

Quran & Scholars

by Matteo Bächtold

The three large volumes of *Le Coran des historiens (The Historian's Quran)* revolutionises the reading of this text, much as the historical-critical exegesis of the Bible did in the 19th century. It does this by carefully situating the Quran in its historical, political religious and legal context and at the crossroads of the civilisations that engendered it.

About: Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye (Eds.), *Le Coran des historiens*, Éditions du Cerf, 2019. 3 volume box set, 4372 pp., 88 €.

Far from the heated debates on the role of Islam in Europe, the historians Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye were at work. After over five years of gestation, they offer readers the fruit of their and their collaborator's labour. The result, *Le Coran des Historiens*, a monumental synthesis of knowledge on the context, origins and content of the Quran, has already become a reference work that will be viewed as a major landmark in the study of the Quran. This book is a far cry from psychology-oriented biographies of Muhammad or controversial writings that focus on a handful of verses taken out of context, to glorify or debase Islam. Here, what dominates is science, freed from traditional sources, theology and biased views, leaving room for a purely historical view of the Quranic texts. From pre-Islamic epigraphy to Manichean writings, from the kings of Ethiopia to the Byzantine factions, not forgetting the Jewish tribes, the authors forcefully demonstrate the extent to which the Arabia where the Quran was born was a rich and interconnected world. At the crossroads of religion, literature, law, politics and much more, *Le Coran des historiens* is a dive into a more loquacious Antiquity than we imagine. For many readers, this book will provoke a radical shift in their perception of the Quranic text and all that surrounds it.

A detailed study of the context

Among all the literature on Quranic studies, it would be difficult to find a project comparable to *Le Coran des historiens*, and for good reason. The model Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Guillaume Dye, adopted for their approach is the historical-critical commentaries of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, reviving a methodological proximity between Biblical and Quranic studies that had disappeared many years ago. Indeed the importance attributed to traditional narratives surrounding the Quran, and to Muhammad's prophetic status, created a gulf between the two fields of research towards the end of the 19th century (pp. 756-760) that only began to be bridged recently thanks to the perseverance of a new generation of historians.

The historical-critical approach is thriving today, and has gone beyond its original context of Biblical studies to be applied to fields of study as varied as Buddhist and Confucian texts. Primarily, this method suggests reading ancient texts as carefully as possible. The content and form of each verse are analysed line by line, focusing on the historical context in which they were written, leaving aside interpretations transmitted by the different traditions, and paying particular attention to what philology, different versions of the manuscripts, and differences in style and vocabulary within a same text reveal, while also drawing from disciplines not directly related to the study of texts, like sociology or archaeology. This method is notably recognized as the tool that facilitated the demonstration that certain texts in the Hebrew Bible were written and reworked several times by different groups of authors over the course of Antiquity. While the method originated in Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* (1670), it only found a niche to establish itself in a lasting manner at the end of the 19th century, in the Protestant faculties of theology, where its ultimate aim was to serve an ecclesiastical perspective. From there it gradually unshackled itself from this religious context to become a tool used today by secular scientists, with no religious preoccupations. Thus, by adopting a historical-critical type of commentary, *Le Coran des historiens* offers a major paradigm shift.

While the book claims a strong affiliation with contemporary biblical historical-critical exegesis, this does not prevent it from taking a series of initiatives that distinguishes it from classical commentaries, generally for the better. So, while exegetical commentaries (written by historians or not) are usually produced by a single scholar, *Le Coran des historiens*, for its part, adopts a collective approach (28 authors collaborated on the project) in order to benefit from each ones' specialization and to avoid, or at least neutralise, the idiosyncrasies of individual researchers, in order to truly reflect contemporary historical-critical research. The overall structure, however, remains the same, so the book begins with a long propaedeutic introduction, which occupies the first of the two volumes. The editors chose to ask various experts to write a thematic introductory article to create a total of 20 chapters that can be broken down into three sets that look respectively at the historical and geographical context in which the Quran was born, the religious intersections the text represents, and finally, the history and study of the manuscripts that make up the Quran as such.

The first volume goes beyond a mere presentation of knowledge and ideas, to form a powerful methodological presentation that allows the reader, not only to follow the explanations presented in the second volume, but further, provides a healthy foundation to develop their own views. In this respect, the two chapters by Dye, and Moezzi's chapter, located at the very end of the volume, are a dense display of the history of the research and methodology that efficiently prepare the reader for the more technical second volume.

The few articles that contain almost exclusively negative conclusions, like the one on "Les vies de Muhammad" ("Muhammad's lives"), by Stephen J. Shoemaker, may seem surprising at first glance. But they are, in fact, an essential part of the work's vast effort to demystify the origins of the Quran, by reviewing all the major themes, including some false routes. By subjecting the Arabia in which the Quran was born to a detailed historical study, *Le Coran des historiens* redefines the zones of clarity and uncertainty in the knowledge we have of the context in which the Quran appeared. For example, the dossier on Muhammad's life that we believed we knew the details of thanks to non-Quranic sources, is set aside for lack of viable elements to study it, leaving room for more promising perspectives such as a study of the social groups that inhabited Arabia in late Antiquity. Thus, in areas where attempts at a psychological reconstruction have demonstrated their fallibility, the lens shifts to a sociological perspective. The choice of having sometimes called upon specialists of fields other than the Quran, but of themes associated with it, is a double-edged sword. Sometimes the authors drift too far from the volume's main concerns to focus on their specific subject, losing sight of its links to the Quran. These minor deviations that loom over the work are not terribly disturbing, as none of the knowledge presented is ever completely irrelevant.

