Book Reviews


The Muslims’ sacred text, namely the Qurʾān, has come under the spotlight during the past few years because, as the argument goes, Muslim fundamentalists have been deeply influenced by it via their literalist understanding and application of its contents. The book under review has been written by Professor Bruce Lawrence, a well-informed scholar on Islam and Muslims, who is based at Duke University. His book forms part of ‘books that shook the world’ series; among this list are Plato’s *Republic*, Marx’s *Das Kapital*, and Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Whilst in this post-modern era contemporary social scientists have no qualms in equating the Qurʾān with books written by their fellow global citizens such as those just mentioned, Muslims particularly those who hold on to conservative positions of interpretation would vehemently object to this method for they firmly believe it to be God’s infallible word. Nevertheless, let us dip into the contents and review what Lawrence managed to cover in his volume.

Bruce Lawrence dedicates this publication to his Jordanian journalist cum filmmaker friend by the name of Dr Ibrahim Abu Nab, who he acknowledges alongside many of his past students that shaped the contents of this text. Lawrence arranges his book into five sections, each of which consists of chapters or vignettes—as he prefers to call them—of varying length. The purpose of this arrangement is to make the biography of the Qurʾān accessible to a vast reading audience who may wish to read the vignettes selectively and consecutively (p. 8). Lawrence, like authors of other works of this type, includes notes on translations and Romanization respectively before he provides an informative introduction (p. 1–20) and ends off with an epilogue (pp. 193–199). A point that Lawrence stresses and that recurs throughout his book is that even though the Qurʾān, which is ‘A Book of Signs,’ is “a unitary, coherent source of knowledge, there is not a single Qur’anic message” and he
also points out that the Qurʾān’s contents speak across historical periods. Lawrence illustrates how “the use of Qur’ānic passages and invocations of God’s names have no temporal and spatial limit” in each of the chapters (p. 9) and how the multifaceted nature of the Qurʾān has been appropriated and interpreted by scholars in the classical period to those in the contemporary era.

In the “Arab Core” section he has four interrelated chapters. The first two discussed Prophet Muḥammad [peace be on him] as “Merchant and Messenger” (pp. 21–36) and “Organizer & Strategist” (pp. 37–49) respectively. In these chapters the author narrates the well-known story of how early Muslim history gradually unfolded and tells about the place of the revelation in this historical process. Whilst this reviewer found his style pleasing and attractive, he wonders why Lawrence opted to describe the migration of Muḥammad [peace be on him] from Makkah to Madīnah in 623 as ‘a flight’ rather than ‘a migration’ as conveyed by the word in Arabic (p. 40). In the third chapter, the author informs us about ‘Aisha: Muhammad’s Wife and Custodian of His Memory’ (pp. 50–61). The chapter, as was expected, touched upon the ‘Affair of the Lie’ but, more importantly, showed the role that ‘Ā’ishah (d. 57/677), who had a remarkable memory, played in the preservation of Muḥammad’s—and the Qurʾān’s—biography. She undoubtedly was a critical conveyer about the Prophet’s intimate life and the status of the Qurʾān in the lives of Muslims. In the last chapter Lawrence takes us on a journey to the ‘The Dome of the Rock: Jerusalem Landmark, Qur’ānic Icon’ (pp. 62–72), which contains Qurʾānic inscriptions that enhance the structure and shape; Lawrence, who was attracted by these inscriptions, goes on to describe and discuss them.

‘Ja’far as-Sadiq: Shiʿite Imam and Qurʾānic Exegete’ (pp. 75–82) and ‘Abu Ja’far at-Tabari: Sunni Historian & Qurʾānic Exegete’ (pp. 83–94) are the two chapters that form part of Lawrence’s second section on ‘Early Commentaries.’ Whilst one has no reservations with his selection of these two exegetes, one wonders why Lawrence did not include alongside these exegetes one or two prominent Qurʾānic reciters since recitation was another form of presenting the Qurʾānic message. Nevertheless, Lawrence demonstrates the position that these exegetes hold within the arena of the Qurʾānic sciences and he reflects on how they influenced the subsequent generation of Shiʿah and Sunni scholars respectively.

In the ‘Later Interpretations’ section, one notes that the others brings in ‘Robert of Ketton: Polymath Translator of the Qurʾan’ (pp. 97–107), ‘Muhyyiuddin ibn ‘Arabi: Visionary Interpreter of Divine Names’ (pp. 108–118) and ‘Jalal ad-din Rumi: Author of the Persian Qurʾan’ (pp. 119–132).
Although Robert of Ketton (the Englishman) (fl. 1141–1157) is for obvious reasons unknown to the general Muslim reader, Muḥyī l-Din Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Ibn ʿArabi (the Spaniard/Andalucian) (d. 638/1240) and Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Rūmī (the Central Asian/Turk) (d. 672/1273) have been familiar names in many households that embrace Sufi ideas and consider poetry as a viable vehicle that expresses Muslim identity. By the time the Abbasid Muslim empire had gradually moved towards its closure by the 13th century the period during which Ibn ʿArabi and Rūmī had made their mark, the Qurʾānic message had not only been popularized through Arabic and Persian poetry and calligraphic inscriptions on sacred and non-sacred buildings but also via translations into Latin. The latter task has been wrought at the hands of Ketton to whom the Europeans remain indebted because it was the first translation and, in fact, ‘ecumenical act’ of its kind during the 12th century; the century of the Crusades. Translation, as Lawrence highlights, is ‘hard work’ and a challenge. Lawrence marvels at Ketton’s ability to translate the Muslims’ sacred text during a volatile era without a disseminating distorted version of the Qurʾān’s intent. According to Muslim scholarship, any translation of God’s word in Arabic into other languages such as Latin or English — of which Lawrence provides examples from Ketton’s work — is but an approximation and therefore a different way of capturing and conveying His message.

