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## Social Location and Religious Reinterpretation: The Case of Muhammad, the Gospel, and the Torah

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### **SUMMARY:**

*This article illustrates and reaffirms the power of the social location of those who, influenced by it and as subjects who generate meaning, reinterpret "sacred texts" in light of their present, using as an example the way in which Deuteronomy 18 and John 14 are interpreted in Islam, and providing an evaluation of this type of approach.*

### **RESUMEN:**

*Este artículo ilustra y reafirma el poder que tiene la ubicación social de quienes, influenciados por ella y como sujetos que generan sentido, reinterpretan "los textos sagrados" a la luz de su presente, utilizando como ejemplo la manera como en el Islam se interpretan Deuteronomio 18 y Juan 14, y provveyendo una evaluación de este tipo de acercamiento.*

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## 1. Sacred Texts Looked at “Afterwards”

An irrefutable law in the understanding of social reality asserts that any discourse articulated in the past is always interpreted *from* or *in light of* the context and particular circumstances of those who interpret and the role that their position plays in the understanding of that discourse. This means that all interpretation is positioned and this position, led by the interpreters, has a direct impact on the production of the meaning, understanding, and relevance of any discourse. We interpret ancient texts obviously considering their generating matrix and influential environment, but we also do it in light of concrete contexts much later.<sup>2</sup> Interpretations are subjective undertakings socially conditioned.

The interesting thing is that this rule, thus understood, not only applies to the experience of those who, mediated by their faith, read the Judeo-Christian Scriptures from concrete social spaces and faithful to them. It also describes and predicts how other religions constantly turn to their respective "sacred texts" and even "the authoritative" and "inspired" literature of other religions (with which they may or may not have affinity) to nourish their faith, articulate their identity, direct their life-journeys, and legitimize their own ideology. All religions are both guilty and beneficiaries of this understandable, indispensable, and predictable mode of operation.

An interesting example, outside the Hebrew-Christian realm and with which I have recently come across, comes to mind to illustrate and revalidate this important methodological interpretative principle. Many Muslims, whose faith

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<sup>2</sup> In relation to this topic, with much more detail, see W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson 1991), 143-208.

is nourished by the teachings of the Holy Qur'an, the messages of the Sunnah,<sup>3</sup> and the guidance of the Hadith,<sup>4</sup> interpret some passages of the Mosaic Law and the Gospel as divine references about the future advent of the Prophet Muhammad and some of his qualities and functions.<sup>5</sup>

This Islamic rereading of some Judeo-Christian texts, from their present to the past, deserves a brief description coupled with a measured and respectful evaluation, logically from a particular social location and aware of its limitations and possibilities.

## **2. Scriptural "Evidence" and a Socially Conditioned Islamic Interpretation Meet**

Several biblical texts have lent themselves to a Muslim reading.<sup>6</sup> But the most notorious passages and on which I would like briefly to focus are two: Deuteronomy 18 and John 14.

In Deuteronomy 18, especially verses 15 and 18, the God of the Hebrews, through the mediation of the writer of the Mosaic Law, states or predicts the following:

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<sup>3</sup> I mean the collection of some of the sayings and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the decisions he made.

<sup>4</sup> The accounts of the oral tradition put in writing, in which references are made to the words and experiences of Muhammad.

<sup>5</sup> Take as an example the writing by I. A. Abu-Harb, *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*, 2nd ed. translated into Spanish by Anas Amer Quevedo (Raleigh, NC: IIPH, 2004), 38-41, and in which this position is assumed but in a telegraphic way and propaganda; also <https://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=61>

<sup>6</sup> For example Deut 33:2; Is 42:1-4; Song of Songs 5:16; Daniel 7; Haggai 2:7; Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 6:9-13; etc.

