

The Historian, The Believer, and the Qur'an¹

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Can we understand the Qur'ān without knowing its historical context? The answer is, probably, no—but we have to try, because so far there is no alternative: the Qur'ān, at least from the perspective of Western historians, has yet be placed convincingly in a secure historical context. There is still no definite consensus on what the text originally was, what its original social setting and role may have been, how and when and where it came together, or even whether the Qur'ān that has existed for at least twelve centuries originated as a unitary document or whether it is, rather, a compilation of once separate materials coming, perhaps, from different communities.

Given this grave uncertainty over the Qur'ān's context, scholars must reverse the usual procedure when studying a text: rather than using the context to illuminate the meaning of the text, we must start with the Qur'ān text itself, and try to deduce from hints inside it what a plausible historical context (or several contexts, in case it is not a unitary text) might be.

The Qur'ān, unfortunately, offers few decisive clues that suggest anything precise about its original context. The very fact that it is written in Arabic—or at least, mostly in Arabic—gives us only a general idea of where and when the text may have emerged. (When, because we know that Arabic was barely written before the sixth century CE and only emerged as a literary idiom in the seventh.) There may be a more meaningful set of clues to be found in the Qur'ān's frequent references to “Biblical” material—that is, to characters and stories well-known from the older Judaeo-Christian literary traditions of the Near East. But, given this obvious fact, what historical setting could have produced such a text? The Qur'ān's “Biblical” materials have attracted the attention of scholars since the beginning of serious studies of the Qur'ān in the

¹ I am grateful to Carel Bertram for helpful comments on the draft of this article.

West, and the hope remains strong that close study of these passages may help us to establish at least the Qur'ān's *literary* context, that is, its affiliation with other texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We shall have more to say about this below, but for the moment we can note that efforts to pin down just which earlier literary materials may have the closest relationship to the Qur'ān have so far been inconclusive. In any case, even if we were able to determine more clearly the Qur'ān's literary context, doing so would not necessarily tell us exactly what its historical context was.

Muslim tradition, of course, provides great detail on the presumed historical context in which the Qur'ān appeared: the now-familiar story of the prophet Muhammad, Meccan paganism, God's revelations to the prophet, Muhammad's founding of a community in Medina, his struggles with his opponents, and the codification of the Qur'an during the era of conquests that followed Muhammad's death. This traditional Islamic "origins story," as I like to call it, has the virtue of a compelling plot-line, but it is deemed wanting by most Western scholars for at least two reasons. One is because it is a literary tradition of later—sometimes much later—date, and hence likely contains much anachronistic and idealizing material. This is a problem now familiar to almost everyone and I need not belabor it further here. The second reason the traditional origins story has been problematic for Western scholars is because of the way it presents Muhammad's, and the Qur'ān's, relationship to Judaism and Christianity. For, in the traditional origins narrative, Jews are presented as hostile to Muhammad, certainly not a source of inspiration to him, and Christians are entirely absent from the context in which Muhammad lived and worked. One gets the sense that the tradition is not presenting us with an accurate picture of Muhammad's relations with the earlier monotheisms, a feeling that is very strong today, when numerous recent studies have brought convincing evidence that Syriac Christianity and the Syriac language were in some still undefined way an important part of the Qur'ān's *Sitz im Leben* and had a significant influence on the text, or at least on parts of it.

It is striking, then, that despite the manifest inadequacies of the traditional Islamic origins narrative as a contextualization for the Qur'ān, most Western scholars have nonetheless based their understanding of the Qur'ān's context on that very origins narrative, accepting with lesser or greater modifications the framework provided by the *Sīra*. In particular, they have generally followed the classification of the Qur'ān's contents into Meccan and Medinan passages. This basic division, and the identification of three phases in the Meccan revelations, was a system first advanced in the West by Gustav Weil in 1844, and has been generally adopted by later scholars albeit with many attempts to further refine the system (e.g. by T. Nöldeke and F. Schwally, R. Bell, R. Blachère, T. Nagel).

