

# The Qur'ān and the Bible: Some Modern Studies of Their Relationship

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The Institute for the Study of American Religion listed 1,667 different religious groups in the United States in 1988, 836 of them classified as “nonconventional religions,” and at least 500 of this last category were founded since mid-century.<sup>1</sup> The United States has been a virtual breeding ground for new religious movements since its founding, but the entire world has experienced an outburst of religiosity and religious creativity in the post–World War II period that has been unprecedented, save perhaps during the Roman Empire of the first century C.E.<sup>2</sup> Of course, most of those ancient new religions, such as Mithraism or Hellenistic Judaism, failed. Only a few, such as Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, succeeded. The proliferation of new religious movements in the United States has, luckily, been able to serve as a laboratory for sociologists of religion, and one of the issues studied is, What makes a new religion succeed?

The work of Rodney Stark, with Laurence Iannaccone and William Simms Bainbridge, has had the greatest impact in the past two decades on this and other questions of emerging religions.<sup>3</sup> In order for a new religion to succeed, according to Stark, it must among other things retain a cultural continuity with the religious systems of the societies in which it appears while at the same time maintaining a certain level of tension with

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<sup>1</sup> Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society* (London: HMSO, 1989), 148–49.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Cults, New Religions and Religious Creativity* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> The list of their individual and combined publications is huge. See Rodney Stark and William Simms Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); idem, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

its surrounding environment.<sup>4</sup> One can easily observe this mimetic tension in the emergence of biblical religion and Christianity. Both retain aspects of existing contemporary religious cultures while at the same time engaging in a complicated program of re-visioning, revising, and reinterpreting them—Canaanite rituals and traditions in the case of biblical religion, and biblical and Greco-Roman religious *realia* in the case of Christianity. In order for a new religion to succeed it must be recognizable as authentic, which it typically does by incorporating recognizable *realia* of previous religions. But if it is only a copy of what already exists, it will fail to distinguish itself from other religions and therefore have no special appeal. As Stark puts it, it must be deviant, but not too deviant. It must demonstrate its authenticity through an identification with authentic religion but at the same time attract followers by establishing its positive uniqueness. Nowhere is this process seen more clearly than in the emergence of scripture, where language, narrative, theme, style, and motifs of previous religious literature(s) appear in new forms and contexts in the scriptures of emerging religions.

We can observe from our own experience that new religions emerge in a polemical environment. Establishment religions object to the threat of a new religion and try to delegitimize it, while the newly emerging religion preaches the failure of the establishment religion(s) to meet the spiritual or social needs of the new generation. In short, establishment religions can never countenance the emergence of new religious movements. They inevitably attempt to do away with them. New religious movements can only succeed when they incorporate many of the central motifs of establishment religions while preaching the failure of the very traditions from which they obtain many of their basic traits. This polemical relationship may also be observed in scripture, which inevitably records the tensions between the new religion it represents and the establishment religion(s) out of which it, directly or indirectly, evolved. The Hebrew Bible seems almost constantly to refer to the evils and the temptations of the Canaanites and their religions,<sup>5</sup> and the New Testament repeatedly condemns the perfidy and inadequacy of Jews and Greco-Romans and their religions.<sup>6</sup>

The Qur'ān exhibits the same tension described here. In fact, it contains so many parallels with the Hebrew Bible and New Testament that it

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<sup>4</sup> Rodney Stark, "How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model," in *The Future of New Religious Movements* (ed. D. G. Bromley and P. E. Hammond; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Gen 35:2; Exod 23:23–24; Num 34:55; Deut 7:1–4; Josh 24:20; Judg 2:11–14; etc.

<sup>6</sup> See Matt 23; 27:25; John 8:44; Rom 2; Galatians.

could not possibly exist without its scriptural predecessors as subtexts. The Qur'ān itself recognizes this in its extremely referential nature. For example, the ubiquitous construct introducing narrative fragments, *wa'idh* "and then," has come to be understood by qur'ānic audiences as *uthkur mā kāna* "remember what occurred."<sup>7</sup> As in the case of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the argumentative nature of many intentional qur'ānic references to prior scripture reveals the polemical environment out of which Islam emerged.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, as in the case of Judaism and Christianity, polemics did not cease after the establishment of the new religion. In a world in which religion defined empires and often defined national boundaries as well, and where adherents of various religions were in constant contact through geographic proximity, trade, and international politics, it was inevitable that discussion and argument continue; that discourse included critical examination of the scriptures of proximate religions.

Western thinkers<sup>9</sup> have responded to the striking parallels between the Qur'ān and the Bible since Islamic revelation first became known to them, but rarely until the twentieth century did their interest transcend polemics, expressing itself in anything nearing what we today would consider an objective or scientific manner (although our own generation's attempts might be similarly criticized by future scholarship). The immediate military and political success associated with Islam first shocked Christianity to its core, and it must be kept in mind that virtually all premodern intellectual endeavors in what we today casually refer to as "the West" were made by male religious thinkers who engaged in their pursuits within the framework of the church. Islam's continuing successes in the arts and sciences as well as politics and the military further threatened these leaders and colored their readings of the Qur'ān.

Western defensiveness was not merely an intellectual issue. Muslim armies threatened Europe for nearly a thousand years and from nearly all sides. The Muslim Moors of Spain represented a threat to the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne and his descendants despite their defeat by Charles Martel in 732. They continued to hold Narbonne, for example,

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<sup>7</sup> John Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Kor-ān* (1873; repr., London: Curzon, 1970), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Many of the references are not necessarily intentional.

<sup>9</sup> The term "West" or "Western" is fluid. Although I shall continue to refer to such readers of the Qur'ān as "Westerners," the earliest and many continuing "Western" responses to Islam derived from Byzantine Christians who lived in the Middle East. Perhaps a more accurate though more awkward term, since it would include Jews, would be "non-Muslims deriving from the Christian world."

until 759, and their growth and consolidation in North Africa and southern Italy remained a danger for centuries following. Berke Khan, the Mongol grandson of Jenghiz Khan, lord of the Golden Horde who conquered much of Russia and Eastern Europe in the thirteenth century, converted to Islam and made the Khanate into a Muslim nation. The Tatars, as the mixed Mongol and Turkish people came to be known in European chronicles, raided as far north and west as today's Poland and Lithuania. The Seljuk and then Ottoman Turks managed to wrest away the Christian heartlands of Anatolia, capturing Belgrade and Buda before Constantinople, from which they threatened Vienna itself in both 1529 and 1683. Muslim fleets operated out of various North African ports to raid Western European lands bordering the Mediterranean and fought their navies even in the Atlantic. As late as the seventeenth century, corsairs from what is today Algeria and Morocco raided southern England and Ireland and in 1627 even raided as far as Iceland.<sup>10</sup> It should not be surprising to observe, given the geopolitical climate, that premodern Western readings of the Qur'ān tended to be polemical.

