

ISLAMIC SOURCE LITERATURE

What should one read in order to acquaint one's self with Islamic or Muslim ideas and history?

There has been an explosion of books on Islamic identity of late, and most of the authors are Westerners or western oriented individuals who are writing with an axe to grind. Most notably this may be seen in the recently published volume "Wahhabi Islam" by Natana J. Delong-Bas. It takes a revisionist perspective and seeks to present Wahabism as a historically moderate sect within Islam and that modern day radicals are not true representatives of the historic beliefs of Muhammad ibn abd al Wahhab {Full disclosure: The author thanks the "King Abd al azzi Foundation for research and archives for their financial support—page eight of preface}. This brief article asserts only that a return to the original source texts is a much needed corrective for the irrational and unconfirmable theories put forth today in media and press circles. This author avers that acquiring other the use Islamic languages for genuine scholarly studies is requisite for today's student of Middle Eastern Muslim history.

I

There are a number of good volumes on the market today from which to choose when seeking to gain information on the religion of Islam. What one does need to do though is make an honest attempt at getting the right data on this largely Middle Eastern religion. I have sat through many conferences where speakers have gone out of their way to portray an Islam wholly non-existent to the vast millions of its practitioners. And sadder still, the same individuals could handle Christian materials no better. So I thought I would put a few ideas on paper for the avid reader and student who is diligent, industrious and enjoys challenges.

First of all, let us remember that reading materials outside of the original source language is—necessary for most, but—second rate at best. In the West the majority of Christian writers caricature Muslims in ways that make it entirely difficult to see them as persons in need of redemption rather than objects for western disdain. Yes, there are radicals, and millions of them, whose sole objective is the destruction of the West but our approach must continue to be evangelistic in its approach.

So if and where possible you should seek to learn Arabic as another language. Some obstacles may arise but the rewards for properly learning to investigate texts on your own are great--it must also be noted that many Christians of the earliest days of Christendom also spoke Arabic, so knowing this tongue makes it possible to read the wide and varied texts created within their culture. Islam began as a religion of the deserts of Arabia.

Thus, the original and earliest literature is in the dialect of the early Arabians. However, the history of Islam is rich and as you observe it's rapid, albeit fierce, overspreading of the regions surrounding it you can see for yourself how it took on the shape which it currently holds. From various Islamic capital cities the whole movement was able to enjoin its rituals and beliefs upon others.

Presently, Islamic history and literature is an amalgamation of varying faiths derived from, for the most part, the same historical traditions. Muslims view themselves as the truly chosen people of God who have accepted the final revelation sent by God (Allah) by means of their prophet Muhammad. This has tremendous consequences for how Judaism and Christianity both are perceived in the Islamic community. To assume that they are correct is disastrous for the integrity of Holy Scripture's counsels, even though the Quran posits a premise of Islamic usurpation over all faiths. The assumption that Islam was Abraham's religion is false for a number of reasons: (1) In the area of Chaldea, the pagan religions were a part of the cultural district of each area, (2) Abram's faith came as a revelation from the Lord, no early texts propose (such as Islam) a religion which dies then regenerates millennia later, (3) finally, The primitive cult customs of modern Islam do not resemble any of the practices from the Mesopotamian region of 2000BC.

We have a number of Amarna tablets and cuneiform texts that do describe interpersonal transactions and other familial duties, but nothing on the scale as outlined in the Quran, in particular, in surahs number two and five. It is for this reason that many translations Muslim writings are published today, to give a peep into the past for necessary scrutiny. On the one hand, this is fruitful as it allows humans all over the world to view for themselves what was written back then. On the hand, we must critically read all these new publications as they come off the press because rarely are they close translations of the texts they propose to elucidate; only readers have no idea this is the case.

These explosive and highly combustible books commonly cited are worth rarely little and add no significant advantages to the readers of their pages but there is another alternative, a path to truth that leads through many differing interpretations but yields up knowledge by the pound: Learn Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Greek and Latin. These are all time consuming endeavors and the earlier the start the better, but conduct yourself in an appropriate anyway and learn the languages. It is true that few will be able to study with linguists and philologists as I did but one may still reach a level of working exactitude which allows you to 'see' for yourself what a text does or does not say.

Moreover, Muslims claim to be descendants of Abraham. I find this to be highly doubtful. As a claim it is dubious because it infers that Ishmael is the sire of all Arab peoples. The Bible contradicts this claim by stating that after Sarah's Abraham married a woman named Keturah whose descendants populated the Persian Gulf regions {Gen. 25:1-4}. A little etymological work would prove that linguistically many of the modern names of today are derived from these biblical locutions written of 4000 years ago. Muslims may seek to confirm their status amid Holy Scripture but the Islamic truth is far from forthcoming from those pages. To find Islam proper one has to reach forward in time to the sixth century Anno Domini and search for a young man whose quest for religious truth led him to found a religion of tribal warfare and of what we now call 'genocide'.

Islam's textures are unique. For many years the Persians were the dominant persons within Islamic spheres, at the same time, we recognize the six century contributions of the Ottoman Empire to Islam's variegated stories. More recently, we study the contrasts which exist within radicalism--Wahabism, Sunnism, Shiism, Sufism and other small sub-sects of the mainstream divisions in Islam; do not be misled. Islam is not monolithic there are as many denominations within its groupings as there are Protestant factions among Christians.

