

**In Defense of the Bible: A Critical  
Edition and an Introduction to  
al-Biqā`i's Bible Treatise**

*Walid A. Saleh*

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*In Defense of the Bible* contains Walid Saleh's critical edition of *Al-Aqwal al-Qawimah fi Ḥukm al-Naql min al-Kutub al-Qadimah* (The Just Verdict on the

Permissibility of Quoting from Old Scriptures). This treatise, composed by Ibrahim ibn `Umar al-Biqā`i during the last days of Mamluk rule, sought to defend his commentarial use of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Gospels to interpret the Qur'an. While many Qur'anic commentators rely heavily on the *isra`iliyat* genre to support their interpretations of the Qur'an, al-Biqā`i's *tafsir* radically departed from the Islamic religious and scholarly practice by quoting directly from the Jewish and Christian scriptures. This hermeneutical decision met with great resistance and criticism from al-Sakhawi, one of Cairo's leading scholars, who wrote a scathing response in support of the traditional Islamic legal prohibition against the religious use of the Bible, a text believed to have existed only in corrupt form.

The question of why al-Biqā`i relied so heavily on the Hebrew Bible and Christian Gospels, and how he defended his decision to do so, is the subject of both the *Aqwal* and Saleh's introduction to his critical edition of this medieval text. Saleh's work not only sheds light on the complexity of Mamluk-era Cairo's vibrant intellectual milieu, but, more importantly, corrects the contemporary academic bias that Muslims rarely engaged with the Bible during these times.

Chapter 1 presents Saleh's reconstruction of al-Biqā`i's biography, in which he outlines the latter's hermeneutical approach to his massive Qur'anic commentary, *Nazm al-Durar fi Tanasub al-Ayat wa al-Suwar*. Saleh suggests that the *Nazm* was unique both in terms of its use of rhetoric and logical causality to interpret the Qur'an and for its reliance on direct quotations from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Through an analysis of marginal intellectual figures who also impacted al-Biqā`i's work (namely, al-Haralli and al-Asbahani), Saleh concludes that the seemingly conservative author was, in reality, quite open to interpretive innovations. Others thought so as well. He notes how, contrary to modern expectations, this commentary was widely read during its author's lifetime and is now becoming increasingly popular across the Muslim world.

The first section of chapter 2 explores in depth how the controversy surrounding his work evolved. Here Saleh delves deeply into this scholar's private life to illustrate how the personal reputation of scholars played a decisive role in determining the quality of their work. It was not as though al-Biqā`i's use of the Bible alone caused scholars to attack his methods; rather, Saleh suggests that a combination of scandalous accusations and lawsuits provoked other scholars to question his hermeneutical methods. The chapter's last part is dedicated to highlighting some important features of the *Nazm*, particularly its author's reliance on a wide range of authoritative

sources. Clearly, al-Biqā`i saw his role as that of a collector; the Bible, therefore, did not serve as the sole basis for his commentary, as his enemies would have us believe, but rather as one of the many respected sources that he quotes. In this section, it would have been helpful to have more description about the commentary itself, or at least a few examples, to illustrate his commentarial style. While Saleh suggests that he deals with the content of the *Nazm* in another article, a summary of those findings would have given the reader a greater context in which to situate the *Aqwal*.

Chapter 4 takes up a discussion of the four *Aqwal* manuscripts upon which Saleh relied: the *Dar al-Kutub tafsir 49* and *Escorial ms. arabe 1539* served as the basis for reconstructing al-Biqā`i's original text, and the *Dar al-Kutub tafsir 1269* and *Escorial ms. arabe 1540* were used only sparingly to fill in the gaps where necessary. The rest of the book contains manuscript images from two of these manuscripts (excerpts from *Dar al-Kutub tafsir 49* and *Escorial ms. arabe 1539*) and the critical edition in Arabic.

In the Arabic portion of the book, Saleh outlines the strategies he employed to reconstruct the text and describes the apparatus he created to make the text more accessible to scholars of Islam. For example, additions in *Escorial ms. arabe 1539* that were not available in *Dar al-Kutub tafsir 49* have been placed in the apparatus. Book titles are distinguished from the rest of the text, and Qur'anic quotations are clearly marked. Saleh crosschecked quotations from the Qur'an, hadith, proverbs, poetry, and other *tafsir* and, if quotes were incorrect, he noted the corrections in the apparatus and not in the text. He also added modern punctuation and divided the text into logical paragraphs. Valuable indices supply the full names and referenced titles mentioned in the work, thus giving scholars quick access to context. The apparatus is clear and easy to use; the Arabic text is highly readable.

Given the sheer number of unedited manuscripts in the field of Islamic studies, Saleh's painstaking work serves as a valuable and accessible resource to both medieval and modern scholars. Scholars of medieval Islam will gain insight into the vibrant cultural and intellectual milieu of Mamluk society; scholars of the modern period will come to appreciate the surprisingly fluid nature of scriptural exchange among Muslims, Jews, and Christians. *In Defense of the Bible* will be greatly appreciated by graduate students and specialists in the field.

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