

## Thinking Biblically about Islam: Genesis, Transfiguration, Transformation

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Thinking Biblically about Islam: Genesis, Transfiguration, Transformation**, by Ida Glaser with Hannah Kay, 2016, 346 pp., £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78368-912-5

In this book, authors Ida Glaser and Hannah Kay attempt to fill what they see as a void in Christian assessments of Islam: a framework for viewing and responding to the religion that is based solely on the Bible. With this in mind, the book is meant primarily for Christian readers, especially those who are curious about what the Bible might say in response to the questions they have about Islam or that have arisen as a result of their interactions with Muslims. In this way, Glaser and Kay do not attempt to locate Islam in the biblical text, but try instead to shape a Christian posture towards Islam and Muslims that aligns with sound biblical exegesis.

As Glaser and Kay note, Christian history reveals a number of different responses to Islam and uses of the Bible as a means for thinking about Islam (9–10). Additionally, some Christian communities, especially in the last century, have worked to develop responses that take into account Church Tradition in addition to the Bible. This book does not circumvent these kinds of responses, but focuses on the Bible as a source. As a result, while the book will be very useful to Christians of all kinds, it may be of particular interest to Protestants for whom the Bible represents a singular source of authority.

The book unfolds in four sections: ‘Genesis’, ‘Transfiguration’, ‘Islam’, and ‘Transformation’. The first section is perhaps the most helpful for Glaser’s and Kay’s primary audience. In it, the authors offer simple, but very pastoral exegeses of biblical passages that help to humanize Muslims and normalize their religious convictions as a part of humanity’s attempt to know and relate to God. In addition to biblical exegesis, the authors – both in this section and throughout the book – offer personal stories and comparative readings of the Bible and the Qur’an. As a result of their efforts, readers are introduced to qur’anic themes, shown similarities between the Qur’an and the Bible, and helped to understand the function of the differences that exist between qur’anic and biblical accounts. The authors do not shy away from the differences that exist between Christian and Islamic sacred sources and are not afraid to account for what they see as a preference for a Christian narrative. Even so, they are keen to build an honest and respectful bridge between Christians and Muslims and between the two sacred texts.

The section on ‘Transfiguration’ focuses on the prophets Elijah and Moses as well as on the figures of the Messiah and Jesus. Each of these individuals appears in the biblical accounts of Christ’s Transfiguration (Matthew 17.1–8; Mark 9.2–8; Luke 9.28–36) and Glaser and Kay use them in order to show how the Bible and the Qur’an treat these individuals and the diverging theological views on topics such as revelation and prophethood that result in Christianity and Islam.


Some of these themes continue in the third section titled ‘Islam’. This is particularly the case with the authors’ focus on comparing Elijah and Moses in the Bible and the Qur’an, but they move quickly to discuss how Christians might use the Bible to think about the Qur’an, Muhammad, the development and maintenance of the global Muslim community (*umma*), Sharia law, and the essential theological differences between Christianity and Islam.

The final section, ‘Transformation’, functions as an extended conclusion. In it, the authors focus on applying what they have argued towards a process of transforming readers’ minds with regard to how they think about themselves, Islam and Muslims.

Whilst much of the book offers comparisons between Christianity and Islam that are helpful in building bridges between followers of the two religions, some of the comparisons threaten to obscure the very elements that the authors are trying to elucidate. At times, they elaborate upon these comparisons in order to account for their delicate nature. For example, in their discussion of Sharia, the authors argue that, for Christians, ‘the whole idea of law has been transformed through Jesus, and through ... his acceptable sacrifice’ (249). For Muslims, however, the authors argue that the ‘option of sacrifice has been removed’ (249). As a result, Muslims have developed laws as a means for guiding human behaviour. To illustrate their point, the authors discuss various Muslim laws governing marriage and the punishments that may be meted out for those who commit adultery (249–250). The topic of marriage in Islam has largely been sensationalized in the eyes of Westerners, one of the book’s primary audiences. Therefore, the authors risk unfairly representing the great variety of Islamic thought on marriage and adultery and may allow their discussion to play into Western stereotypes. Glaser and Kay do attempt to contextualize their discussion, noting that Sharia law is ‘varied, as are other aspects of Islamic practice’ (250–251). This clarification is important, but it is brief and one wonders whether readers will be able to discern how important it is and how drastically it affects discussions of Islamic law.

Other comparisons are not accompanied by such clarifications and are rendered much weaker than they might be otherwise. For example, the authors helpfully liken Islam to Judaism since both are Mosaic religions (instead, as some Christians have deduced, of Islam being a derivative of Christianity; 259–261). With this in mind, the authors point out a number of important differences between Judaism and Islam. One of these differences is that Islam, unlike Judaism, is a universal faith untied to a specific ethnicity. As a result, even though the two religions have laws that govern their followers’ daily lives, Islam’s laws are universal and are meant to be applied to all peoples, regardless of race or ethnicity (261). Besides distinguishing aspects of Islam from Judaism, the discussion is intended to stand in contrast to Christianity, a faith that has transformed ‘the whole idea of law’ (249). Such a position lacks specificity and fails to account for Christian traditions, like those found in Eastern Orthodox communities, which maintain laws such as those governing food consumption and communal worship. In these ways, Islam is not unlike some Christian traditions and so the authors’ comparison neglects the influence of Eastern Christianity upon the early development of Islam, a misstep that threatens to obscure how readers are meant to view the relationships between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The result could be a rather simplistic view of how these religions think about and use religious law.

Such comparative missteps, however, are not only relatively minor, but also few and far between. The book remains an incredibly helpful resource for its target audience. The authors are consistent in their ability to humanize Muslims and normalize their piety and religious convictions in such a way as to remove barriers that might otherwise impede Christian readers from following a biblical command to love their neighbours and enemies as themselves. As such, the book is an excellent resource for Christian ministers and lay readers looking for Christ-like ways to think about Islam and Muslims that are based on the Bible.

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