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A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

Elahe Hadian Rasanani ¹ 

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Abstract

This article provides a critical analysis of Samuel Ross's perspective presented in his book, "Quranic Exegesis and the Turn to Scripture." Ross examines the interaction of Muslim exegetes with the Bible, aiming to elucidate the reasons for its neglect in pre-modern interpretations and its increasing use in modern ones. He argues that despite the existence of old Arabic translations of the Bible, Muslim exegetes rarely referenced it until the late nineteenth century. However, after this period, influenced by factors such as British and French colonialism, the arrival of Christian missionaries, and the publication of Arabic Bible versions, exegetes in the Islamic world began to extensively utilize this text in their interpretations. This article critiques Ross's methodology and examines his historical and theoretical foundations, analyzing the challenges to his hypothesis of initial Muslim unfamiliarity with the Bible and his simplification in analyzing interpretive developments. The findings reveal that despite Ross's innovation in studying intertextual relationships, his source-critical and historical limitations hinder a complete understanding of the complexities of Muslim engagement with the Bible. This research, focusing on critiquing Ross's viewpoint and analyzing its methodological and historical limitations,

1 . Associate Professor at the Quran and Hadith University, Tehran, IRAN. hadian.e@hadith.ir

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

aims to clarify the weaknesses and challenges of his hypotheses regarding the interaction between Quranic exegesis and the Bible.

Keywords: Samuel Ross, Bible, Quranic exegesis, Turn to Scripture, Interpretive Influence, Early Interpretations, Modern Interpretations.

Introduction

Samuel J. Ross, an assistant professor of religion at Texas Christian University and a prominent American scholar of the Quran, specializes in Islamic studies and Quranic exegesis. Ross received his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Yale University in 2018, focusing on Islamic studies. He taught Classical Arabic at the *Qāṣid* Institute in Amman, Jordan, from 2007 to 2011, gaining experience in this field.

Ross interprets this transformation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a "Biblical Turn," arguing that this global shift not only generated new Muslim perspectives on the Bible but also engendered novel interpretations of the Quran.

In addition to teaching Quranic studies and Islamic beliefs, Ross currently also teaches courses related to the contemporary Muslim world. Other areas of his research and teaching include Islam-Christianity relations, the study of Islam and modernity, and the position of Muslims in America, fields in which he has conducted significant research.

He has published numerous books and scholarly articles in the field of Quranic and Islamic studies. One of his prominent works examines the importance of Quranic interpretations during the Ottoman era.

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

Furthermore, Ross has been active in teaching the Arabic language and has authored a four-volume set on Arabic grammar and morphology, which has garnered attention from Arabic language enthusiasts and researchers.

His latest work, titled "Qur'an Commentary and the Biblical Turn: A History of Muslim Exegetical Engagement with the Biblical Text," explores the interaction between the Quranic exegetical tradition and biblical texts, and the tendency to utilize these texts in Quranic interpretations.

In this book, Ross examines the interaction of Muslim commentators with the Bible. By analyzing over 170 Quranic commentaries, he analyzed the history of Muslim engagement with biblical texts and found that, until the late nineteenth century, commentators rarely referenced the Bible. However, afterward, commentators throughout the Muslim world suddenly began using the Bible in their interpretations. Ross attributes this change to the expansion of British and French colonialism, the arrival of Christian missionaries, and the introduction of Arabic versions of the Bible. He also examines examples of interpretive changes following access to the Bible, demonstrating how commentators attempted to reconcile apparent contradictions between the Quran and the Bible.

This research by Samuel Ross received the BRAIS – De Gruyter award from the British Association for Islamic Studies (BRAIS) in 2019. This award, presented by BRAIS and De Gruyter publishers, recognizes outstanding research in Islamic studies. The award was given to Ross's manuscript before publication and recognized it as innovative and impactful research.

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

Given the importance and influence of this work in Islamic studies, a critical evaluation of its arguments and hypotheses is necessary.

The present study aims to critically evaluate Samuel Ross's views on the interaction of Muslim exegetes with biblical texts in Quranic interpretations. The main focus is on analyzing Ross's hypotheses regarding the extent of the early Quranic audience's familiarity with the Bible and the influence of biblical texts on Islamic interpretations. The article also critiques Ross's methodology, sources used, and classification of modern exegetes.

1. Research Background

It is noteworthy that in the last two decades, interdisciplinary research and comparative hermeneutics in Quranic studies have increasingly focused on the role and influence of non-Islamic sources, especially the Bible, on Quranic interpretations. One important area in this field is examining how Muslim exegetes used Jewish and Christian sacred texts and the influence of these texts on the formation and development of Islamic interpretations. The term "Biblical Turn" was introduced into Western scholarly literature in 2024 by Samuel Ross, analyzing the historical and interpretive attitudes and reasons for Muslim exegetes' use of these texts.

To the best of our knowledge, the term "Biblical Turn" had not been specifically used in scholarly literature before Samuel Ross. Ross introduced this concept in 2024 to emphasize the shift in the approach of Muslim exegetes to the Bible, especially in the modern era. Although before Samuel Ross's work, some somewhat related research had been conducted. For example, the book "Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

and Bible Criticism" by Hava Lazarus-Yafe (1992), is among the works that examines medieval Muslim perspectives on the Bible and their critiques of it. Lazarus-Yafe, in the second part of the book, analyzes the interactions of Muslims with the Bible, particularly the Old Testament (Lazarus-Yafe, 1992: 49-19).

