

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN THE QUR'ĀN

# New Perspectives on the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān in its historical context 2

Edited by  
Gabriel Said Reynolds



# New Perspectives on the Qur'ān

In this book, which continues the work of *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*, an international group of scholars address an expanded range of topics on the Qur'ān and its origins, looking beyond medieval Islamic traditions to present the Qur'ān's own conversation with the religions and literatures of its day.

Particular attention is paid to recent debates and controversies in the field, and to uncovering the Qur'ān's relationship with Judaism and Christianity. After a foreword by Abdolkarim Soroush, chapters by renowned experts cover:

- method in Qur'ān Studies;
- analysis of material evidence, including inscriptions and ancient manuscripts, for what they show of the Qur'ān's origins;
- the language of the Qur'ān and proposed ways to emend our reading of the Qur'ān;
- how our knowledge of the religious groups at the time of the Qur'ān's emergence might contribute to a better understanding of the text;
- the Qur'ān's conversation with Biblical literature and traditions that challenge the standard understanding of the holy book.

This debate of recent controversial proposals for new interpretations of the Qur'ān will shed new light on the Qur'ānic passages that have been shrouded in mystery and debate. As such, it will be a valuable reference for scholars of Islam, the Qur'ān, Christian–Muslim relations and the Middle East.

**Gabriel Said Reynolds** is Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Theology at the University of Notre Dame (USA). He is the author of *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Routledge 2010), the editor of *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (Routledge 2008), and the translator of *'Abd al-Jabbār's A Critique of Christian Origins* (Brigham Young University 2010).

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**In memory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943–2010)**  
*requiescat in pace*



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# Foreword

I was given the opportunity to address the scholarly conference on “The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context” at the University of Notre Dame as a guest speaker, and to contribute a rejoinder and a postscript to Dr Nasr Abu Zayd’s opening speech. He spoke about the possibility of a Qur’ānic worldview. I highlighted the fact that ambiguity is intrinsic to language, including the language of the Qur’ān, and said that there is a need for constantly ridding the Qur’ānic worldview of its ambiguities.

Over the course of the three-day conference, the speakers, who were all senior researchers in their own fields, opened up before us the record of Qur’ānic studies to date and placed the Qur’ān “in its historical context.” There was a discussion about the way in which “a” or “aleph” was written in the earliest manuscripts of the Qur’ān (nearly 1,200 years ago) and the problems that this creates in reading some of the Verses (e.g., *lā uqsimu* [“I do not swear”] versus *la-uqsimu* [“I do swear”], and *lā a’bad* [“I do not worship”] versus *la-a’bad* [“I do worship”]). The Qur’ān’s similarities and dissimilarities with the Torah and the Gospel in terms of discourse, the narration of stories, and the way in which they chastise disbelievers were also discussed, as was the importance of diacritics, opening letters of some Sūras, and the dots above and below various letters that would lead to new readings (following Lüling, the German scholar).

Some of the conference participants were Muslims, like myself; such as Nasr Abū Zayd, Munther Younes, Suleiman Mourad, Hani Hayajneh, Waleed Ahmed, Emran Bedawi and Shawkat Toorawa. I thought to myself what a shame it is that conferences of this kind are not held in Islamic countries, and are unlikely to be for the foreseeable future, because they would not be welcomed by Muslims. I recalled a seminar that I attended many years ago in Istanbul, Turkey, which was convened to examine the ideas and works of Professor Fazlur Rahman, the Pakistani Islamologist who taught at the University of Chicago. The seminar’s director highlighted a noteworthy point: that it would be impossible to hold a seminar of this kind in any Islamic country other than Turkey. And this is despite the fact that Fazlur Rahman had not said anything particularly “blasphemous” about the Qur’ān. It occurred to me at the time that not even one of his books had been translated into Persian. But I did not lose hope, because some of Dr Nasr Abu Zayd’s works have been translated and published in Persian. As I reflected on the causes (or reasons) for this, I

realized that political systems are less to blame than religious systems. Even if politicians authorized conferences of this kind, believers would not tolerate them, because they find it difficult to accept that discussions of this kind can benefit their creed. Regrettably, the level of intolerance is still very high in Islamic countries and their religious leaders are more to blame than their political leaders.

A few years ago, thanks to UNESCO's efforts, a seminar on Al-Ghazālī was held in Iran. At first, it was meant to be held in Khorasan, in north-east Iran, where Al-Ghazālī was born and where he was laid to rest. But believers and religious leaders in Khorasan were outraged and did not allow the seminar to go ahead, because they considered Al-Ghazālī, a Sunni, to be anti-Shi'ite. In the end, the seminar had to be moved to Tehran.

The Qur'ān is more important than Fazlur Rahman, Al-Ghazālī, and other scholars and thinkers of course. And it goes without saying that believers do not like to hear and are not prepared to allow any discussion of the Qur'ān's whys and wherefores. It is not difficult to see the reason for this. Fred Donner, too, touched on this subject at the Notre Dame conference. He tried to explain the relationship between "the believer" and "the historian," and to rid believers of any apprehensions they may have about historians of the Qur'ān and religion.

It is not that believers (and, here, I mean learned believers) consider Orientalists and non-Muslims who study the Qur'ān to be malicious or ignorant; but they think that Orientalists' approach averts faith or, at least, is unacquainted with it.

In order to remove all ambiguity, let us replace "approach" with "presuppositions," which is effectively what it means. Believers are of the view that, because of the presuppositions that Orientalists have (or do not have), they ultimately arrive at conclusions that conflict with believers' "beliefs." Moreover, they think that this outcome was foreseen by the Qur'ān, which states that God guides a people with the Qur'ān and leads another people astray. ("Thereby He leads many astray, and thereby He guides many" *al-Baqara* [2] 26). And that the Qur'ān is healing for some and a loss to others. ("And We send down, of the Qur'ān, that which is healing and a mercy to the believers; and the unbelievers it increases not, except in loss" *al-Isrā'* [17] 82). The Orientalists are – in the eyes of believers – the people who go astray, who lose out, and who have not been apportioned anything but a repudiation of the Qur'ān. ("What, do you hold this discourse in disdain, and do you make it your living to cry lies?" *al-Wāqi'a* [56] 81–82)).

Jalaleddin Rumi conveys this same notion in a beautiful, poetic form by likening the Qur'ān to a rope (an analogy derived from the Qur'ān itself): "Many are they who have been misled by the Qur'ān / Many are they who followed this rope to the bottom of the well / But the rope is not to blame, O misguided one! / It is you who lacked the aspiration to ascend" (*Mathnawī*, Book III).

Rumi argued that the "aspiration to ascend" precedes and is superior to exegesis, and that the exegete's understanding follows from his intention and purpose. Rumi asks, what can the Book possibly do for an exegete who does not have the intention and the aspiration to be guided and to emerge from the well?

Of course non-Muslims who study the Qur'ān believe that their work is objective, impartial and scientific, and they do not accept any of the charges that are

leveled at them. They can even appeal to modern epistemology's findings, which hold that knowledge is fundamentally a collective and ongoing affair that cannot be summed up in this or that individual's opinion, and that although any researcher may have his or her own particular predispositions and myopias, the convoy of learning, as a whole, is led by rational argumentation; so, the strongest arguments always win the day. All the same, this defensive statement does not convince Muslim believers. They argue, for their part, that objectiveness and impartiality are little more than myths and that no researcher is immune to interference by non-epistemic factors. Researchers are not angels who are totally devoid of desires and dogmas and abide unswervingly by rational argumentation and abstract reasoning. In other words, the adherence to dogma, of which believers stand accused, also exists in different ways among non-Muslim scholars who boast of impartiality. And this is precisely why the goods that the "Orientalists" have to offer seem so suspect (and even abhorrent) to believers.

In short – the argument goes – what we have here is one set of dogmas versus another set of dogmas, and one faith versus another faith; not dogma versus objectivity, not attachment versus detachment, not obscurantism versus science. And this being the case, why should we abide by non-believers' dogmas and undervalue and abandon our own religious attachments and dogmas?

Simply saying that "the Qur'ān is far too important to be left to lovers alone" will not lead us to the conclusion that the analysis should be left to non-lovers (with their claims of impartiality), since, although these "non-lovers" are not in love with the Qur'ān, they are in love with other ideas and schools of thought. And this is enough to undermine their robustness and impartiality.

Thomas Kuhn, through his theory of paradigms, and Michel Foucault, through his idea of Epistemes, have shown that "empirical science" is itself an ideology, with all the dimensions and corollaries that this entails. So, what grounds can there be for any claims of impartiality, especially in areas, such as Qur'ānic studies, where it is not at all a question of the mathematical precision of the natural sciences, but a question of tentative historical conjectures?

Bear in mind, too, that Orientalists – like biologists who dissect a dead corpse – seek to unravel the genesis of the Qur'ān, its relationship with pre-Islamic times and the Arabian environment, and the means whereby it was compiled, and to study the different manuscripts, examine in excruciating detail some of its unusual terms, expose any contradictions, compare it with other holy books, discover what it derived from earlier sources and authorities, and so on and so forth. Meanwhile believers – who are more like the guests of a friend who is very much alive – seek to discover the meaning of the Friend's talk and to enjoy it, to act on the Friend's prescriptions and proscriptions, to delve deep into the secrets and beauties of His discourse, to read it, to share in the Prophet's transcendental experience, and so on and so forth. Does this not make it clear that these two sets of people, with their two differing approaches, are seeking two different goals? Does it not make it clear that not viewing the Qur'ān as revelation opens the way to conclusions that viewing it as revelation forecloses, and vice versa? And if the first approach bars the way to the second, why should we not sacrifice the second?

If we were to leave things here, we could conclude that Muslim researchers' disregard for Orientalists' achievements is justified and thus feel no urge to esteem Orientalists' endeavors. But the truth of the matter is that the stand-off between the two sides' arguments hides something from view which we must now bring to light and explain.

The tale of the impact of presuppositions on understanding and interpreting empirical findings is a well-known and well-supported one. And, of course, there is no disputing it. But the thing that remains hidden and unsaid in all this is the tale of the impact that empirical findings can have on presuppositions. The dialectic between facts and presuppositions is what we should bear in mind and heed here. We must not remain endlessly confident and complacent that, thanks to our presuppositions, everything will always succumb to our views and fall in line with our intentions. For how, in the midst of such complacency, would we critically assess our presuppositions? Are they immune to criticism and change? This is undoubtedly not the case. Presuppositions (which are generally non-empirical) can be subjected to critical assessment by two means: first, with other presuppositions and, secondly, with findings and facts. And this is exactly how the achievements of the two groups of scholars – believers and non-believers – can come to one another's assistance. A critically-assessed active understanding is much more mature than a simple, passive understanding. And a critically-assessed understanding becomes possible in the light of a critical assessment of presuppositions. We must value the critical assessment of presuppositions and borrow things from "the others." If we accept this, then, we must amend the earlier phrase in the following way: "The Qur'ān is far too important to leave its critical assessment to lovers alone," because lovers do not criticize and revise; they worship. The lovers must be told that the beloved Book may well appear more beautiful and authentic to them after being revised. But let it also be added that the Qur'ān is not a book that can be understood via critical assessments alone. The eyes of believers can see beauty and perfection therein that are invisible to non-believers' eyes. And this is a ruling that holds true for all the classical works of religion, mysticism and literature. The two different ways of looking at them are complementary.

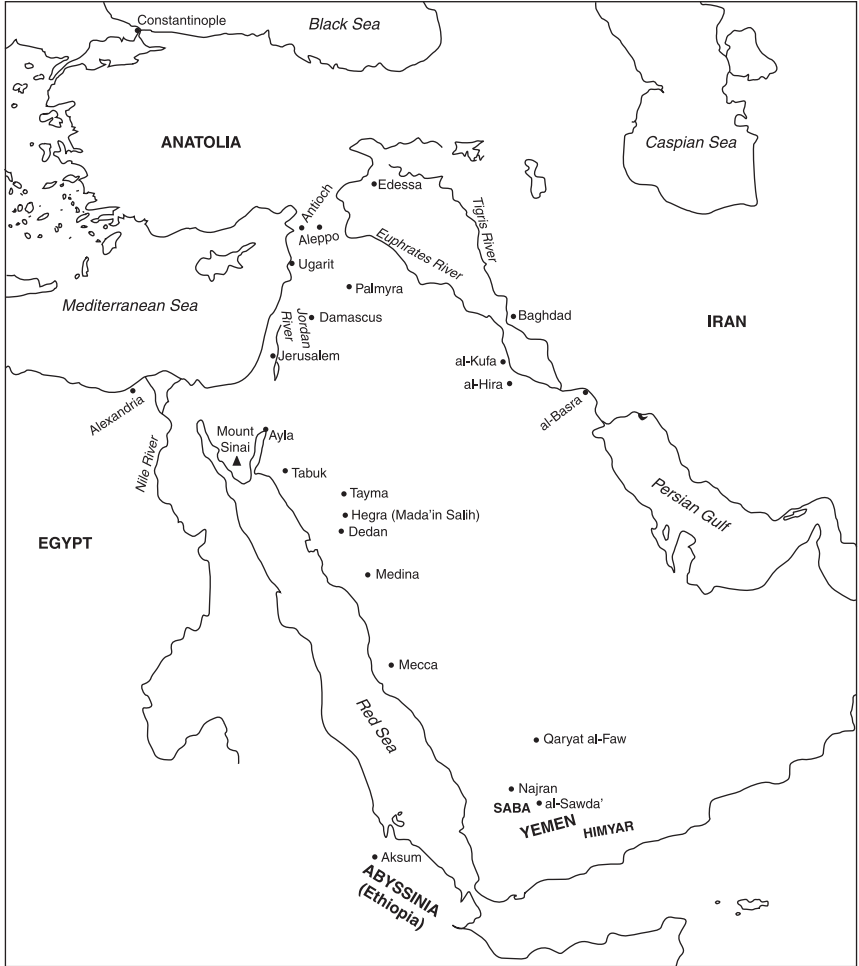
What I have proposed esteems both the work of non-Muslim researchers and their fair-minded, "non-believing" explorations, and the work of Muslim exegetes who seek guidance in the Qur'ān, see it as a gift from God that contains transcendental secrets, and turn to it in order to find felicity, not to dissect it.

