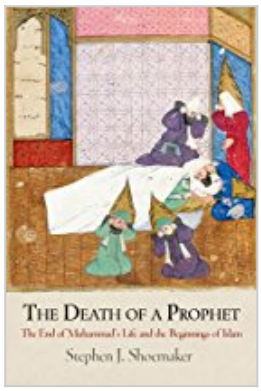

The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion)

By Stephen J. Shoemaker

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Using methods and perspectives borrowed from biblical studies, Shoemaker concludes that these reports of Muhammad's leadership during the Palestinian invasion likely preserve an early Islamic tradition that was later revised to meet the needs of a changing Islamic self-identity. Muhammad and his followers appear to have expected the world to end in the immediate future, perhaps even in their own lifetimes, Shoemaker contends. When the eschatological Hour failed to arrive on schedule and continued to be deferred to an ever more distant point, the meaning of Muhammad's message and the faith that he established needed to be fundamentally rethought by his early followers.

The larger purpose of *The Death of a Prophet* exceeds the mere possibility of adjusting the date of Muhammad's death by a few years; far more important to Shoemaker are questions about the manner in which Islamic origins should be studied. The difference in the early sources affords an important opening through which to explore the nature of primitive Islam more broadly. Arguing for greater methodological unity between the study of Christian and Islamic origins, Shoemaker emphasizes the potential value of non-Islamic sources for reconstructing the history of formative Islam.

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Editorial Review

Review

"[Shoemaker] develops [previous ideas] substantially, discusses them in the light of recent publications, and also offers highly instructive parallels with the situation in (and scholarship on) early Christianity. . . . [He] has done a very good job of highlighting the issues and giving them sophisticated and thorough discussion, and [*The Death of a Prophet*] is a worthwhile addition to the fast-expanding body of material on Islamic origins."—*Journal of the American Oriental Society*

"A work of utmost importance, and one that has profound implications for our understanding of how Islam began."—Fred Donner, University of Chicago

About the Author
Stephen J. Shoemaker is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Oregon and author of Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption.

Introduction

The publication of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's controversial study *Hagarism* in 1977 unquestionably marks a watershed in the study of religious culture in the early medieval Near East, even if its significance has occasionally been underestimated by other specialists in this field. In particular, this relatively slim volume highlighted the potential importance of non-Islamic literature for knowledge of religious (and secular) history in the seventh and eighth centuries, a so-called dark age for which sources are often sparse and spotty. Perhaps more importantly, however, this study proposed a radical new model for understanding both the formation of the Islamic tradition and the general religious landscape of the early medieval Near East. Together with the contemporary works of John Wansbrough, *Hagarism* articulated an innovative reinterpretation of formative Islam as a faith intimately intertwined with the religious traditions of Mediterranean late antiquity and in need of extensive study in the context of this religiously complex and intercultural milieu.

There are, it must be admitted, some considerable and undeniable flaws in *Hagarism*'s reinterpretation of formative Islam, as even its most sympathetic readers have often acknowledged. Most significantly, *Hagarism* has been rightly criticized for its occasionally uncritical use of non-Islamic sources in reconstructing the origins of Islam. Wansbrough, for instance, asks rather pointedly of Crone and Cook's reconstruction: "Can a vocabulary of motives be freely extrapolated from a discrete collection of literary stereotypes composed by alien and mostly hostile observers, and thereupon employed to describe, even interpret, not merely the overt behavior but also the intellectual and spiritual development of helpless and mostly innocent actors?" Undoubtedly, Wansbrough's question is intended as rhetorical and meant to impugn the value of non-Islamic sources for understanding earliest Islam. Nonetheless, I think that the most honest and accurate answer to this question is in fact, possibly. While such information perhaps cannot be freely

extracted from these sources, when analyzed with some care they may potentially yield historically valuable information concerning the beginnings of Islam.

The imperfections of *Hagarism* should not lead us to discount completely the important insights that both this study and its approach have to offer. While some scholars have somewhat unfairly dismissed *Hagarism* and its approach as either hopelessly colonialist or methodologically flawed, there is still much to gain from this seminal book. Wansbrough's more considered rejection of *Hagarism* reflects his concern for the overwhelming and historically distorting impact of "salvation history," that is, theologized, sacred history, on both the Islamic and non-Islamic sources, and in light of this he essentially committed himself to an historical agnosticism regarding the origins of Islam. Yet such resignation is not our only option. Admittedly, both Wansbrough and Robert Hoyland after him have correctly noted that non-Muslim sources alone "cannot provide a complete and coherent account of the history of Early Islam," as was essentially proposed in *Hagarism*. But this recognition does not somehow make non-Islamic witnesses to the religious history of the seventh and eighth centuries any less valuable as a whole than the early Islamic sources, and on particular points they may possibly report more reliably than the Islamic tradition, as this study will argue. Almost all the documentary resources for understanding the formative period of Islam, including even the Qur'an, are highly problematic from a religious historian's viewpoint: these sources are frequently overwhelmed and controlled by a master narrative of sacred history, as well as being influenced by the social, political, and theological concerns of the particular groups that produced them. But such conditions do not present an altogether uncommon or impossible circumstance.

