

Review Essay*

The Qu'rān through the Lens of Late Antiquity, Late Antiquity through the Lens of the Qu'rān: Approaches, Perspectives and Possibilities

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Edited by Mohammad Amir-Moezzi (École Pratique des Hautes Études/PSL, France) and Guillaume Dye (Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium), *Le Coran des historiens* brings together twenty-eight scholars to investigate the history of the Qur'ān. The work complements *Le Dictionnaire du Coran* (2007), which Amir-Moezzi edited and which features more than five hundred entries to “present the essentials of what you need to know about Muslim spirituality and philosophy.”¹ Dye, also an established figure in Islamic studies, is the co-founder of the Early Islamic Studies Seminar, whose proceedings from the second and third gatherings

* Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye, eds. *Le Coran des historiens, vol. 1: Études sur le contexte et la genèse du Coran; vol. 2: Commentaire et analyse du texte coranique* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2019) 3,408 pp. € 89,00, ISBN 9781978700758. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye, eds. *Le Coran des historiens, vol. 3: Bibliographie*, prepared by Paul Neuenkirchen (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2019) 330 pp. € 29,00, ISBN 9782204135535. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

¹ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Dictionnaire du Coran* (Paris: Laffont, 2007). Amir-Moezzi is also the author of, among other monographs, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam: Beliefs and Practices* (London: Tauris, 2011) and *Le voyage initiatique en terre d'islam. Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996).

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have recently been published in a volume he co-edited with Isaac W. Oliver and two of the contributors to *Le Coran des historiens*, Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen and Tommaso Tesei.²

Le Coran des historiens is divided into three parts, in four physical volumes (1; 2a; 2b; 3). The first volume, subtitled *Studies on the Context and Genesis of the Qur'ān*,³ features twenty studies on the origin of Islam. The second volume, in two physical books, *Commentary and Analysis of the Qur'ānic Text*, investigates the 114 *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān (2a and 2b) individually. Finally, the third volume (sold separately) contains a bibliography of studies on the Qur'ān from the nineteenth century until today. According to the endorsements on the back cover of the boxed set of volumes 1 and 2a and b, reading *Le Coran des historiens* is: “an unprecedented adventure of the mind. A sum without precedent in history. A major contribution to science. A decisive advance for the mutual understanding of cultures.” At least two of these four propositions are unarguably true. Amir-Moezzi and Dye invite the reader to “slow read” *Le Coran des historiens* (2a, 13–14), quoting a famous passage from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Dawn of Day*: “philology is that venerable art which exacts from its admirers one thing above all: to step to one side, to leave themselves spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow.”⁴ The following paragraphs provide an overview of the volume’s contents, before evaluating the extent to which these statements hold up and before discussing the work’s envisaged impact on the field of qur’ānic studies.

The introduction offers a thorough survey of previous scholarship on the origins of Islam; Abraham Geiger, Ignác Goldziher, and Theodor Nöldeke are only a few of the names mentioned there. The volume’s aims and scope are explicit: the editors reiterate their wish to make almost two centuries of academic research accessible to everyone. The first part, “The Qur’ān and the Beginnings of Islam: The Historical and Geographical Context,” opens with a contribution on pre-Islamic Arabia by Christian Julien Robin (Centre national de la recherche scientifique, France). Robin is undoubtedly one of the foremost experts in pre-Islamic South Arabian epigraphy, and his article summarizes some of his previous publications.⁵ It is followed by the chapter “Arabs and Iranians Before and at the Beginning of Islam” by Samra Azarnouche (École Pratique des Hautes Études/PSL, France), a scholar of ancient Iran with no previous publications on the rise of Islam.⁶ Two scholars in the United

² *The Study of Islamic Origins: New Perspectives and Contexts* (ed. Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen, Guillaume Dye, Isaac W. Oliver, and Tommaso Tesei; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021). Dye is a co-editor of various publications, such as *Figures bibliques en Islam* (with Fabien Nobilio) (Brussels: EME, 2011).

