

REVIEW ARTICLE

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IN SEARCH OF A COMPREHENSIBLE QUR'ĀN: A SURVEY OF SOME RECENT SCHOLARLY WORKS

Recent books discussed in this article include: Mohammad Abu-Hamdiyyah, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 136 pp., Hb. ISBN 04 152225086, Pb. ISBN 04 15225094; Issa Boullata, ed., *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, Curzon Studies on the Qur'an (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 393 pp., Hb. ISBN 07007 12569; Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 174 pp., Pb. ISBN 0 19 285344 9; Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 208 pp., Hb. ISBN 0 19 512580 0; Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*, Curzon Studies on the Qur'an (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), 213 pp., Hb. ISBN 07007 13948; and Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1999), 318 pp., Hb. ISBN 0 87850 134 7.

THE FIELD OF QUR'ĀNIC STUDIES is currently witnessing a vogue among scholars not seen since the high days of the German School on the eve of World War II. This proliferation of scholarship is taking place at a time when no consensus exists on a central core of works to define the field—let alone on a program to train future scholars. Yet, as I shall argue, our knowledge of the Qur'ān has continued to expand solely through studies conducted in the tradition of the German School,¹ which maintains that the Qur'ān reflects the career of the Prophet Muhammad and that it was codified at an early date. This review article will reaffirm the central significance of the German School as representing the most scholarly approach to the Qur'ān.

The dire state of Qur'ānic studies in recent years is readily apparent if we compare the large number and high quality of introductory works on the New Testament or the Hebrew Bible to those on the Qur'ān. Readers wishing to learn about the New Testament face the daunting task of

picking from tens of titles: indeed, a new introduction appears almost annually to inform the general reader about the latest developments in New Testament studies. The same can be said about introductions to the Hebrew Bible. Although many of these new publications challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of earlier scholars, they also provide historical sketches of how the field grew and matured, the topics currently engaging it and bibliographies to guide readers through the accumulated literature in their respective fields.

We have yet to see such a standard approach in the field of Qur'ānic studies. The few introductions that do exist, if not idiosyncratic, are gravely flawed by their lack of reference to recent scholarship. To date, there is no generally-accepted alternative to M. W. Watt's 1970 reworking of Richard Bell's 1953 *Introduction to the Qur'ān*.² Thus, the standard introductory text to the Qur'ān is almost fifty years old. Neal Robinson's recent publication, *Discovering the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*,³ would seem to be a worthy replacement, since it is the only work written in the past three decades with the specific intention of introducing students to the field in a systematic and coherent manner. Unfortunately, this volume is still little known, perhaps owing to the exorbitant price set by its publishers. I will not discuss Robinson's work here, but do recommend it to colleagues and students despite the fact that it is already eight years old.

It is unfair to judge Mohammad Abu-Hamdiyyah's *The Qur'an: An Introduction*⁴ against the three titles mentioned above. Because Abu-Hamdiyyah's text comes from outside of the Western tradition of Qur'ānic scholarship it cannot be measured using the standards usually employed to assess scholarly Western introductions to scriptures. Although it is unconventional, it can only be understood as a confessional, apologetic introduction to the Qur'ān aimed at a non-Muslim audience. As such, it exhibits all of the characteristics of a primary document in that it tells us more about the efforts of a certain stratum of Middle Eastern intellectuals to approach the Qur'ān than it does about the Qur'ān as a seventh-century document.

This stratum is the professional middle class, whose members usually have training in one of the scientific fields, such as medicine or engineering. They represent a new breed of Qur'ānic specialists, one whose access to scholarly English-language works on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament permit some smattering of the methodology of higher Biblical criticism to penetrate their milieu. Yet, without a thorough overhaul of the curriculum at al-Azhar and other seminaries, new methods of studying the Qur'ān will have only a restricted impact on the Middle East owing to the absence of a receptive audience among the only people who might give such trends traction: the *ʿulamāʾ* coming out

of theological institutes. So Abu-Hamdiyyah's title is actually misleading. When we talk about introductions to scripture, we tend to have works of a scholarly nature in mind, which this one is not. Neither is Abu-Hamdiyyah's work a translation into English of a classic *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* genre text, the usual fare to which we are accustomed; it is a totally different take on the Qur'ān from within the Islamic tradition.

The author maintains that his work is a "new and original study on the Qur'an" and that it does not deal "with theological interpretations which accumulated across the ages, nor with any of the recent studies dealing with the Qur'an."⁵ He is thus breaking bonds both with inherited Islamic understandings of the text and with modern scholarship in order to embark upon a more personal journey. This is in line with a new trend among the Muslim world's emerging religious élite, which believes that it is entitled to offer a fresh, unmediated explanation of Islam and the Qur'ān. This new religious élite, which has benefited from a modern education, rather than a traditional one in a seminary, is engaged in a highly complex exercise to understand the Qur'ān as a text that is in harmony with modernity. Its members are unabashed in their insistence on the immediacy of their perception. Hence, Abu-Hamdiyyah informs us that he will interact "directly with the text of the Qur'an in a straightforward objective manner to produce a fresh presentation of the Qur'anic discourse from a modern perspective."⁶

Almost a third of the work is dedicated to a survey of pre-Islamic religions in the Near East which is intended to show that Islam was the natural culmination of this shared religious history. What appears at first to be the author's acceptance of the methods and findings of scholars involved in higher criticism and the history of religions turns out to be half-hearted acquiescence at best. Higher criticism is used only to the degree that it can show the historicity of Judaism and Christianity—their historical evolution is seen as restricting their universality—without impinging upon the assumed divine nature and timelessness of the Qur'anic message. In this section of the book, the author is primarily interested in demonstrating the primacy of the Qur'ān over the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—its rationality, universality and utter compatibility with modernity. The tone sometimes becomes what can only be described as anti-Christian and anti-Jewish.⁷ The Qur'ān, according to Abu-Hamdiyyah, is an empirical text, both enjoining the use of the scientific method and providing, through it, a way to God.⁸ Ours being a time in which the word 'pluralism' is on everyone's tongue, Abu-Hamdiyyah is not to be outdone in his embrace of it. In a rather incomprehensible passage, he assures us that the Qur'ān both allows pluralism and restricts it to prevent relativism from gaining ascendancy.⁹

