Jihad, apostasy, filicide, and underage marriage: these are but a selection of the controversial and contemporary issues related to Islamic Law which are tackled in this work. Brown explains in his preface the choice of title for his book as well as the phenomenon which compelled him to write it. As a Professor of Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian understanding, he noticed a distinctive dilemma which faced both Muslim and Non-Muslim audiences seeking to understand the religion of Islam: getting to grips with Islamic scripture in the modern age. In the question and answer sessions of his public lectures, he observed repeatedly “the disillusioning clash between scripture and modernity” which faced individuals attempting to comprehend “such and such a controversial Qur’anic verse, or such and such a provocative Hadith” (xv). What complicated the matter was that Islamic scripture does not stand alone; rather it carries with it a rich heritage of interpretative tradition. The real dilemma of Brown’s audiences was thus how to respond to this interpretative tradition in their modern context, which had ushered in a new epistemological era. As a result of this phenomenon, Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy was born. In it the author analyses the interpretative tradition of Islamic scripture, drawing insightful parallels where possible with the scriptural and legal heritage of Christianity, Judaism as well as other religions and civilisations in order to illuminate the discourse. At the same time the author addresses the challenges and choices which modern audiences have faced in responding to this interpretative tradition and ultimately coming to terms with Islamic scripture. At the end of his preface, the author reveals a personal objective in writing this book. Having experienced himself the damage caused by cultural chauvinism and narrow-mindedness in the study of other cultures and traditions, he hopes this book will
contribute to elevating the study of Islam above such paradigms so that it is treated as an equal which deserves a sincere and objective mind.

Critically analysing the scriptural interpretative tradition of Islam is a daunting task in and of itself. It requires a close study of classical books which contain sophisticated discourses written in archaic language and spanning many volumes. Addressing modern contentions and debates surrounding this interpretative tradition alongside such an analysis as well as drawing parallels with the scriptural traditions of other religions and civilisations becomes a task which is far too daunting for many a competent scholar to even consider. Brown’s intimate knowledge of Islam’s scriptural tradition as well as the modern discourses surrounding such tradition allows him to take on such a task, and his decision to do so deserves praise. The huge breadth of references which Brown makes to classical works right across the spectrum of Islam’s various scriptural sciences illustrates the depth and meticulousness of his study. Indeed Brown’s frequent reference to classical legal manuals of Islamic Law such as Al-Mabṣūṭ of Al-Sarakshi and Al-Mughni of Ibn Qudāmah can readily be compared to a student of the English Common Law’s frequent reference to the legal manuals of Blackstone and Coke, such is their status. It is Brown’s personal interaction with Islamic scholarship however which marks the most outstanding feature of this study. Brown’s journey in seeking to unlock and master Islam’s scriptural sciences has taken him to Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Yemen, India and Iran amongst other countries. He is thus able to infuse the study with his own personal insights obtained throughout his long journey, particularly regarding modern discourses and debates on Islamic scripture which have surfaced in the Muslim world.
The book is split into seven chapters. The first chapter titled “The Problem(s) With Islam” serves as an introduction to the book. The author begins this chapter by highlighting the critical importance of scriptural interpretation in Islam using the recent Egyptian revolution as an illustration. He notes how Egyptian Muslims differed completely on an issue as fundamental as revolt against the ruler even though they both based their arguments on the same scripture. Interpreting scripture and understanding its interpretative tradition can thus be a matter of life and death in Islam. Brown then justifies why Islam and its scholarly heritage should be taken seriously before ending with a brief critical analysis of the West’s polemical interaction with Islam which he traces back to John of Damascus in the 8th century. He also notes how Western scholarly and scientific development was “eminently indebted to Islamic civilisation”, mentioning for example that the Muslim polymath Avicenna’s book on medicine was used “as the standard medical textbook in Europe throughout the seventeenth century” (12). He laments the fact that this debt was not acknowledged, rooted as it was in a historical prejudice against the “hated, infidel Saracens” (12).

The second chapter “A Map of the Islamic Interpretative Tradition” presents a critical and sophisticated survey of the Islamic scriptural and scholarly tradition, covering the tripartite development of the legal, theological and spiritual streams of thought which came to life in Islamic history. The chapter is based upon and structured around a book by the classical Indian scholar of the 17th century, Shah Wali Allah, which the author himself acknowledges. The author notes how Wali Allah had pinpointed three main tensions in Islam’s scriptural interpretative heritage. These comprised of an over confidence in reason versus a blind reliance on scriptural text; clinging to the legal minutiae of Islamic law versus the longing to meet God himself, and finally following those who developed the Islamic tradition versus going back to the ones who founded it. Brown begins the discourse on Islam’s legal heritage
by pointing how Pauline Christianity would find the notion of a Prophet bringing an all-encompassing law which covers mundane aspects of life to the finest of details rather difficult to grasp. Jews of Palestine and Babylonia however would find Islamic law much more familiar, possessing as they do a detailed law themselves. The author then delves into a careful examination of why the different schools of law emerged in Islamic history and their variances in legal methodology. In his discussion on the development of the theological schools of Islam, the author draws a very interesting parallel between the Muslim rationalist sect known as the Mutazila, and the famous rationalists of Christianity and Judaism—Boethius and Maimonides—all of whom shared a heavy inclination towards Greek philosophy in their theological discourses. This chapter, the longest in the book, forms the foundation for the rest of the study.

