Robert G. Hoyland: In God's Path. The Arab Conquests and the Cre-
ation of an Islamic Empire. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015
(Ancient Warfare and Civilization 4). VIII, 303 S. £ 18.99/$ 29.95.
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While the book to be reviewed here has appeared over four years ago and
been copiously reviewed since, I very much appreciate the initiative of the
editors of Plekos to take the occasion of the launch of a paperbacked, but
otherwise unchanged, edition in 2017 to recapitulate the debates surround-
ing Hoyland's monograph. As emphasized by its appearance as a paperback,
Hoyland's depiction of the development of what he calls the 'Islamic Em-
pire' of the ʿAbbāsid califate promises to be highly influential and accord-
ingly offers a very convenient starting point to review the 'state of the art' of
early Islamic history. Accordingly, I will only briefly dwell on Hoyland's
monograph, referring mainly to the reviews that have already appeared, be-
fore sketching the debates between Hoyland and some of his most influen-
tial reviewers, to which Hoyland himself contributed in a reply to some of
the reviews. Lastly, I will take the opportunity of this review to suggest what
I believe could be a profitable way forward from this somewhat controversy-
ridden state of contemporary historiography engaging with the first Century
AH in particular.

The Book

In the last ten years several ambitious books written for a wider audience
have attempted to consolidate our view of the first one and a half centuries
of Islamic history.[1] Hoyland does not systematically review this recent boom
of popular histories or – for that matter – academic case-studies describing
the development of Islam as a social and religious entity and has duly been

1   See for example H. Kennedy: The Great Arab Conquests. How the Spread of Islam
     Changed the World We Live in. London 2008, F. M. Donner: Muhammad and the
     Believers. At the Origins of Islam. Cambridge, MA 2010, T. Holland: In the Shadow
     of the Sword. The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire. New
     York 2012, and L. Berger: Die Entstehung des Islam. Die ersten hundert Jahre. Mu-
     nich 2017.

criticized for this omission.[2] Nonetheless, Hoyland's approach is both consistent and innovative, as he systematically attempts to favor sources contemporary to the events over later descriptions, departing from his earlier stance of systematically championing non-Islamic over Islamic sources (2–3). Hoyland also consistently includes non-narrative sources, such as numismatic, epigraphic, and diplomatic evidence, in his reconstruction of events. Combining these very heterogeneous sources, which were composed in different literary traditions and mediums, he proceeds with regional case-studies of the conquest of particular locales. These case-studies are frequently breath-taking in the vividness of their description and the amount of detail Hoyland succeeds to retain in his prose. While he impressively manages to avoid major factual blunders in his synthesis of this vast array of frequently conflicting material, Hoyland has been criticized for implicitly adhering to the chronological framework of Arabic-Islamic historiography in the master narrative of his depiction.[3] Additionally, his depiction of the early stages of the internal development of the Islamic polity remains somewhat sketchy, as the focus of most of his external narrative sources predating the rise of Arabic-Islamic historiography lies on the interaction of the '(proto?)–Muslims' with the social contexts framing the literary traditions in which the non-Arabic sources are embedded.

To this critique, I would add a risk inherent in his somewhat positivist approach of synthesizing sources from very diverse traditions, namely that of overlooking the intertextual outlook of the individual texts. A good example of this danger would be the very concise depiction of the struggle between Muʿāwiya and ʿAlī (impressively condensed to some 9 lines on page 104), which Hoyland depicts based on the Armenian history ascribed to Sebeos. Here, Hoyland takes Sebeos' claim that "Muʿāwiya fought and killed ʿAlī" (104) as a contemporary and precise description of this episode of the first Islamic civil war. Sebeos' report, however, could arguably be equally read as a paradigmatic description of infighting among infidels during which one of the contenders dies, rather than as a reference to contemporary events.

2   See the review by F. M. Donner in: Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā 23, 2015, 134–140.

3   See the review by J. J. Scheiner: Reflections on Hoyland's *In God's Path*. In: Bustan 7.1, 2016, 19–32.

One could further object to Hoyland's approach based on the possibility that earlier material may have been preserved in later sources. Such a preservation in later sources is in fact assumed by Hoyland himself in his treatment of Theophilus of Edessa, whose history did not survive independently as a full-fledged source.[4] As a pragmatical approach, however, Hoyland's focus on the source chronologically closest to the events discussed is in the whole well justified and consistently applied.

The Debate

Rather than paraphrase the wide array of reviews of Hoyland's work, I will in the following concentrate on the reviews of Donner, Scheiner, and Webb, which Hoyland himself singled out in his reply.[5] This is especially justified as all three share a number of concerns, which Hoyland in turn addressed.

