

# Review

## Some Recent Contributions to the Study of the Qur'ān

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Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 332 pp.

Andrew Rippin, (ed.): *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 560 pp.

Manfred S. Kropp (ed.): *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'ān: The Question of a Historio-Critical Text of the Qur'ān*. Beirut: Beirut textes und studien 100/Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007, 198 pp.

With the publication of the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (2001–2006), a five-volume (plus an index) project edited under the guidance of Jane Dammen McAuliffe, the western academic study of the Qur'ān has taken a great step forward. Since Theodor Nöldeke's monumental work *Geschichte des Qurāns* (1909–38), Arthur Jeffery's *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (1938) and John Wansbrough's *Qur'ānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (1977), the holy book of Islam has not been a primary focal point for historians of religions. With the publication of the encyclopaedia and the steady growth in new academic publications, however, the study of the Qur'ān seems to have regained its former position within the history of religions, Islamic studies and Semitic languages.

This review essay is based on a close reading of three books that deal explicitly with the Qur'ān. The material for the review consists, first of all, of two introductory volumes: *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Andrew Rippin, and *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. In addition, I have included a volume of conference proceedings published and edited by Manfred S. Kropp, under the title *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'ān: The Question of a Historio-Critical Text of the Qur'ān*.

### **Handbooks about the Qur'ān**

From a general point of view, the larger international publishing houses have lately become more interested in publishing handbooks and encyclo-

paedias. This development is most likely linked to the fact that expensive publications are now mostly produced for libraries and research bodies, not for individual consumers.

However, the publication of new handbooks is also of great importance for the identity of an academic discipline. They can be seen as collective memories and/or as snapshots of the state of the art, and they have the potential to inspire future work. Hence it is essential to study the content of the handbooks in one's own field.

*The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, is divided into five parts. Part One, 'The formation of the text', deals with the historical context, the creation of a fixed text and alternative accounts of the Qur'ān's formation. In Part Two – 'Description and analysis' – the reader is confronted with specific topics, linguistic styles, the art of recitation and the aesthetic dimension of the Qur'ān. Part Three focuses on 'Transmission and dissemination'; the chapters in this part deal with the transmission of the Qur'ān from palm leaves to the Internet, as well as Qur'ānic inscriptions on art and architecture. Part Four – 'Interpretations and intellectual traditions' – deals with questions linked to exegesis and interpretations, as well as with the western study of the Qur'ān. The fifth and last part focuses on 'Contemporary readings': the reader is introduced to feminist and political interpretations and issues related to interfaith dialogue.

From the outset of the volume, the reader is introduced to western criticism of the Muslim perception of how the Qur'ān was collected and edited. The gap between non-Muslim academic study and the Muslim perception, for example, is clearly presented and outlined in Claude Gillot's excellent chapter on the 'Creation of a fixed text'. The different tensions involved in the collection of the Qur'ān are also highlighted by Harald Motzki. Here the reader is informed about the most important Muslim and non-Muslim approaches to the Qur'ān. Besides a historical overview, Motzki casts an important light on some of the most influential and polemical writings about the Qur'ān, such as the ideas of Günter Lüling and Christoph Luxenberg, two highly controversial and polemical scholars who argue that the Qur'ān is based on Christian sources in Aramaic or Syriac. Consequently, Lüling and Luxenberg argue that the Qur'ān is not an authentic revelation.<sup>1</sup> While Motzki gives an informed presentation of the major dividing lines in the

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical discussion of Christoph Luxenberg's theories about the origins of the Qur'ān, see for example François De Blois, 'Review of Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache,' *Journal of Quranic Studies*, Vol. V, Issue 1 (2003).

study of the Qur'ān, it is unfortunate that so little room is left for Muslim scholars to defend and explain themselves, especially since Motzki has given more room to the 'insider's' point of view in his earlier studies of the *ḥadīth* literature.<sup>2</sup> I am not saying that the study of the Qur'ān should be driven by the aim of pleasing Muslims. But for those of us who are interested in the arguments put forward by Muslims themselves, it is also interesting to study the apologetic literature, a topic hardly discussed in any of the three books included in this review.

