

Chapter 2

Methodological Foundations: Analysing Religious Narrative

Abstract This chapter will build on the preceding chapter in fleshing out the conceptual notions outlined therein and grounding them in methodologies designed specifically to uncover and convey the essential meanings attached to religious texts and narratives. The so-called ‘Ehrman Method’ of the biblical scholar, Bart Ehrman, will serve to represent the many scholarly efforts in Judaism and Christianity to broaden understanding of Jewish and Christian texts that take them beyond narrative literalism. Mohamed Talbi, the Muslim historical theologian, will serve to represent important scholarly efforts in the present day to address the texts of the Qur’an and other Islamic sacred sources in ways that go beyond narrative literalism and invoke higher levels of cognitive interest. Finally, the archetypal work of Muhammad al-Tabari will be introduced as a means of establishing that this most crucial narrative about Islam’s origins, including its sacred texts, was from the beginning one with far greater significance than could be contained by a narrative literal genre. It can never be fully appreciated unless the cognitive interests directed to meaning-making and self-reflectivity are impelled; its challenge was always that it should be understood by way of a form of second naiveté.

Introduction

Narrative literalism regarding the Judaeo-Christian texts was challenged in the nineteenth century, partly externally by new paradigms of knowledge wrought by the sciences and social sciences, and partly internally through (especially) Christian scholarship seeking richer understandings of the heritage of its sacred texts than narrative literalism allowed. Internally, that is within church circles, this was an inevitably controversial move and one not encouraged by and large by religious authorities. In the nineteenth into twentieth centuries, the scholarly move was characterized by the notion of ‘the quest for the historical Jesus’ or searching for ‘the Jesus of history versus the Christ of faith’, or a similar coin of phrase. Such notions bespoke an increasing recognition that the Christian gospels, indeed the entire Judaeo-Christian Bible, were not historical or literal accounts (how could the gospels be so when there were several of them and they differed in significant

respects?). The recognition grew that, in all these texts, we were dealing with a genre other than historical or factual record but that this did not mean they were fictional, as indeed, many scientists and social scientists were alleging on the basis of their newfound empirical methodologies.

This 'liberal theology', as it became known, and its allied 'biblical criticism' took a number of forms and involved many scholars. Among them was Albrecht Ritschl (Barth 2012) who was explicit in his claim that faith was not built on facts but on value judgements, effectively meaning-making exercises. It was of no great significance that the gospels could not deliver the facts about Jesus because Christian faith did not rest on these facts, nor did rejection of faith inevitably result from their absence. Faith rested, rather, on the knowledge and understanding that Jesus was the Son of God regardless of what the recorded facts recounted. Schweitzer (2001) went further in suggesting that the historical Jesus, whoever he may have been, is effectively lost because the gospel texts we have left to us were written well after the 'facts' they purport to record and they were constructed to serve later institutional purposes, rather than record historical facts. What Schweitzer did not know at the time was that many other gospels and accounts of the life of Jesus had been rejected by the church in its early centuries because they did not fit with the image of Jesus that the church at the time, wishing to find a foothold in the Roman Empire, wanted to promote. Hence, even if there had been a record of Jesus' life, that is, a narrative literal, it had likely been lost or deliberately destroyed for institutional purposes. This would simply have added weight, had he known of it, to Schweitzer's assertion that the gospels did not represent a factual or historical account of Jesus, nor were they meant to do so.

Coming further into the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann builds on the case made by the liberal theologians in what is described as a second quest. The second quest accepted the final judgement of the first quest that there is no narrative literalism represented by the gospels but went further in explicitly asserting that the meaning behind the gospels can only and must be discerned through a method of textual analysis described as 'demythologization'. Effectively, Bultmann (1984) rendered the gospels entirely mythical, crediting them not at all with any shred of historical or factual accuracy. Indeed, Bultmann would suggest that allowing even a vestige of belief in narrative literalism only serves to blind oneself to the reality of the gospel myth and, in turn, to slow the essential process of demythologizing in order to discern their meaning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer later on acknowledged the contribution of Bultmann to understanding the gospels:

