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**Pantheon of Skeptics.
Moshe Sharon and the Early (R)evolutions of Islam
– a Brief Outline¹**

Summary

The paper focuses on Moshe Sharon's scholarly vision on the historical developments of early Islam. Representing substantially a skeptical approach to the traditional Islamic account, the Israeli historian and epigrapher attempts intriguingly to separate the wheat from the chaff using his own critical methodology which, quite expectedly, didn't find a warm reception amongst modern scholars of early Islam. Being today in many aspects quite outdated or disproved, Sharon's vision on the dawn of the Islamic age has yet found its place in the history of modern Islamic studies, being a conspicuous contribution to this field. The scholar takes on a brief chronological, topographical and ideological reconstruction of the genesis of the Islamic movement, the role of the prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, Mecca, the Ummayad era, touching on 'Abd al-Malik, the Dome of the Rock, early Islamic terminology and other academically debated issues.

Keywords: early Islam, skeptical school, the Dome of the Rock, 'Abd al-Malik

Aside Yehuda D. Nevo, Moshe Sharon (born 1937) is one of the most prominent modern Israeli scholar critical of the early history of Islam. Sharon, a specialist in Islamic history and Arabic epigraphy educated at the Hebrew University and the University of London, strives to combine elements of the traditional Islamicist methodology with

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instruments of scholarly criticism, applied by the Western academia. His main interests touch on the question of legitimacy of authority in early Islam. This paper aims at briefly summing up the broad lines of Sharon's scholarly vision of the genesis of Islam, somewhat "lost" among many spacious volumes of modern publications on the Middle Eastern history, however deserving greater attention and verification.

The Israeli researcher argues that that early Muslim history is being commonly reconstructed almost exclusively based on the Muslim tradition, on the other hand, this same tradition has been repeatedly rebuilt and "amended" through centuries of social tensions, political struggle and theological disputes which puts automatically in question the reliability of the Muslim historiography taken literally². Skeptical scholars like Sharon agree that the historiographic sources for the reconstruction of the earlier Islamic history are replete with myths, contaminations, fabrications, interpolations, etc, however academics differ greatly in approaching this problem methodologically. Thus, modern Islamicists are facing a tough choice and, as a result of which, are essentially torn between two opposing methodological factions – those who because of the lack of alternative sources acknowledge the traditional Muslim historiographical account as credible or credible enough to work on its basis using different methodological tools for differentiating facts from legends, and those who, like John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone (especially at the earlier stage of her academic career) and others, take on the difficult and rather ambitious task – to reconstruct the Islamic history from scratch with the tools of scientific criticism. The latter group of skeptics is joined, with some emendations as shown below, by the Israeli epigrapher.

At the crossroads of traditionalism and skepticism

Thus, Sharon heads out to explore "the workshop of inventing history" according to his own methodological assumption, being primarily concerned with deciphering the code of the Muslim tradition³. For the Israeli researcher, at any significant change in political power in the seventh and eighth centuries CE., "tradition could conveniently be fabricated, and history be invented to back the claims of each party involved in the debate over the question of the Islamic leadership"⁴. Historiography was thus formed and repeatedly modified by the victorious elite in power. Any counter-theory alternative to the classical account of the early Muslim history is thus welcome and should not be spontaneously discredited as groundless. In the worst case, it stimulates to reconsider certain axioms of the Oriental scholarship, and helps in shedding light on it from new perspectives.

² More on the example of the 'Abbasids rewriting the Umayyad version of the earliest history of Islam in e.g.: Moshe Sharon, *Black Banners from The East, The Establishment of The 'Abbāsīd State: Incubation of a Revolt*, The Max Schloessinger Memorial Series, The Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 231–238.

³ Moshe Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, "Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam" 1991, 14, p. 116.

⁴ Ibid.

