

AZIZ AL-AZMEH

The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity

Allāh and his People



CAMBRIDGE

THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAM IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Based on epigraphic and other material evidence as well as more traditional literary sources and critical review of the extensive relevant scholarship, this book presents a comprehensive and innovative reconstruction of the rise of Islam as a religion and imperial polity. It reassesses the development of the imperial monotheism of the New Rome, and considers the history of the Arabs as an integral part of Late Antiquity, including Arab ethnogenesis and the emergence of what was to become Muslim monotheism, comparable with the emergence of other monotheisms from polytheistic systems. Topics discussed include the emergence and development of the Muhammadan polity and its new cultic deity and associated ritual, the constitution of the Muslim canon, and the development of early Islam as an imperial religion. Intended principally for scholars of Late Antiquity, Islamic studies and the history of religions, the book opens up many novel directions for future research.

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107031876

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First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

'Azmah, 'Aziz.

The emergence of Islam in late antiquity : Allah and his people / Aziz Al-Azmeh.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-03187-6 (hardback)

1. Islam – History – To 1500. 2. Islam – Origin. I. Title.

BP55.A96 2014

297.09'021 – dc23 2013023226

ISBN 978-1-107-03187-6 Hardback

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For Nadia

Bald heads forgetful of their sins.
Old, learned, respectable bald heads
Edit and annotate the lines
That young men, tossing on their beds,
Rhymed out in love's despair
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.

....

Lord, what would they say,
Did their Catullus walk that way?

W. B. Yeats

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Preface

This book is an extended essay in historical interpretation. Its overarching theme is Islam *in* Late Antiquity, rather than the vaguer one of Islam *and* Late Antiquity. It is hoped that this unequivocal formulation will facilitate a reassessment of the wealth of source material and of scholarship on Late Antiquity and the emergence of Islam. In many ways, this material is ripe for synoptic and synthetic treatment, and for a fresh look at Muslim emergence which might bring together its various thematic and historical elements into an articulated analytical perspective, placed on a new footing.

Central to the theme of Islam in Late Antiquity is a deliberative perspective on Islamic emergence, an academic growth industry in recent decades that has hitherto been generally captive to older habits of thought which have disallowed it from coming to terms historically with the material at hand and the issues raised by it. To this purpose, the historiographic category of Paleo-Islam will be proposed and developed in the following chapters, as an aid to the convergent operations of periodisation and categorisation. Both are intended to facilitate regarding this foundational period as highly specific, captive neither to a retrojection of its later developments, nor to its restricted conditions of emergence, generally officiated as a search for the red herring of origins, often textual origins, a search which obscures both process and contingency.

It will emerge that this conjunction of historical categories, Late Antiquity and Islam, reveals that Paleo-Muslim religion and polity are thinkable only in terms of conditions and structures that mark the broader history of Late Antiquity. Central to this is the history of late antique Arabs, but in a manner that is determined entirely neither by origins nor by outcomes.

It is hoped thereby that a perspective on the emergence of Islam will be won without the all-too-common recourse by interpretation to contrastive histories of East and West, or the equally common presumption that Islam was somehow frozen in a perpetual moment of inception, or that it was, as a consequence, to be interpreted only in terms of its scriptural

or ethnological bearings, to which tropes might be added the ascribed character of a derivative phenomenon arising from what is so vaguely described as Judaeo-Christian. The category of Paleo-Islam is designed to denominate a historical category bounded in space and in time, with time accelerated and space rapidly dilated. It is meant to impart a specific historical dynamic to a historical emergence, impelled by both internal momentum and external conditions. The time is *c.* 600–750, and the space Arabia, Syria and farther afield. Nowhere will the end product be used to colour the interpretation of emergence, a process with no predetermined end inherent in its beginnings.

