

Is Bible Study *Ḥalāl*?

Muhammad Al-Hussaini considers potential difficulties and opportunities from a Muslim perspective.

A recent legal opinion in Saudi Arabia declares, 'It is not permissible for the believer to read the Torah and Gospel by reason of what has occasioned them both by way of corruption and alteration, and because God (Glorified be He) has enriched the Muslims with the Noble Qur'ān, which is preserved from any change or alteration...' ¹ The *dallīl* (juristic proof) for this ruling asserts a Qur'ānic supersessionist principle: 'This day I have perfected for you your religion, completed My Favour upon you, and elected for you Islam as your religion'. ² It further cites the *ḥadīth* compiled by Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, ³ with its cognate narrative in the collection of al-Dārimī:

*'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb brought the Messenger of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) a copy of the Torah, and said, 'O Messenger of God! This is a copy of the Torah'. And he [the Prophet] was silent, and he [Umar] began to read. And the face of the Messenger of God began to change. So Abū Bakr said, 'Woe to you! Do you not see how the face of the Messenger of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) is become?' So Umar looked at the face of the Messenger of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) and said, 'I seek refuge from the anger of God and the anger of His Messenger (may God bless him and grant him peace)! We are well pleased with God as Lord, with Islam as religion, and Muḥammad as Prophet'. So the Messenger of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) said, 'By Him in whose hand is the life of Muḥammad, even were Moses to appear to you, and you were to follow him, and you were to leave me, so would you have gone astray from the level path, for if he were alive and knew my prophethood, so would he have followed me.'*⁴

These and further related rulings confine reading of the Bible only to Islamic scholars who are aiming to refute the alleged errors of the People of the Book. It might appear that a practice such as Scriptural Reasoning is therefore unlikely to have sanction in orthodox Muslim circles. The Talmud introduces parallel

prohibitions for Jewish reading of the New Testament.⁵ It is certainly true that through the Middle Ages much interreligious textual engagement between Muslims and Christians (as well as Jews) was framed within the architecture of classical scholarly polemics and the artifice of the Disputation. The development of a highly evolved genre of polemical *Sefer Nizzahon* and *Radd* literature in Judaism and Islam respectively, reflects a strict limitation of reading of the New Testament to scholars and anti-Christian polemicists. The roll call of authors of such treatises, however, spans a wide range of exegetes, philosophers, and divines from both traditions.

Out of this less-than-fertile ground, then, how might the modern activity of textual studies like Scriptural Reasoning develop into a practice that has a mandate from traditional Muslim believers? First, a traditional Muslim might rightly look afresh at Qur'ānic mandates which speak unequivocally of the interrelation between the Arabic Qur'ān and the foregoing Scriptures, which allege foreshadowing reference to Islam's Prophet in those texts, and which speak of a Torah 'wherein is guidance and light'.⁶ Thus, permission for the Muslim to engage in shared Christian-Muslim textual study arises from a robust imperative to truth-seeking inquiry, as expounded in al-Ṭabarī's classical commentary on *Qur'ān* 2:256 'Let there be no compulsion in religion, the truth stands clear from error', and its counterpoint in *Qur'ān* 16:125 'To remonstrate by that which is best'. The exegesis of al-Ṭabarī on the former verse cites several *ḥadīth* narratives contextualising the occasion of revelation in the narrative of a man who was seeking to coerce his Christian or Jewish children to enter Islam, which coercive behaviour was prohibited by Qur'ānic Revelation.⁷ In regard to *Qur'ān* 16:125, al-Ṭabarī asserts that the call (*da'wa*) should be by 'that which is best' after the manner provided by God in His Book. Such engagement is set in apposition to pious forbearance and gracious patience

of character.⁸

These fundamentals therefore might yield the seeds of respectful but robustly truth-seeking Christian-Muslim study, fostering not liberal consensus but rather 'better quality disagreement'. In the best of our classical tradition of polemics, it is recognised on the one hand that study by a Muslim (or a Christian) of the sacred text of another tradition does not necessitate abandonment of the efficacy and sufficiency of her own Scripture, nor does it require an *a priori* endorsement of the full truth of the other book. However, by calling upon Qur'ānic moral imperatives for graciousness in dialogue, the Muslim must reflect the profound reverence which she holds for the sanctity of Islamic Scripture and traditions of reading by extending the same courtesy to the sentiments of her Christian reading partner about the Bible. The *a priori* here is thus not the acceptance of another's claims to truth, but simply the acceptance of the other as fellow truth-seeker of God's face and God's Word, and in this latter there is undoubtedly much stronger Islamic sanction.

Notes

¹Fatwa 13445 of the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Iftā' in 'Abd Allah ibn Ghudayyān, 'Abd al-Razzāq 'Affī and 'Abd al-'Azīz bin 'Abd Allah bin Bāz, *Fatāwā al-Lajna al-Dā'ima* (Makkah: al-Ri'āsa al-Āma li-l-Buḥūth al-'Ilmiyya wa-l-Iftā', n.d.) 2: 3: 123.

²*Qur'ān* 5:3.

³'Abd Allah al-Dārimī, *Sunan al-Dārimī*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Fikar, 1978), 435.

⁴Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 20 vols. ed. Aḥmad Shākir and Hamza Aḥmad al-Zayn (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1995), 15,437.

⁵*Tosefta Shabbat* 116a and *Sanhedrin* 59a

⁶*Qur'ān* 5:44

⁷Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 12 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1991-92), on *Quran* 2:256.

⁸*Ibid.*, on *Qur'ān* 16:125.

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