

Controversies over Islamic Origins

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*An Introduction to
Traditionalism and Revisionism*

Mun'im Sirry

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A few words about conventions: As this book is written mainly for introductory students and general readers, I have followed a simple method of transliteration when converting words from Arabic and other Near

Eastern languages to Roman letters and have omitted diacritical marks for proper names and places. However, I distinguished between ‘*ayn* (‘) and *hamzah* (’). The Arabic *tā’ marbūṭah* is rendered *ah* not *a*: ‘A’ishah not ‘A’isha. In most cases, dates are given first in the Islamic calendar, followed after a forward-slash by the Common Era date. “Ibn Ishaq (d. 150/767)” means that he died in year 150 of the Islamic calendar (AH) and year 767 of the Common Era (CE). As for Qur’an translations, I have used M.A.S Abdel Haleem’s *The Qur’an: A New Translation* (Oxford, 2004).

INTRODUCTION: CELEBRATING THE DIVERSITY OF PERSPECTIVES

In the last few years there has been a growing interest in the academic study of the Muslim sources from which information about the emergence of Islam has been derived. Some of the most contested issues in the scholarly field commonly known as “Islamic origins”¹ include the history of the Qur’anic text and its development into *textus receptus*; the biography of the Prophet Muhammad; and the crystallization of Islam as the religion that we know today. Several scholars have challenged the historicity of commonly-held assumptions concerning the canonization of Muslim scriptures as well as the authenticity of the received life of Muhammad. In a similar vein, the traditional picture of Islam achieving its full-fledged form within Muhammad’s lifetime has come under strict scrutiny. At issue is the dating of certain Muslim literary sources, written in Arabic, which seem to reflect later contentious developments. On the one hand, our knowledge about Islam’s origins in the Hijaz (Mecca and Medina) rests upon narrative sources produced in the late second and third centuries during the ‘Abbasid period in Iraq. On the other hand, scholars are perplexed by discrepancies in these writings and have thus developed theories to account for the various historiographical problems that these sources pose. However, their theories are diverse and often conflict with one another, depending on the particular scholar’s approach to the traditional narratives as well as extra-Islamic sources written in other languages than Arabic. Some have sought to uncover “the historical kernel” hidden in these sources by devising criteria

¹ Terms such as “Islamic origins” or “the emergence of Islam” or “the rise of Islam”, as G.R. Hawting has rightly noted, “are ambiguous and understood differently by different people” because “to decide a time at which its ‘rise’ or ‘emergence’ occurred and when it existed in a state of maturity will involve a number of subjective judgments.” See G.R. Hawting, “The Rise of Islam” in Youssef M. Choueiri (ed.) *A Companion to the History of the Middle East* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 9. In this book, the emergence of Islam is envisaged as a process covering the first three generations of Muslims, roughly from the time of the Prophet to the Umayyads, which means a little over one hundred years.

and methods with which to delve into various layers of the Arabic literary writings. Others view the Muslim literature as having no historical value, and instead sketch an alternative account of early Islam through other sources.

This book critically examines the theories developed by modern scholars who attempt to reconstruct the emergence of Islam. Commenting on diverse approaches to Qur'anic studies, Devin Stewart contends that recent scholarship produces "a series of one-sided conversations in which scholars do not respond directly to one another and in the end fail to build on each other's advances or even to engage in a productive debate."² Unlike the many books that present a particular approach to early Islam in isolation from the other, in this book I analyze conflicting theories in dialogue with each other. There is no question that the period covered here, Islam's emergence and early development (commonly known as the "formative period"), is crucial. The most important events in Islamic history occur in this era. In the eyes of Muslims, this period represents a golden age for within the epoch the Qur'an was revealed alongside Muhammad, and pious caliphs were elected to rule and expand the state while at the same time it was a period of theological and political disputes.

It is hardly surprising that Muslims have idealized the Islam of the Prophet and the next two generations as the most authentic "pristine form" of the religion. They therefore seek to recreate the Prophet's Islam in the contemporary world. Traditionally, Muslims have developed a kind of regressive approach to history by adhering to the concept of "the degeneration of the times" (*fasād al-zamān*) in order to express the increasing temporal (and consequently, moral) distance from the time of the Prophet and the model *ummah*. At a time when some Muslims feel that they are beset by problems or have inherited a sense of insecurity due to an aggressive global secular culture, many long for, and aspire to emulate, a pure and manageable past. Their appeal to the glorious past, therefore, can be understood as an attempt to alleviate the present difficulties.

Recently we have witnessed the emergence of various missionary movements (*da'wah*) calling for a return to the religious model of the best Muslim generations. Some Muslims hope to revive the spirit of the pious forefathers, known as *salaf* (ancestors), a term usually referencing the first generations of Muslims. Their aspiration to follow the Islam of the generation of *salaf* is of such great importance that they call themselves

² Devin Stewart, "Reflections on the State of the Art in Western Qur'anic Studies" in Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (eds.) *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity and the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17.

salafiyyūn (followers of *salaf*) and dub their movement “salafiyyah.” This modern salafiyyah, or salafism, has “reincarnated” itself to become one of the most influential Islamic reform movements. Those who claim this label, of course, differ on who exactly constitute the pious *salaf*, or in which period they lived. Nevertheless, they do agree on the importance of reviving and following the first Muslim generations, who are believed to have set an idealized standard of life for every Muslim today. And the spirit of reviving early Islam strengthens and emboldens even modern Muslim reformers and renewal movements. Key concepts in modern Islamic discourses, such as “renewal” (*tajdīd*), “revival” (*iḥyāʾ*), and “reform” (*iṣlāḥ*), are often associated with current efforts to rekindle the essence of early Islam.