In Part II of the work, Abu-Hamdiyyah offers us his understanding of the Qur'ān. He begins by describing in some detail many of the Qur'ānic themes that are contained in what he calls "quranic units." Thus, we are told what the Qur'ān has to say on God, freedom of religion, the creed of Islam, resurrection day, ethics, justice, self-defence, male-female relationships and marriage.¹⁰ Most of the definitions given here are what I would call modernist in spirit and seem to have a Christian European audience in mind. Certainly, the author's anxiety about Islam's image in the West is evident in his discussion of references to fighting in the Qur'ān (under the rubric of self-defence). At this point, he sees fit to digress to inform us that the word 'sword' does not appear in the Qur'ān, although it is amply attested in the Hebrew Bible. Still more interesting to him is the famous verse (10:34) in the Gospel of Matthew,¹¹ which he simply quotes without comment—the point, in his view, being too evident to state.

The most intriguing part of this book involves Abu-Hamdiyyah's discussion of human knowledge and revelation. Using quasi-mystical, quasi-New Age jargon, he seems to equate divine revelation with human self-knowledge:

Thus in reality, inspiration or revelation is a human activity connected with the learning process and the seeking of the truth. There is an invisible thread connecting things together (the Order) and humans struggle to delineate this invisible interconnectedness. The effort lies with the human being. This invisible interconnectedness points the way to God, the ultimate reality. The process of inspiration or revelation need not only deal with large issues such as man's destiny, but may deal with something mundane such as inventing a new tool, discovering a new product or solving any simple problem regardless of how trivial it may appear.

The author does not seem to realize the radical import of such statements: if divine revelation is the product of human activity, then why is it divine at all? But that would be the wrong approach to understanding Abu-Hamdiyyah's words. He is not advocating the abandonment of the divine nature of revelation so much as the elevation of the mundane to the realm of the divine. This is altogether typical of the concerns of a certain type of Islamist modernist who wishes to prove that inventing tools, solving mundane problems—in short, addressing the challenges faced by Muslim societies in their march toward modernity—are divine activities.

Having agreed to publish this book, Routledge should have taken the trouble to offer the author an editor's assistance. The work is marred by incomprehensible sentences, pages and even whole sections; in certain

places, it is simply indecipherable. On the whole, unless the reader already knows Arabic, he or she will have a hard time making out what the author is implying or trying to say, for the text is heavy on Arabisms and short on idiomatic English.¹² This is unfortunate because, as I have said above, this book is a fascinating primary document illustrating how liberal middle class intellectuals in the Middle East are trying to come to terms with the challenge that higher criticism represents to the integrity of divine revelation.

Firmly within the tradition of Western scholarship is Michael Cook's *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, which attempts to inform the interested non-specialist about the role of the Qur'ān "in the religious history of the Islamic world."¹³ This ambitious plan is perhaps also the book's major shortcoming for, despite the author's best efforts, he is unable to cover in one brief introduction all of the material on what is arguably the most important document in Islamic civilization. Just to give one example: nowhere in the text does Cook discuss the Qur'ān's influence upon the artistic and poetic heritage of the Arab/Islamic world, yet both are integral to its religious history. The Qur'ān was and remains an inspirational text for the two most characteristic of Islamic arts: calligraphy and poetry. Nonetheless, Cook has only this parenthetical statement to make about calligraphy and the Qur'ān: "(Calligraphy was an enormously prestigious art in Islamic culture, just as it was in traditional China.)"¹⁴ The comparison to China is not helpful, for it presupposes the reader's familiarity with Chinese calligraphy and its significance; moreover, most readers would want to know more about calligraphy in one culture before it is compared with another.

Cook is very familiar with the latest scholarly literature on the Qur'ān and does an admirable job of summarizing some of it. However, the moment that he starts offering us his own assessment of—or musings upon—this literature, it becomes obvious that, as a non-specialist on the Qur'ān, he is not equipped to carry out the task. Moreover, the methods that he uses to do this are not only outdated, but questionable on scholarly grounds: invariably, his observations lead him to conclusions that are unjustifiable. I will give just one example of this. Cook starts his book with a translation of the first *sūra* of the Qur'ān, known as *al-Fātiḥa*.¹⁵ The single aspect of this short chapter that Cook chooses to highlight is the expression *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*, 'the straight path.' His analysis of this term is set apart in a box to draw the reader's attention to it—a common practice in Oxford's Very Short Introduction series. It is worth quoting the text in full:

'The Straight Path': *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*. The word *ṣirāṭ* is interesting. The Romans used the Latin 'strata' for the kind of paved road they built

so straight. From them the word passed to the peoples of their empire and even beyond, so that from 'strata' derive both the Arabic *ṣirāṭ* and the English 'street'. But whereas 'street' has remained a secular term, *ṣirāṭ* came to be used only in religious contexts. It is a curious feature of the word that it has no plural in Arabic, reinforcing our sense of the uniqueness of the Straight Path.¹⁶

This passage is in the tradition of etymological studies of the Qur'ān. The main premise of this approach is that the non-Arabic cognates of certain Arabic words are keys that allow us to understand the use of the latter in the Qur'ān.¹⁷ Thus, Cook informs his reader about the etymology of *ṣirāṭ* but, as is typical with this approach, not of its significance in the text, where it appears 46 times. The proper way to understand the meaning of *ṣirāṭ*, however, is to investigate how it is used in each of these instances. Moreover, Cook is simply wrong to claim that there is no plural for *ṣirāṭ* in Arabic: there are at least two of them.¹⁸

