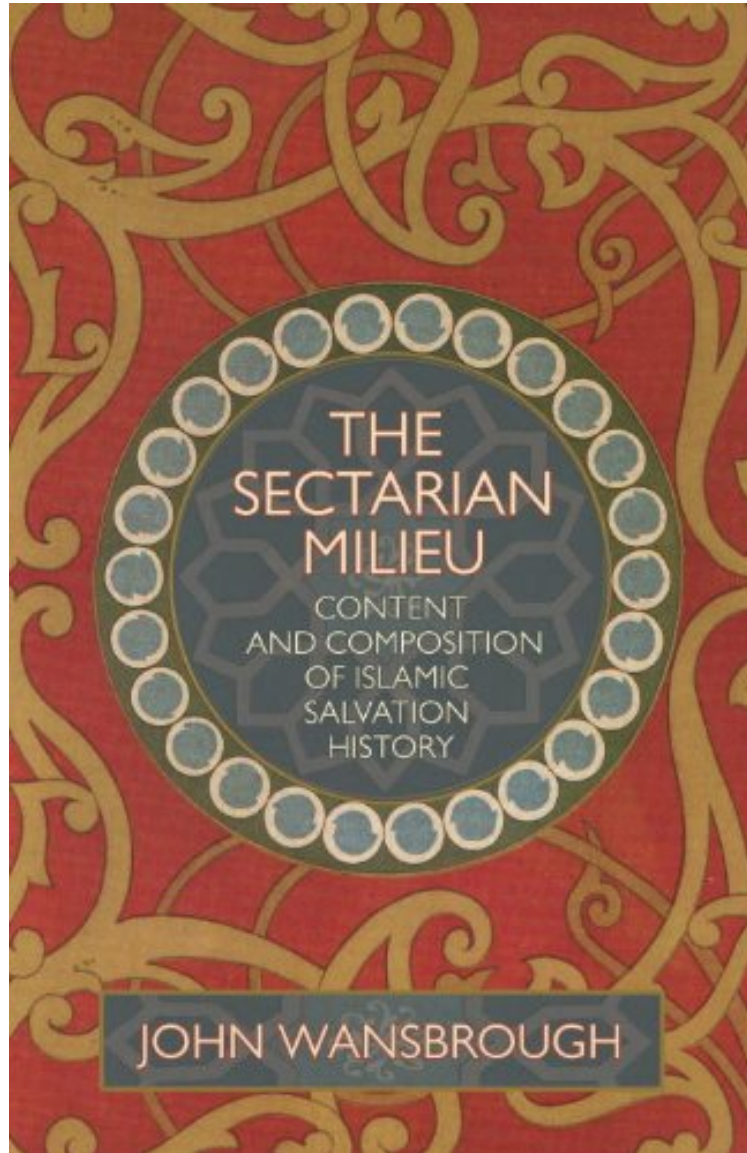


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# The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History

*John Wansbrough*

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**John Wansbrough : The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Not for your average reader By A Skeptical Reader This is an

important book in the field of Islamic studies, but it's definitely not for the average reader. Unless you're really up on your Islamic history, don't bother. I've read several books on the topic of Islamic origins by Crone and Ibn Warraq, and had no problem keeping up, but with this one, I felt as though I had walked in on a lecture half way through without having read the reading assignment the night before.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Difficult Read on an Interesting Subject

By S. Smith

The Arabs made extensive conquests in the Middle East in the 7th century, but written sources for their religious beliefs date from much later. The traditional view is that much in these sources comes from faithful contemporary records transmitted orally for over a century. Wansbroughs main theme is that they originated when written, long after what they claim to record, and reflect the religious and political situation of a later time. In outline his argument is that the Arab political domination and introduction of Arabic as the language the ruling elite in the first century and a half of the Muslim era does not imply that Islam was created, much less that it took on its mature form, in Arabia during or shortly after Muhammads lifetime. He argues that a specifically Muslim identity and literature originated in Iraq late in the second Muslim century (the 8th century AD), formed by a clerical elite that was influenced by a variety of monotheistic sects there.

This is a review of the 2006 Prometheus reprint of John Wansbroughs *The Sectarian Milieu*, including a Foreword, Translations and Notes by Gerald Hawthing. The original 1978 Oxford edition had words and quotations in their original languages, often Arabic, without explanation. Hawthings translations make these more understandable and his Foreword includes a summary of Wansbroughs arguments: without these, *The Sectarian Milieu* would be an even more difficult book. It remains difficult because it makes few concessions to those without some background in Islamic studies. It is written in a highly technical language and frequently refers to the authors earlier Quranic studies, so its meaning is often unclear, Despite all this, it is an original enquiry into the origins of Islam and the early Islamic state and the study of its history.

After a short preface, Wansbrough sets out his argument in four chapters. The first two analyse the main sources for the life and teaching of the prophet Muhammad, from which he concludes that many events recorded were not historical, but had the aim of creating a distinct Muslim identity even though they often used Judaeo-Christian themes to do so. The next argues that these sources were not largely composed orally in 7th century Arabia, but developed over a long period, mainly in the sectarian environment of Iraq. In the final chapter, Wansbrough discusses the problems of the history of Islam. He concludes that, as the sources are not records but literary creations that provide a story of the origins of the Muslim community adapted to late 8th century circumstances, no historical reconstruction of these origins is possible.

Wansbrough makes a reasonable case for Islam developing over a period, partly outside Arabia, and being subject to Jewish and Christian influences, but he probably goes too far in arguing that it did not exist as a separate religion until the late 8th century. It has generated a good deal of debate in a highly specialised field but has persuaded only a few scholars. This and the obscurity of the writing detract from the remarkable originality of this book.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. An Interesting Idea, but a Difficult Read

By S. Smith

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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 Sectarian 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."

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