

SPRING
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Study Guide and Readings for the “Signature Assignment”

REL 265.103, “WORLD RELIGIONS”
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Signature Assignment

Due February 23, 2018

Is the God of the Bible the same deity (divinity) as the “Allah” of the Qur’an?

Here are some possible ways of answering the question:

1. **Yes.** There is one “true” God, and that God is both revealed in the Bible and in the Qur’an.
 - a. You can try to prove this *philosophically*. There is only one God, and religions that claim to believe in one God must believe in the same God.
 - b. You can try to prove this *theologically*: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have the same view of “ultimate reality,” of understanding “how the world works,” of what “God is like.”
2. **Yes.** We cannot know if any god exists (or, there is no god), but the 3 religions have the same understanding of what their god is. (This is a variant of 1.b.; however, you will be questioning/doubting whether the god “really” exists.)
3. **No.** The God of the Bible is the true “one God,” and the “Allah” of the Qur’an is a parody or “counterfeit” god. You can try to prove the negative of 1.a or 1.b.
4. **No.** Only Jews have the true God; the god of the Christians and Muslims is a “fake” or “forgery”.
5. **No.** The divinities of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are imaginary beings anyway, and each religion “invents” a version of god that supports their understanding of reality and their authority over their believers.
6. **It is impossible to know.** The divinities of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are imaginary beings anyway, and it is impossible to know if one god is the same as another god.
7. Remember the question posed at the end of our discussion on the Signature Assignment: How does one know that two spiritual beings are identical? How can one determine that God A is the same being as God B?
8. The essay should be 5-6 pages long, \approx 1750-2000 words.

Reserves

Translations of the Qur'an (Koran)

1. *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*. Introduced and Translated by Michael Sells. **BP130.4 .S43 2007**. Clear Translations with detailed commentary on the facing page. Begins later (Surah 83) in the Qur'an than the instructor's commentary (below). The place to begin when the student is ready to actually "read" the Qur'an.
2. *The Holy Qur'an*. Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary. Ali, Maulana Muhammad. **BP 109 .K45 1995**. Detailed Notes.
3. *The Qur'an*. English translation and parallel Arabic text. Abdel Haleem, M. A. **BP109 2010**.
4. *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. Cleary, Thomas. **BP 109 .K4613 2004**. Probably the best translation in the library for the average student. Small Print.

Introductions and Reading Guides

5. *How to read the Qur'an : a new guide, with select translations*. Ernst, Carl W., 1950-. **BP130 .E76 2011**. Ch. 2, "Early Meccan Surahs," gives detailed explanation of the Surahs which are presumed to be given at the beginning of Muhammad's activity. For advanced students.
6. *The Koran, a very short introduction*. Cook, Michael, 1940-. **BP130.4 .C66 2000**. Chapters 1 & 2: (pp. 3-20). **Start here!!**
7. The instructor has written a complete commentary on the Qur'an. The student can access it at the instructor's website:
http://www.davidwaynelaymanphd.com/uploads/9/6/0/5/9605300/quran_commentary.pdf

Judaism, Christianity, Islam

8. *Common ground: Islam, Christianity, and religious pluralism*. Heck, Paul L. **BP172 .H43 2009**. Ch. 1: "Does the Qur'an Belong in the Bible?"
9. *Inheriting Abraham: the legacy of the patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Levenson, Jon Douglas. **BS580 .A3 L483 2012**. A detailed explanation of the instructor's position that there is not a single "Abrahamic religion." See esp. chapter 6: "One Abraham or Three?"
9. *Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: Theological and Historical Affiliations*. Busse, Heribert. **BP172 B8613 1997**. Explains the Qur'anic retelling of the Biblical stories. Requires substantial background in the stories of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, and their understanding of their own stories.
10. *Islam: Past, Present & Future*. Küng, Hans. A theologically sophisticated presentation by famous Christian theologian. Küng adheres to the modern ecumenical idea that we ought to find common ground among all the world's religions, that ultimately they ought to seek to "get along." Requires some theological sophistication and background. Some parts that might be helpful include:
 - a. Pp. 45-56: Is there a single "Abrahamic" religion?"
 - b. Pp. 489-503: How do we understand Jesus from Jewish, Christian and Muslim perspectives? The student needs to be aware that the instructor does not agree with Küng's understanding of Jesus as "Messiah".

