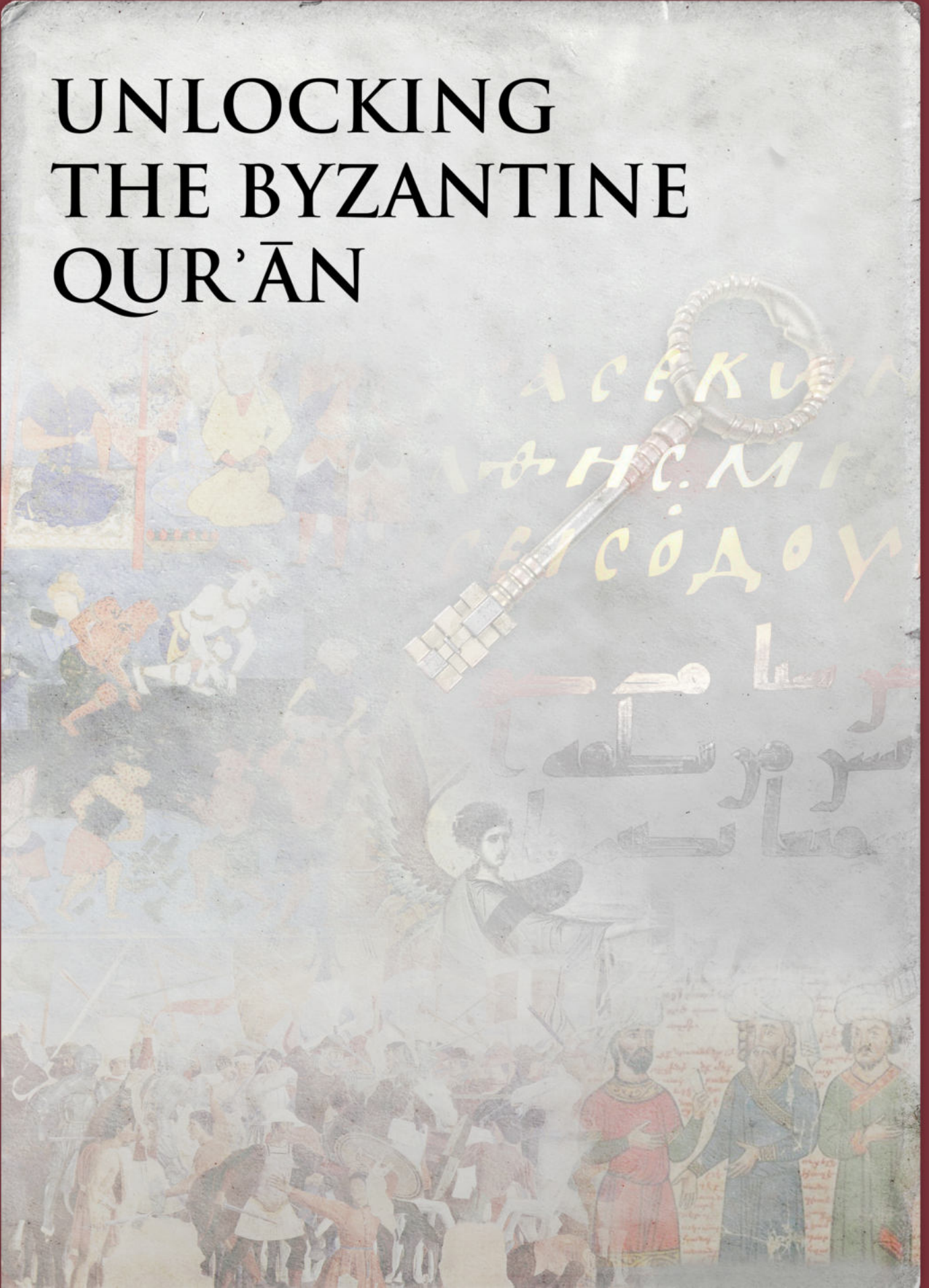


29TH- 31TH AUGUST 2022
UNIVERSITY OF PADERBORN

UNLOCKING THE BYZANTINE QUR'ĀN



Ἰσχυροὶ ἄνθρωποι ἔσονται
ἐν τῷ ἔθνεϊ ἡμῶν· καὶ
ἐπισημοὶ ἄνθρωποι
ἐν τῷ ἔθνεϊ ἡμῶν



