A Legacy of Learning

Essays in Honor of Jacob Neusner

Edited by

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and Gary G. Porton

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The Formative Period of Islam and the Documentary Approach: A Prolegomenon

Aaron W. Hughes

Jacob Neusner devoted his academic life to tearing down the yeshiva walls in order to make room for the study of rabbinic texts within the secular context of the modern university. Needless to say, as the reaction to his work from those inside the closed and rarified environment of the yeshiva shows, he met with both considerable and hostile resistance. This resistance was occasioned by two major objections to his project. The first stemmed from the novelty and freshness of his approach to rabbinic texts; the second and related objection emerged from his general unwillingness to treat these texts as intrinsically special or inherently sacrosanct. Rather than regard these latter categories as either descriptive or autochthonous, he made us aware that they are subjective terms applied in retrospect and, because of this, have little or no heuristic value. Neusner's perseverance, and I am certainly not the first to point this out, successfully integrated the study of Jewish data, as even the quickest of glances at any self-respecting department will show, within the larger field of Religious Studies. This is certainly not to imply that there are not problems associated with this larger field that, especially in recent years, has tended to be less interested in asking the types of hard analytic questions that Neusner did and has instead been preoccupied with a host of irenic concerns such as interfaith dialogue.

Because Neusner neither confused nor conflated his data set, that is, rabbinic texts, with his overarching methodological concerns, it stands to reason that his methodology should be repeatable when applied to other data sets. Indeed, were it not repeatable, his approach would simply be unique and sui generis, two terms that his analysis abhors. To make sure that his analysis of rabbinic texts is not confined solely to the formative period of Judaism, this chapter takes the type of issues that Neusner had with the then status quo and applies it to another set of texts from a different religious tradition. My goal, stated simply, is to take the documentary approach and show how it can potentially illumine texts from the formative period of Islam (ca. seventh-tenth centuries). My desire in doing this is simultaneously to show the correctness of Neusner's approach and to provoke those in Islamic Studies, one of the self-imposed holdouts of successful integration into departments of Religious

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Studies, to consider the critical questions of the sort that Neusner forced us all to confront in Judaism.

There are certainly important differences between the study of the formative periods of these two traditions. Our understanding of the Quran, the Sira (biography of Muhammad), the authoritative hadith collections (sayings of Muhammad that comprise the Sunna), the histories of al-Tabari (ca. 838–923 C.E.), and other literature are not even at the stage of analysis in which Neusner found rabbinic texts in the 1960s. In addition, despite the fact that some scholars in the mid- to late nineteenth century, primarily German-Jews,[1] had undertaken initial forays into critical and historical analyses of such texts, this is today written off with the now pejorative term "Orientalism."[2] In light of Edward Said's critique of this term, the overwhelming tendency, at least in Religious Studies circles, has been to avoid all critical questions of early Islam owing to its insensitivity to Muslim sensibilities.[3]

Yet, despite such incongruities I remain convinced the Neusner's pioneering approach to rabbinic texts can be reproduced, with obvious modifications, in the study of the works of early Islam. This may, in part, be related to the fact that Neusner himself adopted and adapted his documentary approach from biblical scholars. Regardless, an intellectual orientation that refuses to buy into the assumptions of later texts and interpreters and that instead focuses on each text as a discrete document produced by a certain ideological reading of events is more than appropriate to import into the study of Islamic origins, a field that, perhaps not surprisingly given the stakes that are involved, is in considerable disarray.[4] My other reason for focusing on the texts of early Islam

1 See, for example, the collection of essays in Martin Kraemer, ed., *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center, 1999). See also my *Situating Islam: The Past and Future of an Academic Discipline* (London: Equinox, 2007), pp. 9–32.

2 See, for example, Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, eds., *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010). I shall discuss this edited collection in greater detail below.

3 In a leading introductory textbook to Islam, for example, we read, "It is painful for Muslims to witness certain types of historico-critical, philological, and otherwise 'Orientalist' scholarly treatment of their sacred book." See Frederick M. Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994), p. 148. This is not to conflate an introductory textbook with a specialized study, but it does call attention to a particular posture in Islamic religious studies.