But Europe's fear and loathing of Islam was existential as well as physical. The roots of Christianity's existential predicament had been established even before the birth of Muḥammad. Some five hundred years earlier, Christians found themselves in intense competition with Jews over the religious future of the Greco-Roman world. The old pagan religious systems were no longer adequate to fulfill the spiritual needs of the various peoples and classes in the realm; new religious movements emerged and found themselves in competition for the religious heart of the empire. The two most successful contenders were rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, but Christianity won the day and became the officially favored religion. Most other religions were then outlawed, but Judaism remained officially permitted, both for legal and religious reasons. With the emergence of the victorious religion of Christ as the official religion of the mighty Roman Empire, some of Christianity's religious thinkers and apologists saw its very victory to have proven its rightness. God was understood to have acted in history in order to prove the truth of Christianity, not only in relation to the pagan system of the old empire, but also in relation to its forebear and nemesis, Judaism. When Islam then emerged victorious over the Christian Roman Empire in the seventh century, capturing its most precious lands and holy places and threatening Constantinople itself, this doctrine of divinely ordained historical proof was shattered and its adherents badly discomfited. In fact, the identical reasoning was then applied by Muslims

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11–12.

to the emerging doctrines of *Jihad*. The very victories of the Conquest were understood to prove the truth of Islam and the rightness of its ongoing campaign. Subsequently, according to the prevailing Muslim intellectual reasoning, the world was divided into two spheres: the “world of Islam,” in which Islam was the ruling religiopolitical system, and the “world of war,” in which Islam had not yet become the hegemonic religious system.<sup>11</sup>

The reaction of the Christian world to the huge success of Islam was to denigrate both the religion and its revelation. Premodern chronicles referred to Muslims in ethnic rather than religious terms—not as Muslims but rather as Saracens, Moors, Ishmaelites, Turks, Tatars, or simply as infidels<sup>12</sup>—in order to relieve the painful possibility that perhaps the children of God had been defeated by another faith. The Christian response was that Islam was not a true religion, Muḥammad was not a true prophet, and the Qur'ān was not a true revelation.

The general perception among Christian medieval scholars was that the Qur'ān was a haphazard collection of human documents authored by Muḥammad himself, collected after his death and proclaimed to be the word of God.<sup>13</sup> This view may have been influenced by the Arab Christian writer of the *Risāla*,<sup>14</sup> dating from the early tenth century or before, who knew of the difficulties during the earliest Islamic period in assembling a canonical text of the Qur'ān. Medieval Christian views of the Qur'ān were later influenced also by the scholastic requirement for order and a strict organizational plan for written works, a condition that clashed with the seemingly random arrangement of the Qur'ān.

Medieval and early modern Europeans tended also to view the Qur'ān through lenses that were shaped by their own personal readings of their own scriptures. Thus, the qur'ānic emphasis on a material paradise clashed with the Christian notion of a spiritual afterlife, and although they noted the many parallels between the Qur'ān and Christian scripture, they found those parallels literarily, conceptually, and theologically bizarre. Of course, the qur'ānic polemics directed against Christians (and Jews) and denigrating the extant form of prior scripture invited polemical responses. These and many other observations, such as the Qur'ān's

<sup>11</sup> Wahba Mustafa al-Zuhayli, *Athar al-Harb fil-Fiqh al-Islami* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 166–96; Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), 141–46.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, *Islam and the West*, 7–8.

<sup>13</sup> Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960; repr., Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 55–59.

<sup>14</sup> The name given to the author of this work is 'Abd al-Masīḥ b. Ishāq al-Kindī, though it is undoubtedly a pseudonym (*EI*<sup>2</sup> 5:120–21).

apparent internal contradictions along with its disagreements with general moral and scientific assumptions that formed the basis of medieval European life, added to the a priori condemnation of the Qur'ān by medieval Christian scholars. Most medieval Europeans were hardly curious about something as foreign and threatening as the Qur'ān. The general worldview of pre-Enlightenment Europe prevented scholars from viewing it with anything much more than hostility.

Jews had less to say about Islam or the Qur'ān than Christians. As a people lacking their own political autonomy for centuries prior to the ascendance of Islam, Jews were not nearly as threatened existentially by the Conquest as were Christians. In fact, the earliest Jewish responses to the Conquest appear as positive because they seem to have identified its military successes as a divinely ordained rectification of the injustice of Christian domination.<sup>15</sup> As Islamic power and its accompanying degradation replaced the earlier Christian equivalent, however, Jews also contributed to assessments of Islam and the Qur'ān that were neither complimentary nor unbiased, though because of their delicate position, Jewish writings tended to be more discreet and circumspect than those of Christians.<sup>16</sup>

Attempts to read the Qur'ān by applying critical but nonpolemical methods began in earnest only in the nineteenth century. A few dozen scholars writing mostly in German, French, Dutch, and English have engaged in this kind of research during the past 175 years, and virtually all found themselves working on the "biblical" material found therein. Given the number and complexity of studies and issues associated with them, this essay is limited to only a few among the more important and accessible monographs that were written or have been translated into English.

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<sup>15</sup> See "Ḥizayōn 'al ha-mil-amah ha-'aḥarōnah," in *Ginzey Schechter: Genizah Studies in Memory of Solomon Schechter* (3 vols.; Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 7–9; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1928–29), 1:310–12; English translation in Bernard Lewis, "On That Day: A Jewish Apocalyptic Poem on the Arab Conquests," in *Mélanges d'islamologie: Volume dédié à la mémoire de Armand Abel par ses collègues, ses élèves et ses amis* (ed. P. Salmon; Leiden: Brill, 1974), 197–200; and "Nistarōt de-Rabbi Šim'ōn bar Yōḥay," *BHM* 3:78–82.

