



Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract

This article looks at the different approaches that medieval and modern, Muslim and Western scholars have adopted when attempting to write on the life of Muhammad. It considers the sources for his life and the different methodologies that have been devised for assessing their authenticity. It examines the degree to which Muhammad and the ingredients of the religion that he started were a part of the Late Antique world that he lived in and the way in which religious trends of that era might have impacted upon the formation of Islam. Finally, some suggestions are given for how one might take the study of the biography of Muhammad in different directions in the future.

Writing from his vantage point in north England shortly after the Muslim occupation of Spain in AD 711–13, the monk Bede begins his commentary upon Genesis 16:12 with the standard exposition of the Arabs as descendants of Ishmael, condemned by birth to roam the desert, and then continues:

But that was long ago. Now, however, so much is his hand against all and the hand of all against him that they press the length and breadth of Africa under their sway, and also the greater part of Asia and, hating and inimical to all, they try for some of Europe.¹

The threat came even closer in 729 when ‘a plague of Saracens wrought wretched devastation and slaughter upon Gaul’, an event which Bede connects with the appearance of two comets, ‘presaging grievous disaster for east and west’.² A few decades later, in 801, Charlemagne’s son Louis the Pious delivered the following speech to the soldiers about to besiege Muslim Barcelona:

Had this people (the Saracens) worshipped God, pleased Christ and received holy baptism, we should have made peace with them and kept that peace in order to bind them to God through religion. But this people remain detestable; it spurns the salvation we offer and follows the commandments of the demons.³

The fact that the Muslims first entered the Western stage in the guise of conquerors and as deniers of Christ’s divinity meant that the tone of the literary response from Western Christians inevitably tended to be hostile.

Muhammad was regarded at best as an impostor fuelled by ambition and lust, at worst as the Antichrist, a heathen idol, the devil's son and so on. Even so late and great a thinker as Blaise Pascal (1623–62) merely reiterated age-old polemic, pointing out that since Muhammad 'worked no miracles and was not foretold', he could not be a true prophet, and indeed was the very antithesis of Christ.⁴

The enlargement of the horizons of Europe in the eighteenth century through travel and trade on the world's oceans and the secularising and rationalising forces of the Enlightenment served to release the Orient as a whole, and Islam in particular, from this narrow religious purview by which it had hitherto been examined and judged. Men such as Simon Ockley (*History of the Saracens*, 1708–18), Edward Gibbon (*History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776–87) and Thomas Carlyle (*The Hero as Prophet. Mahomed: Islam*, 1840) could now approach Muhammad as a historical figure who had played a part in world events and not as a diabolic deceiver driven by depravity and greed. Research along these lines was also aided by the establishment of chairs of Arabic (Leiden, 1613; Cambridge, 1632; Oxford, 1634), the compilation of Arabic dictionaries and grammars (especially that of Silvestre de Sacy, 1810), and the acquisition and study of numerous manuscripts from the Middle East. Such was the progress in knowledge of Muhammad's biography that upon reading Gustav Weil's *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre* (Stuttgart, 1843) and A. P. Caussin de Perceval's *Essai sur l'histoire des Arabes avant l'Islamisme pendant l'époque de Mahomet* (Paris, 1847–48), the Oriental philologist Ernest Renan felt able confidently to assert that 'one can say without exaggeration that the problem of the origins of Islam has definitely now been completely resolved'. 'The life of its founder', he maintained, 'is as well known to us as that of any sixteenth-century reformer. We can follow year by year the fluctuations of his thoughts, his contradictions, his weaknesses . . .'⁵ Reading almost any introductory work on Muhammad, and a good few academic ones too, will give the impression that this view is still prevalent,⁶ but beneath this serene untroubled surface bubbles a maelstrom of controversy and debate.

The reason for such optimistic assessments is that Muslim traditions (i.e. reports handed down) about the life and career of the Prophet Muhammad exist in huge numbers, recorded in numerous and often voluminous compendia. Each tradition (called in Arabic a *hadith*) gives details about Muhammad's sayings and doings, and is accompanied by a list of the authorities who transmitted it, beginning with the eyewitness and ending with the author of the text containing it. At first sight it really does seem, therefore, that we know a tremendous amount about Muhammad. But scholarship after Renan suggested that the picture might not be quite so rosy. Ignaz Goldziher dealt the first blow when he demonstrated that many of the traditions about Muhammad originated in the doctrinal, legal and sundry other controversies of the second and third centuries after the Hijra. For example, Muhammad is reported as saying that one should rebel against

unjust rulers and that one should not rebel against rulers even be they unjust, that one should write down his sayings and that one should not do so, that the Arabs were the best of people or that the non-Arabs were, that Syria was the favoured country of God or that Iraq was, and so on. Goldziher's conclusion was that 'the *hadith* will not serve as a document for the history of the infancy of Islam, but rather as a reflection of the tendencies which appeared in the community during the maturer stages of its development'.⁷ This was a boon for those interested in these 'maturer stages', but it shook the confidence of those trying to document the rise of Islam.

The next major assault came from Henri Lammens. He argued that allusions from the Qur'an were taken up and elaborated into stories, and doctrinal and legal traditions were collected and arranged chronologically, and the resulting combination, together with a few 'packets of historical truth', constituted Muhammad's biography.⁸ Though many declared his theory extreme,⁹ none have successfully refuted it, and it has recently been reiterated by Patricia Crone, who states: 'Much of the apparently historical tradition is in fact of exegetical origin . . . As for what remains, some is legal and doctrinal *hadith* in disguise'.¹⁰ As an illustration of how 'the Qur'an generated masses of spurious information', she adduces the chapter (*sura*) named Quraysh, which speaks of 'the *ilaf* of Quraysh, their *ilaf* of the journey in winter and summer' (106:1–2). The context gives no clue at all to the meaning of *ilaf*, but commentators provided ready answers. The journeys were, they said, the greater and lesser pilgrimages to Mecca, or they were the migration of Quraysh to Ta'if in the summer and their return to Mecca in the winter, or else they were trading trips by Quraysh to various places, and so on. Her conclusion from this diversity of explanations is that

the exegetes had no better knowledge of what this *sura* meant than we have today; what they are offering is not their recollection or what Muhammad had in mind when he recited these verses, but, on the contrary, so many guesses based on the verses themselves; the original meaning of these verses was unknown to them.¹¹

The implications of Goldziher's ideas were taken up and developed by Joseph Schacht, who emphasised that 'to a much higher degree than hitherto suspected, seemingly historical information on the Prophet is only the background for legal doctrines and therefore devoid of independent value'. For instance, the jurists of Medina regarded the marriage concluded by a pilgrim as invalid while those of Mecca and Iraq considered it valid. The Medinans projected their doctrine back to the well-known early scholar 'Abdallah ibn 'Umar and, with spurious circumstantial details, to Caliph 'Umar I himself (634–44). The opposite doctrine was expressed in a tradition to the effect that the Prophet married Maymuna as a pilgrim. This tradition was countered, on the part of the Medinans, by another tradition related by Sulayman ibn Yasar, who was a freedman of Maymuna, alleging that the Prophet married her in Medina, and therefore not as a pilgrim. Thus,

concludes Schacht, 'we see that even the details of this important event in the life of the Prophet are not based on authentic historical recollection . . . but are fictitious and intended to support legal doctrines'.¹²

