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REVIEW ESSAY: POSITIVISM, REVISIONISM, AND AGNOSTICISM IN THE STUDY OF LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE QUR'ĀN

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Abstract

This essay examines two recent publications relevant to research into the Qur'ān's revelatory context in late antique Arabia: G. W. Bowersock's *The Crucible of Islam* and *Islam and Its Past*, edited by Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook. The approaches to questions of Islamic origins, the background to the Qur'ān, and the interpretation of the qur'ānic corpus in each of these volumes are strikingly different, and tell us much about the contemporary status quo in Qur'ānic Studies on these questions, or rather the abiding incoherence of the field. Despite significant advances in the field over the last ten years, a cogent, universally accepted framework for understanding the background of the Qur'ān is still lacking, as is a general synthesis of the insights yielded by different methodological approaches. Nevertheless, the approaches of more positivist and more revisionist scholarship are not wholly irreconcilable, and a basic consensus on certain fundamentals (such as the heuristic utility of the basic chronology of revelation), as well as a tacit reconciliation with major aspects of the traditional view, point the way forward for productive research in the future.

Keywords

Late Antiquity, Qur'ānic Studies, methodology, historiography, South Arabia, Muḥammad, revisionism, positivism

This essay is a review of two recent works on the Qur'ān, early Islam, and the late antique environment in which they emerged, as well as an attempt to explore some of the larger methodological issues they provoke. *The Crucible of Islam*, the most recent monograph by the historian G. W. Bowersock, is a concise survey covering the transition from pre-Islamic Late Antiquity to the

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early Islamic period *c.* 700 CE.[1] It focuses on specific aspects of that transition of special interest to the author, an eminent scholar of the eastern Roman Empire (particularly the Arabian, Red Sea, and Levantine regions) who in recent years has increasingly turned his attention to the nexus of late antique politics, culture, and religion and their significance for the genesis and early development of Islam. *Islam and Its Past* is a collected volume edited by Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook, distinguished scholars in the fields of Rabbinic Judaism and Islamic Studies respectively.[2] The volume is partially based on the papers given at a conference held at the University of California, Los Angeles on the occasion of Patricia Crone receiving the Levi della Vida award in 2013. The eight chapters therein are somewhat heterogeneous, but, as the title implies, all converge in one way or another on the subject of the Qurʾān or the historical background to the emergence of Islam. (Two of the chapters discuss the way that background is conceptualized or represented in Western scholarship and Muslim tradition respectively, and so remain thematically relevant although they are not specifically grounded in the Qurʾān or early tradition *per se*.)

Given the prominence of the scholars involved, these two volumes may reasonably be thought to represent the current state of the field in the study of the Qurʾān and its late antique milieu, as regards both the pre-Islamic Arabian context specifically and the wider Mediterranean and Near Eastern context more broadly. Viewed together, they encapsulate important trends in the contemporary study of Islamic origins. They also collectively demonstrate some of the conspicuous shortcomings of this field of research as a whole, particularly a general failure on the part of scholars to productively integrate different approaches and consider different bodies of evidence in analyzing the emergence of Islam.

I should emphasize at the outset that, taken on their own terms, both Bowersock's monograph and Bakhos and Cook's volume are eminently worthwhile, interesting contributions to the field; it is not the intention of this reviewer to hold any of the scholars whose work is discussed here individually accountable for the failings of the discipline as a whole. Rather, my goal is to contrast the approach and perspective exhibited in each of these works as they reflect particular problems endemic to the current study of the Qurʾān and Islamic origins.

In what follows here, I will outline the main arguments and insights of both of these books; offer some criticisms of each; and attempt to highlight

1. G. W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

2. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

the differences, even incongruities, in approach between them. These differences and incongruities appear to me to be illustrative of the way in which scholars of Late Antiquity working in a more historical vein and scholars of the Qur'ān and early tradition working in a more text-critical vein sometimes seem not to be talking to one another, but rather *past* one another. The concrete historiographic insights yielded in the study of pre-Islamic Arabia and neighboring regions or in critical reevaluations of early Muslim tradition often seem to be overlooked in the contemporary study of the Qur'ān. In turn, methodological advances in Qur'ānic Studies seem to be having only a limited impact on historians seeking to advance our knowledge of the circumstances in which Islam originated—if and when they are acknowledged at all.

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Bowersock begins his study with a prologue that addresses, in rather cursory fashion, the debates over sources that have impaired progress in the study of Islamic origins for some time. The author clearly has little patience for what he would perceive as radical revisionism. (This impatience is manifest in various ways throughout the book.) Bowersock acknowledges the recent works of Fred Donner, Robert Hoyland, and Aziz Al-Azmeh as different approaches to tackling the source problem, and favors Al-Azmeh's work—and his approach to "Paleo-Islam"—as the most successful of the three. This is somewhat curious, as it is at least this reviewer's impression that the reception of Al-Azmeh's work among specialists in the Qur'ān and early Islam has been rather mixed, while the contributions of Donner and Hoyland have been more influential. [3]

However, in the end it is perhaps not surprising that Al-Azmeh receives such praise from Bowersock, because their approaches to Islam's origins are fundamentally similar.[4] Both draw positivist conclusions about the

3. *The Crucible of Islam*, 3–9. Bowersock dismisses the work of Donner as too conditioned by contemporary ecumenism and that of Hoyland as placing too much trust in biased sources external to the early Islamic polity. For some interesting observations by Hoyland on the current state of the source problem and the debate around it, see his "Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 25 (2017): 113–140; on the question of corroborating literary sources, even late ones, with material evidence, compare Harry Munt, "Oman and Late Sasanian Imperialism," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 28 (2017): 264–284.

4. See Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), and cf. the reviews of G. R. Hawting in *JQS* 17 (2015): 114–118 and Karim Samji, "Method and Impasse: Critical Remarks on the Reconstruction of Formative Islam," *Der Islam* 93 (2016): 216-233; though they

Jāhiliyyah and the emergence of Islam based on their own critical appraisal of the available evidence, which often seems to hang on little more than a subjective intuition of which claims seem plausible and which less so. To more skeptical readers, Al-Azmeh may seem to simply be giving priority to evidence that confirms his own sense of what is going on in the period, with an arbitrariness that some will find hard to accept as really transcending or resolving the historiographic problems. Bowersock's own method, seeking to steer a middle path between uncritical acceptance and overly critical rejection of the sources, will probably meet the same kind of objections from skeptics. One's perception of the success or failure of such ventures will depend on one's sense of how convincing and coherent the results are, as well as one's degree of commitment to a particular picture of what is going on in the proto-Islamic and early Islamic periods. [5]

Chapter 1, on the Red Sea wars of Late Antiquity and the Ethiopian interventions in South Arabia up to the time of Abraha in the sixth century CE, is one of the most striking and to my mind successful chapters of the book. Here Bowersock offers a particularly robust but concise synthesis based on significant recent advances in research on South Arabia and other Red Sea communities, particularly the impact of Ethiopian imperial adventures in the Yemen, in the centuries and decades preceding Islam. Bowersock is a formidable authority on this period, and his treatment of it here is vigorous and convincing.[6] Unsurprisingly given his particular vantage as a historian of the

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expose somewhat different aspects of Al-Azmeh's project to critique, Hawting and Samji are united in their lack of enthusiasm for his approach to the source problem.

5. Likewise, Al-Azmeh's emphasis on "Paleo-Islam" as the result of largely indigenous religious developments in pagan Arabian society at first seems to be at odds with Bowersock's focus on an image of the Jāhiliyyah not as isolated from broader trends in the world of the late antique Near East, but rather as increasingly impacted by them. But here too they are united, insofar as both interpret the sources with a steadfast conviction that the Prophet's contemporaries were polytheists pure and simple; while Al-Azmeh sees the Ḥijāz in the Jāhiliyyah as an isolated island of persistent paganism, Bowersock sees its paganism as persisting despite its integration into the wider late antique world.

6. *The Crucible of Islam* is the third of a trilogy of short, accessible, but provocative works presenting Bowersock's ideas on the influence of the imperial conflicts over the Red Sea region in Late Antiquity on the emergence of Islam. See also the publication of his Menahem Stern lectures at the Historical Society of Israel in Jerusalem in 2011, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012) and his volume in the *Emblems of Antiquity* series, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Bowersock is only the most prominent scholar engaged in the contemporary revival of interest in the subject of the Red Sea in Late Antiquity and the interactions between Arabian and other cultures in the region; cf., e.g., George Hatke, "Africans in Arabia Felix: Aksumite

Roman East, in Bowersock's presentation the various principalities of Arabia (not only in the Yemen but also in the Ḥijāz and in the Syrian borderlands farther north) seem far less like isolated, remote territories on the periphery of the late antique *oikoumene* and more like significant and increasingly integrated tribal principalities swept up in the larger political currents of the day.[7] Thus, he tends to see cultural developments in the various Arab communities in this period as naturally reflecting prevailing trends in the wider Roman and Persian worlds at the time, not least of all Judaization and Christianization. Bolstered by significant advances in archaeological research of the last decade, Bowersock paints a picture in which the Yemen in particular can be understood as one of the main arenas in which the conjunction of imperial politics and monotheism that was characteristic of this era came to have an increasing impact on Arabia, as the pendulum swung between Roman or Axumite and Persian influence in the region and the native Arab population was repeatedly brought into contact with Jewish and Christian groups vying for control as proxies of one or another imperial power.[8] In the larger scheme, the gradual integration of Arabia into the Mediterranean-Near Eastern world at this time, and thus its increasing participation in the transnational or globalizing trends of the day, makes the irruption of the Arab conquerors

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Relations with Himyar in the Sixth Century C.E.," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2010; Timothy Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, AD 500–1000* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2012); and the many publications on Yemen in Late Antiquity by Iwona Gajda, Christian Robin, and Paul Yule.