<sup>16</sup> Few were written as polemical works. See Solomon b. Abraham Adret (Rashba, 1235–1310), *Ma'amar 'al Yishma'el* (cf. J. Perles, *R. Salomo b. Abraham b. Adereth: Sein Leben und seine Schriften* [Breslau: Schletter, 1863]), a work that responds to the attacks of the eleventh-century Muslim scholar Ibn Ḥazm. Note too Simeon b. Šemaḥ Duran (Rashbaṣ, 1361–1444), *Qešet u-Magen*, which is mostly directed against Christianity, and also Maimonides (Rambam), *Ḥiggetet Teyman*.

ABRAHAM GEIGER

One of the first and certainly most revolutionary early students of the Bible and the Qur'ān was Abraham Geiger (1810–74). A Jew who had grown up with a thorough traditional religious education, Geiger was strongly influenced by the spirit of the Enlightenment and pioneered the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the new historically oriented study of the Jewish religion and people.<sup>17</sup> His interests extended beyond Judaism, however, and at the age of twenty-two he submitted a Latin entry to a contest sponsored by the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Bonn calling for enquiries into those themes of the Qur'ān that were derived from Judaism. His entry, which he later translated into German as *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (i.e., “What did Muḥammad borrow from Judaism?”), won the contest and was subsequently accepted as a thesis for the doctoral degree by the University of Marburg.<sup>18</sup> Geiger continued to engage energetically in scholarship on Judaism, but this groundbreaking monograph represents his only work dedicated to Islam.

As the title suggests, Geiger believed that the Qur'ān was a human rather than divine product and that much of it was a reshaping of Judaism. The two parts of this assumption, that the Qur'ān is not revelation but, rather, a human creation and that it is derived largely from prior monotheistic scripture and ideas, was hardly new with Geiger. But unlike his predecessors, Geiger worked with this epistemology in theoretical and scientific rather than polemical and religious terms. Although he was applauded by all of the great Arabists and Islamicists of his day (and for generations thereafter), he was criticized by some for his view that

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<sup>17</sup> This approach to the study of Judaism was quite new in Geiger's day, having emerged only about a dozen years before he wrote his dissertation. It was of profound influence not only on the study of Judaism, but also on the direction of Jewish religious life. See Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994), esp. 149–205; and Michael A. Meyer, “Abraham Geiger's Historical Judaism,” in *New Perspectives on Abraham Geiger: An HUC-JIR Symposium* (ed. J. J. Petuchowski; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1975), 3–16.

<sup>18</sup> It was subsequently translated into English by F. M. Young in the hopes that it would draw Muslims closer to Judaism and therefore Christianity with the title *Judaism and Islam* (1898; repr., New York: Ktav, 1970). For a recent and excellent summary of Geiger's personal history and his contribution to the field of Islamic studies, see Jacob Lassner, “Abraham Geiger: A Nineteenth-Century Jewish Reformer on the Origins of Islam,” in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (ed. M. Kramer; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 103–35.

Muḥammad had been a sincere religious enthusiast. As Moshe Pearlman pointed out in his prolegomenon to the 1970 reprint of the English translation of Geiger's book, the renowned French Arabist Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1833) wrote that Geiger's views contrasted with his own that Muḥammad was "un imposteur adroit, préméditant toutes ses démarches, et calculant de sang-froid tout ce qui pouvait favoriser et assurer le succès de ses projets ambitieux" (a skilled imposter, premeditated in all his actions and cold-bloodedly calculating all that which favored and assured the success of his ambitious projects).<sup>19</sup>

Geiger's project was not intended to discredit Islam or to credit Judaism but rather to get at the "truth" (his *wissenschaftliche* scholarship on Judaism was no less critical). Yet to today's scholar he would appear somewhat naïve and judgmental as he reflected the tremendous intellectual confidence that was so much a part of his age. Geiger was unburdened with the need for religious apologetics, but he was also uninitiated into the subtleties of modern anthropological studies in orality and the transmission of tradition or modern and postmodern literary theories of composition and reading. To Geiger, the clearly observable literary, linguistic, conceptual, and ritual/legal parallels between Jewish scripture and tradition and the Qur'ān that emerged centuries later proved an obvious influence of the former on the latter. This observation also was not new; Geiger's contribution was to problematize the relationship and approach it conceptually rather than polemically, coherently rather than illogically, and systematically rather than haphazardly.

His brief introduction clearly lays out the parameters of his investigation from the outset:

And so this treatise falls into two divisions, of which the first has to answer the following questions: Did Muhammad wish to borrow from Judaism? Could Muhammad borrow from Judaism? and if so, how was such borrowing possible for him? Was it compatible with his plan to borrow from Judaism? The second division must bring forward the facts to prove the borrowing, which has been stated on general grounds to have taken place. Only in this way can an individual proof of the kind referred to acquire scientific value, partly as throwing light upon the nature of Muhammad's plan, and partly as showing the intrinsic necessity of the fact and its actual importance by virtue of its connection with other facts of Muhammad's life and age.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Moshe Pearlman, prolegomenon to the 1970 Ktav edition of *Judaism and Islam* (see preceding note), x (all subsequent references are to this edition); translated by Lassner, "Abraham Geiger," 107.

<sup>20</sup> Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 2.



Geiger's method consisted of locating qur'ānic parallels with biblical and rabbinic literature that could confidently be dated prior to the seventh century C.E. Linguistic, literary, and conceptual parallels were considered proof that the later material was borrowed from the earlier. Borrowing is direct—there is rarely an assumption of intermediaries—and differences are attributed to errors, usually on the part of the receivers, though sometimes also on the part of the lenders (the uneducated Jews of Medina). He attributed some differences to purposeful distortion by the new Muslim proprietors of the religious lore/tradition.

