

Reflections on Certain Theories to do with the History of Early Islam

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Abstract

The vast corpus of premodern Arabic historical writing, encompassing both Islamic and Christian narratives, remains largely unexplored, with many manuscripts still awaiting classification and editing. This historiographical heritage has faced critical scrutiny since the late nineteenth century, particularly regarding early Arabic Islamic sources from the first few centuries of Islam. Revisionist scholars have applied techniques from biblical criticism and modern literary analysis to challenge the authenticity of these early histories, often labeling them as “salvation history,” which they argue imposes a supernatural framework on events. Critics contend that the temporal distance between events and their recording diminishes reliability; however, recent scholarship suggests that oral traditions coexisted with written records from the outset of Islamic history. Furthermore, the concept of “*topoi*” in historical narratives raises questions about the credibility of certain accounts while acknowledging their potential to convey underlying truths. This essay evaluates these revisionist critiques, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of historical sources that transcends simplistic categorizations of reliability and fictionality.

Keywords:

Arabic historiography; early Islam; revisionist history; salvation history; oral tradition; manuscript studies; biblical criticism; literary analysis; historical authenticity; historiographical methods.

The existence of a vast corpus of pre-modern Arabic historical writing, Islamic and Christian, is a fact well-known to both experts and the general educated public. There is no parallel to this corpus in the pre-modern period except perhaps the Chinese chronicles. And when one adds the biographical material, which Arabic civilization often equated with history, the total must be in the tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of volumes.¹ Many years will pass before we uncover its full dimensions since much of it is still in manuscript form and in need of identification, classification, and editing.

This extremely rich pre-modern historiographical heritage has been undergoing a critical revision by some Western Arabists and Islamists. This began in earnest in the late nineteenth century with the assault on hadith; and hadith, as we know, is a first cousin of history. This skeptical revisionist program has recently come to focus with greater intensity on the earliest Arabic Islamic historical sources, produced, roughly speaking, during the first two to three centuries of Islam, while later historical sources escape such skepticism and revisionism relatively unscathed. More specifically, these revisionists have come to target the early historians from the generation of Ibn Ishaq (d. 767 CE) down to al-Tabari (d. 923 CE), but later historians such as, say, Ibn al-Athir (d. 1233 CE) have not yet come under what Salim Tamari calls the “critic’s surgical knife.”

This revisionist program comes in several varieties, so it is not easy to summarize and analyze their views. This is because their revisionism has several sources, the most prominent of which are critical techniques derived from higher criticism of the Bible and critical techniques derived from modern Western literary criticism. In what follows I try to address some of the major points raised by the revisionists, and then attempt an evaluation.

One common critique of the early Arabic Islamic sources is that these can best be described as “salvation history” which reads history to understand God’s redemptive actions and intentions and are therefore teleological and tendentious.² A supernatural grid is thus imposed on human history so that every historical event becomes both a fact and a symbol of the divine plan. These revisionists thus read early Arabic Islamic history as having one dominant mover, the Almighty, who runs the show in one direction towards a definite end. In other words, we are not dealing with history in the positivist or empirical sense – “what actually happened” – but rather with theophany masking itself as history.

Yet it should be noted that all three major monotheistic faiths suffer from excessive attachment to the immediate and present historicity of their respective revelations. All three exhibit a high degree of adherence to what might be described as “salvation history.” If we choose to describe Arabic Islamic history as “salvation history” we are not saying anything about it that cannot also be equally applied to early Christian or Jewish history. The concept of divine salvation is integral to all three faiths, and all three faiths have used history to show how salvation has manifested itself through time. The salvation history school ends by telling us that we should, in effect, throw the baby out with the bathwater, since there is very little “real history” in these early works. It is like a virus that infects historical texts, rendering them unusable. So what’s to be done?

Some revisionists such as John Wansbrough and his disciples, including Patricia Crone and Michael Cook,³ would argue that we look for an alternative history derived

from contemporary but non-Islamic sources: for example, Syriac, Byzantine, Armenian and other similar chronicles.⁴ But then one might ask: Do these other chronicles also not suffer from the virus called salvation history? I am happy to report that this strand of revisionism has not won too many adherents and has not produced any significant or fertile leads that one can follow.