καὶ ἐπισημοὶ ἄνθρωποι ἐπὶ χεῖρας· καὶ
ἐπισημοὶ ἄνθρωποι ἐπὶ χεῖρας
ἐπισημοὶ ἄνθρωποι ἐπὶ χεῖρας
ἐπισημοὶ ἄνθρωποι ἐπὶ χεῖρας

UNLOCKING THE BYZANTINE QUR'ĀN

Speaking about the 'Byzantine Qur'ān' may initially be surprising and even misleading – yet another revisionist and exclusivist approach to the Qur'ān, alongside attempts to understand the Qur'ān within a Syriac background or within the traditional framework for the life of the prophet Muhammad. Indeed, there has been – with a few noteworthy exceptions – a cautious reluctance in Qur'ānic scholarship to contextualize the proclamation of the Qur'ān within the wider historical background of the Near East. The reason for this could be the prima facie ahistorical character of the Qur'ān, which, taken on its own, does not usually refer extensively to concrete historical events in the life of the prophet Muhammad or to the wider context. But the ongoing progress in several disciplines (Epigraphy, Syriac Studies, Byzantine Studies, Ethiopian Studies, etc.) with regard to the context of the Qur'ān at the beginning of the seventh century has paved the way for approaching the Qur'ān as a historical document that attests to political and religious developments in Late Antiquity and participates theologically in ongoing discourses. Several articles and studies in recent years promote the idea of the Qur'ān's distinct historical awareness of contemporary political events, such as the Roman-Persian war (Howard-Johnston 2010; Tesei 2019; Ghaffar 2020; Cole 2018). Certain Qur'ānic themes such as eschatology (Shoemaker 2018) and law (Crone 1987, Cole 2020, Zellentin 2022) also appear to testify to the connection of the evolving theology of the Qur'ān within the context of Eastern Roman history – already in Mecca, yet especially so in Medina.

The conference aims systematically to engage with the Qur'ān in its Byzantine context and to explore elements of Qur'ānic theology, historiography, and liturgy that seem intertwined with Eastern Roman political, religious and cultural history. The conference will thereby attempt to broaden the understanding of the Qur'ān beyond its primary Hejazi context by seeking to probe how far the northern Byzantine neighbors of the nascent Islamic community proved relevant for the evolution of the Qur'ān.

Schedule

Monday, August 29

01:30pm

Opening addresses and introduction to the conference (Zishan Ghaffar)

Methodology and Hermeneutics

02:00pm - 03:00pm

Stephen Shoemaker (Oregon):

*The Qur'ān's Byzantine Context:
The Christian Traditions of the Qur'ān*

03:00pm - 04:00pm

Nicolai Sinai (Oxford):

*The Christian Elephant in the Meccan Room and
the Hidden Cost of Taming It*

Coffee break

Historiography

04:30pm - 05:30pm

James Howard-Johnston (Oxford):

The Qur'ān as a historical source

05:30pm - 07:00pm

Nestor Kavadas (Bonn):

*Defining 'Romans' in the Late Antique Near East:
The linguistic and theological context of the Qur'ān*

Dinner

Schedule

Tuesday, August 30

Eschatology and Apocalypticism

09:00am - 10:00am

Lutz Greisiger (Halle):

Byzantine Imperial Propaganda and Jewish and Christian Anti-Imperial Apocalypticism in the Qur' ān

10:00am - 11:00am

Dmitrij Bumazhnov (Göttingen):

Apocalypticism and the concept of the Last Byzantine Emperor as a context for the Qur' ān

Coffee break

War and Imperial Propaganda

11:30am - 12:30am

Zishan Ghaffar (Paderborn):

Believing rulers and the political theology of the Qur' ān within its Byzantine context

