CHAPTER 33

MUḤAMMAD AND THE QUR'ĀN

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At the midpoint of the nineteenth century, Ernest Renan famously wrote of Islam's founding prophet that it was possible to know "year by year the fluctuations of his thoughts, his contradictions, his weaknesses," further exclaiming that Islam, unlike so many of the world's other religions, had been born "in the full light of history" (Renan 1851, 1025; trans. Renan 2000, 129). Such remarks are particularly noteworthy for their source: Renan was one of the pioneers of historical Jesus research, whose *Life of Jesus* remains one of the most important and influential biographies of Jesus (Renan 1863; cf. Baird 1992, 375–384). Given Renan's critical rejection of much that the Christian Gospels sought to pass for history, his full-throated endorsement of the Islamic historical tradition and its memory of Muḥammad's life is remarkable. If a critic of Renan's stature would vouch so forcefully for the authenticity of Muḥammad's traditional biographies, one might expect that they would, in fact, be historical sources of the highest quality. Unfortunately, however, Renan's initial enthusiasm now appears to be altogether unwarranted, and with the turning of a new century, fresh doubts concerning the traditions of earliest Islam and their accuracy began to emerge. Ignác Goldziher's groundbreaking studies of Islam's prophetic traditions, the *ḥadīth*, called attention to the highly tendentious, contradictory, and artificial qualities of early Islamic literature (Goldziher 1889–1890; trans. Goldziher 1967–1971). Goldziher's studies were shortly followed by the important work of Henri Lammens (Lammens 1910; 1911; 1912; trans. Lammens 2000c; 2000a; 2000b) and Leone Caetani (Caetani 1905–1926) on the biographical and

historical traditions, which dimmed considerably the "full light" imagined by Renan and found the origins of Islam instead shrouded beneath a cloak of pious memories.

By consequence, it is now widely recognized in Western scholarship on Islamic origins that almost nothing conveyed by the early Islamic sources can be taken at face value, and indeed, most of what these narratives relate concerning Muḥammad and his earliest followers must be regarded with deep suspicion.[1] As no less of an authority than Marshall Hodgson concludes, "On the face of it, the documentation transmitted among Muslims about his life is rich and detailed; but we have learned to mistrust most of it; indeed, the most respected early Muslim scholars themselves pointed out its untrustworthiness" (Hodgson 1974, 160). Yet despite this widely held recognition, it is peculiar that so many modern scholars have continued to write as if nothing has changed. Any number of introductory works on Islam or biographies of Muḥammad present only a very lightly edited, more or less uncritical version of the traditional Islamic narratives of Muḥammad's life, the *sīra* traditions.[2] Perhaps the most famous example of this phenomenon is the work of Montgomery Watt, whose biographies of Muḥammad often seem to have attained a near canonical status in the modern study of Islam (esp. Watt 1953; 1956; 1961). In his defense of the traditional sources, Watt appeals to the existence of "a solid core of fact" underlying the traditional accounts, particularly for Muḥammad's Medinan period. This "historical kernel" guarantees the accuracy of their "basic framework" and provides a reliable chronological foundation (Watt 1958; 1983; cf. Andræ 1935, 31): such reasoning allows Watt to reproduce essentially unaltered the traditional Islamic accounts of Muḥammad's activities at Mecca and Medina. Nevertheless, despite his frequent invocation of this "authentic core," Watt merely asserts rather than demonstrates its existence, amounting to little more than a *petitio principii* that fails to confront significant problems with the source material (cf. Schacht 1949, 146–147).

Early Islamic Biographies of Muḥammad: The *Sīra* Traditions

The earliest biographies of Muḥammad are arrestingly late: the first *sīra*, or "life," of Islam's prophet was compiled only in the middle of the eighth century, some 120 years after Muḥammad's death, by Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767).[3] Even more troublesome, however, is the fact that Ibn Isḥāq's biography itself does not survive; rather, its contents are known only through later recensions of his foundational work, the most important of which are the ninth-century *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām (d. 833) and al-Ṭabarī's *History* from the early tenth century. When

these and other related sources converge in assigning a particular tradition to Ibn Isḥāq, the probability is high that his biography was indeed their common source. Nevertheless, many details of Muḥammad's life survive only in Ibn Hishām's more recent adaptation, and insofar as Ibn Hishām does not always reproduce Ibn Isḥāq's biography faithfully but has "abridged and vigorously edited" his source, the authorship of such material is often questionable.[4] By way comparison with Christian origins, it is as if, as Patricia Crone observes, the earliest Gospel had been compiled by Justin Martyr and yet was known only in a recension by Origen (Crone 1980, 202, n. 10). One can only imagine what such a Gospel might have looked like, but presumably Jesus would have appeared much more like a Hellenistic philosopher and somewhat less like a Jewish eschatological prophet.

Of course, it is clear that Ibn Isḥāq did not simply create his biography of Muḥammad from whole cloth, and occasionally he identifies his sources, frequently attributing material to Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 742), a renowned early authority on the life of Muḥammad. According to the Islamic tradition, al-Zuhrī was Ibn Isḥāq's teacher, and while it is doubtful that al-Zuhrī himself actually composed a life of Muḥammad (Goldziher 1889–1990, 2:210–211; M. Cook 1997, 459–466; Robinson 2002, 25), it certainly seems plausible that much of Ibn Isḥāq's biography derives from al-Zuhrī's teaching at the beginning of the second Islamic century. Nevertheless, despite occasional attributions to earlier authorities, it is much less certain that Ibn Isḥāq actually transmits material authored by these more legendary figures, such as 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr (d. 712) (Robinson 2002, 24). To be sure, al-Zuhrī's teachings were almost certainly rooted, at least in part, in a tradition of oral lore that he inherited, but the nature of his own personal contribution to these collective memories is unclear: how he shaped or added to what he received is largely unknown.

Recently, a handful of scholars have sought to escape the apparent limitations of the early Islamic sources through a method known as "*isnād* criticism," which seeks to date individual traditions on the basis of their alleged patterns of transmission. In general, each of the biographical traditions, like Islam's other prophetic traditions (the *ḥadīth*), is prefaced by an "*isnād*," a pedigree that purports to record the chain(s) of transmitters by which a given tradition eventually reached a particular collector. Unfortunately, however, these testimonies of transmission are notoriously unreliable, and rather than conveying accurate records of a tradition's provenance, *isnād*s were easily manipulated and became a favorite forger's device. New traditions could be introduced with the appearance of antiquity by simply adorning them with impeccable ancestry, tracing their origins to Muḥammad himself through his closest and most trusted companions. Likewise, existing *isnād*s were often edited to fill out gaps in their early transmission history, and individual transmitters could be added or deleted according to their changing reputations.

That such widespread manipulation of *isnād*s occurred is not in dispute: the Islamic tradition itself has long acknowledged that forgery occurred on a

massive scale in the Middle Ages. Al-Bukhārī (d. 870), for instance, the most authoritative early collector of *ḥadīth*, is said to have considered some 600,000 traditions attributed to Muḥammad by their *isnād*s, rejecting more than 593,000 as later forgeries (Crone 1987b, 33). In its suspicion of *isnād*s, modern scholarship has merely intensified the healthy skepticism already introduced by traditional Islamic scholars. Goldziher and, more recently, Joseph Schacht have persuasively argued that the earliest tradents of most *isnād*s are, in fact, almost always false (Goldziher 1967–1971, vol. 2; Schacht 1949; 1950). As Schacht in particular has observed, *isnād*s exhibit a tendency to grow backward, as later generations sought to validate individual traditions by assigning them directly to Muḥammad through his companions and their successors (Schacht 1950, 3, 163–175; cf. Goldziher 1967–1971, 2:148). The earliest *isnād*s generally do not include such venerable transmitters, which more than likely is a consequence of the *isnād*'s relatively late implementation only around the turn of the second Islamic century. Consequently, any record of transmission during the first Islamic century is almost certainly artificial and mythologized, making it nearly impossible to date any Islamic traditions other than the Qur'ān to before the mid-seventh century.