Far from forcing each other off the road, these two approaches can open up new avenues for each other, as long as they do not fall into the trap of pious dogmatism or academic exclusivity and snobbery. Perhaps the following verses (*al-Rahmān* [55], 19–22) are the ideal words with which to conclude this foreword: "He let forth the two seas that meet together, between them a barrier they do not overpass . . . From them come forth the pearl and the coral."

Abdolkarim Soroush

# Abbreviations

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <i>BSOAS</i>          | <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>  |
| <i>CSCO</i>           | <i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i>   |
| <i>EF<sup>2</sup></i> | <i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , Second Edition, Leiden: Brill, 1954–present  |
| <i>EQ</i>             | <i>The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān</i> , ed. J. McAuliffe, Leiden: Brill, 2001–present   |
| <i>FV</i>             | A. Jeffery, <i>The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān</i> , Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938. Reprint: Leiden: Brill, 2007   |
| <i>GAL</i>            | C. Brockelmann, <i>Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur</i> , Leiden: Brill, 1937–49   |
| <i>GAS</i>            | F. Sezgin, <i>Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums</i> , Leiden: Brill, 1967–2000   |
| <i>GCAL</i>           | G. Graf, <i>Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur</i> , Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1947  |
| <i>GdQ1, 2, 3</i>     | <i>Geschichte des Qorāns</i> , 2nd edition, including T. Nöldeke <i>Über den Ursprung des Qorāns</i> (volume 1) and F. Schwally, <i>Die Sammlung des Qorāns</i> (volume 2), Leipzig: T. Weicher, 1909, 1919; Reprinted with G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl, <i>Die Geschichte des Koran-texts</i> (volume 3), Leipzig: T. Weicher, 1938; reprint: 3 vols in 1, Hildesheim: Olms, 1970. (1st edition, including only volume 1: T. Nöldeke, <i>Geschichte des Qorāns</i> , Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1860) |
| <i>JAOS</i>           | <i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>  |
| <i>JNES</i>           | <i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>   |
| <i>JQS</i>            | <i>Journal of Qur'ānic Studies</i>   |
| <i>JRAS</i>           | <i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>  |
| <i>JSAI</i>           | <i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>   |
| <i>JSS</i>            | <i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>  |
| <i>MIDEO</i>          | <i>Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales du Caire</i>  |
| <i>MUSJ</i>           | <i>Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph</i>   |
| <i>OC</i>             | <i>Oriens Christianus</i> (serial)   |
| <i>QHC</i>            | <i>The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context</i> , ed. G.S. Reynolds, London: Routledge, 2008   |
| <i>SI</i>             | <i>Studia Islamica</i>   |
| <i>ZDMG</i>           | <i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>   |



Locations cited in the present volume.

# Introduction

## The golden age of Qur'ānic studies?<sup>1</sup>

*Gabriel Said Reynolds*

On the afternoon of Monday July 5, 2010, as I was working on a draft of the present introduction, I received the terrible news that Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd had died earlier that day in Cairo. Professor Abu Zayd, the keynote speaker of the 2009 Notre Dame Qur'ān conference on which this book is based, was a revered teacher of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. His Arabic works on Islamic thought were translated into Turkish, Persian, Indonesian, and many European languages. His “humanistic hermeneutic” (see his contribution to the present volume), a method of Qur'ān interpretation developed during his work in exile towards the end of his life, garnered significant interest in the West and in the Islamic world.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly Prof. Abu Zayd was often asked to give major speeches, and to him the keynote speech at our conference could hardly have been an extraordinary event. Yet to the community of students and scholars of the Qur'ān who gathered at Notre Dame it certainly was. And so the present book is dedicated to his memory, in gratitude for his presence among us in April 2009, and in gratitude for the wisdom he has shared with many throughout the years.

The April 2009 Notre Dame Qur'ān conference was preceded by a conference in 2005, the papers of which were published under the title *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (Routledge, 2008). In that book's introduction, subtitled “Qur'ānic Studies and Its Controversies,” I describe the mysteries surrounding the supposed destruction of the Qur'ān manuscript films collected by Gotthelf Bergsträsser (d. 1933) and Otto Pretzl (d. 1941) and the early Qur'ān manuscripts discovered in 1972 in the Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā', Yemen. I focus, however, on the works of those authors who have challenged traditional ideas about the Qur'ān in recent decades. The works of these authors, I argue, have fomented methodological confusion in Qur'ānic studies: “Their theories, besides their basic precept, actually have very little in common. This sub-culture, therefore, has not developed a methodology, much less a school, that poses an organized challenge to the current paradigm.”<sup>3</sup>

1 In preparing the present introduction I benefited greatly from the process of reading and editing the works of the contributors to this volume. I would like to express my gratitude to them, and to Prof. Michael Pregill, who offered constructive observations on an earlier version of this introduction.

2 To this end see the PhD dissertation of Yusuf Rahman (McGill University, 2001): *The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpretation*.

3 G.S. Reynolds, “Introduction: Qur'ānic Studies and Its Controversies,” *QHC*, (1–25) 8.

In the introduction to the present book I will focus not on particular controversies, but rather on the remarkable increase of work in Qur'ānic studies generally. Indeed if such things were to be evaluated by the level of activity alone, then it would seem that the golden age of Qur'ānic studies has arrived. In order to illustrate this scholarly activity I will present the state of Qur'ānic studies today in the light of earlier assessments of the field. Thereafter I will ask whether this activity is indeed the sign of a golden age.

### Three assessments of Qur'ānic studies

In the "Present Status of Qur'ānic Studies," published in 1957, Arthur Jeffery emphasizes the failure of scholars to produce critical work on the text of the Qur'ān.<sup>4</sup> While noting numerous studies (including his own) on non-canonical (*muṣḥaf*)<sup>5</sup> and canonical (*qirā'āt*) variants to the Qur'ān,<sup>6</sup> Jeffery laments the failure of the project that he had begun with Bergsträsser and Pretzl to produce a critical edition of the Qur'ān.<sup>7</sup> He notes that the 1342/1924 edition of Cairo had increasingly become something approaching the *textus receptus* of the Qur'ān, even among western scholars. Yet this edition, he adds, is an imperfect reproduction of the Ḥaḥṣ (d. 180/796) 'an 'Āṣim (d. 127/745) tradition and hardly a critical text.<sup>8</sup> As for the ever increasing number of translations of the Qur'ān in his day, Jeffery finds them largely redundant: "Translations, however, in both European and Oriental languages, continue to appear, but with few exceptions, they make no real contribution to Qur'ānic studies."<sup>9</sup>

4 See A. Jeffery, "The present status of Qur'ānic studies," *Middle East Institute: Report of Current Research*, Spring 1957, 1–16.

5 G. Bergsträsser, "Die Koranlesung des Ḥasan von Baṣra," *Islamica* 2, 1926, 11–57; idem, *Nichtkanonische Koranlesarten im Muḥtasab des Ibn Ginnī*, Munich: Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1933; *Ibn Halawaiḥs Sammlung nichtkanonischer Koranlesarten*, Istanbul: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1934; A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Qur'ān: The Old Codices*, Leiden: Brill, 1937; idem, "The Qur'ān readings of Zaid b. 'Alī," *Revista degli Studi Orientali* 16, 1936, 49–89; idem, "The Qur'ān readings of Ibn Miqṣam," *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume*, Budapest: n.p., 1948, 1–38.

6 A. Jeffery, *Two Muqaddimas to Qur'ānic Sciences: The Muqaddima to the 'Kitāb al-Mabānī' and the Muqaddima of Ibn 'Atīyya to His Tafṣīr*, Cairo: Brothers Khanijī, 1954; O. Pretzl, "Die Wissenschaft der Koranlesung," *Islamica* 6, 1934, 1–47, 230–46, 290–331; E. Beck, "Der 'uṭmānische Kodex in der Koranlesung des zweiten Jahrhunderts," *Orientalia* 14, 1945, 355–73; idem, "Die Kodizesvarianten der Amṣār," *Orientalia* 16, 1947, 353–76; idem, "Studien zur Geschichte der Kūfischen Koranlesung in den beiden ersten Jahrhunderten I," *Orientalia* 17, 1948, 326–54; idem, "Studien zur Geschichte der Kūfischen Koranlesung in den beiden ersten Jahrhunderten II," *Orientalia* 19, 1950, 328–50; idem, "Studien zur Geschichte der Kūfischen Koranlesung in den beiden ersten Jahrhunderten III," *Orientalia* 20, 1951, 316–28; idem, "Studien zur Geschichte der Kūfischen Koranlesung in den beiden ersten Jahrhunderten IV," *Orientalia* 22, 1953, 59–78; idem, "Die Zuverlässigkeit der Überlieferung von ausser'uṭmānischen Varianten bei al-Farrā'," *Orientalia* 23, 1954, 412–35.

7 On which see G.S. Reynolds, "Introduction: Qur'ānic studies and its controversies," 3–7.

8 "As Bergsträsser pointed out in his 'Koranlesung in Kairo,' in *Der Islam* 20, 1932 this edition does not succeed in giving an entirely satisfactory text of the Ḥaḥṣ tradition, largely because its editors relied on relatively modern writers instead of going back to the older and more reliable sources." Jeffery, "The present status of Qur'ānic studies," 2.

9 *Ibid.*, 3–4.

Regarding “higher (or literary)” studies of the Qur'ān, Jeffery is hardly more enthusiastic. He notes with appreciation the appearance of Régis Blachère's *Introduction au Coran*,<sup>10</sup> and the posthumous publication of Richard Bell's *Introduction to the Qur'ān*,<sup>11</sup> but he concludes that neither surpasses Nöldeke (et al.)'s *Geschichte des Qurāns*. To this Jeffery adds: “There has been no recent systematic investigation” of the grammar and syntax of the Qur'ān, and “we still have no comprehensive work on the theology of the Qur'ān.”<sup>12</sup> He similarly laments the absence of a comprehensive work on the literary and religious sources of the Qur'ān (commenting, “we are still using the rather antiquated works of Geiger . . . and St. Clair Tisdall”<sup>13</sup>). He does, however, acknowledge the appearance of a considerable number of studies focused on either Jewish or Christian antecedents to the Qur'ān. To this end Jeffery recognizes in particular the exceptional value of Heinrich Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Koran*.<sup>14</sup>

Angelika Neuwirth opens her 1983 analysis of Qur'ānic studies with the remark, “Die westliche Koranforschung . . . steckt – gemessen an vergleichbaren Forschungsgebieten – noch immer in den Kinderschuhen.”<sup>15</sup> Like Jeffery twenty-six years earlier, Neuwirth finds that the field of Qur'ānic studies still lacked the sort of resources that are taken for granted in other fields, such as a dictionary of Qur'ānic Arabic, a comprehensive evaluation of Qur'ānic grammar, and a commentary arranged by subject.<sup>16</sup> Neuwirth describes most recent works in the field as studies of minor, isolated matters, achieved “ohne besonderes Methodenbewußtsein.”<sup>17</sup> Otherwise Neuwirth objects to the manner in which certain scholars (namely Bell, Blachère, and Wansbrough) had argued against the conventional notion that the Sūra was the original organizing unit of the Qur'ān.<sup>18</sup> In a similar tone she notes how John Burton and John Wansbrough both challenged the notion of the 'Uthmānic

10 Paris: Maisonneuve, 1947. NB: Also *The Qur'ān: An Encyclopedia*, ed. O. Leaman, London: Routledge, 2006

11 Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953.

12 Jeffery, “The present status of Qur'ānic studies,” 6.

13 *Ibid.*, 8.

14 After noting his wish that the articles of David Künstlinger would be gathered together and republished, Jeffery adds that it would be “a still greater service if there could be issued in this country [i.e. the United States] Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Koran* (Breslau 1937), all but a few copies of which were destroyed during the anti-Jewish troubles in central Europe.” *Ibid.*, 9. Speyer's work was in fact later republished in Germany: Hildesheim: Olms, 1961.

15 “Qur'ānic studies in the West, when measured against comparable fields of study, is still in its infancy.” A. Neuwirth, “Zum neueren Stand der Koranforschung,” in F. Steppat (ed.), *XXI. Deutscher Orientalistentag, vom 24 bis 29 März 1980 in Berlin*, Supplement 5, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983, (183–89) 183. For a second assessment of the field from roughly the same period see A.T. Welch, “Qur'ānic studies – problems and prospects,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion Thematic Studies* 47:4S, 1979, 620–34.

