
This translation of Muqaddasi’s (334–390/945–1000) celebrated geographical treatise of the 4th/10th century forms part of a larger project which seeks to make available to the English language reader a diverse selection of classical compilations from the formative years of the Islamic tradition. The project focuses on those works distinguished within their respective fields of learning and will include traditional disciplines such as the Qur’anic sciences, the Prophetic traditions, jurisprudence and theology, together with works on sciences of a rather more abstract nature such as astronomy, physics, chemistry, medicine and fields of study such as geography and horticulture; given the extensive nature of these works and their conceptual variety, the selection of Muqaddasi’s remarkable text for this series of translations is especially fitting for whilst it represents a geographical account of the lands of Islam as depicted through the eyes of an itinerant geographer, it also creatively places conventional scientific abstraction, empirical investigation, and a well-embellished literary narrative within an Islamic framework; besides, this cohesive blending of approaches was one of the definitive features of the so-called Balkhī or Classical school of geography and Muqaddasi was its most renowned exponent.

The contents of this book and its primary purpose are eminently circumscribed by Muqaddasi’s preliminary remarks which establish the framework for the work. He states that it was intended to be ‘an account of the Islamic regions, with the deserts and the seas in them; the lakes and rivers there; a description of their famous metropoles, and noted settlements: the way stations that are well used and the roads that are frequented’, adding ‘I will state in my account the ingredients of their medicaments and drugs, the sources and cargoes of commerce; the diversity of the peoples of the countries in their expressions, intonations, languages, complexion; their doctrinal schools, their measures, their weights, their coins, large and small; with particulars of their food and drink, their fruits and waters’ (p. 1). Moreover, he boasts that this was to be ‘a work travellers and merchants cannot do without’. It was the meticulous attention to detail expressed so stylistically which rendered Muqaddasi’s text so valuable, serving as a portal into the classical Islamic world.

It is worth noting that this is not the first time that Muqaddasi’s text has been the subject of a translation. Collins’ preface to this publication includes an elaborate survey
of the various manuscripts of Muqaddasi’s work and the different translations. This is followed by an introduction which provides a refined digest of the development of Islamic geography, highlighting the eminent status of this text not only within the classical Islamic tradition but also within contemporary Western scholarship: it was the subject of no less than six previous translations. These appeared in German, French, and English; however, they were not complete renditions of Muqaddasi’s treatise, instead they focused on specific chapters and selected passages from the work. The most comprehensive of which was the effort by G. Ranking and R. Azooz, which was published as fascicles in 1897, 1899, 1901 and 1910, covering pp. 1–202 of this text, whilst the translation of A. Miquel also covered extended parts of the text and included an in-depth commentary. The manuscript source of all these translations was scrupulously derived by Michael Jan de Goeje from two apographs and first published in 1877 as the third volume of Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum: this was revised and published as a second edition in 1906. The previous translations of Muqaddasi’s work were all based on de Goeje’s derived text, which did not include the maps found in the two apographs, although Collins, like others before him, made use of this illustrative material. Furthermore, Collins was also responsible for one of these earlier translations. This was published under the title Al-Muqaddasi: The Man and His Work; With Selected Passages Translated from the Arabic, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974). Given his earlier translation of representative sections of Muqaddasi’s text which includes his authoritative study of its author, it is evident that Collins not only has an assured command of the literary sources for Arabic geography but he also shows a profound appreciation of the significance of this text. And this is reflected in his assiduous approach to its translation.

The genre of works entitled al-masālik wa’l-mamālik (books on routes and realms) represented the earliest examples of geographical literature. It was a secretary by the name of Ibn Khurradadhbih (d. 272/885) whose work was to provide a ‘blueprint’ for subsequent Arabic geographical literature. (See Maqbul Aḥmad’s entry entitled ‘Djughrāfiyya’ in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edn). It is maintained that this work must have been based on antecedents; moreover, an extrinsic influence is also perceptible in the conventions and divisions employed in this and other early works; such material was largely patterned on Greek, Iranian and Indian concepts. Despite being replete with geographical, mathematical, and astronomical data, several of the authors of these early works were secretaries and administrators. It is argued by both Collins and Aḥmad that the works of this early period were plainly ‘secular’ in their perspective. A transformation in respect of approaches was intrepidly ventured with the advent of the Balkhī school and its putative founder Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934), the author of a work entitled Ṣuwar al-aqālim. It is the Islamic element that becomes particularly pronounced not only in the general philosophy of these writings, but also
in respect of their specific focus: literature by geographers of the Balkhī school concentrated only on the realm of Islam (the geographical compass of the masālik wa’l-mamālik works was more extensive). Indeed, Muqaddasī asserts that he did not concern himself with the terrain outside the realm of Islam (‘the countries of unbelievers’) unless of course there were Muslim inhabitants therein (p. 8 of Collins’ translation). Moreover, the literature of the Balkhī geographers revealed a concerted attempt to reconcile and illustrate geographical description with Qur’anic and Prophetic dicta, giving the Islamic element greater definition; this was coupled with the use of cartography (see pp. 312–15 of the article entitled ‘Geographical and Navigational Literature’ by J. Hopkins, Religion, Learning, and Science in the Abbāsid period, ed. M. Young (et al.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Muqaddasī did have predecessors who were adherents of this school: figures such as ʿĪstakhri (d. 350/961) and Ibn Hawqal (d. 380/990); the former was the author of a treatise incidentally entitled al-Masālik wa’l-mamālik, supposedly based on Abū Zayd’s text, and the latter wrote a work entitled Şūrat al-ard. However, Muqaddasī’s text was to surpass the works of his predecessors: for it integrated scientific, religious and literary components with such dazzling effect. Indeed, Muqaddasī in his rather candid summary of previous geographical literary endeavours does speak of his dissatisfaction with previous writings in the field: this inspired him to take upon himself the task of composing his text. Whilst he certainly consulted previous writings, often referring to works by earlier geographers, much of the work was derived through his own experiences as an itinerant geographer: he spent 20 years passing through the different towns, cities, and provinces of the Islamic regions: in his own words, ‘I could not complete the compilation of it until after my travels throughout the countries, and my visiting the regions of Islam; until after I had met the learned, and been of service to princes, had meetings with the qadhis, and studied under the jurists; had frequented the society of men of letters, the readers of the Qur’an, and writers of the traditions; had associated with ascetics and the Sufis’ (p. 2 of the translation). Collins mentions that Muqaddasī personally traversed most of the Islamic regions with the exception of al-Andalus and al-Sind (see p. 19 of Al-Muqaddasī: The Man and His Work; With Selected Passages Translated from the Arabic). The description of his trials and tribulations is a harrowing one: he recounts how he was close to drowning, robbed by highwaymen, confined in prison, and accused of being a spy; indeed, he even speaks of a plot to murder him (p. 42 of the translation).

It is this fascinating and often witty narrative furnished by Muqaddasī which provides the text with a very personal quality and Collins has skilfully managed to retain this in his translation, conveying the dynamic combination of features which engagingly distinguished Muqaddasī’s text. Whether one is referring to its utility as a source of political, historical, social and linguistic documentation or indeed the value of the religious material which it ingeniously preserves, Muqaddasī’s text is invaluable.
It is intriguing to note that a cursory comparison of Collins’ earlier translation of sections from Muqaddasi’s text with this current work shows a large number of changes and refinements made to his earlier translation; however, this would seem to indicate the sustained nature of the effort made by Collins in his quest to capture the substance and style of the original text; moreover, it also highlights the complexities and difficulties inherent in translating classical texts of this nature. Collins has presented a thoroughly readable and entertaining translation: this is no mean achievement given the variegated nature of Muqaddasi’s text and his inclination to resort to the use of rhymed prose for rhetorical effect. The translation crucially enables its reader to savour the tenor of the Arabic original. Furthermore, this is all accomplished without departing immoderately from the literal language of the text. Besides, the text is also replete with defined lists of place names, commodities, and material of a technical nature in addition to theological, juridical, exegetical and linguistic anecdotes.

