UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

Master Thesis

How Western Scholars Have Seen the Eve of Islam: A Historiographical Analysis.

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Abstract

This thesis is a work of historiographical analysis with a focus on how Western scholars have presented the beginning of Islam. It investigates the narratives they have produced about a historical period which constitutes an important element in the lives of many Muslims, conceived by some as a golden age to be recalled and imitated. The traditional emic understanding of the era is challenged by historical critical scholarship, mostly done in Western academia. The thesis is a meta-study of the scholarship done, beginning in the nineteenth century by Orientalist, and ending with current debates in the field of early Islamic studies. I Will analyses the work of important scholars such as Julius Wellhausen, Montgomery Watt, and Patrcia Crone. I will Comment on their contributions, the criticisms they have faced, in addition to exploring the social context in which their scholarship was produced.

The focus is to analyze the scholarly bias that has affected the narrative presentation of the period. Narratives are here understood as "a way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values" (Merriam Webster Dictionary s.v "narratives", 28.05.2023 accessed 29.05.2023). In conclusion, the thesis will show that western scholarly work on the beginning of Islam may be divided into a "Revisionist narrative" and a "Traditional narrative". It will show how these narratives came to be and how recent changes have made the revisionist position move in a more radical direction. I will also show that attempts have been made recently to unify the narrative with mixed results.

In short, this thesis examines the most important aspects of different narrative explanations for the beginning of Islam and places them within larger changes to the academic debate. In addition, it explores the broader impact of these narratives, analyzing how some of them permeate textbooks used in higher education, for example at the University of Oslo.

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1   Introduction

Scholars have very often used their research as a foil for working out their own polemic agendas (Brockopp 2010, 13).

The life of Muhammad is of huge importance to millions of Muslims all over the world. The story is the foundation myth for one of the world's largest religions, with more than 1.7 billion followers worldwide (Bigelow 2016, 238). This has made the period interesting for many scholars in different fields and working in different time periods. These scholars have approached the period with their own bias, often influenced by the academical paradigm of their time. Some of this scholarship has challenged the traditional emic understanding of the period, particularly the work done with a Historical-critical method. I became interested in analyzing how the understanding of the period in the Western academia has changed over time, in sync with larger changes in the academic world, as well as larger social changes in the West. In this thesis I want to use historiography with special interest in narratives, to analyze *how Western scholars have described and understood the eve of Islam*.

My argument is that we can divide the different interpretations and descriptions of the beginning of Islam into different *narratives*. We can here define narrative as "a way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values" (Merriam Webster Dictionary s.v "narratives", accessed 25.09.2022). A narrative is a particular way to arrange the facts into a larger story, one with a beginning, middle and ending. I here divide the different Western scholarly works that exist about the beginning of Islam into particular narratives. I am interested in how these narratives came into existence, who follows them and how changes in the scientific paradigm affected the narrative that different scholars presented. Any scholarly representation will be effect by the scientific paradigm around the scholar, and this can create wildly different narrative explanations for the history of religions. Where it is possible i will try analyzing how changes in the scientific paradigm of religious studies has affected the scholars understanding of Religion. Here the work *Nine theories of religion* by Daniel Pals will be useful (Pals 2015).

Each chapter in this thesis will focus on one particular narrative representation of the period. This means that each chapter focuses on a particular scholar, school of thought, or academic period. Most narratives do not exist in a vacuum but are affected by new narratives appearing and evolving. I have tried, where possible, to keep the flow of chronology generally correct.

1.1   Structure of the chapters

In Chapter 2 I will present the *traditional narrative*. This narrative is the one most often presented in textbooks about Islam used in schools and higher education in for example Norway. It is built on Muslim sources and tries to present a version that most Muslims can agree with. At the same time, it is built on Western scientific study and is not the same as the insider narrative. Since it is often retold in schoolbooks and textbooks, it is a version most non-Muslim will be familiar with.

Chapter 3 and 4 will focus on the orientalist period. Chapter 3 is shaped by Edwards Said understand of Orientalism in his book *Orientalism.* This narrative was built on the polemic language of the Middle Ages and presents a rather negative view of Islam. Chapter 4 presents the German orientalist narrative, which differs from Edward Said's account in many interesting ways and therefore warrants its own discussion. While Said's conclusion in *Orientalism* is based on French and English orientalist scholarship demonstrates Suzanne L. Marchand that the German case was different. There narratives were less based on negativity towards Islam, but was built on the ideas of positivism, and a general anti-religious sentiment.

The post war period changed the scientific paradigm and initiates the beginning of the end of Orientalist studies, and the turn to Middle eastern studies and Islamic studies. It saw authors like Montgomery Watt present a more favorable view of Islam than many previous scholars. Watts narrative became very popular and continues to be so in modern textbooks. It also inherits problems from the time it was written. The discussion of this narrative will be presented in Chapter 5.

During the 1970's a new direction emerged in the study of Islam, called the *Revisionist School,* which applied a historical critical approach to the study of early Islam. Within this school are figures like John Wansbrough, G. R. Hawting and Patricia Crone. Their work created a series of new theories about the origin of Islam, that were far removed from the traditional narrative. Some of these theories have been criticized for being critical of Islam in their denial of any truth in the Muslim tradition. Most of the academia found the arguments made by the revisionist school to be problematic. This has only been strengthened in recent years with the advent of modern Neo-Orientalism and overtly islamophobia narratives. The

creation of the Revisionist School created a divide that runs deep, a divide that will be explored in Chapter 6.

Finally, in Chapter 7 we will see a movement towards a middle ground, with scholars like Fred Donner and Robert Hoyland, who are critical but accepting of the Muslim sources. They attempt to combine the best of both worlds and create a narrative that fits better with the historical records, without denying the insider perspective of many of the 1.7 billion Muslims living today.

1.2   Scope of the inquiry

This thesis is not primarily interested in Muhammad as a historical figure, his message or how and why Islam spread. These points are of importance for the different narratives I present, however my thesis is a form of meta-study focusing on the historical narratives themselves. I will be looking at a series of different scholarly works on early Islamic history and trying to understand what influenced them, both within the field itself and outside of it. In addition, I will be exploring which narratives have been the most influential in introductory textbooks about Islam used in higher education in Norway.

If one is inclined, one can describe this thesis as a Matryoshka doll, or a Russian nesting doll. At the core one has the center, the actual historical event of the beginning of Islam. In the next layer there are the primary sources, often in the form of written texts from the period. These have been interpreted by scholars who, to make sense of them, have placed them into narrative structures. My work is to interpret the interpretations and place a new narrative structure over this new material.

It is important to note that I am not making any judgments of the value of any narrative over another. I am not arguing that any one of the narratives gives a "truer" reflection of the past. I am simply interested in how different narratives exist and what basis they are built upon.

1.3   Methods

In this thesis I am building on the methods of historiography and hermeneutics. Historiography is the study of history. It can be described as the act of analyzing the methods,

theories, styles, and structures historians use when they create history. We can see historiography as the history of history (Encyclopedia Britannica s.v. historiography, accessed 23.09.22). As a method, this means that I am going to be studying and analyzing the works made by scholars about the beginning of Islam. Where scholars might use texts from the period as their primary source, I am using the texts of historians as primary texts. Not to come to an understanding of the eve of Islam, but to come to an understanding of the methods, styles, and narrative structures used by the historians. A historian always makes decisions of what to include, how to describe it, and where to end the story (Sandmo 2015, 189).

Hayden White argued in his book *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* that there is no way to present a value-neutral representation of history. White believes that to be able to make sense of the different facts presented, they must be tied together into a narrative structure (White 1973, 7). This is what separates history from chronicles, which can be simple lists of things that have happened (White 1973, 6). This narrative structure leads history to be much closer to fiction than to science (Sandmo 2015, 189).

White argues that historians place different narrative structures into a larger plot structure, which is necessary for the story to make sense for the reader. White believed that there exist four such plot structures historians used, but states that there might be more. These are "romantic", "tragic", "comedic", and "satirical" (White 1973, 8). By choosing a different plot structure the same story can be told in many ways (White 1973, 7). For example, the story of the eve of Islam could be told as a romantic tale of the victory of monotheism, or as a tragic fall of pre-Islamic religion, all depending on which plot structure the author chooses. This method of looking at different narrative structures does not try to argue that one way is more correct than another. Instead, it looks at the structure, and compares how the different authors use different structures to further their points (White 1973, 4). This direction within historiography argues that "history" can be put together in a series of different ways, and that there exists no one correct account of the past, but many different ways to tell the same story (Iggers 2000, 383).

White's theory has been widely critiqued. One of the main criticisms has been of relativism. Are all narratives equally true and is there no difference between history and fiction? In White's opinion the choice of a plot is a purely aesthetic and moral one (White 1973, xii). White himself disagrees with the argument that he is relativistic. He emphasized the closeness

between history and fiction but believed that history is at its core based on facts. He argues that to disregard facts in the way Holocaust deniers do is "morally offensive" (White 1998, 76). According to George Iggers' understanding of this, it is therefore possible to criticize and assess different narratives based on their fidelity to the sources (Iggers 2000, 384).

Another important question is the relationship between text and context. White's main focus is the author's choice of a plot and less on how the social context around the author affects what narrative structure they can choose. White argued that the only context that was needed to know came from the text itself (White 1973, 5; Iggers 2000, 377). Iggers points out that White is not consistent in this regard. He often looks to the social contexts to understand and place a text, instead of basing it fully on the text itself (Iggers 2000, 378). Iggers argues that a better understanding is created by a closer form of textual reading (Iggers 2000, 381). To understand a text, one also must understand the context. Iggers argues that the needed context all comes from the text itself (Iggers 2000, 381). This argument I disagree with. It is often useful to look outside the text itself to find a deeper understanding of the context. Every text exists as part of a context and is filled with intertextual references to other works (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 316). One can understand a text without analyzing the contexts outside the text, but my understanding and analysis is going to be based on reading both the text and the context. I will explain this further in the next part about *Hermeneutics*. I am here not searching for authorial intent, but rather one of an infinite number of ways to interpret the text that aligns with the context of its creation (Iggers 2000, 378).

Another problem with White's theory is that he is particularly concerned with nineteenth century historians. In the post WW2 period, it became popular to try to avoid narratives and the telling of stories. Instead, the focus was on the quantitative elements of history (Stone 1979, 5). The four plot structures White suggested work well for nineteenth century historians but are not necessarily adequate if we move out of this period. I will therefore be adjusting White's theory of historiography for my own use. I am not going to be using the four plot structures White suggested. They were useful for the works he studied, but not necessarily the works I have analyzed in this thesis. I am not alone in questioning White's categories, Iggers suggested that "One may dismiss this categorization" (Iggers 2000, 377). The focus of using White is more to show the similarities between history and literature rather than exactly following all his arguments and categorizations. My use of narrative is simply to use it to analyze how different scholars can create different explanations for the same period. I want to study how scholars place information into a theme and argument (Stone 1979, 4).

The second method I am using is *Hermeneutics*. This is the study of how humans interpret expressions, as well as how to come to useful interpretations (Engler and Stausberg 2011, 275). Hermeneutics began with the study of texts but has expanded into interpretations of art, movements, sayings, or pictures, as well as culture or religion, seen as webs of signs (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 315).

I am for the most part following in the steps of Hans-Georg Gadamer here. Gadamer argued for a version of Hermeneutics that focuses on how every reader comes to a text with a certain set of existing beliefs and preconceptions, created by the reader's historical situation (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 319). These existing preconceptions are by Gadamer called the readers "horizon of understanding". The understanding of a text is created when the reader's horizon meets the horizon of the text. No reading is ever complete, it is a continual back and forth between the reader's existing horizon, with the horizon of the text. This means that a text can be interpreted endlessly as the reader's horizon changes when meeting the text (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 316). I am here coming to the texts with my own inherent bias and interpreting them from the vantage point of my historical horizon. My bias and horizon is then changed by contact with the text.

This is also important as my primary sources are scholarly works. These scholars have interpreted primary sources, like the Quran, Hadiths or Sira literature in different ways. These different interpretations stem from the scholars coming to the texts with their own historical horizon. This historical horizon has also been shaped by previous reading of the sources by previous scholars, shaping how the next generation reads it. Gadamer was particularly interested in this element of how the same text has been interpreted and reinterpreted, and how this effects the reads horizon(Gilje 2019, 167) I am trying to analyze how the different scholars have interpreted the primary sources. For this it is crucial to understand the context (scientific paradigm) the scholars were writing in, as this is part of the historical horizon (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 316).

Another important element of Gadamer's argument is that the understanding of a text does not need to be the same as the author's intention with the text. The author might not be aware of all the meaning they have placed in the text. The reader can find meaning that the author never intended (Gadamer 2004, 182). This is particularly important for my use of hermeneutics. My interpretation of many of the scholarly works might not fit with what the

scholar was intending when they wrote it. My interpretation comes from my historical horizon and is therefore different from the author's.

As mentioned, I am interested in analyzing the texts as part of a context. I am particularly interested in texts as part of *intertextuality*. This means references within the text to other texts outside of it (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 316). A work's meaning does not exist independently but is created by the systems, codes, and traditions established by previous works (Allen 2021, 1). To interpret a text, one must understand the intertextual relation between the text and context. This can be seen as a form of the hermeneutic circle, one where the reader moves between text and the intertextual references related to it (Allen 2021, 1). By moving back and forth understanding is constantly created. One can move from the text to the intertextual references and back to come to a new understanding every time.

Intertextuality is often easy to find in scholarly works in the shape of direct quotes or footnotes to other scholarly works. Analyzing these expressed intertextual references can help place the text in its contextual web. How a scholar uses a reference is also interesting for understanding where they place themselves as part of a narrative. If a scholar makes references to a different scholar, it is often interesting to look at how they comment on the work of the previous generations. Some might accept ideas and build on them without further examination, while others might question or oppose what another scholar presented. Equally interesting is to look at what references some scholars don't use. Does a scholar choose to ignore a particular counter argument, or work done by previous scholars?

Another place where intertextuality is apparent is in the form of academic reviews of scholarly works. Reviews are predicated on the intertextuality between itself and the original work it is reviewing. This can be particularly interesting if the academic review is written by somebody who argues for a different narrative structure than the author. While intertextuality is sometimes explicit it can also be implicit. Texts will sometimes be built on arguments made by other scholars or make arguments that are counter arguments to other scholars in the past, without making explicit reference to doing so. It is then important to ask why a scholar might not make the reference explicit. In some cases, it is because a source has become so all pervasive that it has passed into what can be considered general knowledge. With these methods of historiography and Hermeneutics I will now analyze some of the different narratives wester scholars have presented in the last two hundred years. I will Begin with the standard narrative.

2   The traditional narrative

Muslims look to Muhammad's example for guidance in all aspects of life (Esposito 1988, 14).

Before progressing to a closer examination of the historiography of the eve of Islam, it is useful for the reader to have a common understanding of the generally accepted narrative. This narrative is the one most widely recognized today, and one both students and Muslims will be familiar with. I will refer to this narrative as the *traditional narrative*. When opening a textbook this is the narrative that will most likely be presented to the reader.

This retelling uses the *insider narrative* to form the basis for the story. In this case, a compilation of the Quran, bibliographies of the prophet and, to a smaller degree, the hadiths (Donner 1998, 5-6). Patricia Crone (See chapter 6) described most scholarly works, and by extension textbooks based on these works, as "Muslim chronicles in modern languages and graced with modern titles." (Crone 1980, 13). A book does not need to refer directly to these sources but does use them to form the basis of the narrative. Secondly these interpretations of the sources fit with how most Muslims understand and see their own past. There is, of course, no way to account for the entirety of the emic perspective, one made up of the beliefs of Muslims from every walk of life, which accounts for differences between Muslim traditions. There exists no *one* insider narrative, and in the same way there exists no *one* traditional narrative.

The traditional narrative is a very popular narrative found in books for general readership. Some examples include (Hourani 1991a; Lapidus 2002; Brockopp 2010; Vogt 2007), to mention a few. Many different books can present the beginning of Islam in many ways, and still be considered a part of the traditional narrative (Donner 1998, 7). As a foundation for the traditional narrative there are two central elements. Firstly, a trust for the insider source and narratives as reliable sources (Donner 1998, 5). Modern accounts using these sources often try to give an account that is close to what Muslims themselves see as the past. Accepting the insider narratives as legitimate.

This can be partially seen in religious studies. The modern scholarly paradigm in the last decades has either been Phenomenology of religion or a form of "Dialogical ethics" (Waugh 1985, 41; Flood 1999, 199). The goal of both methods has been to take the perspective of the insider seriously. In the form of Phenomenology is this done by bracketing out questions of

objective truth, and take seriously the lived experiences of the believers (Flood 1999, 95; Waugh 1985, 41). In the dialogical approach to religion, proposed by Gavin Flood is the approach one of "friendship" (Flood 1999, 212). Here the focus is on religion as "value laden narratives (…) that bind people to their objectives, to each other, and to non-empirical claims" (Flood 1999, 185). With this understanding of religion is an understanding of the emic narrative central. It is part in understanding the religious stranger and becoming familiar with them as living agents (Flood 1999, 202 and 212). This has meant that modern religious studies are often centrally interested in the emic narrative of how religious people see themselves and their own past.

The second element of importance is a long history of western academic inquiry into the period. Some of the oldest Western scholarly accounts tried to formulate this account. The attempt was to differentiate themselves from the Christian sources that had been used in the past (Donner 1998, 5). We will in the next two chapters see the problems with these narratives, particularly those from the orientalist period, for a modern reader. These Orientalist works do however form the basis of modern Islamic studies (Shepard 2014, 6). The sources they used to base their narrative on are for the most part the same as modern scholars use (Donner 1998, 6). I will now present a short retelling of the standard narrative, for the reader to have a common understanding of where later scholars differ.

2.1   The birth of a prophet according to the traditional narrative

In the early seventh century, Arabia was situated between two superpowers of the period. To the north-west was the Christian and Greek-speaking Byzantine empire. At the north-east was the Iranian-speaking (and nominally Zoroastrian but more multi-religious) Sasanian Empire. Both empires had interests in Arabia and had taken control of parts of the land (Shepard 2014, 29). Both empires had, in the last few decades, been occupied with a series of wars between each other. In this battle, Arabia had a particularly unusual position. The two empires had gained direct or indirect control of most of the nearby world, except the Arabian Peninsula. Some parts of north Arabia operated as vasal states, and both empires used Arabs as auxiliary forces, but most of Arabia was not directly involved in the fighting (Brockopp 2010, 9-10).

The conflict had consequences for the territory. Trade routes between east and west now went through Arabia bringing about more knowledge of Greek culture, Indian fairytales, and the

religions of the empires (Vogt 2007, 13). Some textbooks argue that if Muhammad did not exist, Arabia would most likely have converted to either Christianity or Judaism (Brockopp 2010, 22). Many modern textbooks make a strong point of underlining the idea that Arabia was connected to the rest of the world (Brockopp 2010, 22; Vogt 2007, 13; Bigelow 2016, 247; Shepard 2014, 31).

The Muslim term for the period before the advent of Islam is called *Jahiliyyah.* This term can be translated in many ways, but a popular one is *the age of ignorance*. It is an intentionally normative word, intent to stress the perceived periods idolatry, violence and tribal antagonism (Webb 2014, 70). The term does not need to refer to one period in particular. Sayyid Qutb, a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood, has described the modern world as being in a state of Jahiliyyah. It can be interpreted to mean any world living with an improper understanding of Islam (Olsson and Sorgenfrei 2021, 268). Most of our knowledge of the pre-Islamic period comes from the Muslim sources and often has inherited this negative and normative attitude to the period.

At the time, Arabia did not have any unifying political entity. Instead, power was held by different tribes. Some were living in towns and others lived nomadic lifestyles. Each tribe had their own affiliates and clients that answered to the tribe itself (Bigelow 2016, 247). The law of the land was an unwritten agreement of vendetta. An attack against a member of your tribe was to be retributed by the whole tribe (Esposito 1988, 5). Within a tribe, honor was central. Belonging to a strong tribe was a mark of honor, and to live and die in service of the tribe was the highest honor. The work of poets was to write in praise of the tribe (Watt 1953, 24). Religion was equally un-centralized as Arabian religion during the period was polytheistic. The population believing in a wide array of gods, angels, jinn's, fortune tellers, and oracles. The gods were often associated with parts of nature like stars, stones and trees (Shepard 2014, 32). There is some belief in Allah as a supreme God, but he was rarely invoked unless in the case of life and death (Denny 1985, 53). The three goddesses Allat, al-Uzza and al-Manat are also often seen later as the daughters of Allah (Vogt 2007, 14).

Both Christianity and Judaism were, to some extent, known to the Arabs. Doctrinal differences within the within the Byzantine empire had led some Christians to be marked as heretics, prosecuted and exiled. Some found safety in the Sasanian Empire or on the peripheries of the empire, such as in Arabia (Bigelow 2016, 246-247). Knowledge of Judaism

was even stronger. Yathrib (later named Medina) had a sizable Jewish population and Yemen had been ruled by a Jewish ruler (Bigelow 2016, 247). In addition, there were a few of what is referred to as *hanifs*, meaning monotheists that did not believe in Christianity or Judaism. Muhammad is often considered as one of these *hanifs* (Shepard 2014, 33).

