

## **Book Review**

Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2026. Pages: xiv+336; ISBN: 978-1-03-259043-1; pbk

Abdullah Saeed, the Sultan of Oman Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia, has extensively contributed to Quranic studies and modern Islamic thought. In the former area, a few of his notable works include *Interpreting the Qur'ān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (2006), *Reading the Qur'ān in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (2014), and *Contemporary Muslim Quranic Hermeneutics* (ed., 2026). Below is presented a brief assessment of the 2nd edition of his *The Qur'ān: An Introduction* (first published in 2008).

The book consists of thirteen (13) chapters, preceded by Acknowledgements (p. xii), Preface to the Second Edition (pp. xiii-xiv), and Introduction (pp. 1-5) and ends with Glossary (pp. 295-303), Bibliography (pp. 305-322), and Index (pp. 323-336). *The Qur'ān* provides a comprehensive and student-friendly overview of the Holy Qur'ān, "its place in [Islamic] history, and its role in the lives of Muslims today" (p. 2) by bridging historical understanding and contemporary relevance through an engagement of Islamic and Western academic perspectives. The second edition enhances the first, reflecting recent advancements in Quranic studies (p. xiii).

The revised edition enhances and enriches discussions by incorporating new scholarship and expanding contemporary debates (particularly in chapters 6 and 12); includes a diverse range of Muslim intellectual voices; and adds a new chapter on "contextualist approaches to interpretation," aimed at "reform-minded Muslims seeking to engage the [divine] text in light of contemporary ethical, social, and historical realities" (pp. xiv, 4). While maintaining its original structure and pedagogical orientation, the book connects contemporary developments in the field to increase its relevance for both students and scholars (p. 2).

This book is noteworthy for several reasons: (i) it draws extensively from the author's previous works on the topics covered,

especially contemporary topics; (ii) it aims to be a scholarly yet accessible and relevant guide to the varied dimensions of the study of Holy Qur'ān; and (iii) it is targeted for both Muslim and non-Muslim students studying in Muslim and western contexts. It provides a comprehensive overview of the Holy Qur'ān's revelation, history, interpretation, major themes, and contemporary debates and discussions. It also examines the Holy Qur'ān in Western scholarship as well as gives an overview of the rich interpretive traditions from classical to contemporary eras. The content includes examples to illustrate key points and aid student understanding, chapter summaries, timelines, textboxes, and recommended readings with brief descriptions for those readers who wish "to enhance their knowledge of topics covered in this book" (p. 5), and a glossary. Each chapter outlines topics covered and concludes with 'summary' points, presented in easy and jargon-free language, making it a valuable introductory resource.

The book is evaluated below thematically, rather than focusing on individual chapters, emphasizing Islam's foundational text through a systematic and coherent progression from historical context to contemporary application. In the Introduction (pp. 1-5), Saeed contextualizes the theme, provides an overview of the contents, and highlights the major objective of this book as providing "a broad and engaging introduction to the study of the Holy Qur'ān" by merging "traditional Muslim approaches with some modern theories and ideas" (p. 2).

The first three chapters examine the 7th-century Arabian socio-political and religious context of the Holy Qur'ān's revelation (p. 6), emphasizing its recognition as both "revelation and scripture" (p. 2). Key themes and topics covered include the historical context of the Holy Qur'ān, its nature as Revelation and Scripture, and the need for "socio-historical context" and understanding of the verses (p. 7). It argues that there is no doubt in considering the Holy Qur'ān as "one of the most significant religious literary works in the history of the world" (p. 28). It also argues, as illustrated through the discussion on the "position of women" in chapter 1, that while Muslims generally regard "Quranic texts as *legal* in nature, a closer look often reveals that much of the Qur'ān's language is primarily *ethical*" (p. 20; italics in original).