The impact of the arguments of these three scholars has left those of a more conservative bent in disarray. Régis Blachère tried to circumvent the problem by using the Qur'an as his starting point.¹³ This text is generally considered to issue from Muhammad himself and in which case it is the key to his thought. But even if this is granted,¹⁴ it does not help us very much, for the Qur'an makes scant reference to the historical environment in which it arose. Events are alluded to rather than narrated, and names are rarely given (aside from Biblical figures, only two personal names are specified – Muhammad four times and a certain Abu Lahab once – and only two names of peoples, the Romans and the tribe of Quraysh; eight places are mentioned once, Sinai twice; four religious communities feature – Jews, Christians, Magians and the mysterious Sabians – and three Arabian goddesses). Even these few references that it does contain are uninformative, because their significance is not explained nor any story told about them. Thus the one reference to Mecca gives no indication of the role which the place is supposed to have played in Muhammad's life: 'It is He who restrained their hands from you and your hands from them, in the hollow of Mecca, after He had made you victorious over them' (48:24). The one reference to Badr does not identify it as the famous first battle between Muhammad and his adversaries, though it is not incompatible with this interpretation: 'And God most surely helped you at Badr when you were utterly abject' (3:119). Hence any biography of Muhammad based on the Qur'an would still have to draw, in some measure at least, upon the corpus of prophetic traditions in order to construct any form of coherent narrative.¹⁵

The response of many scholars, the most renowned being Montgomery Watt, to the Goldziher-Lammens-Schacht thesis is to posit an authentic kernel, 'a solid core of fact'. There are accretions and distortions, but these can be identified and discarded after due reflection:

Once the modern student is aware of the tendencies of the early historians and their sources . . . it ought to be possible for him to some extent to make allowance for the distortion and to present the data in an unbiased form; and the admission of 'tendentious shaping' should have as its corollary the acceptance of the general soundness of the material.¹⁶

This, however, flies in the face of Schacht's warning that 'as regards the biography of the Prophet, traditions of legal and of historical interest cannot possibly be divided from one another', and ignores his consequent recommendation that

we must . . . abandon the gratuitous assumptions that there existed originally an authentic core of information going back to the time of the Prophet, that spurious and tendentious additions were made to it in every succeeding generation . . . but that the genuine core was not completely overlaid by later accretions.¹⁷

Elsewhere Watt champions the reliability of the ‘basic framework’ of the Prophet’s biography, namely the material relating to his military expeditions, arguing – with Lammens in mind – that none of this material could have been derived from the Qur’an and that none of it has legal or doctrinal worth.¹⁸ And he, along with many other Islamicists, makes much use of the argument that if a tradition presents Muhammad in a bad light, then it must be true, for then ‘it is unthinkable that the story could have been invented by Muslims’.¹⁹ Watt said this of the most famous story of this type, namely the incident of the so-called Satanic Verses: Muhammad, having named the three goddesses worshipped by Quraysh in verses 53:19–20, continued, according to many early Muslim scholars, with another verse that ran: ‘They are the high-flying cranes whose intercession is to be desired’, but the angel Gabriel subsequently informed him of his error and cancelled this verse. Surely, the conservatives argue, no Muslim could have had a reason to invent so scurrilous a story about their Prophet. However, John Burton has shown that ‘there existed a compelling theoretical motive for the invention of these infamous *hadiths*’, namely, to support the doctrine that Qur’anic verses could be divinely withdrawn without a verbal replacement (*naskh al-hukm wa-l-tilawa*).²⁰ And in general the idea that we can designate reports unfavourable to Muhammad as true is highly dubious, for it simplifies the nature of a report too much (i.e. either authentic or false) and implies that our modern views on what is favourable or not coincide with those of early Muslims.

Springing from the same desire to isolate a historical core is Rudolf Sellheim’s attempt at a stratigraphy of the Prophet’s biography.²¹ He identifies a layer of miraculous and legendary material and another of political propaganda; all the rest he labels *Grundschrift* (‘ground layer’) and characterizes as bedrock, presumably corresponding to Watt’s ‘basic framework’ or ‘solid core’. But the whole idea of distinct layers or cores, though seductive, is misleading. The different strands of the Prophet’s biography are far too interwoven and cannot simply be teased out into bundles. Patricia Crone puts it more forcefully:

The problem is the very mode of origin of the tradition, not some minor distortions subsequently introduced . . . The entire tradition is tendentious, its aim being the elaboration of an Arabian *Heilsgeschichte* [salvation history], and this tendentiousness has shaped the facts as we have them, not merely added some partisan statements that we can deduct.²²

Most would-be biographers of Muhammad recognise that their task presents difficulties, yet tend to pass over them when they sit down at the writing table. Thus F. E. Peters acknowledges in an article that

Goldziher, Lammens and Schacht were all doubtless correct. A great deal of the transmitted material concerning early Islam was tendentious – not only the material that was used for legal purposes but the very building blocks out of which the earliest history of Muhammad and the Islamic community was constructed.

Nevertheless, when he came to write his own biography of the Prophet, he ignored his own warnings and simply followed the traditional storyline.²³ The problem is that we possess no criteria for authenticity with the result that, as William Muir noted long ago,

the biographer of Mahomet continually runs the risk of substituting for the realities of history some puerile fancy or extravagant invention. In striving to avoid this danger he is exposed to the opposite peril of rejecting as pious fabrications what may in reality be important historical fact;²⁴

or in Maxime Rodinson's more cynical phrasing:

Orientalists are tempted to do as the Orientals have tended to do without any great sense of shame, that is, to accept as authentic those traditions that suit their own interpretation of an event and to reject others.²⁵

The question here is not whether material has been falsely ascribed to the Prophet or not. All parties are agreed that this did in fact happen, including the early Muslims, who ironically imputed this realisation to the Prophet as well, most famously in the tradition: 'He who (deliberately) tells lies about me will have to seek for himself a place in Hell'.²⁶ Rather, the question is where do we place the burden of proof? To the conservatives, 'we cannot but start from the premise that a tradition is a genuine report of "fact" until it is creditably shown to be false',²⁷ whereas this is turned on its head by the revisionist camp:

every legal tradition from the Prophet, until the contrary is proved, must be taken not as an authentic or essentially authentic, even if slightly obscured, statement valid for his time or the time of his Companions, but as the fictitious expression of a legal doctrine formulated at a later date.²⁸

This question is important, because proof one way or another is hard to come by. Therefore the initial presumption will decide whether one accepts the majority of the traditions or rejects the majority of them, and it is difficult to strike any middle way; as one critic has put it, 'one can take the picture presented or one can leave it, but one cannot work with it'.²⁹

Is there any way out of this impasse? Is there any method that could be devised to sift the wheat from the chaff in all this material? When considering this very question, early Muslim scholars came up with a number of solutions of their own. Firstly, they had the idea of insisting that a transmitter of a report specify his/her source and also the source of that source and so on back to the originator of the report. This chain of authorities, called an *isnad*, could then be checked to see that it was plausible and did not contain any inconsistencies (e.g. that the lifetimes of two scholars who transmitted from each other overlapped, that there was a possibility they could have met, etc.). To this end there evolved collections of biographies of scholars, which gave information about when and where each scholar lived, whom they studied with and whom they taught, whether they were known to have been reliable transmitters or not, and so on. The chief objection to this

technique is the obvious one that if someone could forge the text of a tradition, they could also forge its *isnad*. It is, nevertheless, a technique that Western scholars have studied, especially in the hope that they might be able to date a particular tradition by identifying which person in the *isnad* is most likely to have originated it.³⁰

Most recently, Harald Motzki has taken this technique of *isnad* criticism in a different direction by focusing on a single collection of traditions, namely that of ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-San‘ani (d. 211/826), which comprises some 30,000 traditions.³¹ Analysis by Motzki has shown this work to derive largely from the compilations of Ma‘mar ibn Rashid (d. 153/770), Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) and Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161/778). Furthermore, forty per cent of the writings of Ibn Jurayj are said to come from ‘Ata’ ibn Abi Rabah (d. 115/733), mostly in the form of statements (*dicta*) or answers to questions (*responsa*). Ninety-two per cent of these *responsa* and eighty per cent of the *dicta* are given as ‘Ata’s own personal opinion (*ra’y*), suggesting that ‘Ata’s own legal thinking is to some degree recoverable. The problem comes when Motzki tries to trace traditions back into the first century of the Hijra (622–718). To take a very simple example, ‘Abd al-Razzaq quotes Ibn Jurayj who quotes ‘Ata’ who invokes Caliph ‘Umar I regarding the following text:

When a man says to his wife, ‘I find you not to be a virgin’, without accusing her of adultery, he is not to be flogged (for false accusation/*qadhif*). ‘Umar didn’t flog (on such a pretext); they claim that ablution and the like can cause loss of virginity.

