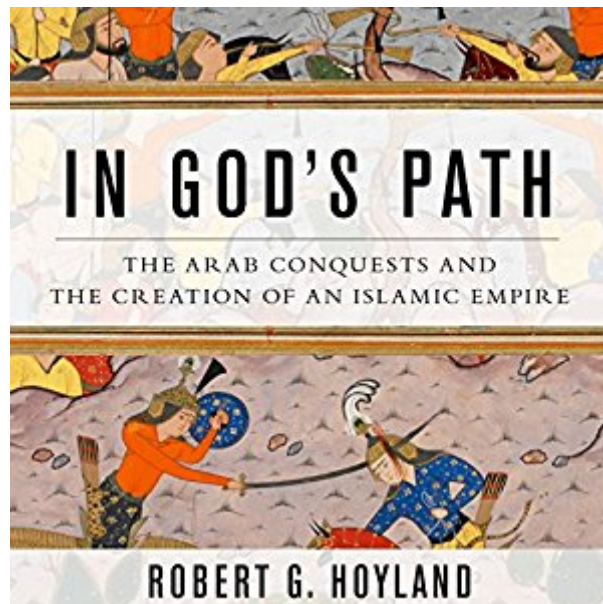


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In God's Path: The Arab Conquests And The Creation Of An Islamic Empire



Synopsis

In just over a hundred years - from the death of Muhammad in 632 to the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 - the followers of the Prophet swept across the whole of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain. Their armies threatened states as far flung as the Franks in Western Europe and the Tang Empire in China. The conquered territory was larger than the Roman Empire at its greatest expansion, and it was claimed for the Arabs in roughly half the time. How this collection of Arabian tribes was able to engulf so many empires, states, and armies in such a short period has perplexed historians for centuries. Most accounts of the Arab invasions have been based almost solely on the early Muslim sources, which were composed centuries later to illustrate the divinely chosen status of the Arabs. Robert Hoyland's groundbreaking new history assimilates not only the rich biographical information of the early Muslim sources but also the many non-Arabic sources, contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous with the conquests. *In God's Path* begins with a broad picture of the Late Antique world prior to the Prophet's arrival, a world dominated by two superpowers: Byzantium and Sasanian Persia. In between these empires, emerged a distinct Arabian identity, which helped forge the inhabitants of western Arabia into a formidable fighting force. The Arabs are the principal actors in this drama yet, as Hoyland shows, the peoples along the edges of Byzantium and Persia - the Khazars, Bulgars, Avars, and Turks - all played critical roles in the remaking of the old world order. The new faith propagated by Muhammad and his successors made it possible for many of the conquered peoples to join the Arabs in creating the first Islamic Empire. Well-paced, comprehensive, and eminently readable, *In God's Path* presents a sweeping narrative of a transformational period in world history.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 9 hours and 54 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: December 8, 2014

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00QQRBNDO

Best Sellers Rank: #41 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Religion & Spirituality > Islam #91

Customer Reviews

Robert Hoyland's book on the Arab conquests is a must read for anyone who is looking to gain insight into a 'blind spot' of world history, namely the emergence of the Arabs as a dominant force on the world scene in the 7th century. The traditional narrative describes the Arab upsurge as a religiously motivated zeal that made short work of 2 superpower empires. The author of this book, relying on a number of sources both Muslim, but primarily non-Muslim, all but proves that the truth was far more prosaic. The popular historian Peter Heather wrote a throwaway sentence in his book 'The Restoration of Rome' where he characterizes Muhammad as an Arab Attila the Hun, a warlord who led nomadic raiders into a declining Byzantine empire in much the same way Attila and the Huns in general preyed on the declining Western Roman empire, moving progressively from the Caspian to the Danubian plains and launched raids to extort wealth from the Romans. Robert Hoyland uses the same lens of secondary state formation theory to explain the rise of the Arabs as a military power in the wake of 2 dying and declining empires. He makes the following key points: 1. The Arabs of 7th century Arabia were not all isolated or semi-civilized nomads who emerged from the desert but were client states and vassals of the Roman (Byzantine) and Persian empires and had deep cultural and commercial ties with their powerful neighbours, especially along the fringes of the desert. These contacts were firmly cemented when 2 tribes, the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, were made client states by the Romans and Persians respectively in order to fight proxy wars on their behalf.

I am glad that Oxford University Press published this book since works by Middle East historians on early Islamic conquest (seventh to ninth century AD) are rare as the author stated in the introduction and the end of the book. I thought this is a relevant book in light of the contemporary discussion about Islam, Islamic violence and the Middle East which lead some to ask the question of what the Islamic Arabic world was like shortly after Muhammad died. It is indirectly relevant to those discussions because this book touches on the early Islamic movement and warfare. The author has no intention of writing a book bashing Islam nor is he presenting an apologetics for Muslim. The book's main thesis is to challenge the common assumption made by many people today including historians that the Islamic Arabic empire expanded rapidly at an unprecedented rate and that these military expansion are driven to convert people to Islam. Here the author points out that the Islamic

expansion was at the same rate as those of other nomadic people such as the Mongols; the author also noted how few people converted to Islam during the military conquests during the early Caliphs as evidence that in the beginning the expansion was not about bringing about conversion of others to Islam per se. In fact, there were strong incentive in the beginning not to convert people into the Arabic community of faith, as that would mean the distinction between conqueror and conquered would be erased and the profit of invasion for the conqueror would disappear (in later period the issue of conversion was controversial because of what it would mean for the original Arabic party). I think the author's citation of early Muslim political sources are solid in establishing this point.

To counter the almost universal impression that Arab armies swept over the Mediterranean and out to central Asia like a cloud and virtually overnight created an Islamic empire, Robert Hoyland has done yeoman research and presents facts. Using clues from coinage to letters, he has assembled a history that he delivers in bite-sized sections, some military, some religious and some societal. The first millennium AD was a time of trading religions. Yemen and parts of today's Caucasus and steppes converted to Judaism. Eastern Romans (Byzantium) converted to Christianity. The Persian Manichean religion was establishing itself, and Buddhism was the religion of the Uighur Turks. The game of the era was to pressure the leader/emperor to convert, and the whole territory would follow. Religions had come and gone for centuries, so this was nothing bizarre. The entire area was simply never free of war. Invaders and raiders came and went. For decades, parts of the Arab empire still thought this a passing phase like any other, and continued to use the coinage of Byzantium or Persia, as appropriate. Mohammed's forces took advantage of constant wars between Persia and Byzantium to hive off border areas. He leveraged raiding parties by declaring God automatically granted the victors wealth and slaves. It was all about the money. Mohammed welcomed all comers. Christians and Jews participated as equals. They all believed in the same original God, so technically they were all on the same side. Mohammed's concept was an inclusive community. It was not till 150 years later that his successors started to officially distinguish among the races and creeds. Progress was not lightning quick.

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