

Mustansir Mir: *Understanding the Islamic Scripture: A Study of Selected Passages from the Qurʾān*
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Understanding the Islamic Scripture: A Study of Selected Passages from the Qurʾān “seeks to make the Islamic Scripture, the Qurʾān, accessible to general English-speaking readers.” The author tells us in his short preface that

these readers, Muslim or non-Muslim, presumably wish to know—in an intellectually respectable way, yet in readable idiom—the following: What kind of a book is the Qurʾān? What does it have to say, and how does it say it? Are there—many readers in the West might ask—any correspondences or points of contact between the Qurʾān and the Bible? Questions like these have guided my writing of this book. (ix)

The book consists of thirty-seven translated “representative passages” of the Qurʾān “in readable, jargon-free language” (ix), a short “General Introduction”, “Concluding Remarks”, copious “Notes”, a glossary, and a bibliography consisting of twelve works consulted by the author. In most, but not all, of its thirty-seven sections containing translations of the passages of the Qurʾān (or of short surahs), the book follows a uniform pattern. Each part begins with (i) an introduction, which contextualizes the selected passage or surah; (ii) a verse by verse commentary, which forms the second major aspect of this work (the first being the translation itself); (iii) literary notes, which highlight the literary qualities of the text; and (iv) a comparison of the passage (or surah) with the Bible, using Biblical data and/or interpretation of events or persons as found in the Bible.

Although the author’s stated intent is to produce a book for “general English-speaking readers,” this pedantic structure is obviously more suited for university students rather than general readers. This aspect of the book is further highlighted by the endorsement on the back cover: “I found this text accessible, engaging, and teachable, and I think it will make a wonderful addition to classrooms and armchair scholars across the English-speaking world.” This brief statement sums up the most prominent quality of the book: the work will, indeed, make a good addition to the academic works on the Qurʾān and to the libraries of armchair

scholars for it drenches all power, warmth, and motivational force of the Qurʾān, punctiliously dissects its text and reads like the discourse of an armchair scholar steeped in Western literary theories. It is precisely this approach to a revealed text that raises numerous issues of translation, interpretation and usage for discerning readers. What *Understanding the Islamic Scripture* does to the most cherished book of one fourth of humanity amounts to a surgical operation which dispenses with the canon of propriety and respect with which Muslims have treated the Qurʾān for centuries. These rites of Islamic tradition may not be of much concern to an average non-Muslim reader, but the serious problems of translation and interpretation must be the concern of all and hence they form the main body of this review.

Problems of Translation

The well-known limitations of translation are, by general consensus, much more pronounced when dealing with the text of the Qurʾān for a variety of reasons, which include its characteristic style that conforms neither to the conventions of Arabic prosody (*nazm*) nor to the rhymed prose (*sajʿ*) of the pre-Islamic Arab poets—a style which ipso facto imparted to Arabic a quintessential sublimity. Its consecrated language which, together with the astonishing stability of the root forms of Arabic, ruled out any corruption of the text of the Qurʾān due to the natural changes that take place in languages over time simultaneously made it impossible to be rendered into any language through human effort without considerable loss of the force, eloquence, sublime beauty, and grandeur of the original. Humbled by the task, no translator has ever claimed to come close to the original. By necessity, translators have to make a number of fundamental decisions in accepting these limitations. The author of *Understanding the Islamic Scripture* claims to have “endeavored to stay close to the text and yet produce a readable translation...which aims at retaining the structures and emphases of the original Arabic text” (10).

The emphasis of the original is often built into the verbal forms of the Arabic language, forcing translators to use superlatives in English in order to express the quality and force of the original. For instance, faced with the task of conveying the intensity of Divine Mercy and various shades of meaning imbued in the Divine attribute *al-Raḥīm*—one of the two Names of Mercy used in the invocation *basmalah* as well as in *al-Fātiḥah*, the opening surah of the Qurʾān—in conjunction with *al-Raḥmān*, many

translators often resort to using phrases like “the Most Merciful”, “the Ever-Merciful”, the Boundlessly Merciful”, or “All-Merciful”. The original verbal adjective derived from r-ḥ-m on the pattern of *faʿīl* indicates an intense quality possessed by the subject as well as an act which is frequent, or occurs constantly. Mir uses the quantitative adjective “Very”, which conveys only one of the two essential qualities (intensity) of the original, but not the other (repetition, perpetuity).⁶ There is no justification for coining a new and rather weak, commercial sounding, phrase when previously available and readable translations exist.