Sharon is clearly inspired by the works of his prominent predecessors – Patricia Crone, Michael Cook and Souleiman Bashear. According to Bashear and now also Sharon, neither Islam as an independent state-religion nor the Qur’an as its Holy Book, can be historically traced prior to the end of the seventh century C.E. and the beginning of the eighth⁵. Sharon does not reject tradition as Crone does (however, she doesn’t seem to be consistent in her approach), but believes that one can selectively „read out” of it true information. For Sharon, “The generally accepted description of the inception and development of early Islam should be regarded only as a scheme retrospectively formed by later political developments”⁶.

As mentioned by Sharon when quoting one of the mentors of modern Islamic studies – the Dutch scholar Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje - “In our skeptical time there is very little which is above criticism, and, one day or the other, we may expect to hear that Mohammed never existed. The arguments for this can hardly be weaker than those of [Paul] Casanova against the authenticity of the Qur’an”⁷. The Israeli scholar is of the opinion that the Qur’an, in its highly allusive and symbolical language cannot stand alone – it needs to be explained by the religious tradition in order to be understood in one way or another. The tradition shaped the meanings of the Qur’an giving it its final identity, influenced by multiple factors as the historical and geographical background, timespan and human intervention. Sharon seems to believe that the Qur’anic verse standing on its own has no specific identity. This shall be the case of almost all the Qur’anic verses.

Also the pre-Islamic history, as far as the genealogy of the family of the Prophet is concerned, was invented at a later time and tailored (and then repeatedly retailored) to the needs of both the Umayyads and their adversaries⁸. Sharon points out that a number of Muslim scholars themselves have admitted that the hadith might have been fabricated, and even attempted to categorize the motives behind such actions⁹. However, their works didn’t produce results of greater value from the point of view of modern Islamic scholarship.

Pillars of Sharon’s approach

Does Moshe Sharon believe in the historical existence of the Prophet Muhammad? It seems that this matter does not play a bigger role in his research. What might be concluded from Sharon works, one cannot deny the existence of the historical Muhammad or, possibly, a greater number of local prophets preaching similar messages, however one can only surmise facts about him and deeds ascribed to him. Sharon believes that

⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *Mohammedanism. Lectures on its Origin, its Religious and Political Growth, and its Present State*, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York and London 1916, pp. 16–17.

⁸ Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, p. 119.

⁹ Moshe Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, in: Moshe Sharon (ed.), *Pillars of Smoke and Fire. The Holy Land in History and Thought*, Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg 1988, pp. 229–230.

the tradition (perhaps not necessarily only the Muslim one) presents the history not as it has really been, but as it should have been, according to the later compilers of the sanctified tradition¹⁰. One can also take on the reconstruction of history based on dubious historiographic sources having always in mind the intentions and the reasons which motivated the compilers of this tradition.

Bearing in mind this brief outline of his methodology, how does Sharon use it to reconstruct chronologically and topographically the genesis of Islam? The regions of Arabia, Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia witnessed the formation of groups of believers called *al-mu'minūn*, each group led by its own *amīr al-mu'minīn* (for Sharon: *the chief of the faithful*). This is why – as he writes – it is possible to find several *amīrs* at the same time, also among such groups as the Kharijites¹¹. Influential Umayyads in Syria had its own *amīr al-mu'minīn*, likewise another powerful group of believers centered around Medina (their leader, *amīr al-mu'minīn*, was 'Abd Allāh Ibn az-Zubayr). The Shiite tradition reports only of one orthodox *amīr al-mu'minīn* – 'Alī¹². For the Israeli scholar, the fact that the tradition attests to so many examples of the use of this title as to leaders standing at the forefront of religious groups, shows that at the first stage of Islamic history these groups of believers constituted politically independent communities¹³. The relationship between them was similar to that of the Arab tribal system, fastened together by the same prophetic inspiration, common beliefs and probably a similar structure of authority within them. These two systems – the tribal and the new religious one (of Muḥammad inspiration) – were for a very long time intertwined with each other in a very fluid manner.

