

1 The historical context

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The Qurʾān, considered by believing Muslims to be a literal transcript of God's word as revealed to the prophet Muḥammad (c. 570–632 CE), poses a number of interesting, and sometimes vexing, questions when we attempt to discuss its historical context. In one sense, the Qurʾān's theological status as divine word negates the very idea of it having a historical context at all, for it implies that the text is of eternal and unchanging validity. Muslim tradition even asserts that it had been revealed on several other occasions, to earlier communities via their prophets. This being so, the historical context in which a particular passage was revealed to Muḥammad can be understood only as an accident, and has no real bearing on the meaning of a passage at all, which is immutable and intrinsic.

Despite the Qurʾān's theological status, Muslims over the centuries elaborated highly detailed traditions about the Qurʾān's historical context. This took the form of a vast biographical literature on the Prophet and his time which, loosely following traditional usage, we can call the *sīra* literature.¹ The *sīra* literature was compiled by Muslim sages during the several hundred years following Muḥammad's death in 11/632, and offers a richly detailed account of Muḥammad's life, of his receipt of the revelations that are enshrined in the qurʾānic text, and (although less fully) of the codification of the revelation in the years following his death to produce the text of the Qurʾān as we have it today. Most Western scholarship on the Qurʾān and its context has drawn heavily on the *sīra* literature for its basic documentation.

TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE OF ISLAMIC ORIGINS

According to the traditional Islamic origins narrative, Muḥammad belonged to the tribe of Quraysh, which dominated the town of Mecca in western Arabia, where he was born sometime in the third quarter of the

sixth century. Mecca had only meagre agricultural potential – the spring of Zamzam provided sufficient water, but the town was situated in a rocky valley that was not suitable for extensive farming, only household garden plots. (In this, Mecca differed from some other west Arabian settlements, like the oases at Yathrib, later Medina, and Khaybar, which had open land with fields of barley, vegetables and, above all, vast plantations of date-palms.) Instead, Quraysh prospered on a combination of regional caravan trade and stewardship of a large shrine centred on a cubical stone building, the Ka'ba. This combination of commercial and cultic activity put Quraysh in touch with people of many tribes from diverse corners of Arabia.

The *sīra* literature presents Mecca's cult as a pagan one to the god Hubal, and depicts the Arabian religious environment in which Muḥammad grew up as overwhelmingly pagan – the final vestiges of the ancient near eastern religious tradition. The shrine itself was surrounded by a sacred area or *ḥaram*, delimited by boundary stones, which included the whole town of Mecca. Quraysh, as guardians of the shrine, imposed regulations on all who entered the town, including forbidding them from engaging in violence; and they enforced these regulations with the help of various other tribes who lived outside Mecca but honoured its religious cult (and utilised its markets). This ban on violence meant that Mecca's *ḥaram* was safe ground where merchants could market their goods without fear of being plundered, and where representatives of hostile tribes could meet to resolve their feuds without fear of ambush.

Muḥammad belonged to the clan of Hāshim within Quraysh; his father died before he was born, and when he was a young boy, his mother also died, so that he was raised to adulthood by his paternal uncle, Abū Ṭālib, who was head of the Hāshim clan at the time. Some clans of Quraysh had become wealthy through their trading activities, and were assigned responsibility for key rituals in the Ka'ba cult. Other clans, however, were of more modest means; Hāshim was one of these. Despite his relatively humble origins, however, Muḥammad is portrayed by the *sīra* as participating actively in the commercial life of Mecca in his youth and adolescence – for example, he is said to have accompanied his uncle and guardian Abū Ṭālib on caravans to southern Syria. He also participated in the cultic activities of Mecca in his early years. As a result of these experiences, he acquired as a young man a reputation for skill, tactfulness, honesty and fairness. These qualities attracted the attention of a well-to-do widow, Khadija, who hired him to manage her caravan trade; later, she proposed marriage to him, which Muḥammad accepted.

