

Ibrahim, Ayman S. *A Concise Guide to the Life of Muhammad: Answering Thirty Key Questions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022, 240pp., \$39.99 hardcover.

Muhammad is a central figure in Islam and a name that most Muslims cherish because of what it represents. As a prophet in Islam, Muhammad is the most revered name among Muslims. The portrayal of Muhammad in trusted Muslim sources requires critical examination by non-Muslims, especially Christians. Ayman S. Ibrahim has written a simple yet well-researched book on Muhammad as the primary foundation of Islam. The book completes the first part of his work on the primary foundation of Islam, i.e., the Qur'an. However, Ibrahim treats the book as an independent resource. His work is informative, containing the introductory history (i.e., events and episodes) and teachings of Muhammad in the form of questions. Ibrahim intends for non-Muslims, especially Christians, to find a resource for Christian-Muslim interactions (xvii). His approach is thirty critical questions on Muslims' foundational belief systems and traditions, followed by critical analysis in his responses to each question (3). He reveals the centrality of Muhammad's sayings (hadiths) and biography (sira) in Islam and the worldview of Muslims. Ibrahim provides the Muslims' view of Muhammad as a legend, tradition, and historical figure. However, he mentions the negative portrayal of Muhammad by some non-Muslims, though he acknowledges that other non-Muslims have a favorable view of Muhammad as a heroic figure, monotheist, and revivalist (xv).

Ibrahim serves as the director of the Jenkins Center for the Christian Understanding of Islam at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS). His literature underscores his ability to engage Islam and Muslims from their primary sources. He critically evaluates the historicity of Islam from Muslim and non-Muslim sources. The thesis of Ibrahim's work focused on the need for non-Muslims, especially Christians, to examine and understand Muhammad's life, i.e., the impact of his sayings and deeds (xv). Because the Western world has

a narrow perspective on Islam and Muslims, Ibrahim began by laying a foundational knowledge about Muhammad from Muslim primary sources, explaining the significance of his name, personality, prophethood, and messages. He mentioned Muhammad's possible nuances as viewed by conservatives and progressive Muslims. Ibrahim used robust yet non-exhaustive Muslim and non-Muslim sources. He provides a compendium of references for further research in the appendixes, chronology, and glossary. Ibrahim provided arguments based on Sunni and Shiite sources and revealed the ambiguity of mostly the Sunni sources using secular scholarship (6–7). He wrote his book focusing on non-Muslims, especially Christians, who do not have knowledge of Muslim sources—but he had Muslims in mind. The purpose of Ibrahim's work is threefold: first, to provide robust information on Muhammad from Muslim sources; second, to reveal the diverse interpretations among Muslims; and third, to spur significant research about Muhammad's sayings and deeds (xix).

The book is a work on the history of the Islamic religion. As a scholar of Islamic history, Ibrahim focused his research methodology on the reliable primary sources of Muslims. His work reflects his knowledge of the Qur'an, hadith, maghazi, sira, futuh, and tarikh as foundational sources for Muslims and non-Muslims to understand Muhammad. However, scholars doubt various claims in the Muslim primary sources for two reasons: the documents appear late, i.e., about two centuries later, and they contain tendentious materials (12n15). Non-Muslim scholars like Ignaz Goldziher, John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, and Andrew Rippins were skeptical of the Muslim sources because of historical inconsistencies that appear in reconstructed narratives of the past (16–17).

A non-skeptic scholar like Fred Donner reports the dubious validity of the Muslim sources because of their invention tendencies (18). Ibrahim concludes that irrespective of the views of non-Muslim skeptics and non-skeptics, Muslims tend to accept the portrayal of Muhammad in their sources, so “we aim to study what the Muslim community believes about Muhammad's life and career and to engage with the picture critically” (19). Ibrahim supports his

thesis with a critical analysis of each question. He exposes the reason scholars are skeptical and unconvinced of the history of Muhammad's birth (24), Muhammad's genealogy (27n29), Muhammad's attributes (chap. 6), Muhammad's historical figure (34n41), Muhammad's birthplace (47), Muhammad's religion (64), Muhammad's night journey (chap. 12), Muhammad's fight with Jews (93) and Christians (chap. 17), and Muhammad's death (102–3).

