

A remarkable commentary on the Qur'an and the Bible

Gabriel Said Reynolds puts the two sacred texts into respectful, honest conversation.

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In Review

GABRIEL SAID REYNOLDS

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TEXT AND COMMENTARY

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By Gabriel Said Reynolds
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Some scholars believe that the Qur'an's teachings are based on Judeo-Christian subtext (as do many Christian theologians); others believe the Qur'an to be the last link in the chain of the Abrahamic scriptures (as per Islamic understanding). Both groups will benefit from this nonpolemical study, which comments on the entire text of the Qur'an (as translated by Ali Quli Qara'i) in relationship to the Bible and ancient literature related to the Bible.

Gabriel Reynolds, a Catholic who teaches Islamic studies and theology at the University of Notre Dame, focuses mostly on the Qur'an in its historical context rather than interpretations or traditions that emerged in the medieval period. While most scholars put the relationship of the Qur'an with the Bible aside in their exegetical commentaries, this project is centered on the Qur'an's relationship with biblical literature. Reynolds points out that about one-fourth of the Qur'an addresses Jewish and Christian scriptures, characters, and stories. He frequently refers to the "Qur'an's conversation with the Bible" as a critical resource for understanding the Qur'anic text. What makes this book exceptional is that it is arranged in the same order as the Arabic Qur'an (the version that Muslims consider *the* Qur'an) while drawing attention to comparable themes and stories in Judeo-Christian literature.

Reynolds frequently makes use of extrabiblical literature, including Jewish and Christian texts and homilies that followed the Old and the New Testaments but preceded the Qur'an. For example, he puts the Talmud in conversation with Qur'an 2:80 ("And they say, 'The Fire shall not touch us except for a number of days'") and 3:24 ("That is because they say, 'the Fire shall not touch us except for numbered days'"). In the section from Talmud that Reynolds cites here, b. Rosh Hoshanah 16b-17a, Beth Shammai identifies three levels of suffering on the Day of Judgment. The thoroughly righteous will not suffer at all, the thoroughly wicked will suffer infinitely, and "the intermediate will go down to Gehinnom and squeal and rise again," having experienced the refiner's fire described in Zechariah 13:9. Readers familiar with the Qur'an may recall at this point that references to "three groups" are found elsewhere in the Qur'an. Similarly, in the commentary on Qur'an 4:43, which addresses refraining from prayer when drunk, ablution with water (*Wudhu*), and ablution with the earth when water is not available (*Tayammum*), Reynolds identifies parallel traditions in the Talmud.

Many Islamic traditions draw upon the Qur'an's Christian subtext more than its Jewish subtext, Reynolds argues, and he draws attention not only to the canonical Greek Gospels but also to Syriac gospels and homilies. For example, a section of Qur'an 3:181 that is sometimes characterized as anti-Jewish polemic refers to the unjust killing of the prophets. Commenting on this verse, Reynolds cites places in both the Old Testament and the New Testament where Israelites are accused of killing prophets. He then quotes similar rhetoric from the *Lives of the Prophets* and Ephrem, a Syriac Christian who proclaimed that the Jewish people "slaughter the prophets / like innocent lambs. Doctors came to them / and they became for them a butcher" (*Sermons on Faith*, 3:379-382).

Reynolds highlights the contrasts between traditions as well as the commonalities. For example, regarding the story of Joseph, Reynolds points out several differences between Qur'an 12 and the Genesis narrative. Genesis speaks of Joseph having two dreams, while Joseph has one dream in the Qur'anic narrative. Jacob scolds Joseph in Genesis when hearing about his dreams, but there is no scolding in the Qur'an. Instead, in the Qur'an's version of the story, Jacob is concerned for Joseph's safety given the jealousy and animosities shown by his brothers. At this point, Reynolds extends beyond the canon and looks at Syriac Christian writings (e.g., the homilies of Narsai), which he shows to be more similar to the Qur'anic passages than the Genesis narrative is.

In commenting on Qur'an 57:27 ("Then We followed them up with Our apostles and We followed [them] with Jesus son of Mary and We gave him the Evangel, and We put kindness and mercy into the hearts of those who followed him"), Reynolds points out similarities to the Sermon on the Mount. He cites Matthew 5:7-9: "Blessed are the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them. Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognized as children of God." In this instance, he writes, the Qur'anic text "seems to reflect something of the spirit of the Gospels."

On the subject of God confirming Jesus with the Holy Spirit (*ruh al-qudus*) in Qur'an 2:87, Reynolds notes the traditional Muslim identification of the Holy Spirit with the archangel Gabriel. He writes, "the Qur'an seems to reflect here the Christian notion of a close relationship between God, the Spirit, and Christ, even while it refutes the divinity of Christ." Additional cross-references here to the Syriac term for Holy Spirit (*ruha d-qudsha*) and South Arabian Christian inscriptions (*rh qds*) impressively demonstrate Reynolds's vast research into the subject.

Devout Muslims may frown upon Reynolds's language about the authorship of the Qur'an. While acknowledging that Muslims believe the entire text to be God's literal word and non-Muslim readers sometimes regard it as the words of Muhammad, Reynolds avoids making either claim by using the phrase "the Qur'an says."

Nonetheless, as Reynolds points out, his book was written not to express a particular faith but rather to increase understanding of the Qur'an's subtext by examining its relationship with the Judeo-Christian scriptures and literature. He has done a masterful job with that objective. This book is a great reference for anyone serious about studying the Qur'an to gain an understanding of the relationship between Islam and its Judeo-Christian predecessors.