11. *No other gods: Christian belief in dialogue with Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam*. Vroom, H. M., 1945-. **BR128.B8 V76 1996**. Ch. 4, “The One God, the Prophet, and the Cross” is probably the most accessible discussion of the Assignment Prompt in the books on reserve.
12. *Opening the Qur’an: introducing Islam’s holy book*. Wagner, Walter H., 1935-. **BP130.4 .W24 2008**. Chapters 2 & 3, “Basic Narratives for Judaism and Christianity,” and “Islam’s Basic Narrative and Core Positions” give a detailed compare and contrast of the “narratives” (the basic “story-line”) of the three religions.

Other Translations in the “Stacks”

13. *The Glorious Qur’an: A Translation*. Pickthall, Mohammed Marmaduke. **BP 109 .P5 2000**. An older translation by an English convert (so English was his native language).
14. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*. Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. **BP 109 2002B**. A parallel edition of the Arabic and English translation, with extensive notes. Might be difficult to follow for the student new to the Qur’an.
15. *Interpretation of the meanings of the noble Qur’an in the English language : a summarized version of At-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, and Ibn Kathir,...* **BP130.4 .K5714 1994**. Printed in reverse (right to left order), with extensive notes.
16. *The Message of the Qur’an*. Asad, Muhammad. **BP 130.4 .A77 2003**. Heavy (literally: Arabic/transliteration/English with extensive notes).

Sources on the Internet

17. Several years ago, an instructor at a Christian college wore a “hijab” in “solidarity” with Muslims. This initiated an internet debate over whether the Christian god was the same god as Allah. This is a *philosophical* question: **is there only one “one-God”?** Put another way: can there be two different divinities, each claiming to *the* “one God”? Here are some important postings from that debate
 - a. **Pro** (God *is* the same god as Allah): <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2015/12/17/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god/> ;
follow-up: <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2016/01/07/why-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god/>
 - b. **Con** (God *is not* the same god as Allah):
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2015/12/muslims-and-christians/?> ;
<http://thefederalist.com/2015/12/21/wheaton-is-right-the-christian-and-muslim-gods-are-different/> ;
<http://www.andrewwalker.com/2015/12/18/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god-a-response-to-francis-beckwith/> ;
 - c. The basic theory that there is only *one* one-God is called “classical theism”. One contemporary defender of this theory is Edward Feser. Here he gives a “round-up” of different postings he has done on the issue:
<https://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2012/07/classical-theism-roundup.html> . Here is the primary post on the issue: <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2010/09/classical-theism.html> .

(Continued next page)

18. Pope Benedict XVI gave an important speech contrasting Christianity and Islam. Here is the Wikipedia summary (which you are permitted to use in your essay):
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regensburg_lecture . The important paragraphs are found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regensburg_lecture#Key_paragraphs . The full text can be found here: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html .
19. Muslim leaders responded with “A Common Word Between Us and You.” You can read key ideas here:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Common_Word_Between_Us_and_You#Main_quotes_from_the_Letter .
 The full text can be found at <http://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/> .
20. A key argument between Muslims and Christian critics is whether Allah is a God of love. A good statement on this question (arguing the negative position), and the general question of whether the God of the Qur’an is the God of the Bible is <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/06/no-the-god-of-the-quran-is-not-the-god-of-the-bible> .
21. Here is one of the instructor’s own writings comparing the role of Christ and the Qur’an: <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2010/08/is-the-quran-analogous-to-christ> .

Beginning on the next page, there is a commentary on the final part of the Qur’an, the “early” Surahs. (As the instructor explains in class, the Qur’an is in reverse chronological order.) The student is advised to read this to gain a quick introduction to this part of the Qur’an.

This commentary is based on and excerpted from the instructor’s complete commentary, posted at:

http://www.davidwaynelaymanphd.com/uploads/9/6/0/5/9605300/quran_commentary.pdf .

THE QUR'AN, SURAHS 73-114

In this last part of the Qur'an, a prophet (thought to be "Muhammad," but never named) is given what he believes to be a revelation of imminent destruction. This revelation is triggered by the prophet's horrified reaction to the pain and suffering of the weakest and poorest in his society. (I accept here the argument that there were economic dislocations within the Hijaz, presumably caused by the loss of trans-Arabian trade.) He is outraged, and his originally moral and humanitarian concerns twist into an angry attack on his community. He wants destruction. He wants doom.

