

The Study of Islam's Origins since W. Montgomery Watt's Publications

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I wish to thank Dr. Anthony Gorman of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, and Professor Hugh Goddard of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Centre, and their colleagues for honoring me with the invitation to speak at this important occasion, celebrating Professor William Montgomery Watt's long and distinguished career at Edinburgh. Montgomery Watt (1909-2006) was one of the most important and respected scholar of Islamic studies alive when I was beginning my scholarly career in the late 1960s and early 1970s—certainly, he was one of the most important for me, although, unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to meet him in person. His numerous studies—above all his works on the prophet Muḥammad¹ and his several short introductory volumes in the Edinburgh University Press's "Islamic Surveys" series (which, I believe, he may have instigated), especially his *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (1962) and *Islamic Political Thought: the basic concepts* (1968)—were, on the one hand, models of lucid, careful scholarship and, on the other, incredibly helpful introductions to various topics within Islamic studies. Without his work to learn from and absorb, I know that my own development as a scholar would have been far more difficult, and much less pleasant.

¹ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953); *idem*, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956); *idem*, *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

And I am sure that I am not the only scholar of my generation who owes such a debt to Professor Watt and his work.

I. Watt's work in its time

Reflecting back on his work forty years later, however, it is possible to see it with more perspective. I still esteem it very highly, but now I can also see Watt's contributions as products of their time. The social sciences, after a period of gestation in the first half of the twentieth century, became in the years following World War II the regnant academic disciplines in much of the Western academy (and outside it, in the arena of policy formation). Watt's work, like that of everyone else in that time, reflects this. His interpretation of Muḥammad's life, for example, focuses on the economic and social tensions that, he argued, had developed in Meccan society because of the nascent inequality produced by the burgeoning commerce of Mecca. He spoke of the demise—under the corrosive effect of the growing rift between rich and poor – of what he called “tribal humanism,” the ethos of mutual responsibility according to which members of a tribe shared and looked after each other. Watt saw Muhammad's teachings as, in part, a response to this essentially socio-economic and, hence, moral dislocation in Meccan society. There was relatively little emphasis on the impact of Muḥammad's religious ideas as a factor in Islam's appearance

Watt's work on Muḥammad resembled in some respects the earlier work of Hubert Grimme (1864-1942). Grimme had argued that Muḥammad was not a religious preacher, but a social reformer, concerned with succoring orphans and widows, and the poor

generally.² This view was, however, almost immediately criticized by other scholars, who emphasized the centrality in Muḥammad's teachings of the idea of God's oneness and concern with the Last Judgment and the afterlife, concerns that went far beyond merely mundane social issues.

Watt did not deny Muḥammad's religious role—far from it; indeed, he seems to have accepted that Muḥammad had been sincere in presenting himself as a prophet, and always spoke of Muḥammad in a tone of respect that bordered on reverence. But he did not expend much ink in elaborating how Muḥammad's religious message contributed to the success of the movement he had begun, nor did he explore very deeply how Muḥammad's religious message fit into currents of religious thought in the seventh-century Near East. This tepid engagement by Watt with the religious aspects of Muḥammad's mission was also in keeping with the outlook of the social sciences of his day. Social scientists at that time, and secular-minded historians above all, were uncomfortable talking about religion, and had particular difficulty accepting religion as a factor of historical explanation. So they often engaged in a kind of reductionism when speaking of early Islam, explaining away Islam's worldly success as being due to something else, searching for what they considered the “real” cause—anything other than religion: the desiccation of Arabia, the lust for booty among Arabian tribesmen, the desire to open new commercial markets, the expression of a presumed “Arab” national feeling, the exhaustion of the two great empires, the social integration brought by Islam that unleashed the latent energy of a hitherto fragmented tribal society (this last one being

² Hubert Grimme, *Mohammed* (2 vols., Münster: Aschendorff, 1892-1895).

my own contribution to the reductionist agenda³). Watt was swimming in these secular waters too; the secular tone of his work was pronounced enough that the French Islamicist Georges-Henri Bousquet (1900-1978) gave his review of Watt's *Muhammad at Mecca* the wonderfully ironic title "A Marxist interpretation of the origins of Islam by an Episcopal clergyman."⁴

Watt's work also represented an earlier phase of scholarship in its assumptions about the sources for Islam's beginnings. Watt took a fairly sanguine view of the traditional Islamic narrative sources—the chronicles, biographical dictionaries, works of genealogy, collections of poetry and belletristic prose, works of theology, and even the collections of *ḥadīth* or sayings attributed to the prophet Muḥammad—that provided almost all the evidence for his reconstruction of the events of Muḥammad's life and Islam's origins. In accepting the general reliability of these sources, Watt was doing what almost everyone else did prior to the 1970s. A few scholars had raised questions about the reliability of the traditional Islamic sources—notably the Hungarian scholar Ignác Goldziher (1850-1921), the Belgian Henri Lammens (1862-1937), and the German Josef Schacht (1902-1969). But their trenchant criticisms of Islamic tradition were either brushed off by most scholars, or said to apply only to legal injunctions and not to be relevant to the historical sources that described the events and personalities associated with the rise of Islam.

II. The Study of Islamic Origins since Watt's Heyday

³ Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁴ G.-H. Bousquet, "Une explication marxiste de l'Islam par un ecclésiastique épiscopalien," *Hespéris* 41 (1954), 231-47.

How, then, have studies of early Islam changed since Watt's day? It is perhaps a little misleading, actually, to speak in this way, because Watt's day is hardly over--he continued to publish until a few years before his death nine years ago in 2006; the last of his books appeared in 2002, when he was 93. But we can say that the scholarly ground was changing rather dramatically under Watt's feet just about the time he retired from the University of Edinburgh in 1979.

