A New Hermeneutical Approach to the Qur’ān with Special Reference to the Narrative of Prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) in the Qur’ān and the Bible

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Abstract: Prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) is considered to be a bridge between Islam and Christianity. Both traditions emphasize that he is a ‘rightly-guided’ figure and among the company of ‘the righteous’ such as Abraham and Moses. The story of Yaḥyā is included in two chapters (Q. 3: 39 and Q. 19: 12–14) in the Qur’ān. Canonical Gospels also provide various aspects of John the Baptist. Muslim commentators have used biblical and other sources in their interpretation of the Qur’ān, elaborating some aspects of his life within the Qur’ānic theological framework. Whereas various similarities may be seen in narratives of Islamic sources and the biblical sources regarding Prophet Yaḥyā, some differences are present. Therefore, this article seeks to provide an analysis on the story of Prophet Yaḥyā through Qur’ānic narratives. It also investigates the classical exegetical approach to such a comparative reading (isrā’īliyyāt, biblical materials) and a modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible. Relying on the framework of comparative theology, considered as “welcoming wisdom wherever it exists” and “faith seeking understanding” in light of truth(s) embedded deeply in other religious tradition, such mutual close readings and interactions across religious traditions could be a good model for the Muslim world, instead of a fully rejectionist fundamentalist discourse against other traditions. Such a pluralist approach emphasizes a global raising of awareness and mutual understanding.

Keywords: Prophet Yaḥyā; John the Baptist; the Qur’ān; Qur’ānic exegesis (tafsīr); isrā’īliyyāt; canonical gospels; comparative theology

1. Introduction

Francis X. Clooney SJ describes contemporary comparative theology as an original response to twenty-first century religious diversity. It involves “finding God in all things” and “welcoming wisdom where it exists”. It is “faith seeking understanding” in light of truth(s) embedded deeply in other traditions. In his view, the aim of the attempt is “to know God better” (Ray et al. 2013, p. 99). Clooney highlights the following:

Comparative theology marks acts of faith as seeking understanding, which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition(s) as well as the home tradition (Clooney 2010, p. 10).

Clooney adds that Comparison is a reflective and contemplative attempt by which we see the other in the light of our own and our own in light of the other. This comparison ordinarily starts with the intuition of an interesting similarity that assists us to place two realities—texts, images, practices, doctrines, and persons—near one another, so that they may be seen over and again, side by side. We understand each differently in this necessarily random and intuitive practice since the other is near, and through increasing insight also begin to comprehend related matters differently too. Ultimately, in his view, we see ourselves differently, intuitively revealing dimensions of ourselves. Otherwise, we
could not grasp them through a non-comparative logic. Clooney underlines that it is a theological discipline that one is confident about being intelligently faithful to his tradition even while looking for fresh understanding outside his tradition (Clooney 2010, pp. 10–11).

Clooney indicates that there are several distinctive features of the comparative initiative. First of all, comparativists should have a commitment to the truth of their home tradition before they journey into another tradition. In Clooney’s project, one moves from a commitment base through involving intellectual inquiries to a renewed and transformed reappropriation of confessional ideas. The second feature of contemporary comparative theology is its strong textual part. He states that religious texts have a way of bringing to life the truths they seek to tell. The words in religious texts are like windows allowing the comparativist to see into the text. Moreover, Clooney advocates comparative theologians not to make a priori judgements, but to internalize the materials and address theological challenges after reading, reflection, and dialogue. The reason for this is that he does not intend to force his own ideas upon the texts but prefers to wait and see what the texts might provide. Furthermore, it is recommended that the discipline must not remain theoretical, but must have a practical aspect. Clooney maintains that in ideal circumstances, one sees, hears, visits, tastes, smells, and touches the “reality” of the other tradition. In addition, the comparative enterprise ends where it began—in a return home. The comparativist travels full circle and reallocates their original commitment position (Ray 2014, pp. 54–59).

In her book, Catherine Cornille indicates various types of approaches to comparative theology such as postcolonial, confessional, trans-religious and interreligious. In inter-religious comparative theology, theologians focus on commonalities and what they can learn from each other by examining the common ground between religious traditions to achieve mutual illuminations (Cornille 2019). However, it is worth mentioning here that the purpose for such comparison of sacred texts is a deep theological learning across religious traditions and not to harmonize conflicting interpretations, emphasizes the distinct nuances of meaning understood by the other even when broad concepts are shared (Albayrak 2012).

