The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters: Collected Studies in Three Volumes. Volume I

Patricia Crone (ed. Hanna Siurua)
Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016. 503 pages.

The late Patricia Crone (d. 2015) was one of the most provocative scholars of early Islam. She is infamous for *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (1977), which she co-authored with Michael Cook. That she has disavowed some of its more skeptical conclusions may surprise many of her fiercest critics, as well as those revisionists who still invoke them. This current volume, however, demonstrates that while she has not disavowed any of her skeptical approaches to the study of this field, to her great credit she remained open to revising her views as new evidence presented itself. Reprints comprise most of this volume, although two chapters have not previously been published. Even the reprints, however, were selected, arranged, and in some cases revised by Crone herself.

All of the articles are tied together by subject matter and methodology. They focus on the *mushrikūn* (lit. associators), whom she calls "Qur'ānic pagans," and for the most part seeks to reconstruct their religion, particularly during the Makkan period. She takes as her point of departure G. R. Hawting's *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (1999), which argues that the *mushrikūn* were monotheists and not idolaters (another common translation of the term). In hoping to show that he was mistaken, Crone was prompted to read the Qur'an systematically and, in so doing, discovered that these people were not the pagans depicted in the Hadith, *sīrah*, *tafsīr*, or Ibn al-Kalbi's *Book of Idols*.

As for methodology, she largely ignores the later exegetical tradition in order to examine, insofar as possible, what the Qur'an itself says and relating it to earlier religious writings in the Near East. Her emphasis is on intertextuality, decidedly not on borrowing. In other words, she treats the Qur'an as a primary source and the various traditional materials are mere secondary sources. Reading the Qur'an in such a manner, she discovered, is deeply defamiliarizing.

How much so is evident in most of the first eleven chapters, which come to startling or puzzling conclusions about the *mushrikūn*. In chapter 1, Crone examines how the *muskrikūn* made a living. Based on imagery used in Qur'anic passages, they were not the Makkan traders in a barren region that the tradition portrays. Although the later Madinan believers may have been involved in trade, Muhammad's original pagans were agriculturalists. The second chapter examines the leather trade prompted by the Perso-Byzantine wars. This activity extended into the Hejaz and beyond, and in that sense accords with tradition, but that tradition also suggest that the Makkans did not trade leather where one would expect them to have done so. Moreover, the sources require an uncomfortable amount of guesswork.

Crone then turns to the *mushrikūn*'s religion. Chapter 3 finds little evidence of the idolatry for which they are famous. Rather, they identified Allah with the god of the Jews and Christians and were quite familiar with material of Biblical origin. What the Messenger and his opponents disagreed upon was those lesser beings whom the latter believed served as intermediaries and whom they venerated. They also disagreed on other issues, as the next three chapters illustrate. In Chapter 4, Crone explores what the *mushrikūn* understood a messenger to be: A *rasūl* was an angel with a warning of imminent danger, whereas the Qur'anic term includes a human apostle. Chapters 5 and 6 look at their conception of resurrection. Generally, they are unconcerned with this event either because it is not seen to be imminent or its reality is

doubted. Still others are radical deniers of the very concept. In other words there are subgroups within the *mushrikūn*, some of whom are much closer to the Jews. Crone then turns to context: The Qur'anic polemics form part of the larger Near Eastern debates about resurrection and the afterlife.

Chapter 7 examines another part of the Qur'an's context: the *Book of Watchers* story, which formed part of the general background in which the Qur'an was revealed. This helps explain why it suggests, rather oddly, that Jews worship ʻUzayr. Here, Crone is adamant that when she speaks of ideas influencing the Qur'an, she does not mean parasitic dependence, as has too often been the case with earlier scholars. Chapters 9 and 10 reexamine the claim that Jewish Christianity played a role in the Qur'an's formation. Crone argues that the Qur'anic usage of "Israelites" refers most plausibly to Jewish Christians, although some standard Christian doctrines are absent from this group. Chapter 11 repeats material already presented in earlier chapters, as Crone examines the *mushrikun* as God-fearers. "Israelites" again includes Jews and Jewish Christians "of the low Christological type." In Madinah, this latter group became the People of the Book, some of whom were believers but most were wrongdoers. As all these chapters highlight, the "Qurʾānic pagans" were semi-believers who had no trouble understanding the Qur'an's references to the Biblical tradition.

