Introduction

JOHANNA PINK AND ANDREAS GÖRKE

> There seems to be a solid consensus among scholars as to what the genre is not, but very little agreement about what it is.
>
> Walid Saleh[1]

Tafsīr Studies: The State of the Field

The question of boundaries – both internal and external – is at the heart of the self-conception and analytical framework underlying any scholarly discipline, and *tafsīr* studies is no exception. What is its object of study, and where does it touch upon other fields? How can it be structured in a meaningful way, and what criteria do we apply in order to develop the required analytical categories? Debating these questions is all the more important for a field such as *tafsīr* studies, which is still in its infancy.

For a long time, within Islamic Studies, the vast corpus of works by Muslim scholars dealing with the exegesis of the Qur'an (*tafsīr*) was given little attention in Western scholarship, especially when compared with the text of the Qur'an itself. Indeed, *tafsīr* was often regarded merely as an auxiliary science to the correct understanding of the Qur'anic text and not as a genre of Islamic scholarship in its own right. As a result, commentaries on the Qur'an were usually consulted rather than studied, that is, they were consulted in order to gain a clearer understanding of the meaning of the text, but not, as a rule, studied as literary or theological works with their own style, method and concerns. In fact, the more exegetes expressed a distinct personal approach towards the exegesis of the Qur'an, the more detrimental many scholars considered this to the 'proper' understanding of the Qur'anic text.[2] It occurred to few scholars to consider *tafsīr* an important and integral part of the 'discursive tradition' of Islam, in the Asadian sense,[3] and not just

an extension of the foundational text of Islam. What scholarship there was tended to be mainly concerned with the evolution of *tafsīr* in the first three centuries of Islam. There was also a certain interest in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Muslim exegetical activities, but with a consistent limitation to reformist works of *tafsīr* that were being perceived as original, in contrast to most of the *tafsīr* tradition produced between the tenth and the nineteenth centuries, which was usually characterised as repetitive, unoriginal and imitative.[4]

This has started to change significantly in recent years. An increasing number of monographs and articles have been published on individual exegetes and on the exegesis of specific parts or themes of the Qur'an since the 1990s, and quite a few scholars have devoted their careers to the study of *tafsīr*. Today, a field of *tafsīr* studies in the proper sense has emerged, as an area of research separate from Qur'anic studies; moreover, this field has significantly expanded the focus of scholarly interest in Muslim exegetical activities.

While the formative period of *tafsīr* still receives a large amount of scholarly interest, the field of *tafsīr* studies has increasingly emancipated itself from the near-exclusive focus on origins and on the 'Golden Age of Islam', echoing developments in the discipline of Islamic Studies as a whole. The post-Ṭabarī area, which had long been considered to have mainly produced unoriginal and imitative commentaries on the Qur'an, is now taken more seriously, and even the large gap in *tafsīr* scholarship on the period between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries might eventually be filled.

Although there is now a considerable amount of literature on *tafsīr*, the field remains rather fragmented, and there remain huge gaps in our knowledge on the subject. The period between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries is only one of them; the *ḥāshiyya* (supercommentary) is another. Additionally, the fact that the publication of Qur'an commentaries in print has often been due to ideological or dogmatic considerations, not necessarily related to their actual importance in the *tafsīr* tradition,[5] does not make it easier to come to an overall assessment of the development

of the genre. Few studies have thus far tried to evaluate the fragmented research landscape and to provide an overarching perspective on the development, sources and subgenres of *tafsīr*. Two articles can be considered a recent attempt to provide such an overview, those of Claude Gilliot, 'Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Classical and Medieval' and Rotraud Wielandt, 'Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Early Modern and Contemporary', in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*.[6] However, even the basic distinction between these two articles, namely, the division into 'classical and medieval' exegesis on the one hand and 'early modern and contemporary' exegesis on the other, is open to debate, as are many of the proposed subgenres or currents within *tafsīr*. A comprehensive history of *tafsīr* has yet to be written.

What is more, the field of *tafsīr* studies is, due to its relatively recent emergence, as yet analytically underdeveloped. Few studies have so far attempted to present an analytical framework for the understanding of *tafsīr*, or to advance the discussion on the theoretical assumptions underlying the study of Muslim exegesis.[7]

An analytical approach to the phenomenon of *tafsīr* that takes into account previous scholarship would invariably have to address two core questions: First, what is *tafsīr*? And second, how can we make sense of the vast amount of exegetical literature by structuring and categorising it in a meaningful way? These questions lead back to the issue of boundaries that is at the heart of the present volume.

The Boundaries of *Tafsīr*

Any discussion of *tafsīr*, its structure, methods and function, will invariably come to the point where the very definition of the term is under debate.

One option would be to adopt the original Arabic meaning of the term *tafsīr*, namely, 'explanation', and to consider any activity that tries to explain or interpret the Qur'an or parts of it as *tafsīr*. Following this option has the merit of including exegetical discourses that might not be part of any formal genre of Qur'an interpretation, but are nevertheless highly relevant for achieving an

overall assessment of Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an and might also be influential for Qur'anic commentaries in a narrower sense. This includes hermeneutical works, but also exegetical material contained in works of legal, theological or hadith scholarship. The advantages of an inclusive approach to the definition of *tafsīr* are even more obvious for researchers dealing with the modern period, when formal genre boundaries have lost much of their importance. On the other hand, this approach entails the risk of extreme vagueness, resulting in an unmanageable amount of material that could theoretically be included in the category of *tafsīr*.

