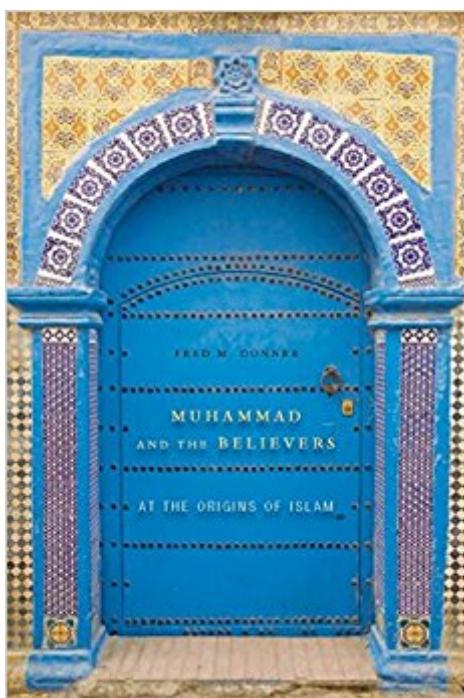


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# Muhammad And The Believers: At The Origins Of Islam



## Synopsis

The origins of Islam have been the subject of increasing controversy in recent years. The traditional view, which presents Islam as a self-consciously distinct religion tied to the life and revelations of the prophet Muhammad in western Arabia, has since the 1970s been challenged by historians engaged in critical study of the Muslim sources. In *Muhammad and the Believers*, the eminent historian Fred Donner offers a lucid and original vision of how Islam first evolved. He argues that the origins of Islam lie in what we may call the "Believers' movement" begun by the prophet Muhammad • a movement of religious reform emphasizing strict monotheism and righteous behavior in conformity with God's revealed law. The Believers' movement thus included righteous Christians and Jews in its early years, because like the Qur'anic Believers, Christians and Jews were monotheists and agreed to live righteously in obedience to their revealed law. The conviction that Muslims constituted a separate religious community, utterly distinct from Christians and Jews, emerged a century later, when the leaders of the Believers' movement decided that only those who saw the Qur'an as the final revelation of the One God and Muhammad as the final prophet, qualified as Believers. This separated them decisively from monotheists who adhered to the Gospels or Torah.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A University of Chicago professor in Near Eastern history, Donner (*Narratives of Islamic Origins*) presents the intriguing view that the early Islamic movement, as presided over by Muhammad, actively included Jews and Christians in the flock as part of a general monotheistic community. It

was only later, after Muhammad's death, that a new generation of Muslims began ritualizing Islam with its own distinctive practices, such as the hajj (pilgrimage) and the five daily prayers. Though Donner isn't entirely persuasive (and surely many Muslims would be stunned by some of his assertions), he raises many original points, gleaning evidence from everything from coinage to original source documents. Questioning longstanding stereotypes, he argues (and proves) that Muslims are not, by nature, anti-Jewish and also that, based on archeological evidence, Muslims did not routinely tear down churches. The early Muslims, though brutal in war, created a sophisticated and organized civil system. For those curious about Islam's beginnings, no book is as original and as evenhanded as this succinct read. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Donner is one of the leading scholars of early Islam in the world. No other book I know of distills the often highly arcane and dispersed stuff of scholarship on the first century of Islamic history into such an accessible narrative account that, in addition, offers a compelling new interpretation on the formation of Islamic confessional identity. A tremendous achievement. (Ahmet Karamustafa, Washington University in St. Louis)This is an invaluable book. Not only does it provide a sane and lucid guide to the origins of Islam, a topic that is currently more mired in controversy than any other in the entire field of ancient history, but it is also a stimulating and original work of scholarship in its own right. (Tom Holland, author of *Millennium*)Donner presents the intriguing view that the early Islamic movement, as presided over by Muhammad, actively included Jews and Christians in the flock as part of a general monotheistic community. It was only later, after Muhammad's death, that a new generation of Muslims began ritualizing Islam with its own distinctive practices, such as the hajj (pilgrimage) and the five daily prayers...He raises many original points, gleaning evidence from everything from coinage to original source documents. Questioning longstanding stereotypes, he argues (and proves) that Muslims are not, by nature, anti-Jewish and also that, based on archeological evidence, Muslims did not routinely tear down churches. The early Muslims, though brutal in war, created a sophisticated and organized civil system. For those curious about Islam's beginnings, no book is as original and as evenhanded as this succinct read. (Publishers Weekly 2010-03-08)In *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, Donner takes a fresh look at the heart and soul of Islamic history. (Joseph Richard Preville Saudi Gazette 2010-06-21)A learned and brilliantly original, yet concise and accessible study of Islam's formative first century...Donner's explanation of the process by which Muslims came to define themselves is both fascinating and enlightening. (Max Rodenbeck New York Times 2010-06-27)It is an excellent introduction to how

