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The Study Quran (SQ) can perhaps best be understood as an analog to its forerunner, the Harper Collins *Study Bible* (SB).¹ Originally published in 1993, the SB is an ecumenical project. Though various denominational actors and figures are cited, the SB bears no preference for one over another. Aside from its denominational accommodations, the SB is also significant as an academic project—entry level courses in academic institutions teaching the Bible or Christianity routinely mandate the SB as required reading. As a result of its widespread use in academia, the SB has sold quite well, having exceeded 150,000 copies since initial publication. Therefore, although the SB may not hold much currency within devotional contexts, it retains a majority market share in academic environments.

Like the SB, the SQ is also an ecumenical work. The authors account for both Shiite and Sunni perspectives when offering exegetical commentary and translating verses (see, for example, SQ commentary on Q 33:33), and have maintained translations of creed that can mutually support the various theological orientations that predominate in Islamic thought (Atharī, Ash‘arī, Māturidī, and Mu‘tazilī). In addition to its ecumenicism, the SQ will likely become a bona fide standard for Islamic Studies courses in academic institutions throughout the world. Unlike the SB, the SQ enters an arena in which alternatives are sparse. Instructors have long struggled to provide accessible translations of the Qur‘ān, let alone commentaries that provide

1. Wayne A Meeks, *Study Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 1993); HarperCollins also has published *Commentary on the Torah* by Richard Elliott Friedman (New York: HarperOne, 2001).

meaningful insight corresponding to seemingly ambiguous and otherwise difficult passages found in the Qurʾān.

Qurʾān Translations²: The Current Landscape

The challenge to provide accessible translations of the Qurʾān has not been unique to the academic world. Originally published in 1934, Abdullah Yusuf Ali's (1872-1953) *The Holy Qurʾān: Translation and Commentary* became a de facto standard in English-speaking communities well into the 1990s. Though useful as an early translation, Yusuf Ali's work was fraught with problems. The language of Yusuf Ali's translation mimicked Victorian prose, employing terms that were not comprehensible to the majority of his Muslim readers. In addition to the linguistic shortcomings, the footnotes contained serious errors, particularly in earlier versions (later revisions eliminated much, though not all, of the truly egregious content). The best available alternative was perhaps Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's (1875-1936) *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, published in 1930. Yet he too suffered what Khaleel Mohammed has described as "archaic prose and lack of annotation".³

Muhammad Asad's (1900-1992) *The Message of the Qurʾān* (1970) has experienced broader adoption as of late, especially within the context of Muslim outreach. Despite its readable prose and accessible language, Asad's translation and commentary is explicitly slanted toward rationalist or allegorical interpretations of many verses (in place of their evident meanings), a hermeneutics which draws upon a Muʿtazilite heritage. Take for example Q 13:27, which Asad translates as, *Now those who are bent on denying the truth [of the Prophet's message] say, 'Why has no miraculous sign ever been bestowed upon him from on high by his Sustainer?' Say: 'Behold, God lets go astray him who wills [to go astray], just as He guides unto Himself all who turn unto Him'*. Notice here that *al-ladhina kafarū* is translated as *those who are bent on denying the truth*, instead of the more direct *those who disbelieve*—a terminological difference yielding a theological

2. Translations, by definition, are subject to the shortcomings inherent in attempting to convey meanings from one language to another. The case of the Qurʾān presents more complications than most—'clean' equivalents are not always available for certain terms, let alone the stylistic, rhetorical, and linguistic features native to Qurʾānic passages. Ultimately, this requires interstitial commentary and interpretive decisions, many of which are non-trivial. The term "translation" can, therefore, be somewhat misleading. A better term would be 'an interpretation of the Qurʾān's meaning.' For more details, see Abobaker Ali et al, "Some Linguistic Difficulties in Translating the Holy Qurʾān from Arabic into English", *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Vol. 2 (2013) No. 6.

