

Excursus on Islamic origins

The reader who comes fresh to the subject of Islam, with or without a prior interest in any of the great contemporary religious traditions, will find the literature on Islam bewildering in its sheer quantity and varied in its quality and apparent aim. Any casual reader of the daily press, or television viewer for that matter, will realize that Islam plays an important role in many parts of the globe, whether in the trouble-torn former republic of Yugoslavia, in the Muslim states of Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, and Algeria, or even in the (post-Christian?) secular society of modern-day Britain in the aftermath of the so-called Rushdie Affair and the decree of the late Ayatullah Khomeini against the author and the publishers of *The Satanic Verses*. Over the past fifteen years or so, books on Islamic history and thought and on the current phenomenon of Islam in politics have become a growth sector in the publishing world. Only a tiny portion of this output can be cited in the notes and list of further reading below. In this excursus discussion is restricted to a selection of works in English dealing with the question of Islamic origins, since much important, original – and controversial – work has been done in recent years on this subject. However, in addition to new studies with fresh perspectives, there are available, too, numerous reprints of scholarly and popular works on Islam originally published, in some cases, as much as a hundred years ago. It is a discriminating reader today who picks up a book on Islam and looks to see when it was first published. It should be evident, however, that a book on Islam written around 1900 cannot be accepted as a reflection of our understanding of the subject nine or ten decades later. In other words, as obvious as this is, serious studies and popular accounts of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad have a context and a history of their own. The purpose of this excursus is, in a very general way, to bring the reader's attention to this simple but generally unstated fact.

In the West, Islam has been the subject of attention almost since the formation of the community in the seventh century CE. The question of the early Christian perceptions of Islam has been touched upon in Chapter 2 above. Norman Daniel has treated the subject in detail in his *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1958). In his later book, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe* (London: Longman, 2nd ed., 1979), Daniel observes that in medieval Christian accounts of the Prophet, "he was subjected to gross abuse which, however shocking in itself, we must understand as rooted in folk-lore. The Qur'an was seen as the product of the events of the life of the Prophet, but rather as a deliberate contrivance than as God's revelation, in response to particular needs" (p. 234). A briefer account, complementary to Daniel's, is R. W. Southern's *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962). Modern Western scholarly endeavor fortunately no longer indulges in crude and fanciful stereotypes of Muhammad and Islamic scripture. Stereotypes of Islam and Muslims generated from the pool of medieval "folklore" survived, however, throughout the nineteenth century in many books of a popular nature. They can also be detected today in so-called "best-sellers," works of "instant analysis" by self-styled experts, and in much of the Euro-American media coverage of current events in the Middle East and other Islamic countries. As a sequel to his first volume, Daniel has covered the nineteenth century in *Islam, Europe and Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966). To this should be added the important, but controversial, analysis of Western attitudes to Islam by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) and his incisive account of Western media treatment of Muslims and Islam in the wake of the of the Iran hostage affair of 1979–1980, in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine how we See the Rest of the World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981). The following articles of Albert Hourani are also recommended: "Islam and the philosophers of history," in his *Europe and the Middle East* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), and the title essay of his *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Scholarly Euro-American inquiry over the past century on the nature and origins of the prophetic-revelatory event (dealt with in Chapter 1 above) has nevertheless resulted in interpretations which contrast with, even contradict, the traditional Muslim interpretation. This is not surprising. In contemporary Western secular societies,

matters of faith have been almost entirely consigned to the individual's personal conscience. Therefore, in theory, a scholar's public discourse on faiths other than his or her own should be free of his or her own personal religious predilections. The result is supposed to be an "objective" account. In other words, there apparently exists a secular truth distinct from religious truth. In theory, secular truth is "objective" in a way that religious truth cannot be, because religious truths are embedded in scripture believed to be of divine provenance but which is not subject to rational proof. At one time religious truths prevailed in societies in general, reinforced by an intellectual arrogance which at times resulted in persecution and oppression of those who dissented from the accepted norms. Today, explicit persecutions of this type are fortunately rare. There is nonetheless, today, a form of secular intellectual arrogance which, even while it cannot claim absolute certainty for a particular hypothesis, deems its findings superior to the content of religious truth. The two perspectives are irreconcilable and totally out of touch with each other. This, at least, appears to be the case with a range of writings currently available dealing with the origins of Islam. In the discussion which follows, these writings form two distinct groups. The first is mentioned briefly only in order to draw the necessary contrast between it and the second group.

