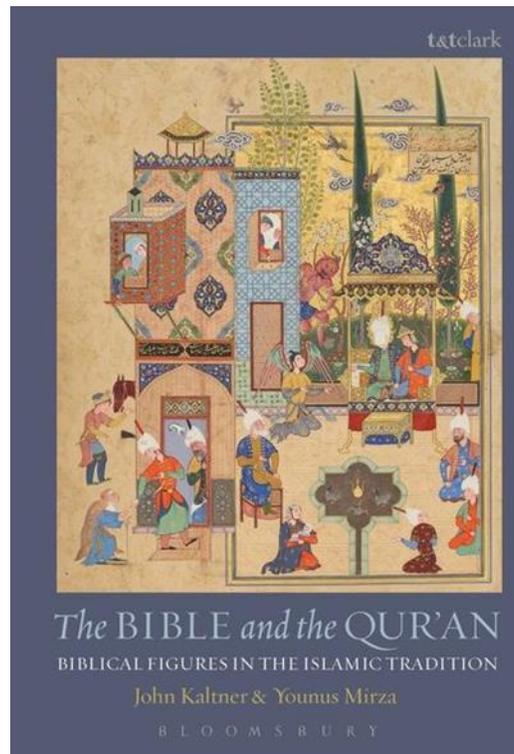


On Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition: In Conversation with Younus Mirza

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John Kaltner and Younus Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition*, Bloomsbury Publishing, February 2018, 184 pp., \$26.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9780567666000.

In this brief interview with a *Milestones* contributor, Younus Mirza discusses *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition*, his forthcoming book co-authored with John Kaltner. Mirza is an Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies at Allegheny College. He defended his dissertation in Arabic and Islamic Studies from Georgetown University in 2012 and was awarded a postdoc in Religious Studies at Millsaps College in 2012-3. While his dissertation focused on the influential medieval historian and Qur'anic exegete Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), his current research focuses on how modern Muslims engage the Qur'an and the classical Islamic tradition. *The Bible and the Qur'an* is forthcoming in Bloomsbury Publishing this February (2018).

Milestones (M): Tell us about your forthcoming co-authored book. Why focus on Biblical figures in the Islamic tradition?

Younus Mirza (YM): Thank you very much for the opportunity to be interviewed. Many Muslims and non-Muslims may not realize that there are many “Biblical” or “Western” figures within the Islamic tradition, ranging from Adam to Yusuf/Joseph. Many of these figures follow a similar story within the Islamic tradition but often the stories are altered to fit within an Islamic ethos.

For instance, in the Biblical story of Abraham’s/Ibrahim’s attempted sacrifice of his son, God speaks directly to Abraham and commands him to sacrifice his “only son” Isaac. Abraham asks Isaac to go out with him to give the offering but does not tell him that he intends to sacrifice him. However, in the Qur’an, Ibrahim has a dream that he should sacrifice “his son”, who is never made explicit in the story. He then asks his son what should he do and he responds that he should follow the command and that he will, by the will of God, be patient. In the Bible, the story is more about Israelite patriarchs of Abraham and Isaac, while in the Qur’an it is more about prophets following God’s command and submitting to his will.

M: Elaborate on the collections known as the Stories of the Prophets (Qisas al-Anbiya’), which play a central role in your book. Why did you turn to this literature in addition to the Qur’an?

YM: It was important to include the Qisas al-Anbiya’ literature within the book to demonstrate how Muslims have imagined and reimagined the stories throughout their history. While the Qur’an presents biblical figures within a unique light, the Qisas literature builds upon the Qur’anic structure and includes fascinating narrative details. Some of the Qisas material eventually became “literature” in that they develop their own fictional stories that are based on the Qur’anic framework.

M: How do you respond to critical appraisals of comparative religions,¹ particularly those that suggest the discipline is foundationally and methodologically Christocentric?

YM: In my work on the Bible and Qur’an, I have often found that early Western authors sought to understand the Qur’an in light of the Biblical tradition. Any difference they found in the Qur’an they saw as a mistake that Muhammad made in understanding or retelling the story. However, more recently scholarship, such as that of Marilyn Waldman, demonstrates that the Qur’an has a particular goal in using Biblical material. The Qur’an frequently takes Biblical stories and repurposes them to fit a message of monotheism and belief.

M: Can you tell us about the history/genealogy of the phrase “Abrahamic religions”? When did this term gain traction? How is this concept similar or different from the Islamic designation of *Ahl al-Kitaab* (People of the Book)?

YM: Abrahamic religions is a term that developed in the mid 20th century but really took off after 9/11 in a liberal climate that did not want to see Islam as the enemy per se but as part of America's so-called "Judeo-Christian" heritage. In this sense, the term was understood to be more inclusive. The proponents of the term pointed to the shared Biblical heritage and to the reality that Muslims preserved Greek and Roman thought throughout their history. However, scholars like Jon Levenson have critiqued the term since it often elides the differences between the various religions. Jews, Christians and Muslims have always understood Abraham in different ways and within their own theological contexts.

For instance, returning back to the story of Ibrahim's sacrifice, Jews have understood the story as part of "Genesis" or the evolution of the story of Children Israel. Christians, on the other hand, were drawn to the story in relation to the sacrifice of Christ. The story was a prefiguration of Christ and resembled the later example of the Father sacrificing his son Jesus. In Islam, the sacrificial son became to be identified with Isma'il, the father of Arabs, and the Qur'an emphasizes how both followed God's command and believed in his will. Thus, each group has understood the same story as part of their distinct theology and part of their historical narratives.

M: Have your research interests been informed by questions in your immediate life?

YM: As a Muslim who grew up in the United States, questions have always surfaced regarding the relationship between Islam and the West. As I became more interested in the relationship between the Bible and the Qur'an, I was amazed to learn how much "Biblical" material is found within the Islamic tradition. However, Muslims have always adapted this material to fit within their theologies and historical contexts. In other words, they made the material their "own" and built upon it in unique and creative ways. I believe this historical example can be a template for modern Muslims who want to benefit from knowledge and examples of other communities but also retain their individuality and distinctiveness.

¹ See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005)