3. See Khaleel Muhammad, "Assessing English Translations of the Qurʾān", *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 12 (2005) No. 2.

distinction; *yudhillu man yashā'* is rendered *God lets go astray him who wills [to go astray]* as opposed to more conventional translations which accord to God an active role in the individuals straying, a position the Mu'tazilite's rejected due to the primacy of God's justice within their theology. Similarly, Asad translates *fā-zāda-humu Llāhu maraḍā* in Q 2:10 as, *so God lets their disease increase* whereas Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem, Hilali-Khan, and others translate the passage as God increasing the disease. Such interpretations are not isolated incidents: miracles, any issue related to divine decree (*qadr*), the manifestations of divine justice (*'adl*), nonhuman phenomena—the evident sense of such verses is frequently allegorized, interpreted away, or otherwise situated within a Mu'tazilite worldview, rendering it theologically problematic for the majority of Sunni readers, whatever the clarity of its language.

Another recent yet problematic translation of the Qur'an is Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan's *The Noble Qur'an* (circa 1985). Subsidized by the government of Saudi Arabia, copies of *The Noble Qur'an* can be commonly found in mosques both across the United States and overseas. Unfortunately, the Hilali-Khan translation suffers from egregious errors and interpolations of its own, advancing a dogmatic Salafist orientation of Islam directly within the translation itself. Wherein prior translators constrained their efforts to translating the texts and footnoting their interpretive efforts, Hilali-Khan chose to interpose these biases directly into the translated words, making the distinction between God's words and their own quite difficult to discern. Though a number of verses can be brought to bear to demonstrate this active interpolation, perhaps the most noteworthy is the final verse of "The Opening" (*fātiḥa*) Q 1:7 which is translated as, *The Way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not (the way) of those who earned Your Anger (such as the Jews), nor of those who went astray (such as the Christians)*. The translation includes parenthetical references to both Jews and Christians which a plain reading of the verse simply does not support.

Two less problematic recent translation attempts include M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem's *The Qur'an, A New Translation*, and Aminah Assami's *Saheeh International The Qur'an: English Meanings* (accessible at Quran.com). Both provide cogent, readable prose, and have largely refrained from incorporating denominational biases within the actual translation itself, though of course neither is perfect and there remains significant room for improvement. Some have alleged the Saheeh International translation is little more than a less doctrinaire recension of the Hilali-Khan translation, borne out by renderings such as, *And Our angels are nearer to him than you, but you do not see*, where the pronoun "We" is translated as "Our angels", in direct contrast to the literal meaning of the term. Though such interpretation does have precedent among certain premodern commentators, a direct translation would not deliver this

meaning on its own. Due to this and other instances of interpolation, those with sensitivities to denominational impositions will likely prefer Abdel-Haleem's translation.

All of this is to say nothing about the category of exegesis in English, which is far less developed than translation. Few exegetical works have been translated, and those which have been are often summarized with their own, often copious shortcomings. In this regard, there is a palpable dearth of available vehicles through which inquiring minds can learn about the Qurʾān and its meanings. For this reason, the SQ is a contribution likely to take hold not only within secular academia but among lay believers as well, and the early reception to the SQ has certainly reflected that vacuum.

Features and Overview of the SQ

The SQ approaches 2,000 pages in full. It is the product of a decade of work, and its academic rigor is apparent after even a cursory reading. The exegetical commentary of the SQ references forty-one commentaries, with medieval commentaries constituting the predominant points of reference. Of the commentators cited, Ibn ʿĀshūr (d. 1973) and Ṭabāṭabāʾī (d. 1981) are the most recent.

The Study Quran has many strengths. For one, the SQ incorporates prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*) into the commentary, something that I suspect will not please structural reformists who anchor their efforts in a Qurʾān-only epistemology. In addition, the SQ is not a work colored by the ideologies and agendas of secular liberalism (in its many forms). That is, it does not strike an apologetic tone, even regarding pericopes that appear discordant with the metaphysical commitments of contemporary liberal society. Instead, the SQ contextualizes, elucidates the tradition, and offers an understanding of those verses within the terms that the Muslim community (or at least some portion of it) has understood them for over a thousand years. This, I suspect as well, will not gratify reformists who view the majority of premodern jurists and theologians as having been prejudiced by patriarchy, exclusivism, and militarism.

