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Remnants of an Old *Tafsīr* Tradition?

The Exegetical Accounts of ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr

Andreas Görke

1 Introduction

This article aims to assess the exegetical traditions ascribed to the early Medinan scholar ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. c. 93/712). ‘Urwa is mainly known as a jurist and historian, but several *ḥadīth* collections and commentaries on the Qur’ān also contain a number of exegetical statements based on his authority, which have not been closely examined to date. By focusing on the statements of a seemingly marginal figure in the history of *tafsīr*, this article also seeks to contribute to the study of the early Islamic exegetical tradition. This field is characterized by contrasting and seemingly irreconcilable positions with regard to the ascription of exegetical material to early figures of the first and second centuries AH (seventh and eighth centuries CE). Focusing on marginal figures may provide a better chance of finding authentic material from that period, which will in turn allow for a better understanding of the early development of *tafsīr*.

This article will first briefly summarize previous scholarship on ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr as well as on the debates surrounding the origins and early development of *tafsīr* to place it into its scholarly context. Subsequently, the material that is adduced on the authority of ‘Urwa in Qur’ān commentaries will be analyzed to provide an overview of the topics and types of traditions that have been circulating with reference to him. This will be followed by an assessment of the authenticity of these references, i.e. whether they do indeed go back to ‘Urwa and reflect his positions or whether they are later ascriptions. The article concludes with a discussion of the impact these results may have on understanding the early development of Islamic exegesis.

2 Previous Scholarship on ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr and His Role in *Tafsīr*

‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr is mostly renowned for his expertise in law and his knowledge of the Prophet Muḥammad. He is counted among the seven *fuqahā’* of Medina, legal scholars who were active around the turn of the seventh

century CE and who are deemed largely responsible for the development of legal thought in Medina. He is also considered to be one of the earliest scholars to write down and transmit traditions about the life of Muḥammad.¹

There is, in particular, a considerable amount of scholarship on ‘Urwa’s role as a historian² and some recognition of his importance in the development of Islamic law.³ In contrast, very little research has been conducted on his traditions relating to the Qur’ān, despite the fact that a considerable number of those that are traced back to him more or less explicitly refer to the Qur’ān. Von Stülpnagel, to whom we owe the first substantial study of the life and work of ‘Urwa, identified a total of some 315 independent traditions going back to him, of which almost 100, or roughly a third, refer to the Qur’ān either by explicitly quoting parts of a *sūra* or by clearly hinting at it.⁴ ‘Urwa is also regularly quoted in all major works of *tafsīr*. Thus, for instance, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) and al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) quote him on at least 50 occasions, and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) in more than 100 instances, with the total number of traditions quoted being considerably higher.

Despite the apparent importance of the Qur’ān in traditions going back to ‘Urwa, he was never regarded as a prominent figure in the field of Qur’anic exegesis. As such, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. c. 380/990) does not mention him in the chapter on *tafsīr* in his *Fihrist*,⁵ and he features in neither of the two classical

1 Cf. Gregor Schoeler, *Urwa b. al-Zubayr*, *El2*.

2 See in particular Joachim von Stülpnagel, *‘Urwa Ibn az-Zubair. Sein Leben und seine Bedeutung als Quelle frühislamischer Überlieferung*, Ph.D. diss. (Tübingen 1957), 54–113; A.A. Duri, *The rise of historical writing among the Arabs* (Princeton 1983), 76–95; Salwā Mursī al-Ṭāhīr, *Bidāyat al-kitāba al-ṭārīkhīyya ‘inda l-‘Arab. Awwal sīra fī l-Islām, ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām* Beirut 1995; Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds* (Berlin 1996), 28–32, 59–170; Andreas Görke, The historical tradition about al-Ḥudaybiya. A study of ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr’s account, in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The biography of Muhammad. The issue of the sources* (Leiden 2000), 240–75; Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, Reconstructing the earliest *sīra* texts. The Hijra in the corpus of ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, *Der Islam* 82 (2005), 209–20; Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muhammads. Das Korpus ‘Urwa ibn az-Zubair* (Princeton 2008); Stephen J. Shoemaker, In search of ‘Urwa’s *Sīra*. Some methodological issues in the quest for “authenticity” in the life of Muḥammad, *Der Islam* 85 (2011), 257–344; Andreas Görke, Gregor Schoeler, and Harald Motzki, First-century sources for the life of Muḥammad? A debate, *Der Islam* 87 (2012), 2–59.

3 See von Stülpnagel, *‘Urwa*, 126–30, 139–46; Charles Pellat, Fuḳahā’ al-Madīna al-Sab‘a, *El2*; Joseph Schacht, *An introduction to Islamic law* (Oxford 1964), 31.

4 Von Stülpnagel, *‘Urwa*, 55.

5 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist*, ed. Gustav Flügel (Leipzig 1872), 1:33–4.

works on the history of *tafsīr*, al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911/1505) *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*⁶ and al-Dāwūdī's (d. 945/1538) work of the same title.⁷ While Ibn al-Nadīm and al-Suyūṭī focus on written works (and thus the omission of 'Urwa is not surprising), al-Dawūdī also lists a number of early authorities in the field, such as Ibn 'Abbās (d. c. 69/688),⁸ the alleged "founder" of *tafsīr*, and his students 'Ikrima (d. c. 105/723),⁹ Qatāda b. Dī'āma (d. c. 118/736),¹⁰ and Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. c. 104/722),¹¹ as well as other early figures such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728)¹² and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/723),¹³ but he does not mention 'Urwa even in passing. Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845), the most important early source on 'Urwa, does list Ibn 'Abbās amongst the people from whom 'Urwa heard traditions, but otherwise only indicates that 'Urwa was a legal scholar, and does not mention any exegetical activity.¹⁴

While 'Urwa's exegetical traditions have been mentioned in previous studies, they have not been studied in any detail so far. Preliminary results indicated that some of these traditions seem to be connected to legal discussions.¹⁵ Others are connected to events in the life of Muḥammad,¹⁶ although they do as a rule not feature in 'Urwa's lengthy traditions on these events.¹⁷ Traditions with a purely exegetical background that are not connected to legal discussions or the life of Muḥammad seem to have been mostly traced back to either 'Urwa or 'Ā'isha (d. 58/678). Those traditions that are said to have been transmitted by 'Urwa's student Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) are often traced back to a generation before 'Urwa, while those allegedly transmitted by his son Hishām (d. 146/763) regularly stop with 'Urwa.¹⁸ These exegetical traditions mostly either contain explanations of words or identify to which event a specific revelation refers.¹⁹ We will revisit these preliminary results in the course of this study.

