**The Historical-Critical Study of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Scriptures\***

Isaac W. Oliver

Bradley University

The first conference of the Early Islamic Seminar Studies, which was held at the beautiful Villa Cagnola under the umbrella of the Enoch Seminar, was in many ways exceptional. It assembled regular participants of the Enoch Seminar who specialize in early Judaism and Christianity with scholars of early Islam. The numerous discussions and presentations confirmed certain premonitions I held before attending the conference concerning the state of the academic investigation and instruction of early Islam in many Western institutions, public and private. The conference reinforced my conviction that early Islam must be studied in conjunction with early Judaism and Christianity as well as other Late Antique religious traditions (Zoroastrianism, Mandaeanism, etc.).[[1]](#footnote-1) In the following, therefore, I include a modified version of my response to Guillaume Dye’s paper on surah 19 (published in this same volume) with the hope that it will demonstrate the academic potential in promoting scholarly exchange between specialists working across fields as diverse as Second Temple Judaism, New Testament, early Christianity, early rabbinic literature, and early Islamic studies. I also take the opportunity here to expand my reflections on the question of historical-criticism by drawing from my own experience teaching Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures in a non-confessional university in the United States. These reflections include a brief assessment of English translations of the Qur’an and introductory works on early Islam that have been used in American universities at the undergraduate level. The realization that few pedagogical books treat early Islam in the same way that early Christianity and Judaism are critically presented in Western academies then leads into a brief discussion on the delicate issues of “Orientalism” and “anti-Semitism” as they relate to historical-critical inquiry, on the one hand, and ecumenical endeavors, on the other. The reluctance to apply historical criticism or other critical approaches to the study of the Qur’an and Islam is questioned. Besides promoting a better understanding of Islam as a historical, cultural, religious, and social phenomenon, the promotion of critical approaches can, arguably, even contribute towards better Jewish-Christian-Muslim understanding. But the latter endeavor, however noble, should not theologically nor teleologically condition historical-critical inquiry to reach certain outcomes.

**Response to Guillaume Dye’s Paper**

Overall, I find Dye’s application of the redactional-critical method to Q 19:1–63 quite compelling. Dye avoids the atomistic tendencies that dominated earlier stages of biblical criticism, which tended to obsess over source-critical minutiae and conjecture about the diachronic stages of development of biblical texts in the smallest detail, even when dealing with hypothetical sources of the Pentateuch such as “J” or “E” or the so-called “Q” source standing behind the synoptic gospels of Matthew and Luke.[[2]](#footnote-2) Dye admits that it is often impossible to reconstruct *every* historical layer of literary production of a given text. Even when dealing with the “original version” of Q 19:1–63, Dye concedes that it might not be possible to reconstruct this original version in any detail, that the original version is above all a *Grenzbegriff.* On the other hand, Dye does not dismiss historical inquiry entirely, nor does he shy away from making some specific observations about the Quranic pericope he investigates. Dye asserts that redaction criticism *can* work and is reliable, when properly performed.

Affirming Dye’s general stance, I would like to stress that redaction criticism has, along with other historical-critical approaches (e.g., source criticism and form criticism), demonstrated that the Pentateuch and the canonical gospels are composite works. This is no small achievement. All historiansof the Hebrew Bible agree that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses but is a complex, composite, and even contradictory text produced by various schools that stretched over a wide span of time. Since the rise of historical criticism, no one has demonstrated—from a historical point of view—that “Moses received Torah at Sinai,” as one rabbinic dictum famously puts it, even though most Jews and Christians believed in its Mosaic authorship throughout the centuries until the rise of modernity.[[3]](#footnote-3) The case of the canonical gospels is probably even more apropos as a comparison to the historical investigation of the Qur’an and the life of Muhammad: a century at best separates the composition of the canonical gospels in their final form from the death of the historical Jesus. Yet no historian of early Christianity will accept, without questioning, the traditional accounts concerning the historical genesis and formation of said gospels. For example, historians of early Christianity do not accept without questioning Papias’ claim (second century C.E.) that Peter dictated an eyewitness account of Jesus’ life to Mark who then recorded these materials in writing.[[4]](#footnote-4) Similarly, it is hardly maintained, from a historical point of view, that *Matthew*, the actual disciple of Jesus, wrote the gospel that now bears his name. The same observations would apply to the gospels of Luke and John.

Specialists of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament would certainly yawn at all of the assertions just made, but it is worthwhile recalling them, since Dye’s paper deals with the Qur’an—a canonical text—which, like the gospels of the New Testament, is an *anonymous* work, containing materials expressing diverse viewpoints stemming from different sources. The methods of source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism have demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the canonical gospels, despite their relatively short compositional life, underwent several stages of development that included, among other things, the oral transmission of materials originally formulated in Hebrew or Aramaic that were then translated into Greek, only to be further modified, deleted, and expanded to serve the various needs of an amorphous, fluid movement adapting to evolving circumstances (what is called in form criticism the *Sitz im Leben*)—all of this before the gospels reached the hands of their final redactors who gave these texts their final imprint through further editing. Historians of early Christianity might continue to disagree over the schemes that best account for this process. They will further acknowledge, more than ever before, the limitations of their historical enterprise given the fragmentary evidence at their disposal. Some are also keenly aware of their own subjective position as contemporary readers who, inevitably, are products of their social-cultural settings. Nonetheless, most would agree that the canonical gospels are multi-layered texts stemming from multiple sources that at best can only convey the “gist” of what Jesus originally said and did.[[5]](#footnote-5) From the perspective of a “biblical critic,” there is nothing extreme in the very least regarding Dye’s methodological approach, including his questioning whether the Qur’an records Muhammad’s *ipsissima verba*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

