the last prophet. These ideas are similar, but their execution is not because Bell states very clearly that “sorely tempted as he must have been to profess power to work miracles, he never does so [as Maerlant does]. The most that he alleges of a miraculous kind is having seen one or two visions (Bell 109). He also never mentions Muhammad’s purported claim that he will rise to heaven three days after his death. In Bell’s account, Muhammad tries to establish a more political than mystical kind of legitimacy in his place as the ultimate prophet.

Even later, he purposely constructed components of Islam in opposition to them so that it could be set apart as an independent religious tradition. He apparently changed the direction that Muslims face for prayers from Jerusalem to Mecca in order to distance Muslims from the Jews, and he had people called to prayer by the human voice rather than trumpets or bells so as to distance Muslims from both Christians and Jews. Throughout Muhammad’s life, however, Bell suggests that he used whatever knowledge he had at hand in a practical manner to make his religion more coherent and impervious to polemics. He paints a picture of Muhammad as more functional and commonsensical than conniving, as Maerlant would have him be.

In the wider historical context, it is easy to see why discussions of medieval Christian writers on Islam tend to say that the writers get more tolerant even though it seems like they are just recycling the same arguments. Maerlant and Bell are essentially doing the same thing: using the materials they have at hand to prove a historically valid but inherently biased view that Islam borrowed from Christianity. In a post-Enlightenment, modern viewpoint the support for that view is more rational, even-handed, and systematic, while in the medieval view the justifications are strongly but understandably based on popular fables or even mythological narratives. The concept of borrowing is an incredibly forceful argument for a Christian polemicist

because it undermines the very foundations of Islam's legitimacy, its claim to original divine revelation, and it is unsurprising that it has survived for so long.

Works Cited:

Bell, Robert. *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*. London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1968.

Claassens, Geert H.M. "Jacob Van Maerlant on Muhammad and Islam." *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam*. Ed. John Victor Tolan. New York: Routledge, 1996. 211-232.