6 Suyūṭī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad 'Umar, Cairo 1976.

7 Dawūdī, *Ṭabaqāt al-mufasssīrīn*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām 'Abd al-Ma'īn, Beirut 2002.

8 Ibid., 167.

9 Ibid., 265.

10 Ibid., 332–3.

11 Ibid., 504–6.

12 Ibid., 106.

13 Ibid., 155.

14 Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Beirut 1985), 5:179.

15 See von Stülpnagel, *'Urwa*, 38, 40, 43, 51, 52.

16 See e.g. *ibid.*, 39, 45, 48; Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 69–73, 80–2, 174.

17 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 75, 222, 252–3, 265–6.

18 Ibid., 16.

19 Ibid.

3 Debates on the Origins and Early Development of *Tafsīr*

As ‘Urwa is said to have lived in the first/seventh century and the earliest extant written sources containing his traditions date from the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, an assessment of his exegetical statements cannot be made without addressing the question of the reliability of the purported lines of transmission, the *isnāds*. This question is closely linked to that of the origins of Islamic exegesis and its early development, which is a highly controversial and contested field. While the extant commentaries on the Qur’ān from the third/ninth century and later claim to contain material going back to the first generations of Muslims, the question is whether these ascriptions can be considered reliable or not, and what this tells us about the early development of *tafsīr*.

The reliability of the *isnāds* in general was challenged first and foremost by Goldziher²⁰ and Schacht²¹ in their studies on *ḥadīth* and law. Goldziher argued that individual *ḥadīths*, despite being traced back to the Prophet, reflect later political and theological debates and thus should be regarded as documents for the later developments of Islam rather than for the time of Muḥammad.²² Schacht took this skepticism towards the *isnāds* further. On the basis of his analysis of legal discussions in early Islam, he argued that *ḥadīths* only became important from the second half of the second century AH (late eighth/early ninth centuries CE) and that *ḥadīths* traced back to the Prophet only became the rule after al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820) had been able to make the case for the supreme authority of prophetic *ḥadīths* over any statements from later generations.²³ This, according to Schacht, led to a “backward growth of *isnāds*,” through which statements by later figures were gradually traced back to higher authorities and ultimately to the Prophet.²⁴

The controversy with regard to the reliability of the *isnāds* has also impacted on the study of early *tafsīr* in general. There are basically three different views as to the origins and early development of *tafsīr*. Fuat Sezgin can be regarded as the major proponent of a very early written exegetical tradition, beginning as early as the first/seventh century and faithfully transmitted ever since.²⁵ An opposing view was advanced by John Wansbrough, who argued that the *tafsīr*

20 Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle 1890), volume 2.

21 Joseph Schacht, *The origins of Muhammadan jurisprudence*, Oxford 1950.

22 Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, 2:6.

23 Schacht, *Origins*, 2–3, 138.

24 *Ibid.*, 165.

25 Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden 1967), 1:19–24.

tradition cannot be traced back before roughly the year 200/815, as the material was only provided with *isnāds* at that time,²⁶ and that different types of exegesis evolved in a particular chronological order.²⁷ Other scholars held that while the earliest history of exegesis may be shrouded in darkness, various types of exegetical activities can already be observed from the time of the second and third generations of Muslims.²⁸

The different positions are closely related to the question of the reliability of the *isnāds*. Thus, some scholars have argued that the general skepticism towards the *isnāds* does not apply to the same degree to exegetical traditions as it does to legal ones. The main reason is that exegetical *ḥadīths* are, as a rule, only traced back to the generations of the successors or of the companions, not to Muḥammad himself.²⁹ Others, however, disagreed and saw the same procedures of ascription of later positions to earlier authorities at work in the *tafsīr* tradition,³⁰ with the main difference being in the fact that in the exegetical tradition positions were ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbās and his students on account of the association of exegesis with Ibn ‘Abbās.³¹

What all the previous studies, despite their very different conclusions, have in common is that they have focused on the major figures commonly associated with the field, such as the alleged “founder” of *tafsīr*, Ibn ‘Abbās, or some of the putative early authors of *tafsīr* works such as Mujāhid b. Jabr and

26 John Wansbrough, *Quranic studies. Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford 1977), 179.

27 *Ibid.*, 119–246.

28 See, e.g., Fred Leemhuis, Discussion and debate in early commentaries of the Qur’ān, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al. (eds.), *With reverence for the word. Medieval scriptural exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Oxford 2003), 322–3; Claude Gilliot, The beginnings of qur’ānic exegesis, in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Qur’ān. Formative interpretation* (Aldershot 1999), 9–24. Herbert Berg gives a summary of the different positions and arguments in his *The development of exegesis in early Islam. The authenticity of Muslim literature from the formative period* (Richmond, UK 2000), 65–111. For a critique of some of Berg’s assessments, see Harald Motzki, The question of the authenticity of Muslim traditions reconsidered. A review article, in Herbert Berg (ed.), *Method and theory in the study of Islamic origins* (Leiden 2003), 211–57.

29 See, e.g., Heribert Horst, Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar at-Ṭabarīs, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 103 (1957), 305–7.

30 See in detail e.g. Berg, *The development of exegesis in early Islam*.

31 Herbert Berg, Weaknesses in the arguments for the early dating of qur’ānic commentary, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al. (eds.), *With reverence for the word. Medieval scriptural exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Oxford 2003), 330–2. See also Claude Gilliot, Portrait “mythique” d’Ibn ‘Abbās, *Arabica* 32/2 (1985), 127, for a discussion of Ibn ‘Abbās’s role in early exegesis.

Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). While their importance of course warrants the attention they received, it also makes them the most likely candidates for false ascriptions by later generations. As they were held in highest esteem, it is probable that later material was falsely transmitted under their name to enhance its authenticity.

Focusing on a figure who is not among the famous eponyms of *tafsīr*, namely the early Medinan scholar ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr, may provide a better chance of unearthing authentic material from the early *tafsīr* tradition. Despite his marginal role in *tafsīr*, it can of course not be assumed *a priori* that traditions circulated under his name are authentic, but they have to be scrutinized before any far-reaching conclusions can be drawn.

