

## OBITUARY: FRED LEEMHUIS (1942–2021)

BARBARA ROGGEMA  
University of Florence, Italy

In late November 2021, Prof. Frederik Leemhuis, known to many as Fred, passed away after a short illness. Leemhuis was a Dutch Arabist and Qurʾān scholar who studied and worked at the University of Groningen, from 1965 to 2002 in the Department of Languages and Cultures of the Middle East and from 2003 to 2009 as Professor of Islam and Qurʾānic Studies at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. Leemhuis’s fascination with Islam and his love for the Arabic language were the driving forces behind his dynamic and multi-faceted research career that began in a somewhat dusty department of Semitics and ended with archaeological research among the mudbrick houses of the Dakhleh oasis. (As always, one is tempted to ask: What’s in a name?)

Leemhuis’s dissertation, “The D and H Stems in Koranic Arabic: A Comparative Study of the Function and Meaning of the *faʿala* and *ʿafala* Forms in Koranic Usage,” dealt with the subtle differences between the two factitive/causative verb stems in Qurʾānic Arabic, which until then were believed to be more or less undistinguishable. The research of this dissertation combined close readings of the Qurʾānic text with findings from West-Semitic linguistics, the interpretations of classical Arabic grammarians, and Qurʾānic exegesis. It was published by Brill in 1977 and is still a point of reference for scholars of Qurʾānic Arabic nowadays.

During the following decade his scholarship focused predominantly on the origins of early Qurʾānic exegesis. Beginning with an article on the *Tafsīr* of Mujāhid,<sup>1</sup> Leemhuis published a number of studies that deal with the question of the dating and authenticity of early interpretations of Qurʾānic verses as found in later comprehensive works of exegesis, notably al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*. He became known for his ‘intermediate position’ between Fuat Sezgin’s acceptance of most of the early traditions in exegetical

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1. “Ms. 1075 tafsīr of the Cairene Dār al-Kutub and Muḡāhid’s Tafsīr,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, Amsterdam 1st to 7th September 1978* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 169–180.

works as authentic and John Wansbrough's claims about the slow genesis of the Islamic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

I remember from my undergraduate courses in *Qur'ān* and *tafsīr* that Leemhuis carefully considered the ideas with which revisionists had given a new boost to the field of qur'ānic studies and early Islam. Yet, at the same time, as a teacher he seemed to stand on what he considered the firm ground of Islamic traditions about Muḥammad, including the "occasions of revelation" during his life. He would tell us vivid stories about the animosity of the Meccans towards the Prophet, tensions between his wives, and the circumstances leading to the revelation of the Satanic Verses. It was not surprising that he assigned Maxime Rodinson's *Mahomet*, a very human account of the Prophet's life for which the *Sīra* provides the basic chronology. I will not forget his lively lectures about the collection of the *Qur'ān*, which made students feel as though they had met Ḥafṣah bt. 'Umar and Zayd b. Thābit personally.

In 1989 Leemhuis completed his translation of the *Qur'ān* into Dutch. His careful and reliable translation distinguishes itself by its clarity and readability. It was well received by Dutch Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It continues to be one of the best-known translations in the Netherlands and has already been reprinted fifteen times.<sup>3</sup> The attentive reader will notice that the calligraphy on the cover was made by Leemhuis's alter ego, Farīd Abū 'l-Ibnayn.

Less well-known but useful to anyone in qur'ānic studies are Leemhuis's articles on Biblical figures in Islam, which come forth from a series of conferences at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in Groningen. Of particular interest is his intriguing study on Hagar (Hājar) in early Islamic *Qur'ān* commentaries.<sup>4</sup> Hagar is not mentioned by name in the *Qur'ān*, yet the fact that Q 2:158 refers to the sanctity of al-Ṣafā and al-Marwah and that the pilgrimage ritual of running between these two places is often associated with traditions about Hagar's desperate search for water, suggests that stories about her were circulating in early Islam and alluded to in the *Qur'ān*. Leemhuis's study shows that, on the contrary, early exegetes do not refer to her in connection with this verse, nor hardly in other contexts.

2. Cf. Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 89–91.

3. *De Koran: Een weergave van de betekenis van de Arabische tekst in het Nederlands* (Houten: Het Wereldvenster [Unieboek], 1989).

4. "Hājar in the *Qur'ān* and Its Early Commentaries," in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, ed. Martin Goodman et al. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 503–508

This leads him to conclude that this Biblical connection was absent in the Qur'ān's milieu of origin and only established towards the third/ninth century.

Leemhuis was appointed director of the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo twice, from 1975 to 1979 and again from 1991 to 1995. During his second stay in Egypt he befriended the famous modernist Qur'ān scholar Naṣr Abū Zayd. When Abū Zayd was declared an apostate in 1995 and forced to divorce his wife, he turned to his friend for help. Together with colleagues from the University of Leiden, Leemhuis helped Abū Zayd acquire residency and an academic position in the Netherlands. During this period Leemhuis and his son Rob took it upon them to translate some of Abū Zayd's major essays on Islam and modernism into Dutch.<sup>5</sup> Not only his eldest son but also his Swiss spouse, Vreni Leemhuis-Obrecht, a French-Dutch translator, took an interest in Abū Zayd's life and work. She dedicated herself to the translation of his autobiography as narrated to Navid Kermani.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his career Leemhuis was a point of reference for journalists who wanted to and needed to be better informed about Islam. Newspapers and mainstream media outlets from all sides of the political spectrum turned to him for his expertise. After September 11, 2001, when public opinion about Islam lost the nuances it may have had, Leemhuis took on the Islamophobic politicians and intellectuals who preached hatred through pseudo-scientific claims about the essence of Islam. Not as an apologist for Islam but as a rational being with profound knowledge of the text of the Qur'ān, Leemhuis picked apart Geert Wilders's supposed proofs of the Qur'ān's inherently violent world view.

Far from this whirlpool of heated public debate, Leemhuis spent several months every year in the Eastern Sahara desert of Egypt, in the Dakhleh Oasis. He participated in the longstanding international preservation project "Dakhleh Oasis Restoration and Archaeology Project" and worked for years on the exploration and restoration of buildings in the village of al-Qaṣr. These activities also led to the discovery of documents, which formed the basis for several interesting publications about the social and religious aspects of life in the oasis during the Islamic period.

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5. Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid, *Vernieuwing in het islamitisch denken: Een wetenschappelijke benadering*, uit het Arabisch vertaald en ingeleid door Fred Leemhuis en Rob Leemhuis (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 1996).

6. Nasr H. Abu Zayd, *Mijn leven met de islam, zoals verteld aan Navid Kermani*, vertaling Vreni Obrecht (Haarlem: Becht, 2002).

In 2006 Leemhuis was appointed Officer in the Order of Orange Nassau, a distinction conferred to him by the Royal House of the Netherlands for his exceptional and longstanding meritorious service to society. He will be remembered as a scholar with a boundless passion for the Arabic language, as a true friend of the Egyptian people, and as a meticulous reader of the Qur'ān.