The question arises: What kind of early Islam do the Salafis envision, exactly? What is the original shape of early Islam – what did living it look like? What evidence do we have to support the idea that their *imagined* Islam is exactly like what is presented in the traditional Muslim sources? From a historical-critical perspective, it is difficult to accept at face value the straightforward formation of early Islam described in the traditional narratives. Scholars have been increasingly and keenly aware of the problematic character of the sources from which the traditional account of Islam’s rise has been constructed. The portrait of early Islam that the Salafis expound is largely dependent on literary works recorded more than a century and a half after the events that they claim to report. These texts have recently been regarded with deep suspicion. Stephen Humphreys judiciously and succinctly describes the challenges facing modern scholars as follows:

If our goal is to comprehend the way in which Muslims of the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries understood the origins of their societies, then we are very well off indeed. But if our aim is to find out “what really happened” – i.e. to develop reliably documented answers to modern questions about the earliest decades of Islamic societies – then we are in trouble. The Arabic narrative sources represent a rather late crystallization of a fluid oral tradition. These sources can become an adequate foundation for “scientific” history only when we have learned a great deal more than we presently know about this oral tradition: its origins, the social and cultural institutions by which it was shaped and transmitted, the variations and transformations it underwent in the course of transmission, the circumstances in which it was first committed to writing, the degree of alteration suffered by early written versions before they at last achieved their definitive form in the mid-3rd/9th century, etc. Questions of this kind have been discussed over and over by modern scholars, but so far their conclusions remain more in the realm of speculation than of demonstration. The evidence is such, in fact, that reasonable certainty may

be beyond our grasp. The first seventy years of Islamic history command our attention, therefore, not only because of the enormous interest of this period, but also because of the extraordinary methodological problems posed by our principal sources.³

Thus, the first century of Islam is an important but equally problematic period. The confidence of many historians of Islamic origins was undermined by the unreliability of the early sources. Scholars must grapple with the problems posed by these sources in order to reconstruct what happened in the first Islamic century. The difficulty in tracing the development of early Islam, as many scholars have pointed out, lies in the fact that “the numerous accounts we have of the life of Muhammad and his companions are a late distillation of an oral history that has been much transformed and distorted in the course of its transmission and, more important, that alternative versions have been edited out.”⁴ One may add to the problem the uncertainty of our sources for that period. These source deficiencies have led some modern scholars to call the traditional narrative of Islamic origins into question; others disregard it altogether. Lyall Armstrong is correct in saying that “[t]he debates which swirl around the rise of Islam are in essence debates about the sources and their reliability. Clearly, the extent of our knowledge of any historical event depends upon the late sources which describe that event.”⁵ It is, therefore, understandable that the history of early Islam continues to elude historians.

This book discusses the challenges facing historians of early Islam in dealing with the sources and how the origins of Islam have recently been problematized by modern scholars. Over the last century, scholars have grappled with the sources without reaching a consensus. At the heart of this critical endeavor lies several questions: Can we know the past? How has the emergence of Islam been framed in the traditional Muslim narratives? How can early Islamic history be reconstructed? To what extent can the Arabic literary sources be relied on in the effort to reconstruct the nature and shape of early Islam? Are the claims of their late-eighth and ninth century authors – that they merely passed on the materials of earlier authorities – historically correct? Are there ways to validate early sources?

³ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 69-70.

⁴ Robert G. Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion” in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbooks of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1056.

⁵ Lyall Armstrong, “The Rise of Islam: Traditionalist and Revisionist Theories,” *Theological Review* 33 (2012), 87.

There are many other books that theorize the emergence and historical development of early Islam. But this one discusses recent developments in the scholarly study of Islamic origins, including fresh perspectives and methods ranging from traditionalist approaches to recent breakthroughs as a result of better understanding of the different phases of religious formation. I use the term “traditionalism” to signify the standpoint that views the birth and development of Islam in a manner similar to that presented in the literary writings produced by early Muslim historians. Somewhat polemically, Herbert Berg refers to this approach as “sanguine,” noting that these scholars contend that “the sources for the formative period of Islam, primarily the Qur’ān, *sīra*, and *sunna*, can be relied upon for historical information, that is to say, ‘what really happened’.”⁶ The sanguine scholars, according to Berg, “collect all the extant versions of related *ḥadīths* and by examining both the *matns* (using methods such as redaction criticism) and the *isnāds* (using ‘*ilm al-rijāl*’), they reconstruct progressively earlier versions of the *matns* until they find an *Urtext*, which is often contemporary with Muḥammad or his Companions. In so doing, they believe that they have conclusively shown that *ḥadīths* are largely authentic.”⁷ I would argue that each scholar develops different methods and studies different materials. One of Berg’s sanguine scholars, Harald Motzki, for instance, rejects the former’s conclusion, arguing that Berg’s “application of the *isnād-cum-matn* method is not accurate and sophisticated enough” and “that the method, when properly applied, does not lead to these results.”⁸

In this book, I prefer the term “traditionalists” not only because it is less pejorative, but also because their methods and conclusions seem to preserve the integrity of Muslim traditions to a greater extent. Traditionalist scholars rely heavily on the biography of the Prophet and later Muslim historical writings in their reconstruction of early Islam. This does not mean that they accept this late corpus at face value, but they do believe that historians can work with it in reconstructing what happened in the first Islamic century, including the life of Muhammad. Indeed, various phases of Muhammad’s life are presented in elaborate detail in the *sīrah*, “biography

⁶ Herbert Berg, “Context: Muḥammad” in Andrew Rippin (ed.) *Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 200-201.

⁷ Berg, “Competing Paradigms in the Study of Islamic Origins: Qur’ān 15:89-91 and the Value of *Isnāds*” in Herbert Berg (ed.) *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 260.

