

# THE NEEDLE IN THE HAYSTACK: ISLAMIC ORIGINS AND THE NATURE OF THE EARLY SOURCES

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of Islamic origins focuses on three core topics: the provenance of quranic materials and their canonization in the Qur'ān, the biography of Muḥammad and his successors, and the normative example of Muḥammad preserved in thousands of independent reports: that is, to say, the Qur'ān, the *ṣīra*, and the Sunna. Thus we are dependent for our historical reconstructions almost exclusively on texts. Not just any texts, but texts produced within the community and for which the earliest extant manuscripts are a century or so after the events they purport to describe. Ignaz Goldziher and others had earlier noted this out about *ḥadīths* of the Sunna, but starting in the mid 1970s, a group of scholars, who having pointed out that this fairly obvious fact applied to the Qur'ān, its *tafsīr*, and Islam's early history, and then acted accordingly, were described, often derogatorily, as revisionists and sceptics. Prominent among these scholars stood John Wansbrough, and his students Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. Since then many other scholars have challenged both their conclusions and assumptions, some by simply negating their scepticism and a few somewhat more fruitfully by attempting to reconstruct earlier texts from later extant ones.

Despite what some contemporary sceptics claim—or perhaps more accurately what the strawman sceptics are said to claim—these efforts by the challengers have made a significant impact on the study of Islamic origins. Although much has been accomplished with the Qurʾān, the *sīra*, and the Sunna since the work of Wansbrough et al, many of the problems to which he alerted scholars still remain inherent in the sources—whether extant or reconstructed. As a result, those scholars who seek to extract historical information about Islamic origins from these sources are constructing figures which the sources may not describe. The sources describe largely theological entities, not historical ones. And, despite how the impressive work of scholars to narrow the gap between texts and origins, they have not freed us from the most important claim made by Wansbrough.

#### WANSBROUGH AND LITERARY ANALYSIS

Negative reactions to John Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies* and *The Sectarian Milieu* focus on three major concerns (1) is on the late dating of the canonization of the Qurʾān; (2) placing the origin of Islam within a Judeo-Christian sectarian milieu outside of the Hijaz; and (3) the redescription of the *sīra* as narrative exegesis instead of history. All of these concerns might be dismissed as conclusions that Wansbrough himself described as “provisional,” “conjectural,” and “tentative and emphatically provisional.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, for the first concern, Wansbrough noted that “it is of course neither possible, nor necessary, to maintain that the material of the canon did not, in some form, exist prior to that period of intensive literary activity”, though his claim that the *ne varietur* text only occurred “towards the end of the second century”<sup>2</sup> needs to be modified.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wansbrough, John. *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, ix and xi. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; idem. *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, x. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> Several scholars have suggested a “Marwānid” instead of an ‘Uthmānic canonization of the Qurʾān. That is to say, the text was standardized during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik. See de Prémare, Alfred-Louis.

With 25 out of the 28 prophetic figures in the Qurʾān bearing a strong resemblance to figures within the Judeo-Christian traditions, and with direct quranic addresses and references to Jews, Christians, and People of the Book, disputing the second concern seems to be mere catering to Muslim sensitivities<sup>4</sup> or fearing being accused of robbing Islam of its originality.<sup>5</sup> Scholars such as Suliman

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*Les fondations de l'Islam: entre écriture et histoire*, 278–306. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002; and Robinson, Chase F. *ʿAbd al-Malik*, 100–4. Oxford: One-world, 2005. See also Cook, Michael. *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, 119–22. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; and Powers, David S. *Muhammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet*, 155–96 and 227–33. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009. I thank Stephen J. Shoemaker for making available to me his paper “Canonization and Criticism: The Collection of the Qurʾān and the Resistance to Methods from Biblical Studies in the Qurʾānic Studies,” presented at the *Society of Biblical Literature* Annual Meeting, Atlanta, November 20, 2010. For an argument against the Marwānīd hypothesis, see Sadeghi, Behnam, and Uwe Bergmann. “The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qurʾān of the Prophet.” *Arabica* 57 (2010): 343–435.

<sup>4</sup> Berg, Herbert. “Failures (of Nerve?) in the Study of Islamic Origins.” In Arnal, William E., Willi Braun, and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds. *Failure and Nerve in the Study of Religion: Working with Donald Wiebe* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Failure to preserve the originality of Islam was a charge leveled at Wansbrough: “I am always annoyed by those who do not dare to ascribe any originality to the Arabs and constantly look for Jewish and Christian models which the community of Muḥammad might have borrowed.” Juynboll, G. H. A. “Review of *Qurʾanic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* by John Wansbrough,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 24 (1979): 294. R. B. Serjeant likewise criticized Wansbrough’s *Qurʾanic Studies* as having “a thoroughly reactionary stand in reverting to the over-emphasis of the Hebrew element in Islam. ... one has the sense of a disguised polemic seeking to strip Islam and the Prophet of all but the minimum of originality.” Serjeant, R. B. “Review of *Qurʾanic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* by John Wansbrough and *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1978): 76–78. The need to make religions unique and “original”, that is, not a product of its socio-cultural context, is essentially a crypto-theological position. The question should not be, “is the origin of

Bashear and Fred Donner, who could hardly be called radical, both admit something similar.<sup>6</sup> Granted, Wansbrough's construction of that milieu is problematic. As for the third concern, much of the *sīra* clearly is commentary<sup>7</sup> despite recent attempts to show that at least some of it has an early provenance (see discussion of Görke and Schoeler's reconstruction below). What is most surprising, is how little can be shown to be early.

Donner, in his book *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, believes he has decisively undermined the aforementioned historical concerns raised by Wansbrough's approach. The existence of early "multiple orthodoxies" which nevertheless agree "on most central features of the traditional origins story;" the non-existence of authorities who could have redacted this story; and the improbability of no dissenting view surviving somewhere in the vast Muslim empire; all belie the conclusions of the argument of the sceptical approach.<sup>8</sup> Of course, one could argue that given that the competing orthodoxies agree on the main features of Islamic origins (such as the Qur'ān), they are but different movements within one orthodoxy, which in turn explains why redacting authorities are unnecessary and dissent

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Islam a product of its context?" but "what was the context that gave rise to Islam?"

