In Search of Chronology: Narratives of Qur'anic Evolution in Western Academia

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Abstract: Since the nineteenth century, Orientalist scholars have been preoccupied with recovering the original order of the Qur'an. In the past fifty years, the question appears to have reached an impasse with no sign of an emerging consensus. Divergences over the anchoring in space and time of the Qur'an have contributed to the diagnosis of "crisis" in (Western) Qur'anic studies.

What do the project of determining Qur'anic chronology and its failure tell us about Qur'anic studies in Western academia? What do the current impasses reveal about the nature of the Qur'an as a text and as a theological object? This study analyses disagreements over the Qur'an's space and time by drawing on tools from literary theory and hermeneutics. It argues for a shift from a positivist to an interpretative paradigm. Moving away from the question of the *actual* historical order of the Qur'an, this article examines the making and the workings of diachronic readings of the Muslim scripture, with a particular focus on the works of two of the most prominent scholars in the field, Angelika Neuwirth and Nicolai Sinai. The aim of the exercise is double: first, to perform a critical reflection on the networks of meaning that we construct or inherit in our engagement with the Muslim scripture; and second, to apprehend better the nature of the Qur'an as an "open text" (Eco 1962) whose textual characteristics make it particularly prone to a number of interpretations.

Keywords: Qur'anic chronology, origins of the Qur'an, historical study of the Qur'an, Prophet, conflict of interpretation, hermeneutics, semiotics, historical narrative

Introduction

"History is explanation", writes philosopher Michael Oakeshott. To enter the realm of historical inquiry, an event must have a cause "other than God" and find

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its rightful place in the unbroken fabric of the past. For, in the flow of time as in nature, adds Oakeshott, Leibniz's principle of continuity governs: *everything goes by degrees and nothing by leaps*. History, as a discipline and a human activity, is tasked with providing as full an account as possible, one in which, ideally, all *hiatus* is overcome (Oakeshott 1995 [1933]: 125–43). Some gaps, however, are harder to bridge than others. Depending on the nature and availability of documentary evidence, certain events demand great effort and creativity before they can be meaningfully integrated into an account of the past. The formation of the Muslim scripture is such an event.

In which context, through which processes and for what audiences, was the Qur'anic corpus originally composed? The context of the Qur'an has divided the field since John Wansbrough radically called into question the reliability of Muslim sources more than forty years ago. The first attested book in Arabic, the Qur'an seems to enter the stage as a *unicum*, abruptly and without antecedents. How did an elaborate scripture arise in a geographically isolated region, in a society that had been attached, or so we are told, to oral forms of authority and transmission (Macdonald 2000, 2005)?[2] John Wansbrough (2004 [1977]) was first to point out that there is something profoundly astonishing – indeed, theological – in this scenario. Almost five decades later, no alternative account has been convincingly put forward. Attempts to reduce the gap that separates the Qur'an and its Arabian milieu from the literate and biblically permeated culture of the late antique Near East have gone in varied, at times contradictory, directions.[3] Despite substantial progress made in Arabian epigraphy, in the study of Qur'anic manuscripts, in late antique studies and archeology, the Qur'anic *hiatus* largely remains:[4] the historical process that gave rise to the Qur'an continues to represent "one of the most persistent mysteries from the end of antiquity" (Shoemaker 2021a). We know *le fait coranique* (Arkoun 1975), to be theologically embedded, but we remain, so far at least, unable to produce an account that does not demand equal leaps of faith.

A fundamental and well-known challenge for reconstructing the history of the Qur'an and the beginning of Islam lies in the dearth of documentary and archaeological evidence. The Qur'an is the main, perhaps the only, document reliably dated to that early period.[5] It is also, as is often observed, a particularly difficult text from which to extract univocal meaning, let alone history. The absence of a narrative framework, the malleable relationships between the components of the text (at the level of the verses and at the level of the suras), the elusive character of its author (whether represented as divine, single, or collective), the use of recurrent formulas, images, and themes, all these cohere to produce a surplus of meaning.

In the heyday of structuralist semiotics, Umberto Eco famously coined the expression of the "open work" (*opera aperta*) to describe experimental creations that require the reader or the performer to cooperate in actualizing the work, by

making decisions, establishing connections, and filling in blanks (Eco 1962, 1979). Roland Barthes's notion of "writerly text" (*texte scriptible*) converges toward a similar reality, that of a plurivocal text. The "writerly text" is a "galaxy of signifiers" whose final *writing* is accomplished by the reader, each and every time they *read* (Barthes 1974 [1970]). Though the Qur'an perhaps does not strictly qualify as an *open work* in Eco's original sense – the latter assumes an authorial intention for the reader's collaboration and, therefore, describes a modern phenomenon – it *performs* as one.[6] To the reader, and perhaps even more so to the reciter who has memorized it, the Qur'an offers the experience of a hypertext, that is, a text characterized by multiple networking possibilities. The Qur'an's plural nature, bolstered by its scriptural status, provides a particularly rich case study for a reader-response approach. Several studies have examined the hermeneutics of confessional readings, both at level of the individual and the community, past and present.[7] This article extends a reader-oriented inquiry to the contemporary historical-positivist interpretations produced in the Western academy: how is the Qur'an *read* philologically? What interpretative procedures, reading strategies and contextual presuppositions are applied to the text when attempting to reconstruct its history, and with what results?[8]

This reflexive gaze provides a valuable perspective on the current state of the field, which, as is often observed, is characterized by a plurality of readings, yet tainted by a sense of frustration. The "crisis" of Qur'anic studies – the field's incapacity to reach a consensus on basic historiographical questions (Donner 2008; Sinai 2017a) – has absorbed scholars for half a century. The skeptical turn has given rise to a flurry of publications on the *Methodenstreit* and the desiderata of the field (Berg 2003; Azmeh 2014; Brockopp 2016; Dye 2019; Sirry 2021, etc.). Competing reading strategies to "unveil", "decrypt", or "unlock" the Qur'an often appear as "one-sided conversations" (Stewart 2017: 52). Scholars differ in their evaluation of the state of the field, deploring the lack of consensus or rejoicing in its new-found "vitality", but most agree that the disagreement is essentially hermeneutical. The root of scholarly dissonance is located in the varied ways in which we read and interpret the Qur'an: the differing "incidental normativities" (Brockopp 2016), "competing paradigms" (Berg 2003), the "position chosen by the researcher" (Neuwirth 2002: 245), or perhaps, simply, the "personal dispositions" we bring to the text (Rippin 2014: 2). Circularity of argument has become a recurrent critique, throwing into question the field's ability to regulate itself and produce cumulative knowledge. As John Wansbrough (2004 [1977]: 21) pointed out with characteristic phlegm, "the kind of analysis undertaken will in no small measure determine the results". Alongside political and institutional dynamics (Caeiro and Stefanidis 2018), the conflict of interpretations is one of the clearest manifestations of the "crisis" of Qur'anic studies.