Around 610 CE, when Muḥammad was perhaps forty years old or so, he began to withdraw occasionally to the desolate outskirts of Mecca to engage in meditation. During one of these retreats, he started to have visions and hear voices informing him that God had chosen him to receive the divine word – that, in other words, he was a prophet. Initially terrified by this experience and reluctant to take on this charge, he was comforted and reassured by Khadija – who is thus honoured by Muslims as the first person to recognise his prophecy – and eventually accepted his new role as bearer of God’s message to humankind, particularly to his fellow-Quraysh of Mecca. After this initial experience, revelations came to him on a regular basis; in each instance, he was physically overwhelmed by the revelatory experience and emerged from it with the new passages burned indelibly into his memory. It was these passages that, memorised or written down by his followers, were edited together some years after his death in 11/632 to form the Qur’ān.

Muḥammad’s message

The basic doctrines that Muḥammad taught were that God was one, the creator of humankind and the natural world, and that the recognition of a plethora of pagan deities was an affront to God and his unity. Closely tied to this was the notion that the world would end at the last judgement, when all souls would be brought before God and judged by him on the basis of how they had lived their lives. Those who had believed in the one God and lived righteously would be rewarded after death by enjoying eternal bliss in heaven, whereas unbelievers and the impious would suffer everlasting torment in hell.

Muḥammad began preaching the message embedded in these revelations to his fellow Meccans, and won some early adherents, but many members of Quraysh were deeply suspicious of his preaching. To judge from the testimony of the Qur’ān itself, some were sceptical of Muḥammad’s claims that there was an afterlife in which they would be reborn. Others were incensed by Muḥammad’s claim that unbelievers could not enter heaven, which implied that their Quraysh ancestors, who had died pagans, were burning in hellfire – a shocking insult in a society whose members identified themselves mainly by their lineage. Whatever the reasons, Muḥammad and his followers faced increasing opposition and, as time went on, harassment by Quraysh. Some of his followers took refuge with the Christian king of Abyssinia (an episode about which we know, unfortunately, very little). His uncle Abū Ṭālib, as head of the clan of Hāshim, protected him and refused to hand him over to the other clans of Quraysh, who organised a boycott

of Hāshim. With the death of Abū Ṭālib, however, and, at around the same time, of his wife Khadīja, Muḥammad was deprived of his most important sources of practical and emotional support. As his situation deteriorated further, Muḥammad began to search for support outside Mecca, with little success until he encountered a group from the oasis of Yathrib, some 350 kilometres north of Mecca, at a trade fair near Mecca. Impressed with his teachings and thinking that he could serve as arbiter for Yathrib's own bitter internal feuds, they returned the following year and made an agreement to welcome and support Muḥammad in Yathrib. Some time thereafter, in 622 CE, Muḥammad and his supporters in Mecca emigrated to Yathrib – henceforth to be known as Medina – and established themselves there. The *hijra*, as this emigration is called, marked the beginning of the Muslim community as an autonomous political community, and the year in which it took place – 622 CE – was subsequently adopted by Muslims as the year 1 of the Islamic calendar (AH 1).

The move to Medina

Muḥammad faced numerous challenges in his years in Medina, but succeeded gradually in establishing his mastery over the town both as its religious leader and in practical terms. Medina's inhabitants included the indigenous Aws and Khazraj tribes, formerly pagan but now following Muḥammad's religious teachings. They were styled collectively the *anṣār* or 'Helpers' because of their assistance to Muḥammad and his followers at a crucial time, but despite this common appellation, the Aws and Khazraj still retained some of their traditional antipathy for one another. Another important element of the population were the numerous Jews of Medina. Traditional sources speak especially of three large Jewish clans – the Qaynuqā', Naḍir and Qurayza – but there were as well smaller groups of Jews affiliated with various clans of the Aws or Khazraj. Muḥammad's followers from Mecca formed yet another population group, called *muhājirūn* ('those who had made the *hijra*'). All these groups are mentioned in the text of an agreement between Muḥammad and the people of Medina (sometimes called, rather misleadingly, 'the constitution of Medina'), which has survived in the *sīra* literature. It lays out the idea that all these groups are to form a single *umma* or community for mutual defence, of which Muḥammad was to be the head.

