

Mohammed Rustom's "What is *Tafsir al Qur'an bi'l-Qu'ran*?": Reflections of a Jewish Reader

Alan Levenson
University of Oklahoma

Mohammed Rustom's "What is *Tafsir al Qur'an bi'l-Qu'ran*?" offers an elegant explication of an Islamic exegetical principle in a frankly postmodern reading of two Quranic passages, Sura 39:23 and Sura 95:4-6. While my response makes some attempt to address Rustom on his own terms, the bulk of my remarks will be confined to exploring the ecumenical limitations of this approach, at least from the perspective of a more old-fashioned reader. It may be scored as indisputable that the concept *Tafsir al Qur'an bi'l-Qu'ran* is well worth understanding, both as "a basic given among Muslims," as Rustom writes, and also as an "operational principle of readers of any text." Whether all scholars of Islam would place Rustom's deployment of *Tafsir al Qur'an bi'l-Qu'ran* within this category, or regard it as more akin to Sufi mysticism, goes beyond my expertise. Similarly, granting that Rustom's premise that *Tafsir al Qur'an bi'l-Qu'ran* constitutes a fundamental in principle in Qu'ranic exegesis, which a non-scholar of Islam can grant only provisionally, *Tafsir al Qur'an bi'l-Qu'ran* commands the same sort of intellectual and ecumenical understanding and appreciation that a Jew or a Muslim ought to be able to muster when approaching Christian "prefiguration" as applied to the relationship of Old Testament and New Testament, or that a Christian or a Muslim ought to be able to muster for rabbinic Midrash as a means of sewing together Written Torah (*torah sh'bikhtav*) and Oral Torah (*torah sh'ba'al peh*). Each tradition has its own exegetical fundamentals that deserve to be understood both as they operate within their religious context, and, hopefully, also as a tool deployable outside that indigenous context by members of other exegetical and religious traditions.

Tafsir in general might be translated as explication, explanation, exposition, elucidation interpretation and commentary.¹ The closest parallel in Judaism to this very broad category would be midrash, so clearly we must look for a narrower term for comparison. Rustom claims, quite rightly in my view, "we can find the same operational principle amongst the readers of any text." The most obvious parallel in Judaism to *Tafsir al Qur'an bi'l-Qu'ran*, as Rustom explains it, would be the short but widely studied text in the yeshiva and seminary world: the "Baraitha of Rabbi Ishmael," attributed to the contemporary of Rabbi Akiva, both of whom died as martyrs in the second great revolt against Rome (132-135 C.E.). This particular baraitha² earns its special

¹ "Tafsir," in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 624-635; Mutansir Mir, "Tafsir," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² A baraitha is an early rabbinic (or tannaitic) source not included in the Mishnah (ca. 225 C.E.), often cited in the talmudim or midrashim, as is the case here. The Baraitha of Rabbi Ishmael may be found in any traditional prayer book, including Philip Birnbaum, *The Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishers, 1977), 41-46. The best overview of these terms remains that of the 19th century German Protestant, Hermann Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 5th edition (New York: Harper & Row/Jewish Publication Society, 1951), 93-98.

appellation by being placed as the introduction to the *Sifra*, the major midrashic collection on Leviticus (*Sifra* being mainly legal or halachic in nature), which, in turn, probably elevated the status of the Baraitha of Rabbi Ishmael to the role it enjoys today within Judaism. It is part of the preliminary morning service in the daily prayer book; hence, it is recited daily Sunday-Friday by observant Jews. Now, the most obvious difference between the traditional form of the *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran* and the Baraitha of Rabbi Ishmael is that the latter actually comprises 13 discrete rules of interpreting scripture, without any overarching thematic assertion or exegetical dictum. The other outstanding feature of the baraita, as a historian sees it, is that Rabbi Ishmael’s rule seems to be patently retrojected by later generations. That is, the process of scriptural interpretation in Jewish culture was well underway before the thirteen principles were codified, and, moreover, would it seem to be neither an adequate nor exhaustive means of interpreting Scripture in reality. (Is “biblical intertextuality” a possible synonym for Rustom’s view of *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran* as it pertains to Qu’ran? I am not sure.)³ Finally, nobody in the scholarly world imagines that this baraita was sitting on the desks of the rabbis as they composed their midrashim, whether legal or lore-oriented, using it as an exegetical guideline.

Rustom’s desire to bypass the latter sort of observation (“I do not wish to delve into an historical inquiry concerning the origins of this notion,” he writes) is principally why I term his reading postmodern rather than modern. He is likely correct to claim that “readers of sacred texts would be more committed to such a position for both practical and doctrinal reasons.” However, perhaps one needs to add a proofreader’s *karet* before this clause that prefixes this claim with “religious” or “observant” or “faithful” readers. After all, the historians’ task with respect to religious texts includes being open to reading them *not* as the tradition demands these texts to be read, but on the contrary, in a historical-critical mode that identifies and taxonomically categorizes the actual hermeneutics at play. The critically minded religious studies scholar obviously does read sacred texts, but she brings a different set of commitments that I would hesitate to call lesser than the observant or devotional reader of sacred texts. Admittedly, there are more devotional readers of the Bible and the Qu’ran than are all the professors in the all the universities in all the world, but these non-devotional readers have different values at stake—not necessarily lesser ones.

Rustom intends to broaden the application of *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran* from consideration of words and phrases “to clusters of key Quaranic ideas, concepts and themes.” Despite the nature and praxis of scriptural reasoning as presented in this journal, it is not my place as an outsider to Muslim faith and a tyro in Islamic scholarship to comment on how far-ranging Rustom’s suggested innovation truly is—and which he downplays by aligning his innovation to precedents within the Sufi tradition. Were this Judaism, one would have to say that this kind of esoteric approach, this kind of mystical interpretation, would have to be located

³ The factor of Scripture interpreting itself had long been sensed by Jewish expositors. The scholarly turning point was surely Michael Fishbane’s seminal *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, which documented the presence of hundreds of examples combined with a demonstration of a lexical battery of techniques, including citation, allusion, inversion, extension, restriction. Collectively, these data made Fishbane’s case for the presence of inner-biblical interpretation irrefutable. Many successors apply this technique, although a few critics, including James Kugel, take issue with Fishbane’s particular taxonomy of inner-biblical exegesis into legal, narrative and mantalogical modes.

exclusively in the realm of *sod*, that is, mystical, or kabbalistic understanding. For the mystic or kabbalist, of course, this understanding is not only equally valid, but in some ways superior to simpler interpretations (*p’shat*, *remez* and *d’rash*) which constitute only three of four senses of Scripture.⁴ One might adduce the concrete case of Moses Nachmanides (also known as the Ramban), a late 13th century exegete whose canonical *Commentary on the Torah* clearly considered the mystical understanding of Torah as the most profound level of the four. What a historian of Jewish exegesis would *not* say about Nachmanides’ preference is that this Baraita of Rabbi Eliezer, second century C.E., invited Nachmanides’ reading all along (*ab initio*). Mysticism had ultimately prevailed within Jewish tradition by Nachmanides’ day, but there were always those who championed the plain or homiletic sense over and against the mystical. Rustom’s ahistorical approach raises the question of whether he does not wish to delve into a historical inquiry of *tafsir* generally, whether he means that he refuses to be governed by such historical inquiries in his inquiry of *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran*, or both. (In any case, a few more sentences explaining the various possible positions regarding the concept of *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran* would have been helpful for the uninitiated reader.)

Coming to Rustom’s own explication of *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran* as it relates to these two Suras, I find myself awed by the power of his parable. In Rustom’s reading, Surat al-Yusuf—and the character of Joseph—become the embodiment of the principle of human development as found in Surat al-Tin. Thus, we come to better understand why Qu’ranic Joseph is called “the most beautiful discourse” (39:33). His neo-Platonic and mystical tale of the actualization of one’s soul and self in the face of “the rugged terrain of earthly life” constitutes a moving and compelling noetic gesture. Since Rustom recounts this so beautifully, I will not attempt to summarize what should not be summarized. For all its considerable explicative beauty, Rustom’s account leaves this outside reader outside. The editor of this journal, Professor Jacob Goodson, encouraged me to reflect upon why I found it difficult to read an essay on the Joseph narrative, in which I am deeply invested—as a scholar who has written a book on Joseph in the Jewish tradition, as a teacher who enjoys conveying the sort of nuance in Hebrew Scriptures that Professor Rustom conveys in his reading, and as a synagogue-going Jew who spends four weeks of the year experiencing this narrative in a liturgical setting. The obvious negatives seem easy to enumerate and dismiss as causes of discomfort: it is not that I think the biblical version “superior” to the Qu’ranic version. (Anyone cognizant of religious supersessionism should reject any such sort of “better” or “worse” categorization of religious texts.) Nor I am overly troubled by the issue of influence or priority: The Joseph of the Hebrew Bible precedes Qu’ranic Yusuf by ordinary historical measures, but an impressive substratum of Egyptian folktales preceded the Hebrew Bible’s version of the Joseph narrative, which, in any case, biblical source critics regard as a composite narrative.⁵ These are not the sources of my difficulties when approaching Rustom’s essay.

⁴ In late medieval Jewish and Christian traditions, the fourfold sense of Scripture became a widely accepted, if not dogmatically asserted, principle of exegesis. I do not know if Islam offers a clear parallel.

⁵ For a handy summary of the various Egyptian predecessors to Joseph unearthed by Egyptologists, see Levenson, *Joseph: Portraits Through the Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), xviii-xxii.

