

SCRIPTURE, POETRY AND THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY

This volume presents the views on the Qur'an by Professor Angelika Neuwirth, one of the leading scholars in Qur'anic studies today. It contains fourteen articles that reflect her original thought on the topic as developed over thirty years of research. The book consists of a mixture of new as well as previously published pieces, some of which are translations from the German while others are articles originally written in English. Thus, for the first time, Prof. Neuwirth's scholarship on the Qur'an is presented to a global audience in English in a comprehensive way.

In Prof. Neuwirth's view, scholars are used to understanding the Qur'an as the 'Islamic text' par excellence, an assumption which, when viewed historically, is far from evident. More than twenty years before it rose to the rank of Islamic scripture, the Qur'an was an oral proclamation addressed by the Prophet Muhammad to pre-Islamic listeners, for the Muslim community had not yet been formed. Those listeners might best be described as individuals educated in late antique culture, be they Arab pagans familiar with the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity, or syncretists of these religions, or learned Jews and Christians whose presence is reflected in the Medinan suras. The interactive communication process between Muhammad and these groups brought about an epistemic turn in Arab Late Antiquity: with the Qur'anic discovery of writing as the ultimate authority, the nascent community attained a new 'textual coherence' where scripture, with its valorisation of history and memory, was recognised as a guiding concept. It is within this new Biblically imprinted world view that central principles and values of the pagan Arab milieu were debated. This process resulted in a twin achievement: the genesis of a new scripture and the emergence of a community.

Two great traditions, then, the Biblical, transmitted by both Jews and Christians, and the local Arabic, represented in Ancient Arabic poetry, appear to have established the field of tension from which the Qur'an evolved; it was both scripture and poetry which had produced and shaped the emerging Muslim community.

ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH was educated in Classics and Oriental Studies at German and international universities (Italy, Iran and Israel). She has taught at the universities of Munich, Amman, Bamberg and Cairo, and has held the Chair of Arabic Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin since 1991. From 1994 to 1999 she served as the director of the Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft in Beirut and Istanbul. Her major fields of research are classical and modern Arabic literature and Arab Late Antiquity studies. In several recent publications, she has tried to vindicate the Qur'an as a Late Antique text, which – though deeply rooted in Arab culture – has contributed creatively to a number of major theological discourses. Angelika Neuwirth has been acknowledged for her novel approach to interreligious studies by being bestowed several honorary doctorates, academy memberships and professional awards.

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Scripture, Poetry
and the Making of
a Community
Reading the Qur'an
as a Literary Text

BY

Angelika Neuwirth

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Cover illustration:

Mosaics of a seventh-century Umayyad arcade, from the inner face of the octagonal arcade
(northern side) of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. The Kufic inscription reads, [*The Messiah
will not disdain to be a servant of God, neither the angels who are near stationed to Him. Whosoever
disdains to serve Him, and waxes proud,*] *He will assuredly muster them to Him, all of them*
(Q. 4:172). Oh God, bless [your messenger and servant Jesus son of Mary . . .]. The text before
and after the visible part of the inscription has been placed in brackets.

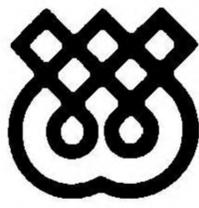
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The Institute of Ismaili Studies

THE INSTITUTE OF ISMAILI STUDIES was established in 1977 with the objectives of promoting scholarship and learning on Islam, in historical as well as contemporary contexts, and fostering better understanding of Islam's relationship with other societies and faiths.

The Institute's programmes encourage a perspective which is not confined to the theological and religious heritage of Islam, but seeks to explore the relationship of religious ideas to broader dimensions of society and culture. The programmes thus *encourage* an interdisciplinary approach to Islamic history and thought. Particular attention is given to the issues of modernity that arise as Muslims seek to relate their heritage to the contemporary situation.

Within the Islamic tradition, the Institute promotes research on those areas which have, to date, received relatively little attention from scholars. These include the intellectual and literary expressions of Shi'ism in general and Ismailism in particular.

The Institute's objectives are realised through concrete programmes and activities organised by various departments of the Institute, at times in collaboration with other institutions of learning. These programmes and activities are informed by the full range of cultures in which Islam is practised today. From the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Africa to the industrialised societies in the West, they consider the variety of contexts which shape the ideals, beliefs and practices of the faith.

