Introduction

Primum Non Nocere

Today, as the concept of religion is receiving less attention in the secular academic world, Euro-American scholarship on the origins of Islam is experiencing an unusual surge. If postmodernity has finished the incomplete project of modernity by secularizing the public sphere, academia included, then what do we make of this renewed obsession with Islam's "origins"? Is there a connection between the academic rise of Qurʾānic studies starting in the 1960s, and, say, the decolonization of Arab/Muslim states, the rise of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (1928–), the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Salman Rushdie affair of the 1980s, or the events of 9/11? Did the accumulative ideological shaping of Islam as a threat to the West authorize Western historians of Islam to explain away the "problem" of Islam from exclusive and parochial perspectives? The position of Islam and, in particular, of Qurʾānic studies in the Western academy over the last five decades surely lends some credibility to these questions.

Addressing the status of contemporary Euro-American scholarship on the Qurʾān, Angelika Neuwirth comments that "apparently what is lacking is the hermeneutic corrective accumulated in the inner-Arabic linguistic-stylistic tradition."[1] This timely acknowledgement draws pointed attention to a yet-to-be addressed lacuna in approaching and understanding the Qurʾān. "At present," asserts Neuwirth, "historical Western research is only breathing with one lung, so to speak. The second lung, the *Arabicity and poeticity of the Qurʾān*, has not yet been utilized."[2] If the academic body of Qurʾānic studies wishes to remain healthy and to breathe fresh air, to dwell on the metaphor, it is high time to address this gap or, if I may put it this way, to heal this wound.

Engaging the Arabicity of the Qurʾān in Western research, however, is a task easier said than done. Neuwirth herself is deeply aware that her own work "demands an initial approach oriented to Biblical scholarship, if only to warrant an equal treatment for the Qurʾān and to 'synchronize' the three scriptures, to set their respective perceptions on the same level."[3] In other words, engaging this "hermeneutic corrective" with a focus on the Arabic language and the literary significations of the Qurʾān remains a desideratum that may have to wait until the most urgent task of repositioning Islam on equal footing with Judaism and Christianity is achieved. This repositioning is predicated, Neuwirth stresses, on the crooked line of first engaging with biblical scholarship in order to offer a fresh "European reading" and "a hope that her recent book [*Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (published in an English translation by Oxford in 2019 as *The Qurʾan as a Text of Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*)] will make Western readers aware of the Qurʾān's close connection to an epoch that has been reclaimed for European identity."[4]

I examine the histories of the development of the new framing of the Qurʾān in what is called late antiquity in a separate chapter. For now, it is worth noting that late antiquity means different things for different scholars. Some employ late antiquity to revive Hagarism, which was an extreme and dangerous manipulation of historical sources. Proponents of such radical revisionism want to throw out all Arabic and Islamic sources as unreliable and to rely only on outside sources. There are two major problems with this approach. First, insiders often have better information than outsiders; secondly, the alternative scenarios they present are based on minimal evidence and are often just unscholarly. Others use late antiquity to revive Biblicism, a trend in Qurʾānic studies scholarship that sees the Qurʾān with biblical eyes and emphasizes the connections between the Qurʾān and Christianity in particular as a way of shedding light on some passages of the Qurʾān.

But so far, Neuwirth's approach to late antiquity has been the most involved. Her study is part of a series of recent attempts to explore the category of late antiquity as an "epistemic space" that *includes* Islam. The idea is to prompt Western readership to see for itself that the Qurʾān is part of the same late antique discourse that envelops the Jewish and Christian traditions commonly assumed to be an exclusive European heritage. But Neuwirth also admits that her work "is primarily an engagement with historically oriented Western research."[5] Hers is a project written with multiple goals in mind: it supports the notion that the Qurʾān must be understood in relationship to ancient Arabic poetry[6] in order to open a productive conversation between Muslim and Western scholarship on the Qurʾān, a conversation that has been deeply polarized and fractious.[7] It furthermore seeks to educate Western audiences, teaching them that the "Europeanness" of the Qurʾān is not a fantasy but a remarkable shared history that can be appreciated if only scholars apply a more inclusive epistemic space regarding late antique times.[8] Neuwirth is quite successful in achieving the last of these sundry and ambitious

goals. In her over five hundred-page volume, she dedicates a pithy chapter (chapter 12, "The Qurʾān and Poetry") to what she refers to as the Arabic "poeticity" of the Qurʾān. This is a promising endeavor, even though the formidable task of engaging with biblical criticism has exhausted the bulk of her study.

