

Reacting to Muḥammad: Three Early Islamic Poets in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī**

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Abstract

This article investigates how the secular Arabic poetic tradition interacted with the new religious rhetoric of emergent Islam. Concretely, it deals with the verses and legacies of three poets contemporary to Muḥammad who converted to Islam, yet protested its pietistic rhetoric. Abū Khirāsh al-Hudhalī, Abū Miḥjan al-Thaqafī, and Suḥaym, the slave of the Banū al-Ḥaṣḥās, all lived in the Ḥijāz and witnessed the formation of Muḥammad's movement up close. The first aim of the article is to listen to their reactions. Because the three poets were not directly involved in the promotion of the new religion, nor were they in an open struggle against it, their testimony is especially valuable for its insight into the reception of the emergent Islamic movement among Arab tribes in the Ḥijāz, beyond Muḥammad's close community. The second aim is to follow the later reception of the poets and their incorporation into the Arabo-Islamic canon through an examination of the narratives (akhbār) that accompany the verses in Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī's (d. 356/967) Kitāb al-Aghānī, the underlying assumption being that these akhbār are secondary to the verses. Besides these two main points, an examination of the interplay between the verses and the akhbār also establishes the importance of Mukhaḍram poetry as a historical source and exposes the multilayered nature of the poets' akhbār.

“Nothing is like the times of our [old] abode [. . .]! Now, chains have encircled [our] necks / and the youth has become like a middle-aged man, saying only the right things (*laysa bi-qā'il siwā al-ḥaqq*),”¹ noted Abū Khirāsh bitterly in his poem. The poet, commenting on the changes that the Prophet Muḥammad and his community had brought about, hereby

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1. Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2008), 21:151–152. I have