

Story-telling  
in the framework  
of non-fictional  
Arabic literature

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- 74 lam yaṭmiṭhanna insun qablahum wa-lā ḡānn  
 75 fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukaddībān?  
 76 muttaki'ina 'alā rafrāfin huḍrin wa-'abqarīyin ḥisān  
 77 fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukaddībān?

liturgical motto (doxology):

- 78 tabāraka smu rabbika dī l-ḡalālī wa-l-ikrām!

## The biography of the Prophet and its scriptural basis

WIM RAVEN

Whoever may want to write a biography of Nadjīb Maḥfūz will have a difficult task. The novelist has been so discreet about his private life that almost nothing is known about it. However, since he is famous and has written an extended œuvre, one may guess what will happen one day: a biography will appear, mainly based on his *works*. This, I suppose, is what has happened with biographies of authors of all times and cultures.

In ancient Arabic literature, the situation was similar, as some examples may show. In the case of the pre-Islamic poet Ta'abbata Šarran a question which apparently cried for an answer was, how he had got that peculiar nickname, which means: 'he carried something evil under his arm'. Several anecdotes (*akhbār*) adduce explanations; one of them recounts that the poet had a fight with a *ghūl*, which he killed and carried home under his arm. Since he composed some lines of poetry about a fight with a *ghūl*, it is obvious that this particular anecdote was inspired not only by the desire to explain his name, but also by that poetic text.<sup>1</sup>

Another example: the little that is supposed to be known about the life of the Umayyad poet al-Šamardal was almost completely distilled from his *diwān*, as SEIDENSTICKER pointed out.<sup>2</sup>

Of the anecdotes about the life and death of Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd al-Zāhiri (255–297/868–910), a good deal is directly based on his *Kitāb al-Zahra*.<sup>3</sup>

1 Abū l-Faradj al-Iṣbahāni: *K. al-Aghāni*. Cairo 1927-61, XXI, 128-9.

2 TILMAN SEIDENSTICKER: *Die Gedichte des Šamardal ibn Šarḥ. Neuedition, Übersetzung, Kommentar*. Wiesbaden 1983, 4-9.

3 W. RAVEN: *Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣbahāni and his Kitāb al-Zahra*. Diss. Leiden 1989, 53.

Narrators who rely on texts by the very authors they want to write about may have various starting-points. Their primary interest may be the author's life, which they find so important or fascinating that they start collecting text fragments, to exploit them for their purpose and knit them into a coherent, marketable narration. Their activity can also start from the author's text itself. They may, for instance, wish to explain an enigmatic passage by weaving a story around it. Or they may search for the circumstances in which the text came into being. Many a piece of ancient Arabic poetry would be incomprehensible, had it not been embedded in an explicatory narration.

The assessment of fictitious elements in historiographical *akhbār* may draw attention to their literary quality, but it does not necessarily invalidate them as historical sources.<sup>4</sup> Whether we like it or not, we have to agree with this statement of STEFAN LEDER,<sup>4</sup> since neither fact nor fiction ever occurs in an unadulterated form. But what about intertextuality? When an element in an anecdote is not only fictitious, but can demonstrably be reduced to some earlier text fragment, can it still be used as a historical source? Whoever believes that the historical Ta'abbata Sharran really carried a *ghāzī*/home under his arm may see his belief already shaken when he understands how aetiological legends work, but he will loose it completely as soon as he reads Ta'abbata's verse about his fight with that *ghāzī*.

Does this have any relevance in the case of Muḥammad? The Prophet was not considered to be the author of the Koran, but he was so closely connected with that scripture that, for practical purposes, he was treated like an author. His biography is largely dependent on the scripture he spread. The situation with Muḥammad is even more complicated than with other authors, because the biographical elements are not only connected with his 'own' text, the Koran, but also with biblical narrations,<sup>5</sup> and perhaps with other literary sources, such as Christian legends of the saints.<sup>6</sup>

4 STEFAN LEDER: The Literary Use of the *Khabar*. A Basic Form of Historical Writing. In: AVERIL CAMERON and LAWRENCE CONRAD (eds.): *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*. I. *Problems in the Literary Source Material*. Princeton 1992 (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 1), 277-315, at 306.