Neuwirth also hoped her book could have something "to say to Muslim readers."[9] Who are these readers? With over two billion Muslims in the world today—concentrated mostly in twenty-three Asian and African countries (to count only the ones where Islam is a state religion) and including a sizable population spread across the Americas, Australia, and Europe—Muslim readers cannot be seen to constitute a monolithic whole. If by "Muslim readers" Neuwirth is referring to more specialized readers and practitioners of orthodox Islam, or traditional scholars of the Sunni and Shia persuasions, then her effort has had a limited effect, largely because her book stays within an accumulated body of Western scholarship, which, Neuwirth would admit, follows a historical-critical method familiar with an extensive hermeneutic tradition of biblical criticism. The constitutive tenets of Neuwirth's study thus remain faithful to the "first lung," so to speak, at least as that lung is outlined in the book's original German title, *Ein europäischer Zugang* (A European approach). Even the exhaustive list of the works consulted in this enormous undertaking makes scant references to Arab-Muslim scholars and texts (e.g., al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Jurjānī, Khalafallah), references that remain inconsequential in the heavy-handed thirty-eight-page bibliography of biblical scholarship. In its totality, then, Neuwirth's book subjects the Qurʾān simply to Western scholars who talk about other Western scholars, Western thought, and Western texts.

I speak more about the Qurʾān's literary signification and Arabicity in the book's later chapters, but a central goal of this study is also to offer an academic contextualization of late antiquity as a contested period in history. This important contextualization is absent from Neuwirth's study, understandably, because she not only thinks of late antiquity as an epistemologically enriching space; she is also positing "a radical turn of perspective," one that will entail "repos[ing] the question of the historical anchoring of the Qurʾān in time and place."[10] This drastic shift will necessarily mean (and it is hard not to see the Eurocentrism here) that Muslim readers will cease to read the Qurʾān in hagiographic terms—that is, as part of the life of the prophet, which has always been the case in the Islamic tradition since the seventh century. Instead, situating the Qurʾān "*historically* [emphasis hers] as a document of 'community formation' within a sectarian milieu', a landscape of debate, of arguments fought out between diverse groups, Christians, Jews, and pagans alike"[11] will give it a European stamp, lend it an authentic "voice," and make it "recognizable as a European legacy."[12]

But if the Qurʾān did not offer itself as a linguistic rival to the seventh-century Meccan society, with all its orators and poets, then what do we make of the entire corpus of *Jāhilī* poetry and of *āyāt al-taḥaddī* (challenge verses in the Qurʾān, such as 10:38, 11:13, 52:34)? What do we make of prophetic hagiography, not necessarily

the *Sīra*, but the biographical references to Muḥammad in the Qurʾān? What do we do with *asbāb al-nuzūl* (promptings of revelations) and the *iʿjāz* tradition? What do we do the work of al-Jāḥiẓ? What do we make of the inner-Islamic exegesis, when just a terse reading of postclassical scholars like al-Khaṭṭābī, al-Rummānī, al-Bāqillānī, and al-Jurjānī would show how the *balāgha* (rhetorical eloquence/distinctiveness) of the Qurʾān is not merely a ninth-century theological invention but a culmination of literary thought and a theorization of a stylistic mode that offered itself to a culture deeply immersed in its own poetic achievements? In this very context, the Qurʾān presents itself as serving a dualistic function to this very culture. First, it acts in a manner that lends itself to ordinary human self-perception both linguistically, within the familiar tradition of Quraysh's finely tuned dialect of classical Arabic, especially in its earlier phases, and anthropologically, within the defined sociocultural framework of the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula. Many verses in the Qurʾān (e.g., 44:58, 26:195) emphasize the clarity of its Arabic as well as the accessibility of its content. Secondly, the Qurʾān does not shy away from underscoring and celebrating its rhetorical distinctiveness, of claiming itself both as unparalleled and as inimitable by its own community. Yet, whereas this textual dualism takes place *within* a determined linguistic and cultural milieu, ignoring this all-assertive dialectical mode and its rhetorical power is bound to continue reducing the cognitive perception of the Qurʾān text to a banal historical generality and, consequently, to a lack of common ground not only with Muslim readers but also with global scholarship on Islam, including linguists, philologists, rhetoricians, as well as literary and cultural critics.

