

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext* by Gabriel Said Reynolds, 2012. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 308 pp., £28.00, 978-0415-52424-7 (pbk) [MD]**

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Qur'anic studies has been one of the most active areas of Islamic Studies with scholars seeking to shed light upon the Qur'an's history and its reception. Especially during the past decade, academic presses have published numerous original works dealing with the Qur'an and its exegesis. This current work by Gabriel Said Reynolds is another timely scholarly contribution as a part of the Routledge Studies in the Qur'an series. In the introduction, the author clearly places himself in opposition to the school of the eminent historian, William Montgomery Watt (d.2006). For Reynolds, this opposition to Watt and others lies in the fact that for him the key to unlocking the Qur'an 'secrets' does not involve reading the Qur'an through the prism of Muḥammad's biography (*sīra*) but rather in exploring the Qur'an's literary milieu without necessary recourse to Muḥammad's biography which is largely the product late eighth and ninth century (C.E.) Muslim dogma and thus an entirely unreliable guide to reading the Qur'an.

This book consists of four lengthy chapters. Chapter one entitled "The Crisis of Qur'anic Studies" the author further justifies his creative methodology. Here, Reynolds insists that both the Muslim exegetical tradition (i.e. *tafsīr*) and *sīra*, was a product of later centuries in which Muslim writers were embroiled in a wholly dissimilar cultural-religious context-detached from the literary milieu of the Qur'an. . In a shot across the bow, Reynolds describes scholars such as Noldeke (d.1930), Neuwirth and 'Abdel Ḥaleem as being overly reliant upon the exegetical tradition which guides them in the otherwise untamed literary chaos of the Qur'an I find this comment excessive and dismissive of his years of scholarship on the Qur'an not to mention the Qur'anic dictionary (co-authored with Elsaid M. Badawi) in which 'Abdel Ḥaleem demonstrates his ability to engage with the language and style of the Qur'an without blind

recourse to the *tafsīr* as speciously ascribed to him by Reynolds. In continuing his critique of post-Qur'ānic exegetical literature, the author states that the entire collection of 'pre-Islamic' poetry has been retroactively ascribed to the pre-Islamic era by Muslim scholars and thus, unreliable. The author did not expand upon this sweeping generalization of pre-Islamic poetry nor did he provide any examples to demonstrate his point. It seems that the author's objective was to indicate that in the same way the exegetical *ḥadīth* literature (ascribed to Muḥammad and his early community) is a product of later Muslim construction, so it is the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry- thus both of these sources are unreliable tools for accessing the Qur'ānic literary milieu. Overall, the author's objective in chapter one was to display the poverty of contemporary Qur'ānic studies and the need to situate the Qur'ān within its larger literary tradition, namely, Biblical sources. Reynolds vehemently insists that the field of Qur'ānic studies has for too long relied upon post-Qur'ānic sources as a means for understanding and unlocking the meanings of the Qur'ān. These post-Qur'ānic sources include *tafsīr*, *sīra*, and *pre-Islamic poetry* all of which are products of eighth-ninth century Muslim dogma which was disconnected from the Qur'ān's seventh century religious-literary milieu.

"Qur'ānic Case Studies" is one of the important chapters of the book in which Reynolds presents fourteen case studies. He begins his study by laying out the Qur'ānic passages which deal with the selected theme; he then ventures to demonstrate the paucity of consistent and reliable information in various exegetical sources and Qur'ānic translations. Once the reader is able to fully appreciate the confusion of the matter, he then introduces the 'Biblical subtext' which essentially consists of Syriac, Greek, and Hebrew passages stemming from the Bible itself and its commentary tradition, all of which is either pre-Qur'ānic or nearly contemporary to the Qur'ān (pre-7th century or early-late 7th century). Reynolds analytically endeavors to work on Q7:25 "O children of Adam we sent down to you clothing to cover your shameful parts and *rish*..." He points out that although the literal meaning of *rish* is feathers, the vast majority of classical and medieval exegetes have been unable to accurately define *rish* within the context of Adam and Eve's fall from the Garden of Eden. (p.66) He initially illustrates that various translators have

