



HAL
open science

M. A. AMIR-MOEZZI et G. DYE (éds.), Le Coran des historiens. I. Études sur le contexte et la genèse du Coran; II. Commentaire et analyse du texte coranique. III. Bibliographie (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2019)

Gavin Mcdowell

► **To cite this version:**

Gavin Mcdowell. M. A. AMIR-MOEZZI et G. DYE (éds.), Le Coran des historiens. I. Études sur le contexte et la genèse du Coran; II. Commentaire et analyse du texte coranique. III. Bibliographie (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2019). 2021. hal-03929084

HAL Id: hal-03929084

<https://hal.science/hal-03929084v1>

Submitted on 8 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye, eds. *Le Coran des historiens I. Études sur le contexte et la genèse du Coran; II. Commentaire et analyse du texte coranique*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2019. Pp. 3408. ISBN: 9781978700758. € 89,00.

Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye, eds. *Le Coran des historiens III. Bibliographie*. Prepared by Paul Neuenkirchen. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2019. ISBN: 9782204135535. Pp. 330. € 29,00.

Gavin McDowell
Université Laval

Le Coran des historiens is a monumental work of Proustian dimensions. Billed as a “a summary (or perhaps: *summa*) without precedent in history” and also “an unedited adventure of the spirit,” whatever that might mean, this dense work does have a legitimate claim to be the first of its kind. The introduction to the commentary (Vol. 2a, pp. 7–14) touts itself as the only historical-critical commentary on the entire Qur’ān in the French language. Its only true predecessor is the philological commentary of the controversial Scottish Arabist Richard Bell (d. 1952), which was already out of date when it was finally published in 1991.¹ The introduction also approvingly cites the annotated translations of Rudi Paret,² Régis Blachère,³ and Arthur Droge,⁴ who each offered abundant notes but lacked the depth and completeness of the present volumes. This work makes space for more commentary by ditching translation altogether. Despite its title, *Le Coran des historiens* is not a Qur’ān at all. It is an extended introduction, commentary, and bibliography, but there is no Arabic text or translation.

In terms of methodology, *Le Coran des historiens* could be described, in a sense, as “backward-looking.” That is, the Qur’ān is interpreted in light of contemporaneous, largely non-Muslim sources and ignores, for the most part, traditional Muslim exegesis. This approach distinguishes the work from two other projects: *The Study Qur’ān* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr⁵ and the *Corpus Coranicum* database (<https://corpuscoranicum.de/>). *The Study Qur’ān* is a confessional work whose starting point is the very exegetical literature *Le Coran des historiens* eschews (making it a potentially interesting companion piece; it is “forward-looking,” explaining how the Qur’ān has been received rather than where it came from). The *Corpus Coranicum* shares a historical-critical perspective with the present work but adheres to the paradigm established by Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930). Nöldeke and his successors operated under three major assumptions: 1) The Qur’ān is the authentic preaching of Muhammad; 2) The Qur’ān accurately reflects the

¹ Richard Bell, *A Commentary on the Qur’ān*, ed. by Edmund Bosworth and Mervyn E. J. Richardson, 2 vols. (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1991). For the significance of this commentary and its author, see Andrew Rippin, “Reading the Qur’ān with Richard Bell,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112 (1992): 639–647.

² Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Übersetzung von Rudi Paret*, 10th ed. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2007), and idem, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1980).

³ Régis Blachère, *Le Coran. Traduction suivant un essai de reclassement des sourates* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1947–1950).

⁴ Arthur J. Droge, *The Qur’ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013).

⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

experiences of the fledgling Muslim community between 610 and 632 CE; and 3) The compilation of the Qur'ān was initiated by 'Uthmān, the third caliph, before his death in 656 CE (see vol. 1, pp. 746–748). Though influential, the presumptions behind the “Nöldeke paradigm” differ little from a confessional approach and lack a solid historical foundation. Representatives of this approach (such as Angelika Neuwirth) are nevertheless well-represented in the commentary since *Le Coran des historiens* aims at providing a full summary of the current state of critical scholarship.

Le Coran des historiens, like *Gaul*, is divided into three parts. They are sufficiently different that the individual volumes could be sold separately (indeed, the third volume—the bibliography—is sold separately). The first volume, *Études sur le contexte et la genèse du Coran*, provides an introduction and background to the Late Antique world in which the Qur'ān emerged. It is almost exactly 1000 pages long. It consists of twenty chapters, some quite long (100 pages or more), written by specialists in their respective fields (not all of whom are specialists of the Qur'ān). As a stand-alone volume, it could almost serve as a general introduction to Late Antiquity. A translated table of contents gives some idea of its breadth:

Part One: The Qur'ān and the Origins of Islam: The Historical and Geographical Context

1. Pre-Islamic Arabia (Christian Julien Robin)
2. Arabs and Iranians Before and at the Beginning of Islam: An Overview of Some Zones of Contact and Conflict (Samra Azarnouche)
3. The Lives of Muhammad (Stephen J. Shoemaker)
4. From Arabia to Empire: Conquest and Caliphal Construction in Early Islam (Antoine Borrut)