I use the translation of Arberry,¹ for its literary qualities. In order to follow along, get some context, and consult alternative translations, the reader can go to <http://quran.com>. Type in the reference (e.g., 96:1-5, the first verses below) in the search bar at the top. One can select from six translations on the left hand side.²

I shall describe "The Book of Doom" under the following headings:

1. The prophet's summons
2. The reasons for judgment
3. The signs of judgment
4. Deniers of the day of doom
5. The sentence: paradise and Gehenna.

1. The prophet's summons

The Traditional Account gives the honor of the first surah (a section of the Qur'an) to **96**:

Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created,
created Man of a blood-clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous,
who taught by the Pen,
taught Man that he knew not. (vv. 1-5)

But the prophet is already thinking about the book that is supposed to be "recited". Since the revelations were originally communicated orally, it is unlikely that this was the very first revelation that he received.

Some western scholars prefer **Surah 74**:

O thou shrouded in thy mantle,
arise, and warn! Thy Lord magnify
thy robes purify
and defilement flee! Give not, thinking to gain greater
and be patient unto thy Lord. (vv. 1-7)

¹ *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. A. J. Arberry (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

² I recommend especially Pickthall and Yusuf Ali. Also, for clarity's sake, *deselect* Arabic images.

The prophet enclosed himself in his cloak to create a private place for prayer. It would also have created a cocoon of “sensory deprivation,” a fact significant in understanding the psychosomatic roots of his prophecies. He was told to purify himself, give without expecting reward, and wait patiently for “thy Lord.” The fact that he is urged to “be patient” suggests that it is not the very first.

I believe the most likely candidate for the first surah is **93**:

By the white forenoon
and the brooding night!
Thy Lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee
and the Last shall be better for thee than the First.
Thy Lord shall give thee, and thou shalt be satisfied.
Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee?
Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee?
Did He not find thee needy, and suffice thee?
As for the orphan, do not oppress him,
and as for the beggar, scold him not;
and as for thy Lord’s blessing, declare it.

The prophet had experienced some emotional trauma. The voice was assuring him of “thy Lord’s” presence. The words assume that the prophet was indeed an orphan. His own felt loss and presumably divine reassurance was then the basis of the central moral claim of the voice: **care for the poor**. For now, the “Lord” is the prophet’s specific spirit-guide. There is no hint of the absolute monotheism that emerges later.

The divine assurance is repeated in Surah 94:

Did We not expand thy breast for thee
and lift from thee thy burden,
the burden that weighted down thy back?
Did We not exalt thy fame?
So truly with hardship comes ease,
truly with hardship comes ease.
So when thou art empty, labour,
and let thy Lord be thy Quest.
The prophet hopes for some eventual divine reward in a life of “ease.”

The next step of the prophet’s aural revelations was the development of the belief in a judgment. His community didn’t accept his call for a more just economic order. Wealthy people in his community thought that they were protected from any loss, from the intrusion of any alien power that would deprive them of the fruits of their labor (90:5-6). They hadn’t realized “the steep,” the hard pathway to human flourishing:

“The freeing of a slave,
or giving food upon a day of hunger
to an orphan near of kin
or a needy man in misery;.... (90:11-16).”

They would be divided among the “Companions of the Right Hand” and “Companions of the Left Hand”; the latter were “those who disbelieve in Our signs.” Those who rejected the prophet’s message would be sent to “the Fire” (90:18-20).

2. The reasons for judgment

Why would people be sent to hell?

“We were not of those who prayed,
and we fed not the needy,
and we plunged along with the plungers, and we cried lies to the Day of Doom,... (vv. 43-46).”

Did not pray: 74.43; 75.30. Prayer is reliance on “the Lord,” the prophet’s spirit-guide, now universalized as the one true God of justice and judgment

Did not give to the needy: 74.44; 76.8 (those who did give); 89.17-20; 90.11-17; 92.8; 93.9-11; 107.

Ingratitude for God’s blessings and ill use of wealth: 74.10-25; 75.30-35;

77.23: God determines, not man;

80.17, 19-32: blessings of existence and life;

82.6-9: we are deceived about the origins of our lives, and thus fail to give proper thanks;

83.14: wealth has “rusted upon their hearts”

Failure to trust God in the bad as well as the good: 89.15-16; cf. 93.3 (The “Lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee”)

Would only do the right if there was some reward: the “godfearing...confers no favour on anyman for recompense (92.19)”--i.e., the godfearing does not bribe

Rivalry (102.1), Backbiting and Slander (104.1); Arrogance and “Insolence”: 75.30-35; 78.22; 96.6-7.