7. Bowersock places much less emphasis on the northern Arabian imperial frontier, for the most part mentioning Palmyra and the Ghassanid and Lakhmid polities only in passing (with the exception of one section in which the Ghassanids are cast as playing an extremely important role, on which see below). He also makes no mention of recent work on eastern Arabia. On the Jafnids/Ghassanids, see Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Denis Genequand and Christian Julien Robin (eds.), *Les Jafnides. Des rois arabes au service de Byzance (VI^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne)* (Orient et Méditerranée 17; Paris: De Boccard, 2015); on the Lakhmids, see Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Hira: eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (IHC 104; Leiden: Brill, 2014); and on eastern Arabia, particularly the Syriac church of Beth Qaṭraye/Qatar, see Mario Kozah et al. (eds.), *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century* (GECS 38; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014).

8. As many scholars have noted over the years, Yemen continued to be a crucial arena for contacts between communities, and thus the transmission of various sorts of lore, well into the Islamic era; see, e.g., Raif Georges Khoury, "Story, Wisdom and Spirituality: Yemen as the Hub between the Persian, Arabic and Biblical Traditions," in Johann P. Arnason, Armando Salvatore, and Georg Stauth (eds.), *Islam in Process: Historical and Civilizational Perspectives* (Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam 7; Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2006), 190–219.

and the establishment of a new political, social, and religious order in the region in the seventh century after Muḥammad's mission seem almost like a foregone conclusion.

Chapter 2, on Arab paganism, is less a survey of the evidence and more a deliberate attempt to stake a position in an ongoing scholarly debate, insofar as Bowersock soundly rejects the claims of those contemporary scholars who would make of the religion of the Jāhiliyyah anything less than complete polytheism. He dismisses the currently popular idea of "pagan monotheism" as a scholarly fantasy; in this vein, he also rejects the idea that the Daughters of Allāh (who are not presented as such in the Qur'ān, Bowersock reminds us) were angels of the Judeo-Christian sort. In his view, in both the Qur'ān and the Arabian milieu, Allāt, Manāt, and al-'Uzzā were unambiguously autonomous entities, full-blown deities in their own right. Part and parcel of Bowersock's approach to the evidence here and elsewhere is his view that the *mushrikūn* of the Qur'ān were polytheists pure and simple. In this, Bowersock is clearly reacting against the work of scholars such as G. R. Hawting and Patricia Crone, whose criticism of the image of the Prophet's interlocutors as simple "pagans" has had enormous repercussions in the field of Qur'ānic Studies over the last fifteen years or so.[9]

Bowersock's anti-revisionism sets the stage for the discussion of Mecca in Chapter 3, in which he explicitly targets and rebuts Crone's classic work challenging the traditional accounts of Mecca's economic prominence.[10] There is something self-consciously atavistic about Bowersock's common-

9. See *The Crucible of Islam*, 36–42. Bowersock is perhaps correct that recent work on "pagan monotheism" sometimes seems to overstate its case on the basis of ambiguous evidence, but he surely overstates his own as well in dismissing pagan monotheism as self-evidently a contradiction in terms. In the end, the point of such research is to promote a critical interrogation and reevaluation of the category of monotheism in the Greco-Roman and late antique milieus, similar to that which has taken place for the category as operative in ancient Israel. This case seems to me to be analogous to that of the so-called 'parting of the ways' between Judaism and Christianity: for some scholars 'Jew' and 'Christian' remain natural categories to deploy in speaking of the early centuries CE, whereas research of the last fifteen years has aimed at critiquing not only the notion of a decisive 'parting' accomplished shortly after the emergence of gentile Christianity but the very terms 'Jew' and 'Christian' as representing stable categories in the period.

10. Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987; repr. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2015); see also Crone's later articles revisiting the subject, "How Did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?," *BSOAS* 68 (2005): 387–399 and "Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan Leather Trade," *BSOAS* 70 (2005): 63–88, reprinted in her *The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters. Collected Studies in Three Volumes, Volume 1*, ed. Hanna Siurua (IHC 129; Leiden, Brill, 2016), 1–20 and 21–51 respectively.

sense approach to the Meccan scene in which Muḥammad first preached Islam, as when he states pointedly that "if we have not returned precisely to the image [of Mecca] promulgated by Montgomery Watt… we are no longer far removed from it."[11] (The invocation of the name of Watt here cannot be accidental, given that he was the *bête noire* of Crone and other scholars who rejected the positivism of mid-twentieth-century Western scholarship on the Qur'ān.) There is also something deliberately matter-of-fact about Bowersock's position regarding the actual stimuli that precipitated the emergence of Islam. What is to Bowersock the indisputable fact of the overwhelming paganism of the Ḥijāzī Arabs is here somewhat uncomfortably juxtaposed with the significant inroads into the peninsula made by Abrahamic monotheism, such that he deems the appearance of Arabian prophets not only unsurprising but almost inevitable. (Here Bowersock succumbs—as others have, including myself—to the temptation to see the *riddah* prophets not as mere imitators of Muḥammad but as genuine, if far less consequential, products of the same cultural context of prophetic ferment that gave rise to Muḥammad himself, a view now challenged quite vigorously by Hawting, as we shall see below.[12])

Chapters 4 and 5 address the intensification of the wider imperial struggles in which Arabia was embroiled in the decades immediately preceding the career of the Prophet. [13] Chapter 4 returns to the topic of Ethiopia, imperial Axum having loomed large in the Arabian horizon for centuries by the time of Muḥammad's birth, and its influence continuing even then despite the collapse of the Ethiopian imperial project in Yemen, with Abraha's breakaway principality supplanted by direct Persian suzerainty imposed around 570 CE. Bowersock's special interest in and emphasis on the links between Ethiopia and Arabia lead him to underscore the significance of the seldom-discussed 'first *hijrah*,' the temporary relocation of some of Muḥammad's followers to Axum around 615, which anticipated the final migration of the entire community to Yathrib-Medina in 622. He reads the event of the first *hijrah* not only as evidence of the continuing impact of Ethiopia in Arabian affairs (this time in the Ḥijāz rather than the Yemen) but of a special intimacy between Axumite

11. *The Crucible of Islam*, 53. Crone had much to say over the last decade of her life on the subject of the Meccan religious scene; see below.

12. Ibid., 58–63. Compare my "Ahab, Bar Kokhba, Muhammad, and the Lying Spirit: Prophetic Discourse before and after the Rise of Islam," in Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas (eds.), *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (TSAJ 146; Berlin: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 271–313, esp. 32–37.

13. Starting even before this point and becoming more noticeable here in these chapters, Bowersock sometimes presents themes, characters, concepts, and so forth that have already been mentioned in previous chapters as if they are only appearing for the first time, which is frequently disconcerting for the reader.

Christianity and the early *ummah*. Thus, Bowersock speculates that at least some of the passages addressed to the People of the Book in the Qur'ān are aimed directly at the Ethiopians, for example those passages that express belief in the Virgin Birth and God's inspiration of Jesus while also insisting that Jesus is not divine, but rather God is one (e.g., Q Nisā' 4:171).[14]

In Chapter 5, Bowersock leaps ahead to a later phase in the decades-long confrontation between Christian Rome and Sasanian Persia, examining the circumstances and repercussions of the Persian invasion of Jerusalem in 614–615, which provides the larger context for the Medinan phase of Muḥammad's career (discussed in the next chapter). Here Bowersock emphasizes two points of particular significance: the Jewish community as recipients of special patronage by the Sasanians (another theme of consequence for the next chapter) and the often overstated impact of the Persian invasion of Palestine. Citing recent archaeological research, Bowersock refutes the age-old claim that the ground was laid for the Arab conquests by the devastation and exhaustion of communities in the Holy Land by the Persians in the years immediately previous; this anticipates his discussion further on of the repercussions of the Arab conquests themselves.

Chapter 6, on the Medinan phase of Muḥammad's career, is a particularly robust treatment of the subject that demonstrates the potentially fruitful results of the kind of cautious positivism Bowersock advocates here. Certainly not all scholars will be comfortable with his enthusiasm for the historicity of the traditional accounts here. But overall, it is hard to deny the appeal of Bowersock's synthesis, particularly his depiction of the circumstances surrounding the emerging prophetic state, as his account coheres well with the thick context he has provided for it in previous chapters. His account relies on certain presuppositions about the conditions that made the formation of that first Islamic state in northwest Arabia possible—in particular the premise that Yathrib had long been inhabited by a significant Jewish community with ties to Palestine, as well as that the circumstances of the early 600s (particularly the conflict over Muḥammad's mission in Mecca and ongoing tribal conflict

14. The *tafsīr* and *sīrah* literature sometimes associate the Qur'ān with Axum and the first *hijrah* in various ways, as in anecdotes depicting the recitation of verses from the revelation by a follower of Muḥammad at the court of the Negus; thus, Ibn Isḥāq has an account of one of the Companions reciting the recently revealed Q Maryam 19:16–21 (the Nativity) for him. Reading the Medinan Q 4:171 in this context is idiosyncratic, as is Bowersock's emphasis on dialogue with the Ethiopians as the larger frame for the Qur'ān's messaging about Christianity, but it is a significant part of his overarching argument that the various traces of evidence for the Prophet's interactions with the Negus form a "dossier" that corroborates Muḥammad's early attempts at forging solidarity, if not a lasting alliance, between the *ummah* and Axum.

in Yathrib) presented various parties, especially the Byzantines, with a unique diplomatic and political opportunity in the Ḥijāz.

