

## An Islamic Commentary on Galatians: *A Muslim Philosopher Reads Paul*

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'Repent of your evil deeds' is a motto dating from early Islam that generated controversy over the status of the sinner's works. A fierce legal battle arose that led to opinions that later ossified into Sunni juristic orthodoxy. The hidden impulse behind this 'gospel of works' was to track heresies that could affect the integrity of the state, since every religious controversy was a surrogate for some political disagreement that could threaten the cohesion of the community. By contrast, Christians do not view good deeds as an avenue to salvation, but rather as the outworking of the free gift of salvation offered by Jesus on the cross.

Christians and Muslims have long differed over the role of law in a believer's life. It was the Apostle Paul who first rejected a key inherited ritual of Judaism, namely circumcision, an emblem of the law and its works. Paul preached Christ crucified, not Christ circumcised. Sinners need a saviour, not mere guidance; they crave salvation through divine payment for sin, not the gifts of divine education and edification. They need the Christ, not simply another messenger from God.

Paul's epistle to the Galatians is the occasion for the first declaration of his apostleship. It portrays Paul's mission in Galatia, then a Roman province and now a part of secularized Muslim Turkey. On his first journey, Paul established assemblies of Gentile Christians who were not obliged to follow Jewish ritual and ceremonial laws. Perhaps owing to changes in policy by the Jerusalem apostles, especially Peter and James, other missionaries from the mother church of Jerusalem visited the Galatian neophytes and caused confusion. Paul felt that they were diluting and indeed adulterating the pure message of God's free grace in Christ Jesus. Christ is enough for the Christian; the law does not save.

In my commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, I shall examine the Apostle's core contentions using the lens of Islamic doctrine. There are no unbiased readers of any text, sacred or secular, since we all bring presuppositions to our reading. Indeed, a Muslim takes an ambiguous view of Christianity since the Qur'an both

honours Jesus of Nazareth as one of the prophets and is critical of Christian doctrine about him. Muslims are both post-Pauline and pre-Pauline in their thinking: they can see Islam as both an historical faith, founded in seventh century Arabia, and hence post-Christian, but also as the faith of submission (*islām*), the confession of all messengers, including Jesus and Abraham, and therefore pre-Christian. If Paul was the Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles, Muhammad was the Gentile Apostle to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Exegesis of a rival scripture can be a concealed form of polemic. My aim, however, is to enter into the mind of the Apostle and present his vision to the Muslim (Gentile) reader. Christians, given the arguments of Galatians (and more fully of Romans), coherently but competitively view Islam as a regrettable regression to an earlier law-observant model of the believer's life. Islam is a return to Judaism, albeit a Judaism for the Gentiles. Paul would lament, 'O you foolish Muslims!' (cf Gal 3v1)

By inquiring into the status and limits of law, we arrive at a comparative inter-faith theology. Like the Judaizers who crept into the Galatian churches, the Muslims (or the Islamizers) began to undo the work of the Spirit and of the Christian kerygma some six centuries later. The Qur'an was revealed in part to subvert Pauline Christianity! Muslims plague the labours of the Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles.

Are Muslims then doomed to read Galatians with hostility? While every reader brings certain commitments to the text, his or her awareness of this fact can counteract some prejudices. A more intractable problem, however, is that writing a commentary on a work can imply a measure of reverence for the author. Many orthodox Muslims were suspicious of the way Muslim philosophers, especially Avicenna and Averroes, wrote commentaries on pagan authors such as Aristotle since such an undertaking implied respect for their superior wisdom.

Virtually all commentators on Biblical texts are themselves from the Christian tradition



and most accept the inspiration of the text and see it as divine scripture. Respecting another faith, however, does not entail accepting its ideals to be true. As a Muslim commentator, I see the New Testament as *partly* true, since many of its claims (moral and doctrinal) are similar if not identical to those found in the two related Semitic monotheisms. Among Muslims, the word *tafsīr* is used paradigmatically only of commentary on the Qur'an. A commentary on the Bible is in a sense a *tafsīr*; a word used in the Qur'an (*al-Furqān* 25:33) that merely means explanation. It would nonetheless be doubly odd to call my work a *tafsīr* since it is not on the Qur'an and is moreover about a rival if partly revered scripture that makes competitive claims about human nature and salvation.

In the interests of Christian-Muslim relations, Muslim readers should seek to understand the subtlety and nuance of Pauline teaching in Galatians and other Pauline epistles. Otherwise, it is easy to misinterpret Christian thinking concerning the law-versus-grace debate, and to caricature doctrine dealing with Christology and the Incarnation. Indeed, the Qur'an is completely silent on the law and grace debate: it never accuses Christians of being guilty of permissive antinomianism nor criticises the (Pauline) doctrine of liberty in the Spirit. This charge, unlike the doctrinal ones, is post-Qur'anic, a part of the vilification of Paul by later Muslims.

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