A second option might be to accept an author's definition of whether what he is doing is *tafsīr* or not. The pitfalls of this approach are obvious: it would result in enormous inconsistencies because the authors themselves have different conceptions of what a *tafsīr* is and might, for reasons of dogma or scholarly standing, over- or understate the extent to which their work constitutes an exegesis of the Qur'an. On the other hand, an author's self-conception should not easily be dismissed, for it might well be worth looking into the reasons for which an author understands his or her work as being, or not being, part of the *tafsīr* tradition.

A third option, diametrically opposed to the first one, would define *tafsīr* as a literary genre with fixed characteristics, resulting in a limited – but still extremely vast – corpus of works of relatively comparable structure. This approach has been pursued by Norman Calder in his ground-breaking study on *tafsīr* from Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) to Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373),[8] who defined the characteristics of the genre as follows:

i) The entire Qur'an, or at least a significant chunk of it, is interpreted in its canonical order, with segments of text being followed by commentary.
ii) The interpretations of a wide range of named authorities are cited, which results in a polyvalent reading of the text that acknowledges several possible meanings.
iii) The text of the Qur'an is measured against external structures, both instrumental and ideological.[9]

This characterisation is helpful and has been picked up by numerous authors; however, Calder's study itself points to the problems inherent in it, for he has difficulty accommodating Ibn Kathīr's commentary within this model.[10] The main problem, however, does not lie with works like Ibn Kathīr's that might fulfil the second or third criterion to a lesser degree than others; rather, it is chronological. *Tafsīr*, as a literary genre with the characteristics that Calder describes, might not have been present before the fourth/tenth century, certainly did not exist before the mid-second/eighth century and, moreover, its boundaries have become blurred in many ways throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – exactly the reasons for which Calder limited his own study to the period between these centuries. It would hardly be useful, however, to rigorously exclude studies on the early development of the genre or on the widening of its margins in modern times from the field of *tafsīr* studies simply because they do not fit the above structural characteristics. The definition would, for instance, exclude any kind of thematic commentary, even if it dealt with significant portions of the Qur'an. Rather, we would suggest taking Calder's model as a helpful analytical tool against which early or modern exegetical activities can be measured.

Another useful characterisation has been offered by Walid Saleh, who has called the discipline of *tafsīr* a 'genealogical tradition'.[11] This stands in explicit contrast to the views of many a previous Islamicist who considered the *tafsīr* tradition to be repetitive, imitative and mainly concerned with recycling the views of earlier exegetes, to the extent that Ignáz Goldziher claimed that, due to the large amount of exegetical traditions going back to the Prophet's Companions, Muslim exegetes had no need to exert themselves intellectually, because rather than forwarding their own interpretations, which risked drawing blame for practising *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* (exegesis based on their own, arbitrary, opinions), they could simply quote relevant traditions. This argument, as Saleh rightly criticises, completely ignores the intellectual endeavour involved not only in compiling the existing traditions and exegetical opinions – with the latter constituting an ever-growing body of sources – but also in making conscious selections, the motives and mechanisms of which

can only be uncovered if one ceases to consider the genealogical mode of exegesis as a handicap.

Another possible, and widely overlooked, way to describe the boundaries of *tafsīr* is by looking at the sources that exegetes use, including, specifically, the traditions going back to the first generations of Islam. The common assumption that Islamic scholarship compiled, over the course of the first few centuries of Islam, a more or less canonical body of traditions that was used as a common source by later scholars irrespective of their disciplines has already been called into question with respect to other fields[12] and deserves critical examination with regard to the field of *tafsīr* as well. The question of whether the sources used by exegetes are different from those quoted by jurists, historians or other scholars deserves further study and might also shed light on the differentiation of scholarly disciplines in early Islam.

Whatever approach towards defining the boundaries of *tafsīr* one chooses – and the preferences may legitimately vary, depending on the topic and the questions guiding the research – the question of its boundaries can also be understood to refer to its interrelationship with the wider intellectual environment that surrounds it. This includes the wide range of literature within the field of Qur'anic studies (*ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*), but also other disciplines of Islamic scholarship like law, linguistics and theology which have, as Calder has rightly stated, often informed the activity of exegetes and in turn incorporated the results of exegetical activity. However, the processes and methods through which this diffusion of knowledge functioned have hardly been sufficiently explained. This becomes especially pertinent when one looks at the works of exegetes who have – as was the norm – been active in other fields of knowledge. To what extent are their *tafsīr*s influenced by the works they have produced in other disciplines? Are they based on the same assumptions, sharing the same methods and coming to the same conclusions? Or are there differences, in which case, can these differences be explained by the specificities of *tafsīr* production? Is *tafsīr*, in the sense of interpreting the Qur'an, limited to the literary genre of the Qur'anic commentary, or can Qur'anic exegesis be identified in other types of text and examined in a way that is productive for our

understanding of *tafsīr*, both as a genre and as an exegetical activity? And to what extent does *tafsīr*, on the other hand, allow for a propagation of ideas that authors have developed in other fields? The answers to these questions can shed further light on the place of *tafsīr* within Islamic intellectual history, and on the boundaries of the genre and their permeability. This is what the present volume proposes to undertake.

The Taxonomy of *Tafsīr*

From its beginnings, proponents of *tafsīr* studies, both in the Arab world and the West, have been concerned with identifying ways to structure the field and to devise categories that help to make sense of the enormous amount of material with which they are confronted, thus drawing boundaries within the genre – something that no field can entirely dispense with.