5 See e.g. HANS VON MÛZIK: Die Gideon-Saul-Legende und die Überlieferung der Schlacht bei Badr. Ein Beitrag zur ältesten Geschichte des Islam. In: *WZKM* 29 (1915), 371-383.

6 G. D. NEWBY: An Example of Coptic Literary Influence on Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah*. In: *JNES* 31 (1972), 22-28, establishes a parallel between the story about the Nadjran Christian ascet

The perception that the *vita* of the Prophet is useless for historiography inasmuch it is dependent on scripture is by no means new. However, it seems to have been persistently forgotten, and then rediscovered. Rather than with developments in science, this is due to the personal background and persuasion of the researcher, as well as with the *Zeigeist*. Some people happen to be 'sceptics'; others are not. Although non-Muslim scholars have no religious reason to believe what was written about Muḥammad, many of them simply feel at home with the traditional stories, whereas others seem to know no greater pleasure than debunking them.

In the early fifties the 'conservative' scholar W. M. WATT wrote an extensive biography of the Prophet, which turned out to be the last one.<sup>7</sup> With WANSBROUGH, COOK AND CRONE<sup>8</sup> and others, a new wave of 'scepticism' came. Their works, although not generally accepted, at least spread the idea that writing a scholarly biography is no longer possible. After the 1980 Strasbourg colloquium on the *sīra*, a period of silence on the matter set in.<sup>9</sup>

This silence was broken recently, when URI RUBIN and GREGOR SCHOELER published sizable monographs on the *sīra*.<sup>10</sup> I was curious to see how these scholars would handle the use of scripture in the *sīra*.

In the introduction to his *Charakter und Authentie*, SCHOELER deals with the history of the research and the fluctuations of scepticism and counter-scepticism. In his important first chapter he discusses the character of the sources and their development from oral *ḥadīth* and *qiṣṣa* to fixed literary works meant for a general public (from about 800 AD onwards), with their intermediate stages

Faymiyūn (Ibn Hishām: *Das Leben Muhammed's nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk, bearbeitet von Abd el-Malik Ibn Hishām*. Ed. F. WÜSTENFELDT. Göttingen 1858, 20-22) and a Coptic hagiology about Pachomius. In this story the Prophet does not occur; yet saints' legends may well have contributed to other parts of the *sīra*.

7 *Muhammad at Mecca*. Oxford 1953; *Muhammad at Medina*. Oxford 1956.

8 E.g. J. WANSBROUGH: *The Sectararian Milieu. Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*. Oxford 1978; P. CRONE & M. COOK: *Hagarism. The making of the Islamic World*. Cambridge 1977.

9 *La vie du prophète Mahomet*. Colloque de Strasbourg (Octobre 1980). Ed. T. FAHD. Paris 1983. F.E. PETERS: The quest of the historical Muhammad. In: *JMES* 23 (1991), 291-315, surveys the debris left by the 'sceptics' and what there is left to do on Muhammad's biography.

10 URI RUBIN: *In the Eye of the Beholder. The Life of Muhammad as viewed by the Early Muslims. A Textual Analysis*. Princeton 1995. GREGOR SCHOELER: *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds*. Berlin/New York 1996.

such as mnemotechnic aids, notebooks for private use, and fully-fledged books for internal use both in school and at court. Then he focuses on two narratives from the *sīra*: that of the first revelation (with the *iqra'* and *uṭīq* episodes as central motifs), and that of ʿĀ'isha's alleged adultery (*ifk*).

