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Introduction

> Niebuhr was an accurate and careful observer, had the instincts of a scholar, was animated by a high moral purpose, and was rigorously conscientious and anxiously truthful in recording the results of his observation. His works have long been classics in the geography, the people, the antiquities and the archaeology of much of the district of Arabia which he traversed. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (11th Edition, 1910–1911)

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The lone European sat at a low table as he put the finishing touches on the text. He wrote in German, the language of his native Saxony, and he was compiling the notes to accompany his drawings of the hieroglyphs he had seen on a watering trough near the Qalaat al-Kabsch, or "Fortress of the Ram," in Cairo. Some Egyptians traced the name of the fortress to the sacrifice by Abraham of a ram in place of his son, Isaac (Gen 22:1–19, Koran, XXXVII: 99–111). But like so many tales from the Old Testament, as they were later modified and passed through the Koran, it was impossible to verify their truth. In any case, the fortress was long gone and in its place lay the *madrasa* of Qaytbey, the greatest of the Mamluk builders of Egypt. It was not far from the mosque of Ibn Tulun, which lay beneath the range of the Muqattam and the Citadel to the east of the Fatimid city. The walls of the latter were visible through the morning haze and the *mashrabiyya* of the window in the study. It was already warm, but the early morning hours were still the most productive time for the sustained work of drafting and composition that constituted much of his daily routine. The temperature in Cairo on this day, August 19th, 1762, was already eighty-three degrees and it was only 7:30 in the morning. We know this from the records of the careful, thrice-daily readings on his Fahrenheit thermometer. That was another part of Carsten Niebuhr's routine, and the records of temperature would continue for the almost seven years of his travels in the Orient. We

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also know that there had been a violent rainstorm earlier in the week, and that it had probably tempered the heat.

But Egyptians were famous for their ability to use the elements to their advantage, and most houses had a kind of vent that was pointed to the north and admitted cooling breezes into the living area. In addition, the water from the Nile had just been introduced into the *khalig*, the canal that ran along the western boundary of the Fatimid city. That was a double blessing for those who lived in its vicinity. In the first place, when it was dry the canal bed was full of refuse, much of it organic, and this house was in the Harat al-Ifrang, or the Frankish Quarter, and directly overlooked the canal. The odor could be oppressive in the summer heat. But the swift flow of the Nile water had carried away the collected garbage and in its place provided another source of cooling breezes, although the respite was brief before effluents from the nearby houses would turn the canal into an open sewer. And the day before, on the 18th of August, the water from the *khalig* had been introduced into the Birkat al-Azbakiyya, the large pond that lay to the west of the canal. Soon, the grandees of the city would begin their seasonal fetes on the water. Planks would be laid down on the shore of the pond, over which people could walk, and lights would be hung on the nearby houses, their reflections twinkling in the water at night. The heat of the day was to be avoided in Cairo, but the city came alive at night and it was a colorful scene, with the multitudes, musicians, madmen, magicians, and jugglers. Pickpockets and prostitutes worked the crowd. Cairenes, no matter how poor or oppressed they were, had always known how to enjoy themselves.

But in the middle of the eighteenth century they were still insular and they disliked outsiders, particularly if the outsiders were Christians and Franks. Europeans were permitted to live in the city, but only three European powers were allowed to maintain consulates in Cairo—France, Venice, and Holland. It was through the French that Niebuhr and his colleagues had rented the house overlooking the canal. Along with Copts, or native Christians, and Jews, Europeans were subject to the conditions of the Caliph Omar: they couldn't ride horses, they had to dismount from a donkey in the presence of a Turk, and they couldn't publicly lament their dead. For the local Christians and Jews, the strictures were even more severe. So Europeans were very careful residents of Cairo indeed, and they avoided as much as possible contact with the representatives of the slave caste, or Mamluks, who tilted for control of the country. The year before, the residents of Damietta on the Mediterranean had taken exception to French merchants' mixing with Muslim women, and they had risen up and killed them to a man. The French were now forbidden to enter Damietta and other Europeans did so only with trepidation.