Lunch break

02:00pm - 03:00pm

Ana Davitashvili (Tübingen):

"Martyrs," Being Alive with God in Q 2:154 and 3:169, and War Propaganda of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius: A Reconsideration

Schedule

Tuesday, August 30

03:00pm - 04:00pm

Klaus von Stosch (Bonn):

Jesus and Mary in Q 5 – An anti-imperial discourse in the Qur'ān as a critique of Byzantine misuse of Christology

Coffee break

Liturgy and Form

04:30pm - 05:30pm

Angelika Neuwirth (Berlin/Jerusalem):

Politics and Liturgy – Byzantine cultic practices and figures of thought reflected in the Qur'ān

05:30pm - 06:30pm

Nora K. Schmid (Oxford):

Qur'ānic Legal and Ethical Exhortation in Light of Byzantine Homiletics

Dinner

Schedule

Wednesday, August 31

09:00am - 10:00am

Charbel Rizk (Bonn/Paderborn):

The Arabic Qur'ān and the Syriac Mimrā

Byzantium beyond borders

10:00am - 11:00am

Sebastian Bitsch (Göttingen):

The Long Shadow of Zoroaster. Spolia of Mazdean eschatological motifs in the Qur'ān

Coffee break

11:30am - 12:30am

Holger Zellentin (Tübingen):

The Arabian Qur'ān between Bible and Byzantium

Lunch



Stephen Shoemaker

University of Oregon



The Qur'ān's Byzantine Context: The Christian Traditions of the Qur'ān

Abstract

According to the current state of our evidence, there was no Christian presence of any significance in either Mecca or Yathrib. Both were remote and very small settlements - Mecca having a total population of around 500 by the best and most recent estimates - and their cultures were fundamentally illiterate. Needless to say, such conditions do not present a milieu that seems remotely capable of possessing the broad and sophisticated knowledge of late ancient Christian culture that is reflected in the Qur'ān. Unquestionably, the bulk of these traditions, beyond the most basic principles of the Christian faith, must have entered the Qur'ānic tradition only after Muhammad's followers began to colonize the Near East and Mesopotamia. Accordingly, we require a new model of the Qur'ān's formation that can account for these circumstances.

Nicolai Sinai

University of Oxford



The Christian Elephant in the Meccan Room and the Hidden Cost of Taming It

Abstract

Much of the Qur'ānic corpus is shot through with a selective adaptation of Christian traditions, including an impressive panoply of cosmological and eschatological notions, miscellaneous narratives, and important aspects of Qur'ānic diction. As highlighted in 2019 by Guillaume Dye, this diagnosis sits uneasily with the lack of evidence for organised Christian communities in the immediate milieu in which the Qur'ān's genesis is supposed to have unfolded. While I am more optimistic than Dye that the force of the problem can to some degree be blunted by an appeal to oral tradition and missionary activity, it does indeed remain a moot question whether such an approach is capable of eliminating the difficulty altogether. Dye accordingly recommends that at least parts of the Qur'ānic corpus be dated after the death of Muhammad and decoupled from the latter's Hijāzī context. This strategy admittedly stands a good chance of domesticating the Christian elephant in the Meccan room. The approach does, however, come with significant explanatory and theoretical difficulties of its own that any account of conquest-age additions to the Qur'ān must seek to resolve in appropriate detail. My paper will survey these challenges and argue for a twofold bottom line: (i) while there is no prima facie reason to rule out that the genesis of the Qur'ān could be satisfactorily explained by more than one historical scenario, no model is likely to be devoid of its specific explanatory challenges and costs; (ii) scholars promoting a non-standard narrative of the Qur'ān's genesis are legitimately expected to supply a fully worked out analysis of the Qur'ānic text that addresses such challenges (and therefore ought to beware the latent temptation of deflecting the topic of conversation by riffing on the moral worthiness of iconoclastic doubt).