Although a religious tradition keeps its originality and major sources, it is a reality that interactions and exchange between religious traditions and knowledge among cultures took place in the past. Any religious tradition can benefit from accumulated human knowledge. In the context of Islamic intellectual tradition, there had been interreligious leaning in several fields of Islamic studies such as mysticism (sufism, tasawwuf) and ethics. For example, Sayyid Hussain Nasr says that today, Muslims’ engagement with other religions relies on rich foundations laid by Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) and Ibn Al-Arabi (d. 1240). He also points out that “the Sufis spoke about universality of the truth and of revelation. It was figures such as Ibn Al-Arabi and Rumi who had a vision of the Formless which allowed them to see the truth in forms other than those of their own religion” (Nasr and Jahanbegloo 2010, p. 290). Moreover, there are examples from some Muslim mystics who were intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking a fresh understanding from outside that tradition. For instance, Muslim mystic Ibrahim Ibn Adham (d. 778) “fell in with Christian anchorites”, who instructed him in their “inner wisdom”, or “gnosis” (marifa), which gives its possessor power over his fellow believers (Knysh 2000). Further, Muslim mystic Shaqiq al-Balkhi (d. 810) had a curious encounter with a Buddhist monk who taught Shiqiq the meaning of trust in God (tawakkul) and challenged him to demonstrate his trust in God as the sole provider of men (Knysh 2000).

This article focuses on John/Yahyâ in the Qur’an in the light of the exegetical tradition and certain Qur’an commentaries. Using isra’iiliyyat reports (related to biblical materials) in the interpretation of the Qur’an along with modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible will also be examined. The main argument of this article is that, as examples of learning across religious borders in the Islamic tradition are present, such as using isra’iiliyyat in Qur’anic exegesis and ‘the laws preceding Islam’ (shar’a man qablanâ) in Islamic law, and certain Muslim mystics’ engagement with others, openness to mutual, closer readings of scriptural texts, deeper learning, and thereby mutual illuminations could be a good model for the Muslim world in today’s world.
2. John the Baptist/Yahyā as a Common Figure

The origin of John is Yōhānān in Hebrew, meaning Jehovah bestowed (Aydin 2020). In the Qur’an and Islamic sources, his name is Yahyā. The word Yahyā is derived from the word hayya, meaning “to make alive” or “to quicken”. Qur’an commentators interpret this word as referring to “his miraculous birth and his mission to renew faith” (Hillier 2006, p. 700).

Prophet Yahyā (John the Baptist) is prominently a great figure as a bridge between Islam and Christianity. Both traditions accept him to be “rightly-guided” and among the company of “the righteous” such as Abraham and Moses. Both traditions perceive his mission as intrinsically related to the life of Jesus (Hillier 2006). However, in the Bible his mission was a preparation for the coming of Jesus and he is not independent from Jesus. In Islamic tradition, his birth, identity, and his prophetic mission is as one of the prophets for the sons of Israil (Bani Israel) (Aydin 2020).

3. Prophet Yahyā in the Qur’an and Exegesis

The Qur’an indicates Prophet Yahyā’s miraculous birth, identity, and his prophetic mission as one of the prophets for the sons of Jacob. It should be noted that Prophet Yahyā appears five times in the Qur’an. However, the bulk of John’s story takes place within two nativity chapters (3 and 19), Al Imrān (House of Imran) and Maryam (Mary), which is similar to the nativity narrative in the Gospel of Luke (Hillier 2006). This section will briefly analyze Q. 3: 39–41 and Q. 19: 2–15 through selected Qur’an commentators and a few selected modern studies.

