Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation

John Wansbrough
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Since its first release in 1977 by Oxford University Press, *Quranic Studies* has become part of a wider body of published scholarship that is taking a fresh look at the traditional renditions of early Islamic history. Apart from this book, John Wansbrough (1928-2002), who was professor of Semitic Studies at London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), also wrote *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford University Press: 1978). Others have since continued to research the formative period of Islam in a similar fashion. Among the most controversial contributions in this genre was *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Oxford University Press: 1977), a joint project of Patricia Crone (who did her Ph.D. under Wansbrough) and Michael Cook (who also taught at SOAS until 1986).The scholars belonging to this "school" of history writing have been characterized as representatives of a "renewed scepticism" (Mohammed Arkoun), "revisionists" (R. Stephen Humphreys), and even practitioners of "bad Orientalism" (Leonard Binder).

This last characterization is indicative of the direction in which the discussions have moved. Rather than having a continued exchange of views informed by scholarly arguments, which this highly specialist and arcane subject matter would certainly merit, the debate was, regrettably, soon dominated by ideological overtones. Due to new communication technologies, it became part of a discourse that went far beyond what would have been its normal readership. Now, *Quranic Studies* has been released again, enhanced with a foreword, new annotations, and a glossary by Andrew Rippin, a Qur'anic studies expert from Victoria University in Canada. Rippin undertook this venture in order to counter some of the ideological and non-scholarly ways in which the book has been used during the first twenty-five years of its existence. In fact, the editor even questions whether all of those voicing the strongest opinions about this book have actually ever read it.

That would indeed be most remarkable, because Wansbrough's study is at a level of erudition that few can hope to master. Unfortunately, that is also its main drawback: For the non-specialist, and by that I mean the Islamicist whose interests lie outside scriptural exegesis, this erudite book poses a for-

midable challenge. Reading Wansbrough is apparently even frustrating for some of the most prominent historians of Islam, as can be deduced from Humphreys' characterization of Wansbrough's chosen writing style: "He affects a ferociously opaque style which bristles with unexplained technical terms in many languages, obscure allusions, and Teutonic grammar" (Humphreys, *Islamic History* [1999], 83-84).

Rippin's careful revision of the 1977 original alleviates some of these problems. Not only has he added a list of the manuscripts that Wansbrough consulted for his study, but he also has provided translations and explanations of citations and terms that can be considered as problematic for most of the readership. However, even with these new tools, this study remains difficult to penetrate.

Wansbrough presents his analysis of the Islamic scripture in four sections: "Canon and Revelation," "Emblems of Prophethood," "Origins of Classical Arabic," and "Principles of Exegesis." Such a framework betrays a first indication of the comprehensiveness of his argument, which should be read against the background of his broader scholarship in the field of Semitic studies; his view of the nascent Islamic tradition, as explained in *The Sectarian Milieu*; and his reliance on the achievements in Bible exegesis from the nineteenth century onward.

Commencing with a study of the *mushaf* (the copy of the Qur'anic text), Wansbrough problematizes its genesis through a consideration of the text that is now considered canonical as well as of references to the relevant exegetical literature. His argument is dense and complex, so only a few examples will have to suffice. The fragmentation of episodes from Judaic-Christian scripture found in the Qur'an are regarded as an indication of familiarity with those traditions, so that brief references were considered sufficient. Wansbrough backs this up with a reference to later exegetical literature, where the narrative structure is, as it were, "read into the text." Next, he wonders why the *asbab al-nuzul* (reasons for the descent [of the particular passage]) chronology has never been questioned, since, in his view, both intra-textual examination and later commentaries give sufficient reason to do so. Finally, the fact that law texts prior to the third/ninth century do not make explicit reference to the Qur'an as a source of law allows Wansbrough to make an *argumentum e silencio* inference that there might not have been a canonical text before that time.

To establish a link between the Sunnah's formulation and the Qur'an's possible canonization, Wansbrough proceeds with a study of the nature of prophethood, in which he addresses the complex relationship between "rev-

elation" (*wahy*) and "inspiration" (*ilham*). Read as synonymous in the Islamic tradition, he argues that the former actually presupposed the intercession of some kind of messenger. After making excursions into the ethnic orientation of Islamic prophetology, the inimitability of the Qur'an and, closely related to that, the potential doctrinal minefield of the createdness versus the eternity of the Qur'an, the author returns to textual study *per se*, since the Muslim commentators ("masoretes" in Wansbrough's parlay) "were above all grammarians" (p. 84).

The section on classical Arabic is particularly challenging for non-linguists, because it assumes, not surprising for a professor of Semitic studies, a great deal of familiarity with Semitic philology in general. Given the prominence of German scholarship in this field – Wansbrough draws on Theodor Nöldeke, Hans-Jürgen Becker, Hans Wehr, Anton Spitaler, and Wolfdietrich Fischer – the text is rife with technical expressions from German philology. Apart from the "Teutonic grammar" noticed by Humphreys, this may pose an additional obstacle for many readers.

The second half of *Quranic Studies* examines the exegetical literature on the Qur'an, which, as Wansbrough states at the outset, can "hardly be described as homogenous" (p. 119). In order to get a handle on this diversity, he suggests an experimental approach: drawing on various types of exegesis that have been applied to Judaic-Christian scripture. I believe that it is not too far-fetched to assume that, given the antagonism – not just theologically but also from a political-historical point of view – between the monotheist traditions, as well as the impact of the critique of Orientalism during the last twenty-five years, Wansbrough's reliance on these stylistic and functional modes of exegesis (known under such arcane names as "Haggadic," "Halakhic," and "Masoretic") may also have something to do with the hostile reception this book has had.

Be that as it may, and notwithstanding the fact that many practicing Muslims may find themselves at odds with the premises on which Wansbrough operated, what cannot be denied is that his controversial but groundbreaking work of some three decades ago was based on solid and conscientious academic research. While his conclusions are open to debate and should be subject to frank discussion, scholars owe each other the professional courtesy of a degree of detachment when challenging each other's viewpoints.

Carool Kersten
Ph.D. Candidate, The Department of the Study of Religions
School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London, United Kingdom