

Book Reviews

The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary

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General Editors: Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake,
and Joseph E. Lombard; Assistant Editor: Mohammed Rustom
New York: HarperOne, 2015. 2,048 pages.*

The Study Quran (hereafter *SQ*) is an impressive undertaking that took several scholars years to complete. It consists of a general introduction, a translation of the Qur'an, a synopsis/adaptation of certain Quran commentaries, and a series of essays that seek to explain the sacred text's place in Islamic life and thought. These latter range from "How to Read the Quran" and "The Islamic View of the Quran" to "Quranic Ethics, Human Rights, and Society" and different aspects of the text's interpretation, such as "The Qur'an and Sufism" and "Quranic Commentaries." The project includes maps that reconstruct the position of important events such as the Battle of Badr and the Conquest of Makkah. Several of the essays are written by excellent scholars, and the project as a whole is grand in its scope. The entire work, including introductions and maps, exceeds 2,000 pages.

It is difficult to review such a work as a whole, because there is so much of it and at almost every level it represents a construction of particular values and views. From the choice of the editors and their approach to the manner of translating the text, the commentaries that are included, and even the maps – each of these elements has been chosen by the editors as a part of an overall vision of what it takes to understand the Quran correctly.

In this review, I will focus on how the commentarial tradition is represented and modified on gender issues. My argument is that when it comes to gender, the *SQ* is an excellent example of modern conservative methods and perspectives. Methodologically, this involves picking and choosing, as well as summarizing and (crucially) modifying, pre-modern commentaries, as well as prioritizing those written during the fourteenth century and before. However, the use of particular elements from those commentaries only gives an ancient air to what is essentially a modern interpretation. Not that the editors claim that their work represents the medieval heritage perfectly; they state outright that

their work is an entirely new one that sometimes reflects medieval commentaries and at other times departs from them (p. xlv). Obviously, what they pick and choose from within the medieval commentarial tradition and how they depart from it are necessarily selective. Since they do not specify their methodology, it is useful to put this into a larger framework. Below, I shall show how specific examples of their picking and choosing are typical expressions of modern Muslim conservatism. But first I would like to raise a separate issue: the way in which the chosen sources construct the “Islamic tradition.”

The editors list some forty commentators whose views they consulted. These commentators seem to represent a wide time period as well as a variety of opinions on the text. But the list is somewhat misleading, for cross-referencing it with the actual number of citations in the index shows that the modern and early modern authors listed are not actually referenced in their commentary; rather, they appear either in the essays at the end or in the introduction to the book.

Thus Tabataba’i (d. 1981) is only represented in the introduction and two of the essays; Ibn ‘Ashur (d. 1973) is referenced only in the introduction. The early modern author Shihab al-Din al-Alusi (d. 1854) is referenced in the commentary on four verses (Q. 24:31, 33:56, 51:56, 58:22), al-Shawkani (d. 1839) is referenced in the commentary on two verses (Q. 93:1-2), while the Shadhili Sufi Ibn ‘Ajibah Ahmad (d. 1809), is referenced in some forty-six passages, some of them including several verses. Burusawi (d. 1725) is referenced in the commentary on only one verse (50:43). Muhammad Muhsin Fayd al-Kashani (d. 1680) is referenced only in the introduction. Sadr al-Din Shirazi (known as Mulla Sadra) (d. 1640) is referred to in the commentary on nine verses. Al-Suyuti (d. 1505) is referred to in the commentary on two verses, al-Biqā’i (d. 1480) is referenced only in the introduction and concluding essays, and ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani (d. 1336) is referenced in the commentary on nine verses. Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) is referenced many times, as are other authors who died earlier than this, such as al-Qurtubi.

In sum: authors who died during the twentieth century or after are completely omitted from the commentaries; authors from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries are very rarely referenced, except for Ibn ‘Ajibah, and authors of the fourteenth century and before have the most citations.

Such basic statistics give us a very good idea of what the editors mean when they refer to the “Islamic tradition.” While they fully admit that they had to make difficult choices, they chose to represent it mainly through the intellectual output from the fourteenth century and before. The presumption here seems to be that these commentators had more insight into the Qur’an

than do today's scholars, or that it is more important to present these views than any modern ones. Yet when we examine how these views are presented in the actual interpretations, it becomes clear that at least some of the editors were uncomfortable with the idea of presenting views formed in the tenth to fourteenth centuries as they really were; instead, these views are modified in ways that suit a specific sensibility about what it means to be a modern conservative Muslim. While relating to aspects of the tradition, such interpretations are actually entirely modern in their approach. This is an extremely common, in fact almost universal, pattern in modern conservative exegesis of the Qur'an, at least when it comes to gender issues.¹

The *SQ*'s interpretation of Q. 4:1 provides a good example of the modern conservative approach. The verse reads: "Fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate, and from the two of them spread forth many men and women." First, it is translated in a modern way, so *ittaqu* is not "fear" but "reverence," which removes any negative connotations that the term *fear* might have in the modern context.

