The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into Its Early History

How Islam Came Into Being

The standard histories of Muhammad and the early development of Islam are based on Islamic literature that dates to the ninth and tenth centuries--some two centuries or more after the death of Muhammad in 632. Islamic literary sources do not exist for the seventh and eighth centuries, when, according to tradition, Muhammad and his immediate followers lived. All that is preserved from this time period are a few commemorative building inscriptions and assorted coins. Based on the premise that reliable history can only be written on the basis of sources that are contemporary with the events described, the contributors to this in-depth investigation present research that reveals the obscure origins of Islam in a completely new light. As the authors meticulously show, the name Muhammad first appears on coins in Syria bearing Christian iconography. In this context the name is used as an honorific meaning revered or praiseworthy and can only refer to Jesus Christ, as Christianity was the predominant religion of the area at this time. This same reference exists in the building inscription of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built by the caliph `Abd al-Malik. The implication of these and other findings here presented is that the early Arab rulers adhered to a sect of Christianity. Indeed, evidence from the Koran, finalized at a much later time, shows that its central theological tenets were influenced by a pre-Nicean, Syrian Christianity. Linguistic analysis also indicates that Aramaic, the common language throughout the Near East for many centuries and the language of Syrian Christianity, significantly influenced the Arabic script and vocabulary used in the Koran. Finally, it was not until the end of the eighth and ninth centuries that Islam formed as a separate religion, and the Koran underwent a period of historical development of at least 200 years.

My Personal Review:
Throughout history autocrats have recognized the value of religious ideas and feelings for promoting social cohesion and support for government. Accordingly, autocratically governed empires have promoted official
religions and have styled themselves as protectors of their religions and as agents their gods.

In many cultures the origins of religious concepts are obscure.

During the first two and a half centuries of Christianity the religion was independent of and often persecuted by the (Roman) government. Only under Constantine in 312 and following did the government identify with and exploit Christianity. (There is a nice essay on this theme by Shaye I.D. Cohen at [...].)

The book "The Hidden Origins of Islam" deals among other things with the relationship between the Arian form of Christianity in vogue among the Arab aristocracies of southern Iran and eastern Iraq in the 7th century, the formation of the Arab empire in the power vacuum left in those regions following the Byzantine defeat of the Persians in 622 CE, the tangible evidence concerning religious ideas in the Arab empire in the 7th century, and the appearance of Islamic literary documents (other than the Qur'an) in Arabic in the 9th century. I found the first chapter by Popp and the 2nd chapter by Luxenberg particularly compelling.

It will be interesting to see if any of the scholars who work within the framework of the traditional Islamic stories of Islamic origins can find any basic flaws in the marshalling and interpretation of objective evidence presented in this book and in related studies by scholars such as Kalisch.

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