

What Is Late Antiquity and What Does the Qur'ān Have to Do With It?

The 1972 discovery of the most important document regarding the Qur'ān history at the Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā' proved beyond dispute that the text was transmitted semi-orally before 650 AD, thus silencing all faulty orientalist speculations about its historical time and location. This transmission took place, as Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi effectively demonstrate, “most likely via hearers who wrote down a text that was directed by the Prophet.”¹ Yet, Euro-American scholarship, which has largely focused on reconstructing the Qur'ān's textual and contextual history outside its cognate sources, has been slow in recovering from this shock. In the *medias res* of the chaos in the field of Qur'ānic studies today, two main interrelated strategies of exclusion stand out: opposition and avoidance. The first, initiated by John Wansbrough in the 1970s, has typically been an approach in which a scholar extends an act of unwarranted intellectual generosity in order to prove how a certain historical period, or an Arabic or Islamic source, is “problematic” and thus unreliable for objective scholarship on Islam.² The second approach avoids reference to Arabic and Islamic sources altogether under the pretext of perpetuating a non-Arabic origin (mostly Syriac) or historical repositioning of the Qur'ān as a rearticulation of the biblical tradition, a “cross-section” of late antique times, or both. It follows, at least by implication for these approaches, that any peninsular Arabic sources about the literary traditions and social habits of pre-Islamic Arabs, or about the customs and practices of Arabs and early Muslims immediately before and during the life of the Prophet, or even in the early decades of Islam, do not apply.³

In opposition to these exclusivist trends, a new school that ties the Qur'ān to late antique times has emerged with the prospect of “including” the Qur'ān and breaking away with the methodological foibles of exclusivist scholarship. This

“inclusion” entails an annexation of the Qur’ān into the same domain that constituted biblical history. Regardless of the Qur’ān’s origins, which this school seeks to resituate, late antiquarians maintain that the text should be integrated as part of the biblical tradition and studied on equal footing with the Torah and the Christian Bible.⁴ For centuries, this school maintains, the Qur’ān established itself as a *textus receptus*—a received text, a commanding sealed corpus, committed to memory, informed by and informing cultural traditions of the Islamic world and beyond. Since the findings of Sadeghi and Goudarzi were published more than a decade ago, it is possible that this new school materialized as a response to the discovery of the Ṣan‘ā’ palimpsest (Ṣan‘ā’ 1), a critical reassessment of the field’s exclusivism, or perhaps a modification and redirection of its force. After all, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in *Hagarism*, for instance, did ask credible questions, but they manufactured misguided answers. By the mid-1990s, numerous essays and books carrying the names “Islam” and “late antiquity” in the same title began to be published. Both Princeton University Press and Princeton’s Darwin Press embraced the initiative quite enthusiastically.⁵

As I argued earlier, the most prominent claims on the Qur’ān as a late antique text to this point come from Angelika Neuwirth, whose work provides the most elaborate model of late antiquarian approaches to the Qur’ān known in the Western academy.⁶ Now that Wansbrough’s and Crone’s hypotheses regarding the belated accumulation of the Qur’ān have become *passé*, Neuwirth’s approach comes across as a break with the parochial theologocentrism of her Euro-American predecessors. She positions the Qur’ān as part of the shared cultures that produced Jewish and Christian texts in the larger framework of late antiquity. She emphasizes that her approach to late antiquity treats it not as a historical period but as a “an epistemic space” in which polytheists, Jews, and Christians approached their variegated antiquities with inventive exegetical interpretations.⁷ In this larger context, Neuwirth advances the Qur’ān as a response to, or, more precisely, as a commentary on the rampant debates regarding divinity that were typical of late antiquity. To Neuwirth, the Qur’ān draws on rhetorical devices characteristic of Hellenistic culture that engage with and offer fresh theological premises for the *textus receptus* of late antiquity, which include Halakhic and Haggadic traditions of Judaism, as well as the writings of the early church fathers, while claiming its own place amid established Jewish and Christian traditions.⁸

More importantly, Neuwirth seeks to carve an epistemological space for the Qur’ān between two opposing poles: a traditional Muslim and non-Muslim approach that reads the Qur’ān as a primordially Arabic text through the lens of the Prophet’s biography; and an archeological Western approach that focuses on “source texts” and relies heavily on the historical-critical method to uphold the perception of the Qur’ān’s “secondarity”—namely, its unoriginality and its substantial dependence on a biblical and postbiblical tradition. A major difference between the traditional and the archeological approach to the Qur’ān is that the

former approaches the Qur'ān as a radical break with the past and a correction to the course of Abrahamic monotheism,⁹ whereas the latter seeks to establish direct connections with and continuities between the contents of the Qur'ān and the biblical intertexts that served as prerequisites for the Qur'ān's *raison d'être*. In this context, it is important to emphasize that Neuwirth's project of connecting Qur'ānic content and form with the debates of late antiquity texts seeks to dispense not with the historical-critical method, which Neuwirth clearly adopts and defends, but with the "traditional" applications of this method that, according to Neuwirth, "rarely contended . . . with illuminating the Qur'an historically."¹⁰

In this act of historical reillumination of the Qur'ān, proponents of the late antiquity thesis seek to find ties and connections between epistemes of text-based, oral, ascetic, and sermon-centered cultures that became mutually influential from the first to the seventh century AD. Further, they attempt to explore the rise of Islam within this much broader historical background by integrating it into the philosophical, artistic, and legislative framework of that period. The task is colossal: for "late antiquity" as a concept to make sense in the context of Islamic studies *writ large*, it must be defined as referring to the interactions between Judaism, Christianity, and paganism (including Neoplatonism)¹¹ in the first six centuries AD. In the East, this Judeo-Christian-pagan compound, with its intense debate over the nature of human and divine realms and how they relate to each other stretches geographically from Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia in the north to Ethiopia and southern Arabia in the south. The moment a late antique *Denkraum à la* Neuwirth is adopted, Mecca and the Arab dominions would no longer be at the periphery, but squarely in the middle. After all, Mecca was a center where the trade routes of this Afro-Asian dominion converged—to Yemen, to Syria and across the Red Sea to Ethiopia. It is possible that thick epistemological dialogues and debates would take place and travel alongside traders. If Ethiopia and southern Arabia are not integrated into this proposed space, the subsumption of the Qur'ān under the rubric "late antiquity" would fail to make sense not only historically and geographically but also epistemologically. Indeed, how do we explain the geographical references to these regions in the Qur'ān, or, for that reason, the *sīra* narrative of Muḥammad's advocacy for Christian Ethiopia as a refuge and haven for persecuted Muslim migrants?

This question invites the inference that "late antiquity" is more than the sum of its Neuwirthian parts. In the history of Qur'ānic studies in the West, the term "late antiquity" constitutes a relatively new European approach, situating the origins of Islam within a larger geographical-historical context of the cultures of the Near East, including Jewish, Christian, pagan, and syncretic traditions, that preceded it. This approach is both bold and creative. While benign in that it eschews flagrant claims that the Qur'ān is derivative or plagiarized, it still challenges Muslim historical narratives of the genesis of Islam, which present it as a break with existing *Jāhili* (pre-Islamic) tradition in sixth- and seventh-century Mecca. Proponents

of late antiquity contend that such periodization is informative and enlightening precisely because it avoids the accusations of direct textual plagiarism from Jewish or Christian texts advanced by old orientalist and their contemporary devotees. These proponents propose instead a study of the Qur'ān as a key text that draws on narratives and figures from the biblical tradition in an intriguing and vigorous manner. Neuwirth's venture, considered the first full-fledged study to connect the Qur'ān to this larger context, was welcomed with applause and commendation. Praised by *Deutschlandradio Kultur* as a book that will "re-organize all the myths and misunderstandings that have crept into interpretations of the Koran over the course of the centuries on the part of Muslims," and commended by Andrew Rip-pin as "unrivalled by any other work that has appeared for probably the past 100 years, in its overall scope, analytical depth, unified vision and intellectual rigor," Neuwirth's argument that the Qur'ān is a product of so-called late antiquity is thus positioned to make an impact on studies of the Qur'ān. But what exactly is, or was, "late antiquity"? And what does the Qur'ān have to do with it?

