

Introduction

The present volume aims to fill a significant gap in the materials presently available for studying the beginnings of Islam. It gathers for the first time in a single volume the most important (in my judgment at least) non-Islamic witnesses for understanding the formation of the Islamic religious tradition during the first century of its existence. It has long been a standard practice in religious studies to employ contemporary sources external to a given religious tradition in order to study its early history, particularly during its formative era. It is thus unfortunate that even at this late date such an approach to earliest Islam remains effectively sidelined. The study of Christian origins, for instance, has long benefitted from concerted, critical attention to the testimonies of contemporary Greek and Roman writers about Christianity during the first two centuries of its existence. And although in the case of early Christianity these sources are both sparser and sparer than they are for early Islam, specialists on Christian origins have long recognized these external witnesses as among the most valuable sources that we have for understanding the formation of Christianity.

The observations from these outside voices regarding the emergence of Christianity afford “a unique perspective unavailable in

other writings from the period,” as Robert Wilken states in *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. There he also notes that “much of what the pagan critics say is ‘true’ but cannot be fitted into the Christian self-understanding. I am convinced that the perceptions of outsiders tell us something significant about the character of the Christian movement, and that without the views of those who made up the world in which Christianity grew to maturity, we will never understand what Christianity was or is. How something is perceived is an aspect of what it is. This is especially true in the social world, where the perception of others is an essential part of the reality people inhabit.”¹ One hopes someday to see a similar attitude and greater openness to the range of the available data in the study of early Islam. With such intent I decided to publish this volume.

Of course, this book is not the first effort to bring these external sources to bear on the study of Islamic origins. That honor belongs, it would seem, to Sebastian Brock. In 1975 at an Oxford colloquium on first-century Islam, Brock delivered a brief communication that gestured toward the importance of non-Islamic sources for understanding the beginnings of Islam with a paper entitled “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam.”² Henceforth, the study of Islamic origins would be changed. In effect, Brock’s paper issued a challenge to the discipline to expand its data pool to include the witness of Christian sources contemporary with the events of earliest Islam. No longer could scholars of early Islam remain innocently ignorant of their invaluable testimony, content to reconstruct the rise of Islam on the basis of the Islamic sources alone. This challenge could, of course, simply be ignored, as it so often has been. Yet for those scholars who would embrace it and expand on it to include other non-Syriac and non-Christian sources, the resulting turn to integrate earliest Islam with its late antique milieu would prove transformative.

The first scholars to attempt an integration of these non-Islamic sources with study of formative Islam were Patricia Crone and Michael

Cook, whose path-breaking work *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* also took shape at the same Oxford conference and appeared only two years later in 1977.³ *Hagarism* proposed a bold reinterpretation of earliest Islam on the basis of these non-Islamic sources, yet its argumentation is deeply flawed by the uncritical credulity with which it approaches these non-Islamic witnesses while disregarding evidence from the Islamic tradition almost entirely, and the work was rightly criticized for this significant error, even among its most sympathetic readers.⁴ But the overarching genius underlying its approach has nonetheless been unfairly marginalized and even maligned by far too many scholars of early Islam.⁵ Indeed, in part because of the controversial nature of this book, and also the scholars who wrote it, the study of formative Islam has often proceeded largely in ignorance of the invaluable witness that these contemporary sources have to offer as we seek to understand the earliest developments within Muhammad's new religious movement. One can see this tendency, for instance, in any number of recent studies of Muhammad and the beginnings of Islam.⁶

Nevertheless, it remains essential that the evidence of these contemporary witnesses to the rise of Islam be fully integrated with the study of its earliest history. This is all the more so given the fact that the traditional Islamic accounts of the rise of Islam, as related in the earliest biographies of Muhammad, were composed only long after the events in question, and their accounts are notoriously unreliable and heavily determined by the beliefs and practices of Islam in the Abbasid Empire of the eighth and later centuries. Although these biographies relate copious and detailed information about Muhammad and the beginnings of his religious movement, as sources they are widely recognized as being highly tendentious and artificial. Yet most scholarship on Muhammad and the beginnings of Islam still looks to these sources to reconstruct the rise of Islam, believing them to preserve a reliable "historical kernel," even though the

reliability of this kernel is merely asserted by scholarly fiat without a critical basis.

