

Book Review

Robert Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), x + 303 pages. ISBN: 9780199916368, Price: \$29.95 (cloth).

Fred M. Donner*

*Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
and The Oriental Institute, University of Chicago*

(f-donner@uchicago.edu)

Robert Hoyland's *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* is the most recent attempt to make sense of the world-changing developments associated with the rise of Islam. It offers an attractive, well-informed, and readily comprehensible account of the geopolitical background in the Near East, the conquests, and the rise of the first Islamic empire up to the fall of the Umayyad dynasty in 750. Its author, an established scholar who has made important earlier contributions to the study of Arabia and the seventh century, is in many ways ideally qualified to undertake such an enterprise. Its writing style and organization are absolutely lucid; it provides a readable and fairly concise narrative of the events of the conquests on many different fronts, from Spain to Central Asia and India, made lively by

interlarding the narrative with frequent quotes from relevant primary (or literary) sources; and it grapples in numerous asides with some of the broader processes that are associated with this historical phenomenon, such as Arabization and Islamization. The book contains a number of illustrations that, like the quotes from primary sources, help make the material "come alive" for the reader. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of using contemporary sources rather than later chronicles, partly as a way of giving more voice to the conquered populations who wrote many of them, and partly because of the likelihood that 7th and 8th century sources will provide a more accurate view of "what actually happened" than the idealizing views of the conquests written centuries later in Arabic by Muslim authors. This is a fundamental

* The author is grateful to the Stanford Humanities Center and its Director, Prof. Caroline Winterer, for appointing him Marta Sutton Weeks Fellow for the academic year 2014-2015, and providing him with the supportive environment in which this review was first drafted.

point of method, widely recognized now for several decades, and an approach to which Hoyland himself made a yeoman contribution almost twenty years ago with his indispensable earlier book, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*.¹ This methodological point will be especially important for new readers, and together with the book's accessibility means that it will probably find a wide audience, particularly as a textbook in college survey courses on early Islamic history.

It is therefore most unfortunate that this book, with so many points in its favor, adopts an interpretation of the conquests that this reviewer considers seriously misleading—besides having its share of merely formal or cosmetic shortcomings.

Let us begin with the latter. *In God's Path* is marred by what must be called a lack of professional courtesy or etiquette, in that its author often fails to give appropriate (or, sometimes, any) credit to the many scholars whose work prepared the way for his own—sometimes, indeed, conveying the impression that he is the originator of an idea or approach. To pick one glaring example: Hoyland stresses in the "Introduction" that he will emphasize the testimony of seventh-century sources, and non-Arabic sources, rather than later Arabic-Islamic ones—implying strongly in doing so that all previous authors have done otherwise. But, important though it is, this is not an approach new with Hoyland, and precisely because the book is intended for non-specialists, he has a responsibility to make clear (if only in a few brief notes) that he is continuing on

1. Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997).

a trail blazed by others. Yet one looks in vain in these passages for any reference to or acknowledgement of the work of scholars like Walter E. Kaegi,² Patricia Crone (Hoyland's teacher!) and Michael Cook,³ Sebastian Brock,⁴ Lawrence Conrad,⁵ Steven Shoemaker,⁶ and many others⁷—to mention only those writing in English—some of whom had already adopted this approach when Hoyland was still in grade school. In the "Appendix" (p. 231), he once again notes the importance of relying on contemporary and non-Muslim sources, saying with satisfaction, "which is what I have done in this book," but here, too, he does not find it necessary to mention the work of the many predecessors who showed the way.

2. Walter E. Kaegi, Jr., "Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest," *Church History* 38 (1969), 139-49.

3. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

4. Sebastian Brock, "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam," in G. H. A. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9-21.

5. Lawrence I. Conrad, "The Conquest of Arwād: A Source-Critical Study in the Historiography of the Early Medieval Near East," in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I. Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), 317-401.

6. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: the end of Muḥammad's life and the beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012)

7. Including the present reviewer: see Fred M. Donner, "The Formation of the Islamic State," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (1986), 283-96; idem, *Muhammad and the Believers: at the origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

The problem of failing to give proper acknowledgement is unfortunately pervasive. In part, this failure to acknowledge may reflect a lack of close familiarity with others' work, particularly studies in languages other than English. Some key works are included, in list form, in Hoyland's "Select Bibliography" but otherwise seem to have had no impact;⁸ others are simply missing,⁹ even though they are highly relevant, even critical, to Hoyland's subject.

These shortcomings do not for the most part materially affect the book's content; and, since *In God's Path* is likely to sell well and be widely used in teaching, they can be easily rectified in a future edition by the addition of a few notes. There are,

8. For example, Alfred-Louis De Prémare's *Les fondations de l'Islam: entre écriture et histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), and Christian Décobert's *Le mendicant et le combattant: l'institution de l'Islam* (Paris: Seuil, 1991) are both mentioned in the bibliography, but never in the notes, and I sense little trace of their content in Hoyland's presentation.

9. For example, Jens Scheiner's massive *Die Eroberung von Damaskus: Quellenkritische Untersuchung zur Historiographie in klassisch-islamischer Zeit* (Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill, 2010), on the conquest of Damascus—which one might expect to be mentioned in a book on the conquests; the work of Muriel Debié (see now her *L'écriture de l'histoire en syriaque: transmissions interculturelles et constructions identitaires entre hellénisme et islam* [Leuven: Peeters, 2015], which offers a comprehensive bibliography on Syriac historiography) and others on the Syriac and other non-Muslim sources; or Antoine Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir: l'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides (v. 72-193/692-809)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), with its important insights into historiography and 'image-making' and his detailed study of the career of the Umayyad prince Maslama ibn 'Abd al-Malik and his siege of Constantinople, discussed at length by Hoyland with no reference to this work.

however, also fundamental problems with the book's interpretation, which takes a strong but, to this reviewer at least, highly misleading position in the larger debate about how to characterize the conquests.

The basic argument of *In God's Path* is that the expansion of Muḥammad's community, which took over most of the Near East in the seventh and eighth centuries, should be seen as akin to the expansions of other "peripheral peoples" living just beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire. In Hoyland's view, it is important to see the conquests in this way both because of their intrinsic similarity to the European "barbarian" migrations, and in order to avoid the overly Islamicizing trend of the later Muslim sources (mostly 9th century and later), which viewed the whole expansion as due to the impulse provided by the new religion of Islam.

Hoyland is certainly correct to point out the tendency of later Islamic sources to "Islamicize" the conquest movement, projecting their later understandings back to the origins period of the community. Here he is drawing on the pioneering work of Albrecht Noth, in particular, who revealed the strongly salvation-historical agenda that underlay the later Islamic conquest narratives,¹⁰ work that has been followed by other studies (again, mostly not acknowledged) that brought to light different aspects of this tendency.¹¹

10. Albrecht Noth, *Quellenkritische Untersuchungen zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen frühislamischer Überlieferungsgeschichte* (Bonn: Selbstverlag der Universität, 1973); revised English translation: Lawrence I. Conrad and Albrecht Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1994).

11. John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu*

There is, however, a reason to eschew referring to the early expansion as the “Islamic conquests” that is even stronger than the desire to counteract the bias of later sources: it is because in the available early sources the conquerors did not call themselves “Muslims,” in the sense of a distinct monotheistic community, before about 700 C.E. Instead, to judge from the testimony of their seventh-century documents and the Qurʾān, the conquerors in their earliest years seem to have referred to themselves as *muʾminūn*, “believers.” Curiously, however—perhaps because of his desire to avoid a religious interpretation of any kind—Hoyland passes in virtual silence over the term *muʾminūn*. Despite the author’s professed desire to privilege seventh-century and documentary sources, he devotes only a passing mention and brief discussion (p. 57) to the word *muʾmin* and its implications; the uninitiated reader will probably not realize that the early conquerors called themselves, and presumably thought of themselves, primarily a “believers.”¹²

