

benefit from the merit of being counted among the progeny of Abraham through Isaac (either genealogical or spiritual). The Qur'an declared by its exposition (among other things) that *who* was nearly sacrificed is not the point. At issue, rather, is the awesome nature of the divine demand and the awesome nature of Abraham *and* his son's response. Who 'gets the credit' is not the point.

A book that treats the exegetical traditions of three complex and highly productive religious civilizations, even a book this size, cannot do full justice to the range and depth of production among them. And such a work requires working with texts in a range of languages that are rarely acquired even by scholars. Gregg worked mostly with translations in the Jewish and Islamic traditions. This presents less of a problem with Jewish material since so much has been translated over the last century. But translations into English from Arabic and other languages spoken by literarily productive Muslims are relatively rare, and there is almost nothing in the field of *tafsīr*, the official genre of Islamic exegesis. Gregg had to rely, therefore, on a related genre of the 'Stories of the Prophets' material (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) that can be found in three recent works, Ṭabarī's *History* (SUNY Press) and al-Kisā'ī (Twayne) and al-Tha'labī's (Brill) *qiṣaṣ* collections. While these contain a massive number of traditions, they only represent one type of the vast exegetical literature of Islam.

I came away from this book slightly puzzled over its purpose. It is not an easy read, though always an interesting one. Its length would seem to preclude using it as a course textbook. It seems that it can best be used as a reference work through which one can learn some of the exegetical responses of the three scriptural monotheisms. And indeed, it is a wonderful collection of exegesis on some of the core narratives that have come to define distinction between the three scriptural monotheisms.

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The Qur'an and the Just Society. By Ramon Harvey. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. Pp. 276. £80. ISBN 978 1 4744 0329 0.

This is an excellent book, clear, comprehensive, and well-argued throughout. The author defends the idea that the Qur'an is setting out to produce an account of justice, and seeks to explain this by going through the Qur'anic text where it deals with politics, punishment, and equality. Although the thesis itself is not novel, Harvey succeeds in differentiating his approach from that of many other commentators on the topic, and for anyone interested in this aspect of the Qur'an this monograph is going to be an important addition to the literature. One of its great virtues is the sophisticated approach

Harvey takes to hermeneutics, bringing in a whole variety of interpretive machinery in an attempt to explain what is going on in various places in the text. The leading principle he follows is to try to put the verses in a historical context, and there is a lot to be said for that. Again, this approach itself may not be original, but many of the comments he makes are novel and well worth considering. However, the book includes an extensive account of pre-Islamic Arabia, the relevance of which was not clear to me, and as far as I can see it is not used as one would have expected. There is no mention of the relevance of *ʿurf*, for example: I initially assumed the author would talk about how some of the customs of the *jāhiliyya* were not objected to and found their way into what Islam regards as *ḥalāl*. Strangely to my mind in a book on the topic of morality neither of these terms appears anywhere in the text, as far as I can recall, nor are they in the glossary or in the index.

Harvey is out to defend a Māturīdī approach to understanding the nature of Islamic law, and spends a lot of time outlining the virtues of such a position. He does a good job here, and shows how that approach links up with natural law views, and places great reliance on rationality. His defence of the idea that the Qurʾan is morally realist is less plausible. He points out that God is merciful and tends to reward us far more than we deserve, yet at Q. 4:48 *shirk* or idolatry is said to be beyond the pale, there will be no forgiveness for that sin. Harvey minimises this by claiming that Q. 4:110 and Q. 25:70 suggest that even this sin could be forgiven, and so God's mercy is absolute (p. 25). Neither of those verses actually mention *shirk* though, and there is no reason to think that God was not serious when he labelled *shirk* the unforgiveable crime. It is a claim we must accept given its source, even if it offends the view of rationalism the author is trying to apply to Islam.

We see this trend continuing throughout the book, such that even instructions that seem problematic, like Q. 4:34, the passage apparently advocating violence against wives, can be explained away by judicious use of *ḥadīth*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, grammatical remarks, and so on. Some of the argument here is a little forced, especially when the Prophet is said to have come down on a lenient interpretation of how men should treat their wives while God went for the more robust approach. This certainly gets us to an interesting view of the Qurʾan as a document put together by negotiation between God and His messenger, rather than the latter just receiving and reporting it.

Harvey is caught in a dilemma that many progressives experience when wishing to respect the text but advocating changes in interpretation. The Qurʾan was originally produced for a certain audience, with its own preconceptions about gender roles and slavery and so on, and wished to fit in with that audience, so it tolerated many things that do not accord with modern ideas on these issues. All we have to do is keep the principles and apply them to modern times as a guide, but not necessarily as something that does not require change. We can understand the principles and how they are

supposed to help establish a state of affairs where justice rules, something we can understand rationally. This is something Harvey refers to when matters are discussed in the Qur'an that seem out of date and old fashioned, they then need to be changed, albeit maintaining the spirit of what God has laid down as the law.

