

The Qur'an in Context: A Christian Exploration
 Available October 2016
 \$30, 360 pages, paperback
 978-0-8308-5142-3

"As well as providing a well-informed and nuanced introduction to the current scholarly debate over Islamic origins, The Qur'an in Context offers a substantial, theologically serious and at points provocative discussion on the Qur'an in its interface with the Bible and the core themes of the Christian faith."

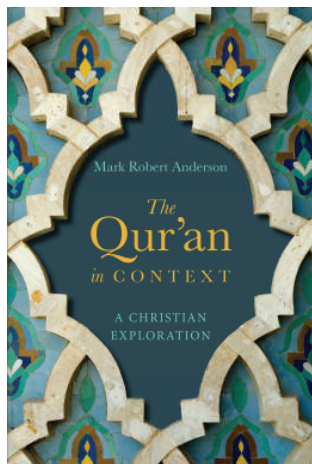
– David Marshall, Duke
 Divinity School

Mark Anderson Brings Understanding to the Qur'an, on Its Own Terms

Islam. It rides the crest of our daily news. But seldom are those headlines engaged theologically in the West—though recently some evangelicals have been opining on whether or in what way Christians worship the same God as Muslims. Surely understanding the Qur'an is more urgent now than ever. And Christians who interpret Scripture in its context will agree that the Qur'an should likewise be read in context.

Mark Robert Anderson, a wise and seasoned guide deeply familiar with the gentle folds and rugged features of the Qur'an's textual terrain, takes us on an interpretive journey. We traverse a long distance to the Qur'an's origin in the oral culture of tribal nomads who roamed the burning sands of seventh-century Arabia. Unfurling the worldview of the Qur'an, Anderson helps us understand its theological claims and to then compare them with those of Christian Scripture.

In *The Qur'an in Context*, Anderson listens seriously to the Qur'an, on its own terms, and responds in both grace and truth. Whether for academic study, for crosscultural mission or for personal interest, this is a carefully and thoughtfully crafted study that will reward its readers and call for repeated reference. It just might open up theological conversations between Christians and Muslims.



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Mark Robert Anderson offers a gateway into the original world and worldview of the Qur'an. Its theology, anthropology, soteriology, spirituality as well as its portrayal of Jesus are all carefully examined. Finally, the Qur'an's claim to be the Bible's sequel is probed and evaluated. Fortright in Christian conviction and yet sympathetically open to dialogue, *The Qur'an in Context* is a reliable guide for those who want to explore the holy book of Islam in its varied facets.

Looking at the Qur'an in Context

I aim to do three things in this book:

- To establish the Qur'an's original context as the key to its original meaning
- To inform readers unfamiliar with the Qur'an of its teachings and show how they relate to those of the Bible, giving special emphasis to Jesus' place in the Qur'an
- To offer an initial response to the Qur'an's truth claims and encourage open dialogue between Christians and Muslims on our respective faiths

Truth and Grace in Dialogue

My goal of encouraging dialogue should need little justification from a Christian perspective. The psalmist says how pleased God is when brothers and sisters live together peaceably and the New Testament calls us to do all we can to be at peace with everyone (Ps 133:1-3, Rom 12:18, Heb 12:14). In our global village, that demands dialogue.

But true dialogue does not deny or minimize difference. Rather, it begins with an honest acknowledgement of difference no less than similarity. Without that, we cannot be truly heard and understood. Using the term neighbor in its broadest sense, Jesus commands us to treat our neighbor as we want her to treat us (Mt 7:12; cf. Lk 10:25-37). Paul also counsels us to do good to everyone, Christian or not (Gal 6:10). So we lovingly speak what we hold to be true and graciously listen as our Muslim brother or sister does likewise. And we remain ready, as Peter charges us, to offer a defense to anyone who seeks the reason for our hope, doing so with gentleness and reverence (1 Pet 3:15-16). So our truth telling is to be marked always by kindness and honor for our partner in dialogue—as a *Thou*, not an *It*, in Martin Buber's terms.

