Fred M. Donner*

A Historian's View of the Qurʾān

IQSA Presidential Address – Palermo, Italy – September, 2022

https://doi.org/10.1515/jiqsa-2024-0020

Abstract: The Qurʾān, as a sacred text, poses distinctive challenges for the historian. The talk will begin by addressing briefly some of these challenges, in particular the limits of what the historian can say about sacred texts like the Qurʾān. The bulk of the talk will then discuss the challenges historians face in understanding the text's transmission, as revealed both by Muslim tradition and from the evidence of the material record, and what implications the historian might draw from the Qurʾān's content.

Before I begin my lecture in earnest, I want to thank the Board and membership of IQSA for inviting me to serve as IQSA's President. I am doubly honored because, as all of you surely know, I am not primarily a student of the Qurʾān, but rather a historian who has devoted himself to the history of the Near East between the end of Late Antiquity and the medieval Islamic period. It is true that for fifty years I have wrestled with the changes that overcame the Near East between the fifth and tenth centuries, which include the rise of Islam and the coalescence of the Qurʾān – which is surely one of the most consequential books in all of human history. But I have not engaged in the kind of deep philological or textual or literary or theological analysis of the text that is pursued by most true specialists in the Qurʾān. So my comments today will be something of an outsider's perspective, from the point of view of my discipline, History.

I also feel that I should start with a bit of an apology, because as you will see, the burden of my comments will deal with the question of the Qurʾān's origins and earliest history. This may be something of a bore for the many of you who work on the many later centuries, right up until today, during which the Qurʾān has been a central fact of inestimable importance in the life of large and vibrant Muslim communities. And there is a wealth of historically interesting questions related to the Qurʾān coming from those later centuries. But my own work has almost always focused on the first centuries of Islamic history, and so my comments here do also.

***Corresponding Author: Fred M. Donner**, Professor of Near Eastern History, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA, E-Mail: f-donner@uchicago.edu

So please bear with me. I will touch again, but only briefly, on a few questions relating to the Qurʾān's role in later Islamic history at the end of my talk.

The first point to be made is the obvious one, that the Qurʾān is a sacred text. That is, it presents itself as, and is taken by believing Muslims to be, a text of divine origin. This claim, however, which is explicitly supernatural, immediately thrusts the historian into a quandary, for as I have attempted to explain elsewhere, the historian is not equipped to pass judgment on supernatural phenomena, such as the experience of prophecy.[1] Historians can certainly acknowledge that the text and its adherents assert this claim, but whether or not the claim itself is true is not something historians can pronounce upon, at least within the confines of their discipline. Theologians might be able to do so, but not historians: it is simply "above our pay grade." This also applies to the narratives found in Muslim tradition that describe the way the Qurʾān came to the prophet through a process of revelation. Evaluating the cogency of narratives is of course a routine part of what historians do. But as soon as the narratives under consideration depict events of a supernatural quality, the historian's only responsible course of action is to demur: to acknowledge the inapplicability of the historian's toolkit to supernatural phenomena. The historian may, of course, offer the view that in his or her opinion, a report about a revelatory experience, or the very phenomenon of revelation itself, is "true" or "false," but that is only to say that he or she believes or does not believe it; it is not a judgment grounded in historical analysis, but rather a statement of personal faith. It is thus crucially important that we discern when a historian is speaking with his or her historian's hat on, so to speak, that is, conducting a discussion in accordance with historical methodology, and when a historian is merely expressing a personal opinion that cannot be justified through properly historical argumentation.

As a historian then, I cannot pass professional judgment on the claim that the Qurʾān is God's word as revealed to Muḥammad; nor can any other historian. This claim, however, for Believers, will certainly be viewed as the single most important fact of all about the Qurʾān. Note that I do not say that I reject the claim, or that I endorse it: rather, that fact, or claim, must remain unaddressed, because historians have no means to address it.