Traditionally, the term "late antiquity" comes out of classical studies and it refers to the end of the classical period. "Late antiquity," as a term, has therefore only made sense historically within the confines of the Roman Empire and as the later epochs of the Greek-and Latin-speaking world. For centuries of active historical scholarship, "late antiquity" has thus been understood and researched as a temporal marker referring to a limited geography. The Roman Empire used Greek administratively in the East in a very small part of the extreme north of the Arabic-speaking world. Since "late antiquity" does not make sense outside this context, and since most of the Arabic-speaking world has historically been marked outside the Roman Empire, while in tangential relationship with it, it is useful to understand precisely how Islam became included within the thicket of "late antiquity." As the liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel puts it, "Chronology has its geopolitics."¹² It is therefore fair, for the sake of Neuwirth's "Muslim readers," to pose a few questions. If the historical investigations of "continuity" versus "discontinuity" in the genesis of Islam have to submit to a new recharting of the contours of such history, how can we assess the validity of Neuwirth's remapping of this space beyond the existing structures of Eurocentric historiographic boundaries? Is the historical past, especially that of Western Europe's most "contested" religion, considered a progression toward an ostensible goal? Or is it, rather, a recounting of an intelligible totality? To ask the question more directly, if the history of Islam's origin is a matter of compulsive scholarship that constitutes itself in relationship to ongoing debates, documents, and historical contexts of Europe's understanding of "late antiquity," what makes the judgment of such theoretical history veritable? What makes it relative or constructed? And for whom?

Before addressing the relationship between the Qur'ān and late antiquity more fully, I would first like to take a detour and examine the origins of "late antiquity"—that is, the origins of the term in Western historical discourses. One

must acknowledge that any serious probing of origins in general should situate this old-age conundrum of continuity and discontinuity more squarely. "What is found at the historical beginning of things," Michel Foucault reminds us, "is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."¹³ In this disparity, one must always be reminded that the notion of historical (dis)continuity of the Qur'ān derives its momentum and meaning not from late antiquity per se, but from present discourses and ideologies.¹⁴ Historical revisionism, as we have seen, has an unflattering history of tempting the historian to identify an object and to fabricate the context. The history of Islam in the West has always been imbricated in Europe's own historical development and cultural heritage—at least since the seventh century—an involvement whose multiple variegations continue to demand further examination.¹⁵ As Mark Bevir has put it, "Historians cannot access the past and secure facts apart from the context of their present concepts and theories. The past only ever appears in our present beliefs; it is never given at a distance."¹⁶ These protracted and complex projections onto the past have spilled over and permeated intellectual discourses in Europe about biblical history since the eighteenth century, and about Islam since the nineteenth. Regardless of their philosophical underpinnings, most of these methods have, in the process, succumbed to the pressure of a present cultural moment, often trusting a thin linearity when it comes to views of a "real" history of Islam—that is, of the idea of being able to determine, decidedly, what Islam really is, or how it really was, or where and what it emerged from.

As a representative of a historical period that "includes" Islam, the term "late antiquity" was coined only fifty years ago, as it was first used by Peter Brown in the title of his influential book *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750*. Since Brown's book became the founding text of subsequent research in the category of "late antiquity and the Qur'ān," it is incumbent on us to provide a prehistory of his thesis. Brown's book is written primarily as a reaction to a dominant scholarly consensus regarding the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and the collapse of Hellenism, going against the grain of established thought and classical authors, including manuscripts by Latin thinkers chronicling the fall of the Roman Empire (such as Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus), and continuing all the way up to the mid-twentieth-century scholarships of Idris Bell, Ward-Perkins, and Will Durant.¹⁷ The collapse of the Roman Empire could be summarized in the words of Will Durant's important 1944 book, *Caesar and Christ*: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself within. The essential causes of Rome's decline lay in her people, her morals, her class struggle, her failing trade, her bureaucratic despotism, her stifling taxes, her consuming wars."¹⁸ Brown's thesis is based on offering a contrarian hypothesis to Durant's statement—namely, that Rome never actually fell but rather transmuted into something else, something better than its original elf. Brown's Rome is not an empire of "decline and fall," as most historians have credibly argued, but one of "change and continuity."¹⁹

Yet, as though to complicate Brown's ambitious thesis, Theodor Mommsen, many years before, called Islam "der Henker des Hellenismus"—that is, "the executioner of Hellenism."²⁰ Before Brown published his study, H. Idris Bell, the eminent papyrologist of Oxford and a scholar of Roman Egypt, traced the decline of Rome and the decay of Hellenism in his well-known book of 1948, *Egypt From Alexander The Great to the Arab Conquest: A Study in the Diffusion and Decay of Hellenism*. In this important study, Bell provides a fascinating, evidence-based account of both how antiquity *ended* and how Islam irrefutably ushered in the beginning of new era. Bell's account concludes with the following statement:

The story of Hellenistic Egypt was at an end, and the country whose gaze has been turned by the victories of Alexander from the East and the past to the West and the future, had returned to the Oriental world of which it had formed a part. But the world, whether Eastern or Western, was very different from that which Alexander knew. The oracle of Ammon was silent. The great temples of Egypt were abandoned or turned into Coptic monasteries. In the Christian churches and monasteries of Europe and Asia men debated subtle points of a theology constructed by Greek thought out of the teaching and life and death of a Jewish prophet, and already from the minaret of many a mosque in Arabia and in the neighbouring lands sounded the cry of the Muezzin, *Allahu akbar; la illah illa' llah*, "God is great, there is no god but God."²¹

Contrary to Bell's account and, before that, to Durant's, Brown's thesis on the continuity of "late antiquity" appears rosy and extrapolative. While his book focuses on cultural and religious transformations, it does not explain how the Qur'ān is a late antique text. Furthermore, it neither addresses socioeconomic changes nor does it provide evidence to substantiate claims for cultural continuities. To crown it all, the book does not address the seismic shifts in religious discourses from paganism to Judaism to Christianity to Islam, not to mention the political violence, religious dissensions, or economic hardships that permeated antiquity. In short, Brown's book speaks to none of the convoluted circumstances, the socioeconomic factors, the state finance, the aristocratic identities, the peasant societies, the legal and military affairs, the rural settlement, or the harsh taxation systems that led to the fall of the Roman Empire, issues that Chris Wickham brilliantly and patiently examines and documents in his important evidentiary work, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800*.²²

In this context, it is useful to draw attention to the famous "Pirennean controversy" of 1922.²³ This was when Henri Pirenne, the Belgian historian of the Middle Ages, made the forceful claim, which had gone uncontested for fifty years, that the event of Islam brought an end to antiquity. This argument did little to help the relationship between Islam and the West; if anything, it worsened it. I bring up this argument here to better contextualize Brown's call for a continuity thesis. It is crucial to point out that a decade before Brown embarked on his continuity

thesis of late antiquity, Henri Pirenne had argued with clear evidence that it was not the Germanic invasion but Islam and the Arab conquest that were responsible for a break in continuity in Mediterranean civilization.²⁴ And so for decades in Euro-American scholarship, Islam was seen, à la Theodor Mommsen, as the executioner of Hellenism but also, at the same time, as the archenemy of Christianity. To be sure, throughout much of the twentieth century, there was a widespread lack of opposition in Western European thought to the collapse, disintegration, or diffusion of the classical ancient world order. The debate was rather about how this collapse happened, whether it took place from within the empire or whether there were external forces, such as a causal relationship between the expansion of Islam and the downfall of the traditional order in Western Europe. In fact, one of the main forces behind this decline was believed to be the general maritime insecurity prevailing in the Mediterranean because of the ceaseless warfare involving Byzantine and Muslim fleets. In support of Pirenne's thesis, Eliyahu Ashtor, another prominent contemporary historian of the Middle Ages, introduced evidence pointing to the rapid decadence of Syrian and Egyptian coastal towns in the wake of Arab victory.²⁵ A third well-known historian of the period, Andrew Ehrenkreutz, concludes that it is high time Pirennean polemicists admitted to the probability that the roots of Rome's decline "may be found in the progressive and constructive economic policy of the Arab conquerors."²⁶

What Brown's book does in relationship to this prehistory of discontinuity is offer a radically alternative narrative of how the Mediterranean world was transformed from classical paganism to a medieval Christian civilization during the period from 150 AD to 750 AD. It does not do anything else. In fact, to Brown, Europe entered medievalism when Christianity moved from the peasant cottages to courts and palaces around 700 AD. But this is also the same time Islam came to establish itself as a religion in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, a new wave that has created a cultural discontinuity, or, as Brown himself admits, "a division" between East and West, a division that still exists to this day.