Literary theory, semiotics, and hermeneutics have long grappled with questions of interpretation, validity, the nature of texts, and the role of the reader in meaning-making. Building on insights from this body of literature, this article presents a case study of what literary theorist Jonathan Culler has called a "semiotics of reading" (2001 [1981]): an exploration of both the Qur'an's intelligibility and the interpretative operations performed by readers to make sense of it.

I focus on a specific and coherent group of scholarly works: chronological reconstructions of the Qur'an. Based on premises of Muslim exegetical thought and developed in the heyday of historical criticism in the middle of the nineteenth century (Weil 1844; Nöldeke 1860; Muir 1858–61), diachronic approaches consider the traditional setting for the Qur'anic proclamations (Mecca and Medina) a valid working hypothesis and attempt to recover the history of the Qur'an from within, based on philological-historical considerations. These studies assume that the Qur'an, in its form and content, keeps traces of the "communication process between a charismatic speaker and his audience" (Neuwirth 2003: 5). Hence, a close examination of the text allows for a reconstruction of the evolution of the Qur'anic discourse, providing a window unto the gradual shaping of the community gathered around it. Ambitious in method and scope, chronological approaches to the Qur'an provide a well-suited case for a preliminary study of the networks of meaning scholars, as readers, construct, for two main reasons. First, while the results of such studies vary, they remain commensurable since these scholars work on the same textual corpus (the Qur'an in its entirety)[9] and share the same presuppositions regarding the Qur'anic setting. Secondly, chronological approaches are at the heart of the field's ongoing methodological debates. Hailed as the key to unlocking the Qur'an's historical meanings or judged to be an impasse, an investigation of how diachronic reconstructions function sheds light on how and why chronology has come to be seen as the "Shibboleth of Qur'anic studies" (Neuwirth 2016: 182).[10]

The article consists of three parts. The first section is a general presentation of the workings of chronological approaches, defined here as readings which organize the Muslim scripture in a specific sequence and account for that sequence through a narrative. The following two sections analyze the interpretative operations performed by scholars at two crucial moments in the construction of a narrative of Qur'anic evolution: the determination of the beginning of the proclamation, on the one hand, and the nature of its subsequent transformation, on the other. While I draw on various contributions to the problem of Qur'anic evolution, I pay particular attention to the works of two of the leading scholars of the field today, Angelika Neuwirth and Nicolai Sinai.[11]

Reading the Qur'an Diachronically

Ordering (that is to say, in Barthesian language, *reading*) a "writerly" text can be done in many ways. Within the framework of a chronological reading, a general progression of the Qur'anic discourse from short rhythmic suras with strong eschatological imagery to longer narrative or exhortative pieces is assumed. Beneath the shared assumptions of chronological re-orderings, however, lies a variety of ways in which the Qur'an is organized, and its evolution narrated and justified. A diachronic interpretation of the Qur'an is built along the model of the hermeneutical circle: one's understanding of the text as a whole is established in reference to the individual parts, and vice versa, ideally in an increasingly refined manner. Scholars examine the heterogeneity of the text based on certain interpretative principles and synthesize their observations in a coherent and plausible account of evolution, which in turn, may lead them to nuance their original assumptions. Circularity is a frequently raised objection to chronological approaches. This objection was perhaps most clearly articulated by Andrew Rippin (2001: xxii) when he pointed out that "using the chronological framework produces a systematic picture of the development of semantic information which may then be used to re-date elements which do not fit into the basic scheme". The critique is well-founded; yet, from a hermeneutical perspective, circularity is a fundamental element of interpretation *per se*, not a shortcoming typifying chronological re-orderings. That the Qur'an semiotically performs as an *open* or *writerly* text entails a degree of circularity in all interpretations thereof. While this does raise the question of validity – if circularity is unavoidable, how do we evaluate individual hypotheses? – neither the problem nor the solution is specific to Qur'anic studies. With few, if any, controls exterior to the text, the main criterion for assessing the efficacy of a chronological reading must be consistency. How are formal and semantic characteristics of the Qur'an meaningfully emplotted in a narrative of evolution? Does the text offer any resistance to that narrative? What are the internal logic and interpretative principles of each narrative? Where are disagreements situated, and why?

In recent years, stylometric studies have promised to infuse some quantitative objectivity into a debate that seems hopelessly subjective. A digitalized analysis confirms that several Qur'anic style markers appear to vary in a consistent fashion. Sadeghi (2011) and Sinai (2020) have argued that this coincidence is best explained as reflecting development over time. A sophisticated tool, stylometry is an important argument in the current debate on the history of the Qur'an, though it is unlikely to be, by itself, conclusive. The disagreement regarding the Qur'an is multifaceted and runs deeper than the chronological debate. Thus, the unity of the Qur'anic corpus, a fundamental assumption of the chronological reading, remains a debated question (Dye 2019, 2021; Reynolds 2020; Shoemaker 2021b).

Sadeghi's assertion that stylometry firmly proves the single authorship of the Muslim scripture is tempered by the Qur'an's limited size and the lack of a parallel textual corpus to which it can be meaningfully compared. Moreover, recent alternative dating of specific Qur'anic passages on the basis of late antique intertextuality and archaeology (Shoemaker 2003; Dye 2012; Van Bladel 2008; Tesei 2011) pose a challenge to which stylometry cannot respond.[12] Finally, and most crucially for the present article, a stylometric analysis remains contingent on interpretative choices performed before and after the actual text-mining. Stylometry cannot produce a chronological order; it can only put one to the test. The former must be decided beforehand either by using a sequence developed qualitatively or through a formal criterion, such as verse length (Sinai 2017a, 2020). Furthermore, the determination of the basic textual unit – the sura or a smaller fragment – inevitably affects the resulting chronological sequence.[13] Then, once a sequence has been corroborated, comes the task of fleshing out the data to produce a "reconstruction of a plausible theological and literary trajectory" (Sinai 2017a: 124). Stylometry's usefulness ends before the elaboration of a *narrative* of Qur'anic evolution. The meaning attributed to a specific sequence will have to be the product of a *reading*.

