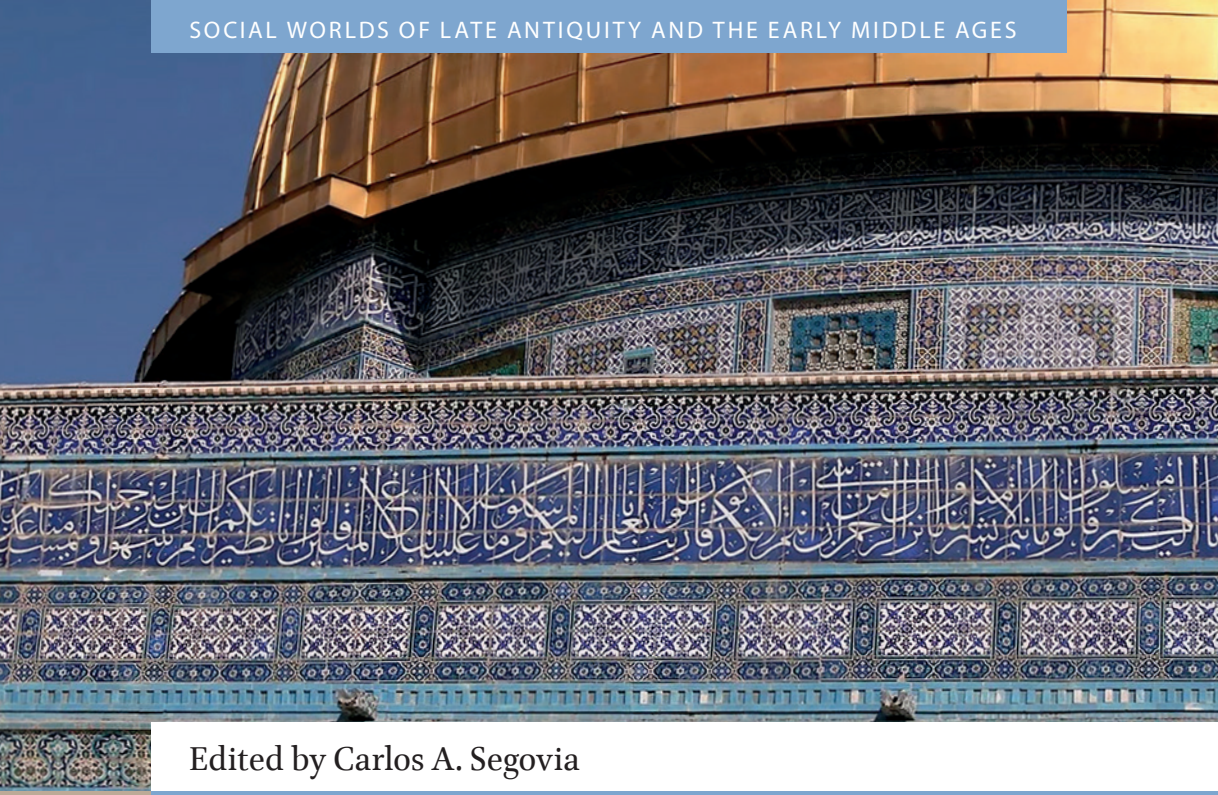


SOCIAL WORLDS OF LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES



Edited by Carlos A. Segovia

Remapping Emergent Islam

Texts, Social Settings,
and Ideological Trajectories

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Social Worlds of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

The Late Antiquity experienced profound cultural and social change: the political disintegration of the Roman Empire in the West, contrasted by its continuation and transformation in the East; the arrival of 'barbarian' newcomers and the establishment of new polities; a renewed militarization and Christianization of society; as well as crucial changes in Judaism and Christianity, together with the emergence of Islam and the end of classical paganism. This series focuses on the resulting diversity within Late Antique society, emphasizing cultural connections and exchanges; questions of unity and inclusion, alienation and conflict; and the processes of syncretism and change. By drawing upon a number of disciplines and approaches, this series sheds light on the cultural and social history of Late Antiquity and the greater Mediterranean world.