4 This is often referred to as the "authenticity debate." At least three different camps have stakes in this debate. The first contends that even though the earliest sources of Islam may come from a later period, they nonetheless represent reasonably reliable accounts concerning the matters on which they comment or describe. For example, the biography

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is to introduce a new data set to scholars of rabbinics, because, as products of the eastern Mediterranean basin of the late antique period, it is time that these early Islamic texts become of greater interest to them. Indeed, the types of questions that scholars of late antiquity, Jewish and Christian, bring to their data need to be broached in a much more serious fashion by students of early Islam. What better way to do this than to have non-Islamicist scholars of late antiquity begin to approach this material?[5]

In order to accomplish this task I divide what follows into three discrete, yet overlapping parts. In the first part, I provide a very brief summary of Neusner's documentary approach, showing what it is and how it redefined the study of rabbinic texts, all the while having an eye toward how they can illumine the first centuries of Islam. In the second part, I show how the study of Islamic texts from the formative period is currently in a similar messy predicament (one could perhaps even say in a relatively worse state) to the one that Neusner found in the study of rabbinic texts. Finally, in the third part I shall connect Neusner's insights to these early Islamic texts. Given the spatial restraints, however, these conclusions will only be tentative, to be picked up either by others or by myself in a subsequent monograph.

The Documentary Approach

Imagine a situation, Neusner asks us, in which historians of the New Testament ignored the fact that the four Gospels formulated distinctive statements that reflected the discrete communities that produced them, and instead treated

(*sira*) of Muhammad, which dates at the very earliest to a couple of generations after his death, is held up as a reliable account of Muhammad's life and times. Another camp contends that the Muslim historical record of the first two centuries is problematic. The social and political upheavals associated with the rapid spread of Islam fatally compromise the earliest sources. These sources, according to this position, are written so much after the fact and with such distinct ideological or political agendas that they provide us with very little that is reliable with which to re-create the period they purport to describe. The third camp acknowledges the problems involved with the early sources but tries to solve them using form and source criticism, both of which seek to determine the original form and historical context of a particular text. For the sake of full disclosure I should confess that my own take vacillates between the second two options.

5 One recent example of this that has had tremendous results, albeit largely and unsurprisingly ignored by the status quo, is Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

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them as if they formed a harmonious account of what Jesus really said and did. While such an account may well pose no problem for the religious believer, it flies in the face of what we know historically and stylistically about the Gospels, or any other religious text for that matter. In terms of scholarship, such an orientation makes the scholar of such texts into, at best, a custodian of the tradition (for which we already have rabbis) or, at worse, little more than a color commentator. This, however, is precisely how *scholars* (not rabbis) traditionally and habitually approached rabbinic texts. And, as I shall show in the following section, it is not unlike how *scholars* of Islam—not legal and religious authorities (*fuquha'*), but secular scholars with secular PhDs from secular universities—treat early Islamic texts. Both have traditionally overlooked historical settings and contexts and opted instead to focus on disembodied ideas that ignore the lives and contexts of those who produced them. In terms of early Islam, this translates into the notion that we can actually ascertain a "historical" Muhammad from a set of texts that were written as "salvation history" (*not* to be confused with history!) much after the fact and with such distinct ideological claims concerning the legitimacy and authority of particular, and often distinctly partisan, Islams.[6] Following Neusner, rather than assume that all these texts form an interlocking set produced by those who shared a similar or corresponding vision of what Islam is or should be, it might be more useful to begin the process of prying them apart from one another with an eye toward both their specific concerns, in addition to their localized genealogies and contexts.

