ROBERT SPENCER'S THOUGHT ON THE EXISTENCE OF MUHAMMAD ﷺ:A CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract: The discussion surrounding the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, as articulated by Robert Spencer, enters contentious territory blending academia, religion, and culture. Spencer's scepticism challenges the established consensus on Muhammad's ﷺ existence, presenting a thesis demanding rigorous examination. This research aimed to evaluate Spencer's arguments and methodology, finding critical shortcomings. It analysed Spencer's approach, revealing flaws in reasoning and lack of empirical support. Spencer's use of scholarly material appears subjective, favouring revisionist sources and lacking direct references to original works, raising concerns about scholarly integrity. His methodological inconsistencies and selective criticism of sources undermine argument coherence. Additionally, his handling of evidence, such as dismissing non-Muslim texts mentioning Muhammad ﷺ within 100 years of his death, reflects a lack of balance. Spencer's critique of Islamic texts appears disproportionately focused on later transmission and internal inconsistencies, neglecting nuanced analysis. Ultimately, the research concluded that Spencer's thesis lacks scholarly rigour and balance, failing to establish a compelling argument against Muhammad's ﷺ historical existence. This research, employing a qualitative research design, aims to deepen comprehension of historical discussions surrounding Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ existence, enabling critical assessment of Spencer's arguments through scholarly discourse.
Keywords: Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Robert Spencer's thoughts.

Introduction

The historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ☷ has long been accepted by scholars and historians worldwide, forming a crucial aspect of Islam's foundation and impacting millions globally. Despite this consensus, dissenting voices like that of Robert Spencer challenge the veracity of Muhammad's ☷ existence, citing insufficient evidence and questioning the reliability of traditional accounts. Spencer, a prominent author and commentator known for his skepticism toward Islam's central figures, argues that the historical evidence supporting Muhammad's ☷ existence is lacking and casts doubt on the credibility of conventional narratives.

This research critically examines Spencer's skepticism regarding Muhammad's ☷ existence, focusing on his methodology and dismissal of established historical evidence. It highlights the absence of coherent reasoning and empirical support in Spencer's arguments, aiming to elucidate the implications of his denial within religious discourse. The paper provides a comprehensive critique, emphasizing the impact on the broader understanding of Islamic history. To assess Spencer's arguments, his methodology and sources are scrutinized, while presenting an overview of historical evidence supporting Muhammad's ☷ existence and addressing scholarly consensus. Sensitivity to the religious and cultural implications is crucial, emphasizing academic integrity and a balanced approach.

The research contributes to scholarly discourse on Muhammad's ☷ personage, offering a balanced analysis of skeptical viewpoints and academic consensus. The methodology involves qualitative analysis of historical texts and primary sources, ensuring robustness and reliability while adhering to ethical standards.

Background and Context

The historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ☷, the central figure of Islam, is a topic of great significance and scholarly inquiry. Prophet Muhammad ☷ is revered as the final prophet and messenger of God, whose teachings form the foundation of the Islamic faith. The life of Prophet Muhammad ☷ is documented in early Islamic texts, such as the Quran and Hadith literature, which provide a detailed account of his teachings, actions, and the development of the Islamic community during his time. The primary sources provide detailed accounts of Prophet Muhammad's ☷ teachings, actions, and interactions with his contemporaries. However, Quran, the earliest Muslim document detailing Muhammad's life, offers scant personal details, sparking historical debates about its accuracy.[1] Additionally, non-Muslim historical accounts from the early Islamic period contribute to our understanding of the historical context in which Prophet Muhammad ☷ lived. These include the works of Byzantine and Persian historians who documented events related to the rise of Islam and the early Muslim community. While

these accounts may not offer a comprehensive biography of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, they provide valuable insights into the political, social, and religious dynamics of the time.[2] Archaeological findings and epigraphic evidence also contribute to our understanding of the historical context of Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ life. Excavations at ancient sites in the Arabian Peninsula have revealed inscriptions and artefacts that provide glimpses into the religious and cultural practices of the time. These findings corroborate aspects of the early Islamic tradition and lend support to the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.[3]

These sources, along with non-Muslim historical accounts, archaeological findings, and epigraphic evidence, form the basis for understanding the historical context of Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ life. However, within the realm of historical scholarship, there have been dissenting voices that challenge the accepted historical consensus regarding Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ life. One prominent critic who questions the historical authenticity of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is Robert Spencer. Spencer is an author, commentator, and director of Jihad Watch, a website focused on critiquing Islamic ideology and its perceived impact on global affairs.

Spencer has written several books, including "Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam's Obscure Origins" and "The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion." In these works, Spencer questions the reliability of the early Islamic sources and argues that the historical evidence supporting the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is insufficient and subject to interpretation and manipulation. He contends that the traditional accounts of Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ life and the development of Islam are based on biased and unreliable sources, and therefore should be treated with scepticism. Spencer's sceptical viewpoint is not unique, as other scholars have also engaged in critical analysis and debates surrounding the historical sources and the authenticity of various aspects of the Islamic tradition. However, his position is notable due to his public presence and the attention his works have garnered within both academic and public spheres in the age of Islamophobia. The book's provocative thesis has the potential to shape public perceptions as established through its readership being best seller on Amazon and attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. A critical review can help contextualize the arguments presented in the book and provide readers with a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand.

This research aimed to evaluate Spencer's arguments and methodology, finding critical shortcomings. It analysed Spencer's approach, revealing flaws in reasoning and lack of empirical support. The research paper critically engages with Robert Spencer's arguments and methodology in challenging the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. It evaluates the strength of his claims, the reliability of his sources, and the soundness of his reasoning.

Furthermore, it assesses the scholarly consensus on the historical evidence supporting the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The research will facilitate a nuanced understanding of the historical debates surrounding the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, enabling readers to critically assess and evaluate the arguments put forth by Robert Spencer and contribute to avert the misleading propaganda striking at the very basis of Islam. Engaging with provocative works like this allows for critical examination of historical claims and presents an opportunity to evaluate the evidence presented by the author.

Overview of Robert Spencer's Arguments

Robert Spencer, a prominent critic of Islam and his work delves into the complexities of Islamic theology and history, offering a perspective that challenges mainstream narratives. Spencer's critique of jihad is central to his writings, as he highlights the ideological underpinnings of violence perpetrated by jihadists and its roots in Islamic scripture and tradition. Moreover, he questions conventional understandings of Islamic history, as evidenced in his book "Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam's Obscure Origins," where he scrutinizes traditional accounts of the life of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and the early Islamic period. This section provides an overview of the main arguments put forth by Spencer.He asserts that Muhammad ﷺ purportedly existed within a specific era and propagated specific teachings that he claimed were divinely revealed to him by God.The accuracy of their statements may be evaluated to some degree through historical examination.