When reading the Qur'an diachronically, two kinds of interpretative operations can, therefore, be distinguished. The first is the close reading of the text to identify features and collect evidence. The second is the emplotment of the Qur'an: the construction of a narrative that will meaningfully integrate, and account for, the textual characteristics highlighted by the close reading. These two interpretative operations are interdependent, following the model of the hermeneutic circle linking the whole and the parts; yet they respond to different logics and constraints. Critical reading classifies and organizes. It aims at "discovering heterogeneity that can be of technical use", to use Michel de Certeau's evocative formulation (1988 [1975]: 77). The value of a narrative, on the other hand, lies in its capacity to mimic our intuitive experience of time. Its explanatory force entails, however, a degree of simplification and distortion. Heated discussions on the nature, role and shortcomings of narratives have occupied the field of history since the linguistic turn (Dray 1971; Clark 2004). What these debates have brought to the fore is the recognition that, to paraphrase Hayden White (1987), the form impacts the content. The configuration of a narrative tends to follow certain principles.[14] One may recall the classic (Aristotelian) model of the narrative characterized by a beginning (the set-up) and an end, in which *change* is the necessary principle that sets the story into motion (Todorov 1971). Set-up and change, in other words, constitute crucial moments in the construction of a narrative. In the following two sections, I examine challenges that arise in the construction of these two moments.

Defining the "Beginning"

To tell a story, one needs a starting point. What was the original focus of the Qur'an? How did that focus then develop? To answer these two questions, scholars build on specific representations of the Qur'anic milieu, the psychology of the messenger, and readings of the corpus of the short suras. While the short suras are unanimously considered to represent the oldest stratum of the proclamation, they comprise a range of thematic and stylistic features which can be meaningfully connected in various diachronic sequences. Orientalists such as Hubert Grimme (d. 1942) and William Muir (d. 1905) proposed scenarios which prefigure later treatments of the question. For Grimme, the original focus of the Qur'an was social reform. He considered that Muhammad was not primarily interested in founding a religion but in offering a "socialist" solution to "certain earthly ills that were rampant" (Grimme 1892: 14). Grimme selected the short suras with a strong emphasis on solidarity and the shunning of wealth (Q al-Humaza/104, Q al-Māʿūn/107, Q al-Takāṯur/102, etc.) as best representing the core message of the Qur'an. In his view, religious tropes such as God's omnipotence and the Day of Judgment were secondary themes developed to reinforce the Prophet's social concerns.

William Muir's reconstruction followed a different path, although it resembled that of Grimme in making contingent what is generally considered a defining characteristic of the Qur'an. The author of an erudite biography of the Prophet and an active member of the Christian mission of Agra, Muir noted that a few short suras refer to God using the third person form: Q al-ʿAṣr/103, Q al-ʿĀdiyāt/100, Q al-Zalzala/99, Q al-Šams/91, and al-Fātiḥa/1. He conjectured that these suras, which he called "rhapsodies" (1861 2: 60), represent the earlier phase of Muhammad's religious activity when, in his spiritual yearning, he produced "wild and impassioned poetry" (ibid.: 60). Faced with the objection that God had not sent any prophet to the Arabs, Muhammad would gradually come to be convinced that he was divinely entrusted. The burgeoning belief in his own prophethood, Muir continued, would have come after a painful "mental struggle" (ibid.: 69). Doubts eventually called for self-reassurance, of which Q al-Ḍuḥā/93, Q al-Šarḥ/94 and Q al-Kawṯar/108 are telling examples (ibid.: 70). Muir's carefully laid out narrative may have been motivated by more than philological considerations. Indeed, one may assume, following Theodor Nöldeke (1860: 61), that Muir, a devout Christian, was troubled by Muhammad, whom he found inspiring in his initial spiritual thirst and piety (ibid.: 60) and yet repugnant for founding Islam, that "formidable antagonist of Christianity" (Muir 1897 [1845]: 2). A chronological reconstruction is "a stage on which incompatible elements can be put into play together", notes Michel de Certeau (1988 [1975]: 89). Muir's reconstruction of the early stage of Muhammad's proclamations may have been an attempt to address a specific, and to a large extent personal, perplexity.

In recent years, Nicolai Sinai has examined the question of the first suras in two articles that develop diverging arguments (2006, 2010). The evolution of Sinai's work illuminates the interpretative choices entailed in defining the beginning of the Qur'anic proclamation. In an article entitled "Qur'ānic Self-Referentiality as a Strategy of Self-Authorization" (2006), Sinai explores how the Qur'anic discourse progressively constructed its own authority as a revelation. Mocked and rejected by contemporary skeptics, the Qur'an develops an ever more refined "strategy of self-authorization". In a late antique context familiar with the Biblical concept of scripture, probes into the Qur'an's scriptural claims were bound to arise. Its situatedness and fragmented character was grounds for ridicule, as the Qur'an itself attests most clearly in Q. 25:32: *The disbelievers ask: "Why was the Qur'an not sent down to him all at once?"*. According to Sinai, the Qur'an's response entailed an increasingly complex exposition of its relationship to the heavenly book, the *kitāb*. Building on, and modifying, previous observations that *kitāb* and *qur'ān* are related but not necessarily identical categories (Madigan 2001; Neuwirth 2014 [1996]) Sinai identifies the notion of *tafṣīl* as the pivotal element of the Qur'an's self-definition, developed under hostile pressure. *Tafṣīl* is usually understood as "detailed elucidation", but Sinai suggests a meaning closer to "translation". The *kitāb* being celestial and inaccessible in essence, *tafṣīl* denotes the process through which it reaches humanity. God is the one who "translates" or elucidates the *kitāb* into a *qur'ān*, an oral proclamation. Remarkably, as Sinai notes, the Qur'an's theological argument thus transforms "[its] situated and interactive nature from a liability into an asset": it grants the revelation both the timeless authority of the Kitab and the immediacy and proximity of the oral word (2006: 125).

This succinct summary fails to do justice to Sinai's perceptive exposition but helps to underline what its benchmark for a diachronic reconstruction of Qur'anic discourse is: an increasingly sophisticated strategy of self-authorization.[15] Sinai infers that the first fragments to be revealed must have been short suras which "display no interest in defining their own authority, function and origin". He identifies five suras as fitting this delineation of the earliest stratum of revelation: Q al-Ḍuḥā/93, Q al-Šarḥ/94, Q al-Fīl/105, Q Qurayš/106, Q al-Kawṯar/108 (2006: 107). As Harris Birkeland (1956) noted, these five monothematic suras celebrate God's guidance, whether on an individual (Q. 93, 94, 108) or a collective level (Q. 105, 106). A second trait that characterizes them is the absence of eschatological content, which, in view of the latter's prominence in the Qur'an, and in the short suras in particular, demands an explanation. A chronological sequence provides, once again, an answer. Sinai (2006) suggests that the revelation began with the five afore-mentioned "guidance suras", then underwent "some sort of eschatological turn" before developing an increasingly refined self-authorization strategy in the face of objections and mockery:

from oaths to the affirmation of the divine origin of the Qur'an, the latter gradually evolving into a complex scriptural theology.

