

The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext

Gabriel Said Reynolds



Routledge Studies in the Qur'an

The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext

This book challenges the dominant scholarly notion that the Qur'ān must be interpreted through the medieval commentaries shaped by the biography of the prophet Muḥammad, proposing instead that the text is best read in light of Christian and Jewish scripture. The Qur'ān, in its use of allusions, depends on the Biblical knowledge of its audience. However, medieval Muslim commentators, working in a context of religious rivalry, developed stories that separate Qur'ān and Bible, which this book brings back together.

In a series of studies involving the devil, Adam, Abraham, Jonah, Mary, and Muḥammad among others, Reynolds shows how modern translators of the Qur'ān have followed medieval Muslim commentary and demonstrates how an appreciation of the Qur'ān's Biblical subtext uncovers the richness of the Qur'ān's discourse. Presenting unique interpretations of thirteen different sections of the Qur'ān based on studies of earlier Jewish and Christian literature, the author substantially re-evaluates Muslim exegetical literature. Thus *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, a work based on a profound regard for the Qur'ān's literary structure and rhetorical strategy, poses a substantial challenge to the standard scholarship of Qur'ānic Studies. With an approach that bridges early Christian history and Islamic origins, the book will appeal not only to students of the Qur'ān but to students of the Bible, religious studies, and Islamic history.

Gabriel Said Reynolds is Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Theology at the University of Notre Dame (USA). He works on Qur'ānic Studies and Muslim-Christian Relations and is the author of *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu*, the translator of 'Abd al-Jabbār's *A Critique of Christian Origins*, and the editor of *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context*.

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To Luke, Emmanuel, and Theresa

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Abbreviations

Sources

- AEI* *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, ed. E. Lane, London: Williams and Norgate, 1863–93
- BEQ* H. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, Gräfenhainichen: Schulze, 1931 (reprint: Hildesheim: Olms, 1961). F. Rosenthal notes in “The history of Heinrich Speyer’s *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*” (see bibliography entry) that the original publication information is false. The printing was only completed in 1937, and then under the direction of the Marcus family in Breslau
- BT* Babylonian Talmud
- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
- CSCO* *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*
- EI*² *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Leiden: Brill, 1954–present
- EQ* *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. J. McAuliffe, Leiden: Brill, 2001–6
- EV* A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ān*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938. Reprint: Leiden: Brill, 2007
- GdQ1*, 2, 3 1, 1st edition: T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1860; 2, 2nd edition, Nöldeke’s revised work being titled therein *Über den Ursprung des Qorāns* and including F. Schwally, *Die Sammlung des Qorāns*, ed. and revised F. Schwally, Leipzig: Weicher, 1909, 1919; 3, 2nd edition including G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl, *Die Geschichte des Koran-texts*, Leipzig: Weicher, 1938; reprint: 3 vols. in 1, Hildesheim: Olms, 1970
- JAOS* *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
- JNES* *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
- JRAS* *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
- JSAI* *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
- JSS* *Journal of Semitic Studies*

x Abbreviations

<i>KU</i>	J. Horovitz, <i>Koranische Untersuchungen</i> , Berlin: de Gruyter, 1926
<i>LCD</i>	<i>Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez</i> , ed. W. Leslau, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987
<i>LJ</i>	L. Ginzberg, <i>Legends of the Jews</i> , trans. H. Szold, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1988
<i>MIDEO</i>	<i>Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales du Caire</i>
<i>MQQ</i>	<i>Mu'jam al-qirā'āt al-Qur'āniyya</i> , ed. Aḥmad 'Umar and 'Abd al-ʿĀl Mukarram, Tehran: Dār al-Uswa li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1426
<i>MW</i>	<i>The Muslim</i> (or, in earlier volumes, <i>Moslem</i>) <i>World</i>
<i>NTA</i>	<i>New Testament Apocrypha</i> , ed. W. Schneemelcher, trans. R. Wilson, Cambridge: J. Clarke & Co., 1991
<i>OC</i>	<i>Oriens Christianus</i> (serial)
<i>OIC</i>	T. Andrae, <i>Les origines de l'islam et le christianisme</i> , trans. J. Roche, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1955. Originally published in German as "Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum," <i>Kyrkshistorisk årsskrift</i> 23, 1923, 149–206; 24, 1924, 213–25; 25, 1925, 45–112
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>PO</i>	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i>
<i>QHC</i>	<i>The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context</i> , ed. G.S. Reynolds, London: Routledge, 2007
<i>QS</i>	J. Wansbrough, <i>Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation</i> , Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Reprint: Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004
<i>SI</i>	<i>Studia Islamica</i>
<i>TB</i>	J. Kugel, <i>Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era</i> , Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998
<i>TS</i>	R. Payne Smith, <i>Thesaurus Syriacus</i> , Tome I, Oxford: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1879; Tome 2, 1901
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

Biblical abbreviations

Gn	Genesis
Ex	Exodus
Chr.	Chronicles
Mt	Gospel of Matthew
Mk	Gospel of Mark
Lk	Gospel of Luke
Jn	Gospel of John
Acts	Acts of the Apostles

<i>R.</i>	<i>Rabba</i> (thus, e.g. <i>Gn R.</i> = <i>Genesis Rabba</i>)
LXX	Septuagint
Psh.	Peshitta

Language abbreviations

Ar.	Arabic
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
Syr.	Syriac

Other abbreviations

CS	Case Study
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Nota bene

In the case studies (Chapter 2), italicized words are transliterations. Underlined words are provisional translations. Unless otherwise stated, Biblical translations are from the New Jerusalem Bible.

Introduction

Listening to the text

The present work is largely a response to the difficulties that scholars have in explaining large parts of the Qur'ān. Scholarly difficulties are nothing strange, of course, but there is something particularly intriguing about this case. For the most part, scholars of the Qur'ān accept the basic premise of the medieval Islamic sources that the Qur'ān is to be explained in light of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad. The life of the Prophet, meanwhile, is recorded in those sources with intricate detail. This detailed information, one might assume, should allow scholars to explain at least the literal meaning of the Qur'ān without difficulty. But it does not.

Perhaps the most salient example of this problem is the work of William Montgomery Watt. In his books *Muḥammad at Mecca* and *Muḥammad at Medina*,¹ Watt, following Islamic sources, provides details on every aspect of the Prophet's life, from his family, to his relations with his neighbors and friends, to his military and diplomatic strategies. Yet in his book *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān* Watt consistently notes how much is unknown about the Qur'ān, from the chronological order of its proclamation, to the mysterious letters that open 29 Sūras, to obscure vocabulary throughout the text.² The method of reading the Qur'ān through the life of the Prophet seems not to have served Watt well. Nevertheless, Watt and other scholars argue (or, in some cases, assume) that the Qur'ān must be viewed through the lens of Muḥammad's biography. For Watt this is not one method of reading the text; it is the only method.

The present work is meant as a challenge to this state of affairs, at least in part. This is not a work of history and I will not examine, let alone rewrite, the biography of the Prophet. My concern is only to develop a fruitful method of reading the Qur'ān. And yet the Qur'ān is not a text that renders its secret easily. There is, as has often been noted, nothing that approaches a true

1 W.M. Watt, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953; idem, *Muḥammad at Medina*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.

2 W.M. Watt and R. Bell, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 2nd edition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977 (1st edition 1970).

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narrative in the Qur'ān, the story of Joseph (Q 12) notwithstanding. Instead the Qur'ān seems to direct the reader, through allusions and references, to certain traditions which provide the basis for appreciating its message. The Qur'ān awakens the audience's memory of these traditions and then proceeds without pause to deliver its religious message. This means, in other words, that the task of reading the Qur'ān is a task of listening and response. The audience must follow the Qur'ān's lead to some subtext of traditions.