Ibrahim's central focus is the way Muslims and non-Muslims perceived Muhammad. Muslims see Muhammad as the final legitimate prophet, and non-Muslims refute the claim based on Muhammad's deeds and teachings (114). Ibrahim reveals the perception of Muslims about Muhammad from three different perspectives. First, Muhammad exists in the minds of Muslims as a legend. Second, Muhammad exists in the time of writing of Muslim sources as a traditional Muhammad, and third, he lives as a historical Muhammad (34n41). Ibrahim suggests that the historical Muhammad does not connect with the traditional Muhammad in the Muslim sources. Muhammad appeared as an Arab warrior. There are Syriac sources that provide information about Muhammad's existence. All these are non-Christians, including early Chinese sources that portray Muhammad as a warlord, trader, Arab leader, etc. Most of the sources that provide information about Muhammad are Christian sources, sources of John of Damascus, and others. John speaks of Muhammad as an anti-Christ with an Arian monk. Ibrahim disagrees with the view that Arabs descended from Ishmael, as others attest. Timothy I and others like George, the monk, defended Christianity and said Muhammad was a man with some truths. Ibrahim believes only the historical Muhammad existed against the legendary and traditional Muhammads portrayed by Muslims and their sources (chap. 20).

The second part of the book focuses on Muhammad's message. Ibrahim begins with Muhammad's central message, tawhid, i.e., an Arabic term that refers to the oneness of Allah. Muhammad called people to "strict monotheism, Unitarianism, or divine unicity" (117). Hence, followers of Islam are "the people of tawhid," contrasting them with polytheists (121). Ibrahim reveals Muhammad's deity as Allah. He explains the skepticism around the ninety-nine names of

Allah (chap. 22). He critically analyzes Muslim sources and shows Muhammad's recognition of Jesus as one of the prophets who were honored and respected—but denied that Jesus was crucified (chap. 23). Ibrahim rightly says the Islamic Jesus differs from the biblical Jesus in a crucial, definitive, and decisive way (131). The claim that Jesus prophesied about Muhammad in the Muslim sources seems to seek the legitimacy of Muhammad's prophethood and attempt to make Christians believe in Muhammad's message (chap. 23). Ibrahim's conclusion exposes the illegitimacy of the claim that Muhammad is in the Bible. He says the reference to Muhammad is not explicit in the Bible and is hardly plausible (136).

Regarding the place to find Muhammad's message (chap. 25), Ibrahim points to the Qur'an and Muhammad's hadith as the authentic collections approved by Muslim scholars (140). The remaining part of Ibrahim's book (chaps. 26–30) appears as the application of Muhammad's message. The message was for Muslims to use Muhammad's example to relate with neighbors (chap. 26), apostates (chap. 27), hadith rejecters (chaps. 28–29), and how to apply jihad (chap. 30).

Ibrahim's book appears as an extension of *A Concise Guide to the Qur'an*, though separate works, with the same pattern of thirty questions. His writing style of asking questions and responding helps provide straightforward answers. He writes with a particular "focus on episodes, events, and teachings in Muhammad's life" (xvi). I understood his response with a recap at the end of each chapter. Ibrahim seems to know his audience's knowledge of Islam, so he targets non-Muslims, especially in the West, as his primary audience. However, he writes with Muslims in mind. As seen in the book's title, Ibrahim provides a concise, thorough, yet inexhaustive work on Muhammad's history and message. He rooted his work in the most trusted Muslim sources, which are the earliest authoritative sources. The consistency of avoiding speculation about Muhammad reflects Ibrahim's deep knowledge of Muslim sources. He did not only rely on Sunni traditions. Instead, Ibrahim consulted Sunni and Shiite traditions because of his crucial consideration of the Shiite voice in any serious study of Islam (xvii). Ibrahim

concludes his book with helpful information and resources for further research. The resources are appendixes, glossary, consulted sources, bibliography, and index. These English-translated bibliographies of Muslim primary sources, helpful websites for Islam, and a glossary of key terms are beneficial for further research on Muhammad's history, sayings, and deeds.

To a Christian with a shallow knowledge of Islamic history and Muslim sources, the book can appear dismissive, unimportant, and irrelevant to one's faith. Ibrahim provides helpful information that brings understanding of Islam and Muslims, especially the two most important and foundational subjects, i.e., the Qur'an and Muhammad. Hence, the book is informative, educative, and equipping for evangelistic and apologetic purposes. The book broadened my understanding of Muhammad and Muslims' perception of Muhammad as a legendary, traditional, and historical figure. The information Ibrahim provides is a sine quo non to understanding Christian-Muslim encounters, although Ibrahim did not explicitly point out such encounters.

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