A few years later, Sinai offered a substantially revised interpretation. In an article entitled "The Qur'an as Process" (2010), Sinai emphasized the differences between Q. 105 and 106, on the one hand, and the other three suras Q. 93, 94, 108, on the other. Only the former suras present truly "discontinuous" – meaning, here, archaic – characteristics. Their focus on God's blessing on the Quraysh combined with the absence of any polemical materiel would indicate a stage preceding the onset of hostilities. The latter three suras (Q. 93, 94, 108), which Sinai had previously characterized as not yet partaking in the Qur'an's self-authorization strategy, are now considered "meta-texts". Together with Q al-Qadr/97, they constitute "important statements of authorization" of the Qur'anic proclamation (2010: 429).

How can these opposed readings of the same suras be sustained? Sinai's turnaround illustrates how Qur'anic passages can be contextualized differently according to the connections and inferences made by the reader. Q. 93 and 94 can be read as suras of private guidance (Sinai 2006) but also, by virtue of their display of God's proximity to the messenger, as authorizing testimonies (Sinai 2010). Linking them to other passages and positioning them in a sequence of development provides weight to one reading over another. Thus, in his 2010 article, Sinai disconnects the five "guidance suras" which he had previously, following H. Birkeland, associated: "Birkeland's notion of a cluster of five 'guidance surahs' with a common theological outlook is problematic, since the five texts analyzed by him in reality fall into two very different classes" (2010: 427). Q. 105 and Q. 106, based on their unique features, are cast at the very beginning of the proclamation, while Q. 93, 94, and 108 are brought closer to Q al-Qadr/97, which is traditionally understood as describing the process of Qur'anic revelation itself and, as such, can easily be characterized as self-referential. Seen through the lens of Q. 97, Q. 93, 94, and 108 become more easily perceived as "statements of authorization".

What is gained from this rearrangement is that a greater weight is accorded to the brief suras focusing on divine judgment (Q. 95, 102, 103, 104, 107) and apocalyptic descriptions (Q. 99, 100, 101, 111), which the 2006 article had addressed in cursory fashion. In the 2010 version, these suras do not constitute "some sort of an eschatological turn"; they are rather the core of early Qur'anic proclamation. It is because the eschatological message of the Qur'an was met with suspicion that suras validating the message (Q. 97) and the messenger (Q. 93, 94, 108) were called for. The studies of 2006 and 2010, therefore, differ on two crucial points. First, the reading of Q. 93, 94, and 108 goes in opposite directions: the 2006 study characterizes them as devoid of any self-referentiality, while the 2010 piece considers them "the beginning of the Qur'anic discourse of authorization" (2010: 429). Second, the relative position of Q. 93, 94 and 108 in relation to the eschatological and judgment

suras is inverted: according to the 2006 study, the "guidance suras" and their message of divine sustenance represent the starting point of the Qur'an, whereas in the 2010 article, as well as in Sinai's later publications (2017a, 2017b), the nucleus of the Qur'an is eschatological.

Sinai's fluctuating analysis provides an example of how different readings highlight different facets of the text. The reconstruction of the beginning of the revelation depends on the wider argument and on the question(s) asked. Sinai's initial qualification of Q. 93 and 94 as non-referential (2006) is a consequence of the project he then set out to complete, namely a study of the Qur'an's claim for its scriptural status. Meanwhile, the focus of the 2010 article is to demonstrate the value of a "processual reading" of the Qur'an reflecting the dynamic and gradual establishment of a community of followers. Center stage is here given to the two "Quraysh suras", Q. 105 and 106, and the eschatological proclamations, while the personal suras, Q. 93, 94 and 108, fulfill a supportive role.

Sinai returned to the issue of the Qur'an's core message in a third article, entitled "The Eschatological Kerygma of the Early Qur'an" (2017b). His concern is, here, to situate the Qur'an within the late antique, particularly Syriac, tradition of apocalyptic literature to get a "better sense of how the Qur'anic phenomenon got under way" (2017b: 220). Zooming out from the particulars of the community, Sinai takes a panoramic view that does not require a precise reordering of Qur'anic themes or suras. For his purposes, he selects Q al-Takāṯur/102 as the prototypical early sura because it most clearly encapsulates the "two principal dimensions of the early Qur'anic kerygma" (ibid.: 226), moral critique and eschatological menace, which also characterize the Syriac homiletic tradition.

As Sinai's works illustrate, differences in chronological reconstructions can be explained with reference to the larger project that encompasses them. Similarly, Nöldeke's chronological reconstruction, whose focus on Qur'anic style was pathbreaking at the time, emphasized the short apocalyptic suras because they best represented Muhammad's initial "passionate excitation" (1860: 78; Nöldeke and Schwally 1909: 98) which he wanted to contrast with the "dull" style of the later Meccan suras (1860: 107; Nöldeke and Schwally 1909: 143). Nöldeke was not particularly concerned with identifying the first sura(s), because he considered this a naive enterprise ("or should we hold", he wrote with sarcasm, "that Muhammad was keeping an archive?" [1860: 48; Nöldeke and Schwally 1909: 62]), and because his reconstruction was structured in a way that stressed the principle of *change* over that of the *beginning*. Struck by the stylistic contrast between the short, rhythmic passionate suras and the longer, "repetitive" passages, he suggested that the Qur'an's style "declined" on account of the Prophet's loss of heart in the face of unflinching opposition (1860: 90; Nöldeke and Schwally 1909: 118; Stefanidis 2008).

While Nöldeke's project did not require a precise definition of the earliest revelations, setting a particular beginning plays a crucial role in other chronological reconstructions. The Qur'anic chronological beginnings proposed by Muir, Grimme, and Sinai in his later version (2017b) exemplify the three most common solutions. The initial core of the Qur'an is presented as an anxiety for social reform (Grimme 1892: 14; Chabbi 2008: 112[16]), a personal religious experience of God's bounties (Muir 1858–61; Bell 1953: 106; Birkeland 1954; Blachère I: 6; Neuwirth 2011: 44) or an eschatological discourse permeated by late antique literary topoi (Sinai 2017a, 2017b; Nöldeke 1860; Andrae 1955 [1926]). These interpretations must not necessarily be perceived as mutually exclusive. The Qur'an, many would agree, reflects a religious experience, calls for reform, and draws on a stock of late antique imagery and themes. Yet, scholars have disagreed, at times vehemently so, on how best to connect these three themes diachronically. Brushing over differences does not allow us to perceive what can be at stake in determining the earliest stratum of the Qur'an.

