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# Review of John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, Cambridge 1977; Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge 1977

We possess considerably more reports about the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the textual history of the Koran than about the life of Jesus and the formation of the New Testament. But historical criticism has taught us to look for the editorial bias in the sources, and most of the Islamic sources are not even contemporary. It is true that the Arab historiographers say that they reproduce the reports of eyewitnesses, but this claim is not entirely free from wishful thinking. The conclusions drawn from this insight have been widely divergent and will certainly always remain so. The two books under review share in this respect a certain radicalism. It is comforting to observe that their findings are totally different.

This is only partly due to a difference of topic and intention; the essential dissimilarity lies in their approach. John Burton's book *The Collection of the Qur'an*, rather poorly printed as a mimeographed manuscript, concentrates on a specific problem: the redaction of the Koran and, in connection with it, the doctrine of "abrogation" in Muslim law. Patricia Crone's and Michael Cook's book, handsomely produced in the Cambridge University Press's traditional style, discusses the "Making of the Islamic World" up to the sixth century H.; the solution here offered for the redaction of the Koran is but one of many hypotheses, though by no means the least explosive, which the authors have to offer. But what is more important, whereas Dr Burton departs from the Islamic texts, patiently analyzing – and discarding – report after report, the authors of *Hagarism* declare by their choice of title that they are not very fond of Muslim lore. "Hagarism" is their label for Islam; it is derived – *con amore* – from Christian sources which liked to stress that the "sons of Ishmael" had had the wrong mother, i.e. *Hagar*. And whereas Crone and Cook expect the reader to stumble through cultures and continents with Hegelian seven-league boots, Burton proceeds in meticulously small steps, rehearsing and reiterating his proofs. I shall take the liberty of starting with the latter's study.

Until now the redaction of the Koran has been regarded, in principal agreement with the Muslim sources, as a complicated and intricate process which

 | DOI: 10.1163/9789004336483_126

was finished by the establishing of a *textus receptus* under the third caliph Uthman (23–35 H). It is true that contradictions in the traditions could not be overlooked, but they acted only as a stimulus for the choice of one view or another. Dr Burton's radicalism lies in the assumption that not some of the traditions are wrong, but all of them. The truth is to be found in what all of them explicitly or implicitly exclude: that the Koran stems, in its actual form, from Muhammad himself. Dr Burton argues that there has been no redaction by anyone at all after the Prophet's death.

This conclusion grew out of a methodological step which is really self-evident. The accounts of textual variants of the Koran, of the collecting of fragments, of diverging codices, etc., do not differ in character from the material found in the prophetic tradition, the so-called Hadith. Yet Western scholars had long since been rather sceptical concerning Hadith. This attitude had simply to be applied to the Koranic material, so that what had previously been accepted as correct historiography was suspected of being mere harmonization.

But there was still something missing. There seemed to be no motive for the pious minds having tried so unanimously to modify the past. The Koran would, after all, have gained in persuasiveness if it had been handed down to posterity in the form given by the Prophet himself. But the Koran was not allowed to possess this persuasiveness since the believers had by-passed it in certain juridical points. Or, put into Muslim categories, since the Koran was the Word of God in the strictest sense possible, and since Muslim law (which sometimes diverged from Scripture) could not be anything but divine commandment, the relevant passages of the Koran were bound either to have been abrogated or forgotten. But only God could have abrogated them – which would presuppose that the Prophet was not sure until the end of his life whether a "final" version established by him would not turn out to be premature. And only those who survived him could have forgotten these passages – which would explain why they transmitted a text which, in its ultimate version, did not contain certain things which seemed to be proven as divine revelation by the divine law.