The fact that he deems it appropriate to draw broad conclusions from the presumed absence of an Arabic plural is another indication that his method of studying scripture lacks theoretical reflection. Worst still, at the end of his work, Cook implies that the absence of a plural for *ṣirāṭ* is far more significant than a mere philological peculiarity: it reflects a fundamental mental state shared by all Arabs. The fact—or, better, non-fact—that Arabic does not have a plural for 'path' is used to indict today's Arabs for their alleged inability to comprehend the concept of pluralism.¹⁹

Our confidence in Cook's ability to assess the Qur'ān is also weakened by his arbitrary approach to scholarly literature on the subject. Consider, for example, his sweeping dismissal of all scholarship on the phrase '*an yadin*' (Qur'ān 9:29) and his assertion that the academic community is baffled by its meaning. There are at least 10 articles on this term and the usual way of refuting a reading is to offer an analysis indicating how and why it is unacceptable. No one can fault Cook if he remains unconvinced by any of these articles, but he gives his readers not an argument, but a judgement.

This brings us to the issue of authority in the discipline of Qur'ānic studies as a whole.

It is an unfortunate fact—and, certainly, most unusual—that only scholars of Islam (and the Middle East) encounter no objections when they make pronouncements on subjects within their vast field, but beyond the confines of their specialities. Professor Cook may be a leading scholar of early Islamic theology, but none of his scholarly output is dedicated to the Qur'ān itself, so it is not clear why he feels competent to write on it. Take, for example, his cavalier treatment of seafaring in the

Qur'ān. Without citing any particular verses, Cook informs us that the Qur'ānic material on this topic reflects firsthand knowledge of the sea, something that is not reported of Muhammad. Reading Cook, one might get the impression that the Qur'ān rivals *Moby Dick* in maritime information value, but this is hardly the case.²⁰ In fact, there is nothing in the Qur'ān on this subject that cannot be explained in terms of what a late antique merchant might have heard from his contacts.²¹ Moreover, it takes little imagination to realize that anyone who has lived and travelled in a desert is in an excellent position to extrapolate on seafaring. Finally, the *Sīra*, for what it is worth as a source of historical information, does mention that some of Muhammad's companions moved to Abyssinia, so they might have told him about the sea and seafaring. We also know that the roof of the Ka'ba was rebuilt after a flood using wood from a ship stranded on the Red Sea's shore, west of Mecca. Thus, historical information does exist that might indicate sources for Muhammad's knowledge of the sea.

Despite being a non-specialist on the Qur'ān, Cook is not afraid to express his disdain for its intellectual worth, a position that he has repeatedly expressed in other publications. In *Hagarism*, he declared that "the book [Qur'ān] is strikingly lacking in overall structure, frequently obscure and inconsequential in both language and content, perfunctory in its linking disparate materials, and given to the repetition of whole passages in variant versions."²² Yet, unlike Robert Alter on Biblical studies, Cook is not explicitly stating that he is approaching Qur'ānic studies as an outsider and merely offering us his perspective.²³ Nor does he indicate that he is highly selective when considering the conclusions of genuine specialists on the Qur'ān. For instance, he insists that "only very short Sūras possess an evident thematic unity"²⁴ even though Angelika Neuwirth has shown this position to be unfounded.²⁵ Indeed, studies published since the appearance of Neuwirth's magisterial work are proving that even major Qur'ānic *sūras* (such as chapter two) have been coherently planned and possess an overall structure. Yet, we find no reference in Cook to any of these studies. On the other hand, when a later finding by Neuwirth on the liturgical use of the Qur'ān agrees with Cook's preferred slant, the reader is acquainted with the evidence.²⁶ Since Cook is obviously familiar with Neuwirth's work, it seems odd that he rejects her *Studien zur Komposition*, which represents the most important contribution to the field since the 1980s.

The way in which Cook handles Neuwirth's research is indicative of his general attitude toward the German School. Although he gives the School's findings in his general outline of the Qur'ān, his retelling is presented in a provisional way that places doubt upon the finer points while failing to offer a coherent alternative. In many ways, it should be

said, his account is substantially the same as one that might be given by any guarded scholar from the German School. But although Cook positions himself as an authority in the field, he fails to commit himself to any definite position that might be subject to scrutiny. Moreover, he not only omits mention of Neuwirth's *Studien zur Komposition*, but also Rudi Paret's unsurpassed *Mohammed und der Koran*.²⁷ In many respects, Cook simply fails to acknowledge the degree to which his understanding of the Qur'ān has been formed and shaped by the German School or that he and other like-minded scholars have as yet to offer a different understanding that is of equal cogency.

Cook's work leaves the reader with the general impression that both the Qur'ān and the Muslims are inadequate. Because of the way in which he uses the comparative method, that approach, as championed by practitioners of the history of religions, is turned upside down. As Cook would have it, the Qur'ān does not offer a sustained narrative "of the kind found in the Book of Exodus."²⁸ But it is not clear why the Qur'ān should resemble the book of Exodus. Furthermore, Muslims from the non-Arab world show "little sign of adopting the idea of a vernacular scripture in the manner of sixteenth-century Protestantism or twentieth-century Catholicism."²⁹ But, unlike the situation in Latin Europe, where any translation of scripture was banned, Muslims had interlinear translations of their scriptures from an early date, as Cook himself mentions. Thus, the translation of scripture in the Muslim world did not take on the symbolic significance that it had in Latin Europe, where it involved movements of religious and political reform in the Church. Indeed, the very opposite occurred in the Muslim world, where reform movements were very much connected to the notion of teaching Arabic to non-Arabs in order to make the Qur'ān more accessible.

