

Introduction

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The present volume is the work of 25 scholars who participated in the 2012–13 Notre Dame Qur’ān Seminar. The Qur’ān Seminar scholars represent various specializations important to the study of the Qur’ān, including Arabic language, comparative Semitic linguistics, paleography, epigraphy, history, rhetorical theory, hermeneutics, and Biblical studies. The 2012–13 Qur’ān Seminar project involved five conferences, each of which consisted of a series of ten sessions, with each session dedicated to a passage of the Qur’ān. After those conferences the editors of this work solicited written commentaries from the Qur’ān Seminar scholars. Subsequently we narrowed those commentaries down, seeking to eliminate redundancy, to the number found in the present work. A list in the opening section of this work (“Commentary Sections by Scholar”) indicates the passages for which each scholar has contributed a commentary.

In this brief introduction to the *Qur’ān Seminar Commentary* I will address three topics: first, the rationale behind the “Qur’ānist” approach which distinguishes this project; second, the criteria behind the selection of the 50 passages covered by this commentary; and third, the contribution which the present work makes to the field of Qur’ānic Studies.

1. Introduction to the Qur’ānist Approach

The Qur’ānist approach involves setting aside divisions or classifications which might be imposed on the text of the Qur’ān and predetermine possible readings of it. The point of the Qur’ānist approach is to encounter the Qur’ān itself, and not the Qur’ān as it has been categorized, classified, and explained by others. In this the Qur’ānist approach might be contrasted with the way some studies in the field of Qur’ānic studies are shaped by the assumptions of medieval Islamic exegesis, or *tafsīr*. Now, scholars who follow the Qur’ānist approach may end up with a conclusion that agrees with medieval Islamic exegetes, but they will have arrived there because of evidence in the Qur’ān itself.

It is the Qur’ānist approach that distinguishes this volume, and not any one argument about the origins or meaning of the text. In this work scholars with different perspectives employ this approach, and they do so without compromising their scholarly (or religious) convictions. Nor do they necessarily arrive at the same conclusions. Indeed they often arrive at dramatically different interpretations of the same Qur’ānic passage.

The Qur’ānist approach is thus not meant to support any one school of thought or to suggest any particular historical conclusions about the Qur’ān. Instead it is

meant to encourage intellectual creativity by awakening scholars to the way in which our thinking about the Qur'ān can be limited by certain assumptions. For example, most readers encounter the Qur'ān in a manner that privileges, if it does not render inevitable, a chronological reading of the text. In many Arabic editions of the Qur'ān readers will find, along with a title, the term “Meccan” or “Medinan,” although the text of the Qur'ān itself does not refer to a single *sūra* in this way. In the original 1924 printing of the Cairo edition of the Qur'ān (which has since become the standard text) readers will find even more. The *sūra* headings therein indicate the exact place of the *sūra* in a chronological classification of the Qur'ān's revelation, all the while noting specific verses which were revealed separately from the rest of the *sūra* (but meant by God nevertheless to be part of that *sūra*). For example, at the opening of Q 2 in the 1924 edition readers will find the following heading:

sūrat al-baqara madaniyya wa-āyātuhā mi'atāni wa-sittu wa-ṭamānūn wa-hiya awwalu sūratin nazalat bi-l-Madīna illā āyata ٧٨١ fa-nazalat bi-Minan fī ḥaḡḡati l-wadā' (“The Medinan *sūra* al-Baqara, two hundred and eighty-six verses; it is the first *sūra* revealed in Medina except for v. 281 which was revealed in Mina during the Farewell Pilgrimage”).

Now, whether or not *al-Baqara* was revealed in the city of Medina at a certain moment in Muḥammad's prophetic career (and verse 281 somewhere else at some other moment), nothing of this is found in the text of Q 2. The idea that *al-Baqara* should be thought of in the light of the category of “Medinan,” or associated with a certain element of the Prophet's biography, comes from outside of the Qur'ān, and it necessarily shapes and mediates analyses of it.

