

Conclusions

The Qur'an was revealed in three places: Mecca, Medina, and Syria.

—AL-SUYŪṬĪ, *AL-ITQĀN FI 'ULUM AL-QUR'AN* 1

To do justice to the literary character of the Qur'an, we need to pursue its development as both a monotheist proclamation, an oral message, a *Verkündigung*, voiced by a messenger, and at the same time as a successively growing text reflecting a community's construction of identity.

—ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH¹

Al-Suyūṭī is admittedly a rather late author, who wrote in only the fifteenth century, and yet, based on what we have seen in this book, we must regard this tradition, which he brings on the authority of al-Ṭabarānī, as *ṣaḥīḥ*. Although the Qur'an seemingly has deep roots in the preaching of Muhammad to his earliest followers in Mecca and Medina, the text that we have today was composed no less, it would seem, in Syria—that is, in al-Shām or Syro-Palestine—as well as in Mesopotamia. Numerous reasons and a vast array of evidence lead us unmistakably to this conclusion. The bewildering confusion and complexity of the early Islamic memory of the Qur'an's formation, as we saw in the first two chapters, only reaches some level of clarity once we recognize 'Abd al-Malik as the primary agent responsible for producing and enforcing the canonical *textus receptus* of the Qur'an. Under his supervision, a team of scholars wove together and honed the various sacred traditions that had entered circulation among Muhammad's followers during the seventh century, creating a new imperial Qur'an that was imposed across the caliphate, displacing its antecedents in the process, often by force. The evidence of the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts and the efforts to date them using radiocarbon analysis also support this conclusion, at least when the data are interpreted carefully and with the degree of relative imprecision that they

demand. Likewise, the social and economic conditions of late ancient Mecca and Yathrib seem too impoverished to have singularly given rise to a compendium of religious lore as complex and sophisticated as the Qur'an.

The linguistic evidence relevant to the Qur'an's formation identifies its traditions as initially forming and circulating in a fundamentally oral and nonliterate context for decades, before being written down in Umayyad Syro-Palestine, as the particular dialect in which the Qur'an is written seems to indicate. Major advances in the scientific study of memory and oral transmission over the past century, as well as important research on collective memory, alert us to the fact that Muhammad's followers would have constantly revised and recomposed any teachings that they had received from him—inadvertently and unconsciously—to meet their current social and cultural circumstances. No less would they have readily adopted and adapted new traditions that they encountered from the rich Abrahamic religious lore of their new Jewish and Christian neighbors. Even after the gradual move to writing began, the Qur'anic text and traditions would have continued to be adjusted to meet the needs of the community along the way to final canonization. And as we have seen in the preceding chapter, much of the Qur'an is incompatible with a provenance in the central Hijaz, including almost all the Qur'an's Christian material, given the apparent lack of any significant Christian presence in the region.

The Qur'an, therefore, is not only a product of Muhammad's preaching in Mecca and Medina; it is also a product of Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia, where his early followers remembered his words and amplified them according to the new traditions and changing circumstances that they constantly encountered during their early decades. The quotation from Angelika Neuwirth above is thus an entirely apt summary of how we must approach the Qur'an as a historical document: it began as an oral tradition inspired by Muhammad's teachings that was then largely shaped by his early followers during its transmission in order to fit the changing contours of their communal and religious identity as they settled in alongside the other more developed monotheists of the Fertile Crescent. As Neuwirth elsewhere observes, the Qur'an as we now have it is the product of "a continuous communal rethinking," which "is evident from the textual phenomenon of the later additions made to many of the earlier sūras in order to update them; that is, to align them with successively acquired new theological insights of the community": it is "primarily an oral scripture, the charter of a prophetic communication open to continuous communal rethinking."² Of course, in Neuwirth's view, any such changes to the text or developments in the community's construction of its identity must be strictly confined to the lifetime of Muhammad and the city limits of Mecca and Medina. For whatever reason, she and many others remain shackled to the traditional Islamic account of the Qur'an's origins on these points. Therefore, according to Neuwirth, any legitimate understanding of the Qur'an as a historical document must approach it as "the *transcript* of a prophetic communication"

that cannot in any way be “dissociated from the ministry of Muḥammad and isolated from his community.”³ If only scholars would dare to let go of this artificial tether, which of course remains essential for Muslim views of the Qur’an as revealed scripture, it would enable understanding and investigating the Qur’an fully within the world of Near Eastern late antiquity that gave it birth.

