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F. E. Peters

THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL MUHAMMAD

Writing in 1962 Stephen Neill listed twelve of what he regarded as “positive achievements of New Testament studies” over the past century.¹ As an affirmation of progress in a notoriously difficult field of investigation, they make satisfying and even cheerful reading for the historian. Who was Jesus of Nazareth? What was his message? Why was he put to death? Why did his few followers become, in effect, the nucleus of the powerful and widespread community called Christianity? These were the enormously difficult questions that had begun to be posed in a critical–historical way in the mid-19th century, and some of the answers Bishop Neill discerned, though by no means final, represented ground gained and truths won. Neill’s widely read book was revised in 1988, and though his optimism was here and there tempered by what had been said and thought in the twenty-five years since the first edition,² there was still good reason to think that historians were by and large on the right track in pursuing what Albert Schweitzer described in 1906 as “the quest of the historical Jesus.”³

The pages of Neill and his redactor Tom Wright are lustrous with congratulation and hope for the various tribes of New Testament critics and historians, but they make dismaying reading for their Islamicist cousins who were not too long ago instructed by one of their own eminences that “there is nothing of which we can say for certain that it incontestably dates back to the time of the Prophet.”⁴ Indeed, there is much in both the first and second editions of Neill’s work to puzzle, and even discourage, the laborers in a neighboring historical field, where scholars engaged in the “quest of the historical Muhammad” share many of the problems, tools, and therefore, one would have thought, some of the same successes as Neill’s enterprising investigators. However, even though a great deal of effort has been invested in research into the life and times of Muhammad, the results do not seem at all comparable to those achieved in research on Jesus, and the reasons are not at all clear. It may be useful, then, to look at some recent and representative examples of “Muhammad research” and attempt to discover why this is the case.⁵

Muhammad would appear, at least in theory, to be a far more apposite subject for historical inquiry than the founder of Christianity. The most abiding and forbidding obstacle to approaching the historical Jesus is undoubtedly the fact that our principal sources, the documents included in the New Testament, were all written on the hither side of Easter; that is, their authors viewed their subject across the absolute conviction that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God, a conviction later rendered explicit in Christian dogma. There is, however, no

Resurrection in the career of Muhammad, no Paschal sunrise to cast its divinizing light on the Prophet of Islam. Muhammad is thus a perfectly appropriate subject of history: a man born of woman (and a man), who lived in a known place in a roughly calculable time, who in the end died the death that is the lot of all mortals, and whose career was reported by authorities who share the contemporary historian's own conviction that the Prophet was nothing more than a man. What is at stake in Islam, then, is not dogma as it is in Christianity, but rather piety; obversely, it is the same sense of impropriety that a pre-1850s Catholic might have felt in the presence of a positivist-historical study of Mary.⁶

With Muslim piety and Christian dogma put aside, as the historian insists they must be, there would seem at first glance to be sufficient historical evidence on Jesus and Muhammad from which to at least attempt, as many have done, to take the measure of both the men and their milieu. Indeed, in the view of one early biographer of Jesus, the available sources are even better for Muhammad than for Jesus, since Islam was "born in full view of history."⁷ Within twenty-five years after Ernest Renan wrote those words, his optimism regarding Islamic origins—or perhaps simply his pessimism at getting at the historical Jesus—already stood in need of serious revision. History's view of the birth of Islam, it turned out, was neither full nor particularly clear, and the search after Islamic origins had to begin where the search for Christianity's origins had, standing before the evidence for the life of the founder and its milieu.

The question of milieu is a critical one for the historian. Many of Bishop Neill's underscored gains in New Testament studies have to do with a better understanding of both the Jewish and the Hellenic background out of which Jesus and his movement issued, and it is in that area that arguably the greatest progress has been made—and the greatest number of new hypotheses spawned—in the last quarter century.⁸ Moreover, it is here, historians of Muhammad will discover, that the "full view of history" grows exceedingly clouded and that their own inquiry is not going to run on equal stride with the quest after Jesus.

Quite simply, there is no appropriate contemporary and contopolitical setting against which to read the Qur^ʿan. For early Islam there is no Josephus to provide a contemporary political context, no apocrypha for a spiritual context, and no Scrolls to illuminate a Palestinian "sectarian milieu." There is instead chiefly poetry, great masses of it, whose contemporary authenticity is somewhat suspect but that was, nonetheless, "the main vehicle of Arab history in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods,"⁹ and that in any event testifies to a quite different culture. The Qur^ʿan, in fact, stands isolated like an immense rock jutting forth from a desolate sea, a stony eminence with few marks on it to suggest how or why it appeared in this watery desert. The nearest landfalls for our bearings are the cultures of the Yemen to the south, Abyssinia across the Red Sea, and the distant Jewish and Christian settlements of Palestine-Syria to the north and Christian Iraq to the northeast.¹⁰ It is the equivalent, perhaps, of attempting to illuminate the Gospels solely from Egyptian papyri and Antiochene inscriptions. The fact is that, despite a great deal of information supplied by later Muslim literary sources, we know pitifully little for sure about the political or economic history of Muhammad's native city of Mecca or of the religious culture from which he came.¹¹ Moreover, to

the extent that we are ignorant of that history and culture, to that same extent we do not understand the man or the movement that followed in his wake.

The surviving evidence for both Jesus and Muhammad lies primarily in literary works rather than in material evidence,¹² and in both instances those works include an important body of “teaching.” Jesus’ teaching is incorporated into, but is not the entirety of, the Gospels, while Muhammad’s constitute a separate work, the Qur’an, both of which have some claim to be regarded as authentic.¹³ “Some claim” is not, of course, the same as self-evident, particularly with regard to Jesus, whose words and teachings are embedded in complex Gospel narratives whose purpose is far more than mere reportage. The argument about the reported words of Jesus has been loud and vigorous, and even if many people now seem to be convinced of the authenticity of at least some of what Jesus is alleged to have said, and likely of the very words of its expression, that conviction remains only the first step in a continuing and even more difficult historiographical process centering on Jesus and Muhammad. Granted that there is *something* of these two men in the works said to be about or by them, what precise part, one must then go on to ask, of what is said and done by Jesus in the Gospels is really his own words and deeds? Similarly, what part of what is reportedly said by Muhammad in the Qur’an and in the extra-Qur’anic reports circulated under his name are really his words,¹⁴ and which of the deeds ascribed to the Prophet in the Muslim historical tradition actually occurred? The disparity is immediately apparent. Both the life and message of Jesus are contained in the Gospels, while for the events of the life of Muhammad we must turn to sources outside the Qur’an, what I have just called “the Muslim historical tradition.”

At first glance the question of the authenticity of Jesus’ sayings would appear to be a relatively simple one since their *final* tradents, the “evangelists,” worked, at the furthest remove, no more than forty to eighty years after the death of Jesus—and quite conceivably even closer, perhaps thirty-five to forty years.¹⁵ Moreover, they give every indication of resting, as Luke maintains quite explicitly in the opening of his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4), upon the testimonies, some recollected, some written, of eyewitnesses themselves. The issue appears no less simple with Muhammad, at least as it concerns the Qur’an. Parts of that document were apparently written down during his own lifetime, and the finished work, what is essentially our Qur’an, was finally assembled or “collected” from various sources, some recollected and some written, no more than fifteen years after the Prophet’s death.¹⁶

Why, then, is there such apparent skepticism about retrieving the actual words of Jesus from the Gospels, while there is no similar debate about the Qur’an, which is generally thought to represent what issued from Muhammad’s mouth as “teachings” in the interval from A.D. 610 to 632? Indeed, the search for variants in the partial versions extant before the Caliph Uthman’s alleged recension in the 640s (what can be called the “sources” behind our text) has not yielded any differences of great significance.¹⁷ This is not to say, of course, that since those pre-Uthmanic clues are fragmentary, large “invented” portions might well have been added to our Qur’an or authentic material deleted. This latter charge has, in fact, been made by certain Shi‘ite Muslims who fail to find in the Qur’an any explicit

reference to the designation of Ali as the Prophet's successor and so have alleged tampering.¹⁸ However, the argument of the latter is so patently tendentious and the evidence adduced for the fact so exiguous that few have failed to be convinced that what is in our copy of the Qur^ʿan is, in fact, what Muhammad taught, and is expressed in his own words.¹⁹

Why, then, are there these differences in recollection, the fluctuating memory of what Jesus said and the apparently flawless and total recall of the words of Muhammad? To advance what is at this point simply a preliminary consideration, we may point to the fact that the anonymous tradents of the pre-Uthmanic Qur^ʿan, Muslims all, were convinced from the outset—the outset being their own conversion to this belief—that what they were hearing and noting “on scraps of leather, bone and in their hearts” were not the teachings of a man but the *ipsissima verba Dei* and so they would likely have been scrupulously careful in preserving the actual wording. In the case of Jesus, however, whatever the respect for him as a teacher—a very particular and unique teacher—by the first auditors of his words, the mere recollection of his teaching, its substance and gist, was all that was required for their moral instruction. Certain phrases and images might have lodged in their memories—formulae used in cures, predictions about the destruction of the Temple, the blessing of the bread and wine at his last supper spring readily to mind—but there is little ground for imagining that during his actual lifetime there would have been any motive for his followers to memorize every word that proceeded from the mouth of Jesus of Nazareth.

The four Gospels are not about Jesus of Nazareth, of course, but about Jesus the Christ, and his sayings and teaching were re-collected after the Resurrection from a very different perspective, it is true. However, the initial impression had already been taken, so to speak, and no change in the understanding of what Jesus *meant* could enlarge the memory of what he had actually *said*. Even then, however, in the very different post-Easter light that bathes the entirety of the New Testament, it is not so much the words of Jesus that were illumined as his deeds. The earliest forms of the Christian *kerygma* (in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7/8, for example, or Acts 2:22ff. and 10:36–43) include not Jesus' teachings but the events of his life: his miracles, his death, and his Resurrection, and Paul's scanting of Jesus' words is, of course, notorious.