At the same time, Sharon stresses that Muḥammadan revelations were far from being canonized in the middle and second half of the 7th century CE¹⁴. Each of these communities preserved the core of the prophetic message, above all orally, in the form received from Arabia. And because these communities of believers were living in the so called sectarian milieu (to use Wansbrough's terminology), so the body of revelations preserved by them was being gradually permeated and replenished by local elements and materials which were of course later also ascribed by the local groups to the Prophet himself¹⁵. Under the influence of the multifaith environment, the *al-mu'minūn* communities developed

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 225.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 226.

¹² Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, p. 124. In Sharon's theory, one cannot consider the Shiites (nor the Kharijites, consequently) apostates from the Muslim faith, because in the middle of the seventh century there was still no dogmatic canon of Islam, universally applicable by all communities of the faithful. „(...) such a politically and theologically coherent body [of Islam] did not exist in the seventh century”. For Sharon, the Shiites were one of many communities of believers, living in Iraq, with its own *amīr- al-mu'minīn*, its own version of the prophetic revelations and a vibrant religious tradition heavily influenced by Iraqi Judaism. The Shiite *ahbār* reflect the degree to which the leaders of this community have adapted large parts of the Talmudic materials into their own religious tradition, including stories relating to biblical scenes and figures. Ibid.,126.

¹³ Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

their own slightly divergent religious rites and beliefs. We see reminiscences thereof in the traditional reports of ‘Uṭmān’s Qur’anic redaction who has ordered to unify the official version of the Qur’an.

One can assume that all of the Muslim communities were drawing on their religious inspiration from the same monotheistic Muḥammadan source, regardless of whether it was historically consubstantial with one or more prophets. Taking into account the religious reality of that times, we must bear in mind that it abounded in many local prophets, out of whom only few found their place by name in historical reports or legends of the religious tradition, often conveying convergent religious messages, e.g. Musaylima – the prophet of the Banū Ḥanīfa, who was not as successful as Muḥammad and whose life and career have been distorted beyond recognition by the later Muslim tradition. As the Islamic tradition communicates, Musaylima was calling himself *rasūl Allāh* and *raḥmān al-yamāma*, and preached the word in the name of *ar-raḥmān*¹⁶. Similarly, Al-Aswad Ibn ‘Awf al-‘Ansī, the prophet of ‘Ans, was calling himself *raḥmān al-yaman*)¹⁷.

Historical Syria at the forefront

For Sharon, the most important events took place in Syria¹⁸. The Syrian *amīr al-mu’minīn*, following in the footsteps and tradition of the Ghassanid buffer rulers (dependent on Byzantium) were granted the title of phylarchs (Arab. *mulūk*) probably by the Byzantine emperor, while preserving at the same time their religious title of *amīr al-mu’minīn* (as Sharon notes, later Abbasid historiographical sources emphasized that the Umayyads depicted themselves as *mulūk* what was supposed to be an argument against the Umayyads claims for their rights to succeed the righteous caliphs). According to the Ḡassānid tradition, the rulers were entitling themselves *mulūk aš-Šām* (Arab. kings of Syria)¹⁹. In the late antique Roman and, later, Byzantine Empire, the title of phylarchs was given to Middle Eastern tribal chieftains (mostly Arab) allied to Constantinople, usually in the limes (border) areas. In the 2nd half of the 6th century CE the system was centralized by subjecting all Syrian phylarchs to the hegemony of the Ghassanid one²⁰.

The Umayyad clan was active in Syria long before the time by which it has been recorded by the Muslim tradition for its start. The Umayyads captured the power over the region from the Ḡassānids, and probably cherished good relations with the Byzantines²¹. Sharon mentions the legendary meeting between Abū Sufyān and the Emperor Heraclius, which, although being a story of polemical nature, may partly include some historical

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 123, footnote 20. M. Sharon is quoting: Aḥmad al-Balāḍurī, *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān*, Michael de Goeje (ed.), Brill, Leiden 1863-1866, pp. 87f, 99.