What, then, can I address, as a historian? Here we must reflect for a moment on the transition from the moment of revelation to the codification of the written text – that is, on the relationship between the religious experience of revelation or prophecy and the writing down of what was revealed through it. For, while the

1 See F. Donner, "The Historian, the Believer, and the Qur'an." There I sketch out the three assumptions on which historical analysis rests: rationalism, humanism, and naturalism. It is the last of these that makes it impossible for historians to evaluate supernatural phenomena; and yet, without this assumption, we cannot do history.

supernatural act of revelation remains beyond the historian's toolkit, once the revelation assumes written form, it enters the thoroughly mundane world of texts, which is the historian's workshop, or playground, if you prefer. Once written down, the text becomes a worldly, physical artifact – both in its leaves or pages and in the words written on those leaves – and thus becomes something that the historian can begin to question and to analyze, to work with or to play with. Sometimes the questions raised during these reflections on the text may force the historian to contemplate solutions that require us to go back to the time before the text was written down – in which case, the insuperable barrier of the supernatural forces us to abandon our search for further explanation at that point. Or, if the words of the text are thought to have been transmitted orally before being written down (as is commonly assumed to be the case with the Qurʾān), then we may acknowledge the existence of a kind of gray zone, extending between the inscrutable phenomenon of revelation and the definitive writing-down of the text, a period when the content of what had been revealed and was eventually to become the written text was passed back and forth between people in the mundane world, and was possibly undergoing some evolution in the course of those exchanges. This evolution may be only dimly visible to us as later historians, but, nevertheless, we may as historians attempt to grapple with it despite an overwhelming dearth of precise evidence about these possible changes, because the transmission of oral tradition is a normal human process, not one that is supernatural. And, of course, the final process of writing down the text is definitely something that, as historians, we may grapple with. But this writing-down process poses its own challenges: did it happen all at once, or did it take place in stages? If it happened all at once – when was that, in relation to the prior event of revelation and the gray period of oral transmission? If on the other hand the writing down took place in stages, did some of the later stages also involve the editing, modifying, adding to or subtracting from what had been written down in the earlier stages? In the case of the Qurʾān, it seems to me that none of these potential scenarios can, in the present state of our knowledge, be confidently embraced as certain by the historian, and none of these scenarios, it goes without saying, is free of complexities of interpretation for us as historians. But at least these problems of the "gray zone" and of the process of writing down the text represent coherent issues with which historians may legitimately grapple, on the basis of whatever suitable evidence may exist.

Historians are, of course, most in their element when dealing with written texts, since the writing down, copying, and transmission of texts are processes with which historical analysis is very familiar. So it is only after the Qurʾān's text is fully written down that the historian can comfortably begin to work with it. In particular, historians should be able to work with the actual written copies of the Qurʾān, the various surviving *maṣāḥif*, especially the earliest extant ones. This was the plan

underlying the abortive project inaugurated in the first decades of the 20th century by Gotthelf Bergsträsser and his colleagues to reconstruct a critical edition of the Qurʾān text by collecting copies of thousands of early manuscripts. That project was derailed by the Second World War, which made the photo archive inaccessible, and the subsequent willful concealment of the photo archive after the war, an unfortunate episode about which we need not speculate here.[2] As a consequence, however, for roughly a half century, scholars who worked on the Qurʾān drew mainly on the 1924 Cairo edition, rather than on early Qurʾān manuscripts. The 1924 Cairo edition did not consult early manuscripts, but was rather based on careful transcription of only one reading of the text – the Kufan Ḥafs from ʿĀṣim tradition – so it could in no way be considered a "critical edition," but it was convenient to use and widely available.[3] Today, however, and for the past thirty years or so, numerous scholars are once again looking closely at the earliest Qurʾān manuscripts, an undertaking now made easier thanks to the widespread availability of high-resolution digital images of them on the web.[4]

