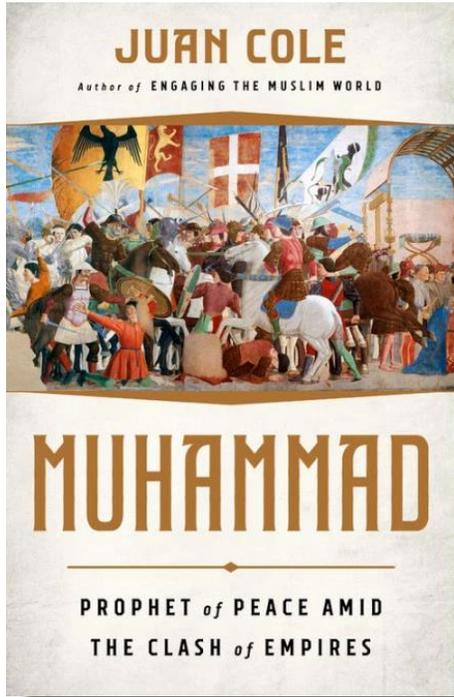


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Juan COLE

Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires

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In recent years, the field of Islamic Studies has witnessed a growing trend centered on reinterpreting early Islam. The reinterpretation concerns historical episodes, events, or figures, and stands in a clear dissonance with traditional narratives depicted by classical Muslim historians. The method utilized relies primarily on attempts to reread the Qur'ān by disassociating it from later qur'ānic exegesis. More importantly, this rereading, though principally concerned with early Islamic history, distances itself from traditional Muslim historiographical accounts. This trend has flourished particularly in the years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, perhaps as a response to increased public hostility, in the Western World, towards Islam and its prophet.¹

¹ I am indebted to several esteemed colleagues who read an early draft of this review and provided valuable critical observations. Thanks to Mustafa Akyol, Ahmad el-Badrawi, David Cook, David Johnston, Brent Neely, Gordon Nickel, Gabriel Reynolds, and Jack Tannous. Of course, none of them is responsible for any shortcomings or errors.

Juan Cole's *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires* is a recent representation of this trend. The author attempts to reinterpret early Islam, particularly in relation to the image of the Muslim prophet. Following Fred M. Donner's footsteps in *Muhammad and the Believers*, Cole's *Muhammad* "puts forward a reinterpretation of early Islam as a movement strongly inflected with values of peacemaking" (1). If Donner's reinterpretation portrayed early Islam as an ecumenical movement (a community of believers, not Muslims), Cole's book emphasizes Muḥammad as a "prophet of peace" who led a peacemaking community. Like Donner, Cole's focus is the Qur'ān: "This book studies the Qur'an in its historical context rather than trying to explain what Muslims believe about their scripture" (1). He contends: if the Qur'ān forbids "aggressive war" and commands the pursuit of "a resolution even in the midst of violent conflict," the title "prophet of peace" is justified for the Muslim prophet "even if Muhammad was occasionally forced into a defensive campaign" (3).

Cole begins by lamenting what he views to be an unfortunate reality among students of Islam, namely that numerous Muslims and non-Muslims alike have badly misunderstood the Qur'ān and misinterpreted it. Muslims in particular, says Cole, have, for centuries, done a disfavor to Muḥammad's image by misrepresenting it through their erroneous writings, as they "lost touch with the realities of the early seventh century" (4). Their writings resulted in a distorted image of Muḥammad as man of war. In response, Cole aims to transform this understanding by emphasizing peace and peacemaking as the core of Muḥammad's career and calling as found in the peaceful message of the Qur'ān. Realizing the probable pitfalls in his initial claims, he makes two caveats. First, he acknowledges that both "peace and war are present in the Qur'an," and while he will analyze both, he states that "the focus [in his book] is on peace" (1). Second, he advances the method of reading the Qur'ān "in its historical context"

yet in isolation from “what Muslims believe about their scripture” (1). We are told, he reads the Qur’ān “judiciously alongside later histories” (3). He claims that there is a solid foundation for his peace-centered interpretation, as the Qur’ān *insists* on the freedom of religion, forbids unprovoked fighting, and “promises salvation to all righteous monotheists and not just to followers of the prophet Muhammad” (2).

