

Essential text: how is the meaning of the Qur'an understood?

Jon Hoover, Shuruq Naguib and 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. Teachers and older students can find the original, extended article online, while this article presents an abridged version.

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.

Traditional Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an

Ibn 'Abbas lived in the seventh century CE and was a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. He is said to be the first interpreter of the Qur'an. Al-Tabari (d. 923) wrote the most famous Qur'an commentary in early Islam (a 'commentary' explains a text). Al-Tabari collected the sayings of Ibn 'Abbas and many other early Muslims about the different verses of the Qur'an. For many of the verses, he pointed out whose view he thought was best.

Early Muslim interpreters also began to show interest in the language used in the Qur'an. They used Arab poetry to work out the meanings of words, traced the origins of Arabic terms and analysed grammatical structures. This interest in language led to a commentary on the Qur'an by al-Thal'abi (d. 1035). Al-Thal'abi's commentary was an encyclopaedia of Qur'an interpretation and it was used by both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims.

Another major figure who explored linguistic interpretations of the Qur'an was al-Zamakhshari. He also wrote a commentary. His commentary clearly showed Mu'tazili thinking. An example of this is that Mu'tazilis thought that humans had free will. Ash'aris were rivals to Mu'tazilis and believed in predestination rather than human free will. Al-Baydawi was an Ash'ari who produced a popular commentary by changing al-Zamakhshari's work, removing all the Mu'tazili ideas.

Another scholar, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) did not produce a Qur'an commentary but instead wrote about how to interpret the Qur'an. His writing shows revealed sources to be more important than independent linguistic examination (i.e. examination of the language structures and meanings). Ibn Taymiyya said the Qur'an should be interpreted through:

- 1 the Qur'an itself
- 2 then through the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad
- 3 next through reports from the early Muslims closest to the Qur'an and Prophet

According to Ibn Taymiyya, using linguistic methods such as al-Thal'abi's approach to interpret the Qur'an should be avoided.

The fourteenth century scholar Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) copied Ibn Taymiyya's ideas into the beginning of his commentary. He also tried to remove what he saw as Jewish and Christian material from the commentary tradition. His work has been popular among Muslims who seek to modernise and reform Islam through 'purifying' it. Moving in a different direction, Shi'i commentators like al-Kashi (d. 1505) and Sufis like Ibn al-'Arabi (d.1240) looked for allegorical meanings in the Qur'an.

Modern Qur'an commentators use the mediaeval commentaries while also thinking about modern-day issues. In the twentieth century, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood, produced a commentary on the whole Qur'an reflecting his revolutionary outlook. The highly regarded commentary of the Shi'i al-Tabataba'i (d. 1981) shows his strong philosophical thinking.

Study of the Qur'an in the West

In the middle ages, Christian and Jewish scholars saw the Qur'an as heretical, as it differed from Christian and Jewish teachings. During the Enlightenment, Western scholars slowly began to study the Qur'an as a cultural object more than a religious one. However, there were three main issues with their methods of study:

- 1 In the West, scholars were preoccupied with an attempt to prove the Qur'an to be a text authored and written by a human, seeking to dismiss Muslim claims of its divine origins. Regardless of the theological questions involved, this meant that Western scholars did not consider the fact that the Qur'an is written in a way that assumes it to be a prophetic text. They did not understand its oral and dialogical nature, and often misunderstood its message.
- 2 Scholars in the West emphasised how the Qur'an 'borrowed' ideas from Judaism and/or Christianity. They took the Islamic Scripture's own unique voice as if it was just a mistaken version of accepted Christian and Jewish traditions.
- 3 The traditional Islamic view of the Qur'an linked the 'occasions of revelation' very closely to the life of Muhammad and the personal, political and religious developments of the early Muslim community. Western scholars questioned the Qur'an's divine origin, but for a long time remained uncritical about this historical framework – only to dismiss it, eventually, in its entirety.

Despite these issues, Western scholars, just like Islamic ones, produced lots of very valuable work. For example, Abraham Geiger (1810–74) showed similarities between the styles of the Qur'an and the Jewish rabbinic tradition. Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) worked out how to show the sequence or 'chronology' of the different *surahs* of the Qur'an, as the preserved text mostly arranges *surahs* by length. Heinrich Speyer (1897–1935) collected many of the examples where the Qur'an echoes motifs found in the Bible and in Jewish and Christian thought.

