

Review Essay*

Peering Behind the Lines

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Books always speak of other books,
and every story tells a story that has already been told.¹

Modern academic study of the Qur'an has grown at breakneck speed in the past two decades. In this period of rapid growth, many subfields of Qur'anic Studies have left behind decades of stagnation after World War II, and several new subfields have emerged. As a result, there has been major progress in the study of qur'anic manuscripts, the literature on variant readings (*qirā'āt*), structural and literary analysis, commentaries and supercommentaries, chronology, organization of the qur'anic corpus, philological questions, and intertextuality.² The twenty-first century

* Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (trans. Ali Quli Qarai; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 1,032 pp, \$40.00 hb, ISBN: 9780300181326.

¹ Umberto Eco, *Postscript to "The Name of the Rose"* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984) xxiv.

² To name only a few notable contributions: Tayyar Altukulaç, *al-Muṣḥaf al-sharīf al-mansūb ilā 'Uthmān b. 'Affān: nuskhat Maṭḥaf al-Āthār al-Turkiyyah wa-l-Islāmiyyah bi-Istānbūl* (Istanbul: Markaz al-Buhūth al-Islāmiyyah, 2007); François Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'islam. Le codex Parisino-petropolitanus* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, "The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qur'an of the Prophet," *Arabica* 57 (2010) 343–436; Eléonore Cellard, *Codex Amrensis 1* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Shady H. Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'an: The Problem of Tawātur and the Emergence of Shawādh* (Texts and Studies on the Qur'an 9; Leiden: Brill, 2012); Michel Cuypers, *Le festin. Une lecture de la sourate al-Mā'ida* (Paris: Lethielleux, 2007); Aisha Geissinger, *Gender and Muslim Constructions of Exegetical Authority: A Rereading of the Classical Genre of Qur'an Commentary* (Islamic History and Civilization; Leiden: Brill, 2015); Walid A. Saleh, "The Gloss as Intellectual History: The *Ḥāshiyahs* on *al-Kashshāf*," *Oriens* 41 (2013) 217–59; Nicolai Sinai,

has also witnessed the appearance of the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, as well as several introductions, handbooks, edited volumes, and concordances synthesizing the results of ongoing research and making them accessible to a wider audience. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Qur'anic Studies represents one of the most dynamic fields of historical research at present.

One research domain that has attracted particular attention is the relation between the Qur'an and the earlier literary traditions of the Near East, in particular Jewish and Christian writings. Like other aspects of Qur'anic research, the study of such intertextual relations had fallen victim to the Second World War. However, this subfield is resurgent again, benefiting not only from the general growth of Qur'anic Studies but also from the maturation of the field of Late Antiquity. The recent publication of Gabriel Said Reynolds's *The Qur'ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary* represents a milestone in the development of the field, as this work synthesizes the fruits of old and new research on the question of intertextuality. In what follows, I provide a brief description of Reynolds's contribution and offer critical remarks on the merits, limits, and methodology of intertextual research in the study of the Qur'an.

■ The Qur'ān and the Bible

The Qur'ān and the Bible (henceforth also *QB*) is a monumental work that combines the functions of a concordance and a commentary. In simple terms, *QB* offers a full English translation of the Qur'an (newly revised by Ali Quli Qarai) together with copious annotations. These annotations use two centuries of academic research to underline potential connections between statements in the Qur'an and texts found in the Hebrew Bible, para-biblical writings, the New Testament, and the biblically inspired literary output of Jews and Christians before Islam. Thus, while the book's title might suggest that it compares the Qur'an with the Bible alone, Reynolds's comments frequently refer to para-biblical literature and to the manifold engagements of Jews and Christians with the Bible in exegetical, polemical, legal, liturgical, and homiletic contexts.³ *QB* thus serves simultaneously as a commentary

Fortschreibung und Auslegung. Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009); Behnam Sadeghi, "The Chronology of the Qur'ān: A Stylometric Research Program," *Arabica* 58 (2011) 210–99; Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010); Gabriel S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010); Holger M. Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The "Didascalia Apostolorum" as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

³ The inevitable inadequacy of the work's title is captured elegantly by Paul Mankowski, who offers a humorous alternative imitating 17th-cent. conventions: "A New English Rendering of The Qur'an, being a Revision by the Author of the celebrated Translation of Ali Quli Qarai, together with a seriatim Commentary shewing the manifold narrative Tributaries ultimately derived from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, with particular Attention to various Syriac Christian Vehicles of Transmission, enriched by the Annotations and Explanations of sundry eminent Scholars: Muslim, Jewish, and Christian alike, together with a compendious Bibliography, &c" (Paul V. Mankowski, "Historical-Critical Qur'an," *First Things* [November 2018], <https://www.firstthings.com>).

on the Islamic scripture, a guide to the vast religious literature of late antiquity, and a conspectus of academic research on the Qur'an.