This dynamic is raised by Salwa El-Awa in a recent article. She comments, "If recipients of the Qur'ānic text lack access to the knowledge they need to process the meanings of its language, they are unlikely to succeed in uncovering the intended meanings."³ El-Awa proceeds to illustrate her point with reference to *al-masad* (Q 111), wherein the Qur'ān rebukes a man named "father of flame" (*abū lahab*) along with this man's wife. The proper explanation of this chapter, she insists, is found among those medieval Muslim exegetes who explain it by describing a confrontation that Muḥammad had in Mecca with an uncle named Abū Lahab. And yet she adds that this explanation is not obvious in the Qur'ān itself: "If information about the historical situation is not available to interpreters, the meaning of the whole *sūra* may be turned into an image of man and his female partner being punished in hellfire for their disbelief."⁴

Thus El-Awa follows faithfully the manner in which the medieval exegetes use biographical material to explain the Qur'ān. I, on the other hand, will argue below (see Ch. 1) for the very position which she is relieved to avoid, that the *Sūra* is "an image of man and his female partner being punished in hellfire for their disbelief."

Accordingly, the general argument in the present work is that the connection made by medieval Muslim exegetes between the biography of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān should not form the basis of critical scholarship. Instead, the Qur'ān should be appreciated in light of its conversation with earlier literature, in particular Biblical literature (by which I mean the Bible, apocrypha, and Jewish and Christian exegetical works). This argument necessarily involves an examination of both the relationship of Muslim exegetical literature to the Qur'ān and the relationship of the Qur'ān to Biblical literature. Still it is the latter relationship that is of particular importance to me, since ultimately I will argue that the Qur'ān expects its audience to be familiar with Biblical literature. Whereas both Islamic tradition and the tradition of critical scholarship have tended to separate Qur'ān and Bible, the Qur'ān itself demands that they be kept together.

3 S.M.S. El-Awa, "Linguistic structure," in A. Rippin (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, London: Blackwell, 2006, (53–72) 67.

4 Ibid.

1 The crisis of Qur'ānic Studies

The scholarly conflict over the Qur'ān

The idea that the Qur'ān and Biblical literature are related is not a new one. Indeed there is a long tradition of critical scholarship dedicated to the search for sources of the Qur'ān in earlier Jewish and Christian writings. Yet for the most part the scholars who contributed to this tradition took for granted the connection made by medieval Muslim scholars between the biography of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān. In their search for sources, they tended to ask when, where, and how Muḥammad learned something from Biblical literature. In other words, these scholars generally assume that the Prophet, as it were, stood between the Bible and the Qur'ān.

The link between the Qur'ān and the Prophet's biography, or *sīra* (by which I mean not only works by this title but biographical information on Muḥammad generally), was generally taken for granted from the beginning of European scholarship of the Qur'ān.¹ The three most prominent translations of the Qur'ān in eighteenth-century Europe all include a biographical sketch of the Prophet Muḥammad.² The 1833 prize-winning work of Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*, includes frequent references to details of the Prophet's biography.³ From its beginnings,

1 Regarding the dominance of this method see E. Gräf, "Zu den christlichen Einflüssen im Koran," *Al-Bāḥith* 28, *Festschrift Joseph Henninger zum 70 Geburtstag*, 1976, (111–44) 111. In a recent article N. Sinai refers to this method as the "authorial paradigm." See his "Orientalism, authorship, and the onset of revelation: Abraham Geiger and Theodor Nöldeke on Muḥammad and the Qur'ān," 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, 145–54.

2 These include the Latin translation of L. Marraccio (Padua: ex typographia Seminarii, 1698; see 1:10–32), the English translation of G. Sale (London: Ackers, 1734; see 33–56), and the French translation of C.-É. Savary (Paris: Knapen, 1783; see 1:1–248).

3 Thus Geiger writes, "Was aber die übrigen Abweichungen und vorzüglich Hinzufügungen betrifft, so rühren diese wiederum . . . von der Vermischung mit seiner Zeit und Person her." A. Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*, Leipzig: Kaufmann, 1902 (1st edition: Bonn: Baaden, 1833), 114. On Geiger see S. Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, ch. 2; J. Lassner, "Abraham Geiger:

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in other words, the method of reading the Qur'ān through that biography was a *sine qua non* of European scholarship on the Qur'ān.

This method reached its most famous formulation in *Die Geschichte des Qorans*, a book in three volumes which evolved over seventy years, through the efforts of four different authors: Theodore Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, and Otto Pretzl. The earliest form of the *Geschichte* was a 1856 Latin essay by Nöldeke: *De origine et compositione Surarum Qoranicarum ipsiusque Qorani*.⁴ Nöldeke submitted this essay to a competition hosted by the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres of Paris, a competition that asked participants to “déterminer autant qu'il est possible, avec l'aide des historiens arabes et des commentateurs et d'après l'examen des morceaux [coraniques] eux-mêmes, les moments de la vie de Mahomet auxquels ils se rapportent.”⁵ In other words, the competition to which Nöldeke submitted his work involved the assumption that a critical study of the Qur'ān means matching individual passages (“morceaux”) of the Qur'ān with elements of the Prophet's biography.

Nöldeke's work, which would become the first volume of *Geschichte des Qorans*, is in fact almost completely taken up by a critical arrangement of the Sūras of the Qur'ān into four periods of the Prophet's life: 1st Meccan, 2nd Meccan, 3rd Meccan and Medinan. Nöldeke adopted the system of four periods from Gustav Weil,⁶ but the idea that each Sūra, as a unity, can be placed in a certain moment of the Prophet's life is a tenet of Islamic religious tradition.⁷ On the other hand, this idea is in no way obvious from the text of the Qur'ān. The text itself nowhere demands to be arranged according to the life experiences of an individual.⁸

Yet this idea had its attraction. The scholars of Nöldeke's era believed that the Prophet's biography, when read critically, was a reliable source of historical information.⁹ It therefore seemed an optimal place to begin a

A nineteenth-century Jewish reformer on the origins of Islam,” in M. Kramer (ed.), *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999, 103–35.

4 See *GdQI*, v.

5 Quoted by Watt and Bell, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, 175.

6 See G. Weil, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran*, Bielefeld: Velhagen and Klasing, 1844. Cf. *GdQI*, 72, n. 1.

7 Thus the standard Egyptian edition of the Qur'ān, first published in 1924 and ubiquitous today, labels each Sūra “Meccan” or “Medinan.”

8 Accordingly it is worth noting the observation of H.-C. Graf von Bothmer, that in the early Qur'ān manuscript fragments discovered in the Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā', Yemen, not a single Sūra is identified as Meccan or Medinan. See H.-C. Graf von Bothmer, K.-H. Ohlig, and G.-R. Puin, “Neue Wege der Koranforschung,” *Magazin Forschung* 1, 1999, (33–46) 43–4.

