

Not Just an Interesting Exercise

Ida Glaser considers why shared study of scriptures is profitable from a Christian perspective.

Reading the Qur'ān and the Bible together is a complex activity. Consider the following two verses chosen for our first group study, which was on knowing the truth:¹

'If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own account' (John 7:17, NIV).

Indeed, those who disbelieve, it is the same upon them whether you have warned them or have not warned them, they will not believe (Qur'ān 2:6, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem).

From any perspective, this is interesting. It introduces both common ground and difference between Christians and Muslims, and does so not through assertions or emotions but through foundational texts. We immediately see that the verses share the idea that accepting the truth depends on the recipient's attitude, but that the first is about discovery and the second about belief. We might also note a question about the place of the individual's freewill relative to God's determination of response; indeed, the Qur'ān goes on to speak of God sealing the hearts and the ears of the unbelievers. If we read the verses in their immediate contexts, we further find that:

- The first is spoken by Jesus to Jews gathered in the temple for the Feast of Tabernacles; the second is addressed by God to Muhammad, but neither audience nor occasion is mentioned.
- The first is part of a long discussion of the acceptance of Jesus as God's promised Messiah; the second is about the acceptance of the Qur'ān as God's book of guidance.

These differences reflect the different natures of the Qur'ān and the Bible, and point to the different questions that Muslims and Christians bring to their respective texts. For example, Christians read John 7 not only as part of John's Gospel, but in light of the biblical salvation history that centres on the Messiah. What, then, is the significance of the Feast of Tabernacles, and what precisely is Jesus claiming in this context? Muslims would ask at what point in Muhammad's life *Sūra* 2:6 was given, what *hadīth* might say on the subject, how previous authorities have interpreted it, and what guidance for

action might be implied.

From an academic perspective, this is difficult. A comparative study of just these two verses would ideally require knowledge of both Greek and Arabic and the range of interpretation of both texts. Reading together with knowledgeable Muslims and Christians is an excellent way forward. It not only enables us to learn from one another's expertise, but also to listen to Muslims and Christians discussing different interpretations within their own traditions.

From a relational perspective, this is important. Listening to one another in this way, especially in the context of eating together, develops not only understanding but also relationship. The Qur'ān and the Bible are not just being handled as interesting historical documents, but as authoritative scriptures for their respective adherents, so we can see each other's tensions and questions and get beyond stereotypes. For example, there is a stereotype that suggests that Muslims are fatalistic while Christians see themselves as totally free to choose. Our group had a very interesting discussion of the tensions between predestination and free will not only in theory but also in the personal experience of both the Christians and Muslims present.

From a Christian perspective, is this valid, and is it useful?

On the one hand, there are two major Christian objections to the practice of joint reading of Scripture:

First, that it implies acceptance of the Qur'ān. From the beginning, there has been a range of Christian opinion on the Qur'ān, as there has been of Muslim opinion on the Bible.² Some have rejected it outright, some have seen it as in some way inspired by God, and most have taken an intermediate position of affirming such truths in it that accord with biblical teaching while rejecting its revelatory claims. However, for the purposes of joint study, participants choose not to pre-judge each other's texts, but be ready to learn and be honest about points of disagreement as well as those of agreement.

Second, that Christians should not study other scriptures. In that the Qur'ān, as

usually interpreted, denies some central aspects of Christian faith, some would see studying it as not only unnecessary but also potentially dangerous. However, I would argue not only that the Christian need fear nothing, but also that there is good biblical precedent for studying non-biblical religious texts. Daniel and his friends are the prime Old Testament example. Their study of the 'wisdom' of Babylon would have included learning about religious rites that would have been objectionable to them, but this study was a key to effective service and mission in their context (Daniel 1–6). In the New Testament, Paul's knowledge of Greek literature was an important element in his witness to the Athenians (Acts 17:16–31).

On the other hand, there are important potential gains from such study:

- The context is, in itself, fruitful for developing mutual understanding and good relationships with Muslims.
- Hearing from Muslims how they interpret the Qur'ān can help us on the one hand to assess its truth and on the other hand to avoid 'bearing false witness' against Islamic faith.
- Better understanding of Muslims and of the Qur'ān can enable us, like Paul in Athens, to find relevant ways of explaining Christian faith.
- Hearing Muslims' questions about the Bible and about how we interpret it can stimulate examination of our own faith and fresh appreciation of our Scriptures.
- This can be an excellent opportunity to introduce Muslims to the Bible, and to Christian readings of it, in a non-confrontational environment.

At the very least, as my colleague Muhammad al-Hussaini often points out, shared study can lead 'towards better quality disagreement'.

Notes

¹The texts studied are at [www.cmcsoxford.org.uk/downloadlibrary/Q & B TRUTH.pdf](http://www.cmcsoxford.org.uk/downloadlibrary/Q%20%26%20B%20TRUTH.pdf)

²An introductory selection of relevant primary texts in translation can be found in J-M. Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*, v.2 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, 2000), 201–18, 261–76.

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