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CHAPTER 2

Remnants of an Old Tafsīr Tradition?
The Exegetical Accounts of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr

Andreas Görke

1 Introduction

This article aims to assess the exegetical traditions ascribed to the early Medinan scholar ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr (d. c. 93/712). ʿUrwa is mainly known as a jurist and historian, but several hadīth collections and commentaries on the Qurʾān 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 ʿUrwa 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 ʿUrwa in Qurʾān 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 ʿUrwa 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 ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr and His Role in Tafsīr

ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr is mostly renowned for his expertise in law and his knowledge of the Prophet Muḥammad. He is counted among the seven fuqahāʾ 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 Qurʾān, despite the fact that a considerable number of those that are traced back to him more or less explicitly refer to the Qurʾān. Von Stülpmagel, 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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān in traditions going back to ‘Urwa, he was never regarded as a prominent figure in the field of qurʾānic 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

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1 Cf. Gregor Schoeler, Urwa b. al-Zubayr, El2.
4 Von Stülpmagel, ‘Urwa, 55.
works on the history of *tafsir*, al-Suyūṭī’s (d. 911/1505) *Ṭabaqāt al-mufassirīn*, and al-Dawūdī’s (d. 945/1538) work of the same title. While Ibn al-Nadīm and al-Suyūṭī focus on written works (and thus the omission of ʿUrwa is not surprising), al-Dawūdī also lists a number of early authorities in the field, such as Ibn ʿAbbās (d. c. 69/688), the alleged “founder” of *tafsir*, and his students ʿIkrima (d. c. 105/723), Qatāda b. Diʿāma (d. c. 118/736), and Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. c. 104/722), as well as other early figures such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/723), but he does not mention ʿUrwa even in passing. Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845), the most important early source on ʿUrwa, does list Ibn ʿAbbās amongst the people from whom ʿUrwa heard traditions, but otherwise only indicates that ʿUrwa was a legal scholar, and does not mention any exegetical activity.

While ʿUrwa’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. Others are connected to events in the life of Muḥammad, although they do as a rule not feature in ʿUrwa’s lengthy traditions on these events. 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 ʿUrwa or ʿĀʾisha (d. 58/678). Those traditions that are said to have been transmitted by ʿUrwa’s student Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) are often traced back to a generation before ʿUrwa, while those allegedly transmitted by his son Hishām (d. 146/763) regularly stop with ʿUrwa. These exegetical traditions mostly either contain explanations of words or identify to which event a specific revelation refers. We will revisit these preliminary results in the course of this study.

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8 Ibid., 167.
9 Ibid., 265.
10 Ibid., 332–3.
11 Ibid., 504–6.
12 Ibid., 106.
13 Ibid., 155.
16 See e.g. ibid., 39, 45, 48; Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 69–73, 80–2, 174.
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 Qurʾān 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 Goldziher and Schacht in their studies on hadīth and law. Goldziher argued that individual hadīths, 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. Schacht took this skepticism towards the isnāds further. On the basis of his analysis of legal discussions in early Islam, he argued that hadīths only became important from the second half of the second century AH (late eighth/early ninth centuries CE) and that hadīths traced back to the Prophet only became the rule after al-Shāfīʿī (d. 204/820) had been able to make the case for the supreme authority of prophetic hadīths over any statements from later generations. 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.

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. An opposing view was advanced by John Wansbrough, who argued that the tafsīr

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20 Ignaz Goldziher, Muhammedanische Studien (Halle 1890), volume 2.
24 Ibid., 165.
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 hadīths 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 ʿAbbās and his students on account of the association of exegesis with Ibn ʿAbbās.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 ʿAbbās, or some of the putative early authors of tafsīr works such as Mujāhid b. Jabr and

27 Ibid., 119–246.
30 See in detail e.g. Berg, The development of exegesis in early Islam.
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 ʿUrwa 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 ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr

Let us first analyze the contents of the traditions quoted on the authority of ʿUrwa in the Qurʾān commentaries. Most of these works do record some statements going back to ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr, although the number of such traditions varies considerably in each commentary. As a complete survey of all ʿUrwa 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 ʿUrwa. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, who usually provides an *isnād*, al-Qurṭubī and al-Māwardī include several statements from or positions of ʿUrwa without an *isnād* (*hādhā qawl ʿUrwa* or *qālahu ʿUrwa 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 ʿUrwa in the *tafsīr* tradition.

