

Quranic Studies and the Literary Turn

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This review essay examines current trends in the field of Quranic studies, as expressed in recent introductory works on the Quran, which in turn reflect developments in more specialized publications. A prominent characteristic in this body of scholarship is an increased emphasis on approaching the Quran as a literary text, as conceived within the structures of textual criticism. Much of this work strives to bypass the autochthonous exegetical corpus developed by Muslim authorities and read the Quran on its own terms, as a text best situated within a sectarian milieu of late antiquity. Particular attention is given here to the configuration of literature as a secular category of analysis and the implications it bears for this growing field.

The study of the Quran has been enjoying a surge of attention of late, both in and beyond the Western academy. One indication of this interest can be measured by the sheer number of publications in European languages that engage the Quran in some fashion, intended for both specialists and general readers alike. This is in addition to the profound impact that Internet resources are having on the field, in terms of telegraphing information and shaping modes of interpretation. While much of this scholarship focuses on exegesis and the historical reception of the Quran, there is a growing body of research tracing the lineaments of the Quran's historical formation through such literary methods as lexicography, codicology, and textual criticism.

Given the pronounced philological character of much of this work, it is perhaps not surprising that the pioneering classics of German Quranic scholarship from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have continued to find relevance. This is reflected most recently in the English translations by Wolfgang Behn of *Geschichte des Qurâns* by Theodor Nöldeke and his successors (1909–38; Eng. tr. 2013) and of *Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* by Ignác Goldziher (1920; tr. 2006). Prior to their English translations, these two works, which tackle the historical formation of the Quranic text and the autochthonous practices of Quranic exegesis respectively, enjoyed translations into non-European languages—*Geschichte des Qurâns* has been partially translated into Turkish (1970) and fully translated into Arabic (2004), while Goldziher's study has appeared in Arabic (1944, 1955) and in Persian (2004). This broad translation activity reflects the multiple constituencies and readerships that have engaged with Western Quranic scholarship.

The often divergent frameworks, assumptions, and methodologies that have shaped the modern field of Quranic studies, both in and beyond the West, at times have made the exchange of ideas between religious and intellectual communities rather tenuous. Needless to say, many modern Muslim scholars have closely followed Quranic research by non-Muslims in terms that have been neither adversarial nor confrontational. As with much of the earlier Western academic writing in the field, Régis Blachère's *Introduction au Coran* (1947) could imagine a non-Muslim readership composed largely of aspiring Orientalists. Blachère's

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prolegomenon, however, found an entirely different audience with the Persian translation by Maḥmūd Rāmyār (1980). A scholar of Islamic studies at Mashhad University, Rāmyār pursued a second doctorate with William Montgomery Watt at Edinburgh University; Rāmyār is best known today for his *Tārīkh-i Qurʾān* (1967). As the title suggests, this study draws inspiration from Nöldeke's foundational work in the field. Rāmyār engages with a host of modern European scholars as well as classical Muslim authorities of Quranic exegesis. For Watt's part, in his 1970 revision of Richard Bell's *Introduction to the Qurʾān* (1953), he duly noted a sea change underway in what he found to be "the strange new world" of the later twentieth century. Seeing Muslims and non-Muslims in greater proximity to one another, Watt called for new research on the Quran to be undertaken by both communities, in a collaborative spirit. Just as writing for an imagined coterie of only non-Muslim scholars is no longer tenable, so too are university classrooms in North America and Europe increasingly diverse spaces, in religious and ethnic terms.

These transformations can be felt in the wide array of introductory offerings in English on the Quran, by both Muslims and non-Muslims, directed to a general audience, in and out of the undergraduate classroom. The situation has changed much from the days when the available English introductory materials were limited to, say, Watt's survey, the introduction to the Quran by Kenneth Cragg (1971), and Fazlur Rahman's thematic study (1980). The last two decades have witnessed a perennial march of publications exploring the Quran in some fashion. Included in this list are introductions by Neal Robinson (1996), M. A. Abdel Haleem (1999), Michael Sells (1999), Mohammad Abu-Hamdiyyah (2000), Michael Cook (2000), Farid Esack (2002), Bruce Lawrence (2006), Mona Siddiqui (2007), Abdullah Saeed (2008), Ingrid Mattson (2008), Walter Wagner (2008), Clinton Bennett (2009), Anna Gade (2010), John Kaltner (2011), and Ziauddin Sardar (2011). This is not to forget multi-authored volumes, such as those edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (2006) and Andrew Rippin (2006), which are also aimed at the introductory level. To be sure, these materials present different areas of focus and exhibit a range of perspectives, from the religiously committed to the agnostic yet largely sympathetic. Even the more skeptical treatments of the Quran tend to express a good deal of deference toward the sacred text. Admittedly, much of this propaedeutic attention to the sacred scripture of Islam has emerged within broader political contexts of war and terrorism, which have foregrounded the Quran as a key to understanding current events. Many of these introductory works address in some fashion the inadequacies of conflating scripture with religion while underscoring the profound epistemic and ethical shortcomings of interpreting scripture solely through the prism of modern conflicts. However, in no small measure such presentist concerns have fueled interest in Islam in general and in the Quran in particular and have helped to generate an expanding market of publications for scholarly and general interest audiences.