Three observations may be made in this regard. First, and rather evidently, one may discern in these debates an essentializing quest for the "true nature" of Islam, in reaction to centuries-old anti-Muslim vilification. Grimme's assertion that the Qur'an constitutes a socialist reform and Muir's insistence on the (initial) authenticity of Muhammad's mystical experience aim to define Islam's essence and need to be situated in their historical contexts.

Second, the determination of a beginning often plays a crucial role in chronological reconstructions. Scholars argue for one beginning to the exclusion of another to support their general argument on the evolution of the Qur'an. Richard Bell, for example, asserted that Muhammad's initial message was centered on the feeling of gratitude for God. He insisted that "the end of the world and final judgment played little part in his teaching" because these ideas would only come later through contact with Christians (1953: 128, also 106–7). In the next section, I trace the effects of the narrative's logic through an examination of Angelika Neuwirth's chronological account.

The third point concerns the current methodological divisions of the field. To what extent should the Qur'an be read as playing out a personal or communal story? Psychologizing interpretations of the Qur'an have, rightly, been problematized (Rippin 1992, 2000). Recent research has demonstrated the fruitfulness of a comparative late antique approach (Reynolds 2010; Neuwirth 2019 [2010]). This issue therefore cuts deep into Qur'anic studies' current polarization. An emphasis on the eschatological core of the Qur'an permits a loosely diachronic reading of the Muslim scripture which does not rely on a biographical framework. Indeed, an "unbiographical Qur'anic chronology", which takes eschatology as a benchmark for dating suras, has been recently advanced (Durie 2018). The losses and

gains entailed by an erasure of the Qur'anic Messenger, however, remain to be assessed.[17] Adopting a late antique perspective while defending the value of chronological reading of the Qur'an is a fine balancing act, as Neuwirth's and Sinai's works show. Neuwirth (2011: 44–50) considers the "'You'-directed suras" (Q. 93, 94, 108) as best representing the start of the proclamation, although she cautions elsewhere against a biographical interpretation of these suras, pointing rather to their intertextuality with the Psalms (2010, 2019: 247–54). Sinai has favored in his later publications (2017a, 2017b) a late antique eschatological beginning for the Meccan Qur'ān, thus marginalizing the role of the Prophet, while at the same time strongly arguing for refocusing the Medinan suras on the Messenger and his community (Sinai 2015–16).

Identifying "Change"

Although they are presented here as two separate acts, the definition of the beginning of the revelation and the determination of the nature of the change which characterizes its subsequent evolution are intrinsically connected. The plausibility of a Qur'anic chronological account rests on its consistency, economy, and relevance. The narrative should be consistent with the textual evidence adduced and economically organized around an identifiable pattern of change. It should, moreover, also be relevant to some of the larger questions that remain unresolved in the field. These three expectations can, at times, pull the narrative in different directions. I will illustrate this point through an examination of the Qur'anic narrative proposed by Angelika Neuwirth.

Among Neuwirth's earliest contributions to the study of the Qur'an is her ground-breaking observation that suras classified as middle- and late Meccan in Nöldeke's periodization tend to display a tripartite structure, with short introductory and concluding sections framing a Biblical narrative (2007 [1981]).[18] This observation prompted her to pursue two questions: What can the structure of suras reveal about their social setting and liturgical use? What function did these Biblical narratives serve and why are they characteristic of the middle and late Meccan suras?

Neuwirth's seminal article "Von Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon" (1996)[19] offered a masterful response to these two sets of questions through an account of the early community's development as reflected in the Qur'anic corpus. She suggested an evolution in three stages. In the first stage, Qur'anic discourse is embedded exclusively in the local Arab substrate. The small group of believers surrounding the "proclaimer" belong to the same cult community as their opponents. They perform identical rites and share the same "mnemotope", the Kaaba. The "unmistakably ceremonially stylized form" of the early suras point to a ritual

setting which Neuwirth equates with the "clearly ancient Arabian" *ṣalāt* ritual that was performed at the Kaaba (2014 [1996]: 144 and 147). One needs to picture the proclaimer reciting the early suras publicly at the Meccan sanctuary to an audience comprised of both followers and opponents. Qur'anic instructions for pious practices (prostration, purification, sacred recitation, prayer, etc.) have, therefore, to be understood as referring to pre-existing local ritual practices.

The second stage marks a break with the pagan setting and rituals and a shift away from the Kaaba. Distraught by the conflict with their Meccan compatriots, the community finds a new symbolic "home" in the Biblical imagination of Jews and Christians (2014 [1996]: 151). It is in the context of this reorientation that tripartite suras eventually emerge. Their structure, comprising an introductory address, a Biblical narrative, and a concluding statement, mirrors the performance of "the monotheistic verbal service of the Jewish and Christian religions", which is centered around the ceremonial recitation of a portion of the Bible (ibid.: 151).[20] It signals the new cultic expression of the community. The positioning of the *qibla* toward Jerusalem seals the symbolic adoption of Biblical memory (Neuwirth 2002: 263).

In the third stage, new circumstances in Medina shift the center of gravity from allochthonous Biblical memory to the Muslim community itself. The short Medinan suras, described by Neuwirth (2014 [1996]: 153) as "prophetic oratory suras" (Q al-Taḥrīm/66, Q al-Ṭalāq/65, etc.) now center on the Prophet and his role in the community. The second change of *qibla*, in response to Muhammad's desolation (Q. 2:144), symbolizes the return of the native referent but also points to the now "elevated status" of the Prophet (ibid.: 153). The short suras of this period display a simple structure; they are "typologically homogeneous" and have ceased to reflect a specific liturgical setting. The proclamation increasingly resembles a sermon focusing on the proclaimer himself or on matters of the community. The fading away of the liturgical function explains the emergence of the long Medinan suras which, according to Neuwirth, do not appear to be rhetorically structured, but rather serve as "collecting baskets for isolated groups of verses" (ibid.: 154).[21]

Neuwirth's hypothesis provides an account of the community's evolving identity, an explanation of the suras' formal diversity and a detailed reconstruction of the social settings of the revelations. The movement of an ascending and then descending engagement with Biblical memory explains, in one gesture, an array of transformations reflected in Qur'anic discourse. The strength of the argument rests, to a large degree, on the assumption of a clear-cut distinction between a local Arabian substrate and an imported Biblical referent. It is the passage from one to the other, followed by a creative fusion of the two referents, that provides the logic of the narrative. Unsurprisingly, then, Neuwirth's reconstruction carefully preserved the early Meccan suras from any Christian or Jewish influences. Early Qur'anic injunctions to prostrate, praise God and proclaim His name, which

recalls monotheistic, particularly Christian monastic, practices, were exclusively linked by Neuwirth to pagan rites (2014 [1996]: 145–6): *And bow thyself, and draw nigh* (Q. 96:16); *Then magnify the Name of thy Lord, the All-mighty* (Q. 56:96); *And proclaim the praise of the Lord when thou ariseth* (Q. 52:48), *keep vigil in the night, except a little* (Q. 73:2).