The first issue, which both Donner and Scheiner raise, concerns the way in which Hoyland presents his use of non-Arabic Christian sources in particular. Webb compliments Hoyland on his use of the "under-utilized evidence of Christian writers"[6], however both Donner[7] and Scheiner[8] criticize Hoyland's somewhat ambiguous statement, the effect of which is that he is the first to use the non-Arabic Christian writers in his description of early Islamic history (2). While this may or may not constitute "a lack of professional courtesy or etiquette"[9], Hoyland's claim that "Fred Donner and Jens Scheiner failed to pick up on this change of stance [from Hoyland's earlier approach of championing non-Islamic over Islamic sources to a systematical favoring of contemporary over later sources] in their reviews"[10] is unjustified

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4   See Scheiner 2016 (as in note 3), 29–30. A translation of the reconstructed historical work of Theophilus of Edessa has been published by Hoyland: Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle. And the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam. Liverpool 2011.

5   R. G. Hoyland: Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East. In: Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā 25, 2017, 113–140.

6   P. Webb: March of Islam. In: Times Literary Supplement, March 13th 2015, 24.

7   Donner 2015 (as in note 2), 134–136.

8   Scheiner 2016 (as in note 3), 25–26.

9   Donner 2015 (as in note 2), 135.

10   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 115.

on closer inspection of the reviews. While both do, as stated above, criticize Hoyland's omission to refer to the scholarly tradition which he continues, neither Donner nor Scheiner explicitly refer to Hoyland's earlier stance in their reviews. Nonetheless, the long-standing antagonism between Donner and Hoyland's teacher Patricia Crone most probably underlies some of the irritation evinced by Donner in particular, deploring in his conclusion "that this well-written and readable volume embraces an interpretation that, to this reviewer at least, seems so stubbornly wrong-headed."[11]

The main issue underlying this long-standing antagonism concerns the joint question of the identity of the '(proto?)-Muslims' during the first Century AH and the role of 'religion' in the development of the 'Islamic Empire'. Even though the criticism of Hoyland's presentation as a "militarized narrative"[12] "downplaying [...] a religious element"[13], which attests to a "determined avoidance of any religious explanation for the Believers' movement"[14] could be somewhat tempered by observing that his monograph does, after all, form part of Oxford University Press' series on "Ancient Warfare and Civilization", Hoyland himself chose to focus on this aspect in the main part of his reply, in which he essentially evaluates his current view of "the identity of the members of the early Islamic community"[15].

In the main part of his reply, entitled "Terminology", Hoyland champions an approach to the identity of the early Islamic community that concentrates on the designations they themselves and other contemporaries employed.[16] He then goes on to briefly review Donner's suggestion to interpret the

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11   Donner 2015 (as in note 2), 140. Donner's emotional response echoes Hoyland's earlier avowal of his "frustration" with the "general trend in the study of the Middle East of this period" represented by Donner, see the review of R. G. Hoyland of F. M. Donner's "Muhammad and the Believers" in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 44.3, 2012, 573–576. The cited passage is on p. 576. See, however, also the stated aim of Hoyland in the monograph under review to diminish the distance between "skeptics/revisionists and traditionists" by situating "Islamic history in a broader historical framework" (p. 232).

12   Webb 2015 (as in note 6).

13   Scheiner 2016 (as in note 3), 28.

14   Donner 2015 (as in note 2), 139.

15   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 115.

16   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 115.

'(proto)-Muslims' as a supra-confessional "believers' movement"[17], mainly referring to the Qurʾānic passages quoted by Donner that can be adduced to bolster this interpretation. This is followed by very brief sketches of interpretations as "Muḥammadans"[18], emigrants (*muhājirūn*)[19], subjects of the "Commander of the Believers" (*amīr al-muʾminīn*)[20], Arabs[21], and Muslims[22]. This is then followed in his conclusion in short overviews over three "challenges" Hoyland claims to have encountered in writing on this topic, namely "acceptance of diversity", "the role of religion", and "isolationism and exceptionalism"[23].

Some Comments

The debate between Hoyland and his reviewers highlights the importance of the formative period of Islam in interpreting the early stages in particular of the development of an 'Islamic Empire'. While Hoyland has explicitly referred to his view on possible interpretations of the '(proto?)-Muslims' in his reply, Scheiner in particular has also touched on some pragmatical 'further steps' that should help move beyond these heated and long-standing controversies. I will in the following attempt to sum up these insights as to 'how to proceed'.

In his characteristic honesty, Scheiner acknowledges his difficulty in following Hoyland's two swiftly sketched etymologies of Arabic *muhājirūn* / Syriac *mhaggrē* / Greek *magaritai* and Arabic *ṭayyiʾ*[24] / Syriac *tayyaya* / Persian *tazik*, *tajik* / Chinese *ta-shi*.[25] If the discussion concerning the identity of the '(proto?)-Muslims' is to proceed, the importance of making available in systematic form the whole dispersion (Foucault) of the terms used to designate the

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17   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 116–120.

18   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 120–122.

19   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 122–124.

20   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 124–126.

21   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 126–130.

22   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 130–131.

23   Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 131–135.