There are ways of extracting historically credible data from such "contaminated" repositories. We must deploy methods capable of identifying different types of bias and excavating information from these sources, along the lines of those techniques used to reconstruct the historical Jesus from the highly theologized narratives of the Christian gospels. This endeavor will not yield, to be sure, history "wie es eigentlich gewesen," but this was always a hypermodern fantasy in any case. Instead, we will be able to reconstruct a narrative (or quite possibly several narratives) of Islamic origins that possesses a degree of probability derived from the particular methodological principles used to assess the relative reliability of various testimonies concerning the formation of Islam. *Hagarism* opened the door to this new approach, and in its wake we must critically assess the strikingly dissimilar descriptions of earliest Islam often found in the non-Islamic sources of the seventh and eighth centuries and in the more traditional Islamic accounts from the later eighth and ninth centuries. While a great deal of investigation still remains to be done along these lines, the past two decades have already seen some excellent work in this area, much of it inspired by the initial insights of Crone and Cook.

Rather than pursuing one of the many new issues that undoubtedly await exploration, the present study will return to what was surely one of *Hagarism*'s most startling revelations: its identification of widespread reports from seventh- and eighth-century writers that Muhammad was still alive and leading the Islamic community as his followers began their invasion of the Roman Near East. This indication is strikingly at odds with the traditional account of Muhammad's death before the Near Eastern conquest at Medina in 632, first recorded in the earliest Islamic biographies of the mid-eighth and ninth centuries. With so many unanswered questions still to pursue, one might rightly question the return to an issue raised now already over thirty years ago. There are, however, several reasons for doing so. In the first place, Crone and Cook merely note the existence of this discrepancy in the sources, gathering many of the most significant references together in an endnote. Instead of carefully evaluating the historical significance of these witnesses both individually and collectively, they conclude their list of references with only the remark: "The convergence is impressive." Indeed it is, but can we say something more than this? Might a critical analysis of the sources give us some sense of how much historical weight they can bear, both individually and collectively? Is it possible that, even if Muhammad did not in fact lead the Islamic conquest of Palestine, this tradition might reveal something about the nature of formative Islam?

In all fairness, we are presently much better equipped to pose such questions, in large part due to the excellent work of Hoyland, most notably in his Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. Not only has Hoyland produced an outstanding catalogue of the many references to early Islam made in non-Islamic sources, but he takes the project that was begun in *Hagarism* an important step forward by proposing a basic methodology for evaluating the significance of these sources, as well as providing examples of its application. In essence, Hoyland proposes that we should ask three basic questions of each potential witness to assess its historical worth: What is the source of its observation(s) about early Islam? What is the character of the observation? And what is the subject of the observation? The first question rather straightforwardly asks us to consider the reliability of each author's source: Was he himself an eyewitness to what he reports? Did she hear it from those who were eyewitnesses? Or is it merely hearsay or gossip? Clearly there is a descending scale of reliability as one moves down this list. In addition, Hoyland suggests that we consider the nature of the observation itself: does the source report a "simple observation of fact," or does the information in question serve some sort of apologetic agenda or "totalizing explanation"? "Simple observations," Hoyland suggests, will likely have a much higher degree of historical veracity.

Somewhat related to this is the third principle, which questions the nature of the matter that the non-Islamic source describes: Is it something that an outsider would likely have accurate knowledge of? That is, does the statement reflect something that would be readily observable by a non-Muslim, or even better, is it something that would have directly affected non-Muslims? In such cases, the witness of non-Muslim writers is more likely to transmit reliable information. When the same writers comment on aspects of Islamic belief and intracommunal life, however, we must adopt a more skeptical approach to their reports.

These are sound principles for assessing the relative worth of the various non-Islamic witnesses to the earliest history of Islam, to which I would add one further: the criterion of multiple, independent attestation, one of the oldest and most fundamental principles of modern biblical criticism and particularly important for studies of the historical Jesus. As biblical scholars have long recognized, a higher degree of historical probability inheres in observations attested by several independent sources, since this pattern makes it highly unlikely that a particular writer has invented a given report. When a particular tradition from the non-Islamic sources meets all of these criteria, there is a significant probability that such a report reflects genuine information about the formative period of Islam. While it cannot be said with any certainty that these witnesses disclose what really happened, such reports present high-quality information that derives from the period in question. Nevertheless, despite their exceptional value, these testimonies should not simply be taken at face value, and they need to be compared critically with related traditions from the earliest Islamic sources.

