OBITUARY: URI RUBIN (1944–2021)

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Uri Rubin, one of the most significant and pioneering scholars of Islam of our times, passed away on October 26 in his Tel Aviv home at the age of seventy-seven. The death of such a humble and brilliant scholar will leave a significant mark on all those who knew him either personally or professionally.

Rubin became interested in the Arabic language and the world of Islam as a high-school student. He continued to pursue this interest during his studies at Tel Aviv University, where he went on to complete all of his academic studies and research activities. Initially, Rubin studied towards a BA in Middle Eastern Studies and Biblical Studies. The completion of his undergraduate degree coincided with the establishment of the Department of Arabic Studies of Tel Aviv University. Rubin then embarked upon a second BA in this department, where he continued up until his doctorate and beyond. His doctoral work, which he completed magna cum laude under the supervision of Prof. M. J. Kister, addressed aspects of the figure of Muhammad in early Islamic tradition. Rubin’s first paper, which concerned the symbolism of light in the figure of the prophet Muhammad, was based on a chapter of his doctorate.¹

Near the end of his doctorate, Rubin began to teach in the Arabic Studies department at Tel Aviv University. He later served as the department chair for three terms, during which he played a critical role in the department’s formation and development. In 2012, Rubin retired from his position as a full professor yet continued engaging in research and teaching at Tel Aviv University until his passing. His continued contribution to the University is testament to his unstinting dedication and devotion.

Throughout his research career, Rubin published numerous books and articles. He was a member of the advisory committee of the Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān and wrote dozens of entries for it as well as for the second and


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third editions of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, and additional encyclopedias. Rubin also published a new Hebrew translation of the Qur’ān, which once again underlined his essential contribution to the study of Islam.

Uri Rubin’s work dealt with the Qur’ān and its interpretation as well as the early Islamic tradition in general. Over the years, he told his close students that his sojourn at the Department of Biblical Studies had contributed significantly to his study of the Qur’ān. The aim of Rubin’s scholarship, as embodied by his articles and books, was to reveal Muslim views on the early Islamic past and on Muslim religion and culture as reflected in early Islamic sources. Rubin did not aim to distinguish between “history” and “legend” but rather between various layers of tradition and between the different perspectives and beliefs that generated the sources available to us today. He sought to illuminate the ways in which those who compiled and disseminated the Islamic tradition had molded the historical memory of Islam.

Rubin’s first book focused on the life of Muhammad. In it, he examined the literary composition of traditions concerning the prophet Muḥammad and the underlying views that they reflected. Rubin demonstrates that Muḥammad’s biography was largely constructed from the following two sources: (i) an extra-qur’ānic stratum consisting of the names of specific figures, places, and battles, which provided a structural framework of events for the story of Muḥammad’s life; and (ii) a qur’ānic stratum, that is, verses from the Qur’ān that were incorporated by the compilers of Muḥammad’s biography into the extra-qur’ānic framework in order to anchor obscure qur’ānic passages in a concrete series of events.

Rubin’s second book examined the portrayal of the Children of Israel and the Islamic self-image. In this book, Rubin compares Muslim depictions of the Israelites as shaped by biblical and qur’ānic models, discussing the ambivalent attitude of early Muslim traditions toward the Children of Israel. On the one hand, it is possible to discern a positive image of the Children of Israel in the form of a messianic model adapted to the Islamic community; on the other hand, the sources also highlight the factionalist character of the Children of Israel by way of a negative model that the Islamic community must take care to eschew. Rubin notes that the negative traditions make greater use of qur’ānic motifs in order to replace biblical ones.

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Two years ago, in 2019, Rubin published two books in Hebrew with the Hebrew University’s Magnes Press. The first book is a brief introduction to the Qurʾān. The second book addresses the holy status of Mecca and Jerusalem in the Qurʾān and in the Islamic tradition. It discusses central aspects of Jerusalem’s sanctity and the fluctuation between the sanctity of Jerusalem and that of Mecca and the Kaʾbah. According to Rubin, an axis of holiness connecting Mecca and Jerusalem had been an accepted fact well before the appearance of Islam on the historical stage. An English translation of the book is forthcoming; in the final year of his life, Rubin invested considerable efforts in translating the book into English and preparing it for print.

The articles that Rubin wrote over the course of his rich and diverse research career cover a broad range of topics, including the image and life of the prophet Muhammad, the history of Islamic prayer, the Meccan pilgrimage rites, Abrahamic religion in pre-Islamic Arabia and its connection to the Kaʾbah rituals in Mecca, the Kaʾbah as a direction of prayer, the sanctity of Jerusalem in Islam, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, biblical models in the Islamic tradition, prophets and prophecy, governmental authority in Islam, and the meaning of numerous Qurʾānic verses. Rubin also edited an anthology of articles examining various aspects of the life of Muḥammad and was the coeditor of a volume on the status of dhimmīs.

Rubin’s translation of the Qurʾān was well received by researchers, students, and seekers of knowledge in Israel and also in the Arab world. In 2001, the head of Tel Aviv University Press had turned to Rubin with a request to translate the Qurʾān for readers of Hebrew. The first edition of the translation was published in 2005. A decade later, in 2016, a new, updated and expanded edition was published. The translation was praised for its meticulousness, its thoroughness, and for its extensive and valuable annotation. Rubin sought to reflect the accepted traditional interpretations; in footnotes, he described various additional meanings that were not reflected


6. For a selection of Rubin’s articles on Muhammad and pre-Islamic Arabia from the years 1975–2009, see *Muhammad the Prophet and Arabia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

7. Rubin wrote multiple articles on each of the topics listed above. For a complete list of Prof. Uri Rubin’s publications and files of the articles, see http://www.urirubin.com/publications.

in the body of the translation as well as parallels from Jewish and Christian sources. The translation also contains appendices and a detailed index.

Rubin provided a foundation for generations of students and researchers, making an important and essential contribution to Islamic studies through his books and articles. His students—past, present, and future—are fortunate to have learned from the work of such a remarkable lecturer and mentor, whose benevolence and devotion toward his students were profound and limitless.