While the Qur'an's attitude to Christians is somewhat mixed, it sometimes calls for open, irenic discussion with them. Q 29:46, for example, counsels Muslims:

Do not dispute with the People of the Book except in the best possible way – apart from those of them who have done wrong. Say, "We believe in what has been revealed to us and in what was revealed to you. Our God and your God are one and we surrender to him."

And Q 3:64 tells Muslims to say to Christians and Jews, "O people of the Scripture, come to a word that is common between you and us: 'We serve only God, and we associate nothing with Him.'" The verse continues, "If they turn away, say, 'Bear witness that we surrender [to God].'" Even of enemies of the community, whomever they be, Q 8:61-62 tells Muslims that "if they incline to peace, you should incline to it and trust God. He is the Hearer and the Knower. And if they wish to deceive you, God is sufficient for you" (Jones).

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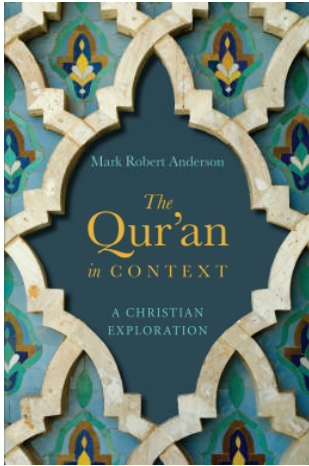


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“Anderson avoids the pitfalls of inflammatory us-them polemics. He enters into the realities of the Muslim worldview by exploring the seventh-century context of the Qur’an on which Muslim belief and behavior is built. Without reservation, I commend Anderson’s work to all who desire to move beyond ‘breaking news’ and sensationalism and come to grips with the inside story of who Muslims really are.”

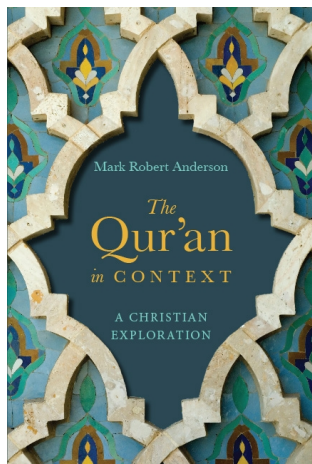
— Phil Parshall, Serving in Mission (SIM) USA

Sadly, neither side has lived up to the standards our scriptures have set for us here. From early on, our shared history has been marked by hostility and misunderstanding. This raises the question: If we in the world’s two largest faith communities cannot dialogue amicably about our respective understandings of Jesus, for example, how can we realistically hope to have the kind of relationship that sets us on the path to peace?

While most Muslims reject the West’s religious pluralism, some also oppose any public discussion of the Qur’an’s truth claims by non-Muslims and seem to make conversion to Islam prerequisite to that. This is ultimately counterproductive. For how can anyone’s beliefs be promoted by so sheltering them from objections? Surely truth is strong enough to withstand false criticism. This makes non-Muslims wonder if such rigor in controlling public discussion masks an underlying fear that their truth is not in fact true, but only communally constituted as such.

Thus I seek a middle way between secular pluralism and Muslim protectionism, making every effort to take seriously the Qur’an’s truth claims while still being respectful of my Muslim brothers and sisters. This approach will doubtless yield more questions than answers, but it seeks to foster dialogue in an atmosphere of honesty, humility and sympathetic understanding – that is, of friendship. And what could be more urgently needed between Christians and Muslims now than that friendship which lovingly speaks the truth?

— Adapted from chapter one, “Approaching the Qur’an”



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Approaching the Qur'an with Grace and Truth

Why did you decide there was a need for *The Qur'an in Context*?

Mark Robert Anderson: To begin, no other scripture makes it into the news on such a regular basis as the Qur'an and yet is so enigmatic, inspiring such wildly contested interpretations. So I wanted to guide readers through the interpretive minefields to a place where they can truly grasp what this immensely important book is saying. Another reason I wrote *The Qur'an in Context* is that Christians have been at loggerheads with Muslims for ages now, and the Qur'an stands at the heart of our differences. Most Christians today either join in angrily attacking the Muslim scripture or else try to gloss over our differences with it in an attempt to seek friendship with Muslims. I believe another approach is needed, one that respects Muslims by taking their distinctives and their humanity with equal seriousness. That's what I see Jesus doing – with the Samaritan woman, for example. So in my book I attempt to model the way I believe Jesus would have us approach the Qur'an, with grace and truth.