Q. 3: 39 highlights the following:

The angels called out to him (Zachariah), while he stood praying in the sanctuary, ‘God gives you (Zachariah) news of John, confirming a Word from God. He will be noble and chaste, a prophet, one of the righteous’. (Q: 3:39) (Abdel Haleem 2004)

The story of Zachariah and John is given in fuller detail in 19:2–15, and sûra Maryam’s narrative indicates Zachariah’s fear of what his existing heirs might do after his death due to his own and his wife’s advanced age (Nasr et al. 2015). According to the exegete al-Ṭabarî (d. 310/923) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), “confirming a Word from God” indicates John will confirm Jesus, son of Mary, who is described as a word from God (Al-Ṭabarî 2022a; Al-Rāzī 2022). “Noble” (sayyid) is interpreted as learned, devout, wise, generous, reverent of God, clement, and temperate (Nasr et al. 2015; Al-Ṭabarî 2022b). “Chaste” in the verse, according to some, refers to someone who abstains from sexual relations with women or vice versa, though many commentators believe that this means abstention only from illicit sexual relations (Nasr et al. 2015; Ibn Kathîr 2022).

In line with the passage above, Q. 19: 2–15 (mpha Maryam) elaborates the story. The stories of Mary, Zachariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus are linked in the passages of verses 2–35 of mpha Maryam (Mary). The two stories also have relations with Q. 21: 89–91 as
well as in the biblical account found in Luke 1: 5–80. The parallel between the miraculous birth of Jesus to the young virgin Mary and the miraculous birth of John to the elderly and previously infertile wife of Zachariah serves to illustrate how age and human limitations have no bearing on the way in which God’s will has been carried out in sacred history (Nasr et al. 2015).

Regarding the story of Zachariah and John the Baptist in Maryam, Reynolds maintains that passage of Q. 19: 2–6 might be read in light of Luke 1. Both texts notably have Zechariah refer to the “House of Jacob” (Q. 19: 6 and Luk 1: 33). Only the Qur’an, however, has Zechariah pray to God for an heir (cf. 3: 38–40; 21: 89; Zechariah is also referred to in 6: 85) (Reynolds 2018, p. 473). About verses 7–11 of the same sura, Reynolds believes that the Qur’an is developing Luke 1 while indicating few differences such as it has God speak directly to Zechariah (unlike Luke, where it is the angel Gabriel, and unlike 3: 39, where it is instead “angels”). He also highlights that “Verses 8–9 should be compared to Luke 1: 18–19” (Reynolds 2018, p. 474). In this context, Reynolds highlights one difference between the narratives of the Qur’an and the Bible: Zechariah loses his speech in Luke as a result of rejecting the angel’s message, whereas in the Qur’an (verses 9–10), this is the response to Zechariah’s plea for a sign (Reynolds 2018).

However, in another study, Wonjoo Hwang (2022) argues that the Qur’an uses biblical figures within its own theological framework. Hwang also maintains that a comparison of the Islamic narratives on Zakariyya and Yahya with the biblical accounts indicate not only similarities but also significant differences that cause significant theological breaches between the Qur’an and the Bible. Awareness of such differences will result in a better understanding of their roles in their respectful narratives. For example, Zachariah’s being not able to communicate is a sign in the Qur’an, but it is a punishment in accordance to Luke’s Gospel. This took 3 days according to the Qur’an, but, In Luke’s Gospel, Zachariah did not communicate until the eighth day after the birth of John (Yahya) (Hwang 2022). Hwang, in general, takes the polemical nature of the two chapters (Al-Imran and Maryam) into account, arguing that the Islamic narratives of Zakariyya and Yahya should be taken “as a counter-biblical or anti-Christological assertion” (Hwang 2022, p. 176). In another work, Kaltner and Mirza (2017) briefly summarize the Qur’anic narrative of the Baptist/Yahya, making few comparisons between the Qur’an and the Bible.

3.1. Intertextual Reading from the Classical Notion of Isrā’īliyyat to the Modern Trend of Direct Biblical Citations in the Qur’anic Exegesis

This section aims to discuss the classical exegetical approach to isrā’īliyyat (using biblical materials in Qur’anic exegesis) and a modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible, thereby providing a framework for the next section, where selected annotated translations of the Qur’an from the modern period are analyzed in relation to the Qur’anic narrative of Yahya/John the Baptist.