When there is sharp disagreement with the canonical narratives of Islamic origins, as is the case with the circumstances of Muhammad's death, one must also subject the relevant Islamic sources to a similar scrutiny, in order to determine if the difference reflects the influence of later theological, political, literary, or other interests within the Islamic tradition. This process will involve bringing the full toolkit of historical criticism to bear on the traditions of the Qur'an and the earliest narratives of Islamic origins, including elements of form criticism, tradition criticism, *Tendenz* criticism, and, whenever possible, source criticism and redaction criticism. Likewise, in such circumstances it will be important to look for any anomalies within the Islamic tradition that might corroborate the reports of the non-Islamic sources. Here the criterion of embarrassment or dissimilarity (that is, dissimilarity from the later tradition) is particularly valuable. According to this cornerstone of historical Jesus studies, material sharply at odds with the received tradition is unlikely to have been invented by the later community; such divergences from established belief and practice are instead likely remnants of an older formation, preserved in spite of their deviance on account of their antiquity. When a number of witnesses converge to reveal the same discordant theme, there is a high probability that this material reflects a particularly early tradition that has been effaced from the canonical sources. Moreover, if evidence from the non-Islamic sources exhibits coherence with such anomalies in the early

Islamic sources, then there is an even greater likelihood that this represents a primitive aspect of the Islamic faith that was either altered or abandoned by the later tradition.

Hoyland has recently questioned the value of this criterion of dissimilarity or embarrassment for the reconstruction of early Islam, characterizing such reasoning as "highly dubious." As evidence against the value of this principle, Hoyland refers to John Burton's explanation of the Satanic Verses episode from Muhammad's early biographies: while scholars have overwhelmingly looked to this embarrassing moment from Muhammad's career as almost certainly genuine, since "it is unthinkable that the story could have been invented by Muslims," Burton suggests that the story was indeed invented to show "that Qur'anic verses could be divinely withdrawn without verbal replacement." Nevertheless, Burton's rather complicated argument has not gained much traction, and his proposal that the entire story was invented simply to provide justification for a particular form of Qur'anic abrogation is not very persuasive and certainly does not afford sufficient grounds for abolishing this core principle of historical and textual analysis. Hoyland further remarks that the reasoning behind this criterion "implies that our modern views on what is favourable or not coincide with those of early Muslims." Yet Burton's alternative merely replaces this modern viewpoint with the arcane world of early Qur'anic exegesis, and one must admit that it is certainly no less problematic to view the origins of Islam through the lens of the medieval Islamic tradition and its interpretive categories. In this regard, Gerald Hawting's analysis of the Satanic Verses tradition offers a far more compelling interpretation than Burton's, while also preserving the value of the criterion of dissimilarity. Arguing on the basis of the Qur'?n, Hawting persuasively identifies angelic intercession rather than idolatry as the main issue here, establishing a credible context for this episode within the religious milieu reflected in the Qur'?n. Likewise, Hawting makes equally clear the improbability that the story is a later fabrication based on the Qur'an, as well as explaining its suppression in many sources as a result of the Islamic tradition's association of Muhammad's opponents with polytheism and idolatry.

Admittedly, Hoyland's caution that one must be careful about assuming that modern ideas of tension or contradiction within the Islamic tradition coincide with those of early Muslims is an important point. Such concerns certainly warrant constant and careful consideration, but they need not paralyze historical analysis: reconstruction of the past always involves viewing its events through the lens of the present, no matter which methods or criteria the historian applies. No (post)modern historian can escape the limitations of her social and intellectual context, and as salubrious as Hoyland's warning is to historians in general, it seems there is no alternative "view from nowhere" that does not bring contemporary concerns and perspectives to the analysis of the past. If we are to abandon the toolkit of modern historical study simply because of its own historical contingencies, then we presumably must resign ourselves either to a radical historical agnosticism or to the indigenous critique of the Islamic tradition itself. Moreover, the application of this criterion of historical analysis is not simply a matter of judging a tradition "either false or authentic," as Hoyland somewhat incorrectly draws the dichotomy in his critique, but instead this method affords principles for identifying a probability that certain material is unlikely to have originated in specific historical circumstances. In the case of traditions that are strongly divergent from the beliefs and practices of second- and third-century Islam or its canonical memory of origins, one must admit that these are less likely to have been invented by the later community than traditions undergirding the classical Islam of the 'Abbasid era. While Hoyland's implicit critique of modern historiography's claim to divide truth from fiction is welcome, his rejection of this method of analysis for its failure to yield such objective results is not fully persuasive.