Nevertheless, with most *isnād*s, there comes a point at which the list of transmitters passes from the legendary figures of Islamic origins and begins to reflect an often accurate record of actual historical transmission. As Schacht recognized, it is often possible to identify this moment of transition with some probability by comparing a large number of *isnād*s that are assigned to the same tradition by different sources. When all of these *isnād*s trace their divergent paths back to a single transmitter, the "common link," one can reasonably conclude, as Schacht suggests, that either this figure was the first to circulate that tradition or, alternatively, that perhaps a student or someone else initially circulated the tradition in that person's name. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain how so many different *isnād*s could independently converge on this single individual. Nevertheless, a number of scholars, including Schacht himself, have pointed to potential problems with this method, raising in particular the issue of the manipulation of *isnād*s during the process of transmission: such alterations could lead to the identification of false common links and, by consequence, false datings of traditions (Schacht 1950, 166–175; M. Cook 1981, 107–116; Crone 1987b, 27–34; Calder 1993, 236–241). These concerns are certainly real, as Michael Cook has demonstrated (M. Cook 1992), and such potential deficiencies in the chains of transmission can be offset, it would appear, only by a network of transmission that is sufficiently dense to rule out the possibility of distortion by manipulation of *isnād*s. Consequently, this method not only is laborious but also can be used to date only traditions that are preserved in a large number of collections and display a complex pattern of transmission involving several "partial common links" who can confirm the original transmission from the common link (Juynboll 1983, 206–217; 1989; 1993). Although such traditions are rare, when these conditions are satisfied the results are quite persuasive.

G. H. A. Juynboll and Harald Motzki have recently applied this method to certain *ḥadīth* from the Islamic legal tradition with some success, convincingly dating a number of traditions to the beginnings of the second Islamic century.[5] Motzki, however, often argues aggressively for an even earlier dating, to the first Islamic century, yet in doing so he generally must ignore the safeguards established by partial common links and engage in special pleading on behalf of early tradents (e.g., Motzki 1991a, 3–4, 6–7, 9, etc.; 1996a; 1996b). As several critics have noted, these efforts to push certain traditions back into the seventh century are methodologically problematic and not very convincing.[6] Nevertheless, Motzki and others, particularly Gregor Schoeler and Andreas Görke, have used this same method of common-link analysis in an effort to date material from the *sīra* traditions, albeit with somewhat limited success. The primary difficulty is that the data of the biographical traditions generally cannot meet the demanding requirements of this methodology: their networks of transmission usually are not dense enough to establish sufficiently meaningful patterns. Consequently, one often cannot exclude the possibility that an apparent common link is in fact the result of a corrupt *isnād*, a "dive" as Juynboll names it, which aims to create the illusion of greater antiquity by ascribing a tradition to an early authority (Juynboll 1993). Absent the reassurances of a complex pattern of transmission by a number of sources through several partial common links, the method is much less persuasive.

Despite such shortcomings, Motzki has applied this approach to a tradition in which Muḥammad orders the assassination of a Jewish opponent, Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, and while he persuasively assigns the tale to al-Zuhrī, his efforts to find an earlier source are not convincing (Motzki 2000). To do so, he must conflate two traditions that appear to be independent (Mattock 1986; Newby 1986) and ignore the deeply problematic nature of one of his tradents, Abū Isḥāq (Juynboll 1982, 170–171; 1983, 141–142). Schoeler has made a similar analysis of the traditions of the beginnings of Muḥammad's revelations (the *iqra'* episode) and the rumors that 'Ā'isha had committed adultery (*ḥadīth al-ifk*) (Schoeler 1996), and Görke has studied accounts of Muḥammad's treaty at al-Ḥudaybiya (Görke 2000). Together, Görke and Schoeler have published a very brief article on a complex of traditions purportedly linked with the events of Muḥammad's *hijra* (Görke and Schoeler 2005). In each instance, they attempt to link these traditions with 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, whose "biography" of Muḥammad they aim to reconstruct using the methods of common-link analysis (Schoeler 2003; Görke and Schoeler 2005). While all of these traditions are convincingly assigned to al-Zuhrī and occasionally other authorities of his generation, the reach back to 'Urwa is generally not very persuasive. Their arguments often require a great deal of optimism regarding the accuracy of certain *isnād*s and an occasional willingness to accept hypothetically reconstructed lines of transmission. In the case of the tradition complex associated with the *hijra*, for instance, a large body of material transmitted by only a single source is received as

genuine, while *isnāds* belonging to only specific parts of the alleged tradition complex are represented as authenticating the entire block of material.

Görke and Schoeler are most successful in arguing that the traditions of Muḥammad's experience of visions and voices at the onset of his revelations and a basic narrative of his flight to Medina in the face of opposition had already begun to circulate during the second half of the first Islamic century. Likewise, the story of 'Ā'isha's suspected adultery and her acquittal is persuasively assigned to this period through the study of its *isnāds*. Yet one should recognize just how meager these results are, particularly given the amount of effort involved. Even if all the methodological questions regarding such an *isnād*-critical approach to the *sīra* traditions are placed to the side, the resultant biography of Muḥammad is disappointingly minimal. Motzki himself expresses some doubt whether "the outcome will justify the time and energy needed for such an enterprise," and he forecasts that "the historical biography which will be the outcome of all these source-critical efforts will be only a very small one" (Motzki 2000, 234–235).

Perhaps even more important is the failure so far of this arduous method to reveal anything particularly "new" about the historical Muḥammad that could not already be determined using simpler approaches. For instance, there can be little doubt that the early Muslims believed that Muḥammad had been the recipient of divine revelation, and its representation as a vision of light and auditions merely reflects a well-established biblical pattern (Rubin 1995, 103–112). Moreover, dating according to the *hijra* is attested by early documentary sources, signaling the importance of a tradition of Muḥammad's flight for the earliest Muslims (Crone and Cook 1977, 7, 157, n. 39; Humphreys 1991, 19). The accusations against 'Ā'isha are also credibly early, inasmuch as they reflect negatively on a figure who later came to be revered as the "mother of the faithful," and one would thus imagine that the story had begun to circulate before 'Ā'isha had attained this status in Sunni piety (Schoeler 2002, 362; 1996, 164). Even if one were to accept the more problematic arguments presented on behalf of the traditions of al-Ḥudaybiya and Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq's murder, very little is added to our portrait of Muḥammad. It is certainly credible that Muḥammad may have concluded an unfavorable treaty regarding fugitives at al-Ḥudaybiya or ordered the assassination of an opponent. But these traditions reveal almost nothing about the nature of Muḥammad's religious movement and its early history. In these areas, the *sīra* traditions remain not only unproven but also highly suspect, presenting modern scholars with an undesirable choice: as Patricia Crone concludes, "one can take the picture presented [by the *sīra* traditions] or one can leave it, but one cannot *work* with it" (Crone 1980, 4). Either one must accept the basic narrative of Muḥammad's traditional biography, placing faith in the existence of a reliable historical kernel embedded therein, as Watt suggests, or, abandoning the *sīra* traditions as hopelessly tendentious and artificial, one is left to reconstruct the beginnings of Islam solely on the basis of the Qur'ān, whose traditions are generally regarded as having a direct connection with the historical Muḥammad.[7]

The Historical Muḥammad and the Qur'ān

Régis Blachère first undertook to write such a biography of Muḥammad based solely on the Qur'ān, and the limited results of this endeavor attest to the inherent difficulties of any attempt to reconstruct the origins of Islam using the Qur'ān only (Blachère 1952; see also Blachère 1959). The Qur'ān is, as Fred Donner observes, a "profoundly ahistorical" text (Donner 1998, 75–85, esp. 80). In contrast to the Gospels of the Christian New Testament, for instance, its contents do not concern the events of Muḥammad's life or the early history of the religious community that he founded (Peters 1991). Rather, the Qur'ān serves primarily to "bring strands of earlier biblical and Arabian traditions together through the person of Muḥammad" (Wansbrough and Rippin 2004, xvii), excluding from its purview the "incidentals of time and space" (Halevi 2007, 207). As Michael Cook effectively summarizes, based on the Qur'ān alone, "we could probably infer that the protagonist of the Koran was Muḥammad, that the scene of his life was in western Arabia, and that he bitterly resented the frequent dismissal of his claims to prophecy by his contemporaries. But we could not tell that the sanctuary was in Mecca, nor that Muḥammad himself came from there, and we could only guess that he established himself in Yathrib" (M. Cook 1983, 70).