James Howard- Johnston

University of Oxford



The Qur'ān as a Historical Source

Abstract

The Qur'ān is an important source of the origins of Islam, but also the central player in the events of the time. It is the most performative text of all time, one that triggered the wholesale transformation of western Eurasia. I shall be homing in on what I judge to be the key moment in which the Prophet adjusted the faith to fit better with circumstances, towards the end of the 6-year confrontation between the believers and their helpers at Medina and the Quraysh of Mecca. That moment was when the Prophet announced a change in the qibla from Jerusalem (almost certainly) to the Ka'ba. Careful scrutiny of suras 2, 3, 5 and 22 (all late) leaves no doubt that the change was made long after the hijra (contrary to a brief, bald statement in the sira). This conclusion casts new light on the agreement reached at Hudaibiyya and helps to explain the extraordinary dynamism of the new religion.

Lutz Greisiger

University of Halle-Wittenberg



Byzantine Imperial Propaganda and Jewish and Christian Anti-Imperial Apocalypticism in the Qur'ān

Abstract

This paper shall offer a reconstruction of the interplay between the pro- and anti-imperial discourses among the inhabitants of the Byzantine Near East around 630 CE and the ways in which that interplay is reflected in Hebrew and Syriac apocalypses of the early Middle Ages. Based on this reconstruction two Qur'ānic narratives, the story of the spring of life (Q 18:83–98) and the prophecy concerning Rūm (Q 30:2–4) shall be contextualized, to demonstrate how far the Qur'ān participated in the general eschatological expectancy of the period.

Nestor Kavvadas

University of Bonn



Defining ‘Romans’ in the Late Antique Near East: The linguistic and theological context of the Qur’ān

Abstract

A few years before the so-called „School of the Persians“ – i.e., of East Syrians stemming from the Iranian Empire – in Byzantine Edessa (today: Urfa) was closed down, allegedly due to confessional reasons, by the pro-miaphysite Emperor Zeno (r. 474-491 AD), the School’s teachers were instantly identified (basing on their looks?) as “Persian” foreigners by the “Roman” Syrians in the streets of Edessa. And these “Roman” Syrian Edessans would fiercely protest to the authorities, denouncing the “Persian” Syrians – who represented in their city a theology very different from their own – as malevolent agents of the Sassanians, and demanded that they be sent back to Iran. The case of Edessa, the cultural capital of Western Syriac Christianity, is quite representative of the entire Near East, from Palestine to Syria to Northern Mesopotamia: In its cities, towns, and villages, the Syriac- or Christian-Aramaic-speaking populations were deeply integrated in the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Byzantine Empire, strongly embracing the “Roman” identity. This is reflected with striking emphasis and frequency in their literary production too. So, looking at the Qur’an and the double question about its possible intertexts and about the cultural political world(s) it addresses or engages with, this should mean that the dichotomy between “Syriac” and “Byzantine” intertexts, political milieus, religious groups etc. that is still at work in a part of relevant scholarship should be seriously revised.

Dmitrij Bumazhnov

University of Göttingen



Apocalypticism and the concept of the Last Byzantine Emperor as a context for the Qur'ān

Abstract

According to a certain number of Christian sources from the late 4th – 7th centuries, the abdication of the Last Roman (i.e. Byzantine) Emperor and his handing over the royal power to God shall introduce the final eschatological period of world history. The story of Dhū al-qarnayn (i.e. Alexander the Great, Qur'ān 18:83–101) borrows extensively from one of those sources, the so-called Syriac Alexander Legend. It was observed that widely accepted Gerrit Reinink's dating the Legend from shortly after 629/630 needs reevaluation due to the traditional date of Muḥammad's death in 632 (Ghaffar, 2020). One of the necessary steps in this respect is a fresh look at all available texts related to the Legend including two passages from sūra 18 (18:60–63 and 83–101). Only on this basis can conclusions concerning the Qur'ānic reception of the Last Roman Emperor legend be drawn. The paper provides some glimpses into the work in progress on this topic.