Cook is also struck by the fact that the Islamic world, "of all the major cultural domains," seems to have been the "least penetrated by irreligion" and contrasts it with North America where, he says, irreligion does exist, but believers are strong enough to engage in cultural warfare against the mainstream, although they "have currently no chance of prevailing over it."³⁰ As any expert in American history knows, however, religion has long been and still is one of the most fundamental determining factors of American culture. General comparisons of this kind neither illuminate Islamic cultures, nor promote the dissemination of accurate information about the ones to which Cook compares them.

The most interesting failure of the Muslims, according to Cook, has been their apparent inability to match the complex linguistic developments that occurred in East Asia in relation to the Confucian classics. When reading the Qur'ān, Muslims pronounce its Arabic words uniformly; hence, "there is nothing in the Islamic world to compare with the

situation in East Asia, where the traditional readings of a Confucian classic [in Chinese ideograms] by speakers of Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Japanese would be mutually unintelligible."³¹ One is at a loss here to know why the reception of the Qur'ān and of Confucian classics should be compared and, if they are, why developments in one tradition should be taken as the norm by which the other is measured. As the Chinese language does not use an alphabetical script, readers from different linguistic traditions can read Chinese texts differently: the Japanese learned the Chinese script from the Koreans, but not Chinese pronunciation. Thus, the effects of the reception of Confucianism upon the languages of East Asia might not have occurred had the language of transmission been a different one. Alphabetical script aside, Muslim scholars who were not Arabs have invariably been bilingual, speaking their native tongues as well as Arabic, while those who were Arabs traditionally travelled to distant lands for study and trade.

Cook might have made a more apt comparison had he considered the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi (Jews of the Arab world) readings of the Hebrew Bible. Despite the fact that these two communities were linguistically separated for over a millennium and despite the phonetic peculiarities that each tradition developed, their readings are not mutually incomprehensible for, like Arabic, Hebrew is an alphabetic language. In the end, Cook's attempt to compare the linguistic effects of the reception of Confucianism with the situation in the Muslim world is so inconsequential that it seems to have no other aim than to hint at a stultifying Islam that precludes divergence or evolution.

Professor Cook is the quintessential expert on the Middle East; he knows it all: its past, its future, its history and its habits. Thus, he can tell us that that the English Calvinist, William Whitaker (d. 1595), "might have made an acceptable Muslim and held down a job at the Azhar."³² He even knows that Fazlur Rahman's *Major Themes in the Qur'ān* "is not the kind of book that Azhar could be expected to approve."³³ This might indeed be the case, although I think it just as likely that al-Azhar might endorse the work, if it took notice of it, but here I am speculating—just as Cook is doing. This sort of speculation is as good as useless. Al-Azhar's reactions are unpredictable and its history rife with contradictions; at one time, it busied itself rubber-stamping socialist initiatives. In the summer of 2003, three years after Cook made his comments, al-Azhar decided, in fact, to stop banning books. This decision was not unanimous and, indeed, some members of the governing council issued dissenting statements; moreover, the arguments given in favour of the decision were probably not what free speech activists would have liked to hear. All the same, al-Azhar did make an unforeseen decision to change one of its practices.

These are the sort of musings that Cook offers in a *very* short introduction to the Qur'ān which, as he notes, gives him little space to say much.³⁴ Had the author offered us what we expect to find in an introduction, his digressions would have mattered less, but in order to obtain the missing information, we are told that we must buy yet another of his books. Tucked at the very end of his book is this surprising statement: "A short survey of what the Koran has to say about some of the things that are important to it can be found in Chapters 3-6 of my *Muhammad* (in the Oxford University Press 'Past Masters' series, Oxford 1983)."³⁵ Hence, readers of the volume under review will learn of Cook's conviction that Whitaker would have made a good Muslim, but not the most important facts about the Qur'ān.

Reuven Firestone's monograph, *Jihad: The Origins of Holy War in Islam*, attempts to "examine the origin of the holy war phenomenon in Islam, to test whether the traditional Islamic position on its origin and development is sound, and to employ methodologies and assumptions current in the social sciences as well as philology in order to describe and explain the early importance of holy war ideas and their implementation in primitive Islam."³⁶ Had Firestone restricted himself to a detailed study of the Qur'ānic data alone, he would have done the field a great service. However, he also investigates the prophetic Sunna, thus confining his assessment of the Qur'ānic data to one chapter only, a chapter that is barely 35 pages long. This hasty analysis of the Qur'ān greatly weakens the conclusions that he wishes to draw concerning the significance of fighting in the Qur'ān. There are literally scores of verses that are not considered or discussed. Any analysis of a concept in an enclosed text has to be comprehensive, particularly when an author wishes to replace an old understanding of it with one that is new, rather than merely refining some aspect of the accepted view. So it is on this point that Firestone's work falls short.

Firestone claims that the material in the Qur'ān on fighting cannot be understood in an evolutionary manner, that is, as progressing from pacifism to militarism. Rather, he believes that the conflicting verses regarding war "articulate the views of different factions existing simultaneously within the early Muslim community of Muḥammad's day and, perhaps, continuing for a period after his death. Each faction would refer to different scriptural sources available from the oral and as yet unedited and uncanonized compendium of revelation for support of its views."³⁷ He sees four different aspects that the verses on fighting emphasize. Some verses express "nonmilitant means of propagating or defending the faith"; some put restrictions on fighting; other verses express "conflict between God's command and the reaction of Muḥammad's followers"; and yet others strongly advocate "war for God's religion."³⁸