Robert Spencer hesitates to accept the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ and classifies him as a "legendary and semi-legendary" figure who has inspired soldiers in the past to perform noble acts.[4] He acknowledges the significant impact of the prophet, but believes that this effect is not contingent upon the prophet's existence as a historical figure. He asserts that Macbeth is equally clear and captivating as the figure of Muhammad ﷺ. He proceeds to draw a comparison between the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Robin Hood, whose true adventures and deeds are obscured by vague folklores.[5] He believes that examining the conventional story of Islam from a historical perspective will deeply offend numerous Muslims.[6] He asserts that his investigation is unlikely to be appreciated by them as they are unwilling to base their theories on historically questionable basis.[7]

He contends that under rigorous historical scrutiny, the conventional story of Muhammad ﷺ, the Holy Qur'an, and the commonly acknowledged depiction of early Islam are untenable. The specific details of the entire story become increasingly difficult to grasp upon closer examination.[8]

He advocates that thorough examination of the historical data reveals compelling hints that many aspects of the legends about Muhammad ﷺ might be considered mythological rather than historically accurate.[9] He asserts that

the Holy Qur'an is not comprised of the divine word revealed by Muhammad ﷺ, but rather was assembled from pre-existing Jewish, Christian, and other contemporary traditions.[10]

In the debate surrounding the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Spencer has put forth arguments challenging the traditional understanding of Muhammad's existence. Contrary to the majority of scholars and historians, who accept Muhammad's ﷺ historical existence based on Islamic sources, Spencer offers a dissenting viewpoint that merits examination and analysis.[11]

Robert Spencer argues that the Islamic sources, particularly the Quran and the Hadith literature, cannot be relied upon as historical documents.[12] He questions their authenticity, suggesting that they have been subject to embellishment, manipulation, and political agendas. According to Spencer, the Quran was compiled years after the events it describes, allowing room for biases and alterations.[13] He contends that the substantial gap in time between the events they describe and their recording raises questions about their accuracy and potential for distortion. He is of the view that in the absence of contemporaneous, independent evidence from non-Muslim sources raises doubts about the reliability of the Islamic tradition.[14] Spencer suggests that the individuals who compiled these sources may have had political or religious motivations that influenced their content. He argues that these motives could have led to the inclusion or omission of certain details or events from the historical record, potentially distorting the true nature of early Islam.[15] Spencer points out that there is a scarcity of contemporary non-Muslim sources that independently corroborate the events of early Islamic history. He contends that the absence of such external sources leaves room for skepticism regarding the accuracy of the Islamic historical accounts.[16] Spencer highlights the existence of numerous variations in the hadith literature, with different versions of the same hadith circulating among different Islamic sects and scholars. He argues that these variations demonstrate a lack of consensus and raise doubts about the reliability of individual hadith.[17]

It is important to explore and evaluate Spencer's arguments in order to put across a comprehensive understanding of the debate surrounding the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ. This research paper aims to critically examine and unpack Robert Spencer's perspective, scrutinizing his claims, analyzing the evidence he presents, and assessing the scholarly responses to his arguments. By delving into Spencer's perspective, we can engage in a scholarly discourse that fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances surrounding the historical inquiry into the life and existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Through a thorough examination of his arguments, we can assess the validity of his claims and contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation on this important topic.

Critical Analysis of Spencer's Thought on Existence of Muhammad ﷺ

3.1 Logical Fallacies in Spencer's Arguments -Hasty Generalizations by Spencer

One of the significant fallacies present in Spencer's arguments is hasty generalization. This section aims to examine how hasty generalizations are employed by Spencer in relation to the existence of Muhammad ﷺ and provide counter-evidence to refute these generalizations. Hasty generalizations occur when someone draws broad conclusions based on insufficient evidence or a limited sample size. It involves making sweeping claims without thoroughly examining a diverse range of data or considering the complexities of the subject matter.

3.1.1 Selective Interpretation of Historical Sources: Spencer often cherry-picks isolated historical sources that cast doubt on the existence of Muhammad ﷺ. He uses these limited sources to generalize that the historical evidence for Muhammad ﷺ is unreliable or nonexistent. While commenting on a Hadith with regard to Trees, he writes "Still, maybe there were grass and trees in Mecca in the seventh century and their existence was too trivial for anyone to mention, or no record of them remains in the available literature".[18] However, this approach overlooks the vast array of historical sources that support Muhammad's ﷺ existence and the scholarly consensus on this matter. By focusing only on a select few sources, Spencer fails to provide a comprehensive analysis of the historical evidence. The historical evidence supporting the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is abundant and diverse. Numerous early Islamic and non-Islamic sources from various regions and cultures provide detailed accounts of Muhammad's ﷺ life and the emergence of Islam. These sources include the Quran, Hadith literature, biographical works, legal texts, correspondence, and historical chronicles. By disregarding this wealth of sources, Spencer's hasty generalizations neglect a significant body of evidence.[19]

3.1.2 Ignoring the Consensus of Scholars: Spencer dismisses the overwhelming consensus among historians and scholars regarding the existence of Muhammad ﷺ.[20] He selectively cites a minority of dissenting voices to suggest that there is significant doubt about Muhammad's existence. This approach ignores the extensive research and scholarly consensus that has been established over centuries. By disregarding the consensus, Spencer fails to engage with the breadth of scholarly knowledge and expertise in the field.[21]

3.1.3 Methodological Rigour in Historical Research: Historians employ rigorous methodologies, including textual criticism, source criticism, and linguistic analysis, to evaluate historical sources. The consensus among scholars regarding Muhammad's ﷺ existence is based on a meticulous examination of the available evidence using these rigorous methods. By neglecting these established methodologies and instead relying on selective

interpretations, Spencer undermines the credibility of the scholarly consensus. Historical research on Muhammad's ﷺ existence draws upon various disciplines, such as history, archaeology, linguistics, and religious studies.[22] Scholars approach the subject matter with interdisciplinary rigour, examining a wide range of evidence and employing diverse methodologies. This multidisciplinary approach contributes to a comprehensive understanding of Muhammad's ﷺ historical context and existence.[23] Spencer's hasty generalizations fail to engage with this interdisciplinary scholarship, thus limiting the depth of his analysis.

3.2   Confirmation Bias in Spencer's Arguments: Confirmation bias refers to the tendency to interpret information in a way that confirms pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses while ignoring or dismissing contradictory evidence. In the context of Robert Spencer's arguments challenging the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, instances of confirmation bias in Spencer's work can be observed to highlight the implications of such biases on the validity of his arguments.

*3.2.1. Selective Use of Historical Sources***:**   Spencer demonstrates confirmation bias by selectively utilizing historical sources that align with his preconceived notions and dismissing those that contradict his viewpoint. He tends to focus on obscure or minority opinions that cast doubt on the existence of Muhammad ﷺ while ignoring the vast body of scholarship and historical consensus supporting Muhammad's ﷺ existence. The chronology of events from life history in the beginning of the book has serious omission of the events of the life of Prophet ﷺ widely covered by all and sundry authors of Sīrah.[24]   This bias leads to a distorted representation of the available evidence in subsequent events. His preconceived ideas are visible being an anti-Islamic writer, such as "A thorough review of the historical records provides startling indications that much, if not all, of what we know about Muhammad ﷺ is legend, not historical fact."[25] A balanced analysis requires a comprehensive examination of the available historical sources. Early Islamic and non-Islamic texts, archaeological findings, inscriptions, and other forms of evidence contribute to a holistic understanding of Muhammad's ﷺ existence. Ignoring or downplaying these sources due to confirmation bias limits the depth and accuracy of the analysis.

*3.2.2. Dismissal of Counter-Evidence***:**   Confirmation bias is evident in Spencer's dismissal of counter-evidence that challenges his claims. He tends to downplay or reject evidence supporting the existence of Muhammad ﷺ, such as the consensus among historians and the abundance of early Islamic and non-Islamic sources.[26] By neglecting counter-evidence, Spencer reinforces his preexisting skepticism and avoids engaging with opposing viewpoints. He accepts the existence of Muhammad ﷺ and in the same breath raised doubt on his existence. "However sharply people may differ on the virtues and vices of

Muhammad ☸, and on the value of his prophetic claims, virtually no one doubts that he was an actual person who lived in a particular time and a particular place, and more to the point, who founded one of the world's major religions. Could such a man have never existed at all?"[27] He, taking lead from the internal criticism of Judaism and Christianity, says, "Why should Islam and its leading figure be exempt from the scrutiny that has been applied to other religions?"[28] That seems to be his motive to hit at the very roots of Islam.