Perhaps most Western scholars adopted the basic framework provided by the *Sīra* simply because there is no real alternative: we lack almost entirely documents and contemporary sources for Islam's origins. Whatever the reason, we find that much Western scholarship—even as it pours criticism on the reliability of the traditions it broadly designates as the *sīra* literature—tacitly or explicitly accepts at least the basic outlines of the traditional origins narrative when attempting to analyze the Qur'ān. This includes those many scholars who were particularly interested in establishing the nature of the relationship between Muhammad and the Jews (and, possibly, Christians) of Arabia, such as Abraham Geiger, Charles C. Torrey, and Richard Bell. It includes also those who portrayed the life of the prophet Muhammad in a relatively conservative or traditional way, such as A. Sprenger, W. Muir, M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, W. M. Watt, M. Rodinson, and, relatively recently, F. E. Peters. It includes some who have attempted a more radical re-evaluation of the traditional material in some way, such as G. Lüling and J. Chabbi. It also underlies some studies devoted to the form of the Qur'ān text, such as that of A. Neuwirth.

We might say, then, that the mainstream of Western scholarship has historically been much more willing to challenge or reject the Islamic tradition's views on the nature of Qur'ān itself, than it has been to criticize the tradition's view of the Qur'ān's historical context.

In recent years, several scholars have broken from this mould and attempted to study the Qur'ān, or to depict the origins of Islam, in a manner that dispenses entirely with the contextual framework provided by the *Sīra*. John Wansbrough's *Qur'anic Studies* (1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu* (1988) seem to have begun the process;² in both works Wansbrough adopted a frankly agnostic attitude toward the origins period, refusing to speculate about the history of the prophet on the grounds that the reports about him in Muslim tradition tell us only about his later image, not about the historical Muhammad. Wansbrough further asserted that the Qur'ān actually came together not in Arabia but rather in a monotheistic "sectarian milieu" somewhere in Mesopotamia or Syria, although he remained vague on exactly where. He also argued that the Qur'ān text crystallized as scripture gradually and much later than Muslim tradition says, claiming that it did not attain the status of scriptural canon until as much as 200 years after the time of Muhammad. Wansbrough's hypothesis that the Qur'ān originated in an extra-Arabian monotheistic environment was further developed by G. Hawting.³ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook had also proposed, at the same time Wansbrough was publishing his ideas (1977), that the Qur'ān may have been a product of a north-Arabian or southern Syrian environment rather than of Mecca.⁴

Even more radical are those scholars who argue that the prophet did not even exist, but is merely a literary construct assembled by Muslims of the eighth and later centuries C.E. in order to provide a heroic founder-figure for their new religion and state. The archaeologist Yehuda Nevo, inspired by Wansbrough's work and his own archaeological findings in the Negev, argued that a Byzantine withdrawal from Syria in the seventh century resulted in the rise

² J. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; *idem*, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

³ G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁴ P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

of local Arab chieftains who consolidated their power to form the Umayyad state. In Nevo's view, both what is usually termed the "Islamic conquest" or "Arab conquest" and the figure of the prophet Muhammad (as well as Muhammad's supposedly pagan environment in Mecca) were literary fictions.⁵ Volker Popp, in a long essay relying in part on numismatic evidence, also alleged that the prophet never existed except as a literary fiction.⁶ In his view, the Byzantines were forced out of Syria by resurgent Nestorian Christian tribesmen from Iraq, formerly part of the Sasanian army, who made common cause with the Monophysites of Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Near East to drive out the hated Orthodox. Having done so, these Iraqi Nestorians (according to Popp) established themselves as rulers in Syria—we know them as the Umayyads. Popp's theory is supported by an essay by C. Luxenberg in the same volume, in which he analyzes 'Abd al-Malik's inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock, arguing that they represent a non-trinitarian form of Christianity (the references to Muhammad *rasūl Allāh* Luxenberg claims are allusions to Jesus, "God's highly-praised messenger").⁷

While independence of thought is certainly a virtue, I must admit that I find unconvincing these efforts to reconstruct Islam's origins and to explain the historical context of the Qur'ān in a manner that rejects completely the framework provided by Muslim tradition. To list quickly some of the obvious objections to the main skeptical hypotheses:

-Non-existence of prophet theory – This willfully chooses to ignore early non-Muslim sources like the *Doctrina Jacobi* and the fragment from Matthew the Presbyter, as well as relatively early chronicles like those of Sebeos and John Bar Penkaye, all sources known for many years (and used by more responsible revisionist authors like Crone and Cook). And, to go a bit beyond the

⁵ Y. D. Nevo and J. Koren, *Crossroads to Islam. The origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2003.