Bowersock relies heavily here on the recent work of Lecker, who plausibly argues that the *hijrah* (that is, the second *hijrah* in 622) occurred on account of the Ghassanids' availability and willingness to play a "supervenient role" in mediating between the Byzantines and Muḥammad. As Bowersock puts it, this theory "addresses both the self-interest and political diplomacy of the several parties to the agreement at the same time as invoking their religious and tribal allegiances from an international perspective that encompasses both Byzantium and Persia."[15] Lecker's hypothesis is that Heraclius understood that Persian intentions in the region, particularly their attempt to expand their influence in northwest Arabia through Jewish proxies as they had previously done in the Yemen, could be thwarted and their diplomatic efforts outflanked by the Byzantines' exertion of their own influence in the region through the Ghassanids.[16] Thus, at Byzantine prompting, the Banū Ghassān served as imperial agents encouraging the various rival factions in Yathrib to come together under the leadership of the Prophet, who found refuge there for his increasingly persecuted community in Mecca.

It has long been conventional for scholars to acknowledge that the activities of the Banū Lakhm and Banū Ghassān as imperial *foederati* anticipated a greater role for the Arabs in imperial affairs, culminating in the total disruption of the established imperial system by the Arab conquests under the Rashidun.[17] What is novel in this approach is both the extension of political significance to the Banū Ghassān past the point of the apparent

15. *The Crucible of Islam*, 108.

16. See Michael Lecker, "Were the Ghassānids and the Byzantines behind Muḥammad's *hijra*?" in Genequand and Robin (eds.), *Les Jafnides*, 277–293. Bowersock highlights Lecker's major insight as the detection of the coincidence between Heraclius' counterattack against the Persians and the *hijrah*, though I read Lecker's most significant discovery here as his observation of the Ghassanid tribal links as the factor that appears to have united (and lubricated cooperation and coordination between) various parties among the Aws, Khazraj, and the Jews of Medina.

17. In some accounts the collapse of the centralizing project of political consolidation under Ghassān plays a central role in directly stimulating the rise of Islam, in that the dissipation of the Byzantine-Jafnid condominium at the northwest frontier between Syria and the Ḥijāz creates both instability and a power vacuum ripe for exploitation by ambitious parties, including, eventually, the *ummah* under the Prophet's leadership. Its more radical propositions aside, this is the basic thesis of the controversial work of Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World* (London: Little, Brown, 2012), a book reviled by many for its unfettered revisionist claims and subjected to rough treatment by Bowersock himself in his review in the *Guardian* of May 4, 2012 (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/04/in-shadow-of-sword-tom-holland).

marginalization and overthrow in the 580s of the Jafnid chiefs who had led the Ghassanid confederation and the attribution of a direct intermediary role in orchestrating the *hijrah* to Ghassanid agents, as well as an indirect role in fostering the creation of the early Islamic state to the Byzantines. (The implication, of course, is that Muḥammad was then to be groomed as a Byzantine proxy himself, though this is not explicitly stated by Bowersock.) The subversive role of the Jews in northwestern Arabia as agents of the Sasanians (following on their supposedly having played a similar role during the Persian invasion of Palestine) was thereby anticipated and circumvented.[18]

The final three chapters of *The Crucible of Islam* address the succession to Muḥammad, the dynasties of the Rashidun and the Umayyads, and—the culminating point of proto- and early Islamic history from the late antiquitist's perspective—the construction of the Dome of the Rock.[19] Overall a particularly conspicuous conservatism reigns here, Bowersock's occasional nod to revisionist historiography notwithstanding (e.g., the aforementioned conjecture that the *riddah* prophets were authentic products of their time and not mere imitators of Muḥammad). Attempts at revisionist reappraisal of the post-prophetic phase of Islam's emergence, for example the attempt to counterbalance traditional claims by turning to outside sources, seem to have little traction with Bowersock, who by and large deems divergent accounts from Jewish or Christian sources on the conquests to reflect a natural tendency towards distortion and not some hidden truth subsequently concealed by Muslim historians and traditionists for doctrinal reasons.

Throughout these chapters, Bowersock emphasizes that the state the conquerors built—and the Islam they and their descendants ultimately shaped—reflected and dovetailed into the wider environment. The early Arab rulers styled themselves according to the imperial conventions of the day;

18. One detects here a lamentable, though no doubt inadvertent, echo of an age-old trope of Jewish collusion and treachery, manifest in (e.g.) Christian sources on the Arab conquests from Iraq to Spain and later appropriated and reversed by Muslim accounts on the Reconquista.

19. One notices several slight but conspicuous errors of interpretation or emphasis in these chapters, some of which are rather puzzling. The Sasanian shah is said to rule from Baghdad; ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib is identified as belonging not to the tribe of Quraysh but rather Hāshim, as if the latter were not part of the former; the Kharijites are depicted as emerging at the moment of "civil insurrection" against ʿAlī that culminated in the Battle of the Camel, rather than during the confrontation at Siffin; ʿAlī is identified as the supreme martyr of the Shi'ah, rather than Ḥusayn; the Ahl al-Sunnah emerged in the First Fitnah as partisans of Muʿāwiyah and the Umayyads; and so forth. Bowersock's overall command of this material is more than adequate, but minor lapses of this sort prove disconcerting to the specialist reader as they pile up over time.

they ruled though proxies drawn from local elites according to the established conventions of the time; and overall, to their profit, they sought to disrupt established economic and social patterns as little as possible. As elsewhere in the book, here Bowersock demonstrates with great lucidity how in its genesis, development, and maturation, Islam was thoroughly a product of its time and not a foreign intrusion into the affairs of the late antique world.[20]

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As noted at the beginning of this essay—and as its editors themselves openly acknowledge—the contents of *Islam and Its Past* are unavoidably heterogeneous; some derive from the conference in Patricia Crone's honor that precipitated the collection, while others were commissioned later. Nevertheless, the volume is largely cohesive and stands as a fitting testimony both to Crone's legacy and to the diversity of approaches found in the contemporary study of the Qur'ān and Islamic origins.[21]

The collection leads off, appropriately enough, with a very fine survey of the current state of the field of Qur'ānic Studies by Devin Stewart. It has been some time since an adequate stock-taking of the field of this sort has been published, and so Stewart's essay provides a much-needed service to scholarship, especially in that he discusses a number of areas in which the field has grown tremendously in recent years. Additionally, the author's knowledge of both historical and contemporary scholarship on the Qur'ān is nothing short of prodigious, and so he is able to map contemporary developments against a deep historical context. This piece will surely prove indispensable in teaching and research on the Qur'ān in coming years.

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20. The clarity of Bowersock's argumentation and the elegance of his prose are aspects of his work that indisputably set him apart from Al-Azmeh, whose turgid and insistently, unapologetically jargon-laden writing style often presents an insurmountable stumbling block not only to students but to other scholars as well.

21. While the overall vision of the volume is commendable, one notices that it seems to have been rather hastily edited in places. For example, in the long essay by Stewart, a very significant and thoughtful piece, there are considerable repetitions that should have been spotted by an editor. Likewise, on a more mechanical level—and here the responsibility surely lies with the publisher and not the editors—there are persistent and conspicuous inconsistencies in style found throughout the volume, specifically regarding transliteration of technical terms, capitalization, and italicization. These are highly distracting, especially as they sometimes appear in a single paragraph or even a single sentence, e.g.: Qur'anic studies/qur'anic studies; *ḥadīth/Ḥadīth*; surah/*surah*; *tafsīr/Tafsīr*. Likewise, the notes and bibliography sometimes seem to be plagued by minor but noticeable glitches, and varying styles of citation are in evidence in different chapters; for example, the rendering of the titles of Arabic works seems to differ from chapter to chapter.

It is not possible to comment at length on the many useful and provocative observations Stewart makes about the field here, and so I must confine myself to a few short points germane to my larger purpose in this essay. One is particularly struck by the enormous diversity of contemporary scholarly activity on the Qur'ān he maps here, including a number of subfields that barely existed even ten years ago. (This is somewhat ironic, insofar as this diversity is not reflected in the contents of the volume, a point to which I shall return presently.) Nevertheless, Stewart observes that many productive avenues of research explored in previous generations have not been adequately taken up in contemporary scholarship, especially pertaining to linguistic, stylistic, and literary approaches to the Qur'ān. Moreover, he issues a stern and much-needed note of caution, inasmuch as a significant amount of contemporary work seems to inadvertently recapitulate that of older scholars, whose contributions are either overlooked or just not taken seriously. The result is a field of scholarly endeavor that has enormous growth potential, yet is chronically inchoate and frequently incapable or unwilling to build on previous breakthroughs in any systematic way. Stewart also notes—quite correctly in my view—that many contemporary scholars have developed such an allergy to reliance on traditional sources that they ignore the many useful, even indispensable, lessons to be learned from those sources, especially in regard to the study of qur'ānic language and rhetoric.

Michael Cook's contribution comes later in the volume, but it is in some ways analogous to Stewart's and so should be mentioned here. While this chapter, "Early Medieval Christian and Muslim Attitudes to Pagan Law," might at first glance seem incongruous with the rest of the volume, the focus of the piece is on Muslim scholarly apprehensions of the Jāhiliyyah; thus, it is an interesting complement to Stewart's survey of Western scholarly apprehensions of the Qur'ān. Both chapters are second-order reflections on scholarly attitudes towards and perceptions of the background to Islam—one focusing on pre-modern, insider perspectives and the other on modern, outsider perspectives—and thus stand apart from the other chapters. Cook's tidy discussion draws a sharp and instructive distinction between medieval Christian jurists' tolerance for and readiness to accommodate pagan law as such (even sometimes characterizing pagan law as implicitly compatible with the divine will or revealed law) and Muslim jurists' discomfort with the idea of pagan law and insistence that the inevitable holdovers from pagan practice of the Jāhiliyyah that survived into the Islamic era must have been explicitly confirmed as legitimate by the Prophet. This difference Cook attributes to the fact that Islam initially developed as a law unto itself, independent of the rule of others and so completely autonomous from other compelling regimes of truth; in contrast, the early Christians were for centuries forced to acquiesce to Roman law, imposed as the norm by the dominant Roman society.