<sup>6</sup> Bashear, Suliman. *Arabs and Others in Early Islam*. Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997; and Donner, Fred M. *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, the analysis of Qur'ān 15:89–92. Wansbrough, *Secularian Milieu*, 10–11; Berg, "Competing Paradigms in the Study of Islamic Origins: Qur'ān 15:89–91 and the Value of *Isnāds*." In Berg, Herbert, ed. *Methods and Theories in the Study of Islamic Origins*, 259–90. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003; Motzki, Harald, Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, and Sean W. Anthony. *Analysing Muslim Tradition: Studies in Legal, Exegetical and Maghāzī Hadīth*, 231–303. Leiden, Brill, 2010; and Berg, H. "The 'School' of Ibn 'Abbās." In Burge, Stephen, ed. *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicology and Tafsīr* (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Donner, Fred M. *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, 26–27. Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997.

need not have been suppressed. To focus on these three concerns, however, is to miss Wansbrough's most important contribution.

Wansbrough's real contribution was his call for literary analysis. He admits that he was not the first to acknowledge historiography as literature.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, he notes that this fact "must cause some unease among historians who had staked a claim on their special ability to tell us 'what really happened' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)."<sup>10</sup> Wansbrough elaborates:

the sources for that historical event are exclusively literary, predominantly exegetical, and incarcerated in a grammar designed to stress the immediate equivalence of word and world. ... all we know is what we have been told. With neither artifact nor archive, the student of Islamic origins could quite easily become victim of a literary and linguistic conspiracy. He is, of course, mostly convinced that he is not. Reason for that must be confidence in his ability to extrapolate from literary version(s) what is likely to have happened. The confidence is certainly manifest; the methodological premises that ought to suspect the existence somewhere of a tacitly shared paradigm, that is, an assumption that the literature in question has documentary value.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, Wansbrough argues that, "If ... what we know of the seventh-century Hijaz is the product of intense literary activity, then that record has got to be interpreted in accordance with what we know of literary criticism."<sup>12</sup> Nothing, nothing at all, he suggests, should be considered obvious or self-evident.<sup>13</sup>

A very brief comparison with Christian origins is apt. Accepting the basic narrative of the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles as a description of early Christianity (that is, in a manner

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<sup>9</sup> Wansbrough, J. *Res Ipsa Loquitur: History and Mimesis*, 6. Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

that the *sīra* and historical *ḥadīth* or *akḥbār*<sup>14</sup> often are) would be considered incredibly naïve. That is not to say it is not done, but it is clear that these scholars are operating within a theological framework. In addition to this theoretical problem, there is a methodological one. When Burton Mack constructs communities of Jesus followers out of various texts within the Gospel of Mark, he is called to task.<sup>15</sup> Scholars of Islam are not similarly challenged in their reifications.

What was needed, according to Wansbrough, was evidence, what he called artifact and archive. Scholars have made efforts in this regard using two techniques: finding new artifacts and archives outside the extant literary collection, and creating them from within it. Of the former, success has been limited and subject to differing interpretations. Though hardly new, the evidence of variations in the Quranic passages on the Dome of the Rock have been interpreted in various ways. For some, it is evidence that the Qurʾān was not canonized as a *ne varietur* text prior to the building's construction.<sup>16</sup> Donner, on the other hand, explains away the differences and so the texts on Dome of the Rock do indicate a canonized scripture well prior to the date of its construction.<sup>17</sup> A more recent

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<sup>14</sup> Juynboll, G. H. A. "Some Thoughts on Early Muslim Historiography." *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 49 (1992): 685–691.

<sup>15</sup> Mack, B. *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*, 83–102. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988. For a critique, see Berg, H., and S. E. Rollens. "The Historical Muhammad and the Historical Jesus: A Comparison of Scholarly Reinventions and Reinterpretations." *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses*, 32.2 (2008): 274.

<sup>16</sup> Crone, Patricia. "Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qurʾān." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 17–18, n. 48; and more importantly, Crone P., and Michael Cook. *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, 18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. See also Nevo, Yehuda. "Towards a Prehistory of Islam." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 17 (1994): 108–141.

<sup>17</sup> Whelan, Estelle. "Forgotten Witness: Evidence for the early Codification of the Qurʾān." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998): 3–8; and Donner, Fred M. *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*, 208. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.

and perhaps still more fruitful archive are the fragments of the Qurʾān of the Ṣanʿāʾ manuscripts. Once again we see disagreement. For some scholars the Ṣanʿāʾ manuscripts show that the Qurʾān was canonized very early, that is in a timeframe that accords with the tradition of the ʿUthmānic recension, whereas for others they reveal a far more complex and unorthodox origin.<sup>18</sup> Until more scholars have thoroughly examined these fragments, little more can be said. And so, we are left with our extant sources and the historical reconstructions of earlier texts from them. Of course, when reconstructions of texts take place, we are still left with *literary sources*.

### THE RECONSTRUCTIONS:

#### THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD

#### V. LITERARY ANALYSIS

Long gone are the days when scholars simply trusted in the information in *isnāds* and other later references and so postulated the existence of texts in the manner of Faut Sezgin or of exegetical corpora in the manner of Heribert Horst.<sup>19</sup> Far more sophisticated methods are employed by Harald Motzki for individual *ḥadīths* of

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<sup>18</sup> Because of these manuscripts, Gerd-Rüdiger Puin states “My idea is that the Koran is a kind of cocktail of texts that were not all understood even at the time of Muhammad. ... Many of them may even be a hundred years older than Islam itself. Even within the Islamic traditions there is a huge body of contradictory information, including a significant Christian substrate; one can derive a whole Islamic *anti-history* from them if one wants.” Lester, Toby. “What is the Koran?” *The Atlantic Monthly* (January 1999): 46. See also von Bothmer, Hans-Casper Graf, Karl-Heinz Ohlig, and Gerd-Rüdiger Puin. “Neue Wege der Koranforschung.” *Magazin Forschung* (1999): 33–46.

<sup>19</sup> Sezgin writes that “almost all of the earliest quranic commentary together with the transmission changes are preserved unaltered in later works.” Sezgin, Faut. *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums, Band I: Qurʾān-wissenschaften, Hadīth, Geschichte, Fiqh, Dogmatik, Mystik bis ca. 430 H.*, 17–18. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967. Thus he is comfortable cataloguing all the texts that (in his view) must have been extant at one time. Horst, Heribert. *Die Gewährsmänner im Korankommentar at-Ṭabarī. Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der exegetischen Überlieferung im Islam*, Ph.D. dissertation. Bonn 1951.

the Sunna and by Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler for *ḥadīths* from the *sīra*.<sup>20</sup> Their reconstructions assume that *isnāds* may, at least in part, reflect the actual transmission history. Also, variations in the *matns* may, at least in part, be a product of that transmission history. Careful analysis, therefore, of both the *isnāds* and *matns* of all the extant versions of particular *ḥadīth* often permits one not only to determine the origin of the tradition, but even sometimes to reconstruct the original form of the report and who adapted it along the way. Motzki refers to this as the *isnād-cum-matn* method. It is not a method that can be used on isolated *ḥadīths*, but for many *ḥadīths* of the Sunna, *sīra*, and *tafsīr* the requisite number of closely related *ḥadīths* exist.

