

**Shabbir Akhtar**, *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes: Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, Routledge, London, 2018, 292 p.

Credibility and authenticity of the Bible and composition process of its content has long been a controversial topic within both mainstream Islamic thought and other Muslim strands outcropping at the periphery. In contrast with the manifoldness of the kindred religious terms embraced by believers of the Judeo-Christianity and Islam - like angelological and apocalyptic doctrines, the belief in afterlife and so on- the nature and trait of revelation, degree of non-celestial interference in due course of recording the Scripture remarkably differentiates for the two monotheistic traditions. And this variety portrays a junction for exegesis traditions pertaining to Islam and Christianity.

It is fair to say that Muslim mind is a Gentile when the case is biblical commentary. Commentary of the Qur'an by non-Muslims and New Testament criticism of Muslims has presented mostly polemical and apologetic feature as the two parties belong to two different and highly polarized theological premises. Thus, it is not surprising for the each religion's believers to embrace an endeavor targeted for justifying its own Scripture, accompanied with a pugilistic perspective on the other "rival" religion's corpus. When Qur'anic scholarship in the West is reviewed critically, it is inevitable to detect that non-Muslim researchers unwaveringly applied textual criticism method that can be easily defined as an *haute couture* methodology for the Bible itself, whereas canonization process of the two Scriptures, the Bible and the Qur'an, seem to nullify the functionality of the relevant method on the Qur'an. In other words, bearing various genres and a dialectical relationship with the first target community, the Qur'an depicts highly seminal content and stylistic features, though there exist apparent intertextual characteristics with the Bible particularly in narratives, and prevailing references to biblical content within the Qur'an.

Contrary to the usual apologetic and offensive rhetorics applied by Muslim thinkers when the case is Biblical commentary, Akhtar's work provides the reader with a non-pugilistic analysis of Paul's non-celestial authority over the Scripture. His work consists of nine chapters. In the

very beginning of his work, Akhtar explains his grounds for opting Paul's Letter to Galatians with some reasons. Accordingly, Letter to Galatians embodies answers to some key questions on Paul's personality despite its being reticent about some pivotal subjects. In addition, the Letter reveals fundamental aspects of Paul's, who used to be a Pharisee, volatile personality that ended with his conversion to a Christian Saint. At this point, Akhtar makes an intriguing comparison between the Letter to Galatians and the Qur'an's portrayal of Muhammed and remarks that this Letter enables us to know Paul's religious biography much more than the entire Qur'an does the same about Muhammed, apart from Surah as-Sajdah (p.3).

A turbulent and normative epistle, Galatians is the earliest and probably the most revolutionary Epistle of Paul explicating declaration of his apostleship, ensuring that Jesus movement would turn decisively outwards in the *ekkleasia*, inclusive of Gentiles. In the second chapter of his work, Akhtar states that Paul established assemblies of Gentile Christians who were exempted of Jewish rituals and law on his first journey, and Paul seems to be striving for eradicating a confusion created by Jerusalem apostles Peter and James after their visit to Galatian neophytes. Jerusalem apostles insisting on practising the Law, in particular circumcision of the believer men, were seen false teachers by Paul who preached a salvific efficacy without obedience to the whole law. This is why his opposition to supporters of the Law is acutely defined as "the battle of the baptised versus circumcised" by Akhtar (p.3). In other words, for Paul, righteous-being lays on the ground of accepting the grace of Jesus as a gift, instead of bounding to Mosaic Law.

In the second chapter titled "There is no Gospel except the only Gospel" the writer records his detailed comments on 1.1-12 verses of Letter to Galatians. Implied in the opening verses of the Letter and of the exordium, a brief analysis is made on Paul's discourse and Akhtar concludes that Letter to Galatians could be the first written declaration of Paul's own apostleship. In this chapter, writer also makes quite valuable philological inferences as to preposition usage in the verses, its Greek version *koine* and particular particles in comparison to Qur'an's philology.

The Letter to the Galatians' verses 1.6-9 portrays a shift in Paul's discourse. According to Akhtar, Paul's focus on thanksgiving (i.e.1 Cor. 1.4-9) is replaced by threat and curse utterances in these verses. There also exist an accent on the one-being of the true gospel as per the singular usage of the

Greek world *evangellion* although there are four canonical Gospels. As to Pauline thought, the sole Gospel was “the criterion” that is similar to *furkân* definition of Qur’an (p.61). Paul’s preaching the singularity of the evangel is compared by *i’jâz* of Qur’an by Akhtar. Although Qur’anic verses endorsing challenge (*at-tahaddî*) matter states inimitability of the Qur’an, there also exist a confrontation for opponents and the context of subject ayahs gives us highly different background compared to Paul’s.

