Historical Criticism and Recent Trends in Western Scholarship on the Qur'an: Some Hermeneutic Reflections

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Abstract: The application of the historical-critical method to the Qur'an is sometimes viewed as an imperialist attempt to undermine Islamic belief. This view, however, fails to sufficiently consider that the same method has also been applied to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The historical-critical study of the Qur'an cannot, therefore, be accurately described as a targeted assault on Islam in particular. There can, nonetheless, be no doubt that there are significant methodological differences between a historical-critical approach to the Qur'an and premodern Islamic approaches. Additionally, the Western study of the Qur'an has yielded results that are apt to be of interest to scholars based in the Islamic world, even to those who might not be prepared to accept the historical-critical approach in its entirety. These results include a close comparison between Qur'anic narrative, on the one hand, and ancient Jewish and Christian traditions in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew, on the other. Such a comparison permits a deepened understanding of the specificity of Qur'anic doctrine against its contemporary intellectual background. Moreover, the last few decades have witnessed a strong interest among Western scholars in the literary and rhetorical structure of the Qur'an. There is increasing awareness that the literary and rhetorical analysis of the Qur'an, even if practiced from a historical-critical perspective, can significantly benefit from Islamic scholarship.

Keywords: Historical-critical method; Western Scholarship on the Qur'an; hermeneutics; ancient Jewish and Christian traditions; literary and rhetorical structure of the Qur'an

النقد التاريخي وبعض النزعات المؤخرة في دراسة القرآن الكريم في الغرب: ملاحظات تأويلية

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ملخص البحث: يُنظر أحيانًا إلى تطبيق منهج النقد التاريخي في دراسة القرآن الكريم وكأنّه محاولة لزعزعة العقيدة الإسلامية، ويخدم مشروعًا استعماريًا. لكن ما يُغفل عنه في مثل هذه الرؤية هو أنّ نفس المنهج تم تطبيقه على التوراة والإنجيل معًا، ما يدل على أنه لم يشكّل هجومًا على الإسلام بوجه خاص، بل كان الداعي الأكبر لهذه البحوث هو الرغبة في التعرّف على التراث الديني العالمي للإنسان، بالرغم من تأثّر بعض الباحثين بالأحكام المسبقة فيما يخص الحضارات غير الأوروبية. لكن لا شـك أن هناك اختلافات منهجية هامّة بين مقاربة النقد التاريخي للقرآن الكريم من جهة، والمقاربات الإسـلامية التقليدية من جهة أخرى. مع ذلك، يجب التشديد على أن الدراسات القرآنية في الغرب أدّت إلى نتائج حقيقية من شـأنها أن تثير اهتمام الباحثين في العالم الإسـلامي حتى ولو كانوا لا يقبلون بالمنهج النقدي بشكل كلي. ومن هذه النتائج المقارنة الدقيقة بين القصص القرآنية والتراث المسـيحي واليهودي القديم باللغات اليونانية والآرامية والعبرية، وتسـمح هذه العملية بفهم أعمق لخصوصية التعاليم القرآنية أمام خلفيتها الفكرية الأصلية. ومنذ بضعة عقود برز في أوسـاط الباحثين الغربيين اهتمام قـوي بالبنية الأدبية والبلاغية للقرآن الكريم، ويزداد الإدراك بأن التحليل الأدبي والبلاغي للقرآن الكريم يمكن أن يسـتفيد من مؤلّفات علوم القرآن الإسلامية حتى ولو مُورس هذا التحليل من منظور نقدي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: منهج النقد التاريخي، دراسـة القرآن الكريم في الغرب، تأويلي، التراث المسيحي واليهودي القديم، التحليل الأدبي والبلاغي للقرآن الكريم

The application of the historical-critical method to the Qur'an is sometimes viewed as an imperialist attempt to undermine Islamic belief. This view, however, fails to sufficiently consider that the historical-critical method has crystallized in the modern study of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Thus, historical-critical scholars of the Qur'an extend to the Islamic tradition a certain set of hermeneutic principles, assumptions, and interests that have for centuries been applied to the Bible. The historical-critical study of the Qur'an cannot, therefore, be accurately described as a targeted assault on Islam in particular.