This is of course a cause for hope, but in the case of the Qurʾān, even dealing with the written text is fraught with difficulties. One obstacle resides in the way early Qurʾān manuscripts are written. The Arabic script was still evolving when the Qurʾān first appeared, and it is well known for being "defective," as Semitists are fond of saying; that is, the writing sometimes – often, actually – does not provide an unequivocal reading of the sounds of the language it was intended to render. This "defectiveness" of the Arabic script is itself something that evolved. The earliest Qurʾān manuscripts often lacked some very basic indicators of important linguistic features of the spoken language rendered by the text – vowels, and distinctions between different sounds rendered by a common letter-form, such as the letters *ḍād* and *ṣād*. The resulting *rasm* or consonantal skeleton of words in the text was thus often ambiguous and capable of being realized in two or more different pronunciations. These deficiencies in the writing of the *rasm* were over time gradually remedied in part by the addition of supplementary marks in later copies of the text, in order to eliminate ambivalent readings, as the work of Keith Small has shown.[5] But even our knowledge of the evolving *rasm* has been incomplete; the maddeningly inconsistent rendering of the long *ā* sound in early Qurʾān manuscripts by the use of

2 See Higgins, "The Lost Archive."

3 Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 49; Graham and Kermani, "Recitation and Aesthetic Response," 117; Donner, "The Historical Context," 32.

4 See, for example, Déroche, *Le transmission écrite du coran*; Hilali, *The Sanaa Palimpsest*; Cellard, *Codex Amrensis 1*; Brubaker, *Corrections in Early Qur'ān Manuscripts*; and the online site of the Corpus Coranicum project, Potsdam: https://corpuscoranicum.de.

5 Small, *Textual Criticism*; cf. Déroche, *Le Coran, un histoire plurielle*, esp. 272.

various *matres lectionis*, or the introduction of the *hamzah* sign to mark medial and final glottal stops in a text that originally seems not to have had them, are two well-known, and long-debated, but not yet fully resolved, cases.[6] And, there are even more recent discoveries, such as Ahmad Al-Jallad's identification a few years ago of a new letter-form in early Qurʾān manuscripts.[7] All of this suggests that although we thought we knew how to read the *rasm*, that is, to pin down exactly what was the consonantal text, in fact our reading of it was not completely accurate, even in such basic terms such as being sure we had the consonants right. (Not to mention the vowels, mostly unwritten, and posing even more complex problems.) Do more such orthographic surprises lurk in the future? We can't know, of course. But these kinds of concerns make me as a historian ask whether we can be confident that we understand even the basic meaning of some passages of the Qurʾān, if we can't be certain that we understand what linguistic facts the *rasm* is telling us. And while I'm sure many passages are capable of being understood accurately, the discovery of a new letter-form as recently as the last five years makes one uncertain. Reading early Qurʾān manuscripts, in other words, is not quite like reading manuscripts in a language whose writing system was long-established, consistent, and well known, such as the Greek alphabet. As Al-Jallad suggests, we will have to recognize that parts of the Qurʾān text likely reflect the survival of several different pre-Islamic traditions of Arabic orthography.[8] So while historians, as I noted above, are – or should be – at home in dealing with texts and their transmission, our comfort is only really justified when the texts can be read accurately – that is, when the written traces that we have before us can be unambiguously converted into linguistic facts: the consonants and vowels of human speech. It seems that with the Qurʾān, we cannot yet be absolutely confident that we are capable of this, capable of recovering the actual sounds of the language shrouded behind the "defective" *rasm* that we have. Later manuscripts in the Islamic tradition of course tell us exactly how they read passages that in the early *rasm* are ambiguous or unclear – but have they found the correct reading, or have they simply imposed upon the slippery and incomplete *rasm* a reading that accorded with the theological or linguistic preferences of their own time, a century or several centuries later, rather than capturing the text's original intent?

Let me move on from these rather depressing and apparently nihilistic observations about how the early Qurʾān was written to another issue that, as a histo-

6 On long a: Diem, "Untersuchungen zur frühen Geschichte der arabischen Orthographie. I.," esp. 237–56. On *hamzah*: Van Putten, "Hamzah in the Quranic Consonantal Text." As this article makes clear, the rendering of long *a* is often entangled with the writing of *hamzah*.

