

***The History of the Qurʾān***, by Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, and Otto Pretzl; edited and translated by Wolfgang H. Behn (Texts and Studies on the Qurʾān, 8) (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013), xvi + 666 pp., ISBN: 978-90-04-21234-3, €179 / \$245 (hb)

*The History of the Qurʾān* is the first English translation of the magnum opus of western Qurʾānic Studies, *Geschichte des Qorāns*.<sup>1</sup> It includes English versions of the second edition of Theodor Nöldeke's original (1860) work, as revised by Friedrich Schwally (commonly referred to as *GdQ1*; first published in 1909), "Die Sammlung des Qorāns," by Nöldeke and Schwally (*GdQ2*, 1919) and "Die Geschichte des Koran-texts" (*GdQ3* 1926, 1929, 1938), begun by Schwally but finally written by Gotthelf Bergsträsser and his student Otto Pretzl (all three works were later published together: Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1970).<sup>2</sup> In this review I will first reflect on the nature of the translation and then discuss the usefulness of this classical work of Qurʾānic Studies to contemporary scholars.

The translation, by Wolfgang Behn, is a significant accomplishment. The collected work is well over 600 pages and the German is in many places complicated and technical. In addition to translating the body and the (extensive) notes, Behn inserts references notes to the English translations of non-English works originally referred to by Nöldeke, Schwally, Pretzl, and Bergsträsser. Thus, for example, in a note with a reference to Goldziher's *Mubammedanische Studien* Behn refers also to the corresponding pages of the English translation (*Muslim Studies*, 1977; in some other cases he misses available Eng-

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Rippin and Gerald Hawting for their comments on an earlier draft of this review.

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Nöldeke who died at an advanced age in 1930, all of the other authors died premature deaths. Schwally died in 1919 from the effects of the food shortages during World War I (according to his brother-in-law's account; see p. xxi of the work under review). Bergsträsser died after a fall in the mountains of southern Germany in 1933, and Pretzl died when his plane crashed in 1941 during the Battle of Sebastopol, in World War II. For more on the strange misadventures of the authors of *GdQ* see G.S. Reynolds, "Introduction," *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-7.

lish translations, such as: H. Lammens “Qoran et tradition, comment fut composée la vie de Mahomet;” trans. in *The Quest for the Historical Muḥammad*, 169-187). While the bibliography has not been updated to include more recent works in Qurʾānic Studies, Behn frequently adds references to the entries in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* on personalities discussed in the course of the *History of the Qurʾān*. He also puts in capital letters the names by which Muslim scholars are most frequently known (thereby facilitating research on those figures in biographical dictionaries). *The History of the Qurʾān* is well indexed, and includes marginal references to the pagination of the original German.

As a rule Behn’s English reads very well. Indeed it is remarkable that in such an enormous text only a relatively few minor corrective comments can be made. For German *Flucht* (i.e. Arabic *hijra*) Behn renders “flight” when in contemporary scholarship Arabic *hijra* is standard. On one occasion (p. 460) he has Jacobin when he means “Jacobite.” In some cases he follows German idioms too closely (e.g. on p. 280, where he renders: “Hartwig Hirschfeld is unable...to put Weil’s lame arguments back on their feet”). Overall, however, the translation is a skillful work of precision and common sense. One appreciates his manner of rendering complicated German phrases in idiomatic English. For example, in *GdQ2* Schwally writes: “Die umfangreiche Kommission scheint den Zweck zu verfolgen, den Anteil der medizinischen Gemeinde an dem Qorānwerke stärker hervortreten zu lassen” (p. 53). Behn translates: “For all intents and purposes, the story of this large commission simply aims at a better representation of the Medinan community in establishing the Koran” (p. 255).

Behn’s translation is thus of a quality which does justice to the importance of *Geschichte des Qorāns*. This work, in all of its three parts, has long played a fundamental role in the training of Islamicists in German speaking countries. It has been less influential in non-German speaking countries, whether in the West or in the Islamic world, where advanced knowledge of German is often wanting. In 2008 *Geschichte des Qorāns* was published in an excellent Arabic translation by Georges Tamer. The publication of an English translation is a significant event. Many students of the Qurʾān outside of Germany will now have the opportunity to discover this work for the first time. They may be surprised by what they find. In all three of its parts *Geschichte des Qorāns* offers students detailed insights on the Islamic sources, along with critical arguments about their interpreta-

tion, which remain relevant today. Indeed one might hope that the availability of this translation might contribute to the rise of interest in places such as North America and Turkey in the critical academic study of the Qurʾān.