In what follows, I shall briefly highlight several recent developments in the historical-critical study of the Qur'an, and I shall argue that these developments hold considerable potential for a mutually stimulating conversation between scholars based at European and North-American universities and scholars based at universities in the Islamic world. To refute the simplistic perception that these developments reflect a contrast between Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship, I would like to highlight from the start that there is cutting-edge research on the Qur'an in English, German, or French whose authors happen to be Muslim but who are not therefore approaching the Qur'an from a substantially different methodological perspective than their Christian, Jewish, or agnostic colleagues. It is unreservedly welcomed that contemporary European and North American scholarship is marked by a much higher degree of diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, and also gender than was the case during the heyday of classical Orientalism.

Before continuing, it may be useful to restate what I mean by the "historical-critical method." This label designates an approach to interpreting the Bible that gained a clear methodological profile in the 17th and 18th centuries. One of the earliest systematic manifestations of this approach is the *Theological-Political Treatise* of Benedict Spinoza (d. 1677)[1]. Spinoza rejected how the Bible was interpreted by previous Christian and Jewish exegetes and maintained that their approach to the text was predicated on the assumption that the Bible is "everywhere true and divine." As I have argued elsewhere, this statement by Spinoza may be understood to mean that previous interpreters of the Bible, according to Spinoza, assumed that whatever the correct meaning of a given Biblical passage might be, the passage had to enunciate something that was both *true* and theologically, morally, scientifically, or otherwise *significant* (since the content of divine revelations is, presumably, not a trivial one). Accordingly, a prior acceptance of scripture's general truth and significance was allowed to determine what scripture was subsequently found to say.

In objecting to such an approach, Spinoza observed that the prior assumption that scripture is "everywhere true and divine" had often led interpreters to project onto scripture whatever theological, philosophical, or scientific beliefs they happened to hold: in Spinoza's words, earlier interpreters of the Bible had tended to "wring their own figments and opinions out of the sacred text." As an example, Spinoza pointed to the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, or Mūsā ibn Maymūn: convinced of the basic correctness of Aristotle's understanding of the cosmos, Maimonides developed an interpretation of certain sections of the Hebrew Bible that read them as expressing fundamental tenets of Aristotelian physics, such as the theory of the four elements[2]. Spinoza presumably found this interpretation dangerously arbitrary. My use of the adverb "dangerously" is quite deliberate: after all, Spinoza's historical situation was defined by the devastating confessional wars that ravaged Europe in the seventeenth century, in which both Protestants and Catholics relied on theological and scriptural arguments to justify their respective causes and, ultimately, to justify their recourse to military violence. "Wringing one's figments out of a sacred text" can potentially do violence not just to a text.

As an alternative to what he deemed to be the traditional manner of interpreting the Bible, Spinoza demanded that an interpreter postpone consideration of whether the Bible is communicating something that is actually true and

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[1] For more details, see Nicolai Sinai, "Historical-Critical Readings of Abrahamic Scriptures," in *The Oxford Handbook of Abrahamic Religions*, edited by Adam Silverstein and Guy Stroumsa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 209–225, at 211–213.

[2] For more details, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 334–351.

significant by the interpreter's own standards until after the act of interpretation has been carried out. Thus, we should try to understand what the Bible is saying without presupposing that what it is saying is necessarily true and relevant. To be sure, it *might* be, but equally well scripture may turn out to contain statements that we have reason to believe to be false or trivial, given contemporary values or beliefs or scientific findings. Spinoza thus insisted that the question of how the Bible relates to what we consider to be a scientifically or philosophically true understanding of the world must not enter into our interpretation of the Bible at all. Instead of having us read the Bible against the background of our own theological, philosophical, scientific, or ethical convictions, Spinoza would require us to read the Bible against its own historical background. That is, the meaning of a given Biblical statement is to be determined first and foremost by establishing what the Hebrew words used in that statement would have meant in the Bible's ancient Israelite historical context, as far as this contextual meaning of Biblical words can be reconstructed from other sections of the Bible, other ancient literature, and also inscriptions and archaeological sources.