There are a number of passages in the translation which do deserve consideration. In the resourceful chapter on ‘Dhikr al-madhāhib wa’l-dhimma’, translated by Collins as ‘Account of the Madhāhib (Schools of Islamic Law) and the Dhimma (Free Non-Muslim Subjects)’, Muqaddasi initially identifies the principal legal and theological schools of Islam before moving on to assert that these schools were divided into innumerable sub-groups and often granted secondary labels. However, Muqaddasi’s point was that these schools were in essence already enumerated in his earlier classification; the secondary designations, of which there were four classes, were no more than allusions to these previously identified schools. These included nicknames; names denoting commendation; names intimating an opprobrious trait; and in the final class were those labels concerning which there was a difference of opinion. Referring to the passage which identifies the opprobrious class, Collins states: ‘Disavowal: al-Kullābiyya, who disavow divine constraint on man; al-Hanbaliyya, disavowed for their hatred of ʿAlī; those who do not recognise the attributes of God and are disavowed because of their anthropomorphism; and those who disavow all the attributes of God’ (pp. 34–5 of the translation). Given that Muqaddasi is referring in these two instances to a pejorative connotation inherent in the use of such labels, it would seem logical that the Kullābiyya are actually accused by their opponents of adopting jabr (a deterministic bent) and labelled accordingly, despite any protestations against such accusations. Similarly, the Ḥanbalites are referred to as ahl al-naṣb, which Lane’s lexicon confirms, through references to al-Qāmūs al-muḥiṭ and Tāj al-‘arūs, was an allusion to a sect of possible Khārijite origins who felt it was a matter of religious obligation to bear intense hatred for ʿAlī; the same term is used disparagingly to refer to the Ḥanbalites, obviously by their detractors (a detailed discussion of this is presented in the notes of Ranking and Azoo). There is also the context in which the terms are themselves introduced: Muqaddasī is referring to that fact that these
conventional schools are known by other labels. Complex passages of this nature present the translator with a perplexing choice and yet the way they are translated is critical to a precise understanding of the text, although in fairness to Collins he does class these theological schools under the heading ‘disavowal’.

Moreover, it is the next part of the translation which is problematic because of the contradiction it creates. The Arabic reads ‘wa-munkirū al-ṣifāt yunkirūn al-tashbih; wa-muthbitāhā yunkirūn al-ṣa’tīl’ (p. 37 of the Arabic text), which means those who deny the attributes (do so in order to) reject anthropomorphism; whilst those who affirm (the attributes) reject (any) negation (of them). Collins’ translation reads ‘those who do not recognise the attributes of God and are disavowed because of their anthropomorphism; and those who disavow all the attributes of God.’ It is interesting to note that the rendition of this whole passage by Ranking and Azoo reads: ‘The blamed ones are: Kullābiyya, condemned for the doctrine of compulsion in human actions: al-Ḥanbalīyya censured for their hatred of ‘Ali; the muthbitū al-ṣifāt (attributists) condemned for representing God as similar to man; munfīṣ al-ṣifāt (deniers of attributes) blamed for rejecting all eternal attributes of God’ (pp. 52–3: Ranking and Azoo).

The version translated in these passages was obviously based on the first edition of de Goeje’s manuscript (1877) and the variant wording found therein is referred to in the footnotes of the 1906 revised edition. To their credit the translation of Ranking and Azoo did comprise an illuminating commentary, with many of the aforementioned intricacies explained with a profusion of references to primary source material. It is perhaps useful to note that Watt adduces a reference to the Kullābiyya comprised in these introductory passages to argue that in the early tradition they were the true precursors of the Ashʿariyya, but that Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Asḥarī was subsequently made the eponym of this school, although this can in no way attenuate the significance of his contribution to a synthesis of Sunni orthodoxy (see The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997, p. 311).

In the same chapter Muqaddasi’s reference to ahl al-raʿy and ahl al-ḥadīth (p. 35 of the translation) is qualified by Collins as ‘people of subjective opinion – followers of the madḥhab of Abū Ḥanīfa’ and ‘followers of tradition – the madḥāhib of Mālik, Ṣāḥibī, and Ibn Ḥanbal’ respectively. Studies have tended to show that the term ahl al-raʿy was not just a reference to the tradition of Ḥanafi jurists, rather its semantic compass was much greater as it denoted those schools of jurisprudence who upheld the validity of legal reasoning; and thus it encompasses a number of the other traditional schools of jurisprudence (see pp. 14–15 of W. Hallaq, A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Uṣūl al-Fiqh, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; cf. pp. 57–8 of Islamic Philosophy and Theology, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987).
Amongst the other parts of the translation warranting brief attention are the following: the phrase ‘fā-hiya aḥaqqu bi-fināʾihā’ in the chapter on the jazīrat al-ʿarab (the Peninsula of the Arabs) is translated as ‘the greater right attaches to the surrounding space’ (p. 69 of the translation). This occurs in the context of Abū Ḥanifa’s advice to the caliph concerning the purchase of property in the vicinity of the Kaʾba in order to extend and renovate the sacred precincts and should read ‘it (al-kaʾba) has more right to its surrounding enclosure’; in Muqaddasi’s recounting of the exquisite merits of iqlim al-shām (the Clime of Syria), he resolves to enumerate some of its drawbacks and defects (ʿuyūb), translated by Collins as ‘disadvantages’, moving on to state ‘al-mastūr mahmūm; waʿl-ghanī mahṣūd; waʿl-faqīḥ mahjur; waʿl-adīb ghayru mashūd’. This is translated by Collins as follows: ‘the blameless are aggrieved, the rich envied. The jurisprudent is in solitude, and the man of letters disregarded’ (p. 141 of the translation); whilst Ranking and Azoo’s translation reads: ‘The meek are molested and the rich envied; jurisconsults remain unvisited and erudite men are forgotten’ (p. 274). The phrase al-mastūr mahmūm might be translated as ‘the person of modest means is aggrieved’, particularly as an antithesis is implied with the phrase al-ghanī mahṣūd; whereas al-faqīḥ mahjur suggests a ruefully neglected or shunned jurist. Finally, the expression waʿl-adīb ghayru mashūd must refer to the littérature not being frequented. In the same chapter (p. 144) Muqaddasi mentions a spring located in the village of Sulwān, describing its waters as sweet (ʿudhaybiyya, the diminutive form of ʿadhb, although several variants of this term are cited in the manuscript’s footnotes, p. 171 of the Arabic text, including ʿadhiba). This is translated by Collins as ‘water of moderate quality’ and Ranking and Azoo as ‘fairly good water’ (p. 280). It is the case that the lexicon of Ibn Ṭarīq (d. 395/1004) entitled Mujmal al-lughah records that al-ʿadhb is al-māʾ al-ṭayyib (fine water) (vol. 2, p. 656); however, it also confirms that the renowned 2nd/8th century Kufan philologist Liḥyānī refers to māʾ fihi ʿadhiba(tun), as ‘water containing impurities’; and yet one wonders whether sweet water was actually intended in Muqaddasi’s text given that he relates how these waters fed magnificent gardens.

