

**JOHN WANSBROUGH
AND THE PROBLEM OF ISLAMIC ORIGINS
IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP:
A FAREWELL
TO THE TRADITIONAL ACCOUNT**

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In a recent study dealing with the historical setting and the literary development of ancient narratives on a concrete subject, John van Seters has rightly made the point that “[t]oo often a social and historical context is put forward, and then the narrative sources are made to fit this context, and finally the fit is used to confirm the reality of the historical context—a complete circularity of argument”.¹ Accordingly, he writes, “[a]ny search for a controlling for narrative sources or background must establish a sufficient level of confidence outside this hermeneutical circle to be effective.”²

Perhaps there is no other field of study in which such circularity of argument has by and large prevailed in past and present scholarship as that of the rise and early development of the Islamic faith and its scriptural (both religious and historiographical) corpus. Regardless of the very late date of the earliest Muslim writings and in spite of the lack of other textual sources that could validate them, they are usually taken to describe with a certain measure of accuracy the hypothetical—in fact not at all clear—events they depict, which, in

¹ Seters, J. van. *The Biblical Saga of King David*. Winona Lake, IN, 2009, 2.

² Ibid.

rigour, cannot be deduced but from those very same writings. Neither their quite frequently literary nature nor their didactic and political concerns is usually regarded as a decisive challenge to the veracity of the presumed historical records included within them. The events referred to in such literature were so firmly established by the weight of the Muslim tradition, and they have come to be so familiar to everyone, that almost no one questions them. Moreover, they tend to “provide” the historical setting for such literature, which is in turn read in light of them. In short, the effect becomes the cause, and the conceptual movement by which such paralogical exchange is made possible is either ignored or else obliterated.

On the other hand, there is also a supplementary problem brought about by the comparison of current Jewish, Christian and Islamic studies regarding the emergence of each particular religion. To put it briefly: the historical-critical method successfully applied in the past two centuries to the study of early Judaism and nascent Christianity has almost gone unparalleled in the study of Islamic origins, which does represent an anomaly of very significant proportions, therefore, within the field of comparative religious studies. Yet only very few scholars seem to be aware of this and even a more reduced number of scholars working on the field of early Islamic studies can be said to care much of such an astonishing asymmetry.

And there is, finally, the problem of interdisciplinarity. Scholars working on early Islamic studies are not always adequately informed about the progress made by their colleagues in the study of late antique Judaism and Christianity. They frequently go their own path without noticing that, here and there, their research proceeds along a complex crossroad.

Hence it is not only a question of method. Nor is it only a question of hermeneutical caution. Scholarship on Islamic origins must also come out of the deceitful isolation in which more often than not it still dwells. Yet this conviction is, to be sure, far from being a mere claim in the desert. One need only reflect on the very suggestive works published in the past four decades or so by several scholars either present or not in this volume—which is of necessity, as any other book, unhappily limited in both its scope and extension—to perceive that things are changing at last (albeit not as rapidly as one would perhaps desire!). And it is fair to say that, at least to a certain measure, it all began some forty years ago with the

work of the late John Wansbrough, to whose memory we would wish to dedicate this miscellaneous volume.

In the late 1970s Wansbrough published two groundbreaking, complementary studies on which he had started working a few years earlier: *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*,³ and *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*.⁴ Whereas he devoted the latter to the study of early Muslim historiography and to its sectarian milieu, in the former he addressed the Qurʾān “as a document susceptible of analysis by the instruments and techniques of Biblical criticism.”⁵ This, of course, was—and to be precise still is in some measure—something entirely new and much provocative within the realm of Quranic studies. For “[n]ot merely dogmas such as those defining scripture as the uncreated Word of God and acknowledging its formal and substantive inimitability, but also the entire corpus of Islamic historiography, by providing a more or less coherent and plausible report of the circumstances of the Quranic revelation, have discouraged examination of the document as representative of a traditional literary type”⁶ whose historical setting should be also investigated instead of taken for granted. Accordingly, he attempted at “a systematic study of the formal properties of scriptural authority as merely one (though possibly the major one) factor contributing to the emergence of an independent and self-conscious religious community,”⁷ which meant examining “the literary uses, and hence communal functions, of scripture,”⁸ its sectarian background within “the marginalia of Judaeo-Christian history,”⁹ the “traditional stock of monotheistic

³ Wansbrough, J. *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*. LOS. Oxford, 1977; repr. Amherst, NY, 2005, with Foreword, Translation and Expanded Notes by A. Rippin.

⁴ Wansbrough, J. *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*. LOS. Oxford, 1978; repr. Amherst, NY, 2006, with Foreword, Translation and Expanded Notes by G. R. Hawting.