Reynolds synthesizes past research on the Qur'an and explains the results of this research with exemplary lucidity. Moreover, he often provides substantial excerpts from suggested intertexts of the Qur'an, thereby enabling the reader better to appreciate and assess their relevance. His discussion of Q al-Mā'idah 5:27–32 is a case in point. In this passage, the Qur'an follows a brief account of the murder of Abel with the following statement: "That is why We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul, without [its being guilty of] manslaughter or corruption on the earth, is as though he had killed all mankind, and whoever saves a soul is as though he had saved all mankind" (Q 5:32). As scholars have long recognized, this proclamation is similar to a statement in the Mishnah that also follows discussion of the story of Abel and Cain in Genesis (*m. Sanh.* 4:5). Instead of providing a mere reference, however, *QB* quotes the relevant part of this mishnaic teaching at some length, thereby demonstrating its status as the likely referent of the qur'anic proclamation.⁴

In addition to discussing previous academic research and potential qur'anic intertexts, Reynolds maintains a conversation with the Islamic exegetical tradition. Sometimes he relates a common exegetical opinion without further elaboration.⁵ In other cases, Muslim exegesis functions as a foil that vindicates recourse to biblical and post-biblical literature. For example, the qur'anic story of Jonah in *Sūrat al-Sāffāt* opens by mentioning that Jonah "absconded toward the laden ship" (Q 37:140). As Reynolds points out, the popular commentary known as *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* claims that Jonah absconded when the punishment with which he had threatened the Ninevites did not materialize. Citing part of the biblical account of Jonah, however, Reynolds asserts that the qur'anic statement "refers to Jonah's initial refusal to preach to Assyria (Nineveh), Israel's enemy."⁶ The biblical text thus sheds light on the qur'anic statement and explains why it is situated at the beginning of the story: we are dealing with Jonah's reluctance to preach among Israel's oppressors, not to his later disappointment with God's revocation of Nineveh's punishment.

The Qur'an and the Bible is thus an invaluable resource that will be useful to readers with various levels of competence and interest in the Qur'an. From the general public and undergraduate students to seasoned scholars, this book can serve as an indispensable guide to the Qur'an and its literary background as well as academic research on this text for years to come. The publication of this work

com/article/2018/11/historical-critical-quran). I thank my colleague Bernard Levinson for bringing this review to my attention.

⁴ *QB*, 199.

⁵ E.g., *QB*, 705, ad Q 39:67.

⁶ *QB*, 685.

offers an opportune moment for methodological reflections on some questions of importance to Qur'anic Studies. It is to these reflections that I now turn.

■ Methodological Reflections

A. Micro-contextualization versus Macro-contextualization

Although *The Qur'an and the Bible* is a concordance, it advances a number of important arguments and claims that are reflected in its methodology and its selection of studies and sources. To begin, Reynolds emphasizes the distinction between biblical traditions and medieval Islamic literature as key for unlocking the Qur'an's message.⁷ According to Reynolds, it is problematic for academics to read the Qur'an in the light of the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) genre or the Prophet's biography (*sīrah-maghāzī*), because the reports embedded in these corpora are later inventions meant to historicize Qur'anic passages by connecting them with supposed episodes of the Prophet's life.⁸ Instead of relying on these *post-Qur'anic* reports, Reynolds suggests that we need to turn to *pre-Qur'anic* material from the "Late Antique Near East," in particular biblical and post-biblical writings.⁹ In Reynolds's view, these writings pervaded the Qur'anic milieu in oral form and shaped the concerns and worldviews of the Qur'an's author(s) and audience.¹⁰ As such, turning to them represents embracing "a 'contextual' reading of the Qur'an."¹¹

By drawing on biblical literature, therefore, *The Qur'an and the Bible* consciously eschews traditional accounts of Islam's emergence. In this vein, Reynolds questions not only individual details of the Prophet's biography but also its basic structure. As such, he refrains from using the labels "Meccan" and "Medinan" in relation to Qur'anic passages.¹² In a similar vein, Reynolds rejects the idea that the Qur'an appeared in a primarily pagan society. He thus frequently suggests that the Qur'anic label *mushrikūn* may refer not to pagans but to certain groups of Jews or Christians.¹³ Finally, Reynolds expresses skepticism that the Qur'an can be attributed to a single author and suggests that it may have had "multiple sources and a complicated history

⁷ Following Reynolds, I use "biblical traditions" and "biblical literature" in a broad sense, i.e., as including the Bible as well as para-biblical and post-biblical writings.

⁸ *QB*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6; cf. Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (henceforth *QBS*; Routledge Studies in the Qur'an 10; New York: Routledge, 2010) 13.

¹⁰ *QB*, 4.

¹¹ *QB*, 4. Cf. *ibid.*, 6, 8. This concern with the Qur'an's original context is reflected in the titles of two excellent volumes that Reynolds edited: *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'an; New York: Routledge, 2008) and *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'an 12; New York: Routledge, 2011).

¹² *QB*, 4.

¹³ See, for example, *QB*, 4, 235, 309, 388, 438–39, 529, 847–48. Similarly, in an earlier work, Reynolds claims that "paganism is hardly evident in the Qur'an" (*QBS*, 33).

of redaction and editing.”¹⁴ Reynolds’s reliance on Jewish and Christian writings is therefore informed by, and coupled with, rethinking key aspects of Islam’s origins.

In revisiting the Qur’anic milieu’s religious character, *The Qur’an and the Bible* participates in a core debate of Qur’anic Studies. In simple terms, a fundamental question in front of scholars of the Qur’an is whether biblical ideas and stories were peripheral, prominent, or predominant in the Qur’an’s original context.¹⁵ Put differently, there is disagreement as to whether the Qur’anic milieu was *barely, partially, or thoroughly biblicalized*. According to early Arabic sources, the Prophet proclaimed the Qur’an to pagan Arabs in Mecca for more than a decade before going to preach among a largely pagan (and partly Jewish) populace in Medina.¹⁶ The resulting image of biblical conceptions as peripheral to most members of the Qur’an’s audience came under sweeping criticism by John Wansbrough, who claimed that these conceptions were in fact well known to the Qur’an’s earliest hearers.¹⁷ Later, a number of scholars (including notably Gerald Hawting and Patricia Crone) developed John Wansbrough’s postulate of thorough biblicalization by disentangling the Qur’anic *mushrikūn* from the discourse of the Jāhiliyya and integrating them within the biblically inspired religious currents of late antiquity.¹⁸ Perhaps as a compromise between this radical reimagining of early Islam and its traditional counterpart, many scholars have come to accept a prominent (though

¹⁴ *QB*, 5. Although Reynolds questions the idea that the Qur’an is “a transcript of Muḥammad’s proclamations between AD 610 and 632” (ibid.), he does not seem to accept John Wansbrough’s late dating of the Qur’an. In fact, in a 2015 article, Reynolds cites the results of radiocarbon analysis on certain Qur’an fragments to suggest that the Qur’an may be earlier than commonly imagined (“Variant Readings: The Birmingham Qur’an in the Context of Debate on Islamic Origins,” *TimesLitSupp* [7 August 2015] 14–15).

