

Book Review

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Daniel J. Crowther, Shirin Shafaie, Ida Glaser, and Shabbir Akhtar,
eds. *Reading the Bible in Islamic Context: Qur'anic Conversations*. Oxford:
Routledge, 2018. 338 pages. ISBN: 9781138093577 (hardback), \$140.

This volume brings together contributions from a conference held in 2015 under the title “Biblical Interpretation in Islamic Context,” hosted by the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies in Oxford. It aims at being the first in a series on the same topic.¹ At the conference, Christian and Muslim scholars read a number of biblical texts, from both the Old and New Testaments, from a Muslim perspective. They either read these texts together with possible parallel texts from the Qur'an, or they brought notions from the Islamic tradition to aid their comprehension of the text.

Part of the context in which many Christian readers of the Bible live today is religious diversity. In the introduction to the volume, editor Ida Glaser argues that it is important for committed Christian scholars to read their Scripture in conversation with Islam.

For their part, Muslim scholars have read their Scriptures in conversation with the Bible from the outset. Readers of the Qur'an have always been aware of its complex relationship with Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The text of the Qur'an itself is constantly referring to those Scriptures. It was a well-known practice of early Muslim exegetes (who sometimes had a Jewish background) to make use of biblical texts in order to clarify the

¹ See the website at <http://cmcsoxford.org.uk/research/the-bible-in-an-islamic-context/>.

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meanings of qur'anic references. This practice, however, was met with sharp criticism by a number of other classical Muslim scholars, who argued that Jews and Christians had falsified and obscured the original revelation from God in their Scriptures. In other words, it is not strange to Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an to be aware of the contentious and complex, yet real, issue of intertextuality.

For the majority of Christian scholars and readers, however, reading the Bible through the lens of Muslim tradition is a relatively new practice. One of the fruits of this enterprise may be the development of Bible translations that are more sensitive to the perceptions of an audience of people living in a Muslim context.

Glaser and her co-organizers do not aim at the development of a uniform methodology. There can be no general recipe for this type of comparative reading. However, Glaser does distinguish different tasks which the contributors have set for themselves. Her organization of the volume is informed by the analytical framework David Tracy uses for the reading of classical texts. He sees such reading as a process progressing from a *conversation* between the world of the reader and the world of the text, to a *recognition* of relevant commonalities, and finally to the development of *analogy* between the world of the text and the world of the reader. Each of these elements is reflected in the sections of the collection under review: Part I, Intertextual conversations; Part II, Questions about texts; and Part III, Analogical explorations.

None of these tasks is without its ambiguities. In the "conversations" section, the comparison between biblical and qur'anic narratives (for instance, stories about Abraham/Ibrahim, Joseph/Yusuf, and David/Dawud) reveal deep differences as well as commonalities. The section on "recognition," or questioning the texts to identify commonalities, raises the important question, among others, whether it is at all possible for Muslims to see the Bible as Scripture for themselves, and the related question of how Christians should regard the Qur'an. The third part, "analogy," makes very interesting reading, dealing with a number of themes that have always been bones of contention between readers of the Bible and the Qur'an, such as the nature of sin, the meaning of purity, and the way in which God's word is revealed to humankind. Here also, the differences make clear that this type of enterprise does not necessarily lead to easy consensus.


This reminds me of the practice of scriptural reasoning, the joint reading of texts from their traditions by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.² This

² See the website at <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/>.

practice does not aim at agreement but, as Nicholas Adams puts it, “better quality disagreement.”³

This book has much to offer for committed Christian and Muslim scholars who aim at just such a clarification of their own faith in the light of their conversations with those of other religions.

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³Nicholas Adams, “Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics,” in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People*, ed. David Cheetham, Ulrich Winkler, Oddbjørn Leirvik, and Judith Gruber (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 59–78 (66).