Some scholars in the past have written off this work (and Nöldeke's contribution in particular) as an example of Orientalist excess. Others (myself included) have taken issue with certain elements of this work (notably the certainty with which Nöldeke assumes a chronological reading of the Qurʾān). Yet it should not be missed that this work has an enormous amount of data on the text of the Qurʾān, Islamic literature on the biography of the Prophet, and the historical transmission of the text. Even if readers are disappointed with certain parts of the *History of the Qurʾān*, they will certainly find other parts useful.

As there is no question of summarizing the arguments of the four authors of the *History of the Qurʾān* (or indeed five, as August Fischer – Bergsträsser's professor in Leipzig – edited the final version of Schwally's text [*GdQ2*]), I will here draw the reader's attention to certain elements of the work which still represent impressive insights on the composition and transmission of the Qurʾānic text, along with those which are less impressive today.

*GdQ1* is well known as the text in which Nöldeke puts forth his argument for a chronology of Qurʾānic verses. This he does, it is important to emphasize, with a great deal of circumspection. Indeed he grew increasingly cautious about the limits of dating sūras. In a note added to the second edition of *GdQ1* Nöldeke explains that he has come to believe that for the Meccan period of Muḥammad's career there is no question of coming up with a precise chronological order of sūras, but only of grouping them into three main categories (He reflects: "Some of my claims, which at the time seemed quite certain, upon new and careful scrutiny turned out to be uncertain;" p. 61). In the second edition of *GdQ1* Nöldeke notes that many of the stories (*asbāb al-nuzūl* or otherwise) which the exegetes use to date certain sūras are unreliable. Regarding Sūra 3 he comments: "The historical explanations of tradition regarding the individual verses are of little use to us" (pp. 154-55). Elsewhere he comments: "The tales of Muḥammad's problems in private life, which tradition brings forward, are useless" (p. 185).

Too often, however, he nevertheless turns to the tales which tradition brings forward to date Qurʾānic passages. He concludes, for example, that Sūra 74 must be very early because he follows the tradition that the term *muddaththir* therein refers to Muḥammad’s being “wrapped up” in blankets (which Nöldeke argues was due to the superstitious fear which overcame the Prophet at the beginning of his mission). Elsewhere Nöldeke relies on an abstract sense of older and newer styles of Qurʾānic language (for which Hartwig Hirschfeld later criticized him). Indeed the usefulness of this entire section is questionable and Nöldeke’s approach to the text appears simplistic today. He never considers seriously the possibility that the Qurʾān might include different sources, or that later redactors might have had a role in modifying an earlier text. He takes for granted the traditional notion that the Qurʾān can be split up according to the episodes in the life of one man and assumes that the Qurʾān is a perfect transcript (albeit out of order) of what Muḥammad – and only Muḥammad – really said.

It should also be pointed out, however, that *GdQ1* is not entirely consumed with questions of chronology. The first 46 pages (in the English translation) involve a critical discussion of a variety of aspects of the Qurʾān’s composition which is still valuable. Of particular note is the attention which Nöldeke pays to the role of rhyme in the composition of the Qurʾānic text (pp. 29-33) and to larger questions of coherence, or *nazm* (pp. 34-35).

Schwally’s contribution, *GdQ2*, is an analysis of traditions concerning the collection of the Qurʾān. Schwally works from the assumption that Islamic literature contains a mass of both valid and invalid traditions regarding the collection of the Qurʾān, and that the task of critical scholars is something like triage. In his view the traditions of Abū Bakr’s collection of the Qurʾān into sheets are largely invalid, but those of the ʿUthmānic collection are largely valid (and indeed he defends their validity against both Orientalists and Shīʿites). Throughout his study Schwally demonstrates a conviction – which may seem exaggerated today – that even the details of what really happened during the process of the Qurʾān’s collection can be known through this work of triage. This conviction is evident, for example, when he writes regarding the ʿUthmānic collection: “I suspect that the actual copy work was done by a staff of professional calligraphers, with Zayd ibn Thābit’s activity limited to the overall charge of the project.” With similar confidence he proposes (p. 306)

that ʿUthmān’s goal with the dissemination of his *muṣḥaf* must have been only to solve an issue among his troops (and not to establish a standard Qurʾān throughout the empire), since he sent this *muṣḥaf* to only a few garrison cities.

In the latter part of *GdQ2* (pp. 315-68), Schwally turns from historical speculation about the collection of the Qurʾān to a remarkable review of early Islamic (and western) literature on the Qurʾān, *tafsīr*; and Muḥammad’s life. This section of *GdQ2* is of great interest, and would serve as a good reading for a graduate level class in Islamic Studies, even if many new works have been edited since the publication of *Geschichte des Qorāns*.

