Barbara Freyer Stowasser. *The Day Begins at Sunset: Perception of Time in the Islamic World*. London • New York: I. B. Taurus, 2014; ISBN: 978-1-78076-542-6; eISBN: 978-0-85773-554-6

This last work by the late professor Barbara Freyer Stowasser (d. 2012) is a fitting culmination to her academic life—dedicated as it was to the understanding and exploration of Islamic civilization—in the sense that it deals with one of the most entrenched and multifaceted aspects of that civilization: Concept of Time. The tantalizing main title of the work is not merely a marketing ploy; for Muslims, the day really does begin at sunset and this understanding of time, entrenched in the primary sources of Islam, has been aptly used by the author to anchor her last work in the longstanding history of Islamic science.

The Day Begins at Sunset, published posthumously, is scholarly in the sense that it is informed by a lifelong study of sources, but it is presented as an enjoyable narrative for the lay person. Stowasser uses the work of the great 5th/11th century polymath Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī from the Khwārizm as a pivot to rotate her lens to see various aspects of perception of time in the Islamic civilization. Divided into three parts, ("History, Religion, Politics and Time;" "A Medieval Case Study: Cosmology, Technology and Five Eastern Calendars through an Islamic Lens;" and "How Daily Muslim Rituals are Still Performed 'on Time'"), the seven chapters of the book are held together with a weak thread. The thread is weak because, despite brilliant insights here and there, these chapters read as if they were initially written independently of each other, or perhaps as part of three different books, but were in the end collected for this publication. "The Islamic Calendar" and "Time, the Qur'an and Science", two chapters which make up the first part of the book (pp. 3-56) along with the "Introduction", can be read as stand-alone articles, although they are integral to the book. The middle section of the book (pp. 57-140), however, seems to have been originally conceived as a book on the life and works of al-Bīrunī. Its narrative, readable as it is, digresses and divulges into life-stories of other medieval scientists (such as al-Khwārizmī) and topics (such as numeral systems), and common place instruments of the time (such as the astrolabe).

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The third part of the book, consisting of only one chapter, "'Time Sticks': Regulating the Islamic Day", begins with an admirable quote from al-Bīrūnī, who held that "the *day* is the only unit of time that is universally recognized; all cultures have used it as a common building block in their much varied larger constructions of time" (p. 141), before exploring prayer times through their mention in the Qurʾān and Hadith reports; Stowasser sadly omits the pivotal hadith which describes how obligatory prayers were ordained during the Prophet's Ascension (*miʿrāj*).

The book ends with a quote from Augustine and a statement, both truly indicating how time has been understood by the adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths. Augustine had said: 'What then is time? I know what it is if no one asks me what it is; but if I want to explain it to someone who has asked me, I find that I do not know.' (p. 165). The last paragraph of *The Day Begins at Sunset* affirms:

> The Qur'an's vision of time is likewise God centred. Time is God's creation. There can be no abstract time because God, ruler of the universe who is beyond time, is lord over time from the beginning to the end of Creation. While time is a function of God's omnipotence, so is its measurement a divine gift that God created for the benefit of mankind. The Qur'an presents richly designed examples that prove God's authorship of all celestial movements and their utility to the human race as devices to measure (but not to control) time. Night and day and even the 12 lunar months of the year are 'appointed times for the [believing] people'. Reading the sky for the prayers of the day and for the 12 months of the year is a constant reminder of God's divine power and Providence. (p. 165)

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