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BOOK REVIEW

David in the Muslim Tradition: The Bathsheba Affair, by Khaleel Mohammed, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2014, 227 pp., $85.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-7391-9715-8

Khaleel Mohammed's *David in the Muslim Tradition* traces the development of Islamic exegesis of a single qur'anic pericope, Q 38.21–25, a passage of particular interest in the history of both Qur'an interpretation and Islamic theology. In this brief narrative, which the Qur'an refers to as "the account of the litigants," two individuals intrude on King David in a private space and exhort him to arbitrate between them; one has purportedly wronged the other by taking his only ewe and adding her to his flock of 99. David denounces this as transgression, then realizes that he is being tested and repents. Scholars have consistently identified this passage as an allusion to the biblical story of David and Bathsheba from 2 Samuel 11–12, in which David covets Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers, Uriah the Hittite; he commits adultery with her, arranges the death of Uriah in battle, and takes her for himself. Subsequently, the prophet Nathan shames David into repenting by recalling a parable that makes the king realize the seriousness of his transgression. The qur'anic passage at Q 38.21–25 is typically understood as a rewriting of the original biblical version of this parable (2 Samuel 12.1–46).

However, traditional Muslim exegesis steadfastly denies this connection. Rather than seeing the qur'anic story as an abbreviated allusion to the biblical passage, Muslim commentators reject the biblical account as a slander against David, who as a prophet is protected from sin (a principle termed *ʿiṣma*). The ambiguity of the qur'anic story – specifically, the lack of any explicit context for the parable recounted there – allowed exegetes to essentially rewrite the story in keeping with their own priorities and principles, severing the link to the biblical precursor.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of Mohammed's *David in the Muslim Tradition* is the clarity with which he demonstrates the increasing predominance of theological concerns in Muslim exegetical literature (*tafsīr*) as he meticulously demarcates the major stages in the evolution of the traditional view of this episode. This approach is valuable because it shows exactly how early commentators' ambivalence about the possibility that the Qur'an alludes to David committing a serious sin came to be superseded by an insistent denial of any significant wrongdoing at all on his part – a "metamorphosis from censure to exculpation" (4).

Mohammed's study opens with an introduction that examines the biblical and qur'anic passages on David's sin. He then proceeds to an overview of the nature and scope of the *tafsīr* tradition and a concise discussion of the concerns that informed Muslim exegesis of the qur'anic episode over the centuries. The next four chapters survey exegetical trends in the history of *tafsīr*, tracing developments from the formative period of the tradition through the classical and medieval periods to modern times. Each of these chapters follows the same pattern, beginning with short biographies of major exegetes, proceeding to summary and analysis of each exegete's understanding of the episode, and concluding with extensive translations from major commentaries from the period. There follows a brief chapter in which Jewish and Christian comparanda are discussed, and finally the conclusion restates the major insights of previous chapters and offers some general observations.

In Chapter 2, Mohammed shows how at least some early exegetes, such as Muqātil (d. 150/767) and ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/826), were willing to acknowledge some significant sin on

David's part, which they identified, however, not as his adultery, but rather as his orchestration of Uriah's death so that he could claim Bathsheba as his own. Notably, even exegetes who were willing to admit this much shied away from acknowledging the possibility of adultery, claiming instead that Bathsheba had merely been *betrothed* to Uriah and that David legally married her after Uriah's death. Even this relative candor regarding David's sin (which hardly seems candid at all) disappeared over time, as the impulse to portray David as a prophetic exemplar free of serious sin drove exegetes to gradually adopt other approaches to the qur'anic pericope.

The formal consolidation of a canon of theological principles accepted by Sunnīs and Shīʿa alike forced a dramatic reconceptualization of David's deed. Chapter 3 of Mohammed's study describes the turning point in the tradition among the great commentators of the fourth/tenth through sixth/twelfth centuries. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) relates some of the earlier traditions that were more candid about David's sin but marginalizes them; al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) alludes to them obliquely, but insists that it is improper for believers to speculate openly about the sins of a prophet; the Muʿtazilite al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981) holds that what the Qur'an alludes to as a sin is merely a minor infraction, prophets being kept to a higher standard of behavior than ordinary people. As time wore on, many exegetes found the admission of even a venial sin too much to accept; thus, in an astonishing turn in the sixth/twelfth century, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) not only denies David's sin, but advances an interpretation of the episode meant to establish that it actually illustrates David's exemplary virtues as a prophet.

Although the exegetes' treatment of this episode and their effective transformation of the qur'anic account have been explored before, Mohammed claims that his study is distinguished by his comprehensive treatment of the *tafsīr* tradition on this pericope. Still, one cannot help but feel that the sample of literary material is actually too narrow; the exclusive focus on *tafsīr* seems artificial, omitting as it does any discussion of major authors who addressed the narrative outside of this genre. The story of David and Bathsheba was seen by some authors as an important proof of the corruption of the Bible, as it defamed a prophet; it is one of the prime cases cited by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) in his account of the corruption of the Torah in his *Ifhām al-Yahūd*. Some consideration of this polemical discourse, in which theology impinged so dramatically on exegesis, would have been helpful. Moreover, Mohammed could have broadened his inquiry still further, to treatments of David in works outside the genre of Qur'an commentary, such as chronicles, *belles-lettres*, *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, and so forth, where one would undoubtedly find significant deviation from the overall trajectory of development in the *tafsīr*.

Mohammed's monograph unfortunately falls short on a number of other counts as well. A very large amount of introductory material is included, to the extent that the specific analysis of texts is often overwhelmed. The four main chapters each begin with short biographies of the exegetes whose views are discussed, and conclude with lengthy translations from some of their commentaries. The introductory material is usually clear yet sophisticated, and some of the translations might have some utility in a classroom setting. But this reviewer is uncertain whether the conclusions the book draws are substantial enough to merit a specialist's prolonged attention.

Another weakness is the book's lack of robust comparative analysis. The brief discussion of Jewish and Christian approaches to David's sin in Chapter 6 raises significant issues. However, given the repetitive nature of much of the *tafsīr* material, as well as the obvious pertinence of parallel traditions of apologetic in rabbinic sources in particular, Mohammed's study would clearly have benefited from more discussion of Jewish comparanda, as well as from locating this material at the beginning of the book and not at the end. Further, while I agree with his overarching argument that one must read both the qur'anic account and the rewritings of the

story in the *tafsīr* with a deep appreciation of the very different narrative priorities that prevail in these texts and in the Bible and midrash, Mohammed's navigation of the complex and difficult issues that emerge in the comparison of Bible and Qur'an in his conclusion is unsatisfying and will prove confusing to the uninitiated.

Finally, the book suffers from a host of technical problems, including prolific typos. Not all of these problems can be laid at the author's feet, but overall, the book feels as if it was rushed to publication, and could probably have been significantly improved with some editorial guidance regarding not only technical issues but also basic considerations of approach, organization, clarity of argument, and potential audience.

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