This complicated game is not by itself improbable. As it frequently happens, the theologians and jurists would have paid for accommodating themselves to reality in one place by sowing confusion in another. Points can certainly be made in support of the hypothesis. The pretentious attempt of G. Bergsträsser to reconstruct the textual history of the Koran out of its variant readings has failed. Another German scholar who kept himself busy with Koranic problems, August Fischer, wrote in a posthumously published article (1948) that the variants are "for the most part nothing else than emendation experiments of philologically trained Koranic scholars on difficult passages of the Uthmanic

*textus receptus*". A thesis submitted at Munich (though not yet published) has recently tried to prove that the structure of the earlier suras is so coherent and artistic that it can only be explained by the *Stilwillen* of an individual personality, i.e. Muhammad. And as to abrogation, it is striking that in spite of the fact that this concept also raises serious theological problems (by imputing a certain capriciousness to God and therefore contradicting His immutability), it was discussed in Islam mainly in law; in theology, however, it was treated almost exclusively in connection with the problem of the Mosaic law which was considered to have been abrogated by the revelation given to Muhammad.

But there are also some objections to be made. Dr Burton has used a lot of Arabic sources, but most of them are rather late compilations. His theory is a good example of historical criticism, but his actual performance is strangely unhistorical. He tries to smash a view of history, but he shows only *why* it originated, not *how* it originated. The process he postulates must have taken place very early, for the traditions which he rejects surely existed in the second century H. That being the case, it would have almost suggested itself to compare the earliest texts we possess for the topic of abrogation: the book by al-Zuhri (d. 124/742) or the *Tafsir khamsmi'at aya* by Muqatil b. Sulayman (d. 150/767) – see the doctoral thesis by M.M. Al-Sauwaf, Oxford 1968. There is, of course, the problem of authenticity, at least concerning the first text; but already with the second one we are on safe ground. In addition to that, other branches of Arabic literature could have been checked: historiography, biographical and heresiographical material. It might have been interesting to know at what time Uthman was first blamed for having destroyed the divergent codices of the Koran (the text which comes closest to the events, the letter addressed by Abdullah b. Ibad to the caliph Abdulmalik and written about 75 H., insists only on the fact that Uthman was the first to prevent the Koran from being paraphrased in the style of the popular preachers). The heresiographers tell us that already Wasil b. 'Ata' (d. 131/748–749) preferred a specific doctrine of abrogation which seems to presuppose extended discussions, especially with Shiites.

On the whole one still wonders why all the sources should have only preserved the black legend and why there are no traces whatsoever of what actually happened. It is true that the motive for the reshaping of history was cogent enough, but the theory of abrogation was, as the author admits, not the only way out, and the *Geschichtsklitterung* was undertaken so early that it can have hardly escaped all protest. We may hope to get somewhat further by comparing the catenae (*asanid*) of the reports and by asking who was it who brought them up, or by analysing the dialectical interrelation of the traditions; this step has

not been taken either. Dr Burton's book quickens our appreciation of a problem and may point in the right direction for its solution, but its thesis needs further discussion and substantiation.

*Hagarism* starts from a different angle. For here we have a study in cultural anthropology, focusing on how the Arabs found their "identity" in order to create the Islamic civilization. The lack of concordance between "Arab" and "Islamic" reveals the inherent tension: as the rise of the new religion almost coincided with the foundation of an empire, the identity could be either national or religious, an alternative which for a modern Muslim – and for him perhaps more than ever – is still difficult to decide. The empire covered regions of totally different historical traditions, and the authors insist on the fact that these traditions were not abruptly cut off nor even pushed aside, but rather absorbed into the new entity. Islam did not bring a sharp caesura, especially since it had to find an "identity" of its own, too.

In the longest chapter of the book, the individuality of the social and political development in Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia since the time of Hellenism is described in a sketchy, but on the whole convincing way. The authors have succeeded in combing through the relevant secondary literature with a keen eye for the essentials; the Nestorian and the Monophysite (Jacobite and Coptic) churches are not differentiated according to their views on the nature of Christ, but according to the decisions they made in the framework of their societies. The same is done for Iran, although on a larger scale and with less space, by comparing the role of Zoroastrianism to that of Judaism and of Greek philosophy in their respective environments. The situations were indeed different: whereas Egypt, Syria, and, to a certain extent, also Mesopotamia had a provincial civilization where different elements were mixed together, Iran was monolithic, the heartland of a world power.