That Muḥammad rather than the Almighty was the source of the Qur'ān is taken by Geiger as self-evident throughout his work. It is "his Qur'ān,"<sup>21</sup> yet Geiger credits Muḥammad with genuine religious enthusiasm. Muḥammad believed that his mission originated with God; he had no compunction about creating a scripture that could serve his Arab people as prior scriptures served earlier monotheists.<sup>22</sup> Geiger unselfconsciously attempts to enter the mind of this author of scriptures, and the results of this exercise anticipates the work of Stark and Bainbridge on the emergence of new religious movements: Muḥammad borrowed from Judaism in order for his new religion to be recognizable and acceptable to the inhabitants of Arabia.<sup>23</sup> The appearance of recognizable religious symbols and motifs provided him with the authority necessary for his project.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, he could not borrow wholesale lest he be accused of failing to represent a new religious dispensation;<sup>25</sup> the net result of the process had to be a unique religious creation,<sup>26</sup> and he was obliged to denigrate the previous traditions out of which his new religion emerged. Despite the latter axiom of emerging religion, Geiger insisted (as a true representative of liberal nineteenth-century Judaism) that Muḥammad held the Jews in great respect despite his eventual enmity toward them.<sup>27</sup>

According to Geiger, Muḥammad did not borrow exclusively from Judaism. Pre-Islamic Arabian tradition and Christianity were additional sources for his Qur'ān, but Geiger limited himself only to the former. Certain Jewish ideas and values served Muḥammad well and were taken into Islam intact. In other cases, however, Geiger carefully noted the obvious and sometimes not-so-obvious differences in the parallels he cites. He

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–17.

accounts for these differences in three ways. In some cases, Muḥammad purposefully distorted or misrepresented Jewish teachings in order to make them fit the historical, cultural, ritual, or moral-ethical contexts in which he was working.<sup>28</sup> In others he did not alter the information he received from his informants, but the uneducated Jewish community in Medina did not know it correctly, thereby causing the discrepancy. Finally, in some cases he recorded the information incorrectly, either because he misunderstood its meaning or because he received it in an oral rather than written form, thereby allowing for greater error.<sup>29</sup>

It should be noted that Geiger did not consider a simple parallel to prove the indebtedness of the Qur'ān to Judaism. He recognized that all monotheistic religions share certain common themes and therefore narrowed his search to concepts, motifs, and terms that could be studied with the philological, literary, and historical tools that he had at his disposal. In his examination of the word *tābūt*, for example, the qur'ānic term for both the ark of the tabernacle (Q 2:248) and the box in which was placed the infant Moses (Q 20:38; see Exod 2:3), he notes the nonnormative morphology of the *-ūt* ending in Arabic and attributes its origin to Jewish Aramaic, citing the parallel *tēbūtā* (תִּבְוֹתָא) and noting the common ending also in Christian Aramaic. Beyond the philological examination, he notes the peculiar use of the qur'ānic term for both the floating box with its biblical Hebrew cognate *tēbā* (תִּבָּה) and the sacred ark that is rendered biblically as *'ārōn* (אֲרוֹן). In postbiblical Hebrew, however, the common term for the ark in the synagogue, itself a derivative of the ark in the tent of meeting and later the temple, is *tēbā*, suggesting a borrowing out of a rabbinic rather than biblical Hebrew literary context.

Geiger's encyclopedic grasp of the details in Jewish literatures (prior to the emergence of good concordances, let alone computer databases) is astonishing. His approach was certainly positivistic and reductionist, but it merely reflects the intellectual fashion of his age, which was to get down to the essential textual and ideological bases upon which texts are constructed in order to uncover their sources.

Certain of Geiger's assumptions seem quite jarring to our own sensibilities today. Perhaps the most glaring is his tremendous confidence that he can unambiguously uncover the simple truth of the issue surrounding the intertextuality of Qur'ān and Bible. A second would be his view of qur'ānic authorship, which he confidently attributes entirely and directly to Muḥammad. Jacob Lassner recently noted how Geiger's method, though in many ways far ahead of his time, nevertheless rested upon two

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

questionable assumptions that were held by the best orientalist scholars of his day: “that the transmission of literary artifacts was consciously initiated and carefully programmed by the Muslims; and that the artifacts themselves were always discernible to the borrowers. Neither assumption reflected the complex interaction of closely linked cultures, especially in the early and fluid stages of contact.”<sup>30</sup>

Despite its shortcomings, Geiger’s work represents a new beginning for the critical comparative study of the Qur’ān and the Bible. His small but tremendously influential monograph, now nearly two centuries old, still remains a starting point for many scholars interested in probing the complex relationship between the Bible and Qur’ān.

## RICHARD BELL

Richard Bell, a Scot, wrote his magnum opus fully one hundred years after that of Geiger, and much Qur’ānic and biblical scholarship occurred in the intervening century. *The Qur’ān Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs*,<sup>31</sup> appeared in two volumes in the late 1930s, but because of its prohibitive price in the United States<sup>32</sup> and the outbreak of the Second World War, it initially did not have a great impact on the field. Now well over half a century old, Bell’s method and conclusions continue to influence critical textual study of the Qur’ān, but not without some controversy (see below). He originally planned to publish the extensive notes that he accumulated in the course of writing his translation but was prevented from doing so due to the printing costs. These notes were finally released some forty years after his death in 1991 as *A Commentary on the Qur’an*.<sup>33</sup>

Bell’s greatest contribution was his “most elaborate attempt . . . to identify and date the original units of [Qur’ānic] revelation.”<sup>34</sup> Attempts to date what would appear to be a virtually random order of the Qur’ān have been made since the earliest Islamic Qur’ān scholarship. According to al-Suyūṭī,<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Lassner, “Abraham Geiger,” 108.

<sup>31</sup> (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937–39).

<sup>32</sup> Six dollars per volume due, according to John Merrill, to exorbitant U.S. customs charges (John E. Merrill, “Dr. Bell’s Critical Analysis of the Qur’an,” *MW* 37 [1947]: 134; reprinted in *Der Koran* [ed. R. Paret; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975], 11).

<sup>33</sup> (2 vols.; JSS Monograph 14; ed. C. E. Bosworth and M. E. J. Richardson; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991). For a review, see Andrew Rippin, “Reading the Qur’ān with Richard Bell,” *JAOS* 112 (1992): 639–47.

<sup>34</sup> Alfred T. Welch, “Al-Ḳur’ān,” *EF*<sup>2</sup> 5:417b.