Forging a unified community in Medina from this mixed population was, however, a difficult assignment. Some people (mostly from Aws or Khazraj) were outwardly counted among Muḥammad's supporters but worked against him and his religious ideas behind the scenes; they are

called *munāfiqūn* or 'hypocrites', and Muḥammad had to contend with their machinations for much of his career in Medina. More serious still was the opposition of Medina's Jews to Muḥammad's leadership. It appears that Muḥammad hoped at first to win the Jews of Medina not only to his political leadership but also to his claim that he was a prophet continuing the line of prophets known from the Hebrew Bible, such as Abraham, Moses and Joseph. It is not clear exactly how or why his relationship with the Jews went awry; the *sīra* literature offers numerous tales of the Jews' opposition (without clarifying whether that opposition was fundamentally political or was basically a rejection of Muḥammad's prophetic claims), but also hints that desire to seize lands held by the Jews, perhaps to relieve the distress of the *muhājirūn*, may have been one of Muḥammad's motivations. In any case, the *sīra* accounts describe how each of the three major Jewish clans in turn was either exiled from Medina (with loss of their lands) or, in the case of the Qurayza, liquidated – the men executed, the women and children seized as slaves. After the Qurayza were eliminated late in 5/627, Muḥammad's leadership in Medina was no longer seriously contested.

The *sīra* literature also details certain episodes in Muḥammad's personal life that apparently became matters of public controversy or had important implications for the community in some way. It notes his marriages, some of which had political significance, such as his union with Zaynab, who belonged to the powerful Umayya clan of Quraysh; and it relates the scandalous rumours that circulated when his favourite wife, 'Ā'isha, caught up with and rejoined the caravan that had inadvertently left her behind in the company of a young man who had given her transport.

Expeditions and battles

Another central theme in Muḥammad's career in Medina as recounted in the *sīra* literature was his struggle against Quraysh and his home town of Mecca. Muḥammad's ambition to subdue Mecca sprang partly, perhaps, from a desire to settle scores with Quraysh, who had in effect expelled him from the city; and it may also have been to provide plunder to support the poor *muhājirūn*. But his desire to overcome Mecca also had a religious dimension, for Muḥammad came to see the Ka'ba in Mecca as a formerly monotheist shrine first established by Abraham, so that restoration of pure monotheist worship there became an important issue for him. This attitude was reflected in Muḥammad's decision that his believers should no longer pray towards Jerusalem, as they had previously, but towards the Ka'ba in Mecca – a change that may have been related to his deteriorating relationship

with Medina's Jews. Closely connected to his struggle for supremacy with Quraysh were Muḥammad's many efforts to win over the nomadic groups of western Arabia, whose support often determined the political balance between the two towns of Mecca and Medina.

Whatever his motivations may have been, Muḥammad began to organise raiding parties to attack Meccan caravans shortly after arriving in Medina. After several minor raids, Muḥammad ambushed a large Meccan caravan at Badr in 2/624, which resulted in the death of a number of leaders of Quraysh, seizure of much booty and the taking of numerous prisoners for ransom. Quraysh responded a year later by organising an expedition against Medina. Battle was joined at a place called Uḥud just outside Medina, and while it was a setback for Muḥammad's forces, with quite a few of his men killed, the Meccans did not press their advantage and occupy Medina or kill Muḥammad, whose men in subsequent years continued to harass Meccan caravans. Then, in 5/627, the Meccans assembled a large coalition of local tribes and again marched against Medina, intending presumably to finish Muḥammad off. Medina was besieged for roughly a month, during which some skirmishing took place, but partly because Muḥammad and his followers built a trench to defend one vulnerable flank, the city was not taken and the Meccan alliance began to unravel. The so-called 'Battle of the Trench' had demonstrated Mecca's overwhelming military superiority, but had once again left Muḥammad and his followers standing, though presumably somewhat humiliated.