16 Neuwirth, “Zum neueren Stand der Koranforschung,” 183.

17 “with no particular consciousness of methodology.” *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, 183–84.

codex, although in quite different (and indeed contradictory) ways.<sup>19</sup> Neuwirth dedicates most of her survey to a refutation of their works.<sup>20</sup>

Fred Donner's 2008 assessment of Qur'ānic studies in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* is notably different.<sup>21</sup> Donner is not concerned by a lack of scholarly work on the Qur'ān, but rather by conflicts among scholars working on the Qur'ān. Donner opens his article with the remark. "Qur'ānic studies, as a field of academic research, appears today to be in a state of disarray."<sup>22</sup> Thereafter he identifies five questions regarding the Qur'ān on which no scholarly consensus exists:

- 1 The existence of an "Ur-Qur'ān."
- 2 The character of the "Ur-Qur'ān" (among those who accept its existence).
- 3 The original language and script of the Qur'ān.
- 4 The transmission of the "Ur-Qur'ān".
- 5 The codification and canonization of the Qur'ān.

Donner illustrates how recent critical studies of the Qur'ān have addressed these matters, but in such different ways that no clear picture of the Qur'ān's origins has emerged. Lüling, for example, argues that behind the Qur'ān lies the hymnal of an Arabic Christian community, while Wansbrough proposes that the Qur'ān is the product of scattered "prophetic *logia*." In a more recent publication Christoph Luxenberg contends that the original language of the Qur'ān was heavily influenced by the vocabulary and syntax of Syriac (a language that the Muslim scholars who later established the *scriptio plena* of the Qur'ān did not understand).<sup>23</sup> On the question of the transmission of the Qur'ān, Donner notes the conventional view that an ancient oral tradition accompanied the transmission of the *scriptio defectiva* text, and recent research that seems to contradict this view. On the problem of the codification of the Qur'ān, he comments: "The available evidence

19 J. Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'ān*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977 (reprint: Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004). See A. Neuwirth, "Zum neueren Stand der Koranforschung," 184–87.

20 "Es scheint daran festzuhalten zu sein, daß nicht nur der Koran bei der frühen Gemeinde ein 'wohlbewahrtes Buch' war, sondern auch die Nachrichten über seine Sammlung ein wohlbewahrtes Kapitel in der Geschichte ihres Selbstverständnisses." Ibid., 189

21 F. Donner, "The Qur'ān in recent scholarship: Challenges and desiderata," *QHC*, 29–50. Donner addresses a larger range of scholarship than Neuwirth, in part because Neuwirth's article is intentionally focused on certain questions, and in part due to the works that had appeared in the intervening years (or, in the case of Lüling, works that were available to Neuwirth but which she does not discuss). See G. Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān*, Erlangen: Lüling, 1974; translated and expanded as *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, Delhi: Molital Banarsidass, 2003; idem, *Der christliche Kult an der vorislamischen Kaaba*, Erlangen: Lüling, 1977; idem, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muḥammad: eine Kritik am "christlichen" Abendland*, Erlangen: Lüling, 1981.

22 Donner, "The Qur'ān in recent scholarship," 29.

23 C. Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*, Berlin: Das arabische Buch, 2000 (2nd edition: Berlin: Schiler, 2002; 3rd edition, 2007; English trans.: Berlin, Schiler, 2007).

on the Qur'ān's codification, similarly, seems to provide support for *both* the early-codification and the late-codification hypotheses.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of Donner's article readers might expect a gloomy assessment of Qur'ānic studies. Instead, Donner finds the field to be markedly improved: "I do not want to imply, however, that this current disarray is necessarily a bad thing. Quite the contrary, it is far preferable to the earlier stage of 'false consensus,' which really concealed a failure or refusal to address some burning questions in a critical way (perhaps for fear of antagonizing believers)."<sup>25</sup>

## Current developments in Qur'ānic studies

But the rise of interest in the critical questions of Islamic origins is not the only positive development in Qur'ānic studies. Research on the Qur'ān generally has continued to increase, and today many of the desiderata named by Jeffery and Neuwirth have been achieved. The following brief survey of recent critical work in Qur'ānic studies might illustrate this trend, although it hardly represents a comprehensive catalog of such work.

Perhaps the most significant development in Qur'ānic studies is the appearance of new scholarly reference works. Two Arabic–English dictionaries of the Qur'ān have recently been published: *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (2004) by Arne A. Ambros and Stephan Procházka (supplemented in 2006 by *The Nouns of Koranic Arabic Arranged by Topics: A Companion Volume to the Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*),<sup>26</sup> and *The Arabic–English Dictionary of Qur'ānic Usage* by Elsaïd Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (2008).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, another lexical resource can now be found in Martin Zammit's *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'ānic Arabic* (2002),<sup>28</sup> a work that provides cognate terms in a number of Semitic languages (although not, unfortunately, Christian Palestinian Aramaic) for Qur'ānic vocabulary.

The most significant new publication in terms of breadth is the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (2001–6), which covers a wide range of topics, including many of those which Jeffery felt were in need of scholarly treatment, such as the grammar, syntax, and theology of the Qur'ān. The 2007 publication of the *Dictionnaire du Coran* (not a lexicon but a one-volume reference work), a dense volume with

24 Donner, "The Qur'ān in recent scholarship," 42.

25 Ibid., 43.

26 Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004, 2006.

27 Leiden: Brill, 2008. However this work, it seems to me, does not substantially surpass the 1873 dictionary of John Penrice: *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Qur-ān with Copious Grammatical References and Explanation of the Text*, London: King and Co., 1873. For a more detailed consideration of these and other dictionaries of the Qur'ān see Andrew Rippin's contribution to the present volume: "Studies in Qur'ānic vocabulary: The problem of the dictionary."

28 Leiden: Brill, 2002.

contributions from a wide range of francophone scholars, is likewise a noteworthy development in Qur'ānic studies.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas Jeffery noted the absence of a critical edition of the Qur'ān, this task has now been taken up by a research team of the Freie Universität in Berlin.<sup>30</sup> The significance of this task, however, is still unclear. The defective script of the early Qur'ān manuscripts renders the very definition of a critical edition problematic. If the goal of such an edition is to represent the earliest pronunciation of the Qur'ān, the ancient manuscripts themselves will hardly be sufficient, since they represent only a shorthand of the consonantal text. Scholars might then turn to the reports found in later Islamic literature on the readings (*qirā'āt*) of the Qur'ān to infer the shape of the complete text. But in that case the task achieved would not be fundamentally different from the work of the committee, led by Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Ḥaddād, that established the Cairo version of the Qur'ān on the basis of literary reports of the Ḥafṣ (d. 180/796) 'an 'Āṣim (d. 127/745) reading.<sup>31</sup> Of course, a critical edition could provide a wider range of *qirā'āt* in some sort of apparatus – or perhaps with a digitalized hypertext – and scholars could attempt methodically to decide in each case which reading is more ancient. But then individual scholars can already use a work such as *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt al-qur'āniyya* (1983) to make their own decisions on these matters.<sup>32</sup> In any case scholars might remember that Otto Pretzl himself apparently gave up the task of a critical edition of the Qur'ān towards the end of his life, having grown convinced that the Islamic tradition of *qirā'āt* was essentially exegetical.<sup>33</sup> With similar logic Donner himself

29 Ed. M.A. Amir-Moezzi, Paris: Laffont, 2007.

30 The research project *Corpus Coranicum: Edition und Kommentar des Korans* (the name *corpus coranicum* coming from Pretzl's description of the initial project; see: O. Pretzl, *Die Fortführung des Apparatus Criticus zum Koran. Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1934 (Heft 5)*, Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1934, 12) is described by M. Marx, "Ein Koran-Forschungsprojekt in der Tradition der Wissenschaft des Judentums: Zur Programmatik des Akademienvorhabens *Corpus Coranicum*," in D. Hartwig, W. Homolka, M. Marx, and A. Neuwirth (eds), *Im vollen Licht der Geschichte: Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Anfänge der kritischen Koranforschung*, Würzburg: Ergon, 2008, 41–53.

31 G. Bergsträsser, "Koranlesung in Kairo," *Der Islam* 20, 1932, (1–42), 3–4.

32 *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt al-qur'āniyya*, ed. 'Abd al-'Āl Mukarram and Aḥmad 'Umar, Kuwait: Dhāt al-Salāsīl, 1403/1983.

33 In 1948 August Fischer wrote: "Von den 'Koran-Lesarten,' die m.E. größtenteils weiter nichts sind als Emendationsexperiments philologisch geschulter Koran-Forscher an schwierigeren Stellen des 'oṡmānischen Koran-Textes, ist in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten unter dem Einflusse Bergsträsser's, seines Schülers und Mitarbeiters Pretzl und Jeffery's wohl zu viel Aufhebungs gemacht worden. Pretzl war, wie ich in wiederholten mit ihm in Kairo über diese Dinge geführten Gesprächen feststellen konnte, in den letzten Jahren seines – leider wie das seines Lehrers zu früh tragisch abgeschlossenen – Lebens von der generellen hohen Bewertung der Koran-Handschriften und Koran-Lesarten, wie er sie zunächst von seinem Lehrer übernommen hatte, stark zurückgekommen." A. Fischer, "Grammatisch schwierige Schwur- und Beschwörungsformeln," *Der Islam* 28, 1948, (1–105) 5, n. 4. Anton Spitaler, Pretzl's successor, testifies to the same in his obituary for Pretzl, *ZDMG* 96, 1942, 163–4. Whether Spitaler himself chose not to work on a critical edition on the same grounds is unknown to me.

argues that, in light of our current state of knowledge, any project to establish a critical edition of the Qur'ān will likely be flawed.<sup>34</sup>

Alternatively, of course, the goal of a critical edition could be to represent the most ancient orthography of the text. But in this case a critical edition of the Qur'ān would be effectively illegible, since it would not include the diacritical marks that appear in later manuscripts to fill out the skeletal script of the early manuscripts. Such a critical edition would not be much more useful than the facsimile reproduction of the early manuscripts themselves. And indeed the most ancient manuscripts are increasingly available to scholars. Sergio Noja Nosedà and François Déroche have in recent years published clear and large-scale facsimiles of Ms. arabe 328 from the Bibliothèque nationale de France (1998),<sup>35</sup> and the first half of Ms. Or. 2165 of the British Library (2001).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, an increasing number of *hiǧāzī* manuscripts are available through digital representations online, including Mingana-Islamic Arabic 1572,<sup>37</sup> and twenty-seven of the Qur'ān fragments discovered in 1972 in the Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā', Yemen.<sup>38</sup>

In general the increase in online resources for the study of the Qur'ān is notable.<sup>39</sup> Mehdi Azaiez manages an extremely useful website (<<http://mehdi-azaiez.org>>; in French) with information on conferences and publications in Qur'ānic studies. Meanwhile, the number of websites that offer a variety of Qur'ān translations for

34 “There can be no doubt that the most cherished dream of everyone who works with the Qur'ān – whether academic specialist or believing Muslim (not, of course, exclusive categories) – would be the preparation of a truly critical edition of the text: that is, an edition that, working from the evidence provided by the earliest manuscript sources, comes as close as scientifically possible to the exact wording and vocalization of the original text – the Ur-Qur'ān. But no sooner do we make this statement than, in light of what we have just discussed, we realize how problematic it is. For, the implication of many of the preceding reflections on recent scholarship on the Qur'ān is that we face daunting problems of analysis and interpretation – orthographic, linguistic, and historical – that must be resolved before we could prepare such an ‘Urtext’ edition with any confidence. To attempt such an undertaking before we have attained greater clarity on at least the more pressing of these problems, it seems to me, would be to risk making many false starts and possibly calamitous failure of the enterprise, as laboriously-edited parts of the text were shown to be incorrect by new discoveries.” Donner, “The Qur'ān in recent scholarship: Challenges and desiderata,” 43–44.

35 *Sources de la transmission manuscrite du texte coranique, I. Les manuscrits de style hiǧāzī, le manuscrit arabe 328*, ed. F. Déroche and S.N. Nosedà, Lesa, Italy: Fondazione F. Noja Nosedà, 1998. Regarding this manuscript scholars might also now benefit from the exceptionally detailed study of F. Déroche: *La transmission écrite du coran dans les débuts de l'islam: Le codex parisino-petropolitanus*, Leiden: Brill, 2009.

36 *Sources de la transmission manuscrite du texte coranique, I. Les manuscrits de style hiǧāzī, le manuscrit Or. 2165 (f. 1 à 61)*, ed. F. Déroche and S.N. Nosedà, Lesa, Italy: Fondazione F. Noja Nosedà, 2001.

37 See <[http://vnr.bham.ac.uk/Collections/Mingana/Islamic\\_Arabic\\_1572/table/](http://vnr.bham.ac.uk/Collections/Mingana/Islamic_Arabic_1572/table/)>. As of January 28, 2011 the website incorrectly labels the script “kufic.”

