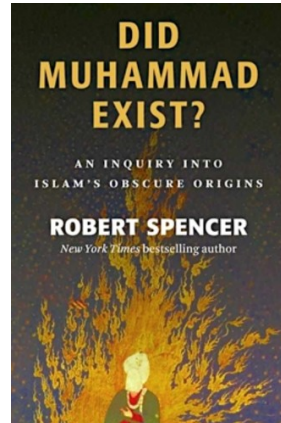




Written by [James Heiser](#) on July 13, 2012

A Review of “Did Muhammad Exist?”

[Did Mohammad Exist?](#) is both the title and the question at the heart of every page of Robert Spencer’s latest book on Islam. As noted in a review of one of Spencer’s earlier books — [The Complete Infidel’s Guide to the Koran](#) — the author is no stranger to the more controversial aspects of the Muslim religion and its purported founder. As director of [JihadWatch](#), Spencer has received numerous threats from Muslims who are intimidated by having the spotlight turned on the history and teachings of Islam. But it is fair to say that nothing Spencer has written previously has generated a fraction of the animosity his most recent book seems destined to receive.



The gravest difficulty that the author of *Did Muhammad Exist?* faces is the intrinsic implausibility of its central thesis: that Muhammad, the purported prophet of Islam and author of the Koran, either never existed or — if there was a “prophet” named Muhammad — he certainly never wrote the Koran. It is a thesis which also seems to fly in the face of one of Spencer’s earlier books, [The Truth about Muhammad — The Founder of the World’s Most Intolerant Religion](#) (2007). The image of Muhammad as a butcher, pedophile, and brigand is the enduring impression left by Spencer’s previous work. Now, however, Spencer would have his readers believe that the very evidence that supported his previous writing about Muhammad was an elaborate fiction — a hoax to justify the reign of early leaders of the expanding Arabic Empire, as the Abbasids sought to demonize their predecessors — the Umayyad caliphs — and solidify their control over the empire. It is a thesis for which Spencer compiles an impressive array of data, but whether or not he convincingly proves his central thesis is a matter of personal judgment.

Spencer’s attempt to deconstruct Mohammad requires an examination of several sources that purport to offer factual biographical information regarding the founder of Islam. Of necessity, Spencer has to deal with the references to Mohammad in the Koran, the voluminous Hadith which ostensibly record the events of his life (and the context of the text of the Koran), and the biography of Mohammad written by Ibn Ishaq. We will address these points of critique in reverse order.

Spencer’s criticisms of Ibn Ishaq’s biography seem relatively straightforward. As Spencer notes, “Ibn Ishaq was not remotely a contemporary of his prophet, who died in 632. Ibn Ishaq died in 773, and so his work dates from well over a hundred years after the death of his subject” — and, in fact, only survives in a redacted form that may date to several generations after the death of Ibn Ishaq. (87) This is of profound significance, because to this day Ibn Ishaq’s biography is considered the starting point for telling the life of Mohammad. Among the most telling criticisms of this biographical work is that it stands not only without any support from archaeology or historical writings that are contemporaneous with Mohammad; in fact, it stands in contradiction to the Koran. The Koran maintained that Mohammad worked no miraculous signs as proof of his supposedly divine inspiration; however, Ibn Ishaq



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credulously records almost endless miraculous signs that its subject is claimed to have performed:

There are many, many such [miraculous] stories in Ibn Ishaq. If any of them had been known at the time the Qur'an was written, it is inexplicable that Muhammad would have been portrayed in his own holy book as a prophet with a book alone and no supporting miracles. It is remarkable that a man who could heal the sick, multiply food, draw water from dry ground, and shoot out lightning from the strike of a pickax would nonetheless be portrayed as a prophet whose message was unsupported by miraculous signs. (95)

Even Ibn Ishaq's supposedly meticulous record of the non-miraculous events of Mohammad's life is called into question as he seems utterly oblivious to the fundamental changes that had taken place in the Arabic calendar from the time of Mohammad to his own time: leap months that existed in the seventh century never occur in the life in Mohammad.

The Hadith is of even greater significance for the ongoing life of Muslims because these non-Koranic records of Mohammad's words and deeds are the basis of much of sharia law, since the life of "the prophet" is considered the ideal guide of Muslim life. According to Spencer, "The various Muslim factions produced a steady stream of hadiths defending their leaders or attacking those of their opponents," and even Muslim authorities ultimately had to discard the overwhelming majority (293,000 out of 300,000) of the hadiths as fictional. Spencer explains that what remain are still "utter confusion"; "Consequently, the ninth-century scholar Asim an-Nabil (d. 827) threw up his hands in despair, 'I have come to the conclusion that a pious man is never so ready to lie as in matters of the hadith.'" Spencer ultimately concludes regarding this second source of details regarding the life of Mohammad:

Ultimately, it is impossible to tell whether or not Muhammad himself actually said or did any of what the traditional Islamic sources depict him as saying or doing, or even if there was a Muhammad at all. We have already seen that the Abbasids to a great degree sponsored the proliferation, and ultimately the collection, of the prophetic hadiths. This was in keeping with their opposition to the Umayyads on religious grounds. (85)

Spencer's analysis of the Koran addresses the text on several levels. Among the most significant are his endeavors to demonstrate that the Koran originated as a Syriac document; the fact that "every fifth sentence or so simply doesn't make sense" in the Arabic Koran is rooted in the fact that it "was not originally an Arabic book at all." (149) Ultimately, Spencer posits that the Koran actually began its existence with "a Christian text underlying" the later Islamic meaning. Citing several scholars who have reevaluated various passages of the text as ultimately being Syriac rather than Arabic in origin, a number of key passages are transformed to into Christian — albeit heretical — texts. For example, Sura 5 contains an extended reference to the Christian Lord's Supper that is seen as so clearly in its intention that, in the words of one of the author's sources: "If the Muslim exegetes had understood these passages as the Koran intended them, there would have been a liturgy of the Last Supper in Islam." (175)

In Spencer's assessment, the Islamic religion was created by Abbasids to form a state religion to justify the existence of the Arabic Empire, and to demonize the line of caliphs that they had overthrown in assuming power over that empire. The Koran was a heretical Christian text that was polished and reinterpreted, hadiths were generated to furnish a 'back story' to the fictitious prophet, and Ibn Ishaq's credulous biography sold the freshly minted prophet to an equally credulous audience.

What one ultimately makes of *Did Muhammad Exist?* will vary based on how seriously one takes



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Spencer's arguments. Although many of the arguments presented have a measure of credibility, for this reviewer it seemed that Spencer himself was a bit too credulous when it came to gathering as much evidence as imaginable against Muhammad. Spencer's work is not a "balanced" one — nor does it appear to have been intended to be. Very little counter evidence is presented seeking to refute the various arguments Spencer raises, and he may seem to some readers to be all too willing to give heed to "deconstructionist" writings. Did Muhammad exist? At the least, Spencer gives readers a reason to doubt that he did, and in this regard, his work achieves its goal.

Robert Spencer, [*Did Muhammad Exist? — An Inquiry into Islam's Obscure Origins*](#), (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2012). Hardcover. 254 pages. \$27.95

Photos: Did Muhammad Exist?; author Robert Spencer



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