Muḥammad launched further raids in the months after the Battle of the Trench (a period that also included the liquidation of the Qurayza Jews, who were said to have been in treasonous contact with the Meccans during the siege). Then, in 6/628, Muḥammad organised his followers to march to Mecca unarmed, in order to perform the *umra* (lesser pilgrimage rites) at the Ka'ba. The Quraysh were stupefied by this move, since barely a year before they had chastised Muḥammad by besieging Medina itself, and doubtless thought they had 'taught him a lesson'. They blocked his entry to the town with armed forces at a place called al-Ḥudaybiya, just at the border of the Meccan *haram*. Here Muḥammad engaged in negotiations with the Meccans in which he agreed to respect a ten-year armistice and to return to Medina, but secured permission to enter Mecca the following year to do the pilgrimage.

Some of Muḥammad's followers thought that he had given away too much in the al-Ḥudaybiya agreement – for example he had abjured raiding the caravans of the Meccans – but in the year and a half following this

negotiation, Muḥammad steadily consolidated his political position in the Ḥijāz and increasingly isolated Mecca politically and militarily. A key stroke was Muḥammad's campaign against the oasis of Khaybar, 150 kilometres north of Medina, undertaken just a few months after al-Ḥudaybiya. Khaybar had a primarily Jewish population, including many of the Medinan Jews who had been exiled by Muḥammad, and had long been allied with Quraysh against Muḥammad, who thus had to contend with hostile forces on two sides. By conquering Khaybar and requiring its inhabitants to pay tax, Muḥammad greatly improved his strategic (and financial) situation in relation to Mecca. Muḥammad and his followers made further raids on various communities not aligned with Mecca, and then successfully completed their first pilgrimage since the *hijra* at the end of 7/early 629. Following it, clashes between allies of Mecca and those of Muḥammad, and the latter's increasingly dominant position, created conditions in which Muḥammad could consider subduing Mecca directly, on the grounds that the Meccans had broken their treaty obligations. Late in 8/early 630, he assembled a large force of Medinans and a variety of tribal allies from the Ḥijāz, marched on Mecca, and secured the capitulation of its leaders, notably Abū Sufyān of the Umayya clan. Only a few of his most bitter opponents were executed; the majority, who recognised his claim to be prophet and renounced polytheism, he welcomed into his new movement – even giving some of the leaders of Quraysh important assignments as a way of cementing their loyalty. He proceeded to purify the Ka'ba and its environs of remnants of polytheist worship and dedicated it henceforth to the worship of the one God.

During the last several years of his life, then, Muḥammad became the unchallenged political leader of western Arabia, as well as fulfilling the role of a monotheist prophet. Shortly following his occupation of Mecca his forces defeated a large alliance of tribesmen at the Battle of Ḥunayn. After giving them fairly lenient terms, he then enlisted their aid in subduing the remaining large town of the Ḥijāz, al-Ṭā'if. He then returned to Medina, from where he ruled and where he remained except for another two visits to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage (end of 9/631 and 10/632). During the final two years of Muḥammad's life he dispatched raiding parties to secure the submission of many smaller towns or tribal groups, and delegations from many groups, sometimes from distant areas of Arabia, arrived in Medina to tender their submission or conclude an alliance with the man who was now clearly the leading figure in western Arabia. In the year 11/632, after a short illness, Muḥammad died in Medina in the lap of his favourite wife, 'Ā'isha.

