

Hermeneutical Strategies

Chair: Kees Versteegh

Revisionists' *tafsir*

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Scholars such as Richard Bell, John Burton, and others are often considered quite radical in their interpretation of the Qur'an and its composition. However, their view relies on the traditional Muslim materials: *tafsir*, *sunna*, and *sira*. In that regard, they are quite conservative in their interpretations, differing from Muslims only on a few crucial issues, but hardly at all on methodology. One of most notable characteristics of the revisionist scholars is that they question the historicity of all these traditional materials for interpreting the Qur'an. Nevertheless, these scholars, such as John Wansbrough, G.R. Hawting and Patricia Crone, continue to read and interpret the Qur'an. In the absence of (what are for them) spurious traditional materials, they have devised other criteria, which are not always explicitly stated, for reading the Qur'an. Although their interpretations and methodologies are far removed from those of traditional *mufasssirs*, ironically, an examination of the hermeneutics of these sceptics reveals that they are not without precedence with Muslim *mufasssirs*.

Two Hausa Translations of the Qur'an and the Negotiation of Sufi and Ash'ari Allegiances in Contemporary Nigeria

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web-catalogue of the collection of Arabic manuscripts from West Africa at the Herskovits library. He is presently collaborating on a research project coordinated by ISITA (Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa, Northwestern University, Evanston) on 'Constructing Bodies of Knowledge in Muslim Africa: The Tijani Literature', which involves the creation of a bio-bibliographical database of the authors of the Tariqa Tijaniyya, to be published in 2010 by E.J. Brill, and the collection of manuscripts and/or biographical information in Tunisia (November 2006), and Nigeria and Ghana (scheduled for October 2007-February 2008). His publications include 'The Radio Kaduna Tafsir (1978-1992) and the Construction of Public Images of Muslim Scholars in the Nigerian Media', *Journal for Islamic Studies* (forthcoming), 'Two Recent Hausa Translations of the Qur'an and their Doctrinal Background', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35:4 (2005), and 'The Fayda Tijaniyya of Ibrahim Nyass: Genesis and Implications of a Sufi Doctrine', *Islam et Societes au Sud du Sahara* 14-15 (2000/2001).]

In the late 1970s, the government of Saudi Arabia sponsored the publication of the first translation of the Qur'an in Hausa, the major language of the predominantly Muslim North of Nigeria. This translation was authored by the then 'Grand Qadi of Northern Nigeria' and reformist thinker, Abu Bakr Mahmud Gumi (d. 1992). Its publication immediately aroused numerous controversies, as it was based on a clearly identifiable set of 'anti-Sufi' and 'anti-Ash'ari' doctrinal guidelines, thus challenging some basic tenets of the classical theoretical frame of local religious culture. Moreover, the publication of this translation, which allowed ordinary Muslims an individualised access to the Qur'an, occurred in a time when, after the launching of the UPE (Universal Primary Education) program in 1976 and the diffusion of both State secular schools and modern 'Islamic' schools, a rapid erosion of the hitherto overwhelming control of the traditional '*ulama*' upon the transmission of religious knowledge through Qur'anic and informal Islamic training was taking place. 'Traditional' '*ulama*' reacted to Gumi's 'reformist' translation, which they officially rejected and accused of spreading 'Wahhabism' and 'free thinking'. After a few years, this reaction took the form of the publication of a 'counter-translation' by Muhammad al-Nasir Kabara (d. 1996), a former teacher of Gumi's and leader of a dynamic branch of the Qadiriyya *tariqa* in Kano.

Through an analysis of selected controversial themes in the two translations (the translation of the *yadu'llahi* verses; the authority of Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti; the use of footnotes to support arguments for or against Sufism), this paper intends to draw attention to the debates surrounding Qur'anic interpretation in contemporary West Africa, showing the degree to which African scholars are involved both in the languages and sources of classical Islamic exegesis, and in the contentious contemporary readings of the classical interpretative legacy.

Qur'anic Readings of the Psalms

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Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5.1 (2003), the articles 'Cosmology', 'Form and Structure of the Qur'an', and 'Geography' in the Brill *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, and 'Structural, linguistic and literary features' in the Cambridge *Companion to the Qur'an*, and 'Referentiality and Textuality in Surat al-Hijr: Some Observations on the Qur'anic "Canonical Process" and the Emergence of a Community' in Issa Boullata's *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*.]

Though the Qur'an refers to the Psalms as a Scriptural corpus, *al-zabur*, the Qur'anic relation to the Psalms is – unlike that to the Torah or the Gospel – not explicitly described in terms of an affirming re-collection of that Scripture. In the Qur'an, 'the Psalms' as a Scriptural authority play a rather marginal role. Yet individual Psalm texts are strikingly present in the Qur'an. Not only are they reflected in numerous Qur'anic metaphors, but more generally, their particular vision of human-divine relations is closely related to that mirrored in the early suras.

The paper attempts to trace the Qur'anic references to particular Psalm verses. It will further analyse individual re-readings of Psalms in Meccan texts. In view of the formal and semantic similarities between the Psalms and the early suras, the problem of text-referentiality vs. 'life-referentiality' arises: are particular Qur'anic texts to be read as references to the Prophet's personal experience or rather more generally as references to an already existing literary model for the pious' spiritual situation? The paper will further investigate the function of typological references to the Psalms employed as textual strategies in later Medinan suras and try to outline a development of this particular – non-narrative – manifestation of Biblical intertextuality in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an and the Topic of *tanasukh* (Metempsychosis): Patterns of *ta'wil* in 'Alawi Doctrinal Literature

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This paper is concerned with the specific 'Alawi *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation) of the Qur'anic text through the study of some passages quoted from 'Alawi doctrinal literature. To that purpose it will consider some sections of *Kitab al-Bad' wa'l-I'ada* ('The Book of the Beginning and the Reiteration'), an 'Alawi doctrinal text not mentioned until now in works on 'Alawi/Nusayri bibliography like Massignon's *Esquisse d'une bibliographie nusayrie* in *Mélanges R. Dussaud*, II (1939), pp. 913-922. Presumably composed in the 5th/11th century by the 'Alawi Abu 'Abd Allah al-Husayn b. Ahmad b. Harun al-Baghdadi, it is based upon *riwayat*, the chain of authorities of which goes right back to the Twelver Shi'i imams.

The passages taken into account deal with the *tanasukh* (metempsychosis) doctrine. Developed, as it is, into five principal stages namely *naskh*, *faskh*, *maskh*, *waskh* and *raskh*, all this process of transmigration is explained in the light of the 'Alawite *ta'wil* of certain ayas quoted by the author in order to confirm the difference between the *mu'min* (believer) and the *kafir* (unbeliever) as regards to the reward and punishment after death in terms of rebirths and reiteration on different levels.

This study is also supported by comparison with passages from other 'Alawi religious works, as well as with some Shi'i *tafasir* and some Hadith collected in the Shi'i encyclopedia of *Bihar al-Anwar*.