For Neusner, each document of rabbinic Judaism—the Mishnah, the *Sifra*, the two *Sifres*, Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, the Babylonian Talmud, the Yerushalmi Talmud, and so forth—clearly differentiates itself, both stylistically and topically, each from the others. Although certain passages may well exist in different documents, it is nevertheless important that the documents in question neither be confused nor conflated with one another. Each document, in other words, is the product of a particular group and, in turn, reflects its unique culture and society. In order to understand something as mammoth and convoluted as "rabbinic Judaism," Neusner argues that it is first necessary to understand each text as an *autonomous* unit, as possessing its "own framework, exhibiting its own distinctive traits of rhetoric, topic, and logic, as

6 The problem here, however, is that given the current political moment, many non-academics critical of Islam use such ideas to try and undermine the tradition. They will pick up, for example, on the notion that we cannot verify Muhammad's identity or existence as proof that Islam was "made up." Needless to say, this is both ridiculous and decidedly non-scholarly. Islam is neither more nor less "made up" than any other religious tradition.

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a complete book with a beginning, middle, and end, in preserving that book, the canon presents us with a document on its own and not solely as part of a larger composition or construct."[7] This approach, as we all know, led Neusner to examine, on its own terms, each of the works that comprise rabbinic Judaism.

Although Neusner would later go on, after this descriptive work had been completed, to engage in the subsequent interpretation and analysis of these texts, the situation in Islam is still at the descriptive stage. This means that an important scholarly desideratum is to begin the process of unraveling the texts of formative Islam from one another, of refusing to assume that they all share a coherent and monolithic vision, and in describing the contents—including the system and the structure—of *each* text *on its own terms*. This will subsequently permit us to envisage both the similarities and differences between these rather diverse groups of texts. One major problem, however, is our ability to date successfully these texts. Even a text such as the Quran, which many see as foundational to later texts (though this has been questioned by some), is impossible to date with any degree of certainty. Whereas tradition has it revealed to Muhammad over the course of his life, others see it as a document that was produced or redacted roughly two hundred years after he was purported to have died, in order to legitimate the ideology of rulers who now found themselves in charge of a large and growing empire and who wanted to differentiate themselves from Jews and Christians.[8]

The result of all of this is that we have largely failed to understand early Islam on its own terms because we have confused and conflated it with later interpretations of the tradition. The reorientation of an early movement based on an apocalyptic end-of-the-world message to an imperial religion within a relatively short span of time "provides a very likely context for dramatic revision to its narrative of origins, including especially the life of its founder, Muhammad."[9] If we simply start at the later stage we may certainly be privy to an appreciation of the whole, but we will certainly miss out on the ingenuity of

7 Neusner, *The Documentary Foundation of Rabbinic Culture*, p. 6.

8 E.g., John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and, more recently, Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab* State (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003); David S. Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last* Prophet (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) and Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*.

9 Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 195.

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all the parts, the original contexts to which they initially spoke, and the ways they were subsequently transformed by the later commentarial traditions.

The result should not be the monolithic Islam of later centuries, but a host of Islams that skirmish with one another over the nature of political authority, the inheritance of this authority, and who has (and has not) a rightful claim to it. This may be witnessed in the fact that the Quranic text in the years after the death of Muhammad was in an extreme flux and it was only a later Caliph, Abd al-Malik, who standardized it in the hope of displacing the variant codices in use in different cities in the burgeoning empire.[10] Just as the documentary approach in New Testament Studies and as pioneered by Neusner in rabbinic texts works on the hypothesis that early communities shaped and reshaped—even invented—traditions about the lives of important individuals, we should not assume that the situation was at all different for the early framers of Islam. Unfortunately, however, this type of scholarship has yet to enter into the mainstream in the field and is instead written off as the rantings of a "minority rejectionist camp, which has based its contrarian position on its own rather tendentious readings of the sources and unsubstantiated speculations."[11]

It is safe to say that the results of the documentary approach revolutionized the academic and secular study of rabbinic literature. No longer, if one agreed with Neusner's systematic approach to this literature, would it be possible to treat the diverse texts that comprise rabbinic literature as a uniform whole. Each document possesses a distinctive set of formal and intellectual attributes. It stands to reason, then, that every text will be in possession of its own set of concerns, which must be described and analyzed on its own terms. These texts must not be studied theologically as speaking to a set of timeless and disembodied truths or harmoniously as if all these texts can be read as a seamless whole. Neusner's method essentially involves deconstructing centuries of harmonization and construction seen in later texts and reverting them to their constitutive parts in order to contextualize them within their social worlds and to see how they functioned therein. "For in the end," Neusner summarizes, "knowing what people thought, without understanding the world about which