In facilitating the *Qur'anic Studies Series* and other publications, the Institute's sole purpose is to encourage original research and analysis of relevant issues, which often leads to diverse views and interpretations. While every effort is made to ensure that the publications are of a high academic standard, the opinions expressed in these publications must be understood as belonging to their authors alone.

QUR'ANIC STUDIES SERIES

THE QUR'AN has been an inexhaustible source of intellectual and spiritual reflection in Islamic history, giving rise to ever-proliferating commentaries and interpretations. Many of these have remained a realm for specialists due to their scholarly demands. Others, more widely read, remain untranslated from the primary language of their composition. This series aims to make some of these materials from a broad chronological range – the formative centuries of Islam to the present day – available to a wider readership through translation and publication in English, accompanied where necessary by introductory or explanatory materials. The series will also include contextual-analytical and survey studies of these primary materials.

Throughout this series and others like it which may appear in the future, the aim is to allow the materials to speak for themselves. Not surprisingly, in the Muslim world where its scriptural sources continue to command passionate interest and commitment, the Qur'an has been subject to contending, often antithetical ideas and interpretations. The series takes no sides in these debates. The aim rather is to place on the record the rich diversity and plurality of approaches and opinions which have appealed to the Qur'an throughout history (and even more so today). The breadth of this range, however partisan or controversial individual presentations within it may be, is instructive in itself. While there is always room in such matters for personal preferences, commitment to particular traditions of belief, and scholarly evaluations, much is to be gained by a simple appreciation, not always evident today, of the enormous wealth of intellectual effort that has been devoted to the Qur'an from the earliest times. It is hoped that through this objective, this series will prove of use to scholars and students in Qur'anic Studies as well as other allied and relevant fields.

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Contents

<i>Note on Transliteration, Conventions and Abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
Introduction	xix
SECTION I: PAGAN AND MONOTHEISTIC FRAMEWORKS	
1. <i>Neither of the East nor of the West (lā sharqiyya wa lā gharbiyya, Q. 24:35): Locating the Qur'an within the History of Scholarship*</i>	3
2. From Tribal Genealogy to Divine Covenant: Qur'anic Re-figurations of Pagan Arab Ideals Based on Biblical Models**	53
3. Glimpses of Paradise in the World and Lost Aspects of the World in the Hereafter: Two Qur'anic Re-readings of Biblical Psalms	76
4. Images and Metaphors in the Introductory Sections of the Early Meccan Suras	102
SECTION II: THE LITURGICAL QUR'AN AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE COMMUNITY	
5. From Recitation through Liturgy to Canon: Sura Composition and Dissolution during the Development of Islamic Ritual*	141
6. <i>Sūrat al-Fātiḥa</i> (Q. 1): Opening of the Textual Corpus of the Qur'an or Introit of the Prayer Service?*	164
7. Referentiality and Textuality in <i>Sūrat al-Ḥijr</i> (Q. 15): Observations on the Qur'anic 'Canonical Process' and the Emergence of a Community	184
8. From the Sacred Mosque to the Remote Temple: <i>Sūrat al-Isrā'</i> (Q. 17), between Text and Commentary	216

Contents

9. A Discovery of Evil in the Qur'an? Revisiting Qur'anic Versions of the Decalogue in the Context of Pagan Arab Late Antiquity**	253
SECTION III: NARRATIVE FIGURES BETWEEN THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'AN	
10. Narrative as Canonical Process: The Story of Moses Seen through the Evolving History of the Qur'an*	277
11. Oral Scriptures in Contact: The Qur'anic Story of the Golden Calf and its Position between Narrative, Cult and Inter-communal Debate	306
12. Imagining Mary, Disputing Jesus: Reading <i>Sūrat Maryam</i> (Q. 19) and Related Meccan Texts in the Context of the Qur'anic Communication Process	328
13. Mary and Jesus: Counterbalancing the Biblical Patriarchs. A Re-reading of <i>Sūrat Maryam</i> (Q. 19) in <i>Sūrat Āl 'Imrān</i> (Q. 3)	359
14. Myths and Legends in the Qur'an? An Itinerary through its Narrative Landscape	385
<i>Bibliography</i>	414
<i>Index of Qur'anic Citations</i>	439
<i>Index of Biblical and Post-Biblical Citations</i>	454
<i>Index</i>	457

* Revised version of a translation by Gwendolin Goldbloom

** Revised version of a translation by W. Scott Chahanovich

To my sons, with love and gratitude for their dedication and perdurance,
and to the fathers

