Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). Pp. 408; $75.

SANDRA TOENIES KEATING, PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

In his recent book, *The Death of a Prophet*, Stephen Shoemaker explores the intriguing evidence found in both Islamic and non-Islamic sources that contradicts the traditional account of the death of Muhammad and the earliest decades of the Muslim community. The book seeks to make a contribution to current scholarship concerning the life of Muhammad and the origins of the Qur'an by taking up a number of suggestions that have been largely ignored by mainstream scholars, and draws attention to some very important questions that remain to be answered. In particular, Shoemaker takes a fresh look at the implications of scholarship by Casanova in the early 20th century, and Crone and Cook nearly forty years ago which suggested that Muhammad was first and foremost an eschatological prophet who led his followers into Syro-Palestine with the expectation that the Final Hour would come before his own death. His unexpected demise, however, caused the young Muslim community to rework his teachings to accommodate the empire it was rapidly acquiring, and ultimately to shift the center of Islamic sacred geography from Jerusalem to the Hijaz.

The book is divided into four chapters, the first two examining the data indicating that Muhammad was still alive at the time of the Syro-Palestinian invasions and may even have led the armies himself. Chapter three reevaluates evidence in the Qur'an and *Hadith* that Muhammad's preaching of an imminent apocalypse centered on Jerusalem was reworked by his followers when the end did not come before his death, while chapter four attempts to explain the apparent radical revision of the movement into a thoroughly Abrahamic and Arabic religion focused on Mecca and Medina. A brief conclusion argues that such a comprehensive revisioning is not impossible seen in light of what is now known about the early development of Christianity.

Shoemaker's approach to adjudicating the historical value of the sources places an emphasis on evidence that the canonical version of Muhammad's life and the rise of Islam represent a later reworking of the material. Nonetheless, traces of an alternative

narrative can be found in both Islamic and non-Islamic sources. Especially important here are several apparently non-polemical references to Muhammad's presence in Syro-Palestine after 632 (his traditional death date) and contradictory reports of the circumstances of his death and burial. The author contends that these remarks reflect a more ancient account of the events that was mostly obscured with the construction of a narrative in line with the needs of the Umayyad Empire. Such reworking of the material does not require duplicity on the part of those who compiled the authoritative accounts of Muhammad's life, such as the *Sira* of Ibn Hisham, or those who collected the *Hadith*. These chroniclers were simply trying to make sense of Muhammad's teachings in light of the events that actually occurred—Muhammad died before his prophetic expectation was fulfilled, while the stunning success of the Muslim armies had brought a vast empire of ancient civilizations under their control.

Chapter one analyzes Christian, Jewish and Samaritan documents (most of which have been collected in Hoyland's seminal book, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 1997) reporting the appearance of a Saracen prophet. The texts are in a multitude of languages – Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, Armenian and Latin. Especially important here are the Syriac Common Source, as well as a number of shorter Syriac chronicles, which Shoemaker carefully compares to the canonical account of Muhammad's life. Surprisingly, these reports independently describe Muhammad as leading the invading armies into Syro-Palestine after 634, several years after the traditional date given for his death in Medina. The *Zuqnin Chronicle* (ca. 775), on the other hand, unmistakably records Muhammad as the Arab king and prophet who led his armies to conquer Palestine in 621. In spite of the mistaken date given for this event, however, the account is remarkably consistent with the details of beliefs of Muhammad's followers and his presence in Palestine, calling into question the tradition that Muhammad died in Medina.

The various non-Islamic accounts also give strong indications of a widespread Jewish hope during this time that Muhammad might drive the Persians and Byzantines from the Holy Land, ushering in a new age of freedom, a hope quickly dashed. Although there is some discrepancy among the various dates given by the texts, it is difficult to explain this expectation if Muhammad was already dead and buried in Medina. Shoemaker notes that recent

study of the correspondence between ʿUmar II and Leo III (early eighth century) appears to confirm this evidence less directly, further raising serious questions about the reliability of the traditional accounts.