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However, if a man was careful, he could learn much, and Cairo and its environs probably had more in the way of monuments of recent and remote antiquity than any place on earth. Niebuhr had already walked the length and breadth of the city, pacing off distances and noting its geographical features and the location of its major structures. In the process, he would produce the first detailed map of the city by anyone, European or otherwise. So we already see the Niebuhr we have come to expect, having read vol. I of his *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien* or *Travels in Arabia* (hereafter called the *Travels*). There would be the familiar sociological studies, the careful astronomical observations, a short history and detailed maps of the city and the Delta, drawings and commentary on the nearby Pharaonic antiquities, a discussion of the commercial activity, a description of the ruling class, and a survey of the polyglot population. In the relatively congenial atmosphere of the house overlooking the *khalig*, he was able to polish his observations, take sightings with his quadrant, complete his sketches, and dispatch to Copenhagen the material already collected by the members of the expedition. But Niebuhr was only beginning to hit his stride, and it would be another five years before he himself returned to Denmark. The expedition to Happy Arabia had theoretically not even begun, although Niebuhr had already collected enough material to fill several hundred pages of his *Travels*. But what brought him to Cairo in the first place? And what reserves of curiosity, dedication and scholarship would urge him on? Who was this man Carsten Niebuhr, and what was he doing in Egypt?

The short answer is that he was the German mathematician, for want of a better title, on the ill-fated Royal Danish Expedition to Happy Arabia of 1761–67. Born on March 17th, 1733[1] in West Ludingworth (today Cuxhaven) on the estuary where the Elbe exits into the North Sea, Carsten Niebuhr was the son of a free peasant farmer, a Frisian and a Saxon. The Frisians were a stubborn, independent people of Teutonic stock who had historically resisted outside domination, whether Roman, Frank, Christian, Hollandish, or Burgundian. They were:

> . . . a free peasantry . . . each man occupying and cultivating his own little freehold; and possessed the industry, frugality, and

1. See *Lives of Eminent Persons*, published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge; *Journal des Savans*, 1818; *The Life and Letters of Barthold George Niebuhr*; the *Algemiene Deutsch Biographie*, vol. 23; and the *Biographie Universelle Moderne*, vol. 30. Niebuhr's son, Barthold Georg Niebuhr, wrote a short life of his father that is used in all the above references. The most extensive was in the *Lives of Eminent Persons,* where this simple peasant from Friesland appeared as one of thirteen intellectual and historical giants, among them Gallileo, Kepler, Newton, Mohammed, Adam Smith, Michaelangelo, and Sir Christopher Wren.

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> sturdy independence which usually characterize their order. The circumstance that his childhood and youth were passed among such a population probably contributed to the strong interest and sympathy which Niebuhr always regarded this class.[2]

His son says that he was born a peasant—“in stature . . . rather under the middle size, of a very robust and sturdy make”—and remained a peasant to the end of his days. This apparently was evidence not of any lack of culture but of stubborn independence and an unwillingness to put on airs. His early life was scarred by the death of both parents, his mother when he was six months old and his father when he was an adolescent. Being a younger son, Niebuhr’s share of the inheritance was small and his careful husbanding of the available funds had a decisive influence in his choice of careers. While he showed an inquisitiveness and promise at school, the uncertainties of his inheritance and the financial difficulties of his guardian made it necessary for him to work for extended periods during his youth. He originally studied music and he played the organ, the flute and the violin,[3] hoping to secure a post as an organist. It is interesting that this ambition, if realized, would probably have brought employment at one of the Lutheran churches in the canton and exposure to the work of Johann Sebastian Bach, then employed as a cantor in Leipzig, 150 miles to the southeast. Having largely fulfilled the passion of his middle years, the development of “a well-regulated church music to the glory of God,” Bach had returned in this final phase to his original focus as an organist and musical theoritician. Unfortunately, we have little indication of Niebuhr’s theological attitudes at the time. But subsequent evidence would suggest that he combined a certain latitudinarianism with the same commonsense approach to religion that he showed with regard to other matters. This was to have mixed results in an expedition whose purpose was expressly religious, as we will see below.

During a period of work on the farm of an uncle, and hearing the call by the government for a cadastral survey of the area, Niebuhr’s patriotism was engaged and he decided to become a surveyor. So, at the age of twenty-one, he set about preparing himself for higher studies. He went to Hamburg where he spent the next eight months studying Latin and mathematics. This only whetted his appetite and in 1757 he was accepted at the University of Göttingen, 150 miles south of Hamburg and, incidentally, a center of Oriental studies. There, he studied mathematics and astronomy, both necessary

2. Winkworth, vol. I, 3.

3. As a matter of fact, he took the violin with him on the journey, and he and other members of the party occasionally treated their hosts to a European concert. The Arabs found the sound unendurable.