The next two chapters (4 and 5) illustrate the Holy Qur'ān as a theological text, an ethical guide, and a living scripture. Chapter 4 outlines the major themes of the Holy Qur'ān (pp. 70-93)—ranging from concepts like God, spiritual beings, satan, creation, prophets, the Quranic view of other religions, and historical events of the Prophet's time, to life after death, human behaviour, and types of texts in the Holy Qur'ān—

emphasizing “the central theme of God’s relationship to human beings” (p. 71). The 5th chapter, “The Qur’an in daily life” (pp. 94-107), shifts the focus to how Muslims interact and engage with the Holy Qur’ān in their everyday lives, both historically and in contemporary contexts, highlighting the lived religious experience over theological debates.

The history of Western scholarship (both polemical and scholarly), the challenges of translation, and the Holy Qur’ān’s relationship with previous Judeo-Christian scriptures, respectively, are all covered in chapters 6-8, which place Quranic studies within wider intellectual traditions. Chapter 6 (pp. 108-143) traces the rise and growth of Western scholarship (8th to 21st century), highlighting its transition from polemical origins to contemporary diverse methodologies, illustrating the influence of diverse scholarly contributions on Quranic interpretations. It underscores how “traditional Islamic methodologies with modern theoretical frameworks” are combined in contemporary scholarship of non-Muslims and western Muslims (p. 135).

Chapter 7 discusses the linguo-theological complexities involved in “Translations of the Qur’ān” (pp. 144-169), whereas Chapter 8 addresses the Holy Qur’ān’s perspectives on other religious scriptures, particularly those with Judeo-Christian roots (pp. 170-188). Both chapters uphold a diverse, interdisciplinary approach and the major arguments put forth are: “any attempt at translation” of the Holy Qur’ān in any Oriental or European language, “is in fact a form of interpretation and paraphrase” affected by “translator’s theological and ideological orientation”, resulting in “inaccuracies or misrepresentations” of the original text as illustrated through diverse translations of “highly contested” verse, Q. 4: 34 (p. 154); and “Despite the differences between the Qur’an, the Torah and the Gospel, a number of verses show that the Qur’an recognises authenticity of earlier revelations”, however, they have been “distorted” by the followers of these religious traditions and are no longer considered “authentic revelations” (p. 171).

The last five chapters (9-13) constitute the intellectual centre of the book, addressing the complex subject of interpretation—past and present. Although these chapters address distinct subjects—ranging from ethico-legal teachings, history of exegesis, exegetical principles and ideas and approaches to Quranic exegesis to modern interpretations and contextualist hermeneutics—they are united by a common concern: how should Muslims understand and apply the Holy Qur’ān in changing socio-historical circumstances? It is here that the book moves decisively beyond the common themes covered for introductory works on the Holy Qur’ān/ Quranic studies and begins to articulate Saeed’s own contribution to

contemporary Islamic thought through his reformist agenda and contextualist approach.

Focusing on different types of “Ethico-Legal Teachings” (chapter 9, pp. 189-204), one of “the most extensively studied areas of the Qur’an,” addressing both “ritual worship and more worldly affairs” (p. 189), the chapter explores the way in which these ethical and legal texts are understood and put into practice in today’s world. It focuses on relationship between scripture and religious law, categorization of ethico-legal teachings, their adaptability to changing situations, and other aspects, concluding that the “Qur’an’s main emphasis is on the relationship of God with His creation, rather than on providing detailed regulations for daily life” (p. 202).

Chapters 10 and 11 collectively examine the field of Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*)—its history, principles, categories and kinds, approaches, and modern trends and developments—offering an overview of the development of this discipline, major trends and approaches, and recent advances. It argues that *tafsīr*, since early times, has been “central to the intellectual development and practical application of Islam as a religion,” and Muslims have developed, over the last fourteen centuries, “a range of principles and methods for approaching the Qur’an ... designed to assist in interpreting and understanding its meaning” (p. 205). It further states that approaches to interpretation have not been confined to “three broad trends of exegesis”, viz., Sunni, Shia, and Khariji (pp. 226-233), but encompass a wide range of approaches and trends, such as theological, legal, mystical, and philosophical (pp. 233-240) and “Exegesis in the modern period” (p. 240) which cover categories like modernist, scientific, socio-political, thematic, feminist, and contextualist exegesis (pp. 240-253). With respect to the thematic and contextualist exegesis, Saeed argues that the proponents of thematic method, such as Fazlur Rahman, argue that it “allows for a more objective approach to the Qur’an (p. 245); and advocates of the contextualist approach, such as Rahman, Nasr Abu Zayd, M. Arkoun, Amina Wadud, and Khaled Aboul El Fadl, argue that “scholars must be aware of both the social, political and cultural context of the revelation as well as the setting in which interpretation occurs today” (p. 246).