We have touched here on a basic difference between the Christians' regard of Jesus and the Muslims' regard of Muhammad. For the Christians Jesus was—whether he intended it or not, the historian carefully adds—an “event.” His goal was achieved by deeds, his redemptive death and the probative miracle of his Resurrection: “He was declared Son of God by a mighty act in that he rose [or: was raised] from the dead” (Rom. 1:4). Jesus did not reveal; he was himself a revelation, and that fact informs our Gospels, which bear witness to the event. More, the Christian tradents of the words of Jesus who stood behind the canonical Gospels had no idea, as the early Muslims certainly had, that they were transmitting a revelation, nor did the authors of those same Gospels by any means understand, as Muhammad's scribes and secretaries were convinced, that they were writing down Scripture. Indeed, that was the original understanding of the Arabic word, “a rec-

itation,” unmistakably for liturgical purposes.²⁰ However, for a considerable time after the completion of the Gospels, the Christians’ “Scripture” continued to be what it always had been for the Jews, including Jesus and his followers, to wit, the Hebrew Bible.

To sum up at this point: the Qur²an is convincingly the words of Muhammad, perhaps even dictated by him after their recitation,²¹ while the Gospels not only describe the life of Jesus but contain some arguably authentic sayings or teachings of Jesus. How does that latter argument proceed? A primary version of it is that devised by Form criticism, and Rudolf Bultmann, one of its masters, formulated the criterion of authenticity with elegant brevity:

We can only count on possessing a genuine similitude of Jesus where, on the one hand, expression is given to the contrast between Jewish morality and piety and the distinctive eschatological temper which characterized the teaching of Jesus, and where, on the other hand, we find no specifically Christian features.²²

To take the second point first, where the form of Jesus’ reported sayings and stories conform to what we know of contemporary Jewish, that is, rabbinic, didactic forms, the likelihood is strong that they are authentic. The obvious example is, of course, the parables, and whether Jesus is judged a skilled or merely a traditional practitioner of the genre, there are enough rabbinic parables in the Gospels to convince the skeptic that here at least he is face to face with a form of Jesus’ teaching that could not, or at least was not, invented by some later Christian pietist. Whether those “rabbis” whose works provide one term of the comparison, namely, the authorities quoted in the Mishna (ca. A.D. 200) onward, may in fact be regarded as Jesus’ “contemporaries” for purposes of illuminating either the teachings or the events of the Gospels continues to be a vexing question whose answer is more often assumed than discussed, particularly by Form critics.²³

Most Form critics have turned with Bultmann from this modest piece of ground gained through “rabbinic parallelism” to the other principal criterion of authenticity, that of “dissimilarity,” where the credited sayings can be shown to be unique to Jesus to the degree that we do not find parallels in either the early Church or ancient Judaism. To put it more brazenly: when Jesus sounds like a rabbi, that is authentic; when Jesus does not think like a rabbi, that too is authentic. As far as context is concerned, then, originality is a mark of authenticity, and, by way of an aside at this point, very little of Jesus’ teaching has been retrieved on the basis of that criterion, not assuredly because he does not often express original notions in the Gospels, but rather because he sounds all too original, in John’s Gospel, for example, and Redaction criticism has denied Jesus most of that originality and credited it instead to the first generation of Christians.

What does Muhammad sound like? His contemporaries thought they caught echoes of a number of familiar charismatic types, seers, or poets (Qur²an 52:29–30; 69:41–42), which the Qur²an stoutly denies, or even a rehash of old stories (25:5). Some modern scholars think the first charge has some merit, though by no means for the entirety of the Qur²an.²⁴ However, once again we are limited by an almost total lack of contextual background. We know little or nothing of the utterances of

the “seer” (*kāhin*); the preserved pre-Islamic poets are patently not the demonic (*majnūn*) type to which Muhammad was being compared; and our only contemporary examples of “ancient tales” are precisely those told in the Qurʾan.

There is something curious about the Qurʾan’s stories, a quality that once again underlines our inability to penetrate into the milieu. In 1982 Anthony Harvey raised the issue of the “constraints of history” in connection with the study of the life of Jesus:

No individual, if he wishes to influence others, is totally free to choose his own style of action and persuasion: he is subject to constraints imposed by the culture in which he finds himself. If communication is to take place, there must be constraints recognized by both the speaker and his listeners. . . . Now Jesus . . . succeeded in communicating with his hearers, his followers, and indeed his enemies. To do so he had to speak a language they could understand, perform actions they would find intelligible, and conduct his life and undergo his death in a manner of which they could make some sense.²⁵

What was true of Jesus was equally true of Muhammad. He too was bound by the “constraints” of matter and style “recognized by both the speaker and his listeners.” Now it is clear from the Qurʾan itself that, though there may have been those of his Meccan contemporaries who doubted the supernatural origin of what Muhammad was proclaiming, there was no problem with understanding it, and in understanding it better in many cases than we do today. The Qurʾan is filled with biblical stories, for example, most of them told in an extremely elliptical or what has been called “allusive” or “referential” style.²⁶ Manifestly, Muhammad’s audience was not hearing these stories for the first time, as the remark about “rehashing old stories” itself suggests. These stories were current in Mecca then, though we have little idea how current or for how long, and when Muhammad “retold” them in his allusive style in the Qurʾan to make some other moral point (God’s vengeance for the mistreatment of earlier prophets, to cite one common theme), his listeners might not agree with the point but apparently knew well enough to what he was referring.

We, however, do not know since these stories are “biblical” only in the sense that they take characters or incidents from the Bible as their point of departure. However, their trajectory is haggadic; they are the residue, echo, recollection—we are at a loss precisely what to call it—of what is palpably Jewish *midrashim*, though which they were, or what were their origins, we cannot even guess. We have only one biblical *midrash* current in 7th-century Arabia, and that is the Qurʾan itself.

The accusations of Muhammad’s contemporaries that he was no more than a “seer” or a “poet” provided an important guidepost for modern attempts at applying Form criticism to the Qurʾan. The literary forms employed in the book range, we can observe, from brief oaths and mantic utterances, through parables and apocalyptic fragments, to rather extended narratives to illustrate in homiletic fashion what awaits those who ignore or mistreat prophets.²⁷ There are, as well, a large and generally unconnected body of halakic dicta that obviously date from the Medina period of the Prophet’s life and prescribe norms of action and behavior for a community-in-being. The remainder consists of the warnings and threats (many of

them repeated catchphrases) and a good deal of polemic, sometimes in the form of retorts to questions whose source or thrust we do not know.

However, if Form criticism proved valuable as a clue to the transmission and the secondary *Sitz im Leben* of the New Testament, that is, “the situation in the life of the Church in which those traditions were found relevant and so preserved (as it turned out) for posterity,”²⁸ it can have no such useful purpose in Islam since there is no conviction that the Qur^ʿanic material was in any way being shaped by or for transmission. On our original assumption that Muhammad is the source of the work, what is found in the Qur^ʿan is not being *reported* but simply *recorded*; consequently, modern Form criticism amounts to little more than the *classification* of the various ways in which the Prophet chose to express himself, a procedure that casts no light forward since the Qur^ʿan was regarded by Muslims as “inimitable,”²⁹ and none backward where there is, as we have noted, only darkness in the religious past of western Arabia—no convenient rabbis, monks, or Arab preachers to whose words or style we might compare the utterances of the Prophet of Islam.

This is not to say that *no* hands have touched the Qur^ʿanic material. An early investigator of the life of Jesus compared the Gospel stories about him to pearls whose string had been broken. The precious stones were reassembled in the sequel by individuals such as the Evangelist Mark, who supplied both the narrative framework and within it the connective links to “restring” them. The Qur^ʿan gives somewhat the same impression of scattered pearls, though these have been reassembled in quite a different, and puzzling, manner. The Qur^ʿan as we now possess it is arranged in 114 units called suras connected in no obvious fashion, each bearing a name and other introductory formulae, of greatly varying length and, more appositely to our present purpose, with little internal unity. There is no narrative framework, of course, and within the unconnected suras there are dislocations, interpolations, abrupt changes of rhyme and parallel versions, a condition that has led both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike to conclude that some of the present suras or sections of them may once have been joined to others. By whom were they joined? We do not know, nor can we explain the purpose of such rearrangements.³⁰

Nor do we know the aim or the persons who arranged the suras in their present order, which is, roughly (the first sura apart), from the longest to the shortest. They are not, in any event, placed in the order of their revelation, as everyone agrees. However, there the agreement apparently ends. Early Muslim scholars settled on a gross division into “Meccan” and “Medinan” suras, which were labeled accordingly in copies of the Qur^ʿan, and they even determined the relative sequence of the suras. However, this system rested on premises unacceptable to modern Western scholars,³¹ who have attempted to develop their own criteria and their own dating system, which, though it starts with different assumptions, ends with much the same results as those of the early Muslim savants.³² This distribution of the suras even into limited categories like “Early-,” “Middle-,” and “Late-Meccan” or “Medinan” is of critical importance to the historian, of course, since it provides the ground for following the evolution of Muhammad’s thought and at the same time for connecting passages in the Qur^ʿan with events that the ancient Muslim authorities asserted had occurred in Muhammad’s lifetime. The highly

composite nature of many of the suras makes any such distributional enterprise highly problematic to begin with, but an even more serious flaw is the fact that the standard Western system accepts as its framework the traditional Muslim substance, sequence, and dating of the events of the life of Muhammad, an acceptance made, as we shall see, “with much more confidence than is justified.”³³