Keenly aware of this confluence between publishing, scholarship, and the public sphere is Carl Ernst, whose decades of scholarship reflect a profound expertise in Islamic studies and the academic study of religion. Ernst has contributed recently to this growing body of publications with his 2011 introduction *How to Read the Qurʾān*, a concise and thoughtful guide written after several years of experience teaching the Quran largely to American university students. This work offers a lucid presentation of the Quran, specifically designed for the undergraduate classroom. Ernst is a sympathetic and close reader, committed to a broader project of demystifying Islam and building bridges of communication between various cultural, intellectual, and religious divides. He succeeds in maintaining this larger ethical concern, while also closely analyzing the Quran as a textual and historical document, worthy of literary attention on its own terms.

Ernst introduces his readers to much of the recent research on the Quran, and does so while making a compelling case for a literary approach to the sacred text. The richly referenced endnotes bear testament to his broad engagement with current Western (particularly German) scholarship in the field. Reference is also made to a handful of modern Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and reformers (e.g., pp. 64–65). From both the main body of the text and the supplementary notes, a reader may easily be left with the impression that the most important scholarship on the Quran today comes from outside the sphere of Islamic learning, however broadly construed. Ernst's commitment to a non-theological reading of the text may well contribute to the general absence of modern Muslim scholarship in his work; it may also reflect the ambivalence and suspicion expressed by some Muslim religious authorities toward Western form criticism of the Quran, which constitutes a primary locus of attention for Ernst's enterprise. Indeed, Ernst explicitly aims to bracket out interpretations rooted in religious commitments as a means of advancing what he terms a non-theological reading, accessible to a wide range of audiences.

The name of Ernst's book finds a parallel in numerous publications entitled, in some fashion, *How to Read the Bible*. While the title features prominently in nineteenth-century Protestant Sunday school instruction, it has for some time been associated with college-level introductory courses on the Bible. This trend has recently crossed over to the teaching of the Quran, as reflected first with the Pakistani-British scholar Mona Siddiqui, who published a guide entitled *How to Read the Qur'an* (2007). Siddiqui also aims to lead a general audience through a reading of the Quran. Building upon a paradigm that already exists for biblical scholarship, this shared title highlights the growing desire of publishers, readers, and teachers for introductory pedagogical materials designed to explain a text long marginalized in Western education.

Like Ernst, and many of the other recent scholars in the field, Siddiqui addresses the particular challenges of reading the Quran in the post-9/11 era. However, in contrast, Siddiqui also writes as a Muslim academic, devotionally committed to the Quran as a "book of divine guidance and inspiration." As such, she engages with largely normative arguments concerning how Muslims ought to read the Quran with a "mature" spirit of religious pluralism and tolerance as a direct challenge to the literalist hermeneutics vocally advanced by fundamentalists (p. 86). Siddiqui's short guide follows a largely thematic progression, presenting key topics in the Quran and in the development of Islamic history, by which she seeks to distill a foundational message of justice and compassion. She concludes with a reflection on the challenges and benefits of recent Western critical scholarship on the Quran and exhorts Muslim believers to be receptive to both devotional and critical engagements with the text, as part of a broader ethical imperative to promote mutual understanding and respect (p. 105). Siddiqui does not critically address the limitations of this moral-ethical framework of pluralism and multiculturalism in terms of practice or implantation within the privileged spheres of Western secular education and public life. Similarly, the treatment of the Quran is itself at times rather cursory and impressionistic, often largely tending faith-based positions concerning the formation and transmission of the text promoted by early Muslim authorities, with little qualification concerning the attendant historical problems that have so preoccupied much of modern Western scholarship.

In contrast, Ernst's introduction seeks to move the emphasis away from normative, tradition-based presentations rooted in the later exegetical reception and instead to shift attention toward the questions of the historical and literary contexts of the Quran's formation. Like Siddiqui, Ernst also locates his reading within a broader ethical imperative shaped by current events. Nonetheless, he strives to maintain a close attention to the text itself, while attempting to synthesize modern scholarship on the Quran with his own critical analysis.

To this end, Ernst opens his work with two insightful introductory chapters: the first on the challenges of reading the Quran in the current political and cultural context; the second on the history of Quranic reception and interpretation. These are followed by three chapters focused entirely on the chronological development of the Quranic text. The work concludes with a final chapter further advancing the case for a literary reading, by which is largely meant a form-critical and structuralist analysis. In this vein Ernst supplies three helpful appendices. The first offers a chronological as well as structural outline of the Meccan suras, as developed by Angelika Neuwirth in her formal literary analysis, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (1981; rev. ed. 2007). The second supplies an outline of the ring composition of *sūrat al-Baqara* (Q 2), as proposed by Raymond Farrin (2010). Similarly, the interpretive exercises presented in the final appendix focus almost exclusively on the textual analysis of the Quran. Indeed, it is through the particular framework of form criticism that Ernst intends to instruct his readers on how to read the Quran.