If Muslim readers, or more specifically European Muslim readers, were to infer something from Neuwirth's book, it would be that a scholar of Qurʾānic studies has surgically identified a malady in Western Europe's approach to the Qurʾān. To cure this malady, she offers a treatment, via self-critique, of an accumulated heritage of historical biases bent on othering and excluding Islam. Neuwirth's treatment comes from history, an offering of an alternative history, or rather, a different viewing of European history as a space for confronting one's own prejudices and repositioning the place of Islam in Europe. Late antiquity comes to Neuwirth's mind as a perfect remedy: a remedial transitional space that bridges the quintessentially European (the founding legacy of Western Europe) with the quintessentially Qurʾānic (the founding text of Islam), all the while prioritizing a way of reading that is at once remediating and perpetuating our forgetting. Nothing could put an end to old acrimonies or wipe away chronic hostilities better than realizing that Islam and the West have more in common than anyone could have ever thought. In this "shared heritage," the entangled histories of Mediterranean studies (long before modernity/globalization) would happily link Europe to Africa to Asia, and Judaism to Christianity to Islam, and the "gehört der Islam zu Deutschland/Europa?" (does Islam belong to Germany/Europe?) debate will finally be laid to rest. What does such a remedy defer and forget as it

selectively heals and remembers? What histories, told by whom, are lost in such a narrative cut?

As much as it is a remedy and an offering, late antiquity is also a scapegoat and a sacrifice. The political unconscious of the return to late antiquity reveals a deep layer of scholarly concern. There is a desire for a new discourse and a need for stopping the persistent othering of Islam—even and especially the insidious othering that occurs through hierarchy-maintaining forms of inclusion—that is often practiced by a systematic network active on numerous sociopolitical levels, including the very field of Qurʾānic studies.[13] This othering was as true in precolonial and colonial metanarratives of the European nation-states as it is true today, and it is particularly evident in the burgeoning of publication industries and a revitalized academic press market focused on Islam in the aftermath of 9/11 in what Manuel Castells aptly identifies as the "new geopolitics" of the "informationalism" concomitant with "the rise of the network society."[14] Many Euro-American scholars of the Qurʾān will admit that both the literary interpretations of the Qurʾān have been silenced in their field and the less inclusive scholarship on Islam has been put into place and practiced uncritically for decades. Muslim readers would be eager to learn why this is the case—why ancient Arabic culture, Arabic sources in general, the Qurʾān and its literary significations continue to be entombed and marginalized, even after the argument against the authenticity of pre-Islamic literature was laid to rest years ago. As a postcolonial Muslim reader myself, I would even ask harder questions about what always gets sacrificed in the relationship between self and other. Such questions matter because the unchallenged and impressionable tone of approaches to the Qurʾān *as* a text of late antiquity may itself not have the same intent, and indeed may obscure the fact that the concept of the political at work in most Western narratives of historical "formations" or "reformations" of other cultures has always been contingent on the authority of a dominant theory of knowledge.

The scope of Euro-American revisionism may offer no space for the local and the indigenous. In addition, Arab-Muslim texts—those of exegetes, biographers, and historians—have received little to no value in addressing their own tradition, often dismissed as too "faith-based" to gain admission into the skeptical mind of the Western historian. But rather than question the futility of searching for historical origins in all religions, we run the risk of dissolving indigenous histories into global melting pots in order to nurse the fragile sensibilities of an idea of Europe and of a "Europeanness" that refuses to respond to the other unless that response proceeds through colossal epistemological oversight, which, if corrected, would allow Europe to see that the other was never really an "other" after all, and that Europe, when it comes to Islam, has always been an ever-expanded and gratified self.