At the time, Mecca was an important trade hub and religious place. The *Kabba,* a black stone building in the center of the town, that might have originality been a temple for the god Hubal, was a religious gathering point for many of the surrounding tribes (Denny 1985, 53). According to Muslim tradition, it was built by Abraham and Ishmael (Shepard 2014, 33). At the time of Muhammad, it contained more than 300 (some say 360) idols of different gods from the surrounding land. This made it a pilgrimage site for many religions, bringing trade to the town (Vogt 2007, 87).

Muhammad was born in Mecca around the year 570 as a part of the ruling Quraysh tribe (Shepard 2014, 32). While he was a member of an important tribe he belonged to a smaller branch, the Banu Hashim clan (Esposito 1988, 5). When Muhammad was six years old his mother died, leaving him an orphaned at a young age. He was first raised by his grandfather and then later by his uncle. He was in part raised by Bedouins in the mountain, a custom that was normal during the period, both because the air was believed to be better and also to learn Arabic (Vogt 2007, 87). According to the Muslim tradition, a young Muhammad is said to have been stopped by a Christian hermit who proclaimed him a prophet (Shepard 2014, 34). In the Sira literature, his birth is also to have been predicted by a rabbi, a priest and the son of a magi priest (Brockopp 2010, 28).

As a young adult, Muhammad was seen as a respectable but not prominent member of society (Brockopp 2010, 28). The most important story from this period is when the black stone that was placed in one of the walls of the Kaaba fell out. Muhammad suggested to the leaders of the different tribes, who all wanted to put it back, that they place it on a carpet and each leader take one corner so that they could all place it back together. In time, Muhammad became a caravan trader and, at the age of 25, married a rich widow named Khadijah (Shepard 2014, 34).

At the age of 40, he received his first revelation in a cave outside Mecca. This became the first of many messages he received from God, later collected in the Quran. At first, he was

unsure as to what these revelations meant, but in time accepted his position as a prophet. He began to preach and gathered a small group of followers. His message spoke of monotheism, going against the established polytheism in Mecca. This angered the Meccan elite who opposed him. This opposition only grew after the death of his uncle Abu Talid, who had protected him. In 622 he and his followers left Mecca for Yathrib/Medina. This event is called the *Hijra,* or emigration, and marks the start of the Muslim calendar (Shepard 2014, 35).

At the time, Medina was locked in a political struggle between the Jewish and pagan clans. Muhammad became an arbiter between the two groups, and in time the leader of the town. This places Muhammad in an interesting position as a prophet. He had gained a dual role; on one hand he was a religious leader, on the other, a temporal leader. For the next ten years Muhammad lived in Medina, slowly gathering allies and more followers to Islam. This community formed by Muhammad is called the *Ummah* (Shepard 2014, 35). Muhammad was unable to unify the Jewish community in Median, who came to oppose him.

During this period, the Ummah experienced particularly strong opposition from the Meccan elite. A series of wars were fought between the two parties, concluding with a truce and Muhammad gaining control of Mecca (Shepard 2014, 37). Muhammad forbade non-Muslims from taking part in the pilgrimage to Mecca, and destroyed the idols on the Kaaba (Vogt 2007, 16; Shepard 2014, 38).

At the time of Muhammad's death in 623 most of the Arab tribes had converted to Islam but not all. Thus began the period of the four caliphs. Under the leadership of Abu Bakar, the rest of Arabia converted and united. He did have to fight a series of wars against copycat prophets, and tribes that saw their allegiance only to Muhammad personally, not to his successor. Under Umar, Islam saw explosive growth. Muslim armies were able to conquer large parts of Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. This accounted for large parts of the old Byzantine and Sasanian Empires (Shepard 2014, 38-39). The third caliph, Uthman, saw the collection of the Quran into one text. In the period following Muhammad's death variations both written and oral had existed. Under Uthman were all known variations destroyed and a complete Quran created (Shepard 2014, 39). The leadership of Umar lead to the first *fitna*, or civil war, where the population of Medina chose Ali to be the next caliph (Shepard 2014, 39).

While the Quran was collected over a short period, in Muslim tradition the collection and categorizing of the *hadiths* was a longer process. The hadiths are sayings and stories from

Muhammad's life, together with a chain of transmission going back to one of Muhammad's close allies. Many hadiths were fabricated in the two hundred years following Muhammad's death. A system of organization was developed where hadiths were categorized based on whether they could be trusted or not. There is no clear agreement among modern Muslims on whether hadiths are to be trusted (Shepard 2014, 88-90).

2.2   Comments on the standard narrative

From this narrative I would like to draw out a few questions that scholars have considerd when describing this period and placing the separate parts into a coherent narrative:

a) What sources are to be used to best answer the scholar's questions?
b) Was Muhammad first a religious man or a social reformer?
c) Why were the Meccan elite so strongly opposed to Muhammad's message?
d) What was the relationship, and potential differences between the Bedouins and the settled Arabs?
e) What knowledge existed about monotheistic religions in Mecca?

These questions, raised here in standard narrative will be important for many of the scholars in the following pages. I do not plan to answer any of these questions in this thesis, they are simply points where disagreements between the different narratives often arise.

As mentioned, the standard narrative is derived from insider source of the Sira and Quran. At the same time, it is also built on a lengthy tradition of Western scholarship dedicated analysis, examination, and interpretation about this period. We will now take a closer look at some of the key scholarly works that have produced this account.

3   The Orientalist narratives

We strip him[Muhammad] of his borrowed plumes and reduce him to the condition of an
imposter! (Hughes 1894,5).

Having given an overview of the standard narrative, let's draw the line from this narrative as far back as we can reasonably get. I am here going to focus on the narratives presented by British Orientalists during the nineteenth century. However, it is useful for the reader to have a simple grasp on the understanding of the eve of Islam the West had from around the late Middle Ages.

As one might imagine is the narrative from this period strongly anti-Muslim. For the medieval Christians in Europa was Islam seen as a threat. For Christians was the message of Jesus the final fullness of Gods truth. Any message made after this was seen as false and blasphemy. It disputed their entire foundation for a universal religion (Lewis 1993, 6). The coming of Islam was in this seen as the beginning of the end, Muhammad was described as the anti-Crist himself (Varisco 2007, 75).

Another element of importance was geographical closeness. Islam was seen as a military challenge lying right on the border, and at times crossing the border into Europe. Places like Spain, Portugal, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Holy Land became battle grounds for domain (Hourani 1991, 7; Lewis 1993, 12).

It is important to stress that war and conflict was by no means the only interaction between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Islam controlled parts of Europe for centuries, living as neighbors. They traded on the Mediterranean and exchanged ideas, culture and works. Specialty works of science, medicine and philosophy from the Muslim world to the Christian (Hourani 1991, 8). They inhabited the same cultural world, reading many of the same works. Muslims translated Latin works, and Monks translated the Quran (Lewis 1993, 12).

Muslims had a different view of Christians in this period. Jesus was seen as a prophet, and Christianity as a precursor to the true message found in the Quran. Muslims did not see it as an intentionally wrong religion, but more of a misunderstanding of the truth. This led Christians, as well as Jews to be accepted in Muslim ruled lands as long as they submitted (Lewis 1993, 6).

It is important to stress that the two sides had a much more nuanced relationship than presented, it is the conflict that is the most important element to understand in the image the Christian world had of Islam, and therefore what picture they had of its beginning. This presentation was, as one might guess, strongly polemic. To state that the narrative had a negative view of Islam is to underplay it. Islam was seen at the time as the antithesis of Christianity and the West (Daniel 1960, 1-3). The eve of Islam, and the life of Muhammad, was seen as a central part of disproving the truth of Islam (Daniel 1960, 79). Descriptions, especially from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries cloud Muhammad in all kinds of negative traits like "lechery, debauchery, sodomy" (Said 1979, 62). He was the anti-Christ, the beast, the false prophet, and the denier of the trinity. Muslims were supposed to be worshiping him like a God (Varisco 2007, 74-75). Another way was to present Muhammad as a brutal leader imposing his religion on an unwilling people (Daniel 1960, 107). He was seen as a sinner, who created a religion to excuse his sins (Daniel 1960, 107; Varisco 2007, 75).

The Arabs at the beginning of Islam were described as incompetent. Not wise enough to judge and understand the heresy of the message Muhammad delivered. Arabia was seen as a hub for heretical outlaws (Said 1979, 63). The Monotheists living in Arabia were all seen as heretics escaping justice, be it Jews seen as Samaritan heretics, and the Christians as Nestorian or Jacobite (Daniel 1960, 79).

Muhammad's death was often made particularly horrible. Some of them base it on Muslim sources but many fabricate their own melodramatic death. Matthew Perry gives a narrative where "He was handed over to be torn to pieces by pigs, by this threefold agency, drunkenness, poison and epilepsy" (Daniel 1960, 105). It was especially important for them to focus on his death, to prove his humanity, even though no Muslim has ever argued against this (Daniel 1960, 105).

The medieval narrative is fascinating, but clearly gives a skewed image of the beginning of Islam. It is filled with myths, misunderstandings and lacks original sources (Daniel 1960, 295). White argued that we can only judge a narrative on its fidelity to its sources. In this case the fidelity is particularly poor. Their presentations span from full fabrications to polemic and bias accounts (Daniel 1960, 107). It is an interesting narrative, but one that is very different from the modern academic one.

A more scientific inquiry into the Islam, one based more on source, began around the seventeenth century. Here the field of orientalism finally becomes central. Originally orientalism was a part of philology, the study, recovery and interpretation of texts, from the Orient (Lewis 1993, 101). Slowly the field grew, incorporating new eryas of study like history, language, anthropology and sociology (Said 2003, 12). At the same time, it incorporated larger and larger parts of the world as well. Stretching from Turkey to Japan (Lewis 1993,103).

Instead of relying solely on Christian sources and poor translations, a select few Arabian sources were now available. One example is George Sale (1697–1736) who translated the Quran into English in 1734 and used commentaries on the holy texts to come to a better understanding of Islam (Said 1979, 117). The earliest reading of the sources contained little historical criticism. Elements like the Quran were seen as virtually documentarian in their ability to reproduce the past (Donner 1998, 6).

3.1 Orientalism according to Said

Our modern understanding of the Orientalist period is in large part shaped by Edwards Saids book *Orientalism*. Said used the word Orientalism with a slightly different meaning than to the original. (When referring to Saids theory I am using the word with a big O, Orientalism, if I am referring to the academical discipline, with a small o, orientalism) Saids placed the focus squarely on the Arabian world, ignoring most of Asian studies. He is at the same time referring to a much larger field of human expression, not only the scientific world but also poetic, artistic depiction, as well as the descriptions in political speeches and news articles (Said 1979, 2-3). The common theme for said was that Orientalism was an epistemological distinction made by the authors between the "orient" and "occident" (Said 1979, 2-3).

Connected to this is an institutional power imbalance where the west tries to control the Orient it the form of teaching about, and studying it, as well as directly ruling it (Said 1979, 3). As a foundation theory for his argument, Said used critical Discourse Analysis (Racevskis 2005, 83). The focus here is on how spoken or written language is not only a representation of reality, but constructs the reality around us (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 229-230). Said was particularly interested in Michel Foucault's interpretation of discourse analyses. Foucault's focus is the relationship between power in the form of ideology and discourse. Ideology is

here defined as "meanings in the service of power". For him power in the modern world is increasingly exercised in the form of persuasive language (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 235). To have the power to define something is to have power over that thing. What language an institution or individual uses influences the thing being described.

According to said while the orientalist saw themselves as scientific, were they continuing the same repertoire of ideas and polemic language from the Middle Ages. The descriptions from this period were very often in the same form as in the Middle Ages, only under the gist of being scientific. It often contains the same polemic language (Said 1979, 287). Said argued that Western scholars during the colonial/Orientalist period presented a hegemonic portrayal of the East, and of Islam, for the West. His view was that this hegemony was fundamentally racist, and presented the East as the "other" to the West (Said 1979, 17; Hjelm 2020, 1006). The narrative was filled with misunderstanding, mistranslations, and general anti-Muslim sentiments (Donner 1998, 5). It was a commonly held repertoire of ideas and values presented about the Orient (Said 1979, 41-42).

As an example of the anti-Muslim sentiment let us look at Thomas Hughes' (1822-1896) book *Notes on Muhammadanism* (1894). The book is a perfect example of the anti-Muslim rhetoric used during the Orientalist period. He uses traditional sources and leans heavily on Sirah literature, like Ibn Ishaq, Al-Waqidi, and Tabari, in addition to the Quran (Hughes 1894, 1 and 16-17). He does not trust the reliability of the habits, something that was normal during the period, but does lean on it at times (Donner 1998, 5; Hughes 1894, 16-17 and 59). Unlike the polemic writing from the Middle Ages, he uses legitimate sources.

In his language and narrative, we can see his anti-Muslim and particularly anti-Muhammad stance. Muhammad is described as an "Imposter" and "would be prophet" (Hughes 1894, 5 and 7). One who "encouraged his own vices" and used religion as "the cover of the prophet's depravity" (Hughes 1894, 3-4). This language of labeling Muhammad an "imposter" who created a fraudulent version of Christianity was popular during the Orientalist period. It shows the dismissal that exists of Islam and its founder Muhammad (Said 2003,79). It is not a far step from the explanations from the Middles ages, and it is clear to see where Said's argument comes from.

The title of Hughes' book is also an important element of the Orientalist understanding of Islam and Muhammad. The accepted name is *Islam* and *Muslim.* These are the names

Muslims themselves have chosen. This was known to the Orientalists. Hughes himself states that: "Islam is the name given to the Muhammedan religion by its founder" (Hughes 1894, 10). Instead of using this name, one picked from the insider perspective, Orientalists often use a series of different names. Some of the names were based on ethnicity, like calling all Muslims Moors, Saracens, Tartars, or, the most popular, Turks (Lewis 1993, 7). Another choice was a variation on the name of Muhammad such as Muhammadanism, Mahometan, or Mohammedan. The choice of any of these names was based on a Christian understanding of Islam. Christianity is based on the worship of Jesus, and therefore the Christians saw it as only natural that Muslims had to have the same understanding of Muhammad. Muhammad was nothing more than an imposter version of Jesus (Said 1979, 60).

The use of these terms is often considered polemic in the modern world and shows a misunderstanding of Muslim beliefs. They are, in addition, clear examples of the power of language to redefine. The terms were not used to understand Muslims better, but rather to represent Islam for the interest of the Christian West (Said 1979, 60). The use of the terms removes any ability for Muslims to define themselves, removing their own names for themselves, replacing them with a Christian Western idea that fits the Orientalist narrative better. This was not a simple mistake. As mentioned, Orientalists like Hughes knew that Muslims called it Islam. Instead, it was an intentional choice to further one's narrative.

If one looks at the political world we can easily find plenty of examples of this narrative. We can look to Lord Cromer, who was Controller General of Egypt 1883-1907 as an example. He described the Arab as "gullible", "given to fulsome Flattery", "cunning" and in most ways directly opposite to the European way of behaving (Said 1979, 38-39). He is a perfect example of the power imbalance between the ruler and ruled. This belief both underpinned and was crucial for colonial rule according to Said. If one accepts the belief that the Orient is incapable of self-governance, it becomes not just the privilege, but also the duty of the West to control it, lest it falls into tyranny and chaos (Said 1979, 33-34 and 207).

While the anti-Islamic narrative is important did it not have a total hegemony of narratives. Some authors even had a positive view of the Orient admiring its stability, spirituality, and temperament. Even so, the view of the Orient was always as something *different* from the Occident (Said 1979, 150-151). This is exemplified by writing of Edward Gibbon, who did not describe Muhammad as a false prophet, or the devil himself, but as a historical figure, one

who influenced the Western world (Said 1979, 120). At the same time, the rise of Islam is seen as the antithesis to the fall of the West (Said 1979, 117 and 120).

One might argue that the heyday of orientalism died with the colonial period, shortly after WW2. Said on the other hand believes that the power imbalance between East and West persisted, now with the United States as its spearhead (Said 1979, 4). The USA's interest in in the region is many faceted, it includes oil as well as ideas of the democratic West vs the totalitarian Arab world (Said 1979, 27). He argued that the image of Islam presented both inside academia and outside was little different from the picture from the Middle Ages (Said 1979, 287).

3.2   Consequences and critics of Said presentation.

The release of Said's book had a huge effect on Middle Eastern studies and academia at large. He became a front figure in Post-colonia theory, a new direction focused on the effect and consequences of Colonial rule (Arthur 2022). Said's focus on the dual relationship prominent in the Orientalist narratives has had a huge influence on later post-colonial works that take the idea and apply it to new fields like African and Caribbean history (Arthur 2022). In the decades after Said's book we can see how scholars focusing on the beginning of Islam have pushed for a liberal and inclusive narrative, something we saw with the traditional narrative (Hoyland 2015). A narrative that most Muslims can tolerate. The common consensus is often that the modern world is moving "Beyond orientalism" and that the system that enables this narrative is slowly fading away in light of the interconnected modern world (Samiei 2010, 1148). If we compare the Orientalist narrative with the traditional narrative, we can see just how much the academic voice has changed. Said clearly had a huge effect on later scholars' interactions and narrative about the eve of Islam.

However, to argue that Said's book single-handedly changed the narrative from an Orientalist one to a Post-colonial one is false. To see this, we must look at some of the criticisms Said's book has received. Said was able to put his finger on an important narrative, one with far reaching consequences, but his analyses did make a series of mistakes and generalizations. Some, such as Bernard Lewis have criticized Said for his overarching argument that often ignores the complexity of the situation in favor of a strong thesis statement (Lewis 1993, 107). He particularly questioned Said's geographical fixation of the Arabian world, leaving out Turkish and Persian studies, as well of Semitic studies, the original field of inquiry (Lewis 1993, 107).

Another problem is Said's understanding of Foucault. Said has himself changed much of his opinion on Foucault's methodology, stating that by the end of the book he had become anti-Foucault (Racevskis 2005, 84). His use of the theory is at times contradictory. Leaving it unclear whether a true representation of something is possible or if everything is a misperception (Racevskis 2005, 84). He is also in his methods merely continuing the ideas of Foucault with his arguments of power and discourse, instead of presenting a completely new idea (Racevskis 2005, 84). It is therefore wrong to place too much focus on Said's contributions. It can be better to say that he wrote influenced by changes that was already happening in the theoretical framework.

The most interesting argument against Said's presentation of the Orientalist narrative is the scholars he ignores. Scholars who presented interesting narratives of the beginning of Islam that differ from Said's representation of the Orientalist narrative. Said argued for discourse *hegemony* during the period. Hegemony here means standardization, a unity of voices. Within discourse analyses is the goal of power seen as being able to control the discourse and shut out all opposing views and create a hegemony (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 235). The hegemony that Said presents might not have been as complete as he presented it. Varisco in *Reading Orientalism Said and the unsaid* (2007) pointed out many of the scholars Said chose to ignore (Varisco 2007, 43). Said's counter argument to this has been that he did not need to mindlessly summarize every Orientalist writer, but it is curious that many of those he chose to ignore do not fit well with his theories (Varisco 2007, 44). The narratives he chose to ignore also became very important after the release of his book, as alternatives to the polemic language of the Orientalists. This leads to the next narrative of importance in this histography, the German orientalists.

4 German orientalist

"I knew that interest in and understanding of Arab history was weak, but I would not have believed that it is so minimal that no review of my book has appeared."

(Julius Wellhausen, as sited in Marchand 2009, 188).

Looking at the scholars that Said choose to ignore in his book it is clear that a large part of them were Germans. Said has two reasons for this, firstly, that Germany did not have any colonial power and that the power dynamic was therefore different from the English and French perspective (Said 1979, 19-20). The second, that German scholars did not produce any important or new discoveries of the Orient (Said 1979, 17).

Suzanne L. Marchand argues against Said's execution of the German scholars in her book *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*. In her opinion is the first point by Said problematic. Even if Germany did not have empirical wants, something they did, it is misleading to argue that Orientalism is a part of colonial power structures, and then only focus on where this might be true (Marchand 2009, xix). The second point made by Said is at least misleading and at worst factually wrong. The work done by the Germans was highly advanced and of huge importance for any further understanding of the eve of Islam. In the period between 1830 and 1930 Germany led the way in orientalist writing (Marchand 2009, xviii). Germany's increasing economic and political power were particularly important to this. The unification of Germany and the policies of Bismarck led to Germany becoming a European powerhouse. In the period after 1884 Germany became a colonial empire, acquiring colonies in Africa, the Pacific and China (Marchand 2009, 158).

This created a boom in academic works and was central to an orientalist renaissance. Here, huge scholars like Wellhausen, Nöldeke, and Goldziher led the way into a scientific understanding of the eve of Islam (Marchand 2009, xviii). Their works were groundbreaking and at times they are still mentioned today (Shepard 2014, 90). It is important to underline that this form of orientalism was in large parts an armchair form of history. Most scholars preferred to stay at home, working with texts than travel to the Orient (Shepard 2014, 186).This led to the discipline being particularly interested in the ancient Orient rather than the modern Middle East (Marchand 2009, 158). While the works were strongly influenced by imperialism, it was less directly tied together than English and French orientalism. I here want to point out a few important aspects of the German orientalist narrative, the use of Positivism,

translations, anti-religious sentiment, and the low levels of popularity for the field of early Islamic history and the effect of nationalism.

