The Qur'an: Its Biblical Subtext, by Gabriel Said Reynolds, (Routledge Studies in the Qur'an: 10), (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), xi + 304 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-77893-0, £80 (hardback)

Gabriel Said Reynolds' painstaking study is a welcome addition to the swelling corpus of Qur'ān studies. The central arguments are neither complex nor entirely new. The Qur'ān is best understood as a homily upon Jewish and Christian traditions. More specifically, the Qur'ān alludes to anti-Jewish Christian homilies on biblical themes. The supposition that the intended audience for the Qur'ān's preaching would have been familiar with the narrative and its attendant morals, so that allusion would suffice, is one of the insights that Reynolds owes to the late John Wansbrough. However, what was so well known to the original audience of the Qur'ān was not at all familiar to the huge *umma* that developed over the succeeding centuries. Reynolds adds that it was the deliberate decision of the Muslim *mufassirūn* to distance their holy writ from the traditions of rival – by now, subdued and despised (*dhimmī*) – faiths. Hence, even when the *mufassirūn* had access to a Jewish or Christian tradition, they would not exploit it for the clarification of difficult Qur'ānic passages. Therefore, academic scholars should not rely on *tafsīr* for the elucidation of difficult passages.

Reynolds has closely studied the old and new literature, not only Qur'ānic studies proper but allied fields as well. More precisely, he strongly emphasizes biblical studies, which he cogently affirms are on the right methodological track, one that Qur'ānic studies ought to take as well. James Kugel's highly acclaimed *In Potiphar's House* is cited as a prime example. Towards the end of the book, Reynolds aligns himself with the approach taken by Max Grünbaum in his *Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde* in 1893; I would not be surprised if I were not the only one not to have read that paragon of academic study. Despite the occasional snide remark about some scholarship, Reynolds' tone is almost always respectful. Note in particular that he does not voice any snobbish scorn for the work of Christopher Luxenberg, though he, like everyone else that I know, ultimately rejects Luxenberg's suggestions.

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Special praise goes to Reynolds for his courage to criticize the current academic reticence toward any hint of criticism of the Qurʾān and to "celebrate" what seem to be literary problems rather than to investigate them dispassionately. In my view, this approach was begotten from the trauma of post-9/11 Islamophobia as well the horror of being suspected of any form of "Orientalism." Reynolds' words deserve to be quoted in full: "Yet neither is the method of the present work the sort of apology for the canonical text that is increasingly seen in recent publications, according to which any literary peculiarity – such as the repetition of accounts – necessarily redounds to the Qurʾān's literary brilliance." (pp. 237-238)

The book is divided into four parts. The first, relatively brief, section is a fairly exhaustive survey of the "scholarly conflict over the Qurʾān." I will not review this section here, except to point out that Reynolds' synopses of the earliest phases of Qurʾān research, most of which was written in German, is itself a service to a generation whose reading knowledge of European languages cannot be taken for granted. The second part comprises thirteen case studies, which I shall briefly summarize. The third and fourth parts, "Qurʾān and tafsīr" and "Reading the Qurʾān as homily," present Reynolds' conclusions and suggestions concerning the proper direction for Qurʾānic studies. I have already discussed the salient points; some additional remarks will follow the discussion of the case studies.

The method of the case studies is as follows. Reynolds first sets up the problem, displaying the problematic Qurʾānic passage or passages and indicating the difficulties. Next, he reviews the solutions of the *mufassirūn*, which invariably prove unsatisfactory. Five have been selected, offering a wide range of exegetical approaches and doctrinal allegiances but falling short, as Reynolds freely admits, of full coverage. They are (1) Muqātil; (2) al-Qummī; (3) al-Ṭabarī; (4) al-Zamakhsharī; and (5) Ibn Kathīr. Finally, Reynolds suggests several biblical subtexts that, when brought into the discussion, allow him to arrive at, or at least approximate, a solution. In each case, a wide range of scholarly literature is addressed as well; often, Reynolds' solution is similar or identical to an idea found therein. The treatment of each case is quite good, and any one of them could, and perhaps should, be used as a unit in a survey course of the Qurʾān. There is, however, one important stricture: given the nature of this enterprise,

the solution must be found in textual sources. When Reynolds presents his own original solution, it seems to be an ill-advised guess.