This is precisely the moment when the staging of history, of late antiquity in this instance, could turn into a dialectic: on the one hand, it would seek to course-correct and expand the horizons of Europe's perception of Islam, thus fixing the

one operating lung of Qurʾānic studies; on the other, it would continue, albeit unwittingly, to submerge the other in the very act of acknowledging its absence. In the case of Islam, the other is not just a scripture, but a language, a culture, a skin color, a heritage, and a literature. Even if we were to assume that this *Denkraum* was always already there, obfuscated by nationalist and separatist inventions of history, could this historical *Aufklärung* restore the second lung to Qurʾānic studies? If Islam were no longer the other of Europe, then what would become of it? What would happen to the other after the disappearance of its otherness? What would be the fate of its accumulated excisions and erasures, its "negative theology," and its silenced traditions? What would the Muslim readers expect if the study of the Qurʾān were to reemerge as an empirical boomerang in Western historical literature? If a deeper look into the thicket of late antiquity would reveal a "European Qurʾān," so to speak, how would this new identity reimagine the Qurʾān's Arabicity, with all its variegated fabrics of aesthetic weight and literary merit?

A point that might be obvious for the critically minded scholar of the Qurʾān is still worth emphasizing: historians have an academic responsibility to let the chips of their research fall where they may, even if the findings are to the displeasure of Muslim readers. Some Muslims readers may tend to accept uncritically certain versions of their sacred past, but this is not binding for historians who must follow a well-defined method and arrive at conclusions supported by evidence, be it tangible or conceptual. The issue is not the findings, but the very *method* employed in reaching those findings. The challenge in repositioning the Western academy's hardened epistemological lines indeed lies in the fact that scholarship on the Qurʾān in the West is often conducted by dedicated and well-trained scholars who may not see or even understand the need for a "second lung" outside a dominant brand of scholarship. They follow the footsteps of their mentors and advisors in applying sophisticated historical methodologies to continue to examine the same issues that have shaped the field for the last hundred years: debunking Muslims sources; finding alternative theories to the genesis of Islam in lieu of traditional Muslim accounts; rewriting Islam's early history; revising the life of Muḥammad; reshuffling the history of the compilation of the Qurʾān; rearranging chronological order of *suwar* (chapters of the Qurʾān); relocating the Qurʾān's *aʿjamī* (non-Arabic) vocabulary; and, most famously, analyzing the Qurʾān with biblical lens.

Two methods I want to problematize briefly are "source studies" and the historical-critical method. Recent scholarship that underscores the Arabicity of the Qurʾān continues to be sidelined if not effectively colonized by the Western academy's obsession with extra-peninsular "source studies."[15] Source studies proceed through locating non-Arabic influential texts outside the Qurʾān's first community or positing, à la Gerald Hawting, that the Qurʾān was addressing an imaginary community. One example of this method is Bronwen Neil's seminal article on John of Damascus and Theophanes the Confessor as the earliest known non-Muslim "historians" of Islam. In this article, Neil cautions against what she calls

"the dyothelite and iconophile biases" of Syriac authors.[16] Neil admits that historians are fortunate to have in *De haeresibus* and the *Chronographia* two exceptional witnesses to early Greek understandings of Islam. But she pulls no punches in underscoring the completely different genres and perspectives of these two texts. "The differences between them," concludes Neil, "should alert us to the dangers of characterizing early Islam on the basis of evidence provided by Greek Christians, even if they were near contemporaries of the events they sought to understand and represent."[17] The second example comes from two twenty-first century edited volumes on the Qurʾān: Jane Dammen McAuliffe's *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān* and Andrew Rippin's *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾan*.[18] None of these studies of the Qurʾān makes the slightest reference to the internal dynamics of the Qurʾān's literary language or to pre-Islamic poetry as a significant prehistory to the text.[19]

A further example of a work that effectively deconstructs the historical-critical method is Herbert Schneidau's book on the Bible and Western tradition. The last chapter of Schneidau's book deconstructs the structural dilemmas involved in twentieth-century historical positivism: "It congratulates itself on being liberated from theologization, while its very notions of 'reality' and 'truth' are, fairly obviously, covert theologization."[20] Yet from a disciplinary point of view, these issues in the field of Qurʾānic studies are not, as I explain in this work, simply extraneous or mythological details that it is a historian's privilege to ignore or to dismiss but rather fundamental limitations that return to take their toll on a methodology that has been sacralized for far too long. This methodology merely suspends the literary and linguistic ontology of the Qurʾān text for the sake of extrapeninsular and European epistemological postulates, while reinforcing the old self/other dichotomy that was at the root of the fallacies of classical orientalism. What is perhaps only now becoming clear, at least as we deduce it from Neuwirth's call, is that it is high time we confronted the intellectual harm that has resulted from the willful entombment of the other and replaced it with a new philosophy of inclusivity. But instead of thawing the other in the self, I would make a call for renewed responsible thought, which would celebrate the authentic heritages of alien traditions.