In respect of its production, this is an accomplished edition. Not only is the pagination of de Goeje’s original included in the margins of the book, but Collins has also provided variant versions and additions to this text collated from different manuscripts. He has also isolated the various lacunae in the manuscripts used for this edition. Having also included twenty maps, he has painstakingly provided English keys to these maps in the book’s appendix. It is, however, difficult to understand why a full-system of diacritics was not used in the transliteration of the Arabic given the overall quality of this book: the text only makes use of macrons along with apostrophes to denote the guttural and glottal stops. Moreover, the index for this volume is less than comprehensive and given the book’s value as a reference source, this needs
to be addressed. Amongst the typographical errors which I came across were: the inside cover of the first page refers to authorisation by al-Ahzar instead of al-Azhar; Khwârij instead of Khawârij (p. 34); Yaḥṣibî instead of Yaḥṣubî (p. 36); all of the page headings for the section entitled madhâhib (p. 34) read madhâib; al-Ḥujjâj ibn Yûsuf instead of al-Ḥajjâj ibn Yûsuf (p. 334).

It should be said that anyone with an interest in the classical Islamic tradition would want to acquire this volume. Collins' translation leaves one with the distinct impression he has successfully presented a generally accurate, fluent, and discerning rendering of the original Arabic text. This will be especially appreciated by readers with recourse only to the English language, given the academic value of Muqaddasi's text. And this fulfils one of the objectives of this book series. Additionally, students of Arabic and Islamic studies will also find this text of use, particularly in exploring techniques used in the translation of classical material. This publication is highly recommended.

MUSTAFA SHAH

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This book will be of very great interest to scholars of Islamic art, calligraphy in particular, as well as to all who are admirers of the numerous, even spectacular, ways whereby the mushaf has been bequeathed to prosperity, to be cherished not simply as the sacred text of scripture but also as an 'icon', wherein the most delicate, yet bold, and highly imaginative artists in the World of Islam, over the centuries, have devoted their skill as artists and designers to the sublimest of their religious endeavours. The book is also an introduction to the artistic and archaeological riches of the Islamic Museum in Jerusalem.

The book is subdivided into several short chapters. Part One is devoted to the Islamic Museum itself. A separate section of it is concerned with stone inscriptions in Arabic from different ages, including an inscribed tombstone from Halhul, near Hebron (al-khalîl). This stone may date from 55/674, which could make it the oldest dated Arabic tombstone in Palestine. It is of great relevance to the manner and style in which Qur'anic expressions have been engraved for the benefit of posterity at such an early date. Part Two is concerned with the background to the Qur'ans in question, the scripts which are represented therein, the illumination of the manuscripts, the textual history of the Qur'an, and associated artistic skills, the bindings, and sundry matters
relating to the materials used. Part Three, the bulk of the text and the plates, is entirely devoted to the Qur’anic collection itself.

The choicest examples of the sacred text have already been described by Lawrence Conrad and Khader I. Salameh in the ‘Palestine’ entry which is included in The World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts. Volume II, ed. Geoffrey Roper (London: Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 1993), pp. 579–81. The collection is summarised in that work (p. 580):

The manuscript collection of the Islamic Museum consists entirely of Qur’ans donated over the centuries to the Al-Aqṣā mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Some were presented by rulers and private individuals, and others have been donated by such Palestinian cities as Hebron and Nablus.

The Qur’ans vary in type, age and size. Many are rab’īṭ (i.e. they were copied in thirty fascicules and stored in a chest, or rab’ā). The oldest is Kufic, from the end of the second century AH, while the most recent is a copy from the end of the thirteenth century AH.

In the view of the authors, amongst the finest of all the Qur’ans is the Kufic copy of the second part of the Qur’an, the transcription of which is attributed to al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālīb. The covers, however, date from the Mamluk age. Fine plates which illustrate this copy are to be found in the book reviewed here, see in particular pp. 47–55.

The book is furnished with bibliographical references to studies of relevance to the history of the collection and on the Qur’anic texts and manuscripts worldwide. Further bibliographical references are to be read in the footnotes. There is a glossary and a short index. A high standard of transcription and accuracy is to be observed throughout the content and the photography, in colour, is of a very high quality of reproduction. In places, however, puzzling references and errors are to be noted. On p. 27, the founder of al-Qayrawān (Kairouan) is named as ʿUqba al-Dabbāgh, whereas, in almost all sources of reference, he is named as ʿUqba b. Nāfiʿ (more rarely, ʿUqba b. ʿĀmir). Throughout Abdulwahid Dhanun Taha’s The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain (London: Routledge, 1989), the founder of the city is consistently mentioned as ʿUqba b. Nāfiʿ and it is hard to see why ‘al-Dabbāgh’ is particularly cited. Secondly, on p. 32, the text reads, ‘Nevertheless, the Islamic art of illumination in North Africa and Spain retained its individual artistic identity separate from the Islamic east, especially in the period of the Muwahhidun, noted for the avoidance of excess in the illumination. Their Murabitun successors inherited this style, and their manuscripts were characterized by local artistic features which became the predomi-
nant style'. Since the Muwahhidūn displaced the Murābitūn, this statement is a historical travesty. It was obviously not spotted at proof stage, but it is an example where a very fine text is seriously marred. Even so, the vast bulk of the text and the marvellous illustrations still make this book a most desirable purchase.

H.T. NORRIS

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This volume contains fifteen chapters by leading scholars on a vast array of subjects, both medieval and modern, embracing history, Islamic faith and practice, law, science, art and architecture, philosophy and theology, Islam and Christendom, and contemporary Islam from a number of perspectives. Composite works in several volumes which deal with a range of themes similar to that covered here in the Oxford History of Islam do exist, but the convenience of having all the topics in one volume is enormous. The quality of the contributions is, moreover, very high. With well-established scholars such as Donner, Fakhry, Lapidus, Voll, Bloom, Blair and Esposito, to name but a few, this is not surprising.

The balance of contributions between medieval and modern is well judged. The approach of the book is inter-disciplinary, covering the fields of history, religion, social sciences, art and science. Scholars have been chosen from a variety of countries and traditions. The first part of the book concentrates on classical Islam – religion, society, institutions and art. Ahmad Dallal provides a fine chapter on science, medicine and technology, whilst Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, who were also responsible for the choice of illustrations in the book – appropriate, telling and often unexpected – give an excellent overview of the themes and variations of Islamic art and architecture. The chapter by Jane Smith, who deals with the interaction between Islam and Christendom until the 15th century, is most welcome. The next part of the volume looks at pre-modern and modern Muslim societies and analyses the ways in which they developed in the face of European colonialism from without and stagnation and decline from within. The final chapters of the book deal with contemporary matters, re-emphasising, as Esposito puts it, that in the 21st century Islam 'is indeed a global presence that blurs old distinctions between the Muslim world and the West'. His own contribution to the volume is a magisterial overview of contemporary Islam.

It is perhaps invidious to single out individual chapters in a book of uniformly high standard. Readers will have their own preferred sections and will, in any case, wish
to consult it for varying purposes. The volume is praiseworthy in its emphasis on the truly global dimensions of Islamic history and culture, since it includes geographical areas normally neglected in encyclopaedic ventures of this kind – Bruce Laurence writes on Islam in south and southeast Asia, Dru Gladney discusses Central Asia and China and Nehema Levtzion surveys Islam in Africa. Nor is the West neglected; Yvonne Haddad writes a thought-provoking piece entitled ‘The Globalisation of Islam: the Return of Muslims to the West’, in which she raises the issue of Islam’s becoming ‘part and parcel of the West’: will there be Muslim assimilation, integration or separation in Western societies? This question will remain at the forefront of our minds for some time to come.