The change had somewhat quiet roots, however noisy—as we shall see—its later manifestations may have become. One of the first decisive contributions was the publication—if one can call it that—of the *Habilitationsschrift*, or second German dissertation of Albrecht Noth (1937-1999), which had the intimidating title *Quellenkritische Untersuchungen zu Themen, Formen, und Tendenzen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung* (“Source-Critical Investigations into the Themes, Forms, and Agendas of early Islamic Historical Tradition”). This appeared in 1970, but because it was in German—and in a rather difficult German at that—and because it was not published by a regular academic publishing house but rather was cheaply produced in a softcover issued by the Oriental Seminar of the University of Bonn, where Noth was teaching, the book had limited circulation even within Germany and became only slowly known to other scholars. (A second edition was subsequently produced, translated into English, with Lawrence I. Conrad, as *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: a source-critical study*.⁵ Noth's book, and some of his subsequent articles,

⁵ Albrecht Noth and Lawrence I. Conrad, *The Early Islamic Historical Tradition*. Translated by Michael Bonner. (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994).

challenged the factual reliability of the corpus of Islamic historical accounts about early Islam, especially about the conquests that followed closely after Muḥammad's death, which he subjected for the first time to the kind of form-critical and text-critical analysis that had long been routine in studies of the Hebrew Bible and Gospels. This was not an accident; Albrecht's father, Martin Noth (1902-1968), was one of the leading German scholars of the Old Testament in the middle years of the century, so the young Albrecht was probably served text-critical perspectives along with his breakfast cereal while growing up in the Noth household. The effect of Albrecht Noth's work was to cast doubt on the accuracy or truthfulness of the traditional Islamic origins narrative, but he did not yet offer any alternative view of those origins.

Another decisive contribution to this changing terrain in early Islamic studies was the appearance, in the 1970s, of revisionist works on the Qur'an text. Although Western scholars, as non-Muslims, did not consider the Qur'an to be God's word, as devout Muslims do, most Western scholars assumed that the Qur'an was essentially a product of Muḥammad's own life and thought, and tried to understand it in the context of the standard Islamic biography of Muhammad's life, Ibn Ishāq's *Sira*. The first blow against this consensus view of the Qur'an also came from Germany, in the 1970 dissertation and subsequent book by Günter Lüling (1928-2014), *Über den Ur-Koran (On the Original Qur'an)*.⁶ For reasons of academic politics I won't bother to

⁶ Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Koran. Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qu'ran* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974).

detail here, Lüling was driven out of the German university system and his work was subjected to a conspiracy of silence by the German academic establishment for several decades. He became an academic outcast, had to self-publish his several books and, because those books were written in German, they too became known only slowly to scholars elsewhere. Lüling's critique was theologically-based and proposed an alternative view of how the Qur'an had developed and, consequently, of Muhammad's career. In Lüling's view, the Qur'an was in part a reworking of older liturgical hymns of a hitherto unknown Arabic-speaking Christian community in Mecca. According to him, Muhammad had begun his life as a member of this Christian cult, but came to disagree with some of its theology and consequently altered these strophic hymns to reflect his new religious views. Lüling attempted, by making various changes to the standard Qur'an text, to uncover what he thought was their original Christian meaning. Lüling's proposed emendations, as they gradually became known, were criticized by many as arbitrary and unfounded, and his ideas have not gained much support, but he did advance many perceptive insights on the Qur'an and was one of the first to challenge directly the inherited consensus views of the Qur'an and of Muhammad's life.

More serious for the scholarly establishment of Islamicists was the publication by John Wansbrough (1928-2002) of his book *Qur'anic Studies*, which was produced by Oxford University Press in 1977. The prestige of its imprimatur, Wansbrough's status as a respected professor at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and the fact that the book was in English meant that scholars everywhere quickly

took notice of it (although its English style is often so dense that, for many readers, it might as well have been written in academic German). On the basis of a literary analysis of the Qur'an, Wansbrough proposed (among other things) that the text of the Qur'an was not mainly the product of Muhammad's time, but rather a text that coalesced as a codified, closed canon of scripture only gradually, over a period of more than 200 years. He also suggested that the likely place of its origin was not Muhammad's Mecca, but the "sectarian milieu" of interconfessional religious debate somewhere in the Fertile Crescent, possibly southern Iraq. This work, too, implied that the traditional narrative about how Islam began was not just wrong, but was actually intentionally misleading, an exercise in the writing of ex post facto salvation history by the later community—a notion that was also embedded, if only implicitly, in Noth's study of the historiographical tradition.

As I noted earlier, these works represent what we might call the quiet beginnings of the revisionist wave of works on early Islam that began in the 1970s: quiet in Noth's and Lüling's case because their works were in German and poorly disseminated, and in Wansbrough's case because of the forbidding difficulty of his prose (one colleague even suggested to me that someone should review Wansbrough's book, ending with the comment that it was important, and that a competent English translation was greatly to be desired).

The noisy phase of the wave of revisionist scholarship came first and foremost with the publication, also in 1977, of the book *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world* by

Patricia Crone (1945-2015) and Michael Cook.⁷ They built on the historiographical critique of Noth, the earlier skeptical opinions of scholars like Goldziher and Schacht, and were probably inspired in some way by the work of Wansbrough (who was their colleague at London's SOAS, but whose relationship to their work, if any, has remained unclear and unarticulated). On this basis, Crone and Cook fashioned a radically new reconstruction of early Islamic history. In doing so, they set aside almost completely the traditional Islamic sources as historiographically suspect and drew instead mainly on the testimony of seventh-century non-Muslim sources in Greek, Armenian, Syriac, and other languages, as well as on some seventh-century documents. Theirs was not the first attempt to utilize the non-Muslim sources systematically to talk about Islam's beginnings (the Byzantinist Walter Kaegi may have been the pioneer in this regard)⁸ but unlike earlier scholars, Crone and Cook assembled from these sources a revisionist narrative that struck many people familiar with the traditional origins story as little short of scandalous. Relying on the seventh-century chronicle attributed to the Armenian bishop Sebeos, they proposed, among other things, that Islam began when Jews evicted by the Byzantines from Edessa fled to Arabia and joined forces with Muhammad's followers in order to reconquer the Holy Land, above all Jerusalem, from the Byzantines. Drawing on other sources, they argued that Muhammad was still alive when the conquests in Palestine began; that the original Muslim sanctuary was located somewhere in the northern Hijaz, not in Mecca, and that the story of Muhammad's career in Mecca was a later fiction; that

⁷ Cambridge University Press, 1977.