38 See <<http://www.unesco-ci.org/photos/showgallery.php/cat/837>> (accessed May 17, 2011).

39 On this topic generally see A. Rippin, “Tools for the scholarly study of the Qur'ān,” *EQ*, 5:294–300.

comparison continues to increase,<sup>40</sup> while the site “Project Root List” (<<http://www.studyquran.co.uk/PRLOnline.htm>>) allows students to search through a virtually complete list of Arabic consonantal roots in the Qur’ān. Each entry includes a list of the various lexemes in the Qur’ān from that root with an English translation, Qur’ānic chapter/verse references, and relevant grammatical information, along with a link to a PDF of the corresponding entry in Lane’s *Lexicon*. The site <http://cl.haifa.ac.il/projects/quran/> allows users to search a transliterated text of the Qur’ān on the level of morphemes. No less impressive among online resources is “The Qur’ān Arabic Corpus” (<<http://corpus.quran.com>>), a site based at the University of Leeds that provides students with a detailed word by word analysis of the Cairo Qur’ān’s vocabulary, morphology, and syntax, along with various syntactical charts (similar to those commonly used in grammars of New Testament Greek), and a detailed dictionary of the Qur’ān.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, a remarkable number of new critical scholarly studies of the Qur’ān have appeared since the publication of *The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context*. In 2010 the Qur’ān research team centered at the Freie Universität Berlin (led by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michel Marx) published *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations in the Qur’ānic Milieu*,<sup>42</sup> a diverse work with twenty-eight contributions that emerged from a 2004 symposium.<sup>43</sup> A second center of critical Qur’ānic Studies in Germany has also appeared in recent years with the title: *Inārah: Institut zur Erforschung der frühen Islamgeschichte und des Koran*. Led by scholars at Die Universität des Saarlandes (including Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin), the *Inārah* Institute published four collected volumes of critical studies on the Qur’ān and Islamic origins – volumes in part marked by radical historical revisionism – between 2005 and 2009 (and subsequently published two additional volumes).<sup>44</sup>

40 The website <<http://www.quranbrowser.com>> includes ten Qur’ān translations (divided by orthodox Muslim, non-Muslim, and heterodox Muslim translators) into English that can be compared in an interlinear fashion. The page <<http://www.altafisir.com/Languages.asp?LanguageID=2>> includes (as of February 5, 2011) links to translations of the Qur’ān in 25 languages (including eight English translations). The “Online Quran Project” at <<http://al-quran.info>> aims at producing a comprehensive online library of Quran translations (all websites accessed February 5, 2011).

41 Also of note is <[www.altafisir.com](http://www.altafisir.com)> (accessed January 28, 2011), run by the “Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought,” a center founded by the Jordanian government that is also connected with the Common Word project. In addition to a selection of classical commentaries (in Arabic and English translation), their website includes a searchable database of *qirā’āt*.

42 Brill: Leiden, 2010.

43 “Historische Sondierung und methodische Reflexionen zur Koranexegese – Wege zur Rekonstruktion des vorkanonischen Koran.” Berlin, January 21–25, 2004.

44 *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, Ed. K.-H. Ohlig and G.-R. Puin, Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2005; English trans.: *The Hidden Origins of Islam*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010; *Der frühe Islam*, ed. K.-H. Ohlig, Berlin: Schiler, 2007; *Schlaglichter: Die biden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte*, ed. K.-H. Ohlig and M. Groß, Berlin: Schiler, 2008; *Vom Koran zum Islam*, ed. M. Groß and K.-H. Ohlig, Berlin: Schiler, 2009. The theme of illumination is apparent in two of these titles, and in the name *ināra* itself (“enlightenment”).

Of particular note in these contributions is the two-part article of Elizabeth Puin: “Ein früher Koranpalimpsest aus Ṣan ‘ā’ (DAM 01–27.1),” *Schlaglichter*, 461–93, and *Vom Koran zum Islam*,

Similarly a substantial number of individual critical studies of the Qur'ān have appeared in recent years,<sup>45</sup> some of which are marked by idiosyncratic theories. In *Le messie et son prophète: Aux origines de l'islam* (2005),<sup>46</sup> Edouard Gallez argues that Judaeo-Christianity (i.e. the ideas of Jewish Christians) lies behind much of the Qur'ān. A similar, though more sober, argument is found in the work of Joachim Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran, Eine Spurensuche* (2007).<sup>47</sup> These two works might be contrasted with the rhetorical study of Michel Cuypers in his *Le festin: Une lecture de la sourate al-Mâ'ida* (2007). Cuypers analyzes closely the Qur'ān's fifth chapter in order to uncover the logic of its rhetorical strategies and its use of Biblical traditions.<sup>48</sup>

523–81. Puin analyzes several folios of a palimpsest Qur'ān manuscript found in the great mosque of Ṣan'ā' in 1972. In her analysis she details the orthographic variations between the *rasm of the scriptio inferior* and the *scriptio superior* and compares both texts to the standard ("King Fu'ād") 1924 Cairo edition. The implication, evidently, is that an appreciation of the Ṣan'ā' manuscript can help produce a more ancient Qur'ānic *rasm* than that achieved through the *qirā'āt* traditions that shape the *textus receptus*.

A telling comparison can be made between her article and that of Behnam Sadeghi (assisted by Uwe Bergmann): "The codex of the companion of the Prophet and the Qur'ān of the Prophet," *Arabica* 57, 2010, 343–436. Sadeghi seems to have worked with a folio of the same manuscript. Whereas Puin identifies her manuscript as 01–27.1 of Dār al-Makhtū'āt in Ṣan'ā', Sadeghi names the folio he examined only as "Stanford [20]07" and the manuscript to which it belongs only as "Ṣan'ā' 1." However, he reports (p. 355) that his folio, which was purchased at auction at Sotheby's in 1993, belongs to the same manuscript of a folio purchased on auction at Christie's in 2008. For her part Puin comments (p. 461, n. 1) that this latter folio seems to have been taken from the same manuscript with which she worked. Unfortunately Sadeghi seems to have been unaware of Puin's work and makes no mention of it.

In his article Sadeghi similarly analyzes the variants found between the *scriptio inferior* and the *scriptio superior* of the palimpsest. However, his principal concern is to compare both layers with medieval Islamic traditions on the *maṣāḥif*. Ultimately he argues that the *scriptio superior* (which Sadeghi labels "Uthmānic" and argues is a reflection of the Prophet's own reading) of his manuscript is *more* ancient than the *scriptio inferior*, which he attributes to a "companion" (although it does not match the traditional descriptions of any one companion *muṣḥaf*). Thus Sadeghi concludes that the traditional account of the Qur'ān's codification is vindicated by his analysis. This conclusion, he explains, was predictable: "If anybody had the resources to ensure that a reliable version be chosen, it would have been the caliph; and if anybody had more to lose by botching up the task, again that would have been 'Uthmān." (Sadeghi, 414).

<sup>45</sup> In the following section I describe only scholarly monographs, in deference to space. Still it behooves me to mention, at least, the rigorous articles published in recent years by F. de Blois and P. Crone, both of whom approach the Qur'ān in its historical context. See F. de Blois, "Naṣrānī and Ḥanīf: Studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and Islam," *BSOAS* 65, 2002, 1–30; idem, "Elchasai – Manes – Muhammad: Manichäismus und Islam in religionshistorischen Vergleichs," *Der Islam* 81, 2004, 31–48; P. Crone, "How did the Qur'ānic pagans make a living?" *BSOAS* 68, 2005, 87–99; and most recently eadem, "The religion of the Qur'ānic pagans," *Arabica* 57, 2010, 151–200.

<sup>46</sup> Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Freiburg: Herder, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Paris: Lethellieux, 2007; English trans.: *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'ān*, Miami: Convivium Press, 2009. Also noteworthy is the work of M. Cuypers and G. Gobillet, *Le Coran: Idées reçues*, Paris: Le cavalier blue, 2007.

A different approach is taken by David Powers in *Muḥammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (2009).<sup>49</sup> Powers, who presents physical evidence that the consonantal skeleton of Q. 4:12b was revised, argues that the stories of Muḥammad's biological son Ibrāhīm and his adopted son Zayd b. Ḥāritha are narrative tropes more than recorded history.<sup>50</sup> In *Muḥammad and the Believers* (2010) Fred Donner looks to the Qur'ān in order better to understand early Islamic history (the reverse of how things are conventionally done in western scholarship).<sup>51</sup> The Qur'ān, Donner argues (in a manner much more subtle and sophisticated than can be summarized briefly), reflects an interconfessional movement of monotheistic believers; the definitive demarcation of Islam from Judaism and Christianity is a later development.<sup>52</sup>

For his part Tilman Nagel, in his introduction to *Der Koran und sein religiöses und kulturelles Umfeld* (2010),<sup>53</sup> notes the remarkably intimate correspondence between the Qur'ān and Syriac literature of the time. In my own work, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (2010),<sup>54</sup> I likewise emphasize this point, arguing that what seems to be idiosyncratic Biblical material in the Qur'ān (often a cause for scholars to speculate that Muḥammad was influenced by a heterodox Jewish or Christian sect) can be better understood when the Qur'ān's relationship with the tradition of Syriac homilies is appreciated. Furthermore I contend that Islamic exegetical literature (including accounts of *asbāb al-nuzūl*) is best appreciated when read as the creative product of later Islamic intellectual culture, and not as an imperfect record of historical events.

These sorts of arguments are based on a reasoned analysis of the Qur'ān's relationship to earlier literature. In this they differ profoundly from the old tradition of Orientalism, by which research usually begins not with the Qur'ān but rather with a reading (often polemical or hyperbolic) of the Prophet's biography. In this regard it is noteworthy that Michel Cuypers' work, in its English translation, won the 2009 "World Prize for Book of the Year," awarded by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance of the Republic of Iran. This award helps to undermine the fallacy that believing Muslims will neither welcome nor tolerate serious critical research on the Qur'ān. Indeed it would be ironic if scholars in the West today would refrain from such research – concerned that they might offend Muslims thereby – when Muslims in the Islamic world are increasingly interested in it.

49 Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

50 Powers argues (pp. 155ff.) that *kalāla* (in Q 4:12b) is a later correction of *kalla* in the ms. Bibliothèque nationale 328a, and that the second appearance in the Qur'ān of *kalāla* (in Q 4:176) is a later addition meant to explain the new meaning of Q 4:12b. This redaction, Powers contends, reflects changes in inheritance law related to the abolition of adoption in Q 33:4–5.

51 Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010

52 In this regard Todd Lawson's *The Crucifixion in the Qur'ān: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009) is noteworthy. After a detailed examination of the material relevant to the death of Jesus in the Qur'ān, Lawson shows how the traditional Islamic teaching on this question reflects later doctrinal and historical developments.

53 ed. T. Nagel, Oldenbourg: Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, 2010. This work is a collection of papers from a 2006 colloquium on the Qur'ān.

54 London: Routledge, 2010.

## Qur'anic studies and the translation of the Qur'ān

Yet the principal question at hand is not whether critical research in Qur'anic studies is increasingly prevalent, but whether this research is contributing to a more precise understanding of the Qur'ān. In order to address this latter question we might look briefly at recent translations of the Qur'ān. Translators, after all, must deal with what the Qur'ān means, and their work might be thought of as the place where advances in our understanding of the Qur'ān first become evident.

A growing number of translations of the Qur'ān into European languages have appeared in recent years, no doubt due in part to the increased market for all things Islamic since September 11, 2001. Here I will examine briefly six recent translations of the Qur'ān, four of them English: Abdel Haleem, Jones, Khalidi, and the Monotheist Group; one French: Abu-Sahlieh; and one German: Bobzin.<sup>55</sup> With one exception (the Monotheist Group), all of these translations are meant to be grounded in sober academic principles and unaffected by religious commitments. Still, and as we will see, they form a diverse group.

In the introduction to his translation (published 2004), Abdel Haleem explains that in translating he always takes into account the occasion in the Prophet's life when individual passages of the Qur'ān were revealed.<sup>56</sup> Tarif Khalidi (translation published 2008), on the contrary, contends that by emphasizing traditions on the "occasions of revelation" translators risk limiting the meaning of the text: "But the very allusiveness of the text, its impersonality, its-meta-historical tone, seem almost deliberately to de-emphasize context, and to address its audience or readers in a grammatical tense that I have elsewhere called 'the eternal present tense.'"<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> The list of recently published translations of the Qur'ān is in fact much longer. Translations into English since 2005 include as well: *The Koran Handbook: An Annotated Translation*, trans. Nicholas Starkovsky, New York: Algora, 2005; *The Qur'an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English*, trans. Ali Ünal, Somerset, NJ: The Light, 2006; *The Korana of Mother Goddess: A Women's Feminist Koran*, trans. JoAnne Marie, n.c.: Lulu, 2007; *The Qur'an: A Reformist Translation*, trans. Edip Yüksel, Layth Saleh Al-Shaiban, and Martha Schulte-Nafeh, no city: Brainbow, 2007; *The Sublime Quran*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar, Chicago: Kazi, 2007; *The Qur'ān*, trans. Wahiduddin Khan, New Delhi: Goodword, 2009. Uri Rubin's scholarly recent scholarly translation of the Qur'ān into modern Hebrew is also noteworthy: *Ha-Ḳor'an. Tirgem me-'Aravit ye-hosif he'arot, nispaḥim u-mafteah*, Tel Aviv: University of Tel Aviv Press, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> *The Qur'ān*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, xxx. Abdel Haleem introduces his translation with traditional accounts of the biography of Muḥammad, the revelation of the Qur'ān, and the compilation of the Qur'ān. He continues with an account of the Qur'ān's structure (Sūras and verses), and of the traditional division of the Qur'ān into Meccan and Medinan periods. Thereafter Abdel Haleem discusses the style of the Qur'ān, Islamic interpretation (here he is concerned almost exclusively with a defense of the Qur'ān's material on war and the status of women), and the history of English translations of the Qur'ān. Generally his account reflects a concern with religious apology: "By the end of the Prophet's life (632 CE) the entire Qur'ān was written down in the form of uncollated pieces" (p. xvi); "[the companions of the Prophet who collated the Qur'ān] belonged to a cultural background that had a long-standing tradition of memorizing literature, history, and genealogy" (p. xvi).

