I am extremely gratified to be able to contribute to this volume in honor of Andrew Rippin, as there are few scholars who have exerted as much of an impact on my own work and ideas as he has. When I entered graduate school some fifteen years ago Andrew’s impressive body of publications on tafsīr constituted my introduction to the discipline at a time when it was not nearly as robust as it is today. His surveys of the field, his edited volumes, and his discussions of the work of Wansbrough remain invaluable for the clarity with which they show us what has already been accomplished, what is problematic about older approaches to the genre, and what work still remains to be done. His magisterial treatment of the ubiquitous commentary misleadingly entitled Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās vividly demonstrates the need to approach texts and traditions of the tafsīr genre with a keen appreciation for the symbolic function of attribution, both as an authorizing device and as a means of shaping collective memory. My own articles on the lost tafsīr of al-Kalbī and the corpus of
traditions attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih would have been impossible to conceive without Andrew’s pioneering work.

Today, tafsīr studies has clearly emerged as a field of inquiry distinct from the study of the Qurʾān, and it is hard to believe that this could have happened without Andrew’s contributions. His various discussions of specific qurʾānic topoi and, especially, his work on the subgenre of asbāb al-nuzūl offer compelling evidence of why it is so crucial for scholars to recognize that there is far more going on in tafsīr than first meets the eye. Along with his contemporaries Patricia Crone and Gerald Hawting, Andrew has for decades been a consistent (and insistent) voice for the necessity of distinguishing the Qurʾān’s meaning in the originating contexts of Late Antiquity and the prophetic period – what we are increasingly comfortable calling an historical-critical approach to the text – from the massive edifice of almost 1,400 years of Muslim exegesis.

The idea of studying the Qurʾān on its own terms has now gained considerable traction in Anglo-American and European academic circles, to a degree unknown – and perhaps unforeseen – when Andrew and a handful of his peers began publishing in this vein some forty years ago. However, in Andrew’s work in particular, this perspective is constantly tempered by a complementary insistence on understanding tafsīr on its own terms as well – that is, with an appreciation for the way exegesis functions as an arena in which Muslim beliefs, behavioral norms, and values are expressed and

---


4 See, e.g., Andrew Rippin: The function of asbāb al-nuzūl in qurʾānic exegesis, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 51 (1988), 1–20, which serves most directly to address a question raised by Wansbrough, viz., whether this material primarily has a legal (“halakhic”) or narrative (“haggadic”) function. The historiographical implications of Andrew’s demonstration of the exegetical function of asbāb al-nuzūl are difficult to overlook, however.