For example, the commentary of Q 4:11, a somewhat difficult verse given its prescription for inequitable distribution of inheritance between men and women, explicates traditional inheritance law without seeking to reinterpret or historicize it. The SQ explains that the inequitable apportioning of inheritance can be attributed to the male's provider-responsibility within a household, a reasoning cited from the exegetical work of Ibn Kathīr. The commentary does not belabor the point, nor engage in apologetics. The explanation of Q 4:11 alone makes reference to the exegetical works of al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Wāḥidī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Ṭabrisī.

A similar approach can be seen in the explanation of Q 4:34, the verse of marital discord (*nushūz*). The SQ translation reads, *Men are the upholders and maintainers of women by virtue of that in which God has favored some of them above others and by virtue of their spending from their wealth. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [their husbands'] absence what God has guarded. As for those from whom you fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Truly God is Exalted, Great.* In the accompanying commentary the authors cite premodern jurists, expound upon the occasion of revelation (*sabab nuzūl*), and provide stipulations that premodern jurists would articulate when commenting on the very controversial locution *ḍarb* (“striking”). Of note is that the authors do not adopt an alternative explanation or translation, electing instead for a hermeneutic of fideism to the tradition.

Ādam, the genealogical father of humanity, the first of creation, and a prophet of God, is created *ex nihilo*, miraculously from dust, and not reenvisioned in light of Darwinian macroevolution (see commentary on Q 2:30-37; 3:59, and others). The *ḥūr ʿin*, or wide-eyed maidens of the Garden, are appropriately presented as otherworldly figures in the commentary of Q 56:22. Although these figures have, of late been imparted to the general public via a medium of radicalism/extremism, the SQ authors reconfigure this discourse from one that is predominantly sensual/erotic to one that is part of a realm that God described as that “which no eye has seen and no ear has heard and what has not occurred to the heart of any human being.”⁴

The exegetical commentary on Q 13:11 explains the axiom, “*Truly God alters not what is in a people until they alter what is in themselves,*” as an imperative to individually reform. Premodern exegetes took this verse as an indication of how God’s blessings in this life, such as health and wealth, are contingent on one’s obedience to God—a far cry from the social revolutionary or even insurrectionary connotations with which it is deployed today.

The story of Lot is as well consistent with the premodern narrative concerning the sins of Sodom. Commentary on Q 29:28-29 states that although “some maintain that Lot reproaches them [i.e. his people] for forcible rather than consensual sexual relations,” the “emphasis here and in Q 7:81; 26:165-166; and 27:54 is upon approaching men with desire and lust, whether consensual or not.” The former framing interprets the sins of Sodom

4. See note 22-24 in SQ, which states: “Regarding all such allusions to the blessings of Paradise, there is a famous *ḥadīth qudsī*: ‘God says, ‘I have prepared for My righteous servants what no eye has seen and no ear has heard and what has not occurred to the heart of any human being; so recite if you will, No soul knows what comfort is kept hidden for it.’”

to concern rape, pederasty, and in certain cases highway robbery, rather than homosexual acts per se. As the SQ authors rightly conclude, a Qur'ānic reading of Sodom provides no such indications.

In many instances, the SQ provides lucid, powerful commentary on verses related to the Hereafter, repentance, virtue, and self-discipline. There are few texts that so seamlessly integrate spirituality (*tazkiya* and *taṣawwuf*), eschatology, intricacies of juristic disagreement, and creed. Take, for example, commentary on *Sūrat Yūsuf* (Q 12), which brings together Biblical references alongside exhortations deriding envy, advocating persistence and patience, the palliative power of prayer, and familial solidarity. The SQ authors take no creative license in this exercise, but rather draw from the copious medieval and modern commentaries relevant insights that animate the content of the chapter in ways that other books simply do not. Whether one is able to appreciate the painstaking research that must have gone into producing this work or not, a non-Muslim accessing the SQ as an entry-point for learning about Islam may in fact maintain prior prejudices, but cannot conclude that Islam as a religion, and the Qur'ān in particular, is a simplistic, irrational, malevolent, or univocal tradition from its content. This, if nothing else, merits considerable praise.