This material adduced on the authority of ʿUrwa consists of various types. We can at the outset distinguish between traditions in which ʿUrwa’s own statements are related (A) and those in which ʿUrwa 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 Qurʾān (A2), and those 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 hadīths 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 qurʾānic 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 ‘Āʾisha (d. 58/678) (including, in rare instances, a reference to the muṣḥaf of ‘Āʾisha) (B4).

There is not a direct quotation from a specific qurʾānic 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 hadīths (B1 and B2) and a good part of the companion traditions (B3), which do not contain a direct quotation from the Qurʾān. In general, these types of traditions seem to have their origin in ‘Urwa’s interest in the sīra or law rather than in his attempts to explain or contextualize the Qurʾān. 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 Qurʾān. This can be concluded from the observation that several qurʾānic elements are not included in ‘Urwa’s traditions on the events alluded to in these verses. For instance, while Q 48 (al-Fatḥ) 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). 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). Several of these historical traditions of ‘Urwa have been

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32 See Görke and Schoeler, Die ältesten Berichte, 266.
33 Ibid.
discussed in detail elsewhere,\textsuperscript{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 Qurʾān 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,\textsuperscript{35} but this is controversial.\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{37} the following list should cover most of the devices common in the tafsīr tradition: variant readings of specific words (qirāʾāt); 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 (wuḍūʿ), 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.\textsuperscript{38} Another verse for which a

\textsuperscript{34} See, in particular, Schoeler, \textit{Charakter und Authentic}; Görke, al-Ḥudaybiya; Görke and Schoeler, Hijra; Görke and Schoeler, \textit{Die ältesten Berichte}.

\textsuperscript{35} Wansbrough, \textit{Quranic studies}, 119–246.

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


\textsuperscript{38} Ṭabarī, \textit{Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwil āy al-Qurʾān}, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo 1968\textsuperscript{3}), 6127.
reading of ‘Urwa is recorded is Q 11:42, where he is said to have read wa-nādā Nūḥ ibnahā (or ibnaha) (“and Noah called out to his son”) instead of ibnahu (his son). In Q 11:46, he is said to have read “he behaved badly” (innahu ‘amlah ghyra šālihin) instead of “it was bad conduct” (innahu ‘amilun ghyru šālihin). 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”).

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). The majority of the qurrā’ read rīsh instead of riyāsh (with the same meaning of “plumage”) 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” (thiyyāb) and “piety” (taqwā) with “fear of God” (khayyat Allāh), as well as in a number of other instances. On verse 7:99 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.” 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. 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. 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 istaṭāʿū (“and they will not cease to fight you until they turn you back from your religion if

39 All translations from the Qurʾān are my own.
42 Ibid., 10:244.
43 Ţabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 8:148.
44 Ibid., 8:147.
45 Ibid., 8:147.
49 Ibid., 15:66.
they can”).\textsuperscript{50} He also paraphrases \textit{ahāta bi-l-nās}, ("[God] encompasses mankind") in Q 17:60 as “protects you from mankind” (\textit{mana'aka min al-nās}).\textsuperscript{51}

In a number of traditions 'Urwa is said to have identified what a verse refers to. For instance, he states that \textit{ṣalāt} (usually referring to the ritual prayer) in Q 17:110 (\textit{wa-lā tajhar bi-ṣalātika wa-lā tukhāfīt bihā} – “and be not [too] loud in your prayer, nor [too] quiet”) actually refers to the more informal invocation or supplication (\textit{duʿāʾ}) (\textit{qāla: fī l-duʿāʾ}).\textsuperscript{52} For Q 10:64, he explicated that the “good tidings” that are promised to the friends of God consist in their vision of him.\textsuperscript{53} On Q 26:214 (“and warn your nearest kin”), he relates that Muḥammad directly addressed his daughter Fāṭima and his aunt Ṣafīyya [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.\textsuperscript{54} With regard to Q 9:107 he identifies those who have “founded a mosque on piety” as the Banū ‘Amr b. ‘Awf.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{dār al-ḥarb}, even if they were Muslims,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{al-rāṣīkhūna fī l-ʿilm}). 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.\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{al-ṭalāq marratayn}, “divorce is twice”).\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{60} and explains further parts of the verse in

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 2:354.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 15:110.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 15:184.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 11:37.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 19:19, 122–3.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 11:28.
\textsuperscript{56} Māwardī, \textit{al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn}, 2:34.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 3:182–3.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 2:356; Māwardī, \textit{al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn}, 2:293–4.
reference to what al-Julās did. On Q 80:1 ("He frowned and turned away") refers to Ibn Umm Maktūm and gives the occasion of the revelation. On Q 60:1 he explains that the verse was revealed in relation to Ḥātib b. Abī Balta’a and provides a lengthy background story. Likewise, he provides a background for the revelations of Q 2:218, Q 28:53, Q 46:11, and Q 79:46.