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to an understanding of position-finding using celestial bodies. However, his funds were nearly exhausted, and to help make ends meet he enrolled in the engineering corps. His life might have taken a decidely different turn if, in Göttingen, his quiet intelligence had not come to the attention of a certain Professor Kästner, and it was through Kästner that Niebuhr was introduced to another Professor, Johann David Michaelis. It was rather by accident that Michaelis recommended that Niebuhr be appointed mathematician and surveyor on an expedition to be sponsored by the King of Denmark. The goal of the expedition was Arabia.

Johann David Michaelis and Philology

The long answer to the question as to what Niebuhr was doing in Egypt on that August morning in 1762 is rather more complicated. It involves an understanding of the discipline of philology as it was conceived in the middle of the eighteenth century, of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as they were increasingly subjected to critical examination, and of the European study of the "Orient," itself a subject nearly as difficult to define as it was to describe. It also involves an awareness of advances in science in a seminal age of progress in the understanding of the physical world. In the end, it was the marriage of science with the study of the Orient that made the Danish expedition so unusual. It was a marriage that, in the eyes of its sponsors, could hardly be other than successful. In a curious way, it both succeeded and failed. Its success was due largely to the determination of Carsten Niebuhr who, throughout the years he was in the Orient and in the equally difficult years after his return, studiously applied himself to the principles set out in the instructions to the members of the expedition. To understand its failure we must understand the perhaps extravagant expectations of the man who conceived it in the first place.

The epic journey for which Niebuhr is almost alone remembered began in the fertile mind of the same Johann David Michaelis, professor at the University of Göttingen and the foremost philologist and Oriental linguist in Europe. He had been born to the study of Oriental languages. His father, Christian Benedict Michaelis, preceded him as an Orientalist and everyone agreed that the father was his superior as a Hebrew grammarian. To Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and the more common Oriental languages the younger Michaelis added Chaldean and Syriac, which he believed were critical to an understanding of the Hebrew scriptures. But his real love was history and, in an age when the study of so broad a subject could be undertaken by a single scholar, he combined his interests into what might be called the

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discipline of sacred philology. Philology, the historical study of written texts and determination of their authenticity and meaning, differs from what we call today linguistics. Linguistics, or the study of language in all its aspects, has since resolved itself into the separate disciplines of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. But the word philology carried a far greater burden in the eighteenth century than linguistics does today. It rested, coequal with philosophy, at the top of the scholarly hierarchy.[4] If philosophy, taken from the Greek, meant the love of knowledge, philology, taken from the same root, meant the love of words. But there was more to the relationship than appears in this simple distinction. Philosophy represented what *was*, the sum of knowledge as a whole. Philology represented the knowledge of what was *known*, the sum of what had been produced by the human mind. Where philosophy strove to know more, philology strove to understand what had previously been known. In this effort the subject matter of philology was literature, not narrowly defined but, in the minds of eighteenth-century philologists, an all-encompassing literature that included art, government, science—in fact, the entire written record of mankind. It was in this formulation that it stood alone with philosophy atop a pyramid representing everything produced by the human spirit.

The primary focus of philology was the past. The techniques it used could be applied to the present as well. But the present, with its incessant claims on the attention of the scholar, was too near in time for the kind of dispassionate study such a subject required. The most fertile ground was the remote past, where the study could be taken more leisurely and objectively. This might seem to consign the work of philologists to a perpetual reshuffling of knowledge, with no net increase in what was known. But that judgment would be superficial. The goal of philology was nothing less than

> to relearn what has been known, to present it in a pure state, to remove falsifications of time, to make an apparent into a real whole . . . these are necessary to the very life of knowledge.[5]

Such an activity represented an *addition* to what was known. Moreover, he who ignored the past would do so at his own risk for, however refined and complete one's knowledge at a particular time, it was still dependent on the vast body of knowledge that had gone before.

The full range of philological activity could be applied to specific areas: thus, there was Greek philology, Roman philology, and Oriental philology.

4. This organization of knowledge, and especially the place of philology within it, was probably best codified by the German philologist August Boeckh (1785–1867) in his *On Interpretation and Criticism*.

5. Ibid., 13.

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The last had heavily religious overtones. Oriental philology could, of course, exist without a specifically Christian focus. In the general development of Orientalism beginning in the sixteenth century, source documents in the original languages were examined, lexica and dictionaries developed and refined, and treatises written, all with an ostensibly secular purpose. But it is remarkable the degree to which this activity served a religious, even polemical, purpose. Most of the pioneers in Oriental studies had taken orders. Among the near contemporaries of Michaelis, only Sale (see below) was not a man of the cloth. A refusal to subscribe to the Confession of Augsburg, a summary of the teachings of Martin Luther required of all Lutheran clergymen, deprived Michaelis of the career in the church that, everyone agreed, was his natural vocation. But this in no way diminished the religious nature of his concerns. In fact, his biographer in the *Biographie Universelle Moderne* faults him for too great a propensity to see in Scripture a foreshadowing of modern, secular knowledge and for a tendency to

> see the authors of sacred texts too often as scholars, naturalists, doctors, astronomers etc., and to search in the poetic tablets of Job, and in the writings of Moses and the prophets discoveries of modern times and the observations of Linnaeus.