Harald Motzki suggests that the differences between the historical critical approach particularly as represented by his *isnād-cum-matn* method and the literary approach advocated by Wansbrough are not as different as I have suggested elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> His arguments focus on the epistemological value of texts, the value of *isnāds*, and the dating of the sources—though these three issues are inextricably intertwined in the case of Islamic origins.

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<sup>20</sup> Many other scholars engage in much the same activity. Miklos Muranyi attempts to discover the transmission history of texts while Kees Versteegh attempts to restrict reconstruct pre-Sībawayah Arabic grammar using *tafsīr*. Muranyi, M. "A Unique Manuscript from Kairouan in the British Library: The *Samāʿ*-work of Ibn al-Qāsim al-Utaqī and Issues of Methodology." In Berg, Herbert, ed. *Methods and Theories in the Study of Islamic Origins*, 325–68. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003; and Versteegh, Kees. *Arabic Grammar and Qurʾānic Exegesis in Early Islam*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993. For a critique of this approach, particularly as employed by Versteegh, see Rippin, Andrew. "Studying Early *tafsīr* Texts." *Der Islam* 72 (1996): 310–23. Another interesting variation of this method is employed by Behnam Sadeghi. He refers to his method as "traveling tradition test," which compares the content of the *matns* with the cities represented within the *isnāds*. Like Motzki, Sadeghi finds evidence for an early provenance for several *ḥadīths*. Sadeghi, Behnam. "The Traveling Tradition Test: A Method for Dating Traditions." *Der Islam* 85 (2008): 203–42.

<sup>21</sup> Motzki does so in response to my "Competing Paradigms," 259–90. See Motzki, *Analysing Muslim Tradition*, 231–303, particularly p. 285.



Although Wansbrough characterizes the sources as being predominantly exegetical in character and thus not a record of “what really happened,” ultimately he does make at least conjectural suggestions about what really happened—as evidence in the aforementioned three concerns. He suggests that much of this material first developed in the middle of the second/eighth century, that is, in the early ‘Abbāsid period. In the course of his analysis of the Qur’ān, Wansbrough postulates that the *logia* originated in a Judeo-Christian sectarian milieu. Motzki rightly asserts that both his method and Wansbrough’s methods similarly focus primarily on analysis of the sources and what that analysis can tell us about their origins.<sup>22</sup> In both cases, it is not so much Islamic origins as the origins of particular Islamic texts that matters. Epistemologically, therefore, they agree. These texts can provide some insight into what really happened.

Motzki then notes the “crucial difference”: he is willing to admit that with very early sources:

it may be possible and sensible to ask whether parts of the events that the sources depict really happened. The reason is the closeness of the source to the reported events. Yet the chance is greater that, to give an extreme example, an eyewitness report of an event transmitted some decades later is less affected by later developments than a description of the same event given two centuries later by someone who, although perhaps basing himself on traditions about the event, tries to make sense of it for his time.<sup>23</sup>

The assumption is that chronological proximity increases the likelihood of historical accuracy. And in many cases, most historians would agree with Motzki’s argument. It is here, however, that I disagree, but for a very specific reason. Were the texts ever historical? Motzki himself is very careful to avoid making specific claims. However, not all scholars who share his methodology are. For an example, see the discussion of the work of Görke and Schoeler below. I will defer my critique of this position until then.

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<sup>22</sup> Motzki, *Analyzing Muslim Tradition*, 287.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

A second difference between Motzki and Wansbrough concerns the value of *isnāds*, Wansbrough sees them as a literary device, a fairly late innovation.<sup>24</sup> The only historical value of the *isnād*, therefore, is as an indicator that the text took its extant form quite late.<sup>25</sup> Motzki dismisses that claim based on the “close correlation that has been observed between textual variants and *asānid*.”<sup>26</sup> I have searched for just such a correlation using the exegetical *ḥadīths* of Ibn ‘Abbās as recorded in al-Ṭabarī. By examining the distribution of various exegetical techniques along various lines of transmission, I hoped to see if any correlation existed. There was none.<sup>27</sup> Motzki would of course argue that the sort of correlation

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<sup>24</sup> “The supplying of *isnāds*, whether traced to the prophet, to his companions, or to their successors, may be understood as an exclusively formal innovation and cannot be dated much before 200/815.” Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 179. “The *ḥadīth* literature reflects both form and substance not only of juridical concern with the actions and utterances of the prophet of Islam and with the contents of the Quranic revelation, but also of its haggadic (narrative and historical) expression in *sīra*, *maghāzī*, and *ayyām*. The presence of *isnāds* as halakhic embellishment is, from the point of view of literary criticism, a superfluity.” Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 183.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Rippin (“*Tafsīr Ibn ‘Abbās* and Criteria for Dating Early *Tafsīr* Texts.” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1995): 61) makes this point most forcefully:

The single most important element here is to recognize that the *isnād*, as a mechanism, came to be required at a certain point in Islamic history as the element that provided authenticity and validity to reports supposedly stemming from earlier authorities. The presence of *isnāds* automatically dates a report to the second century or later, at least in its final recension: it would always have been possible, after all, for a later editor to add an *isnād* to an earlier text in order to give it validity.

<sup>26</sup> Motzki, *Analyzing Muslim Tradition*, 288.

<sup>27</sup> Berg, Herbert. *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Debate over the Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period*. Richmond: Curzon, 2000.

he is speaking of can only be seen in individual traditions using the *isnād-cum-matn* method.<sup>28</sup>

Motzki's argument, however, is valid. If revisionists see no value whatsoever in the contents of the *isnāds*, then the observed correlations between the texts and those *isnāds* requires some alternative explanation. Organic growth and mass fabrication would likely favor randomness, not correlations. Wansbrough obviously never proffered any explanation, nor have scholars who share his perspective. Short of doing so, and especially if one is willing to admit that only the last name is an *isnād* may reflect actual transmission history—that is to say, that al-Ṭabarī or al-Bukhārī did not invent all of the thousands of *ḥadīths* they record—then Motzki's *isnād-cum-matn* method can be employed. The only debate remains about how far one can extend this method, and what one may conclude as a result. The latter, however, forces us to return us to the epistemological issue discussed above.