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 jīdihā 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).

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 hadith 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.
Early Attestations of ʿUrwa 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 ʿUrwa’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 ʿUrwa’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 ʿUrwa, it is necessary to resort to other considerations. In the following, the earliest attestations of ʿUrwa’s exegetical traditions shall therefore be scrutinized.

To assess whether ʿUrwa’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 Qurʾān began. This roughly encompasses the time until the end of the second century after the Hijra (early ninth century CE). 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, ʿAbdallāh b. Wahb, and ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī 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 is based on the manuscript Cairo, Dār al-kutub, MS 1075 tafsīr, which in fact contains the Tafsīr ʿan Warqāʾ b. ʿUmar ʿan Ibn Abī Najīḥ ʿan 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

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later transmitters added further traditions. The *Tafsīr* contains three traditions that are traced back to ʿUrwa 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. Abī Iyās from either Ḥammād b. Salama or al-Mubārak b. al-Faḍāla, then from ʿUrwa’s son Hishām, and finally from ʿUrwa himself. One contains ʿUrwa’s explanation for the “wing of humbleness [or submission]” in Q 17:24, with the other two being statements from ʿĀʾisha.

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. Nevertheless, the published work represents only one of several different recensions of the *Tafsīr*. However, it does not seem to contain any references to ʿUrwa.

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, 

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73 Ibid., 550, 626.


found in Rampur. The manuscript is incomplete, only covering the text up to Q 52, and the beginning is missing. 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. This Tafsīr contains four traditions that are traced back to ʿUrwa through his son Hishām. In one tradition ʿUrwa, referring to Q 2:180 (prescribing a bequest if a believer is close to death and leaves behind wealth), relates that ʿAlī 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. This tradition from ʿAli as transmitted by ʿUrwa is recorded in numerous variants in works of tafsīr as well as in hadith collections. A second tradition provides the occasion of the revelation of Q 2:231 on the authority of ʿUrwa. The story provided is similar to the one that ʿUrwa is said to have related with regard to Q 2:229. 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 ʿUrwa, while the last contains the identification of ʿalāt with duʿāʾ in Q 17:110, although not on the authority of ʿUrwa, but rather as transmitted by ʿUrwa from ʿĀʾisha.

ʿAbdallāḥ b. Wahb (d. 197/813) included chapters on tafsīr and the qurʾānic sciences in his fāmi, the text of which has been transmitted by his student Sahnūn b. Saʿīd (d. 240/854), and which have been edited and published. 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.

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, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 2:456; Māwardī, al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn, 2:293–4.
84 Sufyān al-Thawrī, Tafsīr, 171.
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. The work does not include any statement by ‘Urwa, but does have three traditions in which ‘Urwa allegedly transmitted material going back to ‘Ā’isha and ‘Umar (on Q 12:110 and 98:1). Al-Zuhri, Ḥabib b. Hind, and Abū l-Aswad are recorded as transmitters from ‘Urwa.

The commentary of ‘Abd 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*. There are at least three editions of the work. Altogether, 27 traditions are traced back to ‘Urwa. Of these, eight are statements of ‘Urwa himself on a specific verse, five are traditions from ‘Ā’isha on specific verses, and the remaining fourteen are general statements not explicitly linked to a verse, either by ‘Urwa himself or transmitted by him. Amongst the traditions is the one about ‘Ali with regard to Q 2:180, as well as others traced back to ‘Ā’isha on Q 2:225, Q 4:3, Q 26:223, Q 33:28, and Q 60:10. ‘Urwa’s own statements are adduced on Q 7:199 (on the meaning of *khudh al-ʿafw* and *ʿurf*), on Q 9:107–18, with regard to the mosque "founded on piety" and that established “for harm," (identification of *ṣalāt* with *duʿā*), Q 26:217 (Muḥammad’s nearest kin), Q 60:1 (Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta’a),