Scholars like Goldziher,[13] Helmut Gätje[14] and Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī[15] have usually divided the genre along ideological lines with an added chronological component. Following a Sunni mainstream approach, their typology is based on the assumption that there is such a thing as a 'normal' traditional or classical commentary on the Qur'an, from which one can distinguish dogmatic approaches (i.e. *tafsīr*s that follow a certain theological agenda like the Muʿtazilī one, but are nevertheless Sunni), 'sectarian' commentaries (i.e. Twelver-Shiʿi, Zaydī, Ismaili, Ibāḍī) and mystical commentaries. Additionally, the formative and modern stages are treated separately; *Tafsīr al-Manār* by Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) is usually considered the prototypical modernist Qur'an commentary, representative of the 'modern period'.

This taxonomy has been as influential as the dogmatic distinction between *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* and *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, in other words, exegesis based on sound traditions and exegesis based on arbitrary opinions. This distinction has no analytical value, as it is practically impossible for an exegete to dispense with any form of reasoning – *al-Durr al-manthūr* by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) being a possible exception – and the labels *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* and *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* are normally awarded simply in

order to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable *tafsīr*s, from a certain dogmatic perspective. Likewise, different exegetes can have very different perceptions of whether what they are doing is *raʾy* or not, depending on their ideological point of view.[16]

As for the dogmatic divisions outlined above, they are no less problematic. To begin with, they tend to be based on the inherent assumption that Sunni *tafsīr* is the norm and all other categories can be seen as deviations. Studies like Bruce Fudge's work on Abū'l-Faḍl al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1154)[17] make it very clear that not every Shiʿi exegete is solely concerned with using the Qur'an to prove the imamate of ʿAlī and his descendants; rather, many of them not only have a hermeneutical approach that aims at doing justice to the text, but they also regularly use the same sources and methods as their Sunni colleagues – and are, in fact, often cited by later Sunni exegetes. Moreover, reading an external dogmatic agenda into the Qur'an is not the prerogative of non-Sunni commentators (*mufassirūn*). It simply cannot be taken for granted that an exegete's theological or dogmatic outlook influences his *tafsīr* in a certain way. A person with mystical inclinations can interpret the Qur'an in a completely non-mystical way, just as an exegete with no particular mystical agenda can borrow from previous mystical exegetes. A Muʿtazilī theologian does not necessarily have to use his *tafsīr* to promote Muʿtazilī dogma, and a modernist does not necessarily have to reject traditional methods and interpretations. This is what makes *tafsīr* a 'genealogical' tradition; exegetes are often much more involved with the task of creatively appropriating the tradition of *tafsīr* than with pursuing a specific dogmatic or sectarian agenda, and even if they do have such an agenda, most works are hybrid rather than clearly dogmatic or sectarian.[18] As Jamal J. Elias writes about the *tafsīr* of the Sufi ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 736/1336): 'One point I am trying to make by examining Simnānī's *tafsīr* in this manner is to stress how statements made in the context of speaking formally about the Qur'an and its meaning do not necessarily reflect accurately on the thought and teachings of some Ṣūfī thinkers.'[19] Thus, even when one deals with *tafsīr* works with clearly mystical content, one would do well to be cautious about clear-cut categorisations.

Conversely, the mere fact that an exegete cannot be clearly associated with a specific theological school or 'sect' does not preclude dogmatic tendencies that limit the range of possible interpretations; in that sense, what is often considered 'conventional' Sunni *tafsīr* has the potential to be just as 'sectarian' as any other kind of Qur'anic exegesis.

Chronological categories seem to make more sense; after all, it is apparent that the 'classical' *tafsīr* tradition, as Calder describes it, was not there from the beginning, but evolved through earlier stages; and it is equally apparent that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought numerous profound changes to the genre, not only with respect to the aims, methods, style and structure of *tafsīr* works, but also with respect to their audience, their authors and the media in which they are distributed. Some scholars essentially distinguish between the classical and the modern period;[20] Andrew Rippin argues for a finer distinction, between a formative, a classical, a mature and a contemporary period.[21] However, this does not mean that the exegetical repertoire of which 'classical' exegetes made use was not there in earlier stages of *tafsīr*, or that it became obsolete in the nineteenth century. The formation of the genre and the dynamics of its interaction with other currents of religious activity and thought are still offering ample opportunity for fruitful research; the persistence and appropriation of the pre-modern *tafsīr* tradition in modern times has hardly been studied in comparison to the amount of attention that reformist and Islamist exegetical endeavours have received.[22] Thus, chronological categories have to be used with caution as well, as they should not hide the existence of significant continuities and the fact that the unbroken tradition of *tafsīr* still continues today.[23]

Another mode of categorisation that might be of analytical value is Saleh's proposal to distinguish functional categories within the pre-modern *tafsīr* tradition. The categories proposed by Saleh are, on the one hand, the madrasa-style commentaries, offering a concise overview of what the exegete considers to be the essentials of the *tafsīr* tradition, and, on the other hand, the encyclopaedic commentaries that try to collect and present a large array of exegetical material and frequently refer to named authorities or even include

isnāds.[24] These categories are certainly helpful in explaining many of the observable divergences in style and method between different works of *tafsīr*; they might benefit from further differentiation on the basis of additional material. Certainly, they do not cover all of the developments that have occurred in modern times. For this period, Johanna Pink has proposed two additional categories: the institutional commentary that is usually written by a committee of scholars and published to serve the interests of a nation-state, and the popularising commentary that has a mass-media background and tries to reach large audiences.[25] The latter form very probably has precursors in the oral *tafsīr* tradition in pre-modern times that is not accessible to us; it bears similarities to the practices of oral *tafsīr* that Andrea Brigaglia describes for West Africa.[26]