7 Al-Jallad, "The Digraph."

8 Al-Jallad, "The Digraph," 15.

rian, I see as a salient one in considering the Qurʾān. That is the Qurʾān's obvious relationship to the Jewish and Christian traditions, a subject that has been the focus of study by Western scholars for well over a century, yet has continued to elude definitive resolution. (And I will not pretend to resolve it here.) That there is some such relationship may be obvious, but what is the nature of it? There are scores of parallels, evident to everyone, between various episodes in the Qurʾān and counterparts in the biblical tradition – including but not limited to episodes involving figures well known from the Hebrew Bible, from the Christian Gospels, or from other texts in the broad Judeo-Christian tradition, such as Moses, Abraham, David, or Jesus. Yet a century and more of determined sifting of those traditions has yielded almost no verbatim overlaps, no obvious cases of "borrowing," even though earlier generations of Western scholars generally conceptualized the relationship as one of the Qurʾān's dependency on and borrowing from Jewish or Christian tradition, an attitude perhaps most bluntly exemplified in the title of Abraham Geiger's famous book *Was hat Muhammad aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* "What did Muhammad take from Judaism?" (1833). If most Western scholars of an earlier generation simply assumed that the Qurʾān was dependent on the earlier traditions, however, there was nevertheless a striking lack of consensus among them on the source of the dependency, neatly reflected in the titles of two other books published in the first decades of the 20th century, David Margoliouth's *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (1925) and Charles Cutler Torrey's *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (1933). Scholars of the Qurʾān today do not generally accept the simplistic notion that the Qurʾān simply "borrows" from these earlier traditions, and our horizons today are considerably wider too. Recent work by Suleyman Dost and others has opened our eyes anew to resonances found in South Arabian and Ethiopic traditions;[9] Holger Zellentin has reframed the debate in terms of the Qurʾān and the biblical traditions both partaking of a common Late Antique legal culture.[10] But the question remains: how are we to understand the historical relationship between the Qurʾān and these earlier traditions? Historians, considering the Jewish and Christian writings older than the Qurʾān, usually centuries older, are still inclined to see the Qurʾān as in some way dependent on them; that is, growing out of some familiarity with those older texts, not dependent in the sense that it borrows directly or owes its intellectual content to them. Gabriel Reynolds has argued persuasively that the Qurʾān has the character of a homily, not repeating the Judaeo-Christian tradition but rather engaging in debate with it to correct what it considers flawed theological positions.[11] But what, exactly, is the relationship? This remains unclear. Believing

9 Dost, "An Arabian Qurʾān."
10 Zellentin, *The Qurʾān's Legal Culture*.
11 Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*.

Muslims, of course, may argue that the qurʾānic material is actually older than that of the Jewish and Christian tradition, since the Qurʾān is the eternal Word of God as inscribed on the guarded tablet by the divine throne and dates from time immemorial. This, however, takes us onto the kind of supernatural ground upon which historians fear to tread, at least if they wish to remain historians. Many historians would no doubt be glad to have a look at the guarded tablet and see for themselves, but none has to date credibly claimed to have been granted access to that particular archive. So the Qurʾān's historical relationship to the Judeo-Christian tradition thus remains, to my mind, an unresolved conundrum.

Another puzzling issue for me, as historian, is the Qurʾān's apparently contradictory or inconsistent pronouncements on certain subjects, in particular its utterances on the *ahl al-kitāb* in general and on Christians or Christianity in particular. I will do no more here than mention a few passages to illustrate the point, since I am sure that all of you are very familiar with the problem. We find, for example, in Q 5:82, the statement: "Indeed, … you will find the nearest in love to the Believers to be those who say 'We are Christians.' That is because among them are priests and monks, and they are not proud." This must be considered a positive endorsement. There are also several verses that state that among the peoples of the book (including Jews and Christians) there is a subset that are Believers, and they will have nothing to fear for the afterlife, (e. g. Q 2:62; cf. Q 3:199).