3.2.3. Distorted Interpretation of Evidence: Confirmation bias in Spencer's arguments leads to a distorted interpretation of historical evidence. By selectively emphasizing certain sources or opinions while disregarding others, he presents an unbalanced and biased portrayal of the available evidence. At numerous places, he refuses to accept Muhammad ☸ as name of the Prophet by saying, "The name Muhammad ☸ actually appears in the Qur'an only four times, and in three of those instances it could be used as a title — "the praised one" or "chosen one"—rather than as a proper name."[29] Similarly, he assumes Christ to be meant by what Muhammad ☸was mentioned. "That would mean that in 3:144, Jesus is the figure being referred to as "the praised one"—that is, the Muhammad."[30] His writing suffers from self-contradiction, as he immediately wrote, "In Sura 33 we read that "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but the messenger of Allah and seal of the prophets. And ever is Allah, of all things, knowing" (33:40). This is almost certainly a specific reference to the prophet of Islam, and not simply to a prophetic figure being accorded the epithet "the praised one".[31] This undermines the objectivity and accuracy of his arguments. A wide consensus among historians and scholars, both Islamic and non-Islamic, affirms the existence of Prophet Muhammad ☸ as a person. This consensus is based on rigorous research, textual analysis, and interdisciplinary approaches that span across various fields. Dismissing this consensus without robust counter-evidence demonstrates confirmation bias and undermines the scholarly discourse on the subject.

3.2.4. Limited Perspective: Confirmation bias limits Spencer's perspective and inhibits a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. In his previous work, "The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion," it is evident that Spencer criticized the Prophet ☸. In this book, Spencer selectively presents information by downplaying facts related to peace treaties, social justice, welfare, and community work. Instead, he emphasizes war and violence through deliberate omissions and exclusions. He himself in response to critics about his changing stance on earlier biography says, "The Truth About Muhammad ☸ is a portrait of what Muslims believe about their prophet as he is depicted in those sources. This present volume, by contrast, is an evaluation of whether or not, and to what extent, those sources

have any historical value and give us information about an actual person."[32] By favouring evidence that confirms his preconceived beliefs, he overlooks alternative interpretations, nuanced analysis, and the broader historical context surrounding the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. This narrow perspective undermines the depth and breadth of his arguments. Confirmation bias prevents Spencer from critically evaluating counter-arguments and engaging in meaningful debate. By dismissing or ignoring evidence that challenges his claims, he fails to address the robust counter-evidence put forth by scholars and experts in the field. This undermines the intellectual rigour of his arguments and weakens the overall validity of his claims.

3.3   The Straw Man Fallacy in Spencer's Arguments

The straw man fallacy is a rhetorical technique where one misrepresents an opponent's argument and attacks a distorted version rather than addressing the actual position. Robert Spencer's book questioning the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ demonstrates instances of this fallacy. Spencer's oversimplified portrayal of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, reducing him to a violent and power-hungry figure, weakens the validity of his critique. He focuses on instances of defensive warfare or conflicts, disregarding the broader historical context, peaceful aspects of his life, and his ethical teachings. This undermines the overall strength of his counter claims and fails to provide a substantive critique of historical evidence. By disregarding scholarly consensus and constructing a straw man argument, Spencer dismisses extensive research supporting Muhammad's ﷺ existence.

3.4   The Fallacy of Appeal to Ignorance in Spencer's Arguments

The appeal to ignorance fallacy occurs when one argues that a claim must be true (or false) simply because there is no evidence to the contrary. In Robert Spencer's arguments questioning the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, instances of the appeal to ignorance fallacy can be identified. He assumes that if something has not been proven false, it must be true, or if something has not been proven true, it must be false. This fallacy disregards the importance of evidence and critical examination.

3.4.1 Burden of Proof: Spencer places the burden of proof solely on those asserting the existence of Prophet Muhammadﷺ. He argues that since there is no definitive evidence or conclusive historical records, it is rational to reject the claim of Muhammad's ﷺ existence. However, the absence of concrete evidence does not automatically disprove the existence of an individual, especially when dealing with historical figures from distant eras. By placing the burden of proof solely on those asserting the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Spencer shifts the responsibility of providing evidence onto others while avoiding the need to present compelling evidence to support his own claims. This undermines the intellectual integrity of his arguments and creates an imbalance in the evaluation process.

*3.4.2 **Lack of Historical Documentation***: Spencer highlights the gaps and uncertainties in historical documentation regarding Muhammad's ﷺ life, using this lack of information as evidence to support his skepticism. He argues that the absence of detailed records during Muhammad'sﷺ lifetime suggests the possibility that he did not exist. However, the lack of comprehensive historical documentation does not prove the non-existence of an individual, particularly in the context of ancient history where written records were limited. The appeal to ignorance fallacy oversimplifies the complexity of historical research and the interpretation of historical evidence. Historical inquiry requires meticulous analysis of available sources, critical examination of biases and limitations, and the application of various methodologies. Dismissing the existence of Muhammadﷺ based on incomplete historical documentation disregards the multifaceted nature of historical investigation.

*3.4.3 **Historical Methodologies***: Historians employ rigorous methodologies such as textual analysis, source criticism, and contextualization to evaluate historical evidence. While the lack of extensive documentation on Muhammad's ﷺ life presents challenges, scholars have utilized meticulous methods to analyze available sources and construct a comprehensive understanding of his existence. The consensus among historians and scholars regarding the existence of Prophet Muhammadﷺ carries significant weight. The consensus is based on a careful examination of historical evidence, including early Islamic and non-Islamic sources, archaeological findings, and linguistic studies. Dismissing the consensus based on an appeal to ignorance overlooks the collective expertise and scholarly consensus developed over centuries.

3.5.   Questioning the Historical Existence of Muhammad ﷺ

Robert Spencer has put forth arguments challenging the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. His stance on this topic is considered controversial and not widely accepted among scholars and historians. While his views have generated significant debate, it is important to understand the details of his position.

One of the main arguments presented by Robert Spencer is the scepticism towards the reliability of the Islamic sources, particularly the Quran and the Hadith literature. He questions their authenticity and argues that they have been subject to embellishment, manipulation, and political agendas over time. Spencer suggests that the Quran was compiled years after the events it describes, allowing room for potential biases and alterations to the text. He argues that this raises doubts about its accuracy as a historical document.

In addition, Spencer challenges the process of Hadith authentication, which involves verifying the chains of transmission (*isnad*) and the content (*matn*) of the narrations attributed to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. He suggests that this process is flawed and susceptible to human error, leading to the inclusion

of unreliable and fabricated traditions. According to Spencer, this undermines the credibility of the Hadith literature as a historical source.