Crucial to the overall theme is the emergence of Allāh as the monotheistic deity of Paleo-Muslims, emblematic of the religion of Islam that developed and crystallised only in the fullness of time. Conventional wisdom, medieval as well as modern, has generally assumed that the emergence of Allāh was somehow self-explanatory, almost natural, and this book will propose theses at variance with this view. The historical theogony of Allāh, initially an exotic deity, it will be argued, needs to be sought in the structural possibilities of Arab polytheism, but also in terms of broader structures of polytheism which had themselves, under determinate political and social conditions, generated henotheistic and monotheistic deities in other times and places.

It will be seen that Allāh, initially a very specific deity emerging in a specific time and place, subject to conditions and possibilities obtaining there and then, was later to be recast and elaborated in terms of a universal regime of monotheistic divinity, convertible to Theos, Yahweh, Alāha, Deus, and the other names by which the monotheistic divinity is known. The interpretation of the emergence of Allāh will therefore utilise two distinct grids of interpretation used throughout this book, the one at once anthropological and polygenetic, the other minimally diffusionist. Otherwise, apart from alert eyes, an open mind and the curiosity of a naturalist, disentangling this historical theogony requires no special gifts. In all, the terms of reference need to be correlated to social and socio-political processes, like all theogonies which are collective representations of the sublime with conditions of emergence and consolidation that are ultimately worldly.

The turn taken by this deity from the conditions of west Arabian polytheism to universal monotheism was propelled by the development, ultimately the imperial development, of Muḥammad's Paleo-Muslim polity, inducted into the world of late antique empires, using the ways of that particular world. Empires had been abiding and commonplace systems of

large-scale power articulations, and the Arab empires were unexceptional in this regard. In other words, it will be seen that Paleo-Islam and its deity need to be regarded more as points of arrival, and less as generic beginnings. They did not arise from or act upon a *tabula rasa*, but brought to conclusion a constellation of long-term developments, Hellenistic and late antique, religious, social and political, but also ones that are specifically Arab. These last are imperfectly known, and an attempt has been made here to provide ethnological material sufficient for the purposes of interpreting the main themes addressed; in some discussions, little-known background material has been foregrounded for the sake of completeness and clarity.

What this perspective entails for historical research is the rescaling of a major event, the emergence of Paleo-Islam, and an expansion of the remit of its interpretation. Such a rescaling would take our central phenomenon into larger settings. These are chronological, geographical and conceptual, bringing a heightened understanding on a more general plane, broadening the scope of inquiry through comparisons and parallels, reclaiming matters submerged by the snares of history which, in their turn, ensnare unreflected habits and turns of scholarship.

This book starts from fairly broad thematic and temporal parameters, in broad strokes, which are then narrowed down gradually with an increasingly 'thick description' to a middle point where the emergence of Allāh is discussed, before broadening out again – to use a plastic metaphor, the thematic and chronological parameters of this book have the shape of an hour-glass. Thus, the discussion of the book's overall historiographic bearings ([chapter 1](#)) is followed by an interpretation of religious and imperial developments in the Hellenistic age and in Late Antiquity ([chapter 2](#)). The purpose is to disengage a number of interpretative themes, and a number of conceptual means for the analysis of relevant material, particularly the structures of polytheism, the development of monotheism, and the nexus of religion and political power, that will help in the reconstruction of Paleo-Muslim emergences, not least the consideration of the workings of cult at the points of concrete application, on the assumption that gods emerge from cults.

The book then narrows its focus as it goes on to describe Arab ethnogenesis in late antique times ([chapter 3](#)), in terms of both internal dynamics and possibilities, and of the impact of late antique empires upon the induction of the Arabs into the world of Late Antiquity, at the time when Barbarians on the western and northern fringes of the later Roman empire had charted their way out of the late antique system. The developments of polytheism, monolatry and henotheism, and what may arguably have been forms of

monotheistic faith among late antique Arabs (chapter 4), regarded in relation to the concrete social conditions of cultic worship, are then brought to constitute the background against which, and the means by which, the theogony of Allāh is discussed (chapter 5).