Everything else that we "know" about Muḥammad comes from these later biographical collections, which in their nature are much more comparable to the apocryphal writings of early Christianity than they are to the Gospels and letters of the Christian New Testament. Peters is thus quite correct when he likens the efforts of modern scholars to recover the historical figure of Muḥammad with the notion of producing a historical-critical biography of the Virgin Mary (Peters 1991, 292). Although Peters's primary intent is to note the impact of religious piety on how such endeavors might be received by the respective religious communities, the comparison is apt with regard to the source materials as well. Mary, like Muḥammad, was merely the vessel by which the divine Word came into the world, and like the historical Muḥammad, the historical figure of Mary is similarly obscured from view. While minuscule information can be gleaned from the writings of the New Testament, the details of her life and her involvement in the beginnings of Christianity remain largely a mystery. Various early Christian documents, however, relate certain episodes of her life with great detail. The *Protevangelium of James*, for instance, composed just over a century after the death of Christ (and Mary), purports to give an account of Mary's childhood, and likewise the early Dormition apocrypha of the third century describe the events of Mary's departure from this world. Although these texts compile older traditions that had previously circulated in either oral or written form (Zervos 1997; 2002), no scholar of early Christianity would use these narratives to reconstruct actual events from the life of Mary and her son. They are highly tendentious and mythological texts whose purpose is to

memorialize the time of origins and to inscribe the beliefs and practices of second- and third-century Christianity onto its beginnings. The apocryphal acts of the various apostles are similarly comparable. For example, no historian would take the second-century *Acts of Peter* as a more or less accurate record of Peter's actual preaching and martyrdom in Rome. Yet when Watt and others invoke the existence of a reliable historical kernel at the core of Muḥammad's traditional biography, it is hard to see how this assumption is very different (cf. Robinson 2003, 123).

Consequently, when faced with such problematic and limited sources for knowledge of Muḥammad's life, one may rightly wonder if it is in fact possible to know anything of Islam's founder and its early history separately from the mythological narrative of origins composed by the Muslim scholars of Medina during the mid-eighth century. Is the historical Muḥammad at all identifiable, or has he been obscured almost to the point of invisibility, like the mother of Jesus? Can one hope to achieve a kind of historical-critical reconstruction of Islamic origins comparable in nature to the accomplishments of Early Christian Studies, or are we faced instead with the prospect of writing, as Jacqueline Chabbi has recently suggested, "la biographie impossible de Mahomet" (Chabbi 1996)? If the Qur'ān is ahistorical and the traditions of the *sīra* and the *ḥadīth* are so determined and overlaid by the concerns of later generations, is there any possibility of excavating earlier traditions from these sources that reveal the changing nature of Islam over the course of its first century? Or must we simply be resigned to complete silence and skepticism with regard to the beginnings of Islam, as John Wansbrough has proposed (Wansbrough 1978b, 116–119; cf. Wansbrough 1978a)?

Fortunately, as Blachère was perhaps the first to recognize, the Qur'ān provides a unique window into the first century of Islam, and although the Qur'ān reveals frustratingly little about the events of Muḥammad's life and the early history of the religious community that he founded, it nevertheless is alleged to preserve a record of Muḥammad's teaching. As the oldest surviving piece of Islamic literature and the only document from Islam's first century, the Qur'ān presents a precious witness to Muḥammad's religious beliefs as interpreted by his earliest followers. Thus, the Qur'ān offers the most promising chance of peering behind the veil of the Islamic myth of origins. By attempting to read the Qur'ān against, rather than with, the traditional narratives of Islamic origins, it may be possible to excavate an older stratum in the development of the Islamic faith. This endeavor, of course, is not simply a matter of interpreting the Qur'ān at every instance in a manner opposite to the received tradition simply for the sake of doing so. Rather, the aim is to locate, following methods from biblical studies, places where the text of the Qur'ān appears to be in tension with the traditional accounts of Islamic origins, while searching for parallel anomalies in the early tradition that similarly resist interpretive closure. By finding such hermeneutic gaps between the sacred text and tradition, we discover a space that invites the potential

discovery of a different sort of Islam at these earliest stages, a religious movement perhaps not completely discontinuous from what would follow but that has a distinctive character nonetheless.

The methods and perspectives developed in the study of Christian origins are particularly well suited for such an endeavor, yet unfortunately, as Wansbrough rightly observes, the Qur'ān "as a document susceptible of analysis by the instruments and techniques of Biblical criticism . . . is virtually unknown" (Wansbrough 1977, ix).[8] Resistance to the use of methods from biblical studies in the investigation of the Qur'ān and Islamic origins established itself quite early and has remained remarkably persistent. Any historical-critical study of the Qur'ān analogous to New Testament criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been long forestalled by the influential views of Theodor Nöldeke, who from the very beginning pronounced that "the development of the Islamic canon is utterly unique—one could say that it took place in the opposite fashion" from the biblical texts (Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–1919, 2:120; cf. Wansbrough 1977, 43–44). Likewise, Nöldeke's insistence that "the Qur'ān contains only authentic material" left little opportunity for investigating the history of the Qur'ānic text or for raising questions about any potential influence that the early community may have had on its contents (Nöldeke 1892, 56; cf. Gilliot 2008, 100). For well more than a century now, such views have continued to hold sway over the study of the Qur'ān in the West. For example, F. E. Peters, in his article on the "quest for the historical Muḥammad," rejects outright the methods of biblical studies as having no pertinence to study of the Qur'ān. Inasmuch as "our copy of the Qur'ān is, in fact, what Muḥammad taught, and is expressed in his own words," there is little need or even possibility for historical-critical study of the Qur'ānic text (Peters 1991, esp. 293–295). The fact that Angelika Neuwirth, one of the most respected Western scholars of the Qur'ān, would recently describe Nöldeke's work as "the rock of our church" reveals the degree to which his views continue to determine the modern study of the Qur'ān (see Higgins 2008).

Nöldeke's apparent resistance to the application of methodological perspectives from biblical studies may owe something to his training under Heinrich Ewald, a notoriously martinet *Doktorvater* whose fierce resistance to the emergent critical methods of Early Christian Studies and to the groundbreaking work of F. C. Baur in particular is legendary.[9] More generally, however, the relative quarantine of these methods from study of the Qur'ān may also reflect the early marriage of the study of Islamic origins with philology (Semitics) and study of the Hebrew Bible, rather than New Testament and Early Christian Studies, during the nineteenth century (Fähndrich 1976; Irwin 1999, esp. 91–101, 104–107). Accordingly, such comparisons as Qur'ānic scholars have drawn to the study of the Bible tend to compare the Islamic sacred text with the Christian Old Testament. Insofar as the historical process by which these two corpora formed differs considerably, Nöldeke and others

could rightly insist that the history of the Qur'ān and its canonization were radically different, thus obviating the need to subject Islam's sacred writing to the same level of scrutiny given to the Hebrew Bible. Such thinking is readily apparent, for example, when Fred Donner more recently explains that methods from biblical studies are not "applicable to the study of the Islamic materials, which crystallized much more rapidly than the Old Testament tradition" (Donner 1998, 29). Indeed, Julius Wellhausen, another of Ewald's students, achieved radical breakthroughs in the study of both the Hebrew Bible and the early Islamic historical tradition (Wellhausen 1883; 1902). Nevertheless, Wellhausen failed to apply his insights into the Bible's formation to a similar study of the Qur'ān, no doubt because the traditional accounts of the Qur'ān's rapid collection could not allow for the sort of slow evolution that Wellhausen discovered within the Hebrew Bible. And neither he nor any of his contemporaries brought to bear on the early Islamic tradition the sort of radical critique that Baur and others had begun to apply to the origins of Christianity with increasing intensity.