However, another form of comprehending God’s message is via the mystical interpretation represented by Ibn ʿArabi’s school of Sufism, on the one hand, and Rūmī’s school, on the other. The former, who authored about 300 books, became well-known for two of his widely read and quoted works, namely Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam (Bezels of Wisdom) and al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah (the Makkan Illuminations). The last mentioned covers a range of topics that touches upon mystical philosophy and Sufism; the selections that appear in Lawrence’s chapter comment on selected Qurʾānic verses and of God’s beautiful names that was written in mystical and poetic form. Whilst Ibn ʿArabi’s sincere commitment and desire to know God through ‘the inner meanings of the Qurʾān’ were unsurpassed, Rūmī demonstrated similar character traits but stressed the Qurʾān’s meanings through ‘the display of everyday wonders.’ This is reflected in his famous Matnawī (Spiritual Rhyming Couplets), which he likened to the Qurʾān in Persian and in which he “constantly combines and recombines Qurʾānic and non-Qurʾānic motifs …” (p. 124). Even though Rūmī, who employed Persian poetry as his medium, followed a path that differed somewhat from that of Ibn ʿArabi, they basically reached the same spiritual heights and destination.

In the fourth section, which is labeled ‘Asian Echoes,’ Lawrence first
visits the ‘Taj Mahal: Gateway to the Qur’anic Vision of Paradise’ (pp. 133–142), then narrates the story of ‘Ahmad Khan: Indian Educator and Qur’an Commentator’ (pp. 143–150) before talking about ‘Muhammad Iqbal: Pakistani Poet Inspired by Qur’anic Motifs’ (pp. 151–162). The Tāj Maḥal, like the Dome of the Rock, forms part of the wonders of the Muslim world that tangibly demonstrates the aesthetic qualities of the Arabic script and the Qur’ānic message. Shāh Jahān, the Mughal ruler (1037–1068/1628–1658), spent much of his energy to build this exquisite ‘throne of the Almighty’ not only to show his true love towards his departed wife, Mumtāz Maḥal (d. 1040/1631), but also to divulge his subservience to God by adorning it with the visible display of Qur’ānic chapters and verses at each of the entrances as well as its interior. Although the scientific engineering and architectural knowledge, which contributed towards the building (and Qur’ānic embellishment) of the Tāj Mahal in the 17th century, proved that religion and science comfortably complemented one another, it appears that some of the subsequent generations of South Asia’s Muslims in the 19th century were dislodged from that understanding because of orthodox theological positions that influenced and deeply affected their thinking and perceptions. Consequently, it was Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1315/1898) who came to their aid in stressing how science unveiled God’s message and how it harmonized with and conformed to Islam’s rudimentary teachings. Lawrence lists and comments (pp. 145–147) on Khan’s fundamental principles of Qur’ānic commentary and reveals aspects of Khan’s rationalist approach to the Qur’ān.

The final ‘Global Accents’ section Lawrence brings into view other voices that engage with the Qur’ānic message. In this section, he looks at ‘W.D. Mohammed: Qur’ān as Guide to Racial Equality’ (pp. 163–171) and relates how Warith ud-Din Mohammed, the prominent Afro-American Muslim leader who died on 9 September 2008, appropriates the Qur’ān in response to the racist tendencies that remain rampant in the American society. He discloses how W.D. Mohammed interprets in a creative manner al-Fātiḥah, the Qur’ān’s opening chapter (see, pp. 167–170). In his penultimate vignette he shares his thoughts on ‘Osama bin Laden: Qur’ān as mandate for Jihad’ (pp. 172–183) and analyzes extracts of Bin Laden’s speeches that emphasize jihad as the method of combat against Saudi Arabia’s ‘illegitimate’ leaders and the modern day Crusades represented by the Bush administration and its allies. Even as Lawrence openly reveals his dislike for Bin Laden whose “Qur’ān interpretation) is not a signpost but a grave marker,” he also fails to mention the circumstances that gave rise to such a character and why Bin Laden pursued a path that most Muslims do not identify with.
Before Lawrence offers his final thoughts in his epilogue in which he categorically states that “it is indeed impossible to imagine Islam without the Qur’an” (p. 193), he discusses how ‘AIDS Victims and Sick Women: (use the) Qur’an as Prescription for Mercy’ (pp. 184–192). He refers to the Indonesian based and Sufi oriented Barzakh Foundation that makes ample use of Qur’anic formulae, a fairly age-old practice employed by Muslim diviners/healers in Muslim communities, to assist and help cure those who suffer from HIV/AIDS and other related diseases. In this final chapter, the author expressively shows how the Qur’an is being invoked by those who do not regard themselves on par with Qur’anic commentators but who see themselves as individuals who possess significant healing powers inspired and influenced by the Qur’an which is viewed in many circles as a shifa (cure).

Lawrence’s biography of the Qur’an, which adopts a flowing and pleasing style, is an easy and delightful read. Even though we would have preferred it to appear in a series on ‘sacred texts that shook (and continues to shake) the world’ since we are of the firm opinion that it cannot be compared to either Das Kapital or Origins of Species, it has offered an insightful account of aspects and issues that have either been glossed over or basically ignored in other texts covering the same theme.

Muhammed Haron


After a long period of gestation, the editor, professor of psychology at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania, produced this book on one of the most burning issues of the ummah: how to keep the family together (and on the road to salvation), and that in a Western secular environment?