¹⁵ For a recent and insightful discussion of this question, see Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) 59–77. Note that the labels and the three-fold division of approaches are mine, not Sinai’s.

¹⁶ For a recent discussion of the few Christian individuals mentioned in these sources, see Ghada Osman, “Pre-Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into the Arabic Sources,” *MW* 95 (January 2005) 67–80.

¹⁷ Drawing attention to the elliptical nature of the Qur’an’s retellings of biblical stories, Wansbrough concluded that “the public for whom Muslim scripture was intended could be expected to supply the missing detail” (John Wansbrough, *Qur’anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977] xxi). See also idem, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁸ See G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also Patricia Crone, “The Religion of the Qur’anic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities,” *Arabica* 57 (2010) 151–200; eadem, “Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God,” in *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (ed. Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 315–36; eadem, “The Qur’anic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection (Part I),” *BSOAS* 75 (2012) 445–72; eadem, “The Qur’anic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection (Part II),” *BSOAS* 76 (2013) 1–20; and eadem, “Pagan Arabs as God-Fearers,” in *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur’an* (ed. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 140–64.

not necessarily dominant) role for biblical traditions in the Qur'an's initial context of appearance.¹⁹

This is not the place to assess the arguments behind these contrasting viewpoints. Instead, I will focus on the implications of Reynolds's position—that is to say, his estimation of the qur'anic milieu as thoroughly biblicalized—for *The Qur'an and the Bible*. First, by discarding data from the Prophet's traditional biography, *The Qur'an and the Bible* de-contextualizes the Qur'an from its reported Hijāzī milieu. However, there is no subsequent *re*-contextualization of the Qur'an in a different historical setting. It is true that Reynolds draws on late antique Judeo-Christian texts to shed light on the Qur'an. However, "late antiquity" is a broad category, covering centuries of development in a vast geographic area. As such, it cannot serve as a concrete milieu for the Qur'an. Recourse to late antique literature enables us to appreciate the genealogies of certain qur'anic narratives and concepts. Although insightful, such investigations afford us little information about the distinct social, religious, cultural, political, and economic aspects of the Qur'an's historical context. This work may be compared to analyzing the speeches of Barack Obama on the basis of works of political philosophy from the Renaissance through the end of the Cold War. There is much to learn about the background of key ideas, but it would be difficult to appreciate the significance of these ideas in their own unique context. Therefore, while Reynolds describes *The Qur'an and the Bible* as providing "a 'contextual' reading of the Qur'an," one could in fact describe its approach as largely *non*-contextual or *a*-contextual.²⁰ Alternatively, we might say that *The Qur'an and the Bible* abandons the traditional *micro*-contextualization of the Qur'an in the early seventh-century Hijāz and focuses on its *macro*-contextualization in the late antique Near East.

A key consequence of this non-contextual or macro-contextual approach is commentarial silence on precisely those parts of the Qur'an that seem to reflect its distinctive environment. This silence includes most passages of evident political

¹⁹ See, e.g., Sidney H. Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: The 'Companions of the Cave' in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (ed. Reynolds) 109–37, at 115; Reuven Firestone, "Is There a Notion of 'Divine Election' in the Qur'ān?," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān* (ed. Reynolds) 393–410, at 399; and Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 62. For a similar position that predates Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies*, see Hamilton A. R. Gibb, "Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia," *HTR* 55 (1962) 269–80, esp. 273, where Gibb claims that Meccans were familiar with biblical ideas but did not yet believe in them. One of the few scholars to depart from this trend is Holger Zellentin, who makes a distinction between the Qur'an's Meccan and Medinan contexts: "the audience of the Medinan Qur'ān, in a general way, is implied to be much more scripturally astute than the Meccan audience, which may have been familiar with Biblical stories only in a rudimentary way" ("Triological Anthropology: The Qur'ān on Adam and Iblīs in View of Rabbinic and Christian Discourse," in *New Approaches to Human Dignity in the Context of Qur'ānic Anthropology: The Quest for Humanity* [ed. R. Braun and H. Çiçek; Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017] 59–129, at 65).

²⁰ The approach in *QB* is therefore similar to Reynolds's previous work, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*, which he notes "is not based at all on a historical context, whether pagan, Jewish, or Christian" (*QBS*, 35).

import—such as the beginning of *Sūrat al-Tawbah* (Q 9:1–22), which conveys a declaration of war against the pagans (*mushrikūn*), or the bulk of *Sūrat al-Hashr* (Q 59:1–17), which discusses the expulsion of some of the People of the Book from their settlements. Recourse to late antique literature offers little help in identifying the referents of these passages. A similar problem affects many statements of explicit religious significance. For example, there is no discussion of the Qur'an's imposition of fasting during the month of Ramaḍān (Q 2:185),²¹ nor of its proclamations about the sacred months (Q 2:194), condemnation of intercalation (Q 9:37), or certain taboos of the *mushrikūn* (mentioned in Q 6:138–44). The resulting marginalization of the Qur'an's distinctive religio-political content makes it easier to integrate the Qur'an within the matrix of biblical tradition. However, this integration comes at the cost of leaving fundamental aspects of the Qur'anic milieu behind. Put differently, the perception of an easy fit between the Qur'an and biblical literature involves a measure of circular reasoning.