9 Already in the middle of the nineteenth century E. Renan proclaimed: “One can say without exaggeration that the problem of the origins of Islam has definitely now been completely resolved.” E. Rénan, “Mahomet et les origines de l'Islamisme,” *Revue des deux mondes* 12, 1851, 1065. Reference and translation from R. Hoyland, “Writing the biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and solutions,” *History Compass* 5, 2007, (581–602) 582.

critical study of the Qur'ān, a text that is often not forthcoming with contextual details. Thereby scholars were able, for example, to explain Biblical material in the Qur'ān through reports in the Prophet's biography that connect him or his followers to Jews and Christians.¹⁰ In this way Aloys Sprenger argues, on the basis of the reports in Islamic literature that the Prophet met a Christian monk (named Baḥīrā) during a childhood journey to Syria, that Muḥammad had a Christian informant.¹¹ Nöldeke devoted an article to the refutation of Sprenger's theory,¹² but tellingly he pursues this refutation only by pointing to other elements in the Prophet's biography (such as Muḥammad's relationship with Waraqa b. Nawfal) that render superfluous the search for a secret informant.¹³ This Nöldeke does even while he acknowledges the questionable authority of such reports, admitting that "der einzige unverfälschte, durchaus zuverlässige Zeuge über Muḥammad und seine Lehre ist der Qur'ān."¹⁴

Karl Ahrens exhibits a similar method in his influential article, "Christliches im Qoran."¹⁵ He argues that the Qur'ān was influenced more by Christianity than Judaism with reference to a report in Islamic literature, namely that Muḥammad's followers were distraught to hear of a defeat the Christian Byzantines had suffered at the hands of the Persians. Yet this report is evidently a story designed to give a context to *al-rūm* (30) 2–4a ("The Byzantines

10 See, for example, the comments of J. Obermann: "The situation becomes clear once we recognize that Muhammad had acquired his entire store of knowledge about Scripture, and about Judaism and Christianity in general, through oral channels and personal observation during a long period of association with the People of the Book. His was the case of a pagan converted to monotheism, who absorbed its theory and practice by attending services and pious assemblies of worshipers, by listening at the feet of popular preachers and missionaries, but who never read a line of Scripture, or a breviary, or even of a hymnbook." J. Obermann, "Islamic origins: A study in background and foundation," in J. Friedlander (ed.), *The Arab Heritage*, New York: Russell and Russell, 1963, (58–120) 95.

11 A. Sprenger, "Mohammad's journey to Syria and Professor [F.L.] Fleischer's opinion thereon," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 21, 1852, 576–92; cf. idem, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Muḥammad*, Berlin: Nicolai'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1861–5, 2:348–90.

12 Nöldeke, "Hatte Muḥammad christliche Lehrer?" *ZDMG* 12, 1858, 699–708. He opens by noting (p. 700), "Nun hat sich aber in neuester Zeit Sprenger zur Aufgabe gemacht, seine Ansicht, dass Muḥammad nicht der Stifter des Islāms, sondern – denn darauf läuft doch seine Beweisführung hinaus – ein unbedeutendes, halb betrogenes, halb betrügendes Werkzeug Anderer gewesen sei."

13 Nöldeke returns to this refutation in the *Geschichte*, commenting: "Wenn in den Legenden, welche Muhammed mit einem syrischen Mönche Bahira oder Nestorios Verbindung bringen auch ein wahrer Kern steckt, so kann doch eine solche Begegnung kaum eine ausschlaggebende Bedeutung für seine Prophetie gehabt haben. Und mag Muhammed noch so oft nach Syrien gekommen sein – Hunderte seiner Landsleute machten ja jahraus jahrein diese Reise: um die Offenbarungsreligionen kennen zu lernen, brauchte weder ein heidnischer Mekkaner nach Syrien oder Abessinien, noch ein syrischer oder abessinischer Christ nach Mekka zu kommen." *GdQ1*, 17–18.

14 Nöldeke, "Hatte Muḥammad christliche Lehrer?" 700.

15 K. Ahrens, "Christliches im Qoran," *ZDMG* 84, 1930, 15–68, 148–90.

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have been defeated * in a nearer land. After their defeat they will inflict defeat * in a number of years.”¹⁶ In other words, the Qur'ān seems to explain the story, not vice versa.

The link between the Qur'ān and the Prophet's biography also led scholars, confident that they knew the time and place in which the Qur'ān was written, to search outside of the Islamic canon for Jewish and Christian groups that might have influenced the Qur'ān.¹⁷ Wilhelm Rudolph, for example, dedicates the first chapter of his *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum* (1922) not to anything in the Qur'ān but rather to the nature

16 Wansbrough finds the logic of this explanation particularly wanting: “The primary motif, a natural alliance between Muḥammad's followers and the Byzantines (both being ‘people of the book’) against his opponents and the Persians (both being idolaters), became a constant in Quranic exegesis and a ‘fact’ of oriental history. The circular argumentation underlying that process is graphically illustrated by the manner in which Ahrens drew upon Wellhausen's assertion (itself apparently an inference from the haggadic interpretation of Q 30.1–4) that the Jews in Arabia (hence opponents of Muḥammad) had traditionally (!) sided with Persia against Byzantium to prove, conversely, that Islam was influenced in its development by the prophet's sympathetic attitude to Christianity.” *QS*, 144–5. See Ahrens, “Christliches im Qoran,” 148; J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, Berlin: Reimer, 1897, 236. I personally heard this motif expressed in dramatic fashion by Irfan Shahid, who in a lecture I attended at the American University of Beirut in Spring 2001 proposed that Arab Christian and Muslim scholars unite against secular scholars in the West, as Christians and Muslims united in the days of the Prophet to combat the “fire-worshipping” Zoroastrians.

17 On the influence of Jewish groups see especially R. Dozy, *Die Israeliten zu Mekka von Davids Zeit*, Leipzig: Engelmann, 1864; A.J. Wensinck, *Mohammed en de Joden te Medina*, Leiden: Brill, 1908; English trans.: *Muhammad and the Jews of Medina*, trans. W. Behn, Freiburg: Schwarz, 1975; R. Leszynsky, *Die Juden in Arabien zur Zeit Mohammeds*, Berlin: Mayer and Müller, 1910; D.S. Margoliouth, *The Relations between Arabs and Israelites Prior to the Rise of Islam*, London: Oxford University Press, 1924; H. Hirschberg, *Judische und christliche Lehren im vor-und frühislamischen Arabien*, Krakow: Nakl. Polskiej Akademii Umiejetnosci, 1939; On the influence of Christian groups see especially L. Cheikho, *al-Naṣrāniyya wa-adabuhā bayna ‘arab al-Jāhiliyya*, Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1912–23; French trans.: *Le christianisme et la littérature chrétienne en Arabie avant l'Islam*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1923; H. Lammens, *La Mecque à la veille de l'Hégire*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1924; idem, *Les sanctuaires préislamites dans l'Arabie occidentale*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1926; idem, *L'Arabie occidentale avant l'hégire*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1928; R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*, London: Macmillan, 1926; F. Nau, *Les arabes chrétiens de Mésopotamie et Syrie du VIIe au VIIIe siècle*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1933; H. Charles, *Le christianisme des arabes nomades sur le limes et dans le désert syro-mésopotamien aux alentours de l'hégire*, Paris: Leroux, 1936; J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London: Longman, 1979; E. Rabbath, *L'orient chrétien à la veille de l'islam*, Beirut: Université Libanaise, 1980; R. Tardy, *Najrān: Chrétiens d'Arabie avant l'islam*, Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1999; I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984 (and subsequently *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 1989; . . . in the *Sixth Century*, 1995); idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs: Late Antiquity*, Bruxelles: Byzantion, 2005–6.

of Judaism and Christianity in pre-Islamic Arabia.¹⁸ Scholars frequently looked to Muḥammad's Arabian context to explain the idiosyncratic nature of Biblical material in the Qur'ān. The Arabian desert, they often assumed, must have been a sort of refuge for heretics and heterodoxy. Thus the anonymous English translator of Gustav Weil's nineteenth-century work *Biblischen Legenden der Muselmänner* explains:

Many heresies respecting the Trinity and the Savior, the worship of saints and images, errors on the future state of the soul, etc., had so completely overrun the nominal church of that country that it is difficult to say whether one particle of truth was left in it. More especially the worship of Mary as the mother of God, whom the Marianites [!] considered as a divinity, and to whom the Collyridians even offered a stated sacrifice, was in general practice round Mohammed; and it is as curious as it is sad to observe how this idolatry affected him.¹⁹

Other scholars, more restrained in their judgment, often came to the conclusion that Muḥammad was influenced by some sort of Jewish Christianity. Sprenger, among others, proposed this idea in the nineteenth century.²⁰ Rudolph, Hans-Joachim Schoeps, Shlomo Goitein, and Yūsuf Durra al-Ḥaddād did so in the twentieth century,²¹ and a number of contemporary

18 W. Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1922. The second chapter is dedicated to the question, "Wie ist die Übernahme jüdischer und christlicher Stoffe durch Muhammed zu denken?"