It is no easy task to produce a book such as this at a reasonable price; but the publishers have done just this. The book has 749 pages of text and is, moreover, lavishly illustrated with many superb colour photographs, as well as black and white ones. These make it a delight and an education to browse through the volume. The book will remain a valuable reference work for years to come. If general readers want to buy just one book to inform themselves about Islam – and the need to do so is, of course, enhanced by recent events – the Oxford History of Islam is that book.

CAROLE HILLENBRAND

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REVIEW ARTICLE


Each volume of the Variorum Collected Studies Series musters long term writings by some noteworthy scholar (in this case, one of the biggest names in Qur’anic studies in the West); by grouping articles on sundry fields, perhaps written over decades, it allows a clear glimpse of the scholar’s development, their deeper presuppositions, the methodological patterns and mental habits which undergird their work. Rippin’s corpus is avowedly built on groundwork laid by John Wansbrough. Two whole chapters (II and IV) of the book at hand are indeed given over to aspects of Wansbrough’s work. The tell-tale framework of haggadic, halakhic, massoretic, rhetorical and allegorical genres/phases in the elaboration of the Muslim scriptures is assumed throughout the book, which brims with references to Quranic Studies and praise for its late author.

Qur’anic exegesis is in the foreground of Rippin’s research, not the Qur’an per se. However, the fraught issue of the ‘canonization process’ (so-called) is inseparable
from early exegesis in Wansbrough’s doctrine – a premise looming in Rippin’s work too. Like his cynosure, Rippin believes that the Qur’an underwent ‘stabilization’ well into the Abbasid period: ‘early Islamic sources ... would seem to witness that the text of the Qur’an may not have been totally fixed until the early part of the third/ninth century’ (II, p. 154). Again: ‘The ultimate enshrinement of the text of the Qur’an as we now know it ... was the result of two to three centuries of vigorous debate as reflected in these texts of interpretation as well as in the evolution of the actual text of scripture’ (Introduction, p. xvii; also see X, p. 4). Thus, exegesis generated the Qur’an as much as the Qur’an generated exegesis (=vicious circularity?), and Rippin’s research into the early ‘interpretive tradition’ implicitly aims at laying bare the process by which the very text of scripture was supposedly negotiated.

The issue of the Qur’an’s historical status therefore lurks in the background of the whole volume, and in keeping with this, Toby Lester’s sensational(ist) article ‘What is the Qur’an?’ from the January 1999 issue of Atlantic Monthly is Rippin’s opening gambit in the Introduction. A talking point in Lester’s piece was the trove of ancient Qur’an manuscripts discovered in the Great Mosque at Sanaa in 1972. Excitingly, some of this material (22 groups of fragments) dates from the 700s and uses the early ‘Hijâzî’ form of the Arabic script. Nevertheless, these documents hardly lend themselves to Wansbrough’s tortuous thesis of an evolving text. The differences from the textus receptus are in fact surprisingly minimal, with small disparities in chapter-order and minor variant readings. Yet even these features are put to full use by Rippin, who finds in them evidence against the traditional Muslim claim that a stable oral tradition accompanied the early unwovelled and ‘defective’ text, and guaranteed that it was articulated correctly. For Rippin, the irregularities of the Sanaa fragments prove that this assumptive tradition is wholly chimeric (Introduction, p. x).

In the void which ensues in its absence, ostentatious new solutions to thorny old problems are found. For instance, the somewhat unexpected Islamic version of the name Abraham, ‘Ibrâhîm’, is argued to have come about through reading the Hijâzî script without the oral guideline mentioned. In the relevant script, long ā was represented with the letter yā’ both finally and sometimes also medially – whereas in later scripts this only remains an option finally (=alif maqṣūra). So the Hijâzî script, in its nakedness, might yield a feasible original pronunciation of the Patriarch’s name, ‘Abrâhîm’, in line with Hebrew. By a similar manoeuvre, the unpointed script could yield ‘Sâṭân’, again in line with Hebrew, in contrast with the otherwise puzzling form of this word current in Arabic: Shaytân (Introduction, p. xv).

Needless to say, any ‘sense of the sacred’ is besides the point in this kind of approach, and Rippin even affects blank incomprehension of the latter’s secular academic analogue, the phenomenological epochē: ‘One of the arguments which I often seem to
hear ... is that, when studying the Qur’an as literature, we must use a method which is “appropriate to the text itself”, that usually being one which involves the basic historical ... assumptions which the tradition of Islam itself suggests. Now, I must admit that I am at a loss to understand these statements and why they should be so adamantly held and expressed” (I, p. 43, italics mine). Clearly, the basic idea of the phenomenological method – the possibility of eidetic vision via ‘bracketing out’ the researcher’s preconceptions – is not just set aside in Rippin’s framework, it is even declared wholly and intrinsically unintelligible. If he thus stands in a long line of modern scholars of the Semitic monotheist traditions, starting with Eichhorn, whose ‘scientific’ aim has been to use historical criticism to unmask religion and the authentitas scripturae, Rippin nevertheless professes greater subtlety, less naïveté, in his theoretical foundations, than his 18th and 19th century predecessors. In fact, confusingly, he distances his approach from crude historicist attacks on religion, and associates himself with post-modern trends like ‘deconstruction’.

A number of examples of this turn of speech are found in the volume. In Chapter IV Rippin speaks of our ‘contemporary scholarly world’ living ‘in the light of James Joyce and deconstruction’ (IV, p. 646) – mentioned in the course of evaluating Richard Bell’s infamous restitutory approach to the text of the Qur’an. Bell found evidence of ‘progressive reformulation’ in the Qur’an, driven by the Prophet’s gathering knowledge of Christianity, and by other shifts in his strategy. This progressive reformulation had been supposedly hidden by disruptive editing in the textus receptus, which Bell duly reorganised. Notwithstanding the gross circularity in making ‘progressive reformulation’ both the premise and conclusion of this re-editing of the Qur’an, Bell’s overall project is judged by Rippin to have been enriching, though very much of its time. Such a project was in the then current Germanic tradition of Tendenzkritik and the historical criticism of the Bible, entering European Qur’anic studies via figures like Wellhausen, who worked on both scriptures. On the other hand, for Rippin himself, as just quoted, the cocksure positivism of this framework is evidently rendered irretrievably passé by ‘James Joyce and deconstruction’. Again, in Chapter XII Rippin urges with disarming modesty that historical/literary approaches to the study of holy scripture be granted equal rights with traditional religious ones, using the patently post-modern reasoning that this ‘seems to have legitimacy by virtue of the way it reflects an investigator’s own interests and construction of reality’ (XII, p. 249). In this, Rippin seemingly equivalents each intellectual standpoint, with each worldview as much of a construct as the next, and each with its intrinsic legitimacy.