Comparison is indeed the main heuristic device of Crone and Cook, and it is expressed in a strictly antithetic style. They work with enharmonic permutations between different civilizations – a kind of history of the non-historical (*Geschichte des Nichtgeschehenen*) which may be, in happy moments, full of surprising perspectives.

This is also the technique in which Islam is treated in the last seven chapters. Under the common denominator of "barbarian conquests", the authors make a comparison between Islam and the Germanic invasions, especially that of the Goths in Spain because they possessed something like a religion of their own, Arianism. Then the analysis of the different regions is taken up again, contrasting their evolution under Islam with what had been said before concerning their pre-Islamic situation. In the two following chapters the authors try to apply categories taken over from Judaism. They sort out rabbinical (Phar-

isaic) and priestly (Sadducee) phenomena, "Sadducee Islam" being more or less equated with Shiism. In the final chapter they venture a parallel with Europe, especially with Calvinism, trying to explain the "austerity of Islamic culture" which could "oppose only Salafiyya, the return to the unitary religion, culture and ethnicity of the righteous ancestors" to "Reformation, Renaissance and nationalism". This leads to the question which will already have occurred to the reader of the book some time before, namely why Islam, for all its borrowed identity and its inherent barrenness, exerted – and continues to exert – such on appeal on its followers. The authors conjecture that it was family life which compensated for the "sanctity which had fled the public domain". The two pages devoted to this hypothesis do not altogether serve to disarm the sceptic.

Despite the family *Gemütlichkeit* evoked at the end, the book is written by uncompromising intellectuals for the encyclopedic reader. The latter must not only know why Nubia was the Daylam of Egypt, or why Plato experienced a Zaydi misadventure in Syracuse and why there were Maoist *muhajirun* in Yemen, but also who are the Rastafarians, or Jacob Wimpheling and a whole host of other obscure figures, and how the Manchus in Confucian China or the Celtiberians in the Roman empire had something in common with the Syrians under Muslim rule. The cultural omnicomparatism leads to a megalomania which does not square well with the 150 pages devoted to a problem which in itself already exceeds the limits of usual scholarship. Instead of being explained, the parallels are frequently reduced to mere aperçus. This seems to be a conscious stylistic decision; the book appears to be deliberately provocative. The price paid for this is a haughty hermetism which leaves the reader helplessly wandering about in a mirrored cabinet of cultural parallels. I must confess that I found a number of coinages quite incomprehensible. This impression increased the more I approached my own field – which naturally induced the solid inferiority complex perhaps intended by the authors, but which also made me suspicious. And even when I did understand, it took some effort to get over the habit of constant headlining which pastes over the clear lines of argumentation. The book is full of esprit, but void of structure. It represents an attitude which credits the scholar more as a wit than as a thinker.

But to be fair it should be said that the authors are extremely well read, and there are almost no inaccuracies in the documentation. The problem is the method and the perspective. The method of distilling entire books into a handy formula can be seriously misleading. To explain later Islamic mysticism as "imported monism of India" is, *pace* R.C. Zaehner, somewhat out of focus. The statements that the Umayyad prince Khalid b. Yazid got books on alchemy from Greek philosophers in Egypt, and that the early Egyptian mystic

Dhu l-Nun was familiar with the Greek heritage of Alexandria, are somewhat implausible. What is said about the origins of Muslim law (page 97 ff.) looks like a mere course in dry swimming. In such cases, condensation does not lead to a synthesis, but to mere "tertiary literature": argument is reduced to rhetoric, and wide reading merely drugs the reader.