In other words, he can truthfully accuse her of not being a virgin without thereby accusing her of unchastity. The same tradition is found in the compilation of Ibn Abi Shayba, who has it from ‘Abbad ibn ‘Awwam from Hajjaj ibn Artah from ‘Ata’: ‘I asked about a man who says to his wife, “I find you not to be a virgin”. He (‘Ata’) said: “there is no punishment on him. Jumping, illness and long spinsterhood can cause loss of virginity.”’³² There is no real reason to doubt that both traditions are a genuine representation of ‘Ata’s views, but did ‘Ata’ owe it to ‘Umar? Was ‘Umar omitted from one tradition or was he added to the other? And who was responsible for the change in wording? Motzki stresses that ‘Ata’ would not have invented those traditions in which he invokes ‘Umar. But the question is not so much whether a tradition is authentic or fabricated – in a general sense much material goes back to the first century – but whether we can pinpoint its originator and the precise wording of his ruling. That is the problem with *isnad* criticism. The same tradition may be transmitted with impeccable *isnads* and still drift wholly away from its original meaning. No one need have cheated; each authority may have transmitted the report faithfully, as they understood it. But by the time it is found in texts that are available to us, often two centuries or so after its genesis, it may have changed almost beyond recognition.³³ This is the principal problem, transformation of a tradition’s content in the course of transmission, and not systematic forgery.

A second solution adopted by Muslim scholars was to assemble variant or even conflicting versions of the same tradition. They then placed them one after another in their text, often making no attempt to link them, but rather simply noting that 'which one is correct is best known to God'. For this failure to apply critical judgement they were derided by certain of their contemporaries and also by some modern scholars.³⁴ They defended themselves, however, by pointing out that to engage their own personal opinion in the process of transmission, to reject and select, would be to run the risk of excluding genuine reports about the Prophet. The feeling is much the same as that expressed in the above quotation from William Muir, though the point for the Muslims was not merely academic, and the methodology is stated clearly by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari in the introduction to his monumental *History of the Prophets and Kings*:

Let him who studies this book of ours know that in everything I say about the subjects which I have decided to recount there, I rely only on what I transmit from explicitly identified reports (*akhbar*) and from accounts (*athar*) which I ascribe by name to their transmitters. I do not achieve understanding through intellectual arguments nor do I make discoveries by intuition, save to a very limited degree . . . And if we mention in this book any report about certain men of the past which the reader finds objectionable or the hearer offensive, to such a degree that he finds in it no sound purpose or truth, let him know that this is not our fault, but is rather the responsibility of one of those who has transmitted it to us. We have presented (such reports) only in the form in which they were presented to us.³⁵

Though not in the same unquestioning vein, modern scholars also commonly follow this procedure of assembling and contrasting variant versions of a tradition. This allows them, if not to establish the original version, at least to illustrate its trajectory and growth.³⁶

A combination of the above two approaches was proposed by Rudi Paret, who identified the chain Ibn Ishaq < Shihab ibn Zuhri < 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr as representative of a genuine master-student relationship and therefore a channel through which information could reliably be passed, and he observed that 'Urwa, as the son of a close companion of Muhammad, was a direct link to the latter's time.³⁷ Though more cautiously, this idea has been taken up and elaborated by Gregor Schoeler, who takes two well-known narratives in Muhammad's biography: the earliest Qur'anic revelation and the occasion when Muhammad's wife 'A'isha was suspected of adultery (*hadith al-ifk*), and then compares a limited number of versions of each tradition, paying particular attention to those transmitted via plausibly trustworthy chains of authorities.³⁸ The problem with this method is that respectable chains, because they were less likely to be questioned, offered an easy means of bringing suspect material into circulation.³⁹ Nevertheless, the book is useful for its focus on the process of the transformation of information brought about by prolonged transmission (*Veränderungsprozess*)

and is very instructive, since it draws on the author's earlier excellent studies on oral and written transmission.⁴⁰

Early Muslim scholars give a third hint as to how best to set about writing the biography of Muhammad, and it is one that, unlike the previous two discussed above, has not been paid sufficient attention by modern Islamicists. It consists in the recognition that what Western researchers simply call the 'Tradition' is a very diverse body of material that comprises many different genres, that has been transmitted in many different ways for many different purposes by many different people, that is possessed of different origins and forms, and so on. This is evident from the variety of terms applied to this material (*athar*, *ahadith*, *akhbar*, *siyar*, *maghazi*, *qisas*, etc.), from the different ways of describing its transmission (*haddatha*, *akhbara*, *qala*, *za'ama*, *ajaza*, *nawala*, etc.), and from the varying judgments that transmitters pass on one another, such as is found in the following account by the Medinan jurist Malik ibn Anas (d. 179/795):

During my lifetime I have come across people in this city who, if they were to pray for rain, would have their prayers answered, but, although they had heard much by way of knowledge and *hadith*, I have never transmitted anything from any of them. (This is) because they were preoccupied with fear of God and asceticism, whereas this business, that is, teaching *hadith* and giving legal decisions, needs men who have awareness of God, scrupulousness, steadfastness, exactitude, knowledge and understanding, so that they know what comes out of their heads and what the result of it will be tomorrow. As for those who do not have this exactitude and understanding, no benefit can be derived from them, nor are they a conclusive proof, nor should knowledge be taken from them.⁴¹

Malik is here presumably talking about pious ascetics (*zuhhad*), whose chief aim was enjoining good Islamic conduct (*uwarā'*) and whose principal interest was in the spirit of the message not its letter, in the moral lessons of a text not in the precision of its wording. Not dissimilar were the goals of many of the so-called storytellers (*qussas*) and preachers (*wu'az*), whose business was

relating narratives of peoples of the past wherein there is a lesson to be gained which gives warning, an admonition which rebukes and an example of the right to be emulated, informing mankind of the blessing God has bestowed upon them.⁴²

And it is on the accounts of such characters that Patricia Crone bases her arguments for the spuriousness of much of the Prophet's biography.⁴³

Furthermore, individual authors can have different methods and designs. Some might strive to be mere compilers, as Tabari says of himself in the passage cited above. Others might actively try to shape the material they were transmitting according to their own vision.⁴⁴ For example, in the following passage from the famous biography of the Prophet by Ibn Ishaq (d. 150/767) one can detect the voice of the historian beginning to speak and not merely that of the transmitter:

When the time came for revelation to descend upon the Prophet of God, he was already a believer in God and in what was to be revealed to him. He was, moreover, fully prepared to act accordingly and to suffer for his faith what God had imposed upon him, both the pleasure and displeasure of mankind. Prophecy imposes heavy burdens and responsibilities which can only be shouldered by prophets of authority and courage, with the aid and blessing of God. This is because of what prophets meet with from people and what God-ordained events may befall them.⁴⁵

And it may well be, then, that the oft-cited fact that Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Waqidi (d. 207/823) is able to supply much more detail about the Prophet's life than Ibn Ishaq (d. 150/767) is explainable not, or not only, by the steady accumulation of 'spurious information', but by the different styles, interests and methods of these two authors.⁴⁶