On the basis of these methodological principles, the present study will argue that the witness of certain non-Islamic sources that Muhammad survived to lead the invasion of Palestine preserves what is quite possibly a genuine early Islamic tradition, despite the fact that several recent articles would suggest otherwise. For instance, Hoyland, who generally advocates the value of non-Islamic sources for reconstructing early Islamic history, has somewhat surprisingly taken the opposing view. In his study of Muhammad's life as reported in Christian writings, Hoyland initially notes the clear witness of these sources to Muhammad's sustained

vitality but then rather strangely concludes that these sources are collectively mistaken in their notice of a later date for Muhammad's death. Without much explanation at all, he declares the accuracy of the traditional Islamic sources on this matter, despite the fact that his own criteria could seem to favor the reliability of the Christian sources in this case. To my knowledge the only other study to address the relationship between the various Christian accounts of the Arab conquests and the Islamic biographies of Muhammad specifically and in any detail is an article entitled "La 'Sira' du Prophète Mahomet et les conquêtes des arabes dans le Proche-Orient d'après les sources syriaques," an article published in the proceedings from a conference on the life of Muhammad some thirty years ago. Unfortunately, its author, Bertold Spuler, not only disregards some of the most important sources, but he rather astonishingly asserts the fundamental harmony of all the sources and completely overlooks their differences concerning Muhammad's involvement in the Palestinian campaign. Finally, we may add to this a report in the popular media that Crone and Cook have allegedly "backed away from" their earlier views concerning the date of Muhammad's death as expressed in *Hagarism*, although I have not yet found any evidence of such a retraction in print. In fact, to the contrary, Cook has maintained the significance of the non-Islamic sources on this point, writing in the same year as the article in question that "non-Muslim sources written in the following decades [after 632] give only very scrappy information and are subject to problems of their own. One point of interest is that they suggest that Muhammad was still alive when the Muslim expansion outside Arabia began." Even more recently, Crone has similarly written that these sources "convey the impression that he was actually leading the invasions. Mohammad's death is normally placed in 632, but the possibility that it should be placed two or three years later cannot be completely excluded."

In light of the rather negative assessment that this report of Muhammad's vitality during the Palestinian invasion has received in recent publications, it seems necessary to revisit the question of Muhammad's death, not so much with the goal of determining when he really died, but with an eye toward whether these non-Islamic sources may in fact preserve an early tradition that was subsequently revised as Islam's self-image and self-understanding were transformed. This book seeks to determine if Muhammad's leadership during the invasion of Palestine is something that might have comported with the beliefs of the earliest Muslims, insofar as they can be known, and, likewise, if are there reasons to suspect that there might have been cause to re-remember the end of his life differently at a later point. The larger purpose of this investigation thus lies not in the possibility of adjusting the date of Muhammad's death by a few years. Instead, this difference in the early sources affords an important opening through which to explore the nature of primitive Islam more broadly. Likewise, this study aims to demonstrate the potential value of non-Islamic sources for reconstructing the history of formative Islam, when these sources are used in a methodologically critical manner and in conjunction with, rather than isolation from, Islamic sources. While others have already made similar demonstrations, including Lawrence Conrad and Hoyland in particular, in view of the generally negative reception of *Hagarism* and its approach within Islamic studies as a whole, it would appear that this point bears repeating.

A related goal of the study is to work toward narrowing the divide that exists between the study of religion and culture in Mediterranean late antiquity and the investigation of Islamic origins, an objective that it shares with much recent scholarship on late antiquity and early Islam. In both its methods and its conclusions, this monograph presents a case for interpreting the beginnings of Islam more within the context of the broader late ancient world, rather than according to the more traditional view of Islam's formation in the relative isolation of the Hijaz. By interpreting the rise of Islam in continuity with, rather than separation from, the world of Mediterranean late antiquity, we are sure to gain new perspectives on both. Moreover, this study aims to demonstrate the value of studying Islamic origins using the same methods and perspectives that have long been utilized in the investigation of early Christianity and early Judaism. The hermeneutics of suspicion have profoundly affected the modern study of formative Christianity and Judaism, but this skeptical approach has yet to significantly affect the comparatively more sanguine attitudes often displayed by scholars of early Islam. Accordingly this book is aimed not only at scholars of early Islam but also at

scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity. It is hoped that by attempting to bridge the disciplines of Christian and Islamic origins methodologically this study might generate further comparative discussion among experts in both fields.

