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# The Crescent Rising

The story of Islam's rise goes far beyond the period between Muhammad's birth and the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate. Christopher Carroll reviews 'The Crucible of Islam' by G.W. Bowersock.

A facade of the Dome of the Rock in the Old City of Jerusalem. PHOTO: EMMANUELE CONTINI/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

*By Christopher Carroll*
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In the opening pages of "The Crucible of Islam," G.W. Bowersock, the distinguished scholar of late antiquity, succinctly summarizes the problems facing anyone trying to understand just what produced "the faith that drove the armies of Arabs out of the Arabian peninsula to take possession of Palestine, North Africa and Syria within a few decades in the first half of the seventh century." Historians, he writes, "have been impeded by the tendentious character of most of the sources for this great upheaval, as well as by their own prejudices. It is difficult for non-Muslims, above all Jews and Christians, to be dispassionate in confronting the tide of Muslim conquests that swept over the ancient cultures of the Near East. It is no less difficult for Muslims to apply scholarly rigor to the word of God as well as to a historiographical tradition that significantly postdates the events it records."

Historical accounts from the period are notoriously sparse. Because the Quran gives little information about the time and place of its origin, much of the evidence for early Islam has traditionally been drawn from sources like the *hadith*, the records of the Prophet Muhammad's words and deeds. But while the first text of the Quran was thought to have been compiled not long after the Prophet's death, the hadith weren't collected and codified until

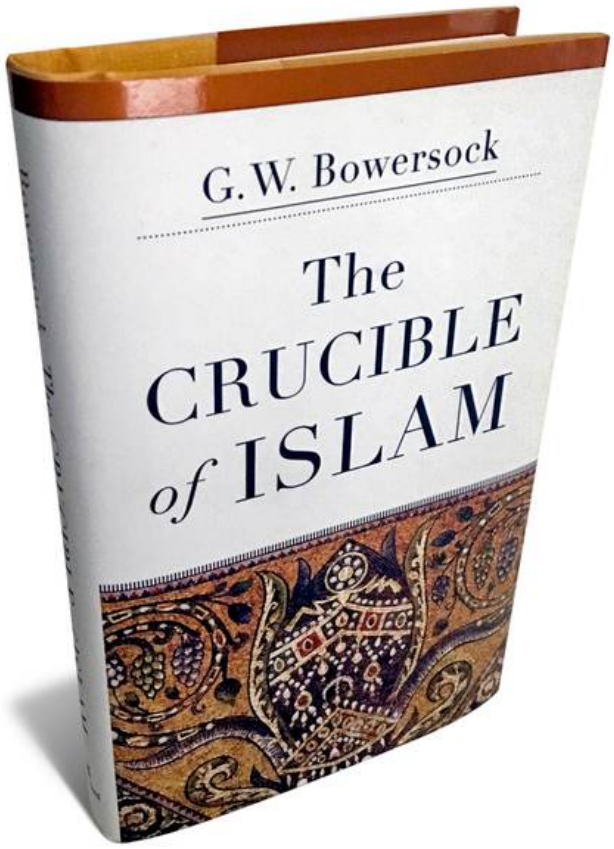
about two centuries later. The earliest extant works of historiography by Muslim scholars date to a similar period. Some Western scholars have declared these sources hopelessly compromised—they variously cite the gaps in time between the composition of these works and the events they purport to describe; religious bias; and signs of sectarian tampering and influence—and thus to be avoided entirely. They turn instead to other sources, like contemporaneous accounts by non-Muslims.

Yet these sources, while valuable, are not without their own biases. The 12th-century historian Anna Komnene, though writing about much later events, gives a sense of the kind of rancor common to Christian accounts of Muslims: "The Ishmaelites are indeed dominated by Dionysos and Eros; they indulge readily in every kind of sexual license, and if they are circumcised in the flesh they are certainly not so in their passions."

Mr. Bowersock, however, disagrees with this skeptical approach. "Minimalism is not the way to throw light on a dark age," he writes. "Interpreting the Qur'an exclusively by reference to its text without invoking outside or later sources is injudicious and unhistorical. . . . Similarly, reading only Jewish and Christian texts about the origins of Islam, because the Islamic texts came later, cannot dispense a historian from asking what the Arabs were thinking and saying precisely when those earlier texts were being written. To whom did those non-Muslim writers talk? What texts were they reading, and in what languages?"

PHOTO: WSJ

Drawing on a wide range of sources, Mr. Bowersock avoids what he calls the familiar path in accounts of the rise of Islam, works that start "with Muhammad's birth at Mecca about 570 and the revelations he received from Gabriel, and . . . progress to his subsequent




emigration (*hijra*) to Medina in 622." Such works, he writes, tend to conclude, after Muhammad's death in 632, with the turbulent reigns of the four so-called orthodox caliphs who succeeded Muhammad and ruled until the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate—the first Islamic dynasty—in 661.

THE CRUCIBLE OF ISLAM

By G.W. Bowersock
*Harvard, 220 pages, $25*

Instead, "The Crucible of Islam," in its "attempt to expose and describe the complex cultural and social environment that fostered a new religion," begins with the Arabian Peninsula in the century leading up to Muhammad's birth. Some of the chapters here cover material from two of Mr. Bowersock's earlier books: "The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam," an account of the sixth-century wars between the Jewish kings of Himyar (in modern-day Yemen) and the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia; and "Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity," which described the conflicts between the Persian and Eastern Roman empires for the control of the Middle East in the 610s and 620s.

Islam, he stresses, emerged from an environment that was already rich in religion—Judaism, Christianity and polytheism—and rife with religious conflict. There were even other monotheist prophets contemporary with Muhammad, including Musaylima, who is "alleged to have had his own unique god called Rahman, his own revelations, and his own Qur'an." Later chapters cover the Arab invasions of the 630s and 640s. Here Mr. Bowersock challenges the commonly held idea that the lands conquered by the Muslim

armies were shattered and exhausted from conflicts between the Persians and the Eastern Roman Empire, easy pickings for the Muslim armies. “In pacifying and administering the regions they had conquered, [the Persians] created a world that was not much different from what it had been before, with its rich traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Hellenism.” Many of the conquered territories—like Jerusalem—capitulated not out of hopeless exasperation but out of a belief that surrender would be the best way to preserve their way of life.

“The Crucible of Islam” is a remarkable work of scholarship, and yet those unfamiliar with the period may find themselves occasionally wishing for more context—the book presupposes a great deal of familiarity with the subject—and especially for more explanation from Mr. Bowersock of his methodology. Early on he cites the 18th-century classicist Richard Bentley’s motto *ratio et res ipsa* (“reason and the subject itself,” that is, are all a scholar needs) as the animating principle of the work, yet more delineation of the careful acts of picking and choosing—where he made use of sources that another scholar might have discounted, and why—would have enriched an already admirable book.

*Mr. Carroll’s writing has appeared in the New York Review of Books, Lapham’s Quarterly, Tin House and elsewhere.*

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