These three methods of the early Muslim scholars have been adopted and adapted to their own ends by modern researchers of a conservative or traditional inclination. However, they do not satisfy those of a more revisionist bent, who have come with up with their own suggestions for (re)writing the biography of Muhammad, most (in)famously 'to step outside the Muslim tradition altogether' or to maintain that 'Muhammad is not a historical figure'. The first suggestion goes back to a question of Claude Cahen posed some four decades ago as to whether the first reactions of the Christians to Islam, evoked before conversion to Islam had put the Church on the defensive and before Byzantium had begun to use words as well as weapons in its war against the Muslims, might not differ from later polemical literature. Might it not be free of 'the need to present an anti-Muslim argumentation' and so be able to inform us about Islam in its formative phase?⁴⁷ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in their book *Hagarism* took up this point and used only sources external to the Muslim tradition to sketch an alternative account of early Islam.⁴⁸ This approach has some merit for the period after the Muslim conquests, when the subjects of the Byzantine and Iranian empires had a degree of direct exposure to this 'new people'.⁴⁹ So, for example, a monk of Mesopotamia writing in the 680s, says that the Muslims consider Muhammad as their guide and instructor and adhere strictly to his 'tradition'. But the actual events of Muhammad's life, before the Muslim conquests carried his teaching outside Arabia, were unlikely to have circulated far with any degree of accuracy. Moreover, in their provision of a response to the situation facing them, namely that a new religio-political entity had unexpectedly arisen, achieved dazzling military successes and promoted itself as favoured by God and in possession of His latest dispensation, the chief concern of the Byzantines and Iranians was to minimise the damage done to their own former status and self-image, to play down the gains won by their new masters and to extend some hope that they would themselves rise to the fore once again. Thus, for example, much of the reason for the presentation by Christian writers of Muhammad as a reviver of Abrahamic religion was to emphasise that his religion was

nothing new, indeed that it was primitive, not having benefited from any of Jesus's modernisations.⁵⁰

The second suggestion, that Muhammad never existed, has a surprisingly long history. In the late nineteenth century Snouck Hurgronje had already predicted that 'one day or other we may expect to hear that Muhammad never existed'. and a series of publications by Russian Islamologists in the 1930s made exactly that point: Morozov argued that Arabia was incapable of giving birth to any religion, as it is too far from the principal areas of civilisation, while Klimovich felt that Muhammad was merely a necessary fiction in fulfilment of the assumption that every religion must have a founder.⁵¹ Recently this latter notion has been championed by Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, backing it up with the observation that Muhammad does not feature in any dated texts – whether papyrus documents, building texts, epitaphs, graffiti or coin legends – of the first seven decades of Islam. Much has been made of this apparent absence of Muhammad's name from early Islamic official state documents, but one should remember that, apart from the fact that it is an argument from silence, such texts were not intended as historical reports. When Muhammad does appear in the material record, it is not to note his existence or to detail the events of his life, but to make use of him as a propaganda weapon. Moreover, quite a number of non-Muslim sources mention Muhammad by name in the course of these first decades of Muslim rule.⁵²

Morozov's point that a major world religion could not have been born in such a remote corner of the Middle East, but rather must have been nourished more fully within the heartlands of the Late Antique Middle East, is at the root of much revisionist thinking on Islam.⁵³ Its practitioners worry about the fact that

in its equation of the origins of Islam with the career of Muhammad and its detailed depiction of Muhammad's life in Mecca and Medina, Muslim tradition effectively disassociates Islam from the historical development of the monotheist stream of religion as a whole. Islam is shown to be the result of an act of divine revelation made to an Arab prophet who was born and lived most of his life in a town (Mecca) beyond the borders of the then monotheistic world.⁵⁴

And they have proffered two solutions. The first is to relocate the origins of Islam to the Fertile Crescent: 'We need to rethink more drastically our ideas about when and where Islam emerged', for 'it is easier to envisage such an evolution occurring in those regions of the Middle East where the tradition of monotheism was firmly established'⁵⁵ The second is to extend the limits of the Late Antique world to incorporate Muhammad's Arabia. Not surprisingly this approach has been very popular with Late Antique historians, since it widens the scope of their field to include a new geographical region and a new religious phenomenon, and it was adopted already by the architect of Late Antique studies, Peter Brown:

The preaching of Muhammad and the consequent rise of a new religious grouping of the Arab world – the religion of Islam – was the last, most rapid crisis in the

religious history of the Late Antique period . . . We know just enough about the Hijaz in the early seventh century to see how this sudden detonation fitted into the culture of the Near East . . . The caravans of the Meccan merchant-adventurers had come to permeate Byzantium and Persia: Muhammad himself had once made the trek to Syria . . .⁵⁶

The explanation for contact between the two imperial powers of the day and Muhammad's people is more likely to have been the desire of the empires for allies in their struggle for supremacy with each other than Mecca's commercial enterprises, but the general idea advanced by Peter Brown is appealing. There are certainly many avenues of fruitful comparison, for early Islamic civilisation would appear to have a number of features in common with Late Antique ones: a desire for religio-political universalism,⁵⁷ religiously-defined communities,⁵⁸ saints and shrines,⁵⁹ piety,⁶⁰ and interest in the Greek intellectual tradition.⁶¹ It is Classicists and Late Romanists who have most willingly adopted this line of thought, seeing in it a means to expand their discipline's horizons, whereas many Arabists and Islamic historians have continued to think of early Islamic civilisation as very distinct from those around it and before it and have limited their investigation into Islam's links with Late Antiquity to the classic question of what Islam borrowed from Late Antique religions and traditions. This produced many studies that exhibited scant regard for the ways in which information might have been transmitted, the affects of a shared physical and cultural environment and so on,⁶² but there are now signs of a change in attitude, with some scholars producing much more sophisticated studies. For example, building upon the insight that it is not so much that the Muslims borrowed directly from the other religions of the Middle East, but rather that they inhabited and were influenced by the same cultural world, Thomas Sizgorich has striven to illuminate

the ways in which Muslims of the first three centuries after the Hijra drew upon the semiotic *koine* they shared with the communities around them to cast certain crucial events of the seventh-century Arab conquests as episodes within a specifically Muslim narrative.⁶³

And Uri Rubin has been doing the same for the biography of the Prophet.⁶⁴ One might object that this is not writing the life of Muhammad, but rather writing about how later generations wrote the life of Muhammad, and yet we could perhaps apply Sizgorich's principle to focus more directly on the lifetime of Muhammad. It is evident, for example, that the Qur'an inhabits the same symbolic world as a number of different communities. Most attention has been paid to the Jews and Christians, who are directly referred to in the Qur'an and whose narratives are refashioned by it for its own ends, but others are alluded to as well. For example, the verse 'They say, our life is only of this world; we die, we live, and it is only at the hands of Time (*al-dahr*) that we perish' (45:24) is a clear reference to the heroic-cum-pessimistic resignation of the authors and audience of pre-Islamic

Arabic poetry in which Time/Fate (*al-dahr*) constantly harries man throughout the all too short passage to his death and the only solution to which is stoic acceptance ('Indeed I know, and there is no averting it, that I am destined to be the sport of fate, and yet do you see me worry?', as one poet puts it) and a hedonistic swagger ('So let me take my fill whilst I live, since I tremble at the thought of the scant draught I'll get when I'm dead. A noble man satiates himself in life, for you will know, if we die tomorrow, which of us is thirsty', Tarafa ibn al-'Abd).

