

The story of the emergence of Islam, as it is usually told, is rather straightforward. Muhammad was born in Mecca, a pagan city in western Arabia in 570 CE. At the age of forty, he began to proclaim revelations from the one true God, the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Because most of the Meccan pagans refused his message, Muhammad traveled to Medina, a city to the north of Mecca, in 622. There he won the fidelity of the Arabs, overcame Jewish tribes who resisted him, and eventually attacked and overcame the forces of the pagan Meccans. When Muhammad died in 632, he had established a small state based on Islam, the religion given to him by God. His successors, the caliphs, launched a great campaign of conquests and carried Islam throughout the Middle East and across North Africa.

The question of how much of this story is historically accurate, however, is less straightforward. Our sources for the study of Islam's emergence are unlike those for the study of Judaism or Christianity, and they present scholars with particular difficulties. The Qur'an is an ancient text, and it certainly contains authentic material from the time of Islamic origins, but it offers almost no explicit

biographical information on Muhammad or his companions. Other Islamic sources, such as Qur'anic commentaries or biographies of the Prophet, often seem to be based on the Qur'an (and not records of an independent process of oral transmission). Non-Islamic sources from the time of Islam's emergence are curiously silent. They simply make no mention of a prophet in Mecca.

In light of these complications, scholars today have an important choice to make when they set out to describe Islam's origins. They might choose simply to follow the traditional Islamic biographies of Muhammad, selecting those portions of the biography they consider most reliable and adding their own commentary. This is the approach, for example, of Karen Armstrong in her work *Muhammad: A Prophet of Our Time* (2006). Armstrong emphasizes those elements of the traditional biography that might make the Muslim prophet appealing to a modern Western audience. It is also the approach of Robert Spencer in his work *The Truth About Muhammad* (2006). Spencer, however, emphasizes those elements of the traditional biography that might make him unappealing to a modern Western audience. Scholars might also cast

aside the traditional Islamic biographies and present new scenarios for the rise of Islam. This is the approach of a *The Hidden Origins of Islam* (2010), a collection of articles in which a number of authors argue that the qur’anic word *muhammad* (which in Arabic means “the praised one”) is not the name of a new prophet but an adjective referring to Jesus. The Muhammad of Islamic tradition, in their estimation, never existed.

Francis Peters takes a different approach. In *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (1994), Peters first acknowledges how little can be reliably known about Islam’s origins: “However long the search has gone on, the ‘quest of the historical Muhammad’ is still surrounded by enormous difficulties from both the growth and encrustations of centuries of pious regard and the difficulty of the source material” (xii). Yet Peters decides to postpone any discussion of these difficulties. In the body of the book, he proceeds “as if” the traditional story were historically reliable: “This is an issue that must be addressed, but it is highly technical, and rather than put such daunting stuff between the reader and the subject of this book, I have placed [it] in an appendix” (xii). Thus in the body of his book, Peters provides the reader with a thoroughly classical account of Islam’s origins, an account that he judges to be fundamentally unreliable.

### Approach of this book

The approach of the present work is different. In part one, I present the traditional story of

Islam’s rise, from the birth of Muhammad to the death of his cousin and son-in-law, ‘Ali (according to the traditional dates, 570–661 CE); this introduction is divided according to the life of Muhammad in Mecca (570–610 CE; chapter 1), the life of Muhammad in Medina (610–632 CE; chapter 2), and the career of the first four caliphs (632–661 CE, chapter 3). In the course of this presentation, however, I discuss how and why pious Muslims scholars wrote the story of Islam in this matter. Whenever possible, I indicate which elements of the traditional account of Islam’s origins are plausible and those that are less so. At the same time, this section of the book is meant to offer readers an appreciation of the Islamic understanding of Muhammad and his pious successors.

In part 2, I provide a critical scholarly perspective on the rise of Islam through a presentation of the Qur’an, our most ancient source for Islam’s emergence. I first offer the reader a general presentation of the Qur’an’s religious message, and the strategies the Qur’an uses to convince the reader of that message (chapter 4). Then I illustrate the Qur’an’s close relationship with biblical literature and biblical traditions (chapter 5). This illustration—which suggests that the Qur’an was preached in a context where Jewish and (especially) Christian traditions were well known—leads to a reconsideration of the traditional biography of Muhammad (chapter 6). Finally I ask what the Qur’an itself might teach us of the story of Islam’s origins (chapter 7). By this point we will have done things in a manner perfectly contrary

to the manner in which they are usually done. Whereas most scholars see the Qur'an through the lens of the traditional histories of Islam's emergence, we will see the history of Islam's emergence through the lens of the Qur'an.

The present work also offers the reader insight into contemporary Islamic visions of the Qur'an and Muhammad's life. In part 3 (chapter 8), I illustrate how Islam's interaction with the West has led Muslims to develop new ideas about the Qur'an and the prophet Muhammad today.