Let us now review the case studies. Because the proof of the pudding is in the eating, we can best appreciate Reynolds' approach by seeing how he deals with some of the knottier problems in Qurʾānic interpretation. His success or failure in these ventures will be the best measure of the cogency of his theoretical deliberations. The first case concerns the prostration of the angels before Adam, described in Q 2:30 and elsewhere. The obvious question is, why should God command the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam? Most plausibly, this divine command indicates Adam's high stature and is likely connected to his designation as God's *khalīfa*. How do the *mufassirūn* handle this? To avoid the theological problems inherent in granting divine stature to Adam, most choose to gloss *khalīfa* as "successor" rather than "representative." In turn, this raises the question: successor to what? The generally accepted answer is that Adam succeeds the *jinn* who were previously given the run of the earth. As for the question of prostration, this is either a token of respect or a command given only to expose the pride of Iblīs, who refused to bow. If taken as an act of worship, then Adam is merely serving as *qibla*, indicating the direction toward which the angels should prostrate themselves before God. These interpretations seem to be dictated by theological worries that developed only later in Islam.

Is there a Judeo-Christian subtext, and can it help us to understand the Qurʾānic narrative? In early Jewish traditions, the angels are so overwhelmed by Adam's countenance that they consider him a divine being. In Christian tradition, Adam prefigures Christ and so is divine. The command given to the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam occurs repeatedly in the Qurʾān and must have some significant meaning for the story of mankind. Angels prostrate themselves before Adam because God dwells within Adam. This solution is lost to *tafsīr*, which offers only forced and unsatisfying explanations, but it emerges clearly from the Adam-Christ typology of the subtext.

The second case concerns the well-known phrase *al-shayṭān al-rajīm*. What does *rajīm* mean? Why is it applied only to Shayṭān (on earth), not to Iblīs (in heaven)? Is it related to the word *rujūm*, which is found elsewhere in the Qurʾān, and, if so, how? Inspection of *tafsīr* reveals that *rajīm* is usually taken to mean "cursed" or "insulted" and

is thus not related to *rujūm*. Consideration of the subtext, says Reynolds, indicates that *rajīm*, in this context, does not derive from the root (in Arabic and other Semitic languages) that means to cast stones or to curse. Instead, it is "semantically connected" to *burūj* (Q 15:16), "towers." The subtext involves cosmic geography, which views heaven as fortified by towers (*burūj*) that are there to ensure that those cast out cannot return. In brief, *rajīm* means "banished from heaven." The full Qurʾānic story of the creation of Adam and his early history continues the trend in Jewish and Christian exegesis of identifying the biblical "serpent" with the devil and "Eden" with the heavenly paradise. Reynolds' approach delivers good results in these first two cases.

The third case study is different. It examines the *hapax legemenon* in Q 7:25, where Allah announces to the children of Adam that he sent down "clothing to cover your shameful parts and *rīsh*, yet the clothing of piety is better." *Rīsh* literally means "feathers," but this does not seem to fit the context at all. Hence, the *mufassirūn* understood it metaphorically, as clothing of some sort. Al-Ṭabarī connects it to the Quraysh practice of circumambulating the Kaʿba naked. Hence, "children of Adam" is synonymous with "people;" it does not refer specifically to Adam. Al-Zamakhsharī takes the verse to refer to two types of clothing, basic covering and more decorative vestments (*rīsh*), even drawing the legal inference that the Qurʾān sanctions decorative clothing.

According to Reynolds, the subtext here is the story of Adam, especially the vestments God made for him (Hebrew *kotnot or*) and their interpretation in Jewish and Christian sources. Reynolds calls attention to the Babylonian Talmud's statement (Sanhedrin 59^{b}) that Adam was a vegetarian, expanding this to mean that no blood could be spilled before Noah's time. Thus, the best that could be done to make garments of "skin" would be to pluck feathers from a bird, provided that the bird could survive the experience! Reynolds has saved the literal meaning of the text, to be sure, but in doing so, he has overreached the mandate of his method. There is no textual source for the claim that spilling blood in any way was forbidden to Adam, nor is there any source for his being covered by feathers. Creativity has its place in research of this sort, but one should not create traditions that do not exist.