This sort of presentation is also common in translations of the Qur'ān. While some exceptions can be found,¹ translators of the Qur'ān often preface *sūras* with the same, or similar, traditions found in the headings in the Arabic Cairo edition. In his translation of the Qur'ān (originally published in 1980) Muḥammad Asad (d. 1992) writes in the introduction to Q 2:

The title of this *sūra* is derived from the story narrated in verses 67–73. It is the first *sūra* revealed in its entirety after the Prophet's exodus to Medina, and most of it during the first two years of that period; verses 275–281, however, belong to the last months before the Prophet's death (verse 281 is considered to be the very last revelation which he received) (Asad 2003: 13).

Muḥammad Hamidullah (d. 2002), in his French translation of the Qur'ān (first published in 1959), takes the same approach, even if he is more succinct. At the opening of Q 2 he writes: “283 versets, *Post-hég. n° 87*, Titre tiré des v. 67/73, Le v. 281 a été révélé lors du pèlerinage du Prophète” (Hamidullah 1421:2).

¹ In his recent translation (which we have used in the present volume), T. Khalidi refrains from adding introductory notes to the *sūras* on their supposed historical context. In the introduction he explains, “But the very allusiveness of the text, its impersonality, its meta-historical tone, seem almost deliberately to de-emphasize context” (Khalidi 2008: xii).

Now Asad and Hamidullah are generally considered to be confessional scholars writing for a religious audience, yet even translators who write for the general public, or for academics in particular, tend to frame the Qur'ān in a similar manner. Régis Blachère (d. 1973; translation published 1949) shows some discretion regarding the nature of traditions that connect the revelation of Q 2 with a particular chapter of the Prophet's biography. Nevertheless, he still introduces the *sūra* with a discussion of such matters:

La Tradition biographique considère que cette sourate est la première révélée à Médine. Des données traditionnelles viennent d'ailleurs contredire cette assertion et disent qu'elle fut révélée à Mahomet, partie durant le voyage de la Mekke à Médine, partie dans cette ville (Blachère 1949: 30).

Muḥammad Abdel Haleem, in his widely read 2004 English translation of the Qur'ān, introduces Q 2 with the observation: "This is a Medinan *sūra* and the longest in the Qur'ān, containing material revealed over several years, and named after the story of the cow which the Israelites were ordered to slaughter (verses 67 ff.)." (Abdel Haleem 2004: 4). In his 2010 German translation Hartmut Bobzin simply puts "Mekkanisch" or "Medinensich" at the opening of *sūras*, making no mention of verses which are traditionally held to be exceptions to the *sūra*'s classification.

Such annotations encourage readers to think about the Qur'ān, as the *mufasirrūn* do, in light of the traditional biography of the Prophet. They do not encounter the Qur'ān itself, so much as the Qur'ān as it has been categorized and interpreted for them.

The goal of the Qur'ān Seminar is to provoke new ways of thinking about the Qur'ān by asking participants to suspend their habits of reading the text according to these traditional categories and to read the Qur'ān as though it were new to them. This does not mean that traditional Islamic scholarship should be ignored. It does mean, however, that medieval Muslim scholars are referred to more as colleagues and less as authoritative transmitters of "what really happened." This approach to medieval Islamic scholarship is seen, for example, in Munther Younes' remarks on QS 14 (Q 11:35–99) in the present volume. In his consideration of a grammatical question, Younes refers to Abū Ishāq al-Zaḡḡāḡ (d. 311/923), but without assuming that Zaḡḡāḡ's analysis is authoritative:

The same challenge is faced with the accusative case in the word *ṣayḥan* in *wa-hādā ba'li ṣayḥan* (v. 72). According to the rules of Arabic syntax, which apply to the overwhelming majority of cases in the Qur'ān, the word *ṣayḥ* should receive the nominative case. In "explaining" the accusative case, al-Zaḡḡāḡ writes (2007, II:335) that *ṣayḥan* is a circumstantial accusative. But he realizes the difficulty of such a case assignment and adds: "And the circumstantial accusative here is a nice but mysterious aspect of syntax" *wa-l-ḥāl hāhunā naṣṣuhā min laṭīf al-naḥw wa-ḡāmiḍih* (ibid.).