At this point, we encounter two basic assumptions that are made by Spinoza and subsequent historical-critical scholars, assumptions that a critic of the historical-critical method may well challenge as unproven[1]. The first of these two assumptions (which are not always explicitly spelled out) may be called the "principle of non-anachronism." This principle stipulates that the Bible can only be taken to say things that were, as it were, "thinkable" by its original addressees. Hence, Spinoza would reject the view that the Bible might be teaching its original addressees Aristotelian physics. Spinoza and later historical-critical scholars also insist – whether implicitly or explicitly – that the historical circumstances and events against which the Bible or any other text is to be interpreted need to be understood in accordance with the assumption that past periods of history were governed by the same natural laws as the present and that the moral and intellectual abilities of past human agents were roughly comparable to those of present human agents. This second assumption, which has been called the "principle of historical analogy," entails that a historical-critical scholar avoid appealing to any sort of miraculous divine intervention or to events and states of affairs that are in principle unparalleled by subsequent history. This assumption can clearly generate tensions for believing Jews, Christians, and Muslims. For instance, one of the doctrinal foundations of Christianity is clearly the resurrection of Jesus Christ; and if Christ did rise from the dead, this was surely a miracle. But if a historical-critical interpreter is expected to avoid resorting to miracles, then how does historical-critical exegesis reconcile with Christian dogma? Another case of tension created by the principle of historical analogy is the Sunni Islamic assumption that the moral integrity of the Companions of the Prophet is unparalleled by any subsequent generation. Unlike the resurrection of Christ, this notion of unparalleled moral integrity does not entail dramatically overturning natural laws; however, it does conflict with the premise that the moral and intellectual abilities of past human agents were roughly comparable to that of present ones.

So far, I have explained the "historical" component of the label "historical-critical." What about the "critical" component? As I have intimated above, Spinoza insisted that interpreters of the Bible should suspend judgment as to whether the Bible is in fact "true and divine": after having undertaken our interpretation of the Bible, we may well conclude that its teachings are true – or we may not. It is this peculiar suspension of judgment that forms the essence of the attribute "critical" in "historical-critical."[2] As a result, historical-critical scholarship is marked by a strong emphasis on scrutinizing traditional certainties about the origin and meaning of canonical texts. Accordingly, historical-critical scholars have often asked questions such as the following: Is it really likely that the Pentateuch was written down by Moses? Is it really likely that the authors of the New Testament Gospels belonged to the Apostles or were close collaborators of them? Is it really compelling to read the Hebrew Bible as

(1) See Sinai, "Historical-Critical Readings," 213–214; Nicolai Sinai, "Gottes Wort und menschliche Deutung: Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von islamischer Schriftauslegung und historischer Kritik," in *Deutung des Wortes – Deutung der Welt im Gespräch zwischen Islam und Christentum*, edited by Andreas Feldtkeller and Notger Slenczka (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 151–171, at 159–160.

(2) Sinai, "Gottes Wort," 159.

predicting and prefiguring Jesus Christ? Such questions imply that many of the things that believing Christians or Jews have traditionally assumed to be true about a particular text may well prove to be historically dubious, improbable, or impossible – although such verdicts of improbability and impossibility are usually governed by very specific presuppositions about what *is* probable and possible, namely, by the principle of non-anachronism and the principle of historical analogy.

The historical-critical method creates tension for traditional believers in all three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This tension does not mean that this approach is unequivocally incompatible with being a believing Jew, Christian, or Muslim. Indeed, the most significant advances in the historical-critical study of the Bible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were made by scholars who were trained and who taught in faculties of theology, especially faculties of Protestant theology at German universities[1]. It would be implausible to maintain that these scholars were either secretly bent on undermining their own religious beliefs or that they foolishly failed to grasp how destructive their scholarly work was going to be to the religion to which they themselves subscribed. Instead, we should view them as being genuinely convinced that there were sound, even compelling, reasons – some of which were specifically *theological* reasons – for Christians to adopt the historical-critical method and as doing their best to grapple with an intellectual tension that they believed needed to be sustained and negotiated. (This tension may play out in two different ways: one may revise or reinterpret traditional religious doctrines; or one may qualify one's commitment to the historical-critical method. The latter could, for instance, take the form of rejecting or severely curtailing the principle of historical analogy. Hence, we are not confronted with a binary decision for or against the full panoply of the historical-critical method. The question is, rather, what specific truce between historical criticism and traditional belief is negotiated by a given theologian or scholar.)

The point at which this tension between the historical-critical method and religious tradition – a tension common to all three Abrahamic religions – most clearly manifests itself is the fact that scholars beholden to the historical-critical method inevitably come to sit in judgement over the trustworthiness of entrenched religious tradition. This is still an extremely powerful cultural motif that can inspire novels and make international newspaper headlines – for instance, when a seemingly ancient papyrus scrap is found that appears to present Mary Magdalene as the wife of Jesus. So even if historical-critical scholars are normally skeptical about Dan-Brown-style conspiracy theories in which powerful religious institutions suppress inconvenient truths, a certain suspiciousness of tradition does form a profound part of historical-critical scholarship's genome – the suspicion that seemingly indubitable pieces of historical information could simply turn out to be legends that spread because enough people found them credible, useful, or appealing. What matters in the present context is that similar questions and doubts are similarly bound to arise with regard to early Islam and the Qur'an when these are studied from the same methodological vantage point as the Bible.