SETTING THE QUR'ĀN IN CONTEXT

Throughout the life just sketched on the basis of the traditional *sira* literature, Muḥammad is said to have continued to receive revelations. In the centuries following Muḥammad's life, Muslims developed a whole science, called *asbāb al-nuzūl* or 'occasions of the revelation', whose goal was to identify the historical context of qur'ānic passages. In general terms, Muslim scholars categorised each sūra as being either 'Meccan' or 'Medinan', depending on when they thought it was revealed. They also strove to define much more precisely the exact moment in Muḥammad's life during which each qur'ānic verse or passage had been revealed. The underlying implication of such an exercise, of course, is that knowing the context in which a verse was revealed will tell us something important about how to understand the verse, or about its potential legal force. What specific situation in the Prophet's life was it revealed to address? So, for example, Q 8 (Sūrat al-Anfāl, 'The Spoils') was said by exegetes to have been revealed immediately after the Battle of Badr, to deal with the questions raised by the booty seized in that battle. The famous verse 3 in Q 4 (Sūrat al-Nisā, 'The Women'), which allows Muslims to take up to four wives, is related to the aftermath of the Battle of Uḥud, when the heavy losses among the believers left many women orphaned or widowed. Q 2 (Sūrat al-Baqara, 'The Cow'), verses 142–5, comment on the change of the *qibla* and verses 11–20 of Q 24 (Sūrat al-Nūr, 'Light') are said to address the scandalous rumours circulated by some of the 'hypocrites' against Muḥammad's wife 'Ā'isha. The biographical information provided by the *sira* literature is thus intimately tied to the text of the Qur'ān itself. It should be noted, however, that in many instances the qur'ānic passage that the exegetes link to a particular episode is quite general in its tone, and lacks any specific indication that the episode is in fact connected with the event. Q 8, for example, does not mention Badr explicitly, and the place name Uḥud never occurs in the Qur'ān at all.

Codification of the text

After Muḥammad's death in 11/632, the revelations of course ceased, and the community was faced with the vexing question of how to order its affairs (including its political and religious leadership) in the absence of their prophet. This crucial subject is beyond the limits of the present essay, but it is important to say a few words about how Muslim tradition views the process by which the revelations Muḥammad received were ultimately codified to form the text of the Qur'ān as it exists today.

Muslim sources offer contradictory, or perhaps merely divergent, information on this process. On the one hand, there is a strong tendency in the sources to emphasise the oral nature of transmission of the Qurʾān text; the revelations were first received by Muḥammad in oral form, and were then recited by him to his followers, who in turn then learned them, or parts of them, by heart. The very word *qurʾān* seems to mean ‘recitation’, particularly recitation for liturgical purposes. Later Muslim tradition advanced the view that the Qurʾān’s characterisation of Muḥammad (in Q 7:157–8) as *al-nabī l-ummī* meant ‘the prophet who did not know how to write’. On the other hand, the Qurʾān also frequently refers to the revelations as *al-kitāb*, ‘the book’ (although in some cases this may be an allusion to a heavenly written archetype, not the earthly text). Muslim tradition speaks of several people who served as Muḥammad’s scribes and were responsible for writing down the revelations for him. It also tells of various people in Muḥammad’s community, such as his wife ʿĀ’isha, who possessed written transcripts or copies of at least part of the revelations at the time of his death. It seems very likely, therefore, that upon Muḥammad’s death, sections of the revelation were known by heart by some members of the community, and other segments were preserved in written form.

The history of the text in the years immediately after Muḥammad’s death is not clear.² Muslim tradition reports that an early collection may have been prepared in the caliphate of Abū Bakr (r. 11–13/632–4), which was later kept by the caliph ʿUmar (r. 13–23/634–44) and then by the latter’s daughter Ḥafṣa, widow of the Prophet. It is not clear, however, whether this written collection was complete or not, nor whether it had any official status. There are also vague reports of other collections held by various parties, about which we know virtually nothing, assuming the reports have any validity at all. More specific are the accounts that ascribe the preparation of an official written copy to the time of the third caliph, ʿUthmān (r. 23–35/644–55). ʿUthmān asked Zayd b. Thābit – who had been one of Muḥammad’s scribes and who is said to have been involved in the collection supposedly prepared under Abū Bakr – to lead an editorial team to prepare a complete, official text of the Qurʾān. To do so, he was to examine all known written collections and to interview all persons who had memorised parts of the text, and on this basis to prepare the complete written copy. This official ‘Uthmānic text’ is generally considered to be the archetype for the Qurʾān text as we have it today, but many questions remain regarding the relationship of the ʿUthmānic text to both the revelations of Muḥammad’s time and to the Qurʾān of today.