4 An Overview of the Exegetical Traditions Ascribed to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr

Let us first analyze the contents of the traditions quoted on the authority of ‘Urwa in the Qur’ān commentaries. Most of these works do record some statements going back to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr, although the number of such traditions varies considerably in each commentary. As a complete survey of all ‘Urwa traditions in all commentaries was beyond the scope of this study, a selection had to be made. A skimming through of various commentaries indicated that the type of material they include seemed roughly similar, and many later sources cite earlier commentaries, in particular al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) *tafsīr*. In contrast, the commentaries of al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) seemed to include some material not present in al-Ṭabarī’s work. These three commentaries were therefore taken as the basis for this analysis. The type of material included by al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) seems roughly similar to that present in these three works. Most other commentaries contain less material going back to ‘Urwa. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, who usually provides an *isnād*, al-Qurṭubī and al-Māwardī include several statements from or positions of ‘Urwa without an *isnād* (*hādihā qawl ‘Urwa* or *qālahu ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr*), and this is often also the practice in later *tafsīr* works. While this study can thus not claim to be comprehensive and it is possible that some more traditions can be found in other commentaries, the following survey should provide a good overview of the material traced back to ‘Urwa in the *tafsīr* tradition.

This material adduced on the authority of ‘Urwa consists of various types. We can at the outset distinguish between traditions in which ‘Urwa’s own statements are related (A) and those in which ‘Urwa merely figures as a

transmitter of older material (B). The first type – statements of ‘Urwa – can be divided further into statements of an exegetical nature (A₁), those in which ‘Urwa is quoted with general statements about the Qur’ān (A₂), and those in which ‘Urwa’s legal position or practices are adduced (A₃). The second type of traditions, those in which ‘Urwa appears as a transmitter of older material, can likewise be further divided into four sections. A significant part consists of *ḥadīths* relating to historical events in the life of Muḥammad (B₁) or to his practices (B₂), both of which are seen in the light of specific qur’anic verses, in the context of which they are adduced. Another, smaller, part consists of traditions of legal or ritual practices of companions of the Prophet (B₃), which likewise are intended to explain the understanding of specific verses. Yet other traditions quote exegetical statements of earlier authorities, mostly from his aunt ‘Ā’isha (d. 58/678) (including, in rare instances, a reference to the *muṣḥaf* of ‘Ā’isha) (B₄).

There is not a direct quotation from a specific qur’anic verse in all of these cases, and often it is not clear whether the connection of a tradition to a specific verse or *sūra* was made by ‘Urwa or by a later transmitter or compiler. This is particularly true for a large number of the Prophetic *ḥadīths* (B₁ and B₂) and a good part of the companion traditions (B₃), which do not contain a direct quotation from the Qur’ān. In general, these types of traditions seem to have their origin in ‘Urwa’s interest in the *sūra* or law rather than in his attempts to explain or contextualize the Qur’ān. It is most likely that they have been adduced by the respective compilers to explain the historical context of specific verses and that they were not based on ‘Urwa’s preoccupation with the Qur’ān. This can be concluded from the observation that several qur’anic elements are not included in ‘Urwa’s traditions on the events alluded to in these verses. For instance, while Q 48 (*al-Fath*) is commonly thought to be connected to the events of al-Ḥudaybiya in the year 6/628, several of the topics mentioned in the *sūra* do not feature in ‘Urwa’s traditions on the event. Thus he mentions neither Muḥammad’s dream (Q 48:27) that is usually considered to have been the cause of the campaign, the Bedouins who refused to join Muḥammad (Q 48:11–2), nor the pledge of allegiance under the tree (Q 48:18).³² Likewise, in his reports on the Battle of the Trench (*al-Khandaq*) (5/627), several elements from Q 33 (*al-Aḥzāb*), which is thought to refer to this event, are not mentioned, such as the strong wind that God sent in support of the Muslims (Q 33:9) or the people who tried to flee because their houses were exposed (Q 33:13).³³ Several of these historical traditions of ‘Urwa have been

32 See Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 266.

33 Ibid.

discussed in detail elsewhere,³⁴ and as they are not exegetical, they can be disregarded here.

As this article pays particular attention to the exegetical activities of ‘Urwa, it will mainly concentrate on those traditions that contain statements of ‘Urwa’s own positions (A₁). Traditions that do not explicitly refer to a specific verse or *sūra* of the Qur’ān will not be taken into consideration, as it is impossible to decide whether ‘Urwa may have established such a connection or not. While the traditions in which ‘Urwa features as a transmitter of earlier material are not the primary focus, they will be taken into account to establish to what extent they overlap with his alleged own positions.

Several scholars have attempted to categorize the different exegetical devices or techniques that can be observed in the *tafsīr* tradition. Wansbrough has argued for a chronological order for the development of these techniques or interests,³⁵ but this is controversial.³⁶ Nevertheless, it seems useful to investigate which exegetical techniques are employed by individual figures to identify different concerns and priorities. This may eventually also lead to a better idea of the emergence and development of specific techniques. Based on the categories identified by Wansbrough, Berg, and Versteegh,³⁷ the following list should cover most of the devices common in the *tafsīr* tradition: variant readings of specific words (*qirā’āt*); circumstances of the revelation of a verse (*asbāb al-nuzūl*); identification of persons, places or other items not mentioned specifically in a verse; discussion of whether a verse is abrogated (*al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*); lexical explanations and paraphrases; citation of poetry; citation of other qur’anic verses; grammatical explanations; rhetorical explanations, adducing of prophetic traditions; legal precepts (*aḥkām*); metaphorical interpretations; and theological explanations.

In the exegetical traditions traced back to ‘Urwa, a number of these techniques can be observed. Thus, there are some instances that specify how he read specific words. In Q 5:6, the verse of ablution (*wuḍū’*), he is quoted as having read *arjulakum* rather than *arjulikum* or *arjulukum*, relating to the question of whether one has to wash or wipe one’s feet.³⁸ Another verse for which a

34 See, in particular, Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*; Görke, *al-Ḥudaybiya*; Görke and Schoeler, *Hijra*; Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*.

35 Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*, 119–246.

36 See, e.g., Fred Leemhuis, Discussion and debate, 322, for a different view.

37 Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*, 121; Berg, *The development of exegesis*, 148–56; C.H.M. Versteegh, *Arabic grammar and qur’anic exegesis in early Islam* (Leiden 1993), 91–2.