⁵ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, xxi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

imagery”¹⁰ upon which the Qur’ān drew, and its canonization as scripture, an achievement by which “the document of revelation was assured a kind of independence, both of historical traditions commonly adduced to explain its existence and of external criteria recruited to facilitate its understanding.”¹¹

Now, whilst it is true that scholars such as Abraham Geiger, Theodor Nöldeke, Tor Andrae, and Karl Ahrens, to just mention a few names, had already written on the unquestionable dependence of the Muslim scriptures upon several Judaeo-Christian motifs, they had not gone as far as Wansbrough in this respect; nor had they offered a systematic exposition of the whole matter—which becomes in Wansbrough a most complex historical and theoretical problem of the greatest importance in the study of Islamic origins—within their writings. Likewise, other authors such as Siegmund Frankel, Alphonse Mingana, Arthur Jeffery, and Heinrich Speyer, had previously studied quite convincingly the foreign vocabulary of the Qur’ān; yet their respective contributions had been mainly punctual. Conversely, opting for a reconstruction of the Muslim scriptures on the basis of their presumed Christian *Urtext*, as suggested by Günter Lüling in the early 1970s, seemed to Wansbrough too ventured, though he regarded many of Lüling’s conjectures not unreasonable. On the other hand, although Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht had also questioned the alleged historicity of the prophetic *logia* which are (together with the Qur’ān) the very basis of Muslim jurisprudence, they were still confident upon other various traditional records and “data.” Doubtless, Wansbrough relied on them all as well as on Walter Baur, who provided him a model for the late development of orthodoxy, Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Schlatter, Hans-Joachim Schoeps, and Chaim Rabin, who had either mentioned (von Harnack and Schlatter) or explored (Schoeps and Rabin) the possible influences of Judaeo-Christianity upon formative Islam. Yet he moved a step further questioning the pre-existence of an autonomous entity upon which influence could be exerted, and hence settled the criti-

¹⁰ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

cal foundations of contemporary scholarship on Islamic origins. As Gerald R. Hawting puts it,

scholars have postulated the existence of one or other religious group in Arabia and suggested how Muhammad might have come into contact with it and been influenced to develop the ideas to which he gave expression as Islam. This is often put as the operation of “influences” or the acceptance of “borrowings.” For example, many academic scholars, concerned with the common monotheistic or biblical stories and allusions that one finds in the Qur’ān, have assumed that Muhammad must have come to know them by coming into contact with Jews or Christians of various sorts.

Wansbrough entirely eschews the idea of influences or borrowings of this sort, usually in Arabia but perhaps on journeys that the traditional account tells us he made to Syria as a young man. Wansbrough entirely eschewed the idea of influences or borrowings from this sort, which assume an already existing entity that can be influenced from outside. He does not talk of Muhammad coming into contact with sectarian circles but understands the religion that will eventually evolve into Islam as arising out of the sectarian circles themselves. There is no suggestion here of something that already exists taking on foreign characteristics, but of Islam as the further development of tendencies already there in sectarian monotheistic circles. Furthermore, he does not envisage Arabia as the likely setting for this, but the regions outside Arabia where the existence of such groups is attested before Islam. . . .

His suggestion, although not spelled out in detail, is that a religious elite responsible for elaborating the beginnings of Islam in the sectarian setting was able to establish a relationship with the originally religiously undefined Arab state so that gradually Islam became a symbol of association with the state and the early history of the state came to be defined as the early history of Islam.¹²

¹² Hawting, G. R. “Foreword.” In Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu*, i–viii, here vi–vii.

In short, Wansbrough considered that identification of the earliest Islamic community may and ought to be “regarded as the investigation of process rather than of structure.”¹³ At a given time and place and under certain circumstances, a new defined religious community emerged from within a composite sectarian milieu. Most likely, however, this did not take place in 7th-century Arabia but somewhere else much later on—probably from the 8th to the 9th centuries;¹⁴ and it resulted from “polygenesis” rather than constituting the effect of a single development.¹⁵ Indeed, Wansbrough was very careful not to set forth any explanatory hypothesis which could be regarded as historically reductive in one way or the other. This explains, in turn, his caution when moving from the literary level (which was the object par excellence of his studies) to the historical domain. Yet this is not to mean that he endorsed a purely deconstructionist view on the early history of Islam. Analysing texts in what they are and in what they are good for (i.e. according to their form and function) is another way of writing history, though certainly not the showiest one. And even if it implies abandoning the rather contradictory and unsatisfactory traditional account of Islamic origins, as it did for Wansbrough, one can legitimately expect to learn more from it than from the non-critical and monotonous repetition of certain well-known yet awkward topics.