I belong to those who have welcomed [Bultmann's] writing ... To put it bluntly, Bultmann has let the cat out of the bag, not only for himself but for a great many people (the liberal cat out of the confessional bag), and in this I rejoice. He has dared to say what many repress in themselves (here I include myself) without having overcome it. He has thereby rendered a service to intellectual integrity and honesty. Many brothers oppose him with a hypocritical faith [*Glaubenspharisäismus*] that I find deadly. Now an account must be given. I would like to speak with Bultmann about this and open myself to the fresh air that comes from him. But then the window has to be shut again. Otherwise the susceptible will too easily catch cold." (DBWE 16 2006, p. 347)

So, in typically balanced fashion, Bonhoeffer is open to new thinking, indeed relishes in anything that can keep the flame of Christianity alive, but, at the same time, he wants to modify some of the extremism in Bultmannian method. He does this by suggesting that the gospel texts do in fact give us some insight into the historical person of Jesus, and that this is important in the relationship that each Christian has with him, but that the greater understanding on offer in the gospels is nonetheless quite beyond such historical and factual considerations and the limited faith that such an understanding allows. In a sense, this balanced approach sets the scene for us to consider Bart Ehrman's contribution to sacred textual scholarship.

Before turning to Ehrman, however, we wish to consider briefly the situation in Islam and whether there is or ever has been an equivalent scholarship. Our answer is that there are indications that there may well have been in its earliest years, especially in what has come to be known as the 'Golden Age of Islam', a period in the Middle Ages wherein scholarship of all kinds abounded in a way that was quite beyond anything that Western Empires could muster. Some of that scholarship was around religious understanding, including about the distinctive role that sacred texts play in establishing and maintaining any religious tradition. Furthermore, such scholarship persists in Islam, albeit with difficulty and doubtlessly in spite of internal suppression of scholarship that leaves open scholarly debate about the nature and role of sacred texts a far less prominent feature of Islamic scholarship than to be found now in Christianity. Part of this relates to the general state of critical Islamic scholarship that has, too often, functioned in difficult, under-resourced and sometimes oppressive social contexts. Part of it pertains to the greater control over scholarship that one often finds in the Islamic world, control from both civil and religious authorities that has rendered open scholarship very difficult, especially the development of a form of liberal theology or textual criticism of the sort noted above in nineteenth century Christendom. In spite of this, we contend that the same spirit of seeing beyond a narrative literalist approach can be seen in Muslim scholarship today (Nasr 2002; Arkoun 2002) and, arguably, even more obviously in scholarship of the past. Representative of the former is Mohamed Talbi and of the latter is Muhammad al-Tabari, both of whom we deal with below. We are not suggesting that either Talbi today or al-Tabari yesterday is to be understood as merely an Islamic version of liberal theologian but simply that they all share an understanding of sacred sources as implying far more than narrative literalism, as we are employing the term in this book.

Bart Ehrman

Bart Ehrman began his religious career as a fundamentalist Christian. His faith fitted well into Ricoeur's first naiveté and his cognitive interest as a scholar was in understanding more and more of the facts and figures of the gospels, what Habermas would describe as empirical-analytic knowing. As he delved further and further into the text, he realized that this narrative literalism was inadequate, both

from a scholarly and faith point of view. The inconsistencies, multiple genres and many layers of meaning-making in the gospels made it obvious that he was dealing with a far more complex set of texts than he had originally understood. In time, his pure scholarly instincts would take over but initially it was his faith and the desire to understand better the gospels that lay at the heart of this faith that drove him to ever deeper textual analysis.

Ehrman's (2006, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016) textual analysis builds on the many works of liberal theology and textual criticism noted above but its intensity has led to a method that goes by his name, the so-called Ehrman method. The Ehrman method is arguably the most rigorous of all the methods applied to biblical analysis in the past 150 years. It is a comprehensive method in the sense that it utilizes so many different analytical tools, including linguistics, historical and social analysis and hermeneutics. It is a method that leaves no stone unturned in attempting to understand how the text came to be the way it is, where it has been interfered with, re-oriented or re-translated, where it has been designed to serve a wider social purpose because of the history going on around it, and finally what the author(s) was intending to convey, what the text meant to those writing and re-writing it, and what it was intended to mean to readers in terms of their values, beliefs and identity.

The original and enduring intention of the Ehrman method was to lay the grounds for a second naiveté, to invoke those cognitive interests that impel the more sophisticated understandings implied by Habermas's historical-hermeneutic and self-reflective ways of knowing. This was when Ehrman turned from fundamentalism to being a 'liberal' Christian, still a believer but an enlightened one, or what Habermas would describe as emancipated in his knowing.