Points of Caution

Given such praise, there are reasons too to be cautious. The SQ is an academic and educational work, and as such includes commentaries from sources that may not be considered orthodox depending on a Muslim's prior commitments or denominational orientation. This includes elaborating views on creed that do not comport with either the Atharī, Ash'arī, or Māturidī Sunni mainstream. Some of the Sufi commentaries can come off as uncomfortably esoteric. Khārijite positions are occasionally expounded upon, and not for the purpose of refutation. Some will also find discomfiting the inclusion of an essay by Ahmed el-Tāyyib, the current Grand Imam of al-Azhar and Mubarak/Sisi loyalist who supported the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi (though it should be noted that the essay predates the 2011 Egyptian uprising).

The SQ's commentary is commensurate with the conventions of secular academia. How that manifests is not always clear to common Muslims, but there are significant implications for the employment of the language. For example, when one refers to the self-referential nature of the Qur'ān, or the way in which 'the Qur'ān teaches us' something, the Qur'ān is treated as an object, with its own voice. This taxonomy is deployed by academics to avoid making an ontological claim. By contrast, for believers, the Qur'ān doesn't say anything: God does. As is common in a devotional context, it is God who proscribes, permits, ordains, praises, and condemns. Although such language is appropriate and necessary for those who do not affirm the divine ontology of

the Qurʾān (a significant audience of the SQ) or work within contexts which do not permit overt faith commitments, one should be careful not to internalize that language within confessional contexts and communities.

Early critics have questioned legal rulings attributed to various legal schools (*madhāhib*) elucidated in the SQ as either not the dominant view within the school or the school or misattributions.⁵ Though the SQ catalogs *ḥadīth* citations and exegetical commentaries, no such citations are provided for legal positions. Referencing source works for legal attributions would help to abate these criticisms, or correct misrepresentations; one should, of course, consult a trained scholar for definitive positions within a particular legal school.

The SQ is a reference work, one that Muslims working in academic contexts will engage. Students and lay congregation members pursuing *ṭalab al-ʿilm* (pursuit of sacred knowledge) should consult a reliable teacher as to whether and how it is advisable to study SQ. Put plainly, Muslim readers should not expect the SQ to inform their beliefs about orthodox Islam.

Departure from Consensus: The Case of *rajm*

In addition to these general remarks, there are more serious concerns. Although numerous verses explicating corporal (*ḥadd*) punishments, such as Q 5:38, are not avoided or explained away and, instead, communitarian benefits are articulated, destabilizing effects of wrongs examined, and premodern exegetes referenced—but the more difficult case of adultery (*zinā*) in Q 24:2 is a notable departure from this general heuristic, with the SQ authors opting to entertain a murkier hermeneutic and call into question the juristic consensus related to the issue of lapidation (*rajm*). In this regard, the authors initially mention the four principal prophetic traditions concerning *rajm*, but later purport “inconsistencies” and “incongruities” between them based on details within the disparate reports. In addition, the authors attend to the question of abrogation (*naskh*), both with regard to the abrogated verse of *rajm* as well as the question of the Sunna abrogating the Qurʾān and whether non-mass transmitted (*mutawātir*) reports are sufficient for overturning clear, unambiguous Qurʾānic prescriptions.

There are a number of issues with this hermeneutic that I will try to

5. These include, but are not limited to, inaccuracies regarding the legal status of *ʿUmrah* (*sub* Q 2:158); the status of the Basmalah (*sub* Q 1:1); SQ statement regarding *wuḍūʿ* (*sub* Q 5:6). It is regarding such inaccuracies that one critic has quipped, “If I can’t trust you with a simple legal matter, I surely cannot trust you on matters of doctrine.” Another remarked: “Explication (*tafsīr*) has conditions; many issues—like creed—are not open to personal reasoning.” Still others have questioned the qualifications of the editors of SQ: “If someone does not fulfil the prerequisites for transmitting knowledge, explicating the Qurʾān, doing fiqh, or the like; what are you doing, endorsing [a] work that you know is folly to follow?”

synthesize here. First and most simply, *rajm* for *zinā* has been part of the juristic consensus since the time of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace; there is little doubt that it was carried out by the Prophet, the Companions, and Forebears thereafter. It continued to be enforced for centuries after the early generations, with no scholar seriously arguing it as having been misapplied prior to the 20th century. If one were to accept SQ verdict on it, one would, in effect, have to accept that thousands of scholars spanning centuries simply got it wrong, or somehow acted in bad faith.

