



**G. R. Hawting.** *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvii + 168 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-65165-3.



**Reviewed by** Walid Saleh (Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto)

**Published on** H-Mideast-Medieval (February, 2005)

### In the Fog of History

This monograph “questions how far Islam arose in arguments with real polytheists and idolaters, and suggests that it was concerned rather with other monotheists whose monotheism it saw as inadequate and attacked polemically as the equivalent of idolatry” (p. xiii). To prove this thesis, the book “questions the commonly accepted view that the opponents attacked in the Koran as idolaters and polytheists (and frequently designated there by a variety of words and phrases connected with the Arabic word *shirk*) were idolaters and polytheists in a literal sense” (p. 1). The theoretical position the author adopts, accordingly, treats the “image of the *jahiliyya* contained in the traditional literature primarily as a reflexion of the understanding of Islam’s origins which developed among Muslims during the early stages of the emergence of the new form of monotheism” (p. 3). The Arabic word *jahiliyya* is the term given by the Qur’an and the tradition to the pre-Islamic era. This traditional material, according to the author, comprises everything produced by the emerging culture apart from the Qur’an itself and the documents stemming from the early period such as inscriptions, papyri, and coins (p. 7, n. 13). The Qur’an, according to the author, neither re-

flects an Arabian background nor was it produced in inner Arabia as the tradition claims. The author argues that “the polemic of the Koran against the *mushrikun* reflects disputes among monotheists rather than pagans and that Muslim tradition does not display much substantial knowledge of Arab pagan religion. There is no compelling reason to situate either the polemic or the tradition within Arabia” (p. 16).

The issue raised by this monograph thus can only exist, as a historical issue, if there is a marked difference between the Qur’an and what the author parenthetically calls “Muslim traditional literature.” This is precisely the author’s position, and he posits that a historical gap existed between the formation of the Qur’an and the appearance of this Muslim traditional literature (pp. 17-18). The Qur’an, according to the author, predates all the other literature. Moreover, the knowledge hitherto accepted as historical that we have about the rise of early Islam is not, according to the author, a product of the Qur’an but of this literature (which he defines as comprising everything but the Qur’an). The whole of the monograph is dedicated to proving that the Qur’an is

not arguing against “real” pagans when it argues with the group it calls *mushrikun*, those who practice *shirk* or associationism, that is, worshiping other deities in addition to Allah. Rather, the author claims, the Qur’an is adopting a rhetorical stratagem that is very common to monotheistic traditions. To call someone a “pagan” or “idolater” was to label them as less Christian or less Jewish than the accusing faction. The same should be held true for the arguments in the Qur’an.

Hawting squarely places his work in the scholarly tradition of John Wansbrough’s *Quranic Studies* (1977) and *The Sectarian Milieu* (1979), but this claim of methodological affinity with Wansbrough’s method undermines the author’s entire effort in this monograph (pp. 16-17). For in a Wansbroughian paradigm the problem raised by Hawting is not a problem. The prime thrust of Wansbrough’s approach, as far as one can summarize it, is that the whole edifice of what we now call Islam is the product of a long historical development that included the formation of the Qur’an. The Qur’an, according to Wansbrough, is thus part of the parenthetical literature that Hawting sets apart from the Qur’an. Wansbrough not only claimed that the canonization of the quranic material took place over three centuries, during which the material that comprised the Qur’an was developing and changing, but above all Wansbrough argued that the Quranic material was polemically formed in opposition to other sectarian groups, namely the Rabbinic Judaism of Iraq. Thus it is inconceivable that the main thrust of the Islamic tradition, which according to both Wansbrough and Hawting was meant to create an Arabian background for the religion, had failed to leave any trace of such a claim in the Qur’an.

Hawting is claiming that the Qur’an was the only document that somehow mysteriously escaped the Wansbroughian paradigm, a paradigm that Hawting declares nevertheless to be the key to understanding Islam, and we are not told why this is so. Thus it is not clear how and to what degree Hawting’s method purports to be a continuation or a refinement of Wansbrough’s method. To treat the Qur’an apart from the tradition is to undo Wansbrough’s fundamental methodological axiom. Hawting’s own account of how his method both follows and diverges from Wansbrough’s is untenable. One cannot follow “Wansbrough’s general approach, and not necessarily his tentative suggestions about absolute or relative chronology,” as Hawting states, without fundamentally shifting the whole paradigm (p. 17). It is precisely the chronological implications of Wansbrough’s method that are the heart of the matter. For if the

