1. The Project

The provocative title of this paper has been chosen deliberately: the Qur’ān in Islamic tradition has been read as a rather monolithic entity consummate in itself; if related at all to a cultural and historical origin, it is more often than not conceived as born into the ethnically and culturally ‘pure’ environment of al-Ǧāhiliyya, of pre-Islamic Arab culture, represented by the Bedouin and sedentary population of the Arabian peninsula. Though contacts of the Qur’ān’s main protagonists, the prophet Muhammad and his community, with other cultural groups have been conceded, these encounters are perceived as episodic rather than functional in terms of serious exchanges of ideas. The Qur’ān in its traditional reading is a text of one language.

Oriental studies have questioned that perception in various ways. The earliest initiative to contextualize the Qur’ān grew out of a Western intellectual movement that targeted the historization of religious traditions as such, though that of Jewish traditions in particular, namely the *Wissenschaft des Judentums.* Abraham Geiger, one of its founding fathers, as early as 1833 published a groundbreaking work with the telling title ‘What did Mohammed borrow from Judaism?’ Though Geiger was imagining the process of proto-Islamic exchange with Judaism in
an all too mechanistic fashion, he did unearth significant intertexts of the Qur’ān, showing that particular qur’ānic discussions, once projected against a backdrop of sectarian debates, reveal themselves as responses to relevant theological questions. Whereas Geiger was exclusively concerned with Jewish traditions reflected in the Qur’ān, in the later extensions of his work presented by Hartwig Hirschfeld, Joachim Wilhelm Hirschberg, Isaac Gastfreund, Israel Shapira and Heinrich Speyer, a ‘Babylon of cultural languages’—Jewish, Judaico-Christian and Christian, in addition to the pagan Arab—comes to the fore: Geiger’s insistence on a sectarian backdrop was corroborated by the qur’ānic scholarship after him—mostly originating from Geiger’s own scholarly tradition, the Wissenschaft des Judentums. These studies, conducted in various fields such as the linguistic features of the Qur’ān, the foreign vocabulary and the relations between qur’ānic proper names and those of neighboring traditions, and—most significantly—the Jewish intertexts of the qur’ānic discourse, were to shed ample light on the intertwined worlds of paganism, Judaism and Christianity in the Arabian peninsula contemporary to the genesis of the Qur’ān. The numerous contributions—all targeting a joint project of critical qur’ānic studies—would arguably have resulted in a complete historico-critical analysis of the Qur’ān and its contextualization in a comparative horizon after the model of Biblical studies, had they been allowed to live up to our days of methodologically more diversified scholarship.

After the disappearance of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, and the elimination of Jewish scholars from German universitētēs during the early 1930s by the Nazi regime, scholars—no longer equipped with linguistic and hermeneutic tools required for the study of pre-Islamic Qur’ānic intertexts—lost interest in the Qur’ān’s setting in Late Antiquity. Instead, they turned their focus to the persona of the Prophet whose psychological development seemed to promise a direct insight into the peculiar genesis

3 H. Hirschfeld, Beiträge zur Erklärung des Korān (Leipzig, 1886); idem, Jüdische Elemente im Korān. Ein Beitrag zur Korānforschung (Berlin, 1878); idem, New Researches into the Composition of the Quran (London, 1902).