One of the strengths of Dye’s approach lies in its ability to demonstrate how Q 19:1–63, ultimately builds on Christian subtexts, some bearing a Palestinian texture. Furthermore, Dye’s investigation sheds light on the meaning of rather vague terms that appear in this Quranic passage, including the “eastern place,” the “remote place,” the “curtain,” and the “sister of Aaron.” With these observations in mind, I would like to concentrate on a few matters of Dye’s piece that relate specifically to the contents of Q 19:1–63. Dye claims that, without the interpolation of vv. 34–40, the earlier form of Q 19:1–63 is definitely not anti-Christian. I could agree but would like to point out the following: I was struck, when reading Q 19:2–33, how this section reminded me of the doublet in the first two chapters of Luke recounting the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. While Q 19:16–33, from a source-critical point of view, depends in part on traditions known to us from the Protoevangelium of James, it contains elements that recall Luke’s “infancy narrative.” Indeed, Dye claims in his paper that the original author of Q 19:1–63 was familiar with Luke 1. I would like to focus further on this possibility. Unlike Q 19:2–15 and Luke ch. 1, the Protoevangelium of James does not start out narrating the birth of John the Baptist. In fact, itonly alludes to the birth of John the Baptist only in passing. Like Q 19:16–33, the Protoevangelium of James focuses more on Mary and the birth of Jesus (though unlike Q 19, it also relates the martyrdom of Zechariah). On the other hand, the Gospel of Luke opens with the announcement of John’s birth during Zechariah’s encounter with the angel Gabriel in the temple.[[7]](#footnote-7) Luke then reports the annunciation of Jesus’ birth to Mary. Many other parallels exist between the Lukan birth accounts of John and Jesus. The literary symmetry in Luke is deliberate, resulting from redactional activity with the ultimate aim of exalting Jesus above his predecessor John. The redactor of Luke chs. 1–2 acknowledges the stature of John, conferring to him a miraculous birth, a priestly pedigree, and a prophetic calling. Ultimately, however, Luke’s John is only the messenger of someone greater to come. Notice what the angel Gabriel has to say about Jesus in Luke 1:32–33—which is absent from Q 19: “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (New Revised Standard Version).

Like the Lukan doublet, the Quranic doublet in Q 19:2–33 presents the births of John and Jesus as miraculous events willed by God. John’s birth is remarkable because of its *timing*: it occurs despite his parents’ senile age. Jesus’ birth is remarkable for the *manner* of its manifestation: the Qur’an confesses the virgin birth of Jesus. However, unlike the Gospel of Luke, it does not seem that the Quranic pericope in question in its actual form uses the virgin birth to exalt Jesus over and above John. Perhaps this was no longer a pressing concern.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this section of the Qur’an, Jesus and John are near equals. Both figures are dejudaized to a large extent: Jesus is not heralded as the Davidic king who will rule over Israel, as is the case in Luke, and no mention is made about John’s circumcision on the eighth day. Both figures are also portrayed as mere mortals, with a clear beginning and an end, who nonetheless look forward to the day of their resurrection. Could the Quranic parallelism in Q 19 even imply that Jesus, like John, has *not* yet risen from the dead? I only present this possibility as an option that merits further consideration. What seems persuasive, as Dye points out, is that Q 19:33 apparently assumes the *real* death of Jesus, challenging the more widespread understanding (based on Q 4:157) that Jesus only *seemed* to have died but actually didn’t.[[9]](#footnote-9)

On the other hand, the Quranic presentation of Jesus as a talking baby could suggest some kind of christological preeminence, particularly when read against a wider historical backdrop of intense christological debates that occurred among Christians concerning the relationship between the human and divine natures of Jesus. Was Mary the bearer of God? Was the *infant* Jesus truly divine? At first sight, by presenting Jesus as a talking infant, one could think that the Qur’an would be favoring one Christian theological position over another. In the immediate literary context, however, the inclusion of the speaking infant seems to be made primarily for a different reason: to safeguard the questionable reputation of Mary and Jesus, given the exceptional circumstances surrounding the latter’s birth. Moreover, the content the Quranic infant Jesus orally delivers points back to his human nature: he is (but) a slave of God, a prophet, commanded by God to pray and practice charity as long as he lives, destined to die but hopeful of the day of his resurrection. We should remember, in the context of the Enoch Seminar conferences, that the Enochic tradition ascribes extraordinary births and virtues to other infants, including Noah (*1 Enoch* 106) and Methuselah (*2 Enoch* 71).[[10]](#footnote-10) To his credit, Dye is careful to distinguish Lukan christology, which only posits a divine *sonship* for Jesus, from subsequent Christian speculations that understood the Lukan (and Matthean) virgin birth accounts as evidence for the divine *nature* of Jesus. As someone who has spent significant time examining the Gospel of Luke, I find the Quranic reception of the virgin birth remarkable, pertinent even for discussing the christological perspective of the gospel of Lukeitself. The Qur’an reminds readers of the New Testament not to assume that the virgin birth in Luke presents Jesus as a preexistent divine being. Indeed, nothing is overtly said throughout Luke (and Acts) about Christ’s preexistence. It could be argued that according to Luke the messiah, despite his miraculous birth, comes into being upon conception and is equated with the heavenly Son of Man only later on in Luke-Acts during Jesus’ adult years. A thorough engagement with early Jewish and Christian sources is necessary to understand the Qur’an from a historical point of view, as Dye finely demonstrates. But the Quranic trajectory could invite in certain instances interesting reassessments of particular passages contained in earlier Christian and Jewish writings. In sum, Q 19:1-63 in its original form is not definitively “anti-Christian,” but representative of a “lower” christology that viewed Jesus simply as a human being.

One final question I raise concerns the acquaintance of the author of the original form of Q 19:1–63 with Aramaic or Syriac. It is remarkable, indeed, as Dye points out, that the Arabic word *hanan* is a hapax legomenon in the Qur’an. This is probably not a mere accident. Behind this unique occurrence likely stands a play of words with John’s name in Hebrew, *Yohanan*. In biblical Hebrew the meaning of the root *hnn* refers primarily to the concept of “grace,” of “being gracious” or “showing favor.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This meaning is carried on into rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic, [[12]](#footnote-12) although one also comes across the closely related notion of “mercy” in Aramaic, notably in Syriac.[[13]](#footnote-13) This semantic range makes it even more challenging to translate the Arabic *hanan* in surah 19:13. Should it be rendered as “grace”[[14]](#footnote-14) or “mercy”? The first option might seem more appropriate, given the explanation in Luke 1:80 stating that the child John “grew and became strong in spirit,” suggesting that he found favor or grace in God’s sight.[[15]](#footnote-15) On the other hand, statements such as Luke 1:54, “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy” (Greek: *eleos*; cf. Luke 1:78), may have led Aramaic speaking Christians to associate the name of *Yohanan* with the notion of divine mercy and intervention.

Regardless of the choice one makes here, why is the name *Yohanan* rendered as *Yahya* in Q 19? Did the original author of Q 19:1–63 know Aramaic in contrast to the (final?) editor of this pericope who added the more polemical verses found in 19:34–40 and also altered John’s name? Or was the alteration of John’s name originally deliberate? In any case, the change of *Yohanan* to *Yahya* links the proper noun to the word *hayya* (“life”), which appears in both Q 19:15 and 19:33, creating an even greater correspondence between John and Jesus. I would suggest that the claim in Q 19:7 with respect to the unprecedented divine naming of John as *Yahya* might ultimately stem from some kind of Christian or Quranic exegesis that tried to account for the rather unique episode related in Luke 1:59–63. In that Lukan pericope, Elizabeth wishes to call her son Yohanan, deviating from the custom of calling one’s child after the father. Zechariah approves this exceptional act. His speech is then miraculously restored. The redactor(s) of Q 19:1–63 may have perceived this episode as truly exceptional, granting, accordingly, to John a more unique name for the occasion, *Yahya* rather than the common *Yohanan*.