A meaningful linguistic account of these irregularities would have to look for explanations beyond those offered by al-Zaḡḡāḡ and the other grammarians whose approach lies within the

tafsīr tradition rather than a sound linguistic framework with a clear and consistent set of rules. (Younes on Q 11:25–99; QS 14)

In other cases participants in the Notre Dame Qur'ān Seminar reach original and reasonable explanations (readers might decide for themselves if they are also convincing) of Qur'ānic passages through an appreciation of the religious context of Late Antiquity in which the Qur'ān emerged. In his consideration of QS 39 (Q 53) Tommaso Tesei proposes a minor emendation to the Cairo text in v. 16, so that it reads – *id tağšā l-sidratu mā tuğšā* (and not *id yağšā al-sidrata mā yağšā*). Thus this phrase would not mean “when there covered the tree what covered it” but rather “as the tree covers what is to be covered.” Tesei argues that the term *sidra* refers not to just any tree but to the “tree of knowledge,” the tree that acts as a barrier between two levels of heaven. By his reading, in other words, the Qur'ān here declares that Muḥammad saw beyond this barrier, “directly into the Holy of Holies.” This verse would then offer an “almost perfect parallelism with Ephrem’s description of Paradise found in the third *Hymn on Paradise*.”

Other original insights in this volume come from a close analysis of the text itself. In his comments on QS 21 (Q 20:9–99) Shawkat Toorawa notes the manner in which the Qur'ān evokes speech and silence:

Just as Zachariah asks God to grant him an heir: “*fa-hab lī... waliyyā*,” “so grant me... an heir”—viz. John the Baptist (Q 19:5), so too Moses asks for a successor from his family in this passage: “*wa-ğ'al lī wazīran min ahli*,” “so grant me a helper from my family” (v. 29)—viz. Aaron. Zachariah is asked by God to keep silent (19:10); Moses has trouble speaking (v. 27). It would seem that in this *sūra*, as in *sūrat Maryam*, speech and silence as well as speaking and silencing are important.

Such examples illustrate not only how the Qur'ānist approach encourages original insights on the Qur'ān, but also how this same approach leads different scholars to a diverse range of insights.

2. Introduction to the Fifty Passages

The present work, with its analysis of 50 passages, also presents the diversity of material in the Qur'ān itself. Our selection of these passages began with two practical concerns.

First, we decided to include selections from the full range of the Qur'ānic text so that the Notre Dame Qur'ān Seminar would have a certain comprehensiveness, even if it was not possible to discuss the entire Qur'ān (although the 50 passages represent a significant portion – approximately 18.7% – of the Qur'ānic text). Accordingly we divided the text into five parts. We then selected ten passages from each part for discussion at each of the five meetings of the Notre Dame Qur'ān Seminar. Thus the

reader will note that the passages studied in the present volume can be arranged into five groups:

1. Q 1–7 (QS 1–10)
2. Q 8–19 (QS 11–20)
3. Q 20–34 (QS 21–30)
4. Q 35–55 (QS 31–40)
5. Q 56–114 (QS 41–50)

Second, in regard to particular passages, as a rule we chose selections of text that are long enough to raise a variety of questions for discussion, but short enough to lend that discussion coherence. This is a rule that we broke on occasion. QS 8 (Q 5:32), 19 (Q 17:85), 24 (Q 24:35), and 30 (Q 33:40) are each a single verse only, and QS 15 (Q 12) is quite long. These are exceptions that we made quite consciously. For example, we decided to include all of *Yūsuf* (Q 12) in light of the opening of the *sūra*, where the divine voice of the Qurʾān relates, “We narrate to you the fairest of tales” (v. 3), and of the end of the *sūra*, where the Qurʾān refers again to stories (“In their stories is a lesson to those possessed of minds;” v. 111). In light of these references it seemed to us worthwhile to invite discussion on the construction of the *sūra* as a whole.

Here an important note might be made about the *sūras*. Islamic tradition relates that God Himself willed for the Qurʾān to be arranged as it is, into 114 *sūras* (even if He revealed it in different pieces which were later assembled into these *sūras*). Among Muslim exegetes one can find those who focus on smaller segments of the Qurʾān (indeed many classical *mufasssirūn* tend to analyze individual verses with no particular concern for the structure of complete *sūras*) and those who emphasize the arrangement (*naẓm*) of complete *sūras*, and even of the Qurʾān as a whole. In the modern period the Indian exegetes Farāhī (d. 1930) and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1997) distinguished themselves for their theoretical work in this latter direction.

