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# A Review of Peters' Muhammad and the Origins of Islam

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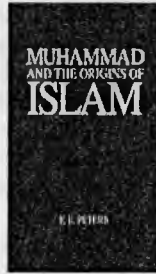
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## Book Review II

### Muhammad and the Origins of Islam

By F.E. Peters



Reviewed by Christopher Schwartz (Graduate Student)

For the pious, God and the attainment of paradise are the great foci of Islam; for the historian, it is, of necessity, Muhammad—the man more so than his myth. Though eminent scholars such as Bernard Lewis and Karen Armstrong have long argued that the Muslim religion was born “in the full light of history,” New York University professor F.E. Peters contends the opposite: the extant sources have been so heavily shaped by historical forces, particularly Middle Eastern politics alongside shifts and rifts in Islamic historiography and exegesis. This is the challenge of Peters’ *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, in which the professor attempts to discern from the dim recesses of the seventh century Arabia the prophet’s environment, his actions, and when possible, his beliefs.

Muslims have been writing biographies of Muhammad since the eighth century, most of which have essentially been hagiographies. Non-Muslims have been examining the Arabian prophet, whom they first dubbed “Mahomet,” since the twelfth century. These works were unapologetically polemical in character until the nineteenth century, when such works as *Studies in Religious History* by Ernest Renan first appeared, exhibiting a fair yet far more rigorously critical approach. Ever since, the goal of modern historical research has been to reconstruct as objective a picture as possible of the man and his ministry.

In his preface and appendix, Peters points out just how difficult this is due to the intractability of the sources. Among these are Ibn al-Kalbi’s *Book of Idols*, an eighth century work which was the first serious historical treatise of pre-Islamic Arabia; Ibn Ishaq’s *The Life of the Apostle of God*, a biographical work which underwent substantial revision over the centuries (the original edition of which is no longer extant); the histories of the great Muslim historian at-Tabari; of course the Hadith, the recorded sayings and doings of the prophet, and the Koran, which Renan was the first to characterize as the literal preachings of Muhammad. “The history of Muhammad and the origins of Islam begins... and ends with the Quran [sic]” Peters writes, adding, “What commends it so powerfully to the historian is its authenticity, not as the Word of God... but rather as a

document to what Muhammad said.”<sup>1</sup>

The chief difficulty of using the Koran, however, lies in the fact that it is a text without a context: its chapters, revealed to the first Muslims gradually over twelve years, have been arranged according to length, not chronology, and as Peters notes, the scripture is exceptionally vague to historical events. “For Muhammad, unlike Jesus, there is no Josephus to provide contemporary political context,” he explains. “No literary apocrypha for a spiritual context and no Qumran scrolls.”<sup>2</sup> Hence his turn to the other sources, which are even more problematic than the Koran in that they have been encrusted, often deliberately, with dogmas and traditions. As a result, this is first and foremost a biography, and though it stays close to its sources, it does have a tinge of revisionism as Peters periodically attempts to extrapolate alternative meanings from the texts.

Peters’ work, serving simultaneously as capstone for two centuries of scholarship and a diving board for the next century is immensely valuable. This is not to say that it is not without problems. For example, almost from the beginning we run into difficulties. Although Peters alleges to have written this book for a general audience, the way in which it references sources and Islamic terms without much explanation clearly indicates that this is not a work for the uninitiated.

The book consists of twelve chapters, with a preface and an appendix. This appendix, entitled “The Quest for the Historical Muhammad” was written following the conceptual lines of an article by him which appeared under the same title in *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*<sup>3</sup> It is among the richest and most valuable sections of the entire work in that it discusses the numerous technical problems which await the historian who attempts to engage the Koran and Hadith, problems that originate in the obscure—and, for the pious, controversial—editorial processes which gave birth to the documents. Judging this “daunting stuff,” Peters opted to have it in the back of the book. Ironically, this appendix is among the most readable of all his chapters, presenting its information in a succinct and pre-digested manner; if there is one bone the reader should have to pick with him, it is that this wasn’t the very *first* chapter.

The book really picks up speed in its last seven chapters, when Peters delves into Muhammad’s life, from his lineage to his birth and marriage through to his war with Mecca and his death. However it is a bit of a slog in its opening five chapters, when he details the situational backdrop, namely, the *al-Jahaliyya*, the “Age of Ignorance,” otherwise known as pre-Islamic Arabia. This is the weakest section of the text due to its tendency for incoherence. For example, his depiction of Meccan geography is, to be frank, garbled. This incoherence makes it seem as though Peters has never stepped foot inside the holy city, which is very probable given the Ottoman and later Saudi authorities’ dislike for *khaffir* – intrusion—and it also seems that he never conferred with anyone, Muslim or not, who has.

Another example of the weakness of these chapters is that Peters’ description of pre-historic Mecca, especially its founding, is overly dependent upon the legends recorded by Ishaq, at-Tabari, al-Kalbi, and some *tafsiris* (Koranic commentators).<sup>4</sup> He

<sup>1</sup> Peters, F.E. *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994): p. 257

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259

<sup>3</sup> Peters, F.E. “The Quest for the Historical Muhammad.” *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 23 (1991), 291-315. Available in full text online at JSTOR.