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*A Prophet from among you, from your brethren, like me, the Lord your God will raise you up; you will hear him; ... A Prophet I will raise for them from the midst of their brethren, like you; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he will speak to them all that I will command him.*

On the presumption that this coming prophet has characteristics equal to those of Moses, that the Israelites have had many prophets who do not fit the profile outlined in these verses, and that "the brethren" of Israel alluded to in this passage necessarily refer to "the Ishmaelites," and not the Hebrews themselves, Muslims believe that this text refers to Prophet Muhammad, not the Messiah or any other divine spokesman. The text also has nothing to do with Jesus since he never called himself a "prophet." And since this Deuteronomic profile has not been fulfilled in any other prophet after Moses, Muslims conclude that the biblical reference has to do with Muhammad; only does this recipient of God's revelation qualifies.<sup>7</sup>

In this way of thinking, there is a syllogism of the type "prophecy-fulfillment" that is woven in Islam with a single thread: 1) Deut 18 speaks of the coming of a future prophet with certain characteristics, 2) Muhammad is a prophet and meets those characteristics and no one else does, therefore, 3) the passage refers to Muhammad.

The interesting thing about this case is that the biblical text does not give any details; its referent is not explicit. And although Jews believe that the word "prophet," in the context of their future arrival in the promised land, might refer to Joshua and that Christians believe that Jesus is the one alluded to (Acts 3:22-24; 7:37; John 5:46), in this text there are no proper names of persons or specific references to dates, places, or events. Focusing on some words or phrases as "meeting points," the Mohammedan interpretation (just like the Christian and

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<sup>7</sup> Which is not true according to John 4:44.

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Jewish readings), ignores other variables that challenge its position or use them only to reaffirm it. Let us remember that the traditional belief that pre-conditions the reading of the biblical text is that Muhammad is the last of a long list of prophets who preceded him; he is “the seal” (Holy Qur’an 33:40). I may add that that given the broad nature of the text and that, because of this, its content could potentially be applied to almost anyone who believes himself to be chosen and sent by God, and who resembles the profile of Moses, is it not contradictory or inadmissible to believe that the passage might refer to a specific person thousands of years later? In addition, let us note that the Muslim reading does not take into consideration the literary and historical-social context of the text, nor how it has been understood by the Hebrew community that originated it and to whom it was addressed or the Christian point of view. How, then, should they defend this position with integrity and in a convincing way given all these considerations? On what objective basis is this "interpretive leap" from one historical moment to another one centuries later be understood and justified? By what method or criteria are they operating, if any, to designate that these texts are “predictors” of the future coming of their Prophet? Or do these questions, which presuppose a critique, lack coherence or validity?<sup>8</sup>

The second text is John 14:16, in which Jesus, before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, addresses the disciples and predicts the following:

*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another 'Comforter' (or Advocate) to accompany you always.*

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the text lets it be known that the recipients of this prophet are the Hebrews (“Prophet of your midst, of your brethren, like me” ... “I will lift them up” and “speak to them,” Deut 18:15 and 18; cf. 17:15), not Muslims. If by 'brothers' we mean to refer to the Ishmaelites, why not clarify this point? In addition, it should be noted that Moses was incomparable as a prophet in the sense of having been the only one. who knew God face to face to face (Deut 34:10)?

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In relation to this passage something similar happens to what happened in the Islamic understanding of Deut 18. The Muslim position understands that the Greek word *paracletes* of which Jesus speaks in v. 16 (and which our Bibles translate as "the Comforter" or "the Advocate") is a "Christian interpolation" that replaces the word *perklet* (whose translation is "renowned" or "illustrious", the same meaning that the Arabic word "Ahmad" has and that it attributed to Muhammad), is not "the Holy Spirit," as Christians have believed and the Gospel makes clear, but a direct allusion to Muhammad instead. Presumably, Jesus is the first *paracletes* (or *perklet*, rather) and the Prophet (meaning Muhammad) is "the other (Comforter)" whom Jesus refers to. To support this interpretation, a passage from is quoted:

*And when Jesus, son of Mary, said, "! Children of Israel! I am the one whom Allah has sent you, in confirmation of the Torah prior to me, and as nuncio of an Envoy who will come after me, named Ahmad (i.e., Muhammad)" (61:6)*