Unlike his predecessors, Ehrman had available to him a corpus of texts that were discovered progressively throughout the twentieth century. In 1945, fifty-two distinctive texts (usually numbered as 53 since one text was included loose in a codex), were found in a cave in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Some of these were mere fragments, while others were quite fulsome. For obvious reasons, they became known as the 'Nag Hammadi texts', the 'Nag Hammadi Library', or simply the 'Nag Hammadi'. They had been buried in a large sealed jar with, contentiously, the skeleton of the apparent protector next to it. The contents made it fairly clear that the burial had been designed to preserve these texts that were at risk of being destroyed. There were gospels, referred to popularly as 'Gnostic Gospels' (Pagels 1979) and other material that projected a Jesus and an image of Christianity that did not fit with the direction that the church was wanting to take in its early days of incorporation into the Roman Empire. In all likelihood, they had lain buried for 1600 years, from the time that the then Patriarch of Alexandria, St Athanasius, had declared that any text that was at odds with the creedal definitions formulated at the Council of Nicaea (325CE) should be destroyed. Athanasius' condemnation and attempt to have all errant texts burned was in 367CE.

Then, in 1947 and progressively through to 1956, further texts were uncovered in caves around the Dead Sea. These 'Dead Sea Scrolls' constituted a much larger collection, many of them far older than the Nag Hammadi texts and shedding light not just on the emergence of Christianity and ways in which the Christian gospels

might have been formed but also on the true nature of the Hebrew Bible, the so-called Old Testament, as Christians called it. For Ehrman, these discoveries have been central to the kinds of probes in which he has engaged. He has become something of a renowned specialist on the Nag Hammadi and their implications for the kinds of decisions that were made in the formulation of the four gospels that were rendered 'canonical' by the fourth century church and, moreover, for the Jesus who emerged from the many politically inspired re-orienting, re-creating and re-writing of them before they emerged as the 'Christian canon', the alleged revelation that underpins Christian belief.

We find in Ehrman's many books the growing confidence with which modern biblical criticism can proceed. We now have such a wealth of evidence of interference in and political manipulation of Christianity's (and indeed Judaism's) 'sacred texts', along with digital analytic techniques and prowess beyond anything earlier generations enjoyed. Ehrman has combined the full array of new and emerging discoveries, advanced understanding via social and archaeological sciences of the civilizations and contextual circumstances relevant to textual formation, and finally the digital analytic power of new technologies in order to uncover the truth about these sacred texts.

Ehrman has clearly been a controversial scholar who has had to suffer a significant amount of denunciation and rejection, especially from conservative religious quarters. He has not always been a favourite scholar among Christian or indeed Jewish authorities. Nonetheless, the rigour and intensity of his method has actually served the Christian tradition well for the very reasons outlined in Chap. 1 about the ease with which the first naïveté, let us call it fundamentalism, can be punctured by new knowledge or modern science and/or can be allied with extremism of one sort or another. As noted then, this extremism can take the form of religious radicalism or religious denialism, or merely the crazy, the unhinged view. So, for example, Ehrman has proven very useful in contradicting those who wish to suggest that the gospels are entirely fictional, that there was probably never a Jesus nor were any of the events and characters depicted part of history in any normal sense. Ehrman's balanced method allows for the overwhelming likelihood that the Jesus character depicted in the gospels was an historical figure and, equally, that many of the characters and events represent a measure of historical truth. Equally, Ehrman's work has been useful in correcting some of the wild speculation of authors like Dan Brown (of *Da Vinci Code* fame) whose popular works have often had the effect of discrediting some of the essential beliefs and claims of the Christian church.

Ehrman's scholarship is a good example of how fruitful it can be to investigate and analyse sacred texts in a way that superordinates narrative literalism, one that enters into the space between bland facts and the meaning-making elements of a legend. While it might seem risky and unpopular among conservative elements and many authorities who will see their vested interests being threatened, it nonetheless has the potential to place the faith of people in their tradition on a far sturdier foundation. In a word, when the cognitive interest in understanding meanings and being assured that one's knowing is emancipated, as in Habermas, and one's faith

accords with Ricoeur's second naïveté, individual faith and the surety of an entire tradition are both on firmer ground. Furthermore, the potential of fundamentalism to turn to extremism at either the religious radical or religious denial ends is ameliorated. So what do we say about Islam in this regard?

