to consult it for varying purposes. The volume is praiseworthy in its emphasis on the truly global dimensions of Islamic history and culture, since it includes geographical areas normally neglected in encyclopaedic ventures of this kind – Bruce Laurence writes on Islam in south and southeast Asia, Dru Gladney discusses Central Asia and China and Nehema Levtzion surveys Islam in Africa. Nor is the West neglected; Yvonne Haddad writes a thought-provoking piece entitled 'The Globalisation of Islam: the Return of Muslims to the West', in which she raises the issue of Islam's becoming 'part and parcel of the West': will there be Muslim assimilation, integration or separation in Western societies? This question will remain at the forefront of our minds for some time to come.

It is no easy task to produce a book such as this at a reasonable price; but the publishers have done just this. The book has 749 pages of text and is, moreover, lavishly illustrated with many superb colour photographs, as well as black and white ones. These make it a delight and an education to browse through the volume. The book will remain a valuable reference work for years to come. If general readers want to buy just one book to inform themselves about Islam – and the need to do so is, of course, enhanced by recent events – the *Oxford History of Islam* is that book.

CAROLE HILLENBRAND

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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Qur'an and its Interpretive Tradition. By Andrew Rippin. (Variorum Collected Studies Series). Pp. 356. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2001. £62.50.

Each volume of the Variorum Collected Studies Series musters long term writings by some noteworthy scholar (in this case, one of the biggest names in Qur'anic studies in the West); by grouping articles on sundry fields, perhaps written over decades, it allows a clear glimpse of the scholar's development, their deeper presuppositions, the methodological patterns and mental habits which undergird their work. Rippin's corpus is avowedly built on groundwork laid by John Wansbrough. Two whole chapters (II and IV) of the book at hand are indeed given over to aspects of Wansbrough's work. The tell-tale framework of haggadic, halakhic, massoretic, rhetorical and allegorical genres/phases in the elaboration of the Muslim scriptures is assumed throughout the book, which brims with references to *Quranic Studies* and praise for its late author.

Qur'anic exegesis is in the foreground of Rippin's research, not the Qur'an per se. However, the fraught issue of the 'canonization process' (so-called) is inseparable

from early exegesis in Wansbrough's doctrine – a premise looming in Rippin's work too. Like his cynosure, Rippin believes that the Qur'an underwent 'stabilization' well into the Abbasid period: 'early Islamic sources ... would seem to witness that the text of the Qur'an may not have been totally fixed until the early part of the third/ninth century' (II, p. 154). Again: 'The ultimate enshrinement of the text of the Qur'an as we now know it ... was the result of two to three centuries of vigorous debate as reflected in these texts of interpretation as well as in the evolution of the actual text of scripture' (Introduction, p. xvii; also see X, p. 4). Thus, exegesis generated the Qur'an as much as the Qur'an generated exegesis (=vicious circularity?), and Rippin's research into the early 'interpretive tradition' implicitly aims at laying bare the process by which the very text of scripture was supposedly negotiated.

The issue of the Qur'an's historical status therefore lurks in the background of the whole volume, and in keeping with this, Toby Lester's sensational(ist) article 'What is the Qur'an?' from the January 1999 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* is Rippin's opening gambit in the Introduction. A talking point in Lester's piece was the trove of ancient Qur'an manuscripts discovered in the Great Mosque at Sanaa in 1972. Excitingly, some of this material (22 groups of fragments) dates from the 700s and uses the early 'Ḥijāzī' form of the Arabic script. Nevertheless, these documents hardly lend themselves to Wansbrough's tortuous thesis of an evolving text. The differences from the *textus receptus* are in fact surprisingly minimal, with small disparities in chapter-order and minor variant readings. Yet even these features are put to full use by Rippin, who finds in them evidence against the traditional Muslim claim that a stable oral tradition accompanied the early unvowelled and 'defective' text, and guaranteed that it was articulated correctly. For Rippin, the irregularities of the Sanaa fragments prove that this assumptive tradition is wholly chimeric (Introduction, p. x).

In the void which ensues in its absence, ostentatious new solutions to thorny old problems are found. For instance, the somewhat unexpected Islamic version of the name Abraham, 'Ibrāhīm', is argued to have come about through reading the Ḥijāzī script without the oral guideline mentioned. In the relevant script, long *ā* was represented with the letter *yā'* both finally and sometimes also medially – whereas in later scripts this only remains an option finally (=*alif maqṣūra*). So the Ḥijāzī script, in its naked-ness, might yield a feasible original pronunciation of the Patriarch's name, 'Abrāhām', in line with Hebrew. By a similar manoeuvre, the unpointed script could yield 'Sāṭān', again in line with Hebrew, in contrast with the otherwise puzzling form of this word current in Arabic: Shayṭān (Introduction, p. xv).