As its name indicates, *Le Coran des historiens* focuses on the Quran and the articles in this volume provide little historical information on the way the text was received, concentrating more on the history of the research carried out from the 19th century to date.

A dynamic and acerbic commentary

The second volume represents the actual commentary of the Quran, and while the best researchers contributed to the volume, unfortunately this is not the case of the Quran itself, which is the missing element in the book. Indeed, the second volume of *Le Coran des historiens* does not contain the text of the Quran, neither in Arabic nor in French. It only provides the commentary, so the reader is constantly obliged to consult one of the editions and/or translations indicated by the editors, or to go to the site: "Coran 12-21" (<https://laviedesidees.fr/Dialogues-autour-du-Coran.html>). It is worth looking more closely at the choice of not including the commented text, as it is an exception in the landscape of historical-critical commentaries. Generally, in this type of literature, the practice is always to provide a personal translation of the commented text. Beyond the practical comfort of not

having to constantly navigate between one or several translations of the text and its commentary, translation is an integral part of the historical-critical approach, as it is already, in itself, an aspect of the analysis of the text. The pragmatic argument Guillaume Dye puts forward, which is that a translation would add to the density of the volumes, is not convincing. At a wider level, an extensive reflection on the issues related to the translation of the Quran deserves to have been included, either in the first volume, or in the foreword to the second. Obviously the problematic Arabic terms are explained, but we never go beyond a case-by-case study to arrive at an encompassing theoretical discourse on the text of the Quran.

Nonetheless, this gap is in no way detrimental to the quality of the commentaries, which is exceptional. The publishers are not exaggerating when they describe this as a unique work in the area of Quranic studies. All the traditional baggage, such as the breakdown into Meccan and Medinan surahs¹ is set aside to focus on a more complex diachronic perspective, based on the text and the available historical data, and spread over a longer period. The authors have no difficulty recognizing a surah as Deuterocanonical,² or a group of verses as a gloss added by authors posterior to Muhammad. But while the traditional interpretations are undermined by today's historians, the commentators are fully aware that this was not always true of earlier historians, hence, for historiographical purposes, the traditional views are mentioned along with the now dated historical hypotheses partially based on these traditional views. There is hence no attempt to erase a common past, but the effort is rather to clarify the distinction between tradition and history and demonstrate why it is necessary to distinguish them.

As was the case for the Bible, the methodological shift and the break with religious tradition permit completely new avenues of interpretation. Nonetheless, this second volume does not lose sight of its aim to provide a synthesis of knowledge about the Quran. The commentators hence devote the most of the work to the state of the research and its history, ensuring they always present several hypotheses whenever possible. This is particularly appreciable when it comes to passages that provoke or have provoked heated debates, like those mentioning the "houris," for example, which would have been a great deal poorer if any of the competing readings had been dealt with in a biased manner.

Despite the title of the book, the literary quality of the work is by no means disappointing, and the authors constantly demonstrate the wealth of the surahs in terms of vocabulary, grammar and structure, even when this leads to debates over interpretations, not primarily of historical interest. Thus, in texts like Surah 111 that offers little historical traction, the commentaries provided are almost exclusively of a literary and philological nature yet remain carefully focused on the text, avoiding any anachronisms. By ensuring that no aspect of the text

¹ The chronological division of the surahs into those pronounced before and after the Hegira is firmly rooted in the Muslim tradition and was the basis of numerous theological and legal developments. Until recently, many historians considered it a reliable historical fact.

² Canonised at a later date.

is underestimated to the detriment of another, the commentary is exhaustive, making this an essential book on the Quran, even for non-historians.

From the Politicisation of the Quran to the Politicisation of the Study of the Quran

It is difficult to express a critical opinion of a work that has become a classic included in any scholarly bibliography, just a few short months after its release. We can nonetheless note that some aspects of the book could have been improved: in his forewords with their programmatic overtones, Guillaume Dye himself provides some of the criteria to assess the work he co-edited. He promises articles and commentaries written in simple language in order to make them intelligible to non-specialists. The idea is welcome, as exegetical commentaries are often akin to esoteric grimoires, accessible only to the initiated. However, the principle seems to have been abandoned when it comes to certain ideas, and this constitutes serious stumbling blocks for the reader who does not already have an in-depth knowledge of the subject. In the first volume, the problem is mainly the geographical data, particularly in the articles dealing with Arabia. The few maps provided are under-utilised in this respect. In the second volume, the linguistic concepts could be difficult for the reader who does not have a minimal knowledge of the workings of Semitic languages. A few pages explaining certain basic concepts, like the “trilateral root”, would have been helpful. Stressing the presentation of these ideas would have been useful because philology is often used as a path to history: philology is the starting point for the Syrian Christian writings, the South Arabian inscriptions, or the Ethiopian Bible. But once the reader has overcome these initial difficulties, the articles and commentaries are limpid and never descend into simplistic popularisation. The book is thus enlightening for both neophytes and initiates. In what concerns the latter, while the editors have created a third, electronic, volume to serve as a vast bibliographical database for Quranic studies, the first two volumes also contain a substantial specialist bibliography at the end of every chapter and after the commentary of each surah.