Additionally, there is a grave problem of reductionism in studying the heritage of Islam, a reductionism exercised on language and resources. This explains the one-lunged approach to Qurʾānic studies and the dearth of a dialogue between the two camps. How can Muslim readers be asked to engage in a historical method that consistently dehumanizes them and marginalizes the Qurʾān's preformative tradition and local language, while expecting them to learn the "language" of this method's historical-critical reading? If Muslim readers were to adopt this imposed "language" in approaching their own scripture, then the West, once again, is dictating the rules of the game, owning the terrain, and imposing its own norms and values on that dialogue. Having a sense of conviction in writing historical research matters, but it is just as important that this writing come from an ethical position

of fairness to the other. Writing with the conviction that the results of historical-critical research on Islam are not influenced by ideologies or political worldviews, and assuming that one's findings come from a place of objective investigation will never resolve the divide in the East-West academic approaches to the Qurʾān.

I am suggesting that religion does not yield itself to a closed off historical totality. No historical method can strip it off its linguistic, rhetorical, traditional, and conceptual referents. The only true history is a history that perpetually questions itself. What we now have instead, and what the field of Qurʾānic studies needs to overcome, is a type of knowledge entitled by hegemonic political and historical discourses to lay claim to what is an "original" and what is a "false" source of Islam's history. If the field cannot overcome this epistemology, it will descend into a Hades of academic troopers too preoccupied with their own telescopic approaches to history to see the blind spots. Ideology is exactly the belief that we are using the right critical tools to debunk a historical myth and engage in a criticism of a myth, unaware that our own "historical methods," so to speak, have their own mythical history, a history that darkly and deeply exposes the fallacy of its own criticism—that is, the myth of guarding a fundamentalist "strategic" truth and perpetuating a deep state of epistemological sovereignty over the other.

One objective of this book is to rethink the current methodology in the production of scholarship on the Qurʾān in the Euro-American academy. It also makes a call for situating the future of Qurʾānic studies within a functional code of knowledge. Such a future will necessitate relinquishing the tools of the historical-critical method that have accompanied the field since the nineteenth century. Historical positivism does not operate from scientifically verified facts, but rather from a scientism—namely, a postulate that there is a clear and straightforward access to the past against which we must measure our thought. This is not to say that historical positivism has not corrected certain methodological errors. But it tends to assume that only the thinking and the scholarship of a certain strand of historians has somehow been usefully guided by the application of this standard, while Muslim scholarship and Arab-Muslim sources are dismissed as tainted with "faith" and superstition.

In order for a "second lung" to function at all, it would need the support of other systems—different scholarly tools, different academic training, and different linguistic and critical approaches to the Qurʾān. How, then, should one understand the place of the Qurʾān in history? The answer to this question is not vague: by engaging fully with the text itself, examining its historical eventfulness, analyzing its literary, phonological and syntactical codes, and probing its pre-formative native literature, namely, the enormous tradition of pre-Islamic poetry. One does not expect here a full rounded analysis of, say, *Masāʾil Nāfiʿ ibn al-Azraq* (Questions of Nāfiʿ ibn al-Azraq),[21] or *Lughāt al-Qabāʾil al-Wārida fī al-Qurʾān* (Tribal dialects in the Qurʾān),[22] or even *Sirr Ṣināʿ-t- al-Iʿrāb* (Genesis of [Arabic] phonemes).[23] The idea is to examine the largely unstudied local environment

of the Qurʾān and explore possible correlations between its Meccan and Medinan themes as well as the social habits and manners of pre-Islamic Arabs. Despite the obvious historical, geographical, and linguistic correspondences between the Qurʾān and pre-Islamic Arabic literature, this aspect is hardly ever approached in Euro-American scholarship on the Qurʾān.