Compared to McAuliffe's book, Andrew Rippin's *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān* is more voluminous and consequently more detailed. However, it follows more or less the same outline as the other book. It too is divided into five parts: Orientation, Text, Content, Interpretation, and Application. The five parts includes chapters for example on language (including linguistic structure and foreign vocabulary), on prophets and prophethood, on Moses, on theology and on contemporary ethical issues. According to Rippin, the aim of the book is to guide and help the curious reader to approach the Qur'ān:

This companion is explicitly designed to guide the reader who may have little exposure to the Qur'ān beyond a curiosity evoked by the popular media. It aims to provide such a person with the starting point of a general orientation and take him or her to a well-advanced state of understanding regarding the complexities of the text and its associated traditions. (Rippin 2006, x.)

A comparison of Rippin's and McAuliffe's volumes reveals both similarities and differences. Both deal for example with the early history of Islam, the revelation, the codification of the Qur'ān, important aspects of the Qur'ān, important figures in the Qur'ān, the relationship between the Qur'ān and other Islamic subjects (jurisprudence, literature), and the recitation and use of the Qur'ān. Rippin's volume, however, is in general much more detailed, clearly being intended as a reference tool for more advanced students and researchers in Qur'ānic studies. Nonetheless the authors in this volume have different approaches to the early history of Islam. While some authors are reluctant to accept and trust Muslim sources, others are more willing to do so. This difference is clearly seen for example in the chapters that touch upon the revelation and codification of the Qur'ān. From the reader's point of view, it is always stimulating to approach historical sources from as many

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<sup>2</sup> See Harald Motzki, 'The Collection of the Qur'ān: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments,' *Der Islam* 78 (2001), 1–34.

angles as possible; the difference between confessional and non-confessional approaches, however, could have been more clearly addressed in the introduction. In my opinion, informative and balanced introductions and overviews, such as those written by Claude Gilliot and Harald Motzki and included in McAuliffe's volume, are missing from Rippin's book.

From this point of view, McAuliffe's book is much easier to use and definitely more reader-friendly. The only comment I have against this book is that it lacks internal cross references. Even though several authors deal with the same topics – for example, the occasions of the revelations or the codification of the text – there are no cross references except in the index. For the reader, it would have been very informative to see how different scholars approach similar topics.

All in all, in any case, both books require the readers to be familiar with the historical contexts of early Muslim society. To be able to use the volumes in a fruitful way, it is also essential to have some basic knowledge of Arabic language, source criticism and Islamic theology.

### **The search for the Ur-Qur'ān**

The founding fathers of the western academic study of the Qur'ān were all driven by the quest to publish a critical edition of it. The aim was to publish a Qur'ān based on all available manuscripts, papyri and all other remaining written information. For this edition, no religious objections or considerations were to be accepted. The prime goal was to publish the 'authentic' version of the Qur'ān. Not surprisingly, this philological approach clashed directly and immediately with the confessional Muslim perception of the Qur'ān. For Muslims, the Qur'ān is the word of Allah and is consequently to be handled with the utmost respect.

While source-critical problems are addressed by both McAuliffe and Rippin, the quest for an ur-Qur'ān is clearly downplayed in the two volumes discussed above. The focus is instead on how Muslims have used, viewed and interpreted the Qur'ān. In Manfred S. Kropp's book, *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'ān: The Question of a Historio-Critical Text of the Qur'ān*, the search for an ur-Qur'ān is in contrast the first priority:

The task of academic Qur'ān studies is to demonstrate how much of a text and its history can be known with the help of human reasoning – relative and temporary knowledge, to be sure, that needs periodical revision – rather than what it means to its believers. Faith and tradition of a particular religious community in its scriptures can become the separate subject of academic

research in its own right; but the task and goal of historico-critical Qur'ān studies is to clarify the origin and genesis of the text, retrieve and describe its earliest forms and functions, and finally collect and publish the result in one or more critical editions of the text accompanied by a historical commentary. (Kropp 2007, 1.)