The subject of fighting does not merely form an occasional digression in the Qur'ān; it is a central topic in most of the Madinan verses. In order to assess Firestone's analysis, I reviewed and reread those sections of the Qur'ān that deal with fighting. The amount of material is simply staggering. Firestone argues that "the very large number of exhortations calling Muslims to engage in battle against their enemies suggests that significant portions of the community were not inclined to do so."³⁹ The Qur'ān's unwillingness to tolerate any apathy regarding the new doctrine of fighting is indicative of one thing alone: the central position of fighting in the orientation of the new polity and the urgent necessity of upholding it. If Meccans were roughly divided into the faithful (or monotheists) and the unfaithful (*mushrikūn*), Medinans saw the appearance of a new category: the *munāfiqūn*, whose only sin was their refusal to submit to the necessity of fighting. Thus, Firestone is undeniably correct in stating that a segment of the early community was unwilling to fight. But this hardly means that the Qur'ān is unclear about what it wants believers to do. We only need compare how many times the Qur'ān exhorts believers to fast, pray, perform the pilgrimage or any other ritual, with its incessant demand that they go into battle. Muhammad was able to pacify Arabia (a domain so vast and so ungovernable that we tend to forget how improbable this achievement was) and to exert his influence over it after less than ten years precisely because he was consistent in his objectives and used the new polity and its more or less standing army of volunteers to bring the peninsula under his control.⁴⁰ Meccans were far more powerful, but lacked the determination and will to fight that Muhammad instilled in his followers. The later Islamic understanding of the centrality of fighting in the Qur'ān is, therefore, unconnected to any attempt to justify subsequent Islamic conquests: the early polity, the first to control all of Arabia, was itself a revolutionary development. The two-year internecine struggle among the Arabs following Muhammad's death demonstrates the fragility of his enterprise even after ten years of effort and the continuing pivotal role of warfare in consolidating the new polity.

Firestone's analysis explains the data that he presents, but not the Qur'ānic data on fighting. The existence of contradictory verses on fighting in the Qur'ān does not negate the fact that the point of exhortations to fight was to allow Muhammad access to a volunteer army ready for deployment at a moment's notice. This was the cornerstone of his success as leader in Medina. By the time that Muhammad had conquered Mecca, he was able to call for the mobilization of all Muslim males (Qur'ān 9:117-129). Because of these considerations, I see no compelling reason to accept Firestone's conclusions and discard the traditional evolutionary theory.⁴¹

Firestone's analysis, however, has drawn my attention to a very intriguing question. Given the preponderance and centrality of verses on fighting in the Qur'ān, how did Islamic theology and ritual manage to eliminate this aspect so completely from the creedal formulation of high Islamic culture? In this respect, Muslim theologians apparently managed to turn their backs on the divinely-sanctioned political exigencies of Medina, demonstrating a remarkable resistance to divine imperative in a scriptural culture. The ambivalence of *jihād* in Islamic culture is thus the *jihād's* greatest legacy. The significance of Firestone's monograph lies less in its conclusions than in the way that it reopens the question of what the Qur'ān is actually saying. In this sense, he forces us to re-examine and test old assumptions, thus permitting a complete re-evaluation of existing scholarship. Henceforth, those who study the concept of fighting in the Qur'ān will have to take Firestone's analysis into consideration.

Roberto Tottoli's *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature* is a much-needed general introduction to Old Testament prophets and the ways in which they have been represented in the Qur'ān and in subsequent Arabic-language works until the modern era.⁴² Tottoli brings together the substantial literature dedicated to this topic in European languages and offers the reader a detailed outline of who's who in the Qur'ān. His is not, however, a totally new assessment as much as a summary and commentary on existing scholarship. As such, it is bound to reflect both the strengths and weaknesses of this secondary literature. Moreover, it comes at a time when the scholarly approach to Biblical material is moving away from an earlier tendency to try to prove the Qur'ān's dependency through the citation of Biblical parallels. Tottoli is all too aware of the pitfalls of most of the secondary literature in this field. He is thus careful to state in his introduction that his account of the similarities and differences between the Qur'ān and the Jewish and Christian material "is not carried out with the purpose of stressing the dependence of or presumed inexactitude of the Qur'ān in relation to the Biblical tradition, but only to explain the particularities of the contents and the form of those parts of the Qur'ān dedicated the prophets."⁴³

The fact that the Qur'ān contains Biblical material should be clear to every scholar by now. In so far as this material has to come from somewhere, it is obviously based, in one way or another, upon traditions that grew out of the Hebrew Bible. Refined methods of scholarship are hardly needed to prove this point. The challenge is to account for what the Qur'ān is doing with this material. Unfortunately, however, most of the scholarship on Biblical material in the Qur'ān has focused upon proving the latter's dependency upon the former, as though this fact alone reveals something about the Qur'ān. There has been a hunt to trace the

antecedents of every piece of information to its supposed sources. Instead of using these parallels to shed light on how the Qur'ān adapted this material to fit its aims, scholars and others used them to argue that the Qur'ān was confused. Discrepancies between the Qur'ānic version of a Biblical story and the one found in the Hebrew Bible led to accusations that the Qur'ān had misunderstood the Bible or was muddled or incapable of getting the story right. This procedure is, of course, counterintuitive. The Qur'ān takes a polemical position vis-à-vis earlier scriptures and posits itself as presenting the 'true' story. Clearly, then, the Qur'ān is not obliged to repeat slavishly the contents of Judaeo-Christian scriptures in its retelling of them. What the Qur'ān gives us is its own interpretation of the significance of previous scriptures. What we need to ascertain, therefore, is how this material is used and transformed to suit the Qur'ān's aims and purposes. The Qur'ān has a vision of what the salvific history of monotheism means and what its truth-value is and, in presenting Biblical material, it refashioned and transformed it to construct a new edifice.

