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Reynolds, Gabriel Said. *Christianity and the Qur'an: The Rise of Islam in Christian Arabia.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025.

One cannot ignore the historical origins of Islam when considering its increasing grasp on the world today. Nor can the Qur'ān be divorced from its historical context, as if it were simply a book of moral dogma devoid of historical claims and implications. While much ink has been spilled on the supposed origins of Islam, Gabriel Reynolds' *Christianity and the Qur'an* offers a fresh perspective that sheds light on this seemingly elusive pursuit. Reynolds, who serves as professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame, does so without any obvious agenda; this allows him to analyze both Islamic and other historical sources in a neutral capacity, thus drawing conclusions about where the scripture of Islam *really* originated—not where one would *like* it to have originated. In that regard, this dense yet digestible book constitutes a valuable and unique contribution to a growing body of recent scholarship on the foundations of Islam and its sacred text.

Summary

Reynolds begins his investigation in Chapter 1 by taking stock of what he considers to be the traditional ideas about Christianity in Arabia at the time of Muhammad. He draws attention to the view of some scholars that there were heretical or unorthodox forms of Christianity in the late antique Hijaz to which the Qur'ān might be responding. Yet Reynolds does not find this idea of heretical Christian teachings—whether by Mary worshipers or apocryphal gospel followers—

necessary to explain why the Qur'ān views and interacts with Christian doctrine the way that it does; rather, he suggests that the author of the Qur'ān is using creative agency and purposeful misrepresentations of Christianity to serve its own theological purposes. Other scholars claimed that the pre-Islamic Hijaz was pagan (though surrounded by monotheism), advancing the idea that Islam did not overlap with Christianity. In response to this, Reynolds points to evidence that Christians in South Arabia referred to God as *al-ilāh* prior to the advent of Islam, which only further connects the dots between Christianity and the origins of Islam. He argues that the biblical elements in the Qur'ān are not mere ornamentation, but rather that in both form and content the Qur'ān is inescapably related to the biblical narrative. Moreover, he suggests that the words of the Qur'ān cannot be reliably attributed to Muhammad, nor can they provide any reliable insight into his thinking. Thus, Reynolds leans not on traditional Islamic narratives that would describe certain interactions with Christianity (or rather a lack thereof), instead seeking to discern and prioritize the Qur'ān's own interaction and dialogue with Christianity, as well as inscription evidence of the presence of Christians in the late antique Hijaz.

In Chapter 2, Reynolds examines what he considers to be the Christian material in the Qur'ān. He argues that the primary use of Jesus in the Qur'ān is not to describe his life, ministry, or anything related to teaching or salvation, but rather to make arguments about God and Muhammad. The fact that the Qur'ān employs Jesus strategically to advance its own theology and claims suggests that this occurred in a Christian context where the words of Jesus would have carried weight. Reynolds outlines multiple Christian "turns of phrase" found in the Qur'ān, such as a camel passing through the eye of a needle (48). This is quite surprising given the standard narrative which suggests that the Qur'ān and nascent Islamic community arose in an essentially pagan context. Interestingly, these turns of phrase betray the Qur'ān's lack of

understanding of or interest in the underlying biblical concepts they mention. This "nonverbatim correspondence" between the Qur'ān and the New Testament, as Reynolds puts it, shows how the Qur'ān engages directly with Christian legends, stories, and ways of speaking (56).

In Chapter 3, Reynolds shifts his focus to the literary evidence in the Qur'ān and shows how it corresponds to the evidence for the presence of monotheism—Christianity in particular—in Arabia. Appealing to the research of various Islamic historians, Reynolds argues that both North and South Arabia had transitioned to monotheism prior to the advent of Islam. He cites ample evidence from pre-Islamic Arabian languages and inscriptions that had long ceased to depict pagan gods in favor of monotheism, concluding that Christianity was not only present but indeed thriving among the Arabs of the sixth century—even in the Hijaz. Finally, he analyzes Qur'ānic passages which suggest that the Qur'ān is interacting directly with Christians. These passages, he argues, do not constitute a hypothetical situation but rather an active conversation with real Christians—perhaps including monastic communities—and an ongoing response on the part of the Qur'ān.

In his final chapter, Reynolds encapsulates his argument that Christianity is the Qur'ān's "ever-present, although sometimes invisible, conversation partner" (142). He leans into the fascinating idea that the *basmala*, which opens nearly all the suras of the Qur'ān, is an intentional tripartite invocation of God that seeks to recall and ultimately supplant Christian trinitarian language. Reynolds draws attention to the Qur'ān's disproportionate emphasis on the miracles of Jesus in comparison to those of any other prophet, but then shows how it goes on to undermine them: it takes the very things that Christians used to point to the divinity of Jesus and explicitly claims that they were done only by the permission of Allah, almost never mentioning this aspect of the miracles of any other prophet. Furthermore, Reynolds highlights the Qur'ān's use of "good

news" and parables to play off biblical modes of expression, as well as its treatment of biblical characters to portray Muhammad as the final prophet. All this further supports his idea that the Qur'ān is specifically appealing to and dealing with a Christian audience.

Reflection

Christianity and the Qur'an is a welcome voice to the chorus of scholarship surrounding the nebulous origins and context of the scripture of Islam. Breaking tradition with the standard Islamic narrative—and indeed with much of traditional Western scholarship—Reynolds weaves together multiple points of view and categories of evidence to challenge the notion that the Hijaz was overwhelmingly pagan leading up to the advent of Islam. Indeed, the very subtitle of his book, which portrays the context of the rise of Islam as none other than a "Christian Arabia," seems intentionally provocative.

There is a sense in which Reynolds' work here is not unlike that of a detective, as he seeks to synthesize various types of evidence and thus achieve a coherent picture of the historical context in which the Qur'ān arose. If his argument relied on only a single type of evidence, then one might be tempted to think that he is stretching the limited evidence to serve his thesis. But that is decidedly not the case here. Taken together, Reynolds' multifaceted arguments make a strong case to support his conclusion that the Qur'ān was developed in dialogue with the largely Christian context of Arabia. Of course, one can hardly read this work without recalling the recent scholarship of Stephen Shoemaker, whose findings largely depart from the claims and conclusions offered by Reynolds. Still, although through very different paths, both Shoemaker and Reynolds ultimately converge in their concluding idea that the Qur'ān did not arise in a pagan Arabia, but rather came about as the result of direct interaction with Christians—whether

much later and further north in the Christian lands of greater Palestine, or in a Hijaz that was much more Christian than traditionally assumed.

Though somewhat modest in length, *Christianity and the Qur'an* stretches far beyond introductory matters and will challenge the student and scholar alike to reconsider the traditional view of where and how the Qur'ān originated. Those seeking to apply this new information to interactions with Muslims might find Reynolds' book somewhat lacking in terms of practical application, as it seems primarily confined to academic concerns. And yet, the implications of this important work are not limited to the realm of academia, providing the reader with helpful tools to reach out to Muslims and challenge the notion that the Qur'ān arose in a context devoid of Christian influence. This will not only pave the way for further scholarship in Qur'ānic and late antique Hijaz studies—important as that is—but will also likely have a ripple effect in the minds and hearts of Muslims who are invited to reevaluate the historical coherence of Islam and the truth claims of its scripture.

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