Chapters three, four and five all deal with the canonical authority of scripture, contrasting the evolution of scriptural interpretation in classical eras with the modern period which has witnessed a new epistemological era. The third chapter “The Fragile Truth of Scripture” begins by comparing the contrasting responses of classical Muslim scholars and modern Muslims to Qur’anic verses and Hadith which appear irrational to the human mind. Brown then moves on to deal with the canonical authority of scripture in religious communities and the impact of new epistemological eras on such authority. In this regard he contrasts the approach of the 4th century Church father Eusebius to the anthropomorphisms in the Old testament with the approach of the 17th century iconoclastic Jewish philosopher Spinoza, noting how charity will only be afforded to canonical texts if they hold canonical authority in the minds of their readers. Brown ends by analysing the canonical authority of Islamic scripture and the impact of such authority on Islam’s interpretative tradition.
The fourth chapter “Clinging to the Canon in A Ruptured World” deals with the new challenges modern audiences have faced in dealing with Islam’s interpretative tradition. On the topic of Jihad the author aptly observes how modern Muslim thinkers like Bin Laden and Abduh tried to rehash the traditional position of all four Islamic schools of law on the nature and conditions of Jihad in order to fulfil their own goals and ambitions in light of their modern settings. He also discusses the fierce debate acted out between Muslim intellectuals and scholars in modern day Egypt on the role of women in society and how interpretation of Islamic scripture and its interpretative heritage proved yet again to be deeply contested. The fifth chapter “Muslim Martin Luthers and the Paradox of Tradition” continues to critically assess how modern Muslim scholars and intellectuals have struggled to contend with Islam’s interpretative tradition in the face of liberalist scepticism and opposition to Islamic scripture, drawing a parallel with the legacy of Martin Luther in the Christian tradition. Before discussing the issue of filicide in Islam’s legal tradition, Brown briefly comments on the topic of honour killings, observing that “no Muslim scholar of any note, either medieval or modern, has sanctioned a man killing his mother or sister for tarnishing her or the family’s honour” (180). Brown then delves into a detailed discussion of the position of the schools of law regarding filicide, describing the majority position as an example of tradition trumping scripture. Next Brown discusses the punishment of apostasy in Islamic law. He notes how this was classically understood by reference to religion as a political and community identity, and then observes how modern scholars such as Qaradawi and Gomaa have tried to revise the traditional position of the schools of law on apostasy whilst at the same time trying to respect their authority. Brown ends with an assessment of contemporary Islamic movements such as the feminist movement and the ‘Qur’an only’ movement, noting how they have battled with the interpretative tradition of Islam’s scripture.
Chapter 6 is titled “Lying about the Prophet of God” and focuses on the theory of truth and the notion of the noble lie in Islamic, Buddhist, and Western heritage. Brown notes how Hadith promising 72 virgins for martyrs and comparing the use of usury to committing incest were historically considered weak in authenticity by leading Hadith scholars but were still used in Islamic history as noble lies to encourage Muslims to be pious. In an important passage within this discussion the author suggests a new theory for evaluating Hadith dealing with virtues. The author correctly notes that Hadith scholars were historically willing to accept Hadith of weak authenticity if they deal with virtues which are not considered to affect the legal provisions of the religion. However this was actually a minority opinion amongst Hadith scholars, and even this opinion only allowed a certain level of weakness in authenticity, ruling out very weak Hadith such as Munkar Hadith. Thus I believe the author takes too large a step from this position to his new suggestion that completely authenticated Hadith on virtues should also be considered to have gone through a less stringent process, without providing enough evidence to support his view. The final Chapter titled “When Scripture Can’t Be True” is structured around the topic of domestic abuse and the verse in the Qur’an which gives men the authority to hit their wives. Brown refers to the contentious debates in the modern era surrounding this verse to illustrate for the final time how interpretation of scripture can pose such a dilemma particularly for audiences in a new epistemological era. Within the discussion Brown critically analyses the classical interpretations of this verse and makes an interesting observation of how Islamic courts historically treated domestic abuse more liberally than the legal rulings of private jurists.

In a time when the world rages over the personality of Muhammad and when few things provoke more controversy than the law which he brought, this book is a welcomed study. By addressing the history of Islamic heritage in a sophisticated and competent fashion, Brown is
able to soothe tensions and offer valuable insights which should promote a more open-minded attitude towards the tenets of Islam and trigger a desire to look deeper into the rich heritage of Islamic legal scholarship.