<sup>35</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: n.p., n.d.), 8–18.

Muslim scholars had divided the qur'ānic chapters into Meccan and Medinan as far back as Muḥammad's cousin Ibn 'Abbās (d. 688), and that division included identifying a few verses within the Meccan *sūras* as Medinan and vice versa. But that is just about as far as it went. Western scholarship had attempted to flesh out the chronology of the *sūras* in more detail,<sup>36</sup> but both traditional Islamic and critical Western scholarship presumed that the *sūras* were largely intact revelations. Bell demonstrated that the *sūras* are far more complicated and that the present form of the Qur'ān is the result of the careful editing, revision, and sometimes replacement of passages. The result of his research is a published translation that is laid out on the page according to a system of columns and boxes separated by dotted lines that attempts to express something of the complex redaction process in visual form. Not only are verses (qur'ānic verses may in fact be composed of several sentences) set in relation to one another on the page, but also individual sentences or even phrases are so placed, accompanied only by a few footnotes and brief introductions to each chapter. His two-volume *Qur'an* thus represents the results of his textual study. His two-volume *Commentary* explains the meaning of his research through a detailed examination of the qur'ānic text and its complex internal textuality.

Bell identifies evidence of revision in a sudden variation in the length of verses, differences in vocabulary, abrupt changes in rhyme patterns, unwarranted shifts in personal pronouns, or a sudden discontinuity of thought.<sup>37</sup> The most powerful cause of these textual shifts was Muḥammad's increasing knowledge and understanding of Christianity and Judaism, which forced a reevaluation and rewriting or recontextualizing of earlier material. Muḥammad's growing awareness and understanding of prior monotheistic scriptural tradition became the major foundation around which his continuing revelation revolved. Most of the revisions were made by Muḥammad himself, though the work continued to a limited extent after his death.

Bell's claim that Muḥammad cut and pasted verses and their component parts in a process that would not be greatly different from that of Bell himself in his translation has evoked a strong response from both traditional Muslims and Western scholars, negative from the former for his audacity in manipulating the order and arrangement, and therefore the meaning, of divine revelation (as well as his assuming that Muḥammad did the same), and mixed among the latter for both his historical-methodological

<sup>36</sup> See the discussion in Welch, "Al-Ḳur'ān," 5:414–19.

<sup>37</sup> Rippin, "Reading the Qur'ān with Richard Bell," 641; Merrill, "Bell's Critical Analysis," 17–18.

assumptions and his particular results. Nevertheless, Bell's pioneering historical and form-critical work has directly or indirectly influenced virtually all critical scholarship on the Qur'ān today.

Bell's approach to the Qur'ān developed while he was preparing a series of lectures to be presented to ministers and ministerial students at the Divinity Hall of Edinburgh University in the spring of 1925. While previous studies had demonstrated the Qur'ān's close textual and linguistic affinity with Judaism, Bell felt that not enough attention had been paid to the Christian contribution to emerging Islam. His seven lectures laid out his view of the relationship between the two by exploring Christianity and its influence on Arabia prior to the birth of Muḥammad and then situating Muḥammad's prophetic career not only in relation to Arabian Judaism but also to Arabian Christianity. He revised and expanded these lectures into seven book chapters, and they were published the following year as *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*.<sup>38</sup>

While his original intent was to explore the nature of Muḥammad's contact with Christianity before receiving his revelations, he discovered "that the Qur'an itself contains the record of his efforts to reach a meagre knowledge of the great religion which surrounded Arabia."<sup>39</sup> Thus began Bell's intensive examination of the Qur'ān in relation to Christianity and within the context of the generally accepted traditional history of the origins and subsequent development of Muḥammad's prophetic mission.

Like Geiger, Bell assumes the general reliability of the traditional Islamic history of the origins and subsequent development of Muḥammad's prophetic mission; he takes issue only with the details. Bell divides Muḥammad's prophetic career into three periods.<sup>40</sup> The earliest represents the beginnings of his mission in Mecca. During this period, "signs" and praise of God predominate, and the revelations carry a sense of deep gratitude to the one supreme God while exhibiting no sign of any awareness of a religion called Christianity. This is not to say, however, that Christianity does not have an indirect impact on his early emerging monotheism. According to Bell, the Qur'ān reveals an awareness of Christian communities in Arabia. References to the enigmatic "Sabaeans" (*ṣābi'ūn*) refer to South Arabian Christians, in apposition to the *naṣāra* (Nazarenes?), who represent Christians or perhaps some heterodox Jewish-Christian communities to the north. The pre-Islamic "Hanifs" are

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<sup>38</sup> *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1926; repr., London: Cass, 1968).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>40</sup> This periodization is worked out explicitly in his later work but is evident already in *Origin*.

associated with “a dim unmoralised idea of a superior deity,” and certain individuals depicted by tradition as “Hanifs” began or ended their lives as Christians (Waraqā b. Nawfal, ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Jaḥsh, and Zayb b. ‘Amr b. Nawfal).<sup>41</sup> Further, although no Christian community made its home in Mecca, Christian ideas were floating around in the town. “Will it be far wrong to surmise that Muḥammad got his information from some Christian (perhaps Abyssinian) slave in Mecca, and that he then gave the material form in his *qur’āns*?”<sup>42</sup> One example of Christian influence offered by Bell is the issue of intercession, deriving from the Christian concept of the intercession of the saints and all but nonexistent in Judaism. Muḥammad did not allow for intercession on judgment day in the *Qur’ān* but then added, “except that of those to whom God will give permission to intercede.”<sup>43</sup>

Despite Muḥammad’s excellent intentions, his message is rejected during this period and he is faced with continuing disbelief among the Meccan townspeople. Thus begins the second or *Qur’ān* period that continues until the battle of Badr in the year 2 A.H. (624 C.E.). The revelations of this period are characterized by the relatively frequent use of the term *Qur’ān*, although other terms such as *ṣuḥuf* (“pages”) are also used. This period stresses the idea of a calamity falling upon special unbelieving peoples, the subtext of course being the unbelieving inhabitants of his own town.

