Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London: Routledge, 2010); xi + 304 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0415778930. RRP £80.

Research into the historical and textual origins of the Qur'ān have blossomed over the last decade or so and, judging by the number of new "introductions" and "companions" aimed at the general reader, this interest has extended to the student and lay populations as well. Brill's *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* is testimony to the strength of the new trend. Gabriel Said Reynolds has himself already edited an important new set of excellent essays on this and related questions by worldleading scholars, *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (Routledge, 2008). Radical re-assessments of Qur'ānic origins have also not been slow in emerging, perhaps inspired by the furore over *Hagarism*, and (ps)Christoph Luxenberg's *Syro-Aramaische Lesart des Koran* (see the discussion in this journal, vol. 3, 2009, pp. 44-71) has brought the subject into the purview of a wider public.

Reynolds' new monograph, however, should not be denigrated by being placed alongside Luxenberg's more controversial but much less tightly argued work. Reynolds is rather to be congratulated not only for producing a restrained, articulate, and thorough investigation, but also for avoiding the pitfalls into which Luxenberg fell and hence successfully locating his work within a more serious scholarly genealogy. Reynolds does not seek controversy and he restrains and controls the questions he asks – he seeks only to gauge the literary genre of the Qur'ānic suras and to pin down the nature of their appropriation of Biblical material. No far reaching consequences for the origins of either Islam or Qur'ān are drawn–in fact, this is explicitly eschewed by Reynolds although others will undoubtedly draw their own inferences.

Reynolds locates his academic lineage among those who have rejected the "Nöldeke system", in which the meaning of individual suras, and even parts of suras, can be explained by deploying information derived from the biography (sira) of the prophet. A critique is presented (although not much elaborated) of scholars who continue to follow this approach and who continue to be optimistic about the reliability of the sira, a group that includes such disparate figures as Angelika Neuwirth, otherwise a sound proponent of an approach to the Qur'ān that uses only its own forms to explain itself, and Karen Armstrong, whose work is considered by Reynolds as rather shoddy and ill-conceived (she is singled out for her biography of Muḥammad, which is, we are told, entirely derivative from secondary sources). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it is in the shadow of Wansbrough (*Studies in the Qur'ān*) that Reynolds conceives his own work. He is in line with Wansbrough insofar as his approach is to explain the Qur'ān not as "in conversation with what came after it (*tafsir*) but with what came before it (Biblical literature)". He is rightly at pains to point out that this is not a question of a pro or anti-Islamic attitude, for academics and commentators of all shades have readily adopted Nöldeke's system (including e.g. Lüling) and the voices against it have always been very few.

The general burden and aim of Reynolds' argument is to break the chain that binds the Qur'ān to the works of the Islamic exegetes (*mufassirun*). This breakage is achieved through a number of detailed case studies, each of which takes a single verse or passage in which the Qur'ān makes use of a Biblical image or narrative

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and explores both how the *mufassirun* failed to understand what was going on and how a proper understanding of the Biblical background illuminates the intention of the sura. The *mufassirun* did not have access to any special knowledge about the meanings of the suras outside of the text itself, and there is no reason why their "guess" at an interpretation should be any better than our own.

Some scattered remarks relating to these case studies may be made here. The discussion of the term *hanīf* provides a typical example of Reynolds's critique of modern translators and exegetes. He shows how most modern versions follow the medieval *mufassirun* and are afraid to make sense of the text in its religio-cultural context, where the term must have meant something more like "gentile, pagan" in the ethnic, rather than the religious sense, and was most likely well-known to the original audience. The term *ghulf* (p.147) is showed to mean "circumcised" in a sense that is quite comprehensible as a Biblical motif, while the *mufassirum* seem never to have understood the notion of "circumcision of the heart" well-known from Jewish and Christian theologies, and their own interpretations have passed into modern translations. The Mary/Miriam issue, the identity of Haman as an Egyptian, and the confusion over the chronology of the Jonah narrative are all further instances of Reynolds's generally excellent and thorough treatment of cruxes within Qur'ānic exegesis that can be cleared up by a proper appreciation of religious background elements, especially a number deriving from Syriac Christian tradition.

The studies are by no means all equally convincing. Whereas Reynolds generally has no problem showing that the *tafsir* frequently makes stabs in the dark which over time became accepted as standard interpretations, he cannot always provide preferable alternatives. His reinterpretation of *rish* (p.64) as the feathers of (live!) birds on the basis of the narrative of Adam and Eve's first "clothes" will hardly convince many as a likely explanation. The Qur'ānic motif of Sarah's laughter is also not really explained unless we assume that a Christian exegesis is being followed, and this can hardly be shown in this case. The discussion of martyrdom (p.156ff.) is too rambling (this is perhaps a pervasive problem – Reynolds has an excellent critical acumen which is sometimes given insufficient time to elaborate the really important and interesting suggestions because too many words have been wasted on, e.g., describing the guesswork of the *mufassirun*). He follows the Ohlig-Puin-Luxenberg school on the question of whether Mohammad is a name or an epithet (i.e. arguing for the latter), which may be considered the point most likely to raise opposition.