10 See, for example, Chase Robinson, 'Abd al-Malik (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), pp. 100–104.

11 Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), p. xx. The dismissive posture of this approach is itself based on dishonesty. See my *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), pp. 10–33. On more serious—though, I think, equally misguided—criticisms of this type of approach see, for example, those discussed in Herbert Berg, "The Implications of, and Opposition to, the Methods and Theories of John Wansbrough," in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9.1 (1997), pp. 3–22.

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they reflected, does not help us either to understand the people who did the thinking or to interpret the results of their reflection."[12]

It is high time that such a systematic analysis be undertaken for the texts that comprise the earliest record of Islam. Although this has been done in a piecemeal fashion, primarily, it should be noted, by non-Muslim and primarily non-American scholars, it is not done with any degree of consistency. This is primarily the result of the political implications of such analysis, especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. As we shall witness in the following section, a great majority of scholars of Islam see this approach as "insensitive" to the feelings of Muslims and as a politically motivated attempt to undermine the tradition.

Islamic Religious Studies: The Hold Out

I should be clear at the outset that my characterization of Islamic Studies in this section is confined to the ways in which it is carried out in departments of Religious Studies in North America. Elsewhere I have used the term "Islamic Religious Studies" to refer to this type of activity.[13] I use this term to refer to a set of largely apologetic and essentializing discourses that are uninterested in (or, even better, hostile toward) critical scholarship. This has made the academic study of Islam as carried out within departments of Religious Studies, especially since September 11, 2001, become increasingly insular, apologetic, and largely irrelevant. It is within this latter context that scholars of Islam have presented themselves to their colleagues, to the media, and to the general public as the de facto interpreters of Islam. They have largely invoked their authority to elevate their particular and idiosyncratic interpretation of Islam (e.g., liberal and egalitarian) over others and, in the process, deemed their version to be somehow more authentic and normative. On one level, given the anger and hostility directed toward Islam and Muslims this is certainly understandable. In this respect, many Islamicists have tried to correct the blatant and often hostile misrepresentations that frequently circulate in both the media and public opinion. However, on another level, problems inevitably arise when, to correct such misrepresentations, the only Islam that is presented as normative is the one that they have largely constructed in their own image. It is a type of scholarship, moreover, that systematically ignores, at best, or writes off as politically motivated, at worse, the types of critical questions and issues

12 Neusner, *The Documentary Foundation of Rabbinic Culture*, p. 19.

13 E.g., Hughes, *Theorizing Islam*, pp. 3–5.

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raised in the previous section that seek to make sense of a social movement that would eventually become recognized and recognizable as Islam in subsequent centuries. The net result is that, when it comes to the study of Islam, we have, in effect, a "yeshiva" mentality in the heart of the secular academy.

In the interests of space, let me use a recent work of collected essays that seeks to redefine the field of Islamic Studies as carried out within departments of Religious Studies. In their *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin begin by being highly critical of Orientalism—this term, it should be duly noted, is often code for the type of critical work that seeks to understand pre-modern texts using non-Muslim hermeneutics—which they believe has largely been responsible for determining and defining the traditional parameters of Islamic studies. As a corrective, they have assembled together a group of scholars, both senior and junior, to begin the process of rethinking "how to theorize and problematize the textual and social data of Islam and how to adjust their investigations to methodologies that address the urgencies of Islamic studies in the twenty first century."[14]

To begin their project of rehabilitation, they divide their book into three overlapping sections with the aim of creating a "post-Orientalist Islamic Studies."[15] The first section seeks to provide various Islamic perspectives on modernity; the second section deals with social scientific and humanistic perspective on Islam; and the third and final section deals with Asian perspectives on the Muslim subject. The choice of such rubrics, however, is not without a set of potential problems. They blur, for example, the boundaries between the academic study of Islam and Islamic perspectives on a particular topic. Islamic perspectives on modernity, for example, are decidedly not the same thing as modern perspectives on Islam/s; and Asian perspectives on the Muslim subject are not the same thing as perspectives on Asian-Muslim subjects.