Part Two: The Qur'ān at the Crossroad of Late Antique Religious Traditions

5. Judaism and the Qur'ān (Meir M. Bar-Asher)
6. Religious Communities in the Byzantine Empire on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (Muriel Debié and Vincent Déroche)
7. Christians in Sasanid Iran (Christelle Jullien)
8. Ethiopian Christianity (Manfred Kropp and Guillaume Dye)
9. “Jewish-Christian” Currents and Oriental Christians of Late Antiquity (Jan M. F. Van Reeth)
10. Manichaeism: Current Research (Michel Tardieu)
11. Jewish Apocryphal Writings and the Qur'ān (David Hamidović)
12. Syriac Apocalypses (Muriel Debié)
13. Iranian Apocalyptic (Frantz Grenet)
14. The Qur'ān and its Legal Environment (David S. Powers)

Part Three: The Qur'ānic Corpus

15. The Study of Qur'ānic Manuscripts in the West (François Déroche)
16. Ancient Qur'ānic Manuscripts: An Overview of the Evidence and Presentation of Research Tools (Éléonore Cellard)
17. The Qur'ān in Stone⁶ (Frédéric Imbert)
18. The Qur'ānic Corpus: Context and Composition (Guillaume Dye)
19. The Qur'ānic Corpus: Questions Concerning its Canonization (Guillaume Dye)
20. Shi'ism and the Qur'ān (Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi)

⁶ That is, the Qur'ān as represented in epigraphy and graffiti.

As can be seen, only the last quarter or so of this volume explicitly treats the topic of the Qur'ān. This is hardly a criticism. On the contrary, it represents the wide tapestry of areas that could potentially shed light on our understanding of the Qur'ān. It is so vast that it is hard to see what is missing, although I would have liked to see an article on Christian Apocrypha and the Qur'ān.

Two articles stand out as foundational for understanding the contemporary state of Qur'ānic studies: Stephen Shoemaker's "The Lives of Muhammad" and Guillaume Dye's two-part study of "The Qur'ānic Corpus." Both articles make the same essential point: the need to sever contemporary Qur'ānic studies from Muslim tradition. In the first case, the received biography of Muhammad (*Sīra*) provided early critical scholars (and some contemporary ones) with a means of better understanding the Qur'ānic text since it gives the historical context of the revelation of each *sūrah* and explains difficult Qur'ānic passages by linking them to specific episodes in the life of Muhammad. However, the biographical literature, compiled more than a century after Muhammad's death, is both late and tendentious. It is better understood as an example of Qur'ānic exegesis rather than the historical background to the Qur'ānic text.

Consequently, the historical unreliability of the biography of Muhammad means that the origin of the Qur'ān itself is something of a mystery. Dye, in his pair of articles, argues that the scholars should not approach the composition of the Qur'ān in a manner fundamentally different from the way they would approach the composition of the Bible. Dye compares the relative swiftness of the Qur'ān's redaction to the compilation of the New Testament, including a reference to the Qur'ān's "synoptic problem" (vol. 1, p. 786, indicating the frequent use of similar passages), although, in my opinion, the form of the Qur'ān more closely resembles (appropriately enough) the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. In any case, Dye underscores that the Qur'ān is not a single book but rather a corpus, akin to the corpus of biblical books. The tools of form and redaction criticism long familiar to biblical scholars should be applied to the Qur'ān to distinguish the different layers of composition and establish a relative chronology independent of the "Nöldeke paradigm."

The second volume, *Commentaire et analyse du texte coranique*, the commentary proper, is divided into two large tomes, labeled 2a and 2b. Volume 2a covers the first 26 *sūrahs* in approximately 1000 pages. Volume 2b, paginated continuously with the preceding volume, covers the rest of the Qur'ān (*sūrahs* 27–114) in about 1400 pages. The disparity in size and the number of *sūrahs* covered in each volume reflects the organization of the Qur'ān from larger *sūrahs* to smaller ones. Volume 2a, in fact, covers almost two-thirds of the Arabic text, but volume 2b is longer on account of each *sūrah* receiving several pages of commentary even if it is only three verses long.

