



# The Sectarial Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History

By John Wansbrough

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One of the most innovative thinkers in the field of Islamic Studies was John Wansbrough (1928-2002), Professor of Semitic Studies and Pro-Director of London University's School of Oriental and African Studies. Critiquing the traditional accounts of the origins of Islam as historically unreliable and heavily influenced by religious dogma, Wansbrough suggested radically new interpretations very different from the views of both the Muslim orthodoxy and most Western scholars.

In *The Sectarial Milieu* Wansbrough "analyses early Islamic historiography – or rather the interpretive myths underlying this historiography — as a late manifestation of Old Testament 'salvation history.'" Continuing themes that he treated in a previous work, *Quranic Studies*, Wansbrough argued that the traditional biographies of Muhammad (Arabic *sira* and *maghazi*) are best understood, not as historical documents that attest to "what really happened," but as literary texts written more than one hundred years after the facts and heavily influenced by Jewish, and to a lesser extent Christian, interconfessional polemics. Thus, Islamic "history" is almost completely a later literary reconstruction, which evolved out of an environment of competing Jewish and Christian sects. As such, Wansbrough felt that the most fruitful means of analyzing such texts was literary analysis. Furthermore, he maintained that it was next to impossible to extract the kernel of historical truth from works that were created principally to serve later religious agendas.

Although his work remains controversial to this day, his fresh insights and approaches to the study of Islam continue to inspire scholars. This new edition contains a valuable assessment of Wansbrough's contributions and many useful textual notes and translations by Gerald Hawting (University of London), plus the author's 1986 Albert Einstein Memorial Lecture, "Res Ipsa Loquitur."

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#### **About the Author**

John Wansbrough (1928-2002) was Professor of Semitic Studies and Pro-Director of London University's School of Oriental and African Studies. Besides Quranic Studies, he also published *The Sectarian Milieu* (1978), *Lingua Franca in the Mediterranean* (1996), and many scholarly articles

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