Theophanes Chasapakis, Archbishop of Gerasa, Greek Orthodox
Patriarchate, Jerusalem;

Aristarchos Peristeris, Archbishop of Konstantine, Greek Orthodox
Patriarchate, Jerusalem;

Laurentius Klein, Dean of Theological Studies at the Dormition
Abbey, Jerusalem

and the gracious teachers

Yasin al-Bakri, Imam al-Masjid al-Aqsa, Jerusalem;

and Eliezer Benno, Mizrahi community, Jerusalem

who introduced me into the language of liturgy in the heart of its
birthplace, with reverence

Note on Transliteration, Conventions and Abbreviations

Arabic transliterations follow a modified system based on the standard of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Names, terms and toponyms from non-Latin alphabets are transliterated unless common to English. The genealogical sequence Muḥammad ibn Qāsim, etc., is abbreviated with ‘b.’ for ibn (son) and ‘bt.’ for bint (daughter); the definite article on the *nisba* and the *laqab* is generally dropped after its first appearance, that is, from ‘al-Khargūshī’ to ‘Khargūshī’ or ‘al-Jāḥiẓ’ to ‘Jāḥiẓ’, and so forth. Definite articles, however, are by and large maintained for formal titles, that is, al-Hākim. Dates pertaining to Islamic history are indicated both in *hijrī* and Common Era forms. Unless otherwise indicated, all Qur’anic translations are Arthur Arberry’s, taken from the Qur’anic Arabic Corpus website (<http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp>). Any deviations from Arberry’s translation appear in square brackets. All Biblical quotations were taken from the King James Bible Online (<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>).

Abbreviations

- EI² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed., P. Bearman *et al.*, 2nd edition. Leiden, Brill, 1960–2009
- EQ *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed., Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Leiden, Brill, 2001–2006

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my deep thanks to the Institute of Ismaili Studies for generously offering me the unique chance to republish in a revised form a number of articles on the Qur'an, thus allowing me to make available to an English-speaking audience several articles that had been accessible only in German, and to bring to light several others that had been 'hidden' within interdisciplinary collective works. The articles appearing in this volume date from 1990 to 2012, a period when many new discoveries were made and novel scholarship further elaborated upon, and often corrected, earlier views of the Qur'an.¹ As the most significant breakthrough in contemporary scholarship, the new approach to the Qur'an as a late antique text deserves to be emphasised.

Yet, one is left with the impression that somehow the wrong questions are still being asked, or even that a rationalistic and positivistic historicism still prevails which induces scholars to focus on external sources rather than on the literary artefact of the Qur'anic text itself. The almost ubiquitous rash dismissal of the Qur'an's original orality, and of its gradual emergence and development out of an interactive process of communication between a proclaimer and his listeners, a process rooted in late antique history, turns the Qur'an into a volatile, indeterminable text. It threatens to hamper Western scholars in their essential task of presenting the scripture of Islam as a text not simply nourished by their own Jewish/Christian theological tradition, but actually a vital part of it, an active player in the formation of the three religious traditions. An important observation made by the Biblical scholar James Kugel has still to be made fruitful for the Qur'an. Kugel observes that there was a momentous shift in the perception of the Bible roughly around the period of Late Antiquity. During this time, the Bible underwent a process of popularisation. It changed from a corpus of texts reserved for particular elites into a scripture, into texts accessible to ordinary readers, fit to serve as the basis of the pious practices of a large and socially diverse community, and to occupy the focus of their theological debate. The changed concept of scripture generated a new, living tradition that pervaded all realms of life. Kugel claims that what spurred this development was a fresh way of reading scripture in light of the Biblical wisdom texts rather than any change in the texts themselves:

One would not be wrong to think of this transformation as, in effect, a kind of massive act of rewriting. The raw material that made up the Bible was

Acknowledgements

written anew not by changing its words but by changing the way in which those words were approached and understood . . . [There are] two very different sets of documents, the biblical texts in their original settings and meanings and what those texts were later made out to mean by Jewish and Christian authorities.²

One might wonder, however, why this momentous ‘rewriting’ of the Bible is thought to have been undertaken only by Jewish and Christian authorities? Why not also by Muslims? The claim raised in this volume is that there was a third wave of review of Biblical tradition that generated an equally new, living religious tradition and a new, canonical scripture. It is manifest in the Qur’an in spite of the fact that it was not the identical words of the written Bible, but the orally transmitted Biblical lore that constituted the bedrock of the emergent Qur’anic tradition. Undeniably, a comparably momentous re-reading of the Bible did take place with the emergence of the Qur’an as well. The Qur’an, therefore, deserves to be re-contextualised with this insight in mind and, ultimately, to be put on an equal footing with the two earlier readings of the Bible, which have never been denied their due scholarly attention.