Cole’s book thus constitutes a new reading of Muḥammad’s biography against the backdrop of the Qur’ān, and is roughly divided into Muḥammad’s Meccan period (chapters 1–3) and his Medinan career (chapters 4–7). Wherever there is a hint of peace, it is highlighted and emphasized. Cole’s argument is threefold: the Qur’ān, God, and Muḥammad make a strong case for peace. If the Qur’ān was revealed on the Night of Power and “this night is peace,” then, says Cole, “so is the revelation, that is, the Qur’an itself” (43). Not only the Qur’ān, but God’s attributes support peace. Since God’s name in Q Ḥaṣhr 59:23 is *salām* (peace), then “peace it is” (54). Further, according to Cole, Muḥammad was a strong advocate for peace in his troubled world. He led a peacemaking movement, and, if we hew closely to the qur’ānic text, while distancing ourselves from Muslim tradition, Cole argues, we will discover that Muḥammad’s movement “was peaceful in character” (54). Throughout the book, he endeavors to show that peace, and only peace, was at the center of Muḥammad’s proclamations, treaties, and raids. Overall, Cole is undoubtedly aware of major classical Muslim sources and recent secondary studies on the topic, but he selectively uses both to serve his major goal: “peace it is.”

The book is chiefly a *search* for Muḥammad, not *research* on him. It is an ambitious attempt to locate a specific Muḥammad presumably existing somewhere in sacred texts, rather than to apply a systematic investigation into complex and competing accounts, weighing supportive and contradicting evidence against each other. The author is determined from the

first page that despite the fact that both war and peace—by his own admission—exist in the Qur'ān, his “focus is on peace.” For the author, Muḥammad was mainly a peacemaker, leading a peacemaking movement, and the Qur'ān speaks accordingly. The task is a clear example of *eisegeting*—and not *exegeting*—Islam's scripture. When needed, a hint to a confirming text or a historical report—Muslim or non-Muslim—suffices. If opposing evidence does exist, it is overlooked, diluted, or rejected.

For example, Cole is willing to use the Greek work *Doctrina Jacobi nuper Baptizati* so long as it supports his thesis and interpretations (247, 248, 263, 266, 269, 274, and 286). However, when this same source includes what sits poorly with his thesis, it is overlooked. The *Doctrina Jacobi* refers to “the prophet who has appeared with the Saracens,” identifying him in negative terms: “He is false, for the prophets do not come armed with a sword.”² Cole, as a skillful scholar, is likely aware of the reference, but surprisingly does not deal with it at all. Furthermore, he is ready to use the *Doctrina Jacobi* as a reference for polemical attitudes against the Jews (269 and 286), but remains silent regarding its critical stance toward what he terms the Believers movement. Clearly I am not suggesting that Muḥammad was a prophet of war instead of peace, or that he was portrayed only as a false prophet by contemporaneous non-Muslims. This would be inaccurate. In the first Hijri century, non-Muslim sources depict Muḥammad not only as a monotheist revivalist and trader, but also as a conquest initiator, king, lawgiver, and false prophet.³ The point is that the author here appears decidedly selective in what accounts to employ and what to dilute or dismiss from the same early source.

² Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1997), 55. Hoyland tells us that *Doctrina Jacobi* is “purportedly composed in Africa in July 634.” If this is true, the reference of *Doctrina Jacobi* is one of the earliest reports to unrest in Arabia contemporary to the time of Muhammad's career.

³ Robert Hoyland, “The Earliest Christian Writings on Muḥammad: An Appraisal,” in Harald Motzki (ed.), *The Biography of Muḥammad* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 276–295.

This selectivity appears also in Cole's treatment of the testimony of Sophronius (d. ca. 639), Patriarch of Jerusalem. The author refers to Sophronius in discussing the capture of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614 and their defeat of the Romans (81, 263, and 272–273). Cole affirms that Sophronius “exemplified Christian anguish at the loss of the holy city [to the Persians]” (81). But Sophronius is also reported to have explicitly commented on the conquering Arabs and their military activities in Jerusalem in 634. In December 634, according to Robert Hoyland, “Arab raids had prevented the usual Christmas pilgrimage to Bethlehem, and Sophronius was forced to give his Nativity sermon in Jerusalem.”⁴ In that sermon, Sophronius does not describe a peaceful movement coming their way from Arabia, but rather armed “barbarians and godless” warriors who “prevented [Christians] from entering Bethlehem.”⁵ Cole is silent about these statements. In another sermon, which Hoyland dates to 636 or 637, Sophronius details “the Arabs’ atrocities and victories,” as they “overrun the places which are not allowed to them, plunder cities, devastate fields, burn down villages, set on fire the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries,” identifying them as “the vengeful and God-hating” Arabs, “who insult the cross, Jesus and the name of God, and whose leader is the devil.”⁶ Sophronius’ descriptions do not reflect a peacemaking ecumenical movement of believers marching from Arabia to Palestine sometime between 634 and 637, only a few years after the traditional Muslim dating of Muḥammad’s death in 632. In fact, since some other “earlier and more numerous Jewish, Christian, Samaritan, and even Islamic sources indicate that Muhammad survived to lead the conquest of Palestine, beginning in 634–35,” the words of Sophronius, who was actively preaching between 634 and 637, should receive special attention