Apart from these two chapters, the other contribution that seems somewhat anomalous is that of Iwona Gajda, who addresses current research on the wider late antique context from the perspective of material culture, specifically epigraphic and archaeological evidence. This is worth reflecting upon for a moment, in that—despite the aforementioned heterogeneity of the topics discussed in it—the scope and range of methodologies represented among the chapters of this volume is, as it turns out, relatively limited. Only Gajda's chapter approaches the late antique or early Islamic period primarily through a corpus of material outside of the Qur'ān and Muslim traditional literature; it is also the only chapter that deals directly with non-literary evidence. The narrowness of the book on the whole stands in sharp contrast to the diversity of approaches in the contemporary field charted by Stewart in its opening chapter. Even if we limit ourselves to areas of research dedicated to the study of the formative period of Islam specifically (and thus exclude significant facets of the contemporary field such as the study of the Qur'ān as literature, medieval and modern contexts and reception, feminist criticism, and so forth), the scope of methods and evidence here in *Islam and Its Past* still appears unnecessarily and avoidably narrow, and fails to represent the diversity of work within or adjacent to Qur'ānic Studies being done today.[22]

Gajda's "Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia" is a brief note (nine pages!) surveying recent archaeological and epigraphic discoveries that demonstrate the complexity of the religious and political environment in South Arabia, particularly Ḥimyar, in the centuries leading up to the rise of Islam. For the most part her treatment aligns with Bowersock's account of this milieu, albeit entirely from the Yemenite rather than the Ethiopian side. The main point that she emphasizes here is that both on the official and popular level, aspects of traditional religious customs and ideas—that is, antedating the conversion of Ḥimyar to monotheism—seem to have persisted well after said "conversion." This cannot be considered evidence that the Ḥimyarite state did not convert to Judaism, of course, only that the religious terrain remained fluid and variegated, even at elite levels. At the same time, there can hardly be doubt that a significant shift did occur in the fourth century, with royal inscriptions invoking an official religion that was either Judaism or some

22. This narrowness is similarly reflected in another recent edited volume in the field, Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells (eds.), *Qur'ānic Studies Today* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), in which every contribution focuses on literary, philological, and comparative analysis of the qur'ānic text. This stands in sharp contrast with an earlier volume on the Qur'ān co-edited by Neuwirth that featured a much greater diversity of methodological approaches, including a number of significant studies engaging material culture and archaeological evidence: Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (TSQ 6; Leiden: Brill, 2009).

kind of autonomous monotheism with a Hebraic cast (dubbed "Raḥmānism" by some).

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The other five chapters of *Islam and Its Past* are more directly relevant to the issues with which we are specifically concerned here, in that they are all attempts to come to terms with the Qur'ān and traditional sources (primarily *sīrah* and *ḥadīth*) as evidence for Islamic origins. The contributions of Nicolai Sinai, Joseph Witztum, Angelika Neuwirth, and Patricia Crone are solely or mainly concerned with literary and text-critical analysis of the qur'ānic *textus receptus*; most of them discuss conjectured literary parallels to or subtexts of qur'ānic passages, and all are interested in inferring a possible revelatory or compositional process or context in the nascent Muslim community. They differ in the degree to which they are willing to engage with or rely on traditional material to reconstruct that process or provide such context, though all depend on some degree on the basic outline of what we know (or think we know) about the Qur'ān's gradual revelation during the Meccan and Medinan periods, while also taking care not to assume too much about what can only be discerned on the basis of the traditional sources. In contrast to these four 'Qur'ān-centric' chapters, the contribution of Hawting is more specifically concerned with the reliability of Muslim sources for reconstructing the immediate historical context of the revelation of the Qur'ān, or rather, with the limits of what can be known about the Arabian context due to our inevitable dependence on those sources.

Nicolai Sinai's chapter, "Processes of Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion in Two Medinan Surahs," is perhaps the most original contribution to the volume, in that it showcases a new methodology for the analysis of the qur'ānic text. Here, the author offers an extremely sophisticated (and admirably clear, given the complexity of the material) model for evaluating the growth of compositional strata within qur'ānic *sūrah*s. There is some precedent for this, though scholars have usually sought to isolate secondary insertions in Meccan-period *sūrah*s, whereas here Sinai proposes to discern additions in the longer Medinan chapters. He articulates a set of systematic criteria for evaluating proposed cases of compositional growth that holds significant promise for scholars interested in such stratigraphic analysis. In brief, in Sinai's model, a purported addition to an earlier *sūrah* must be readily removable from its current redactional setting without doing violence to the coherence of the passage at hand, on the basis of some clear indication of why the insertion is anomalous as it was redacted into that passage; the result should be a discernibly improved and more coherent text. After brief discussion of a classic case of a Medinan intrusion into a Meccan text

(Q Muddaththir 74:31, the long, rambling gloss on the previous verse's cryptic statement "over it are nineteen"), Sinai tackles two examples of passages in Medinan *sūrah*s that are plausibly construed as the result of developmental growth in multiple stages. The results are intriguing and eminently worth the considerable effort that careful analysis of the proposed compositional-redactional process requires.

In the first example, Sinai unravels layers of commentary on core elements of the opening statements about dietary restrictions in Sūrah 5, yielding the interesting hypothesis that the original intention of the core statement in Q Mā'idah 5:5 about the food of Ahl al-Kitāb being licit for believers—difficult to square with dietary restrictions being imposed in the very same passage—was in fact *to abrogate dietary prohibitions entirely*, rendering all the food of the People of the Book (including the pork of the Christians) licit for both Muḥammad's community and Jews. In Sinai's second case study, he dissolves the notoriously difficult Q Tawbah 9:1–11 into two distinct passages and three redactional layers, countenancing a number of different solutions to the pericope's manifest contradictions. Notably, the solution Sinai favors is that an originally more irenic and conciliatory passage was later subordinated to a secondary addition that legislated a rather more strident policy regarding the treatment of unbelievers. Sinai's analysis of this passage reveals a developmental history not wholly reconcilable with an orthodox view; nevertheless, his results are fundamentally congruous with the traditional account of a transition in the early community from lesser to greater truculence against the *mushrikūn*. Here, Q 9:5, the famous Sword Verse, abides, as it does in Muslim jurisprudence and commentary, as the culmination of the mature 'jihad theory' of the emergent *ummah*.

Joseph Witztum's contribution to *Islam and Its Past*, "'O Believers, Be Not as Those Who Hurt Moses': Q Aḥzāb 33:69 and Its Exegesis," is perhaps more conventional in its methodology, yet likewise offers significant conclusions. Witztum proceeds using a method often in evidence in his much-cited dissertation—as well as in the work of certain recent precursors, most notably Gabriel Said Reynolds—of revisiting interpretive cruxes in the Qur'ān that were examined by previous generations of scholars and correlated with biblical, Jewish, or Christian parallels, but doing so with greater philological acumen and methodological self-awareness.[23] Here, the argument of some older scholars that Q 33:69's cryptic reference to "those who hurt Moses" is an allusion to the biblical episode of Aaron and Miriam's opposition to

23. This methodology is in ample evidence in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010) and Joseph Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2011.

Moses's taking a foreign wife (recounted in Numbers 12) is vindicated. What makes Witztum's treatment of this subject interesting is that he marshals a number of different types of evidence in favor of the argument, including the larger context of Sūrah 33, in which marital issues seem to recur as topoi of concern; lexical parallels between this passage and others in the Qur'ān; and, most strikingly, a variant reading of the verse associated with Ibn Mas'ūd in which the suggested lexical change—or possibly original reading (*ʿabdī* for *ʿinda*)—reveals a conspicuous parallel with Numbers 12:7–8, where Moses is called God's servant (*ʿavdī*). Witztum concludes by comparing this passage with two others in the Qur'ān that "clearly reflect the disquiet that afflicted the Prophet's large and complicated household"; all three are explicated through a number of extra-qur'ānic traditions that demonstrate that the Prophet's marriages appear to have been a perennial source of conflict and dissension in the early community. This supports at least the broad conjecture that the passage's condemnation of the harm done to Moses by accusations about his wife would have been meaningful in such a context.[24]

Appropriately enough, the next two chapters supply a larger context for biblical-qur'ānic parallels of this sort, albeit in rather different ways. The contribution of Patricia Crone, "Pagan Arabs as God-fearers," both builds upon and complements a number of other articles Crone published over the decade before her untimely passing in 2015. Her approach here is similar to that of a number of other studies in which she conjectures about the religious worldview of the Prophet's opponents.[25] *Pace* the view of both Muslim tradition and Western scholars (including Bowersock, as we have seen) that they were simple pagans, Crone infers from the statements the Qur'ān attributes to them that these opponents' cultural outlook was in fact heavily biblicized, though they rejected certain key doctrines of the biblical heritage as then understood by Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity, particularly the resurrection of the body. In this chapter, Crone's specific emphasis is on postulating that the *mushrikūn* or "pagans" of Muḥammad's time were

24. The domestic arrangements of the Prophet's household and their implications for subsequent law and practice have of course been of great interest to both traditional exegetes and modern scholars, both as they impinge upon the Qur'ān itself and as they are understood in *tafsīr*. See David S. Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) and *Zayd* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); cf. Pavel Pavlovitch, *The Formation of the Islamic Understanding of Kalāla in the Second Century AH (718–816 CE): Between Scripture and Canon* (IHC 126; Leiden: Brill, 2016).

25. See the articles collected in her *The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters*, and compare her posthumous contribution to volume 1 of this journal, "'Nothing But Time Destroys Us': The Deniers of Resurrection in the Qur'ān," *JIQSA* 1 (2016): 127–147.

basically God-fearers—that "Israelites" were prevalent in the environment, and many Arab polytheists were proximate enough to them to have gradually but incompletely assimilated their ideas, language, and practices without formally converting *per se*. Among her most trenchant observations here are that the Qur'ān's rather low standards for defining inclusion in the community of Believers—profession of God's oneness, prayer, and payment of *zakāt*—are essentially identical to the distinctive markers of the pagan God-fearer in antiquity; that the Prophet's polemic against his interlocutors presupposes that they have a basic respect for the Jewish scriptures and for the ultimate truth claims associated with the Israelite tradition; and that it is this proximity to the ambient "Israelite" culture that ensured that the Prophet's audience was familiar enough with biblical references that they could understand them even as they were manipulated and recast in complex ways.