Redaction criticism, one of the most powerful critical tools developed for an understanding of the Gospels, is founded on the premise that the Gospels are not mere transcripts of Jesus’ words or an unretouched photograph of his life, but that both the words and the deeds recorded therein have in the first place been illuminated by the witnesses’ belief in his Resurrection, the proof that Jesus was Messiah, Lord, and Son of God; and second, as the Redaction critics have pointed out, the Gospels reflect the perceptions of the Christian community when and where they were written down. Can we make the same assertions with respect to Islam? Does any serious scholar now doubt that the materials in the Qur^ʿan and/or the *Sira*, the standard life of Muhammad originally composed by Ibn Ishaq (d. 767) and preserved in an edition from the hand of Ibn Hisham (d. 833), were shaped by the needs of the early Islamic community? There is probably no doubt, at least as far as the *Sira* is concerned,³⁴ particularly since its re-redactor Ibn Hisham openly admitted as much in the introduction to his reediting of his predecessor’s work:

God willing I shall begin this book with Isma^ʿil and mention those of his offspring who were the ancestors of God’s apostle one by one with what is known of them, taking no account of Isma^ʿil’s other children, for the sake of brevity, confining myself to the prophet’s biography and omitting some of the things which Ibn Ishaq has recorded in this book in which there is no mention of the apostle and about which the Qur^ʿan says nothing and which are not relevant to anything in this book or an explanation of it; poems which he quotes that no authority on poetry whom I have met knows of; things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people; and such reports as al-Bakka^ʿi told me he could not accept as trustworthy—all these things I have omitted. But God willing I shall give a full account of everything else so far as it is known and a trustworthy tradition is available.³⁵

As for redaction activity in the Qur^ʿan, that would depend on when the materials were assembled. On the Burton hypothesis there is no need to search for community shaping; on the Wansbrough hypothesis there must have been a great deal of shaping indeed, but “the Qur^ʿan as the product of the early Islamic community” is not a proposition that has found a great deal of favor in Islamicist circles. Indeed, there is a notable redactional “flatness” about the Qur^ʿan. As has already been said, there was no Easter for the Muslims—Muhammad died of natural causes in A.D. 632 and by all reports still rests in his tomb in the mosque at Medina—but the enormous and astonishing expansion of Islam, which was unmistakably underway when the Qur^ʿan was collected into its final form sometime about 650, is an Islamic event of similar if not identical redactional magnitude to the Christians’ Easter. If the almost miraculous success of the movement he initiated did not change the Muslims’ essential regard for Muhammad, who was after all only a man, it could certainly have cast a different light on his version of God’s message. However, we find no trace of this in the Qur^ʿan, no signs that its “good

news" was "redacted" in the afterglow of an astonishing politico-military authentication of its religious truths.

Why should this be so? It is probably because of the reason already cited, that the Qur^ʿan was regarded not as preaching or "proclamation" but as revelation pure and simple, and thus was not so inviting to redaction and editorial adjustment as the Gospels. Indeed, what was done to the Qur^ʿan in the redactional process appears to have been extremely conservative. The materials were kept, in the words of one modern scholar, "just as they fell,"³⁶ or assembled in such a mechanical fashion as to exclude redactional bias. Our conviction that either was in fact the case is strengthened when we look to the other source of Muhammad's teachings, the *hadith*, or traditions, which even on the Muslims' view constitute Muhammad's words and not those of God.

The hadith are discrete reports of the words, or less often the deeds, of the Prophet, each generally accompanied by its own chain of tradents: I heard from Z, who heard from Y, who heard from . . . A, who reported that Muhammad, upon whom be peace, said. . . . In other words, each hadith is arguing its own authenticity, something the Qur^ʿan and the Gospels do only occasionally.³⁷ Muslims were alerted, as we are, by this obvious *petitio auctoritatis* in the hadith, and looked closely at those argumentative chains, accepting many and rejecting a great many more. Modern Western scholars may point disarmingly to these earlier Muslim attempts at separating the authentic Prophetic wheat from the chaff of forgery,³⁸ but they have at their disposal a different heuristic tool in dealing with the hadith, the now familiar Redaction criticism, which, since the late 19th century, they have wielded with enormous and, what should be, at least for the historian, dismaying success. A great many of the prophetic traditions bear on their own bodies what is for the Redaction critic the equivalent of a smoking gun: circumstantial tendentiousness. If certain of the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels show a suspicious, and very un-Jewish, concern for the Gentiles, many hadith report remarks by Muhammad on personalities, parties, and religious and legal issues that could only have arisen as subjects of community concern after his death, and in some instances, long after his death.³⁹ If the Gospel critic, or some Gospel critics, think it possible to retrieve a good bit of Jesus' words and at least some of his own authentic teaching from the canonical Gospels, there are only very few modern historians who would make the same claim for Muhammad and the hadith.

If the hadith-sayings of Muhammad are suspect—and they are, after all, mostly halakic in content—what of the Prophet's deeds? Have we grounds for a biography? We have none in the Qur^ʿan, it would appear, since its form is that of a discourse, a divine monologue or catechism so to speak, that reveals little or nothing about the life of Muhammad and his contemporaries. Both the life and the work of Jesus are integrated in the Gospels, and, unlike Paul's letters, which are essentially hermeneutical when they come to speak of Jesus,⁴⁰ the Gospels treat both the words and deeds of Jesus in the manner of history; that is, they *describe* events and they *reproduce* teachings, and each is done circumstantially enough for the modern historian to form some kind of unified judgment about the veracity of the first and the authenticity of the second.

For Islam, on the other hand, the pursuit of truth and authenticity is infinitely simpler (though not necessarily more satisfying) since there is a very large gap indeed between the sources for Muhammad's life and those for his teachings. On our assumption that the notions in the Qur^ʿan are Muhammad's own—there is very little historical evidence that they are anyone else's—one can indeed approach them with much the same questions as one might bring to Jesus' reported teachings in the Gospels. Are these words or sentiments likely to be authentic in the light of, first, the context in which they were delivered, and second, the manner of their transmission? The reader of the Gospels is immediately predisposed to give an affirmative answer to the first question since, as Stephen Neill expressed it, "When the historian approaches the Gospels, the first thing that strikes him is the extraordinary fidelity with which they have reproduced, not the conditions of their own time, but the conditions of Palestine in the time and during the ministry of Christ."⁴¹ The Qur^ʿan, on the other hand, gives us no such assurance, nor indeed any instruction whatsoever on the context in which its contents were delivered, and no clues as to when, where, or why these particular words were being uttered; it is as little concerned with the events of the life of Muhammad and his contemporaries as Paul was with the narrative life of Jesus. The Holy Book of Islam is text without context, and so this prime document, which has a very strong claim to be authentic, is of almost no use for reconstructing the events of the life of Muhammad.⁴²

There is, however, another, somewhat less obvious, facticity that rests between the lines of Islam's sacred book. If the Qur^ʿan is genuinely Muhammad's, as it seems to be, and if, somewhat less certainly, distinctions between "Early-" and "Late-Meccan" and "Early-Medinan" suras of the Qur^ʿan hold firm, then it is possible in the first instance to retrieve a substantial understanding of the type of paganism confronting Muhammad in his native city—the primary religious *Sitz im Leben* of the Meccan suras of the Qur^ʿan—and even to reconstruct to some degree what appears to be an evolution in Muhammad's own thinking about God.

Though later Muslim historians profess to know a good deal on the subject, there exists, as has already been remarked, no physical or contemporary evidence for the worship and beliefs that prevailed at Mecca on the eve of Islam. The Qur^ʿan, however, avers often to those conditions in its earliest suras. They were, after all, directed toward an overwhelmingly pagan audience whose beliefs and religious practices Muhammad was attempting to change and on which he was not likely to have been misinformed. Since the appearance of his *Muhammad in Mecca* in 1953, Montgomery Watt has concentrated much of his subsequent research on this issue, now summed up in his *Muhammad's Mecca: History in the Qur^ʿān*,⁴³ and the work has been pushed further, and argued somewhat more rigorously, by Alford Welch.⁴⁴ What emerges is not a very detailed picture, but the outlines are clear and distinct.

Muhammad's own beliefs are somewhat less distinct. Welch was not eager to find "evolution" in the ideas of the Prophet,⁴⁵ but viewed through the prism of "the historical Muhammad," that is exactly what he discovered. The name "Allah" does not appear in the earliest revelations, as he has pointed out, and Muhammad refers to his God as simply "the Lord." When he does begin to use a proper name,

his preference is for *al-Raḥmān*, “the Merciful,” a familiar deity from elsewhere in the Fertile Crescent. It can scarcely be argued that “*al-Raḥmān*” is identical with “Allah”; otherwise, why would he have introduced the unfamiliar “*Raḥmān*” (17:110, 25:60) for the known and accepted “Allah” except out of personal conviction?

The issue of “*al-Raḥman*” aside, what distinguished Muhammad from his Meccan contemporaries was (1) his belief in the reality of the Resurrection and the Judgment in both flesh and spirit, and (2) his unswerving conviction that the “High God” was not unique but absolute; that the other gods, goddesses, jinn and demons were subject and subservient to Him: Allah’s “servants,” as he put it (7:194). Muhammad was to go much further than this; as Welch has demonstrated, sometime around the battle of Badr in 624, two years after the Hijra, a fundamental change took place in his thinking: Thereafter, Muhammad was an absolute monotheist. The other gods had completely disappeared and the now unique and transcendental Allah was served only by his invisible host of angels.⁴⁶

This is genuine history, and it is more secure than anything else we know about Muhammad. It is not very “occasional” perhaps—we cannot firmly connect any of these religious changes with external events—and it tells us nothing about the social or economic life of Mecca. Those aspects of his environment will not yield up their secrets to the biographer unless additional context can be supplied from some other source, as Josephus provides the general background for the Gospels, or much as the Evangelists are thought to have done for Jesus himself, where historical narrative and a “sayings” source like the famous “Q” were integrated into a single Gospel narrative. Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, is already an integrated account of sayings and deeds, and everything else we know indicates that Jesus’ followers remembered his sayings, his actions, and what happened to him all in the same context. If events showed that certain of his acts, notably his death and Resurrection, were considerably more consequential than his preaching—witness Paul and the earliest creeds—nonetheless, sayings and deeds were never completely disassociated in the Christian tradition.

