

---

2020

## Arabia and the Birth of Islam: When History, Myth and Opinion Become Inseparable

Suleiman A. Mourad  
*Smith College*, [smourad@smith.edu](mailto:smourad@smith.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.smith.edu/rel\\_facpubs](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/rel_facpubs)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mourad, Suleiman A., "Arabia and the Birth of Islam: When History, Myth and Opinion Become Inseparable" (2020). Religion: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
[https://scholarworks.smith.edu/rel\\_facpubs/21](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/rel_facpubs/21)

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Religion: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu)

# Arabia and the Birth of Islam: When History, Myth and Opinion Become Inseparable

---

Suleiman A. MOURAD

Since the nineteenth century, modern historians have struggled to explain the origins of Islam and the nature of Muhammad's career, largely following scholarly agendas determined by European modernity. Armed with a variety of "scientific" tools (methodologies, theories, etc.), and hidden political and religious agendas, many a scholar have toiled with scanty historical evidence in order to produce smooth narratives that in their minds explain Meccan and Arabian society and the religious movement of Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> Probably the most stellar case was *Hagarism*, the epic monograph by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published in 1977.<sup>2</sup> The mania around *Hagarism* dissipated faster than its meteoric rise, when scholars realized its questionable and manipulative methodology and the double standards applied of doubting the Islamic narratives and blindly trusting alternative narratives.<sup>3</sup> The failure of *Hagarism* opened the door to others to try their luck, ranging from the wild (e.g., Yehuda Nevo and his fantastical theory of the emergence of Islam in the Negev in Palestine)<sup>4</sup> to the spectacular (Stephen Shoemaker's theory of Islam as a movement of urgent eschatological belief).<sup>5</sup>

---

(1) For an overview, see Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* (Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press, 2008); and Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 1–31.

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

(3) See, for instance, R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 84–85.

(4) Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).

(5) Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

One would think that we have learned the lesson, and we have learned it the hard way. Studies about Islam's origin have become embarrassingly awkward, at best historical fiction, that their damage far exceeds any imagined benefit. Aziz al-Azmeh has thrown his hat in the ring with *The emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*. A book that no doubt demonstrates al-Azmeh's vast knowledge and enormous reading, but unfortunately is only good to be shelved alongside this pedigree of books that speculate but do not get us anywhere close to a firm understanding about Islam's origin.

### **Historians as Religious Historians**

In the DNA of historians, there is the "storytelling" gene. However hard they try to resist it, it often takes control. The urge to narrate the history of Arabia before Islam and during the time of Muhammad requires much more than the scanty historical evidence we possess. The bigger problem is not in the questionable fillers (unsubstantiated information, modern theories and disciplinary perspectives) that historians have used to weave their narratives, but rather in the way fillers become confused as factual history and infused with meanings that are projected back to the societies being studied. The Achilles heel of historians is precisely this tendency to speculatively narrate, in the absence of or with very scant evidence, and advance hypotheses that they then mistake as history.

The basic fact remains unchanged. Our knowledge of the beginnings of Islam is that the evidence we possess is so scant that it does not provide any viable basis for solid research into Islam's origin. It is not about mastering languages and grand theories, or applying anthropological or sociological methodologies. History, as a modern discipline, relies on evidence (at least this is the claim about modern history as an academic discipline). History is vastly different from religious history. History is about facts that can be clearly linked to their time and verified. Religious history is what a group claims happened in the past without their ability to factually corroborate it. Often, historians are in no position to comment on religious history, for doing so means that they become sophists (I mean this in the sense of saying things that are not verifiable). To give an example, given the evidence that

currently exist, historians cannot contribute as historians to the debate about the historical Moses, either by affirmation or by refutation. When they do, they cease to be historians and become ideologues. I say this because we do not have historical evidence about Moses, and the only “evidence” is religious history, namely what Jews, Christians and Muslims believe happened.