This is not an isolated example; it seems that the entire effort is driven by the desire to be different, to say something new, no matter how irrelevant or even absurd it becomes: The author translates *ihdi na-ṣirāṭal mustaqīm* as “Guide us into the Straight Path” and then insists that the clumsy “into” conveys the meaning of the Arabic text from which “the preposition—it would, normally, be *ilā*, “to”—is omitted” (18). The same desire to produce a different or unique translation has resulted in a number of other striking variants: *al-Qāriʿah* (often translated as “Calamity”, or “The Sudden Calamity), is translated here as “Striker” while the title of the fifth surah of the Qurʾān, *al-Māʿidah*, is translated as “Feast”, which leaves out one of the primary meanings of the word often indicated by other translators as “The Table Spread”. To be sure, this translation of *al-māʿidah* is closer to the primary meanings of the original as all classical dictionaries tell us.

Modernism in Approach

The work is marked by a modernist approach to the Qurʾān. This is reflected in the translations as well as in interpretation. There is a strong emphasis on a clean break with tradition and Aristotelian rationalism reigns supreme, reducing everything to the level of strict rational discourse. This approach is not accidental or specific to this work only; it is present in Mir’s

6. The Oxford Dictionary provides the following details for “very” as adjective, none of which has the quality of something done often: (i) properly so called, truly entitled to the name or designation; real, genuine; (ii) truthful, sure, reliable; (iii) exact or precise as opposed to approximate; (iv) so-called in the fullest sense, possessing all the essential qualities of that specified, complete, absolute; (v) as an intensive emphasizing identity, significance, or extreme degree; (vi) that is neither more nor less than that denoted or specified by the noun, exactly that specified, sheer, mere.

other works as well. Fourteen years before the publication of *Understanding the Islamic Scripture* Mir had concurred with Mohammed Arkoun, another modernist, that “twentieth-century Qur’ān commentary makes a definite break with traditional style of exegesis, which, in general terms, may be said to have lasted from the early Islamic centuries to the end of the nineteenth century”.⁷ Whatever the meaning of this dramatic statement may be in concrete terms, it is closer to truth that “this definite break” is more in the minds of those who have severed their ties with the tradition, for the “proofs” offered by these modernists do not really amount to much. The “proof” offered by Mir in the same article is based on a statement: “one manifestation of this break is the view that the quranic⁸ (*sic*) *sūras* are unities. I shall argue that this view is now fairly well-established in modern Qur’ān commentary.”⁹ The weakness of this “proof” is self-evident: the *sūrah* has always been considered a discrete unit of the Qur’ān; *suwar* of the Qur’ān have distinct names, there are numerous *aḥādīth* about specific characteristics of different *suwar*, they have always been treated as discrete units; they are memorized and recited individually, exegetes have always considered them as units, so what does it mean to say that there is a “definite break” with the entire tradition if four Qur’ān recent commentators have placed greater importance on the internal unity of the Qur’ānic *suwar* and their thematic relationships?

The second aspect of modernist thought in this work appears in its strict Aristotelian rationalism, although the logic and didactic processes employed here do not rise above the level of a sophomore. A representative example is the section entitled, “The *Sūrah* As A Logical Argument”, which brings into reader’s purview an imaginary “human speaker”, who

7. Mustansir Mir, “The *Sūrah* as a unity: A twentieth century development in Qur’ān exegesis” in G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur’ān* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 211-224.

8. Mir follows the Orientalists’ convention of using a lower case “q” for the adjective Qur’ānic. Since “everything signifies” is a truism, this recent shift in the so-called conventions of the Oriental scholarship is not without meaning. Among other things, a capital letter is used to represent uniqueness. When we spell “John”, we impart a uniqueness to this word which is lost in “john”. The word “Qur’ān” and its derivatives refer to a unique text and its qualities; therefore, to remove capitalization from a derivative but not from its mother word is, to say the least, an inconsistent choice.