On the other hand, there are numerous passages that express negative views about Christians and Jews. Most direct is Q 5:51: "O you who believe, Do not take the Jews and Christians as *awliyāʾ*" (friends, helpers, associates, anyone close to you). And almost too many to enumerate are the verses that criticize the notion of the Trinity, or the divinity of Jesus, or the notion that Jesus was God's son ("Don't say three!", Q 4:171).

It is, of course, a well-entrenched view that the Qurʾān first appeared entirely within the lifetime of the prophet Muḥammad, and within the milieu in which he worked. But if we accept this idea – that the Qurʾān text comes from that restricted chronological and geographical context, the early 7th century Ḥijāz – then the existence of such contradictions becomes difficult to explain. It seems more plausible to assume that the text arose in some ways differently. Two possibilities seem most likely.

The first is to see the text as a fusion of materials from the time of Muḥammad, but originally coming from different communities, perhaps originally situated in different localities, which differed radically from one another in their attitude toward Christians and toward the *ahl al-kitāb* more generally. In this way, positive and negative views on them might both have been incorporated into the text we now have. (Incidentally, this hypothesis might also help explain the existence of the markedly different rhetorical and literary styles found in the Qurʾān – perhaps these

different local materials not only espoused different attitudes, but also expressed them in different ways. But that is another issue.)

The other logical possibility is to assume that the text was reworked or edited over time, with an earlier text or base layer (perhaps even one dating in part from before the time of the prophet?), to which additional material was added later, reflecting the different attitudes of later times. Both Günter Lüling and Patricia Crone suggested that parts of the Qurʾān might date to before the time of Muḥammad,[12] and some scholars have in the past two decades suggested that the Qurʾān contains interpolations dating from decades after the prophet, notably Edouard-Marie Gallez and David Reid Ross.[13] These works have not gained widespread attention or support, but perhaps such approaches need to be more broadly considered. If nothing else, the evidently changing attitude of the Umayyads toward Christians as the seventh century progressed raises the question of whether this may underlie some of the Qurʾān's contradictory utterances.

Another aspect of the Qurʾān that strikes me as curious is what we might call the text's muted attention to the prophet himself – that is to say, the Qurʾān hardly talks about Muḥammad. If, as I believe, the most basic definition of a Muslim is "someone who believes in the Qurʾān as God's word, and Muḥammad as God's prophet," we might expect that after the instruction found in God's word – to be always mindful of God, fear the Last Day, treat the less fortunate kindly – the Qurʾān would contain a great deal of specific information about the prophet. But as all of you surely know, this is not the case, for the Qurʾān only mentions the prophet directly a few times. Is this perhaps a hint that the bulk of the text is early, that it comes from a time before the community had clearly defined itself in such a way that the prophet and his mission were a central part of that identity? As some of you know, I have argued elsewhere that this clear focus on Qurʾān and prophet as the basis of the new community's identity may have been first championed by the Umayyads.[14] So, contrary to my reflections on the contradictions on Christians in the Qurʾān, perhaps this qurʾānic reticence on the prophet suggests that most of the text is early after all.

---

12 Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān*; revised English translation: *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*. Patricia Crone ("Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qur'ān") suggested that words in the Qurʾān that no early exegete seemed to understand may be vestiges of pre-Islamic texts.

13 Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète*, which has a strongly Christian polemical undertone. Also, three works by David Reid Ross, all published on Amazon: *House of War: Mecca, the Qur'an, and the Propaganda of 675–695* (publ. 2012), *Throne of Glass: Formations of the Islamic State* (2014), and *A Garden for the Poets: Essays on the Construction of Islam's Holy Book* (2016); the presentation in these works is often inchoate and difficult to follow, and hence to evaluate.