Ernst addresses a broad audience of students and general readers, both religious and non-religious; he also speaks directly to Muslims who might be “curious about what non-Muslim scholars make of the Qur’an,” and argues that his “historical and literary approach is impartial and respectful,” as he seeks to promote understanding, which is “the basis for real communication” (p. 8). Ernst applies to the Quran approaches developed in literary readings of the Bible in order to analyze the text in terms of its content and various forms. He isolates this reading from the later exegetical traditions of Muslim religious authorities who developed canonical interpretations. Ernst notes that this approach contrasts with the majority of introductory works on the Quran, which he argues largely present broad themes and messages and generally fall back on the Sunni interpretive tradition as the primary authority for understanding the text. Additionally, Ernst laments that missing from these introductions is any real engagement with the current scholarship on the historical formation of the Quran. Given the broad range of educational materials in the field, this may not be the fairest assessment. However, it serves as grist for Ernst’s presentation of a text-critical reading, building on an argument that he developed earlier in his article “Reading Strategies for Introducing the Qur’an as Literature in an American Public University” (2006).

Ernst seeks to access the Quran in its pre-exegetical and pre-canonical state. He sets out to accomplish this by probing the internal evidence of the Quran as a textual document. Such an exercise bypasses the authority of the exegetical tradition in the hope of recreating the earliest historical reception of the Quranic text. Through this form-critical approach, Ernst aims to place the study of the Quran on the same footing as the study of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament within the context of American higher education, as “literary texts that emerged in particular historical contexts” (p. 17). Furthermore, he contends that as his non-theological, literary approach does not assess the actual religious authenticity of the Quran, it offers an alternative to “the implacable hostility and prejudice against Islam” that shapes attitudes toward Muslims in America and Europe. Ultimately, for Ernst this literary reading provides a basis for religious pluralism, as it does not address the legitimacy of any particular religious claim as such.

As for his analysis, it is greatly indebted to the work of Theodor Nöldeke and Angelika Neuwirth, as well as to the voluminous body of scholarship contained in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* (2001–2006). The chronological ordering of the suras proposed by Nöldeke and modified by Neuwirth serves as the basis for Ernst’s hermeneutical process, as he takes his readers through Nöldeke’s early, middle, and later Meccan suras, which are then followed by a reading of the Medinan suras. Ernst does allude to the scholarly criticism facing this particular form of ordering the text. He largely bypasses these issues, however, in favor

of a working and pragmatic hypothesis that helps him to map the structural, rhetorical, and thematic variety within the Quranic text onto a particular chronological development.

One of the primary aims of Ernst's study is to make modern scholarship on the Quran more accessible to non-specialists. This results in a rather felicitous balance between close attention to the Quran and larger arguments concerning the historical development of the text through the process of canonization. In this light Ernst provides a compelling analysis of the fifth sura (pp. 162–63, 190–203) as structurally akin to a ring-cycle, drawing from Michel Cuypers' study in *The Banquet* (2009). This follows similar structural and thematic explorations of suras 2, 3, and 60. Also of great value is Ernst's attention to broader historical scholarship on late antiquity, which he puts in dialogue with the Quran. Particularly insightful here are his discussions of burial practices, tombs, and notions of the afterlife within the context of the Arabian peninsula in the pre-Islamic period (pp. 84–89).

While such reliance on secondary scholarship can have drawbacks, it results here only in some minor areas that warrant further explanation, clarification, or correction. In his brief yet astute discussion of vernacularity and translation, Ernst explains that already in the tenth century "the massive Arabic Qur'an commentary of al-Ṭabarī was translated into Persian" (p. 68). Needless to say, this oversimplifies the relationship between the Persian commentary, generally known in the manuscript tradition as *Tafsīr-i Ṭabarī*, and the exegetical and historical corpus of material associated with al-Ṭabarī. Similarly, Ernst claims that al-Tha'labī's commentary remains unpublished (p. 64); however, while we still lack a critical edition of the *tafsīr*, the work itself is widely available on the Internet as a PDF of the Beirut edition (2002) and as a searchable text file. Yet, as exegesis is clearly not Ernst's area of concern such oversights do not detract from the larger focus of the work.