Another aspect of Spencer's argument is the absence of non-Muslim contemporary evidence that directly attests to the existence of Muhammad ﷺ. He asserts that the lack of independent, external sources raises questions about the reliability of the Islamic tradition. Spencer highlights the limited references to Muhammad ﷺ in non-Muslim texts and inscriptions, arguing that they do not provide substantial evidence for his historical existence. Spencer argues that if Muhammad ﷺ was indeed a significant figure in the 7th century, one would expect to find references to him in non-Muslim contemporary accounts. He points out that while there are some references to Arab conquerors and tribal leaders during that period, there is a notable scarcity of direct references to Muhammad ﷺ. He suggests that this absence of non-Muslim contemporary evidence casts doubt on the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ.[33]

Furthermore, Spencer highlights the limited number of inscriptions and non-Muslim texts that indirectly reference Muhammad ﷺ. He argues that these references, such as the Byzantine chroniclers or the Doctrina Jacobi,[34] do not provide substantial evidence for the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ. According to Spencer, these references are either too ambiguous or can be interpreted in alternative ways that do not necessarily support the traditional Islamic narrative.[35]

However, it is important to note that scholars and historians have critiqued Spencer's assertion regarding the lack of non-Muslim contemporary evidence. They argue that the absence of direct references to Muhammad ﷺ does not automatically invalidate his historical existence. They contend that the scarcity of non-Muslim contemporary sources can be attributed to several factors, such as the limited historical record from that time period, the bias of certain chroniclers, or the lack of preservation of materials.[36]

Scholars also caution against relying solely on non-Muslim contemporary evidence to establish the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ. They argue that the Islamic sources, such as the Quran and the Hadith literature, provide valuable insights into the life and teachings of Muhammad ﷺ, even if they are not supported by extensive non-Muslim accounts. They emphasize the importance of contextualizing the Islamic sources within their historical and cultural frameworks.

Additionally, scholars highlight that the existence of non-Muslim contemporary evidence indirectly supporting the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ should not be overlooked. While these references may not explicitly mention Muhammad ﷺ by name, they provide glimpses into the early Islamic period and the emergence of a new religious movement, which aligns with the Islamic narrative.[37]

It has been established that Robert Spencer's assertion regarding the lack of non-Muslim contemporary evidence on the existence of Muhammad ﷺ from a historical perspective is a subject of debate among scholars. While he questions the absence of direct references to Muhammad ﷺ, scholars argue that the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ is supported by the Islamic sources and indirect references from non-Muslim contemporary accounts. Understanding the complexities of historical evidence and the limitations of available sources is crucial when examining the question of Muhammad's ﷺ existence.

3.6   Questioning the Reliability of Islamic Sources

One of the central pillars of Robert Spencer's argument against the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ revolves around the reliability of the Islamic sources, namely the Quran and the Hadith literature. Spencer challenges the traditional narrative, asserting that these sources are not reliable historical documents and were subject to embellishment, manipulation, and political agendas. In this section, we will critically examine Spencer's arguments and evaluate the validity of his claims.

Robert Spencer has expressed scepticism regarding the compilation of the Quran and its relationship to the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. In his perspective, he questions the traditional narrative of the Quran's compilation, raising doubts about its historical accuracy and authenticity. Spencer asserts that the Quran, as the primary religious text of Islam, lacks the historical accuracy required for a reliable account of Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ life. He argues that the Quran was compiled years after the events it describes and suggests that the content may have been shaped by the political and religious interests of the early Muslim community. Spencer contends that the lack of contemporaneous, independent evidence from non-Muslim sources raises doubts about the historical authenticity of the Islamic tradition.[38]

While it is true that the Quran was compiled after the time of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, it is important to consider the methods used by Muslim scholars to preserve and transmit its text. The early Muslim community had a strong oral tradition, with the Quran being recited and memorized by numerous individuals during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The process of compilation, which began during the caliphate of Abu Bakr (RA) and was finalized during the caliphate of Uthman (RA), involved consulting multiple reliable sources and cross-referencing with the memories of those who had memorized the entire Quran. This meticulous process ensures a high level of accuracy in preserving the original text.

Spencer suggests that the Quran was compiled years after the events it describes, potentially allowing for the introduction of alterations and the shaping of its content to suit political and religious agendas. He argues that the

process of compiling the Quran may have involved the selection and exclusion of certain materials, with the intention of solidifying the authority and legitimacy of the ruling elite at the time.[39]

According to Spencer, the lack of a standard methodology for verifying the authenticity of the Quranic text raises questions about its reliability as a historical document. He points out that there were various versions and recitations of the Quran in circulation during the early Islamic period, which indicates a lack of consensus regarding its precise content. Spencer suggests that this diversity of versions supports the notion that the Quranic text was subject to human manipulation and editing.[40]

Furthermore, Spencer questions the role of individuals like Uthman ibn Affan (RA), the third caliph of Islam, in standardizing the Quranic text. He argues that Uthman's involvement in the compilation process may have been politically motivated and aimed at suppressing variant versions that did not align with his preferred theological and political outlook. Spencer suggests that this standardization process may have contributed to the loss or deliberate suppression of alternative versions of the Quran, further complicating the historical examination of its compilation.

It is important to note that while Spencer raises concerns about the compilation of the Quran, however, his perspective is highly controversial and not widely accepted among scholars and historians. Scholars argue that the compilation of the Quran was a meticulous process that involved the involvement of companions of Prophet Muhammad ☸ who had memorized the text. They contend that the compilation aimed to ensure the preservation of the Quranic revelations and maintain the integrity of the message.[41]

Moreover, scholars emphasize the presence of an oral tradition during the time of Prophet Muhammad ☸, with many individuals memorizing and reciting the Quran from memory. This oral tradition served as a means of preserving the Quranic text before its written compilation. They argue that the standardized text of the Quran emerged through a collaborative effort to collect and preserve the revelations as they were revealed to Prophet Muhammad ☸.[42]

He suggests that the process of compiling the Quran may have involved alterations and political motivations. However, it is important to consider the counterarguments presented by scholars, who emphasize the meticulous nature of the compilation process and the role of oral tradition in preserving the Quranic text. Understanding the complexities surrounding the Quran's compilation is crucial when examining the historical context of Muhammad's ☸ existence.

Furthermore, the Quran contains numerous references to specific events, individuals, and historical contexts that would have been familiar to the contemporaries of Prophet Muhammad ☸. These references provide

valuable insights into the social, political, and cultural milieu of the time, lending credibility to the historical authenticity of the Quran.

Regarding the Hadith literature, Spencer questions its reliability and authenticity. He suggests that the Hadith literature was susceptible to manipulation and fabrication, as it was compiled several generations after the Prophet's ﷺ death. Spencer argues that the biases of the narrators and compilers may have influenced the content, leading to the inclusion of unreliable or fabricated traditions.[43] It is crucial to acknowledge the rigorous methodologies developed by early Muslim scholars to assess the authenticity of individual narrations. Hadith criticism or Hadith authentication involved examining the chain of narrators, evaluating their credibility, and cross-referencing the content with other narrations and historical evidence. This meticulous process resulted in the categorization of Hadiths into various levels of authenticity, with the most reliable ones considered as Sahih (authentic) or Hasan (good).

Spencer asserts that the authentication of Hadiths, which involves verifying the chains of transmission (isnad) and assessing the content (matn), is a flawed process. He argues that the chains of transmission can be unreliable, as they often rely on the trustworthiness and memory of individuals over several generations. According to Spencer, this opens the door for errors, fabrications, and intentional misattributions to occur, leading to the inclusion of false or dubious Hadiths in the corpus.[44]

Furthermore, Spencer highlights the presence of contradictory and problematic content within the Hadith literature. He points out that there are Hadiths that promote violence, misogyny, and intolerance, which raises concerns about their authenticity and ethical implications. He suggests that these problematic Hadiths may have been selectively preserved and promoted by certain factions within early Islamic society to further their own agendas.