The Unique Value of the Non-Islamic Witnesses

According to the traditional narrative of Islamic origins, as stored in the collective memory of the Islamic historical tradition, Muhammad's new religious movement achieved its mature, traditional form before his death, which occurred, again following the Islamic historical tradition, in 632.⁷ Islam's faith and practice were fully elaborated and perfected by this time, so that the classical Islam of the later eighth century and beyond was already in place and in no need of any further development. Likewise, the contents of the Qur'an were complete by this time, having been revealed to Muhammad and through him to his followers over the course of his prophetic career, so the canonical text reached its close with his death. The text of the Qur'an was thus already established in its final form, as it has come down to us in the present, even if its contents were only codified decades later and the final vocalizations added later still. Accordingly, Muhammad's followers received the Qur'an as a distinctive and uniquely authoritative scriptural tradition from the very start.

The message of the Qur'an and of Muhammad's preaching shares substantial similarities to earlier Jewish and Christian traditions, a fact that the Islamic tradition itself also recognizes. Yet Muhammad and the Qur'an brought their divine message specifically to the Arabs in Arabic and in the originally perfect form that the ancestors of contemporary Jews and Christians had corrupted. Thus, while there was a genetic relationship between religious cultures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, according to the traditional narrative, Muhammad and the Qur'an owe no debt to their religious predecessors. Instead, they have directly restored through

divine revelation the true religion of Abraham, which he observed in Arabia, rather than the biblical Holy Lands, with his son Ishmael and his mother Hagar. Islam was therefore already by the death of Muhammad understood by his followers as a new, separate religious confession that revived an older faith and was clearly distinct from Judaism and Christianity with its own unique scripture and prophet.

Muhammad revealed his message and the Qur'an, according to tradition, in the Arabian Hijaz, the western part of the central Arabian Peninsula, in the cities of Mecca and Medina. Muhammad began to preach in his hometown of Mecca, which the Islamic tradition remembers as having been thoroughly pagan or polytheist in its religious belief and practice, although there is good evidence to suggest that this was not actually the case.⁸ The tradition reports, nonetheless, that Mecca possessed a major pagan shrine, the Ka'ba, and pilgrimage to this sanctuary was an important part of the local Meccan economy. For this reason, and for others no doubt, the citizens of Mecca did not welcome Muhammad's new message of exclusive monotheism. Although he managed to attract some followers in Mecca, after about ten years he migrated with them to another city to the north, Yathrib (later renamed Medina) at the invitation of its inhabitants. This event, known as the *hijra*, the "flight" or "migration" to Yathrib/Medina is the event that traditionally marks the beginning of the Islamic tradition as well as the beginning of the Islamic calendar in the year 622 CE.

In Medina, Muhammad was accepted as the city's leader, and again he found himself among large numbers of Arab pagans, but in their midst was also a large Jewish community. Neither Mecca nor Medina, one should note, had any Christian community at all according to the Islamic tradition, and there is likewise no external evidence for a Christian presence in either location at this time. Muhammad made a pact with Medina's Jews, at least for a while, allowing them to be members of his new politico-religious

community while retaining their traditional faith and practice, but according to tradition this was a short-lived experiment. It was also in Medina that Muhammad, soon after arriving, changed the direction of prayer for his followers away from Jerusalem, their original orientation, and established instead the Ka'ba in Mecca as the focus of Islamic prayer henceforward. Although at the time the Ka'ba was still in use as a pagan shrine, according to Islam it had been founded by Abraham and was thus an originally monotheist shrine that had subsequently fallen into pagan misuse. In 627 CE, Muhammad and his followers conquered Mecca and cleansed its shrine, restoring it to its monotheist roots, elevating it as the most sacred shrine of his new religion, and integrating it into an elaborate pilgrimage rite that he established in Mecca and its environs. Several years later, in 632 Muhammad died in Medina just as his followers were preparing to spread the dominion of their new monotheist polity beyond Arabia and into the Near East and Mediterranean world.