⁸ Harald Motzki, “The Origins of Muslim Exegesis: A Debate” in Harald Motzki, Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort and Sean Anthony (eds.) *Analyzing Muslim Traditions: Studies in Legal, Exegetical and Maghāzī Ḥadīth* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 234.

of the Prophet.” During his lifetime in Mecca and Medina, the Prophet is reported to have preached religious doctrines and rituals which achieved their final shape before his death. This is also reportedly the case with the Qur’an, which (according to certain traditions) was memorized, then recorded on pieces of wood, papers, palm leaves, animal skin, bones, etc. during the time of the Prophet, and then compiled into a book form, called “*muṣḥaf*” (collection of pages) by the time of the first caliph Abu Bakr (r. 10-12/632-34). After the Prophet’s death, early Muslims began propagating and spreading this complete religion through the conquests of new territories (*futūḥ*, lit. “opening”) as they expanded their political power beyond Arabia.

These three aspects – the biography of Muhammad, the compilation of the Qur’an, and the history of territorial and political expansion – are related to the emergence of Islam and have been the subject of recent rigorous studies. These three case studies also form the major concern of the present book, which discusses the extent to which their traditional expositions can hold up to critical scrutiny following a wave of new scholarship beginning in the 1970s. These scholars have called into question the “master narrative” of the traditional account and have offered an alternative. This is not to say that prior to 1970s traditional beliefs about Islamic origins were always accepted at face value. However, the newer wave of critical scholarship, rooted in western studies of Islam conducted in the 1970s, has been quite successful in exposing major weaknesses of the traditional narrative. To mention but a few examples, the renowned British scholar John Wansbrough’s influential books *Qur’anic Studies* (1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu* (1978) basically view the traditional Muslim sources as literary works, not historical records. For Wansbrough, these sources present salvation history rather than a history of “what really happened.”⁹

⁹ John Wansbrough uses the term “salvation history” (*Heilsgeschichte*) to refer to a literary form “composed by members of the early Islamic community to depict its origins and to direct its movement in response to a particular theophany.” See John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 2. Wansbrough further argues that “the motive of all salvation history is interpretation, and to that extent salvation history is always mythic.” Ibid., 31. Thus, salvation history does not tell what has actually happened, but rather what later authors believe happened concerning the divine intervention in history. Or, in the words of Norman Calder, salvation history is “that part of history which is brought forward by a religious tradition as being somehow part of the definition of that religion.” See Norman Calder, *Interpretation and Jurisprudence in Medieval Islam*, ed. Jawid Mojaddedi and Andrew Rippin (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 73.

In 1977, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook also published their provocative book *Hagarism* and John Burton published *The Collection of the Qur'an*, both inspired by Wansbrough's methodology. These four works, of course, differ from one another, but as a whole, they offer a totally different explanation of the emergence of Islam than the generally accepted traditionalist account.

In recent Islamic studies, the model of scholarship developed by Wansbrough and others offering alternative views is known as "revisionist."¹⁰ Although revisionist scholarship questioning the authenticity of Islamic traditions can be traced back to earlier scholars like Ignaz Goldziher, Henri Lammens, and Joseph Schacht,¹¹ only since the 1970s has revisionism found its momentum. Of course, there is no agreed definition of the term "revisionism," as the revisionist conception itself is not monolithic. In this book, the revisionist perspective is understood as a non-normative and unconventional framework offering an alternative methodological approach to the traditional Muslim sources. The revisionist approach, like the traditionalist one, is in no way unitary and does not reflect a single body of knowledge, but rather in itself is diverse. Both their approaches to the sources and their conclusions are often at odds with one another. For instance, revisionists have developed different sets of criteria for authenticating the early sources. For some revisionists such as Berg, "the very presence of an *isnād* is not an indication of the transmission of the report, but an indication of the late fabrication (that is, after the first century of Islam) or reworking of the report to which it is attached to make it look authentic."¹² Others like Stephen Shoemaker permit the limited use of *isnād*-criticism as "it is

¹⁰ Herbert Berg prefers the term "skeptical"; however, it is not clear why he keeps the term "revisionist" for John Wansbrough, for instance, saying "The skeptics clearly include those who are sometimes called revisionists (for example, Wansbrough)." See Berg, "Competing Paradigms in the Study of Islamic Origins," 261.

¹¹ These three scholars, in particular, pointed to the highly tendentious, artificial, and even contradictory nature of much traditional Islamic material. See Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1889-1890), esp. 2:1-274; English translation, *Muslim Studies*, ed. S. M. Stern, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967-71), 2:15-251; Henri Lammens, "Qoran et tradition: Comment fut composé la vie de Mahomet," *Recherches de science religieuse* 1 (1910), 27-51; Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).

¹² Herbert Berg and Sarah Rollens, "The Historical Muhammad and the Historical Jesus: A Comparison of Scholarly Reinventions and Reinterpretations," *Studies in Religion* 37:2 (2008), 274.

certainly valuable to see these conclusions affirmed by this approach.”¹³ As will be discussed in this book, the scholarly disagreement not only occurs between traditionalists and revisionists but also among scholars of the same camp. Of course, this book will also explore areas of convergence among different scholars.

Revisionist scholarship should not, then, only be associated with a “group of scholars [who] suggested that the Islamic origins edifice was a total fabrication,” as Lyall Armstrong describes them. In his article, “The Rise of Islam: Traditionalist and Revisionist Theories,” Armstrong identifies a revisionist approach with skepticism:

These revisionist scholars, known as such for the extensive revision they have proposed for early Islamic history, have argued, for example, that the Qur’ān itself was not a closed canon until possibly the second/eighth or even third/ninth centuries and thus does not offer any evidence for the origins of Islam, and that the stories of the origins of Islam are not actual history but ‘salvation history’, meaning that they were created to support a history of the faith as it came to be and are not accurate historically. They also allege that the reports about the life of the Prophet are exegetical, meaning that they were intended to interpret the Qur’ān, and are therefore unreliable as historical sources.¹⁴

Armstrong further argues that revisionist views on early Islam are not only radically different from the traditional Muslim account, but also that “they all propose that the traditions about early Islam are fabrications of later generations, forged in response to political, sectarian, even tribal agendas.”¹⁵ Robert Hoyland seems to follow the same rigid framework when he divides recent studies on early Islam into two camps: “traditionalists who accept the picture and revisionists who reject it.” As an example of the latter, Hoyland refers to the work of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, which relies solely on non-Muslim sources,¹⁶ and that of Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, which is based on archaeological evidence.¹⁷ He then argues that

¹³ Stephen J. Shoemaker, “In Search of ‘Urwa’s *Sīra*: Some Methodological Issues in the Quest for ‘Authenticity’ in the Life of Muḥammad,” *Der Islam* 85 (2011), 343.