The temporal and geographical parameters of the book then start to widen again. The constitution of Paleo-Muslim polity and its internal and external consolidation, the workings of Muḥammad's extraordinary charisma and political adroitness, and the beginnings of what became the Arab empire of the Umayyads, are taken up in chapter 6, building upon historical and analytical materials sketched in the previous chapters. The terms of interpretation are attuned to internal dynamics, rather than the flowering of religious and social developments allegedly latent in west Arabia. One of these internal factors was the composition and canonisation of the Qur'ān, Paleo-Islam's most lasting legacy (chapter 7). Models for the interpretation of its composition, scripturalisation and canonisation are proposed in terms of its *Sitz im Leben*, the status of Muḥammad's vatic pronouncements and the nature of these pronouncements. Finally, a perspective is sketched, in the final chapter, designed to help model the continuities of the Paleo-Muslim Arab empire with earlier empires in place, and the beginnings of points of departure which were finally to crystallise in what one might recognise as Islam.

Clearly, a book such as this requires some familiarity with several bodies of specialist scholarship. It draws upon the classics, ancient history and historiography; on Late Antiquity scholarship and Islamic Studies, as well as on epigraphy, archaeology, historical linguistics, anthropology and the comparative history of religion. Some sites with archaeological and epigraphic remains relevant to this study are indicated on Map 1. All of these disciplines are internally differentiated, bearing differences of style, emphasis and interpretative direction. Many are developing rapidly, with scholarship being produced at a very rapid pace, and an attempt has been made to integrate or at least recognise some recent developments and results which emerged as this book was being completed, in a number of areas. Decisions, including decisions of strategic implications for the analyses and arguments of this book, have needed to be made with regard to controversial points, based upon judgements of merit and relevance. In many cases and where necessary, scholarship has been discussed, mainly in footnotes, in its historical contexts, on the assumption that scholarship, and the technical apparatus of scholarship with its attendant questions of interpretation, has a history and various webs of connections with its historical conditions of emergence. Above all, care has been taken with

the precise use of terms and expressions, especially terms and expressions widely used.

Further, this book has no specific disciplinary loyalties, neither does it share the parochial preoccupations, the institutional horizons or the in-group habitus of any specific discipline, except for that of the historical sciences, broadly conceived, as they developed over the past half-century. In institutional terms, it is a contribution to the history of Late Antiquity, to the history of religions, and of course to Arab history and Islamic Studies.

With regard to this last field of scholarship, and to the philological and historical templates it utilises, this book will be seen to break some standard moulds and to contain a number of significant departures from the framing of research questions and the identification of thematic relevance that are habitually taken for paradigmatically normal. The technical and interpretative preoccupations of nineteenth-century philological and positivist scholarship, canonised most explicitly in Germany, still weigh heavily upon scholarship on Islam, with little headway made, until very recently, by the overall development of the historical and social sciences. This is reflected by its relative institutional and paradigmatic isolation, taking over little from more developed fields of study, and conveying little of more general relevance to the framing of broader questions of religion and of history. It is hoped that this book will bring a measure of self-reflexivity in historical research into the fields and themes treated, and contribute to making up for the relative lack thereof that often marks the work of those cognitive institutions that we term disciplines.

Studies of the emergence of Islam and Qur'anic studies have been a substantial growth area in recent decades, with mixed results. These mixed results are largely due to the deflection of research into the facile excitements of hypercriticism, a mood that has been incorporated into wider fields of historical scholarship, as if in distancing confirmation of the exotic character of the theme and of the field more generally. Although I am generally given to scepticism by temperament, and to scepticism over Arabic literary sources specifically by inclination, yet, having looked at the material and the arguments closely, I have considered it necessary to write a companion to this book, in order to put these matters in workable perspective, listed in the Bibliography and abbreviated as *ALS* throughout.