9. *Ibid.*, at 211.

observes the universe, notes its order and harmony and

reaches the conclusion that the source of all this providential care is a single being—a sovereign who created everything and sustains everything.... The speaker next wonders why God is taking such providential care of the universe... At this point, a question arises in the speaker's mind: 'Does God's providential care place any responsibility on me?' The question arises because privilege entails responsibility... The thought of accountability leads the speaker to the notion of a day on which all human beings will be called to account, a day on which God will sit in judgment. So, the speaker says: the Master of the Day of Recompense'... Having submitted to God, the speaker, still using the plural pronoun, now asks for direction: 'Guide us into the Straight Path' (16)

This chilling rationalism is as far from the intensity and urgency of the Qur^ʿanic discourse as one can imagine; perhaps Kyriell M. Noon is right in describing *Understanding the Islamic Scripture* as a “wonderful addition to armchair scholars”. The translator seems to be obsessed with the task of flattening the text to the nth degree in order to squeeze out the immediacy and intensity of the original. In addition, the vocabulary and syntax of these translations is more suited to a commercial treatise than a religious text: “This passage highlights, in a striking way, the importance of the Bible as an aid to Qur^ʿanic exegesis; it shows unmistakably that *the Qur^ʿān has stakes in the Bible*” (49, emphasis added). One wonders what does it mean to say that the Qur^ʿān has stakes in the Bible? What kind of corporate world are we dealing with?

Mir shows a marked preference for oddities in matters of interpretation, choice of words, and in various other exegetical matters. One example will suffice: He preferably calls “plausible” the view that the first surah revealed to the Prophet was *al-Fātiḥah* on the authority of al-Rāzi; Bayhaqī's *Dalāʿil an-Nubuwwah* as quoted in Ibn Kathīr, and *al-Manār*” (209) without giving any weight to the fact that al-Rāzi merely says “it is said that this is the first surah sent down from the heavens” without quoting any authority; that Ibn Kathīr has a tendency to indiscriminately quote *aḥādīth* of varying authenticity in his *tafsīr*, but in this case, he himself has called Bayhaqī's report *mursal* in his *al-bidāyah wa'l nihāyah* (vol. 3, 10); and the opinion in *al-Manār* is at odds with generally accepted Muslim

exegetical tradition based on *ṣaḥīḥ aḥādīth*—an opinion which regards the first five verses of *al-ʿAlaq* as the first revealed verses of the Qurʾān.¹⁰

Problems of Beliefs

One of the most pronounced aspects of *Understanding the Islamic Scripture* is the author’s desire to show a positive relationship between the Qurʾān and the Bible. This overriding desire may have been the result of his personal commitment to some idealized notion of contributing toward interfaith harmony, it may have been the publisher’s selling strategy, or it may have arisen from other motives not accessible to readers, but there is no mistake in the conclusion that the work is motivated by a strong desire to show a positive relationship between the Qurʾān and the Bible. This is stated in so many words in the brief note by the author in his “General Introduction” (section IV) and given expression in the sections entitled “Comparisons with the Bible” that appear in almost every selection or surah translated in the book. In his General Introduction, the author claims that “the popular view of Islam as a religion that is radically different from Judaism and Christianity is mistaken. Equally innocent of truth is the popular view that the Qurʾān is completely at odds with the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament” (8).

While it is true that the Qurʾān is an integral part of a larger scriptural tradition, yet the claim that “in their essential religious outlook and ethical perspective, the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Scriptures are more similar than dissimilar [because] the themes of the oneness of God, prophecy, revelation, ethical conduct, and moral accountability are as central to the Qurʾān as they are to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament” (9) raises important concerns from an Islamic perspective. A fundamental article of Muslim belief is that the Qurʾān is a revealed Book—a revelation sent down by Allah to Prophet Muḥammad over a period of twenty-three years. Furthermore, Muslims believe that the Qurʾān is incorruptible; its protection has been guaranteed by none other than by the Sender of the Qurʾān Himself: *Verily, We have sent it down and We are its Protector.*¹¹ On the other hand, the New Testament is, by general consensus, a record of the life of Jesus written by four identifiable human beings none of whom ever claimed to have received revelation. Thus, to treat the New Testament

10. See Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1422/2002), 76-77.

11. *al-Ḥijr*: 9.

at par with a revealed book is highly problematic. Likewise, the bulk of the present-day Old Testament is non-revelatory; all that the Qurʾān confirms as revealed is the Torah and the Zabūr—the first five books (the Pentateuch) of the Hebrew Bible revealed to Prophet Mūsā (Moses),¹² and the Psalms, revealed to Prophet Dāwūd (David). And even while the Qurʾān confirms these revelations, it points out in a number of passages that these books have been falsified and this falsification is not of ancillary nature, but of fundamental importance as far as beliefs, laws, and rules of conduct are concerned. Thus, only a facile comparison can build an edifice on the assumption of centrality of certain themes (“the oneness of God, prophecy, revelation, ethical conduct, and moral accountability”) in the Qurʾān, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament. For one thing, the central theme of the New Testament is not *Tawḥīd*, Unicity of God, not even God Himself; the central theme of the four Gospels that comprise the New Testament is the life of Jesus. As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, the author, by his own admission is not competent to quote from the original (“I am not a Bible expert”) and the New Revised Standard Version is utterly inadequate in matters of belief.

