

Why does the Bible Matter?

The significance of the Bible for contemporary life



Reflections from the Centre for Bible, Ethics & Theology



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Why The Bible Matt

There is a sense in which the Bible does not matter at all to Muslims and is of no interest for the study of Islam. Mainstream Islamic tradition has discouraged or prohibited reading the Bible and has taken the Qur'an as the final and complete revelation, making earlier revelations superfluous. Moreover, Muslims maintain that Christians and Jews have either changed the very wording of their Scriptures or at least corrupted the pure monotheistic message they originally contained. It is Islamic doctrine that God gave Moses the Torah, David the Psalms, and Jesus the gospel. However, Muslims do not find sufficient evidence to believe that the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have transmitted those original revelations faithfully, and they maintain that the original gospel given to Jesus has in fact been lost. The four Gospels found in the New Testament are no more than accounts written by Jesus' followers. They may contain some parts of the gospel revealed to Jesus, but one cannot know for sure.

The relationship of the Qur'an and Islam to the Christian New Testament may be compared to the relationship of Christianity to the Jewish Tanakh or Hebrew Bible. Historically speaking, Judaism and Christianity as we know them today both emerged out of the variegated Jewish religious environment found at the time of Jesus. Theologically speaking, however, Christianity comes after Judaism and sees the New Testament message of Jesus Christ as the completion of God's promises given in the Hebrew Bible. Christians thus read the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament, preparing the way for the New, and the Hebrew Bible is an integral part of the Christian canon of Scripture. Christians cannot reject the Hebrew Bible since

they believe that the story it tells is essential to God's work brought to fullness in Christ. The fact that Jews and Christians share a Scripture with its stories, wisdom, and prophetic insights means that they have much in common. They can talk together about the faith journey of Abraham and Sarah and the drama of Samson and Delilah, and they can appreciate together the prophets' calls for justice and the deep psychological insights of the Psalms. Yet the Christian relationship with Judaism remains ambivalent, because Christians and Jews disagree on the fundamental meaning of the Hebrew Bible and whether it finds fulfilment in the New Testament.

Much as Christians confess to know better what the Hebrew Bible means than

ers: Islamic Studies

Jon Hoover

Jews, Muslims confess that the Qur'an trumps both the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible. However, Muslims go one step further than Christians, by excluding all earlier texts from the domain of authoritative Scripture. Emerging in the seventh century, Islam comes after Christianity both historically and theologically—and the Qur'an clearly refers to both Judaism and Christianity in a way that the Bible could never have referred to Islam. The Qur'an perceives itself as proclaiming the same message as that given to earlier messengers, such as Moses and Jesus, and it sometimes regards Jews and Christians as having equal access to God's blessings and rewards: 'Truly, those who believe, those who are Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians—whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does

good deeds—will have their reward before their Lord. No fear will overtake them, nor will they grieve' (Q. 2:62). Moreover, the Qur'an refers to many stories, practices, and beliefs familiar from the Bible and late antique Christian and Jewish literature—to the point that some historians speak of a biblical subtext to the Qur'an. Yet Muslims have traditionally rejected the notion that the Bible, Judaism and Christianity had any influence on the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad, and Muslims have not taken the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament into their canon of authoritative Scriptures. Instead, it is understood that the Prophet Muhammad received the Qur'an directly from God, without the mediation of the Bible or the Jews and Christians of that time. In Muslim doctrine, the Qur'an proclaims the

MEET THE AUTHOR



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same essential theological message as the Bible and provides the final corrective to all error found in it, but the Qur'an is in no way dependent upon the Bible.

The fact that Muslims have not adopted the Bible as part of their canon of Scripture means that they need not try to reconcile its stories with differing accounts found in the Qur'an. In a simple example, the biblical account of Noah has all three of Noah's sons and their families board the ark, and they are all saved from the impending flood (Gen. 7:13). However, the Qur'anic account says that one of Noah's sons refused to enter the ark and thought that he could save himself by seeking refuge on a high mountain; he of course drowned (Q. 11:42-43). For Muslims the Qur'anic account takes priority over the biblical version.