¹⁷ Ibid. Sharon is quoting: Al-Balāḍurī, *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān*, p. 105.

¹⁸ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 227.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

background basis²². For the Israeli scholar, the Umayyads took over power from the Ḡassānids in a fluid manner, and were subsequently fluidly accepted by Constantinople. The first Umayyad ruler known from historical facts was Mu'āwiya, although there are materials suggesting that his brother Yazīd could have preceded him in power²³. Mu'āwiya crowned himself as a *malik* in Jerusalem²⁴. Why? In this way he eluded from harming the political relations with the Byzantines and managed to reconcile the Christian tradition of the Ḡassānid Arabs with new beliefs of the al-mu'minūn communities. This also means that, for Sharon, Mu'āwiya had been in power long before the traditional account tells us, still in times of no open conflict with Byzantium²⁵.

Speaking of it, a question arises: why, since most of the Umayyads were not right-believing (as the Muslim Abbasid tradition wants it), the first two Umayyad governors of Syria were appointed by the caliph 'Umar?²⁶ It seems that the Muslim traditions is here denying its own account – on the one hand the Umayyad *mulūk* are portrayed as usurpers, and on the other hand Muslim provincial governors are appointed by 'Umar himself from the Umayyad clan. Sharon suggests that the late Abbasid historiographers were not able to erase this fact from history, and had to integrate it somehow into the factual body of that epoch²⁷. In reality, however, as suggested by Sharon, it appears that the Umayyad might have reigned over Syria from a much earlier time, independently from the rise of a new religious ideology, later to be called Islam²⁸.

Moshe Sharon suggests that the religious affiliation of Mu'āwiya remains unclear²⁹. In general, it is impossible to depict the beliefs of the early Umayyads (including even 'Abd al-Malik) as „Islamic” in the meaning of Islam centuries later. It may not be excluded that Mu'āwiya was a Christian belonging to one of the Eastern rites (not necessarily the largest or most known ones), but it is also possibly that his faith has already evolved beyond the borders of Christianity³⁰. It seems that for Sharon the ideological axis of the seventh century around which vibrated debates of most Middle Eastern religious groups was the dispute over the nature of Christ (i.e. the topic of almost all ecumenical councils from the beginning of Christianity).

The early Umayyad faith incorporated elements of beliefs of their subordinates – mostly Christian Arabs, Jews, Samaritans³¹; it was loaded with scriptural monotheistic tradition, enhanced by the intense topography of places of worship in the Holy Land (Christians shared with Muslims, among others, the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 228.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 227.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 228.

²⁸ Ibid., see also: Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, pp. 120–121.

²⁹ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 228.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Damascus, and probably also other places of worship)³². Mu'āwiya certainly remained in a very close relationship with Christianity. During his reign he was relying on the entirely Christianized Kalb tribe, married the its chieftain's daughter, who gave birth to Yazīd – his successor in power. The descendant of Mu'āwiya and the Christian princess was naturally predisposed to rule over Christian Arabs and *al-mu'minūn* communities in Syro-Palestine³³.

'Abd al-Malik and the birth of Islam

For Sharon, the breakthrough in the history of *al-mu'minūn* and the key to understanding the gradual metamorphosis of their beliefs into Islam came with the rule of 'Abd al-Malik³⁴. After coming to power in approx. 685 CE, he set for himself a goal of uniting different *al-mu'minūn* groups scattered across the Middle East under one scepter of power, i.e. establishing one empire. To do so, it was not enough to conquer Iraq, Egypt and Hijaz. It was first and foremost necessary to carry out dogmatic reforms and introduce one official orthodox faith, following the religious pattern of the state religion in the Byzantine Empire³⁵.

