

The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu, edited by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, (Texts and Studies of the Qurʾān: 6) (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2011), vii + 864 pp., ISBN: 978-90-04-21101-8, \$67 (pb)

This voluminous anthology, comprising one introductory chapter and twenty-seven essays, is devoted to Qurʾānic studies. It emerged from a conference in Berlin in 2004 and a summer academy in 2007 conceived and led by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, all scholars specializing in Qurʾānic studies. The organizers reappear as editors and contributors to this publication. It comes as no surprise, then that *The Qurʾān in Context* reflects the general outlook of the ‘Berlin school’ (Sinai has since taken a position at Oxford University), whose main instigator is associated with the work of professor Angelika Neuwirth. In addition to the majority of scholars with a German academic background, this perspective implies an emphasis on Late Antiquity and the emergence of the Qurʾān within this broad and multifaceted regional, chronological, and religious framework. Indeed, the twelve essays in the first part of the volume, titled *The Qurʾān’s Historical Context*, “address various general aspects of the Qurʾān’s political, economic, linguistic, and cultural context.” (p. 17) This includes archaeological, theological, and literary aspects. The now-obsolete opinion that the Qurʾān emerged in splendid Arab isolation is definitively abandoned in favor of a Qurʾān emerging and acting as a dynamic force-field in continuity (and polemics) with late antique milieus, texts, and discourses. Within this framework, the term ‘Qurʾān’ becomes the common denominator of both the chronological-dialectical processes of the three factors (Prophet, revelation, and community) as well as the edited and canonized text corpus, crystallizing into the post-ʿUthmānic and diacritical Qurʾānic *muṣḥaf*. Neuwirth and her affiliated peers tend to place special emphasis on the diachronic trajectories of the Qurʾānic text, especially its self-reflexive intertextual relations with and appropriations of Jewish, Christian, and Arab-pagan traditions. Despite this emphasis on agency, dynamics, intertextuality, and fluidity, there is also an insistence on a close reading of the text, a reading inspired by *Litteraturwissenschaft* and Biblical studies. This is also indicated in the subtitle of the anthology. This literary approach seems particular-

ly preoccupied with intelligible local and global semantic and formal patterns and coherencies. This emphasis on close reading unfolds in the second part of the book, *Contextualizing the Qurʾān*, which comprises a number of articles devoted to the editorial and transmission-related history of the Qurʾān. It should perhaps be said that the close readings in the volume never venture into the type of imaginative flights that we often find in literary criticism or theological writings. The philological and historicist commitments of the contributors are severe headmasters that keep the essays within strict bounds. For those of us who would look for a Qurʾān beyond context, as a piece of text that is able to define and create its own context, as it were, we encounter more imaginative and experiential passages and hypotheses, especially in the essays dealing with inter- and intratextuality. Although these complex approaches bypass and sometimes challenge certain Islamic doctrines and verities, no one (except perhaps Jan Retsö, who presents a theory claiming Qurʾānic Arabic to be a specimen of a specific sacred language register prevalent on the Arab peninsula) in this volume subscribes to the more or less revisionist hypotheses that have been part and parcel of modern Qurʾānic studies, not least German Qurʾānic studies. We think, for instance, of Günther Lüling's ideas of a Christian *Ur-Koran* already proposed in the mid-1970s and, more recently, of Christoph Luxenberg's ideas of a Syriac-Aramaic reconstruction of an ostensible 'original' Qurʾānic text. The theories of John Wansbrough and John Burton are also addressed and countered in the volume (most thoroughly by Gregor Schoeler). Instead of silencing these revisionists to death, however, their ideas are often recycled as thought provoking and worthy of critical engagement. Despite the flaws and tendencies of, for instance, Wansbrough and Luxenberg's studies, their ideas seem to have invigorated a sound interest in the literary set-up of the Qurʾān and Islam's relations to Syriac Christianity.

