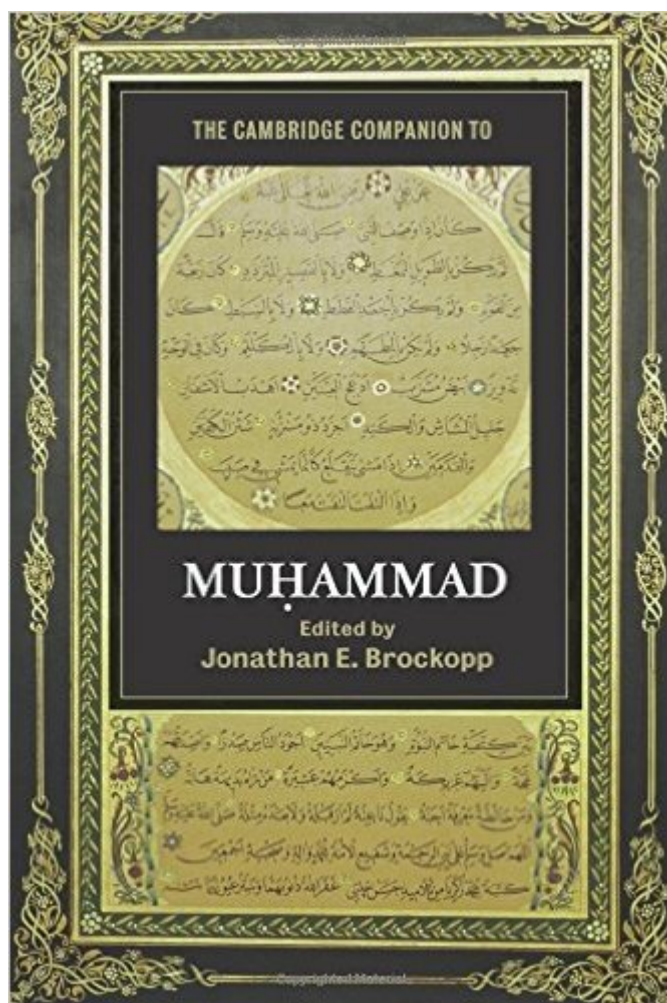


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The Cambridge Companion To Muhammad (Cambridge Companions To Religion)



Synopsis

As the Messenger of God, Muhammad stands at the heart of the Islamic religion, revered by Muslims throughout the world. The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad comprises a collection of essays by some of the most accomplished scholars in the field exploring the life and legacy of the Prophet. The book is divided into three sections, the first charting his biography and the milieu into which he was born, the revelation of the Qur'ān, and his role within the early Muslim community. The second part assesses his legacy as a law-maker, philosopher, and politician and, finally, in the third part, chapters examine how Muhammad has been remembered across history in biography, prose, poetry, and, most recently, in film and fiction. Essays are written to engage and inform students, teachers, and readers coming to the subject for the first time. They will come away with a deeper appreciation of the breadth of the Islamic tradition, of the centrality of the role of the Prophet in that tradition, and, indeed, of what it means to be a Muslim today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As stated: "The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad is designed to represent current trends in the scholarly study of Muhammad's life and legacy" (p.14). This is an adequate description, no embellishment of this statement is found within these pages. The authors are astute. This is a well-written book of 325 pages and contains 14 chapters spread over three sections: (I) Muhammad in his world, (II) Muhammad in History, (III) Muhammad in memory. The eminent writers "all hold academic appointments" (again p.14) and the reader is informed that they "write with intellectual

rigor and uncommon clarity of thought." However, there are a few problems. Muhammad's character and career is positively described in ways that are reminiscent of Jesus or Buddha; in this narrative the Founder of Islam has a sword, but it is properly sheathed. Unlike scholars who work on the texts of the Bible these writers are hesitant to note any place where the Quran is in 'error,' even when they discuss problematic historical issues. There is an amazingly uncritical view of Muhammad put forward; a volume on Jesus Christ written up like this would encounter one difficulty after another as it made its way through the editing stages of the average university academic press. Shia and Sufi page citations are noted explicitly in the index (p.324); Sunni citations are absent. But they need not be mentioned in any case, for in this volume of essays the main Sunni themes are pervasive and conspicuous. As for the reception theories of section III, there was not even a segment on the radical influences of so-called Jihadi ideas on persons from medieval times unto modernity, i.e. the 11th and 12th century Ismaili sect of assassins, who used murder as a political weapon: they are also absent in the index (p.318). The content is not unusual. For example: J.E. Brockopp, the editor, and W.A. Saleh present competing views about when Muhammad began to preach his message of submission and how long he preached it in Mecca. This contradiction, though, was not intentional. The former believes the sources say he waited 3 years after the vision from Gabriel (p.6), the latter seems to be unfamiliar with these sources or does not agree, for he says Muhammad "preached almost a decade" (p.34). Then Uri Rubin's article alleges that post-Quranic literature created a 'New Muhammad' of miracles signs and wonders; something the Quran does not support, so he thinks. Incidentally there are Imams by the thousands who could refute that thesis simply by iterating features of the Arabic text Q 54:1,2 of which he seems unaware. Michael Lecker downplays the conflict between Muhammad and the Jews in Medina by assuming there is a corruption in the text: that the word "yahud" (Arabic word for 'Jews') was later inserted and was not in the original text. And so dismissing a particular historical bias previously attributed to Muhammad (p.66); how convenient for the ancient MS! The rest of the essays bear more of the same fruit that is sown in the early papers. Most of them are artfully written and constantly beg the reader to believe that ancient interpretations of Islam, Muhammad and the Quran led many people astray from perceivable explanations that are currently academic dogma. Hence one should believe that the light finally has come in this new Cambridge Companion. This is a useful book but useful for the wrong reasons. Each paper is enlightening, but more so for the reader with little Arabic. The Quranic texts cited tend to be re-imagined in atypical ways; the footnotes are filled with titles of Arabic volumes whose texts are often mistranslated or misunderstood; much better it is when they cite one another in English journals, but even then one feels as if an author is attempting to demonstrate his familiarity with a

colleague's work rather than with historical facts. If only I had not had studied the Hijazi and Levantine dialects, and the Quran, in Saudi Arabia and Jordan the authors' conclusions would have been more believable. It seems that the long hours spent studying and discoursing in the King Abdul Aziz University library in Jeddah has inoculated me against many assertions in this book: serving in the US Marine Corps and serving in US consulates in the Middle East also immunized me from some misleading caricatures of Muhammad which plague this volume. As a result I can state firmly: if you are looking to understand the Muslim who walks the streets of Turkey, Indonesia, Syria, Yemen, Oman or Tunisia, Palestine etc., or if you desire to learn more about the 7th century Muhammad who is adored and revered by various Islamic sects throughout the world, this volume may be a bit of a disappointment. On the other hand, if you are interested in the type of critical Islamic scholarship that (I believe) must be done in order to obtain academic standing and/or tenure, this is the ideal volume. Notwithstanding, one should remember that this, too, is a 'post-Quranic' piece of scholarship, and in not so subtle ways it does offer to readers some variegated accounts of a "New Muhammad."

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