⁸ Walter E. Kaegi, "Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest," *Church History* 38 (1969), 139-49. Curiously, this work is not mentioned in *Hagarism's* extensive bibliography.

the caliph Abu Bakr never existed, but was “invented” when Muhammad’s death was back-dated to fill the gap between his “new” death date and the beginning of the reign of the second caliph, ‘Umar—who, since he was called *al-fārūq*, “the redeemer,” had to follow immediately upon the prophet in any case. For Watt, who had spent his whole career elaborating aspects of a narrative of early Islam that closely followed the traditional paradigm, these ideas—appearing just two years before his retirement—must have been a kind of nightmare, as it was for many other established scholars. The rather sensational manner in which *Hagarism*’s claims were presented suggested that there could be no compromise between its new views and the traditional account; but the fact that *Hagarism* built its arguments on unimpeachable sources of evidence and for the most part used them quite judiciously made it impossible simply to dismiss its arguments out of hand as crank literature. What Crone and Cook did, essentially, was to pose a blunt challenge to historians of early Islam: are you going to behave as proper historians, and subject the sources you use to rigorous source criticism? Or are you going simply to look the other way when the limitations of the Islamic sources become apparent, and continue to preach their religiously-grounded vision of the past?

All of these developments, but particularly the publication of *Hagarism*, with its provocative manner of presentation, ignited a firestorm of intense discussion among scholars (and some non-scholars)⁹ about Islam’s origins. (Watt himself responded to some of the revisionist critique, in characteristically measured fashion, in his

⁹ In particular, devout Muslims, and those intent on discrediting Islam in order to advance the claims of their own faith (usually Christianity). Also Ibn Warraq?

1988 book *Muḥammad's Mecca: history in the Qur'ān*¹⁰). The appearance of these first revisionist works completely revitalized the study of early Islam, which for some time had been a rather sleepy and unexciting field, and placed it on much more secure foundations. The electrifying realization that there were fundamental historical questions still to be resolved drew in scores of new researchers, most of whom also approached the task with a keen awareness of the need to handle evidence in a manner that could withstand the most careful scrutiny. These early revisionist works, therefore, marked a real turning-point in the history of our field, and it is for this reason that I consider *Hagarism* perhaps the most important single book in Islamic studies of the twentieth century.¹¹ It was important not because of its reconstruction of early Islamic history, many aspects of which are, I think, simply wrong, but because it led all of us to work with much greater methodological integrity and awareness. And, it inaugurated a veritable flood of subsequent researches, and set the agenda for the study of early Islam right up until the present, and with no end in sight.

There was another dimension to the sea change that came over early Islamic studies in the 1970s, one that was not directly related to the rise of source-critical studies and revisionist history in the style of *Hagarism* that we have just described. It had to do with the emergence of what we can broadly call "Late Antiquity studies," which

¹⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muḥammad's Mecca: History in the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988).

¹¹ See my retrospective review in *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40 (2006), 197-99.

burst on the scene rather suddenly following the appearance of Peter Brown's epoch-making book *The World of Late Antiquity* in 1971.¹² Before its publication, one finds hardly any book titles that include the phrase "Late Antiquity," except among German art historians, who occasionally referred to the art of the *Spätantike*. After 1971, however, scores of books (and hundreds of articles) making reference to Late Antiquity appear; and some of these works have relevance for our concerns, because Brown's book *The World of Late Antiquity* included a consideration of early Islamic history (to the fall of the Umayyads and early Abbasids) as a final chapter of Late Antiquity. In effect, what Brown did was to synthesize several fields of study that had hitherto been largely separate, pursued by discrete communities of scholars who did not talk much to one another: the field of late Roman (or early Byzantine) history, the field of church history, especially the history of the eastern churches (which had been a rather musty subject pursued mostly by scholars in religious orders), the study of Sasanian history (pursued by almost no one), and the study of early Islamic history. Brown conceived of Late Antiquity as extending from the second to the eighth centuries C.E. in the Near East and Mediterranean, and portrayed this period as one of dynamic cultural and social creativity rather than "decline."

Brown's integration of early Islamic history into the framework of Late Antiquity broadened the perspective of historians of early Islam, and we might consider the

¹² Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

approach taken by Crone and Cook in *Hagarism* to be in part a kind of response to Brown's *World of Late Antiquity*, which had been published six years earlier; like it, *Hagarism* integrated evidence from Syriac and other non-Muslim source languages, and various kinds of documentary evidence. The rush of new work on early Islam that emerged in the 1980s and has continued unabated ever since reflects this broadened perspective. We see it not only in the increased attention paid to Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, and other literary sources dating from the seventh century, but also in a renewed interest in various forms of documentary evidence for this period. Studies of the coins and seals of the early Islamic and of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, formerly the province of a mere handful of scholars, proliferated rapidly in number and increased in sophistication, and became the primary occupation of a growing number of scholars, rather than merely a sideline pursued by historians whose main concerns were elsewhere. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s "Islamic numismatics" was more or less synonymous with the name of George Miles, by the 1990s scores of scholars were engaged.