In another example, the Qur'an does not say clear-

ly that Jesus died on the cross. Rather, it accuses the Jews of claiming that they had killed Jesus when in fact they had not. The text reads, '[The Jews] said, "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them... they certainly did not kill him' (Q. 4:157). Many a Muslim interpreter has said that this verse denies that Jesus died on the cross—God instead raised him to heaven directly—and has suggested instead that one of Jesus' disciples was made to look like him and was crucified in his place. Christian readers of the Qur'an have noted that it also quotes Jesus as saying, 'Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised to life again' (Q. 19:33), and have argued that there is thus no reason to deny Jesus' death on the cross, as the verse affirms both Jesus' death and resurrection. It was,

have explained this Qur'anic reference to Jesus' death differently: it applies to his dying a natural death after returning to earth just before the final Day of Resurrection—not to a death during his earlier time on earth. This traditional Muslim interpretation makes no attempt to reconcile the text with the New Testament crucifixion accounts.

Even though the Bible holds no religious authority for Muslims and despite the widespread Muslim conviction that the Qur'an and Islam owe nothing to the Bible, Muslims have still found occasion to use the Bible, in a variety of sometimes unexpected ways. It is here that the Bible begins to matter for Muslims and the study of Islam, and Muslim use of the Bible certainly constitutes an important chapter in the history of the Bible's reception and interpretation.

The Qur'an is not always easy for readers today to understand, even for native speakers of Arabic. Nor was it easy to understand for the early Muslim community either. This created a demand for biblical lore—stories derived from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and especially later religious writings of biblical inspira-



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after all, the Romans who carried out the crucifixion, not the Jews. Muslim commentators for their part

tion—to fill in the gap. Two early Jewish converts to Islam, ‘Abd Allah ibn Salam and Ka’b al-Ahbar, were well known for knowledge of biblical traditions, while the most famous early Qur’an commentator, Ibn ‘Abbas (d. 686), apparently made liberal use of their traditions. Moreover, there was a saying narrated from the Prophet Muhammad permitting borrowing from the Jews. The Prophet is reported to have said, ‘Transmit from me, even if only one verse. And narrate [traditions] from the Children of Israel; there is nothing objectionable in that’ (found in the hadith collection of Bukhari). The net result of this liberality toward biblical lore was that a lot of it found its way into early commentary on the Qur’an. With the passing of the centuries, however, some Muslims grew increasingly ambivalent toward these stories; the medieval Qur’an commentator Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) was one noteworthy critic. Ibn Kathir argued that Muslims should rely solely on the Qur’an and traditions from the Prophet Muhammad to interpret the sacred text, not on stories and legends borrowed from Jews and Christians.

One example will illustrate the point. The Qur’an is not entirely clear about which son Abraham was commanded to sacrifice (Q. 37:100-107). Was it Isaac, as Jews and Christians contend on the basis of Genesis 22:1-13, or was it Ishmael? Numerous traditions were gathered in support of both views, and classical Qur’an commentators weighed up the evidence, sometimes in favour of Isaac and sometimes in favour of Ishmael. Ibn Kathir sought to put an end to this speculation by condemning the Jewish convert Ka’b al-Ahbar as the source for all traditions supporting Isaac and by reinterpreting the Qur’an, and even the Bible itself, to support Ishmael as Abraham’s intended sacrifice. Ibn Kathir’s attack on Ka’b al-Ahbar reverberated through the centuries into