³ All translations from French are mine.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day* (1911; 1980) 18 (my translation is from the French edition cited by Amir-Moezzi and Dye).

⁵ E.g., Christian J. Robin, “Arabia and Ethiopia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 247–332; idem, “Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta in Late Antiquity: The Epigraphic Evidence,” in *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (ed. Greg Fisher; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 127–71.

⁶ Her first monograph is an edition and commentary of the Pahlavi text *Husraw i Kawadan ud*

States who have published extensively on the making of Islam are also featured in this first section. While Stephen J. Shoemaker's (University of Oregon) essay focuses on the historical Muhammad,⁷ Antoine Borrut (University of Maryland) investigates the Muslim conquests and the making of the Caliphate; his work is influenced by Fred Donner (with whom he is currently collaborating) and, to a lesser extent, by Patricia Crone (he held the Patricia Crone Membership in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton for the academic year 2016–2017).⁸

The second part, "The Qur'ān at the Crossroads of the Religious Traditions of Late Antiquity," is longer than the first. Meir M. Bar-Asher, an expert on early Shi'ism, based at the University of Jerusalem, surveys the contacts between Jews and Arabs in Arabia and the representation of Jews and Judaism in the Qur'ān.⁹ While Muriel Debié (École Pratique des Hautes Études/PSL, France) and Vincent Déroche (Sorbonne Université, France) jointly explore the milieux of the religious communities in the Roman Empire at the dawn of Islam,¹⁰ Christelle Jullien (Centre national de la recherche scientifique, France) investigates the Christian milieu in Iran. Like Azarnouche, Jullien has no previous publications on the Qur'ān but has produced valuable contributions on the study of ancient Iran.¹¹ Guillaume Dye, one of the editors, and Manfred Kropp, a prominent historian specializing in Semitic studies who is based at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Germany, survey Ethiopian Christianity.¹² Following Jan M. F. Van Reeth's (Université d'Anvers, Belgium) essay "'Judeo-Christian' Currents and Eastern Christians of Late Antiquity,"¹³ Michel Tardieu, one of the world's leading experts on late antique religions (Collège de France), offers an overview of Manichaeism.¹⁴ The

Redag-e: Samra Azarnouche, *Husraw ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē = Khosrow fils de Kawād et un page* (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2013).

⁷ His most recent book is Stephen J. Shoemaker, *A Prophet Has Appeared: The Rise of Islam through Christian and Jewish Eyes: A Sourcebook* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

⁸ Antoine Borrut is co-editor with Fred M. Donner, a prominent scholar of Islam, of the series *Late Antique and Medieval Islamic Near East (LAMINE)*. With Donner, he has edited *Christians and Others in the Early Umayyad State* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2016).

⁹ Bar-Asher has previously edited a volume with Amir-Moezzi and Simon Hopkins, *Le Shi'isme Imamite quarante ans après. Hommage à Etan Kohlberg* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

¹⁰ Muriel Debié is an excellent Syriacist and the author of *L'Écriture de l'histoire en Syrie. Transmissions interculturelles et constructions identitaires entre hellénisme et islam* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015). Vincent Déroche is a Byzantinist; see, e.g., his *Études sur Léontios de Néapolis* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis; Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia; Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995).

¹¹ E.g., Christelle Jullien, *Husraw Ier, reconstructions d'un règne. Sources et documents* (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2015).

¹² Manfred Kropp is co-editor (with Harry Stroemer) of A. J. Drewes's posthumous *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019).

¹³ Jan M. F. Van Reeth's recent work includes "L'hégire et la fin du monde," *OrChr* 100 (2017) 188–226.