The third issue Motzki raises derives from the previous two: dating the sources. The *isnād-cum-matn* method most often dates texts significantly earlier than Wansbrough's dating using exegetical typology (i.e., haggadic, halakhic, masoretic, and rhetorical, and allegorical, which emerged chronologically in this order).<sup>29</sup> Despite what Motzki claims, he and I are not so far apart—Wansbrough's typology is “an *a priori* premise.”<sup>30</sup> Thus the real difference between Motzki and myself rests not on his method, the value of *isnāds* or even the dating of texts, but on the historical conclusions—the epistemological issue to use his terminology—drawn from the method using traditional *isnāds* and the dates they produce.

Wansbrough would likely not have been convinced by such Motzkian reconstructions, but there is no doubt that it takes his earlier call for more archives seriously and does not rely simply on

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<sup>28</sup> For an extended critique of my method and conclusions, see Motzki, Harald. “The Questions of the Authenticity of Muslim Traditions Reconsidered: A Review Article.” In Berg, Herbert, ed. *Methods and Theories in the Study of Islamic Origins*, 211–57. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 119.

<sup>30</sup> Motzki, *Analysing Muslim Tradition*, 294.

ascription and *isnād* analysis. Of course these new, purportedly earlier, archives are still literary. That this situation remains problematic becomes evident when one examines some examples of historical claims made on the basis of this method.

### CONSEQUENCES: THE *SĪRA*<sup>31</sup>

The study of Christian origins encompasses such nuanced and overlapping discussions as the synoptic problem, the redaction history of Q, reconstructions of the various Jesus movements, Jewish Christianity, Markan Literary sources, formation of Luke-Acts, Pauline epistles, and, of course, the quest for the historical Jesus. And if one focuses on the just the latter, the quest for the historical Jesus, one discovers various competing theories: Jesus the myth (heavenly Christ and the man of the indefinite past), Jesus the Hellenistic hero, Jesus the revolutionary, Jesus the wisdom sage, Jesus the man of spirit, Jesus the prophet of social change, Jesus the apocalyptic prophet, and Jesus the saviour.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to this bewildering array of scholarship, as noted above, Islamic origins remains largely seems fixated on the Qurʾān, the *sīra*, and the Sunna. The historical Muḥammad may be a statesman, or even a reformer and mystic relevant to today,<sup>33</sup> but he is also *always* Muḥammad the Prophet—a very epithet produced by Muslim tradition itself. Of course, like most of the epithets of Jesus, it is a religious designation.

In Donner's recent book, *Muhammad and the Believers*, he makes a claim that might seem reminiscent of those revisionists who also suggested that *muhājirūn* was one of the earliest self-designations

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<sup>31</sup> The two examples in this section appear in Berg, "Failures (of Nerve?)"

<sup>32</sup> Kirby, Peter. "Historical Jesus Theories." <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/theories.html>. To this list could be added many more: Jesus the feminist, Jesus the homosexual, Jesus the humanist, and even Jesus the atheist. See Berg and Rollens, "The Historical Muḥammad and the Historical Jesus," 278.

<sup>33</sup> Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961; and Armstrong, Karen. *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006.

employed by the movement that would develop into Islam and that Jews played an early significant role in that movement.<sup>34</sup> But the similarity ends there. Despite describing all the “well-founded concerns” about the biography of Muḥammad, from “many contradictions” to the efforts “to make biography conform” to prophetic paradigms, Donner refuses to conclude that it is not a historical record: “This, however, is surely going too far and in its way is just as uncritical approach as unquestioning acceptance of everything in the traditional accounts. The truth *must* lie somewhere in between.”<sup>35</sup> Donner also asserts that it is better to speak of the Believers and Believers’ movement instead of Muslims and Islam. The former are for him earlier and a “strongly monotheistic, intensely pietistic, and ecumenical or confessionally open religious movement that enjoined people who were not already monotheists to recognize God’s oneness and enjoined all monotheists to live in strict observance of the law that God had repeatedly revealed to mankind—whether in the form of the Torah, the Gospels, or the Qur’an.”<sup>36</sup> Yet, when it comes to describing the beliefs and practices of this proto-Islamic movement, it becomes evident that there is no revisionism inherent in his neologisms. Donner presents something very akin to the traditional five pillars and five principles of Islam. His chronology of events and of revelations in the Qur’an (into Meccan and Medinan suras) is also traditional.<sup>37</sup> The sources remain an archeological site though a bit of sifting is required. In

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<sup>34</sup> See Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 3–20.

<sup>35</sup> Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 52. Emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Donner argues that the late origins hypothesis of Wansbrough fails to explain many features of the Qur’an. Had the Qur’an crystallized over a period of 200 years, mostly outside of Arabia, perhaps mainly in Iraq, Donner expects to see anachronistic references to later important events. He sees none, and he states that “some of the Qur’an’s vocabulary suggests that the text, or a significant parts of it, hailed from western Arabia. So we seem, after all, to be dealing with a Qur’an that is a product of the earliest states in the life of the community in western Arabia.” Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 56.

that regard, the difference between him and W. Montgomery Watt is negligible.<sup>38</sup>

Religious/theological texts see the movements of which they are a part, unsurprisingly, as not a product (and certainly not *merely* as a product) of their cultural, social, political, and economic contexts. They want to see themselves as a product of a unique (albeit sometimes indirect) encounter with a supreme being (at least in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim contexts). In other words, they do not seek to present history, that is give temporal, material, contextual, or more bluntly, human explanations. Rather, they present a very particular theology or salvation history (to use Wansbrough's expression). And, if one then mistakes these texts for historical texts, all manner of peculiar things occur. Donner, by accepting the historicity of essentially theological texts, describes the movement in essentially theological terms.

Donner argues "that Islam began as a religious movement—not as a social, economic, or 'national' one; in particular, it embodied an intense concern for attaining personal salvation through religious behavior." Elsewhere he reiterates that the Believers were "a movement rooted in religious faith" and driven by a "religious motivation—the desire to extend the recognition of God's word."<sup>39</sup> Donner admits that "the social dimensions of the message are undeniable and significant, but they are *incidental* to the central notions of the Qur'an, which are religious: Belief in the one God and right-

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<sup>38</sup> W. Montgomery Watt argued that historical materials were reliable: "In the legal sphere there may be some sheer invention of traditions ... but in the historical sphere, in so far as the two may be separated, and apart from some exceptional cases, the nearest to such invention in the best early historians appears to be 'tendential shaping' of material." Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Mecca*, xiii. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953. Similarly, after stating how difficult it is to determine who was at fault for the first *fitna*, Donner states "We can discern quite clearly, however, the basic course of events, the individuals and groups involved, and the main issues at stake because most sources regardless of tendency agree." Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 155.