For SCHOELER, authentic (*echte*) traditions are traditions which were really transmitted, whereas inauthentic (*unechte*) traditions were consciously modified, embellished, ascribed to false authorities and/or contaminated. Applying these definitions enables him to declare many traditions authentic, for 'contradictions between various transmitted versions are not necessarily an argument against the authenticity (in this sense)'. When a story is transmitted orally, it is no wonder that already at an early stage *topoi* appear, to meet with both the expectations of the hearers and the inner logic of 'what must have happened'. 'We should not expect, then, not even in the case of 'authentic' traditions, that we have matter-of-fact reports about real events before us. What we have are at best 'memories' (*Erinnerungen*), or even more frequently, 'memories of memories'.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, this concept of authenticity obtains another ring when we read immediately after this exposé, with reference to the *ifk* story, that too much secpis is out of place, and that there is no reason to doubt the outline of the story, because:

- in oral transmission one or two generations after the event can be bridged without distorting the facts too much,
- the plurality in transmission is almost a recommendation (a variant of the traditional muslim *mutawātir* argument?),
- the anecdotes have resisted the usual pattern of idealisation, in this case of ʿĀ'isha as the mother of the faithful.

In my view early Muslims were by no means shy when it came to writing fiction. They did not even hesitate to describe the *allzumenschliche* characteristics of the Prophet. Besides, ʿĀ'isha does not always have a good press in Tradition. Often enough she is depicted as jealous and bothersome. In the *ifk* story she is dripping with so much innocence that one is almost inevitably convinced of her guilt. However, SCHOELER would agree that scepticism is a matter of taste, and I should not allow myself to be carried away into a discussion of a type which SCHOELER is right in avoiding carefully.

<sup>11</sup> SCHOELER: *Charakter*, 163-164.

SCHOELER's method has various great merits: 1) He uses *all* versions of a story he can lay hands on. That this is necessary has also been seen and said by others, but who else brought this principle into practice? - 2) He studies the relationship between the various transmissions and establishes where every version of a story belongs on the scale between orally transmitted and fixed literary text. - 3) On this base, he convincingly assigns dates to the various stages of a text, with the help of *isnād* analysis according to the common link method designed by J. SCHACHT and further developed by G. H. A. JUYNBOLL. This is one of the first serious attempts to apply that method, outside the works of JUYNBOLL himself.

The 'character', then, is the oral, written or literary character of a tradition; an important aspect indeed. Besides, SCHOELER sometimes characterises a given version of a narrative in a few words, by summarising its tenor. However, one looks in vain for an investigation into the impact of the Scripture on the narratives. Next to textuality lies intertextuality, but the latter is not discussed at all, in spite of the fact that koranic text plays an eminent part in both the *iqra'* and the *ifk* story. SCHOELER is of course aware of this, but leaves it simply outside the scope of his book. This remains to be studied, because there would indeed be reason to doubt the outline of a story, if koranic text were at the origin of it. And, more interesting, koranic text may have been applied differently in the various versions of a narrative, which affects their character.

In *The Eye of the Beholder*, RUBIN studied eleven motifs and episodes from the *sīra* which refer to Muḥammad's Meccan period, and we can only hope that he will continue with the materials about Medina. In his introduction, he declares not to be interested in finding out 'what really happened', which is a great relief. The study of Muḥammad's biography as literature, which is long overdue, has always been impeded by the obsession with the 'historical Muḥammad'. From RUBIN's revealing chapter on chronology in the *sīra*, which leaves few illusions about the 'historical Muḥammad', I deduce that he may well be a 'sceptic'. On the other hand, his dating of traditions (*hadīth*) is conservative, or at least vague: traditions are earlier than the *sīra*, if I understand him right, and he speaks about earlier and later traditions without explaining why they are so. There is no attempt to assign dates to the traditions or to establish a relative chronology for them, except on the base of their contents. This does not distract much from the value of the book, which is above all an eye-opener for the possible scriptural

origins of the stories, and how these were removed, manipulated or enriched. In fact, the scriptural base of Muhammad's biography is the main subject of his book.

I will try to summarise RUBIN's view of the development of narratives about the Prophet:

In the beginning there is something like a 'basic narrative framework',<sup>12</sup> describing the bare facts or wording a universal theme. Since the Prophet was modelled on his biblical predecessors, this framework was likely to be padded with biblical materials. Or the original stage of a narrative was biblical in the first place. The basic narrative framework is always independent of koranic verses and ideas.