Of course, it may be argued that a macro-contextual reading of the Qur'an is the best we can do at the moment, considering the absence of reliable contemporaneous information about the Qur'an's society of emergence. As Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, “whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent.”²² This position is not without merit. However, it is still important to recognize the limitations of reading the Qur'an through the lens of Judeo-Christian literature.²³ Specifically, if we define success as resolving “the difficulties that scholars have in explaining large parts of the Qur'ān,”²⁴ then a purely intertextual approach seems hardly capable of overcoming these difficulties. For, as can be seen within the pages of *The Qur'ān and the Bible*, a considerable portion of the Qur'an pertains to specific events and practices that resist clarification through biblical literature.

B. Intertextuality versus Intratextuality

In the past, scholars steeped in a variety of traditions—Rabbinic Judaism, non-Rabbinic Judaism, Jewish Christianity, “Nestorian” Syriac Christianity, “Jacobite” Syriac Christianity, Ethiopic Christianity, South Arabian religions, Manicheanism, and Samaritanism—have argued for a special relationship between said traditions and the Qur'an.²⁵ By and large, *The Qur'ān and the Bible* avoids such reductionism by drawing on a broad set of writings. Nevertheless, because it relies almost exclusively on the biblical tradition, there are cases where *QB* posits parallels and influences where none seem evident or needed. To avoid a biblical bent when

²¹ There is commentary on this verse, but it discusses only the terms *qur'ān* and *furqān* (*QB*, 82–83).

²² “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, *With an Introduction by Bertrand Russell* [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1922] 162).

²³ My phrasing here reflects the title of Reynolds's opinion piece, “Reading the Qur'an through the Bible,” *First Things* (November 2009) 17–20.

²⁴ *QBS*, 1.

²⁵ Some of these studies are referenced in Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 6–9.

reading a certain Qur'anic text, it seems prudent to harness at least the following sets of *nonbiblical* data in a systematic manner: other texts from the Qur'an itself and archaeological and epigraphic finds. Potential Qur'anic intratexts or "simultexts"²⁶ are especially important, as they are far closer to other Qur'anic passages than biblical writings composed in a different language, time, and environment. The following example shows how the application of this method can sometimes lead to a better reading of the Qur'an.

■ Locating the Qur'an's "Arabian Prophets"

Most historical characters that are named in the Qur'an can be identified with figures mentioned in biblical or post-biblical texts. Two commonly cited exceptions to this rule are Hūd and Šālīḥ, whom the Qur'an describes as messengers, respectively, to the peoples of 'Ād and Thamūd. Because Hūd and Šālīḥ do not seem to correspond to any figures known from Judeo-Christian writings, scholars commonly describe them as "nonbiblical" or "Arabian" prophets of the Qur'an.²⁷ These figures and their communities constitute an important component of the Qur'an's historical vision: There are seven references to Hūd, nine to Šālīḥ, twenty-four to 'Ād, and twenty-six to Thamūd.²⁸

Because of its biblical focus, *QB* offers no commentary on the figure of Šālīḥ or the people of Thamūd. As for Hūd, Reynolds discusses him briefly by mentioning the position of Abraham Geiger, a scholar of the early nineteenth century. Geiger identified Hūd with the biblical Eber (great-grandson of Shem and ancestor of Abraham) and suggested that the people of 'Ād were the generation who built the Tower of Babel.²⁹ Reynolds dubs Geiger's theory "not certain" and offers a different

²⁶ A "simultext" can refer to any other text from the Qur'an that is relevant for understanding a given passage at hand. This term has been introduced to Qur'anic Studies by Holger Zellentin, who has in turn adopted it from the study of Rabbinic literature. See Zellentin, "The Synchronic and the Diachronic Qur'ān: *Sūrat Yā Sīn*, Lot's People, and the Rabbis," in *The Making of Religious Texts in Islam: The Fragment and the Whole (Pre- and Early Islam)* (ed. A. Hilali and S.R. Burge; Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2019) 111–74, esp. at 113 and 163–64 n. 21.

²⁷ See Daniel A. Madigan, "Themes and Topics," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān* (ed. Jane D. McAuliffe; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 79–95, at 87. Shu'ayb is also sometimes considered an Arabian prophet, although he is more commonly associated with the biblical Jethro. A prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) attributed to Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī posits four Arab prophets: Hūd, Shu'ayb, Šālīḥ, and Muhammad himself (*Al-Iḥsān fī taqrīb Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Hibbān* [ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt; Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1988] 2:77–79).

²⁸ These statistics are drawn from *The Quranic Arabic Corpus*, <http://corpus.quran.com>.