It is worth mentioning that isrā’īliyyat reports (biblical materials) were used by the earliest Muslims in order to interpret the Qur’an (Saeed 2005, p. 96). Isrā’īliyyat narrations are used as available historical sources mostly for interpreting the stories of earlier prophets (Paçacı 2007, p. 7). Interpreting the Qur’an in the light of isrā’īliyyat reports is considered under tradition-based exegesis (tafsir bi-al-mathhir (Çoruh 2017). Exegetes used biblical materials to fill some gaps in prophetic narratives. The use of isrā’īliyyat to provide narrative detail to stories shared by the Qur’an and the Bible. There is the very widespread reliance on isrā’īliyyat traditions in classical Qur’an exegesis such as al-Tabari’s commentary. For example, Prophet Abraham saw in his dream to sacrifice his son (Q. 37: 102). The Qur’an does not give a name. Some commentators say Ishmael, other commentators, such as Al-Tabari (2022b), state that he was Isaac (Ishq) based on the Bible. It should be noted here that in Al-Tabari’s Qur’an commentary, the first 2.5 centuries of Muslim interpretation were collected and organised methodically (McAuliffe 2007). Therefore, Al-Tabari’s Qur’an commentary also contained many isrā’īliyyat reports, particularly related to Qur’anic stories, from the early period of Islam. Many Muslim historians and interpreters had no trouble
adopting biblical sources in the early phases of Islamic history, but from the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries onward, resistance started to take hold (Saeed 2005, p. 96). Saeed (2005, pp. 96–97) argues for several factors for this resistance such as the maturing of Islam and the establishment of Islamic disciplines (such as kalam), Muslims’ confidence of their theological positions and of their own distinctive scripture. Ibn al-Kathîr (d. 774/1373) put some limitations on these reports, explaining that isrā’īliyyāt are reported li al-istishhâd (for supplementary attestation) not li al-i’tidâd (for full support and reliance or i tiqad, belief) (Çoruh 2019).

Moreover, in the tafsîr literature, the most narrations of isrā’īliyyât are cited as reports from certain converts such as Wabh ibn Munabbîh (654–737 CE) and Kab al-Abbar (d. 653 CE) in the earliest period of Islam, and most classical exegetes do not seem to cite directly from the Bible’s text. As Albayrak (2000) highlights, the classical commentators do not provide any textual proof that they were familiar with the Jewish and Christian sources though al-Biqâ’t’s Qur’an commentary (809–885/1407–1480) is considered an exception (Saleh 2007). Mesut Kaya (2013) lists the followings as reasons why the classical exegetes relied on isrā’īliyyat reports rather than direct citations from the Bible: the peculiar structure of classical tafsîr and narration of knowledge by isnad (chain of transmission), the legitimacy of quoting the Bible, and Muslim self-confidence and dominant attitudes. In general, it could be said that classical Muslim scholars’ relationship with the Bible did not go beyond passages that they believed foretold the Prophet’s prophecy, nor transmitting some of the texts they used for polemical purposes (Kaya 2013).

However, with the emergence of modernity, a new method of direct citations from the Bible in the interpretation of the Qur’an or using the Bible as a source of tafsîr has developed by certain influential exegetes in parallel with a critical approach to isrā’īliyyat reports. Engagement with modernity and Western thought provided great opportunities for Muslim exegetes to compare and to crosscheck classical isrā’īliyyat reports with the Bible and Talmud. They thought that there was a need for learning their religions and books from their own sources as classical scholars had no sufficient knowledge of the religion and books of the People of the Book (Kaya 2013).

In the beginning of Islamic modernism, Muhammad Abduh’s highly critical approach to isrâ’îliyyat has become a turning point and a starting for a new tendency in Qur’anic exegesis and influencing other exegetes. As Tottoli (1999, 2002) notes, Abduh and his student M. Rashid Riḍâ (d. 1935) are usually considered the departure point for a new approach, and the complete denial of the traditions passed down by the first generations of Muslim converts, also known as isrâ’îliyyat, (Abduh and Rashid Riḍâ 1947, p. 18).

“(Of the methods followed in the tafsîr) the third is that the stories (qisas) to be investigated. Many people have adopted this method, and they have added what they want from historical and isrâ’îliyyat sources (kutub al-târîkh wa-l-isrâ’îliyyat) to the stories of the Qur’an. Meanwhile, they did not rely on books that were valid according to the People of the Book such as the Torah and the Gospel and other valid religious books according to other religious followers; on the contrary, they took isrâ’îliyyat stories without distinguishing whatever they heard from them, and without checking if they are compatible with Shari’ah and reason (wa’lla tanqîh. lima yu’khâlîf al-shar wa’lla yu’ţâbih al-aqîl).” (Abduh and Rashid Riḍâ 1947, p. 18).