**The Academic Instruction of Early Islam**

As noted, nothing in Dye’s historical-critical approach to the Qur’an would strike the biblical scholar or specialist in early Judaism and Christianity as scandalous or preposterous. Indeed, adopting a historical-critical approach allows the scholar of religious studies to analyze early Islamic literature in the same way other religious writings are scrutinized. It is, furthermore, customary in college courses on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to be presented in a way that cultivates a critical appreciation for the historical contexts in which these texts emerged. For the Hebrew Bible, this involves showing how its authors inevitably were shaped by and participated in Near Eastern culture. Attention is given to sources embedded in the biblical writings, their dates, authorship, and provenance. The same holds true for the New Testament, which is now intimately related to its Jewish matrix even as it is understood within a broader Greco-Roman context. Textbooks and other resources that introduce beginning students to historical-critical issues related to the Pentateuch, the historical Jesus, Paul’s letters, or the gospels abound in number. On the other hand, finding introductory textbooks or translations of the Qur’an that adequately discuss issues related to its formation, the “historical Muhammad,” or nascent Islam proves more challenging. As a point of illustration, I note that Oxford University Press does not possess any introductory work on early Islam or translation of the Qur’an equivalent to their *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, by Bart Ehrman, *The Old Testament: Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, by Michael D. Coogan, or *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*.

Instead, one encounters several publications of a non-critical tenor, written by Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers alike, which for the most part rehearse traditional claims concerning Islamic origins. Karen Armstrong’s best-selling books have been used in confessional and secular settings alike. Her volume, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* was one of the required readings for a world religions course a close acquaintance took at a large public American university.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is also recommended in various publications, even ones written by scholars, for those interested in learning more about Muhammad’s life.[[17]](#footnote-17) As the title of her book suggests, Armstrong aims to defend Islam by combating negative characterizations of Muhammad. As someone devoted to promoting better Jewish-Christian-Muslim understanding, I certainly sympathize with Armstrong’s ecumenical aspirations. The historian, however, will quickly note that the book contains no explanation of methodology or justification for the selective usage of materials from primary sources for reconstructing Muhammad’s life. Armstrong simply contends that “we know more about Muhammad than about nearly any other founder of a major religious tradition.”[[18]](#footnote-18) But to make such a wide-sweeping statement, one must overlook the late date of the relevant sources on Muhammad (siras, hadiths), not to mention the penchant for the miraculous in some of the materials and, more generally, the rhetorical discursive strategies adopted by religious texts to further theological and political aims. But Armstrong has another primary source at her disposal: “For some twenty-three years, from about 610 to his death in 632, Muhammad claimed that he was the recipient of direct messages from God, which were collected into the text that became known as the Qur’an. It does not contain a straightforward account of Muhammad’s life, of course, but came to the Prophet piecemeal, line by line, verse by verse, chapter by chapter. Sometimes the revelations dealt with a particular situation in Mecca or Medina.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The Qur’an, however, makes no such claims about the progression of Muhammad’s career. Armstrong simply reiterates tradition. The selective use of tradition allows her to pursue her ecumenical agenda, which is confused with historical analysis. The historicity of reports culled from Ibn Ishaq or Bukhari are assumed rather than demonstrated, while unpleasant materials that might seem offensive to a Western audience are simply left out. Armstrong’s Muhammad is certainly a prophet for our time but is he a messenger of his time?

By contrast, when Armstrong deals with the New Testament, she has no qualms adopting historical-critical positions when this proves congenial to her enterprise. For example, she questions the historical reliability of the depictions of the Pharisees in the canonical gospels, sharply distinguishing the historical Jesus’ disposition toward the Pharisees from that of the gospel writers who lived after Jesus’ time. The stories related in the gospels, in other words, often tell us more about the emergence of Christianity than the historical Jesus.[[20]](#footnote-20) Why not make similar distinctions between the historical Muhammad, the Qur’an, and the traditional biographies and hadiths? Has not form criticism cautioned biblical and even rabbinic studies against confidently peeling traditional layers in search of historical kernels, encouraging rather the appreciation of the function (theological, political, social, etc.) of a particular form in its original *Sitz im Leben*? Reliance on tradition for historical reconstruction proves problematic not only because of dating or legendary accretions. The very formof many traditional materials, which were designed to serve the ideological needs of the communities they targeted, presents at times insurmountable tasks for historical reconstruction. Stripping the miraculous from tradition will not necessarily bring one closer to the “historical Muhammad.” Verisimilitude, as Neusner pointed out long ago in the context of rabbinic studies, should not be confused with probability![[21]](#footnote-21)

Likewise, the first chapter of John Esposito’s *Islam: The Straight Path* adopts in many ways Armstrong’s approach, save that it is written by a specialist in Islam. Like Armstrong, Esposito claims that “we know a good deal about Muhammad’s life after his ‘call’ to be God’s messenger.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Moreover, Esposito observes, without critical assessment, that the “Quran has served as a major source for information regarding the life of the Prophet.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The brief biography of Muhammad he sketches, however, derives primarily from extra-Quranic Islamic traditions that enable him to fill huge gaps missing in the Quran. Only at one point in his chapter does Esposito touch on the issue of “biblical criticism” simply to contrast it with the Islamic doctrine of revelation (*wahy*), which posits that both form and content as well as the actual words of the Qur’an are attributed to God. Otherwise, Esposito’s main concern, besides rehearsing Islamic self-understanding, is akin to Armstrong’s, as he seeks to reduce Western anxieties about Islam.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Finding the right translation of the Qur’an with annotations that do not simply repeat tradition but are also historically grounded can be equally challenging. I have used translations written by Michael Sells, N. J. Dawood, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Asa, A. J. Arberry, and M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. Sells’ *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* splendidly cultivates for the non-Arabist an appreciation for the poetic feel of the Quranic text.[[25]](#footnote-25) But as its subtitle suggests, Sells’ book accepts *sans plus* the traditional bifurcation of the Qur’an into Meccan and Medinan layers. To be fair, Sells does not aim at providing any kind of historical reconstruction of the Quranic text. The book only seeks to familiarize the general reader with a sense of the beauty and contents of a limited number of selected Quranic passages, specifically those that are not so polemical (i.e., the “Meccan ones”) in their tone. Jewish and Christian sources play little to no role in elucidating Quranic passages, although Sell’s reference to pre-Islamic Arabian poetry proves illuminating.