38 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo 1968³), 6:127.

reading of ‘Urwa is recorded is Q 11:42, where he is said to have read *wa-nādā Nūḥ ibnahā* (or *ibnahā*) (“and Noah called out to her son”)³⁹ instead of *ibnahū* (his son).⁴⁰ In Q 11:46, he is said to have read “he behaved badly” (*innahu ‘amila ghayra ṣāliḥin*) instead of “it was bad conduct” (*innahu ‘amalun ghayru ṣāliḥin*).⁴¹ And in Q 17:24 (“And lower unto them [i.e. the parents] the wing of humbleness”) he is supposed to have read *janāḥ al-dhill* (“wing of submissiveness [?]”) instead of the more common *janāḥ al-dhull* (“wing of humbleness”).⁴²

On one occasion, a specific reading by ‘Urwa is implied, but not made explicit, in what is otherwise a lexical gloss on Q 7:26, when he translates “plumage” (*riyāsh*) as “wealth” (*māl*).⁴³ The majority of the *qurrā’* read *rīsh* instead of *riyāsh* (with the same meaning of “plumage”)⁴⁴ and thus it is implicit that ‘Urwa was following the minority reading. Other examples for lexical explanations can be found for the same verse, when he glosses “garments” (*libās*) with “clothing” (*thiyāb*),⁴⁵ and “piety” (*taqwā*) with “fear of God” (*khashyat Allāh*),⁴⁶ as well as in a number of other instances. On verse 7:199 he states that *urf*, in the phrase *wa-’mur bi-l-’urf*, has the same meaning as the (much more common) *ma’rūf*, and the phrase thus translates as “enjoin good.”⁴⁷ On the same verse, ‘Urwa is also quoted stating that the (cryptic) expression *khudh al-’afw* (“take to forgiveness” [?]) means to be lenient towards the character traits of the people.⁴⁸ With regard to Q 17:24, mentioned above, he explains that to lower the wing of submissiveness/humbleness onto the parents means to not deny them anything they want.⁴⁹ Other instances of lexical paraphrases include Q 2:217, where ‘Urwa explains the meaning of the phrase *wa-lā yazālūna yuqātilūnakum ḥattā yaruddūkum ‘an dīnikum in istaṭā’ū* (“and they will not cease to fight you until they turn you back from your religion if

39 All translations from the Qur’ān are my own.

40 Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-‘Alīm al-Bardūnī (Cairo 1966–7³), 9:38, 47.

41 Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 9:46.

42 Ibid., 10:244.

43 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 8:148.

44 Ibid., 8:147.

45 Ibid., 8:147.

46 Ibid., 8:149; Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-’uyūn. Tafṣīr al-Māwardī*, ed. al-Sayyid b. ‘Abd al-Maḥsūd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm (Beirut n.d.), 2:214.

47 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 9:155; Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-’uyūn*, 2:288.

48 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 9:153–4.

49 Ibid., 15:66.

they can”).⁵⁰ He also paraphrases *aḥāta bi-l-nās*, (“[God] encompasses mankind”) in Q 17:60 as “protects you from mankind” (*mana’aka min al-nās*).⁵¹

In a number of traditions ‘Urwa is said to have identified what a verse refers to. For instance, he states that *ṣalāt* (usually referring to the ritual prayer) in Q 17:110 (*wa-lā tajhar bi-ṣalātika wa-lā tukhāfit bihā* – “and be not [too] loud in your prayer, nor [too] quiet”) actually refers to the more informal invocation or supplication (*du‘ā*) (*qāla: fī l-du‘ā*).⁵² For Q 10:64, he explicates that the “good tidings” that are promised to the friends of God consist in their vision of him.⁵³ On Q 26:214 (“and warn your nearest kin”), he relates that Muḥammad directly addressed his daughter Fāṭima and his aunt Ṣafiyya [the mother of al-Zubayr, ‘Urwa’s father] directly, in one version also including the whole clan of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, implying that these were Muḥammad’s nearest kin.⁵⁴ With regard to Q 9:107 he identifies those who have “founded a mosque on piety” as the Banū ‘Amr b. ‘Awf.⁵⁵ Other instances of attempts to explicate what a verse refers to can be seen for Q 5:34, where ‘Urwa identifies “those who repent before you overpower them” with people who went to the *dār al-ḥarb*, even if they were Muslims,⁵⁶ and on Q 33:50, where he indicates that “any believing woman who gives herself [in marriage] to the Prophet” refers to Umm Shurayk bt. Jābir.⁵⁷

At least one case is concerned with the grammar, that of Q 3:7, on the question of whether the meaning of some verses is only known to God, or also to those firm in knowledge (*al-rāsikhūna fī l-‘ilm*). Both readings are possible, and ‘Urwa is reported to have held that those firm in knowledge do not know the interpretation, but that this refers to God only.⁵⁸

‘Urwa also provides a number of circumstances of revelation. As such, he explains the reason and occasion for the revelation of Q 2:229 (*al-ṭalāq mar-ratayn*, “divorce is twice”).⁵⁹ He also provides the occasion for the revelation of Q 9:74 (“they swear by God that they did not say it”), stating that this was revealed about al-Julās b. Suwayd,⁶⁰ and explains further parts of the verse in

50 Ibid., 2:354.

51 Ibid., 15:110.

52 Ibid., 15:184.

53 Ibid., 11:137.

54 Ibid., 19:119, 122–3.

55 Ibid., 11:28.

56 Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn*, 2:34.

57 Ibid., 4:414; Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 22:23.

58 Ibid., 3:182–3.

59 Ibid., 2:456; Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn*, 2:293–4.

60 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 10:185, 186; cf. Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn*, 2:383.

reference to what al-Julās did.⁶¹ ‘Urwa also relates that Q 80:1 (“He frowned and turned away”) refers to Ibn Umm Maktūm and gives the occasion of the revelation.⁶² On Q 60:1 he explains that the verse was revealed in relation to Ḥātīb b. Abī Balta’a and provides a lengthy background story.⁶³ Likewise, he provides a background for the revelations of Q 2:218,⁶⁴ Q 28:53,⁶⁵ Q 46:11,⁶⁶ and Q 79:46.⁶⁷

On at least one occasion ‘Urwa is also reported to have cited one qur’anic verse to explain another. Q 111:5 reads “On her neck is a rope of *masad*” (*fī jādihā ḥablun min masad*), with *masad* usually understood as a palm fiber. ‘Urwa, however, is cited as a proponent of a different interpretation, namely that it is a metal chain, and he states that it is 70 cubits long, citing Q 69:32 (*silsila dhar’uhā sab’ūna dhirā’an*).⁶⁸

There seem to be no instances of discussions about abrogation, citations of poetry, rhetorical explanations, metaphorical interpretations, or theological explanations in the traditions of ‘Urwa. This overview allows for some interesting observations. The overall number of exegetical traditions traced back to ‘Urwa is rather low, amounting to no more than 30 or 40 traditions. The higher number given by von Stülpnagel also includes traditions in which ‘Urwa only features as a transmitter as well as those in which the link to the Qur’ān is possibly only secondary and not an essential part of the tradition. Most of the traditions do not seem to have been widely circulated, and many are only adduced by one or two commentators. Only very few, in particular those with a legal or ritual relevance, can also be found in *ḥadīth* collections, with a significant number of variants. Despite the small number, they display quite a large array of exegetical techniques attributed to ‘Urwa. If these can indeed be shown to go back to ‘Urwa, this would be an indication of the rather early development and application of most of these techniques.

