

Book Review

Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. xxiii-634. ISBN: 9781107031876, Price: £110 (US\$180).

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Aziz al-Azmeh aims his *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* at two of the most important questions concerning Middle Eastern history: how did the Muslim faith arise, and what was the role of the Arab people in the venture of Islam? Al-Azmeh proposes to lead the flock of Middle East historians into the pastures of Hellenism, Late Antiquity and anthropology of religion, which he intones have been little-nibbled hitherto, and thereby suggests a “fresh look at Muslim emergence” (i). With this ambitious program, *The Emergence of Islam* is a lengthy text which surveys a wide array of studies written over the past 150 years on Late Antiquity, early Islam, paganism and monotheism to evaluate the paradigms through which modern scholars contemplate Islam’s rise and to situate al-Azmeh’s own position.

The admirably omnivorous bibliography and the extensive discussions of Late Antique Christianity and Mediterranean polytheism, politics and philosophy in

Chapters 1 and 2 establish this book as the fruit of a long scholarly genesis. Pursuant to his intentions, al-Azmeh introduces a host of intriguing theoretical questions about the nature of monotheism, the patterns of its adoption and its continuities with prior beliefs, and his expedition into Arabian polytheism in Chapter 4 adds further potentials for complexity, all of which should be welcomed by specialists. Al-Azmeh’s attention to recent archaeological finds and pre-Islamic Arabian epigraphy is another strength of the book, presenting a store of material that can facilitate constructive advances in scholarship. As the reader rounds the corner into the book’s final chapter on the articulation of Islam as the end-product of Umayyad imperial canonisation, he will have traversed a plentiful gamut of details and inferences that argue for the development of Paleo-Islam, an “Arab religion” (100) in the “pagan reservation” (40) of central Arabia, into a “recognisably Muslim cult” and an “imperial religion”

(428) under the transformative vision of the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik and his entourage who rigorously dissociated their Islam from both “Arab religion” and Judeo-Christian monotheisms. By this juncture, however, the reader will also be carrying a number of qualms, and these need some elaboration before appraising the conclusions al-Azmeh draws from his theoretical questions.

One issue stems from al-Azmeh’s theoretical lens. By formulating a model in Chapters 1-2 for the emergence of monotheisms in Late Antiquity as a function of cultic and political centralisation, he establishes a mould into which he pours the evidence about early Islam, driving the argument that Islam’s form needs to be understood as a (independent) replication of processes in Christianising Rome (279). The preponderant weight accorded to Romano-Byzantine legacies renders al-Azmeh’s vision of Islam as beholden to what he dubs “Romanity”, and the space for Sasanian inputs is expressly marginalised (3). This could summon concerns: the Arabic sources for early Islam are Iraqi, and the *a priori* conceptualisation of the Islamic faith as a purely Syrian imperial operation, separate from the supposedly ‘Persian’ Abbasids, perpetuates a timeworn conceptual model which is currently in need of more reflection than al-Azmeh’s model permits. Al-Azmeh’s rigid adherence to his model also has the attendant drawback of subordinating evidence to structure: the model takes precedence, and while theory is manifestly valuable in the field, textual evidence remains important – and here the book docks in difficult methodological moorings.

Al-Azmeh details his interpretive

methodology in a companion volume, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2014). It is directed against the formerly hyper-critical approach to early Islam adopted by various scholars, but in seeking to redress earlier cynicism, al-Azmeh swings far towards a form of positivism whereby writers of Arabic literary sources between the second/eighth and fourth/tenth centuries are lauded as “antiquarians” (*The Arabs in Islam* 43, 62; *The Emergence of Islam* 173) with “scrupulous” intentions to accurately record pre-Islamic facts. This reviewer supports the broad tenor of the Arabic literary tradition, but a classification of its authors as essentially anthropologists will stumble into hazardous misreadings of their literature. Al-Azmeh argues for the sources’ empirical accuracy in order to use them as data repositories from which almost any quotation can be extracted to reconstruct *the* pre-Islamic Arab way of life, but this approach is not sustainable. While Arabic literature houses incredibly rich information, it is not a cultural monolith: anecdotal contradictions abound, and the most pressing task of analysis is not simply to distinguish ‘correct’ from ‘false’, but rather to question why different visions of the past subsisted (and co-existed) in Arabic literature. The field remains needy of better understanding of the discourses which constructed the edifices of classical Arabic literature before the corpus can be simply trawled for data. The sources require diachronic analysis to unpick the layers of historiography that developed over the 300-year period of recording the pre-Islamic past, with due accord to genre and the voices of classical-era authors, as they were developing varied discourses. Relegating writers to the status of