Needless to say, any 'sense of the sacred' is besides the point in this kind of approach, and Rippin even affects blank incomprehension of the latter's secular academic ana-logue, the phenomenological epochē: 'One of the arguments which I often seem to

hear ... is that, when studying the Qur'an as literature, we must use a method which is "appropriate to the text itself", that usually being one which involves the basic historical ... assumptions which the tradition of Islam itself suggests. Now, *I must admit that I am at a loss to understand these statements and why they should be so adamantly held and expressed*' (I, p. 43, italics mine). Clearly, the basic idea of the phenomenological method – the possibility of eidetic vision via 'bracketing out' the researcher's preconceptions – is not just set aside in Rippin's framework, it is even declared wholly and intrinsically unintelligible. If he thus stands in a long line of modern scholars of the Semitic monotheist traditions, starting with Eichhorn, whose 'scientific' aim has been to use historical criticism to unmask religion and the *authoritas scripturae*, Rippin nevertheless professes greater subtlety, less *naïveté*, in his theoretical foundations, than his 18th and 19th century predecessors. In fact, confusingly, he distances his approach from crude historicist attacks on religion, and associates himself with post-modern trends like 'deconstruction'.

A number of examples of this turn of speech are found in the volume. In Chapter IV Rippin speaks of our 'contemporary scholarly world' living 'in the light of James Joyce and deconstruction' (IV, p. 646) – mentioned in the course of evaluating Richard Bell's infamous restitutory approach to the text of the Qur'an. Bell found evidence of 'progressive reformulation' in the Qur'an, driven by the Prophet's gathering knowledge of Christianity, and by other shifts in his strategy. This progressive reformulation had been supposedly hidden by disruptive editing in the *textus receptus*, which Bell duly reorganised. Notwithstanding the gross circularity in making 'progressive reformulation' both the premise and conclusion of this re-editing of the Qur'an, Bell's overall project is judged by Rippin to have been enriching, though very much of its time. Such a project was in the then current Germanic tradition of *Tendenzkritik* and the historical criticism of the Bible, entering European Qur'anic studies via figures like Wellhausen, who worked on both scriptures. On the other hand, for Rippin himself, as just quoted, the cocksure positivism of this framework is evidently rendered irretrievably passé by 'James Joyce and deconstruction'. Again, in Chapter XII Rippin urges with disarming modesty that historical/literary approaches to the study of holy scripture be granted equal rights with traditional religious ones, using the patently post-modern reasoning that this 'seems to have legitimacy by virtue of the way it reflects an investigator's own interests and construction of reality' (XII, p. 249). In this, Rippin seemingly equivalues each intellectual standpoint, with each worldview as much of a construct as the next, and each with its intrinsic legitimacy.

As an aside: it is unclear how deconstruction can truly escape the 'transcendental *tu quoque*', any more than can older Pyrrhonic viewpoints. Like its intellectual forebears, it cannot avoid the same, fascinating, but ultimately fatal paradox of

constituting a systematic anti-systematism or dogmatic anti-dogmatism (the only retort being that deconstruction, like philosophical scepticism, is an *agōgē* and not a *hairesis*, a tendency, not a school). But let us swim clear of that maelstrom and suggest anyway that Rippin's couching his work in such terms comes over as more convenient than sincere. Significantly, one of the greatest successes of the broadly deconstructive stance on scholarly discourse (in Islamics to boot) – Edward Said's *Orientalism* – is reproached by Rippin for its impact on Islamic studies, which is judged to have been an unwelcome level of politicisation (I, pp. 41–2). Rippin's support for the broader framework is thus clearly cautious, selective even. Anyway, a thoroughgoing version of deconstruction is hardly viable for him, since if taken absolutely, deconstruction would entail the strictly rhetorical tenor of all historiography, and how could positive historical research build on such premises? It is telling here that Rippin mentions he had previously toyed with (but evidently moved on from) the idea of an enclosed hermeneutical circle in historical discourse, a circle precluding the prospect of objective historical knowledge (I, p. 44). In the end, some notion of *authentia historica* is unavoidably premised in any historian's project.

The force of the clash in his premises is screened by Rippin's particular choice of historical framework – namely, Wansbrough's. This school of Islamics, with its leitmotiv of 'salvation history', might be seen as laying bare the allegedly rhetorical character of Islamic historiography and tradition, not as formulating the 'authentic history' of the origins of the religion (see II, p.158). It is noteworthy in this regard that Rippin is critical, in passing, of some such attempts at fashioning alternative, positive accounts of Islam's origins, like that of Bell, as just mentioned, or that of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in their *Hagarism, the Making of the Islamic World*. The problem with *Hagarism* is evidently that using contemporary non-Muslim sources in reconstructing the beginnings of Islam is in the end merely to substitute one polemic with another (II, p. 152). By comparison, the thrust of Rippin's work is presumably understood by him more in terms of demolition than positive reconstruction. It is a fact that many pages of Rippin's Variorum volume are prima facie taken up with trying to overturn old notions, rather than proposing new ones – above all, with trying to overturn the received apparatus of Qur'anic exegesis, from variant readings to 'occasions of revelation' narratives (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), to the whole idea of the reality of a body of early exegetical tradition.

