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As with many volumes, the content of this volume is better revealed by its subtitle than by its title. Although Bridger is respectful of Islam, Muslims, and the Qur’ān, he demonstrates no interest in reading the Qur’ān for insights which can be incorporated into the Christian faith to assist Christians in the practice of their faith. The Qur’ānic exegesis explored in this volume all serves the purposes of converting Muslims from Islam to Christianity. As an Evangelical Christian, Bridger asserts that “the goal of any truly Christian apologetic theology authored in an Arabic-speaking context must be to subvert the Qur’ān-based, theological infrastructure that supports the Muslim construal of salvation history” (33). Bridger writes to “subvert” Islam and to assist his readers in their mission of converting Muslims to Christianity.

Although many participants in the Scriptural Reasoning project (including this reviewer) will not share Bridger’s proselytizing zeal, the book should be dismissed neither as a piece of triumphalist Christian propaganda nor as a bit of thinly veiled Western colonialism. This is a solid piece of scholarship with something to say—even something to say to persons who are uninterested in subverting Islam.

The first of Bridger’s five chapters locates his project within contemporary Western Evangelical discussion. Bridger stakes out a middle position within that discourse, on the one hand rejecting arguments that the Qur’ān is a pagan book which should be avoided by Christian readers, and on the other hand rejecting arguments that the Qur’ān is ultimately supportive of Christian doctrine when properly interpreted. Bridger’s thesis is that “in Arabic-speaking Muslim milieu[s] Christians are justified in making positive apologetic use of qur’ānic points of contact in religious discourse about the Bible and Christian doctrines, including Christology” (31).

Bridger’s second chapter makes his theological case for using the Qur’ān in the manner in which he does. His justification for the Christian use of “noncanonical sacred literature” in the service of apologetics is largely based on his reading of the speech attributed to Paul in Acts 17. This speech, set in the city of Athens on Mars Hill, draws upon ancient pagan maxims and inscriptions in the service of evangelism. Critical readers of the New Testament will find Bridger’s exegesis naïve. Bridger even fails to note that the speech has been preserved and shaped—or more likely, created—by Luke and merely attributed to Paul. Still, Bridger draws a comparison between the use of pagan texts in this speech and contemporary Christian use of the Qur’ān. Although “the Qur’ān subverts the message of redemption through Jesus Christ,” Christians can find areas of “conceptual agreement” between the Bible and the Qur’ān (62).

For readers of this journal, it is particularly important to understand how Bridger understands and employs the concept of scriptural reasoning. Bridger approvingly quotes Timothy C. Tennent and explains that any concept taken from the Qur’ān “should be lifted out of its original setting and clearly reoriented within a new Christocentric setting” (63, italics in both
Bridger and Tennent). Bridger explains that when Christians find conceptual agreements between Biblical texts and the Qur’ān, “Christians must make sure that they tie any explanation of these doctrines to how they are revealed, developed, and explicated in the whole of the [Christian] canon and throughout the course of redemptive history. In other words, they must employ scriptural reasoning and not mere rational argumentation” (63, italics Bridger). Bridger’s understanding of the approaches, aims and techniques of scriptural reasoning appears to be largely informed by the Biblical Theology movement of the mid-twentieth century.

Chapter three examines two Arabic Christian writings from the eighth and ninth centuries, the anonymous Tahlīth (On the Triune Nature of God) and the Mūjadiḍala (Disputation) between Theodore Abū Qurra and Mutaklliumūn. Bridger’s reading of these texts is interesting and engaging. He uses both documents as examples of the sort of “scriptural reasoning” that he advocates. Although I have little personal expertise to bring to bear on these texts, I was left wondering if these documents were really seeking the subversion of Islam and the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. The documents’ primary goal may have been the legitimation of Christianity for Christians (why Christians should remain Christians) and not the de-legitimation of Islam (why Muslims should become Christians). Nonetheless, Bridger’s analysis of these two underappreciated texts is enlightening and will prove helpful to many readers.

The fourth chapter applies the approach of the third chapter to contemporary Arabic Christian writers, the commentators of the Al-Kalima school. Bridger correctly notes the important difference between the social, religious, and political context of the medieval writers he investigated in chapter three and the contexts of contemporary Arab Christians. The Tahlīth and Mūjadiḍala were composed during Islam’s more formative period before many contemporary Muslim assumptions about the Bible, Jesus, and the Christian faith had been crystallized. The Tahlīth and Mūjadiḍala had the advantage of entering into existing debates within Islam. Contemporary Christians do not have the same advantage of inserting their Christian voices into active debates with Islam. According to Bridger, the Al-Kalima school therefore employs a logos-apologetic which draws both upon the centrality of a word-centered revelation within Islamic epistemology and upon the Qur’ānic notion of Ḥūṣayn b. Ša‘īrat (Jesus, son of Mary) as foundations for apologetics regarding Jesus as the eternal, uncreated Word of God.

Bridger’s final chapter engages in theological and evangelistic reflections about how the content of this volume can inform contemporary Christian evangelism among Muslims. Bridger’s primary suggestions are for Christians to help Muslims reread the Qur’ān and its message apart from the influence of its later interpretive traditions, primarily the mufassirūn and tafsīr. According to Bridger, when this task is completed, Muslims will be able to compare the Bible and Qur’ān fruitfully; they will see that “the Qur’ān’s assumed continuity with the Bible and its message of redemption lacks substance” (157). Christians will then be able to “draw the Qur’ān into the Bible’s horizons” and “allow the Bible’s comprehensive and self-contained narrative [to] fill in and correct the narrative formation lacking in the Qur’ān” (157).

Astute readers will note two theological themes within Bridger’s theology of evangelism in this final chapter: (1) a Protestant, sola scriptura, perspective which denigrates tradition and (2) a Biblical Theology commitment which emphasizes a salvation history approach. It is difficult to know if Bridger and those who share his commitments will ever be able to get their would-be Muslim converts to share these restorationist and narrative assumptions from the Protestant Biblical Theology movement.
Regardless of how one evaluates Bridger’s evangelistic objectives and theological presuppositions (I am unsympathetic), the historical analyses in the third and fourth chapters are enlightening as examples of the history of exegesis. Bridger’s reading of these texts is fair and instructive.