archivists homogenises them and silences their voices, overlooking the important advances in modern historiography that analyse history writing as narrative. Al-Azmeh's *The Arabs and Islam* refers to Hayden White as a kind of waiver (37), noting the value of his narratological theories, but not adopting his methods.

Accordingly, *The Emergence of Islam* traces Islam's development without giving feel for the Arabic material from which its evidence is adduced, and it rests manifold conclusions on single anecdotes. For example, a reference in the fourth/tenth century al-Iṣfahānī's *Kitāb al-Aghānī* about the Island of Ḥaḍūdā as a place of imprisonment is adduced to indicate that the pre-Islamic Arabs had an articulated pan-Arabian public political sphere (142). One reference in the reconstituted 'source' of the second/eighth Ibn Ishāq's biography of Muhammad is quoted as evidence for the 'fact' that pre-Islamic Arabs had a habit of rubbing their bodies on idols (226). And a quotation from the Book of Exodus is matched with an anecdote from the fifth/eleventh century Iranian poetry specialist al-Tabrīzī to prove that the pre-Islamic Arabs and ancient Hebrews shared common views towards sacrifice (225). Chapter 3 relies particularly on the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* to reconstruct the facts of Arab life, but the complex question of how a book of songs, composed for a fourth/tenth century Hamdanid prince in Aleppo can be used as an anthropological survey of pre-Islamic Arabian etiquette is left for the readers to resolve.

As a consequence, large sections of al-Azmeh's book, particularly chapters 3-5 reduce into vast lists of detail argued as being emblematic of the Arab ways and as proof for the book's model of monotheistic

development. But we lack analysis as to why Muslim authors recorded the information, or synthesis of the facts. Investigation of the 'facts' also unearths some inconsistencies. For example, al-Azmeh is rightly critical of the notion of 'tribe', and avows to see through the tidy tribal classifications of Muslim-era genealogies when he discusses the Iraqi group Bakr ibn Wā'il (127), but elsewhere he expressly cites Bakr as a cohesive tribal actor on the Iraqi-Arabian frontier (119), and Chapter 4 is replete with detailed taxonomies of specific tribal religious practices. I sense that al-Azmeh wants to deconstruct Orientalist prejudices about 'tribal Arabia', and this is an asset to his thinking (see 109), but because he uses Muslim-era sources with limited source-critical apparatus, he incorporates their embedded tribalism via the backdoor, and so ultimately repeats too many of the old sentiments about 'Bedouin' pre-Islam. Al-Azmeh's empirical application of Arabic sources causes some misleading simplifications too. For instance, he names Tāabbaṭa Sharran as one of the quintessential outlaw *ṣa'ālīk* brigand poets (142), but Tāabbaṭa Sharran's literary persona as such a brigand was actually crafted by Muslim narrators over 150 years of storytelling between the second/eighth and fourth/tenth centuries, and the association of Tāabbaṭa Sharran with ghouls, which al-Azmeh notes as an factoid about pre-Islamic Arabian belief in spirits (209), was likewise augmented by Muslims and only began to truly flower in the fourth/tenth century with the *Aghānī*'s lengthy biography about the poet. Literary figures such as Tāabbaṭa Sharran are too complex to be adduced as one-dimensional exemplars of this or that Arab trait:

the memories of pre-Islam became the property of Iraqi Muslims and often took on new significations, some seemingly different to the ‘reality’ of pre-Islamic times.

A related, and also fundamental issue concerns al-Azmeh’s treatment of the Arab people. Al-Azmeh’s model needs ‘Arabs’ as the protagonists for its story – the possessors of a definitive range of pre-Islamic beliefs that constituted the ‘Arab religion’, and the actors who transformed Islam into its current form. In aligning “Allāh and His people” with “Arabs”, the analysis ignores Bashear’s *The Arabs and Others* with its observations from hadith and exegesis that Islam acquired its supposed ‘signature’ Arab identity only during the later first/seventh and second/eighth centuries. The problems with viewing Islam as an ‘Arab national movement’ recently resurfaced in Donner (*Muhammad and the Believers*) and Millar (*Religion, Language and Community in the Roman Near East*), but are not aired in al-Azmeh’s Arab narrative.