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91 *ʿAbd al-Razzāq*, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 1:68.
92 Ibid., 1:90.
93 Ibid., 1:145.
94 Ibid., 2:78.
95 Ibid., 2:315.
96 Ibid., 2:278.
97 Ibid., 1:245.
98 Ibid., 2:287–8; cf. Ṭabarī, *fāmiʿ al-bayān*, 11:25 and 28. In the former case, this is cited as a tradition via ‘Urwa from ‘Ā’isha in Ṭabarī, while the latter, as in ‘Abd al-Razzāq, is given as ‘Urwa’s own statement.
99 *ʿAbd al-Razzāq*, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 1:393.
100 Ibid., 2:77.
101 Ibid., 2:286.
as well as Q 2:196\textsuperscript{102} and Q 79:43.\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 911 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’ishā. 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,\textsuperscript{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 Qurʾān. 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.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 1:75–6.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 2:347.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 2:258.
\textsuperscript{105} See von Stülpnagel, ‘Urwa, 137–8, with further references.
\textsuperscript{106} Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 2:356.
While the earlier commentaries do not provide clear clues as to the authenticity of the traditions ascribed to ʿUrwa, 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 ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr

As seen above, there are too few variants of ʿUrwa’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 ʿUrwa 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, ʿUrwa’s son Hishām features as a transmitter for most of his exegetical traditions, while there are a few that are traced back through al-Zuhrī, Yazīd, or are recorded as anonymous traditions from ʿUrwa. 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 Maʿmar to Hishām (only one from Maʿmar <-- Qatāda <-- Hishām), the names of transmitters in the other sources include Ḥammād b. Salama, al-Mubārak b. al-Faḍāla, Abū Muʿāwiya, Ibn Abī l-Zinād, ʿAbd b. Sulaymān, Jarīr, Ibn Idrīs, Abū Usāma, Wakīʿ, Ibn al-Mubārak, Anas b. Ḥabīb, and Mālik b. Anas.

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

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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 ʿTabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 8:147, 148, and 149, where the traditions are traced back through Abū Saʿīd (or Abū Saʿīd) al-Madani from someone who heard ʿUrwa.
one through Hishām b. ‘Urwa from Wahb b. Kaysān from Abū l-Zubayr. Ibn Abī Ḥātim includes a tradition of the same tenor, but allegedly transmitted by ‘Urwa from Ibn ‘Umar, while al-Bukhārī records a version traced back via ‘Urwa from his brother ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr. The statement that ṣalāt in 17:110 actually refers to the duʿāʾ is not only traced back to ‘Urwa, but also via ‘Urwa to ‘Ā’isha. 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. The same is true for the comments on Q 79:46 and Q 80:1. 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). 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).

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

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110 Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 9:54.
111 Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm musnadan an Rasūl Allāh wa-l-ṣaḥāba wa-l-ṭābiʿīn, ed. Asʿad Muhammad 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, Isnād 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, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 15:283; this is also widely transmitted in the ḥadīth literature, see, for example, Bukhārī, Šaḥīḥ, 1750, 2331, 2737.
114 Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 19:318.
115 Compare e.g. Qurṭūbī, al-Jāmiʿ li-ʾakhkām al-Qurʾān, 19:209 (‘Urwa) with Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 30:49 (‘Ā’isha), and Qurṭūbī, al-Jāmiʿ li-ʾakhkām al-Qurʾān, 19:211–2 with Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 30:50–1, where both Qurṭūbī and Ṭabarī adduce versions going back to ‘Urwa next to versions traced back to ‘Ā’isha.
116 Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 8:349; Māwardī, al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn, 2:214.
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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).\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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-ʾanzala lāh (“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.\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{118} E.g. Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ 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.
\item \textsuperscript{119} E.g. Māwardī, al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn, vol. 4:414.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān, 15:387.
\item \textsuperscript{121} See e.g. Versteegh, Arabic grammar, 96–106, for a general discussion, and 196, for a list of some common terms.
\end{itemize}
7 Conclusion

How can these features be best explained? The most likely scenario is that the majority of the exegetical traditions traced back to ʿUrwa 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 ʿAbbās 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 ʿUrwa 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 ʿUrwa with no explicit reference to the Qurʾān. As shown, it is very likely that the connection of these traditions to verses from the Qurʾān was only made at a secondary stage and not by ʿUrwa himself.

ʿUrwa’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 Qurʾān (however with a similar context) indicates that it was known what these statements referred to, but not necessarily on what occasion ʿUrwa made them.

In the course of the transmission of ʿUrwa’s statements the isnāds were sometimes extended to a companion, usually ʿĀʾisha. 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 ʿUrwa’s informants cannot generally be trusted. This is not to say that it is impossible that the traditions traced back through ʿUrwa contain authentic material from earlier authorities, but this cannot be ascertained through this study.

It cannot be completely ruled out that ʿUrwa’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

number of variants makes it impossible to exclude this possibility. Whether in fact originating with ʿUrwa or his son Hishām, the traditions ascribed to ʿUrwa 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 Qurʾanic 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 ʿUrwa 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.