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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: THE QUR'ĀN BETWEEN BIBLE AND *TAFSĪR*

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JIQSA is being launched at a crucial time for the growth and development of Qur'ānic Studies as a scholarly field. While there has been a surge of advances in just the last fifteen years, the field at times appears incoherent, seeming to lack a clear disciplinary identity. As greater numbers of scholars devote their efforts to the study of the Qur'ān, there is a natural diversification of research aims and methods, stimulating attempts to define Qur'ānic Studies "proper"—to distinguish those aims and methods that are central to the field from those that are peripheral, and determine how (and whether) the center and peripheries are meaningfully related. At the forefront of this drive currently are two major questions aimed at situating Qur'ānic Studies as an emergent field in its own right vis-à-vis those disciplines with which it has been linked historically:

(1) How is Qur'ānic Studies related to Biblical Studies?
(2) How is Qur'ānic Studies related to *Tafsīr* Studies?

Inherent to these field-orienting questions are more fundamental questions about how to situate the qur'ānic text itself in the contexts of Late Antiquity on the one hand and Islamic religion, culture, and society on the other. What does it mean to study the qur'ānic text on its own terms, and how can such study enhance, and be enhanced by, studies of other late antique scriptural, parascriptural, and exegetical texts, as well as the study of Islamic literature?

As a field, Qur'ānic Studies is presently grappling with two major problems provoked by revisionism—epitomized by the groundbreaking but problematic work of John Wansbrough and his students that revolutionized the study of the Qur'ān and early Islam some forty years ago. First, how can the text of the Qur'ān be meaningfully distinguished from classical Islamic exegeses thereof, separating the qur'ānic text as an artifact of its time from the dogmatic, social, and political concerns of later eras? Second, how can extra-Islamic sources (especially the scriptural and parascriptural traditions of Late Antiquity) be responsibly and critically recruited for the study of the Qur'ān's textual history and originating socio-historical milieu?

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Much contemporary work in Qurʾānic Studies may be labeled 'post-revisionist'—grounded in a carefully negotiated synthesis of these two concerns. The best contemporary scholarship seeks on the one hand to re-engage Islamic exegetical traditions in ways that illuminate rather than overshadow the study of the qurʾānic text itself, and on the other hand to reconceptualize the relationship between the Qurʾān and biblical tradition, moving from a model focusing on "influences" to one focusing on "intertexts." A major aim of *JIQSA* is to contribute to a redefinition of the field by facilitating these ongoing efforts, showcasing research that consciously and actively intervenes in debates about theory, sources, and methodologies within Qurʾānic Studies as an increasingly discrete and well-established field in its own right, as well as in conjunction with other relevant fields.

The Qurʾān and Biblical Tradition

It is clear that we have moved away (or are moving away) from the dominance of the influence paradigm, the view of the Qurʾān as borrowing or derived from various biblical, Jewish, and occasionally Christian prototypes. Beginning in the 1970s, the emphasis on uncovering the sources of the Qurʾān began to give way to new conceptions of its relationship to older monotheistic traditions.

There are two main grounds on which to assert a meaningful connection between Biblical Studies and Qurʾānic Studies: the historical-contextual and the methodological. With the former, the Qurʾān may be seen as an "Abrahamic" scripture, emerging out of the matrix of late antique "Judeo-Christian" scripturalism. With the latter, one may attempt to shape and frame Qurʾānic Studies on the model of Biblical Studies, proceeding in a philological and historical-critical vein, and (at least theoretically) branching out into myriad subfields dedicated to textual, contextual, material, literary, and cultural facets of the genesis, development, production, and reception of the text.

Resistance to comparison of Bible and Qurʾān, or to assertions of similarity and filiation, is caused, at least in part, by anxieties about reductionism—a tendency that is foundational in the field. From the early nineteenth century, many scholars employed philological or historical analyses in the quest for the sources of the Qurʾān, and maintained a basic thesis that Muḥammad had produced the Qurʾān through extensive borrowings from Jews, and thus that Islam was profoundly indebted to Judaism from the very start. Other scholars sought to redirect inquiry from rabbinic Jewish to Eastern Christian sources—shifting the putative vectors of influence but hardly altering the basic presuppositions that informed older scholarship.