4.1   Positivism

One of the key aspects of the German narrative is the effect of *Positivism* as a scientific paradigm. Positivism was in many ways a reaction to Romanticism. Where the former had focused on subjectivity, religion, and emotion, the Positivists saw this as a threat to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the scientific method (Marchand 2009, 75). Positivism is concerned with creating a source-critical and value-neutral representation of the past. They argued for an understanding of the world removed from explanations of a theological or metaphysical nature. Any explanation of the world had to be based on empirical observable data (Sandmo 2015, 136). They looked down on the philosophical and theory-based version of history, seeing them as spending too much time in the library and not enough in the archives (Sandmo 2015, 136). It is easy in a post-structural way to dismiss Positivism as too focused on facts, and unable to see its inherent bias, but it is also important to give Positivists credit for where they came from. Their work led to readings that differed greatly from the polemic writing of the Middle Ages and the bias of Orientalists. The Positivist period instead made the attempt to read the sources as historical objects, sometimes even accepting Muslim sources over Christian ones (Marchand 2009, 175).

One of the most important works of this period was the translation and indexation of Arab works. There were two reasons for this development. The first was the positivistic attitude to texts. They catalogued, translated, and printed anything they came across (Marchand 2009, 80). The second important element was the arrival of the first printing press in Arabia. This stimulated the Arabian academic world and made the reproduction of old texts much easier. In the second half of the nineteenth century important texts like Sirah literature, *Futuh al-Buldan* (narratives of the Islamic conquest), *Tarikh al-Rusul* (universal chronicles) and many more were translated (Donner 1998, 8). The huge amount of work done during the period in grammar, lexicons, and translations must be acknowledged. This work has been very useful for modern Middle Eastern studies (Marchand 2009, 75).

One of the key figures in this work was Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930). He was one of the most famous translators of Arabic texts in the period between 1860-1900. He was a stern believer in the importance of facts and that only proper reading and translations of texts could

lead to proper science (Marchand 2009, 75). His work focused on the Quran and Sirah literature.

With Nöldeke, we can also find examples of the Positivistic push to set aside bias in his writing. His acclaimed book, *geschichte des Qorans* (The History of the Quran) shows this. Here he not only used, but trusted the Arabic sources to tell the story (Marchand 2009, 175). In his work, we can see a much more forgiving and accepting narrative than the one given by the Orientalists. Unlike the previous writers and scholars, who often characterized Muhammad as a false prophet, Nöldeke is much more charitable. He gives Muhammad the title of "true prophet" (Said, 1979, 66; Nöldeke 2013, 2). To deny that Muhammad saw himself as a prophet is to Nöldeke ridiculous. Muhammad's message had made him the ridicule of his earlier friend, and at times placed him in grave danger. To call Muhammad an impostor, who only did what he did for personal gains is to ignore the historical reality (Nöldeke 2013, 2).

Some of Nöldeke's bias does still come through. He stated that his work as an orientalist had only reaffirmed his "Low opinion" of the Eastern people (Nöldeke sited in Said 1979, 209). One example of this is his description of Muhammad's opposition. The Meccans are referred to as believing in the "false idolatry of the Arabs" (Nöldeke 2013, 2). Their attacks on Muhammad were not spurred by faith but by believing that he was disrespecting their ancestors (Nöldeke 2013, 2). We can here see a point I want to address later, the anti-religious rhetoric in the German orientalist discourse. While the Germans tried to set aside bias and faithfully represent Muhammad's story, they were shaped by their own bias, in the case of Nöldeke, a dislike of Arabs and religion.

4.2   Biblical studies

The study of early Islam was very strongly tied to biblical studies. On a purely methodological level this is explainable. The Old Testament and the Muslim accounts often shared similar contents, structures and dealt with similar issues (Donner 1998, 29). However, the reason for using this method was not because it was a good methodology for a text. A large part of the early orientalists were educated in theology, from this they inherited the scholarly method from their education (Marchand 2009, 58). The education was one often based on a Lutheran worldview, particularly in the form of radical positivistic Lutheranism

(Marchand 2009, 58). The attempt was to make biblical studies a scientific field. The idea was that a historical-critical or high-critical reading of the sources would prove that the texts were for the most part correct. Showing that their Protestant faith was based on a historical and scientific background (Marchand 2009, 58). This approach was only possible in a radical Lutheran environment. The Catholic and Jewish stand was to refer to tradition or later commentaries to make the text clearer, while the orthodox Lutheran view was that the text alone was enough (Marchand 2009, 76).

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The greatest example of the closeness between biblical studies and German orientalism can be seen with Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). Wellhausen was in his own time considered one of the most significant German scholars of the 19th century (Marchand 2009,180). This fame was mostly from his revolutionary theory about the dating of the Torah. While the idea that the text was not in fact written by one man (Moses) but by numerous hands over a longer period was not new, Wellhausen refined the theory and expanded it. He believed that the Torah was written over four major periods, and that it was possible to date these periods by looking at what terms were used for God in different parts of the text (Marchand 2009, 182). He further argued that the earliest form of Judaism was not monotheistic, but polytheistic (Marchand 2009, 182-183).

This work, while making him famous, also made him highly controversial, especially on the basis of his position as a professor of theology. He was accused of blasphemy, Darwinism and atheism. (Marchand 2009, 183). This forced him to give up his teaching position in Greifswald and move to a new field of interest. In 1897 he decided to use what he had learned from Old Testament dating, particularly religions as evolutions over time, source-critical approaches and a focus on reconstructing the political and religious milieu and applying it to the origin of Islam (Marchand 2009, 182 and 187).

This led to the publication of his book *Reste arabischen heidentums* in 1897 (Wellhausen 1961; Marchand 2009, 187). He here used linguistics to argue that the term *Allah* was not originally intended to mean one particular god but simply the title "God", used for many different gods like the popular pre-Islamic god Hubal (Crone 1987, 193). Sometime around the second century this title grew into being understood and worshiped as its own god, separate from Hubal or any other. Wellhausen also theorized that this Allah slowly grew into a sort of supreme god, above the other local gods before the advent of Islam (Crone 1987,194). His explanation for Islam was that it was like all other religions. It was a motivator for man's actions but at the same time used by interests groups to further their own goals (Marchand 2009, 188). It was not really Muhammed who had created the religion, he might have written the Quran, but it was his followers that made it a religion (Marchand 2009, 184).

Wellhausen's theories would become very important for a later scholar but did not achieve much recognition upon their release. Unfortunately, the release of his book was badly timed, happening at the same time as a huge debate within Old Testament studies on whether Babylonian religion influenced the development of Judaism. This led to a complete disinterest in the release of his book. The silence from the academic academia was defending, so strong that within a year, not a single review of his book had been written (Marchand 2009, 188). To this day, there is no translation into English of this book that I have been able to find (Hawting 1999, 28). Wellhausen continued to study the Quran into the beginning of the twentieth century but focused mainly on smaller linguistic terms. The message from academia was clear; no one really cared about the beginning of Islam.

The unpopularity of the field of early Islamic studies was tied to the adoption of biblical criticism did have its downsides. The most prominent was the challenge posed by language. The understanding was that to come closer to understanding the Ur-text one had to read it in its original language. One was expected to be able to read Aramaic, Sanskrit, Turkish,

Persian, and Arabic (Marchand 2009, 274). While the Germans were some of the front figures within orientalism about early Islam, the path was far from a popular one. If one were to choose to learn a difficult language to be able to read ancient text, then why not choose the Greek and Latin classics? Here the support network of more colleagues, better paid positions and more manuscripts made the work more appetizing (Marchand 2009, XXXII).

4.3   Understanding of Religion

One of the most important elements of positivism affecting the German narrative, is its negative view of religion. Religion was often seen as backwards and in conflict with the new scientific methods of the modern times, often exemplified by natural scientists like Charles Darwin (Jensen 2020, 15). Thinkers like Auguste Comte (1798-1857) divided world history into three periods of human explanation. On the lowest level was religious exploration, followed by metaphysical, and lastly positive science. He postulated that the past had been controlled by religious explanations for the world, in the form of myths, but that the present was controlled by science based on facts (Sandmo 2015, 136; Jensen 2020, 15). This critical view of Religion grew and became widespread, particularly by German philosophers (Jensen 2020, 16).

Around the same time attempts were made to place religion into a new scientific explanation for the world. Scholars like Max Müller (1823-1900) believed that there was value in studying and understanding multiple religions, not just one's own (Jensen 2020, 18). Particularly important here was E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer. They continued ideas already presented by Müller of religion as an evolution. From fetishism to polytheism and finally to a higher religion of Monotheism (Pals 2015, 41 and 342). Auguste Comte held a similar idea of ordering of religions. The same way he had divided world history into three parts he also divided religion into three parts. Going from fetishism, to polytheism, and to monotheism (Jensen 2020, 15). He did, however, see religion itself as a steppingstone towards a better system, positive knowledge. The divide between polytheism and monotheism is important. The understanding of one being lesser, or further down on the ladder of evolution created some of the bias we can see in the German narrative.

Wellhausen agreed with this idea of religion as an evolution. He saw the polytheism in the pre-Islamic period as a natural extension of a fractured society. Small gods for small political units. As society developed into a more complex and unified system was a development into a more central religion also inevitable (Hawting 1999, 26). This rendition is very close to

Tylor's understanding of religious evolution. Tylor argued that as society became more complex, and power became more centralized was the same thing happening with religion. From the gods of the river and stone to the gods of rain, finally into one supreme god overseeing the entire world (Pals 2015, 25-26). Wellhausen also agreed with the idea from Tylor of the doctrine of "survivals" (Pals 2015, 25-26). Tylor had argued while culture evolves upwards are there some elements that do not seem to evolve with it (Pals 2015, 25-26). Wellhausen saw both Jewish and Muslim Law as cases of these irrational customs that lived on long after its social function had long ceased (Marchand 2009, 182-183 and 330).

Wellhausen also presents the general negative in the period toward any form of organized religion. He saw it as a tool for the leaders to use and abuse as they pleased. Anything that smacked of the pulpit was seen with a side eye (Marchand 2009, 178). There is a, probably apocryphal, story that he often liked to time his Sunday swim such that he could walk past the city upper class on their way to church, carrying his bathing suit over the shoulder (Marchand 2009, 179). This story perfectly encapsulated his relationship to organized religion.

He saw polytheism as an evolutionary steppingstone towards monotheism. He believed that the old polytheism had been well suited to a fractured and very independent minded Arabia. At some time before Muhammad a pan-Arabian culture had transcended any old tribal affiliations. This political unification then led to a religious unification (Hawting 1999, 26). His position was that polytheism was nothing more that superstition, giving way to a "proper" religion (Hawting 1999, 26). This superstition had slowly lost ground to the new monotheism (Hawting 1999, 27). We can see a stark difference between his and the standard narrative. Where the former presents the ordering as a religious unification happening in sync with a political unification, Wellhausen sees politics as happening first, then affecting the religious world. The idea that Arabia had developed into monotheism was seen as inevitable, a logical next step in the evolution of culture (Hawting 1999, 29).

It is also a break with the emic narrative that states that the original religion was Monotheism after Abraham and Ismael. The two had built the Kabba, but the descendant of Ismael had taken stones from the temple and began to worship them as idols in their separate villages. This had den devolved into polytheism over many generations (Hawting 1999, 29).

The two narratives present different understandings of the relationship between monotheism and polytheism. In both views is Monotheism seen as better or a higher religion, but the

development is different. The Muslim tradition tells of a breakdown from one to many, and the new revitalization of an original monotheism. Wellhausen's narrative on the other hand presents polytheism as the original religion. that slowly evolves into a better religion, but this development is seen as going one way, upwards towards positive science.

Nöldeke's comments on the pre-Islamic Meccans makes more sense in this context. Nöldeke saw all religion as superstition and fairytales, including Christianity. He was a man fixed in the enlightenment ideas of logic and science (Marchand 2009,176). In some ways he is more radical here than Wellhausen, but both show the trend existing in the scholarly world at that time.

This narrative has a problem with explaining why the Meccan elite even opposed Muhammad at all. If the old polytheism had been discarded before Muhammad, it leaves a question as to why the elites opposed him. One explanation might be that the Meccan elite might just be more conservative, slower to adapt to the new ideas (Watt 1976, 73). This explanation has been favored by some. Wellhausen gives a different explanation. To him it is greed, pure and simple. The location of the Kabba, and its religious center for the surroundings tribes, had made Mecca a formidable trade city. Wellhausen argued that they were afraid that Muhammad might destroy this lucrative trade (Hawting 1999, 26). This idea that the opposition was based on economic reasons has been long lasting in academia. It can be found in the modern day, for example in James Laine's Meta-religion (Laine 2014, 108). Others like Montgomery Watt have very strongly countered this theory as we shall see in the next chapter.

4.4 German nationalism

The German academic world of the late nineteenth century was divided across two axes. We have already seen the first, and in my opinion most central to the German narrative, the agnostic, positivistic view that despised theological explanations. The second dividing factor was political and national. The unification of Germany and the work of Bismarck had put large strains on the Academic world. Nöldeke was a stanchly pro-Bismarck, something that led to him falling out with his teacher Heinrich Ewald who opposed the wars of unification (Marchand 2009, 178). Nöldeke saw the Semitic languages as a sign that all Semites were of the same culture, a culture he described as inferior to the Indo-Germanic people (Marchand 2009, 178).

Wellhausen was, like Nöldeke, pro-Bismarck and pro German unification. One can interpret his work as much in the tradition of anti-religion as pro-nationalistic. Wellhausen saw Muhammad as a proto-Bismarck, a national unifier able to cut through the individual tribal disagreements and unity a people. This ability to unify a nation was to Wellhausen more important than being the founder of a religion (Marchand 2009, 188).

The idea that Muhammad's greatest achievement was to unify the Arabs and act as a national unifier has been proposed very recently by Robert Hoyland. Hoyland is arriving at the problem from a very different angle than that of Wellhausen. Hoyland is arguing against modern interpretations that have a tendency, in his eyes, to place religious explanation as central to why Muhammad succeeded (Hoyland 2015, 5). He is instead trying to show how Muhammad acted as a national unifying force for a people who had increasingly come to see each other as having a common cultural identity. This is very similar to the narrative Wellhausen presents. Hoyland has been criticized for being anachronistic in his portrayal (Donner 2010, 218). The same can also been seen with Wellhausen, placing modern ideas in his time of nation building into the seventh century. It is interesting how an idea like this can show up in completely different narratives, for completely different reasons.

4.5   Historical critical narrative

The narrative presented by Wellhausen and Nöldeke had its differences but was for the most part similar (Watt 1953,23; Hawting 1999, 28). The main difference between this narrative, and the next is that the interpretation from Wellhausen and Nöldeke mainly accepted that the sources were for the most part accurate representations of the period they portrayed. They only had to be read in a critical light. Nöldeke wrote that the Quran was an "uncorrupted source for our knowledge of his [Muhammads] mind" (Nöldeke 2013, 2). This idea was challenged by a stricter historical critical narrative. The second narrative is exemplified here, and in large parts created, by Ignác Goldziher.

Goldziher was born a Hungarian Orientalist and together with Nöldeke, and Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, considered one of the founders of Modern Islamic studies in Europe. His work was primarily concerned with the study of hadiths. In this field he is considered one of the finest scholars in Western academia (Simon 1986, 11 and 96). His most famous book is *Muhammedanische Studien (Muslim Studies)* (released in two parts, 1889-1890, translated to

English first in 1966 and 1971). Here he argued that almost all the hadith originated later than most scholars previously believed - around two hundred years after Muhammad's death (Goldziher 1971, 19).

According to him there was a small amount of origin hadiths that could be attributed to Muhammad(Goldziher 1971, 18). However, after his death and with the rapid Arab expansion his followers began to create hadiths that they felt were in line with what Muhammad might have wished. The followers did not see this as creating fake hadiths, but merely placing Muhammad's sentiments and wishes into new forms. This then lead to an exponential growth in the number of hadiths, often concerned with elements the new generations of Muslim were concerned with, like legal and religious norms (Goldziher 1971, 18).

Goldziher argued therefore that the hadiths could not be used as a source for the beginning of Islam, but might be useful in assessing the social, political and religious situation they were created (Goldziher 1971, 19). This opinion is different form scholars like Wellhausen whose source-critical approach did not see the hadiths as useful sources for the beginning of Islam and therefore not useful at all (Donner 1998, 10). The work of Goldziher was continued in the 1950s by Joseph Schacht (Schacht 1967, v and 2). The theories of Goldziher and Schacht where for the most part brushed aside by later scholars as only affecting the legal tradition (Donner 2019, 22; Crone 1980, 14-15).

This work by Goldziher and Schacht is considered some of the earliest works of a tradition-critical approach to Islam (Donner 1998, 13). Their works laid the path for the direction later in the 1970s, the historical critical or revisions school of early Islam, most famously here is Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's highly controversial book *Hagarism* (more on this in chapter 6). It is important to note, that while Goldziher did question the reliability of the hadiths, did he not do the same for the Quran. This work was first done by the revisionist school, and John Wansbrough (Donner 1998, 22).

Goldziher had a very different view on religion from Wellhausen and Nöldeke. Where the former were for the most part armchair scholars had Goldziher the ability to study Islam up close and personal. in 1873-4 he was able to take a year travel in Egypt and Syria, paid for by the Hungarian Cultural Ministry, most likely with colonial intent (Marchand 2009, 325–26). During this year he set himself the goal of "living in Islam" and truly understand the religion from the inside. He interpreted the religion not as a "Survival" of antiquated explanations for

the world, but as a living constantly changing tradition (Marchand 2009, 330). To hit it was fullish to try and remove the religious layer to find a hidden truth. For its believers, religion was its own absolute truth (Marchand 2009, 330). When analyzing Muhammed, he came to a very differently form of understanding than the Orientalists view. Where the Orientalists saw Islam and the Orient as unchanging and monolithic, Goldziher had a different description (Said 1979, 96). He focused on how Muhammad had often changed his opinion on how best to proceed, his message had changed as his political and temporal position changed. The same was true for his message, it had been interpreted numerus ways by different Muslims through time (Marchand 2009, 329-330).

This approach is surprisingly modern from the period. it focuses on submerging oneself in the context of the fieldwork. It also tries to understand the religious other on their terms, not on the terms of the scholar. It reminds one very much of Phenomenology, in its denial of answering questions of truth (Flood 1999, 95 and 212). Of course, it does not use phonology of religion nor a focus on language as the dialogical method, but that is to be expected. His focus on how Islam have changed and how Muhammed has been understood differently by different followers' is very reminiscent of modern religious studies where the focus is often just as much on how Muslims understand Muhammad as the man himself.

For the most part we do not find direct reference to the German orientalists in textbooks. One exception from this trend is the work of Goldziher and Schacht who are at times directly referenced for the ground breaking work they did (Shepard 2014, 90). Still the works of the German orientalists are very important for modern history of religion's understanding of the past (Shepard 2014, 6).

4.6 Conclusion on the German narrative

Drawing this together we get an image that is very different from the Orientalist narrative. Said argued that the Orientalist narrative had a hegemony, but this is barely true in the English and French world. The German orientalist narrative has its own peculiarities tied to its history and geographical location. Most of this is tied to its relationship with the Orient and advanced the study of religions in academical methods.

The German narratives were often more neutral than the polemic writing in English. They chose to present Muhammad as an historical figure, one with an effect on history and as an honest believer, rather than an imposter and false prophet. At the same time the narrative is

colored by anti-religious sentiment, any religious explanation is seen as superstition and unscientific. While they did recognize that Muhammad was a believer, they focused on how he acted as a political unifier rather than on his religious importance. Some of the elements of this will continue into the next narrative but take a new shape as orientalism falls out of fashion and a new narrative, one with less of a focus on the negative trait of religion, becomes popular.

5   Montgomery Watt; the last orientalist

"A Marxist interpretation of the origins of Islam by an Episcopal clergyman
(Bousquet 1954, 231; as translated by Fred Donner 2019, 21)

The post-war world of the 50s and 60s saw large changes happen in the study of Islam and particularly the narratives of its beginning. The reason for this shift is multifaceted. Firstly there was a new generation of students entering higher education who had taken part in the war, many of whom had been deployed in the Middle East (Hourani 1991, 69). These students returned home with a new interest in the Orient, and Islam. In the period from 1930 to 1948, the numbers of student taking a BA in Arabic or Persian at Oxford quadrupled (Hourani 1991, 69). The same development happened in the American universities as well, where a growing interest in Islam was apparent (Hourani 1991, 50).

At the same time, there was a larger push for a new methodology, more based on dialogue and inclusion. A stronger understanding grew of the orientalist period's polemic language and anti-Muslim narrative. The new wave of scholars tried to include the insider narrative and not present Christian ideas as superior (Varisco 2007, 43). It is interesting to see how this change in narrative coincided with the change in power. Looking at the "Scarbrough Committee", formed by the British Foreign Office in 1944 (finished in 1947) this is made very clear. The Committee argued that with a general end of the imperial age it was important to establish a new style of academic inquiry, one that focuses more on diplomacy and cooperation between nations (Hourani 1991, 69) In many ways we can see a growing understanding in academia of the problems Said would bring to the forefront (Varisco 2007, 32).

Said decides in his book to move the focus from Europe to the USA. His argument was that the old colonial powers of Britain and France were slowly falling apart. According to Said, it was now the United States that controlled the hegemony of the discourse, continuing the racist descriptions seen during the English-French colonial period (Said 1979, 285). By doing this Said is ignoring the interesting changes happening in England and one of the most influential scholars within early Islamic studies; Montgomery Watt (1909-2006). I am not alone in questioning Said's decision to exclude Watt (Varisco 2007, 43 and 329). Just like Said excluded the Germen orientalist, he has also excluded Watt for not fitting his narrative. The truth is that both the German orientalist, and the new more accepting narrative that Watt

represents, does not fit Saids argument and therefore is not used in his book (Varisco 2007, 43).