Bell takes a sympathetic view of Muḥammad’s prophethood, but at the same time he cannot countenance the possibility of Muḥammad receiving a truly divine revelation:

He claimed to be an Arab prophet and he was. We shall see him consciously borrowing—he is quite frank about it. But to begin with, the materials which he uses, though they may remind us ever and again of Jewish and Christian phrases and ideas, are in reality Arab materials. They may have been originally derived from outside Arabia, but they had by Muhammad’s time become part of the Arab mind.<sup>44</sup>

The last sentence may appear curious, particularly considering his view that Muḥammad had informants with whom he communicated directly, but Bell’s intent here is not that biblical ideas had penetrated the porous

<sup>41</sup> Bell, *Origin*, 57–58.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 105 (parenthesis in original). Bell refers to each individual transmission of information as *qur’ān*, thus the plural form in the citation.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

cultural boundaries of Arabia in general.<sup>45</sup> He meant simply that the more “primitive” (though not less intelligent) Arab mind was not capable of understanding the complexity of what might have been termed “high cultural” renderings of Christianity.

By his second period, Muḥammad had become familiar with many biblical themes, and one can observe these themes in sections that Bell classifies as Meccan. Prominent among them are the many renderings of the Moses stories, most of which he would subsequently revise and reposition during his last period in Medina.<sup>46</sup> To Muḥammad, his *hijra* (i.e., emigration from Mecca to Medina) was his own exodus, and his repeated reference to Moses was his way of working through his own prophetic career amidst the hostility of his enemies and opposition even from among many within the ranks (thus the telling, to cite only one example, of the story of Korah). Bell’s method incorporates a psychological reconstruction of Muḥammad and the playing out of his mission, and Bell’s reconstruction of the order of the Qur’ān is also a reconstruction of the order of its emergence (revelation) in relation to the life of Muḥammad.

The third period of Muḥammad’s mission begins with the victory at Badr in 2 A.H.:

Outwardly it has always been recognized that [Badr] was a turning point in Muhammad’s career. It gave him prestige and established his power. Inwardly I think it was of equal consequence. The victory of the Moslems, 300 over thrice their number, was miraculous. The angels had been sent down to the assistance of the Prophet and his band. The Battle of Badr was the Calamity upon the unbelieving Meccans. It was the *Furqān*, the deliverance out of that Calamity, for the believers. . . . He is no longer a warner to his own city alone. He is now a warner to the world. He is the giver of laws and head of a theocratic community. He is now at last the full-fledged Prophet.<sup>47</sup>

Islam finally emerges in post-Badr Medina. After living among Jews for two years Muḥammad has increased his knowledge of biblical ideas and themes and has learned to differentiate between Judaism and Christianity. This is when he reaches the pinnacle of his nevertheless wanting knowledge of the Bible and of Christian theology and of the church.<sup>48</sup> It is also

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<sup>45</sup> See Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>46</sup> Bell, *Origin*, 123–24; idem, *Qur’an*, 353, 373.

<sup>47</sup> Bell, *Origin*, 124.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

when he has the resources to begin to engage in his personal editing of revelation. Indeed, he was obliged to reorder the large quantity of disparate previous revelations in order to make them consistent with the more highly developed religious system that had been emerging.

The result is the first and most important redactionary stage of a highly complex Qur'ān. Although according to Bell its redaction history is relatively simple, it is nevertheless extremely difficult to reconstruct. Muḥammad as primary editor formulated the many disparate revelations, already existing in written form, into the *sūras*, but he and later redactors had to work with a very difficult situation:

All the possibilities of confusion in written documents have had to be considered—corrections, interlinear additions, additions on the margin, deletions and substitutions, pieces cut off from a passage and wrongly placed, passages written on the back of others and then read continuously, front and back following each. It is to this, rather than to textual defects, or to confusion in Muhammad's own thought and style that the dreary welter of the Qur'ān so often deplored by Western writers is due.<sup>49</sup>

Bell, then, was the first to engage in a radical rethinking of the redaction history and process established by Islamic religious tradition, and his result was a significantly different ordering of revelation. Yet as he did so, he never questioned the general schema of the traditional Islamic biography of Muḥammad, which is authenticated by, if not based upon, qur'ānic revelation. Bell never recognized “the circularity in such a process, using the Qur'ān especially in the Meccan period to deduce historical progression in order to be able to reformulate the Qur'ān into a historical order.”<sup>50</sup> But no one at his time questioned the general historical context of emerging Islam; they were only beginning to question the Bible's story of its own genesis as scripture.

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Western scholars of Islam have always assumed, in agreement with Islamic tradition, that the Qur'ān emerged in relation to the history of Muḥammad and therefore represents, in at least a vague way, real history. But like the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, Islamic scripture emerged in what could be described, for all intents and purposes, as a historical vacuum. It is true that writing, and even the writing of history, certainly existed at least during the emergence of the New Testament and

<sup>49</sup> Bell, *Qur'an*, vi.

<sup>50</sup> Rippin, “Reading the Qur'ān with Richard Bell,” 640.



the Qur'ān (and writing, by definition, certainly existed during the emergence of a written Hebrew Bible), but no extant contemporary writings seem to express an interest in any of these revelations. Later writings relate to them within the contexts of the religions themselves by applying subsequent perspectives onto the earlier material. This methodology is repeated so often that religious sources establish a powerful institution of “sacred history” that is difficult to get around in order to uncover a neutral historical record unencumbered by theological constructs or other religious needs.

Sacred history in the religious context<sup>51</sup> is a construct applied to a canon of texts that represents a worldview constructed from theology, law, ethics, and the particularist element of election. The neutral historicity of Moses or Jesus or Muḥammad is irrelevant to religious sensibility unless it supports or confirms the worldview of the believer (or better, perhaps, the religious institution). Traditional religious scholarship always presumes and never challenges the sacred history of tradition, and that sacred history becomes such a part of the general intellectual milieu that it is difficult even for critical scholars to transcend completely. This has clearly been the case with biblical scholarship and remains so to this day. According to John Wansbrough, the problem may be said to be compounded with qur'ānic scholarship for a variety of reasons that cannot be examined in any detail here. In short, according to Wansbrough and those who have been strongly influenced by his bold ideas, Western scholarship on the Qur'ān has been blessed with exceptional philology but simplistic or wanting literary and historical methodology.<sup>52</sup> It has not succeeded in extricating itself from the historical presuppositions of Islamic tradition, therefore failing to advance the critical historical study of the Qur'ān (and Islamic tradition) much beyond that of traditional Islamic scholarship.