Crone's conjectures about the emergence of the proto-Islamic movement in a thoroughly biblicized environment dovetail nicely with those adumbrated in Angelika Neuwirth's contribution, "Locating the Qur'an and Early Islam in the 'Epistemic Space' of Late Antiquity." Neuwirth has of course published extensively in the past on the subject of the biblical underpinnings of the qur'ānic revelation, interpreted specifically as a manifestation of late antique scripturalism. Her chapter here is a particularly successful and concise crystallization of her views on this subject. After an introductory section in which she criticizes scholars who continue to analyze the Qur'ān and early Islam in isolation from the Western monotheistic tradition, Neuwirth demonstrates the necessity of understanding Late Antiquity as a *Denkraum*, an "epistemic space," in which "textual controversies are staged between confederates and opponents from diverse theological realms," and not only discrete traditions drawn from the Israelite scriptural legacy but distinct strategies of reading and argumentation pass freely from one community to another.[26] Using specific examples from the Abraham and Moses narrative complexes in the Qur'ān, Neuwirth vividly demonstrates how the development of the qur'ānic corpus reflects a dialogical process in which biblical material and awareness is first

26. Angelika Neuwirth, "Locating the Qur'an," in Bakhos and Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past*, 167. Neuwirth's specific allusion to *Denkraum* or "epistemic space" here (corresponding, one infers, to the use of *imaginaire* in French theory and historiography to refer to the subjective symbolic order that holds a community or society together) is similarly evoked in a recent German volume she co-edited: Nora Schmidt, Nora K. Schmid, and Angelika Neuwirth (eds.), *Denkraum Spätantike: Reflexionen von Antiken im Umfeld des Koran* (Episteme in Bewegung 5; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016). The focus on *episteme* or *imaginaire* is also what presumably inspires the title of another recent volume of essays on the diverse religious cultures of the period, Kirill Dmitriev and Isabel Toral-Niehoff (eds.), *Religious Culture in Late Antique Arabia: Selected Studies on the Late Antique Religious Mind* (IHC 6; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017).

transferred to the emergent community and then the community articulates its responses to the assimilation of that knowledge, synthesizing it with late antique Arabian culture.

Neuwirth then dissects this process into a tripartite scheme, which she terms the *staging*, *penetrating*, and *eclipsing* of biblical tradition. The earliest revelations to emerge as a result of the dialogue with biblical tradition are imitations of psalms, Arabizations of biblical motifs, and adaptations of traditional Arabian forms to communicate biblical concepts; somewhat later, the community's appropriation of the Bible is more fully realized as it comes to identify symbolically with the Israelites and map biblical history onto its own experience (or vice versa); then, in the final stage, the Qur'ān and its community become full participants in the ongoing (and contentious) scriptural discourse of the Ahl al-Kitāb, self-confidently asserting not only their own exegeses of the biblical tradition but the validity of their hermeneutics as superior to those of the Jews and Christians. Throughout this piece, Neuwirth emphasizes—as she has in many previous publications—the importance of understanding the qur'ānic community's agency and virtuosity in its engagement with the Bible and other scripturalist communities.

Gerald Hawting's contribution to the volume, "Were there Prophets in the Jahiliyya?", is in some sense a classic exercise in the methodology he has pursued in previous studies, most notably *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*. According to this method, rather than viewing the statements of classical and medieval sources of Muslim tradition regarding the circumstances in which the Qur'ān was revealed as presenting basically reliable historical data, Hawting demonstrates that a corpus of material handed down by the tradition was most likely generated to serve the particular needs of the later community, especially in helping to make sense of the Qur'ān, rather than preserving objectively verifiable facts. Hawting's interrogation of the traditional sources on the Jāhiliyyah in *The Idea of Idolatry* opened up new vistas for research because it showed that there was much more to the religious and cultural background to the Qur'ān than the simple characterization of the Quraysh as "pagans" would allow; not coincidentally, it also helped to better locate the qur'ānic community in the late antique worldview and discourses in which it was embedded.

Notably, Hawting's exercise of a similar procedure here seems in this instance to actually foreclose upon research of this sort. *Pace* those who have speculated that Muḥammad's career was not *sui generis* in the environment but rather was part of a larger prophetic ferment in late antique Arabia, Hawting shows that the only available evidence for such ferment—the accounts of Muḥammad's quasi-prophetic predecessors and contemporaries, especially the *ḥanīf*s and so-called *riddah* prophets—comes from the traditional sources. This material, as he shows, is quite likely to have been generated for exegetical

or doctrinal purposes. While the existence of genuine claimants to prophecy in the biblical tradition before or contemporary with Muḥammad would certainly improve our understanding of the larger context for his mission, we simply do not have any objective basis for this beyond mere speculation.

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As should be apparent by now, the differences between the approaches to the Qur'ān and the early Islamic milieu exhibited by Bowersock on the one hand and most (if not all) of the contributors to *Islam and Its Past* on the other are stark. Bowersock is at his strongest when he focuses on the larger political, cultural, religious, and social context for Islam's origins—the eponymous crucible in which both the early movement under the Prophet and classical forms of expression under the caliphs were shaped. (I would reiterate at this stage the particular value of the first chapter of *The Crucible of Islam*, on the Red Sea wars; this, to me, should be essential reading for any scholar working on the period or any university course dealing with the topic.) While many scholars have paid lip service to the importance of considering Islam's origins in the context of late antiquity, it often seems that advertising such a focus or orientation serves primarily to signal an interest in examining the Qur'ān in the light of Jewish and Christian literary comparanda of the period, rather than serious reflection on larger issues concerning the pre- or proto-Islamic period in this historical context.[27] In contrast, the synthesis on the period Bowersock offers here in *The Crucible of Islam* is robust and useful, and would undoubtedly be of benefit to scholars of the Qur'ān seeking to think more deeply about that historical context (as they should).

However, a major problem—as already noted—is Bowersock's strident resistance to principles or ideas associated with the contemporary study

27. A point raised by Stewart in his discussion of the state of the field, in which he also trenchantly notes that the "Late Antiquity" label sometimes appears to serve as a marketing tool for classicists to emphasize the larger significance of their work on late Roman provincial Christianity or other such topics—"a way to argue that studying Christian topics in the centuries before Islam was somehow making grander statements about human history than a label like fifth-century Egypt would suggest" ("Reflections on the State of the Art," in Bakhos and Cook [eds.], *Islam and Its Past*, 30–31). He is not wrong in principle, though I feel compelled to point out that late antique Christian Egypt is a topic that offers much of potential benefit to scholars of Islam as well, especially as the subject lends itself to consideration of larger processes of cultural change and religious adaptation that persisted well into the early Islamic period: see, e.g. David Frankfurter's new book *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). I would argue that Frankfurter's work epitomizes the kind of serious engagement with larger issues that precisely justifies the use of the rubric "Late Antiquity."

of the Qur'ān that one might deem "revisionist," but that in fact have become rather mainstream among scholars working in the field, especially over the last ten years or so. Again, scholars who have become acclimated to an instinctive skepticism regarding our ability to locate qur'ānic passages in a concrete compositional or revelatory context—or, for that matter, regarding the possibility of recovering anything but the sketchiest outline of a reliable biography of the historical Muḥammad—will likely be alienated by Bowersock's positivistic treatment of various aspects of the circumstances and events of the life and career of the Prophet and how they are reflected in the Qur'ān, as well as by his implicit or explicit dismissal of the work of scholars such as Crone and Hawting.

In some cases Bowersock's claims rely on the work of others who build on a foundation of critical reevaluation of the sources (for example Lecker, as noted above). In other cases, those claims are staked on his own critical reading of the evidence. Admittedly, his predisposition towards a more conservative approach is understandable. For one thing, to execute a study such as this one, seeking to trace a historical trajectory over several centuries, one must inevitably make certain positivistic commitments if one is to establish and traverse a linear path. Attempting to survey and make sense of the larger trends spanning the later phases of the Roman-Persian conflict, the various stages of Ethiopian imperialism in Yemen, the gradual integration of Arabia into the Mediterranean-Near Eastern world system, and the Arabs' own intervention into—and eventual transformation of—that world system would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, if one was compelled to interrogate the sources and take skeptical perspectives into account at every turn. Caution about traditional claims is obviously merited, but if one indulges every possible doubt about major watershed moments or seminal developments in the period—calling into question whether Muḥammad existed, whether the Qur'ān is really the cultural product of late sixth and early seventh-century Ḥijāz, whether major battles that established the *ummah* at the head of an imperial state left traces in the Qur'ān, and so forth—these questions become bumps in the road that accumulate and render smooth, linear progress of the sort that a narrative such as Bowersock's requires difficult, or even impossible.[28]

28. This is perhaps the most obvious factor that makes it challenging to shift to a more critical presentation of Islamic origins in the classroom. For a successful attempt at modeling a critical approach and integrating revisionist perspectives into an elementary presentation of Islamic origins in an accessible way, see Gabriel Said Reynolds' textbook *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012).

Another element informing Bowersock's perspective on the period is his position as an historian of the Roman East. He notes the relative obscurity of specific points in his history, for example the decades between the collapse of the Ethiopian regime in Yemen in the later sixth century and the Persian invasion of Jerusalem in the early seventh.[29] But generally, from the vantage of Roman history, the late antique centuries may scan as a generally comprehensible sequence of developments, in which Muḥammad's prophetic career and the origins of the Islamic state may appear overall relatively legible. This, in fact, is the kind of perspective that makes contemplation of Late Antiquity as a broader period particularly worthwhile for Islamicists. But it is also perhaps the perspective that explains Bowersock's readiness to accept many of the details of the Prophet's life as provided by traditional sources, or the polytheism of Muḥammad's interlocutors as a given.