A similar, if even more delayed, transformation occurred in the field of papyrology. The existence of papyri from the seventh century, written in Greek, Coptic, and Arabic, had long been known, but they had not, with few exceptions, been much used by historians.¹³ Moreover, aside from the indefatigable Adolf Grohmann

¹³ The most brilliant exception was that of Carl Heinrich Becker (1876-1933), whose *Papyri Schott-Reinhardt* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1906) was a magnificent study of Arabic papyri from the early eighth century; but Becker eventually left scholarship to become minister of culture in the Weimar republic.

(1887-1977),¹⁴ few made the study of Arabic papyri, particularly those of the early Islamic period, the main focus of their research. It was not until the 1980s and especially the first decade of the twenty-first century that the number of scholars working actively in Arabic papyrology began to swell markedly (though not all focused on the earliest Islamic period).¹⁵

Even more striking were developments in the study of the archaeology of the early Islamic period. Until the 1960s, relatively little archaeological work had been undertaken that focused on the Islamic period in the Near East, and much of what had been done was concerned principally with recovering works of Islamic art or with major architectural monuments. Beginning in the 1970s, however, there was an explosion of archaeological exploration conducted along broader lines (often with an anthropological focus), especially in Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Turkey, with important work also undertaken in Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, and Yemen. This work has helped correct serious misconceptions about the historical evolution of the Levant, in particular, during the early Islamic period. For example, it had earlier been the norm to assume that the rise of Islam coincided with a general collapse of prosperity, but the careful work of Donald Whitcomb, Alan Walmsley, and others¹⁶ revealed that many areas in the Levant continued to flourish during the seventh

¹⁴ Particularly his *Arabic Papyri in the Egyptian Library* (6 vols., Cairo: Egyptian Library Press, 1934-1962) and over a dozen other publications.

¹⁵ We may note especially the work of Raif Georges Khoury, Yusuf Rāghib, Werner Diem, Lucian Reinfandt, and Petra Sijpesteijn, among many others.

¹⁶ To mention a few: Denis Genequand, Heinz Gaube, Michael Meinecke, Jodi Magness, Claus-Peter Haase, P. M. Watson, Robert Schick, J.-P. Sodini, and Jeremy Johns.

century and into the eighth. Numerous buildings once considered to date from the end of the Byzantine period were re-assigned, on the basis of more careful stratigraphy and better knowledge of the ceramic sequences, to the early Islamic period. The rise of Islam, rather than being seen as an episode of violent destruction and discontinuity, appeared instead to be what one scholar called an “invisible conquest,”¹⁷ because at most sites in the Levant the transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule was so gradual as to be imperceptible, at least in terms of the archaeological evidence—in contrast to the image gained from literary sources, both Christian and Islamic.¹⁸

This burst of new work, then, utilizing new kinds of evidence beyond the Arabic literary sources, ushered in nothing less than a revolution in our understanding of early Islam; and the new evidence, and novel interpretations of long-known literary evidence, resulted in the appearance of many new attempts to reconstruct “what actually happened” at Islam’s origins. It is impossible in the time available today to provide a comprehensive overview of all the works and new ideas that formed part of the “revisionist wave;” but in what follows, I will try briefly to highlight a few themes as illustrative of the variety of viewpoints that have been advanced as part

¹⁷ Peter Pentz, *The Invisible Conquest. The Ontogenesis of Sixth and Seventh Century Syria* (Copenhagen: The National Museum of Denmark, 1992).

¹⁸ On this problem in the literary sources, see Fred M. Donner, “Visions of the Early Islamic Expansion: From the Heroic to the Horrific,” in Nadia El-Cheikh and Shaun O’Sullivan (eds.), *Byzantium in Early Islamic Syria* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, and Balamand: University of Balamand, 2011), 9-29.

of the revisionist wave—almost all of them in sharp contrast to the views of the traditional paradigm.

One novel approach has been to deny that what we call the rise of Islam began as a unified movement at all. The historian Moshe Sharon in the mid-1980s, for example, posited that there was an indigenous Arabian form of indeterminate monotheism—indeterminate meaning that it was not Judaism or Christianity--that existed before Muhammad. These monotheists formed communities in various parts of the Arabian peninsula, each under a different leader. One was led by Muḥammad but, as Sharon put it, about the nature of Muḥammad’s activity we can only guess. In time these different communities of monotheists expanded into Syria and Iraq, and through a process of sorting-out in the 650s (what the traditional paradigm would recognize as the first *fitna* or civil war), there emerged a unified state led by the Umayyads, and this later unity was projected backwards and given a supposed unified origin in Muḥammad’s leadership.¹⁹

Perhaps the most extreme position has been to assert that Muhammad never actually existed, a hypothesis sometimes building on the fact that the name of Muḥammad is not found in Muslim coins and inscriptions until the second half of the seventh century. Volker Popp, relying heavily on numismatic evidence, presented a

¹⁹ Moshe Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” in M. Sharon (ed.), *The Holy Land in History and Thought* (Johannesburg: Southern, 1986), 225-35. On the notion of pre-Islamic monotheism, see also the ideas of Waardenburg, cited below at note 27.

reconstruction according to which Arabic-speaking Nestorian Christian contingents of the Sasanian military, held in reserve when the Sasanian forces were defeated by the Byzantines in 627-8 CE, launched a counteroffensive against the Byzantines, whom they detested for their long persecution of Nestorian Christians. They persuaded other disaffected Christian groups such as the Miaphysite Christians of Syria and Egypt to join them, chased the Byzantines out of the Levant and Egypt, and established a new state. The Umayyads, in this presentation, thus began as Nestorian Christians.²⁰ Yehuda Nevo proposed a different hypothetical reconstruction that also dispensed with the presence of Muhammad entirely. According to Nevo, the Byzantine emperors grew weary of the religious fractiousness of the provinces of Syria and Egypt, and so planned to set up friendly Arab dynasties there and hand power over to them. This, they hoped, would spare them the nuisance of having to manage these troublesome areas; but after they voluntarily withdrew, their former clients assumed a hostile attitude, and emerged as the Umayyad state, which launched raids against the Byzantines and even twice besieged the Byzantine capital at Constantinople.²¹ I will not discuss these and other such hypotheses further here, but will simply say that they seem to me to pose greater problems than they solve. For one thing, although it is true that Muhammad is not mentioned in any document produced by the Believers themselves so far

²⁰ Volker Popp, "Die frühe Islamgeschichte nach inschriftlichen und numismatischen Zeugnissen," in Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin (eds.), *Die dunklen Anfänge. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam* (Berlin: Schiler, 2005), 16-123.