As Sharon sees it, 'Abd al-Malik carried out his plans in two phases. In Jerusalem, he built the Dome of the Rock as a manifesto of the foundations of the new faith (cutting itself off from Christianity). The temple was essential in shaping the Islamic holiness in Jerusalem³⁶. The new holy structure thus served as a physical refutation of the Christian belief that the site should remain in desolation³⁷. At the same time, 'Abd al-Malik ordered the redaction of the official unified text of the Qur'an. It was all meant to constitute the final break with the remnants of the religious and political dependence on the Byzantine Empire.

In general, the Israeli researcher seems to accept the common thesis of the Oriental scholarship and the traditional Muslim scholars as to the direct reasons for building the Dome of the Rock. Sharon quotes the Muslim historian Aḥmad al-Ya'qūbī (author of a historical compendium till 872 CE)³⁸ suggesting that 'Abd al-Malik is said to have built the Dome of the Rock in the intention of placing Jerusalem in the center of Islam and re-diverting the pilgrimage activities from Mecca to Jerusalem, because Mecca remained under the control of the 'Abd Allah Ibn az-Zubayr³⁹. The Dome of the Rock was meant

³² Ibid. Sharon refers here also to: Al-Balāḍurī, *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān*, pp. 125–126.

³³ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 228.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 229.

³⁵ Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, p. 130.

³⁶ Moshe Sharon, *Islam on the Temple Mount. In Muslim Tradition the Dome of the Rock Restored Solomon's Temple*, "Biblical Archaeology Review" 2006, July/August, p. 39.

³⁷ Moshe Sharon, *The 'Praises of Jerusalem' as a Source for the Early History of Islam*, "Bibliotheca Orientalis" 1992, 49, no.1/2, p. 57.

³⁸ Aḥmad Ibn Abī Ya'qūb Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'riḥ*, Martijn Houtsma (ed.), Leiden 1883.

³⁹ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 229.

to be an important statement of a political and religious nature⁴⁰. But this is where the interpretations of Sharon and the traditionalists split up not to meet anymore.

For the Israeli scholar, building the Dome of the Rock was to solidify and manifest the faith of *al-mu'minūn* as rising out the Abrahamic rock and building on it according to the prophetic inspiration⁴¹. Having overcome a longer crisis, 'Abd al-Malik was able to again consolidate the Umayyad power in Syria, seeking to stretch it further to Hijaz and Mesopotamia. However, for Sharon, groups of *al-mu'minūn* were feeling outnumbered by the dominating Christian and Jewish population. The elevation of the Dome of the Rock was to help them to reverse the balance of power to the advantage of the *al-mu'minūn*.

Only from this point one can speak of the appearance of the term *Muslims* and can date the birth of Islam, if the genesis of a religion can at all be dated in this way. As Sharon writes: „The Dome of the Rock was thus built as the major sanctuary of Islam and as a symbol of its superiority over the other religions. Islam was born as a term which was to unify all the groups of *mu'minūn* under the slogan of *dīn al-ḥaqq*, the “true religion” with which Muhammad was sent in order to rule over all the other religions. Islam was also declared the religion of the state, though the state was not yet unified”⁴².

The term *Muslims* was introduced to signify collectively the unified *al-mu'minūn* communities after 'Abd al-Malik's reform. The rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple gave Islam a new depth⁴³. After completing it, the second stage of 'Abd al-Malik's plan included emancipating the canonized Islamic religion from the Christian tradition. Islam needed its own Arab „*salvation history*” (to use J. Wansbrough's terminology) rooted in Arabia. Mecca was the ideal choice for it – it was a place radiating with Arabhood and symbolically associating Muhammad with the heritage of Abraham⁴⁴.