In the untutored hands of his students and followers, the tendency to eclecticism became extreme. To be fair, the same biographer also remarks that this tendency should not detract from Michaelis's immense contribution to the study of the Orient. Again, to quote the entry, Michaelis

> found the edifices of human knowledge composed of bricks and he left them changed into gold or, better yet, he put together the fragments and the building materials into solid structures, regular and spacious, capable after their initial arrangement of accommodating all the additions which new knowledge would make necessary.

That the Bible was incontrovertible truth was accepted at the outset, and evidence that called the document into question, or did not support it, was unwelcome. As interesting as the myriad subjects of concern to the philologist Michaelis are those things that were *not* important, beginning with the language of another, even more ancient Oriental people, the Egyptians. As we will see below, it would be left to a rank amateur, Carsten Niebuhr, to suggest that an understanding of the language of the ancient Egyptians would come only with an understanding of Coptic, its ultimate successor. We would probably not be too far wrong if we assumed that one of the reasons for this lack of interest was that the language was "profane." Although

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classical philology came increasingly to constitute a triumvirate of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, there was still a useful distinction between the sacred and the profane. The first two were considered important, indeed vital, to an understanding of the classical past. The last was vital to an understanding of Europe's putative religious past. For it was not just any text but that interested the sacred philologist, but the Bible itself, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, the word of God as passed down to mankind through His prophets and messengers. Here the exegesis—or critical analysis—was of a document that was simultaneously accepted as the product of the human spirit and divinely inspired.

The problems of sacred philology were, by comparison with classical, much greater. Sacred Scripture as a written document presented enormous difficulties. Not the least of these was understanding the language in which it was originally written and the several languages, filters, through which the text had passed in the centuries before it reached Europe. Christians had come relatively late to the study of Hebrew and, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the discipline of sacred philology was a comparatively recent one. Unlike the Greek and Roman works that constituted the classical canon, the extant examples of Hebrew were far fewer and far less a part of the European intellectual tradition. Study of the Old Testament suffered from this paucity of sources, or at least of a Christian understanding of them. But with the rise of Protestantism and the emphasis on the importance of the Bible[6], the need arose for Christian scholars competent in Hebrew, still considered by many to be the first and most perfect of all languages. In a pamphlet published in 1740 Gregory Sharpe was profuse in his claims for Hebrew.[7] While we shouldn't necessarily attribute to Michaelis all of Sharpe's opinions, the essay was nonetheless a general statement of the prevailing eighteenth-century attitudes about the importance of the language of the ancient Jews. According to Sharpe, Hebrew was an invaluable aid in learning *all* eastern languages, including Greek, Turkish, and Arabic. The author appends his method of learning Hebrew without points, almost a "Hebrew in three easy steps" of the eighteenth century, as well as a list of some 5,000

6. In one of the most revolutionary contributions to the new religious dispensation, Martin Luther made his landmark German translations of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek, the two sacred languages. "In proportion as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages," he said, "for the languages are the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit (namely the gospel) is contained." See *Luther's Works,* 359–60. It should be noted that this "philological" approach to Bible translation was accompanied by Luther's firm belief in divine inspiration as a necessary guide to the translator. Only by means of the two together, with inspiration in the lead, could truth be arrived at.

7. See Sharpe, *TWO DISSERTATIONS.*

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Latin and English words which, he claims, are derived from Hebrew. But his claim for the importance of the language does not stop there:

> But to say that *Hebrew* is the key to all the Oriental languages, and the source of the *Greek*, is not so say enough in its favor. It is also so simple in itself, and so easy to learn, that one may be forgiven for calling it the language of nature, or the first language of the world. (p. xiv).

In spite of the alleged simplicity of Hebrew, textual controversies had occupied Jewish scholars for centuries, and Christian scholars now lept into the fray. The seventeenth century had witnessed the growth of a body of Christian Hebraists,[8] assisted by Portuguese and Spanish *Marraños* and Jews who had moved northward to the more congenial atmosphere of the Protestant Netherlands. Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), Thomas Erpenius (1584–1624) and Jacob Golius (1596–1667) were early examples of the type. As we have seen, Michaelis's own father transmitted the tradition to his son.

