for relational solidarity and the incorporation of diverse beliefs, ethics, and desires into Islamic poetics of existence.

This is a deeply personal work in which we see the imprint of the author throughout. The author uses "we" to include herself in the body and metaphysics of the work. She concedes that her subject position is also undergoing changes during the writing of the book. Also, the book makes a much-needed distinction between Muslim and Islamic, emphasizing the fallible nature of Muslims and their redemption through repentance.

Shaiq Ali*

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Ilkka Lindstedt. *Muḥammad and His Followers in Context: The Religious Map of Late Antique Arabia*. Leiden: Brill, 2023, Pp. 390. Paperback. ISBN: 978-90-04-68712-7. Price: $167.

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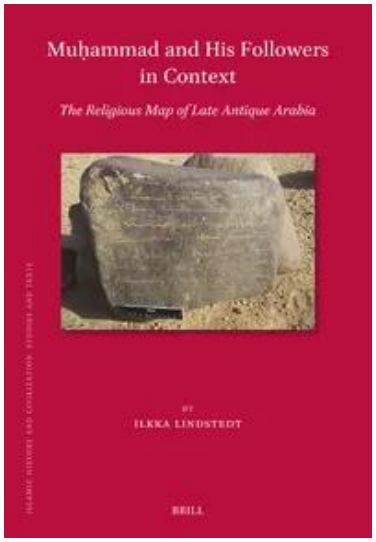

The book *Muḥammad and His Followers in Context: The Religious Map of Late Antique Arabia* (2024) by Ilkka Lindstedt offers a promising perspective of epigraphic and contemporary sources to contextualize Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be on him) social and religious community and his times in "late antique Arabia." Using a historical approach to study the religious map from the first century CE till after the death of Prophet Muḥammad around 700 CE, Lindstedt's main thesis pivots around his claim that although the "rise of Islam was an impressive and formidable historical development," the historical inquiry into the "Islamic origins have been lopsided" (p. 2). He proposes that, contrary to the popular narrative about the people of Arabia having dominantly polytheistic beliefs, monotheism was widely practised. Therefore, there should be no dichotomy between "pre-Islamic" and "Islamic" periodization while studying the "Arabian and Near Eastern history" (p. 2). This thesis, that is, monotheism (of sorts) and polytheism were both practised in Arabia, is already a fact, and an informed reader may not find anything new in this hypothesis.

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While studying the history of this period from epigraphic and contemporary sources offers a fresh perspective, the author's positionality at the book's onset seems a bit problematic. With an age-old orientalist approach, he prioritizes Jews and Christians while using the patronizing terminology of "the gentile prophet" (p. 6) or "gentiles" for Muslims, pagan Arabs, or followers of any other faith, "who believed or behaved differently than they did" (p. 121). Lumping together people other than the Jewish or Christian disposition as gentiles is an a priori technique of the Orientalists. Secondly, his prolegomenon and methodological approach of using limited epigraphic inscriptions by anonymous sources pose some real problems. The authenticity of such sources, foregrounded for validated research that this book claims, cannot be certain, especially when Lindstedt acknowledges that the people of these areas and the selected era of the study were not very keen on epigraphic inscriptions.

Similarly, some of the claims in the earlier pages of his book are also counter-intuitive. On the one hand, Lindstedt considers monotheistic elements "of sorts" prevalent in that era's Arab society despite their adherence to different deities because most of the Arab population believed in a higher God. On the other hand, he cites Michael Lecker as overlooking the presence of the strong Jewish and Christian presence in the Arab milieu. Citing a couple of historians implying that perhaps the Jewish and Christian communities' presence was put under erasure by the historians is not a valid claim. Most pre- and post-Islamic historical sources acknowledge Arabia's strong Jewish and Christian presence. An Islamic theologian is expected to have complete knowledge of the elaborate Qur'ānic discourse about the Jewish and Christian presence and a direct address to them. Therefore, it seems like a sweeping statement that the Jews or Christians in Arabia were not accounted for.