The relationship of the ‘Uthmānic text to the revelations received by Muḥammad is clouded by the existence of numerous collections of variant readings that have survived, attributed to a number of early scholars who were widely known for their excellence in reading and reciting the Qur’ān, and who claimed to base their readings on pre-‘Uthmānic traditions.³ The existence of these variants implies that the recitation of the text was far from uniform. Most variants are minor, but some are significant and involve not just vocalisation but completely different words. The 1924 Cairo edition of the Qur’ān, which is the most widely used version today, follows one of these readings, that of the Kūfan ‘Āṣim b. Bahdala (d. 127 or 128/745), as transmitted by his student Ḥafṣ b. Sulaymān, while the other readings are mainly ignored by lay readers and even by most scholars. The full import, however, of these variants for our understanding of the ‘Uthmānic text and its relationship to the revelations as they existed in Muḥammad’s time is still not clear.

Another problem is that the ‘Uthmānic text, from what we know of it, was written in a highly defective script – essentially providing only a rough consonantal ‘skeleton’, without vowels and without diacritical marks to distinguish two or more consonants that were written with the same shape. It was only after the passage of several centuries that fully vocalised, unequivocal texts were prepared of the different variant versions. This means that in its original form, the ‘Uthmānic text could only have been ‘read’ easily by people who already knew it. On the one hand, this suggests that for much of the text, at least, a strong tradition of oral recitation may have existed, and that the ‘Uthmānic text served mainly as a mnemonic device to aid in recitation. On the other hand, it opens the possibility that the fully vocalised texts that were eventually prepared could have contained erroneous vocalisations, further clouding our perception of the relationship of today’s vocalised text to the revelations of Muḥammad’s time – that is, of the relationship to the Qur’ān, as we have it today, to its presumed historical context.

Western scholars have also tended to accept, until recently, the broad context provided by the *sīra* literature: the consensus was for many years that Muḥammad did, in fact, live in Mecca and Medina and that his career followed roughly the path outlined in the *sīra* and summarised above.⁴ A milestone in Western analysis of the Qur’ān’s contents in light of the *sīra* was the appearance of the first edition of Theodor Nöldeke’s *Geschichte des Qorans* in 1860.⁵ Nöldeke, following the lead of Muslim scholars, divided the Qur’ān into Meccan and Medinan sūras, but he also used criteria of style and content to subdivide further the Meccan passages into early, middle and

late. His reconstruction of the chronology of the revelations has continued to exert a powerful influence on most Western Qurʾān scholars, even until today.⁶ A few subsequent scholars, such as Richard Bell and Régis Blachère, have attempted alternative chronological reconstructions which differ in some measure from Nöldeke's, but most Western students of the text have until recently remained largely beholden to Nöldeke's reconstruction.

The real question facing Qurʾānic scholarship at the beginning of the twenty-first century is whether the Arabian setting described by the *sīra* literature is the actual historical context in which the Qurʾān emerged. The rise in recent decades of a highly sceptical school of historical analysis regarding the origins of Islam – including particularly the *sīra* literature – has cast grave doubt on much of the earlier work that took the framework provided by the *sīra* for granted. The roots of this sceptical attitude towards the traditional Muslim sources go back to the pioneering work of nineteenth-century scholars such as M. J. de Goeje and Ignaz Goldziher and were developed in the twentieth century by scholars such as Joseph Schacht, but the approach really came to the fore in the 1970s. John Wansbrough asserted that the Qurʾān was not a stable canon of sacred text until at least two centuries or more after the death of Muḥammad in 11/632 – contrary to the traditional view, which considers the ʿUthmānic text to be quite firmly established a mere two decades after Muḥammad's death.⁷ He also believed that the actual context in which the Qurʾān emerged was not Arabia, but what he termed the 'sectarian milieu' of monotheistic debate in places with long-established monotheist communities, particularly Iraq and Palestine.⁸ Recent work suggests that Wansbrough's hypothesis of a very late crystallisation of the Qurʾān text outside Arabia is not in accord with the internal evidence of the text itself, which implies a very early crystallisation (before the first civil war, 36–41/656–61) and, for at least parts of the text, an origin in western Arabia.⁹

Sīra as exegesis?