Dawood, who was born in Baghdad and of Jewish heritage, strived to translate the Qur’an in a way that would be accessible to the modern reader. The introduction to the text, however, follows Islamic tradition. Furthermore, his translation does not number all of the verses for each surah, presenting difficulties for beginning students trying to navigate a new text, and the annotations are extremely brief.[[26]](#footnote-26) Arberry’s translation, though elegant in its English rendering, also contains a unique numbering system, while some of the dated formulations can prove burdensome for a contemporary undergraduate reader. In addition, the introduction to his translation includes hostile statements against the historical-critical method.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Today, the language of the widely-distributed translation by Yusuf Ali would prove equally cumbersome. It is, furthermore, confessional in nature, at times “evangelistic” in its attempt to persuade readers about the merits and truths of Islamic belief. Nonetheless, the translation and numerous annotations derived from Islamic medieval sources are valuable for illustrating how certain Muslims have viewed their scriptures.[[28]](#footnote-28) Mention of Muhammad Asa’s translation could be made here as well, as it is also written from a similar confessional vein. Asa was a Jewish convert to Islam. His translation and annotations tend to demythologize and rationalize.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Two more recent translations also adopt a confessional stance that eschews critical analysis of the Quran. Abdel Haleem’s *The Qur’an: A New Translation* introduces each surah of the Qur’an as “Meccan” or “Medinan,” followed by explanatory comments in italics derived from medieval Islamic traditions (presumably Sunni) that were produced after the time the Qur’an was composed. Naturally, such introductory notes will condition the uninitiated reader’s understanding by restricting the meaning of particular suras—and the Qur’an as a whole—to a particular contextualization deriving from medieval tradition, which Abdel Haleem takes to be the original historical setting of the Quranic text. His historical approach is, accordingly, no different than that of Yusuf Ali or Asa.[[30]](#footnote-30) But unlike Yusuf Ali and Asa’s editions, Abdel Haleem is a professor at a prominent Western institution, the University of London. His translation, furthermore, is published by a Western academic university press (Oxford).[[31]](#footnote-31)

The *Study Quran* is published by a Western press (HarperOne), translated and authored by several professors working at Western universities, both public and private, and was widely promoted at the 2015 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.[[32]](#footnote-32) HarperOne initially intended to create an edition of the Qur’an that would correspond to *The HarperCollins Study Bible.* Those familiar with the latter know that it presents the Bible from a critical standpoint, as it is authored by professors in biblical studies teaching in Western institutions—confessional and secular—who embrace critical methods widely used in the Western academy. Yet *The Study Quran* categorically rejects these well-established methods. In the preface of *The Study Quran*, the editor-in-chief Seyyed Hossein Nasr takes credit for this outcome:

I therefore accepted with humility on the condition that this would be a *Muslim* effort and that, although the book would be contemporary in language and based on the highest level of scholarship, it would *not* be determined or guided by assertions presented in studies by non-Muslim Western scholars and orientalists who have studied the Quran profusely as a historical, linguistic, or sociological document, or even a text of religious significance, or do not accept it as the Word of God and an authentic revelation.[[33]](#footnote-33)

For these reasons, Nasr adds, “I only chose Muslim scholars to collaborate with me in this task.” However, he then states: “At the same time, I did not want the work to be confined or limited confessionally, ethnically, or geographically. It was to be universal and at the same time traditional, that is, expressing traditional Islamic views and therefore excluding modernistic or fundamentalist interpretations that have appeared in parts of Islamic world during the past two centuries.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Unfortunately, Nasr also resorts to *ad hominem* remarks to describe scholarship that does not align with his theological convictions:

Although we have relied heavily upon traditional sources, which are the mainstay of our translation and commentary, we have also consulted reliable sources based on both previous and recent academic scholarship in Qur’anic studies. We have, moreover, carried out this task with constant awareness of the biases and fashions present in both historical and contemporary writings about the Qur’an. We have been fully aware that many of these resources suffer, from the Islamic point of view, from the fact that they do not accept the Quran as revelation, they have a truncated view of the Islamic intellectual tradition, or they reject the Islamic worldview as a whole. In some extreme cases, such sources are based on either thinly veiled or sometimes outright hostility toward Islam and are often grounded in very questionable theories and published for the sake of worldly ends, such as gaining fame or furthering academic careers.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Given these pronouncements, it is not surprising that *The Study Quran* does not include one single article that deals with the the Qur’an’s historical context in Late Antiquity, its Jewish-Christian milieu, Byzantine, Abyssinian, or Persian contours, or possible Zoroastrian contacts, although it contains numerous informative essays that present Islamic views deemed proper by its editors on the Qur’an, Islamic Law, ethics, the afterlife, and the like. The edition does not engage in any kind of comparative critical religious analysis. Instead, the opening essay, “How to Read the Quran,” supplies the reader, Muslim or other, with the proper instructions on how the Qur’an *ought* to be read, concerned as it is with the depiction of Islam in the West, on the one hand, and Islamic fundamentalism and sectarianism on the other. The extensive commentary on each surah selectively draws from medieval Islamic commentaries and texts but almost wholly ignores biblical, Second Temple, rabbinic, patristic, and other Late Antique sources. The project of *The Study Quran* leaves one wondering how it really differs in its methodological approach from other traditionalist translations of the Quran such as the Saudi-sponsored edition by Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, as both navigate through traditional sources, each one extracting from the bottom of the sea those materials that prove most congenial to their theological expeditions, one ecumenical, the other exclusivist.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Many of the works assessed above are valuable resources for they can challenge non-Muslims unfamiliar with Islam to appreciate its complexity and diversity. *The Study Quran* excels in this regard more than any other preceding translation, making readily available to the non-Arabist an abundance of rich insights stemming from Islamic tradition and *tafsir*. Certainly, in the post-9/11 and current global context we live in, it is important for specialists in religious studies and theologians alike to reflect on the ethics of their scholarship and pedagogy, particularly as they relate to current politics. The specialist in religious studies, however, must also consider how to approach Islam in a manner that does not simply recite its creedal forms. Otherwise, to be consistent, one will have to present all other religions in the Western academy and classrooms in the same way. The Book of Mormon will have to be presented as a revelation given to Joseph Smith. Ellen G. White’s visions will be solely described as prophecy confirming Seventh-day Adventist belief.[[37]](#footnote-37) It is evident, however, that for the discipline of religious studies to retain its academic integrity it must include all religions in the same type of open academic discussion, which includes the critical inquiry and investigation of canonical texts. One could argue, furthermore, that refraining from critically examining the Qur’an constitutes a form of discrimination against Islam. It not only sets one religious tradition aside methodologically, thereby perpetuating its alterity. It may also unwittingly assume that the genius of Islam, unlike its Jewish and Christian counterparts, is too primitive to handle and assimilate the same level of critical scrutiny. There must be a way in the academic setting to handle such a complex matter, to contextualize while remaining appreciative, to question while respecting a given culture.