19 G. Weil, *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud or Biblical Legends of the Musselmans*, New York: Harper, 1846, 256. Weil himself was a Jew and presumably would not have thought of pre-Islamic Christianity in this manner.

20 Sprenger bases this conclusion in part on the traditions which relate that Zayd b. Thābit learned Hebrew. He therefore argues that Arab Christians in Muḥammad's day had translated the Bible into Judaeo-Arabic. *Leben*, 1:131. Similar ideas are proposed in Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (see esp. p. 205), and in the work of the Protestant missionary S. Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ* (New York: American Tract Society, 1912). Cf. the conclusion of Nöldeke (*GdQI*, 8), that Islam is "eine wesentlich in den Spuren des Christentums gehende Religionsstiftung."

21 Rudolph writes that the particular form of Christianity that influenced the Qur'ān, "wie überhaupt alle orientalischen Christensekten, einen starken jüdischen Einschlag hatte . . . deshalb kann vieles im Qoran stehen, was auf den ersten Blick als zweifellos jüdisch erscheint und doch aus christlicher Quelle geflossen sein kann" (*Abhängigkeit*, p. 27). Elsewhere (p. 51) Rudolph points to the fact that the Qur'ān has essentially nothing to say about the apostles, which he interprets as a reflection of Ebionite ecclesiology. Schoeps includes Islam in his larger survey of Jewish Christianity: *Theologie und Geschichte des Judentums*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1949 (see pp. 334–43). S.D. Goitein describes the sect that influenced Muḥammad from the opposite direction. They were not Jewish Christians but rather Jews heavily influenced by Christianity. See S.D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*, New York: Schocken, 1955. Ḥaddād builds his argument on an analysis of the Qur'ān's use of the term Naṣārā, and reports of Nazarene sects in early Christian heresiographies. See Yūsuf Durra al-Ḥaddād, *Al-Injīl fī-l-Qur'ān*, Jounieh: Librairie pauliste, 1982; idem, *Al-Qur'ān da'wā naṣrāniyya*, Jounieh: Librairie pauliste, 1969.

scholars, including Joseph Azzi, François de Blois, Édouard Gallez, and Joachim Gnilka continue to hold to it in different forms today.²² Still others looked to Manicheism,²³ or the Qumran community.²⁴ Tor Andrae, for his part, concluded that Muḥammad was influenced by Nestorian (i.e. East Syrian) Christianity, which he asserts had become prominent in the southern Arabian peninsula due to the Persian triumph over the (Jacobite/monophysite) Ethiopians there.²⁵ More recently Günter Lüling has argued that the Qur'ān developed from the hymnal of a Christian sect that rejected both the Trinity and the divinity of Christ (holding him instead to be an angel of the divine council), a sect that had fled from Byzantine oppression to Mecca.²⁶ If these works reach wide-ranging and contradictory conclusions, they have one thing in common. They all work from the basic premise, inherited from Islamic tradition and enshrined by the work of Nöldeke, that the Qur'ān is to be understood in light of the biography Muḥammad.²⁷

22 See Abū Mūsā al-Ḥārīrī, *Nabīy al-raḥma*, Beirut: Diyār 'Aql, 1990; idem, *Qass wa-nabīy*, Beirut: n.p., 1979; French trans.: J. Azzi, *Le prêtre et le prophète*, trans. M.S. Garnier, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001; F. de Blois, "Naṣrānī and ḥanīf: Studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and Islam," *BSOAS* 65, 2002, 1–30; É. Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète: Aux origines de l'islam*, Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2005; J. Gnilka, *Die Nazarener und der Koran, Eine Spurensuche*, Freiburg: Herder, 2007. See also A. Yousef, *Le moine de Mahomet: L'entourage judéo-chrétien à La Mecque au VI^e siècle*, Monaco: Rocher, 2008.

23 See C. Clemens, "Muhammads Abhängigkeit von der Gnosis," *Harnack-Ehrung*, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1921, 249–62; and more recently, M. Gil, "The creed of Abū 'Amir," *Israel Oriental Studies* 12, 1992, 9–47; F. de Blois, "Elchasai – Manes – Muhammad: Manichäismus und Islam in religionshistorischen Vergleich," *Der Islam* 81, 2004, 31–48; cf. M. Sfar, *Le Coran, la Bible et l'orient ancien*, Paris: Sfar, 1998, esp. 409–25.

24 See C. Rabin, "Islam and the Qumran Sect," in C. Rabin (ed.), *Qumran Studies*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957, 112–30. Rabin writes (p. 128), "To sum up, there can be little doubt that Muhammad had Jewish contacts before coming to Medina; it is highly probable that they were heretical, anti-rabbinic Jews; and a number of terminological and ideological details suggest the Qumran sect."

25 Andrae (*OIC*, 16) shows that the liturgical language of Yemeni Christians at the time of Islamic origins was Syriac. Elsewhere (*OIC*, 29–31) he argues (in less convincing fashion) that Muḥammad originally supported Nestorian/Persian Christianity due to an anti-Ethiopian sentiment among the Arabs (a sentiment Andrae proposes was connected to Abraha's campaign against Mecca).

26 See G. Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenvlieder 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; idem, "A new paradigm for the rise of Islam and its consequences for a new paradigm of the history of Israel," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 7, Spring 2000, 23–53; Irfan Shahid, on the other hand, argues that orthodox Chalcedonian Christianity was widespread among the Arabs by the rise of Islam. For example, I. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najrān: New Documents, Subsidia Hagiographica* 49, Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1971; cf. idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs*.

27 Tellingly this premise can be found in works by scholars who otherwise disagree entirely. It is evident, for example, in the polemical work of the Christian missionary W. St. Clair

This premise is no less central to works which per se are dedicated not to history but to philological studies of the Qur'ān, such as the sober and scholarly works of Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (1926) and Heinrich Speyer (a student of Horovitz in Frankfurt), *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (1931). Horovitz introduces the reader to Qur'ānic narratives not according to their appearance in the Qur'ān or their interior chronology (i.e. Adam before Noah before Abraham), but rather according to the supposed moment in Muḥammad's life when he proclaimed them.²⁸ Speyer, in this same vein, indicates one of Nöldeke's four periods (1st Meccan, 2nd Meccan, 3rd Meccan, Medinan) every time he mentions a Qur'ānic verse.

Meanwhile, the method of reading the Qur'ān through the Prophet's biography was questioned by a handful of scholars. In an article written fifty years after the first volume of *Geschichte des Qorāns*, the Belgian scholar Henri Lammens argues that the biography of Muḥammad is not something that the Islamic community remembered, but rather something that Muslim exegetes developed in order to explain the Qur'ān.²⁹ The *sīra* is itself a product of exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'ān, and therefore it can hardly be used to explain the Qur'ān.³⁰

Tisdall, who finds in the division of the Qur'ān between Meccan and Medinan passages evidence for the corruption of Muḥammad's character: "The Qur'an is a faithful mirror of the life and character of its author. It breathes the air of the desert, it enables us to hear the battle-cries of the Prophet's followers as they rushed to the onset, it reveals the working of Muhammad's own mind, and shows the gradual declension of his character as he passed from the earnest and sincere though visionary enthusiast into the conscious impostor and open sensualist." W. St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'an*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1905, 27. It is no less evident in the apologetical work of the Muslim modernist M.H. Haykal, who comments: "I discovered that the most reliable source of information for the biography of Muhammad is the Holy Qur'an. It contains a reference to every event in the life of the Arab Prophet which can serve the investigator as a standard norm and as a guiding light in his analysis of the reports of the various biographies and of the Sunnah." M.H. Haykal, *The Life of Muḥammad*, trans. I.R.A. al-Fārūqī, n.p.: North American Trust, 1976, li–lii.

