

The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an

Andrew Rippin, ed.

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With *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, Andrew Rippin, an illustrious scholar in the field of Qur'anic studies, presents yet another impressive contribution to previous collections of articles on the Qur'an that he has edited: *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Oxford University Press: 1988); *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretations* (Variorum:

1999); and, with Khaleel Mohammed, *Coming to Terms with the Qur'an: A Volume in Honor of Issa Boullata* (Islamic Publications International: 2008), just to name a few. Gathering the works of scholars from leading universities throughout the world, Rippin has constructed a volume that is designed not only for the general reader “who may have little exposure to the Qur’an beyond a curiosity evoked by the popular media” (p. x), but also to scholars specializing in the Qur’an. The overall aim of this large volume, which comprises thirty-two articles, is to guide the reader to “a well-advanced state of understanding the complexities of the text and its associated traditions” (ibid).

The journal’s book review editor generously allowed me to scrutinize the book for three semesters. Thus, I had the chance to check the relevancy of its contents for my students in several undergraduate (“Introduction to the Religion of Islam,” “Readings in the Qur’an,” and “Qur’an Exegesis”) and graduate (“Modern Approaches to Qur’an Interpretation”) courses. Added to this is my professional interest in more than a few of the articles as a researcher of Islamic theology. Hence, this review aims, first and foremost, to evaluate this volume’s value for teachers and students as well as its merit for scholars and specialists.

The book comprises five parts. The first, “Orientation,” introduces the Qur’an and the complex relationship between the text and its reader. Tamara Sonn’s “Introducing” is a very good overview of the text, its names, structure, history, themes, and interpretation. Describing the Qur’an’s relationship with other scriptures, its role in ritual, art, and the making of Islamic law, this article is best for undergraduates. Christopher Buck’s “Discovering” applies the terminology of literary criticism on different readings of the Qur’an (i.e., inside-outside readings and religious-secular readings). His article is a useful springboard for leading a discussion on the difference between reading the Qur’an as an object of literary research and criticism and reading it as a revealed scripture. Abdullah Saeed’s “Contextualizing” is an excellent introduction to the method of reading the Qur’an within its historical context. For graduate students struggling with Fazlur Rahman’s (d. 1988) writings on the subject, Saeed’s article provides a smooth entrance to the world of contextualization.

The second part, “Text,” deals with different aspects of the Qur’anic text: its structure and language, textual and contextual readings, the development of the written text, and even the influence of prominent figures on its content. In “Linguistic Structure,” Salwa M. S. El-Awa deals with the problem of the apparent discursive style of the Qur’an, and especially with the distinctly loose structure of the longer *suwar* (sing. *surah*, chapters). While

scholars like Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997) and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) seek to prove the existence of interrelations in a given *surah*, El-Awa's solution goes even further: she offers a different understanding of the role of the Qur'anic units of *ayat* (verses). This article is essential reading for scholars dealing with post-modern approaches to the Qur'an.

Rosalind Ward Gwynne's "Patterns of Address" analyzes Badr al-Din al-Zarakshi (d. 1392) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's (d. 1505) classification of discourses in the Qur'anic text (see part 5, below). The language of the text, for instance the use of *saj'* (rhymed prose), is discussed by Mustansir Mir in an article rich with examples and illustrations ("Language"). "Poetry and Language," by Navid Kermani, is a stimulating discussion of the Qur'an's effect on the development of the Arabic language in general, and on Arabic poetry in particular. As such, it should arouse the interest of specialists in modern Arabic literature. Michael Carter's "Foreign Vocabulary" lists non-Arab words in the Qur'an and summarizes different etymological theories concerning their origins, focusing on Arthur Jeffery's influential article on foreign words in the Qur'an (from 1938).

Angelika Neuwirth's "Structure and the Emergence of Community" begins with an essential analysis of the impact of John Wansbrough's theory (in his *Qur'anic Studies* [1977]) on the origins of the Qur'an according to western scholarship. Her stand, that the Qur'an reflects "the wording of communications that were actually pronounced by Muhammad" (p. 141), is the starting point of an illuminating discussion on the evolution of the Qur'an in the Makkan and Madinan periods. Aliza Shnizer's "Sacrality and Collection" describes the critique within early Islamic scholarly circles (seventh and eighth centuries) on the Uthmanic codex, established on the initiative of Caliph Uthman (d. 656), and their preference for the alternative Qur'an of Ibn Mas'ud (d. 652-53). François Déroche's "Written Transmission" meticulously surveys the history of the written Qur'an, from the earliest manuscripts (seventh century) until the online Qur'an of the Internet, and provides details that were previously inaccessible. Herbert Berg's "Muhammad" and Avraham Hakim's "Umar b. al-Khattab" describe both figures' influence on the Qur'anic revelation. Hakim's article in particular is important for those interested in gender relations in Islam, since Umar was the trigger for the revelation of the hijab verse (33:53).

The third part, "Content," characterizes major topics in the Qur'an. Most of the articles also depict, from various angles, the problematic relationship between the Qur'anic text and the Jewish scriptures. Andrew Rippin's "God" is an inspiring essay. Through an examination of the Qur'anic concept of God, Rippin urges his readers to see the text's metaphors within the context

of seventh-century Arabia and not of the ancient Near East. In "Prophets and Prophethood," Uri Rubin enhances the Qur'anic depiction of Biblical prophets. In "Moses," Brannon Wheeler demonstrates how Muslim exegetes used the Bible to legitimate their own authority as commentators. Kate Zebiri's excellent contribution to this section, "Argumentation," presents a prominent aspect of the Qur'an. She examines the Qur'anic set of argumentations in a coherent article, which is indispensable.