¹⁴ In 1984 Michel Tardieu published, with Cerf, the monograph *Écrits gnostiques. Codex de Berlin. Manichaeism* (trans. M. B. DeBevoise; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), which is one of his best-known publications in English and is a translation of the 1997 (2nd, rev.) French

final chapters feature David Hamidović's (Université de Lausanne, Switzerland) contribution to the relationship between Jewish Apocrypha and the Qur'ān,¹⁵ followed by Muriel Debié's essay on Syriac apocalypses (drawing from her previous co-authored book on the topic)¹⁶ and Frantz Grenet's on Iranian apocalyptic. Grenet was deputy-director of the Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan and specializes in the history and archaeology of Central Asia and Zoroastrianism. While Grenet is mainly an archaeologist (and defines himself as such on his website),¹⁷ and although these three scholars of Iran are not specialists in Islamic studies, their contributions are valuable, nevertheless, as Sasanian Iran had plausibly more political control on the Arabian Peninsula at the dawn of Islam than did Rome. While publications on Arabia and Rome abound,¹⁸ the study of the relationship between Iran and Arabia and the state of archaeology in regions such as the Persian Gulf lag behind the Roman counterpart. Last, David S. Powers (Cornell University, USA), founding editor of the journal *Islamic Law and Society*, closes the section with an essay on the legal environment of the Qur'ān.¹⁹ The third and last part, "The Qur'ānic Corpus," opens with an essay by François Déroche, a renowned specialist of Islamic codicology and paleography, based at the Collège de France, who writes on the study of Qur'ānic manuscripts in the West.²⁰ Éléonore Cellard (also at the Collège de France) presents the oldest Qur'ānic manuscripts,²¹ while Frédéric Imbert (Aix-Marseille Université, France) explores the epigraphic Qur'ān.²² The two editors write the last three contributions. Guillaume Dye offers

edition, *Le Manichéisme*.

¹⁵ Hamidović has himself recently co-edited a French encyclopedic work: *Encyclopédie des messianismes juifs dans l'Antiquité* (ed. David Hamidović, Xavier Leveils, and Christophe Mézange; BTS 33; Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

¹⁶ Muriel Debié and Alain Desreumaux, *Les apocryphes syriaques* (Études syriaques 2; Paris: Geuthner, 2005).

¹⁷ See <http://frantz.grenet.free.fr/>. *La Geste d'Ardashir fils de Pâbag* (Die: Éditions A Die, 2003) is one of Grenet's most recent monographs.

¹⁸ To mention one notable example: Irfan Shahîd, *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984); idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984); idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989); and idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995).

¹⁹ David S. Powers's latest monographs, both published by the University of Pennsylvania Press, are *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (2009) and *Zayd* (2014).

²⁰ See, e.g., François Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview* (Leiden: Brill 2014); and the multi-authored *Manuel de codicologie des manuscrits en écriture arabe* (François Déroche, in collaboration with Annie Berthier et al.; Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2000).

²¹ For a recent case study that Éléonore Cellard brilliantly carried out, see her "Un nouveau témoignage sur l'ordre des sourates dans le Coran. Le cas du manuscrit Šan'ā' daM 01-29.1," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (2019).

²² Frédéric Imbert has collaborated with many of the specialists featured in *Le Coran des historiens*. He has published the essay "L'islam des pierres. Expression de la foi dans les graffiti arabes des premiers siècles," in Antoine Borrut's edited volume *Écriture de l'histoire et processus*

two essays on the context, composition, and canonization of the Qur'ānic corpus, and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi focuses on Shi'ism.

