

## *Book Reviews*

### **The Lives of Muhammad**

*Kecia Ali*

*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 342 pages.*

The title of Kecia Ali's latest book, *The Lives of Muhammad*, suggests that it is another biography of the Prophet. And it very much is that book, not as biography but as historiography, cultural study, and the methods of the Study of Religion. By focusing narrowly on the material, she is able to be expansive in her thought and raise several important issues in the study of Muhammad's life, both from the perspective of the believer and the non-believer. Most importantly, and what makes this book particularly successful, is that she recognizes conflict and contradiction without offering resolution. The result is a work that can be extremely useful in classroom settings, in addition to making a valuable contribution to what we think about the meanings of Muhammad.

The work is structured into six chapters, with shorter introduction and conclusion sections. However, the length of these two sections belies the depth of material contained therein. In the introduction, Ali maps out the scope of her project: a diachronic study of the biographies of Muhammad. She argues for the increasing dialogic between non-Muslim and Muslim views of the Prophet, especially since the nineteenth century. Her statement of what she chose to exclude is greatly appreciated, for it helps point out that there is a great diversity of Muslim thought concerning Muhammad. By making the breadth of the material omitted explicit, she allows the reader to understand in more concrete terms her statement that "[religious] traditions have always been internally heterogeneous" (p. 3).

The first chapter focuses on questions of constructing a historical Muhammad. Ali begins with a basic outline of the Muslim narrative version of his life story, but immediately begins to bring up some of the issues, both in terms of the sources and the narrative's neatness. She explicitly mentions *Hagarism* and the more recent work of Fred Donner in laying out the historical context of Muhammad. She then deftly works through this scholarship, giving the

reader a sense of both rationales underlying the approaches and their weaknesses. This chapter excels in helping the reader understand how the Muslim narrative was constructed, from the explicit Sunni and Shi'ah differences on the Prophet's death (p. 22) to an implicit understanding that constructing a narrative bounds and binds a community (p. 10). She does spend some time on Muhammad as the source for a ritualistic practice, legal authority, and spiritual life, but it is not the main area of focus.

It ends with a discussion of early non-Muslim constructions of Muhammad, which establishes the back-and-forth between Muslim and non-Muslim communities presented in the following chapters. Early European scholars looked at Muhammad as "monstrous," and thus his followers were "monstrous" as well (p. 30). This trope was deployed not only against the external threat of the Turks, but also against the internal threat of the Catholics (p. 31). The legend of Muhammad and the myths of Muslims loomed large in the minds of European Christians during the period covered in this chapter. However, the concerns seem to be more about European insecurities than actual knowledge of or concern with Muhammad and Muslims.

In chapter 2, aptly titled "A True Prophet," we read of how Muhammad's claim to prophethood is either claimed or challenged. One of the chapter's highlights is recognizing that the claim/challenge division does not necessarily parallel a Muslim/non-Muslim division. Ali pulls out Muslim sources critical of Muhammad and non-Muslim sources that praise him. In this section we begin to see more fully the interaction among different cultural groups. With the rise of colonialism and the spread of English as a language of the learned, we find, for example, Egyptians and Europeans reading Indian authors. However, Ali does mention the inherent power asymmetry in this process: The colonized read the works of the colonizers in far greater volume than the colonizers read the work of the colonized. One practical impact of this imbalance is that Muslim authors had to use the methods and logics of European colonizers, which did not always align with the methods that Muslims scholars had built over the centuries. This turn to a debate that depends upon a modality of engagement and proof determined by non-Muslims established the ongoing constructions of Muhammad from the nineteenth century onward.

In the third chapter, which discusses Muhammad's earliest Companions, Ali argues that part of the emphasis on this group comes from reformist movements that "owe a profound debt to Protestantism, including its assumptions about authority and texts" (p. 81). This observation supports the argument from the previous chapter that Muslim societies were operating within a new cultural language, one that affected how they saw themselves. The history of great men

and reformers became more normative, and biographies of Muhammad began to fill this function. He was no longer a religious and mystical figure, “a channel of mercy and grace to this world” (p. 93), but a genius and social reformer who constructed a better society. One work that falls into this pattern is *The Benefactor*, an Urdu-language biography of Muhammad and the first four caliphs. As an example of the layering of information in it, Ali points out that *The Benefactor* was translated into English and then distributed by the Nation of Islam. This simple statement opens up avenues of discussion around transnationalism, orthodoxy, and cultural history.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with Khadijah and A’ishah, respectively, two of Muhammad’s most well-known wives. While each chapter offers unique elements in the discussion of each woman, there is a certain resonance across the chapters as well. They are linked in the ways Muslims communities use to construct themselves, and many of the historical concerns that we see in one are mirrored in the other. It is generally taken as fact that Khadijah was 40 when she married Muhammad and then proceeded to bear him seven children. This fact suggests that perhaps she was not as old 40, but that her biography was constructed in that way in order to use the number 40, which was commonly viewed as a magic number in the Abrahamic traditions. Ali points out how Muhammad’s marriage to her, and to no other woman while she was alive, when she was 40 highlights the fact that he was not sexually deviant, as many later critics would make him out to be.

One can juxtapose this with the age of A’ishah at consummation, traditionally believed to be when she was nine. Ali points out the conflicting sources as well as how at one time it may have been advantageous to have her be nine: Since she was born after the advent of Islam, she could not have known anything else. Ali clearly indicated how both of these wives play a role in the rhetoric of “Muslim women need saving.” At the same time, they are also deployed as examples of the freedom women enjoyed during Muhammad’s lifetime. Both usages are fraught with problems, many of which the author highlights in her chapters.

The final chapter looks at contemporary biographies of Muhammad. We see him placed in a pantheon of enlightened figures, both in a way that would be recognizable to those in the Study of Religion and as someone who is recognized as being a great spirit. Ali does deal with some modern polemicists, but pays greater attention to voices that struggle with meanings of Muhammad. She points out writers like Karen Armstrong and W. M. Watt and places them in an intellectual context that deepens an appreciation of their work. This chapter is notable for the author’s discussion of how Muslims are engaging with

biographies of Muhammad. It is a hint of the etic/emic debate on how Muslim scholars should approach Muhammad; however, she adds nuance by pointing out that Muslims have multiple identifications. One can further argue from her work that the dialogic of knowledge means that we are also more accepting of multiple methodologies.

Ali's conclusion offers a summation and points out other avenues of discussion, such as images of Muhammad or the neo-liberal incorporation of Muhammad into capitalism. Like much of the book, a simple description does not do justice to the layering of approaches and thoughts. It is well-crafted and easy to read, and yet that simplicity itself is deceptive in terms of the depth of ideas. At one level, this book can easily find its way into an introductory course on Islam. It also contributes wonderfully to the literature around Muhammad and could be useful in a course on the history of Muhammad or a comparative course on religious figures. However, I believe it can be used most effectively in a theory course on the Study of Religion. It touches on themes of community formation, religious narrative, and hagiography. The chapters appear to stand alone rather well and can also be incorporated into a variety of other courses.

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