Martin Whittingham's "A History of Muslim Views of the Bible: The First Four Centuries" explores the evolution of Muslim attitudes towards the Bible (Torah and Gospels) during the first four centuries of the Hijri calendar. The author demonstrates that, during this period, Muslims generally held a more open and less critical view of the Bible, utilizing it primarily as a theological and historical source. However, from the fifth century AH onwards, more serious critiques of the Bible, including emphasis on textual contradictions and historical inaccuracies, became the dominant discourse among Muslim thinkers (Whittingham, 2020).

Camille Adang's "Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm" (1996) also addresses the critiques of Jewish and Hebrew texts by Muslim thinkers, showing that these critiques served as a tool to emphasize the authenticity and correctness of the Quran in contrast to Jewish sacred texts, which Muslims believed to be corrupted (Adang, 1996).

Gabriel Said Reynolds, in his book "The Qur'an and the Bible," analyzes the interaction between the Quran and the Bible, examining how the Quran was influenced by biblical narratives and teachings. Reynolds also addresses the differences between the Quran and the Bible, the nature of textual changes throughout history, and the social and cultural influences on these interactions (Reynolds, 2018).

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

Despite previous research on the interaction between Muslims and the Bible, Samuel Ross's work offers a distinct and novel approach to this topic. Ross specifically focuses on the concept of a "Turn to the Bible" in modern Quranic interpretations, examining how, in the nineteenth century, social, cultural, and political changes led to unprecedented attention to the Bible among Muslim commentators.

Samuel Ross argues that, contrary to traditional assumptions, early Muslim familiarity with biblical texts was not direct or widespread. This interaction developed primarily during the modern era, in response to political and cultural changes. He thus analyzes the direct influence of the Bible on Quranic interpretations within a new framework, demonstrating that this interaction, rather than being an initial and natural connection, resulted from specific modern transformations and pressures.

This distinctive approach sets Ross's work apart from other historical research. By proposing a novel theory, he highlights the role of extra-religious factors and the socio-political context in shaping modern interpretive approaches. He transcends traditional frameworks, raising new questions about how and why the Bible was used in Islamic interpretations.

2. Samuel Ross's Approach and Theoretical Framework in Analyzing Quranic Interpretations

In his book's introduction, Ross presents two enigmas he attempts to answer throughout the work. First, why did Quranic commentators, despite early Arabic translations of the Bible and the possibility of using it for Quranic interpretation, rarely engage with it, instead utilizing unofficial

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

Jewish and Christian sources such as "Israiliyyat"? The second enigma is why, in the late nineteenth century, Muslim commentators from around the world unprecedentedly and extensively turned to the Bible in their interpretations, at a time when Islamic scholars sought to limit Islamic sources to the Quran and authentic hadiths?

Samuel Ross, by presenting contrasting viewpoints among Lazarus-Yafeh, Camille Adang, Martin Accad, and David Thomas, aims to clarify the challenges and complexities in Islamic studies concerning Muslim interaction with the Bible.

Hava Lazarus-Yafeh argues that Muslim authors lacked direct knowledge of the Bible until the 9th century AH (15th century AD), relying more on intermediaries. She believes that quotations from the Bible in Muslim works often reflect limited awareness of and legitimacy attributed to this text (Lazarus-Yafeh, 1992: 113–114).

Kamil Adang holds a similar view, emphasizing that Muslim knowledge of Hebrew and Greek was very limited, with only a few individuals, such as *Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī*, being exceptions (Adang, 1996: 249). Conversely, Martin Accad challenges this minimalist perspective. He argues that the doctrine of textual corruption in Islam refers more to changes in the interpretation of scripture than to the text itself. Accad, citing over 648 verses from the Gospels in early Muslim works, points to the depth of their engagement with scripture (Accad, 2003 (a): 67–97; 2003 (b): 72).

David Thomas also believes that the extensive use of scripture to refute Christian doctrines was a common feature of early Islam (Thomas, 1996: 31).

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

Ross, after presenting these contrasting viewpoints, notes that these contradictions highlight the challenges inherent in the historical study of Muslim interaction with scripture. He emphasizes that the wide discrepancies in this field are due to a lack of comprehensive research. Ross suggests that to resolve these discrepancies and achieve a better understanding, modern methods, such as digital and quantitative analyses, should be employed. He presents these tools as valuable for a broader and more comprehensive assessment of existing sources. In this section, Ross also points out that despite numerous studies, only a small fraction of Islamic interpretations have been examined, and digital tools can facilitate a deeper and more extensive study of these texts (Ross, 2024: 16–18).

3. Analysis and Critique of Samuel Ross's View on Baqā'ī's Use of Scripture

Ross states in the third chapter of his book that, prior to a fundamental shift he terms a "Turn to Scripture," the direct use of biblical texts in Quranic interpretations was very limited, with only some commentators, such as Ibrahim Baqā'ī, employing such an approach (Ross, 2024: 45-71).

3.1. Baqā'ī and the Justification for Citing Scripture in Quranic Interpretation from Samuel Ross's Perspective

Ross argues that despite historical evidence and extensive resources justifying the use of scripture, most pre-modern Quranic commentators avoided direct reference to these texts. He outlines three main reasons for this:

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

- 1) Access Restrictions: Many commentators lacked access to Arabic translations of the Bible, or these texts were unavailable. Even when available, they were often incomplete or presented in the form of oral translations.
- 2) Socio-political Attitudes: The socio-political context of the pre-modern era fostered a negative attitude towards the use of biblical texts. These attitudes included distrust in the accuracy and authenticity of these texts due to beliefs about their distortion (literal or semantic).
- 3) Legal and Jurisprudential Obstacles: Some jurists considered reading or using biblical texts forbidden or undesirable for religious reasons. While viewpoints like that of Baqā'ī defended the use of these texts, such views were not dominant.