Though there is no contemporary Josephus to report on 7th-century western Arabia; there are, in fact, just such integrated, Gospel-like sources in Islam. These *sīras* or traditional biographies of the Prophet, of which the oldest preserved specimen is the *sīra* written by Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), as edited by his student Ibn Hisham (d. 833), provide a richly detailed narrative of the events of Muhammad’s career into which at least some Qur^ʿanic material and other “teaching” has been incorporated at the appropriate places.⁴⁷ The “appropriate places” were the subject of a great deal of speculative attention by Muslim scholars who studied them under the rubric of “the occasions of revelations,” that is, the particular set of historical circumstances at Mecca or Medina that elicited a given verse or verses of the Qur^ʿan. The results of this energetic quest are not always convincing. There is very little evidence, for example, that independent sources of information were brought to bear on the enterprise, and the suspicion is strong that medieval Muslim scholars were re-creating the “occasion” by working backwards out of the Qur^ʿanic verses themselves, an exercise at which a modern non-Muslim might be equally adept.⁴⁸ If these “occasions of revelation” are strung together in chronological order, a task

accomplished by early Muslim scholars by arranging the suras, or part of suras, of the Qur^ʿan in *their* chronological order, and one which we have already seen rests on extremely problematic grounds, then a semblance of a biography of the Prophet can be constructed, one that covers the ground at least from 610 to 632. This is, in fact, what was done, and the standard “Lives” of the Prophet, Ibn Ishaq’s for example, rest on that kind of framework, fleshed out by other material about his early life at Mecca and considerably more elaborate descriptions of his later military expeditions at Medina.⁴⁹

Though the earliest extant lives of Muhammad are far more distant from the events they describe than the Gospels are from the life of Jesus,⁵⁰ the Muslim authorities, unlike their Christian counterparts, cite their sources, by name and generation by generation, back to the original eyewitnesses contemporary with Muhammad. Hence, it is not unnatural that historical criticism in Islam has concentrated on those chains of transmitting authorities rather than, as is overwhelmingly the case in early Christian documents, on the matter transmitted. As has already been noted, in the 19th century Ignaz Goldziher,⁵¹ and more recently Joseph Schacht,⁵² looked more carefully at the accounts themselves and came to the generally accepted conclusion that a great many of the “Prophetic traditions” are forgeries fabricated to settle political scores or to underpin a legal or doctrinal ruling, a situation with no very convincing parallel in the Jesus material.⁵³ This conclusion was drawn, however, from the analysis of material in reports that are chiefly legal in character, where both the motives and the signs of falsification are often quite obvious; what of the reports of purely historical events of the type that constitute much of the life of Muhammad? The obvious clues to forgery are by no means so obvious here, nor is the motive quite so pressing since it is not the events of Muhammad’s life that constitute dogma for the Muslim but the teachings in the Qur^ʿan.⁵⁴ However, so great has been the doubt cast on the bona fides of the alleged eyewitnesses and their transmitters in legal matters that there now prevails an almost universal Western skepticism on the reliability of *all* reports advertising themselves, often with quite elaborate testimonial protestations, as going back to Muhammad’s time, or even that of his immediate successors.⁵⁵

Though Goldziher and Schacht concentrated chiefly on the legal hadith, the Belgian Jesuit Henri Lammens argued in a number of works that the historical traditions are equally fictitious, and whatever his motives and his style—Maxime Rodinson, a contemporary biographer of Muhammad, characterized Lammens as “filled with a holy contempt for Islam, for its ‘delusive glory’, for its ‘dissembling’ and ‘lascivious’ Prophet”—Lammens’s critical attack has never been refuted.⁵⁶ One of the most notable of Muhammad’s modern biographers, W. Montgomery Watt, found no great difficulty in this, however:

In the legal sphere there may have been some sheer invention of traditions, it would seem. 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 a “tendential shaping” of the material. . . . Once the modern student is aware of the tendencies of the historians and their sources, however, it ought to be possible for him to some extent to make allowance for the distortion and to present the data in an unbiased form; and

the admission of “tendential shaping” should have as its corollary the acceptance of the general soundness of the material.⁵⁷

While Watt rejected Lammens’s criticism of the hadith, he accepted the main lines of the Jesuit’s reconstruction, out of the same type of material, of Meccan society and economy, which in turn provided Watt with the foundation of his own interpretation of Muhammad’s career.⁵⁸ However, Goldziher, Lammens, and Schacht were all doubtless correct. A great deal of the transmitted material concerning early Islam was tendentious—not only the material that was used for legal purposes but the very building blocks out of which the earliest history of Muhammad and the Islamic community was constructed.⁵⁹ “The actual historical material [in Ibn Ishaq’s *Life of Muhammad*] is extremely scanty. So the allusions to the Qur²an are taken and expanded; and, first and foremost, the already existing dogmatic and juristic *hadīth* are collected and chronologically arranged.”⁶⁰ This opinion was written near the beginning of the century, and long past its midpoint it was concurred in, as we have seen, by one of Muhammad’s most recent biographers, Maxime Rodinson.⁶¹

Whatever the quality of the material with which he was working, Ibn Ishaq generally hewed much closer than the Gospels to the straight historical line; he was much more a biographer than an evangelist. For one thing, he is excused from presenting the teachings of Muhammad on two grounds. First, according to the Muslim view, there are no “teachings of Muhammad,” at least not in any sense in which a Christian would understand that expression as applied to Jesus. There are the enunciations of God, but *they* are in the Qur²an, and if Ibn Ishaq occasionally reproduces the text of the Holy Book, or paraphrases it, it is generally, if we except the summary types noted above,⁶² to set out some particular “occasion of revelation,” a circumstance in the life of Muhammad that provided the setting for some particular sura.

The recorded life of Jesus is filled with mysteries, most of which derive not from the fact that we have four disparate written testimonies to what happened—any single Gospel would present the historian with the selfsame problems of interpretation—but because the evangelists were recording events and discourse and at the same time attempting a demonstration. The recording is, in fact, rather straightforward, and apart from certain problems of chronology and the incorporation of what appears to be legendary material (in the infancy narratives, for example), fashioning a biography of the “historical Jesus” from the Gospel materials would pose no unfamiliar or entirely insuperable difficulties for the historian of either Greco-Roman antiquity or post-biblical Judaism.

It is the demonstration that causes the historian’s problem. The Evangelists were not simply recording; they were arguing. The conclusion to that argument was already fixed in their minds when they began their work, a fact they made no effort to disguise, namely, that their subject was no mere man but the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God;⁶³ that he was embarked on a series of events governed not by the historian’s familiar secondary causality but by God’s provident will; that Jesus was both completing the past—and thus “the Scriptures were fulfilled”—and breaking forth into a new and only gradually revealed eschatological future.

Indeed, the death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus do not complete the story; there is more: Pentecost at least, and how much more beyond that no one of the New Testament writers was aware. There is in all the material before the historian an open-ended anticipation that reflects disconcertingly backwards on almost every event in Jesus' life.

Many of the same problems confront the student of the life of Muhammad. Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet begins, at least in the Ibn Hisham version we now possess,⁶⁴ much the same way that Mark's Gospel does, with a declaration that "this is the book of the biography of the Apostle of God,"⁶⁵ and it has, like Matthew and Luke, a brief "infancy narrative."⁶⁶ Moreover, there is a consistent, though low-key, attempt to demonstrate the authenticity of the Prophet's calling by the introduction of miracles, a motif that was almost certainly a byproduct of the 8th-century biographers' contact with Jews and, particularly, Christians.⁶⁷ This is sometimes imitative or polemical piety, and sometimes, and perhaps at an even earlier stage, a simple desire to entertain,⁶⁸ and its manifestations are not difficult to discern. Moreover, though the *sira* literature is not used to mask special doctrinal pleading—there are no carefully crafted "theologoumena" on this landscape⁶⁹—there are, in their frequent lists, genealogies, and honorifics, abundant signs of the family and clan factionalism that troubled the 1st- and 2nd-century Islamic community.⁷⁰ Finally, there are chronological questions. The earliest "biographers" of the Prophet, who were little more than collectors of the "raids" conducted by or under him, took the watershed battle of Badr as their starting point and anchor, and dated major events in Muhammad's life from it. However, for the years from Badr (624) back to the Hijra (622) there is great uncertainty, and for the entire span of the Prophet's life at Mecca there is hardly any chronological data at all.⁷¹ The historians' only relief, perhaps (if relief it is), is that they do not have four differing accounts with which to work—all the earliest surviving versions of Muhammad's life rely heavily on Ibn Ishaq's original *Sira*—and that in that *Sira* he is not constrained to grapple with either a prologue in heaven or an eschatological epilogue.