14 In particular, see my "Umayyad Efforts at Legitimation."

Regardless of how the Qurʾān's relative silence about Muḥammad is to be explained, however, one thing that we know for sure is that the later Muslim community of the eighth and subsequent centuries, armed with this Qurʾān-cum-prophet identity package, strove mightily to recover, and sometimes to invent, as much information about the prophet's life as possible. The Qurʾān itself was not of much help to them in this project of filling out the contours of the prophet's life, but later scholars proved very skillful at detecting veiled or implicit references to him in the text – what we might call "finding the prophet in the Qurʾān." But this, then, raises for us further questions about the text and how we should properly understand it. To take one simple example: as is well known, some passages in the Qurʾān begin with the word *qul!* "say!", which the exegetes decided was an imperative, a divine command directed to Muḥammad to recite the bit of text that follows. In doing this, the exegetes have made a set of assumptions about the nature of the revelatory process and further assumptions about the way the prophet received the revelation. But are these assumptions correct ones? Might the text be read in a different manner entirely, and what implications would that have for our understanding of Muḥammad's prophecy? (For example, might the *rasm*'s *ql* be interpreted as *qāla*, 3rd person singular perfect, rather than as the imperative *qul*!? The maddening inconsistency in writing of the long *ā* sound in early Qurʾān manuscripts opens this possibility for consideration.)

Or another example of "finding the prophet": many passages in the Qurʾān are linked by the exegetes to the prophet, even though there is no explicit mention of him made at that point in the text. How confident can we be, however, that these passages really refer to the prophet? Q 93:5–6, for example, states "Your lord will give you [blessings] and you will be satisfied; did he not find you an orphan, and provide you with shelter?" [(5) *wa-la-sawfa yuʿṭīka rabbuka fa-tarḍā (6) a-lam yajidka yatīman fa-āwā*] The exegetes universally consider this verse a reference to the prophet Muḥammad's being an orphan, and there is a robust tradition in the *sīrah* literature supporting this, with a number of reports that describe the deaths of his mother Āminah (when the prophet was six) and of his father ʿAbd Allāh (either before the prophet's birth, or some months after it). But then one stumbles upon a cluster of traditions that suggest that the prophet's parents were alive at a much later date – at the battle of Uḥud, when the prophet was about 55 years old (and his parents, therefore, in their eighties). These, obviously, contradict the notion that the prophet was an orphan, and it is not surprising that these reports are often presented in many variants with what appear to be later additions designed to obscure or deflect the implication that the prophet's parents were still alive that late – by saying, for example, that the prophet was simply invoking the blessings of his parents for a certain reason, so his mentioning of them at a later time is not to be taken as a statement that they were still

alive.[15] Nevertheless, one has at least to consider whether the verse Q 93:6 might refer to someone else – perhaps to Moses, who was also an orphan, and is a prophet who looms large in the Qurʾān. Was the verse, in other words, used as the basis for "discovering" an aspect of the prophet's life, or was an authentic experience of the prophet's life being referred to by the verse?

That is, we seem by 2022 not to have progressed very far beyond the reflections of Henri Lammens over a century ago, who proposed that much of the content of the *sīrah* is actually not the product of independent historical evidence, but rather of qurʾānic exegesis.[16]

In sum: we still can't really say, as historians, some very basic things about the Qurʾān. What was the function of the Qurʾān text in its original community? What, even, was the nature of that original community? Exactly when and how did the Qurʾān assume the form in which we have it today? These are fundamental matters about which I think that we still lack historically satisfactory answers.

As I noted at the beginning of this talk, my comments have focused overwhelmingly on the earliest period of the Qurʾān's history because that is the period to which I have devoted most of my own professional attention. But it seems to me that the role of the Qurʾān in later centuries, long after the sensitive questions involving its origin were long settled in the minds of most in the Muslim community, also presents many points of interest for the historian. I have today neither the time nor the knowledge and training to explore any of these issues in depth, but want to list a few that occur to me as worthy of further exploration.

