

Scot Nielson

### Sacred Texts: Holy Words in the Modern World

As a young Christian reading one hundred pages of the Qur'an for the first time, it's easy to forget in the process that I'm not actually reading the Bible. Much like my first encounter with Christian scripture, the archaic phrasing and complicated syntax due to translation rendered the meaning of the text difficult to draw out on the first pass. But while I approached the task with the assumption that I would leave with a better understanding of Islamic culture and belief, I was pleasantly surprised to find myself somewhat comforted and my own faith in God strengthened, and not so much as a result of finding the teachings of the Qur'an foreign to my own but rather it resonating with my beliefs. I posit that most Christians would benefit in the form of gaining a heightened level of respect for the Muslim community and a deeper understanding of the nature of their own faith from the experience of personally interacting with the Qur'an and seeing the parallels between it and the Bible in the form of its teachings and structure.

Of course, there are numerous differences between the Qur'an and Christian scripture, but understanding some of the history behind its origin gives way to seeing how these differences have contributed to the unique growth of Islam at the individual and community level. Among those differences are the perspective of the text and the explicit interaction with and inherent acknowledgement of existing religions by the text. The Qur'an purports to contain the messages of God, sent through angels, to Muhammad, who was born in Mecca around 570 AD when polytheism was rampant in the area. The narrative style of storytelling and instruction in the form of dialogue coming from angels to Muhammad gives some hint to why The Prophet is held in such extremely high regard in Islam; the Bible is, of course, about Jesus Christ, but the speakers and audiences in its books shift so often, it makes the Qur'an feel refreshingly constant

in comparison. In terms of similarities, the Qur'an dismisses the practice of worshipping multiple gods or idols with a familiar frequency and fervor to that of the Old Testament, and near explicitly states the purpose for its being communicated to Muhammad as condemning the practice and upholding one God as supreme in all. In this way, "The People of The Book", or Jews, as well as Christians, are almost set up as equals to Muslims, but the Qur'an goes on to offer clarifying advice to believing Muslims on how to interact with members of these other faiths, warning that, "you who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them (73).

The Qur'an provides even more explanation as to how a believer should live in ways that felt similar to the advice my scriptures give me, and topics that even Jesus approaches in the New Testament, in areas as specific as how one should handle money, what food is suitable for consumption, and when it is appropriate to hunt game or divorce a wife, to more obviously spiritual issues like proper prayer and explanations of condoned family dynamics. As a primary basis for all these practices is the worship of God and the sacredness of spending one's life in trying to live as that God says to live. The Qur'an provides instruction on how to live as a believer as well as the doctrinal foundation for islamic practices. This is not unfamiliar territory for readers of the Bible, who would feel especially at home interpreting metaphorical passages like this verse on the nature of God and faith--"your hearts become as hard as rocks, or even harder, for there are rocks from which streams spring out, and some from which water comes when they split open, and others which fall down in awe of God: He is not unaware of what you do" (pg. 10).

The God of the Qur'an and the God of the Bible can at times seem like the same being, like in this verse, taken from a section about virgin birth that says, "[The angel] said, 'This is how God creates what He will: when He has ordained something, He only says, "Be", and it is."

Today's Christians would probably be surprised by how much of a role Jesus plays in the Qur'an, and the respectful tone it takes towards Him. Christian now, or at least the American brand, also seems to have come a ways distant from Christianity around 600 AD, as the passage in the Qur'an mentioning that Muslims "are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians' (75-76) seems ironic in the context of today's rising islamophobia and general mistrust. Damian Howard explains the categorization of Jesus in the Qur'an in *"Who Do You Say that I Am?": Christians and Muslims Disputing the Historical Jesus*, stating that "Islam summons the world in general and Christians in particular back to the authentic monotheism of Abraham (and Adam), a call which has the christological corollary we have already noted, that Jesus was, and understood himself to be, a prophet of the Muslim sort and nothing more." (311).

While much of the Qur'an speaks at a personal level, first to Muhammad and second to the Muslim individual, it also addresses Muslims as a whole, even admonishing at one point that the community should "Hold fast to God's rope all together; do not split into factions" (pg. 42). This was a difficult thing for the Christian community to do, and the Islamic community has had a similar difficulty in preventing the proliferation of diverse schools of religious thought. Yet, like Christians, all Muslims hold the Qur'an to be sacred, and similarly rely on their leaders to help understand and apply the teachings in their scripture to their lives. The Qur'an plays an intimate role in the life of the average Muslim. As I discussed, the system of belief laid out in the Qur'an translates directly into the system of life given to the believers. Passages commenting on

temporal matters like “you shall have your capital if you repent,” and explicit warnings on usury hint towards the reason why religious Islam and political Islam are difficult to separate in countries with large islamic populations. The Qur’an is intimately tied to the community it created.