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Cover illustration: Detail from the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. Late seventh-century construction.

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 806 4

e-ISBN 978 90 4854 010 5

DOI 10.5117/9789462988064

NUR 684

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Introduction

Carlos A. Segovia

This multidisciplinary volume aims at moving forward the scholarly discussion on Islam's origins by paying attention to three domains – textual, social, and ideological – whose intersections need to be examined afresh to get a more-or-less clear picture of the concurrent phenomena that made possible the emergence of a new religious identity and the progressive delimitation of its initially fuzzy boundaries. It therefore deals with the renewed analysis of a number of key texts, social contexts, and ideological developments relevant for the study of Islam's beginnings – taking the latter expression in its broadest possible sense. More specifically, the essays in this volume explore: (1) the multi-vectorised socio-cultural milieu in which the early quranic movement might have gradually taken shape, as well as their multi-layered ideological frameworks, which are the subject of chapters 1–4; and (2) the various ways in which its identity was measured, narrated, and encrypted – i.e. directly or indirectly thematised – within and beyond the Qur'ān itself, on which, in turn, chapters 5–9 offer renewed insights.

No unifying pattern in terms of methodology and style has been imposed on the authors' creativity. Intentionally. For selecting different accoutrements when disembarking on a continent still lacking any precise cartography risks different perceptions of its landscape, which cannot be totalised beforehand. Furthermore, the pretension that such cartography exists, and that such totality must be taken for granted at the very outset of the exploration, is what this volume would like to question.

Thus in Chapter 1, 'South Arabian "Judaism", Ḥimyarite Raḥmanism, and the Origins of Islam', Aaron W. Hughes explores the social and religious settings of South Arabia at the advent of Islam. Rather than assume that the 'Jews' of Ḥimyar (present-day Yemen) were religiously normative (as scholars like Glen W. Bowersock do), Hughes works on the assumption that they were not. Who, to use but one example, were the Ḥimyarite Raḥmanists of South Arabia? Were they 'Jewish', 'Christian', or some combination thereof? This fluidity of religious forms and identities – argues Hughes – means that boundaries

Segovia, C.A., *Remapping Emergent Islam: Texts, Social Settings, and Ideological Trajectories*.
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020

DOI 10.5117/9789462988064_INTRO



Amsterdam
University
Press

amongst Arabian Christianity, Judaism, and what would emerge as Islam were often ambiguous. And yet this ambiguity – he adds – does not mean that there were not distinct Christianising and Judaising tendencies, given the lengthy history of these two religious traditions in the area. In short it is not simply the case that Islam emerges as the sum of other, more established, monotheisms in the area, but that Islam's appearance played an active role in their self-definition, which went in both directions – he concludes.

In turn, in Chapter 2, 'Early Islam as a Messianic Movement: A Non-Issue?', José Costa reminds us that, while the Qur'ān refers to Jesus as *al-masīh*, the 'Messiah', it never explains the meaning of the term. Besides – he goes on to say – if one leaves aside the ambiguous passages dealing with *al-masīh*, then the Messiah and messianism do not appear in the Qur'ān. And this absence is all the more puzzling given that eschatology and apocalypticism do play an important role within it. Some scholars have argued that Muhammad's function was to announce the imminent coming of the Jewish Messiah or the return of Jesus, and that the messianic materials of the Qur'ān were erased from the text at a later period. In his paper, Costa offers an alternative approach to the issue, based on often overlooked aspects of Jewish and Jewish-Christian eschatology. As pointed out by David Flusser – Costa underlines – 'for ancient Judaism the idea of eschatological salvation was more important than the concept of Messiah. Hence there are books from the Second Temple period where the Messiah does not occur, even if they refer to eschatological salvation.' Moreover, the Rabbis only admitted a sort of minimalist messianism. This Jewish background contributes to shed light on the early layers of the Qur'ān, which contain an eschatology without Messiah. Conversely, in its late layers one finds a non-eschatological Messiah identified with Jesus, which, in turn, may be related to Ebionite conceptions – Costa argues.