Where must we begin in order to move toward a better understanding of the Qur'an?

Anderson: To understand any text, we need to begin with its original context. And that's a big part of our problem with the Qur'an. Most of us know very little about the world – let alone the hinterland of Arabia – during the early seventh century when the Qur'an originated. Divorced from its historical context – which is how it usually comes to us – the Qur'an can be made to say all kinds of things it never meant to say.

How does the portrayal of Jesus in the Bible compare to how he is portrayed in the Qur'an?

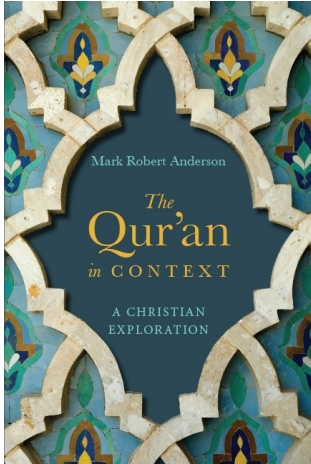
Anderson: The Qur'an clearly honors Jesus by presenting him as a virgin-born, sinless prophet and miracle worker (in the same sense that the Bible presents Moses and Elijah as miracle workers). But even as the Qur'an honors Jesus, it sidelines him, making him very secondary to Muhammad, whom it calls the Seal of the Prophets. It also reverses Jesus' ethical teachings on a number of key points and deemphasizes his death and resurrection to such a degree that most Muslims believe the Qur'an denies their historicity. It does call Jesus the Messiah, but it empties the term of its biblical meaning. It clearly does not view Jesus as God's last word to humankind, as the New Testament does, nor anything he did as vital to our salvation.

What are two ways in which the teachings of the Bible and the Qur'an are similar? Different?

Anderson: Like the Bible, the Qur'an presents God as the sovereign creator of all that is. But

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while it would agree with the Bible that God can do anything he chooses to do, it nevertheless would never allow that he could choose to become incarnate and enter his creation as a man. The Qur'an also agrees with the Bible in presenting Adam as God's vicegerent on earth, but it never says what that role involves. It apparently excludes Eve from that responsibility (indeed, it doesn't even mention her name) and it generally makes the divine-human relationship far less intimate.

How does the Qur'an claim to be the sequel to the Bible?

Anderson: The Qur'an speaks repeatedly and always very respectfully of both the Jewish and Christian scriptures, acknowledging them as God-given. It specifically mentions, for example, the Torah given to Moses and the Psalms given to David. But its primary purpose in mentioning the biblical Scriptures is to position itself as God's last word to humankind, or in other words, as the Bible's sequel.

Briefly describe the Western debate about traditional Islamic origins. How do you hope this book helps in bringing understanding?

Anderson: There's quite a gap between Muhammad and the first Muslim sources on him—about two hundred years. The first non-Muslim sources on Islam narrow the gap to within a few years of Muhammad's death, but they exhibit non-Muslim biases and tell not the Muslim story per se, but only how it intersects with their (non-Muslim) stories. The resultant messiness is very normal to historical study, and these two sets of sources can be harmonized. But, by capitalizing on their divergence and on contradictions within the Muslim sources, some Western scholars reject the traditional origins narrative and render the qur'anic milieu an open question. They hypothesize radically different narratives, ranging anywhere from denying Muhammad's existence outright to turning him into a defender of Christian orthodoxy. *The Qur'an in Context* guides readers through this debate and helps them appreciate why a scholarly consensus is forming around an approach in basic agreement with the traditional origins narrative, but much more grounded in the world of Late Antiquity in which it played out. Again, this is vital because our understanding of the Qur'an—on everything from Jesus to jihad—is inevitably rooted in our understanding of both its story and its original context.