CHAPTER FIVE

THE ORIGINS OF MUSLIM EXEGESIS. A DEBATE

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I. The Problem

When did the scholarly exegesis of the Qurʾān start? Muslims usually date its beginnings to Ibn ʿAbbās, who died between 68/687 and 70/689. Exegetical opinions of Muḥammad, the first four caliphs and other Companions of the Prophet have also been transmitted it is true, but Ibn ʿAbbās is considered to be the father of scholarly exegesis.¹ Since the beginning of the twentieth century non-Muslim scholars have cast doubts on this view. Instead, they argued that the differences and contradictions contained in the exegetical traditions circulating in Ibn ʿAbbās’ name are evidence that his eminent role at the beginning of Muslim exegesis is a fiction. They did not conclude, however, that he had no role at all in it but rather that later scholars must have put many of their own interpretations under his authority.² This balanced critical judgment was challenged, on the one hand, by scholars like Fuat Sezgin, Nabia Abbott and Isaiah Goldfeld who defended the Muslim position and even claimed that written compilations of Ibn ʿAbbās’ exegesis had already existed in his pupils’ generation, and, on the other hand, John Wansbrough, who held the view that the extant recensions of early commentaries were not written before the beginning of the third/ninth century and nothing definite can be said about the preceding period when exegesis of the Qurʾān was transmitted orally. According to Wansbrough, who considered the chains of transmitters as literary devices, early exegesis that may date from the

second/eighth century can be identified only as a genre. The ascription of exegetical opinions to particular scholars, however, is spurious.3

Based on a study of the so-called Tafsir Mujahid, Fred Leemhuis proposed an intermediate solution. “The fixation in writing of already existing variant versions of a tafsir tradition […] took place around 150/767.”4 At the same time, that is, half a century earlier than Wansbrough assumed, two simultaneous practices began: firstly, of providing the anonymous living tradition of exegesis with chains of transmission5 and, secondly, raising these asānīd to Ibn ʿAbbās.6 Leemhuis did not, however, exclude the possibility that Ibn ʿAbbās and other alleged exegetes living up to the middle of the second/eighth century may have had a part in the early living exegetical tradition. Yet we cannot know what their actual impact was owing to the lack of independent source material.7 This is, all in all, also the view of Andrew Rippin and Claude Gilliot, who, however, have serious reservations about the role of Ibn ʿAbbās in the emergence of Qurʾānic exegesis.8 C.H.M. Versteegh, on the other hand, draws nearer to the position held by Sezgin and Goldfeld in assuming that the tafsir literature as a whole “provides us with a clear picture of his [Ibn ʿAbbās’, H.M.] teachings.”9

The opinions held by Sezgin, Abbott, Goldfeld and Versteegh have recently been attacked again. In his book The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam. The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the

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5 Ibidem, 28.
6 Ibidem, 25.
7 Ibidem, 26–28.
9 C.H.M. Versteegh, Arabic Grammar and Qurʾānic Exegesis in Early Islam, 59.