Fitzgerald on Bowersock, 'The Crucible of Islam'

Review published on Monday, June 24, 2019


Reviewed by Timothy J. Fitzgerald (James Madison University) Published on H-Empire (June, 2019)
Commissioned by Gemma Masson (University of Birmingham)


Questions about Islam's origins have long attracted the attention of scholars. For generations, the significance of the period (the sixth to ninth centuries CE), and the challenges to examining it, have appealed to the most impressive minds in “Oriental” and then Near/Middle Eastern studies. Their findings and debates, moreover, have loomed large. Even scholars who specialize in much later periods are typically familiar with the foundational controversies of early Islamic historiography. In recent years, new work has accumulated to the point where fresh syntheses—including those aimed at a general audience—are possible. G. W. Bowersock’s The Crucible of Islam is a book of this kind. Yet his purpose is different: the book “is not intended to be another narrative of the rise of Islam, but to provide a glimpse into the chaotic environment that made Islam possible” (p. 9). Accordingly, Bowersock casts a wide net. While focusing on Arabia, he has a sharp eye for geopolitics, here to include the interventions not just of the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires but also of Ethiopia across the Red Sea. And, while he expectedly zeroes in on the sixth and seventh centuries, Bowersock is in no hurry to put the Prophet Muhammad and his successors at center stage. References to Muhammad, the Qur’an, and early Muslims appear as occasional excurses for over half of the book (five of nine chapters). Bowersock’s study is thus more about that “crucible” than about “Islam” per se. It is an erudite exercise in late antique world-building.

Though a classical scholar and ancient historian, Bowersock understands the intellectual landscape of early Islamic studies. In the prologue, he draws special attention to three recent monographs: Fred Donner’s Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam (2010), Robert Hoyland’s In God’s Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire (2015), and Aziz al-Azmeh’s The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People (2014). These and other works have shown Bowersock the basic problems that attend the field. First among these is the reliance on “tendentious” primary sources that not only reflect a complex spread of prejudices but also often far postdate the events they purport to describe (p. 1). For Bowersock, what is needed is a middle path between “unquestioning acceptance of later Muslim tradition and equally unquestioning rejection of it.... Rigid methodologies have run their course” (p. 12). The author’s appeal to moderation and “critical reasoning” is sensible enough and compellingly applied (p. 13). But it is probably wishful to think he can end “the factional quarrels that have bedeviled Western scholarship on early Islam,” especially in so compact a study that does not itself directly engage the Arabic source material (p. 12). Yet this is, again, a valuable and highly learned survey. It is enriched by a wide reading of the literature, including recent studies in European languages that are sometimes missed by specialists. Bowersock has also benefited from ideas shared at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton where he became acquainted with the late Oleg Grabar and Patricia Crone. And, I contend, the
author’s background permits a distinctive approach to the subject, which helps to set Islam in a deep historical context.

There is a chronological drift to the book’s nine chapters, but the organization is also thematic. In chapter 1, Bowersock shows how pre-Islamic Arabia was closely tied to the international politics and cultural transformations of the late antique Near East. The author notes Byzantine and Sassanian connections, but he is most keen to demonstrate ties to Ethiopia, as these are underappreciated linkages. In the fourth century, monotheism spread across the region. The Arab tribes of Himyar (Yemen) established a Jewish kingdom and the Ethiopians based in Axum converted to Christianity. These changes intensified religious rivalries and foreign entanglement. In the 520s, “irredentist” Ethiopia conquered Himyar, and an independent Ethiopian king, Abraha, established himself there (p. 18). According to archaeological evidence, Abraha ruled vigorously, conducting diplomacy, building churches, and marching armies that threatened Mecca. Though his kingdom crumbled, it left a “toxic legacy” of tension between Christians and pagan polytheists (p. 29). Bowersock’s work is particularly original here, as it builds on his previous *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (2013). Chapter 2 widens the lens on religion by surveying Arab paganism (Bowersock prefers “polytheism”), with asides about the name “Allah,” angels, and the diverse forms of non-Jewish, non-Christian monotheism that predated Islam (for example, the religion of Abraham, hanifiyya). Chapter 3 focuses on Mecca, including its origins and commercial and religious identity. Bowersock argues Crone went too far in diminishing the town’s mercantile importance. She also underestimated its antiquity, which is attested to in a second-century register by Ptolemy. Bowersock’s facility with Greek and Latin sources and the fruitful comparisons he makes with ancient cities like Petra show the benefits of his perspective. In this chapter, he also elaborates on the “efflorescence of prophets and prophecy” at the time, with Musaylima, Muhammad’s famed rival, as an emblem rather than an exception (p. 58).