Such is the portrait of Islamic origins that we find in the traditional Islamic biographies of Muhammad: an Arabian monotheism proclaimed by an Arabian prophet through an Arabic scripture focused on an Arabian shrine deep within Arabia, with some Jewish presence and an absence of Christianity. Yet Muhammad's traditional biographies, the *sīra* traditions, as they are known, are widely recognized by modern historians as little more than pious imaginations about the beginnings of Islam that took shape in the collective memory among Muhammad's followers over at least a century after his death, at which time they were first collected and written down, around 750 CE. Relying on these traditional biographies as trustworthy sources for the beginnings of Islam is thus no different than if one were to write the history of first-century Christianity based on the second and third-century apocryphal acts of the apostles, something that no scholar of Christianity, by comparison, would ever even dream of doing.⁹ Moreover, like these biographies

of Muhammad, the early Islamic historical tradition first took shape only during the Abbasid Empire, and accordingly it betrays a pervasive bias against the Umayyad dynasty, the predecessors of the Abbasids who ruled as Muhammad's successors (caliphs) from 661 to 750 CE. Thus, the traditional Islamic accounts of the first century are regularly distorted not only by the pious memories of later generations, but also by a deliberate anti-Umayyad bias.¹⁰

The traditions of the Qur'an, for their part, almost certainly belong to the first Islamic century. Nevertheless they convey virtually no information concerning the life of Muhammad and the circumstances of his prophetic mission, let alone the early history of the community that he founded.¹¹ Indeed, it is this acute crisis of evidence for the history of Muhammad's new religious movement during the first century of its existence that makes attention to the witness of contemporary non-Islamic sources absolutely critical. Given the fundamentally unreliable nature of the early Islamic sources, one can highlight the problem clearly by simply reversing Jonathan Brown's argument that "to rely solely on these Christian sources would be like writing a history of the Soviet Union during the Cold War using only American newspapers."¹² Point taken, but certainly to rely solely on the early Islamic tradition in this case would be like writing a history of the Soviet Union during Cold War using only Soviet newspapers. It is thus perhaps not the best analogy for him to make, since that is effectively what Brown and so many other Islamists generally have done when writing the history of early Islam.¹³ For what it is worth, I more than suspect that an account based on the American news media would, in fact, prove more accurate than one drawn from the pages of *Pravda* or reports from TASS. Yet that is beside the point: surely any historian of the Cold War Soviet Union would use Soviet, American, and other sources together in a critical manner, and that is precisely what historians of formative Islam must also begin to do with more regularity and rigor.

Despite the frequent neglect of the non-Islamic sources in much scholarship, their study has by no means lain dormant since the publication of *Hagarism*. Fred Donner's volume on *The Early Islamic Conquests*, for instance, reconstructs the expansion of Muhammad's followers outside of the Arabian Peninsula through a synthesis of Islamic and non-Islamic sources, yielding admirable results in what remains the standard account of these events.¹⁴ Donner's more recent study *Muhammad and the Believers* presents a compelling reconstruction of earliest Islam using both Islamic and non-Islamic sources.¹⁵ Likewise Crone herself and Gerald Hawting have both published a number of excellent studies on earliest Islam using these sources.¹⁶ I have myself also attempted two studies of early Islam that aim to synthesize evidence from the complete range of available sources.¹⁷ And Sean Anthony's recent monograph *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith* offers an outstanding exemplary model of how the Islamic and non-Islamic source can be productively used in tandem.¹⁸ Yet by far the most significant work on these non-Islamic sources is the magisterial inventory of these traditions in Robert Hoyland's *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*.¹⁹ Indeed, given Hoyland's near exhaustive catalog of these sources and their content, one might well wonder what is the need for the present volume. Likewise, Michael Penn's recent *When Christians First Met Muslims* provides interested readers with a ready sourcebook of the earliest Syriac writings on Islam.²⁰ In light of these two fine studies in particular, then, why would there be a need to publish this anthology of non-Islamic witnesses to the rise of Islam? Is not such a collection merely superfluous at this point?