28 On Horovitz see G. Jäger, "Ein jüdischer Islamwissenschaftler an der Universität Frankfurt und der Hebrew University of Jerusalem," in Hartwig et al. (eds.), *Im vollen Licht der Geschichte*, 117–30.

29 H. Lammens, "Qoran et tradition: Comment fut composé la vie de Mahomet," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 1 (1910) 25–51; English trans.: "The Koran and tradition: How the life of Muhammad was composed," in Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000, (169–87) 181. See also Lammens' work on the material in Islamic tradition regarding the age of the Prophet: "L'Âge de Mahomet et la chronologie de la *sīra*," *Journal Asiatique* 17, 1911, 209–50; English trans.: "The age of Muhammad and the chronology of the *sīra*," in Ibn Warraq (ed.), *Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, 188–217; cf. C.H. Becker, "Prinzipielles zu Lammens' Sirastudien," *Der Islam* 4, 1913, 263–9.

30 Lammens, "The Koran and tradition," 179. Describing the *sīra* Lammens writes elsewhere: "Autour du noyau, fourni par l'interprétation du Qoran, sont venues se superposer des couches inconsistantes, amas bizarre d'apports chrétiens et judaïques, amalgamé avec le

One of the few scholars to appreciate this insight was Régis Blachère. In his *Introduction au Coran* Blachère rejects the fundamental precept of the first volume of *Die Geschichte des Qorāns*:

Il n'apparaît pas inutile de rappeler les principes qui, après Nöldeke et Schwally, semblent devoir inspirer désormais un regroupement acceptable des textes coraniques.

En premier lieu, il faut renoncer pour toujours à l'idée d'un reclassement des sourates qui collerait à la biographie de Mahomet, fondée uniquement sur la Tradition. Seul le Coran pourrait être un guide sûr. . . . Puisque ni la biographie de Mahomet telle que l'ont imaginée les auteurs musulmans, ni celle qu'ont tenté d'établir les historiens occidentaux ne fournit une base sûre ou assez détaillée pour un regroupement chronologique des textes de la Vulgate.³¹

Thus Blachère objects to the manner in which Nöldeke established a chronology of the Qur'ān, that is, on the basis of reports in Islamic tradition. Yet he does not object to the idea of a chronology per se (indeed in the first version of his translation of the Qur'ān the Sūras are arranged according to a chronology). He simply argues that it must be achieved solely on a literary basis, that is, independently from *tafsīr* and *sīra*. This, of course, is problematic, inasmuch as the Qur'ān itself provides little evidence for the Prophet's life.³²

In a similar fashion the English scholar Richard Bell, and thereafter his student Watt, proposed a modification, but not a rejection, of Nöldeke's method.³³ Bell leaves no doubt that the Qur'ān should be read in the light of the Prophet's biography.³⁴ He begins his study of the Qur'ān with a

théories dynastico-politiques, avec les rêveries théocratiques, les opinions des écoles de théologie et de droit, avec les tendances de cercles ascétiques et les aspirations de soufisme." H. Lammens, *Fāṭima et les filles de Mahomet*, Rome: Sumptibus pontificii instituti biblici, 1912, 139–40.

31 Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 2nd edition, Paris: Maisonneuve, 1959 (1st edition 1947), 252–3. Cf. R. Blachère, *Le problème de Mahomet*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1952.

32 Thus R. Hoyland relates: "Régis Blachère tried to circumvent the problem by using the Qur'ān as his starting point. This text is generally considered to issue from Muhammad himself and in which case it is the key to his thought. But even if this is granted, it does not help us very much, for the Qur'ān makes scant reference to the historical environment in which it arose." R. Hoyland, "Writing the biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and solutions," *History Compass* 5, 2007, (581–602) 584.

33 R. Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963; Watt and Bell, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*. The latter work is Watt's revision and commentary of the former work. Cf. W.M. Watt, "The dating of the Qur'ān: A review of Richard Bell's Theories," *JRAS* 1957, 46–56.

34 Thus A. Rippin accurately notes: "At this point it is worth noting that the highly praised work of Richard Bell, although supposedly using the biblical methodology consequent on

presentation of the historical context of pre-Islamic Arabia and historical reports of Muḥammad's life.³⁵ Regarding the chronological order of the Qur'ān, Bell criticizes Nöldeke's conviction that Sūras in their entirety can be placed into certain periods in the Prophet's biography,³⁶ and notes, like Lammens, the place of (haggadic) exegesis in shaping that biography:

But in the great bulk of the Qur'ān there is either no reference to historical events, or the events and circumstances to which reference is made are not otherwise known. In regard to such passages there are often differing traditions, and as often as not the stories related to explain them turn out, when critically examined, to be imagined from the passages themselves. . . . There is, in effect, no reliable tradition as to the historical order of the Qur'ān.³⁷

In his revision of Bell's views Watt notably edits this point, arguing that such traditions should nevertheless be seen as the fundamental basis for understanding the Qur'ān. After acknowledging the objections of Bell, Watt continues:

Despite these deficiencies the traditional dating of passages by Muslim scholars is by no means valueless, and indeed forms the basis of all future work. In so far as it is consistent it gives a rough idea of the chronology of the Qur'ān; and any modern attempt to find a basis for dating must by and large be in agreement with the traditional views, even if in one or two points it contradicts them.³⁸

The contrast between Bell and his student on this point is significant, inasmuch as later scholars largely follow Watt. The great exception to this

the Documentary Hypothesis, has, in fact, progressed not one iota beyond implicit notions in the traditional accounts of the revelation and the collection of the Qur'ān; he took the ideas of serial revelation and the collection after the death of Muḥammad (the common notions accepted by most Western students of the Qur'ān) and applied them literally to the text of the Qur'ān. However, the primary purpose of employing modern biblical methodologies must be to free oneself from age-old presuppositions and to apply new ones. This Bell did not do; in fact, he worked wholly within the presuppositions of the Islamic tradition." A. Rippin, "Literary analysis of Qur'ān, *tafsīr* and *sīra*: The methodologies of John Wansbrough," in R.C. Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985, (151–63) 156; reprint: *The Qur'ān and Its Interpretive Tradition*, ed. A. Rippin, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001.

35 Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 1–36; Watt and Bell, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 1–39. In the *Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*, Bell argues that the fundamental dynamic in the Qur'ān is Muḥammad's gradual discovery of Jewish and Christian teachings during his career. Bell, *Origin*, 68–9.

36 Regarding which see A. Rippin, "Reading the Qur'ān with Richard Bell," *JAOS* 112, 1992, (639–47) 643.

37 Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 100.

