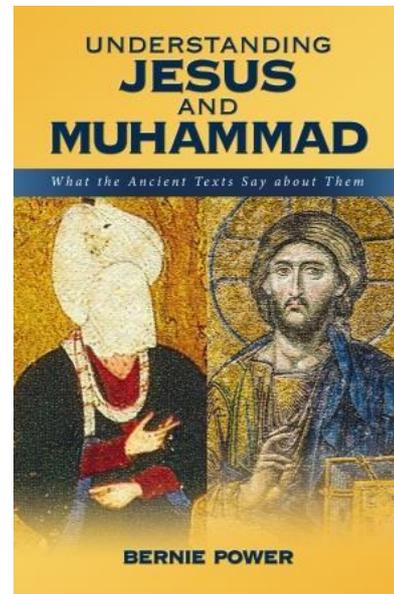




Bernie Power, *Understanding Jesus and Muhammad: What the Ancient Texts Say about Them* (Moreland, Vic.: Acorn Press, 2015)

Review by Richard Shumack

Sensibly discussing Islam is obviously a great need for the Australian public in general, and Christians in particular. Sensationalist views of Muslims, both positive and negative, dominate our media, Islamist terrorism is the prime target for our security forces and Muslim refugees bear the brunt of much political debate over our immigration policies. Properly, Christians play a key role in welcoming and advocating for these refugees and, increasingly, are seeking to engage with Muslims in discussions to do with faith. Also properly, Christians seek this engagement for both missional and community building reasons.



Discourse about Islam, however, is often hindered by the fact that few ordinary Australians – Christians and Muslims alike – have a deep knowledge of Islam’s authoritative texts. Many will not be aware that the traditional Islamic schools of thought constructed their theologies via appeal to not only the Qur’an (understood as the word of God), but also the *hadith* (the traditions to do with Muhammad’s words and actions) and the authoritative biography of Muhammad by Ibn Ishaq. Coming to terms with this is crucial, especially with the growing prominence of groups like ISIS who are *salafist*. (Salafism is a traditionalist reform movement that seeks to return Islam to its supposedly pristine early form as witnessed in the hadith and biography). It is, however, rare to meet even a keen Muslim who has a solid familiarity with the hadith, and even rarer to meet one who has read Ibn Ishaq’s biography.

This situation clearly makes it difficult to have constructive conversations on Islam, and it is this that has led Melbourne School of Theology’s Dr Bernie Power to write *Understanding Jesus and Muhammad: What the ancient texts say about them*. Power is uniquely qualified to help Muslims and Christians talk. He lived and worked in the Muslim world for many years, and, uniquely among Christians as far as I know, pursued doctoral research into the *hadith*

traditions. His expertise is well recognized with regular invitations to teach at Muslim universities.

As the title suggests, *Understanding Jesus and Muhammad* is built upon the crucial, and sensible, idea that Islam (and Christianity) cannot be properly understood without reference to its foundational texts. From this starting point Power offers a comparison between Jesus and Muhammad that covers a whole range of topics that regularly arise in conversation between Christians and Muslims. All the usual suspects are here: what the Qur'an says about Jesus and what the Bible (supposedly) says about Muhammad; the place of religious violence in the life and teachings of Muhammad/Jesus; human rights as taught and exemplified by Muhammad/Jesus; and the treatment of women by both. Less common, but nevertheless important, topics such as the miraculous, eschatology and the precise nature of faith are covered along the way.

The aim here is that particular Muslim/Christian beliefs about these things are evaluated by examining what each faith's key texts have to say and then seeing if this stands up to theological or historical scrutiny. The book is unusual in its style of going about this. Most chapters begin with a brief story to introduce the topic. From that point on there are lots of dot points, lists of references, diagrams and summaries. This is not a weakness, but a strength. That's because this is designed as a book to be used, rather than just read. It is, in short, a handbook for discussion that summarises the key things you need to know about each topic, including what responses you will likely get to different points. It is worth the price for the volume of information packed into the summary charts and diagrams alone.

What Power has produced, then, is not so much a short textbook to be read for information, but instead a 'handbook' to be used in facilitating discourse. Since the material here was forged in the context of real life interaction by Power over many years, the discussions are framed in everyday language and have been road tested for facilitating helpful conversations. Taken as a handbook, *Understanding Jesus and Muhammad* is a great resource for any Christian who is speaking about faith with Muslims. I recognise each and every conversation from my many years of living, working and playing among Muslim friends. Muslim readers, though, may not be so enthusiastic. This is not because the book contains false or misleading material. Power knows his stuff on both Christianity and Islam, and even in such a short popular book his scholarly expertise is evident. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that, despite every effort at objectivity, Power writes as a Christian who has decided that, in the apologetic debate between Islam and Christianity, the argument clearly falls on the side of Christ. It is hard to blame Power for this honesty, but I would recommend that, at the very least, any

Christian engaging with Islam read a similar work by a Muslim writer to hear the other side of the debate in their own words. Power's bibliography is comprehensive enough to show you where to look for such works.

One quibble the Christian reader might have with *Understanding Jesus and Muhammad* is that some of Power's illustrations of complex Christian doctrines are oversimplified for the sake of contextualising his point for a Muslim audience. While Power's motivation is understandable and commendable, it remains theologically problematic to, for example, illustrate the Trinity using mathematics or the chemistry of water. This is, however, a small quibble. *Understanding Muhammad and Jesus* is an excellent resource worth having on your shelf and, indeed, in your backpack, ready to pull out at university or on the bus. As Australia comes to terms with Islam, and especially radical Islamism, Christians should be leading the way. We are among the few left in our rapidly secularising society – and especially our rapidly simplifying and polarising media – who can genuinely understand people who are motivated by theological conviction. More importantly, we are the only ones who can respond to Islamism's theo-political ideology with a theological alternative, in the gospel, that can properly satisfy the misplaced zeal of Muslims for God. This book will equip you better to do just that.

About the Reviewer

Dr Richard Shumack is a research fellow specialising in philosophy of religion with the Centre for Public Christianity in Sydney. He is on the faculty at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths at Melbourne School of Theology and part of the Understanding and Answering Islam team at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. He teaches regularly on ministry in Muslim contexts in Australian colleges, universities, churches and schools. His publications include 'Witnessing to Western Muslims' and the philosophical apologetic 'The Wisdom of Islam and the Foolishness of Christianity'.