The result is that many of the essays straddle the boundary between insider and outsider accounts or, framed differently, between apologetic and critical studies. The danger of this is not that the academic study of Islam will become more familiar to those working in religious studies, but less so. If the desire is to create a rapprochement between contemporary theoretical modeling in religious studies and the academic study of Islam, why do the editors/contributors encourage an approach that stresses essentialized and reified "Muslim" and "Asian" perspectives as opposed to critical ones? I suspect that they would

14 Ibid., p. 2.

15 Ibid., p. 15.

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argue that this is because the latter is implicated in numerous wills to power and the Orientalist heritage from which they desire to move.

Despite their intentions of "rethinking" the field, the editors fail in their task because they work with vague notions of what exactly needs to be rethought. This categorical failure stems, in part, from the fact that nowhere do they clearly define any of the key terms that sit together in the title of the book: "Orientalism," "cosmopolitanism," and "religious studies." The editors tell us, for example, that "Orientalism remains for most scholars the bête noir in the expanding family of Islamic studies today."[16] Why? Says who? Recent years have seen many important monographs—ones that greatly extend our understanding of the formative and other periods of Islam—that we or their authors might comfortably label as Orientalist. Using the term pejoratively, however, is a matter of ideology, a way of dismissing all those who take a critical perspective when it comes to dealing with the historicity of early and other Muslim sources. Even though the editors are calling for a "rethinking" of the discipline, it is more the case that they are trying to set the parameters for what gets to count as authoritative Islamic studies in the future. Their easy dismissal of those who disagree with them and their hermeneutical approaches, however, cannot take the place of a serious engagement with rival methodologies. To lump their critics under the omnibus rubric "Orientalist" is ultimately to create a straw man.

The worst part about the volume is its presentism and its concomitant complete disregard for anything from the pre-modern world. Such an interest has already been written off as the stuff of Orientalism. In Ernst and Martin's new Islamic Religious Studies, questions of sources—for instance, problems associated with their authenticity, their interconnections, their verifiability—are not asked. In fact, the pre-twentieth century is largely ignored, and those who engage in early Islam, except to sugar-coat it or to describe the sources as historically accurate and unproblematic—are written off as "Orientalists." In like manner, issues of skirmishes around identity formations are not broached (with the possible exception, for example, of African American Muslim women in the contemporary United States). Any topics that deal with Islam as an overlapping set of social and ideological formations are rarely, if ever, entertained.

I have spent considerable time on this collection of essays to show non-specialists what exactly is at stake in Islamic Studies at the present moment. I have also mentioned it to show what stands in the way of a systematic understanding of the various Islams in the formative period. In the following

16 Ibid., p. 4.

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section, I wish to outline what the documentary approach might look like in this period.

Neusner Meets Islamic Texts from the Formative Period

At this point in the analysis I would like to return to the work of Neusner and to begin the process of introducing his critical methodology to the study of texts from the formative period of Islam. Before I do, however, it is worth underscoring two facts. First, we know very little, despite the self-assuredness of some, about the historical and sociological formation of the texts in question (e.g., Quran, Sunna, hadiths, tafsir collections). Investigation into these texts, in other words, is not nearly at the same level as it is of rabbinic texts. Second, there is a huge discrepancy, and this is part of the problem, between a social scientific approach to these texts and what they mean to believers. This latter point, as witnessed in the previous section, has created a huge impasse, no less significant than the one Neusner encountered in the 1960s. There is, without putting too fine a point on it, no will among those working on Islamic data in departments of Religious Studies to investigate these matters. There is a tendency to accept what these texts say about themselves at face value.