On the other hand, scholars of the Qurʾān and Islamic origins often contemplate the same period and actually perceive it to be relatively opaque, specifically because their attention tends to be drawn to what we do not know and perhaps *cannot* know, at least with real certainty—the compositional process that created the Qurʾān, its literary and cultural background, the circumstances of the revelation and redaction of its constituent parts, the beginnings of Muḥammad's prophetic mission, the actual demographics of his audience, and so forth. Focusing on these issues, the period seems quite obscure indeed. In contrast to the positivism of an historian like Bowersock, this is the perspective informing many of the contributions to *Islam and Its Past*. This explains the tentative and agnostic attitude exhibited by many of their authors, an attitude that is common enough among specialists in the study of the qurʾānic text.

It is perhaps as a consequence of the impact of revisionism that contemporary scholars of the Qurʾān so frequently focus on the *textus receptus* as a given fact and treat it as effectively lacking any tangible context whatsoever. Literary analysis of the qurʾānic corpus has flourished over the last decade; this type of study, focusing on elements such as style, rhetoric, inner-qurʾānic resonances, structure, and so forth, may justifiably be deemed meritorious in itself. But apart from the intrinsic merit of such approaches to the Qurʾān, such work seems to function to liberate scholars from having to address questions about context entirely. One's investments are simply different if concerns such as authorship and milieu are abstracted away from the basic fact of the text *qua* text as an object of analysis laid before us. Crucially, even comparative work of the sort that once nurtured

29. With characteristic precision, Bowersock actually specifies the years 560–610 (the Persian takeover in Yemen) and 632–660 (the Rashidun and the early expansion of the *ummah*) as the darkest periods in the history he charts in *The Crucible of Islam*.

hypotheses about foreign elements "influencing" the Qur'ān is now frequently conducted in an analytical setting wholly evacuated of contextual concerns. Perhaps because the sinister phantom of older reductionist and Orientalist scholarship obsessed with exposing Islam's 'debt' to Judaism and Christianity still looms large before us, even the most convincing demonstrations of the Qur'ān's probable literary intertexts and precursors are often quite painfully reticent about historical implications, rehearsing familiar tropes about the unknowability of the real sources of, or the actual mechanisms of 'influence' upon, the Qur'ān.

Most of the contributions to *Islam and Its Past* read the Qur'ān against the grain of traditional claims about Islam's origins; many of them assert hypotheses that would have been rather radical fifteen years ago, but now are increasingly commonplace and widely accepted as within the established boundaries of responsible, informed scholarly speculation. Many of them provoke complex and difficult questions about the *textus receptus*. However, few of them offer any concrete observations about the Qur'ān's revelatory context that might be extrapolated from their textual analysis. Here, it should be noted, Crone is the exception, standing out as the pioneer she always was: the whole point of her "God-fearers" article—as with many of her other late studies—is to read the textual evidence outside of the traditional framework of interpretation and then to directly infer a social and religious context from it. Most of the other contributors are markedly silent on the question of context when their work might reasonably provoke such questions; the textual developments they describe seem to take place in a milieu absent of detail, and they avoid conjecturing about how the *textus receptus* actually developed, how revisions and expansions occurred, or how we can account for the acute and subtle facility with biblical texts exhibited by the corpus. These chapters collectively testify to a compositional and redactional process far more complex than the traditional frame suggests, but—all too typical of this type of contemporary scholarship—without speculating as to the circumstances that might have made this possible.

This is not to say that Bowersock's handling of these specific types of question is much more satisfactory than that of the agnostics. Entirely aside from the specific revisionist tenets he would reject out of hand—that the *mushrikūn* were anything but straightforward Arabian pagans, or that the traditional representation of Mecca as a commercial hub was incorrect—it is hard to see how his framework would accommodate those aspects of the chapters of *Islam and Its Past* that challenge the status quo in ways that are increasingly commonplace and reflective of the current consensus. Nothing in his account seems to allow for the possibility of a more complex revelatory and redactional history for the *muṣḥaf* than that presented in the *sīrah* and related traditional sources. And again, Bowersock generally exhibits

a confidence in the traditional framework for interpretation of the Qur'ān and account of the circumstances of its revelation that is out of step with mainstream scholarly approaches today.

For example, at the end of the chapter on the Medinan period, Bowersock gives a very terse account of the emergence of the first Muslim state after the *hijrah*, asserting that the military activities of the *ummah* in this period left a direct impression on the Qur'ān, reading Sūrah 85 (specifically vv. 4–9) as a reference to the Battle of the Trench in 5/627.[30] This is another of his idiosyncratic readings of the Qur'ān, since the passage in question is sometimes interpreted as a reference to Muḥammad's people being vindicated against their oppressors (and thus as an allusion to Badr, not the Khandaq), but it is much more commonly correlated with the Ḥimyarite persecution of the Christians of Najrān. Bowersock refers to this event a number of times in his account, so it is puzzling that he opts to assign a totally different context to this passage here.[31]

As with so many other contemporary studies of their ilk, the chapters of *Islam and Its Past* cleave to a radically different conception of the origins of the qur'ānic corpus. For example, the contributions of Witztum and Neuwirth in particular seem to imagine an author or authors behind the qur'ānic corpus possessed of significant agency and ability vis-à-vis the appropriation and reimagining of biblical tradition. Neuwirth is more willing than most to designate the Qur'ān as communal property, a collective enterprise that reflects the dynamic development of a prophetic community rapidly evolving in ability and awareness as it navigates the complex religious terrain before it.[32] This dovetails with the insights yielded by Crone's inquiry, insofar as Neuwirth's schema of qur'ānic discourse evolving to "stage," "penetrate," and "eclipse" biblical tradition is conceivably reconcilable with Crone's hypothesis of an Arab community gradually acclimating to a proximate "Israelite" presence and actively assimilating its traditions. It also dovetails with Sinai's description of the growth of qur'ānic passages through secondary and tertiary additions, since one can readily imagine a dynamically evolving community having to revisit older revelations and adjust the legislations therein in keeping with changing attitudes and circumstances.

30. *The Crucible of Islam*, 112–113.

31. It is also possible that Bowersock has simply confused this passage, with its distinctive reference to the "Companions of the Trench" (*aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*), with the traditional accounts of the Battle of the Trench.

32. See also the introduction to her *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community*: *Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014) for a current statement of her views on this point.

The underlying assumption that informs most of the chapters of *Islam and Its Past* is that careful investigation of qur'ānic evidence without the intervention of tradition may lead us to conclusions at odds with the traditional account—or, put another way, that the traditional account may not hold up in the light of conclusions an unbiased inquiry into the textual evidence might yield. But again, Bowersock is tremendously skeptical about such skepticism, especially about the feasibility of casting the Prophet's contemporaries as anything but straightforward polytheists. Admittedly, familiar as he is with such evidence as survives of the Arabian *ḥaram*s, litholatry, the cult of the goddesses al-ʿUzzā, Allāt, and Manāt, and so forth (especially as they may overlap with bodies of evidence elsewhere than the Roman East, for example the Syrian borderlands or other imperial territories), one can imagine why Bowersock is impatient with revisionist attempts to argue that this evidence is immaterial or marginal.

But it is clear that to some degree Bowersock actually misunderstands the nature of contemporary revisionist critique of the traditional sources. The point of such work is plainly *not* to suggest that Arabian polytheism did not exist at all. Much of what we believe we know about Arabian polytheism comes either from material evidence such as that which informs Bowersock's perspective or from accounts preserved in later Muslim tradition; on some level, much of what is related by the tradition must surely be accurate or at least reasonably verisimilitudinous. However, the real point of revisionist critique is to emphasize that the image of Arabian polytheism that emerges from the available evidence is in fact almost entirely absent from the Qur'ān itself, which does not describe pagan cultus, nor even trouble itself to condemn it directly. Rather, as the close readings of Hawting and others demonstrate, the criticisms levied against the *mushrikūn* in the Qur'ān quite plausibly constitute a form of intra-monotheist polemic instead. If Arabian polytheism was really ubiquitous in the Ḥijāz, including among the Quraysh—that is, in the milieu in which we generally assume the qur'ānic corpus took shape—it is startling that that corpus actually seems to register it so minimally. We can only conclude that 'idolatry' in the literal sense is prevalent in the Qur'ān if that is what the term *shirk* does in fact unambiguously mean. For almost twenty years a great number of scholars of the Qur'ān have been at least reasonably certain that this is not the case.[33]

33. The single most influential work advancing the thesis that the *mushrikūn* were likely not literal pagans—or at least that *shirk* in qur'ānic discourse may have been a term of intra-monotheist polemic—is G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Hawting's work set the agenda for much of the work that has followed over the nearly two decades since it was published, though its influence is often unacknowledged or underestimated. It was not underestimated by Crone, who cited

Bowersock's reluctance to accept this argument is especially striking because in the last chapter of his book he notes that in the context of the epigraphic program of the Dome of the Rock, the evocation of the term *mushrikūn* there must either mean Chalcedonians or Trinitarians more generally, since Christianity could readily be cast as tantamount to polytheism in Muslim polemic.[34] Why *shirk* must be figurative in the context of seventh-century Jerusalem is obvious; why it cannot likewise be so in the original qur'ānic context escapes me, especially given Bowersock's acknowledgement of the presence of Jews and Christians in the Ḥijāz in Muḥammad's time.[35]

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One might not be willing to go quite as far as Neuwirth or Sinai regarding the possibility of collective authorship behind the Qur'ān, or of a qur'ānic corpus gradually expanding due to the input of multiple redactors, but still may be inclined to recognize the complexity of the Qur'ān's literary horizons. In this case, historiographic problems still loom large, and one of two choices regarding our perception of the historical Muḥammad is possible. One can compromise on the question of the immediate source of the Qur'ān, since the traditional picture of Muḥammad and his peers can accommodate a

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Hawting's book as the direct inspiration for her later work on the Qur'ān. Bowersock acknowledges Crone's earlier work on Meccan trade but seems to have taken little of her later research into account; likewise, he cites Hawting's *The Idea of Idolatry* in one footnote but largely overlooks its most important insights.