Though the apparent stalemate over determining the authenticity of the Muslim tradition may seem intractable, the outlook for progress in writing the biography of Muhammad is not all gloomy. In particular, advances in the state of our knowledge about the Prophet's life are to be expected from archaeology. Excavations, such as those presently underway at Tayma and Hegra (Mada'in Salih), will tell us more of the social and economic conditions and material culture of northwest Arabia in the Late Roman period. And epigraphic discoveries can shed light on a whole range of different topics relevant to Muhammad's world. For example, the references in the Qur'an to the irrigated lands of Saba (Sheba) destroyed by a flood (34:15–17), the raiders on Mecca coming from Yemen with elephants in their ranks (105), 'the people in ditches' burned in the fields of Najran (85:4–7) and the subjects of the dynastic rulers of Himyar known as the *tubba'* (44:37, 50:14) demonstrate that the Hijaz was influenced by its southern neighbour. And indeed new finds of inscriptions in Yemen are making it clear that there is a substantial body of religious vocabulary common to the Qur'an and the epigraphic record of South Arabia, most famously the three 'daughters of God' (cf. 53:19–20) and the name Muhammad, but also a number of ritual practices and regulations.⁶⁵ Looking to the north, a new generation of skilled Saudi scholars have been conducting highly professional and scientific epigraphic surveys that are elucidating the transformation of the Nabataean Aramaic script into what we would call the Arabic script, a process that was already under way long before Islam and that would seem to have begun in northwest Arabia.⁶⁶ Such developments may not advance us in the traditional sense that we will learn more or become more sure of the details of Muhammad's life, but it will take us forward in the sense that we will become better informed about the world in which he lived and its relation to the other worlds that coexisted with it, with the result that we would at least understand more clearly where to situate this historically crucial figure as regards the intellectual and religious currents of the wider world in which he lived.

Postscript: Muhammad or 'Abd al-Malik?

In AH 72/AD 691–92, having just successfully ended a long-running civil war (66–72/685–92) and completed the stunning Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem with its message to Christians to respect God's Oneness and

Muhammad as God's Messenger, the caliph 'Abd al-Malik decided to Islamicise a little the coins used in his realm, which had up till then been copies/imitations of the Byzantine and Iranian coin types. In particular, he removed the transverse bars of the crosses⁶⁷ and introduced the Muslim profession of faith: 'There is no god but God alone; Muhammad is the Messenger of God'. The Byzantine emperor Justinian II (685–95, 705–11) responded with an even more startling innovation: he relegated the image of himself to the reverse of the coin and put on the front a human effigy of Jesus Christ, both unprecedented moves (Fig. 1):

In retaliation 'Abd al-Malik placed an image of a standing human bearing a sword in a scabbard⁶⁸ on the front of his coins, the earliest dated is 74/693–94⁶⁹ (Fig. 2):

This is generally assumed to be a representation of the caliph himself and so the coins are known as the 'standing caliph' coins.⁷⁰ However, there are a number of reasons to doubt this:

Firstly, it ignores the war in visual and verbal propaganda going on between Justinian II and 'Abd al-Malik and the wider issue of the use of religious images and slogans that was being hotly debated at this time.⁷¹ If, in response to Justinian's demotion of himself to the reverse of Byzantine coins in favour of Christ's effigy on the front, 'Abd al-Malik had merely put his own image on the front of Muslim coins, it would have seemed a very feeble reply in the view of Christians; rather, the obvious move for him would have been to put an image that would challenge that of the image of Christ, which could only be that of the Prophet Muhammad himself. The very dramatic nature of these changes, their closeness in time, their evidently polemical overtones and enormous propaganda impact (coins circulate very widely) at a time of great tension (in particular, the Byzantines suffered a major defeat at Sebastopolis in 73/692–93) make it essential for these two innovations to be considered together.

Secondly, it ignores the context of the Arab civil war of 685–92 in which religion had played a major role for diverse groups clamouring for greater social justice, and 'Abd al-Malik saw the chance to steal their thunder and to heal the divisions among the Muslim community by putting Islam at the heart of the state. Henceforth, the name of the Prophet Muhammad, which had been absent from all state media (i.e. administrative documents, monumental inscriptions, etc.), became *de rigueur* on every official text and became pretty much standard in epitaphs and graffiti. This makes it unlikely that the image on the front of 'Abd al-Malik's new coins was himself, which would have been condemned by Muslims as an imitation of infidel kings, and much more likely that it is a religious personage, again most obviously Muhammad himself.

Thirdly, the iconography of the person on 'Abd al-Malik's coinage is closer to that of Justinian II's Christ figure than to an emperor figure: both have long, flowing hair and are bearded,⁷² and both are without headgear (i.e. no turban or crown).⁷³



Fig. 1. Justinian II (1st) DOC II/2, no 7h, obv + rev.



Fig. 2. Ashmolean Standing Caliph, obv + rev.

Fourthly, the standing-figure coins of Jerusalem, Harran and al-Ruha (Edessa) do not, unlike those of other mints, name the Prophet Muhammad *and* the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik, but *only* mention Muhammad. As Clive Foss has remarked, 'ever since the inception of portrait coinage in the Hellenistic period, the image and superscription had gone together, that is, the inscription names the figure portrayed . . . I know of no coin where the obverse inscription refers to someone different from the figure portrayed'.⁷⁴

Fifthly, the objection sometimes raised, that Muslim religious authorities would have forbidden the image of the Prophet to be placed on the coins, is not really valid. It is certainly true that around this time, or shortly afterwards, the question of what images were admissible and in what context became a hot topic,⁷⁵ and indeed the fifteenth-century Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi quotes a report to the effect that when the new coins of 'Abd

al-Malik reached the surviving companions of Muhammad in Medina, 'they disapproved of their engraving, for it contained an image, although Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyab (a famous lawyer of Medina) bought and sold with them finding no fault with them at all'.⁷⁶ One must bear in mind that the Muslims were still working out for themselves what exactly was the Islamic position on a whole host of different issues, especially where, as is the case with images, the Qur'an does not advocate a particular position. And there are a number of historical reports which imply that there was no specific prohibition on representations of the Prophet. One example is found amid a large corpus of stories about the meeting between a group of Arabs and the emperor Heraclius (610–41), who is portrayed as recognising the truth of Islam and its Prophet, but not daring to convert out of fear of his generals/patriarchs. In some accounts he shows the group a series of paintings on silk of the prophets, the last of which was the exact image of Muhammad (*surat Muhammad*), as the members of the Arab delegation themselves confirmed.⁷⁷ Another example is provided by a cluster of reports about the black paving stone to the right of the prayer niche in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which was said to be over one of the gates of paradise and onto which was carved, according to some authorities, the 'form' of Muhammad (*khilqat Muhammad*).⁷⁸ Whether true or not, it is interesting to note that none of the numerous transmitters of these two narratives ever expresses even the slightest hint of disapproval at the idea of a representation of Muhammad.

The standing-figure coin was only minted for three years (AH 74–77/AD 693–97) before giving way to a wholly aniconic form, that is, engraved only with words and no images at all; now quotations from the Qur'an proclaiming God's Oneness and Muhammad's mission replace the standing figure. The period of experimentation to find an aesthetic suited to an Islamic style of coinage had come to an end, the conclusion being that the simple and elegant beauty of the Arabic script alone, the vehicle of God's message to the Muslims, best provided this aesthetic. If it is true that this figure on the Muslim coinage of 694–97 was Muhammad, then this would be very exciting indeed, for, even though it is in stylised form, it comes from a time when some of his Companions, who knew him personally, would still have been alive.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ Bede, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. J. Giles (London, 1844), 8.185.

² Bede, *Opera historica*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1896), 1.349 (= *Historia ecclesiastica*, 5.XXIII).