The first group may be called the Faithful. The Muslim perspective is that of the "insider," as it were, which is held to be true by hundreds of millions of Muslims who have been, and still are, guided in their daily lives by the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet. The integrity of the Qur'anic text, according to the Muslim sources, was spared possible corruption and distortion since the establishment of a reliable and uniform edition within a few years of the Prophet's death. An additional source of knowledge of the content of the divine will and command was the *sunnah* of the Prophet. This was believed to be his words and deeds as transmitted by his Companions which were finally collected, sifted, and recorded in the late third/ninth century. These two sources, scripture and *sunnah*, inform every aspect of subsequent Muslim religious inquiry, whether in law, in theology, or in mystical spirituality. The ultimate source of guidance for Muslims, in this world and in preparation for the next, is therefore divine, whether transmitted by direct revelation or by inspired comment upon revelation reflected in the exemplary life of the Prophet himself. One excellent example of the Muslim perspective is that of the Indian

scholar Syed Ameer Ali, who, in his *Spirit of Islam* (London: Methuen, 1965 [1922]) set out to explain his faith to a British public which was either indifferent to or ignorant of Muslim thought and practice. More recently, the late Professor Fazlur Rahman, a Pakistani Muslim scholar who in his lifetime contributed much to a modernist reorientation of Islamic thought, describes the Qur'an as a "document of [Muhammad's] revelatory experiences" in which the central concern is with human conduct, since, he says, "no real morality is possible without the regulative ideas of God and the Last Judgment" (*Islam and Modernity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], pp. 13, 14). Rahman's concern with a proper understanding of scripture for modern Muslim life was urgent owing to the threat of modernity to religious faith. As he observes, "the bane of modernity, in the form of secularism [is that] secularism destroys the sanctity and universality [transcendence] of all moral values" (p. 15).

Muslim scholars have also contributed to an understanding of their tradition for English readers, especially in several aspects of the field of Islamic law. In addition to those mentioned in the Further Reading for Chapter 3, the following should be noted. First, there is *Theories of Islamic Law* by Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1994) which also treats of the relevance today of the various methodologies employed in classical times. Ahmad Hasan's *The Doctrine of ijma' in Islam: A Study of the Juridical Principle of Consensus* ([Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1991 1978]) deals with this specialized source of Islamic law, also with reflections on some modern trends of its application. Perhaps the most significant book in the past decade to come from the same publishers is Muhammad Khalid Masud's *Shatibi's Philosophy of Islamic Law* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1995), covering the work of a fourteenth-century thinker, which has important resonance for a modernist Muslim approach to law today.

For modern Western scholars, on the other hand, the sacred sources of Islam are seen in a different light. This is so, in part, because they are simply not Muslims and do not share the commitment of the Faithful. Nevertheless, as "outsiders" they have contributed to an understanding of Islamic origins by bringing to the early extant Arabic sources different concerns, questions and methods of investigation. Their approach to Islam has, moreover, been profoundly influenced by the new approaches in scholarly research applied to the sources of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament which commenced in European academies in the nineteenth century. Indeed, many of these scholars of the early generations (for example Julius

Wellhausen, to name but one) were as much at home in biblical studies as they were investigating the origins of the Islamic community. For both these reasons, therefore, Western scholarship approaches the Qur'an, not as a revelation, but as a man-made historical source subject to the usual probing methods of modern historical research. The phenomena of revelation and prophethood are not regarded as the proper domains of scientific inquiry. Rather they must remain in the realm of faith, the certain truth of which cannot be rationally demonstrated. In this sense, the earlier, largely negative, European attitudes to the Prophet and the Qur'an have been abandoned for what is, in theory, a more "objective" and "value-free" approach. A useful survey of the various and changing views of Muhammad, for example, will be found in James Royster's article "The study of Muhammad: a survey of approaches from the perspective of the history and phenomenology of religion," *The Muslim World*, 62/1 (1972), 49–70. This second group of writers, the "outsiders," will now be discussed in more detail. Depending upon the degree of reliability with which they view the primary Arabic sources for the study of Islamic origins, this group may be further divided into doves and hawks. We commence with the doves.