Overall, the first volume is a well-executed juxtaposition of synthetic works but fails to bring these together into a larger, comprehensive whole. In fact, the volume does not “synthesize our knowledge.” Indeed, it lacks a global perspective and amounts to an encyclopedic aggregation. In this regard, *Le Coran des historiens* strongly resembles the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, which similarly lacks an overarching view. Put simply, the hyperspecialized scholars of both works are not in dialogue with and work independently of each other. Repetitions and, to a lesser extent, contradictions, undermine the merits of the boxed set. If taken individually, the contributions provide insightful syntheses. Yet, the volume fails to hold up when viewed through a macroscopic lens. The reader does not get a sense that the volume was a shared project that spurred multiple discussions and confrontations. Of course, part of the problem lies in the fact that this is an edited, multiauthored collection. A pluralist collection of diverse perspectives and approaches (and a greater variety of surveyed material and case studies) on one particular issue is often the strength of edited works. Still, the individual contributions should have been more aligned and tightly connected. Although the authors included in the first volume of *Le Coran des historiens* work in various fields and provide overviews of their area of expertise (e.g., Michel Tardieu has worked mainly on Manichaeism and Gnosticism and Muriel Debié studies Syriac literature), the Qur'ān is often relegated to the margins, despite its status as the *fil rouge* of the volume, making the boxed set less cohesive than it could have been. Indeed, only the chapters in part 3 (Déroche, Cellard, Imbert, Dye, and Moezzi) focus on the Qur'ān. Meanwhile, the preceding two parts provide more than competent introductions to other late antique religious fields. Learning more about the current state of various disparate research areas is a worthwhile pursuit, but getting a sense of where separate fields collide is perhaps more stimulating. It is true that *Le Coran des historiens* does not present itself as a collection of symposium proceedings. Still, a clear and cohesive overarching statement is found only in Guillaume Dye's final piece in volume one.

The second and third physical volumes probe the entire Qur'ān, *sūrah* by *sūrah*, with volume 2a covering the first 26 *sūrahs* and volume 2b *sūrahs* 27–114. The longest *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān are found at the beginning, so volume 2b covers a more significant number of *sūrahs* than volume 2a, but these are shorter in length. While the contributors to the first volume are all established scholars, volumes 2a and b feature new voices in Qur'ānic studies, such as two PhD students, Paul Neuenkirchen (*sūrahs* 1; 47–68; 100–14) and Julien Decharneux (*sūrahs* 12 and 84), whose doctoral work is supervised by the two editors—Neuenkirchen at l'École

de canonisation dans les premiers siècles de l'islam (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2011). He has also collaborated with a paper titled “Le Coran des pierres. Statistiques épigraphiques et premières analyses” in Mehdi Azaiez and Sabrina Mervin's edited volume *Le Coran. Nouvelles approches* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2013).

pratique des hautes études with Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, while Decharneux works at the Université libre de Bruxelles under the supervision of Guillaume Dye, with whom he wrote the commentary on *sūrah* 10. Their perspectives are not entirely “new”; nonetheless, the quality of their commentaries is on a par with those of established scholars. Only eight scholars contributed to volumes 2a and b: Carlos A. Segovia (Saint Louis University’s Madrid campus, USA/Spain), *sūrahs* 2–3;²³ Gabriel Said Reynolds (Notre Dame University, USA), *sūrahs* 4–6;²⁴ Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann (Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster), *sūrahs* 7–9;²⁵ Tommaso Tesei (currently Duke Kunshan University; no affiliation listed in the volume), *sūrahs* 11, 13–15, 91–95;²⁶ Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen (Université libre de Bruxelles), *sūrahs* 16–20 and 83;²⁷ Mehdi Azaiez (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), *sūrahs* 21–26, 78, and 90;²⁸ and Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau (Université de Strasbourg), *sūrahs* 37–46.²⁹ Only four contributors to the first volume (Dye, Van Reeth, Reynolds, and Kropp) reappear in the second, a further indication that most of the authors of volume 1 are not specialists in the Qur’ān but operate in neighboring fields. Repetitions are also quite common in volumes 2a and b. In this case, however, it merely reflects the repetitive nature of the Qur’ān, hence mirroring a structural feature of the object of study. These repetitions are needed, and they could not (and should not) have been prevented with better coordination of the editors. It is unrealistic to read the entire *Le Coran des historiens* in one reading session. On the contrary, it is plausible that scholars will consult the essays in volume 1 and the commentary in volume 2 on separate occasions, skimming through *sūrahs* or even through verses. Each *sūrah* commentary needs to be consulted independently. The opening letters featured in twenty-nine qur’ānic *sūrahs* are addressed twenty-nine times, as they should be if one follows the correct methodological approach.