¹⁴ Armstrong, “The Rise of Islam,” 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹⁷ Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2003).

although these two types of scholarship yield important insights, they “are too scanty to provide a credible alternative vision.”¹⁸

While Armstrong and Hoyland characterize the revisionist scholarship as monolithic, this book pays attention to the plurality of revisionism, both in its approaches to the Muslim sources and in its general conclusions. If the traditionalist and revisionist perspectives represent broadly differing presumptions about and approaches to the historical value of Muslim literary writings, each is also internally diverse. In other words, revisionist scholars include not only those who reject the historical value of the Muslim sources but also those who make use of traditional sources critically, along with other types of evidence, to reach conclusions that are different from those of the traditional Muslim accounts. Thus, what distinguishes traditionalists from revisionists is not the use or dismissal of the Muslim literary texts. Restricting “revisionism” to those who entirely discard the texts is too simplistic and rigid, and fails to take accurate account of the serious scholars who have developed theories and approaches differing significantly from the strict traditionalist position.

The scholarship of Fred Donner, for instance, does not accord with the traditional description of Islam’s emergence into history, in spite of his critical stance towards revisionist skeptics who reject the Muslim sources altogether as having no historical value. Having debunked skeptics’ contention that Islamic literary sources have no historical value, Donner argues that “it seems plausible to assert that the traditional Islamic material, considered as a whole, notwithstanding the (sometimes) extensive redaction of particular parts of it, contains embedded within it sufficient material to reconstruct at least the main issues debated by Believers in the early Islamic period.”¹⁹ However, Donner’s own theory about Islamic origins radically differs from the commonly held assumption that the Prophet Muhammad laid down detailed features of Islam as we know it today. Donner argues that in its early period Islam had not yet crystallized into a definable religion. It was only by the end of the seventh or early eighth century that

¹⁸ Robert G. Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion,” 1056. See also, idem, “New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 69:3 (2006), 395-416; idem, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1998), 28-29.

Islam developed a distinct confessional existence.²⁰ The fluidity or porousness of confessional identity in the early community, he argues, seems to have given way to stricter boundaries around the early eighth century, when the core of the community redefined itself around the Qur'an and the figure of the Prophet, and became Muslim in the classic sense.²¹ This theory of gradual development into an identifiable religion, as Robert Hoyland has rightly noted, "is indeed the current favorite among revisionist-minded Islamicists."²² It is, therefore, safe to include Donner's scholarship as an example of the revisionist approach, which cannot be said to represent a single cohesive approach.

This book demonstrates that revisionist perspectives are quite diverse, offering various innovative insights that have both enriched our perspective and contributed to the vibrant field of Islamic studies. Even among early revisionist scholars, there have been conflicting views and conclusions. For example, while Wansbrough argues for the late canonization of the Qur'an, John Burton contends that the Qur'an was collected and put together during the lifetime of Muhammad.²³ Despite their differences, however, revisionist scholars agree that Islamic studies must rethink the basic paradigms underlying our knowledge about the birth and development of Islam. They argue that Islamic studies must make use of the various critical methods that have been successfully applied in scholarship on other religious traditions. This means that the Muslim sources must be read with historical-critical lenses to better understand the portrait of early Islam in its true nature and shape, not the one idealized by later Muslims.

Here is the crux of the matter: the Islamic historical narratives were written much later than – that is, more than one hundred years after – the events they purport to record. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, the main problem with any effort to reconstruct the emergence of Islam is the problem of sources. Muslim literary sources do not meet basic historical-critical requirements for being regarded as an authentic account of the first

²⁰ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); idem, "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community," *al-Abhath*, 50-51 (2002): 9-53.

²¹ Donner, "Muhammad und die frühe islamische Gemeinschaft aus historischer Sicht," *Asiatische Studien*, 68:2 (2014): 439-351.

²² Robert G. Hoyland, "Review of Fred Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44 (2012), 574.

²³ For a brief discussion of non-traditional theories concerning the canonization of the Qur'an, see Herbert Berg, "The Collection and Canonization of the Qur'an" in Herbert Berg (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Early Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 37-48.

century of Islam. Historians, this argument goes, should not use primary sources which are not contemporary with the events they are reconstructing, and the Muslim sources cannot withstand such critical scrutiny. Moreover, their description of early Islam has been shaped and overlaid by the concerns of the later generations who wrote them. Skeptics like Stephen Shoemaker would ask: “Is there any possibility of excavating earlier traditions from these sources that reveal the changing nature of Islam over the course of its first century?”²⁴ Do we have alternative sources to reconstruct the emergence of Islam? What would be the portrait of Islam had we relied only on non-Islamic sources? Those who accept the traditional sources, however, might also raise counter-questions: Isn’t it the case that the Muslim sources are based on careful transmissions of reports or narratives? Can the distance between the events in the first Islamic century and their sources be bridged? Is it possible to develop a source-reconstruction method to validate the early Muslim sources?

The present book answers these two types of questions and attempts to offer insights into how to think critically about the historical birth of Islam. It can be argued that Muslim sources should not be discarded altogether, not only because, as Robert Hoyland writes, “Muslim traditions (i.e. reports handed down) about the life and career of the Prophet Muhammad exist in huge numbers, recorded in numerous and often voluminous compendia,”²⁵ but also because non-Muslim sources are not sufficient to support an alternative version of the development of early Islam.²⁶ One of my main concerns in this book is to explore the diversity of opinions and theories that have been put forth to account for the emergence of Islam. I will examine recent scholarship on this issue in light of the three important issues already mentioned: the collection and canonization of the Qur’an into an extant *muṣḥaf*; the composition of the biography of Muhammad as an exemplary model for Muslims; and narratives of the early conquests.