²¹ Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam. The origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).

discovered, these theories must pass in silence over the fact that some quite early non-Muslim sources do mention Muhammad, so their effort to erase him from the historical record seems high handed. Moreover, the idea (in Popp's scenario) that Nestorian Christians would have been able to win the support of Miaphysites in their campaign against the Chalcedonian Byzantines seems dubious, given the fact that the Nestorians and Miaphysites considered each other, as well as Chalcedonian Christians, to be heretics and had spent more than a century attacking one another in very pointed polemics. And, it is hard to believe that the Byzantine emperors ever contemplated withdrawing voluntarily from provinces they controlled—in the case of Egypt, an economically vital province at that. In comparison to such hypotheses, Cook and Crone's reconstruction in *Hagarism* seems positively tame, as they hewed much closer to the existing sources and always accepted the existence of Muhammad as a historical figure.

In recent years, some scholars have attempted to imply, or to assert outright, that Islam began as a form of Christianity. We have seen that one of the early revisionist writers, Günter Lüling, considered Muḥammad's movement as having started in a Christian environment in Mecca. The notion that Christianity is somehow to be found at the root of Islam has not infrequently been held, however, by those who, unlike Lüling, wish to deny the existence of Muhammad (as we saw in the case of Popp, mentioned above). Christoph Luxenberg, the apparent leader of a coterie of scholars who rather presumptuously style themselves the "Inarah" or "Enlightenment" group, has argued that the mosaic inscriptions in the Dome of the

Rock, built by the Umayyad ‘Abd al-Malik in the 690s, demonstrate that Islam was originally a Christian movement. As is well known, the mosaics on the inside of the Dome contain many verses from the Qur’ān. According to Luxenberg, however, the references in those inscriptions (and in the Qur’ān) to “Muhammad, the apostle of God” (*rasūl Allāh*) really refer to Jesus, who elsewhere in the inscriptions (and the Qur’an) is also called *rasūl Allāh*. The word *muḥammad*, in Luxenberg’s view, is actually not the name of a person as we have thought for centuries, but is the Arabic rendering of a Syriac word meaning “the highly praised one,” so that the phrase *muḥammad rasūl allāh* should be understood to mean “the highly praised apostle of God,” a reference to Jesus.²² This theory, like those just discussed, ignores the testimony of the early non-Muslim sources mentioned above, which do mention Muhammad. It also raises other problems: for instance, the Dome of the Rock inscriptions also roundly denounce the concept of the Trinity, which means that these supposed Christian inscriptions must come from non-Trinitarian Christians, who are however unknown in geographical Syria at this time.

Another trend in some revisionist scholarship has been to dismiss the role of Islam, or of religion of any form, in the expansion movement of the seventh century, and to understand the expansion instead as a manifestation of some kind of “Arab” identity. Actually, this idea is a very old one, as I noted in my opening comments, advanced already in the late nineteenth century by scholars such as Hugo Winckler

²² Christoph Luxenberg, “Neudeutung der arabischen Inscript im Felsendom zu Jerusalem,” in Ohlig and Puin (eds.), *Die dunklen Anfänge*, 124-47.

(who imputed climatic change in Arabia as the force that drove the “Arabs” from the peninsula). It is an idea encapsulated and popularized in the term “the Arab conquest” for the expansion of Islam. The notion that the expansion was the result of climate change was discredited long ago, but some revisionist writers rehabilitated the view that the expansion was essentially a national or ethnic one in more subtle terms. Patricia Crone herself seems to have been attracted to this view, for her book *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (1987) includes an extended discussion of the idea that Islam began as a “nativist” movement against Byzantine encroachment.²³ More detailed was the presentation by the Palestinian scholar Suliman Bashear (d. 1991), whose book *Arabs and Others in Early Islam* argued that the “Arab state” was established first, after which Islam as a religion developed to legitimate the state in the religious context of the Near East.²⁴ More recently, others have attempted to reinforce the notion that the rise of Islam began as an expression of a presumed “Arab” identity.²⁵ We cannot here provide a full critique of this idea, but basically there seems to be no substantial evidence for the existence of an Arab political identity on the eve of, or at the time of, the rise of Islam. It therefore seems that such theories engage in the careless projection of modern nationalist notions of ethnic or national identity back to the distant past.²⁶

²³ Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 231-50; she explicitly begins with a critique of Watt’s views.

²⁴ Suliman Bashear, *Arabs and Others in Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997)[*Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, 8]

²⁵ Notably Robert Hoyland, *In God’s Path: the Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁶ For a fuller rebuttal, see: Fred M. Donner, “Review of Robert Hoyland, *In God’s Path*,” *Al-‘Usūr al-Wuṣṭā: the Bulletin of Middle East Medievalists* 23 (2015),

Another tendency found in some revisionist work is the idea that Islam developed in stages, beginning with a strongly monotheistic impulse (perhaps to be identified with the elusive *ḥanīfiyya* mentioned in the Qur’ān, which seems to predate Muḥammad²⁷) and gradually acquiring more distinctive features until the lineaments of Islām as we know it become clearly established. This sometimes posits the existence of early phases in which the movement begun by Muḥammad was not so sharply distinguished from other monotheist faiths. Crone and Cook, in *Hagarism*, argued that Islam began as what they termed “Judeo-Hagarism,” an early form that had close associations with Judaism.²⁸ Yehuda Nevo examined early Arabic graffiti and inscriptions in the Negev that refer not only to Muḥammad but also to Moses and Jesus, suggesting a confessionally indistinct monotheism.²⁹ In my own work I have proposed that Muḥammad began a movement of “Believers” (*mu’minūn*) that at first included not only those who followed the Qur’ān but also other monotheists, such as Jews and Christians, who were deemed adequately righteous, and only about the year 700 C.E. redefined itself as the distinct

forthcoming; *idem*, “Talking About Islam’s Origins,” forthcoming. A detailed study of the question of Arab identity in relation to the rise of Islam is being prepared by Peter Webb.