Such views of the Qur’an, it would seem, are deeply linked to certain apologetic efforts—not so much for Islam but for the Qur’an itself. I mean this as no insult but as a simple observation of the persistent stance that one finds in much scholarship that is determined to defend the Qur’an against any diminution or detraction. There is concern not only to demonstrate that the Qur’an is a work with a high degree of literary subtlety and sophistication but also to advocate it as a theologically brilliant and erudite work of sui generis scripture that demands equal consideration alongside the Bible in both Western culture and religious tradition. Indeed, some scholars have even advocated the Qur’an’s introduction to contemporary Jewish and Christian theological debates, which they view as essential for “reclaiming the Qur’an’s universal significance, to remind of its message as *rah̄matan li’l-ālamīn*, as addressed ultimately to all mankind,” and “to reclaim the Qur’an as bearing intellectual and aesthetic significance in our present day culture across the confessional boundaries.”⁴ In many respects one must note that this cultural and theological elevation of the Qur’an is frequently enlisted in the service of what scholars of religious studies identify as “protectionist” discourse, which in this case aims to shield the Qur’an from the rigors of historical-critical analysis.⁵ Indeed, such scholars will openly question whether it is ever at all appropriate to approach the Qur’an using the perspectives of historical criticism, asking whether we are “entitled to focus on these texts as such—in isolation from their recipients, and moreover, in isolation from present day concerns.”⁶

Likewise, many scholars consider it unacceptable to analyze the material that the Qur’an appropriates from other religious traditions in order to better understand its position within the history of late ancient religious culture. Focus on these antecedents of the Qur’an bears the taint, so it is maintained, “of aiming to demonstrate that the Qur’an is nothing but a rehash of earlier traditions in order to discredit the Islamic faith and assert Western cultural superiority.”⁷ Such interest in the Qur’an’s dependence on earlier religious culture is, so these scholars would profess, inevitably designed to reinforce the Qur’an’s subordination to the Bible, in relation to which it is considered merely a poor epigone.⁸ Holger Zeltin, for instance, identifies any notion of cultural influence as a “problematic paradigm” and avers that we must “conceive of this shared world mostly, if not entirely, within the framework of a shared oral culture and reject any notion of ‘textual influence’ unless strong evidence suggests a more intimate textual relationship, which is rare.”⁹ Michael Pregill, too, has recently offered an extended critique of what he names “the influence paradigm,” directed primarily at the work of Abraham Geiger and its influence, suggesting in the process that the

search for antecedent traditions to the Qur'an is not "a self-evidently worthwhile scholarly enterprise."¹⁰

This critique is certainly a valid one, but only to a point, and unfortunately it often seems deployed to proscribe a full historical-critical investigation of the Qur'an's origins. Indeed, it would seem that much of Qur'anic studies is currently in the midst of an excessive overcorrection, a reaction against an approach that was largely characteristic of nineteenth-century scholarship, rather than twenty-first. I more than suspect that this overcorrection will itself soon be corrected, since it has moved so far in the opposite direction as to hinder study of the Qur'an in its full historical context. The influence, and I think we may rightly use this term, of antecedent religious traditions on the Qur'an is historically significant, telling us not only a great deal about the context in which the Qur'an itself must have developed—one with a lot of Christians, for instance—but also about the broader, general history of religion in the late ancient Near East. It is unquestionably important to investigate how the Qur'an makes use of the traditions that it adopts from Judaism and Christianity and transforms them into something distinctively new. Yet at the same time, we may not simply push aside the investigation of these influences—in their own right and for their own purpose. We cannot leave them to languish on the margins of Qur'anic studies, as if their pursuit were some sort of questionable scholarly endeavor.