At first, it is worth noting that an obsession with origins presents its own pitfalls. The French historian Marc Bloch has reminded us that in the search for origins "there lurks the danger of confusing ancestry with explanation." Two monographs which displayed an obsession with the antecedents of Islam were written by Richard Bell and Charles Torrey. They both accept that the Qur'an was Muhammad's own composition and express confidence in its historicity as the authentic basis for our knowledge of the Prophet's life and thought. The question of whether it is revelation is irrelevant. On the other hand, each regards the material continued in the *sunnah*, the record of the Prophet's words and deeds, as of little use in providing genuine data on the Prophet's life. Therefore, as a historical document, the Qur'an could be examined in order to determine the sources which inspired and influenced Muhammad's own ideas. For Bell and Torrey, the antecedents clearly lay in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Bell, the more cautious of the two, saw Muhammad as "a brooding religious genius and man of great native mental power, but very limited knowledge, striving to find out what others more enlightened than his own Arab people knew, which might be of use to him in his own enterprise" (*The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* [London: Frank Cass, 1968 (1926)], p. 111). He was an avid collector of information from whatever quarter he could find it.

Bell's deep interest in the history of the Qur'anic text resulted also in his attempt to reconstruct its chronology in order to determine the development of Muhammad's ideas (see his *The Quran Translated with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surahs* [2 vols., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937–1939]). Apart from certain religious vocabulary which he supposes Christians to have introduced into Arabia, Bell observes that it is impossible to determine at the outset of his career any direct Christian or Jewish influence on Muhammad since he himself did not distinguish between the two monotheistic faiths. Only as his career developed and his knowledge increased can such external influence be detected, although the immediate sources of his information and the channels through which they reached him cannot be definitely decided. His conclusion, whoever, is that the contemporary Christian environment provided the ultimate stimulus to Muhammad's religious ideas.

All things considered . . . I think it was the great religion which prevailed in the land round about Arabia, and especially in Syria and the Roman Empire, which had attracted his attention and which occupied in his untutored mind a position of imposing authority. From it he was prepared to borrow, probably assuming that in the Revelation which it cherished were contained those things which by his own reflection he could not reach, but which were as necessary for the true religion as was the truth of God's creative power and bounty, which he had reached by himself, and upon which that religion was also founded. (*Origin of Islam*, pp. 136–137; see also p. 41)

Charles Torrey, on the other hand is more categorical. For him, Muhammad was a "thoughtful man and, in addition, a man of very unusual originality and energy" (*The Jewish Foundation of Islam* [New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933], p. 7). As to the Qur'an, Muhammad's own creation, Torrey states that "there is no clear evidence that [he] has ever received instruction from a Christian teacher while many facts testify emphatically to the contrary; and that, on the other hand, the evidence that he gained his Christian material either from Jews in Mecca, or from what was well known and handed about in the Arabian cities, is clear, consistent and convincing" (*ibid.*). In general, he concludes, "while Muhammad's Islam was undoubtedly eclectic, yet both in its beginning and in its later development by far the greater part of its essential material came directly from Israelite sources" (*ibid.*, p. 8). To support his position, Torrey goes so far as to postulate the existence in Mecca of an anonymous Jewish teacher of Mesopotamian origin who instructed the Prophet. The problem with the Bell–Torrey approach, as we can now see it, is that the milieu

of seventh-century central Arabia is as yet so little known that the Qur'an cannot easily be placed in its historical and cultural context. More recent surveys dealing with some of the problems raised here may be found in Maxime Rodinson, "A critical survey of modern studies of Muhammad," first published in 1963 and translated from the French in Merlin Swartz, *Studies on Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 23–85 and the articles on "Muhammad" and the "Kur'an" in the new edition of the authoritative *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979 in progress). The author-revisor of these articles, A. T. Welch, has also attempted a biographical sketch of Muhammad based on the Qur'an, in his "Muhammad's understanding of himself: the Koranic data," in R. G. Hovannisian and S. Vryonis (eds.), *Islam's Understanding of Itself* (Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1983), pp. 15–52.