Watt's representation of the eve of Islam is often used as part of the traditional narrative in Western textbooks on Islam at the university of Oslo. His two-part magnum opus, *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (1956), gives an account of Muhammad's life and the social, economic, and religious milieu into which he was born. Some of the textbooks include *Islam the Straight Path* (Esposito 1988), *An Introduction to Islam* (Denny 1985), *Islams Hus (The House of Islam)* (Vogt 1995), (Armstrong 2000), *Hva er Islam (What is Islam)* (Vogt 2007), *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad* (Brockopp 2010)*, Introducing Islam* (Shepard 2014) and *The Qur'an: The Basics* (Campanini 2016)*. S*ome of these textbooks do comment on their use of Watt, while others simply accept his theories, sometimes even without acknowledgments.

Textbooks are often cautious when using any scholarly works from the orientalist period. There is a commonly held agreement that they are too problematic and too polemic. Any reading of them must be taken with a grain of skepticism (Shepard 2014). The big exception to this seems to be Watt, who has been popular for decades now. Watt is sometimes called "the last orientalist", yet he shares little in common with the old orientalists, and much more with the social science of his time (Maan and Mcintosh 2019; Donner 2019, 20).

Looking at Watt's background we can see that he marks an interesting departure from the other scholars we have analyzed. He was a Scottish Minister and became an ordained priest in 1940. Between 1964 and 1979 he worked as professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Edinburgh (Donner 2019, 22).

Watt was one of the earliest important English writers on the beginning of Islam. There are of course a few exceptions, take H.A.R Gibb and Richard Bell, both of whom were thanked by Watt in the preface to *Muhammad at Mecca* (Watt 1953, preface). Most of the important work had however been done by Germans. Watt here represent an interesting turn marked by a new interest in Islam, as well as the orient at large (Hourani 1991, 69-70). Watt had at the same time many similarities to the German scholars. He often referenced their work, particularly those from Nöldeke and Wellhausen (Watt 1953, 23). He was not a positivist like them, but still had a strong faith in his ability to reconstruct the past accurately (Rodinson 1971, 344).

He however differed greatly from the German scholars in his relationship to religion. Both Nöldeke and Wellhausen had shown their disdain for any form of organized religion. Watt represents an interesting turn from this. His Christian background might make one thing he fits better inn with Orientalists like Thomas Hughes. However, Watt had a much more accepting attitude toward Islam than previous generations of orientalists. He had a much greater acceptance of the insider-narrative, something that led him to be one of the most revered Western scholars on Islam by many Muslims as well as later academia (Hillenbrand 2019, 3).

Watt mostly used the Muslim accounts of the beginning of Islam as his primary sources. Among these we have the Quran, Biographies of Muhammad (mostly those by Ibn Ishaq and al-Waqidi) and collections of hadiths (especially those by al-Bukhari and Ahmad b. Hanbal) (Watt 1953, xi). On the question of source is he using basically the same as the orientalists of the past. On this front little has changed. However, Watt stands apart from old narratives in one important aspect, Watt is working from a completely different scientific paradigm than the old orientalists Positivism.

5.1   Watt's scientific paradigms

Watt does not have a clearly defined scientific paradigm. In his own words, he states that "an attempt has been made to preserve neutrality" and "I have endeavored (…) to say nothing that would entail the rejection of any of the fundamental doctrines of Islam." (Watt 1953, x). In Watt's opinion, he is trying to represent a value neutral image of Islam, one that for the most part can be accepted by Muslims. He also believes that the scholars of the past, whom have created representations that cannot be accepted by Muslim, have in some ways, failed as scholars (Watt 1953, x).

Attempting to be value neutral is fine and is a step up from the polemic Orientalist narrative. It does not really help in placing him into a scientific paradigm. Some like Herbert Berg and James E. Royster places him in the category of phenomenology (Royster 1972, 64; Berg 1997, 502). In some respects, this category is clear. Some of the most important elements of this method is to bracket out the questions of truth, and try to set aside the bias of the scholar (Flood 1999, 94-95). Berg points out how the adoption of this method has some clear advantages, particularly its emphasizing with the "experience of the believer". After all, the

previous Orientalist narrative have been far from kind to the perspective of the insider (Berg 1997, 502).

We can consider Watt to fit into this category, but it does not complete the picture. Filling out this picture let's turn to the French Islamicist Georges-Henri Bousquet's review of Watt's book, *Muhammad at Mecca*. Bousquet gave it the title: *"A Marxist interpretation of the origins of Islam by an Episcopal clergyman"* (Bousquet 1954, 231; translated by Fred Donner 2019, 21). The part about an Episcopal clergyman is clear, Watt was a priest, but what does Bousquet mean when he says Marxist here? Bousquet even points out that Watt would not accept to be placed in this category (Bousquet 1954, 231).

What Bousquet is referring to here is the enormous effect Marx's ideas had on social science of the time. Marxism attempts to explain history through the lens of economy. Where History in the past often had focused on *Big men of History* Marxism instead tries to create a narrative structure that focused on conflict between the working class and the capitalists. The new focus led to new questions being asked, as well as new narrative structures being used (Sandmo 2015,140).

The ability for Marxist history to change the "lens" through which we see history had a huge effect on later scholars, including those that are not themselves Marxist (Sandmo 2015,140). R. B. Serjeant points out that Watts was affected by this wave within scholarly research at the time. Stating that he is: "Reflecting the fashionable socialist views of the fifties combined with an evangelist coloring" (Serjeant 1990, 473). To call Watt a Marxist like Bousquet does might be to take it too far. It is more appropriate to say that he is influenced by the larger changes happening in his time.

In Watt's own words he agrees with Marxists' focus on economy but disagrees with the idea that it is the prime moving factor (Watt 1953, 19). Watt did not believe that economy controlled everything, but that it was strongly correlated to the development of Islam.

Another important aspect of Marxist thought that effected Watt was its *reductionist* approach to religion. During the twentieth century there was a series of theories, usually from outside religious studies, that tried to define religion as something other than religion. Examples of this can be Sigmund Freud, who tried to define religion as a part of psychology (Flood 1999, 67). These reductionist theories often place the focus outside the individual's ability to act. Explanations for social realities are placed on naturalistic laws, as well as cause and effect as

the prime mover of the social world. The individual choices are reduced to having been controlled by outside factors (Flood 1999, 67). In the case of Marxist theory, religion is reduced to a part of the economic reality, that acts as a prime mover of the world. To Marx it is economic reality that forms the underlying reality for religion (Pals 2015, 135). To him there is no point in studying religions doctrines, as they are all just illusions controlled by economic realities (Pals 2015, 126).

Watt is clearly influenced by the reductionist paradigm. His account of the beginning of one of the largest world religions almost entirely ignores the religious side. He is more interested in economic change as the driving force for religious change. In the narrative of *Muhammad at Mecca,* religion plays a shockingly small part of the narrative. The book has a very secular tone where the religious testaments are written off as something different (Donner 2019, 21).

Lastly there is a problem both Marxist and positivist history have in common. They both believe that their explanation of the past is an *objective* retelling of that past. With proper source critical interpretation was a correct understanding of the past possible (Sandmo 2015,140). Watt also follows this, he argues that with a proper interpretation of the Muslim texts was it possible to accurate reconstruct the past (Watt 1953, xiii). Watt has been criticized for this belief, and the idea has become less popular in recent decades (Rodinson 1971, 344; Sandmo 2015, 181).

In the second part of Bousquet review we can find the largest difference between Watt and Marxism. Both Bousquet and Serjeant points out Watts tendency towards a religion language (Bousquet 1954, 231; Serjeant 1990, 473). Watt was a devote religious man, and his religion did seep into his writing on more than one occasion. In the introduction to *Mecca* he commented that "[I] write as a professing monotheist"(Watt 1953, x). At the end of a paper on the closeness between Christianity and early Islam he commented that: "It would be premature to think of a union of religions, but in the foreseeable future Muslims and Christians might well come to accept one another as fellow-servants of God" (Watt 1967, 201).

This accepting attitude towards religion might be the largest difference between Watt and Marxism. Where Marx had a disdain for religion, seen in the classic quote: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (Marx 1994, 57). Marx saw religion as a man made

concept (Marx 1994, 57). Watt instead had a more neutral and at times even pro religious view. This sets him apart from both Marxism and the Germen orientalists.

Watt's accepting attitude to the insider perspective has also helped make his books very useful for modern scholars and textbooks, who want to represent this perspective. Watt's attempt to present a retelling of the past, that is acceptable to Muslims, has also made him an important figure against islamophobia. Watt here stands as an example of how the academical discipline can counteract this moment through dialog and deeper understanding (Hillenbrand 2019, 17). In the end we might consider Watt's scientific paradigm a mix between phenomenology, Marxism, and theology.

5.2   Mecca at the time of Muhammad

In Watt's narrative is the central role of economy made clear from the first page, together with this he draws a deep separation between settled and nomadic life. He states that "the desert played no creative part in the development of Muhammad's monotheism" (Watt 1953, 1). To him is the economy of city life central instead. The description of Mecca is here almost as central as Muhammad himself. Watt presents the city as the center for a sprawling economical trade system (Watt 1953, 3).

He gives two reasons for his, firstly was Mecca a religious sanctuary or a *haram,* where the Kaaba acted as a gathering point for the different tribes in the surrounding area. It was a place travelers could come to without fear of being attacked. The dessert was a dangerous place where the Bedouins often made a living of raiding caravans (Watt 1953, 2). Therefore, sanctuaries like Mecca were a necessary place for safe trade between the different tribes.

The second reason for this was that Mecca was located at a crossroad between the east-west passage between Ethiopia and Iraq. As well as the north south passage between Syria and Yemen. Watt argues that these two elements, the sanctuary and perfect placement, led to Mecca becoming a bustling and growing economical center in the decades before the sixth century. Its leadership during Muhammad's time is described by Watt as:

> Financiers, skillful in the manipulation of credit, shrew in their speculations and interested in any potentialities of lucrative investments from Aden to Gaza or Damascus. In the financial net that they had woven nor merely were all the inhabitants of Mecca cough, but many notables of the surrounding tribes also. The Qur'an

appeared not in the atmosphere of the dessert, but in that of high finance. (Watt 1953, 3).

This image of Mecca as a center for a large-scale trade network is called the *Meccan trade theory*. The beginning of the trade theory is taken from the orientalist Henry Lammens (Crone 1987, 2). He described the trade in a similar way to Watt. He envision a trade network stretching far into the Byzantine Empire, where Mecca was a thriving mercantile city, one with complex credit institutions, capital gains, and shareholders (Wolf 1951, 333). This idea by Lammens was continued by Eric R. Wolf, who saw the Meccan elite as consciously using the riches the trade afforded them to centralize both the political and religious power from the surrounding tribes into Mecca (Wolf 1951, 333).

Watt used this idea that Mecca was the center for a new economical trade network to further his other opinions. In his opinion this economical change had brought about a form of capitalism during the sixth century (Watt 1953, 19). Watt argues that the reason Muhammad's message worked was because while the economy had changed, the social and moral ideals did not change with it. They were stuck in the past, and now did no longer work for the new social structure brought about by the huge inequality a capitalistic system brings (Watt 1953, 19-20).

To understand how Watt argues for this we must first understand Watt's description of the social and religious system before Muhammad. On the question of the pre-Islamic religion, Watt is very dismissal. His understanding of this religion is according to himself, taken from Nöldeke and Wellhausen. He states that this religion had little effect on the development of Islam and therefore he gives little time to it, spending no more than two pages discussing the pre-Islamic religion (Watt 1953, 23-24).

Just like Wellhausen, Watt argues that the Arabs surrounding Mecca had begun venerating a "high god" above the individual polytheistic gods (Watt 1971, 36). This high god was only prayed to in the case of life-or-death situations. One example by Watt is this line from the Quran:

> When they sail on the ship, they call on Allah as sole object of devotion, but when he has brought them safe to land they give partners [to him]. (the Quran 29:65 as sited in Watt 1971, 36).

Watt draws the conclusion that while the veneration for this high god above the individual deities was not universal in Arabia was it widespread enough that it is often argued against in the Quran (Watt 1971, 35 and 38). These pagans believed in a similar creator god that the early Muslims did but did not attribute all the same elements to him and worshiped different gods when it was applicable. Watt here brings up the satanic verses. In this removed verse from the Quran are the goddesses al-Lat, al-'Uzza, and Manat to be "exalted" and their "intercessions hoped for" (Watt 1971, 37). Watt was opposed to Wellhausen's theory of the exact nature of this high god, but agreed with his conclusion that the belief had existed (Watt 1971, 35).

While the pre-Islamic religion was not particularly strong, was there a commonly held idea of *Dahr* controlling one's life. Watt translates *Dahr,* to time or fate (Watt 1976, 73). This belief is that important events in human life like the day of death was predestined. This idea was generally held in the dessert, but at no time did the Arabs personify this belief into a God. Watt argues that this part of the pre-Islamic culture survived into Islam and the Quran (Watt 1976, 73). It is interesting that Watt does not consider *Dahr* a part of religious belief because it does not affix itself to any deity. This is an understanding of religion that is very different from modern understanding were belief in deities is not necessary to call something a religion.

Watt argues that at the same time as veneration of a high god grew, was knowledge about monotheism also growing. His understanding of what kind of Monotheism this was, is however very different from the standard narrative (Watt 1953, 28). He argues that when the Quran speak of Christians worshiping three gods, it is referring to some uncertain heretical Christians who were prevalent in Arabia. This uncertain heretical branch was really worshipping the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost as three different gods. They were pushed out for the byzantine empire for not following the mainstream movements (Watt 1967, 198). According to Watt this was the main form of Christianity Muhammed knew. Muhammed arguments that Christians were worshiping three gods was aimed at this kind, not mainstream Christianity.

While Muhammad might have faced opposition from Jews during his time in Medina, was it only once the Muslims begin facing military opposition from Christians in Syria that a more directly anti-Christian doctrine was established (Watt 1967, 198). He argues that while the Quran often speak against the mistakes of Judaism and Christianity, was this originality only aimed ad Jews, the addition of Christians in these verses were later revisions to the original

verses (Watt 1967, 197). Here Watt ends the paper by hoping that Muslims and Christians will be able to accept one another as "fellow-servants of God" (Watt 1967, 201). This focus from Watt that the Christians were not orthodox Christians can be seen as attempting of social commentary, argue for a place in the past were unity and agreements between Muslims and Christians existed. This argument has been made against later scholars like Fred Donner (Hoyland 2012, 576).

Watt argues that any of these religious beliefs, including the belief in *Dahr*, did not have any serious effect on people's lives. It was more done out of tradition than any strong convictions (Watt 1976, 73). Instead, Watt postulated that a different religion existed in the desert, one he calls *Tribal Humanism*. This was according to Watt the: "effective religion of the Arabs of Muhammads day" (Watt 1953,24) This "religion" stood above any individuals affiliations, and superseded the normal veneration of any particular gods. It was the tribe as a collective that was to be venerated, believed in and trusted as the harbinger of truth (Watt 1953,24). To belong to a strong tribe was the essence of a fulfilling life. It's to be able to boast of the bravery and generosity of one's tribe, and when the time comes lay down one's life in the defense of the tribe. It was the work of the poet, given magical powers from a Jinn to create poetry that spoke highly of the deeds of the tribe (Watt 1953, 24).

This tribal humanism had at its foundation a strong tribal solidarity. Every individual was responsible for taking care of the rest of the tribe and those less fortunate than them self. This system was responsible for public order both in the city and the desert. If one individual was harassed, murdered or robbed it was the responsibly of the tribe to avenge the wrongdoing. Watt characterizes this system as primitive but the only possibility system of Law in the time (Watt 1953, 17). This tribal humanism was to Watt the real religion of Arabia.

This view of religion from Watt has definitive connotations to Durkheim. Durkheim too saw religion as not a just personal affair but an important element of society and human belonging (Pals 2015, 81-82). Durkheim saw religion as something eminently social, it is a tradition handed down to us from birth (Pals 2015, 103). Durkheim also saw how in his times the old sacred values of the church were being supplanted by new ideals (Pals 2015, 85). To Watt religion is not realty about personal belief in deities, but how religion acted as social glue and held society together. Like Durkheim he too saw the old sacred values being supplanted, destroyed by the new mercantile system.

The idea of tribal humanism is as far as I can find fully Watt's idea. The term has since become popular to explain the social situation. As an example we have John Esposito presents the ideas of tribal humanism the same way Watt does (Esposito 1988, 5-6). Maxime Robinson acknowledges that the idea of tribal humanism comes from Watt, and states that it seems to fit the nature of Arabia at the time (Rodinson 1971, 17). Shepard says that religion had little effect on the Arabs ethical values but instead tied to loyalty to the tribe. He never says the words Tribal Humanism but the arguments are the same (Shepard 2014, 33)

Watt argues that the new mercantile economy created fractures between different parts of the tribes. Huge economical differences grew between rich and poor. The old system of tribal solidity had made sure everyone within the tribe was taken care off, the new individuality in a proto-capitalism led to widespread poverty among the people, who now wanted social change (Watt 1953,72-73). Some textbooks do follow this argument from Watt. William Shepards expands on this idea of the social contract in Mecca breaking down, and sees Muhammads own experience as an orphan as an example of this breakdown in the old tribal system (Shepard 2014, 34).

This is where we find Muhammad and his message according to Watt. While Muhammad's message was chiefly a religious one, it was keenly concerned with the social and economic situation. The new brotherhood of the ummah acted as a new basis for social solidarity. For Watt it was much more important how the call for generosity helped alleviate the divide between rich and poor, than its doctrinal reasoning (Watt 1953, 73). The actual message of Muhammad is to Watt's in this regard not that important, what was important was the feeling of brotherhood and unity the first Muslims felt. He does, however, not deny the truth of the message, stating that Muhammad first and foremost was a religious man, but one that also had economic and political effects (Watt 1953, 73).

While Watt presents the original intention of Muhammad as a mixture of religious and socially informed, is the presentation of the opposition more based in politics and power. Watt presents two arguments for why the Meccan elite might have opposed Muhammad. Firstly, there was the obvious religious one. Muhammad was promoting a new monotheism that had no room for the old gods (Watt 1953, 135). Secondly, was the fear that he would remove the idols at the Kaaba, removing its ability to work as a sanctuary for the different tribes (Watt 1953, 134). To Watt is neither of these reasons the real one. In his opinion the opposition was almost completely political. The elite was afraid that Muhammad would be accepted as a

prophet and supplant there political power (Watt 1953, 135). Watt argues that the idea that the elite opposed Muhammad based on economic grounds is "best forgotten" (Watt 1953, 134).However it can still be found, one example is James Lane who presents the argument that the opposition was based on economical wants (Laine 2014, 105-106).

5.3   Critique of Watt

You don't stay around for as long as Watt has without gathering a good portion of critique. One of the most important critiques against Watt was levied by the Revisionist school of early Islamic study. A direction that in many ways is a counter movement to many of the theories and arguments presented by Watt here.

One of the most famous arguments against Watts theory is by Patrcia Crone in *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (1987). One of her biggest disagreement with the theory is that it adopts modern ideas of trade and mercantile ideas into the seventh century (Crone 1980, 13). She argues that contrary to Watts narrative, Mecca was not the center for a large trade network. She condemned Watts use of Lammens, an orientalist scholar who showed little scholarly evidence for this presentation (Crone 1987, 3). In her opinion was Mecca only trading in commodities like leather, perfume and animals, with a small level of trade done in silver and gold, not even close to the level explained in Watt's narrative (Crone 1987, 87; R. B. Serjeant 1990, 474). The trade between the Byzantine empire and India was in her opinion easier done over the red sea, than the long travel over land (Crone 1987, 39-40). She finds no evidence that Arabia traded with Greece (Crone 1987, 11). Off all the trade that *did* cross the dessert was Mecca not a particularly important or necessary place to stop. It was too Westerly for most known trade routes from Yemen and had too little agriculture and food production to be a logical place to stop (Crone 1987, 6). Crone argues that if Mecca was not the center for a large commercial network, Watts theory of social inequality falls apart (Crone 1987, 231).

She also argues against Watt's separation between the tribe and town system. Even if Mecca did prosper in the decades before Muhammad, this was in her eyes not enough to lead to the complete collapse of this old system. Crone points to other towns in Arabia, primarily Ḥa'il as other places where economic growth did not lead to the fall of the tribal system (Crone 1987, 231). Crone states that the Mecca trade theory is so pervasive that most scholars don't event give documentation to the argument (Crone 1987, 3).

Crone accuses Watt of anachronism and that he is trying to place twentieth century capitalism, and ruthless pursuit of profits, into the sixth century (Crone, 1987, 232). Crone does fall into somewhat the same trap here as Watt does. She argue that economical change in Ḥa'il during the nineteenth century is comparable to economical change in the sixth century (Crone 1987, 231). Some of this can be compared to the old Orientalist idea of Arabia as unchanging and stable.

Crones' argument against Watt has sparked its own debate. Part of this is because of her place as a prominent member of the Revisionist school, as will be apparent in the next chapter. In her argument she mostly bases it on non-Arab source, like the Greeks (Crone 1987, 11). Most of this is based on her distrust of Muslim sources as being too late to give an accurate picture (Nevo and Koren 2000, 423) Serjeant states that there is no reason to disregard the entire corpus of Muslim sources for this, but rather that scholars must read with knowledge of the inherent bias to reach useful data (Serjeant 1990, 472-473). He states that Crone : "starts, with deep-seated prejudices, to produce a confused, irrational and illogical polemic" (Serjeant 1990, 472).