Furthermore, al-Azmeh’s underlying assumption that pre-Islamic pan-Arabian populations were ethnically unified under the term ‘Arab’, projects Arab identity into an ancient past which verges on primordialist racial archetype, and this notion is critically challenged by the fact that pre-Islamic Arabians did not

seem to call themselves ‘Arabs’, nor did their neighbours describe them as such, labelling Arabians instead as Saracens/*Saraceni* and *Ṭayyāyē*. Al-Azmeh acknowledges the absence of the name ‘Arab’ in pre-Islamic records, (104-5), and he argues to trace Arab “ethnogenesis”, *i.e.* the process by which Arab communities developed their identity (and name) over time (100, 110, 147), but to substantiate his investigation into ethnicity and ethnogenesis, there is a surprising lack of theoretical engagement, especially given al-Azmeh’s wide anthropological reading in other fields. Scholarship now possesses elaborate models to interpret how groups gather together and imagine themselves to constitute an ethnic community: the idea of ethnogenesis began with Max Weber, and more recently with key contributions from Barth, Anderson, Smith, Hobsbawm, Geary and Pohl and Reimitz,¹ but reference to these works is absent in *The Emergence of Islam*. Using the word ‘ethnogenesis’ without consulting the relevant theorists is a substantial misrepresentation, and the fallout is reflected in al-Azmeh’s homogenised treatment of Arabness in pre-Islam. The consequences are not merely semantic: imposing an anachronistic notion of Arabness across Arabia engenders the presumption that there was one cohesive body of people who were ‘ready’ to come together under

1. The classic study for ethnicity and identity is Weber, Max, “The Origins of Ethnic Groups,” in John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith, *Ethnicity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996, pp. 35-9. For more recent work, see Barth, Fredrik, *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969); Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); Hobsbawm, Eric, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); Smith, Anthony, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003); Pohl, Walter and Helmut Reimitz (eds.), *Strategies of Distinction: the Construction of Ethnic Communities (300-800)* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Geary, Patrick, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003); and Jenkins, Richard, *Rethinking Ethnicity* (London: Sage, 2008).

Muhammad's message, and so risks overlooking perhaps the most important achievement of early Islam: the creation of a novel community of believers. These peoples' decision to call themselves Arabs is reflected in convoluted discourses in Arabic literature about Arab family trees, the definition of 'arabī and the merits of Arabness: such issues can be broached by carefully examining Muslim-era narratives, but this is absent in *The Emergence of Islam*.

A reader may equate the tenor of al-Azmeh's book with Jawād 'Alī's ten-volume survey of pre-Islamic Arabness, *al-Mufaṣṣal*: both present their readers with an agglomeration of anecdotes about 'Arabs', but yet without according space for source-critical reflection or investigation into Muslim discourses about their pre-Islamic past. Herein, a reader would expect engagement with the idea of *al-Jāhiliyya* (the pre-Islamic 'Age of Ignorance' or 'Passion'): al-Azmeh offers a brief statement illustrating his ample grasp of the discourses involved (359-60), but his treatment of the sources precludes deeper probing; he lists Drory's important

1996 article "The Abbasid Construction of the Jāhiliyya" in his bibliography, but, according to my reading, I could not find it cited in the text or footnotes.

Overall, al-Azmeh's thoughts on monotheism and Late Antiquity are original and pertinent, and it is therefore unfortunate that he retreated into an unsophisticated approach to the Arabic sources which means his excellent questions and inferences are not always backed by compelling evidence. The result is a dense narrative about Islam's origins as an evolution from pagan Arabia, through a nascent guise under the charismatic leadership of a prophet, to a fully articulated faith system in the Fertile Crescent. This ultimately reflects the narratives of many current (and past) scholars, and instead of spearheading the "fresh approach", al-Azmeh rather points towards it. We can hope that scholars will take up his many erudite challenges and think around them with more sensitive methodologies to both sources and the notions of community, faith and ethnicity.