However, contrary to 'Abd al-Malik's expectations, the construction of the Dome of the Rock did not solve his essential problem, i.e. it did not become the anticipated strong historical accent, the point of religious reference around which the new era of the Umayyad state and the Muslim religion were to be born⁴⁵. Jerusalem, the most important center of religious authority for Syro-Palestine and Egypt, for some unknown reasons not expressed by Sharon explicitly, “meant nothing to the Iraqis, the Hijāzies, or the Mesopotamians”⁴⁶ (i.e. to the *al-mu'minūn* groups in these regions). Why did they prefer Mecca instead of Jerusalem? *Al-Mu'minūn* were probably looking for a place of reconciliation for all their traditions. They also wanted to pivot the fundamentals of the

⁴⁰ Sharon, *Islam on the Temple Mount. In Muslim Tradition the Dome of the Rock Restored Solomon's Temple*, p. 46.

⁴¹ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 229.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, p. 132.

⁴⁴ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 232.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

new faith on Muhammad, not on Jerusalem⁴⁷. The new remote place was to symbolize additionally the spirit of Arabhood in Islam, make it unique and independent of other religions. As Sharon writes, the choice fell on Mecca. According to one of the ancient tradition extant in Islam till today, the sanctuary of Al-Ka‘ba, or generally Mecca, was visited by the biblical Abraham himself⁴⁸.

Mecca’s late entering the stage

Having failed to create the transnational religious hub of the *al-mu‘minūn* in Jerusalem, ‘Abd al-Malik changed now his strategy and strived to pivot the new faith in Mecca, trying to transform the old rustic religious shrine into the capital of the new state, which began in Syria⁴⁹. This is why, according to Sharon, ‘Abd al-Malik decided to conquer Mecca which was at that time under the rule of another *amīr al-mu‘minīn* – ‘Abd Allāh Ibn az-Zubayr (who himself attempted to extend his authority over the *al-mu‘minūn* communities in Iraq and Syria). ‘Abd Allāh Ibn az-Zubayr was promoting the Hijazi version of the Muḥammadan apparitions which was in particular stressing the exalted position and rank of the Al-Ka‘ba shrine (the ancient holiness of Al-Ka‘ba was supported by traditions claiming its elevation by Abraham and its renewal in the spirit of God by Muhammad)⁵⁰.

As Sharon writes, the veneration of Al-Ka‘ba by the Hijazi *al-mu‘minūn* headed by ‘Abd Allāh Ibn az-Zubayr was not in any way universal, i.e. it did not embrace other communities of believers scattered to the north of Hijaz (although ‘Abd Allāh was striving to achieve this goal)⁵¹. As the Israeli scholar suggests, in Egypt, Syria or Iraq the faithful were not directing their faces in prayer toward Mecca, but, under the influence of Christianity, at least in Egypt and Syria, early *al-mu‘minūn* prayed towards the east⁵². As a proof for it, Sharon mentions that some of the oldest Islamic mosques (e.g. the ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ mosque in Al-Fuṣṭāṭ in Egypt) have the *miḥrāb* directed towards the east (Arab. *al-qibla al-muṣarraqa*)⁵³. Similarly, the mosque in Be‘er Orah in the south-eastern part of the Negev in Israel, has two *miḥrābs* – an earlier and an older one (for Sharon, the latter one must have been added later, after the reform of ‘Abd al-Malik and Al-Walīd came into force)⁵⁴. Sharon writes that one of the Muslim traditions reports that during the reign of the Umayyad caliph Al-Walīd I, the son of ‘Abd al-Malik (705–715), a state

⁴⁷ The Qur’an does not mention Jerusalem explicitly – the Arabs who conquered it came to learn about its spiritual importance only after closer contacts with Jews and Christians. Moshe Sharon, *Islam on the Temple Mount*, “Biblical Archeological Review” 2006, vol. 32, no. 4, p. 47.

⁴⁸ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 232.

⁴⁹ Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, p. 128.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 129.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 230.

decree was issued changing the orientation of mosques towards the south – onto Mecca⁵⁵. Sharon stresses the fact the reports of the Muslim tradition itself include information concerning the worship of early communities of believers, in which the *mihṛāb* faces east - however this includes late reports by Yāqūt Ibn ‘Abd Allāh ar-Rūmī al-Ḥamawī (12–13 century CE), Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad Ibn Duqmāq (14–15 century CE, and also Taqī ad-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (14–15 century CE) who is quoting Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī from the 9th century CE⁵⁶.