This leads us to the question of whether regional categories make sense in the study of *tafsīr*; a question that is maybe exacerbated in modern times, when *tafsīr* in the non-Arabic languages of the Islamic world is widespread. To our knowledge, the issue has hardly been systematically discussed, as most studies of *tafsīr* – even the few studies of non-Arabic *tafsīr* that exist – do not tend to look across regional and linguistic boundaries.[27] Thus, even the basic question of whether the dichotomy of centre and periphery has any meaning for the study of *tafsīr* cannot satisfactorily be answered, based on the present state of scholarship. The issue of regional boundaries requires a lot of future research.[28]

The Approach of this Volume

It is apparent from what has been said above that the genre of *tafsīr* as a whole is still analytically under-studied and insufficiently investigated and that there is not much clarity about its characteristics, its place within Islamic intellectual history and its inner and outer boundaries.

This volume wishes to contribute to the clarification of these issues by uniting a variety of approaches dealing with various epochs, regions and potential subgenres of *tafsīr*, all of which offer insights into the characteristics of *tafsīr*, its place in Islamic intellectual history, its relation to other genres of scholarship and its

internal subdivisions. The question of boundaries is always at the focal point: What kind of disciplinary, dogmatic, sectarian, chronological or regional boundaries are there, how are they affirmed and how are they permeated, transgressed or shifted?

The volume is divided into five sections, the first of which is devoted to the formation of boundaries. It deals with the emergence of *tafsīr* as an independent genre distinguishable from, but interwoven with, non-Islamic religious traditions, hadith scholarship, storytelling, linguistics and early theological controversies.

Catherine Bronson discusses the historicisation of the formative exegetical discourse on Eve among Qur'an exegetes during the first/seventh to fourth/tenth centuries. She examines the literary interrelationships between Qur'anic commentary (*tafsīr*), quasi-historical traditions (*akhbār*), prophetic hadiths and late antique literary representations of Eve found in Jewish and Christian literature. By viewing early Muslim exegesis on Eve as an accreted body of literature produced within the confluences of late antique syncretism, she argues, we can glean an insight into the intellectual development of the early Islamic community as conceptions of the first woman evolved from ecumenically minded, multi-confessional renderings of Eve to particularistic renderings where self-defining and legitimation took precedence. The emergence of *tafsīr* as a distinct genre went along with the establishment of Islam as a distinct religion; the exegesis of the Qur'an was used to draw and strengthen the boundaries of the new faith. Defining the boundaries of *tafsīr* itself can thus be understood not only in relation to other branches of religious activity and learning within Islam, but also – and for this period, perhaps even mainly – in relation to the scriptures and exegetical traditions of other religions.

Claude Gilliot, in his chapter, deals with one of the most important early transmitters of exegetical material. Based on sources which have not been used, or not sufficiently so, in previous studies on Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), the chapter offers insights into the beginnings and transmission of Mujāhid's legacy and on the Qadarī orientations of many of its transmitters. By analysing examples of narratives transmitted from Mujāhid, it demonstrates how this early exegete was not merely a storyteller, but that he also

used narratives to express an implicit predestinationist theology. Gilliot thus illustrates the different realms in which early Muslim exegesis took place and the functions it fulfilled. His chapter shows how early exegetes appropriated the stories of the storytellers and connected them to Qur'anic verses in order to exemplify theological paradigms that, at a later stage, played an important role in dogmatic controversies. Early *tafsīr* thus appears as an activity that is deeply interwoven both with popular storytelling and the emergence of theology, and with the increasing authority of the Qur'an as an authoritative reference it assumes a specific function for its proponents.

Nicolai Sinai further pursues the issues raised by Gilliot, with respect to a slightly later stage, through an examination of the early Qur'anic commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). His chapter explores the exegetical approach of Muqātil's commentary and situates it within the history of pre-classical Qur'anic exegesis. Although the work has been labelled a 'narrative' commentary, Sinai argues that structurally it can much more appropriately be described as a cross-breeding of popular storytelling (*qaṣaṣ*) on the one hand and text-based cursory exegesis on the other. Moving beyond Muqātil's commentary, Sinai aims to show that it is likely that these two approaches correspond to two consecutive historical stages: an earlier, pre-exegetical stage characterised by a sort of literary seepage in the process of which popular narratives about earlier prophets, Muhammad, and the Last Judgement came to incorporate decontextualised Qur'anic segments; and a genuinely exegetical interest in the Qur'an that first surfaces in around 80/700, when scholars such as the aforementioned Mujāhid systematically turn towards the Qur'anic text itself. Sinai concludes that in the course of the first/seventh century, the Qur'anic corpus might only gradually have come to take on an interpretive, rather than a primarily ritual and devotional, function.

The second section of the volume further elucidates issues of the emergence, affirmation and permeation of disciplinary boundaries already alluded to in the first section, the relevance of which naturally increased with the differentiation of the scholarly arena and the emergence of disciplines like law, Hadith and linguistics.