The perspective of *Hagarism*, however, may be best analysed from its starting-point. The "Hagarenes" are treated as empty shells which had to be filled with foreign ideas in order to acquire an "identity". They were beduins who had no "answers to the problems of settled life". This strict antithesis between sedentaries and nomads is, although canonized somehow by the authority of Ibn Khaldun, normally not supported by the results of modern geography and anthropology. The authors do not mention the fact that Arab tribes were already living in Syria and Iraq in pre-Islamic times, and not simply as beduins. The Ghassanids and the Lakhmids ara hardly incorporated into the picture, the Yemen not at all. This explains the unconvincing treatment of Arabic poetry, absurdities like the formulation that (given a certain hypothetical situation) "Muʿawiya might have demanded the collection of the Muʿallaqat in the form of an Arab Iliad", and banalities like the discovery that Hammad al-Rawiya "was no precursor of Firdawsi". According to the authors, the "Hagarenes" were first influenced in Syria and only afterwards exposed to "the more integral traditions in Iraq", but we are not informed how this "move from Syria to Babylonia" tallies with the fact that Syria and Iraq were conquered at the same time and developed a Muslim civilization concurrently. There was, of course, a shift of the capital from Damascus to Kufa and then to Baghdad, but a capital is not an "identity".

The explanation of this attitude is that the authors are working with a hypothesis which they try to explain in their first five chapters: the "Hagarenes" had to be influenced first in Syria because it was there that they became Muslims. This is the point where the book reveals what it announces in its preface: that it is "written by infidels for infidels". The entire history of the early Muslim community in Mecca and Medina, including all we know about the life of the Prophet Muhammad, is declared to be a myth: the "Hagarenes" – and it is only now that the new term reveals its full explosive force – started as Jews in Palestine, guided by Muhammad who certainly was a prophet, but the prophet of a Jewish messiah, not of Islam.

This Messiah was, as Crone and Cook presume, up to now known to us under a false title: as the second caliph of Muslim historical tradition, i.e. Umar who conquered Jerusalem and whose epithet *al-faruq* given to him in the Arabic sources they understand in the sense of the Aramaic *paroqa* from which it derives, as "savior". When his messianic role was not accepted by the Jews

themselves the "Hagarenes" started searching for a new identity. After a short flirtation with Christian messianism, they invented themselves an Arab past which forced them to shift back the death of their prophet for about two years in order to have him die at Medina.

The gap was filled not by the extension of Umar's caliphate – as one might have expected – but by the intercalation of another caliph, namely Abu Bakr whom we have known since as the first successor of the Prophet. Doctrinally, the Arabization manifested itself in the new role attributed to Abraham, who was supposed to have built the Kaʿba at Mecca. But this move was not energetic enough to exclude a strong Samaritan impact on the newly arising religion, equally possible only in Palestinian environments.

The role played by Abraham is, of course, already extensively mentioned in the Koran. But the Koran did not yet exist at that time. "There is some reason to suppose that the Koran was put together out of a plurality of earlier Hagarene works"; the authors presume that this process took place during the time of the caliph Abdulmalik (65/685–86/705), i.e., two generations after the death of Muhammad. They suggest that Hajjaj, his governor in Iraq, had something to do with it. But it was Abdulmalik who "proclaimed", with the erection of the Dome of the Rock, "the prophetic mission of Muhammad".

Thus far, *in nuce*, the hypothesis with which the book begins, somewhat simplified, of course, but also, perhaps, somewhat clearer than in its original rhetorical embellishment. There is not sufficient space here to refute it in detail. But such a refutation is perhaps unnecessary since the authors make no effort to *prove* it in detail. Neither do they so elsewhere in their book. Where they are only giving a new interpretation of well-known facts, this is not decisive. But here, where the accepted facts are consciously put upside down, their approach is disastrous.