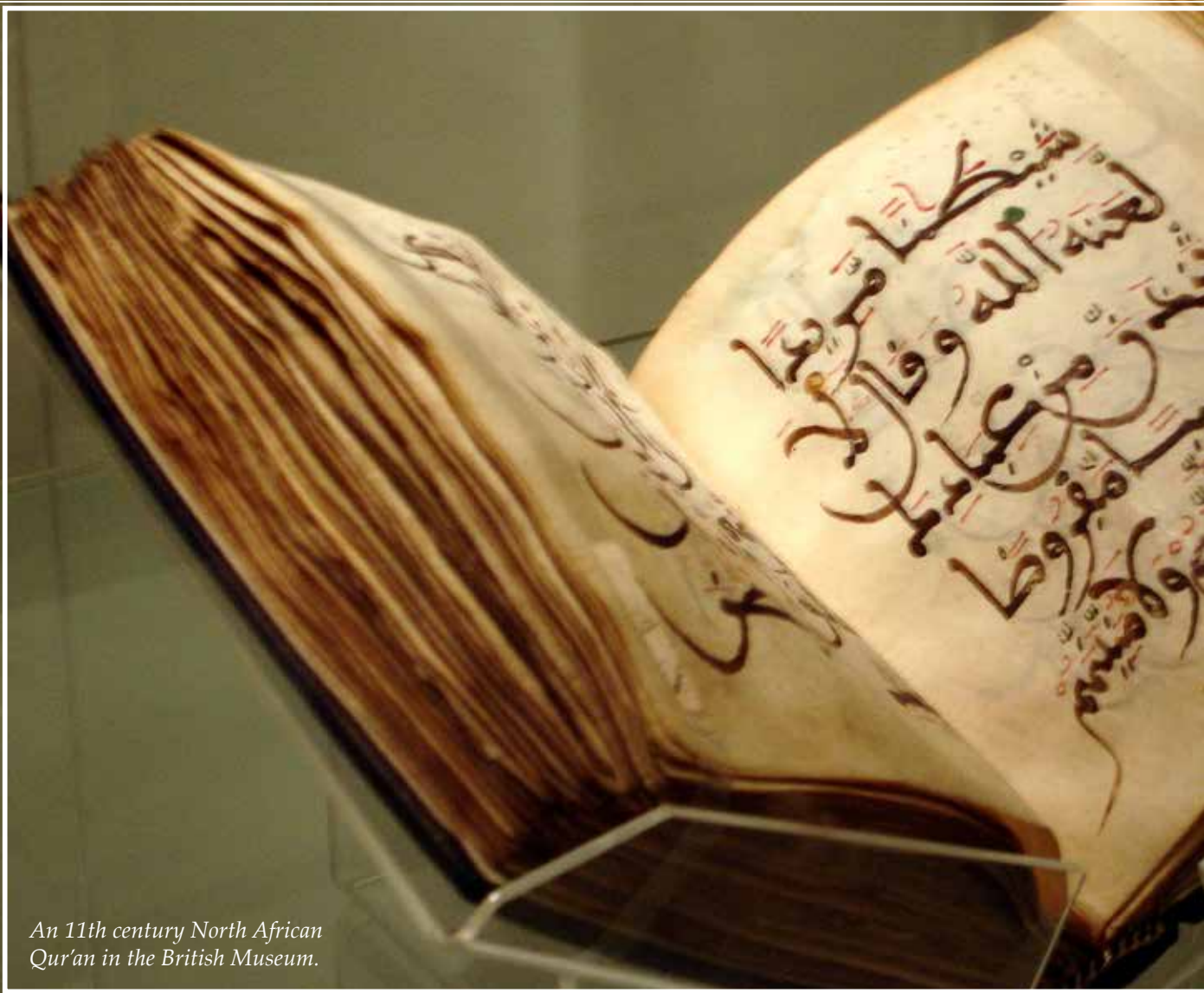
the modern period. Just before Zionism ushered in the state of Israel in 1948, a Muslim commentator in Egypt named Abu Rayya labeled Ka’b al-Ahbar the first Zionist, on account of what was now seen to be his hideous attempt to undermine the Islam-

Many Muslim Qur’an scholars throughout the twentieth century worked to cleanse qur’anic commentary of biblical lore and interpret the Qur’an only through itself.

ic religion. Many Muslim Qur’an scholars throughout the twentieth century worked to cleanse qur’anic commentary of biblical lore and interpret the Qur’an only through itself and traditions from the Prophet.

Even though most Muslims no longer look to biblical lore to illuminate the meaning of the Qur’an, the Bible is still of concern to them insofar as they encounter it in interaction with Jews and Christians. For readers of the Qur’an today, the ongoing existence of Jews, Christians and the Bible provide contemporary, even if inexact, analogues for the Qur’an’s numerous references to them, and they continue to present many of the questions to which the Qur’an was responding 1400 years ago. If the Bible and those who read it as authoritative Scripture no longer existed, the Qur’an would lose much of its rhetorical force as a dialogical and polemical text speaking to a sectarian religious environment.

The fact that Jews and Christians take the Bible as authoritative and express their religiosity through it also challenges Muslims to read it and come to a view on its contents. Muslims have adopted several strategies in this regard. I will outline four, two of which are dominant. The first is to demonstrate the corruption of the biblical



An 11th century North African Qur'an in the British Museum.

text, and the second is to find predictions of the Prophet Muhammad in the Bible.