In a discussion on the Quran's historical context, Ernst summarizes an argument advanced by Nöldeke (1890) and then revisited by Kevin van Bladel (2008) on the relationship between the Quranic account of Dhū l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–102) and the anonymous seventh-century Syriac prophecy of Alexander the Great, *Neṣḥānā d' Aleksandrōs* (The Triumph of Alexander). Following the dating of *Neṣḥānā* advanced by Gerrit Reinink (1985, 2003), Ernst suggests that the Syriac legend was incorporated into an earlier body of Meccan material during the later Medinan period (p. 138). At a linguistic level, however, the significant instances of divergence between the Quranic text and the Syriac *Neṣḥānā* put into serious question the exact relationship between the two accounts. There is much to suggest that eschatological discourses on the life of Alexander and Gog and Magog were widely diffused throughout the seventh century, both orally and textually. It is thus rather tenuous to attempt to historicize the Quranic account using material that may not have been a direct intertext for the Quran. As this particular issue has been the subject of some scholarly debate, it could have served as an opportunity to explore the often rather simplistic notions of influence, borrowing, and the circulation of texts in late antiquity developed in nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship on the sources of the Quran.

Ernst is quick to explain that his literary reading offers only one of many ways to approach the sacred text and that others may well challenge the particularities of his analysis. This frankness is refreshing and lends dynamism to his treatment of the material. One might wish, however, that more attention had been given to the implications and limitations of the particular modes of reading advanced in the book. For instance, the treatment of the formal structure of the Quran at the level of individual verses and larger verse clusters follows closely the method developed by Neuwirth in her seminal study on the composition of the Meccan suras. This allows Ernst to tease out broader rhetorical patterns and groupings of themes and materials in the structural organization of the sura as a literary unit. He follows Neuwirth's observation that

material that disrupts these structural sections or independent groups of verses (i.e., *Gesätz*; cf. *Studien*, pp. 175–78) thematically or breaks with the internal rhyme and paragraph structure may represent later additions or interpolations to the original text, such as with the occurrence of a long section of prose within a series of rhyming verses. At times these explanations can be rather convincing. Yet, internal lower criticism, independent of any form of external codicological or interpretive witnesses, risks the tautology of circular argumentation. As Andrew Rippin (1982) has highlighted in his review of Neuwirth's *Studien zur Komposition*, there are profound methodological limitations to the process of identifying the underlying structure or grouping of verses, a procedure that he views as necessarily subjective and at times arbitrary. A full engagement with the benefits, as well as limits, of this particular heuristic method would grant further transparency to Ernst's own reading.

For Ernst, reading the Quran as literature is largely an activity of structural analysis, examining the formal qualities of the text as a means of probing its historical formation. There are notable epistemic drawbacks to such a method, particularly in the extent to which such positivist approaches can truly uncover the *Sitz im Leben* of a scripture's formation, independent of the later exegetical reception. With the rise of post-structuralist criticism, the field of modern biblical scholarship has started to wrestle with these very problems, and it is entirely appropriate in an introduction to the Quran to address the shortcomings of structural literary theory and textual criticism as a means for recuperating historical knowledge. A literary reading of the Quran, nonetheless, could very well turn beyond such formal considerations of canonization, textual formation, and structural patterns.

Equally subtle, though nonetheless important, are the problems that the category of literature itself poses. Ernst uses literature mainly as a neutral and transparent term, evidently universal in its scope, in need of little explanation or contextualization. As Ernst rightfully highlights, just as with the Bible the academic approach to the Quran as literature is designed to bracket out the theological question of belief, a task that is entirely congruent with the discursive aims of secular education. Here a literary reading, which largely means historical criticism, is championed as a way of accessing the textual formation of scripture as a historical phenomenon. Needless to say, neither the category of literature nor the methods of historical criticism are free from ideological commitments or assumptions. The British literary critic Terry Eagleton (2008) has argued in a discussion of secular aesthetics that "most aesthetic concepts are theological ones in disguise"—an observation also advanced by Talal Asad (2011) in a discussion of secularism, religion, and freedom of speech. Modes of reading generally have ideological, if not explicitly theological, commitments underwriting them. There is a very rich history of Muslims approaching the Quran as a supreme and divine expression of literary excellence; yet as Ernst aptly demonstrates, a literary reading can indeed avoid an overtly theological approach to the Quran. Nonetheless, while such interpretive engagements may not be predicated on theological commitments, they still transmit values and assumptions.

The constitution of literature as a secular domain, bearing authority and authenticity divine neither in its origin nor in its scope, forms part of a particular process within the history of Western secularism that could occasion fuller reflection as we consider the political implications of reading the scriptures of others. While Andrew Rippin (1983) has pointed to some of the problems with reading the Quran as literature, the question deserves further consideration, and an introduction on the Quran as a literary text situated in history could very well address these problems directly. One implication is that the historical method of literary criticism tends to privilege the world behind the text in its pre-canonical and canonical formations and as such can risk freezing scripture and its meaning within a historical vacuum. Rather than a living

document disseminated through diverse contexts of reception, the emphasis on the primacy of original meaning can obfuscate the very social-ethical imperatives facing multiple interpretive communities. Originary significance is precisely the battlefield where diverse forms of religious and secular authority are staged. Such ethical problems have been well analyzed in the course of postmodern reactions to historical criticism of the Bible. As a method of reading, historical criticism has become increasingly (and perhaps ironically) a conservative force within particular currents of modern biblical hermeneutics.