Qur’an’s canonization (and thus stabilization) was a belated event contemporaneous with other Muslim literature, why did the tradition not see to it that the Qur’an also reflected what was to become the fundamental claim of the new religion? To separate the Qur’an from the other Muslim traditional literature is to fall back on the method of the German school of quranic studies, from which Hawting is so adamant in differentiating himself. One cannot both invoke Wansbrough and work within the parameters of the German school. We have thus no minor methodological problem here but a major flaw that vitiates the entire work. To a Wansbroughian the issue could not be simpler: the Qur’an has material that claims to reflect an Arabian pagan past because the tradition wanted to create such an image of this past. The material in the Qur’an is thus ahistorical in so far as it does not reflect anything historical about seventh-century Arabia, but historical in so far as it reflects what Muslims wanted to project about their new religion and its origins.

A Wansbroughian would consider the presence of “pagan” material in the Qur’an, like the names of the three Goddesses, as an indication that the tradition was trying to create the illusion that Muhammad was an Arabian prophet who ministered to a pagan crowd. Thus whole passages which speak of idols, shrines and rituals of paganism—and there are many of those in the Qur’an (see Hawting’s admission of this p. 50)—are there to create such an illusion. To the degree that other Muslim traditional literature, according to Hawting, was attempting to create such an illusion and to the degree that arguably they are there to create such an illusion, why should we believe the Qur’an is uniquely different on this score? We cannot have the two kinds of pagan material in the Islamic literature that Hawting posits: one that is patently false because it is historically untrue (the material in what Hawting called “Muslim tradition literature” which purports to reflect the original setting of the rise of Islam in inner Arabia) and another that is polemically false, yet historically true (the material in the Qur’an which uses pagan imagery but only does so polemically, according to Hawting, and can only be referring to a monotheistic environment and is thus referring to actual historical polemic with other “monotheists”). The conclusion seems inescapable that, like the reports about the life of Muhammad (what is called the *Sira*), the Qur’an was also trying to create this image of an Arabian background.

Thus to review the rest of the work is to suspend judgment on it. Even if, however, we accept the author’s assertions that the Qur’an is above and beyond the tradition (forgetting the supposed affinity with Wansbrough

and thus overlooking the theoretical conundrum at the heart of the work) and if we follow the book's argument, we will also find that most of its conclusions are based on the slimmest of evidence, a fact that the author himself is willing to concede. Not only does the main supporting beam of the book, namely its affinity with Wansbrough's method, prove to be absent on closer inspection, but most of the evidence the author supplies to prove his thesis in fact runs counter to it.

I will give here some examples of the author's method. Chapters 2 and 3 of the book attempt to show that nothing in the Qur'an refers to "real polytheism." Much of the author's argument rests on analyzing the word *shirk* and its cognates in the Qur'an; he attempts to show that these words mean something different from what we have so far supposed they mean. The argument depends on whether Arabic *shirk* could be proven to refer to polytheists or not. If inscriptions earlier than seventh-century Islam used the word to refer to polytheists, then the Qur'an is most probably referring to "real polytheists." As it happens there is such an inscription, which comes from a Sabaeen inscription available at the British Museum. The author has to grapple with this inscription and two others which clearly use the root "sh-r-k." Yet the author attempts to mitigate the implication for his theory of such inscriptions by casting doubt on it in a footnote that states, "in conversation Dr. Arthur Irvine remarked to me that he thought there had been questions about the reading of the text" (p. 70, n. 6). This is a most troubling way of dismissing published works, i.e. hearsay! The author lives and teaches in London, and the inscription is available for inspection. To reject the reading one has to show how and why the original reading, done by leading scholars in their field, is wrong. But one only needs to check Arthur Jeffrey's *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, to read the inscription in Sabaeen script and its English translation: "and avoid giving a partner to a Lord who both bringeth disaster, and is the author of well being" (p. 186). Hawting does not refer directly to this citation and instead refers to another article citing this work. Indeed, the bulk of the book is an attempt to downplay paleographic evidence which, as it happens, confirms the historical existence of the names of the Gods and Goddesses mentioned in the Qur'an. For a school of scholars who bemoan the lack of dated inscriptions to compare the Qur'an with, the ease with which such evidence is dismissed in this book, is rather baffling.[1] Thus *shirk* seems to be an old word common in Arabia and it does refer to polytheists. Even if one inscription is too little evidence for Hawting, it is, nonetheless, not the same as

the absence of evidence. As long as we have material evidence to support the traditional reading we are not required to reject both.

