

Amir, Saemi. *Morality and Revelation in Islamic Thought and Beyond A New Problem of Evil*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024, 256 pp.

Zain Ali  
University of Auckland

This is a deeply thought-provoking book in which Amir Saemi draws our attention to the problem of prescribed evil. The problem is presented in the form of three theses that are in tension with each other (p. 23):

Divinity of Scripture. Scripture is the word of an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God.

Existence of Seemingly Prescribed Evil. There are some actions prescribed or permitted by the best interpretation of a Scriptural passage which seem immoral, according to our independent moral judgments.

Reliability of Our Independent Moral Judgments. Our independent moral judgments reliably represent moral values, moral duties, and moral permissions.

Can a believer accept all three theses? Perhaps, but then Saemi claims the believer would run into the following problem:

...if a believer accepts the reliability of our independent moral judgments, and the existence of seemingly prescribed evil, then that person should believe that some seemingly prescribed evil is really evil, and thus that Scripture prescribes evil. This would undermine belief in the divinity of Scripture (p. 23).

In response, a believer may abandon their belief in the reliability of their independent moral judgements and accordingly, may not view seemingly prescribed evil as actual evil.. However, Saemi has in mind modern, progressive and conscientious Muslims – i.e., Muslims who are committed to the independence of their moral judgments, and who would find it hard to question the reliability of their own independent moral judgments (about slavery, sexism, discrimination against minorities, fairness, etc.) (p. 27).

Such a progressive and conscientious Muslim will affirm the divinity of scripture, the reliability of their own independent moral judgments, and is also likely to affirm the existence of seemingly prescribed evil within scripture. As an example, Saemi highlights Quran 4.34, which he observes, “seems to imply that men are in charge of the affairs of women, that wives have a strong duty to be obedient to their husbands, and that husbands can punish wives by beating them when they think that their wives are rebellious” (p. 12). To his credit, Saemi skilfully canvases a range of contemporary Muslim perspectives on Q. 4.34. He observes that there are two broad responses, namely: the reinterpretation view, and the contextualization view.

The reinterpretation view describes approaches which employ exegetical considerations, and linguistic reasoning to render morally controversial passages as being consistent with our independent moral judgments (p. 11). The contextualization view on the other hand, seeks to understand a Scriptural passage, especially a morally controversial one, in light of the historical context of the passage including the values and practices of the people to whom Scripture is revealed (p. 18). Saemi includes Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud as proponents of these two approaches. In relation to Q. 4.34, Saemi observes that Barlas and Wadud hold that it only applies to the cultural context of seventh-century Arabia, and that it acts to restrict (and thus makes an improvement in) the existing practice of unchecked violence against women, in addition, the Arabic *daraba* (i.e., to strike) can also be translated as “holding in confinement” (pp. 9-13).

Saemi suggests that both approaches are problematic, since the reinterpretation view and the contextualization view take our contemporary moral judgments for granted. Both approaches leave us with the following question - why should our contemporary moral judgments guide our interpretation of Scripture and its implications, and not the other way around? (p. 21). Accordingly, Saemi seeks to develop his own response to the problem of prescribed evil and presents two possible responses which we will consider in turn.

The first response appeals to the Quranic narrative relating to Moses and his travels with the enigmatic Khidr. Moses is deeply concerned by the actions of Khidr, and he comes to view these actions as being wrong and immoral (e.g.) Khidr making a hole in a boat thus endangering the livelihood and lives of the boatowners and passengers (pp. 163-164). The Quranic narrative has Moses object to Khidr’s actions, although, as Saemi observes, while Moses believes justifiably that Khidr is right, he also correctly believes that he (rationally) ought not to act in accordance with Khidr’s judgment. Instead, Moses thinks that he should act in accordance with ordinary human morality, it would be morally too risky for him to act upon Khidr’s judgment when he does not have access to the reasons that make Khidr’s judgement to be true (pp. 164-165). As it turns out, Khidr is justified in his actions. However, as Saemi notes, the Quran does not raise any moral objections to Moses’s attitude toward Khidr (pp. 164-165). Acknowledging the epistemic limits of Moses, does not undermine him being rational or justified in his moral objections about Khidr. This insight is codified as the Moses principle:

If one receives very reliable testimony that one should  $\phi$ , and the situation is such that one knows that if the testimony turns out to be

wrong, one's  $\phi$ -ing would be seriously wrong, but one has no idea of how wrong one's not  $\phi$ -ing would be if the testimony turns out to be true, then one ought not to act in accordance with the testimony (p. 165).