On the verses 1.10-12, Akhtar presents the reader another intertextual deduction between Paul’s rhetoric and muslim liturgical tradition. Accordingly, Paul’s hyperbolic view that can be characterized as pleasing both man and God may be sensed as *takîyya* principle of Shiite doctrine. In addition, the verse 12 gives implications on the dual-nature of Paul’s attainment of apostleship. While, Muslim thought is mainly based on the doctrine concurring that prophets are chosen only by God, Paul present himself as an apostle rectified by Jesus Christ and God (pp.53-56). Notion of prophets in the Old Testament and New Testament seem to vary. In other words, Christians retained the older robust notion of prophet for the prophets of ancient Israel, but also adopted, for New Testament times, a broader notion of the the prophetic office which could cover older seminal personalities like Elijah and Elisha (p.87).

In the second chapter “The Apostle’s Apologia and Gospel”, Akhtar expands his work around Paul’s apologia, his confrontation with Peter. Gal 1.16 encloses the first intimation of Pauline mysticism, namely Christians’ dwelling in Christ. The verses to be commented in this chapter also consists some implications about pre-apostolic Paul and his visit to Arabia. These visits are described “mysterious” by Akhtar as Paul leaves unspecified the duration and purpose of this visits (pp.74-75). The Apostle’s sentences in vv.2.7 “..But on the contrary, seeing that I have been entrusted with the Gospel of the ‘uncircumcision’, just as Peter (was entrusted) with that of the circumcision” shows us the Apostle’s maintenance of independent authority. His tone is “defensive”, he manages to proclaim explicitly that God alone knows the truth. But, Akhtar notes that Paul’s visit to Jerusalem indicates his desire to get an external validation as well (p.79).

In vv.7-9, the term ‘circumscision’ is defined as a double metonymy that implies the whole of Mosaic law and Israelite nation according to the writer. Akhtar grounds this idea by philological evidence that is remarkable in order to understand Paul’s irreversible evolution within Christion

tradition. At this point, it comes out that the New Testament covers two opposed views within the framework of the addressed community of the Christian belief. Luke and John gospels retracts Messianic message to the Jews, not Gentiles, Matthew and Mark welcomed Gentiles' eager seek out Jesus, though (p.81). This reflection provides us with the clues of biblical abrogation. It is fair to say that abrogation in New Testament tradition ensues in a significantly distinct way in comparison to its equivalent in the Qur'an as abrogation (*nash*) in the Qur'anic terms is not exclusively based on apostolic articulations. Instead, the proof of abrogation's truthness is inferred from some specific verses of Qur'an and a methodology stipulating binding terms for a genuine abrogation was developed as per the methodology of Islamic law. This is why, apostolic interference over the legal content of the Bible does not have a fully equivalent form within Qur'anic abrogation principles.

Within the same chapter, liberation theology that is hallmarked with an eager for support for the socio-economically poor layer of the community, is another theme handled comparatively between Christianity and Islam, as well as Judaism. Accordingly, all of the three monotheistic religions have been manifesting a compassionate encouragement for charitable duty to the poor. This duty is inherited from Jewish ethics while in Qur'an and prophet's life, abject poverty is a theme that gives responsibility on believers' shoulders. With regard to the verses Gal: 2.11-15, Akhtar highlights the city of Antioch and the conflict between Peter and Paul in Antioch about table fellowship with Gentiles as an anticipation of the crisis to occur later about abrogation in the whole law. Antioch is defined as the "premier Gentile church" and the epicentre of gentile Christianity by Akhtar (pp. 82-84).

In the fourth chapter, the writer focuses on Paul's articulations on Abraham as a model for Gentile Christians in an interfaith context among three Semitic religions. In view of circumcision in flesh, Paul regards this ritual as a seal of righteousness based on faith and takes the risk of arguing that faithfulness of pre-Mosaic Abraham is not based on faithfulness to the covenant of circumcision, he was bounded by faith, though. Akhtar asserts that the difference between Judaism and Christianity hinges on a distinction between faith, which means a personal trust in God, and faithfulness that connotes the legal duty derived from contractual fidelity to God's covenant. Paul is deemed to have recognised this divergence and he calls

Abraham both the father of the circumscised Jews and equally as the father of uncircumscised Gentiles. Akhtar's reflections on this point are as follows:

"...He (Paul) quotes Gen.15.6 at Gal.3.6 to link Abraham to the believer to Jesus the Christ, and thus the "old" testament to the emerging "new" testament, understood both as scriptures and covenants. Paul asserts with force and clarity that all those who have faith qualify henceforth with salvation, solely by virtue of their faith, regardless of ethnicity and the scrupulously precise performance of the Works of the Mosaic Law. Slaves of the Law to be freed by Christ to become sons and inheritors of Abraham and of God." (p.117)

In the following chapters, Paul's deployment of a covenant of the spirit annulling covenant of Mosaic Law has a large coverage and Akhtar argues that Paul's endeavour can be defined "spiritually liberating and liberatingly spiritual and therefore anti-Sinaitic, anti-Torah and anti-Mosaic". In other words, this new covenant enforced by Paul takes morality and spirituality as its basic impulse, not legal as per its content. In Gal. 4.21-23, Paul uses an apocalyptic allegory for finding a basis affirming that genuine descendants of Abraham are the ones who free themselves from worldly enslavement to the law, flesh sin and therefore death (p.179). It is fair to say that cardinal tenets of Pauline theology is summarized in relevant verses, as follows:

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"Tell me, you who are wishing to be under law, do you not hear the law? For it has been written that Abraham has two sons, one from the maidservant and one from the free woman. But the son of the maidservant has been born according to the flesh and the son by the free woman through promise. These matters may be allegorised: for these (women) are two covenants, one from Mount Sinai bringing forth to slavery: She is Hagar. Now, this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the Present Jerusalem for he serves as a slave along with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother." (Gal 4. 21-27)

Paul consults to figurative reading of these verses as literal meanings does not give any hint about justification of a law-free Christianity and Akhtar sees this problematic and indefensible. This is why, Paul's exegesis on the Old Testament can be easily classified as *eisegesis* as the old testament's verses are explicit, not figurative in their own nature. Namely, Paul prefers the allegory for the sake of reaching a mystic hint about the sterility of the Law.

Apart from his grounded reflections on Galatians Epistle within main chapters of his work, Akhtar also highlights some key doctrinal currents that run throughout the New Testament. To this end, a reader can easily find a

succinct appraisal of the trinity doctrine in the conclusion part of his work. For Paul, God's essence and nature become evident only via faith that is trust in God himself whereas Old Testament's God is seen as sterile and inert by Christian thinkers, despite being noble. Namely, in contrast to deity notion in Judaism, New Testament's deity portrays himself as the numerically one, but seeking relationship with his created ones in a Trinitarian monotheism instead of a "unitary and juridical" one (p.256). In addition, the theme of "justification by grace" that is abundant in Pauline Letters does not pervades in pre-Paul Gospels, while giving prerogative of Saviourness to Jesus is available in both. This is why, it is noted that Paul's account of faith that is based on salvifically urgent question of Jesus and the cross, and this is dubbed as "Crosstianity" by the author. Lastly, in the epilogue section, Akhtar recommends Muslims to engage with Paul's discourse beyond the Islamic paradigm of distortion (*tahrif*) so as to eliminate the ancient and stale deadlock. He notes that neutral reading of any text or Scripture is impossible by virtue of juxtaposition of sacred texts, still, it is possible to detain from desultory observations of them.

To sum up, Dr. Shabbir Akhtar's work comes to the fore as a highly critically contemplated and manifested form of Muslim thought over the non-celestial authority over the Scripture through major themes such as salvation modals for a sinner, abrogation of the law and prophetic authority over the scripture. And the writer richens his insights on these themes with comparative philological evidences elicited from the New Testament and the Qur'an. As Paul's Letter to the Galatians is defined as the most personal epistle of him, Akhtar's work reveals some key points in the Christian thought embolden as per St. Paul's insights, and it boldly accentuates pillars of Paul's authority over the Scripture and Muslim reflections on this authority.

However, as Akhtar employs a methodology based on a higher biblical criticism genre inspired from analytical philosophy of the religion, his work lacks veins of the exegetical method that is usually applied in the Bible and Qur'an commentaries. This is why the subject work may not be classified as an exegesis work, albeit being an outstanding sample of analysis of Pauline discourse. And philological comparisons recorded occasionally omits pertaining contexts of Qur'an verses paving the way for

overlooking semantic shifts on the subject word or phrase. All in all, it is undeniable that the work embodies valuable appraisals shedding light for further researches in fields of Philosophy of Religion, Biblical Studies and Interfaith Studies.

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