

It is of course the work of Isaiah Goldfeld which originally refocused our attention on the centrality of al-Tha^ʿlabī to Islamic studies. Single-handedly, Goldfeld forced al-Tha^ʿlabī onto the research agenda through his masterful edition of the introduction to the commentary. From a recognised, yet all the same marginal, figure in Islamic studies, al-Tha^ʿlabī has emerged as a central figure in Islamic intellectual history. With Klar's monograph, we have now three monograph studies on the three works of al-Tha^ʿlabī that have survived (Beate Wiesmueller has edited and studied the book *Qatlā al-Qurʿān* ('The Martyrs of the Qur'an'), and I myself have studied *al-Kashf wa'l-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurʿān*, the Qur'an commentary of al-Tha^ʿlabī which was edited in Beirut in 2002) and this combination of new studies sheds a remarkable light on al-Tha^ʿlabī's intellectual legacy. This kind of attention to neglected figures in the crowded history of Islam is essential to allow us a deeper understanding of this history. Klar's monograph is, even independently of this context, a timely and excellent addition to the field of Islamic studies which will also open the genre of 'tales of the prophets' to scholars from other disciplines.

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The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life. By Ingrid Mattson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Pp. x + 262. £60.00/£17.99.

The keys to understanding this immensely readable book are in the title and preface (pp. vi–viii). The title reveals that the author will be recounting a *story* about the role of the Qur'an in Muslim life, and the preface alerts us to the fact that 'in many ways' the book 'reflects [Mattson's] personal perspective on the Qur'an' (p. vi). 'I approach the Qur'an', she explains, 'from the perspective of a Western academic who is also trying to live as a faithful Muslim', going on to note that '[t]his is not the only perspective on the Qur'an, but it is one that, perhaps, has been underrepresented in the literature' (p. vi). The only other such books, to my knowledge, are Farid Esack's *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), Nimat Hafez Barazangi's *Women's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), Asma Barlas's *'Believing Women': Unreading Patriarchy in the Qur'an* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002) and Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1992; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Mattson – Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary, where she also serves as Director of the Macdonald Center for the Study of

Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, and Director of the Islamic Chaplaincy Program – is a convert. She does not privilege (or even) mention this fact, but then she does not privilege her gender either (in contrast to Barlas, Barazangi and Wadud). As becomes clear from this book's very opening line, however – '[b]efore God mentioned her, Khawla bint Tha'laba was apparently an ordinary woman living in seventh-century Medina in the Arabian Peninsula' (p. 1) – women play a significant role in Mattson's narrative. As the reader soon discovers (or, one can only hope, does not discover, since the mention of men would arouse no special notice), Mattson uses the accounts of women in particular to tell the story of the Qur'an. In this she is innovative and successful.

Innovative too is Mattson's organisation of the material; the chapters are broken down as follows: (1) 'God Speaks to Humanity' (pp. 1–24); (2) 'The Prophet Conveys the Message' (pp. 25–75); (3) 'The Voice and the Pen' (pp. 76–136); (4) 'Blessed Words: The Qur'an and Culture' (pp. 137–74); (5) 'What God Really Means: Interpreting the Qur'an' (pp. 175–219). It would have been most useful to include the subheadings of each chapter in the table of contents. As it stands, the reader does not get a sense of the full extent of the author's remit: chapters two and three, for instance, account for half of the book, but their general titles belie what they capaciously cover. To take chapter two as an example of this wide coverage, it comprises the following discussions: 'Historicizing the Qur'an' (pp. 25–32), 'The Medium and the Message' (pp. 32–5), 'God is One' (pp. 35–44), 'Moral Conduct and Its Ultimate Consequences' (pp. 44–8), 'Servants of God' (pp. 48–53), 'Persecution of Believers Past and Present' (pp. 53–9), 'Establishing a Viable State and a Just Political Order' (pp. 59–67), 'Building Community' (pp. 67–71) and 'A Door to Heaven is Closed' (pp. 72–3). As for chapter three, it comprises: 'A Sacred Pedigree' (pp. 76–82), 'The Word of God' (pp. 82–5), 'The Prophet and the First Collection of the Qur'an' (pp. 85–98), 'The Early Generations: Regional Schools of Recitation and the Elaboration of the *Mushaf*' (pp. 98–102), 'Standardizing the Curriculum' (pp. 102–6), 'Qur'anic Recitation and Ritual Life' (pp. 106–16), 'Breaking the Tradition' (pp. 117–22), 'Transmission of the Qur'an in the Modern Age' (pp. 122–31) and 'Conclusion' (pp. 131–2) (incidentally, the only chapter with its own conclusion).

As the above makes abundantly clear, there are many useful discussions in this book. There are also some 300 *ayas* quoted, and numerous, often lengthy, passages from important and illuminating sources, both primary and secondary: the *Sīra nabawiyya* (pp. 34–35); an Adrian Brockett article on Ḥafṣ and Warsh (p. 96); the *Rihla* of Ibn Jubayr (pp. 109 ff.); Cecil Roth on the Spanish Inquisition (pp. 119–20); an account of the nineteenth-century, enslaved African, Lamen Kebe (pp. 120–21); the caliph al-Ma'mūn's letter to scholars explaining his doctrinal positions (pp. 139–40); al-Juwaynī on God's speech (pp. 142–3); the testament of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (pp. 182–3); the *Risāla* of al-Shāfiʿī (p. 196, p. 204); and much more besides. In this respect,

Mattson's book is an excellent resource and repository, and is consequently as much an introduction to Islam as it is an introduction to the Qur'an per se. *The Story of the Qur'an* is not a substitute for, say, Neal Robinson's long and quite detailed *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (2nd edn, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003) or Michael Cook's short but very focused *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), but then, it does not try to be.

