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Hagarism: The Story of a Book written by Infidels for Infidels

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Hagarism: The story of a book written by infidels for infidels

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The book titled "Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World," questions just about everything Muslims believe as historical truths. It challenges the common belief that the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad over a period of 22 years (610-632) in Mecca and Medina. Instead, the book contends that the Quran was composed, possibly in Syria or Iraq, more than fifty years after the Prophet's death, projected back in time, and attributed to the Prophet.

The Quran, according to the book, was fabricated during the reign of Caliph Abdul Malik (685-705) to legitimize an expanding empire. The book also contends that the word Muslim was invented in the 8th century to replace the word Muhajirun (immigrants), which was the original name of the Arab community that conquered Palestine and built the Dome of the Rock.

The book itself prescribes a new name for early Muslims. It calls them Hagarenes, that is, the biological descendants of Abraham by Hagar. This racial naming of early Muslims is employed to distinguish them from Jews, who are the descendants of Abraham by Sarah. Hagarism, the book's title, is a quasi-pejorative, and possibly a racist, label to describe the historical phenomenon of early Muslims.

In the authors' own words, the book is written "by infidels for infidels." Attacks on the Quran's authenticity, the Prophet's integrity, or Islamic history are not new. The Quran itself acknowledges similar attacks the unbelievers made while the Quran was being revealed. For more than a thousand years, Western scholarship has been determined to expose what it considers to be the "fraudulent foundation" of Islam. In this sense, Hagarism is yet another book in the large dump of attack literature.

However, what distinguishes this book is the fact that its authors, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, no longer subscribe to its critical findings. On April 3, 2006, I had a phone conversation with Michael Cook and we talked about Hagarism. He said to me the following, which he later confirmed by means of an email: "The central thesis of that book was, I now think, mistaken. Over the years, I have gradually come to think that the evidence we had to support the thesis was not sufficient or internally consistent enough."

On April 6, 2006, I interviewed Patricia Crone, as well, to see what she now thinks about the book. She was even more candid in repudiating the central thesis of the book. She agrees with the critics that the book was "a graduate essay." The book was published in 1977 when the authors lived in England. "We were young, and we did not know anything. The book was just a hypothesis, not a conclusive finding," said Crone. "I do not think that the book's thesis is valid."

Many Western scholars, Christians and Jews, have dismissed Hagarism as a "thin argument" rather than "credible research." One historian, however, who appears to admire the book is Daniel Pipes, who has taught at Chicago and Harvard universities. Pipes, an embittered Zionist known for his ugly utterings against Islam and Muslims, argues that while Western scholars like Crone and Cook "in the role of termites" are eating away at the magnificent Islamic edifice, Muslims are "acting as though the beams and joints were as strong as ever." Even Pipes, however, describes the book as "wild." Notwithstanding scholarly repudiations, Internet websites continue to rely on the book to malign Islam, assuming that the book's thesis is derived from credible research.

Even online Wikipedia features the book, citing a large quotation from Daniel Pipes, The article concludes: "Although this line of research is discounted by Islamic traditionalists, Western scholars have generally applauded Crone and Cook's advances in tracing the origins of Islam." When I insisted that Wikipedia provide a source to support the above conclusion, the editor added "citation needed" to the conclusion. As of today, no citation to support the conclusion has been furnished.

Part of the confusion arises from the fact that Cook and Crone have made no manifest effort to repudiate their juvenile findings in the book. The authors admitted to me that they had not done it and cater no plans to do so. Repudiating scholarly work is not easy because sometimes errors are intertwined with valid findings. No scholar is obligated to rewrite books to correct errors. Scholarly decency, however, demands that the authors officially repudiate a scandalous thesis, one in which they no longer believe and one that maligns the faith of more than a billion people.

It appears however that the authors do not wish to discount a book that launched their careers and brought to them contacts and fortune. Patricia Crone teaches at the Institute for Advanced Studies, the academic home of Albert Einstein, an institute that proclaims itself as "one of the world's leading centers for theoretical research and intellectual inquiry." Michael Cook is a chaired professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, who in 2002 (a few months after 9/11 terrorist attacks) received \$1.5 million Distinguished Achievement Award from the Mellon Foundation "for significant contribution to humanities research."

One needs no brains to write against Islam in the Western world. After 9/11, anti-Islamic literature has become a big business that even acclaimed academics have generously exploited for self-promotion. In this milieu, repudiating even a false anti-Islamic book will be condemned as apostasy. We need not burn the book. Crone and Cook themselves must muster the courage and put out the brushfire they started three decades ago, albeit in youthful excitement.

Ali Khan is a professor of law at Washburn University School of Law in Topeka, Kansas. This excerpt is taken from his forthcoming law article, The Externalist Scholarship on Islamic Law, which will be published in Michigan State Law Review.