In this sense, there are real methodological divergences between a historical-critical approach to the Qur'an and some of the tacit assumptions underlying much traditional Islamic (or Jewish or Christian) scholarship. The logic of historical criticism, if fully embraced, requires that all traditional convictions pertaining to a given text be subjected to an ongoing process of systematic scrutiny and doubt; and it proscribes historical scholars from invoking divine interventions in the process of human history. These peculiarities of the historical-critical method may cause some believers in the revelatory origin of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or the Qur'an to harbor legitimate reservations. I stress the adjective "legitimate" here: it would be parochial for historical-critical scholars to tell themselves that their approach to the Bible or the Qur'an is the only tenable or intellectually credible approach.

Yet it would be simplistic to treat the vast exegetical legacy left behind by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interpreters of their respective scriptures as a monolith. Especially the Islamic tradition of scriptural exegesis, which is marked by a pronounced emphasis on historical context and on linguistic (lexicographical, grammatical,

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(1) For a brief overview with further references, see Sinai, "Historical-Critical Readings," 217–220.

and rhetorical) analysis, contains many textual and literary observations and insights that are partly or even primarily philological in nature rather than inevitably geared to harnessing the Qur'anic text to doctrinal preconceptions. Thus, when Islamic scholars catalog textual variants diverging from the consonantal skeleton (*rasm*) of the so-called ʿUthmānic recension of the Qur'an, list the variant surah orders reportedly found in the Qur'anic recensions of Ibn Masʿūd or Ubayy ibn Kaʿb, and juxtapose different systems of subdividing the Qur'anic text into individual verses; when they endeavor to illuminate certain grammatical or lexicographic features of the Qur'an by quoting Arabic usage or lines of early poetry (whether or not the poetry adduced has a good claim to being authentic); or when they tease out the implications of a certain Qur'anic word order or the employment of one particular expression rather than a semantically similar one – in all these cases, premodern scholars are engaging in philological work that is continuous with, and in many cases abidingly valuable to, contemporary historical-critical research.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that some mainstays of the modern Western study of the Qur'an are patently borrowed from premodern Islamic scholarship. A primary example is the notion that the Qur'anic corpus lends itself to being analyzed as a diachronic series of proclamations paralleling the prophetic activity of Muhammad, and the related distinction between a Meccan and a Medinan layer of the Qur'an. It must be underscored that both views are capable of being buttressed by cogent philological arguments rather than simply by the fact that there is a long-established Islamic consensus in their favor[1]. In other words, Islamic scholars and exegetes have creatively devised and honed philological concepts and tools that continue to hold significant explanatory merit even for researchers who are not imbued by any preexisting commitment to Islamic doctrine as such.

In any case, the historical-critical study of scripture, whether of the Bible or the Qur'an, is not exclusively a destructive phenomenon. On the contrary, the historical-critical method has yielded results that may well prove of interest to scholars in the Islamic world, even scholars who are not prepared to embrace the historical-critical method without significant qualifications. These results include a close comparison of Qur'anic narrative and ancient Christian and Jewish traditions that are transmitted in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew; for such research permits, I would argue, a richer and more exact understanding of the specific profile of Qur'anic theology, placed against its contemporary intellectual horizon[2]. It is true that this sort of scholarship can easily create a certain fear of reductionism – the fear that the aim being pursued is to present the Qur'an as a derivative text that is reduced to, at best, a faithful carbon copy of the Bible and, at worst, a willful distortion of it. Some older Orientalist scholarship is indeed apt to fuel this suspicion, insofar as its authors will often rather crudely characterize the Qur'an (or Muhammad, whom older Orientalist scholars generally treated as the Qur'an's author) as replicating or distorting Biblical traditions. However, current research shows a very decisive turn away from such reductionism[3], and I sense that most Western scholars who are currently active in this kind of work would squarely deny that they see the Qur'an as a derivative document in the above sense.

As an example for my assessment, let us examine a brief passage in Sūrat Yūnus (Surah 10), verses 90 to 92[4]. This passage describes how Pharaoh and his army pursued the Israelites through the sea after their exodus from Egypt:

90 We brought the Israelites across the sea, and Pharaoh and his hosts followed them in willful transgression. But when he [= Pharaoh] was drowning, he said, "I believe that there is no God except the one in whom the Israelites believe; and I am one of those who surrender [themselves to Him]."

