

ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH. *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies. London. 2014. xl + 470 pages. Cloth US \$125.00 ISBN 978-0-19-870164-4.

English-speaking readers should feel greatly enriched by the publication of this book containing articles from 1990 to 2012 by renowned Qur'an scholar Angelika Neuwirth. Several of these were originally in German only and are now, with others, accessible. One of the most important voices in Qur'an scholarship in the West today, Neuwirth has offered corrections to recent findings by others and has developed bold original views on the Qur'an that have given the field of Qur'anic studies in Western academic circles a new trend and new horizons of research.

Neuwirth confronts essential questions about the literariness of the Qur'an, while accepting it as a mantic manifestation giving rise to a new community. She sees the Qur'anic text as a drama to be viewed sequentially and thus she reads it diachronically, the parts revealed later being in dialogue with ones revealed earlier and interpreting them. This intratextuality helps understand the growth of the Qur'anic text as it is forming the new community of believers through language. Meanwhile, she is also aware of intertextuality, whereby the Qur'an considers the religious texts of other religions, and is in dialogue with them and is therefore interpreting them too. But she is not as concerned with intertextuality in this book as she is with intratextuality because, she says, she wants to counterbalance the known Western scholarly preference for "source studies" (dealing with texts outside the Qur'an and influencing it) over literary studies dealing with the Qur'an *itself*.

The Qur'an in her view is a transcript of an ongoing debate, at times between Prophet Muḥammad and his Arabian contemporaries, and at other times between the new religion of Islam and the previous religions. All this happens in what Neuwirth calls Late Antiquity, which is not to be understood as a political chronological period, though she sees it historically extending from early Roman imperial times to classical Islamic times; Late Antiquity is rather to be understood as an "epistemic space" out of which the Qur'an emerged. The Qur'an in her view is thus the cultural translation of this space of interaction, it is a transcript of an ongoing debate as mentioned above and a dynamic participant in it, in addition to being a mantic manifestation, i.e., a prophetic discourse.

Neuwirth's book has three sections: section I, "Pagan and Monotheistic Frameworks"; section II, "The Liturgical Qur'an and the Emergence of the

Community”; and section III, “Narrative Figures between the Bible and the Qur’an.”

In section I (four articles), Neuwirth deals with the Arab environment in which the Qur’an emerged, an environment to which, she says, scholarship in the West paid little attention but which now deserves more attention because more about it is known through archaeology, especially epigraphy. The Qur’an’s appearance is studied in its historical setting and Neuwirth shows that it was an unexpected leap creating a genuine cultural shift with a new theological discourse. As a result, Arabian society’s ideals underwent a revolution, and relationships based earlier on blood kinship and oral traditions had now to be inspired by the authority of a text, by the medium of language. In the early short suras of the Qur’an, the motif of paradise, the announcement of the imminence of the Day of Judgement, the oaths affirming the proclaimer’s prophethood, and the powerful images and metaphors are all seen as literary strategies that emotionally affected the listeners.

In section II (five articles), the ritual use of the Qur’an in public worship is studied and its effect on the gradual emergence of the new Muslim community is recognized. *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* (Q. 1), as an introit of the *Ṣalāt*, and *Sūrat al-Ḥijr* (Q. 15), as a body of rulings for believers, both reinforce the process of the canonization of the Qur’an and the emergence of the community. *Sūrat al-Isrā’* (Q. 17), acknowledging Jerusalem as *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* to which Prophet Muḥammad was miraculously transported from Mecca one night, brings the new community finally within the realm of the established monotheistic community of Jews and Christians. Neuwirth’s argument, supported by her detailed literary study of the suras, accentuates her theory about the simultaneous growth of the Qur’anic text and the parallel development of the Muslim community historically as she reads the Qur’an diachronically.

In section III (five articles), narratives in the Bible and the Qur’an are studied and their function is shown to correspond to the changing needs of the early community as it evolves from its connection with a local shrine to an association with a remote sanctuary in Jerusalem. The Biblical narratives are recounted not once but several times in the Qur’an, with varying emphasis and content depending on the evolving community’s needs, and the idea of a transcendent scripture named *al-Kitāb* is considered to be their source beyond all other sources and higher than them all. Neuwirth studies the changing representation of Moses, of Mary and Jesus, and of others—but always takes each sura holistically as a literary unit and makes an attempt to

classify the Qur'an's stories within a more general narratology that accords with a developing theology.

The diachronic reading of the Qur'an is Neuwirth's principle throughout her book, and it helps in understanding the oral development of the Qur'an during the Muslim community's growth engendered by it. But it has to be admitted that such a diachronic reading cannot be fully valid until a rearrangement of the Qur'an's suras in a chronological sequence is completed—which has not yet been done. In Western studies of chronology since Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930), literary form and linguistic structure have been the principles helping to distinguish between earlier and later suras, and Neuwirth herself has contributed to these studies, only for Meccan suras, in her book *Der Koran* (Insel, 2010). At any rate, scholarship has to go on with present data and methods with the hope of having more in the future—though the true chronology may never be known.

Meanwhile, Neuwirth's book reviewed here is a good contribution to a reading of the Qur'an in its *Sitz im Leben* with an appreciation of its literary character as scripture, and it is a good study of how the Qur'an helped make a community, even while it was itself orally growing and being canonized as a scripture of a new religion. Her book is recommended to all scholars of the Qur'an and is even useful to scholars in Biblical studies and in comparative religious studies. ✂

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**KARL-HEINZ OHLIG, ED.** *Early Islam: A Historical-Critical Reconstruction on the Basis of Contemporary Sources*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013. 647 pages. Cloth US\$45.95 ISBN 978-1-61614-825-6.

This anthology, translated from German, continues the revisionist program of The Inārah Institute for Research on Early Islamic History and the Koran. Alongside some interesting ideas, it contains a great deal of dross and pays insufficient attention to relevant evidence and prior scholarship.

The foreword to the English edition by Markus Gross and the introduction by Karl-Heinz Ohlig position the volume's contributors as outsiders to an overly credulous Orientalist establishment. They regard the traditional Islamic salvation history about the Qur'an and the rise of Islam as a fictitious back-projection, and propose instead to rely solely on non-Muslim sources. This is like tracing the history of Catholicism through Protestant polemics