The first move that Neusner calls for is that we remove all texts from one another and begin the process of seeing them, not as part of a whole, but as discrete units that only later are brought together in such a manner. In terms of the texts that emerged out of the formative period in Islam this means that we cannot afford simply to lump them together in ways that reflect later theological concerns. Each document, in other words, represents a distinct system that is unique to the discrete community that composed it. Read in this way, we cannot conflate, as is customarily done, the Quran with the Sunna, the Quran with the Sira, and so on and so forth, as if they provide a seamless and holistic account of the early Islamic polity. We must try to extract historically credible data, framed differently from "contaminated" repositories. This ought to involve using methods that prove capable of identifying different types of bias and that permit us to remove information from these sources in ways that resemble those techniques used to reconstruct the historical Jesus from the highly theological narratives of the Christian Gospels and in ways that resemble what Neusner has done with rabbinic texts.

This must involve careful documentation, translation into non-native terms and categories, and comparisons with the various and manifold descriptions that appear in non-Islamic sources of the period in question (e.g., seventh

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and eight centuries C.E.).[17] Many of these sources provide us with radically different accounts than those presented in Muslim sources. Most startling, for example, are those reports in non-Muslim sources that make reference to Muhammad as still alive and leading the invasion into the Roman Near East, where Jerusalem was located. Each one of these stories—both written by partisans and critics of Muhammad and his nascent polity—need to be evaluated for their historical significance. For even if Muhammad did not in fact lead the Islamic conquest of Palestine, what might such a tradition—and this type of question is never far from the type that Neusner himself asked of his own data—reveal about the period of formative Islam? Why was it important for later framers of the tradition to have Muhammad die in Mecca as opposed, say, to Jerusalem? Why did some want him to die in Jerusalem?

Robert Hoyland has begun this process, though much work certainly remains to be done. His *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* provides both an inventory of these non-Muslim sources and proposes a methodology for evaluating them. Of each of these sources, he encourages us to ask three basic questions: What is the source of a text's observation/s about early Islam? What is the character of the observation? Finally, what is the subject of the observation?[18] All of these questions will ideally enable us to avoid apologetics on either side, and help us to work on the assumption that simple observations probably have considerably greater historical veracity than more grandiose and theological claims.[19]

The second thing that Neusner's documentary approach calls for is not to assume that the texts that are now considered by believers to be normative in the religious sense of the term were so at the time of their composition. Rather than assume that a document such as the Quran simply entered the world "from heaven" as a consensually normative work, a more basic question

17 Recent years have seen some interest in these questions, much of which was inspired by Crone and Cook's *Hagarism*. See, for example, Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997); Lawrence I. Conrad, "The Conquest of Arwad: A Source-Critical Study in the Historiography of the Early Medieval Near East," in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Papers of the First Workshop on Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), pp. 317–401. It is worth pointing out that none of this takes place within the discipline of Religious Studies, a discipline that, as we have seen, tends to be very critical of such investigations. Moreover, most of it is carried out by scholars with training in Late Antique and Medieval Studies, and not Islamic Studies per se.

18 Here I follow the comments in Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*, p. 3.

19 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, pp. 592–594.

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might be, how and by what processes did the Quran become normative and for whom?[20] At what point did it become attached to the persona of Muhammad, who is rarely mentioned within it? And how does the Quran fit with other documents that would eventually also become normative (for example, the hadiths or sayings/deeds of Muhammad)?

Most self-respecting Islamicists acknowledge that all the information we have about the first two centuries of Islam—this includes the Quran—comes from compilations and writings whose present recensions date from little earlier than the third Islamic century (i.e., 800 C.E.). Despite this acknowledgement, many attempt to circumvent it by placing their faith in the truth claims of the later sources to preserve earlier ones in a reasonably reliable manner. This, however, is extremely problematic because (1) many of these early sources are treated as if they formed a composite and accurate whole; and (2) this basic "methodology" turns out to be no methodology at all. Instead it is tantamount to a parroting of what later Muslims themselves believe. It fundamentally ignores a major question between fact and fiction. In the words of Koren and Nevo, it refuses to articulate what the later Muslim community "*thought* had happened or *wanted to believe* had happened or *wanted others to believe* had happened."[21]