As an aside: it is unclear how deconstruction can truly escape the ‘transcendental tu quoque’, any more than can older Pyrrhonic viewpoints. Like its intellectual forebears, it cannot avoid the same, fascinating, but ultimately fatal paradox of
constituting a systematic anti-systematism or dogmatic anti-dogmatism (the only retort being that deconstruction, like philosophical scepticism, is an agôgê and not a hairesis, a tendency, not a school). But let us swim clear of that maelstrom and suggest anyway that Rippin’s couching his work in such terms comes over as more convenient than sincere. Significantly, one of the greatest successes of the broadly deconstructive stance on scholarly discourse (in Islamics to boot) – Edward Said’s Orientalism – is reproached by Rippin for its impact on Islamic studies, which is judged to have been an unwelcome level of politicisation (I, pp. 41–2). Rippin’s support for the broader framework is thus clearly cautious, selective even. Anyway, a thoroughgoing version of deconstruction is hardly viable for him, since if taken absolutely, deconstruction would entail the strictly rhetorical tenor of all historiography, and how could positive historical research build on such premises? It is telling here that Rippin mentions he had previously toyed with (but evidently moved on from) the idea of an enclosed hermeneutical circle in historical discourse, a circle precluding the prospect of objective historical knowledge (I, p. 44). In the end, some notion of authentia historica is unavoidably premised in any historian’s project.

The force of the clash in his premises is screened by Rippin’s particular choice of historical framework – namely, Wansbrough’s. This school of Islamics, with its leitmotiv of ‘salvation history’, might be seen as laying bare the allegedly rhetorical character of Islamic historiography and tradition, not as formulating the ‘authentic history’ of the origins of the religion (see II, p.158). It is noteworthy in this regard that Rippin is critical, in passing, of some such attempts at fashioning alternative, positive accounts of Islam’s origins, like that of Bell, as just mentioned, or that of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in their Hagarism, the Making of the Islamic World. The problem with Hagarism is evidently that using contemporary non-Muslim sources in reconstructing the beginnings of Islam is in the end merely to substitute one polemic with another (II, p. 152). By comparison, the thrust of Rippin’s work is presumably understood by him more in terms of demolition than positive reconstruction. It is a fact that many pages of Rippin’s Variorum volume are prima facie taken up with trying to overturn old notions, rather than proposing new ones – above all, with trying to overturn the received apparatus of Qur’anic exegesis, from variant readings to ‘occasions of revelation’ narratives (asbâb al-nuzûl), to the whole idea of the reality of a body of early exegetical tradition.

Confirming that this is indeed the deeper theoretical drift of Rippin’s research, he sometimes explicitly hitches the sceptical ‘Wansbroughian’ (sic) approach to the ‘post-modern ethos’, claiming a kinship between the two (see IV, p. 646 and VI, p. 44). But the link-up of these frameworks, which is certainly ingenious, begs a major question. Even when radically sceptical in mode, with a drastic source-criticism centre stage, how can students of history ever sidestep the notion of authentia
historica, which seems the suppressed premise of all historical research? Rippin himself does not leave a historiographical vacuum, nor does he ever seriously mean to. For instance, his very denial of the historicity of early Islamic sources (following Wansbrough) involves a corresponding positive commitment to the claim that the earliest phase of Islamic intellectual culture was ‘haggadic’ in complexion, and was in fact dominated by the trivial figure of the storyteller (qāṣṣ) (e.g. XIX, p. 19). Again, more than once in sweeping away received Arabic lexicographical ideas, the positive thesis of heavy Hebrew influence on the early Islamic tradition takes their place (Introduction, p. xv; VII, p. 53).

Another case is Rippin’s denial of the authenticity of asbāb al-nuzūl (‘occasions of revelation’ narrations). Via these narrations, the verses of the Qur’an have been historically contextualised by commentators in order to answer key questions about which verses are abrogating (nāsīkh) and which are abrogated (mansūkh), or which are generally applicable (bi’il-‘umūm) and which are only specifically applicable (bi’il-khuṣūṣ). Rippin’s denial that such narrations originate in authentic memories of the Prophet’s life demands in turn an affirmation of their ‘real’ origin. Using typical reasoning, Rippin asserts that the real origin of such narrations is at one with their function. They spring from the commentatorial process itself, in its attempt to impose coherence on scripture, or as Wansbrough would put it, they are ‘purely exegetical’: ‘It is evident that ... the sabab serves primarily an exegetical function by taking the Qur’anic phraseology and elaborating it through narrative embellishment in order to remove the apparent intra-Qur’anic conflict, and that the sabab does not simply act as an external verificant of time and place of revelation’ (XVIII, p. 256). The expedient of merging origin with function, aetiology with teleology, is used by Rippin not only for asbāb al-nuzūl, but also for variant readings (e.g. XIII, p. 23) and to explain the emergence of details in Qur’anic lexicography (e.g. IX, p. 320). Thus the data of these separate fields routinely find their origin within the turmoil of exegesis itself, though the latter seems to assume them. Such is Rippin’s view. It is clear that in this kind of historical inference, the positive counter-thesis is practically constituted by the very doubt about the old thesis; so intimate is their interrelation that the new doctrine is virtually the obverse of the very act of skepsis.

Be that as it may, attributing the origin of asbāb al-nuzūl simply to their exegetical role is not without difficulty. The basic thrust of their exegetical function emerges clearly in the course of three chapters focused on ‘occasions of revelation’ (XVII, XVIII, and XIX – the first two developed from Rippin’s PhD thesis). Prima facie, the main function of asbāb is in deriving law from revelation. Correspondingly, in Suyūṭi’s fascinating apologetic for asbāb covered in Chapter XVIII, four or five out of six points offered in defence of their exegetical role present them in legal, or (to use Wansbrough’s terminology) halakhic, terms (XVIII, p. 257). This seems reason-
able. In view of Rippin’s axiom that function and origin coincide, one would therefore expect the conclusion from him that asbāb originate in the context of legal exegesis. But matters are not nearly so straightforward. Asbāb in practice are frequently cited simply to contextualise scriptural verses, without any obvious legal profitability (XIX, p. 2), and in legal contexts asbāb are often found to be cited but overlooked in the actual derivation of rulings, which are based on some other consideration, such as consensus (XIX, pp. 16–17). Such observations clearly indicate that, notwithstanding their basically legal raison d’être, asbāb al-nuzūl have a definite ‘life of their own’, strongly implying a lateral and quite independent origin for them beyond the imperatives of halakhic exegesis. Muslim tradition will hold that the origin in question is (by and large) history itself – the actual history of the Prophet’s life and mission. Rippin, unwilling to give ground to commonsense, asserts that asbāb must instead have emerged wholesale in some other purely exegetical context, namely a ‘haggadic’ one, created by quṣṣāṣ (storytellers) to edify the faithful, embellish the Qurʾan (XIX, p. 19), or even just to ‘create a good yarn’ (XIX, p. 4).

One of Rippin’s general aims in Chapter XIX is to bring out that asbāb narrations are unreliable as a historical witness, and simply mirror issues of exegesis; that is, they simply arise to support one or another option of interpretation. That they may actually contradict one another implies that they simply originate from this need to justify some exegetical point of view, and so lack all historical substance. Variant readings in Qurʾan 2:119, tus’alu and tas’al, cannot both be correct, yet both are supplied in the sources with separate asbāb. If such an example seems solid as evidence, others given by Rippin seem less so, since contradiction between asbāb narrations must clearly be outright to prove his point successfully. For instance, Qurʾan 2:115 (‘To God belong the east and the west. Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God. God is All-pervasive, All-knowing!’) is given different asbāb. In one, the verse is found in a context in which the rightness of praying for the dead Negus is questioned by some Companions, since, though he ‘believed in God and in what had been revealed to the Prophet’, he still did not pray in the Islamic direction of prayer (qibla). In response to their complaint, it is said, Qurʾan 2:115 was revealed. Then in a separate narration, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb cites the same verse as confirming that it is legal to pray the witr prayer riding, facing in any direction, and he is held to have said that ‘concerning this it was revealed (… Qurʾan 2:115)’ (XIX, pp. 13–14). However, it is arguably quite straightforward to interpret ʿUmar as simply meaning that the case of praying witr while riding, inter alia was covered by Qurʾan 2:115 (i.e. ‘concerning this case, among others, it was revealed … ’). In another example, Rippin presents separate asbāb for Qurʾan 2:232. But scrutiny bears out that they both boil down to the scenario of relatives in the position of guardian (walī), preventing divorced women from remarrying their ex-husbands after the statutory ‘waiting period’ (XIX, pp. 14–15). Again, these narrations are not
emphatically contradictory in a manner that would make them impressive as evidence that *asbāb* narrations are purely arbitrary.