In the second chapter, Shoemaker examines the earliest sources for the life of Muhammad as transmitted by Ibn Hisham (d. 833) and al-Tabari (d. 923). It has long been recognized by both Islamic and Western scholars that these late biographies, although containing earlier traditions, are historically unreliable. Much of this chapter is concerned with tracing the course of *Hadith*, *Sira* and *isnad* criticism, leading to Shoemaker's conclusion that the very nature of these sources makes them untrustworthy for accurate information about the earliest period of Islam. Among the suspicious aspects of the descriptions of Muhammad's life and death are the blatant parallels drawn between the periods of the prophet's life and that of Moses, most obviously in the use of numerologically significant time-spans. Another strangely contradictory story of ʿUmar's reaction to the news of Muhammad's death linked to the transmitter al-Zuhri (d. 741) seems to retain an earlier, non-canonical version. In the report (which Shoemaker takes up more extensively in the following chapter), ʿUmar refuses to believe that Muhammad is dead, and must be convinced by Abu Bakr, who produces a "revelation" previously known only to himself predicting that the Prophet would die like all previous prophets. The implication is that ʿUmar had anticipated a different course of events, and did not expect he would witness the Prophet's death. The report includes a number of unusual details, including the comment that the situation became dire when the decomposing body began to stink and required burial, a repugnant point that later tradition takes pains to deny.

In light of these challenges to the authoritative *Sira* and *Hadith*, chapter three proposes a picture of Muhammad that accounts for both the material found in the Qur'an and the apparent anomalies in the traditional version—that of the eschatological prophet. In short, Shoemaker argues that the Qur'an presents Muhammad not so much as the "social reformer" advanced by Western scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a prophet who has come to bring the news of the Hour of Final Judgment and to call the people to monotheistic worship and submission to God's divine laws in preparation for the end times. Indeed, monotheism and the

impending Hour are the two most prominent themes in the Qur'an, easily found on nearly every page of the *textus receptus*. Shoemaker's proposal is quite compelling; somewhat surprisingly he does not include the designation of Muhammad as a "warner" (*nadhir*) common in the Qur'an and tradition as further support for his theory.

The real question that Shoemaker brings to the forefront here is why the (somewhat obvious) evidence contradicting the canonical version of the rise of Islam has been almost completely ignored by scholars. He traces the origin of the problem to the home that Islamic scholarship found in philology and especially in Old Testament studies. Because of the particular concerns of these fields of study, the Qur'an and *Sira* have not been subjected to the same critical methods as the New Testament, and instead have been treated as complete and coherent texts. Furthermore, the system of classification of *suras* into 'Meccan' and 'Medinan' by Nöldeke and Bell that both assumes and supports the canonical version has remained virtually unchallenged for a century and a half. This lack of critical scrutiny means that the confidence of both Western and Islamic scholarship in the traditional account of Muhammad's life and the formation of the early community as historically reliable is unwarranted. On the contrary, a multitude of examples can be found in which serious scholars have noted anomalies and contradictions, but dismissed them because they did not cohere with what was "known" to be the correct version.

In the final chapter, Shoemaker attempts to account for the apparent shift of Islamic sacred geography from Jerusalem to the Hijaz in the eighth century. This shift included suppressing the memory of Muhammad as an eschatological prophet who died in Syro-Palestine in favor of that of an Abrahamic prophet with a unique message in Arabic who reconsecrated Mecca and was buried where he died in Medina. Here Shoemaker makes use of the recent book of Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2010) which suggests that the earliest of Muhammad's followers were an ecumenical community of monotheists concerned with piety who called themselves "Believers" and embraced Jews and Christians. Donner's thesis, along with conclusions reached by Cook, Crone, Hawting and others, leads Shoemaker to propose an early community of Believers focused on "the land of eschatological

promise, Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Only when the expected immanent destruction failed to arrive did the early Muslims find a need to re-remember the landscape of the Hijāz as the sacred cradle of Islam." (p. 251) In this reorientation of sacred geography, eighth-century Muslims began to emphasize the distinctiveness of Muhammad's teachings from Judaism and Christianity, the importance of Mecca and Medina, and the sacred language of Arabic, in essence creating Islam as it is known today.