The treatment of the fourth case, "Abraham the Gentile Monotheist," the Qurʾānic account of Abraham's spiritual biography, is more successful, though it is not without its difficulties. Reynolds examines various stories in the Bible and apocrypha. He does not always interpret them properly, to my mind, especially confusing astrolatry with astrology. However, he reserves his attention mainly for the difficult term *ḥanīf*, one of the most debated words in Qurʾānic studies. After a thorough review of the literature, Reynolds settles on the idea that *ḥanīf* correlates with *ummī*, which means "gentile," neither a Jew nor a Christian. *Ḥanīf* is thus an ethnic label (indeed, Payne-Smith lists *ethnicus* as one of the definitions of *hanpe*) rather than a religious one.

Case 5 is Sarah's laughter, the reason for which is not explained in the Qurʾān. The subtext is the "Sarah/Mary typology," with the Qurʾān conflating the announcements of the births of Isaac and Jesus. This explanation is necessary because the etymological connection in the Hebrew Bible between the word for laughter and the name Isaac (both from the same Hebrew root) does not work in Syriac or Arabic. Sarah's laughter actually anticipates the announcement made to Mary. Case 6 asks who Hāmān is, whom the Qurʾān consistently connects with Pharaoh. Traditional exegetes make no effort to identify him beyond what can be deduced from the Qurʾānic context. One exception is Muqātil, who uses two Persian words to describe Hāmān's office. According to Reynolds, this is only because Muqātil was a native speaker of that language; Muqātil does not know that Hāmān is found in the Book of Esther as the vizier of the Persian king. The subtext is that the Qurʾān is here integrating a number of biblical personalities, all of whom have in common an uncommon arrogance.

In this connection, Reynolds remarks (p. 105), "The argument that the Qurʾān is somehow wrong or confused by placing Hāmān in Egypt (or, for that matter, that the Talmud is wrong by placing Jethro, Balaam, and Job there) seems to me essentially irrelevant. The Qurʾān's concern is not simply to record Biblical information but to shape that information for its own purposes. The more interesting question is therefore *why* the Qurʾān connects Hāmān and Qorah with the story of Pharaoh. The answer, it seems, is that the Pharaoh story is to the Qurʾān a central trope about human conceit and rebelliousness, on the one hand, and divine punishment, on the other."

True enough, but against whom is he arguing? Who, in this day and age, would criticize the Qurʾān or Talmud for "confusing" historical (at least, biblical history) facts? Tellingly, Reynolds refers to Geiger, Wensinck, and Vajda. To this reviewer, it seems that all of the contemporary scholars – and Reynolds knows their work well, relying, in this case, on a study by Adam Silverstein – approach the scriptural narratives as literature rather than history. Reynolds appears to be beating a dead horse.

Case 7 involves a number of verses from different chapters of the Qurʾān that speak of a Sabbath-observing people – presumably Jews, though they are never called this by name – who, in one way or another, violate the Sabbath by fishing and are cursed to become (or, alternatively, are made by God into) apes or pigs. Some modern translators strain to see the transformation as metaphorical, suggesting that this group ought to be despised like apes, or something of the sort. All of the *mufassirūn*, save al-Zamakhsharī, take the transformation literally. The subtext is a combination of the motif of the transformation into animals as a form of divine punishment and the Biblical idea that obedience to God is tested by the observance of the Sabbath.

The eighth case is the story of Jonah, called Yūnus or Dhū l-nūn ("the person of the fish") in the Qurʾān. Stories about this prophet are found in several places in the Qurʾān, but there are some gaps, and the narrative is not as smooth as it is in the biblical book. Reynolds finds that the Qurʾānic story is in conversation mainly with Christian understandings. In the New Testament, like the Qurʾān but unlike the Hebrew Bible, Jonah is a major prophet. In both later scriptures, the moral of the story clearly contrasts the repentance of the citizens of Nineveh with the stubbornness of the Jews. "Thus the Qurʾān's references to the story of Jonah reflect the content of the Old Testament Book, but the homiletic interpretation of the New Testament." (p. 129)