Despite their differing viewpoints on this crucial era in European history, both Bell and Durant agree with Brown that Islam is not part of antiquity or late antiquity as much as it is a marker of its end. Oddly enough, for Brown—who does not believe in endings and who views early Byzantines, Sasanians, and Umayyads as constituting a single historical phase—Islam is the sign of the expiration of late antiquity, or what he calls "the most rapid crisis in the religious history of the Late Antique period."²⁷ To add to the confusion, Brown still acknowledges that Muḥammad's Mecca shielded itself from Near Eastern cultures as well as Western civilization:

Yet for its foreign contacts, Mecca kept out of the maelstrom of Near Eastern Civilization. Its elder statesmen pursued a canny policy of neutrality. Its inhabitants held aloof from Christians, Jews and Persians. They were still held back by the fully developed style of life which they shared with the nomadic Bedouins. They were as proud

of it as they were of the resources of their own language—a language formed by epic poetry, and ideally suited to a tribal environment; it was a style of life hallowed by custom and by the lack of any viable alternative for that harsh land.²⁸

In his brief reference to Islam, Brown remarks that when Muḥammad died in 632 AD, he had transformed the whole Arabian Peninsula into a land of peace and that Islam emerged with a message of unity to make all the hearts of the people of the peninsula one, perhaps in reference to the Qur'ānic verse: "And He brought their hearts together" (Q.8:63).²⁹ Brown is right. The ethical value of the Qur'ān made Muslims on par with God-fearing Jews and Christians and provided the illiterate Arab tribesman with a unique foundation for a literary culture that would soon rival existing monotheistic traditions. Yet, the focus in the concluding chapter of Brown's book is neither the message of Muḥammad nor its Qur'ānic principles, but rather the rapid rise of dynasties and the swift expansion of Islamic civilization into Mesopotamian Asia and the shores of the Mediterranean that created, in his view, "a division between East and West, which has been blurred throughout the Late Antique period by the confrontation of Byzantium and Persia along the Fertile Crescent."³⁰

The deficiencies of Brown's integration of Islam into late antiquity are blatantly obvious to both trained classicists and informed readers. Brown's thesis has been sharply criticized for its heavy illustrations that occupy more than one hundred pages of a pithy 203-page text and for its sketchy summary of six hundred years of complex history.³¹ Nothing is more damning than Brown's careless redrawing of the ecclesiastical map of late antiquity. Alexander Murray, for instance, finds Brown's mapping of the "world" of late antiquity to be quite disturbing. "On the end-map Constantinople is exactly in the middle. Even Mesopotamia is far from the eastern edge, which is taken by Kabul." Not only this, but "China is mentioned seven times in the index," contends Murry, while "the West gets correspondingly lighter emphasis."³² These playful geographical shifts are deliberate enough to create alterations in abstract notions and currents of intellectual thought. Constantinople, while self-styled as the Eastern Roman Empire, was not substantively Rome. Its sociopolitical and historical conditions were shaped quite differently, as were those of Egypt and Syria, for that matter, yet Brown decidedly throws a larger blanket for late antiquity that not only decenters Rome and Hippo, but goes all the way to encompass the Fertile Crescent, Mesopotamia, and Iran, the "Castle of the Near East." Changing the geographical mapping of late antiquity is bound, in turn, to change its chronology and to cause seismic shifts in the weight of historical events. This is a hugely erroneous yet astutely imaginative undertaking: for how else could he show that the end of the Roman Empire in the West was barely an event at all, or even an "end" to begin with? Worse still, Brown never explains what counts as Mediterranean or why his version of the Mediterranean is somehow broken into two seas (excluding northern Spain, northern Italy, and Gaul). He does not tell us

why Africa is included in the “eastern Mediterranean” in this peculiar division³³ or why Italy belongs to what he calls “a different world” south of the Apennines than the world to which it belongs in the north.³⁴ Nor does he explain why there could not have been a better time in world history for Christianity to thrive at the shores of the Mediterranean with a “radical communal appeal,”³⁵ whereas Islam has been met with the opposite results.³⁶

In the confused logic of Brown’s late antiquity, Islam cannot be a continuity of something that has already been there, in Rome and Hippo, and at the same time function as a rupture and a rapid discontinuity. This contradiction proves that Brown’s argument is largely defective. But this is not new. Revisionist histories depend to a large degree on the intellectual climate and the ideological context in which they are produced. If humanism, the key word of the educated milieus of 1970s academic circles in America, could bring together Roman traditions and Christianity as an optimistic harmonious continuity of the idea of the West, so be it. It is obvious from Brown’s contradictory thesis that it certainly could not do the same for Islam. So once again, the Arab conquest and the drastic urban change in Asia Minor that came with it, which were seen as the absolute non-West, are now begrudgingly admitted into the sphere of the West through the crafty act of stretching the historiographical boundaries of late antiquity.

While it is hard to know for how long the Brownian paradigm of late antiquity will continue to structuralize the field Qur’ānic studies, one could make an educated guess. It is likely to remain in vogue as long as it is allowed to do so, despite the fact that Brown’s “smooth” theory of continuity is excessively overdone, especially when it comes to Islam’s origins. Averil Cameron has forcefully pointed out that late antiquity is itself a muddled “Anglo-centric phenomenon.”³⁷ I would argue that for the Muslim readers invoked in Neuwirth’s study, this phenomenon, in addition to being “muddled,” is terrifying enough to raise the red flag of Eurocentrism.

All this is to affirm the arbitrary nature of Brown’s theory and the unquestionable fact that *The World of Late Antiquity* is written within the framework of a historical debate and a particular method of rethinking history that has little to do with the Qur’ān or the rise of Islam. Yet, in its integrative authority to “include” Islam, this “method” has dialectically managed to bury the peninsular prehistory and early history of Islam in the icy tomb of “otherness.” One could only conclude that Brown’s *World of Late Antiquity* is at best a colonial fantasy, an imaginary conquest of the past, and another variation on the familiar theme of violating the boundaries and intellectual heritages of alien cultures and traditions. It is a crossing gone too far, but it is also a crossing that is all too familiar, one that has long established itself in Western historical scholarship on the origins of Islam. Thanks to Brown, the thesis that Islam is part of *The World of Late Antiquity* has inadvertently given a new life to a decaying discipline, one that has been struggling to survive after it has long outlived its pertinence.

Thanks to Brown's thesis, it did not take long for a renewed evaluation of the emergence of Islam within the continuous shifts in Europe's Late Antique paradigms. Michael Cook's and Patricia Crone's *Hagarism* was, in fact, the first of many such attempts. When the *Hagarism* thesis received scathing criticism in the late 1970s, many scholars argued that the history of Islam's origins had been deliberately and unfairly distorted in comparison, say, to historical revisionisms of similar religious traditions like Judaism and Christianity. *Hagarism* consists of three parts: "Whence Islam?," "Whither Antiquity?," and "The Collision." Cook and Crone go on to argue that Muslim sources treating the genesis of their religion and Muḥammad's faith are unreliable, concocted ex post facto, include only theological material, and have little to no historical value. This argument, the reader finds out, is the rationale behind their writing of *Hagarism*. In order to set historical records straight, Cook and Crone decided "to step outside the Islamic tradition altogether and start again."³⁸ The first part, "Whence Islam?," is at best sugarcoated and could have been titled "F— All Arab/Muslim Sources."

The logic is simple: Why trust Muslims to say anything meaningful about their own faith, or even take anything they say at face value? On logical grounds, the argument makes sense. Generally accepted narratives of Islam's origins did not rely on contemporary documents but on sources compiled by Muslims years after Islam. Cook and Crone justify their argument by citing the usual suspects (Geiger, Goldziher, Schacht, Noth), who find problems with Islam's origins. But the alternative they offer is not less problematic. Cook and Crone sought to reconstruct Islam's origins from Greek and Syriac sources contemporary with Muḥammad. According to their findings, invaders from the Arabian Peninsula sought to reclaim Syro-Palestine early in the seventh century based on the pretext that the Arabs, as children of Abraham through his concubine Hagar, who begat his son Ismael, had an ancestral right to Palestine and the holy city of Jerusalem, and that Mecca, their native holy city, was just a temporary asylum. They also concluded that Muḥammad had lived longer than Muslim sources recount, until the beginning of the conquest of Syria, directly succeeded by 'Omar, because there was no Caliph Abū Bakr.

Furthermore, Cook and Crone surmised that Islam was a theopolitical movement and that Muḥammad was influenced by the Jews whom the Byzantines expelled from Edessa and who joined forces with the Arabs to reclaim the Holy Land. This, in addition to a "discovery" that Petra, not Mecca, was the original center for Mohammad's movement. With their "discoveries," Cook and Crone opened up a Pandora's box of world antiquity, demanding that all scholars of early Islam not only jettison those "false" Arabic Islamic sources but also arm themselves for a fierce battle of historical verification. And now, thanks to Cook and Crone, history—Eurocentric history, that is—is wearing its neat laboratory coat and ready to debunk the grand Muslim conspiracy theory of historical falsifications. The new historians of early Islam must now be versed in the Armenian, Coptic, Greek,

Pahlavi, Samaritan, and Syriac languages and must search every corner of late antiquity to find the “true” origins of Islam in whichever form they can be found, including coins, papyri, relics, monuments, inscriptions, and any kind of evidence available in sermons, liturgies, theological manuscripts, or literary works. In the lack of genuine proficiency in the very language of the Qur’ān, the ironic question remains: Who can claim to master this late antique past with all its languages? And what do these languages have to say “objectively” about Islam?