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(1) See Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 111–137.

(2) For an overview, see Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 138–157.

(3) For an illustration, see Sidney Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qurʾān: The Companions of the Cave in Sūrat al-Kahf and in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context*, edited by Gabriel S. Reynolds (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 109–137.

(4) This passage and its intertextual background are treated in more detail in "Pharaoh's Submission to God in the Qur'an and in Rabbinic Literature: A Case Study in Qur'anic Intertextuality," in *The Qur'an's Reformation of Judaism and Christianity: Return to the Origins*, edited by Holger Zellentin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 235–260.

91 [God:] "Now? And you committed rebellion before and were one of those causing corruption!

92 Today We shall [only] deliver you in your [lifeless] body, so that you may be a sign to those after you – and many humans are heedless of Our signs."

The passage recounts how Pharaoh, who is about to drown in the returning waters of the sea, declares himself to believe "that there is no God except the one in whom the Israelites believe," and proclaims himself to be "one of those who surrender" to God. As I show elsewhere, this passage has a precursor in a Jewish tradition that adduces the figure of Pharaoh to illustrate the awesome "power of repentance": even a perfect villain such as Pharaoh, this earlier Jewish tradition holds, survived the just punishment that he had coming because he repented at the very last moment before his impending death. Yet the Qurʾanic presentation strikingly diverges from this view: according to the Qurʾan, Pharaoh's repentance came too late – the answer that he receives from God in the Qurʾan in Q 10:91 is, "Now? And you committed rebellion before and were one of those causing corruption!" The Qurʾan then goes on to imply that it was only Pharaoh's lifeless body that was delivered.

In placing the Pharaoh passage from Sūrat Yūnus against the background of earlier Judeo-Christian tradition, we can, therefore, observe a tangible discrepancy between the Qurʾanic version and its likely antecedent. Incidentally, such a discrepancy is entirely in keeping with the Qurʾan's self-characterization as providing both a "confirmation" and a "clarification" of Jewish and Christian traditions[1]. Now, the interesting question is what it means for the Qurʾan to tell the story differently. A believing Muslim, of course, may want to respond by saying that the Qurʾan simply tells the story as it actually happened. That may be so. But even if one were to assume that the Qurʾan is simply correcting the historical record, it seems likely that this operation serves some doctrinal or theological purpose. After all, the Qurʾan very clearly does not aspire to be a mere collection of historical facts; the Qurʾan reminds its hearers of certain events in the past because these events have a theological significance to the Qurʾan's addressees in the present. In the case under discussion, this significance is illuminated by a number of Qurʾanic statements (which are found both in Sūrat Yūnus and elsewhere) to the effect that even the most incorrigible unbelievers will ultimately come to believe – namely, when they are faced with God's overpowering punishment. For instance, Sūrat Ghāfir (Q 40) contains the following statement about the unbelievers or "repudiators" (kāfirūn):

84 Then, when they saw Our might, they said, "We believe in God alone, and we repudiate what we used to associate with Him."

85 But their belief when they saw Our might did not profit them – as was God's custom with His servants in the past. And thus the repudiators are lost[2].

Thus, just as there is no great merit in acknowledging the existence of an earthquake when it strikes, so the Qurʾan insists that believing only at this point, when God's punishment has already begun to materialize and to unfold, is simply too late. The Qurʾan is in principled theological disagreement with the idea that repentance has a virtually unconditional efficacy and power – which is the theological point that the story of Pharaoh's

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(1) See, inter alia, Q 5:19 ("O people of the scripture, Our Messenger has come to you, providing clarity for you after a lull in messengers ...") and Q 5:48 ("And We have sent down the scripture upon you with the truth, confirming what has preceded it of the scripture ...").

(2) See also Q 10:51: "Is it only then, when it [namely, God's punishment] has come about, that you will believe in it? [In that situation, God will say to them:] 'Now (āl-āna) you believe, after you have been seeking to hasten it?'" (a-thumma idhā mā waqaʿa āmantum bihi āl-āna wa-qad kuntum bihi tastaʿjilūn). This verse's conspicuous overlap with Q 10:91 is a clear signal as to how the Qurʾanic text would have us understand the fate of Pharaoh. See also Q 32:29 ("Say: 'On the Day of Victory the repudiators shall not profit from their faith, nor shall they be given respite"), Q 4:18 ("But God shall not turn towards those who do evil deeds until, when one of them is visited by death, he says, 'Now I repent,' and neither shall He turn to those who die as repudiators; for them We have prepared a painful chastisement"), and Q 6:158.

repentance seems to have served to make in the Jewish tradition. Consequently, the reason why the story is told differently in the Qurʾan is not only to correct the historical record but also, and most importantly, to correct the theological record: according to the Qurʾan, humans are bidden to make an existential choice between belief and unbelief, and this choice needs to be made before belief has become empirically confirmed fact.