⁴ Hoyland, *Seeing*, 70.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

and importance.⁷ Yet Cole appears uninterested in Sophronius's comments on the Arabs and mostly ignores them. At best, he labels them "hysterical pronouncements" (207). I am not denying Sophronius' bias against the conquering Arabs.⁸ My point rather is that Sophronius' words reflect views which Cole appears to ignore, despite the fact that he uses the same source for other references in order to support his claims.

The *Doctrina Jacobi* and Sophronius' sermons are not the only important early sources. We can cite another significant account, which Hoyland has described as "the first explicit reference to Muḥammad in a non-Muslim source, and its very precise dating inspires confidence that it ultimately derives from firsthand knowledge."⁹ The account—dated Friday, February 7, 634—is attributed to Thomas the Presbyter and explains the Battle of Dathin: "at the ninth hour, there was a battle between the Romans and the Arabs of Muḥammad... The Romans fled, leaving behind the patrician *bryrdn*, whom the Arabs killed. Some 4000 poor villagers of Palestine were killed there, Christians, Jews and Samaritans. The Arabs ravaged the whole region."¹⁰ The explicit mention of "the Arabs of Muḥammad" and their aggressive treatment of non-Muslims does not fit Cole's arguments, and he does not seem interested in incorporating such primary references. In fact, he rejects the notion of war between the Romans and the Arabs of Muḥammad, and insists on depicting the early followers of Muḥammad as *members* of the Byzantine Empire (66). For his thesis on peace to stand, Cole

⁷ See Stephen Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 1–17, esp. 2–3.

⁸ I agree with Hoyland that one ought not "to champion non-Muslim sources over Muslim sources." See Hoyland, "Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East," *al-'Uṣūr al-wuṣṭā* 25 (2017), 113–140. He also rightly observes that, "Muslims and non-Muslims inhabited the same world, interacted with one another and even read one another's writings." Hoyland, *In God's Path*, 2–3; also, Antoine Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir: L'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 137ff.

⁹ Hoyland, *Seeing*, 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

even dismisses the report that Muḥammad's expedition to Tabūk against the Byzantines had actually occurred, labeling it "a later fiction" (185). However, we have Syriac evidence dated in 637 which mentions Muḥammad's name explicitly and refers to the fact that the "Arab troops decisively defeated Byzantine forces" and that "many villages were destroyed through the killing by {the Arabs of} Muḥammad."¹¹ Cole does not seem interested in these pieces of evidence. This selective approach to non-Muslim primary sources does not yield to proper evaluation and sound interpretation, and raises questions about the overall methodology. Although Cole claims that his examination of the Qur'ānic theme of peace aims "to trace its development throughout the text chronologically [and] to listen for resonances with other works of late antiquity" (229, emphasis mine), he seems interested chiefly in works that fit his claims.¹²

The same selectivity appears in Cole's treatment of Arabic primary sources. While he states in his preface, "The Qur'an tells us about that history [of peace] if we will listen to it" (4), it turns out that he is unable to establish that history without relying on classical Muslim accounts, written or compiled centuries after the events they describe. Although he claims to "concentrate on the Qur'an and weigh it as the only Arabic primary source" (229) and that he does not try "to explain what Muslims believe about their scripture," he is constantly forming

¹¹ Michael Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 22–24. I am surprised that Cole never refers to this Syriac sourcebook. Similarly, Cole refers to the source of Sebeos, Bishop of the Bagratunis (writing in 660s), seven times (242, 266, 267, 297, 298, 301, and 304), but makes no mention that "this source also has the Muslims evict the Jews from their place of prayer," which opposes Cole's thesis of inclusivism. See Hoyland, *Seeing*, 128.