Yet does not the Qur'an warn us about this? For example, there is, ...*Do you then believe in a part of the Book and disbelieve in the other? What then is the reward of such among you as do this but disgrace in the life of this world, and on the day of resurrection they shall be sent back to the most serious penalty, and God is not unaware of what you do* (Q. 2:85). Even more powerfully we are told *It is not fitting for a believer, whether man or woman, when a matter has been decided by God and His messenger to have any option about their decision: if any one disobey God and His messenger, he is indeed on a clearly wrong path* (Q. 33:36).

The idea of following more egalitarian principles seems to come up against *They have taken as lords besides God their rabbis and their monks and the Messiah son of Mary, when they were told to worship only one God. There is no God except for Him ...* (Q. 9:31). The 'rabbis' and 'monks' here can be equated with the ideas of gender equality that some think need to be followed in their interpretation of religion. They are part of *shirk* since they are principles we often accept yet which do not seem to be part of the Qur'an, quite the contrary. And at Q. 4:48 we are warned that *shirk* can never be forgiven.

Harvey has an ambitious aim, to show that those who do not accept the Qur'an can nonetheless be regarded as good, according to the Qur'an. By contrast, many of the major commentators on Islamic ethics, such as Izutsu, have argued that the Qur'an sees revelation as the ultimate criterion of justice. Harvey wants to defend the idea of a natural law we can follow on the basis of our rationality, and the Qur'an is taken to accord with such an idea. It is a difficult project to support, but he does a good job in working with the few texts that could be taken in that way, and these of course cannot be limited to the Qur'an but have to be drawn from the widest range of hermeneutic material that the commentator on the Qur'an can use.

If the book has one merit above others, and it has many merits, it is in the close reading that Harvey gives to the text and the very varied sources of interpretation on which he draws; it really is an exercise in hermeneutic virtuosity. It is nice to see this in a Māturīdī approach to *tafsīr*, instead of the often rather stolid and unadventurous arguments. Yet it can be difficult to see what is going on. For example, when dealing with Q. 4:34, which seems to advocate violence (albeit perhaps of a very limited nature) against an erring wife by her husband, the full range of interpretive machinery is brought into play to weaken the apparent thrust of the verse. Harvey does not want to say it is just how people talked about relationships between husbands and wives at that time ('I do not think that historically relativizing its basic moral principles does justice

to the ethical claims of the scripture' [p.152]). He goes on to say that 'it is possible to acknowledge a system of wise purposes that retain universal validity even as the rules by which they are instantiated may need to shift in time and place' (*ibid*). This is the typical disingenuous language of the reformers, sometimes described as wanting to have your cake and eat it. They want to change things to make them fit in with how life is now, but at the same time they do not want to criticise what we are told we should do in the past, since the broad principles behind everything are the same and benign. It is difficult to take seriously all of the various interpretations of what is involved in striking the errant wife, ranging from a brutal assault to an attack with a toothbrush or handkerchief but, although it is easy to make light of this sort of hermeneutic manoeuvre, one cannot help thinking of how for many centuries this verse may have been used to justify or excuse violence of a very unpleasant nature against women. It is not easy to see the 'wise purposes' here.

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The Koran in English: A Biography. By Bruce B. Lawrence. (Lives of Great Religious Books Series) Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. 247 + x. £15. ISBN 978 0 6911 5558 5.

Bruce Lawrence has presented us with the first comprehensive introduction to the history of English Qur'an translation. This is an exciting contribution to a field that has as yet received relatively little scholarly attention. As part of a series of short volumes that are targeted at general readers and written by experts, this book is meant to be accessible to non-specialists. At the same time, it contains a thorough bibliography of English Qur'an translations as well as extensive, informative notes, which make it a useful reference work for students as well as scholars seeking to gain an overview of the topic.

In many parts, the book presents a highly personal account which proves to be both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, it makes the narrative engaging and relatable. On the other hand, it results in imbalances. Such translators, translations, and approaches that the author does not hold in high esteem receive little attention beyond bibliographic remarks, regardless of their impact, whereas others, especially those that aim for a literary rendition of the Qur'an's style, as well as the illustrated 'American Qur'an' by Sandow Birk, are treated extensively. Of course, in a short volume such as this, some bias can never be completely avoided but it is nonetheless striking that, for example, the Saheeh International translation that is available all over the internet is barely mentioned in passing.