



Ibrahim, Ayman S. *The Stated Motivations for the Early Islamic Expansion (622-641): A Critical Revision of Muslims' Traditional Portrayal of the Arab Raids and Conquests*. Crosscurrents: New Studies on the Middle East series, eds. R. Kevin Lacey and Sari Nusseibeh. New York and Bern: Peter Lang, 2018, 240 pp. By David Johnston.

I cannot claim total impartiality in reviewing this important book. When it was still in dissertation form, I was Ibrahim's outside reader. I was impressed with his stellar historical skills, encouraged him to keep working on it for publication, and we have become good friends since. In fact, it was he who, countless times, helped me with Arabic passages I struggled with in a long translation project for Yale University Press.

Even aside the significant research he is now doing for his second PhD at the University of Haifa, Ayman Ibrahim is fast becoming a noted historian in early Islam. This book, *The Stated Motivations*, demonstrates his wide and strong grasp of the sources and critical issues relative to early Islamic history and historiography. Part of the great input of his mentor, J. Dudley Woodberry, in his PhD program was to put him in contact with three exceptional historians of Islam: Chase Robinson, Gabriel Said Reynolds, and David Cook. No doubt they in turn generously invested in Ibrahim because they saw his obvious gifting and hard work.

In this book Ibrahim critically evaluates the traditional Muslim assertion that the initial conquests were a) defensive in nature and b) motivated by the Arabs' desire to spread their newfound faith in Islam. To do so, he combs through the most venerable Islamic sources, which narrate the raids led by Muhammad during his ten-year rule in Medina and the military expeditions carried out by his two immediate successors in the next decade, Abu Bakr and Umar. What do these documents say about the motivation of the military commanders, both at the highest level – Muhammad and his first two caliphs – and those who led specific expeditions? Were they primarily

religious, that is, did they involve preaching and proselytizing? Or were they primarily for the sake of reinforcing the power of the Islamic realm politically and economically?

The evidence is consistent and incontrovertible. The earliest sources show no trace of religious motivation, only that the new monotheistic ideas and practices spread by Muhammad's preaching in Arabia and reinforced by his military successes and skillful diplomacy were one important part of what brought the formerly warring tribes of seventh-century Arabia together. "Islam," as we know it today, took at least three centuries to develop its legal and theological foundations. As Ibrahim reminds us, at this early stage the Qur'an had not yet been written down as a book. The five daily prayers were a new ritual most people living under this new polity were not yet practicing. Only the Hajj pilgrimage was well known and it had remained practically unchanged in its Muslim form. So being Muslim at this stage was to pledge loyalty to the new state founded by Muhammad in Medina.

In granular detail, then, the sources highlighting the Islamic military expansion of the first twenty years describe leaders focused on strategic considerations about how best to gain maximum territory and resources in order to strengthen and grow the burgeoning Islamic state. Using his vast knowledge of the writers and their different times (from the late eighth century to the fourteenth), Ibrahim deftly demonstrates that divine or angelic interventions in the texts were additions from a much later period. In addition, all these raids and expeditions were initiated by the Muslim leaders (they were never defensive) and the invaded populations were only given three choices: convert to Islam, keep your faith and pay the poll tax (*jizya*), or fight. There were even times when Christian tribes in Greater Syria (*al-Sham*) fought with the Muslims. The conquests were first and foremost about political expansion and economic gain.

Tellingly, the early sources also report many examples of cruelty, numerous instances of greedy squabbles over booty, as well as disagreements among the Muslim leaders over strategy. There seems to be no concern anywhere about attracting conquered people to a new faith through preaching and exemplary living, as Muslims today are apt to say.

Now I will devote the rest of this review to the three main strengths I see in this work and will explain why I believe it represents an important contribution to the mission of the worldwide church at this juncture. The first is that Ibrahim has given us a valuable primer on early Islamic history and historiography, all the way through the medieval period. He begins with a short glossary of Arabic terms followed by the names and dates of the authors he consulted in chronological order (over 150). Then, his second chapter introduces the reader to the leading figures among those authors and to the issues historians, Muslim and non-Muslim, have to deal with in consulting their works. Ibrahim is correct in his assessment of the surprising diversity of opinion and approaches among Muslim scholars themselves, and especially today.

Under this rubric, also, comes the clarity and meticulous organization of Ibrahim's writing. In the two chapters that detail Muhammad's raids (Ch. 3) and the first expeditions after his death (Ch. 4), he follows a clear pattern of consulting the relevant sources in chronological order and then follows up with critical remarks always numbered and succinctly expressed.

The second strength I will mention is his excellent presentation of the Qur'anic material on this topic of fighting, the meanings of jihad, and the treatment of non-Muslims (Ch. 5). Again, Ibrahim offers us a concise treatment of three very different approaches in the Qur'an itself. He mostly relies on the meanings of key terms but then launches into a more holistic method of seeing individual passages fitting into those three aforementioned categories. The Qur'an does not speak with one voice and one ignores that at one's own peril.

Finally, Ibrahim has struck a constructive and, in my view, a Christ-like tone in his impressive study. Early, in the Introduction, he avers that some might mistake his “focus on Arab raids and conquests” as “a polemic attack on a specific faith or particular religious leaders.” He explains that other religious traditions have generated unspeakable violence in the past, like the conquest of Canaan and the Crusades for example. On the other hand, he notes that he is not thereby negating other “honorable actions” by some of these same leaders. “This study,” he insists, “avoids sweeping generalizations about key Arab leaders, an endeavor to which all scholars should ascribe” (7). This is an important stand to take, because in interfaith discussions each side is tempted to compare the worst on the other side with the best on their side. Jesus, by contrast, tells us to take out the log from one’s own eye before pointing to the speck in a brother’s eye.

In the Conclusion, therefore, Ibrahim makes a distinction between an Arab Empire spread by the sword (true) and the spreading of Islam by the sword (false). He categorically refutes the common Muslim assertion that the Islamic conquests were both defensive and for the purpose of spreading the peace of Islam. Consider that at the end of the Umayyad Empire (740s, a century after the date at which this study ends), only ten percent of its population was Muslim. At the same time he rightly warns Muslims that this discourse inadvertently damages and soils the integrity of the Islamic message by associating it with the often brutal wars of expansion in the first generation of Muslims. Those actions contravene the explicit teachings of their holy book, he argues, teachings that instruct: do not initiate hostilities and do not force religious conversion on those attacked.

Hate crimes against Muslims have, in fact, risen sharply in the last two years. If we are serious about loving our Muslim neighbors and leading them to Jesus, we must also strive to be

fair, truthful, and respectful about their faith. That's the Golden Rule. I believe Ibrahim's tone in this study is pointing the way.

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