Indeed, historians of pre-Islamic Arabia have the tendency, on the basis of very scant and insufficient evidence, to generalize patterns of belief, customs, attitudes, etc., as applicable to all of Arabia and the Arabs. Yet, we do not have any way to know whether or not those patterns were limited to specific cases, certain locales, or if they were negotiated by the same groups alongside other competing patterns. For example, a few pre-Islamic poets (such as Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma) used to invoke *dahr* (fate) in their poetry.<sup>6</sup> But what does this tell me as a historian other than a few poets in pre-Islamic Arabia invoked *dahr*? Does this mean that all the Arabs at that time believed in fate? Is this determinism or fatalism, or neither? Is it a hyperbole? In the absence of historical data, the historian is incapable of answering these questions, except by speculation. Speculations impose meanings in that the answers become the basis for reducing all of Arabian society to a specific pattern. The point here is that we cannot take one aspect alone as informative of how a society formed its belief system, values, behavior, motivations, etc., especially when that aspect is derived from speculation.

There is also the problem of binarism, which more often than not misleads rather than leads to correct conclusions. After all, the most sophisticated forms of manipulation of the law exist in societies that allege absolute obedience to the law, such as questionable complex schemes to evade taxation developed by financial and legal institutions in Europe and the US. The worse abuse of human life happen in societies that speak the most about the value and dignity of human life, such as the crimes against humanity the US has perpetrated on the world stage since the Second World War. Recently, climate change has become the most pressing concern on the minds of many groups around the world,

---

(6) See, for example, W. Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London: Luzac, 1949), 21–31; and idem, “Dahr” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*.

yet many of these groups partake in lifestyles that worsen the level of pollution. So, the very little that we might know about Arabian society does not help us understand all of Arabian society and impose a binary narrative.

### **The Problems with the Qur'an**

There are still major issues surrounding the Qur'an that we need to resolve before we can use it as a historical source for pre-Islamic Arabia and the Muhammad movement. For one, we have no way to determine whether Muhammad was the sole author of the Qur'an, if others in his movement had a role in its formation, or if the text as we have it preserves layers of material from different periods and origins. Every scholar who has used the Qur'an (including myself) has taken for granted the codex of 'Uthman as pretty much the revelation Muhammad told his followers he had received, even though Islamic history records a huge debate among Muslims regarding the shortfalls of 'Uthman's codex.<sup>7</sup> In other words, we have subscribed to a specific religious dogma, which is contested by many narratives that we find in early Islamic history. For instance, we are told that Ibn Mas'ud considered suras 1, 113 and 114 as not belonging to the Qur'an.<sup>8</sup> If so, who was their author, and what does that entail to our understanding of the Qur'an? There is also the criticism of the early Shi'is that all references to 'Ali and the family of the prophet Muhammad were removed from the codex of 'Uthman.<sup>9</sup> Would that change anything? There are equally many stories that indicate a number of verses were not included in the codex of 'Uthman, such as in the purported story attributed to 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar that a lot of the Qur'an was lost.<sup>10</sup> Malik b. Anas also reported that the prophet Muhammad forgot or was

---

(7) See for example, John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law: Islamic Theories of Abrogation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 1990), 43–55; and Muhammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Silent Qur'an & the Speaking Qur'an: Scriptural Sources of Islam between History and Fervor*, trans. Eric Ormsby (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 44–74.

(8) Amir-Moezzi, *Silent Qur'an*, 57.

(9) For an examination of Shi'i views on the codex of 'Uthman, see Amir-Moezzi, *Silent Qur'an*, 53–65.

(10) Al-Qasim b. Sallam, *Fada' il al-qur'an*, ed. Marwan 'Atiyya et al. (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1995), 320.

caused to forget some verses in order for him to produce in their place Sunna.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the theory of abrogation does not always explain why certain verses were “abrogated,” as in the case of the verse about the martyrs at Bi’r Ma’una.<sup>12</sup> In brief, when we restrict our examination to the codex of ‘Uthman, we leave out what could have been part of the pre-650 Qur’an, and thus project backwards the image contained in the codex of ‘Uthman as the exclusive window into the Muhammad movement and Arabian society at the time, rendering any observation we might advance as tenuous.