Ibn Ishaq's *Life* is, on the face of it, a coherent and convincing account, and certainly gives historians something with which to work, particularly if they close their eyes to where the material came from. However, as has already been pointed out, the authenticity of the hadith has been gravely undermined, and a medieval biography of Muhammad is little more than an assemblage of hadith. Most modern biographers of the Prophet have been willing to close their eyes, and while conceding the general unreliability of the hadith, they have used these same collections as the basis of their own works which differ from those of their medieval predecessors not so much in source material as in interpretation.⁷² This may be a calculated risk based on the plausibility and internal coherence of the material, or it may simply be the counsel of despair. If the hadith are rejected there is nothing notably better to put in their place.⁷³

A few modern biographers, however, have attempted something different, to apply the biblical criteria of Form and Redaction criticism to the basic historical assemblage on which our knowledge of the events of the Prophet's life rests, the *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq. While Watt contented himself with a brief investigation of the

“sources of Ibn Ishaq,” first Rudolf Sellheim and then, far more thoroughly, John Wansbrough attempted to see the parts in the whole.⁷⁴ As Wansbrough explained the procedure, various motifs (the election and call of a prophet, for example) that are common to many religious societies—Judaism, Christianity, and possibly even Arab paganism among them—were adduced as *topoi* as surely in the construction of the “Gospel of Muhammad” as in the parallel lives of Moses and Jesus.⁷⁵

Thus, if we regard the *Life* through Wansbrough’s eyes, the “evangelical” materials of Islam were assembled out of standard Jewish and Christian (or other) *topoi* long after the death of Muhammad, and reflect not so much historical data as the political and polemical concerns of the “sectarian milieu” that shaped them. The Islamic “Gospel” was, as a New Testament critic might put it, the product of the Muslim community, and, in its final form, of the 9th-century Muslim community in Iraq, and far removed in time and space from the primary *Sitz im Leben*. There is, unhappily, no documentary hypothesis to explain the content of the frame-like *topoi* of the *Sira*, no J or E or P or Q; instead, there are only the discredited bits and pieces of the hadith, snippets of anecdotes, each with an “eyewitness” attached to the end of a more or less complete chain of transmitters, and with chain and witness sharing the same degree of likelihood or implausibility. “P” was an editor, “Q” the collector of *logoi*, but A^ʿisha was the child bride of Muhammad and Abu Hurayra was a Companion of the Prophet, a man who had the simultaneous reputation of knowing more hadith than anyone and of being an idle chatterer. Between them they witnessed an enormous number of the tesserae out of which we attempt to reconstruct what happened between 610 and 632.

One effect of Redaction criticism on the study of the life of Jesus has been to direct the emphasis forward from Jesus himself to Paul and the first generation of Christians who shaped the tradition of Jesus. Muhammad died a success and Jesus died a failure; and historians work within those givens. One common position, then, is to maintain that whatever Jesus may have said or done (to put it in its most obviously agnostic terms), Gospel Christianity, whether Mark’s early version or John’s later one, was the creation of Jesus’ followers. In Islam, on the contrary, where historical agnosticism would seem to be equally justified by the sources, the historians’ interest remains riveted on Muhammad and what is imagined to have been his own immediate milieu. Muhammad the charismatic, the mystic, the social reformer, and the political genius are all familiar figures in Western scholarship—as familiar as the same qualities are alien to the present portrait of the historical Jesus—and there is no Paul nor a “Johannine community” to distract from the Prophet’s central, or rather, unique, role in the fashioning of Islam.

A degree of reductionism has occurred, and it can be read between the lines of Wansbrough’s reluctance to indicate a single or even principal sectarian influence operating on the *Sira*. In the first half of this century, when there was far greater trust in what the later Muslim sources said about pre-Islamic Arabia, and when there prevailed an innocent freedom to extrapolate from almost any Jewish or Christian source, whatever its date or provenance,⁷⁶ the formation of Muhammad had not infrequently been reduced to the sum of the Christian, and particularly the Jewish, influences operating on him,⁷⁷ but only to account for the presence in the

Qur²an of pervasive and detailed references to things Christian and Jewish, and never to explain Muhammad's enormous impact on his environment. Jesus, on the other hand, often appears in current historical appreciations, and overwhelmingly so in Jewish ones,⁷⁸ as a rather commonplace but politically naive rabbi who was the victim, the dupe, or the ploy of other forces or other men whose agenda were political rather than spiritual; who was caught up, probably unwittingly, in a movement of national liberation and paid for it with his life.

With Jesus we have some hope of coming to an informed judgment, of speaking with a degree of conviction about "Jesus within Judaism," or "Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism," with its corollary of taking the measure not only of Jesus' "traditionalism" but of his "originality."⁷⁹ Judgments of Muhammad's originality, on the other hand, founder on our almost absolute inability to measure him against any local or contemporary criterion. As Michael Cook has put it, "To understand what Muhammad was doing in creating a new religion, it would be necessary to know what religious resources were available to him, and in what form."⁸⁰ However, we do not know. We cannot tell whether Muhammad is innovating or simply borrowing because, if the Qur²an is silent on the matter, as it often is, then:

We are obliged to turn to the theologians of later periods, to the authors of tradition and *fiqh*, who frequently give accounts expressing variant interpretations. Even if these writers are in agreement with each other, often their consensus is still unacceptable to us. Generally, posterity was inclined to trace back to Muhammad all customs and institutions of later Islam. . . . Islamic tradition, however, not satisfied with claiming that the greater part of the cult was introduced by Muhammad, wants to date every institution as early as possible so that in many instances the pre-Islamic Arabs appear as precursors of Islam. This tendency is a consequence of the dogma of the religion of Abraham, the basis of Islam, which Muhammad felt it was his mission to preach.⁸¹

At every turn, then, historians of Muhammad and of early Islam appear betrayed by the sheer unreliability of their sources. The New Testament documents have their *Tendenz*, as all will quickly concede, and much of the "quest of the historical Jesus" has been in reality a search for a means to get around and behind that historical disability. However, most New Testament scholars also share a conviction that somewhere within the documents at their disposal is a grain or nugget, or perhaps even entire veins of historical truth, and that they can be retrieved. This explains the enormous and ingenious assiduity expended on the quest. Historians of Muhammad entertain no such optimism. They confront a community whose interest in preserving revelation was deep and careful, but who came to history, even to the history of the recipient of that revelation, too long after the memory of the events had faded to dim recollections over many generations, had been embroidered rather than remembered, and was invoked only for what is for historians the unholy purpose of polemic. Islam, unhappily for modern historians, had no immediate need of a Gospel and so chose carefully to preserve what it understood were the words of God rather than the deeds of the man who was His Messenger or the history of the place in which he lived.

Is there anything valuable in this Islamic tradition, which Patricia Crone has pessimistically called the “debris of an obliterated past”? It seems that there must be. It is inconceivable that the community should have entirely forgotten what Muhammad actually did or said at Mecca and Medina, or that the tenaciously memoried Arabs should have allowed to perish all remembrance of their Meccan or West Arabian past, no matter how deeply it might now be overcast with myth and special pleading. Some historians think they can see where the gold lies;⁸² what is lacking is a method of extracting that priceless ore from the redactional rubble in which it is presently embedded. Those redactional layers may be later and thus thicker and less tractable than those over the figure of the historical Jesus, but just as the redactional editing of the Gospels was addressed and made to yield substantial results, there is no reason why the enterprise within Islam should prompt either resignation or despair. Faced with his own kind of unyielding tradition, the Islamicist has at least two ways of proceeding, as Julius Wellhausen recognized a century ago in his classic *Prolegomenon* on biblical criticism: either to arrange the accounts, in this instance, the hadith, in an internationally coherent order that would then represent the growth of the tradition—thus, for pre-Islamic Mecca, M. J. Kister and, after him, Uri Rubin, Michael Lecker, and others⁸³—or else to deduce the evolution of matters at Mecca from a comparison with parallels in other religious cultures, a task that carried the biblical critic Wellhausen into his equally classic study of “the remains of Arab paganism.”⁸⁴ This latter method is the one pursued most recently by G. R. Hawting,⁸⁵ and though terribly hypothetical, it has the advantage of forming hypotheses about the religious phenomena themselves and not merely about the traditions regarding those phenomena.⁸⁶

Both methods are painstakingly slow and yield results that are notably more successful in analyzing Jewish influences and cultic practices than in dealing with Christian ideas, and more convincing when applied to pre-Islamic Mecca than to the Prophet’s own life. Moreover, in dealing with Muhammad, where the Qur’an is the historian’s chief “document,” it is far easier to do as Watt and Rodinson have done and to apply a combination of common sense and some modern heuristic devices to the traditional accounts than to attempt what Griesbach and Wrede did in the 19th century with the Gospels, or Streeter or Bultmann in the 20th. It is easier still simply to give over the “quest of the historical Muhammad” and produce instead *Muhammad, His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (1983), Martin Lings’s uncritical English conflation of the traditional Muslim accounts which is offered without a word of explanation from the author on what he is about, or why, in this curious undertaking. There may be some value in presenting the Prophet of Islam in the same manner one might write a biography of Moses out of Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews*, but it is not an enterprise likely to summon forth an Albert Schweitzer from the distraught bosom of Orientalism.

DEPARTMENT OF MIDDLE EAST LANGUAGES & LITERATURES
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NOTES

¹Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961* (London, 1964), pp. 338–40.

²Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986* (New York, 1988), pp. 360–64.

³I use this latter expression in the sense isolated by Martin Kähler's famous distinction, first made in 1892 (cf. Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten [Philadelphia, 1964]), between the "historical Jesus" and the "historic Christ," the latter being the continuous subject of Christian preaching and the object of both Christian faith and Christian piety. Precisely the same distinction is intended when reference is made here to the "historical Muhammad." While the Prophet's person is not the object of Muslims' faith, as Jesus' is for Christians, his prophethood is, and thus both the person and the role of "the historic Prophet," to adapt Kähler's expression to the Islamic situation, have had an enormous and continuous influence on Islamic piety, practice, and beliefs (cf. Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* [Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985]), none of which is in question here.

⁴Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed*, trans. Anne Carter from the revised French edition of 1968 (London, 1971), p. xi. This was by way of preliminary to writing a 324-page biography of the Prophet!

⁵What follows does not pretend to be exhaustive on either Muhammad or the Qur'an, nor does it generally recover—though it occasionally glances at—the ground surveyed by Rudi Paret and Maxime Rodinson down to the early 1960s (Rudi Paret, "Recent European Research on the Life and Work of the Prophet Muhammad," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 6 [1958], pp. 81–96; Maxime Rodinson, "A Critical Survey of Modern Studies of Muhammad," first published in *Revue historique*, 229 [1963], pp. 169–220; and translated from French in Merlin Swartz, *Studies on Islam* [New York, 1981], pp. 23–85). The state of Qur'anic studies through the 1970s is reflected in Alford T. Welch, "Kur'ān" in *EI²*, vol. V (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1981), pp. 400–432; and, more recently, in Angelika Neuwirth, "Koran," in Helmut Gätje, ed., *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie*, vol. II; *Literaturwissenschaft* (Berlin, 1987), pp. 96–135.