²⁹ As it happens, in identifying Hūd with Eber, Abraham Geiger was building on the opinion of some Muslim scholars (as he notes in *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* [2nd ed.; Leipzig: M. W. Kaufmann, 1902] 111–12), though he was presenting new arguments to this effect. While some Muslim authorities identified Hūd with Eber (Ar. 'Ābir), others considered Hūd a son of Eber. See Badr al-Dīn al-'Aynī, *Umdat al-qārī: sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (25 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.) 15:225; Wabb b. Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tījān fī mulūk Ḥimyar* (ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Maqālīḥ; Sana'a: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Abḥāth al-Yamaniyyah, AH 1347) 37.

biblically grounded hypothesis about 'Ād.³⁰ Noting that Hūd criticizes his people for behaving like *jabbārīn* (often translated as “tyrants”), Reynolds suggests that the Arabic term *jabbārīn* may be connected to the Hebrew term *gibbōrīm*, which he translates as “giants.” He thus concludes that 'Ād were perhaps “meant to be the antediluvian *nephilīm*,”³¹ beings whom the Bible describes as having enormous stature (Numbers 13:33), characterizes as *gibbōrīm* (Genesis 6:4), and identifies as the offspring of “the sons of God” and “the daughters of humans” (Genesis 6:4).

Yet this etymologically inspired identification of 'Ād seems problematic on several grounds. For one, the Hebrew adjective *gibbōr* does not mean “giant” in Biblical Hebrew but rather “strong” or “mighty,”³² and even in Rabbinic Hebrew “giant” is only one possible meaning of *gibbōr* alongside its older biblical significations.³³ Even if the Hebrew *gibbōrīm* and Arabic *jabbārīn* meant “giants,” however, this would not have implied that 'Ād themselves were so, for Hūd does not describe them as *jabbārīn*. Rather, he criticizes them for behaving like *jabbārīn* in their deployment of violence (Q 26:130). Moreover, given that another qur'anic verse condemns 'Ād for having followed “the command of every obstinate *jabbār*” (Q 11:59), it is highly doubtful that *jabbārīn* in Q al-Shu'arā' 26:130 denotes a special group of beings like “giants.” It is more likely that in these verses *jabbār* signifies an insolent or powerful person, as it usually does in Arabic and indeed elsewhere in the Qur'an (e.g., Q 28:19, 19:14, 40:35).

Other qur'anic texts show that 'Ād are *not* imagined as antediluvian. The clearest example is Q al-A'rāf 7:69, where Hūd urges his people to “remember when [God] made you successors *after* (*min ba'd*) the people of Noah.”³⁴ Elsewhere the Qur'an warns the Prophet's community that God “destroyed the former [people of] 'Ād, and He did not spare Thamūd, and [He destroyed] the people of Noah before that (*min qabl*)” (Q 53:50–52).³⁵ Formulaic references to “the people of Noah and 'Ād and Thamūd” have a similar chronological implication (Q 9:70, 22:42, 40:31). Thus, unlike the biblical *nephilīm*, it is fairly clear that the Qur'an assigns 'Ād and Thamūd to the time after Noah, not before him.

While qur'anic intratexts show that 'Ād are not imagined as antediluvian, documentary sources indicate their actual place of residence. Specifically, epigraphic

³⁰ *QB*, 264.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

³² *BDB*, 150. The adjective seems to have the same meaning when applied in Genesis 6:4 to the *nephilīm*, and the Septuagint's translation of it there as “giants” (*γίγαντες*) seems interpretive. Most modern translations thus render *gibbōrīm* as “mighty men” or “heroes” (e.g., ESV, NRSV, ISV). For a discussion and review of previous scholarship on this term, see Archie T. Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits: The Reception of Genesis 6. 1–4 in Early Jewish Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 83–89.

³³ Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1996 [1903]) 234.

³⁴ After recounting the destruction of 'Ād, this text continues with the story of Šāliḥ, who similarly describes his people (the Thamūd) as “successors after 'Ād” (Q 7:74).

³⁵ Cf. Q 51:41–46.

finds suggest that ʿĀd lived to the northwest of the Arabian Peninsula. A Himaic inscription found at the temple of Allāt in Wadi Rum (south of modern Jordan) commemorates the building of the temple (*bayt*) of Allāt, attributing it to “the people of ʿĀd” (*dhī āl ʿād*).³⁶ Furthermore, just as the Qurʾan identifies the residence of ʿĀd with Iram (Q 89:7), a Nabatean inscription found on a wall at the temple of Allāt specifies the place name as “Iram” (*ʿrm*).³⁷ This name appears in another Nabatean inscription that describes Allāt as “the goddess of Iram.”³⁸ The Qurʾan’s references to the punishment of ʿĀd, therefore, seem to capture the memory of a bygone people whose ruins were known to some members of the Prophet’s community (Q 29:38). Closer attention to the Qurʾan itself and consideration of epigraphic finds thus seems to provide a better guide than biblical literature for understanding ʿĀd and their qurʾanic image.

■ Syriac Turn

Scholars who undertake source-critical investigations of the Qurʾan sometimes identify a specific branch of the biblical tradition as the main source of the Qurʾan’s biblical content. In the past two decades, many studies have traced various qurʾanic ideas and narratives to Syriac Christian literature. This focus on Syriac Christianity has an old pedigree,³⁹ but it was dramatically resurrected at the turn of the millennium with the appearance of *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*. Published under the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg, this book claimed that the Qurʾan is composed in a mixed Arabic-Syriac language.⁴⁰ Although scholars have generally greeted this claim with skepticism and dismissal, its provocative nature played an important role in raising the profile of Syriac in the field of Qurʾanic Studies. Thus, many recent studies have argued that Syriac literature provides a background to various elements of the Qurʾan—from its terminology⁴¹ to its

³⁶ Fawzi Zayadine and Saba Farès-Drappeau, “Two North-Arabian Inscriptions from the Temple of Lāt at Wādī Ramm,” *ADAJ* 42 (1998) 255–58, at 256.