This investigation thus will adopt the more skeptical approach to the sources that is characteristic of the historical-critical study of early Christianity and the historical figure of Jesus. It expects of early Islamic traditions that they meet the same rigorous criteria that scholars of formative Christianity have applied in judging the historicity of traditions contained in early Christian literature. Although this study will treat traditional narratives of Islamic origins with a great deal of suspicion, this will not exceed the skepticism that scholars of religious history bring to bear on similar narratives of Christian origins. It is very important to stress this methodological consistency, particularly in light of the fact that the *sira* traditions and their historicity have lately become a sensitive issue in contemporary Islam. While the medieval Islamic tradition was itself rather circumspect regarding the historical authenticity of these traditions, in more recent years, largely in response to the historical-critical study of these traditions in the West, the *sira* traditions have become in the Islamic world "almost a holy writ, whose reliability was accepted almost without asking questions." The result is a deep and widening gap between Western and Islamic interpretation of both the *sira* traditions and the *hadith* more generally: the methodological skepticism that guides much modern scholarship on these topics is often rejected out of hand by traditional Islamic scholarship and occasionally seen as an attack on Islam itself.

This divide between modern secular and traditional Islamic scholarship over the historical reliability of the *sira* and *hadith* presents an important context for understanding both the nature and intensions of this investigation into early Islamic history. This study and the methods that it employs are in no way aimed at casting doubt on the religious truth of the Islamic tradition. Instead, this book explores a particular aspect of formative Islam from a point of view outside the Islamic tradition, with explicit commitments to the principles of modern, secular historical criticism and the hermeneutics of suspicion rather than fidelity to the traditions and values of the Islamic faith. When approached from this secular perspective, with its specific concerns and commitments, the formative period of Islam will rather obviously look quite different than it does from within the *umma*. It is important to recognize, however, that both perspectives on Islamic origins are certainly valid, and within their own contexts and communities they are rightly understood to disclose truth. One approach interprets early Islam from the outside, confessing the skepticism of the secular academy, while the other presents a sacred history of formative Islam, a narrative that both shapes and is shaped by the Islamic faith and its community.

Neither perspective then can claim to represent an unbiased account of Islamic origins that somehow is obvious to any objective observer: both understandings are fully intelligible only within the particular interpretive communities that produce them. Moreover, one perspective does not necessarily invalidate the other, and the conclusions of traditional Islamic and modern secular scholarship can both rightly claim to be valid within their own cultural and intellectual contexts. In fact, it is quite possible for an individual to approach a particular issue simultaneously from both a secular point of view and a confessional one, as numerous Western scholars have demonstrated. What must be conceded on all sides, however, is that truth depends on the context of an interpretive community, be it religious or secular, and there is no objective truth that will appear as such to every individual and in every cultural context. This approach then does not negate the truth of Islamic accounts of formative Islam: they are in fact true for those whose worldview has been and continues to be shaped most fundamentally by the Islamic tradition. Likewise, those outside the Islamic faith community will not necessarily find Islam's representation of its own early history to be true in the same way that Muslims do. In similar fashion, however, secular knowledge must also recognize the situatedness of its own truth claims: it may only claim to be objective perhaps in the somewhat limited sense that it approaches Islam, for instance, from the outside and thus as an object of study.

Finally, if some readers may perhaps think it entirely implausible that the Islamic tradition has incorrectly preserved something as significant as the time and place of its founder's death, a quick glance at formative Christianity is instructive. Undoubtedly many scholars of early Islam will want to persist in maintaining the accuracy of the traditional Islamic accounts of Muhammad's death and burial, regarding the deviant reports considered in this study as simply misinformed errors coming from those outside of the Islamic community. Yet it is not at all clear why the traditional Islamic narratives of Muhammad's death should warrant such implicit confidence, particularly in the face of this alternative early tradition. The simple fact that the Islamic accounts were produced by insiders in no way guarantees the accuracy of their information, any more so than one would presume that the Christian gospels accurately record the life and death of Jesus on the basis of their production by insiders. Indeed, to the contrary, it is for this very reason that New Testament scholars are generally suspicious of the gospel accounts, seeking to test them whenever possible by quality evidence drawn from external sources. This sharp contrast with the study of early Islam is seen quite clearly in F. E. Peters's recent comparative study, *Jesus and Muhammad*, where the discussion of Jesus begins with evidence from the "pagan" and Jewish sources, while evidence from non-Islamic sources for the beginnings of Islam is rather strangely ignored.