The two physical tomes of volume 2 are the core of Amir-Moezzi and Dye’s edited oeuvre, as the first physical volume serves as an introduction and a contextualization for the commentary. The historical-critical approach adopted in volumes 2a and b resembles the one commonly adopted in studies of the Hebrew

²³ I reviewed his latest edited volume elsewhere; see Valentina A. Grasso, review of *Remapping Emergent Islam: Texts, Social Settings, and Ideological Trajectories*, edited by Carlos A. Segovia, BSOAS 84 (2021) 389–91.

²⁴ For his most recent monographs, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) and *The Qur’ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (Qur’ān trans. Ali Quri Qarai; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

²⁵ Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann has mostly published works in German; see, e.g., *Militanz und Antimilitanz im Koran. Historisch-kritische Untersuchungen zur Koranexegese und zu den Ursprüngen des militanten Islam* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2018).

²⁶ Tesei does not write on *sūrah* 18, which he brilliantly examined in “Some Cosmological Notions from Late Antiquity in Q 18: 60–65: The Qur’ān in Light of its Cultural Context,” *JAOS* 135 (2015).

²⁷ Mette Bjerregaard Mortensen has analyzed *sūrah* 18 also in “Koranen som træningsprogram. Et Case Study af Sura 18,” *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift* 64 (2016) 173–86.

²⁸ See his monograph: Mehdi Azaiez, *Le contre-discours coranique* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015).

²⁹ See her book: Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même. Vocabulaire et argumentation du discours coranique autoreférentiel* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

Bible and the New Testament. In the general introduction, Amir-Moezzi and Dye describe the Qur'ān as an "enigmatic document" (1:21) and claim that *Le Coran des historiens* tries to fill a gap, aiming to make available to a broad public a synthesis of past studies on the Qur'ān, but not at the expense of scientific accuracy. In more hermetic terms, they claim that "this is a first" (1:22). The result is a monumental work, but it is inaccurate to claim that it is the first of its kind. A decade after publishing his 1925 Edinburgh University Gunning Lectures (*The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*),³⁰ Richard Bell published *The Qur'ān: Translated, with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs*.³¹ This was followed much later, in 1991, by his two-volume *Commentary on the Qur'ān*, edited by C. Edmund Bosworth and M. E. J. Richardson. Bell's commentary, published posthumously, received mixed response and was outdated at publication, due to its long incubation period.³² A significant difference between Amir-Moezzi and Dye's volumes and Bell's work is the former's lack of a translation of the qur'ānic text. To some extent, the commentary section of *Le Coran des historiens* also has a forerunner in one of the contributor's previous works, Gabriel Said Reynolds's *The Qur'ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary*, which explores the connections between the Qur'ān and the Bible and is accompanied by translations by Ali Quli Qarai.³³ *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages*, published by three *Le Coran des historiens* contributors (Azaiez, Reynolds, and Tesei), was also a pioneering attempt.³⁴ Finally, another notable predecessor is the ongoing Corpus Coranicum, a Germany-based project that offers access to early qur'anic manuscripts and features a commentary of each *sūrah* (including the Arabic text and its translation) by such authoritative qur'anic scholars as Angelika Neuwirth (Freie Universität Berlin) and Nicolai Sinai (University of Oxford).³⁵ The absence in *Le Coran des historiens* of the Arabic text and translation forces the reader to consult one or two texts alongside it. Although a translation would have increased the already gargantuan length of the volumes, an extra volume would have made little difference, considering how massive the boxed set is in its present form. As the language of *Le Coran des historiens* is French and the majority of the contributors are French and/or based in Francophone regions, perhaps *Le Coran des historiens* is indeed "a sum without precedent," as its editors claim—but only in relation to its sheer length or in a Francophone context. It is unclear what the

³⁰ Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh University, 1925* (London: Macmillan, 1926).