38 Watt and Bell, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 109.

trend is John Wansbrough,³⁹ who argues trenchantly in *Qur'ānic Studies* that the stories which exegetes tell to explain the Qur'ān are not historical records, but rather the literary product of a community developing a salvation history in an environment charged with sectarian rivalry. The stories that involve Muḥammad, no less than the stories that involve Abraham, Moses, or Jesus, are literary, not historical.⁴⁰

Now most critical scholars acknowledge that story-telling is a salient element in classical Qur'ānic exegesis. For Wansbrough, however, this acknowledgment leads to fundamentally different conclusions about the Qur'ānic text. First, the idea of a chronology of the Qur'ān according to Muḥammad's life is by his reading spurious, since the stories that would link a certain passage of the Qur'ān to a certain moment in that life have no historical authority. Second, and even more far-reaching, *tafsīr* literature in general, *even when it is read with a critical method*, cannot provide the scholar with privileged information on what the Qur'ān originally meant.⁴¹ Instead,

39 The literary approach of Toshihiko Izutsu, followed more recently by Daniel Madigan, might also be considered an exception to the trend. Izutsu concerns himself only with an analysis of the language and semantics of the Qur'ān, setting aside the question of its relationship with the *sīra* for the sake of his method. In this, however, Izutsu provides no fundamental challenge to the dominant method of reading the Qur'ān through *sīra*, but rather frames his work as an alternative – but not contradictory – approach to the Qur'ānic text. See T. Izutsu, *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Koran: A Study in Semantics*, Tokyo: Keio, 1959; idem, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, Tokyo: Keio, 1964; D. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

40 In this same line Patricia Crone argues that the fundamental process in the development of *tafsīr* is not remembering but story-telling: "Classical exegetes such as Ṭabarī may omit the story, having developed hermeneutical interests of a more sophisticated kind; but even when they do so, the story underlies the interpretation advanced. It is clear, then, that much of the classical Muslim understanding of the Qur'ān rests on the work of popular story tellers, such story tellers being the first to propose particular historical contexts for particular verses." P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, 216. To this argument Uri Rubin responds that the exegetical elements of the *sīra* are secondary efforts to connect earlier stories about the Prophet to the material in the Qur'ān. See U. Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, Princeton: Darwin, 1995, esp. pp. 226–33. Similar is the approach of M. Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie: Eine quellenkritische Analyse der Sīra-Überlieferung zu Muḥammads Konflikt mit den Juden*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998. It is also worth noting that Watt himself wrote a short work in response to Wansbrough and Crone, intended to show that the evidence in the Qur'ān itself verifies the basic outline of the *sīra*. See his *Muḥammad's Mecca: History in the Quran*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988.

41 Noting the argument of Joseph Schacht that legal traditions attributed to Muḥammad are in fact the products of medieval Muslim scholars, Wansbrough comments, "It seems at least doubtful whether for exegetical (*tafsīr*) traditions a different origin can be claimed." *QS*, 179. Schacht himself makes this point forcefully in "A revaluation of Islamic traditions," *JRAS* 1949, 142–54; reprint: *Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. Ibn Warraq, 358–67.

tafsīr literature is a remarkably successful intellectual enterprise to develop original and distinctive religious traditions in the face of competition from (above all) Jews and Christians. It is this second conclusion that is particularly important for the present work. I will argue that the Qur'ān – from a critical perspective at least – should not be read in conversation with what came after it (*tafsīr*) but with what came before it (Biblical literature).

In other respects, however, this work diverges from Wansbrough's theories. Wansbrough doubts that the Qur'ān had a unitary form before the 'Abbāsid period (instead of an Ur-text of the Qur'ān he imagines that various "prophetical *logoi*" first came together as a book in this period). In the present work, on the other hand, I have no concern for this question. Instead my concern is how the canonical text of the Qur'ān might best be read.

The answer to that question offered by the present work conflicts with the dominant scholarly method today. With some exceptions,⁴² scholars in the field today continue to explain the Qur'ān by means of a critical reading of *tafsīr*. By dividing the Qur'ān according to Muḥammad's life they hope to find a historical context that will illuminate the passage at hand. By sorting through the traditions in *tafsīr* they hope to spot a valid tradition that preserves ancient material. This approach to the text, as Wansbrough points out, is essentially that of medieval Muslim scholars.⁴³

In this regard the example of Angelika Neuwirth, a student of Anton Spitaler (the student of Bergsträsser and Pretzl in Munich), is particularly

42 Notably G. Hawting in various publications including *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; "Qur'anic exegesis and history," in J.D. McAuliffe, B. Walfish and J. Goering (eds.), *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 408–21; see also the article by J. Chabbi, "Histoire et tradition sacrée: la biographie impossible de Mahomet," *Arabica* 43, 1996, 189–205. Particularly noteworthy are the remarks of Fred Donner in his opening essay in the recent *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*: "Taken together, these two facts – that the Qur'ān text crystallised at an early date, and that the *sīra* reports are sometimes exegetical – suggest that we must consider the relationship of the Qur'ān to its context in a manner that reverses the procedure normally adopted when studying the relationship of a text to its context. Rather than relying on the *sīra* reports about a presumed historical context to illuminate the meaning of the Qur'ān text, we must attempt to infer from the Qur'ānic text what its true historical context might have been, and in this way check on the historicity of the various reports in the *sīra*." F. Donner, "The historical context," in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, (23–39) 34.

43 On Nöldeke, Wansbrough comments: "His historical evaluation of traditional data did not bring him much beyond the position established and occupied by Süyūṭī 400 years earlier." To this he adds: "Modifications of Nöldeke-Schwally by Bell and Blachère, respectively, exhibit refinement of detail but no critical assessment of the principle involved, namely, whether a chronology/topology of revelation is even feasible." *QS*, 126.

illuminating. Neuwirth argues that the Qur'ān should be studied for its literary forms and its internal indications of a community of believers, not on the basis of *tafsīr*.⁴⁴ Despite this, Neuwirth bases her work on the traditional division of the Qur'ān into Meccan and Medinan periods of Muḥammad's life.⁴⁵ Neuwirth, like Blachère, looks for evidence of a chronological development within the text.⁴⁶ In practice, however, her division of Sūras between Meccan and Medinan is essentially that proposed by Nöldeke in the middle of the nineteenth century. Indeed, in a recent publication Prof. Neuwirth laments that more scholars have not returned to Nöldeke's chronology, which she names the "foundation for any historical Qur'ān research."⁴⁷

44 See, e.g., A. Neuwirth, "Qur'ānic literary structure revisited," in S. Leder (ed.), *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998, 388–420; eadem, "Qur'ān and history—a disputed relationship: Some reflections on Qur'ānic history and history in the Qur'ān," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5, 2003, 1–18.

45 Notice the title of her first book: *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981 (2nd edition 2007). See more recently her "Structural, linguistic and literary features," in McAuliffe (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, 97–113. More recently Neuwirth has begun a major project to establish a critical edition of the Qur'ān with the evidence of manuscripts, a project once imagined by none other than Bergsträsser and Pretzl (along with the Australian Arthur Jeffery). I understand that the critical edition will be produced according to a supposed chronology of the Qur'ān, i.e. "Meccan" Sūras will be produced first. The project has been announced as *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). For more details on the project and the proposed format of the online text see M. Marx, "Ein Koran-Forschungsprojekt in der Tradition der Wissenschaft des Judentums: Zur Programmatik des Akademienvorhabens *Corpus Coranicum*," in Hartwig et al. (eds.), *Im vollen Licht der Geschichte*, 41–53; and <http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/semiarab/arabistik/projekte/index.html>. This project was in part the focus of a front page *Wall Street Journal* article: A. Higgins, "The Lost Archive," *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2008, A1.

46 She argues that Meccan Sūras are distinguished by liturgical concerns, while Medinan Sūras are distinguished by political and social concerns, along with the rejection of Judaism for a Meccan, Abrahamic cult. "Die Neureflexion des Koran als Diskursabfolge hat gegenüber der klassischen Periodisierung den Vorteil, dass sie nicht auf einer linearen Vorstellung von einem Informationszuwachs der einen Figur des Propheten und einer stilistischen Entwicklung der Texte aufbaut, sondern die Übermittler-Hörer-Kommunikation in ihrer Bedeutung erkennt und den Koran als einen Kommunikationsprozess zu beschreiben unternimmt." Neuwirth, "Zur Archäologie einer Heiligen Schrift: Überlegungen zum Koran vor seiner Kompilation," in C. Burgmer (ed.), *Streit um den Koran*, Berlin: Schiler, 2004, (82–97) 97.