³ The speech is attributed to him in a poem composed by Ermold the Black c.826; it is cited by B. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission. European Approaches towards the Muslims* (Princeton, 1984), 7–8, 215–6.

⁴ B. Pascal, *Oeuvres*, ed. L. Brunschvicg (Paris, 1921), 14.37–8. Similarly, the entry for Muhammad in Barthélemy d'Herbelot's celebrated *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697) merely repeats the standard polemical line: 'This is the famous impostor Mahomet, author and founder of a heresy which has taken on the name of a religion and which we call Mohammedan . . .'

⁵ E. Renan, 'Mahomet et les origines de l'Islamisme', *Revue des deux mondes*, 12 (1851): 1065.

⁶ E.g. Ziauddin Sardar and Zafar Abbas Malik, *Muhammad for Beginners* (Cambridge, 1994), 30: 'The Life of Muhammad is known as the Sira and was lived in the full light of history. Everything he did and said was recorded . . . We thus know his life to the minutest details: how he spoke, sat, slept, dressed, walked; his behaviour . . . his attitudes'; Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad. A Biography of the Prophet* (London, 1995), 14: 'We know more about Muhammad than about the founder of any major faith . . .' Montgomery Watt's *Muhammad at Mecca* and *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1953, 1956), though commonly used at a university level, do little more than rehash early Muslim biographies of Muhammad. And Reza Aslan's *No God but God* (London, 2006), 53, though stressing that 'to understand what really happened in Medina and why, one must sift through the sources', nevertheless reproduces the standard account. A rare exception is Michael Cook's *Muhammad* (Oxford, 1983).

⁷ I. Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle, 1990), 2.5. The discussion of the 'Sources for the Biography of Mahomet' in William Muir's four-volume *Life of Mahomet* (London, 1861; retained as an appendix in the abridged version of 1876) anticipates most of the subsequent objections to the authenticity of the traditions and has perhaps been unjustly neglected, though the case is not so systematically presented as by Goldziher.

⁸ In particular see H. Lammens, 'Qoran et tradition: Comment fut composé la vie de Mahomet', *Recherches de science religieuse*, 1 (1910): 27–51. The term 'packets of historical truth' is found in his 'L'âge de Mahomet et la chronologie de la Sira', *Journal asiatique*, 17 (1911): 249.

⁹ C. H. Becker, 'Prinzipelles zu Lammens' Sirastudien', *Der Islam*, 4 (1913): 263–9 (still agreeing with the fundamentals of Lammens's theory); T. Nöldeke, 'Die Tradition über das Leben Muhammeds', *Der Islam*, 5 (1914): 160–70.

¹⁰ P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford, 1987), 214–15. Note, however, that Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder* (Princeton, 1995), 226–33, argues, quite persuasively, that these exegetic elaborations on the Qur'anic text were added to already existing stories, and 'none of the Qur'anic verses which appear in the biography of Muhammad can be regarded as the primary source of the story'.

¹¹ Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 204–13, 210.

¹² The information in this paragraph is found in J. Schacht, 'A Reevaluation of Islamic Traditions', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1949): 143–54. His theories are elaborated at much greater length in *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1950) and clarified in *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford, 1964).

- ¹³ R. Blachère, *Le problème de Mahomet* (Paris, 1952). Cf. M. Rodinson, *Mahomet*, rev. edn. (Paris, 1968), 13: 'Must one then abandon the task in despair, give up the idea of writing this biography and, like one Soviet writer, speak instead of the myth of Muhammad? I do not think so. We still have the text of the Koran, very difficult to use . . . but it provides a firm basis and is certainly authentic'. Cf. J. Chabbi, *Histoire et tradition sacrée: la biographie impossible de Mahomet*, *Arabica*, 43 (1996), 204: 'Historiquement . . . il semble que l'on ne puisse guère [travailler sur Mahomet] qu'en travaillant, d'abord et presque exclusivement, sur sa figure coranique'.
- ¹⁴ Most scholars do grant this, though John Wansbrough (*Quranic Studies*, Oxford, 1977) would see it as a later compilation of disparate materials; cf. P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977), 3, 17–18; P. Crone, 'Two Legal Problems bearing on the Early History of the Qur'an', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 18 (1994): 1–37.
- ¹⁵ For what one might be able to infer from the Qur'an alone see Cook, *Muhammad*, 70.
- ¹⁶ Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 338; Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, xiii.
- ¹⁷ Schacht, 'Reevaluation of Islamic Traditions', 150, 146–7.
- ¹⁸ M. Watt, 'The Materials used by Ibn Ishaq', in B. Lewis and P. M. Holt (eds.), *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), 23–34; Watt, 'The Reliability of Ibn Ishaq's Sources', in T. Fahd (ed.), *La vie du prophète Mahomet* (Colloque de Strasbourg, 1980; Paris, 1983), 31–43.
- ¹⁹ Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 103. Another example is the tale of Muhammad up a palm tree eavesdropping on the Jewish would-be prophet Ibn Sayyad, of which D. Halperin says 'the peculiar and embarrassing nature of this story itself argues for its authenticity'. 'The Ibn Sayyad Traditions and the Legend of al-Dajjal', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 96 (1976): 219.
- ²⁰ 'Those are the High-Flying Cranes', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 15 (1970): 265.
- ²¹ R. Sellheim, 'Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte. Die Muhammed-Biographie des Ibn Ishaq', *Oriens*, 18–19 (1967): 33–91.
- ²² Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 230, neatly summing up the thesis of J. Wansbrough's *Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford, 1978).
- ²³ F. E. Peters, 'The Quest of the Historical Muhammad', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 303. His biography of the Prophet is entitled *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (New York, 1994), and is reviewed (unfavourably because of his uncritical approach) by P. Crone in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 5 (1995): 209–12.
- ²⁴ Muir, *Life of Mahomet* (abridged version), 579.
- ²⁵ M. Rodinson, 'A Critical Survey of Modern Studies of Muhammad', in M. Swartz (ed.), *Studies on Islam* (New York, 1981), 42. It would seem that Rodinson himself succumbed to this temptation, since he managed to write a 324-page biography of the Prophet despite his concession in the foreword that 'there is nothing of which we can say for certain that it incontestably dates back to the time of the Prophet'.
- ²⁶ See Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, 2.131–44; G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 96–133. Cf. al-Nazzam (d. ca. 221/836): 'How can he who hears a *hadith* be sure that the transmitter is truthful when nothing in the report itself obliges him to believe it . . . How can we be sure that truthful persons never lie . . . when we see that jurists will make up lies in *hadith* and falsify *isnads*, alleging that they have met people they never met and to have heard false reports they never heard?' Cited by J. van Ess, 'Ein unbekanntes Fragment des Nazzam', in W. Hoenerbach (ed.), *Der Orient in der Forschung: Festschrift für Otto Spies* (Wiesbaden, 1967), 171.
- ²⁷ R. B. Serjeant, 'Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam: Misconceptions and Flawed Polemics', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 110 (1990): 472.
- ²⁸ Schacht, *Origins*, 149; cf. Cook, *Muhammad*, 67.
- ²⁹ P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1980), 4.
- ³⁰ This is the so-called common-link theory espoused by Schacht. The idea is that you assemble the different versions of a tradition, look at their *isnads* and see if there is one person who appears in all of them (the common link); this person is then likely to be the originator. For discussion see M. Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma* (Cambridge, 1981), 107–16; Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 206–17.
- ³¹ H. Motzki, 'The *Musannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani as a Source of Authentic *Ahadith* of the First Century A.H.', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 50 (1991): 1–21. He presents his arguments in much greater detail in *Die Anfänge der islamischen Jurisprudenz: ihre Entwicklung in Mekka bis zur Mitte des 2./8. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1991).

