

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Crucial Weakness on History

When British novelist and historian Tom Holland recently set out to research the history of the Arab Empire he approached his research as he had for his previously published popular histories. As a secular historian, Holland was not an expert on Islam so he consulted academic scholarship on Islam. He was surprised to find such a lack of good historical sources and how “the same questions that had been confronting scholars of early Islam for the past forty years were now staring me full in the face.”

This chapter probes the Qur’an’s approach to history, focusing on the biblical history it transmits. What is the Qur’an’s interest in history—is history important to the Qur’an’s concept of revelation? When the Qur’an presents the story of a personality who is known from the Bible, does the Qur’an treat the Bible as a book of history?

This chapter also examines the use of history in Muslim interpretation of events about which there is inadequate information in the Qur’an (e.g. what is the name of the son Abraham intended to sacrifice? What happened in the moments after the authorities came to seize Jesus, intending to kill him?).

1. The Qur’an and history

- A basic difference between the Bible and the Qur’an is their approach to history. In the Bible’s view, God acts in history (e.g. creation, exodus, exile). The Bible is the record of God’s self-revelation through these acts (e.g. John 3:16). Both the Old Testament and New Testament anchor their stories in history, with the names of rulers and the years of their reign supplied (e.g. Luke 2:1-2). The Qur’an contains very little narrated history and “is a disjunctive and discontinuous book of lessons, warnings, instructions, and exhortations” which “adopts a profoundly ahistorical view of the world and of mankind.”

2. Biblical history in the Qur’an

- The Qur’an presents its own version of stories about figures readily recognizable as the personalities of the Bible, however the qur’anic stories are clearly different from the biblical accounts. The Qur’an itself invites comparison and evaluation when it names the Torah and the Gospel and claims to be giving the true version of accounts in dispute. Determining the truth using principles of history (e.g. proximity in time, eyewitnesses) is more reasonable than making subjective judgments based on personal preferences.

3. Can dogma determine history?

- A famous story shared by Islam, Christianity, and Judaism is the account of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22; Q 37.101-111). Which of his two sons was this? The Torah is clear, but the Qur’an is unclear. Many early Muslim commentators understood the son to be Isaac, either from evidence in the Qur’an itself (al-Ṭabarī) or in the Torah (Ibn Qutayba). But later Muslim commentators claimed it was Ishmael, basing such a conclusion solely on dogma rather than any historical evidence.

4. Can polemic determine history?

- The “Gospel of Barnabas” (a pseudepigraphic Islamic book written 900 years after the rise of Islam) has been used by polemical Muslim writers to support their accusations against the Bible, even though most scholars consider the text a forgery. This is a strikingly unconscionable example of how some willingly disregard the importance of historical evidence and integrity when their only purpose is to attack.

5. Historicity of Jesus’ death

- The three references in the Qur’an to the death of Jesus leave the reader in great uncertainty. The best-known qur’anic verse related to the death of Jesus (Q 4.157) says the Jews did not crucify ‘Īsā, but leaves what actually happened in mystery. Elsewhere, ‘Īsā says, “Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive” (Q 19:33), and a straightforward translation of Q 3.55 is “I will cause you to die.” Yet most Muslim commentators conclude that Jesus did not die. This is surprising since Jesus’ death is the central event in all four witnesses of the fourfold Gospel and has been attested even by non-Christian documents of the first century that referred to Jesus’ death.

6. Sense perception and reliable transmission

- Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) provided an exegesis of Q 3.55 and 4.157 that demonstrates the kind of clear thinking possible even in the face of the prevailing Muslim “substitution theory” of Jesus’ death. Among al-Rāzī’s six proposed *ishkāl*, or ambiguities, about this theory, two raise the issue of how “casting the likeness of one person onto another” leads to confusion, and four *ishkāl* touch on the matter of God’s character. Lamin Sanneh’s testimony illustrates the importance belief in Jesus’ death makes.