³⁷ Robert Hoyland, “Mount Nebo, Jabal Ramm, and the Status of Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Old Arabic in Late Roman Palestine and Arabia,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 40 (2010) 29–45, at 39.

³⁸ Zayadine and Farès-Drappeau, “Two North-Arabian Inscriptions,” 257, citing J. Savignac, “Notes de voyage. Le sanctuaire d’Allat à Iram,” *RB* 41 (1932) 581–97, at 591–92.

³⁹ See the insightful critical survey by Joseph Witztum, “The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011) 10–65.

⁴⁰ *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000); translated as *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: H. Schiler, 2007).

⁴¹ For example, Sidney Griffith, “Syriacisms in the ʿArabic Qurʾān’: Who Were ʿThose Who Said “Allāh Is Third of Three” according to *al-Māʿida* 73?,” in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Medieval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qurʾān; Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai* (ed. Meir M. Bar-Asher et al.; Jerusalem: The Ben-Zvi Institute for the History of Jewish Communities in the East, 2007) 83–110.

narratives,⁴² legal maxims,⁴³ anti-Jewish polemic,⁴⁴ and eschatology.⁴⁵ Reynolds himself has contributed to this Syriac turn,⁴⁶ and he places particular emphasis on the Qur'an's potential Syriac intertexts in *The Qur'an and the Bible*.⁴⁷

This renewed interest in Syriac literature is a welcome development that has produced valuable results. However, studies that identify Syriac Christianity as the main storehouse of Qur'anic intertexts sometimes exhibit the following methodological problem: their focus on Syriac literature is a point of departure rather than an end result. In other words, the studies in question focus on Syriac works from the beginning and declare this preselection valid as long as these works yield a sufficient number of parallels with the Qur'an.⁴⁸ Thus, these studies do *not* offer a broad exploration of Christian writings that reveals Syriac literature as particularly proximate to the Qur'an. Yet, at least as concerns themes and topics of especial import in Christianity, a putative genetic relationship between the Qur'an and Syriac literature remains unverified without systematic investigation of other corpora of Christian writings, in particular the sizeable corpus of Greek texts.⁴⁹

Of course, it is not unreasonable to think that the Christianity of the Qur'anic milieu had connections with Syriac churches. However, we should be wary of

⁴² Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an," 109–37; Witztum, *The Syriac Milieu of the Quran*, and Tommaso Tesei, "The Prophecy of Dū-l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83–102) and the Origins of the Qur'anic Corpus," in *Miscellanea Arabica 2013–14* (ed. Angelo Arioli; Rome: Arcane Editrice, 2014) 273–90.

⁴³ See, in particular, Zellentin, *The Qur'an's Legal Culture* (cited in n. 2), and idem, "Judeo-Christian Legal Culture and the Qur'an: The Case of Ritual Slaughter and the Consumption of Animal Blood," in *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam* (ed. Francisco del Río Sánchez; Turnhout: Brepols, 2018) 117–59.

⁴⁴ E.g., Gabriel Reynolds, "On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*Tahrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic," *JAOS* 130 (2010) 189–202.

⁴⁵ E.g., Nicolai Sinai, "The Eschatological Kerygma of the Early Qur'an," in *Apocalypticism and Eschatology in Late Antiquity: Encounters in the Abrahamic Religions, 6th–8th Centuries* (ed. Hagit Amirav, Emmanouela Grypeou, and Guy Stroumsa; Late Antique History and Religion 17; Leuven: Peeters, 2017) 219–66. See also Emran el-Badawi, *The Qur'an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (New York: Routledge, 2014) esp. 165–206.

⁴⁶ E.g. Gabriel S. Reynolds, "A Reflection on Two Qur'anic Words (*Iblīs* and *Jūdī*), with Attention to the Theories of A. Mingana," *JAOS* 124 (2004) 675–89.

⁴⁷ *QB*, 12 *et passim*.

⁴⁸ See Sinai's excellent study (cited in n. 45), which assumes the particular relevance of Syriac literature based on a number of parallel features highlighted by Tor Andrae between this literature and the Qur'an (ibid., 233). However, these features (such as concern for orphans and the poor or the importance of fearing God) are quite widespread and thus not exclusive to Syriac Christian literature. See also Witztum's discussion of potential para-biblical and post-biblical precedents to the Qur'anic story of the Ka'ba's foundation by Abraham and Ishmael ("The Syriac Milieu," 154–87), as well as Holger Zellentin's "The Synchronic and the Diachronic Qur'an," 113, which speaks of "the Scriptural as well as the rabbinic and Syriac Christian traditions" in describing the Qur'an's intertexts.

⁴⁹ For compelling applications of this methodology, see Reynolds's own analyses in *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*, which take systematic account of both Jewish and non-Syriac Christian sources (e.g., pp. 46–54 on the angelic prostration to Adam).

overstating the extent and ease of these connections. In particular, it is doubtful that native speakers of Arabic could absorb biblical lore simply by listening to the liturgical recitation of Syriac hymns and homilies.⁵⁰ A Late Aramaic dialect, Classical Syriac was spoken in the city of Edessa and its environs but gradually developed into a literary, high variety form of Aramaic. While many Aramaic-speaking Christians adopted Syriac as a literary and liturgical language, we cannot assume that their local dialect was mutually intelligible with Syriac.⁵¹ This caveat applies all the more so to speakers of various Old Arabic dialects. Therefore, connections between early Islam's Arabian milieu and the Syriac churches to their north would have necessitated bridging a linguistic gap—either through missionaries who knew or learned Arabic to proselytize among Arabian communities or through bilingual speakers of Arabic and Aramaic who joined or interacted with Syriac congregations.⁵² The same possibility was naturally available, even if on a smaller scale, to Christians of Greek churches, as well as to those in the Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopic traditions.