⁶See generally, on what might be called the "irenic approach" to Islam, Andrew Rippin, "Literary Analysis of Qur'an, Tafsir, and Sira: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough," in Richard Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson, 1985), p. 159.

⁷Ernest Renan, writing in 1851, and cited by Maxime Rodinson in "The Life of Muhammad and the Sociological Problem of the Beginnings of Islam," *Diogenes*, 20 (1957), p. 46.

⁸Neill and Wright, *Interpretation*, p. 363.

⁹Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, vol. I, *Historical Texts* (Chicago, 1957), p. 18; and compare Frants Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammeds*, translated from the second Danish edition of 1953 by Hans Heinrich Schaeder (rpt. Heidelberg, 1961), pp. 21ff. The pre-Islamic poetry makes its inevitable appearance in modern surveys on the "background sources" on Muhammad (see Rodinson, "Critical Survey," p. 37), but, except for Henri Lammens's work (see nn. 11, 56 below), it is far less in evidence when it comes to actually describing that background.

¹⁰These are all likewise dutifully reported in surveys of the "sources for the life of Muhammad" (see Rodinson, "Critical Survey," pp. 29–39). It is in the north that we come the closest to the environment of Mecca, since both Jewish and Islamic traditions agree that there were Jewish settlements in the northern Hijaz; and, more important, the assertion is confirmed by epigraphical evidence (see Moshe Gil, "The Origin of the Jews of Yathrib," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 4 [1984], pp. 203–24). However, the fact remains that there is between the contemporary Greek, Roman, and Sasanian sources about Syria and Arabia and the later Islamic tradition about the same places a "total lack of continuity" (Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* [Cambridge, 1980], p. 11).

¹¹Compare Henri Lammens, *La Mecque à la Veille de l'Hégire* (Beirut, 1924), where the Arab literary evidence is collected (and perhaps distorted), with Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), passim; and F. E. Peters, "The Commerce of Mecca before Islam," in Farhad Kazemi and R. D. McChesney, eds., *A Way Prepared. Essays . . . Richard Bayly Winder* (New York, 1988), pp. 3–26. A more sober approach than that of Lammens to the same pre-Islamic milieu has been taken over the last quarter-century by M. J. Kister of the Hebrew University (see M. J. Kister, *Studies in Jahiliyya and Early Islam* [London, 1980], and n. 83 below). In the face of the complete dearth of Hijaz evidence, Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren have recently attempted to extrapolate the

pre-Islamic Meccan milieu from what appears to have been a collection of pagan shrines still flourishing in the mid-8th century at Sde Boker in the Negev (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, "The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jahili Meccan Sanctuary," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 49 [1990], pp. 23–44). The argument is seductive, but whether the buildings in question were indeed shrines does not appear to be at all clear.

¹²For Muhammad, see Buhl, *Das Leben*, p. 366. While there is some material evidence for the Galilee and Jerusalem of Jesus' day, the latter conveniently summarized in John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem as Jesus Knew It: Archaeology as Evidence* (London, 1978), there has been no archaeological exploration in either Mecca or Medina, nor are the prospects good that there will be (F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem and Mecca: The Typology of the Holy City in the Near East* [New York, 1986], pp. 72–74). The almost total absence of archaeological evidence for early Islam is particularly striking when contrasted with the role that the excavation of sanctuaries and the discovery of legal and liturgical inscriptions have played in controlling the purely literary material that constitutes the "Hebrew Epic."

¹³In all that follows I have left aside the question of "revelation" and "inspiration" and taken as my starting point the historian's normal assumption that the religious documents in question, the New Testament and the Qur'an, are entirely and uniquely the products of human agents, whoever those latter may turn out to be.

¹⁴These latter reports are the hadith or Prophetic traditions allegedly reproducing the actual words of Muhammad on a variety of subjects. Their authenticity, which is of crucial importance to the historian, will be taken up in due course; here it need only be noted that while they do not share the cachet of divine inspiration attached by Christians to the entire New Testament, they have for Muslims a high degree of authority. Though that authority may have originated in their promotion, like that of the Mishna and Talmud, to magisterial authority in legal questions, the hadith soon began to enjoy the same status as purely historical documents.

¹⁵If anything, the gap between the events of Jesus' life and their final redaction in the preserved Gospels appears to be growing narrower as time passes (see John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* [Philadelphia, 1976]; and Neill and Wright, *Interpretation*, p. 361).

¹⁶Conceivably even fewer, or perhaps many, many more. Though the later Muslim tradition came to agree that the "collection" of the Qur'an took place in the caliphate of Uthman (644–656), some early Muslim authorities dated it to the Caliph Abu Bakr (632–634) and others to Umar (634–644). This early uncertainty about what would appear to be a critical event in Islamic history is by no means atypical, and two modern scholars have rejected the traditional "Uthmanic" consensus out of hand. One (John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an* [Cambridge, 1977]) would make the "collection of the Qur'an" the work of the Prophet himself, while the other (John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* [Cambridge, 1977]) would postpone it to the 9th century. It is still early in the career of each hypothesis, but neither seems to have been widely embraced.

¹⁷Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an* (Leiden, 1937); Rudi Paret, "Der Koran als Geschichtsquelle," *Der Islam*, 37 (1961), pp. 24–42, cited from its reprint in Rudi Paret, ed., *Der Koran* (Darmstadt, 1975), pp. 141–42.

¹⁸J. Eliash, "The Shi'ite Qur'an: A Reconsideration of Goldziher's Interpretation," *Arabica*, 16 (1969), pp. 15–24; E. Kohlberg, "Some Notes on the Imamite Attitudes toward the Qur'an," in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays . . . Richard Walzer* (Columbia, S.C., 1973), pp. 209–24.

¹⁹As noted, one who has failed to be convinced is John Wansbrough who, in two major studies (Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, and Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition in Islamic Salvation History* [Oxford, 1978]) has attempted to demonstrate that (1) the Qur'an was not finally fixed ("collected") until the early 9th century, and (2) it was shaped out of biblical and other materials by redactors influenced by contemporary Judeo-Christian polemic. For a sympathetic appreciation of Wansbrough's work, see Rippin, "Literary Analysis"; and for a Muslim's criticism of both Wansbrough and Rippin, see Fazlur Rahman, "Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay," in Richard Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson, 1985), pp. 198–202.

²⁰William Graham, "Qur'an as Spoken Word: An Islamic Contribution to the Understanding of Scripture," in Richard Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson, 1985), p. 31: "Fundamentally, the Qur'an was what its name proclaimed it to be: the recitation given by God for human beings to repeat (cf. Sura 96:1)."

²¹This is believed according to the universal Muslim tradition (W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* [Edinburgh, 1970], pp. 37–38).

²²Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York, 1963), p. 205.

²³See W. D. Davies's judicious remarks (*Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* [Philadelphia, 1980], p. 3): "While it is clear that Rabbinic sources do preserve traditions of an earlier date than the second century . . . [i]t must never be overlooked that Judaism had made much history during that period. It follows that we cannot, without extreme caution, use the Rabbinic sources as evidence for first century Judaism." Study of the life of Muhammad suffers, as we shall see (see n. 80), from the selfsame problem.

²⁴Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, pp. 77–79; compare R. B. Serjeant, "Early Arabic Prose," in A. F. L. Beeston et al., eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 126–27.

²⁵A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia, 1982), pp. 6ff.

²⁶Rippin, "Literary Analysis," p. 159, commenting on Wansbrough's delineation of this style (Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, pp. 40–43, 47–48, 51–52ff.; Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, pp. 24–25): "The audience of the Qur'an is presumed able to fill in the missing details of the narrative, much as is true of work such as the Talmud, where knowledge of the appropriate biblical citations is assumed or supplied by only a few words." Far more than this is assumed by the Mishna and Talmud, of course. There, the reader is expected to understand the lines of both the issues and the current state of the debate on those issues when the text opens.

²⁷Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, pp. 77–82, 127–35. All these would fall within what the New Testament Form critics would call "Paränesis" or "Sayings and Parables" (cf. Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1987], pp. 168–72), though with far greater variety than the Gospel examples show.

²⁸Neill and Wright, *Interpretation*, p. 264.

²⁹See, most recently, Issa Boullata, "The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an: *I'jāz* and Related Topics," in Andrew Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 140–41.

³⁰For Richard Bell's ingenious but unconvincing hypothesis, see Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, pp. 101–7.

³¹Namely, that the present suras were the original units of revelation, and that the hadith, and the historical works incorporating them, provide a valid basis for dating the suras (cf. Neuwirth, "Koran," p. 100). These premises, which roughly correspond to standard rabbinic theory about the books of the Bible, would, of course, rule out even the possibility of a "documentary hypothesis" for either the Bible or the Qur'an.

³²The standard statement of what has become the Western position is found in the first volume of Theodor Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorans* (Göttingen, 1860), revised by Friedrich Schwally in 1909. Others have slightly revised the Nöldeke-Swally sequence, but it remains the basic sura order used in the West (Neuwirth, "Koran," pp. 117–19).

³³Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, p. 114: "Like all those who have dated the Qur'an, Bell accepted the general chronological framework [and much else besides] of Muhammad's life as this is found in the *Sira* . . . and other works." The value judgment is that expressed in Welch, "Kur'an," p. 417.

³⁴This was somewhat disingenuously conceded by W. Montgomery Watt (*Muhammad at Mecca* [Oxford, 1953], p. xiii), and, more helpfully, by Rudolf Sellheim ("Prophet, Calif und Geschichte: Die Muhammad Biographie des Ibn Ishaq," *Oriens*, 18–19 [1965–1966], pp. 33–91); and Wansbrough (*Qur'anic Studies and Sectarian Milieu*), among others.

