



Zayd (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion)

David S. Powers

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Although Muḥammad had no natural sons who reached the age of maturity, Islamic sources report that he adopted a man named Zayd shortly before receiving his first revelation. This "son of Muḥammad" was the Prophet's heir for the next fifteen or twenty years. He was the first adult male to become a Muslim and the only Muslim apart from Muḥammad whose name is mentioned in the Qur'an. Eventually, Muḥammad would repudiate Zayd as his son, abolish the institution of adoption, and send Zayd to certain death on a battlefield in southern Jordan.

Curiously, Zayd has remained a marginal figure in both Islamic and Western scholarship. David S. Powers now attempts to restore Zayd to his rightful position at the center of the narrative of the Prophet Muḥammad and the beginnings of Islam. To do so, he mines traces left behind in commentaries on the Qur'an, in biographical dictionaries, and in historical chronicles, reading these sources against analogues in the Hebrew Bible. Powers demonstrates that in the accounts preserved in these sources, Zayd's character is modeled on those of biblical figures such as Isaac, Ishmael, Joseph, and Uriah the Hittite. This modeling process was deployed by early Muslim storytellers to address two key issues, Powers contends: the bitter conflict over succession to Muḥammad and the key theological doctrine of the finality of prophecy. Both Zayd's death on a battlefield and Muḥammad's repudiation of his adopted son and heir were after-the-fact constructions driven by political and theological imperatives.

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