A critically engaged exegesis of pre-Islamic poetry would reveal that pre-Qurʾānic Arabs were nomadic communities with their own sets of beliefs.[24] Even though the belief in a certain "earthly" eternity was common among them, they may have not necessarily envisioned a life after death in the manner, say, in which the Qurʾān portrays it, which is also radically different from the manner in which both Judaism and Christianity depict the hereafter. Pre-Islamic Arabs had communal vices that ranged from *tijāra-t-al-raqīq* (slave trade) to *ẓulm* (social inequities/injustices) to *shuḥḥ* (avarice) to *ʿunṣuriyya* (racialism/racism), vices that were normalized and accepted among pre-Islamic Arabs but that the Qurʾān, with its strong penchant for social justice, vehemently criticizes. But pre-Islamic poetry also celebrates virtues that include *muruwwa* (chivalry, virtue), *fakhr* (pride, mostly tribal), *ḥamāsa* (warrior spirit of heroism) *shajāʿa* (courage/gallantry), *karam* (generosity/benevolence), *ḥaqq al-ḍayf* (right of guest/hospitality), *ḥaqq al-jār* (right of neighbor), and *wafāʾ* (loyalty/fulfilment of promise), traits that Islam was soon to overturn and integrate into more wholistic and socially cohesive values. It does not take long to see these habits represented in pre-Islamic poetry and interpellated in the Qurʾān. Nor does it take long to see how the Qurʾān enters into focused dialogues with this community, both in the Meccan and Medinan periods, valorizing social justice, acknowledging the literary and poetic sensibility of pagan Arabs, but also critiquing and distinguishing itself from it. In verse after verse, the Qurʾān confirms the spiritual tendencies of pre-Islamic Arabs, confronts their polytheistic propensities, and offers a monotheistic alternative to a folk tradition with an enormous appetite for divinity. This dialogic tension, which is clearly articulated in the Qurʾān, is crucial for explaining the tectonic shift in ideals and the revolutionary transformation of social relationships in the first Muslim community as it moved from a society loyal to tribal and blood solidarity to an *umma* regulated by an overpowering oral authority.

To understand the Qurʾān's oral authority, which for secular criticism remains one of history's most compelling linguistic invitations, not only is it necessary to learn of its rhetorical power but it is also important to dwell on its thematic consistency. For how can one really assess a text that emphatically challenges its own community to bring forth something like it in content and in form when one does not know how that language works or what it looks like? And how can one begin to evaluate—much less enjoy—the masterpieces of ancient Arabic literature and the overshadowing *balāgha* of the Qurʾān without having the basic understanding of its composite language and central themes? Reliance on the written and translated words of the Qurʾān certainly has its use, but it must not be the only

way of approaching the text. Certainly there is a distinction between a scholarly demand of studying a text in its original language and methodological nativism. No graduate student would be allowed to write a dissertation on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* without possessing a reading knowledge of German, and no such dissertation would pass its defense without some knowledge of Protestantism and the broader social/religious context from which Hegel's book emerged. Further, it is no secret that even the most celebrated and "enlightened" European translations of the Qurʾān—including that of the seventeenth-century orientalist Ludovico Marracci (d. 1700), in which he relied on major *tafsīr* (explication) sources like *Itqān*–continue to cause confusion and misunderstanding about the Qurʾān and its message.[25] Even a competent, integral, and content-oriented modern translation like that of Marmaduke Pickthall (d. 1930) will always irretrievably fail to capture the full significations of the original text. This does not mean that the Qurʾān is not "translatable." It certainly is. But the constitutive orality of the text—the intricate relationship between its parts and the beauty of its language," whose sound, to use Annemarie Schimmel's words, "defines the space in which the Muslim lives" and "moves people even when they don't understand the word"—demands a level of engagement from a scholar fully conscious of the text's literary power and rhetorical eloquence.[26]

To be clear, this book is not a vote for resurrecting the late dogma of *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*, which is yet to be taken seriously in Western scholarship anyway. Nor is it a vote for denigrating varied theoretical positions on the Qurʾān, or for exceptionalism, for that matter. One must not conflate the linguistically unique with the theologically exceptional. The Qurʾān specifically states that Muḥammad is one among many prophets who preceded him,[27] and that his call for monotheism is not at all exceptional, rather an iteration of a long chain of historical pleas for the one God, enjoined to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.[28] If anything, Euro-American scholarship has telescoped various historical revisions into the genesis of the Qurʾān, which can only accentuate a more profound perpetuity of "Western exceptionalism" in probing Islam's past. This is pertinent to the literary argument because my intention is also to give the simplest academic explanation of how a seventh-century Arabian audience would have understood the language of the Qurʾān as it was directly addressed to them, a basic matter that was complicated, diverted, and redirected by the field of Qurʾānic studies.