Somewhat later, the biblical elements were found embarrassing. Therefore themes found (also) their way into narratives with an Arabian atmosphere, a Meccan decor, pre-Islamic poetry and pagan actors.

The next step was the islamisation of the stories. Unislamic details, e.g. allusions to the Bible, were eliminated. Adaptations to koranic models were made, and koranic texts were woven into the framework, to embellish it and make it acceptable for the increasingly islamised environment. This is what RUBIN calls koranisation.<sup>13</sup> It took place in *sīra* works.

In the last stage, these koranised *sīra* fragments were turned into 'occasions for the revelation', *asbāb al-nuzūl* stories. This happened only in *tafsīr* works, which are essentially later than and separate from *sīra* texts.

As a matter of fact, RUBIN does not claim that all narrations actually go through all these stages. It is merely a model of what happened to *sīra* materials during their development, that can be distilled from his investigations.

I will briefly mention two convincing illustrations of RUBIN's way of looking at things here:

It is fascinating to see how a biblical description of the expected Prophet: 'He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street [...] (*Isaiah* 42:2), turns into a fully-fledged Islamic Tradition without any biblical reference, about a prophet who 'is not crude nor coarse, and does not raise his voice in the

<sup>12</sup> This expression reminds of SELLEHEIM's *Grundschrift*, albeit that RUBIN is not interested in 'what really happened'. In his view, these basic stories only deal with facts *as told*.

<sup>13</sup> He writes *Quransisation*, I homogenised the orthography.

streets'.<sup>14</sup> This indeed is a clear case of islamisation by eliminating an embarrassing biblical element.

The Traditions about the splitting of Muhammad's belly (*shaqq al-baṭn*), which were adulterated, in their later stages, with the wordings of sura 94 (opening of the breast, *sharḥ al-ṣadr*), are a convincing example of koranisation of an ancient Arabian motif.<sup>15</sup>

How does RUBIN's scheme of koranisation work out with a narrative which he did not discuss? I tried it with the story of how Quraysh plotted to starve out, expel or kill Muhammad, just before the *hidjra*, and how the latter had 'Ali sleep in his bed and left unseen; which I read in the version of Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabari<sup>16</sup> and that of Wahb ibn Munabbih.<sup>17</sup>

Both versions are elaborations of Q 8:30: 'And [remember] when the unbelievers plotted against you, so as to confine you, kill or expel you. They schemed, and Allah schemed, but Allah is the best of schemers'.<sup>18</sup>

The three possible lines of action against the Prophet mentioned in the Koran verse all find a parallel in the narration,<sup>19</sup> as does God's counter-plot. So at least about this particular narrative it is obvious that it was generated by the Koran. There are too many correspondences to suppose anything else. Now RUBIN would probably like to see an earlier, non-koranised version of this episode, but apparently there is none. It seems that, for lack of an older layer to be koranised, the narrator could only start from the bare fact of that plot, then looked for an appropriate Koran passage to apply, found Q 8:30, and built his plot – and – counter-plot story on it. But was there ever such a bare fact, outside this story? Did the event really take place? Or did the plot of Quraysh take place, whereas God's counterplot did not? Here we are back at the tiresome question of 'what really happened,' which RUBIN, sympathetically, wished to avoid.

The idea of koranisation of an initially non-koranic 'basic narrative framework' seems simply not to work here. Besides, the narration presents itself

14 RUBIN: *Eye*, 30ff.

15 RUBIN: *Eye*, 59ff.

16 Ibn Hishām: Ed. F. WÜSTENFELD, I,1-2 - II. GÖTTINGEN 1858 1860, I,1, 326; al-Ṭabari: *Tārīkh al-rusul wal-mulūk*, Ed. M.J. DE GÖEJE, Series I-III, Leiden 1879-1901 I, 1229-34.