Chapter 4 backtracks to lay out, once more, the “symbiosis” between Arabia and Ethiopia, “a sleeping giant that awaited yet another call to life” (pp. 65, 69). For Bowersock, this matrix is vital to understanding Muhammad’s prophetic career and the mold that was cast for relations with non-Muslim “People of the Book.” As conditions worsened in Mecca, the early believers sought refuge with the Christian negus in Axum. This was the first “emigration” (hijra), circa 615. The encounter left many traces in the Qur’an and subsequent Muslim memory. Chapter 5 shifts north and, somewhat curiously, drills down into the Persians’ conquest of Jerusalem in 614. Here the Sassanians and Jews of the city cooperated—as they did in Arabia—against the Byzantine Christians. But Bowersock’s larger point seems to be that the alleged violence of the takeover has been exaggerated. Indeed, the archaeological evidence is now, he submits, conclusive in supporting a picture of relative stability across the Persian and later Muslim capture of Jerusalem in 638. There is a “new consensus” that before the Islamic conquests the Near East was not “lying desolate and ready for new rulers” but “was already experienced in survival under a foreign power and therefore all the more likely to be accommodating when a new one arrived” (pp. 96-97). Chapter 6 returns to Arabia and examines Muhammad’s career in Yathrib/Medina, where his followers established themselves after the hijra of 622. Bowersock paints a scene of swelling tensions, especially among the Jewish and pagan tribes of the oasis town. To explain the absorption of the believers and the elevation of Muhammad—as represented in the remarkable “Constitution of Medina”—the author adopts the notion that Byzantine emperor Heraclius leaned on his clients in the area to neutralize potential allies of the Sassanians and to secure the southern flank of his pending campaign against Persia.
Chapters 7 and 8 undertake a brisk survey of the period between the Prophet’s death in 632 and the ascent to power of Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik in 685. This is a complex and formative half-century, and it is hard for Bowersock to do justice to it here, though he does, as usual, sense key questions. One argument he pursues is that the Islamic conquests were not only swift but also generally nonviolent, a reality confirmed by archaeology and symbolized by the peaceful surrender of Jerusalem to the Caliph `Umar. There was, moreover, continuity in daily life. The early caliphs “simply showed no interest, apart from imposing some taxes to pay for their soldiers and other routine costs, in imposing their own language, religion, or traditions upon the lands into which they had moved” (p. 129). Byzantine coins circulated deep into the Umayyad period, and government documents were still written in Greek. But, as `Abd al-Malik sought to restore order after a bitter civil war (fitna) that saw the revolt of an anti-caliph in the Hijaz, a more determined Arab-Islamic stamp was put on everything from coinage to architecture. “Visual proof” of this climactic turning point was the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which `Abd al-Malik caused to be built in 691-92 (p. 137). The Dome, and what preceded it on the Temple Mount, is the subject of chapter 9. It is noteworthy that for all Bowersock’s emphasis on tolerant continuity, he strikes a dark and portentous chord at the finish. The monumental Dome’s inscriptions proclaimed the truth of Islam, while offering “no path to coexistence” with the other two Abrahamic faiths that shared the holy city (p. 158).

*The Crucible of Islam* is an attractive and accessible introduction to the world that gave rise to Islam. For me, its early chapters are the most valuable. There are inconsistencies in the transliteration of Arabic names and terms. There are two anachronistic references to Baghdad, well before its foundation as the Abbasid capital in 762 (pp. 108, 120). The Dome of the Rock is imprecisely called a “mosque” (p. 140). And there are a few tenuous characterizations, notably the suggestion that the three decade “interregnum” of the “Rightly-guided” caliphs “constituted the final stage in the forging of Islam as we know it” (p. 114). Islamic law, Sufism, and sectarianism—three major elements of Muslim identity—took at least another century or two to crystallize in early forms. Yet again, given the task, Bowersock’s study is an achievement, and one that will repay the attention of specialists and nonspecialists alike.


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/).