Case 9 addresses the textual and doctrinal questions raised by the Qurʾān's account of Mary. Among the former are her designation as "sister of Aaron," suggesting confusion with Miriam, sister of Moses; the *miḥrāb* where Mary is harbored; and the "casting of pens (*aqlām*)" to determine who would be Mary's guardian. The doctrinal question is posed by the statement in Q 3:42 that Mary was chosen to

be "above the women of the worlds." In what way was she superior? Here again, the *mufassirūn* avail themselves of a variety of ḥadīths, and some personal ingenuity, to resolve the issues. The problems are largely removed once we identify the subtext: the *Protoevangelium* of James, a very popular apocryphon that tells the story of Mary in some detail. Thus, for example, we can now see that the *miḥrāb* refers to the *koiton* or sanctuary where Anne ensconced her daughter Mary until she was old enough to be presented to the Temple, and the *aqlām* are not pens used to decide who would be Mary's guardian, but rods used to determine who would be her groom. Not all of the difficulties are removed by appealing to this early Christian text, but the remaining issues can be resolved by acknowledging some recent research on Qurʾānic modes of expression. For example, "sister," as in "sister of Aaron," need not denote a precise familial relationship but rather indicates "general tribal/national relationships or religious bonds" (pp. 144-145, citing Suleiman Mourad). In general – and this is another major theme – the story in the Qurʾān reflects a literary typology (adopted or established by the Qurʾān) rather than an attempt at history or chronology.

The tenth case is "The Jews' Uncircumcised Hearts." In two chapters of the Qurʾān, reference is made to the Jews' admission, "Our hearts are *ghulf*," the context is a rebuke of the Jews. *Ghulf* can be understood in a number of senses. Among the *mufassirūn*, al-Zamakhsharī comes closest when he remarks that the word may mean "uncircumcised," but it is to be understood metaphorically. Surprisingly, nearly all of the modern translators miss the mark as well, even though the subtext here – the biblical metaphor of the uncircumcised heart – should be quite obvious. Once again, the Qurʾān echoes a Christian exploitation of the biblical reprimand to the Jews. In discussing this case, Reynolds offers another generalization that is central to his argument, and should be cited here:

That the Qurʾān makes no effort to explain the metaphor of the uncircumcised (*ghulf*) hearts implies that at the time of the Qurʾān's composition/proclamation it was well-known. That this metaphor was so mysterious to the *mufassirūn*, on the other hand, shows how much had been forgotten. This point has been made in previous case studies. Here, however, it is even more evident. (p. 152)

One small remark: we find here (page 153 note 507) one of the frequent references to the Hebrew midrash *Pirqe de-Rebbe Eliezer*; but this work, or at least large portions of it, is now considered to be post-Islamic. Hence, its value in establishing the sought-after subtext is questionable.

Case 11 involves the reward of martyrs. Verses from different chapters indicate that martyrs enter "the garden" immediately. Their reward is greater than that of mere "believers;" they do not have to await judgment day, but instead receive both bodily and spiritual reward immediately. The *mufassirūn*, as is their wont, interpret the verses in light of ḥadīth. Reynolds points again to a Christian, specifically Jacobite and East Syrian, subtext here. Whereas ancient Jewish eschatology has little, if anything, to say about the afterlife, Christian tradition has much to say, especially about the reward enjoyed by martyrs. Nonetheless, for Christians, the redemptive sacrifice of martyrs is closely connected to the crucifixion; the redemptive value of Jesus' suffering is not found in the Qurʾān.

The twelfth case is the Seven Sleepers, or "The Companions of the Cave." Reynolds acknowledges immediately, "Other scholars have analyzed the Qurʾānic version of this narrative at great length. Here I will approach the account [...] only inasmuch as it illustrates the theme of the present work: the Qurʾān's homily on Biblical literature." (p. 167) He further allows that his own treatment owes much to the recent article by Sidney Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qurʾān," as well as to the monograph of Michael Huber published over a century ago, *Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschlafern*. The homily here, *tout court*, is bodily resurrection.