Spencer also questions the motives and biases of the early collectors and compilers of Hadiths. He argues that their political and theological affiliations may have influenced the selection and preservation of specific Hadiths, resulting in an incomplete and potentially distorted picture of Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ teachings. He suggests that these biases undermine the reliability and objectivity of the Hadith literature as a historical source.[45]

It is important to note that while Spencer raises some valid concerns about Hadith authentication, his perspective is not universally accepted among scholars and historians. Scholars argue that the process of Hadith authentication, which involves rigorous scrutiny of the chains of transmission and the content, provides a reliable means of differentiating authentic Hadiths from unreliable or fabricated ones. They point to the meticulous efforts of early Hadith scholars to collect and preserve the sayings and actions of

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, employing stringent criteria to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the narrations.[46]

Moreover, scholars emphasize the importance of critically evaluating Hadiths in their historical and contextual contexts. They argue that not all Hadiths carry the same level of authenticity or applicability, and that understanding the nuances of the Hadith science is necessary to interpret and apply the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ accurately.

Moreover, non-Muslim scholars of Hadith, such as Ignác Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, have acknowledged the reliability and historical value of certain Hadiths, particularly those pertaining to legal, social, and historical matters. Their positive assessment of the Hadith literature indicates that it contains valuable information for understanding the context and practices of the early Muslim community.

It is essential to recognize that critical analysis and scrutiny of the Islamic sources is a vital part of academic research. Scholars have engaged in extensive textual, historical, and literary studies to evaluate the reliability of the Islamic sources. However, the majority of scholars in the field of Islamic studies, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have concluded that the Islamic sources provide a coherent narrative that aligns with the socio-historical context of the time.

One of Spencer's main contentions is that the Quran, the central religious text of Islam, was compiled years after the events it describes. He suggests that during this time gap, the text may have been altered or embellished to serve the interests of those in power. Spencer points to potential political motivations, asserting that the Quran was crafted to consolidate the authority and legitimacy of the ruling elite at the time.

3.7   Analysis of the Primary Claims Made by Spencer on the Existence of Muhammad ﷺ

Robert Spencer has made several claims questioning the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. His assertions challenge the traditional narrative of Muhammad's ﷺ life and have sparked debates among scholars and historians. Thus, there is a need to analyze some of the primary claims made by Spencer and evaluate their validity within the context of historical research before responding to it. The existence and life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the central figure of Islam, has been a subject of study and debate among scholars and historians for centuries. Robert Spencer, a prominent critic of Islam, has made several claims regarding the existence of Muhammad ﷺ. Hereunder, we analyze and evaluate the primary claims put forth by Spencer concerning Muhammad's ﷺ existence.

Claim 1: Lack of Contemporary Sources: One of Spencer's main contentions is the supposed absence of contemporary sources that directly mention Muhammad ۩. He argues that this absence raises doubts about Muhammad's ۩ existence. However, this claim overlooks the historical context of early Islam. During Muhammad's ۩ lifetime in the 7th century, the Arabian Peninsula was primarily an oral culture, and the practice of maintaining written records was not widespread. Most historical events were transmitted orally before being compiled into written form later. It is not surprising, then, that there are limited contemporary written sources that specifically mention Muhammad ۩.

Claim 2: Reliance on Biographical Accounts: Spencer also argues that the biographical accounts of Muhammad's ۩ life, such as the Hadith literature, should be viewed with scepticism due to their compilation occurring several decades after his death. While it is true that the Hadith literature was compiled after Muhammad's ۩ demise, scholars employ rigorous methods to analyse and authenticate these texts. Through the science of Hadith criticism, scholars have established a framework to assess the reliability and authenticity of individual narrators and the chains of transmission. While there may be variations in the grading of specific Hadiths, the core aspects of Muhammad's ۩ life are widely accepted by historians.

Claim 3: Alternate Explanations for Islamic Origins: Another claim made by Spencer suggests that the rise of Islam can be attributed to socio-political factors rather than the existence of a historical figure like Muhammad ۩. He posits that the emergence of Islam was a consequence of various cultural, political, and economic circumstances. However, this argument fails to account for the unique religious and spiritual aspects of the Islamic faith that are deeply rooted in Muhammad's ۩ teachings. Moreover, the rapid spread of Islam during and after Muhammad's ۩ lifetime cannot be adequately explained by purely secular factors.

Claim 4: Non-Islamic Historical Sources: Spencer questions the lack of detailed references to Muhammad ۩ in non-Muslim historical sources. He asserts that the absence of such references indicates that Muhammad's ۩ existence is dubious. However, it is crucial to consider the limited scope and coverage of non-Muslim historical sources from the 7th century Arabian Peninsula. Many of the surviving historical records from that time focused on major empires and their conflicts, paying little attention to events in peripheral regions. Moreover, the scarcity of surviving pre-Islamic Arabian literature further hampers the availability of non-Muslim sources.

3.7.1 Lack of Contemporary Non-Muslim Evidence:

Spencer's use of `modern-day' scholars fair no better. He ignores mainstream scholarship for a fringe group of ineffectual revisionists. Even when quoting recognized skeptical scholars, he ignores their most recent

works for dated ones. Spencer writes that he relied on "Crone's earlier work". Why Crone's earlier work? Why not her current and latest works?"[47] The answer is simple. Crone's current work is rather mainstream. In fact, Crone and Cook have either renounced or revised their revisionist theses of the 1970's and 1980's which Spencer is so heavily reliant on. All one has to do to know this is read anything Crone or Cook have written since 2000. Spencer evidently laments this fact but he is unwilling to let such exciting and salacious theses go. He writes on page 13 that Crone's writing on Muhammad ﷺ in 2008, where she emphatically states the historicity of Muhammad, "represented a departure from her earlier position on Islam's origins". However, he justifies his grip on her renounced thesis with the hollow words: "she offers no new findings or evidence to explain the change; instead, she left her earlier reasoning and the evidence presented standing untouched". What could be weaker than to hold on to a thesis that has been rejected by both the entire scholarly community and Crone herself? Why doesn't he read her current works where she does indeed offer her new findings and evidences along with the findings of other academic scholars such as Mikhail Bukharin, Peter Stein, Jan Retso, Isabel Toral-Niehoff, etc?

One of Spencer's key arguments is the alleged absence of non-Muslim contemporary evidence regarding Muhammad ﷺ. He argues that if Muhammad ﷺ was a significant figure in the 7th century, there should be more references to him in non-Muslim sources. However, it is essential to consider the limitations of historical documentation from that period. The scarcity of direct references to Muhammad ﷺ can be attributed to various factors, such as the scarcity of surviving records, the predominantly oral nature of early Arab societies, and the limited interactions between the Arabian Peninsula and other regions at the time.

It is noted that Robert Spencer's claim of a lack of contemporary non-Muslim evidence, there exists a substantial body of historical sources from various non-Muslim perspectives that attest to the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the rise of Islam. Byzantine, Persian, Arab Christian, Jewish, Samaritan, epigraphic, and geographical sources provide a comprehensive picture of Muhammad's ﷺ life and the impact of his teachings. It is crucial to consider this abundance of contemporary non-Muslim evidence when evaluating the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ and the early development of Islam. He has overlooked the contemporary Byzantine and Persian sources provide valuable evidence regarding the existence of Muhammad ﷺ and the emergence of Islam. Byzantine historians such as Theophanes and John of Nikiu, as well as Persian sources like Tabari and Al-Tabari, mention Muhammad ﷺ and the rise of Islam. These accounts, although written from non-Muslim perspectives, acknowledge the existence of a

significant religious and political movement led by a figure named Muhammad ﷺ.