Confirming that this is indeed the deeper theoretical drift of Rippin's research, he sometimes explicitly hitches the sceptical 'Wansbroughian' (*sic*) approach to the 'post-modern ethos', claiming a kinship between the two (see IV, p. 646 and VI, p. 44). But the link-up of these frameworks, which is certainly ingenious, begs a major question. Even when radically sceptical in mode, with a drastic source-criticism centre stage, how can students of history ever sidestep the notion of *authentia*

historica, which seems the suppressed premise of all historical research? Rippin himself does not leave a historiographical vacuum, nor does he ever seriously mean to. For instance, his very denial of the historicity of early Islamic sources (following Wansbrough) involves a corresponding positive commitment to the claim that the earliest phase of Islamic intellectual culture was 'haggadic' in complexion, and was in fact dominated by the trivial figure of the storyteller (*qāṣṣ*) (e.g. XIX, p. 19). Again, more than once in sweeping away received Arabic lexicographical ideas, the positive thesis of heavy Hebrew influence on the early Islamic tradition takes their place (Introduction, p. xv; VII, p. 53).

Another case is Rippin's denial of the authenticity of *asbāb al-nuzūl* ('occasions of revelation' narrations). Via these narrations, the verses of the Qur'an have been historically contextualised by commentators in order to answer key questions about which verses are abrogating (*nāsikh*) and which are abrogated (*mansūkh*), or which are generally applicable (*bi'l-ʿumūm*) and which are only specifically applicable (*bi'l-khuṣūṣ*). Rippin's denial that such narrations originate in authentic memories of the Prophet's life demands in turn an affirmation of their 'real' origin. Using typical reasoning, Rippin asserts that the real origin of such narrations is at one with their function. They spring from the commentatorial process itself, in its attempt to impose coherence on scripture, or as Wansbrough would put it, they are 'purely exegetical': 'It is evident that ... the *sabab* serves primarily an exegetical function by taking the Qur'anic phraseology and elaborating it through narrative embellishment in order to remove the apparent intra-Qur'anic conflict, and that the *sabab* does not simply act as an external verificant of time and place of revelation' (XVIII, p. 256). The expedient of merging origin with function, aetiology with teleology, is used by Rippin not only for *asbāb al-nuzūl*, but also for variant readings (e.g. XIII, p. 23) and to explain the emergence of details in Qur'anic lexicography (e.g. IX, p. 320). Thus the data of these separate fields routinely find their origin within the turmoil of exegesis itself, though the latter seems to assume *them*. Such is Rippin's view. It is clear that in this kind of historical inference, the positive counter-thesis is practically constituted by the very doubt about the old thesis; so intimate is their interrelation that the new doctrine is virtually the obverse of the very act of *skepsis*.

Be that as it may, attributing the origin of *asbāb al-nuzūl* simply to their exegetical role is not without difficulty. The basic thrust of their exegetical function emerges clearly in the course of three chapters focused on 'occasions of revelation' (XVII, XVIII, and XIX – the first two developed from Rippin's PhD thesis). Prima facie, the main function of *asbāb* is in deriving law from revelation. Correspondingly, in Suyūṭī's fascinating apologetic for *asbāb* covered in Chapter XVIII, four or five out of six points offered in defence of their exegetical role present them in legal, or (to use Wansbrough's terminology) halakhic, terms (XVIII, p. 257). This seems reason-

able. In view of Rippin's axiom that function and origin coincide, one would therefore expect the conclusion from him that *asbāb* originate in the context of legal exegesis. But matters are not nearly so straightforward. *Asbāb* in practice are frequently cited simply to contextualise scriptural verses, without any obvious legal profitability (XIX, p. 2), and in legal contexts *asbāb* are often found to be cited but overlooked in the actual derivation of rulings, which are based on some other consideration, such as consensus (XIX, pp. 16–17). Such observations clearly indicate that, notwithstanding their basically legal *raison d'être*, *asbāb al-nuzūl* have a definite 'life of their own', strongly implying a lateral and quite independent origin for them beyond the imperatives of halakhic exegesis. Muslim tradition will hold that the origin in question is (by and large) history itself – the actual history of the Prophet's life and mission. Rippin, unwilling to give ground to commonsense, asserts that *asbāb* must instead have emerged wholesale in some *other* purely exegetical context, namely a 'haggadic' one, created by *quṣṣāṣ* (storytellers) to edify the faithful, embellish the Qur'an (XIX, p. 19), or even just to 'create a good yarn' (XIX, p. 4).

