

In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire - Robert G. Hoyland (Highlight: 6; Note: 0)

The problem with this narrative is not so much that it is wrong, but that, like all histories told from the standpoint of the victors, it is idealizing and one-sided: the role of God and Islam is played up and the role of non-Muslims is mostly ignored. It is the aim of this book to try to give a more rounded account of this undeniably world-changing phenomenon. The main strategy for achieving this is a simple one: I will give precedence to seventh- and eighth-century texts and documents over later ones.

To reduce this later Islamicizing perspective I will speak of "Arab" conquests rather than "Islamic" conquests. Both terms are to some degree inaccurate, since the conquerors were neither all Arabs nor all Muslims, and the meaning of both terms was in any case evolving in the immediate aftermath of the conquests.

Islamicists would say that religion plays a greater role in the object of their study, but that is a dubious claim. When the Vandal king Geiseric was asked one day by his ship's captain whether he should sail, he replied: "Against those with whom God is angry of course,"⁶ and this accords well with the spirit of the conquerors treated in this book.

In an oft-quoted passage, the Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta refers to the empires of Byzantium and Persia as "the two eyes of the world," the divinely ordained realms responsible for maintaining order and civilization amid a sea of inferior untrustworthy barbarians. Of "the Saracen tribe," for example, he writes that they were "most unreliable and fickle; their mind is not steadfast and their judgement is not grounded in prudence."¹ They needed to be kept in check so that justice and harmony could reign, but they were not a serious problem, for the two empires would always prevail. And yet this comfortable world order, which had endured so long, was suddenly turned upside down by the Arab conquerors not long after Theophylact had finished his work sometime in the 620s.

When Byzantium was rocked by a military coup in 602, Khosrau decided that the time was ripe to renew hostilities and he launched an all-out attack on his erstwhile ally. The onward march of his forces seemed impossible to check: Syria was captured by 610, Palestine by 614, Egypt by 619, and Anatolia as far as the walls of Constantinople itself by 626. Yet the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, who had wrested the imperial throne from its usurper in 610, made a dramatic comeback by marching through the Caucasus and attacking Persia from the north, supported by a large contingent of Turks.

The Persian prophet Mani (d. 274) and his successors made great efforts to win powerful backers for their religion, which we call Manichaeism; it was popular across Central Asia and China, and in 762 it became the creed of the ruling clan of the Uighur Turks.