II

So to study Islam proper one must at least begin with their own writings. You can find a number of titles which are translated for you. I know that few place the original script with translation because of publication costs but if you do need a 'trot' then go for it. You may learn some new things.

Arabic source texts:

After gaining facility with the Arabic tongue you can begin first with the Quran. It seems only reasonable to filter these texts through your own mind, coming to grips with Muhammadan beliefs. Arabic—like all Semitic tongues—is a shaded and nuanced idiom and requires multiple readings of the same texts for clarity. Since so much parallel literature is available you can acquire rudimentary understanding in how words are utilized in their syntax. For English translations of the Quran I recommend Arthur J. Arberry's version published back in 1955. It is written in an Elizabethan style English but it captures the lofty Arabic better than most of the current fodder offered in America for bewildered citizens, and it follows the Arabic closely.

It would be nice if you moved from the Quran to the earliest biography: *The Life of Muhammad* written by Ibn Ishaq (and later revised by Ibn Hisham) who was born in Medina, Saudi Arabia about 80 or so years after the Hegira.¹ Here you can read of all the miracles said to have occurred under Muhammad's rule. It is often asserted that the Quran contains no specimens of Muhammad doing miracles, these assertions stem from mis-readings of the Quranic corpus. The alleged supernatural events are there but one must sift them historically for their true sense.

These two texts, Quran and biography are enough for any beginner to drink deeply from the wells of the formative years of Islam.

Persian source texts:

Within Farsi there are vast tomes of writings. Many of them are even of a poetic nature and also require some close readings in order to get a handle on the disparate materials. As with Arabic, begin with a Persian Quran in Farsi—Ali Quli Kara'i has issued a nice blue cloth covered edition called *The Quran*. You may ask the question 'why is this needed', well, first off, it is good to see how a text is reflected in the language of the people being studied. At least you can have some idea of why their cultural milieu is formed in the way that it is. Persia, or Iran, has for centuries been a Shiite country. This factor alone gives it uniqueness in the Middle East. Iran is the first country to see a literal Islamic revival which led to the establishment of an Islamic state.

If you can get your hands on the Ayatollah Khomeini's *Lectures on Islam and Revolution*, which he did while exiled in Iraq, you can move ahead of the pack quickly in your understanding of Shiism. Although Khomeini was not the senior ranking mullah of his day, he did become the dominant model and his writings need to be read to understand the current regime in power and their views of the west. As of now you can get online and read the writings of many of Iran's Mullahs in translated form.

Turkish source texts:

Turkish literature is expansive and there are volumes with copious notes too. Yes, do begin with a Turkish Quran if possible. Take the time to acquire some historical books on the Ottoman Empire and its influences. Most people forget that it has only been about 90 years since the

¹ Hegira in Islam refers to the 622AD period when Muhammad moved—some say fled—to Yathrib-Medina and established the world's First Islamic Theocracy, with constitution. This year came to be known as the A.H. 1—Year one After Hegira.

Ottoman hold on power fell apart. Yet, their legal systems remain in play throughout the Middle East. When I lived in Turkey back in the early 90s there were still elderly people who had learned Turkish with the old Arabic Script prior to Ataturk's introduction of the Roman script. Also, there too are many who pine for the old days of the supposed glory of the Empire with King to rule, and Islamic Caliphate to make religious decisions for the masses.

All of Central Asia is a religious mixture of the Ottoman's traditional beliefs and ritual. Throughout the Middle East Turkish jurisprudence continues to be thought to be superior to the secularized nature of Western legal thought; this may change but when? You will need many, many books on the Ottomans to be able to fathom how they affected the Mediterranean region so try to be thorough in your searches. Look for books written by Turks as they will reflect what is believed, generally speaking, by their own national group. Since Christianity has its roots in what is now known to be Modern Turkey, look for volumes written by medieval Christian who lived then and contrast it with modern Turkish Christian writings of today from that country. This will help you learn of how diverse peoples interacted, if they did or not.

*I would be remiss if I did not encourage you to familiarize yourself with the *Cairo Geniza* texts. These were discovered more than a century ago but only now are being published rightly. They contain fragments of Jewish writings from the middle ages onwards. A geniza was a place where Jewish scrolls no longer in use were placed for later destruction or burial of some type. The religious requirements for their treatment often led people to merely assign them to a location in a geniza for safekeeping.

Their discovery by Solomon Schecter has led to a reevaluation of Jewish-Muslim-Christian relationships during the timeframes annotated in the MSS. It is not that the differences were not significant however, these MSS allow us inside the homes and marketplaces of the many Jews of the times and to read of their views of life under Islamic authorities. From letters, marriage contracts, Scriptures, and responsas, we now have a fairly good picture of what Jewish life was like during this period.

These are only a few words designed to give you your first steps toward a more thoroughgoing learning of Islam. It is a religion that is here to stay—till the Lord Jesus returns—so Christians need to learn now how to defend their beliefs in light of the present onslaught of promotion of Islamic verities currently being propagated by liberal Western media personalities. So be careful and learn to do your own research by navigating through the texts available to us now.