Mohamed Talbi

The Tunisian historical theologian, Talbi (1967, 1995, 2006, 2011), has trodden a different scholarly path from that of Ehrman. He would make no claims to being the textual analyst of Ehrman's proportions. He is, rather, an expert on the history of Islam and the various theologies that have driven its directionality over time. From a different perspective, he has nonetheless arrived at a similar place, one that sees and understands the meaning behind his sacred text being far beyond what narrative literalism on its own could deliver. Indeed, his strident criticism of the radical Islamists is that their minds are stuck at the level of literalness; they can quote the words but quite misconstrue their meanings. He stands as a good contemporary representative of a Muslim scholar whose cognitive interests impel understanding meanings and self-reflectivity on how therefore an individual Muslim should project her or his faith. His own faith is clearly built around what Ricoeur would call a second rather than first naïveté.

The position of Talbi is that of a faithful Muslim, from which perspective he stands against the literalist's narrow interpretation and especially any interpretation associated with hatefulness and violence. On the contrary, Talbi sees in the Islamic inspirational narrative an inherent inclusiveness and therefore proffers that Islam should be the world's leader of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. In supporting his argument, he draws also on the historical instances of Muslim empires maintaining some of the medieval world's most successful polyglot societies. As a result, his representation of Islam is far from that of the fundamentalist image of it as a recalcitrant if not violent opponent of tolerance and acceptance of difference. Talbi employs the sacred sources of Islam to illustrate that, on balance, it was one of, if not the greatest of, the reforming movements of the medieval world, building societies where peoples of all faiths, including especially Jews, Christians and minority Muslims could live safely and thrive together for the common good. His understanding of Islamic history highlights the instances where a Muslim Empire was protecting its non-Muslim subjects and the intellectual circles were engaging in scholarship with different religious creeds and cross-pollinating with their beliefs in theological conversations. To add to this account, one could also highlight instances of inter-worship and common usage of sites for different faith worship to be found in the Levant of late antiquity, something that was certainly not happening anywhere else at the time.

By using this line of argument, Talbi employs historical instances to make the point that these medieval Muslims would have been horrified to think that, 1000 years later, Islam and terrorism would be so associated in the popular mind.

He furthermore proposes that it is important, indeed urgent, that all people, especially vulnerable youth, should have these images of Islam presented to them in order to challenge both the tabloid stereotype about Islam and those Muslim youth who might be prone to take up the Jihadist's call to arms.

Talbi (2002) argues strenuously for what he sees as the authentic Islam. He defines this authentic Islam as a faith that was ahead of its time and that, far from the view promoted by the radical Islamists, took an innovative measured position on an equivalent status for all revealed religions. For him, the inspiration for this position is to be found in the Qur'an itself which, according to his reading, renders a belief that all revealed religion is equal in status so long as it is faithful to its essential charter to be a spiritual and ethical force in the world. He appeals to a citation from the traditions in suggesting that the Qur'an is 'God's Banquet' to which all are invited but none is compelled to attend. Indeed, to attend through compulsion is not to attend in the way God intends. One can only truly attend if one is free and willing to do so. On this basis, he argues that there should be no Islamic claims made towards exclusivity or being a sole pathway to salvation.

For Talbi, it is the exclusivist beliefs of the narrative literalists across the religious traditions that cause so much strife in a world where faiths intersect and interact in ways that were not so common in the past. In a world of mass communication, rapid transport and instantaneous intercultural exchange, the world needs faith positions that are attuned to difference and pluriformity, and so impel dialogue, understanding and peace between peoples.

For Talbi, as a faithful Muslim, Islam should be at the forefront of such faiths, rather than 'dragging the chain' in the way of the popular stereotype. The importance of Talbi's scholarship is especially in the fact that he draws on the Qur'an and Islam's other sacred texts. He shares his sources and confessional principles with the radicals and fundamentalists. Nonetheless, using the same traditions, he projects his own view of Islam as a 'best fit' faith tradition for the issues confronting the twenty-first century:

... the dialogue with all men of all kinds of faiths and ideologies is from now and onwards strictly and irreversibly unavoidable ... Man's fulfillment is in community and relationship. And this is written in the Qur'an ...