³¹ Richard Bell, *The Qur'ān: Translated, with a Critical Re-Arrangement of the Surahs* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937).

³² Richard Bell, *A Commentary on the Qur'ān* (ed. C. Edmund Bosworth and M. E. J. Richardson; Manchester, UK: University of Manchester, 1991). For a brilliant review, see Andrew Rippin, "Reading the Qur'ān with Richard Bell," *JAOS* 112 (1992) 639–48.

³³ Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible*.

³⁴ *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016). Hamza Zafer is the fourth editor of the volume.

³⁵ *Corpus Coranicum*, <https://corpuscoranicum.de/en>.

endorser means when describing the text as an “adventure of the mind.” Despite the fact that it is not “unprecedented,” it deserves to be praised for several reasons. In fact, and despite its structural shortcomings, *Le Coran des historiens* remains a “major contribution to science.”

Le Coran des historiens often reiterates that its target audience is “le grand public,” understood as “cultivated, certainly, but not specialists” (1:22). Dye’s introduction claims that the boxed set has a “civic and political” significance, and I predict that the boxed set will undoubtedly positively impact the public debate on Islam. Two of the most widespread French newspapers, *Le Figaro* and *Libération*, have devoted a few articles to the boxed set. *Libération* describes Amir-Moezzi as “a great specialist in the Qur’ān” and Éditions du Cerf as “a venerable Catholic house renowned for its editorial work in theology.” Before its five-year-long editorial gestation, Éditions du Cerf approached Amir-Moezzi about publishing a new translation of the Qur’ān into French, and Amir-Moezzi instead submitted a proposal for this work (according to *Libération*, Amir-Moezzi said, “I needed it for myself”).³⁶ Meanwhile, *Le Figaro* emphasized that this was “the first time in the world” that several historians of religions “have analyzed the sacred text by restoring it to its historical context.”³⁷ For the reasons mentioned above, such an advertisement may help sell more copies, but it is ultimately quite misleading and thus a disservice to the newspaper’s readers. Moreover, it also foregrounds some of the most glaring issues of the volume, such as the search for the “historical Muhammad” in a section titled “Muhammad, This Unknown” (see Sean Anthony’s excellent book on this matter).³⁸ Unfortunate choices of words, such as “lift the veil on the myth of Islamic origins,” do not help the cause either.

We can hope that *Le Coran des historiens* will fulfill its stated aim to “advance the mutual understanding of cultures.” Both *Le Figaro* and *Libération* make the excellent point that knowledge of the dietary prescriptions of Islam was not just a concern for the first Muslim communities alone. Noting that the Qur’ān does not constitute a break with earlier monotheistic texts, and that it was not an alien product of late antiquity but could potentially foster dialogue, the article in *Le Figaro* describes the volume, paradoxically, as a “peaceful weapon.” Based on the more than one thousand comments on its online version, much more education is needed. It is to be expected that there will be some negative responses from the most extreme fringes of both Muslim and secular communities about any publication of this breadth (*Libération* mentions that the site *Riposte laïque* published an article titled “*Le Coran des historiens*: 3000 pages, 3 kg, 59 euros. The Apology of Islam!”).³⁹

³⁶ Bernadette Sauvaget, “Analyse. Il était une fois le coran,” *Libération*, 21 November 2019, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/11/21/il-etait-une-fois-le-coran_1764826/?redirected=1.

³⁷ Jean-Christophe Buisson, “La vérité sur le Coran,” *Le Figaro*, 15 November 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/histoire/la-verite-sur-le-coran-20191115>.

³⁸ Sean W. Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

³⁹ Etienne Dolet, “Le Coran des historiens; 3000 pages, 3 kg, 59 euros. L’apologie de l’islam!”