<sup>57</sup> *The Qur'ān: A New Translation*. London: Penguin Classics, 2008, xii. The reference is to T. Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, 10. Khalidi

For his part Jones (translation published 2007) contends that Islamic traditions on pre-Islamic Arabia might help the translator better understand the Qur'ān's rhetoric, which he explains as an integration of "the clipped, gnomic style" of soothsayers, the "admonitory, exhortative and argumentative style" of scribes, the "narrative techniques" of the story-tellers and the "dramatic style" of some poetry.<sup>58</sup> Different concerns are raised in the introduction to the translation (published 2008) of the Monotheist Group.<sup>59</sup> The anonymous translators (affiliated with the site <<http://free-minds.org>>) are "Quranists" (Ar. *qur'āniyyūn*) and focus therein on the importance of understanding the Qur'ān independently from Islamic tradition and exegesis (which they contend is a sectarian distortion of the scripture) and structures of Islamic authority today.<sup>60</sup>

The French translation of Sami Awad Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh (published 2008),<sup>61</sup> which includes the Arabic text of the Qur'ān in a separate column,<sup>62</sup> is unusual even

divides his translation into paragraphs, in light of his conviction (which he shares with Suyūfī) that the Qur'ān is ordered according to "bursts" of revelation; he marks verse numbers only with a marginal note at the end of each paragraph. Khalidi also distinguishes between genres of Qur'ānic material in his formatting so that the reader might make better sense of the Qur'ān as a literary work ("Where it is in any sense 'dramatic', I have arranged the lines in a vertical 'poetic' fashion." Ibid., xxi.). In his introduction Khalidi also emphasizes the challenges a translator of the Qur'ān is faced with: "But here too I cannot claim to have done anything other than to highlight a problem of translation and offer a tentative solution to it." Ibid., xxi.

58 Alan Jones begins his translation with an introduction to the Prophet's life, including a brief introduction to the geography and demography of pre-Islamic Arabia, along with a traditional account of the religion and culture of pre-Islamic Arabs. When it comes to introducing the structure of the Qur'ān, Jones warns the reader that traditions dating individual passages to certain moments in the Prophet's life are unreliable: "But while it is true that with some of the Medinan *sūras* there is quite a good case for relating material they contain to historical events, there is a large number of *sūras* whose dating remains highly doubtful." *The Qur'ān*, trans. Alan Jones, Exeter: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007, 11–12. He adds that the western chronology of the *Sūras* established by Nöldeke is no less so: "Yet it must be said that it is no real advance on the traditional Muslim dating." Ibid., 11. Jones accordingly rejects the traditional notion that Qur'ānic material moved from "terse and abrupt" to "diffuse" during the career of the Prophet, maintaining that a proper evaluation of the text shows that "there is relatively little change of style during the period of the Qur'ān's revelation." Ibid, 16.

59 *The Message: A Pure and Literal Translation of the Qur'ān*, no city: Brainbow Press, 2008.

60 To this end they include, in the introduction, images of early Qur'ān manuscripts meant to show that the *basmallah* should be understood as part of the revelation (whereas later Islamic tradition made it an introductory formula). So too on the basis of manuscript evidence they do not include any titles of the *Sūras* in their translation. In the opinion of the translators their independence from Islamic tradition and authority has allowed them to achieve, as the subtitle of their volume puts it, "a pure and literal Translation of the Qur'ān." However, in order to maintain a connection with the conventional chapter:verse numbering, they do not number the *basmallah* as a verse in their translation.

The translators conclude the introduction with the admonition: "You now should have the necessary tools to educate yourself to the Scripture's system and method for deriving meanings and laws . . . Try to make it a habit of seeking the answers for yourself through the guidance of God . . . Do not be quick to ask 'others' what God says regarding this or that." *The Message*, xix.

61 Vivey: L'Aire, 2008.

62 In the first edition of his translation (*Le Coran*, trans. R. Blachère, Paris: Mouton, 1949), Régis Blachère similarly arranges the Qur'ān according to a chronological ordering of its *Sūras*. Whereas Blachère, however, develops his own chronology, Abu-Sahlieh relies on that established by al-Azhar.

in its form. Abu-Sahlieh arranges the Sūras according to a supposed chronological order, beginning with *al-'Alaq* (Q 96) and ending with *al-Naṣr* (Q 110).<sup>63</sup> For his part Harmut Bobzin does not rearrange the Sūras in his German translation (published 2010), but he does include the traditional Islamic header which makes certain Sūras Meccan and others Medinan.<sup>64</sup> Regarding the translation itself, Bobzin explains that he has attempted to preserve the abrupt quality, and even the rhyme, of terse material in the Qur'ān, and something of the rhythmic nature of the entire text.

Evidently the translations presented here differ both in regard to the formal representation of the text and the usefulness of Islamic tradition in interpreting it. Our concern, however, is to what extent these translations have benefited from recent critical scholarship on the Qur'ān. In order to address this question I turn now to their rendering of two passages which have presented difficulties to earlier interpreters. The first, *Āl 'Imrān* (3) 3–4, is concerned with Biblical material:

*Nazzala 'alayka al-kitāba bi-l-ḥaqqi muṣaddiqan li-mā bayna yadayhi wa-anzala l-tawrāta wa-injīl \* min qablu hudan li-l-nāsi wa-anzala l-furqāna inna lladhīna kafarū bi-āyāti Llāhi lahum 'adhābun shadīdun wa-Llāhu 'azīzun dhū intiqām*

Abdel Haleem – Step by step, He has sent the Scripture down to you [Prophet] with the Truth, confirming what went before: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel \* earlier as a guide for people and he has sent down the distinction [between right and wrong]. Those who deny God's revelations will suffer severe torment. God is almighty and capable of retribution.

Jones – He has sent down to you<sup>s</sup> [the superscript “s”=singular] the Scripture in truth, confirming what came before it. And He sent down the *Torah* and the *Gospel*, \* Previously, as a guidance for the people; and He sent down the Salvation. \* [4a] Those who do not believe in the signs of God will have painful torment. God is Mighty and Able to take revenge.

Khalidi – He sent down to you the Book with the Truth,  
Confirming His previous Scriptures.

<sup>63</sup> Abu-Sahlieh also includes extensive footnotes with indications of variants (*qirā'āt*), relevant Biblical (or Talmudic/midrashic) references, notes on verses considered abrogated by traditional Islamic jurisprudence, and citations of earlier French translations that differ from his own rendering.

<sup>64</sup> *Der Koran*. Munich: Beck, 2010. At the end of the volume Bobzin includes 170 pages of comments, made up above all of brief explanations of the Arabic that underlies the words, syntax, and punctuation he has chosen in the translation. The comments are arranged with chapter/verse references, i.e they are not endnotes. In other words, readers will find no mark in the translation itself to indicate that a comment exists at the end of the volume. Thereby Bobzin no doubt meant to preserve something of the visual simplicity that is found in the standard Arabic Qur'ān. Yet the very length of his explanatory comments illustrates how much of the Qur'ān's meaning is uncertain, and the format of his text might give readers precisely the opposite impression.

And He sent down the Torah and the Evangel, beforehand:

A guidance to mankind.

And He sent down the Criterion.

Those who blaspheme against the revelations of God shall meet with terrible torment.

God is Almighty, Vengeful.

Monotheist Group – He sent down to you the Scripture with truth, authenticating what is present with it; and He sent down the Torah and the Injeel. \* From before as a guidance for the people, and He sent down the Criterion. Those who rejected God’s revelations, they will have a painful retribution, and God is Noble, extracting in Revenge.

Abu-Sahlieh – Il a fait descendre sur toi le livre avec la vérité, confirmant ce qui est devant lui. Il a fait descendre la Torah et l’Évangile \* auparavant, comme direction pour les humains. Et il a fait descendre la délivrance. Ceux qui ont mécru aux signes de Dieu auront un châtiment fort! Dieu est fier et vengeur.

Bobzin – Herabgesandt hat er auf dich das Buch mit der Wahrheit, bestätigend, was vor ihm war. Herabgesandt hat er Tora und Evangelium \* schon vorher – für die Menschen als Geleit. Und die Entscheidung hat er herabgesandt. Siehe denen die nicht an Gottes Zeichen glauben, ist strenge Strafe bestimmt. Gott ist mächtig, Herr der Vergeltung.

In analysing these translations one might first notice certain peculiar features. Abdel Haleem adds the phrase “step by step” to his description of revelation. This may reflect his notion of “occasions of revelation,” but it does not seem to correspond with any phrase in the verse. He also indicates between brackets that the pronoun (which in Arabic has no precedent) “you” (i.e. the recipient of revelation) is the Prophet. His translation “capable of retribution” seems to soften considerably the Arabic *dhū l-intiqām*; others translate: “Able to take revenge;” “Vengeful;” “extracting in Revenge” (I assume “exacting” is meant here); “vengeur” or “Herr der Vergeltung” (in a comment Bobzin suggests “Herr der Rache” as another rendering). *Kafarū* is rendered with different terms and different tenses but (with the exception of Khalidi, who translates “blaspheme”) all of the translators seem to agree that it means something like “deny” or “disbelieve.”

All of the translators likewise agree that the term *kitāb* in the opening line means “book” or “scripture.” They all capitalize their translation of *kitāb* – except for Abu-Sahlieh (in German, of course, nouns are anyway capitalized) – suggesting that they have a specific book in mind. They are less clear about the phrase *li-mā bayna yadayhi*, which some translate as “that which is before him” (Abu-Sahlieh, Bobzin) or “before it” (Monotheist Group), and others as “what went before” (Abdel Haleem) or “what came before it” (Jones) or “beforehand” (Khalidi). These latter translators may mean thereby that the *kitāb* is the Qur’ān itself (which confirms earlier books),

but then Bobzin at least suggests in a comment that the Qur'ān is intended instead by a term in the next verse: *furqān* (regarding which see below).<sup>65</sup>

All of the translators simply render *tawrāt* as Torah, but with *injīl* confusion appears. The Monotheist Group transliterates the Arabic word into English letters (Injeel); Abdel Haleem, Jones, Abu-Sahlieh, and Bobzin translate the term as “Gospel” (Jones puts Gospel in italics). Khalidi uses “Evangel” (perhaps because it means “gospel” but sounds like *injīl*). All of the translators capitalize this term, suggesting that the Qur'ān means a specific book. But none of them explains what *injīl* refers to (The Christian New Testament? Only one of the Gospels? An oral message? A Muslim book?).

Perhaps the most salient difference between the translations is the rendering of *furqān*, a term understood in Islamic exegetical tradition in light of the Arabic root *f.r.q.* (≈“to differ”), but which in western scholarship is often connected to the Aramaic root *p.r.q.* (≈“to redeem”).<sup>66</sup> Abdel Haleem follows tradition, translating, “the distinction [between right and wrong];” Jones translates “the Salvation”, but then adds in a footnote: “or ‘the Criterion;’ ” Khalidi translates, “the Criterion;” as does the Monotheist Group. The capital “C” in these translations implies that the translators think the Criterion is nothing other than the Qur'ān. Abu-Sahlieh translates “la délivrance,” while Bobzin opts for the traditional meaning: “die Entscheidung” (although in a comment he adds, “oder: ‘die Rettung’ ”).

Similar confusion is found in the translations of *al-tīn* (95), a passage concerned in part with eschatology:

*Wa-l-tīn wa-l-zaytūn \* wa-tūri sīnīn \* wa-hādhā l-baladi l-amīn \* la-qad khalaqnā l-insāna fī aḥsani taqwīm \* thummā radadnāhu asfala sāfilīn \* illā lladhīna āmanū wa-‘amilū l-ṣāliḥāti fa-lahum ajrun ghayru mamnūn \* fa-mā yukadhdhibuka ba‘du bi-l-dīn \* a-laysa Llāhu bi-aḥkami l-hākīmīn*

Abdel Haleem – By the fig, by the olive, \* by Mount Sinai, \* by this safe town, \* We create man in the finest state \* then reduce him to the lowest of the low, \* except those who believe and do good deeds – \* they will have an unfailing reward. After this, what makes you [man] deny the Judgement? \* Is God not the most decisive of judges?

Jones – By the figs and olives, \* By Mount Sinai, \* By this secure territory, \* We have created man in the fairest stature; \* When We have rendered him the lowest of the low, \* Except for those who believe and do righteous deeds – they will have an unbroken reward. \* What will henceforth declare you<sup>s</sup> false concerning the judgement? \* Is not God the most discerning of judges?

<sup>65</sup> Bobzin, 629, ad Q 3:4.

<sup>66</sup> Thus Jeffery (*FV* [2007], 225–29); cf. the theory of F. Donner that in certain cases *furqān* corresponds instead to Syriac *puqdānā* (“command” or “commandment”): “Qur’ānic *furqān*,” *JSS* 52, 2007, 279–300.

Khalidi – By the fig and the olive,  
And by Mount Sinai,  
And this city, secure!

We created man in fairest proportion,  
Then reduced him to the lowest of the low,  
Save them who believe and do righteous deeds –  
To them belongs a wage, unstinted.

What then can lead you to deny the Judgement?  
Is God not the fairest of judges?