While there is strong methodological consistency between the authors, on occasion one cannot help regretting the lack of better coordination before the articles or commentaries were written. Of course the relative independence of the texts by each researcher is due, on the one hand to the vast technical difficulty of having so many people (28) work together, but also to the ambition of the editors, who wanted to avoid presenting articles with strictly homogenous ideas and perspectives. For example, although Christian Julien Robin on the one hand, and Manfred Kropp and Guillaume Dye on the other present, to some extent, the same subject in their respective articles, that is to say the relationship between Christian Ethiopia and the context in which the Quran was born, they highlight different facts, which gives the reader access to two different views of a same reality. In this case, the Ethiopian influence on Arabia in late Antiquity. Nonetheless, preparatory discussions could have led to greater knowledge

sharing between specialists and could have opened up other avenues of research and the possibility of new interpretations, although the book already contains a plethora of them. For example, greater coordination between David Hamidovic, specialist of ancient Jewish literature, and Carlos A. Segovia, who discusses several surahs, could have revealed parallels between the Jewish apocrypha and the Quran, which would have enriched both the article dedicated to apocrypha in volume 1, and the commentary of the surah in volume 2. In particular, it would have been interesting to discuss the similarities between Q2:79 and 1 Enoch 104:10, two texts that speak of the falsification of holy books, a subject already raised by André Caquot.³

We will now look at the book's focuses and its political ambitions, mainly expressed by Guillaume Dye in his forewords. Indeed, he claims that *Le Coran des historiens* is of "civic and political" significance "in the most noble sense of the terms," and is certain that this book can contribute to a healthier public debate on Islam. Reading the articles and commentaries in *Le Coran des historiens*, all of which respect a rigorous scientific neutrality, we could wonder whether Guillaume Dye is not trying to lend the book ambitions it does not possess. But in reality, these few remarks are a fundamental key to understanding the quality of the book. They show that the historical-critical approach to the Quranic texts goes beyond the narrow positivism that encourages "science for science's sake." In this sense, a political stance of this type is the final movement in secular historical-criticism, in the same way that the stance of religious historical-criticism is theological. To take an example not from the Quran, Thomas Römer, the main representative of the historical-critical method among the Francophone Biblicists, represents a similar type of movement that had political repercussions on the debates around "same-sex marriage".⁴ Events and texts are carefully examined using a historical-critical approach, not so that it serves as a silent guardian, but to drive citizen considerations and reactions. Thus, the political views Guillaume Dye expresses are perfectly legitimate here; they reveal the complete awareness a group of scientists has of the whys and wherefores of their research, and of the historical-critical method in general: the ecclesial perspective has been replaced by a citizen's perspective.

³ In a passage of surah 2, the Jews are accused, in these terms, of falsifying the writings: "So woe to those who write the Book with their hands, then say, 'This is from God,' that they may sell it for a little price; so woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for their earnings. (The Koran interpreted, trans. Arthur J Arberry, (London – Allen & Unwin; New York Macmillan, (1955).

The Book of Enoch is a Jewish apocrypha, the fragments of which were found in Qumran. In a passage that mingles exhortations and predictions, the Prophet Enoch makes a similar declaration: And now I know this mystery, that sinners will alter and pervert the words of righteousness in many ways, and will speak wicked words, and lie, and practice great deceits, and write books concerning their words. (The book of Enoch trans. R.H. Charles (1917) London Society for promoting Christian Knowledge). See in particular Marc Philonenko (Ed.) *Écrits intertestamentaires*, Gallimard, coll. "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 1987, p. 619.

⁴ <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/thomas-romer/course-2013-03-21-14h00.htm> I refer here to Thomas Römer's two lessons on sexuality in the context of his class: "La condition humaine: Proche-Orient ancien et Bible hébraïque", where the historian defends the idea that the Bible should not be used in contemporary ethical debates on sexualities.

Further reading:

- François Déroche, *La voix et le calame ; Les chemins de la canonisation du Coran*, Paris, Collège de France, 2016 (<https://books.openedition.org/cdf/4761>).
- Thomas Römer, *Les Cornes de Moïse ; Faire entrer la Bible dans l'histoire*, Paris, Collège de France, 2013 (<https://books.openedition.org/cdf/163>).
- Thomas Römer, *L'Invention de Dieu*, Paris, Seuil, 2014.

First published in lavedesidees.fr, 23 April 2020.

Translated from the French by Renuka George
with the support of the Institut français.