61 Ibid., 10:187, 188.

62 Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 19:211; Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 30:51 only has the information that this was revealed about Ibn Umm Maktūm (without the occasion of the revelation) on the authority of ‘Urwa.

63 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 28:60.

64 Ibid., 2:356.

65 Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 13:296.

66 Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn*, 15:274.

67 Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 19:209.

68 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 30:340; cf. Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn*, 6:367.

5 Early Attestations of ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr’s Exegetical Traditions?

The overview presented above is based on sources from the late third/ninth centuries and later. As indicated, most of these traditions have only been recorded by a few commentators, and some of them do not provide proper *isnāds* for the statements, so no serious study of different variants can be made. This is in contrast to ‘Urwa’s traditions on the biography of the Prophet or his legal traditions, for which usually a large number of variants exist, allowing, to some extent, the reconstruction of ‘Urwa’s teachings in these fields. As the small number of variants does not allow for a systematic *isnād-cum-matn* analysis to examine whether these statements can securely be attributed to ‘Urwa, it is necessary to resort to other considerations. In the following, the earliest attestations of ‘Urwa’s exegetical traditions shall therefore be scrutinized.

To assess whether ‘Urwa’s traditions were circulated in the early *tafsīr* tradition, let us look at the extent to which they were adduced by the early commentators of the formative phase. The focus will be on those commentators who were active before the systematic study of the grammatical features of the Qur’ān began. This roughly encompasses the time until the end of the second century after the Hijra (early ninth century CE).⁶⁹ Although several allegedly early *tafsīr* works of this period have been published in the last decades, the question of the extent to which they actually contain early material is controversial. It is therefore necessary to consider each of them in its own right. In the following section the works ascribed to Mujāhid b. Jabr, Muqātil b. Sulaymān, Sufyān al-Thawrī, ‘Abdallāh b. Wahb, and ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī shall be examined.

The commentary of Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. ca. 104/722) has not come down to us in its original form. Quotations from Mujāhid in later works show that several different recensions of the work must have existed. The published commentary of *Mujāhid*⁷⁰ is based on the manuscript Cairo, Dār al-kutub, MS 1075 *tafsīr*, which in fact contains the *Tafsīr ‘an Warqā’ b. ‘Umar ‘an Ibn Abī Najīh ‘an Mujāhid*, transmitted by Ādam b. Abī Iyās. It is best described as a collection of statements and traditions based on the lectures of Mujāhid, to which

69 Cf. Claude Gilliot, *Kontinuität und Wandel in der “klassischen” islamischen Koranauslegung (II./VII.–XII./XIX. Jhd.)*, *Der Islam* 85 (2010), 7.

70 There are at least three editions of the work: *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, ed. ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Ṭāhir b. Muḥammad al-Sūrātī, 2 vols., Islamabad n.d.; *Tafsīr al-Imām Mujāhid b. Jabr*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Salām Abū l-Nīl, Cairo 1989; and *Tafsīr Mujāhid*, ed. Abū Muḥammad al-Asyūṭī, Beirut 2005. I have used the Cairo edition from 1989.

later transmitters added further traditions.⁷¹ The *Tafsīr* contains three traditions that are traced back to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr. However, none of the three was transmitted by Mujāhid; rather, they are among the later additions. They are traced back through Ādam b. Abi Iyās from either Ḥammād b. Salama or al-Mubārak b. al-Faḍāla, then from ‘Urwa’s son Hishām, and finally from ‘Urwa himself. One contains ‘Urwa’s explanation for the “wing of humbleness [or submission]” in Q 17:24,⁷² with the other two being statements from ‘Ā’isha.⁷³

In contrast to Mujāhid’s *Tafsīr*, the work of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) appears to have been composed by Muqātil himself and most probably retained its original form during its transmission, with only a few later interpolations that are clearly indicated as such.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the published work⁷⁵ represents only one of several different recensions of the *Tafsīr*.⁷⁶ However, it does not seem to contain any references to ‘Urwa.

Sufyān al-Thawrī’s (d. 161/777) work resembles that of Mujāhid in that it constitutes a later collection of statements and traditions on the authority of Sufyān. The published *Tafsīr* is based on the single manuscript of the work,

71 See Georg Stauth, *Die Überlieferung des Korankommentars Muḡāhid B. Gabrs. Zur Frage der Rekonstruktion der in den Sammelwerken des 3. Jh.d.H. benutzten frühislamischen Quellenwerke*, Ph.D. diss., Gießen 1969; Fred Leemhuis, Ms. 1075 *tafsīr* of the Cairene Dār al-kutub and Muḡāhid’s *Tafsīr*, in Rudolph Peters (ed.), *Proceedings of the ninth congress of the Union européenne des arabisants et islamisants, Amsterdam, 1st to 7th September 1978* (Leiden 1981), 169–80; Fred Leemhuis, Origins and early development of the *tafsīr* tradition, in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the history of the interpretation of the Qur’ān* (Oxford 1988), 19–22; Versteegh, *Arabic grammar*, 57, 107; Claude Gilliot, Mujāhid’s exegesis. Origins, paths of transmission and development of a Meccan exegetical tradition in its human, spiritual and theological environment, in Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink (eds.), *Tafsīr and Islamic intellectual history. Exploring the boundaries of a genre* (Oxford 2014), 63–111.

72 Mujāhid, *Tafsīr al-Imām Mujāhid b. Jabr*, 430.

73 Ibid., 550, 626.

74 Kees Versteegh, Grammar and exegesis. The origins of Kufan grammar and the *Tafsīr Muqātil*, *Der Islam* 67 (1990), 207–9; idem, *Arabic grammar*, 130–1; Gilliot, *Kontinuität und Wandel*, 13–5.

75 There are at least two editions of the work: *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḡmūd Shihāta, Cairo 1980–7, and *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Aḡmad Farīd, Beirut 2003.

