

Book Review

Exploring the Lives of Early Muslims

A Short Encyclopaedia of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, by Dr M.A.J. Beg, UK: Cambridge, pp233, 2007, PB, £5.95.

Biographical Dictionary of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, by Dr M.A.J. Beg, UK: Cambridge, pp226, 2008, PB, £6.00.

Dr Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg, a graduate of Rajshahi University, Bangladesh and a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, is a leading specialist on the lives and times of the sahabah or the companions/disciples of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). After obtaining a doctorate with his thesis on “*The Social History of the Labouring Classes in Iraq under the Abbasids*” in 1971 from Cambridge University, he began to pursue research about the lives of the sahabah and in the process he had amassed a large quantity of information and data concerning the early Islamic period. This data was subsequently published under the title of ‘*Brief Lives of the Companions of Prophet Muhammad*’ (2002, revised and expanded, 2003), along with the two books under review. In addition to this, the author has recently published a small booklet entitled ‘*Quiz on the Companions (sahabah) of the Prophet Muhammad*’ (2008).

Like his other works, all of these books have been published by the author himself and this probably explains why the books are not as widely known or available as they ought to be. Although there are a large number of books available in Arabic on the lives of the sahabah, there are very few such works in English. And even those who can read the original Arabic sources will tell you that most of these works are hagiographical in nature, often devoid of historical context and narrative. Being a historian by profession, Dr Beg has pursued a critical and historical approach to the lives and times of the Prophet’s companions and for this reason I found his books very informative and beneficial.

Unlike the *Dictionary*, however, the entries in the *Encyclopaedia* are arranged chronologically. This is very helpful from a historical perspective but not so easy to utilise for the purpose of quick referencing. By the same token, since the *Dictionary* is arranged alphabetically it is very user-friendly but not so helpful from a chronological point of view. This means both of these volumes (along with the *Brief Lives*) need to be read together to acquire the maximum benefit. That said, although both books contain biographical sketches of hundreds of sahabah, they are accompanied by two invaluable introductions wherein the author seeks to provide the historical context in which the early Muslims lived and pursued their careers. For instance, in the introduction to the *Encyclopaedia*, the author attempts to answer the question: Who were the Companions (sahabah)?

In response, he states, “It is preferable that the term *al-sahabah* refers to the disciples of the Prophet because he in a symbolic sense played the role of a teacher (*mu’allim*) to his associates and friends. Some prefer the word ‘companion’ to ‘followers’;

because, it is argued, all Muslims are the followers of the Prophet. Hence the word ‘followers’ does not precisely describe those contemporaries of the Prophet who embraced Islam in his presence....although, admittedly, all the *sahabah* were followers of the Prophet Muhammad, it cannot be argued that all his followers were his companions....therefore, we propose that the Arabic term *al-sahabah* should henceforth be translated as ‘the disciples’ or Companions” (pp1-2). Steeped in both modern and classical literature on the lives and times of the *sahabah*, the author then explores the definition of ‘*sahabi*’ and ‘*sahabah*’ as defined by the classical scholars like Sa’id ibn al-Musayyib, al-Waqidi, al-Bukhari, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Abul Fida, al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Athir among others. His grasp of the subject-matter is erudite and impressive. Likewise, in the Dictionary the author provides a brief but useful survey of pre-Islamic Arabian history and society, thus contextualising the lives and times of the early Muslims for the benefit of his readers. Admittedly, not all the entries in these two books are of equal length, indeed, some are very short (consisting of no more than a few lines) while others (such as the entries on the first four Caliphs) run into several pages each.

All the entries in the Encyclopaedia are rigorously referenced and it also includes five important Appendixes covering topics such as the companions who died during the Prophet’s lifetime, the *ahl as-suffah*, *al-sabiqun al-awwalun*, and clarifying the mistaken identity of Uqbah ibn Nafi, etc. Likewise, the Dictionary contains four Appendixes covering the *al-asharah al-mubashsharah*, the extremist sect of *khawarij*, the tribe of *banu shaybah*, and analysis of Suhayb al-Rumi’s genealogy/racial origins. Unlike the Encyclopaedia, however, only the first one hundred and six of the entries in the Dictionary are referenced individually although the author has listed all his sources in a comprehensive bibliography. Both books also contain useful indexes but unfortunately there are numerous spelling mistakes and, as such, the copy editing, layout, design and the production of the books leave a lot to be desired.

Nevertheless, by researching and writing these books, the author has developed a new and fresh approach to the study of the lives and times of the Prophet’s companions and for this reason alone these books are worth reading, and the author should be congratulated for his sheer dedication and labour of love. May the Almighty reward him immensely for his contribution to preserving early Muslim history and heritage!

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan – author of *The Muslim 100: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of the Most Influential Muslims in History* (UK: Kube Publishing, 2008, reprinted 2010)