According to Ross, this occurs despite the Quran frequently referencing Jewish and Christian traditions, implying that readers should be familiar with these narratives. This argument suggests that referencing sacred texts could be beneficial for better understanding and interpreting the Quran, but in practice, Quranic commentators relied more on oral Jewish and Christian traditions known as "Israiliyyat" (Ross, 2024: 45-71).

Ross highlights the importance of Ibrahim Baqā'ī's perspective on the legitimacy of using Jewish and Christian sacred texts in Quranic interpretation, considering him one of the few Muslim scholars who theoretically defended this approach. He also explains that despite Baqā'ī's efforts, the use of the Bible in Quranic interpretations was rarely continued by other commentators and was often abandoned due to social and cultural

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

limitations. He emphasizes that Baqā'ī, in his treatise "*al-Aqwāl al-Qawīma fī Ḥukm al-Naql min al-Kutub al-Qadīma*," presented numerous reasons for the legitimacy and importance of quoting these texts.

It is noteworthy that Ibrahim Baqā'ī (d. 885 AH), a Sunni scholar, was one of the first commentators to cite the Bible in his interpretations. In this treatise, he defended the direct use of sacred texts and provided jurisprudential and religious reasons for it. Baqā'ī believed that citing the Bible was not only permissible but necessary.

Baqā'ī supports this view by citing verses from the Quran and the Prophet's hadiths, including a verse that calls upon the Prophet to read the Torah: "...Say: Then bring the Torah and recite it if you are truthful." (Āli 'Imrān/93) Baqā'ī considers this verse as evidence for the legitimacy of studying the Torah to confirm Quranic teachings, since the verse commands the recitation of the Torah. He also refers to certain narrations and accounts, including narrations concerning the Prophet Muhammad's use of the Torah in judgments and his permission for Muslims to narrate from the Children of Israel, and considers the well-known hadith, "Narrate from the Children of Israel, and there is no harm in that" (Dārimī, 2000 AD/1421 AH: 1, 455; Bukhārī, 1989 AD/1410 AH: 5, 405; Tirmidhī, 1998 AD/1419 AH: 4, 465; Abū Dāwūd, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 3, 1584; Nasā'ī, 1990 AD/1411 AH: 3, 431) as a basis for the legitimacy of narrating Jewish and Christian traditions. Baqā'ī also points to the use of Torah translations in the early Islamic community, documenting this practice as unhindered by the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) and his companions. He considers the citation of scripture a great tradition whose legitimacy is confirmed from a Fiqh perspective (Baqā'ī, n.d.: 93-100).

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

Baqā'ī views the use of Jewish and Christian scriptures in the interpretation of the Quran as a means to better understand the Quran and confirm its messages, and by citing the Quran, narrations, and the Prophet's tradition, he presents the use of sacred texts as a legitimate and necessary tool for a more accurate interpretation of the Quran (ibid.).

He believed that the scriptures held more authority than Islamic narrations (Israiliyyat), and while acknowledging some distortions, he maintained that only a small portion of the scriptures had been corrupted. He argued that only parts of the scriptures were distorted and attributed this view to Imam Shafi'i (ibid.).

Samuel Ross, in chapters three and four of his book, concludes that Baqā'ī, by using scripture and implementing the theory of appropriateness, offered a different interpretation of the Quran and was able to bring about significant changes in Quranic interpretation within the conservative atmosphere of the Mamluk period (Ross, 2024: 45-104).

Samuel Ross, in a section of his book, referencing Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Silver Blaze," addresses the limited use of Jewish and Christian scriptures in Muslim Quranic interpretations. He utilizes an idea from the Sherlock Holmes story, where the dog's silence on the night of the crime serves as a crucial clue. Ross employs this idea to illustrate the importance of examining phenomena that did not occur. He emphasizes that, just as the dog's silence in the Holmes story requires analysis, investigating the reasons for the widespread lack of use of the Bible in Quranic interpretations is also necessary. Ross argues that this lack of utilization should be analyzed within the social, cultural, and historical context of pre-modern periods. He believes that studying the reasons for

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

this "non-occurrence" can be as important as examining events that did occur and requires a careful look at the conditions of the time. Ultimately, using this example, he demonstrates that even absent phenomena can be a valuable subject for research (Ross, 2024: 48).

3.2. Challenges to Samuel Ross's Analyses: Reliance on Baqā'ī and Neglect of Shi'a Interpretive Foundations

One noteworthy point in Samuel Ross's reference to Ibrahim Baqā'ī's views in defense of using Jewish and Christian scriptures in Quranic interpretation is that Baqā'ī, as a Shafī'i Sunni scholar, primarily bases his arguments and references on Sunni traditions and jurisprudential and interpretive foundations. However, within the framework of Shi'a traditions and foundations, no such recommendation or legitimacy for utilizing Jewish and Christian scriptures is apparent.

For example, Baqā'ī, in proving the legitimacy of quoting Jewish and Christian traditions, cites the well-known hadith "Narrate from the Children of Israel, and there is no harm in that." (Dārimī, 2000 AD/1421 AH.: 1, 455; Bukhārī, 1989 AD/1410 AH: 5, 405; Tirmidhī, 1998 AD/1419 AH: 4, 465; Abū Dāwūd, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 3, 1584; Nasā'ī, 1990 AD/1411 AH: 3, 431)

This hadith is narrated in numerous Sunni hadith sources, but its chain of transmission and text warrant examination and reflection. The Isnad (chain of narrators) includes Abu Hurairah, a figure whose reliability in narrating hadith is itself debated.