This book has many strengths; chief among them is Shoemaker's willingness to reevaluate the plausibility of a multitude of suggestions previously rejected in favor of the "orthodox" account and to put them into a coherent framework. Within the short space of 260 pages, he draws attention to an astounding number of anomalies in the extant material and, I believe, forces serious scholars to move beyond the canonical texts of Islam in order to answer the troubling questions he has raised. Certainly the identity of Muhammad as an eschatological prophet has great merit. The case for this may even be stronger than Shoemaker suggests when one takes into account the Qur'anic evidence (which he largely ignores in this book). Nonetheless, I am not convinced by the concluding chapter, which ultimately seems to reject the entire canonical version of the life and teachings of Muhammad in favor of a hypothetical religious community that bears no resemblance to its offspring a century later.

Particularly disturbing to Shoemaker, Donner and others is the apparent presence of Jews and a Jewish perspective in the oldest accounts of Muhammad and his teachings, a presence clearly evident in the "Constitution of Medina" purportedly written by Muhammad himself. This murky relationship between Muhammad and these Jewish followers has been the subject of speculation since the earliest Qur'anic exegesis and remains so today. Donner's attempt, however, to accommodate these non-Arab monotheists by positing a primitive inter-confessional community of Believers led by Muhammad is not convincing. In my opinion, it is Shoemaker's acceptance of this proposal that sets his project off in the wrong direction—the notion that Islam began as an almost liberal Protestant movement focused on the restoration of Jerusalem, only to be suppressed and replaced with a fiction more convenient for political gain sometime after ʿAbd al-Malik (685–705) strains the evidence. Some obvious questions can be put to this scheme. Why

would those who revised the material feel the need to tie the religion of their emerging empire to someone who was apparently a failed prophet? Furthermore, how was it possible to gain broad acceptance in such a short time for the new version of Muhammad's life and teachings? If Muhammad was an obscure figure, why make him into the prophet-hero he became; if he was widely revered, how could accounts of him be so effectively obliterated? Surely there were Believers committed enough to remain faithful to his original teachings, yet evidence of them has not materialized. It is more likely that Muhammad's semi-tribal monotheistic movement attracted random Jewish (and perhaps Christian) adherents when it appeared that he might be successful in taking possession of the Holy Land. Rather than being an 'open society', this early movement seems to have been characterized by acknowledgement of Muhammad's leadership through the payment of tribute, as well as nominal monotheism and perhaps common worship, requirements that some Jews and Christians were willing to accept.

Many, many more objections to this current trajectory in Islamic studies could be raised, but the use of the 'argument of silence' is particularly problematic. Shoemaker, *et al.* claim that lack of evidence from pre-Islamic Arabia indicates the traditional version cannot be considered accurate. Yet, such a conclusion neglects the fact that limitations on archeological work in the Arabian Peninsula (as well as the lack of early Islamic art and inscriptions from the Hijaz) has severely hindered study in this field. Future archeology may well alter our understanding radically, but at this point conclusions based on the silence of the historical record are inappropriate. A related problem is our very limited knowledge of Judaism and Christianity in the Hijaz. Following Donner, Shoemaker hypothesizes a coherence within the presumed community of Believers that remains unproven. If one concludes that the tradition is not trustworthy, any reconstruction of an alternative in the absence of corroborating evidence remains just an exercise in speculation.

All in all, this is a very interesting book that skids off onto thin ice and then open water in the final pages. Shoemaker is to be commended for his courage, but the value of his proposal remains to be seen.