Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qurʾān as a Literary Text, by Angelika Neuwirth (Qurʾanic Studies Series, 10) (New York: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), xl + 470 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-870164-4, ₤ 80.00

Over the last decades, Professor Angelika Neuwirth (Freie Universität, Berlin) has become one of the leading figures of Qurʾānic studies and the *Corpus Coranicum* project led by her is a major attempt to develop the field.

Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community collects together twelve articles published by Neuwirth in 1991-2009, adding two new articles that do not seem to have been published elsewhere, as well as an Introduction. Many of the articles have been revised for the new publication and several appear here for the first time in English.

The articles are divided into three sections. The first four form a section on "Pagan and monotheistic frameworks," the following six are on "The liturgical Qurʾan and the emergence of the community," and the final section "Narrative figures between the Bible and the Qurʾan," closes the book with five articles. Obviously, there is a lot of overlap between the themes of the articles published in the three sections. As the other articles have been earlier published and are easily available elsewhere, the present review will concentrate on the new articles.

The two new articles are no. 2 "From tribal genealogy to divine covenant: Qurʾanic re-figurations of pagan Arab ideals based on Biblical models" and no. 9 "A discovery of evil in the Qurʾan? Revisiting Qurʾanic versions of the Decalogue in the context of pagan Arab Late Antiquity," both originally written by Neuwirth in German and here translated into English by W. Scott Chahanovich.

"From tribal genealogy to divine covenant" (pp. 53–75) studies how genealogy lost some of its earlier importance in the growing Muslim community. The idea is by no means new, but Neuwirth analyzes a number of Qurʾānic texts to show the processes behind this gradual change. While her analysis is convincing in an overall way and the discussion of the Qurʾānic texts themselves very insightful, there are

also a number of details which are either taken for granted or considered proven by earlier studies which are not conclusive.

Thus, to make the contrast between the old and the new models of thought as sharp as possible, Neuwirth (p. 53) summarizes the old ideas of nobility "in the Arabian milieu" as resting "at the heart of the concept of *muruwwa* (heroism), the dominant behavioural code which was strongly imprinted with Bedouin values."

The *muruwwah* forms, without doubt, the "dominant behavioural code" in pre-Islamic poetry, but it is a long shot to assume that it must have been the dominant code also in the towns and among the agriculturalists, especially as Neuwirth elsewhere assumes that Biblical stories were well known on the Peninsula and monotheist religions had already started infiltrating there, even the Meccans becoming "monotheistically inclined" (cf. below). It is also dubious whether we can read poetry as indicative of the Bedouin code in real Bedouin life as such.

It is not a question of some individual cases, either. In the same article, we find *al-abtar* (Q 108:3) translated as "cut off" (which most probably is correct), but then the further conclusion is given without any supporting evidence: "... spiritual abundance compensates for the poor pedigree for which he [i.e., the Prophet] was derided (as we may infer from Q. 108:3)" (p. 55). This is an inference which reads more into the brief and enigmatic passage than the text itself allows. We know that the Prophet (assuming in the first place that this refers to the Prophet and not to Everyman) was cut off – but from what and because of a "poor pedigree" or for some other reason, remains unclear.

Speculation all too often takes the role of evidence. Neuwirth continues, p. 56, by analysing Q 102 to refer to "ancestry worship" (on the basis of *zurtum al-maqābir*). This leads her to interpret Q 56:47-48 in similar terms:

> Thus Q 56:47-48 reports that they scoff at the notion that their ancestors will be raised from the dead: *What, when we are dead and become dust and bones, shall we indeed be raised up? / What, and our fathers, the ancients?* Resurrection, an event making all men equal, would deprive their forefathers of the privileged status they continue to enjoy post-mortem.

The most unforced reading of the passage is to take it as referring to the absurdity of the idea that dead people would be resurrected and

the utter absurdity of those being resurrected who had been dead for ages. To read a deprivation "of the privileged status" into this is again making far-reaching conclusions based on little concrete evidence.

Similar stretching of the evidential basis is common in the article. The eschatological passages Q 80:33-37 and Q 70:8-14 are interpreted by Neuwirth to refer to the collapse of clan solidarity and the powerlessness of the tribal system in the individual calamity of the Day of Judgement (pp. 57–58). The passages certainly emphasize the individuality of the horrors, but I fail to see any signs of clans and tribal society in them. They do, obviously, say that "a man shall flee from his brother, his mother, his father, his consort, his sons" and that "no loyal friend shall question loyal friend" and "[t]he sinner will wish that he might ransom himself from the chastisement of that day even by his sons, his companion wife, his brother, his kin who sheltered him, and whosoever is in the earth."

The first passage, however, speaks only of the immediate family and the second only makes a passing mention of "kin" between the immediate family and humanity in general. Both passages would equally well work in an agrarian context without any trace of tribal society or in a modern urban context, for that matter.