A second critique has to do with oral versus written sources. Simply put, it states that early Arabic Islamic scholarship began its life in orality and only a hundred or a hundred and fifty years later did it resort to writing. Thus, when the earliest historians sat down to record Islamic history in written books they were already separated by a century or more from the events they recorded. Quite apart from the issue that oral transmission is by its very nature defective, we are told that no one can or ought to trust a record so far separated from its historical antecedent. Among both the skeptical revisionists and others who are prepared to grant the early sources some value, the argument goes something like this: early Islam did not have a contemporary historian, like a Thucydides or a Tacitus, who lived in Mecca or Medina at the time of Muhammad.⁵ What we have instead are reports allegedly going back to that period but they are embedded in histories written down a century or more *after* the events they describe. Similarly, and analogously, no twentieth-century work should be considered an original or primary source for the history of the eighteenth century.

But let us concentrate first and in brief on orality and writing. The view that Islamic scholarship began in orality and then a hundred or more years later switched to writing is no longer tenable. The research of scholars like Gregor Schoeler, Harald Motzki, and others demonstrate clearly that this was not so: that the confusion is mainly the result of a misunderstanding of technical terms of transmission, and that it is becoming increasingly obvious that orality and writing coexisted from the earliest Islamic times.⁶

Let us now turn to the third critique, namely, the question of the distance between the sources and the period they describe. On the surface, this looks like a perfectly respectable historiographical principle; that is, trustworthy sources need to be contemporaneous or eyewitness sources. But let us examine for a moment what precisely we mean by a contemporaneous source.

The span of a typical individual human memory can easily extend backward and forward across a range of even hundreds of years. If we imagine a person who transmits historical reports from, say, a grandparent who in turn is relating from a grandparent, and further imagine that that person transmits them to a grandson, a span of two centuries can easily be attained.

This sounds a little abstract, so a concrete and personal example might be appropriate. I was born in 1938 and my mother was born in 1897. Any information I now transmit to any other person which I heard directly from her regarding Beirut's social life in 1907, for example, is, today in 2024, already 117 years old. That is not all. As a young girl, my mother often stayed with *her* grandmother who was born around 1820, and her grandmother used to tell her stories of Beirut life around 1830 or so. Therefore, if I relate to someone today a story directly from my mother who transmitted it directly from *her* grandmother, the span of memory has already extended for nearly two centuries. And

what happens if an interlocutor of mine today transmits this information to his or her grandchildren? We now have a span of memory that far exceeds two hundred years. To maintain that one cannot trust a report *because* it is separated by a century or more from its origins goes against a common human exercise, especially in societies that greatly prized the transmission of memories.

Naturally, this does not mean that all such reports are trustworthy, but it does mean that reports at a temporal distance from their origins are not *ipso facto* to be dismissed as untrustworthy. If you have no reason to disbelieve what I am telling you, and I have no reason to disbelieve my mother, and she in turn has no reason to disbelieve her grandmother, a historian cannot dismiss such reports simply because they are distant in time from their occurrence. Arguments that dismiss and discount any report that is not contemporaneous with an event are still very common in studies of early Islam because not much attention has been paid to the meaning of the word “contemporary.” Thus, reports may be highly reliable even when separated by centuries from the events they relate because they can be the result of a relatively short line of transmission of just a few informants, each of whom is relying on his or her own personal memory.

A fourth, and important, critique comes from source criticism, especially as seen in the influential study of the late Albrecht Noth.⁷ We might summarize the central argument of this work as follows. Noth presents us with a list of obstacles facing a reconstruction of early Islamic history. He does not say it is impossible to reconstruct that history. He merely says: here are the hurdles one must be aware of before one begins the work of historical reconstruction. These obstacles or hurdles come in two basic forms, *topoi* and *schemata*. Noth describes *topoi* as basically concerned with the content of reports while *schemata* are basically concerned with their form. He then provides us with several examples of each.

Let us look at only one example of a *topos*, which may be taken as typical. Arabic sources describe some battles against the Byzantines in which the Byzantine soldiers were chained together. Is this credible? Of course not, says Professor Noth. No sane general would ever tie his soldiers up in chains. In 1967, I heard exactly the same story about Israeli soldiers being chained inside their tanks. When you see such a *topos*, beware! What you have is fiction and not history. We are told that examples can be multiplied of such *topoi* far beyond what Noth himself has dealt with in his work.