¹² But there is another problem. Cole's decision regarding how he defines which sources are early or late is obscure. He considers *Doctrina Jacobi* a "late" source, notes in passing that this source is "dating from sometime late in the seventh century," and claims that "Islamicists have in contrast tended to date it much earlier but are likely mistaken" (247). Surprisingly, he refers to an exegete mentioned in the *Ta'rikh* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) as "an early interpreter" (76) and to 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 94/713) as an "early biographer" (128). It appears that the author labels sources as early or late arbitrarily. On the problematic methodology of using "early" quotes preserved in later works (such as those preserved by al-Ṭabarī), see Ella Landau-Tasseron, "On the Reconstruction of Lost Sources," *al-Qantara* 25 (2004): 47; Lawrence I. Conrad, "Recovering Lost Texts: Some Methodological Issues," *JAOS* 113, no. 2 (1993): 258–263. See also the valuable observations of Borrut, *Entre mémoire*, 17ff.

what he calls “historical context” by relying on accounts from the *sīrah*, *ta'rikh*, *ṭabaqāt*, and even *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr* (e.g., 29–30, 230, 231, *et passim*). His retelling of Muḥammad’s life, however, entails a substantial twist: he is careful to emphasize peace and only peace. If the Arabic sources tell different narratives elsewhere, it seems these are unimportant to incorporate.

For instance, in discussing *Sūrat al-Rūm*, Cole wants to advance his interpretation that the “opening verses of [the *sūrah*] describe the eventual success of a Christian monarch as a triumph for the God preached by Muhammad” (86), likely because this interpretation supports Cole’s claim that Muḥammad “envisioned the Believers as being members of the eastern Roman Commonwealth” (66). To support such an interpretation, Cole refers to Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) and his *Tafsīr* (86). Similarly, in his interpretation of Muḥammad’s Night Journey, Cole seeks to support the claim that Q *Isrā’* 17:1–8 “responds to the Iranian capture of Jerusalem,” and thus he again uses *Tafsīr Muqātil* (82 and 273). But Muqātil has many other descriptions of early Islam, and many statements concerning peace, that Cole is apparently unwilling to admit or employ. Contrary to Cole’s thesis of inclusivism in early Islam, Muqātil advances many other claims: (1) Jews are those who have deserved God’s wrath, Christians are polytheists, and “anything but the religion of Islam is not a straight path”; (2) Jews are among *alladhīna kafarū* (those who disbelieved); (3) Jews and Christians do not follow the right religion, as “any religion but the religion of Islam is *bāṭil* (invalid or worthless),” and thus they should pay the *jizyah* while *mudhallūn* (humiliated).¹³

¹³ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihātah (5 vols.; Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1423/2002), 1.36 (on Q *Fātiḥah* 1:5–7); 1.121, 4.275; and 2.167 (on Q *Tawbah* 9:29), respectively.

Similarly, contrary to Cole's arguments on peace, Muqātil affirms that: (1) the call for peace and reconciliation of Q Anfāl 8:61 is "abrogated" by the revelation of "So be not weak and ask not for peace, while you are having the upper hand" (Q Muḥammad 47:35); (2) the "Sword Verse" annulled the verse of "pardon and forgiveness" (Q Mā'idah 5:13), the verse of "had your Lord wished, all those who are on earth would have believed" (Q Yūnus 10:99), the one of "to you your religion, and to me my religion" (Q Kāfirūn 109:6), and that which encourages, "do not dispute with the People of the Book [*ahl al-kitāb*] except in a manner which is best" (Q 'Ankabūt 29:46), as well as "say to those who believe that they forgive those who do not fear the days of God (Q Jāthiyah 45:14)."¹⁴ All these peaceful verses, says Muqātil, are annulled. In fact, Muqātil bluntly and explicitly insists that the verse of *al-i rāḍ wa'l-salām* (pardoning and peace) has been divinely annulled, and that the verse "turn away from [your enemy], and say 'Peace!' (Q Zukhruf 43:89)" no longer applies "since the Sword Verse abrogated turning away and peace."¹⁵

Muqātil's assertions obviously do not agree with Cole's arguments regarding the peaceful inclusivity of the early Muslim community. This includes, most notably, his major claim that *islām* encompasses and embraces all monotheistic religions, as the "Qur'an's paradise is, implicitly, a world parliament of religions" (51, see also 79). Cole uses Muqātil's *Tafsīr* only when it supports the book's thesis.

