

## 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 Muḥammad in early Islamic tradition. Rubin's first paper, which concerned the symbolism of light in the figure of the prophet Muḥammad, was based on a chapter of his doctorate.<sup>1</sup>

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 Qur'ān* and wrote dozens of entries for it as well as for the second and

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1. "Pre-Existence and Light—Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muḥammad," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 62–119.

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

Uri Rubin's work dealt with the Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān. 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 Muḥammad.<sup>2</sup> 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-qurʾānic 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 qurʾānic stratum, that is, verses from the Qurʾān that were incorporated by the compilers of Muḥammad's biography into the extra-qurʾānic framework in order to anchor obscure qurʾānic passages in a concrete series of events.

Rubin's second book examined the portrayal of the Children of Israel and the Islamic self-image.<sup>3</sup> In this book, Rubin compares Muslim depictions of the Israelites as shaped by biblical and qurʾānic 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 qurʾānic motifs in order to replace biblical ones.

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2. *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims; A Textual Analysis* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995).

3. *Between Bible and Qurʾān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1999).

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 Qur'ān.<sup>4</sup> The second book addresses the holy status of Mecca and Jerusalem in the Qur'ān and in the Islamic tradition.<sup>5</sup> It discusses central aspects of Jerusalem's sanctity and the fluctuation between the sanctity of Jerusalem and that of Mecca and the Ka'bah. 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 Muḥammad,<sup>6</sup> the history of Islamic prayer, the Meccan pilgrimage rites, Abrahamic religion in pre-Islamic Arabia and its connection to the Ka'bah rituals in Mecca, the Ka'bah 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 qur'ānic verses.<sup>7</sup> 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*.<sup>8</sup>

Rubin's translation of the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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

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4. *The Qur'ān: The Divine Voice Speaks to Muḥammad the Messenger* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2019).

5. *Between Jerusalem and Mecca: Sanctity and Salvation in the Qur'ān and the Islamic Tradition* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2019).

6. For a selection of Rubin's articles on Muḥammad and pre-Islamic Arabia from the years 1975–2009, see *Muḥammad 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.urubin.com/publications>.

8. Uri Rubin and David J. Wasserstein (eds.), *Dhimmis and Others: Jews and Christians and the World of Classical Islam = Israel Oriental Studies 17* (1997).

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.