34. As in the invocation of the phrase "though the *mushrikūn* hate it" in the inscription, putatively an allusion to either Q Tawbah 9:32 or Q Ṣaff 61:8 (given by Bowersock as 9:33 and 61:9; *The Crucible of Islam*, 187, n.13).

35. The underlying logic here seems to be that paganism is an all or nothing enterprise, without gradations. In Bowersock's view, when pagans incline toward monotheism—that is, toward recognizing the superiority of a single god—this is still polytheism, especially since many people we would unambivalently deem polytheists in antiquity appear to have subscribed to such a view. The logical consequence of this seems to be that the *mushrikūn* of the Qur'ān, presumed to be polytheist on the basis of archaeology and tradition, are not really evolving towards monotheism if and when they posit that the so-called Daughters of Allāh are intermediaries between their devotees and God. Bowersock seems to overlook (or dismiss out of hand) the possibility that for the *mushrikūn* the Daughters were not really deities but rather created beings. (I deliberately avoid the term "angel" here, as Bowersock notes that some pagan messenger deities were "angels" outside of the monotheistic context, and so the appearance of "angels" in the Jāhilī environment actually *reinforces* the idea that the *mushrikūn* are pagans; see *The Crucible of Islam*, 38ff.) Bowersock seems generally uninterested in considering the possibility that the *mushrikūn* were actually partially monotheized or biblicized Arabs as Crone imagines in her late work, e.g., her contribution to *Islam and Its Past* discussed here.

thesis of significant biblical literacy only with difficulty. Alternatively, one can compromise on the question of the prehistory of the corpus, insofar as said biblical literacy can perhaps be attributed to the sources of the constituent parts of the corpus, which then must be granted a significant history of development at the pre-revelatory (or pre-prophetic) stage, during which time the ambient biblical tradition could have been adapted, Arabized, and distilled into textual components that were then secondarily redacted into the *textus receptus*.[36]

Admittedly, while he rejects some revisionist tenets, in other respects Bowersock is not so much hostile to such conceptual possibilities as he is prone to just sidestep or defer them.[37] He is extremely direct about the larger context of Arabian integration into the larger imperial world system, and openly acknowledges Judaization and Christianization as important factors, but becomes rather vague when addressing questions such as how the Qurʾān came into being, or how the early prophetic movement related to these larger trends:

> There can be little doubt that when Muhammad was reaching maturity, the cults in central and southwestern Arabia under Persian domination were embedded in a thick context that went back at least as far as the late fourth century, and were an amalgam that was part Jewish, part Christian, and part polytheist. This was fertile ground for a charismatic prophet like Muhammad, but also for comparably charismatic figures in the Arabian hinterland not far away from Mecca.[38]

36. Proponents of a more conservative approach to the origins of the Qurʾān often caricature revisionism as founded upon the claim that the scripture emerged later than tradition holds, an argument vitiated by the assignment of dates to early witnesses to the *muṣḥaf* that locate them in the proto-Islamic period (i.e., the first century *anno hegirae*). However, such attempts to vindicate the traditional view do nothing to address the complicated background to qurʾānic discourse, which a critical scholar cannot responsibly attribute to the historical Muḥammad working in isolation. This objection is raised in a particularly lucid way by Gabriel Said Reynolds in his comments on the public debate over the significance of Alba Fedeli's dating of the Birmingham Qurʾān fragments to 568–645 CE; see "Variant Readings," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 5, 2015.

37. In the prologue, Bowersock makes the peculiar claim that he is not advancing an alternative account of Islam's emergence, only describing "the chaotic environment that made Islam possible" (*The Crucible of Islam*, 9). It is unclear, at least to this reviewer, what the value of such a description is except in order to contextualize the origins of Islam—that is, exactly to advance some account of its emergence.

38. *The Crucible of Islam*, 58.

The particulars of this "embedding," how this "amalgam" originated, remain unspecified. The larger context is surely significant, but Islam seems to have just *happened* within it. Inroads were made by Jews and Christians and presumably had an impact on the native Arabs of the peninsula, but for Bowersock, questions such as how exactly new ideas percolated throughout Arabia (and in what form), what constituted the Judaism and Christianity to which Muḥammad (as author of the Qur'ān, as insinuated by Bowersock in various places) was exposed, how exactly new prophets were inspired, and so forth remain seemingly unanswerable.[39]

The tension between Bowersock's emphasis on the circumambient political and social conditions in which the proto-Islamic movement arose and his reluctance to engage in deeper speculation about the origins of the qur'ānic corpus recurs throughout the book, but is especially acute in Chapter 5, where he lays particular emphasis on the close relationship between Ethiopia and Arabia from antiquity up to and through Muḥammad's day. The implication of this close relationship, we may infer, is that the Axumite version of the characteristic late antique fusion of religious and political claims into imperial ideology inspired the Prophet's model for what the *ummah* should be, or would become. But it is remarkable that Bowersock completely overlooks (or omits) the small but significant body of scholarship on the Qur'ān that explores the possible impact not just of Ge'ez terminology but whole scriptural complexes drawn from Ethiopic biblical tradition on qur'ānic discourse.[40] This is a frontier in Qur'ānic Studies that is wide open for exploration, and Bowersock's narrative certainly encourages more investigation of an Ethiopian matrix for early Islam. But his lack of interest in this area of research in *The Crucible of Islam* is rather perplexing.

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In conclusion, it hardly seems necessary to point out that much work remains to be done in seeking to bring disparate approaches to the pre-Islamic milieu

39. This posture of agnosticism is perhaps deliberate, reflecting Bowersock's aforementioned declaration that he would avoid advancing a new account of the origins of Islam, but his refusal to engage questions that seem to lie at the heart of his project creates a strange and recurrent tension throughout the book.

40. Cf., e.g.: Manfred Kropp, "Beyond Single Words: *Mā'ida – Shayṭān – jibt* and *ṭaghūt*. Mechanisms of Transmission into the Ethiopic (Gəʿəz) Bible and the Qur'ānic Text," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 204–216; Gabriel Said Reynolds, "On the Qur'ān's *Mā'ida* Passage and the Wanderings of the Israelites," in Carlos A. Segovia & Basil Lourié (eds.), *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom? Studies on the Rise of Islam in Memory of John Wansbrough* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 91–108.

and the origins of the Qur'ān and Islam together. Bowersock's account provides at least a baseline narrative for scholars and students investigating the formative period of Islam. His accessible and provocative treatment of that period is in some ways too conservative in its approach to complex questions pertaining to the origins of the Qur'ān. But he is indisputably well informed about these questions, and his work is exceptional among similar surveys in successfully synthesizing the Islamic foundation narrative with current scholarly thinking about developments in the larger late antique environment, especially in pre-Islamic South Arabia. In turn, Bakhos and Cook's *Islam and Its Past* is a highly worthwhile collection of very useful studies representative of significant strands of thought in the contemporary critical study of the Qur'ān and early Islam. As stated before, the volume's main shortcoming is the lack of diversity in approaches to the proto-Islamic period featured therein, with a conspicuous paucity of material on epigraphy, archaeology, paleography, and manuscripts. This omission is especially striking given the glaring disjunction in approaches exhibited in these two works, reflecting a chronic disparity in the field between the methods and results of more positivist historical accounts like Bowersock's on the one hand—directly informed by consideration of material evidence—and those of contemporary textual studies on the Qur'ān like those in *Islam and Its Past* on the other—provoking rather different questions about the origins of Islam, yet often veering away from drawing direct and explicit historical conclusions from the more radical implications of textual analysis.

So as not to end on a negative note, I should also acknowledge the ways in which Bowersock's account and the studies in *Islam and Its Past* are compatible, their points of agreement and conjunction possibly pointing the way forward for productive research in the future. For example, Bowersock's narrative emphasizes Islam's emergence in a context of (for lack of a better word) globalization, with the Prophet's career and the formation of the *ummah* and the jihad state under the Rashidun and the Umayyads resulting from the increasing integration of Arabian society into what we would today call international affairs. Although Bowersock shies away from considering such processes closely, one is struck by the fact that the dynamic of cultural and religious adaptation and acculturation that underlies (e.g.) Crone's "God-fearer" model for the Arabian background of the Qur'ān would be a natural consequence of the larger political and social changes that Bowersock focuses on. Crone's positing of a significant "Israelite" presence in the Ḥijāz (not just Medina but Mecca as well), entailing both the construction of places of worship and the dissemination of scripture in various forms and registers, is hardly outlandish in light of the movement of people and ideas into various parts of the peninsula over the centuries—migration and colonization being two obvious avenues of

religious and cultural change. Bowersock openly acknowledges as much, though he would likely balk at Crone's implication that there might have been synagogues in Mecca, or that Christianity was widespread in the Ḥijāz, just as he openly opposes the interpretation of the qur'ānic *mushrikūn* as anything but pagans pure and simple.