Monotheist Group – By the fig and the olive. \* And the mount of ages. \* And this town of peace. \* We have created mankind in the best form. \* Then We returned him to the lowest of the low. \* Except those who have believed and done good work, they will have a reward of thanks. \* So what would make you deny the system after that? \* Is God not the wisest of the wise?

Abu-Sahlieh – Par le figuier et l’olivier! \* Par le Mont Sināï! \* Par cette contrée sûre! \* Nous avons créé l’humain dans la meilleure forme. \* Ensuite, nous l’avons ramené au plus bas des plus bas. \* Sauf ceux qui ont cru et ont fait les œuvres vertueuses. Ils auront un salaire non reproché. \* Après [cela], qui te fait démentir le [jour du] jugement? \* Dieu n’est-il pas le plus sage des juges?

Bobzin – Bei den Feigenbäumen! Bei den Olivenbäumen! \* Beim Berge Sinai! \* Bei diesem sichern Ort! \* Wir erschufen den Menschen in vollendeter Gestalt, \* alsdann machten wir ihn zum Niedrigsten der Niedrigen – \* außer denen, die glauben und gute Werke tun, denen wird Lohn zuteil, nicht unverdient – \* was last dich also das Gericht noch leugnen? \* Ist Gott denn nicht der weiseste der Richter?

The translators agree that the opening verse of this chapter is a type of oath on fig(s) and olive(s) (or fig and olive trees). They likewise agree that the second verse is an oath on *tūr sīnīn*; which five of the translations render as Mount Sinai. The Monotheist Group, however, translates *tūr sīnīn* as “the mount of ages.” Now elsewhere (Q 23:20) the Qur’ān refers to Mount Sinai as *tūr saynā’* (although *sīnā’* might better reflect the ancient pronunciation), but Islamic tradition generally (and with good reason)<sup>67</sup> considers *sīnīn* to be a secondary form of the same term.<sup>68</sup> The Monotheist Group rejects this tradition, understanding *sīnīn* as the plural of *sanna*, “year,” (although *sinīn* is the typical Qur’ānic plural) and translating “mount of ages.”

67 As Jeffery (*FV* [2007], 183–84) notes, the form *sīnīn* responds to the *ūn/īn* rhyme of this Sūra.

68 Abu-Sahlieh in fact notes *saynā’* (and *sīnā’*) as a traditional variant reading for Q 95:2.

The difference among the translations in the third verse is more subtle but still significant. Jones and Abu-Sahlieh understand *balad* to be a reference to a region (“territory,” “contrée”) but the other translations understand it to be a town or a city. Behind this lies the traditional idea (no doubt encouraged by the demonstrative article *hādhā*, “this”) that the Qur’ān intends here “Mecca.” Abdel Haleem says as much in a footnote; in his commentary Bobzin explains that by *balad* the Qur’ān means more specifically the Ka’ba, which even the pre-Islamic pagans considered an inviolable site.

Finally it is worth noting the differences to be found in the penultimate verse (*fa-mā yukadhdhibuka ba‘du fī-l-dīn*). Five of the translators understand *mā* to refer to a thing (e.g. Abdel Haleem: “what makes you [man] deny . . .”) but Abu-Sahlieh understands it as a person (“qui te fait démentir. . .”). The translators also disagree over the meaning and object of *yukadhdhibuka*. Five of the translations suggest that God is here speaking to “man” (n.b. Abdel Haleem’s insertion) in a general sense, and asking what (or who) could make him (i.e. anyone) deny the *dīn* (which, according to the Monotheist Group, means “system,” but according to the others is short for *yawm al-dīn* [n.b. Abu-Sahlieh’s insertion] and means “the Day of Judgement”). Jones, however, understands that God is speaking to Muḥammad, and asking rhetorically how anyone could now reject his teaching on God’s power to judge all humans and send them to heaven or hell.<sup>69</sup>

Evidently, there is no little disagreement among translators over the meaning of these two passages, which are not among those (such as, say, *al-Nisā’* [4] 157–9 or *al-Kawthar* [108]) traditionally considered to be especially opaque. If critical scholarship had provided a convincing explanation of their meaning we would have found, presumably, less confusion among the translators.

Tellingly, all of the translators – even the Monotheist Group – turn frequently to traditional Islamic lexicography and exegesis for solutions. For this reason they all seem to believe that *al-tawrāt* and *al-injīl* were books; they understand (with two exceptions) *furqān* to mean something like Criterion; and they suggest (with two exceptions) that *balad* is a reference to Mecca. Now the Islamic lexicographical and exegetical tradition, of course, cannot be dismissed lightly. By relying on it the translators presumably do arrive quite often at the ancient meaning of the Qur’ān.

For other problems, however, help is found outside of this tradition. Only by turning to Syro-Aramaic, for example, do Jones and Abu Sahlieh arrive at the compelling translation of *furqān* as “salvation” or “la délivrance.”<sup>70</sup> And for still other problems, such as the meaning and object of *yukadhdhibuka*, Syro-Aramaic is of no help. The problem for such cases is that the Qur’ān is short on proper

<sup>69</sup> Abdel Haleem mentions this latter interpretation, acknowledging that it is found with Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.

<sup>70</sup> Muslim exegetes and lexicographers were of course extremely interested in the question of foreign words (*al-kalimāt al-dakhīla*) in the Qur’ān. Such interest, however, did not regularly lead to the study and application of foreign languages in their exegesis. On the idiosyncratic nature of reports on non-Arabic languages in traditional Islamic exegesis see A. Jeffery, *FV* (2007), 1–42; A. Rippin, “Syriac in the Qur’ān,” *QHC*, 249–61.

names and details of context and long on allusions and references. And since translators have no contemporaneous or earlier Arabic literature to work with,<sup>71</sup> the only place to find explicit explanations of these allusions and references is medieval Muslim literature. But this literature itself is filled with debates over the Qur'ān's meaning (along with occasional confessions of complete uncertainty). Thus we arrive at the curious yet common phenomenon whereby the differences in modern translations of the Qur'ān are often distant – and yet evident – reflections of the very same differences to be found centuries earlier among traditional Islamic authorities.

In this light it would hardly seem correct to describe the current moment as a golden age of Qur'ānic studies. Scholars of the Qur'ān have not yet approached, let alone agreed upon, a basic understanding of the ancient meaning of the text. Thus the recent multiplication of translations of the Qur'ān seems more ironic than *à propos*.

Now the recourse of translators of the Qur'ān to medieval Islamic literature is understandable. Their task might be compared to the translation of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. For their part, translators of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible do not look to traditional literature such as Philo, Origen, the Babylonian Talmud, the *Midrash Rabbah*, or Martin Luther to discover the ancient meaning of the text. Instead they look to the study of Akkadian and North-West Semitic languages and literature, of paleography, of archaeology/epigraphy, etc. to do so. But this is only possible because of the immense archeological, epigraphical, and philological work that has been done in the fields of Assyriology and Judaic Studies, work that allows translators to understand their text in the light of the historical context in which it was composed.

In comparison, scholars of the Qur'ān still have a lot of work to do, and it is to this work that the Notre Dame conferences on the Qur'ān are dedicated. The studies presented here are dedicated to furthering our understanding of the Qur'ān's place in its historical context; in other words, they are meant to help students follow the Qur'ān's own references to the religion, literature, and society of the Late Antique Near East. This work alone will hardly resolve all of the methodological problems that are evident in recent studies and translations of the Qur'ān. However, it offers further resources for students of the Qur'ān to discover the surprisingly profound ways in which the Qur'ān is in conversation with its context. Moreover, it offers an example of how Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike can express their appreciation for the Qur'ān through the critical study of its contents.

### **Regarding the contributions to the present volume**

*New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2* is divided into five parts, the first of which is “Method in Qur'ānic studies.” Therein Fred

71 On the troubles with using Jāhili poetry in this manner see Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 30–33.

Donner, in “The historian, the believer, and the Qur'ān,” argues that critical scholarship on the Qur'ān, properly understood, can neither prove nor disprove Islamic claims of faith. Accordingly he concludes that scholars have no need to shape their research according to Islamic apology, and no warrant to frame their research in polemical terms. Thereafter Andrew Rippin examines in detail the efforts of western scholars to develop a useful dictionary of the Qur'ān, and notes the importance of etymological research to that task. Finally, Nasr Abu Zayd introduces the reader to the principal methodologies for the interpretation of the Qur'ān associated with different Islamic sciences, and to the compelling story of his lifetime of engagement with the Qur'ān and Islamic studies. Ultimately he argues that critical studies of the Qur'ān's ancient meaning can help Muslims contemplate the Qur'ān's meaning (or better, significance) today: “The contextual socio-cultural meaning, that which was addressed to the first Arab recipients, should not be ignored or simplified. This meaning is a vital indication of the direction of the Qur'ān's message, i.e. its significance for the future generations of Muslims.”<sup>72</sup>

The second part of the present book, “The Qur'ān and material evidence,” opens with Robert Hoyland's examination of those early Arabic inscriptions in the Hijaz which seem to have been written by Jews, or which seem to refer to Jews or Judaism. Thereby he illustrates how an appreciation of epigraphy can play an important role in our study of the Qur'ān's historical context. Hoyland's chapter is complemented by that of Hani Hayajneh, who analyzes in detail Ancient South Arabian inscriptions that anticipate Qur'ānic vocabulary. Through this analysis Hayajneh develops compelling new interpretations of ten Qur'ānic passages. The final article in this section is that of Gerd Puin, who offers an exacting examination of the Qur'ānic *rasm* based on the evidence of the earliest manuscripts. Puin illustrates the substantial changes that have been made to Qur'ānic orthography in the medieval and modern period (including with the 1924 Cairo Qur'ān), and offers critical insights into the ancient shape of the Qur'ānic text.

The articles of the third part of the present volume, “Qur'ānic vocabulary,” are focused on the nature of the Qur'ān's lexicon and the meaning of poorly understood Qur'ānic terms. Shawkat Toorawa offers an exhaustive presentation and careful categorization of Qur'ānic *hapax legomena*, and uses the results to caution scholars who hasten to emend such terms to match more common vocabulary. Manfred Kropp focuses in particular on *al-Ikhlāṣ* (Q 112). He both proposes an emendation of this Sūra and argues that a proper understanding of its development allows us to identify three phases in the development of the entire text of the Qur'ān. Munther Younes, for his part, makes a compelling argument for an emended reading of *al-Nāzi'āt* (Q 79), in his chapter, “Angels, stars, death, the soul, horses, bows – or women? The opening verses of Qur'ān 79.” Finally, Christoph Luxenberg, applying the insights of Syriac vocabulary and grammar, offers a profoundly new reading of *al-Najm* (Q 53).

72 Abū Zayd, “Towards understanding the Qur'ān's worldview: An autobiographical reflection,” this volume, p. 47–87.

In the fourth part, “The Qur’ān and its religious context,” the authors illustrate how a careful appreciation of the religious context of the Late Antique Near East can help us understand aspects of the Qur’ān that have long troubled interpreters. In the first chapter therein Sidney Griffith presents an exhaustive study of the Qur’ānic term *naṣārā* in the light of the use of cognate Greek and Syriac terms in earlier Christian literature. Through this presentation the Qur’ān’s logic for using an unusual term for Christians becomes evident, and the idea that this term reflects the influence of a heterodox sect is refuted. Devin Stewart reviews both traditional Islamic and western scholarship on poorly understood Qur’ānic formulae (such as *mā adrāka*, *qul*, and *rabb* [+definite noun]) and the disconnected (or “mysterious”) letters that open twenty-nine Sūras. He then shows how an appreciation of earlier oracular texts, both Babylonian and Greek, can help us better to understand both features of the Qur’ān.

For his part Suleiman Mourad, by calling attention to various Qur’ānic passages that are often read in isolation, argues persuasively that the Qur’ān does not deny the death of Jesus. His chapter is followed by that of Clare Wilde, who examines quotations of the Qur’ān in early Christian Arabic literature, and investigates whether these quotations (many of which date to the early ‘Abbāsīd period) might indicate something of a pre-orthodox Islamic approach to the Qur’ān, if not a pre-canonical form of the Qur’ān. Thereafter Gerald Hawting addresses the ambiguity between human and angelic messengers in the Qur’ān. Noting that later Islamic exegesis attempted to draw distinct boundaries between the two, Hawting argues that this ambiguity reflects earlier Judaeo-Christian prophetology and angelology.

The fifth and final part of the present volume is “The Qur’ān and Biblical literature,” by which is meant the Qur’ān’s conversation not only with the canonical Bible, but also apocryphal and exegetical literature, including Talmudic, midrashic, and homiletic works. Therein Reuven Firestone first introduces the reader to the idea of the divine election of a people or a community in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. He then shows how the Qur’ān both insists that only individuals, not communities, merit election (usually in the context of anti-Jewish or Christian polemic), and also emphasizes that merit is to be won by obeying the Prophet and being included in God’s chosen community. Waleed Ahmed addresses the Qur’ānic passages (Q 11:78–79; 15:71) on Lot’s offer of his daughters to his hostile townspeople (cf. Genesis 19), illuminating both the intertextual nature of this material and its interpretation in traditional Islamic exegesis.