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

The phrase "*Lā Ḥaraj*" (no objection) in this hadith implies that narrating stories of the Children of Israel, even if their authenticity is not fully established, is permissible and not religiously prohibited.

Some versions of this hadith include this permission alongside a prohibition against writing down the Prophet's (peace be upon him) sayings: "Do not write anything from me except the Quran. Whoever writes anything from me other than the Quran let him erase it." And he said: "Narrate from the Children of Israel, and there is no objection. Narrate from me, and do not lie about me." He said: "And whoever lies about me— Hammām said: I think he said: intentionally—let him take his seat in the Fire." (Ibn Ḥanbal, 1995 AD/1416 AH: 18, 94) This issue itself is a subject of debate in hadith history and Muslim attitudes towards Jewish traditions.

Some research has specifically examined the Isnad and text of this hadith, attempting to assess the authenticity of its attribution to the Prophet (PBUH) and its historical and theological implications.

Goldziher believes this hadith demonstrates the disagreement among 2nd-century AH scholars regarding the narration of Jewish traditions, and that the oldest source recording this hadith is Imam Shafi'i's "*al-Risālah*" (d. 204 AH) (Goldziher, 1902: 64).

Kister, a prominent scholar of Islamic studies, devoted a detailed article to the hadith "*Ḥaddathū 'an Banī Isrā'īl wa lā Ḥaraj*." His research comprehensively analyzes the transmission paths of this hadith and its related sources (Kister, 1972: 215-239; this article has also been translated into Persian under the title "A Study of an Ancient Hadith; *Ḥaddathū 'an Banī Isrā'īl wa lā Ḥaraj*").

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

In some Shia hadith sources, this hadith appears unsourced and is not mentioned in primary and authoritative Shia works. Most narrations of this hadith are found in weak sources and do not hold significant credibility among Shia scholars (Ibn Ḥamza Ṭūsī: 306; Rāwandī Kāshānī: 18; Quṭb al-Dīn Rāwandī: 179). In reality, Shia Muslims approach previous sacred texts with a more cautious perspective, primarily due to their belief in the corruption (*Tahrīf*) of these texts.

Furthermore, the Quran itself mentions the corruption of previous scriptures in numerous verses (for example, see al-Baqarah/75; al-Mā'idah/13), a point heavily emphasized in Shia sources. Therefore, any reliance on these texts to confirm or interpret Quranic verses is, from a Shia perspective, not only unreliable but also potentially misleading, hindering a correct understanding of the Quran.

Shia traditions include recommendations against consulting Jewish and Christian sources, particularly Israiliyyat. These recommendations stem from the potential for corruption and inaccuracy in these sources (for relevant traditions, cf. Diyari: 203-243).

Therefore, it is crucial to note that Ross, citing Baq'i's viewpoint, presents this argument as a general approach within the Islamic world. However, significant differences exist between Sunni and Shia schools of Tafsir (exegesis) in this regard; generalizing such a perspective without considering these differences risks overlooking a significant part of the history of Quranic interpretation.

Walīd Ṣāliḥ, in his analysis of Baq'i's efforts, emphasizes that his approach was met with indifference and even opposition in pre-modern Islamic society. Baq'i operated in an environment where public interest in studying

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

the sacred texts of minority religions was low, and this cultural and social apathy prevented his method from being adopted by other commentators. Despite the resistance, Baq'i's efforts represent an exceptional example of the open approach some Muslim scholars took towards the sacred texts of other religions (Şālih, 2008: 629–664).

4. Historical and Social Contexts of Muslim Exegetes' Engagement with the Bible in the Nineteenth Century from Ross's Perspective

In the fifth chapter of his book, Samuel Ross analyzes the social, cultural, and historical contexts that led to the engagement of Muslim exegetes with biblical texts in the nineteenth century (Ross, 2024: 105-126).

4.1. Analysis of Ross Regarding Three Factors Influencing the Inclination of Muslim Exegetes toward the Bible in the Nineteenth Century

Ross analyzes the 19th-century inclination of Muslim interpreters toward the Bible through three main factors:

- A) Increased access to Arabic Bible translations through widespread printing and publishing;
- B) The social and legal reforms of the *Tanzīmāt* era and the Arab *Nahḍa* (Renaissance);
- C) The influence of Christian missionary activities on Muslim communities (ibid.).

4.1.1. Increased Access to Arabic Bible Translations

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

Ross explains that the invention of the printing press and its widespread use for Arabic Bible translations played a key role in Muslims' access to these texts. While medieval handwritten copies were rare and expensive, printing technology reduced costs and enabled wider distribution. The Smith-Van Dyck translation, published in 1871, attracted widespread attention in Arab societies due to its linguistic quality and adherence to Arabic literary standards. Unlike previous versions, this translation was specifically designed to appeal to Muslims and, with its complete vocalization, resembled the standard of Muslim scripture (ibid.).

4.1.2. Ottoman Reforms and the Arab Nahḍa

Ross further points to the influence of 19th-century Ottoman reforms, such as the Gülhane Edict (1839) and the Hatt-ı Hümayun (1856), which opened the legal and social space for greater interaction between different communities and religions. These reforms granted equal legal rights to religious minorities and prohibited the use of derogatory terms like "*Kāfir*." On the other hand, the Arab *Nahḍa*, with its focus on shared linguistic and cultural heritage, brought Muslims and Christians closer together. This movement viewed biblical texts as part of the Arab cultural heritage and played a significant role in increasing Muslim interest in these texts (ibid.).

4.1.3. Influence of Christian Missionary Activities

Ross emphasizes that the activities of Christian missionaries in the 19th century, particularly in the second half, brought Muslims into contact with the Bible. These missionaries employed methods such as widespread Bible distribution. Muslim reactions to these efforts varied; some showed interest

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

in the Bible and found it a valuable resource, while others viewed it as a threat to their Islamic identity.