In the 1970s, some Western historians questioned basic facts about the history of Islam contained in the Islamic tradition. These historians were called 'revisionists', chiefly John Wansbrough and Patricia Crone. They even tried to prove that the Qur'an was not composed in Arabia in the seventh century CE. Although the revisionists were not correct about many things, their radical questioning of the received narrative has helped the study of the Qur'an. Western scholars have actually learnt a great deal by proving the revisionists' ideas to be incorrect, and nowadays have a better understanding of the many ways in which the Qur'an links with Judaism and Christianity.

Many modern Western ideas are now moving closer towards many ideas about the history of the Qur'an and early Islamic community that closely resemble those of the Islamic tradition, and the use of ideas from traditional Islamic scholarship in Western scholarship on the Qur'an is now very common. Despite this

overlap, hermeneutical and theological differences make it difficult for Western scholars and those working within a traditional Islam scholarship to work together. ('Hermeneutical' describes the framework of understanding.)

Towards a fusion?

Western and Muslim scholars studying the Qur'an started to have contact with each other in the late 1800s. Some Muslims explored ways in which the Qur'an could be reinterpreted using modern reason. Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) gave lectures about making sense of the Qur'an in this way, but some conservative Muslim scholars were not impressed by how he tried to separate the Qur'an from traditional interpretations. Some people, such as Shaykh Tantawi-Jawhari (1862–1940), thought about the Qur'an and modern science; they tried to show there was no disagreement between the two.

One way in which Western and Muslim ways of studying the Qur'an had contact was when important Western studies were translated into Arabic in the 1930s and 1940s. These translations stimulated critical responses to Western scholars who emphasised how the Qur'an 'borrowed' ideas from Judaism and Christianity. Shaykh Amin al-Khuli (d. 1966) proposed that a more productive approach is one that moves beyond the idea of 'borrowing' and towards a study of continuities and mutual influence. This became an important topic in Western Qur'an scholarship by the end of the twentieth century. Al-Khuli used Theodor Nöldeke's (1836–1930) work on the 'chronology' of the Qur'an to develop a thematic method of interpretation. His student Aisha Abd al-Rahman (d. 1998) applied this method when studying what the Qur'an says about 'human beings'. She drew the conclusion that the Qur'an fully supports the view that men and women are equal. By the start of the twenty-first century her work had helped lead to a feminist school of Qur'an interpretation.

Focusing on the history of the Qur'an had been important in Western scholarship. This became an area of interest for Muslim scholars too. The work of some scholars has been well-received, such as Aisha Abed Al-Rahman and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988). Others were more radical and their ideas about the Qur'an as a historical text were challenged by conservative scholars, such as the work of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. He argued that you can only interpret the Qur'an today if you have a rigorous understanding of the cultural attitudes of seventh-century Arabs, to whom the Qur'an was revealed.

Western scholars, to conclude, have used modern methods such as carbon dating to find out more about the Qur'an. They are now closer to agreeing with some traditional ideas about history of early Muslims and the Qur'an than they were before. They again using many ideas from Muslim scholarship in their work, which they had done in the nineteenth century – but neglected in the 'revisionist' phase. Modern Islamic scholarship still focuses on traditional material. It cannot be fully separated from Western work, since it was transformed by adopting some of the Western methods and rejecting others. So, neither 'Western' nor 'traditional' scholarship can be understood as separate from each other.

A complete fusion of the approaches seems neither necessary nor likely. There are, however, clear signs that both sides have learned much from each other, and could benefit tremendously from paying even closer attention to each other's insights.

Professor Jon Hoover, Dr Shuruq Naguib and Dr Holger Zellentin

To get you thinking

- 1 With a partner, take a piece of paper and fold it in half. One of you should read the section entitled 'Traditional Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an'. On the left-hand side of your paper, note down all of the people that you have read about who were involved in interpreting the Qur'an and what they did. The other person should read 'Study of the Qur'an in the West'. Note down the people mentioned and their work on the right-hand side of your paper.
- 2 Stick with your partner. Orally summarise the section that you read and listen to your partner's summary. Now read the text your partner was summarising. Did they mention all the main points?
- 3 Using what you have learned, draw up a timeline of key points about how the Qur'an has been interpreted and understood over time. The timeline can start at 610 CE and should extend to the modern day.
- 4 Read the section entitled 'Towards a fusion?' Add any important dates and developments mentioned here to your timeline.
- 5 In no more than 100 words, how would you answer someone who asked you 'who works out the meaning of the Qur'an and how do they do it?'