Daniel A. Beck takes an altogether different approach to the beginnings of Islam in Chapter 3, 'The Astral Messenger, The Lunar Redemption, The Solar Salvation: Manichaeic Cosmic Soteriology in the Qur'ān's Archaic Surahs (Q 84, Q 75, Q 54)', where he interprets the cosmological imagery of several archaic quranic passages, with special attention to analysing their depiction of the moon as an eschatological sign and soteriological mechanism. Beck argues that the parallel celestial messenger's oaths embody Manichaeic cosmological concepts, in which the sun and moon were the primary cosmic vehicles of redemption during the 'Third Evocation', our human era. By comparing archaic quranic cosmology, ancient North Arabian devotional epigraphy, and Manichaeic cosmology, he suggests that the divine speaker's oaths were discontinuous with Old Arabic pagan devotional structures,

and were instead closely related to contemporary forms of late antique Manichaean eschatology.

In turn, in Chapter 4, ‘Messalianism, Binitarianism, and the East-Syrian Background of the Qur’ān’, I make the point that the theology of the earliest quranic layers displays a puzzling characteristic: it is – I claim – overtly binitarian. Such theology was soon replaced by the combination of a human prophetology and a more strictly monotheist theology that entailed not only an ‘epistemological rupture’, but also the ‘foreclosure’ of the Qur’ān’s early binitarianism. Through the interplay and alignment of quranic discourse analysis, structuralist-Marxist epistemology, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, I thus try to uncover the most plausible historical setting of the early binitarian theology of the Qur’ān in light of the east-Syrian monastic crisis of the early seventh century and the role played in it by the Messalians, whose recent characterisation as a ‘polemical category’ I also discuss.

In other words, whereas chapters 1 and 2 examine possible Jewish backgrounds for the early quranic movement, chapters 3 and 4 instead inquire into peripheral Christian settings. And they arrive at contrasting conclusions, because they place their interpretative stresses on different aspects of the extremely rich and complex quranic textuality. An additional contrast, this time between chapters 2, 3, and 4, on the one hand, and chapter 1, on the other hand, is that while the former three begin by rethinking a series of concepts and/or conceptual strategies, and then attempt to offer a tentative reconstruction of their more-likely background, the latter attempts to clarify a historical context right from the start. Moreover, it could be argued that, rather than searching for cultural re-elaborations as chapters 2, 3, and 4 do, chapter 1 analyses primarily cultural effects. And yet these four chapters all deal with issues related to the process of cultural adjustment at the textual, social, and ideological levels.

Basil Lourié brings together the Jewish and Christian trimmings of emergent Islam in Chapter 5, ‘The Jewish and Christian Background of the Earliest Islamic Liturgical Calendar’, by exploring the ways in which the Islamic festivals of *Āšūrā’* (10 Muḥarram), *Laylat al-Mi’rāj* (27 Raġab), and *Laylat al-Qadr* (at the end of *Ramaḍān*) preserve the core structure of Jewish and early Christian calendars, where the main dates were the Day of Atonement, Passover, and Pentecost (although, in the Second Temple period and in Christian Jerusalem, the Day of Atonement and the Christian feasts on 13–14 September derived from it were assimilated into Passover). Now, while the two former festivals share an Exodus-typology – observes Lourié – the revelation of the Qur’ān in the latter has an obvious precedent in the Jewish and Christian Pentecosts. These considerations – he adds – are

to be enforced with calendrical computations. Thus the date of 27 *Rağab* seems to have Christian origins (27 March being the standard Julian date of Easter), which is corroborated by the anti-Christian polemics and a discussion of the resurrection in Q 17 (*Sūrat al-Isrā'*) – he highlights.