Despite their differences, the thread that runs through both Bowersock and Crone's work is the idea that the transformative processes of the period involved the gradual acclimation and incorporation of Arabian society into the larger late antique milieu. Textual studies that focus on qur'ānic discourse's complex imbrication with biblical tradition may likewise be reconciled with Bowersock's account, even though they may shy from explicit conjectures about the social and demographic context like Crone's and remain agnostic on specifically historical questions. Among the studies in *Islam and Its Past*, the chapters of Neuwirth and Witztum seem particularly compatible with Bowersock's portrayal of the environment, especially Neuwirth, given that her method is to read the qur'ānic corpus diachronically as a record of the prophetic community's progress across stages of exposure, assimilation, and finally appropriation of the scriptural culture of the Ahl al-Kitāb. Such studies of the Qur'ān's relationship to the biblical tradition, with their decisive shift from themes of dependency and borrowing to those of dialectical engagement and agency, dovetail well with Bowersock's representation of the milieu, in which gradual integration and complex interactions are the dominant historiographic keys.[41]

I should also note in this connection one of the most striking features of many of the contributions to *Islam and Its Past*. Again, some of the conclusions—or at least implications—of many of the volume's chapters would be difficult to reconcile with the orthodox account of the revelation and collection of the Qur'ān, an account Bowersock accepts in virtually all details. However, one also detects in the collection a certain impulse towards rapprochement with Muslim tradition manifest in a variety of ways, which is perhaps indicative of an increasingly prevalent tendency in the field of Qur'ānic Studies as a whole—a swinging of the pendulum back from an extreme rejection of tradition towards a sanguine embrace of more conventional ideas, or at least some synthesis with them, balancing revisionist insights with a more constructive positivist agenda.

41. Gajda's short contribution to *Islam and Its Past* may be read as supporting this approach as well: her emphasis on gradualism in Ḥimyar's adjustment to Judaism or Israelite-style monotheism, even as a deliberate policy under a centralizing state, implies that biblical and Jewish cultural material was not only disseminated in this arena, but slowly and imperfectly assimilated to native strains of Arab culture—exactly the sort of process Crone describes among her "God-fearing" Arabs in the Ḥijāz.

Bowersock's account hearkens back deliberately to Watt's, which quite famously (or infamously) was predicated on an enthusiastic embrace of traditional sources as fundamentally trustworthy. Likewise, Neuwirth has long championed the necessity of accepting the traditional chronology of qurʾānic revelation, building on the edifice established in Western scholarship by Nöldeke and his successors, which was itself based on the Muslim interpretive paradigm. Her diachronic charting of the stages of qurʾānic engagement with biblical tradition shows how traditional chronology is still serviceable—perhaps even indispensable—as a heuristic framework enabling serious analysis of the development of the prophetic community.

Sinai's work here and elsewhere makes an analogous commitment to chronology, however provisionally, and his chapter models a kind of redaction criticism of the stratigraphy of the qurʾānic *sūrah* as a literary form. Notably, as mentioned above, in the second of his two case studies (Q 9:1–11), his preferred interpretation of the textual growth of the verses making up this difficult pericope vindicates the overarching conception of the development of policy pertaining to the treatment of the *mushrikūn* adumbrated in classical Muslim sources. This complements an explicit methodological statement Sinai makes early on, noting that "many Muslim scholars were expert readers of their scripture who possessed abundant philological acumen, interpretive creativity, literary sensitivity, and an intimate familiarity with the Qurʾanic corpus as a whole."[42]

Similarly, in the conclusion to his chapter, Witztum underlines the importance of drawing on disparate bodies of evidence for interpretation—"combining lower criticism, contextual readings, attention to pre-Islamic lore, and a consideration of what we know, or at least think we know, of the Prophet's life."[43] That is, data drawn from philological, inner-qurʾānic, and comparative analysis complements and in some way corroborates aspects of the traditional account of the circumstances of revelation, at least in broad terms. Hawting's conclusions in his chapter are quite different in tone and implication, but he likewise signals the inevitability of navigating the terrain of Islamic origins in partnership with the tradition. As much as we might want to see Muḥammad's career in a particular phenomenological or historical light, we cannot deviate at will from what the traditional sources tell us because they very often provide our only vantage point onto the period. Those sources can only tell us so much, and contravening them simply for the sake of advancing a

42. Nicolai Sinai, "Literary Growth and Editorial Expansion," in Bakhos and Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past*, 105.

43. Joseph Witztum, "'O Believers, Be Not as Those Who Hurt Moses,'" in Bakhos and Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past*, 135.

revisionist hypothesis, however appealing, is methodologically questionable—and ultimately counterproductive if such work is to appear credible.

This brings us back full circle to the observations of Stewart, whose chapter introduced so many of the themes we have explored here. He also notes the importance of engaging with the Muslim scholarly tradition on the Qurʾān, especially pertaining to the study of qurʾānic language and rhetoric. Clearly, we ignore the insights of the many centuries of Muslim scholarly inquiry into qurʾānic and classical Arabic at our peril; but arguably, this applies to *sīrah* and *tafsīr* as well. While we cannot and should not go back to an era in scholarship when the doctrinal and ideological impulses behind classical (and medieval, and modern) Muslim interpretation went uninterrogated and so the traditional meanings ascribed to the Qurʾān were uncritically accepted, it is obvious that there remains much of value in Muslim exegesis for scholars to consider. The challenge for contemporary (and future) scholars is to continue this rapprochement with tradition, bridging the gap between the modern critical study of the Qurʾān and the resources offered to us by the traditional qurʾānic sciences.

This effort must go hand-in-hand with a greater attempt at integrating the study of text and context. Literary and philological methods of analysis will likely always enjoy pride of place in Western approaches to the Qurʾān, but these must be combined with the study of the *muṣḥaf* as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Qurʾān, which requires the ongoing development of the disciplines of paleography and manuscript studies. Further, these endeavors cannot be separated from the attempt to locate the Qurʾān and its development in the larger political, social, religious, and economic histories of the late antique world; nor, for that matter, can they be divorced from ongoing critical inquiry into what can be known about the life of the Prophet and the immediate circumstances of the revelation of the Qurʾān. The task that lies before contemporary scholars is obviously an enormous undertaking, but—as this essay has hopefully demonstrated—enormous opportunities await scholars as well. One may readily predict that the field of Qurʾānic Studies will continue to flourish, provided that scholars embrace the task of adopting a more balanced or holistic approach to the scripture and bring the same level of energy that has propelled the vital growth of the field over the last decade to this new agenda.

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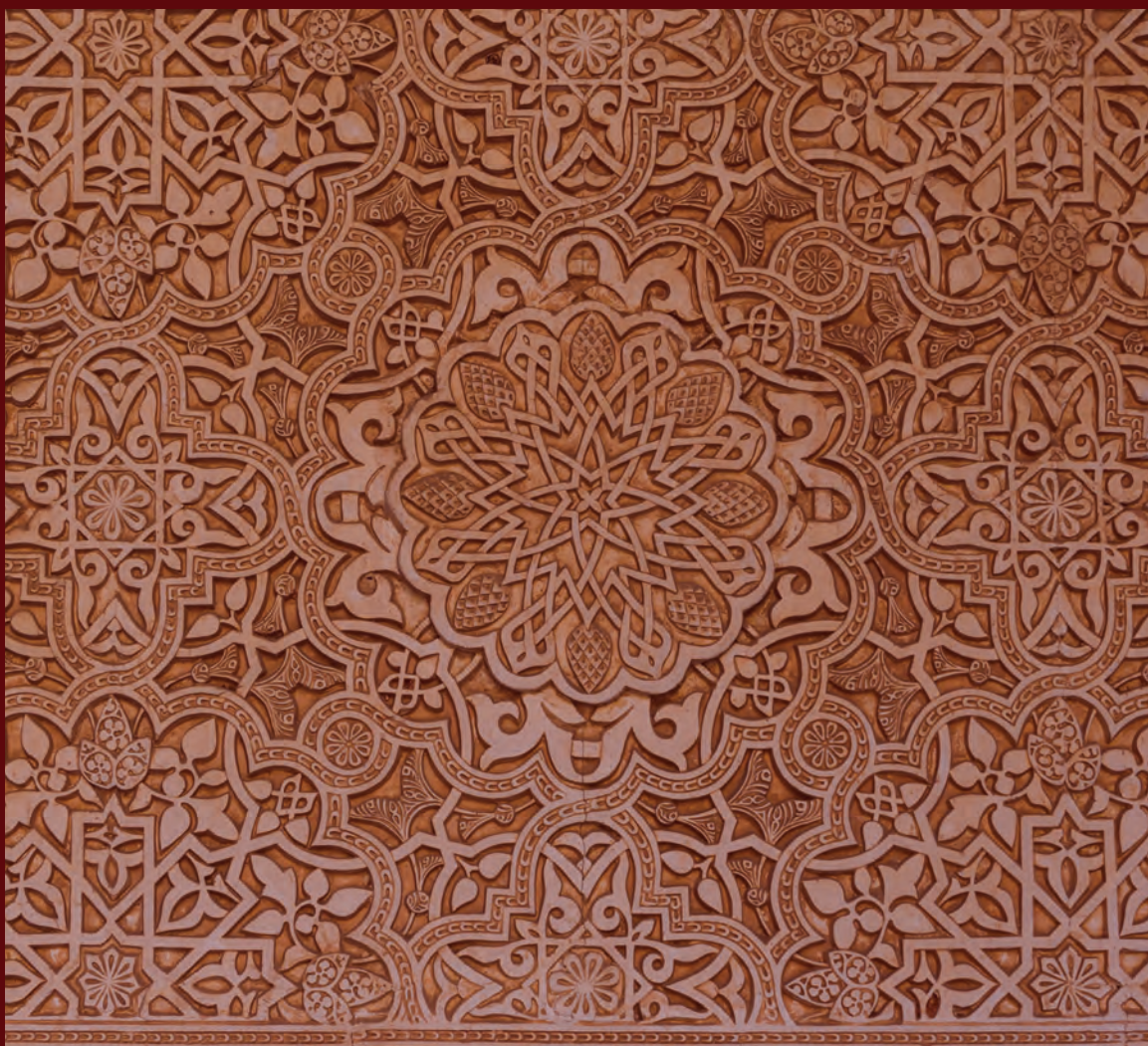

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