Roberto Tottoli examines the relationship between Qur'anic exegesis and Hadith, a topic of extreme relevance given the high proportion of hadith material contained in most Qur'anic commentaries. Analysing the *Muwaṭṭa'* by Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), a legal compendium that is at the same time one of the earliest hadith collections, and its reception in works that formally belong to the genre of *tafsīr*, he sheds light on the convergences and differences between the disciplines of *tafsīr* and Hadith, not just with respect to formal or functional characteristics but, most importantly, with regard to the source material they use and transmit. His chapter shows that, while Mālik's *Muwaṭṭa'* is a prestigious hadith collection and of high relevance in legal scholarship, the exegetical material contained in it is hardly used by exegetes of the Qur'an. This suggests that the discipline of *tafsīr*, in spite of the fact that it shares common sources with other fields of Islamic scholarship, has boundaries going beyond structure and method; *tafsīr* works – at least in some periods and milieus – seem to make use of a distinct and genre-specific corpus of exegetical material that is not congruent with the material used in other disciplines. Furthermore, it has its own authoritative figures; an authority in hadith transmission and law need not be an authority in the field of Qur'anic exegesis as well.

Ignacio Sánchez, in his chapter on *Kitāb al-ʿUthmāniyya* of Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), discusses the way in which exegetical activity in the Abbasid period was an integral part of debates on hermeneutics, epistemology and source interaction that were inspired by Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), but went beyond the circle of his followers and also beyond legal theory. In doing so, Sánchez also casts doubt on the conventional reading of Jāḥiẓ's exegetical activity as Muʿtazilī; in spite of Jāḥiẓ's affiliation with the Muʿtazila, he argues, this author was much more concerned with hermeneutical issues than with defending a specific theological dogma. Sánchez's findings address the crucial question of whether categories that discriminate in terms of discipline are helpful, at least for the period under consideration; the ascription of the *ʿUthmāniyya* to any single genre, like legal exegesis or political theory, is misleading, as it does not take into account the broader scholarly debates in the midst of which it was written. Especially

important, in this context, is the use of the distinction between the *khāṣṣa* (elite) and the *ʿāmma* (the masses), which underlines that Qur'anic interpretation was – probably for most of the pre-modern period – not primarily understood to be the prerogative of a specific denomination, dogmatic group or academic discipline, but of a specific epistemic community.

Rebecca Sauer further examines the relationship between law, political theory and exegesis with respect to a later period, based on the discussion of the 'rebel verse' (*āyat al-bughāt*; Q. 49:9) in six Sunni Qur'an commentaries from between the fourth/tenth and seventh/thirteenth centuries; for comparative purposes, she also draws on *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya* by Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) and the *Kitāb al-Umm* by Shāfiʿī, the latter of which was a central legal source for the doctrines on rebellion. Her analysis shows that, although works of *tafsīr* – at least from the sixth/twelfth century onwards – do contain legal discourse, it is not usually their primary concern; rather, they focus on sources and methods that are not necessarily of related importance in law. The traditions they report, in particular, are not those that inform legal and political arguments about rules on rebellion against a ruler. Often, exegetes are more concerned with morals than with legal judgements, drawing on the fact that many Qur'anic prescriptions may be understood as either legal or ethical injunctions. *Tafsīr* of legal verses thus appears as a genre that is clearly distinct from legalistic readings of the Qur'an, even when the exegetes are fully aware of legal discourses on the issue or even participate in them in their other works.

Nejmeddine Khalfallah, whose chapter forges a connection between the second and the third sections of the volume, shifts the emphasis back to an issue that had already emerged in Sánchez's chapter, namely the existence of exegetical debates in scholarly works outside the literary genre of *tafsīr*, if understood in a narrow sense, and their influence on exegetes. He argues that the grammarian and literary theorist ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078), although never having authored a Qur'anic commentary, developed a consistent exegetical theory and that his works contain considerable exegetical activity. Furthermore, exegesis was not only a

fundamental axis in Jurjānī's work, but he was also deeply involved in the exegetical debates of his time and explicitly critical of the exegetical methods employed by major scholars in the field. Finally, his theories were a major influence on exegetes like Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1114) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) and thus of great importance to the field of *tafsīr*. This shows that the study of Qur'anic commentaries alone is insufficient in order to gain a complete picture of the exegetical debates going on at any given time, as crucial aspects – like the target of a polemic, or the source of an exegete's hermeneutics – might be missed if one neglects to study the wider intellectual climate in which exegesis took place.

A second important point that this chapter makes is that despite Jurjānī's emphasis on linguistic, as opposed to tradition-based, exegesis and despite his hermeneutical concern with establishing a rational meaning to the text, based on grammar and rhetoric, the framework of Sunni dogmatic theology limits the range of possible results, precluding, for example, interpretations that are considered to violate the principle of God's unity and uniqueness (*tawḥīd*).

Expanding on this observation, the third part of the volume contains chapters that indicate similar preoccupations for a variety of exegetes of the post-formative period. These chapters show how *tafsīr* can be used as a vehicle of self-assertion, in order to express dogmatic ideas and to set up ideological and theological boundaries, by Sunni and non-Sunni exegetes alike. They also demonstrate that this function of *tafsīr* has to be taken into consideration when examining an exegete's choice of methodology. Given the prevalence of dogmatic preoccupations, the chapter raises the question of whether the concept of a 'dogmatic *tafsīr*' makes any sense and whether a dogmatic agenda can ever be entirely absent from works of *tafsīr*, although there might be differences in degree.