The earliest extant gospels were written between forty and seventy years after the death of Jesus, based in part on earlier literary sources that had begun to form perhaps some twenty years after his death, a considerably smaller interval than the time elapsed between Muhammad's death and his earliest biographies. Yet despite the fact that Jesus' biography took written form more quickly than did Muhammad's, the gospels have significant disagreements in chronology, including perhaps most famously the differences between the synoptic and Johannine gospels regarding the length of Jesus' ministry. Likewise, the date of Jesus' death, for instance, can only be known approximately: 28-33 CE. Yet perhaps more comparable with the tradition of Muhammad's death in Medina are actually the accounts of Jesus' birth. These reveal that only half a century after Jesus' death, the early Christians had created a historically improbable tradition of his birth in Bethlehem to serve the needs of Christian salvation history. Still more apt is the comparison of Islam's apostle with early Christian traditions about its apostles. Take, for example, the apostle Peter, whose death and burial are located in Rome by multiple, independent reports written just over a century after the fact: there is even an early tomb identified as the site of this burial. Yet there is considerable debate as to whether Peter was ever even in Rome, and the most recent analysis argues rather persuasively that in fact he was not. Likewise, traditions from the second century identify Ephesus as the apostle John's final resting place, some of which are allegedly based on oral transmission spanning only two generations. Yet the strong consensus of New Testament scholarship rejects the accuracy of these reports. If then early Christian traditions concerning Jesus and the apostles could be subject to such manipulation over the course of just a century or even less, how much more so might one expect to find similar developments in the early Islamic biographies of Muhammad, whose contents are widely regarded as highly stylized and untrustworthy.

Such adjustments to a religious tradition's memory of its early history are in fact not at all unusual and need not be judged as either deceptive or the product of some insidious conspiracy (as some scholars of early Islam have wanted to insist). To the contrary, it is quite common to find that a religious community has revised certain important aspects of its formative history to comport with its most cherished theological principles, as the Christian Nativity traditions bear witness. Often such revisions serve to extend and intensify the interpretive power and cohesion of a religion's core narrative by incorporating various important religious symbols and practices into the story of its origins. The early Christian gospel writers, like Muhammad's early biographers presumably, simply were not interested in writing an objective description of past events in the fashion that modern history values. Their narratives urgently seek to communicate the truth about Jesus Christ and the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection: to expect a dispassionate inventory of events would be both anachronistic and absurd. Moreover, the pious fictions of early Christian literature would be wrongly condemned as frauds or deceptions: to the contrary, they undoubtedly were efforts to proclaim the truth, as seen by the authors and their communities, with perfect clarity. One would only expect

that similar impulses and developments are to be found in the nascent Islamic tradition, and as I will argue, the early Islamic traditions of the end of Muhammad's life (much like the Christian Nativity traditions) appear to have adapted the arc of his biography to fit the needs of early Islamic identity and salvation history nearly a century after his death. Consequently, our knowledge of exactly when Muhammad died is not nearly as certain as much previous scholarship has assumed, and it seems we must accordingly adjust our historical estimate for the end of his life to sometime more approximately within the period 632-35 CE.

The first chapter of this study examines the various sources from the seventh and eighth centuries that attest to Muhammad's survival and leadership at the time of the initial assault on the Roman Near East, circa 634-65. Although later sources, particularly from the Christian tradition, continue to repeat this tradition, this chapter focuses on witnesses from the first century and a half after Muhammad's death. Sources from this period hold special value as potential bearers of early traditions that may subsequently have been displaced once the canonical narratives of Islamic origins came to be established during the later eighth century. At that time, Ibn Ishaq's officially sanctioned biography of Muhammad, as well as the teachings of other contemporary Medinan traditionists, began to be widely known. From this point onward, the life of Muhammad as remembered by Muslims and non-Muslims alike was largely governed by the contents of these canonical biographies. Early evidence of their influence outside of the Islamic tradition can be seen already in the early ninth-century *Chronicle* of Theophanes, which, owing to direct influence from Islamic sources, is the first non-Islamic source to "correctly" relate Muhammad's decease prior to the invasion of Palestine. The fact that later Christian sources, and in particular the Western Christian accounts of Muhammad's death surveyed by Etan Kohlberg, should largely adhere to the traditional Islamic chronology is merely testimony to the ascendency and authority of these canonical biographies within the Islamic tradition of the second and later centuries.

Eleven different sources from this period, including even one from the Islamic tradition itself, indicate Muhammad's continued survival at the beginnings of Near Eastern conquests. Each of these documents is first evaluated individually to assess the quality of its testimony. Then, the chapter considers the collective value of these reports, reaching the conclusion that they convincingly bear witness to an early tradition that Muhammad was still alive and leading the Islamic community as his followers invaded Roman Syria and Palestine. This tradition, it would appear, reached each of the various religious communities of the early Islamic empire by the beginning of the second century AH, and it is not contradicted by the more traditional chronology of Muhammad's decease until after the composition of Ibn Ishaq's influential biography of Muhammad around 750 CE. As such, this divergent tradition regarding the end of Muhammad's life merits serious historical consideration.