It would certainly be unfair to present the twenty-seven essays as mere replicas of the Berlin school. One should perhaps conceive of the essays as exhibiting a theoretical and methodological family resemblance to the approaches characterized above. The following essays are in the first historical part of the book. Norbert Nebes analyzes the political conflicts between Sasanian Iran and Axum as played out in South Arabian Ḥimyar prior to the advent of Muḥammad. Special attention is devoted to the story of the 'martyrs of Najrān.' Barbara Finster's article is a translation of a German article

from 1996 and provides an exemplary overview of the studies of antique and late antique Arabia. Given that the original article is from 1996, it does not do full justice to the field as it has developed since then, but it provides a good starting point for novices. Mikhail D. Bukharin takes up the neo-classic discussion about the economic foundation of Mecca and the city's position in the caravan networks and incense trade. Harald Suerman provides one of the shorter articles about Islam – and perceptions of Islam – in light of Jewish and Christian sources. Stefan Heidemann provides an exemplary article on the trial-and-error-like development of coin imagery and texts in early Islam, including a thorough refutation of the revisionist theories recently presented by Volker Popp. The article also discusses the 'the bar/globe on a pole on steps' motif found on many early Islamic coins (and on the famous Jordanian Madaba mosaic, which embellishes the cover of the paperback edition). The remaining essays of part one focus on linguistic and literary issues. Ernst Axel Knauf investigates the varieties and developments of Arabic from 200 CE - 600 CE. Peter Stein's contribution is a translation of a four-year-old German article that analyses pre-Islamic epigraphic evidence, concluding that a widespread but sporadic literacy, mostly upheld by specially trained scribes, existed prior to the advent of Muḥammad. Jan Retsö's contribution has been presented above. Tilman Seidensticker engages the pre-Islamic *labbayka/talbiya* formula and counters the ultra-skeptical conclusions of Gerald Hawting and John Wansbrough regarding the usefulness and authenticity of both pre-Islamic and Islamic sources. Seidensticker's contribution is a translation of a five-year-old German article. Isabel Toral-Niehoff investigates the Christian community in the late antique Lakhmid territory of Iraq, proposing that the Lakhmids' Arab identity may have influenced the identity constructions of the early Islamic community. Kirill Dmitriev calls attention to pre-Islamic Christian Arabic poetry and how the role it may have played as a thematic repository for the later Qur'ānic text. Agnes Imhof concludes part one with a literary analysis of a 'transitional' (between the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras) Muslim poet and how his poetry may have been influenced by early Qur'ānic and Islamic priorities.

The second part continues the philological thrust of part one but opens up more literary investigations. Nicolai Sinai critically surveys the various studies devoted to the chronology of verses and *suras*, especially the master's thesis of Theodor Nöldeke, and argues in fa-

vor of a processual, intratextual, and textual understanding of the Qurʾānic text. Nora K. Schmid forwards some preliminary considerations of the usefulness of quantitative text analysis. Although we can endorse quantitative text analysis, which has become even more potent after the digitalization of the Qurʾān, it is a pity that she does not exploit more recent studies, such as those by Arne Ambros. Islam Dayeh struggles with the age-old contention that the Qurʾān is a fragmentary and literarily incoherent text. Through close reading and intratextual analyses (Dayeh uses the term intertextual, but it is, strictly speaking, intratextual because it refers to the Qurʾān's (re)reading of itself), Dayeh concludes that the *suras* at hand constitute a "clear sense of character and unity." (p. 493) Angelika Neuwirth, in her usual magisterial style, probes the Qurʾān's intertextual traces and renegotiations of the Christian version of the Abrahamic figure. Neuwirth contributes yet another intertextual reading, this time focusing on the Psalms. Michael Marx is also intertextually committed, but his analysis revolves around the most important individual female Qurʾānic figure, Mary, and her plausible Christian traces and reconfigurations. Recent Qurʾān translator Hartmut Bobzin takes up the thorny question of what 'prophet,' *nabī*, and 'seal of the prophets' could mean. Bobzin concludes that the term displays a strong typological connection with the figure of Moses. Gabriel Said Reynolds, who has also published two recent volumes about the Qurʾān's context, contributes a very short essay on the intricate passage on Sarah's laughter and suggests certain Syriac Christian intertextualities. Unlike the other contributors, Reimund Leicht does not take a semi-narrative passage as his point of departure but focuses on a legal passage, the Qurʾānic commandments of writing down loan agreements (Q 2:282). Leicht compares rabbinical law but cautions readers not to overestimate Jewish influence, and he calls attention to neglected Greek document traditions. François de Blois argues for a Jewish-Christian (i.e., Nazorean) context for the Qurʾān and Muḥammad, describing the latter as a "plausible figure located in a historical vacuum." (p. 620) Stefan Wild directly addresses the (in)famous Luxenberg thesis about the virgins of paradise (*ḥūr*, *ḥūrīn*). Wild refutes the thesis, but he also counters the *ad hominem* refutations that have been directed against Luxenberg. Walid Saleh also contests Luxenberg's virgin thesis and suggests a possible Greek inspiration instead, namely the hedonistic life of the Gods on Olympus rather than Late Antique ascetic Christian ideals. Saleh's article is a spirited