However, I doubt that the general public (or any first-year undergraduate student majoring in religious studies) will be able to track this debate or be interested in reading such a voluminous work (Glen W. Bowersock's latest publication, *The Crucible of Islam*, would be a better introduction).⁴⁰ As *Libération* puts it: "those who would think to find here a 'Qur'ān for dummies' risk being disappointed." This audience may be dismayed to discover that the list price of 89,00€ (approximately \$96) only includes the first two volumes, and an additional 29,00€ (\$32) is needed for the third volume (the bibliography). The total cost of around \$130 is not necessarily an accessible price. It is unclear why the bibliographical volume is sold separately. There are lengthy bibliographies at the end of each contribution. Still, volume 3 is a valuable resource. It is divided into two parts. The first arranges the bibliography by *sūrah* and the second by named figures. The editors state that a digital version of the publication will be updated, and new studies will be added. If a new edition is to be published in the near future, a few typos can be corrected (e.g., in the index of volume 2b, the commentary of *sūrah* 36 (*Yā Sīn*) is attributed to Boisliveau, while *sūrah* 37 (*al-Şāffāt*) is attributed to Van Reeth).

Labeling all Muslim sources as untrustworthy will not foster dialogue, either. Most of the work's contributors seem to feel that it is necessary to set aside the Muslim tradition when investigating the origins of Islam. This is particularly evident in Stephen Shoemaker's contribution, "The Lives of Muhammad," where he reiterates ideas he expressed in his previous books, such as *The Apocalypse of Empire*.⁴¹ Amir-Moezzi and Dye claim that *Le Dictionnaire du Coran* was written by specialists for a broad audience (unfamiliar with the Muslim perspective), while the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*⁴² and *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*⁴³ were written by scholars for other scholars. The two editors argue that *Le Coran des historiens* differs from these preceding works in that it has been written for a broad audience and engages only marginally with Muslim sources. As Amir-Moezzi and Dye put it in an interview, "the current objective of the research is no longer to approach the Qur'ān solely from traditional Muslim sources."⁴⁴ Indeed, *Le Coran des historiens* does not approach the Qur'ān solely from traditional Muslim sources; mostly, it disregards them altogether. While the (authoritative) *Encyclopaedia of*

Riposte laïque, 18 November 2019, <https://ripostelaique.com/le-coran-des-historiens-3000-pages-3-kg-59-euros-lapologie-de-lislam.html>.

⁴⁰ Glen W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). For a review, see Valentina A. Grasso and Garth Fowden, review of *Arabs and Empires Before Islam*, edited by G. Fisher, and *The Crucible of Islam*, by G. W. Bowersock, *JRS* 108 (2018) 317–20.

⁴¹ Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). I have reviewed this book elsewhere: Valentina A. Grasso, review of *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, by Stephen J. Shoemaker, *JEH* 71 (2020) 618–20.

⁴² *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe; 6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001–6).

⁴³ *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān* (ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴⁴ Buisson, "La vérité sur le Coran."

the *Qur'ān* and *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān* often rely on Muslim sources, a number of works began moving away from this literary corpus starting in the 1970s, when the provocative works of the so-called revisionist school of Islamic studies, led by John Wansbrough,⁴⁵ Patricia Crone,⁴⁶ and Gerald Hawting,⁴⁷ emerged. Today, a more balanced view is often advocated, as Muslim literary sources capture at least some of the tendencies of the early Islamic community.