I have tried to illustrate by means of this brief discussion of Pharaoh's repentance that a careful comparison of the Qurʾan and earlier traditions and texts allows us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the Qurʾan's own theological profile; and it seems to me that both scholars who are committed to the Qurʾan as divine revelation and scholars who do not share this commitment might be equally interested in tracing the distinctive contours of Qurʾanic theology in this way. In any case, there is no reason to be overly worried that juxtaposing the Qurʾan with earlier texts and traditions will necessarily result in a reductive view of the Qurʾan, i.e., a view of the Qurʾan as a mere echo or replica of these earlier traditions.

Apart from such close intertextual comparison, a second focus of recent European and North American research on the Qurʾan are issues concerning the Qurʾan's literary and rhetorical structure, especially the question whether and in what sense Qurʾanic surahs can be said to be coherent and well-structured compositions rather than a collection of isolated verses or verse groups[1]. This issue has also received significant interest in the work of 20th-century Islamic exegetes writing in Arabic or Urdu, such as Maḥmūd Shalṭūṭ (d. 1963), Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī (d. 1930), and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1997), all of whom propose that Qurʾanic surahs are structured around thematic "hubs" (sg. ʿamūd), "aims" (sg. gharaḍ), or "pivots" (sg. miḥwār)[2]. It seems fair to say that most Western scholars now accept that at least the short and medium-sized Qurʾanic surahs are unified and sophisticated literary compositions, and due to the work of scholars such as Matthias Zahniser, Neal Robinson, and Nevin Reda, the longest Qurʾanic surahs, such as Sūrat al-Baqarah, are also increasingly seen as displaying a significant degree of literary coherence[3]. Neal Robinson has, furthermore, found that the canonical text of the Qurʾan as a whole – i.e., the order in which the surahs are arranged – exhibits signs of thematic or literary coherence, rather than being based merely on a quantitative arrangement of surahs by decreasing length[4].

What I would like to highlight in the present context is the crucial role that references to premodern and modern Islamic scholarship have played in the modern Western conversation about surah coherence. One of the earliest scholarly monographs in English to explore a holistic view of Qurʾanic surahs was Mustansir Mir's 1986 book on Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī[5], and although few Western scholars of the Qurʾan read Urdu, Iṣlāḥī's understanding of the structure of some of the long Medinan surahs and the arrangement of the Qurʾanic corpus as a whole is

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(1) For an attempt to survey the state of this particular strand of research, see Sinai, The Qurʾan, 81–110.

(2) See Mustansir Mir, Coherence in the Qurʾān: A Study of Iṣlāḥī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Qurʾān (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986); Mustansir Mir, "The Sūra as a Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in Qurʾān Exegesis," in Approaches to the Qurʾān, edited by G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 211–224; Nicolai Sinai, "Reading Sūrat al-Anʿām with Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā and Sayyid Quṭb," in Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage, edited by Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 136–159.

(3) E.g., Nevin Reda, The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qurʾan's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Neal Robinson, Discovering the Qurʾan: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text, second edition (London: SCM Press, 2003), 201–223. For a treatment of Sūrat al-Baqarah that relies on the scholars listed in the main text, see Sinai, The Qurʾan, 97–104, where further references can be found.

(4) Robinson, Discovering, 256–270. See also Sinai, The Qurʾan, 25–30.

(5) Mir, Coherence.

discussed in important publications by Neal Robinson and Mathias Zahniser, among others[1]. Incidentally, the first two volumes of Iṣlāḥī's nine-volume commentary *Tadabbur-e Qurʾān* are now available in English[2].