However, Neuwirth's 1996 interpretation of these verses has been shaken, if not undermined, by the field's new emphasis on the Jewish and Christian (particularly Syriac) influences on the Qur'an. The "Syriac turn" of the field gathered momentum in the wake of the controversial work by Christoph Luxenberg (2007 [2000]). His hypothesis that the Qur'an comes from a Syriac milieu failed to convince, yet it prompted a renewed interest in the Christian and, more largely, Biblical context of the Qur'an (see in particular, Reynolds 2008, 2010).[22] Neuwirth's own scholarship in the last two decades has been at the forefront of the movement to correct the false idea of an inward-looking pre-Islamic society. Rather than an isolated and culturally homogenous society, one should imagine the Qur'an's earliest audience as culturally "hybrid" and already "shaped by monotheistic thought" (Neuwirth 2014 [2007]: 29).

This revised assumption called for a reconsideration of the account of Qur'anic evolution that Neuwirth presented in 1996. She offered a first adjustment in 2007 in an essay written as an introduction to the second edition of her *Studien*.[23] There, she acknowledges the early Qur'an's "very close connection with Christian culture" (2014 [2007]: 27). She does not, however, fully integrate this adjustment into an explanatory account of Qur'anic evolution. If the community was, from its inception, shaped by Christian piety, the adoption of Biblical narratives, in the later Meccan period, can no longer be described as a "momentous change" (ibid.: 144). The "shift" which brought about the structure of the middle and late Meccan suras is merely "cultic" (ibid.: 29); the narrative does not provide a reason for its occurrence.

A decade later, Neuwirth published a second revision of the same account. In her article "Qur'anic Studies and Philology: Qur'anic Textual Politics of Staging, Penetrating, and Finally Eclipsing Biblical Tradition" (2016), Neuwirth puts forward a middle-ground approach that ensures some pagan indigeneity to the nascent Muslim community. A new cultic setting for the early Meccan suras is identified. Drawing on a close reading of Q al-Muzzammil/73, Neuwirth suggests that these suras were proclaimed during "night vigils", a "liturgical frame that elsewhere would have involved a psalm reading" (2016: 185). While the monotheistic influence on the early Qur'an is now fully acknowledged (and the "ancient" rites of the Kaaba have disappeared), Neuwirth retains the notion of a *progressive* discovery of Biblical culture and religiosity, stressing that the awareness of sharing the Biblical covenant with Jews and Christians "does not emerge

immediately (2016: 186)". The shift toward Biblical heritage – that is, "the cultural memory of a different group" (2016: 188), is precipitated by the conflictual situation of the community in Mecca. As the title of the 2016 article indicates, the revised scenario is the following: the Qur'an "stages" a psalm-inspired religiosity, before "penetrating" the Biblical cultural memory and finally "eclipsing" it when the Muslim community inherits the Biblical covenant. The narrative aims to reproduce the principle of change that characterized the 1996 account: it posits a movement from a (somewhat) pagan memory to a Biblical one. But the revised understanding of the first stage, now marked by "hybridity", has weakened its explanatory power. The new version leaves fundamental questions unanswered: what was the initial relationship of the community to Biblical tradition? In what circumstances did the believers adopt a "psalmic" performance of piety without initially being aware or interested in Biblical memory? Narratives are not neutral discursive forms. They create specific "structures of signification" that constrain the author in certain directions (Culler 2001 [1981]: 201). The narrative logic at work in Neuwirth's account requires that the Qur'an's proclamation be set in a "Bible-free" environment; while the field's current debates emphasize, at the very least, the cultural hybridity of the Qur'anic milieu. The tension resulting from these two requirements is not easily resolved. Thus, in her *magnum opus*, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity* (2019 [2010]), Neuwirth opts for a *juxtaposition* of the two scenarios: in a sketch of Qur'anic development, she situates the early Meccan suras exclusively within a pagan setting (ibid.: 213–7), while in a later descriptive account of these same suras, she primarily focuses on their proximity to the psalmic corpus (ibid.: 239–75).

Neuwirth's conundrum reflects a fundamental dilemma in the field. Through what prism should the Qur'an be read? What parallel texts and documentation can help contextualize it? "Where does the Qur'an and early Islam belong?" (Neuwirth 2017: 165) The Qur'an's precise relationship to Biblical literature is a crux of Qur'anic studies. The question is eminently complex and has important theological and political ramifications. From a historiographical point of view, situating the Qur'an in a biblically imbued monotheistic milieu has constituted, in the wake of Wansbrough's (2004 [1977], 2006 [1978]) and Hawting's (1999) monographs, the main solution to the *hiatus* characterizing the Qur'anic event. In recent years, the Qur'an has variously been conceptualized as a Biblical lectionary (Luxenberg 2007 [2000]), Biblical "homily" (Reynolds 2010), a Biblical palimpsest (Segovia 2012: 235) and a Biblical apocryphon (Shoemaker 2021b). What role the Arabian background may have played in the formation of the Qur'an remains an open, and often neglected, question. Angelika Neuwirth has consistently called for situating the Qur'an within both its "pagan and monotheistic frameworks" (2014). The difficulty in thinking about the intermingling of these two cultural worlds

lies in the fact that the Qur'an is the only textual evidence documenting their integration. There is historical and archaeological evidence for the integration of the Arabian Peninsula within Near Eastern networks of commerce and cultural transmission (Fisher 2011; Robin 2008, 2019), but we have no contemporary literary work that can shed light on the specific cultural patterns this integration may have followed. Archaeology is of limited help for contextualizing the Qur'an within its Arabian environment (Robin 2015: 64). The main source available to reconstruct the cultural aspect of Arabian society is ancient poetry. The latter, a corpus of texts with a complex history of transmission, fetishizes a nomadic way of life and seems indifferent to the late antique preoccupations that we find in the Qur'an (Stetkevych 2011). The study of ancient pre-Islamic poetry may illuminate aspects of the Qur'an (see Horovitz 1975 [1923]; Bauer 2010; Neuwirth 2019 [2010]: 419–52, 2015; Masri 2016; Sinai 2011, 2019), but it does not reduce the hiatus between the "epistemic space" of Late Antiquity (Neuwirth 2017a) and the geographic space of Western Arabia. Chronology has been thought to provide an answer. When ordered according to the principle of a progressive discovery of the Biblical tradition, the Qur'an is made to reveal the cultural process of which it is the result, the "Biblicisation of Arabian knowledge" (Neuwirth 2017a: 170). However, while the assumption of a gradual Biblical familiarity explains certain aspects of the text – such as irregular references to Biblical narratives – it stumbles on others.