These small matters aside, Ernst's erudite presentation of what he terms the best of the current research in the field offers an attentive and approachable introduction for teachers and students interested in a serious study of the Quran. The focus on the formative stages of the Quranic text fits into an increased effort both within and outside the academy to contextualize the Quran in the scriptural milieu of late antiquity and particularly in light of biblical and extra-biblical texts. There are many factors motivating this interest. At a scholarly level, there has been a growing reaction to the use of Islamic exegesis as a means of studying the Quran; as a corpus of literature, it has been argued, exegetical material has tended to deemphasize and at times even ignore the profound dialogical connections between the Quran and the larger scriptural environment of its initial contexts of reception.

More popularly, the juxtaposition between the Quran and the Bible has served as a basis both for interfaith dialogue and for hostile attacks against Muḥammad and Islam. Many of these general interest publications suffer from serious epistemic flaws. The well-intentioned collection *Sharing Mary: Bible and Qur'an Side by Side* compiled by the Dutch author Marlies ter Borg offers a telling example of the pitfalls that plague popular writing on the Quran. The volume seeks to present a non-partial reading, in this case by "placing the Bible and Qur'an stories side by side on an equal basis" (p. 31). Ter Borg stresses that her juxtaposition of the two scriptures is based ultimately on the disavowal of interpretation or evaluation. As she argues, "this is better than historical experience [*sic*] of misinterpretation." The author emphasizes that she has no religious affiliation and that rather she is committed to increasing understanding between Islam and the West. She also makes clear that her collection is designed to promote religious dialogue and mutual understanding.

Ter Borg is quick to highlight that she herself is not a scholar of Islam, the Quran, or the Bible. The publication is an expansion and partial translation of her earlier Dutch compilation, *Koran en Bijbel in verhalen* (2007). In the English version Ter Borg has succeeded in marshaling a broad array of scholarly authorities, with reflections that preface and conclude the volume by three well-known scholars of Islam and the Quran in the North American academy: Andrew Rippin, the late Barbara Stowasser, and Khaled Abou El Fadl. Also included are a range of scholars and religious authorities from the Netherlands, many of whom are involved in promoting religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue in some fashion: Martha Frederiks, Herman Beck, and Moch Nur Ichwan, an Indonesian and Dutch-trained scholar of Islam, as well as the liberal Dutch rabbi Awraham Soetendorp. Also featured is a piece by Mehmet Paçacı, a well-known Turkish scholar of Quranic exegesis. The broad range of voices brought together in the pages of her collection, which spans continents, disciplines, and religions, is a testament to the success of ter Borg's interfaith undertaking, which is itself designed to promote dialogue, communication, and mutual understanding. The headings and chapter titles, the illustrated material, and the actual contents of the collection, which juxtapose these scholarly and religious voices with the parallel scriptural passages, all point to a very creative and lively engagement with the source material.

Yet the admirable aspirations of the project are colored by several problems. Most of these contributions appear to be original to the volume. However, it should be noted that the section

by Barbara Stowasser is largely a rewriting of material from her *Women in the Qur'an* (1994), a matter that is not explicitly stated and might lead to some confusion. Similarly, while the cover page prominently features Abou El Fadl as a contributor, the collection merely quotes passages from his earlier published work, *The Search for Beauty in Islam* (2001).

Beyond these rather immaterial concerns, the structure and design of the enterprise also deserve further reflection. The presentation of the parallel passages advances a linear biblical progression from creation, with the story of Adam and Eve, followed by accounts of the biblical prophets and kings (chs. 5–17). This ultimately builds up to the lives of Mary and Jesus (chs. 18–21) and a short excursus (ch. 22) that links Jesus and Muḥammad. This chapter briefly and inadequately addresses Christian and Muslim exegetical traditions concerning the *paraclete* in the Gospel of John and in the Quranic passage on Jesus' prediction of a messenger who would succeed him, whose name was Aḥmad, i.e., the most praised (Q 61:6: . . . *bi-rasūlin ya'tī min ba'dī 'smuhu aḥmadu*). From here the volume transitions into sections on eschatology and soteriology (chs. 23–25) and legal and ethical concerns (chs. 36–39). This is followed by a final chapter on the attributes of God, which stresses the common monotheistic core shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Ter Borg insists that her collection shuns later exegetical explanations in order to leave “interpretation and contextual and historical analysis to the reader” (p. 40). Needless to say, her brief prefaces to each chapter are themselves reflections of a very particular heuristic framework, drawn in great measure from traditional interpretive sources; this is patently the case in treatment of such theological and political issues as the divinity of Jesus, holy war and terrorism, human rights, homosexuality, and the status of women. Furthermore, the method of selecting and juxtaposing particular passages, often in a profoundly atomistic fashion, is itself a form of hermeneutical intervention that is inevitably designed to promote a particular analysis and interpretation. While ter Borg is candid in her editorial method of cutting out large sections of text from the respective scriptural sources, the result is often a jumbled pastiche that is largely shorn of any given context other than the editorial design of the collection.

