

The death of a Prophet: the end of Muhammad's life and the beginnings of Islam, by Stephen J. Shoemaker, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, x + 416 pp., US\$75.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-812-24356-7

Stephen Shoemaker, of the University of Oregon, has carefully ventured into the field of 'Hagarism' first publicly hypothesized in the West in an eponymic tome by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook (1977). Shoemaker acknowledges the problems and weaknesses of the earlier and notoriously controversial (and much criticized) monograph. However, he then engages in an interesting analysis of recent literature in this arena and relevant research in archaeology, history and philology over the past three decades. He is particularly struck by the early narrations that imply Muhammad was still alive after 632 CE and argues that we still do not possess enough firm raw information about the first century of Islam outside an exceptionally narrow band of accepted sources. Indeed, 'Almost all the documentary resources for understanding the formative period of Islam, including even the Qur'an, are highly problematic from a religious historic viewpoint: these sources are frequently overwhelmed and controlled by a master narrative of sacred history' (p. 2). Shoemaker undertakes a thorough examination of nearly a dozen known references to Muhammad after 632 CE from a variety of sources (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Greek and Latin). He contends that, even if discrepancies with the canonical accounts of the Islamic prophet prove to be entirely illusory, the process itself will reveal a lot about early Islam and, in fact, he is correct. The sources presented are terribly obtuse and extremely obscure, and the interpretation is hopelessly speculative. However, they do provide a fascinating insight into early perceptions of Muhammad 'as an eschatological herald' (p. 15) and a vision of nascent Islam that deserves to be better known and understood. Thus, the first chapter, for example, whilst extremely intriguing, is unconvincing. Partly the conundrum here is a modest stylistic criticism. The author is sometimes a little too tentative – he is at pains to repeatedly emphasize that this book is an academic exercise and not an attack on Islam per se. However, he is consequently too sensitive and arguments that need a bold assertion tend to lose all thrust in carefully worded inoffensive sentences.

The book is divided into five lucid chapters with well over 100 pages of footnotes and an excellent bibliography. There is academic strength and clarity of expression, together with the robust methodology that the author brings to his work in Islamic Studies. This comes through clearly in chapters 3 and 4: 'The beginnings of Islam' and 'From believers to Muslims'. Scholars – both Muslim and non-Muslim – have long been aware of on-going problems with the standard chronology of traditional biographies of Muhammad. Debates about the variant year of his birth and the exact age of Ayesha when they married still dominate most Muslim discussions on the issue. The significance of Shoemaker's work here is that, if true, it essentially calls for a radical re-write of early Islamic history. Even if one dismisses the Hagarism thesis, the evidence for a greater emphasis on the eschatological ramifications of early Islam is certainly important. It also raises issues about by whom, when and how such a transmission to our modern 'classical' Islam was made or undertaken.

I would thoroughly recommend this book to anyone with a serious interest in Islam, especially Islamic historiography, and the study of the Qur'an or the Hadith. Rather like reading a Dan Brown novel, whilst fundamentally unconvinced of the author's primary contentions – in this case regarding Hagarism – I thoroughly enjoyed the engaging prose and appealing writing style. Irrespective of an assessment of the final conclusions here, it is difficult not to appreciate the well-presented scholarly content and the totally absorbing material. Above all, Shoemaker's strength here is, perhaps

surprisingly, in his powerful and insightful critique of the *isnād* of the Hadith and his equally interesting analysis of qur'anic *sūras*.

Curiously, I suspect this volume will also appeal to and fascinate students of the Bible. Shoemaker convincingly places early Islam firmly in the cultural orbit of the Byzantine-Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity and downplays the traditional emphasis on the faith developing in the Hijaz in some sort of splendid isolation, far from international events in neighbouring Palestine-Syria, Mesopotamia and so forth. This perspective, naturally, ties the 'Ishmaelite prophet' (p. 30) much more intimately to Judaism and Christianity than do the usual presentations.

Reference

- 1. Crone, Patricia and Cook, Michael. 1977. *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.