Frequently, theological controversies have a profound impact on works of *tafsīr*. Abdessamad Belhaj analyses the hermeneutics of the Muʿtazilī exegete al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) and shows that the removal of ambiguity from the text is central to this exegete's endeavour. At the same time, he readily resorts to figurative meanings when this allows him to escape predeterminist and anthropomorphical readings, which are not in line with his

theological agenda. In this respect, the exegesis of the Qur'an is a pretext for ʿAbd al-Jabbār, one that serves the purpose of defending the Muʿtazilī theodicy and claims a role for the Muʿtazila in the process of Qur'anic interpretation. On the other hand, ʿAbd al-Jabbār approaches the Qur'an as a text that has to be read with an interdisciplinary hermeneutical outlook, situating it within a cosmic order that is indicated in the Qur'an, but at the same time helps to interpret the scripture; a circular argument that the exegete could only escape if he allowed for ambiguity, which is ruled out for theological reasons. The boundaries that ʿAbd al-Jabbār draws on a theological level are, however, transgressed where rhetoric, hermeneutics and the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'an (*iʿjāz al-Qur'ān*) are concerned; on this interdisciplinary level, ʿAbd al-Jabbār is very much involved with the scholarly discourse of his time and has offered an important contribution to it that to a certain extent transcends theological boundaries.

Neguin Yavari's chapter moves the discussion on to the modern period in which quite similar issues arise: to what extent is exegesis of the Qur'an a pretext for the expression of specific ideological ideas and for the erection of boundaries of exclusion? This question is especially pertinent with regard to 'political' or 'Islamist' exegesis. Thus, Yavari examines and compares the *tafsīr*s of two paradigmatic proponents of political Islam: Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966). She shows that, while both authors use the medium of *tafsīr* to promote a political agenda that involves opposition to tyrannical regimes in the Islamic world and Western imperialism, their ideological and hermeneutical outlooks are quite different. For Quṭb, the meaning of the Qur'an is clear and apparent to everyone; for Khomeini, faith is a journey that allows for the discovery of aspects of meaning, but never a complete understanding. For Quṭb, the Qur'an draws strict boundaries between believers and non-believers and calls for the absolute adherence to all tenets of Islam at the risk of exclusion from the community of Muslims; for Khomeini, the essence of the Qur'an is the establishment of a legal and political order, which then allows for the pragmatic accommodation of divergences from specific legal prescriptions for the sake of the common good. Ultimately,

Quṭb's and Khomeini's works of exegesis not only reflect the authors' differing political circumstances and perspectives, but also their differing backgrounds and claims to religious authority, which is very obvious in Khomeini's rejection of the kind of lay exegesis that Quṭb engages in. Just like Jurjānī, he tries to bolster his own scholarly authority by denying others the legitimacy to interpret the scripture of Islam.

Lay exegesis – at least in printed or mass-media form – is only one of the aspects that have newly emerged with the advent of modernity and that call into question conventional genre boundaries. The fourth section of this volume includes chapters that renegotiate these boundaries, which are usually based on the – implicit or explicit – assumption that a 'proper' work of *tafsīr* is a complete commentary on the Qur'an written by a (mostly pre-modern) religious scholar in Arabic. However, these boundaries are difficult to define clearly and might entail the risk of not doing justice to large segments of Muslim exegetical activity.

Johanna Pink, in her chapter dealing with the Yemeni exegete Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1835), discusses the validity of conventional boundaries between pre-modern and modern *tafsīr*. The period in which Shawkānī worked has been the object of an extensive theoretical and historical debate within Islamic Studies, centring on issues of reform and renewal; but this debate has hardly taken into account the voluminous *tafsīr* works produced in this period, nor have *tafsīr* studies so far taken up the theoretical issues connected to this age of reform. Reformist exegetes like Shawkānī, the author argues, elude the clear-cut categories of pre-modern and modern *tafsīr*; they draw on intellectual currents that have always been present, albeit usually not in a prominent way, in Sunni Islam, but they actualise these ideas for their own agenda. This agenda might be personally and politically motivated, but is at the same time driven by an ideal of 'true religion' that is extremely relevant for modern Muslim exegetical thought, which might account for the tremendous popularity that certain pre-modern exegetes enjoy today.

Andreas Görke discusses the extent to which a narrow definition of the genre of *tafsīr* excludes important aspects of Muslim exegetical thought and thus offers insight on some of the theoretical

considerations pointed out above. He calls attention to the fact that a great deal of Muslim exegetical activity has always been conducted orally, not in writing, and that the scope of Muslim exegetical thought increases even more when one looks at exegesis performed by 'lay Muslims', exegesis of individual parts or verses of the Qur'an and the interpretation of the Qur'an in vernacular languages of the Muslim world. Especially with regard to modern times, a large part of these exegetical activities that do not meet conventional definitions of *tafsīr* are available to the scholar through audio and video recordings or other forms of publication. Based on his study of the splitting of the moon (Q. 54:1) and its discussion by Muslims in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, he argues that taking a closer look at this material will make it possible to identify, among other things, regional specificities that have hitherto been seriously understudied or not been recognised due to the heavy reliance on printed Qur'an commentaries written by religious scholars.

Expanding further on the important issue of regional specificities and interrelations, Andrea Brigaglia explores the role of *tafsīr* in the intellectual history of Islam in West Africa and especially the crucial role that public *tafsīr* performances play in the social and intellectual life of the region. The assessment of former scholars that most of West African *tafsīr* is little more than a reproduction of the Arabic *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, he argues, misses important parts of the picture. His observations on the historical and present-day practice of West African *tafsīr*, both in Islamic learning and the public sphere, show how the interpretation of the Qur'an, despite the sources it shares with other regions of the Islamic world, is localised with respect to its ideological functions and to the role it assumes in the career of Muslim scholars; it is entrenched in region-specific developments, but also shaped by the interaction with the Arab world.