These three case studies aim to show both where traditionalist and revisionist scholars differ and where they share something in common. Scholars like Herbert Berg contend that traditionalists and revisionists operate “with two different and mutually exclusive paradigms, and that

²⁴ Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Muḥammad and the Qur’ān” in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook on Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1085.

²⁵ Hoyland, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions,” *History Compass* 5:2 (2007), 582.

²⁶ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 598.

there is little hope of one side convincing the other.”²⁷ It is true that the two sides disagree on a number of important issues as they employ different methods, but that does not mean the twain will never meet. One of the main arguments of this book is that, while scholarly disagreement should be welcomed, the unpalatable differences between traditionalists and revisionists are not as wide as has commonly been assumed. It will be argued that there are overlaps and areas of agreement between the two streams of scholarship. As both traditionalists and revisionists have engaged in fruitful and constructive conversations, they have become better acquainted with each other’s argument, which has allowed them to rethink their intellectual stance. Traditionalists have attempted to narrow the gap between the events of Islamic origins such as the life of Muhammad and their sources, arguing that some reports preserved in the second/third century AH or eighth/ninth century CE can be traced back to the previous century. Certain aspects of this argument have been accepted by some revisionists. Similarly, revisionists’ contentions about the problematic nature of the Arabic sources has also been widely recognized by traditionalists. Indeed, as Aziz al-Azmeh has pointed out, some aspects of revisionist arguments have become “an academic orthodoxy.”²⁸

While I do not agree with al-Azmeh’s assertion about the “neo-conservative ideological temper” of the revisionist scholarship, he is nonetheless correct in noting that “revisionism, more or less simultaneously, moves from the margins to the centre” in the academic study of Islamic origins.²⁹ Interestingly, just a few years back, writing in 2008 Gabriel Reynolds considered revisionism in Qur’anic studies was still “a sort of sub-culture within the field”³⁰ in the sense that it represented an isolated voice vis-à-vis “the dominance of the master narrative of Islamic origins.”³¹ Today, however, revisionism can no longer be seen as a “sub-culture” within the field. Learned and constructive intellectual conversations between traditionalists and revisionists, as will be discussed in this book, signal a healthy climate and exciting development in the rigorous debates over Islamic origins. The meeting of the twain has produced areas of

²⁷ Herbert Berg, “Competing Paradigms in the Study of Islamic Origins: Qur’ān 15:89-91 and the Value of *Isnāds*” in Herbert Berg (ed.) *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 261.

²⁸ Aziz al-Azmeh, “Islamic Origins for Neo-Conservatives,” (unpublished paper), 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁰ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Introduction: Qur’ānic Studies and Its Controversies” in Gabriel Reynolds (ed.) *The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

common ground, three of which are highlighted by Jonathan Brockopp as follows:

First, the Qur'an was compiled by at least the late seventh century and is the first Arabic book; however, variant readings of the consonantal structure (*rasm*) continued to be discussed, and it did not achieve its full theological status within the Islamic faith until centuries later. Second, while the details of his life are disputed, Muhammad existed. His name already appears in a Syriac account dated to 636 and on a coin from 670, less than forty years after his reported death. By 690, we have physical evidence that some people considered Muhammad to be God's prophet. Third, Donner (2010) is not wrong to suggest that we call those people "believers" instead of Muslims, but this does not mean that there were no self-identified Muslims in the seventh century, only that the religion of Islam was still in the process of formation, and that Muslims had limited influence within a world that was largely Christian.³²

In light of this new common ground, Chapter 1 examines complicated issues related to the sources for reconstructing early Islam. I identify and analyze in detail three basic problems inherent in the traditional Muslim sources. Firstly, these sources are, in many cases, written years after the events and are thus not contemporary with the events they describe. For historians, this violates the first principle of historical-critical approach, namely, to use contemporary sources whenever possible. Secondly, there are contradictions and inconsistencies in the narrative, which pose serious challenges to historians in their reconstruction of the past. Finally, a question mark is placed against the reliability of the narrators as their reports seem to reflect later developments and concerns that emerged in the period during which the books were written. If the Arabic sources are problematic, can we filter out these problems to find the "historical kernel" contained in those sources? To answer this question, I map out a typology of approaches to the traditional sources developed by modern scholars, both traditionalist and revisionist. The impact of different approaches to the Islamic historical writings on scholarly theories of early Islam is also highlighted.

Chapter 2 discusses traditionalist and revisionist scholars' various hypotheses and theories on the emergence of early Islam. I demonstrate that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries the field of Islamic studies in general and the scholarship on Islamic origins in particular has been enriched by a number of theories which tend to problematize the traditional historical narratives. On one side of the spectrum, traditional

³² Jonathan E. Brockopp, "Islamic Origins and Incidental Normativity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84:1 (2016), 34.

scholarship accepts the Muslim sources at face value. On the other side of the spectrum, a radical-skeptical revisionist approach rejects the traditional sources' historical value altogether. As an alternative, they prefer to rely on sources such as chronicles written by Christian and Jewish authors, mostly during Islam's first century. A third, middle-way approach tends to bridge and synthesize the two opposing camps. This synthetic approach is in no way monolithic, but rather represents several diverse theories about the rise of Islam that can neither be grouped into the traditionalist nor the radical revisionist perspectives. These scholars utilize Arabic sources as well as numismatic and archeological data, such as inscriptions. This book further explores the differences between traditionalists and revisionists, and what they share in common through three case studies: the collection of the Qur'an, the biography of the Prophet, and conquest narratives.