The eleventh century Andalusian scholar Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) adopted the first strategy. He is well known for pointing out alleged errors, contradictions and inappropriate claims to prove the corruptness of the biblical text. He notices, for example, that the four Gospels differ over Jesus' first disciples Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Matthew and Mark report that Jesus called these two disciples to follow him just as they were about to cast their fishing nets into the sea and after the arrest of John the Baptist (Matt. 4:12-20; Mark 1:14-18). How-

ever, John reports that Andrew and Peter followed Jesus before the arrest of John the Baptist, not afterward (John 1:35-42), and Luke reports that Jesus' called them after they had been fishing all night, not before they were about to start out (Luke 5:1-11). Ibn Hazm concludes from the differences in these accounts that one or more of the Gospel writers must have lied and that the Gospels were written by liars. Beyond highlighting contradictions of this kind, Ibn Hazm complains that the Bible contains unfulfilled prophecies (e.g., Jesus' promise that the disciples would see the Kingdom of God before they die in Mark 9:1), por-



trays an anthropomorphic God (e.g., God as a warrior in Exod. 15:3), and attributes wrongdoing to prophets (e.g., Jacob stole Esau's birthright in Gen. 27).

The second strategy, that of finding the Prophet Muhammad predicted in the Bible, takes its cue from the Qur'an 61:6, 'And when Jesus, Son of Mary, said, "O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of God to you, confirming the To-

rah that was revealed previously and bearing good news of a Messenger coming after me whose name is Ahmad [i.e. the Prophet Muhammad]".' Following on from this, Muslims frequently interpret Jesus' promise of the 'Comforter' or 'Advocate' (*paraclete*) in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; and 16:7 to refer to the Prophet Muhammad, not the Holy Spirit as Christians understand it. Similarly, Muslims have taken numerous texts from the Hebrew Bible to be predictions of Muhammad's coming, as in Deuteronomy 18:15 where Moses promises, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people.' Some Muslims have also claimed that Muhammad's name appears explicitly in Habakkuk 3:3 and 3:9.

It has often been observed that upholding the corruption of the Bible is incompatible with using it to prove the coming of Muhammad. If the Bible is corrupt, how can we know that its predictions of his prophethood are reliable? The fourteenth century theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) neatly resolves this dilemma by maintaining that God preserved the predictions of Muhammad from corruption at the hands of Jews

and Christians but not the rest of the text.

A third but less common Muslim strategy for dealing with the Bible is to give it an Islamic interpretation. This approach allows that the biblical text may not have been corrupted, but claims that Jews and Christians have misinterpreted it. In this manner, the medieval scholar Najm al-Din al-Tufi (d. 1316) wrote an extensive commentary on various parts of Genesis, the prophetic books and the four Gospels in order to 'correct' Christian interpretations. For example, al-Tufi considers the expression 'God is with us', found in the birth narrative of Christ in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 1:23, quoting Isa. 7:14). Al-Tufi accuses Christians of taking 'God is with us' literally, to refer to Jesus Christ as God incarnate, when they should rather read it metaphorically. The sense in which God was 'with' us in Christ was in Christ's performing miracles and in his commanding and prohibiting what God commanded and prohibited; God was with us inasmuch as his messenger was with us. Al-Tufi notes a parallel with the interpretation of the Qur'an verse 'God is with you wherever you are' (Q. 57:4) which, according to al-Tufi, means

A fourth and perhaps more recent Muslim strategy for making sense of the Bible is to treat it as one form of revelation among the many in which the one God has revealed the truths of divine unity and transcendence.

that God is our helper and protector, not that God in his very being is literally right next to us.

A fourth and perhaps more recent Muslim strategy for making sense of the Bible is to treat it as one form of revelation among the many in which the one God has revealed the truths of divine unity and transcendence. This approach is found among some Sufis, and a prominent proponent is Seyyed Hossain Nasr (b. 1933), for whom the diverse religions vary in their outward forms but are one in their inner meaning. Thus, the fact that the Bible and the Qur'an differ and even contradict each other in their particulars simply reflects God's choice to manifest the single inner truth in diverse forms. There is no substantive difference between the various religions and revelations.

The four Muslim strategies just surveyed share the same aim of giving biblical texts an Islamic reading, in order to blunt and replace Jewish and Christian interpretations that do not accord with Islamic doctrine. However, Muslims have not only read the Bible to neutralize antithetical interpretations of the text. They have also, on rare occasions, turned to the Bible as an ally in their pursuit of Islamic religious learning and even as a kind of independent sacred text.

