

HOW TO READ THE QUR'AN: A NEW GUIDE, WITH SELECT TRANSLATIONS. By Carl W. Ernst. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011. Pp. 273. \$30.

In this concise work Ernst presents a literary and historical approach to reading the Qur'an, arguing that its central meanings may be gleaned from its structure. E. successfully makes accessible to conscientious readers (including advanced undergraduates) the latest works of academic Qur'an specialists (especially Angelika Neuwirth). College instructors of Islamic studies will find particularly useful the appendixes containing learning exercises and structural outlines for the Qur'anic suras.

E. adopts Theodore Noldéke's chronological division of the Qur'an into early, middle, and late Meccan suras and Medinan suras to facilitate the study of the Qur'an in the precanonical sequence in which the first Muslims received it, and to trace the text's development over the duration of its revelation. E. uses structural and rhetorical analysis to demonstrate the tripartite and ring structures of selected suras from each period, which, he argues, reveal the Qur'an's central points of emphasis; he observes that internally placed verses furnish universal statements, while verses placed at the external frames furnish contingent meanings. E. argues that in numerous suras, verses indicating Qur'anic acceptance of religious pluralism belong to the former category, while verses on debates and conflicts with religious others belong to the latter. Structural analysis also reveals certain verses to be later insertions into suras, as indicated by their departures from surrounding stylistic patterns. E. believes that such revisions likely occurred in dialogue with the first Muslims' responses to the Qur'an's ongoing revelation, meeting their needs for clarification, consolation, or admonition, and reflecting developments in their communal identity and liturgical usages of the text. (Here, readers would benefit from consulting Nasr Abu Zayd's work on the Qur'an as a discourse, an aspect not addressed by E.)

E. persuasively argues that the suras' structural and rhetorical elements offer a much more satisfying resolution of the Qur'an's seeming self-contradictions than traditional Muslim arguments about abrogation, since they help make sense of textual disparities rather than simply explaining away tensions in the text. Additionally, E. evaluates the internal resonances of the Qur'an (whereby certain suras and verses recall others) and examines its adaptation and revision of previous scriptures, myths, folklore, epics, and poetry from Judeo-Christian and Near Eastern sources, including pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Given popular debates on the Qur'an, readers will be particularly interested in E.'s fascinating discussions of the religious awareness of Meccan skeptics, evidence that the so-called Satanic verses were likely never part of the Qur'an, and some parallelism to the Catholic *Magnificat*. Some might disagree with E.'s observation that reading

the Qur'an in its canonical order is unnecessary in its academic study (as bypassing it would obscure how the Qur'an, as shown by Michael Sells and William Graham, effectively resists its own objectification as a physical or linear text). Overall, however, the book provides a much-needed alternative to introductory books on the Qur'an that treat it as a text easily mined for what it "says" on various topics.

E.'s work is also valuable in serving as an entry point into debates about academic study of the Qur'an. E. aims at a fair-minded and non-theological approach, insisting that anyone, regardless of their religious or nonreligious allegiances, can employ a literary approach to studying the Qur'an; such a task should be no different from study of the Bible as part of the humanistic study of our global heritage in an age of religious pluralism. E. sets aside Muslims' authoritative claims about the Qur'an and the question of its divinity, aiming to treat the text "like any other writing" and asserting that there is nothing remarkable about seeing all scriptures as rewritings of previous texts.

On the topic of E.'s claim to the theological neutrality of his proposed literary approach to the Qur'an, readers may find a great complement in the work of Peter Wright. His study of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics examines the dramatic shift in modern conceptions of history and temporality that led to the notion that texts are encoded by history, a shift that enabled some 20th-century Muslim interpreters to defend a literary approach as distinct from a theological rejection or profaning of the Qur'an. Thus a person could argue that E.'s literary reading of the Qur'an can be viewed as theologically neutral only through a particular understanding of time and history. Thus E.'s claim to the universal appropriateness of his literary method of reading the Qur'an, as well as his advocacy of reading texts independently of communal authority, may be buttressed by treating historically not only the Qur'an and its first audience but also our own selves as readers. The historicization of ourselves as readers is also crucial in light of the historical circumstances of the post-9/11 United States, which is heavily invested in endorsing "hermeneutical" readings of the Qur'an to promote "moderate" forms of Islam—a distinctive historical circumstance setting apart the proposal of a literary reading of the Qur'an from that of the Bible.

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