A. H. Mathias Zahniser's "Knowing and Thinking" presents the different kinds of knowledge and contemplation mentioned in the Qur'anic text. His contribution is a wonderful introduction to medieval *kalam* (speculative theology). Khaleel Mohammed's "Sex, Sexuality, and the Family" should be used as a basic reading in gender studies. The author's familiarity with the Qur'an, the hadith, the Jewish sources, and contemporary feminist readings of the Qur'an provides interesting insights combined with a meticulous study. Reuven Firestone's "Jihad" discusses the concept of war in the Qur'an, while providing parallels with the Hebrew scriptures. This section could have benefited from discussions on other prominent figures in the Qur'an (e.g., Abraham and Jesus), but all in all, most of its contributions form essential readings for students.

The fourth part, "Interpretation," benefits scholars and is not suited for the general reader or undergraduate student, since its six articles focus on under-researched exegetes of the Qur'an rather than introducing the well-known ones, by which I mean, for instance, al-Tabari (d. 923), al-Qurtubi (d. 1272), and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373). Two articles deal with the works of al-Tha`labi (d. 1035): Walid Saleh's "Hermeneutics: Al-Tha`labi" and Marianna Klar's "Stories of the Prophets" (see part 5, below). Al-Tha`labi's exegetical enterprises were overlooked by both western and Arab scholars, as is demonstrated in the laconic two-paragraph entry dedicated to him in the second edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Saleh, giving credit to Isaiah Goldfeld, who was the first scholar to invest any intellectual effort in al-Tha`labi's Qur'anic exegesis, proves that this exegete was, in fact, the developer of "the encyclopedic exegetical tradition" (p. 335), whose effect on later exegetes was tremendous. Saleh's article refines the conclusions he arrived at in his 2004 research, and hence is a prominent contribution to this collection. Klar deals with the reception of al-Tha`labi's more familiar work on *qiṣaṣ al-anbiya'* (the stories of the prophets). Alan Godlas' "Sufism" is, in my opinion, the most coherent and accessible account on yet another under-researched exegetic tradition, that of Qur'an exegesis through allusion.

The fifth part of the book, "Application," is, in my opinion, the weakest part, starting with the fact that some of its contributions discuss once more, although from different angles, topics addressed in previous parts. That is the case with Jane Dammen McAuliffe's "Exegetical Sciences" and Roberto Tottoli's "Narrative Literature." I am sure there were editorial considerations to separate these two from their "nonidentical twins" in the second and fourth parts, but I have failed to detect them. Another weak point is the inclusion of an unjustifiably lengthy article dealing with the use of the Qur'an on the Internet by an author whose expertise is probably the Qur'an, but definitely not media and the Internet.

Apart from these comments, I found the following articles essential reading for researchers and students in general and teachers of the Qur'an in particular. McAuliffe's "Exegetical Sciences" and Binyamin Abrahamov's "Theology" provide thorough yet fundamental surveys on two issues often taken for granted: the discipline of Qur'an exegesis in its culmination and the Qur'an's role in Islamic theology. McAuliffe discusses Badr al-Din al-Zarakshi's *Al-Burhan fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's *Al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an*. These most comprehensive manuals for Qur'an exegetes were, and still are, the basis of the curricula of Qur'anic studies not only in Islamic schools, but also in western universities and western scholarship. As McAuliffe points out, Theodor Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorans* (1860) draws extensively from *Al-Itqan*. Abrahamov demonstrates the Qur'an's role in Islamic theology by examining the different theological trends. To be noted are his valuable comments of al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210).

A. Kevin Reinhart's "Jurisprudence" discusses the Qur'an's role in Islamic legislation, Hanafi legislation in particular. Among its important sections are those dealing with the abrogating verses (*nasikh*). Strangely enough, the Arabic term is not indicated in the article, and accordingly not in the index. Tottoli's "Narrative Literature" discusses the Qur'an as a source of inspiration for three literary genres: *qiṣaṣ al-anbiya'* (stories of the prophets), *al-sirah al-nabawiyah* (the life of Muhammad), and eschatology. Anna M. Gade's "Recitation" discusses the practical aspects of the different readings (*qira'at*) of the Qur'an and the different traditions of Qur'anic recitation.

I have detected problems in this well-edited volume that affected my reading experience. An acute problem is the references to the Qur'an throughout the volume, which follow, as they should, the numbering system of the Cairo text. There are too many flaws in the references, which could have been amended by the copyeditor. For example, in Sonn's "Introduc-

ing,” I came across an odd phenomenon of indicating wrongfully a verse preceding the verse, which the author probably meant to single out (Q. 16:59 instead of Q. 16:58, Q. 43:18 instead of Q. 43:17, and so on, for more than ten verses). A reader who is not versed in the Qur’an, so to speak, might use these incorrect references. Another puzzling problem is that none of the authors indicate which of the several English-language translations of the Qur’an they use in their contributions.

Following the opening statement that the book is meant for the general reader, the editor has decided to delete tedious (but necessary) references to footnotes and citations. The bibliographical references for each chapter have been consolidated into one bibliography at the end of the volume. Most of the contributions lack endnotes as well, while the very short bibliography in the end of each contribution is mainly a suggestion for further reading. The logic behind this decision is puzzling, since it makes the reader work even harder to find an exact reference. Although minor, the lack of pictures and illustrations for such a visually rich topic is also a disappointment.

These comments aside, the companion remains an indispensable aid for teachers and students. Some of its contributions are important to scholars as well. The great achievement of this collection is that it succeeds in putting the majority of the contributions more or less on the same level and unfolds a broad view on contemporary research of the Qur’an.

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