24   The *ṭayyʾ* of Scheiner appears to be a printing error.

25   Scheiner 2016 (as in note 3), 26.

identity of the early Islamic community is hard to overstate. The importance of systematically assembling all available evidence is underscored by the dispute between Donner and Hoyland as to which part of the *shahāda* is attested first[26]. It is difficult to see how so seemingly straightforward to answer a question continues to constitute a point to be argued about.

This systematic overview of the use and context of the individual terms in the various scriptural traditions would need to comprise etymological dimensions as well, enabling a subsequent discussion of the interpretation of, for instance, the curious career of the Syriac term for the Arab tribe of Ṭayyiʾ into the generic term for settled people in Central Asia, which was much later in Soviet times taken up as the designation for the newly established 'nation' of Tajikistan. In a similar way, I would like to expand Hoyland's remarks on Donner's stimulating suggestion to frame the '(proto?)-Muslims' in terms of a supra-confessional 'believers' movement' by an etymological dimension.[27] If we follow Donner, the term *muʾminūn*, which he proposes to translate as *believers*, was intended as a supra-confessional designation including adherents of various monotheistic confessions such as Christians and Jews, while at the same time constituting an 'umbrella-term' distinct from the different groups it comprised. In contrast, he suggests interpreting the term *muslimūn*, the equivalent of the modern word *Muslims*, as denoting a more restricted concept referring exclusively to those followers of Muḥammad who did not see themselves as adherents of other monotheistic confessions simultaneously to 'belonging' to Islam. Stimulating as Donner's suggestion to root negotiations surrounding '(proto?)-Muslim' identity in the dichotomy of these terms is, I believe it leaves open some questions deriving from the etymology of both words. The fourth stem of the Arabic verb *amana*, namely *āmana*, *to believe*, is, according to Jeffery, a loanword. In addition, he suggests interpreting the participle *muʾmin* in the sense of believer as a borrowed form from Ethiopian *maʾämänä*.[28] In a similar way, Jeffery inter-

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26   See Hoyland 2017 (as in note 5), 122, note 41.

27   See Donner 2010 (as in note 1), 57-61.

28   A. Jeffery: The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān. Leiden 2007, 70–71. Compare also A. I. Hebbo: Die Fremdwörter in der Arabischen Prophetenbiographie des Ibn Hischam (gest. 218/834). Dissertation. Heidelberg 1970, 36–38, and his reference to J. Horovitz: Jewish Proper Names and Derivatives in the Koran. Ohio 1925. Repr.

prets the fourth stem *aslama* in the sense of *to devote oneself to Islam* as a borrowing from Syriac *ashlam*, *to devote oneself to the God and His church*, from which the Arabic participle *muslim* is to be derived.[29] If this use of non-Arabic cognates of *muʾmin* and *muslim* as communal self-designations of non-Muslim 'monotheist' groups is accepted, it is difficult to see how the Arabic term *muʾminūn*, which was after all drawn from contemporary living languages and traditions, should have been deployed as the designation of a novel grouping operating on a synthesizing level above the established communities. In a similar way, it remains unclear how the Syriac self-designation of *muslimūn* could constitute the self-designation of an exclusively '(proto?)-Muslim' community in contrast to the Syriac Christians who continued to use the term as a self-designation for members of their in-group.

Beyond establishing the dispersion of the relevant designations, while keeping in mind their respective etymologies, I would suggest also sketching the intertextual connotations of the terms in question inside their respective literary traditions. In this way, the work of Boaz Shoshan[30] and others on the Arabic historiographical tradition should be made accessible for non-specialists in this field as far as it concerns the narrative dynamics that shape the deployment of terms and concepts relating to the '(proto?)-Muslims'. This would then need to be supplemented by overviews over the other narrative and literary traditions. Thus, for instance, a concise overview over the connotations of *tayyaya* in Syriac texts preceding and contemporary to the seventh Century CE would enable non-specialists to profitably and confidently draw conclusions from this evidence in their evaluation of its import on the overarching question of early (proto?) Islamic identity.

As the reviews and the subsequent reply of Hoyland show, the title under review gives little cause for discussion in its depiction of the events commonly designated the *early Islamic conquests* or even in its interpretation of the making of what Hoyland terms "Islamic civilization" (207–230). At the same time, the debate over how to interpret the predecessors of the 'Islamic Empire' of the late Umayyads / early ʿAbbāsids continues. It is to be hoped that some consolidation of the heterogeneous material supporting the various

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Hildesheim 1964, 47 (191 according to the original pagination), who alternatively suggests Hebrew as the origin of this loanword in Arabic.

29   Jeffery 2007 (as in note 28), 62–63.

30   B. Shoshan: The Arabic Historical Tradition and the Early Islamic Conquests. London/New York 2016. Cf. the review in Plekos 19, 2017, 449–463.

positions will be undertaken, in order as to allow the debate to concentrate on those points which continue to be contested.

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