In summary, the indictment is the men are ungrateful, arrogant, and self-reliant, they rely too much on their wealth, they do not live rightly for its own sake, without some this-worldly reward, and they are constantly struggling to get ahead in life’s game, at the expense of their fellows.

3. The signs of judgment

This is probably the strangest part of these surahs. Many of them include oaths, often at the beginning, that seem to claim to support the truth and veracity of the revelations. For example, the first one (in canonical order) is 74.32-35:

“Nay, by the moon
and night when it retreats
and the dawn when it is white,
surely it [the Book] is one of the greatest things...”

The prophet is confronting a doubter, who says that the words of the prophet are “naught but a trumped-up sorcery (v. 24).” The prophet responds (in modern English), “I’ll see you in hell.” So he’s trying to prove the truth of his revelations. But how does the natural process of the moon do that? Everyone knows the moon comes out at night and disappears at daylight. But the prophet is using it as an oath to prove the truth of his words.

At the beginning of Surah 77, we read:

“By the loosed ones successively
storming tempestuously
by the scatterers scattering
and the severally severing
and those hurling a reminder
excusing or warning,

Surely that which you are promised [the day of doom] is about to fall!

The prophet’s meaning is very obscure. Most translations give the idea of storms and (rain-) clouds, but obviously all such paraphrases are educated guesses. But once again, how does the fact of storms, and the mysterious nature of winds blowing, prove that the prophet’s words are not just made up?

Many of these oaths refer to astronomical phenomena (84:16-18; 86:1-3; 91:1-6; 85:1).

Otherwise, they refer to events or phenomena of generally obscure, barely explainable, emotional power. The prophet seems to be saying: “there are amazing, astonishing, inexplicable things that happen in the world--and that’s what’s happening to me and in me and through these messages I bring.” The words themselves communicate *power* and *energy*, which is what the prophet is experiencing inside of himself.

Secondly, there is the awe we experience in the skies. A transcendent yearning rises within us, unnameable, surging like a great wave that both threatens to overwhelm us, yet comforts us with its stability and certainty.

Thirdly, the other events are **liminal** events. “Liminal” is a term applied by anthropologists to a particular kind of rituals. A **liminal ritual** is a ritual that is enacting a transition from one stage to another. However, the transition has not been completed. In our culture, weddings and funerals are the best examples: in the former, the couple is neither single or wedded; in the latter, the bereaved family has lost a loved one, but has not fully relinquished that one to the post-life state. In cultures where there are complex coming-of-age rituals, the young man or woman is no longer a child, and not yet an adult. Traditional cultures view such events as times of great danger, to be navigated with complex and carefully enacted ritual.

No! I swear by the slinkers,
the runners, the sinkers,
by the night swarming,
by the dawn sighing,
truly this is the word of a noble Messenger

having power, with the Lord of the Throne secure,
obeyed, moreover trusty. (81.15-18)

Note the energy and motion of the words (slink, run, sink). The night “swarms” (ever stared up in a night sky until your head swims?). The dawn “sighs” as the sun--not yet here--slowly rises.

All of these phenomena are phenomena or times of emotional tension. The old has gone, the new has not yet come. Indeed, the entirety of the Book of Doom is a liminal time: **Doom is coming, but not yet here.** Thus all the other liminal, emotionally charged, moments give evidence that *this* impending Day of Doom is real.

4. Deniers of the day of doom

The prophet’s summons that the prophet’s prophetic mission began with a personal promise to him from his spirit-guide that he would take care of him. This promise was attached to the revealed declaration that people were to provide for the poor, needy and orphans, even as the spirit-guide was taking care of the prophet.

The prophet began to spread the message, but it was not well received. the prophet responded with bitter anger: “how dare you not respond to this divinely revealed message? God (actually, the prophet’s spirit-guide) will punish you.” This, I think, is the origin of both the prophet’s belief in a final judgment and in a single deity. The logic was:

The prophet was powerless to effect the revenge, therefore the spirit-guide must do it at some future point.

As resistance continued, and no resolution was in sight, the prophet’s expectation both hardened and was projected into an eschatological future: there would be a decisive judgment, at which those who resisted the teaching would receive a final and full punishment.