As a result, some Muslim exegetes included the Bible in their analyses, both to better understand it and to counter Christian propaganda. Ross concludes that these three main factors paved the way for a fundamental shift in Muslims' interaction with the Bible. These changes not only led to greater access to these texts by exegetes, but also caused the Bible to be used as a supplementary source in Islamic interpretations (ibid.).

4.2. A Critique of Samuel Ross's Analysis of Muslim Interaction with the Bible in the Nineteenth Century

Samuel Ross's perspective in this section of the book is open to criticism from various angles:

4.2.1. Focus on External Factors and Neglect of Internal Dynamics within Islamic Societies

Ross primarily focuses on external factors such as Ottoman reforms, the missionary activities of Christian missionaries, and access to Bible translations. This analysis neglects the influence of the internal dynamics of Islamic societies, including internal intellectual and cultural developments, the political-religious motivations of Muslim exegetes, or long-standing traditions of using the Bible in Islamic studies (such as Israiliyyat narratives). This may present an incomplete view that interprets Muslims' interaction with the Bible as merely a reaction to external factors.

4.2.2. Neglect of the Critical Aspects of Muslim Exegetes' Interaction with the Bible

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

Ross's perspective emphasizes the positive and empathetic use of the Bible by Muslim exegetes, but ignores the critical aspects of this interaction. Many Muslim exegetes used the Bible as a tool to critique Christian doctrines and prove the superiority of the Quran. This type of critical use, which is prominent in interpretive sources, is faintly visible in Ross's analysis.

Mohammad Jawad Balaghi, a prominent Shiite exegete of the fourteenth century AH, provides a prominent example of the critical use of the Bible in his interpretations and works. In the book *Ālā' al-Raḥmān* (Balaghi, 1973 AD/1352 SH) and another work titled *al-Riḥla al-Madrasīyya* (Balaghi, 1943 AD/1321 AH), Balaghi, citing biblical texts, criticizes Christian doctrines and highlights the superiority of the Quran. By using Christian sources and comparing them with Quranic teachings, he attempts to prove the distortion of biblical texts.

In his works, Balaghi, emphasizing the distortion of the Bible, analyzes the contradictions within it and uses these contradictions as a tool to critique doctrines such as the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ. He argues that these doctrines contradict the core messages of Jesus Christ and are the product of later distortions in the sacred texts (ibid.).

This critical approach demonstrates that interpreters like Balaghi were not merely seeking positive and empathetic engagement with the Bible, but rather used it as a tool to strengthen Islamic arguments and refute Christian doctrines. This approach indicates that Muslim engagement with the Bible was not limited to comparative or empathetic approaches; in many cases, critical and challenging aspects were prominent.

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

This critical approach, adopted by many Muslim scholars, including Balaghi, is a prominent example of utilizing the principle of *Jadal Ahsan*. *Jadal Ahsan* means using premises accepted by the audience with the aim of persuasion and guidance. The Quran recommends this discursive method, stating: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel and argue with them in a way that is best." (al-Nahl/125)

Many Muslim scholars, using this method in their works, have critiqued the intellectual and theological foundations of Christianity and explained the superiority of Quranic teachings. This approach not only demonstrates the skill of these scholars in using logical arguments and critical tools but also reflects an insight that utilizes opposing sources as tools of argument to strengthen Islamic viewpoints and emphasize the truth of the Quran. This method, in addition to refuting distortions and contradictions in opposing doctrines, emphasizes proving the validity of the Quran and guiding the audience towards the divine message, showcasing an example of the Quran's comprehensive and wise teachings in scholarly and critical discourse.

4.2.3. The Role of Orientalists in the Critical Engagement of Muslim Exegetes with the Bible: A Critique of Ross's Analysis

One important aspect of Muslim engagement with the Bible in the nineteenth century, overlooked in Samuel Ross's analysis, is the influence of Orientalist activities. During this period, Orientalists, by offering perspectives and critiques of the Quran, created an environment that prompted a reaction from Muslim exegetes. Many Orientalists had previously critiqued the Bible and extended their analytical methods to the

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

Quran. This approach not only increased Muslim attention to the Bible but also led them to utilize these texts to critique the doctrines of Judaism and Christianity, and to respond to Orientalist challenges.

An examination of Islamic commentaries from this period reveals that, contrary to Ross's view, Muslim exegetes rarely used the Bible to clarify or resolve ambiguities in Quranic verses. Instead, these exegetes approached biblical texts critically, employing them primarily as tools for analysis and critique.

Ross, in his analysis of the Muslim inclination towards the Bible, mentions various factors such as Arabic translations and an open social environment, but ignores the direct or indirect influence of Orientalist activities and the critical motivations of Muslim exegetes. This neglect of a key historical factor prevents his analysis from comprehensively explaining the diverse and complex motivations behind this engagement.

4.2.4. The Role of Colonialism in the Inclination of Muslim Exegetes towards the Bible: A Critique of Ross's Analysis

Samuel Ross, in his examination of this interaction, overlooks the influence of colonial policies and their role in promoting Christianity and imposing cultural changes on Muslim societies. In the nineteenth century, colonial powers, particularly Britain and France, aimed to weaken Islamic identity through the widespread distribution of Bible translations and support for Christian missionaries. These actions led Muslim exegetes to pay more attention to the Bible in order to defend Islam and counter Christian propaganda.