In turn, in Chapter 6, 'The Persian Keys of the Quranic Paradise', Gilles Courtieu introduces a new, strange, but fascinating element into this already complex picture: that of Sasanian Iran. The descriptions of paradise are numerous and precise in the Qur'ān: in relation to their total coherence with one another – states Courtieu – they surely come from a unique source. Furthermore, they reflect a social model present in many regions of the seventh-century Near East: the Persian banquet, as enjoyed in the Sasanian Empire. Not only the vocabulary, but the objects, the people, the physical or mental attitudes, the food, and the beverages are all taken from the imagery of the banquets at the Persian court. Hence the quranic paradise is clearly not of religious, but of profane origin. And this offers evidence that one should consider not only Palestine, but also Mesopotamia, as a source of inspiration for the authors of the Qur'ān – and as a site of excavation for the original quranic milieu, Courtieu suggests.

But how deeply may one be able to excavate in the landscape of ideas when digging into the origins of Islam? In Chapter 7, 'Divine Attributes of 'Alī in Shi'i Mysticism: New Remarks on "Heresy" in Early Islam', Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi examines the heresiographic sources, both Sunnite and so-called moderate-Shi'a, that accuse the first Shi'ites of ideological 'extremism' (*guluww*) due, firstly, to their alleged messianism, and, secondly, and somewhat complementarily, to their more-or-less-straightforward divinisation of their *imām* or 'spiritual leader'. Considering that these accusations may well be – he argues – to some extent reliable, how are we to envisage the connection that apparently existed between such doctrines and Muhammad's own early message, with its emphasis on the more-or-less-imminent end of the world and its subsequent announcement of the coming of the Messiah, be he Jesus or 'Alī? In other words, Amir-Moezzi puts the spotlight on the inner, rather than outer, uncertainties of proto-Islamic self-definitions.

In turn, in Chapter 8, 'Echoes of Pseudepigrapha in the Qur'ān', Tommaso Tesei addresses questions of quranic intertextuality which contribute to clarifying, among other things, the Qur'ān's undeniably scribal nature. The first part of Tesei's essay focusses on the presence of important Enochic traits (i.e. elements drawn from the pseudepigraphical Enochic literature) in the quranic corpus. Specifically, it deals with the quranic characters of Idrīs and 'Uzayr and the fallen-angels – traditions the echoes of which can be heard in the Qur'ān. And it raises the question of whether people in the

Qur'ān's environment knew those books which we tend to categorise under the label of 'Pseudepigrapha' directly, or if they merely encountered themes and motifs which happened to trace back to pseudepigraphical literature. Thus, the Qur'ān becomes a nexus within a broader intertextual web.

Finally, Emilio González Ferrín's essay 'What Do We Mean by *THE* Qur'ān? On Origins, Fragments, and Inter-Narrative Identity' (Chapter 9) questions the two canonical narratives that hinder our understanding of the Qur'ān as a literary masterpiece: the canonisation of its unwarranted unity as a Sacred Book and the parallel canonisation of a historiographical concept, i.e. the absolute beginning of a presumed Arab conquest of the Near East, the meta-narrative of which unduly reverses cause and effect. Unity and order thereby constitute a twofold obsession ultimately ossified into what may be labelled as the unusual 'otherness' of Islam – argues González Ferrín, whose aim, therefore, is to brush against the grain of history to depict the Qur'ān's miscellany.

Miscellaneous, too, are the respective conceptual choices and analytical tools used by the contributors to the present volume. The fact that some of them find suitable, for instance, the use of hadith literature as a source – a type of literature that other contributors, considering it unreliable, withdraw from instead – and vice versa, posits no problem of coherence to a volume that makes no claim to uniformity, let alone to scholasticism. Rigour and free creativity prevail over any other considerations, in the hope that the quality of intellectual work does not depend on normativity.

Revitalising the very notions of heterogeneity and marginalia in the contemporary study of emergent Islam is, to conclude then, the chief purpose of this book. In the persuasion that what was long ignored and is still often rejected as an upsetting spectral figure in this particular field of research – namely, the need to bracket self-referential narratives of religious origins and look elsewhere instead – is the only thing we can do, and carries with it the only chance we have to make out something of the beginnings of Islam as a crossroads of historical processes beyond the theoretical and methodological constraints imposed by any form of mythopoiesis.

About the Author

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