- ³² 'Abd al-Razzaq, *Musannaf*, ed. Habib al-Rahman al-A'zami (Beirut, 1970–72), vol. 7, no. 12401; Ibn Abi Shayba, *Musannaf*, ed. Sa'īd Muhammad al-Lahham (Beirut, 1989), vol. 9, no. 8356.
- ³³ Though it is true that certain types of transmitted material proved very hardy, suffering remarkably little adulteration; two plausible examples are pithy legal maxims (e.g. *al-walad li-l-firash*/'the child belongs to the wedding bed' – i.e. even if the biological father is other than the mother's husband) examined by Schacht and the battle cries of the first civil war studied by Martin Hinds.
- ³⁴ Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, 2.133–38 (derision from contemporaries), 148–52 (derision from Goldziher; e.g.: 'the Muslim critic has no feeling for even the crudest anachronisms as long as the *isnad* is correct').
- ³⁵ Cited by R. S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Enquiry* (Princeton, 1991), 73–4.
- ³⁶ For examples see any of the articles of M. J. Kister in his *Studies in Jahiliyya and Early Islam* (Variorum CS 123; London, 1980), and *Society and Religion from Jahiliyya to Islam* (Variorum CS 327; Aldershot, 1990). For some thoughts on methodology see J. Lassner, 'The Stratigraphy of Historical Traditions', *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory* (New Haven, CT, 1986), 30–6.
- ³⁷ R. Paret, 'Die Lücke in der Überlieferung über den Urislam', in F. Meier (ed.), *Westöstliche Abhandlungen. Rudolf Tschudi zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden, 1954), 147–53.
- ³⁸ G. Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds* (Berlin, 1996).
- ³⁹ See Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 134–60, for problems in *isnads*; e.g. on page 160: 'there is undeniable evidence in support of the theory that certain key figures in *hadith* transmission, such as Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri, constitute in reality a collection of persons who have all played a part in *hadith* and whose common name is used or misused in *isnads* either by themselves or by otherwise anonymous *hadith* forgers'.
- ⁴⁰ These appeared in various issues of *Der Islam* from 1985 to 1992.
- ⁴¹ Cited by Yasin Dutton, *The Origins of Islamic Law* (Richmond, 1999), 17–18.
- ⁴² Ibn al-Jawzi, *Kitab al-qussas*, ed. And trans. M. L. Swartz (Beirut, 1971), paras. 3–6.
- ⁴³ Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 214–30 (page 216: 'it is . . . thanks to the contribution of storytellers that the historical tradition is so short of authentic information').
- ⁴⁴ As has recently been seen to be the case for the historian Sayf ibn 'Umar; see Patricia Crone's review of the edition of his *Kitab al-ridda wa-l-futuh* and his *Kitab al-jamal wa-masir 'A'isha wa-'Ali* in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 6 (1996): 237–40. And as has also been demonstrated by Stefan Leder with regard to the historian Haytham ibn 'Adi; see his *Das Korpus al-Haitham ibn 'Adi* (st. 207/822). *Herkunft, Überlieferung, Gestalt früher Texte der Akhbar Literatur* (Frankfurt, 1991), or else any of his series of articles (especially those in *Oriens* 1988 and 1990).
- ⁴⁵ Cited by Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1994), 36.
- ⁴⁶ Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 223–5; cf. Cook, *Muhammad*, 63–4. For an alternative view see Michael Lecker, 'The Death of the Prophet Muhammad's Father: Did Waqid Invent Some of the Evidence?', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 145 (1995): 9–27.
- ⁴⁷ Claude Cahen, 'Note sur l'accueil des chrétiens d'Orient à l'Islam', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 166 (1964): 51–2, 56–8.
- ⁴⁸ Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, esp. 3–34.
- ⁴⁹ Though see the qualifying remarks to this idea in my *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton, 1997), esp. 591–8.
- ⁵⁰ For further examples and discussion see my 'The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad: An Appraisal', in H. Motzki (ed.), *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden, 2000), 276–97.
- ⁵¹ References given by Ibn Warraq, 'Studies on Muhammad and the Rise of Islam' in Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* (New York, 2000), 44 (Hurgronye), 49 (Morozov and Klimovich).
- ⁵² *Crossroads to Islam: Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (New York, 2003), 247–69; see, however, my 'New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 69 (2006): 395–416.
- ⁵³ Note Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, vii: 'We have expended a good deal of energy, both scholastic and intellectual, on taking seriously the obvious fact that the formation of Islamic civilisation took place in the world of late antiquity'. N.B. 'Late Antiquity' is a term coined to refer to a Near/Middle East undergoing the changes wrought by the transition from a pagan to a Christian Roman Empire.

⁵⁴ G. Hawting, 'John Wansbrough, Islam and Monotheism', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 9 (1997): 24.

⁵⁵ G. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge, 1999), 13; cf. Wansbrough, *The Sectarial Milieu*, 99: 'The elaboration of Islam was not contemporary with but posterior to the Arab occupation of the Fertile Crescent', and S. Bashear, *Arabs and Others in Early Islam* (Princeton, 1997), 113: 'The proposition that Arabia could have constituted the source of the vast material power required to effect such changes in world affairs within so short a span of time is, to say the least, a thesis calling for proof and substantiation'.

⁵⁶ *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971), 189. For some perceptive remarks on this issue see C. F. Robinson, 'Reconstructing Early Islam: Truth and Consequences', in H. Berg (ed.), *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins* (Leiden, 2003), 101–34. Peter Brown's *World of Late Antiquity* put Late Antiquity's chronological parameters as 150–750 and included the land of Iran and the religion of Islam, but not all are of his view; e.g. 'His [Henri Pirenne's] thesis that the advent of Islam in the Mediterranean sealed the end of Late Antiquity remains valid'. J. Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton, 1987), 134.

⁵⁷ G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), esp. 138–68 (boldly argues that Islam is the consummation of Late Antiquity by virtue of its achievement of politico-religious universalism).

⁵⁸ 'Large Christian groups, Chalcedonians quite as much as Monophysites, were prepared to forget ancient loyalties to their cities. Religion provided them with a more certain, more deeply felt basis of communal identity. Even when they lived in villages and cities where their own church predominated, they had come to see themselves first and foremost, as members of a religious community. They were fellow-believers. They were no longer fellow citizens' (P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford, 2003), 189). 'The arrival of the Arabs merely cut the last threads that had bound the provincials of the Near East to the Roman empire' (Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 187).

⁵⁹ 'Under Islam, monasteries and their holy men continued to fill a niche in the landscape and society of the late antique Middle East. Only now, the visitors who passed through the monastic complexes included Muslims . . . For many early Muslims it seems that Christian practices and beliefs acted as stimuli along the way to the formation of a distinctively Islamic way of holiness and asceticism' (E. K. Fowden in *ead.* and G. Fowden, *Studies on Hellenism, Christianity and the Umayyads* (Athens 2004), 162).

⁶⁰ 'Qur'anic piety continued these late antique traditions of piety' (F. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins* (Princeton, 1998), 72). See also C. Robinson, 'Prophecy and Holy Men in Early Islam', in J. Howard-Johnston and P. A. Hayward (eds.), *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1999), 241–62.

⁶¹ 'Islam . . . builds on and conserves Christian-Antique Hellenism . . . A time will come when we will learn to understand late Hellenism by looking back from the Islamic tradition' (C. H. Becker, *Islamstudien* (Leipzig, 1924–32), 1.201); 'Those scholars of late antiquity and of medieval Europe who ponder about when the late-antique era ended and the medieval began, can infer from my book that at least as far as the history of metaphysics is concerned, the decisive moment occurred around 1001, in the Samanid library in the city of Bukhara in the Central Asian province of Transoxania, far outside their traditional area of focus' (R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (London, 2003), 266).