For Sharon, it is not unreasonable to assume that ‘Abd al-Malik’s conquest of Mecca, which initiated the Muslim imperial era, was retrospectively introduced into the *Sīra* of Muhammad as an element of the prophet’s career⁵⁷. In the *Sīra*, it was the prophet Muhammad who conquered Mecca and cleansed the Al-Ka‘ba from all kinds of non-orthodox beliefs, with the Umayyad Abū Sufyān playing a role in it. In fact however, as Sharon wants it, it was only a backward projection of actions taken by ‘Abd al-Malik.

To resume, ‘Abd al-Malik conquered Mecca in 73 AH / 692 CE and destroyed Al-Ka‘ba in order to rebuild it according to the “original” plan of Muhammad. According to Sharon, the Arab sources (aware that this historical fact was to unite all the *al-mu‘minūn* groups under the rule of ‘Abd al-Malik,) call this date the year of unity (Arab. *sanat al-ḡamā‘a*) - till that time this term was reserved for signifying the year in which Mu‘āwiya united the new empire for the first time after the death of ‘Alī in 661 CE⁵⁸. By this year, 73 AH/692 CE, as Sharon wants it, the mission of making Islam was completed – born anew, Arabic in nature, with a full-fledged Arab sanctuary, with an Arab prophet and a holy book in the Arabic language with its official version distributed throughout the empire. The concept of the state religion came true. Muslims have been since then commanded to pray facing the Mecca and build new mosques with a new a orientation of the *mihṛāb*. Muhammad became the seal of all the prophets preceding him. Scholars began to work on the pre-history of Mecca and Islam granting the Prophet’s family a historical depth⁵⁹. Later, with the success of the Abbasid revolt, the story of Islam was reshaped again in order to fulfill the needs of new rulers. The image of the ancestor of the Abbasids – ‘Abbās – was reconstructed, receiving a central role in the creation of Islam, alongside the Prophet⁶⁰. At the same time, in Sharon’s theory, historians continued to fabricate stories and rework the existing traditions in order to delegitimize the retreating Umayyads⁶¹. They were basing their work on the same materials about Mecca that had been previously accumulated at the behest of ‘Abd al-Malik and later used by Wahb Ibn Munabbih in his work on the *Sīra*⁶² (which later laid at the basis of the *Sīra* by Ibn Ishāq).

⁵⁵ Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, pp. 129–130.

⁵⁶ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 230.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 233.

⁵⁸ Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, pp. 133–134.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

⁶⁰ Sharon, *Black Banners from The East*, pp. 24–25, 33.

⁶¹ Sharon, *The Umayyads as Ahl al-Bayt*, p. 145.

⁶² Ibid., p. 144.

And so it was not the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, but the establishment of Al-Ka‘ba as the religious center of *al-mu‘minūn* which was the highlight of ‘Abd al-Malik reign. Al-Ya‘qūbī, either intentionally or drawing on an already distorted tradition, reported that ‘Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock in order to turn Jerusalem into the center of Islam and redirect the pilgrimage traffic to Jerusalem from Mecca which remained under the control of the ‘Abd Allāh Ibn az-Zubayr. In fact, however, as Sharon believes it, the opposite happened⁶³.

Thus, the Israeli scholar is a proponent of the theory that Islam was born outside the Arabian Peninsula, and was only later retrospectively transposed onto it historiographically. For Sharon, reminiscences of this thesis are preserved in the *Sīra* itself saying that Jerusalem was the qibla before Mecca⁶⁴. In general, we may conclude, that the key to the studies on Islamic genesis has to be looked for – in Sharon’s theory – in the proper deciphering of the Abbasid written sources using adequate critical methodology.