Thus, the spinal chord of *Understanding Islamic Scripture* is a fractured skeleton that cannot bear the weight of the mighty issues it attempts to tackle. This is obvious to everyone, even to the author himself, since he is compelled to conclude, albeit indirectly, that the comparison he is making is rather far-fetched. At each instance of stating this he, however, hops over issues of belief, requiring utmost care, merely by inserting a “nevertheless”, “however”, or a “but”: “Undeniably, there exist irreducible differences between the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and, consequently, between their scriptures. Nevertheless...” (9); or through confluence: In “Jesus in the Bible and the Qurʾān”, the author side steps what can be called the most important point of belief (*ʿaqīdah*) by saying: “We cannot discuss at length the Biblical view of Jesus’ birth, miracles, and mission. We will only consider how the Bible seems to help to elucidate some of the points made in the Qurʾānic passage under discussion and how the Biblical account is similar to or different from the Qurʾānic” (87); with this caveat in place, the author quotes the opening chapter of Luke, where the birth of Jesus is described, and then states: “There are some obvious similarities between the Qurʾānic passage under discussion (that

12. That is, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

is, *Āl-ʿImrān*: 45-51), and the New Testament passage”; then he notes

There are also some obvious differences between the New Testament passage and the Qurʾānic passage. Unlike the Qurʾān, the New Testament provides more detail, giving names of specific persons and places. And, unlike the Qurʾānic passage, the New Testament passage acquires political overtones by predicting the ascendancy of the house of David over the house of Jacob. Most important, though, the New Testament passage, by calling Jesus “the Son of the Most High” and “Son of God,” seems to divinize Jesus, whereas the Qurʾānic passage repeatedly emphasizes Jesus’ humanity. From an Islamic standpoint, however, the word “son” in the New Testament expressions “the Son of the Most High” and “Son of God” ought to be understood in a figurative rather than in a literal sense. If so, then the word “son” or the expression “son of God” may be used of any human being, not exclusively of Jesus—just as God may be called the “Father” not only of Jesus but of any other human beings (*sic*) (see section IV.5, below). (88)

Section IV.5 states: “There is a clear resonance between Jesus’ statement in verse 51 of the Qurʾānic passage, “God is my Lord and your Lord” (verse 51), and Jesus’ statement in John 20:17, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (89).

What is glossed over here and elsewhere in the book regarding Jewish, Christian, and Muslim beliefs about God, prophecy, prophets, and the Hereafter are the most important issues of belief. Linguistic acrobatics notwithstanding, fundamental beliefs of major denominations of Christianity are in sharp contrast to the message of the Qurʾān. One cannot bulldoze them merely with literary devices or figurative interpretations; the whole edifice of Christianity crumbles if one takes away the belief in Jesus’ crucifixion, his resurrection on the third day, the redemptive powers ascribed to him and other such tenets. What is astounding in this work is its deliberate avoidance to engage in these fundamental differences between the Qurʾān and the Bible. These differences are not merely limited to the status of Jesus; they span the entire spectrum of fundamental beliefs about the nature of revelation, the status of God’s Prophets, life, death, and the Hereafter.

In these matters of belief, one cannot avoid the fact that although the Qurʾān and the Bible both deal with many similar themes (oneness of God, prophecy, revelation, ethical conduct, and accountability), they do so from their own specific perspectives which cannot be reduced to any

common ground. For instance, the acts and deeds of various prophets recorded in the Bible have very little to do with how they are mentioned in the Qurʾān. In fact, when viewed from the Qurʾānic perspective, the Biblical account appears to be sacrilegious. Not only that, there are irreducible differences between the treatment of these themes in the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible.

Biblical data has been used by many Qurʾān commentators, but it is also important to note that this usage is traditionally guided by certain well-defined rules and is often limited to details of events. In the work under review, these limits have not been observed. The book may be a good start for its intended readership, but it is an introduction that leads to a simplified, even false, understanding of the message of the Qurʾān.

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