<sup>4</sup> Peters, *Muhammad*, pp. 1-30

does an admirable job of including what little is known of the Romans' *Arabia Felix* and *Arabia Deserta*, as well as Abyssinian, Persian, and Yemeni perspectives, but he gives too short shrift to tantalizing references in other sources, such as "Makoraba," the city's possible cameo in Ptomely's work, or "Bakkah," an alternative name for Mecca which appears in the Koran's third chapter.<sup>5</sup> His discussion of pre-historic Mecca is also the first warning that, although Peters surpasses his predecessors in his incorporation of relevant scholarly research findings published during the 1970s and 80s, he cannot escape the narrative order imposed by the Muslim writers. Indeed, a solid third of the entire book consists of excerpts, many of which are pages long—academically it is surprising that he opted for such a style.

The professor is seemingly trapped not only by his Muslim predecessors' historical framework, but also their exegetical system, in which the Koran is all too neatly and conveniently divided into Meccan and Medinan chapters. Peters does little—indeed, he is little able—to posit alternative approaches beyond merely casting reasonable doubt upon certain verses and at other times offering revisionist ideas on the why's and how's about such-and-such sentence or word. Nonetheless, whenever he does decide to exercise his speculative muscle is also when the book shines. The two best examples of this is his whole eye-opening treatments of the "Satanic Verses" incident and Muhammad's cantankerous relationship with the Jews of Yathrib (later, Medina), during which he utilizes the Koran itself as his primary point of engagement.

His discussion of Muhammad's conflicts with the Jews highlights the crux of Peters's entire project, namely, that the Koran is not (or not only) a scripture, the eternal, unchanging Word of God, but also an artifact of history, as much shaped by events as also a shaper, and that Muhammad was himself as much a product of circumstances as a visionary and prodigy. The reason that this book even needs to exist lies in the fact that "Muslim tradition found it increasingly difficult to accept that Muhammad had been, perhaps for most of his life, before his call, a pagan. The doctrine of Muhammad's 'impeccability,' [as well as the Koran's eternality] was grounded, like its Christian counterpart, Mary's perpetual virginity, on the principle of *quod decet*."<sup>6</sup>

Again and again in Peters's book we are reminded of how Muslim tradition has encrusted the historical sources. That Peters is even able to wedge in as many reconsiderations as he does makes his endeavor very worthwhile. Yet, it must be pointed out that there are some glaring oversights in the text. Most startling is when he fails to discuss the historical origins of one of Islam's most distinctive features, namely, its unitarianism vis-à-vis Christianity. Though the Koran deems Jesus Christ the *al-Masih*, "the Messiah," and appears to incorporate miraculous stories of him from apocryphal sources, including possibly the Gospel of Thomas, it seems to reject the Crucifixion, and it is outright in its opposition to the Trinity, which it deems a kind of hidden theological polytheism.

These notions have been at the root of Islam's competition with Christianity, but their appearance in the Koran are somewhat startling and puzzling, considering that Muhammad had no direct conflict, armed or otherwise, with peninsular Christians. What few fights he did have with Christians occurred only in the form of ill-conceived raids into the far-away lands of Sinai and Syria. Moreover, after "The Year of the Elephant,"

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 64 and Koran 3:96

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 131

in which an Abyssian-backed Abraha expedition was trounced by Meccan forces forty years before Muhammad's ministry began,<sup>7</sup> Christians were never serious competitors for the prize, that is, West-Central Arabia.

Another major oversight on the part of Peters is the Koran's notion of *al-khatam-an-nabbiyin*, "the seal of the prophets." The term *khatam* refers to a wax seal or ornament, something moldable and with the implication of authority. Muslim tradition has conflated its meaning with the term *khatim*, which literally means "final" or "last." This interpretation sparked civil wars between orthodox and heterodox forces within the Caliphate, heaped fuel onto the Sunni-Shia fire, and dangerously constrained the development of mysticism in Islam, a natural aspect of most organized religions but one about which most Muslims have been undecided, often violently so, as with the recent case of the Bahá'í. How and why this important notion, which appears only once in the Koran, ever occurred at all, and what exactly it might really mean, is not discussed.

There is one more oversight, indeed, a critical flaw: the complete and utter dearth of archeological information. Historians tend to conceive of their discipline as dealing with *sola biblia*, texts alone. Yet, in order to understand pre-historic societies such as Muhammad's (the Koran literally birthed the literate age of Arabian civilization), it is absolutely vital that they include material cultural sources in their analyses. Nowhere is this flimsiness of archeologically uninformed history more pronounced in Peters's book than in his description of the founding of Mecca, as well as when he is discussing Muhammad's wars with other settlements and cities, especially the polytheist redoubt of Ta'if and his failed invasion of Byzantine Syria.

Truth be told, this may have been something beyond Peters's control. Modern archeology's emergence as a discipline over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has coincided with the rise of the House of Saud, a royal family who has pegged their political fortunes upon an ideology of religious primitivism and as a result has been very hostile toward scientific investigation of Islam's origins. While the various regimes of Ethiopia, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, even Yemen, have welcomed archeologists, the Saudis, who enjoy clinging to such erroneous beliefs as the Arabian peninsula being "100% Muslim" (disregarding the presence of Bedouin polytheists in the central regions, or the legions of Filipino Christian workers in the midst of their cities), have shunned them as possible "threats to the faith."

This brings home the final and crucial point: historians of Islam mustn't continue to accept the hoary assertion that Islam was born "in the full light of history." They must not be fooled that the "original" sources, by virtue of their being so copious, so variously attested, and their redaction so clear and "unambiguous," are accurate. Neither we moderns nor our predecessors are in any position to know exactly what happened and how this grand religion grew from such humble, unlikely, and uncooperative beginnings. Peters's book, therefore, is a reminder that the origins of Islam may, when all is said and done, have to be sought outside the dominion of historiography; the truth of what happened—*why* it happened—is probably to be found in the same place from which all other great religions are born: inside the human being.

New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84-88