Fortunately, a few recent works of pedagogical use do not discriminate against Islam or the Qur’an but approach them in the same way other religious traditions are treated. They are particularly useful for those who wish to teach Islam within a comparative religion context, particularly in conversation with Jewish and Christian traditions. Francis E. Peters’ *The Children of Abraham* is certainly useful in this regard, though incomplete.[[38]](#footnote-38) His pioneering initiative places the study of Islam alongside Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, Peters presents to the general reader the challenges affecting our historical understanding of each tradition. When discussing the founding figures of Judaism, Peters soberly admits that their lives “unfolded in such remote antiquity that they are by now irretrievable.”[[39]](#footnote-39) The Talmud is but a compilation of “disjointed utterances and judgments that provide flavor and personality but are poor makings for biography.”[[40]](#footnote-40) If on the other hand the careers of Jesus and Muhammad are bathed in a discernible historical light, Peters remarks that they are also embellished with legends. The Qur’an, furthermore, contains on almost every page material that can be described as “biblical,” leading to the sensible conclusion “that some Jewish or Christian, or perhaps Jewish-Christian, influence wat at work.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Peters is aware that such a position would clash with the Muslim belief that “Muhammad enjoyed an absolute originality, remote from either texts or informants, and was in communication with God alone.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Yet as Peters notes, this position only raises the same issue in a different form: how could the Meccans of the early seventh century have been so familiar with the Qur’an’s opaque allusions to Moses, Abraham, and Jesus without some knowledge about biblical material and related material? The question is particularly acute in the case of Q 19 (passage discussed above), traditionally identified as “Meccan.” Peters’ answer to this dilemma remains somewhat elusive, however. He suggests that the historian proceed cautiously with the Qur’an in hand. Yet his historical presentation remains based on the traditional understanding of the Qur’an as a text stemming from Muhammad.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Two more recent introductory books finely present Islam using methods and theories drawn from religious studies, historical analysis, Near Eastern studies, archaeology, and other cognate disciplines. Aaron W. Hughes’ *Muslim Identities* shows respect for the great complexity and diversity of Islam without compromising the endeavor to present it as a phenomenon grounded in history and human existence. The strength of this work lies in its theoretical sophistication and emphasis on the diversity of Muslim experience. Gabriel Said Reynolds’ *The Emergence Islam* will interest those who wish to focus more on nascent Islam, the formation of the Qur’an, and its Jewish and Christian subtexts. Reynolds compares traditional Islamic understandings on such issues with an alternative proposal that is firmly based on archaeology, philology, and historical analysis. Using this method, he convincingly shows how Jewish and Christian scriptures can elucidate the meaning of many Quranic passages.

Arthur J. Droge’s *The Qur’ān: A New Annotated Translation* is the only English translation to date that adopts historical analysis and can be compared in any way to resources on the Bible such as *The HarperCollins Study Bible* or *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. In Droge’s own words, “there is certainly no shortage of English translations of the Qur’ān currently on the market” but, as he adds, “there has been a longstanding need for an edition of the text suitable for use in an academic setting.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Droge’s translation, unlike others, shows textual critical awareness, highlighting the problems involved in relying on the Cairo edition of the Qur’an while suggesting variant readings to certain Quranic passages. It discusses the problems involved with the usage of tradition for the understanding of the original meaning of the Qur’an. Like many translations of the Bible, Droge’s work consults cognate languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and even Greek to shed light on Arabic terms.[[45]](#footnote-45) The annotations contain numerous references to extra-Quranic sources written before the Qur’an, biblical and non-biblical.

A brief survey of some introductory works and translations can hardly reflect the actual state of Quranic and early Islamic studies in all its aspects. Textbooks and translations do, however, point to certain conventions that have accumulated over time. The instructor will find no short supply of Quranic translations and introductory works that present Islam in favorable light. The resistance to critical inquiry noted in these publications becomes all the more salient when compared to equivalent works produced in the fields of biblical, Second Temple, early Christian, and early rabbinic studies. Multiple factors can probably account for this type of reluctance. Droge points to the institutionalization of academic orthodoxies over the last one hundred and fifty years, highlighting a particular unwillingness, even in secular academic circles, to analyze religion critically because it might prove offensive.[[46]](#footnote-46) Add to this the extremist discourses about Islam and Muslims one hears from several corners, including from prominent presidential candidates in the US, not to mention the complex web of political circumstances spun by 9/11, the rise of ISIS, or the refugee crisis, in a social context where many are poorly informed about religion, prone to generalizations, and unwilling to nuance or contextualize. In such circumstances, any critical assessment of Islam might unwittingly lead to unforeseen social-political ramifications. In the academic context, the unfortunate aspects of the legacy of “Orientalism,” noted ever since Edward Said, means that investigating the “origins” of Islam automatically implies in certain circles the perpetuation of a Western colonialist or imperialist bias against Islam. The fear of such incrimination can be strong. But this charge should not go unchallenged. The days when New Testament scholars employed historical criticism to denigrate Judaism are over. The eradication of anti-Semitism (or anti-Judaism) from biblical studies did not entail with it the demise of historical criticism. Why can the same not be true for Quranic studies?

**Orientalism, Anti-Semitism, and Historical Criticism**

Whether he intended so or not, Said’s influential *Orientalism*, which was published in 1978, has since depleted the academic level of critical engagement with Islamic canonical sources.[[47]](#footnote-47) Said set out to demonstrate how the Western study of the “Orient” by philologists, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, political theorists, philosophers, and economists was profoundly entrenched in prejudices, stereotypes, and even romantic views about the East, particularly Arabic culture. Worse yet, Said claimed that the philological inquiry of the Orient performed by Western scholars, “Orientalism” as he called it, were implicated in the very colonial endeavors that allowed the West to dominate the Arab world.[[48]](#footnote-48) At the very least, the Western study of Islamic civilization represented an exercise in European self-affirmation rather than in an objective inquiry.