The parties to this early exercise in Jewish-Christian cooperation had their own polemical interests. The two religions, after all, shared a sacred text but remained bitter enemies. To some Jews, the acquisition by Christian scholars of a knowledge of the Hebrew sources was a sacrilege. To others, it was felt that as long as Christians were interested in the Hebrew scriptures, they should at least be provided with Jewish guidance. To some early Christian scholars, the knowledge of Hebrew was a guarantee against Jewish tampering. Just as the more reasoned view of Islam often served only to place the basic hostility of Europe on firmer scholarly ground, the same held true for the study of Judaism. Even the earliest Hebraists, men such as Grotius or the Englishman John Seldon (1584–1654), studied Hebrew both to better inform themselves about scripture, and to arm themselves against the errors of the Jews. The Jews had, after all, for centuries been keepers of a part of the sacred books of Christianity. It was generally, if grudgingly, acknowledged that they had exercised this trust faithfully and had not, as some alleged, purposely corrupted the Hebrew text.[9] But one couldn't be too careful, and it was unthinkable that Christians should not have their own scholars, capable of understanding so important a part of their heritage. While relations between representatives of the two religions were not always the most edifying, at least this long-ignored area of scholarship was now opening to Christian Europe.

8. See Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis*.

9. This suspicion had to do particularly with language prefiguring the coming of Christ. For a contemporary refutation of the charge of corruption, see Gill's *A Dissertation Concerning the Antiquity of the Hebrew Language*.

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The textual obsession is surely understandable when we consider the reverence with which the text of the Koran is held by Muslims, where a misplaced diacritic or mistake in pronunciation can lead to the most egregious of errors. But instead of a normative sacred text, codified for all time in grammatical and rhetorical if not doctrinal purity, Christians were dependent on an uncertain text, one part of which—the Old Testament—was originally in Hebrew, a dead and little understood language, and the other—the New Testament—was in a debased Greek with Hebrew, Chaldean, and Syriac influences.[10] The existence of an accepted text was *not* the end of controversy, as centuries of Jewish commentary on their own sacred texts had shown. Masoretes, or those who zealously guarded the correct spelling, reading and writing of the Hebrew Bible, had for centuries concerned themselves with preserving a normative text, even if it contained irregularities, which they treated with marginal notes. But we can understand why the delicate consciences[11] of men like Michaelis found congenial the most minute study of the sacred books of Christianity.

In spite of an early reputation as a *religionspötter*,[12] or "scoffer at religion," Michaelis was a believing Christian who saw in the study of the cognate languages of Hebrew—Arabic, Syriac, Chaldean, and Samaritan—the key to Biblical exegesis. Having wrestled with a question as to the basis of his Christian faith, he apparently drew back from the precipice of unbelief into a literalism, a focus on the text itself, that condemned him to the status of one of the near great. Of two theses he submitted on graduation in 1739–40, one was designed to prove the antiquity and divine inspiration of the vowel points of the Hebrew scripture. To a believing rationalist like Michaelis, there could be no conflict between the Bible and science. God was the author of both. Both were therefore "true," and the challenge was to reconcile these two aspects of the truth. Indeed, since there could be no disagreement, apparent conflict could only be due to our lack of understanding of the context in which the Bible appeared. The explicit purpose of the Danish expedition to Arabia was to assist those interested in sacred philology to better understand this context.

10. Even with the New Testament there seemed to be grounds for suspicion that the "schismatic Greeks" might have corrupted parts of the text.

11. His biographer says that it was the 12th and the 24th verses of the 19th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew that were most troubling to Michaelis. The first had to do with eunuchs and the second contains the statement that "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." A later and deeper knowledge of the texts apparently laid these scruples to rest.