For his final case study, Reynolds treads extremely dangerous ground: is Muḥammad the name of an actual historical person, the "founder" of Islam, or is it, rather, an epithet? Indeed, the name Muḥammad appears only four times in the Qurʾān; earlier prophets are named much more frequently, Moses topping the chart with 136 appearances. We encounter the term messenger (*rasūl*) or prophet (*nabī*) hundreds of times; why so few mentions of Muḥammad? Moreover, in the four verses where the word appears, it is not entirely clear that a proper name is intended. In a fifth verse, ʿĪsā (Jesus) announces that a prophet will come after him, whose name is Aḥmad. All five occurrences could be readily understood to describe the

prophet as praiseworthy, using different forms of the verb *ḥamada*, rather than disclosing his proper name. Modern translators, almost without exception, treat both Muḥammad and Aḥmad as proper names. Some *mufassirūn* report traditions that the prophet had several epithets; Ibn al-Jawzī relays a tradition that the prophet had twenty-three names!

Modern academic studies on this issue are copious, and Reynolds reviews them with his usual diligence and critical insight. Whereas earlier scholarship, beginning with Sprenger, debated whether Muḥammad was used as a proper name by the pre-Islamic Arabs, more recent scholarship, beginning with the book *Crossroads to Islam* by Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, looks outside Islamic traditions. Much of this body of work makes the name Muḥammad more or less equivalent with Muṣṭafā, "the chosen one," but this work also contends that it refers not to the Prophet of Islam, but to Jesus! Reynolds sides with those who do not take Muḥammad to be a personal name. The Qurʾān, as a rule, does not show much interest in the proper names of people and places; *muḥammad* as an adjective is a perfectly valid form in Arabic, and religious figures, notably several of the apostles, are given new names (that is, epithets) when they receive their calling. Reynolds concludes, "The Qurʾān ... is not interested in the proper names of its historical context. It should not be a great surprise, then, that the Qurʾān never provides the proper name of its own Prophet." (p. 199)

The *mufassirūn* shaped the Qurʾān in light of their particular concerns, be they haggadic (Muqātil [?], al-Qummī), sectarian (al-Qummī), literalist (al-Ṭabarī), rationalist (al-Zamakhsharī), or fundamentalist (Ibn Kathīr). *Tafsīr* is much less a historical record stretching back to the time of the Qurʾān's origins and much more the product of individual scholars and the (historically removed) context in which they worked. Reynolds might have phrased this in terms both stronger and more universal: commentary on the Qurʾān is generically and essentially the same as commentaries on other writings. It informs us as much (or maybe more) about the commentator as it does about the text that s/he proposes to elucidate.

Though Jeffrey pointed out long ago that *sīra* and ḥadīth (the two main sources of *tafsīr*) are not of much use in clarifying difficult points in the Qurʾān, Reynolds finds that some trained scholars – in-

cluding the avowedly critical translations of Fakhry and Abdul Haleem – rely on those traditional sources. Here, I must raise a small objection: isn't translation, especially a translation aimed at a general audience, a different cup of tea? The reader dependent upon an English Qurʾān will likely be unwilling or unable to sort through all of the traditional commentaries and scholarly literature on a given verse and will form an impression of Islam directly and exclusively from the plain English translation. Hence, in an age when many worry that Islam has acquired an image of violent militancy, it is understandable that a translator would mollify the text at the expense of academic depth or precision (see the critique of Abdul Haleem on page 229, note 142).

"Qurʾānic discourse" is thus most profitably viewed as a homily on biblical tradition, especially Christian tradition. What is homily? Reynolds embraces the characterization formulated by Angelika Neuwirth, only to be rejected by her: a homily "expresses a truth that has already been announced and attempts to urge that truth upon the listener." Because this truth has already been "announced," the Qurʾān need do no more than allude to the story by means of a few key words that stimulate the audience to recall (*dhikr*) a biblical story. This explains the many gaps in Qurʾānic narrative and the alleged confusion (alleged only by those who look for historical accuracy) of characters, such as placing Hāmān at Pharaoh's court. As noted, Reynolds finds the most satisfaction in the treatment of the Qurʾān in the work of biblical scholars. The book ends with a call to graduate students interested in pursuing research on the Qurʾān to study Hebrew, Aramaic, and the other languages of the pre-Qurʾānic Judeo-Christian tradition. To sum up, this is a work of very impressive scholarship. All scholars may benefit from the review of scholarly literature and the revisiting of long-standing controversies, whether or not they accept Reynolds' solutions. The book is also very valuable as an aid to those who teach the Qurʾān at the university level.

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