As can be seen in the above, Abduh is highly critical of isrâ’îliyyat reports, the style of their transmissions (oral) and their contents. However, although he thinks superstitious stories of Jewish and Christian origin are unreliable in tafsîr, he does not include the Bible itself in this category (Pink 2015). Abduh says above that it needs to be relied on their own resources during the interpretation of the relevant parts of the Qur’an.

Abduh’s this new method has an impact on certain exegetes, and various other scholars have also adopted this method in the modern period. After him, Rashid Riḍâ has developed it further, providing the entire passages of the Torah in tafsîr al-Manâir. Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and then intellectuals who studied in tafsîr in India such as Hamiduddin Farâhî (d. 1930), Thanâullah Amritsâri (d. 1948), Abu’l-Kalâm Azâd...
(d. 1958), Mawdüdî (d. 1979), Ghulam Aḥmad Parviz (d. 1985), and Amin Aḥsan Islāhī (d. 1997) seriously engaged with the Bible in their works though their views and schools were different. Moreover, certain annotated Qurʾān translations also included Qurʾān–Bible comparisons in relevant parts such as Muḥammad ʿAlī’s (d. 1951) *The Holy Kurʾān*, Ömer Rıza Doğrul’s (d. 1952) *Tanrı Buyruğu*, Muḥammad Aṣād’s (d. 1992) *The Message of The Qurʾān*, Muḥammad Hamidullah’s (d. 2002) *Le Saint Coran*, and Suat Yıldırım’s (b. 1941) *Kurʾān-ı Hakîm ve Açıklamalı Meali* (The Wise Qurʾān and Annotated Translation). Tāhir b. ʿĀshūr (d. 1973), M. Izzat Darwaza (d. 1984), and Süleyman Ateş (b. 1933) are also among the commentators who use this method in their commentaries in a prominent way (Kaya 2013). Kaya discusses criticisms against this new method of intertextual conversations while he analyses in detail on which contexts and purposes the Bible citations are used in modern Qurʾān commentaries such as history of religions and polemics, cross-text comparisons between the Qurʾān, the Bible and Talmud, and the Bible as the modern source of *tafsīr* (Kaya 2013).

3.2. Case Study of Selected Modern Approaches to the Narrative of Yahyā/John the Baptist in the Qurʾān

This section will analyze ’Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā’s Qurʾān commentary, and three annotated translations of the Qurʾān, namely Muḥammad Aṣād, Muḥammad Hamidullah, and Suat Yıldırım, about Q. 3: 39–41 and Q. 19: 2–15 and evaluate their approaches to the story of Yahyā/John the Baptist in the Qurʾān. The reason for why these names are selected is that they applied for the modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible in their respective works though their distinctive methods may have some differences. As highlighted above, ’Abduh is a key figure for this new tendency in Qurʾānic exegesis. How he applied it in his Qurʾān commentary on the story of Yahyā will provide us some insights into this tendency. The other three annotated Qurʾān translators have also showed an interest in this tendency, and analyzing their perspectives/applications of direct citations from the Bible will be helpful to see a modern method in Qurʾān translation genre though they have different backgrounds.

When we analyze ’Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā’s Qurʾān commentary on Q. 3: 39–41, we see that they aim to provide some lessons via the verses in question. Further, it seems that they avoid narrating some miraculous extraordinary events reported as additional information to the story of the Qurʾān (for ’Abduh and demythologisation see, Shareea 2019). For example, regarding Mary’s provisions from Allāh on Q. 3: 37, “Whenever Zachariah went in to see her in her sanctuary, he found her supplied with provisions. He said, ‘Mary, how is it you have these provisions?’ and she said, ‘They are from God; God provides limitlessly for whoever He will’”. Rashīd Riḍā commented that “there is no evidence in the verse that sustenance came down as a supernatural event (*min khawāriq al-ʿādāt*), and the attribution of the believers’ command to God in this regard is customary in ancient and modern times” (’Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā 2022, p. 54). Riḍā cites from his teacher the following:

