



International Qur'anic Studies Association

الجمعية الدولية للدراسات القرآنية

ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH AND PHILOLOGY: A RESPONSE TO THE KEYNOTE
LECTURE

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ANDREW RIPPIN
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

It is certainly an honor for me to have this opportunity to make a few remarks in response to Professor Neuwirth's stimulating-as-ever keynote lecture. As Acting President of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (IQSA), I would like to express my thanks to her for having accepted our invitation to provide this lecture. To have Professor Neuwirth support this new initiative of IQSA in this way is important to all of us associated with the organization. We truly do wish to see this as an international organization, including not only scholars from North America and the Muslim-majority world but from other centers of Qur'anic Studies, and especially from Europe. Professor Neuwirth's participation today augurs well for the future of our emerging association.

This audience hardly needs me to emphasize Professor Neuwirth's impact on our discipline. A prolific scholar, she has worked consistently throughout her substantial career to elucidate the structure, rhetoric, and historical development of the Qur'an. She burst prominently onto the scene with her first major work on the structure of the Meccan *sūrah*s published in 1981, and she has continued from there on a true intellectual adventure. When I look back to my 1982 review of that early work of hers (in *BSOAS*), I note that even then, with my youthful brashness and hyper-critical perspective, I could manage to acknowledge that her work was "a significant reorientation of interests for the historical-critical school of analysis of the Qur'an" (Rippin 1982, 149). I also recognized – predicted the future, one might say – that my dear colleague "display[s] tremendous energy and capability in her book and future productions from her pen will undoubtedly prove worthy of further attention" (150). What now strikes me as so impressive in Professor Neuwirth's work is the depth of her reading in fields beyond Qur'anic Studies and the way she has been able to bring those into a fruitful relationship with our field of study. She has certainly introduced me to many authors and critical works that have helped me grapple with conceptual issues about how we go about studying religion and especially the Qur'an.

I would also like to draw attention to how apt it is that we have Professor Neuwirth speaking today in the context of IQSA meeting as an affiliate organization of the Society of Biblical Literature. Her message in her paper today – and in many of her other contributions – suggests a desire to see Qur'anic Studies become a part of Biblical Studies. This she expresses in a manner that most of us have not yet fully contemplated. By seeing the word "Bible" as an ambiguous designation that in its late antique context already hides two distinct dimensions of meaning – the Jewish and the Christian – Professor Neuwirth proclaims an understanding that the Qur'an too is "Bible" in this sense. Picking up on Sidney Griffith's framing of the Qur'an in the context of the Arabic Bible, she sees the object of our study as a transformed Bible, an interpreted Bible. This transformation, she suggests, is contained in a dynamic process that the text of the Qur'an discloses in its historical progression, incorporating different hermeneutical approaches to the task of transforming the Bible within the Meccan and Medinan settings. This careful enunciation of this particular point clearly avoids the reductive aspects that have plagued past studies looking for biblical parallels in the Qur'an. I think we might all concur that contemporary biblical scholarship could stand to gain significantly from the study of the way in which the Qur'an reads the biblical tradition; that is a thought that has particular resonance in our setting of IQSA's meeting here in San Diego today.

However, the invitation – or perhaps the duty as President of IQSA – to respond to the paper of Professor Neuwirth suggests to me that my role is not simply to laud our

speaker, however just and deserved such praise may be. It is an opportunity for some level of engagement, analysis, and perhaps even critique. And there are, of course, many directions in which it might be expected that I would pursue this. My youthful brashness has not totally left me in this blissful period of retirement.

Of course there are all the basic questions regarding the epistemological possibility of the project that Professor Neuwirth proposes, and obviously we are a long way from resolving these questions – if we even wish to do so. There are many aspects to this issue, and I will not dwell on them. There is an implicit claim that a twenty-first-century historian can re-enter seventh-century discursive contexts and determine the historical logic of progression at that time. But to what extent is the logic of that discursive progression independent of our own “common sense,” and can it ever be truly independent of the “extra-textual social contexts” that, as Professor Neuwirth says, “are hard to verify”? By what criteria can one distinguish that supposed historical grain of truth from later imaginings or our own projections? Further, does a text really speak of, or even imply, its own “discursive contexts” such that they can be extracted as a reflection of historical reality? The answer that might be suggested – that the text itself discloses the logic behind the historical progression – does not satisfy me, for such a position reflects an understanding of textual data as a transparent reflection of a social reality that is somehow still accessible to us today, and that literary observations can provide justification for historical conclusions. These points I continue to doubt.

Such epistemological issues are fundamental, but they are unlikely to be resolved in the context of this session. The questions and their answers may reflect personal dispositions more than truly intellectual arguments. And, I must admit, I have become rather bored with many of these debates, especially when they are positioned in the rhetoric surrounding the state of the discipline of Qur’anic Studies and its supposed disarray, as they so often seem to be nowadays.