A smaller pool of experts, for the most part different from the authors of volume 1, wrote the commentaries. In contrast with the previous volume, the authors here are specifically specialists of the Qur'ān. Most wrote commentaries for at least a block of consecutive *sūrahs*. Several also wrote additional commentaries for the final, shorter *sūrahs*:

Paul Neuenkirchen: *Sūrahs* 1, 47–68, 88, 100–114

Carlos A. Segovia: *Sūrahs* 2–3

Gabriel Said Reynolds: *Sūrahs* 4–6

Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann: *Sūrahs* 7–9
Guillaume Dye and Julien Decharneux: *Sūrah* 10
Tommaso Tesei: *Sūrahs* 11, 13–15, 91–95
Julien Decharneux: *Sūrahs* 12 and 84
Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen: *Sūrahs* 16–20, 83
Mehdi Azaiez: *Sūrahs* 21–26, 78, 90
Jan M. F. Van Reeth: *Sūrahs* 27–36
Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau: *Sūrahs* 37–46
Guillaume Dye: *Sūrahs* 69–70, 73–77, 79–82, 85–87, 97–99
Guillaume Dye and Gabriel Said Reynolds: *Sūrahs* 71 and 72
Guillaume Dye and Manfred Kropp: *Sūrahs* 89 and 96

Every chapter opens the same way, with the number of verses, the rhyme scheme (the Qur’ān is written in rhymed prose), and an outline of the overall structure of the *sūrah*. Apart from this, there is a great deal of variety in the approaches to the text, reflecting each author’s personal research interests. For example, Reynolds⁷ shows a special interest for the Qur’ān’s discussion of biblical figures and use of biblical language; Pohlmann⁸ prefers to discuss redaction criticism and identifies different layers of the text; Azaiez⁹ discusses at length the Qur’ān’s “counter-discourse” (i.e., the objections of opponents embedded in the Qur’ānic text); Boisliveau¹⁰ discusses the Qur’ān’s many references to itself. The variety among the authors means that reading the entire commentary in succession is not an insane enterprise. It is, in fact, entirely feasible to read a small portion of the Qur’ānic text alongside the commentary over the course of one or two months.

The third volume, *Bibliographie des études sur le Coran*, is not included with the other volumes in the boxed set. Instead, the back cover of each volume refers to the publisher’s website, where it can be purchased separately (an electronic edition is also available on Amazon’s Kindle store). The bibliography was assembled by Paul Neuenkirchen, who also wrote the greatest number of commentaries and translated many of the English contributions. His introduction (and, indeed, the general introduction: vol. 1, p. 30) suggests that this bibliography was intended to be a regularly updated online reference. Why this is not the case eludes me, and it is an annoyance on two fronts: 1) It is scandalous, in principle, that a bibliography should be sold separately from the main work (some unhappy Amazon customers bought the bibliography unaware that it was not the main work); 2) The other volumes are not available in an electronic format. This latter feature would have been greatly appreciated, since the box set, though pleasing to the eye, weighs seven and a half pounds and takes up a lot of shelf space.

The first two volumes have their fair share of bibliography (one at the end of every chapter), so one could, in principle, skip the third volume. This would be a mistake. The third volume is not merely a master bibliography of all the works cited in the preceding volumes. It is something of a bibliography-*cum-index* in two parts. In the first part, it arranges the bibliography by *sūrah* and

⁷ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); idem, *The Qur’ān and its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁸ Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Die Entstehung des Korans: Neue Erkenntnisse aus Sicht der historisch-kritischen Bibelwissenschaft*, 3rd ed. (Darmstadt: WBG, 2015).

⁹ Mehdi Azaiez, *Le contre-discours coranique* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

¹⁰ Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même. Vocabulaire et argumentation du discours coranique autoréférentiel* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

verse. In the second part, it organizes the bibliography according to every named figure in the Qur'ān (mainly biblical figures). This is an extraordinarily useful feature, and I am certain to use it immediately in future research—possibly more frequently than the commentary itself.

I have very few quibbles with the work. The most evident are the occasional typos, two of which appear in the table of contents. In Volume 1, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi's contribution, the twentieth in the volume, is numbered X instead of XX. More bothersome is an error in volume 2b, where the commentary of *sūrah* 36 (*Yā Sīn*) is attributed to Boisliveau, while *sūrah* 37 (*al-Ṣāffāt*) is attributed to Van Reeth. In fact, it is the reverse. The chapters are correctly attributed in the commentaries themselves. Verses that could merit whole books, such as Q 2:102 (Hārūt and Mārūt) or Q 4:157 (the crucifixion of Jesus) are only dealt with briefly. This is hardly surprising as the commentary is already 2,400 pages, but it is a little disappointing. This is one of the reasons that the bibliography in volume 3 is so valuable: it shows where one can go for further reference. Furthermore, the Qur'ān is a repetitive book, and this sometimes leads to repetitive commentary. Twenty-nine *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān begin with mysterious, disconnected letters that have so far not received a universally satisfying explanation. That has not stopped scholars from trying. Thus, in this commentary, the issue is addressed twenty-nine times. Finally, the professed audience of *Le Coran des historiens* is the general public (vol. 1, p. 22: “cultivated, certainly, but not specialists”). True to this aim, there is a dearth of footnotes. In addition to the necessary citation of sources, the footnotes will sometimes define concepts that might be unfamiliar to the general reader. Sometimes they are over-explanatory (vol. 2a, p. 834, defines “rhetorical question”).

On a final note, most of the authors are French or Francophone, but not all of them. This is one of the strengths of the work. It is really an international effort. It deserves an international audience.