In this regard, the immense accumulation of secondary literature on the 'sources' of the Qur'ān has put Tottoli in a very difficult position. Merely by summarizing this literature, he is positioning a supposedly discarded method of understanding Biblical material in the Qur'ān at the centre of his presentation. This is unavoidable since Tottoli is not re-examining the stories, but studying how they have been understood in previous scholarship. Thus, despite the stated intentions of the author in his introduction, this work ultimately reiterates the charge that the Qur'ān is 'mixed up' about certain Biblical stories.

I will give an example of what I mean by this. In the process of telling us about David, Tottoli rushed through the story of Saul as given in the Qur'ān. This is how Tottoli presents the material in the body of his book:

A long passage from the sura of the Cow (no. 2) introduces the events that preceded the ascension to the throne of David and states that after the death of Moses the Israelites called for a prophet to raise up a king from amongst them. The prophet, which the Qur'ān does not give the name of, indicates Saul as the future sovereign and the Ark as the token of this reign. With a description of the contents of the Ark and of the troops of Saul, who are put to the test when they refuse to confront Goliath, one last verse finally refers to David and states that he "slew Goliath and God gave him the kingship, and wisdom, and He taught him such as He will."⁴⁴

Let us ignore, for the moment, the fact that the Israelites refuse to fight after the test and not before it, as Tottoli erroneously tells us, and consider instead the author's very illuminating footnote to this passage. I will quote it in full:

The whole passage is in Qur. 2:246-251; the verse quoted is Qur. 2:251. The exegetical literature identifies in Samuel the anonymous prophet mentioned in these events. As regards the contents of the Qur'ānic passage on the other hand, according to Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 144, they are the product of a confusion between Saul and Gideon. The extremely positive Qur'ānic figure of Saul has, according to Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen*, 367, parallels in Christian rather than Jewish literature. Also, Busse, *Die Theologischen Beziehungen*, 110, returns to this topic, when he adds that one can also recognize a parallel between the conditions of the Muslims and the story of the Israelites with Saul.

As we can see, Tottoli says nothing in his text about any mix-up in the Qur'ān. The moment we move to the footnotes, however, we are faced with a scholarly assertion of a confused Qur'ān. The implications of such an understanding of the Qur'ān are not trivial: they hamper any insight into the Qur'ān and its world.

Let me now quote the verse on the testing of the Israelites as given in the Qur'ān (Penguin Classics translation):

And when Ṭālūt marched out with his army, he said: "God will put you to the proof at a certain river. He that drinks from it shall cease to be of me, but he that does not drink from it, or contents himself with a taste of it in the hollow of his hand, shall be of me." But they all drank from it, except a few of them. And when Ṭālūt had crossed the river with those who shared his faith, they said: "We have no power this day against Jālūt (Goliath) and his warriors." But those of them who believed that they would meet God replied: "Many a small band has, by God's grace, vanquished a mighty army. God is with those who endure with fortitude" (2:249).

Is this really a confused account of a Biblical tale? Not if we analyze the verse in its Qur'ānic context. Here, Saul asks his warriors to refrain from drinking the waters of a river they are about to cross before the battle, saying that God wants to test them. Those who drink liberally are unwilling to fight, while those who drink only sparingly or not at all, namely, the minority, are God-fearing and certain of victory. Geiger and Speyer saw the origin of this episode in the story of Gideon in Judges 7:5-8 and they argued that Muhammad had confused this tale with the one in which Saul ordered his soldiers to avoid eating in I Samuel 12:24-48.⁴⁵ Yet, to make such a claim is to miss the whole point of the episode in the Qur'ān. First, the Qur'ān tells the story in such a manner as to exonerate Saul of any hint of capriciousness or folly. It is not Saul who orders the soldiers to refrain from drinking, but God, who wishes to test the believers. Thus, we can conclude that the Qur'ān does not want to

undermine Saul's image as a warrior king. This is in keeping with the Qur'ān's presentation of the Patriarchs and other Israelites as sinless prophets or near-perfect human beings. Indeed, the presentation of all salvific history as one constituted of unblemished prophets coming to preach to unresponsive crowds is a Qur'ānic hallmark.⁴⁶

The prohibition against eating in the Bible is turned upside down in the Qur'ān. In I Samuel, Saul's foolish order is obeyed by all of the Israelites except Jonathan, who violates it only because he is unaware of it. In the Qur'ān's retelling, most of the Israelites disobey God's demand, preferring to drink copiously after initially pledging to fight and do God's will. Moreover, the Qur'ānic story has different aims. In Gideon, God chooses who will have the honour of fighting, since too many Israelites show up for the battle. In the Qur'ān, the Israelites are unwilling to risk a fight. The Qur'ān is not trying to prove that God has no need of their help for a victory; it is emphasizing trust in God, a blind trust in God's inscrutable wisdom—for what could be more inscrutable than asking a fighting army to abstain from water before a battle and to claim that this is God's wisdom and test?

It is precisely this enigmatic demand that is the point in the Qur'ān's retelling of the story. In many ways, it also reflects the totally unrealistic program of Muhammad who, despite being unprepared to take on the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula, dared to think of launching a polity where none had been tried before. Thus, the Qur'ān is here drawing a parallel between the mission of Saul and the mission of Muhammad in Medina. Both are indefensible through the use of logic and make sense only if one has complete trust in God. Muhammad is asking his supporters to follow his lead even if his demand is as unfathomable and as maddening as being asked to avoid drinking water before a battle. Those who will follow him are those who have faith in victory. This is not confusion, but the artful use of Biblical motifs to reshape a story to suit another end. One might argue without difficulty that the Qur'ān knew not only the Saul story, but also the Gideon episode and used elements from both to shape a totally new episode to fit its program.