Even if we assume that Arabic speakers were exposed to Christianity primarily through the intermediary of Syriac churches, this does not justify a nearly exclusive focus on *extant* Syriac literature. What renders such a narrow focus problematic is the extensive contact between the Greek and Syriac traditions. Even though Syriac was increasingly the main vehicle of religious expression in the East Syrian and Syrian Orthodox churches, both traditions had strong links to the Greek tradition. In particular, Greek was still widely used in the Syrian Orthodox Church, whose elite were energetic translators of Greek writings in the sixth century.⁵³ Greek

⁵⁰ As suggested by a number of scholars (e.g., Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu," 261–64).

⁵¹ For a brief overview of this subject, see David G. K. Taylor, "Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia," in *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Text* (ed. J. N. Adams, Mark Janse, and Simon Swain; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 298–331, esp. 300–305.

⁵² In a recent article, Guillaume Dye discusses various Qur'anic terms, phrases, and syntactical features to argue that the Qur'an's author(s), and possibly also members of its audience, had Syriac competence ("Traces of Bilingualism/Multilingualism in Qur'anic Arabic," in *Arabic in Context: Celebrating 400 Years of Arabic at Leiden University* [ed. Ahmad al-Jallad; Leiden: Brill, 2017] 337–71). While the article is thought-provoking, some of its examples are unconvincing. For example, following Christoph Luxenberg, Dye asserts that understanding the term *kathīr* in Q 20:33–34 as "much" yields an "awkward" translation of these verses as "so that we may glorify You much and remember You much" (*ibid.*, 345). He thus proposes that *kathīr* in these verses means "constantly," a meaning that he believes this term acquired under the influence of Syriac *ku(t)ītārā* (*ibid.*, 345–46). However, the Qur'an elsewhere criticizes those who remember God only "a little" (*wa-yadhkurūna llāha qalīlan*, Q 4:142), using the term *qalīl* that is the clear antonym of *kathīr* (see, e.g., Q 2:249, 9:82). In light of this criticism, it seems perfectly logical for the Qur'an to present ample remembrance of God as a virtue.

⁵³ Fergus Millar, "The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?," *J ECS* 21 (2013) 43–92. As Millar points out, "Greek remained in this period, for the 'orthodox' as for the Chalcedonians, the established language of public expression, as used in theological treatises, in letters to bishops or groups of bishops from other areas, and in communications with the church of Constantinople and with the emperors" (*ibid.*, 71).

was also the dominant religious language among Aramaic-speaking Christians who were loyal to imperial orthodoxy (the so-called Melkites).⁵⁴ Considering the continued importance of Greek, it is quite possible that ideas and texts migrated from Greek sources into Syriac ones and thence to Arabic-speaking communities without surviving in *extant* Syriac writings. As such, systematic exploration of Greek writings is a sine qua non for capturing a more accurate and fuller picture of Christianity's reach among Arabic-speaking communities.

The second reason that intertextual studies of the Qur'an should continue to explore Greek texts systematically is that we cannot rule out direct exposure of Arabian communities to Greek Christianity. As the language of empire, Greek had much utility and prestige, making its mastery necessary, or at least desirable, for some speakers of Arabic.⁵⁵ There is of course much (and growing) evidence for the use of Greek not only in urban settings but also in the countryside and even the desert. The papyri found at Petra and Nessana demonstrate the use of Greek in various interpersonal and commercial contexts by the largely Arabic-speaking population of these provincial towns both before and after the rise of Islam.⁵⁶ Of the three Arabic inscriptions written in the Arabic script in sixth-century Syria, one (from Ḥarrān) appears next to a corresponding Greek inscription and another (from Zabad) is etched alongside a Greek-Aramaic bilingual inscription.⁵⁷ Rome's Jafnid allies, often mentioned as facilitating the transfer of Syriac literature into the qur'anic milieu on account of their support for the emerging Syrian Orthodox Church, supported the construction of religious buildings that are graced with Greek inscriptions.⁵⁸ The "Letter of the Archimandrites" shows that in monasteries of the

⁵⁴ See Sidney H. Griffith, "From Aramaic to Arabic: The Language of the Monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods," *DOP* 51 (1997) 11–31, esp. 11–24. In fact, all extant manuscripts written in Christian Palestinian Aramaic seem to be translations of Greek works, not original compositions (*ibid.*, 19).

⁵⁵ According to Leah Di Segni, "Greek was the dominant written language in late antique Palestine and Arabia, especially among the Christians, who by the sixth century were the majority of the population in the region" ("Greek Inscriptions in Transition from the Byzantine to the Early Islamic Period," in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* [ed. Hannah M. Cotton et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009] 352–73, at 356).

⁵⁶ A recent discussion of the languages spoken in the Nabatean realm can be found in Michael C. A. Macdonald, "Ancient Arabia and the Written Word," in *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language* (ed. Michael C. A. Macdonald; Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010) 5–27, esp. 19–20. On the linguistic diversity of Nessana and the importance of Greek, see Rachel Stroumsa, "Greek and Arabic in Nessana," in *Documents and the History of the Early Islamic World* (ed. A.T. Schubert and P.M. Sijpesteijn; Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts, 111; Leiden: Brill, 2015) 143–57.

⁵⁷ For a recent discussion of these inscriptions and references to earlier literature, see Greg Fisher et al., "Romans, Persians, Arabs, and Christianity in the Sixth Century," in *Arabs and Empires Before Islam* (ed. Greg Fisher; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 313–67.