So, rather than pursue that avenue of discussion in my response, I wish to draw attention to a matter that has been a part of Professor Neuwirth’s emphasis in her approach for a number of years now, and that has recently gained a new prominence – not only to some extent in the paper we have heard today, but in some other pieces that she has recently prepared. That matter is the highlighting of the word “philology.” Professor Neuwirth’s invocation of this concept first came to my attention in her co-edited collection of essays focused on Abraham Geiger published in 2008, but it has recently received more emphasis in her various reflections on Sheldon Pollock’s stimulating essay, “Future Philology.” Published in *Critical Inquiry* in 2009, Pollock’s essay is remarkable on many levels, and I think Professor Neuwirth draws our attention to it quite justifiably. Pollock is a Sanskritist and he writes from that perspective – something quite refreshing in the context of a journal such as *Critical Inquiry*, which can sometimes be so jargon-laden within disciplines that are remote from our concerns and involvement. At least Pollock’s jargon many of us will understand! If you have not read the essay yet, you should – it is well worth the time.

As an aside at this point, I would draw your attention to the main character in the 2012 Israeli film, *Footnote*, who is a Hebrew philologist. A significant part of that film deals with his work, and concerns manuscripts and words in their historical context. The film is well worth watching for a reflection of the passion that philology provokes, and it will likely bring some well-respected living scholars to mind for those of you who follow

Biblical and Jewish Studies. Overall, watching *Footnote* is a good way of reminding yourself of how seriously and passionately people take the idea of philology.

Recognizing that, there are some aspects of this notion of philology that I would like to reflect upon in drawing attention to the importance of Professor Neuwirth's contribution to our discipline.

It is probably a good idea to echo Pollock's essay here and start by discussing what we mean by philology. It is a word that is often tossed around without it being totally clear what we might mean by it. We might – dangerously, perhaps, in this context – invoke the word's etymology from the terms *philos*, meaning “love,” and *logos*, meaning “word.” It is often simply understood as work undertaken on language and literature, conducted on a textual basis and in a historical framework. Pollock proposes a simple definition: “the discipline of making sense of texts” (934), something he suggests is a global practice like philosophy or mathematics.

Of course, we need to view Pollock's construction of his thoughts within the broader theoretical circle of discussions of philology, which extend well beyond Sanskrit or Arabic specializations. Perhaps the most prominent contribution in recent decades in this regard – as Pollock acknowledges – is, somewhat ironically, that of Edward Said. This might seem ironic to some people because it is sometimes suggested that Said is responsible for the epistemological crisis that is felt to afflict our studies today. Regardless of that, in a paper delivered in 2000 entitled “The Return to Philology,” which was published in his small 2004 book *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Said suggests that the modern discipline of philology may be viewed as a complement to the attention to language developed by classical Muslim exegetes of the Qur'an. But it was with Vico in the eighteenth century that a “science of reading” came about that was seen as providing the secret to achieving humanistic knowledge (Said 2004, 58). Philology, for Said, is “getting inside the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what may be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we may have before us” (59). Said's approach is one that calls first for close reading and then for a gradual locating of the text “in its time as a part of a whole network of relationships whose outlines and influence play an informing role *in* the text” (62). The resonance here with Professor Neuwirth's approach to philology should be apparent.

Said, of course, was a literary critic, and Pollock adds some important additional points that are relevant to us. One is obvious: philology is more than close reading, because it involves competence in languages, linguistics, and specifically necessitates that we learn ancient languages in their historical dimensions. This necessity is paramount. The other point is how deeply historical philology is. This is a point that Professor Neuwirth also emphasizes.

It is important to note that these two characteristics – linguistic and historical – emerge at the outset of the rise of what we know as modern philology today. The heritage and stimulus of philology are closely aligned to the Renaissance and its search for the pure origins of Europe in the classical world of Greece and Rome. Its purpose was to renew the sense of European culture as an entity. This was a transformation of language into something historical, as Pollock points out (936). Scholars in Biblical Studies have critically mapped the impact of this momentous development. Take, for example, Jonathan Sheehan's *The Enlightenment Bible* (2005), and Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood's more recent *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar* (2011), to mention just a

couple of titles that I have found stimulating. I will not dwell on the causes and effects of the transformation of language and the Bible here, but I will simply wonder about the future of its current manifestation in our discipline in light of what has been learned in biblical studies. To paraphrase what Michael Legaspi has said in *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (2010, 9), will we eventually look back on the current revival of philology in Qur'anic Studies and observe that this revival produced a non-confessional Qur'an, with the emergence of academic criticism constituting a constructive response to the modern fracturing of Islam? Will we find that operating on the Qur'an as text, rather than approaching it as scripture, still effectively retained the Qur'an's cultural authority? Or will it be the opposite: that the Qur'an as a scholarly object remains "a historical relic, an antiquarian artifact" – as is suggested in the Bible and Culture Collective's *The Post-modern Bible*, quoted in my essay "Muḥammad in the Qur'ān" (2000), something distinct from the believers' scripture and scholarship? What will the impact of our scholarship be? This is a critical question.

Pollock sees the way forward through all these complications by constructing his future philology with concern for three domains of meaning in history, as Professor Neuwirth mentioned. Pollock calls these the "textual meaning," in which the text is placed in history and read for what it is and not for what it claims; the "contextual meaning," in which the meaning of the text is that which it has for historical actors; and the "philologist's meaning," which requires tacking "back and forth between pre-judgment and text to achieve real historical understanding" (Pollock 2009, 957). But it is here that I see greater potential for developing our studies in the direction of the *contextual meaning* of the text, greater perhaps than the scope Professor Neuwirth would allow.