Second, the prophetic traditions concerning *rajm* are not negligible. The principal reports cited in the SQ span dozens of traditions in Bukhārī and Muslim alone, with narrations pronounced by way of thirteen independent Companions of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, across the two canonical texts. ‘Alī, ‘Umar, Abū Hurayrah, Jābir, Zayd ibn Khālid, Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Mas‘ūd, Ibn Abī ‘Awfa, ‘Ubāda, Buraydah, Jābir ibn Samura, ‘Imrān ibn Ḥusayn, and Abū Sa‘īd al-Khuḍrī—God be pleased with them—all provide *rajm* accounts. In other words, the two most authoritative works in the field of prophetic narrations contain a multitude of independent reports about the Prophet having carried out *rajm* and the Companions fervently defending its place within Islamic jurisprudence. Ibn Qudāma (*Mughnī*), al-Bayhaqī (*al-Kubrā*), Ibn Ḥazm (*Marātib al-Ijmā‘*), Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (*Istidhkār*), Ibn al-Mundhir (*al-Awsat*) and Māwardī (*al-Ḥāwī*) cite a consensus on the issue of *rajm*, with Ibn Qudāma saying he “is unaware of any discordant [views on *rajm*] other than the Khārijites” (see *Mughnī* 3/209). To simply dichotomize the issue as one of singular (*aḥād*) reports and dispense with it is not enough.

Third: The “incongruities” referred to are forced upon the various traditions. For example, in comparing the opportunities to recant afforded to the male adulterer with the Jewish couple to whom the Prophet—upon him blessings and peace—extended no such opportunity, the Prophet may have felt reluctant to offer leniency out of consideration to the established rabbinic authority. As is mentioned in the tradition concerning the Jewish couple, the Prophet—upon him blessings and peace—requested a copy of the Torah and adjudicated based on the ruling of their tradition, not his, while the couple are reported to have approached the Prophet for the explicit purpose of escaping the Torah’s retribution for adultery. Al-Zamakhsharī, al-Ṭabrisī, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr and al-Rāzī all either explicitly make mention of the Jewish couple tradition or invoke the ruling of lapidation as one of the reasons for the revelation of Q 5:42-43 (as is noted in the SQ commentary of Q 24:2), the latter of which states, *And how is it that they come to thee for judgment, when they have the Torah, wherein is God’s Judgment?* The “misquotations in the Torah” mentioned in the SQ may in fact belong to a recension of the Torah extant during the Prophetic period. As for the famous case of the employer’s wife, in which a father’s son commits adultery with his employer’s wife, it makes no mention of

the specifics carried out by the delegation sent to obtain a confession. It is quite possible that she chose to confess like the pregnant adulteress. Banishment, combining stoning and lashing, and related considerations may be viewed as discretionary, beyond the explicit *ḥadd* ruling—perhaps based on the nature of the infidelity, and as supported by the prophetic traditions. For example, the case of the employer’s wife began with the adulterer’s father attempting to offer compensation for his son’s crime, and the Prophet’s inclusion of the banishment—upon him blessings and peace—may have been added as a future deterrent against attempted bribery. There are other possibilities, many of which are examined and detailed in works authored by eminent premodern jurists. In conventional jurisprudence, scholars would exhaust legal instruments of reconciliation prior to classifying prophetic traditions as conceptually irreconcilable (*mudṭarib*).

Fourth: The issue of abrogation (*naskh al-tilāwah*), though important, is not the central legal issue in determining the applicability of *rajm*. Even in the absence of the abrogated verse, the multitude of prophetic traditions, practice and statements of the Companions, and juristic consensus forms a sufficient corpus to evidentially support *rajm*. Furthermore, strictly speaking, the prophetic traditions concerning lapidation do not abrogate the verses stipulating flogging (*jaldah*), but rather delimit them to unmarried fornicators. Finally, although the SQ mentions lapidation as “a more grievous punishment than all others mentioned in the Qur’ān,” that distinction almost certainly belongs to the punishment for brigandry (*ḥirābah*) in Q 5:33.