Early Arab Christian sources, such as the writings of Thomas the Presbyter, Sebeos, and John bar Penkaye, provide additional evidence for the existence of Muhammad ﷺ. These sources mention Muhammad ﷺ and the spread of Islam, often portraying him as a military leader and the founder of a new religion. Jewish and Samaritan sources from the time also provide references to Muhammad ﷺ and the advent of Islam. The Constitution of Medina, a treaty between Muhammad ﷺ and the Jewish tribes of Medina, is documented in Jewish sources, indicating the interaction and engagement between Muhammad ﷺ and the Jewish community. Epigraphic evidence, such as inscriptions and coins from the early Islamic period, further supports the existence of Muhammad ﷺ. These inscriptions mention Muhammad's ﷺ name and the Islamic faith, affirming the presence of a religious and political movement during that time.

Another critical issue arises with Spencer's pivotal assumption, which forms the foundation of his entire argument. His thesis presupposes that as the early Arab-Muslims conquered the extensive territories of the Byzantine and Persian Empires, they would have swiftly implemented a comprehensive top-down (A-Z) transformation across North Africa and the Near & Middle East. In other words, Spencer asserts that the Arab-Muslims would have immediately initiated the minting of their own coins, the construction of architectural monuments, the transformation of administrative practices, the alteration of trade patterns, the modification of agricultural norms, and the change of the administrative language to Arabic, among other changes. This grand assumption, constructed as a hypothetical "this is what we would expect if..." scenario, sets unrealistic expectations. Spencer relies on this assumption to justify his en-silencio thesis when the archaeological evidence fails to meet these impractical expectations.

Scholars familiar with the field recognize, however, that until the second fitnah, culminating in Umayyad Caliph Abdul' Malik ibn Marwan's rise to power in 685 CE, the Arab-Muslim conquerors left a relatively light footprint. Several factors contributed to the early obscurity of the Arab-Muslims. Firstly, they resided in garrison towns such as Homs and Kufa on the outskirts of urban centres and were uninterested in mingling with the general population. Secondly, their lack of material expertise prevented the outward proclamation of their religion through mediums such as coins or architecture. Thirdly, the early period of Islam witnessed major internal upheavals, diverting energy and resources toward internal resolutions rather than outward propagation. These reasons, among others, delayed the public expression of Islam for the first fifty years.

The events leading to `Abd al-Malik's Caliphate marked the initial ostensible attempts of Muslims to proclaim their religion. Abdullah ibn Zubayr's challenge to the caliphate, the kharaji rebellion, and `Abd al-Malik's ascension to leadership brought about significant changes. His reign witnessed the minting of fully Islamic coins, the establishment of a professional standing army, the adoption of Arabic as the lingua franca, the centralization of taxes, and the modification of trade routes. After AD 685, virtually all coins, papyri, tombstones, seals, and most architectural monuments exhibited overt Islamic references.

The gradual transformation is best documented in coinage. The earliest Islamic coins resembled inexpensive Byzantine and Sasanian prototypes, maintaining similar iconography. The only indication of their Islamic nature was the inscribing of `bismillah', `jayyid', `ja'iz', `dayyib', or some other small Arabic inscription, sometimes accompanied by the removal of the cross. This process continued until the time of Abdul Malik, when the Arab-Muslims established a centralized administration to mint their own coins. The final Islamic stage of coinage featured epigraphic coins with Qur'anic calligraphy and, notably, no imagery. This transformation was a gradual process, marked by various challenges along the way.

The seal impressions found on official documents during the time of Muhammad ﷺ provide additional evidence of his existence. These seals bear the names of individuals who were contemporaries of Muhammad ﷺ, suggesting their participation in administrative and legal matters during his lifetime. Geographical references in contemporary non-Muslim sources, such as the Ptolemaic maps and the accounts of Arab geographers, also support the existence of Muhammad ﷺ. These sources acknowledge the expansion of the Islamic empire and the establishment of cities and regions associated with Muhammad ﷺ and early Islam.

One immediate issue that arises is Spencer's subjective handling of scholarly material, evident in a cursory examination of his bibliography that highlights a pronounced bias towards revisionism. Despite the absence of support from reputable academic scholars—whether mainstream or skeptical—on the non-existence of Muhammad, Spencer resorts to relying on an obscure ultra-revisionist fringe. Some of these individuals, presented as scholars, have works that are largely marginal or outdated, while others lack scholarly credentials altogether.

In his introduction, Spencer categorizes the scholars whose works he consulted into "earlier generation" and "modern-day" scholars. However, concerning the earlier generation, he selectively employs their material by seizing upon any doubts they expressed about various aspects of the Islamic literary tradition, all the while overlooking their broader assessments of the sources. For instance, Goldziher's reservations about specific political and

theological traditions are generalized into scepticism towards all traditions, and Schacht's doubts about legal traditions are extrapolated to encompass scepticism about everything.

What Spencer omits to disclose to his readers is that many of these scholars from the "earlier generation" were, in fact, renowned for their biographies of Muhammad ﷺ. For instance, although Spencer incorporates some of David Margoliouth's arguments, he fails to acknowledge or include in his bibliography Margoliouth's biography of Muhammadﷺ , titled "Muhammad ﷺ and the Rise of Islam." Similarly, Spencer draws upon the arguments of Aloys Sprenger without mentioning or referencing in his bibliography Sprenger's biography of Muhammad ﷺ, titled "The Life of Muhammad ﷺ from Original Sources." Additionally, Spencer uses some of William Muir's points without disclosing that Muir authored a comprehensive four-volume biography of Muhammad ﷺ titled "The Life of Mahomet ﷺ."

Spencer compels us to entertain an excessively simplistic, almost comical notion: that the Arab-Muslims would have dramatically burst onto the scene, "shouting `Allahu Akbar,' invoking Muhammad ﷺ, and quoting the Quran"[48]. According to this view, they would presumably have left the Byzantine and Sasanian populations in awe, prompting them to document these events in intricate detail. When the expectation is set for an epochal transformation but the evidence reveals a more gradual and modest change, the flawed conclusion follows that Islam did not exist, Muhammad ﷺwas not real, and everything is a fabrication. This flawed assumption forms the primary premise of Spencer's thesis.

Applying a similar line of reasoning to Spencer's own faith offers a parallel assumption. If, as the New Testament suggests, St. Paul and the earliest Christians indeed traversed cities in the Mediterranean, proselytizing their faith, we would anticipate finding references to them in non-Christian writings. Moreover, if they faced distinctive punishments, we would expect official references to such events. However, in a world with numerous contemporary historians, not a single non-Christian text mentions Jesus, Paul, or the earliest Christians until Josephus in AD 95. Additionally, there is no documentary evidence for Christianity in the first century. If the narrative were true, non-Christians would likely have referred to this emerging religion, yet they did not. Moreover, there are no material remnants of their faith, and none of their texts are attested in the first century.