The opposition has by no means only come from the Revision school. Serjeant, one of the leading Arabist in Watts generation, and a student under Richard Bell, opposed Watt's ideas as well. He opposed Watts' proposed dichotomy between the settled and tribal communities. He argued that the two parts were much more closely tied together, and that a tribe might settle for hundreds of years without losing its tribal identity (Serjeant 1958, 187). He also agrees with Crone's arguments that Watt and western scholars have been too fast to accept the idea of economic change as the core reason for the religious change (Serjeant 1990, 473).

Lastly, we have the problem of Orientalism. Watt marks in many ways the last step before the release of Said's book in 1978. On one hand is Watt clearly aware of a lot of the same problems Said showcases. He points out the polemic language of the previous scholars and tries to present a value neutral account (Watt 1953, x). At the same time is Watt still using the older generation of orientalist scholarship. Serjeant points this out, stating that Watt did not use much of the more recent research done, and instead used the research of the older generations (Serjeant 1958, 187). While Watt's books do not contain the same underlying polemic tone as previous scholars, it does not completely deal with the problematic past of the orientalist narrative.

5.4   Watt today

Watt has in many ways stood the test of time much better than many of the other Orientalists. One aspect of this is the post-war period he was writing in. The period sought a new method for dealing with the orient. One less inclined to look at the entire continents as one large monotonies group, but rather to study the individual differences (Varisco 2007, 32). In addition, there was a push to set aside personal bias and try to write non polemically about cultures and religions.

Watt here is a scholar of his time (Donner 2019, 20). He believed that an unbiased rendition and honest analysis of the sources could create an accurate reconstruction of the past. However, his narrative was strongly influenced by the popular Marxist ideas of his time. He saw Mecca as a proto-capitalist city. Still Watt's work to present a narrative that Muslim could find agreeable made it an important work for later textbooks. His rendition either directly or indirectly influenced countless textbooks and later scholars.

While Crone argued against Watts' theory of Meccan trade is the idea still popular. Scholars like James Lane presents the argument, stating that the trade network reach all the way to Ethiopia (Laine 2014, 105-106). Unlike Watt he also argues that the opposition was based on economic factors (Laine 2014, 105-106). Kari Vogt presents the argument that the Persian-Byzantine war had led Arabia to be the center for trade between the East and West (Vogt 1995, 86). However, unlike Lane she argue that the opposition was not economical, but rather came from earnest religious belief (Vogt 1995, 90).

6   The Revisionist School

The attitude of modern historians of Islam oscillates between complete and almost complete rejection of Islamic tradition as an inadequate source for the reconstruction of early Islam (…) and full acceptance of the tradition as an authentic reproduction of Islamic history. (Sharon 2009, 229)

The late seventies and early eighties saw the rise of a new direction within Islamic studies. This direction has many names including the "Historical-Critical school", the "Skeptical approach", and the most wildly used title; "The Revisionist school". Modern readers might be most familiar with the ideas from Tom Hollands popular book *In the Shadow of the Sword* (Holland 2012). This direction asked fundamental questions that shocked Middle Eastern studies and the early Islamic studies to its core, and opened the fields to changes in its methodology (Donner 2019, 25). The basic idea of the direction is simple. Can scholars trust the Quran and other Muslim sources as historically accurate?

This question led to a series of different explanations for the eve of Islam, explanations that most Muslims and those that are familiar with the traditional understandings found quite alien. Some revisionist scholars argued that the career of Muhammad was a late fabrication (Crone and Cook 1977). Some argued that Islam began with sporadic groups of Arabian monotheist all over the Arab world (Sharon 2009, 230). Others that Islam began as a Christian non-Trinitarian sect, or even that Muhammad never existed at all (Nevo and Koren 2003; Donner 2019, 31). This development led to large controversy and debate (Donner 2019, 27). At the same time has the school uncovered many new sources for the beginning of Islam (Holmberg 2004, 53-54). This chapter will take a closer look at how this development happened, important scholars within the revisionist school, addressing criticism they faced, and the effect they presently have on the historiography of early Islam.

The question of whether the Muslim sources were accurate were not a new academical problem. We saw in chapter two how the Orientalist were aware of some of the same problems the revisions school had. The easiest line to draw is to Goldziher, who had questioned whether the larger parts of known hadith were really created much later than previously thought. He argued that many of the hadiths were fabrications, something that made it impossible to be certain which one were authentic to the period, and which one were later polemic arguments (Goldziher 1971). In the case of the biographies of the Muhammed was this problem the clearest. They were written too late, and were filled with contradictions

and inventions (Sharon 2009, 229-230). Until the Revisionist schools new hypotheses, however, had scholars taken the narratives as mostly correct (Sharon 2009, 230).

Scholars like Wellhausen believed that while the traditional account is filled with contradictions, it is possible with a source critical approach to gain a rough picture of the past (Donner 1998, 10). Nöldeke stated that the Quran was an "uncorrupted source" (Nöldeke 2013, 2). Because they believed the document was from Muhammad`s time it was seen as a useful source for establishing the religious situation surrounding him. They accepted the Quran as a quasi-documentary document (Donner 1998, 10). Some questions did get raised about the authorship and dating of the Quran as early as in 1916, but this theory was never seriously considered by most scholars before the Revisionist schools (Donner 1998, 24). This new direction had a much stronger criticism of all the sources. To them the previous scholars had been too quick to accept that the insider narrative of Islam represents a true retelling of the past (Crone and Cook 1977, 3).

The birth of the revisionist school is often attributed to two scholars; John Wansbrough the author of *Qur'anic Studies* (1977) and *the Sectarian Milieu* (1978), and Patricia Crone, who together with Michel Cook coauthored the book *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (1977). Hagarism will be dealt with later, but first it is important to have an idea of Wansbrough's arguments. His position was that the current understanding of the dating of the Quran was fundamentally wrong (Hawting 1997, 29). By applying a strict source critical view of the Quran, he concluded that it could not have been produced in the Hajj during Muhammad's lifetime but evolved over a 200-year period in southern Iraq (Wansbrough 1977, 202; Donner 2019, 25). This meant that for him the Quran could not be used as a source for the pre-Islamic and early Islamic milieu as it was not a product of this milieu, but rather a vestige of the milieu around the Fertile Crescent (Donner 2019, 25). If this argument was accurate, it represented a challenge to the last hundred years of scholars, from Wellhausen to Watt. This created a rift between those that accepted that the Quran was a product of Muhammad's time, and those who didn't.

This is a classic example of why understanding the context of a text within hermeneutic is fundamentally important (Engler and Stausberg 2022, 316). The revisionists school argue that the traditional narrative has misunderstood when and how the Quran was created. Therefore, they have arrived at a completely wrong interpretation of the text. In a reading of the text as

part of its context it is fundamentally important to be able to place the text in the correct context. The revisionist school uses the same Quran, the same hadiths, as the traditional account. By changing where the texts were formulated are the interpretations completely different.

Wansbrough's theory, that the Quran was not suitable for the study of the beginning of Islam, became the foundation for the new revisionist school. Many of these revisionist scholars worked or studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies (abbreviated to SOAS), where Wansbrough worked as a teacher. Among these there are Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Andrew Rippin, and Gerald R. Hawting. Other important voices from outside the SOAS that deserve a mention are Moshe Sheron, Judith Koren, Yehuda D. Nevo, and Günter Lüling (Donner 2019, 23; 1998, 23). These scholars make up the core of the revisionist school. It is important to understand that The Revisionist school is in no way a uniform movement, and does not present the same, or at times even similar narratives. They are however all working of some common ideas (Koren and Nevo 2000, 420). They all to some extent did not accept the Quran, the Hadiths, or biographies as sources in the way they had been previously used. However what parts of the traditions were to be accepted, or how to construct a new narrative is different for every author, as are their conclusions.

6.1   The scientific paradigms

If the revisionist school did not accept the insider narrative as reliable, what did they accept? How were they supposed to work historically if almost all the sources used in the previous hundred years were to be distrusted? It is important to understand that the important problem was not necessarily that the Muslim sources were wrong, but that the previous scholars accepted them without being seriously historically critical of them. It was in some ways a challenge to the field of early Islamic studies, to not just ignore the problems with the sources, but to use proper rigorous source criticism (Donner 2019, 27). The revisionist school were more than happy to use insider narratives where it could be supported by some outside sources. Crone made the argument in *Hagarism* that just because something is from an oral tradition, like the Quran, this is no reason to disregard it. There is, however, no reason to trust its validity without a second source either. The decision is therefore to widen the horizon, and look outside the Muslim tradition to support or disprove the insider narrative (Crone and Cook 1977, vii and 7).

The revisionist school approached the Quran from a different point of departure than most previous scholars. They borrowed heavily from biblical criticism. Wansbrough saw the development of the Muslim tradition as a parallel to how the Bible had developed over time. He saw the development of halakhah (Jewish Law) from the Old testament as a parallel to how interpretations of the Quran had led to the development of Islamic Law (Nemoy 1978, 184). He used traditional biblical critical tools like analyzing the structure, language and thematic content of the text to make his argument for a late authorship of the Quran (Koren and Nevo 2000, 428).

Fred Donner has criticized the application of biblical criticism by the revisionists. Firstly, he points out that the application is not new, one of the first to use this method was Albrecht Noth (Donner 1998, 29). Secondly, he argues that the revisionist school has conflated the methods of biblical criticism with their conclusions. The argument that the sources were filled with redactions and changes was taken from biblical criticism, without necessary fitting the context of the beginning of Islam (Donner 1998, 29). Others like Koren and Nevo has argued against this, presenting their opposition as just like to Old Testament scholars who cling to an outdated orthodoxy, without accepting the new theories (Koren and Nevo 2000, 426-427).

One important element in the change of methods happening was the growth of "late antiquity studies." Spurred by Peter Brown's book *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), the last chapter of the book focused on the beginning of Islam, placing it side by side with Roman and Sasanian history (Brown 1971, 189). Brown's presentation was of a world where these different elements was truly part of one holistic narrative, one not colored by decline and fall of old empires, but one of social and cultural creativity (Donner 2019, 28). Books like *Hagarism* tried to explain the beginning of Islam within the larger chaotic contents of the late antique world, rather than only within the background of the Jahiliyyah period (Donner 2006, 198). This work of placing the Quran in the context of antique world has in recent years been continued by Angelika Neuwirth (Neuwirth 2019).

The approach of the revisionists was to see the beginning of Islam as happening in this antique world and set aside the Muslim sources for the moment. Instead, the use of non-Arabic texts, mostly Christian and Jewish texts, were used. The focus became to read Greek, Latin, Samaritan, Coptic, and Armenian texts instead of Arab texts (Crone and Cook 1977,

23-24). A new focus was also placed on material culture. Starting around the 1980 there was a wave of interest in coins, seals, and Arabian papyrus. Fields that had been almost complete desolate now had a sizable number of scholars interested (Donner 2019, 29). Another discipline that became important to form a larger picture of the world of late antiquity was archaeology. New discoveries were made that among other things shattered the old idea that the rise of Islam had led to a marked decline in prosperity (Donner 2006, 197).

This focus on outside texts and evidence was fundamental for the revisionist school. There is no clear acceptance within the revisionist school of what can be taken as a proper source or how these sources are to be accepted. The general idea was that the insider narratives were to be accepted if they fit inside the outside narrative's framework. The idea of incorporating outside sources to deepen ones understanding of the material is not necessarily a controversial direction to go (Donner 2006, 197). However, the difference is that this new style only allowed the insider sources to be accepted if it coincided with the outside sources.

6.2   Patricia Crone and Hagarism

As mentioned, Patricia Crone is one of the forerunners within the revision school. Here book *Hagarism* is together with Wansbrough's books considered the beginning of the revisionist school. It also marks the beginning of the "noisy phase" of the movement (Donner 2019, 25). Where Wansbrough was influential to a small group of scholars was his writing by most readers consider too difficult to read. It did not gain a large reader base (Cobb 2009, 157) *Hagarism* however was a real wakeup call. It immediately gained much criticism both form Muslims and Western scholars alike (Donner 2006, 197; Little 2022, 1). Crone might be the most controversial person discussed within these pages, maybe except for Edward Said (Donner 2006, 197). Her work presents a fundamentally different reading of the past from those we have previously seen.

Crone was born in Denmark and studied at the university of Copenhagen and received a PHD at SOAS. In 1997 she became a Professor at the institute of Advanced study in Princeton, New Jersey, where she stayed until her retirement in 2014 (Tor 2018, 1). While working at SOAS with Wansbrough, she released *Hagarism* (1977) in collaboration with Machel Cook. Both Crone and Cook has later renounced many of the theories but it still stands as an important work in the histography of early Islam (Holmberg 2004, 53; Tor 2018, 1).

Crone and Cook worked off the arguments Wansbrough had laid down. The Quran was too late to be used as a source for the beginning of Islam. In the preface to *Hagarism* they thank him personally stating that: "without his [Wansbrough] influence the theory of Islamic origin set out in this book would never have occurred to us."(Crone and Cook 1977, viii). Crone and Cook used the idea of late authorship as a springboard for their own ideas. Instead of using sources from the Muslim tradition, they try to reconstruct the period based on outside sources. Some of the sources Crone and Cook used include Armenian chronicles from 660, written by a Bishop Sebeos, anti-Jewish tracts from the Heraclean persecution and other non-Muslim sources (Crone and Cook 1977, 3-6). Using these Crone and Cook constructed an unfamiliar retelling of the past. One that strains very far from both the traditional Western explanation as well as the emic perspective of Muslims (Crone and Cook 1977,vii-viii).

The most obvious change is the title, *Hagarism*. Crone and Cook argues that there is no proof that the terms *Muslim* or *Islam* were used before the year 691, they argue that it did not exist until much later (Crone and Cook 1977, 19). Instead they find proof of a different name used outside the tradition, in Greek and Syriac writing they find the term *Magaritai* and *Mahgre* as a name used for the Arab conquerors (Crone and Cook 1977, 8). They then argue that this term is synonymous with the Arab *muhajirun.* This term is used inside the Muslim tradition to mean "those who take part in the hijra, the exodus."(Crone and Cook 1977, 9). Crone and Cook conflate these terms together and argue that they also mean decedents of Hagar. The mother of Abraham's first-born son Ishmael (Crone and Cook 1977, 9). From this they translate the term into Hagarism and Hagarenes. I will in this part use the terms Crone and Cook use, to make it clear I am discussing their theories.

Crone and Cook take a lot of time focusing on the syncretism of cultures and religions. To them Islam was born out three separate period of change all colored by a closeness between Arabs to one of three different religions. The focus is on how closeness with Judaism, Christianity and Samaritanism changed the evolution of Islam (Crone and Cook 1977, 130-131).

According to the argument in *Hagarism* the first part of this syncretism take the forms of an alliance between Hagarenes and Jews, united in a belief in fulfilling the Jewish messiah myth (Crone and Cook 1977, 5 and 120). To argue this, they change the location of the narrative, from Mecca and Medina to the north Hajj and Jerusalem. This change of location is an important aspect of their theory, in their opinion is the commonly understanding of the Quran,

held by Muslims and previous scholars wrong. The Quran when discussing the holy city is not referring to Mecca, but to Jerusalem (Crone and Cook 1977, 21-22).

The conquest of Jerusalem is in this narrative the beginning of Islam as a religion, instead of an important step in the post-Muhammad expansion (Crone and Cook 1977, 10). Crone and Cook redefine the idea of the *hijra* within Islam. In Muslim tradition is this understood as Muhammad's departure from Mecca to Medina. Here is this event ascribed to the immigration from north Arabia to Jerusalem (Crone and Cook 1977, 9). According to their theory was Mecca of no importance to the early Hagarenes (Crone and Cook 1977, 21).

The argument for Mecca not being the original holy city is a good example of Crone's focus on an expanded repertory of tools when studying. They base the argument on two accounts. Firstly, archaeological evidence that some early mosques faced to far north, instead of pointing directly to Mecca. As well as on Christian testimony that Muslims in Egypt prayed pointing directly east (Crone and Cook 1977, 23-24). Previous scholars often did not account for archaeological finds, or Egyptian texts to create a more holistic picture of the past.

Muhammad's place in the narrative is completely different as well. Muhammad is to have outlived not only the conquest of Jerusalem by his followers but all the way until the conquest of Iraq. The entire rule of Abu Bakar is in this narrative a total fabrication (Donner 2006, 198). Muhammads is to have been a prophet, proclaiming Umar to be the coming Jewish messiah (Crone and Cook 1977, 5). They uses the insider narrative of Muslim accounts to further this argument. Stating that the Muslim title *al-Faruq* or redeemer point to an earlier messianic meaning. One originally given to Umar by people of the book, not by Muhammad and only later adopted by the Muslims (Crone and Cook 1977, 5).

The early close relationship between Jews and Arabs did not last long. According to Crone and Cook, the groups separated soon after the messiah myth was fulfilled by the conquest of Jerusalem. Soon disagreements broke out over reconstruction of Solomon's temple (Crone and Cook 1977, 10). At the same time the new Arab rule was quickly gathering steam, new lands were taken, and the Arabs became the rules of large groups of Christians (Crone and Cook 1977, 11). According to *Hagarism* the Jewish messiah myth led to conflict with Christians. During the political expansion was this placed to the side and some elements of Christian ideas Syncretized into Hagarism. One example is the veneration for Jesus, who even

becomes understood as the messiah by some of the early Hagarenes, according to Crone and Cook (Crone and Cook 1977,11-12).

This strong integration with the Christian community sparked fear amongst some of the Hagarenes that their distinct religious identity was being lost (Crone and Cook 1977, 13). Soon to be completely consumed by the much larger Christian population. A new focus was placed on themselves as different from the surrounding Christian and Jewish population. One element of this was a stronger focus on Abrahamic elements that also had existed in the pre-Islamic Jahiliyyah period, that now were recontextualized. Most important of these were sacrifice and circumcision (Crone and Cook 1977, 13). Both elements existed in the Jahiliyyah period, as well as in Abrahamic faits, and so became important elements in establishing that the pre-Islamic Arabs had a distinct Abrahamic identity, separate from both the jews and Christians. This was then strengthened by the belief in certain individuals who had kept this proto-Abrahamic religion during the Jahiliyyah, these people became known as *hanif* (Crone and Cook 1977, 13).

According to Crone and Cook the last step of the development into what is recognized as Islam happened in the late seventh century. During the leadership of Abd al-Malik in Mesopotamia (Crone and Cook 1977, 41). Under his rule the Quran took its final shape. Until this point had the transmission been oral, leading to changes, distortions and misunderstanding as the ideas came into new contexts (Little 2022, 3).

6.3   criticism of *Hagarism*

The release of *Hagarism* created a huge wave of criticism within early Islamic studies. It is important to point out that Crone and Cook knew that their theory would spark controversy. In the introduction they call their work "radical new" and that they "set out with a certain recklessness (…)." Calling the book, a "pioneering expedition"(Crone and Cook 1977, vii). Even then it is hard to imagine they had any idea just how fundamentally grand shifting and highly debated their work would be.

One of the strongest and longest lasting criticism of both the early and later part of the revisionist school is that of racism and anti-Islamic polemic. R. B. Serjeant criticized *Quranic Studies* as: "pervaded by prejudice against Islam (…) disguised polemic seeking to strip Islam

and the Prophet of all but the minimum of originality" (Serjeant 1978, 76). On *Hagarism* he states: "not only bitterly anti-Islamic in tone but anti-Arabian" (Serjeant 1978, 78). This argument that the revisionist school is presenting polemic attacks against Islam does not stop. In some ways the comments here by Serjeant come to the very core of the divide that was going to grow between a revisionist and traditionalist narrative.

One important element in this view that the revisions school was anti-Islamic is the disparagement between the approach to Muslim and not Muslim sources. While the direction threw out the entire Muslim tradition had they were little criticism for non-Muslim accounts (Donner 2006, 198). Many of the non-Muslim sources they used were often polemic and from people who had little direct contact with Muslims. The inherent bias they argued existed in the Muslim sources were apparently not a problem if it came from Armenian bishops. On one hand Crone and Cook did acknowledges that the source were filled with mistakes and biblical ethnography (Crone and Cook 1977, 7). On the other they still used these texts to form their narrative.

Another problem is the question of what inside narratives they accept as historically accurate. When discussing Umar's proposed role as the messiah, they were happy to use Muslim sources when it suited the arguments. Even though it did not have any secondary references from outside the tradition to underpin the argument. Crone clarified this in her book *slaves on horses* (1980). Here she argued that one can use the sources that are part of what she calls the "secular tradition", while texts that fit inside what she described as the "religious tradition" or "tribal tradition" cannot be trusted at the same level (Crone 1980, 3; Little 2022, 2). To describe something as being inside one tradition like this is difficult within religious studies. How do you separate the religious from the secular? Did it exist a difference for people living in the past? Categories like this are therefore very problematic. Exactly what is included or excluded for Crone is unclear but for the most part is detailed information about the lives of people in the political or military sphere considered part of the "secular tradition" (Bonner 2016, 356).

Another point of critique was the language. Many felt that both Crone and Wansbrough used unnecessarily complicated language. *Quranic studies* was accused by Fred Donner of being "so dense that, for many readers, it might as well have been written in academic German"

(Donner 2019, 24). Donner also retells a joke from a collage that the book "was important, and that a competent English translation was greatly to be desired" (Donner 2019, 24).

