

JOHN WANSBROUGH REMEMBERED

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A tribute to John Wansbrough, the religious historian who caused a furore in the 1970s when he argued that the Koran was put together from various sources - and heavily influenced by Christianity and Judaism - some 200 years after the Prophet Mohammed's death.

Transcript

Stephen Crittenden: One of the leading figures in the study of early Islam and the Koran, Professor John Wansbrough, died earlier this month.

John Wansbrough was born in Illinois, studied languages at Harvard, and spent the whole of his academic career teaching at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies.

He hypothesised that the Koran was actually compiled over a much longer period than had previously been thought.

Dr Gerald Hawting was his colleague at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and he spoke to me about Wansbrough's ideas and how they have been taken up.

Gerald Hawting: He's best known for his work on the Koran, but that has to be seen in the context of his work on early Islam in general. He developed a sort of model of the emergence of Islam, and he sees the Koran as part and parcel of that emergence of Islam.

Stephen Crittenden: Was he essentially bringing to bear the techniques that have been used in modern Bible scholarship for a very long time? Is that the most important thing he was doing?

Gerald Hawting: Yes, this is one of the features of his work. He was very much aware of what's been done in the study of the Bible, and indeed of early Christianity and early Christian text, and he argued that those approaches could be applied to the Koran as well.

Stephen Crittenden: What did he end up arguing about the Koran? I gather the key thing was that it wasn't produced I guess all of a piece, if you like, and lowered down from heaven to the prophet Mohammed.

Gerald Hawting: Yes, well of course Western scholars never really accepted that anyway. Non-believers of course have never seen the Koran as a revelation from God, although they could in a sense identify to the Revelation, but that would be stretching the idea of Revelation somewhat, and certainly it wouldn't be the same as what Muslims understand by Revelation of the Koran.

Stephen Crittenden: And so where was Wansbrough's work new?

Gerald Hawting: Well even Western scholars who don't talk of Revelation nevertheless have always associated the Koran with Mohammed, following Muslim tradition, they've agreed that the Koran was not put together in the lifetime of Mohammed, that they see it as being put into the form in which we know it and its being the most important Islamic text from about 30 years after Mohammed's death. And the materials in it have always been seen by Western scholars and by Muslims as originating in the lifetime of Mohammed, and very closely associated with the events of Mohammed's life. Now Wansbrough tried to break that link between Mohammed and the Koranic materials.

Stephen Crittenden: And argue that the Koran had been compiled over a very long period, and that in fact it even possibly wasn't known to the first generation of Muslims?

Gerald Hawting: Yes, sure. There is evidence from about 70 years after Mohammed's death in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, of some of the texts that are a part of the Koran, but Wansbrough's view is that the Koran as we know it was gradually pieced together, and as I said at the beginning, he saw this process of piecing it together, the formation of a Muslim Scripture, of part and parcel of the emergence of Islam, the growing up of a new religion with its own identity.

Stephen Crittenden: And the importance of Jewish and Christian sources was one of the issues that he embraced?

Gerald Hawting: Oh yes. I mean anybody who reads the Koran is immediately aware of this, that the Koran contains references to individuals and stories which Jews and Christians maybe not today, but probably Jews and Christians of the time, would have known about. The significant thing that he picked out was that the Koran seems to assume that the readers know these stories, it doesn't tell these stories as if it's talking to people who are ignorant of them, it's using these stories to make moral and religious points, and assuming that the people already know the details of the stories.

Stephen Crittenden: Another important book he wrote was *The Sectarian Milieu* in 1978, and there he really looks at the way that Islam develops after the Arab conquests of the Holy Land in the mid-7th century and so on, and emerged in a period as sort of intense debates over religion between Christians and Jews. Does that actually in the end leave him to conclude that the whole early traditional history of Islam is perhaps fabricated in some way? Does he go that far?

Gerald Hawting: No, he wouldn't say fabricated, that's not a word that he would have used. But all religions, all communities have their own myths, their own ways of looking at history, and he saw Muslim accounts of Islam's origins as reflecting the way that later Muslims understood the origins of their religion and their tradition.