The first scholar to adopt this principle of Qur'anic change in his chronological hypothesis, Richard Bell, quickly realized the extent of the text's resistance to a neat scenario of Biblical discovery. Bell proposed four stages of growth which prefigure Neuwirth's reconstruction. An initial phase centering on gratitude to God was followed by the threat of collective punishment (the stories of annihilated peoples). Contacts with Christians then introduced eschatological ideas (personal judgment and eternal life) and Biblical narratives; in that stage, the Qur'an aimed at providing "something similar to the scripture read in their services by other monotheists" (Bell 1953: 129). In the final phase, marked by a conflictual relationship with Jews in Medina, the Qur'an claimed scriptural status and supersession of the Bible. Bell's scenario explains, among other things, the puzzling presence in the Qur'an of two types of punishment entailing divergent conceptions of individuality, responsibility, and the afterlife. The Qur'an, however, intertwines these two kinds of punishment and weaves them together with passages on God's bounties, Biblical narratives, and supersessionist claims, to such an extent that Bell had to conclude that the text had undergone multiple layers of revision. As a consequence, Bell's "critical rearrangement" of the Qur'an unmakes the sura unit and freely reorganizes the resulting fragments (1937–9). The cogency of his reconstruction resulted in the breakdown of the text.[24]

Conclusion

In this article, I have suggested that the field of Qur'anic studies faces a conflict of interpretation exacerbated by four factors: a dearth of documentary sources, the abruptness of the Qur'anic event, inevitable theological implications and, finally, the Qur'an's textual characteristics that resemble those of an open work. In view of these difficulties, I have argued for an interpretative approach which pays attention to our meaning-making practices as we read and interpret the Qur'an in the current context of the discipline. I have focused on chronological approaches that search the Qur'anic text for clues regarding its development and propose a reconstruction of its evolution. These approaches exemplify the range of disagreement in the field at two levels. Firstly, the hypotheses presented here, by Muir, Nöldeke, Grimme, Bell, Neuwirth, and Sinai, diverge significantly both in their reading of the Qur'an and in their emplotment. Each represents a unique attempt to make sense of the Qur'an and, together, they constitute a small-scale conflict of interpretation. On another level, the shared assumptions of chronological reconstructions have been contested, and their value has become the object of heated discussion. Here again, we are facing a conflict of interpretation, albeit one addressing more fundamental questions regarding the Qur'an's history, composition, and context.

This article has offered an understanding of the interpretative operations entailed in the historical study of the Qur'an. In view of the chronological question's centrality in the field, the analysis presented here is necessarily preliminary. Several procedures and constraints have, nonetheless, been highlighted. Networks of meaning are created in response to questions and puzzles that may be implicit: how does the Qur'an justify its scriptural status in view of its situated character? Is the implied speaker of the Qur'an always God? Why does the structure of suras vary? How can we reconcile the diverging understandings of punishment in the Qur'an? Answers are provided by spreading out the Qur'anic corpus through time, along a certain sequence. Connections between texts (either Qur'anic or external) are made accordingly. At every stage, the act of interpretation is modeled along the hermeneutic circle, resulting in a multiplication of interlinked circles. The "nesting of circles" (Iser 2000: 67) makes a direct confrontation of two chronological re-orderings difficult. The aim is to examine each according to its own assumptions, its initial question, and the specific narrative logic it entails.

Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco on writerly texts, the chronological interpretations are analyzed here as *actualizations* of the text. The interpretative knots that constitute them signal a corresponding difficulty in understanding the text and its context. By directing our attention to the *liminal spaces* unfolded by interpretation, we can better assess the gaps in our understanding of the Qur'an and of the Qur'anic event.[25]

The contextualization of the Qur'an is fraught with challenges, but it offers unique opportunities for hermeneutic reflection. While new documents and refined methods may allow us gradually to reconstruct its history, for now, the field of Qur'anic studies is a privileged site for exploring interdisciplinary questions: Where is the meaning of a text located? How are historical narratives constructed? What does a conflict of interpretations indicate? How do we disentangle historical truth from ideological signification?

Notes

1 This article draws on Chapter 4 of my Ph.D. dissertation, *Du texte à l'histoire: La question de la chronologie coranique* (Sorbonne Université 2019), supervised by Professor Abdallah Cheikh-Moussa; I thank him for his guidance and support. The chapter was reworked and expanded during a research fellowship at the University of Nantes funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program, grant agreement no. 810141, project EuQu: "The European Qur'an. Islamic scripture in European Culture and Religion 1150–1850". I am grateful to Devin Stewart and to the anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft.

2 For a differing perspective on the supposed orality of pre-Islamic society, see Jones (2003: 587–93); Al-Azmeh (2014: 101–11),

3 Sinai (2017a: 41–77) provides a lucid summary of some of the problems involved and the various solutions suggested.

4 On Arabian epigraphy, see Hoyland (2008); Imbert (2019); Al-Jallad (2022). On the study of early Qur'anic manuscripts, see Déroche (1983, 2009); Sadeghi and Goudarzi (2012); Van Putten (2019); Marx and Jochum (2019). For a useful overview of the promises and limits of late antique studies' contribution to a better understanding of the emergence of Islam, see Cameron (2015). On archeology in the Arabian Peninsula, see Hoyland (2001) and Robin (2019).

5 A good case has been made, however, for the historicity of the so-called "Constitution of Medina". See Lecker (2004).

6 Eco's initial reflection in *Opera aperta* (1962) was triggered by avant-garde artistic works – literary and musical – in which the artist forces, so to speak, the reader or the performer to cooperate in the creative process by delegating the final arrangements either to the public or to chance. Through the concept of the *open work*, Eco aimed to account for the structural qualities of *particular* works, beyond the general observation that texts, once detached from their original context, become autonomous and are variously received by readers according to their time, place, status and sensitivity. Eco's *open work* invites us to consider the unequal semiotic "openness" of messages themselves. While all texts are open to a multiplicity of interpretations – and scriptures, by virtue of their religious and civilizational significance, particularly so – few present textual features that would qualify them as "open" in Eco's original sense. In the case of the Qur'an, its *writerly* and *open* nature (I use Barthes' and Eco's terms interchangeably) lies primarily in the collapse of narrative and temporal frameworks. The de-contextualization of the message puts all its parts in synchrony thus opening it to a plurality of reading paths. This characteristic of the Qur'an echoes Barthes' description of the *writerly* text: "It has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one" (1974 [1970]: 5).

