

The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective

Gabriel Said Reynolds

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Gabriel Said Reynolds' *The Emergence of Islam*, with a new interpretation and new (although somewhat critical and controversial) insights, is an illustrated, lucidly, and comprehensively contribution to the study and history of the "emergence" of Islam. Usually such an account is rather "straightforward," whereas the question of "how much of this story is historically accurate" is "less straightforward" (p. ix). The book's three parts – "The Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs" (chapters 1 through 3), "The Qur'an" (chapters 4 through 7), and "Contemporary Perspectives" (chapter 8) – discuss the emergence of Islamic history from its origins to the contemporary views.

Part 1 presents the "traditional story" from the Prophet's birth to Ali's death (570-661): "Muhammad in Mecca," "Muhammad in Medina," and "The Birth of an Empire." In this part, Reynolds analyzes how and why pious Muslim scholars wrote Islam's "story" in this manner and simultaneously offers, in the same section or part, an appreciation of the Islamic understanding of the Prophet and his immediate four political successors.

Part 2 provides a "critical" scholarly perspective of Islam's rise through presenting the Qur'an, which, according to the author, is the "most ancient," earliest and primordial (p. x), and "most intriguing" source of its emergence (p. 167). Chapter 4, "The Qur'an and Its Message," comprises a general presentation of the Qur'an's message and the strategies it uses to convince the reader of its truth. Chapter 5, "The Quran and the Bible," deals with the Qur'an's close relationship with Biblical traditions. These are followed by chapter 6, "Rethinking the Biography of Prophet Muhammad," and chapter 7, "The Historical Context of the Qur'an," wherein Reynolds asks what the Qur'an itself might teach us about the "story" of Islam's origins.

In this part, Reynolds uses the "Qur'anist" approach, although not in the "religious sense of the term" but "by relying on the Qur'an alone," in order to "gain a revealing view of Islam's emergence" (p. 92): "Whereas most scholars see the *Qur'an through the lens of the traditional history of Islam's emergence*, we will see the *history of Islam's emergence through the lens of the Qur'an.*" (p. xi; italics added). In other words, he bases his narrative only on what is found in the Qur'an: "What we can know about the emergence of Islam from the witness of the Qur'an alone" (p. 90). Chapters

5 and 6 especially suggest that the “Qur’an was proclaimed in a milieu where people were hotly debating theology ... and where they knew the literature of the Jews and Christians well” (p. 135). Similarly, in chapter 7 Reynolds states: “Instead of asking what the biography of the Prophet can teach us about the Qur’an, we will ask what the Qur’an can tell us about the biography of the Prophet, and about the emergence of Islam in general” (p. 154).

Part 3 offers insight into contemporary Islamic visions of the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad’s life, illustrating thereby how Islam’s interaction and contact with the West has led Muslims to develop new ideas about the Qur’an and the Prophet today. This chapter introduces case studies (viz., Egypt, Pakistan, and Iran) as bearing witness to the “power of the story of Islam’s emergence to shape the world we live in today” (p. 196). It also discusses “Islam and Modernity” and “The Qur’an and Scientific Miracles,” thereby making reference to Maurice Bucaille’s *The Bible, the Qur’an, and Science* and “Muhammad and Morality” – with special reference to Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s *Hayat-u-Muhammad/The Life of Muhammad*.

The most important arguments put forth are that (1) the “idea of scientific miracles in the Qur’an” is due to modernity and “a response to the modern world” in general, as well as to the “increasing awareness among Muslims of Western critiques of the Qur’an” in particular (p. 200); and (2) the “Prophet of Islam demonstrated moral, spiritual, and psychological qualities that offer humanity the secret of happiness today” (p. 203). In this chapter’s conclusion, Reynolds answers the question, quoted at the beginning of this review, regarding the “story” of Islam, as historically, “less straightforward” (p. ix) in these words: “In the course of this book, it has become apparent that the question of Islam’s emergence is *far from settled*” (p. 205; italics added).

Suggesting that both “traditional Muslim scholars and earlier generations of Western scholars have largely failed to understand the Qur’an’s intimate relationship with its religious context” (p. 208), Reynolds wrote this book not to *reconcile* “critical scholarship and religious thought,” but to offer insights into two questions: (1) What can we actually know of Islam’s emergence in history? and (2) How do faithful Muslims understand Islam’s emergence? (p. 208). He has largely realized his goal, especially with regard to the first question. One shortcoming/weakness needs to be pointed out, however: He repeatedly uses *story* when referring to Islamic history, instead of *history*, *narration*, and similar terms for its emergence, and *traditional* for the majority of references to the “biography of Prophet.”

The book also contains many helpful features: a timeline illustrating the traditional chronology of Islam's development from 570-661, a simplified genealogical chart of the Prophet's family tree, photographs of Islamic manuscripts and monuments, reproductions of classical Islamic art objects, charts and maps, three types of test boxes (viz., excerpts from original Islamic sources, simple introductions to Islam's basic beliefs and concepts), brief biographies of key Muslim figures (e.g., Khadijah, Abu Bakr, Jesus, and Khomeini), questions for review, a glossary, a suggested reading list, and an index. Each of the book's three parts opens with an introduction and closes with a conclusion, which enables readers to get an idea of the information that each part seeks to convey.

These features, along with the author's new insights, make this book a significant and most important resource. Many of these insights, however, are complicated, controversial, and in need of a critical and significant analysis. *The Emergence of Islam*'s overall accessible and well-researched methodology shows an objective assessment of scholarly arguments and historical accounts that makes it a highly recommended must-read work for all of those who are interested in a new and/or (re-)reading of Islamic history in general, and in understanding the classical Islamic traditions in contemporary perspective in particular. In short, it is meant for everyone who wishes to become acquainted with the history of Islam and the Qur'an.

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