Book Review

Isra Yazicioglu


Miracle stories constitute an enduring aspect in the life of religious communities, particularly as they relate to scripture. Yet how these stories are approached is as determinative for the discursive formations that make use of them as is the belief that miracles can occur. In her book, Understanding the Qur’anic Miracle Stories in the Modern Age, Isra Yazicioglu delves deeply into aspects of the reception history of the Qur’an in order to “offer a glimpse of the ways in which meaningful implications have been drawn from these apparently strange narratives, in both the pre-modern and modern eras” (p. 2). In so doing, she highlights the underlying complexities within the interpretation of miracle stories in scripture and the relationship between texts and their readers. It is her contention that with regard to the Qur’an and subsequent Islamic discourses “scriptural texts that seem irrelevant or absurd to many readers at first glance may turn out to be meaningful” (p. 165). Using what she terms “pragmatic hermeneutics,” she analyzes the miracle stories as a way to open up new vistas of approach for thinking through difficult, yet important, philosophical ideas and scriptural nuances.

In approaching the reception history of Qur’anic miracle stories, Yazicioglu attempts to fulfill (in part) the call initiated by Vincent Wimbush’s Institute for Signifying Scriptures to analyze scripture not by its content alone, but by what scripture does and is made to do for us.¹ Such an effort has significant ramifications for both academics interested in hermeneutics and reception history and the educated lay Muslim community as they consider the roles

and possibilities of miracles within their own faith tradition. As she states, her book “offers another compelling illustration of how the meanings of scriptures go beyond words on a page... to the ways in which they interact with and inform human perception, praxis, and social institutions.” (3)

Yazicioglu commences her introduction by setting the stage for an examination of Qur’anic miracle stories through a brief yet necessary background and overview of the content of these stories. This is problematized by questioning the intent of the Qur’an in recalling these miraculous stories from past prophetic activities, especially in light of its own declaration that the revelation of the Qur’an itself, coupled with natural phenomena, are sufficient to prove to Muhammad’s people the divinity of his message (and answer the demands of his critics for miraculous signs): “Given that the Q clearly acknowledges that it is not addressing bygone communities in the pre-Muhammad period... why would it narrate these stories repeatedly for a people who would never see them? Could there be a deeper significance than merely reporting past events? Since the Q repeatedly presents itself as offering guidance..., it is fair to wonder about how these miracle stories serve its purposes of edification.” (8) Unsurprisingly, such questions have been dealt with in a variety of ways throughout the history of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Yazicioglu offers chapters providing overviews and analyses of the approaches of al-Ghazâlî (1058-1111) and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) towards these questions, then places them in conversation with the modern Western thinkers David Hume (1711-1776) and Charles S. Peirce (1839-1913), and concludes with a discussion about the contemporary Muslim approach of Said Nursî (1877-1960). According to Yazicioglu, al-Ghazâlî approached miracles from a metaphysics of contingency (i.e. natural laws are contingent upon God) linked with a metaphysics of grace (i.e. the natural order is a gift bestowed by God). He argues for the possibility of reading the miracles literally without jeopardizing the coherence of Qur’anic discourse by contending that “the miracles stories are not told primarily to provide evidence for faith; rather, they are told to initiate a breakthrough in the way the reader perceives nature and to enhance the awareness of ‘signs’ of God (āyāt) in nature” (p. 41).

Ibn Rushd disagreed strongly with al-Ghazâlî regarding the contingency of the natural order, defending Aristotelian rationalism and presenting counter-arguments on both logical and scriptural grounds. He generally makes a case against the acceptance of the mythical (or literal) reading of miracle stories, yet also allows that the common lay person may believe in literal miracles, while still rejecting the possibility that a philosopher ever could. Yet in his view this was still problematic from a rationalist standpoint as the acceptance of literal miracles could prompt “subversive readings that might lead to a disruption of common sense and scientific inquiry” (p. 10).