Once the link between Qur'ān and *Tafsir* has been (as Reynolds believes) broken and the way lies open to profer alternative contexts within which to understand any sura or verse, Reynolds remains at pains to present his work as one in literary intertextuality rather than historical reconstruction. His work, he says, has nothing to say about sources or the religious milieu out of which the Qur'ān emerged. The rejection of the search for sources arises in part out of Reynolds's rejection of the sira tradition itself (for even an argument that Muḥammad the consummate pagan must have received his information about Judaeo-Christian traditions falls for the sira-fallacy) and in part from the observation that the Qur'ān is itself an exercise

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in exegesis, alluding to and working on pre-existing literary and religious motifs. Such a task is, quite rightly, best understood as a form of *Traditionsgeschichte* and not as source criticism in the usual sense.

Nonetheless, this pleading that the study is literary rather than historical is evidently an attempt to steer the reader away from the temptation to draw his/her own radical conclusions about the movements of early Islamic history. But the breaking of the chain of *tafsir* is, albeit negatively, an historical reconstruction, and indeed any reader would find it hard not to imagine what historical processes must inevitably lie behind Reynolds's literary constructs.

The (ir)relevance of the *mufassirun* is most succinctly and cogently stated in the conclusion to chapter 3, which provides an overview first of the different strategies they used to adapt the Qur'ānic narratives to their own purposes and then summarises the methods of the five exegetes that have been used throughout the case studies. At the end of the chapter, Reynolds pronounces that "*tafsir* is less a historical record that stretches back to the time of the Qur'ān's origins, and more the product of individual scholars and the context in which they worked" (p.228). In this, Reynolds follows the line of European critical scholarship going back to Jeffery. He pointedly notes, however, that much modern scholarship on the Qur'ān still presupposes that *tafsir* is a valid assistant in Qur'ānic exegesis. When he quotes Rippin in urging that the Qur'ān be read "freed of the Muslim construct", he is suggesting the text be read as a product of late antique religion and culture, fully at home in the seventh century near east, rather than as the starting point of a religious tradition unknown to its compiler(s). This is an important point that needs to be taken on board.

To digress for a moment, a useful comparison might be made between the *mufassirun's* tendency to assign Qur'ānic moments to the biography of the prophet and hence illuminate the meaning of the former, and the fifth century Greek theologian Theodore of Mopsuestia, who assigned the Psalms to moments in the biography of King David, an approach which has had a long afterlife. The study of *tafsir*, like the study of Jewish or Christian exegesis of the Bible, is a fundamental part of understanding those religious traditions; but has nothing whatsoever to do with assessing the actual meaning of the Scriptures in question, *unless* of course one had strong reason to believe that the exegetes had access to other, independent sources of information unknown to us. That the Muslim exegetes or biographers had any such information remains to be proved and can hardly be assumed. Indeed the fundamental question does seem to be whether such a continuity apart from the Qur'ān itself can be demonstrated. Reynolds provides a few examples (p.19-20) which suggest that there can be no such continuity since even certain basic features of the text were a mystery to the exegetes, e.g. the disconnected letters with which 29 suras begin, and the report of the Sabians as people to be saved. Surely, Reynolds argues, the exegetes could not have "forgotten" these basic things; since they do not understand even these things, we must assume that they really knew nothing about the meaning of the Qur'ān and developed their own exegesis purely on the basis of what they felt they *could* understand. The degree of disagreement and argument among early exegetes points in this direction.

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There are severe implications for translation too, itself a function of exegesis. All existing translations owe more or less to *tafsir* even, Reynolds contends (p. 231), when philological considerations suggest something quite different. This point has been sufficiently demonstrated (if it needed it) within the case studies. The potential wider impact of the approach championed by the author thus becomes apparent. The problem is not, however, limited to modern Qur'ān translation. The translation of the Hebrew Bible (whether of Jewish or Christian leaning) will almost always ignore the original meaning of certain terms and motifs even where these are well known, in favour of either "Judaising" or "Christianising" translations which are ultimately based in exegetical traditions deriving from a post-canonisation era (e.g. "north" for "Zaphon" at Ps 48.2; "master" for "Baal" at Hosea 2.16; "heavenly beings" for "sons of El" at Ps 89.7).