There is no denying that it would be an intellectual failure only "to regard the Qur'an merely as a passive beneficiary of Late Antique culture; rather the need is to focus the Qur'an as a vital and creative player in the Late Antique debates." Although we certainly would not go so far as to elevate the Qur'an as "the climax" of these late ancient debates,¹¹ we must of course take every opportunity to examine such points of contact in order to appreciate the creative ways that the Qur'an transforms these earlier traditions into new theological expressions, in those cases where it does, which will not necessarily be always.¹² Moreover, along these same lines we must resist any notion that merely discovering the cultural roots of the Qur'an, or any other religious phenomenon for that matter, should somehow define and explain it. I have made this same point, for instance, in my previous studies of the emergence of Marian piety in late antiquity. All too often one finds in the historiography of early Christianity judgments that various Christian practices, and among them especially devotion to the Virgin Mary, are simply "pagan" survivals that disrupt the purity of the otherwise biblical foundation of the Christian faith.¹³ Similarities between Christian devotion to Mary and the worship of various goddesses from the ancient Mediterranean world are frequently adduced as if merely naming these parallels were all that needed to be said and somehow they could account for and explain Christian devotion to Mary. Nevertheless, while we certainly must not allow these antecedents to Marian piety to control the interpretation of this centerpiece of Christian devotion, we also cannot simply disregard their obvious influence. These parallels between Marian devotion

and ancient Mediterranean goddess traditions are invaluable data for investigating the history of religions, and therefore they should not be marginalized or ignored. Rather, they must be given their proper place in seeking to understand how early Christianity emerged in relation to its immediate context, even if these parallels are not given the final say in how we understand devotion to the Virgin as a Christian practice.¹⁴

The same holds true in the case of the Qur'an. Although we should not allow the Qur'an's appropriations from its broader religious milieu to exert complete control over how we approach and interpret this text, we must nonetheless invite them to inform our historical understanding of the Qur'an in its formative context and also allow them to illuminate just what the nature of that context was. While we certainly do not wish to be crudely reductive of the Qur'an by focusing solely on its derivatives from other late ancient religious traditions, Patricia Crone rightly insists that it is absolutely essential

to resume the study of the relationship between the Qur'an and earlier religious books so as to pinpoint the religious milieu in which the book took shape. Once a flourishing branch of study, this approach was discarded in the sixties as diffusionist, lacking in explanatory potential, and offensive for its alleged derogation of the "originality" of Islam. Scholars studying the sources of Shakespeare's plays would be astonished to learn that they are engaged in the pernicious task of detracting from Shakespeare's originality, and there is in any case something peculiar about the implicit view of history as a competition for prizes for originality, with modern scholars in the role of adjudicators. (Who writes about the originality of Jesus or the Buddha?) The study of the relationship between texts certainly will not explain why Islam arose, but it might tell us something about where and how it did so, which would put significant constraints on explanations offered on the basis of other evidence. It would be a major step forward.¹⁵

Therefore we reject any mandates insisting that scholars must somehow make a choice between either of the two approaches, so that "they thus have to decide: are they going to explore the Qur'an as a new identity document of a historical community or are they to explore the Qur'an as a material source for the early Arabic reception of Christian tradition?"¹⁶ I hope most readers will instantly recognize the utter fallacy of this alleged either/or. There is no reason, as I see it, why we cannot have both/and, which seems to be the preferred option. Interest in understanding how the Qur'an transforms its antecedent traditions does not mean that we must correspondingly abandon the study of the history of religions. It is true that for scholars of early Islam, "the Qur'an as a new identity document of a historical community" may be of primary concern, while for the historian of late ancient religion, the text's connections with its broader religious context will likely hold the greatest interest. But there is no reason why we cannot simultaneously concern ourselves with both. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, for what it is worth, have been routinely scoured for their connections with antecedent

religious cultures, which is one of the most important aspects of their critical study. Nevertheless, this approach in no way prevents us from simultaneously being able to investigate how these writings reveal the formative identity of particular religious groups: indeed, such an approach seems essential for understanding the text itself and its emergence as the identity document of a new religious community, neither of which developed in a cultural vacuum.