Undoubtedly, the next milestone in the study of the Prophet was erected by William M. Watt, whose two-volume study appeared in the 1950s (*Muhammad at Mecca* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953] and *Muhammad at Medina* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956]). He was influenced by but went significantly beyond the world of Richard Bell. This he accomplished by reconstructing the socio-economic and political context of the central Arabian society in which Muhammad and his community lived. He was less concerned to look for supposed influences upon Muhammad from the earlier religious traditions. In the introduction to the volume on Mecca, Watt states, "I have endeavoured, while remaining faithful to the standards of Western historical scholarship, to say nothing that would entail the rejection of any of the fundamental doctrines of Islam" (*Mecca*, p. x). In his discussion of the Arabic sources, the Qur'an is taken as the record of revelations which Muhammad believed he received from God but which does not, as with Bell and Torrey, provide the fundamental source for the Prophet's life owing to its partial and fragmentary character. He says,

The sounder methodology is to regard the Qur'an and the early traditional accounts as complementary sources, each with a fundamental contribution to make to the history of the period. The Qur'an presents mainly the ideological aspect of a great complex of changes which took place in and around Mecca, but the economic, social and political aspects must also be considered if we are to have a balanced picture and indeed if we are to understand properly the ideological aspect itself. (*Ibid.*, p. xv)

By "traditional accounts" Watt means sources such as the biography of Muhammad by Ibn Ishaq (mentioned in Chapter 1 above), the history of al-Tabari (mentioned in Chapter 2 above), and the collections of the

prophetic Traditions (treated in Chapter 3 above), the earliest of these sources being composed more than a century after the Prophet's death. Of this material Watt says, "I have proceeded on the view that the traditional accounts are in general to be accepted, are to be received with care and as far as possible corrected where 'tendential shaping' is suspected, and are only to be rejected outright when there is an internal contradiction" (*ibid.*, p. xiv; see also his discussion in *Medina*, pp. 336–338). In this manner Watt accounts for the beginnings of Muhammad's career against the background of a Meccan transition to a mercantile economy which undermined the traditional tribal order by creating a moral and social malaise. Muhammad's mission, therefore, was a response to these markedly deteriorating conditions.

On the question of influences upon the Prophet's thought and practice, Watt noted that pagan ideas were retained where they were either already deeply rooted in Arab society or else provided a degree of social utility to the new community; these included the belief in angels, jinn, and demons and acceptance of the notion of the sacredness of certain places (*Medina*, pp. 309–315). As for Christianity, he notes that "One of the most remarkable features of the relationship between Muslims and Christians is that neither Muhammad nor any of his Companions seems to have been aware of some of the fundamental Christian doctrines" (*ibid.*, p. 320). Relations with the Jews of Medina were at once closer and more complicated. Muhammad believed that his message was identical with that which had been given to both Jews and Christians and also that the teachings of these two communities were similar to each other. However, after the decision was taken to move from Mecca to Medina, Muhammad "appears to have tried to model Islam on the older religion" of Judaism in instituting Friday worship, praying in the direction of Jerusalem, the institution of the fast, and the introduction of the mid-day prayer (*ibid.*, pp. 198–199). Other gestures of accommodation toward the Jews of Medina were made in order to win over their support and to demonstrate the essential identity between his revelations and theirs. These overtures were rejected by the Medinan Jews, partly from religious, partly from political motives. When Muhammad received a revelation ordering him to change the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to the Ka'bah in Mecca, relations between himself and the Jews soured and finally ended in open hostility. The ideological distinction that Muhammad then drew between himself and both previous monotheistic communities was to make the Muslims followers of the creed of Abraham, who was neither Jew nor

Christian. Thus Muslims became adherents of the pure religion of God, since all subsequent prophets, including Moses and Jesus, had received essentially the same message.