²⁷ Jacques Waardenburg, “Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam according to its relations with Other Religions,” in R. Peters (ed.), *Proceedings of the 9th Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 304-26; reprinted in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Qur’an. Style and Contents* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2001), 93-115.

²⁸ Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*.

²⁹ Yehuda D. Nevo, Z. Cohen, and D. Heftmann (eds.), *Ancient Arabic Inscriptions from the Negev* (Jerusalem: IPS Press, 1993).

monotheistic confession we know as Islam.³⁰ All of these theories stand in contradistinction to the traditional paradigm, which posits that Islam as a fully developed faith distinct from other monotheisms existed from the very beginning, at the time of Muḥammad.

Still another notion that has been advanced by revisionist scholars since the 1980s is the possibility that the movement begun by Muḥammad, whatever we choose to call it, was apocalyptic in nature—that is, that Muḥammad and his early followers were convinced that the End-Time and Last Judgment were imminent. This idea, which Muslim tradition strenuously disavows, was actually advanced forcefully as early as 1911 by the French scholar Paul Casanova in his book *Mahomet et la fin du monde*,³¹ but Casanova's work never gained much traction among traditional Orientalists and was quietly ignored for decades. It is, however, an idea that is once again gaining some attention, in part because of the strongly eschatological character of parts of the Qur'ān, and in part because apocalyptic enthusiasm seems a possible way to explain the tremendous energy exhibited in the early stages of the Believers' expansion out of Arabia—which otherwise is difficult to understand.³²

³⁰ Fred M. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the early Muslim Community," *Al-Abḥāth* 50-51 (2001-2002), 9-53; idem, *Muḥammad and the Believers: at the origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³¹ Paul Casanova, *Mahomet et la fin du monde, etude critique sur l'islam primitive* (2 vols., Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1911-1924).

³² See Fred M. Donner, "Seeing Islam in Historical Perspective," 1st annual Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture, Indiana University, Nov. 4, 2002, in Z. Istrabadi and M. Drain (eds.), *In Memoriam* (Bloomington: Indiana University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, 2003), 10-32; idem, *Muḥammad and the Believers: at the origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 78-82;

This rapid survey has provided, I hope, some sense of the range and variety of new interpretations of Islam's origins that have been advanced since the beginnings of the revisionist wave that occurred around the time of Montgomery Watt's retirement in 1979. Obviously, being so diverse and at times contradictory, they cannot all be correct. But they represent the first efforts, all I think sincere efforts, to replace the illusory certainty of the traditional paradigm with something more consonant with the broader (and growing) range of evidence—literary and documentary—now regarded as relevant. Some of these interpretations, as I have suggested above, appear destined to be set aside as inadequate, but the search for new ways of viewing Islam's origins will go on because there is still much that we do not understand about this process. To take one example: the relationship— theological and practical—between the early Believers and the Christians and Jews with whom they had contact in the Near East is still a matter that remains puzzling in many ways, and for which the available evidence is sometimes perplexingly contradictory. The Qur'ān is often bluntly anti-Trinitarian; and yet we know that Christians often held important positions in the Umayyad state and participated in the conquests. On this and other topics, there is still much work to do, and a continuing need for creativity and deep reflection, if new interpretations are to be crafted that can win general assent.

Steven J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet. The End of Muḥammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), index s.v. "Eschatology".

III. Developments in the Study of the Qur'an

For the final part of my presentation, I wish to focus on one more aspect of the study of early Islam that has changed greatly in recent years: that is our understanding of the early history of Islam's sacred scripture, the Qur'an.

The Qur'an, of course, lies at the very heart of the Islamic tradition. Its appearance constitutes the most crucial point in the account of Islam's origins, and the story of its revelation is the very basis of Islam's faith-claims.

Tracing exactly how the Qur'an came to assume the form in which we know it today and have known it for centuries is therefore central to the project of attaining a historical understanding Islam's origins. Ironically, this task was long neglected in the West and is only now beginning to be addressed systematically.

The Islamic tradition has, of course, its own narratives of how the Qur'an text developed. The most widely-known, but not the sole, account states that the revelations vouchsafed to Muḥammad were memorized by him and also by many of his followers piecemeal, as they arrived, and some of the faithful also wrote down parts of the revelation for their own use. Twenty-odd years after Muḥammad's death, the third caliph 'Uthmān, worried by the death of many Qur'an reciters, feared that some of the revelation might be lost and ordered that a definitive written copy be made. He appointed a team of trusted companions, led by Zayd ibn Ḥāritha, to collect all known written copies and to interview everyone who had memorized

parts of the revelation. These materials they edited together to form what is usually known as the “Uthmānic recension,” and this has been the secure basis for the Qur’ān text ever since that time in the 660s.

Like much of the traditional Islamic origins narrative, this story of the Qur’ān’s genesis and early development has also been challenged by Western scholars;³³ I mentioned earlier the revisionist views of the Qur’ān’s crystallization advanced Lüling and Wansbrough, to which could be added many more, including works by John Burton³⁴ and Christoph Luxenberg.³⁵ They part company not only with traditional Islamic views of the Qur’ān, but also with each other, so we cannot yet speak of an emerging consensus in Western views on the Qur’ān. But the most startling fact about these and other Western studies of Qur’ān text is that they have all been based on a deficient text. Explaining this, however, requires a short digression.