The foregoing is an expounding of the premodern consensus, a defense of the place of *rajm* in the premodern tradition, and stands apart from how Muslim communities should wrestle with these traditions today. The SQ says nothing as to how this can be done (nor is that its purpose or claim). Some modern jurists have called for a moratorium on the *ḥudūd* corporal punishments altogether, and others have specifically called for a revisitation of the *ḥadd* related to *zinā* due to unfortunate abuses, honor killings, and other misapplications that have resulted in the deaths of many innocent lives. This is not a trivial matter, and any earnest effort to address current abuses will have to take the tradition and its evidences into account on its own terms.

Soteriological Pluralism⁶ in the SQ

The legal case examined above aside, an even more problematic concern is with the SQ’s pluralistic commitments. Upon release, Muslim critical reception of the SQ fixated almost exclusively upon the pluralist advances of the SQ,

6. Though much of the social media fervor has employed the term perennialism, pluralism is, in fact, a more accurate term to denote the extending of salvific efficacy to diverse faith traditions. Though particular perennialist orientations may accord a pluralist soteriology, one does not necessitate the other.

responding most pointedly to an essay in the SQ authored by Joseph Lumbard entitled “The Qur’ānic View of Sacred History and Other Religions”. After reading social media vituperation over the inclusion of pluralist soteriological commitments, my initial suspicion was that such a reading was overstating the pluralist overtones, preoccupied with an essay in the back of the book and perhaps curious interpretations of verses Q 3:84-85. But such critics were not altogether wrong in begrudging the multiple areas in which pluralistic interpretations are forced into passages that do not ostensibly support them and have never been maintained as such within the tradition. What follows will again be an attempt to synthesize the primary arguments averred by the SQ authors within the exegetical commentary itself while also paying heed to a few arguments in Lumbard’s essay. The primary arguments in the SQ concerning this topic are as follows:

- Q 5:73 rebuts Monophysite Christology and not Chalcedonian Christology. Non-Chalcedonian Christological orientations are presented on multiple occasions as the focus of the Qur’ān.
- Q 2:79 and elsewhere are not speaking about the Abrahamic (Kitābī) traditions. The scriptures of the Kitābī traditions have not been excessively altered.
- Q 2:62 is the primary verse serving as a rule for the salvific efficacy of other traditions. More critical verses addressing other traditions should be subsumed beneath Q 2:62.
- Q 3:84-85 and elsewhere speak to a general, universal submission to God (“islam”), and not to the specific “Islam” characterized by the prophethood of Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him.

With respect to the Trinity, the SQ maintains in multiple places that orthodox Chalcedonian Christology is not the subject of God’s reprimand in the Qur’ān, but rather exaggerated forms of the Trinity (namely, Monophysite Christology). The claim of ‘exaggeration’ is an argument extended from Q 4:171, which reproaches the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) for exaggerating (*taghlū*) in their religion. Although the SQ does in fact state that the tradition largely considers a unicity of God with three hypostases as incommensurable with the theology of Islam, a grievous error, and a major sin, in other places it delimits criticism to non-Chalcedonian Christology and largely creates a distinction between a Trinity with three hypostases and polytheism (*shirk*) proper, alleging the former to not necessarily constitute the latter. In the commentary of Q 4:171 and Q 5:73 it is stated that “the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity as three ‘persons,’ or hypostases, ‘within’ the One God is not explicitly referenced, and the criticism seems directed at those who assert the existence of three distinct ‘gods,’ an idea that Christians themselves

reject.” Later, the commentary states that “Islamic Law never considered Christians to be ‘idolaters’ (*mushrikūn*) and accepted Christians’ own assertion of monotheistic belief.” In certain instances, the SQ portrays Chalcedonian Christology as a minority, or at the least, largely misunderstood/unknown during the formative period of Islam.

Although medieval Eastern Christianity was more complex than the post-Niceno-Constantinopolitan theology which dominates today, Chalcedonian Christianity was not altogether uncommon and there is little reason to assume the early Muslim community to have been unaware of its presence and beliefs. The direct Qur’ānic criticisms of Christians include their attributing divinity to Christ, a child to God, and belief in a Trinity. There is no scholar in Islamic history that I am aware of who provided a concession for one Christological orientation over another, and exposure to Melkite Churches and its concomitant beliefs existed from the earliest days of Islam.