A similar division is found among western scholars of the Qurʾān. Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930), following Gustav Weil (d. 1889) placed the *sūras* of the Qurʾān, as complete units, in one of four chronological categories. Hartwig Hirschfeld (d. 1934) and Richard Bell (d. 1952) responded to Nöldeke’s work by insisting that the Qurʾān is better understood according to smaller units, whether these units be identified by form (Hirschfeld) or by the historical moment of their composition (Bell). More recently Angelika Neuwirth and Michel Cuypers, a contributor to the present volume, have argued in distinctive ways for the coherence of complete *sūras* of the Qurʾān. While 16 of the 50 passages in this volume are complete *sūras*, this volume does not reflect a position for or against the idea of *sūras* as original units (or coherent redacted units) of the Qurʾān. The great majority of complete *sūra* passages are short *sūras*, and so their inclusion is a simple consequence of our concern to identify passages of a modest length.

Readers might judge for themselves whether the manner of proceeding “passage by passage” as opposed to “*sūra* by *sūra*” is deleterious. We believe it is not, above all

because scholars commenting on particular passages are invited, indeed encouraged, to discuss its place within its *sūra*, and indeed within the Qur'ān.

Having settled upon the model of ten passages for each fifth of the Qur'ān, and the rule of selecting passages of a modest length, we proceeded to think about the identification of passages according to three criteria:

1. themes of central importance to the text itself
2. a diversity of literary genres
3. topics which have received particular attention in classical and contemporary exegesis

In regard to the first criterion (“themes of central importance to the text itself”) we looked for themes that are frequently repeated in the Qur'ān. These include:

- Exhortations (meant to convince the audience to repent and believe—often with reference to divine signs, or to eschatological judgment), e.g. QS 14, (Q 11:25–99), 16 (Q 13:1–7); 28 (Q 29); 36 (Q 44:43–57); 40 (Q 55); 42 (Q 75); 44 (Q 90); 45 (Q 96); 49 (Q 108).
- Reflections on Biblical narratives, e.g.: 2 (Q 2:30–39, on Adam); 6 (Q 3:33–63, on John, Mary, and Jesus); 8 (Q 5:32, on Moses); 9 (Q 5:109–20, on Jesus and the disciples); 10 (Q 6:74–83, on Abraham); 15 (Q 12, on Joseph); 21, Q 20: 9–99 (on Moses); 26 (Q 26:105–22, on Noah); 27 (Q 27:15–44, on David and Solomon); 34 (Q 38, 17–26, on David).
- Discussions of God, e.g.: 4 (Q 2:255–56); 17 (Q 13:27–43); 24 (Q 24:35); 33 (Q 37:149–82); 35 (Q 43:81–83); 50 (Q 112).
- Allusions to events surrounding the Prophet, e.g.: 11 (Q 8:1–19); 13 (Q 9:111–18); 29 (Q 30:1–7); 38 (Q 48).
- Legal prescriptions, e.g. QS 3 (Q 2:178–79); 7 (Q 4:1–28); 18 (Q 17:22–39); 23 (Q 24:1–17)
- Cosmological descriptions, e.g. QS 32 (Q 37:6–11); 41 (Q 72)

The second criterion (“a diversity of literary genres”) involves a consideration of literary forms in Qur'ānic passages, regardless of the topic addressed therein. Our sense of form and genre was shaped by the work of Muhammed Arkoun (d. 2010), who writes: “J’ai montré comment le ‘désordre’ cache un ordre sémiotique profond et, par suite, la nécessité de repérer les types de discours utilisés dans le Coran” (Arkoun 1992: 75).² While participants in the Qur'ān Seminar have different views regarding order (semiotic or otherwise) in the Qur'ānic text, as organizers we found Prof. Arkoun’s views an important starting point for thinking about types of discourse in the Qur'ān. Ultimately we decided to select passages according to the fol-

² Arkoun identifies five such “types de discours” : 1. le discours prophétique ; 2. le discours législatif ; 3. le discours narratif ; 4. les discours sapientiaux ; 5. l’hymne.