Presented here is a parallel argument akin to those found in Jesus mythicist literature. However, it is unlikely to convince Spencer, a devout Catholic, or a professional historian. Disregarding the fact that Christianity, until the time of Constantine, was the religion of a persecuted minority unable to assert its claims through architecture and coinage would be disingenuous. Similarly, neglecting the myriad factors that delayed the explicit public

expression of Islam in material culture during the first 50 years is equally disingenuous.

While Robert Spencer's claims raise questions about the existence of Muhammad ﷺ, a comprehensive analysis reveals the weaknesses in his arguments. The absence of contemporary sources and limited non-Muslim references do not invalidate the existence of Muhammad ﷺ. The methods employed by scholars to authenticate historical accounts, such as the Hadith literature, provide a strong basis for accepting Muhammad ﷺ as a historical figure. It is essential to approach such debates with a nuanced understanding of historical context and methodology, acknowledging the contributions of rigorous scholarship in shaping our understanding of Muhammad ﷺ and early Islam.

3.7.2. Reliance on Islamic Sources:

Spencer also challenges the reliance on Islamic sources, such as the Quran and Hadith literature, as historical evidence for Muhammad's ﷺ existence. He suggests that these sources may have been shaped and manipulated to suit religious and political agendas. While it is true that Islamic sources were compiled after Muhammad's ﷺ death, scholars argue that they contain valuable historical information that can be critically analyzed and corroborated with other available sources. The internal consistency of the Quran and the rigorous methodology employed by Hadith scholars in assessing the reliability of narrators provide a basis for considering them as valuable historical sources.

3.7.3. Variations in Early Islamic Narratives:

Spencer points to the existence of variations in the early Islamic narratives regarding Muhammad's ﷺ life and argues that this indicates a lack of historical accuracy. However, it is common for historical accounts to contain some degree of variation, especially when they are based on oral traditions. The presence of different versions and interpretations does not necessarily undermine the overall historical reliability of the accounts. Scholars employ rigorous textual and source criticism to identify common themes and key events across the various narratives, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of Muhammad's ﷺ life.

Spencer never directly cites the scholars from their original works. His references to Gustav Weil, Ernest Renan, and William Muir are sourced from Ibn Warraq's book, not the original works themselves. Similarly, his citations of Muslim scholars such as Al-Jahiz, Ad-Darimi, Abu Dawud, An-Nasa'i, Al-Qastellani, Ibn Majah, Al-Yaqubi, Al-Baghdadi, and Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani are all drawn from Ignaz Goldziher's book, rather than the original texts. Consequently, Spencer's book is laden with the practice of copying and pasting other people's citations.

To exacerbate matters, Spencer often cites works without providing a complete reference, making it difficult to verify his sources. Discerning readers may not be surprised if, in the end, Spencer's book turns out to be essentially a rehashing of popular arguments presented in the works of Warraq, Puin, Luxemburg, Nevo, and Luling, with every other citation strategically employed to lend an air of scholarly credibility. Therefore, when Spencer claims that "this book is the fruit of my research into the writings of scholars of earlier generations... as well as modern-day scholars,"[49] it should be approached with skepticism.

3.7.4. Misinterpretation and Manipulation of Historical Evidence

His handling of the documentary material for Muhammad ☪ is perhaps even worse. Within fifty years after Muhammad's ☪ death, we have Muslim coins, papyri carrying the Islamic dating system, inscriptions which make mention of Muhammad companions such as Umar Ibn Khattab and Mu'awiyaa ibn Sufyan, tombstones, dams, milestones, Qur'anic manuscripts, and even textiles. Admittedly none of them mention Muhammad, but they do constitute documentary evidence for early Islam. Again, contrast this with Christianity which cannot adduce even a single documentary source until John Rayland Library Papyrus dating 130CE. The earliest Islamic documentary source is 8 years after Muhammad while the earliest Christian documentary source is 100 years after Jesus. The first clear documentary reference to Muhammad occurs in the Zubayrid drahma, dated 685 CE, 53 years after Muhammad, which has inscribed "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah".

How does Spencer deal with the dated documentary sources mentioning Muhammad? He cannot dispute their existence, dating their origin. The only thing left is linguistic gymnastics and omission. As for linguistic gymnastics, Spencer argues that Muhammad ☪ in these documentary sources does not refer to the Prophet Muhammad ☪, but refers to Jesus? Since the name "Muhammad ☪" linguistically derived from Arabic verb `hamada' meaning `he who is praised', these documentary sources could possible be referring to Jesus. There are at least five reasons why this is hopelessly fallacious.

3.8. Evaluation of Spencer's Methodology

A third issue arises with Spencer's methodology, characterized by frequent inconsistencies and incoherences. It has been observed Spencer criticizing a source for being late, only to discover that he utilizes late, sometimes very late, material when it aligns with his thesis. A notable instance occurs, where Spencer contends that the Qur'an postdates Caliph Abd al-Malik. To support this claim, he cites a tradition found in the work of the 16th-century traditionalist al-Suyuti (d. 1505 CE). Spencer acknowledges that "it is hard to explain why this hadith would have been invented at such a late date unless it contained some kernel of authenticity."[50] Thus, while Spencer adopts

revisionist historical criteria, he has no reservations about using literary material from 900 years after the fact as long as it supports his argument.

Regarding incoherence, an example includes Spencer's adoption of a very simplistic black-or-white view on various matters. He dismisses something as Islamic without exploring all possible interpretations, often adopting the interpretation most favourable to his thesis. For instance, Spencer denies that coins with iconography are Islamic because orthodox Islam forbids pictures of animate creatures. However, he fails to consider whether all Muslims regarded picture-making as impermissible, whether every single Muslim was aware of this impermissibility, or whether every single Muslim abstained from it. Such nuances are overlooked in favour of a black-or-white perspective. Scholars in Islamic Art and Archaeology find such arguments amusing, as one need only explore the first-century Umayyad desert palaces, adorned with pictures of people, animals, and celestial bodies, along with post-reform coins containing pictures despite featuring the Islamic testimony of faith. The first-century coin, encompassing the Islamic testimony of faith, an Islamic dating system, and two verses of the Qur'an, is deemed in-Islamic by Spencer solely due to the inclusion of the Caliph's picture on the obverse. He disregards all the surrounding Islamic inscriptions that accompany the picture.

Another instance of dubious methodology is Spencer's constant assumptions about what Muslims would have done. For example, when examining the Qur'anic inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock, he argues that if Muslims wanted to convey A, they would have cited the Qur'anic passage B. If they wanted to convey C, they would have cited D, and so on. Instead of examining what was actually cited, he speculates about what they might have intended. This raises questions about the soundness of his methodology and how he claims to know the intentions of the inscribers.

A notable concern is Spencer's lack of expertise in Islamic studies. He is primarily known as a critic of Islam rather than an academic scholar in the field. While interdisciplinary perspectives are valuable, evaluating the existence of Muhammad ⬧ requires a deep understanding of Arabic language, Islamic history, and the methodologies employed in Islamic studies. Spencer's limited expertise raises questions about his qualifications to make authoritative claims on such a complex subject.

In evaluating Robert Spencer's methodology in his book, "Did Muhammad ⬧ Exist? An Inquiry into Islam's Obscure Origins," several significant flaws become apparent. The selective use of sources, disregard for scholarly consensus, overemphasis on silence of sources, dismissal of the development of Islamic tradition, and lack of expertise in Islamic studies weaken the credibility of his arguments. To properly evaluate the existence of Muhammad ⬧, it is crucial to engage with a broad range of scholarly

perspectives and rely on rigorous methodologies employed by experts in the field of Islamic studies.

