

Book Review

The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People, by Aziz Al-Azmeh, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014 xxi + 634pp., £110.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-107-03187-6

Aziz Al-Azmeh starts his excellent new book by modestly describing it as “an extended essay in historical interpretation” (xi), but in reality this is a truly massive analysis of the origins of early Islam that will challenge many contemporary assumptions. His main argument is a call to rethink, entirely it seems, much of our scholarship and knowledge in this field. In this particular tome, he argues for a total reconstruction of our comprehension of the rise of Islam as a faith and polity, with no academic restrictions and “no specific disciplinary loyalties” (xv). Al-Azmeh wants to re-examine the emergence and evolution of the political community of the Prophet Muhammad, its social order and associated rituals, and the development of nascent Islam in Arabia and the Levant as an imperial theology.

The book contains eight chapters following a brief Preface and Acknowledgements, and carries a curious foldout at the end that provides a model for the composition of what Al-Azmeh proposes to call a paleo-Muslim Qu'ran. Chapter 1, “Late Antiquity and Islam: Historiography and History,” outlines the period in space and time, discusses the role of religion and Islam in Arabia during this era and explores historiographic concerns and issues. The second chapter, “Gods, Divine Economies, and Emperors,” extrapolates the epigonic profusion of numinous syncretic cults and polytheistic transitions within the framework of evolving (contracting and expanding) power bases and peripheries. Chapter 3, “Arabia and Arab Ethnogenesis in Late Antiquity,” places the Arab folk squarely at the fringe of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. Al-Azmeh also looks at the dichotomy of *al-‘arab al-‘ariba* and *al-‘arab al-musta‘riba*, their various political and tribal alliances and their dialects. The fourth chapter, “Preface to Allah,” examines the “lineaments” of Arab religious practices, the under-studied role of conceptualizations of time and space in pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabia and the place of Arabian monolatry. This is followed by a chapter entitled “Allah,” in which Al-Azmeh debates nomenclature and Paleo-Muslim divinity. Chapter 6, “Paleo-Islam 1: Charismatic Polity,” outlines the traditional biography of Muhammad and his contemporaries with a view to issues of personality and politics. The penultimate chapter, “Paleo-Islam 2: The Paleo-Muslim Canon,” elucidates the evolution and history of the Qur'an as a sacred scripture. The final chapter, “Retrospective and Prospective: Islam in Late Antiquity and Beyond,” neatly sums up the main points of his thesis. In short, Al-Azmeh believes that post-Muhammadan Islam was shaped more by the East Roman Empire of Late Antiquity than by the Sasanian or Persian realms. Constantinople was always the prize for the Arabs, he reminds us, not Persepolis. Using modern research on the Umayyad era, he demonstrates the plethora of Hellenistic influences, continuities and confluences that saturated the early Islamic community at the critical point when it was defining itself.

Al-Azmeh has clearly been influenced by Fowden's *Empire to Commonwealth* (1993), which he cites extensively. He artfully reveals the means by which Muslim scholars of the Umayyad period integrated and manipulated their respective traditions into the composition of popular conceptualizations of the Muslim faith and religion, and convincingly argues that classical Islam “is the end product of the translation of Romanity to the East” (4). It should be noted that he does employ a densely academic vocabulary and some of the verbose textual articulations, such as “precipitating kratophanic intervention” (59) and references to “epicletic conjuration” (77) and “doxological and mythological motifs, theologoumena and mythemes” (270), may be challenging for readers. In short,

he assumes a high degree of cerebral erudition and an excellent vocabulary. Al-Azmeh illustrates his thesis through a complex exploration of orality and literacy, the linguistic transmission of mythography and theonyms, classical (pre-Islamic) Arabic poetry, the Qur'an and a very wide variety of alternative literary sources. He is aware of but not overly concerned with conceptual conundrums related to hazy historiographic tropes and topoi rooted in metaphorical thinking, morphological stereotypes or metaphysical philosophies. Al-Azmeh critiques the "mixed results" (xv) of modern studies of Islam and the Qur'an, and compares the emergence of what was to become Muslim monotheism with the emergence of other forms of monotheism drawn from polytheistic social structures, based on an extensive analysis of epigraphic and other material evidence, traditional literary sources and pertinent recent research in this field.

Massive in word length, too, at over 630 pages, the text and the footnotes, one suspects, might have benefitted from some further editing, and a glossary would certainly have been very helpful. *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People* is essentially a sequel to *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources* (2014), which serves as both a companion and a technical preface to this book, and the two are best read together. There are several well-drawn maps and figures illustrating the text.

In the final analysis, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* re-evaluates the history of the Arabs as an integrated component or synthesis of Late Antiquity and contends that the key hinge in Mediterranean history was the "oecumenical empire" (5), with its variegated competing politics and theologies, and its elastic urban institutions rooted intellectually in classical Greek culture. This intriguing and engaging book is a welcome addition to academia. Intended primarily for postgraduate scholars of Islam, religion and Late Antiquity, this monograph suggests many exciting new directions for future studies and empirical research.

References

- 1. Al-Azmeh, Aziz. 2014. *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources*. Berlin: Gerlach Press.
- 2. Fowden, Garth. 1993. *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.