In light of this history, it is unsurprising that demographic changes in scholarship in both Anglophone and European university cultures in the later twentieth century, particularly the inclusion of Muslim students and scholars as full participants in a scholarly discourse from which they were formerly excluded, led to resistance to such conjectures about "influence." Until quite recently, a countervailing sympathy for the conventional account of Islam's origins, at least in its broad contours, discouraged direct discussion of the possible literary influences on the Qur'ān—to say nothing of the question of its authorship. The exception to this trend was the aforementioned work of scholars of the so-called revisionist school, whose impact on the larger field of Islamic Studies was relatively marginal until the recent resurgence of interest in their ideas.

Much attention is now being given to Syriac literature as providing the primary comparanda of interest for investigation of the literary, cultural, and religious background to the Qur'ān, especially of the echoes of biblical tradition found therein. A new consensus is emerging that this corpus of literature appears to provide the most apposite parallels for understanding both qur'ānic *contexts* and *subtexts*. (Perhaps this is comparable to the significance of the discovery of the literary remains of Ugarit in revolutionizing the study of the oldest strata of the Hebrew Bible and investigation into the origins of ancient Israel.) But this shift in direction in the field needs to be managed carefully, and arguments about the relevance of this material constructed thoughtfully and self-consciously. What do we mean when we compare, when we draw parallels, when we excavate sources, when we point to the language, themes, and style of (for example) Syriac *memrē* as meaningful for understanding the Qur'ān? If we do not refine our conceptual models and approaches, then we risk falling into the same reductionist trap into which scholars fell in the past, and the work of those who now strive to articulate a new historical-critical approach to the Qur'ān may justifiably be criticized as improving little upon the insights of a century ago. Further, we also run the risk of alienating an audience that may be apprehensive about attempts to draw Biblical Studies and Qur'ānic Studies closer together, an enterprise that has great constructive potential.

Recent advances in the field of Qur'ānic Studies have to a large degree involved looking backwards, revisiting older work on comparanda and the late antique historical context of the Qur'ān—but now, at least ideally, reconfiguring or re-envisioning comparanda in order to explore the cultural and literary frame of reference reflected in the Qur'ān, rather than merely cataloguing passively received "influences" *per se*, and thus shedding some of the problematic baggage of older scholarship. Despite these attempts to proceed in a more nuanced and less reductionist way, concern with the Qur'ān's background in older scripturalist traditions is sometimes still

perceived and represented as being dated, retrograde, and politically and ideologically suspect. At worst, the critical study of qur'ānic origins may be portrayed as the essence of Orientalism, a Western colonization of the Qur'ān that subordinates it to a Judeo-Christian tradition presupposed to be more original and authentic.

However, any contextualist or historical-critical approach to the Qur'ān must of necessity seek to locate its origins—as a discourse and living revelation before the emergence of the *textus receptus*—in an older context in which there was in fact no Islam. Logically, the Qur'ān in its originating context can only make sense in terms of the Bible and contemporary Judaism and Christianity, with its primary comparanda being those literatures with which Biblical Studies and related fields are concerned. Thus, while some may deem Biblical Studies to be marginal to Islamic Studies, it cannot be deemed marginal to Qur'ānic Studies.

Further, although the attempt to assert the Qur'ān's autonomy from Biblical Studies is an understandable response to the once-ubiquitous Orientalist assertion of the Qur'ān's dependence on—and, implicitly, its inferiority to—Judaism and Christianity, there is a danger of going too strongly in the other direction. To overstate the Qur'ān's autonomy from the Bible and the Judaism and Christianity of its time and sever it from its most salient frameworks of meaning in its original context is to slip into another Orientalizing trap—that of rendering the Qur'ān irresolvably alien to these traditions, and thus estranging Islam from its roots in the same historical contexts, discourses, and experiences that informed historical Judaism and Christianity, anchored in the late antique *oikoumene* of the Near East and Mediterranean. The isolation of Qur'ānic Studies from Biblical Studies, the insistence that the Qur'ān is *sui generis,* can be a danger to constructive study of the Qur'ān and substantive dialogue about its meaning and historical significance.