Given our epistemic limits, a believer may respond to the problem of prescribed evil by suspending judgement on whether the morally objectionable injunctions of scripture are genuinely wrong. These injunctions may very well be morally justified, however, we do not have access to the underlying reasons for the justification. Consequently, the theist can also withhold judgment concerning whether seemingly prescribed evil holds the status of genuine evil (p. 170). Like Moses, a believer may justifiably object to these injunctions while acknowledging their epistemic limits. A progressive conscientious Muslim may then affirm ordinary human morality, acknowledge that there are apparent morally objectionable injunctions within scripture, but also suspend judgement on whether these injunctions are genuinely immoral given their epistemic limits. At this juncture, I wonder how comfortable a progressive conscientious Muslim will be, with suspending judgment on the reliability of their independent moral judgments in an objective sense. I suspect many would be uncomfortable doing so, especially if they are committed to the independence of their moral judgments and find it hard to question the reliability of their own independent moral judgments.

The second response seeks to reframe the morally objectionable aspects of scripture as legal injunctions. This approach is motivated by a principle Saemi terms Legal Interpretations, which is outlined as follows:

Actions prescribed or permitted by the best interpretation of a Scriptural passage are legally obligatory or permitted, according to religious law. But God or the Prophet may legislate legal obligations or permissions that deviate from moral ones (p. 208).

A believer may respond to the problem of prescribed evil by reframing their reading of scripture. The morally objectionable injunctions of scripture need not be seen as prescribed or permitted actions that are morally obligatory or permitted. Rather, these injunctions may be viewed as legal prescriptions, which need not be in accordance with morality. This approach may initially strike us as being counterintuitive. Here Saemi draws our attention to the Geneva Convention, which is a widely accepted set of international laws that aim to regulate human behavior during war (p. 220). There is, nevertheless, recent discussion suggesting that these laws are morally problematic, since the Conventions make no distinction between the combatants of the conflicting parties; even though the combatants on the just side are not morally on a par with combatants on the unjust side. (p. 220). Even though the Conventions are morally questionable, there are also overriding pragmatic considerations at play, namely, to avoid disputes about who is just or unjust. Rather, the Conventions aim to minimise harm and damage to all, leaving aside questions of morality.

Like the Geneva Convention, the morally objectionable aspects of scripture may then be viewed as legal injunctions that have pragmatic intent. Once these passages

are viewed as legal injunctions that aim to address a social problem, we need not take these passages as applying to all societies at all times. Saemi argues that:

Legal permissions and obligations are designed to solve the social problems of a community. When the structure of the community changes radically, new positive laws are needed. So it is very plausible to think that legal permissions and obligations specified in morally controversial passages need not extend to our modern societies (p. 209).

Applying this to the case of Q. 4.34, Saemi contends that, while the permission for wife-beating as a last resort might be a good plan to improve a deeply misogynistic community, it would be a terrible plan to solve our social problems today, given the broad understanding of the wrongness of sexism in our society (p. 222). A progressive conscientious Muslim may then respond to the problem of prescribed evil by reading the morally controversial passages as context specific laws. Consequently, these passages need not be seen as conveying fundamental moral principles and need not be seen as prescribing actions that are morally obligatory or permitted. The morally controversial passages may be seen as laws that aim to address context specific social issues. As the context changes, so do our laws, such an approach may involve an underlying moral principle - to minimise harm in a way that is in accordance with social context. This second response may rest more comfortably with progressive conscientious Muslims. As it allows for a deeper engagement with the moral and hermeneutical principles that underlie scripture.

There is much to admire in this book as it is clearly written and engaging. Saemi does well to anticipate and respond to potential objections. He also takes up the daunting task of defending the reliability of our ordinary moral judgements. For example, when an agent conscientiously, thoughtfully, carefully, responsibly, and with enough preparation and investigation makes a moral judgment, that judgment is not morally mistaken (p. 200). An aspect of the book that I enjoyed was Saemi's deep engagements with various Muslim thinkers ranging from Abd al-Jabbār, al-Juwayni, al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Tufayl, Averroës and al-Hillī. Saemi engages with these thinkers on questions of morality, ethics and scriptural interpretation. It would have been easy to become lost among the weeds with such an approach, yet Saemi manages to keep these discussions connected with the theme of his book. I also appreciated Saemi's engagement with Quranic narratives, such as Moses and Khidr, and Abraham's sacrifice, and the way these narratives are interlinked with classical and contemporary scholarship on ethics and morality.

A slight concern I have with this work is Saemi's focus on modern, progressive and conscientious Muslims. This may be off-putting to some Muslim readers who do not view themselves in these terms but nevertheless share Saemi's philosophical concerns. I also sense that modern, progressive and conscientious Muslims is a highly diverse group, with varied views as to the strength and grounds of their moral commitments. My concerns aside, Saemi's work is part of an important and growing body of contemporary literature that brings together Muslim tradition and erudite philosophical analysis. This book would be suitable as a reader for a graduate level course on morality and revelation in Islamic thought. Overall, I would highly

recommend this work for anyone with a serious interest in a philosophical approach to faith, scripture and morality.

**Copyright Information**

This is an open-access article published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.