

The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective

By Gabriel Said Reynolds

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This is an important book that traces the origin and development of Islam, lucidly depicting contemporary visions of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's life. It focuses on early Islamic interaction with Judaism and Christianity, assessing in particular the manner in which Islam was construed during contemporary times. The book is divided into three parts and comprises eight chapters with a total of 226 pages.

The first part ("The Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs") effectively focuses on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, analysing the emergence of the caliphate and early Islamic conquests. The analysis adopts a historical perspective and examines classical narratives on the emergence of Islam in the formative period.

Part two ("The Qur'an") offers a critical account on the rise of Islam from a Qur'anic perspective. Chapter 4 deals primarily with Qur'anic text and explores its various features. In order to situate the Qur'an in the Jewish and Christian historic context, the ensuing chapter focuses on the Qur'anic account of Jesus. The author analyses the relationship between the Qur'an and the Bible, examining in particular the stories found in the Old and New Testaments that are relevant to Qur'anic narratives. Finally, a biographical sketch of the Prophet is examined in the light of Qur'anic evidence.

Part three ("Contemporary Perspectives") illustrates the meaningful interaction between the West and Islam and the development of a new understanding of Islam. Chapter 8 highlights the constant struggle to revive the ideals of Islam. The author traces the earlier Islamic vision of pluralism and its contested application in modern Pakistan. The Irani case, given its importance in the complex interaction between Islam and modernity, is succinctly analysed.

This is an innovative addition to the existing works on the emergence of Islam. It is an erudite and well-written book that demonstrates the engaging

accounts of contested resources and their impact on developing a framework for understanding historic and contemporary perspectives on the rise of Islam. The work adopts a critical and comparative methodology, examining the traditional approaches through careful and judicious analysis. Gabriel Said Reynolds argues that inconsistency, in not being able to comprehend the intimate relationship between the Qur'an and its religious context, has caused stagnation in the traditional western perception of Islam. This work attempts to answer such basic questions related to the rise of Islam as: What can we actually know of Islam's emergence in history? How do faithful Muslims understand Islam's emergence? The author seems to have achieved his purpose in formulating a new perspective on the rise of Islam, but his stress on Ibn Ishaq's Seerah requires a critical re-examination because of his reliance on weak and suspected narrations. Apart from that, the work provides an excellent and effective approach to understanding seerah and its contemporary relevance. This work will therefore interest not only those who delve critically into Islamic history, but also those who are curious about comprehending the diverse interpretations of Islam's emergence.