

Ali, Kecia. *The Lives of Muhammad*. Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 2014, 342pp.

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Biographies on Muhammad are legion, as they are for any figure who leaves a definitive mark on world history; furthermore, these biographies create an historical landscape which, like the Swiss Alps, can be treacherous even for somewhat informed readers: The peaks and valleys of the biographical field do not lend to easy understanding and can often leave readers with less certainty than they had before venturing out of their front-door. In this case, a guide to the terrain may be necessary.

Rather than adding to the chorus of biographies on Muhammad, *The Lives Of Muhammad* traces the ways in which Muhammad has been interpreted throughout the centuries after his death—from Ibn Ishaq’s *Sīra* to Deepak Chopra’s *Muhammad: A Story of the Last Prophet*. Like a trail guide, *The Lives* explains the terrain before us. “This book approaches Muhammad as he has been portrayed over the centuries,” writes Kecia Ali, Associate Professor of Religion, Boston University. “It is a book not about the life of Muhammad but about the ways in which his life has been told” (1). The underlying thesis of this work is: Muhammad has been interpreted in which ever ways are expedient for the communities’ present needs, in light of present circumstances. Ali’s conclusion reveals this most clearly. If indeed it is true that “Modern Islam is a profoundly Protestant tradition” (by which she means modern Islam has attempted to return to the sources of the faith apart from tradition), that shift itself has been brought about by confrontation with the West (239–240). Modern Islam has been forced to reengage the texts because of the Renaissance humanist tradition of *ad fontes*. Muhammad’s reinterpretation for all readers is distilled into one sentence. “Why should a business man not write about [Muhammad] as the epitome of executive skill” (241)?

The Lives does not, however, merely parrot the various historical interpretations, comparing and contrasting the historical interpretations of various biographies. Central to the argument of the book, Ali argues history is inherently interpretative and the historian, in most cases, desires to draw out a response from the intended audience. Whether awe or disgust, praise or blame, the art of history is by nature an illocutionary act. Historical writing seeks to accomplish something in the reader. This is demonstrated most clearly by two different groups of biographies. First, Muhammad’s biographies “gradually shifted from a prophet in the biblical tradition to an Arab hero, suitable for the imperial context developing as Muslim rule spread throughout the near east, across the Mediterranean, and into Asia” (24). Written by Muslims for Muslims, this genre of biography was intended to steel the community for their present labors amongst other religious traditions. Second, Deepak Chopra’s fictionalized account attempts to “find the ‘true’ historical figures behind the legends,” attempting to separate the historical from the doctrinal Muhammad and offer a spiritual but not religious version of him to a post-modern society (204–5). Muhammad, in Chopra’s work, becomes a spiritual leader without doctrinal teaching from whom postmodern society could learn.

A similar occurrence takes place when more critical interpreters turn to parts of Muhammad’s life, most especially his marriage to Aisha (187). If a historian desires to stir the modern American imagination to revolt, it would hardly take much more than a hint at this marriage as an act of child-abuse. “She was only six!,” they would say. The

converse is also true. Another biographer, in this case seeking to draw out sympathy for a man governed by his time and culture, would emphasize the regularity with which those kinds of things occurred and the impact of the climate on the female body (164–166).

This also implies another aspect of the book's chief argument: context informs historical work and interpretive justification. Few examples of Muhammad's life reveal this more than Muhammad and polygamy. Until Muslim biographers were forced to justify Muhammad's polygamy against the criticism of the West, defending his multiple marriages was rare. "Why defend something no one found objectionable" (139)? Reminding his readers of the culture in which Muhammad lived, Ghulam Malik apologetically argued in 1996 that Muhammad married vulnerable widows to protect them from economic destitution and to form political allies (142–143). Humphrey Prideaux, watching as Islamic imperialism was attempting to spread into Western Europe during the last decade of the seventeenth century, argued Muhammad's marriage to Aisha was a "massive fraud: marrying Aisha as well as Sawda and Hafsa was part of a strategy to shore up alliances with their fathers" (158).

Critical Reflection

On the whole, *The Lives of Muhammad* accomplishes its stated task: tracing the ways Muhammad's life has been interpreted through the centuries after his death. Ali adds interpretive clarity by making connections with other religious and contemporary events—Muhammad and the Protestant Reformation (31, 85), visible depictions of Muhammad in a Danish cartoon (1), and so forth. The basic premise of the book—history is done by those who have a goal for their writing and have a particular context from which they write—helps readers understand the nature of history better. If it is true that there is no such thing as purely objective history, it is indeed important to recognize the goals of the historian's work, a helpful reminder derived from the reading.

