

**Michael Cook.** *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 164 pp. \$8.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-285344-8.



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In *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, Michael Cook states that a short introduction does not have time to say much (p. 8). If we take him at his word, then the title of his book is misleading, for all that is short about his book is its length; the little paperback says way beyond what may be expected from a work of this size. Divided into fourteen chapters, and four main parts, the volume provides such an immense wealth of information that in fact it is a veritable mini-encyclopedia. Written in a simple, eloquent style, the book is a gem for both the lay reader and the academic. In 164 pages, Cook manages to cover a myriad of topics, among them comparative exegesis, comparative scripture, *fiqh*, theology, fundamentalism, modern approaches to interpretation, and the collection of the Qur'an. He provides information in as objective a manner as possible, and as troubling as some of his conclusions might be, almost never fails to indicate his sources.

It is evident that Cook is a master of his subject; indeed many of the topics he discusses are way beyond the scope of many who are perceived as learned. Ibn Hazm would have been proud, al-

beit unsatisfied, of the way Cook deals with the interpretation of the *purified* who may touch the Qur'an (p. 56). The one instance where Cook does not provide a source, however, is problematic: in discussing Q9:5, he states that the verse orders the killing of *mushriks* (polytheists) unless they convert (p. 34). There is certainly more to the Qur'anic verses than this, for the *mushriks* in question are evidently those who have waged war against Islam and against whom a war, in which no quarter is given, is declared. Cook rightly defines a *mushrik* as anyone who associates partners with God, but then states that the term extends to Jews and Christians (p. 34).

This statement could create the misconception that the Jews and Christians are to be killed for polytheism according to the imperative in Q9:5. Although it is possible that Jews and Christians may be viewed as *mushriks* by some extremist Muslims, the Qur'an does not use this term to describe the people of the Book. To be sure, the Qur'an speaks of the Jews taking Uzayr as the son of God and the Christians making the same assumption regarding Jesus. Significantly, however,

the word *shirk* is not used in reference to Jews or Christians; rather derivatives on *kufr* are employed, and as Izutsu has shown, the meaning of *kufr* is different to that of *shirk*. Yet, with a sagacity that is designed to mollify even the most ardent critic, Cook observes that the Qur'anic way of dealing with people outside one's own religion is considerably gentler than the Bible.

While every chapter is a treasure trove of information, perhaps the most interesting is chapter 13, entitled 'Doubts and Puzzles, in which Cook deals with the vexing problem of linguistic puzzles of the Qur'an. Here Cook makes some postulations and conclusions that are questionable. He uses as evidence the problematic terms such as *yadin*, *kalala*, and the mysterious letters that occur at the beginning of some suras (p.139), to conclude that either (1) the materials that make up the Qur'an did not become available until several decades after Muhammad's death, when memory of the meaning of the original material had been lost or that (2) Much of what is in the Qur'an was already old by the time of Muhammad (p.140). But are these the only possible conclusions? Is it not possible that indeed there was a loss of memory regarding certain meanings of the text? The earliest reliable exegeses we have appeared many years after Muhammad's death, and were compiled in a milieu that was quite different to that of the Prophet. Muhammad's contemporaries could be assumed to be familiar with his references, and may not have passed on everything, contrary to what the traditional reports state.

Is it not possible that certain explanations, for whatever reason, may have grown out of favor? The explanations of the term *ahl al dhikr* (Q16:43, 21:7), for example, show that in early Islam, it was taken to refer to the Jewish scholars; later interpretations sought to divest the Jews of this honor and have led to a preponderance of the newer interpretation suggesting that the reference is in fact to Muslim scholars. Similarly, the Isaac-Ishmael controversy indicates that while in early Is-

lam, there was the presupposition that Muhammad's contemporaries considered Isaac to be the sacrificial son; later exegetes, by the use of hadith and narrations attributed to the Prophet's Companions, claimed that the son was in fact Ishmael. A thorough examination of the Qur'an reveals several instances of such refraction of meaning, and brings to the surface a simple conclusion: we have a text that has been preserved by a community. That community could not alter the text, but could, by an Islamic equivalent of an Oral Torah, and by selective amnesia or censorship of exegesis, seek to reinterpret the text.

And there are more problems: while the book is intended to be a "short introduction," Cook's consideration of only the assumptions of Wansbrough and Neuwirth seems insufficient. Certainly they are not the only researchers whose work is noteworthy. Cook makes the strange observation that the verses on seafaring in the Qur'an are presented in a manner that seem strange for someone supposedly having no direct experience with it. He buttresses his argument by referring to the lack of agreement between the Qur'an and the biographical reports. This is somewhat surprising since, in his *Muhammad* (1983), Cook points out that the biographical literature is not reliable as history. His postulation, however, raises the question as to why we must necessarily assume that Muhammad and his people were cut off from the rest of the world; and that certain simple verses pertaining to the sea serve as evidence for the importation of pre-Qur'anic material. The report of Sozomenus (141) is not the only one referring to Arab familiarity with Judaic material; Josephus mentioned in his *Antiquities* that the Arabs practiced circumcision, following the Abrahamic ritual. Is it so difficult to assume that there was indeed a shared history, and that the Arabs of Muhammad's time were familiar with the broad outlines of such a past, and were indeed observing certain practices, the origins of which they may have forgotten?

Yet, for all these arguable drawbacks, Cook's book raises questions and issues that are challenging and informative. Not only does the work excel in its vast depth of material, it is put together in a very attractive manner-- there are little nuggets of information in shaded boxes, much like the inserts seen in magazines. As if this is not going way beyond expectation, Cook also provides a subject index and notes, as well as an index of the Qur'anic verses cited. *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* merits praise in the highest terms. It should be mandatory reading for any introductory course on Islam.

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