lowing four “types of discourse” (as the reader will notice, we hold that more than one type of discourse can be found in the same passage):

- Prayers or hymns to God, e. g. QS 1 (Q 1); 5 (3:1–7); 16 (Q 13:1–17); 24 (Q 24:35); 44 (Q 55).
- Polemical engagement with the views of opponents, e. g. QS 9 (Q 5:109–20); 12 (Q 9:29–33); 17 (Q 13:27–43); 25 (Q 26:105–22); 33 (Q 37:149–82); 35 (Q 43:81–83); 37 (Q 46:7–12).
- Meta-textuality, or the scripture’s references to itself, e. g.: 5 (Q 3:1–7); 16 (Q 13:1–17); 25 (Q 25:1–10); 39 (Q 53); 41 (Q 72); 46 (Q 97)
- Homiletic, e. g.: 14 (11:25–99); 20 (Q 18:9–26); 28 (Q 29); 44 (Q 90); 45 (Q 96); 49 (Q 108)

The third criterion (passages which have “received particular attention in classical and contemporary exegesis”) reflects a concern to include passages that are frequently discussed in courses on the Qur’ān and studied in academic scholarship. Among such passages we included:

- Q 1, *al-Fātiḥa* (QS 1)
- Q 2:30–39, the angelic prostration before Adam (QS 2)
- Q 2:255, the “Throne Verse” (QS 3)
- Q 3:7, the *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* (QS 5)
- Q 4:3, polygamy and monogamy (QS 7)
- Q 5:112–15, the table (*al-mā’ida*) from heaven (QS 9)
- Q 9:29, fighting the People of the Book and the *ḡizya* (QS 12)
- Q 12, the story of Joseph (QS 15)
- Q 18:9–26, the Companions of the Cave (QS 20)
- Q 24:45, the “Light Verse” (QS 24)
- Q 30:1–7, *al-rūm* (QS 29)
- Q 33:40, the “seal of the Prophets” (QS 30)
- Q 53, the “satanic verses” (QS 39)
- Q 96, including the passage often described as the “first revelation” (QS 45)
- Q 97, the “night of *qadr*” (QS 46)
- Q 105, the “Companions of the Elephant” (QS 47)
- Q 112, on God and the denial of a divine son (QS 50)

Our decision to include these passages reflects a concern to produce a commentary of value to students of the Qur’ān. We hope that this will prove to be the case.

3. Contribution of the Present Volume

The Qur’ān Seminar Commentary opens with short methodological statements from each of our contributors which we have named “Research Perspectives.” These Research Perspectives, accompanied by a brief biography, are meant to act as frames

for the commentaries. They will help readers understand why certain scholars focus on certain aspects of the Qur'ān. They are also something like self-portraits of these scholars, and in this they are important documents for what they show of how various academics approach the study of the Qur'ān.

The commentaries on the 50 passages are ordered according to their place in the canonical text. In this section the Qur'ānic text is presented first, with the canonical Medina Muṣḥaf Arabic text (*Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm, Muṣḥaf al-Madīna al-Nabawiyya*, 1415/1994–5), the English translation of Tarif Khalidi, and the French translation of Muhammad Hamidullah. The commentaries of Qur'ān Seminar scholars follow thereafter, organized in alphabetical order. Bibliographic references are given with abbreviated parenthetical notes. The details for these references can be found in the comprehensive bibliography at the end of the work. (There readers will also find a general index of People, Places, and Subjects). Internal references to commentaries on other passages are given with the abbreviation: QS [number of passage].

The commentaries of the present volume are distinguished from other works in Qur'ānic Studies in three ways. First, they provide insights which emerge from a Qur'ānist approach to the text. Most academic works on the Qur'ān begin (and sometimes end) by asking what medieval Islamic exegetes say about a certain passage. This tendency is dominant, for example, in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (EQ), the standard reference work in Qur'ānic Studies. The overwhelming majority of entries therein are focused not on the Qur'ān and its conversation with earlier traditions, but rather on what *mufasssīrūn* have said about the Qur'ān through the centuries, or on the stories involving the Prophet and his companions told by the *mufasssīrūn* or other medieval scholars.³

For example, the EQ article “Cain and Abel” includes one (not entirely accurate) sentence on the relation between the Qur'ān and earlier traditions on Cain and Abel: “The Qur'ānic account of Cain and Abel (Q 5:27–32) closely follows the narrative in the Bible” (H. Busse 2001: 270a). It continues with three pages on the history of *tafsīr* on this passage. In contrast, the commentaries on QS 8 in the present volume (Q 5:32) include various insights on the way in which the Qur'ānic passage on Cain and Abel interacts with a rich tradition of Jewish and Christian thought on the Biblical story.