But this, nevertheless, creates real and perhaps intractable problems. It is at this point that again Neusner's name ought to be invoked. According to Wansbrough, if "what we know of the seventh-century Hijaz (the area of Mecca, Medina and environs) is the product of intense literary activity, then that record has got to be interpreted in accordance with what we know of literary criticism."[22] These sources, in other words, are not history, but salvation history, a subgenre of literature, and the most appropriate way to analyze them is by means of form criticism, redaction criticism, and literary criticism—in much the same manner that they have been used in the study of early Christianity and Judaism. Wansbrough is, rightly in my opinion, opposed "to that school of sanguine historiography in which the pursuit of reconstruction is seldom if ever deflected by the doubts and scruples thrown up in recent

20 Here the pioneering work of the late John Wansbrough deserves mention.

21 J. Koren and Y.D. Nevo, "Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies," in *Der Islam* 68 (1991), pp. 87–107, at 89

22 Wansbrough, *Res Ipsa Loquitur: History and Mimesis* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1987), pp. 14–15.

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(and not so recent) years by practitioners of form-criticism, structuralism and the like."[23]

In like manner it is important not to go to later interpretations of, for example, the Quran to try and shed light on it. At the same time, however, we must realize and acknowledge that all we have of the earliest Islamic period are later interpretations. The problem has been to assume that they simply offer eye-witness accounts of what "really happened" without employing any sort of theoretical or methodological criteria by which to adjudicate their veracity or lack thereof. Once again, the work of Neusner proves helpful in this context. Rather than proceed with the assumption that these texts represent a normative Islam at this early stage, we ought instead to understand them as single works that constitute different, even competing, versions of what its framers thought Islam should be. If we do not do this, we risk confusing distinct systems. This means that, say, the Quran represents *a* type of Islam in the eighth century C.E. (not the seventh, as is usually assumed), and that we ought to be aware that other types of Islams—other types of religious and/or philosophical systems—existed concurrently with it.[24] Each one of these *Islams* thought itself to be and described itself as the authentic veritable Islam.

Conclusions

I have engaged in this analysis to try and make the academic study of Islam more, not less familiar, to those working with the field of rabbinics. In so doing, I have tried to redirect what seems to me an ominous turn in the academic study of Islam, especially as carried out in departments of Religious Studies, that seeks to put protective walls around its object of study. This confusion of scholarship with theology and of ends with means will, I submit, end badly for the academic study of Islam. Rather than engage in such an irenic and largely feel-good approach to the textual sources of Islam, it is necessary to begin the process of systematic description, analysis, and interpretation. Juxtaposed against the tendency to take these texts at face value, as accurate accounts of what they purport to describe, we need to subject these sources to the types of analysis encouraged by form and source criticism. These types of analysis are

23 Wansbrough, "Review of Josef van Ess, *Anfänge muslimischer Theologie: Zwei antiqadaritische Traktate aus dem ersten Jahrhundert der Higra*," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43 (1980), pp. 361–363, at 361.

24 Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah*, p. 3.

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foreign neither to the study of the New Testament nor, since the pioneering work of Jacob Neusner, to rabbinic texts. Why, then, should they be so foreign to the study of early Islam? And why must they be written off as a form of "Orientalist" hegemony?

I would hope that the lines of further research that I have laid out here would be of relevance to scholars of rabbinics. Like many of the formative texts from the latter field, the texts examined here are also the product of late antique attempts to organize and understand various social worlds. The question that Neusner and his students asked of rabbinic material must be asked of early Islamic material. If they are not, the result is simply a failure of nerve.[25]

25 I discuss this in greater detail in Aaron W. Hughes, "The Failure of Islamic Studies Post-9/11: A Contextualization and Analysis," in William Arnal, Willi Braun, and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Failure and Nerve in the Study of Religion: Working With Donald Wiebe* (London: Equinox, 2011), pp. 129–146.

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