

Book Reviews

Misquoting Muhammad: The challenge and choices of interpreting the Prophet's legacy. By Jonathan A. C. Brown. London: Oneworld Publications, 2014, pp. 361, ISBN: 978-1-78074-420-9.

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Jonathan Brown's *Misquoting Muhammad* attempts to deconstruct the classical and contemporary discourses regarding the challenged and contested aspects of the life of Prophet Muhammad. In doing so, he explores the place, use, and understanding of Prophetic narrations, both as scripture and as tools in jurisprudence. In order to do this, the author uniquely brings together his diverse classical training in Islamic studies and experiences from throughout the Islamic world along with his studies in Western academic traditions. The result is a detailed work that speaks fluidly within both traditions and contextualises these discussions within wider debates surrounding claims of knowledge in other religious and non-religious fields. The nature of the topic, one of heated controversy, is such that Brown's work is surely not to be the last publication on the issue; however, his detailed analyses, depth of knowledge, and systematic approach make this essential reading.

Misquoting Muhammad begins with the author's interaction with the subject matter and presents an overview of the objectives of the work. One interesting contextualisation is the presentation of historical ways in which non-Muslim, largely Western, commentators have understood and/or explained Islam, which demonstrates the deep roots of the problematic presentation of Islam post-9/11. The second chapter (A Map of the Islamic Interpretive Tradition) wades through the development of codifications of knowledge in general, and in particular that of the Prophetic narrations. The works and life of the eighteenth century scholar Shah Wali Allah guide readers through this historical

overview and forms a narrative around which this contextualisation is presented. References to Shah Wali Allah appear throughout the text as “perhaps more than any other mind of his day, [he] seemed to epitomize the breadth and depth of Islam’s intellectual tradition” (p. 16). The chapters that follow weave time, text, and tradition together as a means to present the foundations and development of multiple interpretations as well as the ways in which contemporary tensions interact with their respective historical roots. Throughout these chapters, Brown analyses the place and uses of Prophetic narrations, and in doing so entertains academic discussions about contested topics such as female-led prayer, rewards of virgins, and domestic violence. This analysis is within the context of navigating multiple (re)interpretations and understanding the respective processes involved in making them.

Readers looking for the author’s explicit opinions or positions on the contested issues discussed in the book may be disappointed, because they are not presented. Although one naturally is interested in “the answer”, Brown makes clear such an effort is akin to the historical processes of (re)interpretation that he explores. Additionally, the book is about methodologies of interpretation, it is not a book of religious rulings and does not claim to be. While the book does not provide authoritative answers to these challenging questions, it focuses on analysing and deconstructing the discourse that surrounds them so that they can be understood in their respective theological, historical, political and socio-cultural contexts. In doing so, Brown does not suggest that sacred texts are context-specific themselves or ought to be read context-specifically. Rather, he argues, that their interpretation is a contextually-specific process, including the so-called “literal” reading of them; he explains that “there is no such thing as “literal meaning” in its usual sense ... the “dictionary meaning” of a text may indeed exist, but it is neither objective nor universal” (p. 273).

In this book, Brown confronts an assumption that the critical study of Prophetic narrations began with the entry Western academics. This narrative implies that the Muslim scholarly tradition was simplistic and did not recognise the potentially problematic nature of some scriptural content. Even the contributor of the foreword to the book describes Western academic study of Islam as rigorous, possibly implying the classical version was less so. The author presents a powerful and detailed counter narrative, one that indicates that the contested,

problematic, and troublesome narrations of contemporary times were identified, discussed, and debated within the classical tradition. What differentiated the critical discourse of the classical scholars was the worldview with which they approached the narrations. A contemporary critic might toss out an entire canon of literature based on troublesome narrations whereas a classical critic might use linguistics, based on usage found within Qur'ān, to justify an alternative meaning, such as a metaphorical use of a term.

Brown argues that the perceived meaning of any text, including the Qur'ān and Prophetic narrations, relies heavily upon how the text in question is read and consequently understood. In sum, he states, “texts themselves do not *say* anything. What they *say* and what they *mean* is determined by the reader in the unavoidable and sometimes unconscious act of interpretation” (p. 83, emphasis original). In this regard, Brown presents a challenge whereby the authority of scriptural explanation may be contested as one of many potential valid interpretations. Engaging texts while understanding the positionality of the exegete and contextualising historical exegeses deconstruct the classical, charitable, and reconciliatory approach, just as much as it does the critical Western academic traditions. Brown’s argument ought to encourage greater reflexivity lest we fail to recognise the constraints of our own worldviews and context. In this regard, he states, “What seems jarringly inconsistent in the ways of others somehow becomes natural and unremarkable when pointed out in ourselves” (p. 238).

The author presents a complex history and analyses a complicated array of issues in an effective, engaging, and readable way. *Misquoting Muhammad* is essential reading for those within formal Islamic studies as well as those seeking to understand the contemporary debates surrounding controversial issues. Due to the relevance of these topics within a number of fields, this text would be suitable as a supportive addition in areas of history, journalism, critical studies, sociology, anthropology, and political science. For students with a background in Islamic studies, this text could be utilised by scholars as well as by students in an upper undergraduate course, and for those without such a background, the depth of the book may make it more appropriate at the graduate level.