In principle this experiment might be welcomed. We are far from possessing any universally accepted historical picture of early Islam, and we should frankly admit that there are many facts – or better, reports – which still demand a convincing explanation. But all these facts and reports are open to more than one interpretation, and even if no explanation has been given at all this is no immediate proof that the authors' explanation is correct. The book is indeed remarkable for its complete absence of philology. Although "there is some reason to suppose that the Koran was put together out of a plurality of earlier Hagarene works" it is given exactly twelve lines, and there is no textual analysis whatsoever, let alone any attempt at a reconstruction of these earlier Hagarene works (which would have to reflect the rather bizarre development of the sect, the change of basic assumptions – and perhaps of style, given the difference of Palestinian origin and Iraqian redaction, etc.). In addition to that, there

remains the basic question whether the early Muslims can really be viewed, in their attitude towards the Koran, as editors patching fragments together and whether they were not rather believers who recited the Koran in their liturgy: "Qur'an" means, after all, "recitation".

A second methodological problem is the deliberate reduction of the available sources. The authors proceed from contemporary non-Muslim (Christian and Jewish) reports and leave aside the entire Muslim tradition itself. This has the advantage of showing how the phenomenon of a slowly unfolding new religion was seen from outside and, moreover, it draws attention to a number of texts which have been unduly neglected by Islamicists. The specialization and dephilologization of Oriental studies has had the result that the knowledge of Syriac, Armenian, Greek, and Hebrew which was still presupposed in the time of Nöldeke or Wellhausen, has almost disappeared among the Islamicists. Crone and Cook are intrepid enough to break with the normal Arabic sources and to use Hebrew and Syriac testimonies, obviously not only on the basis of translations.

But we should not forget that these texts, though contemporary, only show how the new phenomenon was seen, not how it actually was. If we agree that Islam, at this early stage, was still trying to define its "identity" then we cannot demand that an observer from outside who could even less evaluate the radical novelty of the event should have had a clearer concept of what was really happening. We should rather expect that he tried to describe the phenomenon with his own categories – which would have been messianism in the case of a Palestinian Jew. And the fact that he mixed up or ignored important details ceases to be surprising when we compare the kind of knowledge people of our well-informed age may have of Arabia or Islam.

As to the Muslim sources, there is, of course, some point in claiming that they are posterior and even tendentious (although I would not concede this for all of them, e.g., the "Constitution of Medina"). But this does not mean that their evidence is without value. The Muslim tradition is enormously vast and detailed; when there was a discord about the facticity of an event or about its interpretation it has usually left its traces. The method for discovering these traces is again philology. If we work with the hypothesis of an intentional "editing" of the past on the scale assumed by the authors we would have to presuppose not one forger, but a host of them, and not only in Syria where Abdulmalik could have "manipulated" the process, but also in Iraq and in the Hijaz. Not only a historical tradition would have been invented, but also much poetry showing the impact of the new religion (cf. the doctoral thesis by Omar A. Farroukh, "Das Bild des Frühislam in der arabischen Dichtung von der Hiğra bis zum Tode 'Umars", Erlangen 1937, obviously unknown to the authors). In

this respect, the situation is different from that in early Christianity; we are not dealing with a few isolated gospels.

Moreover, the single elements of this story do not always support each other. Samaritan "influence" is, e.g., conceivable without the framework given to it by the authors (cf. M. Gaster's article "Samaritans" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* to which the authors refer). But – and this is the third methodical criticism – they never take the time to explain when they bring in Judaism whether they understand it as a phase before Islam, as an element in it, as a model for it, or as a mere comparison in a strictly phenomenological way. Their language remains judaized throughout the book: we hear about "Umayyad priests" (i.e., the caliphs), the "Muslim rabbis" in Iraq (apparently the lawyers), or about "Sadducee Islam". But the meaning is – to use a favourite expression of the authors – increasingly "etiolated". This is why one's verdict on the first half of the book does not necessarily affect the second part. But even there the reader might profit more by responding to the authors' challenge than by going along with it. There is obviously no great danger of Islamicists being compelled henceforth to call themselves "Hagarists".