17 R.G. KHOURY: *Wahb b. Munabbih. Teil I. Der Heidelberger Papyrus PSR Heid. Arab. Leben und Werk des Dichters*, Wiesbaden 1972, 23, 136-144.

18 *The Qur'an. A modern English Version*. Trsl. MAJID FAKHRY. Reading 1997.

19 The order in the narration has been changed, however, to build up more suspense.

explicitly as an *asbāb al-nuzūl* story,<sup>20</sup> and it does so in *sīra* contexts, not in a *tafsīr* work, as RUBIN would have liked it to see.

However, for part of the story RUBIN's line of thought is applicable. God's counter-plot consists, among other things, in His making the Quraysh enemies temporarily blind. Muḥammad spreads dust on their heads and walks away without being seen by them. In the version of Wāḥb this part of the story comes with a piece of poetry. RUBIN would recognise here a non-koranic, Arabia-centered 'basic narrative framework'. In Ibn Hishām's edition of Ibn Ishāq, however, the motif is grafted onto Q 36:8: '[...] and We have covered them, so they do not see.' From the eight quoted verses of sura 36, only these words were, with some effort, applicable to the narrative. So this is indeed an interesting case of attempted koranisation as meant by RUBIN. It seems fruitful, in any case, to read the *sīra* with RUBIN's scheme of koranisation in mind. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not, but for every time it does we owe him gratitude.

The way RUBIN handles the story of the Satanic verses I cannot find convincing. He considers the episode with these verses secondary and sees it embedded in the theme of isolation by rejection. So far so good. First he adduces a non-Koran tradition of al-Zuhri about this theme:

al-Wāḡidi *ʿan* Ma'mar *ʿan* al-Zuhri: The Prophet calls to Islam in secret; many young and weak men follow him. The Quraysh admit that he is spoken to from heaven. But when he attacks their idols, and states that their fathers have perished in unbelief, they resent it and persecute the Prophet.<sup>21</sup>

Then he presents three versions of the story which are attributed to ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr. According to RUBIN,<sup>22</sup> 'Versions 1 and 2 represent the non-Quranic level, whereas version 3 is Quranic'. I summarise:

V. 1. Hishām *ʿan* ʿUrwa in his 'letter' to ʿAbd al-Malik:<sup>23</sup> The Meccans believe the Prophet and listen to him. When he attacks their idols, some Meccan leaders torment him. Most people abandon him, except a few. The Meccan leaders plot

20 Wāḥb ibn Munabbih, ed. KHOURY, 138; al-Ṭabarī: *Tārīkh*, I, 1234; Ibn Hishām, 326.

21 RUBIN: *Eye*, 156, the summary was done by me.

22 RUBIN: *Eye*, 157, quoting al-Ṭabarānī: *al-Muʿdjam al-kabīr*. Since I do not have this work at my disposal, I must rely on his excerpts.

23 This story exists in two versions. RUBIN presents on p. 157 the version of al-Ṭabarī: *Djāmiʿ al-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. Būlāq 1323–29, IX, 162–3. The other version is in al-Ṭabarī: *Tārīkh*, I, 1180–1.

to tempt (*ifṭatana*) their relatives away from God's religion. 'It was a vehement *fitna*.' Then the Prophet orders the Muslims to set off for Abyssinia [...].

– The Prophet remains in Mecca for several years; Meccans continue to torment converts. Yet, Islam spreads and even notables convert, so that the leaders moderate their persecution. 'This was the first *fitna*, the one which compelled the Muslims to leave for Abyssinia.'

– When the *fitna* calms down and Islam spreads in Mecca, this becomes known in Abyssinia and the Muslims return, feeling nearly safe in Mecca now. Islam spreads also in Medina. When the Meccan opponents see that, they plot to tempt them and to persecute them. 'This was the last *fitna*, and they were two: a *fitna* which caused some to go to Abyssinia [...], and a *fitna* when they had returned [...].'