76 Claude Gilliot, Muqātil, Grand exégète, traditionniste et théologien maudit, *Journal Asiatique* 279 (1991), 39–50; Mehmet Akif Koç, A comparison of the references to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (150/767) in the exegesis of Tha’labī (427/1036) with Muqātil’s own exegesis, *Journal of Semitic studies* 53 (2008), 69–101.

found in Rampur.⁷⁷ The manuscript is incomplete, only covering the text up to Q 52, and the beginning is missing.⁷⁸ While in the manuscript the *sūras* are discussed in the common order, the order of the verses within each *sūra* does not always correspond to the order in which they are discussed.⁷⁹ This *Tafsīr* contains four traditions that are traced back to ‘Urwa through his son Hishām.⁸⁰ In one tradition ‘Urwa, referring to Q 2:180 (prescribing a bequest if a believer is close to death and leaves behind wealth), relates that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib denied the wish of a man from the Banū Hāshim to make a bequest because he considered the man’s wealth too small.⁸¹ This tradition from ‘Alī as transmitted by ‘Urwa is recorded in numerous variants in works of *tafsīr* as well as in *ḥadīth* collections. A second tradition provides the occasion of the revelation of Q 2:231 on the authority of ‘Urwa.⁸² The story provided is similar to the one that ‘Urwa is said to have related with regard to Q 2:229.⁸³ That the story is linked to different verses is not necessarily surprising; these verses are closely related, as the whole passage (Q 2:228–32) deals with divorce. The third tradition has the explanation for the “wings of humbleness” (Q 17:24) on the authority of ‘Urwa,⁸⁴ while the last contains the identification of *ṣalāt* with *du‘ā’* in Q 17:110, although not on the authority of ‘Urwa, but rather as transmitted by ‘Urwa from ‘Ā’isha.

‘Abdallāh b. Wahb (d. 197/813) included chapters on *tafsīr* and the qur’anic sciences in his *Jāmi‘*, the text of which has been transmitted by his student Saḥnūn b. Sa‘īd (d. 240/854), and which have been edited and published.⁸⁵ There is some debate about the ascription of the work to Ibn Wahb, but it is certainly amongst the oldest extant manuscripts of any exegetical work.⁸⁶

77 *Tafsīr Sufyān al-Thawrī*, ed. Imtiyāz ‘Alī ‘Arshī, Beirut 1983.

78 Versteegh, *Arabic grammar*, 111; Gilliot, The beginnings of qur’anic exegesis, 14–5; Gilliot, Kontinuität und Wandel, 8–9. See also Gérard Lecomte, Sufyān al-Ṭawrī. Quelques remarques sur le personnage et son œuvre, *Bulletin d’études orientales* 30 (1978), 52–8.

79 Sufyān al-Thawrī, *Tafsīr*, 35–6.

80 *Ibid.*, 55–6, 67, 171, 175.

81 *Ibid.*, 55–6.

82 Sufyān al-Thawrī, *Tafsīr*, 67.

83 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 2:456; Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn*, 2:293–4.

84 Sufyān al-Thawrī, *Tafsīr*, 171.

85 There are two editions of the work, in three volumes each. The first is: *al-Ġāmi‘. Die Koranwissenschaften*, ed. Miklos Muranyi, Wiesbaden 1992 (first volume), and *al-Ġāmi‘. Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Miklos Muranyi (final two volumes), Wiesbaden 1993–5. The second is: *al-Jāmi‘ fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān li-‘Abdallāh b. Wahb*, ed. Miklos Muranyi, 3 vols., Beirut 2003. I have used the latter edition.

86 On this work see Andrew Rippin, Studying early *tafsīr* texts, *Der Islam* 72 (1995), 322–3; Miklos Muranyi, Neue Materialien zur *Tafsīr*-Forschung in der Moscheebibliothek von

The fact that his *Tafsīr* is arranged according to transmitters rather than according to the chronology of the Qurʾān may suggest a rather early date.⁸⁷ The work does not include any statement by ʿUrwa, but does have three traditions in which ʿUrwa allegedly transmitted material going back to ʿĀʾisha and ʿUmar (on Q 12:110 and 98:1). Al-Zuhrī, Ḥabīb b. Hind, and Abū l-Aswad are recorded as transmitters from ʿUrwa.⁸⁸

The commentary of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211/826) is sometimes ascribed to his teacher Maʿmar b. Rāshid (d. 154/770), whose teachings constitute the main source of the *Tafsīr*.⁸⁹ There are at least three editions of the work.⁹⁰ Altogether, 27 traditions are traced back to ʿUrwa. Of these, eight are statements of ʿUrwa himself on a specific verse, five are traditions from ʿĀʾisha on specific verses, and the remaining fourteen are general statements not explicitly linked to a verse, either by ʿUrwa himself or transmitted by him. Amongst the traditions is the one about ʿAlī with regard to Q 2:180,⁹¹ as well as others traced back to ʿĀʾisha on Q 2:225,⁹² Q 4:3,⁹³ Q 26:223,⁹⁴ Q 33:28,⁹⁵ and Q 60:10.⁹⁶ ʿUrwa’s own statements are adduced on Q 7:199 (on the meaning of *khudh al-ʿafw* and *ʿurf*),⁹⁷ on Q 9:107–8, with regard to the mosque “founded on piety” and that established “for harm,”⁹⁸ Q 17:110 (identification of *ṣalāt* with *duʿāʾ*),⁹⁹ Q 26:217 (Muḥammad’s nearest kin),¹⁰⁰ Q 60:1 (Ḥatīb b. Abī Baltaʿa),¹⁰¹

Qairawān, in Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qurʾān as text* (Leiden 1996), 230–43; Berg, *Development of exegesis*, 87–8.

87 Muranyi, *Neue Materialien*, 242.

88 Ibn Wahb, *al-Jāmiʿ fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 1:27; 3:21–2, 62.

89 Versteegh, *Arabic grammar*, 154–6; Gilliot, *Kontinuität und Wandel*, 16–7; Rippin, *Studying early tafsīr texts*, 321–2.

90 *Tafsīr ʿAbd al-Razzāq*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad ʿAbduh, 3 vols., Beirut 1999; *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān lil-Imām ʿAbd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Ṣanʿānī*, ed. Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad, 3 vols., Riyadh 1989; *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿazīz al-musammā Tafsīr ʿAbd al-Razzāq*, ed. ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī Amīn Qalʿajī, 2 vols., Beirut 1991. I have used the Riyadh edition.

91 ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 1:68.

92 *Ibid.*, 1:90.

93 *Ibid.*, 1:145.

94 *Ibid.*, 2:78.

95 *Ibid.*, 2:115.

96 *Ibid.*, 2:278.

97 *Ibid.*, 1:245.

98 *Ibid.*, 2:287–8; cf. Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 11:25 and 28. In the former case, this is cited as a tradition via ʿUrwa from ʿĀʾisha in Ṭabarī, while the latter, as in ʿAbd al-Razzāq, is given as ʿUrwa’s own statement.

99 ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 1:393.

100 *Ibid.*, 2:77.