For nearly a quarter of a century Watt's attractive "materialist thesis" was universally accepted in its general framework, if not in every detail. To this point, modern Western scholarship on Islamic origins may be said to have been "dovish" in its treatment of the Arabic source material. Now came the turn of the "hawks" to claim revenge. In 1977 a book appeared which its authors calculated would create a storm. The book was *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, by P. Crone and M. Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). In the preface the authors acknowledge that their account is radically new, a "pioneering expedition" (p. vii) "written by infidels for infidels" (p. viii). Readers had been forewarned. The novelty of the work lies in the method adopted toward the primary source material and, of course, in its conclusions. Their method reverses that of Watt. Crone and Cook are Sceptics and argue on the one hand that there is no hard evidence for the existence of the Qur'an until the decade of the 690s CE and, moreover, that Muslim tradition which places the Qur'an in its historical context cannot be attested before about 750 CE. Their attitude toward the entire tradition contained in the Muslim historical sources is that since there are "no cogent internal grounds for rejecting it, there are equally no cogent external grounds for accepting it"; therefore, "the only way out of the dilemma is . . . to step outside the Islamic tradition al-together and start again" (p. 3). Having combed through an impressive array of non-Muslim sources of Greek, Jewish, Armenian, and Syriac provenance, the authors hit upon three meager scraps of testimony which provide the foundation for their novel interpretation. They argue that Muhammad was preaching some form of Judaic messianism and that the earliest stage of the Arab conquests was an irridentist movement in alliance with Jewish refugees from Palestine aimed at the recovery of the Holy Land. Moreover, the invaders were not called Muslims at this stage but rather *muhajirun* or Hagarenes, "those who take part in an exodus." The movement subsequently split and the Arab break with the Jews (which does not occur in Medina according to the Muslim sources, Watt, and everyone else) takes place in Palestine when the Arabs cloak their movement in "Islamic" garb, presumably in an attempt to conceal the movement's true origin in order to gather support from the numerically larger Christian communities.

The Crone-Cook theory has been almost universally rejected. The evidence offered by the authors is far too tentative and conjectural (and possibly contradictory) to conclude that Arab-Jewish relations were as intimate as they would wish them to have been. In addition, the non-Muslim sources themselves would seem to be of equally doubtful historical value since they are all polemical works of one kind or another, a point possibly appreciated by the authors but one they do not trouble to make explicit as a fundamental problem. The Crone-Cook methodology is judged on another point, too, "particularly so because the authors' criticisms of the possibilities of understanding the earliest periods of Islam would seem, if applied as a general method to the sources used by historians of religion, to lead to a kind of historical solipsism" (G. D. Newby, *A History of the Jews in Arabia* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988], p. 110). The book, nevertheless, has raised serious and legitimate questions by emphasizing the difficulty in employing the Muslim sources for a reconstruction of Islamic origins. Indirectly, it poses the broader question of how any of the contemporary sources relevant to Islamic origins, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, can be understood and interpreted in a manner which has some hope of securing a consensus, if only among Western scholars. That task awaits completion.

Meanwhile, in a second study Patricia Crone, this time on her own, returned to the question of Islamic origins in her *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). The same hawkish approach to the sources is employed, of which she states, "It is not generally appreciated how much of our information on the rise of Islam, including that on Meccan trade, is derived from exegesis of the Qur'an, nor is it generally admitted that such information is of dubious historical value" (p. 204). The work is directed explicitly against both the method and the reconstruction of Islamic origins proposed by Watt. That method, however, says Crone, rests on a misjudgment of the sources.

The problem is the very mode of origin of the tradition, not some minor distortions subsequently introduced. Allowing for distortions arising from various allegiances within Islam such as those of a particular area, tribe, sect or school does nothing to correct the tendentiousness arising from allegiance to Islam itself. The entire tradition is tendentious, its aim being the elaboration of an Arabian Heilsgeschichte [salvation history], and this tendentiousness has shaped the facts as we have them, not merely added some partisan statements that we can deduct. Without correctives from outside the Islamic tradition, such as papyri, archeological evidence and non-Muslim sources, we have little hope of reconstructing the original shapes of this early period. Spurious information can be rejected, but lost information cannot be regained. (Ibid., p. 230)