The Qurʾān was revealed plain and easy for everyone to understand without the need for trouble or going to defend something other than the apparent meaning (*zāhir*). We must not deviate from its way and do not add to it (*Qurʾānic stories* *isrāʾīliyyāt* or non-*isrāʾīliyyāt* tales to make this story an extraordinary supernatural event (*min khawāriq al-ʿādāt*). To search for that sustenance as what it is and where it did come from is superfluous, and such things do not need to understand the meaning (of the Qurʾān) or need further lessons. If God knew that his statement is good for us, he would have made it clear (’Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā 2022, p. 54).

As another example, on Q.3: 41, “He said, ‘My Lord, give me a sign’. ‘Your sign’, [the angel] said, ‘is that you will not communicate with anyone for three days, except by gestures’”. Rashīd Riḍā emphasizes one narration about Zakariyyā’s speechlessness which is indicated by the classical exegetes. Then he directly cites from Luke Gospel: “In the Gospel of Luke, it is said: Gabriel said to Zechariah: He said: ‘Right now your tongue
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will be held and you will not be able to speak at all until these things happen. Because you have not confirmed my promise that will come when the time comes” (Abduh and Rashid Ridā 2022, p. 55). He uses this biblical citation as part of tafsīr on this verse while not commenting on it. However, it is interesting to note that Rashid Ridā does not mention or comment on one difference between the Qur’an and the biblical narrative: Zakariyyā’s speechlessness took 3 days according to the Qur’an, but, in Luke’s Gospel, Zachariah did not communicate until the birth of John (Yahyā/John the Baptist) (Abduh and Rashid Ridā 2022, p. 55). Ri dā may not see that these two narratives in the Qur’an and the Bible are a great difference that disputes each other and so disregards to provide any comments on it. As noticed, Abduh and Rashid Ridā’s Qur’an commentary applies for the modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible.

In The Message of the Qur’ān, it is interesting to note that Muhammed Asad (1984) makes similar comments with Abduh and Rashid Ridā regarding Mary’s provisions from God on Q. 3: 37, highlighting that there is absolutely no indication in the Qur’an or in any authentic tradition that these provisions had a supernatural origin, notwithstanding all the legends that most commentators have cited in this context. It seems that Asad’s source in his comments is Tafsīr al-Manār, and Asad also considers some isrā’īliyyāt reports as legendary and not reliable. However, on Q.3: 41, “ . . . ‘Your sign’, [the angel] said, ‘is that you will not communicate with anyone for three days, except by gestures’”. Asad cites Mu tazilī exegete Abu Muslim’s (d. 934) opinion that Zachariah was not rendered speechless as in the New Testament story (Luke i, 20–22); rather, he was simply instructed not to speak to anyone for the next three days, underly ing that Zachariah had to completely give himself over to prayer and reflection as the “sign” which was only to be a spiritual manifestation (Asad 1984). It could be derived from here that Asad interprets Zakariyyā’s speechlessness spiritually in line with the Mu tazilī exegete, meaning that Zakariyyā refrained from talking to people by his own will and devoted himself to prayer and contemplation even though other interpretation is more preferred and common, which is that although Zakariyyā has the power to remember God and pray to Him, he will not be able to talk to people, but that he can only communicate through signs. In this context, Asad makes a comment against Luke’s narrative, which looks similar with the majority of the Qur’ānic exegetes’ interpretation.

Regarding Asad’s critical approach to isrā’īliyyāt reports above, it is worth mentioning here that the modernist and rationalist orientation of Asad’s commentary on the Qur’ān should be understood within the early Muslim modernist trend. Therefore, it is significant to highlight Abduh’s intellectual influence on Asad’s work (Dango 2018). Asad attempts to rationalize miraculous extraordinary events in the Qur’ān as can be seen regarding the case of Mary’s provisions above.