⁶ V. Popp, "Die frühe Islamgeschichte nach inschriftlichen und numismatischen Zeugnissen," in Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin (eds.), *Die dunklen Anfänge. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, n.p.: Verlag Hans Schöner, 2005, pp. 16-123.

⁷ C. Luxenberg, "Neudeutung der arabischen Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem," in Ohlig and Puin (eds.), *Die dunklen Anfänge*, pp. 124-47.

time of the prophet, the assertion of Nevo and Popp, for example, that the early caliphs are also fictions, ignores the evidence of Chinese annals (which mention the murder of 'Uthmān)⁸ and the recent discovery of an inscription/graffito that mentions 'Umar.⁹ Nevo's assertion that the Byzantines withdrew from Syria intentionally (and even, in his view, encouraged the emergence of sectarian forms of Christianity as they did so) strikes one as, shall we say, out of character for the emperors in Constantinople. Popp's and Luxenberg's assertion that the Umayyads were Christians is also hard to accept. Popp's claim that the Nestorian tribesmen whom we later come to know as the Umayyads would have found such ready support among the Monophysites of Syria and elsewhere seems far-fetched, in view of the fact that Monophysites and Nestorians had spent the previous century or so pouring polemical vitriol on each other (and not only on the Chalcedonians) for heresy. One also does not understand how these supposedly Nestorian tribesmen, formerly of the Sasanian army, made the theological shift to a non-trinitarian outlook on their way to becoming the Umayyads, as Luxenberg suggests, since the Nestorians certainly did not reject the notion of the Trinity.

-Late crystallization theory -- this is demonstrably wrong; for one thing, the Qur'an lacks the kinds of anachronisms that would have been inescapable had the text not stabilized before the first civil war (*fitna*) in 656-661.¹⁰ Moreover, recent work with some of the oldest extant Qur'an manuscripts seems to confirm that the text was already established as scripture no later than the end of the first century AH.¹¹ On the other hand, the traditional view that the whole Qur'an was the subject of secure oral recitation from the time of the prophet must also be wrong, because recent work has shown that some parts of the text, at least, could only have been

⁸ This and several other of the early sources mentioned above are collected in R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997.

⁹ M. Kawatoko, "Archaeological Survey of Najrān and Madīnah 2002," *A+tlāl* 18 (1426/2005), 45-59 at p. 52, and Plate 8.12.C.

¹⁰ F. M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: the beginnings of Islamic historical writing*, Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998, chap. 1, "The Date of the Qur'ānic Text," pp. 35-63.

¹¹ F. Déroche, "Manuscripts of the Qur'ān," *EQ* III, 255-73.

transmitted in written form, without the benefit of a controlling tradition of recitation.¹² So, while the basic *rasm* text must have been written down fairly early, its antecedents may have included both oral materials *and* written materials, some of which may go back to the prophet or may even antedate the prophet. And they may (or may not) be diverse in origin.

-Sectarian milieu theory (that the Qur'ān crystallized in an environment of monotheistic debate, not in a pagan environment): this seems to be true.¹³ But the location of this monotheistic sectarian milieu is still far from clear; which bring us to the--

-Extra-Arabian origins theory – this seems unlikely; there are some hints in the Qur'ān that the text, or parts of it, may indeed have coalesced in Arabia,¹⁴ and there is little, if any, positive evidence pointing to a likely venue outside Arabia.¹⁵ But we still don't know exactly where in Arabia, and it would have to have been in a monotheistic setting in Arabia about which the tradition is silent; here perhaps the views of Lüling, who argued that the Qur'ān contained reworked liturgical materials of a hypothesized Meccan or Hijāzī Christian community, may bear further consideration.¹⁶ So even if Arabia does turn out to have been the historical context of the Qur'ān, as seems likely to this author, it may be an Arabian environment vastly different than anything with which we are familiar from the *Strā*'s picture of Muhammad's Mecca and Medina. As sheer speculation, for example, we might propose that different parts of the text hailed from different monotheistic communities in different parts of Arabia, and were pieced

¹² On this, see J. A. Bellamy, "Some proposed emendations to the text of the Koran," *JAOS* 113 (1993), 562-73; *idem*, "More proposed emendations to the text of the Koran," *JAOS* 116 (1996), 196-204; F. M. Donner, "Qur'ānic *furqān*," *JSS* 52, 2007, 279-300.