⁵⁸ See Pierre-Louis Gatiér, "Les Jafnides dans l'épigraphie grecque au VI^e siècle," in *Les Jafnides: Des rois arabe au service de Byzance (VI^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne)* (ed. Denis Genequand and Christian Julien Robin; Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 2015) 193–222. As Millar notes, "[t]he important role in the evolution of the 'orthodox' church played by Arethas [al-Ḥārith] and his son Mundhir . . . will have been mediated through the use of Greek" ("Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church," 83).

countryside knowledge of Greek was not uncommon.⁵⁹ There is even evidence for a limited degree of Greek–Old Arabic bilingualism among nomads who inhabited the Syro-Arabian desert in late antiquity.⁶⁰ To the extent that Christians and others in the qur’anic milieu interacted with the Byzantine realm, therefore, they maintained the possibility of direct and indirect exposure to the dominant discourse of Greek Christianity.⁶¹

■ Conclusion

As *The Qur’ān and the Bible* vividly demonstrates, an intertextual approach to the Qur’an sheds light on many qur’anic passages and contributes to the reception history of biblical writings.⁶² It also enables us to appreciate the Qur’an’s originality as reflected in its departures and unique emphases. While intertextual analysis is of immense value, it also comes with certain limitations and potential hazards. In particular, biblical tradition does not furnish us with a concrete context for the Qur’an. To use an example cited at the beginning of this essay: It is illuminating to know the Mishnaic referent of Q al-Mā’idah 5:32, but that does not tell us much about the sociohistorical state of affairs that motivated the invocation of this referent. We can gather the sense of tension (particularly with a group of Jews) from the surrounding verses of *Sūrat al-Mā’idah*, but we are still far from grasping the causes and details of this tension.

As such, intertextual study of the Qur’an can hardly be characterized as representing a “contextual” reading of the scripture. More accurately, intertextual analysis amounts to a *non-contextual* or *macro-contextual* approach with inherent limitations. In particular, and almost by definition, intertextual analysis of the sort surveyed in *The Qur’ān and the Bible* is not suited to studying aspects of the qur’anic milieu that lack evident linkage to extant pre-Islamic Judeo-Christian writings. Therefore, utilizing these writings as our primary interpretive lens may inadvertently relegate those distinctive aspects to a position of insignificance—in

⁵⁹ Of the 137 subscriptions to this letter, 20 were written in Greek and the rest in Syriac (which in this context might have meant Christian Palestinian Aramaic). See Fergus Millar, “Christian Monasticism in Roman Arabia at the Birth of Mahomet,” *Semítica et Classica* 2 (2009) 97–115, at 107.

⁶⁰ See, most recently, Ahmad al-Jallad and Ali al-Manaser, “New Epigraphica from Jordan I: A Pre-Islamic Arabic Inscription in Greek Letters and a Greek Inscription from North-Eastern Jordan,” *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 1 (2015) 51–70; and idem, “New Epigraphica from Jordan II: Three Safaitic-Greek Partial Bilingual Inscriptions,” *Arabian Epigraphic Notes* 2 (2016) 55–66. According to al-Jallad and al-Manaser, “the rarity of Greek epigraphy in the desert would not necessarily reflect an absence of knowledge of the language or script, but rather the fact that Greek did [not] have a position in the rock art tradition of the nomads” (ibid., 61).

⁶¹ For a similar argument about the importance of Greek Christianity, see now also Juan Cole, “Paradosis and Monotheism: A Late Antique Approach to the Meaning of *Islām* in the Quran,” *BSOAS* 82 (2019) 405–25, esp. 410–12. I thank Professor Cole for sharing his article with me.

⁶² By “intertextual approach” here I mean particularly the attempt to find biblical or biblically inspired precedents for various qur’anic statements. Naturally, other corpora of pre-Islamic texts can also serve as precedents in a similar capacity.

practice if not in theory as well. Yet, one's approach to these aspects has bearing on one's overall impression of the Qur'an's first hearers, specifically as to whether their religious world was barely, partially, or thoroughly biblicalized. This impression, in turn, informs the extent and depth to which one tends to search for and find biblical texts lurking behind qur'anic concepts and expressions. While there is no escaping this iterative interpretive cycle, it seems prudent to couple intertextual study with active exploration of the qur'anic community's distinctive ideas and practices.

Finally, recent scholarship has shown considerable interest in Syriac literature as the main conduit for the movement of biblical traditions into the qur'anic milieu. While this line of research has been fruitful, some notes of caution about mining Syriac writings are in order. Specifically, we still possess little by way of concrete evidence for the precise extent and means of contact between Syriac churches and Arabian communities. Therefore, at this stage we cannot assume that Syriac writings *must* preserve the closest versions of Christian ideas and stories of concern to the Qur'an; this proximity can be demonstrated only on a case-by-case basis, through broad examination of pre-Islamic Christian texts. Hence, it may be best to remain in systematic conversation with other corpora of Christian writings, especially the Greek corpus, which probably exerted both direct and indirect influence on the qur'anic milieu.

Leaving these general reflections aside, it is important to appreciate the value and significance of *The Qur'an and the Bible*. Here, Reynolds sets forth, in exemplary exposition, results harvested from hundreds of scholarly investigations and bearing on a wide range of primary sources. Although many of these investigations were conducted before the 1950s, a significant portion belong to the past few decades. This fact signals the renewed vitality of Qur'anic Studies. Scholars of the Qur'an often lament the slow progress of their field, but *The Qur'an and the Bible* shows that the field has turned a major corner. There is cause to reassess gloomy characterizations and celebrate recent achievements.