One of Rippin's general aims in Chapter XIX is to bring out that *asbāb* narrations are unreliable as a historical witness, and simply mirror issues of exegesis; that is, they simply arise to support one or another option of interpretation. That they may actually contradict one another implies that they simply originate from this need to justify some exegetical point of view, and so lack all historical substance. Variant readings in Qur'an 2:119, *tusʾalu* and *tasʾal*, cannot both be correct, yet both are supplied in the sources with separate *asbāb*. If such an example seems solid as evidence, others given by Rippin seem less so, since contradiction between *asbāb* narrations must clearly be outright to prove his point successfully. For instance, Qur'an 2:115 ('To God belong the east and the west. Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God. God is All-pervasive, All-knowing!') is given different *asbāb*. In one, the verse is found in a context in which the rightness of praying for the dead Negus is questioned by some Companions, since, though he 'believed in God and in what had been revealed to the Prophet', he still did not pray in the Islamic direction of prayer (*qibla*). In response to their complaint, it is said, Qur'an 2:115 was revealed. Then in a separate narration, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb cites the same verse as confirming that it is legal to pray the *witr* prayer riding, facing in any direction, and he is held to have said that 'concerning this it was revealed (... Qur'an 2:115)' (XIX, pp. 13–14). However, it is arguably quite straightforward to interpret ʿUmar as simply meaning that the case of praying *witr* while riding, *inter alia* was covered by Qur'an 2:115 (i.e. 'concerning this case, *among others*, it was revealed ...'). In another example, Rippin presents separate *asbāb* for Qur'an 2:232. But scrutiny bears out that they both boil down to the scenario of relatives in the position of guardian (*walī*), preventing divorced women from remarrying their ex-husbands after the statutory 'waiting period' (XIX, pp. 14–15). Again, these narrations are not

emphatically contradictory in a manner that would make them impressive as evidence that *asbāb* narrations are purely arbitrary.

Rippin thus seems over-eager in finding evidence of inauthenticity in every disparity between *sabab* narrations. The mysterious verse, Qur'an 2:189, is yet another case in point: 'They ask you concerning the new moons. Say: They are but signs to mark fixed periods of time for humanity and for the Greater Pilgrimage; and it is not virtuous behaviour for you to enter your homes from the back. Virtuous behaviour is [that of] whoever is godfearing. Enter houses by their doors, and be mindful of God – perhaps you will prosper!' The verse is traditionally explained as implicitly referring to a pre-Islamic Qurayshite religious group known as Ḥums, who maintained some taboo during pilgrimage, pertaining to entering houses. But the fact that some *sabab* narrations speak of the taboo in terms of Ḥums *having* to enter by the front door, while others speak of it in terms of their being *forbidden* from the same, is ruled by Rippin (following Wansbrough) as clear evidence of inconsistency, thus good grounds for holding that the '*sabab* ... responds to the basic haggadic impulse' and that it lacks any historical substance (XIX, pp. 9–10). The tenor of this last argument seems rhetorical, not scientific. It is as if the claim that no historical kernel underlies the Ḥums *asbāb*, that indeed Muslims later made up the whole idea of this group, together with their idiosyncratic name, Ḥums, and the lore about their distinctive pre-Islamic taboos – all just to explain Qur'an 2:189 – is not itself rather improbable by comparison with the original account.

Rippin's 'hyperbolic scepticism' in the above is typical. In the 'salvation history' school of thought, Islamic sources a priori lack historicity. That is why his reflex as a scholar is always to respond to the intellectual challenge of sifting the sources with the one-track reaction of outright dismissal – seemingly, ideologically driven to deny any kernel of fact. Many examples might be cited. In Chapter III, 'RḤMNN and the Ḥanīfs', Rippin covers the claim that epigraphic evidence exists in South Arabia of a pre-Islamic non-aligned monotheism, consisting in references to RḤMNN (i.e. *al-Rahmān*, 'the All-Merciful'), and that this evidence is related to the elusive native Arabian monotheistic grouping known as Ḥanīf in the Qur'an. Rippin is opposed to the claim, which clearly entails a factual element in the Qur'an and Islamic historiography. The Islamic sources indeed provide specific names of individuals in a list of four or even ten Ḥanīfs from the Prophet's milieu.