Muhammed Asad makes some comments on Q. 19: 7–16. He provides the meaning of the name Yahyā (John the Baptist). He also makes a connection between the story of Yahyā and the story of Maryam, pointing out that John’s birth story is followed by that of Jesus in these both sūras, Maryam and Āl Imran, for two reasons: first, because John (also known as “the Baptist” in the Bible) was to be a forerunner of Jesus, and second, because there is a clear connection between the birth announcements of these two children (Asad 1984). In his short notes, Asad indicates Yahyā’s biblical description and his role as the forerunner of Jesus.

In Le Saint Coran, Muhammad Hamidullah (2000) provides some explanatory notes on Q. 3: 37–40. On Q. 3: 37, he states that “Zechariah” is the father of John the Baptist. He had nothing to do with the prophet, who had a chapter with his name in the Old Testament. Regarding Q. 3: 38, Hamidullah (2000) recommends comparing this story through the Gospel of Luke (1, 5–25), highlighting that the Qur’ān only reminds us of the previously known story and is content with making certain points. Regarding “ews of John, confirming a Word from God” on Q.3:39, he remarks that the “word” here means both God’s command and Jesus himself (Hamidullah 2000). As the above shows, Hamidullah has not any hesitation to make a reference to Gospel of Luke in his notes, interestingly noting that the Qur’ān only reminds us of the previously known story. As Hamidullah lived in the
West for a long time, it seems that he aimed to address the Western people as an audience and adopted a comparative approach by comparing certain topics of the Qur’an with other religions and cultures. However, his detailed approach to other religions or Bible references are beyond the scope of this article. In addition, he does not look to rationalize miraculous extraordinary events in the story like Asad did.

In the introduction to his annotated translation of the Qur’an, Suat Yıldırım (2006) provides some major characteristics of his Qur’an translation. In this context, he emphasizes that at times he touched on parallels with existing Torah and biblical texts merely for the purpose of comparison and for demonstration of the places other scriptures have on the same topics rather than interpretation. He also refers to other exegetes who adopted a similar method of citing other scriptures for the purpose of comparison such as Rashid Riḍā, Ibn Āshūr, and Muhammad Hamidullah. On Q. 3: 41, Yıldırım makes a reference to Luke, 1, 20. Regarding Q. 19: 2–15, he provides some biblical references to certain verses. He refers to Luke, 1, 5–25 for Q. 19: 2; 1 Chronicles, 23 for Q. 19: 5–6; Luke, 1, 5–22 for Q. 19: 7; Luke, 1, 5–22 for Q. 19: 15. Finally, at the end of the story of Prophet Yahya, Yıldırım (2006) makes a brief comparison between the Qur’anic and biblical narratives, stressing that there are just two differences between the stories of the Qur’an and Gospel: 1. Zachariah’s being not able to communicate is a sign in the Qur’an, but it is a type of punishment in according to Luke’s Gospel. 2. This took 3 days according to the Qur’an, however, in Luke’s Gospel, Zachariah did not communicate until the birth of John (Yahya). Yıldırım (2006) makes it clear in his introduction that references to the Bible and other scriptures are made for the purpose of comparison and to be aware of the information and contents of other scriptures as the Qur’an makes references to Torah, Gospel, and Palms in many places. Yıldırım’s Qur’an translation adopts a unique style. In many cases, the translation just provides references to the Bible in the relevant parts without citing them, and examination and comparison are left to readers. In his translation, Yıldırım applies for the modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible. However, he follows the mainstream traditional line without attempting to rationalize and demythologize miraculous extraordinary events.

From a comparative theology perspective, it could be concluded that our selected authors above attempt to perform interreligious learning by direct citations from the Bible in their respective works. They believe the importance of intertextual readings and interreligious learning in the contemporary context and globalized, pluralist world. However, their level of engagement with the others’ scriptures seems different. At this point, as Kaya (2013) highlights, the crucial question is that on which contexts and purposes the Bible is cited/referenced in modern Qur’an commentaries? If the biblical texts are cited merely for the purpose of comparison and what do other scriptures have on the same topics, this could be considered as more intertextual dialogue or a history of religions because comparative theology is considered as broader advancing of theological understanding and advancing religious truth, not only just understanding (Cornillé 2019). The level of understanding could be more related to Scriptural Reasoning. Moreover, in Abduh’s case, if the purpose is citing the Bible as the modern source of tafsir (Qur’anic exegesis), this could be a closer engagement and deeper reading as Abduh believes that it needs to be relied on others’ own books/scriptures during the interpretation of the relevant parts of the Qur’an (Abduh and Rashid Riḍā 1947, p. 18). In addition, it could be highlighted that the context of our selected authors affected their level of engagement with the others’ scriptures in their works.