Crone's writing was accused of using the same overly complex language. J.J. Little describes her writing as "infamous for their technical and terse style" (Little 2022, 8). While Fred Donner described it as "sometimes labyrinthine" and "sometimes incomprehensible to those who lacked strong specialist training" (Donner 2006, 198). The complexity of the writing led to difficulty for some when separating the nuance of the arguments. Especially when their theories were new and alien to most readers. One example of this is the misinterpretation that *Hagarism* denied the existence of Muhammad, something it never did (Little 2022, 2).

The release of *Hagarism* led to a series of new studies and different angles to approach the development of early Islam. In some ways we can see Hagarism as acting as a centripetal force, pushing a stale and hegemonic presentation into becoming a *polyphony*, or a place where different voices can exist at the same time (Kraft and Natvig 2006, 64). Even in a polyphony like the one that grew after the release of *Hagarism* it is important to notice that some voices, those that hold power, "speak louder" and have a stronger influence on the discourse than other (Kraft and Natvig 2006, 62).

I now want to take a closer look at some of the most important or interesting works following *Hagarism*. I have here tried to present a wide breadth of theories to show how some members of the revisions school, while working from the same methodology arrive at widely different conclusions.

6.4   Hawting and Jahiliyyah

G R. Hawting (1944) was a student under Wansbrough and Bernard Lewis. Lewis is best known for being critical of Said argument in *Orientalism* (Lewis 1993). Hawting gains his PHD in 1978 and currently works at SOAS. Like Wansbrough his focus is on the pre-Islamic milieu creating Islam. His key work in this regard is *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (1999).

Hawting continues some of the ideas of both Crone and Wansbrough. Like them he argues that most of the knowledge we have about the beginning of Islam and the pre-Islamic religion is wrong (Hawting 1999, 2). One of the most interesting parts of Hawting's argument that sets him apart from Crone is the different relationship they have to the Quran. Crone disregards it

as she sees it as constructed too late. Hawting on the other hand argues that the Quran is a historical object, one with a long oral tradition and one that went through changed over time, but still a historical object. Instead of disregarding it he tries reinterpreting the text, finding a understand of it that does not hinge on the later Muslim interpretation and literature (Hawting 1999, 45). If we look at the text as in a vacuum, what understanding does it bring?

Hawting is particularly interested in the pre-Islamic period. He argues that if one ignores the later Muslim texts and only focus on the Quran there is nothing to point that the text was written as a counter argument to Meccan polytheism (Hawting 1999, 4). Hawting argues that the Quran when describing the opposition to Muhammad's message is not realty talking about polytheists, but instead different kinds of monotheism. He argues that the terms used in the Quran, *mushrik,* mostly interpreted as idolators or idol worshippers, does not need to mean this (Hawting 1999, 3). Instead, one can interpret it as a polemic expression, saying that the opposition is *like* idolators (Hawting 1999, 48). His argument is that these refences in the Quran are polemic arguments, angled at other monotheists. The Quran is an argument between different kind of monotheists, not primarily against polytheists. This polemic writing was then later misunderstood, or partly internally twisted, by later Muslim to reference polytheism (Hawting 1999, 47 and 150-151).

Some part of his argument is based on comparative religion. He compared the situation to early protestants, who attack Catholics as idolators. In the eyes of the Catholics were they by no means idolators, they only believed in one God. In the eyes of the protestants however had they altered Jesuses Message of monotheism, with pictures and statues, and were therefore no better than idolators (Hawting 1999, 45). The same argument has been made by some Muslim against Christianity, that the trinity is not real monotheism (Hawting 1999, 47). From this it is possible to argue that the same might be the case in the Quran. The people the text is calling idolators and polytheists really saw themselves as monotheists, but with a different understanding of what that entailed (Hawting 1999, 45).

Based on this interpretation there are two possibilities. The first is that Araba had a much greater knowledge about monotheism that the traditional account present. The second is that Islam really began, as Crone and Wansbrough has argued, somewhere else, not western Arabia (Hawting 1999, 67). Hawting here choices the second option, something he has be criticized for, mainly by Fred Donner.

Reading a text, the way Hawting does has its problems. The first and foremost is the lack of historical context. Changing the context, the work was created in will change the interpretation of the work. Hawting does see the problem with his own reading stating that "Often such a reading seems arbitrary and necessarily inconclusive." (Hawting 1999, 48). Any such reading is not truly giving an accurate picture of what the Quran "really means" (if such a thing exists), but does show an alternative interpretation to the traditional account (Hawting 1999, 48).

Reviews of Hawting's theory seem to have come to a consensus. Most agree that the questions he asked were important but disagree with his conclusions. Fred Donner speaks very warmly of the general thesis of the book, that the Qurans references to *mushrik* does not need to mean polytheism or idol worship but can be interpreted to be polemic saying against other monotheists. He does however disagree with Hawting conclusion that Islam began somewhere else (Donner 2001a, 336-337). We will see this clearer in the next chapter, but it seems Donner was here wear smitten by the idea of the Quran arguing against Monotheists, he says that the idea based on Hawting's works seem quite likely (Donner 2001a, 336).

Yasin Dutton agrees that the Qurna might have been arguing against monotheists, but this is no real argument to place the story outside west Arabia. No part of the Muslim tradition state that the Pre-Islamic Arabs saw themselves as only polytheists. In the Muslim account was monotheism well known (Dutton 2001, 178). There is no evidence that the Pre-Islamic Arabs only ever saw themselves as polytheists, some might have seen themselves as monotheist, but with a different understanding of God.

Paul Cobb sees Hawting's work as one of the better works of revisionist scholarship. Instead of disregarding the Quran like Crone he is willing to use the text as a historical object (Cobb 2002). He does, however, also disagree with the conclusion of Islam beginning outside Arabia. He suggests that Hawting might need to read some of Fred Donner's work (Cobb 2002, 299). As we will see later has Donner created a different possible narrative that fits with Hawting ideas without completely removing the traditional narrative.

One point often brought up is the language. Unlike previous revisionists like John Wansbrough and Crone, Hawting can argue his points succinctly and clearly. Where Wansbrough and Crone was often criticized for overly complex writing is Hawting

congratulated for presenting the ideas in a readable fashion (Cobb 2002, 299; Donner 2001a, 336).

We can see Hawting as one of the most important late revisions. He continued many of the same arguments previous scholars made but was able to present it in a language suitable for both experts and general readership. His acceptance of using the Quran was an important step in establishing the theories as not just revisionist history, but legitimate scholarship that offered legitimate interpretations of all the available sources.

6.5   The Existence of Muhammad

One of the most radical positions taken is that Muhammad never existed at all. One of the earliest theories that can be said to belong to this category is the work done by Moshe Sharon (1937-). In *the birth of Islam in the holy land* (Original 1988 my edition 2009) he lays out what he sees as the problems with the historiography of early Islam. He here point to *Hagarism* as an influence in his work (Sharon 2009, 229). His argument differs significantly from Crone. He argues that Crone removed to much of the Muslim texts, and that the two parts, insider and outsider sources can coexist. To make the Muslim source fit his narrative he does have to interpret them very differently from how the traditional narrative has done it in the past (Sharon 2009, 230).

Sharone argues that Islam did not begin as a uniformed movement but rather as a slow sporadic growth of different Arab communities, all with some concept of monotheism. Islam began in a disorganized and sporadic fashion. There was no time in the past where all Muslims were united. The understanding of Muslim schisms and civil wars is a misunderstanding of the past. Muhammad was just one of potentially many Prophets in the period who inspired followers in different communities across the Arabian world. These separate groups Sharon calls *Muminun;* the believers, and there leaders *amir al- Muminin,* which he translates to; chief of the faithful (Sharon 2009, 229-230).

 One of these groups, the Umayyads ended up after a prolonged struggle with control of the other communities. The Umayyad leadership then under leadership of Abd al-Malik worked to make the undefined monotheism into a religion with the power to unify the many separate *Muminun* communities. The first step was creating the inscription on the Dome of the Rock, a

decision intended to stress the Abrahamic connection between the different *Muminun* communities with Judaism and Christianity (Sharon 2009,233). The hope was to establish *Muminun* as a meeting place between Arab identity and Abrahamic religion. The second element was the establishment of Mecca as the sanctuary. In Sharons opinion was Jerusalem for a long time the original sanctuary until the Umayyad *Muminun* under Abd al-Malik conquered Mecca and made it the new sanctuary in 695 (Sharon 2009, 237). Sharon presents a retelling of the beginning of Islam that begins in Iraq, conquers Syria and lastly conquers the Arabian Peninsula (Sharon 2009, 235-237) A complete reversal of the traditional timeline.

Sharons narrative is interesting in how it almost completes removes Muhammed from the equation. He did however argue that he was not trying to deny the existence of Muhammed, but was only trying to present a new interpatient of the tradition, not deny its truth (Sharon 2009, 230). Even Moshe Sharon, who almost completely remove Muhammed from the narrative still says that he existed.

The complete removal of Muhammad from the narrative truly began in the last decades. This idea has mainly been proposed by a few scholars, who follow very similar ideas with some variations. The general idea follows much of the same logic as *Hagarism*, and Wansbrough, but where they were concerned with textual interpretations is this branch more interested in inscriptions and nomistic evidence (Popp 2010, 101).

The key idea is that the name Muhammad only appears in written form first in the 690 on coins and the inscription on the Dome of the rock (Nevo and Koren 2003, 247). These occurrences must be explained away to make the last evidence of Muhammad the man disappear.

The explanation given is that "Muhammad" means "the praised one", and therefore can be used as both a name and a title. Nevo argues that the word can be interpreted as the praised on, or the desired one, or, chosen by God (Nevo and Koren 2003, 263-264). It was therefore not intended to be read as one person, but rather a holy title. This title was soon after its use on the Dome of the rock confused as a name of a particular prophet called Muhammad. This interpretation of Muhammad as a name was then adopted by the early written sources (Nevo and Koren 2003, 265).

The question then becomes who made the inscription on the Dome of the Rock and the early coins. Here scholars differ. Volker Popp argued that early references to "Muhammad" is intended to be interpreted to reference Jesus, and that the inscription was made by Christians (Popp 2010, 52). Yehuda D. Nevo disagrees. He instead argues that the inscription was made by the Arab pagans. In his narrative was there no great Arab conquest, he sees the Byzantine empire as already having pulled out of the regions, leaving Arab states as buffers states (Nevo and Koren 2003, 89-90). There was no war between then Byzantines and Arab in the beginning just a peaceful transfer of power. The pagan Arab elite slowly adopted a monotheism like Christianity and Judaism, and created the role of the Prophet Muhammad later (Nevo and Koren 2003, 11 and 258).

Much of the theory is based on a lack of evidence, rather than evidence itself. The easiest position to take is that nothing is real before it can be proven. However, the scholars have at times deliberately ignored, or twisted evidence to further their goal. The proponents have decided the insider source are unreliable and then argue that become there are no sources for it, Muhammad never existed. Outside sources like a Greek text from 632-634 mentioning a prophet appearing amongst the Arabs is ignored (Crone 2008; Donner 2019, 32).

The idea that Muhammad never existed is not a generally held consensus among Revisionists. Crone herself has spoken against the idea, stating that a prophet most likely did exist in Arabia around the beginning of Islam, and that we know more about Muhammad than about other prophets like Jesus and Moses (Crone 2008).

Outside the revisionist school has the theory received even less agreement. Donner called the idea "high handed", and build on dubious interpretation of history (Donner 2019, 32). Gabriel Said Reynolds called the theory of Nevo and Koren for "a conspiracy theory *par excellence*" (Reynolds 2005, 453). Their idea that Byzantine would willingly withdraw from important lands and simply give them up is a strange departure from the traditional understanding. To be able to form their narrative they must disregard both Muslim accounts and the history of the byzantine empire as well (Reynolds 2005, 453).

6.6 Neo-Orientalisme

In the early part of the twenty-first century, we can see a move within the revisionist narrative towards more radical positions (Hoyland 2015, 232). This more radical position is often tied together with Neo-Orientalism. Neo-Orientalism is a term used by some to describe curtain elements of the Orientalist mindset that has continued into the moder world (Samiei 2010, 1148). Some of the key aspects of this paradigm is the dualistic view of Islam against the West, Muslims as terrorists and the middle East as incompatible with democracy (Samiei 2010, 1148-9; Anees 2015).

Aspects of Neo-orientalism began right at the offset of the release of *Orientalism.* This was particularly shaped by the Iranian revolution and questions of Democracy in the Middle East. Some of Crones comments have been taken to argue that Islam was a monolithic religion, incompatible with modern states or democracy (Sadowski 1993, 12). In her words Islam had in the seventh century "already acquired its classical shape as an all-embracing holy law characterized by a profound hostility to settled states" (Crone 1980, 62). We also saw this in her argument against Watt where she argued that a modern day city of Ḥa'il is comparable to seventh century Mecca (Crone 1987, 231-232). This is the same arguments and style used by Orientalists, where sweeping statement about the modern day was seen as applicable to the ancient world (Said 1979, 235).

If one looks at it in the right way is the core of the revisionist narrative built on the ideas of Orientalism. One of the ideas of the Orientalist narrative was that Arabs and Muslims were unable to speak for themselves, they had to be spoken for (Said 1979, 6). It does not take much to see the revisionist narrative as a continuation of this, the basic idea can be imaged as "you do not understand or know your own past, but I do."

The Neo-Orientalist narrative is tied together with a larger form of Islamophobia. For the Unites states has 9/11 been central to this (Morey 2019, 270). It had a profound effect on the American psyche, it left many feeling scared confused and angry (Rogan 2012, 555). The media fueled the narrative of all Arabs as violent and potential terrorists (*Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society* s.v "Islamophobia", 2008, 2). It can also be drawn in with the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Moshe Sharon has stated that peace for Israel with the Muslim world is impossible (Lappin 2006). In Europe has the narrative often been tied to ideas of Eurabia, or a "Muslim invasion" taking over Europe from within (Bangstad 2013, 374–75).

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One important part of this Neo-Orientalist narrative is to present Muhammed, in as negative light as possible (Anees 2015). There is a particular focus on Muhammed as a pedophile and his polygamy (Anees 2015). In this we can see revisionist narratives about Muhammed's life that argue for even more radical positions than previously held, partially in the work of Ibn Warraq and Robert Spence.

Ibn Warraq is a pseudonym, and it is therefore hard to know his exact history. In the opinion of Fred Donner he is clearly not trained in Arabic studies (Donner 2001, 75). One of his most famous works is *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (1995). He here presents Muhammad as ruthless and power hungry, a man who "gave vent to his cruel tendencies, with no sign of forgiveness" (Ibn Warraq 1995, 93 and 345). Ibn Warraq's represents a general trend of neo-Orientalism showing Muhammad in as negative light as possible (Anees 2015). His portrayal here very close to the Orientalist narrative in chapter 3.

His exertion into the world of revisionism happened in the book *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* he here proposes to "give sufficient background to put the current debate, between the revisionist and traditionalist about the origins of Islam, in their intellectual context" (Ibn Warraq 2000, 9). The presentation is however very one sided, with most texts from Orientalists or revisionist scholars (Ibn Warraq 2000, 7-8; Donner 2001, 75). Some of the works are useful as important parts in the revisionist narrative (Ibn Warraq 2000, 420). This one-sided nature of the texts chosen gives the wrong impression to a new reader of how extensive the ideas are. The book says it is attempting to give the intellectual context for the debate, but only shows one perspective in the debate. Donner described Ibn Warraq's work as "Religious polemic attempting to masquerade as scholarship" (Donner 2001, 75).

Ibn Warraq argues against modern academical inquiries into Islam as to focus on what he calls "Patronizing liberals" that have a "Misplaced concern for the sensibilities of Muslims." (Ibn Warraq 2000, 19-20). He goes particularly strongly against Watt, arguing that his presentation borders on being non-scholarly in its attempt not to offend Muslim sensibilities, particularly his choice not to comment on the authorship of the Quran. He questions why a Christian clergy like Watt might possibly presents sensibilities towards "the most anti-Chrisitan of religions" (Ibn Warraq 2000, 20). He can see no reason a scholar might take the

perspective of the insider seriously without also converting to the religion (Ibn Warraq 2000, 20).

We can here see how Ibn Warraq perception on doing a scientific inquiry into the religious other differ greatly from that held by Gavin Flood and dialogical ethic. Here the proposed method of scientific inquiry is a focus on a form of friendship between the ethnographer and the informant (Flood 1999, 213). The focus is precisely to blur the lines between oneself and the other and see other humans as agents. The goal is to immerse oneself in the field, while at the same time keeping a certain "outsideness" (Flood 1999, 214). This is opposed to the way Ibn Warraq sees scientific inquiry, where any form of care taken towards the sensibilities of others is seen as a mistake (Ibn Warraq 2000, 24).

Robert Spencer presents a similar case. He is an American author with no education in Islamic studies (Bangstad 2013, 370 and 387). One of his most prominent books is *stealth jihad* which popularized the term "counter-jihadist" (Pratt and Woodlock 2016, 242). He is perhaps most well known in Norway as one of the key influences on Anders Behring Breivik. Spencer was reference 162 times in Breivik's manifesto (Pratt and Woodlock 2016, 242). In addition has two of Spencer's books been used as suggested reading for FBI operatives to learn about Muslims (Ackerman 2011).

Spencer's dip into revisionist work happened in 2012, with *did Muhammad exist?* (Spencer 2021). The book does not give any new theories, but instead takes some of the most radical stances from previous revision scholars. He uses the arguments from Volker Popp about early Muslim coinage are referring to Jesus when using the term Muhammad (Spencer 2021, 48). Like Crone, he uses the term Hagarenes when referring to early Muslims (Spencer 2021, 40 and 42). The book argues that Muhammed most likely never existed, and if he did is there no knowledge about him we can be sura about (Spencer 2021, 112). He argues that Islam was a construction, and that the Quran was Christian texts "adulterated" (Spencer 2021, 241). The duster of the book askes the question "Are jihadis Dying for a fiction?" (Spencer 2021, Duster). Kerboua Salim argues that the goal of Spencer is to intentionally conflates Muslims with terrorist, and Islam as opposed to the west (Kerboua 2016, 22 and 26).

It is important to note that this anti-Muslim and Neo-Orientalist stance is not shared by most of the revisionist school. For the most part they are a group of scholars who hope to arrive at a

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deeper understanding of the beginnings of Islam through a historical-critical reading of the sources. However, the ideas have been coopted by the Neo-orientalist narrative, to try and present Islam as a religion build on fiction.

6.7   Criticism of the revisionist school
One of the strongest criticisms levied against the revisionist school is that of islamophobia. As we have seen has this criticism been levied from the very beginning. Serjeant went very strongly out against both Crone and Wansbrough, seeing there writing as polemic and anti-Muslim (Serjeant 1978, 76 -78). The criticism is particularly apparent with the Neo-Orientalists, where Donner saw the work done by Ibn Warraq as un-legate scholarship (Donner 2001, 75). The introduction of Robert Spencer makes this even more apparent. He has been described as "The central premise provider for the development of Islamophobic history of science" (my translasjon from Enebakk 2015).

Some members of the revisionist school have lamented this attitude towards them. They have argues that this is a form of polemic langue, trying to quickly dismiss there theories without seriously arguing agist them (Koren and Nevo 2000, 421). However, when looking at scholars like Ibn Warraq it is not hard to see why some have criticized the direction of being anti-Islamic or continuing the style of Orientalism. This more extreme position taken by some might make it harder to come to a consensus between the two narratives. This is separation can easily be drawn back to the release of *Orientalism*, some revisionists have argued that Said might have been right in his book, but the reaction from the discipline has been too strong. (Berg 1997, 19).

The revisionist school's approach posed some potential challenges for religious studies at large. The focus on the emic understanding of the living Muslims can be seen as having stifled any ability to get a deeper understanding of the period. If we take comparative religion as an example, it is in some ways fruitless to try and compare the beginning of Christianity with the beginning of Islam without a corrects understanding how both religions began.

I argued earlier that based on Hyden White's theories we can discard narratives that deny the historical record. White points particularly to holocaust denying revisionism as "morally offensive" (White as cited in Iggers 2000, 383). However, this does not work when the

different scholars honestly believe the sources, they are use are truthful, and try their best to present narrative that fits with their understanding of what the sources tell. One of the most interesting ways the direction has been denounced is in the use of language, and particularly the name used for the school. I have here chosen to use the name "Revisionist school". It is a name not created by the group itself and often disliked by members. Nevo and Korena dislikes the term but chooses to use it is general accepted (Nevo and Koren 2000, 420). Crone refers to the term in parentheses, and in a slight sarcastic tone (Crone 2010). It is a term mostly used *about*, not *by* the members, and is not a name they choose themselves. The term "Revisionist" does have connotations to WW2 Revisionism and holocaust denial. It can be seen as polemic word, used by members outside the direction to disregard the theories. The same was Nevo and Koren and argued the use of Islamophobia is used to disregard the theories. As mentioned earlier is the ability to define something to have power over that thing, here have the outsiders chosen a name not accepted by the insiders to categorize them.

Most might agree that getting a fuller picture of the past by reading from a well of different languages is an advantage, but how many are actually willing to go through with it? (Donner 2006, 197). Before Crone's time it was expected to learn Arabic if you were going into the beginning of Islam, but now you are in addition expected to learn Aramaic, Greek, Latin and others, In addition to Arabic (Donner 2006, 197). The old orientalists had also been expected to learn a series of different languages, which had been a hindrance for many entering the field (Marchand 2009, 274). The same can be said for the new level of skills required. It was now expected to interpret coins, inscriptions, archaeological finds and texts in many languages (Donner 2006, 197). On one hand has few scholars outside the direction opposed them on purely methodological grounds (Koren and Nevo 2000, 421). It is, however, a difficult set of new methods to set oneself into.

