

## REVIEW

*Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation & Qur'anic Hermeneutics: An Analysis of Four Discourses* by Ali Akbar, 2020. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, £80, 200 pp. ISBN: 978-1-474-45616-6 (hbk).

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Ali Akbar's work on revelation and Qur'anic hermeneutics examines the calls of four prominent Muslim scholars – Fazlur Rahman, Abdolkarim Soroush, Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd – for a revised account of the canonical rendition of revelation. These thinkers adopt a humanistic approach to the Qur'anic revelation, meaning there is a dialogical relationship between God and the Prophet, who is not to be considered a passive recipient of revelation.

Akbar analyzes each scholar's views on revelation, especially the assessment that revelation is anchored in the Prophet's state of mind and influenced by the socio-historical vicissitudes of the circumstances under which the text was revealed. Thus, for the four scholars, the Qur'anic message is intertwined with the socio-historical context of pre-Islamic norms and customs.

The book argues that the four scholars not only furnish a theological understanding of God's relation to the Prophet but also that this has broader implications in the realm of Qur'anic interpretation and the discourse on socio-political issues, such as those of women's rights, religious pluralism, democracy, and human rights. The work also traces the four scholars' understanding of revelation to medieval Muslim philosophical ideas and modern Western theological discourses. Here, the author relies on his own appraisal of these scholars' theories of revelation and his assessment of their place in philosophical and theological discourses. He believes that this approach provides an insight into what formed the scholars' theory of revelation. While parallels can be discerned in a number of cases, it is difficult to ascertain that each of the scholar's views have been molded and shaped by either Muslim philosophical ideas or modern Western theological discourses.

*Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation & Qur'anic Hermeneutics* further examines the hermeneutical strategies of each scholar and the conflation of his interpretive method with the theory of revelation. Akbar explores each scholar's understanding of the process of revelation, the role that the Prophet played as an active participant, and how each theory of revelation can be understood in light of the thinker's broader understanding of the Qur'an. All the authors have formulated theories that directly contradict the normative understanding of revelation. For example, Fazlur Rahman maintained that Gabriel was not a physical being who delivered God's message to the Prophet. Rahman also claims that the idea that Gabriel brought the Qur'anic text to the Prophet was an eighth or ninth century innovation. Equally controversial is Rahman's view that the Prophet received revelation as an "idea,"

words that had become closely tied with his heart. Thus, the Qur'an becomes Muhammad's speech. For Rahman, 'the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad' (33). Akbar explains the theories of the scholars but does not engage with classical sources on the theory and process of revelation; he narrates the contemporary theories of these four thinkers without questioning or evaluating them in the context of the centuries of scholarship on hermeneutics that preceded them.

Unlike Rahman, Soroush claims that the Prophet verbalized the Qur'an with his own words. Soroush contends that God gave non-verbal inspiration to the Prophet, who then translated it for others. Soroush thereby transforms revelation from a metaphysical concept to a historical notion by highlighting the role of the Prophet in it and by emphasizing its dialogical nature. For him, 'the era of prophetic mission is over, but the opportunity remains for the expansion of the prophetic experience, both spiritually and socially' (71). By equating revelation to the religious experience of the Prophet, Soroush also connects revelation with the socio-historical context of seventh century Arabian society. Although he mentions it briefly, Akbar needs to provide a more nuanced view of Soroush's theory of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge and the implications this has for Soroush's theory of revelation.

Shabestari's humanistic approach to Qur'anic revelation is rooted in his view that the Qur'an grew out of Muhammad's experience of the divine and therefore reflects a Prophetic understanding of the world. The dialogical nature of the text means it is intertwined with the society in which it came into being. This leads Shabestari to emphasize the interpretive nature of the Qur'an and to highlight the significance of the socio-cultural milieu at the time of revelation.

Shabestari also accentuates the role of hermeneutics. For him, the Qur'an 'speaks by means of interpretation' (110), which is connected to the episteme of the specific period in which it is shaped. More significantly, the process of interpretation is never absolute, and thus as long as history continues, new interpretations of the Qur'an will appear. Further, Shabestari's hermeneutic conflicts with normative political discourses since he opposes the idea of an official rendition of the Qur'an. Unfortunately, Akbar does not discuss Shabestari's theory of revelation and his concept of the hermeneutical cycle, which can have major ramifications in the contemporary reading of scripture.

Although less humanistic, the views of Abu Zayd are no less controversial. For him, revelation transfers the Qur'an from the existential level of a pure divine text to that of a human text. 'The divine text became a human text at the moment it was revealed to Muhammad' (131). Abu Zayd's theory differs from those of Soroush and Shabestari in that he does not emphasize the Prophet's human experiences in the revelation process.

Like the other scholars, Abu Zayd links the message of the text to the socio-historical context of its emergence. His hermeneutic provides an insight into the acceptance of a plurality of exegeses and rejects claims that link the Qur'an to a singular official pronouncement. For him, the Qur'an should be viewed as a linguistic, historical, and human text that is the product of an interaction between God and His Prophet. In contrast to the other scholars considered, Abu Zayd does not state that the Qur'an reflects the words of the Prophet himself.

The major conclusion of Akbar's work is that the revisionist theories of revelation in the works of Rahman, Soroush, Shabestari, and Abu Zayd are germane to scriptural exegesis in approaching Qur'anic socio-political precepts. The work makes a significant contribution in expounding the theories of revelation of the four scholars. However, it does not answer relevant questions, including: How will the revisionist ideas of these scholars provide alternative models of the Qur'an? How will they allow the reader to rethink the interplay between the foundational principles of revelation and various disciplines to reconstruct Islamic thought? How do such revisionist theories of revelation connect with a theory of law that might provide a basis for an inclusive civil society? What are the political implications of the view that there cannot be a singular or official reading of the sacred texts? More significantly, precisely how will the revisionist readings of revelation function? What results will they achieve? What role will they play in the reformation of moral and legal precepts? And will they be able to play such a role without ignoring the role of traditional Islamic legal theory?

Similarly, Akbar merely recounts the theories of the four scholars and does not critique them or highlight their limitations. The work does not explore the link between the theory of revelation and *ijtihad* especially as it impacts the hermeneutics on women's rights, religious pluralism, democracy, and human rights, the four domains that the author had earlier highlighted in his work. Hence the reader is left with the impression that the principles of hermeneutics discussed in the book are still a work in progress.

Despite these shortcomings, this book will appeal to scholars and students interested in revisionist theories of revelation, reformation in the Muslim world, and contemporary religious/political thought. It will also be an invaluable contribution to the study of contemporary Islam.