Zishan Ghaffar

University of Paderborn



Believing rulers and the political theology of the Qur'ān within it's Byzantine context

Abstract

*Several Qur'ānic figures as Solomon, David, and Alexander are described in the Qur'ān as believers with special authority and power, who ruled on earth with divine permission. Heribert Busse famously categorized this type of Qur'ānic ruler as "Herrschertypen" and analyzed a certain affinity between them. This paper tries to reconstruct the political theology of the Qur'ān inherent to these political figures. It aims to contextualize Qur'ānic concepts such as *mulk* and *ḥalīfa* as part of late antique political discourses in the Byzantine realm.*

Ana Davitashvili

University of Tübingen



“Martyrs,” Being Alive with God in Q 2:154 and 3:169, and War Propaganda of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius: A Reconsideration

Abstract

The paper examines the Qur’ānic concepts of shuhadā’ (frequently translated as “martyrs”) and being alive with God after dying in battle and compares them with Syriac and Byzantine ideas of martyrdom and imminent reward of martyrs by God. In Q 9:111, the Qur’ān claims that the promise of salvation for killing by the believers and being killed as believers is shared by the Torah and the Gospel. Yet it is not exactly clear how it relates to Christian ideas. Recently, Tommaso Tesei (2019) has argued for a relationship between Heraclius’ understanding of military martyrdom and the Qur’ānic concept of dying in battle. On the other hand, Tor Andrae (1926) and Nicolai Sinai (2017) have referred to a similar wording of the East Syrian father, Mar Ishai, and the Qur’ānic phrase of “being alive with God.” This paper takes stock of these scholarly works and offers new evidence as well as possible explanations on how Qur’ānic ideas on this theme have emerged.

Klaus von Stosch

University of Bonn



Jesus and Mary in Q 5 – An anti-imperial discourse in the Qur'ān as a critique of Byzantine misuse of Christology

Abstract

The paper wants to unlock some influence of Byzantine imperial theology on the latest developments of the Qur'ānic perception of Christianity. Especially the use of Jesus and Mary in Herakleios' propaganda after the siege of Constantinople in 626 seems to have a considerable impact on their Qur'ānic treatment. The paper wants to explain some verses of Q 5 with the help of Byzantine imperial intertexts. It also tries to defend the legacy of the Qur'ānic interventions from a Christian point of view. This will be a way of exploring whether the Qur'ān can be understood as a Word of God that is also addressed to Christians.

Angelika Neuwirth

Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences



Politics and Liturgy – Byzantine cultic practices and figures of thought reflected in the Qurʾān

Abstract

While the geopolitical embedding of the Qurʾān, its emergence from an area where communities /states with imperial ambitions were competing with each other, has received due attention in recent scholarship, the discovery of textual traces of the resulting tensions was to take time. A new reading of the “political Qurʾān” was started by the team of the Corpus Coranicum project and was pursued systematically by the convenor of this conference. Concerning Byzantium, the hypothesis has come to prevail that it was the propaganda image of the emperor Heraclius that exerted the most substantial impact on the Qurʾān, particularly in the doctrinal domain. But since the Qurʾān is not primarily a container of ideas but equally a poetically, indeed a liturgically coded message, one should expect encounters with Byzantium in other venues as well: such as poetry and liturgy, sound and performance, all prominently present in Byzantine culture. These will hardly have remained hidden from the access of the proto-Islamic community. The paper will trace aspects of the possible aesthetic impact of Byzantine culture focusing on those suras that should have emerged during and in the wake of the occupation of Jerusalem in 614. The aesthetic discourse has been sidelined unduly in favor of the more topical political and doctrinal problems. Two points of entry into this field will be proposed: a liturgical (performance) and a literary (hymnology) touching on a central issue of Byzantine theology.