101 *Ibid.*, 2:286.

as well as Q 2:196¹⁰² and Q 79:43.¹⁰³ All these traditions are also recorded, in some variant form, in later works. The last alleged comment of ‘Urwa, on Q 54:29, in which he states that the person who hamstrung the Prophet Ṣāliḥ’s camel was among his people as unassailable as Abū Zam‘a,¹⁰⁴ is usually considered as part of a sermon by the Prophet and is transmitted by ‘Urwa as such on other occasions. In this case it is connected with Q 91:11–2, which likewise deals with the story of Ṣāliḥ.¹⁰⁵

In sum, the study of the pre-canonical works does not help much to ascertain the authenticity of the exegetical traditions ascribed to ‘Urwa. Even if the ascription of these works to their putative authors were accepted, this would only confirm that some of the traditions adduced in later works were already circulating in the middle of the second/eighth century. The overall number of exegetical traditions traced back to ‘Urwa in these works is very small, but this is in accordance with their volume: four of the 91 traditions included in Sufyān’s work are traced back to ‘Urwa (0.4%), compared to the 27 of roughly 3,750 traditions in ‘Abd al-Razzāq (0.7%), and some 180 of around 38,000 traditions in al-Ṭabarī (0.5%).

The character of the traditions in the allegedly early works is similar to the ones in later collections: they almost exclusively consist of traditions that were transmitted from ‘Urwa by his son Hishām and his most prominent student Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī. The vast majority of traditions which contain exegetical statements of ‘Urwa himself feature his son Hishām in the *isnād*, while those traditions that are traced back to ‘Urwa through Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī include more accounts from earlier authorities, in particular from ‘Ā’isha. The rare instances in which an exegetical position of ‘Urwa is transmitted through al-Zuhrī (and sometimes Yazīd b. Rūmān) rather than through Hishām seem to be more closely linked to the *sīra*, such as the reason for the revelation of Q 2:218, which ‘Urwa and others thought refers to the expedition of ‘Abdallāh b. Jaḥsh,¹⁰⁶ or the story about Ḥātib b. Abī Balta’a, which has been commonly assumed to be connected to Q 60:1. The scope of different types of traditions is smaller, and there seem to be no traditions on variant readings, grammatical explanations, or citations of the Qur’ān. As these are likewise rare in the later works, it is impossible to decide whether their lacking in the earlier collections indicates a later origin of these traditions or whether this is just due to the small sample.

102 Ibid., 1:75–6.

103 Ibid., 2:347.

104 Ibid., 2:258.

105 See von Stülpnagel, *‘Urwa*, 137–8, with further references.

106 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 2:356.

While the earlier commentaries do not provide clear clues as to the authenticity of the traditions ascribed to ‘Urwa, the fact that the character of the traditions they include is similar to those found in the later works makes it feasible to discuss them together and consider them to be independent attestations.

6 A Critical Analysis of the Exegetical Traditions Ascribed to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr

As seen above, there are too few variants of ‘Urwa’s exegetical traditions to securely establish their authenticity through an *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, and there are no indisputable early attestations of his traditions. How, then, can we establish whether these traditions go back to ‘Urwa or whether they are later ascriptions? Closer scrutiny of the traditions themselves and their significance within the discussion of the verses to which they relate may provide some hints.

Let us first have a closer look at the *isnāds*. As indicated above, and in line with previous observations,¹⁰⁷ ‘Urwa’s son Hishām features as a transmitter for most of his exegetical traditions, while there are a few that are traced back through al-Zuhri, Yazīd, or are recorded as anonymous traditions from ‘Urwa.¹⁰⁸ The range of transmitters from Hishām is quite wide. While Sufyān al-Thawrī appears to have transmitted directly from Hishām, and in ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s work almost all traditions are traced back via Ma‘mar to Hishām (only one from Ma‘mar ← Qatāda ← Hishām),¹⁰⁹ the names of transmitters in the other sources include Ḥammād b. Salama, al-Mubārak b. al-Faḍāla, Abū Mu‘āwiya, Ibn Abī l-Zinād, ‘Abd b. Sulaymān, Jarīr, Ibn Idrīs, Abū Usāma, Wakī‘, Ibn al-Mubārak, Anas b. ‘Iyāḍ, and Mālik b. Anas.

A comparison of the traditions that claim to include statements by ‘Urwa with those in which ‘Urwa only features as transmitter reveals that these ascriptions are not always unanimous. Thus, while al-Ṭabarī once cites ‘Urwa as an authority with regard to the interpretation of 7:199, in two other traditions the same statement is traced back via ‘Urwa to Abū l-Zubayr, and in

107 Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 16.

108 In addition to most of the statements in Māwardī’s work and some in Qurṭubī’s, which are adduced without *isnād*, see also Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 8:147, 148, and 149, where the traditions are traced back through Abū Sa‘d (or Abū Sa‘īd) al-Madanī from someone who heard ‘Urwa.

109 ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān*, 1:131.

one through Hishām b. ‘Urwa from Wahb b. Kaysān from Abū l-Zubayr.¹¹⁰ Ibn Abī Ḥātim includes a tradition of the same tenor, but allegedly transmitted by ‘Urwa from Ibn ‘Umar,¹¹¹ while al-Bukhārī records a version traced back via ‘Urwa from his brother ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr.¹¹² The statement that *ṣalāt* in 17:110 actually refers to the *du‘ā* is not only traced back to ‘Urwa, but also via ‘Urwa to ‘Ā’isha.¹¹³ Likewise, the identification of the “nearest kin” in Q 26:214 is sometimes reported on the authority of ‘Urwa, and sometimes as transmitted by ‘Urwa from ‘Ā’isha.¹¹⁴ The same is true for the comments on Q 79:46 and Q 80:1.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, many traditions are only traced back to ‘Urwa (and have no variants reaching further back to earlier authorities via ‘Urwa), while other traditions are only reported on the authority of ‘Ā’isha (or other companions) and not as positions ‘Urwa held.

The exegetical statements with which ‘Urwa is credited are, as a rule, not unique. Usually he is cited alongside other authorities who held similar views, such as Ibn ‘Abbās, Mujāhid, al-Suddī, al-Ḍaḥḥāq, and others. There are only a few instances in which he is presented as the only person to have held a specific view. Thus, he seems to be the only one to hold that *taqwā* (piety) in Q 7:26 means fear of God (*khashyat Allāh*).¹¹⁶ In one case where his position is not a common one (his variant reading of Q 11:42), his view is regarded as anomalous (*shādhdh*).¹¹⁷

The exegetical traditions traced back to earlier authorities through ‘Urwa in general show a slightly different profile than the ones given as his positions. Most of these are traced back to ‘Ā’isha. A large part deals with occasions of the

110 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 9:154.