V. 2. Ibn Lahī'a *ʿan* Abū l-Aswad *ʿan* ʿUrwa *ʿan* Miswar ibn Makhrama *ʿan* Makhrama ibn Nawfal:<sup>24</sup> All(!) Meccans become Muslims. The Muslims grow so numerous that they cannot perform prostration during the recitation of the Koran, because of the crowds. When the Meccan leaders return from Ṭāʾif, they reprove the Meccans for having abandoned the religion of their ancestors. The people renounce Islam and break up with the Prophet.

V. 3. Ibn Lahī'a *ʿan* Abū l-Aswad *ʿan* ʿUrwa.<sup>25</sup> [Muslims fled to Abyssinia due to persecution.]<sup>26</sup> [...] The polytheists say: If this man only mentioned our idols in a favourable manner [...]. Then God reveals sura 53. Satan introduces his own false words. 'This was the *fitna* of Satan.' The polytheists rejoice. At the end of the sura, Muḥammad prostrates himself, and everyone with him, except old al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīra. The polytheists are pleased with what Satan had thrown into the recitation of the Prophet. Their participation in the *ṣalāt* reaches the Muslims in Abyssinia; these return to Mecca. Gabriel comes in the evening to review the revelation. When checking sura 53, he flares up. Muḥammad becomes aware that he has spoken the words of Satan. God abrogates the Satanic verses and reveals Q 22:52.

24 RUBIN: *Eye*, 158, quoting al-Ṭabarānī.

25 RUBIN: *Eye*, 158–61, quoting al-Ṭabarānī.

26 RUBIN calls this the first *fitna* of version 1'. I would be curious to see whether the word *fitna* is used in the text itself.

It is obvious that V. 3 is permeated with koranic materials, but is it therefore the koranised elaboration of something like al-Zuhri's tradition, or of 'Urwa's V. 1? The first one looks like a short epitome, and V. 1 looks far from being a 'basic narrative framework' to me. It twice repeats the same motif: 'after initial success, a *fitna* arose', and a third time in a different way. One gains the impression that the compiler knew two or three conflicting variants of the same story, none of which he wanted to discard; so he combined them in one report. Of what had been essentially one *fitna*, he made two-and-a-half *fitnas*, two with a number and one without. The resulting report is clumsy, and by no means a narration. The compiler wanted, or had to be, very concise. Apparently he wrote for an addressee already acquainted with the subject matter, who may have needed a mnemonic device, or a politically correct compendium.

And this hybrid, incomprehensible, condensed triple report would be the real thing, the narrative starting-point? That seems very unlikely. Why would not Q 17:73–75 have been the starting-point of the whole episode, with its keyword *iftitana*, a golden opportunity for every story-teller? Maybe it was recounted in a period of real *fitnas* (civil wars), which made it attractive to project the *fitna* phenomenon into the past. Or otherwise the origin of the story may have been Q 22:52, which, by the way, was presented as a *sabab al-nuzūl* as early as Ibn Bukayr's edition of Ibn Ishāq.<sup>27</sup> Is it not just as well conceivable that the compilers of the short versions were familiar with all the koranic materials, but omitted them because they were irrelevant for their purposes?

And what about V. 2? Is this an early, not – yet – koranised version of the story, or is it a late, *de-koranised* version with the emphasis on prostration, the remains of a longer text in which sura 53 once figured, as suggested by RUBIN himself?<sup>28</sup> And would this not indicate an early rather than a late koranisation?

We simply cannot know how it started, and certainly not from such a small number of texts. Here I would have liked to see SCHOELER at work before RUBIN! The latter mostly uses only a few versions of the story – although his footnotes show that he knows many more – and he does not look at the type of text he has before him. SCHOELER would use them all, and establish their interdependence and relative dates. RUBIN's discourse remains rather impressionistic,

27 Ibn Ishāq: *Ṣirat ibn Ishāq al-musammāt bi-kitāb al-mubtada' wal-mab'ath wal-maghāzī*. Ed. M. HAMIDULLAH. Rabat 1976, no. 219.

