

BOOK REVIEW

Walid A. Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible. A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqā'īs Bible Treatise*. Leiden, Boston: Brill. 2008. Viii +223pp. ISBN 978 90 04 168572. Price £85.00 \$167:00

There is a general perception in Western and indeed in mainstream Islamic circles that Muslims hardly exhibit any positive attitude towards the Bible and that their view of it is one of measured opprobrium that verges on outright rejection. The Mamluk savant, Ibrāhim b. 'Umar b. Hasan al-Biqā'ī (809-885AH/1406-1480CE) wrote *Al-aqwāl al-qawwāmah fī hukm al-naql min al-kutub al-qadīma* (The Straightforward Statements concerning Quoting from Ancient Scriptures), henceforth *Aqwāl*, in order to confirm authoritatively the permissibility to the Muslims of using Biblical materials for religious and epistemic reasons. It is a critical edition of this work as introduced by Walid A. Saleh that is being reviewed here.

A *hadith* in al-Bukhārī which is related on the authority of Abū Hurayrah indicates that the “People of the Book” (that is, Jews and Christians) used to read the Hebrew Torah to the Muslims and explain it in Arabic to which the Prophet Muhammad reacted “*Lā tusaddiqu ahla l-kitāb wa-lā tukadhhibūhum wa-qūlū: “āmanā bi-llāh wa-mā unzila ilaynā wa-mā unzila ilaykum...”*”¹ (Do not affirm nor deny what the People of the Book proclaim but say: “We believe in Allah and in what was revealed to us, and in what was revealed to you ...” Q2: 136. So the dominant, dismissive, and rejectionist attitude towards the Bible in the Muslim tradition is ultimately to be attributed to this declaration. Muslims’ use of the Bible before our author, as rightly observed by Saleh, has been either polemical, that is, to attack Judaism and Christianity, or apologetical, that is, to underpin Biblical annunciation of the advent of the Prophet Muhammad. But al-Biqā'ī’s challenge to the tradition is eminently illustrated with his copious, perhaps, quotations *ad nauseum* from the Hebrew Bible and the Arabic translation of the Gospels in his *magnum opus*, his *tafsir* work, namely, *Nazm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa-l-suwar* (Stringing of Pearls in the Correlation of [Qur’anic] Verses and Chapters), particularly in the elaboration of Bible-related narratives,

an approach that rightly qualifies to be characterized as an “Islamic Diatessaron” (p. 23). It is precisely this ‘ahistorical’, and perhaps iconoclastic perspective and orientation in Islamic hermeneutical scholarship that al-Biqā‘ī has tried to rationalize and articulate in *Aqwāl* which he authored in 873/1469 at the provocation of Ibn Qattān (d. 879/1475) and al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1492), an arch opponent *par excellence*.

However one might disagree with the view that the Qur’an adopted and modified the Late antique cultural heritage,² formal similarities between Qur’anic and certain Jewish-Christian narratives should point to the direction of sameness of source of the materials, regardless of the varying degree of details. This seems to be the underlining perspective in al-Biqā‘ī’s discursive paradigm and hermeneutical thesis. According to Saleh, *Aqwāl* is an ‘engaging, argumentative, and deeply personal’ effort (p. 4) by which the author sets out to prove two points, namely, that religious, and of course epistemic, use of the Bible is licit; that his *tafsir* work, *Nazm* which is a practical demonstration of the first point, is superior to all previous efforts in the Islamic hermeneutical enterprise. (p. 33). In spite of the obvious self-glorification in al-Biqā‘ī’s claim, the importance of *Nazm* was not lost on later contributors in the genre, *odium theologicum* notwithstanding, as Saleh has tried to show in the title under review.

Moreover, the composite intellectual landscape and milieu that shaped al-Biqā‘ī’s speculative and interpretive perspective is brilliantly essayed by Saleh such that we are able to have a nuanced exposé of why and how the author was able to generate admiration and rejection in the intellectual salon of his time with equal intensity. There are of course a number of editorial glitches and peccadilloes to which Islam Dayeh has already referred in his extensive review, and we need not repeat the same again.³

By and large, Saleh’s critical edition of this treatise is a remarkable example in unearthing intellectual nuggets, and his success at identifying the sources cited by al-Biqā‘ī in *Aqwāl* clearly demonstrates the richness and vastness of the intellectual repository available to Mamluk authors whose period has traditionally been assessed in less than complimentary terms, at least in the Western discourse. Beyond this, the treatise has furthered our understanding of the overall Muslim perspective on the “Other” Scripture, and an English translation of this treatise would probably offer more to enrich the debate on interfaith scriptural traditions

or at least correct the dominant but less than universal view about the negative attitude of Muslims to non-Islamic foundational texts.

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¹ Abd al-Badī ‘ Saqr, *Mukhtār al-Hasan wa-l-Sahīh min al-Hadīth al-Sharīf* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islamī, 1982), p. 371.

² Kirill Dmitriev, “An Early Christian Account of the Creation of the World”, in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, Michael Marx (Eds), *The Qur’an in Context Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu* (Leiden, Boston, Brill 2010), pp. 349-87.

³ See Islam Dayeh’s review in *the Journal of Quranic Studies*, Vol 10, No 2 October 2008, pp. 101-106.