John Wansbrough avoids the historical conundrum by reading the Qur'ān not as existing in a historical context but rather as existing in a literary context, that is, by reading the Qur'ān entirely literarily and refusing to read it historically. Others from Theodor Nöldeke onward have read the Qur'ān in a literary as well as historical manner, but Wansbrough's understanding of qur'ānic history is that it is entirely “salvation history,” a sacred

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<sup>51</sup> At least in the religious context of the traditional monotheisms exhibited by varieties of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Rippin attributes this to intellectual laziness, the desire to produce positive results, and an “irenic approach” that avoids hard questions in its desire to understand and relate to Islamic religiosity. See his “Literary Analysis of *Qur'ān*, *Tafsīr*, and *Sīra*: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough,” in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (ed. R. C. Martin; Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 156–59.

history written in literary form in order to demonstrate God's unique relationship with his prophet Muḥammad and, therefore, his newly elected people and religion in Muslims and Islam. Reading the Qur'ān can tell us nothing of the early seventh century, when, according to Islamic tradition, it emerged as a text revealed to God's prophet and subsequently recited publicly by him. It cannot tell us about a historical Muḥammad. It can only tell us about those who were responsible for its emergence as the text we know today.

Wansbrough's literary reading ends up, finally, with a historicization of the Qur'ān by reconstructing a literary history of the text that places it in ninth-century Iraq. Arabic literature only emerges at this time, and the famous habit of early religious writers to cite earlier authorities in a chain of tradition leading all the way back to the generation of Muḥammad can as easily be an arbitrary construct of back-projection as a depiction of historical reality. Wansbrough argues that there is no authentic literary material before the late eighth century to the early ninth century. His study and conclusions are indeed radical, but he states at the outset and repeats not infrequently that his efforts are tentative and conjectural.<sup>53</sup> One of the extraordinary aspects of his contribution is his boldness, not out of disrespect to the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition, but rather out of intellectual and scholarly integrity in applying methodologies to qur'ānic studies that were never fully carried through before him.

Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies*, written between 1968 and 1972, was published in 1977, and his second and closely related monograph, *The Sectarian Milieu*, which was written between 1973 and 1977, was published in 1978. The two works fit together logically, and their serial release was probably not unintentional.<sup>54</sup> The first, which is the subject for discussion here, concentrates on the formation of the Qur'ān along with those early exegetical writings (*tafsīr*) that witness that formation, while the latter study examines the continuing evolution of early Islam through the traditional biographies (*sīra*) of Muḥammad and beyond. Wansbrough's method, but much more so his conclusions, have been severely criticized by Western as well as traditional Islamic scholars. The pros and cons need not be rehearsed here.<sup>55</sup> The truism that method influences results is no

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<sup>53</sup> John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), xi, 119, 138, etc. See also idem, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>54</sup> Rippin, "Methodologies," 153.

<sup>55</sup> For reviews of *Quranic Studies*, see Josef van Ess, *BO* 35 (1978): 349–53; Edward Ullendorf, *BSOAS* 40 (1977): 609–12; Rudi Paret, *Der Islam* 55 (1978):

more relevant than in the case of Wansbrough versus his critics, yet despite criticism and condemnation, the jury still cannot reach a verdict. We are less interested here with his conclusions than we are with his method, particularly in his first essay in *Qur'anic Studies*, which is highly comparative and contextualized literarily in biblical and postbiblical Jewish tradition.

Wansbrough's analysis begins and ends within a context of scripture and interpretation in general. He examines how qur'ānic words, phrases, symbols, and ideas fit into the unfolding of generic scripture. His models are drawn mostly from the Bible and rabbinic tradition (and it should be noted here in support of Wansbrough's thesis, though he does not, that the latter in the form of the Talmud functions in rabbinic Judaism also as scripture). His goal is not to show, as was Geiger's and Bell's, that Muḥammad received much of his scriptural information directly or indirectly from Jewish or Christian informants but rather to demonstrate how the Qur'ān developed organically within a sectarian biblical/rabbinic milieu. The so-called "biblical" materials that are found in the Qur'ān "are not so much reformulated as merely referred to."<sup>56</sup> That is, the Qur'ān is a highly referential text that establishes its relevance and authority by situating itself fully within the context of generic scripture. A great deal of earlier scholarship tried to prove the biblical origin of much of the Qur'ān but was then perplexed by the nature and consistency of the sometimes strange divergences from biblical texts. Wansbrough observes the Qur'ān emerging in "a strongly sectarian atmosphere, in which a corpus of familiar scripture was being pressed [through reference, not through citation] into the service of as yet unfamiliar [that is, emerging] doctrine."<sup>57</sup> The narrative material finding biblical parallels he calls *exempla* because they are not, strictly speaking, narrative at all. They are, rather, allusive references to illustrative situations that may have evolved out of material originating essentially for homiletical purposes.

The Qur'ān is full of biblical imagery, but the imagery is not limited to the *exempla*. The imagery of divine retribution, for example, is expressed through what Wansbrough calls the "substantives" of *umma* (nation), *auwalīn* (predecessors), *qarn* (generation), and *qarya* (abode). The key here is imagery and not cognate or linguistic parallels. A whole series of key Arabic lexicographical usages that may or may not find linguistic parallels with Hebrew or Aramaic are used to express the imagery. Other such

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354–56; William A. Graham, *JAOS* 100 (1980): 137–41; Leon Nemoy, *JQR* 68 (1978): 182–84; R. B. Serjeant, *JRAS* (1978): 76–78; Issa J. Boullata, *MW* 47 (1977): 306–7; Ewald Wagner, *ZDMG* 128 (1978): 411; and Kurt Rudolph, *TLZ* 105 (1980): 1–19.

<sup>56</sup> Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, bracketed comments added.

images include “sign” (*āya/ōt*), “exile” or displacement (expressed often by the stem *hjr*), and covenant (usually *mithāq/‘abd*), and Wansbrough stresses that the means of expressing these images is not rigid; they may employ other terminology and phraseology. These images situate the Qur’ān within the context of scripture; they are not intended as reproductions of biblical institutions.