Scholarly concerns to protect the theological originality and literary brilliance of the Qur'anic text by segregating it as much as possible from these antecedent traditions seem largely directed toward shielding the Qur'an from the theologically challenging perspectives of *Religionswissenschaft*. At the same time, there appears to be an effort among scholars adopting these positions to identify an alternative approach to the Qur'an that will ultimately be acceptable to more liberal and Westernized members of the Muslim world. For a particularly telling example, one may look to an interview that Neuwirth did several years ago for the series on *Jesus and Islam* produced by the European television network ARTE in 2015. In the final episode, on "the Book of Islam," Neuwirth is asked to comment, as were others in the documentary, on who wrote the Qur'an, to which she replies by naming God—in addition to Muhammad and the community—as the Qur'an's primary and ultimate author. For good measure, she explicitly rejects the suitability of any sort of secular approach grounded in the values of the Enlightenment for studying the Qur'an. Unless we accept the Qur'an's divine authorship, she maintains, then the Qur'an itself is in fact trivial (*eigentlich belanglos*), as simply the product a particular group engaged in theological disputes under the leadership of a prophet. Without recognition of God as the Qur'an's author, she avows, we cannot understand the Qur'an; nor can we explain how this religious group could have such a significant impact on world history.¹⁷ One often finds a version of the latter argument voiced, *mutatis mutandis*, by conservative Christian apologists in defense of the New Testament and the historicity of Jesus's bodily resurrection. Yet in both cases, such apologetics and supernaturalism are entirely inappropriate in the academic study of religion.

There is, to be sure, nothing inherently wrong with seeking an irenic approach to studying the Qur'an in a manner that can be done alongside believing Muslims. Likewise, there is nothing the least bit inappropriate in taking a theological or even apologetic approach to the Qur'an and early Islamic tradition, so long as one is up front in acknowledging the differences between this sort of approach and the very different approaches advanced in historical criticism and religious studies. Neuwirth's conceptualization of the Qur'an is in this case openly theological: it seeks to embrace Islamic views of the text's inspiration while at the same time directly rejecting many of the critical approaches of religious studies. Such a stance, when judged on its own terms, can certainly be a legitimate undertaking and can in fact be scholarly, but one must not in any way confuse such confessionally based approaches with *Religionswissenschaft* or historical-critical study. And

so once again we must invoke Bruce Lincoln, with his thirteenth and final thesis on method in the study of religion: “When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one’s interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between ‘truths,’ ‘truth-claims,’ and ‘regimes of truth,’ one has ceased to function as historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur, retailer of import goods). None, however, should be confused with scholarship.”¹⁸

Herein lies a fundamental divide between many more traditional approaches to the Qur’an and the one advanced in the pages of this book. It has been our goal to articulate a model for understanding the Qur’an’s formative history that does not rest on fidelity to the Islamic tradition or require divine agency but is grounded, as Lincoln directs, “in the temporal and contingent.” It views the Qur’an as indeed the product of a particular religious group that engaged in certain theological disputes under the leadership of a prophet and eventually carved out a distinctive identity as a new religious community. The religious faith of this community was almost immediately fused to the political power of a vast worldly empire, and this synergy brought great success to both on the world-historical stage. Yet the truth of the matter is, as Crone observes, “that we do not know how, where or when the Qur’ān originated and that all the evidence we have to go by is the Qur’ān itself,” and so “we need to pursue the Qur’ānic evidence wherever it takes us, without trying to fit it into the historical mould created for it by the Islamic tradition.”¹⁹ From this vantage, the Qur’an’s history is certainly messier and more complicated than the Islamic tradition would suggest. Nevertheless, this perspective better enables us to understand the Qur’an’s development as a new sacred scripture for a new religious faith in a process that was far more deeply integrated with the worlds of Jewish and Christian late antiquity than the traditional Islamic narrative of the Qur’an’s origins would allow. Therefore, we strongly agree with the recent trend toward understanding the Qur’an as a product of the religious cultures of Near Eastern late antiquity. The only matters of disagreement concern just when and where this encounter with the world of late antiquity would have taken place.