The Collection of the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān's virtual segregation from the critical perspectives applied to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures depends largely on certain assumptions about the Qur'ān's formation, which many modern scholars have adopted almost unaltered from the traditional Islamic accounts of the Qur'ān's collection. According to the most widely accepted narrative of the Qur'ān's formation, Muḥammad's teachings circulated orally for only a brief period before they were gathered together and written down at the direction of the caliph 'Uthmān (r. 644–656), during the second half of his reign. For the most part, modern scholarship has followed the early precedent established by Nöldeke in accepting the claims of the Islamic tradition that the *ne varietur* text of the Qur'ān was collected both early and under official supervision by some of Muḥammad's closest followers, thereby ensuring the complete authenticity of the Qur'ān as a witness to Muḥammad's teachings. In this regard and many others, as Andrew Rippin has recently observed, "when modern scholars approach the Qur'ān, the core assumptions of the Muslim tradition about the text are not challenged."[10] Indeed, such an early collection would leave very little time for the early Islamic community to have effected significant changes in the text of the Qur'ān, potentially securing a strong connection between the Qur'ānic *textus receptus* and Muḥammad's religious teaching.

Nevertheless, the Islamic tradition itself preserves several divergent accounts of the Qur'ān's collection, including one ascribing the task to the first caliph Abū Bakr (d. 634). In his article on the Qur'ān in the second edition of

the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Alfred Welch considers this alternative tradition, concluding that "there are serious problems with this account" and dismissing it because "most of the key points in this story are contradicted by alternative accounts in the canonical *ḥadīth* collections and other early Muslim sources." Yet Welch further remarks that the story of the Qur'ān's 'Uthmānic collection "stands up to critical analysis no better than the first [i.e., Abū Bakr's collection]," and he estimates it to be "another story whose particulars cannot be accepted." Despite this negative judgment, Welch nonetheless resolves that "the unanimity with which an official text is attributed to 'Uthmān, in the face of a lack of convincing evidence to the contrary," ensures that the consonantal text of the Qur'ān can be assigned to the reign of 'Uthmān (Welch 1960–2005, 405). Motzki has published an *isnād*-critical study of the tradition of an 'Uthmānic collection in an effort to demonstrate its veracity (Motzki 2001). Although Motzki identifies a probability that this tradition may be associated with al-Zuhrī, this finding certainly does not decide the question of the Qur'ān's origins; rather, it merely reveals that this story had begun to circulate by the middle of the eighth century, presumably alongside other rival accounts. Indeed, despite the widespread acceptance of this account of the Qur'ān's 'Uthmānic origins, there seems to be little reason for investing this tradition with any more veracity than scholars of early Christianity have allowed Papias' account of the Gospels' formation, particularly in light of the significant problems that Welch identifies with the 'Uthmānic tradition.[11]

There is in fact considerable evidence suggesting that the text of the Qur'ān remained in flux beyond the reign of 'Uthmān, as Wansbrough has argued rather persuasively on the basis of the Qur'ānic text itself and early Islamic literature concerning the Qur'ān.[12] Likewise, Gerald Hawting and Crone have demonstrated that certain aspects of the Islamic legal tradition seem to suggest the Qur'ān's later redaction (Hawting 1989; Crone 1994), and Claude Gilliot has argued for an understanding of the Qur'ān as a product of collective work, calling attention to the traditions of Muḥammad's "informants" (Gilliot 1998; 2004; 2005; 2008). Perhaps the most intriguing alternative to the 'Uthmānic collection is the recent revival of Paul Casanova's earlier hypothesis that the Qur'ān was redacted under 'Abd al-Malik (685–705), a position championed in particular by Alfred-Louis de Prémare, whose works have been unfortunately overlooked by much recent scholarship on the Qur'ān and Islamic origins.[13] De Prémare points to compelling evidence for the instability of the Qur'ānic text still at the end of the seventh century (see also M. Cook 2000, 118–122; Welch 1960–2005, 404b), while also noting the existence of traditions reporting that 'Abd al-Malik worked in concert with his governor of Iraq, al-Ḥajjāj, to standardize the text of the Qur'ān. 'Abd al-Malik's strategy was, de Prémare proposes, to displace various divergent codices that were being used in different cities, with the goal of establishing a religious unity that would foster cohesion of the Islamic polity around his central authority. As for the legend of a collection under 'Uthmān, de Prémare regards this as a piece of Umayyad propaganda,

designed to bolster their dynastic claims by ascribing to the first caliph from their family this pious act of collecting the Islamic Scripture. The legend ultimately attained its canonical status through inclusion in al-Bukhārī's highly influential collection of *ḥadīth*.

Chase Robinson has recently endorsed the idea of the Qur'ān's collection under 'Abd al-Malik, noting that even if 'Uthmān may have made an effort to standardize the text, he lacked the means by which to enforce his new version: "in a polity that lacked many rudimentary instruments of coercion and made no systematic attempt to project images of its own transcendent authority—no coins, little public building or inscriptions—the very idea of 'official' is problematic." 'Abd al-Malik, however, not only "had the resources to attempt such a redaction and to impose the resulting text," but his reign also witnessed a concerted effort to Islamicize political authority "by broadcasting ideas of order and obedience in a distinctly Islamic idiom" (Robinson 2005, 102–104). Even Angelika Neuwirth seems to have more or less conceded the possibility that the text of the Qur'ān remained in flux and was not standardized before the reign of 'Abd al-Malik. Although she clearly remains loyal to the traditional position of the Qur'ān's collection under 'Uthmān, Neuwirth allows, in addressing de Prémare's work, that the *ne varietur textus receptus* of the Qur'ān was perhaps not established until 'Abd al-Malik's rule. Nevertheless, she insists that even if the text was fixed only at this later date, this would allow a period of at most only sixty years between "the completion of the text" (apparently the end of Muḥammad's life) and its publication in an authoritative edition. "Contrary to de Prémare's conclusions," she maintains, such a brief interval "is too short to allow sufficient room for significant, that is, deliberate, theologically relevant modifications of the text" (Neuwirth 2007, 18*–22*, esp. 19*).

The comparanda of the Christian Gospels, however, show such claims to be unfounded. If once again writings of the Hebrew Bible are the model, then the time frame is indeed comparatively short. But the Christian Gospels, by contrast, took literary form fairly quickly: the Q collection was compiled perhaps as early as twenty to thirty years after the death of Jesus, while the first Gospels appeared within forty to fifty years. It is a fundamental principle of New Testament criticism that during this short interval, the so-called tunnel period, the early Christian community shaped and reshaped—even "invented"—traditions about Jesus' life and teachings.[14] If we follow Robinson's prescription that the study of early Islam should be "committed to the idea that the history made by Muslims is comparable to that made by non-Muslims" (Robinson 2005, 103), then one must allow the possibility that similar changes occurred during the early oral transmission of the Qur'ānic traditions. One certainly cannot, as Neuwirth resolves, simply exclude this possibility as a matter of principle. Indeed, future study of the Qur'ān will need to confront more seriously the potential impact of oral transmission on the shape of the Qur'ān. It will no longer suffice, in a methodologically comparative context, to insist on its complete authenticity and integrity with hollow appeals to the brevity of its transmission.

Muḥammad's Message: Eschatological Herald or Social Reformer?