In fact, this collection offers something quite different from these earlier publications. In contrast to Hoyland's tome, which includes at least some discussion of nearly every contemporary text that merely mentions Islam, I have instead focused on a limited number of sources, offering a curated selection chosen on the basis of their

quality as witnesses to the rise of Islam. To merit inclusion in this volume, a source should ideally satisfy two criteria: (1) it must date with a high degree of probability from the first century of Islam; and (2) it must convey information concerning the religious beliefs and practices of Muhammad's followers. Mere mentions of the "Arabs," reports of battles, discussions of diplomacy and other political issues, and so on have been largely excluded. It should be noted, however, that I have made certain exceptions to the second point for a handful of important sources that are noteworthy for their very early witness to Muhammad and his new religious movement. Moreover, in contrast to Hoyland's book, the focus here is on the texts themselves, each of which we give in translation—something that Hoyland does only piecemeal and selectively. And while Penn's collection offers extensive translations from a range of sources, he limits his collection to only writings in Syriac and aims primarily to show how Syriac Christians responded to the rise of Islam. My objective, however, is to present something rather different. Each of the sources included in this volume holds significant value for understanding the early history of Muhammad's new religious movement itself. Moreover, while the Syriac tradition is of course vital for understanding the formation of Islam, as readers soon will see, it is by no means uniquely or singularly important. If one's goal is to use non-Islamic sources as important witnesses to the rise of Islam, then one must look beyond Syriac to the other linguistic communities of the late ancient Near East, including Greek, Hebrew, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, and even Latin.

Readers familiar with some of my earlier publications will notice that this volume seeks to make some similar arguments about the nature of the religious movement founded by Muhammad that have already been raised in those studies. The main difference, however, lies in the approach. Rather than focusing on a theme—the end of Muhammad's life or apocalypticism, for instance, in this book we

instead present all the relevant contemporary witnesses to the rise of Muhammad's new religious community from the non-Islamic primary sources themselves, allowing readers to encounter them directly. The result is not really a general reader for an introductory course on Islam (although, depending on the approach taken by the instructor, why not?). Instead, this volume seeks to encourage more attention to these sources and their historical witness to the rise of what would become Islam, especially in university classrooms where questions about Muhammad and the rise of Islam are engaged more specifically and narrowly. Yet I suspect that this anthology will also be of use to specialists in the study of early Islam and late antiquity, both graduate students and more advanced scholars, since most individuals working in these fields do not have facility in all the languages represented by the included texts. In many respects, I conceive of this volume as sharing much in common with Wilken's seminal volume *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, cited above, albeit with more direct attention to the texts themselves.²¹

As a further point of clarification, I would note that in the end-notes I frequently refer readers to my earlier publications for further clarification of various points. This pattern should not be taken as a sign of vanity—as if to suggest that only my work on these topics is worth consulting. Far from it: this is a matter of convenience. Since in these works I have already engaged a wide range of scholarship on a variety of matters, I refer readers to my publications in lieu of reproducing their arguments and references in the commentaries or notes of this volume. Readers can find in these publications discussions of the range of scholarly opinion on given topics along with references to other important works on these same subjects. To facilitate direct interaction with the texts, I have presented them in the following manner. Each text is preceded by a sort of basic introduction, providing the reader with the essential details of who wrote it, when, where, and why, insofar as we can know. These introductions