

***Jews and the Qur'an.* By Meir M. Bar-Asher. Translated by Ethan Rundell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. xix+167.**

In this clear and concise, yet erudite book, Meir Bar-Asher succeeds in putting forth a fascinating exploration of the relationship between Jews and the Qur'an. Bar-Asher is Professor of Arabic Language and Literature and Max Schloessinger Professor of Islamic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is also an eminent scholar of rabbinic language and President of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. Born in Ksar es-Suk in Morocco, he wrote his original draft of *Jews and the Qur'an* in French. He publishes articles both in French and in Hebrew.

This short book synthesizes, in accessible terms, a wealth of research performed over many years. Ben-Asher's scholarship about the Qur'an goes back to his dissertation topic, eventually published in 1999 as *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shiism*. Two other major works followed, both with Aryeh Kofsy: *The Nusayri-Alawi Religion: an Inquiry into its Theology and Liturgy* (2002) and *Kitab al-ma'arif by Abu Saïd Maymun b. Qasim al-Tabarani: Critical Edition with Introduction* (2012). At Hebrew University, he was part of a research group studying "Encountering Scripture in Overlapping Cultures: Early Jewish, Christian and Muslim Strategies of Reading." He has also lectured on such topics, including giving a 2012 seminar on "Judaism and Islam: Contact and Conflict as Reflected in the Qur'an and Muslim Tradition," for the University of West Bohemia. The notes for this course seem to have developed into the current book.

The style of the book reveals Bar Asher's true nature and ease as a teacher. He takes care to review basic concepts about the Qur'an, as, for example, the definition of a *sura*, and the organization of the Qur'an, before approaching his analysis. Then, he outlines the key areas relating to his subject: the ambivalent status of Jews in the Qur'an, the intriguing parallels between biblical and midrashic narratives and qur'anic ones, and the political status of People of the Book (*dhimmis*) under qur'anic law. He stays very close to primary texts. For the most part, he cites secondary sources to summarize the approach taken by previous scholars and to build upon them, without getting into scholarly debates. We see this in his choice to include only the mainstream interpretation of the Fatiha (the Qur'an's first chapter), that originally of Tabari (d. 923). (30) Presumably to keep his narrative stream-lined, Bar-Asher omits a discussion of other possible interpretations, such as that of Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) or several included in *The Study Quran* (2015), which perform a more universalist reading.¹

In the first chapter, Bar-Asher investigates the archaeological and literary record of the Jewish community in the Hejaz, both in the pre-Islamic period and during the time of Mohammad. While Bar-Asher argues that the qur'anic *suras* are best interpreted contextualized historically, he points out certain impediments to this process: only Muslim sources describe the Jews of this period, and these accounts date from several centuries after the fact.

¹ The *Fātiḥa* is particularly important as it functions as the first *sura* of all canonical Muslim prayer, and is recited by Muslims at funerals, weddings, and at the birth of a child. See S. H. Nasr et. al. *The Study Quran* (San Francisco: Harper, 2015). There is a disagreement among Muslim scholars regarding verse 7, which in *The Study Quran* reads "the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who go astray." Tabari interprets "those who incur wrath" as the Jews, and "those who go astray" as the Christians. Others, including Muhammad Abduh and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, offer alternate readings, which take the verse to refer more generally either to individuals from previous nations who sinned or, more simply, to those who sin in various ways.

In the second chapter, Bar-Asher analyzes the varying tones of passages in the Qur'an about the Jews, depending on whether they are described as *banu Isra'il* (descendants of Israel in the biblical period), *al yahud* (Jews of the post-biblical period), or *ahl al-kitab* (the People of the Book). Bar-Asher tackles the Qur'an's criticisms of the Jews, in particular the sins for which the Qur'an suggests the Jews have lost their election. He situates them in the context of an "anti-Jewish polemical tradition that predated Islam" (53).

In one of the most intriguing chapters (chapter three), Bar-Asher describes parallel biblical and qur'anic accounts, noting that the Qur'an relies on post-biblical sources (Talmud and Midrash) more than on the Hebrew Bible itself. He suggests this material was transmitted by Jewish converts to Islam, mentioning in particular Wahab b. Munabbih. (Other scholars, among them, Israel Shrenzel, have suggested early Muslims attended Jewish schools.) Bar-Asher's comment that "countless texts remain to be studied," (87) whetted my desire to learn more.

In chapter four, Bar-Asher summarizes the strong parallels that exist between Islamic and Jewish law, in particular regarding prayer, fasting, dietary laws and the calendar. According to the author, the Prophet Muhammad, seeing himself as a successor to the biblical prophets, adopted many practices advocated by them, but also strove to differentiate Islamic practices from Jewish and Christian ones.

In chapter five, Bar-Asher explores Islamic legal rules governing the People of the Book living under Muslim rule (*dhimmi*s). He analyzes what elements are introduced in qur'anic passages (for example, Q. 9:29–30, the establishment of the *jizya*, the tax on the People of the Book), and which elements were formalized later on, in the Pact of 'Umar (which he cites in its entirety), and in decrees added to it, over the centuries. He notes that *dhimma* has been "officially abolished" (119) in almost all Muslim states. In chapter six, Bar-Asher looks at the Shi'ite belief that Jews are ritually impure, and its implications.

To conclude, I would like to comment briefly on how Bar-Asher's book compares with some remarks by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, editor-in-chief of *The Study Quran*, and author of over fifty other books, regarding the position the Qur'an takes towards other faiths. For his part, Nasr emphasizes the *suras* that are consistent with the perennial philosophy, which argues that all religious traditions share a single, metaphysical truth. Bar-Asher, on the other hand, studies the ways in which Islam and Judaism are "inextricably entwined" (4), and yet, differentiated. Both Nasr and Bar-Asher have the merit of performing nuanced and careful exegetical work about interfaith matters in the Qur'an, at a time when "incendiary discourse" abounds. (140)

I would strongly recommend this book for undergraduate classes in the history of religion; it would also be appropriate for a graduate-level course, but might need to be supplemented with articles that further explore topics introduced by Bar-Asher. Finally, it would be provocative reading for interfaith circles.

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