Chapter 3, accordingly, addresses the issue of the Qur'an in the formative period of Islam. In the past few years, we have witnessed a remarkable development in the academic study of the Qur'an. In the context of our discussion on Islamic origins, we ask whether the Qur'an can be used as a reliable source for reconstructing the context in which Islam emerged onto the historical stage, and if so, how. This chapter begins with the codification of the Qur'an by illuminating a variety of views concerning the stabilization of the Qur'anic text as well as the transformation of the text of the Qur'an from *scriptio defectiva* through *scriptio plena*, including its implications for re-reading the Muslim scripture. Following the discussion on the canonization of the Qur'an, this chapter looks at the internal evidence from the Qur'an to help us understand the historical context of early Islam. We discuss, for instance, how scholars deal with what may be called "Biblical material" in the Qur'an and what this may tell us about its Arabian context. Next, post-Qur'anic literature, including the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), is examined to see if it can help us unlock the "hidden" history of early Islam. The diversity and conflicting views concerning issues ranging from the codification of the Qur'an to its interpretation are to be welcomed as indicative of a healthy climate of scholarly debate. After rehearsing the debate, this chapter concludes with the radical revisionist Patricia Crone's latest testimony that "the Qur'an existed by the time when the tradition says it existed."³³

Chapter 4 discusses the scholarly debate on the sources for reconstructing of the biography of the Prophet (*sīrah nabawiyyah*). The Arabic sources on the life of Muhammad were written in the third/ninth

³³ Patricia Crone, *The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1:xiii.

century. In other words, they were written much later than the events they purport to describe. Can this gap between Muhammad's life and its sources be shortened? To illustrate the lively debate between traditionalists and revisionists, this chapter begins with traditionalists' attempt to rediscover the first-century sources using a variety of methods, including the source-reconstruction approach. This attempt to bridge the interval has been subject to much criticism by revisionists. However, on close examination of this debate, we can identify certain areas where both sides seem to agree. By highlighting this debate, I hope to show that the differences between traditionalists and revisionists are not as great as has commonly been assumed. This chapter then illuminates the search for the "historical Muhammad" and closely examines the relationship between the *sīrah* literature and hadith. It seems that the question is not whether or not historians can rely on the Arabic sources in their search for the historical Muhammad. The simple answer to this question is: Yes, we can. But the question of *how* remains. The last section of this chapter offers some examples of the shortcomings of the Islamic literary sources.

Chapter 5 examines the final case study—the conquest narratives in the context of Islamic origins. As Brockopp has mentioned above, one area of common ground between traditionalists and revisionists is a belief in the gradual development of Islamic religion. Fred Donner has been actively advocating this idea in his numerous publications.³⁴ For instance, Donner analyzes the shifting identity of the early community from "Believers" (*mu'minūn*) to "Muslims" (*muslimūn*). The connection between narratives of Islamic origins and conquests is highlighted in this chapter. Like the other case studies, it begins with the scholarly debate on the reliability of the Arabic sources, which were written more than a century after the early conquests. This chapter provides examples of contradictions and inaccuracies in the later Arabic sources and discusses scholarly attempts to narrate the conquests based on non-Muslim sources, mostly contemporary or near contemporary to the events. Then it discusses various hypotheses put forth by scholars about the identity of the conquerors: Who were the conquerors? Some scholars identify the conquerors as "Muslims," whereas others describe them with the ethnic term, "Arabs." Other scholars yet describe the conquerors as "Believers." Still others propose that the conquerors called themselves "Emigrants" (*Muhājirūn*) or were called by

³⁴ At least, Donner has devoted three publications to this issue. See, Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," 9-53; idem, *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*; idem, "Talking about Islam's Origins," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 81:1 (2016): 1-23.

others “Maggaritai” or “Mahggrāyē.” The last section of this chapter discusses modern theories on the cause of the conquest and its success.

The concluding chapter offers a brief reflection on how historians have read the sources. If we, as scholars, are to claim that the early sources – Muslim and non-Muslim – should not be taken at face-value because of their ingrained biases, then should we not be equally concerned that our own scholarly readings of these sources are similarly tainted by certain methodological biases? It is argued in this book that scholars’ divergent approaches to the sources have a profound impact on their theories concerning Islamic origins (the codification of the Qur’an, the biography of Muhammad, and the conquest narratives). In our conclusion, we therefore ask: What factors have shaped scholars’ divergent approaches or competing paradigms? Are there certain ideological tendencies that have circumscribed, and thus limited our scholarly perspectives? By acknowledging our own scholarly tendentiousness, it is hoped that our critical endeavor will serve what William Graham calls “humane scholarship,” a collaborative scholarship that is subjected to human reasons within a specific circumscribed domain. In order to pursue such scholarship, we must proceed with “a certain humility about its own limitations and the relative modesty of its goals.”³⁵ As the sub-title of this book indicates, this project is a modest attempt to introduce general readers and students to the sophisticated perspectives of traditionalists and revisionists. It is understandable, therefore, that this book may raise more questions than it can offer answers.

³⁵ William A. Graham, *Islamic and Comparative Religious Studies: Selected Writings* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 173.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM OF SOURCES AS A SOURCE OF PROBLEMS

The traditional Muslim account presents the history of early Islam as follows: “Islam” is the practical result of a divine message received and preached by the Prophet Muhammad. According to this account, Muhammad was born in Mecca in the Year of the Elephant (*‘ām al-fīl*), c. 570 CE. When he was 40 years old, Muhammad received a revelation which marked the beginning of his prophetic vocation. He proclaimed this message in Mecca, a pagan, idol-worshipping community, for thirteen years, after which he and his followers then decided to emigrate to Medina, previously known as “Yathrib”. After successfully establishing a Muslim community (*ummah*) in Medina, he finally was able to return and enter Mecca eight years later. The Prophet died in 632 CE. A few years later, the Qur’an was codified into a single book (*muṣṣhaf*), and territorial expansion began to take place under the leadership of the Guided Caliphs (*khulafā’ rāshidūn*), who had taken over the Prophet’s role as leaders of the Muslim community. Power struggles and theological tensions, involving several political affiliations and religious sects, emerged after the Prophet’s death. But despite these various upheavals, Islam, the religion of the Prophet, had achieved its full-fledged form during and immediately after Muhammad’s lifetime, and “all the fundamental teachings of Islam have been established before his death”¹ As Robert Hoyland puts it, “[t]he source material tends to give the impression that Muhammad and his Companions brought forth Islam complete and that later scholars merely codified and interpreted it.”²

This description about Muhammad’s life and the development of Islam, as presented in Islamic historical writings, was generally accepted and has become the master narrative of Islamic origins. According to this

¹ Jonathan E. Brockopp, “Islamic Origins and Incidental Normativity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84:1 (2016), 29.