¹³ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, has made a convincing case for this, although his insistence that the location of this sectarian milieu must be outside Arabia is not convincing.

¹⁴ Donner, *Narratives*, loc. cit.

¹⁵ Hawting's failure to provide any evidence for an extra-Arabian venue for the Qur'ān in his *The Idea of Idolatry* is quite striking, since this assertion is one of the main points of his book; evidently the evidence does not exist.

¹⁶ G. Lüling, *Der christliche Kult an der vorislamischen Kaaba*, Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1977; *idem*, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān*, Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974.

together in the early decades of the seventh century; but other possible speculative reconstructions might prove just as fruitful in explaining the limited evidence available.

Clearly, the *Sīra*'s vision, as a historical reconstruction of Islam's origins, has grave weaknesses. Moreover, a recent study of the fall of the Sasanians by P. Pourshariati on the basis of coins, seals, and a re-analysis of the Arabic sources suggests that there may be serious problems with the chronology of the traditional Muslim conquest narratives and, consequently, of the prophetic biography that is usually placed immediately before the conquest.¹⁷ But at this point, it seems likely that some aspects of the traditional *Sīra* framework may, in the end, emerge as historically sound. My own sense is that the tradition's presentation of the period following the *hijra* is more credible than it is for the period before the *hijra*, reports about which seem overwhelmingly legendary in character. But in the process of reworking and redaction to which early reports may have been subjected, the elements that would most likely have been subjected to the greatest modification (in order to bring them in line with later realities and needs) would be matters relating to theological doctrines and communal orientations—precisely those dimensions of the historical record that would be most crucial to understanding the historical context of the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān between Historians and Believers

There is another issue to be addressed, however, when considering revisionist work on Islam's origins, besides its impact on the work of scholars who wish to understand the Qur'ān for scientific reasons. That other issue is, of course, the impact such work has on believing Muslims, and on the way they view the work of historians. Even the most heedless of historians among us must know that our investigations into Islam's origins, in particular into the context,

¹⁷ Parvaneh Pourshariati, *The Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008, 166-73 and 281-85.

origins, and history of the Qur'ān text, will be of the greatest interest to believers. Many believers may turn to the work of historians in the hope of securing a better understanding of the Qur'an and of the life of the prophet who was, in their view, the vehicle of the Qur'an's delivery to humankind. Although revisionist theories may be unsettling even to some historians—those who are loathe to abandon the comfortable sense of mastery they long enjoyed over the traditional narrative material, or who have staked their reputations closely on a more traditional vision of Islam's origins—they are sure to be even more disturbing to Believers, for whom the Qur'ān is nothing less than God's eternal word as revealed to His prophet Muhammad, their wellspring of guidance in this life, and their roadmap to eternal salvation in the life to come.

It may seem inappropriate even to raise this issue in a piece addressed to historians and critically-minded students of the Qur'ān as text. My goal in doing so, however, is two-fold. On the one hand, I want to make clear that as historians and scholars we must pursue our researches wherever they lead us, even if the results of our explorations seem unsettling to some—whether they be fellow scholars or believing Muslims. On the other hand, I hope to show that the apparent clash between historians and believers over fundamentals of Muslims' faith is just that, apparent, and not real.

Most of you I am sure have already noted my allusion to the title of the classic book by Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, published in 1966.¹⁸ In this work Harvey, a historian of religion who before his retirement taught at Stanford University, made the point that a true believer in the doctrines of a revealed religion cannot also claim to be a historian of the crucial events of that religion, because the nature of the historian's craft requires that he or she remain intellectually free to challenge, to doubt, and if necessary to reject, the validity of any historical source, without exception. Harvey was concerned particularly with those professing Christians who have attempted to write the history of the origins of Christianity, as the subtitle of

¹⁸ V. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: the morality of historical knowledge and Christian belief*, New York: Macmillan, 1966.

