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Book Review: Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam, by Shahab Ahmed

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Islam

BEFORE ORTHODOXY: THE SATANIC VERSES IN EARLY ISLAM. By Shahab Ahmed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 336. \$49.95.

Ahmed's long anticipated monograph on the Satanic Verses incident pertaining to the Qur'an represents the first volume of a planned trilogy aimed at exploring the various positions held across fourteen centuries concerning the account. The enterprise was cut short, however, with the author's passing in 2016. The present volume, while only covering the first two centuries of Islam, is a testament to Ahmed's erudition and analytical expertise. The author has gathered together fifty distinct narrative reports from the formative period of Islam so that he may closely examine the content of the reports as well as their accompanying chains of transmission. This allows him to delineate the different, shifting attitudes held with regard to the incident. Ahmed uses his case study to understand the nature and formation of orthodoxy within Islam. He methodically maps the earliest periods of circulation for each report, the particular personalities who transmitted it, and the geographic expanses involved. He also identifies three literary genres in which the incident was discussed, namely *adīth* (prophetic reports), *sīrah-maghāzī* (prophetic biographies), and *tafsīr* (Qur'an commentaries), each of which represents, according to Ahmed, a different scholarly culture with its own set of epistemological underpinnings and standards for truth. By the end of his painstaking analysis of all fifty narrations, Ahmed has convincingly demonstrated that the Satanic Verses incident was widely accepted and circulated in the *sīrah-maghāzī* and *tafsīr* genres, but not in *adīth*. The incident was problematic for the scholarly *adīth* culture because of its need for a perfect, paradigmatic exemplar, but it provided for scholars of *sīrah-maghāzī* and *tafsīr* riveting drama and imaginative possibilities, respectively. The study of the Satanic Verses incident, however, is only secondary to the work's enduring contribution to the field. Ahmed's methodology and framework of analysis will prove invaluable for other Islamic studies scholars endeavoring to explore questions of orthodoxy and historical memory across the chronological span and geographic expanse of the tradition.

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