Thus, for instance, on the question of veiling (pp. 267–68), ter Borg draws together passages from Deuteronomy, I Corinthians, I Peter, and I Timothy as evidently representing the biblical position on the matter; this she then juxtaposes with Quranic passages taken from three different suras (Q 7:26, 24:30–31, 33:59). Such a method is entirely in keeping with a particular set of Protestant hermeneutical practices. This is manifest, for instance, in the foundational Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which locates interpretive authority in the individual believer who confronts scripture by itself, shorn of any intermediating, exegetical interference. Such a process of reading finds full expression through the collection of *dicta probantia*—proof texts that can be reduced, rearranged, and dislodged from their original contexts in order to form a “biblical” basis for particular doctrines. While certain classical methods of Islamic exegesis can be at times highly atomistic, the historical context and order of particular revelations governed by the exegetical corpus of writing on *asbāb al-nuzūl*, i.e., the occasions of revelation, and the concomitant doctrine of *naskh* or abrogation, generally limit the kinds of reordering and rearrangements that would be admissible in any particular interpretive procedure. Thus, many of the juxtapositions that ter Borg makes between the Bible and the Quran feel at times either arbitrary or governed by an implied set of interpretive conclusions that she hopes the reader will make.

Considering the diverse manners in which content is spread throughout the Quran, particularly on the line of prophets preceding Muḥammad, there is much to be gained by placing relevant biblical and extra-biblical intertexts alongside Quranic material. As Western scholarship has long noted, there are many passages where a side-by-side comparison proves to be

rather fruitful. Indeed, the Quran envisions itself as the culmination of a heavenly tradition of scriptural revelation that stretches through the revealed writings of Abraham, the Torah, the Psalms of David, and the Gospel of Jesus. Highlighting these profound interconnections certainly helps to situate the Quran within a broader set of scriptural traditions. In its very form, such a side-by-side presentation serves to demystify the radical alterity that many non-Muslims associate with Islam and its scripture.

Here the method of juxtaposition is deeply problematic, however. Most importantly, the collection advances scripture as the primary and authentic means by which religion is constituted. Andrew Rippin highlights this reductionism in his contribution to the volume, where he draws attention to the particular Protestant underpinnings of equating “religion with its scripture” (p. 49). He further argues that such a side-by-side presentation of the Bible and the Quran privileges canonical biblical texts that may not have been historical intertexts for the Quran and thus any conclusions drawn from such a juxtaposition can easily lead to “serious misinterpretations” (p. 50) of the Quran’s formation. That said, the inclusion of Rippin’s rather incisive critique of the very exercise the collection proposes in some measure helps to mitigate the profound shortcomings of the project’s method. One may wonder, nonetheless, why ter Borg did not do more to heed Rippin’s critique. The participation of academics in popular presentations of the Quran reflects a larger imperative to engage in wider public discourses on Islam. While scholarly rigor may be co-opted or diluted in the process, as Rippin demonstrates here, such dangers are not insurmountable.

The textual essentialism of *Sharing Mary* fits into a particular approach to scripture as literature unmoored from the historical contexts of either its formation or reception. Such an approach advances the illusion of an unmediated and direct process of reading. For ter Borg the comparative exercise is designed to underscore that the Bible and the Quran “are part of World literature,” and, as such, deserve to be made easily accessible for “every willing reader” (p. 31). This particular configuration of literature aims to enable the individual reader to access the text and to judge its meaning independent of interpretive traditions, which are seen as historically, ideologically, or theologically contingent. Of course, ter Borg’s impulse is entirely correct in that it has become an increasingly common practice to include within world literature curricula excerpts from the Quran, the Bible, and a host of other scriptural traditions. This is reflected, for instance, in the recent editions of the Norton (2012) and Longman (2004) anthologies of world literature, both of which preface selections from the Quran with general and necessarily perfunctory introductions to the history of the text and its significance in the development of Islamic thought. To exclude the Quran from such anthologies would be its own form of provincialism. However, without the larger historical and indeed exegetical contexts surrounding the textual formation of the Quran, a “literary” reading, particularly in a comparative light, risks flattening out the profound complexities that shape the Quran’s relationship to the scriptural and sectarian milieu of late antiquity, and with it the diachronic reception among Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Another challenge for a comparative exercise is that it can devolve quickly into an evaluative one. This is a problem that ter Borg is well aware of and to her credit takes great pains to avoid. Yet the very structure of the collection is itself formulated upon an interpretive intervention long promoted within Orientalist scholarship on Quran. A particularly important source for ter Borg in her process of identifying parallel passages is Johann-Dietrich Thyen’s *Bibel und Koran: Eine Synopse gemeinsamer Überlieferungen* (1989), which synoptically collates together, in a much more exhaustive fashion, the Quran with biblical material. As Thyen’s preface makes clear, such an exercise serves to demonstrate that the Quran is an imperfect derivation of the Bible, a lesson that he feels will be particularly useful for teachers, pastors, and priests, among others (pp. xvi–xvii). Writing explicitly within a Protestant

