

*Allah: God in the Qur'an*, by Gabriel Said Reynolds. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. x + 344 pages. \$11.70 US. ISBN 978 0300246582

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In a world where the relationships and identities of individuals are polarized along religious lines, the reading of *Allah: God in the Qur'an* by Gabriel Said Reynolds is a compelling necessity. Reynolds takes ten chapters to describe two attributes of God: God's mercy and God's wrath. He cites prolifically from the Qur'an, the Torah, and the Bible to buttress his points while arguing that the God of Islam is the same God of Christianity and Judaism, and that the Qur'an is grounded in those Scriptures.

Written in 2020 and published by Yale University Press, this book is divided into four parts and ten chapters while thematically underlining the various sub topical issues of debate. Each chapter begins with a quote and anecdotal introductions that prepare the reader for the arguments of that chapter. The book is written in simple and direct English language, without too much Arabic transliteration, while explaining Semitic, Hebrew, and Greek words and their etymologies. It introduces a wide range of theological debates that accrue from the "contradictory" attributes of God as presented by the Qur'an and how they differ from the biblical conception of God as "Father," with methodological interventions by Reynolds to harmonize the arguments.

In the book's introduction, the author engages in a discussion of the two contradictory divine attributes (mercy and vengeance) while extolling the pre-eminence of mercy and compassion. For him, the Qur'an gives pride of place to the mercy and compassion of God, such that every chapter of the Qur'an (except for chapter nine) begins with the invocation known as the *Basmala*: "In the name of God the compassionate, the merciful" (2). This, he notes, corroborates the Christian theology of God's mercy. Therefore, he concludes that "the centrality of mercy to Islam opens up the possibility of dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims" (3). He goes further to highlight the Qur'an's ninety-nine beautiful names of God, all of which Christians would accept as biblical names of God, except the "All compeller (al-Jabbar)" (11). Reynolds then points out the implications of these divine attributes for politicians, theologians, activists, and even Islamic fanatics who perpetuate "vengeance" in the "name of Allah the compassionate, the merciful" (1). In his discussion, Reynolds explores the theological aspects of the Qur'anic discourses on God. As he puts it, "The goal of this book is to

uncover the theology of the Qur'an, to explore the Qur'an's presentation of God who is both merciful and wrathful" (16).

The first part of the book, "Allah and his Book," is comprised of chapters one to three. Chapter one, "The Qur'an and the Bible," outlines the literary style of the Qur'an, the controversy surrounding the chronology of its revelation, the time of its canonization (23), and its similarities with and differences from the Bible. The Qur'an is homiletic in its communicative method and tends to interpret the Bible, though it does not retell biblical stories. The author submits that "unlike the Christian preacher, the Qur'an claims to be speaking with the authority of God" (28). He also adds that the Qur'an is not only homiletic but also prophetic because it is written in the voice of God (29) and is self-referential. Finally, the author submits that for traditional Muslim scholars, "God speaks"; for earlier scholars of the 1st century AH, "Muhammad speaks"; and for today's scholars, "the Qur'an speaks" (37). The author concludes the chapter by stating that, although the biblical characters of Adam, Moses, and Jesus seem to be different from those in the Qur'an, it is difficult to conclude that the God of the Bible is not the God of the Qur'an (41).

In chapter two, "God and the Prophets," the author evaluates God's self-revelation and the attributes or names with which He can be identified (47), noting that God can be identified through the combination of God's names and humankind's obedient submission to Him (Islam). The Qur'an cites Abraham and Jesus as models of obedience and submission to God, and the Qur'an includes the prophet as someone to be obeyed because of his infallibility in bearing the divine good news and warnings. The author concludes the second chapter by noting that the mercy of the God of the Bible is for everyone, including the unrighteous, a concept that stands in contrast to the God of the Qur'an, who is merciful only to the righteous (ambiguously defined) Muslim.

The question of "Heaven and Hell" is discussed in chapter three. In this chapter, Reynolds describes the reality of heaven as a place of pleasure and relaxation to be given as a reward to the righteous, while hell is a place of excruciating punishment. He employs arguments by Islamic scholars on how souls fall asleep in death, prior to resurrection, to describe the Islamic eschatological narratives. The author points to some notable differences between the Qur'an's notion of hell and heaven and those of the Bible. The Qur'an also describes heaven as a real place, a garden, with physical (sexual) pleasures to be given by female servants called *houris* (86).

The second part of the book begins with a chapter on "Divine Mercy," Here, the author presents the arguments by scholars on the two divine attributes of mercy (*al-rahim*) and compassion (*al-rahman*). While scholars

argue that *rahman* is exclusive to God, the *rahim* (mercy) of God is communicated through creation, through the sending of prophets, and through the forgiveness of sins (97), an act that excludes unbelievers and polytheists (109).

In chapter five, “Allah and the Fate of Sinners,” Reynolds presents different opinions of scholars on the fate of Muslims who persist in sin, while emphasizing that the mercy of the Qur’anic God “is not boundless” (114). He highlights that the Qur’anic hell is not a place of permanent punishment but a temporary, therapeutic one, a stop on the road to heaven. Several traditions offer differing views on the duration of perdition. Some hadiths describe final judgment as a bridge to be crossed by all. The author concludes that God will be merciful enough to save sinful believers (133).