<sup>39</sup> Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, xii, 219, and 197, respectively.

eous behavior as proof of obedience to God's will."<sup>40</sup> Ironically, Donner dismisses early expansion of the Believers out of Arabia as an "Arab" movement. Arab identity is an effect, not a cause of the movement. He writes, "It usually represents the facile interpolation back into the seventh century C.E. of modern concepts of Arab nationalism that only came into existence in the late nineteenth century."<sup>41</sup> He is no doubt correct, but were one to substitute "religion" for "Arab nationalism" in the quotation, he would be critiquing his own goal to highlight the *religious* causes of the movement. Talal Asad has pointed out that "religion" is a modern category that cannot be treated as abstract and universalized with an autonomous essence.<sup>42</sup> This depiction of Islamic origins is a product of employing the *sīra* and the Qur'ān as historical records, instead of theological ones.

Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler are far more explicit in their use of the historical critical method described above. They also recognize that 150 years between the extant literary sources for the life of Muḥammad and the events they purport to describe force research on the historical Muḥammad "to be restricted to the study of the Islamic self-image."<sup>43</sup> They seek, therefore, to recon-

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<sup>40</sup> Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 89. Emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>42</sup> Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Moreover, Donner's use of the word "religious" emphasizes faith, which reflects a fairly narrow definition of religion, one in which the essence of religion is the private, interior experience—a notion of religion that can be traced back to Schleiermacher's "essential feeling" and beyond him to the Reformation's *sole fide*. Donner also repeatedly emphasizes that early believers were (monotheistically) ecumenical. One cannot help but notice that Donner's description of Muhammad and his Believers' movement (in other words, *original* Islam or ideal Islam) as an ecumenical, not anti-Jewish nor anti-Christian, and "not fanatical" faith is remarkably compatible with our modern theology of religious pluralism.

<sup>43</sup> Görke, Andreas, and Gregor Schoeler. *Die Ältesten Berichte über Muhammads: Das Korpus 'Urwa ibn az-Zubair*, 282. Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2008.

struct the original corpus of 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 713), out of the many thousands of traditions preserved or ascribed to him in these later, extant works. They are not reconstructing the origin of Islam but the origin of its historical traditions. However, this reconstructed Urtext of 'Urwa—as the first collector and transmitter of such biographical material about Muḥammad—allows Görke and Schoeler to assert that “the material that can be securely ascribed to 'Urwa was collected some 30 to 60 years after Muḥammad's death. It would therefore go back to eye-witnesses and to persons in very close contact to Muḥammad. It may therefore assumed that these reports reflect the general outline of the events correctly.”<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the first problem with their assertion is to assume that chronological proximity has some bearing on historical accuracy. Here, Christian origins tells a cautionary tale: just two decades separates the historical Jesus from Paul's Christ, and Jesus the miracle worker in the Gospel of Mark from the Cosmic Lord in the Gospel of John. Speaking of the Gospel of Mark which was written approximately four decades after Jesus, William Arnal states:

The nature of the sources for Jesus exacerbates the situation. While the object of our supposedly 'historical' inquiry keeps transforming into a theological entity in front of our very eyes, the main sources on which we base our reconstructions present him as a theological entity in the first place. Whether Jesus himself existed as a historical figure or not, the gospels that tell of him are unquestionably mythic texts. The Gospel of Mark, for example, is a narrative that includes a cast of characters comprising, *inter alia*, God, a son of God, angels, the devil, demons, holy spirits, evil spirits, and what seem to be the ghosts of Moses and Elijah. It is a story that features miraculous healings and exorcisms, as well as walking on water, feeding thousands of people with a handful of loaves and fishes (twice!), face-to-face conversations between people who lived centuries apart, spooky prognostications, trees withering at Jesus' simple command, a sun darkening in the middle of the day, and a temple curtain miraculously tearing itself in half. ... In seeking

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<sup>44</sup> Görke and Schoeler, *Die Ältesten Berichte über Muhammads*, 294.



to find the real, historical person behind these narratives, we are using these texts as sources for a figure that they themselves show no interest in at all. Just as myths and legends about Herakles are simply not *about* a historical person, so also the gospels are not *about* the historical Jesus.<sup>45</sup>

The study of Islamic origins and the study of the historical Muhammad, if based on the extant *ṣīra* or Görke and Schoeler's reconstructed Urtext, are forced to rely on similarly mythic material that would have been produced with a confessional theological perspective. In claiming their reconstruction as a historical text, they are reproducing, in a scholarly voice, the basic theological claims of the Muslim tradition's presentation of its origins. What they have produced, that is if one accepts the possibility of reconstructing earlier Urtexts out of the later extant sources, is merely an earlier "self-image" (to use their terminology).

That such is the case, one need only look at their conclusions. Görke and Schoeler determine that "Urwa's accounts include Muhammad's first revelations, they reflect the reactions of the Meccans, they tell the story of the harassment of the Muslims and their flight to Abyssinia and Medina, and they describe the military conflict with the Meccans and with other Arab tribes up to the eventual success of Muhammad's mission [i.e., the conquest of Mecca]."<sup>46</sup> The more fantastic elements, such as Muhammad's night journey and ascension to heaven, the more problematic ones, such as the reference to the "Satanic verses" and the many conflicts with the Jews seem to be absent from the reconstructed corpus.<sup>47</sup> In an earlier work, Schoeler examined the reports about Muhammad's very first revelation and traced their transmission from the (probable) first reporter to their final redaction in extant works. He concluded that that story was very early, but the various motifs were likely combined in the first century A.H. and emerged

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<sup>45</sup> Arnal, William E. *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity*, 75–76. London: Equinox, 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Görke and Schoeler, *Die Ältesten Berichte über Muhammads*, 290.

<sup>47</sup> As with Donner, a much more pleasant and reasonable early Islam results.

within the Zubayrid family of which 'Urwa was a part and which had a rival caliphate from 681 to 691. 'Urwa cleansed the report of its storyteller (*qāṣṣ*) elements, reworking it into *ḥadīth*-format. Schoeler further suggested that the original report is that of the storyteller 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr who built the story out of various components while with the Zubayrid court. Significant changes were still introduced afterward: it was paraphrased, shortened, adorned, and rearranged.<sup>48</sup> This conclusion about such a critical story is clearly at odds with how Muslims would present themselves, belying any conscious theological bias in Schoeler. However, this story's presence in the Urtext signals that (1) 'Urwa was not first and foremost an historian: he was a believer; (2) his corpus was not interested in some Abū l-Qāsim al-Hāshimī, but in Muḥammad, the *Prophet* of Islam—a decidedly theological figure. There is no reason, therefore, to assume that these reports reflect the general outline correctly (i.e., historically).