Philological material is also used somewhat impressionistically. On pp. 62–63, Neuwirth analyzes the term *dhurriyyah* (progeny). She starts with an undocumented claim that the word derives from "*dharrah/dhurrah*, meaning 'grain seed'." As is well known, there, sadly, is still no proper etymological dictionary of Arabic, but all lexicographical evidence for *dhurriyyah* points rather to the semantic fields of "scattering; putting forth" than of "seed," related though they naturally may be. The etymological cognate seems to be Hebrew *zārā* "scatter," not *zeraʿ* "seed." It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that "grain seed" has been selected as the etymon for *dhurriyyah* to make the word fit with the Hebrew *zeraʿ*, which does mean "grain seed" and supports Neuwirth's argument.

Indeed, Neuwirth notes that "[i]t is phonetically near, though not etymologically related, to the Hebrew word *zeraʿ*, 'seed,' *zeraʿ* is used in the Biblical patriarch narratives as a circumscription of 'progeny'." There is a phonetic similarity between the two words, but only a vague one, as the phonemes Dh and *ʿayn* were clearly distinguished in the early seventh century from Z and *hamzah*/vowel length and the distinction between *ʿayn* (ʿ) and *hamzah* (ʾ) is still retained in almost

all Arabic dialects and when Dh vanished from most of them it coalesced with D, not Z.

Despite the vagueness of the evidence, "progeny" becomes a "Biblicising concept" on p. 63. The word is indeed used in conjunction with Noah and Abraham in the Qurʾān, as mentioned by Neuwirth, but also in other connections, which is not specifically mentioned by Neuwirth.

By piling together such passages which can, certainly, be read in the context of the collapse of a tribal society, but by no means need to be read so, the article creates a very strong feeling of a gradual change from the values of a tribal society to individual responsibility and the idea of a prophetic succession. Although in general lines this probably is what happened, the evidence adduced for this process remains vague and inconclusive.

The second new contribution, "A discovery of evil in the Qur'an? Revisiting Qur'anic versions of the Decalogue in the context of pagan Arab Late Antiquity" (pp. 253–274) compares the Decalogue with three passages of the Qurʾān (Q 17:22–39; 6:151–153; 2:83–85) and follows the development of the Decalogue in the Qurʾānic context.

Juxtaposing the three texts is revealing, and it is interesting to see how the later passages concentrate on some of the commandments presented in the probably oldest and certainly longest text, Q 17:22–39. While again interpretatively insightful, the article shows similar signs of a rather cavalier attitude toward concrete evidence. Thus, Neuwirth analyses Q 17:29 (against excessive spending) in terms of the character of the *ʿādhilah* in poetry, where it is her role to warn the poet of extravagant generosity and nonchalance about wealth (p. 263). All this is based on one sentence (*fa-taqʿuda madhmūm^{an} makhdhūl^{an}*), which expresses a very universal idea: if you waste all your money, you'll soon find yourself reduced to poverty and people will blame you.

To make the case more concrete, one would have welcomed a detailed analysis of the vocabulary and the syntax (do they mirror poetic conventions?), instead of a sweeping reference to the theme on a very general level. Neuwirth does refer to her *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike* (2010): 697–698, but there is no concrete evidence for this to be found there, either. A certain similarity there undoubtedly is, but it is still a far cry from the conclusion:

The Qur'anic Decalogue's strategy – of drawing upon both the Biblical Decalogue text and the poetic topoi in order to formulate norms to be heeded by a Meccan society that was monotheistically inclined but still accustomed to receiving messages through poetry – has to be acknowledged as a particularly effective strategy for appropriating authority.

Poetic topoi are taken up in the article and used to interpret the Qur'ān, which is highly commendable but should be based on careful and detailed comparisons. Thus, p. 264, identifies "Satans" in Q 17: 26–27, not with "the evil one in Christian understanding, but rather one of the demons (*jinn*), who, according to pre-Islamic belief, inspire the poets and who are thus partly responsible for the exalted heroic world view of the *jāhiliyya* expressed in poetry." This interpretation leaves unexplained the sentence *wa-kāna l-shayṭānu li-Rabbihī kafūrᵃⁿ*, which clearly refers to one Satan and alludes to Islamic ideas of the relations between Satan and God. It also makes a semantic jump from poets propagating extravagance as part of the *muruwwah* ideology to poets themselves being extravagant (*inna l-mubadhdhirīna kānū ikhwān al-shayāṭīn*) without any comment. How real the belief in demons inspiring the poets actually was, is another matter that would need some investigation.

A few lines later, Neuwirth summarises "poetry's anthropocentric world view, wherein heroic man autonomously rules over his own world." The role of Fate in pre-Islamic poetry may have been exaggerated by some scholars, but, on the other hand, it is hardly just to speak about "heroic man autonomously" ruling his world. The pre-Islamic worldview, of which we know unfortunately little, was hardly at either of the two ends, fully fate-governed or absolutely autonomous.

The already published articles are here conveniently put together and they are now easily available, especially for the English-speaking reader. Despite the sometimes cavalier attitude toward evidence, the articles are well worth reading, with a multitude of thought-provoking ideas and interesting interpretations.

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