³³ Harald Motzki, “The Collection of the Qur’ān. A reconsideration of Western views in light of recent methodological developments,” *Der Islam* 78 (2001), 1-34. See also Viviane Comorro, “Pourquoi et comment le Coran a-t-il été mis par écrit?,” in François Déroche, Christian Julien Robin, and Michel Zink (ed.), *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines* (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2015), 191-205, who shows that the story of Zayd’s editorial activity is only one of several different narratives that circulated in the Islamic community on how the Qur’ān assumed its present form.

³⁴ John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur’ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

³⁵ Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syrisch-aramäische Lesart des Korans* (Berlin: Schiler, 2000).

Western scholars of the 18th century and later developed a standard text-critical procedure for the study of foundational texts—whether it was the Hebrew Bible, the classics of ancient Greek literature, the Gospels, the writings of the Church fathers, or any other work of literature. The unshakeable assumption in such work is that every time a text is copied, errors are introduced into it, intentionally or unintentionally. Assuming that one does not have the author’s autograph copy, the first step is to collate all the surviving manuscripts of the text in question and by studying them closely, to develop a *stemma* or “family tree” laying out the relationship of all manuscripts to one another, so that one can tell which are copies of others, and which manuscripts belong to separate or “sibling” lines of descent from a common ancestor text (perhaps now lost). With the *stemma* established, one can then utilize the earliest manuscripts from each line to reconstruct as accurately as possible a critical edition of the “original text” (*Urtext*). Only when a text is available in a critical edition of this kind, obviously, can one seriously begin to analyze the text’s contents and try to understand its meaning, since before the creation of a critical edition one cannot know whether a particular passage in a given manuscript represents the actual words of the original author, or only a garbled version thereof, or worse yet, a later interpolation or insertion by someone else, having no relationship whatsoever to what the original author wrote. Adhering to this sequence of procedures—first collation of manuscripts, then determining the *stemma*, and finally, preparation of a critical edition—thus ensures that scholars are dealing as much as possible with an authentic version of the text as the original

author composed it; and only such a critical edition can provide a secure basis on which a scholar may try to infer historical information through analysis of the text.

Western studies of the Qur'ān, however, have not followed this rigorous philological procedure. Indeed, they have essentially proceeded in reverse, in that scholars have written extensive studies on various aspects of the Qur'ān text even though we have never had, and still today do not yet have, anything remotely resembling a proper critical edition of the Qur'ān. We must therefore recognize that the myriad scholarly studies of various Qur'ānic passages made over the past century and more (including a few by me) can only be considered provisional—pending the arrival at last of a critical edition of the text.

The lack of a critical edition of the Qur'ān was not something of which scholars were unaware, of course. Already in 1834 Gustav Flügel attempted to provide a reliable edition, but the Flügel Qur'ān was based on a very limited number of manuscripts and was almost immediately recognized as inadequate. The daunting prospect of attempting to collate the tens of thousands of known Qur'ān manuscripts, however, meant that most Western scholars used the Flügel edition anyway, at least for about 75 years, as it was the only published version that Europeans considered in some way a “standard” text. It gradually fell out of use after the appearance in 1924 of the Egyptian Qur'ān produced by scholars at al-Azhar in Cairo, an edition that was superior to Flügel but was still far from a true critical edition. (It remains the most widely-used edition even today.)

There was a plan, originally conceived early in the twentieth century by scholars affiliated with the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Munich, to create a true critical edition of the Qur’ān—a project that by that time had become more feasible due to improvements in photographic technology. Led by Gotthelf Bergsträsser and then Otto Pretzl, in collaboration with the Australian Qur’ān expert Arthur Jeffery, this team spent years in the 1930s amassing thousands of photographs on microfilm of early Qur’ān manuscripts from the important libraries of Europe and from many in the Islamic world. The plan was to collate the manuscripts from the photographs and begin the process of establishing a critical edition. The project foundered, however; Bergsträsser, its brilliant prime mover, was an outspoken opponent of the Nazis, and disappeared under mysterious circumstances shortly after the Nazis took power in 1933. Pretzl continued the project, but was killed early in World War II. Jeffery, as an Australian, had no access to the archive of photographs stored in Munich once the War began in 1939. When the War ended, the scholar who had inherited the archive from Pretzl, Prof. Anton Spitaler of Munich, announced that it had been destroyed in Allied bombing toward the end of the War.

The collapse of the project to create a critical edition may also have had other causes, however. Muslim tradition holds that the Qur’ān exists in a limited number of what are usually called “canonical variants.” These are said to be the different vocalizations of the text favored by various companions of Muḥammad, and are

reflections of the fact that early Qur'āns were written in a highly deficient script that showed only the consonants, and sometimes did not distinguish adequately even between certain consonants. This *rasm* or consonantal skeleton could thus be vocalized in a variety of ways. Moreover, the thousands of manuscripts of the Qur'ān in existence exhibit many other textual variants. The existence of these variants may have caused Pretzl, before he died, to have doubts about the feasibility of the project to create a critical edition of the Qur'ān.

The result was that, after an auspicious start early in the twentieth century, critical study of the Qur'ān text essentially came to a halt at mid-century. Montgomery Watt's whole scholarly career –including the years when he wrote his books on Muḥammad's life, and *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*—was thus spent in this period when critical work on the Qur'ān was essentially at a standstill, and everything was based rather trustingly on the “Egyptian” Qur'ān.

It is, however, no longer at a standstill today, and this marks another profound change in scholarship on early Islam since Watt's day. The current revitalization of critical Qur'ān scholarship is the result of three separate developments.

