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Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers

John Kaltner

Collegetown, MN: Michael Glazier/The Liturgical Press, 1999

308 pages, \$38.50 Softcover

“Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world and will soon have more than one billion followers. To remain ignorant of the facts about something so influential and important for humanity would be irresponsible.” So writes John Kaltner in the introduction to this fascinating book, in which he attempts to introduce a Christian audience to Islam through a study of the Qur'an, Islam's sacred scripture. Kaltner's approach is unique. A number of general introductions to Islam, some specifically aimed at a Christian audience (for example Stuart E. Brown's *The Nearest in Affection: Towards a Christian Understanding of Islam* or Paul V. Martinson's *Islam: An Introduction for Christians* are on the market. But Kaltner wishes to lay the foundation for reconciliation within the Abrahamic family of Jews, Christians, and Muslims by a careful listening to one another's sacred stories, many of which are shared. To this end he offers comparative readings of the stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Mary, and Jesus as they appear in the Bible and the Qur'an. He notes both similarities and differences, but strives towards a notion of “cooperating revelations” in which the Qur'anic version helps the Bible reader discover something new in the biblical text. This endeavour he names “intercanonical criticism.”

An example will best illustrate Kaltner's approach. In his reading of the Qur'anic story of Adam, Kaltner juxtaposes surah (chapter) 7:10-25 and 20:115-122 about the creation and sin of the first human couple with their biblical counterparts in the first chapters of Genesis. Besides the striking similarities, he focuses on significant differences. Generally, while the Bible presents a linear narrative account, the Qur'an is more thematically oriented, using direct address to instruct the reader. The Qur'anic account does not relate a creation of woman separate from man (as in Genesis 2). The agent of humanity's temptation in the Qur'an is not just a snake but Iblis, an angel or jinn who disobeyed God. In the Qur'an, both members of the first human couple are involved equally in the first sin, both are equally culpable, and neither offers excuses for their behaviour as in the Bible, but rather both acknowledge their guilt and beg forgiveness. The consequence of their sin is expulsion from the

Garden, but this is seen as a divine mercy not a punishment, allowing humanity to learn what it means to submit to God's will so that a return to the Garden is possible. In the Qur'an, thus, there is no "fall" or "original sin" as these are seen by Christians in the Genesis accounts.

Rather than rejecting these differences, Kaltner argues that they "allow us to glean additional meaning and insight from the biblical text that we might normally miss" (49). Christian readers traditionally tend to see in the story of Adam and Eve a weak and corrupt humanity rejected by an angry deity. The Qur'anic accounts, with their motif of a covenantal relationship between humanity and the deity, and an emphasis on the persistence of divine compassion and patience despite humanity's offence, point out that the same features appear also in the biblical story, albeit in a muted fashion; only later in Genesis and in the rest of the Bible do they become explicit. Furthermore, the Qur'anic use of direct address and point of view indicate that the story of Adam and Eve is not a simple recounting of a past event but is far more meant to instruct contemporary readers about God's present provision and humanity's ungratefulness, thus circumventing the distinctly modern temptation to read these stories as empirical history. Finally, although Kaltner does not dwell on this point, the mutuality of the man and the woman in the Qur'anic accounts provides a counterbalance to the traditional misogynistic readings of the biblical story.

Kaltner continues in the same vein to examine the stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Mary, and Jesus. In each case he ends with a consideration of how the Qur'anic account "cooperates" with the biblical account, both in its replication of the biblical story and in its unique features which highlight often unnoticed nuances of the biblical story. Thus, the telling of the story of the Flood from Noah's point of view in the Qur'an complements the biblical story which is told from God's point of view. The Qur'an introduces Isaac's point of view into the story of Abraham's sacrifice. The Qur'anic accounts of Moses highlight his journey of self discovery. In the Qur'an, Mary, mother of Jesus, remains independent and free of male control, emphasizing her dependence on God alone, thus complementing especially her portrayal in Luke's Gospel. Finally, while differing theologically from Christianity on the question of the divinity of Jesus, the Qur'an highlights the role of human pride and arrogance in the death of Jesus.

Kaltner begins his book with a helpful introduction, including an outline of the life of Muhammad and a general description of the Qur'an.

He notes that traditionally Muslims have viewed the Christian scriptures as corrupt and Christians have viewed the Muslim scriptures as derivative. In contrast, Kaltner wishes to focus on the interrelated meanings in the two scriptures apart from polemics regarding their origins and development. Unfortunately, the book ends rather abruptly without a conclusion, though there are helpful subject and scripture indexes.

It is difficult to pinpoint the audience for this book. It is probably too difficult for the uninitiated layperson but not satisfying for the scholar. For the layperson the introduction is too short and no guidance is given as to appropriate English translations of the Qur'an (the author employs his own translations of Qur'anic passages but relies on the New Revised Standard Version for biblical quotations). For the scholar not enough scholarship is cited and the book does not deal adequately with the seeming use of extra-biblical (that is, pseudepigraphical, apocryphal, and rabbinic) material in the Qur'an. However, the reviewer has successfully presented material out of this book to Christian lay audiences at retreat centers and in church groups and gatherings; as long as the presenter has some solid background knowledge of Islam, the book can be used by pastors, teachers, and others in various church and educational settings. As for scholars, they should be intrigued by Kaltner's notion of "intercanonical criticism" and see in it another useful tool in the exegetical toolbox and for interfaith understanding.

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Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society

Anthony J. Saldarini

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001

325 pages, \$46.25 Softcover

Saldarini, who has also written on Jesus, Matthew, and rabbinic sources, here assesses the role of first-century Jewish groups using a functionalist, sociological approach (based on G. Lenski's *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*). This book is accessible to a general audience.

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