If this can be admitted ... we can think of the whole of mankind as a brotherly 'community of communities' – or God's Family as the Hadith states – in which everyone has the right to be different, to be accepted, and fully respected in his chosen differences. To respect others in their chosen and assumed differences – not just to tolerate them on point of pain – is finally to respect God's Will. (Talbi 1995, p. 61)

Talbi's (2002, 2011; Talbi and Jarczyk 2002) quest is to re-establish the ethics of tolerance and inter-faith dialogue that, for him, lie at the heart of the Islamic tradition and are the key to Islam's ongoing relevance in the pluriform world of the twenty-first century. Talbi's theology is vital therefore to those whose commitment is to an Islam that can only be understood as an inextricable part of the tripartite 'People of the Book' tradition, to Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a mutually inclusive trinity of Abrahamic monotheistic faiths and all that it has spawned.

The true believer—Jew, Christian or Muslim—will therefore be committed to dialogue with fellow ‘People of the Book’ in order to understand more fully the totality of the tradition, and therefore come to know fully the God who lies behind the complete tradition. Claims to superiority of one of the religions of the Book over the others, be it from Judaism, Christianity, Islam or, least of all, one of the denominations within any of those religions, is for Talbi another sign of ignorance and indeed lack of true faith.

Talbi is highly critical, therefore, of some forms of modern inter-faith ecumenism that seem to him to be none too subtly mere indirect efforts at proselytizing. He singles out the contemporary Roman Catholic approach to dialogue for his harshest treatment in this regard, not because it is the worst representation of Christian proselytizing but largely because he expects so much more, granted the common intellectual thread between Islam and the Roman tradition of Christianity. For Talbi, failure to deal with difference and its legitimacy simply perpetuates the tensions that have torn so many generations apart around the divisions between Jewish, Christian and Islamic belief. As far as Talbi is concerned, God’s plan was always intended to be unfolded in many stages, with, at its centre, Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a troika of beliefs, complementary to each other rather than competitive. Only through the most profound acceptance of this truth can age-old misunderstanding and violence, including the forces that threaten our civilization today, be turned around.

Islamic scholarship of Talbi’s species is at the forefront of challenging the relative ease with which fundamentalist and radical Islamist agendas have become the Islamic stereotype, something that Talbi sees as betraying profound ignorance about and within Islam. Furthermore, the ignorance is all pervasive, infecting both the non-Muslim and Muslim worlds and exacerbating tensions and conflicts that would be unnecessary if this ignorance did not exist. Above all, the ignorance, and the resultant tension between Islam and non-Islam, is robbing the world of one of the forces that could assist most effectively in dealing with twenty-first century challenges. Such a liberating theology, with its capacity to interpret anew the most sacred of Islamic texts, is therefore of profound importance not only to the future of Islam and to a twenty-first century challenged by Islam, but to twenty-first century progress itself.

The important point about Talbi, for the purposes of this book, is that the strength of his position results from his scholarship and personal beliefs that clearly supersede narrative literalism. He is among a minority but vital Islamic scholarship that is nudging the tradition to move towards a more sophisticated appreciation of its own most sacred source material in order to free the tradition from its current subservience to fundamentalism and an inevitable element of extremism that goes with it.

The greatest evidence of its importance arguably derives from the fact that Talbi himself has often been the target for threatening Islamist rhetoric. The greatest threat of all to fundamentalism and extremism is a sophisticated and informed interpretation of a tradition’s sacred narratives. For Talbi, there have been many sources of inspiration for his move to invoke deeper cognitive interests and arrive at

a faith resting on a form of second naiveté, but among them would seem to be his understanding of the work that, more than any other, impelled the tradition we know as Islam (Talbi 1967). This is the work of the ninth century (CE) historical theologian, al-Tabari.

Muhammad al-Tabari

Muhammad ibn al Jarir al-Tabari (839–923CE) had something in common with both Talbi and Ehrman. Like Talbi, he was an historian and, like Ehrman, he was an exegete, one who analyses and dissects sacred source material for its meaning; in his case, the prime object of his exegesis was the Qur'an. However, unlike a modern exegete, his mammoth work, *The History of the Prophets and Kings* (Yarshater 1999) (more commonly known simply as *The History* or *The History of al-Tabari*) consists of 38 volumes that purport to institutionalize the essential history and theological significance of Islam. Accordingly, he delivers a work that is partly a history, in the normal sense of the word, and partly a *histoire* (Mogadam 2015), a creative interpretation of the meaning and significance of Islam premised against the entirety of world history. While focussed on Islam's sacred history, *The History* itself has come to enjoy the status of being something of a sacred source itself, most particularly for its construction of Islamic beliefs, values and identity. Al-Tabari seems to understand well that, just as a reading of the Qur'an as narrative literalism is to badly undersell its significance and is liable to cede its authority to fundamentalist if not extremist elements, so the same can be said of how one should read *The History*.