So, an ever-expanding and open-ended armory of critical weapons is now available for historians’ use. When Noth has finished enumerating all of these *topoi* and *schemata*, they no longer appear like obstacles on the road. Instead, the whole history of early Islam becomes a veritable minefield. This impression is fortified by the fact that Noth’s early and guarded optimism regarding the historicity of the sources is soon abandoned. There is hardly a subsequent page of his work on which we don’t meet words like “fiction,” “absurd,” “legendary,” “inauthentic and unreliable,” “complete confusion,” “clumsy forgery,” “no relation to reality,” “of dubious value” and so forth.⁸ According to Noth, some of these reports may once have had a basis in fact, a “kernel of truth,” but later transmitters detached them from their historical anchors, set them adrift, and clothed them with *topoi* to suit “the mood of their times” or simply to entertain their audience.⁹

But what exactly is a topos? A topos may be defined as a sort of cliché or a metaphor or rhetorical formula. A friend of yours tells you that he fell in love with a woman at first sight: he took one look at her and he tumbled into love. Instead of telling you all this simply and directly, he quotes to you the verse of Ahmad Shawqi: *nazratun fabtisamatun fa salamun fa kalamun* (“a glance, a smile, a greeting, and then talking”) and so on. Now his falling in love may not have happened exactly or literally like this but he chooses a topos, a cliché, to convey his meaning. As a historian writing about this love affair – provided it is an earth-shaking love affair – it is one’s duty to search inside the topos to find the kernel of truth in it, namely, that it was love at first sight. One might argue that our ordinary speech is peppered with topoi and that a topos is appropriately used *precisely because* it carries within it a “kernel of truth.”

But let us go back to the chained soldiers. What exactly is the function of that story? Yes, as a historian, I might say that the story as it stands and if understood literally, sounds nonsensical or fictional. But does my job stop here? Does this story of soldiers in chains have a “kernel of truth”? Surely it does. We could suggest, for instance, that it has to do with perception: the enemy were seen to be cowardly. This is a perception that a historian cannot simply ignore or dismiss.

Again, we might ask: How exactly did this wholesale process of topos construction by later historians occur? Did these later historians sit down, look back on their history and decide: Let us now sprinkle this history that has come down to us with topoi? Did they do so consciously or unconsciously? And is there any parallel to this process in the historiography of other cultures, the Greco-Roman, the Byzantine, or the medieval European for example? Or is this process peculiar to Arabic Islamic historiography and, if so, why? And is there a distinction or hierarchy among topoi? Are some topoi more likely to have a “kernel of truth” than others? Putting all topoi on the same level must surely reduce their value as explanatory tools. The absence of any categorization and enumeration of topoi, which Noth merely describes as appearing “frequently” or “often,” leaves us with no clear indication as to their relative density in the sources.

A fifth revisionist critique comes directly from literary criticism, and more specifically from the important works of the American scholar Hayden White. Here we move from topos to trope, that is to say, to figures of speech similar to what ancient Arab literary critics used to call *al-badi’*.¹⁰ White’s approach may perhaps be encapsulated in the following quote: “Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events” – he means of course factual and fictional – “both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same.”¹¹ Nice of him to say “often”!

Having established not only that there is a family resemblance between history and fiction (something we have known for a very long time – after all, a story or a narrative is common to both history and fiction), White now pronounces history and fiction indistinguishable in form and aim. In other words, history is now turned into historiography: not *what* historians report but *how* they report it.

As the Wansbrough contingent had done before them, the Hayden White contingent have now turned their guns on early Arabic Islamic history. They are asking us to take a text by, say, Tabari (d. 923 CE) or Mas‘udi (d. 956 CE) and, instead of asking: Is this

text credible? Is it plausible? Do we take it as representing a historical event accurately, dispassionately, and so forth? We ask: How is it constructed formally? What is its tone? What are its tropes or figures of speech? Is it epic or tragic or tragi-comic or whatever? How is it “plotted,” to use Hayden White’s favorite phrase? In other words, let us put history aside and let us concentrate on representation, on how these historians build their accounts of the past. And when we do that, we are told that early Islamic history is really a series of parables or else that it is a matter of “poetics,” that is to say, it is basically unknowable.¹²

I have lived with Tabari and Mas‘udi and other early historians for a very long time and this emboldens me to say a few things in conclusion. To begin with, putting Tabari, Mas‘udi, Baladhuri (d. 892 CE) and so forth in one basket is a grave mistake. They are very different historians in style, outlook, intention, and form. Further, did they really have no conception of the difference between fact and fiction? Of course, they wrote to entertain, of course they wrote to moralize and preach, but was this *all* that they were doing? Anyone who reads these historians will also see that they are striving to the best of their ability to give us an accurate account of the past *in addition to* entertainment and moralizing.