Indeed, any scholar working on early Islam cannot avoid the difficult question of what to do with the Qur’an. This is a very complicated issue, and at this point, given the political climate around the field of Islamic studies, it presents an impasse. I think Aziz al-Azmeh tries to dance around this issue. He doubtlessly raises very courageous challenges to traditional Islamic narratives, but remains within the broader boundaries of working with the codex of ‘Uthman, accepting the centrality of Muhammad and his sole engineering of the movement that came to be known as Islam, etc. The Islamic tradition itself is unsure how the Qur’an as a book came into existence. We are told the prophet Muhammad gathered it into a book (which was in early Islam the least credible story), we are also told that it was a committee during the reign of caliph ‘Uthman, around 650 that collected the Qur’an into a codex.<sup>13</sup> Al-Qasim b. Sallam (d. 838) alleged that Abu Bakr was the first to collect the Qur’an as a book.<sup>14</sup> Irrespective of these serious contradictions, it is completely lost to us how the Qur’an looked before it was made into a codex. To repeat, we are essentially clueless about this. If we speculate, our speculation does not become history to deduce from it clear knowledge about the Muhammad movement.

These issues are important because knowing the chronology and organization of the Qur’an before the damage done to it in 650 would

---

(11) Malik, *al-Muwattā*, ed. Muhammad F. ‘Abd al-Baqi (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Thaqafiyya, 1988) 1: 100; and Burton, *Sources of Islamic Law*, 46.

(12) Muslim, *Sahih*, ed. Muhammad F. ‘Abd al-Baqi (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1956), 1: 468; and Burton, *Sources of Islamic Law*, 52.

(13) For an overview, see John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur’an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

(14) Al-Qasim b. Sallam, *Fadāil al-qur’an*, 281.

give us access to the gradual development of the Muhammad movement, especially in terms of creed, understanding of the divine and its nature, dynamics of the group, etc. To make up for this disability, we depend on classical Islamic narratives to tell us about the chronology of the Qur'an. Scholars take it as a matter of disciplinary dogma to think of Meccan (divided into three stages) and Medinan suras.<sup>15</sup> But according to the Islamic tradition, some "Meccan" suras include verses from "Medinan" period, and many "Medinan" suras incorporated verses from the "Meccan" period. This blending is precisely what I call the damage done to the Qur'an (if we assume the Qur'an as a concept-book existed before 650). Again, we have no way to know in what condition and how the early Muslims really understood what the Qur'an meant before it became a codex. The current Qur'an only confuses us on this issue, as we are not sure if the term *qur'an* meant revelation, one verse, several verses, a sura, a set of suras, or everything, or something else altogether.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that some parts of the Qur'an are different from other parts in terms of style, language, size, etc. There are also verses and suras that seem more "developed" than other ones. But all of this is judged on the basis of modern literary theories, and on the assumption that they were from one author and represented a specific progression of that author's thinking. What if there were different authors, would this view still hold true? Equally valid as a hypothesis is that parts of the Qur'an could have been from a much older time, in which case comparing the suras does not necessarily lead to knowing any internal dynamics of the movement of Muhammad and the development of their beliefs. If one thing scholars who have studied the Qur'an have come to realize time after time is that it is incomparable to other books, and what applies to other books often fails to fit the Qur'an.

There is also another equally important problem relating to our assumption to treat the prophet Muhammad as the founder of Islam instead of focusing on a movement of which he was a (notable) member.

---

(15) See for example, Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 76–96.

(16) On the word Qur'an and what it means see the excellent study by Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

The Qur'an does not exclusively speak to Muhammad or through him. It equally speaks directly to a group that it often calls believers, instructing them about their religion and what they should do vis-a-vis others. There are also verses that record their direct voices, as in sura 1. Scholars of early Islam should start thinking about the Muhammad movement rather than about Muhammad as the sole force behind Islam. Our historical evidence seems to point in the direction that the Muslims in the seventh century (and even to some extent in the early eighth century) did not function as a religious community with a need to base their beliefs, laws, rituals, and general religious conduct on the Qur'an or the life of Muhammad. The Qur'an and Muhammad gradually eased their authority into these areas.<sup>17</sup> This also forces us to admit that the Qur'an at most can only give us partial access to the dynamics of the Muhammad movement.

The problem in the broader structure that we have left untouched is a dogmatic convention shared by many in the field of Islamic studies: that the Qur'an can give us full access to the religion of the early believers, that the singular addressee in the Qur'an is Muhammad, that the Qur'an as we have it represents 22 years of revelation he received, that it can tell us about Arabian belief systems and religious life, etc. I call this dogmatic convention because we inherited it from a selective reading of Islamic religious history, and, as such, when we adhere to this convention we are adhering to a religious dogma. The Qur'an gives us, no doubt, some information, but it is neither complete nor accurate, and we have no ability to determine if its information have specific or general applicability.

