



David in the Muslim Tradition: The Bathsheba Affair

By Khaleel Mohammed



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In Chapter 38:21-25, the Qur'an relates a very short narrative about the biblical King David's seeking and receiving God's forgiveness. The earliest Muslim exegetes interpreted the qur'anic verses as referring to the Hebrew Bible's story of David's adultery with Bathsheba, as related in 2 Samuel 12:1-13. Later Muslims, however, having developed the concept of prophetic impeccability, radically reinterpreted those verses to show David as innocent of any wrongdoing since, in the Muslim tradition, he is not only a king, but a prophet as well. *David in the Muslim Tradition: The Bathsheba Affair* outlines the approach of the Qur'an to shared scriptures, and provides a detailed look at the development of the exegetical tradition and the factors that influenced such exegesis. By establishing four distinct periods of exegesis, Khaleel Mohammed examines the most famous explanations in each stratum to show the metamorphosis from blame to exculpation. He shows that the Muslim development is not unique, but is very much in following the Jewish and Christian traditions, wherein a similar sanitization of David's image has occurred.

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Editorial Review

Review

Khaleel Mohammed's book, *David in the Muslim Tradition*.... helps to reveal the "biblical subtext" of the Qur'an. Mohammed shows how Muslim interpretations shifted over time from acknowledging David's sin, to granting it was a minor error, to finally absolving David of any transgression. Mohammed identifies three reasons for this shift in attitude: (1) an increasing skepticism toward material of Jewish and/or Christian origins (*isr??l?yy?t*); (2) the rise of the doctrine of prophetic inerrancy (*?i?ma*); and (3) the doctrine of the corruption of earlier biblical scriptures (*ta?r?f*). He demonstrates that Islamic creedal principles and skepticism regarding other sources led to the declining importance of the Bible as a source for Muslim commentators. (*Reading Religion*)

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 (*tafs?r*) 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). (*Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*)

This is the first monograph study of the story of David in Islam. It is a masterful analysis of the image of King David in the Qur'anic exegetical tradition. This is a wonderful addition to the study of biblical figures in Islam, nuanced, sophisticated, and exhaustive. It is also a wonderful read. (Walid Saleh, University of Toronto)

Mohammed engages the broader subject of Islamic exegesis and breaks new ground in offering a detailed analysis of changing Muslim exegesis over time related to a key figure in all three Abrahamic faith traditions. This book will give readers unprecedented insight into the evolution of Muslim exegesis. It will appeal to readers interested in Islamic studies, Jewish studies, Qur'anic studies, and Biblical studies, providing the depth and clarity needed to understand the complex workings of Muslim exegesis over time. (Aisha Y. Musa, Colgate University)

About the Author

Khaleel Mohammed is professor of religious studies at San Diego State University.

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