Just as Ehrman showed in the Christian gospels, so one can see in *The History* that it captures important factual events (history in the normal sense) but it also takes license to posit interpretation and meaning-making about those events that go beyond the historical account in the normal sense. So, Ehrman could happily contest those who wished to claim that the gospels were pure fiction with his well-informed certainty that they were in fact grounded in historical events but that the purpose of the gospels was well beyond a merely simple recounting of those events. The gospels were designed to posit a faith assertion about the significance to God's plan and his world of the advent of Jesus of Nazareth, an event known in Christianity as the 'Christ Event'.

Similarly, al-Tabari posits the events recounted of Muhammad and the foundation of the first Islamic community as being far beyond a simple recounting of facts but, rather, as a turning-point in the world's history. Muhammad was believed to be the Last and Greatest of God's Prophets and the founder of the Islamic community (the Ummah) at Medina in the 620sCE. He also was perceived to be the fulfilment of God's plan for his people, in a continuum of the Abrahamic tradition. Just as Talbi's faith rests on an apparent Ricoeurian second naiveté, so we might suggest did al-Tabari's at what constitutes the foundation of Islam's written history. While grounded in history, al-Tabari's faith in the truth that was Islam goes well

beyond concern with mere historical factuality or not. Indeed, to be stuck at that level of concern is to risk missing the point about the revelation's message and, possibly, to become embroiled in nit-picking fundamentalist squabbles that ultimately betray the message and import of Islam. It could be said that, a little over a millennium after al-Tabari, this is an aspect of what we are experiencing of Islam and Islamism today, an unseemly fundamentalism that impels an underselling of Islam's importance and a poor reputation as a global contributor.

Far from being a fundamentalist, it seems al-Tabari could well be cast as an Islamic progressive and rationalist in his time, a theologian with at least some of the perspectives of the Christian liberal theologian a full millennium before liberal theology flourished in Christianity. Indeed, it is difficult to find in Christianity the equivalent of a work that does for it what al-Tabari did for Islam. The identity of al-Tabari as a theologian fits well with the fact that the school of thought (doctrine, law or *fiqh*—Islamic jurisprudence) with which he is associated was one of the most liberal of such schools of thought in the early centuries of Islam. Named after part of al-Tabari's own name (Jariri—after Muhammad ibn al Jarir al-Tabari), Jariri was most notable for encouraging a rational approach to Qur'anic interpretation (i.e. not to be caught in the snares of narrative literalism) including around issues of social ethics and reform. Jariri tended towards the inclusivist, or integrative end of any debates about how to treat non-Muslims or the role of women. This brought it into dispute with other more hard-headed schools of thought and, especially as Islam hardened against the challenge of Christian aggression, Jariri's influence weakened in favour of more exclusivist policies. It could be argued that, while al-Tabari's *The History* remains a key facet of his legacy, the greater legacy, namely the real import and meaning behind *The History*, has been lost amidst a disposition in Islam towards fundamentalism, exclusivism and extremism, of the species that tend to flourish when narrative literalism rules. We will spend more time exploring the vital and perhaps yet to be fully realized/re-discovered import of al-Tabari in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have built on the conceptual foundations established in the first chapter. Notions of expanded cognitive interest and a faith built on second naiveté have become central in exploring the exegetical work of Bart Ehrman, the historical theological work of Mohamed Talbi and the exegetical and historical theological work of Muhammad al-Tabari. We are suggesting that these works illustrate the benefits to be derived and the pitfalls avoided of going beyond narrative literalism in one's reading and understanding of one's most sacred source materials. While the conceptual foundations and the first methodological foray were laid in Western scholarship, in this chapter, we proffer that the same conceptual and methodological apparatus can be found, at least implicitly, in contemporary and medieval Islam. Indeed, we proffer that the foundational story on which Islam rests is built on such conceptions and such a methodology.

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Revelation, Reconstruction or Both?

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