At the most general level, the Qur'ān reveals a monotheist religious movement grounded in the biblical and extrabiblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity, to which certain uniquely "Arab" traditions have been added. These traditions, however, are often related in an allusive style, which seems to presuppose knowledge of the larger narrative on the part of the audience. There is clear emphasis on articulating the boundaries of this religious community, particularly in relation to other Arab "polytheists," but also with regard to Jews and Christians. The Qur'ān also regulates social practices and boundaries within the community, proclaiming God's divine law in a fashion reminiscent of the Jewish Scriptures. Likewise, there is pressing concern with the impending arrival of "the Hour," or "God's command (*amr*)," terms that designate the final judgment: Muḥammad and his earliest followers seem to have believed that this eschatological event was about to take place or indeed had already begun. Muḥammad thus appears as a monotheist prophet within the Abrahamic tradition who called his followers to renounce paganism, to submit to the divine laws, and to prepare themselves for the impending doom: altogether, it is a portrait rather familiar from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

Nevertheless, recent scholarship on Islamic origins, particularly in English, has often failed to give the eschatological aspect of Muḥammad's message the proper emphasis that it deserves. From the beginnings of Western study of Islam, scholars have recognized the importance of "the Hour" in Muḥammad's preaching: the coming judgment is in fact the second most common theme of the Qur'ān, preceded only by the call to monotheism (Bell and Watt 1970, 158). Yet despite the Qur'ān's frequent focus on the impending eschaton, many modern experts have sought to minimize the significance of this belief within the early community. In presenting Muḥammad and his message to a modern audience, these scholars generally portray him as a great social reformer and preacher of ethical monotheism. While neither of these traits is inherently contradictory with belief in the world's imminent destruction, these biographers of Muḥammad would have him appear, as Richard Bell explains, not as "a crackbrained enthusiast" ranting about impending doom, but rather as a great leader whose religious message was "from the very start quite a rational and practical one" (Bell 1926, 71–72, 80, 83). Yet in diminishing Muḥammad's eschatological fervor, these studies efface what is perhaps one of the most clearly identifiable features of both the historical figure of Muḥammad and the religious community that he founded.

Snouck Hurgronje seems to have been the first to locate imminent eschatology at the heart of Muḥammad's message. Muḥammad's appearance was itself reckoned to be a sign of the world's impending destruction, and Hurgronje further suggests that his followers did not expect him to die before the

Hour's arrival (Hurgronje 1886, 26). The coming end of the world was the primary inspiration for Muḥammad's preaching, and from beginning to end, he was "haunted" by the notion of divine judgment and its immediate proximity. Other elements of his message were "more or less accessories" to the fundamental theme of the world's imminent judgment and destruction, which always remained "the essential element of Muḥammad's preaching" (Hurgronje 1894, 149–151, 161–162). Frants Buhl also shared this view, arguing that Muḥammad's overpowering concern with the looming eschaton and dread of the horrifying punishments "ruled all of his thoughts" and stood at the core of his message (Buhl 1930, 126–127, 132–133, 144–145, 157; 1936, 645–646). It was Paul Casanova, however, who developed this hypothesis most forcefully. Much like Hurgronje, Casanova proposed that Muḥammad and his followers believed that the end of the world was imminent and could be expected before Muḥammad's death. Casanova went a bit further, however, in offering an explanation for those parts of the Qur'ān that could seem to soften the Hour's immediacy: according to him, these passages reflect the work of Abū Bakr, 'Uthmān, and others, who either "falsified" or carefully "concealed" the true nature of Muḥammad's original eschatological teachings (Casanova 1911–1924, 4). In their day, Casanova's ideas were widely rejected, in particular because they challenged the Qur'ān's integrity as a transparent record of Muḥammad's religious teaching (e.g., Hurgronje 1916, 15–18; Bergsträsser and Pretzl 1938, 6–8; Bell and Watt 1970, 53–54). The reaction is somewhat surprising, in light of the contemporary "discovery" of the importance of apocalyptic and eschatology in early Judaism and Christianity (e.g., Weiss 1892; Schweitzer 1910).

Nevertheless, Bell's 1925 Gunning Lectures, published as *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*, mark the beginnings of a shift in English-language scholarship away from an eschatological understanding of primitive Islam. Since Bell, Muḥammad has often been portrayed as primarily a prophet of ethical monotheism, who aimed above all else to reform the social order rather than warning of its impending divine dissolution. According to Bell, the heart of Muḥammad's preaching was not the imminence of the Hour but instead a call "to recognize and worship the one true God and show thankfulness for His bounties." Only when his fellow Meccans refused to heed this admonition did Muḥammad eventually turn to themes of eschatology and divine judgment, hoping to frighten his audience into changing their ways. For a time, Muḥammad himself came to believe that such eschatological warnings were indeed the message of revelation that he had been charged to deliver, but once he attained authority over Medina, the last judgment passed "into the realm of assured dogma in Muḥammad's mind" (Bell 1926, 72, 102–107). Thus, Muḥammad's fervent warnings of impending doom were merely a passing phase, a "practical-minded" effort to accommodate his message to his audience.

This reconstruction of Muḥammad's evolving message, however, depends primarily on Bell's idiosyncratic attempt to date individual traditions within the Qur'ān (Bell 1958, 72–138), which even Watt, Bell's most sympathetic disciple,

found somewhat questionable (Watt 1957). Only by assigning a very specific order to various elements of the Qur'ān can Bell marginalize its considerable eschatological content in this fashion. Bell's hypothesis demands that a handful of non-eschatological traditions focused on the revelation of "signs" should be identified with Muḥammad's earliest preaching. Nevertheless, Bell's views concerning the order of the Qur'ān have not found much acceptance, and there seems to be a broad consensus that it is not possible to define the precise chronology of the earliest Qur'ānic *sūras*. Even among those scholars who have adopted Nöldeke's influential fourfold chronological schema of the Qur'ān (Nöldeke and Schwally 1909–1919, 1:174–164), there is general agreement that the precise order of the earliest *sūras* cannot be known, but they must instead be "understood as a group rather than as standing in the exact chronological order of their revelation" (Böwering 2001–2006, 322–326). Yet Nöldeke's system, despite its widespread acceptance, is no more reliable than Bell's: as Welch rightly notes, this prevailing hypothesis is "little more than a European variation of the traditional dating," and those scholars embracing this approach to the Qur'ān "have not demonstrated the validity of the historical framework or the development of ideas and key terms assumed by their system" (Welch 1960–2005, 417; see also Reynolds 2008, 9; Donner 2008, 29).

Harris Birkeland advanced a hypothesis similar to Bell's, arguing that Muḥammad's fundamental religious message was rooted not in eschatological urgency but "the recognition of God's merciful guidance in the life of himself [i.e., Muḥammad] and his people" (Birkeland 1956, 5). Yet Birkeland reaches this conclusion only through a rather arbitrary selection of five *sūras* to represent Muḥammad's earliest preaching. Likewise, Watt, despite his criticism of Bell's system, follows his mentor's decisions regarding both the earliest traditions of the Qur'ān and the relatively marginal role of eschatology in Muḥammad's religious system. Eschatology is not a major factor in the small group of passages that Watt identifies as the earliest, and when Muḥammad later turns to themes of divine judgment, he has in mind either temporal chastisement or a distant final judgment that will come "at some unspecified future time" (Watt 1953, 62–66). This displacement of Muḥammad's eschatological urgency enables Watt to portray Muḥammad as the social and moral reformer for which his work is so famous (Watt 1953, 1–25, 72–85; cf. Crone 1987a). Instead of a "crack-brained" eschatological enthusiast who mistakenly forecast the world's destruction, Watt imagines Islam's founder to have been a much more "practical" and "rational" prophet striving for economic justice and an increase in personal piety.

Rudi Paret has rightly criticized these efforts to exclude eschatological themes from Muḥammad's earliest preaching, calling attention in part to their basis in an arbitrary selection of a primitive core of Qur'ānic passages. Paret observes that in the *sūras* assigned by Nöldeke to the earliest Meccan period, eschatology is simply too prominent to be so lightly cast aside. Perhaps more important, Paret suggests that it is misguided to insist that Muḥammad's initial

preaching must have focused on either monotheism or eschatology exclusively. The two ideas are complementary, and one would expect that as Muḥammad began to preach, he offered a message of impending judgment grounded in ethical monotheism (Paret 2005, 69–79). Nevertheless, and most important, Paret resists any notion that Muḥammad believed the final judgment to be imminent. Rather, Paret views the Qur'ān's warnings of impending judgment as Muḥammad's threats against his opponents that they would suffer temporal chastisement, while the final judgment was an event belonging to the distant future. In this regard, Paret ultimately does not depart very far from Bell and Watt's uneschatological prophet: Muḥammad may have preached eschatological ideas from the very start, but according to Paret, these were lacking any sense of urgency (Paret 2005, 96–98).

On the whole, Watt's views in particular continue to hold sway in most English-language scholarship. A prime example can be found in Welch's revision of Buhl's article on Muḥammad for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*: Welch transforms the eschatological prophet of Buhl's original article into Watt's social and economic reformer (Buhl and Welch 1960–2005, 363–364). Peters seems to favor Birkeland's hypothesis (Peters 1994, 152–156), but most other scholars have embraced the non-eschatological reformer imagined by Watt.[15] Presumably, such apparent consensus inspired Karen Armstrong to misleadingly claim that "the Last Judgment was only mentioned briefly in the earliest suras, or chapters, of the Qur'an but the early message was essentially joyful." According to Armstrong, Muḥammad preached the benevolence of God as manifest in the creation and struggled tirelessly on behalf of the poor and oppressed against the rich and powerful. Any apparent Qur'ānic references to "the approaching Last Judgment are essentially symbolic representations of divine truths and should not be understood as literal facts" (Armstrong 1993, 91–107, esp. 91, 99). While a handful of scholars have recently proposed resurrecting the eschatological prophet revealed by the Qur'ān (Donner 1998, 30, n. 78, 46; 2002, 10–13; Ayoub 2003, 145–146; D. Cook 2002, 30), Asma Afsaruddin perpetuates the status quo in dismissing their arguments as "hardly convincing." Instead, she identifies "the Qur'an's clear and powerful message" not as a warning before the impending judgment of the Hour, but as a call to "egalitarianism and social justice" aimed especially at "those who were on the periphery of society" (Afsaruddin 2008, 3, 26).

It is hard not to hear in these descriptions of Muḥammad as a non-eschatological prophet of ethical monotheism and social justice an echo of the various nineteenth-century "liberal" biographies of Jesus. One would likewise suspect that a similar tendency is at work in shaping this image of Muḥammad: sympathy for their subject has inspired these scholars to find a timeless great teacher whose message can speak to modern men and women, rather than an eschatological preacher who, together with his followers, mistakenly expected the world to end in their day (cf. Schweitzer 1910, 402–403; Sanders 1985, 154; Ehrman 1999, 127). Yet if we approach the issue of eschatology in the Qur'ān in the same

manner as it has been pursued in the New Testament, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Muḥammad and his earliest followers, like Jesus and the first Christians, believed themselves to be living in the last days.

"It Is Knowledge of the Hour": Muḥammad, the Qur'ān, and Eschatology

The Qur'ān is rife with eschatological warnings of the impending judgment and destruction of the Hour: the Qur'ān itself defines the very subject of its revelation as "knowledge of the hour—do not doubt concerning it" (43.61).[16] "Nigh unto men has drawn their reckoning," warns another passage (21.1), while one verse declares that "God's command [*amr*] comes" or, even more literally, "God's command has arrived" (16.1). Such pronouncements recall the declaration with which Jesus allegedly began his ministry: "the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15 and parallels). Likewise, the Qur'ānic "parable of the two men" (18.31–44) resembles Jesus' parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21), particularly in its emphasis on the short eschatological window that remains. "The matter of the Hour is as a twinkling of the eye, or nearer" (16.79), warns the Qur'ān. The coming judgment is "imminent" (40.18), or, with even greater force, "the Imminent is imminent" (54.57).[17] The "Lord's chastisement"—or "judgment" or "the terror"—"is about to fall" upon the world; "none denies its descending," and "there is none to avert it" (52.7–8; 51.6; 56.1–2). The chastisement is indeed near (78.40; cf. 27.72; 36.49), and the Qur'ān promises that the punishments of Hell and the bliss of paradise will be known soon "with the knowledge of certainty" (102.3–5). The Qur'ān threatens that all who disregard its warning will soon behold the Hour and its punishments with their own eyes (19.75).

Other passages refer to certain astronomical events that will signal the Hour's arrival: "surely that which you are promised is about to fall! When the stars shall be extinguished, when heaven shall be split, when the mountains shall be scattered and when the Messenger's time is set, to what day shall they be delayed? To the Day of Decision" (77.7–13; see also 45.17; 52.9; 75.7–9; 81.1–2; 82.1–2). Many such signs had already occurred "in the heavens and on the earth" and yet had gone unheeded (12.105): "The Hour has drawn nigh: the moon is split. Yet if they see a sign they turn away" (54.1–2; cf. 69.16). Presumably, as David Cook suggests, these and other passages refer to some remarkable astronomical event that Muḥammad and other inhabitants of the Ḥijāz had recently witnessed (D. Cook 2001a). The Qur'ān often refers to such signs to refute the doubts of skeptics regarding the Hour's immediacy: "Are they looking for aught but the Hour, that it shall come upon them suddenly? Already its tokens have come" (47.20).

Other passages similarly respond to disbelief in the Hour and its imminent arrival: "soon they shall know!" warns the Qur'ān. "Already Our Word has preceded to Our servants. . . . So turn thou from them for a while, and see them; soon they shall see! What, do they seek to hasten Our chastisement?" (37.170–179). In the face of such doubts, the Qur'ān counsels the faithful, "be thou patient with a sweet patience; behold they see it as far off; but We see it is nigh" (70.5–7); similar sentiments are echoed in a number of other passages (e.g., 15.3; 36.49; 75.34–35; 78.4–5; 79.46). When the unbelievers ask to know precisely when the Hour will arrive, the Qur'ān declares that knowledge of the Hour lies with God alone (7.187; 31.34; 41.47; 43.85). Nevertheless, this acknowledgment of the limits to human knowledge does not necessarily indicate weakening of belief in the Hour's immediacy. Although "the knowledge is with God," the Qur'ān rebuffs its audience, "assuredly you will soon know who is in manifest error" (67.26–29; cf. 33.63; 79.44–46). Yet perhaps such uncertainties are also an early sign of efforts to accommodate the Hour's unanticipated delay: while the Hour is still believed to be nigh, it has not arrived with the haste that was initially anticipated.

Other passages betray this redactional tendency more clearly. For instance, the Qur'ān explains that although the Hour is imminent, one should recall that for God a day is a thousand years (22.47; cf. 32.5) or even 50,000 years (70.4). Yet despite the difference between divine and mortal calendars, belief in the Hour's impending arrival remains constant in these passages: "they see it as if far off, but We see it is nigh" (70.6–7; cf. 22.55). In a few places, the Qur'ān proclaims the Hour's imminence with slightly more hesitancy. "It is possible [*'asā ān*] that it may be nigh," but when it comes, "you will think you have tarried but a little" (17.51–52). Indeed, "it may be [*'asā ān*] that riding behind you already is some part of that which you seek to hasten on" (27.72). Although God alone knows when the Hour will descend, "Haply [*la'lla*] the Hour is nigh" (33.63; cf. 42.17). Various other passages urge persistence in light of the Hour's unexpected delay (e.g., 11.8; 40.77), but only once does the Qur'ān allow even the possibility that the eschaton may in fact not be imminent. Despite its pervasive and fervent warnings of the Hour's threatening immediacy, a single passage equivocates, conceding, "I do not know whether that which you are promised is nigh, or whether my Lord will appoint it for a space" (72.25).