Chapter six deals with the fate of unbelievers. The author notes here the traditional notion that non-Muslims are condemned to hell. Some scholars make an exception, however, for innocent infidels: they would not suffer eternally in hell. According to Reynolds, scholars have developed the idea that, since God is not bound by any law, He can still forgive the unbelievers. Therefore, the author concludes that “the door of mercy is always open” (154).

The third part of the book focuses on “Vengeance,” where the author begins with the question of “Divine Wrath,” Here, he argues that the Qur’anic God is both a source of danger and one’s ultimate protection. He adds that God deceives his enemies and accords favour to his beloved. Thus, he reiterates the central issue of this book: “The God of the Qur’an is not simply a God of mercy or a God of vengeance. He is both” (159). Hence, he argues that this is how God becomes involved in human affairs. He also adds that the Bible and the Qur’an depict God as having emotions (166). In contrast to the biblical God, however, the Qur’anic God does not grieve at the sin of unbelievers. The author concludes that though the Qur’anic God is not hurt by human sin, it affects his actions towards the sinner (175).

Chapter eight discusses the Qur’anic notion of God as the Avenger. This, the author notes, is one of the traditional names of God. God is depicted in this chapter as one who takes vengeance against the unbelievers, deceives, and seals their hearts so that they cannot find any reason to repent, and mocks them in his vengeance. The author adopts some biblical stories from the Qur’anic perspective like the crucifixion of Jesus, the destruction of the Egyptians, etc, to buttress this argument (199).

Chapters nine and ten comprise the fourth and final part of the book (“A Personal God”). Chapter nine, “God of the Bible and the Qur’an”, discusses the similarities and differences between the Qur’anic God and the biblical God. Despite the lack of respect for each other’s scriptures, the author argues

that much of what the Qur'an presents is found in the Bible, especially the Torah. The author traces the idea of God's mercy and vengeance throughout the Bible. Even the notion of divine scheming is depicted by Origen in his narrative of the crucifixion as God scheming against the devil. He, however, notes that the Bible differs from the Qur'an through the notion of the biblical God's tendency to be saddened by human sin (220).

The last chapter, chapter ten, "Reading the Qur'an," explores arguments about the nature of the Qur'an as the true and revealed word of God and not historical literature. The author, here, presents the Qur'an as different from the Bible. For him, "the Qur'an is almost ceaselessly involved in an argument, admonition or awakening (*maw'iza*)" (235). The author notes that the notion of humankind as *imago Dei* is missing in the Qur'an, although it is claimed in some hadiths. He concludes the chapter with these words: "The God of the Qur'an is a personal God who responds to human action with pleasure or anger. He grows pleased with those who submit and grows angry with those who refuse to submit" (253).

In the conclusion ("Epilogue"), the author argues that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are simply different manifestations of the same thing, and there is no reason for there to be a conflict between them in the name of God. This God willed more than one religion, not to contradict himself but to encourage unity in diversity. "It seems to me," Reynolds remarks, "that the Qur'an does not mean to separate its God from the God of the Bible. Allah in the Qur'an is the God of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mary as much as he is the God of Muhammad (and the other Arab prophets mentioned in the text). So, the Qur'an does not mean to present a new or different God from the God of the Bible. It does, however, advance a particular understanding of that God" (262).

Gabriel Reynolds shows a mastery of the Qur'anic text and uses a close literary reading of the Qur'an to develop his arguments in this book. This expertise is exemplified in his unbiased arguments and exegetical interpretations of the Qur'anic texts. He uses the widely accepted 1924 Cairo edition of the Qur'an and restricts himself to the narrative critical examination of the entire text while avoiding a chronological or historical approach (9). He also resorts to the use of hadiths and the works of prominent classical and contemporary Islamic scholars that discuss the Qur'an.

Although the author evinces vast knowledge of the Qur'an in particular and Islam in general, he does not ignore the difficulties beginners in Qur'anic studies may face and thus gives a detailed interpretation of every argument in the book. With this approach, beginners in Islamic studies will find this book a reliable companion.

Nevertheless, in addition to all the positive things that can be said about this book, I wish to point out the author's inability to solve the paradox of the divine attributes of mercy and vengeance of God. At the end of the Introduction (16), the author states that the "goal of this book is ... to explore the Qur'an's presentation of God who is both merciful and wrathful" (16). In the last chapter, however, the author remarks that "we have not yet solved the paradox of this affirmation," He goes on to state why the paradox cannot be solved: it is a mystery, adding that the Qur'an intentionally means to "keep God's nature a mystery" (234).

Finally, using Q 5:48, the author enjoins all to "take the lead (vie one with another) in all good works," a quote that has a corollary in Romans 12:10 and Hebrews 16:24 in the Bible. He, thus, concludes the book by saying: "This, I might humbly suggest in conclusion, is the call of the Qur'an to all of us, Muslims and non-Muslims alike" (263).