At the Origins of Islam

Author: Fred M. Donner.

Publisher: Harvard University Near Eastern History at University of Chicago, makes an attempt at providing a narrative that seems to marry the traditional Muslim narrative of Islam's origins with a new historical interpretation or perspective.

At the outset, Donner's aim is to present a historical narrative that contradicts much of Western scholarship, which regards Prophet Muhammad as a social reformer and Islam as a faith without proximity to the text of the Qur'an in delineating his position that the origin of Islam began as an ecumenical faith of believers, which included Jews and Christians.

It was ‘centred on the ideas of monotheism, preparing for the Last Day, belief in prophecy and revealed scripture and observance of righteous behaviour, including frequent prayer, expiation of sins committed, periodic fasting and a charitable and humble demeanour towards others’.

The primary basis for this assertion is the term ‘believers’ and the phrase ‘O you who believe’ in the Qur’an.

Donner interprets the use of this word ‘believers’ and its distinction from the noun ‘M uslim’ as positing a loosely knit group of monotheists and not a distinct religious group of people termed Muslims as is the case with the traditional Muslim narrative.

In addition, Donner suggests that the umma document or what is sometimes termed the Constitution of Madinah (a treaty entered into between the Prophet, the Makkan immigrants and the various pagan and Jewish tribes of Madinah) includes the Jews and the pagan converts to monotheism as being a part of the umma or community of the believers.

A brief section is devoted to how it would have been possible for disparate groups of monotheists within the Believers’ movement to accept the mission of the Prophet and the text of the Qur’an.

However, an important feature of the Believers’ movement was its apocalypticism and eschatological orientation.

Donner contends that the imminent expectation of the Last Day and therefore the fervent desire to establish a community which would attain salvation through the scrupulous execution of God's law transformed the nascent Believers’ movement towards the end of Muhammad’s life into a “movement of militant party, bent on aggressively searching out and destroying what they considered practices odious to God (especially polytheism) and intent on spreading rigorous observance of God's injunctions”.

This, in turn, led to the expansion of the community of Believers which geographically stretched as far as Spain and the Indian sub-continent.

As such, the traditional Muslim narrative of Islam’s origins sprang forth during this period where the memories and stories of the early Believers’ movement and the Prophet were appropriated to legitimise the formation of a distinct religiously confessional persuasion entrenched within the supremacy of the Umayyad dynasty.

Donner provides an intriguing alternative to the traditional Muslim narrative on the origins of Islam and a contribution to the historical study of the early Muslims or ‘believers’.

In doing so, Fred Donner presents a readable historical narrative which is consistent with the traditional narrative in many respects.

Nonetheless, the primary assertions of Donner’s revisionist account is somewhat tenuous in that it is mostly based on the vocabulary of Qur’anic verses and certain other documents such as the umma document.

In this respect, Muhammad and the Believers is not an academic or technical historical work but it does provide an interesting new interpretation of the origins of Islam even though such an account is lacking in historical rigour.

Review by Nadeem Mahomed

Nadeem Mahomed is an MA student in Religion Studies at University of Johannesburg.

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