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The History of Islam

Revelation, Reconstruction or Both?

 Springer

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Foreword

Among others, Charles Taylor has shown how collective narratives can form a ‘social imaginary’ where history and legend blur in order to provide individuals with meaning and communities with ways of representing their collective life. In Islam, the principal narrative concerns the Prophet’s establishment of a godly community (Ummah), first in Medina then in Mecca in the first century of the Muslim calendar (7th century of the Christian Era [CE]). This narrative is central to Muslim belief, offering individual adherents meaning in their lives and the community of Islam guidelines and law for its collective life. But where did this narrative come from?

From a simple historical point of view, the most definitive origins of the narrative are to be found in the work of Muhammad al Tabari (d. 932CE), writing some two centuries after the normally accepted dates of the Prophet’s establishment of the community known as Islam. Al-Tabari’s work is titled *The History of the Prophets and Kings*, known more commonly as simply *The History*. It is what we refer to in the title of this book as ‘*The History of Islam*’ for it provides the most comprehensive and definitive account of the ‘facts’ of Islam’s origins and, more importantly, their meaning. While not widely known outside scholarly circles, al-Tabari’s *The History* is what most Muslims rely on when it comes to knowing and understanding their own tradition and, hence, for a large proportion of their beliefs, values and identity. Without *The History*, there would be many more blind spots about Islam’s origins and significance than is the case.

The History is presented not merely as an account of the origins of a particular religion but as a grand cosmic event, a turning point in the history of the world and God’s plan for it. The context therefore of the Prophet’s establishment of Islam is said to be not just a local event but one that can only be understood in terms of the entire span of history, from the beginning of the world, all the way through to the Ummah’s establishment in Medina and Mecca, and then on to events and happenings in al-Tabari’s own time. *The History* is presented as a history in the normal scholarly sense, as a recounting of factual events, but it is clearly much more than that. It constitutes a grand interpretation of all of reality, with Islam sitting at its centre. In that sense, to simply read it as history in the normally understood sense is

both to underestimate its importance and to risk the account at its centre becoming the object of literalism.

Our book is attempting to address an understanding of al-Tabari's work that does justice to its importance to Muslim identity and meaning but, at the same time, reduces its potential to fuel the kind of fundamentalism that can lead to fanatical partisanship from those who, believing their religion calls on them to destroy any opposition or even dissent, then become a menace to the global community. It will do this by employing proven methods of textual analysis that have been used elsewhere to distinguish historical fact and legend in religious texts. Among others, one method employed will be that of Bart Ehrman whose work on the Bible, and especially the New Testament, has helped in providing Christians with a more informed understanding of the Gospels and the level of historicity that underlies them. Far from simple divisions between what is true and what is untrue, Ehrman's work has shown how a balanced account of what is factual history and what is legend can actually enrich one's appreciation of the text and the importance of the narrative that sits at its centre.

Reading al-Tabari's work as built as much around legend as factual events can achieve the same for Islam. In a day and age that sees the narrative of Islam's establishment used by radical Islamists to justify all manner of horrendous activity and the capacity of Muslim authorities to provide effective counter narratives constrained by a limited critical scholarship about Islam's inspirational narrative, this reading becomes more important than ever. The book will be attempting to apply updated research to this narrative in order to achieve two things: first, it will offer the kind of critical appraisal that respects and indeed fortifies the significance of Islam's distinctive contribution to humankind's religious and spiritual quest; second, it will do this by bringing its interpretation into line with other such interpretations that have managed to preserve religiously significant movements while reducing the risk of their being overtaken by religious fundamentalists and fanatics. In this sense, the book is intended to strengthen Islam's credentials in the modern world while helping to shed its image as providing a natural home for fundamentalism, radicalism and fanaticism.

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