The first was the discovery, in 1972, of a trove of old Qur'ān manuscripts, some of them evidently very early, that had been hidden away and forgotten for centuries, it seems, in the Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā' in Yemen. A German team was brought in several years later to assist in conservation and cataloging of this collection, and

photographs of these Qur'āns are now being studied by a team at the University of Saarbrücken. Among them is a palimpsest, the erased lower layer of writing of which seems also to be Qur'ān, but the text of this lower layer contains numerous previously unknown and major variants from the "standard" text; progress in reading and analyzing this text has been glacial, but after a long wait, some results are beginning to appear.³⁶ It is too early to draw definitive conclusions, except to say that the new range of variants adds more complexity to the question of how the text came to be, and makes more acute the question of what a "critical edition" would look like, or even how it could be attained.

The second development was the renewed, meticulous study of a number of very early copies of the Qur'ān housed in European collections. Long known and sometimes examined by scholars in cursory fashion more or less as curiosities, they have finally begun to be scrutinized closely, particularly by François Déroche of the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris³⁷ (and now also by some of his

³⁶ E.g., Elisabeth Puin, "Ein früher Koranpalimpsest aus Sanaa II (DAM 01-27.1), in Markus Groß and Karl-Heinz Ohlig (eds.) *Schlaglichter. Die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte* (Berlin: Schiler, 2008), 461-93; eadem, Teil II in Markus and Ohlig (eds.), *Vom Koran zum Islam* (Berlin: Schiler, 2009), 523-81; eadem, Teil III, in Groß and Ohlig (eds.), *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion I. Von der koranischen Bewegung zum Frühislam* (Berlin: Schiler, 2010), 233-305; eadem, Teil IV, in Groß and Ohlig (eds.), *Die Entstehung...II* (Berlin: Schiler, 2011), 311-99; Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, "The codex of the companion of the Prophet and the Qur'ān of the Prophet," *Arabica* 57 (2010), 343-436; Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, "Ṣan'ā' 1 and the Origins of the Qur'ān," *Der Islam* 87 (2012), 1-129.

³⁷ See, among many other works, F. Déroche, *Les manuscrits du Coran: aux origines de la calligraphie coranique* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1983); idem, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads. A first overview* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2014).

students).³⁸ Déroche's initial aim has been to classify the earliest manuscripts (especially exemplars in Paris, St. Petersburg, and London) on the basis of all aspects of the text, including format, layout, decoration, palaeography, orthography, and textual variants. Since these are generally large-format Qur'āns produced on full sheets of parchment and written in large, well-spaced script, they would have been expensive and time-consuming to produce, and the assumption is that they were the product of official workshops sponsored by the Umayyad caliphs. Déroche has begun the process of analyzing them into coherent groups, each of which may correspond to the output of a particular workshop. On this basis, we may eventually be able to understand better how the text evolved in the first two Islamic centuries, whether particular workshops (or groups of scribes) were relatively more conservative or innovative in transmitting the text, etc. It may also help to shed more light on the vexing phenomenon of variant readings. This kind of detailed work offers, I think, very exciting prospects for attaining, at last, a much better sense of how the Qur'ān first developed as a text.

The third major development was the revelation by Prof. Spitaler of Munich, a few years before his death, that the archive of microfilms amassed by Bergsträsser and Pretzl had not, in fact, been destroyed during the Second World War after all, but had been in his keeping all along.³⁹ Why he concealed them for a half-century

³⁸ See in particular the work of Eléonore Cellard, *La transmission manuscrite du Coran. Étude d'un corpus de manuscrits datables du 2^e/8^e siècle J.C.* (dissertation Paris: INALCO, 2015).

³⁹ See Andrew Higgins, "The Lost Archive," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 12, 2008. Accessed at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB120008793352784631>.

remains a mystery; but he handed them over to a former colleague, Prof. Angelika Neuwirth of Berlin, who then found funding for a long-term project (called the *Corpus Coranicum* project) to study these photographs, and to study texts from the sixth and seventh centuries C.E. that were part of the intellectual discourse of Late Antiquity amidst which the Qur'ān took form—Christian, Jewish, and other texts in Syriac, Greek, Arabic, and other languages.

After a half-century in the shadows, then, critical Qur'ān studies are now poised to make major gains—with no fewer than three separate centers (Saarbrücken, Paris, and Berlin) finally focusing on detailed study of the actual early Qur'ān manuscripts. It means that, at last, scholars are approaching the Qur'ān in the proper way—starting by establishing a critical edition of the text on the basis of careful reading of the manuscripts, after which we can move on to analysis of the text.

As hinted at above, however, the task of creating a critical edition of the Qur'ān will not be an easy one. The range of variants found in the extant manuscripts of the Qur'an (especially when we bring into consideration the early Ṣan'ā' palimpsest) are considerably greater than those noted in the “canonical variant” literature. This fact raises the possibility that the Qur'ān may have circulated orally, or in part orally, long enough that discovering what Lüling called the “Ur-Koran,” the “original” text of the Qur'ān as known to Muḥammad, may not be possible. Are we dealing, in fact, with a single text, or rather with a family of related texts? What is the relationship of the text's actual evolution to the traditional accounts of the Qur'ān's

revelation to Muḥammad and transmission in the seventh century CE? How stable was the written text in the seventh century? Is there any evidence that some passages may be later interpolations in a text that is otherwise early?⁴⁰ These, and many other questions, still lack satisfactory answers; and searching for them is part of the agenda of the brave new world in the study of early Islam that has dawned since Montgomery Watt gradually withdrew from the front rank of contributing scholars in the 1980s. It is a different world than his, but one built on much surer foundations, and I have no doubt that were Watt alive today, he would share the enthusiasm now felt by many about the future prospects for work in early Islamic history.

Thank you for your attention.

⁴⁰ David Powers, *Muḥammad is not the Father of any of your Men* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), had identified a passage in which a word apparently has been altered in one of the earliest known Qur'ān manuscripts.