Philology for Pollock is a universal practice (see his forthcoming co-authored book, *World Philology*) and needs to be acknowledged as such. In this he certainly echoes Said's view of the Arab heritage of language study. A critical future philology needs to incorporate that heritage of philology and resuscitate it. Pollock suggests that "philologists know they cannot go beyond traditions of reception unless they have to" (Pollock 2009, 954). Professor Neuwirth interprets this in a particularly historical fashion: that one must accept the basic outlines of the Muslim account of the context of the emergence of the Qur'an. But that seems to me a very limited view of how to conceive the necessity and relevance of the contextual meaning. Indeed, when Pollock considers the "contextual meaning," he critiques the philologists' readings for their "hard Wilamowitzian historicism" that avoids the "vernacular mediations" and views them as "perverse and wasted ingenuity" (955). (This refers to the tradition of Sanskrit commentary; an analogous declaration in our discipline is that *tafsīr* engages in "pettifogging.") Pollock warns that "historicism carried too far can underwrite the ideology of singular meaning" (955). This is why the fullness of Pollock's three-pronged philology needs to be emphasized. Furthermore, the temptation of philology to identify the original contextual meaning with a "true" meaning is a constant threat to our own sense of self-confidence in the purpose of what we do as scholars.

Our philological readings of the Qur'an cannot escape the *tafsīr* tradition, nor should they. However, I do think that we need to emphasize that the study of *tafsīr* also needs to be approached on a philological basis, that is, in a critical and historical way. It must not return to what I have described in the past as a random, plundering approach,

but rather to an understanding that each of the readings we find in the *tafsīr* tradition is in itself grounded in its own historical context of discourse and debate.

But the meaning that Pollock – and Professor Neuwirth – wish to emphasize still maintains the fascination with origins that is inherent to philology, even if the contemporary socio-political implications of our studies are understood to add significance to that discovery of the philologist's meaning. There ends up being a very delicate balancing act here. The presentation of the Qur'an stripped of its contextual meaning in terms of the fullness of the Muslim tradition can end up conveying that authoritarian assertion of singular meaning.

Underneath all this is still the nagging question of what the goal of our studies is, especially if we identify with Professor Neuwirth's emphasis on philological meaning. This is the fundamental point underlying all of these discussions. What truly is the goal of our academic studies of the Qur'an? This is hardly a question unique to Qur'anic studies, but rather it is one that underlies so many discussions in the humanities today – especially, one might suggest, in the discipline of philology.

Pollock raises the dispute between Nietzsche and Wilamowitz over precisely this point, and Professor Neuwirth also discusses this in some of her other recent papers. While Professor Neuwirth wishes to maintain a philology that is critical and historical, her philology tries to escape the Nietzschean critique of its pointlessness by recognizing that this work does have political and social purpose within our current climate – that is, by taking into account her own historicity. Said too makes the plea that this is the fundamental goal of humanist scholarship: that reading is “an act of perhaps modest human emancipation and enlightenment that changes and enhances one's knowledge for purposes other than reductiveness, cynicism or fruitless standing aside” (66). It is an enterprise in which its practitioners are kept honest, he says, by a sense of “a common enterprise shared with others, an undertaking with its own built-in constraints and disciplines” (68). For Professor Neuwirth, the German context – heavy with history and a current social context of considerable complexity – clearly underlies her philology. That is the point of the emphasis on reincorporating the Qur'an into the late antique context and thus into the heritage of Europe.

To respond that such moral concerns have no place in academic work does not convince me. This is, I think, the underlying point I was trying to make in my published response to Aaron Hughes' “provocation” a couple of years ago, that a vision of pure scholarship, almost presented as a reified, abstract notion, simply does not meet the challenges of the reality for most of us working in the academy. The reality requires some nuance. There are what I would describe as moral responsibilities that go along with our role – and this is especially so in the classroom and in our public performances. Of course our responsibility remains an academic one, and that is important: our responsibility cannot be to a believing community of whatever confession, although it certainly may have implications for them.

After all of this pondering of our task in relationship to the Qur'an, I do wish to reflect upon one final point of doubt. I must admit that I am left wondering if this focus on a rehabilitated use of the word “philology” is helpful or even wise. Would it not be better to toss it aside and free ourselves of the historical and intellectual baggage of those nineteenth-century discussions that the word carries? What we do certainly has a heritage in the philology of the nineteenth century, but do we really want to carry the

weight of those nineteenth-century positions by doing our work under the same old banner today? Even if what we do is conceived of as a “future philology,” are the implications of this really appealing? We are undertaking historical textual studies, plain and simple. Perhaps we should leave it at that. Just a thought.

All this is simply to say how thought-provoking I continue to find Professor Neuwirth’s work. Thank you, Angelika, for stimulating me once again in this opportunity to reflect upon these aspects of your talk today and indeed all of your work in our discipline.

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