In Part Two, “Whither Antiquity,” they use the word “antiquity” for the first time to refer to Islam’s origins, a claim that neither Gibbon nor Brown, the polar opposites of those advancing the late antiquity thesis and who have their own problems with Islam, could have dreamt up. In this chapter, Crone and Cook ask a direct question: How does the cultural confrontation between primitive Arabs and highly civilized Byzantium and other civilizations in the Near East of the seventh and eighth centuries lead to the emergence of Muslim civilization? Crone and Cook fail to substantiate both their generalized claim about how cultural traditions emerge and their flimsy hypothesis that Islam emerged out of a certain hybridization of complex cultural materials. Part Three, “The Collision,” is an extension of Part Two. The main goal of this part is to disprove that the *Jāhili* period as recorded in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is a genuine and authentic background of Islam. Crone and Cook seek to situate Islam’s origins in the larger historical framework of late antiquity. Oddly enough, they easily accept non-Muslim sources without any of the scrutiny they use to dismiss the entire corpus of Arabic-Islamic sources. Why, we might ask, should seventh-century Greek and Syriac writers, who viewed Islam as the anti-Christ, be regarded as better informed about the so-called facts and as more credible sources for recounting them than Muslim sources?

My point is that Cook and Crone’s hypothesis is not an anomaly that will disappear with an apology and a retraction. Rather, it is a symptom of a deeper malady. *Hagarism* was applauded by some historians not because it was based on concrete evidence. In fact, the opposite holds. It was admired because it created a historical plot *appealing* to the extreme ideological imagination of the Euro-American academy in the 1970s. The book constructed the most scandalous narrative on the origins of Islam to date, one that offers the strongest testimony of the fanciful premises of the historical-critical method in charting the history of the other. And although Crone and Cook belatedly withdrew their thesis, and Crone herself, in her subsequent publications, seems to have distanced herself from the extremism of *Hagarism*, the legacy of this work continues to reverberate across the field of Qur’ānic studies. Might there also be a dialectical benefit?

In a three-decade-belated review of the book, Fred Donner remarks that in *Hagarism* there are “important lessons on method” that need to be “absorbed” and that it compelled “historians of Islamic origins to behave truly as historians, and subject their sources to rigorous criticism.”³⁹ Even though *Hagarism* includes

a central thesis that is dreadfully flawed, as well as supporting evidence that is not only insufficient but also appallingly inconsistent, Donner still praises the book as “positive, valuable, and long overdue in a field that was so hidebound that it often resisted looking at the real evidence.”⁴⁰ There may after all be a silver lining to *Hagarism* in that it makes the task of historians more difficult and holds them accountable to ethical and impartial academic thought. And speaking of impartiality, the systematic delegitimization of Muslim voices for the sake of objective research in the post-*Hagarism* Western academy continues to invite difficult questions. What kinds of methodologies, research tools, or modes of scholarship are given access to prestigious (and widely circulated) publications on Islam in the West? What brand of scholars are allowed to speak with authority on the Qur’ān? What are the prerequisites of scholarship on the Qur’ān, and what scholarly venues and disciplinary or interdisciplinary settings are capable of assimilating, consolidating, or interpreting the Qur’ān and its variegated discourses for a Western audience? If an entire discourse of scholarship on the Qur’ān remains the prisoner of *‘aṣabiyya*, of ripping the other of its right to speak and understand itself, it will be virtually impossible to know how such scholarship could ever become aware of its own deficiencies, let alone critique its protracted apparatus through which we have learned to see a completely different “reality” of Islam’s past than the one broadly acceptable outside of this elite machinery.

But most importantly, if Crone and Cook have aborted their attempt to reimagine Islam’s past, then why has Brown’s continuity thesis remained “applicable” to the field of Qur’ānic studies after this (successful) failure of *Hagarism*? Is it because it still carries hope for a more sanguine alternative in a field that has denigrated the subject of its study for centuries? Or is it because the futile insistence on the objectivity of extrapeninsular sources, as opposed to Muslim sources, now seems antediluvian, so to speak, with an overextended continuity thesis that will most definitely signal the death knell of Qur’ānic studies in the West? Could it be because *Hagarism* never really died but continued to be “positive, valuable, and long overdue,” to echo Donner’s eccentric praise of the book? Does *Hagarism* continue to act like an iceberg informing Euro-American historical thought on the origins of Islam? It is hard to find satisfying answers to these questions. What we know for a fact is that by the time Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity* was published, the old orientalist model that thrived on historical revisionism in mining the sources of the Qur’ān had fallen out of fashion, and for a good reason. In addition, dehistoricized theological approaches of Biblicism left the educated reader confused and hungry for more historical equity and balanced context. In short, it was becoming pronouncedly clear, especially for a global readership of Islam and world history, that denying the immediate context in which Islam evolved any agency to speak for itself simply belies historical facts and benefits only a few zealots for the cause of the historical-critical method. It was becoming even clearer that orientalist approaches were based on strawman assumptions that

monotheistic religions before Islam were in some way more developed and more established than an imposing new religion was.

Cryptic and sketchy in its musings on the place of Islam in late antiquity, Brown's book was controversial enough to draw the attention of the Euro-American field of Qur'ānic studies, which immediately espoused the thesis, as we have seen in the case Crone and Cook, in a manner that seeks to view the Qur'ān's origins with "fresh" eyes, so to speak.⁴¹ To be fair, Brown's thesis still has something to offer the embattled field of Qur'ānic studies: a model that promises to be both more historically grounded and more epistemologically nuanced—at least in its appearance—than the good old orientalist approach, with its blatant biases and adverse stereotypes. Even though Brown does not say that Islam is part of late antiquity, he nonetheless believes in continuities. His colonial remapping includes Islam in the complex world of late antique social formations. This "outlet" is all the field of Qur'ānic studies in the West has been looking for. It gives it a ticket out of the prison house of binary oppositions, one in which it trapped itself for at least two centuries. Brown's flexible continuity thesis for the unmastered past of late antiquity has now paradoxically become the new "mastered" present of Qur'ānic studies. Brown's continuity thesis dissolved the barriers and shifted the debate about antiquity from clear partitions between chronological periods toward more subtle expositions of relationships and interactions among various communities of faith, thus opening the door for a new approach and for renewed investigations of the origins of Islam at a deciding historical moment in the field of Qur'ānic studies. The Brownian shift in the historical thought of the Euro-American academy led to the discovery of late antiquity as a new horizon for engaging with Islam's origins.

Such renewed interest alone makes Neuwirth's annexation of Islam into European Late Antiquity both urgent and timely. After all, this is the claim Hegel made almost two hundred years ago, when he included Islam in the medieval Germanic fourth stage of world history: "[T]he old age of the *Geist* in its complete ripeness, in which *Geist* returns to unity with itself, but as *Geist*."⁴² In Hegel, Islam becomes the West in the unique Hegelian sense of the West—the self-consciousness of *Geist*. Hegel even calls Islam "the enlightenment of the oriental world."⁴³ In the Brownian paradigm of late antiquity, this Hegelian "enlightenment" that is Islam may no longer be just of the oriental world, or even *in* the oriental world as Hegel thought, but may render the peninsular geography of early Islam peripheral, by opening the possibility for expanding boundaries and overturning the traditional categories of the late Roman Empire. This, and the claims of detecting traces of Hellenistic culture within the Arabic language, is all Neuwirth and late antiquarians would need in order to make the Qur'ān an integral part of the religious history of the West.⁴⁴ This "integration" is already yielding important reconsiderations for European Muslims who would no longer be perceived as the "others" of the West, at least not historically or epistemologically. Dialectically, however, it would also mean that the Qur'ān would risk losing its Arabicity and, to echo Neuwirth,

it would risk losing the intimate discursive codes within which the text operated and gained its status as the most revolutionary literary event of the Arabic language *par excellence*.

THE QUR'ĀN AND THE LATE ANTIQUARIANS: A CONTINUITY THESIS?

The relationship between the Qur'ān and late antiquity has thus gone through two extreme changes in the twentieth century. From the start of the century, passing through the "Pirennean Controversy" of the 1920s, up until 1971, Islam was studied as the kiss of death for late antiquity, a line of separation and division, and a boundary between a familiar self and an unfriendly, distant other—a line emphatically drawn in the sand between the so-called "culture" and "anarchy" of two worlds. In the immediate aftermath of Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity*, the infinite distance that once separated the two worlds disappeared, the boundaries were blurred, and the closer the "ein europäischer Zugang" came to this boundary, the more confidently it would want to assert itself, to interpret, to interrogate, to define, and to claim Islam, not as an entity of affection, or as an amicable or friendly extension of the self, but as an entity of ownership and custodial authority, so to speak. To be sure, there is nothing new about the attempts to include Islam as part of the long late antiquity, except that perhaps earlier attempts like that of Crone and Cook were more hostile. What is new, however, is the categorical claim that the Qur'ān—and by extension Islam—is now, at least conceptually, *part of* Europe, constituted via Europe, and has for long been wrongly mistreated as the other of Europe. In other words, long late antiquity can now afford to claim Islam back to its European self, so to speak.