6.8   Effect on textbooks

The revisionist school created a rift with early Islamic studies. Most scholars did not accept the new theories proposed by the direction, choosing instead to continue with the traditional narrative (Shepard 2014, 43). On many grounds it is logical that one might not expect to find the narrative in textbooks for general readership. Most textbooks are interested in presenting the generally accepted understanding, the traditional narrative. As just one example we have

Religions in the modern world that gives the traditional narrative and is perhaps the most straightforward one can get (Bigelow 2016, 246-252).

However, looking at some of the newest textbooks, particularly those focused on religious studies, we can find a different approach. These do sometimes give the general ideas of the revisionist school. The presentation is usually in a negative light, but the ideas are presented. One example is *Islam: En Religionsvetenskaplig Introduktion* (Olsson and Sorgenfrei 2021). Here the authors point out some of the questions raised by the revisionists about the beginning of Islam. Especially how the history has been written 150 years late, and can contain more of those times political and religious situation (Olsson and Sorgenfrei 2021, 16). The book argues this does not mean that the story is fiction, but that it should be seen as a foundation myth that has been fundamentally important for Muslims for 1400years. For religious studies they are fundamentally important to understand how modern Islam developed and what modern Muslims believe (Olsson and Sorgenfrei 2021, 18).

Introducing Islam by William Shepard points out the late authorship, partisan language, and contradictions of the sources (Shepard 2014, 42). Going on to give a short snippet about the different contracting theories before dismissing them with "Critical scholarship in general has rejected some of their conclusions and been cautious about the rest" (Shepard 2014, 43). Shepard argues that it is more important to have a understanding of what he calls "foundation myth" of Islam, as this is what living Muslims look back upon as what it means to be truly Muslim (Shepard 2014, 43).

We can see that these books give a very similar reason for why the revisionist narratives do not pose such a great challenge to the narrative present in their books. They are not interested in "what really happened" but in how modern Muslims understand their own past. This is an argument that can be made by scholars who focus on the History of Religions, where this focus on the insider perspective is often focused on. The same argument has been made by Fred Donner, stating:

> The scholar approaching Islamic origins from the perspective of History of Religions would argue that the only useful information is how later traditions perceived those origins, not what they actually were (Donner 1998, 26).

Donner goes on to say "for the historian, however who want wants to know what happened, this is but a cop-out" (Donner 1998, 26). We can with this see one of the potential differences between the two approaches to the past.

The revisionist school also had a large effect on the number of biographies of Muhammad written in the second half of the twentieth century. If we ignore biographies or scholarly works that basically regurgitate the standard narrative, with a light or non-existing historical criticism, there has been strikingly little work done in those decades. One of the last biographies of Muhammad was the one created by Watt themselves, before him we can find plenty (Brockopp 2010, 12). However, in the second half of the century, while the revisionist school was at its height were very few biographies written (Brockopp 2010, 13). There are of course some exceptions, chiefly the works of Maxime Rodinson, Karen Armstrong, and Michel Cook but the general trend stands. Of these three, Karen Armstrong is not a scholar, but an author and Michel Cook a revisionist. Maxime Rodinson is a Marxist who gives an interesting account of the period, but has been criticized for explaining for his explanation of Muhammad's prophecies as epilepsy (Rodinson, 1971, 77; Armstrong 2000, 14; Brockopp 2010, 12-13). Karen Armstrong even lamented that there were so few modern biographies of Muhammad to lean on (Armstrong 2000, 14).

Some reasons for this lack in texts are in part tied to a general tendency in modern academy to stay away from large sweeping History, instead is the focus on smaller elements. Like parts in Muhamed's life or select passages from the Quran (Brockopp 2010, 13). A second element is the large problems faces by anyone who tries to write about the historical Muhammad. The revisionist school showed that even if one does not agree with their theories is the factual record far from stable enough to be able to accurately give a detailed presentation on the period (Peters 1991, 291).

7   The middle road

"It is my conviction that Islam began as a religious movement" (Donner 2010, xii).

The early parts of the twenty-first century saw new attempts being made to unify the revisionist and traditional narrative. In this part I want to look at two very different attempts to achieve this goal. The scholars I here want to look at are the work of Fred Donner (1945-) and Robert Hoyland (1966-). The two give very different, but also similar narratives for the beginning of Islam, and its early expansion.

7.1   Fred Donner

I first want to analyze is the works of Fred Donner. Donner was born in 1945 and took his PHD in Near Eastern studies at Princeton university. From 1975 to 1982 he worked at Yale, and from 1982 to 2020 at the university of Chicago (The University of Chicago n.d. read 18.03.2023). Donner has in his long career written many books, articles, and reviews. His most important works here are *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Original 1981, my edition 2014), *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (1998), and *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam* (2015). I will here mostly focus on his last book which directly deals with the beginning of Islam, but the book is in many ways build both on Donner's earlier work and the entire corpus presented in this thesis.

Donner builds both on revisionist and traditional scholars. One of the biggest influences on Donner is the work of Montgomery Watt. "Watt (…) was one of the most important and respected scholars of Islamic studies alive, (…) he was one of the most important for me" (Donner 2019, 19). At the same time, he has shown great veneration for Crone and *Hagarism*. Donner has described Hagarism as "perhaps the most important single book in Islamic studies of the twentieth century" (Donner 2019, 27). He has compared its influence with that of *Orientalism* (Donner 2006, 199). As Donner points out, while they both contain many weaknesses are they both important works that should be taken seriously (Donner 2006, 199).

One of the key elements of Donner scientific paradigm is his criticism of the reductionism seen among earlier scholars, particularly Watt (Donner 2019, 20). As we saw when examining the narrative of Watt, is his understanding of Islam shaped by the developments in social science of his time. This had the consequence of Watt attributing the spread of Islam to heavily on socio-economical changes (Donner 2019, 20). Donner is critical of this

reductionism. To him is it setting aside just how monumentally important and effective religion can act as an ideology (Donner 2014, 8). Donner tries to establish the importance of the religious aspects in the establishment and growth of Islam. He tries to place extra focus on the early Muslims as *believers*. They were of course concerned with political and economic problems, but these were secondary to their faith and piety (Donner 2010, xii).

Donner's criticism of reductionism has a lot in common with Mircea Eliade. Like Donner he also believed that religion could not be explained as a by-product of something else. Religious phenomenon could only be understood as something religious (Pals 2015, 230). Eliade also focuses on the study of religion as a part of history. He argued that most religious studies is the study of religion in the past, and like historian they are they trying to gather evidence, critique them and make connections (Pals 2015, 231).

What Donner is criticizing Watt for is not necessary reductionism, but rather his naturalistic reductionism. Any research program has to use some form of reductionism (Flood 1999, 66). A naturalistic reductionism tries to reduce religion down to a part of sociology, economy, or something else (Flood 1999, 70). A non- naturalistic explanation tries to show that religion has to be explained in its own terms and on its own level (Flood 1999, 70). It is important to note that both ways are form of reductionism (Flood 1999, 66). Where Watt and others attributed Religion to something other, is Donner turning the other way, choosing to explain the beginning of Islam and the Arab expansion almost purely as a religious event (Donner 2010, xii). The reductionism Donner does is perhaps just as strong in a different direction from the naturalistic reductionism. Robert Hoyland has criticized donner for focusing too much on Religion and forgetting how the people were also shaped by the many materialistic concurrences (Hoyland 2012, 573).

When it comes to sources Donner in many ways follows the revisionist school. He is critical of the Sira literature, he agrees that it most likely contain many revisions and were written way to late, in such a different social climate that makes it very difficult to use as sources for the beginning of Islam (Donner 2010, 50-51). He does however not want to throw it all out, calling it just as uncritical as accepting all that is written there, but chooses not to rely on this text (Donner 2010, 52).

Donner leans heavily on the Quran as a source. This really sets him apart from the main part of the revisionist school. In his book *Narratives of Islamic Origins,* Donner argues against

John Wansbrough's theory for the late authorship of the Quran (Donner 1998, 25). He argues that the revisionist school is trying to gain plausibility by basing their theories on the historical-critical approach, particularly the works of Goldziher. Goldziher had shown that the traditional narrative was incomplete and filled with mistakes and untruths. In Donner's opinion, the revisionist school is using this uncertainty about what part of the narrative can be trusted, to say that none of it is trustworthy (Donner 1998, 25).

Donner argues that if the Quran had materialized in the same period as other Muslim texts, like the hadiths, it would have more overlap in form and content with these other texts (Donner 1998, 39). One example of this is the question of leadership. Many hadiths focus on legitimate leadership. Some are about how imams are to behave, other on what the roll of the caliph is to be (Donner 1998, 40-43). This question of leadership should appear in the Quran as well if it was created at the same time as the hadiths (Donner 1998, 43). Because it does not contain any of these anachronisms, it is unlikely that the two texts were created in the same period (Donner 1998, 47). There are answers to different questions, for different people living in different times. Donner concludes that the Quran came about at least within the first 30 years of Muhammad death (Donner 2010, 56).

At the same time Donner does not agree with the traditional account. In his opinion is parts of the Quran older than Muhammad himself. Part of the text has been reused and revised under Muhammed. Some parts of this earlier text might even have originated as Christian pre-Islamic strophic hymns (Donner 2010, 54-56). This sets Donner apart from both the main part of the revisionist school, and the traditional account.

7.2   The believer's movement

Donner stresses that the early Muslims did not see themselves as beginning a new religion, but rather a continuation of the old religion. He point to the verse form the Quran stating "I am no innovator among the apostles" (The Quran, translated and cited in Donner 2010, 69). He argues that the early community constituted both jews, Christians and other monotheists recently converted from polytheism who all saw themselves as standing above the less pious society they lived in. These followers continued to practice their sperate religion, but came together in their shared ideas of Monotheism, and the imminent end of the world (Donner 2010, 69).

He calls this group *Believers*, stating that in the Quran this is the name most often used when referring to the followers. He argues that the name "Islam" and "Muslim" only became used about a hundred years after Muhammad death (Donner 2010, 57). At this point the community had separated to far from both Judaism and Christianity, and it was clear that it was a sperate religion (Donner 2010, 72). Donner argues that the term Believers and Muslim has very different original meaning in Muhammed time. According to Donner was the term "Muslim" intended to be understood as a "committed monotheist" (Donner 2010, 72). The term had a much broader intention than to just the believer's movement.

The believers movement were particularly Christians, jews and followers of the early parts of the Quran, who followed a strict monotheism, lived pious lives and believed in the imminent arrival of judgment day (Donner 2010, 70). This strict monotheism was aimed both against the polytheists and against the Christian doctrine of the trinity. Donner's argument here is very close to Hawting. Both agree that the Quran was created in a monotheistic context, and that the arguments against polytheism might be aimed against what Donner calls "lukewarm monotheists" (Hawting 1999, 3; Donner 2010, 59). The Christian members of the believers' movements were therefore in all likelihood nontrinitarian Christian (Donner 2010, 70).

Donner's perspective here differs from Watt. Both argued that Islam's beginning was shaped by disagreements between orthodox and heretical Christians. Watt argue that the Quran is arguing against the heretical belief in tritheism, the worship of the trinity as three different gods (Watt 1967, 198). Donner is instead saying that it is attacking mainstream Christian beliefs, while incorporating non-trinitarian Christians under the label of believers (Donner 2010, 70).

The focus on the early Muslims as believers perhaps shows a Protestant understanding of religion by Donner. Protestantism focuses on religion as on sincere personal beliefs (Laine 2014, 202). In addition to this we can add in the American Protestant focuses on a religious freedom and a separation between religion and state (Laine 2014, 189). The focus from Donner here on presenting Islam in a way understandable to American sentimentalities might be why he is choosing to not to use the Term "Islam", with its meaning to submit, and instead focusing on the religion as believers. An idea that translates better to American Protestantism.

Donner's decision to use the term "believers" instead of "Muslims" can also be taken as a form of Neo-orientalist argument. In some ways is Donner continuing the tradition of both the

revisionist and Orientalist narrative of changing the name of Islam. He is here picking a name he; a western scholar, prefers over the name chosen by modern Muslims themselves and used today. In some ways is this no better than the polemic name "Mohammedan" or "Hagarism". The only real difference is that Donner is at least basing his etymology on Muslim sources. He is not just creating a term out of thin air but is basing it on the Quran.

Donner's focus on the beliefs and piety of early Muslim continued when discussing the Meccan opposition. He states that the position was based on "Muhammad's attack on their ancestral polytheism" (Donner 2010, 41). He also does not point out that the opposition came from "the elites of Mecca" as many other do, but rather that they were "tribesmen of Quraysh" (Donner 2010, 41). Many other scholars have chosen to attribute the opposition to economic incentive from a rich upper class, or traditionalism and unwillingness to change. Instead, one can say that Donner's presentation is that the opposition came from people who held religious convictions and acted on these convictions (Donner 2010, 41)

This perspective by Donner is shared by some textbooks. Shepards comment that the Meccan opposition was fine with Muhammed in the early days, before he proclaimed a strict monotheism (Shepard 2014, 35). This might not necessarily be directly tied to Donner, but rather the textbooks coming from religious studies.

In explaining how the Muslim conquest was able to expand so rapidly he is also focused on giving it a religious explanation. In his eyes were the early Muslims driven by personal zeal and a strong, almost fundamental belief, that judgment day was close at hand. This belief helped inspire and recruit men into the army (Donner 2010, 198-199). The early victories probably helped strengthen this resolve that they were indeed chosen by god for this mission (Donner 2010, 198-199).

The change from believers' movement to Islam happen slowly over decades. Donner argues that this particularly happened after the second civil war, and the growth of a new generation, removed from the life of Muhammad. This new generation lacked the religious zeal and focus on piety of the earlier generation and were more concerned with political and materialistic concerns (Donner 2010, 109). Particularly under the leadership of Abd al-Malik was the believers movement reformed into what can be considered Islam (Donner 2010, 195). Donner stresses that the expectations made by Abd al-Malik were partly focused on economical and

empirical gains, but in large parts the actions of a believers who fully supported the idea of spreading the word of God (Donner 2010, 197).

Under Abd al-Malik were key ideas and concepts alter to more fit with the new world the religion inhabited. Christians and jews were now excluded from the believer's movement and a new focus was placed on the Quran and role of Muhammed. The term Muslim now became those that followed Quranic law (Donner 2010, 204). Muhammad's role as the last prophet was strengthened and made explicit. This is Donner's explanation for why the name Muhammad all of a sudden appear in places like the Dome on the Rock, coins and hadiths confessing the belief in one God (Donner 2010, 205-208). This explanation by Donner can be seen as a counter to the theories of Nevo and Koren, who suggested that the sudden appearance of Muhammad was because his history was fabricated, in large parts by Abd al-Malik (Nevo and Koren 2003, 11, 247, and 255).

Many of the revisionist narratives place a great focus on the role of Abd al-Malik in founding what can be considered Islam. This is true as far back as Crone, who argued that the final stage in the development was done by Abd al-Malik (Crone and Cook 1977, 29). The same is done by Nove and Donner. We will also see that Hoyland also places a great deal of emphasis on the role Abd al-Malik played in changing the meaning of Islam.

7.3 Reception

Steven C. Judd called Donner's book "provocative", and a work that "will remain influential for decades to come" (Judd 2011, 762). Paul Powers has appreciated his attempt to find a middle ground between the two extremes (Powers 2013, 306). He made a very interesting comment on the lack of academical works covering the period in a succinct and general fashion, stating that:

> What is startling, even embarrassing, is that it is only now that the scholarly understanding of early Islam is making such strides and that only at this late date are specialists articulating a robust, sophisticated account of this period for a wider audience. Such a development is long overdue and ought to quickly influence how undergraduate and graduate courses on Islamic history and religion are taught. (Powers 2013, 308).

The last part of Powers' review is particularly interesting. For the most part, textbooks used Watt and the standard narrative, we will in the next part see how Donner is used in textbooks.

The book has also received criticism, particularly from the revisionist school. The most interesting of which comes from Crone herself. In an article for Tablet Magazine, she wrote:

Donner's book has already been hailed in a manner showing that its thesis appeals deeply to American liberals: Here they find the nice, tolerant, and open Islam that they hanker for. If the book attains a wide readership and succeeds in persuading the broad American public that Muslims are not the ogres they tend to imagine, it will have done a useful job. As a contribution to scholarship, however, it leaves something to be desired. (Crone 2010).

This comment by Crone is fascinating. On one side she seems to be dismissive of the book for leaning too hard towards a liberal interpretation of Islam. The comment is particularly interesting considering here Neo-Orientalist remarks earlier in her life, where she was accused of presenting Islam as incompatible with modern states and democracy (Sadowski 1993, 12). At the same time is she presenting appreciation for not painting Muslim the usual anti-Islamic light we have seen with others like Robert Spencer.

Robert Hoyland has also been critical of Donners work. This criticism was in large parts against his focus on the early Muslims as believers, ignoring any materialist reality for the beginning and expansion of Islam. Hoyland argues that these theories, including those written by his teacher Crone, do not disregard the ability for religion to act as ideology. Instead, they try to understand it in a more complete and meaningful way. Ones that looks at how different aspects of the socio-economic context shape the individual's room for action (Hoyland 2012, 576). We will see in the next part what Hoyland sees as the greater mover than religion.

Hoyland has also criticized the form of Donners book. Donner presents his book as one for general readership and not a work of technical scholarship. The first 50 pages is, with a few exceptions, the narrative found in most textbooks (Donner 2010, 1-50). Interwoven with this however is Donner's own theories. Hoyland argues that Donner is in some ways presenting his own theories as if they were the commonly accepted understanding of the beginning of Islam (Hoyland 2012, 573).

Hoyland also accuses Donner of trying to present the beginning of Islam as another period where Christians, jews and Muslim coexisted happily and harmoniously (Hoyland 2012, 576). Hoyland makes it clear that he appreciates Donner's work to counteract the image given of Islam as a fanatical religion, as he says is Donner "in the apologetic camp rather than the polemic one" (Hoyland 2012, 576). unlike his teacher, who seems dismissive of Donner over this, Hoyland stats that he sympathizes with the attempt (Hoyland 2012, 576).

7.4   Robert Hoyland

Like Donner, Hoyland also falls into the middle ground between the two narratives. On some accounts we can see that he falls closer to the revisionist school than Donner. He was a student under Patricia Crone and one of his most important works fits right into the category of revisionist works. *Seeing Islam as others saw it* (1997) is a continuation of the ideas presented in *Hagarism*. Where Crone had uncovered a large amount of almost forgotten primary texts from the period, she had made little effort to categorize them. Hoyland made the effort to collect, categorize and translate the many separate sources on Islam from Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrianism origins (Hoyland, 1997, 3). All these different sources have the shared element of discussing Islam and being written between 630-780 (Hoyland, 1997, 4). One of the tenets of the revisionist school is that separate academical fields should work more closely together. Hoyland here tries to make this work easier by bringing together separate texts into one unified work, making the work of later scholars easier (Hoyland, 1997, 5).

On the surface Hoyland has a similar attitude to the sources to most of the revisionists. He hopes to shed a better light on the beginning of Islam using sources outside the Muslim tradition. However, his conclusions are very different. Where the earlier revisionists argued that insider texts do not fit with the outside sources Hoyland argues that they do. While there might be differences between texts it is not as deep as the revisionist school has argued. "The sharp line that is usually drawn between Muslim and non-Muslim sources will be shown rather to be somewhat blurred on closer inspection." (Hoyland, 1997, 4). This does not necessarily oppose the idea of the revisionist school. They only say that the Quran cannot be trusted as a source without secondary outside sources to confirm the information. It might be that the Quran contains many correct historical pieces, but there is no way to establish what is accurate or a later fabrication (Crone and Cook 1977, vii and 7). Where the previous revisions had focused on the differences is Hoyland instead interested in the similarities. This has led some to even call *Seeing Islam as others saw it* a vindication of Muslim historiography (Morony 1999, 453).

Hoyland argues that both directions, the traditionalist, and revisions, has mistakenly dismissed some parts of the sources. The traditionalist had dismissed Christian text and the revisionist school had dismissed the Muslim narratives. Hoyland argues that all writing is polemic. The only way to judge if a source is useful is to see how close it is to what it is describing. He heavily uses Christian sources, but does not deny the usefulness of the Muslim text (Hoyland

2015, 2). He argues that seeing the Muslim and non-Muslim sources as different is wrong. It misunderstands how connected the late Antique world was. The different texts were not written in dislocated bubbles, but where written in the same world and often commended directly on each other (Hoyland 2015, 2).

This is one of the key differences between Hoyland and the revisionist school, and between Hoyland and Donner. It all comes down to what order you prioritize the sources. Here is a small diagram to make the differences clearer. The first source is the one the scholarly direction places the most trust on, going down.

Traditional narrative	Revisionists	Donner	Hoyland
Sira Literature/the Quran	Outside source	The Quran	Oldest texts (mostly outside sources)
Hadiths	Sira	Outside sources	later sources
Outside sources	Quran	Sira and Hadith	Latest sources

This is of course a simplification, it does not account for scholars like Hawting, whose focus is the Quran, nor Nevo, who focuses more on archaeological evidence. It still gives a general overview to understand how different scholars can come to different narratives while still being based on historical records. It is also important to note that while Hoyland presents this as his own method he is not the first to come up with it or to use it. It was already used with Teodor Nöldeke, and by Jens Scheiner. It is also not that different from the method of Donner (Scheiner 2016, 26).