While Lindstedt acknowledges that the "Qur'ānic manuscripts go back to a single written archetype, which was codified in the first century AH/seventh century CE" (p. 16), it seems that he tries to problematize this fact systematically, quoting certain sources while disregarding others. Raising doubts about the collectors and editors of Qur'ānic inscriptions on the available materials in the time of the Prophet (a fact with authentic historical evidence) does not sit well with the book's thrust. Quoting van Putten, Lindstedt tries to establish that the "language of the QCT [Qur'ānic consonantal script] was close to the language Muhammad would have used during his career as a prophet in the early seventh century" (p. 19n58), implying that perhaps Muḥammad may have made up some *āyāt* of the Qur'ān (I have used the word, *āyāt*, instead of the Orientalists' preferred word, "verses" because an "*āyah*" basically means wonderous

sign and proof, a meaning which gets lost if it is translated as "verse"). Any Arabic and Qur'ānic language linguist and lexicographer would know that the language of a human being, may it be of Prophet Muḥammad, is distinct from the divine language of the Qur'ān.

Lindstedt problematizes the late antique Arabian history by bringing in discussions about the Umayyad or Abbasid historians like 'Urwah b. al-Zubayr (d. 713 CE), Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 742 CE), Hishām b. 'Urwah (d. 763 CE), Ibn Isḥāq (d. 768 CE), Hishām b. al-Kalbī (d. 819 CE), Ibn Hishām (d. 833 CE), and other historians. Historians may have their respective tribal or caliphate associations and their particular preferences. Therefore, a deeper understanding of history makes us mindful of the diverse leanings of these historians to historicize the events, narrating certain events while downplaying other facts. Similarly, Lindstedt's other argument for bringing different extant languages like "Taymanitic, Dadanitic, Safaitic, Hismaic, and different 'Thamudic scripts' . . . [or] Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions" (pp. 44-45) at par with Arabic does not make a valid argument as he may be knowing that though there were many languages that were being spoken in late antique Arabia, these languages had their clusters of influence that could not be overemphasized. The scholars of the Qur'ān know God's declaration that He has selected the Arabic language for the Qur'ān for a reason. Though human beings may not have a complete understanding of divine preference, one easily relatable reason for our limited understanding can be that the Arabic language was, and is, a living language and thus was the strongest candidate for the medium of the Qur'ān since the other languages catered for a limited audience of the Arabian Peninsula. Lindstedt himself acknowledges that several Christian and other communities' prayers were spoken in Arabic (pp. 116, 129), which signifies that Arabic was spoken by many communities in Arabia. Before questioning this divine linguistic selection, a simple example of Chaucer, who wrote in English while his contemporaries like Langland preferred the local dialects, may suffice for our limited understanding. Chaucer's poetry is widely read even today, while the others are not extant. Therefore, we can hardly question the divine linguistic choice if we do not question the human one.

With the discussions about Judaism and Christianity in chapters two and three, it seems that Lindstedt has found a firmer ground to tread upon. His discourse about "Rabbinic Judaism . . . Christian Judaism," and Christianity is based upon established historical facts. He writes about how there was a time when there was much in common between Judaism and Christianity and how many lived "between synagogue and church." Lindstedt acknowledges how, after the "destruction of the

Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE," the Jews were persecuted at the hands of the Romans and how they were "barred from living in Jerusalem" (p. 55). Then, "Persians (614 CE), and later the Arabian believers (*ca.* 635 CE), conquered Jerusalem and let Jews back in" (p. 55). Lindstedt relies on Judaic epigraphy in late antique Arabia to conclude that the Jews living in different parts of Hijaz were diverse linguistically. Since "the Bible could be accessed through religious scholars only" (p. 57), Hebrew was held in reverence as a written language, while the Arabian Jews mostly communicated in Greek, Aramaic, Arabic, and Sabaic languages. Lindstedt's discussions about the kingdom of Axum in Ethiopia converting to Christianity by the 340s and the kingdom of Ḥimyar in Yemen converting to Judaism (pp. 66-67) and their mutual rivalry, e.g., the "massacres of Christians in Najrān" (p. 73) have historical merit (though the Qur'ān speaks of ill deeds of earlier scriptures' followers in great details, these epigraphic finds are, therefore, only a confirmation of what the Qur'ān tells about human conduct of earlier generations). As Judaism and Christianity were the religions before Islam, it is natural that they were adopted at different times in the history of the world. Nonetheless, this does not imply that Judaism or Christianity should be held in higher esteem than Islam, as the subtext of the book seems to suggest. Interestingly, Lindstedt is sceptical of some well-documented facts. For instance, he is sceptical about "the year of the elephant" (p. 76) when Abraha, the king of Ethiopian origins, who ruled Yemen in the 540s-560s CE, attacked Mecca because Lindstedt could not find proof in the celebratory inscriptions that were documented in Abraha's time. Lindstedt acknowledges that Abraha "attacked and conquered Yathrib (later, Medina) or at least its hinterlands," but he disregards any other proof for the attack on Mecca in the *'ām al-fīl* (p. 76). Going selectively for inscriptive proofs is far from a holistic historical picture and tantamount to what Lindstedt says, "the accident of survival affects what the historian 'sees'"(p. 11).

Lindstedt also discusses how the first generation of Christians were not Christians but were Jews, but then the famous "parting of the ways" was popularized (pp. 80-81). Discussing different aspects related to Judaism and Christianity, he quotes from the Old and the New Testaments and states the differences between an "extensive set of purity regulations" or "dietary and purity regulations" (pp. 87-88) between Jewish Christianity and other Christians. Similarly, he discusses how the "conflicts among Christian sects resulted in more bloodshed than those between Christians and pagans" (p. 122). However, the reader of this book may find one of Lindstedt's reiterative arguments quite perplexing. His emphasis that no one can deny the Christian or Jewish presence in the

environs of Mecca, Medina, and North and South of Arabia is rather an uncalled-for contention since no historical traditions, Islamic or otherwise, ever suggest that it was not the case. Nor can anyone deny the presence of different religious dispositions among different communities across Arabia. They are mentioned in the Qur'ān in many places, and the Prophet's wife Khadījah's uncle Warqah b. Nawfil was a Christian monk to whom she took the Prophet Muḥammad for consultation and guidance after his first revelation. Also, many of the contentions about Jewish and Christian presence or "gentile monotheism . . . [or] henotheism" (p. 122) that Lindstedt is trying to raise in his book could have been addressed if, besides giving quotes from testaments, gospels, and poets, he would have quoted the Qur'ān with proper context.

Lindstedt acknowledges that "the idea of Muḥammad and his community belonging to the lineage of Abraham through Ishmael is palpable" (p. 136) and gives several sources confirming this lineage. However, suggesting that this knowledge of "Arabians descending from Ishmael" was common in Arabia even before the Prophet's time and that the Qur'ān "seems to be tapping into an old idea" (p. 136) suggests a somewhat dismissive stance towards the Qur'ān. He makes a baseless thesis by saying, "The prophet Muḥammad or his followers did not call themselves Muslims. They did not see themselves as founding or constituting a new religion, Islam" (p. 323). Similarly, the author declares the Qur'ānic topic as merely "apocalyptic eschatology" (p. 168) and "exclusivist interpretation" (p. 251), using only one meaning of "*al-dīn*," or implying that Jews and Christians are "righteous believers" (p. 174) and may carry a "hybrid identity" (p. 244). One needs to have more insight into Qur'ānic injunctions before calling "Muḥammad's community of believers" a "multireligious" (p. 284) "movement" (p. 272) and quoting out-of-context Qur'ānic words and making such claims.

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