Bell, Watt, Blachère, and others adduce these passages as evidence of Muḥammad's evolving eschatological timetable, using them to relegate any concern with the Hour's fearful imminence to a mere passing phase in Muḥammad's religious development (e.g., Bell 1926, 86–90, 102–107; Bell and Watt 1970, 54; Blachère 1952, 43–51; 1959, 22–24; Rodinson 1971, 120–123). Although Muḥammad for a time experimented with ideas that he borrowed from Jewish and Christian apocalyptic, primarily in an effort to win converts, once he achieved power over Medina, this perspective was abandoned as no longer useful. At this point, the Hour was increasingly pushed into the distant future, and this new orientation can be detected in the Qur'ān's occasionally more guarded forecast

of the Hour's impending arrival. Such passages are understood as Muḥammad's direct cancellation of his earlier focus on eschatological immediacy. In this way, the Qur'ān's ethical teaching and its program for the early Islamic community are made to emerge as the true core of Muḥammad's message. Admittedly, this hypothesis effectively resolves an apparent tension within the Qur'ān: its frequent warnings of impending eschatological doom can seem difficult to reconcile with the parallel concern to define the nature and structure of the early community. Such attention to details of social and political order would appear to be contradicted by the belief that the world itself would soon pass away, a dissonance that Bell, Watt, and others have chosen to resolve by determining the priority of the former. Yet a comparison with formative Christianity suggests that any such conflict may be more imagined than real: the writings of the New Testament often show concern for defining and maintaining a well-ordered community, even in the face of the world's impending judgment and destruction.[18] One would assume such ideas could similarly coexist in earliest Islam.

Perspectives from New Testament studies are also helpful for understanding the different shades of urgency with which certain passages from the Qur'ān proclaim the Hour's impending arrival. The sayings of Jesus occasionally exhibit similar ambivalence regarding the Kingdom's immediacy: although most statements about the Kingdom proclaim its immediacy, a minority tradition suggests that its coming should be expected further into the future. Innumerable studies have examined this eschatological tension in the Gospels, with the clear majority concluding that the historical Jesus preached the world's imminent judgment, heralding the eschaton's arrival within the lifespan of his earliest followers.[19] By applying the same principles to analysis of the Qur'ān, one finds that Muḥammad and his earliest followers seem to have similarly believed that their generation would live to see the end of the world.[20] Although the Qur'ān reflects some diversity of opinion regarding the timing of the Hour's arrival, as with the Jesus traditions, one eschatological position clearly predominates, namely, the Hour's pressing imminence (cf. Sanders 1985, 152–153; 1993, 176–177). Likewise, the response of the unbelievers as depicted by the Qur'ān suggests that Muḥammad's preaching had led them to believe that they would soon behold the Hour's arrival for themselves (e.g., 19.75; 37.170–179; 102.3–5). More important, however, it seems highly unlikely that this prevailing voice, warning of the Hour's immediate approach, is the invention of the later Islamic community, inasmuch as such promises were soon falsified by the passing of Muḥammad and his early followers. The criteria of embarrassment and dissimilarity (i.e., dissimilarity with the experience of the early community) strongly suggest that the historical Muḥammad and the religious community that he founded professed that the world would soon end in divine judgment and destruction. To be sure, a strong eschatological perspective would persist in later Islam (as it did in Christianity), but it seems highly improbable that later Muslims would insert traditions into the Qur'ān wrongly predicting the Hour's appearance in the immediate future (cf. Schweitzer 1910, 360–363; Sanders 1993, 180).

Qur'ānic traditions that may seem to suggest a less narrow eschatological horizon are, like similar elements in the New Testament, the result of efforts to accommodate the primitive kerygma of the impending Hour to the passage of time. For instance, as noted earlier, the Qur'ān occasionally maintains, particularly in responding to its critics, that knowledge of when the Hour will arrive belongs to God alone. While some Western scholars have appealed to such statements as evidence that the early Muslims did not in fact expect the Hour's arrival within their lifetimes (e.g., Rüling 1895, 11; Smith 2002, 46), comparison with the Jesus traditions suggests otherwise. Jesus seems to have similarly preached that the timing of the Kingdom's arrival was known by the Father alone, while insisting that its appearance was imminent (e.g., Matthew 24:32–25:12; cf. Schweitzer 1910, 239). Far from contradicting the Hour's immediacy, these passages instead complement the Qur'ān's emphasis on its sudden and unexpected appearance. Yet it is certainly not out of the question that such sentiments first arose shortly after Muḥammad's lifetime, as the early community struggled to make sense of the Hour's protracted delay.

As the writings of the New Testament evidence, the early Christians adopted a variety of hermeneutic strategies to "correct" Jesus' inaccurate forecast of impending doom (e.g., Sanders 1993, 179–182), and one should expect to find similar tendencies at work in the early Islamic tradition. The gulf between divine and human perceptions of time, for instance, explained the parousia's delay for many early Christians (cf. 2 Peter 3:8, referring to Psalm 90:4), and the Qur'ān likewise invokes this contrast on occasion. While the Qur'ān situates such reflections within the context of the Hour's immediacy, these passages seem designed to soften the blow of the Hour's delay, and as even Bell observes, they have the appearance of interpolations, added by the early Islamic community "to obviate the difficulty of the delay in the coming event" (Bell 1937–1939, 2:604). Likewise, those verses introducing a note of hesitancy regarding the Hour's imminence probably reflect the perspective of the early community rather than Muḥammad's preaching: often by adding only a single word or two, statements heralding the Hour's imminent arrival could easily be qualified to meet the inconsistencies of its continued delay. One should note, however, that such alterations of the text need not be crudely judged as acts of "forgery" somehow inconsistent with the Qur'ān's status as divine revelation. To the contrary, insofar as the primitive Islamic community treasured the Qur'ān as God's infallible revelation through Muḥammad, it would be absolutely essential that its contents should comport with the reality of continued existence. If, as appears to be the case, Muḥammad warned his initial followers that the Hour would arrive very soon, a more conditional tone would have to be discovered to make sense of this eschatological promise for future generations. As in the New Testament, but to a more limited extent, the Qur'ān shows traces of the early community's efforts to adjust Muḥammad's eschatological warnings to the persistence of human history.

It is particularly important that the Qur'ān's imminent eschatology finds significant confirmation in a number of early *ḥadīth*. For instance, at the end of Ibn Isḥāq's biography, when Muḥammad dies, 'Umar, the future caliph, refuses to accept Muḥammad's death, swearing, "By God he is not dead: he has gone to his Lord as Moses b. 'Imrān went and was hidden from his people for forty days, returning to them after it was said that he had died. By God, the apostle will return as Moses returned and will cut off the hands and feet of men who allege that the apostle is dead" (Ibn Hishām 1858–1860, 1:1012; trans. Guillaume 1955, 682–683). When 'Umar is later asked to clarify his behavior, he explains that he truly believed that Muḥammad would remain with the people until the Hour to serve as a witness for them regarding their final deeds, citing Qur'ān 2.143 (Ibn Hishām 1858–1860, 1:1017–1018), while in another account, he justifies himself "because he [Muḥammad] said that he thought that he would be the last of us [alive]" (Ibn Sa'd 1904–1928, 2.2:56; cf. al-Ṭabarī 1990, 200, n. 1328).

Other early traditions describe Muḥammad as having been "sent on the breath of the Hour," noting that his appearance and that of the Hour were concomitant to the extent that the Hour had almost outstripped his own arrival (Bashear 1993, 76–80). According to another tradition, Muḥammad offered his followers a promise (reminiscent of Matthew 16:28, 24:34) that the Hour would arrive before some of his initial followers died (D. Cook 2002, 4; Livne-Kafri 1999, 76, n. 22). In another tradition, Muḥammad responds to questions about the Hour's timing by pointing to the youngest man in the crowd and declaring that "if this young man lives, the Hour will arrive before he reaches old age" (e.g., Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj 1995, 4:1795–1796). One senses here the beginnings of a process of chronological extension, the growth of which can be seen in a promise that "at the end of one-hundred years there will be no one alive on the earth" (Bashear 1993, 87–92; D. Cook 2001b). Yet as this deadline and still others passed, new predictions continued to arise, refreshing the Hour's immediacy for each generation (Bashear 1993, 92–98). As with the eschatological predictions assigned to Jesus, it is difficult to imagine the fabrication of such eschatological urgency by the later Muslim community, let alone its attribution to Muḥammad. The same can be said of certain traditions concerning the first mosque at Medina: as Meir Kister observes, Muḥammad's instruction not to build a roof for the structure "because the affair [*al-amr*] will happen sooner than that" (Kister 1962, 150) seems to suggest a primitive belief in the Hour's imminence. The dissonance of such material with the Hour's manifest delay speaks very strongly in favor of its antiquity if not even authenticity. When joined with the Qur'ān's unmistakable warning that the end of the world had come upon its audience, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Muḥammad and his earliest followers ardently believed themselves to be living in the shadow of the eschaton, in the waning moments of human history.