theological framework, Thyen envisions a process by which Muḥammad, identified as the Quran's author, resorted to borrowing from biblical texts (*zu Anleihen bei biblischen Texten gegriffen*) in order to make his message more credible among Jews and Christians (p. xx). These conclusions are drawn out of a method of historical criticism (*historisch Kritik*) that, according to Thyen, Muslims rightly resist. Thyen's collection is designed to lay bare through the power of synoptic juxtaposition the derivative and fragmentary nature of the Quran.

There is a lengthy genealogy to this particular form of intervention that, often in a blaze of philological erudition, seeks to highlight not only the dependency of the Quran upon Jewish and Christian sources, but also to expose the Quran's imperfect understanding of these original materials, a fault usually imputed directly to Muḥammad. Such a current can be traced in German historical criticism over the course of a century, with the pioneering study of Abraham Geiger (1833) on the one hand and that of Heinrich Speyer (1937 [1931]) on the other. The notion of textual borrowing and misappropriation is still very much alive today in the proliferation of popular publications that seek to uncover the Quran's imperfect dependency on Jewish and Christian materials.

Yet, on the other end of the spectrum, the problem in not directly engaging with the profound dialectic relationship that the Quran evinces with the pre-existing textual corpora of late antiquity, is that, as Angelika Neuwirth (2007) has stressed, it risks separating, and even orientaling, the text as an alien and insoluble isolate. At a scholarly level, the field of Quranic studies is still very much wrestling with the issues of the Quran's formation and its relationship to the larger scriptural milieu of the Near East. In recent years, a variety of publications have directly addressed these questions often in rather exciting and innovating ways. This is reflected notably in full-length monographs and dissertations, such as the studies by Gabriel Reynolds (2010), Emran El-Badawi (2011), and Joseph Witztum (2011), and in edited volumes by the likes of John Reeves (2003), Gabriel Reynolds (2008, 2011), Tilman Nagel (2010), and Angelika Neuwirth et al. (2010). This growing body of scholarship has sought to examine with greater theoretical sophistication the diverse manners in which the Quran emerged in dialogue with a broad array of source material. Largely gone from these discussions is the language of borrowing and misappropriation; it is refreshingly replaced with a focus on the historical communities implicated within the Quranic text and the textual points of connectivity drawing them together and keeping them apart. This is often matched with an emphasis on Quranic intertextuality and self-referentiality deployed within a broader sectarian environment. An attention to the generic form of the Quran is also a prominent feature of this emerging body of scholarship, particularly in relation to Jewish and Christian religious texts of the period and the diverse modes of textual transmission between religious communities.

Much of this work has sought to sidestep the classical exegetical sources of Islamic religious authority in an attempt to better understand the historical context of the Quran and its profound interconnections with the diverse sectarian communities of the period. Ever since the penetrating critique leveled by John Wansbrough (1977), who questioned the validity of reading the Quran through autochthonous Muslim authorities—material that is necessarily shaped by a particular Islamic salvation history—there has been a growing chorus in the field of Quranic textual studies doubting the usefulness of the exegetical tradition for accessing the original formation of the text. These doubts find full voice in several recent studies on the historical context of the Quran. Such observations are often accompanied by the lament that the field of Quranic studies is methodologically and theoretically retrograde when compared to the advances made in biblical studies. Competency in the languages and sources of late antiquity, usually in the form of Hebrew and Syriac, are often positioned as requirements for the proper study of the Quran. Likewise, much of this recent work, which to be sure is by no

means homogenous, has advanced a literary approach to the study of the Quran, in the manner of higher criticism, as a form of properly determining the historical formation of the text.

Like most methodological frameworks, there are benefits as well as limitations to textual criticism. As a basis of evidentiary knowledge, this particular strain of literary analysis can suffer in its own insularity from a certain degree of circular reasoning. At the level of higher criticism, the often widely divergent hypotheses obtained by the use of such methods are noteworthy, particularly with the varying views regarding the formation of the Quran within its original sectarian context(s) of reception. At the level of lower criticism, this also extends to the often-conflicting results produced in arguments for textual emendation.