With *GdQ3* the focus shifts to the later history of the Qurʾānic text. Therein Bergsträsser and Pretzl discuss with precision the development of Islamic literature on the proper reading of the consonantal text of the Qurʾān, beginning with early traditions and ending with the editing of the now canonical Cairo text. They begin (pp. 389-91) by commenting on the traditions of consonantal “errors” in the ʿUthmānic text and the many peculiar features of Qurʾānic orthography (for example, the variable use of *hamza*, the use of the long *tāʾ* where *tāʾ marbūʿa* would be expected, or the use of *yāʾ* or *wāw* where *alif* would be expected, which they explain as a product of early pronunciation, or *imāla*).

One of the great merits of *GdQ3* is the careful way in which Bergsträsser/Pretzl illustrate the different sorts of variants to the ʿUthmānic text. These include variants reported in traditions on the pre-ʿUthmānic codices (of these they argue that the traditions attributed to Ibn Masʿūd’s codex are most likely to be authentic), variants reported in traditions on the copies of ʿUthmān’s codex which were sent to Syria, Baṣra, Kūfa, and Mecca (or, according to other reports, still more cities), and the variants in the literature on the seven or ten (or more) canonical systems of reading the ʿUthmānic codex. This they do by following the medieval literature on variants, including the works of Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 223 or 224/838) and al-Dānī (d. 444/1052), in particular his *Muqniʿ*, as well as *al-Mabānī li-nazm al-maʿānī*. For the variant readings they rely principally on Makkī ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Qaysī (d. 437/1045), al-Dānī, Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505). Of continuing interest – even though much work has since been done on this question – is their discussion of the establishment of seven readings (each with two

*ṭarīq̣s*), and their discussion of Ibn Mujāhid's (d. 324/935) role in that process (pp. 493-544). In the course of this work they show among other things that the nature of the variants reflects a reliance on the written text of the Qur'ān; in other words, the variants do not reflect divergences within an oral tradition but various attempts to read a written text (on this see esp. pp. 474-475).

Yet the theme which runs most prominently through *GdQ3* is the way in which variant readings found in early Islamic texts, both those based on reports of the companion codices and those based on variant readings (*qirā'āt*) of the standard "Uthmānic" consonantal text, were progressively reduced over time (a process which they attribute to "the catholic tendency" of Islam; p. 488) until the establishment of the *textus receptus* (a text that would have been still more uniform had the teachings of Ibn Mujāhid about the validity of all seven readings been less influential). They add, however, illustrations of the way in which creative readings of the text were developed despite this process of standardization. For example, in Q 11:44 the reading *ibnahā* (instead of the standard *ibnahū*) was proposed to argue that the unfaithful son of Noah was not his son, but the son of an unfaithful wife (regarding which cf. Q 66:10). Later traditions avoid emending the consonantal text proposing that *ibnahā* (without the extra *alif*) can mean "her son" (p. 491).

The last part of *GdQ3*, authored by Pretzl alone, is dedicated to a report on the manuscript project which Bergsträsser began in cooperation with the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften. The manuscripts he collected for this project were eventually passed down to Pretzl and then to Pretzl's student Anton Spitaler. Although they were long thought destroyed in the allied bombings of Munich in World War II, these manuscripts (and films of manuscripts) in fact survived and today form one source of the *Corpus Coranicum* project taking place in Berlin.

In this last part Pretzl discusses the sorts of variants found in the manuscripts in comparison with the reports of variants found in Islamic literature. Pretzl argues here that both the manuscripts and literary reports of variants should be used in work towards a critical edition of the Qur'ān. He writes, "Only the recognition of the relative application of the science of *qirā'āt* makes a renewed investigation of the earliest manuscripts of the Koran rewarding" (p. 585). Later in life, however, Pretzl seems to have changed his opinion, and inclined

to the view that the *qirāʾāt* are principally later attempts at emending the text.<sup>3</sup> Indeed in light of the complicated history of these variants, and in particular of the many cases of variants which are meant to improve the grammar or sense of Qurʾānic passages (such as the case of Q 11:44 mentioned above), one wonders if it would not be wise to pursue work on a critical edition of the Qurʾān on the basis of ancient manuscripts alone.

## REFERENCES

- Reynolds, Gabriel Said, "Introduction," *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-26.
- Fischer, August, "Grammatisch schwierige Schwur- und Beschwörungsformeln des klassischen Arabisch," *Der Islam* 28/1 (1948), 1-105.

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<sup>3</sup> This according to August Fischer who wrote in 1948: "Pretzl war, wie ich in wiederholten mit ihm in Kairo über diese Dinge geführten Gesprächen feststellen konnte, in den letzten Jahren seines – leider wie das seines Lehrers zu früh tragisch abgeschlossenen – Lebens von der generellen hohen Bewertung der Koran-Handschriften und Koran-Lesarten, wie er sie zunächst von seinem Lehrer übernommen hatte, stark zurückgekommen." August Fischer, "Grammatisch schwierige Schwur- und Beschwörungsformeln des klassischen Arabisch," *Der Islam* 28/1 (1948), 5, n. 4.