28 RUBIN: *Eye*, 165–6.

meant to support his schedule: non-koranic traditions are original, koranised stories are later, and *asbāb* stories are the final stage. As long as no research is done about the relative dating of *all* the reports and into their character, in the Schoelerian sense of the word, we cannot be sure at all.

SCHOELER and RUBIN have reopened the discussion in different ways, both of which are worth to be continued. It is as if with their books the research into the *sīra* as literature has only begun.

I am still wondering, however, what the exact relations are between *sīra* and Koran or other Scripture. RUBIN answered many, but not all questions. It seems that these relations are manifold, and a next step should be to establish a detailed survey of the various possibilities.

For the moment I only suggest some points for further investigation.

– What is the precise nature of an *asbāb al-nuzūl* story? It claims that first some event took place, on account of which a piece of Koran was revealed. In reality the koranic fragment was there first. After it, and because of it, the story came into existence. HENRI LAMMENS without doubt went too far by suggesting that the whole *sīra* amounts to *asbāb al-nuzūl*. However, RUBIN goes to the other extreme in claiming that *no* part of the *sīra* is such a story: 'no process of spinning a narrative framework round a Quranic verse seems to have taken place.'<sup>29</sup> Or is a *sabab* only an *sabab* when it features the words: 'And thereupon God revealed ...'? There is probably something like a gliding scale between a koranised story and a *asbāb al-nuzūl* story.

– The two narrations about the Satanic Verses in al-Ṭabari's *Tarīkh* are briefly mentioned by RUBIN, but not discussed. The first version<sup>30</sup> presents itself an *asbāb al-nuzūl* story for Q 22:52. The other one<sup>31</sup> is more interesting, as it shows the Satanic Verses episode as an *asbāb al-nuzūl* story for Q 17:73–75, but in the end, albeit somewhat less clearly, *also* as the occasion for the revelation of Q 22:52. Two *asbāb* in one story, that seems to be worth investigating. Should we assume, with RUBIN, that there was a basic story to which koranic verses, including their *asbāb*, could be added to taste? And how do these stories relate to those which RUBIN did discuss?

29 RUBIN: *Eye*, 227.

30 al-Ṭabari: *Tarīkh*, I, 1192–3.

31 al-Ṭabari: *Tarīkh*, I, 1195–6.

– When a koranic verse forms the inspiration of a narrative, the verse need not, or hardly, be quoted. RUBIN himself points to a short version of the first revelation story which had at least the key word *ufuq* in common with sura 53:7.<sup>32</sup> The more elaborated versions of the *ufuq* episode do not have more words in common with sura 53, but the whole setting reminds of the beginning of that sura: *dhū mirra*; *istawā* (either standing, or sitting on a throne or chair, or throwing one leg over another (while sitting?); the difference in height, the vision. Was the intention of the story to casually explain away the embarrassing presence of Allāh, and replacing Him by an angel? Or did Allāh Himself sit on His throne, in some primal version? I cannot help surmising that the whole story was inspired by sura 53 in the first place.

– The story about the reception of Muslim emigrants by the Negus of Abyssinia seems to be built around Koran 3:191.<sup>33</sup>

– In Ibn Ishāq the Ascension story is both preceded and followed by passages about revilers and mockers.<sup>34</sup> These have no connection with the Ascension story, unless one thinks of Q 17:90–93: 'We will not believe in you until you [...] ascend to heaven [...]'. When this miracle had happened indeed, they still refused to believe; that is what Ibn Ishāq apparently intends to express. The unquoted koranic verse may well play a part in the background.

– The first half of the *ifk* story is non-koranic, the second half is very firmly embedded in part of sura 24. This cries for an explanation.

All these, and without any doubt many more, ways of handling of koranic texts in the *sīra* deserve further study.

32 RUBIN: *Eye*, 110.

33 W. RAVEN: Some Early Islamic Texts on the Negus of Abyssinia, In: *JSS* 33 (1988), 197–218, at 201.

34 Ibn Hishām, 262–272.