In addition to being anchored in a conjecture that reads the present Greek text with "suspicion" and presupposes the existence of an "addition," this conclusion is nothing more than a syllogism equal to that of Deut 18:18: 1) the term *perklet* is the original term, not *paracletes*, and is closer to the meaning "the renowned" or "the illustrious;" 2) Muhammad was known as "the renowned" or "the illustrious" ("Ahmad"), therefore, 3) Jesus in this verse refers to Muhammad. Moreover, there is no text in the Gospel equal to or similar to this Qur'anic quotation, nor in the post-New Testament period nor in the apocryphal literature. We also need to point out that in this type of reading there is no space to ask when and where Jesus said these words or what oral or literary source the present biblical text relied on. It is given as a fact that this Qur'anic quote attributed to Jesus comes directly from God and is therefore "true"; thus, it should not be questioned. When rigid pre-understandings and religious faith make a

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close, lifelong alliance, there is no argument that makes or does a dent in that faith and its presuppositions.

Here the Mohammedan reading, from a much later position, conveniently overlooks some basic elements of understanding of any discourse and maneuvers the biblical text to agree with a previously adopted position: 1) it is taken for granted, without explicit and forceful evidence and with suspicion as a criterion, that the term *paracletes* is a Christian addition that replaces an alleged *periklytos*; 2) the semantic field of the present word *paracletes* (or even of the word *periklytos*) is not considered,<sup>9</sup> much less the social background of the word;<sup>10</sup> 3) the literary context of the passage is dismissed as a discursive universe that determines the connotations of the words and their links, and in which *periklytos* would not fit;<sup>11</sup> 4) the audience to whom Jesus addresses his words and the occasion and purpose of the episode where his remarks are recorded are ignored;<sup>12</sup> 5) there is no room to reflect on other possible interpretations; 6) the generic nature of the discourse and the danger of arbitrary, harmonizing, and simplistic readings are by-passed; and 6) it is not even questioned that the Islamic position could be an imposing one like any other that tries something similar.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, "someone who has been called to stand next to someone," and which may be a reference to a helper, comforter, advocate, or lawyer (cf. 1 John 2:1).

<sup>10</sup> The sense of defense in a court (i.e., as a lawyer) or someone who is next to the person.

<sup>11</sup> Jesus uses the word *paracletes* as a reference to "the Spirit of Truth" that the Father will send in the name of Jesus (John 14:17; 15:26) or "the Holy Spirit" (John 14:26). On another occasion it is said that Jesus is who will send the Spirit (John 15:26) and that for this to happen, Jesus has to depart first (John 16:7). What does Muslim reading do with this data? Does it turn this information around and accommodate it to their own ends? For a detailed explanation of John 14, see Raymond Brown, *The Gospel of According to John XIII-XXI* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1979), vol. 2, 884-898; Gerhard Sloyan, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 174-188.

<sup>12</sup> i.e., The disciples and Jesus' departure to be with the Father.

Other religions are also guilty of similar interpretive vices, as well as proposing certain forms of so-called "conspiracy theories."

### **3. An Assessment of Sacred Scriptures Interpreted from "their contextual back then" and "the here and now" of Religious Readers**

The way in which Deuteronomy 18:15, 18, John 14:16, other biblical passages,<sup>13</sup> and even documents that appeared much later than the time of Islam,<sup>14</sup> with the same religious premises and through the mediation of a methodology at its service, leads me to make a few observations to close the present reflection. And I do so, obviously, from my own academic background, practical experience, and through the lens of a different faith (albeit with

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<sup>13</sup> Based on forced inferences seen as "prophecies," I mention the following: 1) "Mount Paran" means "the Mount of Ishmael" (Deut 33:2); 2) in Is 42:1-4 Qedar has association with the place where Ishmael's second son lived; 3) the word "beloved" in Song of Songs 5:16 (*mahmadim*) has connections to the name Muhammad; 4) Daniel 7 is a prophetic vision of Muhammad's ascension to God; 5) the word "desire" *hemdāh* in Hebrew in Haggai 2:7 supposedly has ties to one of Muhammad's names; and (6) Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 6:9-13 teach that the kingdom of God was near but that it came with Muhammad; 7) it is argued that John the Baptist spent his entire life preaching, baptizing, and waiting for the coming of the Prophet (John 1:20-25), and that this individual was not Jesus; and (8) the parable of the mustard seed has to do with the simple beginning of Islam in a single person until it became a strong reign: "... *And in the Gospel are compared with the seed that, having germinated, fortifies its shoot and it grows and stands on the stem, constituting the joy of the sower, to end irritating the infidels because of it ...*" (cf. Holy Quran 48:29).