First: What has been the relationship of the oral recitation of the Qurʾān to both the written text, and to the process of writing in general, as it played out in various Muslim communities? How has the Qurʾān contributed to, or been affected by, the general level of literacy in those different communities? To what extent was the Qurʾān as a written artifact what we might call an elite object, owned by only a few, and in which communities was an effort made to make the written text widely available to people of all stations in society? Today, and for at least a century, we can assume that anyone can gain access to the Qurʾān online, or at a local library or bookstore. But how widely available was the text in pre-modern times, and in what form or recension?

Another curious but well-known feature of the Qurʾān is its existence in seven different traditions of reading (*qirāʾāt*). This is a highly specialized subject, and one usually plied by scholars deeply interested in the written text and its oral under-

15 See Donner, "Was Muhammad an Orphan?"

16 Lammens, "Qoran et Tradition"; English translation: "The Koran and Tradition."

pinnings. But I wonder whether historians might find it worth exploring whether distinct subcommunities of Muslims formed around different reading traditions?

On a somewhat different track, what was the relationship of the Arabic Qurʾān to Muslim communities whose native language was or is not Arabic? There are reports of the early Almoravids destroying copies of what is called in the sources a "Berber Qurʾān," which may have been a different text entirely, but we also have an early Arabic Qurʾān produced in Iran, the so-called Qoran-i Qods, which had an interlinear Persian translation (or "trot"). One imagines that Believers who spoke Turkic languages, Swahili, Urdu and other South Asian languages, Malay, and other tongues may also have produced the Islamic equivalent of *targum*s into their vernaculars. How were these texts viewed by the "authorities," how were they used in the society, what impact did they have? What role did the Qurʾān – in Arabic or in a translation – play in the process of proselytization? One could even, I suppose, try to measure the impact of different translations of the Qurʾān into English on modern English-speaking Muslims.[17] Do different translations produce different social or intellectual phenomena?

Finally, it has long been known that there is some relationship between the Qurʾān and the growing body of Islamic law – the Qurʾān being considered, generally, the first source of Islamic law. But I think this relationship bears closer examination, because of course there are numerous issues on which Islamic law differs significantly from what the Qurʾān seems to say.

These reflections suggest some major issues that deserve further exploration. Those issues dealing with the Qurʾān and its historical role in the later Islamic community can certainly be explored by future scholarship. Unfortunately, however, I am not sure that attaining a properly historical understanding of the Qurʾān's origins will be accomplished any time soon, because the source material available to address this question is so limited. It will tax our collective ingenuity to tease out of the existing evidence what we may deem to be solid historical facts. So I think we may be stuck for a while – perhaps a long while – in this state of uncertainty on many fundamental issues about the Qurʾān's early history; but if this is the case, then I think it is better simply to be mindful of the difficulties we face, rather than to work on the basis of the unfounded assumption that they have been resolved.

Let me conclude by returning a bit to what I noted at the outset: that historical analysis, while it may help to illuminate the path of a text such as the Qurʾān in the world, cannot address the questions of faith that underlie such a text, which reside in the supernatural realm of prophecy and revelation. Historians can neither affirm, nor disprove, the faith-claims that inhere in such texts, which lie outside

17 On translations of the Qurʾān into English, see Lawrence, *The* Koran *in English*.

their competence. Believers in such a revealed text, whether it be the Qurʾān, or the Hebrew Bible, or the Gospels, sometimes – indeed, usually – create apparently historical narratives to explain, and make persuasive, the origin of those texts. These narratives can bring comfort to the Believers by providing a description, plausible on the surface, of how the text or key faith events happened. But although historians may be able to pick these narratives apart and reveal them to be pious myths, they are never able to call into question the central faith-claims the narratives claim to advance. It simply does not matter, then, whether the prophet Muḥammad received the Qurʾān in a kind of nervous crisis that we might call "divine download," or on the contrary assembled the text after having heard or read earlier religious texts. Nor does it matter whether he had three wives or thirty, or whether he was an orphan, or whether he vanquished the Quraysh at Badr; these cherished elements of the traditional Islamic origins story might be confirmed or proven false by historians, but that would not impinge on the central claim of Believers, that the Qurʾān is God's word as revealed – somehow – to their prophet. As a historian, I am eager to learn more about how the Qurʾān as a text coalesced and came to assume the form in which we now know it; my enthusiasm for this project is only increased by the knowledge that, whatever historians may find in this quest, it cannot undercut the basic faith of Muslims who view the Qurʾān as a text of sacred origin.