As with Muqātil, when al-Ṭabarī has something to say to support "wishing your enemies peace and well-being" (76) or "a reconciliation with [the Meccan] pagans" (108) or "a

¹⁴ Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 2.123, 1.462, 2.250, 4.888, 3.385, respectively. It should be noted that the label "Sword Verse" is Muqātil's own description of Q Tawbah 9:5.

¹⁵ Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 3.807. He also states that freeing war captives and accepting ransom for war prisoners are both abrogated by "kill the polytheists wherever you find them, capture them, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every ambush" (Q 9:5) and nothing would be accepted from defeated soldiers *illā'l-islām* (except Islam). Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 4.44.

tolerant universalism” (116), he is quoted by Cole; otherwise, there is silence, even though al-Ṭabarī writes extensively on peace, fighting, and the treatment of non-Muslims.¹⁶ In fact, Cole uses al-Ṭabarī to dilute the severe outcome of the Sword Verse (Q Tawbah 9:5): “Some clerics attempted to use what they called the ‘sword’ verse (9:5) to abrogate all the passages about peace and peacemaking that came in the book previous to it. Many great Muslim scholars pushed back against this intellectual and spiritual travesty. Tabari pointed out that only a command can be abrogated” (203–204). Thus, al-Ṭabarī is used here as a major Muslim authority who denies, says Cole, the abrogation of peaceful passages by the Sword Verse. Unfortunately, Cole’s contention is not only inadequate, but is frankly counterfactual, as al-Ṭabarī asserts many times that the Sword Verse has abrogated tolerant and peaceful passages.¹⁷ When al-Ṭabarī writes on Muḥammad’s reported threat of slaughtering (*dhabh*) the Meccans, Cole rejects it and claims “there is nothing like it in the Meccan suras and it is inappropriate to a sanctuary city” (252). We have here a serious and recurrent methodological problem in Cole’s book: strong claims are frequently made on the basis of slim evidence or special pleading. Once these claims are subjected to rigorous examination based on a wider reading *in the same sources* upon which Cole relies, the substance of these claims tends to collapse.

¹⁶ Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, ed. Muḥammad Maḥmūd Shākhīr and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākhīr (24 vols.; Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risālah, 1420/2000), 2.503 (pardoning and forgiving the enemy is abrogated by the Sword Verse); 3.567 (Muḥammad endorsed the *qitāl* [fighting] until people convert and state the shahada, and God ordered or instructed [*amara*] his Prophet to fight in both the sacred and unsacred months); 7.456, 8.26, 10.467, 500, 11.163, and 17.252 (God endorsed fighting the *mushrikūn* [associators], including Jews and Christians); 24.542 (Jews and Christians have *kafarū* [disbelieved in] God and his apostle). Cole’s interpretations reject any qurʾānic reference to Jews and Christians as *kafarū* or being *mushrikūn* (248 and 261, respectively).

¹⁷ I have identified at least twenty times where al-Ṭabarī explicitly writes on the Sword Verse as abrogating other earlier (peaceful) verses. See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 2.503, 3.567, 8.26, 9.475–479, 10.331, 11.442, 12.32, 12.272, 14.41–42, 14.140, 17.153, 19.316, 22.154–156, and 23.323.

My point is not to support or discourage referring to Muqātil or al-Ṭabarī, but rather to demonstrate the problem of using them *selectively* to support a specific argument. In my estimation, Muqātil's and al-Ṭabarī's interpretations should be viewed as addressing and reflecting the sectarian, political, and social concerns and contexts of their time, rather than precise meanings of the Qur'ān.¹⁸ Cole's reliance on these sources *only* when they support his arguments does not advance a convincing case.¹⁹ This inconsistent use of the Arabic sources affects the picture painted of the so-called Medinan period (chapters 4–7) with its patently hostile polemics against *ahl al-kitāb*.

