James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Pp. xxxv + 573; hardcover $199; paperback $75.

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In this remarkable but idiosyncratic contribution to the historiography of late antiquity, James Howard-Johnston offers a rigorous reassessment of the major narrative sources for the momentous events that shook western Eurasia in the seventh century: the final "Great War" between the empires of Rome and Iran (603–628); the westward migration of Avars, Turks, and other steppe peoples and their incursions into Roman and Sasanian territory; and the meteoric rise of Islamic power from the death of the Prophet in 632 to the first Arab siege of Constantinople in 717–718. *Witnesses to a World Crisis* approaches this world through systematic study of its historians and histories. The focus throughout is on military, political, and social history, though readers interested in other themes and topics will also learn much from the book's methodical dissection of the sources.

Howard-Johnston approaches his sources with a clear and consistent goal: he seeks in each case to define the "character, interests, and working methods" of the historian, chronicler, or other writer responsible for the text in question (9). The point is to test the reliability of the source in order to extract from it the "nuggets of information" ideally derived from eyewitness experience or contemporary documents (65). Although he examines poetry, hagiography, and other imaginative genres, Howard-Johnston reserves his highest praise for more restrained texts, such as the Greek *Chronicon Pascale* and the Syriac *Chronicle of 724*. These texts preserve "the sort of solid, well-organized material which is meat to historians," precisely because of their authors' lack of imagination (49). Howard-Johnston works tirelessly to identify the sources behind his sources, insisting that such analysis is essential for assessing the accuracy of their reports. He finds, for instance, four distinct sources underlying the *Chronicle of 724* and at least nine behind the Armenian historian known as Sebeos. Howard-Johnston readily admits that such analysis is a "long and laborious business" with "inevitably conjectural" results (80). At times, his search for the sources behind our sources pushes beyond plausible reconstruction. In the

hands of a less skilled scholar, this methodology could easily lead to a rather insular approach to historiography. Fortunately, Howard-Johnston remains closely attuned to both the historical context and significance of each source. His analysis of the Armenian *History to 682*, which he "disinters" from Movses Daskurants'i's *History of (Caucasian) Albania*, shows, for example, how the Roman alliance with the Western Turks initiated in 624/625 set the stage for the Roman capture of Tiflis and Heraclius' invasion of Mesopotamia in the winter of 627. Howard-Johnston's chronological precision allows him to document cross-regional connections, which others have only postulated. It appears, for example, that it was Chinese efforts to destabilize the twin Turkish khaganates of the steppe in 629, which brought the Western Turks' military operations in the Caucasus to an "abrupt halt" (127).

*Witnesses to a World Crisis* offers important new observations about the nature and chronology of the early Islamic conquests as well as contemporary views of the new religion. Here too Howard-Johnston's insights emerge piecemeal, patiently acquired and assembled from close study of each text. For example, his reading of the Ethiopic *Chronicle of John Nikiu* (composed, he contends, in Coptic during the mid-seventh century) underscores the rapid and well-planned nature of the Islamic conquest of Egypt in 641/642, which culminated in the evacuation of the last Roman administrators in September of 643 (189–190). His reconstruction of the Umayyad-Roman wars hinges on his high respect for the lost history of the mid-eighth century bishop Theophilus of Edessa, which seems to underlie the accounts of later writers in Greek, Arabic, and Syriac (i.e., Theophanes, Agapius, and Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, the last preserved via the twelfth-century *Chronicle of Michael the Syrian*). In Howard-Johnston's estimation, Agapius, an eighth-century Chalcedonian bishop of northern Syria, was the "least inclined to tamper with Theophilus' text," while the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes (d. 818) edited with a much heavier hand (231–232). This reconstruction will likely require revision in light of Maria Conterno's more recent study of this same cluster of chronicles.[1] Even so, Theophanes emerges in Howard-Johnston's analysis as an invaluable source for understanding how Constantinople

[1] Maria Conterno, "Processo ai testimoni: un' inchiesta storiographica sulle fonte per il VII secolo," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 24 (2011): 897–912, reviewing *Witnesses*.

survived the onslaught of Islamic military expansion. Theophanes' *Chronicle* preserves evidence for what were arguably the three most vital steps that enabled the Romans to retain the Aegean core of their empire: "the mobilization of the peasantry of Asia Minor… the improvement of the defences of Constantinople…and, most important of all, adoption of guerrilla methods, as developed by special forces in the Lebanon, for the defence of the Roman heartland, by land and sea" (301). Working with translations, Howard-Johnston offers a more condensed, but similarly rigorous review of the seventh-century material included in later Middle Eastern sources: Eutychius, the *Chronicle of Seert*, the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, and the Zoroastrian *Khwadaynamag* or *Book of Lords* (as preserved in Firdowsi and the Islamic sources). Howard-Johnston plucks from each of these sources unique and plausible details about the dramatic events of the seventh century. The *Chronicle of Seert*, for example, documents the crucial role of the East-Syrian patriarch in the diplomatic negotiations, ca. 630, which finally "brought the Roman-Persian war to a formal end" (330). The *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* offers a sobering account of the increasingly tough anti-Christian measures imposed by the Arab governors of Egypt beginning already in the 680s (322–323).

As a Byzantine historian whose research has drawn him deeper and deeper into Islamic history, Howard-Johnston brings a refreshing perspective to study of the Islamic sources. He is sharply critical of the revisionist school of Islamic historiography, which has posited an "almost unbridgeable gap" between the era of the conquests and the Islamic sources of the ninth and tenth centuries that describe these events (372). Indeed, his entire analysis inclines toward becoming a defense of the methods and reliability of early Islamic historical writing. We must not, Howard-Johnston argues, view this Islamic tradition of historiography as "something strange, prey to unusual forces," just because of its reliance on oral sources (392). While this is a seductive line of argument, Howard-Johnston's effort to explain away more legendary and unreliable elements of the Islamic sources as "disruptions in the historical narrative" is based upon a false dichotomy between "religious truth" and "historical truth" (380). The problem with this approach—and it is a tendency that runs throughout the book—is that it tends to impose upon the sources a very modern view of what constitutes good history.

The final chapters of the book (ch. 14–16) offer a compelling narrative overview of the final Roman-Sasanian war, the rise of Islam, and the era of the conquests. Building on the meticulous chronological reconstruction established in the previous chapters, Howard-Johnston provides a magisterial account of the political and military history of the seventh century. His analysis in these sections includes valuable discussion of the imagery and themes of the Quran (esp. 449–450), and insightful remarks on the sociology of the early Islamic community (452–460). It also offers a vigorous defense of the sophistication and centralization of the early Islamic state, emphasizing the role of "Meccan statecraft," especially under the caliphate of Mu'awiya (472 and 518–529). Howard-Johnston's characterization of the modern historiography on this issue may be overly schematic and even a little dated. But it is nonetheless helpful that he engages the issue explicitly, affirming the general congruence between his view of the conquests and previous scholarship by Fred Donner, Hugh Kennedy, and others.

In sum, this book will rightly take its place as a pivotal study in the historiography of late antiquity. The author's learning is prodigious and his methodology painstaking. Based on some four decades of intensive reading, writing, and teaching, *Witnesses to a World Crisis* will become an indispensible resource for scholars working on many different facets of this tumultuous era. One hopes that the book will also inspire other approaches to these same texts—analyses that will not only sift them for "nuggets of information," but also probe their distinctive qualities as religious and cultural documents. Scholars working in every genre and language of late antique historiography will find much to contemplate in Howard-Johnston's grand synthesis.