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

For example, reports related to the activities of Christian missionaries in Egypt, particularly those presented in Sharki's (2008) analysis, show that this missionary work had direct and indirect effects on Muslim communities (Sharki, 2008: 48-148). This indicates that more attention should be paid to the role of colonialism and its specific policies in promoting Christianity and its impact on Muslim identity. These policies reveal Muslim engagement with the Bible not merely as a scholarly endeavor, but as part of resistance to colonial cultural and political influence.

Osama Maqdisi, in his book "Artillery of Heaven," demonstrates that the activities of American missionaries in the Ottoman Empire, including the distribution of the Bible and attempts to undermine Islamic identity, were part of a colonial project that provoked critical responses from Muslims (Maqdisi, 2008: 100-105).

Considering these factors and connecting this interaction with Islamic reform movements and the efforts of interpreters to preserve religious identity and resist colonialism, a more comprehensive and accurate picture of this historical period and the complex motivations behind Muslim interpreters' engagement with the Bible can be presented.

5. Review and Critique of Samuel Ross's Categorization of Modern Quranic Commentators

Samuel Ross, in his analysis of modern Quranic commentators, has attempted to categorize them and describe the characteristics of each group. This categorization, while seemingly systematic and scholarly at first glance, faces serious criticisms in several instances.

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

5.1. Categorization of Modern Quranic Commentators in Samuel Ross's Analysis

In the sixth section of his book, Samuel Ross analyzes modern Quranic commentators and divides them into three main branches (Ross, 2024: 127-179).

5.1.1. Purist Salafi

Main Characteristic: This group emphasizes a return to the fundamental principles and teachings of early Islam attributed to the early generations of Muslims (Salaf). They believe that Islam was corrupted in later periods by erroneous innovations (such as Sufism or certain schools of jurisprudence).

Objective: To reconstruct Islam in a manner resembling the teachings and practices of the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions.

Interpretive Approach:

- They strive to extract rulings from the Quran and Hadith without intermediation from schools of jurisprudence;
- They avoid weak hadiths and rely solely on authentic hadiths.

Area of Activity: Primarily in Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

5.1.2. Modernist Salafis

Main Characteristic: This group, in a sense, returns to the fundamental principles of Islam, but their main goal is to reconcile Islam with the conditions and needs of the modern world.

Objective: To uplift Islamic societies by focusing on rationality and creating compatibility with scientific and social advancements.

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

Interpretive Approach:

- They utilize new jurisprudential tools;
- They often emphasize the importance of adapting interpretations to rationality and the dynamic, progressive spirit of Islam;
- Unlike purist Salafis, they may accept weak hadiths, provided they are consistent with rational and Quranic principles.

Area of Activity: They have been mostly active in Egypt.

5.1.3. Late Sunni Traditionalists

Main Characteristic: This group emphasizes preserving the classical traditions of Sunni Islam and believes that the existing Islamic heritage (jurisprudence, Kalam, and Sufism) is sufficient to address modern challenges.

Objective: To continue the jurisprudential, theological, and Sufi traditions that developed in past centuries.

Interpretive Approach:

- They support the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence (Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali), two theological schools (Ash'ari and Maturidi), and Sufi orders;
- Unlike purist Salafis, they use weak hadiths for non-essential matters (such as the virtues of actions).

Area of Activity: They are present in various regions of the Muslim world, but their concentration is greater in areas where traditional educational institutions (such as Zitouna in Tunisia) have been active.

5.2. Deficiency in Comprehensiveness: Neglect of Shi'a Interpretive Schools in Samuel Ross's Analysis

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

Samuel Ross, in his analysis, has only addressed three interpretive schools among Sunnis: purist Salafis, modernist Salafis, and late Sunni traditionalists. While this categorization represents some important interpretive schools, the neglect of other influential schools and important Islamic commentators has resulted in this analysis lacking the necessary comprehensiveness.

A significant deficiency in this section of Samuel Ross's book is its neglect of important interpretive currents outside the Sunni tradition, particularly Shia commentators. Shia Islam holds a prominent place in the history of Quranic exegesis and has played a crucial role in the development of Islamic interpretive thought.

Furthermore, Ross overlooks secular modernist commentators who have offered novel perspectives on the rereading of the Quran. Commentators such as *Muhammad Shahrūr* and *Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd*, by analyzing the Quran within frameworks such as human rights, democracy, and gender equality, have played a significant role in contemporary interpretive thought. These commentators, by criticizing traditional approaches and proposing new methods, represent a transformation in modern interpretive thought that is absent from this analysis.

In addition, the geographical limitations of Ross's analysis are noteworthy. His focus on Arabic-speaking commentators in regions such as Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia has led to the neglect of non-Arab commentators. Among these, the interpretive currents in Indonesia, one of the most populous Muslim countries, deserve mention. A prominent example of exegesis from this region is the *Tafsir al-Azhar* by *Ḥamkā*. This commentary represents an attempt to reconcile Quranic teachings with

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

contemporary issues, addressing social, ethical, and reformist themes. Furthermore, *Ḥamkā*, in this commentary, in some instances, refers to the Bible, and under the verses related to Mary and Jesus, compares the Quranic narrative with Christian perspectives, although these comparisons are largely made with an emphasis on the Quran's monotheistic perspective (Ḥamkā, 2001: 2, 766–779).

Similarly, other non-Arab commentators such as Iqbal Lahori in India and Iranian commentators, who have offered unique perspectives on Quranic interpretation, are absent from Ross's analysis. These regions, with their diverse cultural and social contexts, have offered valuable and distinctive approaches to understanding the Quran.

Consequently, ignoring these interpretive currents has resulted in Ross's analysis reflecting only a portion of the broad and diverse currents of Quranic interpretation. Including these currents in the analysis could have enriched and broadened his research.