Consequently, the present "quest for the historical Muḥammad," finds itself confronted by a dilemma rather similar to the one identified by Albert Schweitzer in his seminal study of the "historical Jesus": one must choose to follow either

a "thoroughgoing skepticism" or a "thoroughgoing eschatology" (Schweitzer 1910, 330–403). Like the Christian Gospels, the earliest narratives of Islamic origins are heavily determined by the theological interests of the later community (i.e., "salvation history"), inviting the conclusion, with Wansbrough, that all "historical" knowledge of Muḥammad and the origins of Islam has been lost, obscured by the imagination of medieval Islam. Alternatively, however, one may adopt the position of "thoroughgoing eschatology," which reveals a historically probable Muḥammad, who, like Jesus, was an eschatological prophet of the end times. The imminent eschatology of the Qur'ān and many early *ḥadīth* invites recovery of this apocalyptic preacher who, with his followers, expected to see the end of the world very soon, seemingly even in his own lifetime. The preservation of such material against the interests of the later tradition suggests that it preserves a credible approximation of the *ipsissima vox Machometi*. While such an image of Muḥammad will perhaps be of little relevance for modern believers, much like Schweitzer's Jesus, it nevertheless presents a plausible reconstruction worthy of standing alongside the historical Jesus, having been recovered using comparable methods and assumptions.

NOTES

1. E.g., the article on "sīra" in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* evaluates these biographical traditions as essentially useless for knowledge of either the historical figure of Muḥammad or the rise of Islam: Raven 1960–2005, 662. See also Buhl 1930, 372–377; Rodinson 1971, xi; Wansbrough 1978b; Crone 1980, 3–17; 1987a, 214–230; Peters 1991, 301–306; Hawting 1997; 1999; Robinson 2002, 8–25; 2003, 121–124.

2. For specific examples, see Donner 1998, 7–9; Hoyland 2007, 597, n. 6. Hodgson, for his part, despite his critical assessments of the sources, nevertheless gives a rehash of the traditional account. Even F. E. Peters, who in one place writes, "Goldziher, Lammens and Schacht were all doubtless correct" with regard to historical knowledge of Muḥammad's life (Peters 1991, 303), later composed his own biography of Muḥammad largely according to the accounts of the traditional sources (Peters 1994).

3. On the date of Ibn Isḥāq's biography, see Sellheim 1967, 33. For general discussions of the early *sīra* traditions, see Rubin 1998, xiii–xxxvi; 1995, 5–17; Jones 1983, 343–346; Humphreys 1991, 77–80; and esp. Hinds 1983.

4. Robinson 2002, 25; see also al-Samuk 1978, 160–161; Conrad 1993, 260–261; Motzki 2003, 174.

5. Juynboll 1989; 1991; 1992; 1993; 1996; Motzki 1991a; 1991b; 1998; 2002; 2003; 2005.

6. Calder 1993, 194–195; Hawting 1996; Berg 2000, 36–38, 112–114; Melchert 2003, 301–304; Hoyland 2007, 587.

7. The main exception to this consensus would be John Wansbrough, who argued that the Qur'ān was much later in forming. While many of the particulars of

his hypothesis, such as the final redaction of the Qur'ān only around 800, are admittedly somewhat questionable, Wansbrough's broader argument that the Qur'ān was in fact redacted later than the Islamic tradition remembers and under different circumstances is well made. Moreover, allowance for a historical connection between Muḥammad and the traditions of the Qur'ān need not entail an acceptance of the "authenticity" of all the traditions collected in the Qur'ān. Despite Western scholarship's long-standing acceptance of the Islamic tradition's views on the Qur'ān's identification with Muḥammad, the possibility of both additions and alterations to the text needs to be more widely considered, as discussed later.

8. For similar, more recent assessments, see Donner 2008, 29–30; Gilliot 2008, 88.

9. On Ewald's fierce opposition to the new approaches that had emerged within early Christian studies, as well as his nature as a mentor, see Davies 1903, 23, 36–40, 63–64, 68–71; Fück 1955, 167, 217; Harris 1975, 43–48; Baird 1992, 287–293; Hurgronje 1931, 245. For remarks on Ewald's methodological conservatism and resistance to the emergent historical-critical approaches within early Christian studies from perhaps the two greatest innovators of the field, see Baur 1860, 122–171; Schweitzer 1910, 116 (esp. n. 4), 135.

10. Rippin 2006, 240–247, esp. 242. See also, e.g., Rippin 1985, 153, 158–159; 1992, 641–642; Arkoun 1982.

11. Alfred-Louis de Prémare draws a similar comparison with Papias' testimony: de Prémare 2004b, 176, 183. The fragments of Papias are most readily accessible in Ehrman 2003, 91–119. The most important fragments, regarding the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, are preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III.39. Regarding the accuracy of Papias' account, see Kümmel 1975, 53–56, 94–97, 241–244; Schoedel 1993; Ehrman 1999, 42–45.

12. Wansbrough 1977, esp. 43–51. See also Rippin 1985; 1997; Wansbrough and Rippin 2004, xiv–xviii; Berg 1997; Hawting 1997; Mojaddedi 2000; Reynolds 2008, 12.

13. Casanova 1911–1924, 103–142; de Prémare 2001; 2002, 278–306; 2004a, esp. 57–136; 2004b; 2005. Cf. Mingana 1916; Crone and Cook 1977, 17–18; Hoyland 1997, 500–501.

14. See, e.g., Sanders 1993, 57–63; Ehrman 1999, 21–53; Dunn and McKnight 2005; Koester 1995, 2:59–64.

15. E.g., Rodinson 1971, 81–98; Rahman 1980, 37–64, 106–120; Muranyi 1986; Bennett 1998, 19, 128–132; Afzaal 2003; Zeitlin 2007.

16. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the Qur'ān are from Arberry 1955. Nevertheless, I have followed the Egyptian system of numbering the verses for easier reference to the Arabic text.

17. Alternatively, one might translate the passage as: "the hastening [Hour] is at hand."

18. As much is reflected in the very title of John Gager's influential *Kingdom and Community*: Gager 1975. See also, e.g., Martin 1995; Theissen 1982; Overman 1990; Saldarini 1994; Balch 1991; Neyrey 1991.

19. While a small minority of New Testament scholars continue to argue that Jesus' message was non-eschatological, Ehrman dispenses with such hypotheses both swiftly and judiciously: Ehrman 1999, 132–134.

20. For comparison, see, e.g., Sanders 1985, 123–156, although one could still explore Weiss 1892 or Schweitzer 1910, 330–397, on this topic with profit, even at such a chronological distance. For more popular presentations of the same ideas, see Sanders 1993, 169–188; Ehrman 1999, 125–139.

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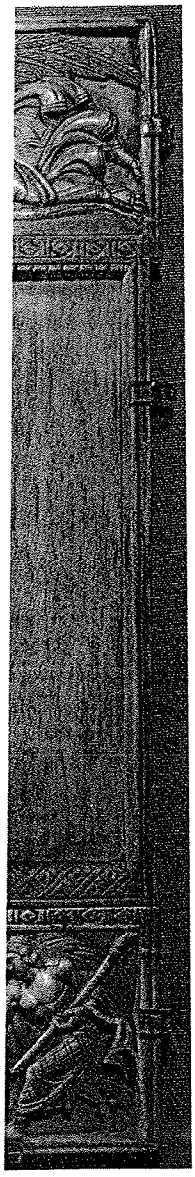

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