Thank you for your attention!

Bibliography

Al-Jallad, Ahmad. "The Digraph ايِ in the Qur'anic Consonantal Text and the Identification of a New Letter Shape for Final hē in the 7th–8th century Arabic script," *Al-ʻUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 29 (2021): 1–19.

Brubaker, Daniel Alan. *Corrections in Early Qur'ān Manuscripts: Twenty Examples.* Lovettsville, VA: Think and Tell Press, 2019.

Cellard, Eléonore. *Codex Amrensis 1.* Leiden: Brill, 2018.

Crone, Patricia. "Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qur'ān," *JSAI* 18 (1994): 1–37.

Déroche, François. *Le transmission écrite du coran dans les débuts de l'Islam: Le codex parisino-petropolitanus.* Leiden: Brill, 2009.

–. *Qur'ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview.* Leiden: Brill, 2014.

–. *Le Coran, un histoire plurielle: Essai sur la formation du texte coranique.* Paris: Seuil, 2019.

Diem, Werner. "Untersuchungen zur frühen Geschichte der arabischen Orthographie. I. Schreibung der Vokale," *Orientalia* 48 (1979): 207–57

Donner, Fred. "The Historian, the Believer, and the Qur'an," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2*, 25–37. Edited by Gabriel Said Reynolds. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.

–. "The Historical Context," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, 23–39. Edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

–. "Umayyad Efforts at Legitimation: The Umayyads' Silent Heritage," in *Umayyad Legacies: Medieval Memories from Syria to Spain*, 187–211. Edited by Antoine Borrut and Paul Cobb. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
–. "Was Muhammad an Orphan?," in *Mers et rivages de l'Islam: De l'Atlantique à la Méditerrannée; Mélanges offerts à Christophe Picard,* 245–54. Edited by Alexandra Bill, Antoine Borrut, Yann Dejugnat, Camille Rhone-Quer, and Jennifer Vanz. Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2023.
Dost, Suleyman. "An Arabian Qur'ān: Towards a Theory of Peninsular Origins," Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2017.
Gallez, Édouard-Marie. *Le messie et son prophète: Aux origines de l'Islam.* Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2005.
Geiger, Abraham. *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen: Eine von der Königl. Preussischen Rheinuniversität gekrönte Preisschrift.* Bonn: F. Baaden, 1833.
Graham, William A. and Navid Kermani, "Recitation and Aesthetic Response," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, 115–39. Edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Higgins, Andrew. "The Lost Archive," *The Wall Street Journal,* January 12, 2008.
Hilali, Asma. *The Sanaa Palimpsest: The Transmission of the Qur'an in the First Centuries AH.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
Lammens, Henri. "Qoran et Tradition: Comment fut composée la vie du Mahomet," *Récherches de Science Réligieuse* 1 (1910): 25–51.
–. "The Koran and Tradition: How the Life of Muhammad was Composed," in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, 169–87. Edited by Ibn Warraq. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000.
Lawrence, Bruce B. *The* Koran *in English: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2017.
Lüling, Günter. *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān.* Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974.
–. *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003.
Margoliouth, David S. *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment; the Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh University, 1925.* London: Macmillan, 1926.
Reynolds, Gabriel Said. *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.
Small, Keith. *Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011.
Torrey, Charles Cutler. *The Jewish Foundation of Islam.* New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933.
Van Putten, Marijn. "Hamzah in the Quranic Consonantal Text," *Orientalia* 87 (2018): 93–120.
Watt, W. Montgomery. *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970.
Zellentin, Holger. *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013.