Finally, as indicated in the introduction, samples of interreligious learning took place in several fields of Islamic studies. Besides certain examples of mysticism (sufism) and ethics in the classical period, it should be noted that knowledge in some isrā’īliyyāt reports is considered reliable and acceptable in the history of Qur’anic exegesis and the genre of stories of prophets (qisas al-anbiyā’). Though Ibn al-Kathīr was critical of using isrā’īliyyāt in his Qur’an commentary, he included some biblical narratives about Yahya (John the Baptist) in his stories of prophets collection. The field of Islamic jurisprudence could be
another example as the laws preceding Islam (ṣhar‘u man qablanā) are considered one of the secondary sources of Islamic Jurisprudence. The previous laws can be used as evidence if the laws are mentioned in the Qur’ān and Sunnah without being identifiably rejected or abrogated (Kamali 2003).

4. Conclusions

This article has analyzed Prophet Yahyā (John the Baptist) in the Qur’ān in the light of the exegetical tradition and certain Qur’ān commentaries. A brief historical overview of using ʾisrāʾʿīliyyāt reports (related to biblical materials) in the interpretation of the Qur’ān, along with a modern tendency of direct citations from the Bible were also examined. As a case study, this article also focused on Abduh and Rashid Riḍa’s Qur’ān commentary, and three annotated translations of the Qur’ān, namely Muhammed Asad, Muhammad Hamidullah, and Suat Yıldırım, regarding two chapters (Q. 3: 39–41 and Q. 19: 2–15) and evaluated their approaches to the story of Yahyā/John the Baptist in the Qur’ān.

This article has emphasized that the narrative of Yahyā (John the Baptist) indicated a similar story between Islamic and Christian Scriptures, and commonalities should be seen as a bridge between Islam and Christianity while being aware of the fact that some distinct differences are also present. This article has also highlighted that there have been examples of learning across religious borders in the Islamic tradition. Closer intertextual readings, deeper learning from each other, and mutual illuminations could be a good model for the Muslim world in today’s globalized world as home tradition could be better understood through looking at other traditions. Narratives on common figures or teachings on common themes of humanity in different traditions may provide different perspectives and insights.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 The Laws preceding Islam (ṣhar‘u man qablanā) is considered one of the secondary sources of Islamic Jurisprudence. There are some previous rulings which are valid and binding onto Muslims as well. One example is Q. 2: 183: “O you who believe! Prescribed for you is the Fast, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may deserve God’s protection”. The previous laws can be used as evidence if the laws are mentioned in the Qur’ān and Sunnah without being identifiably rejected or abrogated. This is the majority of Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali, and some Shafi'i jurists. Also, as another example, Hanafis validated the execution of a Muslim for murdering a non-Muslim due to ‘life for life’ (Q. 5: 45: “In the Torah We prescribed for them a life for a life . . . ”) (Kamali 2003).

2 The figure of John in the Bible is enigmatic, and there have been numerous studies on him. As some examples, see; Josephine Wilkinson’s John the Baptist: His Life and Afterlife (2022), Frederick Brotherton Meyer’s John the Baptist (2022), Wonjoo Hwang’s “A Comparative Study of Zakariya/Zachariah and Yahya/John the Baptist in the Islamic and the Biblical Narratives” (2022), Małgorzata Grzegorzewska’s “The forerunners St. John the Baptist and Lazarus in the poetry of T. S. Eliot” (2020), Joel Marcus’s John the Baptist in History and Theology (2018), Dorothy A. Lee’s “Witness in the Fourth Gospel: John the Baptist and the Beloved Discipline as the Counterparts” (2013), Jaroslav Rindoš’s He of Whom it is Written: John the Baptist and Elijah in Luke (2010), Rivka Nir’s “Josephus’ Account of John the Baptist: A Christian Interpolation?” (2012), Francois P. Viljoen’s “The righteousness of Jesus and John the Baptist as depicted by Matthew” (2013).

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