In this respect, *In God’s Path* is likely to sow confusion, because Hoyland populates the pages of the book with “Muslims,” even for the earliest period, when the term was not yet in use. He states, for example: “For the first fifty years or so after the death of Muhammad there was a quite clear

demarcation between the conquerors and the conquered. The former were mostly Arabs and mostly Muslims, though not as uniformly so as later histories suggest, and the latter were mostly non-Arabs and very few had converted to Islam.” [p. 157]. This passage makes it clear that in the author’s mind, “Muslim” is a distinct religious category, admission to which requires members of other religions, such as Jews or Christians, to “convert,” and that this clear-cut confessional distinction was present already in the earliest years of the movement. There is a deep irony here, because despite Hoyland’s expressed desire to avoid the Islamicizing tendencies of the later sources, he seems to have bought into one of those later sources’ most basic objectives—which was to demonstrate that “Islam,” in its later sense of a separate religious confession distinct from other monotheisms like Christianity and Judaism, already existed at the time of the prophet and during the era of the early conquests. This unfortunate implication could have been avoided simply by referring to the early community as one of *muʾminūn*, “believers,” as they themselves did.

Despite Hoyland’s desire to avoid a religious explanation for the conquests, a decided ambiguity between the religious and non-religious (in this case, “Arab”) perspectives is palpable throughout the book. Hoyland at times acknowledges religion as motivator, as for example when he states, “...there were many non-Muslims in [the conquerors’] ranks initially; what united them was their focus on *jihad*...,” which sounds pretty religious. Indeed, this ambiguity is reflected even in the book’s complete title (or title and subtitle): *In God’s Path: The Arab conquests and the*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Fred M. Donner, *Narrative of Islamic Origins: the beginnings of Islamic historical writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998); Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

12. It is noteworthy that the index contains no entry for “believer” or “*muʾmin*,” but does include entries for terms such as “Islam/Muslim,” “Arab identity,” and “*muhajirun*.”

creation of an Islamic empire. The title phrase is of course a truncated translation of *jihād fī sabīl Allāh*, “*jihad* in the path of God,” so the title seems to put strong emphasis the religious motivations of the conquest—yet the book itself strives to downplay the religious impetus.

And what, then, about the phrase “Arab conquests,” which Hoyland proposes as a more suitable, because less religious, terminology? The problem with this nomenclature—despite the fact that it has been frequently used over the past century—is that there is no inscription, or papyrus document, or coin produced by the conquerors in the seventh century in which they refer to themselves as “Arabs.” (Such usage only occurs in the later Islamic chronicles.) It is therefore especially misleading when, in support of his interpretation, Hoyland quotes the caliph Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 715–717) as saying “I shall not cease from the struggle for Constantinople until either I conquer it or I destroy the entire dominion of the Arabs in trying.” (p. 172). This seems to suggest that the caliph conceived of the state as the “dominion of the Arabs.” The quote, however, comes not from an Arabic source, but from the Syriac *Chronicon ad annum 1234*, on which Hoyland relied to reconstruct the now-lost work of Theophilus of Edessa;¹³ and the Syriac text does not say “dominion of the Arabs”, but rather uses the term *ṭayyāyē*,¹⁴ a standard

Syriac designation for nomads—a word that cannot be considered an effort to replicate Arabic *al-‘arab*, and should not blithely be translated as “Arab,” which decidedly rings of conceptions of ethnic nationalism that arose only in the nineteenth century. To call the movement an “Arab conquest” will thus be profoundly misleading to the general readers to whom this book will appeal—offering, as it does, a simplistic interpolation of modern nationalist terminology onto the distant past.

Hoyland also contends that the expansion should be seen as “Arab” because it was closely analogous to the barbarian invasions in Western Europe. Like those invasions, he claims, the conquests were part of a process of ethnogenesis by which “the Arabs” crystallized into a distinct people, just as the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and other peoples had done in Europe. In view of the fact that no self-styled “Arab kingdom” resembling the kingdoms of the Ostrogoths or Visigoths ever seems to emerge, however, the idea that Arab ethnogenesis was taking place at this time seems questionable.