The first point is then that Rippin predictably favours C. Robin's argument that, out of the fourteen South Arabian inscriptions which truly remain culturally inexplicit (thus which are not self-evidently dismissable as Christian or Jewish), all are in reality Jewish in origin – *pace* A.F.L. Beeston, who instead read them as evidence of the Ḥanīfs (III, pp. 165 ff.). The second point is that Rippin (following Wansbrough

again) tries hard to deny any historical value in the mentioned Ḥanīf list from Islamic sources (III, pp. 162–3). The first four names are supposedly merely part of the Islamic *muthos* of *praeparatio evangelica*. But Uri Rubin has countered this, sensibly enough, with the argument that no Muslim could have concocted the names in question. After all, three of the named individuals are explicitly mentioned as enemies (!) of the Prophet, and what on earth would have motivated Muslims to depict Ḥanīfs (Arabian monotheists, the very forerunners of Islam according to Muslim tradition and the Qur'an) as his enemies? Rippin's retort is to point out that three out of four of these 'Ḥanīfs' are said in the sources to have ended by embracing Christianity. They therefore supposedly fall into the category of Christian counterparts of the motif of the Jewish rejection of Islam (the 'rabbinic pericopes' in the Prophet's biography). The argument seems startlingly disingenuous. After all, the figures in question were precisely originally Ḥanīf, not Christian. Their Christianity will still unavoidably represent the spectre of a Ḥanīf rejection of the Prophet and Islam. This remains counter-intuitive, and smacks strongly of a genuine historical memory of events from the period, exactly as Rubin suggests.

Other examples of Rippin's negativism on Islamic sources are the more striking because upheld in the teeth of his confession of some element of historicity. In regard to this, the last chapter of the volume (XXI) yet again turns to the prospect of archaeological corroboration from South Arabia for data in the Qur'an. The issue here concerns Qur'an 34:15–16 and the extraordinary reference there to the fate of the society of Sabā, in Yemen. Rippin is unable to sidestep the conclusion that genuinely ancient information in the Qur'an is found at this point. The information has been generally viewed as relating in particular to Mārib, a society which depended on the maintenance of a sophisticated dam-system. When the dam gave way, the people of Mārib met their fate, and the rich landscape returned to desert. At this point in the Qur'an we find a *hapax legomenon*, the mysterious term *ʿarim* – with the relevant expression, *sayl al-ʿarim*, generally being rendered into English as 'the flood of the dam'. This expression is not familiar in Arabic and is inescapably a loanword from epigraphical South Arabian. It turns out that the word is actually cognate with Akkadian *arimmu*, meaning a dam. Excitingly, inscriptions at Mārib dating from circa 450 and 540 CE refer to the dam using this very word, *ʿayn-rāʾ-mīm*.

Having perforce assented to this factual core, Rippin contradictorily denies that it constitutes any authentic historical memory by using his favoured expedient of variation in the traditional exegetical material. The key point seems to be that there is no consensus in the sources on the precise date of the 'flood of the dam', this inconsistency being judged sufficient to discredit the references entirely (XXI, p. 170). Few could read this argument and hold it to be reasonable or convincing. Most folk memories are routinely set in an unsituated 'old time', and to use this to deny the

fascinating and noteworthy element of historicity is a crude strategy. Rippin is especially exercised by attempts, *inter alia* by Richard Baron Jr, to coordinate the data of the Qur'an with the actual archaeology of Mārib (XXI, pp. 172–3). Qur'an 34:15 pointedly refers to two gardens (*jannatān*) in relation to the dam, and archaeologists have gone on to read the layout of the Mārib site in terms of there having been two great irrigated tracts. But Rippin alleges that these tracts have been only inferred by archaeology in the first place, prompted by the Qur'anic reference itself, and this assumes the accuracy of equating the latter with Mārib. He goes on to claim that the 'two gardens' (*jannatān*) mentioned in Qur'an 34:15 are just a scriptural device, a mere topos which recurs for instance in Qur'an 18:32 and especially 55:46.

These arguments are ingeniously sceptical, but debatable nonetheless. The archaeology of the Mārib site attests to two separate sluices and distribution systems, a northern one and a southern one, and this is the main basis for the idea that there were two irrigated tracts involved, not the Qur'an per se. Neither can the two gardens of the people of Sabā referred to in Qur'an 34:15 be so easily bracketed with the more stylised double garden (*jannatān*) motif of Qur'an 55:46. After all, the latter is explicitly an archetypal image from the *eschaton*, while the Sabā gardens belong to a different order entirely – narratives on past civilisations (*umam khāliya*). Again, *jannatān* in Qur'an 55:46 corresponds with the stringent demands of the –*ān* rhyme-scheme (*fāṣila*) of this famously, poetically evocative chapter, while the same word in the reference to Sabā in Qur'an 34:15 cannot be explained in these terms at all.

