

REVIEWED BY F. E. PETERS, Department of Middle Eastern Studies, New York University, New York, N.Y.

In *Le Seigneur des Tribus*, Jacqueline Chabbi, professor of Arabic at the University of Paris (VIII), has written a splendid and important new book on the difficult subject of Muhammad and the origins of Islam. The subject is more than difficult; it is disheartening and nearly

intractable, as the growing skepticism on the narrative sources for the life of Muhammad amply testifies. Chabbi shares that skepticism: what we know of Muhammad, she argues, is not only late and uncorroborated; it is sacred history. Faith and not genuine recollection provided both motive and matter for Islam's carefully constructed portrait of its own past. The *sīra* in its various manifestations is the product of a faith community separated from its subject not only by a century and more of time and a profound textual silence but by an enormous shift in cultural consciousness: 9th- and 10th-century Muslim Baghdad that crafted the story of Islam's beginnings was a world apart from the 7th-century tribal milieu that produced Muhammad and his message.

This problem of disassociation between source and subject has been argued by others before, including Chabbi herself in two trenchant articles on early Islamic historiography, but it is put forward once again here with persuasive eloquence. That is not the end of the matter, of course; there remains the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an, by all appearances a collection of utterances from Muhammad himself. The collection was not his work, as all agree, but the matter of the *sūras* has a strong claim to be the *ipsissima verba* of the Prophet and so a precious record of the preaching of Islam in its original environment. This, then, is Chabbi's point of departure: the Meccan *sūras* in particular give us reason to think, even in the absence of genuine contemporary recollections and archeological evidence of any sort, that in them we may expect to learn something plausibly true about the historical Muhammad and his preaching.

This too is not a new approach. It was exploited by, among others, Montgomery Watt in his *Muhammad's Mecca. History in the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an* (1988). But Chabbi has expanded it with great finesse and precision. What she has brought to the task in a truly original fashion is a profound understanding of the semantic fields of the Meccan *sūras*, fields that lie not only outside Baghdad but in the original milieu of 7th-century tribal Mecca. Words count for Chabbi—perhaps they are all that count on this historiographically challenging terrain—and it is in that context above all that the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an must be read, not in the manner of a form critic, like Angelika Neuwirth, say, but through the high-focus lens of the historical philologist. Chabbi is assuredly that, and under her sure hand the accretions of later exegesis—the products of faith, not history, Chabbi would argue—begin to fall away to reveal the still-pristine world of a tribal society, its tribal gods, and a tribal prophet who spoke to his fellows in the only terms they could possibly understand, and, one may add as a corollary, could understand only in their own limited and parochial way, not in that fashioned by an ecumenical and all-powerful umma some two centuries later.

For all its elegance and excitement, this is properly a demanding book. Using selected passages of the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an, most of which have to be retranslated to regain their lost original sense (see pp. 373–87), the argument is laid out, not always or even often, in linear fashion, in 411 pages of text, while the proofs, chiefly philological, unfold in an additional 225 pages of densely packed “Notes et Commentaires,” many of which stand as brilliant miniature essays in their own right. There are a number of “Annexes,” a rather detailed summary of the individual *sūras* (pp. 415–66), a rather remarkable “Glossaire” of some of the critical words and roots in the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an (pp. 633–56) and a “Bibliographie Commentée” (pp. 657–81). Works in languages other than French are not much in evidence in the latter. No matter: Chabbi has written a work of great originality and penetration, and it has no need of a baggage train to sustain it.

Neal Robinson's *Discovering the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an* is quite another matter, the polar opposite of Chabbi's book in its presuppositions and yet no less interesting in what it attempts to do. Professedly, it is not about Muhammad at all, but rather about the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an, which raises “an important theological issue: the question of the status of the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an as the word of God. The case for considering the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an as revelation,” the author continues, “is a very strong one” (p. 286). We are, then, in the realm not of history or even of literary criticism, but of theology.