A number of commentators, for example, note the relationship of Q 5:32 with Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5: “...whosoever destroys a single soul is regarded as though he destroyed a complete world, and whosoever saves a single soul is regarded as though he saved a complete world” (trans. Danby). Michael Pregill notes: “The larger context is telling, since *min aḡal dālik* at the beginning [of Q 5:32] refers back to the sin of Cain, described in vs. 27–31, which is precisely the context of the rabbinic dictum in the Mishnah.” Holger Zellentin notes that a version of this dictum found in

3 One might also contrast this work with the recently published (2015) HarperOne *Study Qur'an* (ed. S.H. Nasr, et al.) which appears to be something like an “Interpreters’ Qur’ān” (and indeed is quite unlike the HarperOne *Study Bible* in terms of method).

the Palestinian Talmud is particularly close to the Qur'ānic verse. Michel Cuypers, noting the mishnaic background of this passage, discusses the significance of the way in which the Qur'ān uses the formula *katabnā 'alā banī isrā'īl* ("We prescribed to the Israelites") to introduce prescriptions found not in the Bible but in the Mishna. For his part, Gabriel Said Reynolds contends that in this passage the Qur'ān is particularly in conversation with late antique Syriac Christian texts which make the murder of Abel into an anticipation of the Crucifixion of Christ.

Shalom Goldman, the author of the *EQ* article "Joseph" is concerned only with the way in which the *mufasssirūn* have understood *sūrat Yūsuf* (12). He notes that *asbāb al-nuzūl* traditions place the revelation of this *sūra*, "at the point where Muḥammad is challenged by skeptics who doubt his knowledge of the narratives of the Children of Israel" (Goldman 2003: 56a). He continues with the assertion: "The *sūra* is one response to this challenge, and is thus greatly detailed and includes information not known from earlier tellings of the stories of Jacob's family" (*Ibid.*).

The discussion of the Qur'ān Seminar scholars on Q 12 (QS 15) is focused not on the *asbāb al-nuzūl* stories of the medieval *mufasssirūn* and the putative historical context that they provide for this passage, but rather on the Qur'ān itself. Holger Zellentín notes how in the opening of this *sūra* the Qur'ān claims divine authority for its account of the Joseph story, and argues that the Qur'ān means to present the "divine original" of the Joseph story (and not later Jewish and Christian versions thereof). Prof. Zellentín concludes: "Hence, the Qur'ān sees itself as self-authenticating not so much in the way Calvin sees the Bible as such, but precisely in its relation to previous Scripture." Shawkat Toorawa also reflects on the Qur'ān's claim to offer the "fairest of narratives" in this *sūra*. He argues that the Qur'ān does not mean thereby to claim its Joseph account is especially complete, but rather that its rhetoric is especially artful.

For his part Mun'im Sirry considers not the beginning but the end of this *sūra*, noting that the Qur'ān describes its account of Joseph as an "admonition" (*'ibra*). He comments:

Since the Qur'ān explicitly claims that the purpose of Qur'ānic narratives is nothing but *'ibra*, does not the Qur'ān itself encourage a literary approach to its narratives, rather than an historical one? This question was raised by Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥalafallāh in his controversial book, *al-Fannu l-qaṣaṣī fī-l-Qur'ān*. Even when the Qur'ān recounts Biblical stories, according to Ḥalafallāh, it does not intend to report history, whether it really happened or not, but rather to elicit a response from its listeners.

The *EQ* article "Light" includes a discussion of the various Qur'ānic terms for light, followed by a translation of the "Light Verse" (Q 24:35) and some remarks on the esoteric and symbolic interpretations of this verse among Sufis such as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī al-Širāzī (d. 606/1209). The article does not raise the possibility that the Qur'ān has any knowledge of, or concern with, the use of light in earlier Jewish or Christian traditions to describe God or the heavenly realm.