For all their limitations, the use of Arabic narrative and other literary sources, interpreted in terms of what the developments of the historical craft since the nineteenth century allow technically and conceptually, will yield the possibility of putting new questions to well-known or recently established *realia*, now reinforced by epigraphic, archaeological,

comparative and other materials which, among other things, help with filling in gaps in the sources by inference. In this way, it is hoped that both questions and results will emerge, many at variance with the disciplinary koine. It will not be odd that some of the questions posed have been left unanswered, or answered only by way of general orientations and pointers; but, clearly, an answer is only as good as the question posed. It is hoped that the results emerging from this book may open new thematic research areas, encourage the framing of new questions, and ultimately produce paradigmatic shifts in the themes treated that will disallow spurious research questions and questions that are no longer relevant to the historical sciences.

It is also hoped that matters emerging from this book might make the history of Islam seem less alien and self-enclosed, and both more relevant and more interesting to historical scholarship overall than is usually conceded. Needless to say, the self-enclosure and prodigious singularity often attributed to Paleo-Islam and Islam in general are a reflection less of history than of the self-enclosed institutional habitus that cultivates its study but which, like other institutional habits, is not given eagerly to self-reflection.

This book is based on a fairly large amount of empirical material and interpretative scholarship, deriving from a variety of fields and a multiplicity of types of sources. I have used Arabic narrative sources extensively, selectively and without exhaustive coverage. There is some empirical material newly discovered, or newly drawn into perspective, emerging in this book, and I have used the considerable resources of a variety of disciplines, sometimes synoptically. Some material used is very well known and widely circulated, and has been given new interpretative twists and directions; material long available has been used in ways that are unfamiliar, such as the use of epigraphic evidence in reconstructing Allāh's historical theogony. In all, I have relied on scholarship that I deemed reliable and convincing, and opted for detailed empirical investigation where I considered available scholarship to be wanting.

Overall, in this interpretative essay, the balance of narrative and of detail, sometimes granular in scale, has been geared to the purposes of the analytical argument. Given the difficulty and patchiness of the source material, particularly that relating to Arab polytheism, the theogony of Allāh and the history of the Qur'ān, comparative material needed to be used for reconstruction, and room needed to be made, of course, for the use of the tempered imagination, however much dreaded by some colleagues.

In many cases, inferences, including inferences of a forensic nature, needed to be made from telling details, and from the physical qualities of material available, such as the linguistic nature of the theonym Allāh, the orthographic and architectonic characteristics of the Qur'ān and its earliest codicological remains, its physical form. Properly considered in analytical context, fragments in this and other contexts can suggest the full range of the structure in which they are embedded, and certain problems with the credibility of source material might be viewed from the perspective of consistency with the overall picture. Thus, in some parts of this book, the description of specific settings, and the narrative of specific groups of events, might be seen to be pointillist rather than comprehensive; yet no concession is made anywhere to the rounding up of matters, and an accent has been placed upon complexity rather than on the summariness of conception.

This is a very large book, and its composition has been a long haul. Readers will doubtless think reading it will be a long haul, too. I was faced with the choice either of writing a multi-volume work, given the scale of material and the range of themes, or of offering a long essay in the hope that other lifetimes might be spent well in pursuing a variety of themes emerging. I have chosen the latter path in the hope of offering the reader some reward for the effort of extended reading, and for the alacrity of disagreement.

Of technical matters, only a few points need to be made. The Bibliography lists all works cited. Footnotes cite abbreviations or an abbreviated title following the author's name. The Qur'ān, the Bible and classical authors are quoted in standard ways. Transliteration and standard epigraphic and phonetic notation, it is hoped, will be readily evident to the specialist, and not appear too distracting to others. Dates are generally given according to the Common Era (BC/AD), except in the case of the early decades of the Hijra (AH), where an indication of small-scale chronology, wherever ascertainable, is useful to highlight scale, and for indicating relative chronologies when others are not ascertainable.