² Robert G. Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion” in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbooks of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1056.

paradigm, “Islam was perfect and complete in Muhammad’s lifetime, and all the fundamental tenets, rituals, and mores were established before his death. Problems and divisions arose only in the faulty interpretation or memory of these events.”³ Among Muslim scholars, the biography of the Prophet (*sīrah*) and other literary sources composed by early Muslim writers, such as Ibn Ishaq (d. 150/767) and Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/923), “enjoy pride of place in the Islamic tradition.”⁴ These writings became the primary source for reconstructing the historical birth and emergence of Islam in the Arab lands, an area that has commonly been understood to have been isolated from its surroundings, especially the Christian Byzantine and Persian Zoroastrian civilizations. In general, scholars rely on these narrative sources in their discussion of what has taken place in the early period of Islam. These Muslim sources provide detailed information concerning the development of the Islamic religion through various phases, including the expansion of its territory after the death of the Prophet. Although written hundreds of years after Muhammad’s death, nearly all Muslim scholars have believed these sources to contain reliable information about the formative Islamic period.

Many western scholars have also endorsed this viewpoint, sketching “the Islamic origins in a manner which resembled the traditional Muslim portrayal.”⁵ Among them is the nineteenth-century French scholar Ernest Renan, one of the pioneers of historical Jesus research,⁶ who addressed the origins of Islam in his influential “Mahomet et les origines de l’islamisme.” According to Renan, the birth of Islam is not shrouded in mystery, in contrast to the emergence of other religions. Unlike so many of the world’s other religions, for instance, Islam was born “in the full light of history,” in which we know about Islam’s founding prophet “year by year the fluctuation of his thoughts, his contradictions, his weaknesses.”⁷ In other

³ Jonathan E. Brockopp, “Interpreting Material Evidence: Religion at the ‘Origins of Islam’,” *History of Religions* 552 (2015), 125.

⁴ Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 65.

⁵ Ayman S. Ibrahim, *The State Motivations for the Early Islamic Expansion (622-641): A Critical Revision of Muslims’ Traditional Portrayal of the Arab Raids and Conquests* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 31.

⁶ In 1863, Renan published his *Vie de Jésus* (The Life of Jesus), which, according to Stephen Shoemaker, “remains one of the most important and influential biographies of Jesus.” See, Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Muḥammad and the Qur’ān” in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1078.

⁷ Ernest Renan, “Mahomet et les origines de l’Islamisme,” *Revue des deux mondes* 12 (1851): 1023-60; English trans. “Muhammad and the Origins of Islam” in Ibn

words, this religion's emergence is recorded in writing, in fine detail, resulting in no unresolved puzzles for historians. Given Renan's skeptical view of the Christian sources to reconstruct the life of Jesus, as Stephen Shoemaker notes, "his full-throated endorsement of the Islamic historical tradition and its memory of Muḥammad's life is remarkable."⁸ For the nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholars like Renan, writes Jonathan Brockopp, "whereas Jesus, Moses, and the Buddha proved their missions through miraculous actions, Muhammad seemed to have professed no miracles at all, other than serving as the recipient of revelation."⁹ Of course, Renan may be correct in that we know more about the historical context of Muhammad than we do about Jesus (let alone Moses or Siddhartha Gautama). Brockopp notes that there were "only fifty years separat(ing) Muhammad's death and the first datable evidence of rudimentary theological claims."¹⁰ He goes on to say:

In comparison, earliest references to Christians in papyrus come more than two hundred years after Jesus' life, the council of Nicaea took place nearly three hundred years after, and numismatics are no help at all in informing us about the Christian community before that point. The lives of Gautama Buddha or Moses recede even further from solid historical data.¹¹

However, the extent to which "the full light" cast by the Muslim sources can be considered historically reliable has recently become a much-debated subject among scholars of early Islam. "Renan's initial enthusiasm," Shoemaker contends, "now appears to be altogether unwarranted, and with the turning of a new century, fresh doubts concerning the traditions of earliest Islam and their accuracy began to emerge."¹² Scholars like Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht have raised serious doubts about the authenticity of prophetic traditions.¹³ Their suspicion of the Muslim sources is further reinforced by skeptical scholars who argue that "all that we know or thought we knew about Muhammad, the Qur'ān, and early Muslims is

Warraq (ed.) *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* (New York: Prometheus, 2000): 127-166.

⁸ Shoemaker, "Muḥammad and the Qur'ān," 1078.

⁹ Brockopp, "Islamic Origins and Incidental Normativity," 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Muḥammad and the Qur'ān," 1078.

¹³ See, Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien)*, ed. S.M. Stern, trans. C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971); Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).

seen as ‘salvation history’ reflecting the situation of later Muslims and having no discernible historical truth.”¹⁴ Even if we do not agree with skeptics, the Muslim sources leave us with a host of important questions to ask: To what extent is the accuracy of early Muslim narratives defensible? How confident can we be that their information is not contaminated by the authors’ personal views at the time of their writing, that is, hundreds of years after the period they describe? Can they be considered academically credible?