Resistance to drawing Biblical Studies and Qur'ānic Studies closer together also seems to be based on a poor understanding of significant developments in Biblical Studies over the last few decades. "The Bible" as a construct has been rigorously interrogated for decades now, and the hegemony of the canonical text has been more or less decisively overthrown, in the sense that the field is no longer defined exclusively or primarily by an attempt to dissect a single canonical Hebrew Bible into its constituent parts, each of which represents an artifact of one or another era in the emergence of Israelite monotheism. Contemporary Biblical Studies is marked by significant disagreement and continuing debate between traditionalists and revisionists, those who in some way seek to revitalize the Documentary Hypothesis and rehabilitate some version of source criticism for the twenty-first century and those who would see such attempts as hopelessly naïve. A general consensus on the most suitable

analytical approach to the text as an historical artifact remains elusive, and perhaps should remain so.

Moreover, to many Bible scholars, there is no single "Bible" that is the universal object of concern of both ancient exegetes and modern scholars. Rather, in the ancient world predating the rise of Islam, the canon is not a reified or unitary thing but rather represents a *discursive posture.* In this period, there are multiple canonical bibles of Jews, multiple canonical bibles of Christians, and a great many parascriptural traditions reflecting engagements with one or another canonical or quasi-canonical text. The Qur'ān as a late antique document reflects the impact of a wider discourse regarding the canonical, the elaboration of the paracanonical, how the two are related, and so forth.

This is all to say that Biblical Studies, like Qur'ānic Studies, continues to evolve, with increasing attention paid to the *Nachleben* or "afterlife" of biblical traditions—the complex processes of canonization, exegesis, and reception in later works. It is true that Qur'ānic Studies has never elaborated anything similar to the Documentary Hypothesis, or developed a serious equivalent of the well-established methodologies of source criticism, form criticism, and the like that are the foundation of the historical-critical study of the Bible. And yet, the contemporary study of the Qur'ān is rather similar to the contemporary study of the Bible, at least in broad terms: each represents a wealth of complementary and competing approaches, a network of overlapping and interconnected methods informed by different presuppositions that may nevertheless enrich each other in a variety of ways. Both Biblical Studies and Qur'ānic Studies have transcended their disciplinary origins, and while the resulting riot of perspectives may seem incoherent, we would argue that this diversity is salutary, reflecting the continuing vitality of both fields.

The Qur'ān and Islamic Tradition

It is worth noting that for much of its history, the study of the Qur'ān in the Anglo-European tradition has actually *not* been modeled on Biblical Studies but rather on Muslim approaches to the text. This is demonstrated by the profound reliance on *tafsīr* in early modern interpretations and translations of the text, as well as by the fundamental reliance on the *sīrah* literature as the primary account of its historical context. Most modern attempts to make sense of the Qur'ān as a discourse have simply taken for granted that the text's meaning could only be brought into focus through the lens of traditional *tafsīr*. Given their closer proximity in time to the composition of the Qur'ān, the works of early and classical Muslim exegetes were assumed to more reliably approximate—and, taken cumulatively, fully capture—the text's "original" meaning. But in more recent years, scholars of the Qur'ān have become

increasingly aware of how the "original" meaning located in the text *per se* may be apprehended apart from early readers' perceptions and constructions of its meaning, and of the inherent subjectivities of *tafsīr* texts (indeed, of all scholarly texts). Serious questions are thus being raised about the relevance and credibility of the *tafsīr* literature for understanding the qur'ānic text on its own terms. Inasmuch as studying the Qur'ān on its own terms is the definitive aim of Qur'ānic Studies proper, there is a growing and persistent call to free the discipline from the presuppositions of *tafsīr* in order to achieve something resembling a more objective assessment of the qur'ānic text and its meaning.

Some participants and observers in the field might construe "objective" here to mean culturally unbiased or ideologically disinterested, but in reality, no position or approach can be entirely free of bias or devoid of interest, so such an agenda is at best aspirational. However, it is not futile to aim to produce scholarship that self-consciously acknowledges and controls for biases and corrects for ideological motivations, and thus seeks to be as objective as realistically possible. Further, it is not difficult to imagine how a deliberate focus on the qur'ānic text as an object presented to scholarly consciousness and read primarily in the light of qur'ānic discourse itself (or its historical context), rather than an uncritical reliance on the subjectivities of individual exegetes or received Muslim tradition, may be productive.