The earliest Christian apologetic text in Arabic to address Islam was a manuscript entitled *On the Triune Nature of God (Fī tathlīth Allāh al-Wāḥid)* by an unknown author (loosely dated to the early/mid-8th century). In it, the author goes to great pains to emphasize that Christian theological commitments are not of three separate “gods”, but of a single God with multiple states. One can assume that this means that in the formative period, Chalcedonian Christology was not being treated any differently than other forms of Christology, and the earliest Muslims regarded it as constituting the very Trinity which the Qur’ān rebukes. Another early Christian writing, a famous polemic against Islam, is John of Damascus’ (656-749) *Fount of Knowledge*. A Chalcedonian Christian, John characterizes Muslim belief as follows:

He says that there is one God, creator of all things, who has neither been begotten nor has begotten. He says that the Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit, but a creature and a servant, and that He was begotten, without seed, of Mary the sister of Moses and Aaron. For, he says, the Word and God and the Spirit entered into Mary and she brought forth Jesus, who was a prophet and servant of God. And he says that the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the law, and that they seized His shadow and crucified this. But the Christ Himself was not crucified, he says, nor did He die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven. And he says this, that when the Christ had ascended into heaven God asked Him: ‘O Jesus, didst thou say: “I am the Son of God and God?”’ And Jesus, he says, answered: ‘Be merciful to me, Lord. Thou knowest that I did not say this and that I did not scorn to be thy servant. But sinful men have written that I made this statement, and they have lied about me and have fallen into error.’ And God answered and said to Him: ‘I know

that thou didst not say this word.⁷

Of note above is John's characterizing of Islam's conception of God against the Trinity (note that elsewhere in *Fount* John argues time and again for Jesus being consubstantial with God, in contrast to his Muslim interlocutors). John's location in the first century of Islam is critical, as his understanding is largely being informed by information imparted by the Companions unto early converts. In this regard, John describes Prophet Muḥammad, upon him blessings and peace—as advocating for “one God, creator of all things, who has neither been begotten nor has begotten.” This same dynamic can be observed in the treatises (*mayāmīr*) of Theodore Abū Qurrah (750-823), as translated by John Lamoreaux. These treatises often simultaneously respond to both Islam and Monophysite Christology, directing vituperative criticism toward both.

One must conclude that if God were addressing only certain Christological orientations and not others, or that it only explicitly called out three separate “gods” but not “states” or hypostases, then that nuance was either missed by the early Muslim community, or that the early Muslim community succumbed to religious chauvinism and disregarded its otherwise ecumenical nature. The distinction between the legal categories of the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) from polytheists (*mushrikūn*) does not mean that one cannot simultaneously be another. Indeed, anything that derogates from the unicity of God constitutes a type of shirk, let alone belief in a godhead with three concurrent states, one of which is believed to be the son of God.

In the commentary of Q 2:62, attention is paid to the case of one who hears about Islam, but encounters obstacles that prevent Islam from taking hold. The SQ cites al-Ghazālī's *Fayṣal al-tafrīqa*, which speaks of the ‘unreached’, an excuse that was more plausible in premodern societies. Theologians have long incorporated such individuals into the category of those ‘excused’ from being subject to chastisement, in keeping with Q 17:15, *We do not punish until We have sent a messenger*. How the notion of ‘unreached’ translates to those whose only exposure to Islam is via the medium of hostility and antagonism, has also been dealt thoroughly.⁸

7. See *Fount of Knowledge*, part two entitled *Heresies in Epitome: How They Began and Whence They Drew Their Origin from Writings*, by St John of Damascus, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 37 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), pp. 153-160, accessed from http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/stjohn_islam.aspx on February 2, 2016.

8. Al-Ghazālī, for instance, adds to the category of those to whom the message of Islam has not reached, those who have only been reached with a distorted picture of Islam. In al-Ghazālī's view, such people are excused until after they have had an opportunity to learn the truth (*Fayṣal al-tafrīqa*, *Maǧmū'a rasā'il al-Imām al-Ghazālī*, 3:96).