In this context, Hugh Kennedy's short entry on "Islam" in the volume on *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, edited by Brown, among others, serves as an example of the late antiquity thesis of continuity. Like Brown, Kennedy builds an argument against the grain, in defiance of "great monuments of scholarship, like A. H. M. Jones's *Later Roman Empire* and the *New Cambridge Ancient History*," two works that "take it as axiomatic that the coming of Islam in the early seventh-century marked a change so complete that there was no advantage in pursuing the topics that had been discussed into the new era."⁴⁵ Inspired in part by, and perhaps written as a prelude to, Sidney Griffith's study of the Christian Arabic tradition of the ninth century, Kennedy's article does not deal with the Qur'ān's commentary on Christianity *per se*, or with Muḥammad's interactions with the Christian communities of his close surroundings or beyond (e.g., Abyssinia) but rather with what he characterizes is a "gradual and multifaceted" transition of the world of antiquity into the dynasties of early Islam, especially Muslim Syria.⁴⁶ "Early Islamic society," writes Kennedy, "built on and developed in the Late Antique legacy."⁴⁷ However, Kennedy does not explain how this happened or

provide supporting evidence for this vague “gradual transition.” Given its focused bibliography, as well as its adoption of the Cronian method of dismissing Muslim sources, Kennedy’s article does not cite any examples from the Qur’ān or the Islamic tradition or include a single Arabic reference on Islam from that period. The article lacks both interest in and awareness of the classical texts of its main thesis. Further, it does not reference medieval Arab-Islamic scholarship on the topic and fails to explain how the Qur’ān “built on” the late antique legacy. The result is a hollowed “continuity thesis” of late antiquity into seventh-century Arabia that has little to no support, especially when there is compelling evidence in medieval Europe and Islam that chronicles the drastic changes and discontinuities in official languages and major transformations in identity politics,⁴⁸ social conditions, education,⁴⁹ military development,⁵⁰ and religious practices.⁵¹

A much more sophisticated and rigorous examination of Islam in late antiquity is to be found in Aaron Hughes’s article “Religion without Religion: Integrating Islamic Origins into Religious Studies.” In this provocative article, Hughes welcomes the study of Islam’s origins under the umbrella of late antiquity. Sickened by the vicious orientalism the field has sunk into, Hughes makes a reasonable plea for Islam to be studied on equal footing with Judaism and Christianity, urging that such inclusion should be left to the specialists in the field of religious studies in order to avoid setbacks, pitfalls, or lapses into the historical errors and generalizations of older orientalism. “Instead of seeing the birth of Islam as a unidirectional and transformative force that enters world history in the early seventh century,” contends Hughes in a Spinozan spirit, “we must be attentive to it as a point of arrival or the culmination—and not merely the sum—of an interlocking set of political, social, intellectual, and religious trends of the Hellenistic and Late Antique periods . . . The origins of Islam, then, are no different from the origins of other Western monotheisms: they are clouded in mystery, and are about human ingenuity and worldmaking in the midst of rapid change.”⁵² In the footnote to his statement, Hughes emphasizes that Ernest Renan was categorically wrong when he argued that “Islam was born in the full light of history.”⁵³

Hughes’s insightful and sanguine plea for inclusivity in treating Islam as an expression of late antique times is reasonable and timely, especially in light of increasing interest in the Abrahamic tradition and its connection to the period.⁵⁴ It is not every day that a Western scholar connects Islam to human ingenuity in the same sentence. But where would Hughes’s sympathetic and inclusive vision of historical equity fit within Brown’s paradoxical paradigm? This is an important question because Brown, who happens to be the very originator of the late antiquity thesis on the Qur’ān, sees Islam not only as a break but also as an event that brought an end to late antiquity. Brown did not perceive the arrival of Islam in Egypt with the Muslim army of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ in 640/642 AD as a token of inclusivity, let alone continuity or culmination of anything. He neither saw Islam as a smooth transition nor took the Muslim “conquest” with a grain of salt, as he did,

say, the Mediterranean's conversion to Christianity. A historian who contradicts himself usually says two things, and both of them should matter. Brown refuses to see Islam's invasion of Egypt as anything more than a conquest—a rupture and an abrupt discontinuity in the traditional sense of the term. This cold reception makes one wonder: How many other historians of this long late antiquity are going to play down the idea of rupture, emphasize endurance over change, and see Islam as a product rather than as a revisionary event, however equivocal that might be? And why do scholars have to take sides and choose between the two?

The forced continuity with which Brown includes Islam at the transmuting point of late antiquity is celebrated in Neuwirth's work.⁵⁵ Despite Cook and Crone's speculative venture into Islam's past, or perhaps because of it, Neuwirth continues to probe the *terra incognita* of Brown's continuity thesis, but to her credit, she does so from a different position. In an earlier essay on the same topic, Neuwirth acknowledges that "the task of positioning the Qur'ān in Late Antiquity still waits to be accomplished."⁵⁶ Staying true to her words, and ultimately espousing Brown's continuity thesis, which is supportive of and central to her project, Neuwirth gives her book the perfect subtitle of "Ein europäischer Zugang" (A European approach). In the singular form, "Zugang" connotes access or admission. In that sense, to translate the title as a "European access" to Islam would not be too far-fetched. Connotatively, "Zugang" implies a viewpoint (like *Perspektive*) and a movement (like *Herangehensweise/Annäherung*), as well as an option or a possibility (*Eingang zu/Tor zu/access to*). In the context of Neuwirth's argument, the rich connotations of a European perspective on Islam (from a remote place and without movement) and a European movement/going to/approaching (*Annäherung zu*) Islam, seem quite telling.⁵⁷ In other words, the idea is to see the Qur'ān as neither a hypocritical mimesis nor an illegitimate son of biblical origins, but as a genuine inheritor and an active participant in the very legacy of Abrahamic monotheism of late antiquity. To Neuwirth, long late antiquity has afforded this apologetic admission of Islam into Europe by way of the Roman Empire. "Read together with the writings of Late Antique rhetoricians, the church fathers, and the rabbis, all of whom are commonly claimed as part of the European legacy," writes Neuwirth, "the Qur'ān actually becomes a text that is familiar to us—or it would be, if our own intellectual preconceptions did not skew our perceptions."⁵⁸

So far, so good. But if a historian of Islam begins by interrogating the origins of the Qur'ān, examining not the present-day text Muslims read the world over, but rather the formative process of the Qur'ān, such a historian might at least consider situating the text within the discursive codes of its original language and the symbolic representations of this text as a document of its own time that is intimately in dialogue with its intended audience. One does not need a Bakhtinian theory to see that the Qur'ān is radically dialogical and in constant conversations with the seventh-century Meccan and Medinan communities, communities with deep pride in their tribal codes and the poetic exploits of their language,

for which regular poetry contexts were held. While the Qur'ān includes an obvious "intratextuality" that invites comparative inquiry with biblical studies, these intertextualities are commentative and interpretive rather than constitutive, which makes it hard to agree with Neuwirth that this relationship "justifies the urgency of a serious analysis of the structure of the text that is to be informed by biblical studies."⁵⁹ The Qur'ān is not just a transcript of an ongoing debate or a cultural translation of this particular "space" of interaction. In fact, most of the dialogical interactions with the Qur'ān's intended audience concern matters germane to the seventh-century Meccan and Medinan communities, including piety, social laws and ethics, aesthetics, and other social matters such as marriage, divorce, adultery, enactments related to children, inheritance, murder, commercial contracts, debts, usuary, food, wine, games, and so on. It is true, to some extent, that the Qur'ān enters into a "dialogue" with other religions—although it is hard to understand this dialogue in pure philosophical terms, given that dialogues are mutual inquiries based on the principle of sharing ideas *at the same time and place* to arrive at a better understanding of that which needs to be understood. In addition to its biblical references, there is a far much larger and more dominant "intertextuality" in the Qur'ān that is best understood in the text's intent to form a just community of believers through a highly emphasized linguistic prophetic discourse known to and practiced by that very community.

This is the case whether one seeks to examine the moment when the Arabic language of the Qur'ān differentiates itself from the conventional ritualistic poetry or prose of pagan Arabia, or whether the investigation is of larger sociohistorical contexts outside the Arabian Peninsula that may or may not have influenced its religious cultures, including the long late antiquity of Europe (via Rome and Hippo) and the eastern Mediterranean. Although Neuwirth dedicates a fraction of her book to the relationship between the Qur'ān and the Arabic language, in particular to pre-Islamic poetry, she acknowledges the obvious illogicality that "while the relationship of the Qur'ān to the neighboring monotheistic traditions across various language barriers has been a central critical interest since the beginnings of Qur'ān research, *the highly developed and extensively transmitted literature in the Qur'an's own language, ancient Arabic poetry, has rarely been contextualized with the Qur'an.*"⁶⁰ This is a sobering acknowledgement. If the Arabic tradition of the Qur'ān were indeed part of late antiquity, as Neuwirth claims, what would be a better place for the European reader than a study of the Arabicity of the Qur'ān? Neuwirth's peripheral treatment of the Qur'ān's Arabic language and of ancient Arabic poetry in her own book reveals a methodological inconsistency.