In the opening of his book, Said makes an interesting, though controversial, observation about the overlap between Orientalist and Western anti-Semitic discourses:

Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me, and certainly my study of Orientalism has convinced me (and I hope will convince my literary colleagues) that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together. In addition, and by an almost inescapable logic, I have found myself writing the history of a strange, secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism. That anti-Semitism and, as I have discussed it in its Islamic branch, Orientalism resemble each other very closely is a historical, cultural, and political truth that needs only to be mentioned to an Arab Palestinian for its irony to be perfectly understood.[[49]](#footnote-49)

One need only mention the name of Ernst Renan to recognize a certain truth in Said’s comparison.[[50]](#footnote-50) Interestingly, Said’s work came out almost at the same time as E. P. Sanders’ seminal *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977). Prior to War World War II, many Jewish and some Christian scholars had sought to combat anti-Jewish depictions of Judaism promoted by Western biblical scholars. Yet Sanders could still detect in the New Testament scholarship of his time a penchant to depict early Judaism as a legalistic religion, a declining phenomenon (*Spätjudentum*), the anti-thesis of a far greater entity to come known as Christianity, which was definitively non-Jewish. Much of Sanders’ six hundred-page book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* deals accordingly with correcting this Christian misconception before tackling the theology of Paul proper. Like the study of the Orient, the Western study of Judaism had become an exercise in reification of the “Other” and self-affirmation, legitimizing in the history of Jewish-Christian relations Christian supersessionism or in the worst cases, atrocities against Jews. Sanders intended to correct such distortions and propose an alternative model for understanding early Judaism, which he argued was a religion based on “grace.” Although many thinkers preceding Sanders sought to correct the anti-Jewish bias pervading Western biblical scholarship, especially after historic events such as the Holocaust, the establishment of the modern state of Israel, and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, one can note a significant shift in New Testament studies in the wake of Sanders’ work (particularly in Pauline studies). Since then, it has become customary to discuss Paul’s relation to Judaism, not to mention that of Jesus’s, in a far more nuanced way that assumes Paul’s Jewishness (however understood). Some even maintain that early Christianity should be viewed originally *as* a“Judaism” or as one of the possible expressions emerging from Second Temple Judaism. Sanders, however, used the tools of historical criticism and comparative religion, studying patterns in different religious texts in order to make his point. He was, unlike Said, a specialist in the field he was critiquing. His research *reinvigorated the historical critical analysis* of the New Testament by bringing it into a more intimate, balanced conversation with its Jewish sources. The critical reassessment of early Jewish-Christian relations, including the Jewish context of the New Testament, the Jewishness of Jesus and Paul (the so-called “New Perspective”), and the *Auseinandersetzungen* between early Jews and Christians is now an established reality.

By contrast, Said’s legacy has put into question the historical critical investigation of the Islamic canonical corpus, inadvertently creating a wider gulf separating the fields of early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His exposure of Western colonial predispositions among certain Orientalists, though vital and necessary, did little to advance our understanding of the history of early Islam or the formation of the Qur’an, questions that, admittedly, Said was not trained to tackle or cared to pursue. Besides chronological proximity, his work shares with Sanders only the effort to denounce certain Western biases. Said critiqued primarily British and French Orientalists; Sanders exposed the anti-Jewish proclivities of German New Testament scholars. Said tended to essentialize an entire field of academic studies as an illegitimate project, disregarding the scholarship of German Orientalists who could claim no physical colonial presence in the Middle East. Sanders denounced Christian misrepresentation of early Judaism but did not stop there. He also made original proposals that stimulated further investigation of Second Temple Judaism and Christian origins. [[51]](#footnote-51) Said deconstructed; Sanders reconstructed.

My main goal in summoning and contrasting the legacies of these two formidable figures is to caution against prematurely dismissing historical-critical inquiry.[[52]](#footnote-52) A historical-critical inquiry of the Qur’an that is informed by the unfortunate legacy of certain Orientalists need not generate any bias against Islam any more than the critical investigation of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud today promotes anti-Semitism. In fact the new historical-critical perspectives on the New Testament have coincided with the improvement in contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. We cannot pretend that the two phenomena are entirely unrelated. The recent publication of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, which targets Jewish and Christian readers alike, corrects erroneous understandings about early Judaism while drawing from critical scholarship.[[53]](#footnote-53) Historical inquiry and ecumenical pursuits are not by definition hostile to one another nor must they operate in concerted alliance. In fact, seeing that the Qur’an appears to be a real treasure trove filled with Jewish *and* Christian materials that have been reworked according to the Quranic genius, I cannot avoid ascribing a certain value, whether for historical inquiry or ecumenical dialogue, in viewing Islam as a “Jewish-Christianity” in the same way that (early) Christianity has come to be understood in a certain sense as (still) constituting a (Christian) “Judaism.” I do not mean that Islam emerged as a “Jewish Christian” sect, as some scholars have speculated,[[54]](#footnote-54) or that Islam passively “borrowed” from Judaism and Christianity,[[55]](#footnote-55) or, finally, that the three “monotheistic traditions” are essentially one and the same throughout time and space. Rather, viewing Islam as a “Jewish-Christianity” underscores the fact that the first protagonists of Islam were products and producers of their time and space, which naturally included encounters with Jewish and Christian ideas. This categorization, though potentially troubling for many contemporary Jews, Christians, and Muslims, could ultimately lead to a greater rapprochement between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jews and Christians used to viewing Islam as the “Oriental Other” would have to recognize that the Qur’an is in a certain sense Jewish and Christian. Many Muslims, for their part, would have to realize that this shared heritage is inscribed in the Quranic foundation of Islam.[[56]](#footnote-56)

List of References

Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. *The Qur’an.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Arberry, Arthur John. *The Koran Interpreted*.New York: Touchstone, 1996.

Armstrong, Karen. *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007.

———. *A History of God*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1993.

———. *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992.

Bock, Darrell L. “The Historical Jesus: An Evangelical View.” Pages 249–81. *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*.Edited by James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 2009.

**Brettler, Marc Zvi, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington,** The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Brettler, Marc Zvi, and Amy-Jill Levine, editors. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, editors. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1907.

Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Dawood, Nessim Joseph. *The Koran.* New York: Penguin Press, 2006.

Dozeman, Thomas B., Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz, editors. *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*. Forschungen zum Alten Testament 78. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

Coogan, Michael D. *The Old Testament: Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Coogan, Michael D., Marc Z. Brettler, and Carol Newsom, editors. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Cook, Michael. *Muhammad*.Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Droge, Arthur J. *The Qur’ān: A New Annotated Translation*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.

Ehrman, Bart. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Ernst, Carl and Richard Martin, editors. “Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies.” Pages 1–19 in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*.Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2010.

Esposito, John L. *Islam: The Straight Path*. 3d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

———. *Great World Religions: Islam*.The Great Courses Series on DVD. Chantilly, Va.: The Teaching Company, 2003.

Gager, John. “Did Jewish Christians See the Rise of Islam?” Pages 361–72 in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jewish and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.* Edited by Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed. Reprint. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. Repr. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.

Geiger, Abraham. “Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentum aufgenommen?”Diss., Bonn. 1833.

Heschel, Susannah. *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Hidayatullah, Aysha A. *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Hughes, Aaron W. *Muslim Identities: An Introduction to Islam*.New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

———. *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Jastrow, Marcus. *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*.Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005.

Khan, Muhammad Muhsin, and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, *The Noble Quran*. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007.

Klinghardt, Matthias. “The Marcionite Gospel and the Synoptic Problem: A New Suggestion.” *Novum Testamentum* 50 (2008): 1–27.

Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

Muhammad, Khaleel. “Assessing English Translations of the Qur’an.” *The Middle East Quarterly* 12 (2005): 58–71.

Müller, Mogens. “Luke–the Fourth Gospel?” Pages 231–42 in *Voces Clamantium in Deserto: Essays in Honor of Kari Syreeni*.Edited by Sven-Olav Back and Matti Kankaanniemi. Studier exegetik och judaistik utgivna av Teologiska fakulteten vid Åbo Akademi 11. Åbo: Teologiska fakulteten vid Åbo Akademi, 2012.

Orlov, Andrei, and Gabriele Boccaccini, editors. *New Perspectives on 2 Enoch: No Longer Slavonic Only*.Studia Judaeoslavica 4; Brill: Leiden, 2012.

Peters, Francis E., *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*.Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.

———. *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*.Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.

Reynolds, Gabriel Said. “Islamic Studies in the North America or Reflections on the Academic Study of the Qur’an.” *Islamochristinana* 40 (2014): 55–73.

———. *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspectives* (Fortress, 2012).

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.

Schoeps, Hans-Joachim. *Jewish Christianity: Factional Disputes in the Early Church.* Translated by Douglas R. A. Hare. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969.

Schwartz, Seth. “Historiography of the ‘Talmudic Period.’” Pages 79–114 in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*. Edited by Martin D. Goodman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sells, Michael. *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*.2d ed. Ashland, Oreg.: White Cloud Press, 2007.

Smith, Payne. *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*. Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1999.

Wansbrough, John. *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. Expanded and edited by Andrew Rippin. Amherst, N. Y.: Prometheus, 2004.

Wellhausen, Julius. *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*.Berlin: G. Reimer, 1878.

Yusuf Ali, Abdullah. *The Qur’an: Text, Translation, and Commentary*. New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 2011.

1. \* A special thanks to Carlos A. Segovia and Robert B. Foster for looking at this piece and providing critical feedback and corrections.