his book makes clear: *the morality of historical knowledge and Christian belief*. He therefore focuses on showing that someone who is a sincere Christian, which involves a pre-commitment to certain gospel narratives as absolutely true, cannot also claim to be a historian studying those same gospel narratives, because his religious pre-commitments prevent him or her from subjecting those sources to the critical scrutiny that is the first obligation of the historian. But Harvey's analysis and his conclusions are just as relevant to those of us who wish to study Islam's origins, or for that matter, the sensitive foundation-stories of any revealed religion. The most obvious implications for us would be that no believing Muslim--that is, someone who accepts Muhammad as prophet and the Qur'ān as God's revealed word--can also truly be a historian of Islam's origins. We might rephrase Harvey's insight in the following way: the believer in a revealed religion cannot also act as a historian of that religion's origins because the discipline of history is itself a kind of faith-system, a rival faith-system if you will, in that history also requires absolute fidelity to certain basic assumptions. The historian's assumptions, however, are rooted in the use of reason rather than in reliance on received knowledge.

We could, with Harvey, stop here and simply acknowledge the stark reality of an unbridgeable gulf separating the historian and the believer. But I think there is some benefit in following this line of thought a step or two further. To do so, however, requires us to consider a bit more fully the nature of the science or craft of historical study.

As we just noted, the historian, no less than the believer in a revealed religion, operates within a kind of faith-system--a system of assumptions that he or she takes as binding and absolute. I see in particular three such assumptions on the part of historians. The first is a belief in the power of human reason and logical analysis, and a commitment to using logic and reasoning to solve intellectual problems—including the problems inherent in reconstructing and interpreting the past, which is what historians normally do. Historians base their explorations of the past on reasoned analysis even when they recognize that there are limits to what reasoned analysis can achieve in the reconstruction of the past. If, for example, the evidence for a

particular historical phenomenon is very limited, the historian may only be able to make educated guesses based on such parallels as exist from other historical phenomena that seem comparable. The result of such an operation is not historical certainty, but rather a kind of approximation or, better, a tentative hypothesis about what might have happened in this particular case. Indeed, the historian's deductions about the past are always in some measure hypotheses, subject to amendment or even total rejection if new, contrary evidence comes to light. As a general rule, of course, deductions about historical phenomena for which very rich and diverse evidence exists are likely to be more "solid," that is, more or less unassailable in their main lines and only subject to revision in matters of detail or nuance. But even in the best-documented eras of history, the historian encounters gaps in the evidence that leave him or her essentially unable to interpret it. We know, for example, a great deal about the events of the end of World War II and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but historians are not agreed on why President Truman decided to bomb Japan with these weapons. Was it to make the cost of continued resistance clear to the Japanese and so to persuade them to surrender, thus saving thousands of lives (American and Japanese) that would have been lost had American forces needed to fight their way through the Japanese islands in pursuit of victory? Or was it to demonstrate that America already had the bomb and would use it, if necessary, thus signaling to Josef Stalin not to advance his Soviet troops too far westward in Europe? Or were both considerations at play in Truman's mind, along possibly with others? Despite all we know about this era in history, we do not have the decisive evidence that could provide the historian with an unequivocal conclusion on Truman's motivations.

It is this fact--the almost inevitable contingency of all historical deductions--that makes the pursuit of history profoundly different from the "truths" embraced by a believer, even though both the historian and the believer might be said to be adherents of faith-systems. But, we now see that the faith-systems of believers and historians are of different kinds. Whereas the believer accepts without question a certain vision of the past, the historian accepts without

question *nothing* about the past; his “faith” is an absolute faith in his *methods*, not in the *results* of his analysis, even though he may be able to defend his deductions with compelling logical argument, for he realizes that his results remain contingent pending the discovery of new relevant evidence, or the cogent reevaluation of existing evidence.

The second tenet of faith of the historian is a belief in what we might call the essential humanness of humanity across time and space. In other words, the historian believes that people of other times, other places, and even other cultures share with those of us alive today essential human qualities—emotions, needs, desires; for if they did not, we could not hope to understand them and their motivations. In the faith-system of the historian, people of past times are not an alien breed, they are human like us and so can be understood by us. The historian must, of course, make great efforts to understand the different cultural systems in which people of the past lived, because cultures shape profoundly how people act or react in a given situation. But it is generally agreed that this is possible, so that the actions of people in the past can be understood and evaluated by a process akin to metaphor linking “us” with “them.” And, indeed, it is often this quasi-metaphorical connection between “us” and “them” that makes their past relevant and meaningful to us, the very reason we wish to study their past in the first place and make it part of our own history.