Nora K. Schmid

University of Oxford



Qur'ānic Legal and Ethical Exhortation in Light of Byzantine Homiletics

Abstract

Preaching had an important impact on the textual genesis of the Qur'ān, especially during the latest stage, the Medinan period. The genre of the homily flourished in Late Antiquity, but the Qur'ān's ties to Byzantine preaching and homiletics have not so far been comprehensively studied. This paper examines Qur'ānic legal and ethical exhortations in light of the homilies of popular Byzantine preachers who flourished in the period between the fourth and the sixth century, notably John Chrysostom (d. 407). Byzantine sermons display a number of significant parallels to the ethical and legal hortatory discourse that characterizes the Medinan suras. Similar interactions between the preacher and the audience on the one hand and the Prophet and his listeners on the other hand emerge from sermons and suras. For example, John Chrysostom warns his audience in his ninth Homily on Repentance and Almsgiving, "I am saying these things to those who absent themselves from the sacred meetings and to those who busy themselves with everyday matters." Qur'ānic suras similarly accuse the listeners of being distracted: "When they see merchandise or some diversion, they scatter to it and leave you standing [...]" (Q 62:11). Besides interactions with the listeners, this paper explores shared legal and ethical themes, such as almsgiving. It also touches on formal and structural similarities such as the use of certain metaphors, especially light imagery, and rhetorical patterns with vocatives, interrogatives, and imperatives, which are used to convey ethical and legal knowledge.

Charbel Rizk

University of Paderborn



The Arabic Qur'ān and the Syriac Mimrā

Abstract

Previous scholarship has recognized strong ties between the Qur'ān and Christian Syriac tradition with regard to stylistic and formal aspects (on the lexical, linguistic, and structural levels). This paper investigates striking parallels between the Arabic Qur'ān as proclaimed by Muhammad and the Syriac Mimrā as proclaimed by Jacob of Serugh. Especially three aspects will be analyzed: The liturgical form, the orality of both text corpora, and the self-image of their proclaimers. These parallels suggest that the Arabic Qur'ān and Muhammad's self-image stand closer to the Syriac Mimrā and Jacob's self-image than has been acknowledged heretofore.

Sebastian Bitsch

Georg-August Universität Göttingen



The Long Shadow of Zoroaster. Spolia of Mazdean eschatological motifs in the Qur'ān

Abstract

Although a profound influence of Iranian religious ideas on the genesis of the Qur'ān and the emerging Islamic umma has been postulated more than a century ago (e.g. Goldziher 1901, St. Clair Tisdall 1905, Richter 1927), Mazdean texts have only played a rather marginal role in scholarly endeavours to reconstruct the polyphonic late antique milieu of the Qur'ānic proclamation. Scholars have instead discussed texts predominantly deriving from Jewish and Christian traditions with quite impressive and illuminating results for our understanding of opaque Qur'ānic eschatological discourses by emphasizing the importance of "the last great war of antiquity" as a catalyst of eschatological reflections. The paper aims at sketching the political impact of the Sāsānian Empire upon the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of the Qur'ānic proclamation, which also seems to indicate a transfer of religious ideas towards the Ḥijāz. Based on the tentative hypothesis that the cataclysmic events of the period may have initiated a boom of eschatological expectations throughout the late antique Near East – and thus may also have fostered a proliferation and dissemination of nuclei of Mazdean eschatological ideas – a variety of potential Qur'ānic allusions to eschatological topoi in the Avesta and Middle Persian literature will be discussed.

Holger Zellentin

University of Tübingen



The Arabian Qur'ān Between the Bible and Byzantium

Abstract

The Qur'ān stands in unmitigated linguistic, cultural, and theological continuity with many aspects of its pagan Arabian compositional context. At the same time, it has been shown to introduce a broad selection of late antique Biblical culture into the Western Arabian religious landscape. This talk seeks to profile the type of Biblical culture Muhammad brought to Mecca and to Medina. I argue that this culture most closely corresponds to that of the Late Roman "Diocese of the East," an area stretching from the Sinai Peninsula to Roman Mesopotamia that continued to cohere politically, economically, and culturally past Justinian's reforms and at least up to the Sassanian invasions. In this sense, I hold that the Qur'ān indeed reflects aspects of Byzantine forms of Christianity and Judaism, which in turn interacted with Jewish and Christian communities in Sasanian Persia and with each other. Building on my recent research on the Qur'ānic community's interactions with Jews and Christians, I suggest that we should therefore broaden the cultural sphere of Eastern Byzantium, and of the Diocese of the East to include much of Western Arabia.