12. See Flaherty, *The Quarrel of Reason with Itself.*

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The Context

An understanding of the context in which Michaelis himself lived and worked is also necessary for us to understand the mainsprings of his thinking. Europe was in the midst of that extraordinary outpouring of scientific and philosophic thought that we know as the Enlightenment, where reason, not faith, was the guide to truth. Philosophy now represented not the love of wisdom or knowledge of the ancients, but that branch of knowledge or speculation dealing with the nature of the universe. The age led to important discoveries in astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, physics, and linguistics. The Danish expedition was itself a typical Enlightenment expedition, with its attempt to add reason and careful observation to what previously had been accepted on faith. But there were limits to what reason could achieve, and there was hardly a man in mid-eighteenth century Europe who dared call himself an atheist.[13] Beginning at least with Blaise Pascal (1623–62), Enlightenment thinkers had wrestled with the idea of God. Their conclusions were often diametrically opposed, but none went so far as to deny the existence of a Supreme Being. Pascal, the precocious French physicist, mathematician, and theologian, found a rational God too remote and academic, but was terrified of the void. Rene Descartes (1596–1650), the French mathematician and converted Catholic, insisted that the intellect could find God, and sought Him with the certainty of mathematics. He saw no contradiction between faith and reason. Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), a Dutch Jew of Spanish descent, was perhaps the prototype of a new secular outlook. He believed in God, but not in the God of the Bible. For his pains, in an extraordinary ceremony, he was excommunicated from the synagogue of Amsterdam. Symbolically, all the lights in the synagogue were turned out and so was Spinoza, with the imprecation "Let him be accursed by day and accursed by night." Isaac Newton (1642–1727), the English physicist and mathematician, saw a mechanical universe with God as the great watchmaker, the sole source of activity. The notion of gravitational force drew his system together, and proved the existence of God. Without an intelligent overseer, it could not work.

Later intellectual giants such as Milton, Kant, and Voltaire continued the struggle to reconcile belief with newfound knowledge. The God of Milton (1608–74) was cold and legalistic and Satan was the real hero of *Paradise Lost*. But without God, Satan was not possible. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the German philosopher who defined the Enlightenment as "man's exodus from self-imposed tutelage," found the way to God through conscience and

13. For the following survey I am indebted to Armstrong, *A History of God*.

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reason, dismissing ritual and the authority of the Church. But he did not dismiss God. Even Francois-Marie de Voltaire (1694–1778), that epitome of anticlericalism, yearned for a simple religion that would make men just without making them absurd, that would not order them to believe things that were "impossible, contradictory, injurious to divinity, and pernicious to mankind; and which dared not menace with eternal punishment anyone possessing common sense." Voltaire may have been the embodiment of Enlightenment thought, but even he did not deny the existence of God.

Others struggled with the practical details, the human accretions of the religion of Jesus Christ. Gottfried Arnold's *History of the Churches from the Beginning of the New Testament to 1688* attempted to trace the historical manifestations of the institution back to the primitive church. Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1694–1755), in his *Institutions of Ecclesiastical History*, recorded the development of theological doctrine. Johann Friedmann Mayer in his Wittenburg's *Innocence of Double Murder* attempted to reconcile the loving message of Christ with a vengeful God and centuries of Christian persecution and cruelty. In perhaps the most revolutionary development of all, Hermann Reimarus (1694–1768) attempted a critical biography of Christ, based on a careful analysis of Scripture. This may have truly represented the beginning of skepticism about the "truth" of Scripture, and would subject these previously unassailable, if not inaccessible, sources to the same analytical methods as secular texts.

In the midst of this ferment, much of it in Germany and much propounded by his contemporaries, Michaelis undertook his own critical analysis of Sacred Scripture. As we have seen, he was no revolutionary, but used his linguistic faculties to study the Bible as a document that, for all of its susceptibility to textual analysis, was still divinely-inspired. He appears to have accepted, at the outset, the factual truth of the document, and brought his erudition to bear on the building blocks of the text, the words and the context in which they were used. By implication, apparent difficulties were only the result of a lack of understanding of this original context. Much of what was not understood by Europeans about the Hebrew Bible was simply a lack of familiarity with the language, habits, practices, attitudes, flora, and fauna of the area in which the document originated. With research into the primitive meaning of words and the context in which they were used, the explication—the intensive scrutiny and interpretation of the interrelated details—of the Bible could be advanced.

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The Orient

European interest in the area where Judaism and then Christianity arose was, of course, centuries old. This was, broadly speaking, called the "Orient," although the term itself was difficult to define, being a part geographical, part linguistic, and part cultural and religious abstraction. Geographically, the Orient included the Near East—North Africa and the Levant; the Middle East—Arabia, Iran, and parts of Turan; and the Far East—everything else to the end of the Asian continent, and was not confined to our common acceptance of the word today as referring to northeast Asia. The geographical definition included most of the world of Islam, although the Muslim lands of North Africa were generally south, not east, of Europe and the question arose as to whether the Islamic portions of east Africa and the east Indian Archipelago, which were assuredly east of Europe, should be included. And the Muslim world was full of pockets of *dimmi*s—free, non-Muslim subjects living in Muslim countries, Armenians, Greeks, and Copts, to name only a few—who were certainly eastern and were often as remote and little understood as their Muslim neighbors. To Europe the Byzantine Greeks had been, of course, little better than the other Orientals, the term "Byzantine" itself, at least since Gibbon, a byword for intrigue and convoluted dealing. All these Easterners were treated by the West with equal disdain, and the sack of Constantinople in 1204 by the Venetians of the 4th Crusade was probably the greatest act of cultural and artistic pillage in history.