³⁵*The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah, with Introduction and Notes by Alfred Guillaume* (Oxford, 1955), p. 691.

³⁶Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (New York, 1983), p. 68.

³⁷See Qur'an 10:38–39, where, as usual, God is speaking:

This Qur'an is not such as could ever be invented in despite of God; but it is a confirmation of that which was before it and an exposition of that which is decreed for men—there is no doubt of that—from the Lord of the Worlds. Or do they say he [that is, Muhammad] has invented it? Then say: If so, do you bring a *sūra* like it, and call for help on all you can besides God, if you have any doubts.

For the Gospels, see John 21:24: "It is this same disciple who attests what has here been written. It is in fact he who wrote it, and we know that his testimony is true"; and cf. Luke 1:1–4.

³⁸Summarily described, from a Muslim point of view, in Muhammad Abdul Rauf, "Hadith Literature—I: The Development of the Science of *Ḥadīth*," in A. F. L. Beeston et al., eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 271–88. However, they may have included, even by their own criteria, far more chaff than has been suspected; compare G. H. A. Juynboll, "On the Origins of Arabic Prose: Reflections on Authenticity," in G. H. A. Juynboll, ed., *Studies on the First Century of Islamic History* (Carbondale, Ill., 1982), pp. 171–72: "Classical Muslim *isnād* criticism has not been as foolproof as orthodox circles, and in their wake many scholars in the West, have always thought."

³⁹Consider, for example, what might be taken, were it genuine, as a prime example of early Islamic *kerygma*, Muhammad's own "farewell discourse" on the occasion of his last pilgrimage before his death. It is reported in substantially similar versions by three major historians, Ibn Ishaq, Waqidi, and Tabari, but, remarked R. B. Serjeant, a generally conservative critic, "patently signs of political ideas of a later age, coupled with internal and external contradictions, largely discredit the attribution of much of the extant versions to the Prophet" (Serjeant, "Early Arabic Prose," p. 123). For another example, see n. 62.

⁴⁰This is not to say that, as Wright put it (Neill and Wright, *Interpretation*, p. 362):

It is still universally agreed that our picture of the earliest Church must begin with the study of Paul, and in particular of the letters generally agreed to be authentic. . . . These writings, which almost certainly antedate the earliest written Gospel, remain central for both the theology and history of the period.

Islam lacks a Paul, that is, an authoritative contemporary interpretation of the founder's message. The Islamic sources for early Islam are, like those on the life of Muhammad himself, later by a century and a half. Paul may have done theological mischief in the Christian context by providing an interpretation before the message, but all in all, it is better to have Paul than Tabari, as either a historian or an exegete.

⁴¹Neill and Wright, *Interpretation*, p. 294.

⁴²Buhl, *Das Leben*, p. 366. Michael Cook succinctly summed up the contemporary historical data provided by the Qur'an:

Taken on its own, the Qur'an tells us very little about the events of Muhammad's career. It does not narrate these events, but merely refers to them; and in doing so, it has a tendency not to name names. Some do occur in contemporary contexts: four religious communities are named (Jews, Christians, Magians, and the mysterious Sabians), as are three Arabian deities (all female), three humans (of whom Muhammad is one), two ethnic groups (Quraysh and the Romans), and nine places. Of the places, four are mentioned in military connections (Badr, Mecca, Hunayn, Yathrib), and four are connected with the sanctuary (Safa, Marwa, Arafat, while the fourth is "Bakka," said to be an alternative name to Mecca). The final place is Mount Sinai, which seems to be associated with the growing of olives. Leaving aside the ubiquitous Christians and Jews, none of these names occurs very often: Muhammad is named four or five times (once as "Ahmad"), the Sabians twice, Mount Sinai twice, and the rest once each." (Cook, *Muhammad*, pp. 69–70)

⁴³W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad's Mecca: History in the Qur'an* (Edinburgh, 1988), especially pp. 26–38. Alford T. Welch ("Muhammad's Understanding of Himself: The Koranic Data," in Richard G. Hovannisian and Speros Vryonis, eds., *Islam's Understanding of Itself* [Malibu, Calif., 1983], pp. 15–52) has likewise attempted a biographical sketch of Muhammad's "self-understanding" as revealed by the Qur'an.

⁴⁴Alford T. Welch, "Allah and Other Supernatural Beings: The Emergence of the Qur'anic Doctrine of Tawhid," in Alford T. Welch, ed., *Studies in Qur'an and Tafsir*, JAAR Thematic Issue 47, 1979, 1980), pp. 733–58.

⁴⁵Welch, "Muhammad's Understanding," p. 16; and compare the significant omission of the personal pronoun in "A thorough analysis of the Qur'anic contexts involving Allah, other deities, and the 'lower' members of the spirit world shows a clear and unmistakable development of ideas or teachings" (Welch, "Allah," p. 734).

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 751–53.

⁴⁷On the genre, see M. J. Kister, "The *Sira* Literature," in A. F. L. Beeston et al., eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 352–67.

⁴⁸The consensus opinion—and reservations—are rendered in Welch, "Kur'an," p. 414. Similar, and stronger, reservations are expressed by Wansbrough (*Qur'anic Studies*, p. 141); Cook (*Muhammad*, p. 70); and Rippin ("Literary Analysis"), who wrote:

Their [the "occasions of revelation" narratives] actual significance in individual cases of trying to interpret the Qur²an is limited: the anecdotes are adduced, and thus recorded and transmitted, in order to provide a narrative situation in which the interpretation of the Qur²an can be embodied. The material has been recorded within exegesis not for its historical value but for its exegetical value. Yet such basic literary facts about the material are frequently ignored within the study of Islam in the desire to find positive historical results. (p. 153)

⁴⁹On Qur²anic exegesis posing as biography, see W. Montgomery Watt, "The Materials Used by Ibn Ishaq," in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, ed., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), pp. 23–34; and on the "raids of the Prophet," which Watt regards as the "essential foundation for the biography of the Prophet and the history of his times," see *ibid.*, pp. 27–28, and also J. M. B. Jones, "The Maghāzi Literature," in A. F. L. Beeston et al., eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 344–51.

⁵⁰Alternatively, as Patricia Crone dramatically stated it (*Slaves on Horses*, p. 203n. 10): "Consider the prospect of reconstructing the origins of Christianity on the basis of the writings of Clement or Justin in a recension by Origen."

⁵¹Ignaz Goldziher, "On the Development of the Hadith," in S. M. Stern, ed., *Muslim Studies* (London, 1971), vol. II, pp. 17–254; originally published in 1890.

⁵²Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1950).

⁵³Compare Stein's recent assessment of the materials attributed to Jesus in the Gospels: "The lack of such material [dealing with the most pressing problems facing the earliest Christian communities] in the Gospels witnesses against the idea that the church created large amounts of the gospel materials and in favor of the view that the church tended to transmit the Jesus traditions faithfully." Moreover, citing G. B. Caird, "There is not a shred of evidence that the early church ever concocted sayings of Jesus in order to solve any of its problems" (Stein, *Synoptic Problem*, p. 189).

⁵⁴Thus argues W. Montgomery Watt in *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. VI, *Muhammad at Mecca*, trans. and annotated W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (Albany, N.Y., 1988), p. xviii.

⁵⁵On these latter see the trenchant Form criticism analysis by Albrecht Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung*, vol. I, *Themen und Formen* (Bonn, 1973).

⁵⁶On Henri Lammens's approach, see "Qoran et tradition: Comment fut composée la vie de Mahomet?" *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 1 (1910), pp. 25–61, and *Fatima et les filles de Mahomet* (Rome, 1912); and compare C. H. Becker, "Grundsätzlichen zur Leben-Muhammadforschung," in *Islamstudien*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1924; rpt. Hildesheim, 1967), vol. I, pp. 520–27, and K. S. Salibi, "Islam and Syria in the Writings of Henri Lammens," in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), pp. 330–42; for Rodinson's characterization, see Rodinson, "Critical Survey," p. 26, and compare Buhl, *Das Leben*, p. 367: "H. Lammens . . . dessen Belesenheit und Scharfsinn man bewundern muss, der aber doch oft die Objectivität des unparteiischen Historikers vermissen lässt."

⁵⁷Watt, *Muhammad*, p. xiii, and compare Watt, "Materials," p. 24. Kister's cautiously worded opinion seems similar:

The development of *Sirah* literature is closely linked with the transmission of the *Hadith* and should be viewed in connection with it. . . . Although some accounts about the recording of the utterances, deeds and orders dictated by the Prophet to his companions are dubious and debatable and should be examined with caution (and ultimately rejected), some of them seem to deserve trust." (Kister, "*Sira* Literature," p. 352)

⁵⁸Compare Rodinson, "Critical Survey," p. 42: "Orientalists are tempted to do as the Orientals have tended to do without any great sense of shame, that is, to accept as authentic those traditions that suit their own interpretation of an event and to reject others." Rodinson, who, as we shall see shortly, had even less faith than Watt in the source material, may have himself done precisely that in his own biography of the Prophet.

⁵⁹Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, pp. 14–15:

Among historians the response to Schacht has varied from defensiveness to deafness, and there is no denying that the implications of his theories are, like those of Noth, both negative and hard to contest. . . . That the bulk of the *Sira* . . . consists of second century *hadiths* has not been disputed by any historian, and this point may be taken as conceded. But if the surface of the tradition consists of debris from the controversies of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid period, the presumption must be that the layer underneath consists of similar debris from the controversies that preceded them, as Lammens and Becker inferred from Goldziher's theories.

According to Crone, Watt “disposes of Schacht by casuistry,” but Shaban, Paret, Guillaume, and Sellheim have likewise been unwilling to deal squarely with the critical issue he has raised (*ibid.*, p. 211, n. 88). Watt’s brief rebuttal is in his “The Reliability of Ibn Ishaq’s Sources” in *La vie du prophète Mahomet* (Colloque de Strasbourg 1980) (Paris, 1983), pp. 31–43; and Watt and McDonald, *Muhammad*, pp. xvii–xix.