⁶² This began with such works as A. Geiger, *Was hat Muhammad aus dem Judenthume ausgenommen* (Leipzig, 1902); C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundations of Islam* (New York, 1933); R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (New York, 1926). Little different in approach is C. Luxenberg's *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* (Berlin, 2000), which presents the Qur'an as dependent on north Mesopotamian Syriac Christian culture without any thought for how the latter could have come to dominate in far away northwest Arabia or why it is that the Qur'an, even when relating Biblical events, does so in such a dramatically different voice and style.

⁶³ 'Narrative and Community in Islamic Late Antiquity', *Past and Present*, 185 (2004): 15.

⁶⁴ *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton, 1995); *Between Bible and Qur'an: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Princeton, 1999).

⁶⁵ In particular, see J. Ryckmans, 'Les inscriptions sud-arabes anciennes et les études arabes', *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, 35 (1975): 443–63; C. Robin, 'Les "Filles de Dieu" de Saba' à la Mecque', *Semitica*, 50 (2001): 113–92. A nice example is the practice of intercalation (*al-nasi'*),

which is forbidden by the Qur'an (9:37) and which has turned up in a South Arabian expiation text with the same significance as in the Qur'an, namely moving sacred festivals from their prescribed time (F. de Blois, 'Qur'an 9:37 and CIH547', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 34 (2004): 101–4).

⁶⁶ See my 'Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur'an', in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *Towards a New Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Routledge, forthcoming). Saudi scholars such as Sa'd al-Rashid, Ali Ghabban, Khaleel al-Muaiikel, Sulayman al-Theeb and Moshalleh al-Moraekhi are providing us with a tremendous body of new epigraphic material that will contribute greatly to our understanding of the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic Hijaz.

⁶⁷ Or at least this is the standard interpretation, though it might be more appropriate to understand it as a Muslim image rather than as a curtailed Christian one; the obvious candidate would be the staff of the Prophet Muhammad (*qadib al-nabi*), which had miraculous properties (the Ghifari tribesman, who grabs it off the caliph 'Uthman while the latter was besieged in his house, dies after trying to break it over his knees) and is linked with the staff of Moses that is mentioned in the Qur'an (e.g., al-Jabiz, *al-Bayan wa-l-tabyin*, ed. A. M. Harun (Cairo, 1961), 3.89). Consider the parallel case of Muslim coins engraved with an image of the Prophet's spear (*anaza*) within an arch, which is a Muslim version of the cross within an arch that appears on Christian coins and other objects (see the very interesting article of L. Treadwell, 'Mihrab and 'Anaza or Sacrum and Spear', *Muqarnas*, 22 (2005): esp. 19–21).

⁶⁸ Again this is the standard interpretation, though I have pondered whether one could see it as a scroll inside a case; note that, Muhammad al-Jazari, *Asna l-mathalib*, Mecca, AH 1324, 36, 'Ali allegedly kept the scroll of the Constitution of Medina, which he received from Muhammad, in a sword scabbard; this would then nicely parallel the image of Christ on the Byzantine coins, who is holding a book.

⁶⁹ Thus G. C. Miles, 'The Earliest Arab Gold Coinage', *ANS MN*, 13 (1967): 227: 'The following succession of events may be proposed: in 691 or 692 (72 AH) the Damascus mint struck the gold adaptation with Kufic legend; in 692 (72 or 73 AH) Justinian II issued his new type; in 693 (74 AH) 'Abd al-Malik responded with the Standing Caliph dinar', which fits with the order of events preferred by Theophanes (d. 817) in his chronicle (ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 1.365). J. D. Breckenridge, *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II* (New York, 1959), esp. 69–77, thinks Justinian started it. In either case the timing is tight, because Justinian's innovation is evidently related to canon 82 of the Quinisext Council convened by him in 691–92, which mandated that Christ no longer be represented as a lamb, but only in human form. For an overview of events see C. Head, *Justinian II of Byzantium* (Milwaukee, 1972), esp. 45–58.

⁷⁰ There is a large bibliography on this innovation; most recently see Stephen Album and Tony Goodwin, *Sylloge of Islamic Coins in the Ashmolean, Volume 1, The Pre-Reform Coinage of the Early Islamic Period* (Oxford, 2002), 91–9; Tony Goodwin, *Arab-Byzantine Coinage*, Studies in the Khalili Collection IV (New York, 2006).

⁷¹ For example, the Byzantine emperor became irate at 'Abd al-Malik's introduction of religious motifs and messages on papyri protocols (al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-buldan*, ed. S. al-Munajjid (Cairo, 1959), 241) and there is an obvious link between Justinian's designation of himself on coins as 'servant of Christ' and 'Abd al-Malik's use of 'deputy of God'. For the wider context of this see P. Crone, 'Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 2 (1980): 59–95.

⁷² Miles, 'Gold Coinage', 216 n. 36, does note that 'his long hair and beard also resemble those of Christ on the Byzantine coin', but does not pursue this point. On the appearance of Umayyad princes see G. Fowden, *Qusayr 'Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley, 2004), 115–41.

⁷³ On Byzantine coins the emperors wore crowns, so the bare-headed Christ is in striking contrast to this; the Umayyad prince in Sasanian attire at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi appears to be wearing some sort of royal headgear (ibid., 121, fig. 39); the one at Khirbat al-Mafjar has his hair exposed on the sides (the top of his head is broken off, so we cannot be sure that he was bareheaded), but tightly coiffed, not flowing, as on the coinage (ibid., 162 fig. 46).

⁷⁴ C. Foss, 'Anomalous Arab-Byzantine Coins', *ONS Newsletter*, 166 (2001): 9, and repeated in Foss, 'The Coinage of the First Century of Islam', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 16 (2003): 758.

⁷⁵ See R. Paret, 'Die Entstehungszeit des islamischen Bilderverbots', *Kunst des Orients*, 11 (1976–7): 158–81; D. van Reenen, 'The Bilderverbot, a New Survey', *Der Islam*, 67 (1990): 27–77.

Note that it is not just the content of an image that matters in Islam, but also its context: e.g., the Umayyad mosque of Mushatta in Jordan depicts images on three of its sides but not on the side that faces Mecca, and there are thousands of extant literary manuscripts that contain illustrations but there are no illustrated Qur'ans.

⁷⁶ 'Kitab al-nuqud al-qadima al-islamiyya' (also known as *Shudhur al-'uqud fi 'ilm al-nuqud*) in A. al-Karmali, *Rasa'il fi l-nuqud al-'arabiyya wa-l-islamiyya wa-'ilm al-nummiyyat* (Cairo, 1987), 41. He also says that the caliph Mu'awiya (40–60/660–80) 'struck dinars on which was an effigy (*timthal*) girt with a sword' and which an army officer proclaimed to be badly struck (*ibid.*, 39); it is usually assumed that he confused Mu'awiya with 'Abd al-Malik, though it is possible that the report is correct and that no examples of this coin-type have survived/yet been discovered. Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh*, 452, also mentions the disapproval of the Companions at Medina, but gives no reason, though it is implied it is connected with their weight.

⁷⁷ N. M. El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 52–3. She recounts the version where the Arabs are Muslims sent by the first caliph Abu Bakr to convert Heraclius, but there is also a version where the Arabs are pagans on a trading mission and it is Heraclius who tries to convince them of Muhammad's prophethood (e.g. al-Nuwayri, *Nihayat al-arab fi funun al-adab*, Cairo, 1923–98, 14.50 = 5.5.1 [*sirat rasul Allah*]).

⁷⁸ A. Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship* (Leiden, 1995), 79, citing Ibn al-Faqih (d. 903); the report is widespread and while the use of the word *khilqa* is odd, it would seem always to intend the outward aspect/form of Muhammad.

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