There were Oriental languages, and a linguistic definition of the Orient seemed to work as well as any other. The Orient was the place where certain Oriental languages were spoken. The most obvious were Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, but there were also the old languages of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, Hebrew, Syriac, Aramaic, and Chaldean. As we have seen, the study of these languages was a relatively recent phenomenon in eighteenth-century Europe, and they constituted a part of the Oriental branch of philology. There was also growing European interest in Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, Burmese, and other languages from the eastern regions of the globe. But to the Orientalists who set in motion the Danish expedition, these other languages were far afield from their concerns. Their exclusion only highlights the difficulty of the linguistic definition of the Orient: it simply depended on which languages were defined as Oriental, and was really no definition at all.

There was, however, a common thread that seemed to run through the concerns of these Orientalists, and that was religious. The Orient seemed to be for them that place where the religion of the Jews arose and gave rise to its successors, Christianity and then Islam. Again, there were other "Oriental"

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religions, but to eighteenth-century Orientalists the belief systems of the people in China, Japan, and India, for example, could hardly be called religions at all, however interesting they may have been as cultural phenomena. With the discovery of new worlds in the previous two centuries, European eyes had been opened to other peoples, most of whom shared nothing remotely close to European ideas about a supreme being. There may have been planted in European minds the idea that these people had beliefs that were not entirely contemptible, but we would be mistaken if we saw this as a form of eighteenth-century ecumenism.[14] There was simply no question in the minds of European merchants, travelers, scholars, and, especially, missionaries of the "truth" of Christianity. Judaism was accorded pride of place as the ultimate source of Christianity and, although the Jews had rejected the saving message of Jesus Christ, they had been the Chosen People. There was still hope that they could be shown the error of their ways.

Christian attitudes about Islam were less ambivalent. The claim of Mohammed to be the last in the prophetic tradition that began with Adam and proceeded through the Old Testament prophets to Jesus Christ, was dismissed as sheer imposture. Islam possessed a certain crude energy that had, admittedly, subjugated a good part of the known world in the first rush after its appearance, but its claims hardly deserved the attention of serious men. The acceptance by Muslims of the truth of, first, Judaism and then Christianity, was seen by Europeans as mere, shallow imitation. The study of Islam *had* undergone a change in the latter part of the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth centuries, benefiting from the new openness as well as interest in the Orient as the source of the Christian past. Gone were the crude polemics with which Christians had approached Islam, and the unremitting hostility with which they had treated its founder. Edward Pococke (1604–91), J. J. Barthélémy d'Herbelot (1625–95), George Sale (1697–1736) and Simon Ockley (1678–1720) were among the leaders of this scholarly revolution, with their insistence on the importance of Arabic documents themselves as the sources of their research.[15] Even Gibbon, no friend of the East, recognized the exceptional character of the founder of Islam: "Conversation enriches the understanding," he said of the Prophet, "but solitude is the school of genius." The old polemicism was increasingly replaced by a more enlightened scholarship. But it still stopped short of

14. There were some of a more liberal bent, notably the French Heugenots Picart and Bernard writing in Amsterdam, that comparative hotbed of religious freedom. Their multi-volume *Religious Ceremonies of the World*, appearing between 1723 and 1737, was notably lacking in polemic. But they were out of the mainstream, being the exception that proved the rule.

15. Holt, *Studies in the History of the Near East*.

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conceding to Islam a place with Judaism and Christianity in the galaxy of important religions, and only seemed to place the underlying hostility on a firmer scholarly footing. The translation of the Koran into English by Sale in 1734 was a vast improvement over the versions that preceded it. But in the *Preliminary Discourse* to the translation, itself a landmark in the European study of Islam, Sale finds hardly a manifestation of Islam that it did not owe ultimately to the Jews.