But who were the *mushrikun*, the group against which the Qur'an levels most of its attacks? Hawting is not forthcoming with an exhaustive analysis of the material in the Qur'an and instead offers this scant summary: "If one can accept such verses at face value, the opponents already know of the sovereignty of God and, perhaps, of the final judgment, something not easily reconcilable with the traditional image of them as idol-worshipping polytheists" (p. 52). If this is so then we have a major problem at hand, for much of the material in the Qur'an attacks a group of people who do not believe either in the resurrection of the body, or in a judgment day. The verses are too numerous to cite, but for one example see Qur'an 6: 22-32. Indeed, such is the nature of the material that I have to disagree with Hawting. The main point of contention between the Qur'an and its major opponent was the issue of the resurrection and the final judgment. The scenes of the Judgment Day in which the Gods of the *mushrikun* are unable to intercede and save the unbelievers are dramatic scenes in which the Qur'an is mocking the belief of the *mushrikun* that their Gods have the power to intercede with Allah or can act as mediators between them and God (see Q. 10:18; Q. 39:3). Hawting is thus wrong to surmise from these verses that the *mushrikun* "perhaps" believe in the final judgment (see Q. 10:15).

Thus the *mushrikun* did not believe in resurrection (see Q. 17: 49, Q. 37: 1-39) and more importantly in this context, they did not have a book, unlike the Jews and the Christians. (We should not forget that it is the Qur'an which invented the phrase "people of the book.") Indeed, the word *ummi* (plural *ummiyyun*) in the Qur'an is precisely a description of such a state: a nation without a divine book—a gentile nation. It is thus puzzling as to why Hawting does not discuss this word in his book. The pre-Islamic Arabs as a nation without a book, are a fundamental part of the image that the Sira and the Qur'an presents, a nation to whom God decides to give a book written in Arabic by sending a prophet from their midst, who delivers a revelation in their own tongue. This is part of the stock imagery of the Qur'an. Thus even if the author was to succeed in casting doubt about the paganism of the opponents of the Qur'an, we are left with major parts of the traditional image of the pre-Islamic Arabs firmly lodged in the Qur'an.

In contrast to the by-now much-quoted and ridiculed

statement of Ernest Renan that Islam was born in the full light of history, the revisionist historians are offering us an Islam born in the fog of history (p. 10). It is now thirty years since the publication of Wansbrough's book and we have as yet to get an historical outline of how this religion developed. Apart from the general answer that Islam "developed" over a long history of time, we are refused firm answers and dates. Islam is thus unique among the histories of Near Eastern monotheisms in this regard, and historians who attempt to offer such an outline are castigated for being unwilling to concede the impossibility of this task. Casting doubt on the German historiography school of Islam is the most that this revisionist has to show for it. Hawting is aware of this problem and he does offer us his apologies for a book that is "mainly critical and deconstructive, questioning what many scholars are prepared to accept as certainties and replacing 'facts' with questions and ambiguities" (p. 19).

There are so many alternative theories as to how Islam came about that one cannot speak of a revisionist school, but rather of revisionist efforts. Thus Islam was a Jewish sect (pace Hagarism), a Christian one (pace Luxenburg), or it arose in Negev desert (pace Nevo); the Qur'an is contemporaneous with the Sira (Wansbrough); the Qur'an postdates the Sira and Hadith (pace Rubin); and in this book the Qur'an was an Iraqi product, and it predates the Sira and is in discord with it. The Arabs, ac-

ording to Hawting, not only managed to forget any trace of the memory of their pre-conquest past, but are unable to even remember to whom the Qur'an was first directed, although it is supposed to have developed in Iraq after the founding of the Abbasid caliphate. With so many competing theories, Hawting was thus forced in this book to disagree with the very people with whom he is grouping himself, in order to be able to argue for his theory. It would be a misrepresentation to state that this monograph has the German school as the only target, for all the other scenarios are also attacked (if ever more gently).

The German school is becoming more and more appealing, the more revisionism is occurring; and it is no wonder that one of the major works of this school, Rudi Paret's *Mohammed und der Koran* is always absent from their bibliographies. It seems that the only methodological rule that revisionism has is that one can offer any theory, no matter how contrary to the evidence, about the origins of Islam as long as it does not agree with the German school.

#### Note

[1]. Compare the ease with which Hawting casts doubts on material that seems to contradict his findings; see John F. Healey's *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*. Healey states: There is no doubt about readings (despite Hawting 1999, 113 n.1), p.128.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-mideast-medieval>

**Citation:** Walid Saleh. Review of Hawting, G. R., *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews. February, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10211>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).