Rippin thus seems over-eager in finding evidence of inauthenticity in every disparity between *sabab* narrations. The mysterious verse, Qur’an 2:189, is yet another case in point: ‘They ask you concerning the new moons. Say: They are but signs to mark fixed periods of time for humanity and for the Greater Pilgrimage; and it is not virtuous behaviour for you to enter your homes from the back. Virtuous behaviour is [that of] whoever is godfearing. Enter houses by their doors, and be mindful of God – perhaps you will prosper!’ The verse is traditionally explained as implicitly referring to a pre-Islamic Qurayshite religious group known as Ḥums, who maintained some taboo during pilgrimage, pertaining to entering houses. But the fact that some *sabab* narrations speak of the taboo in terms of Ḥums *having* to enter by the front door, while others speak of it in terms of their being *forbidden* from the same, is ruled by Rippin (following Wansbrough) as clear evidence of inconsistency, thus good grounds for holding that the ‘*sabab* ... responds to the basic haggadic impulse’ and that it lacks any historical substance (XIX, pp. 9–10). The tenor of this last argument seems rhetorical, not scientific. It is as if the claim that no historical kernel underlies the Ḥums *asbāb*, that indeed Muslims later made up the whole idea of this group, together with their idiosyncratic name, Ḥums, and the lore about their distinctive pre-Islamic taboos – all just to explain Qur’an 2:189 – is not itself rather improbable by comparison with the original account.

Rippin’s ‘hyperbolic scepticism’ in the above is typical. In the ‘salvation history’ school of thought, Islamic sources a priori lack historicity. That is why his reflex as a scholar is always to respond to the intellectual challenge of sifting the sources with the one-track reaction of outright dismissal – seemingly, ideologically driven to deny any kernel of fact. Many examples might be cited. In Chapter III, ‘RḤMNN and the Ḥanifs’, Rippin covers the claim that epigraphic evidence exists in South Arabia of a pre-Islamic non-aligned monotheism, consisting in references to RḤMNN (i.e. *al-Rahmān*, ‘the All-Merciful’), and that this evidence is related to the elusive native Arabian monotheistic grouping known as Ḥanīf in the Qur’an. Rippin is opposed to the claim, which clearly entails a factual element in the Qur’an and Islamic historiography. The Islamic sources indeed provide specific names of individuals in a list of four or even ten Ḥanifs from the Prophet’s milieu.

The first point is then that Rippin predictably favours C. Robin’s argument that, out of the fourteen South Arabian inscriptions which truly remain culturally inexplicit (thus which are not self-evidently dismissable as Christian or Jewish), all are in reality Jewish in origin – *pace* A.F.L. Beeston, who instead read them as evidence of the Ḥanifs (III, pp. 165 ff.). The second point is that Rippin (following Wansbrough
again) tries hard to deny any historical value in the mentioned Ḥanīf list from Islamic sources (III, pp. 162–3). The first four names are supposedly merely part of the Islamic *muthos* of *praeparatio evangelica*. But Uri Rubin has countered this, sensibly enough, with the argument that no Muslim could have concocted the names in question. After all, three of the named individuals are explicitly mentioned as enemies (!) of the Prophet, and what on earth would have motivated Muslims to depict Ḥanīfs (Arabian monotheists, the very forerunners of Islam according to Muslim tradition and the Qur’an) as his enemies? Rippin’s retort is to point out that three out of four of these ‘Ḥanīfs’ are said in the sources to have ended by embracing Christianity. They therefore supposedly fall into the category of Christian counterparts of the motif of the Jewish rejection of Islam (the ‘rabbinic pericopes’ in the Prophet’s biography). The argument seems startlingly disingenuous. After all, the figures in question were precisely originally Ḥanīf, not Christian. Their Christianity will still unavoidably represent the spectre of a Ḥanīf rejection of the Prophet and Islam. This remains counter-intuitive, and smacks strongly of a genuine historical memory of events from the period, exactly as Rubin suggests.

Other examples of Rippin’s negativism on Islamic sources are the more striking because upheld in the teeth of his confession of some element of historicity. In regard to this, the last chapter of the volume (XXI) yet again turns to the prospect of archaeological corroboration from South Arabia for data in the Qur’an. The issue here concerns Qur’an 34:15–16 and the extraordinary reference there to the fate of the society of Sabā, in Yemen. Rippin is unable to sidestep the conclusion that genuinely ancient information in the Qur’an is found at this point. The information has been generally viewed as relating in particular to Mārib, a society which depended on the maintenance of a sophisticated dam-system. When the dam gave way, the people of Mārib met their fate, and the rich landscape returned to desert. At this point in the Qur’an we find a *hapax legomenon*, the mysterious term *‘arim* – with the relevant expression, *sayl al-‘arim*, generally being rendered into English as ‘the flood of the dam’. This expression is not familiar in Arabic and is inescapably a loanword from epigraphical South Arabian. It turns out that the word is actually cognate with Akkadian *arimnu*, meaning a dam. Excitingly, inscriptions at Mārib dating from circa 450 and 540 CE refer to the dam using this very word, *‘ayn-rāʾ-mīm*.

Having perforce assented to this factual core, Rippin contrapuntally denies that it constitutes any authentic historical memory by using his favoured expedient of variation in the traditional exegetical material. The key point seems to be that there is no consensus in the sources on the precise date of the ‘flood of the dam’, this inconsistency being judged sufficient to discredit the references entirely (XXI, p. 170). Few could read this argument and hold it to be reasonable or convincing. Most folk memories are routinely set in an unsituated ‘old time’, and to use this to deny the
fascinating and noteworthy element of historicity is a crude strategy. Rippin is especially exercised by attempts, *inter alia* by Richard Baron Jr, to coordinate the data of the Qur’an with the actual archaeology of Mārib (XXI, pp. 172–3). Qur’an 34:15 pointedly refers to two gardens (*jannatān*) in relation to the dam, and archaeologists have gone on to read the layout of the Mārib site in terms of there having been two great irrigated tracts. But Rippin alleges that these tracts have been only inferred by archaeology in the first place, prompted by the Qur’anic reference itself, and this assumes the accuracy of equating the latter with Mārib. He goes on to claim that the ‘two gardens’ (*jannatān*) mentioned in Qur’an 34:15 are just a scriptural device, a mere topos which recurs for instance in Qur’an 18:32 and especially 55:46.