Perhaps most noteworthy in this regard is the eccentric medieval scholar al-Biqā'i (d. 1480) who provoked considerable controversy in Cairo by quoting the Bible in

his massive Qur'an commentary. The Bible is not quite canonical for al-Biqā'i, and he maintains the authority of the Qur'an over the Bible in case of difference. However, he quotes long passages from the Hebrew Bible and the four Gospels to elucidate parallel texts in the Qur'an, often to the exclusion of more traditional Islamic exegetical materials such as the biblical lore mentioned earlier and the traditions from the Prophet Muhammad. For example, when the Qur'an first mentions the creation of Adam, al-Biqā'i quotes the first three chapters of Genesis. Al-Biqā'i elaborates the long Qur'anic narrative of Joseph by copying in the biblical story of Joseph as well. He even uses the Bible as a source for ascertaining what Jews believe, and he is fond of quoting the Ten Commandments, as self-evidently divine revelation.

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), a prolific theologian from Damascus, provides a different but equally unusual instance of a Muslim finding an ally in Bible. In a treatise on God's creation of the world, he turns to Genesis 1:1-2 to show that his theological position enjoys support well beyond the Muslim community. After citing the first verse of Genesis—'In the beginning of the matter, God created the heavens and the earth'—Ibn Taymiyya emphasises that when God began to create the heavens and the earth 'water was [already] covering over the earth, and the wind was blowing over the water' (Gen. 1:2). As Ibn Taymiyya saw it, God did not create the world from nothing. The world as we now know it was created out of something else that existed beforehand.

That God created the world out of primeval chaos is a common interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2 among biblical scholars today, but in medieval times it was rare among both Muslim and Christian theologians. Christians from the early centuries

of the church argued that God's creative activity had a beginning—it was impossible that the world extended back in time infinitely—and the Fourth Lateran Council enshrined this view as an article of faith in 1215. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) did allow that a good rational case could be made for the eternity of the world as well, but he ultimately found reason inadequate to decide the matter. It must be taken on the authority of Genesis 1:1 that the world had a beginning. Most Muslim theologians reasoned to the same conclusion, and some even condemned Muslim philosophers who argued for the eternity of the world as heretics. Along the way, though, occasional voices wondered whether the Qur'an really said clearly that the world had a beginning. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210), one of the sharpest minds the Islamic tradition has ever known, concluded that neither reason nor revealed texts could decide the matter. The only thing that could be known for sure was that the world depended on God for its existence.

Ibn Taymiyya was not so sceptical. The Damascene Muslim scholar quotes Genesis 1:1-2 to buttress a position on creation that he had already come to on the basis of qur'anic verses, such as '[God] created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His Throne was on the water' (Q. 11:7). To Ibn Taymiyya this verse indicates the existence of water and God's Throne prior to the creation of this world; there is, furthermore, nothing irrational or unscriptural about believing in creation without beginning. In fact, according to Ibn Taymiyya it is profoundly rational that God should create perpetually from eternity. A God who only started to create at some point in the past would have been imperfect prior to that. Rather, the Qur'an speaks of creativity as essential to God's perfection, 'Is He who creates like

one who does not create?!' (Q. 16:17).

Ibn Taymiyya turns to the Bible to corroborate his views on creation and does so with the intention of showing the unity of the three major monotheistic confessions—or at least their Scriptures—in affirming God's continuous creation of the world from eternity to eternity. This was to resist the far more common view among Ibn Taymiyya's Muslim theological competitors that the world had a beginning.

To sum up, the Islamic tradition has usually discouraged or even banned reading the Bible, but Muslims have nonetheless found reason to engage it. The most obvious reason has been to appropriate the Bible into an Islamic frame of reference, so as to take the edge off Jewish and Christian readings of the text and firm up an alternative Muslim doctrinal identity. Yet Muslims also turn to the Bible occasionally to nurture their faith and support their doctrine. Even though the Muslim relationship to the Bible is deeply ambivalent, the Bible does matter for Muslims and the study of Islam, for without the Bible, it would be difficult to understand what the Qur'an and generations of Muslim scholars have been responding to and seeking to set straight. Islam claims to be a correction of corrupted biblical religion, and, without the Bible, Islam would lose a major constituent of its reason for being.

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