The commentary on the verse then combines medieval understanding with modern conservative sensibility. In this view, the "single soul" is Adam and the "mate" is Eve, just as in the medieval sources; but the distinctly modern line is added that "this interweaving of masculine and feminine references suggests a reciprocity of the masculine and feminine in human relations and marriage, which is also implied in other verses (cf. 2:187; 30:21)" (p. 189). The idea of "reciprocity" is notably absent from any medieval sources; instead, for them this verse engenders a hierarchy. In turn, the hierarchical element is absent from the *SQ*'s commentary.

The author of the commentary on this verse, Maria Massi Dakake, mentions that for most commentators this verse refers to the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, while some say that it refers to their creation from the same substance (or the same clay). Some interpreters take *from (min)* to mean "of the same type or character" (p. 189). This is all an accurate representation of the medieval interpretations of this verse; however, the meaning that they attribute to this creation is missing. For most medieval interpreters, the creation of Eve from Adam meant that she was a secondary creation, which had implications for women's worldly status. None of them said that Eve was equal to Adam. Even the earliest interpretations, such as that of Hud b. Muhakkam, cite a hadith that compares Eve to a crooked rib: a woman's "crookedness lives with her."² And even interpretations that speak of woman being created from the same substance do not attribute this to gender equality: they either make no comment at all or say that she

is a subsidiary creation.³ In her commentary on Q. 4:1, therefore, Dakake omits these unpalatable aspects of the tradition and builds the basis for an understanding of men and women as equal in their creation, while citing medieval sources that made no such argument.

The pattern of jettisoning certain less-palatable aspects of interpretation is repeated with Q. 4:34: “men are *qawwāmūn* over women... and if you fear their rising up, admonish them, abandon them in the beds, and beat them, and if they obey you seek not a way against them.” Dakake’s commentary here is extensive; she clearly made a tremendous effort to summarize past interpretations and construct her own. These comments do not address all aspects of it (which would take an entire essay); rather, I will give one brief example to show how the paradigm of modern conservative selectivity and reinterpretation applies here. Like other modern conservative interpreters, Dakake agrees with the hierarchy between the sexes that the verse establishes in its opening (“men are *qawwāmūn*...”), which is in line with the precedent established in the commentaries that she cites (here she relies mostly on al-Tabari and al-Qurtubi, but also mentions Ibn Kathir, al-Tabrisi, al-Zamakhshari, and others).

However, like other modern conservative interpreters, she also does not mention the *reasons* given by the medieval commentators to justify the husband’s superior position in the marital hierarchy. While she justifies this by referring to men’s obligation to support their wives financially, she never alludes to male superiority, which is one of the main reasons given by the medieval commentators for allowing a man to discipline his wife. Thus, in line with other modern conservatives, she maintains the basic ruling but modifies its justifications. It is not the general approach of picking and choosing that is interesting here, but rather *what* is picked and chosen. In the case of gendered verses, the editors’ choices are typically representative of the modern conservative approach to gender issues, which is held in common by both Sunnis and Shi‘is.⁴

This approach is, inevitably for a work edited by many people, uneven. For instance, in her interpretation of Q. 4:1 Dakake cites Q. 2:187 as an example of reciprocity in the spousal relationship (the verse reads, in part, “they are a garment for you and you are a garment for them”). However, Caner Dagli, the editor who wrote the commentary on Q. 2:187, does not mention this part of the verse at all, for it was of less importance to medieval commentators than it is to modern ones. In his commentary, Dagli relies on al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir, who seem to be most interested in the occasion for the verse’s revelation and when it is permissible to have sexual relations during Ramadan (p. 82).

Yet in his commentary on Q. 9:71, Dagli goes the other way: he cites no medieval commentators and refers only to the contemporary understanding of this verse's implications. This verse reads: "But the believing men and the believing women are protectors of one another, enjoining right and forbidding wrong, performing the prayer, giving the alms, and obeying God and His Messenger. They are those upon whom God will have Mercy. Truly God is Mighty, Wise." In his commentary, he says "this verse is significant with regard to the spiritual and social standing of women (cf 33:35) because it places upon them the same spiritual and social obligations placed on men, including moral authority and protection" (p. 525). Perhaps he does not cite medieval commentators here because his interpretation reflects modern sensibilities and a modern concern with the human equality between the sexes.

The Study Qur'an is a monumental work, one which required a huge scholarly effort. It obviously cannot be understood as a representation of the medieval commentarial tradition or of the full range of modern thought; rather, it is a fine example of current conservative trends in Qur'an interpretation. One would, perhaps, not expect to find such a perspective in what one assumes to be an academic work. And yet this work cannot be considered academic in the sense of being an attempt at impartial representation. Rather, it is a clear statement of a particular worldview. The examples on gender issues show exactly how modern conservative thinkers use parts of the medieval tradition as a springboard to construct an entirely modern view of the gender hierarchy, one in which male privilege is still guaranteed but is no longer predicated on the idea of men's innate superiority.

Endnotes

1. I discuss this pattern extensively in my *Gender Hierarchy in the Qur'an: Medieval Interpretations, Modern Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). See especially chapter 2 (on modern interpretations of Q. 2:282), chapter 4 (on modern interpretations of Q. 4:1), and chapter 6 (on modern interpretations of Q. 4:34).
2. Ibid., 112.
3. Ibid., 123-29.
4. For a lengthier explanation of the modern conservative approach see *ibid.*, chapter 6.

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