These arguments are ingeniously sceptical, but debatable nonetheless. The archaeology of the Mārib site attests to two separate sluices and distribution systems, a northern one and a southern one, and this is the main basis for the idea that there were two irrigated tracts involved, not the Qur’an per se. Neither can the two gardens of the people of Sabā referred to in Qur’an 34:15 be so easily bracketed with the more stylised double garden (*jannatān*) motif of Qur’an 55:46. After all, the latter is explicitly an archetypal image from the *eschaton*, while the Sabā gardens belong to a different order entirely – narratives on past civilisations (*umam khāliya*). Again, *jannatān* in Qur’an 55:46 corresponds with the stringent demands of the –ān rhyme scheme (*fāṣila*) of this famously, poetically evocative chapter, while the same word in the reference to Sabā in Qur’an 34:15 cannot be explained in these terms at all.

A destructive intent seems to operate in Rippin’s reasoning, here as elsewhere. The syndrome is again in evidence in the chunk of the book (chapters XIII, XIV, and XV) given over to an evaluation of materials attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, the venerable ‘father of exegesis’. Righdy, Rippin is extremely cautious about the attribution of these materials (≡al-Lughāt fi’l-Qurʾān, Gharīb al-Qurʾān and Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās). He is predictably opposed to the idea of their authenticity, and following Gilliot, concludes that Ibn ʿAbbās is no more than ‘a mythic exemplum for the Muslim community’ (XV, p. 74). Rippin has thrashed out an *iṣnād* structure for the Tafsīr (XV, appendix 3) which repays scrutiny and allows us to engage with his extremely entwined argumentation with a slightly clearer head. What becomes apparent here is that there are two crucial names in the history of the transmission of this body of texts. Earlier, there is a certain ʿAlī ibn Iṣḥāq al-Samarqandī (d. 851), and slightly later, there is the prevalence of the name ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak al-Dīnawarī. What seems certain is that, in the generation of ʿAlī ibn Iṣḥāq the texts become in effect the equivalent of a *khabar wāhid* – they are singly transmitted by ʿAlī ibn Iṣḥāq himself, with all the chains converging on him. In a sense then, the question seems to come down to the probity of such transmissions, and there is of course a strong danger that the ‘transmitted matter’ actually originates from the single transmitter himself. Be that as it
may, what is surprising is that Rippin does not rest content with this attribution of the Tafsir Ibn ʿAbbās in his article, but prefers the even later terminus a quo of Dīnawārī. This is wayward, if only because the latter is clearly not the solitary transmitter in his generation, lateral transmissions also passing in his day via Harāwī and Khajnadī, as even Rippin must admit: ‘It would appear ... that other people in [Dīnawārī’s] generation transmitted the same text without any reference to him’ (XV, p. 49). Yet the quaesitum of Rippin’s whole article is to assign the tafsīr to Dīnawārī!

A recurring problem with Rippin’s dismissive attitude to claims made in Islamic sources, is that having dismissed them he replaces them with hypotheses which, if anything, seem more tenuous by far. An example is found in Chapter VII in his discussion of the traditional exegesis of Qur’an 21:95: ‘A ban is upon any town that We have destroyed, that they shall not return’ (wa ḥārāmūn ʿalā qaryatin ahlān nāhā annahum lā yarjiʿūn). This presents the commentators with an interesting challenge. There seems to be an implicit double negation in the ruling, so that in effect it says ‘It is not allowed for people not to return to any town God has destroyed’, in other words: they must return to it. Zamakhshāri neatly solves the problem by adducing a variant reading. The Arabic may read innahum rather than annahum, effectively putting a grammatical hiatus between the negations: ‘A ban is upon any town We have destroyed; verily, they may not return!’ Bayḍāwī and Ibn Ḥishām significantly also cite this variant. For Rippin such an answer is neither here nor there, clearly arising in the course of looking for exegetical solutions for the problem itself, and the adduced variant cannot possibly be authentic (VII, p. 47). Here again then, we see at work Rippin’s device of collapsing origin with function.

On the other hand, Ibn Qutayba, Shawkānī and others have a different solution to the double negation. They hold that ḥārām, in addition to meaning ‘banned’ could also sometimes mean ‘obligatory’ or ‘necessary’ (i.e. wājib). Though surprising, this is not out of keeping with Arabic polysemy, in which it is not unusual for one word to comprise actually opposite meanings. The commentators in question quote a line of poetry as evidence (sometimes attributed to the pre-Islamic poet Muḥārībī, sometimes to Khansāʾ): ‘Indeed it is necessary (=harām!) that I should never again see someone crying in his sorrow, without me weeping for ʿAmr’. At one stroke the double negation of Qur’an 21:95 is removed: ‘It is necessary for any town that We have destroyed that they not return’. All the same, Rippin surprisingly high-handedly rejects this rather satisfying solution of Ibn Qutayba and Shawkānī, on the weak grounds that the cited line of poetry is obscure in provenance: ‘... the doubtful authority inherent in this line of poetry renders it almost unnecessary to comment that this line, even if genuine, adds little clarification to the matter at hand’ (VII, p. 52). Rippin’s own preferred solution, for its part, is undoubtedly very interesting. His own thesis is that ḥarām here is to be identified with the Hebrew word ḥērem, signifying something
devoted to God – the Biblical idea evidently being that a city laid waste was thought of as consecrated to God, as a sacrifice (VII, p. 52). This is indeed fascinating, and meets the criterion of removing the double negation. Yet it is hardly more impressive or likely than the more traditional exegetical solutions which Rippin has rejected so vehemently. Moreover, his new translation of the verse, in line with the solution aired, seems to wreak havoc with the Arabic: ‘A city, which we destroyed, has been devoted to God [=ḥarāmun ʿalā qaryatin ahlaknāhā?]’ (resulting in the fact) that they may not return (to it) ...’ (XV, p. 53).

Despite the dawning of newer, more sympathetic hypotheses on given issues, Rippin sometimes comes across as opting for those which are more in step with the hostile assumptions of a century ago. One such assumption seems to be that Islam is, at root, an anti-intellectual, originally ‘fundamentalist’ religious tradition. In Rippin’s vocabulary, ‘fundamentalist’ is routinely used for the original, i.e. earliest manifest understanding of a given problem in Islam (e.g. XIII, p. 22). This is worrying. But reassuringly, it is also evident that it is in some cases little more than a presupposition masquerading as a conclusion.

Take for example the long-running debate on whether or not scriptural exegesis was even tolerated in early Islam. Since Goldziher long ago drew attention to it, a key tradition has been fought over in regard to this very important question. The tradition in question (found e.g. Süyüṭï, Itqān, ch. 43) concerns ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb’s harsh reaction to one early scriptural hermeneut, whom we may refer to as Ibn Ṣābīgh. There is not the space here to enter into the details of this topos of the secondary literature. The main point is that ʿUmar is said to have been incensed by this man’s activities in Medina, notably, his inquiry into difficulties in the Qur’ān, and he had him flogged. For Goldziher (in Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung, Leiden, 1920, p. 55) this was good evidence that the basic outlook of this early period was closed and anti-interpretive. There was, in short, heavy opposition to tafsîr for the first century or two of Islam. Harris Birkeland begged to differ. He points out that the ḥadîth, drawn from the Musnad al-Dārimî, was used primarily in Ḥanbalite circles, and patently corresponds with ʿUmar qua ideal and archetype of the Ḥanbalite ethos, which was uniquely hostile to commentary. Moreover, the name of the reproved hermeneut differs suspiciously between different versions of the narration, and (contrary to their drift) ʿUmar is in fact known to have encouraged tafsîr and is said to have sought out its greatest early representative, Ibn ʿAbbās, becoming gravely troubled when the latter fell ill (Birkeland, Old Muslim Opposition Against Interpretation of the Qur’ān, Oslo, 1955, pp. 13–14).

