

Muslim Readings of the Bible

Center for Islamic Theology

27–29 September 2023

The international workshop ‘Muslim Readings of the Bible’ brought together prominent scholars dealing with the theological, historical, and interfaith elements of Muslim scholarly readings of the Bible. Focused on a number of Ottoman examples, the two-day event, held at the Center for Islamic Theology (ZITH), Tübingen, was organized by the sub-project ‘The Argument from Scripture’ (Lejla Demiri), part of the DFG funded interdisciplinary research group, ‘FOR 2828: De/Sacralization of Texts’. Alongside the invited specialists, doctoral candidates, post-docs, and other members of the research group participated.

David Vishanoff (University of Oklahoma, USA) spoke on ‘The Islamic Psalms of David in Ottoman Manuscript Collections’. These psalms take up existing material from the Biblical tradition, Islamic parallels, and the Qur’an. Initially composed for preaching purposes, the texts were improved over time and eventually came to be treated as sacred texts themselves. These writings further played a polemical role, both intra-religiously between ascetics and other Sufis, and interreligiously between Muslims and Jews and Christians.

A different example of interreligious polemic about the Bible can be observed in the 16th-century text on Sultan Djem’s exile, *Gurbetnâme*. In her presentation, entitled ‘The Ottoman Prince in the Majlis of the Pope’, **Lejla Demiri** showed that despite the popularity of the story, this work has not been examined from a theological perspective. The work follows a centuries old tradition of Muslim engagement with Christianity and the Bible; it presents these arguments for the first time in Ottoman Turkish, embedded in the story of Djem, with both entertaining and didactic functions.

Bringing another perspective from Eastern Orthodox sources, **Philip Dorroll** (Wofford College, USA) presented key selections from the ‘Abbasid-era Eastern Orthodox debate with Muslims. In his paper ‘Reading the Qur’an and Constructing Eastern Orthodox Identity in the Ottoman Levant’, he showed how Eastern Orthodox Christians who lived in premodern Muslim societies developed a specific theology of the Qur’an as a ‘worldly’ text that contrasted with their own sense of self as ‘otherworldly’ or ‘heavenly’.

This was followed by **Samuel Ross** (Texas Christian University, USA) who pointed to later developments of Muslim discourse about the Bible in his presentation on ‘Reading the Bible in Late Ottoman Syria: Ṭāhir al-Jazā’irī’s *Munyat al-adhkiyā’ fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*’. This very influential but still understudied figure engaged with the Bible in his 1881 treatise, which was presumably intended for use as a textbook. The treatise includes prophetic stories which al-Jazā’irī translated from Turkish, a commentary on a polemical poem with numerous biblical quotations, and biblical prophecies about the Prophet Muḥammad’s mission, drawing upon the latest missionary translations.

A more implicit engagement with Scripture and the religious ‘other’ was discussed in **Lea Schlenker**’s presentation on ‘Birgivi Meḥmet Efendi’s (d. 981/1573) Employment of Scripture to Address the Im/Permissibility of Non-Muslim Food’. Birgivi uses the Qur’an and Hadith mainly through legal lenses,

but also for semantic and devotional purposes. Lea argued that Birgivī's engagement with the im/missibility of non-Muslim food aims less at interreligious demarcation but rather at intra-religious discernment.

Abdullah Rıdvan Gökbel's paper focused on the sixteenth-century Ottoman Chief Jurist Ibn Kemal's (d. 940/1534) Qur'anic commentary *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm* ('Commentary on the Noble Qur'an') examining its audience and reception. The paper demonstrated Ibn Kemal's use of the 'Bible' and other terms related to 'Scriptures' of the 'other'.

Overall, the workshop contributed significantly to the ongoing research about Muslim reception and readings of the Bible. It showed how encounters with the 'other' shaped the theological discourses and developments in both Islam and Christianity. The participants pointed to artistic and linguistic aspects as well as to the impacts of translations, real vs. imagined interactions, and questions of power. The full program of the workshop can be downloaded here [[add link with the program](#)].

Participants

Matthias Bauer, Prof. Dr. (University of Tübingen)
Lejla Demiri, Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. (University of Tübingen)
Phil Dorroll, Ass.-Prof. Dr. (Wofford College, USA)
Aybenur Durgun Badat, MA (University of Tübingen)
Claire Gallien, Dr. phil. habil. (University of Tübingen)
Abdullah Rıdvan Gökbel, MA (University of Tübingen)
Serkan Ince, Dr. (University of Tübingen)
Hiroaki Kawanishi, MA (University of Tübingen)
Samuel Ross, Ass.-Prof. Dr. (Texas Christian University, USA)
Lea Schlenker, MA (University of Tübingen)
Stefan Schreiner, Em. Prof. Dr. (University of Tübingen)
David Vishanoff, Ass.-Prof. Dr. (University of Oklahoma, USA)
Leon Zimmermann, MA (University of Tübingen)