<sup>14</sup> For example "the Gospel of Barnabas" (written typical of the Renaissance and full of exaggerations and inaccuracies) that presumably talks about Muhammad. This is what work says: "*Jesus answered, 'The name of the Messiah is admirable, for God Himself gave him the name when He had created his soul and put it in a heavenly splendor'. God said, 'Wait for Muhammad; for your sake I will create paradise, the world, and a great multitude of creatures, of which I make you present, to the extent that whoever blesses you will be blessed, and whoever curses you will be cursed. When I send you into the world, I will send you as my messenger of salvation, and your word will be true, to the extent that heaven and earth will fail, but your faith will never fail.' Muhammad is his blessed name.*" Then the crowd raised their voices, saying, '*O God, send us your messenger: O Admirable, come quickly for the salvation of the world!*'" (the Gospel of Barnabas 97:9-10).



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historical, religious, and cultural ties to some aspects of this growing monotheistic religion). As we all know, and whether we are conscious of it or not, there is no evaluation of anything unless we use criteria.

I start by identifying frameworks of knowledge that shape our reading of religious texts from which we cannot escape in today's society no matter how hard to we try. The absence of a long, diverse, and well-grounded tradition of scholarship in the history of Islam, with the exceptions of the case and among people who have been primarily educated in Europe and the United States, has helped to create fertile conditions for the development of artisanal, repetitive, and anachronistic readings of the Qur'an itself, lacking the necessary controls, guiding principles or academic knowledge. To this I add the absence of a convincing methodological sophistication and few spaces for critical dialogues within Islam itself, or of the inter-religious type. This historical characteristic has been contrary to the scholarly trajectory that has been forged in democratic cultures and in religions such as Judaism and Christianity, for example. The paradoxical thing about the Islamic approach to the Qur'an, the Torah, and the Gospel is that its users have used criteria and methodological procedures typical of the West, not to apply other interpretative possibilities or to validate alternative readings, but for harmonizing, propagandistic, and apologetic purposes. Consequently, the knowledge and methodology taken from "the outside" are valid and used when they suit their purposes, but when they do not, they are rejected and labeled as being "Western" impositions, making the analysis of sacred texts a selective approach.

Situated within this historical-social context, in the type of approach in which the past and the present "meet", what happens is that the human qualities, beliefs, historical events, and experiences recorded in "the sacred scriptures" are interpreted as "equal" or "very similar" to those of the people who interpret these

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texts much later and from different social locations. To this practice we must add the preconceived idea that the messages of these scriptures were literally addressed to modern believers, and not to the original recipients, or at least not exclusively. Firm on this preconceived platform, dodging contrary ideas and influenced by faith, religious devotees are moved to claim for themselves these "commonalities", apply them to their lives, give them visibility, formalize them, and defend them against the threat of alternative or adversarial perspectives. To illustrate this, it is as if they would project the images of themselves into the mirror of their Sacred Writings when they read them in order to validate their own identity. This dynamic phenomenon, of which religious interpreters are not fully aware, is rationalized and sometimes even described as "divine revelation." From this perspective, it should come as no surprise that many Muslims interpret Judeo-Christian texts, to which they have conferred inspiration and authority, as divine predictions of the future advent of Muhammad. The good thing is that, throughout this process of actualization, their social identity and their sense of belonging are strengthened, the relationship with Allah deepens, and the moral vocation continues to point to the same horizon with a revived passion, many times without the awareness of the inconsistencies of the case.

Now, when a position such as the one described is assumed, is promoted, and defended with and in favor of that faith and, therefore, there is no room for doubts, alternative readings, or questions that lead to modify this existentialized way of believing, thinking and acting, much less the adoption of a new position. This happens even in cases where the evidence at hand is overwhelming. In a religious hermeneutic from "the here and now", which is believed to be "true", there are no such things as ideas in tension, alternate routes, flaws, ambivalences, or contradictions. The "logic" is another one. Faith creates its own reality and, appealing to the miraculous, this faith always imposes itself. As a consequence,

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the reading of the past or authoritative texts ends up being selective, hermetic, linear, and even "sacred". Still, one thing is what a text says clearly and directly, another is what one believes, imagines, or wishes the text would say. The Islamic reading of Deuteronomy 18:15, 16 and John 14:16 is a typical case of this type of approach that should not be implemented.

Along with this point, when the context of the person interpreting from a religious context is privileged, fundamental variables that structure and delimit the meaning of the words of a given discourse, in their oral or written form, are usually ignored, repressed or rationalized; and surprisingly they are used as criteria only they are convenient. Therefore, there is no place for the explanatory power of the historical-social context; the relationships between the ideas that precede and follow a passage; the meaning of the words in the original languages; the socio-rhetorical situation that originates them and to which the passages respond, the issue of clarity and specificity of writings; and other similar variables related to communication and understanding of ideas. This being so, it is predictable that enthusiastic readings from the present to the past to authenticate the present will continue to be carried out. And it is not that it is wrong to look for these "connections" with history because, after all, all human beings build a part of our identity by dialoguing with the past. The problem occurs when these dimensions of time merge to such an extreme that one cannot distinguish and separate "yesterday" from "today" (as if they were the same thing) ignoring issues such as discontinuity, breakdowns, or temporal, communicational, spatial and cultural abysses.

I would also like to point out that the generic language of sacred texts, whether they are Judeo-Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or otherwise, have always lent themselves to the imposition of references outside them and, for that reason, are susceptible to harmonizing readings, precisely because of the broad,

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imprecise, and incomplete nature of these texts. To this we must add the finitude of those who interpret and their preconceptions, also the lack of self-criticism. And in the absence of effective measures to curb this trend, I wonder if a first step to reverse the abuse of legitimizing interpretations of ancient texts would be to be aware that it is impossible to detach ourselves from our preconceptions and that we must make a responsible use of it, while denouncing the danger of arbitrary impositions, document their practice, and raise these issues to educate the global population.

It should also be said that while these examples taken from Islam have served to illustrate and validate the centrality and power of social location in the way some passages of the Bible are understood from a Muslim point of view, both Judaism and Christianity are no strangers to this behavior. Consider, for example, rabbinic and Christian interpretations that reprocess ancient texts from the present on the basis of some existing "connections," from verbal analogies, arguments based on grammar, allegories, and conceptual relationships of the type "prophecy-fulfillment" or "type and anti-type" (Ps 2:7; 16:18-11; 110:1; Is 55:3; Joel 2:28-32; Mark 12:35-37; Acts 2:16-21, 25-35; 13:16-41; Heb 1:5-13).<sup>15</sup> And how can we forget the Christological readings of the Old Testament or metaphorical readings of the Bible? The decisive role of social location is also seen in Buddhism when its followers interpret their sacred writings from a position of "enlightenment" already adopted, which directly affects the creation and implementation of a methodology consistent with this logical key and its circular logic.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See the definitions of these practices and other biblical examples in James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 42-49, 156-161.

<sup>16</sup> This is clearly seen in Buddha's rules of interpretation, and which are called "The Four Reliances:" (1) the *Dharma* (or "the biding truth in the text") is more important than the teacher;

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Finally, I would like to clarify that the action of resorting to authoritative sources of the past to validate or update ideas in the present is not an exclusive pattern of world religions. The same phenomenon occurs in secular societies. In them there are also *reappropriations* of the ideas of documents of the past, guided by the premises that these documents presumably have something “extraordinary” to say to the present, be it the constitution of a country, the legacy of some prolific author, the choices or lifestyle of a moral exemplar, the memories of the heroes of independence, or the reflections of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the origins of any nation. All as part of that conditioned but viable attempt to understand and be understood, often naively, with the help of methodologies, and with the best or worst of intentions.

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2) the meaning of the text is more important than the literal words; (3) the definitive teaching is superior to what is interpreted; and (4) the scripture or the text is an instrument of enlightenment.