On the substance of Watt's reconstruction, she writes that ultimately "the Watt thesis boils down to the proposition that a city in a remote corner of Arabia has some social problems to which a preacher responded by founding a world religion. It sounds like an overreaction" (p. 235). Crone's own alternative hypothesis, tentatively suggested to be sure, is that Islam was a nativist movement, originating somewhere (but not Mecca) in northwestern Arabia as a reaction to foreign, primarily Persian, domination which, in the nature of these movements, invariably took a religious form so as to reaffirm native (i.e. Arab) identity and values (p. 247). The link with the thesis in Hagarism is explicit: "Muhammad mobilized the Jewish version of monotheism against that of dominant Christianity and used it for the self-assertion, both ideological and military, of his own people" (p. 248). The reaction of one Muslim reviewer to the book was that as a refutation of the Watt thesis it was "excellent." Crone's alternative hypothesis, however, was judged much weaker. The reviewer lamented that Western scholars have paid so little heed to the Muslim viewpoint on the question of Islamic origins (M. A. Khan in *Muslim World Book Review*, 8 iv [1988], 15-17). This well illustrates the gulf which exists between the viewpoints of the Faithful and the Sceptics. It would have been appropriate to note that as in the case of *Hagarism*, the alternative hypothesis proposed in *Meccan Trade* rested upon equally conjectural evidence, that acceptance of it was as likely as rejection.

Sceptics, of course, must expect their views to be challenged and ultimately modified or even refuted, regardless of how passionately they advocate their own views and polemically attack those of others. Moreover, scepticism in the Western study of Islam did not begin in the 1970s. Contributions to an understanding of the first Islamic centuries have been made in the following works. There are, for example, the indispensable studies of the Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher, published originally in 1889-1890 and translated into English and edited by S. M. Stern as *Muslim Studies* (2 vols., London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968, 1971). Volume 2 contains his studies of the development of prophetic Tradition (*hadith*). He shows that as a corpus, the Traditions should be understood as a panoramic picture of the first two or three centuries' development of the Islamic community rather than as a faithful depiction of the life and sayings of the Prophet himself.

Building upon Goldziher's insights, Joseph Schacht produced his major study on *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1950), which was followed by *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). Schacht proposed that the authentic legal Traditions contained in the *hadith* corpus cannot be older than the year 100 of the Muslim era or 718 of the Common Era. As a methodological rule, he states that "every legal tradition from the Prophet, until the contrary is proved, must be taken not as an authentic or essentially authentic, even if slightly obscured, statement valid for his time or the time of the Companions, but as the fictitious expression of a legal doctrine formulated at a later date" (*Origins*, p. 149). Extended to the entire corpus of Traditions including the legal, this rule meant that, unless in each instance the contrary could be proven, there existed no genuine record of the Prophet's life. It also implied that Muhammad could not possibly have been regarded by his immediate Companions and their successors as a guide whose life was a religious paradigm and therefore normative for the community as a whole until more than a century after his death. This proposition, if true, held grave consequences for Muslims who have held that the prophetic example, the *sunnah*, is the second pillar of the religious law, the *shar'iah*. One respected Muslim scholar rejected the notion of a total absence of prophetic guidance as a "shallow and irrational 'scientific' myth of contemporary historiography" (Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966], p. 52). More recently the Indian scholar Muhammad al-Azami dedicated an entire volume to an attack on Schacht's position. (See his *On Schacht's "Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence"* [Chichester: Wiley, 1985]; see also Muhammad Abdul Rauf, "Hadith literature - I: the development of the science of hadith," in A. F. L. Beeston et al. [eds.], *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], pp. 271-288.) The Sceptics dismiss these Muslim objections as "unscientific." Certain Western scholars, however, have also suggested modifications to some of Schacht's views. N. J. Coulson, for example, accepts Schacht's thesis in its broad essentials as irrefutable. On the other hand, he observes that Schacht's methodological rule creates a void or vacuum in the development of the law and asserts that a reasonable principle of historical inquiry should be "that an alleged ruling of the Prophet should be tentatively accepted as such unless some reason can be adduced as to why it should be regarded as fictitious" (*A History of Islamic Law* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964], pp. 64-65). G. H. A. Juynboll, for his part, proposes to push back Schacht's dating of Tradition as a whole by

about two decades (see his *Muslim Tradition* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983]). And the work of H. Motzki, pursuing investigations into sources of Tradition (*hadith*) earlier than those that had been available to Schacht, may modify further his accepted views on *hadith* transmission (see H. Motzki, "The *musannaʿ* of 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Sanʿani as a source of authentic *ahadith* of the first century AH," *Journal of Near East Studies*, 50 [1991], 1–21). It is just conceivable that in the study of *hadith* some accommodation between Western and Muslim approaches might be possible, since the spurious nature of a large part, but by no means all, of the prophetic Traditions had been acknowledged in certain modernist Muslim circles even before Goldziher's innovative studies in the West. For the moment, however, Michael Cook seems to have struck a properly judicious note saying, "The bottom line in the study of early Islamic traditions may well be that anyone can wriggle out of anything" ("Eschatology and the dating of traditions," *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies*, no. 1 [1992], 23–47).