### **Paleo-Islam, Linearity and Questionable Methodologies**

There are some very significant points raised by al-Azmeh in *The Emergence of Islam*. His emphasis on the need to think of Islam in the broader context of Late Antiquity (which for at least the last thirty years have become a dominant view among scholars of Islam) is spot

---

(17) For an excellent study that discusses this process as it relates to the development of Islamic law, see Lena Salaymeh, *The Beginnings of Islamic Law: Late Antique Islamic Legal Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).



on.<sup>18</sup> He also makes a great point to urge that we treat the Islam of the Muhammad movement in a different way than the Islam that came to be defined by the Muslims in later centuries. I personally would not go all the way to calling this paleo-Islam because “paleo” forces us to accept a linear historical progression and cause/effect relationship between the two: Paleo-Islam and Islam. I think what we have here – and this is not exclusive to Islam – are processes that combine linearity (what came before causing what came next), backward-linearity (the present causing the past in the sense that a group invents a history to validate its beliefs and practices), and circularity (when linearity and backward-linearity start to feed into each other and “cause” each other).

Yet, the central point in al-Azmeh’s thesis about Muhammad who championed a little known local deity called Allah and gradually through “an indigenous process that utilized Biblical paradigm” infused him with monotheistic qualities and characteristics is a hard sell.<sup>19</sup> Al-Azmeh is right when he argues that we do not have any epigraphic evidence in the Hijaz (where Islam supposedly started) of a deity called Allah from before 600, and that many of the companions of Muhammad were unfamiliar with Allah.<sup>20</sup> But this is only partly true. We do not only lack contemporary evidence about Allah. We lack contemporary evidence about pretty much almost the entire religious scene in the Hijaz. What type of epigraphic evidence do we have about the deities in the Hijaz? Close to nothing, and absolutely not enough to allow for any history to be deduced. Some of Muhammad’s companions could not have heard of Allah, but the same Islamic sources that tell this also record that many of Muhammad’s contemporaries in Mecca were familiar with Allah and several persons in Mecca and Medina were called ‘Abd Allah.<sup>21</sup> If we say that those reports that feature Allah were edited, then we say that for a narrative to look authentic, it cannot have Allah in it. But we do not know historically if this is correct. We cannot start with a speculative assumption that Allah was not known in Mecca (which we

---

(18) Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and his People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1–46.

(19) Al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam*, 279–357.

(20) Al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam*, 280.

(21) See, for example, the list of names in Ibn Habib, *Kitab al-Muḥabbar*, ed. Ilse Lichtenstadter (Hyderabad: Dāirat al-Ma‘arif al-‘Uthmaniyya, 1942), 278–290.

lack proof of), and then dismiss the veracity of later historical accounts if they include the term Allah and credit those that use other referents. I am not suggesting the former are definitely correct, but this approach to treat what seems to us “ancient” and discredit what seems “edited” is a very questionable methodology. A case in point is the treatment of the satanic verses story as historical on the grounds that it shows Muhammad in a negative light.<sup>22</sup> As the late Shahab Ahmed has argued, the assumptions and conventions of later Muslim and modern scholars about the meanings and implications of this story are very different from those of its early transmitters.<sup>23</sup> In other words, what seems to us today as something negative and impossible to have been invented could have seemed for storytellers in the eighth century as very crucial to invent. What we take today as “plausible model of interpreting available evidence”<sup>24</sup> is not history or fact, it is a tool of speculative knowledge that we have applied to religious history in order to make sense of it and turn it into history. Nineteenth century European historians came up with what seemed to them an ingenious way of arriving at history about Jesus and early Christianity: remove all of the miracles and the superstitions, and voila, the rest is factual history.<sup>25</sup> What they missed was that it could have been the case that the miracle was what people believed was fact, and they had to invent a skeleton (stories) through which to express these miracles.

Essentially, the methodologies we have applied in modern studies on the origins of Islam have only succeeded in recycling selective religious history and present it as THE history of Islam. The interpretation of available evidence is conceptually a process tied to the condition of the interpreter, and this does not make the interpretation history. It only makes it an interpretation.

---

(22) See the discussion of it in al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam*, 323–326.

(23) Shahab Ahmed, “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses,” *Studia Islamica* 87.2 (1998): 69–74.

(24) Al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam*, 280.

(25) Such as in Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1863).