

Traditional and Western scholarship on the Qur'an: towards a synthesis?

How is the meaning of the Qur'an understood? Over its history, different people have interpreted the Qur'an in different ways. In this extended article, Professor Jon Hoover, Dr Shuruq Naguib and Dr Holger Zellentin – lead educators on the University of Nottingham's course 'The Qur'an between Judaism and Christianity' – look at some of the main developments.

Summary

- 1 An introduction to traditional Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an, including interpreters and methods of interpretation that are important in these studies but not generally seen in Western academic study of religious texts.
- 2 Exploring Western scholarship of the Qur'an: how much of it came about at the time that Western biblical scholarship was developing, and was it from the same people with the same understanding of the world?
- 3 Could or should these different approaches to interpreting the Qur'an be synthesised at all? An outline of current movements to do so.

1 Traditional Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an

Ibn 'Abbas (d. ca 688), a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, is said to be the first interpreter of the Qur'an. Then Al-Tabari (d. 923) collected the interpretative traditions of Ibn 'Abbas and many other early figures on each verse of the Qur'an into a large commentary and indicated whose view he preferred. Early Muslim interpreters also began to express strong interest in tracing the origins of Arabic terms, using Arab poetry to establish the meanings of words, and analysing grammatical structures. This trend culminated in the commentary of al-Tha'labi (d. 1035), a veritable encyclopaedia of Qur'an interpretation that both Shi'is and Sunnis drew upon to defend their respective doctrinal identities.

Another major figure in the tradition of linguistic interpretation was al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), who inflected his commentary with Mu'tazili theology. Mu'tazilis upheld human free will, for example, while the rival Ash'aris affirmed predestination. The Ash'ari theologian al-Baydawi (d. 1286 or later) produced a popular commentary by revising al-Zamakhshari to remove the Mu'tazili theology. A little earlier, the Ash'ari theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) wrote a massive commentary that examined linguistic, traditional, and especially theological questions. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) did not produce a Qur'an commentary, but he wrote a treatise on Qur'an interpretation that prioritised revealed sources over independent linguistic analysis. The Qur'an should first be interpreted through the Qur'an itself, then through the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, and then through reports from the early Muslims closest to the Qur'an and the Prophet. According to Ibn Taymiyya, the encyclopaedic and linguistic enterprises of the likes of al-Tha'labi and al-Razi are to be avoided.

Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) copied Ibn Taymiyya's treatise into the beginning of his commentary, and he also sought to remove allegedly Jewish and Christian material, the so-called *isra'iliyyat*, from the commentary tradition. Ibn Kathir's commentary and its purifying impulse have been popular among modernising and reform-minded Muslims. Moving in a different direction, Shi'i commentators like al-Kashi (d. 1505), and Sufis like Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), probed the depths of the Qur'an for allegorical meanings. Modern Qur'an commentators draw readily from the mediaeval sources while also speaking to contemporary concerns. Writing in Urdu, Amin al-Islahi (d. 1997) sought to draw out the thematic and structural unity of the Qur'an against the more atomistic approach of much of the interpretative tradition. Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), the leading ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, produced a lucid commentary on the whole Qur'an, reflecting his revolutionary outlook. The highly regarded commentary of the Shi'i al-Tabataba'i (d. 1981) reveals his strong philosophical bent.