The fifth section takes a closer look at the ways in which the genre of *tafsīr* has changed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; its chapters do not have an exclusive focus on changes and ruptures, but also give close attention to continuities and to the ways in which the *tafsīr* tradition, or parts of it, are appropriated in order to serve the exegetes' concerns. Thus, while pointing out new developments, they

do not disassociate modern exegetical activities from the 'genealogical tradition' of *tafsīr* that has been described above.

Kathrin Klausing examines the notions of 'traditionalism' and 'modernity' in her chapter on gender issues in the *tafsīr* works of two twentieth-century exegetes: the Tunisian Sunni al-Ṭāhir Ibn Āshūr (d. 1973) and the Iranian Shi'i Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981). She shows how little relevance the Sunni-Shi'i divide has when it comes to defending what the exegetes perceive as an endangered family system. While both scholars might be considered traditional in the sense that they received a traditional Islamic education, take part in the 'discursive tradition' of *tafsīr* and do not challenge classical *fiqh* rules, the arguments they deliver in order to support these rules are decidedly modern, as is their idea of a family in which the wife performs household duties and is responsible for the education of children, which is heavily influenced by nineteenth-century bourgeois European ideas. In spite of both exegetes' reliance on pre-modern *tafsīr* and *fiqh* works, the chapter demonstrates that modernist scientific, and especially biologist, arguments play a crucial role for their exegesis; even in the realm of scholarly *tafsīr*, twentieth-century exegetes seem to consider the modes of reasoning found in pre-modern *tafsīr* insufficient in order to convince their audience.

Kathrin Eith adds another facet to the regional and linguistic spectrum covered in this part of the volume by analysing the exegetical activity of Yaşar Nuri Öztürk (b. 1945), a contemporary religious thinker and activist who published books on Qur'an hermeneutics and a *tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* (Q. 1). In her chapter, she describes the endeavour – typical of a broad trend among Muslim intellectuals in recent decades, especially in Turkey – to harmonise the Qur'an with a modern lifestyle and a political and legal system based on Western precedents. Among the techniques used by Öztürk are a reading of the suras in their chronological order of revelation and the interpretation of the Qur'an in the light of its general 'aims', without necessarily applying specific prescriptions; the emphasis on a polyvalent reading of the Qur'an is meant to provide different interpretations that are valid for different times. However, the chapter also addresses the shortcomings of Öztürk's

approach, which makes use of a rather arbitrary assemblage of pre-modern and modern sources and fails to discuss critically the basic assumptions it rests upon, namely the chronology of the Qur'an's revelation and the general aims of the Qur'an. Eith's analysis shows that Öztürk's approach is specifically Turkish in many ways, for instance with respect to his independence from exegetical authorities writing in Arabic; his goal is to make recent developments in Turkish theology accessible to a broader Turkish public. Thus, modernism in the exegesis of the Qur'an seems, in many cases, to be connected to the contemporary environment of specific nation-states and their academic institutions. This hypothesis is fairly plausible for the Turkish case and deserves further research for other regions of the Islamic world.

Finally, Andrew Rippin deals with the distinctly modern phenomenon of the translation of *tafsīr* works into Western languages and thus sheds further light on the effects of regionalism and globalisation on *tafsīr*. His chapter provides a framework for the analysis of translations into European languages – mainly English and French – of classical works of *tafsīr*, as well as their significance. It categorises the aims of translators, both non-Muslim and Muslim, of classical works of exegesis and discusses the impact that translation has on these works. The struggle of translators in tackling the linguistic details, extensive recounting of traditions, repetitions and polyvalence in pre-modern works of *tafsīr* reveals much about the characteristics of the genre that make it hard to deal with for a modern audience.

Conclusion

The chapters of this volume aim at providing analytical tools for the study of *tafsīr* by examining its place in the wider field of Islamic intellectual history and rethinking its characteristics, functions and internal subdivisions. Paradoxically, this involves a clearer demarcation of genre boundaries, but also their transcendence.

In this vein, the contributions of Bronson, Gilliot and Sinai on formative *tafsīr* draw attention both to the emergence of genre boundaries and to their fragility due to the interwovenness of

Muslim exegetical activities with other religious activities like storytelling, linguistics and theology, and likewise with the exegetical traditions of other Mediterranean religions. The dialectic process of the interaction with other fields and, at the same time, the erection of boundaries of distinction has thus been apparent in the development of *tafsīr* from the beginning. This is also true with regard to sources; Tottoli's study seems to point to an early differentiation of genres with respect to the traditions they use.

However, while *tafsīr* as a relatively clearly definable literary genre emerged in the course of the first three centuries of Islam, Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an is not confined to this literary genre. The question of the definition of *tafsīr* that was raised at the beginning of this introductory chapter should remain open, for good reason: different studies have different requirements. Khalfallah's and Görke's chapters, to give two examples, show how important it can be to look beyond the classical Qur'anic commentary for a more comprehensive appreciation of exegetical discourses; other chapters, like Sauer's or Tottoli's, however, demonstrate that *tafsīr*, in the narrow definition proposed by Calder, is a genre with its own logic, its own methods and its own sources and authorities, all of which merit further research. Thus, there would be no point in offering an ultimate definition of *tafsīr*; rather, the approach of this volume should be understood as a plea for analytical clarity.