As I explain in this study, late antiquity promises an overhaul of traditional approaches to the Christian West and a free hybridity of religiocultural exchanges. It nurses Syriac Christianity and embraces Judaism, Manicheanism, Zoroastrianism, Neoplatonism, and Islam as collective participants in a powerful overflow of the God idea. For all these reasons, it could be exciting because it offers European readers something new. But for the same reasons, it could also be eclipsing because Muslim readers may fear that it may offer them nothing new, especially if

it "includes" Islamic heritage as an ancillary to Europe's own grand and expansive historical narrative, an "inclusion" already undergirded by a discourse that serves to control the history of the other. In balance, the epistemic space of late antiquity promises to bring equity among the three Abrahamic religions, treating Islam on equal footing with Judaism and Christianity. This indeed is a welcome turn, no doubt, especially when it has been rare in current Euro-American scholarship to read the Qurʾān as authentic rather than as a derivative byproduct. But what guarantees the Muslim readers, whom Neuwirth genuinely hopes to include, that positioning the Qurʾān within Europe's own narratives of historiography is not yet another variation on the old theme of erasing their own heritage? It is no secret that the field of Qurʾānic studies is confronting an enormous academic divide, which has certainly been anticipated since the 1970s, but which has until today become almost irremediable. Neuwirth has tried to start a conversation between those opposing poles, but her argument for the Arabicity of the Qurʾān, though acknowledged, has still fallen flat.

Such well-intended postulates are also faithful to the exigencies and dictates of a long-standing historical tradition that interpreted the Qurʾān (mostly in translation) from the perspective of Western canonical exegesis. It is not surprising that many eminent Western scholars of the Qurʾān today hail from the tradition of biblical criticism. There is nothing wrong with applying the tools of one's academic training in a certain religious tradition to another, especially if this other intentionally draws on and makes reference to it—in fact, I am deeply in favor of such methodological crossings when they proceed through a reflexive attention to the histories and hierarchies in which they are always already situated. However, one must not stop there. While such scholarship is itself faithful in projecting a European comparative understanding of the Qurʾān, the production of such understanding has yet to connect with, and not just passingly acknowledge, what *Islamic* linguistic and rhetorical scholarship of the Qurʾān has established about it over the last fourteen centuries. This connection, in my view, is an indispensable condition for securing a minimal understanding of the Qurʾān text and its rich tradition. At this juncture in our global history, a literary and rhetorical reading of the text of the Qurʾān—one that goes outside all canonized readings—would shed light on long-neglected corners in Qurʾānic studies, precisely because this reading will pay attention to what the Qurʾān has to say linguistically, figuratively, and rhetorically, but also socially, politically, and culturally, about itself and the organic environment in which it emerged.

This book is thus written in the same spirit of bridging the East-West polarity in Qurʾānic studies. It argues that the field of Qurʾānic studies in the West may have reached a saturation juncture of academic reification and historical self-adoration, to a point that makes it difficult to repudiate its tools for the sake of a precarious and uncharted alternative. It further argues that the historical-critical

method did not simply trap the academic potential of Qurʾānic studies in a dark corner but became itself entangled in its own compulsion toward exclusivism and hegemony. In the same vein, this book calls for, and exercises, a literary and linguistic approach to the text of the Qurʾān as a material reality and as an occurrence that must be treated dialectically—the Qurʾān as an oral text that can be celebrated just as much as it has been met with silence, apprehension, and anxiety. To a great extent, the Qurʾān actually celebrates and performs a comparative theology *extraordinaire* and in no way simply eschews the monotheistic ethos outside its geographical contours. This rich spirit of comparativity that I expound in this book has even allowed classical Muslim philosophers to find affinities and inspiration in European thought, which is at any rate hard to define when we think that, for instance, the *Corpus Aristotelicum* owes most of its survival and recovery to classical and medieval Arab-Muslim authors and translators. In turn, this book celebrates those intellectual crossings and complications while raising questions about power and how power preconditions historical inquiry.