2 Western scholarship on the Qur'an

Western scholarship of the Qur'an emerged from the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The resulting secularist tendencies allowed Western scholars to begin seeing the Qur'an less as the product of a heresy, as which Islam had long been perceived, and more as a cultural object of study. Early Western scholarship on the Qur'an, however, was beset by three problematic issues. First, it tended to react to Muslim claims of the Qur'an's divine origins by perceiving it squarely as an authored and written work, thereby sidelining both the Qur'an's self-understanding as prophetic and its ensuing oral and dialogical nature. Second, early Western scholars tended to emphasise the Qur'an's 'dependence' or 'borrowing' from Judaism and/or Christianity, often mistaking the Islamic Scripture's own unique voice as mere aberration from traditions perceived as normative. Third and last, these scholars remained within the traditional Islamic historical narrative in somewhat uncritical ways, and to a degree continued to rely on the Qur'an's so-called 'occasions of revelation'. These 'occasions', which were preserved by the Islamic tradition, link the Qur'an closely to the biography of Muhammad and to the personal, political and religious developments that shaped the nascent Muslim community. Western scholars thus questioned the religious truth claims of the Islamic tradition, but continued to rely on the historical narrative framework it offered even though parts of that framework projected much later religious and political concerns onto the Qur'an.

Regardless of these issues, Western scholars, just like their Islamic predecessors, have produced a large body of evidence of enduring value. Abraham Geiger (1810–74), for example, has demonstrated the Qur'an's affinity to the Jewish rabbinic tradition, which he presented in terms of Muhammad's 'borrowing' from Judaism. Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) established a variety of literary and lexical markers, allowing scholars to show the 'chronology' (i.e. the sequence) of the Qur'an's *surahs* based on objective criteria. (The preserved text of the Qur'an, by contrast, largely orders the *surahs* by length.) Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) laid the groundworks of the Western study of the Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an, and finally Heinrich Speyer (1897–1935) collected many of the instances in which the Qur'an echoes Biblical and post-biblical Jewish and Christian motifs.

In the 1970s, a new generation of historians sought to dislodge some of the most fundamental facts of the traditional Islamic historical narrative. These so-called 'revisionists' – an unfortunate term, since the essence of historical scholarship is precisely the revisiting and revising of conventional assumptions – radically questioned all aspects of the Islamic tradition. They even sought to deny the composition of the Qur'an in the seventh century CE in Arabia, instead suggesting it should be read as a creation of early Abassid exegetes in eighth-century Mesopotamia. Despite the methodological shortcoming of the revisionists – chiefly John Wansbrough (1928–2002) and Patricia Crone (1945–2015) – it is clear that Western scholarship on the Qur'an has gained much from their insights – and even more from the process of refuting their theses. (This also holds true regarding the output of the less sophisticated contemporary followers of Wansbrough and Crone, such as the pseudonymous Christoph Luxenberg). In wrestling with revisionism, contemporary scholars have managed to establish a much better understanding of the many ways in which the Qur'an engages Judaism and Christianity. At the same time, many recent studies see the pendulum swinging back, and again move closer towards many aspects of the traditional Islamic historical narrative about the Qur'an and about the nascent Islamic community. The most recent studies in the Western academy are increasingly availing themselves of many of the individual insights of the traditional Islamic scholarship mentioned above.

3 Towards a fusion?

Early contact between Western and Muslim traditions of scholarship on the Qur'an goes back to the late-nineteenth century. This was a period of major cultural and intellectual transformations brought about by Muslim encounters with modernity. Debates surrounding the compatibility of the Qur'an with an Enlightenment concept of reason dominated Islamic circles of reform. This spurred multiple responses by

leading Muslim reformers like Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), who delivered a long series of lectures aimed at making sense of the Qur'an in a modern context. These lectures were later published as a work of Qur'an commentary entitled *Tafsir Al-Manar*. In his interpretation, Abduh enthusiastically embraced the spirit of Enlightenment rationalism, provoking the religious establishment by his efforts to disentangle the Qur'an from the medieval scholastic tradition (explored in section 1 above). Some of his other contemporaries pursued a different type of reinterpretation; they began to read the Qur'an in light of modern science in order to demonstrate the absence of contradiction between the two. An important scholar exemplifying this trend is Shaykh Tantawi-Jawhari (1862–1940) who extensively cited scientific knowledge, including Einstein's explanation of space, in his multi-volume, verse-by-verse interpretation of the Qur'an.