Wansbrough and some other writers, partly following earlier writers such as Henri Lammens, also argued that the traditional *sīra* materials do not represent an independent body of information that might be used to understand the text of the Qurʾān, but rather were fabricated precisely to explain various verses of the Qurʾān.¹⁰ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, whose book *Hagarism* unleashed an avalanche of work on Islam's origins, were far less radical than Wansbrough in their view of the date of the Qurʾān, which they thought was probably codified in the late seventh century, but

they took a similarly critical view of much of what was contained in the *sīra* literature.¹¹

The issues raised by these recent sceptical writers and their critical predecessors have yet to be definitively resolved by scholars of the Qurʾān. There is evidence to support the contention that some reports in the *sīra* literature are of dubious validity and may, in fact, have originated in the need to invent a supposed historical context for exegetical readings of particular verses. This evidence includes such things as inner contradictions in the *sīra* narratives, the presence of numerological symbolism, structural hints that some of the *sīra* stories originated in exegesis of the Qurʾān. There is also evidence of a desire to generate an idealised view of Muḥammad or to elaborate on biblical tropes. On the other hand, there is evidence to support the contention that the *sīra* narratives originated independently of the Qurʾān and were linked to the exegetical process only at a secondary stage.¹² Scholars differ greatly in their judgements about the degree to which these characteristics undermine the historical reliability of the *sīra* literature, some rejecting its testimony almost completely, others feeling that the main outlines of the *sīra* are probably authentic.¹³ But even if one contends that the problematic elements are only a small part of the *sīra*, one's ability to rely on it is undermined because there is as yet no generally accepted and foolproof method for distinguishing what might be true from what might be false.

Taken together, these two facts – that the Qurʾān text crystallised at an early date, and that the *sīra* reports are sometimes exegetical – suggest that we must consider the relationship of the Qurʾān to its context in a manner that reverses the procedure normally adopted when studying the relationship of a text to its context. Rather than relying on the *sīra* reports about a presumed historical context to illuminate the meaning of the Qurʾān text, we must attempt to infer from the Qurʾānic text what its true historical context might have been, and in this way check on the historicity of various reports in the *sīra*.¹⁴ Efforts to do this are still in their infancy, but several hypotheses about the Qurʾān's nature and context seem to be emerging as possibilities that bear further investigation. One is that the traditional *sīra* literature may greatly overstate the significance of paganism as the context or background against which the Qurʾān emerged. Gerald Hawting has recently made a strong case for the proposition that the Qurʾān's references to *mushrikūn*, 'polytheists', are in fact hyperbolic products of intra-monotheist polemics and not evidence of an actual pagan background at all.¹⁵ Similarly, the *sīra* literature may downplay the significance of Christianity or Judaism in the formation of Islam and the Qurʾān. The relationship

of the Qurʾān to Judaism and Christianity has long been an important focus of attention for Western scholars, going back as far as the work of Abraham Geiger in the mid-nineteenth century and Tor Andrae, Richard Bell and Charles Torrey (among others) in the early twentieth. Some of this earlier work was crassly reductionist, but more recent work, particularly by Günter Lüling and Christoph Luxenberg, as well as by Wansbrough, has reopened these issues in a more sophisticated way, although the interpretations offered differ significantly from one another, and have been roundly criticised by some. This work generally suggests, however, that scholars need to look at the broader context of near eastern religion in late antiquity to find the Qurʾān's historical and intellectual setting, and not just the Arabian context. And, if we do so, we must consider seriously the importance of religious phenomena that were widespread in the late antique near east, such as ascetic piety (especially strong in Syrian Christianity) and apocalypticism, echoes of both of which can be found in early Islam and in the Qurʾān.