111 Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān al-‘aẓīm musnadan ‘an Rasūl Allāh wa-l-ṣaḥāba wa-l-ṭābi‘īn*, ed. As‘ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib (Mecca 1997), 5:1637. Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s *Tafsīr* is incomplete, and the edition faulty and partly extrapolated from quotations in other works. However, the commentary from *sūras* 1 to 13 and from *sūras* 23 to 29 is extant, thus covering the part quoted here. See Mehmet Akif Koç, *Isnāds and rijāl* expertise in the exegesis of Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/939), *Der Islam* 82 (2005), 146.

112 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Muṣṭafā Dīb al-Bughā (Beirut 1990), 1702.

113 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:183; this is also widely transmitted in the *ḥadīth* literature, see, for example, Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 1750, 2331, 2737.

114 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 19:118.

115 Compare e.g. Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur‘ān*, 19:209 (‘Urwa) with Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 30:49 (‘Ā’isha), and Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur‘ān*, 19:211–2 with Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 30:50–1, where both Qurṭubī and Ṭabarī adduce versions going back to ‘Urwa next to versions traced back to ‘Ā’isha.

116 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 8:149; Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn*, 2:214.

117 Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur‘ān*, 9:37, 48.

revelation and explications of whom or what a verse refers to, while it appears that she is not quoted with lexical glosses or grammatical explanations. Usually her statements are not unique, but occasionally she does seem to be the only one to have held a specific opinion.¹¹⁸ It is again impossible to decide whether the different profile is an indication of the reliability of the transmission or just a result of the small sample. In some cases, ‘Urwa’s position is said to have been different from ‘Ā’isha’s.¹¹⁹

The traditions traced back to ‘Urwa are remarkably consistent in their contents – there are no cases in which ‘Urwa is cited with differing or contradicting views. This is in contrast, for instance, to traditions traced back to ‘Ā’isha via ‘Urwa, in which she is sometimes cited with opposing views. Thus, while she is quoted as holding that *ṣalāt* in 17:110 refers to the *du‘ā*, as we have seen, a different tradition claims that she said that this actually refers to the part of the ritual prayer where the believer kneels down (the *tashahhud*).¹²⁰ Such contradicting views are also very common in the traditions ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbās or Mujāhid, and thus the consistency in ‘Urwa’s traditions is noteworthy.

Those traditions of ‘Urwa that have been recorded in different variants usually differ in their wording while they retain the same sense. As seen above, some traditions deal with occasions of revelation of specific verses or grammatical features. None of these traditions employ any specific technical vocabulary, and none of the terms that came to be used in the discussion of the qur’anic grammar occur in the traditions ascribed to ‘Urwa.¹²¹ Likewise, the term *sabab* is not adduced to indicate a reason or occasion for a revelation, but the traditions traced back to ‘Urwa are introduced with *fa-‘anzala llāh* (“and God sent down . . .”) or *fa-nazalat* (“and [such and such verse] came down”). As Rippin has shown, the term *sabab* seems to have been used in this technical sense only from the time of al-Ṭabarī onwards.¹²²

118 E.g. Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 20:145, where she is cited with the opinion that the “reprehensible deeds” that Lot’s people committed in their gatherings (Q 29:29) consisted of them farting.

119 E.g. Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-‘uyūn*, vol. 4:414.

120 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 15:187.

121 See e.g. Versteegh, *Arabic grammar*, 96–106, for a general discussion, and 196, for a list of some common terms.

122 Andrew Rippin, The exegetical genre *asbāb al-nuzūl*. A bibliographical and terminological survey, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48 (1985), 14.

7 Conclusion

How can these features be best explained? The most likely scenario is that the majority of the exegetical traditions traced back to ‘Urwa do indeed go back to him. As he was not known as an expert in exegesis, it seems improbable that people deliberately ascribed exegetical positions to him (unlike, for instance, to Ibn ‘Abbās or Mujāhid). The fact that the traditions traced back to him are remarkably consistent and do not show any opposing views also speaks in favor of an authentic transmission, as does the lack of any technical vocabulary. If the traditions were later ascriptions, one might expect that these would contain occasional contradictions or an anachronistic use of terminology.

The small number of exegetical traditions and the variants in wording indicate that these traditions were not part of any form of *tafsīr* work, but rather were passed on as oral traditions. While the overall number of ‘Urwa traditions adduced in the major commentaries, such as those of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, al-Tha‘labī, al-Baghawī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr, reaches some 150 or 200, a large part of these consists of legal or historical traditions from ‘Urwa with no explicit reference to the Qur’ān. As shown, it is very likely that the connection of these traditions to verses from the Qur’ān was only made at a secondary stage and not by ‘Urwa himself.

‘Urwa’s exegetical traditions do not seem to have been transmitted together with his legal traditions or those on the life of the Prophet, but may have originally been oral glosses or side remarks. That at least two of the statements are connected with different verses of the Qur’ān (however with a similar context) indicates that it was known what these statements referred to, but not necessarily on what occasion ‘Urwa made them.

In the course of the transmission of ‘Urwa’s statements the *isnāds* were sometimes extended to a companion, usually ‘Ā’isha. This process could also be observed in his traditions on the life of Muḥammad.¹²³ That the same tradition is occasionally traced back to different companions indicates that this is very likely to have been a secondary process, and that statements on ‘Urwa’s informants cannot generally be trusted. This is not to say that it is impossible that the traditions traced back through ‘Urwa contain authentic material from earlier authorities, but this cannot be ascertained through this study.

It cannot be completely ruled out that ‘Urwa’s son Hishām, rather than only transmitting exegetical traditions from his father, actually invented them (or at least some of them). The fact that a number of traditions are also transmitted through al-Zuhrī or other scholars makes this less likely, but the small

¹²³ Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 270–2.

number of variants makes it impossible to exclude this possibility. Whether in fact originating with ‘Urwa or his son Hishām, the traditions ascribed to ‘Urwa clearly reflect an old *tafsīr* tradition and date from the late first century to the middle of the second century AH (first half of the eighth century CE). Despite their small number, they do show that several exegetical techniques, including lexical glosses, circumstances of revelation, identification of references, citation of qur’anic verses, and grammatical explanations were already in use in a rudimentary form at that time. This conforms with the views of Gilliot and Leemhuis on the early development of the exegetical tradition, against the positions of Sezgin and Wansbrough.

The traditions studied here also indicate that exegesis was not confined to a few experts in the field, but was practiced on a wider scale in scholarly circles. While the exegetical traditions of ‘Urwa in themselves do not contain a lot of extraordinary material not otherwise known, this study has shown that a focus on minor figures in the exegetical tradition may be a way forward to find old exegetical traditions that have less or not been affected by later attributions and back-projections. Criteria such as the consistency of the contents of the reported traditions, the vocabulary used and the role of the traditions within the discussions of the respective verses may help to establish the authenticity of such traditions when too few variants exist for an *isnād-cum-matn* analysis.