If we insist on reading the Qur'ān as a series of failed attempts to summarize Biblical stories, we cannot understand the deeper resonance that these stories evidently had with the pre-Islamic Arabs. We have to imagine the impact of this tale on desert dwellers living precarious lives in an almost waterless land. The teller of the story was surely aware of its impact. To be asked to go thirsty before a battle sounds, if not mad, then comical, rather in keeping with the pagan perception of the outlandish God of Muhammad and His claims to total cosmic sovereignty. (Luckily for us, the Qur'ān has preserved the scathing sarcasm of the Meccans against the God of Muhammad and His claims.) Yet, it is precisely the

element of trust that Muhammad wants to instil in his followers, for it constitutes faith and guarantees victory.

And perhaps we are missing another point here. For that which the story does not name, thirst, underlies the whole. The ethos of pre-Islamic Arabia and the mythical dimensions of thirst in relation to blood and vengeance are not unknown to us. Thirst was a primordial fear; it was not merely a physical state, but also a perilous metaphysical condition. When a victim of homicide went unavenged, a thirsty owl was said to spring from his head to haunt the living with its cries for revenge. Thirst and revenge are themes inextricably entwined in pre-Islamic poetry and it is there that one must look for the pre-Islamic ethos needed to approach the Qur'ān.⁴⁷ It was not hunger that the Qur'ān chose as a test in the story of Saul, as the Hebrew Bible does, but thirst, a more terrifying state evocative of death, shrieking owls in deserted ruins and graves thirsty for revenge. Yet, parched mouths and swollen tongues must not turn the believer away from trust in God. Is the Qur'ān transporting the motif of thirst from the dimension of personal tragedy to a communal plan of action?

Fortunately, most of the scholars now working on Biblical material in the Qur'ān have moved beyond the 'confused' text thesis. One of the best is Uri Rubin, the author of *Between Bible and Qur'ān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image*.⁴⁸ It is no exaggeration to state that Rubin is a pre-eminent scholar in the field of Qur'ānic studies. Recently, he announced that he is about to publish a new translation of the Qur'ān in modern Hebrew, which will, I am certain, join the classics of Paret, Arberry and Blachère. I will not give a summary here of what *Between Bible and Qur'ān* attempts to do, but rather will highlight the important shift in Rubin's scholarship that it represents, for the implications of this shift are, in many ways, far more significant.

Rubin has produced a long series of articles over the past 25 years that deal with discreet elements of the Qur'ān, for instance, the concepts of *al-ṣamad* (Qur'ān 112:2) and *'an yadin* (Qur'ān 9:29) among many others. In these articles, Rubin has adhered to the German School of the Qur'ān, by which I mean that he understands the codification of the Qur'ān to have been an early event in Islamic religious history undertaken by Caliph 'Uthmān. In his last two books, (the first being *The Eye of the Beholder*⁴⁹), Rubin has changed his position; he now believes that Wansborough's analysis, which posits the Qur'ān's belated appearance on the scene, is the way to understand the history of the Qur'ān's codification.

But what is most intriguing in this shift is that Rubin further believes that the Sunna contains pre-Qur'ānic material. With this development, Rubin is not just a member of Wansborough's School; in many ways, he is a School in his own right. Specialists in Qur'ānic studies have now to contend with a very complicated picture of the origins of Islam. In

Rubin's two books, we have a reconstruction of the origins of the intellectual identity-formation of the nascent Islamic community achieved by means of a thorough study of *ḥadīth*. Harald Motzki and his followers now have very strong support from someone who does not believe that the Qur'ān preceded the Sunna.

What is important about Rubin's work is that it can stand on its own whether we accept or reject his premise about the dating of the Qur'ān. By this I mean that the historical implications of his study do not affect the analysis that he has carried out on the texts. This is testimony to the rigor of his method: a close reading of the sources. Few scholars are able to collect, sift through and analyze as much early Islamic literature as Rubin has. Indeed, if we want to check up on recent primary publications in the field, we only need look at the bibliography of this scholar. He is simply indefatigable. Although I do not share Rubin's understanding of how the Qur'ān was codified, I see no fault in the method that he uses to analyze and study the data. Indeed, his articles are textbook examples for students to emulate.

It should be clear from the foregoing that the field of Qur'ānic studies is at an impasse: the history of the Qur'ān's codification has now moved inexorably to centre stage. What we need now is clear palaeographic resolution of the issue of the dating of the Qur'ān. We cannot afford more studies on the Qur'ān while this major point remains in dispute. Thus, François Déroche's investigations into the history of early manuscripts of the Qur'ān is presently the most important work being done in the field of Qur'ānic studies. At the very least, we need a *terminus a quo* to tell us, with some degree of certainty, when the Qur'ān's codification was completed.

The last volume that I will review, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*, edited by Issa J. Boullata,⁵⁰ is an outstanding collection of articles by distinguished scholars in the field, including Michael Sells, A. H. Mathias Zahiser, Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Alford T. Welch, Andrew Rippin, Irfan Shahid, Angelika Neuwirth, Mustanir Mir, Anthony H. Johns, Soraya M. Hajjaj-Jarrah, Navid Kermani, Yusuf Rahman, Mahmoud M. Ayoub, Kamal Abu-Deeb and, of course, Issa J. Boullata. The prime concern of these scholars is to study the Qur'ān on its own terms in order to understand it, rather than merely deeming it unintelligible. In the process, the weight of the literary approach is brought to bear upon the Qur'ān. This volume might, therefore, be considered the first comprehensive attempt to present the Qur'ān in a way consistent with the tradition of studying scriptures as literature: it could have been subtitled: "The Qur'ān as Literature."

It is difficult to summarize the contents of fifteen separate contributions in a review article and it might, in fact, be more profitable to try to

outline the assumptions underpinning the approach common to their various authors. The first and, possibly, most evident assumption is that the Qur'ān is capable of being analyzed. By this, I mean the premise that the text is attempting to convey a message to us. As such, it is presumed to be intelligible. This might sound elementary or sophomoric but, unfortunately, the field of Qur'ānic studies is in such a state that this elementary hypothesis is absent from much of the scholarly literature on the Qur'ān owing to the strong influence of the etymological approach to studying it.