Frequently such interpretive interventions are predicated upon a complete disavowal of the classical interpretive tradition. Dislodging the interpretive corpus has often served as the basis for more radical forms of historical revisionism. The profound and at times hyperbolic skepticism brought to bear upon Muslim exegetical sources deserves further consideration. There is a strong current within the field of hadith criticism, represented by such scholars as Harald Motzki, G. H. A. Juynboll, and Gregor Schoeler, which has sought to historicize the circulation and collection of prophetic logia squarely in the beginning of the second century of the Islamic era. Similarly, the codicological studies by François Déroche (2009) and Behnam Sadeghi et al. (2010, 2012) situate the oldest surviving codices of the Quran even earlier. It should be noted that among other matters, statements ascribed to the Prophet and the early community often turn directly to issues of scriptural interpretation.

The point is that while the hadith corpus in its earliest protean, divergent, and heterogeneous forms undoubtedly postdated the Quran, the historical gulf separating the two is perhaps not so vast as to warrant the complete disavowal of one for the other, not at least without an internally consistent methodological reason for doing so. This is not to argue that the Quran must be read solely through its later interpreters, subjected entirely to the epic history of the *sīra* and *maghāzī* literature on the life of Muḥammad and the early community. Yes, the formative exegetical tradition of the second/eighth century is deeply connected to early hadith material associated with the history of the Prophet and the early community of believers. But it is also profoundly invested in the recuperation of meaning at the basic level of the grammatical and lexicographical significance of the Quran. The field of biblical studies does not share any direct parallel to the situation of the early exegetical sources on the Quran in terms of the historical proximity of these materials to the text. While salvation history certainly colors a good deal of this material, not everything these sources marshal forth is done in the service of a theological or historical argument. Foremost, the sources are not monolithic, and much of the formative exegetical corpus focuses on core issues of literal comprehension. Also running throughout the early interpretive traditions is a profound awareness of Jewish and Christian sources, both in their textual and oral forms, a legacy that scholars such as Walid Saleh (2008) and Sidney Griffith (2013) have demonstrated continued to shape the development of Islamic intellectual history. The early exegetical points of connectivity with biblical and extra-biblical material certainly offer fertile ground for examining a range of religious materials circulating within late antiquity.

Despite the obvious force of the interpretive tradition, there is indeed Quranic material that early religious authorities either did not grasp or on which they clearly failed to obtain an interpretive consensus, e.g., the mysterious letters prefacing several suras, the significance of particular words and phrases, and various allusions to biblical and extra-biblical texts and themes. The objection has thus often been raised that this interpretive impasse reflects a historical discontinuity between the Quranic text and the subsequent exegetical tradition. Such a rupture appears rather convincing, particularly if we imagine that the dissemination of the Quran, in its pre-canonical form, both orally and textually, could easily have outpaced the

earliest interpretive communities that sought to govern its meaning. To some degree, these blind spots could also reflect that what is obvious or significant in one generation may fail to be so in the next. Yet, the fact that interpretive discontinuities constitute such a small portion of the exegetical corpus is no doubt itself worthy of reflection.

We may also wish to question the extent to which Quranic studies should emulate the methods and theories of Biblicists. For while the corpora overlap in important and obvious ways, there are meaningful differences in the actual histories surrounding the texts and their respective interpretive communities. These divergences do not end with late antiquity, but extend well into later Jewish and Christian reform movements. They are also reflected in the epistemic authority of Orientalism, which used historical criticism for rather polemical ends. As William Graham has skillfully demonstrated (1987), profound shortcomings can result by privileging the Bible and its formation as the primary and default mode for the comparative study of scripture.

This does not mean that we should forsake a close reading of the Quranic text, its historical context, or that of its broader scriptural milieu. Indeed, in many ways, such literary analysis has enriched the field of Quranic studies and has helped to further situate the Quran within the current frameworks and assumptions governing scholarly authority. Yet, this approach also risks promoting the illusion of immediacy, of a direct hermeneutical process unaided by interpretive voices. The Protestant underpinnings to such an enterprise should give pause, particularly in discourses aimed at cultivating legitimacy through the impression of philological inscrutability. The power of historical criticism is usually advanced in direct opposition to what is necessarily constituted as an interpretive tradition that is enfeebled intellectually and is theologically untrustworthy. Undoubtedly, there is much to be gained through thoughtful examination of the Quran's formation in light of our growing understanding of early Islamic history and the religious traditions of late antiquity. Yet, moving beyond the pursuit of a vanishing point in the origins of Islamic history, a literary turn could speak directly and self-reflexively to the current interpretive frameworks shaping the historical critical study of the Quran. While perhaps slightly apodictic, it deserves mentioning that even scholarly interventions are interpretive ones, no less situated in particular histories and ethical motivations. Just as no text exists without interpreters, no interpreter is without a context, and as interpretive authority can certainly build upon preceding generations, it is often invested in displacing the authority of others. While this cacophony of voices and methods is often lamented in evaluations of the current state of the field, it wondrously echoes the heterogeneity of the classical exegetical material, which also wrestled, in diverse and often rather creative ways, with mastering the meaning of the Quran.

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