Joseph Witztum, in “Joseph among the Ishmaelites: Q 12 in light of Syriac sources,” provides a detailed analysis of the Qur’ān’s place in the larger exegetical tradition on the Joseph tale of Genesis. While western scholars have generally assumed that the Qur’ānic Joseph account is related to Jewish midrash, Witztum illustrates the Qur’ān’s close conversation on this point with a largely neglected corpus of Syriac literature. Emran El-Badawi also provides new insight on the Qur’ān in the light of Syriac, with a case study on the language of condemnation. Through this study he argues that the Qur’ān is better compared to the Syriac, and not the Greek, New Testament. Finally Adam Silverstein analyzes the term *ṣarḥ*,

the name given to the structure that the Qur'ānic Pharaoh orders to be constructed, and examines the distinctive characteristics of the Pharaoh of the Bible, the Qur'ān, and later Islamic tradition. Thereby he uncovers the close relationship of the Pharaoh of the Qur'ān and the Pharaoh of Islamic tradition with (different currents of) Mesopotamian traditions. Thus the Qur'ān's intimate relationship with its Near Eastern religious context emerges.

The present volume, of course, is not the only work in Qur'ānic studies that explores this relationship. Indeed, much of this introduction is devoted to the general increase in scholarly activity on the Qur'ān. This introduction has also shown that recent scholarly activity has not succeeded in illuminating the ancient meaning of the Qur'ān. Still it seems to me that recent research in Qur'ānic studies is marked by two auspicious trends. First, an increasing number of Muslim scholars – in the West and the Islamic world – are becoming involved in critical research on the Qur'ān; many of these scholars have made a persuasive case that such research can play a positive role in religious reflection on the text. Second, and certain exceptions notwithstanding, recent critical scholarship on the Qur'ān has been largely shaped by a sympathetic response to the text of the Qur'ān itself. Instead of polemic, scholars involved in this movement are generally motivated by intellectual appreciation, even fascination, with the Qur'ān. If the present work might contribute positively to either of these trends, then – in my estimation at least – it might be judged a success.



**Part I**

# **Method in Qur'ānic studies**



# 1 The historian, the believer, and the Qur'ān<sup>1</sup>

*Fred M. Donner*

Can we understand the Qur'ān without knowing its historical context? The answer is, probably, no – but we have to try, because so far there is no alternative: the Qur'ān, at least from the perspective of Western historians, has yet to be placed convincingly in a secure historical context. There is still no definite consensus on what the text originally was, what its original social setting and role may have been, how and when and where it came together, or even whether the Qur'ān that has existed for at least twelve centuries originated as a unitary document or whether it is, rather, a compilation of once separate materials coming, perhaps, from different communities.

Given this grave uncertainty over the Qur'ān's context, scholars must reverse the usual procedure when studying a text: rather than using the context to illuminate the meaning of the text, we must start with the Qur'ān text itself, and try to deduce from hints inside it what a plausible historical context (or several contexts, in case it is not a unitary text) might be.

The Qur'ān, unfortunately, offers few decisive clues that suggest anything precise about its original context. The very fact that it is written in Arabic – or at least, mostly in Arabic – gives us only a general idea of where and when the text may have emerged. (When, because we know that Arabic was barely written before the sixth century CE and only emerged as a literary idiom in the seventh.) There may be a more meaningful set of clues to be found in the Qur'ān's frequent references to “Biblical” material – that is, to characters and stories well known from the older Judaeo-Christian literary traditions of the Near East. But, given this obvious fact, what historical setting could have produced such a text? The Qur'ān's “Biblical” materials have attracted the attention of scholars since the beginning of serious studies of the Qur'ān in the West, and the hope remains strong that close study of these passages may help us to establish at least the Qur'ān's *literary* context, that is, its affiliation with other texts of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. We shall have more to say about this below, but for the moment we can note that efforts to pin down just which earlier literary materials may have the closest relationship to the Qur'ān have so far been inconclusive. In any case, even if we were

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Carel Bertram for helpful comments on the draft of this article.

able to determine more clearly the Qur'ān's literary context, doing so would not necessarily tell us exactly what its historical context was.

Muslim tradition, of course, provides great detail on the presumed historical context in which the Qur'ān appeared: the now-familiar story of the prophet Muḥammad, Meccan paganism, God's revelations to the prophet, Muḥammad's founding of a community in Medina, his struggles with his opponents, and the codification of the Qur'ān during the era of conquests that followed Muḥammad's death. This traditional Islamic "origins story," as I like to call it, has the virtue of a compelling plot-line, but it is deemed wanting by most Western scholars for at least two reasons. One is because it is a literary tradition of later – sometimes much later – date, and hence likely contains much anachronistic and idealizing material. This is a problem now familiar to almost everyone and I need not belabor it further here. The second reason the traditional origins story has been problematic for Western scholars is because of the way it presents Muḥammad's, and the Qur'ān's, relationship to Judaism and Christianity. For, in the traditional origins narrative, Jews are presented as hostile to Muḥammad, certainly not a source of inspiration to him, and Christians are entirely absent from the context in which Muḥammad lived and worked. One gets the sense that the tradition is not presenting us with an accurate picture of Muḥammad's relations with the earlier monotheisms, a feeling that is very strong today, when numerous recent studies have brought convincing evidence that Syriac Christianity and the Syriac language were in some still undefined way an important part of the Qur'ān's *Sitz im Leben* and had a significant influence on the text, or at least on parts of it.

It is striking, then, that despite the manifest inadequacies of the traditional Islamic origins narrative as a contextualization for the Qur'ān, most Western scholars have nonetheless based their understanding of the Qur'ān's context on that very origins narrative, accepting with lesser or greater modifications the framework provided by the *Sīra*. In particular, they have generally followed the classification of the Qur'ān's contents into Meccan and Medinan passages. This basic division, and the identification of three phases in the Meccan revelations, was a system first advanced in the West by Gustav Weil in 1844, and has been generally adopted by later scholars, albeit with many attempts to further refine the system (e.g. by Nöldeke and Schwally, Bell, Blachère, Nagel).

Perhaps most Western scholars adopted the basic framework provided by the *Sīra* simply because there is no real alternative: we lack almost entirely documents and contemporary sources for Islam's origins. Whatever the reason, we find that much Western scholarship – even as it pours criticism on the reliability of the traditions it broadly designates as the *Sīra* literature – tacitly or explicitly accepts at least the basic outlines of the traditional origins narrative when attempting to analyze the Qur'ān. This includes those many scholars who were particularly interested in establishing the nature of the relationship between Muḥammad and the Jews (and, possibly, Christians) of Arabia, such as Abraham Geiger, Charles C. Torrey, and Richard Bell. It includes also those who portrayed the life of the prophet Muḥammad in a relatively conservative or traditional way, such as Aloys Sprenger, William Muir, Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes, William M. Watt,

Maxime Rodinson, and, relatively recently, Francis E. Peters. It includes some who have attempted a more radical re-evaluation of the traditional material in some way, such as Günter Lüling and Jacqueline Chabbi. It also underlies some studies devoted to the form of the Qur'ān text, such as that of Angelika Neuwirth.

We might say, then, that the mainstream of Western scholarship has historically been much more willing to challenge or reject the Islamic tradition's views on the nature of the Qur'ān itself, than it has been to criticize the tradition's view of the Qur'ān's historical context.

In recent years, several scholars have broken from this mould and have attempted to study the Qur'ān, or to depict the origins of Islam, in a manner that dispenses entirely with the contextual framework provided by the *Sīra*. John Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies* (1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu* (1978) seem to have begun the process;<sup>2</sup> in both works Wansbrough adopted a frankly agnostic attitude toward the origins period, refusing to speculate about the history of the prophet on the grounds that the reports about him in Muslim tradition tell us only about his later image, not about the historical Muḥammad. Wansbrough further asserted that the Qur'ān actually came together not in Arabia but rather in a monotheistic "sectarian milieu" somewhere in Mesopotamia or Syria, although he remained vague on exactly where. He also argued that the Qur'ān text crystallized as scripture gradually and much later than Muslim tradition says, claiming that it did not attain the status of scriptural canon until as much as 200 years after the time of Muḥammad. Wansbrough's hypothesis that the Qur'ān originated in an extra-Arabian monotheistic environment was further developed by Gerald Hawting.<sup>3</sup> Patricia Crone and Michael Cook had also proposed, at the same time Wansbrough was publishing his ideas (1977), that the Qur'ān may have been a product of a north-Arabian or southern Syrian environment rather than of Mecca.<sup>4</sup>

Even more radical are those scholars who argue that the Prophet did not even exist, but is merely a literary construct assembled by Muslims of the eighth and later centuries CE in order to provide a heroic founder-figure for their new religion and state. The archaeologist Yehuda Nevo, inspired by Wansbrough's work and his own archaeological findings in the Negev, argued that a Byzantine withdrawal from Syria in the seventh century resulted in the rise of local Arab chieftains who consolidated their power to form the Umayyad state. In Nevo's view, both what is usually termed the "Islamic conquest" or "Arab conquest" and the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad (as well as Muḥammad's supposedly pagan

2 J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; idem., *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

3 G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

4 P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

environment in Mecca) were literary fictions.<sup>5</sup> Volker Popp, in a long essay relying in part on numismatic evidence, also alleged that the Prophet never existed except as a literary fiction.<sup>6</sup> In his view, the Byzantines were forced out of Syria by resurgent Nestorian Christian tribesmen from Iraq, formerly part of the Sasanian army, who made common cause with the Monophysites of Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Near East to drive out the hated Orthodox. Having done so, these Iraqi Nestorians (according to Popp) established themselves as rulers in Syria – we know them as the Umayyads. Popp’s theory is supported by an essay by Christoph Luxenberg in the same volume, in which he analyzes ‘Abd al-Malik’s inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock, arguing that they represent a non-Trinitarian form of Christianity (the references to Muḥammad *rasūl Allāh*, Luxenberg claims, are allusions to Jesus, “God’s highly-praised messenger”).<sup>7</sup>

While independence of thought is certainly a virtue, I must admit that I find unconvincing these efforts to reconstruct Islam’s origins and to explain the historical context of the Qur’ān in a manner that rejects completely the framework provided by Muslim tradition. To list quickly some of the obvious objections to the main skeptical hypotheses.

*Non-existence of Prophet theory* This willfully chooses to ignore early non-Muslim sources like the *Doctrina Jacobi* and the fragment from Matthew the Presbyter, as well as relatively early chronicles like those of Sebeos and John Bar Penkaye, all sources known for many years (and used by more responsible revisionist authors like Crone and Cook). And, to go a bit beyond the time of the Prophet, the assertion of Nevo and Popp, for example, that the early caliphs are also fictions, ignores the evidence of Chinese annals (which mention the murder of ‘Uthmān)<sup>8</sup> and the recent discovery of an inscription/graffito that mentions ‘Umar.<sup>9</sup> Nevo’s assertion that the Byzantines withdrew from Syria intentionally (and even, in his view, encouraged the emergence of sectarian forms of Christianity as they did so) strikes one as, shall we say, out of character for the emperors in Constantinople. Popp’s and Luxenberg’s assertion that the Umayyads were Christians is also hard to accept. Popp’s claim that the Nestorian tribesmen whom we later come to know as the Umayyads would have found such ready support among the Monophysites of Syria and elsewhere seems

5 Y. D. Nevo and J. Koren, *Crossroads to Islam. The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003.

6 V. Popp, “Die frühe Islamgeschichte nach inschriftlichen und numismatischen Zeugnissen,” in Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin (eds), *Die dunklen Anfänge. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, n.p.: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2005, 16–123.

7 C. Luxenberg, “Neudeutung der arabischen Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem,” in K.-H. Ohlig and G.-R. Puin (eds), *Die dunklen Anfänge*, 124–47.

8 This and several other of the early sources mentioned above are collected in R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997.

9 M. Kawatoko, “Archaeological Survey of Najrān and Madīnah 2002,” *Atlāl* 18, 1426/2005 (45–59) 52, and Plate 8.12.C.

far-fetched, in view of the fact that Monophysites and Nestorians had spent the previous century or so pouring polemical vitriol on each other (and not only on the Chalcedonians) for heresy. One also does not understand how these supposedly Nestorian tribesmen, formerly of the Sasanian army, made the theological shift to a non-trinitarian outlook on their way to becoming the Umayyads, as Luxenberg suggests, since the Nestorians certainly did not reject the notion of the Trinity.

*Late crystallization theory* This is demonstrably wrong; for one thing, the Qur'ān lacks the kinds of anachronisms that would have been inescapable had the text not stabilized before the first civil war (*fitna*) in 34/656 to 40/661.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, recent work with some of the oldest extant Qur'ān manuscripts seems to confirm that the text was already established as scripture no later than the end of the first century AH.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the traditional view that the whole Qur'ān was the subject of secure oral recitation from the time of the Prophet must also be wrong, because recent work has shown that some parts of the text, at least, could only have been transmitted in written form, without the benefit of a controlling tradition of recitation.<sup>12</sup> So, while the basic *rasm* text must have been written down fairly early, its antecedents may have included both oral materials *and* written materials, some of which may go back to the Prophet or may even antedate the Prophet. And they may (or may not) be diverse in origin.

*Sectarian milieu theory* (That the Qur'ān crystallized in an environment of monotheistic debate, not in a pagan environment) This seems to be true.<sup>13</sup> But the location of this monotheistic sectarian milieu is still far from clear; which brings us to the:

### **Extra-Arabian origins theory**

This seems unlikely; there are some hints in the Qur'ān that the text, or parts of it, may indeed have coalesced in Arabia,<sup>14</sup> and there is little, if any, positive evidence pointing to a likely venue outside Arabia.<sup>15</sup> But we still don't know exactly where in Arabia, and it would have to have been in a monotheistic setting in Arabia

<sup>10</sup> F.M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: the Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998, ch. 1, "The Date of the Qur'ānic Text," 35–63.