A final punishment required a single, unitary deity, otherwise some opposing deity (the jinni, among others) could counter the acts of the prophet’s spirit-guide.

Therefore, a judgment day was coming, and the judge would be the one true divinity of the universe. So now the prophet has added to his message the claim of the “Day of Doom.” But this was simply another assertion that needed to be substantiated against the nay-sayers.

Surah 77 is largely devoted to attacking the “deniers of the day of doom,” and providing “evidence” for the reality of that day.

When the stars shall be extinguished,
when the heaven shall be split
when the mountains shall be scattered
and when the Messengers’ time is set,
to what day shall they be delayed?

To the Day of Decision.

And what shall teach thee what is the Day of Decision?

Woe that day unto those who cry it lies! (vv. 8-15)

The text follows with what it regards as corroborating evidence for the “Day of Decision”:

- destruction of ancient peoples (vv. 16-19);

- gestation of the unborn in the womb, a place of “mean water” (water that is regarded as “impure” when expelled in the act of birth) (vv. 20-22);
- creation of earth with its mountains (vv. 25-27), see also ;
- “sweetest water” (to drink, in apparent contrast to the “mean water” of the womb) (v. 27)

Other examples include:

- 78.5-15: earth, mountains, sleep, night and day, the “seven strong ones” (heavens?), sun, rain to “bring forth ...gardens luxuriant”;
- 86.11-12: the “returning rain” that gives rise to the “earth splitting with verdure, ...it is no merriment (apparently meaning, “it is no joke”);
- 87.4-5: God creates the “pasturage,” and then turns it into “a blackening wrack”;

• 88.17-20:

“do they not consider how the camel was created,
how heaven was lifted up,
how the mountains were hoisted,
how the earth was outstretched?”

It is not clear what this evidence proves. Every pagan knew that the world was both wonderful in its created order, and yet terrible in the cycle of human order and destruction. Yet the prophet thought he was telling them something novel, that nature itself was proof of a final judgment and resurrection.

5. The sentence: paradise and Gehenna

Behold, Gehenna has become an ambush,
for the insolent a resort,
therein to tarry for ages,
tasting therein neither coolness nor any drink
save boiling water and pus
for a suitable recompense.

They indeed hoped not for a reckoning,
and they cried loud lies to Our signs; and everything We have numbered in a Book.

‘Taste! We shall increase you not save in chastisement.’

Surely for the godfearing awaits a place of security,
gardens and vineyards
and maidens with swelling breasts, like of age,
and a cup overflowing.

Therein they shall hear no idle talk, no cry of lies, for a recompense from thy Lord, a gift, a reckoning. (78.21-36)

Hast thou received the story of the Enveloper?

Faces on that day humbled?

labouring, toilworn,

roasting at a scorching fire,

watered at a boiling fountain,

no food for them but cactus thorn
 unfattening, unappeasing hunger.
 Faces on that day jocund,
 with their striving well-pleased,
 in a sublime Garden, hearing there no babble;
 therein a running fountain,
 therein uplifted couches
 and goblets set forth
 and cushions arrayed
 and carpets outspread. (88.1-16)

‘O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord,
 well-pleased, well-pleasing!
 Enter thou among My servants! Enter thou My Paradise!’ (89.27-30)

The human race is primarily divided between the “insolent” and the “godfearing.” I have previously argued that “insolence” is defined by [rebellion](#) against the message as delivered by the earlier prophets or the prophet. If that is correct, then “godfearing” primarily means *acceptance* of God’s message through the prophets. The analysis in the earlier sections on “The Book of Doom,” strongly implies that one’s doom is determined by whether one listens to (or argues against, by “plunging”) the prophet’s revelations.

A notable characteristic of the qur’anic descriptions of paradise and Gehenna is their **sensuality**. The judgment of Gehenna is expressed by graphic images of water that does not cool, liquid that does not quench thirst, food that does not nourish or “fatten”.

In contrast, for the believers is a feast set in a garden with running water, reclining among cushions spread among luxurious “couches” (? benches), set on carpets--presumably in tents on the ground. The conversation will be quiet and pleasant, no argument or heated discussion. For the pleasure of the guests, there will “maidens” (? virgins), of the same age of the guests, with “swelling breasts.”

I therefore conclude that “paradise” for the prophet was the community he always wanted but never had. It was the community in which he could experience God’s pleasure (see 89.27-30 above), and also **be pleased**, experience the gratification, both spiritual and sensual, that he desired.