Though one may argue that soteriological pluralism is ancillary to the overall project of the SQ, or relevant only to a fraction of the two-thousand page oeuvre, the pluralist references do abound: many verses that repudiate Christian or Jewish doctrine are reinterpreted or historicized; salvific efficacy is extended to *all* religions and paths, so long as they are subsumed under the general postulate of “submission to God” (“islam”), instead of the particularized Muhammadan “Islam”. In this regard, belief in the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, is then inessential; belief in the Qurʾān itself and compliance with its injunctions are likewise non-compulsory for individuals living in a post-Muhammadan world. Its implication is that one could renounce the particularized Muhammadan Islam altogether in favor of a more broadly understood “islam” and still find themselves entitled to God’s salvation.

Such an understanding of soteriology is difficult to support within a full reading of the Qurʾān, and certainly impossible after taking into account the less accommodating *ḥadīth* tradition which contains unambiguous reports such as, “By the One in Whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, there is no one among this nation, Jew or Christian, who hears of me and dies without believing in that with which I have been sent, but he will be one of the people of the Fire.” Verses repudiating the *Kitābī* traditions are not scant—they compose a major constituent of the Qurʾān, including extensive passages in Surat al-Baqarah, Āl-ʿImrān, al-Nisāʾ, and Māʿidah. They include critiques of *Kitābī* theology, ecclesiastic authorities, alterations of sacred texts, and implores the People of the Book to submit to the message of the Qurʾān and the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace. Attempts to proffer an inclusivist soteriology requires, as has been shown, a reliance on the Qurʾān-alone absent the prophetic tradition, a subordination of the majority of verses addressing the *Kitābī* traditions beneath Q 2:62, dismissal of the scholarly tradition, and unsubstantiated historicizing. Such a conclusion can fairly be described as a departure from consensus and unfaithfulness to tradition.

Conclusion

The current landscape of Qurʾān exegesis in English to date has not offered much to non-Muslims and Muslims born in western lands seeking to learn about the Qurʾān. As a result, inquiring minds have been relegated to unreliable, often simplistic, web sites responding to “hot button” issues, frequently within a particular theological/denominational persuasion. Consequently, the intellectual legacy of Islam has largely gone unappreciated outside of specialist circles. For many lay Muslims, scholastic discordance has been perceived as an exceptional circumstance, disagreement portrayed as derogating from an unrealistic ideal of unity, and theological polarizations the norm. Lost in the

myriad challenges associated with inaccessible literature about the Qurʾān has been the increasingly perverse portrayal of Islam and the Qurʾān in the minds of the general public.

The presence in recent years of more intelligible Qurʾān translations has surely helped, but accompanying commentaries remain nonexistent. Within this context, the SQ is a monumental contribution to the field of Qurʾān studies, offering perhaps the first proper exegetical work on the Qurʾān in the English language. Anchored in a traditionalist narrative accumulated over a thousand years, the SQ has coalesced the views of luminaries and theologians from disparate theological orientations and denominations. Although it is not the “final word on a whole tradition”, and nor does it seek to be, as Caner Dagli remarked in response to early critics, it certainly provides appreciable insight into a sophisticated, multi-dimensional tradition which has come to formulate how Islam is conceptualized today.

The SQ has regrettable instances in which it has departed from consensus, namely, with respect to lapidation and soteriological pluralism. In both cases, traditional theological methodologies have been jettisoned in favor of extenuating considerations and questionable heuristics that contradict normative orthodox religious teachings. Despite these legitimate and important concerns, non-Muslims interested in Islam, Muslims distant from their faith, policy makers, and universities making use of the SQ is far preferable to the overwhelming majority of content related to the Qurʾān today. In that vein, we are certainly indebted to its authors.

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The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the feedback from the SQ authors in support of this piece. Their insights and feedback have animated this review in important ways. Though some of the critiques in this article are not favorable in reviewing certain topics in the SQ, I have found the authors themselves to be nothing other than genuine, open to dialogue, and very interested in furthering conversations that have been generated since the SQ's release. An earlier version of this review appeared on Muslimmatters.org.