Meanwhile, there has been increasing interest among scholars to study *tafsīr* in its own right—as a literary genre, hermeneutic exercise, and mode of social discourse—in order to better understand how Muslim exegetes have gone about the business of qur'ānic interpretation. Since the early 2000s, we have seen the emergence of three major monograph series in the field of Qur'ānic Studies: Brill's *Texts and Studies on the Qur'an*, published since 2003; the *Qur'anic Studies Series* jointly published by Oxford University Press and the Institute of Ismaili Studies since 2004; and *Routledge Studies in the Qur'an*, published since 2008. Collectively, more than half the books published to date in these series are in actuality devoted to the study of *tafsīr*. It is thus clear that *tafsīr* is no longer being studied merely instrumentally, as a means of making sense of the Qur'ān, but rather ultimately, for the sake of making sense of *tafsīr* itself. *Tafsīr* Studies has thus emerged as a distinctive field of academic specialization, which yet remains intermixed theoretically and practically with Qur'ānic Studies proper. Nowadays a major question across the intermingled disciplines of Qur'ānic Studies and *Tafsīr* Studies is whether they should continue to overlap, and, if so, how.

The pitfalls of consulting *tafsīr* in an "objective" study of the Qur'ān should not be overstated, though some scholars have suggested that Qur'ānic Studies proper should be wholly extricated from the tradition. This attitude is particularly dangerous when it leads to the prejudicial conclusion that confessionally informed perspectives on the Qur'ān—whether in the past or

the present—are uniquely fraught with problems, insufficiently rigorous, or lack value for objective approaches. Such prejudice plays into old "insider" versus "outsider" dichotomies, leading to skepticism, even cynicism, about motivations that is hardly salutary for the field. What is more, excluding scholarship on *tafsīr* from Qur'ānic Studies deprives us of a wealth of knowledge about the qur'ānic text. Many traditional exegetes exhibit a concern for the plain sense of the text—what we would call "objective" textual meaning—and deploy a variety of scholarly approaches to apprehend it, including philological analysis and rationalist arguments akin to those valued and practiced in modern non-confessional academic circles. At the very least, authors of traditional *tafsīr*, despite all their theological and methodological diversity, have one basic thing in common with modern scholars in Qur'ānic Studies: they seek to engage directly with the scripture as their primary object of study. From this perspective, it seems both unnecessary and unprofitable to sever the *tafsīr* tradition from the intellectual and literary heritage upon which modern cosmopolitan scholars of the Qur'ān may draw.

Thus, it is clear that *Tafsīr* Studies as an academic field today should not be severed from Qur'ānic Studies. If *tafsīr* texts are to remain useful in "objective" studies of the Qur'ān, we must better understand their subjectivities and the social, historical, literary, and intellectual contexts that shape them. Studies of *tafsīr* foster a deeper consciousness of the complex interrelationship between text and reader, the rich variety of methodologies in qur'ānic exegesis, and the virtually innumerable ideas about what the Qur'ān means that have come before. More clarity on all these matters equips Qur'ān scholars today with a sharper sense of their own work in historical and cultural context, and a greater dexterity in the use of *tafsīr* texts not as conclusive but as contributing sources for better understanding the Qur'ān itself.

On the other hand, studies of the Qur'ān on its own terms, including linguistic, literary, and historical studies—with all their various methodological advances—enhance our understanding of the text with which the authors of *tafsīr* were concerned, equipping scholars of the Qur'ān and *tafsīr* alike with a deeper empathy for how the *mufassirūn* dealt with shared concerns about the features and history of the text of the Qur'ān.

The fundamental distinction between Qur'ānic Studies and *Tafsīr* Studies today would seem to boil down to what the ultimate object of study is, the qur'ānic text or *tafsīr* texts, and hence to the status one might assign to *tafsīr* literature as a secondary or rather primary source. Since both the text of the Qur'ān and texts of *tafsīr* deserve to be studied for their own sake, the bifurcation of qur'ānic and *tafsīr* study is both natural and beneficial. At the same time, insofar as both fields explore (in more or less direct ways) qur'ānic textual meaning, they may potentially benefit all the more from ongoing conversation and cross-fertilization.