To sum up, Wansbrough opened a good number of questions concerning the academic study of Islamic origins which have found echo in other scholars. It must be also noted, however, that several authors have proceeded along a similar path independently from Wansbrough’s much debated insights.¹⁶

Thus, in 1977, Patricia Crone and Michael A. Cook published a coauthored volume on the making of the Islamic world in which

¹³ Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu*, 128.

¹⁴ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxii, 21ff.

¹⁶ See, for an overall criticism of Wansbrough’s methodological assumptions and a reconstruction of the beginnings of Islam which tries to fit the traditional account (albeit placing some chronological order within its often contradictory strata), Donner, F. M. *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*. Princeton, NJ, 1998.

they sought to demonstrate the Jewish messianic roots of the Arab conquest.¹⁷ Whereas Cook produced shortly after a critical study on the early Muslim dogma¹⁸ and has later devoted several essays to the study of early Islamic culture and tradition,¹⁹ Crone has continued to work on certain controversial aspects of early Islamic history of which she has proposed alternative readings.²⁰ Meanwhile, the late Yehudah D. Nevo, an Israeli archaeologist working at the Negev area ahead of the Negev Archaeological Project, and Judith Koren, an information specialist who collaborated with Nevo for many years, thoroughly examined the archaeological and epigraphic evidence contemporary with the Arab conquest and offered in a series of studies published between 1990 and 2003 a provoking theory on the origins of the Arab religion and the Arab state according to which the latter, once established after the Byzantine withdrawal from the Near East, did not fully promote Islam until the rise of the Abbasids.²¹ No less contentious are the studies of the late Druze Arab scholar Suliman Bashear, who subjected to scrutinizing criticism the earliest Muslim sources and argued that Muḥammad's biography is partly based upon the narratives about the life of the mid- to late 7th-century Arab "prophet" Muḥammad b. al-Hanafīya.²² A somewhat more nuanced, though by no means

¹⁷ Crone, P., and Cook, M. A. *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*. Cambridge, 1977.

¹⁸ Cook, M. A. *Early Muslim Dogma: A Source-Critical Study*. Cambridge, 1981.

¹⁹ Cook, M. A. *Studies in the Origins of Early Islamic Culture and Tradition*. Aldershot, 2004.

²⁰ Crone, P. *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*. Cambridge, 1980; idem, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Princeton, 1987; idem, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law: The Origins of the Islamic Patronate*. Cambridge, 1987; idem, and Hinds, M. *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*. Cambridge, 1986. See also Bacharach, J. L., Conrad, L. I., and Crone, P., eds. *Studies in Early Islamic History*. Princeton, 1996.

²¹ See especially Nevo, Y. D., and Koren, J. *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*. Amherst, NY, 2003.

²² Bashear, S. *Muqaddima fī l-ta'rikh al-akhar*. Jerusalem, 1984; idem. *Liqrat historyab islamit aberet?* Jerusalem, 1985. See also idem, *Arabs and*

conventional, approach to the early stages of Islamic history within the monotheist religious tradition of the ancient Middle East and to the development of Islamic rule from the mid-7th to the mid-8th century can be found in the works of Wansbrough's former disciple Gerald R. Hawting, who has also translated into English two volumes of Ṭabarī's *History*,²³ and Jonathan P. Berkey.²⁴ Herbert Berg's edited volume on current methodologies in the study of Islamic origins must be also alluded to at this point.²⁵ Finally, two French scholars deserve being mentioned as well, namely Alfred-Louis de Prémare and Édouard-Marie Gallez. Prémare has questioned on very solid grounds the traditional account of Islamic origins, the difficulties inherent to which he has analysed with some detail in a study published in 2002.²⁶ Less convincing perhaps, by reason of its often precipitated arguments, is the two-volume study published by Gallez in 2005, in which the author holds the view that the Arab conquest was the last of many efforts by heterodox Christians Jews to gain Jerusalem and other Byzantine territories.²⁷

At a close look, it is not difficult to perceive that, however different their respective approaches and conclusions, these scholars are, in their majority, indebted in one way or another to Wans-

Others in Early Islam. Princeton, 1997; idem, *Studies in Early Islamic Tradition: Collected Studies in Arabic and Islam*. Jerusalem, 2004.

²³ Hawting, G. R. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge, 1999; idem, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750*. London, 2000. See also idem, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 20: *The Collapse of the Sufyānid Authority and the Coming of the Marwānids*. Edited by G. R. Hawting. SSNES/BP. Albany, NY, 1989; idem, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 17: *The First Civil War*. Edited by G. R. Hawting. SSNES/BP. Albany, NY, 1996; idem, ed. *The Development of Islamic Ritual*. Aldershot, 2004.

