



Guardian Review Pages

Review: The age of ignorance: Glen Bowersock is infuriated by a swashbuckling study of the origins of Islam: In the Shadow of the Sword: The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World by Tom Holland 544pp, Little, Brown, pounds 25

Glen Bowersock

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In his sprawling new book Tom Holland undertakes to explain nothing less than the origin of Islam. This is a subject as relevant to today's world as it is controversial within it. How Islam began was obscure right from the start, above all to the surprised Christians who first succumbed to the Arab armies that surged out of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century. They had seen themselves as confronting a different threat. After all, the Persians had captured Jerusalem in 614 and soon moved into Egypt. At that moment they appeared to be the principal antagonist of the Byzantine empire based in Constantinople. No one could have imagined that a little over two decades later the Persian empire would be in its death throes and that the Patriarch of Jerusalem would be turning over the city to an Arab caliph.

The beginnings of Islam have always been anchored in Mecca in the northwestern part of the Arabian peninsula. Here Muhammad was believed to have received from the angel Gabriel the earliest revelations that became incorporated in the Muslim scripture, the Qur'an. Scholarly debate about the revelations and about Meccan society has gone on for centuries, but no one before has seriously doubted the conjunction of Muhammad and Mecca. Holland wants us to believe that Muhammad did not come from Mecca at all but from southern Transjordan, and that his revelation was a compound of languages and ideas floating around in the Near East.

Holland came to his work on Islam unencumbered by any prior acquaintance with its fundamental texts or the scholarly literature. He modestly compares himself to Edward Gibbon, whom he can call without the slightest fear of contradiction "an infinitely greater historian than myself". In the Decline and Fall, at the opening of his magisterial chapter 50 on Muhammad, Gibbon had candidly acknowledged his ignorance of "Oriental tongues", but he also expressed his gratitude "to the learned interpreters who have transfused their science in the Latin, French, and English languages". Holland seems to have confined himself largely to interpreters, learned or otherwise, writing in English, but his efforts to inform himself, arduous as they may have been, were manifestly insufficient.

He has written his book in a swashbuckling style that aims more to unsettle his readers than to instruct them. I have not seen a book about Arabia that is so irresponsible and unreliable since Kamal Salibi's *The Bible Came from Arabia* (1985). Although that work was depressingly misguided in replacing biblical places with their homonyms in the Arabian peninsula, it at least revealed an accomplished scholar who had gone badly astray. Holland has read widely, but carelessly. He starts out with an irrelevant, though arresting, account of a defeated Jewish king in Arabian Himyar (Yemen) killing himself by riding his horse into the Red Sea. It is typical of Holland's style to lead off with this fanciful story when an inscription from the time of the king's death records that the Ethiopians killed him.

Holland explodes with indignation over the traditional term, *jahiliyya* (age of ignorance), for the time before Muhammad. After a tabloid view of Arab culture in that period, he declares: "The effect of this presumption was to prove incalculable. To this day, even in the west, it continues to inform the way in which the history of the Middle East is interpreted and understood." This was partially true in Gibbon's time, but it is quite false today. Research and publication on pre-Islamic history, archaeology, art and languages may be found in many western

universities, such as Oxford, as well as in many Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria.

The past 30 years have seen lively controversies in the scholarship on early Islam, much of it emanating from the revisionist work of John Wansbrough in analysing the text of the Qur'an and its possible links with both Christian and Jewish language and thought. This is catnip for Holland, as is the revisionist work by Wansbrough's disciple, Andrew Rippin, and, much more idiosyncratically, by the pseudonymous Christoph Luxenberg, who dares not speak his name. Although these debates are all solidly grounded in close textual study, they can do little more than titillate uninitiated readers because the dust has not yet settled.

Holland's failure to follow Gibbon in examining French scholarship means that he has missed many of the most important recent discoveries, above all the large number of inscriptions from late antique south Arabia that Christian Julien Robin and his associates in Paris have been publishing in a steady stream. We now know much more about the Judaism of Himyar, the conflict with Christian Ethiopia and the Persian occupation of western Arabia. In discussing early Qur'an manuscripts Holland has missed the collaborative manuscript, in five different hands, which Francois Deroche has dated to the third quarter of the seventh century. It appears to antedate the Qur'anic inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

The scattershot nature of Holland's investigations is particularly apparent in his breezy reference to the Qur'an manuscripts that were found in Sana'a, Yemen, in 1973. He hints darkly at censorship to explain publication delays caused by textual variants in a palimpsest but is unaware that the palimpsest itself and two other manuscripts are actually now with the publisher. He is also unaware that a second cache of Qur'an manuscripts was discovered five years ago in renovations of the Great Mosque in Sana'a and that in February 2010 the Yemeni authorities granted permission for them to be studied.

But Holland is at his most irresponsible when he turns to the Meccan origins of Islam. After reasonably supporting Patricia Crone's argument against the tradition of Mecca as a mercantile centre, he goes on to ask whether the place itself might not be an invention in the story of Muhammad. He raises the possibility that the Qur'anic pagans, called mushrikun, might be confederate tribes simply because the word is constructed from the Arabic root for "sharing". He looks for these tribes in southern Jordan and not only thinks of placing Muhammad among them but proposes that his own Meccan tribe, the Quraysh, took its name from the Syriac word qarisha, which, according to Holland, would have been "duly Arabised". This jaw-dropping idea depends on Holland's mistaken view that the Syriac word could allude to a confederation. What it means is to clot or congeal.

For some reason Holland's book was released in the Netherlands in Dutch before it appeared in English. It had a different title then, *The Fourth Beast*. A marketing strategy of this kind looks like a conscious effort to profit from recent Dutch anxiety over Muslim immigrants. But Holland's cavalier treatment of his sources, ignorance of current research and lack of linguistic and historical acumen serve to undermine his provocative narrative. In *The Shadow of the Sword* seems like an attempt by author, agent and publisher to create a very different account of early Islam, but fortunately the quality of the book stands in the way.

Glen Bowersock's *From Gibbon to Auden: Essays on the Classical Tradition* is published by Oxford. To order *In the Shadow of the Sword* for pounds 18 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0330 333 6846 or go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop

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