⁶⁰Becker, “Grundsätzlichen,” p. 521, cited in Watt, “Materials,” p. 23.

⁶¹Cited in n. 4 above; compare his similar remarks in n. 58 above and, earlier, Buhl, *Das Leben*, pp. 372–77.

⁶²The earliest example of such a summary, in both the serial and the absolute chronology, appears in Ibn Ishaq’s *Life* (1:336) on the occasion of some Muslims emigrating to Abyssinia in 615, when the ruler there was given a summary presentation of Islamic “good news.” This apparently early Muslim “kerygma” has been analyzed in Wansbrough, *Qur’anic Studies*, pp. 38–43, and Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, pp. 100–101. That author concludes (*Qur’anic Studies*, p. 41) that “the structure of the report suggests a careful rhetorical formulation of Qur’anic material generally supposed to have been revealed after the date of that event,” and, even more sweepingly (*Sectarian Milieu*, p. 100), “Save for the Meccan pilgrimage, no item in these lists falls outside the standard monotheist vocabulary, and is thus of little use in the description of origins.”

⁶³From Mark onward—“Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God”—all the Gospels make a similar declaration at their outset.

⁶⁴In Ibn Ishaq’s original “world history” version, before Ibn Hisham removed the “extraneous material,” the story began with Creation, and Muhammad’s prophetic career was preceded by accounts of all the prophets who had gone before. The life of the man was the “seal” of their line (see Abbott, *Studies*, pp. 87–89). This earlier, “discarded” section of Ishaq’s work can be to some extent retrieved (Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* [Columbia, S.C., 1989]), and while its remains are revealing of Ibn Ishaq’s purpose and the milieu in which the work was finally composed (Abbott, *Studies*, p. 89), they add nothing of substance to the portrait of the historical Muhammad.

⁶⁵Ibn Ishaq 3 in Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, p. 3.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 102–7 in Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, pp. 69–73; and compare what Ibn Ishaq calls “Reports of Arab Soothsayers, Jewish Rabbis and Christian Monks” about the birth of the Prophet (*ibid.*, pp. 130ff. in Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, pp. 90ff.).

⁶⁷Sellheim, “Prophet,” pp. 38–39, 59–67; Kister, “*Sira* Literature,” pp. 356–57; and, for a more general consideration of “polemic as a history-builder,” see Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, pp. 40–45 and n. 77 below.

⁶⁸Kister, “*Sira* Literature,” pp. 356–57, on the early *Sira* of Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 728 or 732) and the “popular and entertaining character of the early *Sira* stories, a blend of miraculous narratives, edifying anecdotes and records of battles in which sometimes ideological and political tendencies can be discerned.” (Compare Cook, *Muhammad*, p. 66.)

⁶⁹The New Testament critic Joseph Fitzmyer defined a “theologoumenon” as “a theological assertion that does not directly express a matter of faith or an official teaching of the Church, and hence in itself is not normative, but that expresses in language that may prescind from facticity a notion which supports, enhances or is related to a matter of faith” (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament,” originally published in 1973, rpt. in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel* [New York, 1981], p. 45).

⁷⁰Sellheim, “Prophet,” pp. 49–53; Kister, “*Sira* Literature,” pp. 362–63.

⁷¹Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, p. 35; and compare Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien*, pp. 40–45, 155–58. The reason for the vague “distributional chronology,” as Wansbrough called the pre-Hijra system, was certainly not, as Watt has suggested (in Watt and McDonald, *Muhammad*, p. xxi), that “there were fewer outstanding events.” The call of the Prophet, the earliest revelation of the Qur’an, and the making of the first converts would all appear to be supremely important, though the Muslim tradition had little certainty, chronological or otherwise, about them (*ibid.*, pp. xxii, xxv–xli), likely because there was either no way or no reason to remember the date.

⁷²Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, p. 13:

The inertia of the source material comes across very strongly in modern scholarship on the first two centuries of Islam. The bulk of it has an alarming tendency to degenerate into mere arrangements of the same old canon—Muslim

chronicles in modern languages and graced with modern titles. Most of the rest consists of reinterpretation in which the order derives less from the sources than from our own ideas of what life ought to be about—modern preoccupations graced with Muslim facts and footnotes.

⁷³One attempt to substitute “genuine” eyewitness testimony (if not to Muhammad himself, then to the first appearance of the Islamic movement on the early 7th-century Near East) has been Patricia Crone and Michael Cook’s *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977), and while a brave and provocative book, it has tempted few others to follow its suggestion: “The historicity of the Islamic tradition is . . . to some degree problematic: while there are no cogent internal grounds for rejecting it, there are equally no cogent external grounds for accepting it. . . . The only way out of the dilemma is thus to step outside the Islamic tradition altogether and start again” (p. 3). What the external testimony to early Islam amounts to (and it is not a great deal) is summarized in Cook, *Muhammad*, pp. 73–76; and the limitations of this approach are underscored in Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, pp. 115–16.

⁷⁴Watt, “Materials”; Sellheim, “Prophet”; Wansbrough, “Qur²anic Studies”; Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*.

⁷⁵Wansbrough, “Qur²anic Studies,” p. 66.

⁷⁶See n. 80 below. Michael Cook (*Muhammad*) reflects the far more modest aims of contemporary searchers after “influences”:

For the most part we are reduced to the crude procedure of comparing Islam with the mainstream traditions of Judaism and Christianity, and trying to determine which elements came from which. The answers are often convincing, but they fail to tell us in what form those elements came to Muhammad, or he to them. (p. 77)

⁷⁷This was done as early as Abraham Geiger’s *Judaism and Islam* (originally published in Latin in 1832; rpt. from the translation published in 1898 [New York, 1970]); and then later, Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish Foundations of Islam* ([New York, 1933; rpt. New York, 1967]). There have been a number of suggestive portraits of the “Jewish Muhammad,” followed by the arguments of Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London, 1926; rpt. London, 1968), Karl Ahrens, “Christliches im Qoran” (*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morganlandischen Gesellschaft*, 84 [1930], pp. 15–68, 148–90); and Tor Andrae, *Les origines de l’Islam et le Christianisme* (Paris, 1955), for a “Christian Muhammad.”

⁷⁸The political hypothesis, first argued by Eisler and Brandon, took this more recent form in Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York, 1987):

Though all these [just cited Jewish] writers have their individual approaches, it is characteristic of the school as a whole to use the Talmud to show that Jesus’ life and teaching are entirely understandable in terms of the Judaism of his time, particularly rabbinical or Pharisaic Judaism. The corollary is that, since Jesus did not conflict with Judaism, his death took place for political reasons, later camouflaged as religious by the Christian Church in its anxiety to cover up the fact that Jesus was a rebel against Rome. (pp. 208–9)

Cf. Ernst Bammel, “The Revolutionary Theory from Reimarus to Brandon,” in Ernst Bammel and C. D. F. Moule, eds., *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (New York, 1984), pp. 11–68.

⁷⁹Harvey, *Jesus*, p. 6, was cited in n. 25 above on the “constraints of history.” However, he went on to add:

This is not to say, of course, that he [Jesus] must have been totally subject to these constraints. Like any truly creative person, he could doubtless bend them to his purpose. . . . But had he not worked within them, he would have seemed a mere freak, a person too unrelated to the normal rhythm of society to have anything meaningful to say.

⁸⁰Cook, *Muhammad*, p. 77. Moreover, it is here that the Islamicist, like the New Testament scholar (see n. 23), runs into the problem of the usefulness of the “rabbinic sources”: to what extent can the Mishna, the Talmud, and the Midrashim (many of these latter sources being, in fact, post-Islamic and so possibly influenced by, rather than influencing, early Islam) be used to illuminate the pre-Islamic milieu of Mecca? Geiger, Torrey (*Jewish Foundations*, p. 34), and, notoriously, Abraham Katsh, *Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and Its Commentaries. Surahs II and III* (New York, 1954), invoked them almost as if Muhammad had a personal yeshiva library at his disposal, or, as Torrey thought, even a rabbinic teacher (*Jewish Foundations*, pp. 40–42).

⁸¹Arent Jan Wensinck, *Muhammad and the Jews of Medina*, with the excursus, *Muhammad’s Constitution of Medina* by Julius Wellhausen, trans. and ed. Wolfgang Behn (Freiburg, 1975), p. 73.

⁸²Paret, *Der Koran*; Watt, "Materials," p. 28; Watt and McDonald, *Muhammad*, pp. xxi–xxv; Sellheim, "Prophet," pp. 73–77; Kister, "Sira Literature," pp. 352–53.

⁸³Kister and his students have painstakingly compared variants in early, and largely unpublished, Muslim traditions on various topics—thus, for example, his analysis of a rather mysterious pre-revelation religious practice of Muhammad called *tahannuth* ("Al-Tahannuth: An Inquiry into the Meaning of a Term," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 31 (1968), pp. 223–36)—and attempted to construct the original understanding behind them, on the assumption that the "original" tradition derived, to some degree, from a historical "fact." They did not, however, directly address the critical question of the authenticity of any of the hadith materials with which they are so scrupulously dealing, though Kister for one, as we have seen (n. 68 above), was well aware of the historiographical problems posed by the inauthenticity of the hadith.

⁸⁴Julius Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1897).

⁸⁵G. R. Hawting, "The Origins of the Islamic Sanctuary at Mecca," in G. H. A. Juynboll, ed., *Studies on the First Century of Islamic History* (Carbondale, Ill., 1982), pp. 25–47.

⁸⁶It is instructive of the two methods to compare Hawting, "Origins," with Uri Rubin, "The Ka'ba, Aspects of Its Ritual, Functions, and Position in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 8 (1986), pp. 97–131, both of which deal with the pre-Islamic sanctuary at Mecca.