This brings me to my final observations about Cole's thesis and methodology as they relate to his treatment of the Qur'ān. Leaving aside the startling picture of a Western scholar reinterpreting Islam's prophet for Muslims apart from their received tradition in all its complexity and historical development, Cole's interpretation of the Qur'ān is, at times, clearly reductionist. He claims that, "Muhammad celebrated the children of Israel, displaying clear pro-Jewish sentiments" (69). He then quotes only one qur'ānic verse (Q Jāthiyah 45:16) to support such an all-encompassing claim. But can this claim be truly supported by a faithful reading of all verses (or even the majority) that relate to the Jews in Islam's scripture? The answer is negative. Consider, for instance, "And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion" (Q Baqarah 2:120), and "O believers, many of the rabbis

¹⁸ See Mun'im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9ff, where he views *tafsīr* "as reflecting social, cultural, and political contexts in which it emerges." See also Karen Bauer, "Introduction," in Karen Bauer (ed.), *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'ānic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8, where she rightly observes, "At its essence, *tafsīr* is each scholar's attempt to relate his world to the world of the Qur'ān."

¹⁹ The same goes for the selectivity in dealing with accounts in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrah* and even *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (cf. 37, 242–243, 247, *et passim*). For instance, Cole does not refer to some passages in the *Sīrah* that might affect the peaceful and inclusive picture he attempts to paint (e.g., ripping the woman Umm Qirfa in two "by putting a rope to her two legs and to two camels and driving them until they rent her in two"). Ibn Hishām and Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 665.

and monks indeed consume the goods of the people in vanity and bar from God's way" (Q Tawbah 9:34). These verses are not mentioned at all in Cole's book, and *prima facie* they hardly depict the Jewish community favorably. To claim otherwise would certainly place the onus on Cole to provide far more extensive and persuasive argumentation than he has done. Consider also Q Mā'idah 5:59–61, which depicts the People of the Book not only as "resenting" the Believers, but also as "cursed" by God who "made of them apes and pigs and slaves of Satan," because "they have entered *bi'l-kufr* (with disbelief)." This passage too is never discussed by Cole and does not seem to support his claim that the qur'ānic Muḥammad had clear pro-Jewish sentiments and "celebrated the children of Israel." The same can be said regarding several other verses (e.g., Q Jum'ah 62:6).²⁰ Indeed, gracious and charitable interpretations of qur'ānic verses are much to be desired, but not at the expense of interpretive accuracy.

But there is a deeper problem with Cole's treatment of Islam's scripture. He adopts the normative Muslim practice of dividing the Qur'ān into Meccan and Medinan chapters (67, 77, 87, and 252) even as he proposes to distance himself from Islamic tradition (4). This Meccan-Medinan classification was introduced in later medieval times, and while it is the most common categorization, we must acknowledge that it is not the only possible division. More importantly, although this Meccan-Medinan division is attributed to Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/688), it was not completely fixed until al-Bayḍāwī (d. 716/1316) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), and eventually "was generally adopted by the Egyptian standard edition of the Qur'ān published in 1924."²¹ This adoption made it more official and widely accepted across the Muslim world.

²⁰ Cole does mention the hardly pro-Jewish "O Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians as friends or allies" (Q Mā'idah 5:51). However, I am unconvinced by his claim that this verse "does not imply bad relations or enmity between the Believers and the scriptural communities, only a desire to protect new proselytes from undue coercion of conscience" (184), as he does not provide reasons for such an interpretation.

²¹ Gerhard Böwering, "Chronology and the Qur'ān," *EQ*, 1.316ff, where he writes, "the exact chronological listing of *sūrahs* had been in dispute since Qatāda (d. 112/730)" (322).

Thus, Cole adopts and deploys a later conventional Muslim method of classifying the Qur'ān's chapters, even as he attempts to avoid "trying to explain what Muslims believe about their scripture" (1). Not only can we not be certain of such a Meccan-Medinan division, but we have no evidence it is actually true.²² This problem is repeatedly reflected in Cole's interpretations of the Qur'ān.

Qur'ānic passages which have been ambiguous for centuries—even for renowned Muslim exegetes—seem unproblematically lucid to Cole. Without the least hesitation, he repeatedly employs phrasing such as "the Qur'an insists" (1, 3, 46, *et passim*) when more than one Qur'ānic perspective exists in reality.²³ This suggests an ability to unlock mysterious Qur'ānic texts and contexts as assumptions are transformed into facts. The impression a reader of Cole's book may get is that one can unveil, in a straightforward manner, the meaning of a given verse in context with little-to-no recourse to later Muslim exegesis. For instance, we are invited to believe that: there are identifiable *early* Medinan verses and that we can compare them with *later* Medinan passages (122–123); the verse of "fighting is prescribed for you" (Q Baqarah 2:216) is a push for Banū Hāshim, who "specialized in conflict resolution," to be ready for defensive fighting although they hated it (123); the verse "prepare against them what force you can and horses tied at the frontier, to terrify thereby the enemy of God and your enemy" (Q Anfāl 8:60) is a command to the Believers "to attend to psychological warfare as well as to material preparations in this defensive campaign" (125); as for the *jizyah* verse, "Fight those who do not believe in God and the Last Day... from those who were given the Scripture" (Q

²² Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1–9; *idem*, "Introduction," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (eds.), *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2009), 2ff. See also Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 161ff (on the Meccan chapters) and 188ff (on the Medinan ones).