Furthermore, Ross faces a fundamental challenge in presenting the leading figures of the three groups under examination, and serious criticisms can be leveled against his method of selection and description. One striking example is his presentation of the "Purist Salafis" group. Ross describes this group as avoiding the use of weak hadiths and relying on authentic hadiths, presenting this characteristic as one of their most prominent features. However, a closer examination of Salafist interpretive texts, particularly in the regions Ross mentions, such as Saudi Arabia, reveals that this claim does not align with historical reality and existing evidence.

Ross introduces modern Salafist commentators by emphasizing their return to the fundamental principles and teachings of early Islam. He believes

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

these commentators hold that Islam was corrupted in later periods by innovations such as Sufism or certain schools of jurisprudence, and they strive to return Islam to the teachings and practices of the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions. However, it is noteworthy that if Ross had considered the serious criticisms of these groups by commentators from other schools of thought, especially the criticisms of Shia commentators, he likely would not have arrived at such a portrayal of the Salafis.

The reality is that many interpretations attributed to Salafis in Saudi Arabia are not only not free from weak and even fabricated hadiths, but these hadiths, as well as discussions such as the anthropomorphism and assimilation of God, are widely reflected in these works. Such evidence indicates that the image Ross presents of this group is based more on stereotypes and theoretical assumptions than on precise analysis and direct evidence from interpretive texts. This approach has created a serious weakness in the accuracy and depth of his research, distancing the presented image from historical and interpretive realities.

6. A Review and Critique of Samuel Ross's View on the Role and Authority of the Bible in Modern Quranic Interpretations

In Chapter Seven of his book, Samuel Ross analyzes the status and authority of the Bible (Torah and Gospel) in modern Quranic interpretations, demonstrating how modern interpreters have engaged with these sources differently from pre-modern interpreters. He argues that in modern interpretations, the use of the Bible, rather than being merely a tool for refutation or ridicule, has in some cases been employed as an

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

interpretive source, albeit cautiously and within a framework of critical evaluation (Ross, 2024: 181-207).

6.1. Assessing the Extent of the Role and Authority of the Bible in Modern Quranic Interpretations from Ross's Perspective

Ross points to the influence of social and political conditions on the approach of interpreters. For example, pressure from Christian missionary activities in Egypt led *Rashīd Riḍā* to adopt a more critical tone towards the Bible in his writings, while interpreters like Ibn Ashur, working in a calmer environment, displayed a more balanced perspective.

Ultimately, Ross concludes that the interaction of modern interpreters with the Bible represents a shift in the interpretive approach of this period. This shift not only reflects historical and social conditions but also shows that modern Quranic interpretation has sought to engage in dialogue with other religious texts while maintaining the authority of the Quran.

In this section of the book, he attempts to show that in modern Quranic interpretations, the authority of the Bible, compared to pre-modern interpretations, has increased to some extent, serving as a supplementary source and, in some cases, a more reliable reference than certain weak narrations or *Israiliyyat* (Ross, 2024: 181-207).

Reasons for this claim:

- A) Use as a supplementary source: Ross explains that modern Quranic interpreters, such as *Qasimi*, *'Abduh*, *Riḍā*, and *Ibn 'Āshūr*, have utilized the Bible, especially in sections with shared narratives with

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

the Quran. This has occurred more frequently where other sources (such as Israiliyyat or some weak hadiths) were less reliable.

- B) Comparative Approach: Modern interpreters, while acknowledging partial or complete corruption in the Bible, have utilized it as a source for comparison with the Quran. This process has involved attempts to preserve portions of the Bible compatible with the Quran and reject incompatible parts.
- C) Prioritization over Israiliyyat: A significant point raised by Ross is that the Bible has achieved a higher status in modern interpretations, particularly in comparison to Israiliyyat (Jewish traditions). For instance, *Rashīd Riḍā* and *'Abduh* considered the Bible more authentic than Israiliyyat narratives, criticizing the latter as unreliable sources.
- D) Shifting Perspective on Interpretive Sources: In modern interpretations, the Bible has been employed as a source for analyzing, critiquing, and even supplementing Quranic narratives. Ross demonstrates that this shift reflects a tendency among modern interpreters to utilize more diverse sources for Quranic interpretation.

Ultimately, Ross implicitly argues that in modern Quranic interpretations, the Bible is used not as a replacement for the Quran and Hadith, but as a supplementary and referential source in analysis and interpretation. This development stems from the social and scientific necessities of the modern era and signifies a change in the interaction between the Quran and other religious texts (ibid.).

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

6.2. Critique of Samuel Ross's Descriptive Approach in Analyzing the Role of the Bible in Modern Quranic Interpretations

Ross primarily focuses on analyzing the interpretations of four commentators (*Qasimi*, *'Abduh*, *Rashīd Riḍā*, and *Ibn 'Āshūr*). This limitation in examples renders his findings lacking in generality. Many modern interpretations exist that engage with the Bible to critique, analyze, and respond to doubts—in the face of the same currents discussed in the previous section of the article; namely, the atmosphere of colonialism and Christian missionary activity. Therefore, Ross presents an excessive generalization regarding the role and authority of the Bible in modern Quranic interpretations and has failed to adequately reflect the complexities of the interpreters' approaches and historical circumstances. A more precise and comprehensive analysis could have provided a more balanced and scholarly portrayal of this development.