The same is true for the development of taxonomies and categorisations. Certainly, it is possible to distinguish between different types of exegetical works according to their aims, methods, authors, target groups or other criteria. However, these distinctions should be employed with great care, and an attempt for utmost clarity in the terminology that is used should be made. Chapters like Pink's and Klausing's show that simplistic dichotomies like the one between traditional and modern, which are pervasive in studies of *tafsīr*, are much more complex than they appear to be and might even turn out to be meaningless if properly dissected. As becomes clear from Yavari's chapter, categorising a work of *tafsīr* as Islamist, political, radical or conservative reveals little about the exegete's actual methods, results and concerns; and as Sánchez's chapter reveals, an exegete's engagement with Muʿtazilī theology may be

less important than other concerns, so that not every exegetical work written by a Muʿtazilī should necessarily be classified as a work of Muʿtazilī exegesis. On the other hand, Belhaj's contribution to this volume clearly shows that self-assertion is an important function of *tafsīr*, a fact that also becomes apparent in many other chapters; so much so that it has to be asked if self-assertion can ever be fully absent from exegetical endeavours. Given this finding, categories like 'dogmatic *tafsīr*' become rather meaningless.

Finally, several chapters, especially those of Brigaglia, Eith, Görke and Rippin, point to the tremendous and growing importance of regional and linguistic diversity in *tafsīr* and to the increasing role of globalisation. It seems that specific regional circumstances – among them local scholarly traditions, language, nation-state policies and diasporic situations – have a great impact on the way in which Muslims (and non-Muslims!) interpret the Qur'an. This is a field that merits further study and can be expected to yield fruitful results for the study of both pre-modern and modern *tafsīr*.

NOTES

1 Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical* Tafsīr *Tradition. The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden, Brill, 2004), p. 16.
2 See the discussion of the history of the field in Andrew Rippin, 'The Present Status of *Tafsīr* Studies', *Muslim World* 72 (1982), pp. 224–38.
3 Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC, Georgetown University, 1986).
4 See Rippin, 'The Present Status of *Tafsīr* Studies'; Bruce Fudge, 'Qur'ānic Exegesis in Medieval Islam and Modern Orientalism', *Die Welt des Islams* 46, no. 2 (2006), pp. 115–47, at p. 115; Walid A. Saleh, 'A Fifteenth-century Muslim Hebraist: al-Biqāʿī and his Defense of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qur'ān', *Speculum* 83, no. 3 (2008), pp. 629–54, at p. 629.
5 See Walid A. Saleh, 'Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of *tafsīr* in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12 (2010), pp. 6–40.
6 Claude Gilliot, 'Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Classical and Medieval', *EQ*, vol. II, pp. 99–124; Rotraud Wielandt, 'Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Early Modern and Contemporary', *EQ*, vol. II, pp. 124–42.
7 See, for example, Norman Calder, '*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham' in Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, eds, *Approaches to the Qur'ān* (London, Routledge, 1993), pp. 101–40; Saleh, *Formation*; Saleh, 'Preliminary Remarks'; Bruce Fudge, *Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: Al-Ṭabrisī and*

the Craft of Commentary (London, Routledge, 2011). A new volume by Karen Bauer, ed., *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis (2nd/8th–9th/15th c.)* (Oxford, Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013), is a welcome addition to the field.

8 Calder, '*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr'.
9 Ibid., pp. 101–6.
10 See ibid., in particular pp. 123–34.
11 Saleh, *Formation*, pp. 14–16.
12 Andreas Görke, 'The Relationship between *maghāzī* and *ḥadīth* in Early Islamic Scholarship', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 74, no. 2 (2011), pp. 171–85.
13 Ignáz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung: an der Universität Upsala gehaltene Olaus-Petri-Vorlesungen* (Leiden, Brill, 1920); ed. and tr. Wolfgang H. Behn as *Schools of Koranic Commentators* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2006).
14 Helmut Gätje, *Koran und Koranexegese* (Zürich and Stuttgart, Artemis Verlag, 1971).
15 Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-mufassirūn*, 3 vols (Cairo, Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1961–62).
16 See Saleh, 'Preliminary Remarks', pp. 7–11.
17 Fudge, *Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*.
18 Cf. Walid Saleh's critique of Goldziher's taxonomy: Saleh, *Formation*, p. 17.
19 Jamal J. Elias, 'Ṣūfī *tafsīr* Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12 (2010), pp. 41–55, at p. 51.
20 See, for example, the *EQ*, which distinguishes between 'classical and medieval' on the one hand and 'early modern and contemporary' on the other hand.
21 Andrew Rippin, 'Tafsīr', *EI*^{2}, vol. X, pp. 83–8.
22 Cf. Johanna Pink, *Sunnitischer Tafsīr in der modernen islamischen Welt: Akademische Traditionen, Popularisierung und nationalstaatliche Interessen* (Leiden, Brill, 2011), pp. 6–8.
23 Wielandt, 'Exegesis of the Qur'ān', p. 124.
24 Saleh, *Formation*, pp. 16 f.
25 Johanna Pink, 'Tradition, Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunnī *tafsīr*: Towards a Typology of Qur'an Commentaries from the Arab World, Indonesia and Turkey', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12 (2010), pp. 56–82.
26 See Chapter 12 of this volume.
27 Pink, *Sunnitischer Tafsīr*; Pink, 'Tradition, Authority and Innovation'; and Johanna Pink, 'Tradition and Ideology in Contemporary Sunnite Qur'ānic Exegesis. Qur'ānic Commentaries from the Arab World, Turkey and Indonesia and their Interpretation of Q 5:51', *Die Welt des Islams* 50, no. 1 (2010), pp. 3–59, contain some comparative analysis of Arab, Indonesian and Turkish *tafsīr* works, but this can only be considered a first step towards a mapping of regional *tafsīr* traditions.
28 For a more detailed discussion of the importance of regional differences, as well as the shortcomings of conventional genre boundaries, see Chapter 11 of this volume.