On the other hand, several commentaries on the Light Verse (QS 24) in the present volume note that by referring to an olive tree here the Qur'ān is in conversation with Biblical traditions. Guillaume Dye and Marcin Grodzki refer to the heavenly olive trees in Zechariah's apocalyptic vision (Zech 4:2–3; 13). Abraham Winitzer notes that other elements in the Qur'ān's portrayal of God here mark an important development of a cosmology with roots in the Ancient Near East:

Almost certainly this cosmological image builds on earlier precedents, of which the Biblical (Old Testament) appears in the opening theophany in Ezekiel (chap 1; also 10), the one that provides the basis for the Merkavah mysticism in Late Antiquity.... In fact the mythologem of the deity seated in the sky with a glass-ensconced light at his side represents in itself a borrowing from ancient Near Eastern conceptions, as the following, concerning in this instance the Babylonian chief god: "He (Bēl) sat in the lapis-lazuli dais; he lit a lamp of *elmēṣu* in it."

For his part Mehdi Azaiez emphasizes the sophisticated rhetorical structure of the Light Verse: "Le segment '*maṭalu nūrihi ka-miškātin fihā miṣbāhun al-miṣbāhu fī zuḡāḡatin al-zuḡāḡatu*' s'apparente, sans l'être intégralement, à une anadiplose, figure de style consistant à la reprise du dernier mot d'une proposition à l'initiale de la proposition qui suit. Cette forme rhétorique qui procède d'une forme d'oralisation fixe l'attention sur les mots importants qui se trouvent être tous des hapax (*miškāt*), (*miṣbāh*), (*zuḡāḡa*)."¹ Thus in the Qur'ān Seminar commentary on the "Light Verse" readers will find their attention drawn both to the Qur'ān's conversation with earlier religious texts, and to the Qur'ān's particular rhetorical strategies.

Second, the present volume is also a reference work, as it offers detailed and rigorous analyses of specific Qur'ānic passages from a number of different disciplinary perspectives. The arrangement of this volume will allow readers to find a wide range of scholarly insights on the same passage, in one place, as with Q 2:255–56 (QS 4). Regarding this passage Emran El-Badawi notes the close relationship between the Arabic vocabulary in this passage and the Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic translations of certain New Testament passages, such as Matthew 5:33–35. Frédéric Imbert, a specialist in early Arabic epigraphy, analyzes this passage in light of ancient Arabic rock inscriptions. After describing an abridged citation of the "Throne Verse" from an inscription dating to 83/712 in Ḡabal Usays in Syria, he notes that a later, complete citation of this verse is followed by, "Cursed be anyone who erases or changes this inscription." Imbert comments:

La présence de ces malédictions après des citations coraniques nous rappelle que jusqu'à la fin de l'époque omeyyade, l'unanimité n'était sans doute pas encore faite autour d'une version unifiée et standardisée du texte : des amalgames ou des citations adaptées du Coran étaient encore courantes sur les pierres.

For his part Andrew Rippin asks what this verse reflects of the Qur'ān's theology of God. In particular Prof. Rippin highlights a certain concern with the question of God's embodiment:

The “fluidity” of God’s body is clearly rejected (there is only one God) but his embodiment is important, reflecting a long standing tension between God as having both a heavenly body and an earthly one (or more than one). What we tend to dismiss as “anthropomorphism” or attempts to use language to express ideas about the divine can perhaps be seen to reflect more literal ideas about the way God was conceived.

A similarly rich diversity of insights can be found in the commentary on Q 9:111–18 (QS 13). Reuven Firestone comments on the way this passage – with its declaration that it would not have been right for Abraham to pray for his unbelieving father (v. 114) – invokes themes of kinship relations, an important theme in earlier Jewish and Christian tradition. Devin Stewart’s commentary sheds light instead on questions of Qur’ānic rhyme and rhythm: “Quite striking is the concatenation of *fā’ilūn*, even without *wa-* or particles, in v. 112. The effect of this verse is due in large part to the repeated rhythm – – *v –/– v –/* as well as the internal *–ūn* rhyme.”