Similar observations can be made regarding other insights into the Qur'an's literary and rhetorical features. For instance, Neal Robinson's argument that the surah order of the canonical recension of the Qur'an is informed by literary and thematic considerations, rather than just being based on a quantitative principle[3], builds on observations previously made by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, namely, the realization that the end of one surah sometimes exhibits lexically dovetailing with the beginning of the following one[4]. Thus, both the final verse of Sūrat al-Māʾidah (v. 120) and the opening verse of Sūrat al-Anʿām refer to God's sovereignty over, or creation of, "the heavens and the earth," and similar references to God's power over "the heavens and the earth" connect the end of Sūrat al-Nūr (Q 24, v. 64) and the beginning of Sūrat al-Furqān (Q 25, v. 2). Also relevant in regard to the question of the logic behind the surah arrangement in the canonical text of the Qur'an are Iṣlāḥī's views on thematically unified surah groups and surah pairs. (Striking examples of such surah pairs are Q 73–74, 81–82, 91–92, 93–94, and 105–106[5]).

Despite such promising beginnings, I would maintain that Western scholars are not even close to exhausting the wealth of rhetorical and literary observations and conceptual tools that are preserved in premodern and modern Islamic scholarship. For example, work on the phenomenon of Qur'anic self-interpretation deserves to engage with premodern discussions of the concept of *iqtiṣāṣ*, which similarly picks out the interpretive relations obtaining between many Qur'anic verses[6]; the recent interest that Western scholars have taken in concentric and envelope structures in the Qur'an – whereby the beginning of a surah or of a surah section exhibits prominent thematic or lexical overlap with its ending[7] – will benefit from considering al-Suyūṭī's *Marāṣid al-maṭāliʿ fī tanāsub al-maqāṭiʿ wa-l-maṭāliʿ*, which probes the thematic and lexical correspondences between the beginnings and endings of surahs[8]; recent work on the Qur'an's use of formulaic language has noted that the same phenomenon features in works of Islamic scholarship under the rubric of *tashābuh*, but what the Islamic tradition has to say on this topic has yet to be explored in adequate detail[9]; and the observation that Qur'anic rhetoric, especially the

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(1) A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Sūra as Guidance and Exhortation: The Composition of *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ*," in *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff*, edited by Asma Afsaruddin and A. H. Mathias Zahniser (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 71–85; A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: *al-Baqara* and *al-Nisāʾ*," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qurʾān*, edited by Issa J. Boullata (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 26–55; Robinson, *Discovering*, 256–283.

(2) Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, Tadabbur-e Qurʾān: *Pondering over the Qurʾān*, vols. 1 and 2, translated by Mohammad Saleem Kayani (Islamic Book Trust: Petaling Jaya, 2007 and 2015).

(3) Robinson, *Discovering*, 266–269.

(4) For a general overview of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's understanding of textual coherence in the Qur'an, see Mir, *Coherence*, 17–19 and Mustansir Mir, "Continuity, Context, and Coherence in the Qurʾān: A Brief Review of the Idea of *Naẓm* in *Tafsīr* Literature," *Al-Bayān* 11, no. 2 (2013): 15–29, at 18–21.

(5) Mir, *Coherence*, 75–98.

(6) See Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (Medina: Majmaʿ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibāʿat al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 1426 AH), 1747 (*nawʿ* 58). On Qur'anic self-interpretation, see Nicolai Sinai, "Two Types of Inner-Qurʾānic Interpretation," in *Exegetical Crossroads: Understanding Scripture in Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Pre-Modern Orient*, edited by Georges Tamer et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 253–288.

(7) See, for instance, Raymond Farrin, *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2014).

(8) Al-Suyūṭī, *Marāṣid al-maṭāliʿ fī tanāsub al-maqāṭiʿ wa-l-maṭāliʿ* (Riyadh: Maktabat Dār al-Minhāj), 1426 AH.

(9) See Joseph Witztum, "Variant Traditions, Relative Chronology, and the Study of Intra-Quranic Parallels," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, edited by Behnam Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein, and Robert Hoyland (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1–50, at 8. On formulaic language in the Qur'an, see Andrew G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qurʾan* (Lanham: Lexington Books), 2014.

Qur'anic presentation of the hereafter, is often based on the principle of antithetical eschatological juxtaposition – meaning a pervasive contrasting of paradise and hell, often highly symmetrical – is an insight that can already be found in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's remarks on the Qur'an's penchant to combine promises of paradise (*al-waʿd*) with threats of damnation (*al-waʿīd*)[1].

