

Is there something built into their sacred texts that means that Jews and Muslims will always be in conflict with each other? A Turkish scholar has argued that history and tradition show that Judaism and Islam can flourish together in peace and prosperity / By **BRUCE CLARK**

# Two peoples, one prophet

**M**USTAFA AKYOL (pictured) is an incorrigible optimist. As a practising Muslim and a well-regarded member of the commentariat in Washington DC, the Turkish writer and thinker has been indefatigable in making the case for the compatibility of things many have called incompatible.

A senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington DC, and a visiting lecturer at the Jesuit-run Boston College, Akyol has argued for a benign symbiosis between secular governance and open-ended rational enquiry on one hand and revealed religion on the other. He also advocates the possibility not just of tolerance but of fruitful co-existence between the monotheistic faiths.

In *The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of the Muslims*, he compared the Christian and Muslim views of Jesus. In his new book, *The Islamic Moses: How the Prophet Inspired Jews and Muslims to Flourish Together and Change the World*, he argues that Judaism and Islam can live together in stimulating amity.

This is, to put it mildly, a courageous and timely undertaking. Both in the region and beyond, there has been a surge in hateful rhetoric framed in religious terms since the Hamas atrocities of 7 October, the Israeli onslaught on Gaza which began shortly afterwards, the expansion of the war into Lebanon and the launch of missiles from Iran into Israel. Even more common than open hate-speech is the assertion that the other side is motivated by its own sacred texts to act murderously.

Muslim critics of Israel point to the Hebrew Scriptures' fulminations against the Amalekites, whose slaughter is prescribed in 1 Samuel 15. Defenders of the Israeli cause point to Qu'ranic verses and *hadiths* – well-attested sayings – which seem openly or subliminally directed against Jews. In particular they recall a *hadith* that was alluded to in the Hamas Charter of 1988, though not in the revised version of 2017: a grim prediction of an end-time moment when stones and trees invite Muslims to kill Jews hiding beneath them.

Akyol argues that the essential commonality between Judaism and Islam is rooted not in Abraham/Ibrahim but in Moses, or, as Islam calls him, Musa. The story of Moses features a lot in the Qu'ran (he is mentioned 136 times against 69 for Abraham), with many details that are familiar from the Hebrew Scriptures: the conflict with Pharaoh, the plagues, the miraculous parting of the sea. There are also differences: the Qu'ranic Pharaoh finally repents of his wrongdoing.

Akyol, like many others down the centuries, points out that there are parallels in the way Moses and Muhammad are presented: both spend their early lives as worthy but ordinary men who are visited by a divine revelation that overwhelms and amazes them as much as it transforms the world. Each leads his people from persecution to relative safety (respectively from Egypt to the Promised Land, and from Mecca to Medina), and each journey becomes an event in sacred history.

Having neatly elaborated his Mosaic arguments, Akyol takes readers on a dizzying Cook's tour of monotheistic history, highlighting the eras when Jews and Muslims co-existed peaceably and profitably. To the well-known fact that Jews found the Ottoman empire safer than Christendom, he adds less familiar points. In the early Middle Ages, all three monotheisms pondered an intractable question: in the quest for knowledge, how can divine revelation be reconciled with empirical observation and the rational world of Aristotle? In Islam, the Mu'tazilite school of theology offered the boldest synthesis and this in turn prompted Jews to think creatively. Although the Mu'tazilites lost Islam's internal debate, liberal-minded Jews should still be thanking them.

**FROM THE MODERN ERA**, Akyol plucks another curiosity. *Pace* Edward Said, he points out that European views of the late Ottoman Middle East were not shaped exclusively by British or French imperialists. There were also influential German-Jewish scholars, with a sympathetic understanding of Islam.

All this merits recalling. At a time when many say that Jews and Muslims are destined always to fight one another, one illustration of the opposite can counter the essentialist case. But Akyol's opening argument about Moses is best seen as a starting-point for a much richer discussion. On this question, there are better things for monotheists to do than play Snap. Moses does not merely set the contours of commonality and difference between three monotheisms; his memory has actually divided each monotheism.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, and their interpretation by generations of Jewish and Christian sages, Moses seems to stand for two opposing ideas, or at least emphases. One is the possibility of a mortal human being having a direct encounter with God, and becoming transformed or even deified in the process; the other is the impossibility of such encounters

and the danger of attempting one. That tension exists in each episode of the Exodus story.

Gazing at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3), Moses learns the awesome Name of God but not before hiding his face and being warned not to come closer. In Chapters 19-20, which culminate in the revelation of the commandments, the appearance of God is signalled by fire and smoke which carry a warning to anyone other than Moses who dares approach. In

Chapter 33, Moses is told he can glimpse God's back but not his face; in the following chapter, his own face becomes radiant after speaking with the Lord but he hides this radiance from his followers.

The importance of Moses seemingly grew in the post-exile period when Israel no longer had sacral kings whose office involved contact with the divine.

But this political change, and the memory of Moses, had two utterly contrasting effects. For legally minded Deuteronomists, Moses represented the idea that to please God the only option was obedience to an elaborate set of rules. For those who still yearned for transcendental or deifying encounter, the radiant face of Moses came to personify exactly that possibility.

The latter school may have been on the defensive in the post-exile world but it clearly survived. By the dawn of the Christian era, we find the Alexandrian Jew Philo waxing lyrical on Moses as a kind of divine king; and Saint Gregory of Nyssa uses similar language in his *Life of Moses*, an astonishing mystical text that speaks of finding God in darkness.

Islam also experienced internal tensions between the primacy of law versus the transcendental experience sought by the Sufis, who made arresting interpretations of the stories about Moses. For example, the image of the parted waters, with an intermediate space between them, could be seen as symbolising co-existence, as well as division, between realms of reality.

Akyol is right to say that it would be beneficial for Jews, Muslims – and indeed Christians – to gather and reflect on Moses. But a searching dialogue about that mysterious figure would reveal as much about fissures within each monotheistic tradition as about the differences between them. That might, in the end, be a helpful process – but it would take patience and honesty, and the participants should expect to learn as much about themselves as about one another.



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