mistakenly relied upon the metaphorical interpretation of *riṣh* in the exegetical corpus and thus have translated *riṣh* as adornment or finery. However, there are two key errors on the part of the exegetes; firstly, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, *al-Ṭabarī*, and *al-Kashshāf* do not connect 7:25 with its immediate context as found in 7:27, which states: “Do not let Satan lead you astray as he sent your parents out of the garden *when he tore off their clothing from them*, in order to reveal to them their shameful parts.” Therefore, Reynolds insists that *riṣh* must be some sort of covering or specific clothing. He, then, draws a parallel with Genesis *Rabba* (20:12) in which states that Adam and Eve wore a covering of light prior to their fall from Paradise, and according to Genesis 3.21, it is after this fall that God re-clothed them with tunics of skin. Hereby, Reynolds deduces from this -by also relying on the *Cave of Treasures*- that Adam and Eve were given garments of skin or tunics of skin (either of animal or plant source). Consequently, rather than ponder over metaphorical interpretations of “feathers” (i.e. adornment, wealth or finery), Q7:25 is -for Reynolds- an obvious case in which the Qur’ān is participating in the larger literary-religious milieu of Biblical literature. In fact, Reynolds states these examples indicate that the Qur’ān was in conversation with Judeo-Christian literature. Furthermore, the Qur’ān’s composer(s) (as per Reynolds view) negotiated with Judeo-Christian sources, and eventually integrated and or refashioned various Biblical legends. For Reynolds, the Qur’ān, itself, may be deemed to be a work of exegesis in which it creatively alludes to Biblical passages and commentaries. My only nuisance with this grand hypothesis is to comprehend how, why and when the writer or compilers of the Qur’ān negotiated and digested all of this Biblical material. Was Muḥammad a Biblical scholar, and did he rely upon Jewish and Christian exegetes in composing the Qur’ān? For the vast majority of Muslims, these insinuations are untenable since the Qur’ān in their view is not a creative literary composition written by Muḥammad and or others, rather, it is a divine revelation (*al-wahy*). For Muslim scholars who hold to the tenant that the Qur’ān is a divine revelation-the hypotheses of Gabriel Said Reynolds would be entirely objectionable unless they were ready to dismiss any pre-conceived notion that the Qur’ān is the direct revelation from God. However, it would not be unreasonable for a Muslim to accept that many Qur’ānic passages

can be clarified in the light of Greek, Syriac, and Hebrew Biblical tradition, which was set down prior to the Qur'ān's inception. This notion for Muslims would in turn legitimize many pre-Qur'ānic sources as confirming the Qur'ān's "truth".

In chapter three entitled, "Qur'ān and *Tafsīr*" Reynolds once again returns to the task of breaking the link between the Qur'ān and its exegetical tradition through mentioning that the various exegetical works were grounded in a context foreign to the Qur'ān's seventh century literary milieu. The Qur'ān was read in an atomistic fashion by scholars such as al-Ṭabarī who failed to connect various verses of the Qur'ān to one another due to his reliance upon *asbāb al-nuzūl* (the occasions of revelation) and Qur'ānic chronology. That is to say, they did not treat the Qur'ān as a literary composition in which part of it may shed light on the other. As John Wansborough (d.2002) stated: "historical order could thus be introduced into what was essentially literary chaos" (p.206). Indeed, this passage sums up Reynold's concern with *tafsīr* in so far as instead of historicizing the Qur'ān, ambiguity may be resolved by negotiating with the "literary chaos" of the Qur'ān in light of its Biblical subtext. Put differently, by recalling the Biblical subtext, some semblance of meaning may be given to those otherwise ambiguous passages for which the likes of Ibn Kathīr despite their use of *ḥadīth* traditions are unable to render clear. It is apparent that Reynolds does not dismiss the importance of *tafsīr*, but he stresses that it must be approached as a genre of literature which operates within its own historical context and it should not be confused with the seventh century literary-religious environment of the *Hijāz*.

The author's central thesis that the Qur'ān is in conversation with biblical literature is considered in the fourth and final chapter entitled "Reading the Qur'ān as Homily," The author precisely describes Qur'ānic allusions to the Bible and its exegetical traditions as homilies because many of the references are merely cryptic allusions and thus may be classified as homiletic. These references are not designed to revise or confirm biblical stories, but rather they are formed a part of the Qur'ān's overall rhetorical strategy with the objective of urging its listeners and or readers to live a morally upright and God-centered life.

As for further areas of improvement, it would have been appropriate if the author provided the English translation of the German and French quotations particularly for those readers who are not familiar with these two languages. Moreover, I felt that Reynolds could have explained if the writer(s) of the Qur'ān were really in "conversation" or interacting with biblical scholars and sources, how and where did this precisely take place?

This question will also be raised in the readers' mind; is there any reliable historical evidence to suggest that the Prophet Muḥammad, the Christians and Jews of Mecca or Medina were conversant enough (whether aurally or textually) with the appropriate biblical resources to integrate these allusions into the Qur'ān? Or more plainly, were Muḥammad and his associates Biblical scholars? At this time there is no direct evidence, which can approve or refute these claims. When viewed within the context of current scholarship on the Qur'ān, Reynolds work may be characterized as a unique and provocative work in Qur'ānic studies. All in all, this book would be a great resource for scholars of Western religious traditions, graduate and or upper level undergraduate students.