Stephen Crittenden: Is one of the problems that we're dealing with a period where sources other than traditional Islamic sources are very, very sketchy indeed?

Gerald Hawting: Well yes, but also traditional Islamic sources, and this is one of Wansbrough's fundamental starting points. We don't really have any Islamic literature that you can really date much before about 800 AD. OK, those sources are drawing on earlier reports and earlier traditions, but Wansbrough was always saying you start from when you have the text in a datable form, and they're very late.

Stephen Crittenden: Gerald, did he have a particular picture of the prophet Mohammed himself as a result of his work on the Koran?

Gerald Hawting: No, he never as far as I know, commented on the historical Mohammed. I mean he would draw the line in saying that all we can know is the images of Mohammed that Islam itself created.

Stephen Crittenden: That would be actually very close to the situation that Christians have with Jesus.

Gerald Hawting: Yes of course, yes.

Stephen Crittenden: You would expect his views to be controversial amongst Muslims, but are they in fact controversial amongst Western academics as well?

Gerald Hawting: Yes, they are. It's difficult to see quite why they are controversial, because they're so much in the mainstream of religious studies I suppose in the ways that people have studied Judaism and Christianity. You have the feeling that sometimes scholars of Islam are very loath to take Islam seriously, and to study it in the same way that they study the other monotheistic religions. I'm not quite sure why that is, maybe something psychological, I don't know.

Stephen Crittenden: Perhaps because it's dangerous?

Gerald Hawting: I don't think many of them are worried in any sort of physical sense. It's just that I suppose a desire not to offend, a sympathy for Muslims in the modern world, the predicaments that they say from things like that. So you find a lot of drawing back I think in academic approaches to Islam. Wansbrough always insisted that if you take Islam seriously then you've got to study it seriously as well.

Stephen Crittenden: Has his kind of historical critical method been taken up anywhere in the Islamic world?

Gerald Hawting: There are one or two scholars who I don't think have been influenced directly by Wansbrough, but there are certainly some scholars who are prepared to talk of the Koran as they would talk of other texts. The famous case is Nasser Abu Zaid, the Egyptian, who had to leave Egypt because of his views about the Koran.

Stephen Crittenden: Just finally then, what will his lasting impact be on Islamic studies do you think?

Gerald Hawting: It depends of course. In all academic fields it takes time for models and ideas to establish themselves, and we can't really tell. Looking at the history of Islam, the way people have studied the history of Islam over the past 150 years, you see a sort of to-ing and fro-ing, an ebbing and flowing if you like, of the tide. Someone will come up with ideas and make a big breakthrough, and then over time people fall back into old ways until somebody else comes and says, Hang on a minute, shouldn't we be starting from this previous position? Now I suspect that's going to happen here as well.

Stephen Crittenden: Dr Gerald Hawting of the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University.

Guests

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Publications

Title

Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation

Author

John Wansbrough

Publisher

Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977

Title

The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition Of Islamic Salvation History

Author

John Wansbrough

Publisher

Oxford University Press, Oxford 1978

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F. L. Beeston, T. M. Johnstone, R. B. Serjeant, and G. R. Smith (eds), Arabic Literature to the End JOHN WANSBROUGH. I. OIRANIC
STUDIES Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation. Foreword, Translations, and Expanded Notes by. ANDREW RIPPIN @.
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University Press, 1977, in series: London oriental series. Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN 1-59102-201-0 (alk.
paper) 1. Koran-s-Criticism, interpretation, etc. -History. 2. Arabic languageHistory. One of the first groundbreaking efforts in Islamic
studies was made by John Wansbrough in his unique work QURANIC STUDIES: SOURCES AND METHODS OF SCRIPTURAL
INTERPRETATION. Written between 1968 and 1972, this revolutionary analysis had a profound effect on the study of Islam. It
produced, in the minds of many, a wholly new dichotomy in the approach used in Islamic studies: on one side, the skeptical revisionists
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