BOOK REVIEWS


The purpose of this study is to trace the influences that shaped the Muslim story of Ibrāhīm and Ismā‘īl, “an attempt to put the issue of cross-cultural communication and religious influence in early Islam into perspective.” (ix) In his analysis, Firestone isolates three sources of influence. The first is what he calls the Biblicist milieu, using that term rather than “biblical” (which he reserves for the canonical Hebrew Bible) or “Judeo-Christian” (since Jews and Christians developed separate exegetical traditions) to refer to the narratives on biblical themes that evolved in a variety of forms in the Arabian environment. A second source of influence is that of stories and motifs known from pre-Islamic Arabic culture. And, finally, an influence comes from the infusion of specifically Islamic themes that shape and interpret the stories over all.

Firestone distinguishes his approach from “the classic Islamic view” (p. 158) of a radical separation in thinking between pre-Islamic and Islamic times, speculating instead that a great deal of monotheist and “biblicist” material was known, even if not central and coherently ordered, before the time of the Prophet. He also distinguishes his work from simplistic European scholarship that defines a single authentic source, the Bible, from which the Qur’ān “borrows” in distorted fashion. Grounding himself in recent work on oral tradition, Firestone argues that there is no “original” source, but that rather there are multiple versions of stories, modified in each telling, that will seem authentic to those who hear them in each case. With writing, change is necessarily limited, but still not wholly precluded. The narratives, he suggests, in the end “assume an authentically Islamic form which is as ‘original’ as Jewish or Christian narrative traditions.” (20) The Prophet’s conviction that the Jews, for example, have distorted their revelation is thus as comprehensible as Jewish reaction that Muslims have “misunderstood” the stories.

Firestone’s method is to select 20 interpretive sources, dating from the ninth to the sixteenth century; they include history, tafsir, stories of the Prophets, and hadith. He then takes the particular story of Ibrāhīm and Ismā‘īl and divides it into three sections: the Syrian prologue (including Ibrāhīm’s journey, his encounter with a tyrant, the birth of Ismā‘īl, and the angels’ visit); Makkan events (including the arrival there, the Jurhum Ibrāhīm’s visits, building the Ka‘bah, and the pilgrimage); and the sacrifice (including the act and its prelude, the idea of redemption, and the debate over whether the son involved was Ishaq or Ismā‘īl). For each segment, Firestone organizes the points in each account in order to isolate patterns in the narratives. He then shows in what way particular sections of the story, in each pattern, draw on the three milieux he identifies as sources.

For a historian the method of taking motifs out of context and out of a specific historical setting seems problematic. Firestone notes historical trends only at certain points. For example, over all the hadith in his sources on whether the sacrifice episode involved Ismā‘īl or Ishaq are almost evenly split. Temporally, however, “as the genealogical connection with Abraham, Ishmael, and the northern Arabs became more firmly established,” preference shifted to Ismā‘īl. (151) Elsewhere, however, one is left to wonder why one text makes an emphasis that others do not. The method does, however, allow Firestone clearly to make his well taken two points: first, that there is clear continuity between Islamic and pre-Islamic religious ideas, a pattern that one would expect in the development of any religious tradition; and, second, that the elements passed on attain a unique shape and meaning in their Islamic presentation as they combine what he calls “influence” and “inspiration”. (159)

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