47 "That not only critical analysis of previously formulated positions was abandoned, but also that even the foundation for any historical Qur'ān research was relinquished, namely the chronology of the suras elaborated by Nöldeke, has to be seen retrospectively as a perilous regression." "Im vollen Licht der Geschichte: Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Anfänge der kritischen Koranforschung," in Hartwig et al. (eds.), *Im vollen Licht der Geschichte* (25–39) 34 (quotation from English trans., p. 19).

The dominance of this perspective on the Qur'ān is particularly salient in the work of Karen Armstrong. One of the most popular authors on Islam,⁴⁸ Armstrong is often portrayed as a leading authority in the field,⁴⁹ even if she knows little if any Arabic (as suggested by the transliteration of Qur'ān as Qu'ran throughout [the second edition of!] her work on Muḥammad). Yet precisely because of this her work is an interesting case study, since it is entirely dependent on secondary sources in the field. It is noteworthy, then, that Armstrong accepts, apparently without questioning, the traditional notion of connecting individual passages with Muḥammad's biography. Regarding *al-ḍuḥā* (93), for example, she writes:

We know very little about Muḥammad's early life. The Qu'ran [sic] gives us the most authoritative account of his experience before he received his prophetic vocation when he was forty years old: "Did he not find thee an orphan and shelter thee? Did he not find thee erring and guide thee? Did he not find thee needy and suffice thee? [Q 93.6–9; Arberry]"⁵⁰

In fact, the Qur'ān never identifies the speaker or the intended audience of these questions. According to Islamic tradition, however, God is here speaking to Muḥammad. But certainly these verses could be something else altogether, such as the Qur'ān's exhortation to believers generally to be charitable to orphans ("Therefore do not oppress the orphan," Q 93.10) and to the needy ("and do not reject the needy," Q 93.11). In fact, it might be argued that the powerful moral argument of this Sūra, that mercy should be shown because God is merciful, is nullified when the reader imagines that the Qur'ān intends only Muḥammad here.

Armstrong explains *al-masad* (111) in a similar fashion:

Abu Lahab's wife, who fancied herself as a poet, liked to shout insulting verses at the Prophet when he passed by. On one occasion she hurled an armful of prickly firewood in his path. It was probably at this time that Sūra 111 was revealed: "Perish the hands of Abu Lahab, and perish he! His wealth avails him not, neither what he has earned; he shall roast at a flaming fire; and his wife, the carrier of the firewood; upon her neck a rope of palm fibre [Arberry's translation]."⁵¹

48 On July 5, 2007, Karen Armstrong's *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (2nd edition, London: Phoenix, 2001 (1st edition 1993)) was ranked #8,481 of all books at amazon.com.

49 She was, for example, one of the few scholars called on to provide the basic commentary for the monumental Public Broadcasting (USA) special on Muḥammad broadcast on Sept. 25, 2002.

50 Armstrong, *Muḥammad*, 72.

51 Ibid., 130.

Read by itself *al-masad* hardly supports Armstrong's explanation. The Qur'ān never identifies Abū Lahab, "Father of Flame," as a historical figure. The phrase might in fact be an allusion to anyone who is doomed to hell (regarding which see Ch. 2, CS 13).⁵² Similarly the reference to his wife as a carrier of firewood (*ḥaṭab*) seems to be a rather artful play on the theme of damnation. The rich, sinful woman will not carry her wealth to the afterlife (Q 111.2) but rather be dragged (Q 111.5) by her neck, as she carries instead firewood that will light the flames of her own punishment (Q 111.4). Nevertheless in *tafsīr* this passage is explained through the introduction of a historical figure named Abū Lahab, a relative of, and ultimately an antagonist to, the Prophet. His antagonism is encouraged by a spiteful wife, who is reported to have harassed Muḥammad by throwing firewood in his path. Armstrong adds the detail that the firewood was prickly.⁵³

With Armstrong the reader has the sense that she has chosen the model of reading the Qur'ān through *tafsīr* without any serious reflection. With a second influential scholar, Muhammad Abdel Haleem, the results are the same but the tone is quite different. Abdel Haleem is professor of Qur'ānic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, and founder of the *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies*. His book *Understanding the Qur'ān* has become a standard resource for undergraduate instruction on the Qur'ān.⁵⁴ Therein it appears that Abdel Haleem, like Armstrong, inevitably views the Qur'ān through the lens of *tafsīr*.

This is seen, for example, in his commentary on *al-baqara* (2.223a), which reads: "Your women are your field. Go into your field as you wish." Abdel Haleem explains: "When the Muslims migrated from Mecca the men found the women of Medina bashful and only willing to sleep with their husbands lying on their side. So the Muslim men asked the Prophet if there was anything wrong with such sexual positions."⁵⁵ It perhaps goes without saying there is nothing in the Qur'ānic verses that connects this verse to the bashfulness, or the sexual habits, of the women in Medina.⁵⁶

52 On this point cf. *KU*, 78, 88.

53 Almost all of Armstrong's work reflects this method. For example, she explains Q 96.1–5 with the story of Muḥammad and Mt. Ḥirā' (p. 83), Q 74.1–5 with the story of Muḥammad being wrapped up in a blanket after the first revelation (pp. 84–5, 91), and Q 53.19–26 and 22.51 with the story of the Satanic Verses (pp. 115–6), etc.

54 M. Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, London: Tauris, 1999. See more recently the *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, ed. E.M. Badawi and M.A. Haleem, Leiden: Brill, 2008.

55 Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, 44.

56 In a similar fashion Abdel Haleem argues that the Qur'ān's phrase in *al-baqara* (2) 109, "Forgive and pardon until God gives His command," is God's instruction to the Muslims in Mecca when they were facing persecution from pagans (*Understanding the Qur'an*, 61). This is a strange argument, since the verse begins with a reference to the People of the Book (presumably Jews or Christians, but not pagans). More to the point, there is no detail in this verse itself, or any of the verses around it, that would give it the historical context that Abdel Haleem imagines.

With Armstrong and Abdel Haleem we have returned to a state that might be described as pre-Nöldeke. They assume, like Nöldeke, that *tafsīr* is the key that unlocks the Qur'ān's meaning, but unlike Nöldeke they offer little critical reading of *tafsīr*. In fact, if their works reflect a bias (namely modernism) that would not be found among the classical *mufasssīrūn*, their method is by no means different than that of medieval Muslim scholars.

