

Review of *Qur'an Commentary and the Biblical Turn: A History of Muslim Exegetical Engagement with Biblical Text* by Samuel Ross (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024)

Kitap Deđerlendirmesi: Samuel Ross, *Qur'an Commentary and the Biblical Turn: A History of Muslim Exegetical Engagement with Biblical Text* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024)

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Kitap Deđerlendirmesi
Book Review

Geliş : 17.11.2024
Kabul : 19.06.2025
Yayın : 30.06.2025

Bu makale, iThenticate yazılımı ile taranmış ve intihal tespit edilmemiştir.



Samuel Ross, in *Qur'an Commentary and the Biblical Turn*, which is based on his award-winning doctoral thesis (*BRAIS-DE GRUYTER Prize 2019*), offers a meticulously researched examination of a pivotal yet hitherto understudied phenomenon in the history of Islamic exegetical tradition: the engagement of Qur'an commentators (*mufassirūn*) with the Bible. While the multifaceted relationship between the Qur'an and the Bible has generated considerable scholarly interest, Ross's work stands out for its focus on the direct use and interpretation of the received biblical text by Muslim exegetes. This focus allows the book to unveil a largely unprecedented shift or the "biblical turn," as Ross terms it, that occurred in modern tafsir tradition.

The book comprises nine chapters and a comprehensive appendix that lists the *mufassirūn* and their works, along with the level of popularity of these works based on manuscript records and the commentators' ideological affiliations. The central thesis of the research revolves around "two enigmas" (in Chapter 1) that Ross posits in Muslim exegetes' approaches to biblical texts throughout the Islamic interpretive tradition. He argues that pre-modern Qur'an commentators were reluctant to engage directly with biblical texts in qur'anic exegesis, despite accessible translated biblical resources, the parallel exegetical contexts of the two scriptures, and signs of a moderate attitude towards reading Jewish and Christian sacred texts in qur'anic and hadith proof-texts (the first enigma). What Ross finds more striking is that this attitude stood in stark contrast to the widespread incorporation of narrative material of Jewish and Christian origin, commonly known as *isra'iliyyāt*, into tafsir. It would be helpful to highlight here that the *mufassirūn* regarded *isra'iliyyāt* as an existing component of Islamic interpretive sources.

In his monograph on the critique of *isrā'iliyyāt* in modern *tafsīrs*, Mesut Kaya compellingly argues that the transmission of knowledge or historical information through a reliable narrator (*rawi*) and transmission chain (*isnād*) was central to the inner dynamics of tafsīr practices in the classical period. In line with this dynamic, the material of *isrā'iliyyāt* was transmitted by reliable narrators and *isnāds* throughout the centuries, a process that eventually gives these narratives a character of Islamic interpretive material. Therefore, the premodern *mufasssırūn* largely did not hesitate to use *isrā'iliyyāt* and felt little need to consult biblical scripture for Qur'anic exegesis.¹ This reluctance raises profound questions about historical interpretations, scriptural authority, and the socio-political conditions that shape scholarly engagement. Contrary to the ambivalent exegetical approach in the pre-modern era, a widespread and virtually unprecedented shift occurred in the second half of the 19th century, as Ross demonstrates, wherein Qur'an commentators globally began to engage directly with and draw upon the biblical text in a systematic manner (the second enigma). It is even more intriguing that, although modern commentators restricted the authentic Islamic sources solely to the Qur'an and hadīth, and were more firmly informed about the historical transmission of biblical texts—being more critical regarding the integrity of the Bible compared to their predecessors, owing to the then newly emerged research area of higher biblical criticism—they nevertheless engaged with the biblical text in their exegetical works.