My point is emphatically not that recent Western scholarship is merely cannibalizing earlier Islamic work or that it ought to limit itself to doing this. In fact, many aspects of recent research in English, German, and French extend significantly beyond the Islamic tradition. One example is Angelika Neuwirth's discovery, first presented in a highly technical German monograph published in 1981, that many of the short- and medium-length surahs can be subdivided into three parts, the middle part of which is often occupied by narratives about earlier prophets, such as Noah or Moses[2]. Although premodern Islamic exegetes like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī pay some attention to how certain surahs can be divided into "pericopes" (sg. *qiṣṣah*), or "sections" (sg. *faṣl*), this is at best a subsidiary concern for premodern Islamic exegetes, who did not engage in explicit and focused theorizations of surah structure of the sort found, for example, in the work of Neuwirth. Modern scholarship in German, English, or French (whether produced by Muslim or non-Muslim authors) also relies on a comparative awareness of literary structures and devices in other ancient documents, such as the Bible, to which most Islamic exegetes did not pay sustained attention (even though we now know that some premodern Qur'anic exegetes, in particular, al-Biqāʿī, took a keen interest in the Bible[3]). For instance, the phenomen of keyword concatenation, or *tanāsub*, between the end of one surah and the beginning of the next has a parallel in the Book of Psalms, where comparable instances of thematic and lexical concatenation between neighboring psalms have been identified[4].

Hence, my point is not that there is nothing left but simply to rediscover the superior insights of the likes of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī or al-Suyūṭī. There is, rather, a tremendous amount of work that remains yet to be done, but which should continue to be done by seriously engaging with the Islamic scholarly tradition, both premodern and modern. This engagement will need to be critical, as there will inevitably be cases in which a modern historical-critical scholar will eventually conclude that the views of even such grandmasters as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Suyūṭī, and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī require revision. Consider, for instance, Iṣlāḥī's claim that virtually all Qur'anic surahs form pairs and that all of the Qur'an can be divided into seven overarching and thematically unified surah blocks[5]. Although this opinion is doubtlessly grounded in some very pertinent textual observations, these have questionably been transformed into a schematic formula that is assumed to be unfailingly applicable to all of the Qur'an. Likewise, the operating premise of al-Suyūṭī's *Marāṣid al-maṭāli* appears to be that some relevant thematic or lexical correspondence can always be detected between the beginning and ending of a given surah. My own impression is that we are faced with overgeneralizations that may to some degree arise from certain theological preconceptions that a historical-critical scholar can hardly take for granted – namely, that the Qur'an must be presumed to exhibit an unparalleled degree of systematic orderliness and semantic inexhaustibility, as befits a divine text. Accordingly, historical-critical scholars who navigate the rich Islamic scholarly tradition are bound to confront cases where philology shades into, or is underpinned by, theology; and this will force scholars to exercise their own judgment.

However, none of the above observations actually undermines my basic contention that researchers engaged in the literary and rhetorical analysis of the Qur'an should ensure that they are positioned to benefit from the textual observations and conceptual instruments offered by premodern and modern Islamic scholarship. Additionally,

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(1) Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-mushtahir bi-l-Tafsīr al-kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981/1401 AH), vol. 27, 122 (on Q 41:30–32); see also Mir, "Continuity, Context, and Coherence," 19.

(2) Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, second edition (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007).

(3) See Walid A. Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqāʿī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

(4) See Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 29, with further references.

(5) Mir, *Coherence*, 75–98.

I would maintain that contemporary Qur'anic scholars who are based at universities in the Islamic world – and who may well choose not to embrace the full apparatus of historical-critical methodology – may find it similarly useful to draw on some of the intertextual and literary discoveries and observations that have been made in modern Western scholarship. As I have said elsewhere, "the philologically rigorous analysis of the Qur'anic text that is demanded by a historical-critical methodology discloses intriguing literary features and can help discern how the Qur'an harnesses existing narratives and traditions to its own peculiar messages. Precisely because such findings are arrived at in a manner that does not presume a prior acceptance of the Bible or the Qur'an as 'true and divine,' believing and practicing Jews, Christians, and Muslims may find – and, indeed, have found – it stimulating and enriching to view their canonical writings from a historical-critical perspective."[1]

My argument, then, is an invitation to self-conscious eclecticism. The evident fact that there are significant methodological divergences between modern Qur'an scholarship produced in European languages and scholarship produced in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish is by no means a sufficient excuse for failing to explore and exploit the considerable potential for mutual stimulation and enrichment between practitioners based at European and American universities and those based in the Islamic world (neither of whom, of course, form methodologically monolithic camps). Having a conversation that is intellectually useful to both sides does not presuppose complete methodological agreement. In fact, the conversation is probably going to be far more interesting in the absence of such agreement. Premodern Islamic scholars with their inexhaustible relish for *ikhtilāf* knew this well.

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(1) Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 4.

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