A destructive intent seems to operate in Rippin's reasoning, here as elsewhere. The syndrome is again in evidence in the chunk of the book (chapters XIII, XIV, and XV) given over to an evaluation of materials attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, the venerable 'father of exegesis'. Rightly, Rippin is extremely cautious about the attribution of these materials (=*al-Lughāt fi'l-Qur'ān, Gharīb al-Qur'ān* and *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*). He is predictably opposed to the idea of their authenticity, and following Gilliot, concludes that Ibn ʿAbbās is no more than 'a mythic exemplum for the Muslim community' (XV, p. 74). Rippin has thrashed out an *isnād* structure for the *Tafsīr* (XV, appendix 3) which repays scrutiny and allows us to engage with his extremely entwined argumentation with a slightly clearer head. What becomes apparent here is that there are two crucial names in the history of the transmission of this body of texts. Earlier, there is a certain ʿAlī ibn Isḥāq al-Samarqandī (d. 851), and slightly later, there is the prevalence of the name ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak al-Dīnawarī. What seems certain is that, in the generation of ʿAlī ibn Isḥāq the texts become in effect the equivalent of a *khabar wāḥid* – they are singly transmitted by ʿAlī ibn Isḥāq himself, with all the chains converging on him. In a sense then, the question seems to come down to the probity of such transmissions, and there is of course a strong danger that the 'transmitted matter' actually originates from the single transmitter himself. Be that as it

may, what is surprising is that Rippin does not rest content with this attribution of the *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* in his article, but prefers the even later *terminus a quo* of Dīnawarī. This is wayward, if only because the latter is clearly not the solitary transmitter in his generation, lateral transmissions also passing in his day via Harawī and Khajnadī, as even Rippin must admit: 'It would appear ... that other people in [Dīnawarī's] generation transmitted the same text without any reference to him' (XV, p. 49). Yet the *quaesitum* of Rippin's whole article is to assign the *tafsīr* to Dīnawarī!

A recurring problem with Rippin's dismissive attitude to claims made in Islamic sources, is that having dismissed them he replaces them with hypotheses which, if anything, seem more tenuous by far. An example is found in Chapter VII in his discussion of the traditional exegesis of Qur'an 21:95: 'A ban is upon any town that We have destroyed, that they shall not return' (*wa ḥarāmun ʿalā qaryatin ahlaknāhā annahum lā yarjiʿūn*). This presents the commentators with an interesting challenge. There seems to be an implicit double negation in the ruling, so that in effect it says 'It is *not* allowed for people *not* to return to any town God has destroyed', in other words: they *must* return to it. Zamakhsharī neatly solves the problem by adducing a variant reading. The Arabic may read *innahum* rather than *annahum*, effectively putting a grammatical hiatus between the negations: 'A ban is upon any town We have destroyed; verily, they may not return!' Bayḍāwī and Ibn Hishām significantly also cite this variant. For Rippin such an answer is neither here nor there, clearly arising in the course of looking for exegetical solutions for the problem itself, and the adduced variant cannot possibly be authentic (VII, p. 47). Here again then, we see at work Rippin's device of collapsing origin with function.

On the other hand, Ibn Qutayba, Shawkānī and others have a different solution to the double negation. They hold that *ḥarām*, in addition to meaning 'banned' could also sometimes mean 'obligatory' or 'necessary' (i.e. *wājib*). Though surprising, this is not out of keeping with Arabic polysemy, in which it is not unusual for one word to comprise actually opposite meanings. The commentators in question quote a line of poetry as evidence (sometimes attributed to the pre-Islamic poet Muḥāribī, sometimes to Khansāʾ): 'Indeed it is necessary (=*ḥarām!*) that I should never again see someone crying in his sorrow, without me weeping for ʿAmr'. At one stroke the double negation of Qur'an 21:95 is removed: 'It is necessary for any town that We have destroyed that they not return'. All the same, Rippin surprisingly high-handedly rejects this rather satisfying solution of Ibn Qutayba and Shawkānī, on the weak grounds that the cited line of poetry is obscure in provenance: '... the doubtful authority inherent in this line of poetry renders it almost unnecessary to comment that this line, even if genuine, adds little clarification to the matter at hand' (VII, p. 52). Rippin's own preferred solution, for its part, is undoubtedly very interesting. His own thesis is that *ḥarām* here is to be identified with the Hebrew word *ḥērem*, signifying something

devoted to God – the Biblical idea evidently being that a city laid waste was thought of as consecrated to God, as a sacrifice (VII, p. 52). This is indeed fascinating, and meets the criterion of removing the double negation. Yet it is hardly more impressive or likely than the more traditional exegetical solutions which Rippin has rejected so vehemently. Moreover, his new translation of the verse, in line with the solution aired, seems to wreak havoc with the Arabic: 'A city, which we destroyed, has been devoted to God [=*ḥarāmun ʿalā qaryatin ahlaknāhā*?!], (resulting in the fact) that they may not return (to it) ...' (XV, p. 53).