The story of Khawla in the opening chapter is invoked to illustrate how the Qur'an responded in direct ways to the lives of the Prophet Muḥammad's contemporaries. By opening the book this way, Mattson lays the groundwork for a discussion of the status of God's 'word' and of its instantiation in/as the Qur'an. This is not to say that Mattson eschews antecedents and the Near Eastern context, far from it. Indeed, the prelude to the subsection entitled 'The Arabian Context' is a quotation more than two pages long describing Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael in Mecca. It comes as no surprise that Mattson focuses on Hagar (Hājar), or that in quoting pre-Islamic poetry, she chooses lines from the poet Labīd that open 'Every indigent woman seeks the refuge of my tent ropes' (p. 10). This inclusion of women provides a sorely needed perspective. If chapter two does not have a specific woman around which it anchors its discussion, it is perhaps because its focus is the Prophet Muḥammad; but it does close with a story that, in Mattson's telling, begins as follows (p. 73):

There is a story that sometime later, Abu Bakr and 'Umar went to visit an elderly woman with whom the Prophet had been very close. Umm Ayman had been like a mother to the Prophet, having nursed him when he was young. The Prophet often used to visit her, so the two close companions of the Prophet considered it their honor to do the same.

Mattson then quotes Umm Ayman's lines expressing sorrow that the passing of the Prophet means the cessation of revelation.

Chapter three has as its axis the account of a young twenty-first century woman who decides to memorise the entire Qur'an and thus become a *hāfiẓa* ('memoriser') and *qāri'a* ('reciter'). It opens:

On August 7, 2002, a seventeen-year old American girl named Reem stood in front of a curtain in a humble home on the outskirts of Damascus. Behind the curtain lay an elderly man, feeble of body but sharp of mind. Sheikh Abu'l-Hasan Muhyi'l-Din al-Kurdi ...

The *ijāza* ('certificate') with which Shaykh al-Kurdi authorises Reem to recite the Qur'an is schematised on pp. 80–1. Mattson's discussion of the collection, dissemination and preservation of the Qur'an in this chapter, and in subsequent discussions in later chapters too, returns again and again to Reem's story to help

explain the Qur'an and its role(s) to the modern, general reader. Mattson devotes the majority of the time explaining the views of Muslims – that is, after all, her stated aim for the book – but she does not level those views or discount difficulties and she shows herself to be especially clear and balanced when she broaches issues of religious conviction and commitment. The volume closes with '6. Conclusion: Listening for God' (pp. 220–34), a chapter that is a trifle more pious than the preceding ones. But for the reader who has gone through the earlier pages, it will not seem – because it is not – out of place or apologetic.

There are some typographical errors, minor slips and odd translations. In the first two chapters, typos include 'premiere' for 'premier' (p. 9), *Ta'rikh Mecca* for *Ta'rikh Makka* (p. 23), 'Ehsan Yar' for 'Ehsan Yar-shater' (p. 23); *muda-thir* for *mud-dath-thir* (p. 33), *ulaa* for *uulaa* (p. 34), 'here' for 'there' (p. 35), 'lightening' for 'lightning' in Q. 30:24 (p. 43), 'Muzammil' for 'Muzzammil' (p. 51), 'reigns' for 'reins' (p. 53), a superfluous hard return at p. 73, n. 2, and the occasional stray or incorrect *hamza* and *'ayn* (e.g. p. 73, n. 3); slips include a missing reference to the story of Hagar on pp. 4–7, and the use of 'caliph' for the first time on p. 29 without explaining it there or in the 'Glossary' (pp. 235–8); and translation oddities include *And unto Him there is equal no one* for Q. 112:4 (p. 36), and 'the Flawless' for *al-salām* in Q. 59:23 (p. 40). Later in the book we find, for example, *yeh* for *ya'* (p. 100); *z* represented by *dh* in *mahfudh* (p. 107) but by *th* in *Manthuma* (p. 115); and Ahmed for Ahmad (*passim*).

Such minor infelicities notwithstanding, this is a well-produced book, with a splendid blue cover, featuring a woman walking in front of Isfahan's Imam Mosque as the front cover. All the chapters have accompanying images. Indeed, pictures of women (though there are some of men, too) continue visually to do what the text does in words, namely tell the story of the Qur'an through the daily experience of Muslims the world over: girl-friends breaking the fast in Malaysia, women activists lobbying for equal treatment in the United States, female imāms in China.

The Story of the Qur'an is rich in information, much of it familiar from other books on the Qur'an, but here woven into a very different and refreshing kind of narrative. Mattson may not tell the story of the Qur'an strictly chronologically, and she may tell it in a way that is ultimately also personal, but there is no doubt that the book delivers what it promises, namely to 'hel[p] the reader to understand the Qur'an, while throwing a much-needed light on what it means to be a Muslim' (back cover). In her aim to focus light where it is needed, Mattson has succeeded admirably.

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