and why the faith was born, and explains its proliferation in the Middle East and beyond...Donner uses the original text of the Qur'an and other source materials dating from the same period to piece together the history of the faith. What quickly becomes clear is that Islam, and what it means to be a "Muslim," have both changed dramatically since the early days...Muhammad and the Believers is full...of intriguing questions and challenges readers to reconsider what they think they know about Islam...[It's] a rewarding read. (Dan Sampson culturemob.com 2010-07-07)Donner is to be commended for posing questions that many mainstream scholars have chosen to leave aside. (Malise Ruthven New York Review of Books 2011-04-07)Provocative and accessible...Donner's vision of an "ecumenical Islam" is thought-provoking...Donner's overarching thesis in Muhammad and the Believers is convincing. It sheds light on a world far more fluid and confused than the one we have come to expect from the usual storyline. (Christian C. Sahner Times Literary Supplement 2011-07-01)

Muhammad and the Believers is a history of Islamic Origins from what we could call a moderate revisionist perspective. Unlike Cook and Crone or Wansbrough, Donner accepts that the Islamic religious tradition began in 7th century Mecca and Medina under the leadership of a man named Muhammad and that the Qur'an is a document produced by this movement in the same region and period. He argues, however, that the Islamic religious tradition did not begin as a distinct religion. Rather, he makes the case that Muhammad was the leader of an ecumenical "Believers Movement" that included Jews, (non-trinitarian) Christians, and new converts to monotheism. Some of his arguments for this position are:1) That the Qur'an refers some 1000 times to "Believers" (sing. *mu'min*) but only 75 times to Muslims or Islam.2) That the early successors to Muhammad were called not Caliphs, but Commanders of the Believers (*amir al-mu'minin*).3) The fact that the "Umma Document" (usually referred to as the "Constitution of Medina") plainly includes non-Muslims in the umma and prefers the term "believer" to the term "Muslim" when referring to members of the community.4) That there is ample evidence of ready cooperation on the part of the early "Muslim" conquerors and Christians and Jews. This movement was strictly pious and apocalyptic. The Believers Movement retained its ecumenical character throughout the early conquests and only became a distinct religion beginning with the Umayyad ruler `Abd al-Malik in the late 7th century. Among the innovations that marked this shift were:1) Changes in coinage.2) the emergence of the "double testimony (shahada)" that included not only "There is no god but God" (which Christians and Jews could also wholeheartedly accept) but also the now standard second half "Muhammad is the Messenger of God".3) The construction of the Dome of the Rock.4) The

emergence of distinct Islamic ritual practices such as facing Mecca during prayer (reference to a change in the direction of prayer in Qur'an 2:142 are dismissed as vague and accounts in the sira called a later addition). The process was not complete until several decades later. Islamic Origins is not my specialty and I am not current on the state of the field. As far as I know (and I may be wrong), Donner's book is the first monograph to spell out a comprehensive moderate revisionist scenario of Islamic origins. This being the case, we might expect him to have written a closely argued, meticulously documented specialist's study. He did not. Instead, he has written a book that could be used for teaching undergraduates and for a general-ish audience (though the novelty of his presentation would be largely lost on anyone not at all familiar with the traditional narrative of Early Islam). The great advantage of this is that there is now an accessible resource for teaching Islamic origins and early Islamic history that is in keeping with recent scholarship from a number of scholars of Early Islamic History (such as Donner himself), Early Islamic Archeology, Qur'anic studies (such as Angelika Neuwirth), and studies of the Sira (biography of Muhammad) (such as Uri Rubin). The disadvantage is that, because there are no footnotes, anyone who knows the traditional account will frequently find themselves asking "how can he claim this?" and having no direct way of answering the question by following a footnote to a specific source. Donner rejects many central components of the traditional history of Islamic origins but accepts others. Often he justifies his decisions, but there are times when he does not and the reader is left wondering whether, once he had made the general case for the "Believers Movement" scenario, he rejected material that supports the traditional view and accepted material that supports his revisionist approach without other specific evidence to back these decisions. However, the lack of footnotes is made up for by the extremely rich and helpful "Notes and Guide to Further Reading" section divided into sections corresponding to individual chapters. Anyone who sits down with the corresponding section after reading each chapter will probably find the answers to her questions about sources. Furthermore, Donner is drawing on some of his own earlier work, like his article "From Believers to Muslims," which does closely argue the case for his revisionist scenario. So the detailed case for the different components of his scenario has usually been made elsewhere. In the end, I think Donner made the right call. This book is suitable for teaching undergraduates, while in the past, instructors had a choice between accessibly written traditional narratives of Islamic origins, disparate and often very arcane moderate revisionist studies of individual facets of Islamic origins, and radically revisionist histories of Islamic Origins such as the writings of Wansbrough and Cook and Crone's Hagarism, which have not gained wide acceptance. With the publication of Muhammad and the Believers, the moderate revisionist view of Islamic origins, which had been available only to a small body of specialists, is