7. Samuel Ross's View of the Impact of the "Turn to the Bible" on the Qur'anic Exegetical Tradition

Samuel Ross, in the eighth section of his book, examines the impact of the "Turn to the Bible" on the Quranic interpretive tradition. He explains how some modern commentators, by granting limited interpretive authority to the Bible, have offered new interpretations of the Quran, sometimes leading to a revision of the interpretive tradition. For example, he examines Sarah's laughter in the Quran (Hūd/71) and its difference from the biblical narrative, showing that the order of events differs, with Sarah's laughter preceding the good news of Isaac's birth in the Quran. This

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

discrepancy has compelled commentators to offer various explanations for Sarah's laughter.

Ross further examines modern interpretations, including that of *Ibn 'Āshūr*. He notes that *Ibn 'Āshūr*, unlike the classical interpretive tradition, attributed Sarah's laughter to the good news of the birth of Isaac and Jacob, justifying this interpretation based on the Genesis narrative in the Torah. This demonstrates the direct influence of the Bible on *Ibn 'Āshūr*'s interpretation.

7.1. Factors of Change in Modern Interpretations from Ross's Perspective

Ross analyzes the impact of this "Turn" on changing attitudes towards *Israiliyyat* (narratives of Jewish origin). He shows that the removal of these narratives from modern interpretations has led not only to a change in sources but also to a change in the understanding of Quranic verses. Specifically, he examines viewpoints related to Eve's role in the fall, showing how modern commentators, unlike the older interpretive tradition which blamed Eve as the primary cause of the fall, have rejected this view and returned to the Quranic text, which makes no mention of Eve's specific responsibility (Ross, 2024: 209-216).

From Ross's perspective, modern commentators decided to remove the *Israiliyyat* that had found their way into earlier interpretations. These narratives, often based on oral traditions or non-canonical biblical texts and other sources such as Midrash and Apocrypha, were intertwined with the worldview of earlier societies and sometimes reinforced perspectives not explicitly present in the original Quranic text or the Bible. Therefore,

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

setting aside Israiliyyat led to a change in how topics such as Sarah's laughter or Eve's role in the fall were interpreted.

In essence, Ross argues that modern interpreters, for a better understanding of Quranic themes, have turned to the original biblical text. Instead of relying on Israiliyyat or post-biblical narratives, they engaged in a comparative analysis of the Quran and the original biblical text. This shift in perspective led to the discarding of narratives embedded in Israiliyyat that supported specific viewpoints, such as the role of Eve or the reasons for Sarah's laughter, because such details are not found in the original biblical text.

Therefore, the change in modern interpretations was not solely due to the abandonment of Israiliyyat, but rather to a new approach that relied on the original texts of the Quran and the Bible. This approach not only eliminated Israiliyyat but also led to interpretations that were more scientific and based on the original text. This new approach played a significant role in differentiating between modern and earlier interpretations.

7.2. Ambiguity in the Boundary between the Bible and Israiliyyat: A Critique of Samuel Ross's Oversimplification

Ross appears to consider the Bible and Israiliyyat as two completely separate and unrelated sources, portraying Israiliyyat as distinct and fabricated narratives independently introduced into Islamic interpretations. However, the historical reality is that much of the Israiliyyat, directly or indirectly, was derived from the biblical text or based on Jewish interpretations and traditions surrounding the Bible.

Elahe Hadian Rasanani

For example, Israiliyyat related to the stories of Prophet Lot (Genesis 19:30-38), David (2 Samuel 11:1-27), or other prophets, often have roots in biblical narratives or are based on a particular reading of them. The Israiliyyat transmitters, who played a key role in transmitting these narratives, usually extracted their information from their sacred texts and then, by adding details, distortions, or personal interpretations, presented them in a new form.

Therefore, although Ross claims that removing Israiliyyat and replacing it with the Bible has led to improved interpretations, this distinction is not as clear-cut and defensible as he assumes.

Conclusion

One of the fundamental criticisms of Samuel Ross's viewpoint is that he describes the shift towards the Bible as if this change resulted in a more scientific and credible approach to Quranic interpretation, but several points are overlooked in this analysis. Ross fails to adequately address the fact that accepting the Bible as part of the Islamic interpretive tradition faces serious theological and jurisprudential limitations. Islamic tradition emphasizes the Quran as a unique and unparalleled text, the central axis of interpretation and the primary basis of doctrines. Therefore, even in modern interpretations, the Bible cannot hold a position equal to or similar to that of the Quran.

Ross makes an oversimplified distinction between Israiliyyat and the Bible, presenting them as entirely separate. However, many Israiliyyat are directly or indirectly derived from biblical texts. Therefore, discarding

A Critical Analysis of Samuel Ross's View on the Influence of the Bible on Quranic Exegesis

Israiliyyat and replacing it with the Bible does not necessarily mean eliminating the historical and interpretive influences of these narratives; rather, the same concepts may be reproduced with different expressions.

Another significant criticism of Samuel Ross's perspective is his emphasis on the positive and empathetic use of the Bible by Muslim commentators, while neglecting the critical aspects of this interaction. While many Muslim commentators, particularly during sensitive historical periods such as encounters with Christian proselytization and colonial contexts, used the Bible not as a source for convergence, but as a tool to critique Christian doctrines and demonstrate the superiority of the Quran. This critical use, evident in prominent interpretive works and the dialectical arguments of many modern commentators, is significantly downplayed or even absent in Ross's analysis. Ignoring this aspect provides an incomplete picture of the interaction between Muslim commentators and the Bible and, in particular, fails to accurately reflect the historical and intellectual complexities of this approach.

In summary, Ross's approach, due to its disregard for the actual status of the Quran and the Bible in Islamic tradition, requires a fundamental revision and cannot be accepted as a valid model for analyzing these modern developments, instead of offering a comprehensive and accurate interpretive model of modern transformations.

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Elahe Hadian Rasanani

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