The following chapter turns to the traditional Islamic account of Muhammad's death and burial, focusing especially on Ibn Ishaq's biography, the earliest surviving Islamic narrative of Muhammad's life and the beginnings of Islam. Here the details of Muhammad's sudden illness, his demise, and his interment as recorded in this collection are first described and then compared with other early biographical sources, in order to determine which traditions might possibly derive from earlier authorities. The results of this endeavor, however, prove rather meager, and most of the material concerning Muhammad's death and burial in Ibn Ishaq's biography cannot be assigned to any earlier figure. While a limited number of traditions can be attributed to Ibn Ishaq's teacher, al-Zuhri (d. 742 CE), these reveal only Muhammad's sudden illness and death in an urban context, surrounded by his wives and in the vicinity of a place of prayer where his followers regularly gathered to worship. The location of Muhammad's death and burial in Medina and the chronology of these events relative to the Near Eastern conquests, however, cannot be ascribed with any assurance to al-Zuhri. Ibn Ishaq's biography remains the earliest witness to these traditions, and while one certainly cannot entirely exclude the possibility that he had received this information from al-Zuhri or some other early authority, there is no evidence for this hypothesis.

This chapter continues to consider the issue of chronology within the early biographies of Muhammad more generally, observing that modern scholarship judges the traditional chronology of Muhammad's life to be among the most artificial and unreliable elements of these narratives, apparently devised by his biographers only near the end of the first Islamic century. Moreover, a handful of sources from the early Islamic tradition indicate either a period of seven or thirteen years for Muhammad's Medinan period (instead of ten years) or a date for the *hijra* of 624/25 (instead of 621/22): these variants reveal a significant pattern consistent with the possible revision of an earlier tradition of Muhammad's death in order to place these events prior to the invasion of Palestine. Finally, Chapter 2 examines several anomalous reports from Ibn Ishaq's biography that could suggest traces of an older tradition associating Muhammad with the assault on Palestine. On the whole, these features of Muhammad's earliest biographies invite a possibility that the traditional memory of Muhammad's death in the Hijaz prior to the invasion of the Near East is a relatively recent development.

Nevertheless such significant revisions to the ending of Muhammad's life in early Islamic memory would seem to require some sort of substantial catalyst. Several broad literary tendencies of the early biographical traditions could seem to favor these changes, including particularly the strong influence of certain biblical typologies on the structure of the narrative. Nevertheless, while these tendencies may have contributed to such a reconfiguration of Muhammad's biography, they do not in themselves seem sufficient to have generated this change. The second half of this monograph accordingly identifies evidence of significant ideological shifts in early Islamic eschatology, confessional identity, and sacred geography that profoundly transformed the nature of Muhammad's original religious movement. These dramatic changes not only provide a context that can account for the existence of an early tradition associating Muhammad with the invasion of Palestine, but they also present circumstances that would explain a need to sever his connection with the Near Eastern conquest and instead to memorialize the death of Islam's founding prophet in the Hijaz.

Chapter 3 argues that Muhammad was an eschatological prophet who together with his earliest followers expected to witness the imminent end of the world in the divine judgment of the Hour, seemingly within his own lifetime. Much twentieth-century scholarship, particularly in English, has sought to minimize this aspect of earliest Islam, identifying Muhammad instead as a social-reforming prophet of ethical monotheism. But the evidence of the Qur'an and certain early apocalyptic (or more precisely, eschatological) *hadith* clearly show that Muhammad and the early members of his religious movement believed that they would soon see the end of history. Moreover, it seems rather likely that the eschatological fervor shared by Muhammad and his earliest followers was a driving force behind the Islamic conquest of the Near East: their anticipation of the Hour was, it would appear, closely linked with the restoration of Abraham's descendants to the Promised Land. Yet when Muhammad died before the *eschatori*'s arrival and the Hour continued to be delayed, the early Muslims had to radically reorient their religious vision. The Hour was thus increasingly deferred into the distant future, and in less than a century Islam swiftly transformed itself from a religion expecting the end of the world to a religion that aimed to rule the world. In the course of such a profound transition, one would imagine that more than just the eschatological timetable was revised, and as the fourth chapter demonstrates, there were related changes in the nature of the early Islamic community's confessional boundaries and the location of its sacred geography.