Historians also make a third assumption, or have a third article of faith, if you will, beyond their belief in reason and in the innate humanness of peoples of all eras: and that is a belief in the immutability of the laws of nature. It is not merely the *people* of earlier eras that resemble people today; the *physical world* in which those earlier people lived also operated according to the same principles we can see in operation around us. Since the historian explains events of the past by a kind of metaphor with the present, his efforts would be futile if the universe or physical environment did not always operate according to the same rules—for example, if the laws of gravity did not apply always and everywhere, or if a single physical object (or person) could be in two different places at the same time.

It is precisely here that the historian and the believer in a revealed religion come most acutely into the conflict described by Harvey. For revealed religions always involve the supernatural. That is, they describe events in which the divine, which transcends nature, interferes in some way with the normal processes of the natural world, whether it is God parting the Red Sea to save Moses and the Children of Israel, or God resurrecting the crucified Jesus from the dead, or God downloading installments of His word into the prostrate, perspiring person of the prophet Muhammad. Such events are outside the realm of the natural, beyond the normal functioning of the physical world as we know it. That is, indeed, precisely why they are remembered and celebrated by believers: it is their supernatural character that makes them special, miraculous, and the focus of commemoration and faith.

The supernatural, however, is by definition beyond the competence of the historian. For the historian, as we have seen, can only evaluate reports on the assumption that the normal laws of nature apply at all times. Events of a supernatural kind exist on a different plane, so to speak, than historical events, a plane that the historian cannot access. Confronted with a report that describes a supernatural event, the historian can evaluate the validity of the report only as far as what we might call the external trappings of that supernatural event. So, for instance, if he had sufficient other sources, he might be able to confirm that Moses and the Israelites marched from the Nile valley on a certain day, that Pharaoh's army left in pursuit some time thereafter, and that somehow the Israelites show up at a later time in the Sinai, and that Pharaoh's army never returns. He could say something like, "the story seems to be true to this extent, that it fits other known facts of who was where and when, etc." But the parting of the waters—the actual supernatural event that, according to the story, was God's act of salvation for the Israelites—this the historian simply cannot evaluate. He might be tempted to say that the parting of the waters is a pious legend, that is a fabrication, inserted into an otherwise plausible

scenario (“historicized” as I like to say);¹⁹ but as a historian, he simply cannot say affirm that it is true. By the same token, however, the historian also cannot prove that the parting of the waters as reported in the narrative is false; as a secular-minded person, that is, as a historian, he can say that he doesn’t believe the story, but because it involves an event that is explicitly represented as supernatural, it is simply beyond his competence as an historian to evaluate its supernatural content.

The implications of this fact are, I think, far from trivial. Since the faith-claims of revealed religions reside above all in supernatural events, and since the historian and historical analysis are unable to evaluate these supernatural events, the work of the historian cannot threaten, or call into question, the faith-claims of such religions. By examining the traditional narratives that describe the circumstances in which the supernatural events occur, the historian may be able to debunk (or confirm) many aspects of those stories, but by doing so he does not, and cannot, discredit the faith-claims themselves. This fact should be of some comfort to believers in revealed religions who find the work of historians on their sacred traditions unsettling.

The fact that the work of historical analysis and the faith-claims of revealed religions exist on different planes that do not intersect has another important implication—in a sense, the inverse of the first just noted. Just as historical analysis is incapable of invalidating supernaturally-based faith-claims, we can say also that historical narrations cannot validate faith-claims, either. This realization will not bother the historian at all, but it may be come as a surprise to many believers who have come to revere the origins narratives that revealed religions use to explain the supernatural events surrounding their beginnings—whether these stories be the gospel narratives of Jesus’s resurrection, or the Hebrew Bible’s account of Moses receiving the law, or the *Sīra*’s depiction of how Muhammad received the Qur’ān. The basic fact, however, is that the purveyors of these stories were engaging in a kind of pious fraud (although

¹⁹ On “historicization” in this sense, see Donner, *Narratives*, 209-14.

of course they did not see it as such), by implying, or asserting outright, that the narratives they related could, in fact, confirm the validity of the supernatural events and the faith-claim rooted in them. But, as we have seen, the supernatural is simply beyond the capacity of historical discourse to engage. Believers must believe what they believe, in short, on faith (as we say), not because a story “proves” the truth of their religious beliefs—for no narrative that can be historically verified can actually do this. Those believers who are convinced of the truth of a religion’s faith-claims merely because of the cogency of its origins narratives—and they are many—are leaning on a weak reed indeed; and if their faith cannot survive without the crutch of such narratives, then we might say that they are not endowed with a very robust faith. But, by the same token, no historian can pretend to be able to disprove such faith-claims themselves.