Reception of Sharon’s contribution

The scholarly reception of Sharon’s theory are quite critical, criticizing it mostly for what is quite typical for the skeptical school of Islamic scholarship: selectiveness in the use of sources, historiographical inconsistencies, arbitrariness in arguments and their outdatedness.

Patricia Crone, not depreciating Sharon’s academic engagement and raising a number of important issues for reconsideration, accuses him generally of combining “conjecture with arbitrary selection from a mass of contradictory and frequently quite ahistorical material”⁶⁵. For the renown Danish-American scholar, “All in all, it is not hard to feel that a distinguished scholar has done himself a disservice. (...) one is inevitably disappointed to find oneself presented with what must be characterized as a hasty compilation of youthful research in dire need of further thought”⁶⁶. Paradoxically enough, Crone was confronted a couple of years earlier with the very same arguments by reviewers of her flagship works (arbitrariness, selectiveness, youth experiment) such as “Hagarism. The making of the Islamic world”⁶⁷.

Elton L. Daniel draws attention to the fact that Sharon’s work is antiquated methodologically. “He follows the positivist, empirical tradition of Orientalism popular in the 19th-century that has now fallen into disrepute. It is often a “method” replete with unjustified assumptions, non sequiturs, and circular reasoning, especially in evaluation

⁶³ Sharon, *The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land*, p. 229.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁶⁵ Patricia Crone, review of: *Black Banners from The East, The Establishment of The ‘Abbāsīd State: Incubation of a Revolt* by Moshe Sharon, “Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies” 1987, 50, p. 135.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶⁷ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making Of The Islamic World*, 1977, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977.

of source material. Sharon repeatedly advances a thesis and defends it by conveniently dismissing all contrary evidence as a later fabrication, precisely because it contradicts his thesis! Unlike most contemporary historians, even those of early Islamic history, Sharon remains remarkably confident of his ability “to separate fact from fiction” (...) a more prudent, and at times a more tactful, scholar should admit that most of these matters fall in the category of informed speculation or probability, rather than certain knowledge”.⁶⁸

Wilferd Madelung, in turn, although also reproaching Sharon for his selectiveness in the use of sources and misreading J. Wellhausen’s works on the Umayyad-‘Abbasid relations, receives Sharon’s theory as falling into the category of academic research and worth discussing cautiously. Also for Madelung, however, the main conclusions of Sharon’s theory are hardly tenable, and his scholarly discussion “seems generally unperceptive and poorly informed”⁶⁹.

Criticism notwithstanding after a longer time, it must be remembered however that Sharon’s vision on the genesis of the Islamic religion is a fruit of the 20th-century last two decades which witnessed a conspicuous boom of unorthodox, experimental and often eccentric approaches to this academic field (e.g. G. Lüling, S. Bashear, P. Crone, M. Cook, Y. Nevo etc.). It shall therefore not to be classified as part of the 19th-century archaic critical-historical methodological school, but rather as belonging to the late skeptical revival being a scholarly protest against the abuse of and overdependence on late Muslim sources only. Creating politics of memory and writing history retrospectively can go to both extremes yielding quite distinctive and irreconcilable visions of the past depending on the tools and motives behind its making. Sharon’s experimental attempt to reconstruct the past lies at the crossroads of methodology, somewhere between the classical approach filtering the Muslim tradition for scholarly acceptable evidence and the hardline skeptical approach rejecting all non-contemporary sources to early Islamic times. Although not a full-fledged theory and only generally documented, it surely deserves its place in the history of modern Islamic studies.

⁶⁸ Elton Daniel, review of: *Black Banners from The East, The Establishment of The ‘Abbāsīd State: Incubation of a Revolt* by Moshe Sharon, “International Journal of Middle East Studies” 1989, 21, p. 579.

⁶⁹ Wilferd Madelung, review of *Black Banners from The East, The Establishment of The ‘Abbāsīd State: Incubation of a Revolt* by Moshe Sharon, “Journal of Near Eastern Studies” 1989, 48, pp. 70–72.