The final chapter looks first at the seemingly nonsectarian nature of the early Islamic community. Numerous signs point to the existence of a primitive, inter-confessional "community of the Believers" that welcomed Jews and apparently even Christians to full membership, so long as they subscribed to a simple profession of faith in "God and the last day." Muhammad does not appear to have been understood at this stage as a prophet of unique stature but was viewed instead as an eschatological herald who had been sent to warn the descendants of Abraham before the final judgment of the Hour. Unsurprisingly, the eschatological hopes of these early Believers looked to Jerusalem and Palestine, the Promised Land of their common inheritance, as the sacred landscape within which God would soon realize the climax of history. Although Muhammad's

religious movement may perhaps have originated somewhere in the Hijaz, it seems clear that the western coast of Arabia was not originally its holy land. Jerusalem, and not Mecca and Medina, appears to have stood at the center of early Islam's sacred map, which is only to be expected if Islam began, as seems likely, as an eschatological faith grounded in a shared Abrahamic identity. Only as Islam progressively transformed itself over the course of the seventh century from an inter-confessional Abrahamic eschatological movement into the distinctively Arab faith of an empire defined by Muhammad's unique prophetic message did its sacred geography change accordingly. During this period, the Hijazi cities of Mecca and Medina gradually emerged at the center of a new sacred geography more suited to the sectarian, Arabian faith of classical Islam. This struggle to redefine the Islamic holy land reached its climax in the events of the Second Civil War, a conflict that seems to have been partly grounded in competing ideas of sacred geography and whose outcome appears to have largely settled the matter in favor of the Hijaz.

These changing circumstances can persuasively explain the existence of an early tradition of Muhammad's leadership during his followers' invasion of Palestine as well as its eventual replacement. One would expect that a religious movement driven by an urgent eschatology focused on Jerusalem, which earliest Islam appears to have been, would have originally wanted to remember its founding prophet as leading the faithful into the Promised Land to meet the Final Judgment. Even if Muhammad never actually made it to the Holy Land, one can well imagine that his early followers would have come to remember their early history as such. Yet once the focus of Islamic devotion turned to Mecca and Medina, a new memory of Muhammad's quietus would be required, one that joined the fulfillment of his career to the newly consecrated landscape of the Hijaz: just such an account one finds in the canonical Islamic narratives of Muhammad's death.

The similarity of this hypothesis to the solution proposed by the authors of *Hagarism* certainly should not be missed. As the eschatological hopes of the early Believers went unfulfilled, Jerusalem and the Holy Land lost much of their significance, eventually to be replaced by the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina. Consequently, Crone and Cook conclude that "the Prophet was disengaged from the original Palestinian venture by a chronological revision whereby he died two years before the invasion began." While certain other facets of *Hagarism*'s reconstruction of Islamic origins may now seem somewhat dubious, such as its proposal concerning an early Islamic messianism, the identification of earliest Islam as an eschatological movement focused on Jerusalem and the Holy Land remains persuasive and has been validated by much subsequent research. As this study argues, the reports indicating Muhammad's leadership during the Near Eastern conquests first identified by *Hagarism* most likely reflect an early Islamic tradition that was eventually abandoned: the information is attested by a wide range of high-quality sources, and the tradition's early acceptance as well as its eventual rejection both comport with certain major changes in the development of primitive Islam.

Finally, while some scholars of Islam might protest that such an approach merely perpetuates the sins of earlier Orientalist scholarship, I would argue that such accusations are neither very helpful nor warranted. To be sure, the manner in which we choose to represent other cultures, and particularly those cultures that have been victims of Western colonization and aggression, demands serious and constant reflection. Out of such concerns, many scholars from both the Islamic world and the West have proposed that the academic study of Islam must accordingly respect Islamic truth claims regarding Islam's most authoritative traditions, the Qur'an and the Sunna, and refrain from subjecting them to historical criticism. To do otherwise, some would maintain, is to commit what essentially amounts to an act of intellectual colonialism. Although I deeply sympathize with the concerns that give rise to this position, it simply does not present an adequate solution in my view, at least not from the vantage of the academic discipline of religious studies. Insofar as the approach taken in this study merely applies methods and perspectives of analysis to formative Islam that have now for well over a century been utilized in the study of Jewish and Christian origins, one must recognize just how "othering" it is to insist that Islam—and it alone—should be shielded from similar study. One thereby runs the risk of presenting the Islamic tradition in comparison as something fragile and pristine, whose unique

perspective is somehow harmed by the application of modern criticism. Thus, while the broader political context identified by Edward Said as well as many others certainly cannot be simply ignored, I would argue that it is at the same time essential, for both intellectual and pedagogical reasons, to conduct investigations into the earliest history of Islam, as Chase Robinson recommends, "committed to the idea that the history made by Muslims is comparable to that made by non-Muslims."

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