²³ See Arne Amadeus Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), where he lists many Qur'ānic words, the meanings of which are unknown.

Tawbah 9:29), we are told that it has nothing to do with Christians and Jews as it mainly speaks of fighting “the aggressors at Hunayn” (179).²⁴ This is bizarre. Problematically, there is no way to determine these alleged contexts, especially as the verses do not include elements like Banū Hāshim or “psychological” fighting, let alone early or late Medinan revelations. At a minimum, Cole’s readings here are questionable or idiosyncratic, and his claims require a far more detailed and robust defense than he attempts to provide. Cole himself appears uncertain in many places, as we read, “I suspect” (32 and 239), “I am hypothesizing” (239), “I think this reading is justified” (268), this is “implied” (39 and 48) or “seems more likely to me” (238), the case “may have been” (40), the event “may be referred to in the Qur’an” (48), “implicitly” (57), “implying” (83), and so forth.²⁵ The repeated recourse to “subjunctive possibility” should alert the reader to scholarly guesswork where major claims are made with a little-to-no evidence provided. Eloquent speculation does not constitute evidence. In fact, in his interpretation of the *jizyah* verse (Q 9:29), Cole admits, “I should warn readers that I am engaged in a radical act of reinterpretation here,” as the reading of the verse “makes no logical sense in the context of everything else in [my] book” (303). Seeking to reduce the entire Qur’ān to a document on peacemaking by insisting on eliminating any other contradicting themes while reading it *selectively* against supporting passages from the *Sīrah* (which supposedly appeared two centuries later) results in strange conclusions.

²⁴ Surprisingly, Cole uses *alladhīna ūtū’l-kitāb* (those who were given the Scripture) several times to identify Jews and Christians (97, 184, and 305), but here, in treating Q 9:29, he writes, “This verse was later applied to Jews and Christians, but that use of it is frankly bizarre” (179). However, the verse explicitly uses *alladhīna ūtū’l-kitāb*. This is an apparent inconsistency in Cole’s analysis.

²⁵ Jack Tannous identifies similar uncertainties in Fred Donner’s *Muhammad and the Believers*. See Tannous’ important remarks on the so-called ecumenical movement of early Islam. Tannous, “Review of Fred Donner’s *Muhammad and the Believers*,” *Expositions* 5, 2 (2011), 126–141, esp. 132. See also Nicolai Sinai, “The Unknown Known: Some Groundwork for Interpreting the Medinan Qur’an,” *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 66 (2015–2016), 49ff.

Cole's methodology in interpreting the Qur'ān becomes even more problematic when he introduces definitions. Consider his broad assertions concerning the Qur'ānic jihad. The author argues that the word indicates a peaceful Qur'ānic activity, involving "oral argument with the opponent" (76) and that "The passages about fighting do not use the Arabic term *jihad*, which in the Qur'an refers to ethical struggle and carries no implication of holy war" (123). Without a doubt, the interpretation of the concept of jihad as a peaceful activity and ethical struggle fits neatly into Cole's thesis. This understanding of the concept is only *partially* correct, for at least two reasons. First, the Qur'ān uses a precise term for fighting: *qitāl*. Islam's scripture calls the Believers to fight various groups: *al-kuffār* or *al-kāfirūn* (Q 8:38–39; 9:12, 123; and 48:22), *al-mushrikūn* (Q Tawbah 9:36), and *alladhīna ūtū'l-kitāb* (Q 9:29), among others (Q Ḥujurāt 49:9). In all these verses, the term used is *qitāl* (and its derivatives), not *jihād*. In his attempt to advance his case for the peacemaking movement, Cole mentions the prominent term *qitāl* only once in passing, labeling it a "secular" term (123). Problematically, several of the verses that call for *qitāl* (fighting) are not treated at all in Cole's book; such as, "O you who have believed, fight those adjacent to you of the disbelievers and let them find in you harshness" (Q 9:123), "O Prophet, urge on the believers to fight" (Q Anfāl 8:65), "God loves those who fight in his way" (Q Ṣaff 61:4), and "[God] shall cast into the unbelievers' hearts terror; so [that the Believers would] smite above the necks, and smite every finger of them" (Q 8:12). So too verses such as "So do not faint and call for peace; you shall be the upper ones" (Q Muḥammad 47:35) and "God has bought from the Believers their souls and their possessions for paradise to be theirs: they fight in the way of God, kill, and are killed" (Q 9:111) do not appear at all in the book, although they discuss peace and fighting, and thus shed doubts on