### Features in this book

Before turning to the main body of the work, the reader might benefit from some practical remarks about it. For the most part, I have avoided technical Arabic terms. When I do employ such terms, I generally define them at their first occurrence. In addition, readers will find a glossary at the end of this work with technical Arabic terms, English terms used in a specialized manner, and a brief identification of the main historical and religious personalities of early Islam.

In many recent English publications, the God of Islam is named Allah, as though Allah were the personal name of the God of Islam alone (an idea that inspired a 2007 law in Malaysia prohibiting non-Muslims from calling God Allah). In fact, Allah is simply the word "God" in Arabic (for which reason it is used also by Arabic-speaking Christians). Accordingly, in this work, I simply use the

English word *God* whether referring to the God of Islam.

Biblical citations are from the New Jerusalem Bible. Qur'anic translations are generally those of Arthur Arberry, although I have altered his translation by substituting "Qur'an" for "Koran" (as this latter spelling is rarely used today), and when he uses an especially antiquated word (such as "haply"), I offer a modern equivalent in brackets "[perhaps]." In some cases, however, I present my own translation in order to clarify a point in the underlying Arabic. (Such cases are identified with a parenthetical note.) Instead of using footnotes or endnotes, I present the sources of quotations in abbreviated form in parentheses. The full form of these (and other) sources, and a brief description of them, can be found in the section "Bibliography and Further Reading" at the end of the book.

The present work includes a number of other supplementary features that offer unique insights on Islam's emergence. The opening of the work includes a reference map of the Middle East, a timeline that offers an overview of the traditional chronology of Islam's development, and a chart that presents Muhammad's family background, and his descendants, according to the traditional Islamic account of his life.

More resources are found in the body of the work itself. Interspersed in the text are photographs of Islamic manuscripts and monuments, reproductions of classical objects of Islamic art, and charts/maps meant to illustrate Islamic ideas and traditions. Readers will also discover three types of text boxes: first, the

*Emergence of Islam* includes a diverse selection of original Islamic sources, some of which are presented here in English for the first time; second, this work includes instructional text boxes, which offer a quick and simple introduction to basic topics, including the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, the Islamic notion of *jinn* (or “genies”), and the Islamic idea of jihad; third, our book contains brief biographies of key Muslim figures in text boxes identified as “Personalities in Islam.” Furthermore, at the end of each chapter, study questions are included for individual reflection or group discussion.

At the end of this work (in addition to the section “Bibliography and Further Reading”), readers will find an index of people, places, and subjects, along with a glossary of proper names and technical terms. Entries in this glossary are marked in the body of the text in bold (when they appear for the first time), so that readers can find help on the meaning of a word by flipping to the end of the book. Finally, readers should note that additional resources relevant to *The Emergence of Islam*, including links to reliable educational websites, can be found online at [www.fortresspress.com/reynolds](http://www.fortresspress.com/reynolds).

### Note on Transliteration, Translation, and Abbreviations

The present work uses a simplified transliteration system to refer for the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet. To indicate a particular Arabic letter, Western scholars generally use

the closest equivalent Latin letter (or, in some cases, pairs of letters such as *sh* or *th*) according to English pronunciation. When the same English letter is the closest equivalent to more than one Arabic consonant, scholars often add a dot to the English letter to indicate the emphatic Arabic consonant. Similarly, scholars generally add a macron above *a*, *i*, and *u* to differentiate long Arabic vowels from short Arabic vowels. In the present work, which is not meant to be technical, I include neither dots nor macrons. However, I do include the sign ˆ to indicate the Arabic consonant ʿ*ayn* (which represents a sound close to the bleating of sheep), as in the name ʿAli, and the sign ʾ to indicate the Arabic consonant *hamza* (which represents a sound that takes the place of “t” in the cockney pronunciation of “bottle” [“boʿel”]), as in the word *Qurʾan*. The combination *ay* represents the diphthong found in the English word *may*, and the combination *aw* represents the diphthong in the English word *doubt*.

Arabic words that have an Anglicized form (such as caliph), or that are now commonly used in English (such as jihad or sharia) are presented as English words and not as transliterations of Arabic words. The reader might find it helpful to know that the Arabic word ʿ*abd*—commonly found in names such as ʿ*Abdallah*—means “servant” (thus ʿ*Abdallah* means “servant of God”). The Arabic word *abu* (or *abi*) means “father” (thus Abu Talib means “the father of Talib”), and the Arabic word *ibn* means “son.” Finally, the reader might take note of the following abbreviations:

- AH *anno hegirae* (“in the year of the *hijra*”),  
a reference to the years of the Islamic  
calendar
- Ar. Arabic
- b. Ar. *ibn* (“son”)
- Q Qur’an

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