Early Non-Muslim Historical Accounts Referencing the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

When it comes to sources about Muhammad ﷺ from the first century, they fall into three categories: Muslim literary, non-Muslim literary, and documentary sources. Islamic texts include the Qur'an, the constitution of Medina, the sahifa of Hamam ibn Munabih, and the sahifa of Abdullah ibn `Aas. Three of these texts are contemporaneous with Muhammad ﷺ, while the other derives from a contemporary source. The earliest non-Muslim reference to Muhammad ﷺ is 2 years, while the earliest non-Christian reference to Jesus is 65 years. For any sensible historian, these non-Muslim texts provide compelling evidence for existence of Muhammad ﷺ. Patricia Crone, whom Spencer relies on for her `earlier works', acknowledged in 2008 that "there is no doubt that Mohammed ﷺ existed," and that the evidence for his existence is "exceptionally good."

However, Spencer employs various strategies to discredit these non-Muslim texts. These tactics range from omitting them (such as the Syriac Gospel Fragment dating to 637 CE, just 5 years after Muhammad's ﷺ death in 632 CE) to scrutinizing and highlighting every minor detail they get wrong, using that as a basis for deeming them totally unreliable. He comments on every aspect that contradicts Islamic traditions, cites irrelevant texts, challenges scholarly translations despite his lack of knowledge of the languages involved, and hypothesizes that some references could be about someone other than Muhammad ﷺ without specifying who these other individuals might be. Essentially, Spencer seizes upon any reason to discredit these texts, no matter how trivial. He never takes a moment to explore the cumulative weight of these texts, which were written by various religious communities, in different languages, and situated thousands of miles apart geographically. How is it possible that they all mention an Arabian monotheist prophet named Muhammad ﷺ?

Early non-Muslim historical accounts, particularly those from Byzantine and Persian sources, indirectly refer to the presence and impact of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the emerging Islamic movement. For instance, Theophanes, a Byzantine historian of the 8th century, mentions Arab leaders and their conflicts with the Byzantine Empire, alluding to the rise of Islam. Similarly, the Persian scholar al-Tabari provides insights into the interactions between Persian rulers and Arab leaders during that period. These accounts corroborate the historical reality of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his impact on the geopolitical landscape of the time.

Doctrinal Differences: Some non-Muslim sources highlight the theological and doctrinal differences between early Muslims and other religious groups.

For example, the writings of John of Damascus, a Christian theologian of the 8th century, contain polemical references to Islam and its founder. While these accounts may contain biases and distortions, they still acknowledge the existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and provide glimpses into the early interactions between Muslims and non-Muslim religious communities.[51]

Sebeos' Account: Sebeos, an Armenian bishop from the 7th century, presents an intriguing account of the Arab conquests and the rise of Islam. Although Sebeos was not a contemporary witness, his work reflects the early perceptions and knowledge available at the time. Sebeos refers to Muhammad ﷺ as a false prophet who led the Arabs in their military campaigns. While his account is critical of Muhammad ﷺ and Islam, it provides valuable historical evidence for the existence of the Prophet ﷺ and the influence of early Islam.[52]

Eutychius' Annals: Eutychius, a Melkite patriarch of Alexandria from the 10th century, composed a chronicle known as "Nazm al-Jawhar." In his work, Eutychius provides details on the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the early Islamic period. Although Eutychius lived several centuries after the events, he drew upon earlier sources and oral traditions that were available to him at the time. His annals offer insights into the Islamic tradition and the historical figure of Muhammad ﷺ from a non-Muslim perspective.[53]

It is essential to approach non-Muslim historical accounts with critical analysis, considering the biases, motivations, and limitations of these sources. While some authors might hold biases against Islam or present polemical narratives, their references to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ still contribute to our understanding of the historical context. Scholars employ methods of source criticism and contextual analysis to sift through these accounts, distinguishing factual elements from ideological perspectives.

The early non-Muslim historical accounts referencing the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provide valuable glimpses into the existence, impact, and early perceptions of the Prophet and the emerging Islamic movement. Although these accounts may contain biases and polemical elements, they collectively support the historical reality of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his significant influence during the 7th century. It is crucial to approach these accounts with a critical lens, considering the motivations and limitations of the authors, while recognizing their contribution to our understanding of the early Islamic period.

Findings

Despite dedicating a significant portion to the Qur'an, the primary focus of Robert Spencer's book is to assert that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is a historical fabrication, likely a figure who never truly existed. Spencer's bold claim challenges traditional scholarship, proposing a thesis previously unexplored. However, the question arises: does Spencer present a convincing argument, unveiling a grand forgery that has deceived scholars and believers for 1400 years? This analysis concludes that Spencer's work, much like

literature questioning the historical existence of Jesus, ultimately lacks persuasiveness. Following reasons support this perspective.

• Spencer's subjective use of scholarly material, particularly revisionist sources, raises concerns about his accuracy in assessing the non-existence of Muhammad ﷺ.

• His citation practices, including lack of direct citations from original works, suggest his book may be more of a compilation than an original scholarly contribution.

• Spencer's assumption that early Arab-Muslim conquests would have resulted in an immediate transformation of North Africa and the Middle East is flawed, as historical evidence indicates a lighter early footprint of Arab-Muslim conquerors.

• His methodological inadequacies, including inconsistent criticism of sources and reliance on late material, undermine his argument.

• Spencer's handling of evidence, including dismissal of non-Muslim texts mentioning Muhammad ﷺ within 100 years of his death, is questionable.

• His arguments against Islamic texts lack scholarly balance, focusing on later transmission and internal inconsistencies.

• Spencer's assertion that virtually all Islamic texts survive from the second, third, and fourth centuries overlooks the preservation of first-century texts in later works and manuscripts.

Conclusion

The research has critically examined Robert Spencer's approach to the existence of Muhammad ﷺ, particularly focusing on his methodology, style, and dismissal of established historical evidence. It has been established that Spencer's assertions lack significant scholarly contribution and fail to introduce novel perspectives, however, challenge the conventional historical narratives without substantial logical justification. This study though analysis has highlighted the shortcomings of Spencer's arguments, highlighting the absence of coherent reasoning and empirical support. By scrutinizing his methodology and rhetorical techniques, the research elucidated the implications of Spencer's denial of established historical facts within the context of religious discourse. Ultimately, this paper endeavoured to provide a comprehensive critique of Spencer's position, shedding light on the deficiencies in his approach and its impact on the broader understanding of Islamic history.

Robert Spencer's thesis on the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is criticized for several shortcomings. Spencer's reliance on ultra-revisionist scholars and subjective interpretation of revisionist views hinder the objective evaluation of historical evidence. His assumptions about the immediate transformation of conquered territories by Arab-Muslims and the delayed expression of Islam in material culture undermine the historical

context. Linguistic gymnastics and omissions in handling documentary sources weaken his claims, particularly regarding the name "Muhammad ﷺ." Spencer's criticism of Islamic texts for surviving from later centuries overlooks their preservation of earlier works and the sophisticated source-critical methods employed by Muslim historians. His treatment of non-Muslim sources is selective and contrived, often omitting critical information. His criticism of Islamic texts, citing their survival from later centuries, overlooks their preservation of earlier works and the meticulous source-critical methods employed by Muslim historians. Spencer's thesis lacks the necessary scholarly rigour and balance expected in historical investigations, preventing the establishment of a compelling argument against the historical existence of Muhammad ﷺ.

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