An important impetus for reform was born of the contact with European oriental studies. This was a far more fruitful encounter than is often admitted in Muslim accounts about this period. Early evidence can be found in Abduh's *Tafsir Al-Manar*, which was partly a response to Western scholarly (mis)conceptions of the Qur'an. Another instance is the participation of a highly prominent delegation of Egyptian scholars in the sixth annual conference of the International Association of the History of Religions (IAHR), held in Brussels in 1935. One of the delegates, Shaykh Amin al-Khuli (d. 1966), a disciple of Abduh, presented a paper critically engaging European orientalist on the question of the Qur'an's 'borrowing' from Judaism and Christianity. He argued that a more productive approach is one that moves beyond a linear historical account of what was 'borrowed', and towards a richer one about continuities and mutual influence, thus prefiguring a late twentieth-century development in Western Qur'an scholarship.

An important avenue of contact was the translation into Arabic of key European studies of the Qur'an during the 1930s and 1940s; for example: (1) the work of the aforementioned Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) on the 'chronology' of the Qur'an; (2) Ignaz Goldziher's (1850–1921) history of the Muslim interpretative tradition; and (3) the *Encyclopaedia of Islam I*, published in Leiden between 1913 and 1936. All these works became associated with important trends in early modern Qur'an scholarship in the Muslim world. Their impact is evident in Amin al-Khuli's academic programme for the renewal of Qur'anic and Islamic studies. Al-Khuli cites, for example, the work of Goldziher as bringing to the fore an awareness of the ideological nature of past interpretations of the Qur'an. The greatest influence on al-Khuli and many of his disciples, however, came from Nöldeke: al-Khuli embraced Nöldeke's literary methods in historicising the Qur'anic text. He approached the Qur'an as literature, advancing the view that its meaning was shaped by the historical and cultural context in which it was revealed. He also advocated a thematic method for understanding key Qur'anic concepts.

Al-Khuli's wife and disciple, Aisha Abd al-Rahman (pen name Bint al-Shati, d. 1998), applied this method in her interpretation of the concept of the 'human being' (*insan*). She concluded that the Qur'an's linguistic meaning fully supports the view that men and women are equal. This type of a thematically focused linguistic analysis of the Qur'an gained wide acceptance in the second half of the twentieth century, and by the turn of the twenty-first century it gave rise to a feminist school of Qur'an interpretation.

The idea of the Qur'an's historicity, first introduced in Western scholarship, was adapted and modified by several generations of Muslim scholars. Some of these adaptations were well received, such as the work of Bint al-Shati' and Fazlur Rahman (d.1988), the Pakistani-born Muslim academic and intellectual. Those who more boldly embraced the radical implications of a historical Qur'an, like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010), were targeted by more conservative scholars. Abu Zayd argued that the Qur'an was encoded with the cultural attitudes of the seventh-century Arabs to whom it was revealed. Therefore, any reinterpretation of the Qur'an required a rigorous study of the Qur'an's early context in order to transcend its historical horizon.

To conclude, we can see that Western scholarship, relying on methods such as carbon dating and philology, have moved much closer towards the Islamic historical narrative, and is beginning to incorporate many of the insights of classical and contemporary Muslim scholarship. Contemporary Islamic scholarship, in turn, continues to draw on classical material as outlined above. It cannot, however, be seen as fully separated from the Western academy, since it was itself transformed both by adopting some of the Western methods and by their emphatic rejection – neither ‘Western’ nor ‘traditional’ scholarship can thus be understood as separate from each other. One of the most contentious issues remains the question as to how far the Qur’an should be understood, in its own words, as a ‘confirmation of what was before it’, namely in close dialogue with the Jewish and the Christian traditions. Yet opinions on this question differ as widely in the Western academy as they do in the Islamic world. A fusion of the approaches seems neither necessary nor likely. There are, however, clear tendencies indicating that both sides have learned much from each other, and could both benefit tremendously from paying even closer attention to each other’s insights.

Professor Jon Hoover, Dr Shuruq Naguib and Dr Holger Zellentin