At a more personal level, Reading the Quran felt almost like peeking over a windowsill at a different, parallel universe version of myself who may have grown up under Islam. This was an almost eerie experience, but not an unfamiliar one--I’ve grown up reading scriptures and praying and being taught to be religious from my family, and it causes me to wonder what I would be like if The Book of Mormon had been swapped for a Quran in my childhood. Like James Faulconer’s experience with his Jewish Professor in “Scripture Study: Tools and Suggestions”, I think I would find that I would agree with the Muslim version of myself on a surprising number of topics. We would both believe in a supreme, benevolent God, the importance of prayer and scripture, and we would both feel intimately tied to communities where those beliefs were held and taught. But what resonated especially deep with in this experience of reading the Qur’an was that I could find comfort and insight in an almost identical way to how I gain insight from my own scripture study, even addressing specific topics that I have recently found myself grappling with more and more as I get older and wonder about the role of religion in my life and my own relationship with God. Specifically, the Qur’an speaks about the nature of death, providing little hints toward Islamic doctrine on destiny, resurrection, and divine purpose that nearly mirrors the doctrines I’ve been taught at a face level. For example, the Qur’an tells a short, unfortunate story about apparently tragic death, in this passage: “You who believe, do not be like those who disbelieved and said of their brothers who went out on a journey or a raid, ‘If only they had stayed with us they would not have died or been killed,’ for God will make such thoughts a

source of anguish in their hearts. It is God who gives life and death; God sees everything you do. Whether you are killed for God's cause or die, God's forgiveness and mercy are better than anything people amass. Whether you die or are killed, it is to God that you will be gathered. (46). Indeed, I found the Qur'an to be especially worth reading, and I do not think I will stop at one hundred pages. Rather than diminish or challenge my faith in my own scriptures, my faith was benefited by interacting at such an intimate level with the source material for a religion I previously saw as foreign and incomparable to my own religion, which is why I think Christianity as a whole would profit from understanding Islam in the context of its scripture.

## Works Cited

- Howard, Damian. “‘Who Do You Say that I Am?’: Christians and Muslims Disputing the Historical Jesus. *Neotestamentica*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2015, pp. 297-320. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43927238>.
- Reynolds, Gabriel Said. “*The Quran* and the Apostles of Jesus.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 76, no. 2, 2013, pp. 209-227. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24692806>.
- The Qur'an*. Translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford UP, 2016.

## Passages

The Cow: 74 - Even after that, your hearts become as hard as rocks, or even harder, for there are rocks from which streams spring out, and some from which water comes when they split open, and others which fall down in awe of God: He is not unaware of what you do. (pg. 10)

I found this passage interesting for the metaphor that felt very similar to the way parables are laid out in the Bible, and that it hints to the omniscient nature of God.

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The Family of 'Imran:28 - The believers should not make the disbelievers their allies rather than other believers--anyone who does such a thing will isolate himself completely from God--except when you need to protect yourselves from them. (pg. 36)

I think I was especially careful to look for passages explaining how Muslims should act towards people of other faiths. I highlighted this passage because it gives a spiritual explanation for how one should behave socially, which is a question I've dealt with as a member of the Church among a lot of people who aren't members.

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The Family of 'Imran:47 - She said, 'My Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me? [The angel] said, 'This is how God creates what He will: when He has ordained something, He only says, "Be", and it is. (pg. 38)

I was fascinated to find Bible stories in the Qur'an, and again, for the explanation of the nature of God's power.

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The Family of 'Imran:103 - Hold fast to God's rope all together; do not split into factions. (pg. 42)

I address this passage in my essay, but it stood out to me because when I think of Islam, I think of the many factions that it has split into. It's amazing how often religions diverge, and it always makes me think about how differences should be resolved when issues come up within a religion.

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The Family of 'Imran:156-158 - You who believe, do not be like those who disbelieved and said of their brothers who went out on a journey or a raid, 'If only they had stayed with us they would not have died or been killed,' for God will make such thoughts a source of anguish in their hearts. It is God who gives life and death; God sees everything you do. Whether you are killed for God's cause or die, God's forgiveness and mercy are better than anything people amass. Whether you die or are killed, it is to God that you will be gathered. (pg. 46)

I found this passage to be such an interesting exploration of the nature of grief and the role of death from a spiritual perspective in the context of a story, with heavy reference to the role of God in life and death.

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Scot - Women:1 - People, be mindful of our Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide; (pg. 50)



I spent a few minutes trying to find an explanation of this passage--it seems to say that Muslims believe doctrinally in soulmates?

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Scot - The Feast:32 - We decreed to the Children of Isreal that if anyone kills a person--unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land--it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind. (pg. 71)

I think one of the biggest similarities between Islam and my religion is the role and significance of sacrifice. This is a very interesting passage.

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Scot - The Feast:44 - We revealed the Torah with guidance and light, and the prophets, who had submitted to God, judged according to it for the Jews. (pg. 72)

I mention this above as well, but I was struck by how often the Qur'an interacts explicitly with other scriptures.