Neuwirth is a committed practitioner of the historical-critical approach to the Qur'ān, to which she has dedicated her book,⁶¹ and which she continues to defend even though she acknowledges that it is "an approach that is being questioned from various perspectives in recent times."⁶² It is not hard to see why the historical-critical method has outlived its use.⁶³ It is no secret that this method has informed

the German School's framework of inquiry into the origins of Islam since the Heidelberg orientalist Gustav Weil's work, *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre* in 1843.⁶⁴ This practice is clearly enveloped in the historical-critical method or what is also known as "high criticism" or "historical criticism," a historical approach originally adopted in studying the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament. This approach draws on numerous fields, including history, geography, anthropology, archaeology, and antique literature in order to reconstruct the historical setting within which biblical texts were produced.

Today, new approaches in reception theory and synchronic Bible readings argue for reintegrating the Bible into its internal liturgical and theological tradition instead of into "external" contexts. These approaches have effectively displaced the now defunct historical-critical method. Nevertheless, Neuwirth somehow insists that the Qur'ān does not qualify for this luxury and must continue to be studied in light of the historical-critical method. Her reasoning is that "Qur'ān research, unlike this new direction of biblical studies, is not faced with the task of reconnecting the Qur'ān to its traditional exegetical context."⁶⁵ Why not? And why is it acceptable for a historical method specifically designed to deconstruct the Bible, a method that has now not only outlived its value but has also proved to have significant shortcomings, to continue to be the arbiter of a text it was never meant to interrogate?⁶⁶ Speaking of "Qur'ān research" and the assignments of its tasks, why is it so difficult to see that the biblical bias in this very research ultimately discloses not the meaning of the Qur'ān but how the canon of Qur'ānic studies is shaped in Euro-American academia?

Neuwirth is fully aware that there are mainly two opposite camps when it comes to the study of the Qur'ān: the biblical and the Arabian. Neuwirth's argument for the historical-critical method as the only valid approach for including the Qur'ān under the rubric "late antiquity" is based on an unsubstantiated assumption that the contents and imagery⁶⁷ of the early, middle, and late Meccan sūras have strong affinities with biblical psalms, or what she calls "psalmic piety,"⁶⁸ while maintaining "poetic" local features present in pre-Islamic poetry, whatever that means. Neuwirth bases her assumption on what she surmises in the Meccan sūras to be a representation of Muslims as the rightful inheritors of the Banī Isrā'il (Israelites), especially in reference to Jerusalem.⁶⁹ In other words, the presumption that the Qur'ān appropriates the biblical tradition and reshapes it according to its own existing Arabic "poetic" codes becomes Neuwirth's justification for the application of the historical-critical method. I argue in the following chapter that this deduction is drawn too sharply, given the dense complexity of the relationship between ancient Arabic poetry and the Qur'ān, which has sorely remained understudied in the Western academy. "Almost perversely," emphasizes Thomas Bauer, "Qur'anic scholars (in the West) do not show much enthusiasm about the existence of this literature."⁷⁰ But this is how Neuwirth interprets the Qur'ān's earliest sūras—namely, as a reproduction, or rather, a "reinterpretation" of the biblical

landscape into Arabia, which, in her scheme, would necessitate an annexation of late antique elaborations on scriptural traditions.⁷¹ In other words, Neuwirth softly resurrects Crone's old orientalist thesis that there was a prominent Jewish community in the Hijaz able to influence the literary evolution of the Qur'ān and the permeation of foundational narratives such as Abraham's "anachronistic" erection of the *Kaaba* in the spirit of constructing Mecca as a new *qibla* in lieu of *al-Masjid al-Aqṣá* of Jerusalem.⁷²

All this is to say that Neuwirth's "new" integration of the Qur'ān under "late antiquity" is not a new approach, but a sympathetic restoration of an older method, one that singles out verses and sūras to support a particular theoretical position and to advance an entire epistemology. She dismisses Gustav von Grunebaum's argument for the "Arabicity" of the Qur'ān and considers it both "problematic" and "impaired" for the latter to contend that "from an Arabic standpoint, the teaching of Muhammad [signifies] unmistakable progress towards greater religious and intellectual maturity," and that the Arabs were the intended "receivers of the teachings of Muhammad."⁷³ She argues that von Grunebaum's logic is flawed because it excises the Arabs, "thus removing them by essentialist logic from the wider circles of listeners educated in Late Antique lore and establishing a firm polarity between the Jews and Christians (who appear only later as theological opponents) on the one hand and the putative pure 'Arabs' on the other."⁷⁴ It is hard to see a flaw in von Grunebaum's logic other than that it does not fit Neuwirth's categorical construct. In fact, the Qur'ān supports von Grunebaum's argument in repeatedly asserting that that text's geographical positionality is coterminous with its Arabicity as a mode of intelligibility, and underscoring that its local intelligibility does not necessarily trump the universal appeal of its message:

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّنُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا

And so We have revealed to you an Arabic Qur'ān, so you may warn the Mother of villages and everyone around it. (42:7)⁷⁵

Not only this. Neuwirth has decided, through a misreading of James Montgomery⁷⁶ and an uncritical adoption of Michael Zwettler's Eurocentrist theory on the oral composition of classical Arabic poetry,⁷⁷ that the discourse of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry also falls under the blanket of late antiquity.⁷⁸ Even though she belaboringly insists that late antiquity is an epistemic space not to be misunderstood as a political chronological period, it is hard to deny the fact that the term has a definitive historical framework, which extends from early Roman imperial times and describes the time of transition from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages in Europe. Sooner or later, one has to come to terms with the fact that the comfort of the historical-critical method has consisted in lending a starry-eyed totalization that gives the impression that an intricate web of themes, styles, ideas, and events has in its overall totality come together over an accumulation of centuries to offer a holistic understanding of a certain period or epoch in history. Such an

understanding is diagnostically essentialist, in the sense in which we have seen Hegel condemn the totalizing operations of historicism. Not only Hegel, but Spinoza, who is often credited as the first philosopher to have launched the field of historical criticism of the Bible, sounds a grim warning about its limitations and difficulties, speaking of “the method’s capacity to guide us towards a full and certain knowledge of the sacred books” when most of it “is unknown to us.”⁷⁹

There is a notable difference between the approach of Western historians to the Qur’ān and that of philologists and literary critics, a gap Neuwirth has sought to bridge. On balance, European historians are growing more frequently ambivalent toward the stretched theories regarding Islam’s origins that they inherited from the last generation of revisionist historians—for example, Cook and Crone’s thesis on Islam as Jewish sect⁸⁰ or Christoph Luxenberg’s unscholarly obsession with its Christian borrowings.⁸¹ Many well-informed historians tend to use or propose historical theories of Islam’s past with caution and inclusivity.⁸² By contrast, literary critics are bound to consider the Qur’ān in relation to an existing body of literature, mostly pre-Islamic Arabic literature, which, according to al-Jāhiz, emerged between 150 and 200 years prior to Islam and continued well into the early years of Qur’ānic revelation. For these reasons, discussions between historians and *littérateurs* often arrive at an insuperable impasse. One must tread carefully, then, on the *terra incognita* of late antiquity’s “conversations” with the Qur’ān, lest these conversations carry an unconscious bias or a latent continuity thesis of Cook and Crone’s kind. For what else could Cook and Crone’s venture be other than a dangerous scheme to disperse the Qur’ān in the labyrinths of late antiquity and dilute its origins in a melting pot of cultural forces within an allegedly Hellenized Middle East?

A suitable example of a study attentive to these literary/historical interconnections between the humanities and the social sciences can be found in Holger Zellentin’s recently edited volume, *The Qur’ān’s Reformation of Judaism and Christianity*. Zellentin begins the volume with the acknowledgment that it is high time the West moved away from treating the Qur’ān as the scripture of a minority and toward a more inclusive treatment of it as part of Europe’s legacy. According to Zellentin, this movement is historical in every sense, stemming from the West’s realization that it needs to reposition itself toward the Qur’ān from within its own historical context. “We have come to recognize that the Scripture of Islam should be understood not only as the foundational document of the Islamic community,” argues Zellentin, “but also in dialogue with the world of Late Antiquity, whose transition into the Middle Ages was expedited by the rise of the Islamic community itself.”⁸³ This invitation to redirect the course of Qur’ānic studies more inwardly toward Europe feels like a fresh reset button in a field that has systematically been hostile to Islam. Authors cited in Zellentin’s volume, especially Walid Saleh and Angelika Neuwirth, are aware of this history and know that they are writing against a grain so selective in its pursuit of the origins of Islam.