As noted above, the main premise of the etymological approach to the Qur'ān is that its language and ideas can be explained through the use of cognates from other Semitic languages. It presumes that the Qur'ān does not mean what it says and, more importantly, that what it says is confused and disjointed because it did not know how to say it. During the last century, the 'etymological fallacy' usurped many other scholarly approaches to the study of the Qur'ān so that, until recently, we rarely encounter credible accounts of the Qur'ānic message.

The second premise of these authors is that the chapters of the Qur'ān represent cohesive compositional units and thus form the basic units for any analysis of the whole. The principal scholar to have argued for this understanding of the Qur'ān is Angelika Neuwirth. Her insights into the Meccan chapters of the Qur'ān have laid the foundations for many of the most valuable studies being done on the composition and content of these texts. Interestingly enough, Neuwirth does not hold the same position regarding the larger Medinan chapters,⁵¹ but this has not prevented other scholars from arguing that they were also composed in a deliberate way. In his contribution to this volume, A. H. Mathias Zahniser starts from this premise in an effort to understand the thinking behind the Qur'ān's more substantial chapters.⁵²

Once widespread, these two suppositions—that the Qur'ān is capable of being analyzed and that the rational composition of its chapters is the place where such an analysis should begin—will have a radical impact on the quality of the scholarship being produced. Like Toshihiko Izutsu before them, scholars who posit a comprehensible Qur'ān will gain profound insights into this text and its world. Because these two suppositions are an outgrowth of the German School of Qur'ānic studies, which started with Noeldeke, it is clear that it represents the most fruitful Western approach to the study of the Qur'ān. Despite its many problems, most notably, its focus upon etymology, the German School has managed to continue to refine its method over the years. The natural culmination of this school, the production of a critical edition of the Qur'ān based upon the oldest manuscripts, was interrupted due to World War II. The field languishes because of this disruption. We are left with the

hope that the palaeographic study of the history of the Qur'ān will soon advance to such a degree that we will be able to chart a more generally accepted history of its codification.

NOTES

¹ For a brief summary of this school, see the article entitled "Qur'ān" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2d ed.

² Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1953); W. M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1970).

³ Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SMC Press, 1996). It is unfortunate, of course, that such an astute scholar as Robinson uses the word 'veil' in a title on the Qur'ān. The epistemology of unveiling is now second nature in the field; we scholars are in a perpetual act of denuding and unveiling. Ours is a highly predictable act that borrows hackneyed metaphors to such a degree that even the words become numb.

⁴ Mohammad Abu-Hamdiyyah, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26, for instance: "In the midst of this Semitic milieu . . . there came Muhammad preaching that there is only One God for all creation, *Allah* (an assimilated form of *Al-ilaah*, the god), with no other gods besides Him, accessible to all, with no priesthood as an intermediary, no original sin and no ethnic, tribal or racial overtones. In the Qur'an we find God addressing human beings, in general or the believers, but never 'the Arabs' or 'men' in contradistinction to 'women.'"

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50-57.

¹¹ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

¹² See, for example, this sentence: "Such ideas as these compromise the concept of a 'universal' God and strict monotheism in the Hebrew Bible" (Abu-Hamdiyyah, *The Qur'an*, 13). To his credit, the author does know not to call the Hebrew Bible the Old Testament when speaking of it as a Jewish work.

¹³ Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70; cf. John Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) where a whole chapter is devoted to the influence of the Bible on popular and high culture.

¹⁵ Cook, *The Koran*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷ For a detailed study of the pitfalls of this approach, see James Barr's *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁸ Since Cook does not cite his sources, claiming that scholars will know what they are, it is impossible to discover how he managed to conclude that *ṣirāṭ* has no plural in Arabic. Modern and Classical Arabic both have plurals for this word; see, *al-Munjid* of the Jesuit Fathers, as well as al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf*, sub. Q. 1:6.

¹⁹ Cook, *The Koran*, 143.

²⁰ See the dissertation of Eleonore Haeuptner, *Koranische Hinweise auf die materielle Kultur der alten Araber* (Eberhard-Karls-Universität zu Tübingen, 1966), 106-115.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 106-115.

²² Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, *Hagarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 18. See a similar, but harsher assessment in Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 68. The first time Cook offers this assessment of the Qur'an, he attributes it to Wansborough; by the time that it appears in *Muhammad*, it is his own view.

²³ In a field such as Biblical studies, where the academic discipline is based upon clearly demarcated specializations, entry from outside the field involves a long, arduous process. See the introduction to Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), ix-xii, for an example.

²⁴ Cook, *The Koran*, 6.

²⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien Zur Komposition der Mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981).

²⁶ Cook, *The Koran*, 140.

²⁷ Rudi Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran: Geschichte und Verkuendigung des arabischen Propheten* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1991; originally published in 1957).

²⁸ Cook, *The Koran*, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

³² *Ibid.*, 113.

³³ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁶ Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origins of Holy War in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁰ The number of expeditions mounted by the new polity is enormous: because Meccans were simply not up to the task of maintaining a fighting force, they were defeated despite their superior strength; for a detailed list and analysis see W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956).

⁴¹ Firestone, *Jihad*, 69.

⁴² Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (London: Curzon Press, 2002).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, x.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁴⁵ Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Quran* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1961), 368.

⁴⁶ See Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*, 99-101.

⁴⁷ On thirst, owls and Arabic pre-Islamic poetry, see T. Emil Homerin, "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl: Death and the Afterlife in Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44 (1985): 165-184.

⁴⁸ Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'an: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ Issa Boullata, ed., *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26-27.