Another emerging issue for scholars is the way the Qurʾān text was transmitted, which has a bearing on our understanding of its actual nature as a text and, consequently, its historical context. The aforementioned works by Lüling and Luxenberg, as well as articles by James Bellamy, have suggested that, contrary to the traditional view of an unbroken oral tradition, parts of the Qurʾān text must, at some stage, have been transmitted in written form without a controlling tradition of oral recitation, at least for those passages. This does not yet tell us exactly when or how this written transmission occurred, but it means that we must be willing to entertain a variety of possibilities, and wait until future research on the Qurʾān either confirms or refutes them. Among these possible hypotheses are some close to the traditional view, according to which the Qurʾān emerged from the career of Muḥammad but was transmitted partly in written form before the production of the ʿUthmānic text. Alternatively, it may turn out that parts of the Qurʾān go back to older written texts (of Christian or Jewish or other origin?) that pre-date Muḥammad's career, and were incorporated into the revelations in some form. Yet another possibility is that the Qurʾānic text, with all its diversity of style and content, is a collation of originally independent textual corpora hailing from different communities of believers in Arabia, whose relations with Muḥammad and his prophetic activities remain to be determined. Only when further research has more fully clarified some of these issues will we be able to know with any certainty just what the Qurʾān's historical context truly was.

Notes

1. On the *sīra* literature generally, see M. Hinds, 'Maghāzī', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., 11 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1979–2002), vol. V, pp. 1,161–4, and W. Raven, 'Sīra', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. IX, pp. 660–3. See also J. Horowitz, *The earliest biographies of the Prophet and their authors*, ed. L. I. Conrad (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), particularly Conrad's introduction.
2. The classic treatment of the issues discussed in the next several paragraphs is found in Th. Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qurāns* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1860); second ed., revised by F. Schwally, G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1919–38); a convenient summary in English is provided in W. M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), pp. 40–56.
3. On variant readings, see R. Paret, 'Ḳirā'a', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. V, pp. 127–9, and A. T. Welch, 'al-Ḳur'an. 3. History of the Ḳur'an after 632', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. V, pp. 404–9. The variants are tabulated in A. Jeffery, *Materials for the history of the text of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 1937).
4. Readable Western accounts based closely on the traditional *sīra* literature include W. M. Watt, *Muḥammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), as well as his *Muḥammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956) and his *Muḥammad, prophet and statesman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961); F. E. Peters, *Muḥammad and the origins of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); and M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1957).
5. The greatly expanded revised edition prepared by F. Schwally, G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl (1909–38) is usually referred to today.
6. E.g., A. Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1981); T. Nagel, *Medinensische Einschübe in Mekkanischen Suren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995).
7. J. Wansbrough, *Quranic studies: Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
8. J. Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu: Content and composition of Islamic salvation history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
9. F. M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins: The beginnings of Islamic historical writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), ch. 1.
10. Besides Wansbrough's *Quranic studies*, see A. Rippin, 'The function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in qur'ānic exegesis', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51 (1988), 1–20; M. Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie: Eine quellenkritische Analyse der Sira-Überlieferung zu Muḥammads Konflikt mit den Juden* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1998).
11. P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The making of the Islamic world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
12. Among the works addressing these issues are P. Crone, *Meccan trade and the rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); U. Rubin, *The eye of the beholder: The life of Muḥammad as viewed by the early Muslims* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995) and his *Between Bible and Qur'an: The Children of Israel and the Islamic self-image* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1999); Schöller, *Exegetisches*

- Denken*; M. J. Kister, *Studies in Jāhiliyya and early Islam* (London: Variorum, 1980).
13. Relatively few critical scholars have adopted a 'bunker mentality' and chosen to defend the *sīra* in all its details as accurate; it can be questioned, in light of the overwhelming evidence that the *sīra* does contain interpolations of later attitudes and needs, whether such scholars can be considered critically minded at all.
 14. This is the procedure adopted in W. M. Watt, *Muḥammad's Mecca: History in the Qurʾān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988).
 15. G. Hawting, *The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); however, his adoption of Wansbrough's contention that the locus of this activity was not Arabia, but Iraq and Syria, is less convincing. See F. M. Donner, 'Review of G. Hawting, *The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam*', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001), 336–8.

Further reading

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