While Rippin and McAuliffe are likely to agree with Kropp, the final volume in this review is written from a strictly philological point of view. Questions of how Muslims have used or understood the Qur'ān are not addressed. The aim is to highlight the quest for an Ur-text – nothing less, nothing more! Compared to the two companions discussed above, none of the nine authors included in this volume has written a general overview or introduction to the study of the Qur'ān. The contributions for example by Claude Gilliot, Sergio Noja Nosedá and Françoise Quinsat deal exclusively with the prerequisites for the editing and printing of a historio-critical version of the Qur'ān. Gilliot for example deals with the 'classical [Muslim] works on the readings and their variants', while Quinsat addresses the lexicography and dating of Arabic words. The chapters, however, vary both in content and in length, and the overall impression is somewhat sketchy. Kropp's book is clearly derived from conference proceedings. Hence it is difficult to compare this book to those edited by McAuliffe and Rippin, discussed above.

### **Possible new research topics**

While philological research is the undisputed basis for all studies of the Qur'ān, the search for a historio-critical text should not ignore the fact that the Qur'ān is used and interpreted by over one billion Muslims. Historians of religions, for example, are often interested in how Muslims use, understand and interpret the holy book. However, this insight should not be read as an excuse for neglecting philological studies – on the contrary. It is only by pursuing language studies and by combining different disciplines, theories and methods that we will be able to understand the Qur'ān better. In this final section, I suggest a number of possible research topics that I think deserve more attention in the future. Some of my suggestions are already included in McAuliffe and Rippin, but others have in my opinion been overlooked in the three books included in this review.

The philological approach represented by Manfred S. Kropp will of course continue to play an important and leading role in the future as well. With the discovery for example of new manuscripts, such as those discovered

in the Mosque in Saana in Yemen in 1972, and with better editions of Muslim sources, text-critical study will continue to be of great importance.<sup>3</sup>

Together with source-critical study, however, it is also essential to include more apologetic Muslim voices. Using such material, we will more easily be able to understand the gaps and tensions existing between so-called confessional and non-confessional study. What kinds of motives and epistemological differences are visible in the debate over the Qur'ān? In my view it is a pedagogical problem that Muslim opinions on the revelation are often neglected or downplayed in most textbooks on Islam.<sup>4</sup> Thus the non-Muslim understanding of the Qur'ān is often presented as the norm. The biased focus on non-Muslim interpretations of the Qur'ān creates an imbalance that can hinder us from understanding Muslim points of view. To create some balance, it is for example important to pay more attention to classical and modern Muslim interpretations of the Qur'ān (i.e., the *tafsīr* literature). This approach should of course be combined with non-confessional source-critical study. However, it is necessary for students of the Qur'ān to grasp both sides and to understand that there are several ways of approaching the text.

Finally, from a sociological or cultural point of view it is also essential to increase our knowledge of how so-called ordinary Muslims use the Qur'ān. For example, does the Qur'ān play a different function for Muslims living in the West as compared to those who live in contexts dominated by Islamic values? Similarly, how is the Qur'ān being transmitted and discussed in the new media? Are modern novelists using the Qur'ān as a source of inspiration? What kinds of stories, similes, moral dilemmas and persons are chosen as examples, and why are some verses chosen more frequently than others? What happens with a text when it is mass-produced and sold as a kind of religious commodity?<sup>5</sup>

My suggestions, as collected in this final section, should not be read as criticism of the works included in this review. They are merely illustrations of the fact that the study of the Qur'ān is an exciting and important topic, which deserves greater attention in the future study of Islam.

<sup>3</sup> On the importance of new archaeological findings, see for example Gerd R. Puin, 'Observations on Early Qur'ān Manuscripts in Ṣana'ā', in Stefan Wild (ed.) *The Qur'ān as Text*, Leiden: Brill, 1996. See also Toby Lester, 'What is the Qur'ān?', *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999, Vol. 283, No. 1.

<sup>4</sup> I have tried to address this problem in my book, *Att läsa Koranen: En introduktion* [Reading the Qur'ān: An introduction], Stockholm: Verbum, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> This last question is partly addressed by Gregory Starret, 'The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo,' *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 97, No. 1, 1995.