A careful use of all available literary accounts is advisable (it is worth remembering that the non-Muslim material, although closer chronologically to the events it depicts, was often composed by biased authors who lived far from Arabia and in “other” religious milieux), and that it be compared with archaeological material and placed in the broader political and religious context of Afro-Eurasia. Using Muslim sources is not necessarily an indication that “the perspective of Muslim perceptions of the Qur'ān” has been adopted; scholars can easily avoid falling for the obscurantism of the *Jāhilīyah* if operating within a critical method. Nonetheless, the quality of the commentaries is excellent, and some of the essays in volume 1 are the most synthesized and accurate depictions of some of the most exciting fields in religious studies today, as shown, for example, by Muriel Debié's essay on Syriac apocalypses and Éléonore Cellard's survey of ancient qur'ānic manuscripts. Unfortunately, of the thirty contributors in the volume, only five are women. Men have heavily dominated the field of late antiquity in the past; only three women are included in the 2021 work *The New Late Antiquity: A Gallery of Intellectual Portraits*.⁴⁸ This percentage is slowly changing, including in qur'ānic studies (note that, for example, four of the five members of the new European Research Council project, The Qur'an as a Source for Late Antiquity [QaSLA], are women,⁴⁹ and so are five of the eight on the board of directors of the International Qur'anic Studies Association).⁵⁰ The fact that all contributors are based in Europe or the United States may also raise a few eyebrows.

The lack of an overarching synthesis in volume 1 aside, the strength of *Le Coran des historiens* is that it is a contextualization that considers all strands of

⁴⁵ E.g., John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and idem, *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁴⁶ E.g., Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁴⁷ E.g., Gerald H. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ *The New Late Antiquity: A Gallery of Intellectual Portraits* (ed. Clifford Ando and Marco Formisano; Bibliothek der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften, Neue Folge, 2. Reihe; Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2021).

⁴⁹ The Qur'an as a Source for Late Antiquity: A Research Project directed by Holger M. Zellentin and funded by the European Research Council, <https://uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/evangelisch-theologische-fakultaet/lehrstuehle-und-institute/religionswissenschaft-und-judaistik/religionswissenschaft-und-judaistik/quran-project-erc/team/>.

⁵⁰ International Qur'anic Studies Association, <https://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/>.

late antiquity in a nonessentialist way, taking into account the fluidity of identities of the period (e.g., what exactly was Jewish about the “Judaism” of late antique South Arabia?).⁵¹ The text does not seek answers in one specific place or community but adopts the comprehensive framework of late antique Afro-Eurasia. At the same time, the collection would have benefited from a more thorough contextualization of the political context of inner Arabia and a deeper engagement with the extensive archaeological record from South and North Arabia (broadly defined as including the Syrian desert). Nonetheless, *Le Coran des historiens* succeeds in presenting a well-rounded study of the Qur’ān, supporting an excellent close textual reading of its verses with a thorough contextual analysis. Undoubtedly, the Qur’ān does not present itself as a historical document. So how can we hope to adopt a historical-critical approach to the origins of Islam? Is writing the biography of Muhammad “impossible,” as Jacqueline Chabbi, the author of the expression “le Coran des historiens,” suggested in 2012?⁵² The contributors of the *Le Coran des historiens* demonstrate how historians can approach the text without bending it so that it says whatever pleases them by reframing the issue as a late antique problem and not as a purely Islamic one. Given the current status of Qur’ānic studies, volume 1 may swiftly become outdated. However, it is unarguable that the excellent commentaries in volumes 2a and 2b will serve numerous cohorts of scholars, students, and anyone interested in learning more about the Muslim holy book and late antiquity. Indeed, studying the Qur’ān through the lens of late antiquity can shed light on the history of the Qur’ān, much as studying late antiquity through the Qur’ān allows one to gain a better understanding of that period. Both approaches appear ripe for further promising inquiries into the field.

⁵¹ For the Jews of South Arabia, see Robin, “Arabia and Ethiopia”; idem, “Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta; and Valentina A. Grasso, “A Late Antique Kingdom’s Conversion: Jews and Sympathisers in South Arabia,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 13 (2020) 352–82.

⁵² Jacqueline Chabbi, “Histoire et tradition sacrée. La biographie impossible de Mahomet,” *Arabica* 43 (1996) 189–205; eadem, “Muhammad avant le mythe ou le Coran des historiens,” in *Aux origines du Coran*, special issue of *Le Monde de la Bible* 201 (2012).