At first glance, the problem with Görke and Schoeler appears to be the opposite of that of Donner. Crudely put, he overemphasizes religion and they neglect it. In fact, what they do is quite similar. He creates an artificial and mystifying boundary between the internal experiences of the Believers and the social, historical, economic, and political context in which they appeared. They create a boundary between a later such context and the material ascribed to 'Urwa in which it was produced. For Donner, Görke and Schoeler "religion" is somehow independent of the social and cultural contexts that produced these literary archives.

### THE CONSPIRACY

Having acted as an exegete for Wansbrough's theories in the past,<sup>49</sup> my defense, or rather my experimental application of them has been take for my position. I hope that I have shown that my posi-

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<sup>48</sup> Schoeler, Gregor. *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Muhammeds*, 59–117. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Berg, Herbert. "The Implications of, and Opposition to, the Methods and Theories of John Wansbrough." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 9.1 (1997): 3–22; and Berg, "Competing Paradigms," 259–90.

tion may not be that far from Motzki et al, but there is still an epistemological gulf between my position and those of scholars of the historical critical method who feel that they can see the historical needle within the theological haystack. In opposition to that, I remain firmly in the Wansbroughian camp. This epistemological divide is particularly evident in the discussion of the “conspiracy theory”-critique of Wansbrough. Because the critique is both ubiquitous and sustained, and likely to be leveled at my reformulations of Wansbrough’s call for a recognition of the literary nature of the sources, it deserves some attention.

This critique was made first in several reviews of Wansbrough’s *Quranic Studies*.<sup>50</sup> However the strongest advocates of this critique are Versteegh, Donner, and Motzki. Versteegh states that “one needs a conspiratorial view of the Islamic tradition, in which all scholars are assumed to have taken part in the same conspiracy to suppress the real sequence of events ... there are bound to be some dissenters and in important issues ... it is inconceivable that tradition could manage to suppress all dissenting views.”<sup>51</sup> Donner’s argument invoking the existence of multiple orthodoxies and that dissenting views must therefore have existed has already been noted above. He concludes therefore, that “a conspiracy so widespread and, above all, so totally successful, is highly implausible.”<sup>52</sup> For Motzki, the “deliberate forgery , though possible, does not

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<sup>50</sup> “Indeed, one needs practically a conspiratorial theory of history to argue that the massive 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century written sources are not substantially compendia of earlier written as well as oral tradition”. Graham, William A. Review of *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* by John Wansbrough. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100 (1980): 140. “If the Qur’ān was the result of a conspiracy which Wansbrough now claims to have unearthed, then at the very least he should clarify why these four themes—so prominent in his analysis—did not gain prominence in Islam.” Rahman, Fazlur. “Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay.” In Martin, R. C., ed. *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, 200–1. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985.

<sup>51</sup> Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 283.

seem likely. It presupposes a high measure of ‘criminal energy’.”<sup>53</sup> Motzki has toned down the rhetoric of late, avoiding the terms “criminal energy” and “conspiracy,” but the sentiment is the same: “It is completely unrealistic to assume that a process of *recording and redaction* brought about by an orthodox *scholarly movement* could have occurred without *opponents’ reactions* being preserved in Muslim literature.”<sup>54</sup>

To this charge I have responded before.<sup>55</sup> A common theme in the conspiracy argument is the diverse, competing orthodoxies of early Islam, particularly that represented by proto-Sunnis and proto-Shīʿis. Surely, the argument runs, if such dissension is preserved, something on the scale that Wansbrough envisioned must have left a discernible trace. However, when the texts of Islam began to be recorded (towards the end of the first century, according to Motzki and Schoeler), that consensus was already formed, or was solidified in the act of recording it. The reports that were preserved were simply those the community “knew” to be genuine. Nothing needed to be suppressed. As Rippin so eloquently put it, “we do *not* know and probably never can know what really happened; all we can know is what later people *believed* happened, as has been recorded in the salvation history.”<sup>56</sup> The consensus or what later people believed had happened was recorded (or, perhaps supplied with *isnāds* and hence authority). A much vaster body of material may simply not have been preserved. What I am willing to

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<sup>53</sup> He adds that only should not one assume such activity without evidence, but also that an alternative explanation exists: similarities and differences are due to their transmission from a common source. “The Prophet and the Cat: On Dating Mālik’s *Muwattaʾ* and Legal Traditions.” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 22 (1998): 63.

<sup>54</sup> Motzki, *Analysing Muslim Tradition*, 295. Emphasis added. Motzki’s arguments, obviously, are a reiteration of those by Donner. See Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 26–28 and above.

<sup>55</sup> Berg, “Competing Paradigms,” 283.

<sup>56</sup> Rippin, Andrew. “Literary Analysis of *Qurʾān*, *tafsīr*, and *sīra*: the Methodologies of John Wansbrough.” In Martin, Richard C., ed. *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, 157. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985.

concede, based on the work of the reconstructionists, is that this process began earlier and that the historical parts of some *isnāds* are earlier than Wansbrough originally suggested.

To be convinced, Motzki wants to see evidence for large scale fabrication, systematic redaction, and/or organic growth. However, Motzki's view of how revisionists envision this organic growth is mistaken. He believes the process results in "only one dogma." Viewed in this light, he is correct. Early Islam is characterized by several discrete and competing orthodoxies. However, the manufacture of one hegemonic perspective does not negate the possibility of competing orthodoxies. Protestants and Catholics of the 16<sup>th</sup> century certainly represented competing orthodoxies, but shared the same hegemonic perspective of Christendom. They more or less used the same scripture, rituals, post-Chalcedonian Christology, and so forth. No conspiracy is needed to explain the broad consensus they shared despite their differences, and the same can be said of Sunni and Shī'īs—though we are a little less clear on how that consensus emerged.

However, despite my concession above that recognizes that instead of 200 years without texts (as posited by Wansbrough) we seem to be closer to 100 years, the basic nature of the sources has not changed. Looking again at Christian origins, one can see dramatic changes in just half that time. The Jesus of Q1 can be seen as an itinerant, cynic-like Galilean preacher or, far more convincingly, as a folk hero or mouthpiece used by Galilean village scribes to voice their frustration at their perceived powerlessness. In any case, that Jesus of the year 50, was later re-envisioned (according to some scholars) by other people as an apocalyptic prophet in Q2 and then as a proto-rabbi by the time the Q3 layer was added. The important thing to note is, however, that these Jesuses and the movements that produced them were more or less lost along with Q when the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew were written. It is only the editorial choices of the authors of these texts that allowed Q to be reconstructed.<sup>57</sup> Yet no one (outside of authors of

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<sup>57</sup> Arnal, William E. *Jesus and the Village Scribes: Galilean Conflicts and the Setting of Q*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001; and Mack, Burton. *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*. San Francisco: HarperSanFran-

fiction) suggests that this process required a conspiracy, forgery, or systematic redaction. We are fortunate to have evidence of organic growth, but that need not have been the case.