Where, then, does all this leave us in relation to the study of the Qur’ān and its historical context? Islamic tradition presents the revelation of the Qur’ān as resembling what might be called a “nervous crisis” on the part of the prophet: that is, when he was receiving the divine word, Muhammad is said to have fallen to the ground, oblivious to the world around him, trembling and perspiring heavily; then, after he recovered, he found that a new piece of revelation was burned indelibly into his memory so that he could recite it.²⁰ There are also numerous reports about how the revelation assumed written form, and how it was edited together to form the *mu+s+haf* or Qur’ānic vulgate, the uniformity of which is in any case unclear given the existence of numerous widely-accepted “canonical variants.”²¹ Let us suppose that

²⁰ A selection of reports on this is found in Ibn Sa’d, *+Ṭabaqāt* (ed. Sachau), I/1, 131-32.

²¹ On the traditional reports about the collection of the Qur’ān, see *El²*, “al-+Kur’ān, 3.a . The ‘collection’ of the +Kur’ān” (A. T. Welch); *GdQ2*, Zweiter Teil: *Die Sammlung des Qorāns* by F. Schwally; J. Burton, *The Collection of the Qur’ān*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 117-240; H. Motzki, “The Collection of the Qur’ān. A reconsideration of Western views in light of recent methodological developments,” *Der Islam* 78, 2001, 1-34; J. Burton, “The Collection of the Qur’ān,” *EQ* I, 351-61. On the canonical variants, see for an introduction *El²*, “al-+Kur’ān, 3.b. Variant readings and Companion codices” (A. T. Welch); also E. Beck, “Der ‘uthmānische Kodex in der Koranlesung des zweiten Jahrhunderts,” *Orientalia* 14, 1945, 355-73; *idem*, “‘Arabiyya, Sunna und ‘āmma in der Koranlesung des zweiten Jahrhunderts,”

serious historical research proves that these accounts about the manner of revelation cannot be true; does that prove that the Qur'ān is not divine word? Or, let us take matters a step further, and imagine, for the sake of our discussion, that somehow we discovered a videotape of Muhammad working privately in his study, composing passages of the Qur'ān while referring to older religious texts from his personal library, such as the Hebrew Bible, various Syriac lectionaries, and other writings from the late antique Judeo-Christian tradition. Would this discovery prove that the Qur'ān was not divine revelation, but merely Muhammad's own creation? The answer, of course, even in this preposterous case, is no—for the simple reason that no one can claim with any certainty or authority to know how a transcendent God would choose to communicate with a prophet. Perhaps God's chosen method, at least in this case, was to select a person to be His prophet, then to put in the path of that person a variety of suggestive texts, and finally to inspire the prophet to assemble the revelation from them. Such an assumption is no less plausible than the idea that prophecy takes the form of a "nervous crisis." Even if the historian were to discover that the Qur'ān, or some other "revealed" text, was actually a pastiche of phrases taken from cereal boxes, that discovery would say nothing about the status of the text itself as divine word. The fact that long-standing tradition in the Near East viewed prophecy as a process that resembled a nervous crisis is really irrelevant to the question of the Qur'ān's status as divine word, which is a matter of faith for the believer to decide for him or herself. A convincing story in this genre does not confirm the divine status of the text, nor does proving such a story false disconfirm the divine status of the text.