Munther Younes discusses an aspect of this passage from the perspective of grammar. He notes that the traditional reading of v. 117 (“after the hearts of a party of them had almost swerved aside, then He (God) turned unto them in mercy,” trans. Pickthall) rests upon interpreting the verb *yazīgu* (“swerved aside”) as the subject of *qulūb* (“hearts”), an interpretation which contradicts the rules of Classical Arabic (one would expect *tazīgu*). Accordingly he proposes that God be understood as the subject of *yazīgu*, so that this phrase would mean, “after He (God) had almost swerved aside the hearts of a party of them.”

Shawkat Toorawa is also interested in language, but focuses not on grammar but on vocabulary. He notes that the term *awwāh* (v. 114) occurs only twice in the Qur’ān (here and Q Hūd [11] 75): “Both times in an identical rhetorical context, viz. describing Abraham as kind-hearted and prudent (Tawba) and prudent, tender-hearted and penitent (Hūd).” Finally the commentaries on this verse also include the perspective of a specialist on early Qur’ānic manuscripts, Asma Hilali. She notes that the Ṣan’ā’ Qur’ān fragments include a key phrase – *fī sabīl Allāh* – not found in the Cairo edition, in two different passages of Q 9.

Third, this volume is also an illustration of the principal areas of scholarly disagreement in Qur’ānic Studies. This diversity is evident, among other places, in the commentary on Q 1 (QS 1). Michael Pregill argues that the way in which the Qur’ān divides humanity into good and bad in the last two verses of this *sūra* reflects a religious vision that was prevalent in Late Antiquity: “Communal sclerosis: society is divided into believers and infidels, without any room in between – the most characteristic mark of the shift from classical antiquity to the empires of faith that dominated medieval life.” Holger Zellentin, for his part, argues that *al-Fātiḥa* reflects theological concepts found specifically in the Clementine Homilies, and thus has a particular connection to the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Daniel Madigan focuses instead on the rhetorical structure of *al-Fātiḥa*. He concludes that it has the sort of literary coherence that indicates a certain independence from the rest of the Qur’ān:

As the text stands, it is an elegant and neatly rounded prayer of praise and invocation, that can easily be considered in isolation from the corpus of the Qur'ān. Though it is traditionally given the title *fātiḥat al-kitāb*, there is nothing in particular about it that would indicate any role in relation to a corpus of scripture (as distinct, for example, from the opening of the next *sūra* with its evocation of *al-kitāb*).

Shawkat Toorawa likewise presents *al-Fātiḥa* as a text which is in a sense independent from the rest of the Qur'ān: "It seems to me that the Qur'ānic message, as it were, begins with the opening lines of the second *sūra* (Q 2), and not this one, which strikes me as being exactly what its name (*Fātiḥa*) suggests, namely a prolegomenon, something preparatory, providing entry into something else (and which is later ritualized in its capacity as an 'opener')." However, he also suggests that this *sūra* has a certain substantial relationship with that which follows, describing it as, "a prolegomenon, something preparatory, providing entry into something else." For his part Munther Younes argues that a process of redaction, or editing, can be detected in *al-Fātiḥa*. The first six verses, he contends, form a unit, but the seventh verse, "has the hallmarks of an addition to an originally coherent and otherwise well-written passage."

Thus the Qur'ān Seminar commentary is a polyvalent work. In this it is not unlike some classical Qur'ān commentaries, such as those of Abū Ḡa'far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), which record the views of various religious authorities. If the commentaries in the present volume do not end with the pious declaration "And God knows best!" (in the way that classical exegetes often end their discussions), this work still reflects a conviction that it is salutary to offer readers a presentation of conflicting interpretations. Thereby readers are invited to reflect on their own understanding of the text or question at hand.

The polyvalent nature of the Qur'ān Seminar commentary will allow students of the Qur'ān to appreciate the disagreements and uncertainties that mark the field of Qur'ānic Studies. Hopefully, however, readers will not be left with a sense of despair, but rather with a sense of motivation to contribute to the important task of advancing our understanding and appreciation of the Qur'ān. After all, the study of the Qur'ān is the sort of task that calls for more than one master theory. It calls for a community of scholars and an ongoing conversation marked by academic rigor and mutual enrichment.