Ali, furthermore, engages a vast swath of historical material. From *Sīra* to western "spiritualized" biography, the reader is guided through a mountain range of historical material by an academically trained historian who is thoroughly familiar with the subject. This work is a guidebook into a historical field about which most casual readers are not aware.

The nature of the book, however, does not lead to quick comprehensibility. Rather than tracing the interpretation of Muhammad chronologically-thematically (i.e., demonstrating how interpretation has changed throughout the centuries in various ways), the book follows a thematic structure alone. The reader is jostled, for example, from references to Ibn Ishaq (d. 768) to Humphrey Prideaux (d. 1724) to Robert Spencer (1962–). The perspicuity of the work could have been greatly helped had this shift to chronological structure been made. If it is true that the interpretation of Muhammad has changed throughout history and was impacted by the context of the biographer, the interpretation of Muhammad would be most clearly understood by following the biographies of Muhammad throughout the changes in history. Because of the complex structure, *The Lives* reads more like an extended second chapter of a PhD dissertation—a complicated summary of the state of research on a particular field.

Though this book presents a fairly kaleidoscopic picture of the shifts in the interpretation of Muhammad, when the work turns to modern authors who defect from the current political-spiritual orthodoxy, the tone drastically veers from generally scholarly to fiercely polemical—a chasmal shift from an earlier pattern when addressing

those medieval or early modern writers who are equally critical of Muhammad. Using a neologism of the new postmodern spiritual orthodoxy, *The Lives* understands the historical work of Robert Spencer as the “grand pooh-bah of the legion of American Islamaphobes” (190). It is confusing how this vociferous response only rears its head against Robert Spencer, when other authors have said far worse. For example, Benjamin Franklin pondered “is it worse to follow Mahomet or the Devil?” (Cited in Thomas Kidd, *Church History* 72.4, 786). It seems the author of *The Lives* is incapable of understanding how a contemporary-Western historian can straightforwardly accuse Muhammad of moral iniquities like pedophilia.

Ultimately, this reaction belies two undercurrents throughout *The Lives*. Written in light of purportedly insensitive Western pamphlets that depicted Muhammad (and consequently precipitated violent and deadly terrorist attacks), *The Lives* seeks to portray the peaceableness of histories of Muhammad (1). Modern historians, in a sense, are to take note of the way in which Muhammad’s history should be written. If these opponents of Muhammad could write in this way, the work implies, then there is no room to write “relentlessly negative” modern histories (222). Also, the general trend is that modern Western histories ought to show the inclusive nature of modern society. A modern historian with a Masters degree from UNC-Chapel Hill, who defects from the inclusiveness with which much of the academy writes, throws a monkey wrench into *The Lives*’ general thesis.

How then should Christians think and live in light of *The Lives*? Christians have the duty to not bear false witness against others. This involves both positive and negative aspects. Positively, Christians have a duty to write and speak of history with charity; negatively, Christians must keep themselves from intentionally pejorative and inflammatory historical work. Truly Christian historical writing must, furthermore, speak the truth in love: Whether writing on a beloved leader in the history of the Church or on a figure from another religion, Christians have the duty to tell the whole story—not merely the parts that are acceptable to our current culture ears. Seeking to understand the life of Muhammad and to accurately portray his life not only keeps us from bearing false witness, however, but also from unduly building a dividing wall between Christians and Muslims. Ali helpfully reminds Christians to understand the ways in which history has been done, so that we can think critically about the ways in which both Muslims and non-Muslims present Muhammad. Therefore, Christians can better share the gospel with their Muslim neighbors.

Conclusion

Tracing the ways in which Muhammad’s life has been interpreted, Ali helpfully reminds historians that history is not written in a vacuum and history is written with a purpose in mind. Historians are, indeed, doing something when they write biography. Ali draws the reader into the heart of the mountain range. Though the reader is presented with a vast amount of historical material, in the final analysis, it lacks any true engagement of those who are “relentlessly negative.” Rather than asking why a modern historian like Robert Spencer writes against the flatteringly positive interpretation of Muhammad and consequently helping readers to understand negative historical work, Ali brushes off that work by calling him an Islamophobe—as if that label denies the validity of historical research. Though this reader had qualms with that treatment of dissenting views, reflecting on how history is done was greatly beneficial.