The Qur’ān, like all scripture, must conform to recognizable patterns of human utterances, and the Qur’ān indeed contains imagery according to established literary types known from the Bible. In the case of the Qur’ān and the Bible, the phenomenon is mimetic. This differs from the relationship between the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible, where figural interpretation establishes a claim of fulfillment by the former over the latter. Qur’ānic allusions to biblical themes mostly reflect rather than develop biblical themes, but they are not merely calques of earlier, fixed forms.<sup>58</sup> They represent a historiography that conveys a new dispensation in the revelation of the Qur’ān, and that very revelation reveals its polemical environment in, for example, its record of argument regarding the modes of revelation: Jewish and pagan demands for Muḥammad to produce a scripture according to biblical paradigms.<sup>59</sup> That new dispensation is burdened, however, by its relationship to Jewish scripture and must therefore be differentiated by the text itself, by its own polemic, and by its early interpretation.<sup>60</sup>

Wansbrough has been criticized for placing the emergence of the Qur’ān in a narrowly Judaized environment,<sup>61</sup> and it is true that his analytical vocabulary as well as his parallel citations are taken almost entirely from biblical or rabbinic sources. In Wansbrough’s case, however, his methodology does not reveal an ideological bias, as had those of previous orientalists. His inclination toward the use of Jewish paradigms is acknowledged at the outset as an experimental means of deriving intertextual meaning from the Qur’ān. He correctly notes the much greater overlap with Jewish scriptural rather than Christian scriptural references,<sup>62</sup> an observation that had been explained previously by Islamic tradition through the history of Muḥammad’s interaction with the Jews of

<sup>58</sup> Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Wansbrough suggests that the pagans are retrojected into the polemic. Many negatives associated with pagans originated within a polemical environment as anti-Jewish but were later retrojected to Arabian pagans. This will be treated below.

<sup>60</sup> Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 43.

<sup>61</sup> Graham, review of Wansbrough, *JAOS* 100 (1980): 140.

<sup>62</sup> That would include, for example, references to those parts of the Hebrew Bible that are more regularly cited in Jewish than in Christian interpretation.

Yathrib/Medina.<sup>63</sup> By dehistoricizing the Qur'an, he is forced to limit his analysis to a purely literary investigation of the relationship.

Wansbrough's refusal to accept the reliability of Arabic literature to provide any accurate information about early Islam echoes the work of Joseph Schacht and has been echoed further by other scholars in the past two decades.<sup>64</sup> Most scholars of early Islam, however, while still questioning that literature's reliability, do not take such a radical stand. To dismiss such a comprehensive and complex literary structure with its intricate record of traditionists through many generations, and representing many communities transmitting pieces of internally corroborated (if not always consistent) information, has struck many in the scholarly community as unnecessarily reductionist. On the other hand, Wansbrough's arguments are always impressive even if not always convincing. They should tug at one's conscience and force responsible scholars to take great care in their reading of the literature.

Wansbrough is a difficult read, partly because of his convoluted syntax and liberal use of untranslated Latin terminology for easily rendered English equivalents, and partly for his unsystematic use of Arabic (and Hebrew and Aramaic), sometimes in original orthography and sometimes transliterated, but in either case more often than not untranslated. It is worthwhile, nonetheless, to plow through his work and especially his first essay, "Revelation and Canon." His notations of ideational, thematic, interpretive, and semantic parallels are tremendously instructive, as are his comments regarding earlier work on the same and related topics. The bottom line of his view of Qur'an-Bible intertextuality is that the former emerged out of a corpus of what he terms "prophetic *logia*"<sup>65</sup> that existed, so to speak, in the "public domain." What became the Qur'an was eventually separated out of this

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<sup>63</sup> "A single reference to a Christian covenant (Q 5:14), like inclusion of Jesus in Q 33:7 (above), represents chronological extension, not historical development" (Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 11). See also *ibid.*, 39–42, where the story from the *Sira* about Ja'far and other Muslims interacting with the Ethiopian *negus* parallels Christian prescriptions of essentials for faith (Acts 15:20, 28–29), though this may have been necessary because in the story, Ja'far was trying to prove to the *negus* that he was not simply attesting a newly made-up religion.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964). See especially Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>65</sup> From Greek *logion* (λόγιον), a saying or oracle, defined by *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1981) as "a short pointed pregnant saying or observation, esp. of a religious teacher." This would be similar to *memra* in traditional Jewish terminology, but I understand Wansbrough's use of the term to refer to a somewhat larger literary structure.

mass and built into an independent literary source. The formulation of the Qur'ān involved considerable literary technique, but the end result nevertheless contained a rather erratic distribution of obviously related pericopes. These *logia* or pericopes were probably the intellectual property of various communities, perhaps representing different regions or differentiated in other ways. The *logia* were sometimes contradictory and most likely derive from a polemical environment, possibly in eighth–ninth century Mesopotamia (Jewish *Bavel*), as what became Islam emerged out of a heterodox environment of polemics and debate among a variety of groups associated or conversant with rabbinic Judaism. The process of canonization was protracted and should be seen as part of the process of community formation. That is, the coalescence of the Qur'ān occurred simultaneously with the coalescence of its community of readers/hearers. Ultimately the collection of prophetic *logia* required a prophet to authenticate it. This prophet was found or produced in the Arabian Ḥijāz through a process of back-projection.<sup>66</sup>

Wansbrough's greatest contribution is perhaps his breaking through the ice of rigid historicizing of the Qur'ān. While his critique of the reliability of Arabic literature for the construction of early Islamic history is more convincing than his own rehistoricization, his refusal to be complacent has opened up the field and invites others to engage in similar bold scholarship. He recognizes the extreme complexity of intertextuality in scriptural studies and points the way to future scholarship. Perhaps what seems to have vexed his scholarly contemporaries the most is the truly postmodern aspect of his project. In a field that is positivist and notoriously modern, and despite Wansbrough's attempts, as everybody's in the field to produce a hermeneutically closed system, he proves that there is no final reading of qur'ānic intertextuality. It stands ever ready for another interpretive pass.

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<sup>66</sup> Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 48–52.