Still, while Zellentin's volume does not shy away from engaging with the sources of the Qur'ān's origins, it does so in a manner that appears more nuanced, more benign, and more equitable than former dismissive "Western" approaches. "In contrast to the comparatist efforts of the religious polemicists of past and present," contends Zellentin, "many contemporary scholars have largely digested the lessons of postcolonialism in as far as they tend not seek to establish the superiority of anyone tradition over the other."⁸⁴ Zellentin invokes Dominick LaCapra's seminal article on the topic of rethinking intellectual history. LaCapra is a distinct scholar who bridges intellectual history and literary representations, and is thus an appropriate choice to cement Zellentin's repositioning of the West's historical attitude toward Islam with an epiphany of sorts, an overdue realization that "the Qur'ān's value as a canonical text . . . resists common assumptions, and allows for an especially compelling conversation with Islamic Scripture."⁸⁵ It makes sense for Zellentin to invoke LaCapra in calling for confronting one's own ideological biases and repairing the damage caused by older orientalism—perhaps in an implicit reference to Crone and Wansbrough—when he acknowledges the unpleasant past of Western scholarship on the Qur'ān.

Elsewhere, Zellentin emphasizes the need to embrace the Qur'ān as a primary text and "a key source reference for Arabian culture."⁸⁶ However, there is a stark contradiction in his argument. On the one hand, Zellentin wants to exonerate the Qur'ān from the "derivation spell" cast upon it by the older orientalists and to honor its historical value "regardless of its religious significance," namely, as a document with "a wealth of information about its intended audience" and which "allows for a genuine glimpse into Late Antique Arabia."⁸⁷ On the other hand, Zellentin treats "Late Antique Arabia" as an indisputable historical given and falls back to an essentialist theory of "influence," recasting the Qur'ān as a text that belongs "to the category of monotheism and its history from the Hebrew Bible, throughout Late Antique Judaism and Christianity,"⁸⁸ thus risking, yet again, silencing the Qur'ān's Arabicity, its informative pre-Islamic poetic corpus, and its sociolinguistic specificity.

The invocation of LaCapra could not have been more timely, for all the reasons Zellentin mentions. In fact, LaCapra touches a sore nerve in intellectual history, one that, dialectically enough, interrogates the validity of the very project of late antiquity that Zellentin represents. "The belief in pure interpretation," contends LaCapra, "is itself a bid for absolute transcendence that denies both the finite nature of understanding and the need to confront critically what Freud discussed in terms of 'transference.'"⁸⁹ What this means for late antiquity as a new venture for investigating the Qur'ān is that it finds itself in danger of projecting itself onto the other. When it comes to the relationship between the Qur'ān and late antiquity, the Euro-American academy's excessive denigration of the genesis of the text to external, non-Arab origins is based on an unmistakable case of "attribution bias"—namely, an alarming self-identification with these origins.⁹⁰ Usually, this

is not necessarily harmful. But variations on the Brownian theme of a continuous and unending late Antiquity have to come face to face with the fact that while the Qur'ān comments on and invites comparison with Judaism and Christianity, there remains no clear-cut historical evidence to support the hypothesis that it is "shaped" by external forces outside Muḥammad's Meccan society, linguistically, philologically, or socially.

Nor can the field articulate a clear delineation or a trace for any of the themes of late antiquity in the Qur'ān that are *not* already germane to its immediate context in the Arabian Peninsula; even notions such as asceticism, revelation, miracles, and prophecies had already existed in the collective consciousness of the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. If anything, just a cursory reading of pre-Islamic Poetry would situate the Qur'ān thematically and linguistically at the heart of the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula. The linguistic organicity, the communal dialogue, and the social context of the Qur'ān's revelation all play a substantial part in this relationship. There is a sharp irony between the confirmed state of the field's indiscernibility when it comes to the distinction between what is "native" and what is "foreign," or what Zellentin characterizes as "the ultimate unknowability of much of pre-Islamic Arabic culture and religion," and the degree of certitude and inevitability with which he embeds the Qur'ān into the fabric of late antiquity. Here, again, LaCapra is useful. "Historiography would be an exercise in narcissistic infatuation," maintains LaCapra, "if it amounted to a willful projection of present concerns upon the past. The notion of 'creative misreading' is itself mis-leading when it legitimates one-sided, subjectivist aggression that ignores the ways in which texts may actually challenge the interpreter and lead him to change his mind."⁹¹

Treating the Qur'ān as a text of late antiquity is enveloped in postcolonial guilt. The unending late antiquity tsunami of Peter Brown and its ramifications threaten to drown something linguistically organic to its people. The problem here is not that the Qur'ān includes a universal message or narrates stories from the Old Testament, or even continues themes of codes from late antique times. It does. But notions of piety, social justice, and high moral codes do not necessarily have to come from Europe to receive a stamp of originality. It is almost as if LaCapra predicted the late antiquity thesis, and in particular Peter Brown's fanciful version, on Islam when he wrote that historiography "is not an autonomous hermeneutic undertaking that moves on the level of pure meaning to establish a 'fusion of horizons' assuring *authoritative continuity with the past*."⁹² If anything, the issue of late antiquity, which promises to bring some unity of theory and practice, serves instead to dramatize the ambivalence and uncertainty of the Euro-American academy's position regarding Islam's origins. In this well-intended attempt to locate a privileged space within the self to include the other, we risk defaulting back into the trap of "revisionism," the return of a historical boomerang thought to have been vanquished after the onslaught of *Hagarism*.

This risk brings back the urgent question of a proper approach to the study of the Qur'ān in the West. This question is owing as much to the collapse of one's own inclinations and presuppositions as it is to any conscious and learned awareness of the textual weight of the Qur'ān in the world outside the narrow prisms of scholarly and academic *'aṣabiyya*. One may, therefore, as a practitioner of the larger field of the humanities, acknowledge the crucial need to liberate the Qur'ānic text from the cancerous growth of ideologies, both Eastern and Western, that have beset it since the seventh century. I use the word "text" here deliberately—not in the reductive way that may be meant to resurrect old debates on the text-ness of the Qur'ān, which a scholar like Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd had to endure, but precisely in order *not* to reduce the Qur'ān to one governable discipline or "method" over the other. The idea is to turn one's attention to the presence of the Qur'ān, its message, its rhetorical power, not solely and rigidly to how it came to be, but to what it is and what it does. One is compelled to ask: How long can scholarship on Islam in the West afford to lapse into a collective "defense mechanism" of "transference," to echo LaCapra, and how long before it starts to transcend the obsession with searching for its image in alien texts?

It has become increasingly evident that "interpretive findings" of late antiquity, no matter how stretched or hyperbolic they might be, have become the *modus operandi* of recent and current publications on the Qur'ān. Forcefully armed with Brown's "continuity thesis," the negative authority of Crone's *Hagarism*, and Garth Fowden's notion of "maturation,"⁹³ late antiquarians have one clear goal: to restore the Qur'ān, scripturally and prophetically, to what one might venture to call "operation millennium." In this operation millennium, the thousand-year span between Aristotle and Muḥammad is a fair game, despite the fact that Muḥammad lived in a remote place, far outside the fringes of Aristotle's sphere of influence, and may have not heard of him. This is not to say that the work and ideas of Aristotle did not travel far or did not leave indelible impacts on Islam's cultures and civilization. Yet, there is in the late antiquarian theses regarding the Qur'ān a troublesome assertion of historical totalization. The comparatist in me would normally embrace all forms and themes of textual affinities across time and space, and the influence of Aristotle and the peripatetic school is undoubtedly far-reaching in Islamic philosophy, but I will argue that the imperatives here carry with them pernicious consequences.

Let me illustrate this paradox with an example from Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In chapter 33 of this multivolume work, Gibbon discusses Q.18 (*Sūra-t- al-Kahf*, the Chapter of the Cave); he refers to the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. Gibbon argues that this "insipid legend" must have traveled from late antique Christianity to the land of Islam. To Gibbon, the story of the seven sleepers was originally a narrative about the emergence of Christianity as a victorious religion in the aftermath of a dark era of persecution. In other words, the story of the seven sleepers accurately enough

preceded Islam and may have well been narrated and circulated by Syriac bishops prior to Islam. There is nothing new about this. The Qur'ān refers to parts of this narrative in the Chapter of the Cave, named after the place in which the sleepers stayed. The story of the sleepers, however, constitutes only seventeen verses (Q.18: 9–26) of the sūra's 110 verses. Because the Qur'ān incorporates the narrative of the sleepers of the Cave, Gibbon assumes that Muḥammad must have stolen the tale “when he drove his camels to the fairs of Syria” and recast it “as a divine revelation into the Qur'an.” Furthermore, relying exclusively on Marracci's polemical translation and commentary on the Qur'ān, Gibbon concludes, sarcastically, that “Mahomet has not shown much taste or ingenuity,” even when “he has invented the dog (Al Rakim) of the Seven Sleepers; the respect of the sun, who altered his course twice a day that he might not shine into the cavern; and the care of God himself, who preserved their bodies from putrefaction by turning them to the right and left.”⁹⁴ What Gibbon's thesis leaves out is a system of allegorical interpretation whereby the story of the sleepers, whose account comes as a verification test for Muḥammad's prophethood,⁹⁵ is radically transformed in its Qur'ānic context to respond to local communal interrogations and redirect the story from the quibble of historical details to the ultimate moral lessons that need to be drawn from it. Moreover, Gibbon omits the need for a serious interrogation of the veracity and cohesion of that “first millennium,” which he employs uncritically as a period in the history of monotheism. This is how Gibbon drags Muḥammad into the declining world of the Roman Empire. This is also how he declares Islam as the end of late antiquity—by mocking Muḥammad's character and presenting his prophethood as a debt to Syriac Christianity.