My problem lies more in the purpose and practice of postmodern reading. In my simplistic conception of the same, I try to follow the insight of German-Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, who distinguished premodern, modern and postmodern reading of Jermeiah 31.⁶ Fackenheim deemed premodern (or pre-historical-critical) scriptural exegesis an inevitable aider and abettor of religious polemic; modern exegesis an ostensibly objective form of scholarship, often painfully unaware of its own manifold biases (including denominational, generic, and epistemic); and postmodern reading, which Fackenheim preferred, as proceeding from a hermeneutic grounded in a specific religious tradition, yet aware of that tradition’s particular preconceptions and preferences. With this kind of postmodern reading strategy, Fackenheim hoped, readers of different faiths (he was less concerned with the secular or agnostic reader) could meaningfully interact with each other’s readings. The ecumenical impulse could not be detached from the postmodern hermeneutic, and in Fackenheim’s post-Holocaust world, that impulse ought to be honored. (Note: other post-Holocaust Jewish theologians have adopted other stances.)⁷

A postmodern reading, as Fackenheim constructs it, cannot really do without the praxis of comparison, and I find Rustom’s deliberate exclusion of comparison challenging. Although Rustom acknowledges parallels to the Qu’ran in the biblical account as analyzed by others,⁸ this plays no role in his own analysis. For instance, the critical role Rustom assigns Yusuf’s shirt (*qamis*), on whose repetition the symbol of development hangs, cries out for comparison with the biblical version, if only by way of contrast. The same could be said of Jacob’s prophetic knowledge, so glaringly absent in the biblical account—the verbal response of Joseph to Mrs. Potiphar’s accusation (e.g., Joseph is stone-silent in the biblical version); the very debatable forgiveness of Joseph, who in the Hebrew Bible needs to make two comforting speeches in Genesis 45 and again in Genesis 50; the role of the wolf in the Qu’ranic version powerfully concertizing and explicitly concentrating the danger to Joseph in animal form in the mouths of Jacob and the brothers, as opposed to Jacob’s mere inference (and an incorrect one) in Genesis 37 that a wild beast had “torn, torn Joseph.” At every turn, the stories diverge, and the Qu’ran highlights the prophetic roles of Jacob and Joseph, the greatness of Allah, and the universal applicability of this narrative, among other lessons. The differences are consistent, important and telling—and straightforward. The migration of souls in Rustom’s readings come from other traditions (e.g., Sufi, neo-Platonic), and his reading of Joseph certainly qualifies as an ingenious application of the *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran* (again, insofar as I am able to judge). Rustom does not purport to encompass all *tafsir* traditions concerning Joseph from one era to another,

⁶ “New Hearts and the Old Covenant,” in *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim*, ed. Michael Morgan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 223-234.

⁷ Joseph Soloveitchick held that inter-religious and non-religious cooperation was always desirable, but he feared hanging rights, especially minority rights, on the “understanding” of others with respect to one’s covenantal responsibilities (“Confrontation,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 6, no. 2 (1964): 5-27). Richard Rubenstein belonged to the “death of God” camp and held that, after Auschwitz, traditional religions had lost their standing (See *After Auschwitz* [New York: Macmillan, 1966]). My point in this note is simply to indicate that I am more sympathetic with Fackenheim’s approach.

⁸ Rustom, “What Is *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran*”; Mustansir Mir, “The Qur’anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters,” *The Muslim World* 76, no. 1 (1986): 1-15; Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur’an* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), ch. 12.

much less from one religious culture or set of texts to another. Yet this inter-culturalism is so well-established, especially in the Joseph narrative, that I personally found it difficult to pretend that it does not exist and has no impact on understanding the Qu’ranic text before us.⁹ Certainly Mustansir Mir, Abdel Haleem, Marc Bernstein, James Kugel and others can only be excluded by a deliberately hermetic reading.¹⁰ That hermetic reading, of course, lies within the scholar’s purview and prerogative. Presumably, that is exactly what Rustom intends when he calls for taking the principle of *Tafsir al Qur’an bi’l-Qu’ran* with “absolute seriousness.” Notwithstanding this most beautiful essay, the scholar should not be surprised if this approach impedes communicating his/her vision to those outside the covenantal circle.

⁹ Indeed, both the beginning and end of this Sura, the longest in the Qu’ran, refers to the revelation *in Arabic tongue*. This phrase invites the obvious questions: Why bother to say that unless other tongues told the tale imperfectly? Why tell us this is “the most beautiful of stories” (or “histories”) unless an imagined objection would forward another candidate? Or why insist this is “no invented tale”?

¹⁰ James Kugel, for instance, has an entire chapter dedicated to Joseph’s beauty as represented in multi-cultural sources (*In Potiphar’s House* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990]).