But one need not look to traditions other than Islam to see similar non-conspiratorial processes at work. If Donner is correct, originally the Believers' movement was ecumenical, open to all monotheists, including Christians and Jews. Some time later it became Islam, a tradition that explicitly rejected and criticized Christians and Jews. Moreover, that transition seems to have been largely erased from the tradition.<sup>58</sup> And, if Görke and Schoeler are correct, a vast body of anti-Jewish "history" was invented and inserted into the *sīra* after 'Urwa.

Likewise an example is to be found with Jonathan A. C. Brown, whose position on authenticity of *ḥadīths* is very close to

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cisco, 1993. Coincidentally, Jonathan Brown critiques Ignaz Goldziher who argued that the *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth* "When you see the black banners approaching from Khurasan, go to them, for indeed the Messiah (*mahdī*) is among them," was a product of 'Abbāsīd propaganda. Instead he suggests that 'Abbāsīds may have taken advantage of an existing *ḥadīth*. He then cites Zachariah 9:9 which tells of a king entering Jerusalem on a donkey. Mark 11:1–11 and Matthew 21:1–4 describe Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, and so Brown quite rightly points out that Christians did not write Zachariah, but used the language of a pre-existing text to make it appear as a prophecy, asking, "did Jesus really enter Jerusalem (not unlikely) riding the transport of his day—a donkey (not unlikely)"? Brown, *Hadith*, 234. But his questions miss the point. It is far more likely that the story in Mark (and later copied in Matthew) was constructed specifically around the pre-existing text, "not unlikelyhoods" notwithstanding.

<sup>58</sup> Donner does, of course, find some evidence for this transition, for instance in the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock. In fact, it is the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik who "seems to have encouraged the Arabian Believers to redefine themselves, and the Believers movement, in a manner that was less ecumenical ... than it had been originally. ... A boundary began to be drawn between Qur'anic Believers and those righteous Christians and Jews who had formerly belonged to the Believers' movement". Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 203.

that of Motzki.<sup>59</sup> Brown recognizes that *ḥadīth* forgery was a significant and early problem even in the first generation of Muslims, but even more so and more consistently so once the Companions had died off. “The heyday of hadith forgery was the first four hundred years of Islamic history, when major hadith collections were still being compiled.”<sup>60</sup> The political, theological, and sectarian divisions as well as Sunni-Shīʿī schism and even pious concerns “yielded countless forgeries.”<sup>61</sup> *Isnāds* too were forged for existing *ḥadīths*. Brown then describes the three-step process by which these forgeries were eliminated in early Sunni Islam. The first step was to demand an *isnād* for any report. The second and far more important step was to evaluate the transmitters found in the *isnād* and the contiguity of the *isnād*. Thus, “ultimately, it was the analysis of the body of their transmissions for *corroboration* that determine their accuracy.”<sup>62</sup> As the great compiler of *ḥadīths* Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj

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<sup>59</sup> Although Brown outlines the history of the Western debate on the authenticity of *ḥadīths*, he subjects only the assumptions of the revisionists and the orientalist to analysis. “The Western Revaluation” of Motzki’s position is clearly favored. See Brown, Jonathan A. C. *Hadīth: Muḥammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, 224–35. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009. This is particularly evident when he suggests that “It seems more likely that the Prophet actually said that God descends at night to answer men’s prayers.” Brown, *Hadīth*, 232.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Hadīth*, 71.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 81, emphasis added. Later Brown demonstrates what was at stake, when the Muʿtazila or the *ahl al-raʾy* questioned the value of *ḥadīths* and their *isnāds*:

The whole purpose of the *isnād* was to guarantee that the Prophet said something without relying on man’s flawed reason. If hadith critics admitted that a hadith could have an authentic *isnād* but still be a forgery because its meaning was unacceptable, then they would be admitting that their rationalist opponents were correct! If you could not have a strong *isnād* with a forged report, then any problem in the meaning of a hadith *must* mean that there was a problem in the *isnād*. ... Ibn ʿAdī often states that the questionable hadiths that a certain transmitter narrates “demonstrate that he is unreliable.” (Brown, *Hadīth*, 98).

states, one who narrates unfamiliar *ḥadīths* must be compared to those of others who are known, that is, accepted. If the former's narrations do not concur with their narrations often enough, then he is rejected and his narrations are rejected.<sup>63</sup> Here then we have an example of how a consensus or a hegemonic perspective is created. If a body of *ḥadīths* do not agree with the accepted opinion or if they are not in the accepted form (having not only an *isnād*, but a contiguous one), they are rejected. The third step is clearly does the same thing, looking (again) for corroboration. Thus what seems to be a methodology focused on the *isnād* does implicitly examine the content. In this way, narrations that do not match existing beliefs die out.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, these beliefs need not conform to "only one dogma" but at least to one of the competing dogmas. (The differences between the competing orthodoxies is not so great—at least not any greater than the differences between the christologies of the four canonical gospels).

Were one to ask for a specific example of a theologically driven consensus, one need only look at the belief in the collective and individual uprightness (*ʿadl*) of the Companions—or at least the belief in their inability to lie about Muḥammad. As anyone familiar with the "history" of this period as preserved by later Muslims knows and as later scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) were well aware, this was certainly not the case. As Brown points out, "That the collective impunity of the Companions was a later construct of the Sunni worldview is evident when one finds occasional minor Companions listed in early books of weak hadith transmitters."<sup>65</sup> All the competing orthodoxies remain, but this

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<sup>63</sup> Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī. *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. by Muḥammad Fuʿād ʿAbd al-Bāqī, v. 1, 7. Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmīya, n.d.