There was, of course, more to European feeling than resentment over the religious pretensions of Islam. The historic military conflict between Christianity and Islam was still fresh in the memory of both sides of the religious divide. The last large-scale European and Christian intrusion into the Arab and Muslim world, the Crusades, may have taken place centuries before, but the memory of that interregnum in what had previously been an uninterrupted string of Muslim successes had a remarkable life on both sides of the divide. The Muslims had eventually expelled the Crusaders from the Holy Land after a century of Christian rule, or misrule, and the unhappy cradle of Christianity had reverted to control of the infidels. But by the time the Danish expedition left Copenhagen, the conflict had reached the point where the two cultures could cautiously eye one another, if not accept each other openly.

But the memory of Islam as a threat was still too real and the behavior of the Turks was still too aggressive for Europe to take a dispassionate interest in the Muslim world. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the final expulsion of Muslims from the Iberian peninsula was already 250 years old, but parts of Spain had been Arab and Muslim far longer than they were currently European and Christian. And Catholic Europe was still alive to the threat in its midst of a kind of fifth column of *Marraños* and *Moriscos*, "new Christians" but still secretly Jewish and Muslim respectively. The Turks had begun the transformation of western Anatolia from a Greek and Slavic land to a Turkic one in the thirteenth century, but Constantinople had only fallen in the mid-fifteenth century. More recently, the Turks had subjugated south-eastern Europe, decimating the flower of Serbian and Hungarian chivalry in the process. In their annual spring and summer campaigns, the Ottoman Turks regularly marched into the heart of Europe, and they had only been turned away for the last time from the gates of Vienna in 1683.

The Turks had inherited the mantle of the defenders of Islam from earlier Arab and Kurdish dynasties. For all of their status as foreigners and oppressors in many parts of the Muslim world, there was no question that the sympathies of Muslims lay with them in this increasingly unequal battle. For the insufferable air of superiority assumed by eighteenth-century Turks was the reaction of a culture under siege. In fact, for all of the importance of religion in the clash of cultures, the conflict itself was in the process of change.

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The battle would increasingly be waged from the Western side by science, a kind of secular cousin to religion. In this, Niebuhr and his companions were unconscious and unwitting agents. But however the conflict was formulated, it was defined on Europe's terms. Europe set the stage for its incursions into the Orient, just as European scholars set the terms for this expedition.

The "Orient," then, in the minds of eighteenth-century scholars was an odd composite of equal parts geography, language, and religion. It represented a small part of the area lying to east and south of Europe, most specifically that area where the three "religions of the book" had arisen and were widely practiced. To attempt to define it more precisely would lend a specious clarity to what was, in the end, more a state of mind than a geographical location. It was more familiar than the other areas the preceding two centuries had opened to European eyes, and for that reason Europeans carried preconceived notions about what they would find there. It represented, through Judaism and the Judaic sources of Christianity, a putative cultural and religious past that was more important as it was less understood. Christian Europe had always maintained a curious nostalgia for this "Holy Land" and had maintained contact with it, with the exception of the two-century-long spasm of the Crusades, by means of pilgrims traveling to the holy sites. Their peregrinations took them to Palestine, to the Sinai peninsula, and often to Egypt, all part of the setting for the rise of Judaism, and then Christianity, as told in the Bible. Since the demise of the Crusader kingdoms these travels had always been at the sufferance of the Muslim authorities. North Africa and the Levant still represented a kind of debatable land in the ongoing conflict between Islam and Christianity, with the Mediterranean simultaneously separating the combatants and affording a medium for incursions into the territory of "the Other." As we will see, low-level naval warfare between the two sides still simmered in the "Middle White Sea" in the middle of the eighteenth century.

But it was not this narrowly–defined Orient, or the Muslim world, or the Arab world, or even the Holy Land that interested Michaelis. It was, instead, the Yemen or "Happy Arabia," the remote southwestern part of the Arabian peninsula, where a dialect of Arabic that differed from "western" Arabic was spoken, and whose habits, practices, and attitudes had been less corrupted by contact with outsiders. In his instructions to the members of the expedition, Michaelis makes this clear:

> . . . the accounts we have of Happy Arabia are very small in number. Nature there has spread riches of which we are still entirely ignorant. Its history goes back to the highest Antiquity; we know that the idiom there differs from that of western Arabia; and as

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> the idiom has been the surest light to guide us to a knowledge of the Hebrew language, how will new illumination on that most important of books, I mean the Bible, be possible if we are not able to attain a knowledge of the dialect of Oriental Arabic to the same degree we understand that of the west?[16]

The area of this pristine manifestation of Oriental society was the laboratory in which the scholars of the expedition would work. It was an area deep in the heart of Islam and penetration by Europeans would be possible only with the greatest circumspection and care.

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16. *Fragen*, V.

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