Several chapters have related but much narrower foci. Chapter 8 deals with jihad, and chapter 12 examines Sūrah 53 and its oddities: the heavenly being who is speaking, the recipient of the revelation, the unique process of revelation, and the transitions and connections between its sections. Chapter 13 focuses on "no compulsion in religion" (Q, 2:256). Its material is not based solely on the Qur'anic *mushrikūn*, for Crone examines both the verse's medieval and modern interpretations. The former either argued that it was abrogated by the injunction to fight, referred to those Ansari children who were Jewish or Christian, or referred to the *jizya*-paying *mushrikūn*. The modernist tendency to read it as a universal declaration of religious tolerance is, in fact, largely based on earlier Muʻtazili interpretations that saw it as an expression of human freewill or indicating that one can force other's external conformity but not their belief. Sunni Islamists in particular needed to fudge the tension between their support for jihad and for religious freedom. Chapter 14 is merely a lecture based on the previous chapter.

The final chapter is the earliest written, likely around 1989. In it, Crone takes up Ernest Gellner's hypothesis about the appearance of saints or arbitrators among pastoralists in arid societies – a situation that engenders feuds and the distribution of power. As Gellner notes and Crone confirms (using

modern and ancient Arabian examples), the saints, who must be outside the tribal power structure, enjoy a hereditary sanctity, and possess religious knowledge, do not always appear as predicted. Crone addresses this conundrum by suggesting that the benefit of their presence is not always worth the cost. In agricultural societies the cost is worth it, for they are characterized by a lack of mobility, dependence upon resources that can be destroyed, and economic stratification and social complexity. Without agriculture, the wars of nomadic pastoralists would not be as vicious and their grazing land could not be destroyed.

Since these articles were not written specifically with this collection in mind, it is hardly surprising that at times there is considerable overlap. But this a relatively minor quibble. Perhaps more problematic is Crone's inconsistent skepticism. This inconsistency does not lie in her use of the Qur'an as an historical source for, as she explicitly notes in her preface, she accepts the evidence of carbon dating and thus concludes that there is no longer any good reason to doubt that the Qur'an existed when tradition says it did. In addition, despite using the expression "so-called Meccan suras," she states that they "reflect a time before he had a community of his own" (p. 102). She seems to doubt the town's location, as when she writes "wherever 'Mecca' was" (p. 321), but not the Qur'an's division into the traditional Makkan and Madinan periods (p. 6). For her, its author is the Messenger, Muhammad, although she states that calling the Messenger by that name is "taking a liberty" (p. 103). This inconsistency may merely reflect an evolving reevaluation of the sources' reliability, which is particularly evident in the last chapter, chronologically the earliest written. In it, the transformation prompted by Hawting and the skepticism of tradition had not yet occurred. Tradition could be employed for patterns rather than events, and "legends exemplify generic patterns correctly" (p. 436). Even Ibn al-Kalbi was used as a source.

Nevertheless, the volume's overall argument is very compelling, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The reader cannot help but be struck by the Qur'an's radically different portrayal of the Makkan pagans versus that which appears in the later exegetical and historical tradition. Thus one of the questions that Crone's studies raises (although she does not explicitly address it) is why the later exegetical and historical tradition so completely misunderstood the Qur'an and did not know its Messenger's history? After all, exegetes such as Ibn Abbas and historians such as 'Urwa b. Zubayr claim to be Muhammad's Companions or the latter group's Successors. I have raised doubts about the authenticity of the early exegetical tradition and others, namely, that of the

sīrah. However, Harald Motzki (for the former) and Gregor Schoeler and Andreas Görke (for the latter) dispute that skepticism by claiming that these early scholars lived close enough to the events they purport to relate that we should give the authenticity of their descriptions the benefit of the doubt. If Crone's conclusions are correct, that claim seems quite problematic. Whether one agrees or disagrees with her conclusions, once again she has forced scholars to engage her arguments, made a strong case for skepticism of the traditional accounts, and set the direction of a debate for years to come.

Herbert Berg
Director, International Studies
Professor, Philosophy and Religion
University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC