Retrospective Review

Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World, by PATRICIA CRONE and MICHAEL COOK. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Hagarism came in 1977 as a very loud wake-up call to the then rather sleepy field of early Islamic studies and, like most wake-up calls, its arrival was not exactly welcomed. Not only many traditionally-minded Muslims, but also much of the Western scholarly establishment that dealt with early Islam (which was also quite traditionally-minded) viewed the authors' methods and, in particular, their attempted reconstructions and conclusions, with incomprehension or downright horror. Yet now, thirty years later, we can see that the publication of *Hagarism* was a milestone in the history of Islamic studies. It literally set the agenda for the next generation of work on early Islam, as it continues to do today, and is responsible for the fact that for the past two decades the study of Islamic origins has been one of the most vibrant and interesting branches of Middle Eastern studies.

Crone and Cook's basic argument was a methodological one and, essentially, simple. They started by reminding us of something everyone already knew: that the generally-accepted picture of Islam's origins was based not on contemporary documents, but rather on various narrative sources that had been compiled by Muslims years, sometimes many years, after the events they described. The usual justification for accepting these later sources as evidence was that they were accurate accounts of "what had actually happened" at the time of Islam's genesis, but Crone and Cook pointed out that a long tradition of Western scholarship, going back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, had increasingly cast doubt on this assumption (the works of Goldziher, Schacht, Noth, and many others were cited in particular). The authors therefore proposed that, since the narrative materials were so problematic, scholars should leave them aside and, at least as a heuristic exercise, try to see what could be said about Islam's origins by relying solely on contemporary, or near-contemporary, evidence.

This simple and eminently reasonable suggestion, however, had stupefyingly complex implications in terms of how one pursued history, and it led to what many felt were outrageous practical results. In terms of "doing history," it required scholars of early Islam to consider a much more varied body of source material than most were used to using, or trained to use. Comfortably reading through Arabic chronicles and *hadiths*, as early Islamicists were long wont to do, was no longer sufficient, or perhaps even defensible. That time-honored pursuit now had to give way to, or at least be conjoined with, studying texts in Syriac, Greek, Armenian, Pahlavi, Coptic, Samaritan, and other tongues, and in many strange genres—sermons, liturgical texts, theological tracts, and many more. Moreover, one also needed to consider not only literary texts (in whatever languages), but also various kinds of documentary evidence, such as coins, inscriptions, papyri, weights and seals, and

archaeological remains. Since most early Islamicists in 1977 were conversant with few, if any, of these other languages, genres, or skills, it is little wonder that many felt threatened by the thought that these tools were fundamentally necessary, and resisted acknowledging that they were. And, to be fair, even today, when the importance of being able to use these varied materials is generally accepted, hardly anyone claims to master all these languages and skills. The study of Islam's origins is difficult partly because it demands that we draw from so many diverse kinds of evidence; but, as Crone and Cook suggested, we don't get any closer to the truth by running away from the difficulties.

Then there were the practical results of Cook and Crone's pioneering ruminations on Islam's origins, presented in the book's brief Part I, "Whence Islam?" These results seemed to require jettisoning so many long-accepted "facts" about early Islam that the new reconstruction became almost unrecognizable. To name just a few: There was no caliph Abu Bakr; rather, Muhammad had lived until the beginning of the conquest of Syria, and was succeeded directly by 'Umar. Muhammad's movement was inspired by Jews driven from Edessa by the Byzantines, who joined with Arabian tribesmen to reconquer the Holy Land. The original center of the movement was not Mecca but someplace in the northern Hijaz. The Muslims' concepts for political leadership were borrowed from the Samaritans. These and other suggestions were, above all, the ones that created the storm of controversy surrounding the book.

Parts II and III of *Hagarism* ("Whither Antiquity?" and "The Collision") aroused less overt hostility, but were just as revolutionary in their way as Part I; in these latter parts, the authors attempted to explain how the Islamic tradition had crystallized out of the complex matrix of cultural materials found in the Near East in the seventh and eighth centuries. If anything, the historical generalizations of these parts were even more broadly-framed and challenging than those of Part I, as the authors put forth hypotheses about how cultural traditions emerge, how they deal with the culture of earlier civilizations, and how they integrate, suppress, or isolate competing or conflicting views and practices. *Hagarism*, in other words, broke with a traditional view that had emphasized mainly (or even exclusively) the Arabian *jahiliyya* as Islam's background. Instead, it made a determined effort to understand Islam's origins in the broader historical context of the Late Antique Near East; it may thus be seen as continuing a trend begun, or at least powerfully advanced, by Peter Brown's epoch-making *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971), which was one of the first works to be based on a periodization that viewed the early Byzantines, the Sasanians, and the Umayyads as constituting a single historical phase.

Not everything that Crone and Cook proposed in Hagarism was, of course, right. Or even fair: for example, the authors sometimes seem willing to accept non-Muslim literary sources without the kind of unsparing criticism they used to justify their rejection of the whole corpus of Arabic-Islamic sources. Neither was *Hagarism* an easy read: its arguments were sometimes labyrinthine, and the authors' ideas were often incomprehensible to those who lacked strong specialist training (and even to many who had it).

But, despite its shortcomings, the basic methodological point of *Hagarism*—that historians of Islamic origins need to behave truly as historians, and subject their sources to rigorous criticism—was positive, valuable, and long overdue in a field that was so hidebound that it often resisted looking at the real evidence. To some extent, the very outrageousness of some of the authors' reconstructions helped ensure that the book would attract attention,

and hence that its important lessons on method would be absorbed. (In this, *Hagarism* resembled Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), which despite many weaknesses of argument also contained some important and valid insights that were taken seriously partly because of the shock value of its ad hominem attacks on prominent scholars.)

I can best close by quoting the words of the late Albert Hourani, always a model of precise economy of expression, with whom I had a short conversation about *Hagarism* a few years after its appearance. Of Crone and Cook's book he said, "I don't think they are getting the right answers, but they are asking the right questions." Historians can hardly hope for more, for in the long run, it is posing the right questions that moves our understanding ahead.

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