These questions pose acute challenges to historians’ attempts to reconstitute the historical context of Islam’s origins. The main question of this chapter is: Can we reconstruct the history of early Islam on the basis of literary sources composed by authors writing during the second or third century (eighth or ninth century CE) after the events? The traditional account of Islam as a religion having achieved its final form during the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the Hijaz (Mecca and Medina) is fully based on Muslim literature written in a period remote in both time and place. In the last few decades, there has been a growing effort to rethink the origins of Islam in light of this recognition. If these sources are questioned, then the commonly-understood image of early Islam also needs to be reconsidered. This field of research has now generated an enthusiastic discourse among modern scholars. It is not an exaggeration to say that the emergence of critical scholarship questioning the historical accuracy of sources is a primary cause of the contemporary field of Islamic studies’ vibrant dynamism. Numerous aspects of the traditional interpretation have begun to be revised. This new scholarship offers alternative explanations not only concerning the birth and development of the Islamic religion, but also its early contours. For the lack of a better term, this new development, the historical-critical approach to Muslim sources, is called “revisionist scholarship.”

This chapter discusses various approaches developed by critical scholars for dealing with the traditional Muslim literature. It begins by illuminating some core issues leading to the emergence of revisionism. In the course of this discussion on historical-critical scholarship, I will identify major issues and trends associated with both traditionalist and revisionist schools, including their basic assumptions. After elaborating on the diversity of scholarly approaches to the Muslim sources, this chapter examines some weaknesses and strengths of both schools. At the heart of traditionalist and revisionist contentions lies the question of how best to treat the traditional Islamic narratives that were, up until now, widely used to reconstruct the

¹⁴ Herbert Berg, “Competing Paradigms in the Study of Islamic Origins: Qur’ān 15:89-91 and the Value of *Isnāds*” in Herbert Berg (ed.) *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 259.

context in which Islam arose. The different ways the Muslim historical writings are viewed, used, or contested have had a far-reaching impact on our understanding of the context of the rise of Islam. The final part of this chapter will highlight a perennial question concerning faith and history: How are we to think critically about the historical foundation of faith? For now, let us begin with a simpler question: Why and how have the traditional Muslim narratives been called into question in recent scholarly discussion?

Sources of the Problem

In his seminal work, *The Venture of Islam*, Marshall Hodgson makes an interesting observation concerning the problematic sources for the life of Muhammad: “On the face of it, the documentation transmitted among Muslims about his life is rich and detailed; but we have learned to mistrust most of it; indeed, the most respected early Muslim scholars themselves pointed out its untrustworthiness.”¹⁵ For modern scholars, the time gap between the life of Muhammad and the beginning of Muslim historical writing provides a basis for questioning the accuracy of narratives concerning Muhammad and his early followers. It is well known that the earliest extant Muslim narratives concerning the life of Muhammad and the emergence of early Islam date from some 150 years after Muhammad’s death. No source of information about the Prophet’s life and his religious teachings in Mecca and Medina written prior to the second half of the eighth century has survived today. It is almost certain that such sources will never be found. It is safe to say that the great majority of information about the origins of Islam is derived, therefore, not from contemporary documents, but from literary compilations of later authors.

Therefore, it makes sense to ask, to what extent do these later historical writings reflect what actually happened? Proponents of the traditional account will immediately reject this question as irrelevant, because in their view, trustworthy Muslim scholars would never create fictitious images of early Islam, invented stories generated from fantasies. Traditionalist scholars would argue that the Muslim literature preserves and transmits historical facts through generations, based on chains of transmission (*isnāds*), which can be verified by a technique widely used to examine the reliability of transmitted reports/materials (*matns*). This argument is often linked to the prevalence of oral culture during the time of Islam’s emergence in western Arabia, resulting in the widespread use of oral instead of written

¹⁵ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:160.

transmission. Traditionalists express their confidence that the *isnāds* can be critically used for dating traditions into the first Islamic century. To put it differently, the fact that no written documents contemporary with the Prophet's life exist doesn't mean that the later Muslim sources have no historical value. Various methods and theories can be developed to verify the accuracy of transmitted information and to differentiate accurate from false reports. Some revisionists argue that the *isnāds* themselves are fabricated and, thus, "scholars who base themselves on the *asānīd* to reconstruct an earlier history of the traditions are performing a futile task."¹⁶ John Wansbrough famously says the names of the transmitters that accompany the texts (*matns*) in the early Islamic sources are "literary devices" and "halakhic embellishments," and they are "an exclusively formal innovation" added to the texts only after the year 200 A.H."¹⁷ Wansbrough goes on to say that "analysis of these chains is tedious, and seldom productive of more than pseudo-historical projections of halakhic dispute."¹⁸

In contrast, traditionalists like Harald Motzki contend that "deliberate fictitious ascription of the material to the main informants is unlikely."¹⁹ According to Motzki, "Wansbrough's premise about the *asānīd* – which is derived from his *a priori* premise regarding the character of the Muslim sources available for early Islam – is a fundamental flaw in his work, which is otherwise an admirable piece of scholarship. Even if the *asānīd* were only literary devices, they deserve to be studied just as other elements of the sources."²⁰ For his part, Mustafa A'zami responds to Joseph Schacht's skeptical approach to the authenticity of hadith, saying that "even if mistakes in *isnād* and *āḥadīth* exist, Schacht has produced no evidence that would cause us to impugn the good faith of the majority of the transmitters or abandon the *ḥadīth* literature."²¹ It should be noted, however,

¹⁶ Harald Motzki attributes this argument to Herbert Berg. See, Harald Motzki, "The Origins of Muslim Exegesis: A Debate" in Harald Motzki, Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort and Sean Anthony (eds.) *Analyzing Muslim Traditions: Studies in Legal, Exegetical and Maghāzī Ḥadīth* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 233.

¹⁷ John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 179.

¹⁸ Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 81.

¹⁹ Harald Motzki, "The Question of the Authenticity of Muslim Traditions Reconsidered" in Herbert Berg (ed.) *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 219.

²⁰ Motzki, "The Origins of Muslim Exegesis," 171.

²¹ M. Mustafa A'zami, *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Riyadh: King Sa'ud University, 1985), 182.