<sup>11</sup> F. Déroche, "Manuscripts of the Qur'ān," *EQ*, 3:255–73.

<sup>12</sup> On this, see J.A. Bellamy, "Some proposed emendations to the text of the Koran," *JAOS* 113, 1993, 562–73; idem, "More proposed emendations to the text of the Koran," *JAOS* 116, 1996, 196–204; F.M. Donner, "Qur'ānic *furqān*," *JSS* 52, 2007, 279–300.

<sup>13</sup> Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, has made a convincing case for this, although his insistence that the location of this sectarian milieu must be outside Arabia is not convincing.

<sup>14</sup> Donner, *Narratives*, ch. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Hawting's failure to provide any evidence for an extra-Arabian venue for the Qur'ān in his *The Idea of Idolatry* is quite striking, since this assertion is one of the main points of his book; evidently the evidence does not exist.

about which the tradition is silent; here perhaps the views of Lüling, who argued that the Qur'ān contained reworked liturgical materials of a hypothesized Meccan or Hijāzī Christian community, may bear further consideration.<sup>16</sup> So even if Arabia does turn out to have been the historical context of the Qur'ān, as seems likely to this author, it may be an Arabian environment vastly different from anything with which we are familiar from the *Sīra*'s picture of Muḥammad's Mecca and Medina. As sheer speculation, for example, we might propose that different parts of the text hailed from different monotheistic communities in different parts of Arabia, and were pieced together in the early decades of the seventh century; but other possible speculative reconstructions might prove just as fruitful in explaining the limited evidence available.

Clearly, the *Sīra*'s vision, as a historical reconstruction of Islam's origins, has grave weaknesses. Moreover, a recent study of the fall of the Sasanians by Parvaneh Pourshariati on the basis of coins, seals, and a re-analysis of the Arabic sources suggests that there may be serious problems with the chronology of the traditional Muslim conquest narratives and, consequently, of the prophetic biography that is usually placed immediately before the conquest.<sup>17</sup> But at this point, it seems likely that some aspects of the traditional *Sīra* framework may, in the end, emerge as historically sound. My own sense is that the tradition's presentation of the period following the *hijra* is more credible than it is for the period before the *hijra*, reports about which seem overwhelmingly legendary in character. Furthermore, in the process of reworking and redaction, to which early reports may have been subjected, the elements that would most likely have been subjected to the greatest modification (in order to bring them in line with later realities and needs) would be matters relating to theological doctrines and communal orientations – precisely those dimensions of the historical record that would be most crucial to understanding the historical context of the Qur'ān.

### **The Qur'ān between historians and believers**

There is another issue to be addressed, however, when considering revisionist work on Islam's origins, besides its impact on the work of scholars who wish to understand the Qur'ān for scientific reasons. That other issue is, of course, the impact such work has on believing Muslims, and on the way they view the work of historians. Even the most heedless of historians among us must know that our investigations into Islam's origins, in particular into the context, origins, and history of the Qur'ān text, will be of the greatest interest to believers. Many believers may turn to the work of historians in the hope of securing a better

<sup>16</sup> G. Lüling, *Der christliche Kult an der vorislamischen Kaaba*, Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1977; idem, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān*, Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974.

<sup>17</sup> P. Pourshariati, *The Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008, 166–73 and 281–85.

understanding of the Qurʾān and of the life of the Prophet who was, in their view, the vehicle of the Qurʾān's delivery to humankind. Although revisionist theories may be unsettling even to some historians – those who are loath to abandon the comfortable sense of mastery they long enjoyed over the traditional narrative material, or who have staked their reputations closely on a more traditional vision of Islam's origins – they are sure to be even more disturbing to believers, for whom the Qurʾān is nothing less than God's eternal word as revealed to His Prophet Muḥammad, their wellspring of guidance in this life, and their roadmap to eternal salvation in the life to come.

It may seem inappropriate even to raise this issue in a piece addressed to historians and critically-minded students of the Qurʾān as text. My goal in doing so, however, is twofold. On the one hand, I want to make clear that as historians and scholars we must pursue our researches wherever they lead us, even if the results of our explorations seem unsettling to some – whether they be fellow scholars or believing Muslims. On the other hand, I hope to show that the apparent clash between historians and believers over fundamentals of Muslims' faith is just that: apparent, and not real.

Most of you, I am sure, have already noted my allusion to the title of the classic book by Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, published in 1966.<sup>18</sup> In this work Harvey, a historian of religion who before his retirement taught at Stanford University, made the point that a true believer in the doctrines of a revealed religion cannot also claim to be a historian of the crucial events of that religion, because the nature of the historian's craft requires that he or she remain intellectually free to challenge, to doubt, and if necessary to reject, the validity of any historical source, without exception. Harvey was concerned particularly with those professing Christians who have attempted to write the history of the origins of Christianity, as the subtitle of his book makes clear: *The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*. He therefore focuses on showing that someone who is a sincere Christian, which involves a pre-commitment to certain gospel narratives as absolutely true, cannot also claim to be a historian studying those same gospel narratives, because his religious pre-commitments prevent him or her from subjecting those sources to the critical scrutiny that is the first obligation of the historian. But Harvey's analysis and his conclusions are just as relevant to those of us who wish to study Islam's origins, or, for that matter, the sensitive foundation-stories of any revealed religion. The most obvious implications for us would be that no believing Muslim – that is, someone who accepts Muḥammad as Prophet and the Qurʾān as God's revealed word – can also truly be a historian of Islam's origins. We might rephrase Harvey's insight in the following way: the believer in a revealed religion cannot also act as a historian of that religion's origins because the discipline of history is itself a kind of faith-system – a rival faith-system, if you will – in that history also requires absolute fidelity to certain basic assumptions. The historian's assumptions, however, are rooted in the use of reason rather than in reliance on received knowledge.

18 V. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*, New York: Macmillan, 1966.

We could, with Harvey, stop here and simply acknowledge the stark reality of an unbridgeable gulf separating the historian and the believer. But I think there is some benefit in following this line of thought a step or two further. To do so, however, requires us to consider a bit more fully the nature of the science or craft of historical study.

As we just noted, the historian, no less than the believer in a revealed religion, operates within a kind of faith-system – a system of assumptions that he or she takes as binding and absolute. I see in particular three such assumptions on the part of historians. The first is a belief in the power of human reason and logical analysis, and a commitment to using logic and reasoning to solve intellectual problems – including the problems inherent in reconstructing and interpreting the past, which is what historians normally do. Historians base their explorations of the past on reasoned analysis, even when they recognize that there are limits to what reasoned analysis can achieve in the reconstruction of the past. If, for example, the evidence for a particular historical phenomenon is very limited, the historian may only be able to make educated guesses based on such parallels as exist from other historical phenomena that seem comparable. The result of such an operation is not historical certainty, but rather a kind of approximation or, better, a tentative hypothesis about what *might* have happened in this particular case. Indeed, the historian's deductions about the past are *always* in some measure hypotheses, subject to amendment or even total rejection if new, contrary evidence comes to light. As a general rule, of course, deductions about historical phenomena for which very rich and diverse evidence exists are likely to be more “solid,” that is, more or less unassailable in their main lines and only subject to revision in matters of detail or nuance. But even in the best-documented eras of history, the historian encounters gaps in the evidence that leave him or her essentially unable to interpret it. We know, for example, a great deal about the events of the end of World War II and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but historians are not agreed on why President Truman decided to bomb Japan with these weapons. Was it to make the cost of continued resistance clear to the Japanese and so to persuade them to surrender, thus saving thousands of lives (American and Japanese) that would have been lost had American forces needed to fight their way through the Japanese islands in pursuit of victory? Or was it to demonstrate that America already had the bomb and would use it if necessary, thus signaling to Josef Stalin not to advance his Soviet troops too far westward in Europe? Or were both considerations at play in Truman's mind, along possibly with others? Despite all we know about this era in history, we do not have the decisive evidence that could provide the historian with an unequivocal conclusion on Truman's motivations.

It is this fact – the almost inevitable contingency of all historical deductions – that makes the pursuit of history profoundly different from the “truths” embraced by a believer, even though both the historian and the believer might be said to be adherents of faith-systems. We now see that the faith-systems of believers and historians are of different kinds. Whereas the believer accepts without question a certain vision of the past, the historian accepts without question *nothing* about the past; his “faith” is an absolute faith in his *methods*, not in the *results*

of his analysis, even though he may be able to defend his deductions with compelling logical argument, for he realizes that his results remain contingent pending the discovery of new relevant evidence, or the cogent re-evaluation of existing evidence.

The second tenet of faith of the historian is a belief in what we might call the essential humanness of humanity across time and space. In other words, the historian believes that people of other times, other places, and even other cultures share with those of us alive today essential human qualities – emotions, needs, desires; for if they did not, we could not hope to understand them and their motivations. In the faith-system of the historian, people of past times are *not* an alien breed; they are human like us and so can be understood by us. The historian must, of course, make great efforts to understand the different cultural systems in which people of the past lived, because cultures shape profoundly how people act or react in a given situation. But it is generally agreed that this is possible, so that the actions of people in the past can be understood and evaluated by a process akin to metaphor linking “us” with “them.” And, indeed, it is often this quasi-metaphorical connection between “us” and “them” that makes their past relevant and meaningful to us, the very reason we wish to study their past in the first place and make it part of our own history.

Historians also make a third assumption, or have a third article of faith, if you will, beyond their belief in reason and in the innate humanness of peoples of all eras: and that is a belief in the immutability of the laws of nature. It is not merely the *people* of earlier eras that resemble people today; the *physical world* in which those earlier people lived also operated according to the same principles we can see in operation around us. Since the historian explains events of the past by a kind of metaphor with the present, his efforts would be futile if the universe or physical environment did not always operate according to the same rules – for example, if the laws of gravity did not apply always and everywhere, or if a single physical object (or person) could be in two different places at the same time.

It is precisely here that the historian and the believer in a revealed religion come most acutely into the conflict described by Harvey. For revealed religions always involve the supernatural. That is, they describe events in which the divine, which transcends nature, interferes in some way with the normal processes of the natural world, whether it is God parting the Red Sea to save Moses and the Children of Israel, or God resurrecting the crucified Jesus from the dead, or God downloading installments of His word into the prostrate, perspiring person of the Prophet Muḥammad. Such events are outside the realm of the natural, beyond the normal functioning of the physical world as we know it. That is, indeed, precisely *why* they are remembered and celebrated by believers: it is their supernatural character that makes them special, miraculous, and the focus of commemoration and faith.

The supernatural, however, is by definition beyond the competence of the historian. For the historian, as we have seen, can only evaluate reports on the assumption that the normal laws of nature apply at all times. Events of a supernatural kind exist on a different plane, so to speak, than historical events, a plane that the

historian cannot access. Confronted with a report that describes a supernatural event, the historian can evaluate the validity of the report only as far as what we might call the external trappings of that supernatural event. So, for instance, if he had sufficient other sources, he might be able to confirm that Moses and the Israelites marched from the Nile valley on a certain day, that Pharaoh's army left in pursuit some time thereafter, and that somehow the Israelites show up at a later time in the Sinai, and that Pharaoh's army never returns. He could say something like, "The story seems to be true to this extent, that it fits other known facts of who was where and when, etc." But the parting of the waters – the actual supernatural event that, according to the story, was God's act of salvation for the Israelites – this the historian simply cannot evaluate. He might be tempted to say that the parting of the waters is a pious legend, that is a fabrication, inserted into an otherwise plausible scenario ("historicized" as I like to say);<sup>19</sup> but as a historian, he simply cannot affirm that it is true. By the same token, however, the historian also cannot prove that the parting of the waters as reported in the narrative is false; as a secular-minded person, that is, as a historian, he can say that he doesn't believe the story, but because it involves an event that is explicitly represented as supernatural, it is simply beyond his competence as a historian to evaluate its supernatural content.

The implications of this fact are, I think, far from trivial. Since the faith-claims of revealed religions reside above all in supernatural events, and since the historian and historical analysis are unable to evaluate these supernatural events, the work of the historian cannot threaten, or call into question, the faith-claims of such religions. By examining the traditional narratives that describe the circumstances in which the supernatural events occur, the historian may be able to debunk (or confirm) many aspects of those stories, but by doing so he does not, and cannot, discredit the faith-claims themselves. This fact should be of some comfort to believers in revealed religions who find the work of historians on their sacred traditions unsettling.

The fact that the work of historical analysis and the faith-claims of revealed religions exist on different planes that do not intersect has another important implication – in a sense, the inverse of the first just noted. Just as historical analysis is incapable of invalidating supernaturally-based faith-claims, we can say also that historical narrations cannot validate faith-claims, either. This realization will not bother the historian at all, but it may come as a surprise to many believers who have come to revere the origins narratives that revealed religions use to explain the supernatural events surrounding their beginnings – whether these stories be the gospel narratives of Jesus's resurrection, or the Hebrew Bible's account of Moses receiving the law, or the *Sīra*'s depiction of how Muḥammad received the Qur'ān. The basic fact, however, is that the purveyors of these stories were attempting to do that which cannot be done by implying, or asserting outright, that the narratives they related confirmed the validity of the supernatural events and the faith-claim rooted in them. They may well have believed that this was possible

<sup>19</sup> On "historicization" in this sense, see Donner, *Narratives*, 209–14.