By placing two enigmas at the forefront, Ross invites readers to re-evaluate the historical, socio-political and practical reasons that were at play behind the question of why the majority, with a few exceptions, of pre-modern Qur'an commentators refrained from using biblical citations. While acknowledging that explaining the exact reasons for this historical dearth of direct biblical engagement is a challenging historiographical endeavour, the evidence strongly suggests that it was not the norm before the modern era. Ross's critique of two prevailing explanations —the negative impact of *tahrif* doctrine and legal prohibitions against the use of biblical scripture— reveals their limitations and inadequacies. Instead, he proposes that “liturgical, codicological, and geographical barriers” delayed access to Bible translations among Muslim scholars until the 12th century, after which Muslims appeared to have convenient direct access to biblical texts. (pp. 59-61). Ross further clarifies that from the 12th century onwards, the majority of Arab lands had predominantly become Muslim, which eventually left little opportunity for religious engagement and deepened the “communal segregation” between Muslims and non-Muslim societies. He argues that Muslims considered their positions culturally, politically and socially superior to Christians and Jews, who were religious minorities, so much that they did not regard the Bible and Jewish-Christian traditions as valuable sources of knowledge, perhaps only “a superseded relic of the past” (p. 70). These shifting socio-political and historical circumstances of medieval Muslim exegetes had a decisive influence on their perception of Jewish and Christian scriptures, restraining them from using biblical material in Qur'an commentary, albeit with a few exceptions.

The 15th-century Mamluk scholar and exegete al-Biqā'ī (d. 1480) is one of these exceptional scholars, notable for his defence and direct use of the Bible in his *Naẓm al-durar*, particularly in service of highlighting Qur'anic coherence (*munāsaba*). In Chapter 4, Ross specifically seeks a plausible

¹ Mesut Kaya, *Çağdaş Tefsirlerde İsrâiliyat Eleştirisi [The Criticism of Isrâ'iliyyāt in Contemporary Qur'an Commentaries]*, (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2018), 505-506.

explanation for why al-Biqā'ī took a remarkably divergent path from traditional exegetical methods in deploying biblical material in qur'anic exegesis, despite being a “conservative” scholar. Expanding on two propositions —that al-Biqā'ī's primary motivation in his excessive use of biblical texts may have been driven by “hermeneutical needs” (by W. Saleh) or “his theory of coherence” (by M. McCoy)—Ross argues that al-Biqā'ī may have sought to compile an unprecedentedly comprehensive commentary that would surpass not only previous Quran commentaries but also those of his time in both scope and methodology, which is a motive that would align well with the “competitive and innovative” dynamics of his intellectual milieu. Ross also explains that al-Biqā'ī's close relationships with the Mamluk elites, who had Jewish and Christian networks, and the court may have afforded him opportunities to engage with Jews, Christians, and former Jewish and Christian converts employed in the administration. He argues that this multi-faith intellectual environment and networks may have had a significant impact on his radical method of incorporating biblical material into his tafsīr. One interesting aspect of this section is the context in which Ross examines the level of influence of the Christian-Jewish and European backgrounds on the social and inter-religious dynamics of al-Biqā'ī's environment. His work was admired and cited by later commentators; yet, his specific practice of quoting the Bible was not widely adopted by his admirers in subsequent centuries.

The book then delves into exploration of the factors influencing the nineteenth-century biblical turn by highlighting three pivotal elements: the increased accessibility of biblical texts through mass printing, the diminishing of religious distinctions due to the Ottoman Tanzīmāt reforms and the Arab Renaissance, and the influence of the intense activities of European and American Christian missionaries. Among these, Ross suggests that Tanzīmāt reforms as a factor that may have contributed to opening “the Muslim world to ‘the other’ which might have potentially triggered a heightened Muslim interest in the Bible. While this is a compelling and suggestive line of inquiry, a more conclusive assessment of the Tanzīmāt's impact might benefit from further contextualisation — something that himself acknowledges—within a more expansive study of Ottoman biblical engagements, including their entanglements with the Nahda, missionary endeavours, and responses from Ottoman scholarly milieus, which remains a largely understudied area of research to this day.

The application of Nile Green's model of a competitive “religious economy” provides an interesting analytical framework for the discussion. It suggests that Muslim scholars were strategically responding to the missionary presence by adopting their methods to reclaim and redefine the narrative surrounding biblical texts. This aspect is particularly intriguing as it showcases a proactive stance among Muslim scholars rather than a purely defensive one, which Ross describes as “an attempt by Muslim scholars to co-opt the Bible ... but for Islamic ends.” (p. 124) He further explores “the typologies of biblical turn” by categorising some influential modern figures into three main ideological classifications: Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914) as “the most important Syrian Purist Salafī,” Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) as the most important “Modernist Salafis and co-authors of *Tafsīr al-manār*,” and Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973) as “one of the most important Late Sunnī Traditionalists” (pp. 127-139). He examines the various purposes for which these modern commentators began to employ the Bible, the authority they attributed to it relative to other interpretive sources, such as the Qur'an and hadīth, and isrā'iliyyāt, and, most significantly, the ways in which this engagement reshaped the tafsīr tradition. The analysis of the case studies underscores