7.5   In Gods Path
In Gods Path (2014 my edition 2015) presents some interesting perspectives on the early parts of Islam and is particularly interesting in comparison to Donner's perspective. Hoyland has two main points with his book. The first is to show how the Arab conquest was in many ways a continuation of the old system just as much as it was a break. He argues that both students

of early Islam and late antiquity use the Arab conquest as a breaking point in the story (Hoyland 2015, 9).

In narrative term we can say that the conquest is often used as the end point for the narrative of end of late antique, or as the beginning point for the narrative of Islam. Using the period in this fashion creates an unreal breaking point for the reader and leads authors to often focus on the old systems dying, or the new tradition beginning. It is a period like any historical period, with no beginning or end, just time progressing forward. Hoyland is interested in showing the period was more than just the end of one system and the beginning of another. Instead, he argues that the conquest should be seen as a continuation as well as a rift. He is particularly interested in how developments in the Byzantine, Sasanian and Arabian world led to the conquest happening (Hoyland 2015, 9-10).

The second of Hoyland argument is that the Arab conquest success was based on national or ethnic reasons rather than religious reasons. Hoyland paints Arabia as slowly having become more and more culturally unified in the preceding generations before Muhammad. A large part of this was thanks to influences by the Byzantine and Sasanian war. Arabs, like other people on the periphery of the empire, had for generations been hires in as auxiliary forces to the roman military. This became especially important as the rivalry between Rome and Sasanian empire began in the third century, and roman military was stretch particularly thin. These auxiliary forces became more and more important, leading to skilled leaders being able to demand better titles and more freedom. Groups of people now fought together and with their own leaders instead of being divided into different units under direct imperial command (Hoyland 2015, 17).

This allowed the people on the peripheries, particularly the Arabs to slowly grow in power, influence, and unity (Hoyland 2015, 22-23). At the same time there was an internal push to see themselves as Arabs above all else. For generations they had divided themselves more based on tribal differences than what united them. The term Arab was originality referring to a small portion of the people living between the Assyrians and Israelites. It was a name mostly used by outsiders (Hoyland 2015, 22-23). However, after the Roman conquest of the Arab speaking Nabataeans kingdom in 105, and the establishment of the province of "Arabia" it became more and more popular for the people themselves to call and think of themselves as Arabs (Hoyland 2015, 22-23).

In this slow unification poetry was central. The poets presented shared ideals among the Arab tribes, of harshness and danger of the desert, and the bravery and comradery of the Bedouins. This helped create a shared set of values and experiences (Hoyland 2015, 22-23). Watt presented the poets as chiefly being occupied by proclaiming the greatness and honor of the individual tribes, rather than a Arab unity (Watt 1953, 24). This is most likely closer to the goal of the poetry, but it still shows a shared worldview with beliefs that all tribes shared. There is no point in proclaiming honor, bravery, and generosity if these are not commonly shared values. Another important development was a shared understanding of a common language. Arabia was Polyglottic, but slowly over time Arabian became more and more of a a shared language. This can be seen with Muhammad, who stress that his revelations were in "the Arab tongue" (Hoyland 2015, 22-23).

In this context Muhammed's message was born. As a prophet/statement he was not unique, prophethood was still popular in Arabia in the period (Hoyland 2015, 36). Hoyland argues that this was particularly prevalent because the old political systems had in large parts fallen apart, particularly because of bubonic plague and intense confrontation between the two superpowers. (Hoyland 2015, 28 and 34). This had led the claim of prophet to become a popular political strategy (Hoyland 2015, 36). Hoyland sees Muhammed not as a unique figure but a man among many prophets who take political action in the period.

Hoyland does not comment on why Muhamad's message was opposed in Mecca, but we can here use some of Watts's arguments to fill in the gaps. Watt argued that the Meccan elite was afraid that Muhammed as a prophet would take political power away from them (Watt 1953, 135). This argument fits right into Hoyland's argument, however he does not comment on it.

In his opinion was Muhammad main achievement was the ability to unify and mobilize the first few towns under him by a mixture of diplomacy and force. This formed the basin for further expansion, both military and diplomatic. Unlike the traditional narrative Hoyland is here doubtful that Muhammed converted the entire Arabian Peninsula. He instead argues that Western Arabia had joined in a diplomatic alliance with Mohammed. Only under the leadership of Abu Bakar was Eastern Arabia integrated into the ummah (Hoyland 2015, 38-39).

Hoyland argues that the quick success of Muhammed and the following expansion was built on the fact that the existing empires had already in large parts fallen apart before the conquest (Hoyland 2015, 28 and 34). This is an older argument already present in the 1960s (Donner 2014, 5-6). In Hoyland's opinion faced the Arab army little opposition from the north in the early period. The peace agreements made in this period were not between the Arab army and great empires but between the Arabs and local leadership (Hoyland 2015, 39). In Hoyland's narrative had the old empires already lost control of these territories.

He paints the conquest following Muhammed in the context of a general period of Arab attacks and incursions into the existing empires. The big difference is that Muhammed's was the one best suited to unify the most Arabs and the one that survived the longest. The agreement made in Medina is in Hoyland's narrative akin to a mutual defense pack and a war manifest. One with included both Muslim, jews, and Christians into the community of the ummah, with one goal, of "waging jihad against the pagans" (Hoyland 2015, 57). Hoyland is here choosing to only use one of the meanings of the word jihad. A word that can just as much mean a spiritual struggle in life as in war (Shepard 2014, 10). This understanding of the term can also be drawn back to Orientalist ideas of Muslims as particularly violent because of their holy book sanctions jihad, with a understanding of this as holy war (Morey 2019, 271). Hoyland might not intentionally be using the term with this in mind, but he is clearly affected by this understanding of Jihad as holy war and presents it as a central idea for the early ummah (Hoyland 2015, 37 and 57).

According to Hoyland membership in this ummah was not a Muslim endeavor. At the end of the conquest was only about a third of the Arabs converted to Islam (Hoyland 2015, 208). The expansion was largely successful because of the inclusion of non-Arab people, most often using diplomatic methods. These non-Arabs converted to Islam, began speaking Arabic and took Arabic names. This has in Hoyland opinion later made the conquest seem more homogeneous than it actually was (Hoyland 2015, 39).

Islams role in this narrative can therefore be described as another element that made the integration of different tribes and people possible. Islam offered the people of the Middle East a familiar religion, one with an easy conversion process and equality before God (Hoyland 2015, 229). The more important element is Muhammed's ability to unify the Arabs under one leader and with one cause. Particularly when he could play up the shared Arab identity and

Arab language (Hoyland 2015, 39). Hoyland goes so far as to argue that the Arab conquest was inevitable, even without Islam (Hoyland 2015, 56 n27 at page 258).

Like many of the previous revisionist narratives is Hoyland placing Abd al-Malik in a particularly important place. Hoyland argues that Abd al-Malik at the end of the second civil war needed to bring unity to his divided empire. He elevated Islam to state religion and increases its place in public life, as well as create a new Muslim creed, the basis for the one know today (Hoyland 2015, 139-140). Abd al-Maliks push for Islam to be state religion made it more important for non-Arabs to convert to the new religion, something that according to Hoyland fundamentally changed the religion. Islam became a way for non-Arabs to integrate themselves into elite class (Hoyland 2015, 158).

If we take a second to draw together the use of Abd al-Malik in the revisionist narrative, we can find a pattern. Under the leadership of Abd al-Malik we find a large increase in material culture with clear Muslim connotations. Before him were Muslim coins for the most part the same as the conquered empires. Coins minted under Abd al-Malik however have a complete new design and feature the *shahada* (Donner 2010, 208). The inscription on the Dome of the Rock is also important as it contains passages are very close to passages from the Quran and mentioned Muhammad by name (Nevo and Koren 2003, 247; Hoyland 2015, 196). This makes his rule particularly thorny for a revisionist narrative, by his time Islam as its own religion is well attested to. The conclusion if one does not agree with the standard narrative is to increase his role. To make him a reformer who fundamentally changed the religion from something else, be it Hagarism, believers' movement or non-trinitarian Christianity, and make it into its own religion.

7.6   Comparing Donner and Hoyland

We can see that Hoyland and Donner's narratives have some deep differences. They are both interested in how different people can experience unity between each other, and what is the "prime mover" for this kind of unity. Donner focuses on religion as a prime mover, where Hoyland focuses on how the ground was already laid by Arabs slowly coming to see each other more and more as brothers, even before Islam came to the scene. He is not dismissing Islam as an important force, but only one part in the period.

This can clearly be seen in the language they use. Hoyland argues that the rapid Muslim expansion following Muhammad death should not be called a "Muslim expansion" but instead a "Arab expansion" (Hoyland 2015, 5). Hoyland is here trying to downplay the importance of Islam as a force for the rapid expansion and instead portray it as a question of ethnic expansion (Hoyland 2015, 5). This is the exact opposite opinion from Donner. He argues that it is anachronistic to talk of a "Arab unity" at this point (Donner 2010, 218). In Donner's opinion is this placing nineteenth century ideas of the middle east into the seventh century (Donner 2010, 218). The Muslims themselves in his opinion saw themselves as believers first, and Arabs second (Donner 2010, 88). Hoyland disagrees with this perspective. He argues that it is not anachronistic to call it an Arab conquest, we talk of the conquest of Slavs, Turks and Mongols, without conflating these with modern nations (Hoyland 2012, 574). For Hoyland it is anachronistic to see the expansion as a Muslim phenomenon. Following the revisionist argument that Islam was a gradual evolution, he argues that the expiation was primarily led by Arab unity, not Islam, as the religion had not taken shape yet, and that most of the participants were not Muslim (Hoyland 2015, 5 and 157).

We can here see the separation between two different ways of interpreting the sources. Hoyland choose to ignore the religious position and instead place the focus on the Arab identity and political unity. Donner disagrees with this argument. In his opinion is scholars like Hoyland removing the religious angle in favor of focusing on Arab nationality (Hoyland 2015, 5; Donner 2010, xii).

At the same time there is a lot of overlap between the two narratives. Hoyland too accepts large parts of the Muslim tradition. He places the origin in mecca/Median, and accepts that Muhammad was a political and religious leader that existed (Hoyland 2015, 37). Others like Crone argued that Islam only could have started in the north Hajj, connected to Cristian and Jewish communities. Hoyland disagrees and when describing the life of Muhammad uses the insider source of the Quran (Hoyland 2015, 37). To him it is useful because it is the oldest source we have from the period.

On of the key issues at play between the two narratives is the question of how religion acts upon people. Donner's narrative is a presentation that focuses on religion as acting on the individual in the form of belief and piety. Hoyland is more interested in how religion can act as a unifier of people and conversion to a religion not as a free choice but as shaped by

external circumstances. One last element should be pointed out here. The two scholars might disagree on *What* drove the expansion, and how Islam was able to grow so rapidly, but they both agree on where it to took place, and the general beats of the story. They agree that further explanations must use tools from both the revisionist and traditional narrative.

7.7   Reception

In his review Donner called Hoyland's book a well-informed and compressible account of the period, and he expect the book is going to be widely used for teaching purposes (Donner 2015, 134 and 136). Jens Scheiner called Hoyland's style for "Marvelous" and particularly congratulated him for being able to properly contextualize the period into the landscape of late antiquity (Scheiner 2016, 25).

Criticism of the book often focuses on the opposite view between it and books like Donners. Peter Webb called the book "one-dimensional", and suggest that while the narrative is interesting, he suggests to read other works in addition, like Donner's book (Webb 2015). Jens critiques the use of the term "Arab" without giving a clear definition of what Hoyland means with the term. At different places in the book, he is referring to very different things when using the same term. He also points out that not everybody in "Arabia" were Arabs, and did not all speak Arabic (Scheiner 2016, 27). Hoyland points this out, but his use of the term is inconsistent (Hoyland 2015, 22-23).

Donner of course has problems with the theory. He presents in his review the usual argument that the early followers should be called believers, not Muslims. He also questions Hoyland's choice to call the conquest Arabic, as no contemporary Arab/Muslim sources called themselves that. It was a title purely used by others (Donner 2015, 138). Calling the conquest Arab has its problems. Donner gives just as good a reason to use Muslim instead. In addition, it does not help the confusion in what Hoyland means with Arabs. As he himself points out was a large part of the army buildup of non-Arabs (Hoyland 2015, 39). Why then call it Arab when what is being referred to is the conquest done by Muhammed and his followers after his death? Many of the participants might not have been Muslims at the time but the consequence was the spread of Islam. It also does not differentiate between the conquest done by Muhammed and his followers, and other Arab attacks in the decades before.

7.8   What effect do these narratives have?

The works of Donner and Hoyland are both clearly highly praised, but their narratives have by no means supplanted the traditional narrative. Donners earlier work *The early Islamic conquest* does appear in *Islam the straight path,* but only in the select biography (Esposito 1988, 214). Shepard presents Believers in "further readings" but states that his theories are not "generally accepted" (Shepard 2014, 45). The larges outliner in this trend is James Laine's book *Meta-Religion* (2014). Laine presents Donner's theory from *Believers* and argues in accordance with Donner that Islam began as an inclusive general monotheism including jews and Christians, that slowly develop into an exclusive religion (Laine 2014, 110). However, Laine is not trying to present a textbook as such but more of an argument for the closeness between politics and religion. Laine is using Donner's argument to further his own ideas that Meta-Religion in the ancient world was different kinds of *inclusivism* that slowly changed to *exclusivism* and *universalism* (Laine 2014, 6 and 115). Here he uses Donner's argument to portray Islam as beginning as one and developing into the other.

In many ways is choosing not to use these sources in textbooks a logical choice. While they present Islam in a more accepting light are they still rewriting the history of Islam. Explaining their narrative will for the most part be less useful than giving an account of the traditional narrative. It is after all just as interesting and important to present how Muslims understand their own past. In addition are both books written in a manner suitable for general readership (Donner 2010, xvii; Hoyland 2015, 7). Students who want further understanding can use both books for further reading, in addition to textbooks that present the standard narrative.

While neither narrative has broken through, it is clear from the textbooks that the perspective of Donner is the one most used. This might be shaped by the fact these are books used within religious studies. The focus is on studying religion and how religions effect humans. To use Donner more than Hoyland is in this regard logical. Donner is interested in how religion acts as an ideology for humans. Hoyland's focus is the exact opposite, that religion is not strong enough and that the beginning of Islam needs to be explained as something else (Hoyland 2012, 573).

8   Conclusion

The beginning of Islam is a fascinating period of human history that has interested Western scholars for centuries now. In this thesis I have taken a historiographic look at the beginning of Islam as it is presented by Western scholars. I have found that we can divide these representations of the past into different narrative structures that have been shaped in large part by presiding scholarly works and the scientific paradigm surrounding it. Parts of this can be seen in the text itself but a large part of the understanding comes from understanding the texts in their context (scientific paradigm) and as part of an intertextual web of meaning.

Focusing on western scholarship on the beginning of Islam is particularly fascinating. We can see how the idea of a dual relationship between Islam and the "West", began, a shared history of closeness often colored by hostility and fear. This is clearest in the Middle Ages where the writing was almost exclusively polemic and portrayed Muhammad and the beginning of Islam in the worst light possible. Much of this was continued in the Orientalist narrative where Muslims and Arabs were described and framed as needing to be politically controlled (Said 1979, 207). The polemic descriptions from the Middle Ages arguably continued in orientalist scholarship, but now these descriptions could serve a new agenda of control. Said argued that this narrative build on the idea of "us" vs "them" and a racism towards Arabs (Said 1979, 7). Narrative of the beginning of Islam reflect this.

We can still see parts of the Orientalist narrative surviving in the modern world, evolving into Neo-Orientalism. This is particularly apparent with works from Ibn Warreq and Robert Spencer. It does also exist in the writings of scholars like Crone, who at times describes Islam as monolithic, unchanged, and opposed to the modern world. In a way there is also something neo-Orientalist at the core of the Revisionist narrative. The idea that the orient was unable to speak for itself was continued.

We can see a continuation of Orientalist ideas in what words some scholars use when describing Islam. The Orientalists called it Mohammedanism to stress what they saw as heretical Christian beliefs. Crone changed it to Hagarism, a word she invented based on early Christian texts. Using it as an argument that the Muslims do not know their own history. Even Fred Donner changed it to *believers* arguing that his interpretation of the Quran is correct and that this is the original name used by the first Muslims. In all these cases are Western scholars

trying to argue that the insider's perspective is wrong. The only narrative here that does not change the name is Watt. The person most interested in respecting the insider narrative.

Said argued that the Orientalist narrative had hegemony over the discourse in the period. I instead argue that what he found was one narrative, a very popular one, but not the only one during the period. This narrative had a presentation of the beginning of Islam that was very unkind in its portrayal, focusing on Muhammad's vices and Islam as a heretical version of Christianity.

In my work I found two narratives that do not fit with the image Said present. The first is the narrative of Germen orientalists, their work gave a very different presentation of the beginning of Islam than what was found among Anglo-French Orientalists. The Germans were working out of a positivistic and historical critical view of the past. This presentation made it possible to leave out some of the more obvious bias of the scholars and did a much more nuanced inquiry than what was done in the Anglo-French world. At the same time did this presentation at times buck under the anti-religions paradigm the scholars were a part of. The German narrative appear more in textbooks than the Orientalist narrative, as it really is the beginning of any series academical inquiry into the period. Particularly the work of Goldziher (Shepard 2014, 90).

The second narrative Said ignored is the British post war narrative. Here exemplified by its most lasting representative, Montgomery Watt. His narrative was interested in representing the beliefs of the insider as legitimate and shows less of the dismissive attitude to religion than we have seen with the previous scholars. He was much more inclined to give credence to the insider narratives, and tried to create a Western scientific narrative that was acceptable to Muslims. Watt's narrative was affected by trends in the scientific world of the time. His representations argued for a beginning of Islam shaped by social and economic forces. While he did give credence to the insider narrative and did give a more neutral representation, he did not see religion as a serious cultural element on its own.

At the same time there are large problems with the historical sources that cannot be denied. Scholars like Wansbrough, Crone and Hawting have shown the problems found here. This has split modern scholarly in two. On one side the revisionist perspectives that ask serious questions of the sources, and on the other the main balk of scholars who take a innocent until proven guilty stand and accept most of the Muslim tradition. This narrative builds on the work

done by the German orientalists and Watt. This difference can be seen as two different answers to the same question. What is most important, the historical record or the perspective of the insider?

Recent work has been done to cross this gap. Both Fred Donner and Robert Hoyland have presented interesting narratives that take the challenge of the revisionist school seriously. At the same time without throwing out the entire Muslim corpus.

Drawing together the different narratives, there are some interesting trends that become apparent. First is the question of anachronism. Both Donner and Hoyland accused each other of this. Crone accused Watt of placing modern economy into the sixth century (Crone, 1987, 232). The same was true with Wellhausen, understanding Muhammed as a proto-Bismark (Marchand 2009, 188). Placing modern ideas like this into the narrative comes from the scholars writing as situated observers, influenced by the bias of their time. It is always logical to understand the past and another's religion through your own eyes. Finding places where one sees connections is only natural. This can lead to misunderstandings of what life was like in the period. the beginning of Islam is a particularly easy period for this kind of anachronism to come up. The period has serious holes in the historical record that can easily be filed by scholars' own theories and bias.

One of the most interesting places where the narrative differ is in establishing just how well know Abrahamic religions were in Wester Arabia. The traditional account state that Jews were plentiful in Medina, and that Khadija had a Christians family member (Shepard 2014, 35). Watt's explanation is that a strong trade networks to the Byzantine empire, and internal schism had led "heretical" Christians seeking refuge in western Arabia. He actually argued that contract with Christianity was more extensive, though perhaps not as close as that with Judaism (Watt 1953, 27; Watt 1967, 198). Crone argued that Islam began in north Arabia, were Christianity and Judaism was more well known (Crone and Cook 1977,10-11). Others not discussed in this thesis like J. S. Trimingham have argued that Judaism was well established, but that Christianity was nonexistent in wester Arabia (Trimingham 1979, 249). Donner argues that Islam began as a umbrella religion, containing both Jews, Christians and Quranic Arabs (Donner 2010, 69-70). These narratives are completely incapable of agreeing on how much knowledge existed. For some like Crone and Donner this is an important element in their arguments, answering this question could help establish a clearer narrative.

By studying the historiography of early Islam, we can see how scholars understand of religion has changed over time. These changes in methodology and theory effected how the Western scholars described and understood the beginning of Islam and continues to affect how it is seen today. Wellhausen saw the development of Islam as an evolution. Here the old polytheism was declining in the face of monotheism (Hawting 1997, 28). A natural evolution from one stage of development to another. Others like Watt were inspired by economical explanations popular during his time. Donner is influenced by explanations that focus on religion as its on motivator of people (Hoyland 2012, 576). These often reflect changes in the scientific paradigm of religious studies at large, and how religion is defined and understood.

In conclusion we can see that the discipline is still divided between two main narrative frameworks. One supported by most scholars, based on Muslim sources telling a story most Muslims will agree with. On the other hand, the revisionist school uses a strong historical critical method to conclude that the traditional narrative does not hold up as an accurate representation of the past. Even if the traditional narrative does not hold up a strong historical criticism, it is still valuable as it does form the foundation myth for a religion followed by more than 1.7 billion people. We have also seen attempts in recent years for new narratives that can unite discipline and bring forth the best in each other.

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