Nabia Abbott has produced a synthetic argument, which neatly combines elements of Goldziher’s thetic and Birkeland’s antithetic positions on this issue. That Ibn Ṣābīgh
is referred to by different names simply reflects the common practice of referring to an individual by different aspects of his full name, and cannot seriously be used to question the historicity of the individual. The man’s name was probably something like Ṣabīgh ibn Ṣharīk ibn al-Mundhir ... al-Yarbu‘ī. Next, Ṣabīgh’s punishment makes sense in consideration of various points: his questions about the Qur’an were not innocent; his activity was neither private nor casual; he travelled (notably, in Iraq and Egypt), thus spreading his theological doubts far and wide and could even have undermined the allegiance of the military forces essential to the new community’s stability. Abbott also points out that ‘Umar could be notoriously severe, even to his own family. His elevation to the caliphate was actually opposed in consideration of his severe temperament. There are other cited instances of ‘Umar taking action against tafsīr, such as cutting off the commentary appended to a text of the Qur’an which he found. The critical point is of course the presence in the scripture of so-called ‘ambiguous’ verses (mutashābihāt), speculation upon which is forbidden on the basis of Qur’an 3:7. Once this is grasped, the contradictions dividing Goldziher and Birkeland dissolve. ‘Umar himself engaged in tafsīr, but scrupulously avoided this kind of banned speculation about the mutashābihāt, and it was particularly this which had angered him beyond bounds in the case of Ibn Ṣabīgh. It was, pace Goldziher, exegesis on the mutashābihāt which only began at the close of the second century of Islam, not exegesis per se (Abbott, Studies in Arabic Literary Papyrii II, Chicago, 1967, pp. 106–13).

Finally in this debate, Wansbrough and Rippin himself argue back against Abbott’s extremely satisfying resolution, and in so doing effectively resurrect Goldziher’s original rather undiscerning interpretation of the Ibn Ṣabīgh case: that it points to blanket hostility to Qur’an commentary in the early period. Wansbrough thus contended that Abbott had missed the central point about the term mutashābihāt itself, which is effectively (to put the point philosophically) that the term is not ‘heterological’ but ‘homological’, i.e. that it is itself mutashābih (=‘ambiguous’)! It was itself a hopelessly equivocal term and potentially could extend to every verse of the Qur’an (Wansbrough, followed by Rippin, X, p. 5 and XI, p. 227). In the light of this, the ban on tafsīr al-mutashābihāt enshrined in Qur’an 3:7 might well have extended to the entirety of the Qur’an.

Aside from the bizarre incompatibility of this argument with the Wansbrough/Rippin thesis of the anarchic reign of the storytellers and the ‘haggadic’ framework in the early Muslim tradition, it could additionally be protested that it turns on a highly polemical use of the information at hand. It is fairly obvious that the openness of the definition of mutashābih could cut precisely both ways. Given that one person’s mutashābih verse was not so designated consensually, another person might well include the same verse within the pale of exegesis. Clearly, the definitional ambigu-
ty of the banned category of verse could in principle contribute to opening up the whole Qur'an to exegesis, as much as the reverse. Rippin dismisses the view as ‘trivial’ that the ‘disembodied letters’ (muqatt'a‘ăr) were all that was referred to by the term mutashābihāt (X, p. 7). Yet this is exactly the kind of exegetical view that might also arise from the ambiguity of the term mutashābih – and in impact it would extend the exegetical project to virtually the whole text of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is in fact, itself, radically open on the exact status of its verses. Qur'an 39:23 seems to state that its entirety is ambiguous (mutashābih), while Qur'an 11:1 seems to state that its entirety is unambiguous (muḥkam).

More specifically, Wansbrough’s and Rippin’s reversion to Goldziher’s understanding of the case of Ibn Ṣabīgh is surely no longer tenable. Leemhuis, followed by Gilliot, has effectively solved the problem of the narration’s significance once and for all. What we are left with is a precise specification (takhsīș!) of these events from ʿUmar’s reign, which may no longer form the basis of generalisations about the unacceptability of tafsīr in the early period. The point is that Ibn Ṣabīgh was a member of the notorious Banū Tamīm tribe. This had very recently rebelled against the new faith during the troubled apostasy period (al-ridda) following the death of the Prophet. Their rebellion had of course centred on the ‘false prophet’ Musaylima. This then provides the key to ʿUmar’s specific hostility to Ibn Ṣabīgh’s activities. A crucial detail is that Ibn Ṣabīgh is said to have been particularly interested in the opening of Qur’an 51: ‘By the winnowers winnowing ... etc.’ (wa‘l-dhāriyātī dharwan). Musaylima had produced a ‘revelation’ which strikingly mirrored this: ‘By the winnowers of wheat ...’ (wa‘l-dhāriyatī qamḥān). Ibn Ṣabīgh was thus punished for a highly-focused seditious activity, and not for exegesis as such (see Claude Gilliot in Rippin (ed.) The Qur’an: Formative Interpretation, Aldershot, 1999, p. 6).

Despite the newfangled Wansbroughian and even post-modern terms in which Rippin has formulated his formidable body of research, it is hard in the end to mark it out from a much older Orientalist programme. Such scholarship has long claimed to employ a neutral, indeed ‘scientific’, historical criticism, but in practice is distorted by a kind of animus against the tradition. This is no longer, pace Said, a question of ‘Europe versus Islam’; rather, it is about the tension of secularity and religion. The Rippins and the Wansbroughs have striven to do with the sources of the Islamic tradition exactly what much greater 18th and 19th century names accomplished with the Bible, under the aegis of ‘higher criticism’. Wansbrough’s idea of an evolving Qur’an is, arguably, a distant cousin of the old ‘Grafian hypothesis’ on the Torah. It is of interest, moreover, that elements of the higher criticism later had to be amended. The Hegelian evolutionary assumption that sophistication ipso facto entailed lateness of provenance, had to be qualified when Sayce, Hommel et al. began to draw attention to how the archaeology of Western Asia lent credence to the thesis of earlier Hebrew
sophistication, such that the elaborate legal and ritual codes of Israel were not per se incompatible with a Mosaic dating.

Nowadays, the favoured critical method for studying Biblical texts is more likely to be narrative, or canonical, criticism than historical criticism. Be that as it may, Muslims themselves have always maintained a lively concern with the historicity of the sources of their tradition. Optimistically, it is conceivable that this time-honoured Muslim concern with the historical context of early Islam might in due course take aspects of contemporary historical method in its stride. An implicit assumption that history and religion are at odds is itself, surely, anti-religious. What is there to fear in an honestly and sincerely deployed historical or textual criticism, philology, archaeology etc. etc.? The religious tradition must be strong in a versatile, not brittle, way and contains ready-made tools for these challenges. For example, might one not nowadays somewhat expand the venerable Islamic exegetical concept of asbāb al-nuzūl – i.e. the notion of a ‘horizontal’, historical context through which the ‘vertical’, essentially metahistorical, revelation (nuzūl) is itself, in practice, expressed? Such an expansion of the traditional conceptual framework has the potential to accommodate, and find great interest in, much that modern research may yield. But this prospect clearly assumes the rigorous ideological impartiality, the strictly non-polemical tenor, of the research in question. Despite the thought-provoking wealth of scholarship in the pages of this volume, it is clear that Rippin’s approach does not meet this criterion.

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