Hoyland also seems to want the “Arab conquest” to be similar to the Germanic invasions because he sees them both as processes that lacked a religious underpinning. He faults Islamicists for saying “that religion plays a greater role in the object of their study, but this is a

13. Robert G. Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p. 210.

14. *Chronicon ad Annum Christi 1234 Pertinens* (ed. J. B. Chabot: Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1920), p. 301 [=CSCO 81, *Scriptores Syri* 36]. The

Latin translation by Chabot (*Anonymi Auctoris, Chronicon ad Annum Christi 1234 Pertinens*, I. Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1937), 234 [=CSCO 109, *Scriptores Syri* 56]) uses “Arabum” for this passage, so perhaps Hoyland was simply following Chabot's initiative on this rendering. But Chabot (1860–1948) was raised in the heyday of European nationalism and could be expected to see history in terms of projected national identities.

dubious claim.” (p. 5). But, as we have seen, there is good reason to believe that the conquests actually did have a religious (if not yet an “Islamic”) impetus—as a movement of *mu’minūn*, “believers,” led by their *amīr al-mu’minīn* or “Commander of the Believers.” The differences between the Germanic invasions and the Arabian ones are in this respect surely as striking as their similarities: in a nutshell, Western Europe saw the emergence neither of a new Gothic scripture analogous to the Qur’ān, nor of a “Gothic caliph, “ a unified leader of all Germanic groups having a religious as well as political aura analogous to that of the *amīr al-mu’minīn*. Instead, western Europe saw the emergence of several autonomous Gothic kingdoms. The Germanic invasions did not lead to the emergence of a new religion dominating Europe, as Islam came to dominate the Near East. Nor did the Gothic peoples who fell upon the Roman Empire first announce their presence by emblazoning on their earliest coins, inscriptions, and other documents slogans that are essentially religious. The Arabian believers, however, added short phrases in Arabic such as “In the name of God, who has no associate” to their first coins, based on Byzantine or Sasanian prototypes, which are among the earliest documents testifying to their presence. The religious (if not yet Islamic) character of the early expansion of the believers’ movement is thus not merely a figment of the imagination of modern historians, snookered by later Islamic sources, but something for which solid seventh-century documentation actually exists.

Hoyland’s determined avoidance of any religious explanation for the Believers’ movement also leads him to neglect

completely the possibility that apocalyptic eschatology, the anticipation of the imminent end of the world, may have played a part in its dynamism. This idea has in recent years gained considerable support, partly because of the patently eschatological character of many Qur’ānic passages. *In God’s Path*, however, makes no mention at all of eschatological concerns.¹⁵ Hoyland describes in some detail the two Umayyad sieges of Constantinople, but says nothing about apocalyptic thought as a possible motivation for them, even though the conquest of that city was a central and highly-anticipated event in early Islamic apocalyptic texts, a key objective to be achieved in order to usher in the End-Time. The extraordinary effort expended by the Umayyads to carry out these two assaults suggests that the conquest of Constantinople may have had cosmic significance to them, as one would expect if they were motivated by eschatological concerns. It is perfectly fine to point out that the conquerors were united by a common commitment to *jihād*, and one might certainly further develop the idea that it was the common experience of engaging in *jihād* together that helped bond conquerors of disparate tribes and regions together, and so helped a movement imbued with *communitas* develop the institutional structures of a nascent state. But *jihād* in the name of what, for what cause? Unless we assume something like eschatological enthusiasm, it is difficult to understand what would have motivated the early believers to embark on the conquests in the first place.

15. The index has no entry for “apocalyptic/ism,” “eschatology,” “Last Judgment,” or *yawm al-dīn* (“Day of Judgment”).

The apocalyptic spark seems most likely to be what ignited the sudden burst of expansionist conquest that we associate with the eventual emergence—almost a century later—of Islam.

It is unfortunate that this well-written and readable volume embraces an interpretation that, to this reviewer at least, seems so stubbornly wrong-headed.

The many non-specialists who are likely to learn from it for the first time about the events of Islam's origins will either be forced to re-conceptualize what they know as they learn more, or will continue to cling to the outmoded trope of the "Arab conquests." In neither case will *In God's Path* have done them a service.