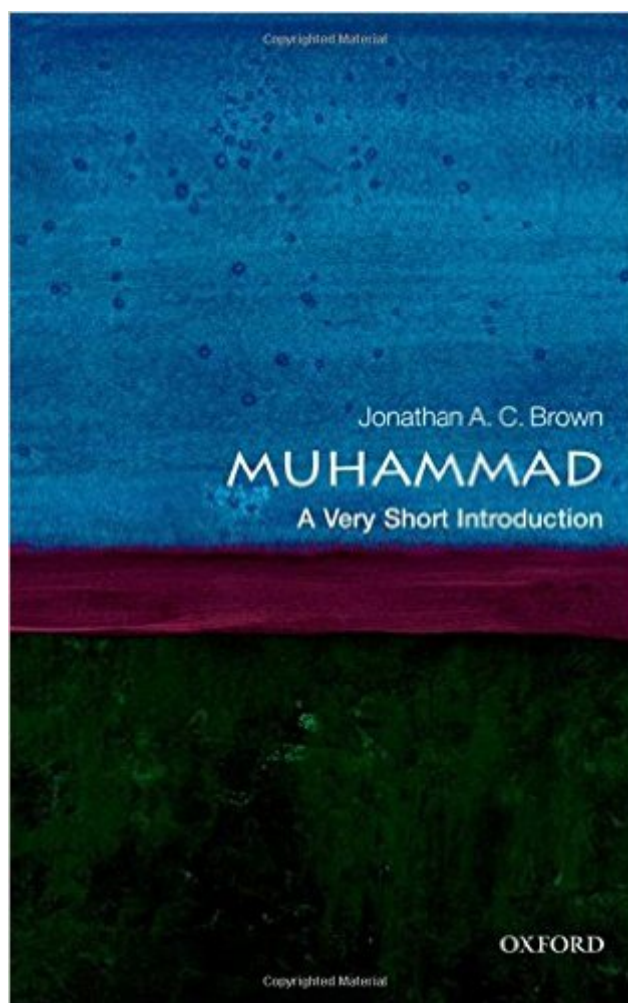


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Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

As the founder of Islam, a religion with over one billion followers, Muhammad is beyond all doubt one of the most influential figures in world history. But learning about his life and understanding his importance has always proven difficult, as our only source of knowledge comes from the biography of him written by his followers, the reliability of which has been questioned by Western scholars. This Very Short Introduction provides a superb introduction to the major aspects of Muhammad's life and its importance, providing both Muslim and Western historical perspectives. It explains the prominent roles that Muhammad's persona has played in the Islamic world throughout history, from the medieval to the modern period. The book also sheds light on modern controversies such as the Satanic Verses, for which author Salman Rushdie was condemned for blasphemy, and the uproar over Danish cartoons of Muhammad, which triggered violent protests around the world. As these recent events show, whatever the truth about Muhammad's life, his persona still plays a crucial role in Muslim life and civilization. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

Book Information

Paperback: 160 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (April 15, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199559287

ISBN-13: 978-0199559282

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 0.5 x 4.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 0.3 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (19 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #113,282 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #24 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Muhammed](#) #37 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Islam](#) #95 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > History](#)

Customer Reviews

Dr. Jonathan Brown has published research in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, Islamic law, and hadith (prophetic traditions - he has published at least two books on this topic as well). Well-versed in traditional accounts and contemporary studies to the Prophet's biography, he takes the same

approach to introduce his readers to the subject. One finds that a reader will directly or indirectly be acquainted to many an approach contained in texts ranging from traditional to the modern including Ibn Hisham and Ibn Kathir to the other extreme such as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. Additionally, other works, such as Ptolemy's account, content similar to Robert Hoyland's "Seeing Islam as Others Saw It", which is a very resourceful collection of narratives from non-Muslim sources regarding the Muslims in the seventh and eighth centuries, and present day accounts in the media also seem to have been utilized. Dr. Brown does not limit research to only sira accounts though but also delves into pre-Islamic Near Eastern history to provide context for several practices of the Arabs which are now anathema to us in the modern world. Many a time, this removes the inherent bias that one comes with to study Islam (this bias can either be for or against Islam). Given the plethora of research on the subject and the fact that it runs a wide gamut, Dr. Brown has done amazingly well to keep the introduction short, yet the reader would come out no less educated about the topic than any other book on the subject. And that is why this work is a class in itself, and has the potential to become an introductory text for college courses to the Prophet. The book is divided into three chapters.

I found the author's organization of this book to be fairly good. Part 1 is a summary of the Prophet's life and character from Ibn Ishaq's book, the standard source of Prophetic biography, written in the 700s. Part 2 offers a scholarly critique of this narrative (mainly from the western perspective). Part 3 covers how Muslims have traditionally seen the Prophet over the centuries. Part 1 was impressive in that the author managed to squeeze quite a bit of detail in a limited space. For whatever reason, it does include some of the less common material that doesn't usually come up in the Prophetic biography (like the correspondence between Heraclius and the priest of Constantinople). I found Part 2 to be the most interesting, taking us into the world of late antiquity to explain some aspects of the Prophet's biography that might seem strange to modern readers (i.e. the ubiquitous presence of jinn, the immense reverence that his companions had for his physical person, his marriages etc.). The section also introduces us to the modern western critique of the traditional biography- which allegedly finds elements of the later Sunni-Shia struggle or disputes between Muslims and Christians reflected in it (while still accepting the broad outlines of the narrative). The author convincingly refutes some of the more sweeping, fringe critiques- such as Michael Cook's thesis that first century of Muslim history is simply a massive forgery by later Muslims. Part 3, although full of interesting tidbits (dalail khayrat was the most widely read book in 18th century Egypt, after the Quran) was the least impressive; I thought it was too short and some of the points, especially

regarding the punishments for blasphemy should have been developed much further.

Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources is still the standard in the field, providing a beautiful account that weaves Quran and bibliographical material together in an epic narrative. That being said, Jonathan Brown's biography of Muhammad is the best account for someone who wishes to get a quick outline of the life of Muhammad. The book is divided into two sections. The first section covers the actual outline of Muhammad's life as conveyed in the primary sources themselves. This is extremely useful. Some accuse it of being hagiography rather biography because it follows the Islamic sources closely without employing non-Islamic sources. But such critics should continue to the section of the book which explains that there are not actually any historical records of Muhammad's life other than those prepared by Muslims themselves. This complicates the task of many historians and there is really no way to avoid this problem. Dividing this book into two sections as does Brown is an excellent way around the complication. The second section runs through the various approaches to the primary source material that have been taken in the secondary literature. Brown does a good job of providing an even keeled approach. He also takes the time to point out how certain objections to Muhammad and Islam have infiltrated the presentation of his biography in the West and thus produced hyper-critical approaches that are even less objective than some of the more hagiographical biographies in the Islamic tradition. Within the limited framework provided by the very short introductions, this is a job very well done.

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