The more constructive part of the study is found towards the end where Reynolds tries to define precisely the nature of the Qur'ān's appropriation of Biblical material, with which he believes it to be "in conversation". One might quibble, of course, with the notion that the Qur'ān is "in conversation" with its "biblical subtext". Any conversation worthy of the name surely needs two partners and the Biblical subtext is rather a silent partner in this exchange. Doubtless the Qur'ān draws on this subtext and plays with it in fascinating ways, but this hardly amounts to a conversation, with the ecumenical overtones that the word carries.

Moreover, it is not quite true that it is a homily on the Biblical texts *per se* since, as Reynolds shows, many of the presupposed narratives are extra-canonical – it would be more accurate to call it a homily on well-known Judaeo-Christian tales. It is less certain whether Reynolds's attempt in the final chapter to define the literary genre of the Qur'ān as "homily" will stand, though it may do so. Much of the time, the Qur'ān does indeed appear purely as a homiletic "reminder" of the biblical/quasi-biblical narratives and draws from them a message (usually of judgment) for its audience; however, if that is so, it would seem to exclude from the text any sense of itself as prophetic utterance, a genre quite distinct from the exegetical homilies of the Greek and Syriac Christian traditions. After all, no homily ever claimed for itself the authority of direct revelation, and indeed such claims on the part of the Qur'ānic suras would seem to imply that the subtextual narratives do not have any authority over and above their Qur'ānic re-impressions. Indeed Reynolds's ecumenically-tinged urge to stress the concordance between Bible and Qur'ān might be taken as special pleading, but such judgments will have to await further scholarly considerations.

There is, I think, a certain confusion at times between form criticism on the one hand and the analysis of content on the other. Neuwirth's comparison between suras and psalms is a form-critical observation and does not collapse on the grounds that the psalms do not, as do the suras, presuppose a known narrative (p. 244). No doubt Syriac homilies provide instructive parallels for certain Qur'ānic formulae and thereby form part of its religio-cultural background, but these features are not inherent to nor exclusive to homilies; the differences between Jacob of Serug's mimra on the Youths of Ephesus and the version in the eighteenth sura may well strike the reader more forcefully than the similarities. The religious imagery shared

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by the Qur'ān and Syriac Christian literature requires a great deal more careful research but it will not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the Qur'ān is homiletic on the Christian scriptures. The very fact of the Qur'ān's "confused" version of Biblical stories would seem to suggest that its "conversation" is not one had with "the Bible" as such (not even including its apocryphal outworkings), i.e. not with static "texts" (p. 255), but rather with the popular versions of religious tales common among the Arab tribes of late antiquity, tribes who listened to the invectives of Simeon the Stylite or to the preachings of the wandering Jacob Baradaeus.

The overarching question remains the nature of the relationship between the historical Muḥammad (if he is recoverable) and the Qur'ān. To this extent (albeit with some significant differences) the problem is the same as that pertaining to the historical Jesus and the New Testament. The latter is a problem solvable only by recourse to a form critical and tradition historical analysis of the texts shaped and passed on by his followers of the first few generations.

Reynolds has highlighted a significant split in modern scholarship on the Qur'ān and Muslim origins. He criticises much recent research (targeting in particular the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*) for always taking the "easy", positivist, approach, accepting *tafsir* as a valid method for understanding the Qur'ān rather than taking *tafsir* as a separate study in its own right. He equally raises the issue of the lack of preparedness of most scholars of Islamic studies to deal with the Qur'ān's origins and religious background (e.g. in terms of languages). Indeed, it may be suggested that Islamicists who take such an approach cannot seriously consider the question of origins – they can only be historians of the tradition. The Qur'ān is a piece of late antique religious expression and only as such can it be genuinely explored.

It is unfortunate that either Reynolds or his typesetters have so mishandled most of the Greek words scattered throughout the book, especially the frequent omission of accents and breathings (for the record, we expect: p. 62 πύργος; p. 94 ἔγνωσαν, ἄγγελος; p. 143 ἁγίασμα, ῥάβδοι; p. 155 ἀπερίτμητοι, τοῖς ὦσιν; p. 165 ἆθλος). Reynolds should, however, be congratulated on producing an excellent piece of research in the tradition of Qur'ānic philology. Its hypotheses (and less explicit ramifications) are far-reaching and have not been definitively demonstrated here; yet no can can afford to ignore the implications of the evidence Reynolds produces, and all future research will have to take careful note of his findings. It is also to be hoped that further work, and perhaps a more comprehensive treatment of the problem, will be forthcoming from the author himself.

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