<sup>64</sup> Brown mentions that some early Muslims rejected the use of *ḥadīths* in Islamic law. "This extreme skepticism towards hadiths, however, died out in classical Sunni and Shiʿite Islam". Brown, *Hadith*, 152. That is to say, opposing views need not be preserved.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *Hadith*, 88. Although Brown recognized this purported infallibility as a later construct, elsewhere he suggests within a rhetorical question within the first 150 years the scholars "exerted a great deal of effort to prevent material from being forged wholesale about the



hegemonic perspective exists without the need for some conspiracy. Of course other such examples exist. Fatima Mernissi has claimed that the scholars of *ḥadīth* have obscured the original message of female empowerment in Islam by introducing patriarchal and even misogynistic statements into the mouth of Muḥammad. Although I find this kind of attempt at making an important religious figure into a feminist to be problematic on several levels, no one doubts that the Sunna is patriarchal and one would not really require a “conspiracy” in order to understand how such a Sunna would come about. Yet another example of a consensus with much diversity is the way non-*mutawātir* *ḥadīths* about the Mahdī became an article of faith, “so that it was impossible to imagine that all these separate hadiths could be forged with one common theme if that theme were not really representative of the Prophet’s words.”<sup>66</sup> The point of these many examples is to demonstrate that a process of mythmaking and social formation,<sup>67</sup> which produced the extant theological literary sources does not require a conspiracy. Donner,

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Prophet”. Brown, *Hadith*, 232. Why could not their effort also be a later construct (to save the authenticity of the Sunna), for much the same reason that the Companions were considered collectively trustworthy?

<sup>66</sup> Brown, *Hadith*, 180.

<sup>67</sup> I am using the word “myth” in the following sense:

(1) that myths are not special (or “sacred”) but ordinary human means of fashioning and authorizing their lived-in and believed-in “worlds,” (2) that myth as an ordinary rhetorical device in social construction and maintenance makes *this* rather than *that* social identity possible in the first place, and (3) that a people’s use of the label “myth” reflects, expresses, explores and legitimizes their own self-image. (McCutcheon, Russell T. “Myth.” In Braun, Willi, and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds. *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 200. London: Continuum, 2000).

Myths deal with the critical human issue of self-identity. These rhetorical acts that construct and maintain identity are called mythmaking. Simply put, mythmaking is a social activity in which the group forms and maintains itself by authorizing its identity and the role it sees for itself in the larger scheme of things. Mack, Burton. *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth*, 11. New York: Harper Collins, 1995. See also Idem, “Social Formation.” In *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 283–96.

of course, recognized this possibility of seeing the consensus of the sources about the origins of Islam as arising from:

... a process of myth-making in the Islamic community ... as a way of explaining both the communal identity of Muslims and their internal divisions; the real events lying at the origins of Islam, whatever they may have been, were either completely forgotten, or have been completely suppressed and obscured by later myth, and can never be satisfactorily recovered from the evidence available today. But ... there is no evidence to support the idea that such a pervasive and effective conspiracy ever existed, and much that seems to contradict it.<sup>68</sup>

The problem from my perspective is seeing this kind of process as unusual and as a conspiracy. It was neither. Mythmaking and social formation are intertwined and ordinary activities of construction, maintenance, and legitimation of a self-identity.

### CONCLUSIONS

Donner critiques the position of sceptics such as Wansbrough as follows: "it asks us to accept on faith—since there is no surviving evidence—that the true origins of Islam are different than what is portrayed by Islamic tradition—perhaps radically different."<sup>69</sup> However, to accept the Muslim tradition's (or even traditions') descriptions of its own origins—even if we can reconstruct texts to within 100 years (though I would still question them were they merely within twenty-five years) is to accept the salvation history of those earlier Muslims has history. This is, therefore, also asking us to accept their own understanding of their origins on faith; or put more bluntly, it asks us to accept their faith. The reconstructions simply do not get us close enough. And, we must recognize that the extant texts reflect the interests of the literary elite and more importantly that the texts are theological (or "salvation history" or

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<sup>68</sup> Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 287.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

*Heilsgeschichte* to use the terms employed by Wansbrough).<sup>70</sup> As Rippin points out:

All such works start from the proposition that the literary record of salvation history, although presenting themselves as being contemporary with the events they describe, actually belong to a period well after such events, which suggests that they have been written according to later points of view in order to fit purposes of that later time. The actual “history” in the sense of “what really happened” has become totally subsumed within later interpretation and is virtually, if not totally, inextricable from it. The question of whether or not there is an underlying “grain of historical truth” may be thought to be of some concern here, namely, whether or not there must have been some sort of historical event or impetus out of which traditions grew and which, therefore, forms the kernel of the narrative. But the real problem here is that even if one admits the existence of such a “kernel” of history, it is ever possible to identify and extract that information? Wansbrough implies in his work that he feels that it is not, at least for the most part. The records we have are the existential records of the thought and faith of later generations.<sup>71</sup>

Wansbrough may have been too sceptical about how we might use the extant sources to glimpse further into the past. However, those efforts of reconstructionists have not changed the most important insight for the study of Islamic origins made by Wansbrough: our evidence is almost exclusively literary and salvation history, mythic, or “theological,” as I prefer to describe it. Donner, though I agree with much of his analysis, and Görke and Schoeler highlight how tempting it is to start treating early sources as history, when what we have is the product of mythmaking and social formation. Whenever a scholar begins to see the origin of a movement in the

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<sup>70</sup> Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu*, 1–2.

<sup>71</sup> Rippin, “Literary Analysis,” 155–56.

single individual, he has more or less already adopted the viewpoint of the tradition.<sup>72</sup>

This is not some orientalist, anti-Islamic, pro-Christian, or pro-Jewish position. It is the same stance that would question if Moses and Elijah really appeared before Jesus, if Allah really appeared in the person of Wali Fard Muhammad in early 1930s Detroit, if Joseph Smith really spoke with God and Jesus and translated some ancient gold plates using magical stones, if the Buddha really descended in the form of an elephant from the heavens to his mother's womb, if Xenu really dropped frozen beings into terran volcanoes 75 million years ago, etc. If one felt obliged to make a crude characterization about this historical critical stance, it could be that it is secular, or even atheistic.<sup>73</sup> In each case above, Christians, Muslims of the Nation of Islam, Mormon Christians, Buddhists, and Scientologists might be offended by such a critical stance. But just as the Gospel of Mark is full of angels, spirits, demons, etc, so the Urtext of 'Urwa as reconstructed by Görke and Schoeler has its god, prophet, angels and miracles. The *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīths* of the Sunna (not to mention the Qur'ān) are rife with such supernatural beings and events. That fact alone should alert us that we are not working with historical texts, but theological literature.

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<sup>72</sup> Max Weber's description of religions starting with founder figures whose charisma is later institutionalized or "routinized" seems to have legitimized this essentially (Western) religious viewpoint within the academy.

<sup>73</sup> It is not atheistic in the sense that anyone doubting these stories is an atheist. Most people outside a particular tradition deny the history, more accurately the salvation history, of other traditions, particularly the miraculous parts. Stephen Roberts famously said, "I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours." Thus, a Buddhist can be an atheist with respect to the Nation of Islam, and a Muslim with respect to the claims about Jesus in the Christian Gospels.

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