Despite the dawning of newer, more sympathetic hypotheses on given issues, Rippin sometimes comes across as opting for those which are more in step with the hostile assumptions of a century ago. One such assumption seems to be that Islam is, at root, an anti-intellectual, originally 'fundamentalist' religious tradition. In Rippin's vocabulary, 'fundamentalist' is routinely used for the original, i.e. earliest manifest understanding of a given problem in Islam (e.g. XIII, p. 22). This is worrying. But reassuringly, it is also evident that it is in some cases little more than a presupposition masquerading as a conclusion.

Take for example the long-running debate on whether or not scriptural exegesis was even tolerated in early Islam. Since Goldziher long ago drew attention to it, a key tradition has been fought over in regard to this very important question. The tradition in question (found e.g. Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, ch. 43) concerns ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's harsh reaction to one early scriptural hermeneut, whom we may refer to as Ibn Ṣabīgh. There is not the space here to enter into the details of this topos of the secondary literature. The main point is that ʿUmar is said to have been incensed by this man's activities in Medina, notably, his inquiry into difficulties in the Qurʾan, and he had him flogged. For Goldziher (in *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, Leiden, 1920, p. 55) this was good evidence that the basic outlook of this early period was closed and anti-interpretive. There was, in short, heavy opposition to *tafsīr* for the first century or two of Islam. Harris Birkeland begged to differ. He points out that the *ḥadīth*, drawn from the *Musnad al-Dārimī*, was used primarily in Ḥanbalite circles, and patently corresponds with ʿUmar qua ideal and archetype of the Ḥanbalite ethos, which was uniquely hostile to commentary. Moreover, the name of the reproved hermeneut differs suspiciously between different versions of the narration, and (contrary to their drift) ʿUmar is in fact known to have encouraged *tafsīr* and is said to have sought out its greatest early representative, Ibn ʿAbbās, becoming gravely troubled when the latter fell ill (Birkeland, *Old Muslim Opposition Against Interpretation of the Qurʾan*, Oslo, 1955, pp. 13–14).

Nabia Abbott has produced a synthetic argument, which neatly combines elements of Goldziher's thetic and Birkeland's antithetic positions on this issue. That Ibn Ṣabīgh

is referred to by different names simply reflects the common practice of referring to an individual by different aspects of his full name, and cannot seriously be used to question the historicity of the individual. The man's name was probably something like Ṣabīgh ibn Sharīk ibn al-Mundhir ... al-Yarbuʿī. Next, Ṣabīgh's punishment makes sense in consideration of various points: his questions about the Qur'an were not innocent; his activity was neither private nor casual; he travelled (notably, in Iraq and Egypt), thus spreading his theological doubts far and wide and could even have undermined the allegiance of the military forces essential to the new community's stability. Abbott also points out that ʿUmar could be notoriously severe, even to his own family. His elevation to the caliphate was actually opposed in consideration of his severe temperament. There are other cited instances of ʿUmar taking action against *tafsīr*, such as cutting off the commentary appended to a text of the Qur'an which he found. The critical point is of course the presence in the scripture of so-called 'ambiguous' verses (*mutashābihāt*), speculation upon which is forbidden on the basis of Qur'an 3:7. Once this is grasped, the contradictions dividing Goldziher and Birkeland dissolve. ʿUmar himself engaged in *tafsīr*, but scrupulously avoided this kind of banned speculation about the *mutashābihāt*, and it was particularly this which had angered him beyond bounds in the case of Ibn Ṣabīgh. It was, *pace* Goldziher, exegesis on the *mutashābihāt* which only began at the close of the second century of Islam, not exegesis per se (Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyrii II*, Chicago, 1967, pp. 106–13).

Finally in this debate, Wansbrough and Rippin himself argue back against Abbott's extremely satisfying resolution, and in so doing effectively resurrect Goldziher's original rather undiscerning interpretation of the Ibn Ṣabīgh case: that it points to blanket hostility to Qur'an commentary in the early period. Wansbrough thus contended that Abbott had missed the central point about the term *mutashābihāt* itself, which is effectively (to put the point philosophically) that the term is not 'heterological' but 'homological', i.e. that it is itself *mutashābih* (='ambiguous')! It was itself a hopelessly equivocal term and potentially could extend to every verse of the Qur'an (Wansbrough, followed by Rippin, X, p. 5 and XI, p. 227). In the light of this, the ban on *tafsīr al-mutashābihāt* enshrined in Qur'an 3:7 might well have extended to the entirety of the Qur'an.