But given the rowdy orientalism of Gibbon's age, one would not have expected him to write favorably about the Qur'ān. It is, rather, the recycling of Gibbon in modern scholarship that is alarming. In writing *Before and after Muhammad*, Garth Fowden states that he has “come to a better appreciation of Edward Gibbon,”⁹⁶ not because of his unapologetic Eurocentrism, his firm belief that European civilization is the pinnacle of human achievement, or because of his unflinching support of the “discontinuity thesis” on the fall of the Roman Empire, which Fowden rejects, but because Fowden sees Gibbon as “setting an agenda that today seems more valid than ever.”⁹⁷ Gibbon, who flagrantly accuses Muḥammad of plagiarism, has an “agenda” that inspires Fowden to write a history that includes Islam in a European millennium, the longest periodization the human mind could ever conceive. Is it likely that Fowden did not know or simply ignored this troubling aspect of Gibbon's scholarship? It is precisely in learning to confront the monstrosity of one's own tradition that the hope of dismantling this machinery of systematic othering and bringing it face to face with what it cannot grasp without succumbing to the larger of metanarrative of Euro-American 'aṣabiyya lies.

When Michel Foucault spoke of “periodization” and when Frederic Jameson cautioned critics to “always historicize,” they did not have in mind any period

longer than a hundred years, let alone a thousand years. Yet Fowden's work has inspired many. It is probably the driving force behind Aziz al-Azmeh's long-winded study on the topic; it also features prominently in Neuwirth's thesis on late antiquity. This is how Europe is making amends and reimagining its relationship to Islam. This is how the Euro-American academy overcomes its long-guarded western-Mediterranean and Byzantine turfs and jumps well beyond its boundaries to intellectually colonize the Qur'ān in an unending stretch of a grand narrative that spans a millennium: a wild subordination of history to a cosmetic surgery and a decadent feast for the Eurocentric historians of the Qur'ān. To be fair, incorporating Islam under "late antiquity" remains a colossal task and a difficult argument to make or even accept in contemporary Europe, precisely because it entails an extension in the teleology of Abrahamic monotheism,⁹⁸ with the hopeful presumption that Islam would still be treated as equal to and not as derivative from both Judaism and Christianity. This will in turn entail a different reading of the Qur'ān as a complement to and a commentary on both Judaism and Christianity. In the other direction, this incorporation will necessitate a radical retooling of Christian theology, which will have to accept Islam, and not Christianity, as the latest update of Abrahamic monotheism. This development is bound to "turn traditional patristics on its head," to use Averil Cameron's fitting words, "by making Islam, not Christianity, the end point."⁹⁹

But my point in citing these examples is to emphasize an important fact: the appeal of late antiquity as framework for research has already opened a portal between two kinds of academics: the "new" historians who see late antiquity as a *fait accompli* periodization that opens up boundaries and geographies to include Islam; and the *Hagarism*-infused historian who is uninterested in the traditional Muslim argument that the Qur'ān ushers in a new age and insists instead that the text is an iconoclastic myriad of repetitive modes recast from previous religious and cultural traditions.¹⁰⁰ While the latter brand of historians are free to locate sources for the Qur'ān wherever they please, they have no qualms in boasting that the practical advantage of studying Islam as "a child of Late Antiquity," is that "it widens the scope of their [late antiquarians] field to include a new geographical region, a new religious phenomenon and a greater span of time."¹⁰¹

Stewart warns against exactly such a maddened rush into what he characterizes as a "quantum leap" in present publications on the Qur'ān, leading to a state of "confusion" and "a feverish activity" that "has produced no grand consensus" in a field that continues to appear "chaotic, even to insiders."¹⁰² Cameron also calls this trend "the explosion of Late Antiquity" and cautions that scholars will eventually have to face "the challenge to be aware and to try to take account of the immensely complex context with which we are now presented."¹⁰³ In this vein, a question that was asked before must be asked again: Does the late antiquity thesis run the risk of participating in a different uprooting of Islam? Is it a radical departure from the crass orientalism that still haunts the field, or is it a return

under a different name, of another metanarrative, another constructed historical category designed to control the event of Islam, its Arabicity and sociolinguistic particularity? Even at this point, it is hopeful to imagine that a productive and decisive position in the field of Qur'ānic studies is still possible, one that, while admitting the messiness and complexity of history, and while grateful to the efforts and methodical approaches of their predecessors, is unafraid to leave behind the carved gods of Eurocentrism and embrace fresh approaches outside the façades of the "objective" method and the convenient metanarratives of authenticity and epigonality. Today, the chaos and disarray in this field warrant an urgent intervention and an ethical response to what Emmanuel Levinas not so long ago characterized as "the face of the other."

There is no denying that until today, and despite its fundamental drawbacks, the historical-critical study of scripture and biblical texts still rules the academy,¹⁰⁴ especially in terms of what gets transmitted to nonspecialists. Scholars who are not operating within an explicitly theological Jewish or Christian perspective often have almost the same attitude toward the Bible as Western scholars have toward the Qur'ān. *Almost!* They do not come at it with the same Eurocentrism and colonialist mentality. So, it is *almost* as if Western scholarship on the Qur'ān sometimes takes the same condescension toward the biblical text and amplifies it with all of the colonialist and postcolonialist hostility and appropriation. It is *almost* a form of intersectionality, except that, in the case of Islam, it is a combination of derision toward religion and derision toward a culture.

While the ghost of "continuity," as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰⁵ never fades away but lurks like a receding telos, such a telos may take many different faces and could even mutate within fluctuating contexts and epistemologies. Appropriations of history for the service of the present are neither new nor appropriate, but as "old as Babylon and [as] evil as Hell," to borrow Edward Abbey's words. In fact, Nietzsche, who once expressed a desire to live among Muslims in order to deconstruct better Europe's crisis in values—so that his "eye and judgement for all things European will be sharpened"—summed up these tendencies to appropriate history quite eloquently in the following statement:

If a man who wants to do something great has need of the past at all, he appropriates it by means of monumental history; he, on the other hand, who likes to persist in the familiar and the revered of old, tends the past as an antiquarian historian; and only he who is oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off this burden at any cost, has need of critical history, that is to say, a history that judges and condemns.¹⁰⁶

This statement plays at the heart of the crisis of current Euro-American scholarship on the Qur'ān. Nietzsche's reference to "critical history" is a history that recognizes the misdeeds of the past and endeavors to liberate people from dominant forms of ideological representations of events. Critical history provides a context in which the historian is irked by a present need to search history maliciously,

twisting facts and drawing cryptic conclusions precisely in order to make a partisan statement on that history. It is crucial, therefore, that interpretations of history, especially of histories that belong to cultural and linguistic traditions different from one's own, should include the historian's own cultural, intellectual, and ideological position vis-à-vis the multiple imbrications of these events outside the historian's familiar grounds. If we follow Nietzsche's hint, when the call for reassessing history is in the service of a present need, then the reassessment of that history will always be "critical"—that is, it will serve the immediate fulfillment of a desire, a desire to contest the study of the prehistory of the Qur'ān as a replacement of the study of the Qur'ān itself. The current postmodern direction of the humanities offers a unique opportunity to rethink Qur'ānic studies in a different light. There surely is a way to see approaches to the Qur'ān as something other than an allegory of an epistemological colonization emanating from a strong cultural desire to reappropriate the other. Or, is there still a lingering conviction that texts of alien cultures are innately subordinate to what the Eurocentric former US Secretary of Education William Bennett has referred to as "the great tradition the world has seen . . . the great books and civilization of the West . . . great, texts, great minds, great ideas"?¹⁰⁷ If this is indeed the case, then the study of the Qur'ān in Euro-American academia *demand*s a new look at ourselves, not just a look inward, but a Nietzschean look from the outside in, to see if we have become, consciously or not, the very ghostly embodiments of those older ideologies we denounce the most.