Marking a transition from historical description to constructive hermeneutics, chapter 12 highlights “Modern Interpretation of the Qur’an” (pp. 251-275) by focusing on the thoughts and contributions of Rahman, Wadud, Arkoun, Abdolkarim Soroush, El-Fadl, Mohsen Kadivar, Kecia Ali, and Sedigheh Vasmaghi (pp. 254-271). Albeit a brief engagement with each interpreter, the chapter reflects the diversity of modern Muslim engagement with the Holy Qur’ān through a

“contextualist approach” (p. 252), which is heavily “influenced by modern hermeneutics” (p. 253), in contrast to the “textualist approach” used by traditionalists and thus successfully demonstrates that contemporary Quranic interpretation encompasses a wide spectrum of methodological commitments rather than a single reformist agenda. It concludes with these points on textualist and contextualist exegesis: “Textualist exegesis generally involves linguistic analysis of textual sources, and is based on the assumption that the meanings of the Qur’an are fixed over time”, while as “Contextualist exegesis involves a range of different techniques, and is based on the assumption that the meanings of the Qur’an are largely indeterminate” (p. 271, cf. pp. 252-53).

The last chapter, “A Contextualist Approach to Interpreting the Qur’an Today: A Practical Guide” (pp. 276-292), is drawn heavily from his *Reading the Qur’an in Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (Routledge, 2014) and serves as the methodological culmination of the entire book by contextualising “the social, political, economic, cultural, intellectual and religious circumstances surrounding the Qur’anic revelation, as well as those of the present” (p. 277).

Introducing contextualist interpretation as a practical approach to reading the Qur’an today (p. 277), Saeed presents a “four-step analytical framework” (p. 283) that encourages readers to examine the historical circumstances of revelation, identify the ethical objectives underlying specific Quranic rulings, distinguish between universal principles and historically conditioned applications, and consider how these principles may be realised within contemporary contexts (pp. 283-90). Furthermore, he anticipates many of the criticisms commonly directed at contextualist interpretation, emerging from “concerns about doctrinal integrity, hermeneutical legitimacy and fears of moral or theological relativism” (p. 290). In concluding this chapter, and by that way, the whole book, Saeed hopes that the contextualist approach assists readers “in forming a deeper, more thoughtful engagement with the Qur’ān—one that speaks to both the heart of the tradition and the demands of the present” (p. 293).

Incorporating recent scholarship, broadening engagement with contemporary Muslim voices, introducing a practical discussion of contextualist interpretation, and updating salient/ pedagogical features, the second edition makes a substantial contribution. While some methodological questions remain open and certain emerging areas of scholarship receive limited attention, it may fairly be described as one of the balanced, accessible, and pedagogically effective introductions to the Qur’an currently available. When considered as a whole, *The Qur’an: An Introduction* holds a distinctive place in the growing body of introductory works on the Holy Qur’ān.

Unique in style and structure, enriching and broader in content, Saeed's work offers an integrated vision of Quranic studies in which historical enquiry, classical Muslim scholarship, and contemporary ethical reflection are treated as mutually enriching rather than mutually exclusive. It is precisely this integrative ambition that constitutes the most significant contribution of the book. In sum, Saeed's *The Qur'an: An Introduction* provides a broad, engaging and captivating introduction to the study of the Holy Qur'ān and is a student-friendly guide and a concise introduction of numerous Quranic topics.

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