Finally, the Qur'an has not escaped the scrutiny of the Sceptic's eye. Crone and Cook's mentor, John Wansbrough, produced two monographs in the late 1970s entitled *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). Wansbrough attempts to assess the sources, the Qur'an, the Prophet's biography, and the Muslim exegetical tradition by the method of literary analysis. These sources must be viewed, in Wansbrough's view, as "Salvation History" (*Heilsgeschichte*). He argues that although these sources purport to record the historical events of the Prophet's time as they actually occurred, in reality the events are described from a later period of time and are simply theological rationalizations of those events. In consequence there is no real possibility of recovering any true kernel of history in the life of the Prophet since, from the very nature of the sources, we can never know what really happened. A second proposition is that the Qur'an was not the product of Muhammad's Mecca but developed over time in a milieu of Judeo-Christian sectarian polemics. It was only at the end of the second/eighth century that the text was set down in the form we have today. This is opposed to the traditional Muslim understanding. That view places the final collection of the Qur'an in the time of the Caliph 'Uthman, less than twenty years after the Prophet's death,

and says that it preserved revelations almost precisely as they had come to Muhammad. Owing to Wansbrough's dense and technical style, his books are not for beginners. There is, however, a clear overview of his position by his disciple A. Rippin (see "Literary analysis of the Qur'an, Tafsir and Sira: the methodologies of John Wansbrough," in Richard Martin [ed.], *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985], pp. 151–163). By coincidence, one of Wansbrough's former colleagues, John Burton, published another monograph on the Qur'an at the same time as Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies*. Applying his own sceptical methods to the Muslim sources, he concluded in the startling last sentence of his book that "What we have today in our hands is the *musnaf* of Muhammad" (*The Collection of the Qur'an* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977]): that is, not the 'Uthmanic edition of Muslim tradition, but the very edition prepared by the Prophet himself. Where Wansbrough saw in the Qur'anic text the activity of later shaping, Burton saw none. Both cannot be correct, and possibly both are wrong; the methods of analysis and interpretation clearly still require refinement. F. E. Peters has outlined some of the problems which scholars have confronted in the study of Islamic origins compared with those who have explored the origins of Christianity. (See his "The quest of the historical Muhammad," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 23 [1991], 291–315; contrast Peters's discussion with that of a modernist Muslim scholar, Mohamed al-Nowaihi, "Towards a re-evaluation of Muhammad: Prophet and man," *Muslim World*, 60/4 [1970], 300–313, who seeks to recover the real qualities of the Prophet by shedding the fanciful and picturesque Traditions about his character but who nonetheless employs the Qur'an as an inviolate source of confirmation.)

Finally, it remains to say a word about the approach in the present work. In an introductory book such as this it is not possible to present a detailed argument on the subject of origins. Briefly, therefore, as to the Qur'an itself, I take the text as an integral and authentic document of the Prophet's day. Rather than seeing either a decisive Christian or Jewish influence mirrored in it, I have hinted that the two monotheistic traditions may be read as sub-texts to the Qur'an as a whole, which better reflects a changing pagan environment in which the inhabitants of central Arabia, pagans, Jews, and Christians, shared a common store of religious ideas for which I have used the expression "common Arabian prophetic pool." This description

allows for the possible existence of an indigenous monotheistic tradition of Arabian prophets also alluded to in the Qur'an. As for all other non- or extra-Qur'anic sources, I assume that they mirror different stages and varying aspects of the developing Islamic tradition during which Judeo-Christian influence is stronger and more pervasive. In this perspective, the Qur'an is crucially the bed-rock of practically every aspect of Islamic religious culture which I have tried to demonstrate throughout the book. The Sceptics' view that our present assumptions and knowledge about the origins of Islam may indeed rest upon precarious foundations can be taken seriously. It does not follow that their alternative hypotheses need be accepted as well, a cautionary word which naturally applies to my own position as well. It is in the very nature of research that our present state of knowledge is tentative and subject to change should new source material come to light or new interpretations of the existing sources be proposed.