the varied approaches within this “biblical turn.” Abduh, for example, uses biblical texts as historical sources that are practically helpful in understanding the history of earlier prophets and their nations. Similar to Abduh, Ibn ‘Āshūr is also noted for quoting the Bible extensively and viewing it as essential for fulfilling one of the Qur’an’s stated purposes: teaching the stories of earlier peoples. To achieve this aim, he lists the field of history and comparative religion among the necessary disciplines. By measuring the level of scriptural authority that the *mufassirūn* attributed to the Bible through their charitable reading of the text, alongside their opinions on the issue of *tahrīf*, Ross claims that they granted “a limited degree of authority” to the biblical text, even though they were all critical of its reliability (p. 207).

In Chapter 8, Ross presents two primary consequences of the biblical turn, albeit describing them as “minor” and not “dramatic,” for modern tafsīr through two case studies. The first one leads to the new interpretations of qur’anic narratives, challenging conventional exegesis. Ross claims that the discovery of “a hitherto biblical subtext” led to entirely new interpretations of qur’anic passages, potentially representing a break from earlier exegetical consensus (pp. 209-211). The example of Hagar and Sarah, and specifically the question of why Sarah laughed in the biblical narrative (Genesis 18: 2-12), serves as a case study for such reinterpretation driven by direct engagement with the biblical text. As for the second consequence of the biblical turn, Ross argues that modern commentators utilised the direct engagement with the biblical text as a tool to supplant the reliance on *isrā’iliyyāt* in tafsīr. By turning directly to the received biblical text, modern exegetes were making a conscious choice about source preference and authority. Ross argues that this decision to favour the biblical text over *isrā’iliyyāt* had profound consequences, not just for the source material used, but for the interpretation of specific qur’anic narratives. The gender-related implications of this preference of the *mufassirūn*, for instance, are evident in the changing interpretation of figures like Eve and the question of her responsibility for the Fall, where traditional interpretations might have been influenced by *isrā’iliyyāt* rather than the biblical text itself.

In tracing the biblical turn, Ross adeptly poses critical questions about the nature of scripture within Islam, the reverberations of this turn across different linguistic contexts, and its potential future trajectory. This push for deeper inquiry challenges the conventional boundaries that separate Islamic scripture from the biblical canon, raising vital discussions about urging a reassessment of its role within modern Islamic thought. He argues that although modern commentators have occasionally used the biblical subtext to extend the meaning of the qur’anic verses in ways that are contrary to the literal meaning of the Qur’an, they do not regard it as a canonical text, but rather as a historical book that “serves as corroboration for other evidence” (p. 217). Building on this observation, he claims that the received biblical text has come to occupy a complex, “liminal space” within modern Islamic thought, potentially challenging traditional notions of “scripture” and “canon” (p. 220).

While the book’s insights are both original and stimulating, Chapter 8 —addressing the complex consequences of the biblical turn— holds the potential to be further enriched with additional case studies examining the new interpretations of modern commentators across different facets. Admittedly, such an expansion may have exceeded, as the author notes, the intended scope of the current volume and caused practical constraints, given the vastness of the *tafsīr* tradition and the book’s present scope. Nevertheless, support with a broader sample could have allowed for a more

precise and more comprehensive demonstration of this multifaceted turn and the Bible's increasing role in modern tafsīr, thereby further strengthening the book's thesis that the biblical turn reshaped modern qur'anic exegetical discourse.

Overall, *Qur'an Commentary and the Biblical Turn* represents a significant and thought-provoking contribution to the study of *tafsīr* and Muslim-Christian intellectual and theological engagements. By rigorously documenting and contextualising the historical rarity of direct biblical engagement in pre-modern Arabic *Sunnī tafsīrs* and charting the rise and impact of the "biblical turn" in the modern period, Ross compels scholars to re-evaluate established narratives about the trajectory of Qur'an commentary and the dynamic interplay between Islamic and biblical interpretive traditions. This book is undoubtedly an essential read for scholars and students of Islamic exegesis, interreligious relations, and, more broadly, Islamic studies.

Bibliography

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