now accessible to a more general audience, which is a great thing and worthy of five stars. That having been said, chapters 3 and 4, nearly half of the text of the book, are a re-telling of the early Islamic conquests, the "civil wars" between Muslims, and the emergence of the Umayyad Caliphate--and Donner's retelling of these events seems too detailed to be for a book pitched to a more general audience. Maybe more importantly, his account of these events in the light of his "Believers" hypothesis differs little from the traditional account. If you want to focus on what is new in Donner's account, you can safely skip from chapter 2 to chapter 5. On the other hand, if you are teaching early Islamic history, the accounts of the conquests and the civil wars is solid and suitable for undergraduates--though the profusion of personal and place names will be a bit much for undergraduates.

This is a lucid, well-written, and fascinating introduction to the rise of Islam. Donner, a leader in his field, has produced a work that both introduces readers to the basic conventional narrative of Islam's early phase while at the same time providing a very distinct interpretation based on cutting edge research. The entire work is highly instructive. That said, the paucity of direct contemporary evidence necessarily lends a somewhat speculative quality to the endeavor. To his credit, Donner is not nearly as dogmatic as some historians who basing their interpretations on early traditions, only written down long after the fact, feel justified in asserting that the rise of Islam can only be attributed to one particular factor. In the end, Donner stresses the importance of politics and religion as motives for expansion. He makes a key decision in taking the Koran as a comparatively authoritative source on the early history of Islam. The logic--mainly internal linguistic and literary clues--seems at least somewhat reasonable. That said, the book displays some inconsistency when it comes to looking past the earliest years of Islam to the expansion outside Arabia. Here, the earliest contemporary accounts do stress the role of warfare and conflict in spreading the realm under the control of the new faith, but Donner points to the absence of archeological evidence of war's destruction to at least minimize the logic inherent in the few somewhat contemporary accounts. If the earliest accounts would tend to be most accurate, why would that not be true for all of the key early phases of Islam? Depending as it does, to a large extend on the internal terminology of Islam, Donner also makes the interesting argument that the followers at first saw themselves chiefly as ardent believers in strict monotheism and only later began to define themselves more as Muslims. That could have been the case, but could there also have been other reasons for such shifts in terminology? Still, this book should prove extremely interesting and informative for anyone interested in the early history of Islam. It is not suitable for readers who only

want to have prior prejudices confirmed.

The book presents an important perspective about the message delivered to the people of Muhammad's day. It was a message for all believers, peoples of previous scriptures, as well as converts to monotheism. The research by Dr. Donner shows that Islam as we know it today, did not begin to emerge until 200+ years after the prophet's death. Muhammad delivered a unifying message for monotheistic worshippers, which later evolved into an exclusive religion for Muslims following a religion called Islam. This book is a must-read for anyone serious about studying the origins of the movement that has come to be known as Islam.

I am quite familiar with the traditional narrative on the origins of Islam, so it was most interesting to read a well written book laying out a revisionist position. While I am still mulling some of Donner's positions over, I found his thesis plausible in most causes.

Well written explanation of the close connections between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Donner argues that Muhammad did not see himself as creating a new religion but extending monotheism.

a must read for the religious

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