the main thesis of Cole's book. The fact that these verses appear to challenge Cole's central thesis can hardly be incidental.

Second, while it is true that jihad and *qitāl* are not synonymous, they still overlap in some Qur'ānic verses. In Q Nisā' 4:94–95, the Qur'ān addresses the Believers to encourage them to strike out in the path of God (*ḍarabtum fī sabīl Allāh*), mentions plenty of spoils of war (*maghānim kathīrah*), and declares, "God has preferred those who struggle in jihad (*faḍḍala'l-mujāhidīn*) with their possessions and their selves over the ones who sit at home." The verse uses jihad in connection to expedition in God's path alongside spoils of war. The term *al-mujāhidūn* (those striving in jihad) is the active participle of the Arabic term *jihād* and is used twice in the same verse. This term *mujāhidūn* is not only explained in the same verse as those who give their *possessions* and their *selves* in God's path, but also is contrasted with *al-qā'idūn* (those who sit at home). Again, while it is true that jihad in the Qur'ān can have various connotations, it is inaccurate to suggest that jihad nowhere in the Qur'ān is linked to struggling in war. Similarly, in Q Baqarah 2:216–218, we find fighting and jihad side-by-side: "Fighting (*al-qitāl*) is prescribed for you" (Q 2:216) and "those who have emigrated and *jāhadū* (striven) in the cause of God" (Q 2:218). A final example should drive home the point: in Q Tawbah 9:20, "The ones who have believed, emigrated, and *jāhadū* (striven) in the cause of God with their wealth and their lives are greater in rank in the sight of God." The verse indicates that God places those who strive (in jihad) with their "possessions" and "lives" in a higher rank, and promises them "gardens wherein they will have lasting bliss." Striving with one's life to gain paradise does not support Cole's claim that jihad does not connote "fighting or war... anywhere in the scripture" (76). In fact, in this same Qur'ānic passage, just a few verses earlier (Q 9:10–17), jihad and *qitāl* are mentioned together in relation to battles: "*qātilūhum* (fight

them), and God will chastise them at your hands and degrade them... God knows not as yet those of you who *jāhadū* (have striven in jihad).” The point is jihad can describe various notions in the Qur’ān, including armed struggle.²⁶

Honor must be offered where it is due. Juan Cole has written an accessible book, one traveling a very hope-filled trajectory. However profoundly sympathetic we should be to his call for coexistence, peacemaking, and religious freedom, one must voice strong objections to his historical methodology. Praiseworthy goals do not justify questionable historical research. The book suffers from significant selectivity in treating both non-Muslim and Muslim primary sources. Historians of religion in general, and Islamicists in particular, will indeed find his thesis reductionist, inconsistent, and contradicted by much of the evidence we do possess. Many devoted Muslims will likely find the depiction of their Prophet fanciful and unacceptable. Much the same could be said for Cole’s interpretations of key Qur’ānic passages. One can hardly be convinced by a picture forcefully painted, created by cherry-picking images, elevating supporting accounts and suppressing opposing reports. The book has successfully created a new Muḥammad, one calculated to appeal to the needs of today’s political discourse. This new Muḥammad is then retrojected into seventh-century Arabia. However compelling this new Muḥammad may be for our day, he is rather difficult to relate to the standard portrayal of the Muslim prophet as found in classical accounts. My objections to Cole’s book are not against his call for reinterpreting Muḥammad’s life to encourage today’s urgent need for peacemaking and religious pluralism, but rather against his execution of such a

²⁶ The literature on jihad is extensive. For a recent list of primary sources and secondary studies, see Ayman Ibrahim, *The Stated Motivations for the Early Islamic Expansion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), Chapter 5.

reinterpretation, which has resulted in a historically implausible tale of an imaginary tribal movement.

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