²⁴ Berkey, J. P. *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800*. Cambridge, 2003.

²⁵ Berg, H., ed. *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*. Leiden, 2003.

²⁶ Prémare, A.-L., de. *Les fondations de l'Islam: Entre écriture et histoire*. Paris, 2002.

²⁷ Gallez, É.-M. *Le messie et son prophète*. 2 vols. Versailles, 2005.

brough, whom they often mention and who was, in sum, the first to overtly challenge the reliability of the traditional account of Islamic origins as a whole by questioning the alleged historicity of its sources. Whatever the new lines of research essayed in the past decades, the scholarly community still owes much to him and to his idea of the “sectarian milieu” out of which the Islamic religion arose.

As to the Qur’ān (i.e. Wansbrough’s other major subject of study), it would be beyond the scope of this prologue to survey the quality and quantity of recent scholarship on this area, on which Wansbrough’s influence has been as punctual as it has been substantial; for there where its traces can be observed it has encouraged further relevant developments. A few titles may nonetheless provide the reader with information on some of the most significant lines of research in this field and on the reception of Wansbrough’s theories and method amidst other scholars.²⁸ These are Andrew Rippin’s *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān*,²⁹ *The Qur’ān and Its Interpretative Tradition*,³⁰ *The Qur’ān: Style and Contents*,³¹ and *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*,³² Gerald R. Hawting’s and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef’s *Approaches to the Qur’ān*,³³ Herbert Berg’s *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*,³⁴ Jane

²⁸ On which see also Firestone, R. “The Qur’ān and the Bible: Some Modern Studies of Their Relationship.” In Reeves, J. C., ed. *Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, 1–22. SBLSS, 24. Atlanta, 2003; Rippin, A. “Literary Analysis of Qur’ān, Tafsīr, and Sīra: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough”. In Martin, R. C., ed. *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, 151–63. Tucson, AZ, 1985; idem, “Foreword.” In Wansbrough, *Qur’anic Studies*, ix–xix.

²⁹ Rippin, A., ed. *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān*. London, 1988.

³⁰ Rippin, A. *The Qur’ān and Its Interpretative Tradition*. Aldershot, 2001.

³¹ Rippin, A. *The Qur’ān: Style and Contents*. Aldershot, 2001.

³² Rippin, A., ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*. Malden, MA/Oxford, 2006.

³³ Hawting, G. R., and Shareef, A.-K. A., eds. *Approaches to the Qur’ān*. London, 1993.

³⁴ Berg, H. *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period*. Richmond, 2000.

Dammen McAuliffe's *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*,³⁵ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi's *Dictionnaire du Coran*,³⁶ Manfred Kropp's *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'an*,³⁷ and Gabriel Said Reynolds' *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*,³⁸ and *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*.³⁹

But enough has been said so far to offer the reader a general overview of the problem and its most immediate implications.

The present volume aims at exploring afresh the "sectarian milieu" out of which Islam emerged by bringing together contributions from several scholars working on a wide variety of fields, not only early Islamic history, but also the Jewish and Christian milieus of the 6th, 7th and 8th centuries that may help to explain the rise of Islam. Its main concern is, therefore, to examine the diverse chronologies and geographies one should alternatively look at and the religious components one should likewise take into account if attempting to define the historical, conceptual, theological, scriptural, exegetical, and liturgical boundaries of that hypothetical "sectarian milieu." The idea first arose out of the Fifth Enoch Seminar held in Naples in June 2009, during which sessions Basile Lourié and I long debated on these and other related issues, as well as on Wansbrough's decisive contribution to the critical study of Islamic origins.

To end with, I should like to express our gratitude to Mrs. Elizabeth Wansbrough for her kind and generous support and to those scholars who have accepted to participate in this volume for their willingness to contribute to it and their most valuable work. We are also grateful to those scholars who have declined our invitation but have nonetheless assisted us with their advice, namely Profs. Michael A. Cook, Patricia Crone, Gerald R. Hawting, and Guy G. Stroumsa.

³⁵ McAuliffe, J. D., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*. Cambridge, 2006.

³⁶ Amir-Moezzi, M. A., ed. *Dictionnaire du Coran*. Paris, 2007.

³⁷ Kropp, M., ed. *Results of Contemporary Research on the Qur'an: The Question of the Historio-Critical Text of the Qur'an*. Beirut, 2007.

³⁸ Reynolds, G. S., ed. *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*. London, 2008.

³⁹ Reynolds, G. S. *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*. London, 2010.