When all is said and done, are these historians so different from modern historians, Eastern or Western? A modern historian’s impact and reputation is based not just on his or her accuracy and synthetic ability, originality and all the other things we admire in a historian. We also admire his or her elegance of style, skillful use of language, simplicity of diction – in a word, readability and entertainment. This does not absolve the historian of the primary function of attempting to represent the facts, nor can we toss facts to the wind and say we can never hope to have a factual or semifactual account of the past. Tabari and company are first and foremost historians, not *hakawatis*, or popular entertainers, or preachers, and all of them, without exception, take a very serious view of their profession even if they also entertain and moralize, just like any modern historian. Mas‘udi, for example, describes history as the font and source of all knowledge since “all branches of knowledge are derived from history.” These branches include philosophy, jurisprudence, eloquence, theology, ethics, and politics. Entertainment value is mentioned at the very end of that list.¹³

And now to my conclusion. We must never give up the attempt to try to understand and reconstruct early Arabic Islamic history. Despite any disagreements we may have with Wansborough, Noth, or Hayden White, we must welcome them into the historians’ community, deal fairly with their views and see if, at any point in our reconstruction of the past, we may be able to benefit from their insights. We must also not allow them to turn our attention completely from the pursuit, which admittedly often seems endless, of the facts of history. Nor need we demolish the “house” of early Arabic Islamic history simply because it might be full of cracks.

Like Sisyphus, historians are condemned forever to push that rock of facts up the mountain, only to see it tumbling down before it reaches the mountain peak, though we might hope that it deposits some fragments along the way.

A quote from George Orwell might serve as a summary of the main contentions of

this article: “I am willing to believe that history is for the most part inaccurate and biased, but what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history *could be* truthfully written.”¹⁴

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Endnotes

- 1 In paying tribute to my dear friend Salim Tamari, it should be pointed out that he has done more than any other contemporary historian to advance the use of biographical and autobiographical material to illuminate the social history of Palestine.
- 2 The term “salvation history” was popularized by John Wansbrough in his work *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- 3 See Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). In their later writings, both authors quietly abandoned the views expressed in this work.
- 4 In a work of great erudition, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998), Robert Hoyland demonstrated that non-Islamic sources frequently “coincide with” the Islamic sources. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, chap. 14.
- 5 For example, in an important work, which is otherwise critical of the skeptics, Fred M. Donner nevertheless holds that the early sources “are not contemporary sources.” Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998), 4.
- 6 See Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and Written in Early Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). See also Harald Motzki, “The *Musannaf* of ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-San‘ani as a Source of Authentic *Ahadith* of the First Century A.H.,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50 (1991): 1–21.
- 7 See Albrecht Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994).
- 8 For these adjectives, see Noth, *Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, 101, 113, 79, 101, 147, 100, 136, 101, 124, 103.
- 9 For “kernel of truth,” see Noth, *Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, 22 (“kernel of truth”), 110 (“mood of their times”), and 145 (for later historians introducing topoi).
- 10 See, for example, ‘Abdullah ibn al-Mu‘tazz, *Kitab al-badi‘*, ed. Ignatius Krachkovskii (Damascus: Dar al-Hikma, n.d. [c. 1969–75]) and Hazim al-Qartajani, *Minhaj al-bulagha’ wa siraj al-udaba’* [Curriculum of the eloquent and lamp of the literary], ed. Muhammad al-Habib ibn al-Khujah (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1986). These are, of course, only two examples of a widespread tradition of literary criticism in Arabic culture. See, for example, Wen-chin Ouyang, *Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).
- 11 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 121.
- 12 Typical of this “tropological” approach is Tayeb el-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the Narratives of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Some Israeli Orientalists also appear to have adopted a tropological approach with even less rigor than el-Hibri. See, for example, Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims, a Textual Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995); and Boaz Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Tabari’s History* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
- 13 Mas‘udi, *Muruj al-dhahab wa ma‘adin al-jawhar* [Meadows of gold and mines of gems], ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut: Université Libanaise, 1965–79), sec. 989.
- 14 Quoted by Ian Jack in “Time for Several Whiskies,” *London Review of Books*, 30 August 2018, online at www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n16/ian-jack/time-for-several-whiskies (accessed 21 November 2024).