Although many of the articles presented here were written before the programmatic re-localisation of the Qur’an in Late Antiquity, they attest to just such an inclusive understanding of the Qur’an.³ Most of the earlier articles have, additionally, been thoroughly revised in light of the recent developments and the weighty desiderata that still obtain for Qur’anic scholarship. The particular hermeneutic underlying them has been made more perspicuous not least by flanking them with a number of more recent articles.

Confronted with this task of revision, it came as a favourable coincidence that, in preparing the second volume of the Concise Commentary on the Qur’an,⁴ I was to re-read a number of middle Meccan suras in class. Particularly, discussions at Berlin seminars held with Joseph Witztum (Jerusalem), Samer Rashwani (Aleppo), Mehrdad Abbasi (Tehran), Esra Gözeler (Ankara), Issam Eido (Damascus);⁵ as well as with Nora Katharina Schmid, Hannelies Koloska, David Kiltz, Yosef Khouriyhe, Ghassan El Masri;⁶ and Dirk Hartwig were extremely stimulating. Debates with the two supervisors of the Corpus Coranicum project, Michael Marx and Nicolai Sinai, are also remembered with gratitude. What, furthermore, proved particularly helpful in rethinking the older texts presented here was a fresh discussion of their topics with a number of most inquisitive and critical American postgraduate students, an opportunity made possible to me through a Carnegie Mellon guest professorship during the fall of 2012 at the University of Chicago. I am most grateful to my Chicago colleagues and friends for

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The project of revisiting and republishing this heterogeneous outcome of a lengthy process of learning in varying scholarly contexts would not have been realised, however, without the support of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. Without the proficiency and dedication of their translators and editors, in particular Lisa Morgan, the indispensable task of reworking the older texts and turning their Teutonic diction into a readable language would not have been carried out. I am grateful for the enduring patience and the immense support I was granted by my partners at the Institute, not least by the inventor of the idea of this volume, Omar Alí-de-Unzaga.

Many of the articles assembled in this volume were originally composed during my subsequent stays in Jerusalem where I was hosted and cared for by

Acknowledgements

my sons. Without their hope-inspiring presence and their continuous kindness in facilitating my frequent shuttling between the textual world and the real world, many of these articles would not have been written. I remember the days and hours spent in their company with deep gratitude. I was furthermore privileged to live and work in the Old City where the language of liturgy is always audible in various tongues. I owe a great deal of my motivation and enthusiasm to the pious of Jerusalem, the adherents of diverse denominations, whose reading practices made me alert to the multiple meanings and the breadth of the life of scriptural texts.

NOTES

- 1 The enormous progress achieved in Qur'anic scholarship during the last few decades can be evinced from the following volume of collected works: Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx, eds., *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (Leiden, 2009).
- 2 James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York, 2007), pp. 671–2.
- 3 The project of this type of inclusive reading of the Qur'an has been programmatically laid out in Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin, 2010). An English version of this is being prepared for publication with Oxford University Press. It was compiled as a general preview of a more comprehensive research initiative, the Corpus Coranicum project, which was established in 2007 at the Berlin Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. The early results of this project are available online at <http://www.corpuscoranicum.de>. For more information, see Michael Marx, 'Ein Koranforschungsprojekt in der Tradition der Wissenschaft des Judentums: Zur Programmatik des Akademienvorhabens Corpus Coranicum', in Dirk Hartwig *et al.*, eds., *'Im vollen Licht der Geschichte': Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Anfänge der kritischen Koranforschung* (Würzburg, 2008), pp. 41–54.
- 4 Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, vol. II, *Mittelmekkanische Suren* (Berlin, forthcoming). The first volume has appeared as eadem, *Der Koran*, vol. I, *Frühmekkanische Suren* (Berlin, 2011).
- 5 Two fellows (2011/2012) of the 'Europe in the Middle East, the Middle East in Europe (EUME)' programme at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and two Humboldt fellows hosted by EUME.
- 6 Researchers for the Corpus Coranicum project.
- 7 See Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Atlanta, GA, 2005).
- 8 John D.G. Dunne, *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London, 1991); Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians, and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge, 2010).