Aside from the bizarre incompatibility of this argument with the Wansbrough/Rippin thesis of the anarchic reign of the storytellers and the 'haggadic' framework in the early Muslim tradition, it could additionally be protested that it turns on a highly polemical use of the information at hand. It is fairly obvious that the openness of the definition of *mutashābih* could cut precisely both ways. Given that one person's *mutashābih* verse was not so designated consensually, another person might well include the same verse within the pale of exegesis. Clearly, the definitional ambigui-

ty of the banned category of verse could in principle contribute to opening up the whole Qur'an to exegesis, as much as the reverse. Rippin dismisses the view as 'trivial' that the 'disembodied letters' (*muqaṭṭaᶜāt*) were all that was referred to by the term *mutashābihāt* (X, p. 7). Yet this is exactly the kind of exegetical view that might also arise from the ambiguity of the term *mutashābih* – and in impact it would extend the exegetical project to virtually the whole text of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is in fact, itself, radically open on the exact status of its verses. Qur'an 39:23 seems to state that its entirety is ambiguous (*mutashābih*), while Qur'an 11:1 seems to state that its entirety is unambiguous (*muḥkam*).

More specifically, Wansbrough's and Rippin's reversion to Goldziher's understanding of the case of Ibn Ṣabīgh is surely no longer tenable. Leemhuis, followed by Gilliot, has effectively solved the problem of the narration's significance once and for all. What we are left with is a precise specification (*takhṣīṣ*!) of these events from ᶜUmar's reign, which may no longer form the basis of generalisations about the unacceptibility of *tafsīr* in the early period. The point is that Ibn Ṣabīgh was a member of the notorious Banū Tamīm tribe. This had very recently rebelled against the new faith during the troubled apostasy period (*al-ridda*) following the death of the Prophet. Their rebellion had of course centred on the 'false prophet' Musaylima. This then provides the key to ᶜUmar's specific hostility to Ibn Ṣabīgh's activities. A crucial detail is that Ibn Ṣabīgh is said to have been particularly interested in the opening of Qur'an 51: 'By the winnowers winnowing ... etc.' (*wa'l-dhāriyāti dharwan*). Musaylima had produced a 'revelation' which strikingly mirrored this: 'By the winnowers of wheat ...' (*wa'l-dhāriyati qamḥan*). Ibn Ṣabīgh was thus punished for a highly-focused seditious activity, and not for exegesis as such (see Claude Gilliot in Rippin (ed.) *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation*, Aldershot, 1999, p. 6).

Despite the newfangled Wansbroughian and even post-modern terms in which Rippin has formulated his formidable body of research, it is hard in the end to mark it out from a much older Orientalist programme. Such scholarship has long claimed to employ a neutral, indeed 'scientific', historical criticism, but in practice is distorted by a kind of animus against the tradition. This is no longer, *pace* Said, a question of 'Europe versus Islam'; rather, it is about the tension of secularity and religion. The Rippins and the Wansbroughs have striven to do with the sources of the Islamic tradition exactly what much greater 18th and 19th century names accomplished with the Bible, under the aegis of 'higher criticism'. Wansbrough's idea of an evolving Qur'an is, arguably, a distant cousin of the old 'Grafian hypothesis' on the Torah. It is of interest, moreover, that elements of the higher criticism later had to be amended. The Hegelian evolutionary assumption that sophistication *ipso facto* entailed lateness of provenance, had to be qualified when Sayce, Hommel et al. began to draw attention to how the archaeology of Western Asia lent credence to the thesis of earlier Hebrew

sophistication, such that the elaborate legal and ritual codes of Israel were not per se incompatible with a Mosaic dating.

Nowadays, the favoured critical method for studying Biblical texts is more likely to be narrative, or canonical, criticism than historical criticism. Be that as it may, Muslims themselves have always maintained a lively concern with the historicity of the sources of their tradition. Optimistically, it is conceivable that this time-honoured Muslim concern with the historical context of early Islam might in due course take aspects of contemporary historical method in its stride. An implicit assumption that history and religion are at odds is itself, surely, anti-religious. What is there to fear in an honestly and sincerely deployed historical or textual criticism, philology, archaeology etc. etc.? The religious tradition must be strong in a versatile, not brittle, way and contains ready-made tools for these challenges. For example, might one not nowadays somewhat expand the venerable Islamic exegetical concept of *asbāb al-nuzūl* – i.e. the notion of a 'horizontal', historical context through which the 'vertical', essentially metahistorical, revelation (*nuzūl*) is itself, in practice, expressed? Such an expansion of the traditional conceptual framework has the potential to accommodate, and find great interest in, much that modern research may yield. But this prospect clearly assumes the rigorous ideological impartiality, the strictly non-polemical tenor, of the research in question. Despite the thought-provoking wealth of scholarship in the pages of this volume, it is clear that Rippin's approach does not meet this criterion.

<div style="text-align: right;">TOBY MAYER</div>