I raise these points because, as I survey recent scholarly discussion about the Qur'ān, I sometimes see evidence of two trends that threaten to interfere with the scientific pursuit of the historical truth, and therefore do not belong in our discourse. The first trend is a tendency of some conservative and doctrinaire Muslims to criticize those historians who engage in critical

scrutiny of the traditions of Islam's origins on the grounds that, by doing so, they undermine the faith of Muslims. Such critics sometimes also imply or state explicitly, as a corollary, that the historians who are engaged in this nefarious work must be motivated by religious polemic or personal animus against Islam. As we have seen, however, the first part of this accusation is simply unfounded: historical research cannot touch the faith-claims of believers, which exist independent of the realm and tools of the historian. It is true that the historian's discoveries may require believers to change their view of cherished origins narratives, requiring them to see them now as symbolic or allegorical stories used to articulate their faith-claims, rather than as literal records of the past, but the transcendent theological propositions attached to those narratives carry the same potency either way. The implication for those of us who wish to engage in such historical research is that we should go full speed ahead and not trim our sails to placate irate believers. We should, to be sure, try to explain to distressed believers exactly why our work is not in any way a threat to their faith (perhaps along lines suggested above); ideally, we should have believers as allies in our researches, not as adversaries. But since this cannot always be, we should not allow ourselves to be deterred from our work by the misguided ire of those who fail to understand the radical discontinuity that separates belief from history.

The second trend that seems to me sometimes manifest in studies of the Qur'ān and its historical context is almost the direct opposite of the preceding one, but it is nonetheless relevant to the question of the historian and the believer. Many early Western studies of Islam's origins were polemical, carried out by scholars who did, in fact, have a religious agenda. Even some highly learned works, such as C. C. Torrey's *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*²² or R. Bell's *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*,²³ seem to me to fall in this category. Often such works used crass reductionism in an effort, or with the hope, to demonstrate that, in some

²² C. C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, New York: Jewish Institute of Religion, 1933.

²³ R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, London: Macmillan, 1926.

way, Islam was derivative and therefore inauthentic, “false,” because some key components of it could be traced to another (usually their favored) tradition, notably Judaism or Christianity.

The reductionist strategem, however, although often satisfying as polemic, is superficial as a tool in the history of ideas. The bare fact that some story, concept, phrase, or concern was “borrowed” from another, older tradition does tell us something, maybe even something of interest, but such borrowing qualifies as a routine fact of history, not the foundation for a far-reaching value judgment. For the polemicist who engages in reductionist argument usually fails to ask other questions that are equally important, or even more important, than the question of what was borrowed. One must also ask, for example, what was *not* borrowed from the older tradition. And why were some things borrowed and others not? What purpose did the thing borrowed serve in the original tradition, and what role did it play in the new one? Does the borrowed item undergo a transformation of meaning in its passage into the new tradition? These and other questions make it clear that an act of borrowing, far from merely showing the dependence of one tradition on another, actually qualifies as a creative act, for the setting in which the “borrowed” item appears is often entirely different from its old setting, and is sometimes imbued with completely new meaning.

I have made this little detour into earlier studies of the Qur’ān and the problem of reductionism because I think that the problem persists even today. I am convinced that most of the scholars who work on the Qur’ān and its historical context today are motivated by a desire to discover the historical truth. But I sometimes get the uneasy feeling, as I read recent work on the Qur’an, that some of it is a little too enthusiastic about finding simplistic textual parallels, without bothering to ask about all the other dimensions of cultural transmission: the omissions, selectivity, transformations, etc.²⁴ This satisfaction with superficial “borrowings” smacks of the

²⁴ As an example, one might cite the work by G. Sawma, *the Qur’an Misinterpreted, Mistranslated, and Misread. The Aramaic Language of the Qur’an*, Plainsboro, N.J.: G. Sawma, 2006.

kind of reductionist approach described above (now focused more on Christian parallels, rather than the Jewish parallels that were more popular in the early twentieth century), and the unseemly enthusiasm that is sometimes palpable in such writings suggests that these authors [e.g. Sawma] are motivated on some deep, personal level not so much by the historian's desire to understand Islam and the Qur'an, as by the polemicist's desire to diminish, discredit, or refute Islam. As historians, we must continue our critical work, all the while being careful to hold at arm's length both Muslim apologists who would have us blunt our critical weapons, and scholars who would abuse those same critical weapons for polemical purposes. For the historian—including the historian who wishes to know the Qur'an's historical context—must always strive to *understand* the past, an undertaking for which polemical critique, no less than apologetic advocacy, can only stand as an obstacle.