The primary goal of this book is to respond to a history, or rather, to a Eurocentric method of approaching the history of the Qurʾān. Usually these responses tend to offer a history of their own, a counterhistory, so to speak. While there is some history in this book, readers will soon discover that my intellectual input shifts with intentionality from the historical to the linguistic and from the applications of methods to the investigation of language and the intricacies of reading. The goal is to be aware how often scholarship is governed by a received version of critical history rather than by a reading of the work itself. Therefore, I start this study by inviting the reader to see through the processes and assumptions of the historical-critical method whereby the modern contemporary study of the Qurʾān emerged in Euro-American academia. Given the new wave of scholarship on the Qurʾān as a late antique text, I am aware that my critique would raise eyebrows in the midst of the pervasive idea that to read the Qurʾān in its late antique context is to contextualize it, situate it, and absorb it into a more enlightening global narrative. My contention is that until today such an absorption remains inadequate to both the content and the form of the Qurʾān. Not only does it reduce the sociolinguistic and literary relations on which the Qurʾān is based to that of a mere search for mutual affinities and parallelisms in the vast span of late antique times, but it taxonomizes the text by pulling it into a formative historicity that serves a metanarrative of domination. A practical approach is to read the Qurʾān's text internally, through a kind of lens that is now posited for studies of the Global South and interruptions afforded by critical theory, not necessarily a critical theory whose anchor is internal to the tradition.

In the first few chapters, I expose how the post-World War II period led to the formation of an academic network on Islam that was responding to its own historical moment. I compare American and European approaches, placing both

in a broader context of geopolitics. Next, I interrogate the purposes for which the scholarly concept of late antiquity has been posited, how Qurʾānic studies has been made to fit within its mold, and how—given this framework—approaches to the Qurʾān in modern and contemporary scholarship are more a reflection of the framework and less that of the Qurʾān's local historical environment. The remaining chapters engage more directly with placing the Qurʾān in its own social and literary contexts, focusing primarily on the linguistic and literary connections and disconnections between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾān, as well as the Qurʾān's distinct aesthetic and rhetorical modes. The point is not to go through the body of pre-Islamic poetry and the Qurʾān with a fine-tooth comb to track reiterations of the former in the latter, since other scholars have already explored this venue and arrived at varied conclusions.[29] It is, rather, to hold them in the linguistic and tropological tensions of what remains an intricate discursive relationship between them. While pre-Qurʾānic Arabic literature offers an understanding of the literary tropes and figural language of the Qurʾān, it also includes rich sociopolitical and cultural associations inherent to that very tradition, some of which, like wine drinking, hunting, tribal wars, slavery, and the status of women, appear in the Qurʾān as well as in pre-Islamic poetry. There is a dire need for vigorous studies that situate the Qurʾān within this neglected local code of knowledge.

The challenge these studies would pose for current Euro-American scholarship of the Qurʾān is that it will be a novel and, dare I say, risky departure from the safe methodical and systemic tacklings to which the text has been subjected for decades. It is highly risky, to be sure, for junior scholars deeply tied to the academic field and the market demands of Qurʾānic studies in Euro-American academic institutions to simply dehegemonize themselves and opt out of the channeled course of scholarly expectations, because such desertion of the canon will mean the flight from "the field," the loss of a job or a grant, a rejection of a publication, or even worse, a denial of a dissertation. I cite a concrete example of this ostracization in chapter 1. I believe it is honest to say that this departure is feared because it destabilizes what has become a comfortable Euro-Americanization of Qurʾānic studies in Western universities. Yet, such a liberation of Qurʾānic studies is precisely the place where new scholarship can be a transformative departure from the reified monopolies of standardization.

I am arguing, then, that Islam's core book has become the other of Euro-American scholarship in the field of Qurʾānic studies. To refuse a robust engagement with this foundational text—and worse, to train students without sufficient proficiency in classical Arabic or regional intellectual history to study the Qurʾān in depth—is a sleight of hand that also dispenses with the field's need to recognize the Qurʾān as a living text. The irony is that for a field whose central text is perhaps the most widely circulated book in the Global South today, Qurʾānic studies has yet to take up the basic insights of postcolonial theory. What remains most

urgently needed is a profound decolonization of the academic studies of Islam in the West. I begin this undertaking in this book. I will go so far as to argue that decolonial and critical theory must never discount religion, especially that of postcolonial states. In fact, religion lies at the heart of contemporary decolonial debates. And to the question "Is critique secular?" the answer is a categorical "No." Critique is never just secular, and religion is always critique.