attack on the etymological fixation that has been a significant part of modern Western studies of the Qurʾān. Saleh stresses that the “*meaning of a word is derived from its linguistic medium, and that holds true even for ‘borrowed’ words.*” (p. 662) Although Saleh’s examples of tendentious and downright erroneous ‘etymologitis’ are well-argued, I think it would be too radical to discard etymological considerations as such because comparative etymologies can reveal broad cross-linguistic and cross-regional semantic patterns and trends that are part of the Qurʾān’s complex context. Thomas Bauer updates the relevance of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry vis-à-vis the Qurʾān and proposes a strategy of looking for “negative intertextuality,” striking Qurʾānic silences or “avoidance of certain features, that has just as formative an influence on the shape of the text as would be the reverse.” (p. 706) This reminds us of Robert Brunchvig’s article on “Simple negative remarks on the vocabulary of the Qurʾān” (org. 1956) as a viable approach. Gregor Schoeler provides a critical reexamination of John Burton and John Wansbrough’s conflicting theses about the redaction history of the Qurʾānic text. Schoeler provides what could be called a neo-traditionalist conclusion, which gives credence to the traditional Muslim position of an ʿUthmānic compilation and redaction. The final contribution comes from Omar Hamdan and investigates the introduction of a standard system of reading signs for proper pronunciation, which took place around 703 CE – 705 CE.

These contributions are subsumed by an introductory chapter written by Nicolai Sinai and Angelika Neuwirth. This introduction presents a rather pessimistic diagnosis of Qurʾānic studies as a discipline in “disarray” (the word stems from Fred Donner). The comparison with Biblical and Classical studies is relevant and heuristic, but it is also unfair to judge Western Qurʾānic studies according to the standards of these two time-honored disciplines. It is somewhat of a coquettish statement, and we think that it is proved wrong by the sheer number of high-quality contributions (and the number of new young scholars) in this publication. In a footnote (p. 15) added to the 2011 paperback edition, Sinai and Neuwirth admit that the “field as a whole has become pleasantly dynamic since the publication of the present volume,” and they call attention to the work of Gabriel Said Reynolds, Patricia Crone, and Behnam Sadeghi. Although Qurʾānic studies continues to be marred by certain polemical and almost conspiratorial trends (e.g., Luxenberg and the German *Inārab*-group),

the field is at a very promising phase – not only in Western academia but also in the Muslim academic world, especially Turkey and Iran. If we take *The Qurʾān in Context* as symptomatic, it seems as if Qurʾānic studies is moving toward a neo-traditionalist position (also on the rise in ḥadīth studies), in which scholars' notions of the Qurʾān's historicity and intelligibility overlap with more traditional Muslim viewpoints and sensibilities.

Thomas Hoffmann

Aarhus University, Aarhus-Denmark