   I am using the epithet “early” in an extremely flexible chronological way to include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam under some kind of common rubric. By “early Judaism” I mean both the Second Temple and Late Antique periods. “Early Christianity” encompasses here the first centuries of formative Christianity until the emergence of Islam (“Late Antiquity”). “Early Islam” refers roughly to its formative period, the time when the Qur’an was formed, when Muhammad lived, and the first traditional accounts related to these two emerge (siras, hadiths, etc.). My overly inclusive usage of “early” is meant to connect the study of nascent Islam with the investigation of a diverse spectrum of Jewish and Christian sources spanning from the Hebrew Bible to the Talmud and patristic literature while avoiding cumbersome language (“Second Temple Judaism,” “Late Antique Judaism,” etc.) or canonical terminology (“New Testament period,” “Talmudic era,” etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, posited four sources, dubbed “J,” “E,” “D,” and “P” for the Pentateuch that were written by different scribal schools. This hypothesis, as of late, has been challenged, though it does not detract from the fact that critical scholarship continues to view the Pentateuch as a composite work. See Dozeman, Schmid, and Schwartz, eds., *The Pentateuch*. Concerning the synoptic gospels, the so-called Two-Source Hypothesis (Matthew and Luke relied on Mark and a hypothetical document dubbed “Q”) has prevailed for a long time. Many are increasingly contesting its validity. Working under the assumption that the synoptic gospels are multi-layered texts, some scholars are searching for alternative explanations that better account for their complex literary relationships. The bibliography is immense. See, among others, Müller, “Luke–the Fourth Gospel?”; Klinghardt, “The Marcionite Gospel and the Synoptic Problem.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Mishnah, *Avot* 1:1. In the rabbinic understanding, “Torah” encompasses not only the Pentateuch but also the rabbinic teachings, “Oral Torah,” which is viewed as authoritative. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Papias’ testimony is related by Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.39.15–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The vague word “gist” is used by an exegete of the New Testament as conservative as Darrell L. Bock who acknowledges the limitations of the quest for the historical Jesus. Bultmann must be smiling in his grave. Bock, “The Historical Jesus,” p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wansbrough used the term “biblical criticism” to justify the historical-critical analysis of the Qur’an (Quranic Studies, p. xxi). I prefer the term “historical criticism” to “biblical criticism,” since the latter risks prioritizing the historical inquiry of *canonical* texts at the expense of neglecting the study of extra-canonical works. In the field of biblical studies, the term also tends anachronistically to compartmentalize early Jewish and Christian texts into canonical and non-canonical corpora (e.g., “Old Testament” vs. “intertestamental” literature; “canonical” vs. “apocryphal” or “pseudepigraphic” writings). I wonder, by extension, whether its usage might also condition the historical investigation of early Islam by prioritizing the comparative study of the Qur’an with the “Bible,” overlooking vital points of contact with “non-biblical” texts such as Jubilees or 1 Enoch. Nevertheless, it might be necessary for the time being to employ the term “biblical criticism” to signal the legitimacy of studying *canonical* texts—Qur’an included—from a historical-critical point of view. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Luke, Zechariah does not actually *pray* to have a child, as in Q 19:2–15. Nevertheless, this may be implied in Luke 1:13 (“your prayer has been heard”), and the Qur’an may be relying on or creatively expounding this Lukan verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The book of the Acts of the Apostles, written presumably by the same redactor who gave Luke its final form, still knows of followers of John the Baptist who were not disciples of Jesus (Luke 5:33–39; 7:18–30; Acts 18:25–19:7). Rivalry between both groups continued immediately after the time of John and Jesus, and account in part for the diverse ways the gospels deal with the admission that the former baptized the latter. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Yusuf Ali, *The Qur’an*, p. 774, concedes: “Christ was not crucified (4. 157). But those who believe that he never died should ponder over this verse.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dating *2 Enoch,* however, is fraught with difficulties, and we must contend with Christian influence. See Orlov and Boccaccini, eds., *New Perspectives on 2 Enoch*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*; Brown, Driver, Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is how Dawood’s translation of the Qur’an renders it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Admittedly, the key Greek word, *charis* (the equivalent of the Hebrew *hen*) is missing here; however, it appears in the parallel expression in Luke 2:52in reference to the child Jesus. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Her book is an abridged, updated version of her previous *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* in which she confesses a particular reliance on the work of William Montgomery Watt. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, for example, the appendix of Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an*, p. 229. On the same page one also finds as suggested readings the academic works of accomplished scholars such as Cook, *Muhammad*; Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*; and Crone, *Meccan Trade*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Armstrong, *Muhammad*: *A Prophet for Our Time,* p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time,* p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See her best-selling book, *A History of God*, p. 81, where she even qualifies the tone of Matthew as “anti-Semitic.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. As Seth Schwartz notes, there was a tendency until (but even beyond) Jacob Neusner’s groundbreaking studies to search for the historical kernel of episodes reported in early rabbinic literature (e.g., Talmud), once the unbelievable was stripped away. Neusner’s introduction of historical-critical methods used in biblical studies by the likes of Gunkel and Bultmann radically changed the field of early rabbinic studies. On this matter, see Schwartz, “Historiography of the ‘Talmudic Period,’” pp. 101–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Esposito, *Islam,* p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. John Esposito’s DVD lectures and course guidebook, *Great World Religions: Islam* presents the Qur’an and the life of Muhammad essentially in the same way. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The book generated unfortunate controversy when it was selected as annual assignment for incoming students at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The controversy is recounted in the preface of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Dawood, *The Koran*. Penguin first published Dawood’s translation in 1956. It has been republished multiple times with several changes and updates. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. His criticism is understandable, given the prejudice and excessive positivism of some Orientalists during and before Arberry’s time. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, vol. 2 p. 10: “Disciples of the Higher Criticism, having watched with fascinated admiration how their masters played havoc with the traditional sacrosanctity of the Bible, threw themselves with brisk enthusiasm into the congenial task of demolishing the Koran*.*” Arberry then (rightfully) criticizes the excessive anatomical analysis of higher critics of his time. Arberry first translated suras 1–20 and then suras 21–114. They were published together in 1955 (London: Allen & Unwin). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Unfortunately, Yusuf Ali’s annotations contain problematic statements about Jews and Judaism. See Muhammad, “Assessing English Translations of the Qur’an,” pp.58–71 for a very insightful assessment of various Quranic translations, including ones not treated here. See also Reynolds, “Islamic Studies.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, pp. xxviii–xxix, for a short critique. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. To their credit, Yusuf Ali and Asa occasionally cite biblical references in their annotations. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cf. Mohammed, “Assessing English Translations of the Qur’an”: “Considering that the translator is a professor of Islamic studies at a secular university and ought to be aware of the haziness of early Islamic history, he should have adopted a more cautious approach to presenting such information as fact.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. An entire session was devoted to the edition at the annual meeting of AAR in Atlanta. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Italics Nasr’s, “General Introduction,” *The Study Quran,* p. xl. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Nasr, “General Introduction,” *The Study Quran,* p. xl. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Nasr, “General Introduction,” *The Study Quran,* p. xliv. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Khan and Al-Hilali, *The Noble Quran,* provide annotations from At-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, Ibn Kathir, and Sahih Al-Bukhari. *The Study Quran* also consults these sources and, admittedly, many other medieval works. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. One may add that far more *contemporary* documentation is available from the time Joseph Smith and Ellen G. White lived, two proclaimed prophets who allegedly received revelations. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Peters, *The Children of Abraham*. In the 2004 edition of this book, Peters updates his pioneering work, which he carried out for decades, pointing out the rich parallels and differences between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, “all children born of the same Father and reared in the bosom of Abraham” (p. xvii). Cataloguing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as “Abrahamic,” useful for theological discussion, comes, however, with its own set of problems. On a critique of the usage of this category for religious studies, see Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Peters, *The Children of Abraham*, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Peters, *The Children of Abraham*, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Peters, *The Children of Abraham*, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Peters, *The Children of Abraham*, pp. 32–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Peters, *The Children of Abraham*, p. 33: “If the Quran came forth from the mouth of Muhammad, as it seems to have, then, whether God’s word or Muhammad’s own, it was uttered in terms comprehensible to a seventh-century Meccan and so may serve, with some basic adjustments, as a rough guide to the emergence of Islam. If we can credit it to Muhammad himself, the Quran may also reveal the evolution of the Prophet’s spiritual life, and his religious and political problems and strategies.” Peters’ approach is reflected more fully in his specialized work, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, where he initially underscores the enormous difficulties confronting the “quest of the historical Muhammad,” only to proceed with the traditional story about Muhammad while placing the more technical discussions in the appendix of his book. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Droge, *The Qur’ān*, p. vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See, for example, Droge, *The Qur’ān*, xvii fn. 38, where the term Qur’an itself is compared to the Syriac *qeryana* denoting scripture reading and recitation in Christian liturgical settings. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Droge, *The Qur’ān*, pp. xii–xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Said’s impact is acknowledged by Ernst and Martin, “Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Studies,” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies*. The editors of this book announce the advent of a “post-Orientalist” approach to Islamic studies, describing Orientalism as the “bête noire” in the expanding field of Islamic studies today (p. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Orientalism*, p. 39: “To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact.” [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Orientalism,* pp. 27–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. On this matter, see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, pp. 33–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Perhaps Sanders’ most influential proposal was that “covenantal nomism” best summarizes Second Temple as well as Rabbinic religious belief. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism,* p. 75: “There does appear to be in Rabbinic Judaism a coherent and all-pervasive view of what constitutes the essence of Jewish religion and of how that religion ‘works’, and we shall occasionally, for the sake of convenience, call this view ‘soteriology’. The all-pervasive view can be summarized in the phrase ‘covenantal nomism’. Briefly put, covenantal nomism is the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.” [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Does the refusal to adopt historical criticism mean that other critical approaches to the Qur’an are resisted as well? Until very recently, Muslim feminist critics of the Qur’an have not entertained the hypothesis that the Qur’an, like the Bible, has contributed to the subordination of women, pointing their fingers instead at androcentric *interpretations* they claim cannot be substantiated by the Quranic text. Those familiar with the history of feminist criticism in the context of biblical studies will quickly note the problem here. Jewish and Christian feminist critics of the Bible, who tend to be more at home with historical critical approaches, often point out the patriarchal bias or androcentric declarations embedded within the biblical text itself. On this issue as it relates to feminist criticism and the Qur’an, see the honest assessment by Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Levine and Brettler, eds., *Jewish Annotated New Testament.* [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity*; Cf. Gager, “Did Jewish Christians See the Rise of Islam?” [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. As implied by the title of Geiger’s dissertation, “Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentum aufgenommen?” [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Nevertheless, religious studies and theological reflection, as intellectual endeavors, must retain their respective autonomies if they are to preserve their integrity and distinctive voices. Confusion arises when theological statements and empirical observations are mingled without making firm distinctions, when faith is confused with fact, revelation with reason. Furthermore, historical inquiry as an academic discipline, in principle, must not be in the service of ecumenism. On the other hand, I do not wish to insinuate that a scholar of religious studies cannot belong to a particular confession or engage in theological, ecumenical, and pastoral endeavors. Some of the best biblical critics belong(ed) to a particular religious affiliation, Jewish, Protestant, or Roman Catholic: Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, John P. Meier, and Jacob Milgrom, just to name a few. For a discussion by scholars of religious affiliation who also engage with scripture critically, see **Brettler, Enns, and Harrington,** The Bible and the Believer. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)