7 For example, Saleh (2004); Bauer (2014); Taji-Farouki (2004, 2016); Pink (2018); El-Badawi and Sanders (2019).

8 A reader-response approach that would include historical-positivist studies of the Qur'an as "one more link in the historical chain of reader-response to the Qur'an" was famously called for by Andrew Rippin (1983: 44).

9 For this reason, thematic or partial chronological studies such as those by O'Shaugnessy (1961, 1971), Witztum (2014), Saleh (2016), and Klar (2017) are beyond the scope of this article.

10 In the last decade, a critique of chronological approaches to the Qur'an has been most forcefully formulated by Reynolds (2011). Reynolds has called for an end to the hegemony that chronology has historically exerted on the field using two main arguments. First, he details the problems entailed by the dependency of the chronological paradigm on Muslim tradition. Secondly, he argues for the limited value of chronological reconstructions by stressing the discrepancies that exist between them. In this study, I similarly focus on disagreements between chronological reconstructions. I don't, however, consider these disagreements to be necessarily indicative of a flaw in the hypothesis of a Qur'anic development within Muhammad's prophetic career. The *open* and *writerly* characteristics of the Qur'an entails that the text can support diverging diachronic reconstructions. My aim in this essay is to examine how connections between Qur'anic passages are established so as not to undermine chronological reconstructions. Since an *open* text, in Eco's sense, is only accessible through actualizations performed by readers, an examination of conflicting readings allows one to better grasp the Qur'an's plural nature and the interpretative challenges it represents for historical criticism.

11 That both these scholars share an interest in Qur'anic chronology is not a coincidence. Nicolai Sinai trained under Angelika Neuwirth and worked under her supervision in the research project *Corpus Coranicum*, established in 2007 (https://corpuscoranicum.de). There, he oversaw the chronological commentary of the early Meccan suras. In parallel, A. Neuwirth published the first volumes of her own chronological commentary (2011, 2017b). Although intersecting in many ways, Neuwirth's and Sinai's approaches to the problem of Qur'anic chronology constitute distinct readings of the Muslim scripture.

12 Philological responses have, however, been put forward by Klar (2020) and Ghaffar (2020: 156–85). Nicolai Sinai's recent reply (2024) to Shoemaker (2022) appeared after this article was written.

13 This is a major difference between Sinai's and Sadeghi's studies which Sinai (2017a, 2020), in his endorsement of Sadeghi's approach, does not address. Sadeghi applies his stylometric analysis on the chronology developed by the Iranian intellectual Mehdi Bazargan (d. 1995) who held that about half of the suras (55 out of 114) were assemblages of proclamations from different periods. Sinai's chronological reordering, in contrast, is founded on the principle that the sura generally constitutes a literary and temporal unit.

14 I use here the term "narrative" in the sense of "emplotment" (*mise en intrigue*) regardless of whether this emplotment uses narrative discourse or not. For example, Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorâns* is a philological examination of the Qur'anic text. Though he does not rely on narration to present his results, Nöldeke constructs a "plot" of the development of the Qur'an. On the difference between *plot* and *discourse* in narratology, see Culler (2001 [1981]: 188–89).

15 An approach reminiscent of that of Muir, as Sinai points out (ibid.: 109).

16 For Jacqueline Chabbi, the initial call combined the need for social reform with a particular kind of threat (or fear) of the destruction of the tribe. She qualifies Muhammad's initial action as that of a warner (Qur'ānic: *naḏīr*) (2008: 112–6). Eschatological representation of judgment and the afterlife were, according to Chabbi, introduced later from contact with monotheistic groups (2016: 76–80).

Her interpretation on this point is close to that of Richard Bell, which I briefly summarize below.

17 In 2012–13, the *Qur'an Seminar* directed by G.S. Reynolds and M. Azaiez, brought together twenty-five scholars to experiment with a "Qur'ānist" approach that did not rely on the Sīra framework. The project was fruitful in highlighting the value of such an approach but also its limits when applied to some "Medinan" passages. See, for example, the discussions at the beginning of Q al-Anfāl/8 (Azaiez et al. 2016: 124–32).

18 In her 1981 study, she identifies twenty-seven suras with a Biblical narrative out of forty-two middle and late Meccan suras. These twenty-seven suras came to define, teleologically and metonymically, the late Meccan period as a whole: *the middle section … of the fully evolved middle Meccan suras is occupied by Biblical recollections* (Neuwirth 2014 [2007]: 30). This is unsurprising: the logic of the narrative will tend to smooth over textual differences in favor of what can be of "technical use", to paraphrase De Certeau.

19 References are to the English translation by Gwendolin Goldbloom: "From Recitation through Liturgy to Canon: Sura Composition and Dissolution during the Development of Islamic Ritual" (Neuwirth 2014 [1996]: 141–63).

20 This idea is more fully developed in Neuwirth's later publications (2002: 263, 2014 [2007]: 30, 2019 [2010]: 219).

21 That some thematic and structural integrity can also be found in the long Medinan suras has since been argued by various authors such as Robinson (2001), Zahniser (1997, 2000), Cuypers (2009), Farrin (2010), Klar (2017), Reda (2017), Sinai (2017a: 81–110). In her later publications, Neuwirth nuances her position on this issue (2019 [2010]: 317).

22 Neuwirth (2014 [2007]: 29) attests to the importance of Luxenberg's work (together with that of G. Lüling's, which was rediscovered after Luxenberg's) in the field's recent direction. The convergence between early suras and oriental forms of Christianity had, however, been noted long before. See, for example, Schwally's revision of Nöldeke's *Geschichte* (1909: 6); Andrea (1955 [1926]) and Jeffery (2007 [1938]: 198) who noted the probable Aramaic origin of the term *ṣalāt*.

23 References are to the English translation by G. Goldbloom (Neuwirth 2014 [2007]).

24 Bell first argued for Muhammad's gradual discovery of the Bible in his 1925 lectures on "The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment" (Bell, 1926: 64–133). His rearrangement of the Qur'anic text was published two decades later (1937–9). For a penetrating review of Bell's "infamous" translation of the Qur'an in the context of early twentieth-century approaches to scriptures, see Rippin (1992).

25 I borrow the concept of the "liminal space" from Iser (2000).

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