Yet even those scholars who propose radical re-readings of the Qur'ān often rely on the presuppositions of *tafsīr*. The Lebanese scholar Joseph Azzi (also known under the pen name Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī)⁵⁷ argues that Muḥammad was actually the disciple of Waraqa b. Nawfal (the cousin of Muḥammad's first wife Khadija who, in the *sīra*, confirms Muḥammad's original revelation), by his view a Judaeo-Christian.⁵⁸ Such ideas reflect a radically (and for Muslims, unacceptable) different view of the Qur'ān. Yet Azzi still relies on the method of reading the Qur'ān through Muḥammad's life that is so central to *tafsīr*. He even cites Nöldeke's chronology of the Qur'ān as justification for his novel thesis:

Cependant, si nous nous référons aux recherches des orientalistes, notamment à celles du professeur Nöldeke, qui a classé les sourates du Coran par ordre chronologique, nous découvrons une donnée extrêmement important et significative. Nous nous rendons compte que les enseignements du Coran de La Mecque sont les mêmes que ceux de l'Évangile des Hébreux.⁵⁹

What is to account for the dominance of this method? In certain cases it seems to be connected with a particular religious orientation, but this hardly explains the dependence of supposedly secular scholars on *tafsīr*. To some extent this may be a case of academic inertia. The method of reading the Qur'ān through *tafsīr* has been taught by almost every western scholar, from Nöldeke to Neuwirth, and to doubt it might seem impudent. But it seems to me that this method is above all favored simply because it is useful, both

57 See Al-Ḥarīrī, *Qass wa-nabīy*; trans.: J. Azzi, *Le Prêtre et le Prophète*.

58 See Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen: Dieterich, 1858–60, 153–4; English trans.: Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, trans. A. Guillaume, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955, 107. According to Azzi, however, Waraqa was actually the priest (*qass*) of a Jewish Christian community in Mecca, and the translator of the Hebrew Gospel of the Nazoraeans, which he incorporated into the Qur'ān. Nazoraeans (Ναζωραῖοι) is the name used by Epiphanius (d. 403), Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. ca. 458) and John of Damascus (d. 749) for a Jewish-Christian sect that existed in the early Christian centuries in Palestine and the Decapolis. Azzi connects these references with the Qur'ānic term *naṣārā*. De Blois takes a similar approach in “*Naṣrānī* and *ḥanīf*,” 1–17.

59 Azzi, *Le Prêtre et le prophète*, 121; Arabic: *Qass wa-nabīy*, 92. The more recent work of J. Chabbi, *Le Coran décrypté: Figures bibliques en Arabie* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), is similar in method. Chabbi pursues her (otherwise novel and scholarly) study of the Biblical background to the Qur'ān with the historical context of Muḥammad always in mind.

to apologetical scholars such as Armstrong and Abdel Haleem and polemical scholars such as Azzi. Without the library of *tafsīrs*, scholars might feel themselves in a sort of intellectual wilderness, with no orienting landmarks to guide their thought.

The remarks of Watt are revealing in this regard. On the one hand Watt seems to recognize that the traditions which match certain segments of the Qur'ān with elements in the Prophet's biography are the creation of *tafsīr*. Thus in discussing the question of whether *al-qalam* (or 'alaq; 96) or *al-muddaththar* (74) was first revealed, he comments:

In fact neither of these may be the first extant revelation, and the stories may be only the guesses of later Muslim scholars, since there are grounds for selecting each as first. Sura 96 begins with "recite", and this is appropriate for a book which is called "the recitation" or Qur'ān; and sura 74 after addressing Muḥammad has the words "rise and warn" – an appropriate beginning to the work of a messenger or warner.⁶⁰

Despite this admission, Watt insists that the *tafsīr* method of dating the Qur'ān according to the Prophet's life is "by no means valueless, and indeed forms the basis of all future work."⁶¹ Apparently what Watt means is that the traditional dating should be used because it is helpful to the scholar. But what if it is wrong?

What if, as John Burton puts it, "Exegesis aspiring to become history, gave us *sīra*"?⁶² Indeed biographical reports on Muḥammad regularly serve the function of explaining unclear passages in the Qur'ān. The story of the Yemeni king Abraha's invasion of Mecca with one (!) elephant seems to be an exegesis on *al-fīl* (105).⁶³ The story of the angels who removed Muḥammad's heart from his body and washed it in a golden basin of melted snow seems to be an exegesis on *al-sharḥ* (94) 1–2.⁶⁴ The story of Muḥammad's first revelation on Mt. Ḥirā', according to which he saw the angel Gabriel as a massive form on the horizon, and then demanded that Khadija wrap him in a blanket, seems to be an exegesis on *al-'alaq* (96) 1–5, *al-najm* (53) 1–18, and *al-muddaththar* (74.1; cf. 73.1).⁶⁵ The story of Muḥammad's night journey to Jerusalem seems to be an exegesis on *al-isrā* (17) 1 and so forth.⁶⁶ Now

60 Watt and Bell, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, 109.

61 Ibid.

62 J. Burton, "Law and exegesis: The penalty for adultery in Islam," in G.R. Hawting and A.A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'an*, London: Routledge, 1993, (269–84) 271.

63 Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, 29–42 (trans., 21–30).

64 Ibid., 105–7 (trans., 71–3).

65 Ibid., 152–4 (trans., 105–7).

66 Ibid., 263–71 (trans., 181–7). There is, of course, more that went into the Prophet's biography. The story of Mt. Ḥirā', as indicated by Waraqa's declaration that Muḥammad has received the *nāmūs* (cf. Gk νόμος, "the law"), is marked by a larger religious topos of the prophet receiving the revealed law on a mountain top, etc.

such traditions, it goes without saying, can be a proper guide for a pious reading of the Qur'an. But to the critical scholar they should suggest that *tafsir* is a remarkable literary achievement to be appreciated in its own right. These *tafsir* traditions do not preserve the Qur'an's ancient meaning, and to insist otherwise does a disservice both to *tafsir* and to the Qur'an.

The standard response to this perspective (much like Watt's reproach of Bell) is that there is no need to throw out the baby with the bath water. The works of the *mufasssirun* can still connect us with the time of the Qur'an's origins. True, the interpretive traditions therein were affected by later legal, mystical, sectarian, and theological currents that flowed through the early Islamic community. Yet at a fundamental level the historical record is intact. All that is needed is a good critical reading to separate the exegesis from the history.

The problem with this view is that the *mufasssirun*, even the earliest *mufasssirun*, are unable to understand basic elements of the Qur'an. Two examples might illuminate this point. First is the case of the disconnected letters (Ar. *al-ahruf al-muqatta'a* or *fawātiḥ al-suwar*) that appear at the opening of 29 Sūras.⁶⁷ These letters seem to play an important role in the organization of the Qur'an. For example, every consonantal form in the Arabic alphabet is represented at least once by these letters, while no form is used for more than one letter.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, Sūras that begin with the same or similar letters are grouped together, even when that grouping means violating the larger ordering principle of the Qur'an (from longer to shorter Sūras).⁶⁹ Yet the classical *mufasssirun* do not know any of this. They do not demonstrate any memory of the role these letters played in the Qur'an's organization. Instead their commentary reflects both confusion and creative speculation.⁷⁰

67 On this topic see, e.g., A. Jeffery, "The mystic letters of the Qur'an," *MW* 14, 1924, 247–60; J.A. Bellamy, "The mysterious letters of the Qur'an: Old abbreviations of the *Basmalah*," *JAOS* 93, 1973, 267–85; M. Seale, *Qur'an and Bible*, London: Helm, 1978, 38–60; The most impressive treatment of this topic, I believe, is the concise analysis of A. Welch, "Qur'an," *EP*, 5:412–4.

68 Thus, e.g., *al-ahruf al-muqatta'a* include ي but not ب, و, or ث; ح but not ج or خ; ر but not ز; ش but not ص; ط but not ظ; and ع but not غ.

69 Thus Sūras 13–15, which are part of the *a.l.(m.)r.* group of Q 10–15, are shorter than Q 16; Sūras 40 and 43, which are part of the *h.m.* group of Q 40–6, are longer than Q 39.

70 Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, for example, opens his discussion of this topic with the admission that "the interpreters of the Qur'an differ over the meaning" of the disconnected letters. He then reports over fourteen different interpretations of these letters, and offers up to five traditions for each interpretation. These interpretations include that the letters represent different names for the Qur'an, or names of different Sūras, or names for God, or a mystical way in which God makes a vow upon His own divinity, or that the letters are each abbreviations for different words, or a method of counting camels, or that each letter has a numerical value, thereby recording the length that certain nations will last, or that the letters are simply a mystery known only to God. In all, Ṭabarī's discussion of the first three disconnected letters takes over nine pages in the standard Beirut edition of his *tafsir*. He concludes this discussion with his own view, that each letter is an abbreviation for more than one word. This is